Amend

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Summary

Negotiating the Accords, dealing with Ross, the end of his relationship with Pepper, Steve's faction coming back to the Avengers compound . . . the stress finally catches up with Tony in dramatic fashion. The team has to decide to step up and handle things while Tony can't. Tony has to decide if he'll let them.

Notes

Written for the avengerkink prompt: After the events of civil war the Avenger are back at the
compound and trying to become a team again. Tony is busy trying to negotiate the accords, deal with Ross, deal with being an Avenger in a fragmented team, deal with the loss of his relationship with Pepper, deal with his company and try and fix Rhodey's legs. All this causes great stress on his already medically fragile body. It should be of little surprise then when he has a heart attack (my new favorite thing in this fandom).

Somehow, someone takes a photo of Tony a short while after when he is in hospital with an oxygen mask and hooked up to machines, and posts it online. The world is appalled first at the fact something this private is now in the public domain and second at how tired, fragile and worn Tony looks, nothing like the larger than life, superhero playboy they are used to.

I would love for the fic to deal with the aftermath of his heart attack- medication and rest not just jumping straight back into his suit. I would love for the Avengers to be appalled that they could have contributed to the stress Tony's body was dealing with that they become very protective and try and make life as easy as possible (much to Tony's annoyance... at first anyway.)

Bonuses-
+ Terrified and protective Rhodey.
++ The heart attack doesn't come during a battle but during a fairly mundane activity such as during a meeting or when cooking dinner etc. But the Avengers are there to witness it.
+++ Tony drifting towards depression because he had a heart attack and feels tired and old and useless.
++++ He is able to be Iron man again.
+++++ The whole incident has shown them all how fragile life is and how no matter what they are a family and a team.
+ 1 million if you can work some Tony/T'challa in the fic. Especially cuddling on the sofa. At the moment I am obsessed with these two and the idea of T'Challa taking care of Tony.

Author's notes:
-This fic will not contain Tony/T’Challa. Sorry.
Chapter 1

Tony remained seated with his eyes closed even after the jet landed, taking slow, deep breaths that belied the rapid flutter of his heart.

"Are you all right?" T'Challa was already standing and looked down at him with an expression that almost might be called concern.

"Always. Just tired," Tony said, quickly unbuckling his harness and getting to his feet with more energy than he felt. He switched his briefcase from his left hand to his right and surreptitiously shook out his left arm; it was feeling numb again, and the stab of pain in his chest felt almost like an anxiety attack. "Come on, they'll be glad to see you."

Tony led the way onto the grounds of the Avengers compound, giving a thumbs-up to his helicopter as it landed itself a short distance away. It was good to be back after three days in New York negotiating with the U.N. subcommittee responsible for amendments to the Sokovia Accords, though being at the compound required its own sort of negotiation.

The squeals of children playing had him shading his eyes with his hand as he pinpointed their whereabouts. When he found them--west of the compound, by the tree line--Laura Barton waved and he raised a hand in response. Lang's daughter must be visiting; there were too many kids for it just to be the Bartons. The secured area extended a mile into the trees so no harm would come to them there.

Habit had him scanning the rest of what he could see of the compound while Friday scanned everything else. The rest of the Avengers were in the training room, and he was mentally accounting for all of the vehicles in his line of sight when Friday broke in. "Boss, Secretary Ross is here. Agent Hill has him secured in the visitor's conference room."

Tony swore under his breath. For months Ross had been trying to send him on missions, starting with the Raft breakout. Active duty non-combatant (it had a much nicer ring than 'consultant') and the Avengers don't answer to you, Tony reminded him every time, but still Ross seemed to think he should have some say over their activities despite what was explicitly stated in the Accords. Then the plot thickened.

To say Ross had been displeased with the U.N. decision to allow the 'renegades' to be kept under house arrest at the Avengers compound would be putting it mildly. In the month since that agreement had been reached and the fugitives had returned, Ross had not ceased to make a nuisance of himself, insisting that it was not legal for Stark to harbor them on U.S. soil no matter what the U.N. said.

Tony had even met with President Ellis about the issue, only to be politely rebuffed. Apparently changes to cabinet positions weren't worth the effort when the president was months away from leaving office.

So Ross remained a particularly annoying thorn in his side. The issue was being discussed by the U.N., which might produce results in five to ten years, and Tony was seriously considering his options for moving their entire base out of the country. To some island, preferably; it would be far easier to secure that way. He certainly had enough money to make it work (why didn't he already own an island? That was a serious oversight on his part), and 'Avengers Island' had a nice ring to it.

Tony intended to go to the training room first; the revelation of Ross' presence only reinforced that intention. The team (well, not quite a team again just yet, but they were working on it) was sparring when Tony burst through the doors. "Focus up, everyone. Look who I found wandering the U.N."
T'Challa nodded in response to their greetings and Tony turned toward him. "I have a problem to deal with. If I'm not back for dinner, send someone to rescue me." He was only half joking. "You know your way around."

"Yes. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Anytime," he said dismissively. T'Challa was already descending the stairs into the large room to join the others.

Tony's eyes lingered on Rhodey for a moment, working in a corner where the others wouldn't accidentally stumble into him, but his friend seemed to be doing fine with the latest iteration of the leg braces as Sam carefully helped him through his exercises.

Tony steeled himself and left to see what Ross wanted this time.

The meeting was just as hostile as he'd expected and by the time he left his jaw ached from keeping his teeth gritted around the things he dearly wanted to say but knew would only make things worse. Like where he thought Ross should shove his requests for Tony's "cooperation." Dealing with Ross made his skin crawl and his heart race and yet again Tony wondered how on earth he'd become an ally to the odious man. Politics makes strange bedfellows indeed.

Agent Hill and Rhodey were waiting in the hall for him, Hill to take charge of escorting their visitor off the premises and Rhodey apparently to keep Tony company. When Rhodey started to ask him something, Tony held up a finger in warning until Ross was out of sight and Friday said, "File sent, boss."

"Good girl." Tony put his phone to his ear and gestured with a nod of his head for Rhodey to walk with him. "Bill, my man. I just had a visit from our favorite person."

Rhodey couldn't quite hear Bill's side of the conversation, but he could guess at it by Tony's responses.

"Of course I have a recording, who do you think I am? My AI has already sent it to you. Now, I know you've assured me that he can't do what he's threatening, but do me a favor and give it a good listen. I want to be absolutely certain that he's not going to get anywhere with this."

Tony stopped in his tracks while Bill spoke, then said heatedly, "I've said it before and I'll say it again: I will personally take the fall before I see Pepper or Stark Industries dragged into this shit show. Do whatever you need to do to keep them safely out of this. That's why I pay you that big fat retainer." He ended the call and shrugged at Rhodey. "Lawyers. Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

They resumed slowly walking down the hall; Rhodey was much faster than he had been but he still wasn't quite up to normal strolling speed. "What's Ross trying to do now?"

"He is falling back on the tool everyone wants to use on rich businessmen: he's threatening a lawsuit."

"On what basis?"

"I don't think he's figured that out yet."

"How did the U.N. meetings go?"

"Same as usual. We made about two sentences' worth of progress. At this rate, we'll be done by the
time Barton's great-grandchildren die."

Rhodey snorted.

"They sent a draft with me. Paper. Again. I swear, the U.N. is single-handedly responsible for killing the rainforest."

"It's great for paper airplanes, though."

"Yeah, the kids'll love it."

They fell into a comfortable silence as they waited for the elevator to take them up to the communal area. Once inside, Rhodey said casually, "You feeling all right? You look pale."

"Next to you, I'm always pale," Tony said dismissively. "Nah, I'm fine, just tired of this bullshit."

"You should let someone else deal with some of it. You're trying to pull the lone gunslinger act again and it's still not necessary."

Tony scoffed. "I started this, I should see it through. But if you're that eager, just say the word when you're ready, sugarbear, and I'll have you take over in a heartbeat."

"Who said I was volunteering?" Rhodey grinned.

A smile flitted across Tony's face but didn't stay long. "I trust you to get it as close to right as I could," he said seriously.

The elevator doors opened and Rhodey had no chance to respond before Tony was being interrogated by some of the others about his time away and what Ross wanted this time. He watched, though, as Tony practically collapsed into a sofa and rubbed at his left shoulder while animatedly telling a story Rhodey couldn't quite hear.

Dinner was ready a short time later and everyone gathered at the table. The original eating table was not large enough for all of the newcomers and the families, so the children were using a round table nearby while the adults pulled another round table up to the end of the usual table, extending its reach.

Tony could not help but notice that the adults were still sitting according to their faction--Tony and his people on one side of the table, Steve and his people on the other. There were some that were more willing to sit with others on the opposite side (Clint and Natasha, Wanda and Vision), and there were some grudges that still had not died (Clint sat as far from Tony as physically possible while still remaining at the adult table).

Wanda was trying to teach Vision how to cook, so the meal that evening was his attempt to correctly prepare the paprikash he'd tried to make for her before. Tony wasn't particularly hungry, and after a few bites he could tell it wasn't sitting well. He gulped some water but could feel his chest tightening in protest.

"What's the matter, Stark? Don't like the food?" Clint teased from his end of the table.

Suddenly all eyes were on him. "It's . . . it's fine. It's just a little too much right now," he mumbled, feeling sweat bead on his skin.

"Can't handle some paprika? You've got a weak tongue, Stark."
"There are many lovely ladies who would beg to differ," he shot back.

Clint laughed. "And some men, too, perhaps?"

"That's enough," Steve interjected. "There are children present."

Slowly the interrupted conversations resumed, and attention largely turned away from Tony. Rhodey, however, was concerned. He leaned closer and said, "Are you sure you're okay? You don't look good."

"I'll be fine," Tony insisted as the pain from his arm and shoulder intensified and spread into his chest. It was hard to breathe against the clenching pain and his heart rate increased sharply as he started to panic. He tried to rise from the table, tried to flee the room to escape the embarrassment of whatever was about to happen, but his limbs did not obey his wishes. He stumbled as he tried to stand, his knees buckling, and he nearly ended up in Rhodey's lap. It would have been more comfortable than where he did end up, wedged between his chair and Rhodey's, but he had no say in the matter.

Suddenly all of the sounds he could hear were urgent, panicked. Hands were on him, pulling him out onto the unobstructed floor, and he was being shouted at to breathe. Faces swam in and out of his swiftly narrowing vision, and with a jolt he realized he was going to die. "Pepper," he murmured wistfully, then knew no more.
Chapter 2

When Stark dropped like a sack of potatoes, Sam was out of his seat and rounding the table purely on reflex. Vision helped Rhodey pull Tony's chair out of the way so he could lie flat on the floor. Rhodey was commanding Tony to breathe while Sam checked his pulse. "Panic attack?" Rhodey asked.

"No, I think it's his heart." Sam shook Stark's shoulder roughly. "Stark! Come on, answer me man."

"Shit. Friday, medical emergency. Get a team up here, prep a jet, and alert the nearest hospital. And someone get the kids out of here, now," Rhodey ordered.

Stark went limp and Sam asked urgently, "Is there an AED anywhere?"

"Negative," Friday answered.

"Stark, we are going to have a talk about proper emergency medical supplies when this is over," he said as he straddled him and began chest compressions.

Rhodey could hear exclamations of dismay from the others, but all he could do was watch with his heart in his throat. The medical team arrived and had Tony on a stretcher within seconds. Sam got on and continued the compressions as they raced back out of the room.

Rhodey turned to Natasha. "Go with them? I can't move fast enough."

She nodded once, then hurried to follow.

A brief silence fell on those who remained in the room. "Is he going to die?" Wanda asked hesitantly.

"God, I hope not," Rhodey said, feeling old and tired. He slowly stood, trying not to think about Tony lifeless on the floor. "I'm going to the hospital. What the rest of you do is up to you."

"I'm going with you," Steve said immediately. "Everyone else stay here; we'll let you know what happens."

The hospital was only three minutes away by air so their helicopter arrived before the quinjet had cleared the landing pad. Rhodey had Friday land it in a nearby empty parking lot instead and, once they climbed out, directed her to return it to the compound.

It took Rhodey longer to trudge from the parking lot into the hospital than it had to arrive at the hospital, and he chafed at his limitations. When they entered the emergency department, Rhodey called Natasha. "We're here. Where will we find him?"

"I'll send Sam out to get you."

While Rhodey was distracted, Steve commandeered a wheelchair. "Get in. You look like you're going to fall over," he said as soon as Rhodey was off the phone.

"I could pull rank, but I won't," Rhodey grumbled.

Sam appeared while Rhodey was still settling in. "This way." He waited to say more until they had left the waiting room where a few curious onlookers might overhear. "They say he'll live. Suspected heart attack, but they're running tests to determine exactly what happened. He's not awake yet."
"Did his heart stop?" Rhodey asked, remembering Sam astride Tony.

"No, but the rhythm wasn't right."

Tony was secluded in a back corner of the emergency department, his shirt cut open, all sorts of wires attached to his chest and an oxygen mask strapped to his face. A doctor and two nurses conversed quietly by the bedside as they watched the readings on the half dozen monitors along the wall.

There wasn't space in the small room for the wheelchair to pull up on the other side of the bed, so Steve parked Rhodey at the end of it. Sam remained just outside the door, on guard.

Natasha handed Rhodey a clipboard. "You're just in time for the paperwork."

Rhodey sighed and began filling out the forms. It wasn't the first time and hopefully wouldn't be the last. "Is it normal that I know his social security number better than he does?" he asked with a sigh.


Rhodey was nearly finished with the paperwork when the doctor requested more details about Tony's cardiac history, like whether he'd had any such attacks before. While they talked, the nurses efficiently finished cutting Tony's clothes off, then draped a hospital gown over him.

When the doctor left the room the nurses were about to follow, but Rhodey asked, "Excuse me, can we take whatever is in his pockets? And his watch, too. He'd prefer that."

The nurses hesitated a moment, then the elder one shrugged. "For you? Sure thing."

Natasha helped them go through the clothes, saying, "I was his PA for a while. I know where he stashes things."

Steve had moved up the bed to stand where the doctor had been, first peering at the machine displays, then down at Tony.

The beeping from the monitors changed, the heartbeat and respiration numbers increasing slightly. Tony's hands twitched, then he gasped a little, and his eyes flew open.

"Hey, Tony, how are you--" Steve stopped when Tony's eyes grew wide and his breathing increased to almost a pant. He shifted on the bed as if trying to get away from Steve.

"Steve, back away. Now!" Rhodey commanded, hauling himself out of the wheelchair and using the bed to support himself as he took Steve's place at the bedside. "Hey, Tony, it's all right, you're all right," he said reassuringly, touching Tony's arm and waving at him slightly so his attention wouldn't stray toward the others in the room.

Tony relaxed a fraction, but his breathing was still rapid and somewhat erratic, and that seemed to set off something with his heart. One of the machines sounded an alarm, and the doctor and one of the two nurses rushed in. Rhodey got out of the way as quickly as he could, though he remained standing in the hopes that Tony would see him and stop freaking out.

"We'll have to sedate him if this is what happens when he wakes," said the doctor. Rhodey didn't know how to explain what had happened, so he let them do their work. After an injection into the IV line, Tony went limp again and the machines returned to their previous noises.

It was several more minutes before the doctor seemed to think the situation sufficiently under control.
for him to turn and talk to them. "We're going to take him to have some tests done, then he'll be moved to the ICU. Someone can take you to the waiting room there and we'll fetch you when he's settled in."

"With all due respect, one of us will need to accompany him. Security reasons," Steve said.

The doctor seemed like he wanted to argue but Steve crossed his arms over his chest and the doctor chuckled and shook his head ruefully. "I apologize, for a moment I forgot who I was dealing with. Yes, one of you may accompany him. Just stay out of the way when we ask you to."

"Of course," Steve said. He turned to Rhodey and Natasha. "Who should stay with him?"

"I can," Natasha said. "Any of you will turn too many heads."

"Fine," Rhodey agreed. He gave her Tony's watch, keeping Tony's phone for himself. "Friday can send for help if it's needed," he said. "Just in case."

All too soon Tony was being wheeled away and a different nurse than they'd seen before was leading the rest of them to the waiting room outside the intensive care unit. They had the room entirely to themselves.

Steve started pacing, Sam lounged on one of the couches, and Rhodey called Pepper, realizing no one had thought to contact her yet. The phone rang four times before she picked up. "Rhodey. What happened?" she sounded resigned.

"What makes you think something happened?"

"You don't call me directly unless something has happened. And it must be bad; you're stalling."

Rhodey took a deep breath and explained what they knew. He could almost feel her shocked disbelief as she listened. "Isn't he too young for a heart attack?"

"With as much damage as he's had to his chest? I don't find it that hard to believe."

"I just-- God, Rhodey, we could have lost him." She sounded teary.

He sighed and wearily rubbed his face. "Believe me, I know."

She took a deep breath. "I'll have his cardiologist call the hospital. Is there anything else I can do?"

"I don't think so." He paused. "I'll call if . . . anything happens."

"Thank you, Rhodey."

He let his phone fall into his lap and stared blankly at the wall for several long minutes, remembering how Tony fell against him on the way to the floor and everything after. Eventually he was distracted from his reverie by Steve's restless pacing. "What's eating you?" he demanded.

Steve stopped, then began pacing in the other direction. "I don't understand what happened when Tony woke up."

Rhodey scoffed. "Really, Rogers? Think about it for just a second: he's disoriented, his chest is killing him, and you're standing over him. What do you think that reminded him of?"

Sam looked between them curiously. "Now I'm the one who needs the play-by-play, because there is something going on here that I'm not getting."

Rhodey shook his head disbelievingly. "Rogers, what did you tell them about Siberia?"

Steve sighed and sank into a chair near Rhodey and facing Sam. "I told them that Stark came, Zemo got him upset, and we fought."

Sam nodded. "There were a few more details, but yeah, that was the gist."

Rhodey turned to Sam. "Did he mention the video of Barnes assassinating Tony's parents?"

"Yep."

"And Tony went berserk? Managed to blow away Barnes' metal arm?"

"Yeah, that was mentioned."

"How about that Rogers beat Tony bloody with his shield, then smashed the arc reactor?"

"That's new to me," Sam said slowly, glancing at Steve.

"He beat me bloody, too," Steve added lamely.

"You fractured his fucking sternum, left his suit without power, and stranded him there alone. If it weren't for his AI calling for help when the suit went offline, he wouldn't have made it out of Siberia," Rhodey said frostily.

"That's cold," Sam said.

"I . . . didn't know that part," Steve said softly.

Rhodey continued. "And despite all that, he put his ass on the line to make it possible for you to come back and not be in jail. He thinks we need you. I'm not so sure anymore."

An uneasy silence settled on the room, unbroken until a nurse came to lead them to Tony's room. "He's just waking up from the sedation," she said, pushing Rhodey's wheelchair while Sam and Steve followed single-file, passing several empty rooms until they reached the one farthest from the waiting room. "We can only allow one person in the room at a time until the doctor approves more visitors."

Natasha was beside the bed when they arrived, talking to Tony, whose eyes were closed. An array of monitors decorated the wall on either side of the head of the bed, a dizzying amount of information scrolling across them, very little of which Rhodey could understand. Natasha squeezed Tony's hand and approached the doorway. "Next," she said lightly, her expression solemn.

Rhodey didn't even look at the others, he just wheeled himself into the room. "Hey, man," he said softly as he took Tony's hand. Tony's eyes slowly opened and fixed on him. "How are you feeling?"

Tony tried to answer, but the oxygen mask was in the way. Rhodey briefly lifted it so Tony could speak. "Lousy," he admitted.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Rhodey said once the mask was back in place. "Rest easy, we've got you."

Tony clung to Rhodey's hand and closed his eyes again.
The nurse—who introduced herself as Natalie, which made Rhodey glance back at Natasha with a raised eyebrow—came in several times to check the monitors and make some notes, then asked Rhodey if he needed anything before she left. His answer was always no.

He'd been sitting with Tony for close to an hour before the doctor reappeared. "If you don't mind coming to the hallway for a moment, I'd like to give you an update on what we know."

Tony was sleeping peacefully, so Rhodey didn't mind moving himself into the doorway.

The doctor got right down to business. "The preliminary diagnosis is still a heart attack, though there are some inconsistencies in the test results. We have communicated with his cardiologist and sent all test results for examination in case his prior history can explain what we're seeing. He is being medicated as is appropriate for a heart attack for now and he seems to be responding well. We will need to continue monitoring him for at least 24 hours; what happens after that depends on what the test results show."

"What sort of inconsistencies?" Sam asked.

"We found no blockages in his coronary vessels that would explain the symptoms. Anything else I would rather not talk about until I discuss it with his cardiologist."

"But for now he is stable," Natasha said.

"For now," the doctor agreed.
It was late, nearly midnight. The kids had long since gone to bed but the remaining Avengers waited restlessly for any further news from the hospital. The last communication had been a brief text from Nat to Clint two hours before, saying that Tony was being moved to ICU.

Clint was lounging on a couch, aimlessly channel surfing while Vision played chess with T'Challa and Wanda, Laura, and Scott played a card game. There was nothing on TV at that hour, even with the super mega cable package that Stark paid for, and Clint had just about decided to stop trying when he flipped past a breaking news bulletin on CNN. He went back and sat bolt upright, immediately pausing the screen. "Uh, guys? Take a look at this."

The frozen image showed a female news anchor beside a photo of Stark in a hospital bed, covered in wires and wearing an oxygen mask. He looked small and frail in the sea of medical equipment.

"How did they obtain this image?" Vision asked.

"However they got it, somebody's going to be in big trouble," Laura predicted.

Clint rewound the footage to the beginning of the segment--somehow Stark managed to get his systems to buffer the last hour of everything on TV, because he was a techno-genius like that--then turned up the volume.

*Breaking news from New York this hour. A photo that appears to depict billionaire Tony Stark in a hospital bed was posted to Instagram and has gone viral. The original photo, seen here with the original caption, 'there's a VIP in the ICU, omg,' was removed within fifteen minutes of posting but copies are circulating wildly, along with speculation about the nature of Stark's malady. Our experts agree that the equipment pictured indicates his heart is being monitored closely. We have not yet been able to identify the hospital, but we will provide updates as we learn new information.*

"Who the hell would post something like that?" Scott asked.

"Someone with an interest in showing Mr. Stark's weakness," T'Challa said.

"Or someone who doesn't know any better," Laura added. "The fact that it was taken down makes me think the person didn't realize what they were doing."

"Unless they know that by removing it that makes it more interesting," Clint said. "Sometimes I really hate people."

No one else said anything for a moment. Then Clint said, "I'm calling Nat. They need to know the media is going to come sniffing."

"Just a moment," Vision said. "Friday?"

"The footage has been forwarded to all four phones and to Pepper Potts," the AI reported. "Is there anyone else you wish to notify?"

"No, that will do for now. Thank you."
Rhodey was startled out of a light doze when the phones in his pockets began buzzing like angry bees. Tony was still holding his right hand, so he fished Tony's phone out of his left pocket. "Friday?"

"Upload from the compound, colonel. The media is aware of Mr. Stark's hospitalization."

He watched the short video and swore. "Can you determine who took the photo?"

"The account belongs to a female college student. By extension, it seems likely she is a volunteer or intern at this hospital."

Rhodey gently took his hand from Tony's and rolled out of the room. From the looks on the others' faces, he didn't have to ask whether they'd gotten the message. "Who wants to tell the hospital administration they have a serious problem their hands?"

Conveniently, Natalie appeared at that moment to check on Tony. When Natasha took her aside and briefly told her what was going on, she was aghast. "That's terrible! We'll contact the administrator on duty right way."

Ten minutes later, a harried-looking woman hurried down the hall toward them, accompanied by another woman who was likely the charge nurse. "I must apologize for the egregious breach of privacy inflicted on Mr. Stark by a member of our staff. He or she will be fired as soon as we determine their identity. We will be making a statement to that effect to the media shortly."

"Wait. I have an idea," Natasha said.

"And I have information about who took the photo," Rhodey added.

The next news update followed within a half hour.

A follow up to our earlier story about billionaire Tony Stark's hospitalization: The CEO of Stark Industries, Pepper Potts, has confirmed that Mr. Stark was admitted to the hospital following a cardiac event of an unspecified nature. She also provided a statement from the unnamed hospital: "We apologize to Mr. Stark and his associates for the egregious invasion of privacy involved in the release of that photograph. The individual who took the photo has been released from service and further disciplinary action is being considered. We will be reviewing our training and procedures to ensure such a breach of trust never happens again." Ms. Potts also stated that Mr. Stark has been moved to a more secure location.

Natasha appeared in Tony's room just as Rhodey finished watching the video. "Throwing them off the scent by not moving him when we say we've moved him? Smooth," he said.

She smirked. "That should prevent any civilians who may have seen us from bringing the vultures down on him. To complete the illusion, I'm going to escort Steve, Sam, and a hospital bed to the compound. Is there anything I can bring you?"

"A change of clothes, a toothbrush, and ibuprofen. I did way too much today."

She squeezed his shoulder, then stepped back. "Natalie will be bringing in a cot for you. I expect you to be on it by the time I get back."

"Since when do I listen to you?"
"Since you don't want to see what I'll do to you if you don't," she said with a wink.

Rhodey was stretched out on the cot, asleep, when Natasha returned.

When Rhodey woke again in the wee hours of the morning, the room was empty. He sat up in a panic and called for Natasha, but there was no response. A small bag had been stashed under the cot next to his phone; when he pulled out his phone to call Nat, he noticed he had a text message from her.

**Tony's cardiologist arrived, so they took him for more tests. I'm with him.**

Rhodey took a deep, relieved breath and texted back: *Thank you.* With that taken care of, he went through the small bag to find the ibuprofen, then realized he had no water.

Natalie appeared as if on cue. "Is there anything I can get you while you wait for them?" she asked kindly.

"Some water, if it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all." She quickly reappeared with a styrofoam cup complete with lid and straw and handed it to him. "As I already told Ms. Ro--sorry, Natasha--you folks are my only assignment for the night, so if you need anything at all, just holler."

Rhodey was about to let her leave, then realized he could use something else. "Restroom?"

She had to help him up off the cot, there not being anything for him to grab to help himself up, and she walked with him down the hall, perhaps afraid he would stumble. He was more unsteady than he'd like, but with everything that had happened and only a few hours' sleep, it wasn't a surprise.

Natalie was curious about his leg braces and he told her what he could as they made their way back to Tony's room. "And Mr. Stark designed them," she said.

"He would tell you he merely modified what was already available but yes, he designed them." They had arrived back at the room, but Rhodey paused outside the door to spend a little time standing before he tried to get more sleep.

If she was going to say anything else, it was interrupted by the return of Tony and his entourage. Tony's color was a little better and he no longer had the oxygen mask. He seemed like he might be awake, but Rhodey waited with Natasha in the hallway while the nurses hooked him back up to the equipment.

Natasha filled him in on what he'd missed and added, "Dr. Mann said she'll wait to draw any conclusions until after another set of tests in a few hours. In the meantime, she's going to get some sleep. You should do the same."

"Yeah, I'll get there." He gave her a skeptical look. "So you think a hoodie and blue jeans will keep people from recognizing you?"

"It worked in D.C.," she said with a smirk, tucking her hair more securely under her hood. "You're a hopeless cause, though."

He snorted. "Hard to hide the leg braces," he agreed.
"Go on," Natasha said as the nurses left the room. "I'll be right here."

Tony was awake, and watched Rhodey as he approached the bed. "Hey," he said.

"Hey yourself," Rhodey said. "You still feeling lousy?"

Tony's shoulders shifted slightly in a shrug. "Maybe a little better than lousy. But they tell me I'm not dying, so that's something."

"You seriously freaked me out, man."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault. Just don't do it again."

Tony gave him a wan smile. "I can't make any guarantees without knowing what the hell happened in the first place."

"Yeah, I know. You tired?"

"Always," Tony sighed.

"Then sleep. I'll be here, and Natasha is just outside."

Tony nodded, but seemed to resist closing his eyes. Rhodey gripped his hand and Tony visibly relaxed, his eyes slipping closed. Rhodey watched him fall asleep, both physically and in the readings on the monitors, then waited a while longer before sinking back down on the cot to do the same.

The next set of tests didn't come until it was properly morning. Natalie had finished her shift by the time Rhodey woke again, but he was fairly certain the plastic chair that materialized at the head of the cot was her doing--with that bit of assistance, he could get up without anyone's help.

Tony's morning nurse was a grandmotherly type named Donna. When Tony (and Natasha) went off for tests again, she gave Rhodey a hospital menu and suggested he order something for himself and Natasha. "Mr. Stark should be allowed to eat a little for breakfast when he gets back, so you both might as well join him," she said practically. "And that might make him more likely to eat something."

"He's not going to like the idea of hospital food," Rhodey agreed. After submitting the order (with input from Natasha via text), he went to the bathroom to clean up and change. He returned to the room before the others did, so he sat in Nat's chair and idly checked the news to see what else people were saying about Tony.

The major news outlets universally scolded the still anonymous photographer for the violation of HIPAA and medical ethics, and some even speculated about legal consequences. Tony's only role in those stories was as the innocent victim. Other stories focused on Tony's "frail health" as compared to the capable, carefree public persona he so carefully cultivated. Some even connected his poor health to his efforts on the Accords and the disagreement with Captain America, both of which were hailed as good things for the world at large. From there they would usually discuss the Accords themselves and America's shameful reluctance to ratify them, putting the American public at risk from enhanced individuals, blah, blah.

Eventually he pulled out Tony's phone. "Friday? Have any reporters figured out where that photograph was taken?"
"No, colonel. A few bloggers have correctly identified the hospital from the photo metadata, but that information has not been widely disseminated. It would appear the larger news networks do not consider it relevant to the stories they wish to tell."

"Good. Keep an eye on that."

When Tony returned, he was allowed to request breakfast, as Donna predicted. Rhodey thought he knew what Tony would want, so he'd included it in his order earlier; he turned out to be exactly right, so Tony's smoothie and oatmeal appeared about ten minutes later with the rest of the food. Donna brought a rolling table in from another room so Rhodey and Natasha could eat more easily and in Tony's company.

She came in again while they were eating and injected a syringe into Tony's IV line. "Morning medication," she said cheerfully. "Can I get you anything else?" The answer was no.

They were all but finished with breakfast when Tony's cardiologist, Dr. Mann, came in. "Tony, my dear, I have some answers for you. Hello Colonel, Ms. Romanoff."

"It was good of you to come, doctor," Rhodey said, shaking her hand.

"Nonsense. We have history, Tony and I, and he always gives me the loveliest little puzzles."

"Would you like us to leave?" Natasha asked.

"It's up to you, dear," Dr. Mann said to Tony.

"Stay. Then I won't have to explain it later."

"Should we call the others so you don't have to explain to them either?" Natasha asked next.

"Where's my phone?" Tony demanded abruptly.

Rhodey passed it to Natasha, who gave it to Tony.

"Friday, record this conversation," he said.

"Of course, boss," the AI said compliantly.

Dr. Mann waited a few seconds, then began. "Tony, dear, the stress you have been under has damaged your heart to the point that it is not beating properly. The extent of the damage tells me that you've had some symptoms you've ignored"--she gave him a look of censure--"until your heart couldn't cope and you suffered that episode. It's called stress cardiomyopathy and, fortunately, the damage is reversible. With time and medication you will heal, but you must find a way to reduce the stress in your life or it might happen again."

"So he didn't actually have a heart attack?" Rhodey asked.

"No, though many of the symptoms and initial test results are the same."

"I didn't know that could happen."

"It's an understudied phenomenon."

"You mentioned medication. I don't like medication," Tony said.

"Yes, I am well aware of that. We will try you on one medication, especially at first while you're
recovering, and then we'll re-evaluate. It is not clear whether long-term medication is beneficial, and in cases like yours where I know you'll forget to take it, we'll probably be better off discontinuing it when you're back on your feet."

"How long are we talking, here?"

"You'll need to take it easy for a month, minimum, to let your heart heal. No using your suit, no battling with your teammates, no traveling abroad, no unusual stresses of any kind. And that includes arguing with bureaucrats. Don't think I don't pay attention to what you're up to."

Tony scowled, then got a wicked gleam in his eye. "Does this mean I have a doctor's note to not deal with Ross for a while?"

"Yes, I can scold the Secretary of State for bothering you."

"Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Not while sober, no," she said with a laugh. "And you won't love me anymore once I tell you that you'll need to have some of these same tests done during the next month so we can make sure you're healing."

Tony paused. "You're right, I don't love you anymore."

Natasha spoke up. "What sort of symptoms would he have had?"

"Chest pain, numbness in the left arm, that sort of thing."

Natasha glared at Tony. "This had been going on for over six months and you didn't tell anyone? Your arm was numb back in Berlin."

"You expected something different from what I've done before? I don't have time to deal with doctors."

"Until you damage yourself so badly that you're forced to," Dr. Mann said sweetly. "Yes, we know. And we know you may kill yourself one day that way, but I would prefer if you didn't do it on my watch."

"How long until I can leave?"

"We're adjusting your medication, then we need to monitor you to make sure you tolerate the change. If you do, you can leave twenty-four hours after we're sure you're stable. If you don't, we'll make more adjustments until you're stable and you can leave twenty-four hours after that."

"So the earliest I can leave is tomorrow."

"The day after," Dr. Mann corrected. "I'd like to have you on the altered medication for a full day before declaring that you're stable."

Tony frowned. "How about you go tell them about the change in meds? And then come back, I have questions about what my AI should be watching for if this happens again."

Dr. Mann laughed. "Don't worry, dear, I told them before I came in. What do you want to know?"

The conversation quickly went into technical territory that Rhodey didn't understand, though the diagrams Dr. Mann showed of Tony's heart compared to an average heart were interesting. Tony took notes on his phone and demanded access to all of the data the hospital had on him. Dr. Mann
promised to provide everything she could manage to collect, then declared she was leaving and he could ask more questions later. "I will stay in town at least until you're discharged from the hospital," she promised. "For now you need to rest."

Tony grumbled half-heartedly as he continued to play with the display from his phone, but Rhodey could tell his energy was flagging. He followed Dr. Mann into the hall. "What should we expect for the rest of the day?"

"I've ordered an echocardiogram every four hours for the next twelve to help monitor his reaction to the medication change. Other than that, all he has to do is stay put."

"Would having more visitors be allowed?"

"Yes, but it's probably not wise. Rest is the best remedy, and having a bunch of people around is not conducive to him resting."

"What if he wants to get out of bed?"

"With the leads on him, that would be difficult. He might be able to stand beside the bed, but nothing beyond that. I don't want him disconnected from the monitors unless absolutely necessary so we have all the information we possibly can."

"All right. Thank you, Doctor."

"Always a pleasure, Colonel," she said with a smile and a salute.

During his absence, Natasha had moved to Tony's bedside and, from the sound of it, was briefly filling him in on the fact that his illness was already news. "Welcome to my life," Tony said, sounding weary. "Friday, are the PR people on it?"

"Yes, boss."

"Send the Dr. Mann conversation to Pepper and tell her I'm sorry. She'll know which details to pass on to the PR people." Tony was still manipulating the images his phone generated during the conversation about his heart, but his movements were sluggish and imprecise.

"I think it's time for you to rest. Doctor's orders," Rhodey said, plucking the phone from Tony's lap.

"I was using that, sourpatch," Tony protested lamely.

"You're exhausted. There will be plenty of time to finish later."

"Spoilsport."

"Yes, I know. Natasha will keep you company; she needs to rest, too."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "I'm all right for another day at least, but if you insist."

"I do insist."

"In that case, good night," she said.

When both Tony and Natasha were asleep, Rhodey took on guard duty. The hallway was deserted except for Donna coming every fifteen minutes to check on Tony, so Rhodey spent his time researching what was going on with Tony.
Natasha joined him in the hallway about two hours later. Tony slept until it was time for his next test, waking only when his bed started moving. As always, Natasha went with him.

They ordered lunch afterward, then the afternoon passed like the morning, with Tony dozing more often than not while Rhody and Natasha watched or napped. The passing time was punctuated by Donna doing her checks, the shift change—their new nurse was named Debbie, and she was a talker—and Tony periodically being whisked away for testing.

Tony was more alert in the evening after dinner and another test, no doubt thanks to sleeping all day, though he was uncharacteristically quiet despite not having anything to do with his hands (Rhodey still had his phone). Rhody hadn't yet asked what was bothering him when Dr. Mann returned to tell them she was declaring Tony stable and he should be able to leave the next evening.

Tony did not seem as pleased by the news as Rhody would have expected. As soon as the doctor left, Rhody sat on the edge of the bed and said, "All right, spill."

Rhody didn't look at him, preferring to fidget with the blanket. Rhody waited patiently. "Why do I bother?" Tony said finally. "I do all this shit to protect people, and for what? Even when things go right, somebody always gets hurt, and some of the people I'm trying to protect don't want to be protected by the likes of me. But still I try. This caring about people thing sucks, especially when those people don't care about you in return."

"You've wanted to try to protect people as long as I've known you. That's just how you are. But yeah, some people won't like whatever you do to help. That's their problem, not yours." Rhody paused to let his words sink in before adding, "And you know who could help you sort all that out? A therapist. You need to talk to someone, Tony, before the stress actually kills you."

Tony seemed to ignore him. "I'm thinking of throwing Rogers to the wolves. Maybe he'll understand better if he talks to the U.N. for once."

Rhody went with it, accustomed to subject changes mid-conversation. "Won't that reinforce his opinion that being subject to the U.N. isn't a good idea?"

"I have--had--a meeting scheduled with the chair of the subcommittee in two weeks. I think talking with her would do him some good. I'll send you, too, so you can record it for posterity. And also because of that house arrest thing. It's a bother that one of us has to go everywhere with them, but the alternative is the pokey, so . . ."

"How could that meeting possibly help?"

"Steve will very politely lay out all of his objections to what the subcommittee is asking for and she'll very thoroughly tell him all of the reasons his solutions won't work. It will be fun."

"Forgive me for not being convinced," Rhody said dryly.

"Give me my phone. I need to let her know about the change in attendees."

"I really don't think that's a good idea," Rhody protested.

Tony held out his hand and unwaveringly met his gaze. Rhody caved. He usually did.

"Friday, show all messages from the subcommittee chair.″ After briefly skimming the list of messages, he said, "Compose new message: My dear chairwoman, I've been benched by my cardiologist for a few weeks. Would it be acceptable for Colonel Rhodes and Captain Rogers to meet with you in my stead? They will be briefed on all current points of debate. As always, I
When he'd finished dictating, the message appeared in holographic form for review. Tony tweaked a few things, then waved it away. "Message sent, boss," Friday said.

Then he spent a few minutes glancing over his inbox, flicking messages left and right, before he stopped and looked satisfied. "Well, well, what have we here?" He opened the message attachment. It was a document on official U.N. letterhead, though Rhodey couldn't read it from his perch. "Friday, forward this to Lang and Pym."

Rhodey's curiosity got the better of him. "What is it?"

"Months of negotiation finally bearing fruit," Tony answered vaguely. At Rhodey's confused look, he elaborated. "We're allowed to monitor the activities of the "rogue Avengers" in the hopes of rehabilitation, yes? Since Lang works more closely with Hank Pym than with us, I've been working with Pym to get him on the approved list. The request has been granted, and in record time by U.N. standards."

"I thought Pym didn't like you."

"He didn't like my father," Tony corrected. "I am not my father."

"What else do you have up your sleeve?"

"Lots," Tony said with a shrug. "I have to, because many things don't pan out. Especially when you're dealing with bureaucrats. Which reminds me . . . Friday, add Rhodey to the access list for the Accords documents." Tony fussed with his phone for a moment, then had it project a list of files. "You will need to read these before the meeting with the subcommittee chair. There's a lot of material here, so you'll have to skim the various drafts of the Accords, but this background is necessary to explain what you'll be meeting about."

Rhodey eyed the lengthy list dubiously. The date stamps went back to the day Tony had brought Ross to the Avengers compound and there were files for nearly every day since then.

"There are briefs from my army of lawyers about every nitpicky detail you could possibly want, my suggested edits, Steve's suggested edits, version tracking of what has been approved or declined by the subcommittee . . . everything involved in this morass of attempted governance."

Rhodey was stuck on one thing he'd said. "You've been working with Steve on this?"

"Yes?" Tony said. "Who else would I ask about what could be improved? I mean, it would've been easier had they consulted us when writing the thing originally, but apparently they didn't know how to find us. Or something."

"But he nearly killed you."

"Oh, really? I hadn't realized that," Tony said sarcastically. "I tried to kill him, too, but I've moved on. If we're going to make this thing work, we need input from all sides."

Rhodey remembered Tony's instinctive reaction to Steve in the E.R. and knew Tony was lying to someone, probably himself, in claiming to have moved on. But again, that was an issue for a therapist to tackle. "How likely is it that the U.N. will agree to enough of the modifications to the Accords that Steve and company will be willing to sign it?"

Tony sighed, suddenly looking at least ten years older. "That is the billion-dollar question. I have to
say, the odds aren't on our side."

"But still you try."

"But still I try," Tony agreed. "The alternatives are even worse."

Chapter End Notes

When I was researching heart attacks for this fic and discovered stress cardiomyopathy was a thing (also called takotsubo cardiomyopathy), I knew I had to use that. Resources consulted on this topic included:
http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/stress-cardiomyopathy-a-different-kind-of-heart-attack-201509038239
http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-science-behind-broken-heart-syndrome-201202144256
http://heart.arizona.edu/frequently-asked-questions

Disclaimer: I am not a medical professional. While the stuff in my fics is fairly carefully researched, there are things I will get wrong (or stretch for the purposes of the story).

Also, I credit AlphaFlyer's The Futurist for inspiring some of how I handle the Accords and related legalities in this fic.
Tony's second day in the hospital was even more dull than the first, and this time Tony was awake for more of it. Rhodey considered confiscating the phone again at several points throughout the day--Tony was supposed to be resting, after all--but he didn't want to deal with a sulking Tony so he let him be.

Natasha returned to the compound for a while in the early afternoon to shower, change, and fetch something for Tony to wear that evening. While she was gone, Rhodey suggested that Tony try standing on his own two feet for a bit. It went reasonably well, once Tony listened to Rhodey's advice to take it slow.

Afterward, Tony showed Rhodey what he'd figured out so far for enabling the suit to detect if he was messing up his heart again, but Rhodey could tell something was bothering him. He wasn't sure what it might be--there were too many options--until Natasha returned with Tony's clothes and tossed them on Tony's lap. "Everyone is looking forward to seeing you," she told him.

"I really doubt that," Tony replied immediately, checking over the outfit: trousers, a collared v-neck shirt, and a suit coat, very much like what he'd worn when visiting Peter that first time. Shit, he needed to text the kid so he wouldn't freak out about what had been on the news. "I think they would all get along just fine without me."

"Maybe, but they're still glad you're coming home," Natasha said.

"Home," Tony scoffed. "I'm not sure I know what that is anymore, but I'm fairly certain it's not where half the residents hate you."

Before either of them could respond, Tony said, "Okay, wow, let's pretend I didn't say that. That was not what I meant to say."

Rhodey exchanged a glance with Natasha. "What did you mean to say?" Rhodey asked.

Tony shrugged helplessly. "I'm not sure anymore. Just . . . never mind."

"You're an important member of the team, Tony," Natasha tried to reassure him.

"Am I?" he asked bitterly. "Which team? The outlaws or the teacher's pets? No, don't answer that. I'm done talking about this." He proceeded to ignore both of them and returned to doing something on his phone.

"What are you working on?" Rhodey asked cautiously, hoping that was a safe topic for conversation.

Tony flicked the display up into the air. "Suit redesign with more protection for the arc reactor, since apparently we need that."

Discussion continued in that direction until it was time for dinner. Tony only picked at his food but Rhodey decided not to fuss at him about it.

Dr. Mann and a nurse they hadn't seen before paid them a visit shortly after dinner and told Tony to go ahead and get dressed while she finished signing the paperwork. "I've put all of your data and a list of my expectations for your activities for the next two weeks in the usual place. You have an appointment at this hospital for follow-up tests in one week; if you miss it, I will prolong your
restrictions. Any questions?"

Tony didn't have any, nor did Rhodey or Natasha. Natasha excused herself as soon as Dr. Mann left so Tony could change in more privacy. The nurse handed Tony his shoes and a white paper pharmacy bag, then unhooked him from his machines and removed the electrodes and IV line. After that Rhodey helped him change, which is to say he helped Tony stay upright once when he nearly lost his balance, but otherwise Tony managed just fine.

Then they waited, Tony fussing with his clothes and scratching uneasily at his stubble. Natasha provided a comb for his unkempt hair, then helped him fix his hair when it wasn't to her approval. "Pepper suggested taking a few pictures to release to the media," she explained when she'd finished. "Where and when would you prefer?"

"Pepper is a wise woman," Tony said. "We'll do it indoors so there's no indication of time of day. If I sit on the edge of the bed, is there anything specific to this hospital in the background?"

Natasha took a photo with her phone and showed it to him. "No, I don't think so."

Tony took out his phone. "Friday, suppress GPS tagging and timestamp on these photos." He held out the phone to Natasha. "Do your worst."

Natasha had him smile, then not smile, hold his fingers in a peace sign, and pretend to wave, and even took a couple with Rhodey in them. Tony looked them over with some discontent. "Sunglasses would really help," he said. "But I suppose if we're trying to make me look pitiful, we're succeeding."

The nurse returned to the room pushing a wheelchair. "You're all set, Mr. Stark."

"Speaking of pitiful," he said, eyeing the wheelchair like it would bite him. "I'm not using that."

"I'm sorry, but it's hospital regulations. We can allow one of your friends to push it, but you need to be in it to leave."

"It's all right, we can take a few more photos," Natasha said.

Tony heaved a put-upon sigh. "Fine."

Another round of pictures later, Natasha was pushing him out of the ICU with Rhodey trailing just behind. Rather than risk being seen using the main doors, Natasha had secured permission to use a back door intended for hospital staff that led to a side parking lot where a discreet black car was parked. The windows were tinted, so once Tony was in the back seat, only those who thought to look through the windshield might see him. Rhodey sat in back with him while Natasha drove.

Tony fidgeted restlessly with his phone while Natasha took a circuitous route to throw off any potential pursuers. He reviewed the new set of photos, then had Friday send them all to Pepper with a note that waiting until sometime tomorrow to release them wouldn't upset him. He sent a brief message to Peter, then busied himself looking at what Dr. Mann had left him in her folder on the server. The list of her expectations he displayed for Rhodey to see, too. "This is ridiculous," Tony grumbled.

Rhodey skimmed the Restricted and Allowed categories and chuckled. "I'd say she knows you better than you'd like." The Restricted section included entries like "Alcohol: none" and "Coffee: maximum 2 cups per day" while the Allowed section provided insight like "Workshop time: within reason, so long as sleep and meal schedules do not suffer."
Tony continued to complain about various items on the list until the brilliantly lit compound came into view. He fell completely silent and put away his phone as the car drew up to the building, then eased into the private garage. "If you ever decide to give up the spy business, you could do well as a chauffeur," Tony told Natasha.

She smirked as she killed the engine. "I'll keep that in mind."

Rhodey could tell Tony was relieved that no one was waiting for them in the garage. He took his time getting out of the car, gripping the door more tightly than usual; probably a bit of dizziness, he'd had that issue earlier in the afternoon when he'd been out of bed for the first time. It passed, and they got into the elevator to go up to the common areas. Tony visibly steeled himself as the elevator slowed, then stopped.

Even though the short hallway to the main room was empty, Tony hesitated briefly before stepping out. That moment of anxiety didn't show when he went down the hall and pulled open one of the doors. "There'd better not be coffee grounds in the disposal again," he teased.

Steve stepped forward first and shook his hand. "Tony. It's good to see you."

Sam was next. "Glad you're back on your feet. But you should know, I have a complaint about the equipment here that we'll have to discuss."

Tony seemed a little taken aback. "Sure thing. Whatever you need."

Hank Pym was even there, with Scott on his heels. "Thanks for this, Stark," he said, gesturing toward Scott. "If there's anything you need me to bother people about, just say the word."

"I will definitely do that." Tony nodded toward Scott. "You both are welcome here anytime."

Laura Barton hugged him. "You're going to have to give the kids some Uncle Tony time soon," she said. "They've been worried."

"That can definitely be arranged," he said. "How's tomorrow look?"

Clint shook his hand. "Hey man, you look like shit."

Tony responded in kind. "I'm still prettier than you."

T'Challa laid a hand on his shoulder and leaned in to speak to him. "$They are worried and will do whatever is necessary to help. You must allow them this."

Wanda hung back and just gave him a little wave while Vision came up and seemed uncertain whether to shake his hand or embrace him. Tony shook his hand firmly. "I am relieved to see you back on your feet," Vision said solemnly.

"Me too, buddy."

Rhodey gently directed Tony toward a chair and the others followed suit after saying goodbye to Scott and Hank. "$So, Tony," Steve began awkwardly as he sat next to Rhodey on the couch. "What happened? What do we need to know for your recovery?"

"Well," Tony said slowly, very aware of all the eyes upon him and how what he was about to say would make him sound weak, or at least too old. "$I'm not sure how to say it, so I'll let Dr. Mann do the talking. Friday, bring up the transcript." He selected the portion where she explained what happened, then the bit about his involuntary month off, and had Friday play it back.
Afterward, Tony hastened to add, "I have a list, of what's allowed and what isn't for the next couple of weeks, it's ridiculous, really, but--"

"We should see it, so we know what we shouldn't let you do," Steve said.

Tony hesitated but Rhodey nodded encouragingly. "I'll make it available," Tony says. "Later. We don't need to worry about that now."

"It sounds like we should've been worried about you for a while," Laura said softly. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Because I never do. I don't have time to deal with doctors."

"He doesn't like to admit having a weakness," Natasha added from behind him. "It's a common failing in egotistical men."

"You can stop helping," he shot back, giving her a peeved look over his shoulder.

"So instead you work yourself nearly to death. Yes, that makes sense," Wanda said sarcastically.

"There were things that needed to be done and I was the only one in the position to do them," Tony said defensively.

"Maybe it doesn't have to rest on you anymore," Sam suggested. "You being benched is a good way for us to find out where can step up."

"Yes," Vision agreed. "There must be things that can be handled by other members of the team."

"I guess we'll find out," Tony said reluctantly.

"But not right now," Rhodey interjected. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd like to sleep sometime tonight."

"Nathaniel is stirring and will wake within two minutes," Friday announced.

"That's our cue," Clint said as he and Laura stood. "Good night, everyone. Good to have you back, Tony."

The gathering dispersed quickly after that. Rhodey walked with Tony to his suite. "Will you be all right?"

"You worrywart. I'll be fine. How about you? You went from wearing those for a few hours to several days. Any complaints?"

"Not really, but we can talk about that later, too. Sleep well, Tony."

"You too."

Now that he was in the same room as his bed, Tony felt overwhelmingly exhausted. He decided to defer his long-awaited shower, preferring to fall into the welcoming bed. He was asleep within minutes.

He woke suddenly a few hours later, drenched in sweat, his heart pounding and his stomach roiling. Whatever the nightmare had been, it vanished much more quickly than the nausea it evoked.
When he could move without throwing up, he stumbled from his bed and into the bathroom. He wasn't going to sleep again anytime soon so he might as well shower.

He emerged feeling a little more human, though his hands were unsteady enough that trying to shave wasn't wise. He threw on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved tee, typical workshop garb, and headed down to the sub-basement where his work area was hidden away.

Both of his bots crowded around him when he arrived. "I have kept them apprised of your whereabouts," Friday informed him.

"Sorry guys, I've been away too long. Let's go build something, yeah?" The bots trilled their approval.

His first priority was developing the monitoring system so his heart didn't go wonky again without notice. Second was integrating the system into his suit. Since he didn't currently have a working suit, he'd have to spend some development time on that as well as on the monitoring system. Both of his previous suits had been trashed to the point it was easier to recycle the materials and start fresh than to repair them, so he was starting from scratch.

But that was all right, he had at least a month before Dr. Mann would let him back in the armor and even then he would still refuse to fly on Ross' behalf. He'd deferred producing a new suit because nonfunctional equipment was a convenient excuse to use on Ross, but he missed it dearly. That, more than anything else, was why he and Pepper couldn't make it work. He just couldn't quit.

Perhaps he should, with this heart thing on top of everything else. He wasn't getting any younger, and it's not like there weren't younger, less morally ambiguous heroes to take over. But he still felt useful in the armor in a way he rarely did outside of it, regardless of his money and fame. So he was going to make a suit with a heart monitor. God, how pathetic was he?

Out of habit, Tony found himself at the small kitchenette where he kept his coffee supplies. He thought about "Coffee: maximum 2 cups per day" and considered whether it would be better to put the coffee in extra large cups or brew regular-sized cups extra strong.

He was still debating this when Friday announced a visitor. "King T'Challa seeks permission to enter."

He didn't have any extra large cups at hand, so he put double the usual amount of coffee grounds into the french press and plugged in the electric kettle. "He can come in."

Footsteps announced T'Challa's presence; he was intentionally doing that, as Tony knew full well that he could move as quietly as a cat if he so desired. Tony didn't turn around until he'd poured hot water into the press. "Hello," he said casually, leaning back against the counter.

"You are awake quite early."

Tony shrugged. "Nightmare. You're up rather early, yourself."

"It is much later in the morning in Wakanda."

"Would you like coffee? I can make more."

"No, thank you." T'Challa perched on a stool by the workbench, near enough to converse comfortably but far enough to give Tony plenty of space.

"Did you come down here for any particular reason? I mean, you're welcome to watch me work, I
just don't think it would be a good use of your time."

T'Challa said slowly, "I wear the mantle of warrior and also of king. These do not always rest easily, for the duties required of one sometimes conflict with the other. You suffer under a similar weight, I think, though your mantles are different enough I do not know what to call them."

Tony turned and finished preparing his coffee, relishing the smell of the nearly black brew as he poured it into a chipped mug. He held the mug in both hands as he returned to facing T'Challa, who continued, "I do not wish to give up being warrior or king, but I find the navigation between them to be . . . challenging. When you first became Iron Man, it appeared that you were able to find balance. How?"

Tony ventured a sip of his coffee and shuddered; it was wonderfully terrible. "A really good assistant," he said, remembering the days when Pepper ran Stark Industries in all but name. "And a friend who would call me on my shit."

"You retain both of them, I think, yet now you struggle beneath the load. What has changed?"

"I keep trying to make things better and end up making them worse," Tony said bitterly. "So I try to do more and more and . . . well, you know what happened."

"Do you have to be the one doing the 'more and more'?"

"When it's my fault, I should be the one to clean up."

"Do you consider the fracture between you and Steve Rogers to be your fault? That appears to be the largest thing you are attempting to 'clean up' at present."

"He thinks it's my fault. I disagree. But assigning fault doesn't change the fact that I have the position and power to do something to fix the Accords mess. If I can do something and don't, then whatever bad happens is my fault."

"I do not know that anyone can prevent the Accords from bringing unintended consequences. It is certainly not upon you to change the mind of everyone on that committee. No one holds that power."

"I don't need to change all of the minds, just enough to have the majority on my side."

"Perhaps." T'Challa fell silent for a while, though his dark eyes were still fixed on Tony. "Is there anything that you have been doing that could be done equally well by someone else?"

"If I thought so, I wouldn't still be doing those things," he said. "Pepper already runs my company and all of the philanthropic foundations I fund."

"Why did the reports about your health have to go out through your Pepper? Should not the Avengers have a person to handle such things?"

"It would make sense," Tony admitted after a moment and another sip of coffee. "I'll look into hiring one."

"I have people who do the hiring for such positions on my behalf. Don't you?"

". . . yes, I suppose I do."

T'Challa nodded in satisfaction. "I suspect you will find more assistance for your burdens if you think about things in this manner. I must return to my home today, but I offer my assistance in this
way: As warrior, I can provide a perspective on proposed changes to the Accords. As king, I consider your alterations to the provisions to be just and necessary, and I believe my father would have agreed."

Tony left the refuge of his corner to go and shake T'Challa's hand. "Thank you," he said earnestly, then changed the subject. "How is our mutual acquaintance?"

"Sleeping soundly."

"Have your people been able to study the damage to the device?"

"Yes." T'Challa pulled a thumbdrive from his pocket.

Tony plugged it into his computer, then examined the schematics that popped up. "So it would be best to interface with what's left of the electronics, then," he said absently.

"That is the recommended course," T'Challa agreed. "There is no guarantee a second attempt at attaching metal to flesh would heal as well as the first one did."

"Do they have any ideas about replacing what was . . . lost?"

"One or two, but the engineers would consider it an honor to consult your work alongside their own."

"Challenge accepted," Tony said immediately, taking another swig of his coffee.

"I do not wish to add to your duties," T'Challa said uncertainly.

"I've been given a month off, remember? Inventing is more like breathing than it is like work." Usually, Tony flipped through the various angles and views provided on the drive. "When will we cross paths next? I'd prefer not to have this pass through too many hands."

"I do not know. Next month, perhaps."

"See you when I see you, then," Tony said absently, his mind already busy at work on this new project.

T'Challa laid a hand on Tony's arm. "Be mindful of your limits. We are only human."

Tony considered this a moment, then waved him away and turned back to his screens. T'Challa left him to it.

Friday's announcement of his next visitor about an hour later startled him into nearly dropping his coffee cup (it was, sadly, almost empty). He shuffled some of his displays around, then told her to let him in. Steve looked like he had just come in from a run, and Tony felt a stab of guilt for neglecting his own workout routine. He would have to check The List for what he was allowed to do.

"Tony," Steve said in greeting. "You still look tired. Did you sleep all right?"

"Would I be down here already if I did?"

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"About the nightmares?" Tony chuckled darkly. "You could have not become one of them, but you
can't take that back now."

Steve shifted uncomfortably. "I am sorry. I didn't realize how much damage I caused."

"You were a supersoldier wielding the strongest metal on earth. You should have realized the possible consequences." Not all of the damage was physical, but he certainly wasn't going to admit that aloud.

Steve didn't answer for a while; Tony turned back to his work and tried to ignore the way his heart was pounding in his chest.

"How did--" Steve started.

"Boss--" Friday interjected.

"Leave. Please. You can ask me later," Tony said tightly, breathing carefully against a rising wave of anxiety. Talking about what happened had not been wise. He could hear Steve hesitate--he couldn't look at him, not right now--then retreat when one of the bots rolled toward him.

Tony rested his head on the work table, clutching his aching chest and trying desperately to breathe normally. He thought he nearly had a handle on it when the door banged open. "Tony!" Rhodey's voice called. "What's going on, man? Friday said you were having 'difficulty'."

He raised his head and peered at the door through his transparent screens. Rhodey was rolling toward him in the wheelchair. "Just a little anxiety from an ill-advised trip down memory lane with Rogers," he said dryly.

"Jesus, Tony, get on the floor right now and put your feet up. You look like you're going to pass out and I can't help without my legs on."

Now that he'd suggested it, the floor did sound appealing. His journey from chair to floor was less than graceful if Rhodey's reaction was anything to go by, but he felt a little better once he'd made it there.

"Give me your feet."

Rhodey maneuvered close enough that he could hold Tony's feet up in his lap, the wheelchair footrests nudging Tony's thighs. It was slightly easier to breathe in this position, and Tony could feel his heart rate ease a tiny bit.

As the adrenaline rush subsided, he broke into a cold sweat and nausea churned his stomach. He swallowed repeatedly, but the nausea only worsened. He yanked his feet away from Rhodey and rolled, intending to reach the garbage can or even just the sink, but he didn't make it farther than rising to his hands and knees.

Well, at least all he'd had in his stomach was coffee; liquid was easier to clean off the floor than solids.

While he was retching, Rhodey fetched the sawdust Tony kept on hand for workshop spills. When Tony sat up on his knees, Rhodey matter-of-factly covered the puddle in sawdust.

"If I throw up a cup of coffee, does that mean I still get to drink two more after that?"

Rhodey snorted as he filled Tony's coffee cup with water from the sink. "If you throw up a cup of coffee, isn't that a sign that maybe you shouldn't be drinking coffee?"
"I'm allowed two cups," Tony pointed out. "Since I don't think they're allowed to roll over from one day to the next, I will make sure I consume my full allotment." He accepted the cup from Rhodey and emptied it before trying to stand.

"Seriously, are you all right? That looked almost as bad as when you went down a couple of days ago."

"I'm fine."

"Have you had your meds this morning?"

"No. What time is it?"

"After seven. Do you even know where your pills are?"

Tony mentally retraced his steps the previous night. "Yes," he said confidently, then corrected, "Maybe. I think they're still in my suitcoat pocket."

"Let's go find them, and then it will be time for breakfast."

"Coffee will be sufficient," Tony said, taking the broom and dustpan from Dummy and cleaning up the mess.

"Oh, no you don't. You will be eating something at every meal. All of us will be making sure of it."

Tony grumbled something about mother hens that Rhodey pretended he didn't hear. Tony saved his work and shut off the system, then trailed Rhodey out of the room.

The pill bottle was exactly where Tony thought it was, still rolled up in its white paper pharmacy bag. He took a single pill under Rhodey's watchful eye, then they went down to the common area.

Tony was greeted with cries of joy from the elder Barton children, especially Lila, who ran to him and threw her arms around his legs. He knelt down and hugged her properly. "Are you better now?" she asked solemnly.

"I will be," he said with equal gravity.

"Your face is scratchier than usual."

Tony ruefully rubbed his cheek. "Yes, I'm afraid it is. Have you had your breakfast?"

"Yes, Daddy made us smiley face pancakes," she said excitedly. "And we had bacon, too."

"Do you think your Daddy will make me a pancake?"

"I think so. Daddy, will you make Uncle Tony a pancake?"

"A smiley face pancake would be just right for your maturity level," Clint said from his post at the griddle.

Tony gave him a one-fingered response. "Since you've had breakfast already, what are you doing now?" he asked Lila.

"We're playing doctor."

"Oh, really? Who's the doctor?"
"I am!" she said proudly, holding up a plastic stethoscope. "Cooper is being you, and I'm your doctor at the hospital."

"Is that right?" Tony had to look around a bit before he saw Cooper sprawled on a pile of pillows near a couch.

"He just fell down. I should go help him."

"Yes, I think you should," he agreed, and she ran off. Instead of helping Cooper, however, she climbed on him and started tickling him.

Tony shook his head as he stood back up, still watching them. Clint slid a plate along the counter toward him. "Your breakfast."

It was a stack of two large pancakes, the top one adorned with two strawberry halves for eyes and a curved line of sliced bananas for a mouth, with a few strips of bacon at the top like hair. Tony might have made a snide comment about it, but Rhodey received an identical plate. "I'm not sure what it says about you, Barton, that you are so good at this," Tony said.

"It means I have kids, that's all," Clint said good-naturedly.

Tony and Rhodey joined Sam at the table, where there was syrup and a pitcher of orange juice set out along with cups, a stack of napkins, and a pile of forks. Tony moved a chair aside so Rhodey could get to the table, then passed him a fork and some orange juice before sitting down next to him.

He ate the fruit off the pancake first and found that Clint had even made the dough look like it had a smiley face. He doused it in syrup. "So, Sam, what was it that you wanted?"

Sam had to swallow before he spoke. "You sure you want to talk about it now? It's about medical stuff."

Tony shrugged. "Sure, why not? Are we lacking some things?"

"Yeah, I talked to the folks downstairs and we made a list. It's not long, but the most important one is an AED--automated external defibrillator--which would have been very handy a few days ago. Instead, I had to do manual chest compressions on you, which neither of us enjoyed."

"So you're the one I can thank for the bruises?"

Sam gave him a mock salute. "The alternative was you possibly dying, so by all means, thank me. There should be an AED in every building, and preferably on every floor."

"Whatever for? I don't plan on letting that happen again, and most of the rest of you are younger than I am."

"There are also guests, including one in particular who has already had a heart attack, and any number of other reasons we might need to use one. It's better safe than sorry."

"What other reasons?" Tony asked curiously.

Sam shrugged. "Anything that can make a heart stop. Electrocution, for instance. Wanda might even be able to--"

"What about me?" Wanda asked as she sat next to Sam. Vision sat on the other side of her, though he wasn't going to eat.
"We're talking about reasons a heart might stop beating. Do you think you'd be able to stop someone's heart with your mind?"

"Would you like me to try?" she asked deadpan.

"I think we'll leave that as a hypothetical," Sam said quickly. "The point is, we needed it and didn't have it, so I'd like to get it and avoid that situation again."

"Done," Tony said. "Get the list to Hill and it'll be taken care of."

"Since when is she our secretary?" Rhodey asked.

"She has performed similar tasks in the past," Tony said defensively. "She can delegate it if she needs to."

Natasha joined them, sitting at the head of the table between Tony and Vision. Her pancakes had bananas for the eyes and the strawberry halves were fangs in the banana mouth. Tony wasn't even going to ask.

"Have you thought about who will be doing what on your behalf?" she asked Tony.

"We need to hire a PR person," Tony said. "Other than that, not really."

"What, you don't want one of us doing PR?" she asked with a grin that looked a little too much like the one on her pancake.

"Are you going to show us that list of what's allowed and forbidden? I'm really curious," Sam said.

Tony sighed. "Friday, throw the list from Dr. Mann on the conference display and leave it there until I say otherwise."

"This I've got to see," Sam said, pushing back his chair. He dumped his plate in the sink before going to stand in front of the glass.

Tony watched Sam start to read, watched him snicker, then watched his eyebrows go up, and decided he didn't want to watch anymore. He rose from the table and disposed of his dishes, carefully not bumping into Barton. "Has everyone else eaten? Laura? T'Challa?"

"Laura ate with the kids. Steve and T'Challa ate just after that; I'm not sure where they are now. By my tally, we're all accounted for," Clint said without looking up from the last of the bacon sizzling in the pan.

Tony wasn't sure what to do with his hands so he picked up and threw away the bacon packaging, dumped the coffee grounds out of the french press, and put away the paper towel roll.

"Hey, I still need that," Clint said.

Tony returned the paper towel to the counter.

"You don't need to help. I've got this, and you're supposed to be on a break."

"I don't think kitchen chores are strenuous enough to be forbidden," Tony said, but he backed out of the kitchen space nonetheless. Someone touched his shoulder and he turned to see Sam.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"
"Sure."

They sat down in chairs along the railing by the conference table and Sam leaned in toward him. "While you're talking about people to hire, I'd like to suggest that we need a therapist full-time at the compound."

"Therapist as in shrink," Tony clarified.

"Yeah. Every single one of us would benefit from having someone to talk to."

"So this isn't just a way to force me to see someone? That has been tried--and failed--before."

Sam just looked at him. "You definitely need to talk to someone, Stark, but you're not the only one is what I'm saying. Think about Wanda with all she's been through. Rhodes, with the whole paralysis thing. Steve and the situation with Bucky, not to mention the skipping seventy years part. Hell, Vision would probably get something out of it too. I'm not exempt, either. And it just might help us get this team thing working again."

Tony found himself nodding. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"I know someone from the V.A. who is looking for something different. I think she'd be great."

"Send me her info, resume, the usual stuff, and tell her to come by within the next two weeks," Tony said decisively. "Are you done demanding things from me now?" he asked with a smirk.

"It's all for the common good, I swear, but yeah, I'm done. For this morning."

Tony stood and clapped him on the shoulder. "If there's anything else, just speak up." He hesitated in front of the displayed list, checking what was allowed as far as exercise was concerned (moderate walking, light weight lifting, lap swimming, and pilates; the pilates had to be a joke, he'd never actually done it), and noticed that it wasn't even eight thirty yet. The remaining hours of the day stretched out before him, empty and endless, a preview of the weeks of idleness before him, and he felt oppressed by their weight.

"Uncle Tony?" Lila's small voice asked from next to him.

He looked down at her.

"Will you read to me?" she asked eagerly. Soon after Mrs. Barton and the kids had moved to the compound, Tony had somehow found himself committed to reading a chapter a day to Lila. They had just started *The Hobbit* before he'd left for New York.

"Sure, honey." He followed her to one of the armchairs; he'd barely sat down before she was climbing into his lap and leaning back against his chest, holding onto the book with both hands. Her head narrowly missed a sore spot, but he wasn't going to say anything about it. "Do you remember where we left off?" he asked as he took the book from her.

"Gandalf and the dwarves visited Bilbo, and Bilbo has to decide if he's going to go on the trip with them."

That sounded vaguely familiar. "Right. Now for chapter two." Sitting and reading was something he remembered doing with his mother, so even though it felt like a waste of time most days, he thought it was sweet that Lila had latched onto him for this. He was never certain if he was pronouncing all those names correctly, but Lila didn't seem to mind.
When the chapter ended, he started to close the book but she put her hands on the pages. "Another chapter? Please? You promised to read to me the day you got back but you got sick instead." She looked at him with pleading eyes and how could he say anything but yes?

By the time they finished chapter three, Tony felt like he’d been talking for hours, though it had really only been about one. Well, that was one way to get through the day. Lila hopped down and took the book back to the small set of bookshelves against the wall that held the various books and toys.

Tony stood and stretched, looking around to see where everyone had ended up. The only other person in the room was Laura, and she had followed Lila and was telling her something quietly.

"Most everyone else is outside," Laura told him as Lila skipped toward the doors. "You're welcome to join us if you'd like."

"I might," Tony said noncommittally. Laura smiled at him and followed her daughter. Tony waited until he heard the door to the staircase close. "Friday, who is still in the building?"

"Captain Rogers is in the weight room. Colonel Rhodes is in the pool annex with Sam Wilson."

Tony took a deep breath and considered whether he was ready to talk to Rogers. He had a pretty good idea what Rogers had been about to ask several hours ago and, if he was careful, that was a topic he should be able to manage. Avoiding it wouldn't help in the long run, anyway.

"Hey Rogers," he said when he entered the room. The methodical blows landing on the punching bag didn't falter. Tony sat on the bench press, well within Steve's range of sight, and waited.

"Tony," Steve finally said when he stopped for a drink of water, breathing heavily. "Are you sure you can bear to talk to me now?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Tony said. "You were going to ask me about the meetings, yeah?"

Steve nodded.

"The Rehabilitation section is coming along so well that I think it will be finalized at the next meeting. The Oversight section, however, is causing a lot of heated debate. Apparently the idea of having half the panel directly represent the Avengers doesn't sit well even though that solves a lot of the problems related to disaster response. But we knew it would be an issue."

"Any comments on the Avengers-funded relief organization to address displaced persons and property damage?"

"They liked it. I'm thinking I can just rebrand the Stark Relief Foundation and take care of that even before it's official. It should help with our public image. Oh, and speaking of that, we're going to hire a PR person. Pepper and the folks at SI are great, but we need to cut some of the ties to protect both them and us, and a dedicated PR person will help clean up our public image in the long term."

"Have you looked at the news lately? You don't need to include yourself in cleaning up the public image," Steve said sourly. "It's just the rest of us that aren't faring too well."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but whatever. Our very own PR person will be a thing. Wilson also suggested that our very own therapist be a thing. Apparently he knows someone."

"Wilson always knows someone," Steve said with a small smile, then sobered. "If you hire a therapist for us, would you talk to them?"
"Would you?"

"Probably," Steve admitted. "Some people in S.H.I.E.L.D. thought I should talk to one after I came out of the ice, but Fury didn't think it was a priority so it didn't happen. So much has happened since then... it might help me understand some things better."

Tony made a noncommittal noise. "On the subject of the Accords, I forgot to mention that you and Rhodey are going to a meeting on my behalf in a week and a half. You'll be meeting with the subcommittee chair. Rhodey has to do his reading, and then I'll tell you both what we were scheduled to talk about."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Steve said hesitantly.

"It'll be fun. I told Rhodey to record it for me."

"Wouldn't it be easier for you to talk to her via video?"

"She's not a fan of technology. Given the crap they have to deal with at the U.N., I don't really blame her. Besides, arguing with bureaucrats is definitely on my 'forbidden' list, and you have to go back to acting like the leader sometime because there is no way in hell I'm keeping this 'head of the Avengers' gig any longer than I absolutely have to. There's a reason I'm no longer CEO of my own company."

"Well, if you insist."

Tony excused himself at that point, both to let Steve go back to what he was doing and to forestall the memories that were vying for his conscious attention. He directed his steps toward his workshop and asked, "Friday, what's the rundown on the news stories about me?"

She summarized what had been said thus far and the generally positive sentiments directed toward him, especially internationally where his current situation was directly attributed to his work on the Accords and the rift with Captain America. Which was mostly true, though incomplete. It's not like those were the only sources of stress in his life.

The American media was more critical of him and his work. Many outlets still supported Captain America when it came to the Accords, thanks to their suspicion of any foreign body trying to take away American rights and their dislike of the U.N. in particular.

When he reached the workshop, he sat at the computer and dashed off a message to his real estate agent about the island idea, then checked for messages from Pepper. There was one from a few hours earlier, letting him know the new photos and a follow-up statement would be released later that morning.

"The statement was just released, boss," Friday said. She was getting better at anticipating his requests.

"Alert me immediately if there are any stories from Christine Everhart."

"Yes, boss."

"All right, where were we?"
Tony immersed himself in work on his monitoring system and made significant progress before Rhodey came down--wearing his leg braces this time--to needle him into coming up for lunch. Tony grumbled but went with him, well aware that Dr. Mann would alter what he was allowed to do if he didn't cooperate.

He drank all of his coffee but only picked at his food, feeling more tired than hungry, and let the conversation flow around him, absorbing it but not participating. Mercifully, no one commented on his silence.

He was considering whether to return to his workshop or throw in the towel and go take a nap when Lila tugged on his arm. "Are you going to watch the movie with us, Uncle Tony?"

"Movie?" he repeated blankly. Evidently he hadn't been following the conversation as well as he'd thought.

Rhodey explained they were going to put the screening room to good use for once, though the movie chosen would be appropriate for the kids. Everyone else had already agreed to join the Bartons, so Tony thought it would be rude to opt out.

"Yes, I'm coming," he told Lila.

She happily started tugging him toward the stairs, then let go of him to chase her brother down the steps. The smell of popcorn wafted up as Tony followed the stream of Avengers down a floor. Vision was minding the popcorn machine while Wanda handed each person a bag as they passed. Tony declined his and hoped for a back row seat.

Lila waved to him from the front row as he came in, but her Daddy and Auntie Nat were already occupying the seats on either side of her, so all he had to do was return her wave as he went past.

The screening room accommodated up to thirty-two people in its various couches and chairs, all of which could recline for greater comfort. Pillows and throw blankets were available at the front of the room, though Tony wasn't sure if any of them had ever been used. The entire room still had that new furniture smell.

Tony settled into a chair in the back corner and immediately reclined it as far as it would go. If the movie wasn't interesting enough to keep his attention, he could get his nap without anyone being the wiser. Well, Rhodey might notice, being the only other person in the back row, but he could be counted on not to say anything. Probably.

The movie was something animated about feelings, and Tony was asleep within the first ten minutes.

Rhodey noticed about a half hour in and thought a blanket would be a good idea, but didn't want to disturb everyone else with his slow gait to the front of the room and back, so he leaned forward and asked Wanda to fetch one. She, of course, used her powers to float a blanket to him, which was probably the one thing that was more disruptive than Rhodey's walking, since the kids couldn't help but notice a flying blanket. The movie was paused while everyone turned to find out what was going on, and Rhodey had to admit that Tony was asleep.

"Why is Uncle Tony sleeping?" Lila whispered to Nat, loud enough that the whole room could hear.

"Because he's getting better from being sick, and that makes him tired," Natasha told her.
"Oh, okay. Can we watch the movie now?"

The rest of the movie passed without any additional disturbances. Tony was still asleep when it ended, and there was some spirited debate about whether to throw popcorn at him until he woke up. Kinder heads prevailed and everyone but Rhodey left the room.

Tony finally roused a half hour later. Rhodey talked soothingly to him about nothing in particular until his disorientation faded and he sat up. "Shit," Tony said eloquently, rubbing his face wearily.

"Don't worry about it, we all understand," Rhodey reassured him.

"What, that I'm apparently an old man now?" Tony groused.

"That, too," Rhodey teased. "But if you're an old man then I'm ancient, and I refuse for that to be true."

"Whatever, old-timer," Tony said as he got up and offered Rhodey a hand.

"Thanks, Mr. Stank," Rhodey replied.

Tony huffed a laugh. "All right, you win. This time."

"Always. I will always win with that one."

Tony went back to his workshop and Rhodey went with him to make a few comments on the leg braces. After that, Tony showed him the monitoring system he was working on. "I can track all of the usual vital signs, but the markers unique to this particular problem are subtle and I haven't been able to reliably pinpoint them even though I know I must still be exhibiting some of them."

"Could someone with more familiarity with biology and medicine help? Helen Cho, perhaps?"

"I've already sent Dr. Mann a message. No answer yet."

"I'm sure you'll make it work. Maybe you'll even miniaturize something."

"Pepper would like the idea of me coming up with something saleable again."

"The leg braces aren't saleable?"

"Well, yes, but they can't be mass-produced. Mass-produced means more margin, which means more profit, which means happier investors. Personalized medical equipment is great for generating good will, though, and more of that is never a bad thing."

Friday spoke as soon as he finished. "Boss, Christine Everhart has requested an interview."

"Show me."

Tony and Rhodey both read the short message. "I don't know, is it really a good idea to do a video interview right now?" Rhodey said doubtfully.

Tony shrugged. "Of all the reporters who could ask, at least she's been covering me since the beginning. I'll check with Pepper, but I don't see how it could hurt."

He sent a quick message to Pepper asking her to call him when she had a chance, then they moved on to discussing the modifications he was making to the arc reactor shielding. A few minutes later, his phone began to buzz. He put it on speakerphone.
"My dear and darling Pepper," he greeted her.

"Tony, how are you doing? What do you need?"

"I've been better and I've been worse," he said dismissively.

"He fell asleep during a kid's movie," Rhodey added.

Tony elbowed him, hard.


"Having my coffee consumption severely limited isn't my thing, either. It's fine. Can we talk about what I actually wanted to ask you about?"

"I'm all ears."

"Christine wants to do a video interview. Rhodey thinks it's a bad idea. I don't think it could hurt. What do you think?"

"Well," Pepper started, then hesitated. "If you're going to talk to her, you need someone there to stop you if you start saying something you shouldn't. Rhodey, you might be able to do that. And you're going to need a very good makeup person, Tony. You look pretty terrible in those pictures."

"Wasn't that the point? And give me a break, I spent two days in the hospital after dealing with stubborn bureaucrats for three days. Nobody would look fantastic after that."

"You've got everyone thinking you look pitiful, that's for sure," Pepper said. "It will be interesting to see how the stock fares on Monday." She sighed. "Tell you what. I would like to see you, but I have a meeting I can't miss on Monday. Tell Christine you're available for an interview on Tuesday afternoon. I can arrive Monday evening, and we'll have to hope that's enough time for me to whip you back into media-ready shape."

"You are perfect and beautiful," Tony said. "See you soon."

"Rhodey, keep an eye on him. Tony, please take care of yourself," she said, then ended the call.

"There, see? It must not be a terrible idea or Pepper wouldn't go along with it."

"Or she knows you'd do it whether she agrees or not, and this way she can at least make sure you don't look ghastly," Rhodey retorted.

"I don't look that bad."

"You haven't shaved since before the hospital."

"I wanted to see how it looked with a few days' growth."

"Like a homeless person," Rhodey said flatly.

"Just for that, I'm not going to shave until Tuesday."

"Suit yourself," Rhodey said, throwing up his hands. "At least I can say that I tried."

Friday interrupted. "Captain Rogers wishes to inform you it is time for dinner."
"Tell him we'll be there in a few minutes," Rhodey said.

"What is it with the obsession about food around here?" Tony grumbled as he saved their work.

Sam sat next to him at the table. "I sent you the info I mentioned. Is it all right if she comes on
Monday to talk to people and do the whole interview thing?"

"That should work," Tony agreed, realizing that not only had he not noticed when that information
arrived, he hadn't warned anyone (like the Human Resources people) that this therapist person would
be coming to interview for a job they didn't know existed, much less was available.

He leaned over to Sam. "On second thought, to keep the HR people from wanting to kill us both,
how about any day after Tuesday? If transportation is a problem, we can take care of it."

Sam nodded. "That should be fine. I'll let her know."

Tony pulled out his phone under the table, quickly located the message, and forwarded it to Hill with
a vaguely apologetic note about the situation. He was fairly certain Hill wasn't actually in charge of
HR things, but he couldn't remember who was, and she'd make sure to notify the right person. She
was good like that.

God, he needed a new assistant if people were going to expect him to do more than just be Iron Man
and invent stuff. How he'd managed this long without one was a mystery to him and probably to
everyone around him as well.

After dinner, some of the group went outside to play lawn darts. Tony opted to stay inside with the
intention of going back down to his workshop with Rhodey, but then he noticed that Steve was on
the balcony, standing at the railing and looking down on the game.

"I thought you went down with them," Tony said as he stepped outside, Rhodey just behind him.

Steve smiled ruefully. "I don't really fit in, remember?"

"Bullshit. You're closer to their age than I am, and you've always been a hell of a lot better of a
leader than me. You're also way better at making friends."

"That's true," Rhodey chimed in as he sat in a chair near the railing.

"I don't know about that," Steve said reluctantly. "Was there a reason you came out here?"

"That's it?" Steve said in disbelief.

"That's it. But if you'd like to talk about something else, I suppose there's nothing stopping you."
Tony sank into a chair near Rhodey and waited to see what Steve would do.

Steve took a deep breath, glanced at the game down below, then sat in a chair on the other side of
Tony. "I'm wondering about what else will need to be done while you're recuperating, other than the
Accords. You seem constantly busy, but I very rarely understand what you're busy doing."

"All right." Tony pulled out his phone and flicked it so the display projected in front of them.
"Friday, display all messages received during the past week, grouped by sender. Display them as
small icons rather than a list."
Clusters of small squares appeared, so many of them that the display area had to double in size. "Now add all sent messages, telephone calls, and documents edited."

The clusters devolved into sheer clutter across every inch of the display. Tony pinched some together and told Friday what to label them. When he was finished they were left with categories arranged from largest to smallest, labeled Accords, Accords Lawyers, Ross, Ross Lawyers, Avengers, Stark Industries, Inventing, and Iron Man. "These last four took up all of my time before six months ago. Lately I've been busy with other things. Iron Man wouldn't even be here except I was finally working on new armor this morning."

"Finally?" Steve repeated. "You mean you haven't had working armor since Siberia?"

"Nope," Tony said, then gestured at the Ross categories. "This guy is why." He explained briefly what had been going on with Ross' repeated efforts to have him and the remaining Avengers act on his behalf. "I have recordings of everything, if you want to take the time to listen. I don't trust that old snake as far as I could throw him. By the way, well done on the Raft breakout. He wanted me to look into it, but the AV equipment suffered an unfortunate series of malfunctions during the time immediately before and during the prisoner escape. I told him if he'd used Stark tech, it wouldn't have happened."

"Is that true?"

"Not a word," Tony said smugly. "I planted a scrambler when I paid a visit to that ridiculous ocean pokey. As soon as the alarms went off, the scrambler nuked the data. I figured it would be covering my tracks but you beat me to it."

Steve looked dazed. "You would have helped them escape?"

Tony scoffed. "You saw how they were being kept, Wanda especially. That's not what I signed on for. Also, Ross holding them was almost entirely illegal."

"So that's where the Ross Lawyers bit comes in?"

"Sort of. That's all of the interactions I get to have with my lawyers as a result of interactions with Ross. Right now he's threatening to sue me personally for harboring all of you."

"You've got a doctor's note not to have to deal with Ross at all," Rhodey reminded him.

Tony glanced at him, then Steve, before returning his attention to the display. "Yes, but Ross will be a pest until he's gone or we are. Part of the Avengers category is an inquiry I have in with my real estate guy about buying us an island so we aren't subject to U.S. jurisdiction anymore. I still have to run that past the lawyers, though. It might be quicker to wait until someone else is appointed Secretary of State, but . . ." Tony shrugged.

Steve shook his head slowly. "And on top of that is everything with the Accords."

Tony nodded. "Friday, keep the current categories and display the last six months, not just the last week."

The Accords and Ross categories dwarfed everything else to the point that only part of them could be seen on the display. The Avengers category wasn't far behind. "What the hell is that?" asked Clint from behind them.

"Who won?" Tony asked.
"My team, of course. But really, what is that?"

"Tony's life for the past six months," Steve said.

"Without considering eating or sleeping or anything like that," Rhodey added.

Clint whistled. "Shit, man, no wonder you're in bad shape."

"Speak for yourself," Tony protested.

"You should not have had to do all of this alone," Laura said.

"The question is, how can we divide it now?" Natasha added. "Tony is supposed to avoid unusual stress for the next month at least. This all looks like unusual stress."

"I believe the typical method of overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles is to 'divide and conquer'," Vision said.

"Yes," Wanda agreed. "Each of us can pick an area to be responsible for and that will be our job."

"We should all be contributing to the Accords," Natasha said. "It's the best way to amend them in a way that will make everyone happy."

"I have been working with Tony on the Accords for nearly six months," Steve admitted. "But I agree, more eyes can only help."

Tony spoke up. "If I may make one addition? It has been suggested that several hires need to be made as far as . . . support staff goes. If one of you will take point on that, Hill would probably appreciate it." He wasn't fully on board with the idea of splitting everything up, but if he wasn't going to be allowed to do it all, that way might keep more of the balls in the air.

Natasha volunteered for the hiring post, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"We'll talk about that tomorrow," Tony promised. "And Friday, permission to access, but not edit, all files related to the Accords, Secretary Ross, and the Avengers is granted to all present. Distribute new messages according to these categories and alter the permissions as appropriate."

"Yes, boss."

By the time they went to bed they all had a general idea of what they'd be working on for the next month but, in Tony's words, "You have a lot of homework."

As Tony fell asleep, he wasn't sure if he should feel relieved that things would be taken care of, smug that it would take so many of them to handle the things he'd been dealing with by himself, or melancholy that his life could be so easily compartmentalized and distributed for others to manage.

He slept poorly, frequently waking up with things to do or things to tell the others circling endlessly in his mind. He made notes for himself every time he woke so he wouldn't have to worry about remembering it all later, but still sleep eluded him.

Fortunately, this also meant that nightmares were absent; apparently he didn't spend sufficient time asleep for any to take hold.

But the night passed slowly and, when the sky began to lighten outside his windows, he groaned at
the prospect of facing the day drowsy and out of sorts.

He was dozing and feeling like this was the time he'd finally get at least a consecutive hour's sleep when there was a light knock on his door that jolted him suddenly and fully awake. He stumbled to the door, cursing all the way. "What the fuck do you want?" he snarled, jerking the door open.

It was Rhodey. "Nobody had seen you yet so I was appointed to check on you," he said. "Bad night, huh? Take your meds and go back to bed. I'll make sure you aren't bothered for the rest of the morning."

"Thanks, man," Tony said wearily.

"Go take your meds. I'm not leaving until I've seen you do it."

Tony sighed. He disappeared into the bathroom to fill a glass with water, then found the bottle and took a pill.

"Is there anything I can do or get for you that will help?"

Tony scratched his scalp, uncertain how his hair had gotten so grimy in the single day since he'd showered. "No, I don't think so."

"I'll come back in a few hours to see how you're doing. Sleep well."

He closed the door and climbed back in bed, curling up with his back to the door and staring at the wall. He started idly contemplating the best way to use Rhodey's suit to support Rhodey's legs and hoped for sleep.

The next time Rhodey poked his head in, Tony was motionless on the bed, his breathing deep and even. He carefully closed the door again and breathed a sigh of relief. "Friday?" he ventured quietly, hoping the AI was integrated into Tony's room despite her absence in most of the rest of the building--Tony had said it was a privacy thing for the other Avengers, but Rhodey knew it was because Tony hadn't really intended to be living here full-time. If he'd planned to live here, his AI would be available everywhere, like Jarvis had been in Malibu and the Tower.

"Yes, Colonel?" she answered, her volume matching his.

"How long has he been asleep?"

"Thirty minutes."

It had been two and a half hours since Rhodey's last visit, so that wasn't ideal, but at least it was something. "Would you let me know when he wakes up?"

"Yes, Colonel."

Tony woke with ideas for his new project buzzing in his head, so he got up and went straight to the workshop to test them out on the more robust computer system there.

He had been there maybe five minutes and was already deep in his work when Rhodey strolled in. "I see you didn't even bother to change. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Tony stared blankly at him for a long moment. "Friday, what time is it?"
"One forty-two p.m.," she said promptly.

"You slept through lunch; we didn't want to wake you. I brought a smoothie," Rhodey said, setting the tumbler on the desk.

Tony grabbed it and took a swig. His eyebrows rose and he took another drink before speaking. "I have no idea what's in this, but it's good."

"Wanda made it for you."

"She can make me smoothies anytime. Friday, add her to the official list," Tony said, turning back to his screens.

Rhodey refrained from commenting on the idea that Tony had an official smoothie-makers list. "I take it you were inspired?" He leaned a hip against the table but didn't try to see what Tony was working on.

"Yes, but I'm not ready to share with the class. Oh, and I had Friday run simulations on the variations for the legs on your next suit. You're welcome to look at the results and let me know what seems most promising."

"Sure, I can do that." He moved to the smaller workstation against the wall and Friday talked him through what he was seeing.

Tony paid no attention after he was sure Rhodey was settled in and returned his focus to the delicate circuitry he was working with. He wasn't worried about coming up with something as far as the larger device was concerned, but making sure it connected in the right places and the right ways would be a challenge. He did love a challenge.

"Tony, is there a reason all of these simulations concern possible injuries?" Rhodey asked after a while.

"Stress testing," Tony said absently. He touched his screen a few more times before looking up. "We're already figuring out the best ways to support walking and standing, and I was concerned that having something like those braces inside the suit would cause additional injury under certain conditions. So I used recorded data about actual damage we've both taken in the suits and used it for the simulations."

"That's . . . very thoughtful of you."

"I do try," Tony said with a brief smirk. He closed out his files and went over to Rhodey's station. "Any clear winners or losers?"

"Not really. They all have pros and cons."

They were comparing designs and discussing how to tweak them when Friday interrupted. "Boss, I've been asked to convey a message."

"Go ahead."

"Uncle Tony, we're going to go swimming now, but after that will you come up and read to me?" Lila's voice came through Friday's speakers.

Rhodey laughed. "She's a determined little girl. She was asking about you while you were still sleeping, too."
"Friday, let her know that Uncle Tony will read to her before dinner. Where is Natasha?"

"Natasha Romanoff is with the Barton family in the pool annex."

"I'll talk to her later, then. For now, a shower and some clothes."

"Don't forget a shave," Rhodey added.

"Oh, no you don't. I'm not shaving until Tuesday, just for you."

"Hobo," Rhodey grumbled as they left the workshop and headed toward the elevator.

"Cripple," Tony jibed in response.

"No fair," Rhodey said. "That's not my fault and I can't change it. You are fully capable of using a razor."

"Ease up, sourpatch, I'm only teasing."

"Yeah, I know. You're a bum like that."

Tony started to leave the elevator. "What are you going to do?"

"I should probably work on all that reading I have to do for the meeting. Or I could just find Rogers and have him give me the short version."

"Start with our annotated version, then skip ahead to the most recent round of lawyer opinions and the version I brought back with me most recently. Speaking of which, I have no idea what happened to it after I got back. Friday, what happened to my paperwork after I returned from New York?"

"Your briefcase is in the office," Friday informed him.

"There you go. It's in the office. I'll have Friday scan it before I go to bed tonight."

"Don't worry, I won't have gotten that far by then," Rhodey said ruefully.

Tony gave him a jaunty wave and finally let the elevator doors close.

As soon as Rhodey couldn't see him anymore, he could feel his shoulders slump. The mere thought of having to face everyone had him wanting to crawl back into bed. Yesterday had been far too much togetherness time; he wasn't used to it and right now he didn't feel able to handle it. Despite ending up with a reasonable amount of sleep (for him), he just felt so goddamn tired.

Well, the shower would help, as would nice, strong coffee. After all, he hadn't had his coffee allotment for the day yet.

Despite his reluctance, dealing with everyone after his shower and coffee wasn't as bad as he feared. Lila provided a convenient distraction at first, and by the time they were finished with the day's chapter, it was like he'd been around all day.

After that, the conversation was entirely speculation about where else HYDRA might be lurking. Steve refused to believe that Rumlow had been the last head of the insidious organization, despite the lack of any discernibly HYDRA-related activity since the incident in Lagos. Tony also suspected there were still loose ends and had a portion of the compound mainframe plugging away at the documents leaked when S.H.I.E.L.D. fell to locate any as-yet-unknown HYDRA operatives. So far, no luck.
He didn't contribute to the conversation, preferring to listen and thumb through the Sunday newspapers that had been waiting for him. Others had obviously read them first, but he didn't begrudge them that. He'd made it clear everyone was welcome to use them, just make sure they remained intact until he'd seen them.

Natasha sat down next to him. "I already talked to Sam about the therapist thing," she said, picking up a newspaper of her own and idly leafing through it. "What other positions are we making available?"

He told her about the PR person, then said, "I'm also thinking about a PA. That is, unless you're available."

She smirked. "You can't afford me," she said. "A PA for you, or for the team as a whole?"

"That depends on how much shit I have to still keep track of once I'm back to my usual slate of activities," Tony said. "Maybe one of each? No, forget it. I don't want to deal with that right now."

"So a therapist and a PR person. Consider it done. I'll let you know when interviews are happening in case you want to watch."

"I'd appreciate that," he said.

Rather than getting up to leave as he expected her to do, she sat and looked at him in that inscrutable way of hers. "If all this--" she gestured with her finger to signal the room and everyone in it, "is too much, you can go somewhere else for a while and no one would be offended." As if on cue, the conversation around them suddenly grew louder; they'd changed topics and were now talking about something politics-related, possibly the U.S. presidential election.

"What happened to being a team player?" he asked sarcastically.

"Knowing and respecting your limits helps the team," she said earnestly. "Especially right now when you're recovering from a fairly serious medical issue."

"Right," he said lamely, appearing to study the paper in front of his nose. She touched his arm briefly, then left him alone.

He continued the appearance of reading the paper for a while afterward, though his mind wasn't absorbing what he was seeing. The conversation changed from politics to food--always a more agreeable topic--and someone started making dinner, judging from the smells that began to emanate from the kitchen area.

When he'd finished skimming the physical papers in front of him, he pulled out his phone and pulled up the online Wall Street Journal to see if they'd released any sort of analysis about what his health issues would mean for Stark Industries. The weekend edition had been published before the news about his release from jail, er, hospital.

There was nothing yet. Tony thought it likely that the stock would dip at least somewhat since he was still majority owner of the company, but it wouldn't take a significant hit since everyone knew he wasn't very involved in day-to-day operations anymore. Time would tell, and he could discuss any needed mitigation when Pepper arrived. The interview with Christine Everhart might even help.

Lila wanted him to sit next to her for dinner, which he agreed to, but when he stood up from the couch he had a bout of dizziness that nearly forced him to sit again. He shook it off and moved to the table, hoping no one else had noticed.
Between Lila on one side and Cooper on the other, they kept up the conversation for the entirety of dinner, so long as Tony inserted short responses and questions in the appropriate places. Afterward, Tony wasn't even certain what he'd eaten, but he knew he'd needed to; he was able to stand up from the table with no hint of the earlier dizziness.

When everyone had eaten and the older kids were put to bed, the Avengers seemed to wordlessly agree that it was time to talk about their newly assumed responsibilities. Each group settled in a different corner of the common room and, from the conversations, it sounded like they had used their mornings to start reading all of the material Tony made available.

Wanda went with Steve and Rhodey to the conference area to discuss the Accords, though she was also going to be working with Clint and Natasha on all things Avengers-related. Some of it was admittedly rather mundane--ordering groceries, arranging for laundry, and the like--but it still had to be done.

For now, Natasha sat with Vision and Sam at the kitchen table to debate Ross and whether what he'd been doing was even legal (it was a matter of concern to Tony's lawyers, as well).

That left Clint as the only Avengers-related group member, which meant he wanted Tony to talk to him about how things were and why they were the way they were. Which meant Tony more often than not felt defensive about his decisions to see to many of these things himself. It was a security issue.

"I don't know, man, it feels like a lot of this could be done by a trusted assistant," Clint said after a while, studying the lists of things and who they were handled by. "The rest could be done by us, especially if it's slow like it's been lately."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "About these trusted assistants," he said. "Do you have one? Because I only ever had the one, and she's got bigger fish to fry these days."

"So we need to find someone else who we think we can trust," Clint said, as if it was that simple. "Nat volunteered for hiring duties, right? She's usually pretty good at knowing who can be trusted."

"I suppose," Tony said reluctantly. The idea of allowing someone new into the Avengers space set off all sorts of alarm bells in terms of risk and possible infiltration, but hell, even the cleaning staff had to pass security checks that were just as rigorous as getting top secret security clearance for the government, so perhaps he was worrying unnecessarily.

He was probably worrying unnecessarily. That was sort of his thing these days.

"Hey Nat, add 'Avengers Assistant' to your list of people to hire," Clint called over to her.

She nodded once and they all knew it was as good as done.

Clint didn't have much else to ask at that point, so he wandered over to listen in on the Ross conversation.

Tony debated going down to the workshop, but after the flood of inspiration earlier, he had nothing more to offer. That, in truth, was as much of the reason he didn't yet have working Iron Man armor as the excuse about Ross; he just wasn't coming up with ideas the way he used to. His mind used to feel like a jumble of plans and solutions and interesting notions that would spill out in the workshop in all of the various things he'd design.

Now his mind felt empty, a well run dry. Certainly there were improvements he could make to the armor, variations he could try for Rhodey, or tweaks he could test on his other project, but it all felt...
dull, uninspired, useless.

Useless. Why have someone like him around if he couldn't improve the tech, find new ideas, prove himself a helpful teammate? He'd been calling himself an active duty non-combatant to Ross, because really wasn't that all he was? The financier and equipment guru for the team formerly known as the Avengers. The consultant.

The weariness that had been his constant companion for months seemed heavier than ever, and the word the media were now using for him rose to mind: vulnerable. Yes, so very vulnerable. He'd always been vulnerable, why else build a metal suit? But now he was exposed--like a nerve, Bruce had said once--his weakness made known, like a snail without a shell.

And the thought of going back in the armor, as protective as it was, made him hesitate after what had happened the last two times. Why Rhod ey didn't share his hesitation was a mystery; him being reluctant to don armor that had left him paralyzed was understandable, and yet he seemed to look forward to being back in the sky once they'd gotten his legs figured out. Maybe he'd ask Rhod ey about that sometime.

"Tony?" Steve's voice broke into his reverie. He was standing several feet away. "Would you mind helping me explain some of the changes we've suggested for the Accords? You have a better grasp of their language than I do."

"I think I can manage that," Tony said and followed him to the conference table. "What do you want to know?"

The discussion lasted for hours, but was far more productive than any of the committee meetings. Wanda was a quick study, Rhod ey had long dealt with government lingo, and Steve had, of course, been working on it for months already. Still, there were questions about what had been meant when the document was first devised (some of which Tony didn't have answers for, not having been there) and at the end Clint, who had joined them at some point that Tony hadn't noticed, asked, "So is this in effect while the changes are being made?"

"The original version is in effect until all amendments are accepted by the subcommittee and presented to the U.N. panel for approval," Tony said, trying very hard to remember the nuances involved. It really was quite complicated. "But, due to the bombing, not many nations officially signed in Vienna. Some have signed since then, but nowhere near all 117 nations that previously pledged support. The U.S. had not pledged support and has not signed. Also, nobody that has signed has actually ratified it, which is what puts teeth into any of the enforcement provisions. Until that happens, it's all an 'in good faith' sort of deal."

"Hold that thought," Clint said. He rolled his chair toward the other table. "Hey, guys, I think you need to hear this. It might explain a few things."

Vision, Natasha, and Sam moved to the conference table and Clint had Tony repeat what he'd just said.

"Is that why you put up with Ross' shit?" Sam asked. "The entire folder is a steaming pile."

"I put up with Ross' shit because otherwise you're all back on the Raft, or worse. He doesn't seem to care about international agreements--ironic, given his position--or about the fact that none of you have done anything illegal according to U.S. law," Tony replied, then added, "Well, Wanda's immigration status is still . . . disputed. They could try to make something of that, but they haven't so
"She's not a U.S. citizen and they don't grant visas to weapons of mass destruction'," Steve quietly quoted what he'd said in Berlin.

"Right," Tony said wearily, casting a wary glance at Wanda, who seemed more shocked than angry. "I have people working on that."

"How long have they been working on it?" Wanda asked.

"Months," Tony said frankly. "Your arrest in Germany set us back quite a bit."

"How soon could that be resolved?" Steve asked.

Tony shrugged. "It depends on a lot of things. My lawyers think the best bet is to file for a work visa under the Avengers Incorporated name, but we have to finalize the incorporation first; that has hit a few snags along the way. Moving our base outside of U.S. jurisdiction would solve some additional problems, but that's more of a long-term solution. I have people working on that, too."

"Is all of that somewhere in the files we have access to?" Natasha asked.

"Ah, yes. I think it's part of the 'Avengers' category."

"I don't remember seeing that," Clint said.

"Friday can help you find it," Tony replied. "Is there anything else you have a burning desire to know? What time is it, anyway?"

It was nearly midnight, so the consensus was that sleep needed to happen before anything else could be reasonably discussed. Rhodey herded Tony off to bed as soon as that decision was made; they could all see Tony was exhausted, though he wouldn't have admitted it. The rest of them stayed put for a few more minutes.

"So what I'm hearing is that Tony has been busting his ass on our behalf all this time," Clint said as soon as Tony and Rhodey were out of the room. "Am I hearing what everyone else is hearing?"

There were nods of agreement around the table.

"Does anyone else feel really shitty about that? I mean, I know I've been giving him a hard time about some things, only to find out we nearly killed him."

"He has always had trouble delegating, so we don't bear all of the blame," Natasha said.

"But we should have seen what was happening and stopped it," Steve said firmly. "We haven't been a team, for a lot of reasons. We need to step up and take care of this, now and going forward."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Given how exhausted he'd been when he went to bed, waking up in the wee hours of the morning to his stomach growling was not Tony's idea of a good time. At least it wasn't a nightmare . . .

He stumbled down to the communal kitchen, grumbling the entire way. When he arrived, he had to figure out what to eat and he stared into the depths of the refrigerator blankly. He didn't want to have to do anything like warm something up, he just wanted to eat something to shut his stomach up so he could sleep. Was that really too much to ask?

He saw the toaster and thought of bagels, but had no idea where bagels would be, if they had any. The ever-present cornflake dispenser was next to it, and that seemed to fit the bill just fine. All he needed was a fucking bowl. Where did they keep the fucking bowls?

He was in the midst of opening every cabinet and straining to peer into their dark depths--turning the lights on would guarantee he'd not be able to get back to sleep--when Vision's head popped out of the cabinet to his right. "Might I be of assistance?"

"Jesus Christ!" Tony yelped and dropped the mug he'd just decided to use as a bowl. It landed on his foot. "Don't startle me like that. I have a heart condition, you know."

"My apologies," Vision said, withdrawing from the cabinet. He reappeared a moment later, rounding the corner like a normal person. "Might I be of assistance?" he repeated.

"I'm good, thanks," Tony said absently, considering his mug of cornflakes and debating whether it was worthwhile to find a spoon. He decided it wasn't. "Just needed a snack, so I'll be on my way."

"Of course," Vision said, standing aside to let Tony pass him. "I have a question for you, when it is convenient."

Tony stopped in his tracks. Vision was letting him not deal with it right now, if he wanted, but if he let it be, he was going to wonder what on earth Vision had to ask him. Dammit. "What's your question?" he asked, turning around and putting the mug to his mouth to suck some cornflakes out of it, as you do when you lack a spoon.

"You mentioned Wanda's status is problematic. Do I have a status that I need to worry about?"

"Uh, no. You don't. Because Wanda is a citizen of another country, the U.S. has certain rules about how long she can stay and under what circumstances."

"Am I a citizen of this country, then?"

Shit, were they really going to do this now? It looked like yes, they really were going to do this now. "No, No, you're not. This country--well, all of our countries--don't have a category for a sentient non-human being. As far as they're concerned, from a legal perspective, you don't really exist. Which could get interesting if you ever commit a crime. So please don't. That sounds like a paperwork nightmare waiting to happen."

"But the United Nations included me for the purpose of the Accords. Do they have a category for me?"
"They just know you are powerful and could be dangerous, so you must be controlled. The specifics of what you are or aren't don't matter."

"I see," Vision said thoughtfully. "I am sorry, I am keeping you from your bed. If I have any further questions, I will ask them later."

"You do that, buddy," Tony said. "Just don't pop up on me like that again."

"Yes, of course."

Predictably, it took a while for Tony to get back to sleep afterward. When he didn't make an appearance for breakfast, Rhodey again came to find out what was up. He knocked lightly, then opened the door a crack when there was no response.

"What?" Tony demanded groggily.

"Just making sure you're still alive and everything," Rhodey teased, slipping into the room and closing the door behind him. "Another bad night?"

"I had the 'sorry, the government doesn't think you're a person' conversation with Vision at 3 a.m. So, yes and no."

Rhodey winced in sympathy. "If it's any consolation, I come bearing a smoothie," he said, holding up the cup. "Wanda wanted me to bring it."

"Breakfast in bed? What am I, an invalid?"

"She's being nice. Don't be a dick about it."

"I enjoy being a dick sometimes. People don't talk about how "vulnerable" you are when you're a dick," Tony grumbled, throwing back the sheet and sitting up on the edge of the bed.

Rhodey handed him the smoothie and the pill bottle. Tony muttered about mother hens but took his medication. "Did you want to try to get some more sleep?" Rhodey asked.

"What I need to do is put in some workout time."

"The physical therapist is coming at nine-thirty if you'd like to join me," Rhodey said with a grin.

"Oh, no. That woman isn't a therapist, she's a torture device. I've watched enough of your sessions to know I want no part of that. I can, however, be present as moral support. From a treadmill on the other side of the room."

"Deal."

It was already nearly nine, so Tony changed into workout appropriate clothes, and they went to the common area to drop off the empty smoothie cup. Everyone else had already scattered after breakfast—to do what, Tony wasn't sure, and he realized that despite the group having been back together for over a month he had no idea of their routines—so it was a quick stop before heading down to the workout room.

Rhodey warmed up with a short stint on a bike; Tony settled in on a treadmill within sight of the mats where Rhodey would be working with the physical therapist. The session lasted a half hour, after which Rhodey was drenched in sweat and Tony was barely winded. Tony moved over to the free weights and did some reps while he waited for Rhodey.
Natasha and Wanda entered the room as the physical therapist left. "Ladies," Tony greeted.

"Did I hear that Pepper is coming?" Natasha asked as she and Wanda took adjacent treadmills.

"Yep. She'll arrive this evening," Tony told them as Rhodey approached in the wheelchair. "Hey, man, how you feeling?"

"Exhausted," Rhodey said. "I need a good, long soak."

"That can be arranged," Tony said cheerfully, taking control of the chair at Rhodey's wave of permission and pushing it past Wanda and Natasha. "Smoothie lady, scary lady, we will see you later."

Wanda smiled at them. Natasha nodded. Neither of them were sweating as much as he would expect them to at the speed they were running.

"Running is something I will never do willingly," Tony said, pushing Rhodey toward the pool annex, which also housed a generously sized hot tub.

"Never say never," Rhodey warned. "But you're definitely safe for now. Dr. Mann would hunt down anyone who tried to make you run right now."

Sam and Clint were in the deep end of the pool, playing some sort of game involving water guns and tiny targets strung up along each wall, while Vision watched and, apparently, kept score. Tony and Rhodey stopped for a moment to watch through the windows. "Do you think Vision can swim?"

Rhodey mused.

"I have no idea, but I kind of want to push him in and find out. I'm a dick like that."

"Yes, you are," Rhodey agreed.

At lunch, Tony and Rhodey were the only ones who were freshly showered; everyone else would be continuing their training that afternoon. Tony contemplated going down to the workshop while everyone else was occupied, but decided watching the others train would be informative. It might give him some ideas for better gear.

Clint started out the session by leading them in stretches, then Natasha took over to work on agility, then Steve had them doing some tactical drills. What Steve was trying to convey by description, Tony got the idea to try to do in hologram, so he pulled out his phone and began jotting down some notes.

He was in the midst of this when Friday said, "Boss, Ms. Potts' plane is ten minutes out."

"Hey Rhodey, want to go welcome Pepper?"

Rhodey silently looked at him for a minute. "I think it would be better if you went by yourself," he said. "You two need to hash some things out."

"All right, catch you later." Tony quietly slipped out of the room with no one else the wiser.

He was standing at the edge of the landing pad when Pepper's plane, a cross between his old private plane and a quinjet, carefully touched down. The hatch opened and the familiar figure stepped out; Tony raised a hand in greeting but waited to speak until she came closer. She stopped just outside the
"Hey Pep, how are you doing?" he said, trying to sound casual.

Pepper's eyes quickly scanned him up and down, as if looking for injuries. "Tony. What have you done to your face?"

"Don't worry, I'll shave before the interview," he said quickly. "I only left it like this because it annoys Rhodey." In the background, Pepper's P.A. led the two members of the flight crew toward the main building, all of them with baggage in tow.

"Of course it does, you look like a vagrant," she said, her tone fond. "Oh Tony, when Rhodey called about what happened, I feared the worst." She embraced him gently.

"I know. I'm sorry," he said, carefully returning the embrace without making it obvious that he would love to hold tight and not let go for a while. As soon as she began to pull away, he released her lest she think he was trying to pull something.

"But you'll be all right? It will heal, that's what she said?"

"With time and rest," Tony confirmed. "And also a little bit of medication, but we don't need to spread that around." He hesitated, then ventured, "I've missed you.

"I've missed you, too," she said softly. "But I don't--I still don't see how we can make this work if you're going to be here and I have to be there."

"We can figure something out," he said, trying not to sound pleading even though he was. "I'm not supposed to travel much right now, but I can commute when I'm better."

"Really, Tony? You would commute from California to here regularly? And what about all that work you've been doing with the U.N. in New York City?"

"For you I would do almost anything," he said honestly.

"Except give up Iron Man," she reminded him. It was an old argument and they were no closer to a resolution for having repeated it so many times.

"Right now I'm all yours."

"I need more than just right now."

"All we know for certain is right now, so why can't we take it as it comes?"

"Oh, Tony," she said with the sigh that meant he just wasn't getting it. Again.

"Enough about that. How are you doing?" he asked as he escorted her into the building.

"Everything is fine. The stock only dipped a few points today, so I think we're safe there."

"No, how are you? After what happened, I wondered if maybe I'm working you too hard, with being CEO and managing several foundations. Philanthropy is all well and good until you work yourself to death. Since apparently you can do that."

She squeezed his hand and let it go again. "Thank you, I'm fine. The foundations each have their boards that more or less keep things running. I'm a figurehead, nothing more."
"Good, that's good." He probably should have known that already.

Silence fell as they entered the building.

"Bunk with me?" he asked abruptly as the elevator arrived with a ding.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"There would only be sleeping involved. I-I've missed you." He was beginning to regret asking, but he still meant it.

She touched his cheek, then quickly drew away her fingers. "Only if you take care of that mess on your face."

"Done," he said instantly. "Want to supervise?"

While he shaved, Pepper had her P.A. bring her bag to Tony's room and she changed out of her suit and heels into something a little more comfortable. She filled him in on what had been going on at Stark Industries, then he explained what was going on with the Accords and Ross and why he had so many lawyers so busy.

It was a good, easy conversation, nothing like the arguments fraught with tension where their voices were never raised but every phrase had an undercurrent of meaning.

By the time they went to the common area, Rhodey, Vision, and Clint were already there. When Rhodey saw him, he said, "Oh, I see how it is. I tell you, as a friend, that you need to shave and you don't do it. She wants you to, and you do it. It's nice to know where I stand."

Tony shrugged. "Hey, she's my CEO. You're just my best friend."

"Just your best friend. Thanks for that, Stank," Rhodey shot back.

"Stank?" Vision asked, confused.

Rhodey shared the story while Tony groaned and sat on a couch. Pepper sat beside him and he gave her a grateful look.

"I'm going to have to use that at some very inappropriate moment," Clint said, grinning.

They bantered easily, absorbing more participants into the verbal play as the other members of the Avengers gradually arrived. The only ones who didn't fully join in were Steve and Vision, Steve because he was starting dinner and Vision because he seemed to prefer to listen. Tony assumed he could understand the repartee--Jarvis always did--but perhaps not.

When Laura and the kids arrived, Lila immediately gravitated toward Tony, book in hand. He introduced her to Pepper, checked with Steve that the food wouldn't be ready for a while yet, then went with Lila to a corner where they could read the day's chapter.

Wanda and Natasha were in the seats on either side of Pepper and evidently involved in a serious conversation when Tony returned so he didn't interrupt. He wasn't sure what they were talking about until Pepper's skin took on a slight orange hue, then faded.

"Friday," he murmured, "restrict audio and video of Pepper, Wanda, and Natasha to level seven. Begin restriction at the moment Wanda and Natasha sat down with Pepper." How the conversation had begun didn't matter if Extremis had come up, and the fact that Pepper still had it (under very tight
control) was a closely guarded secret. She, too, would be subject to the Accords if word got out.

Then he realized he was a big, fat idiot as he looked from Pepper to Rhodey to Pepper to Rhodey. Rhodey noticed his gaze and rolled over to him. "No," he said simply.

"What?"

"No, you're not using that stuff on me. I don't care that you refined it and targeted it and used it on yourself with no apparent lasting effects. Have you ever considered your heart problem might be a lasting effect?"

"No. I used Extremis mostly to regrow my rib cage. Any damage repaired on my heart was external. My current problem is internal."

"I still don't want it used on me. I don't think it's worth the risk."

"But--"

"This is my fucking spine we're talking about. I would rather stay as I am, with the perfectly functional braces we've been working on, than take the risk that more damage might be done in the attempt. No."

"Fine, be that way."

"And you're not going to make a version for me just in case I change my mind. I won't."

Tony cast Rhodey a sour look. That Rhodey knew he was thinking about it was a testament to how long they'd known each other. "Fine," he said sullenly.

When they sat down to dinner most of the attention was on Pepper: how she'd been, what she'd been up to, that sort of thing. The elephant no one mentioned was the status of their relationship, which was quite all right by Tony.

After dinner, Pepper leaned over to Tony. "We're going to go finish our conversation. Where will I find you when we're done?"

"The workshop, probably. You can ask Friday if you're in the common areas or the corridors."

"All right." She leaned over and kissed his cheek before rising from the table and leaving with Natasha and Wanda.

"Where are they going?" Rhodey asked.

Tony shrugged, typing a command to Friday to continue restricting recordings of their conversation, should they be in range of any recording devices. He took his, Pepper's, and Rhodey's dishes to the sink and tried to help with cleanup, but Vision and Clint wouldn't let him. He wandered back over to the table. "You up to working on the armor designs?" he asked Rhodey.

"Absolutely."

They'd been in the workshop for over an hour when Tony began to wonder about Pepper. "Friday, is Pepper still with Natasha and Wanda?"

"Yes, boss."

"Well, all right, then." He shifted his attention back to the suit design they were trying to tweak to
incorporate a few elements from a different design. It was exacting work, and he quickly lost track of time again.

"Weren't you planning to go to bed sometime tonight?" Pepper's touch on his arm as much as her voice brought him out of the world of schematics he'd been occupying.

He quickly looked around. "Where's Rhodey?"

"Colonel Rhodes has been in bed for an hour," Friday answered promptly. "He notified you he was leaving one hour and thirty-three minutes ago."

"It's after midnight," Pepper added. "And you need all the beauty sleep you can get. Come on."

He saved everything and left it, following Pepper to the elevator and then to his room. Pepper had already changed for the night, so she climbed into bed while he changed. He slid in beside her a few moments later and the lights dimmed automatically.

"Sleep well, Pep," he said, consciously resisting the temptation to lean over and give her a kiss.

"You too, Tony." She leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to his forehead, then laid down with her back to him.

Thin light filtered in the windows when he woke from a dream that seemed likely to turn nightmarish in short order. He was spooned up behind Pepper, one arm curled around her. He started to move his arm, but she gripped his hand. "It's fine," she murmured.

He brushed a kiss on the nape of her neck and fell back to sleep.

Pepper was still in bed with him when he woke again, so it couldn't have been too late. "Good morning," she said, sitting up.

"Morning," he mumbled, not sure yet if it was good or not.

"I was about to take a shower. Would you like to go first or second?"

He felt a momentary flash of disappointment that she didn't suggest taking one together, but he knew that wouldn't have been a good idea for a number of reasons, including that they couldn't afford distractions with an interview looming. "Second is fine."

She patted his arm and gathered her shower things. He sat up when the bathroom door clicked shut, then realized he wasn't having the physical reaction that Pepper's proximity and the thought of a shower liaison should have elicited. Well, crap. Was it his heart? The meds? He'd have to ask Dr. Mann. Or maybe he should've read that little insert with the pill bottle.

Speaking of pills . . . he got up and dry swallowed his pill for the day. He carelessly made the bed, then pulled some clothes out for after his shower. Pepper would give him orders about what to wear for later.

When Pepper emerged, she was wearing a bra and a towel tucked around her waist. "Next," she said, stepping out of the way and bending over to briskly rub her hair with a second, smaller towel.

He washed quickly, pausing partway through when he thought he heard a knock. Pepper's voice drifted to him over the sound of the water. He turned off the tap, rubbed himself dry, and pulled
clothes onto his bottom half before opening the door.

Pepper was fully dressed in slacks and a short sleeved shirt and was now doing something with her hair. "Rhodey came to make sure you were awake and had taken your meds," she said, her hands tangled in those lovely red locks.

"I did," he said, turning away to trim his beard better than he had yesterday.

"So Friday told us." She stood behind him to look in the mirror while she pulled parts of her hair back.

He stepped to the side to give her a little more room to see. It was so like old times that he felt a pang of nostalgia.

"You look like you've lost some weight," Pepper commented in her 'should I be worried?' tone.

"I hadn't noticed." He'd been busy enough it was entirely possible she was right.

"Have you thought about what questions Christine might ask?" Pepper had moved on to applying her makeup.

"No," He wandered away from the sink to put a shirt on.

"You do realize she'll ask about us, right?"

It felt like she was following him, but no, she was only going over to her bag to put on a pair of flats.

"You'll have to tell me what you want me to say, then."

"Don't I always?" She stood in front of him and took his face in her hands. "You're quiet this morning. Did you sleep?"

He covered her hands with his. "I slept better than I have for at least a week," he said frankly.

"Thank you."

"I worry about you, you know," she said, lowering her hands.

"But not enough to worry about me in person?" he said, trying to sound teasing, but it fell flat. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"I know." She sounded sad. "Let's go eat, I'm starving."

Tony had hoped Pepper wouldn't begin grilling him for the interview until after breakfast, but she pulled out a pad of paper and a pen as soon as she'd sat down and taken a bite of yogurt.

"All right, we know that she'll work in a question about our relationship at some point. She has also been reporting on the government oversight issue, so expect some questions about the Accords and your role in them." She took another bite. "The question is, how is she going to try to skew your responses?"

The other Avengers watched and listened curiously as they debated what questions were likely to be asked. Pepper pulled up some brief clips of Christine's recent news stories about the Avengers, which most of them had not seen before. She was a staunch advocate for government oversight so Tony hoped she'd be a sympathetic audience for that part, but he knew better than to think that
would make it an easy conversation.

At length Pepper decided it was good enough to figure out general topics and what Tony's responses to them should be. Tony was quickly tired of this endeavor, but Pepper drilled him until he could answer the questions she posed to her satisfaction.

Just before lunch they went to the office Tony had designated for interactions of this nature in order to review the lighting and technical setup. An A.V. staff member was in the midst of a test with the news station so they watched and Pepper made some notes. When the test had concluded, she went behind the chair Tony would be occupying and moved some things out of the visible background. Everything else seemed to satisfy her--Tony didn't care one way or another so long as the tech worked--so they went back upstairs.

Tony didn't eat much. He hadn't been nervous about the interview before, but some of Pepper's anxiety that all go well had rubbed off on him to the point that his palms were already getting sweaty.

After that it was time to change his clothes, do some makeup, and get settled in for the interview.

Then the lights were on him, the camera was rolling (figuratively, of course, as it was digital), and Christine's face appeared on the monitor facing him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Stark. I am delighted that you were willing to be interviewed so soon after your health crisis."

"I am glad to be here," he responded simply. No way was he going to address that 'health crisis' nonsense.

"Since the news of your hospitalization broke, there has been a good deal of debate about what that will mean both for the Avengers and your work on the Accords. First, a question many have asked: will you have to give up being Iron Man?"

"I have no intention of giving up Iron Man," he said firmly. "My doctors have advised a period of rest in the short term, but in the long term there is no reason I cannot continue in that role."

"What about the conflict within the Avengers themselves? Public details of the skirmishes have been scant, but the fact that there was division and what some are calling outright war between you has many wondering if the Avengers are even a team anymore."

"We had some differences of opinion that led to confrontation, that much is true. However, the team is back together and ready to face whatever new calamity may come our way." That was the rosiest angle possible on the situation, but the public didn't need to see all of the Avengers' dirty laundry. Also, it was news to him that there was more than one so-called 'skirmish' involving the whole team, but going along with it was easier than trying to set the record straight.

"What if that new calamity rises from amongst you, like Ultron? Will the Avengers still be a team then?"

Tony swallowed and hoped his face wasn't sweating though he could feel it trickling down his back. "Ultron was a unique situation caused at least in part by alien technology. There are safeguards now in place to prevent such a situation from happening again."

"Safeguards like the Sokovia Accords?"

"The Accords are part of the answer, yes. Also, we simply don't have any other alien technology on Earth that we know of, which helps."

"What you're calling 'confrontation' between the Avengers led to substantial amounts of property
damage. How do you suggest the Avengers be held responsible for such wanton destruction, especially since the Avengers were completely to blame for the damage?"

"In my recent work with the United Nations on the Accords, I have been advocating changes to the language in order to address those issues. In this instance, you will find that the Stark Relief Foundation is footing much of the bill. Going forward, the Avengers will have their own relief foundation to work with citizens of affected areas for cleanup and reconstruction." Here, he was on much firmer footing.

"Is it true that the confrontations between the Avengers were the result of disagreement over the Accords?"

Tony wasn't quite sure what she was fishing for, but he knew he needed to tread carefully. "We did not all agree on whether to sign the Accords," he acknowledged. "However, there were other concerns also involved, and that tension was exploited by the man responsible for the Vienna bombing."

Pepper started shaking her head and motioning for him to end it. He wasn't sure why.

"Are you saying that this man Zemo was able to manipulate the Avengers into fighting one another?" Christine asked, sounding almost incredulous. "How can we trust the Avengers to operate for the public good if one man is able to manipulate these supposed superheroes into fighting one another?"

"Oversight by a third party seems like a good way to start."

"Thank you, Tony, for a most enlightening interview. I have one last question, if you don't mind."

"You always have one last question, Christine."

"That's my job," she said with a broad smile. "Is it true that you and Pepper Potts are no longer a couple?"

"We have been taking a break, but we remain very close."

"At what point does this 'break' become a breakup? It's been at least six months."

"That's two questions, but I'll answer. Our relationship has always been rather . . . unique. Whatever might happen in our personal lives, our work together for Stark Industries and our philanthropic efforts will remain unaffected."

"There you have it. Thank you very much, Mr. Stark."

"Always a pleasure, Ms. Brown."

The camera shut off, the lights dimmed, and Tony took a deep breath followed by a large gulp of water. "Well, that wasn't so bad."

"You've done worse," Pepper agreed. "There are a few things you probably shouldn't have mentioned, but there's no undoing it now."

"What, like Zemo? As soon as he goes on trial, it will all be in the open anyway." Tony stood and staggered a little, catching himself on the arm of the chair. "Just a little dizzy," he explained before Pepper could speak.
"Do you need to lie down?" she asked worriedly.

"No, I'm fine. Unless you're offering to keep me company, in which case yes, I definitely need to spend some time in bed," he said, winking at her.

"I hear what you're saying, but I also see how pale you are right now despite the makeup and I'm thinking I believe your skin over your mouth." She took his arm to steer him out of the office and didn't let go until they were back in his bedroom.

By that point, Tony had to admit he wasn't feeling quite right; doing the interview probably wasn't his best idea from a health perspective. At least it would give him more data for his monitoring system. "Friday, are you recording this?"

"Yes, boss."

Pepper had him sit on the bed before she helped get him out of his suitcoat and tie, even going so far as to untie and remove his shoes for him.

Going from sitting to lying down was more of a slump than a conscious decision, and his legs would have remained dangling over the edge of the bed without Pepper's assistance. His chest felt tight again, but not as bad as those two earlier times, so he hoped this wasn't going to be a big deal. Just in case, though . . . "I love you, you know."

"Don't you dare do that to me right now," Pepper scolded.

He was starting to hyperventilate and his eyes seemed distant, so she snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Tony? Tony, stay with me. Breathe with me. Long breath in, then long breath out."

She repeated it several times until he no longer appeared to be on the verge of passing out. This, at least, was familiar—Tony had been having issues with anxiety for some time, and waking in the middle of the night to find him hyperventilating had happened far more times than she wanted to count.

"Colonel Rhodes and Sam Wilson are coming to assist," Friday announced.

"Why Sam?" Pepper asked.

"Field medic training," Tony murmured. "He helped when I went to the hospital."

"Do you think you need to go back to the hospital?"

"No. Just give me a few minutes, I'll be all right."

The bedroom door burst open and Sam hurried past Pepper to feel the pulse in Tony's neck. Rhodey bumped up to the bed on her other side.

"We should put his feet up higher," Rhodey said, gesturing toward the pillows. Sam passed them down the line and Rhodey did his best from the wheelchair to adjust Tony's feet.

"I'll be all right," Tony repeated. "It's not even as bad as last time."

"Last time?" Sam asked. "When we had to rush you to the hospital?"

"No, in the workshop. Rhodey was there."

Sam gave Rhodey a disbelieving look. "This happened before? Does his doctor know?"
"It was Saturday morning, I think. He said it was an anxiety thing, so no, I didn't tell Dr. Mann."

"She needs to know about this. If he's having anxiety problems this bad, he should be on meds for it, because it's going to mess up his heart worse."

Tony didn't appreciate being talked about like he wasn't there, but at least Sam's irritation wasn't directed at him. "Friday, send the data you've recorded to Dr. Mann."

"I'll call her right now," Pepper said. To step away from the bed required letting go of Tony's hand, which she didn't remember taking hold of in the first place. She squeezed it reassuringly before she let go and went to the other side of the room, already pulling out her phone and finding the cardiologist's information.

She had to leave a message, but she hadn't even made it back to the bed before her phone was ringing. Pepper told Dr. Mann what she'd witnessed and what she knew of the previous episode, and walked back toward the bed as she listened.

"Guys, she wants to talk to all of you," Pepper said, thumbing the call to speakerphone.

"Friday, project the call through the room speakers," Tony said.

When Dr. Mann spoke, her voice booming down on them from the ceiling had a very voice-of-God quality. "Gentlemen," she said, sounding stern.

"Hey doc," Tony said.

"Am I correctly informed that this is the second occurrence of these symptoms?"

Rhodey spoke up. "Yes, ma'am. The first time, I found him in the middle of what I thought was an anxiety attack. I've seen a few." He cast a glance toward Tony, who looked resigned.

"I should have been notified. Tony, I don't like that this has happened twice in less than a week. I'm going to need more information about what is going on and when, so I want you to wear a Holter monitor until your tests at the hospital on Thursday. Do you have one of those at the compound?"

"Yes, ma'am, we do," Sam said.

Dr. Mann continued, "And I'm sorry, dear, but I want you to remain in bed until noon tomorrow, just to be on the safe side. Once I get the results from the monitor and the hospital, we'll talk again."

So now he actually was an invalid. Great. Just great. With friends like these, who needed enemies?

No, that wasn't fair. This was his own damn fault. As usual.

Pepper asked something about visitors that he missed in his self-absorption. "The only visitors allowed are those currently present," Dr. Mann responded. "I think I can trust all of you not to get him riled. Also, Tony, I'm hoping it goes without saying, but with you I'm never sure. Being in bed means resting. No hanky panky."

Pepper flushed, Rhodey smirked, and Sam looked slightly embarrassed on Tony's behalf. Tony cleared his throat. "I, uh, don't think that will be a concern," he admitted, looking away from the others.

There was a long pause. "That is a common side effect," Dr. Mann said finally. "If it troubles you, we can try a different medication."
"It's probably better this way," Tony said, glancing toward Pepper, who was looking at him with sympathy.

"All right. We may end up switching after Thursday, but we'll wait and see. Any other questions?"

They didn't have any, so she hung up. "I'll go fetch the monitor and someone to put it on you, and then I'll pass on the word that you're restricted to quarters for a while," Sam said.

Tony grabbed Sam's arm before he could move. "Do me a favor and don't mention that last bit?"

"That's need-to-know, and no one else needs to know."

After Sam left, Rhodey heaved a sigh. "You need me to do anything?"

Tony moved his feet off the pillows and sat up on the edge of the bed. "Not right now," he said warily. "I guess you were right, though. The interview was a bad idea."

"I don't know. It sounds like if it wasn't that, it would've been something else instead. Better we know now and deal with it."

"Listen to you being all positive," Tony grumbled, carefully standing up.

"Should you be doing that?"

"Would you want to wear horribly expensive suit pants in bed?"

"Good point. Carry on. Do you want me to leave?"

His question was directed more at Pepper than Tony. She replied, "I think we can manage here. Would you send my PA up?"

"Sure thing."

When they were alone, Tony said, "You don't have to stay. I know you have plenty on your plate."

"As if I would leave now," she said, locating a pair of cotton pants in a drawer and tossing them his direction. "Besides, if I leave, you'd lose a third of your allowed visitors."

"I'm sure Nat could be subbed in. She was with me and Rhodey at the hospital," he said, carelessly throwing his trousers on the bed.

"Would she cuddle with you?"

"No, and I don't think I'd want her to."

"Well, there you have it. I'm staying." She held up a t-shirt questioningly.

He shrugged and caught it one-handed when she threw it at him.

"Sit," Pepper said, pointing to the edge of the bed. He obeyed and she embraced him, guiding his head to rest against her chest. She lightly scratched his scalp with her fingernails while her other hand rested flat against his back between his shoulder blades.

He sighed and rested his hands lightly on her lower back.

"How are you doing with all of this?"
"I feel old," he said plaintively.

"You aren't even fifty yet."

"Tell that to my heart."

"And your hair. You've got more grey than I remember."

"See? I'm old."

"That could also be from stress," she said gently.

He humphed.

There was a brief knock at the bedroom door. "Come in," Pepper called without turning around, though she took a slight step backwards. Tony took it as his cue to let go of her and sit upright in preparation for what was coming.

"Delivery." Sam escorted one of the medical staff into the room. Pepper moved to stand beside Tony rather than in front of him.

"Mr. Stark, Ms. Potts," the young man greeted them as he set the machine and its wires onto the bed next to Tony. "Thank you for removing your shirt. I'm going to apply the electrodes and electrical tape to keep everything in place. The monitor can be clipped to a belt or put into a pocket, but we also have a strap for it to be worn, if you'd prefer that."

"The clip should be fine," Tony said as the technician swabbed various areas of his skin with alcohol pads. The electrodes were attached in fairly quick succession, seven in all, their wires taped into place and plugged into the hand-sized monitor. The technician pressed a few buttons, the monitor beeped obligingly, and he handed the monitor to Tony.

"Don't shower or swim and avoid magnets while wearing it. You should keep a log of your activities so the doctor can match the readings to what you were doing. Any questions?"

"No, I think I'm good," Tony replied.

"Let us know if you have any problems. Have a good day, Mr. Stark." The technician nodded to Pepper and Sam on his way out.

Sam also headed for the door. "I'll leave you alone. Can I get you anything?"

"Thanks Sam, we're all right," Pepper said. "I'll let you and Rhodey know if we need anything else."

"Anytime." The door closed behind him.

Tony pulled on the t-shirt so at least he didn't have to acknowledge the wires on his chest. Pepper rested a hand on his shoulder but didn't say anything. There were three light taps at the door.

"That's Katie," Pepper said with a sigh. "I need to go tell her what's up. Will you be all right for a few minutes?"

"I'm not going anywhere," he said wearily.

She stepped out into the hallway. Tony sat motionlessly for several minutes, his shoulders hunched and his head hanging. The monitor sat innocently in his hands and, for a moment, he thought maybe he could just mimic it for his suit. But having leads hooked up to his skin wouldn't be possible and he
wasn't sure he could come up with a way to get the same readings without them.

He sighed and flopped backwards onto the bed, pulling up his legs and rolling onto his side. There he just kind of . . . existed . . . until Pepper returned. The mattress sank behind him as she sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm curious why you decided to tell me you love me when you were having that episode," she said, her hand warm on his hip.

"Because I do," he said. "And also better safe than sorry. I've had more than my fair share of brushes with death."

"Yes, I've noticed."

He shrugged. "So I wanted to make sure you knew."

"Tony," she said, and sighed. "I love you too, you ridiculous man." Another pause. "I'm wondering if it might not be better for you to be somewhere that isn't here for a while. I know you care a lot about the Avengers but it really seems like they're going to be the end of you, and I can't stand for that."

He turned toward her slightly. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I think you'd recover better if you weren't here. New York, Malibu, anywhere would be better than staying here with these people who are stressing you out."

"No can do. There are things I still have to do here."

"You've been forbidden to work for at least a month."

"The team is carrying on in my stead, which is easier if I'm here to answer questions. And I don't want to leave Rhody."

"He could come with us."

"He'd miss everyone."

"You're impossible," Pepper said with irritation.

"You love me that way."

"Heaven help me."

They fell into a comfortable silence. After a while Pepper said, "I'm getting hungry. Would you like me to call Rhody to come sit with you while I go find out about dinner?"

"I'm not a child," Tony said sullenly. "I don't need to be watched every second."

Pepper laughed at him. "You say as you pout like a child. I'll be back."

A short time later, she received a discreet update from Friday that Tony had fallen asleep. "Let me know if he wakes or seems to be having a nightmare," she requested.

"Yes, Ms. Potts."

When Pepper hadn't heard from Friday after three hours, she quietly excused herself from the lively
conversation about just what the others wanted to do to Secretary Ross and went down the stairs for a bit of privacy. "Friday, is he sleeping?"

"Yes, Ms. Potts."

"You're sure he's still breathing?"

Rather than dignify that question with a response, Friday said, "The video feed is displayed on your phone."

Pulling out her phone, she watched Tony carefully. He hadn't moved from his earlier position, but she could see the slow movement of his ribcage as he breathed. "Thank you, Friday."

She returned upstairs in time to overhear something about being hung, drawn, and quartered and she shuddered. Sometimes she did not understand Tony's need to be around these people. How Laura could put up with it she didn't know.

Tony was still sleeping when Pepper headed to bed after ten o'clock. She took a few snacks and an energy drink with her to the bedroom in case Tony woke hungry; he'd missed dinner, after all, and hadn't eaten much at lunch. He had rolled over at some point, leaving the little monitor behind him and all its wires draped over his side. She clipped the monitor to his waistband and tucked the wires under his shirt to try to keep them out of the way.

After she'd changed she realized that Tony was angled across the bed in such a way that she could not try to sleep in her previous spot without kicking him in the head. Well, there was no harm in sleeping a different direction for the night; the bed was certainly large enough. She found an extra blanket in the closet and moved her pillow to a spot next to Tony, then climbed onto the bed and draped the blanket over them both.

Chapter End Notes

The pre-Civil War WHIH World News YouTube videos are what I'm referring to when mentioning coverage of the Avengers previously done by Christine Everhart.

CA:TWS says Sam Wilson was a pararescue, which means he's had training in a bunch of kick ass stuff, including battlefield trauma/paramedic care.
Pepper woke several times during the night, subconsciously expecting Tony to be awake or having a nightmare, but he always appeared to be sleeping soundly. When she woke up around dawn, he was still asleep and it looked like he hadn't moved an inch. She worried that he was comatose or worse; she couldn't remember a time in their long association that he had slept so deeply for so long.

There was only one person who'd known Tony longer than she had, so she carefully slipped out of bed and texted Rhodey. *He's been asleep for over 12 hours now. Should I be worried?*

The response didn't come for over a half hour, which she spent fretting. *It's been a while, but he used to crash for almost a full day when he'd been pushing himself too hard.*

*Thanks.*

*And this way it's no big deal that he's restricted to his room.*

*Very true.*

Pepper was mollified enough to leave Tony's side to get dressed, but she wouldn't be entirely reassured until he woke up.

Which he did, about an hour and a half later. His hands twitched, a deep inhale was followed by a long sigh, and his eyes blinked open.

"Hey there, sleeping beauty," Pepper teased, leaning over so her eyes were level with his.

Tony slowly focused on her face, then his eyes roved around what he could see of the room without moving. "What time is it?" he asked groggily.

"Around seven. In the morning."

His brow furrowed. "How long was I out?"

"Almost fifteen hours. Apparently you were tired. Are you hungry?"

His stomach growled. "I suppose I am," he replied. "Just give me a minute." He sat up slowly, then slid down off the bed. He started toward the bathroom but stumbled and had to grab onto the end of the bed for a moment before moving again. "Friday, log that as dizziness when standing."

"Tony, should I--" Pepper began.

"No," he said shortly. "I'm fine." He closed the bathroom door and was in there long enough that Pepper started to become concerned. Then he emerged, freshly shaven, and she understood.

"If you need something to eat right this second, there are snacks on your desk. Otherwise, I can go and see what's in the kitchen for breakfast," she said.

He stood next to her and casually rested his arm around her waist. "This should be fine, I--"

A knock interrupted him. "Room service," Rhodey's voice said.

Tony pulled open the door.
"What do you think you're doing out of bed, young man?" Rhodey teased as he wheeled into the room, a tray balanced on his lap.

"I just finished in the bathroom, what's it to you?" Tony retorted.

"You're bed-bound until noon, did you forget?"

Tony scowled. He'd forgotten.

Pepper went over to him and rubbed his shoulders. "At least you slept for more than half of it," she said consolingly.

"That doesn't help."

"Thank you for breakfast, Rhodey," she said, taking the tray from him and setting it on Tony's desk. "Was there anything else?"

"Yeah, Tony needs to take his meds," Rhodey said, looking pointedly at Tony, who threw up his hands in exasperation and went over to where he kept the bottle. "Also, Lila has requested that Uncle Tony read two chapters today since he missed yesterday."

"We should be able to manage that," Tony said agreeably once he'd swallowed his mouthful of water.

"Is the therapist coming to interview today?" Pepper asked.

"She is," Rhodey said. "Natasha sent you both the itinerary. Tony, she's assuming that you'll want to watch or listen in on some of the conversations, so she has several options for you this afternoon. If you want to meet with her directly, that can be worked in, too."

"I'll take a look and let her know."

Rhodey nodded. "See you later. Pepper, if we need to help you tie him down or anything, just say the word."

"Traitor," Tony grumbled but sat on the edge of the bed.

Pepper shut the door behind Rhodey, then checked the contents of each insulated mug before holding one out to Tony.

He took a cautious sip, then sighed in satisfaction. "Friday, who is responsible for this?"

"Clint Barton made your coffee this morning," she replied.

"I'll have to move him to the top of the list for upgrades," Tony mused.


"But then I have to put down my coffee," Tony objected. "And the bed lacks cupholders. I should fix that."

"So move up to the head of the bed where you belong and use the bedside table," Pepper said with exasperation. "Honestly, Tony, I don't know why I put up with you sometimes."

"Because your life would be boring without me," he said cheekily, but moved as she'd suggested.
Once he was settled and had his plate, Pepper pulled the desk chair up to the side of the bed. "Friday, project the therapist's itinerary so we can take a look."

Rhodey was right; Natasha had scheduled the afternoon meetings in a room with a one-way mirror so they could be observed. The therapist candidate would be talking to Hill, then Natasha, that afternoon (after an HR person and a security person, which he wasn't as interested in). Either of those conversations would be worth eavesdropping on, so he might as well do both.

Tony sent a message to Natasha saying he'd watch those two, but didn't want to commit to a separate meeting. After that, he had Friday call up the therapist's documents that Sam had sent and he and Pepper perused them while finishing their beverages.

"She has a lot of experience," Pepper said after a while. "Did Sam say why she wants to leave the V.A.?

"He only said she's looking for something different. I'm sure either Hill or Natasha will ask that question."

"I'm a little surprised you're going along with this," Pepper admitted. "Especially with how much money you've spent building stuff to cope with your problems rather than just talking to someone about them."

"Sam thought it would be good for the team, and we need all the help we can get."

"Would you talk to her?"

Tony shrugged. "I can't say until I find out if I like her."

"But if you do?" Pepper persisted.

"I won't rule it out," Tony said evasively.

Pepper knew better than to push any further. She took Tony's plate while he continued examining the therapist's credentials, first on the documents and then by looking her up on the internet. After a little while he seemed to tire of this and waved away the entire display.

"Is there something you'd like to do?"

"Go to my workshop," Tony said sourly. "Sorry, honey, I know it's not your fault. I'm just--" he gestured helplessly.

"It's frustrating, I understand. Would you like me to see if Lila wants to read now? I think Dr. Mann won't mind us bending the visitor rules a little bit."

Tony perked up but tried not to show it. "Sure, if she wants to. I mean, I have nothing else planned."

Lila was only too happy to delay her schoolwork with Laura's permission in order to read with Uncle Tony, and in his room no less. She was a little shy about climbing up onto the bed with him, but when both he and Pepper assured her it was all right, she happily sat next to Uncle Tony.

The two chapters were finished too quickly for both of them, Pepper thought, even though the reading and the talking about it afterward lasted well over an hour.

"Three hours to go," Tony groaned, dropping his head back against the headboard after Lila left.

"Do you want them to wait to have lunch until you can join them?" Pepper asked. She'd gotten a text
from Natasha with that question while Tony had been reading.

"No," Tony said immediately, cringing at the idea of having everyone watching him like a hawk.
"They can have lunch before I arrive, waiting is unnecessary."

"All right." Pepper was debating whether to ask Tony about what he'd been working on in his shop, which could usually keep him occupied for a while, when Rhodey peeked in.

He'd brought the chess board. "Care for a rematch?" he asked, slowly crossing the distance to the bed in his leg braces.

Tony smirked. "Sure thing, as long as you don't mind losing yet again."

Pepper knew Tony was in good hands. "Tony, I'm going to let you and Rhodey do your thing. Would you like me to come back and help you get dressed?"

"N-Yes," he said. "Please." With the therapist coming, input on his clothing wouldn't be a bad idea, especially with the electrodes to consider.

"I'll be back at a quarter to twelve," Pepper said, then left, taking the breakfast dishes with her.

She returned to Tony's bedroom after getting some work done, sending Katie on a few errands, and talking a little more with Wanda about how to be yourself when you have powers that people fear. She wasn't sure what use her perspective would be, since she could hide her abilities while Wanda could not, but she'd enjoyed the conversation.

Rhodey had brought Vision into the chess game via video and earpiece, and still Tony was beating him. "All right, I concede," he said, throwing up his hands. "Thanks for trying, Vision."

"How many games have you played?" Pepper asked as she glanced at the board. Tony had only been two moves from finishing the game.

"Five," Rhodey said with mock exasperation. "Care to guess how many he's won?"

"I don't need to guess."

"You should play Pepper sometime, old man," Tony said as he put his pieces back into the box. "She'll give you a run for your money, but you might have a chance."

"More than a chance," Pepper said with a smile.

"What we should play is poker," Rhodey said as he stood up. "I can read you like a book. Maybe I'll suggest that for the next team game night."

"We have game nights?" Tony handed him the board and box of pieces.

"We will now." Rhodey grinned and nodded to Pepper as he left the room.

As Tony expected, Pepper had thoughts about what he could wear that would be suitably casual but still mostly hide the electrode lumps. Once he was decked out in dark jeans, a polo shirt, and a blazer, he asked, "Will I need makeup, all wise and knowing Pepper?"

She held his chin and tilted his face toward the light. "No, I think you'll do. The bags under your eyes are much less noticeable today. Ready for lunch?"
They went down to the kitchen and found Steve and Rhodey making sandwiches. "The Bartons went out for a picnic and bug-hunting expedition. Everyone else is at the cafeteria having lunch with the therapist," Rhodey reported. "Would you like tuna or tuna?"

"Tuna," Tony said, sliding onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar. "Have you met her yet?"

"Nope. I figure you can tell me what I need to know."

"Why aren't you with them, Steve?" Pepper asked.

"I thought the conversation would be easier without me there," Steve said.

"He thinks they'll end up talking about our little civil war," Rhodey interpreted.

"Is that what we're calling it now?" Tony said. "I mean, I suppose it's strictly true, but still. 'Civil war' makes me think of pitched battles and people dead. We only had that one skirmish and no deaths."

Steve glanced at him but didn't point out that he was omitting Siberia.

"That's an awfully heavy topic for lunch," Pepper commented. "Especially since she doesn't know all of you yet."

"She's a therapist. Who knows what they'll end up talking about," Rhodey said, dropping a handful of carrot sticks on each plate.

"They might just talk about the weather," Tony said, taking a plate and moving to the table. He debated whether to have his second cup of coffee with lunch but decided he'd need it more later.

When Rhodey sat down across from him, Tony asked, "How's your reading coming?"

Rhodey sighed. "Government documents are the worst."

With that, the conversation settled firmly on the Accords and specifically what was to be discussed with the subcommittee chairwoman the following week. Their discussion lasted long after they had finished lunch; Pepper cleared away the plates since she didn't have much to add to the conversation.

"What would happen if you both presented the entirety of your edited version of the Accords to the subcommittee instead of this piecemeal nonsense that's making my head spin?" Rhodey asked.

Steve looked to Tony.

"When we started on these negotiations, Steve was still a fugitive and admitting that I was working with him on the edits would be admitting that I knew where he was," Tony said. "This last meeting was the first where it would have been plausible to have a document that we'd both edited since his return, but the agenda was already set." He looked thoughtful.

"Should we ask during our meeting?" Steve suggested.

Tony rubbed his chin, then nodded. "Why not? It's worth a shot."

Pepper touched his shoulder. "The interview with Hill starts in fifteen minutes, if you'd still like to observe."

"I'll be right down, thanks," he said. "So, we should run our version past everyone before it goes to the chair. If she agrees with your suggestion, she'll want the document by the end of the week for distribution well in advance of the next meeting. You'll see her Wednesday morning, which doesn't
"Then we need to do. Tony, let us know what you think of this therapist."

Tony was ensconced in the viewing room on the other side of the one-way mirror, mug of coffee in hand, five minutes before the doctor's conversation with Maria Hill was due to start.

Dr. Tanya Thomas was a black woman of middling age and moderate weight with close-cropped hair and smile lines by her eyes. She greeted Hill with a friendly openness that was slightly off-putting to Tony at first, but he suspected it was a tactic to take the measure of her interviewer.

After Maria came Natasha, and Tony found it interesting to watch her use the same approach and get different results. From the conversation, Dr. Thomas had done her research on the team, which made him wonder how much he knew about each individual person. Almost on impulse he decided that yes, he would talk to her directly. He sent Natasha a brief message to that effect, and requested that the conversation occur in the room usually used for Ross.

When Natasha concluded her time with the doctor, she rose and cast a glance at the mirror--at him--and escorted Dr. Thomas from the room. Tony waited a few minutes before casually strolling to the visitor's conference room.

When he entered, she was sitting in a chair toward the far end of the room with her back to the door. She rose when she heard him approach and shook his hand quite firmly before they both sat down, Tony facing her where he could see the whole room, as nondescript as it was. "I'm guessing I don't need to introduce myself," he said.

"Mr. Stark, I'm Dr. Tanya Thomas. I'm very glad you were able to meet with me today."

"Really." He sat back in his chair.

"I attended your MIT alumni presentation. It appears you have a keen interest in psychology."

"How did you come to be at that event?"

"My nephew is a doctoral student in electrical engineering. I was his guest."

There were several things there he could ask about from that statement, but he ignored them all. At least she didn't mention how he'd frozen up at the end. "What did you think?"

She smiled kindly and folded her hands on the table. "I think your device is interesting, but you could have saved a lot of money if you'd talked to a therapist instead."

"Why is that?"

"Visually seeing one's traumatic memories isn't likely to aid the therapeutic process. In fact, obsessing about getting the details right might even hinder it. On the other hand, with some tweaking, that system might be interesting from a fantasy fulfillment angle."
The thought had occurred to him, as well. "What do you think of the Avengers so far?"

"The Avengers are a very special group of people. As a very special group, there are unusual challenges and expectations can take a toll if you aren't prepared. From what I have seen, none of you were prepared."

"If you were to work with us, where would you begin?"

"That depends on each individual."

"How much do you know about us?"

"That also depends on each individual. It is probably safe to say your life is the most documented."

"That is safe to say." Tony thought of the leaked hospital photo. "What conclusions do you draw about me from that information?"

"I prefer not to draw conclusions about patients before talking with them at some length." She met his studying gaze evenly.

"Then where would you start?"

"What is distressing you the most?"

Tony found himself nodding. Yes, that would be a logical place to start. "Since this is not actually a counseling session, I don't think I'm going to answer that," he said.

"This can be whatever you want it to be," she said placidly. "You can always delete any recordings later."

She smiled at him and he couldn't help but smile back. She knew him well enough.

"Would you want to work with us?"

"Absolutely. Your group dynamics are interesting, and I think we could work together well."

He shook her hand again when he left and went back to the common area feeling better about the idea of a team therapist. He said as much to Rhodey and Pepper, who looked skeptical at first. "I think I could talk to her and get somewhere," he added, after making sure no one else was where they could overhear.

"That's fantastic," Pepper said, relief evident in her voice.

"I like her already," Rhodey agreed.

Those who had met Dr. Thomas talked about her approvingly at dinner, so the decision to officially hire her was an easy one. Steve's announcement about everyone reading the revised Accords was not as welcome.

After the meal was over and everyone began to disperse for the night, Natasha pulled Tony aside. "Will you want to be involved in interviewing people for the PA position?"

"No, I trust your judgment. Just make sure they're asked how they deal with egocentric billionaires," he said with a smirk. "You'll know if the answers are good ones."

"I hope someone suggests a stun gun."
"You wound me."
"You can usually handle being taken down a peg or two."

"Usually." He wandered down to the workshop for something to do; Pepper had disappeared in the company of Natasha, Wanda, and Laura, while Rhodey was off with Sam fitting in the exercises he should've done that morning instead of playing chess. He wasn't sure why Sam was Rhodey's partner of choice for that endeavor, but it seemed to make them both happy.

It was certainly for the best as far as the team was concerned--stronger friendships might keep what had happened from happening again.

Then again, the only ones who still seemed to be on thin ice around each other were him and Steve. He was working on that but there were memories that haunted his nightmares (and made his heart beat faster even when awake) and Steve, too, seemed to be having difficulty moving past Siberia. Tony knew something about guilt and he could recognize it in Steve.

"Friday, has Steve used the shield since his return?"

"No, boss."

They definitely needed a team therapist.
Chapter 8

Tony was able to work on the newest version of his armor for a while before anyone (read: Pepper) came to chase him off to bed, never mind how long he'd slept the previous night. Since it was Pepper and she wouldn't be staying much longer, he went with her.

He expected to be awake for a while, which wasn't a problem since he would happily watch Pepper sleep anytime, but he dropped off fairly quickly. So, of course, he woke around three a.m. "Friday, log that as a nightmare," he murmured, hoping not to wake Pepper. He focused on breathing deeply and evenly, his ribcage rising and falling beneath her hand, resting where the arc reactor used to be. Sometimes he felt a phantom ache as if it was still there.

If it had been, he'd be dead.

Dammit, no, not a good thing to think about. He felt his heart speed up and his breathing grow more constricted and he swore a blue streak in his mind.

"Tony? Are you all right?" Pepper was awake now, and leaning over him with concern.

"I-I need a distraction," he said brokenly.

She leaned down and kissed him hard, then shifted to straddle him, both of her hands on his torso, kneading and gripping. He clutched her, pulling her closer and kissing her roughly in return. Soon his thoughts were only on her and her atop him and his body's failure to react in its normal fashion.

As soon as his grip on her faltered, she pulled back. "Better?"

"Better. Thank you."

She slipped off him, one hand remaining on his chest, rubbing gently. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"No," he replied wearily. "Unless you can turn back time."

"Sadly, I can't." She kissed his forehead. "Do you think you can sleep?"

"I can try," he said reluctantly.

"I'll be right here."

When he woke again it was morning and Pepper was coming back to bed from the direction of the bathroom. "Good morning. You should take your pill, but otherwise you can't have anything to eat or drink until after your tests at the hospital. Friday reminded me when I got up."

Tony groaned. The one morning he was hungry for breakfast, he wasn't allowed. "What time do I need to be there?"

"Nine o'clock," Friday said promptly.

"I'll go with you," Pepper informed him. "Did you want anyone else to come?"

"I don't need an entourage," he grumbled as he flung the covers back and got out of bed to take his medication.
"Someone else will probably want to come to guard you. You have very protective teammates, you know."

Tony knew that was true for a few of them, but he doubted it about the rest.

Pepper was right about there being another person in their party. Both Rhodey and Natasha had other obligations that morning, so Sam volunteered to be the driver and guard. Tony hesitated, debating whether that was technically abiding by the terms of the rehabilitation agreement, then decided his lawyers could handle it if there were any objections.

"Tony, did you see the message from Dr. Mann?" Pepper asked as the three of them rode the elevator down to the car.

"No." Tony hadn't been checked any messages for days; if the others wanted to handle things, they could put up with the flood of information that was his life. It had been somewhat freeing, to not be constantly inundated with things vying for his attention. On the other hand, he was certain there were things he should know about that had been coming in, which made him anxious.

"That would be why she sent it to me and Rhodey and even Sam," Pepper said. "She'll meet us at the hospital and if all goes well, you'll be home for dinner."

That brought him up short. "Dinner? How long does this take?"

She skimmed the message. "An hour or so? But then they have to make sure you aren't going to bleed out when you stand up." The elevator slowed and stopped and she led the way into the garage.

"Trust me, man, that's not something you want to mess around with," Sam said.

"And if all doesn't go well? I'll be stuck there for a week?" Tony asked sourly.

"You'd have to stay at least overnight," Pepper said gently.

Tony crossed his arms and stopped short of the car. "I don't think so."

"They do dozens of these without a hitch. You'll be fine," Sam said, trying--and failing--to be reassuring.

Pepper stood in front of him and didn't say anything until he met her eyes. "You had a version of this procedure done last week and it went smoothly. There's no reason to expect anything different this time."

"Because it's me. Haven't you noticed yet that nothing goes smoothly around me?"

Eventually he relented and climbed into the backseat next to Pepper. He was silent for the duration of the trip, aimlessly poking at his phone.

As they pulled in to the hospital parking lot, Tony put on sunglasses and a ballcap and pulled his hood up, hoping to evade recognition. The whole situation was humiliating enough without having his picture all over the internet again.

They were escorted to a small room with a bed and Tony was directed to change into a hospital gown. Sam stood near the doorway, facing the hallway, while Tony undressed and Pepper folded his clothes for lack of anything else to do. He had just finished when Dr. Mann arrived with a male
"Tony, dear, we're going to take your monitor off now, and they're going to pull the data off before we give you back the equipment. Did you keep a log for me?"

The orderly silently began removing the electrodes from Tony's chest.

"Friday put it in the usual place," Tony said, wincing as one of the electrodes tried to take some of his skin with it.

"Splendid." Once the orderly left, Dr. Mann explained they would be doing two tests, neither of which should give him any trouble, though minor side effects were always a possibility with the contrast dye. "Still, you were right as rain last week. I will be present during the tests, and we should be able to talk about next steps before you leave."

He was taken to another room not long after, Sam following close behind while Pepper stayed in the room he'd been assigned. The first test involved another set of electrodes; it was a good thing his chest wasn't hairy, though the adhesive was doing a number on his skin.

The second test involved inserting things in places that they really shouldn't go and he definitely didn't remember having this done before, though it explained the bruise near his groin. The insertion didn't hurt, thanks to something they rubbed on his skin ahead of time, but after a while they injected some sort of dye that made him feel a little strange.

When the various doctors—including Dr. Mann—seemed satisfied with whatever images they collected, the test itself was over. Then someone had to apply firm pressure to the spot they'd inserted things, and it seemed like that part lasted as long as the test had. It was decidedly uncomfortable and he was starting to get a headache but he didn't complain.

Dr. Mann patted his knee. "You'll be back in your room in a few minutes, and then you'll need to spend a few hours lying down so that clot sets. I'll check on you after I take a look at all of your results, but you're in good hands here."

Tony nodded, then closed his eyes when the motion made him slightly dizzy. He shivered as his bed started to move again, passing Sam on the way out the door.

Pepper was talking on the phone when Tony's entourage returned to the room. The nurses quickly put his bed back in its place. "Would you like some water, Mr. Stark?" one of them asked.

"No thanks," he said quickly.

Pepper ended her conversation and moved her chair to his bedside when the nurses left. Sam resumed his position near the door. "How did it go?" she asked, checking the time. He had been gone nearly two hours.

"I still have a heart," he joked half-heartedly.

"And here all these people think you're heartless," she said, smiling. "Should we write a press release?"

"It'll be best kept a secret for now."

"How are you feeling?" She could tell something was bothering him, but she couldn't tell what.

"I . . . terrible," he said after hesitating. "I feel like I flew into a wall. Or a Hulk."
She took his hand. "Should we call a nurse?"

Tony swallowed. "No, it will pass."

Pepper should have just hit the call button rather than giving him the choice, but since he'd said no, she waited to see if he was right.

Tony was unusually quiet and still as the minutes ticked by. He shivered sometimes even though his hand was quite warm.

After about fifteen minutes, Pepper said, "Tony? How are you doing?"

"I felt better than this when I was dying," he said flatly. "What the hell is going on?"

Pepper pressed the call button. "I don't know."

The nurse that came in was one they hadn't seen before. She checked his IV, asked a few brisk questions about how he was feeling, and didn't seem overly concerned. "It's probably a mild reaction to the contrast," she said, sounding bored. "I can ask the radiologist, but that's the most likely culprit since you felt fine coming in here."

"If this is mild, I don't want to know what severe would be," Tony grumbled.

"Your heart stopping," she replied nonchalantly. "It's never happened here."

"There's always a first time," Tony muttered as she left the room.

"Should I flag down a different nurse?" Sam asked.

"Don't bother," Tony said. "We can ask Dr. Mann when she comes back."

Dr. Mann didn't make an appearance for over two hours. In the meantime, Tony rolled onto his side and curled into a miserable huddle on the bed. A nurse came to check on him twice in that time, both times offering him some water, which he declined. The second time she asked if he wanted her to ask a doctor about giving him something for the nausea or the headache or both, but he declined that, too.

"Tony, my dear, how are you doing?" Dr. Mann asked as she bustled into the room.

"I've been better," he said miserably.

Pepper explained what had been going on.

Dr. Mann frowned and checked her tablet for Tony's record. "Ah," she said finally. "They used different contrast this time. I will put it in your file not to use that one again. I can order ibuprofen for the aching; do you want something for the stomach upset?"

"Will it help?"

"It's supposed to, or we wouldn't administer it," she said mildly.

"All right," he said faintly.

"I will be right back and then we will talk."

Tony wasn't sure how long she was gone, only that when she returned she came with a nurse who
injected things into his IV line, which took an edge off his misery in short order. But he still wasn't feeling prepared for what Dr. Mann was going to tell him, if her expression was anything to go by.

She pulled up another chair beside Pepper. Sam inched closer to the bed so he could also hear.

"My dear, I don't know what to tell you except that I had hoped for more progress than I'm seeing. I will increase the dose of your medication and we'll extend your rest period to six weeks instead of just a month, to make sure you have enough time to heal."

She paused to let him absorb this, then she continued.

"We will repeat the tests in two more weeks to see if the increased medicine helps, but I am concerned about these episodes that you have had. You did not have one while on the monitor but it looks like you came close once or twice. Judging by your log, the reasons appear to be psychological."

A much longer pause followed that pronouncement.

"I have half a mind to require you to speak to a therapist regularly as a condition of your reinstatement," she finished bluntly.

"Anything else you need to get off your chest?" Tony asked sarcastically.

"I am in absolute earnest about this, Anthony," she said seriously. "You are doing no one any good, least of all yourself, trying to function like this. In fact, if you do not do something to improve how you deal with everything that has happened to you, I will have to consider you suicidal and take appropriate measures."

"That seems overly harsh," Tony protested.

"Not when the alternative is allowing you to drive yourself into an early grave." She stood and put the chair back against the wall. "I will put in your new prescription. You will be allowed to leave in two more hours if your wound is satisfactory and if your reaction does not grow worse. If you have any questions after that, you know how to find me."

Pepper took Tony's hand again and gripped it tightly but didn't say anything. That expression on Tony's face usually meant he was contemplating something, and if he was considering what Dr. Mann said, she didn't want to interrupt.

Tony was caught off-guard by Dr. Mann's conclusions. Being benched for an additional two weeks was troubling, but minor in comparison to the rest. He wasn't sure Dr. Mann could force him into psychiatric care for being "suicidal" since she wasn't a shrink, but he also didn't really want to test her. She'd proven to be as formidably stubborn as him. It's part of why he liked her.

Plus, she would definitely keep him benched if she thought it appropriate. While he could technically ignore her directives--there were perks to being the current boss--there were too many people who would give him flak if he did. Like Pepper. And Rhody. And Natasha. And Laura. And Vision. And Sam. And Steve. Hell, probably even Clint and Wanda and . . .

And that was everyone. When did they start to care? And why?

But did they really care? He supposed he'd find out, now that he was going to be out of commission even longer than anticipated.
Trying to think was starting to hurt, so he stopped trying. He closed his eyes and let himself drift, losing all track of time.

Eventually Dr. Mann arrived with a nurse to determine if he was ready to leave. They checked where he’d been poked, then Dr. Mann had him slowly sit up. "How are you feeling, my dear?" she asked.

"I'll live," he said, his vision doubling for a brief moment. His nausea was back with a vengeance, but he didn't want to stay a moment longer.

She had him stand next. He was definitely woozy, but freedom was in sight so he insisted he was fine. Pepper exchanged a look with Dr. Mann and he knew he was busted, but neither of them said a word.

"All right, dear, get dressed and you can leave."

He had to sit down to put his pants on; there was no way he'd have remained upright if he'd tried to stand and balance on one leg at a time. He fumbled a bit with the buttons on his polo, then decided he might as well just leave them open. Otherwise he managed just fine under Pepper's watchful eye.

She had to help him regain his balance when he stood up again, but really, he was doing quite well, thank you very much. Then he saw Sam leaning against the doorframe, a wheelchair perched in front of him. "I don't--" Tony started.

"Don't even try to tell me you don't want to use the wheelchair," Sam said. "I am not carrying your skinny ass out to the car and there's no way in hell you'll make it there on your own two feet."

Tony paused, his expression vaguely annoyed. Now that Sam was being obnoxious about it, he didn't want to admit he was dizzy enough that he wasn't certain where the chair actually was. "Whatever. How's about you bring it over here so we can blow this popsicle stand?"

Sam wheeled it closer and Tony all but collapsed into it. "Really? No complaints?"

"It's the most expedient way to leave this house of horrors."

Sam dropped a clear plastic bag in his lap, which Tony studied as they left the hospital (it was better than looking around and risking recognition). It was the monitor he'd been wearing, plus a familiar white paper bag. His new pills. Ugh.

Pepper climbed into the backseat with him while Sam returned the wheelchair. He leaned heavily against her and closed his eyes.

"What's going on, Tony?" she asked gently.

"I feel like I have the flu," he said miserably.

"Are you going to need to throw up?"

"God, I hope not. I just had this car detailed." He thought a moment, then added, "Fortunately, I'm not usually the vomiting type."

"Of course not." She sounded amused and tactfully failed to mention all the times she had seen him do just that.
He kept his eyes closed for the entire trip back to the compound and didn't even think about how he was going to get from the car to his bedroom until the car was slowing down. "Um," he said eloquently.

"Everything's taken care of," Pepper assured him.

Sam pulled the car up next to where Rhodey was standing with his wheelchair. Tony took his time deciding to get out; moving required effort, and while getting out of the car could mean pleasant things like taking a long bath, the immediate benefit of not having to move outweighed everything else.

Then his car door was opening and Pepper was moving away from him and a hand was tugging on his arm. "C'mon. You'll be more comfortable inside," Rhodey said.

Tony sighed heavily and began to inch out of the car. He ached more than it should be possible to ache. He could have easily fallen asleep in the wheelchair during the trip to his room, but when they arrived and Pepper suggested changing out of his clothes, he insisted upon a bath first.

Pepper humored him.

He promptly fell asleep in the bath.
For the better part of two days, Tony struggled with flulike side effects of the contrast used for his procedure. He mostly alternated between sleeping and feeling sorry for himself, with occasional visits from the others. Laura visited once to bring him a drawing from Lila. It was a bunch of stick figures, the tallest of which had a triangle on its head, and there was something brown and furry-looking. It took him longer than it should have to recognize the characters from their most recent chapter of *The Hobbit*.

Pepper remained with him the majority of the time even though he knew her workload at home was formidable and growing exponentially with each additional day. Anytime he tried to bring that up and subtly let her know it was all right if she left, she refused to talk about it.

As the symptoms faded, he was again confronted with the empty expanse of days stretching out before him. Under ordinary circumstances, he would relish the time to putter in his lab and do only what he wanted to do. Now, though, his projects came with ghosts and he wasn't sure how to perform the exorcism.

Finally on Sunday he was sufficiently recovered to the point that the prospect of getting dressed and going down to sit with everyone else didn't make him cower beneath the covers. His appetite still wasn't great and the first whiff of lunch made his stomach lurch, but the aches and dizziness were mostly gone, which was a major improvement.

After the initial round of 'hey Tony, it's good to see you', the other Avengers mostly returned to whatever they had been discussing when he'd entered the room. He opted to lounge on a couch near them rather than join them at the table and decided not to ask what they were talking about. It would be far more interesting to try to figure it out.

"There has to be something we can do," Sam said.

"He will retaliate," Natasha insisted. "We all know that. If there's anything we can do, it has to be covert."

"Wouldn't it simply be easier to wait until he no longer holds this position?" Vision asked.

Ross. Of course.

"He has influence separate from his position, and now with the lawsuit--"

"Ross finally filed his lawsuit?" Tony asked, sitting up. Scratch that, for this he needed to be at the table. He pulled out the empty chair next to Steve, who looked troubled. "Spill."

"Secretary Ross paid us a visit yesterday afternoon," Vision said. "He said he'd hoped to see you and ask if your condition has changed your perspective."

"We told him he'd be dealing with us," Natasha added. "He said in that case, you and your lawyers could look forward to having new problems, specifically his promised lawsuit, to deal with on Monday."

"He didn't provide any details?" Tony asked, pulling his phone and checking if his lawyers had tried to reach him. They hadn't.

"No," Sam said. "I think he's blowing smoke up our asses."
"Probably," Tony agreed. "He's been threatening this for a while."

"He is the one who should be put in check," Wanda said, her eyes flaring red.

"You're not wrong," Tony said. "Nat, where are we with hiring a P.R. person?"

"Collecting candidates and running security checks. We'll have a shortlist for interviews by the end of the week."

"Splendid." He sat back in his chair. "I've had a few ideas of how to make his life hell but didn't want to piss him off while some of you were still in his clutches. When we have someone who can deal with the media and make us look even better, it'll be that much easier."

Most of them looked at him blankly. "What did you have in mind?" Steve asked.

"Well, if he comes through with his lawsuit, I don't imagine headlines of 'Secretary of State files frivolous suit against Iron Man' will make him look too good. Releasing the audio of our meetings could raise some eyebrows over his conduct. I'd really like to take out his floating ocean pokey, but legally we don't have a leg to stand on there."

"That wouldn't matter if they couldn't connect it to us," Clint said.

"Because there are so many people in the world who both know where it is and have the means to sabotage it," Tony said sarcastically.

"Would your scramblers work again?" Steve asked.

"Unless they've found and removed them, yeah."

Steve looked thoughtful. Tony raised his hands in surrender. "As you already know, you have access to all of my files on Ross and related matters. If you're going to plan something, leave me out of it. Plausible deniability and all that, especially if there's really a lawsuit. Plus Dr. Mann would kill me."

Natasha gave him a calculating look and Tony winked. She changed the subject to their training schedule for the week, and Tony wandered back to the sofa since that didn't pertain to him.

Tony dozed off to the cadence of their conversation. He thought he heard his name a couple of times, but it wasn't sufficient to force him to wakefulness.

He was roused by the smell of food, which was not a wholly pleasant experience, and found that he'd been moved so his head was resting in Pepper's lap, which was a wholly pleasant experience. He shifted onto his back so he could see her face and she moved her hand to his chest.

"I'll need to go back tomorrow," she said quietly.

"I know."

"How can we make this work?"

He took her hand and kissed her fingers. "I don't know. One day at a time?"

Pepper smiled tightly and motioned for him to sit up. When he did, she leaned over and kissed him. He returned the kiss, one hand cupping her nape.

They were noticed, and there was some catcalling from the other Avengers (read: Clint), which Tony answered with a middle finger waved in that direction.
Pepper broke the kiss and rested her forehead against Tony's. "We can give this another try, but there have to be some guidelines." She sat back and glanced at the others, most of whom were pretending they weren't watching. "We'll discuss that later."

Tony nodded. "Square deal." He turned around to stare back at Clint. "Can you be helped?"

"I'm only wondering if we should clear the room for a minute," Clint said cheekily.

"Just a minute? I'm hurt that you think so little of me."

"I'm only being realistic."

"You calling a minute 'realistic' tells me things I did not want to know about you and Mrs. Barton," Tony retorted.

Clint shrugged, looking smug. "I can't seem to miss."

"Now, that? That is straying into territory that I am not going to touch. There are children present, and even though they are yours, I have standards."

"Boys, behave," Natasha said chidingly.

"Are you going to eat?" Pepper asked him as she rose from the couch.

"I'd rather not."

"Will you sit with us, at least?"

"I can try."

"Tony, come on, we've got you covered," Rhodey called from the table.

He sat between Rhodey and Pepper and while everyone else had some sort of baked chicken thing, he had chicken soup and a mug of tea. "What is this?" he'd demanded when the mug was set before him.

"Ginger and mint. Helps to settle the stomach," Wanda told him.

And it helped some, perhaps, so he didn't protest about being given tea, of all things. Coffee was definitely more his style (though not his stomach's, at the moment).

After dinner, he and Pepper continued the discussion about how to make things work between them. What Pepper was asking for was reasonable: he had to do his part to initiate contact between them, rather than waiting for her to reach out. This included him traveling west sometimes, instead of relying on her to come to New York all the time. Granted, she did so fairly regularly on Stark Industries business, but even so.

The issue of Iron Man didn't come up and he wasn't about to ask. For the immediate future, it didn't matter anyway, though he truly did intend to go back to it. Not doing so was inconceivable despite his current hangups.

It ended well, with Tony giving Pepper some needed attention--just because he couldn't get it up didn't mean he couldn't do other things for her--and curling around her in bed afterward. She fell asleep long before he did; he spent the time watching her sleep, partly afraid it would be the last time he'd do so for a while, if ever. They may be on good terms at the moment, but there was always something. He knew full well he was a handful.
Pepper departed right after breakfast, and her absence was a gaping void he could almost physically feel. Perhaps distraction would help.

He headed to his workshop, but he had difficulty focusing the way he needed to. His phone rang and saved him some frustration. "Bill! What can I do for you, my man?"

Ross had filed his lawsuit, it seemed, but Bill and Tony's cadre of lawyers were confident they could get it dismissed.

Tony thanked him for the update, then hung up and stared thoughtfully at his phone. He added the phone call transcript to the Ross files with a note: *Food for thought: Why would Ross file a lawsuit he had to know wouldn't succeed?*

He also sent a brief message to Vision, Sam, and Natasha to alert them that the lawsuit was a thing. Maybe they would have ideas about the ultimate purpose of this ploy.

Tony turned back to Rhodey's suit designs with new resolve. One of them needed to have working armor, and for now it couldn't be him.

He was tinkering with the arc reactor shielding when Steve brought down his lunch.

"I merit delivery?" Tony asked, surprised.

Steve shrugged. "Friday said you were absorbed in your work and this seemed the easiest way to make sure you ate something."

"So you're going to stay and watch me like a hawk until you've seen me eat?"

"Eating regularly is one of the requirements from your doctor," Steve reminded him.

"Sometimes I wonder why I allow you people to be around, if all you're going to do is bother me," Tony grumbled half-heartedly. That they were still watching out for him even though it had been almost two weeks since the original incident was a bit of a surprise; time would tell if that would continue.

He humored Steve and ate his tuna fish sandwich.

"We start training at two and Natasha expects you to be present."

"I'm pretty sure that's not on my list of allowed activities," Tony said smugly.

"She said you'd say that. 'Accommodations will be made' is her answer."

Tony humphed irritably.

"If you really think we can be a team again, you're going to have to do your part to participate," Steve pointed out. "Prove that you trust us not to force you past your boundaries."

Tony was silent for a long moment. Steve had him there and he knew it. Finally, he said, "I have work to finish if I'm going to be part of your little workout."

Steve nodded once and left the room.

Tony grumbled some more about meddling teammates, but told Friday to remind him to change at a
quarter to two.

They started in the workout room for warm ups and some circuit training; he and Rhodey had their own set of lower-impact exercises while the others rotated through free weights, squats, jump rope, and the like. He hadn't trained regularly with the team since before Ultron but the routine still felt familiar.

After that was the jog to the training room (a slow stroll for Tony and Rhodey) and the work on various techniques. Some of the time was spent fighting with staffs, during which Tony helped Rhodey with his physical therapy exercises. Then Wanda practiced lofting other members of the team to a platform two stories off the ground; there was a climbing rope and handholds on the wall for climbing back down.

Tony watched speculatively as Steve, Sam, Clint, and Natasha in turn were deposited on high, then he stepped forward. "I'll give it a go."

"Are you sure you can get yourself back down again?" Steve asked.

He scoffed. "I'm not completely helpless without the suit."

"I can retrieve him if necessary," Wanda added. "It would be good to practice catching other people."

"You'll have to practice that another time," Tony said. "Do I need to brace myself?"

"No," she said, and he was airborne.

It was strange to feel the air on his skin while aboveground; normally he was encased in metal when he flew. Wanda dropped him neatly on the platform and he turned and waved at everyone before grabbing the rope and using only his arms to lower himself to the floor. His hands were burning by the time he reached the bottom and disused muscles were aching in a 'why haven't we done this sooner' way. It felt fantastic.

"I'm not sure that could be considered 'light weight lifting'," Natasha commented after he landed.

"Compared to what I usually lift it is," Tony said. "And I wasn't lifting, I was lowering. That uses different muscles, you know." He turned to Wanda. "When I have working armor, we should try some things with momentum and such, if that's cool with you."

"All right," she said.

After that each of them spent some time individually working with props in the room. Tony didn't pay attention to most of them, instead watching Steve and noticing how at a loss he seemed without the shield. Not that he was going to call him on it in front of everyone.

The training time was unofficially over after two and a half hours as some team members went away to shower and change before dinner. Tonight's dinner was Chinese take-out (Tony's treat) and the jumble of containers would be ready for pickup at five.

Cooper and Lila were excited to go on an outing to retrieve the food--with Laura, of course, and Auntie Nat was coming along too; Tony had arranged that with Laura's permission to help make up for his recurring absences lately. Lila also negotiated him up to two chapters per day until they made up for lost time or the book was finished, whichever came first.
Tony didn't need to shower but he did change before checking on Rhodey, who did not need any assistance, thank you very much. They were the first to get back to the common area, so Tony began to set out plates, silverware, and the like. When Sam and Clint, who had Nathaniel clinging to his side, arrived, they took over that task, assuring him they had it handled and he could just take it easy.

That had been happening ever since his little incident and it was really starting to chafe. Did they think he was incapable of pulling his weight? Or did they just think he was inept? It's not like getting out plates was difficult or particularly taxing.

He flopped into an armchair with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. Then he realized he could have at least offered to divert Nathaniel for a while; perhaps they had a point about his (in)ability to be helpful. Thinking about watching the kids made him think of something else, and he sent a message to Nat before he could forget.

When the food arrived he confined himself to what should be safe--egg drop soup, a spring roll, rice, and some beef with broccoli--and hoped for the best where his stomach was concerned. He was interested in eating, which was a big improvement, but he suspected trying to eat anything spicy would have unpleasant consequences.

Lila found him as soon as she was done eating and solemnly asked him to meet her at the sofa when he was finished, which he was, so he went with her to read.

By the time the two chapters were read, the food had been put away and all the dishes cleaned up and his teammates were once again conferring in their groups about their designated areas of responsibility. He migrated over to the Accords group, since the deadline for everyone to read it was earlier that day and he hadn't looked at the shared file to see what comments resulted.

For the most part, everyone considered the edited version vastly superior to the original, though there were quibbles about terminology and processes. T'Challa had some useful comments about how members of the panel were selected, while Sam pointed out that the definition of enhanced individuals needed to be made more specific or else a number of the world's military forces could fall under the purview of the U.N. panel.

Tony remained silent unless directly asked a question in order to hear what the others had to say. He'd been living and breathing these issues so long it was interesting to hear another perspective.

They were able to review most of the Avengers' comments before it got late and Rhodey declared he was "too tired to deal with bureaucratic shit anymore." Wanda looked relieved when Steve agreed it was time to adjourn for the night.

Tony followed the others in heading for their rooms and was startled when Natasha fell into step next to him. He'd thought everyone else had gone to bed already.

"Yes?" he ventured when she didn't speak.

"You said you wanted to ask me something about Clint," she said simply.

At first he couldn't remember what or why. "Um, yes. Oh! Right. Have Clint and Mrs. Barton had any time to themselves since he came back?"

"Like after the kids go to bed?"

"That doesn't count. I'm thinking completely kid-free, adults-only time. Have they had any?"

Natasha had to think about that. "No, I don't think so. Why?"
"We should suggest they have a date night. Pep and I used to do that. We can offer to babysit."

She gave him a look that he didn't know how to interpret. "That's . . . sweet of you, Tony. Are you sure you're prepared to babysit? You're supposed to be taking it easy."

Tony shrugged. "If the others wouldn't mind lending a hand, we would have like two adults for each kid. That doesn't sound so bad."

Natasha smirked. "You'd be surprised."

"Are you in for the babysitting?"

"Sure. Could be fun."

They stopped outside his bedroom door. "Spread the word, will you? But don't tell the Bartons yet."

Natasha gave a brief nod. "Good night."

"Good night."

That turned out to be wishful thinking. For the first several hours, he was out like a light, but then the dreams started and turned dark and he woke to a racing heart and panting breaths. Despite past experience telling him it might be a bad idea, Tony tried to go back to sleep again after that.

It was a bad idea this time, too. The nightmares turned into flashbacks which turned into an amalgamation of wormhole and Siberia and visions of dead teammates that was utterly terrifying. He woke up in a cold sweat, hardly able to breathe, his heart pounding like it was going to leap from his chest.

The lights turned on automatically as he stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom. Cold, so cold. He climbed into the shower and turned the water on as hot as he could stand. As the spray began to soak his clothes and warm his face, he slid down the wall and huddled on the floor.

He had no idea how long he stayed under the water and he might have stayed a while longer had Friday not said hesitantly, "Boss? Wanda Maximoff is at the door."

This startled him out of the post-dream stupor enough to stand and turn off the water. "What? Why?"

"Shall I ask her, boss?"

"Have at it," he said with a dismissive wave, looking down at himself and debating whether to let her in or not and whether to change if he did.

"Boss, her response," Friday said, then played Wanda's voice saying, "I came to offer assistance, if it is welcome."

Tony cast a calculating glance toward the bedroom door. "Tell her to give me a moment." He peeled off his wet clothes, briskly rubbed himself mostly dry, then pulled on a new pair of cotton pants and a t-shirt. "She can come in."

The door opened slowly and Wanda peered around it hesitantly, then closed it behind herself. Her messy hair and rumpled clothing implied she had come straight from bed. "Mr. Stark," she said awkwardly.

"You're in my bedroom at whatever ungodly hour of the morning it is right now. Tony will do just fine."
"Tony," she said, as if testing it out.

He leaned against the footboard of his bed and waited with his arms crossed over his chest for her to explain her presence.

"I felt your terror," she said bluntly, her uncanny eyes fixed on his face.

"Sorry," he said glibly, realizing how often he forgot that she could sense minds. It was a good thing he wasn't big on secrets, since there couldn't really be any with her around.

"I helped put it there, so I thought it right to offer to help take it away."

"How?" he asked suspiciously.

"I can put you to sleep with better thoughts. It will only help for now, but it will help."

"What do you mean you 'helped put it there'?"

She finally looked away, shifting her bare feet in the plush carpet. "When you found the scepter, I infected your mind with fear and you conjured the vision of dead teammates."

*You could have saved us. Why didn't you do more?*

Vision-Steve's words echoed in his mind and he was shaken to his core. Everything he had done with the team, for the team, since that moment had been a reaction to those words . . .

. . . only for it to turn out to be a neat little bit of mental manipulation. Fury had tried to tell him but he didn't believe it. Wrong again.

"I'm sorry," Wanda whispered.

Tony felt very old and tired. "I don't know what to say," he said finally. "You're admitting you messed with my mind in an attempt to do it again. Why would I believe you? There's nothing stopping you from just doing it anyway."

"If the suggestion is not welcome, I will leave and never mention it again," she said. "You are right, I could simply do it, but you are no longer my enemy. I do not wish to . . . impose."

He regarded her silently for several long minutes. God, she was so young; only a few years older than Spidey, if he remembered her file correctly. So young and so powerful. What was he doing, thinking he merited any sort of consideration whatsoever in such company? He was just a nearly middle-aged man who happened to have lots of money and some nifty tech.

He made up his mind abruptly. "Sure, what the hell. There's nothing to lose here, right?"

"Right," she agreed. "You should get comfortable."

"Friday, turn off the lights when Wanda leaves," he said as he straightened the bedding. He stretched out on his back. "What next?"

"Close your eyes and think of something happy."

He gazed at her a moment longer before deciding to trust her. He closed his eyes and thought of Pepper and flying and joking with Rhody. After a moment, he could almost feel her in his mind, buoying up his thoughts much like she'd lifted his body earlier that day. Then his consciousness faded and he was lost in dreams.
Wanda did not allow the images to register in her mind as she worked; that small courtesy was the least she could do for this man who by rights should not trust her several times over and yet allowed her in all the same. When she was finished and he was deeply asleep, she left the room and softly closed the door. She could keep her vigil from afar.

Tony did not wake again until Friday gently roused him with the reminder about his medication. He almost felt well rested, and he knew Wanda's assistance was to thank. Not only wasn't he immediately thinking about a nap, there were some things that he'd been puzzling over for his secret project that were abruptly quite obvious.

He threw on some clothes and started making notes so he didn't lose it all before he got downstairs. He was debating going straight down to the workshop and risking the ire of Rhodey and everyone else for skipping breakfast when there was a knock at his door.

"Did you sleep well?" Wanda asked anxiously.

"Yes, very well. Thank you," he said sincerely.

A smile lit up her face. She held out a plastic bottle. "I wasn't sure you'd want to get up yet, so I brought this."

It was, of course, a smoothie. "You are too kind," he said as he took it, and almost meant it.

"Will you be coming down?"

"I'm going to do some things in my workshop, I think, now that breakfast is handled."

She nodded. "I will tell the others so they do not worry."

"Yeah, that'd be great." She left, and he finished jotting his notes while absentmindedly sipping the smoothie and heading toward the stairs.
Chapter 10

Tony worked uninterrupted for hours, ironing out some of the kinks on the one project, then trying a few things for the new Iron Man armor. He still wanted to figure out a monitoring system, but trying to develop a sensing mechanism that could take the right type of readings without requiring contact with the skin was harder than it seemed. Still, those crashed helicarriers could identify individuals from a great distance; there had to be a way to see into the human body without hopelessly irradiating it.

He was in the midst of experimenting with recalibrating the sensors used in both the Iron Man suit and Wilson's upgraded tech, then having Friday scan him as a test subject when Friday interrupted his train of thought. "Boss, Captain Rogers is at the door."

"Let him in." Tony's fingers flew across his keyboard a moment longer, then he held up his hand as Steve's footsteps approached. "Stop right there. Do you mind being scanned?"

"Scanned for what?" Steve replied.

"To see if you have a heart," he said with a smirk, glancing up at him.

"All right." Steve agreed hesitantly.

"Friday, give it a go." Steve looked toward the ceiling, but the scan was already over and Tony was studying the readings. "There are too many squishy bits. I'm no good with squishy bits. Where is Bruce when I need him?" he complained. "Friday, study all the data you can find about the heart and imaging methods. Is there any way to make this work without using contrast?"

"Study in progress," Friday said compliantly.

Tony turned his attention to Steve. "You want to see?"

Steve finally moved and came around the table to look at the screen. He could identify the rough outlines of the bones and organs in his chest and he was impressed. It looked almost like an x-ray.

"Not bad, right? I can manipulate this and isolate whatever parts you'd like." He demonstrated by peeling away the bones and lungs and pulling forward the heart. "But I'd like to be able to isolate it automatically and, even better, get a look at the individual chambers without requiring the process they have to do now. It's . . . intimately unpleasant."

"A look at the outside isn't enough?"

"Not for what ails me." Tony tapped his second screen and brought up two images. "The image on the left is my heart, the right is a normal heart. See the distortion in that area? That's the sort of thing I'd like to be able to detect on the fly. The uses of this technology would extend much farther than that, of course, provided I can make it work."

Steve studied the images, then the scan. He had no expertise in the so-called 'squishy bits' either, but he thought he understood what Tony was trying to do and had no doubt he'd manage to figure it out eventually.

"Anyway, I'm fairly certain you didn't come down to get a progress report on my little project. What do you want?"
"I was appointed to retrieve you for lunch," Steve admitted.

"Yeah? Who appointed you?"

"Laura."

"And if I don't want to come?"

"I'm to carry you upstairs," Steve said sheepishly.

"Right." Tony gestured and the screens went black. "Guess I'll come willingly, then." He led Steve out of the workshop and toward the stairs. "Why no room service today?"

"She wanted to talk about something, said you'd suggested it?"

"Huh. Word travels fast."

They didn't speak again as they climbed the stairs to the common area. Everyone else had already gathered and loaded their plates, so as soon as Steve and Tony were present and within earshot, Laura spoke. "This babysitting thing. Are you serious about it?"

"Absolutely," Tony said immediately. "Just pick a day and a time and we'll do it, provided we don't have to go save the world or something."

"Wait, what are we volunteering for?" Sam asked.

"Watching the kids so Clint and Laura can have some time to themselves," Natasha said. "It's a good idea. You'd never believe it was Tony's."

"Stark, man, when did you become a decent human being?" Sam teased.

"Pepper's been working on me for a while," Tony said easily as he took a seat next to Wanda.

"How about on Friday?" Clint said.

After a brief discussion, they agreed on Friday evening and the conversation turned to jokes about how they might spend the time. Laura blushed while Clint laughed and returned the jibes.

Tony didn't participate in the teasing, knowing quite well what they were likely to end up doing and not blaming them one bit, and finished his lunch fairly quickly. He rose and started cleaning up in the kitchen. Wanda joined him after a few minutes. "You do not need to be doing this," she told him.

"Why the hell not?" he retorted fiercely. "I'm trying to be a team player here, and everyone seems to think I shouldn't touch the goddamn dishes. I'm not going to make them explode, for fuck's sake!"

By the end of his outburst, everyone was staring at him. Evidently he'd been louder than he intended.

"If it means that much to you, you can be on dish duty all the time," Clint said, breaking the silence.

"Tony, we're only trying to help you take it easy," Rhodey said placatingly. "And you could make them explode if you wanted to."

"Of course I could, but I wasn't planning on it."

"You can be on dish duty for dinner, if you'd like, but right now Steve and I need to talk to you."
"About what?"

"The meeting tomorrow."

Tony set the plate he was holding into the dishwasher, then wiped his hands on the dishcloth. "Right. All yours, Wanda."

Steve mostly wanted to clarify the logistics of how to get there, where to go, and at what time, and verify the appropriate attire. Tony gave them the details they needed and permission to use his self-flying helicopter to get there, then added, "Rhodey, it would be better if you didn't wear your legs. I don't want anyone beating you up for them."

"So I get to play the helpless cripple. Got it."

"They might be nicer to you that way."

Lila was the next demand on his attention; they read outside because it was a nice day and Laura thought the kids could use some fresh air. Afterward Lila ran off to play with her brother and Tony remained seated in the grass and watched. He had nowhere to be.

He was startled by something bumping into the back of his shoulder. He turned quickly, arms up in defense, and landed a square blow on Redwing, Sam's drone. It wobbled but stayed aloft. He patted it in apology. "You shouldn't sneak up on me like that."

It hovered there and angled itself as if beckoning him, then the grappling hook lowered from its body.

Tony leveled a forbidding look at its camera. "No," he said, sure that Sam could tell what he said even though he wasn't wearing an earpiece.

Redwing drooped as if disappointed and the hook disappeared back into its belly. A few heartbeats later, Sam swooped down from the roof, landing neatly in front of him. "Don't you trust Redwing?"

"It has nothing to do with trust and everything to do with not wanting to be dangling by one hand," Tony retorted.

"Yeah, sure, I see how it is." Sam tapped a command into his bracer and Redwing neatly tucked itself back into his jetpack.

"Everything working as it should be?" Tony asked with interest.

The gear had still been with Ross even after Steve rescued the others from the Raft and Tony's negotiations for its return had gone nowhere until he'd threatened to sue. He personally retrieved and inspected each piece before taking it all back to the compound about a week before Steve and the others arrived. The fact that he had gone to such lengths to retrieve the Ant-Man suit and did not immediately try to reverse-engineer it helped change Pym's opinion of him, though Pym still held a significant grudge against Howard Stark. Tony could sympathize.

"Seems to be," Sam said, settling on the grass near him. "It's good to be flying again."

"I'll bet."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. Tony wasn't sure why Sam had sought him out, and Sam wasn't saying, so he decided to speak instead.
"Has Steve said anything about why he won't use the shield?"

"What do you mean, he won't use it? I thought he didn't have it."

"It's in his equipment locker, like always. I made sure of that."

"Huh. He definitely misses it--I've seen him reach for it during training," Sam said, shaking his head. "Are you thinking it's because of what he did with it?"

Tony paused. "What do you know about that?" he asked carefully.

Sam briefly described what Steve had told him and the others, then what Rhodey had revealed at the hospital and why. Tony leaned back on his elbows and studied the sky so he wouldn't have to look at Sam while he talked about it. The way Sam methodically described it didn't send his heart racing the way his memories did, which was interesting. "So I know enough," Sam finished.

"You know all there is to know," Tony confirmed.

"I'm thinking it's good we have Dr. Thomas coming. She'll start tomorrow, by the way. That's what I meant to tell you."

"Good." Tony slowly stood up and brushed the grass from his clothes, then offered a hand up to Sam. "See you later, alligator."

"After a while, crocodile," Sam responded, then took off, his wings snapping out as he gained altitude.

Tony went inside and wandered back down to his workshop. He turned his attention to his secret project and made some headway, which was satisfying, and managed not to think about why he was doing it, which was a relief.

After loading the dishwasher with the dinner dishes, he sat down with Steve and Rhodey again to make sure they remembered everything for the meeting, since they'd have to leave right after breakfast in the morning. He concluded they were freaking out less than he was, which was probably a good thing. "Keep me posted," he requested.

Rhodey squeezed his shoulder. "It'll be fine."

"Yeah, I know."

He could tell himself that, but his brain didn't believe it and he didn't sleep well as a result. He was awake and out of bed before everyone except Steve, who had left for his run at the usual ungodly hour.

Since he was up before everyone else, Tony figured he might as well start breakfast.

He was putting an egg dish into the oven when Natasha appeared. "You're going to make everyone wonder what you did that you're trying to apologize for," she said as she perched on one of the stools at the breakfast bar.

"Is me being helpful really such a surprise?" he asked sourly, setting a cup in front of her and pouring coffee from the pot that had just finished brewing. The agave syrup, sugar, and creamer were already on the counter.
"Visibly helpful, yes," she said, stirring a squirt of agave into her coffee. "Most people believe the careless playboy facade you've put on in the past."

He began forking slices of bacon into a large pan. "I would have thought the Avengers of all people would know better."

"Some of us do. A few are still getting to know you. And sometimes we just like to tease you."

"Yeah, I get it. I'm good at being the butt of people's jokes."

"I can tell Clint to cool it for a while, if that would help."

"Nah, it's good to have that back to normal." He moved the first round of bacon onto a plate and slid it into the warming drawer, checking on the egg bake as he did so. When a new round of bacon was in the pan, he began whisking eggs and milk for french toast.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Natasha asked.

"I'm good here."

"I didn't mean for breakfast."

He looked up at her and his hands stilled for a moment. Her expression was inscrutable, as always, but there was a note of concern in her voice. "I don't think so." He returned his attention to the sizzling bacon.

Other team members began filtering in at that point, so Natasha didn't push the issue.

Tony stayed busy keeping the french toast and bacon stocked as everyone filled their plates and started eating. Steve and Rhodey were finishing as Tony sat down with his food, so he could only give them a wave as they left the room; he'd considered going down to the chopper to see them off, but it was probably better this way.

After breakfast was reading time with Lila, which distracted him until it was almost time for the meeting in New York to start. Rather than go to his workshop and fret, he went in search of the others and found them at the outdoor shooting range.

There was also an indoor range, but Clint preferred the outdoor one as a better reflection of actual fighting conditions. Having tested his suits in unpleasant weather just to see how they'd fare, Tony completely understood.

As expected, Clint was working with his bow; a few targets down, Vision was practicing with bolts of energy at various strengths and distances. Natasha and Sam were on Clint's other side, working with Wanda on her accuracy with a handgun and one of the rifles. It was the same sort of rifle Barnes had been carrying, Tony remembered, though he couldn't remember him ever firing it.

Tony stood at a safe distance and watched for a while, making a mental note that they'd need a new set of targets soon. Natasha motioned for him to join them, but he waved her off. Wanda was getting frustrated enough about her aim, and having him stroll over and show her up wouldn't help.

"Why are we doing this? I can aim better without the gun," Wanda said finally, picking up and flinging a bullet at the target with a flash of red energy. It was a bullseye.

"You need to be able to handle and use common weapons," Natasha said patiently. "If you're grabbing an enemy's gun, it's faster to shoot it than to take the bullets out and do it your way."
"Why isn't Vision practicing this?"

"Because he can already shoot well," Natasha said. "We've tested him."

Wanda seemed unconvinced. Natasha took the handgun over to Vision and spoke to him quietly. Clint stopped his own shooting to watch. Vision nodded then took the gun, aimed it at the target Wanda was using, and fired, neatly putting his bullet into the hole she had made in the center of the target.

Tony was as impressed as Wanda, who seemed to notice him for the first time. "What about you?" she challenged.

He shrugged and picked up the rifle, briefly checking it over before bringing it to his shoulder and firing. His shot was slightly to the right of Vision's but still within the bullseye circle. "I didn't just make missiles," he said as he set the rifle down. "Life is unpredictable and we want to make sure you're as safe as possible given the crazy shit we do. That's all."

Wanda somehow seemed a little less frustrated after that. Clint came over to try coaching her, so Tony tried out Clint's bow. He definitely wasn't good with a bow and arrow. Natasha tried next, with more success; he was fairly convinced she'd never met a weapon she couldn't shoot to kill on the first try.

Tony completely lost track of time and was startled when his phone rang. "Hey, done already? How'd it go?"

Rhodey scoffed. "Dude, we were in there almost two hours, but yeah, it went well. We'll fill everyone in at lunch."

"Fly safe."

The phone call served as the unofficial signal to break for lunch. They traipsed inside to clean and store the weapons before heading upstairs; Tony waited until the others left, then went to Steve's locker. The shield was right where he'd left it, still bearing the scratches from T'Challa's claws and a slight discoloration in the paint where it had breached the arc reactor. He closed the drawer again, his curiosity satisfied.
Chapter Notes

I'm going to start throwing rough titles on these chapters so you (and I!) can more easily figure out what's in each section. At some point I'll go back and add titles to the earlier chapters as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve and Rhodey arrived just in time for lunch, so Steve was still wearing his suit and Rhodey was in his uniform as they sat down at the table. Once everyone had their food, Steve said, "The meeting went well. The chairwoman would like to see our fully revised version of the Accords before sending it to the rest of the committee."

"Just like that, she agreed," Natasha said doubtfully.

"There was a considerable amount of discussion first, but yes," Rhodey confirmed.

"We have to make absolutely sure it says what we want it to say before she sees it, then," Sam said.

"You've all read it at least once," Tony commented. "If there's anything you want to change, now's the time. We'll want to run it by the lawyers before we send it out, too."

"After lunch," Laura said mildly with a glance at the kids. "Eat, then work."

"Yes, ma'am," Sam said with a grin.

After eating, they gathered at the conference table so the text could be projected on the screen during the discussion. They kept at it for hours and would have gone longer had Friday not interrupted. "Boss, Dr. Thomas would like to officially meet the team when it is convenient."

Tony glanced around the table. "Anyone mind if we do that now?"

"It will be a nice break," Clint grumbled, making a show of rubbing his eyes.

"Friday, tell her she's welcome to come up." Tony stood up and stretched, groaning as his back popped. "Anyone else need some coffee?" he asked, heading for the kitchen.

The suggestion prompted a general movement toward the kitchen for beverages and snacks and in the hubbub Dr. Thomas' entrance went almost unnoticed.

Vision, who stayed out of the fray since he didn't need to eat or drink, was the first to acknowledge her presence. "Welcome, Dr. Thomas," he said sincerely, shaking her hand. "I am Vision. We met last week."

"Yes, I remember," she said warmly. "And, please, call me Dr. Tanya."

Slowly the others noticed she was there and introductions were made as everyone made their way back to the table. As he offered her a chair, Tony said, "So, Dr. T, was there something you wanted to find out right now, or what?"
Dr. Tanya smiled at them and folded her hands on the table. "What do you think I should know?"

Silence followed her question as they looked at each other uncertainly. "The Avengers were created to make the world a better place," Steve started.

"Recently we haven't been much of a team, but we're working on that," Tony said.

"Some of us are . . . under observation," Clint added slowly. "Because we didn't agree to the Accords."

"Which we're trying to make better," Rhodey put in. "Steve and Tony both have been working on getting a more reasonable version approved by the U.N."

"And if it is, will all of you agree to it?" she asked. "Or will that continue to be a point of contention?"

"We don't know. It depends on what changes," Sam said.

"And if you don't, what will happen?"

"Those who don't will be arrested or become fugitives," Tony said flatly, studying his coffee mug rather than look at any of the others. "We're hoping to avoid those being the only options."

"I see," Dr. Tanya said. "Anything else?"

"There were other factors in our dispute," Steve said hesitantly. "But the Accords were the primary issue."

Tony glanced at Steve, a little surprised he'd bring that up already and in front of everyone, but Steve was looking at her and didn't meet his gaze.

"And these other factors were . . . personal?" she asked in clarification.

"Yes."

When it became clear he wasn't going to elaborate any more than that, Dr. Tanya looked around the table again. "I look forward to meeting with each of you individually. I will have a calendar you can use to schedule time to talk, or you can ask me in person. My office will be on the floor below this one in the east wing of the building. Appointments are available starting tomorrow morning."

When she stood, Tony followed suit and escorted her back to the hallway to make sure she could find her way. She assured him she would be fine. "Thank you, Dr. T, I think you'll be good for us," he said. "I will see you soon-ish."

"So I won't see you tomorrow?" she asked lightly.

"Nope."

"You know where to find me when you're ready."

He waited until the elevator doors had closed behind her before speaking. "Friday, Dr. Tanya has permission to access all Avenger common areas at will."

"Yes, boss."

After dinner they continued reviewing the Accords and managed to finish wading through the whole
thing by midnight. Tony had Friday send the latest version to the lawyers who'd been reviewing it all along, then stumbled to bed.

He slept restlessly, waking often, and when he got up the next morning he was out-of-sorts and irritable. His first priority was coffee; nothing and no one else registered as he headed straight for the kitchen.

He was nearly to the coffee when he was stopped short by a mug being shoved at his chest. "Good morning, sunshine. We already made your coffee," Clint said when Tony finally looked up at him, then he set the mug on the nearest counter.

"That is uncommonly decent of you," Tony mumbled, taking the mug and drinking from it, not caring how hot the coffee might be. Fortunately for his mouth, it wasn't scalding.

"Are you even awake?" Rhodey asked.

"Barely," Tony grumbled. "This will help." He nodded to Clint, who nodded back and returned to the table. He surveyed the food arrayed on the counter and took some sausages and a bowl of oatmeal that someone had spruced up with nuts and apples.

After he'd sat down and eaten a few bites, Natasha said, "We're going to do morning workouts in the pool. You're welcome to join us."

He considered that as he ate a sausage. He wasn't always a fan of water, not since Afghanistan, but the passage of time and developing even bigger hangups over other things meant it wasn't nearly the issue it had been at first. He could take baths now, for instance, and had been swimming once or twice, which was fine so long his chest was covered (which was weird, but whatever worked). "Yeah, I can join you," he said finally. "What time?"

He showed up at the pool a few minutes early, dressed in one of the wetsuits he still owned despite not having surfed in years. It only came down to his elbows and knees, so it didn't look completely ridiculous. He hoped.

Natasha and Wanda were already there and in the water, Wanda in a modest one-piece with her hair tucked up in a swim cap and Natasha in a sleek suit that covered almost as much as his did.

Rhodey and Vision arrived and sat on the bench along the wall to watch. Tony supposed that answered the question of whether Vision could swim. Steve, Sam, and Clint appeared within moments of each other, all wearing some variation of skin tight swim trunks.

After everyone had taken turns to do a few laps as warmup, Clint suggested trying water polo since they had enough people for teams. The others were willing to make an attempt, so they moved the lane lines out of the pool and used towel baskets from the changing rooms as makeshift goals. Clint found a hard plastic ball, likely left behind by his kids, and decided it would work well enough.

They decided the goalkeepers could stand on the bottom of the pool so that Tony could play without exerting himself more than was wise. Wanda was the opposing goalie; Clint and Steve were on her team while Natasha and Sam were on Tony's.

The ball wasn't the best for throwing, so there weren't many successful shots at the goal on either side. After a while, Natasha and Sam figured out how to keep the ball away from Clint, who tried to get even by sneaking up on Nat and pushing her underwater.

Tony witnessed this maneuver and his heart clenched when Nat finally surfaced, sputtering and coughing. "Barton!" he bellowed, wading toward him. "Get out of my pool right now."
Clint gave him a questioning look. "What?"

"Get out. Now," Tony hissed through clenched teeth.

Clint backed away and Tony followed until Clint's back hit the pool wall. "What's your problem?" he asked, scrambling out of the water.

"The one thing I cannot tolerate in my pool is forcing someone underwater," Tony said vehemently. He was starting to tremble, the water no longer something he could tolerate. He moved climbed out of the pool and headed for the adjacent hot tub room.

"What's his problem?" he heard Clint ask, and clenched his fists. He needed to be away for a minute, needed to expend the adrenaline that had surged through him in sympathy as he saw Natasha go under. He stalked around the hot tub several times, taking deep breaths, before his heart rate began to slow and he was no longer shaking like a leaf.

"Hey, you all right?" Rhodey asked from the doorway.

"Yeah, I just--"

"I know, but Barton forgot. We've reminded him."

"It's not just about that. You don't do that shit, especially not to a teammate."

"Natasha has made that perfectly clear."

Tony took another deep breath, decided he had calmed down enough to manage, and returned to the pool area. Vision was quietly observing Steve and Sam putting the lane lines back into place but there was no sign of the other three.

"The ladies left to shower," Sam said from the end of the pool closest to Tony. "Clint is putting away the goals. We'll be headed out as soon as we're done here."

Tony nodded and went to change. He was unsurprised to find Clint was already stark naked in one of the shower cubicles. He passed him without saying a word and headed for the shelf where he'd stashed his clothes. He'd shower later, when the smell of chlorine was an irritant rather than a comfort--the water in Afghanistan had smelled nothing like chlorine.

"Tony," Clint said, coming up behind him as he began to peel off his wetsuit.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out."

Tony turned around. "Did you apologize to Nat?"

"Yeah, after she told me off."

"Then we're good. Don't pull that shit again."

"I won't. It was a dumbass thing to do."

"Damn right it was."

Clint went to get dressed and Tony finished doing the same. He rinsed out the wetsuit and left it hanging in the corner; he'd retrieve it later or maybe even use it again.
When he arrived upstairs, Natasha was there with Laura, cutting up apples and carrots for lunch. The Barton kids were already eating and Lila waved enthusiastically when she saw him. Nathaniel started waving from his booster seat in imitation of his sister. "Come eat lunch with us, Uncle Tony, and then we can read!" she said.

"All right, honey, I'll be there in a minute," he said. He joined Natasha and Laura in the kitchen to get the lowdown on the plans for the rest of the day. There wasn't any training planned for the afternoon and Laura was more than happy to leave Lila with Tony while she put Nathaniel down for his nap.

He sat next to Lila and listened to her account of their morning with some interjections from Cooper when he felt she wasn't telling Uncle Tony the full story. Then Lila commented that how he smelled like the pool and he had to explain what he had been up to that morning. He left out the part about Clint, of course; no need to give the kids any ideas.

When Tony finished eating, Lila eagerly led him in taking their dishes to the sink, then retrieved the book and picked a place to sit. They did two chapters again; when they'd finished with the allotment, he flipped forward to find out how many more chapters were left: just four. Lila would have to pick a new book very soon. "I think we'll go back to one chapter tomorrow," he said as she climbed down from his lap.

"I think we should read two until the book is finished."

"But we've caught up for the days we missed."

She gave him a beseeching look. "Please?"

Tony sighed. "All right, but you're going to have to pick a new one even sooner that way."

"That's okay!" she said happily.

*Just don't pick The Lord of the Rings this time,* he thought.

While Lila put her book away, he wandered over to the table where Natasha and Wanda were playing go fish with Cooper. Lila wanted Uncle Tony to play too so she could 'help' him while sitting on his lap. They played a few rounds; Lila had an uncanny ability to ask for cards one of the other players had only just fished for, so they won easily three different times.

By that point, Laura came back down from putting Nathaniel down for a nap, and she collected the older two for some quiet time in their rooms. Lila wanted Auntie Nat and Wanda to go with her, so Tony was left alone. "Friday, where is everyone?"

"Clint Barton is in his family's quarters. Colonel Rhodes and Sam Wilson are in the workout room. Vision is reviewing a communication from your lawyers. Captain Rogers is meeting with Dr. Tanya."

Interesting. "How long has Steve been meeting with Dr. Tanya?"

"Thirty-five minutes."

While he sometimes enjoyed snooping into things people didn't want him to know, meeting with the therapist really shouldn't be something that anyone could ask about—and not just because he didn't want the others to know if (when) he decided to talk to her. "Friday, treat one-on-one meetings with Dr. Tanya as confidential and do not report their length."
"Yes, boss."

Time to test it. "Where is Steve?"

"Captain Rogers is in a meeting."

"And Doc T?"

"Dr. Tanya is in a meeting."

That would do.

Then something else occurred to him. "Redirect all recordings from that room to the private server that only Dr. Tanya can access and make a note that I should talk to her about how to disable the recording entirely." The Avengers' bedrooms and workspaces he'd intentionally left bare of security equipment, but the office Dr. Tanya was assigned had been intended for visitors and Tony had wanted to be able to eavesdrop on them at any time. With all the trouble with Ross, it had been a good idea. Now, not so much.

Tony ran a hand through his hair and decided it was time to wash off the chlorine. After a brief shower, he went down to his workshop and skimmed his new messages. He read the one from the lawyers; they were again assuring him the lawsuit wasn't anything to worry about. The other lawyers hadn't yet responded about the Accords edit, so he dismissed the message list and turned his attention back to his secret project.

As much as he tried not to wonder what Steve was talking about with Dr. Tanya, his mind kept wandering back to that very subject. It didn't concern him, except that it might. He located and opened Dr. Tanya's calendar, noting absently that it only showed available times (no privacy problems there), and closed it again. It could be so easy to drop his name into one of the many available timeslots, it's not like he had anywhere else to be, but he hesitated.

"Friday, show me what you found for the monitoring system," he said, forcefully turning his attention to something different. This time it worked, as he systematically tweaked and tested his scanning mechanism. He still wished for Bruce's help with the squishy bits, but he was getting there.

He worked steadily until Rhodey came down to find him. Tony tested the scan on Rhodey, pleased when it showed vague outlines of the heart's chambers without any manipulation of the image. The resolution wasn't sufficient for his purposes yet, but he was making progress. On a whim, he zoomed in on Rhodey's spine.

Rhodey watched curiously, nodding. "Looks like my last set of scans," he said. "Does this mean I won't have to suffer that loud machine again?"

Tony chuckled. "I don't think your doctors will trust this over their own machines, but we can certainly show them and see what they think."

Rhodey had, of course, not come down to see what he was doing but to fetch him for dinner. Again with the emphasis on food; Tony didn't think he'd eaten three meals a day this regularly in years. If Pepper had been right about him losing weight (he still hadn't checked one way or the other), that wasn't going to remain the case for long.

After dinner Rhodey convinced him and Steve to teach Wanda how to play five-card draw poker while everyone else was busy. Wanda was a quick study with one hell of a poker face and soon had a pile of the peanuts they were using in place of poker chips. Rhodey won just about every hand that Wanda didn't, until Tony complained, "I'd think she was in my head, but what's your excuse?"
"I've already said I can read you like a book," Rhodey said with satisfaction, sweeping his winnings into his pile. "And Steve either can't bluff or has decided not to."

The game got more interesting as some of the others were dealt in, until all nine of them were trying to outmaneuver each other. Vision played for a while but didn't seem to have a taste for the game; while he knew perfectly well which hands were better and that bluffing was essential, he didn't particularly like lying. Tony wondered if that was the influence of the gem, since the part of Vision that had been Jarvis was able to stretch the truth like taffy—he'd witnessed Jarvis do so on an impressive number of occasions.

After Vision bowed out, preferring to watch, Tony noticed that Laura was winning a surprising number of hands. He decided that no one was expecting her to bluff as effectively as she was. That's what came of being an untrained, regular human at a table of superheroes, he supposed, though technically the same could be said of him. It's just that everyone expected him to be full of bluster, he'd kind of built a reputation on it.

Then someone offered to serve drinks, which was met with general approval, though Tony, Steve, and Vision abstained. Tony never expected to be one of the teetotallers, but the past year or so had blown up all sorts of expectations. He was almost getting used to it.

When Tony and then Steve ran out of peanuts, Clint asked with a grin, "Who's up for strip poker?"

"Depends on the rules," Rhodey replied.

There was spirited debate about the proper way to play strip poker, but Laura took charge of hammering out a consensus since it was her turn to deal next. "So we're all clear: no folding, one item bet per round, and only the worst hand in the round has to strip. Who's in?" Everyone but Vision was game, so she began dealing.

"Vision, man, I need to ask you a question I've been wondering about," Sam said abruptly. "Are your clothes real, or do you just . . . project them? Like, would you even be able to strip?"

Vision didn't answer immediately and then the sweater he'd been wearing vanished. "Does that answer your question?"

Tony didn't think it was a big deal—perhaps because he'd seen Vision sprout a cape out of nowhere not long after he was, um, born—but Sam was staring at Vision with something like awe. Clint elbowed him and laughed. "You mean you didn't realize that Vision is always naked?"

"Are we going to play, or should we give you boys some privacy?" Nat asked, her smirk almost hidden behind her cards.

Sam shook his head and shuffled through his cards. "Nah, I'm good, that just blew my mind a little, which is more than I can say about these cards."

"Table talk," Laura said reprovingly, and the game officially commenced.

The rest of the evening reminded Tony more of a frat house than a gathering of respected superheroes. He was, predictably, the first one to lose all of his clothing and he chose to be done rather than continue playing in the nude.

Steve was out shortly after Tony, followed by Clint and Rhodey, and at that point it was late enough that Sam suggested they turn in. "You just know you'd lose next round," Tony pointed out; Sam was down to his briefs and having a run of bad cards.
Sam shrugged. "So?" he said with an easy grin. "We can all recognize that the ladies are the winners this time. I don't need to lose to confirm it."

Natasha agreed on account of needing to be alert for several PR interviews the next morning, so they cleaned up and collected the clothing shed during the game. Tony was the last one out of the room and did a final sweep for any items left behind; he didn't want Cooper or Lila to find anything that would be difficult to explain in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to quickly comment on the options for those who don't agree to the revised Accords--retirement isn't included because those who opposed the Accords in Civil War do not have that as an option (they've already violated the Accords and some sort of consequences have to result). In this story, I'm assuming the Accords as originally passed do not include any provisions for the rehabilitation of superheroes gone astray, and that's one of the major things Tony and Steve are adding to the new version so that Steve and company have an option other than jail for the rest of their lives (I suppose you could call that "enforced retirement"... more like internment, but anyway).
Babysitting

If there was one thing Tony appreciated about the "Alcohol: none" stipulation, it was that he didn't wake up with a hangover. Several of the others weren't so lucky, if the expressions of pain and the clutching of coffee cups at breakfast were anything to go by.

Perhaps as a result, the morning passed quietly; no team workouts or practice, just each person passing the hours in whatever manner satisfied them. Except Natasha, who was elsewhere in the building doing those interviews. Tony momentarily wondered if he should go help, but dismissed the thought quickly. Natasha knew what she was about and likely could get a better idea of these people without him bumbling about in the background.

Instead, he and Rhodey messed around with suit designs in the workshop, debating the relative merits of the leg modifications until they had two possibilities that seemed equally plausible. "Friday, display the materials inventory for the Tower lab," Tony directed, then skimmed the list quickly. "Tell you what: we'll try both. Friday, begin fabrication of the prototypes."

"Estimated time to completion and arrival, two hours," Friday reported.

"Right. Let's talk firepower. The sky's the limit, now that we're starting from scratch."

Rhodey definitely had ideas on that front, and they spent the rest of the time before lunch making additions and alterations to the holographic representation of the new War Machine armor.

"This is gonna be good," Rhodey said with satisfaction, pushing himself away from the table while Tony made a few final tweaks before they went upstairs. "How's your armor coming?"

Tony caught up with him just before the door and gestured to ask if Rhodey wanted him to push the chair. Rhodey declined with a shake of his head. "It's in process," Tony said, walking alongside him down the hall. "I've been focusing on the monitoring system."

"Look, you know I know you're brilliant and everything, but do you really even need to worry about that? We've got your back."

"You do," Tony said, stepping into the elevator after him. "But I'm not so sure about the rest."

"Hold up," Rhodey said, rolling himself into the path of the closing elevator door and ignoring the dinging alarm that protested the obstruction. "What do you mean you're not sure? They're working their asses off to help cover for you, and you're not sure?"

Tony shrugged and shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "They're doing that now. It's only been, what, two weeks? What happens in two months when I'm back in action? You really think they're going to keep this up long term?"

"Okay, this? This is me calling you on your bullshit. You've been talking a good talk down at the U.N. about rehabilitation and getting the team back together and now you're telling me you don't actually believe a word you've been saying. Either you think we can be a team again or you don't, but don't be saying one while believing the other. You need to put up or shut up, Tony."

"I have trust issues," Tony said lamely. "Can you move? That noise is ridiculous."

"Believe me, I know you have trust issues, and I know you're still dealing with the shit that happened," Rhodey said, not budging from the doorway. "But fake it 'til you make it or stop
spouting the bullshit. You're not doing the team any favors by trusting them but not trusting them."

"Yeah, well, they approved me but didn't approve me, so it happens. Seriously, would you just move?"

Rhodey rolled back into the elevator, the door shut with an almost audible sound of relief, and the elevator rose smoothly. "Don't think this conversation is over, because it isn't."

"Tell me how you really feel," Tony said sarcastically.

Rhodey glared at him. The doors opened and he began to back out. "Give them a chance. They may surprise you."

"I don't know about that," he mumbled as he followed.

The conversation over lunch mostly concerned the timing of Clint and Laura's departure for their evening away. Tony pulled Clint aside afterward. "You've got transportation and all that? Money is no object, you know."

"I've got it covered," Clint assured him. "You do pay us, you know, and it's not like we get charged rent."

"I just wanted to check. It's important to keep the ladies happy."

"Yeah? Have you talked to Pepper since she left?"

"That's none of your business."

"I think I know how to make a relationship work better than you do, Stark, considering I'm married with three kids and you . . . aren't."

"That's a low blow, Barton." But he wasn't wrong, and Tony knew it. "We have the funds if you need them is all I'm saying."

"Yeah, yeah. We'll be fine."

Lila came to Tony's rescue, well-worn book in hand. His mind wasn't on the story despite the action coming to a head in those two chapters but Lila didn't seem to notice his preoccupation.

After she hugged him and climbed off his lap, he realized he should have waited and read to her later after her parents had left. Well, they'd find something to do, or one of the others would have a suggestion. Seven Avengers and three kids was pretty good odds.

Clint and Laura left the compound not long after Nathaniel got up from his nap and everything went smoothly at first. They took the kids outside to play for a while since the kids could keep themselves occupied fairly well that way. But, of course, since they had a gaggle of adults on hand, Cooper and Lila wanted to play games that involved more than just the two of them.

Rhodey, who couldn't run even with his legs on, and Tony, who Nathaniel had inexplicably attached himself to, were the amused audience as the others sat in a circle on the grass to play duck, duck, goose.

After a few rounds, Natasha suggested hide and seek so everyone could participate. Vision was always the hardest to find, since he could phase himself into objects; once Cooper realized that's what he was doing, he demanded repeated demonstrations using various objects because it was "the
"coolest thing ever." Lila, on the other hand, was unnerved by it and hid behind Auntie Nat, so Natasha offered to push her on the tire swing for a while.

That suggestion interested Cooper, too, but there was only one swing so Sam proposed a frisbee throwing contest to forestall an argument. Steve, Wanda and Vision joined in, as did Tony once Rhodey managed to distract Nathaniel from his death grip on Tony's pant leg.

They tried challenges of distance, accuracy, and style. Cooper was his father's son and nailed every target for the accuracy part. "We should put in a frisbee golf course," Tony said as Cooper ran after a rolling frisbee (Tony was not always good with the throwing technique). "We've got enough space for it."

"That could be fun," Sam said. "Just don't let Barton design any of the holes or it'll be impossible for those of us with average aim."

Dinner was pizza, ordered by Tony and picked up by Dr. Tanya, who joined them. Tony was quick to point out to anyone who asked--and even some who didn't--that having Doc T pick up the pizza was her idea.

Even Nathaniel had pizza, though he deconstructed his and mostly ate the cheese while the sauce-covered crust was deemed appropriate for the floor. Of course, it landed sauce side down. Wanda was the first to notice and clean it up. After the second time, she thought that maybe pizza wasn't the best idea for the baby and gave him a banana instead.

When Tony rose from the table and began clearing away some of the mess while the others finished eating, Nathaniel spotted him and waved his hands in his 'I'm done, pick me up' gesture. Tony knew enough to find the washcloth and clean his face and hands before releasing him from his booster seat. He set him on his feet on the floor, but Nathaniel continued to hold his arms up. Tony was already tired of schlepping the kid around so he ignored the gesture.

Nathaniel began to cry. Tony picked him up. Nathaniel settled down immediately and cuddled against Tony's chest, tucking his head beneath his chin.

Tony gave up on helping clean up at that point, since he wasn't as practiced as Laura or Clint at doing things one-handed without dropping kid or stuff or both. He sat on the sofa and tried to shift Nathaniel to sit on his lap, but the kid wouldn't budge from his spot against his chest without starting to cry.

Well, if he was going to have to hold Nathaniel like that, he may as well make it less awkward. Tony turned sideways so he could stretch out on the couch and have Nathaniel draped over his chest.

Nathaniel made a happy-sounding noise and clutched Tony's shirt, two fingers from his other hand shoved in his mouth. Tony wasn't sure what to do with his hands, so he rubbed Nathaniel's back.

The position was surprisingly comfortable and Tony could feel his restless sleep catching up to him now that he wasn't focused on something else. He would have to take Nathaniel to get changed and put in his bed eventually, but for right now, the kid was happy and that's all that mattered. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Tony slowly drifted back to consciousness, drawn by the voices of the others arguing good-naturedly over . . . something. He didn't really care what, but once he started hearing the conversation, his mind latched onto it and he woke up fully.
When he opened his eyes he remembered where he was and why, but Nathaniel wasn't atop him anymore. He sat up and saw Rhodey sitting nearby. "The kid in bed?"

"Yeah, he's good."

"You're not with the others?" He still hadn't figured out what they were doing; a glance over his shoulder found them around the table with some sort of game.

"Nah, world domination isn't my thing."

Tony checked his watch. He'd been out at least three hours and he felt like he could roll over and go right back to sleep. He yawned and pulled up his messages for a brief skim. "Oh, hey, the lawyers responded to our Accords revision."

"Yeah, that's what I've been reading," Rhodey said, lifting his tablet briefly. "Legalese is almost as bad as government documents."

"I've always thought it was worse." Tony laid back down on the couch on his side facing Rhodey. "Anything interesting?"

"They have some good suggestions for defining 'enhanced individuals', but it's still a really narrow line to try to draw."

"Yeah," he said, his eyes falling closed.

"Hey, why don't you just go to bed?"

"I'd have to move."

"If you're going to stay put, there's a blanket on the back of the couch."

He reached back for it without opening his eyes and tugged it haphazardly over himself. Yes, that was better.

He didn't wake up again until the early morning light grew brighter than he could sleep through; there was a reason his bedroom was on the north side of the building. He threw an arm over his eyes and tried to go back to sleep but the damage was done. He sat up and rose to his feet in one motion, letting the blanket fall haphazardly onto the cushions.

A wave of dizziness caught up with him halfway to the door and he had to stop moving until it passed. After that he made it to his bedroom without incident and fell onto his bed with a sigh. He got up again about two hours later, when his attempts to fall back to sleep had repeatedly proved unsuccessful.

He took his meds and contemplated throwing back some ibuprofen as well; spending the night on the couch had left him far more stiff and sore than he'd expected. Perhaps they ought to have a team chiropractor, too, or at least hire one to make a house call once a week. He made a note to look into that, then sent Pepper a good morning message while he was at it. Barton's barb about him not talking to Pepper had stung, and there was only one way to fix that.

He showered, shaved, and changed and was still back in the main room before most of the rest of the team. He made a beeline for the coffee.

"Morning," Sam greeted him.
Steve met Tony's look with a nod. "How was the couch?"

"Not my bed. I woke up feeling very old," Tony groused.

"If you're old, what does that make me?"

"An aberration. Chronologically you're ancient, but I don't think the years in the ice actually count, which makes you younger than me."

"Thanks, I think."

"You're welcome to see what your joints think of a night on the couch. I'm pretty sure you'd fare better than me."

"That has less to do with age and more to do with the serum. What do you want in your omelet?"

Tony had to peruse the options before he could answer that question. Once the omelet was safely in the pan, he asked, "What time did the Bartons get back?"

Sam shrugged. "Don't know, haven't seen them."

"They returned to the compound after midnight, but as far as I know they haven't been back to their quarters. Natasha and I took turns staying near the kids overnight," Steve said, scooping the omelet onto a plate and sliding the plate toward Tony. "Clint sent a message about wanting to sleep in for once."

"Sure. They're sleeping," Tony said, sharing a skeptical look with Sam. "Does Nat need help with getting the kids up?"

"Rhodey went to check on them," Sam said.

The door burst open and Lila and Cooper ran in with Rhodey trailing far behind them. "Uncle Tony!" Lila said excitedly. "Would you read to me now? We're almost done!"

"I think you need to eat breakfast first, honey," Tony said. "And we need to comb your hair."

She brushed her hair out of her face impatiently, completely ignoring the tangle at the back of her head. "No. Only Mama can do my hair."

"Hasn't Auntie Nat done it before?"

She had to think a minute. "Maybe," she conceded. "But not today."

"What if I helped you comb it?"

She eyed him calculatingly. "Okay," she said reluctantly. "After breakfast."

"It's a deal."

Lila wanted to sit next to him while she ate breakfast, and Cooper sat between him and Rhodey. They both ate quickly, then Lila led Tony over to one of the armchairs. Cooper followed.

"Are you going to listen today?" Tony asked. The boy usually read to himself.

"I like this part," Cooper said as he sat on the floor.
"Suit yourself," Tony said, settling himself in and opening the book. He took his time with the reading, but soon enough the story was over. It ended on a happy note, of course, and Tony wished life were so simple.

Then he remembered something. "Weren't we going to comb your hair?"

"Oh. I don't have my comb," Lila said, not sounding upset in the least.

Something tapped Tony on the shoulder. He looked up to see Natasha sliding a bright pink comb onto the arm of his chair. "Here's your weapon. Good luck," she said.

"All right Lila, sit still and I will do my best not to hurt you," he said. He gingerly began running the comb through the thick hair, hesitating when it met resistance, then continuing more boldly when Lila didn't make a sound of protest.

He worked at it slowly, and was nearly done when a voice behind him said, "You're lucky. She never sits that still for me."

"Daddy!" Lila said, turning her head abruptly. "Ow."

"Just a minute more," Tony promised, running the comb over the last strands of hair. "There. All done."

She scrambled down and ran to hug Clint, then Laura, who was talking to Natasha near the kitchen.

"Did you have a good night?" Tony asked as he stood up. He glanced at the comb still in his hand and handed it to Clint.

"Yeah, it was good," Clint said, but didn't elaborate.

Tony could hear Lila telling Laura that they'd finished the book. "Can we go to the library, Mama?"

Laura looked at Clint. "We'll see," she said. "We have others here you can pick from, too."

"I don't want one of those," Lila said. "And I want to see Miss Cathy."

"She may not work on Saturdays."

"Please, Mama," Lila said, giving Laura a pleading look.

"I said we'll see," Laura said firmly.

Lila pouted, crossing her arms across her chest and stomping one foot.

"That is not how we behave. We will not go to the library today, and if you don't improve your attitude, we won't go on Monday, either."

"But Mama-"

"Not another word about it. Go put your book away."

Lila sniffled but did as she was told. Tony was very glad he didn't have kids; he'd never be able to manage them. He'd end up taking his father's approach of keeping the kid at arm's length and letting someone else handle it.

Clint and Laura herded the kids out of the room (to do what, he wasn't sure), leaving him alone.
Again. He checked on the others' whereabouts with Friday; they were all busily doing the work he should have been doing or were just plain busy. Even Dr. Tanya, not that he would've actually gone and talked to her. Well, maybe. He was going to have to just go and do it sometime, because trying to plan for it would give him ample time to think of reasons not to.

Doubts about his usefulness, his place on this team, even his health—he was still so fucking tired despite the coffee coursing through his veins and that really wasn't normal—weighed heavily on him. He supposed he could go work on his armor, but what was the point when he couldn't wear it for at least a month, and that was assuming his recovery period wasn't going to be extended again. His other project, well, he was questioning everything he had done so far.

He felt purposeless, pointless, stuck.

"Stuck, feeling a little stuck? Like a little turtle, cooking in his turtle suit?"

He hadn't thought about that for a long time, but now the memory flashed before his eyes like it had been recreated in holograms. He shook his head and focused on the room around him, which was fortunately still empty.

Stuck. The arc reactor damaged, flight systems non operational, his helmet trashed, an ache in his chest that may or may not be physical.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and jolted him from the memory. Good morning, Tony. You were up early, everything all right?

Mostly. Fell asleep on the couch, not comfy. You have anything big on today?

While he waited for her response, he finally moved, heading anywhere but the common areas. He needed to not be where the others could stumble across him while he was in this funk.

His feet led him first to the office which, while not even close to the first place someone would be looking for him, also lacked any feeling of safety. This was where he had been besieged by demands for his time, his knowledge, his input. Just looking at the desk reminded him of the calls from Ross, the blinking light as he kept Ross on hold as long as possible without making the Secretary snap and do something he wouldn't like.

So he went to his bedroom, that sanctuary that had, not so long ago, also held a Pepper. He kicked off his shoes, pulled the duvet off the bed, and curled up on the floor on the far side of the bed.

No, nothing big today. I'm almost finished playing catch-up. Did you need something?

No, I just wanted to say hi.

His phone remained stoically silent after that, so he set it on the floor and stared blankly at the wall.

At some point he must have fallen asleep, because at some point he was startled awake, his heart pounding, by someone knocking. He untangled himself from the duvet, snagged his phone from the floor, and stumbled to the door. "What?" he demanded without opening it. There were only a few people he would allow to see him in his current rumpled state.

"I am here to summon you to lunch," Rhodey said.

"Oh, it's you," Tony said, opening the door a crack. "Give me a couple of minutes and I'll be down."

"I can wait. I have my own chair and everything."
Rhodey wheeled in and watched. "After lunch, can we test those prototypes? We never got back to that yesterday."

"You read my mind," Tony said with forced cheerfulness. He'd completely forgotten about that.

He hoped the others had gone ahead with lunch without them and they could slip in unnoticed so he didn't have to deal with anyone else. He wasn't in the mood. The former turned out to be true but no such luck on the latter--Sam waved them over to two empty places at the main table and Tony wasn't even left to sit down in peace.

"Tony, we need your opinion," Steve said as soon as he saw him. "Ross wants us to do a mission near a possible HYDRA satellite location. It doesn't seem like he knows about the HYDRA ties, but we could clean that up while we're there. Do we go?"

He blinked as he tried to process both the question and the fact that he was being asked the question. "Back up a second," he said finally. "What's the mission? No, first things first: has the U.N. given approval? I've been holding him off until now by insisting on a U.N. go-ahead for his harebrained schemes."

"The U.N. panel is awaiting our recommendation before rendering a decision," Steve said. "It sounds like they'll heed our yes or no."

"The mission is at the behest of the Joint Terrorism Task Force, so Ross is asking that we accept it," Natasha elaborated. "The Task Force has intelligence that there is a band of enhanced individuals hiding in the mountains in a region neighboring Sokovia."

"Does the intelligence check out? What have they done to merit being hunted down?" Tony asked with interest.

"The intelligence is vague," Natasha said with a frown. "It could be something. It could be nothing. There's no way to tell without more information or going over there."

"And you know as well as we do that the possibility of their existence is enough to make them a target," Steve said unhappily.

"So you don't want to do it," Tony said, nodding. "Where does HYDRA come in?"

"A recently decrypted file indicates that there has been a HYDRA satellite base within a few kilometers of the alleged enhanced individuals," Vision replied.

Steve continued. "If HYDRA is in the area, it's possible they got some tech from Strucker before we took him down, in which case the enhanced--"

"Might just be HYDRA and everyone would be happy if we make them disappear," Sam finished.

"Right," Tony said absently. "Do we have time to get better intelligence before giving our answer?"

"They want the mission completed by Monday," Natasha said flatly.

"What? Why?"

"The intelligence indicates these people are planning some sort of terrorist action for Tuesday," Steve said.

"So the intelligence that doesn't really even know what these people are also claims they're planning
"something for Tuesday," Tony repeated in disbelief. "Why are they taking this seriously?"

"Because the supposed target is New York," Natasha said wearily. "Specifically, the U.N."

"And yet the U.N. panel is letting us decide if we're going to pursue this? That seems fishy," Rhodey said.

"That's what we thought," Steve agreed.

"Because it's a trap," Tony said slowly, the realization dawning in all its hideous glory. "If we decline the mission for lack of good intelligence and something happens in New York on Tuesday, we'll take the fall. If we go and there's nothing there, we prove our judgement can't be trusted and our efforts to have Avenger representation on the panel will be shot to hell."

"What if we don't go and nothing happens?" Wanda asked.

"Something will happen, even if Ross has to plant a bomb himself," he replied and pushed his plate away. He'd lost what little appetite he'd had. Sometimes he wondered if life would be simpler if he'd never agreed to work with that conniving snake.

"But this HYDRA thing," Sam said. "Isn't that an ace up our sleeve? We agree to go, we take out an enemy Ross didn't know was there, and we come out the good guys."

"Only if HYDRA is or was in the area," Steve replied. "We can't know for sure based on one document."

No one spoke for several minutes. Tony pulled out his phone and typed in a few commands. "I'm having Friday check for anything else using the location names from the document we have. It will take some time, but it seems like our best hope for corroborating our own intelligence."

"How quickly could that produce results?" Steve asked.

Tony shrugged. "It could be an hour, it could be three days."

"So what do we think? Should we go for it if Friday finds any additional information?" Steve addressed the group.

"That seems the only way we have to save face," Natasha said sourly. "Unless we can prove their 'intelligence' was manufactured."

"Is it possible to do that?" Steve asked.

"It can be possible, but it's unlikely to happen in the amount of time we have."

"Would you try? We'll provide any help we can."

"I can try. Clint can help."

Clint gave a thumbs up.

"If there's anything on the tech side you need, just ask Friday," Tony added.

"In the meantime, everyone check your gear," Steve instructed. "We may need it."

That was the signal for them to rise and scatter. Rhodey turned to Tony. "Let's go finalize my suit. Could it be finished in time for the mission?"
Tony hesitated. "Maybe? Depends on how you like the prototypes. But I'm not sure it's a good idea to send you out in a completely untested suit."

Rhodey scoffed. "Since when are you the cautious type? Come on."

Tony followed him out of the room. "Since I watched you fall out of the sky," he said quietly. Only Friday heard him.
Mission

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the thoughtful comments on the Tony-Rhodey conversation in the last chapter! I wasn't expecting that much feedback, but it's helpful for making sure I'm thinking through how I'm representing the characters, especially as I try to figure out where this thing is going.

On a related note, I haven't yet acknowledged Browarod for being my test audience and Slayer of Extraneous Commas. His input has gone a long way toward making this story better.

Despite Tony's misgivings, Rhodey's enthusiasm about the possibility of a mission was contagious and it was quick work to determine which version of the leg designs to include in the redesigned armor. It took a little longer to finalize the armaments but the specifications were finished within two hours. Fabrication would take six hours, so it was entirely possible that Rhodey would be able to participate if the mission went forward.

Their work finished, they went back upstairs to find out how the others were faring. Natasha and Clint were fairly certain the entire intelligence report had been manufactured but didn't yet have any proof despite having Friday scan the files for digital inconsistencies.

Steve, Sam, and Vision were poring over maps of the region, examining the area of the possible HYDRA base and the vague location of the alleged enhanced, and discussing strategy. Wanda was watching half-heartedly and levitating the fruit from the fruit bowl.

Tony had checked the progress of the document search while they were in the elevator—nothing new yet. He and Rhodey joined the conversation on strategy, debating timing, approach, and everything else. The routine they had established in the past was irrelevant, both due to certain absences and overall numbers.

And, of course, Tony wouldn't be participating directly. "I don't care that you have to leave me here, I will be on comms," he said bluntly when the issue came up and no one tried to argue. Having someone reviewing the feeds from beyond the fray would be beneficial, especially if HYDRA was there and put up a fight.

The preliminary discussion was finished by mid afternoon; more specific plans would have to wait for additional intel, assuming the mission would occur at all. Steve dismissed everyone but Natasha and Clint from their pursuits and suggested they rest in case they had to set out that night.

Rhodey took that advice. Tony didn't, on account of having had a nap before lunch. He lingered near Natasha and Clint and watched what they were doing, which mostly amounted to methodically going through the report and arguing about the provenance and reliability of each piece of information. Then his watch started pinging, and he opened the screen to see several documents had been identified by the search parameters. He stepped away and pulled out his phone, flicking the screen into the air and scanning each document quickly.

"Friday, where is Steve?" he asked, already striding toward the door.
"Captain Rogers is in the office."

It was a short distance to the office, so he was there before he had fully settled on what to say. The door was open; he knocked on the doorjamb. "I've got something," he said, holding up his phone.

Steve straightened in his chair and minimized the map he'd been studying. Tony sent the data onto Steve's monitor.

"So far there are six more documents indicating the presence of HYDRA in that area," he said. "The most recent of them is from a few days before Nat dumped these files on the internet."

"Do we have any reason to believe they're still there?" Steve asked, examining each document in turn.

"Do we have any reason to believe they aren't?" Tony countered. "We never raided this area; we didn't know we needed to. There haven't been any reports of HYDRA activity here, so they're good at lying low. If you want a reason to go, here it is. But if you're still hesitating, and I understand why you would, this can provide reason for that, too: we have nothing recent to go on."

Steve silently considered this. "What do you think?" he asked at length.

"With this, I think the situation is more easily salvaged if we take the mission. We know for certain there should be traces of HYDRA, and dealing with that now means we won't have to later. It will be good to confirm they're no longer a threat."

Steve nodded. "Friday, tell the team to meet at the conference table in fifteen minutes."

When everyone had assembled, Tony explained what the program had found, displaying the documents for them to see, and Steve summarized their conversation. "So, do we go?"

"Let's do it," Sam said. "As we said earlier, it's the only way to come out of this on top."

There were murmurs of agreement from around the table.

"All right, let's tell the panel." Steve put his phone to his ear. The call was answered almost immediately, judging by how quickly he said, "Yes, sir. We are willing to accept the mission. Do we have permission to proceed?" He nodded, then hung up. "We're on. When should we go?"

During the earlier discussion they had concluded that arriving before dawn or after sunset gave them the best chance to do reconnaissance without being seen if HYDRA personnel remained in the area. The quinjet could get there in just under six hours, so either time was still possible, though trying to get there before dawn on Sunday would mean leaving immediately. Before dawn on Monday was also a possibility, but that would be cutting it close to their deadline.

Tony didn't contribute to that debate, since it mattered to him not at all. Most of the team had no preference either; Rhodey's preference was to wait long enough for his suit to be ready.

Steve agreed that more air support would be helpful, as would more time to plan their strategy. It had been months since any of them had done a similar mission. "Wheels up at eight a.m.," he said finally. "We'll talk tactics after dinner."

Dinner happened shortly after their impromptu meeting was finished, then they gathered around the conference table once again. Tony took a chair along the side since his input wasn't relevant and he listened while using his phone to confer with Friday about satellite placement over the area and what the scans showed (or failed to show, in this case). Since he wasn't going to be there, they needed as
much data as possible. The number of trees in the area was an annoyance, but nothing he couldn't handle.

Partway through the conversation, he wandered back to the kitchen for some coffee. Laura was there, perusing the cupboards and the contents of the fridge. "They'll be gone long enough that taking some food would be a good idea," she explained when he asked. "Especially since Clint doesn't care for the rations and I'm sure he's not the only one."

"He definitely isn't," he agreed. "Unfortunately, all the rations you can buy are similarly uninspiring. I've checked. Maybe I should look into fixing that. I know the military would be interested."

She laughed. "Clint would be a willing taste tester."

"Need help?"

"No, I'm just about done. Take the water pitcher back with you."

Taking the pitcher actually entailed taking a tray with the water pitcher, a stack of glasses, and a small plate of cookies over to the table; he almost didn't have room to stash his coffee in with everything else. He saw Clint eyeing his coffee as he set the tray down and he hurriedly reclaimed it before Clint got any ideas.

The strategy meeting was done by eight so everyone could get enough sleep. As the team dispersed, Tony tapped Rhodey on the shoulder. "How about a test flight?"

Rhodey didn't need to be convinced and within minutes they were in the garage, giving the new War Machine armor a once-over. With Rhodey's leg braces on, getting into the armor was just like it used to be, and Rhodey spent a while walking around in it before taking a brief flight around the building.

"Everything looks and feels good," came Rhodey's voice through Tony's earpiece.

"I'm still concerned about collateral damage when you've got the braces on inside that thing," Tony said, watching the suit carefully and seeing nothing obviously amiss. "Do you think you can take them off after stepping into it?"

"That seems like a lot of extra hassle with no benefit," Rhodey replied as he carefully landed in front of Tony. His faceplate popped up. "Why don't we just see how it goes tomorrow?"

"Because it's already my fault you trashed your spine. I don't want it to be my fault when you trash your legs as well."

"That wasn't your fault, and it wouldn't be your fault," Rhodey said, patting him gingerly on the shoulder. "The shielding on the reactor should be interesting. It'll be fun not to glow like a nightlight while we scope out the area."

"Keep an eye on it, there's a risk it'll overheat."

"Take it easy, Tony, I've got this." Rhodey headed back inside.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, following.

They loaded the suit onto the quinjet then went upstairs, parting ways to head to their respective bedrooms. Once Tony arrived at his, however, he realized he wasn't going to be able to sleep just yet. And he still had to decide where to supervise the action from. The conference screen was the best in the building so he'd use that, with the addition of one or two smaller screens he borrowed
He was finishing his set up when he realized Steve was watching him. "Can you be helped?"

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"Answering a question with a question, I like it. I can't sleep yet and I needed to do this eventually so it might as well be now. Anyway, I can sleep after the rest of you leave."

"Any second thoughts?"

"About the mission? No, you've got that pretty well nailed down. About letting Rhodey fly in an untested suit? Hell, yes."

"We'll keep an eye on him," Steve promised.

"Two pairs of eyes weren't enough to keep him from crash landing," Tony said bitterly, yanking on a power cord harder than was necessary. The cord promptly popped out of the wall outlet. He swore under his breath.

Steve plugged it back in before he could crawl over. "He won't need to be flying at that kind of altitude this time."

"He shouldn't have needed to fly at that altitude then, either," he said with a sour expression.

Steve sighed. "Tony, I'm sorry he got hurt, but you can't blame me for that. At least you still have your best friend; mine is in cryo and may never really come back."

Sometimes he remembered just how young Steve was and how much shit life had thrown his way during his strange, interrupted existence. "Yeah, I know," he said softly. "But they're working on that."

Steve looked startled. "What do you know about it?"

"Very little. In fact, that's all I know."

Steve seemed suspicious but didn't press the issue. "We should both head to bed," he said lamely.

"Big day tomorrow," Tony agreed.

He went to his room then and tried to sleep; at most he dozed, thoughts of crashes and catastrophe crowding his mind whenever he closed his eyes. Having the team go off without him made him anxious even though them doing missions without him wasn't a new idea.

The final straw was a nightmare in which his old vision of dead teammates became a vision of dead teammates scattered amongst the trees in a snowy forest, the chest of Rhodey's armor black and smoking. He couldn't stay in bed after that.

He took a shower in hopes of appearing at least marginally more awake than he felt, then wandered down to his workshop to putter for a little while, as it was far too early for the others to be up. He spent a while tinkering with his suit before switching to his other project for a bit.

Friday alerted him when the others began gathering for breakfast and he went upstairs to join them. Not that he was particularly interested in eating anything; his dream still had his stomach in knots.

At eight o'clock sharp, the quinjet lifted off, full of Avengers and two coolers' worth of food while
Tony, Laura, and the kids waved. Well, Tony didn't wave, but the kids were excited about seeing them off and more than made up for his lack of enthusiasm.

As soon as the jet was out of sight, Laura herded the kids back inside. Tony followed, not quite sure what he was going to do with the next several hours. It was Sunday, so there were newspapers to read, but that wouldn't take six hours and it wasn't as enjoyable without other people trying to steal sections before he was done with them. Still, it was something.

He felt very alone, sitting with the papers in the middle of the empty common room.

He dozed off a few times, the restless night catching up to him despite the anxiety keeping him on edge. Then Laura and the kids were there, insisting that he join them in an expedition to the compound's cafeteria. He reluctantly agreed and found the sheer level of noise and bustle to be difficult to handle. It was easy to forget just how many people lived and worked in the compound when he sequestered himself in the Avengers-only areas.

By the time they made it back to the quiet of the shared floors, it was nearly showtime. Coffee mug in hand, Tony turned on all of his screens and directed Friday what to display where. Two screen areas were still dark; those would show Rhodey's suit display and the birds-eye view from Redwing when the team was in action. He put in his earpiece and said, "Knock, knock, anybody home?"

"We were just betting on when you'd finally show up," Natasha's voice answered.

"Finally?" Tony scoffed. "You're still at least a half hour out. I had plenty of time."

"We are twenty-six minutes from arrival," Vision said.

"Close enough."

"Anything new from the satellites?" Steve asked.

"Nothing definite. Thermal scanning detected something a few hours ago, but it looks like it was wildlife. I'm sending the coordinates."

"We'll keep an eye out. Any other developments? More documents?"

"Not a peep."

"Acknowledged."

After that the line went mostly dead for a while, the murmur of background conversations occasionally breaking through, then the familiar sound of equipment being strapped on. Tony could hear the clank of Rhodey's armored feet on the deck and the crackle of electricity as Natasha tested her gauntlets.

"Earpieces in, report," came Steve's voice next, and each member reported in to verify their tech was working. Tony didn't pay attention to that part until Steve demanded, "Iron Man, report."

"Iron Man ready," he said.

"Visuals of the area are clear," Clint reported from the pilot's seat. "No sign of activity in the drop zone."

"Aerial reconnaissance, you are clear to launch," Steve said.

Tony's final two displays flickered to life as Rhodey and Sam initiated their respective scanners.
Vision was also with them to scope out the area indicated in the 'intelligence' and then move on to the suspected HYDRA base.

As expected, there was absolutely nothing in the area Ross had wanted them to strike, not even signs of a hiker's campsite. After flying over the area twice in a grid pattern with Redwing scoping out under the trees and getting nothing, they cautiously closed in on the other set of coordinates.

They were about a half a mile out when Tony noticed some blips on his thermal scanner. "Guys, I've got heat signatures to your one o'clock. Falcon, are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

Sam stopped and sent Redwing closer, staying close to the trees. The display lit up with four shadowy figures that seemed to be removing camouflage from an old Jeep. "Yeah, I see them. Four hostiles, heavily armed. We're moving into position."

Tony followed their progress via Rhodey's display. A few moments of silence, the sounds of gunshots and a bright beam of light from Vision, and all four hostiles fell.

"Hostiles subdued. Their gear is definitely HYDRA," Sam reported. "From the footprints, looks like their hidey hole is to our ten o'clock. Scanning now."

"Iron Man, can you scan from above?" Steve asked.

"The thermal scanners aren't picking up anything. Falcon, try x-ray."

"I've got nothing," Sam said. "That's some camouflage."

"Rhodey, I'm going to--" Tony started.

"Just a moment," Vision said, then from Rhodey's perspective Tony could see him calmly drift toward the hillside and vanish within it. Maybe thirty seconds later he reappeared. "There are eight individuals in the main room and a dozen more in the barracks. If we can take down their shielding, the quinjet could make short work of the installation."

"But we'll have to go through them to take down the shielding," Steve said. "All right, the rest of us are coming to you. Do not engage unless provoked."

"Rhodey, when you get inside I want you to get to a computer terminal," Tony directed. "There's a chance I can copy all their files and take down the shields at the same time, but I'm going to have to take over your suit to do it."

"Roger that," Rhodey said agreeably.

Tony converted his phone display to a virtual keyboard and began typing commands furiously. "Friday, are you ready? You're going to have to take over his suit as soon as I disable the onboard AI so we don't leave him defenseless."

"Ready when you are, boss."

Steve and the others were close but hadn't yet arrived, so Tony said, "Rhodey, I'm taking over in three, two, one."

"Hello, Colonel," Tony could hear Friday's greeting through Rhodey's comm.

"Are we ready?" Steve asked. Apparently the answer was yes, because his next words were, "Vision, the door, please."
Vision used his gem to cut open the door, then the team filed in. Soon there were shouts and grunts and gunfire, but Tony had to shut all of it out to focus on getting Rhodey safely to a computer interface and then using Friday to hack in.

Not that it was hard. Maybe a minute later, documents and other files began appearing on one of his displays and, while the copying did its thing, he turned his attention to finding and disabling the shielding. He was especially interested in how they'd done it so he could either reproduce it or design a way to see through it.

It was an unpleasant surprise to find that it was the same stealth tech he'd been using for the quinjets. Given that HYDRA had been a parasite within S.H.I.E.L.D. for decades, it wasn't news that some of his tech had been repurposed for the shadow organization. He was still smarting over the use of the repulsor turbines for the Insight helicarriers that would've wiped him and millions of others off the map.

"Copying complete, boss," Friday said, jolting him out of his discontent.

"Great. Fry their systems."

Friday used the armor to overload the computer and cause a cascade failure that took everything offline.

"Their shield should be down," he reported, sitting back in his chair and taking a deep breath. Trying to do such things from a distance was more work than doing them in person.

"Copy that," Clint said. "I'm moving the jet into position. Everyone, get out now."

There was a burst of chatter on the comm, but Tony couldn't make out much more than 'injured' and 'Cap'. Rhodey was closest to the door and left first, so Tony took a few seconds to return control of the suit to him. It was easier for both of them that way.

The rest of the team trickled out, still fighting a few HYDRA soldiers as they made their escape. Wanda, Steve, and Natasha emerged last, and as soon as they did, Clint strafed the structure, dropping a bomb to seal the deal. The detonation knocked several of them to their knees.

"Sorry, guys. I had to nuke them from orbit, just to be sure."

"Nice," Rhodey said sarcastically.

"Barton, you need to land that bird now," Sam ordered. "We have wounded."

Rhodey turned to look so Tony could also see that Steve was on the ground with Natasha bent over him, trying to keep him from sitting up. There was blood everywhere.

"Shit." Rhodey said what Tony was thinking.

Everyone hurried over even as the whine of the quinjet's engines settled somewhere nearby.

"It's nothing, I'll be fine," Steve was insisting.

"Blood loss can kill even you," Natasha said, firmly pressing down on his abdomen.

Clint ran up with the first aid kit, and he and Sam piled gauze on the wounds, then held it on with more gauze wrapped around Steve's torso.

"Vision, can you carry him?" Sam asked.
"Of course."

Rhodey brought up the rear of the motley parade of superheroes piling back into the quinjet, so Tony could see almost everything. As soon as they were aboard, Clint got the jet airborne and pointed back home.

Vision carefully set Steve on a bunk. Sam went digging in the supplies and emerged with a straw and an energy drink. He stuck the straw in the bottle and handed it to Steve. "You need the fluids."

"What happened?" Tony asked finally.

"I had it handled," Wanda said fiercely. "But still he stepped between me and two of the soldiers as they fired. I tried to shield him but it was too late."

"He'd already taken at least one hit before that," Natasha said. "Without the shield--"

"Whoa, whoa, wait right there. What do you mean 'without the shield'?" Tony interjected.

"He doesn't have the shield," she said slowly, enunciating her words carefully as if he had a hearing problem.

"Why not?"

"I don't know, Tony, I thought maybe you did," she said with a hint of venom in her voice.

"Okay, I think this is a conversation that needs to happen later. In person. Because this is most definitely not my fault." Tony switched channels so he was only talking to Steve. "What's all this, Rogers? Are you trying to get yourself killed? You'd better make it back here alive or I'm going to kill you myself."

Steve just laughed. It sounded a little delirious to Tony's ears.

He switched to talk to Sam. "Dude, is he going to make it? Why the hell didn't he take the shield?"

"Yeah, he'll make it, and I have no idea. I wish I knew."

The next six hours absolutely dragged as he waited for the team to return, waited to ask Steve all sorts of questions, at the top of the list being 'What the hell?' He channeled the anxiety into taking apart his viewing setup, then taking apart the toaster, because it had pissed him off the other day.

Laura insisted that he join them for dinner, which she made and he only picked at. After she took the kids off to bed he realized that Lila had never asked him to read to her that day. Perhaps she hadn't picked a new book yet. Whatever the reason, he felt a little bereft at being left out of that, too.
Tony made and drank another cup of coffee--only his first infraction of the two cups a day rule, which was astonishing--and was waiting at the landing pad when the quinjet arrived shortly after ten p.m. By that point Steve was moving under his own power, though Sam and Natasha were flanking him just in case. His uniform was absolutely blood-soaked; if it had been anyone but him, Tony was almost certain they would’ve had a fatality on their hands.

"Rogers," he said with a nod. "Please tell me your first stop will be to see the lovely medical people."

"I'm fine," Steve protested. "It's already healing."

"Who's in charge? Oh, that's right, I am. Don't make me make it an order, soldier."

"Aye, aye, cap'n," Steve said wryly. "I'll remember this the next time you don't want to go to medical."

"I look forward to it," Tony said. "I also look forward to the conversation we need to have about what happened."

"Not tonight."

"No, not tonight." He looked to Sam and Natasha. "Make sure he gets there in one piece, yeah?"

Natasha said nothing and gave him the evil eye, but Sam nodded and they went inside. Tony surveyed the others, who looked tired and dirty but otherwise unscathed. "Did someone report to the U.N. about the mission?" he asked as they trooped inside.

"Steve called it in as soon as Sam would let him sit up," Rhodey said. "Have you taken a look at the files you grabbed?"

"The decryption program is giving them the once-over. Are you thinking we may need to have more raiding parties?"

"It seems possible," Clint put in as they piled into the elevator. "That was seriously good stealth tech on the base."

"I should hope so. It's the same as on the jet," Tony said.

"You mean you can't crack your own tech?"

He shrugged. "I could if I wanted to. I haven't wanted to, but now I'll have to since HYDRA got its filthy paws on it."

Clint and Wanda disembarked, headed for the kitchen to put away the empty coolers. Wanda was
Tony stayed with Rhodey until they were outside Rhodey's bedroom. "You got it from here?" he asked.

"Pretty sure I can take care of this part, yeah," Rhodey answered. When Tony headed back down the hall in the opposite direction of his own room, Rhodey called, "You aren't going to bed?"

"I'm going to check on Captain Idiot. And try to placate Widow. I appear to have pissed her off without meaning to. Normally I mean to."

"Should I wait to get in bed until Friday tells me you've survived?" Rhodey teased.

"Nah, I'll be fine. Wilson will intervene if necessary. I hope."

When Tony arrived in the medical wing, two orderly-type people were helping Steve peel himself out of his uniform while Sam and Natasha stood a discreet distance away.

"Do you really need to watch me undress?" Steve asked with a hint of exasperation. "Wasn't last week's strip poker enough?"

"What, are you ashamed of your spangled underpants? Or, even better, are you trying to hide that you're going commando?" Tony replied with a wink before turning around.

Sam and Natasha followed suit. "He refused to let us help him change on the jet," Sam said in an undertone. "Now I see why: he was wounded in more places than we knew."

"Which wouldn't have happened if he had the shield," Natasha said, glaring at Tony.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that? Wilson, why does she keep looking at me like that?"

Tony said defensively.

"Last I saw it, you had the shield," Natasha snapped. "You're more petty than I realized, refusing to give it back like this."

"Um, hold on a second. As I said before, this is absolutely not my fault." Tony pulled out his phone. "Friday, do me a favor and tell Widow here where the shield is."

"Captain Rogers' shield is in his equipment locker in the armory," Friday replied.

Tony put the phone back in his pocket. "There, see? Not my fault."

"Does he know it's there?" Natasha asked suspiciously.

Tony sighed and pulled out his phone again. "Friday, display the armory security footage when Captain Rogers accompanied me."

It took a moment, then Friday started playback when they entered the armory. Tony had her freeze the image where he displayed the shield to Steve.

"Is the date stamp correct?"

"Who do you think I am? Of course it's correct."

"But that's the day after he arrived."
"Yep." Tony watched her face and could almost see the moment when her ire transferred from him to Steve.

"Does he have a death wish?" she snarled, but not so loud that Steve could hear.

"That is one of several questions I would like to ask him," Tony said, glancing over his shoulder. "Very nice, Rogers. You make even a hospital gown look good."

"Stuff it, Stark," Steve said, accompanying his words with a gesture that made Tony grin.

"Guys, I think we've corrupted young Steve here. He just flipped me the bird."

"I'd give the Army more credit for that than us," Sam said reasonably as they turned around again.

"I don't know, he was still chiding me on my language not that long ago."

"You usually deserve it," Natasha commented.

"Like hell I do," Tony shot back.

Sam ignored them both. "So what's the verdict?" he asked.

A woman in a lab coat came over to them. "He's healing well so far, but we'd like to keep an eye on him overnight in case there are complications from the blood loss."

"Can one of us stay with him?"

"That would be fine."

"I'll stay," Tony said immediately.

"You sure, Stark? I can do it, I've done it before," Sam said.

"You've earned some sleep. I just sat on my ass all day," Tony said dismissively.

It took a moment, but Sam nodded. "All right. I'll come down to relieve you around three."

"Yeah, sure, whatever."

Sam and Natasha left after Steve and his bed were moved to a more private corner of the floor. Tony pulled up a chair and straddled it backwards.

"Are you my guardian?" Steve asked dryly.

"I'm your company," Tony corrected. "But if you'd like to ignore me and sleep instead, that's fine by me."

"You're not going to interrogate me about what happened?"

"I will if you want me to, but I thought you might like some time to think about how you're a complete idiot before I yell at you."

"How considerate of you."

"I do try."

"I'd never guess, from how often you succeed."
"My, aren't we snappy today. You should lose large amounts of blood more often." Tony paused. "No, on second thought, don't. Very messy, and you risk losing too much and sticking me with the leader gig. Which I don't want, in case you forgot."

"Heaven forbid you have to take responsibility for anyone else's actions, much less your own."

Tony beat an aimless rhythm on the chair. "I didn't deserve that, not entirely. Responsibility isn't my strong suit, I'll admit it, but I'm doing better than I used to."

Steve didn't comment.

Tony stopped the idle drumming and crossed his arms instead. "Why?" he asked simply.

"Why?" Steve repeated softly after a long pause. "Because I realized you were right. I don't deserve it."

Tony bowed his head until his forehead rested on the back of the chair. "Of all the times for you to actually listen to me." He sighed and lifted his head. "I won't say I didn't mean it. I did, at the time. But that doesn't make me right."

"I could have killed you. I almost did."

"I know. That still doesn't mean I was right."

Silence fell and lasted for nearly five minutes. Tony kept track by way of the ridiculously loud clock on the wall as he debated what to say next, if anything.

"In spite of that, you're one of the best men I know," he said eventually. "I said once that I don't want to see you gone. I meant it, and that includes through stupidity like leaving yourself vulnerable in a firefight. Come on, Rogers, recklessness like what you just pulled is more my style than yours."

"Who else ranks as one of the best men you know?"

"Rhodey," Tony said. "Happy. Bruce. Sometimes Barton is up there. It depends on what sort of shit he's pulled lately. Wilson is earning a spot in the ranks, too."

"Not Vision?"

"Vision isn't a man, not in the usual sense. I don't know what to make of him more than half the time. But you're getting off topic, which is me trying to say that I was wrong to say you don't deserve the shield."

"I shouldn't have used it against my teammates, against my friends."

"Well, yeah, that would've been nice. But you do realize the shield isn't a magical artifact, right? It's not going to turn evil or something because of what you do with it."

"Of course not." Steve sounded scandalized that he would even make the suggestion. "I haven't lived up to the ideals that Captain America is supposed to stand for, so I don't deserve to carry the shield."

"What, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" Tony asked. "Look, ideals are all well and good, but down here in the real world, shit happens. You're a man, and men make mistakes. But you're a good man, Steve Rogers, a good man who can still do good things if only you don't let your mistakes hold you back."

"Do you consider Siberia a mistake?"
He took a deep breath and went with the first response that came to mind. "For all our disagreements, we don't usually want to kill each other. Punch? Yes. Kill? No. If you'd prefer to call it a failure of judgment, that could work. There wasn't a whole lot of judgment involved in my reaction, that's for sure. But it was definitely your fault you didn't tell me what you knew about my parents."

"Yes," Steve said heavily. "I am very sorry about that, Tony." After a pause, he asked, "What do you think would have happened if you had known?"

"What, after we saw the tape?"

Steve nodded.

He thought about it. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "If I'd known, it wouldn't have been such a shock. Upsetting, sure, but not shocking. Maybe I would've tried to punch Barnes for it. Maybe I would've gone after Zemo instead. But what happened wouldn't have happened."

"Not even with everything at the airport and with Rhodey?"

Tony shrugged. "Right now, I can say that wouldn't have mattered. At that moment, though . . . I don't know. I meant it about the truce, so I'd like to think I would've been able to handle that tape."

"If you had already known."

"If I had already known," he agreed.

Steve sighed. "That's one hell of a mistake," he said miserably.

"Go big or go home," Tony said flippantly.

Steve didn't say anything else so Tony didn't either, though he did turn the chair around and sit in it the normal way. When Steve seemed to fall asleep, Tony pulled out his phone and started flicking through the documents from the HYDRA base. He didn't see anything immediately interesting, but from the way his eyes were starting to close of their own accord, that wasn't really surprising.

The tap on his shoulder startled him from an uncomfortable doze; it was Sam, coming as he'd promised to take a turn sitting with Steve, who was still sleeping. "I hope you brought something to read," Tony said offhandedly as he stood up and stretched, his back popping and cracking in ways that made him feel especially old.

"I did, though it might just put me to sleep," Sam said.

"You wouldn't miss much."

Tony was asleep almost as soon as he crawled into bed, and didn't wake again until after nine. He took his meds, then took a shower, and still felt generally out of sorts. Even coffee didn't completely banish the feeling of disconnection from his surroundings. The rest of the team were off doing whatever it was they needed to do; he 'needed' to do nothing, so he felt aimless and vaguely ridiculous.

He took refuge in his workshop and messaged Pepper until she had to go to a meeting. Then he idly stared at his next armor design for a while, contemplating weak spots and tiny men messing about in the circuitry. Just for fun he had Friday simulate the armor being hit from every possible angle by an object made of vibranium and observed the resulting carnage. There wasn't a whole lot he could do
about that without making the suit itself out of vibranium (or something stronger, if such a something existed).

It was almost a relief when Rhodey came to retrieve him for lunch. Apparently they had tried having Friday call him, but he hadn't even registered that she was speaking. Or maybe he had muted her. He couldn't remember.

Steve joined them for lunch, having been set free from the medical wing about an hour earlier. He, too, was quiet and subdued, so the conversation was carried by Wanda, Natasha, and Clint, who were discussing the pros and cons of various hairstyles in combat. Tony had no idea why Clint thought he had something to contribute to that conversation, but evidently he had opinions.

After everyone was finished eating, they scattered once again. Clint and Wanda went with Natasha to review candidate information for both the PA and the PR positions, Vision and Sam discussed the lawyers' comments on Ross' lawsuit, and Steve and Rhodey were left with Tony to . . . he wasn't sure what.

"Is this an intervention?" he joked when they were left behind.

"Why, do you think you need one? We can make it that, if you want," Rhodey said.

"Intervention?" Steve asked, confused, so they had to explain. Which, of course, took all the humor out of the joke.

"Speaking of intervention, I have a bone to pick with you, Rogers," Rhodey said.

"What's that?"

"Why the hell weren't you using the shield yesterday?"

Steve glanced at Tony. "Stark and I talked about that already. I'd prefer not to do so again."

Rhodey looked to Tony, who nodded in confirmation. "All right, as long as somebody has told you what an idiotic move that was, I don't need to pile on."

When neither Steve nor Tony spoke, Rhodey said, "Since it's just us, I'm going to ask a question I'm pretty sure I already know the answer to: Have we sent the revised Accords to the U.N. people yet?"

The answer was no, as he'd expected.

"I meant to look at that on Saturday, but then the mission came up," Steve admitted.

"I didn't mean to do anything with it, but if you want me to, I can," Tony added. "Sitting on the sidelines all the time is really not my style."

"We'd prefer it if dying wasn't your style either, so it has to be done," Rhodey replied.

"I'm pretty sure I won't drop dead from talking about a long-ass document," Tony retorted. "Except maybe from sheer boredom."

"Then let's see if we can get that sent today," Steve said firmly.

They used the conference screen to display the comments from the lawyers alongside the Accords, making a few minor edits as they went. Tony took charge of manipulating what was on the screen; watching Steve or Rhodey try to do it was just painful when he knew he could do it faster.
It was a slog, but they made it all the way through and identified a few areas where feedback from the subcommittee would be appreciated—primarily on the issue of defining what, exactly, made someone 'enhanced' and thus subject to the Accord's provisions. Tony drafted the message to the subcommittee chair, then had Friday send it under Steve's name, with copies distributed to all concerned parties, namely the Avengers and T'Challa.

By the time they finished, dinner was ready. Tony thought it was good they managed to finish, because Steve looked exhausted and he didn't feel much better. Everyone seemed tired, really, which showed itself in the lackluster conversation over the food. Preoccupation or weariness was evidently the order of the day.

As they slowly finished eating, Sam suggested they all turn in early. Steve quickly agreed it was a good idea and strongly advised they do so, then he set the example by heading to his room as soon as he was certain the cleanup was taken care of.

Tony would have waited until everyone else had left before retreating to his own room, but Rhodey wanted his company in the elevator. As soon as the doors closed on them, Rhodey turned to face Tony. "So what's the deal with Rogers?"

"Apparently it's my fault. As usual." Tony briefly recounted what Steve had said. The elevator ride was a short one, so they were in Rhodey's room by the time he finished.

Rhodey listened with a calculating look. "So because the guy is overwhelmed with guilt, that's your fault? No, this time I think you're in the clear. He only listened to what you said because some part of him already believed that."

"Maybe. But we've got to convince him I was wrong."

"Easier said than done," Rhodey said, grimacing. "Though with him, you'd think it couldn't be that hard. It's not like you agree that often, so he must think you're wrong a lot."

"You'd think."

"We'll have to see what we can do. Tomorrow. Good night, Tony."

"Good night." Tony went to his room and prepared for bed, then stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a while before sleep came.
It had been an unusual night in that he didn't wake at all in the middle of it and, as far as he could remember, no dreams haunted his rest. Tony was up by half past seven and feeling sufficiently awake that he didn't head straight to the kitchen for coffee; instead, he headed to the workshop to do a few small things before breakfast. It was a satisfying start to the day, and he hadn't had one of those for a while.

His upbeat mood lasted through breakfast and until he pulled out his phone to check on the decryption program's progress on the newest documents and instead found a reminder from Dr. Mann that he was due back at the hospital in two days for another set of tests. 'To see how you're healing', she said, but Tony knew the better question was if he was healing. Given the results last time, he couldn't be optimistic even though he'd been doing his best to abide by the rules she had set.

One thing allowed within the rules that he hadn't done as regularly as he should was exercise, so he resolved to remedy that. Conveniently, it was a team workout day. The official plan involved going for a run outside, which Tony was not allowed to do and was not sorry to miss. So he spent time on a treadmill while Rhodey worked with the physical therapist.

According to the usual routine, team training should have happened in the afternoon, but Natasha had to do something related to getting their PR person and she'd asked Wanda to join her, and Rhodey was beat from his time with the physical therapist.

After Rhodey fell asleep on the couch, Tony found out from Friday that Steve was alone in the training room and he decided to do something that was possibly reckless.

He slipped into the room unnoticed, then stood and watched Steve silently for several minutes, waiting for the right opportunity. Abruptly he called out, "Hey Cap, catch!" and flung the shield toward him.

Steve reacted instantly, reaching for it, then changed his mind and struck a glancing blow so the shield skidded to rest on the mats a short distance away. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, breathing heavily.

Tony sauntered closer. "Encouraging you to get back on the horse."

"I can't."

"Then is it all right if I melt it down? I've always wanted to try adding vibranium to my suit."

"No!" Steve cried, aghast, then looked sheepish. "I mean, isn't it still the government's property?"

"Nope," Tony said smugly. "With the Avengers officially under U.N. purview, the U.S. government owning Avenger gear is a no-go. Part of the bargain to get everything back from Ross involved the
transfer of ownership to the Avengers organization. For a price, of course."

"So . . . the shield and Sam's wings now belong to the Avengers?"

"And Rhodey's suit and Natasha's tech and Barton's arsenal, yeah."

"No wonder Ross is unhappy."

"Yeah, well, he can thank himself for starting this ball rolling in the first place."

Steve stared thoughtfully at the shield gleaming several feet away. "Why don't you ask T'Challa for some vibranium?"

"I have. He is the one person on earth who doesn't need anything I can offer in trade."

"No, you can't melt down the shield," Steve said. "Did you notice that you called me Cap? You haven't done that since . . . haven't done that for months."

"It just slipped out," Tony said with a practiced nonchalant shrug. He had noticed and wasn't sure what to make of it. Consciously, he'd been avoiding that label ever since Siberia.

Steve went over to the shield and picked it up with both hands. He adjusted his stance, then threw the shield against the wall a couple of times. It bounced right back to him, as always.

The clanging sound as it impacted the wall made Tony flinch, but he tried not to show it. He inched away from Steve and toward the door.

Steve stared down at the shield for a moment, then turned quickly and flung it at the corner. It struck one wall, then the other, then sailed across the room toward the corner behind him. Tony found himself directly in its path and he only barely ducked out of the way in time. The shield bounced off the other corner and returned to Steve, who turned to catch it.

"I hope that wasn't intentional," Tony said, his heart pounding.

Steve looked at him, then frowned. "I'm sorry, Tony. I didn't realize you'd moved."

"Right. I'll leave you to it, then." He turned quickly on his heel, hoping to clear the room before the anxiety gripping his chest made it impossible to breathe.

There was another clang just before the doors closed and he shuddered, his skin clammy and his throat dry. His memory conjured the concrete missile silo, two angry super soldiers teaming up against him, the sound of the shield impacting his suit repeatedly. He made it around a corner before he had to stop and lean against the wall, then slid awkwardly down it.

He tried to think of Pepper and how she would have him focus on his breathing, in and out, then more slowly. He imitated that as best he could when he was also noticing the fluttering of his heart and worrying that he was doing more damage.

It took several minutes, but not only did he manage to pull himself out of the episode without assistance, he didn't feel ill the way he had the last few times. He hoped that meant he was getting better, though he wouldn't know for certain until after Thursday.

The possibility of the tests going poorly and his recovery time being extended yet again caused a different sort of anxiety and a looming sense of despair. He forced his attention away from that and onto climbing back to his feet, straightening his clothes, and continuing down the hallway like he
hadn't just been a literal ball of anxiety against the wall.

He went in search of Rhodey, who was still on the couch where he'd left him, though now he was awake. Rhodey was on board with his suggestion to spend some time on his suit, checking the diagnostic scans and discussing how it responded during the mission, so they headed down to the armory.

On their way in, they encountered Steve on his way out. "Done already?" Tony asked with some surprise.

"I appreciate the gesture, but I can't do it," Steve said evasively. "Rhodes," he greeted Rhodey with a nod, then continued past them and down the hallway.

Tony didn't say anything as they went to the War Machine niche and Rhodey opened the doors, the suit gleaming in the light. Tony began tapping the panel to review the scan results from after the armor returned.

"What was that about?" Rhodey asked finally.

"Just an idea that didn't pan out," Tony said absently; everything looked fine, and there was no damage from the fight. "So, any comments about handling, weight, range of movement, stuff like that?"

Rhodey didn't answer for long enough that Tony finally tore his gaze away from the results he was skimming to look at him. His shoulders were squared and he wore his solemn 'we need to talk' face. "What?" Tony demanded.

"You don't even see the problem, do you," Rhodey said flatly.

"What problem?"

Rhodey sighed heavily. "That's what I thought. Let me lay it out for you: Rogers is a mess and that mission was a disaster."

"What are you talking about? We got their intel and blew up the base. What's wrong with that?"

"We accomplished what we hoped, but how it happened was a mess. The guy that was supposed to be leading us went unarmed into a firefight. He made himself our weakest link, putting the rest of the team and our objectives at risk, and he let us launch the mission without saying a word about it."

"Rogers was unarmed?" Tony repeated. "Obviously he didn't have the shield, but--"

"He had nothing on him but his uniform. That should not have happened and it cannot happen again," Rhodey said vehemently.

"He's a lethal weapon even without any kit. I should know."

"He should be benched for what he just pulled. He doesn't have the right to put everyone else at risk because he can't get his shit together."

"What do you want me to do? Me telling him that he needs to get his shit together is the pot calling the kettle black, and the HYDRA takedown is his business more than anyone else's."

"Are you in charge or not?" Rhodey challenged. "You told him that you are. Either step up and do what has to be done or step aside and let someone else handle it before somebody gets killed."
Tony took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose as he let it out slowly. "All right, all right. There isn't another mission planned yet, so we all have some time to deal with our demons. When we get another one, I'll talk to him, make sure he goes prepared or not at all."

"See that you do, because if you don't, I will."

"I'm sure you'd enjoy pulling rank on someone who appreciates that sort of thing," Tony said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Damn right I would," Rhodey said with a firm nod, then grinned. "The best part of that mission was being out in the suit again."

And with that, the topic of conversation returned to what Tony had intended. He listened with half an ear as Rhodey commented about the feel of the suit and especially how it felt to walk in it, making the right noises in the appropriate spots and tapping some notes into his phone for later. The rest of his mind was whirling from Steve to the shield to his upcoming tests to his suit to Pepper to the team-that's-not-quite-a-team to Ross to the Accords and on and on and on until he had to tell Rhodey, "I'm sorry, I have no idea what you just said."

"Yeah, I know. You zoned out on me like five minutes ago, so I stopped talking."

Tony rubbed his forehead as he looked anywhere but at him. "Sorry."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I just . . . I've got a lot on my mind."

"Would it help to talk about it? You know I'm willing to listen."

"Oh, really? I seem to remember the last time I tried to talk to you, you told me to talk to a therapist."

"You should do that, too. Have you sat down with Dr. Tanya yet?"

Tony glanced at him, then looked away again. "No."

"You should. She's a good sort."

"What, are you going to tell me you've talked to her?"

"I have, and I will again."

"Huh. Wouldn't have pegged you as the type."

"It's no big deal. I've talked to therapists before, sometimes required, sometimes not."

Tony didn't say anything, the idea of talking to Doc T having been added to his mental noise. That, too, inspired some anxiety, but if Rhodey and Wilson were to be believed, it might also help.

"Should we come back to this later?" Rhodey prodded.

"That depends. How much did I miss?" He read back the few notes he'd jotted down, adding a few details from what he did remember of the conversation.

"That will do for now," Rhodey said, inputting the command to lock it all up again. The doors silently swung closed. "I'm going to find Wilson. You can tag along if you want."
"Friday, locate Wilson."

"Sam Wilson is outside at the shooting range with Vision and Clint Barton."

"Sometimes you take all the fun out of things," Rhodey teased. "Are you coming?"

"No, I'll stay here to take care of a few things."

"Suit yourself. You know where to find me."

He nodded and they parted ways, Rhodey toward the doors and Tony toward his workshop. Once he was safely ensconced where only a select few could bother him unannounced, he sat heavily in his chair and put his face in his hands. Recently he had been lamenting the absence of his multiple mental trains of thought; now they were back in spades and he couldn't filter through the noise.

Worse, none of the things clamoring for attention could be resolved by him, if at all. Were it a matter of an idea that needed to be designed, he could do that and the idea would cease to niggle at him. But everything running through his mind was either out of his hands, may never have a complete resolution, or both. And then there was Rhodey's advice to bench Rogers. He resisted that idea but couldn't put his finger on exactly why.

He dropped his hands and stared dully at the blank screens, a far cry from his satisfied, productive self that morning. On impulse, he had Friday display Doc T's calendar. Her next open appointment was first thing the next morning. He almost had Friday put his name down, but closed the display with an abrupt motion. He still wasn't ready for that.

He had just remembered that he needed to add coming up with a way to see through his stealth tech to his to do list when Friday spoke. "Boss, Natasha Romanoff would like to speak with you."

For the barest moment he hesitated, debating whether he wanted to deal with her, but decided it would be easier to handle the whatever-it-was in private than have her corner him at the dinner table. "Let her in."

The click of high heels entering the room and coming to a stop just inside the door was the only response to his statement. When Natasha didn't speak, he lifted his eyes from his feigned study of his (still blank) screens and found she wasn't even looking at him. Her gaze was fixed on the floor in front of the table where he sat and he only just resisted the urge to peer over the top of his monitors to find out what she was looking at.

"What do you want?" he demanded, the words coming out more harshly than he had intended. He wasn't sorry.

She looked up just long enough to meet his gaze before her eyes skittered away again. "I came to apologize."

"Really. For which part?"

"It was unfair to draw the conclusions I did about the situation with the shield," she said slowly, almost uncertainly.

"You don't say," he shot back.

Her hesitance fled as she grew angry. "Dammit, Stark, I'm trying to say I'm sorry. Stop being a dick about it."
"You want to dictate how I'm supposed to respond to your half-assed apology? I'm sorry, that's not how this works. Remember your line about having to win trust back? You're a long way from having won mine so no, I'm not going to 'stop being a dick' about your assumption that I knowingly sent Rogers on a mission unarmed." He didn't raise his voice but there was no mistaking the anger in his tone.

After a moment, she said simply, "You're right."

Somehow the admission wasn't particularly satisfying. He didn't respond, watching her shift slightly, and realized the other shoe was about to drop.

"There's something else you should know," she admitted at length. "I knew about your parents, too. I didn't say anything because I thought Rogers would. I didn't know he hadn't until recently."

He had to look away, look down at his clenched fists as he focused on breathing slowly and deeply. The shock of his parents' murder had been blunted somewhat by time, so he could see past it to acknowledge that Natasha hiding the information wasn't a surprise. Her behavior was consistent with what he knew of her, which was more than he could have said of Rogers. "Why are you telling me this now?" he asked quietly when he could look up at her again.

She lifted one shoulder slightly in a shrug. "Because if I didn't and you found out later, I don't think you'd ever trust me again."

"So you do want me to trust you? With everything that's happened, I wasn't sure," he said sourly. "You're not going to play the double agent card again?"

"Would I be here if I didn't think we could make the team work again?" she countered. "If you're not sure about trusting me, why am I the one doing the hiring?"

"You're the best of us at reading people, so I trust you'll find someone competent. I just don't trust that you'll have my back."

She seemed vaguely unhappy. "There seem to be a lot of things that I've read wrong lately," she said quietly. "And you've borne the brunt of it."

"Yeah, well, it seems we all misjudged Rogers, so we have that in common."

She drew herself up straighter. "I am sorry about all this," she said. "I don't know how to prove it to you, but I am."

He sighed. "How about starting with the assumption that I can be a decent human being? I even make breakfast for people from time to time." He meant for his words to sound joking, but he just sounded tired.

A brief smile flitted across her face. "That, I can do."

"Then leave me alone. I have work to do."

"I thought you weren't supposed to be working. Doctor's orders," she said with mild reproach.

"Inventing isn't real work, now shoo," he retorted, waving her toward the door and turning away as if preparing to type on the nearby keyboard.

She hesitated, then her heels clacked their way out of the room.
He sighed heavily, set an elbow on the table, dropped his chin into his hand, and resumed his study of the blank screens, his mind whirling. So Rogers might need to be benched, Romanoff wanted to make up, and he'd find out if he even had a superhero future in two days' time.

Sometimes he wondered why he was still trying to coexist with the others, or at least why he hadn't listened to Pepper's suggestion of going somewhere else for a while. It might be nice to be where he didn't have to be on his guard all the time.
This seems like a good place to mention that I am not a psychologist (nor do I play one on TV) and the stuff I describe is probably not true to life. I do my research, but that only goes so far.

Tony had no idea how long he'd been staring vacantly when a message from Pepper roused him from his reverie.

*How are you doing?*

It was a simple question and yet so difficult to answer. He opted for honesty but not the complete truth, only mentioning what he knew she would understand.

*Nervous about the tests on Thursday. Tired of being benched. How are you?*

She was busy, of course, with Stark Industries business of various sorts, negotiating contracts and doing other such things that had bored him so terribly when he was in charge. She thrived on it, though, and he was glad the company was in her capable hands. He probably would've run it into the ground long ago, if his handling of the team was any indication.

The conversation ended just as he was summoned for dinner by Rhodey via Friday. He felt a little more comfortable with the prospect of interacting with the others thanks to Pepper's calming influence, even from a distance.

Dinner was tolerable despite Tony arriving just too late to see the kids before they were bustled off for baths and bedtime. Being around the others was sufficiently distracting that he didn't think too much about all the things buzzing around his brain until he went to bed. Or tried to go to bed. As soon as the lights turned off, everything descended upon him again, now seemingly magnified in the quiet and dark.

Looming especially large was the fear that Thursday wouldn't produce the results Dr. Mann wanted and she would extend his recovery time further or, worse, decide he was unfit to wear the suit again. Giving up Iron Man was something he'd tried to do a few times and failed; having it taken from him by force was unimaginable despite the fact that he was getting older and he still hadn't worked up the courage to complete and wear a suit after . . . everything.

It was different when it was your choice. Steve had been right about that.

Pepper would be happier, though, and perhaps that made the possibility worth it?

He thought about calling her, but she'd told him she had a business dinner, and that would still be in full swing.

He thought about the intel he'd downloaded during the recent mission. He had Friday show him the file structure and the translations of some of the documents. He flagged where it talked about the shielding and had Friday start processing it for locations, cross-referenced with known HYDRA locations and especially the bases they'd already raided.
He thought about Steve and the shield and how the stupid soldier could have gotten himself killed. Whatever was bothering him, he'd seemed all right at first when handling the shield that afternoon. Tony had to wonder if the accidental almost-hit was what made him put it away again so quickly. It seemed plausible. Yet another example of things going wrong around (and because of) him.

He thought about how it might be better for the team if he really was benched permanently. Maybe then Steve wouldn't be afraid to use his shield and could step back into the leader role that he filled so well. Rhodey was more than capable of providing air support, especially with Wilson and Vision in play. Maybe Ross would leave the team alone if Tony wasn't antagonizing him.

He thought about the lawsuit and had Friday tell him the current status. Though it had been over a week since it had been filed, Ross hadn't tried to contact them or hurry the case along at all. That seemed odd, so he had Friday start scanning for news stories, government documents, anything that might provide a hint of what Ross was up to now. If all else failed, he could hack Ross' systems for the info he wanted, but it was easier to try the above-board methods first.

He thought about the Accords and the coming meeting—in, what, two weeks?—that he probably wouldn't be allowed to attend even though they'd be discussing the complete revision. He would have to make sure Steve and Rhodey knew what they were getting into. At worst, the subcommittee could decide to ignore this new version and stick with their edits. At best . . . he had no idea what a "best" outcome would look like.

He thought about the others and considered whether such a disagreement could happen again. It might not have in the first place, if he and Steve hadn't taken opposing views, which might be another argument in favor of him stepping aside for good. He still thought his view on the matter was the more realistic, more functional one. And he had been proved right, in a way. But at such a cost . . .

One thought led to another and another and round and round and round it went, maddening in its endlessness. It's possible he fell asleep for a while, but it seemed unlikely.

In another time and another life, he would have had a stiff drink or five to drown the thoughts into a stupor, but his rules said no alcohol and he was trying to abide by the rules. Also, he had no alcohol in his bedroom. That was really the only thing that kept him from chugging an entire bottle of something down, since finding alcohol meant venturing out into the common areas which meant the possibility of running into someone who would scold him for doing so.

He finally gave up on the whole sleeping thing when he was still awake hours after he'd gone to bed. It wasn't even dawn, he felt like something that had been scraped off his armor, and he knew the day was going to be an utter waste of time and energy. Maybe if he could figure out a way to get to sleep, he could sleep through the whole damn thing.

That vague thought led to the notion that some exercise might be a good idea, since it might tire him out, and that is how he came to be swimming laps at just after four in the morning.

It was peaceful in a way that being in bed hadn't been, and he appreciated the soothing rhythm of strokes and breathing and turns and strokes and breathing and turns.

The peace was broken with a shout. "Stark! What do you think you're doing?"

Tony stopped instead of turning. "Swimming seems like a good guess."

"Alone? What if something happened?" Steve demanded, his arms crossed over his chest.
"I would have called for help, Captain Rogers," Friday answered from Tony's phone at the side of the pool.

"No offense, but how is Friday supposed to know if something is wrong?"

"If the sound of my swimming stops, or if she doesn't hear me breathing, or if I don't give the verbal confirmation at the end of each lap," Tony said with growing irritation. "I have it covered, Rogers."

"Forgive me for expecting you to abide by your own rule of always swimming with a buddy," Steve said with exasperation.

"I am. My buddy happens to be virtual."

Steve threw up his hands. "Have it your way. If you drown, it's your own fault."

Tony returned to his laps without waiting to see if Rogers would leave.

He stopped in frustration after three more laps. His previous peace had been shattered and he was no longer able to focus only on the rhythm of swimming, instead seething over the interruption. How had he known where to find him, anyway?

"Friday, did you tell Rogers where I was?" he asked suspiciously as he climbed out of the pool and headed for the towel heaped next to his phone.

"Captain Rogers routinely requests the location of all team members when he wakes," Friday said.

"Of course he does," Tony muttered, drying his hands and picking up the phone and towel to relocate to the hot tub for a while.

The warm jets of water helped soothe some of the tension that was building in his neck and shoulders, and he leaned back with a sigh. Idly he wondered how long Rogers had been checking up on everyone first thing in the morning; it was something he'd never thought to do, and in retrospect he could see the usefulness even though it felt a little nanny-ish.

When he decided he was done in the hot tub, he wrapped his towel firmly around himself and headed back to his room for a shower. It was still early enough that the only other people awake were Steve and Sam, out for their morning runs, so there was no chance of running into anyone in the halls. Also Dr. Tanya's schedule still had an opening first thing.

He took a long, hot shower, most of which he spent simply standing beneath the spray while his thoughts circled out of control. By the time he emerged, he had decided that yes, he would speak to Doc T today. Before he could second guess himself, he told Friday to put his name in that open space. She quickly reported it done and he busied himself getting dressed, taking his pill almost as an afterthought.

By the time he went down to the kitchen, it was nearly seven o'clock and he knew that meant he'd have to deal with other people. But first, coffee.

The others had grown accustomed to him not responding to anything until after a steaming cup of coffee was in his hands. "If you're not a morning person, why don't you just sleep later?" Sam asked him once.

"You're assuming that I'm sleeping at all," Tony had responded, as that particular morning followed a night where sleep meant nightmares, so he'd picked the no sleep option.
This morning, he wished he'd had an option to sleep, nightmares or no. Anything would have been better than what he'd gotten, and maybe then his eyes wouldn't feel so gritty.

"How was your swim?" Steve asked after Tony had filled his (extra-)large mug with an extra-strong brew.

"Fine until you interrupted," he said sourly. "Lost my groove after that."

"I'm sorry," Steve said and, damn him, he actually sounded sorry.

"Leave me alone next time and we'll be good." Tony turned away and began perusing the options for breakfast. As was typical, the lack of sleep had his gut roundly rejecting the mere thought of most foodstuffs, so he pulled out a blender and started putting together a tried and true smoothie.

When it was finished, he poured the green slop into a bottle he could take with him, then rinsed the blender pitcher and its fiddly bits. He took the bottle and his coffee cup and headed for the door. If Steve or Sam tried to ask him where he was going, he didn't hear it.

There was still over an hour until he was due to talk to Dr. Tanya and he didn't want to sit in the hallway outside her office like an idiot, so he went down to the workshop to pass the time there. The clamor in his head was still there and clamoring, though a few big things had risen above the fray and one in particular loomed above them all.

He pulled up the design for his new armor and worked on it earnestly, losing track of time. Friday had to remind him of the appointment while he could still be punctual.

The office wasn't terribly far away, so he was awkwardly lurking in the hallway when Dr. Tanya arrived. "Mr. Stark, it is good to see you," she said, seeming unfazed by the fact that he was at her door for an appointment time that had been vacant not long ago. "Please come in."

He followed her like a lost child, tightly gripping the bottle of smoothie he'd forgotten to drink while distracting himself from everything else on his mind. She waved him to a chair and he sat in it, eyes fixed on her as she unlocked her desk and pulled out a tablet and stylus. Then she sat comfortably in a chair facing him, settling the tablet on the end table between them.

She said nothing for several long minutes, and he had no idea what to say, so he took a long drink of smoothie.

"Well, Mr. Stark, what can I do for you?"

"You can call me Tony," he said.

"Tony," she repeated agreeably, then waited.

"I don't know where to start," he said finally.

"If there's a beginning, that might work," she said without any mockery in her voice. "Or you could start with what prompted you to come today."

He looked away from her, around the office, then down at his hands fidgeting with the bottle. He couldn't decide where to begin, words coming and then going as he thought that no, that wasn't the right place. "I have more tests on my heart tomorrow," he said in a rush, then frowned. That had nothing to do with Doc T, so why say it?

"How do you think you're doing?" she asked kindly, as if she was interested. Maybe she was.
"Better, I think. I had an anxiety thing yesterday and I didn't feel sick afterward like before, so that's progress. I've been following all the rules, but I did the last time, too, and I got benched for an extra two weeks because I wasn't healing, apparently."

Dr. Tanya asked him to explain in a little more detail what had happened, so he told her the whole story. Her last question got to the heart of the matter. "What do you think will happen tomorrow?"

"I wish I knew," Tony said morosely. "It's possible that it will go smoothly and the results will be what Dr. Mann wants, but my life doesn't often go smoothly. I'm afraid--" he stopped uncomfortably, looking away from her again. It had been easy enough to meet her gaze while talking about the other parts, but this . . .

She remained silent.

Well, he had nothing to lose, right? "I'm afraid this will take me out of play permanently. Giving up being Iron Man is something I've tried to do for Pepper, but I just can't. I feel like there is more good I can do in the suit than I can do out of it."

"That's quite a statement, given your reputation for philanthropy."

"Giving money is easy. It's nothing," Tony said, waving that idea away. "In the suit I can actually do good things."

"What about the good things you do without the suit?"

He looked at her blankly, uncertain what she was referring to.

"Your technology, for instance. Is that 'nothing', too?"

He scoffed and gestured dismissively. "That's different. What the company does has very little to do with me, these days."

"It's still got your name on it," she said mildly. "And if the stories are true, you are solely responsible for the direction the company has taken in recent years."

He avoided her gaze and, in the process, noticed he hadn't finished his smoothie yet, so he focused on that.

She waited until he finished swallowing before she spoke again. "How do you spend your time when you aren't in your Iron Man suit?"

"Before the Accords mess, I dabbled, mostly. Spent time with Pepper, went to a board meeting once or twice, upgraded everyone's gear, made improvements to this place, you know, a little of this, a little of that."

"I think you're forgetting something," she prompted when he didn't continue. "Or did your visualization system simply spring into existence?"

"No, I spent . . . a while on that," he admitted.

"Then would you agree that there are a number of potentially good things you can do regardless of what happens tomorrow?"

He hesitated, then voiced the first thought that came to mind. "But I'd need ideas. I've not had many lately."
"Why do you think that is?"

He shrugged. "Too much on my mind, I guess. A lot has been going on."

"I see."

"And I don't sleep well, if at all. I don't think that helps."

"Probably not," she agreed.

She asked him about his sleep patterns after that and he told her everything, the nightmares and all of it, finishing with not having slept the night before. The next question was, of course, how long that had been going on, followed by whether he'd tried any type of sleep aid. He hadn't, unless she counted Pepper's presence sometimes helping, and that one time Wanda put him to sleep.

"But you haven't tried medication?"

"Just self-medication of the alcoholic variety," he said wryly. He might as well admit it, it's not like his drinking was a well-kept secret. "Until this heart thing happened."

"Of course." She made a few notes on her tablet (when she'd started using it, he hadn't noticed), then laced her fingers together. "Unless there is something else you'd like to discuss now, it seems we have reached a good stopping point for today. Will I be seeing you again?"

Tony started nodding before he was fully aware of what he was doing. "Yes, I think so," he said. "I can't say when."

"That's fine. You know how to find me. Until next time, then?" She stood up and offered her hand.

He rose from his chair and shook it. "Until next time," he agreed.

"Thank you for coming. Let me know how it goes tomorrow."

"I will."

Once he'd left her tidy office and started down the hall, he thought to check the time. He'd stayed for over two hours and didn't even mention some of the things he'd thought for sure would come up. He'd talked about having nightmares, for instance, but didn't describe what they were about. Well, that could come later.

And yes, there would definitely be a later.
When he stopped by the kitchen to drop off his empty smoothie bottle, Tony almost missed the note tucked under the edge of the cutting board: *We're in the pool, if you want to come down.*

"Friday, are they still in the pool?"

"Yes, boss."

He didn't need to ask who'd written the note; he'd recognize Steve's old-timey handwriting anywhere. "Are they going to ask where I've been?"

"Unknown. When there were inquiries about your location, I told them you were not to be disturbed. Such inquiries ceased after Captain Rogers informed them of your insomnia."

"So they're going to think I was napping. Could be worse."

He meandered down to the pool and sank onto a bench near Vision, who greeted him. "Good morning."

"Morning," Tony replied lazily, his eyes sweeping over the water. The team was doing lap drills again, so he wouldn't have been able to participate anyway. Rhodey wasn't there, either, so he briefly checked in with Friday; Rhodey was with the Bartons, for whatever reason, but at least he was accounted for.

Now that he was sitting and not doing anything, his exhaustion was catching up with him. He buried his hands in the pockets of his hoodie and leaned back against the tile wall.

"How good of you to join us," Clint called from two lanes over as he pulled himself out of the water. "I thought maybe you were rethinking the whole team thing."

"What, do I need a doctor's note to miss a swim lesson? Besides, I've already done my pool time today."

"You just know you couldn't keep up."

"Yep, but it doesn't matter. If I'm in the water on a mission, I won't need to worry about swim strokes because I'll have repulsors."

Clint laughed before diving back under. Vision turned to Tony. "What if your repulsors aren't functional?"

Tony stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankle. "Then someone's going to have to rescue my ass, or I'll have to get out of the armor. The suit is way too heavy to keep above water."

"That is a troubling notion," Vision commented as he returned his gaze to their wet teammates.

"I guess." He wasn't too troubled, though, since they hadn't yet had a mission where being stranded in water was a possibility, much less a likelihood, and the manual release mechanisms improved with every suit design. The suit itself was also marginally lighter than it had been several iterations ago, but there wasn't much he could do there without sacrificing durability and armor integrity. Unless he
Somewhere in musing about how he could convince T’Challa to part with a portion of his stores, Tony lost complete track of time and his surroundings. The lapping water made for soothing background noise, and it was only when he realized he couldn’t hear it or the others’ voices echoing off the walls that he woke up.

Somehow he had been moved from the bench by the pool to . . . where was he? He shifted slightly; from the feel of it (and the ache in his hip), he was back on his old friend, the couch. How they’d gotten him there without him waking up was uncertain, but he’d wager Wanda was involved in the not-waking part and Vision in the moving part, though Steve was also a possibility.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then blinked several times to clear his vision.

"Glad you could join us, old timer," Sam said from where he stood a few feet away.

Tony yawned. "Get off my lawn," he grumbled.

"Lunch is ready whenever you are. The rest of us have already eaten."

He stood and stretched, frowning when he opened his eyes to find Sam still standing there, watching him. "What, are you waiting for me to keel over?"

Sam chuckled. "Nah. I figure if I stay here, you won't."

"I won't whether you're there or not. Guaranteed." Tony moved away from the couch and toward the kitchen, passing where Rhodey and Steve were playing chess while Wanda watched.

"Hey, Tony," Rhodey said. "Am I as doomed as I think I am?"

Tony paused a moment to review the board. "Yep."

"I thought I might have it this time," Rhodey said with a sigh. He gestured toward Wanda. "You want to give it a go after I lose horribly?"

Wanda protested that she didn't know how to play. Rhodey offered to be her opponent while Steve coached her, and at that point Tony stopped listening. Lunch had been BLT sandwiches with avocado, so he assembled a sandwich (generous on the avocado; he'd lived in California long enough to appreciate their merits) and grabbed a banana. Sam was still following him.

"What the hell do you want?" Tony finally demanded when Sam sat down at the table with him.

"Two things: first, to ask if you're all right. It's not normal to nap this much."

"I didn't sleep last night. Leave me alone," Tony said around a bite of his sandwich.

"I didn't sleep last night. Leave me alone," Tony said around a bite of his sandwich.

"Whatever you say, gramps," Sam replied. "Second, to tell you I'm going with you to the hospital tomorrow."

"Oh, really? Who elected you?"

"Rhodes."

Tony glanced over to the chess game. Wanda and Steve were switching places and Rhodey was setting up the board. Rhodey briefly looked toward the table and met his gaze; Tony nodded to him and Rhodey nodded back before returning his attention to the board. "Yeah, okay."
"Is anyone else coming?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Do we need anyone else?"

"That depends on whether you want someone to guard your stuff while we're away from the room."

"Seems like a waste of time. It's not like I'll be bringing anything important."

"It might be better to be safe than sorry, you know?"

"I'll think about it."

Sam nodded and finally left him alone. Tony pulled out his phone and wrote a message to Pepper while he finished eating. He cleaned up his dishes, put away the rest of the food, and loaded the dishwasher before wandering back to the group at the chess board.

He had opinions about how Rhodey was playing, though at least he was faring better against Wanda than against Steve. Tony gave him a few suggestions, but then his phone vibrated in his pocket.

"Good luck," he said, standing up and starting to move away.

"You're abandoning me already?"

"It's Pepper," he said, shrugging.

"I see how it is." Rhodey waved him away. "Go on, lover boy."

His phone was already at his ear. "Hello, beautiful." He made it through the doors into the hallway before the conversation could go any further so there was little risk of being overheard. Still, he headed for the elevator to go somewhere more private.

"You had to know I'd call after that cryptic message you sent me. What happened this morning?"

Now that the moment had arrived, he felt almost shy about admitting it. But she deserved to know, after all she'd put up with. "I talked to a therapist. Like, had an appointment and everything." He resisted the urge to stay safely enclosed in the elevator and headed for his workshop. He could sit under the table there, if he still felt this need to curl up and hide.

He heard her take a deep breath. "Oh Tony, I'm so glad. And yes, I'm proud of you for doing that," she said earnestly. "How did it go?"

"Good. And long. But good." He told her the gist of what they'd talked about while idly spinning around on his workshop stool.

"I don't know if I should ask this, but do you think you'll go back again?"

"Yes," he said simply. "You can go ahead and say 'I told you so' now."

"That's . . . that's really good, Tony." She sounded relieved. "When have I ever been the sort of person to say 'I told you so'?"

"I can think of a few times. More than a few. We both know I've deserved it on a number of occasions. More often than not, in fact."

"That's very true. Well then, I told you so."

"Is there anything else you think I should be doing, oh wise and wonderful Pepper? I might listen
now."

She laughed. "No you won't," she said. "But I do want you to call me when you get back tomorrow. I'm sorry I won't be with you."

"Don't be. Sam is coming, at Rhodey's request."

"Good. He can handle you."

"I think the medical people will do a good enough job of that."

"Maybe." Pepper sighed. "I need to go. Take care of yourself, and call me tomorrow."

"I will," he promised. "Love you."

The line went dead and he took a moment to check his messages for the first time all day. There was one from Dr. Mann, of course, reminding him to show up at the hospital and not to eat or drink after midnight. Everything else had either already been directed to the appropriate Avenger working group or was something he didn't care enough about to acknowledge.

He returned upstairs, curious how the chess game was going, if it was still going. It was, with Sam and Steve playing while Wanda and Rhodey watched. Tony sat next to Rhodey and watched Wanda rather than the game. He knew very little about her mental abilities aside from what she had said and done that other night, and his curiosity was winning out over his wariness of what she could do.

Eventually she felt him staring and shot him a look of confusion. Rather than speak, he pictured Vision carrying him from the pool to the couch and waited to see what she would do. Her brow furrowed as she continued looking at him. He tapped his temple, then pointed to her.

Finally, understanding. "I don't do that to allies, it upsets them," she said.

"I'm giving you permission. I want to see what you can do."

She visibly hesitated, then straightened her back. "As you wish."

It might have been his imagination, but he thought he could feel her presence in his mind a moment later. He certainly noticed the way she was moving her fingers in her lap and how her eyes turned slightly reddish. He thought of the same image again; it changed to show Steve carrying him.

Tony brought up an image of Vision.

An image of Ross appeared, accompanied by a feeling of unease.

He frowned, then thought of Ross in the conference room to confirm he was understanding what she meant.

She nodded.

He tilted his head slightly to the side as he considered how else to test her. He thought a question at her, but she didn't seem to pick that up. A memory of Steve and his team at the airport was countered with a view from her perspective of Iron Man and his compatriots.

"It works in images, not words?"

"Images and emotions," she said. "Why?"
He shrugged. "I'm curious. Can you see things that I'm not actively thinking about?"

The response was a rapid succession of images: reading to Lila, watching Pepper from the bed as she got dressed, the Iron Man armor designs as they had looked last week, Bruce staring at a screen while they were trying to figure out using the scepter to create Ultron.

He responded by closing his eyes and bringing forward what he remembered of the video of his parents' deaths.

Her answer was the wave of grief and pain she'd felt when Pietro died.

Tony opened his eyes and had to clear his throat before he could speak. "I understand. You should stop now."

She almost visibly withdrew into herself, saying nothing. The red in her eyes faded away.

"Would anyone care to tell me why Ross was here today?"

"Apparently he doesn't have enough to do as Secretary of State," Rhodey said sarcastically.

"It was nothing, really," Sam said. "He wanted to chat about the mission and any intel we might have gathered."

"We did not admit to collecting any of the data from the base," Vision added, rising up through the floor.

"Vis!" Wanda exclaimed disapprovingly.

"I would have been too late for the conversation had I arrived in another fashion," Vision told her, then addressed everyone. "Secretary Ross seemed satisfied with what we told him."

"Has anyone started looking at what we got from the base?" Tony asked.

"Not yet. Is it decrypted or translated or whatever else it needed?" Rhodey said.

"I thought so." Tony checked quickly on his phone. "Yep, it's ready when we are. I've started the scan for names and patterns, but we'll have to go through it ourselves if there's anything else we're looking for."

"We can talk about that when the game is finished," Steve said as he moved one of his pieces.

"I'm guessing I'll be done soon," Sam grumbled as he considered his possible moves.

"He's got you cornered," Tony agreed.

Sam sighed and conceded. He, Steve, and Rhodey started discussing what they wanted to check the HYDRA documents for, but Tony returned to contemplating Wanda and her mental capabilities. Having her read minds could be useful against opponents even if she didn't manipulate their thoughts. Also, some communication during fights might be easier in pictures rather than words.

When Tony checked back in on the conversation, everyone else was looking at Vision, who seemed to be concentrating. He was about to ask what was going on when Vision spoke. "There are six additional locations of current or recent HYDRA stations in the new documents. All of them are also mentioned in the SHIELD files leaked by Natasha."

"Why didn't we find out about them sooner, if they're in the old documents?" Rhodey asked.
"They were not yet decrypted."

"Is there enough information in the old documents to convince the U.N. this is something we need to pursue?" Sam asked next.

Wanda looked confused. "Why?"

"We didn't tell Ross about the new intel, so unless we can argue our case based on the old information, we either have to admit to withholding information or take care of this under the table."

"Which would be a nightmare if it's ever found out," Tony said sourly. "Unless you liked the Raft."

Vision went still for a moment, then reported, "The information available in the documents for four of the locations is approximately equivalent to what we had for the base we successfully defeated."

"So we get permission for the four, then hope we find something there to point to the other two. Easy," Tony said with a shrug, dismissing the entire conversation and returning to his previous train of thought.

"Will that be enough?" Sam asked doubtfully. "Last time the primary reason they had us go was that threat toward the U.N."

Rhodey was about to chime in when Tony interrupted. "Wanda, how close do you have to be to someone to see into their mind?"

"Tony," Steve said sharply. "You can't resort to underhanded methods to get what you want."

"I'm just asking," Tony said defensively. "It's something we can use in a fight."

"No."

"So you're willing to let me go through their files, but not let her go through their minds? How is that any different?"

"It's not the same thing," Steve protested. "Files are meant to be seen and used. A person's thoughts and memories are private."

"Privacy is a myth. Or didn't you notice that I've developed a way to project a person's memories? It's just the next step toward where we're going."

"Someone has to choose to use that system before it will work. What you're talking about takes away the option to choose."

"I'm sorry, I thought they chose to be part of HYDRA. Are you saying we should be giving them opportunities to switch allegiance rather than just blowing them up like you've been doing?"

"You're missing the point," Steve said heatedly. "We're talking about convincing the U.N. to let us go after these HYDRA bases."

"I'm talking about what happens when we do hit the bases. We all know it will have to be done eventually. If you're worried about convincing the U.N., get Nat to help. She's good at persuading people to do things and making it seem like it was their idea all along."

Steve took a deep breath, then nodded. "Finishing off HYDRA is something we need to do. I'll work with Natasha on making the case to the U.N. panel but the rest of you should prepare as if they'll approve. We need to figure out when to strike, and in what order."
"I may have a few suggestions," Vision said.

"Good. Hash it out with Sam and Rhody. We'll discuss our options this evening."

Orders given, Steve left to find Nat. The others were left gathered around the chessboard. Tony turned to Vision. "If you can get through the data that fast, why weren't you the one hacking the files at the base?"

"I interact with the data, I do not copy it," Vision answered. "While I have been able to bypass the security mechanisms that I have encountered, there would still need to be a way to download the files for our later perusal."

"We can figure something out," Tony said. "You're an android, you've got to have someplace to store information."

"It is possible," Vision said, not sounding convinced.

Sam suggested they move elsewhere to discuss the plans, so he, Vision, and Rhody went over to the conference table to strategize. Tony returned his attention to Wanda. "How close do you have to be?"

"I have only done it from very close. A few feet away at most," Wanda said after she'd thought about it for a minute. "In Sokovia, I spread fear and a desire to leave. I did not manipulate the people's thoughts."

"So, spreading emotion within roughly a half mile works. But you haven't tried reading a mind at any distance?" Tony persisted.

"No," she admitted. "After the Captain said we would not use those methods, I did not try to practice."

"Whoa, what are we talking about?" Clint asked, coming up behind Wanda and crossing his arms across his chest.

"Wanda's ability to read people and potentially influence their thoughts," Tony said. "I'm thinking it can be a useful strategy for the arsenal. Steve doesn't agree. Big surprise."

"Mind control is a bad way to do things," Clint said resolutely.

"I'm not talking about mind control, I'm talking about finding out what people know. Keycodes for doors. The layout of a building. Anything else that can be remembered. I think we can use her abilities to better effect than just flinging cars at people." He gave Clint a long look.

"Yeah, okay," Clint said. "I can think of a few times something like that would've been nice to have."

Tony turned back to Wanda. "What do you think? Are you willing to give it a shot?"

"Sure," she said with a slight shrug.

"This is what we're going to do." He explained an experiment based upon him leaving the room and then thinking of chess layouts that Wanda would have to recreate on the board. Then Clint would send Tony a picture of the board to determine if she'd correctly read his mind.

As Tony had suspected, Wanda's range was better than her past attempts would indicate. She
successfully read him from a variety of distances, even on different floors. Clint let him know that she couldn't read him when he was two floors down and on the opposite side of the building, so he returned to the common room.

Wanda was holding her head with both hands.

"Headache?" he asked sympathetically.

"It happens. It will pass," she said stoically.

"We should try that with someone else, later," Tony said. "There may be a difference in how easily you can read people."

"Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes it isn't," Wanda agreed. "You are not hard."

"I don't know if I should be flattered or offended," Tony said. "Who do you think would be hard?"

"Natasha," Wanda said almost immediately, then glanced at Clint. "And maybe you. I haven't had contact with your mind."

"And I'd like to keep it that way," Clint said.

Tony had Wanda rank the Avengers according to how easily she thought she would be able to read their minds. "We'll have to test this in case it's useful in fights," Tony said, looking over the list that Friday had made up as Wanda made her decisions. "And we'd better hope our opponents don't ever have similar abilities, not with Steve, me, and Vision all at the easy end."

That thought troubled him through dinner and into the meeting about their new targets. What was the likelihood of encountering another being capable of reading minds? Was there any way to protect one's mind from intrusion? These and other questions he never thought he'd be asking crowded his mind. *I'm just a man in a can*, he recalled saying once, and it felt equally true now. He could think of a lot of things, anticipate a lot of things, but stuff like this . . . this was beyond him.

He tried to pay attention to Vision's explanation of the information they had on each base or outpost or whatever, but it was difficult to focus when it seemed unlikely that he'd participate in the raids. Also, he was definitely starting to feel the effects of his sleepless night. He pulled out his phone and messaged Pepper. She responded fairly quickly, and the conversation continued in a rapid back-and-forth until Rhodey knocked on the table next to him. "Heads up, we're done here."

Tony looked around quickly; he and Rhodey were the only ones left at the table. "Sorry," he mumbled, slipping his phone into his pocket and standing quickly.

"I won the bet, so no apologies are necessary," Rhodey said, falling into step next to him as they left the room.

"What bet?"

"Whether or not you'd notice if everyone left."

"What did I miss?"

"We're hoping to start hitting these locations within a week. Other than that, not much. You can skim the documents yourself faster than it took us to talk our way through them."

"Right. Good night," Tony said, perhaps a little brusquely. Rhodey didn't comment, though, and said
good night in return. Tony closed his door and pulled out his phone again, replying to Pepper twice before he got around to changing for bed, his thoughts jumping frenetically from one worry to another.

Chapter End Notes

I confess that I'm not altogether clear on Vision's capabilities in terms of computers and digitally stored information, so my representation in this fic may not be accurate when compared with the character in the comics.
Exhaustion pulled Tony quickly into sleep despite everything cluttering his mind. His dreams were fragmented and nonsensical and vanished as soon as he opened his eyes. Friday continued playing the bombastic music that served as his wakeup call until he was out of bed and headed for the shower, though he wasn't fully awake until he'd stood under the spray of water for several minutes.

What he wore didn't matter, so he paid little attention as he got dressed. He took his meds and replied to Pepper's last messages from the night before, then checked the reminder from Dr. Mann. It was just as well he wasn't allowed to eat, he wasn't sure he could. He hadn't even been this nervous before the surgery to remove the arc reactor.

He arrived at the car just before Sam. "I'm on the wheel, if you don't mind," he said, already opening the driver's door.

"You know how to get there?"

"Friday does."

Neither of them spoke again until they were on the road. Sam broke the silence. "All of your vehicles can pilot themselves except for your cars. Why?"

"Friday could drive any of the cars if I wanted her to," Tony said, keeping his eyes on his mirrors and the road despite the conspicuous lack of any other traffic.

"I'm talking about systems built in. There are no driverless cars in your world and that seems weird, especially since S.H.I.E.L.D. had them."

"I know. I had a hand in programming them."

"But you don't trust them?"

"I like to drive," he said with a shrug.

"So which one is harder to program, a quinjet or a car?"

His reply was immediate. "A car. You're more limited in how you can respond to obstacles."

The discussion lasted for the duration of the drive and into the hospital, and continued after they were escorted to a room and Tony changed into the hospital gown. The topic wandered from self-piloting vehicles to the difference between AIs like Jarvis and Friday and AIs like Ultron. Sam didn't fully grasp the distinction, and none of the ways Tony tried to explain it helped.

Then a transport nurse arrived to take him for his tests, and he no longer cared to pursue the topic. As his bed was pushed past Sam, Tony said, "Thanks for the distraction."

"You caught on, huh?" Sam said with a grin, falling into step just behind the head of the bed.

"You realize I usually talk a lot, right? The strange part is having someone seem interested in what I'm saying."

"I'm interested when you're improving my gear."

"You and everyone else. We should talk about that. I'm sure there's more we can do."
"I think we're both available right after this."

"Plenty of time," Tony agreed, frowning as the bed arrived at the testing room. "Here goes nothing," he sighed.

The process was the same as before, with electrodes and things injected in uncomfortable places. This time, though, he was still feeling fine as they wheeled him away, so perhaps he wasn't going to lose the next few days to illness. That seemed promising.

Once he'd been returned to his room and the various nursing types had left, he looked toward Sam, who was standing against the wall just inside the door where he could see both the hallway and Tony. "So, lay it on me. What else would you like your gear to do?"

Sam had a few thoughts about firepower on Redwing and improving the display of data from the scanners; Tony listened and took notes on his phone, occasionally interjecting with a thought or an objection. The amount of weaponry was dictated by the size and required maneuverability of the drone, so there was only so much that could be done. Displays, however, could always be tweaked.

"What about range?" Tony asked abruptly. "Do we need to boost the signal on the communications?"

"I haven't had any problems, but I usually don't send it far. I'll have to check when we get back."

"Let me know." Tony lapsed into silence as he finished his notes, then allowed his arms fall to the bed. It was dreadfully tiring to hold his arms up to see the screen, but he was still on the 'lie flat until they allow you to sit up' portion of his post-test regimen.

A nurse came in to check on him, and he rested his eyes for a while after that, mentally experimenting on Redwing's systems, then switching gears to review his other project. He was meditating on the finer points of wiring metal to act like fingers when he realized the answer to his earlier conundrum. "Barnes," he said aloud even before opening his eyes.

"What?"

Tony looked over at Sam. "You've met Barnes, right? Seen him as both the Winter Soldier and--" He hesitated to call him a regular person. "And not?" he finished.

"Yeah, what of it?"

"That's the difference. Friday and Jarvis act based on programming and adapt to situations based on that programming, like the Soldier. Barnes when he's not being all brainwashed has the capability for independent thought, for deciding whether to follow orders or disobey them. Like Ultron."

"Ah."

When no further response was forthcoming, Tony said, "Well, I thought it was a good comparison."

"It makes a lot of sense," Sam said.

"You don't sound convinced."

"At what point does a program cross the line into Ultron-level artificial intelligence?"

"If I could tell you that, I'd be even richer than I already am."

"So you don't know why Ultron happened?"

"Does it bother you?"

"What?"

"That you don't know."

"A little, but only because it means I don't know if I'm about to repeat the same mistake with something else. I'd rather not be known for causing the end of mankind." He spoke lightly, but that idea had haunted him since Ultron, and he'd directed his projects to being mind-based rather than machine-based because of it.

If the gem was the reason the Ultron program turned out so dramatically different than his hopes for it, then he didn't have to worry about accidentally creating another murder bot. If it wasn't . . . he should never create anything with the remotest chance of becoming sentient ever again.

For now, he was erring on the side of caution.

"If the human race ceases to exist, nobody will be around to know you were the cause."

"No humans will be around," Tony corrected. "Computers can have long memories."

Silence fell for a few minutes, then his phone began to vibrate. "Have I told you lately that you're my favorite doctor?" he said as he put it to his ear.

Dr. Mann laughed. "I take that to mean you aren't having a bad reaction to the contrast this time," she said warmly. "Good. Everything is going well?"

"It would be better if I could not be stuck flat on my back right now, but I've had worse."

"Yes, you have. Have you had any more of those episodes recently?"

"No, I have been free of any nearly-fainting spells."

"I suspected as much. Well, I have good news. I've seen today's scans and you are definitely on the road to recovery. I'm still going to have you restrict your activities for the full six weeks, but there are some things that you can start doing again as long as you promise to let me know if you have any problems. And I do mean any problems. I'll update your list by the end of the day."

"You are definitely my favorite doctor."

"Don't say that just yet. I'm also going to ask that you do a few things for me long-term, to try to keep this from happening again. One of those things is staying on the meds for a while, but another is talking to a therapist."

"I've already started," Tony said confidently. "I went yesterday."

"That's good, but you'll have to go more than once for it to count." She sounded amused.

"Details, details," he said dismissively. "Anything else?"

There wasn't, so he ended the call and relayed the good news to Sam, who said, "You do realize it's only been three weeks, right? You're still out of action for another three."

"I knew that," Tony said. He had known that, had said something about it the day before, but being
confronted with the stark reality still took some of the wind out of his sails. It was going to be a long three weeks, if the past three were anything to go by.

He was allowed to leave after another two hours of waiting, and of course they made him sit in the wheelchair on the way out. Sam drove them back to the compound. Tony sat up front to make it seem less weird and soon remembered why he didn't like riding up front. Watching other people drive from that close made him edgy. He wanted to take over and do it right. Not that there was anything wrong with Sam's driving. It was just a peeve.

It was mid afternoon by the time they got back; the others had evidently split up after lunch and gone to do their own things, since no one was in the common areas. Sam went to find out what Natasha, Clint, and Wanda were doing in the training room. Tony considered joining Rhodey and Vision at the pool, but ultimately decided to check in with Steve in the office.

Steve was seated at the desk and staring meditatively through the glass screen in front of him. Tony leaned against the door jamb. "You have the look of someone who's spent far too long talking to meddling bureaucrats," he said casually.

Steve glanced up at him and had the decency to chuckle. "I talked to some folks at the U.N. while you were gone. A few of them don't seem to be pleased about dealing with me instead of you."

"They'll get over it," Tony said dismissively. "They weren't too happy to be dealing with me at first, either. Was this about the Accords or HYDRA?"

"A little of both. The next subcommittee meeting has been extended to four days to discuss our full revisions. The panel wants us to wait until after that meeting to take any action on our HYDRA leads since there is no immediate threat indicated in the intelligence."

Tony sighed. "Welcome to the U.N., home to clueless diplomatic types who wouldn't know a snake if it bit them in the ass."

"Last I checked, you advocated for being under their thumb."

"Because it's a thumb we can manipulate more easily than others. Would you rather be at Ross' beck and call instead?"

"I still think the best hands are our own."

"When you're in charge, that might be true. But the average Joe doesn't see that. They just see us waltzing into places, blowing shit up, and waltzing out again. Having the backing of an international body is necessary to keep doing what we do best. Otherwise we look like vigilantes who are no more law abiding than HYDRA."

Steve shook his head slowly. "It's hard to believe the world has come to this."

"A fair bit of that is thanks to your generation."

"So I'm told." Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, then took a deep breath. "Do you think we can find anything in the documents to make HYDRA seem more urgent?"

Tony shrugged. "We can have Vision give them the once-over since apparently he can do that faster than my programs. I need to find out how he does that so I can try to duplicate it."

"All right, I'll ask him."
"What's the scoop on the meeting?"

"It'll start Monday and conclude Thursday of the week after next."

"Right. I'm still technically sidelined then, but maybe my restrictions will have loosened up a bit. I'm on the road to recovery, by the way. Three more weeks and this nonsense should be over." He pulled out his phone and checked the document from Dr. Mann, but it hadn't been updated yet. There was, however, a message from Pepper that she was available to talk for the next hour. "I'll check with the good doctor. I really think I should be there for this one."

"I am willing to go in your place again, but it would be better if you attend," Steve agreed.

"Both of us should be there. The revisions are our baby."

Steve smiled a bit at that. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Fine, have it your way. If there's nothing else, I need to go make a call."

He stepped into his bedroom, sinking onto his bed while the phone rang.

"Tony." Pepper's voice calmed something in him that he hadn't known was agitated.

"Hey Pep. It went well today."

"Good. You aren't sick this time?"

"Thankfully, no."

They chatted comfortably until Pepper had to go to a meeting. Tony remained seated on the bed while he checked the updated restrictions list from Dr. Mann. Arguing with diplomats remained in the forbidden section, so he sent a note to her, explaining the situation with the meeting.

When he'd finished, it was nearly time for everyone to start gathering for dinner. He was reluctant to go back downstairs, which he chalked up to too much togetherness time. He needed some space to breathe, needed some time to himself.

But for now, he had to show up or the others would be on him for missing the meal. They may not be fully a team in other respects, but they would all gang up on him in a heartbeat about something like that.

His absence would have been particularly noticeable, too, for the Bartons were off at some event at the public library. Apparently the kids had talked of nothing else for days, and Tony wondered how he kept managing to not see them. He'd almost think it was personal, except that they were kids and wouldn't think of something like that.

The outcome of that day's tests was a primary topic of conversation at the table, so he assured those present that he was on the mend. Sam and Rhodey were interested in the changes to his restrictions list, which was already displayed in place of the original; the primary difference Tony had noticed was the lifting of any restriction on his exercise regimen. He looked forward to getting back to normal in something.

Especially since his coffee consumption was still restricted to two cups a day. Such cruelty.

After dinner he was able to retreat to the workshop to put in several hours of work on his projects.
and he made some progress, though he still felt dull and uninspired. He couldn't remember if he'd mentioned that to Doc T, and while he was thinking about it he had Friday pull up her calendar. He wasn't sure what Steve was planning for team training times, though, so he didn't schedule anything. He didn't want to give the wrong impression by being absent from training now that he was allowed to participate.

Look at him trying to be a team player. It was a little ridiculous, the things he was willing to do to try to stitch the team back together.

These thoughts followed Tony to bed, and he brooded on his absurd attachment to these people who didn't always even like him. Many of them had proved false and yet he wanted their company, their approval. One—technically, two, though the other was on the other side of the world and he was more than okay with that—had even tried to kill him, but he was willing to put even that behind him for the sake of the team, for the sake of their unity in the face of whatever was coming next.

Because there was always something coming next.
Starting the next day and ramping up through the weekend, Tony threw himself back into physical training in earnest. He felt terribly out of shape thanks to his time off, which had started even before the whole heart thing due to simply not having enough hours in the day to fit everything in.

He still drew the line at actual running.

Steve seemed concerned he'd overdo it but Sam was an unexpected ally for his cause and convinced Steve he'd be fine as long as the amount of workout time was reasonable, just like for everyone else. Friday morning he did weights and the rowing machine, Friday afternoon he trained with the others doing self-defense work using various common objects, and Friday evening he spent in his workshop, sadly the least productive part of his day. Friday night he slept like the dead, physically and mentally exhausted.

Saturday and Sunday didn't involve group workouts but there was still no escaping the others. Rather than training, there were conversations about what Vision hadn't found in the documents, meaning they had nothing to convince the U.N. that HYDRA was an immediate threat, and about planning for the missions whenever they finally got the go-ahead to deal with HYDRA. Ground reconnaissance would have been most helpful but wasn't permitted, so aerial reconnaissance and digital information-gathering had to suffice. Tony stayed out of that, mostly, except for repositioning the satellites and providing permission for the others to make use of Friday as needed.

On Monday, they gathered around the conference table mid-morning to meet the newly hired public relations person. She was a somewhat short, unassuming young woman with curly brown hair and a disarming smile complete with dimples. "Good morning, I'm Mel," she practically chirped, and Tony glanced at Natasha with an eyebrow raised. Natasha gave him a cool look in response and indicated with a nod that his attention should be elsewhere.

The girl was still speaking. "I'm Melissa Brooks, that is, but you can call me Mel. Until last month, I served on the public relations team for the Roxxon Oil Corporation Pipeline Division, and I am really excited to be working with and for all of you. I am an admirer of your work." While she professed excitement, her manner had settled into what Tony supposed could be called 'calm and collected', though no one did that look better than Natasha.
"Why did you leave Roxxon?" Sam asked.

Mel's demeanor remained unchanged, but her tone shifted. "I am unable to fully disclose that information due to confidentiality agreements," she said. It sounded rehearsed.

"We spoke in some detail about the situation and her story checks out," Natasha interjected before anyone else could demand details.

Clint shifted the line of questioning. "Why do you want to work for the Avengers?"

Mel hesitated for just a moment. "Honestly? Because you seem to be doing good things and I would dearly love to be on the right side for once."

"Who says there's a 'right' side?" Tony asked wearily. It hadn't escaped his notice that they had, once again, arrayed themselves around the table according to the sides taken in the Accords disagreement.

"As a group, you have saved the world twice. Perhaps the things you do aren't always on the side of the angels, but your actions save lives and that's more than I can say for my last place of employment." She glanced at Natasha, who had stepped aside rather than take a seat at the table. "May I begin?"

Natasha nodded once. "Please."

Mel turned to face the table again. "During the interview process, I was asked to comment upon the coverage of the Avengers by the news media. My full commentary on that subject could take hours, so I'm going to give a very brief overview starting with your debut as a group."

Most of what she had to say about the early days of the Avengers weren't a surprise to Tony, with his extensive experience at being in the limelight, both good and bad. Visibly saving lives tended to generate goodwill, and New York was no exception.

Mel skipped over the takedown of S.H.I.E.L.D. as "outside the immediate scope of concern, though the fall of a trusted institution always has repercussions," in her words.

Her treatment of Ultron focused on the unpredictability of the foreign technology tapped in Ultron's creation as the primary cause of everything that happened afterward. Based on the information available to her, Tony thought it wasn't a bad attempt at a positive spin on the whole situation.

"I cannot overemphasize how important it is to remind the public as a whole and the media in particular how many people are likely to have died without the Avengers' intervention in Sokovia," she said. "This point can and should be made for nearly every event that has occurred since the Avengers were introduced. It is especially vital for the next incident, and I would like to show you a few clips to make my case clearer."

Tony had a good idea which 'incident' she referred to even before the first video played, and he focused on Wanda rather than the screen. She looked unhappy but not upset, probably because she'd seen all of the footage before.

When the samples of news coverage of the accident in Lagos were finished, Mel said, "These reports are representative of all news coverage about the accident, which means they all omit one very basic fact."

She paused for emphasis. "While all the world's fingers were pointing at the Avengers for the supposedly needless bloodshed in Lagos, not one person acknowledged that the death toll would have been far higher if the explosion occurred at ground level."
Tony watched Wanda become still, focused on Mel. He wondered how long she had waited for someone to comment on that very thing.

"That matters, and it should have been part of the coverage. The death of innocents is always to be mourned, but the death toll should have been weighed against what could have happened without Avenger intervention. Similarly, many of the narratives in support of the Accords have been expertly edited to show the outcomes of your participation in the worst possible light. These are things that a publicist can address on your behalf. I don't know why it took you this long to realize you need someone to help set the record straight, but I am honored to be that person," she concluded.

Silence followed her pronouncement and Natasha waved Mel to an open seat at the table while she took the other available chair.

Vision spoke hesitantly. "So your message will primarily focus on how the events could have been worse?"

"Not exactly. I will provide any context that is overlooked, which isn't the same thing. But if the media doesn't change how it talks about you--and I don't expect it to--then yes, my input will frequently involve a 'here's how it could have been worse' analysis along with whatever damage control is necessary."

"What happens when it's only damage control? When something happens that could not have been any worse?" Clint asked cynically.

Mel met his gaze unflinchingly. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, but short of the world ending or every one of you going rogue and turning all supervillain on us, I don't know if that will happen."

Tony wasn't sure what prompted Clint's question, but his thoughts went to the Hulk in South Africa incident and he debated whether to mention it. As much as he'd like Bruce to turn up, he didn't think Mel would appreciate having him added to her plate of unruly superheroes.

No one else seemed to know what to say, either. "Thanks for sharing," Sam finally said.

"We appreciate your expertise," Steve agreed solemnly.

"Thank you," Mel said earnestly. "I wanted to meet with all of you today specifically to ask about the current state of the team so I can start responding to the stories about your alleged civil war. Also, Mr. Stark, we will need to address your health. Those reports are mostly sympathetic toward you, but often at the expense of Captain Rogers."

"Call me Tony," he said. "We're happy to fill you in, but you also need to know that there's currently a lawsuit against me, filed by Secretary Ross."

Mel's eyebrows rose and she tapped her pen against the legal pad sitting in front of her. "I'm going to need you to start at the beginning, wherever that may be."

What was scheduled to be an hour-long meeting turned into a four-hour marathon that included a brief break to retrieve lunch from the cafeteria.

Mel scribbled pages upon pages of notes as they talked about what had happened and what else she needed to know to make sense of it all. Tony wasn't going to mention Siberia and apparently Steve felt the same way, because he didn't mention it either. They did, however, talk about the Accords and the efforts to revise them.
"Are the meeting minutes available to the public, or is the subcommittee's work under wraps until it's all approved?" Mel asked between bites.

Everyone looked at Tony, who had his mouth full, of course. He swallowed hurriedly. "The fact that the meetings are happening is public. What's discussed is only known to those who attend."

"So I can't mention any details, got it," she said, drawing in the margin next to that section of notes.

The conversation with the team lasted until nearly two in the afternoon, with Tony staying behind to fill her in on the health stuff. He also gave her the contact information for the lawyers so she could get a statement from them about the lawsuit. He watched her take notes with some interest. "Aren't you a little young to know shorthand?" he asked when she seemed to have run out of questions.

"It's a hell of a lot quicker than writing it all out. Faster, even, than typing it all," she said nonchalantly, rapidly drawing a few symbols in the margin of her latest page. Only then did he notice she was left-handed.

"Which part of our mess are you going to try to tackle first?"

"I haven't decided yet. It's a pretty big mess." She looked back over her notes. "Some of it will depend on if there is any news that requires a response in the next day or two. When are you going to rebrand your relief organization? That will make for an excellent press release."

"I'll let you know. There are a few things that still have to happen."

"Oh, I know what I have to tackle immediately. Y'all need a website, social media presence, the whole nine yards, like we mentioned earlier during, what, hour two? Do I have permission to contract that out?"

"Check with HR. We might already have someone around with expertise. If not, do whatever you need to do."

"Awesome. And one more thing; don't agree to any interviews I don't know about. Requests should come through me. Please."

"I'm not that bad at interviews," he protested.

"You do your job and I'll do mine," she said neutrally. She had no more immediate questions after that so she gathered her notes, shook his hand, and left to get some work done before the afternoon was over.

Tony groaned when he stood and stretched, his body protesting his intensified workouts in combination with the hours of sitting in a chair. He had two options at this point: join some of his teammates in the workout room and endeavor to work out a few of the kinks before dinner, or head down to the workshop and tinker.

Working out a few kinks seemed like the better idea. He thought he'd do something low key, perhaps put in a little time on a treadmill, but Clint, Natasha, and Wanda were using the treadmills for sprints. He took the rowing machine instead and settled into a comfortable rhythm. For once he wasn't trying to beat his own best time; the temptation was there to try to match the intensity of his teammates but when he sped up the pace, his back reminded him that he'd been overdoing it.

During a break in the running, Clint dared him to try it, but that was a challenge Tony had no trouble declining. "I'm good, thanks," he said without pausing.
The three of them left shortly thereafter, headed for the mats in the training room for some tumbling (Natasha's idea), and Tony was left to row in peace. He meditated on Rhodey and the suits and what else he should design into his suit and whether continuing his fruitless efforts on a method to scan his heart would be worth the time. He'd surpassed the existing technology but he had his doubts whether he'd manage to achieve what he wanted. Then again, why was it so difficult to go that next step? What was he missing?

The rowing machine didn't have the answer and neither did he. He decided this must be what everyone else felt like when looking at his designs: frustrated and confused.

It troubled him enough that he went down to the workshop rather than up to dinner when he was finished in hopes that staring at the schematics would help.

His frustrated rumination was disrupted by Rhodey, who rolled in and unceremoniously dropped a cafeteria tray on the table with a clatter. "You're welcome," he said sarcastically.

Tony looked at him, then at the food-like substance on the plate. A casserole of some kind, perhaps. "Thanks?" he ventured.

"Cafeteria food twice in one day is something I don't plan to do again anytime soon. Apparently it was your turn to do dinner?"

"Was not," Tony countered reflexively even as he fought back a spike of panic that he'd truly forgotten.

"You should see your face. No, it wasn't," Rhodey assured him. "Cooper and Lila wanted to go to the 'magic room full of food', so we all tagged along. I tried to call down but I guess you didn't get the message. Lila missed you."

"Sorry," he said with a wince.

"It's all right, I could've come down to get you but I decided not to. I thought you needed some space for a little while."

Tony heaved a sigh and squared his shoulders briefly before letting them return to a slump. "You're not wrong," he admitted.

Rhodey regarded him silently for a moment. "Are you okay?"

Tony gestured dismissively. "Peachy. I just need to figure out where I've gone wrong on that scanner." He leaned closer to the pasta-and-sauce substance on the plate. "What is it?"

"Dinner. Eat up," Rhodey said a little too cheerfully.

He grimaced and stabbed what seemed to be a shell-shaped noodle with the fork. Rhodey didn't leave until he'd eaten half of it, at which point he still wasn't sure what it was.

He abandoned his "dinner" and went back to the schematic. He stared at it for far longer than was useful, then relegated it to his mental back burner and returned to tweaking his suit with the assumption that it would not include the monitoring system. With that settled, and the arc reactor shielding from Rhodey's suit, he could send the suit into production whenever he liked.

Except . . .

Having it around would tempt him to put it on. It would remind him, perhaps a little too much, of the
last time he'd worn the armor. Then again, working on it wasn't sending him into flashbacks, so maybe he was blowing that out of proportion. Wouldn't be the first time.

He switched to his other project and fiddled with it for a while, intently studying the schematics T'Challa provided and a simulation of how his design fit in. Some of the connections weren't quite right, so he tinkered with that and when he looked up again it was past midnight. He shut everything down and went to bed, knowing Friday would tattle on him in the morning if he stayed in the workshop any later and he was at a good enough stopping point.

The night wasn't bad but neither was it good, full of strange dreams and odd periods of wakefulness. No nightmares, though, so it could have been worse.

Rhodey was in charge of breakfast, and Tony accidentally-on-purpose nudged him with a shoulder on his way to the coffee supplies. "Don't play with me or you'll find your breakfast mysteriously burnt," Rhodey said. "I know you hate that."

"I sure do," Tony agreed, putting the water on to boil.

"Hurry it up, boys, some of us have work to do," Natasha said as she passed between them, slid a mug into the Keurig, then slotted in her desired beverage and started it brewing.

"Got a big date at eight a.m.?" Tony teased.

She picked up her full mug and smirked at him over the rim. "I'm interviewing PA candidates today. If they can manage to look better than me, it's bonus points."

"That's a pretty high bar," Rhodey said doubtfully.

"That is exactly the plan." She reached around him to take a slice of canteloupe off a plate. "Are you ready yet, or should I find something else to eat?"

"Wait just a second," Rhodey said. A timer started beeping. "There we go." He went over to the oven and pulled out a pan. "Now we're ready."

"Are those caramel rolls?" Natasha asked, leaning over the pan for a good sniff. "Oh, I love you."

"Can be manipulated with gooey baked goods'. We should add that to your file," Tony said, finally taking a sip of his lovely, lovely coffee.

"As long as 'Will do anything for coffee' is somewhere in yours," Natasha said, unashamedly scooping out a large roll onto her plate next to the fruit and sausage.

"What, you didn't include that in your personality evaluation?" Tony leaned back against the counter next to the sink, staying safely out of the way.

"In my defense, you were drinking a lot of non-coffee substances at the time."

Tony thought about it a minute. "Yeah, that's true. There's not much time for coffee when you're drinking ungodly amounts of that green sludge."

"What was in that, anyway?" Rhodey asked as he loaded up his own plate.

Tony shrugged. "Limes, something green . . . I don't remember. Jarvis came up with it and the bots could manage to make it, so I wasn't really involved."

"Would Vision remember, do you think? Since part of him is Jarvis and everything."
"He doesn't seem to directly remember things that Jarvis would know, though I haven't tested him comprehensively." Tony smirked. "I hope to God he doesn't remember some things, because that's more than I want anyone else to know."

A statement like that couldn't be left without comment. Rhodey and Natasha began speculating on what sorts of things Jarvis would've witnessed that Tony wouldn't want to get out. Sam and Clint joined in while Laura looked exasperated with the increasingly wild guesses and Wanda just looked confused.Vision was nowhere to be seen, which was either fortunate or unfortunate depending on the point of view.

Steve arrived just in time for Clint to suggest that Tony had been involved in mass orgies. "Why do you think people liked my parties so much?" Tony shot back just as he heard Lila asking a horrified Laura, "Mama, what's an orgies?" He hadn't even realized the kids were in the room.

Clint was about to retort when Steve broke in, "I think we should have a team practice this morning. Natasha excepted, of course."

Natasha nodded to Steve on her way out the door.

"I guess this means we're down to business," Clint grumbled.

"Just for the record, at least half of the stuff you guessed I've already done. The tabloids don't always need to exaggerate, you know," Tony said with a wink and a grin.

"It's been awhile since we've sparred," Steve continued, undeterred.

"Rhodey, how much of that did you already know about? And why haven't you shared with the class?" Clint demanded.

"I can only think of a couple of things that would fit," Rhodey said. "You have to remember I didn't know him until MIT."

"I was a precocious child," Tony added. "In more ways than one."

"That's quite enough," Steve said sternly.

"Are you going to give us detention?"

"Sometimes I wish I could."

"You could always go the corporal punishment route and dole out spankings," Tony said, only just managing to keep a straight face.

Rhodey tried to give him a forbidding glare but spoiled the look when he had to smother his grin.

Steve sighed and looked down at his plate. "Are we really doing this?" he asked, sounding forlorn.

"I think there are a lot of people out there who wouldn't mind being spanked by Captain America," Sam commented.

"But the important question is, are any of them in this room?" Tony asked.

Clint raised his hand, looking around the table for anyone else to take the bait. No one did.

Steve shook his head, at a loss for words.
"Boys," Laura said in warning, giving her husband a significant glare before casting her disapproval around the table. "You're behaving like middle schoolers this morning. It's not a good look."

Tony had been scolded by Laura once before and didn't care to repeat the experience, so he said nothing. Sam and Rhodey also remained silent. "Sorry," Clint said contritely.

Laura wasn't satisfied. "And the rest of you?"

"Sorry," Rhodey said, which Tony echoed.

"Play nice," Laura warned, then left the room with Nathaniel on her hip and Cooper and Lila following close behind her. Tony heard Lila asking why Mama was scolding Daddy and Uncle Tony before the door closed behind them.

Steve resumed his attempt to tell them the agenda for the morning. Clint wasn't keen on the idea of sparring without having Natasha as his partner, but Steve was adamant. "We've all seen each other fight at some point, but things have changed. We need to know the current capabilities of each team member if we're going to be going on missions regularly."

Tony followed everyone from the room to go and change. He had reservations about participating for several reasons but especially because he didn't have a suit and his suits weren't designed for hand-to-hand combat. With how many times he'd ended up fighting hand-to-hand in a suit, though, he should try to do something about that.

In the meantime, he'd show up because he no longer had a medical excuse. Team player and all that.

Chapter End Notes

I highly recommend the School of Movies podcast episode on Civil War. There's a section where they discuss to what extent the Avengers are actually responsible for the events Ross mentions prior to introducing the Accords, and that influenced my thought process through the initial drafts of Mel's presentation even though there isn't a whole lot left that's directly attributable.
Tony dawdled as he changed and made his way to the training room but he still managed to be on time. Pepper would be amazed.

He arrived as Rhodey was stepping out of his suit in the nearest corner of the room. "I thought I'd even my odds a little bit," Rhodey said.

"I wish I could," Tony replied ruefully. He always felt out of his league around the likes of Steve and Natasha, with their extensive training. Wanda was the only other untrained person in the lot, but her actual abilities could blow any of them away.

As if on cue, Wanda appeared, followed closely by Sam. "What's your biggest weakness fighting hand-to-hand, Stark?" he asked with a grin.

"Fighting hand-to-hand," Tony said. "There's a reason I have a suit that flies."

"So if I took you on right here, what would happen?"

"You'd win. Eventually. I like to think I'd get a few good hits in first."

Rhodey scoffed.

Tony turned to him. "What, you don't think I could land a few? Some best friend you are."

"Being your friend has meant rescuing your ass when you get in over your head. It's happened a few too many times in my book."

"You make me sound like some damsel in distress. I can hold my own."

"Oh, yeah? Want to prove it?" Clint challenged as he joined them.

"Isn't that what we're here for?" Tony said evasively.

Steve and Vision arrived and put an end to the conversation before Clint could needle Tony any further. Tony was more than a little relieved; taking on Barton solo and sans suit probably wouldn't end well for him. Barton could be an annoying little shit but he knew how to fight.

After some warm ups--which included jumping jacks, how retro--they started with one-on-one unarmed fights that Tony and Rhodey merely watched. Vision watched, too, since no one but Wanda could do anything against his density-shifting ability. As they watched they commented on the performance of their teammates, mostly sarcastically.

Then they shifted to two-on-one, still without weapons. Clint and Sam held up pretty well against Steve, as did Sam and Wanda, but Steve was hardly even breathing heavily when they were done. Clint nudged Tony. "You think we can take him?"

"What, you and me?" Barton wouldn't have been his first choice of partners, but Rhodey couldn't spar without the suit, Sam had already gone two rounds, and he wasn't sure what he and Wanda could try that would be at all effective.

"Yeah. Or do you think you won't be able to hold your own?"

Tony looked at Steve calculatingly. Their odds weren't that good, but having the chance to punch
those perfect teeth was hard to pass up. "Let's do it. You have a strategy?"

They murmured back and forth briefly, then fist bumped and stepped forward onto the mats.

Steve watched them warily, his hands curled into loose fists. "You sure you don't want a third person on your side?"

"Legolas here seems to think we can do it," Tony said conversationally, taking a defensive posture while Clint moved a little closer to Steve, also in a defensive posture. "And it's not like he cares what I think."

Clint attacked first, managing to land a few blows on Steve's torso before going low, as planned. Then Tony moved in and got a good shot in at Steve's face while Steve was distracted. After that Steve started fighting back and it devolved into something more like a bar brawl than a training exercise. But they got Steve off his feet and onto the ground, so Tony considered it a win.

When it was over and they were sitting on the mats, Tony shook out his hand as Steve rubbed his jaw. "You got me pretty good," Steve said grudgingly.

"You know I've been wanting to do that for a while," Tony said with a grin as he got up and offered him a hand up.

"Is that what this was about?" Steve said as he accepted the offer and sprang to his feet.

"Nah, it was just a convenient opportunity."

Clint lightly punched Tony's shoulder from behind. When he turned, Clint had his fists up. "C'mon, you and me."

"I don't think I like that idea."

"So you'll fight with me but not against me."

"Yes, that's exactly right. Far less chance of injury that way." As he spoke, he quickly activated his watch and sheathed his hand in the gauntlet, hoping Clint wouldn't notice.

"How about if I call you a damsel in distress?"

"I've been called much worse, and by people better than you," Tony said reasonably, then stepped forward, his left hand feinting toward Clint's face while he brought his knee up. He wasn't too proud to resort to dirty tactics.

Clint caught his hand and nearly managed to dodge the knee to his groin, then went on the offensive.

Tony caught his punch and then held on to his hand with the gauntlet while he struck Clint repeatedly with his left hand, landing a lucky strike to his solar plexus.

Winded, Clint withdrew. "You learned that from Nat," he wheezed, bending over with his hands on his knees.

"The hold and punch thing? I sure did. Would've worked better if I had been punching with the other hand, though."

"It worked well enough," Clint said, straightening and approaching him again.

Tony had thought they were finished, but he was proven wrong when Clint swept his legs out from
under him as soon as he was close enough. He went down with a yelp and struggled as Clint tried to press his advantage. Tony stunned him with the flash of light from the gauntlet and then rolled over, pitching him off. There was some flailing after that, which only stopped when Clint began bleeding profusely from his nose.

"Ow!" he complained, both hands coming up to his face to feel the damage. "I think you broke my nose with your armor hand. Cheater."

Steve hurried over with the first aid kit, pulling out gauze and passing it to Clint.

"Pretty sure it wasn't that hand," Tony said defensively. His immediate reaction was guilt that he had hurt someone in a situation that didn't call for it. And yet, it did matter which hand he'd used, because if he had managed to do some damage even without the suit, that proved he had a chance of holding his own on his own.

"That doesn't matter," Steve interjected. "Barton, go to medical to get it checked out. Stark, put that thing away."

Wanda helped Clint up and went with him as he left. Tony silently started stowing the gauntlet, still kneeling on the mats. "Wait," Sam said. "Stark, what's it do?"

"Half a sec," he said, letting it fold itself away, then unfolded it again, wrapping his hand in gleaming red metal. "It can emit pulses of light or sound for disorientation, or, if I exhaust the power source, it can manage a short repulsor blast. Also, it's bulletproof," he said, remembering his brief face-off with the Winter Soldier in Berlin.

"Is that the same watch you used to muck up the audio on the Raft?"

"The one and only," Tony replied, letting the mechanism fold away again and grateful for the diversion.

"Why don't you make a whole suit like that? Fold it up, put it in your pocket, bam, you're good to go."

"I tried that. It takes too long to assemble." He got to his feet and addressed Steve. "So are we done here, boss?"

"If you want to leave, I'm not going to stop you." He said, sounding resigned.

"Then I'm going to tap out." Tony didn't wait for a response and headed for the door. It was too early for lunch; Rogers had probably intended for their sparring to last longer, but he'd ruined that plan. Well, Barton ruined it by insisting on fighting. But he could've been the better man, decided not to engage . . .

When had he ever been the better man?

He went to his bedroom and took refuge in the shower, spending countless minutes letting the water cascade over him, soaking his clothes, but the slightly soiled feeling of having unintentionally hurt someone didn't fade. It stung more keenly since Barton didn't deserve it, not really. Sure, Barton was an idiot, but so was he.

And thoughts of Siberia weren't far off. He'd attacked a teammate, former teammate, and meant it. Always that thought, that guilt, lurked in the corners, in the darkness, waiting to remind him that he, Tony Stark, genius billionaire playboy philanthropist, was a sad excuse for a human being.
Yes, he had been upset about his parents’ murder, about Steve knowing and not telling him, about the assassin being Steve's best friend.

Yes, some of the fight had been self-defense (after he'd started it), but again, he could have been, should have been, the better man.

He would never be the better man.

Where did that leave him?

All of his attempts to redeem his past life, his company's past life, his mistakes, his failures . . . all for what? First Ultron, now a broken team, perhaps broken beyond repair. Or maybe it was just him broken beyond repair. The rest of the them would be better off without him around, reminding everyone of the schism between them.

There were reasons he'd stepped back from avenging after Ultron. There were even more reasons to withdraw now. And yet here he was, trying to get the team back together and fit himself into it.

Why was he still trying?

Right now he didn't have any answer, much less a good one.

Friday broke into his reverie. "Boss, I've been asked to tell you that it's lunchtime."

"All right," he said numbly. The last thing he wanted to do was go down and face the others; the mere thought of it made his chest constrict with anxiety. Maybe he really should take some time away like Pepper suggested. He awkwardly stood up and began peeling off his soaked clothing. "Friday, does the list from Dr. Mann still include travel restrictions?"

"In-state travel is allowed, out-of-state travel is not recommended, and international travel is forbidden, boss."

So he could go to the Tower without being yelled at, but that would be worse than being at the compound, with the reminders of the team as it used to be while he rattled around the cavernous space alone. If he wanted to risk Dr. Mann's ire, he could head west . . .

He shut off the water and briskly toweled himself dry, the idea teasing at his mind. Could he? Apparently yes. Should he? Well, that was debatable. The reasonable answer was no. He was leaning toward yes.

He wandered out of the bathroom and grabbed his phone to send a quick message. Hey Pep, do you have plans for dinner?

Taking the stairs down ate up a little extra time, and he busied himself with his phone as he entered the main room, hoping to attract minimal notice. No such luck; he was the last one to arrive, so not only did everyone fall silent and watch him come in, the only seat open was across from Barton. Unless he wanted to sit at a completely different table, which was an option, but that would attract far too much attention.

There was already bruising across Barton's nose and under his eyes, but there was no visible bump and no bandaging so the damage wasn't extensive. Tony knew that from personal experience.

"How good of you to join us, Stark," Clint said dryly.

"It's a shame that my attempt to improve your face seems to have failed," Tony retorted as he
surveyed the food on offer, taking some lettuce and piling it with chicken and shredded parmesan cheese. He noticed as he did so that the kids' dishes were already in the sink and he felt a pang of regret that he had missed them once again. Some uncle he was.

He slid into the chair opposite Barton and forced himself to meet his gaze.

"Yeah, well, I'm tougher than you'd think," Clint commented.

"I'll have to try harder next time."

"So there will be a next time?"

Tony shrugged and started stabbing at his salad. "Never say never."

"Good. I'd like a rematch when we're both appropriately armed."

"I've designed your arrows to be good, but they're not that good."

"Then we'll have to work on some improvements." He sounded remarkably cheerful about that prospect.

Tony looked at him suspiciously. "So we're good?"

"Yeah, we're good."

He nodded once, fully expecting that Barton was already planning a way to get even, and turned his attention to eating while the murmur of conversation carried on without him. He was nearly finished when his phone vibrated in his pocket, so he dug it out and didn't even try to be discreet as he read the message. *Dinner meeting was just cancelled. Call me.*

He finished his food at record pace and stood up from the table. "Sorry, I need to make a call," he announced to no one in particular, then dropped his dishes in the sink and left, heading for the privacy of his bedroom.

Pepper's greeting was abrupt and to the point. "Tony, are you trying to invite me to dinner? I thought you weren't supposed to travel."

"Yes, I am inviting you to dinner. Travel isn't recommended, but I need to get away for a little while."

He could almost hear her debating whether to demand more information over the phone or wait until she saw him in person. Eventually she asked, "How long is a little while?"

"Couple of days?" he said uncertainly. He hadn't thought that far ahead, but it sounded reasonable.

"Where will you be staying?"

Something else he hadn't considered. "The penthouse, I suppose. I might as well put the exorbitant rent to good use."

"It's being fumigated this week. One of the tenants a floor down found bedbugs."

Which was something he might have known, had he been checking his email. "That's . . . inconvenient." That also meant he'd have to pack any clothes he wanted to wear or buy new ones, since he couldn't raid a closet that was being fumigated.
"Very," Pepper said, then sighed. "You can stay with me. We'll talk ground rules when you get here." If you come remained unspoken; she knew that plans this hastily thrown together had a tendency to fall apart just as quickly.

"Let me know what you want for dinner, and I'll let you know when I'm due to arrive." He hadn't even considered how, exactly, he would get there, but he had options. He always did.

"All right. See you soon," she said, not sounding convinced.

"Love you," he said quickly before she hung up. He checked his watch and lingered in indecision, then shook his head and began to pack.

Within a half hour he was settling into the pilot's seat on a quinjet, his baggage tossed onto a seat. He'd considered just leaving a note about where he'd gone, but he did the responsible thing and told Rogers in person that he was going to see Pepper for a few days. Steve seemed surprised but didn't try to talk him out of it.

He sent Rhodey a message once the jet was airborne and on autopilot. I'm off to see Pepper for a bit. Try not to miss me too much.

Rhodey's answer wasn't immediate, but it was still fairly prompt. That's sudden. Is she all right?

She's fine.

Will you be back before the meeting?

That's the plan.

Will you be going?

He'd forgotten to check for a response from Dr. Mann about that, so he looked quickly and saw nothing. He had Friday send another query. Not sure yet.

Have a good time.

Always do.

That killed some time, but he still had hours before he'd need to take over from the autopilot. He paced a little, stared out the windows at the view, and spent entirely too long thinking about the team and his (lack of a) place on it.

The jet was somewhere over the Rockies when Dr. Mann's curt response arrived. I wish you wouldn't. If you do, take the Colonel as backup and notify me immediately if you have any trouble.

He nodded in satisfaction, let Rhodey know, and slouched in the pilot's chair, idly monitoring the various displays. Having everyone learn how to pilot the quinjets and at least one other vehicle had been Steve's idea and it had saved their bacon more than once. Tony hadn't needed much coaching, between piloting his suit and designing various flight-capable machines, so he'd become the de facto backup pilot if Clint was unavailable or unable.

Rhodey could step in, though. He'd had the most piloting experience of them all. Having him provide air support from the quinjet might even be a better use of his skills than having him in armor. He'd have to suggest it sometime.

That got him thinking about ways to make piloting a quinjet feel more like flying in a suit (there had
to be a way), and it occupied his thoughts until Friday said, "Boss, we are approaching the Malibu coordinates."

In a fit of nostalgia, he'd included a flyby of what used to be his Malibu home in the flight plan. He straightened and took over the controls, reducing speed so he could fully take it in. The house hadn't been rebuilt; he still owned the land but hadn't decided what to do with it, so what remained of the concrete was slowly cracking and sprouting weeds.

He hovered the quinjet just beyond the cliff and stared. It was a nice location, worth a fortune. Now that curiosity had died down, maybe he should rebuild. Something smaller, easier to conceal now that he'd virtually perfected the camouflage tech that hid the full extent of the Avengers compound from unfriendly eyes. It could be just the place to retire, not tied to the others in any way.

Images of the house crumbling around him came to mind and he frowned. Not all memories here were good, that was true, but the good outnumbered the bad. He'd have to see what Pepper thought about rebuilding.

He directed the jet toward Stark Industries, landing smoothly near his private hangar. He notified Pepper of his arrival and quickly changed into a three-piece suit while one of the valets brought his car around.

He pulled up to the front of SI just as Pepper stepped through the doors. He rolled down the passenger window and called, "Hey pretty lady, can I give you a ride?"

She rolled her eyes and smiled. "I honestly wasn't sure you'd come," she said as she climbed in.

"I'm making more of an effort, remember? What are you in the mood for?"

"Italian."

"Excellent. We have a reservation at six." He gunned the engine and began the fight against traffic that would get them to their destination just before six. "Friday, cancel all other reservations," he murmured as an afterthought.

Pepper kept glancing sidelong at him during the drive, even as she answered his questions about the company and what she had on her plate. She never asked, though, not through the drive nor through a leisurely dinner at her favorite Italian spot.

Her condo was in Santa Monica, purchased after the Malibu house was destroyed and Tony insisted she shouldn't go back to the crummy place she'd rented before moving in with him. She had paid for it, at her insistence, and if Tony had made sure her bonus that year was quite generous, well, he would never tell. She always deserved it. He'd only been inside a couple of times—as in, literally two—since they normally spent togetherness time at his penthouse with its generous bed and a hot tub in the master suite.

The decor was tasteful and understated, an oasis of tidy serenity, just as he'd expect from her. She dropped her keys on a small table by the door, then shucked off her heels. "All right, ground rules," she said, taking down her updo with a few efficient motions. "I am not taking time off just because you are here. I will follow my normal schedule and I expect you not to tinker with my belongings in my absence. I don't think I need to say it, but clean up after yourself. If you finish any of my food, you need to buy more."

"Pretty sure I can handle that."

"You'd better. And I expect you to adhere to Dr. Mann's rules. I know she gave you some, and I
suspect coming here is either a flagrant violation or at least not quite within the terms she set." She crossed her arms and gave him that look.

"Out-of-state travel wasn't forbidden," Tony said defensively. "It's not like I flew in one of my suits."

"I expect you to provide me a copy of the current restrictions."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a touch of sarcasm. "Friday, you know what to do."

"File has been shared, boss."

"Anything else, my lady?"

"Help me out of my dress?" she said more seriously.

"Gladly, but I'm still on the meds so--"

"I really just need help out of the dress," she said. "Bring your bags."

Once Pepper was liberated from the jammed zipper in her dress, she vanished into the walk-in closet to change for bed. Tony did the same, gratefully removing the suit that didn't feel like it was fitting quite right anymore. It wasn't tight, it just wasn't as comfortable as it used to be and he wondered if it was a physical problem or if it was entirely in his head. Either was possible.

He rehung the suit, then Pepper took it and his garment bag and put them in her closet. "I forgot to mention, I'm seeing my personal trainer in the morning. If you'd like to come, you're welcome," she said as she went from closet to bathroom.

He'd brought workout clothes, but her preference for early morning sessions wasn't his style. Especially if he didn't sleep well. "Maybe."

He waited until she was finished before taking his turn in the bathroom, and by the time he was done she was already in bed, sitting up against the headboard while doing something on her phone. He climbed in on the other side and started to lie down, then pulled his phone out of his pocket and slid it onto the bedside table.

She glanced over at him. "You've got messages or something," she said.

He flipped the phone over so the blinking light wouldn't bother her. Why that was an issue when his arc reactor never was, he didn't understand. "I know. I don't care." He settled onto the pillow with a heavy sigh, closing his eyes.

He heard Pepper set her phone down, click off the light, and rustle the sheets as she laid down beside him. Her hand came to rest gently on his chest. "Tony, why are you here?" she asked, finally voicing the question he'd been expecting for hours.

Despite knowing it was coming, he hadn't come up with a good response. "Like I told you, I needed to get away for a little while."

His words hung in the air for a while before she spoke again. "You were against the idea when I suggested it a few weeks ago. What changed?"

"What, I can't want to see you?" He set his hand atop hers.

"That's never been enough reason in the past."
"I'm turning over a new leaf."

"Tony," she said reproachfully.

Silence.

Finally he admitted, "I broke Barton. Well, his nose." He told her what had happened and she listened without comment.

When he finished, she said slowly, "So he challenged you, you broke his nose, and now you're feeling guilty? I don't understand."

"It's not the first time I've hurt someone that I didn't need to fight. And I cheated."

She sighed. "Tony, Barton challenged you, and he's been around you long enough he should expect that you might have something up your sleeve. If you can't live with that, I don't know what to tell you."

"I'm thinking about rebuilding in Malibu. It would be a good place to retire."

"If that means becoming more involved in the company again, the board would love it. But you can't seriously be thinking about giving up Iron Man for good. You've already tried." And failed, but that went without saying

He shrugged. "All options are on the table. Anyway, it's been months since I've had a functional suit and I'm surviving all right."

"Are you?" she immediately countered. "I wonder, because the things you're saying right now do not sound like you. You enjoy saving the day a little too much to go back to only being a businessman."

"Maybe there's a happy medium in there somewhere."

"Since when do you, of all people, deal in happy mediums?"

"Since I got old," he said glumly. "And dealing with bureaucrats has a way of wearing you down."

"Tell me about it," she said sympathetically. "Tony, I'm glad you came, but being here isn't going to solve what's bothering you. Promise me you'll call Dr. Tanya tomorrow. She can talk you through this better than I can."

"I'll think about it."

"If you don't, you're sleeping on the couch tomorrow night."

"That's blackmail."

"You chose to come here."

"Fine."

"Thank you. Good night, Tony."

"Good night." He turned and kissed her briefly, then rolled onto his side to try to sleep. With any luck, he might even succeed.
Falling asleep wasn't difficult but staying asleep was, with the different bed and everything that had taken up residence in his mind. The first few times he woke he was able to fall asleep again fairly quickly, but as the night dragged on he spent more of it awake than asleep, or so it seemed.

Then Pepper's alarm was going off and she was pulling away to sit up. "Morning," she whispered. A muffled groan was his reply.

She kissed his temple. "If my schedule doesn't change, I won't be back until after dinner. The spare keys are by the door. Behave yourself and make sure you eat something more than once today."

"Yes, mother," he grumbled, but turned his face out of the pillow to give her a kiss. He watched her with one eye as she efficiently moved around the room in the semi-darkness and softly closed the door as she left.

Tony drifted off after that, then woke with a start from a nightmare, his heart pounding and his skin clammy. The sun had risen fully and the room was almost blindingly bright, so he threw an arm over his eyes while he tried to catch his breath.

When he slowly eased himself off the bed, Friday spoke from his phone. "Boss, your medication."

"Yeah, I know," he said begrudgingly. He dug through his bag until he found the pill bottle Friday had to remind him to pack. Then he sat on the plush carpet, trying to decide whether he would go for a jog later or something. He didn't feel like doing much of anything.

After a long shower, he pulled on some clothes and went in search of coffee. And breakfast. But mostly coffee. Once those immediate needs were addressed, he flopped onto the couch and began flicking through the stuff on his phone that he'd been ignoring.

As expected, most of it was unimportant. There was a message from Natasha about the PA candidates, but she wanted him to actually do something, so it could wait until later. Maybe later he wouldn't feel like his brain was slumbering without notifying the rest of him.

He gave in to the lethargy and closed his eyes for a few minutes that turned into at least thirty.

Then he remembered he needed to check Doc T's schedule. He had Friday project it, adjusting for the time zone difference. In New York it was already afternoon, so he was quickly running out of time if he wanted to avoid the couch for the night. Then again, it was a fairly comfortable couch.

But why risk it when he didn't need to? He'd thought about talking to her before leaving the compound and hadn't on account of time (and also he didn't want her telling him he shouldn't go, but he wasn't quite ready to admit that to himself just yet). Conveniently, she was available in half an
hour.

His call was prompt and she picked up the phone just as promptly. "Hey doc," he said.

"Tony," she said warmly. "How's the west coast?"

They fell into comfortable small talk for a few minutes before she deftly brought the conversation around to ask about his abrupt departure. He told her everything that had happened the previous day and what Pepper had said, including their bargain.

"Do you agree that what you said doesn't sound like you?"

"I don't know," he said after a long pause. "Years ago, she would have been right. But so much has happened . . . I'm different now. I thought she knew that."

"How would you describe the way you used to be?"

He chuckled hollowly. "Whatever you've heard is probably true."

"I want to hear it from you," she said encouragingly.

He hesitated. "I . . . once I described myself as a genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist. I let other people take care of things so I could have fun. I designed weapons because that's what my company did and I never thought twice about it until I got hit by one."

"What has changed?"

"I don't make weapons anymore, that's kind of a big one. I want to make things better, leave the world a better place in whatever way I can after how much I've screwed it up. And I don't do the playboy thing anymore. I try to do right by Pepper, but I'm not always good at it."

"Would you call these changes significant?"

"That's one word for it."

"And Pepper has been with you this entire time?"

"She's been around me the whole time, mostly."

"Would she say that you have changed significantly?"

"I'd like to think so."

"Why aren't you sure?"

"Because I'm not in her head?" he said irritably. "What are you getting at, doc?"

"Are there ways that your behavior hasn't changed? Things that might lead even someone close to you--like Pepper--to think that you aren't as different as you claim?"

The previous night and the way his suit didn't feel quite right came to mind, but he wasn't immediately certain why. He followed the thread, though, and remembered the last time he'd worn a suit, the interview with Christine Everhart. The prep work, the makeup, donning a carefree grin like a mask just before the feed went live. "I'm still mostly the same in public, around other people, for the media," he said slowly.
"Why?"

His answer came out before he could think about it. "There are fewer questions if I act the way people expect me to. I have a reputation, you know."

"What sort of questions do you think would be asked?"

"Like what the fuck is wrong with me. My every move is scrutinized and speculated about; if I do something unexpected, people start talking about how I must be dying or have a secret family or something. When I laid low after Afghanistan, they were sure I had PTSD and was bedridden." He paused, then added, "The dying part was true, once."

"Do you think something is wrong with you?" she asked gently.

He barked a humorless laugh. "What isn't wrong with me? My issues have issues. I am so intricately messed up . . ." He wasn't sure how to complete that thought, but tried anyway. "If I were one of my suits, I'm not even sure there would be anything worth salvaging. Better to melt it down and start over."

"We do not have that option when it comes to our brains, for better or worse," she said. "But some things are improved by wear and tear, like broken-in jeans or a book with pages worn soft by use."

"There are far more things that wear out and break," he objected.

"Our minds are more flexible than that," she said after a pause. "You are more resilient than that, Tony, or you would not still be doing the things you do."

He wanted to believe her, but he wasn't sure he could.

"I'm going to let you go now," she said when he didn't respond. "Are you able to talk again tomorrow at this time?"

He snorted. "I've got nowhere to be."

"Enjoy the rest of your day, and we'll chat more tomorrow."

He hung up and checked his watch. It was getting to be lunchtime; he wasn't hungry yet, but he was feeling restless. He got up and did a few bodyweight exercises, then decided what he needed was a walk.

The street was pleasantly crowded. It was easiest to evade notice when there were some people around but not so many that he felt trapped in the throng. Tony wandered the area around Pepper's condo for a while, stopping at a little deli to grab a sandwich when he was hungry. It was nice to be out and about like a normal person, though part of him was always monitoring his surroundings while Friday kept an eye on things, feeding him a stream of data along the edge of his sunglasses with occasional comments into his earpiece.

He didn't wander back indoors until almost mid afternoon. He whiled away the hours somewhat aimlessly, tweaking Rhodey's suit and his suit and tinkering with the stealth tech programming to determine how to sense its presence. He even watched the videos Natasha sent from the assistant interviews, deciding within a few seconds of seeing each candidate and listening to them speak that he didn't care for most of them, though one might be tolerable.

Pepper let him know she wouldn't be back until after seven, so he waited until seven to scrounge something to eat. He was stretched out on the couch again when she returned.
"Are you trying to tell me something?" she teased lightly, bending over to kiss his forehead as she passed on her way to the bedroom to change.

He rolled off the couch and followed her. "Nope. The couch is much nicer to my old bones than the floor, that's all."

She gave him a skeptical look, then disappeared into the walk-in closet.

"Do you want to see my call history?" he asked with more irritation than was strictly warranted.

"You don't think I know you can make computers say whatever you want them to say?" she said as she reappeared in her pajamas. She stood in front of him and cupped his face in her hands. "Was it a good talk?"

"I think so."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. How was your day?"

She let go of him and caught him up while he also changed. He thought it seemed early for her to go to bed but he didn't mind. For him it was after eleven, and she'd been up with the birds.

They ended up back in the living room after Pepper decided she wanted some tea, and they chatted about everything and nothing for a while. It was comfortable in a way that being around the others wasn't, and yet . . .

He watched his beautiful, brilliant Pepper as she talked animatedly about something that he'd lost track of and he wondered, not for the first time, if he could ever be the man she deserved.

The thought broke his heart a little. More than a little. He loved her, always had, but he wasn't good at showing it.

"Tony? You look like you're a million miles away." She didn't sound angry. Yet.

"Sorry," he said reflexively. "Are you happy?"

"What?"

"Are you happy?" he repeated. "With work, with life, with . . . us?" he gestured inarticulately, needing something to do with his hands. "I was thinking about how I'm not the, ah, romantic type and how I've never done as well by you as I should, as you deserve, and so maybe it would be better, for you, if we weren't, you know, a thing. If I weren't holding you back." The words tumbled out and as soon as they had he wished he could take them back. Pepper looked thunderstruck.

After a moment of silence, she gave him the look that he'd always thought of as her 'I'm onto you' look. "Tony, are you trying to break up with me?"

He really, really needed something to do with his hands other than roll his empty water glass between his palms, something to look at other than the strange expression marring her pretty face. "No! But, um, maybe yes, if you think that would be best. If you're not happy. I want you to be happy." He sounded like he was pleading with her by the end, and maybe he was.

Pepper's expression was one he couldn't interpret, even with their long years of association. "Oh, Tony," she said sadly. "No, we're not breaking up, not right now, not like this. You don't get to
break up with me so soon after insisting we try again."

"But are you happy?" he persisted. "You don't seem happy."

"I think I'd know better than you whether I'm happy. And right now I'm not happy because you're not yourself and I don't understand what's going on."

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and he stared down at his toes digging into the carpet. He was very aware of a temptation to say something snappy, grin, and brush the whole thing off, but she deserved better, deserved his honesty. "Me neither," he admitted.

Pepper moved from her armchair to sit next to him on the couch and gently took the tumbler from his hands. "It's late. Maybe you're just tired." As if they both weren't aware that he regularly saw the wee hours of morning when he was in a good groove.

"Maybe," he echoed, knowing that wasn't the problem even though he didn't know what was.

She leaned against his side and rested her head briefly on his shoulder. "Come on, let's go to bed."

He nodded jerkily. She got up and took their cups to the kitchen. He watched her go, knowing there was a time that those words, this situation, would have thrilled him to the core, but now he felt nothing but a strange sense of weary resignation. Simply rising from the couch seemed like more effort than it was worth.

But, Pepper. If he didn't get up, he wouldn't get to sleep alongside the lovely lady of his life, and for now that reasoning was enough to spur him into motion.

She took him by the hand and led him to the bedroom as if afraid he'd lose his way otherwise. He followed her lead in climbing into bed and settled on his pillow with a sigh. He faced Pepper and she faced him, and her concerned gaze was the last thing he saw before she turned out the light.

His dreams were dark and foreboding, though nothing lingered in his consciousness except a vague sense of unease. He woke early and found he could not sleep again; he wasn't sure what time Pepper was due to rise but thought he should make her breakfast.

It went badly--so badly that the smoke detector is what roused Pepper from bed and she stumbled into the kitchen, wild-eyed and hair everywhere, to find out what was wrong. Tony froze in the act of trying to wave away the smoke from what was supposed to be a crepe that was now charcoal in the pan.

Pepper took in the scene, then shook her head and fetched a chair so she could reach the smoke detector. Once the piercing noise had stopped, she returned the chair to its rightful place and turned to face him over the kitchen island. "Did you just ruin my pan?"

He glanced down at it. "It's possible," he said sheepishly. "I'll have to clean it to find out."

"You do that. I'm taking a shower."

She left without another word and he surveyed the damage. The smoke was already dissipating, but he switched on the fan over the stove to help it along. Then he turned back to the sink and began cleaning up his mess.

It wasn't a very good pan anyway, he had much better ones, he should give her a new one whether this one was ruined or not. He could give her a whole new set. It's not like he couldn't afford it. He was trying to buy an island, after all, and it's not like funding a team of superheroes was cheap, with
the facilities, the equipment, the vehicles, and all the support staff, not to mention the hazard pay. Pepper probably ought to get hazard pay when he was around her. But cookware might do.

The pan remained usable once the burned bits were scraped off, but it would never look quite the same. A new one was definitely in order. For now, though, breakfast still needed to happen. He dumped out the rest of the batter (no way was Pepper going to let him try again) and started over.

By the time Pepper returned, fully dressed and impeccably coiffed, the smoke had faded to a barely noticeable haze, sausages were sizzling in the slightly discolored pan, and he was stirring scrambled eggs in a larger skillet. "Morning," he said cautiously. She didn't look angry, but she had an excellent poker face. She had to, having worked under him all those years and now running a multinational tech conglomerate.

"Morning," she replied, setting her shoes beside her chair at the table before stepping into the kitchen. "No more mishaps?"

"No more mishaps," he confirmed. "Just breakfast."

"Thank you, Tony. Did you sleep well?"

They settled into small talk as he dished out the eggs and sausage and they each took some of the fruit he had been getting out when the crepe had gone so horribly wrong. Pepper seemed to be watching him more closely than usual, which made him self-conscious. He blustered his way through, as was his habit, and Pepper appeared satisfied. At least, she didn't comment about their conversation the night before.

She kissed him chastely and bustled off to work. He cleaned up, then changed out of his pajamas. He had a mind to go for a jog in the canyon and it seemed a nice enough day for it.

He had no trouble with traffic, as he was traveling in the opposite direction of the commuters, and arrived before the temperature had risen along with the sun. His phone in one pocket, his keys in the other, and a bottle of water in hand, he started along the route he used to take what felt like a lifetime ago.

The familiar surroundings and the familiar route were reassuring, even as he noticed small changes here and there thanks to the passage of years since he'd last been there. Of course, there were a few changes to him, too; no arc reactor, for instance, and he never used to jog with his AI scanning the vicinity.

Not that there was anything to warn him about. The pair of blonde young women jogging back out to the parking lot as he jogged in—he'd nodded to them, they pretended he didn't exist—were the only other living souls he encountered as he traversed the loop path that wasn't overly long but had some nice views. He would probably never admit to appreciating views of nature rather than (or in addition to) views of lovely people, but there was a reason he'd built his mansion where he did.

At one or two of the trail crossings he considered going further, but decided it was best not to overdo it. Dr. Mann would kill him if he had to call for help because he'd wandered a little too far into a park that, by rights, he should've been nowhere near. At least he was playing it safe by walking as much as he was jogging, and his heart seemed to be cooperating.

When he got back to his car, he decided to go for a drive north up the highway, just because he could. He still had more than an hour before he'd be talking to the doc.

His thoughts wandered somewhat as he considered what she might want to discuss. Their
conversations hadn't followed a predictable pattern, and he found it a little unnerving that he didn't know what to expect.

He turned around where the highway bent inland and headed back toward Malibu. He had enough time to get there, but not enough time to be back at Pepper's place before his appointment and he knew it probably wasn't a good idea to have this sort of conversation while driving.

It was either habit or instinct that took him back to where the mansion had been, and he settled in a nook between two large chunks of concrete, out of direct sunlight and overlooking the water.

"Hey doc."

"Hello, Tony. How are you?"

He told her about his morning, how it started poorly but was getting better, and they talked about cookware for a few minutes before he could tell she was preparing to start the serious part of the conversation. He beat her to it. "I tried to break up with Pepper last night. She wouldn't let me," he said in a rush.

There was a palpable pause. "Tell me why you tried to break up with her."

He tried to explain about holding her back, not being as good as she deserved, but the words came reluctantly, if at all, and he couldn't tell if Doc T understood. After that she asked why they'd taken a break before, then what had brought them together in the first place, which turned into recounting the experiences he thought had most changed him and how. Pepper was the only wholly good thing on that list, and he thought that summed up his life fairly accurately. She was an island of goodness in his ocean of shit and the odds that she would emerge untainted grew infinitely smaller by the day.

The last experiences he mentioned were, of course, the disagreement around the Accords and . . . that other thing. If Pepper was an island, the Avengers were a cobbled-together ship that hit the Accords iceberg and they still weren't sure if it would sink or not. He didn't know what metaphor could properly describe what had happened in that silo.

It was easy enough to tell her about the divisions, the fight, his disgust at his teammates-turned-opponents' imprisonment, his decision to follow Rogers to help however he could even if it meant dying alongside him. And then . . .

"Tony, take a deep breath for me," a voice said into his ear. She talked him through a few breaths, then asked abruptly, "How well have you been sleeping?"

Her change of subject completely threw him off. "What?"

"The first time we met you hadn't slept and said you'd been having trouble with insomnia. Is that still a problem for you?"

"Yes," he said shortly.

"You also mentioned having 'anxiety things'. Is that what you were experiencing a few moments ago?"

When he answered in the affirmative, she asked him to describe what happened, how he felt when he experienced such episodes, and how often they'd been occurring. Only after that did she ask gently, "Do you think you can finish your story now?"

He took a deep, bracing breath and tried to ignore the anxious flutter of his heart. "I'll try," he said
firmly. Remembering that conversation with Wilson, he carefully, methodically, told her exactly what had happened or at least what he remembered; he wasn't going to claim that there weren't details he left off that he either hadn't noticed or had forgotten.

From the moment they stepped into that missile silo until his rescue, all of it spilled out in more or less chronological order, though some bits were hazy and blurred together. He wasn't sure if that was an effect of his rage or the blows to his head or both.

When he reached the end and lapsed into silence, he felt a little lighter for having told her the whole story. She was one of very few people who might know how the hell he should be dealing with the whole mess.

"Thank you for telling me this," Doc T said gravely after a few breaths of silence. "How does it make you feel?"

"Guilty," was his primary response, then he added, "Angry. Betrayed."

"How do you feel when you see Steve while these memories are on your mind?"

"Hurt," he said slowly, then hesitated. He could feel his breathing accelerate as he tried to evade the name of the gut wrenching sensation associated with the sight of the shield brandished over him. "Afraid," he said on an exhale before he could think better of it.

There was no immediate response from the other end of the line and he felt ashamed of his admission, then was irritated with himself for his shame. "What kind of a person is afraid of Captain fucking America?" he snapped.

"I don't know, what kind of person?" she asked.

"Usually, it's the bad ones," he said bitterly.

"Do you think you're a bad person?"

"I used to design and manufacture weapons. I semi-regularly kill things, sometimes even people. One of my creations tried to wipe out the human race. I'm pretty sure that doesn't make me a good person."

"But does it make you a bad one?"

"Most people seem to think so."

"I'm more interested in what you think."

"Why would it matter what I think? People will go on believing whatever the hell they want to believe."

"For my sake, then. I would greatly value your answer to that question."

Tony sighed heavily. "Do I think I'm a bad person?" he repeated slowly. "Sometimes. Yes, sometimes I do." His voice trailed off and he stared vacantly out to sea.

"What about the rest of the time?" she prodded gently.

"The rest of the time I try to pretend those times don't exist. I try to pretend that I belong with the do-gooders of this world. Like Captain America, the paragon of all that is right and good." Even he could hear the sarcasm practically dripping from his voice. "I'm a loose cannon, someone not to be
trusted with information like what actually happened to my parents. After all, the only person I fight for is myself."

"Do you really think so?"

"No," he scoffed. "But Rogers does, and good old Stevie boy is never wrong about anything, or so he'd have you think." He drank the rest of the water in his bottle. "Before you ask, no, I don't believe he thinks he's always right. He just usually acts like it, the smug bastard."

"That irritates you."

"Yes," he said shortly. "If you're wrong, you need to cop to it. He's fucked up a lot of things, especially lately, and all he's offered is a half-assed apology for not telling me about my parents."

"Do you always cop to your mistakes?"

"I haven't always, no. I'm working on it, though. Pepper and Rhodey get on me about that."

"It's good to have people who will keep you accountable."

"Yeah." He lapsed into silence, feeling like he'd run out of words.

"Tony, I'm going to send you a questionnaire I'd like you to answer before we talk again. Will you be able to call again tomorrow?"

He shrugged before remembering she couldn't see him. "I've got nothing else planned," he said lamely.

"I'll put you down for the same time again. If you would answer the questions before you go to bed tonight, that will give me time to review them before we talk tomorrow."

He agreed and she hung up. He slowly climbed to his feet, his muscles protesting loudly and at length, the sun hot on his uncovered head and shoulders. It was so far past noon it was nearly one and his body couldn't quite make up its mind whether food was a good idea or not. From the slight dizziness he felt as he stood, food and more water needed to happen sooner rather than later.

He stopped at a nearby local place where he scored a table in a corner to mostly evade notice, though his waitress kept giving him long looks when she thought he wasn't watching. Her service otherwise was impeccable, so he didn't comment on it. When he'd eaten and she brought his bill, she said, "I'm sorry, but do I know you? You look really familiar."

"I used to live near here," he said casually, waiting until she'd set the slip of paper on the table before he picked it up.

"Yes, of course, that must be it. Sorry to bother you. I hope you enjoyed your lunch."

He nodded, making a show of wiping his mouth with the napkin until she left him alone. He paid with a fifty dollar bill left on the table as he made a quick exit. Hopefully if she ever saw him again, all she'd remember was the huge tip.
The "intricately messed up" descriptor was borrowed from the School of Movies Age of Ultron podcast, said by Sharon Shaw at about 30 minutes in.

Tony went jogging in the Zuma and Trancas Canyons, located near where his house was in the movies.

The local place where he ate was inspired by someplace I found while exploring the area via Google Maps, but I forgot to make note of the name. I think it might have been the Sunset Restaurant.
He was back at Pepper's condo by three. A long shower and a change of clothes were first on the agenda, then he sat on the floor in front of the couch, his phone perched on the coffee table and projecting a screen up in front of him. He pulled up the questions from Doc T and ran a hand over his slightly damp hair as he began to read them, then was distracted by the length of his hair. God, he needed a haircut. How long had it even been since his last one?

While he was contemplating this, a message arrived from Pepper. Dinner at 7 at the seafood place work for you?

Sure. Shall I pick you up or meet you there? He replied quickly, then added, I need a haircut.

Meet us there. Happy's coming, too. Moments later, I wondered when you'd notice. You have no idea who to call, do you?

Sometimes she knew him a little too well. She didn't even wait for a response before she sent the name of the place that she'd called for him in the past. They were the kind who came to you rather than you going to them, which was ideal. Even better, they scheduled him for later that afternoon so he'd be done with it before dinner.

It took a while for him to return to the questions from the doc. They were all statements that he was supposed to mark as true or false . . . some were easy enough, but for others he had to sit and think about whether any of his vague feelings of unease fit what they seemed to mean.

The message accompanying the questions said it should take twenty to thirty minutes to complete. It took him nearly twice that long to wrestle through them, and not all of it was due to distraction. Some of it he just didn't know. True-false questions had no right being so difficult.

But at least he finished well before the stylist arrived, a discreet sort who did not try to talk at him after the initial attempts at small talk were answered brusquely. The young man was good at what he did, though, and Tony looked and felt more like himself in short order. He stepped out of the way while the stylist cleaned up, then offered a folded bill along with his handshake. "But you've already paid," the young man protested. He was almost a boy, had maybe ten years on Spidey.

"Then it's for you. Take your boyfriend--it is a boyfriend, isn't it?--somewhere fun."

The kid flushed ten different shades of red but accepted the tip. "Thank you, Mr. Stark."

Tony waved him away and he hurried out. He stared at the door thoughtfully for a few moments, considering what might make the youngster blush so (he could think of at least half a dozen things, just off the top of his head), before going to the bedroom to change. He'd need to leave shortly if he wanted to arrive fashionably but not excessively late. Pepper hated it when he was very late.

Dinner was good, and it was nice to see Happy again. His injuries from that explosion were no longer visible, though every so often he'd be talking and lose his train of thought. The first time it happened, Pepper caught Tony's eye and shook her head slightly, signaling that he shouldn't say anything about it.

The doctors had said there might be lingering mental effects from Happy's injuries and subsequent
time in a coma. Though there had definitely been some hiccups as Happy first began his recovery, Tony had hoped that, too, would heal along with his physical injuries. No such luck, and he felt like a terrible friend for not already knowing, for not having seen him in, what, over a year? Was he even Happy's friend? Had he ever been Happy's friend? Or was he just his employer?

Pepper gently reminded Happy what he had been saying, and he continued as if nothing had happened. The next time, Tony asked him something that got him going again, and the conversation continued comfortably.

Tony had a sneaking suspicion that Pepper had asked Happy along in order to get confirmation from someone else that he wasn't himself, but he tried not to dwell on the possibility. It seemed paranoid even as it seemed likely. Mostly he didn't want to second-guess Pepper's motives, because if he couldn't trust her, the list of people he could rely on would be disconcertingly brief.

When he and Pepper were back at her place, getting ready for bed, he voiced something he'd decided at dinner while watching Pepper and Happy interact and feeling like he was out of place. "I think I'll go back east tomorrow."

"Already? You've only been here two days," Pepper replied as she went from closet to bathroom.

He sat on the end of the bed to wait his turn. "I need to do a few things, and I don't want to be in the way of any weekend plans you might have."

"Just because Friday is girls' night doesn't mean you'd be in the way. I'd leave you here," she said, throwing a smile his direction before she started brushing her teeth.

"Being out of the way is even easier if I'm not here," he said. "Besides, the U.N. meeting starts Monday and I think Dr. Mann would prefer it if I put a day or two between that and traveling." The doctor's opinion was his trump card, and he was going to play it for all it was worth.

Pepper frowned around her toothbrush but didn't try to answer until she was finished. "I suppose you're right. You know I wouldn't mind if you were here longer, right?"

"I know," he said, but wasn't convinced. If he stayed any longer, she'd realize she didn't mean that.

"When will you leave?"

He shrugged. "By noon." He hadn't actually thought about it.

"Do you want to give me a ride in the morning? I can go in a little later so you have more time to throw everything together, and then I can make sure you get a decent breakfast before you head out." While she was speaking she'd come over to stand in front of him and she brushed her fingers over his cheek. "I worry about you. Are you sure you'll be all right traveling tomorrow?"

Tony took her hand and kissed her fingers briefly before pulling away and heading for the bathroom. "I'll be fine. All I have to do is tell Friday where to go and she does the rest. And yeah, I can give you a ride. I don't have a whole lot that needs throwing together."

His sleep was full of nightmares and his night was full of wakings as his heart pounded, his chest heaved, and sweat beaded on every inch of available skin.

"Now are you happy I'm leaving?" he asked after waking both himself and Pepper for the third time before two a.m. He sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her, trying to decide if moving to the
couch would help anything or if he should give up on sleep for the rest of the night. It wouldn't be the first time.

"No, it makes me wonder if the thought of leaving brought this on."

He hadn't thought of that, but he immediately dismissed it. "I don't think so. I talked to the doc again and told her some things that I've been trying not to think about."

"And now you're having nightmares." She sounded sad.

"Now I'm having nightmares."

She touched his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He patted her hand but didn't look at her. "No, I don't think so."

She gently tugged on his shoulder. "Come here."

He sighed but shifted back onto the bed alongside her. Pepper curled up around him and talked to him about lighthearted things, from some of the stupidity she'd had to deal with recently at SI to what she'd thought of him when they first met. He'd heard it before, probably, but at least it was safe to dwell on.

"Didn't think much of me, huh?" Tony mumbled, his eyes closed.

"Under the circumstances, can you blame me?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember doing that. I was very drunk, as you recall."

"Yes, I was quite aware. And yet you remembered me."

He opened his eyes to glance at her briefly. "How could I not? Red hair and a fiery personality to match."

"Only when you upset me," she said with a smile, then kissed him lightly. "Go to sleep. I'm right here."

"I'm not sure I want to," he said with a sigh, but closed his eyes obediently, breathing in the smell of her hair products and perfume. When sleep began to tug at him he debated whether to resist or give in.

With his thoughts firmly fixed on Pepper, he gave in.

The next nightmare was about Pepper and the situation with Killian and what if, what if, what if . . . She fell to her death, burned beyond recognition, and he was alone.

His heart clenched in his chest and he sat up with a gasp. Pepper, lovely Pepper, slept on, her breathing deep and even. He watched her in the dim half-light, put a hand against her ribcage to feel its movement, and slowly, slowly felt his own breathing slow.

When he was certain he could stand without passing out or his knees buckling, he left the bed and bedroom and went to pace in the living room. He was giving up for the night.

The hours dragged by slowly and if it were only up to him, he would have gone ahead and started the trip east. But, Pepper.
So he stayed and paced and sat and started re-reading parts of the Accords since he'd not bothered to look at it for a while and then paced again. At some point in the long slog of the predawn hours, he realized that he was at the four-week mark of his recovery; if his restrictions hadn't been extended, he would have been free and clear in another day. He may be abiding by them (for the most part), but he chafed at some of the boundaries, and he was so very tired of feeling useless and paranoid about his health. He needed a good, stiff drink.

As soon as Pepper was awake he took a shower, then made himself some very strong coffee while she showered and dressed. His stuff was ready as soon as he had finished getting dressed, all he was waiting on was Pepper. Well, and breakfast, technically, but he wasn't feeling breakfast.

When Pepper strode out of the bedroom, he stood from his perch on the couch and they awkwardly stood there for a moment, staring at one another. "Let's go somewhere for breakfast," Pepper suggested, seeming reluctant for him to leave.

Then she frowned and stepped forward to touch his face. He only just managed not to flinch at the sudden motion.

"Unless you don't want to be seen in public like this," she said softly, her fingertips smoothing over the bags beneath his eyes. "I don't have makeup for you anymore."

He sidestepped her hands and pulled a pair of sunglasses out of the suit jacket draped over the arm of the couch. "It will be fine," he said, slipping them on. "Let's go."

They took his stuff to the car, and Pepper directed him to a little local place, a pancake house where the waitress and cook greeted her like an old friend. They also knew her order; Tony didn't know what to get so Pepper suggested he share hers because she never finished it herself anyway. They talked in fits and starts while waiting for the food, neither sure what to say with his departure looming and other people nearby to overhear.

He didn't really taste the food that he ate mechanically, but he ate it anyway to keep Pepper happy. She was already looking unhappy and also tired and that meant her fuse was shorter than usual. It wouldn't do to make her mad right before he left.

He paid the bill, tipping the waitress generously, and escorted Pepper to the car, his hand on her lower back. He could almost feel people watching and taking pictures, but he ignored them to focus on Pepper. Let them take pictures; he didn't care.

Nothing was said in the car until they'd passed the gate and entered the Stark Industries complex. "Are you sure going back today is a good idea?" Pepper asked.

"Flying is easier than driving and I'm doing fine so far," Tony said flippantly. "Let me know when you arrive."

"Yes, dear," he said semi-sarcastically as he pulled the car up in front of the main doors and parked it. "Stay there, I'll get the door."

He rounded the car and opened her door with a gallant bow. "My lady," he said, offering his hand.

She laughed and took his hand but didn't let go right away. "Come here, you," she said fondly, and kissed him, her hands on his shoulders. "Behave," she said fiercely, still gripping his shoulders. "I don't ever want another of those phone calls from Rhodey that something happened to you."

His hands settled on her hips and tightened briefly. "I'll do my best," he said frankly.
"That's all I ask." She glanced toward the building and lowered her voice. "We have an audience."

"Of course we do. It's us. Shall we give them a show?"

Pepper smirked and let him kiss her thoroughly. As he did, he turned her slightly toward the nearest security camera; if they were going to be recorded, they might as well have a good angle. His body still wasn't reacting the way it should--damn medication--but he had a lot of practice at this and knew what Pepper liked. He also knew when to start pulling back lest he seem a tease, and as they parted he raised a middle finger to the security camera. It would give Happy a laugh.

Both of their phones began ringing simultaneously. Both were ignored. "You'll hear from me before the end of the day," Tony promised while Pepper stepped back and straightened her clothing.

"If I don't, you'll pay for it in some way later."

He nodded. She pulled out her phone as she went inside the building, where everyone who had been crowding the windows had mysteriously vanished.

He drove around to the hangar, his phone periodically ringing. "Friday, who is it?" he asked irritably when it didn't stop despite his lack of response.

"Four new messages have been left by Mel."

"I'll deal with her after we're in the air." The ringing mercifully stopped, though whether it was because Mel ceased calling or because Friday stopped letting the calls through he didn't know (and didn't care).

A young valet was waiting by the quinjet. Tony flipped him the keys as he rounded the car to retrieve his baggage from the trunk. "Make sure she gets a good workout more often, yeah? A run up and down the highway ought to do it."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Stark," the valet said eagerly.

Tony waved and strode into the quinjet, the hatch obediently closing behind him. There were no signs of anything amiss, but he had to be sure. He tapped his watch and didn't move until Friday's voice announced, "No unusual activity detected. No suspicious substances detected. No computer interference detected. No forbidden persons detected. Security scan results: all clear."

"Fire up the engines and let's get out of here," he said, dropping his bags onto a seat, then slipped off the suit jacket he'd put on for appearances and tossed it over them. The jet came to life around him as he made his way to the pilot's seat. "How's our flight plan look?"

Friday displayed an arcing line from Los Angeles to New York City overlaid with weather radar and commercial airline routes. He made a few adjustments then swept the map away.

Once the jet was in the air, he activated the stealth mode and the autopilot. "All right, let's see what Mel wants."

He'd been ignoring her calls for days. Specifically, she'd been trying to reach him since the night he arrived in California. He'd deleted her first several messages without listening to them, and now there were half a dozen more. He only listened to the last one. "Mr. Stark, Tony, please, I need to talk to you. I can't do my job properly if you don't talk to me and if you don't want me to do my job then I have to wonder why the hell you hired me in the first place."

She was frustrated with him, angry even, it was obvious in her tone and the clipped way she ended
the call. She didn't know him very well if she thought that would work on him. Then again, she'd been on the job since, what, Monday? And it was Friday now. She must have had one hell of a week.

He took pity on her and called her back.

"Oh, thank god you're not dead" was her greeting.

"I love you too," he joked. "Why would I be dead?"

"I've only called you like half a million times and gotten absolutely nothing in response. I need the skinny on these photos floating around."

"Which photos?"

She sighed. "The ones all over the internet and the tabloids, Mr. Stark. Where have you been, under a rock?"

"I've been visiting my girl," he said defensively. "I'm an adult. It's allowed."

"So these photos of people that look like you and Ms. Potts are actually of you and Ms. Potts?"

"Who else would they be?"

"There are guys who make a lot of money off the fact that they look like you. Nobody bothered to tell me what you were doing, just that you'd gone to California, so how am I to know this guy is really, actually you? I've met you a grand total of once."

"I think I like you when you're angry," he said. "Very blunt. To the point. They're good qualities."

She ignored him. He could hear her flipping a page in her notebook. "Tell me exactly where you've been over the past few days."

He recounted his activities, including the names of the places they ate, while she no doubt took notes in that peculiar style she had.

"There are new photos from this morning. Will there be any more that I should know about?"

"I don't think so, but there is footage from the cameras at SI this morning as well. If you'd like the video, just ask the head of security."

"Name and information?" she asked immediately.

He provided it.

"You do realize that you, as the owner of the company, making out with the CEO of your company in front of the company headquarters is highly inappropriate, right?"

"Since when have I ever been appropriate?"

She sighed more heavily this time. "It's a good thing people like you. Behavior like that can bring all sorts of investigations into inappropriate conduct for us normal folks."

"It's good to be rich," he said breezily. "Being a superhero doesn't hurt."

Mel snorted. "I don't know if I'd go that far. The superhero part can be as big a negative as it is a
positive. More scrutiny, for starters.”

He knew that better than almost anyone, but didn't feel like admitting it. "That's your problem, not mine."

"Believe me, I have become well aware of that. All right, I'm going to release a statement confirming that you were in Santa Monica to spend some time with Ms. Potts, but I need a reason for your departure that doesn't sound like you broke up. You didn't break up, right?"

"No," he said truthfully. "Say that I've returned to New York to prepare for the next round of U.N. meetings about the Accords."

"Is it true?"

"True enough."

"Good. Do you want to see the statement before it's released?"

"No, just run it by Pepper's PR people."

"Will do. And will you please let me know the next time you run off and do something that's going to end up all over the internet?"

"No promises."

"Thanks for nothing," she groused.

"My pleasure." She hung up and he smirked. It was far too easy to give her a hard time, though he didn't enjoy it the way he used to. He'd have to make it up to her somehow.

He sent Happy a heads up. You'll get a call from the new Avengers PR girl, Mel. Let her have the security footage of Pepper and me from this morning. I know you have it.

The response was almost immediate. Is she cute?

"Friday, what's Mel look like, again?" Friday showed him her headshot. Yeah, she's cute.

Nice.

Tony wandered from the pilot's seat to the coffee closet. Each of their jets had a coffee closet, which was really just a cupboard where they'd stashed the instant coffee, spoons, and the requisite assortment of packaged sweeteners and creamers in a neatly arranged drawer. He'd also hardwired a plastic electric kettle into the cupboard, and insulated mugs were stacked next to it and strapped to the wall so there were no casualties if the jet had to dive or roll. A larger drawer was full of bottled water to put into the kettle.

"Friday, show me the photos Mel was talking about." He absently started making a cup of coffee as he skimmed the images. It was the usual assortment of long-lensed paparazzi shots and cellphone pictures of varying quality, so no big deal.

When the coffee was ready he took it back to the pilot's seat and held it meditatively while watching the world seem to move around him. The world had moved on without him when he was in Afghanistan, moved on without him when he was absorbed, obsessed, with getting the B.A.R.F. system up and running . . . would move on without him if he decided to disappear like Bruce did.

Well, eventually. Pepper would be frantic and it was entirely possible that his disappearance would
derail the Accords edits. If that happened, Rogers was likely to take his people and go rogue again. This time all the world would be after them and either countless people would die trying to catch them or Rogers would have a crisis of conscience and turn himself in, which would be a disaster.

The thought of living as someone else somewhere else for a while, of vanishing into thin air, was tempting, but he wasn't about to muck up the Accords now. Also, Pepper. And that project he needed to finish in case T'Challa came to the subcommittee meeting.

"Friday, connect to the computer in my lab at the compound and display on the right screen."

He tweaked this and that and wrote comments about some of the sections until Friday reminded him it was nearly time to call Dr. Tanya. He stood up and stretched and went aft to do a couple of things, but was ready, fresh cup of coffee in hand, right on time. This punctual thing was becoming a habit.

"Hey, doc."

"Hello, Tony. Is it possible for us to talk over video? We have had some good conversations on the phone, but I would like to be able to see you as we chat."

That was, of course, quite possible; it was only a minute or so before they were exchanging greetings face to face. "How are you doing?" Doc T asked.

"I'm tired," he admitted.

"You look it. Nightmares again?"

He grimaced and told her about them and why he thought he'd had them. She asked what he'd thought of the questions she asked him to answer and what was bothering him the most. She also raised the issue of medication and whether he would be willing to try it for any of his concerns. He flatly declined, uninterested in (more) pills.

The conversation was good but long and Tony was so very tired. His coffee was long gone and with the video he couldn't just walk away to make more.

"When will you be back at the compound?" she asked eventually.

"End of the week? Whenever the U.N. meeting is done," he said.

"Where are you now?"

He peered out toward the ground and shrugged. "Flyover country somewhere." He could have pulled up a map, but that felt like too much effort.

"Where are you headed?"

"My tower in the city. I need some space before I go rub elbows with diplomats again."

To his surprise, she nodded rather than trying to convince him to return to the compound. "Call me if you need to talk, no matter what time it is."

Tony chuckled humorlessly. "What, are you worried about me, doc?"

"You're trying to cope with a lot of things and you have a history of self-destructive habits," she said carefully. "Letting you know that I am available if you need me is the least I can do."

"Yeah, well, most people don't bother," he said dismissively.
"I am not most people." She seemed amused.

"We're paying you to care."

If his remark stung, she didn't show it. "There are others here who care about you, no money needed."

"Technically they're all on my payroll," he objected, then sighed. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

He knew she was trying to draw him out and he wasn't going to go along with it, not this time. "No, it doesn't," he said flatly.

"There are people who worry about you, you know," she said gently.

"I find that hard to believe."

"There is more to life than what you can personally imagine."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I can imagine a lot of really shitty things."

"I don't only mean negative things. Why focus on those?"

"Because that's most noticeable," he said, and took a deep breath. He was tired, all he wanted was for the conversation to end, but she was striking a nerve and he couldn't not respond. "Does it matter that I built a self-sustaining tower? No, because a fucking alien used the power source to allow a space army to invade. So I need to anticipate, stay one step ahead, make it so we can respond better, faster, maybe even prevent the next disaster."

"How do the Avengers fit in?"

"The Avengers are a desperate bid to counteract or at least contain the devastation. They're an attempt at a shield between the world's population and whatever is coming next. In the meantime, they try to make the world a better place. A positive charge to neutralize negative ones, but I don't think the positive charge is as strong as Fury hoped it would be."

"Are the Accords positive or negative?"

He sighed wearily. "Depends on what happens next week. They could be positive, or they could be the worst thing that has happened to the Avengers. So far, they've only proven to be negative."

"You wouldn't have supported them if you didn't think they could be a good thing."

"I still think they could be. It's just--" his shoulders slumped and he looked away. "My math was wrong where Rogers was concerned. My math is never wrong, but it was. That's what I get for putting people in my calculations, I suppose. I thought he would support it, he didn't, and everything went to hell."

There was silence for several long moments. "What will you do when you get to New York?" Doc T asked gently.

Tony shrugged. "Have a scotch, maybe order a pizza. I don't know, nothing important, at least until tomorrow. I need to be ready for Monday and right now I'm not."

"Whenever I make it down to the city, I expect you to tell me which pizza place to visit."
"I could bring pizza back to the compound when the meeting's done."

"You could," she said agreeably. "But I haven't been to New York City yet. I need to see the sights."

He was scandalized and they ended the conversation by discussing a future field trip for her and any of the other Avengers who wanted to come, which got him wondering. Had Wanda been to the city yet? He had no idea. If she hadn't, he and Rogers were going to have words about the proper education of an Avenger.

He had the rough outline of a trip mapped out by the time the jet got close enough to the city that he needed to take over for the autopilot. Lodgings weren't a problem, seeing how they had an entire tower, and there were lots of food options, many of which would deliver (though that defeated the purpose of a sightseeing trip). There was no lack of things to do and places to go, so he listed a dozen of each and figured they'd hammer out the details later. Security might be a concern, but it always was. He could even give Happy a call, have him coordinate. That would please him.

Perhaps it could even be a celebratory trip after they straightened out the Accords.

No, that was wishful thinking, and thinking too far ahead. One step at a time, and for now that step was the upcoming meeting.

Chapter End Notes

The "questionnaire" is the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory, a psychological assessment that currently consists of 195 true/false questions (here's one overview). I don't mention actual questions because I don't have access to the current version. At least one sample report is available online, if you're curious what the results would look like. (Note: I am never going to pronounce a diagnosis (diagnoses?) for Tony in the fic for two reasons: 1) that's not the point of the story, and 2) I'm not qualified to make such an assessment.)
Toasted

Tony landed the jet easily, then spent a few minutes going through the post flight checklist while Friday scanned the tower and notified security of his arrival. "All clear, boss," she reported as he was getting out of the pilot's seat. He stood and stretched, messaged Pepper that he had arrived, then collected his bags and strolled into the building, his footsteps echoing in the spacious stillness.

He stopped by the bar to collect a bottle of scotch—he had never fully restocked the bar after the Ultron incident, but scotch was important enough that he always had some on hand—then left that floor in favor of his suite. Those rooms actually looked lived-in, unlike the (former) common areas, since he stayed there whenever he had business in New York. With the Accords and everything else, that had been fairly often.

The scotch he left on a table while he hung his clothes and changed. "Friday, order a pizza. The usual. Have it sent to R&D floor five."

"Delivery estimated in forty minutes, boss."

"On a Friday night? They're treating me well. Tip them another twenty percent on top of the usual if it arrives that quickly."

"Yes, boss."

He collected the bottle of scotch on his way back out the door. R&D floor five was where he'd developed the B.A.R.F. system and where he was still working on a few other brain-related things. Now that B.A.R.F. worked (headaches notwithstanding), it would theoretically be a simple matter to direct the same technology at a different area of the brain to, say, mentally control a device like his suit.

Theoretically. He was having some trouble converting the theory into practice. It was those squishy bits again; he wasn't good at the squishy bits. Someone better with the squishy bits would probably also be able to fix the headache problem. Maybe. But Bruce wasn't around, and there wasn't anyone else he trusted enough to allow free access to his tech, so he'd muddle through.

Not that he was planning to do a whole lot of muddling right then, not with the bottle of scotch as his company. Alcohol could be good for ideas, but it was rarely good for their execution.

Still, he could look and ponder from the stained futon while he sipped his drink.

The pizza arrived promptly and was delivered to him via the private elevator; the people at Ray's knew him and his habits well enough not to balk at leaving a pizza in an elevator while a computer told them the payment and tip had been sent. He was working on his third scotch by then. It was efficient, to use the same ice cubes for multiple glasses of alcohol. Oh had he missed his lovely, lovely scotch. Scotch and pizza was an ideal combination just then—he really had been hungry.

He ate two slices of pizza and considered a third but refilled his drink instead. How many was that? He'd lost count.

He alternated between contemplating the liquid in his glass and the various holographic projections he'd started while waiting for the pizza and then left dangling about the room. A thought teased at the edges of his mind. It had been nagging at him for as long as he'd been there and he finally decided, fuck it, he might as well give it a try. He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp, then stood--more steadily than he'd expected with how much scotch he'd had on an empty stomach--and said, "Friday,
turn on the emitters and prep the program for new input."

The glasses were locked in a box inside a drawer that also locked. His fingerprint opened the drawer, but the box just needed a small key. He hadn't used the system since that demonstration at MIT, and hadn't tried it on anything new for some time before that. The demo memory had been chosen because it was the most complete visually and he'd needed something stable and relatable for the presentation.

Now he was going to see how well it worked on a comparatively recent, somewhat jumbled memory. He put the glasses on, stepped over to the corner where everything was set up, and had Friday dim the lights.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on the scene he remembered right before that video had played. This might work, if he could focus hard enough on changing a detail; he decided to try running it as if he'd already known about his parents.

If he'd already known . . . hell, if he'd already known, maybe he would've tried to go after Bucky earlier. But no, he didn't want to start revising that far back. Assuming they made it to that room in the same way, his reaction to the images would be the primary difference. It would not have been a shock, though seeing it happen would still be . . . disturbing. Devastating, even.

When he opened his eyes, he felt his heart beat a little bit faster upon seeing the place that had been haunting his memories. He pushed that thought away and stepped into the holographic field to check the character positioning. It was a little strange, to see his recent self from the outside like this. "Friday, update character projection based on available data from the suit recording."

"Render complete." A few scuffs appeared on the armor and the Steve projection shifted angle slightly.

He stepped out of the scene and concentrated on transposing his current feelings into his past self. "Start," he said, and the figures began to move, migrating toward the screen with the video.

Tony stood where he could also see the screen, and that proved to be his downfall. Despite knowing what happened, despite having run through it in his mind dozens of times, watching it here and now was like a punch to the throat. He never should have taken the tape from the bunker, much less digitized it.

He lost control of the simulation.

Instead of the alternate events he'd hoped to see, the characters recreated what had happened as his mind and his suit remembered it.

What he saw was dreamlike, in a way, an odd amalgamation of his perspective and how it might have looked to an observer, the changes in background and location vague and sometimes nonsensical.

Perhaps nightmarish was the better word.

He felt each blow anew, panic welling up and overwhelming any thought of stopping, of leaving, even of simply shutting his eyes.

He could not speak to tell the system to stop.

He could do nothing but watch, frozen, as the worst memory of his life played out before him in lifelike holograms.
When the shield shattered the arc reactor he finally reacted, tearing the glasses from his face and fleeing the room.

It was too much. He couldn't take it, not like that, not with the nightmares and the lack of sleep and everything else, not with how much alcohol was in his bloodstream after a long drought.

So he ran.

Out the door, up the stairs, desperate to get away. He ran up to the roof where the difference in texture beneath his bare feet caused him to stumble and fall. He landed on hands and knees with a jarring impact and his churning stomach rejected what it contained.

His heart was pounding, his head was pounding, he could hardly breathe. When his arms began to tremble, he let himself fall to one side rather than collapse into what remained of the pizza and scotch.

He had no idea how long he stayed there, a miserable huddle on the roof of the tower. When he had calmed down enough to be aware of his surroundings, he was grateful that it was night and no one could see him.

Eventually he forced himself to move. He trod slowly, mechanically, back down the stairs, aware that he could take the elevator but not wanting to stop moving lest he be unable to start again.

"Friday, is the system still running?" There was no way he was going back into that room if he had to see the holograms, especially at the point he'd left them.

"No, boss."

"Why did it run as long as it did? I know I programmed a failsafe."

"Yes, boss, there is a subroutine for termination in the event of severe subject distress. However, the parameters for what constitutes severe distress were never specified."

He stopped in the doorway and sighed. Of course it was his fault. Wasn't it always?

When the glasses were safely returned to their locked case in the locked drawer, he collected the box of pizza and the bottle of scotch and returned to his suite. He felt entirely too sober for this nonsense and he planned to fix that.

Slouched on his couch like a slob, he took his time enjoying the rest of the scotch while staring listlessly out the window at the glittering city.

He considered having another piece of pizza since his earlier meal was currently congealing on the roof but decided the scotch was enough. That, and the pizza was on a table by the door where he’d dropped it as he'd come in, and getting up and going over there was too much effort and he would probably be unsteady on his feet anyway.

His thoughts felt like syrup oozing through his brain. It was hard to think and even harder to feel anything other than the comfortable buzz of the liquor sloshing in his veins.

"Boss?" Friday sounded hesitant.

"Yeah?" At least, that was what he intended to say; what actually came out was far less intelligible.

"The bottle has been empty for fifteen minutes." Was he imagining things, or was there a hint of
reproach in her voice?

And when did he start drinking straight from the bottle? He peered at it and it was indeed empty, so he leaned forward to set it on the floor and nearly pitched himself off the couch head-first. He dropped the bottle, then slumped onto his side, the leather of the cushions feeling blessedly cool.

He either fell asleep or passed out at some point after that and didn't wake until the sun coming in the uncovered windows was shining right in his face. He winced, aware of the hammering headache just after the blinding sunlight, and tried to roll onto his back so he could throw an arm over his eyes. The leather that had felt so nice hours before was now stuck to his sweaty skin. Moving his head and feeling his skin slowly peel away from the leather was an unpleasant tactile experience on top of the other misery.

"Boss?"

He grunted in response. Words weren't something he could find through the pulsing cloud that was his headache.

"You need to take your medication."

He groaned at the thought of moving and didn't move.

A few minutes later, Friday tried again, with the same response.

She was nothing if not persistent and after the same conversation had repeated itself at least six times, Tony finally realized that she wasn't going to stop pestering him until he'd taken the damn pill.

He took a deep breath and started rolling himself toward the edge of the couch. It came far earlier than he was expecting and he rolled right off but managed to awkwardly catch himself on hands and knees. He'd intended to try standing but crawling seemed more doable, so he slowly crept forward across the carpet.

"The bottle is in the bag just inside the closet, boss," Friday informed him helpfully.

He made it there eventually, though he almost turned the wrong way after rounding the couch. The bottle was near the top of the bag and he dry swallowed his dose for the day, as that was easier than trying to crawl to the bathroom for water with the pill in hand.

He considered simply sprawling in the closet for a while--it was certainly large enough--but he really, really needed to do something about the headache and the pain relievers were in the bathroom. Plus, water might help and water was also in the bathroom.

So he embarked on the laborious journey from closet to bathroom, then had to pull himself onto his feet using the toilet and the sink. He didn't bother looking into the mirror before pulling it open to find something, anything, that might tame the throbbing. Whatever it was he found first, he took three, then gulped an entire glass of water.

There was a moment when he wasn't sure if the water would stay put or not. It stayed, so he refilled the glass and took his time in draining it again.

Surprisingly, he was still on his feet after that, so he decided a long soak in the tub sounded like a good idea. He even managed to get his clothes off without falling and breaking something.

The warm jets of water went a long way toward relaxing everything that was tense and whatever he'd taken also started kicking in, which made him less than inclined to budge from his spot anytime
soon. Not that he had anywhere to be. The headache was definitely still present, but the dull roar was an improvement over what it had been.

"Boss, Colonel Rhodes is calling," Friday said, pulling him out of a doze.

"Put him through," he replied languidly.

"Tony?" Rhodey's voice asked a second later.

"Yeah, it's me." He knew he should probably say something else, but he hadn't found any more words before Rhodey spoke again.

"You all right? You sound a little off."

"Headache," he said lamely.

"Sorry, I won't keep you long. It's just that we're wondering, what happened to the toaster?"

"What toaster?"

"The toaster. We used to have one, but we can't find it. Any idea where it went?"

"I don't know anything about a fucking toaster," he replied irritably. As soon as he said it, his watch chimed from the ledge beside the tub and Friday played a bit of security footage that showed him dismantling a toaster two weekends earlier.

"Take it easy, it was just a question. We'll buy a new one."

"Then why the hell are you asking me about it?"

"Because finding the old one would be faster," Rhodey said patiently. "Everything okay with you and Pepper? You're not normally this uptight even when you have a headache."

"We're fine," he replied shortly.

"Right," Rhodey didn't sound convinced. "Will you be back at the compound before Monday, or should we meet you in New York City?"

"Meet me in New York City. If you want to stay over Sunday night, I'll be here."

There was a moment of silence. "'Here'?" Rhodey asked finally. "Where are you right now, Tony?"

Shit. He shouldn't have answered the phone, not when thinking felt like slogging through waist-deep sand. He knew something about slogging through sand. "In the bathtub," he answered evasively.

"In what state?"

Damn him, Rhodey knew to be more specific than just asking 'where?' like most people. "New York," he admitted.

"Why not come to the compound?"

"To have some time to get my shit together before Monday."

"Do me a favor and don't do anything stupid."

"Too late."
Another pause. "That would explain the headache."

"Yep."

"Have Friday let me know if you need us there sooner than tomorrow."

"I won't."

"See you tomorrow."

"Bye." The call disconnected and he focused a glare on his watch. "Did you tell him about the toaster?"

"No, boss."

He grumbled under his breath about meddling programs as he drained the tub and stood up, the water swirling around him as it sank.

Wrapping himself in a towel, he padded over to the pizza box; his stomach had started growling and he thought he'd take advantage of the lull in the headache to eat something while he wouldn't want to throw it up again.

Three pieces later, he was questioning his life choices—or at least the choice to have that third piece. He sank back onto the sofa and dozed for a while. During a moment of semi-consciousness, he remembered he really ought to start reviewing the Accords again, but his brain responded to that thought with a stab of pain. Never mind, then.

Eventually he persuaded himself to move off the couch. He exchanged his towel for sweats, drank more water and popped a few more pills, then stretched out on his bed and closed his eyes again. Just that small amount of movement had made him dizzy and the headache continued to throb. It was the worst headache he'd had in awhile, perhaps even since his pre-Iron Man days. No, on second thought, the palladium caused some pretty epic headaches. Whatever. It was bad.

He fell asleep again and woke up with his heart fluttering in his chest even though he couldn't remember having a nightmare. "Friday?" he murmured.

Fortunately, she knew what he wanted without any elaboration. "Temperature and heart rate are slightly elevated, consistent with past episodes. All other readings are within normal ranges, boss."

It was typical for one of his hangovers, then. It had been long enough since he'd had one that he didn't remember.

He paid a visit to the bathroom then went back to bed. The rest of the day passed in similar fashion, then passed into night without him noticing.

When he woke the next morning the headache was finally nearly gone and he felt almost rested. Almost, but not quite. And the thought of facing other people, even though one of those people was Rhodey, had his stomach knotting in dread. Reliving Siberia had him feeling fragile, brittle. He was fairly confident that he could keep Rogers at bay with his polished facade. Rhodey knew him better and might be able to put a finger on his cracks.

Any pressure on his cracks was likely to make him shatter, like a badly damaged suit with no one inside.

Better not to think about it. Better to keep himself moving, keep himself busy, and maybe the focus
on the mundane would reinforce his mask before the others arrived.

He got up, took his meds, showered, shaved, and, pizza box in hand, went down to his lab on the Avenger floors to brush up on all things Accords-related and check his email for the first time in days. He'd need the bigger screens to do that properly.

He occupied himself for several hours this way, then switched his attention to wrapping up the loose ends on that project for T'Challa. He munched on a piece of pizza while Friday connected to his workshop computer at the compound and brought up the schematics. It was nearly finished, though he could think of half a dozen things he could've done better if his mind had been more in the game, but these wouldn't be the final specs so it wasn't the end of the world.

When he was finished, he had Friday wipe the drive T'Challa had given him, encrypt it again, then save the files. He sent Rhodey a message asking him to grab the drive from the workshop and bring it with him, then returned to meditating on the Accords.

His prolonged time away from the document that had formerly been occupying his every thought and waking moment had been beneficial: now that he read it with fresher eyes, he could appreciate all of the things they had done well and notice more immediately the parts that still needed work. The definitions topped that list, but they'd known that already.

Friday alerted him when the chopper landed, so he met Rhodey and Steve at the door to the main room. "Welcome back," he said casually.

"Good to see you, Tony," Steve said and seemed to mean it.

Rhodey looked him up and down, then nodded in apparent satisfaction as he pushed his wheelchair toward the elevator. "I think the time away did you good, despite yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Steve asked.

"I had a migraine," Tony said quickly, shooting a glance at Rhodey.

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Yeah, thanks. Look, I'll be in the lab whenever you're done stashing your stuff."

"Sure thing, Tony," Rhodey said as he followed Rogers into the elevator.

Tony stared at the doors for a minute after they closed, then went back to the lab as he'd promised.

Rhodey was the first to join him, now sitting in the wheelchair he'd been pushing earlier.

"The chopper doesn't have a ramp," Tony said abruptly.

"It sure doesn't," Rhodey agreed. "But I'm getting pretty good at slinging this thing around, and having Rogers hovering, anxious to help, doesn't hurt."

"I'll have to fix that."

"That might be nice. Here's the drive you asked for."

"Thanks," Tony said absently, slipping it into a secure drawer.

"What is it?"
"A project for T'Challa."

"You're still angling to have him give you some vibranium?"

"Wouldn't you?" That hadn't actually crossed his mind in relation to this project, but if the Wakandan King decided to show his appreciation, Tony sure as hell wasn't going to say no.

"Will he be here this week?"

"He said he might."

"How do we look for tomorrow?"

"That depends on what they think," he said, shrugging.

"The chairwoman likes the revisions overall," Steve spoke up as the door closed behind him. "But she has a few reservations. I talked to her while you were away."

"That sounds about right," Rhodey said.

Tony displayed his list of things that needed work as a giant hologram. "If we're doing well, then all of her quibbles are already on this list. If not, then we may be in trouble."

Steve carefully read the list, then nodded in affirmation. They started talking about the list, but Tony stopped them long enough to decide what to have for dinner (with his suggestion being "anything other than pizza").

Once shawarma was ordered, they began compiling predictions of what the committee members would suggest for each of the points of debate. Which is to say, Tony tried to predict the objections, since neither Steve nor Rhodey had met anyone other than the chairwoman yet, and they tried to come up with responses. The three also talked about the likelihood that the attendees would break into smaller groups to discuss certain points (especially, again, the definitions), and how they would split up if that happened.

This continued while they ate and well afterward, until Rhodey suggested they make it an early night. There were no objections.

Steve took the stairs to his quarters, but Tony rode the elevator with Rhodey. "Nervous?" Rhodey asked sympathetically.

"Some, yeah. It has the potential to go so very wrong."

"Worse than it has already?" Rhodey asked doubtfully.

"Far worse," he said without hesitation. "If the revisions don't work, we're all better off becoming fugitives."

"I can see that for Rogers and his group, but for us? Really?"

"Do you want to be the one forced to capture or kill Captain America?" Tony asked pointedly as the elevator doors opened. "I can promise you, that won't end well for anyone involved."

"Assuming Wanda even lets you try," Rhodey said, rolling into the hallway. "I see your point. Are you still planning on buying us an island?"

Tony laughed. "The trouble is finding one for sale. At this rate, it might be faster to build one."
"Like the Raft? That won't go over well."

"It wouldn't be submersible for lots of reasons, starting with the enormous green rage monster."

Rhodey chuckled and shook his head. "Now there's a scary thought." The automatic door to his suite slid open without a sound, but he hesitated before going in. "You're sure you and Pepper are okay?"

"Is there something you're trying to tell me?" Tony joked, but Rhodey didn't even smile. "No, I promise, we're good."

"All right. You just really seemed off yesterday."

"That was the headache. Scout's honor."

Rhodey continued studying him, but eventually nodded. "You know I'm always happy to listen."

"So you keep telling me," Tony said with mock exasperation. "Now look, are you going inside or what? Do you want me to tuck you in?"

"That won't be necessary," Rhodey said archly, rolling through the doorway. "Don't let the bedbugs bite," he called over his shoulder.

"As if I'd allow bedbugs in my tower," Tony replied with feigned horror.

"Knowing you, they'd be tiny bots."

"Don't give me any ideas."
Negotiation

Tony took the stairs up to his suite, the joke about bedbug-bots quickly lost as his mind whirled with snippets of conversation, things he needed to remember, things he needed to do, things he should do . . . You could have saved us. Why didn't you do more?

He shook his head violently, trying to chase away the image of dead teammates with something less troublesome. Like Pepper. Pepper was a safe mental place. Except for the falling-to-what-he-thought-was-her-death part. But she survived, he just saw her a few days ago.

I love you. The message was short and to the point, and he dearly needed her to respond somehow.

His phone rang a moment later. "Hey Pep," he said, sinking heavily onto the couch.

"Tony, what have you done now?" She sounded amused.

"Done? Why do you think I've done anything?" He bristled at the insinuation.

"I don't know, because that's usually when you say endearing things out of the blue? You're like a child trying to make nice before 'fessing up to something."

"There's nothing to 'fess up about. I just wanted to make sure you haven't forgotten me," he said with a mock pout.

Pepper laughed. "As if I could." A pause. "Are you keeping yourself out of trouble?"

"Mostly."

"You're worried about the meeting."

"Yeah," he said with a sigh. "I need an exit strategy if this doesn't work out."

"Not right now, you don't," she said firmly. "Even if everything blows up tomorrow, you'll have time to come up with something. I know you well enough to know that. So right now you're going to tell me what I should wear tomorrow and then you're going to go to bed."

"What you're going to wear? I don't have a useful opinion on that."

"You will," she said confidently.

By the time the call ended, Pepper had manipulated him into helping her pick a dress for the next day, ordered him through getting himself ready for bed, and insisted that he be physically in bed before she would say goodbye.

The distraction worked. He fell asleep before his mind could circle back around to the anxious fretting. His sleep, however, was not immune and he woke several times throughout the night, troubled by dreams that usually dissipated as soon as he opened his eyes. The image of dead Avengers atop a heap of Stark weapons was striking enough to be memorable.

He was mostly awake before his alarm went off and he wasn't entirely happy about it. A shower helped banish some of the drowsiness and he paid special attention to shaving and dressing. This would be his first excursion on official business since the heart episode that had benched him. The three-piece suit he donned felt more like a costume than his clothes, but he looked damn good.
Rhodey was in the kitchen making breakfast, an apron tied over his uniform to protect it from splatters, when Tony made his morning beeline for the coffee. Steve, dressed in a well-tailored suit of his own, joined them before the coffee finished brewing.

There was little conversation over breakfast until Steve commented, "I don't understand why we have to fly or drive when it's close enough to walk there."

"The usual answer to that is 'security', but in this case I'll also speak on Rhodey's behalf that he's not going to want to walk back at the end of the day," Tony said.

"Also, I don't walk fast, especially compared to you," Rhodey added.

"So we call the chopper at the end of the day. It can fly itself," Steve said.

"Yes, it can. But do you really think it's a good idea to stroll through downtown Manhattan during morning rush hour? We'd cause the worst traffic jam known to man."

"And Mel would freak out," Rhodey put in. "Tony has already stressed her out enough for this month."

"Not my fault," Tony said immediately.

With that logic Steve relented, though he made a comment as they climbed out of the chopper about how short of a trip it had been.

Over the course of the morning, Tony had a number of people come up to him to say in multiple languages how good it was to see him after the news of his illness and he began to think his attendance wasn't the best idea after all. The focus needed to be on the proposed revision, not on whether he was at death's door or not—which, of course, he wasn't.

Fortunately, enough of the committee members had opinions to voice, both good and bad, about the revision that they got down to business fairly quickly. Which isn't to say that they completed any business quickly. More's the pity.

By the end of the day Tony was exhausted, mostly from all the forced politeness and the way the committee members had of tiptoeing around the issues rather than just stating them outright. He'd somehow forgotten about that part. It made him want to stand up in the middle of a discussion and swear a blue streak just to startle them.

He took little comfort in having predicted every point of contention. It helped that he'd been dealing with these people for months.

Also as predicted, the second day was spent entirely in smaller groups to debate and attempt to resolve those larger issues. Steve and Rhodey both stayed with the group trying to better define what made someone 'enhanced.' Tony went back and forth between the others; honestly, most of the time he couldn't remember exactly what they were debating about, but it didn't matter because they did just fine without his input.

The third day was spent rehearsing what was discussed the second day and Tony tried really hard not to look utterly bored, but he wasn't sure he succeeded. Every so often he and Rhodey would exchange an exasperated look or text each other under the table for amusement while Steve sat there appearing enthralled and put them both to shame.

To be fair, the definition of what made an 'enhanced individual' enhanced was better than when it started, but Tony could still think of exceptions and problems so the work would have to continue. It
was a challenging line to draw in ways that would keep everyone happy.

The fourth day they had to finish discussing what the groups had discussed on the second day, then discuss anything else that someone wanted to discuss that hadn't yet been discussed (and was there ever going to be an end to the discussion madness?). It seemed to take forever just to get to the lunch break.

The line for the buffet moved relatively quickly, then the hunt for a table began. They were scanning the room when a man stood up from an otherwise unoccupied table and raised his hand to get their attention.

"My friends," T'Challa said. "Please, join me."

"Your highness," Steve acknowledged with a nod as they moved toward T'Challa's table.

Tony slid into a chair next to T'Challa. "Will you be joining the misery this afternoon?"

"I was invited by the chairwoman to sit in on the meeting," he affirmed.

"Do you have time to join us for drinks after? I'd like to hear what you think in a place that isn't here."

"Yes. My business in the city does not resume until tomorrow morning."

Steve, seated on T'Challa's other side, asked what brought him to New York. Tony listened to the response with only half an ear, instead watching Rhodey gingerly ease himself into his chair and shift uncomfortably once seated. He leaned toward him slightly and asked in a low voice, "Are you all right?"

"Been sitting too long in the braces. It starts to hurt after a while and we're long past a while," Rhodey said.

"Would meds help?"

Rhodey shrugged. "I'm out. I took some yesterday and forgot to refill last night."

He patted his pockets to find and pull out a battered-looking tin, then passed it over. "Try this."

"Breath mints?" Rhodey asked doubtfully.

Tony scoffed. "Open it."

The inside of the tin was lined with something soft to reduce the rattling noises, and the assorted capsules inside were most certainly not mints. "Why are you carrying this around?"

"I first put it together before I went to MIT to demonstrate B.A.R.F. I knew it could cause headaches and didn't want to be unprepared."

"Do I even want to know why you have vicodin mixed in?" Rhodey asked as he picked two other tablets out and slid the tin back to Tony.

"Hey, they were a legit prescription. From a real doctor and everything," Tony protested, tucking the tin back into his pocket.

"After Siberia?"
"Yeah."

Rhodey poked at his food after that, while Tony ate some and listened in on the conversation between Steve and T'Challa. It wasn't anything interesting enough to continue eavesdropping, so he pulled out his phone and sent a message to Pepper.

All too soon it was time to return to the meeting, and the afternoon passed painfully slowly in Tony's opinion. At least Rhodey seemed less uncomfortable, which was a relief.

It was lovely how many things could be accomplished while paying half attention to what was going on around him. When he went to these meetings alone, he didn't dare let himself get distracted lest he miss something important, but with Steve and Rhodey and even T'Challa there, he could let down his guard a little bit and surreptitiously clean up his inbox. He even managed to find the email about fumigating the penthouse for bedbugs.

The end result of the day and the meeting as a whole was a fairly warm reception--by diplomatic standards--of the Avenger-authored document. Smaller groups of people were appointed to draft alternate language for a few passages, which would be distributed to the rest of the committee prior to their next meeting. But overall, they were a hell of a lot closer to having the thing in workable shape by the time the chairwoman announced they were dismissed.

As they stood, Rhodey turned to Tony. "Is it just me, or did that go really well?"

"It went suspiciously well," Tony replied. "It almost seems possible to have this giant waste of paper wrapped up and tied with a bow before the year is out."

"Unbelievable."

"But after that the real work begins: getting people and nations to officially sign on. You know the U.S. government isn't likely to ratify it no matter who ends up elected as President."

"So that's when we move to our island?"

"Or maybe Wakanda," Tony said, nodding as T'Challa approached the three of them. As an observer, he'd had to sit in a different part of the room.

"My people would welcome you as guests, for a while," T'Challa said.

"So don't outstay our welcome, is that what you're saying?" Tony asked wryly.

"We are still accustomed to our privacy," T'Challa said simply. "Your presence would draw much attention, and some would find it unwelcome."

"I often find it unwelcome," Tony said.

"Isn't that why we have stealth tech on the quinjets? So we can come and go without attracting notice?" Rhodey asked as they slowly moved toward the door.

While they left the building and returned to the tower, they debated whether it would be possible for the entire team to stay in Wakanda without anyone--and especially the media--realizing where they had gone, including how long it might take before the buzz within Wakanda about their presence filtered out to the rest of the world. Steve was nearly as confident as T'Challa that the Wakandans would be circumspect about their presence (and if Tony hadn't suspected earlier that Steve and company had spent time in Wakanda, that would have been a major clue), so the issue became whether the team could make it seem like they hadn't just up and 'disappeared.'
As soon as they were at the tower, Rhodey excused himself. He returned in the wheelchair.

"Feel better?" Tony asked.

"Hell yes. If I'm going to sit on my ass I might as well be comfortable doing it."

Tony made his way to the bar to make a round of drinks and the conversation looped back around to the Accords. T'Challa agreed that the progress was remarkable, especially with the tension that had permeated the previous meeting. Tony remembered it well; they had been on the verge of taking up a vote to suspend the revisions as a result of heated disagreements. The strain of persuading the several discontent parties that the edits were essential quite likely played a role in his heart episode the day that meeting ended.

"But the largest question remains unanswered," T'Challa said, looking to Steve. "Are the changes sufficient that you would be willing and able to sign?"

Steve hesitated.

"You'd better say yes, Rogers, or everything we've done, all the time we've spent on this, will have been worse than useless," Tony said heatedly, the liquor in his glass sloshing as he gestured emphatically.

"Tony," Rhodey said warningly.

"I . . . I think so," Steve said slowly. "My biggest objections have mostly been fixed. I just need to see the full thing as it will be approved before I can say yes or no for certain. I have to know exactly what I'm agreeing to."

"That's reasonable," Rhodey said.

"What, like you read the fine print before taking Erskine's formula?" Tony asked accusingly.

"That's not the same. There was no fine print because no one knew quite what it would do," Steve replied.

"You do realize that what they're debating you helped write, right? You and I ought to know what it says better than anyone."

"I think we do. But they're going to make changes and I'm not going to sign a blank check."

"Right," Tony said, sounding doubtful. He drained his glass and set it down on the table a little harder than was necessary.

"I should leave," T'Challa said. "You have something for me?"

"I sure do, just give me one sec." Tony was grateful for the excuse to leave the room briefly before he said or did something that he would regret. It didn't take long to go up and grab the drive from his lab. He handed it to T'Challa without fanfare and said only, "My notes and everything are there."

"Thank you for your assistance," T'Challa said.

"Any chance I could score a little bit of vibranium for my trouble?" Tony asked hopefully.

T'Challa smiled slightly. "That is not within my power to grant."

"It never hurts to ask," Tony said, shaking his hand in farewell.
Rhodey and Steve also bade him goodbye, and T'Challa left without another word. Tony clapped his hands together as he turned to the others. "Do we want to head back to the compound, or chill here until tomorrow morning?"

"I wouldn't mind staying put for the rest of the night," Rhodey said without hesitation.

"I told Natasha and Clint we wouldn't be back until morning," Steve said.

"Then it's settled: sleepover at the tower. Shall we make it a movie night?"

That suggestion wasn't met with a whole lot of enthusiasm, so they talked about what to have for dinner instead. Steve didn't want to order something yet again but there wasn't any more fresh food to speak of in the kitchen, so cooking would require shopping and none of them really wanted to venture out to do it.

Tony shrugged, grabbed a packet of pop tarts, and retreated to his lab. He pulled up the schematics for the chopper and began figuring out how to integrate a ramp for Rhodey without adding too much weight. He decided it could work if the ramp and its mechanics weighed no more than the Iron Man suit and its assembly so they'd balance each other out.

It was a fun problem to work out, a puzzle that was solvable with a little time and ingenuity. In the end, it was easier to add the ramp than it had been to integrate his suit into the chopper. He'd just have to wait to make the modifications until they were back at the compound, since the equipment at the tower wasn't intended for use on the helicopter.

He had Friday fabricate the custom parts and he would have to remember to load them on the quinjet or the chopper before they left in the morning. That finished, he wandered back down to the common area to grab a drink. He wasn't technically supposed to be consuming alcohol yet but he'd earned this.

Neither Rhodey nor Steve were anywhere in sight, so he asked Friday for their whereabouts while he poured his scotch. "Colonel Rhodes and Captain Rogers are in their assigned bedrooms."

"Is Rhodey asleep?"

"Yes, boss."

Tony nodded in satisfaction and sat on one of the couches while he drank his beverage and called Pepper. She didn't answer so he left a brief message, then hung up and stared meditatively out the windows at the city lights.

"Friday, when will the ramp parts be complete?"

"Completion estimated for twelve thirty-five a.m."

"How long would it take to produce the Iron Man armor as most recently altered?"

"Estimated production time is six hours."

"So both would be finished by eight?"

"Yes, boss."

He drained his glass then rose from the couch, returned his glass to the bar, and went back to the lab. After a brief look at the Iron Man schematics he hesitated, rocking back on his heels and jamming his
hands into his pockets restlessly, then said decisively, "Friday, commence armor production when the ramp is complete. Load the armor into the chopper in the storage configuration."

"Yes, boss."

Tony took a deep breath and left the lab, the lights turning themselves off in his wake. He took the stairs to his floor in an attempt to burn off some of the nervous energy now coursing through his body. He paced in his bedroom for a little while before turning in and hoping the night would pass smoothly.

His dreams were strange rather than nightmarish. He most vividly remembered a scene of trying to float in unpowered armor while struggling to grasp the manual releases before the armor filled with water and took him down with it. Despite the threat to life and limb implied in the scenario, he wasn't afraid, merely frustrated.

He rose to consciousness slowly even as the armor was presumably sinking--the dream itself did not include that detail, but it was the logical conclusion given the last fragments he remembered--and took a few moments to assure himself of his safety and the lack of water nearby before he began to stir. Based on the fact that the sun was already up, he knew Steve was likely out for his morning run, if not already returning. Rhodey was probably in the bath, both for cleanliness and to soak the knots out of his back.

Tony got up and took a leisurely shower, then dressed and considered what he might do once his recovery time had officially ended. He had a week remaining, seven more days until sweet, sweet freedom.

But how much would that freedom actually change when it came to the day-to-day stuff? Other than his coffee consumption, of course. He was going to have a coffee mug in his hand at all times for the first few days, just because he could.

There was no way the team--and yes, they were most certainly a team when they were ganging up on him--would let him go back to managing things without their help. Not that he wanted that, exactly. But did he have a place in any of it anymore, now that they had been taking care of everything without his assistance?

Had this whole situation proved he was superfluous to the Avengers? Sure, there was the Accords stuff, but eventually that would be resolved (perhaps sooner rather than later, if the week's meeting was any indication) and then what? Rhodey was back in his suit, had already proven himself capable of participating in missions so while Tony was better at the tech stuff whether in his suit or out of it, Iron Man wasn't strictly necessary for air support. That was why he'd suggested Rhodey for the Avengers in his place after Ultron originally.

Perhaps he really should rebuild in Malibu, take a more active role in the company (his company), try once more to be the man Pepper deserved, and let this avenging thing finally die once his backup plans proved unneeded.

Part of him resisted the idea even as the thought crossed his mind. Sure, there were things he could do, could make, could offer to the world as Tony Stark rather than Iron Man. That monitoring/scanning system, for instance, if he managed to figure out why it wasn't doing what he wanted it to do. Other medical-type things would surely arise from his work with Rhody's braces and, maybe, from harnessing Extremis. (That would depend on the final definition of what made someone 'enhanced' according to the U.N.)

And yet . . . he liked the idea of being a hero, of Iron Man proving to the world that he was more
than just a genius-billionaire-playboy-philanthropist.

But was he?

Despite previous protestations to the contrary, he wasn't sure.

His phone rang and he answered it absently.

"I'm sorry I didn't call back last night," Pepper said. "My meeting ran ridiculously long."

Their conversation was light and brief. She was on her way to one of her early morning workouts, so she couldn't talk long. He felt oddly disconnected, even disjointed, while they talked, but she didn't pick up on his distraction.

As soon as he hung up, Friday said, "Colonel Rhodes would like to know when Sleeping Beauty is going to make an appearance."

Tony snorted and gathered his bags. "Tell him Sleeping Beauty was waiting in vain for a prince."

He went to the production area first to collect the ramp pieces on a flatbed cart. He should have had Friday use the armor to carry the pieces up to the chopper. How stupid of him not to think of that.

When he emerged from the elevator pushing the cart, Rhodes was in his wheelchair by the couches and Steve was sitting on an armchair, looking awkward. "Rogers, may I use you for your body?"

Tony asked.

Steve and Rhodes both looked at him strangely.

Tony pointed at the metal pieces on the cart. "If you load these into the helicopter while I stash my shit, we'll be out of here faster."

"Oh, good, you're just taking advantage of people again. For a moment you had me worried," Rhodes said, rolling in Tony's direction.

Steve took a deep breath and stood. "Does it matter how they're loaded?"

"Keep the weight on the port side or it won't be balanced." Tony took his two bags off the cart and let Steve wheel it toward the landing area.

"What is it?" Rhodes asked as they both followed in Steve's wake.

"Ramp for the chopper. You'll have to duck through the doorway, I think, but we can figure out the internal logistics later."

"You old softie."

"Pretty sure you're the old softie here," Tony said, accessing the panel to let down the hatch of the quinjet. "Unless we want to call Rogers that. He's technically the oldest."

"Technically, yeah, but we'll both be old and soft well before him," Rhodes replied, steering himself up the jet's ramp. "I thought you were on a break from working?"

"That wasn't work, it was play. Besides, I like to feel useful, and there hasn't been much of that lately."

Tony waited until Rhodes was in the jet and backing against a wall before taking his own stuff and
the small pile of Rhodey's stuff—which he identified based on the case that housed the braces when not in use—onto the jet. He had Friday start the preflight checks on both aircraft before he went back for Steve's baggage, neatly piled next to the wall.

Steve passed the open hatch with the cart. "Did you want someone in the chopper with those parts?"

"No, it will fly itself back. You can leave the cart by the doors there."

Steve nodded and was on the jet a moment later.

"Friday, is the chopper good to go?" Tony asked, settling into the pilot's seat as the hatch closed.

"Yes, boss."

"Take 'er home."

The helicopter's departure cleared the way for the quinjet to take off. Tony flipped a few switches, then called back, "Everyone buckled in?"

"We're good," Rhodey said.

Tony took off a little faster than was absolutely necessary, grinning when Rhodey grumbled about reckless drivers.

Once they were out of the city, Tony engaged the autopilot and the stealth tech, then wandered back to the coffee cupboard.

"You won't have time to drink that. We'll be there in like twenty minutes," Rhodey said doubtfully.

"And you claim to know me well," Tony scoffed as he put water in the kettle and turned it on. "If you really knew me, you'd know there is always time for coffee. Also, I haven't eaten yet today, so leave me alone."

"I hope you're going to have something else in addition to coffee, then."

"Why would I eat any of the crap we have on board when we're twenty minutes from real food?" Tony asked with a smirk and a wink in Rhodey's direction.

Rhodey threw up his hands. "You're impossible."

"Only because it annoys you." The kettle whistled and Tony had his coffee moments later.

"We have permission to start targeting those HYDRA bases," Steve said suddenly, leaning forward in his seat with his eyes trained on the phone Tony had set up for him when he'd returned to the States. It sure as hell wasn't a flip phone.

"Really? Since when?" Tony asked, leaning against the wall and holding his coffee mug with both hands.

"Since five minutes ago," Steve said.

"When can we start?" Rhodey asked, his fingers drumming on the armrest of his chair.

"Whenever deemed appropriate' is what it says," Steve replied, sitting back. "We can discuss this as soon as the others are available to meet." He looked up at Tony. "Do you mind if we start before your restricted time is up? A week isn't likely to make much of a difference, but--"
"It's fine," Tony said before Steve could say anything more. "You won't be able to hit all four within the week, so I'll have my chance."

"Good. It would be helpful if you are available like last time, but don't you have another of those appointments soon?"

Tony drew a blank. It wouldn't surprise him if he did, but he had no recollection of agreeing to a particular day. "Friday, do I?"

"You have another set of tests at the hospital on Tuesday, boss," Friday replied.

"Tuesday is off the table, then," Steve said.

"You can schedule without me, you know," Tony reminded him. "Especially since you're looking at way more commuting time than actual fighting time."

"We'll see what makes sense when we take another look at the intel and talk to everyone else," Rhodey said practically.

"Five minutes to arrival," Friday reported.

Tony moved back toward the pilot's seat and said nothing more about it while they were airborne. As he began the process for landing, he heard Steve ask Friday to let the rest of the team know there would be a meeting in thirty minutes to discuss the next mission.
Logistics

Half an hour was plenty of time to land, stroll back to the main building, take their baggage back to
their rooms and, in Tony's case, head to the kitchen to find something to eat. And also add more
coffee to his cup because he had a feeling he'd need it.

Natasha was there, seated at one of the smaller tables, talking to someone he didn't recognize from
the back of her head. He turned his back on them, opened the fridge, and pretended to be
contemplating its contents when in fact he was using his watch to ask Friday who the hell was in
their living room.

He'd only managed to bring up the girl's picture when Natasha said, "Tony," from just behind him.
Dammit, she'd snuck up on him again.

He turned around. "What's up?" he asked, sliding a glance at the solemn girl standing beside
Natasha.

"Tony, this is Sara Chen. She's the new Avengers assistant."

He reflexively stuck out his hand for a handshake. "Oh, really? When did that happen?"

Sara's grip was firm. "Tuesday," she said.

Tony gave her a quick once-over. She was probably a little older than Mel but younger than Pepper,
with good taste in clothes and a flawless sense of what styles and colors would work for her. He
guessed she had something Asian in her background from the shape of her eyes and her straight
black hair. He couldn't remember whether he liked her interview video or not. Not that it mattered
now. "I guess I should say welcome and good luck. We're a handful."

She smiled slightly. "I look forward to it."

"She'll need to schedule a meeting with you in the next few days to ask about some things," Natasha
added.

Tony nodded. "Of course," he said and realized he was still standing in front of the open refrigerator.
He was about to awkwardly apologize when Natasha looked toward the door.

"Excuse us, I need to introduce her to Steve," Natasha said, gesturing for Sara to follow.

Tony turned back to the fridge and sighed, then stepped back and let the door close. He didn't know
what the hell he wanted to eat, so he turned his attention to obtaining coffee instead. That he could
do without having to think.

By the time he was pouring his new coffee in with his old coffee in a larger mug, it sounded like
everyone else had already gathered at the conference table, so he quickly grabbed something to eat
from the cupboard and hurried over. Fortunately, he wasn't actually the last one to arrive--that was
Barton--and the food he'd grabbed was a bag of dried apples and an oatmeal bar, which wasn't bad.
At least it was better than the rations on the jet.

After a brief discussion of how the U.N. meeting went, they focused fully on how to go about
mopping up this last bit (or what they really, really hoped was the last bit) of HYDRA. The choice of
where to attack first came down to two options: the closest, or the one they thought was most likely
to provide intel on the two bases the U.N. didn't know about yet.
"We should focus on the intel," Natasha said. "If there's intel we need for the other two, then there may also be intel on everything else."

"So we're less likely to be caught off guard if there's anything unusual," Sam agreed.

"On what basis are we claiming that this particular location has the most information to offer?" Vision inquired.

Everyone looked at Steve. "There isn't much," he admitted. "It is mentioned the most times in the documents we have. Also, when you plot all the known HYDRA bases on a map, it is situated in closer proximity to other bases than the rest."

Tony wordlessly projected the map onto the display with the four targets circled and numbers denoting the number of times that name or location occurred in the files.

"Won't we piss off the Russians when we go waltzing in there?" Rhodey asked. "It's awfully close to some disputed territories."

"I'd be more worried that killing off HYDRA in general will piss off the Russians," Natasha said dryly. "They're usually fond of whatever makes Americans upset."

No one else spoke up immediately, so Steve said, "If there are no objections, we should talk about timing. I want to get it done in the next week, but we also want to take enough time to prepare."

There were several requests to schedule it so they didn't have to fly through the night, but with time zones and travel time, there wasn't any alternative if they wanted to have daylight for the battle.

Tony noticed that Steve was gently steering the conversation away from any suggestions that conflicted with his hospital appointment without admitting that was the reason. He spoke up for the first time since their impromptu meeting began. "How about this: you leave here Tuesday afternoon around three or four. That'll get you there right about seven or eight in the morning so you can scope it out before the attack. Or you can just go for it, whatever. Figure three, maybe four hours there, then you'll get back here Wednesday noon-ish. No muss, no fuss."

"That would give us almost four days to make sure we're ready," Clint said. "We've done fine with far less."

Steve looked around the table, then nodded, and it was settled. As the group began to disperse, Steve said, "Tony, we'll definitely need the computer contents copied again. Would you--"

"I'll work with Rhodey and Vision to get some sort of plan hammered out," Tony said.

"Thanks."

Tony slipped out of the room and went down to the workshop to check on the bots and ponder how to test whether Vision was capable of downloading data. While he was mulling it over, he checked in on his satellites and moved one to better cover their target area.

He also pulled up the security logs for the compound; it had been a suspiciously long time since anyone tried to stray into the secure zone and he wasn't going to assume that the camouflage tech was really that good (though it was). And yes, there was a team dedicated to monitoring security 24/7, but it made him feel better to see for himself that all was well. He'd learned a lot about securing his premises after the Malibu house was attacked.

"Friday, pull up the Malibu blueprints," he said absently, then gestured for the image to move from
the screen to the holographic projectors. It was much easier to manipulate in all three dimensions.

Something about that thought struck him as important, but he wasn't making the connection.

He shook off the feeling and began removing and rearranging rooms, visually working through what he might want from a house now that he could completely start over. Then again, maybe he should start from scratch, reimagine everything rather than reworking what had been. A clean slate.

The trouble with a clean slate was knowing that no matter how careful you were, messing up somehow was inevitable and yet disappointing. When starting from a messy or uneven foundation, mistakes were more understandable, just part of the process.

He got rid of another room, then another, then another, until he had nothing left of the blueprint, mirroring the bare bluff. He waved away the hologram impatiently and sat with his chin in hand, staring morosely into space.

After a while he pulled up the monitoring system project and stared at the jumble produced by his last scan of Rhody. He stared at it long enough that his eyes almost crossed and he began to suspect there was some sort of hidden message buried within the mess. Then he was startled by Friday and he lost whatever he had been seeing.

"Boss, Colonel Rhodes is threatening to come down and physically drag you to lunch," Friday said placidly.

"I'd like to see him try," Tony retorted, but stood up from his stool. "Tell him not to get his panties in a twist. I'll be up shortly."

When he made it to the kitchen, Lila squealed, "Uncle Tony!" She slid down from her chair and threw herself at him, hugging his waist. "Where did you go? I missed you."

Tony patted her head awkwardly and cast a glance at Laura, who didn't seem as perturbed by Lila's abrupt departure from the table as he might have guessed. "How about if I tell you later? Right now we should be eating lunch."

"Okay," she said, sounding disappointed. She let go of him and returned to her seat, casting doleful looks at him periodically.

The kids finished their lunch first and sprawled on the couches with their books while Laura took Nathaniel away for his nap. Tony wandered over to see what they were doing. Cooper had his nose buried in a book of 3D optical illusions and Lila was all but climbing on him in an attempt to see, too. Tony watched him slowly pull the page away from his face, then grin when he managed to discern whatever was hidden in the picture. Lila wanted a turn, then, and Cooper tried to hold the book up for her to see without letting her actually touch it.

Tony couldn't remember enjoying such books when he was a kid, but he'd always been more interested in things that moved, things he could build. Still, the jumble of color on the page Lila was trying to decipher reminded him of the scan output he'd been meditating over.

Then in a flash, he realized what was wrong with that output: it needed depth, dimension. It was entirely possible his scanner was already doing exactly what he wanted it to do, it was just flattening the output. He felt like an idiot.

Since Lila hadn't noticed him, he thought it was safe to head down to the workshop to see about fixing the now obvious problem with what he'd been doing.
He tinkered with it a while and found that the output would only improve if the input did, and that required some modifications to the scanning devices themselves, mostly in terms of positioning and programming. He fixed that, then needed new scans to see if the display was any better.

Lacking any other test subject, he stood between his table and the door and had Friday scan him and display the results as a semi-transparent hologram. The result was a nearly life size copy of himself from the muscles on down to the blood vessels.

"Lose the musculature, the skeleton," he commanded, curiously looking at the body-shaped mass of organs and blood vessels before him. He reached out as if to grab the heart and pulled his hands apart to increase its size. "Isolate the heart. Can we get a better view of the interior?"

"Your movement is interfering with the scan, boss," Friday said.

He stood as still as he could manage and listened as she verbalized the set of adjustments he'd programmed in hopes of clarifying this one final piece. He was beginning to think it would fail but then the image sharpened. "Stop, right there, save those settings and decrease the opacity of the exterior by fifty percent," he ordered, watching the inside of his heart as it beat with something approaching awe. "Are we recording this?"

"Yes, boss."

"Good, that's good. Bring up the images from each hospital scan and display in chronological order."

Black and white photos hovered in the air beside the beating holographic heart, the first image from his hospital stay at the left and each succeeding image forming a timeline to the present. He finally let himself move and scrutinized each photo in turn before returning to the hologram. "Friday, stop the scan and send all of this to Dr. Mann. I'd like her to take a look at the protocol and the end result before I tell anyone else about it, just in case I'm missing something else obvious."

"Message sent, boss."

He returned to his workstation to examine the program and its data. He was sufficiently absorbed that he didn't notice Rhodey's presence until Rhodey said, "What the hell is that?"

Tony looked up in surprise to see him staring at the disembodied heart still hanging in mid-air. "Proof that I have a heart," he said dismissively. "Friday, scan Rhodey."

"It's working?" he asked in disbelief as a new hologram appeared in the empty space.

"It's working?" Rhodey repeated dubiously, rolling backward slightly. "That's not reassuring."

"I know." Tony knew very well what he meant. The experience with the palladium had persuaded him to be slightly more cautious about what he exposed himself to on a regular basis. "Did you come down for a particular reason or were you just checking up on me?"
"Yes," Rhodey said. "I came to see what you were doing and warn you that a certain little girl is very upset that you vanished after lunch."

He sighed. "Right. Uncle Tony ought to make an appearance."

"He will if he knows what's good for him," Rhodey agreed.

Tony stood up from his stool and stretched. "Let's go."

Lila's face lit up when she saw him. Then she remembered she was mad at him; she scowled and began to turn away, as if pretending not to see him. He pretended to walk past her, then turned at the last moment and tickled her briefly. She shrieked and giggled. "Uncle Tony!" she said reprovingly, putting her hands on her hips. "Stop that."

He held his hands up in surrender. "I already did."

She crossed her arms and gazed at him solemnly. "Where did you go?"

"I had to finish something in the workshop. I'm sorry for leaving again."

"Where did you go before that?"

He explained about the meeting in New York. She asked again. He explained about visiting Aunt Pepper in California. She asked still again. "I was here before that, honey," he said.

She just looked at him, seeming unconvinced. "But I haven't seen you in ages. Auntie Nat reads to me instead, but she doesn't do the voices."

He had no idea what to tell her. He'd been at the compound the entire time, but at the same time it was true that he'd hardly seen her or Cooper in what felt like months. "Would you like to fix that?"

"Yes!" she cried, jumping up to get her book.

Before she could return, Laura intercepted her and redirected her to the dinner table. She looked beseechingly at Tony. He joined her at the table. "We can do it right after we eat, yeah?"

Lila heaved a heavy sigh. "Okay."

He was as good as his word this time. Lila had moved on from hobbits to talking animals and he had no idea what was going on in the story since she was already halfway done, but he muddled through and she seemed satisfied by the attempt.

After that, Clint herded his daughter off to take a bath before bed. Tony remained on the couch, leaned his head back against the cushions, and tried to think of what had been going on before his California trip that would have prevented him from reading to Lila or even seeing her in general. He had no idea.

His watch chirped and he obediently tapped it without looking. "Boss, Doctor Thomas would like to see you tomorrow if your schedule allows."

As if he had anything on his schedule. "Sure. Put me down for the first available appointment time."

He didn't pay attention when Friday reported the time of his appointment; she would remind him in the morning.
Lazily he considered his options for the rest of the evening. He could go to bed but it felt too early.

He could try to find the pieces of the toaster he'd dismantled and put it back together, but what had he done with the pieces? He didn't remember leaving them anywhere in particular. Friday would know, but asking would be admitting he didn't remember and he could already feel her judging him sometimes.

He could join whatever conversation was happening at the other end of the room. So far he had identified the voices of Sam, Natasha, and Steve, but hadn't followed enough to know what they were discussing. Then he heard Ross's name mentioned and knew he didn't want any part of that.

He could go out to the hangar and put together the ramp for the helicopter.

He opted for that last idea and slipped out of the room by way of the staircase rather than have to pass the others to go out the normal way. He nearly tripped over Wanda and Vision in the process. In fact, he stepped through Vision, who had the thoughtfulness to make himself less of a tripping hazard. Tony apologized as he hurried on his way, purposely not trying to figure out what, exactly, they were doing on the stairs.

He had gotten as far as unloading the parts from the helicopter and spreading them out in the proper order according to the schematics Friday was displaying when someone behind him said, "Sir, please back away from the aircraft or I will call security."

Tony raised his hands in the air and turned around, smirking. "I think I'm allowed to work on my own chopper."

The technician paled to almost the same shade as her blonde hair. "Mr. Stark, sir, I'm very sorry, I didn't realize-"

He lowered his hands and gestured dismissively. "No harm done. It's nice to know the techs are keeping an eye out for suspicious characters. What's your name?"

She squared her shoulders. "Toni."

"It's a good name," he said, amused. "Would you like to help?"

Her answer was yes. While he dismantled the external panels that formed the belly of the helicopter and surveyed the cavity beneath the floor in comparison with the schematic, she began assembling the ramp itself. He periodically took a look at her work and it was always precisely correct. She was fast, too. "What did you do before you came here?" he asked.

"I worked for S.H.I.E.L.D. maintaining aircraft on the helicarrier. Before that, I was in the Navy and did the same on a carrier in the Pacific."

He asked a few more questions in between requests for tools or an extra hand as he began installing the hardware that would attach the ramp to the chopper and allow it to be controlled from a panel by the door. Her answers were simple and brief. Not the talkative type, but that was fine by him.

Though the ramp was relatively light, it was a great help to have someone else hold it in place while he crawled underneath and attached it to the new mount. Toni was more than equal to the task; even after everything, she didn't look like she'd broken a sweat in her coveralls while he felt drenched. He wiped his hands on his jeans. "The wiring is a one-person job so I'll stop stealing you from your assigned duties now. It's been a pleasure."

She shook his proffered hand with a small smile. "I'm not on duty. I was on my way out when I saw
"You. My assignment today was inspecting this bird, so I wasn't about to let someone tamper with it."

"Right. You're one of those above-and-beyond types, and you know your stuff. You can work on my machines anytime."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark. Good night," Toni said.

"Good night," he responded absently, his mind already deep within the circuitry he was about to rewire.

The wiring took longer than assembling the ramp itself had, mostly because he was connecting into existing circuits in ways that had to make sense and not detract from the pre-existing systems, but also because he kept thinking of other tweaks and improvements he could do while he had the chopper laid bare. He managed to keep his focus on the current project, however, and eventually was able to deploy and retract the ramp from both inside and outside of the cabin.

He almost had Friday call Rhodey to come down and see, then thought to check the time. It was after midnight, so rather than wake Rhodey he put the exterior panels back together. By one thirty, the chopper looked as if it hadn't been touched.

Tony showered quickly before he went to bed, and it seemed like only a few minutes before Friday was blaring music at him to wake up. He grumbled a few choice words in her general direction as he crawled out of bed in search of his meds. "Your appointment with Doctor Thomas is in fifteen minutes, boss," Friday nagged.

"Why the hell is it so early?" he all but whined as he pulled some clothes, any clothes, onto his body.

"The appointment is at nine o'clock," Friday said blandly. The 'nine o'clock isn't early' part was heavily implied.

"You can be replaced," he said irritably.

Fortunately, stopping at the kitchen was more or less on the way to the good doctor's office. Someone had brewed a pot of coffee that would have to be good enough since he didn't have time to do anything else.

Dr. Tanya was in her office working on her computer when he arrived. She smiled when she saw him lurking in the doorway. "Come on in, Tony," she said warmly, rising from her chair.

He slid into his usual seat, clutching his coffee mug with both hands and sipping it carefully.

She sat down across from him and gave him a few moments to drink his coffee before she asked, "What do you remember of our last conversation?"

He answered with a question. "When I was flying to New York?"

She responded in kind. "What were you doing that night, after you arrived?"

"Drinking," he admitted. "Lots of drinking, more than I have in years."

"You called me while you were intoxicated. You don't remember that?"

He could remember what he thought was the whole evening, from the pizza and scotch to slumping over and sleeping on the couch. "No."

"Have you failed to remember activities and conversations that occurred while you were intoxicated..."
in the past?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Do you remember using your visual memory system that evening?"

His shudder was entirely involuntary. He clutched his coffee more tightly. "I wish I didn't."

"Am I correct in thinking that was the first time you'd used it since the MIT presentation?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"What made you go back to it that night?"

Tony shrugged, staring into the dark liquid in his cup. "I don't know. Every so often I'd wonder how else that might have gone down, but I never had the time to try it. Maybe it was courage I lacked. I don't know. But I'd had some to drink and somehow it seemed like a good idea." He took a sip, then glanced up at her. "If I didn't talk about that, what did I say when I called?"

She weighed her words carefully. "You were . . . distressed," she said after a long pause. "You talked at length about what happened, but never explained what prompted you to use it in the first place."

"Is there anything else I mentioned doing that I might not remember?" he asked, embarrassed that he needed to ask the question. It had been a long time since that was a regular concern.

"You might want to check for other calls from that night. I got the impression that you talked to Pepper before calling me."

He frowned, then drained the rest of his coffee. "She wasn't mad at me when we talked on Sunday, so I don't think I did." He tapped his watch once. "Friday, did I call Pepper last weekend while I was drunk?"

"No, boss."

"Why didn't you tell me that I'd called the good doctor, here?"

"Your behavior patterns were within historical parameters. A failure of memory is not detectable by an external system and it is not normal operating procedure to report every phone call."

"Where did you learn how to sass me?" he grumbled, shaking his wrist to deactivate Friday again. He looked up at Doc T, beginning to feel defensive about the whole line of questioning. "Is this really what you wanted to talk about? What I get up to in my off hours?"

"Partly, yes," she said honestly. "If you were returning to alcohol to drown your sorrows, so to speak, that would be a concern. While I knew you were preoccupied with the U.N. meeting this week, not having seen or heard from you since then made me wonder about your state of mind. You were not in a good place that night, Tony."

"I'm going to have to listen to that conversation later," he said with a small shake of his head. "It must have been something."

"I don't know that listening to it would help, but I'm not going to tell you not to. That would only guarantee that you would."

"Yep."
She steered the conversation to the meeting and his impressions of how it went and the drunken chat wasn't mentioned again. At least, not verbally. Tony had the distinct impression the doc was weighing his answers carefully in light of whatever concern that call had raised.

When she was finished with him, he sought out Rhodey and steered him out to the hangar to show off his night's work. Rhodey scrutinized the ramp, tried rolling up into the helicopter and back out again, then tested to make sure he could reach the controls without his chair being in the way of the ramp.

"This would have been more useful last weekend," he said finally. "It's really nice, Tony. Thanks." He fell silent a moment, staring at the ramp, then pressed the button to make it retract. "Is your company going to start selling these?"

"I hadn't thought about it," he said as they headed back to the main building. "Would you mind?"

"Nah, you might as well get some mileage out of it if you can."

"Friday, send the specs to the medical device team. They know what to do," he directed.

"Have you talked to Rogers yet? We need to know who we'll have before we talk strategy."

Tony didn't answer right away, thrown off by the change of subject when his mind was considering whether it was worth modifying vehicles to add the ramp or if he needed to make a deal with the electric car guy to design a line of vehicles with ramps already built in.

"You said you'd talk to Rogers before the next mission about coming armed or not at all," Rhodey persisted, unfazed by his lack of response.

Right. That conversation he needed to handle or Rhodey would take the matter into his own hands. While the thought was tempting, he should by rights be the one to deal with it. "Don't worry, buttercup, I'll talk to him soon," he said dismissively.

Rhodey stopped his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked unimpressed. "Today," he insisted.

"All right, all right," he conceded. "Friday, where is Rogers?"

"Captain Rogers is in a meeting, boss."

"I tried," he said with a shrug. "You want me to--?" He gestured toward the wheelchair.

"No, I'm good," Rhodey said, wheeling himself forward again. "I'm going to keep asking until you do it, you know."

"Yeah, I know. You busy? We need to figure out how to use Vision as a storage device."

"Not having you hack my suit would be nice," Rhodey agreed. "Let's go."
Preparations

Chapter Notes

Two notes from the previous chapter:
- The character Toni is a salute to a fic writer I know. Mad props to folks who are/have been in the military; it's not something I could ever do.
- In addition to taking this fic over 100,000 words (omg), the previous chapter also marks the transition to material I've written within the past couple of months (I wrote the earlier stuff last summer and have been reworking it ever since). This means I'm revising each chapter before posting while scrambling to make sure I stay ahead of what I'm posting by a comfortable margin. So I appreciate your patience as I continue the one-chapter-every-two-weeks update schedule.

Tony devised a series of experiments with progressively larger sets of data before Rhodey dragged him upstairs for lunch. They returned to the workshop with Vision in tow.

"Here's the deal," Tony said, standing next to a hard drive he'd stripped from its original home in a busted laptop. "This drive is blank except for a small file. I want you to transfer the file to this flash drive." He held up a plastic figure shaped like Iron Man, then plugged it into the computer Rhodey normally used.

"All right," Vision said agreeably. He touched the hard drive. "It is a text file that says 'hello world'," he murmured.

"Don't read it, just copy it," Tony urged. "There won't be time to sift through everything during a mission."

Vision appeared to concentrate, fixing his gaze at the wall. After a moment, he turned and his fingers went through the flash drive.

Tony double-checked, but the drive remained empty. He shook his head and Vision frowned.

"Do you have to touch it? You read those other files without touching anything," Rhodey said.

"I don't care if he feels the need to stand inside the computer as long as the files transfer," Tony countered with some impatience.

"Would it help to think of it like a package that you pick up and then put down?" Rhodey asked Vision.

"I will try," Vision said gravely, and tried again.

And again. And again. And nothing happened. Vision was a good sport about it, but after more than an hour even he seemed to be getting frustrated.

"What did you do to keep Ultron from escaping through the internet? Can't you do the opposite of that or something?" Tony asked irritably. It had to work, something had to work, it didn't make sense for an android to be unable to store data. But then, Vision was hardly the sort of android he would...
have designed himself.

Perhaps it was that suggestion, or perhaps it was something else, but on Vision's next attempt, a file appeared on the flash drive. It was corrupted, but it was a start.

By the end of the afternoon, Vision had managed to successfully transfer the two smallest test batches--the text file and a music file (AC/DC, of course)--to the flash drive.

It was encouraging that he'd done that much, given the repeated failures over the hours, but Tony was not optimistic about using him to transfer the intel during the upcoming mission. That would involve terabytes of data, minimum.

Tony would have insisted upon continuing the attempts, but Rhodey made it clear that eating dinner was not optional and Vision seemed happy to have a break.

When he arrived upstairs, he was greeted enthusiastically by Lila. "Uncle Tony, will you read to me?"

"Lila, come to the table please," Laura called.

"Coming, mama," she replied, then slipped her hand into his. "Will you sit next to me?"

"Sure, honey," he said, allowing himself to be tugged over to the table.

Lila kept up a steady stream of prattle while they ate, which he listened to with half an ear. The rest of the table was discussing their afternoon pursuits, all of which had something to do with the upcoming mission.

As soon as Lila was finished, he went with her to the couch to do their reading for the day while the others cleaned up. Laura took the boys to get ready for bed; she gestured for Tony to bring Lila when they were done and he nodded his agreement.

Everyone else had settled back around the table by the time they finished. When he returned to the common room after escorting Lila to the Barton quarters, they were discussing what Natasha and Steve had been able to determine about their target, both its design and its surroundings.

Tony lingered near the door a moment, feeling like an outsider peering in. He shook it off and slipped into a chair as unobtrusively as he could. He watched the discussion and especially Rogers, knowing they needed to have that conversation but not wanting it to be so public. Better to wait and pull him aside when it wouldn't be so obvious.

When they finally dispersed, Tony moved to leave the room with Rhodey, who shook his head and gestured toward Steve. He sighed but nodded and hung back, dreading how it might go.

Vision approached him as he waited. "Would you like me to continue the file transfer attempts?"

Over Vision's shoulder, Tony could see Steve leaving with Sam and felt relieved. "No, don't worry about it. We'll try again tomorrow. Just . . . do whatever it is you normally do at night."

Vision nodded. "Good night," he said before floating out of the room. Why he bothered to walk sometimes and not others wasn't something that Tony was going to question.

He was the last to leave and could have gone down to his workshop rather than turn in so early, but he was already tired thanks to his short night and there wasn't anything he felt inspired to work on. He ought to try to finish the peek-a-boo program, as he'd privately dubbed the effort to see through
the stealth tech, especially since it might be needed for the mission, but he still hadn't had any grand insights to make it work.

So he went to bed and dreamed of awkward conversations atop floating computers and standing unseen in the midst of crowds of people.

As soon as he woke, he could tell it wasn't going to be a good day. Everything felt wrong somehow, even his clothes, and he kept dropping things even though his hands didn't look like they were shaking. He didn't try shaving, just to be safe, and he steeled himself to have that conversation with Rogers despite his suspicion that it wasn't likely to go well.

"Friday, where is Rogers?" he asked when he was finished getting dressed.

"Captain Rogers is in his quarters, boss."

"Tell him I'd like to speak to him in the office when he's available," he said, squaring his shoulders and sauntering out of his room like nothing was wrong.

Tony had enough time to do a brief check of his messages and put his feet up on the desk before Rogers appeared in the doorway looking like a walking clothes advertisement, all freshly washed and perfectly cut. "You wanted to talk to me?" Rogers asked.

"Yeah. Come in and close the door," he said nonchalantly, resisting the impulse to sit up straighter. When Rogers settled in front of the desk, standing in parade rest, Tony asked, "How are you getting along with the shield these days?" He meant it to sound light-hearted but it fell flat.

Steve frowned. "That's none of your business."

He sighed. "You can't go on a mission unarmed. If you aren't taking the shield, you need to take something else. Gun, bow and arrow, rocket launcher, whatever, I don't care, but you need to be armed."

"I'll take care of it," Steve said staunchly.

"Will you? Do tell, what is your weapon? You'd better do a good job of convincing me or you're not going."

Steve clenched his jaw. "Do you really think it's wise to send the team out short two people?"

"There's still as many of them as there used to be of us," Tony retorted, pulling his feet off the desk and standing up in challenge.

"You'd risk the mission over this? We need all hands on deck."

"You risked your life and everyone else's by going in unarmed," Tony hissed. "I will not allow that to happen again."

"You won't allow it," Steve repeated mockingly. "Stark, what are you trying to prove? That you're a big man even without your suit of armor?"

"This isn't about me," Tony said hotly. "This is about you. And guess what? You're benched for this mission. Now get out before I give in to the urge to punch you again."

Steve clenched his fists but turned on his heel and strode out of the office, leaving the door open
behind him. Tony let out his breath in a rush and sagged back into the chair, running one hand through his hair.

Could he have handled that better? He didn't want to bench Rogers, though a part of him had suspected all along that it would end that way.

Now he needed to spread the word. "Friday, where's Rhodey?"

"Colonel Rhodes is--"

"--right here," Rhodey announced as he rolled into the room. "You talked to Rogers."

"I talked to Rogers," he confirmed with a sigh. "You're in charge for this round."

"Right." Rhodey studied him for a moment. "Do me a favor?"

"For you? Anything."

"Remember that it's his decision that put him here. Not your fault, not your responsibility."

"Easy for you to say. He wasn't accusing you of risking the mission by daring to send the team out short-handed."

"We'll manage," Rhodey said confidently. "Come on. Breakfast, then I have a mission to coordinate."

Tony followed him into the elevator, then had a sinking realization. "And I have to teach an android to move large amounts of data, if all this is going to be worth the effort. Unless you want to give the orders while I'm operating the suit for you."

"I can be the backup plan," Rhodey said after a brief pause. "Good luck with that."

"Easy for you to say," Tony said with a grimace. The day just got better and better.

Everyone else, including Rogers, was already at the table when they arrived. Tony busied himself with figuring out what to eat rather than look at him. Benching Rogers now seemed simple compared to telling the others about it.

Fortunately, he was able to sit next to Rhodey at the table. Unfortunately, the kids had already cleared the room, so there was no convenient way to keep the conversation from turning to the upcoming mission. He idly dragged his spoon back and forth through his oatmeal—it kept sticking in his throat so he wasn't going to finish it anyway—and listened as the others discussed what still needed to be done for them to be prepared.

Before he decided how to interject, someone asked Steve a question about strategy and he replied, "I won't be going."

"What are you talking about?" Sam demanded when no one else spoke.

Tony seized the opportunity. "I benched him," he said flatly. "Rhodey will be leading the mission."

"Who died and put you in charge?" Clint asked snidely.

What little patience he'd managed to maintain during the confrontation with Rogers had long since evaporated. "Well, let's see, I only finance this entire outfit," he shot back. "Not to mention that I had to vouch for your sorry asses so you wouldn't end up on the Raft again. You go rogue, it's my
reputation that goes down in flames. So yeah, I'm in charge for now. Like it or leave it."

"Why did you bench Cap?" Natasha inquired calmly.

"You want to answer that, Rogers?" He was more than a little curious if Rogers would be willing to confess.

"I put everyone at risk by going on the last mission unarmed," Steve said meekly. His demeanor in making the admission was so different from their interaction earlier that Tony had to wonder what happened in the interim.

"And he couldn't convince me that he wouldn't do it again. If we're planning a mission, you go prepared or not at all," Tony added, just to make sure it was clear that this wasn't personal.

To his surprise, Sam nodded. "You would've been in even hotter water--and sooner--in the Army for a stunt like that," he said to Steve. "Will you be on comms like Stark?"

Steve shrugged and glanced at Tony, who hadn't thought about it. "I don't see why not," he said carelessly. "It's not like he could do any damage from here."

"So what's the plan?" Clint asked.

"Let's collect everything we've got so far and see if we need to plug any holes before we devise a plan of attack," Rhodey said. "How about we regroup in ten minutes? Rogers, you're welcome to stay and strategize."

"Do you need Vision or should we go do the other thing?" Tony asked as the others began to rise from the table and clean up the meal.

"Go do the data thing. We won't need him until later."

"Got it. You need anything, just call."

Rhodey waved him off. "We'll be fine, they know what they're doing."

"I wish I could say the same of Vision," Tony grumbled half-heartedly. It wasn't the android's fault, he knew that, but that he didn't know how to fix it troubled him. Especially now that the crux of the mission relied on Vision figuring this out.

As it turned out, Vision had spent time overnight working on his technique. "I do not require sleep, so passing the time usefully seemed wise," he said when Tony expressed his surprise that the first two attempts were successful.

It was too good to last, of course. After the initial spurt of progress, they were back to where they had left off the previous afternoon: frustrated and at a standstill.

Tony felt helpless, useless. Why was he even there? It's not like he could do anything besides watch and try to come up with a contingency plan for when this one inevitably failed.

He was almost glad when Rhodey demanded he make an appearance for lunch. Vision stayed behind to keep trying; perhaps the absence of an audience would help.

As he finished his sandwich, he became aware of a small presence hovering next to his chair. He pretended he didn't notice and took a long swig of water while studying her out of the corner of his eye. Lila was bouncing on the balls of her feet, clutching her book to her chest with both arms.
Finally, she couldn't contain herself any longer. "Uncle Tony?" she said shyly.

He feigned surprise as he turned to look at her. "Oh, hello there. Would you like to join me?"

She shook her head vigorously. "Will you read to me?"

"Hang on, let me check with the boss. Rhody, do I have time to read to the little lady?"

Rhodey paused on his way out of the kitchen. "We don't need you yet, so do what you want."

"You know where to find me," he said, carefully sliding his chair back. "Okay honey, I'll be right there."

He always found it a little uncanny how still Lila could be while reading a book despite her (and her brothers') seemingly boundless energy otherwise. But maybe it wasn't that strange; he could vaguely remember being very focused on the things that interested him as a child. People usually assumed that his early success in electronics was due to his father's prodding. In truth, his father had been angry to find him messing with the equipment. His mother talked him down, pointed out that it was natural for their son to show interest in such things, and wasn't it nice that he also seemed to have an aptitude for it?

He forcefully pushed the thoughts of his parents away as Lila clambered down off the couch and reverently placed the book back onto its designated shelf. She stood in front of the bookshelf for a moment, alternately studying the books and him while playing with the tail of her braid. He waited, wondering what she was thinking about, but she never spoke her mind. Instead, she grabbed a different book, waved goodbye, and disappeared down the stairs.

Tony sighed and grabbed the neglected newspapers off the chessboard. Newspapers meant it was Sunday, how did it get to be Sunday already? He left them on the counter when he noticed the dishes hadn't been finished after lunch.

After washing the dishes and checking with Friday about everyone's whereabouts, he tucked the papers under his arm and headed for the workshop to see how Vision was doing.

The afternoon passed much like the morning did. Vision made halting progress on the data transfer experiment. Tony skimmed the newspapers. There was nothing particularly interesting, just lots of talk about curbing terrorism even though there hadn't been any incidents for months. The Mandarin had been the last terrorist explicitly targeting the U.S., though there were always some groups up to no good in the Middle East. (Why was it always the Middle East?)

He pushed the papers aside and returned his attention to developing some sort of backup method other than hacking Rhody's suit to get the intel they'd need. He could send them with one of the small devices he'd used to allow Jarvis to break into Fury's files on the helicarrier, but with this base located in the mountains--and, from what it sounded like, it was actually within a mountain--the signal from the base to his satellite may not be sufficient for Friday to do her thing no matter where he parked the satellite.

Which left copying the files onto something that could be physically carried into the base. But that would take ages, depending on how much data was there. Still, partial data was better than no data.

He was rummaging around in his drawers of parts, looking for the drive he knew he'd stashed somewhere when Rhodey called down and asked them both to come upstairs.

The others were gathering at the conference table when he trailed Vision into the room, except for Wanda, who was in the kitchen with Cooper. He would have to check when he was on food duty
next; it had been a while since he'd done it and with everyone else busy with the mission planning, at least he could be useful that way.

"How's it coming?" Rhodey asked as Tony slid into the chair next to him.

"He's gotten better, but it's not enough by a long shot. I'm working on an alternative that won't take you out of the fight."

"Good to know." Rhodey turned his attention to the rest of the group. "All right, everyone, let's get this attack planned out. Rogers and Romanoff, any recommendations for our approach?"

Tony listened with half an ear as Natasha and Steve detailed what they knew about the position and layout of the mountain base, complete with a projected diagram of the likely configuration. The rest of his mind was still considering alternatives to Vision getting the data.

"A big unknown is the number of personnel manning the base," Natasha finished. "Based on the plans we found in the HYDRA data dump, this base can house about fifty under normal conditions."

Rhodey nodded solemnly. "How sure are we that there are only two exits?"


"Can we improve those odds?"

"I can try out my new stealth tech tracking program from the nearest satellites, but no promises. It's a work in progress," Tony said, already pulling out his phone.

"Can the satellites use the other scanning thing you've been working on?" Rhodey asked.

"No can do, boss. That only works short range."

"Could we use it from the quinjet once we get over there? Take a better look before we pass the point of no return?"

"It's worth a shot. I'll get the program transferred over," Tony replied, ignoring the looks of confusion being cast in his direction and focusing on inputting the commands for Friday.

Rhodey briefly explained to the others what Tony had been working on, then continued, "Let's assume the maximum possible number of opponents and two exits. What's our first step?"

Tony tuned them out again, reviewing the peek-a-boo program. He wasn't overly pleased with it, but it was a start. He loaded it up and tested it on the satellite above the compound. It sensed the boundaries of the camouflaged area, but couldn't see within it. That would have to do for now. He was sure he could get it working better, if he just had the time, and also inspiration.

He transferred the program to the target satellite, then switched over to examining the scanning program. It wasn't fully compatible with the quinjet's systems, to say nothing of the fact that the jet didn't have enough cameras to produce the full three-dimensional effect. But that didn't have to be a problem; scanning for a door didn't necessarily require three dimensions.

There was a hand on his arm. "How are you doing?" Rhodey asked.

"I'll have to reprogram part of the scanning code before it'll work on the jet," he answered absently.

"But we're good otherwise?"
"I hope so."

"Then come and eat something. You can do the reprogramming after."

"And finish figuring out a backup for copying the data, and check on the satellite," he said with a sigh. There was always something else to do, something else to develop . . . normally, that thought was invigorating. Today it just made him tired.

"We have almost forty-eight hours before the jet has to leave. You have enough time," Rhodey said optimistically.

"Thanks for the pep talk," he said sarcastically as he stood. He was, once again, the last one at the table, and the others had been busy while he was preoccupied. Someone had pulled out the erasable markers and wrote on the glass display as they figured out the plan of attack; someone else (probably Clint) had scribbled beside it: 1. Drop off flyers, 2. Blow up back door, 3. ???, 4. Profit!

Dinner was some sort of meat coated with breading; Cooper was proud about doing that himself. Wanda had supervised the oven part of the process, since the oven was a little too high for children to operate alone. Served alongside the meat was mixed vegetables, plus macaroni and cheese which Cooper had also made. It wasn't what Tony would have picked, but it was good of the kid to cook for so many people.

After finishing he went back to the workshop to try to knock out some of the things he needed to do. He finally found the drive he'd been looking for and hooked it up to make sure it was empty and ready to go. He'd have to check with Rhodey about who should carry it.

Taking a peek at the satellite data didn't take a whole lot of time, either, since the high resolution scan he'd started of their target area hadn't completed yet. Some parts had to wait for daylight in that part of the world, which wouldn't be for several hours yet, so those answers wouldn't be ready until morning.

He was elbows deep—metaphorically speaking—in the reprogramming when Friday alerted him that Vision was requesting entry to the workshop. "Let him in," he replied without looking up.

"Good evening," Vision greeted him soberly. "Is it permissible for Miss Maximoff to accompany me into your workshop? She believes she might be able to provide assistance in my task."

Tony glanced over and saw Wanda lurking in the hallway behind Vision. He briefly considered the options and found he didn't particularly care either way. "Yeah, sure, whatever," he said dismissively, then addressed Wanda. "Don't touch anything, and you leave when Vision does. Clear?"

She paused in her wide-eyed review of the room to bob her head in assent. "Of course. I am not here to impose."

That settled, he ignored their murmured conversation and re-immersed himself in the code. Every so often he'd load it into the test version of the quinjet programming to see how it was doing, only to have another error crop up and send him into another loop of troubleshooting. It was annoying, but the kind of annoyance he knew he'd beat. Eventually.

After at least a dozen attempts, the code didn't throw any new errors and still seemed to be working. The next step was loading the code into the jet itself, but he kind of didn't want to deal with the inevitable problems that would require attention despite his careful troubleshooting. Yet he might as well do it while he was focused and get it off his plate.
He began the upload and leaned back in his chair to stretch a bit; he was feeling stiffer than he ought to, probably because it had been a while since he'd done anything physically active. So much for resuming a regular workout regimen.

Vision and Wanda were still hanging around, so he checked the empty server set up for Vision's experimentation and was pleasantly surprised to find readable data on it in rather large quantities. Not as large as any of the HYDRA data dumps they'd collected before, granted, but much larger than he'd been able to manage before. He watched the pair until his upload was finished, but he couldn't tell what Wanda was doing that was helping and he didn't want to ask.

As expected, there were a few glitches while integrating the new code into the jet; he should do a new program dump and redo the test server because it obviously wasn't identical to the quinjet anymore. But that could wait.

Fortunately the glitches weren't difficult to resolve, and he activated the new code to test it out on the hangar where the quinjet was stored. It seemed to detect the contours of the building the way he'd expect, so that was promising. Doing a field test before the mission would be even better. He sent a message to that effect to Rhodey, as it was far too late for Rhodey to still be awake, then shut everything down for the night. Wanda and Vision had vanished at some point without him noticing.

The hallways were deserted as he made his way to his room so his mind was free to wander, collecting things that he should do, ought to do, why hadn't he done them?

Hit the workout room.

Call Pepper--how many days had it been since they'd talked? Too many.

He ought to have contacted Peter when he was in New York. Not thinking to do that at the time was unforgivable.

Just like not realizing sooner that Rhodey needed a ramp on the chopper. But at least he'd finally fixed that.

He should follow up with the SI team in a couple of days about putting ramps on other vehicles.

He also needed to talk to Dr. Mann about his scanning system. He had another of those appointments soon, maybe he could ask her about it then.

He went as far as making a list of the things circling like vultures in his brain in hopes they would cease to bother him. Then, when sleep continued to elude him, he had Friday start copying the quinjet programming so he could redo his test environment.

When the copying was complete and he was still awake, he returned to the workshop and threw himself into fixing the test server. He finished that without too much effort and moved on to re-examining the peek-a-boo program to see if he could improve it enough that it wouldn't matter if the scanning program didn't work properly from the quinjet. He might as well make the time productive if he wasn't going to sleep.

It was a few hours before the yawning and blurry vision were troublesome enough to force him to stop for a while. He was sound asleep almost as soon as he crawled into bed, unbothered by the weak light and birdsong filtering through the window blinds.

Rhodey was cheerily demanding that he 'rise and shine!' what felt like seconds later. He mumbled something offensive about the man's mother and rolled over. Rhodey wasn't put off so easily, having heard it all before, and tried again. By now Tony was awake enough to croak, "Friday, how long
"Have I been in bed?"

"Three hours, forty six minutes, boss."

"See? Leave me alone."

"Take your meds," Rhodey said, throwing the bottle beside him on the bed. "I was hoping you'd join us to review the plan before I have P.T., but we can do it later. Should I come back in a few hours?"

"Yeah, whatever," he said, swallowing one of the pills without even opening his eyes. He lobbed the bottle toward the end of the bed, not caring where it ended up.

Rhodey left quietly and he might have dozed for a while, but he didn't manage to go back to sleep for long. He gave up when a headache built behind his eyes and he had to abandon the bed in search of painkillers.

The combination of pills and a hot shower helped alleviate some of the pulsing agony, but coffee would be even better. He felt hungover, which wasn't fair considering he hadn't had a drop of alcohol for . . . at least a week. However many days it had been since that ill-considered Friday night binge.

Nobody was in the common room when he arrived and that was just fine. He brewed a nice, strong batch of coffee in the press and was considering what he could do that would require the least amount of brainpower--as, at present, he had very little to offer--when the others began filtering into the room. The sound of conversation grated on his ears and he turned away to escape down the stairs.

"Are you coming?" Sam asked suddenly from behind him.

He only just managed not to slosh his coffee when he jumped in surprise. "I--uh--" he stammered as his phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He fished it out and glanced at the screen, a little surprised to see it was his lawyer. Normally he called the lawyer, not the other way around. "Give me a minute."

Sam left him alone and he debated whether to answer or not. Lawyer-speak could make his head hurt on a good day, and this was most definitely not a good day.

While he was lost in indecision, the phone stopped vibrating. Well, that answered that. But now he had to decide if he would join the others or slip meekly away to nurse his headache in privacy.

No. He needed to show up, be in charge of himself the way he kept insisting he was in charge of everyone else.

He steeled his nerves and crossed the room, claiming a chair along the railing rather than at the table. He had just settled in when his phone started vibrating again. His lawyer again. He frowned and considered answering this time, but then Rhodey started talking, so he slipped the phone back into his pocket.

Barely a minute later, his lawyer was calling yet again without bothering to leave a message and he knew he had to answer this time. "Sorry guys, I have to take this," he said as he rose from his chair, not caring who he was interrupting in doing so. He was out the door in a few strides. "Bill! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I'm afraid this will be anything but a pleasure," the lawyer said grimly.
I was given this Iron Man flash drive and couldn't help but put it in.
A knot settled in Tony's stomach and he directed his steps toward the office. Bill had been his head lawyer for years and he'd never heard him sound so solemn. "Is this about the lawsuit?" he asked as the elevator silently ascended.

"The suit has been dismissed, as we anticipated," Bill replied. "However, I would not have called if that was the only news."

Tony arrived at the office and closed the door, then perched on the chair, his coffee cup centered in front of him on the desk. "Stop beating around the bush and get to the point. What's going on?"

He could hear a deep intake of breath at the other end of the line. "You are under federal investigation and your assets have been seized."

His entire body felt suddenly cold and the phone slipped from his nerveless fingers to clatter upon the desk. "Friday, secure office. Route the call through this phone on an encrypted line."

The window tint immediately darkened, and he heard the locking mechanism in the door engage. The feel of the air changed slightly as the ductwork was sealed and the room's independent air filtration system kicked in.

"Mr. Stark?" Bill's voice asked worriedly from the desk speaker phone.

"I'm here, Bill." He rubbed his face with a shaking hand, then sighed and gripped his forehead. His headache was throbbing in time with his heart rate. "Explain this to me. Why am I being investigated?"

"Terrorism," he said flatly.

"What the hell?"

"I have sent you a copy of the documents we received."

"You know I don't care about the legal mumbo jumbo. Give it to me straight."

"The United States government appears to be treating the Sokovia incident as a terrorist attack."

Tony wrapped his hands around his coffee mug to try to warm his fingers. "But that was ages ago and it didn't even happen in this country."

"There is no statute of limitations on terrorism related charges, and our government can pursue the matter because there were American casualties."
He vividly remembered the photo of Charlie Spencer being thrust at him by the young man’s grieving mother and closed his eyes for a moment, trying to focus on the matter at hand. A sip of coffee helped a little, though the only thing he was clear about was that he was well and truly fucked. He had publicly accepted responsibility for Ultron soon after it happened, and now the government was using that to turn on him.

No, not the government. Ross. This had his fingerprints all over it, though how he'd gotten other agencies to go along with it was something worth pursuing.

"Is there anything we can do about the investigation?"

"No, sir. It is best to simply provide information as it is requested and monitor the situation."

He was about to reply when Friday interrupted. "Boss, Colonel Rhodes is at the door."

"Friday, tell him I'm not to be disturbed. I'm . . . dealing with a thing." The distraction was just enough that he had to wrack his brain to remember his original question. "This hasn't been made public, has it?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Friday, have we picked up anything about this in the routine news scanning?"

"No, boss."

"Right. Do we stand to benefit if we make this public before word gets out another way?"

Bill's answer came after a good deal of throat-clearing. "I couldn't say, sir. All I can tell you is that we have not been ordered to keep it confidential."

So he had some wiggle room to draw first blood in the court of public opinion. He carefully digested the news, trying to consider all of the possibilities that could result from a mess of this scale. The headache was definitely slowing down his thought process. "I'll check with some PR folks on that. You also said something about assets?"

"Yes. All of your assets have been seized."

He took a long draw of his coffee, silently pleading with the throbbing in his temples to calm down. "Everything?" he asked faintly.

"I have sent you the itemized list, but it amounts to everything in the U.S. and those accounts located in cooperating countries. You still have a few resources at your disposal."

He turned to the computer and brought up the list, his horror growing as he skimmed it. "How do we fight this?" he demanded.

"We will respond to the rationale provided in the official notice within the allotted time frame. The government will then have the opportunity to counter our arguments before the assets are officially transferred into the government's possession."

It took him a minute to process the implications. "So what you're saying is, until this is settled, I'm almost broke?"

"Ah, that would be one way to put it," Bill said cautiously.

"There is property on this list, including my tower and the compound. Are we--do I need to worry
about relocating everyone?"

"I don't know, sir. I don't believe so, but we will verify that on your behalf."

"Why is the compound even on this list? I thought ownership would be transferred as soon as the incorporation was done. Is it done?"

"The incorporation of the Avengers was completed, yes, but there were some legal questions about tax status as a result of the Avengers now functioning as an arm of the United Nations. Those issues prevented the transfer of some property before the seizure notice was received."

"But the Avengers' financial accounts are separate? And those haven't been touched?" He knew he was grasping at straws, but he needed something to work with and so far there wasn't much.

"Yes, they are separate. We have contacted the appropriate parties at the U.N. to inquire whether they have received a similar notice. However," he hesitated. "The funds transfer from your accounts to the Avengers' was contracted to occur on a monthly basis. The seizure of your accounts will prevent those scheduled transactions from moving forward."

"And funding from the U.N. hasn't been finalized, not that it would ever be enough," Tony groaned. "Whatever we have is all we've got until this is dealt with."

"I believe that assessment is accurate. We will verify it with our U.N. contact."

It wasn't like Bill not to have all the answers to his questions. He almost hated to ask more, but he needed to know. "What about the equipment, vehicles, all of that? They're not on the list, so they're in the clear?"

"Ownership was transferred to the Avengers for everything except the land and buildings."

Good to know they wouldn't get in trouble for using their gear on the mission. He felt dazed. "Is that all? There are no more shoes waiting to drop?"

"That is all at this point in time, Mr. Stark. Whether the government plans to throw more shoes, I couldn't say."

He huffed a brief chuckle. Bill could be a funny guy when he wasn't so freaked out. And this definitely had him freaked out, which was saying something. "Be honest with me: how do you think it looks?"

"I am reasonably certain that your assets will be released eventually, unless there are reasons for forfeiture that the government hasn't yet revealed. The investigation . . . it is not clear to me why they are pursuing this line of inquiry at this time."

"Do what you can and keep me informed." He ended the call and let his head hang forward. This . . . this was a shitstorm, pure and simple, and he was almost certain he had Ross to thank for it.

He dug through the drawers of the desk until he found a tablet and stylus. "Friday, wipe this thing, then encrypt it, install just the basics, and disconnect it from the network. What I put on it should never hit the server."

While waiting for the process to complete, he drank the rest of his coffee and contemplated what he needed to do, what he needed to know, who he needed to talk to. As soon as the tablet was ready, he began scribbling notes so he wouldn't overlook something. He'd completely forgotten to ask Bill about Stark Industries and whether the company was safe from persecution; that he'd forgotten was a
serious oversight, even with his headache. He was determined not to let anything else slip, not when it was up to him to protect the others from Ross and his shenanigans.

His first call was to Maria Hill, who sounded harried, and there were other voices in the background. "This is Hill."

"I need to talk to you. Call me from your office. Alone. It's urgent," he said shortly, then hung up.

Within sixty seconds, her image appeared on his screen.

"I don't understand the obsession with video calling," he griped as he reluctantly activated his own camera. "You and Fury both. Why can't you appreciate a good old disembodied phone call?"

He could tell when she could see him—her cheek twitched as she took in his disheveled state.

"Yeah, I know, I'm a hot mess. I barely slept and now I'm living a nightmare. Friday, secure her office."

Hill looked exasperated as the room behind her darkened. "I can do that myself, you know."

"Yes, but you didn't. The things we discuss are not to be shared with anyone, not even that minion who gets your coffee."

She might have rolled her eyes. "His name is Nick."

"I don't care if that's followed by Fury, what I tell you doesn't go beyond you. Got it?"

"I worked for the most secret spy organization on the planet, I'm fairly sure I can manage to keep your issues to myself."

He chose not to comment. "There are several reasons I need to talk to you, so let's get this over with. First, when was the last evacuation drill and how did they do?"

He would bet whatever money he had left that she wanted to know why he was asking, but she was too well trained to ask. "The last personnel evacuation was ten days ago, and it took under an hour to clear the compound."

"Has there ever been a drill for a full evacuation? Equipment, vehicles, the whole nine yards?"

"No, there has never been an Abandon Ship drill performed at the compound."

"Put one on the schedule within the week. I need to know how long it takes."

She nodded smartly. "Consider it done."

"Second. Ages ago we discussed reaching out to the persons of interest that we've been monitoring. Don't. Maintain radio silence and do not interfere. Also, that intel needs to be restricted for the foreseeable future. Your eyes only." It may or may not prove necessary, but if he and possibly the Avengers were being targeted, he wanted to make that target as small as possible.

"Yes, sir."

He had to glance down at his notes. "Third. How's the retrofit coming?" A glaring omission from the list of seized property had been the sole remaining helicarrier, probably because it was registered as belonging to Fury rather than him. He would not hesitate to take advantage of that oversight if needed.
"Three of the four engines have been completely replaced and the fourth is halfway finished. She's airworthy, as long as nothing takes out the new engines."

"Good. We may need to activate Plan H."

For the first time, Hill allowed her concern to show on her face. "What's going on?"

He held up a finger to forestall her question. "Fourth, does Fury still have eyes and ears in Washington? I need someone to make discreet inquiries about who is conducting an investigation and why."

"He'll need to know which investigation."

He stared at her for a long minute. "Consider that it's me asking and put two and two together," he said finally.

"Deadline?"

"ASAP."

"I'll see what can be done."

"Fifth. Do me a favor and don't pay any bills, no matter the amount, until I say otherwise. If there's anything that absolutely must be paid, let me know and I'll . . . figure something out."

"Paychecks?" she asked somberly.

Oh, god, he hadn't connected that dot. He stared down at his list rather than look at her as he said softly, "Suspended until this is straightened out. I . . . tell them I'm sorry."

"At least they don't have to worry about rent," she said lightly.

"Assuming I can keep the roof over their heads," he countered bitterly. "Figure out what we'd need to stock if the whole lot has to relocate to the helicarrier. Send me the list and approximate cost."

"Is there anything else?" she asked gently when he didn't say any more.

"Don't spread the word about the pay until I say so. I'm hoping that part will blow over before it's an issue."

"Of course."

He nodded once and ended the call, then massaged the spot on his forehead that spiked with pain when he nodded. Just when he thought it was bad, he found out it was worse. He'd always prided himself on paying people well for what they did, and now he was prevented from doing even that.

Friday interrupted his moment of self-pity. "Boss, Colonel Rhodes and Wanda Maximoff have left items outside the office."

He slowly rose from the chair and went to the door. The locks thudded open as he approached and he swung the door open warily. The items in question were two bottles of water, an insulated tumbler, and a thermos.

He collected the loot gingerly--it hurt his head to bend over--and retreated back into the office, closing the door and hearing it seal itself behind him. The thermos held coffee and the tumbler was a smoothie and of course they would provide some sort of sustenance.
He called the accountants while nursing the smoothie. That conversation was relatively painless, mostly just him demanding to be sent a current list of all his accounts and their balances. The accountants had already gotten a call from the lawyers, so they were able to provide him with both the full list and the list of accounts that still remained available for use.

It was a depressingly short list. Adding everything together, he was still a millionaire and had more money than some could even dream of, but it was far short of his actual worth and wasn't likely to last long with the number of people he was currently responsible for.

He poured the first cup of coffee as he called Bill to ask about the impact of the situation on Stark Industries.

"There is minimal risk to the company from a legal perspective," the lawyer assured him.

"What about the other perspectives?" he asked warily.

"It would be prudent to inform the board of the situation as soon as is practical, so they are prepared for the likely devaluation of company stock when the news is made public. Also, am I correct that you remain, er, romantically entangled with Ms. Potts?"

He couldn't help but snort at the way Bill phrased it. "Yes, we are 'romantically entangled'. Why?"

"An investigation of your activities may involve Ms. Potts on a personal level, which may or may not result in scrutiny of the company itself. It is difficult to predict and depends on what they are investigating."

There wasn't enough coffee in the world to even begin dealing with this can of worms. "Please communicate to the board the information you find relevant to the company's interests and tell them I am happy to attend an emergency meeting as long as it takes place, um, Wednesday or later. I'll want you in on that meeting, too."

"They will wish to meet before such information is made public," Bill objected.

"I do not intend for this information to be public any earlier than Wednesday," he snapped.

"As you wish, Mr. Stark."

That call taken care of, he put his face in his hands and considered the wrinkle named Pepper. No matter how he looked at it, there seemed to be only one thing he could do. And then there was the PR angle to consider. "Friday, tell Mel to report to me immediately and let her in when she arrives."

It shouldn't have been difficult to make the next call, but it took him three tries to enter all of the numbers. The door swung open to admit Mel just as the ringing began.

Pepper picked up on the fourth ring. "Who is this? How did you get this number?"

"Hey Pep," he said, motioning for Mel to remain quiet. "I have a quick question for you."

"Okay?"

"Would you rather be my CEO or my girlfriend?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

"One I need the answer to. Your choice, CEO or girlfriend."
"What do you mean? Tony, what's going on?" She sounded confused but not yet angry.

"I can't explain right now, but I promise I will as soon as I can. Now pick one."

She sighed deeply, one of her Tony-what-have-you-done sighs. "CEO."

"Good. The last thing I need right now is to find a new CEO." He picked up the handset and let it drop back into the cradle, ending the call. His cell phone began vibrating almost immediately; he swept it into the top drawer and slammed the drawer shut.

Mel was gaping at him from just inside the door. "What the hell was that?"

He poured another cup of coffee from the thermos as he replied wearily, "Something that needed to be done."

"But--"

He set the thermos down on the desk a little harder than necessary. "I called you here because I need you to do your job, not question my decisions about my personal life," he said forcefully, then sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sit down, this will take a while."

Mel obeyed silently, wide-eyed. When she was seated facing him across the desk, he said, "You worked for Roxxon, so you've had to deal with sharing bad news. Yes?"

"Yes, sir," she said uncertainly.

"Good. I'm about to dump a truckload on you that you will not be sharing with anyone." He briefly outlined the situation and what he had been thinking in terms of what information to release when.

Mel took frantic notes and did not speak until he'd finished. "So if I'm hearing this right, you want to leak the news about your breakup with Ms. Potts while we nail down the press release about the investigation and also draft a different press release in case the information comes out before you announce it," she summarized.

"Yep, that about covers it."

She studied her notes, then looked at him askance. "Why the delay? Why not announce the investigation immediately?"

He fidgeted with his coffee cup, then drank the last gulp and busied himself with pouring more. "Because the others are leaving on a mission tomorrow and they don't need the distraction." There was only a small amount of coffee left when his cup was full, so he drank it straight from the thermos. When he finished, Mel was frowning at him.

"You're going to hide this from your team?"

"For now. They don't need something like this hanging over them, especially since they're not directly involved." And because the outcome of the mission was uncertain as it was, no distraction required.

She sighed and shook her head, but turned her gaze back to her scribbled notes. "Are you sure you want your relationship with Ms. Potts to be the focus of attention? It doesn't seem necessary to make that public, and putting yourself in the spotlight might encourage someone to up the ante by leaking the investigation."
That... was a good point. His headache was really messing with his ability to anticipate all of the possibilities. "You win. Monitor the media closely. If there's even a hint about the investigation, you can leak the breakup with Pepper as a distraction."

She nodded and made a note. "I hesitate to suggest this, knowing your tendency to go off-script, but if we're the ones to make the investigation public, it would be most effective to do so in a press conference. We'd still need a press release, but that's secondary."

He'd been mulling over a notion of bringing Christine Everhart into the mix at some point, but Mel was right. A press conference would be more effective and more efficient. "I like it, but we can't do it here, that would put the Avengers into the spotlight and I want all the heat on me."

"Your tower in the city?"

"I don't know if I'm allowed in."

"In front of the building?"

"That could be difficult to secure, but it's probably the best we can do. Start making arrangements. I'd like to do it Wednesday afternoon sometime, but we may have to push it back to Thursday."

"All right, so I need to draft the press release, compose a backup press release, sketch out your remarks for the press conference, make the arrangements for the press conference, and leak the Ms. Potts news if there's any hint of the investigation mentioned in the media."

He ticked each thing off his own notes as she listed them. "Sounds like a plan."

She took a deep breath and gathered up her pens and notepad. "Right. I'll get started on that and send you the drafts as I write them."

"Thank you," he said earnestly.

"Good luck."

After she left, he crossed his arms on the desk and buried his face in the crook of his left elbow. He focused on his breathing, in through the nose and out through the mouth--it was something Bruce had shown him what felt like eons ago--and gradually felt the tension in his shoulders fade just the slightest bit.

That is, until his mind returned to his predicament and all the things he still needed to do about it, to say nothing of whatever else he was supposed to do before the mission. He needed time, but the clock ticked inexorably onward and the seconds slipped away. It was already past dinnertime, somehow, which meant he'd been holed up in the office for hours dealing with this mess and it was far from being resolved.

He sat up, squared his shoulders, and returned to his list. He had set just about everything into motion, the rest needed to wait on something or someone other than him, so he checked his messages for the first time that day.

Fortunately, there was nothing explosive lurking there, just a reminder from Dr. Mann about his tests the next day and a note from Rhodey about the field test with the scanning software earlier that afternoon. It mostly seemed to do what they wanted it to do, though there were some apparent glitches in the process and if he had a chance to take a look, that would be great, but no pressure. And P.S. Is everything okay?
Tony chuckled darkly and closed the message without responding. It took him a minute to try to remember what he needed to do for them before the mission. He checked on the satellite scans of the target area and sent Rhodey instructions for accessing them directly. He made a note to retrieve the empty drive he’d prepared and leave it for Rhodey somewhere so they would have a backup method in case Vision couldn't make it work.

That finished, he immersed himself in the code for the scanning program again, looking for the source of the behavior they'd noticed in the field test. He was able to compartmentalize the headache while he worked, still aware of it but as if from a distance, which was just as well because it took hours to merely find the source of the problem. Fixing it took even longer.

When he'd taken it through its paces as well as he could on the test server, he loaded the new version onto the quinjet and double-checked that everything transferred smoothly. Then he was done and he sat back in the chair feeling wrung out and yet wired. And also thirsty.

He stood and stretched and ventured out of the office for the first time in over twelve hours. The hallways were dark and deserted--as they should be at that late (early) hour--so he didn't have to worry about running into people who would ask awkward questions. Unless Vision was lurking somewhere nearby. He really hoped that wouldn't be the case.

Luck was with him for what seemed like the first time all day: he didn't run into anyone on his way to the kitchen. He drank two glasses of water without even pausing, but when he opened the refrigerator door to consider whether to eat something, Friday spoke. "Food and drink are not advisable until after your appointment at the hospital, boss."

Right, that. He sighed and let the door swing closed. He wasn't hungry anyway.

Chapter End Notes

It's easy to get lost down a black hole when trying to figure out the implications of terrorism-related law as applied within the Marvel universe. These are some of the laws and ideas I'm using as the basis of this plot development:
- 18 U.S. Code § 2339A - Providing material support to terrorists https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339A
- 18 U.S. Code § 2332a - Use of weapons of mass destruction https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2332a
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriot_Act,_Title_VIII#Terrorist_support
- 18 U.S. Code § 981 - Civil forfeiture https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/981
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_forfeiture_in_the_United_States

The "persons of interest" Tony mentions to Hill are the characters in the Marvel movies and TV shows that either haven't been seen in the movies (e.g. Luke Cage) or haven't been made official Avengers (e.g. Spider-Man).
Despite his bone-deep weariness, Tony knew that sleeping would not be an option in the handful of hours before he'd need to leave for the hospital. There was simply too much stuffed in his head that would gnaw at him if given the opportunity. "Friday, give me enough warning before I have to leave that I can take a shower," he said distractedly.

"Yes, boss."

He debated what to do next, then realized he'd left the tablet in the office. He went back for it and checked his messages again while he was there. Mel had sent him some of the drafts, Bill had copied him on the message to the SI board, and Hill sent him the evacuating-to-the-helicarrier supply list and an assurance that Fury's contacts were finding out what they could about the investigation.

He settled in and started with the list from Hill, as it was the easiest to deal with, and was reassured that the cost was not out of reach even under the circumstances. He replied to that effect, then moved on to the drafts from Mel.

The press release about the investigation was pretty well fleshed out, though he had some comments and there were one or two things he'd need to run past Bill. Her suggested script for the press conference was better than he'd expected, with her never having written something for him before. She must have reviewed some of his past press outings.

The backup press release was little more than a skeleton, with a range of options to fit in the blanks she'd left depending on what, exactly, they were responding to. Mel called it a 'choose your own adventure', but it reminded him more of those things where you fill in types of words without knowing what the surrounding text was about. He only knew about those thanks to the Barton kids, who loved them. He should get some more for them. When he had money to burn again.

Finishing those meant all that was left was the message to the board and the responses from each board member as he or she saw it for the first time. Many of them were pushing to have a conference call that day to discuss the matter, which he wanted to resist but perhaps getting it over with would be best. He limited himself to one reply and suggested a time that evening, late enough that he should be back from the hospital but early enough not to risk missing the start of the mission.

He reviewed his notes, crossing off a few things and adding a few more, and realized he hadn't dealt with the backup drive yet. As he got up to do that, Friday informed him it was time to shower. He sighed and stretched and told Friday to return the office to its normal state as he left the room, tablet firmly in hand.

Retrieving the drive and leaving it outside Rhodey's door didn't take long, and he had Friday record his comments about it rather than try to write a note. That bought him a little more time in the shower, which he desperately needed. He even broke out the concealer for the circles under his eyes; he couldn't shrug off sleepless nights as easily as he used to, and he wanted to avoid any probing questions. Having to waste time at the hospital in the first place was bad enough; being kept there any longer than absolutely necessary was the last thing he needed.

He was on his way to the car right on schedule, only to be stopped by a female voice behind him.

"Mr. Stark?"

He turned to see a vaguely familiar young woman. "What?" he asked brusquely, stalling in hopes he'd find her name before he'd need to use it. She was . . . the new assistant, that's right.
"There are some questions I need to ask you . . . but first you need to let me fix your face. Come here."

"Fix my face?" he repeated, not moving as she drew closer. If he was less tired, he'd have the energy to be offended.

"You look like a raccoon," she said simply, her fingers deftly blending in the concealer. "There, that's better. When will you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Next week," he said dismissively, turning away. "Excuse me."

She didn't try to stop him, so the interaction didn't delay him much. And it was for the best that she'd helped with his appearance. He'd have to remember to enlist her assistance going into the press conference.

The next unexpected encounter of the morning occurred when he stepped into the garage and found Rogers casually leaning against the car. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Rhodey said someone needs to go with you and the team will need to be ready to leave before you're due back," Steve said patiently.

To argue would take too much energy and also time. "Then shut up and get in the car," he said shortly, sliding into the driver's seat.

The drive was absolutely silent, which was helpful for his headache but not so much for the anxieties amplifying themselves in his mind. He'd been too busy in the last day to worry about this last set of tests--or at least, the last planned set of tests--but now he was staring them in the face and he simultaneously wanted to get it over with and wished he didn't have to do it at all.

At least his grip on the steering wheel hid the trembling of his hands.

Rogers remained mercifully quiet as they were escorted back to a room and even turned his back without being asked while Tony changed into the stupid little gown and awkwardly settled onto the bed. Tony busied himself with checking for responses to his work overnight; other than a few more messages from board members, there wasn't anything yet. He sighed, dropped his phone beside him, and closed his eyes as he sagged against the raised end of the bed.

"Rhodey said you were dealing with 'a thing' yesterday," Steve said cautiously. "Has it been resolved?"

"No," Tony replied flatly.

"Can we help somehow?"

"No."

"I thought you were supposed to be taking it easy."

The reproach in Rogers's tone made him angry. "Life doesn't always color between the lines," he snapped, opening his eyes to glare at him.

A nurse bustled in, pushing a small cart. "Good morning, Mr. Stark, Mr.--?"

"Rogers."

"Mr. Rogers," she said agreeably, then smirked. "You'd fill out that cardigan quite nicely, my dear."
She pushed her cart next to the bed and addressed Tony. "Let's get you ready. Which side do you prefer for the IV?"

"Left is fine," he said. She was already on his left side and the sooner this was started, the sooner it would be over.

She went through the usual routine of taking his pulse, blood pressure, and temperature. "Your pulse and blood pressure are a little high today. Are you feeling all right?"

"I have a bad headache," he admitted cautiously, alarmed by the sudden thought that they might want to defer the tests.

"I'll see if we can do something about that before they take you back," she said kindly as she began prepping his arm for the IV.

He let out the breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. He watched her expertly slide the needle in as if from a distance, abruptly feeling quite disconnected from himself. Needles didn't usually bother him, but this time he felt a wave of nausea and he had to close his eyes.

The next time he tried to breathe in, there didn't seem to be enough oxygen in the room.

Logically, he knew there was nothing wrong with the air and there was nothing to freak out about. He'd been at this hospital before, had done this entire process before, and everything was fine.

But everything was not fine and though he knew exactly what was happening, that didn't mean he could stop it.

He felt someone touch him and he shook them off violently. Then there were hands all over him and he couldn't get them off and his head was pounding and he couldn't breathe . . .

Random bits of light and sound filtered into his awareness, but he had no context to fit them into and they slipped through the cracks into nothingness.

Eventually he settled into his own body. He was flat on his back in a bed that wasn't his; the sheets were rough beneath his fingertips. He could hear people nearby but not close by, talking, walking, sometimes even laughing. The space around him was quiet, though he thought he could hear someone else breathing. Or maybe it was just him? He delayed his next inhale to find out and, sure enough, the other breathing continued.

"Tony?" a voice asked quietly.

The voice shook loose the remaining pieces of the puzzle that had been stuck deeper in his cottony mind and he flushed with shame at what he abruptly remembered. He would have preferred to remain unaware, especially considering who had witnessed the, um, episode.

He would have feigned sleep, except that the rapid uptick in his breathing had already given him away.

"Tony, it's all right," Rogers tried to reassure him.

He scowled. It was far from being 'all right', just like they were far from being friends. But he was becoming increasingly concerned about what had happened in the blank space between the last thing he remembered and the current moment, not to mention his concern about how much time he'd lost.
He tried to speak but his tongue felt like wool. "Here," Steve said, and something brushed against his lips. It felt humiliating to have to accept anything from Rogers, but he cautiously sipped from the straw anyway, resolutely not opening his eyes. Perhaps later he could pretend he didn’t remember this part, either.

"What time is it?" he asked gruffly.

"Not quite three o’clock."

Tony’s eyes flew open and he sat bolt upright. He had a moment to notice the lights had been dimmed and the curtains pulled against the sunlight before his headache caught up with him and he had to screw his eyes shut as the room began to spin around him. He might have whimpered.

"Take it easy, Tony," Steve admonished and tried to push him back down onto the bed.

"Get off," he said hotly, shoving the hands away.

"I’ll find a nurse."

Steve’s footsteps crossed the room and returned with another set of footsteps. Tony cautiously worked his eyes open to see who had come to torment him. "Hello, dear," the nurse--a different one from earlier--said with a drawling accent. "How are you feelin’?"

"Have a headache," he said with gritted teeth. "When can I leave?"

"The doctors haven't released you yet, so I don't know," she said sympathetically. "But let me get you some tylenol or somethin’ and see if that helps."

"Fine," he said shortly.

"You can put the bed up if you want, just use the remote," she added before she left the room.

He felt groggy enough that lying back down just about guaranteed falling back to sleep and he didn't have time for that. Adjusting the bed was a much better option.

The nurse returned in short order with two ibuprofen in a small paper cup and another styrofoam cup of water, which she slid over to him on the bedside table. "Try this, dear, and let us know if it hasn't helped by the time you leave."

"Thanks."

"What do you remember?" Steve asked after she’d left again.

"I freaked out," he said dully, rolling the styrofoam cup between his palms.

"Have you ever been afraid of needles before?"

"It wasn't about the needle."

"Then what was it about?"

"None of your business."

"They had to sedate you, Tony. You've been out of it for hours."

"Did they do the tests?"
"Yes, eventually."

"Good. Where's my phone?"

Steve plucked it out of the pile of his clothes at the foot of the bed and tossed it into his lap. "Are you sure there's nothing we can do to help?"

He didn't dignify that question with a response, instead skimming his list of messages. The most pressing issue was that the rest of the board had agreed to meet that evening. "Pass me my clothes, I need to get out of here."

"The nurse just said you haven't been cleared to leave," Steve objected, not moving.

Tony sighed in annoyance and resigned himself to reviewing the new information on the small phone screen. Mel had sent updated drafts and an assurance that there had been no hint of him in the news so far, he had four missed calls and three emails from Bill, and there was nothing new from Hill. He wasn't sure no news was good news, but he had enough to deal with already.

The first message from Bill informed him that, as far as they could determine, the government couldn't force them to leave the compound, since it was the primary residence for the Avengers. It was good to know but he'd still keep relocation as an option, just in case.

The second message from Bill confirmed that the Avengers accounts, such as they were, remained available for use, unaffected by the legal drama that cut him off from the majority of his personal funds. Also, as suspected, the addition of the Avengers to the U.N. budgetary process was still ongoing so they didn't yet have an official allocation from that source. What was currently in the accounts was what they'd have indefinitely.

The third message related to the investigation; apparently the government was demanding certain Avengers-related documents, including all communications between him and the members of the Avengers team. His response was brief: *Do they really mean all? Even what's classified?*

He skimmed over Mel's drafts and forwarded the one to Bill to make sure the wording was on firm legal ground. Just as he finished, he got a call from Dr. Mann. "So what's the story?" he asked in greeting.

"I should be asking you that. How are you doing?"

"Better than earlier," he admitted. Either the ibuprofen, the water, or both had taken the edge off the headache.

"Despite what happened today, your scans looked good. Have you been talking to the therapist?"

"Not in the past few days, but yeah, we've been talking."

"Good. Make another appointment soon, and I'll have someone take your blood pressure again as well. I want to keep an eye on that."

"I'll be fine. I'm just dealing with some stuff right now."

"You shouldn't be. Your restrictions last through the end of the week."

"I know. There isn't any other option."

She paused, then said, "I'd scold you, but frankly I'm surprised you've been behaving as much as you
have. Take it easy through Friday and I'll check on you in a week or so."

"You're the best," he said gratefully. As soon as he hung up, he crawled forward just enough to reach his clothes. He couldn't have done so earlier without risking an embarrassing incident of nausea.

"Was that your doctor?" Steve asked mildly.

"Yep. We should be out of here soon."

Getting dressed seemed easy enough until he had to budge off the bed to put his pants on. He stumbled trying to find his feet and had to clutch the handrail with some desperation until he was able to balance. He steadied himself before Rogers made it around the bed to try to help, though, which was somewhat satisfying.

He perched on the edge of the bed when he was dressed, his head spinning just a bit and he wasn't sure if it was the headache or whatever they'd dosed him with. But it didn't matter, because then the nurse was there with a wheelchair, telling them they were free to go.

Tony didn't argue about sitting in the wheelchair, a little glad he wouldn't have to stumble out of the building. "Giddyup, let's go," he said over his shoulder, then checked his phone again, keeping his eyes trained upon it.

Steve took his preoccupation in stride and didn't comment until they were outside and Tony gingerly rose to his feet and started patting his pockets. "I have the keys," he said, holding them up and making them jingle.

"Lies. My cars don't require anything so pedestrian as a key," Tony protested half-heartedly, eyeing the distance to the car.

"Allow me," Steve said, offering his elbow. When Tony hesitated, he added softly, "The nurses said you might be woozy for another few hours. I won't let you fall."

"Then what are you waiting for? Carry on," Tony said.

He insisted on riding in the back seat so he didn't have to watch the road or Steve's driving. By the time they arrived at the compound, he was feeling more steady on his feet and declined Steve's proffered arm. He made a beeline for the elevator and headed up to the kitchen. Steve followed without comment.

Tony was in the midst of making coffee before Steve finally asked, "What are you doing?"

He opted for the obvious answer. "Making coffee." He began opening and closing cabinets. "Do we have another thermos? Friday, did I leave that thermos in the office?"

"Yes, boss," Friday said.

Tony sighed, dug out two large insulated mugs, and set them on the counter. "These will have to do."

"Why do you need coffee?" Steve asked patiently. "It will be time for dinner soon."

"I have a dreadful conference call in . . . how long do I have, Friday?"

"Twenty-six minutes, boss."
"Also known as just enough time to make sufficient amounts of coffee and check on a few things before a conversation that is sure to be unpleasant."

"Are you sure you should do that now?"

Tony stopped his bustling long enough to meet Steve's gaze. "There isn't any other option," he said soberly.

Steve frowned. "That's what you said on the phone. What's going on, Tony?"

He gripped the edge of the counter and said fiercely, "Okay, look. Do you trust me or not? Because I do not have time to waste on persuading you that I'm only doing what is necessary."

"To stave off something worse?" Steve asked, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

"I sure hope so. It's hard to imagine something much worse." He felt so weary, but there would be no time to rest for hours. He needed coffee, so much coffee. He turned away from Rogers and his suspicious gaze to finish dealing with the life-sustaining conveyor of caffeine.

Steve didn't try to argue. Tony quickly finished with his coffee and picked one up in each hand. "See you later, Spangles."

"Is there anything I can do to prepare for the mission while you're busy? Surely there's something I could do to help."

He paused halfway to the door. "Haven't even thought about that yet. I'll figure it out later. We've got hours."

"Should I bring you some dinner?"

"Don't bother," he called over his shoulder as he left the room. Once he was out of sight, he shuddered. His stomach churned at the idea of food; even the coffee might be a stretch, but he might not last through the next several hours without it.

He stashed his coffee in the office and paid a quick visit to his bedroom--specifically, the bathroom, and also the drawer where he'd stashed the tablet--before sagging into the chair and securing the office in advance of the call.

A quick check of his messages, a bracing swig of his coffee, and he was on the line with the board.

It wasn't the best way to spend two hours, but it wasn't any worse than the way he'd spent the day before, and it was about what he'd expected it to be. He drained both cups of coffee and longed for more well before the meeting was finally over.

His phone rang almost as soon as he'd hung up. "Hey Bill, what's new?" he asked, not bothering to try to sound upbeat the way he had with the board.

"I wanted to discuss the matter of the requested documents," Bill said briskly. "The answer to your earlier question is that classification doesn't matter. Any pertinent materials are required to be submitted for review."

"Are there any limits? Time period, or something like that?"

"Ah, yes, they are requesting everything in your possession from the time the Avengers were assembled as a team until the Secretary of State visited the Avengers compound to introduce the
"Accords."

"But . . . that covers years. Do they really think I'll have relevant material from that entire time?"

"Given your reputation for recording things . . ." Bill started, but didn't need to finish.

"Just because I record things doesn't mean I keep them forever," he protested. "I have retention rules, just like the company does."

"We will need to submit documentation of those rules to explain what is present and what is absent from the records we provide."

Tony rested his elbows on the desk and gripped his hair with both hands. "Everything," he said faintly. He took a deep breath and said more strongly, "All right. We'll bury them in documents, recordings, whatever I have. They want everything? They'll get everything."

"We have some time to comply, so do not overextend yourself to collect everything immediately, Mr. Stark."

"Are you telling me to go to bed, Bill?" he teased.

"I didn't say that," the lawyer protested, but Tony was willing to bet he would have winked if they were meeting in person.

"Good night, Bill. Keep me posted."

"Of course."

He spent a few minutes afterward making notes on the tablet, then turned to the computer and added a few things to the press conference script and sent the updated version to Mel. When that was finished, he sighed and forced himself back into motion.

His first stop was the kitchen to drop off his varied coffee receptacles. He checked the clock; he needed to set up for the mission, but he still had a few hours. In the meantime, there was another person he had to talk to and the timing seemed like it would be convenient.

He took a deep breath and headed for the Barton quarters.
Tony rapped on the door lightly, hoping that would be loud enough for Laura to hear but not loud enough to wake the kids if they were already sleeping. The door opened just a crack, then Lila gasped, "Uncle Tony!" She flung open the door and hugged him enthusiastically.

"Hey, little bit," he said, slightly winded. "Where are your Mama and brothers?" He didn't see anyone in the front room, but he could hear voices somewhere in the sleeping area.

"Saying good-night to Daddy," she replied, releasing his waist and grabbing his hand. "Will you read with me?"

"Sure, honey," he said agreeably as she pulled him over to the couch that divided the room in half. "Do you want me to read to you?"

"No. Auntie Nat read to me earlier. I'll read to you," she said, having already bounded over to the bookcase. Her selection was something bright yellow with a duck on the cover. She stopped right in front of him and hugged the book against her chest. "Can I sit on your lap?"

He held out his arms in invitation. "Come on up."

She was all elbows and knees as she scrambled up and settled into place. He didn't fully follow the story even though Lila read it fairly skillfully, distracted by everything on his mind and especially how he was going to broach the conversation with Laura.

When the book was finished, Lila hopped off his lap to return the book to its shelf, and he felt a little cold from the sudden absence of her body heat. She was back almost immediately, though, another book in hand.

"Lila, come to bed please," Laura called.

Lila frowned but put the book away without complaining. Then she returned and hugged him around the neck. "Good night," she said.

"Good night," he answered, patting her back awkwardly.

She ran into the hallway and out of his sight. He slouched back into the couch and sighed. When his eyes began to droop closed of their own accord, he knew sitting in that position was a mistake. He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees, staring sightlessly at the floor as he mentally went through the list of what else needed to be done that evening.

"The kids missed you at dinner," Laura said as she picked up an abandoned stuffed toy and dropped it into a basket with its kin.

He hadn't heard her approach. "Sorry," he said. He took a deep breath and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, disappearing from view behind him. There was the sound of a cupboard opening and closing.

He laughed hollowly. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Here." She dropped something onto the cushion next to him. "It's the only food I have here. Do you
"Do you have something to drink?"

"No, I'm not staying long." He picked up the pouch she'd dropped. "What--"

"It's applesauce, conveniently packaged to not make a mess," she explained as she sat at the other end of the couch. "You twist the spout and suck on it."

He fidgeted with the packaging but didn't follow her instructions. "I came to warn you," he said carefully.

"Warn me?" She sounded curious.

"We may have to evacuate the compound, relocate to the helicarrier. The compound personnel will be having a drill sometime this week to get ready. I--I wanted to let you know so you can prepare, just in case. I know the kids aren't easy to pack up at a moment's notice."

She stared at him thoughtfully. "I appreciate that," she said. "Are we in danger?"

"I hope not." The situation was complicated enough as it was.

"Then why would we have to leave?"

He twisted the plastic spout until part of it popped off, trying to determine the simplest explanation.

"Now you'll have to eat it," she said lightly.

He glanced at her, then the pouch of applesauce. It only took him three swallows to drain. "Because Ross is coming after me and I'm the only thing between him and everyone else. I would do almost anything to keep them from being put back on the Raft," he finally replied.

Her brow furrowed. "Can't the U.N. help?"

"Only to a certain point. It's easier to stay out of jail than it is to get someone out. And even with all that's happened in the last couple of days, I get the feeling he's still got something up his sleeve."

"What's happened?"

He briefly explained the issue of the investigation and the asset seizures and everything he'd had to deal with in the last forty-odd hours.

She listened sympathetically. "The team would be happy to help, if they can."

He sighed, feeling more exhausted from his recitation. "I don't think they can."

"You won't know until you let them try."

He nodded, then let his head hang. "I'll tell them, I promise."

She reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "I know you will. Do you have time to sleep before the mission?"

"No," he said shortly, steeling himself to stand and take his leave. "I should go. Things to do, people to see, you know how it is."

"I can only imagine," she said, rising to her feet when he did. "If there's anything I can do . . ."
"Keep the kids safe," he said impulsively. "They're--they're great kids. I'm sorry I keep putting them in harm's way." That was far more than he'd meant to say, but he also meant every word.

She smiled slightly. "We're all just doing our best."

He cleared his throat awkwardly and moved to the door, opening it. "Good night," he said, stepping into the silent hallway and not looking back.

"Good luck," she called after him.

He heard the door close softly behind him and reflexively checked his watch. Three hours until showtime. Mission prep was his next priority, except he couldn't remember exactly how he'd set things up the last time. He'd liked it, whatever he'd done.

"Friday, display viewing center schematics from the last mission." Ah, that was it.

He strode purposefully down the hall to borrow a couple of screens from his workshop. A little physical exertion would tide him over until he could make more coffee.

Tony had manhandled everything into place, hooked up what needed connecting, and was running checks on the software and outputs when he decided he ought to make his next call.

He foraged in the kitchen for an energy drink and popped it open while the phone rang. He honestly wasn't sure if it would be answered, but at least he could say he'd tried.

"Tony."

"I can explain my question from yesterday," he said, transferring the call from his phone to a headset to test out the connections.

"Please do," Pepper said warily.

"Are you alone? What I need to tell you isn't public knowledge yet."

"I'm alone."

He launched into his explanation, which wasn't any easier for having just given something like it to Laura. He told her everything, down to the conversation with the board, and Pepper listened in silence until he finished.

"You do realize that breaking up with me after the fact won't protect me or the company, right?"

"I guess you should've let me break up with you when I was visiting, then," he shot back, then gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I, I'm--"

"You're tired and overwhelmed," Pepper said gently. "I understand. But you need to be aware that if they're investigating things from before, our current relationship status won't necessarily mean anything."

"Right." He paused, trying to remember why it had seemed like the only thing he could do. "I'm just trying to minimize the risk as much as I can. It may not be enough, but at least it's something."

"If you say so." She didn't sound convinced. "Will that be all, Mr. Stark?"
He winced. "That will be all, Ms. Potts," he said softly.

He spent a little longer tweaking and fine-tuning and checking on the satellite readings, then all he had to do was make more coffee and it would be showtime. He wondered at the fact that he hadn't seen Rogers yet, but he didn't let it bother him. If good old Stevie boy didn't show, that wasn't his fault. He wasn't the man's mother, and it would be further proof that benching him had been the right decision.

He put on the coffee--a whole pot's worth, because it would be at least two hours before the whole rigamarole was over--and checked his messages. Nothing new, which was both a relief and a worry at the same time. It made him wonder what people were up to.

As the coffee finished brewing, Rogers appeared as if by magic, standing beside the kitchen island with his arms crossed and a frown firmly fixed upon his face.

Tony glanced at him. "Can you be helped?"

"Why the secrecy, Tony? What are you hiding?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The last time you disappeared for a while, the result was Ultron. Forgive me for being a little suspicious about what you might be up to."

Tony bit his lip and took a deep breath before answering. "We aren't going to do this now," he said firmly. "The others will be waiting for us to check in."

"Because your schedule is the most important, never mind that you left the team high and dry while they were trying to prepare for this mission."

Tony took his pot of coffee and a clean-ish mug over to the table where everything was set up around the conference screen. "I worked through the night to be sure my part was done before they left, Rogers, despite the other shit I had to deal with," he said icily as he put on his headset. He activated the comm line. "Wakey, wakey, how are we looking?"

Rogers donned his own headset, looking for all the world like he was sulking.

"We're five minutes out," Clint replied. "Everyone is suiting up. Anything new at your end?"

"Nothing has changed in the satellite readings, including thermal scans," Tony said. "As far as that goes, you're good to go."

"Thanks, Tony," Rhodey said, then added, "How's that thing coming?"

He glanced at Rogers, who glowered in his direction. "Long story. I'll fill you in when you get back."

"Roger that. Things look good here, but we'll take a few minutes to scope it out before we proceed. Earpieces in everyone, and report," Rhodey ordered.

Each person reported in, with Steve and Tony last. By then the quinjet was within scanning range. Tony was pleased to note the peek-a-boo program worked a little better from the ship than it did from the satellite, and revealed two hazy outlines of openings in the mountain that were being hidden from the naked eye. The other new scanner provided more information about the relative sizes of the openings; one was large enough to admit the quinjet.
"Is anyone else thinking they might have aircraft in there?" Tony asked in a moment of silence.

"Red Skull did," Steve put in. "This looks a lot like that old base. I don't like it." When he finished speaking, he muted their comm line.

Tony looked over at him in surprise. "What?"

"I overheard you talking on the phone earlier," Steve said stiffly. "How dare you hide something like that right after you got upset with me for not telling you what Bucky did."

All Tony could do was stare at him for a moment. "You should lead with that next time," he said finally. "Don't bother asking me what I'm up to when you already have some idea what I'm up to."

"Anyone else have reservations?" Rhodey asked on the comm.

No one spoke.

"We're a go as planned. Aerial contingent, prepare for launch. We'll wait behind that ridge over there until the jet blasts the backdoor, then make our move to cover Vision while he gets inside to copy the data."

Tony double-checked that they were still muted before saying fiercely, "When I asked you earlier if you trust me, you should've just said no. Because it's obvious you don't. But you know what? That goes both ways, buddy. And I have to say, I think my decision not to say something about this right away--while the team was preparing for a mission, might I add--is far less of an issue than your decision not to tell me about my parents' murder for two fucking years," he spat. "Would you have ever managed to spill the beans? Or would I have gone to my grave still believing that my father's drunkenness is what killed my mother?"

He probably shouldn't have let all of that come out, especially not while the mission was commencing--a brief glance at the screen revealed the quinjet pulling away from a cloud of smoke on one side of the mountain--but he was well beyond the point of caring. If Stevie boy wanted an argument, he sure as hell was going to get one.

"This isn't about me, it's about you and your history of hiding vital information from the team," Rogers objected, raising his voice as he stood up and leaned on the table.

"Really? Do tell," Tony shot back. "Besides those three days when Bruce and I were working on Ultron, name just one time I hid something from any of you that negatively impacted the team."

His challenge went unaddressed as their attention was drawn to the unfolding fight by a cry of "Look out!"

A swarm of HYDRA fighters wearing jetpacks was pouring out of the large mountainside opening.

"Guys, I think we seriously underestimated the number of people at this base," Sam said, swooping into the fray alongside Rhodey and Vision. "And they have jetpacks. Jetpacks! Stark, are you holding out on us? Why don't we all have jetpacks?"

Tony unmuted the line. "Check your back, sweetcheeks. Pretty sure you already have a jetpack."

"I do, but what about the rest? We sure could use the backup right about now."

"We're trying to lay cover fire, but they've got anti-aircraft guns so we can't get close yet," Clint said, accompanied by the sound of an explosion. "Oops. Wanda, you okay back there?"
"I am fine," Wanda said. "But I cannot help fight them from here."

"Vision, get inside and try to take down their systems," Rhodey barked. "That should take out the guns so we'll get more help from the jet."

Tony watched with growing anxiety as the fight continued, with a seemingly endless stream of guys in jetpacks replacing those blown out of the sky. Clint's bow could be useful from a distance, but then the jet would have to have the hatch open and facing the opening in the mountainside, which seemed too risky, plus they wouldn't be able to dodge the gunfire as effectively.

Then he had an idea. "Nat, aim your fire at the guns."

"What do you think I've been doing?"

He ignored her. "Wanda, can you try to turn the HYDRA fighters against each other somehow? Like, make them afraid or something?"

"Tony," Steve said reproachfully.

"I will try," Wanda said resolutely.

At first, nothing seemed to change. Then some of the HYDRA fighters turned on one another, sending them in pairs down into the gorge below. There were still too many, but it was progress.

"Their system should be offline," Vision reported.

"I've taken out their guns; even if the system comes back, they won't be shooting at us," Natasha reported shortly thereafter.

"We're coming in closer," Clint said.

"Vision, are you able to do the copying?" Rhodey asked.

"Backup would be appreciated," Vision replied. "There are personnel attempting to interfere."

"Clint, can you and Wanda get in there like we discussed?"

"We're about to find out."

The quinjet swung close to the mountain. A barrage from the guns and a cloud of red energy assaulted the hangar-sized space and a fireball erupted, narrowly missing the quinjet as it dove out of the way. "I think that takes care of any remaining jetpacks," Nat said dryly. The jet swooped back up and into the opening, lightly touching down to allow Clint and Wanda to get off.

"Vision, where are you?" Clint demanded as the jet pulled away to rejoin the firefight. The two closest HYDRA goons in jetpacks were felled by arrows.

Vision's response was garbled, static crackling over the line.

"Vision, picture it in your mind," Tony said urgently, hoping he could be heard. "Wanda, can you read him?"

Wanda replied confidently. "Yes. We're on our way."

With no more reinforcements launching and the assistance of Nat in the quinjet, Sam and Rhodey were able to gain the upper hand and methodically pick off each of the goons in jetpacks. When the
air was clear, they headed for the opening.

"No sign of the others," Nat reported from the jet.

"What's your status?" Rhodey demanded over the comm.

There was no response.

Tony muted his microphone. "Friday, add 'sending signals through mountains' to my project list. There's got to be some way to make this work better," he muttered. He activated his microphone again. "Rhodey, I'm going to use your suit as a signal amplifier."

"Acknowledged. I've always wanted to be an antenna," Rhodey joked.

"Today's your lucky day," Tony replied absently, his attention focused on making the necessary adjustments. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, but translating it into thought and then keystrokes was taking more time and effort than it should. He moved the suit further into the hangar and was just about to have them try it and hope it worked when Sam's voice broke his concentration.

"Guys, I'm pretty sure I'm looking at a self-destruct countdown over here."

"How much time have we got?" Rhodey asked, his voice even.

"A minute."

Friday helpfully displayed a countdown clock in the bottom right corner of the screen.

Shit. Tony flipped the virtual switch. "You're a go for broadcast."

"Vision, Clint, Wanda, you have less than a minute to clear the base," Rhodey said urgently. "If you can hear me, please respond."

Silence.

"Forty-five seconds," Sam said.

"Sam, get to the jet. Nat, be ready to take off. Tony, if I move closer to the door--"

"--the signal won't go as far," Tony confirmed.

"If they're deep enough that they can't hear you, they won't be able to get out in time," Steve said soberly.

"You're right, they won't," Rhodey agreed heavily. "But we'll wait here, just in case."

Long seconds passed, and Rhodey retreated. He had just landed in the jet when the mountain shook. The quinjet burst out of the mountain less than a second later, the hatch still open.

"It's too soon--" Sam started, but his objection was interrupted by Clint.

"We could use a pickup down here."

Nat swore as Vision abruptly appeared in front of the jet. He was pointing down the mountain and appeared unperturbed as he let the jet pass through him.

Tony had to close his eyes for a moment, the wheeling images on the displays a little too much to
handle as the jet banked and Rhodey and Sam both dove out of the hatch toward the new hole in the side of the mountain.

"Got 'em!" Wilson crowed as he and Rhodey raced away from danger, Clint and Wanda in tow.

Muffled explosions echoed over the comm, and the quinjet's scanners witnessed the mountain fold in on itself, crumpling as if it were no more than paper.

"Any signs of survivors?" Rhodey asked when they were all back on the jet, watching a cloud of smoke and dust rise from the settling rubble.

Nat turned the quinjet and inched it a little closer. "Negative," Clint said.

"And there's still no one on the neighboring slopes at risk from avalanches?"

"There's nobody around."

"Everyone all right?"

There was murmured agreement.

"Then let's make tracks. What happened back there?" Rhodey asked, popping up his faceplate and cutting the only video feed of the quinjet interior.

"We heard your warning but didn't have enough time to get back up to the hangar. I guess you didn't hear me say we'd be making our own way out?" Clint said.

"We didn't hear anything from you. How did you do that?"

"Wanda flung Vision through the wall," Clint said, sounding proud.

"He made himself dense first," Wanda added. "I wasn't sure it would work."

"Is Vision all right?" Steve asked.

"I think so. He hasn't talked since we found him by the computers," Wanda replied.

"I was able to get some of the data on the backup drive," Clint said. "But it isn't much. Sorry, Tony."

The comment barely registered, as Tony was still thinking about why Vision wasn't speaking. "Wanda, did Vision get any data?" he asked urgently.

"I think so, but I can't tell for sure. His mind is . . . jumbled."

It seemed too much to hope that the data transfer had gone right in the midst of all the other things that had gone wrong, but either Vision was overwhelmed by the amount of information or he'd been compromised by his exposure to the HYDRA computers. Tony didn't want to even consider the latter as an option. "Rhodey, you're going to want to get out of the suit. I need it."

There was some rustling, then Rhodey said, "It's all yours."

"Vision, transfer whatever you've got to the suit and Friday will take it from there." There was no audible acknowledgment, but new files began appearing on their HYDRA server. Tony couldn't help but hold his breath as the list grew longer and the seconds ticked by.

They had come so close to losing half the team and they still might have lost or damaged Vision and
it was too much for his already shredded nerves to take. "Vision?" he demanded.

"That was . . . odd," Vision said faintly. "But I believe I was able to copy everything."

Tony heaved a sigh of relief that was matched by a sigh coming from Steve's direction. There was cheering from the other end of the comm. "Good job, buddy."

"Let's debrief while everyone is on the line, then we can all get some sleep," Rhody said.

Tony listened with half an ear to the discussion as he began dismantling his viewing setup. There was no longer anything to see, there was nothing he wanted do with the new HYDRA files yet, and just sitting and listening meant he'd have time to dwell on what had happened. Steve remained seated, taking notes on a notepad Tony couldn't remember noticing earlier.

When Rhody bade them good night and the comm line went dead, Tony sighed, tossed his headset onto the table, and debated whether to leave the rest or finish cleaning up so he wouldn't have to do it later. Steve didn't move at first, his jaw clenched, then he slowly removed his headset and said, "You should not have encouraged Wanda to manipulate them."

"If you had a better idea, you should have said something."

"It's a matter of principle, but I should know better than to think you have principles. For you the ends always justify the means."

"When the alternative is someone getting killed, yes, Wanda manipulating the enemy is worth it. And the ends don't always justify the means. If you paid attention you'd already know that."

"So you admit you don't have principles, then?" Steve asked with a smirk.

Tony huffed in frustration. "I have principles," he insisted. "They aren't the same as yours, but they do exist."

Steve scoffed, rising from his seat and crossing his arms over his chest. "How is anyone supposed to know that when you don't stand up for them? All you know how to do is compromise to get what you want. It's only ever about you."

"How is suggesting that Wanda turn the enemy against itself about me?" Tony asked, bewildered. "I may be a genius, but I don't follow that logic, Rogers."

"Because by doing it you're turning the Avengers into something they're not. The Avengers are supposed to make the world a safer place. We can't do that through dishonest means or we're no better than HYDRA."

"Who did you want to die, then?" Tony shot back, noticing that he was almost yelling but he didn't care. If his words didn't get through that thick skull, maybe his volume would.

"No one had to die," Steve objected, his voice also raised.

"They were outnumbered and outgunned! What other outcome could there possibly be?"

"They could have retreated, regrouped. We could have tried again when we're back at full strength!"

"Do you really think HYDRA would wait around for us to go back? They'd nuke the data, destroy the base, and scatter. Mopping them up has been enough of a nightmare, the last thing we need is that many HYDRA goons going to ground. Honestly, it's something of a miracle they were even
there for us to find."

It was the truth, every last word, and Steve seemed to realize that, too, for he didn't speak immediately.

Tony belatedly recognized another truth. "This is about you not being there to help, isn't it? Well, let me be the first to burst your bubble: there isn't a single thing you could have done by being there. What, would you have flung yourself out of the quinjet at the jetpacks? You would've fallen to your death or forced Wilson or Rhodey to catch you and taken them out of play. Flinging your shield wouldn't help, either. Clint shooting them would have been a better gamble, but giving him the opportunity would have endangered the jet and everyone aboard. I thought about that at the time, and I'm sure Rhodey did too."

Steve clenched his jaw and said nothing.

He wasn't finished. "And you want to talk about the ends justifying the means? You went AWOL to find Barnes during the war. You broke into a military base to steal Wilson's wings. You took down S.H.I.E.L.D. to get at HYDRA. You interfered when they tried to arrest Barnes for the Vienna bombing. You've busted people out of the Raft. Worthy ends, dishonest means. And then there's the straight up dishonesty, dare I even call it hypocrisy, of hiding what you knew about my parents. If you want to give a lecture about principles, try facing a mirror."

"Are you going to lecture me on principles?"

"As if I would dare to lecture you on that. All I know how to do is compromise to get what I want," Tony said bitterly. "At least you've been consistent in your low opinion of me. I have to give you that."

"Tony-"

He held up a hand. "No. Don't. We both know you don't mean whatever conciliatory thing is about to come out of your mouth so let's skip to the part where we end this conversation."

A different voice answered. "You've said your piece, you should let him say his," Dr. Tanya said gently as she approached the table. "Sit down, both of you."

"Why are you here?" Tony asked suspiciously, eyeing her fuzzy blue robe and wondering who woke her.

"Friday called me."

"How long ago? How much did you overhear? was the question he wanted to ask but didn't."

"Long enough." She looked between them in silent censure as she sat down. They both hastily took their previous seats. "Now, this discussion will be most productive if you both agree to take what is said in good faith." She focused on Steve. "You were about to say something."

Steve seemed to deflate somewhat under her gaze, but the fight didn't fully leave his posture as he turned to Tony. It took him several tries before he managed to ask the question. "You said you have principles. What are they?"

Tony could only guess how Rogers might've said it in Doc T's absence. He looked at her and she nodded in encouragement, so he turned his attention to Rogers. "Are you seriously asking me that right now? You've known me for how long and you're only just asking at --" he checked his watch, "--three in the morning?"
"Maybe I should have asked sooner, but I'm asking now," Steve said defensively.

Tony checked the coffee pot and his mug. Both were empty. "How about we hold that thought until I can get more coffee."

"If you're both willing, we can have this conversation later," Dr. Tanya offered.

Tony eyed Steve warily. "I can just get more coffee," he said. "I can't guarantee when I'll be available, and I think I'd rather deal with the bee in his bonnet now than have to worry about it later."

"Your schedule is the most important," Steve said bitingly.

"Fuck you," Tony retorted as he took the pot and the mug to the kitchen area. He could hear Dr. Tanya and Steve conversing in his absence, and he didn't care enough to wonder what that was about. He was on his umpteenth hour without sleep, his stomach wasn't thrilled at the idea of more coffee, and he should probably be checking on how the other things were going, but dealing with this now was easier than adding it to the pile of things-to-be-anxious-about.

And if Rogers actually listened, it might even be worth it.
Repercussions

Tony wasn't quiet as he returned to the table so he could be sure he wasn't interrupting something he didn't want to hear. He set his large mug down with both hands, then sank back into his chair.

"I apologize for my last comment," Steve said without preamble and without looking at him.

Tony glanced at Dr. Tanya and bit back his reflexive retort, *No you don't.* "Thanks."

"Steve asked about your principles," Dr. Tanya prompted him.

He took a bracing sip of his coffee. "I'm only going to talk about this once, Rogers, so you'd better listen. You want to know about my principles? Well, there's one that has guided me for, hm, my entire adult life. At least, since I took over the company. Protecting people. God knows I fail far more often than I'd like, but I try. In everything I do, I try."

"Protecting people," Steve repeated dubiously. "You took over your father's weapons company and decided to protect people?"

He focused his gaze on his mug rather than react to Rogers's tone or facial expressions. "The weapons protected American soldiers. I was convinced they had to be as good as they could be, because lives were on the line. One life in particular was on the line, a guy I came to know at MIT who was stupid enough and brave enough to think a military career was better than any of the other things he could have been doing."

"Rhodes."

He nodded without looking up. "Then I went to Afghanistan, saw my weapons used against the soldiers I thought I was protecting. People think it was getting hit that caused the change of heart, and sure, that was part of it, but watching those kids get killed for me by the things I designed . . . "

He had to stop, take a sip of coffee, and take a deep breath. "And Yinsen, of course, and I saw how many of my weapons they had stockpiled and I knew that wasn't going to be all of it and I had to do something." He chuckled a little. "And Iron Man was born. It was only about revenge at first, taking care of the stray Stark tech, but once I realized what I was capable of, that I could put a stop to a lot of the violence in the world, I knew I had to do everything I could."

"And when you hacked S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files on the carrier? That was protecting people?"

"When a shadowy organization like S.H.I.E.L.D. decides to hide things from its own people, that generally doesn't bode well for anyone. You went snooping yourself, so I know you agree with me."

"Designing the repulsor engines used on the Insight carriers?"

"Having a giant flying aircraft carrier that can be felled by predictable problems isn't good for the people on the carrier or the people on the ground. I hoped they'd retrofit the existing helicarriers. I had no idea about the Insight project."


"Insight wasn't on the radar then. After that I was a little busy picking up the pieces from my house being destroyed."
"And the Accords?"

Ah, there it was. He'd expected it sooner. He met Steve's gaze defiantly. "An attempt to make sure something like Ultron or Lagos never happens again. Or at least that the authorities in that country are aware of the danger and ready if something does happen. Why didn't you warn them, Rogers?"

"The Nigerian police had no hope of containing Rumlow. We barely managed."

"But they could have provided reinforcements or at least gotten the civilians out of the way. That was terrible judgment on your part."

"We could have handled it better," Steve conceded grudgingly. "What about the thing you're dealing with now?"

"How much did you overhear?"

"You're being investigated by the government."

"That's it?"

Steve nodded once.

Tony heaved a sigh and mournfully examined the bottom of his empty coffee cup. "I'm going to explain when the others come back, so I'd rather not have to hash it out now. I promise full disclosure then. Deal?"

Steve hesitated, frowning, but agreed.

"Thank you for your honesty, Tony," Dr. Tanya said. "Is there anything you would like to ask Steve?"

He had almost forgotten she was there. Yeah, he had questions, but he didn't think the answers were worth pursuing at that hour and with everything else going on.

Why have you always had a poor opinion of me?

Who put the stick up your ass?

What makes you think I routinely hide things from the team?

On second thought, that answer might be worth his time. "Yeah, I have a question," he said, and heard Rogers shift in his seat. He shifted his eyes from his coffee cup to watch him. "As the mission was starting, you accused me of a history of hiding vital information from the team. I'll repeat the question you didn't answer then: other than Ultron, when have I ever hidden information that negatively affected the team? I have given the team a home, my money, my tech, more than any of the rest of you combined, and you're sitting there saying I hide things from you?"

Rogers's jaw clenched, but he waited to answer until Tony finished speaking. "You mean besides whatever is going on with this investigation?"

"Yes, I mean besides this investigation. I already agreed to tell everyone about it as soon as they're back," Tony snapped even as Doc T spoke up.

"In good faith, gentlemen," she said reprovingly. "Steve, please answer the question."

Rogers clenched his fist, then moved it into his lap, studying the table rather than meet Tony's eyes.
Seconds ticked by and he still did not speak.

Tony might have enjoyed watching him squirm, except that every moment wasted here was one less moment he could spend on something else.

"I don't know," Rogers admitted finally, sounding surprised. "The only other incident I can think of was the palladium, but that predates the team and Natasha only mentioned it because I wondered why she did an eval on you."

"Then why . . . ?" he wasn't quite sure what he was asking, and the words dangled in the space between them.

"I . . . I don't know," Rogers said slowly.

"I think we should continue this conversation at another time," Dr. Tanya said gently. "There are things we will need to discuss individually before any of this can be resolved. For now, I suggest you both get some sleep."

"Yeah," Tony said with a sigh, pulling out his phone. He'd been vindicated in a way but felt no satisfaction with the situation, and now it was time to see if he would be allowed some rest or if he needed to continue dealing with that mess.

Steve silently departed and Tony thought Doc T left, too, until she sat in the chair beside him. "Tony, when was the last time you slept?"

He had to tear his eyes from the latest email from Mel to think about that question. "In the afternoon. They sedated me at the hospital."

"Do they normally sedate you at the hospital?"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "No," he said evasively.

She waited.

"I had an anxiety thing," he mumbled.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Not right now."

"When did you last sleep in your own bed?" Doc T persisted.

When, when, when . . . "Monday morning," he said finally. It was only Wednesday. It felt like he'd lived at least a week in between.

"Hm," she said noncommittally. "Will we be chatting again soon?"

"I don't know. I'm still dealing with that thing."

"If you have time to talk, you'll come find me?"

"Yes."

"Good night, then," she said, and didn't comment when he didn't accompany her out of the room.

He appreciated that. He also appreciated not having an audience for his attempt to stand up from the
chair, as the first attempt was less than successful. He winced as he started moving--again with the too much time in a chair thing--but took his mug to the kitchen, then decided to finish cleaning up the displays before retreating to his bedroom. He didn't want the kids playing with the stuff if he left it out.

Within a half hour he was collapsing on his bed, hoping for enough shut-eye to make it through what promised to be another long day. He slept fitfully and cursed all the coffee he'd drunk when he had to get up to use the toilet after less than three hours in bed.

He was washing his hands when Friday piped up. "Mel would like you to review her last message and contact her as soon as you are able, boss."

He sighed and leaned heavily on the edge of the counter, hanging his head. There was no way he'd be able to sleep again without knowing what that was about. He took a deep breath, splashed water on his face, and squared his shoulders.

Let the games begin.

It took a little searching to find where he'd left his phone; apparently, it had been in his pocket, but it liberated itself and slid to the floor while he was in bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress while he looked at the message. Mel had found a blogger that seemed to reference the investigation, but there were no details and it could be nothing just as easily as it could be something. As much as he wanted to simply send a reply, it would be faster to call.

"This is Mel."

"Is this the only thing out there right now?" he asked without preamble.

"The only thing we know about."

"Nobody has contacted you for comment?"

"No one has reached out to me or the SI team. My contact at SI promised to notify me if they hear anything before I do."

Hiring her couldn't have come at a better time. "Who's your contact?" Not that it mattered, he was just curious.

"Jeremy."

"Isn't he a little old for you?"

"I beg your pardon?" She sounded flabbergasted.

"No, no, I'm kidding. He's a good guy. Been around a while, knows his stuff." He settled back onto the bed with a groan. Being horizontal might be risky, but he'd take his chances. He'd never fallen asleep on the phone before. "Anyway, if anyone does come calling, we have no comment and I'll do the press conference at, um, four thirty. They can ask their questions then. Oh, and don't bother leaking my breakup with Pepper. We're close enough to the main event that we don't need the distraction."

"Got it. Press conference at four thirty? That can happen. I'll spread the word and plan to be there by noon to get everything set up and squared away. Is there a car I can take?"
"Use the chopper. Friday can fly it for you."

Mel paused before replying. "Okay. Well, that frees up my morning. I'll keep an eye on things and let you know if anything changes."

"Do I need to tell the tower security people that you're coming?"

"No, I contacted them yesterday. You're clear to have the press conference in the lobby."

"That's good. With my luck, it would be raining if we did it outside."

"It might be too old-school for you, but there are these things called umbrellas," she teased. "Unless you've come up with something better."

"It's called armor. Multi-functional, but quite expensive," he said dryly.

"Showing up to the press conference in your armor would definitely not send the right message," she countered. "Speaking of which, I'll send you an updated script before I leave. Just do yourself the favor of staying close to the words on the page."

He sighed. "We'll see how it goes. You said you'll notify the news agencies about the press conference?"

"Yes, as soon as we're done here," she said patiently. "That's only, you know, my job."

"You know who to contact?" he persisted. Press conferences were only as good as their coverage and, this being his first in a long while, he expected a lot of coverage. Counted on it, in fact.

"Yes, Mr. Stark. This isn't my first rodeo, and Jeremy is quite helpful."

". . . right. I'll just . . . let you do that, then."

"See you in New York," she said before hanging up.

He was tempted to let the phone fall into the bed and roll over to try to sleep a little more. What he did was send Bill a message about the press conference, requesting that he or a representative be present. Mel could try to keep him on topic, but she wouldn't know what might be legally questionable to say. He also noticed and read the message from his guy at the U.N., who was available for a conversation in an hour and a half.

As he let his phone drop into the sheets and curled up with a sigh, he heard something that sounded like a distant alarm. "Friday, what's that?" he mumbled.

"The compound evacuation drill has commenced, boss."

"Oh. Good. Let me know when Hill's report arrives."

He allowed his mind to drift after that, and he descended into a nightmarish dream in which Ross came to find him while the compound was empty. Ross cornered him in his bedroom, insistently banging on his door and demanding that he stop being a coward and show himself.

He startled awake when a different familiar voice called, "Stark, I know you're in there!" More banging followed. His heart was racing and he thought he was awake but it was so similar to his dream visions that he really had no idea.

He cowered behind the bed until Friday spoke. "Boss, Captain Rogers is about to break down the
"Tell him to stop, I'm coming." He scrambled out of his hiding place and hurried to the door, wrenching it open. "What?"

Steve eyed him uncertainly, his posture braced for an attack. "Are you all right? Why didn't you answer?"

"I was . . . dreaming," he said uneasily. "What do you want?"

"Why is the compound being evacuated?"

Tony ran a hand over his face and leaned heavily against the doorjamb. "It's a drill," he said wearily. "Friday would have told you if you'd asked."

Steve relaxed slightly. "I didn't think to ask," he admitted sheepishly. "Shouldn't we be evacuating?"

"I have every confidence in your ability to pack up and be gone in no time," he replied. "But if you want to participate, feel free."

"What about you?"

He waved dismissively. "All I'd need to do is hop in the suit and go. My stuff doesn't matter."

"Because you can buy what you need?"

"Something like that," he said and winced, remembering that wasn't entirely true at the moment.

"Right." Steve nodded, not quite seeming convinced. He hesitated and Tony braced himself for a rehash of their early morning conversation, but Steve said simply, "Sorry to disturb you."

"It wasn't a very good dream anyway." He closed the door and sighed. Going back to sleep had not been the right decision. Not only did he have the possibly-predictive nightmare—it seemed inevitable that Ross would seek him out to gloat at some point—he felt worse than he had the first time he woke: groggy, disoriented, and sick to his stomach. Coffee would be his answer to the first two, if it weren't for the last.

"Boss, your medication."

And there was that. Grumbling, he left the solid support of the doorjamb to find the bottle. At least the cup of water he drank after swallowing the pill didn't further upset his stomach.

It took some fumbling around in his bed before he found his phone, then he took it and the tablet to the office to see to a few things. Awaiting him was the initial report about the individuals involved in the investigation; he asked Hill to have someone look into those people, and also the blogger who had gotten Mel concerned. Hill was probably already on top of it, but he couldn't afford to make faulty assumptions.

Then it was time to call his guy at the U.N., specifically the head of the U.N. panel for enforcing the Sokovia Accords, or whatever his official title was. The exchange of pleasantries was brief, then they got down to business, specifically what Tony wanted to do as a result of the investigation. His suggestion was met with considerable skepticism, but he could do something about that. After laying out his case, it was simply a matter of providing assurance that he had no intention of vanishing into thin air before the head of the panel agreed to his proposal and promised to see that it was made official through the appropriate channels.
He considered whether to contact the quinjet or make a few notes for all of the explaining he was going to have to do before the end of the day. The notes would require reviewing the legal mumbo jumbo alongside the current draft of his statement, which would be annoying. His decision was postponed when he received a response from Bill about his earlier message. He was calling Bill before he even reached the end of the brief reply.

"Good morning, Mr. Stark." Bill sounded a little tired, and only then did he realize how early it was on the west coast.

Whatever, if he was replying to email he could field a phone call. "Really? You're making me put up with Hugh this afternoon?" he demanded.

"Hugh Mortimer is the head of the New York office, as you well know."

"That pompous British a--"

"--if you disliked him as much as you claim, you'd have fired him a long time ago."

"Just because he says things in a charming accent doesn't make the things he says any less asinine," he protested.

"And yet he has met with great success in negotiations on your behalf."

"Which is why he's still on my payroll. That doesn't mean I want to have to interact with him directly."

Bill was silent a moment before he said, "Was there anything else, Mr. Stark?"

He considered. "Yeah, while I've got you, I want to run a couple of things by you. I'm trying to anticipate the questions and need to double-check how much I can say."

Bill almost certainly had better things to do, and by all rights he could have insisted that Tony ask Hugh instead, but he had the patience of a saint and stayed on the phone with him for another half hour. Tony would have to give him one hell of a bonus when it was all over.

He continued making notes and jotted down a few more clarifications he'd need, just in case. All of the legalese made his head hurt (worse) and there was a lot implied rather than stated outright, but he should be able to speak confidently. And the questions raised when he told the others would be a helpful predictor for the afternoon.

Time to find out when he'd have to bare his soul. "Friday, patch me into the quinjet comm."

"What, do you miss us already?" Clint teased as soon as a beep indicated he was connected.

"You wish, Katniss. More like finding out when my freedom ends. What's your ETA?"

"We'll be back on the ground in two and a half hours. You could have asked Friday, you know."

"But then I wouldn't be able to torment you, and we all know that's my true joy in life." Tony leaned back in the chair, grinning a little since no one could see him. "What's everyone else doing?"

"Watching Rhodey and Vision play chess. Maybe more like watching Vision utterly defeat Rhodey at chess."

"Is Vision back to his usual self?" He was still a little worried that they might've managed to break the android.
"Seems like it, and Wanda thinks all is well."

"Good. I'll see you guys in a few hours."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Yes."

The smile that lasted until the end of the conversation soon faded. He was doing as much as he knew to do to protect them, but it didn't feel like enough. It would never feel like enough.

He didn't realize he hadn't disconnected from the quinjet until Rhodey's voice came on the line. "Tony, you have a minute?"

"For you, always."

"Good, because there are two things I need to say."

Rhodey's tone had him frowning. "Are you about to scold me? Is everyone listening to this?"

"I am in as private a corner as is possible when we're all crammed on a jet," Rhodey replied. "And yes, you're in for a dressing down. First, when you put me in charge, you need to let me be in charge. Ideas are fine, orders are not, and what you said to Nat and Wanda sure sounded like orders."

"Yes, mom," Tony said sarcastically.

"Second, telling Wanda to influence the enemy was absolutely not okay. There are some things that should not be done, Tony, and underhanded tactics like that are in the not-to-be-done category."

He bristled. "You're agreeing with Rogers? That's just peachy. It's so nice to have support from my friend."

Rhodey was silent for a moment. "I'm sure there was more to that conversation, but yes. Using Wanda's abilities that way is not acceptable."

He felt a renewed surge of anxiety as he remembered watching the scene unfold. "You were outnumbered and outgunned. Somebody was going to go down if nothing changed. I couldn't let it be you. I've already watched you fall once."

"Tony," Rhodey said, then heaved a sigh so deep it was audible over the line. "It wasn't that dire, I promise. I had a couple of ideas, but you didn't give me time to try them. I didn't even get to use my new laser."

"Laser?" he echoed uncertainly.

"Remember the one-off you used on Vanko's drones to cut them in half? I guess you forgot that I made you put that in my new suit. It would've been perfect against the jetpacks."

"Right," he said faintly.

"My other options included having Wanda mess with the jetpacks--not the people, the tech--so they'd fail. Or try the sonic cannon. Wilson hadn't even gotten his drone out yet, and you know he can do some damage with it."

Tony was simultaneously reassured and horrified. "I didn't think of any of that," he said dully. And
since that was true of the fight, what was he missing when it came to everything else?

"You would have, if you weren't tired out of your mind and dealing with whatever that other thing is," Rhodey said confidently.

He didn't answer, too busy second- and third-guessing every move he'd made the past few days. Pepper had been disappointed in him, too; she was probably right. Scratch that. She was almost certainly right.

"Tony?" Rhodey sounded worried.

"I'm still here."

"Are you okay?"

Tony huffed a humorless laugh. "If you're asking, you know the answer is no."

"I wish you'd tell us how we can help you," Rhodey said, sounding resigned.

"I promised to tell you what's up when you get back, and I'll keep that promise. What happens afterward isn't really up to me."

"Well, call me if you need to talk before we get back."

"Sure thing, honeybear." This time he made sure he'd hung up. He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly, and rested his chin in his hands, his elbows planted firmly on the desk.

Eventually, he said, "Friday, where is Doc T?"

"Doctor Thomas departed the compound as part of the evacuation drill, boss."

Right. "Is the drill nearly finished?"

"Yes, boss. Personnel have begun returning to the grounds."

"Is the doc's calendar open for the rest of the morning?"

"Yes, boss."

"Alert me when she is back at her office," he ordered, then returned to his mess of notes to go over them with the proverbial fine-tooth comb.

It was maybe a half hour later when Friday provided the requested notification. He wrapped up what he was doing and left the office to find the doc. Time to see what she thought of his current morass.
Difficult Conversations

Dr. Tanya did not seem surprised or upset to see Tony despite the disarray in her office.

"I'm sorry, I should come back later," he said, eyeing the empty surface of her desk and the box of computer parts on a cart beside it.

"Not at all. Come in, have a seat." She waited for him to comply before she continued, "I was just making ginger tea. Would you like some?"

He hesitated, then shrugged. "Sure."

She poured two steaming cups and set them on coasters on the table in front of him, then closed the door on her way to the cart of stuff. After some rattling, she pulled out her tablet and settled into a chair. "How has your morning been?"

"It's been about how the last two days have been," he said with a sigh. "How was the evacuation drill?"

"I was grateful I'd read the safety manual so I knew what was happening," she said, grinning. "It was quite . . . enlightening. I met some very nice people. But it was sobering to think about what sort of situation would require that response."

"One so drastic that we've never had to do this drill before," he said. "You don't need to take your entire computer, though. Just any drives and devices that might have data on them."

"So I was told when I reached the assembly point. Still, it was good exercise, and it will be a learning experience to put it back together again." She laughed and reached for a mug, sniffing appreciatively.

"I can--"

"No, Tony, I'm happy to figure it out myself. But if I get hopelessly stuck, I know who to call." Her eyes were twinkling, but her expression quickly sobered. "Does the drill have anything to do with the thing that has been consuming your every hour for the past few days?"

He had to take a deep breath. "Yes," he admitted, looking down at his interlaced fingers. "It's . . . a long story. You're sure you don't want me to come back later?" Not that he had any idea when he'd have time later, but he felt guilty for disrupting her entire morning, directly and indirectly, especially after she'd been dragged out of bed.

"I'm sure," she confirmed gently. "Please, take as much time as you need."

So he told her about Ultron and Sokovia in more detail than he had before, everything that had happened in the past forty-eight hours, how he'd been trying to address what had happened, and his plan to tell the others what was going on as soon as they returned. "This morning I promised Rogers full disclosure," he said wearily. "I'm not sure what reaction to expect. I'm just doing what needs to be done, but they don't always take things the way I mean them." He thought of Rogers and the conversation in Berlin and frowned.

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," he said heavily.
"Would explaining your reasons more thoroughly help?" she persisted.

He snorted. "No amount of explaining myself would make one bit of difference where some of them are concerned, like good old Stevie boy."

"Hm," she said noncommittally. "I'm not sure I agree with you. Why don't we wait and see what comes of the conversation you had this morning?"

"Sorry, doc, but what I've done hasn't been enough to change his opinion of me, so words aren't going to help. And I just . . . I can't deal with drama on top of everything else. I'm . . ." He stopped himself with a shake of his head and finally picked up his mug. If she noticed that he used both hands to do so, she didn't comment on it. "I don't know how much longer I can do this," he said softly.

"When you say 'this', what do you mean?"

"This . . . thing," he said, gesturing widely to encompass the room and the building beyond. "The togetherness, team-player thing. I'm tired of people who should know me questioning my motives no matter what I do. I'm on the firing line for these people and I don't even know if it's worth fighting for them anymore because they sure as hell don't seem to be fighting for me."

Dr. Tanya was silent for a moment and seemed to be studying him. "Let's say you decide not to fight for them anymore. What would you do?"

"Assuming I'm not in jail from this nonsense with Ross?" he asked bitterly.

"Let's assume that, yes."

"I'd go back to California for a while, probably rebuild my house in Malibu. Do more with the company, that sort of thing."

"Would you stop being an Avenger?"

He sighed. "It depends on what happens. If there's some sort of world-ending threat, I'd be there in a heartbeat. But the more typical stuff, the destroying HYDRA type stuff, that . . . I don't know about that. There are reasons I stepped back after Ultron, and all of those reasons are even more true now."

"How will you decide if fighting for them is still worthwhile?"

He stared down at the mug in his hands, watching the liquid tremble. "I don't know," he said. "I guess some of it depends on how they react to what I tell them."

"That makes sense," she said encouragingly. "What will it look like if they react negatively?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, mindful not to spill the mug he still hadn't sipped from. "Um, they would agree that I deserve to be investigated."

"And what would a positive reaction be?"

"Offering to help, maybe. But at least one person will do that no matter what."

"All right, then, how many people would have to react negatively for you to consider giving up on the team?"

There was a long silence. "It's not so much about numbers as about who's doing it," he concluded eventually. "If I've lost Rhodey or Vision, then I might as well give it all up right now. Or maybe
Natasha. She's more unpredictable, though."

"So as long as you have at least two people on your side, you are willing to remain on the team. Am I understanding you correctly?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I won't consider myself a lost cause as long as there are at least two on my side. But I still might go and be away from here for a while."

"It can be good to take a break," she said diplomatically. "Did your short getaway a few weeks ago seem to help?"

It felt so long ago that he had a hard time remembering. "I think so, but being away longer might have been better."

"I see," she said.

He wasn't sure if the doubt in her voice was just his imagination.

She continued, "If my presence when you tell your team everything would help, I am happy to accompany you."

He took a long drink of the lukewarm tea. "I would appreciate that," he said finally, glancing at her briefly.

"I'll be there. When are they due back?"

He checked his watch and chuckled ruefully. "Fifteen minutes."

"You might want to finish your tea, then," she said with a smile.

"Bottom's up," he joked before taking a sip.

"While we still have a few minutes, I have a question just for my own curiosity. If you're willing." He was definitely interested in changing the subject. "I'm game."

"Do you enjoy doing press conferences, or merely tolerate them? I can't imagine staring down that many cameras and reporters."

He'd never been asked that question before and did not have a ready response. He drained his cup and set it back down on the table, pleased to note his hand did not shake as he did so. "I enjoy the challenge of answering questions while only saying what I want to say," he said slowly. "It's a game of wits, and I'm usually the smartest one in the room."

"Only usually?" she said lightly.

"I've had some pretty disastrous encounters with the press. I'm sure you can find out about them without searching too hard."

"How do you think today's will go?"

He grimaced. "I'm not so much worried about that as what will come after. Announcing the investigation like this is primarily to call the government's bluff. Once I make it public they're going to have to respond somehow. Ross is a wily guy, so I have to be prepared for whatever they might do next, but . . . I'm almost out of ideas. I think I've already mentioned those have been in short supply lately."
"You have," Doc T agreed. "But your team is sure to have more."

"Maybe," he said. He wasn't going to hold his breath.

"Boss, the quinjet has landed," Friday informed them.

"Shall we?" Doc T asked as she rose from her seat.

"Let's get this over with," he said reluctantly.

They went up to the common area to wait for the others and found Laura and the older kids preparing lunch while Rogers played with Nathaniel nearby. Tony hadn't realized he was going to have to deliver his news over a meal. Except he didn't want to bring it up with the kids there . . . or did that even matter? They wouldn't understand, but that didn't make it a topic unfit for young ears.

"I didn't know you'd be joining us for lunch," Laura said to Dr. Tanya. "The rest of them should be right up."

"It wasn't planned, but if you don't mind . . . ?"

"Not at all! It's no trouble to pull out another plate and chair. Cooper, make sure we have enough of everything out for another person, please."

Tony stood awkwardly near the couch, then perched on its arm to double-check the brief outline he'd made for the upcoming conversation.

He didn't make it far before Lila appeared at his elbow. "Uncle Tony, is it bothering you if I ask you to sit next to me? Mama said we shouldn't bother you, but Cooper thinks he gets to sit next to you because I saw you last night and I don't think that's right."

She studied him solemnly while he parsed the torrent of words. "What if I sit between you?" he said.

"Okay. You look sad. Do you need a hug?"

"I'm just tired, kiddo."

She continued staring at him, apparently unconvinced.

". . . sure, I'll take a hug. Back up, little bit, so I can get down," he said finally. He knelt on the floor and she wrapped her arms tightly around him before he could set the tablet and stylus aside. He gingerly put his arms around her, patting her back awkwardly, and took a deep breath.

"Lila, come tell me what you want to eat," Laura called.

He released her and she stepped back, holding out her hand to him. "Come on, Uncle Tony. It's time for lunch."

He let himself be pulled over to the table and pointed to a chair. Lila bounced over to where Laura--and the sandwich fixings--were waiting, babbling about Uncle Tony's solution to the argument about seating. Tony set down his stuff and went around the other end of the kitchen island to where the coffee was. He wasn't sure if the headache prickling at his awareness was a continuation from the other day or just because he hadn't had caffeine yet, so he'd try coffee and see where that left him.

The single cup brewer was gurgling its finish when more voices and Lila's cry of "Daddy!" heralded the others' arrival. Tony picked up his steaming mug and disinterestedly surveyed the spread of food, then assembled a tuna sandwich and picked out a few carrot sticks before heading to his assigned
Lila and Cooper were already there and eating, but he felt a little awkward being the first adult with food. The others were slowly working their way through, though, so the table soon started filling up. He was a little concerned when he realized Rhodey wasn't there yet, but as soon as he thought it, the door opened and Rhodey appeared, with Wilson pushing his chair.

When Rhodey pulled up to the table, he said, "We ran into Mel on our way in. Why are we having a press conference?"

"We're aren't, I am," Tony corrected, setting his half-eaten sandwich onto his plate. He wasn't sure he wanted to finish it anyway. "It's about that thing I've been dealing with. You want me to explain now or after you've all eaten?"

The murmur of incidental conversation died as the others waited expectantly for Rhodey's response. Rhodey's expression seemed to ask if Tony was okay with it; he shrugged in response. Nathaniel squealed into the silence, happily banging on his tray with the bowl he'd just emptied onto the floor.

"I'd like to hear it now," Steve said from further down the table.

Finally Rhodey nodded. "Whenever you're ready," he said, glancing at Tony's plate.

He took a drink of coffee, pushed his plate away, and set his tablet in front of him instead. "So. When I left our little confab on Monday morning, it was to answer a call from my lawyer," he started. Going down his outline, he told them everything, never once looking up at anyone. Plowing through it without seeing their reactions was the only way he was going to make it.

He hesitated just before the end, and cast a glance down the table at Dr. Tanya, who nodded encouragingly. "Last but not least, yesterday I informed the U.N. that I will not participate in Avenger missions until this is resolved and I have withdrawn as the leader of this merry band of misfits. In my stead, Rhodey and Rogers are in charge."

No one spoke right away and he finally dared to scan the faces around the table. They seemed shocked, mostly, and unhappy, though whether at him or the situation he didn't dare to guess. Laura took the opportunity to quietly usher the kids from the room.

"That's a lot to take in, man," Sam said eventually.

"Tell me about it."

"How can we help?" Natasha asked.

So she was on his side. "Stay out of it," he said immediately. "I can't let the rest of you get dragged into this. Ross has it in for me, not you."

"Nope, not an option," Rhodey countered. "How many times do we have to tell you that you don't have to go it alone?"

"Ross will not be satisfied even if he manages to take you down," Natasha said. "This is his first play, but it won't be his last."

"It will be if I can hold him off," Tony argued. "He has the advantage right now, but this whole investigation is on shaky ground. Even if there are charges against me, they won't hold up in court."

"Proving yourself legally will take time, and you said yourself it won't take long for us to run out of
money. We literally can't afford the delay. We need to try to force his hand, see what his play is, because he definitely has one," Natasha pondered aloud.

"That's one of my intentions for the press conference," Tony said. "Having the investigation public should prompt enough questions that he'll have to do something to respond." Like show up at the compound to gloat, he thought, remembering his nightmare.

"So how do we make sure the press conference will force Ross to do something?" Sam asked.

Tony was so caught off-guard by the 'we' in that question, he nearly missed Wanda speaking up.

"Appear as vulnerable as possible," she commented. "He comes here to prey on our weakness. It makes him feel superior."

"Like when he came after Stark got out of the hospital," Sam said, nodding.

"And when he thinks he has the upper hand, he is more likely to make a mistake, let slip something he shouldn't," Clint agreed.

"You already look pretty ragged, so that will help," Natasha said, subjecting Tony to a calculating look.

"I was planning to shower and shave before I go down there," he said defensively. It was the only thing he could think to say in the face of their surprising support.

"I'm almost there anyway," he muttered.

"Were you going to use a prepared statement or just wing it like you always do?" Rhodey asked.

"Mel and I have put something together, along with a statement for the website."

"We'll need to see both of those," Natasha said crisply. "Now let's talk security. It's unlikely but not impossible that someone will try something with you so exposed."

"Mel is arranging that with the people at the tower. I have no idea what she's planned," he admitted. "I've had my hands full with everything else."

"We'll give her a call," Rhodey said. "All right, how about this: Rogers, Wanda, Wilson, Vision, and I will coordinate security. Clint, Natasha, you'll work with Tony on the messaging. Everyone on the quinjet, cleaned up and ready to leave for the city at three. Any objections?"

"What am I, a mission?" Tony groused when no one else spoke.

"Would it make you feel better if we called you a project?" Rhodey teased.

"Let's do this," Sam said, and there was echoed agreement around the table. A clatter of dishes and the scraping of chairs followed.

Tony stared blankly at his mug, trying to understand how it could be that every single one of them seemed willing to help him fight this.

He startled when a voice spoke near his ear. "Are you going to finish your sandwich or should I take your plate?" Natasha asked quietly.
"I--just take it."

She patted his shoulder. "Stay put if you like. Clint and I will be right back."

He nodded slightly, then reached for his mug. It was empty, though he didn't remember finishing it. He sighed as he pushed back his chair and stood, then turned and nearly ran into Rogers.

"Stark, I need to apologize," Rogers said awkwardly.

"Really," he said flatly.

Rogers huffed impatiently. "Will you just listen for once?"

"Why? You don't return the favor."

"That's why I'm trying to apologize. I assumed things about what was going on that were totally wrong and I'm sorry."

Tony blinked once, twice, then muttered, "Fine. Whatever. Excuse me." He stepped around Rogers and headed for coffee.

Once he managed to fill the electric kettle in the midst of Barton and Natasha doing dishes, he faced the counter and shut out all of the noise and activity around him. He tried to focus on what needed to happen next, but his mind kept skipping back to the concerned faces around the table, their insistence on helping, Rogers apologizing . . . It was literally the least he could do, but he hadn't been willing to do even that before.

A gentle touch on his shoulder brought him out of his reverie. "What do you think about how it went?" Dr. Tanya asked quietly.

"I don't know what to make of it," he admitted, turning to face her. "I didn't expect support from all of them."

"Even though they have all been helping since your heart incident?" she asked rhetorically, then patted his arm. "Would you like me to stay a while longer?"

"No, you don't need to do that. Besides, your computer is waiting for you," he said with a smirk.

She grinned. "I am off to be its savior, then. Let me know if you need to talk."

"I will." She left and he tended to his coffee. Even so, he was back at the table before Barton and Natasha. He took the opportunity to have Friday share the emails and the relevant files from Mel with everyone; there was no point in hiding anything now.

Barton threw himself into the chair at the head of the table and put his feet up on the corner. Natasha tsked at him and unceremoniously shoved his feet off as she sat across from Tony. "All right, let's take a look," she said, glancing at his tablet.

"Oh, no, that's-- it isn't-- this isn't connected to the network," he stammered. He must be tired, he hadn't given a moment's thought to how they'd work through his statement. Stupid. The others were at the conference table, already on the phone with Mel, and Rhodey was pulling up a diagram of the tower lobby on the display. "Friday?" he said hesitantly.

"The file can be displayed on the television, boss," she replied.

"I call the couch," Barton said immediately, already on his feet.
"You don't need the entire couch," Natasha chided. She waited to leave the table until Tony stood up and headed toward the TV, coffee in one hand and tablet in the other.

He settled into an armchair at one end of the couch, intentionally choosing to have his back to the others. He was having a hard enough time concentrating without the distraction of wondering what they were doing.

Even so, his attention wandered as Natasha and Clint worked their way through the press release, mostly without comment, then began picking at his prepared statement. He slowly sipped his coffee, willing his headache to recede into the background again. Now that he'd acknowledged its continued existence, it seemed to double in intensity.

"--Tony, tell her that I'm right," Clint said.

"Tony?"

It wasn't until the second time she said his name that he realized they were addressing him. "What?" he said, uncertain if he should be looking at them or the words on the screen.

Natasha's expression betrayed a hint of concern as she explained. "Clint and I are debating the wisdom of telling the world that the Avengers' funding stream has dried up. He doesn't think it's a good idea. I think if you plan on doing everything you have here, the team's bank accounts won't be the primary focus."

He shrugged. "Weren't you guys saying I need to seem vulnerable? A rich guy without money, it's hard to get much more vulnerable than that."

"But I thought you didn't want to bring the team into it," Clint objected.

"As a target, no. This would hopefully generate some goodwill, or at least sympathy."

"It might not be a bad thing to demonstrate that we have to balance our books just like everyone else," Natasha said.

"All right, all right, I give up," Clint said good-naturedly, throwing up his hands.

"What about the document release? Do either of you mind?" Tony asked, hoping they hadn't discussed it while he wasn't paying attention. That particular bit had horrified Mel, so he wanted a second opinion.

"How could I mind? I already willingly dumped everything S.H.I.E.L.D. knew about me onto the internet once. There isn't much left for me to hide," Natasha said wryly.

Clint gestured toward Natasha. "That's pretty much it."

"Good. That will happen as soon as I have time to make it happen," he said, carefully setting his coffee cup on the arm of the chair so he could make a note on his list.

"Is that something Sara can help with?" Natasha asked.

"What?" he said blankly.

"Sara, the new assistant. She assists with the drudgery that we don't want to do," Clint said. "What's the point in having a minion if you don't make use of her?"

"We haven't fully fleshed out her daily duties because some members of the team haven't met with
her yet," Natasha added. "She's quite smart, I'm sure she can wrangle the files with Friday's guidance."

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose as he considered the suggestion. "Does she have security clearance?" he asked eventually. "And don't bother telling me that information was in her file. I didn't actually read it."

"I never suspected that you did." Natasha sounded amused. "Yes, she has top secret clearance."

"Sold." He took a swig of coffee. "Friday, give the assistant, whatever her name is, access to the files you've been collecting for me. And let her change the security level of documents, just in case something is miscategorized."

"Permission granted, boss."

"I'll review it all before it's made public," he said with a sigh, adding that to his list. He also needed to dedicate a server to host the public files separate from the full batch that would go to the investigative team. It went on the list, too.

"You should go shower," Natasha said.

"What, do I smell?" he joked half-heartedly.

"Of coffee," she said lightly. "It's already after two. Sara and I will help you pick out your clothes afterward."

"I don't need to be dressed like a child."

"A second opinion from well-heeled ladies is never a bad thing," Clint pointed out, standing up and stretching before offering Tony a hand up.

He accepted it gingerly, but Clint did nothing more than lend him some momentum to pry himself out of the chair. "Thanks."

"Do you think they've given all of us something to do, or are we going to have to hover in the background pretending we aren't there?" Clint asked Natasha as the three of them headed for the door. The others had already disbanded, and there was no sign of what the final plan would be.

"At least half of us are going to have to stay out of sight for Tony to be able to say what he's planned to say. You know there are people who still object to the conditions that allow you to be here," Natasha pointed out. "That's not the issue here, and we don't really want it to become the issue." She glanced at Tony. "But you should be ready with answers if those sorts of questions are asked."

"I know," he said reluctantly. "I can just wing it."

"We can drill you a bit while you get ready. You need to have something to work with when you're winging it, or your wings won't be flight worthy. Now excuse me, boys, I need to wash up."

"Ten bucks says she beats both of us out of the shower and looks flawless," Clint said after Natasha vanished from sight.

"No bet," Tony said immediately. "I never bet against a woman who could kill me at least a half a dozen ways with just her pinky finger."

"That's wisdom if I ever heard it," Clint said sagely. "You should tell her that sometime. I think she'd
be pleased. Oh, and here's your door, which concludes my chaperone duty. What happens now is your business."

"You're my chaperone now? I think this parenting thing has gone to your head, Barton," he teased.

"If only that were true. Laura would be thrilled," Clint said dryly.

"Don't be like that. You're doing fine. Better than I would, anyway," he said dismissively.

"Give yourself some credit. You're pretty good with Lila," Clint replied, suddenly serious. "I don't think I've thanked you yet for making sure they were all safe."

He shifted his weight, awkwardly looking anywhere but at Barton. "Um, well, it was my fault that Ross found out about them, so you don't need to thank me."

"I don't just mean Ross. HYDRA knew about them."

"Are you serious?" he blurted. "Jesus. How did we not know that?"

"They came up in this last batch of HYDRA files. Friday alerted me as soon as we landed. Hill is having someone check on the farm, but--" he shrugged. "Who knows. So, thank you. They were in more danger than either of us knew."

He took a deep breath and shook his head, closing his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, he met Barton's gaze. "You're welcome. Oh, and sorry about that broken nose thing."

Clint laughed and started down the hall. "No worries, you're forgiven. I should've known you'd even the playing field somehow."

"It's what I do," he agreed.
When Tony turned to open his bedroom door, he realized both his hands were full. He should have left his empty mug in the kitchen or at least on the table; taking it with him had happened on autopilot. He sighed and balanced the mug on the tablet to open the door, then dumped both on the nearest horizontal surface, which happened to be the end of the bed.

He hadn't been in the shower long before Friday said, "Colonel Rhodes and Sara Chen wish to enter, boss."

He sighed and rolled his shoulders beneath the warm spray of water. "They can come in, but the bathroom is off limits," he said, grateful that he'd closed the bathroom door for once.

He didn't hear their voices until after he turned off the water, and he still couldn't decipher what they were saying. Not that he cared. He dried off and pulled on his bathrobe before throwing open the door and padding out into the bedroom.

"Mr. Stark," Sara greeted him as he pulled open a drawer to fish out a clean pair of underwear. "I hope we aren't intruding."

"I'm used to having strange people in my bedroom," he joked with a smirk and closed the drawer with his hip. "It's fine. I told Friday you were allowed."

"Are you trying to call me strange?" Rhodey asked, feigning indignance.

"I didn't say that, you did," he replied smoothly, turning his back on them to slip on the underwear without exposing himself. Rhodey had seen it all before, but he didn't want the new assistant to get the wrong idea. He was a playboy, not a creep. "What have we got?"

"We have several options, depending on if you want to go with a two-piece or a three-piece," Natasha said from inside the closet.

Tony turned back around, startled. "Security breach," he said reflexively. "Friday, why didn't you tell me she was here?"

"I have not been tasked with announcing everyone who steps foot through the door, boss," Friday replied. "Colonel Rhodes allowed her in."

"Stop sassing me," he grumbled. "All right, it's fine. What do you want?"

"Two-piece or three?" she replied, unruffled, and held up an example of each type. She was, as Clint predicted, dressed flawlessly in a short black dress, and Tony was willing to bet that the combs or sticks or whatever held her hair in that updo could be used as weapons. He knew for sure that the heels on her shoes could be fatal.

"Unless you'd like to wear the kitten t-shirt," Rhodey said with a grin. "Why do you even have a kitten shirt?"

"It was a gift from Lila," he said defensively, then addressed Natasha. "Which do you want me to wear? You're the one insisting that I shouldn't shave for this."

"Two-piece," Sara suggested into the awkward silence that followed. "It's less formal but still more than adequate for the occasion."
Natasha nodded and disappeared back into the closet while Sara turned her attention to him. "What about makeup?" she asked, loudly enough that he knew she wasn't talking to him.

Natasha emerged with three suits that she laid out on the bed, then joined Sara in examining his face. "How desperate do you want to look?" she questioned bluntly.

"I don't know, what goes with my hasn't-shaved-in-three-days style?" he asked sourly, running his hand through his nearly dry hair.

"We might want to clean up the facial hair a bit," Sara suggested.

"They've seen worse," he said before Natasha could respond. "Whatever, it's fine. What am I wearing?"

"I vote for the middle one," Rhodey said, having wheeled his chair over to survey the options.

Tony finally turned to see what had been selected. "Why, so we can match?"

Rhodey, dressed in a dark blue suit instead of his uniform, replied deadpan, "Would we? I hadn't noticed."

"Yes, the dark blue," Sara agreed.

"White shirt, red tie," Natasha added.

"And don't forget the flag pin," Rhodey said dryly.

"What, is it the Fourth of July? Why the patriotic look?" Tony objected.

"You're about to announce publicly that the U.S. government is investigating you for terrorism. Looking the part of a patriotic citizen might help win some sympathy from those who won't be sorry that you've lost access to your millions," Natasha explained from the closet as she handed a shirt to Sara and flipped through his ties.

"Billions," he corrected absently. "All right, fine. Are you going to watch me dress, too?"

"No, I think Rhodey can handle that well enough. We'll see you on the quinjet," Natasha said, tossing the selected tie to Rhodey.

"Would you prefer notecards or sheets of paper?" Sara asked.

"For what?" Tony replied dumbly.

"Your prepared statement. Would you prefer it printed on notecards or sheets of paper?" she elaborated. "This is the sort of thing I don't know because we haven't had a meeting yet."

"Uh, right," he said blankly. "Let's go with notecards."

"Of course. I'll have them ready for you shortly."

He nodded dumbly. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Mr. Stark."

Natasha was already in the hall, so Sara followed and closed the door quietly.
Tony shrugged off the dressing gown and began getting dressed by rote. He had his trousers on but not fastened and was buttoning up his shirt when Rhodey said, "Don't worry, you'll make it."

"At what cost?" he asked bleakly, fumbling with his buttons for a moment before marshaling control of his fingers. "A lot could be lost in the time it takes our fine government to get its head out of its ass."

"The team stands with you."

"The team," he scoffed, perching on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks and shoes. "They can't possibly all agree when it comes to me and whether I'm right."

"They're all with you on this, and you know I'm with you no matter what."

"Yeah, I know," he said with a lopsided smile as he took the red tie from Rhodey's hand. His hands were trembling enough that he couldn't manage to loop the knot properly.

"Come down here and let me do it," Rhodey broke in, sounding aggravated. "You look pathetic."

"Just part of the charm," he said halfheartedly, kneeling awkwardly in front of Rhodey's chair.

"You sure you can do this right now?" Rhodey asked when he was finished fixing the tie.

"I have to," he said wearily.

"Promise me that you'll step back afterward and let Mel handle the press."

"Yeah, yeah."

He started to stand up but Rhodey caught his arm. "I'm serious. You look beat. Let her do her job or she's not worth the money you're paying her."

He laughed darkly and stood, shrugging on his suit coat. "I'm not paying anyone at the moment, remember?"

Rhodey waved that away. "I know you. You'll make up for it even if you have to sell the tower to do it."

"Right now it's not mine to sell," he said wearily, fastening his cufflinks and contemplating who could possibly buy the tower at the price he'd demand. Not that he was selling, but it was an interesting idea. He pushed that thought back; he had other things to worry about.

"Ready?"

He shook out his sleeves and stepped over to open the door for Rhodey. "We need better doors," he said. "The whole place needs an upgrade."

"That costs money," Rhodey reminded him, rolling into the hallway.

"What doesn't?" he grumbled.

The others were gathered when they arrived at the quinjet, dressed in an array of clothing that hinted at their appointed roles during the event. Barton was in his full gear and would no doubt be perched somewhere high where he wouldn't be noticed. Wilson was also geared up, though he would have to be somewhere outside, as the tower lobby wasn't large enough to make good use of his wings. Vision was Vision and looked the same as always and Tony privately hoped he would be out of
Rogers was in a suit and his hair had been darkened, though he was still recognizable. Wanda was wearing the ladies' equivalent of a suit, slacks and all, with her hair swept up and her makeup done in such a way that strangers wouldn't immediately realize who she was. She looked uncomfortable and Tony realized he had never seen her in pants before. In those getups, he couldn't immediately guess at their appointed tasks. Natasha and Sara he'd already seen.

When they were all on the quinjet and Barton was finishing the pre-flight checks, Sara appeared at his side. "Where would you like your notecards?" she asked quietly, holding them up.

"I can take them," Rhodey said. "He doesn't like to be handed things."

She smiled slightly, gave Rhodey the cards, and nodded at them both. "I know," she said, then headed toward Rogers, a giant makeup bag bumping her leg.

"Did you tell her that? I didn't tell her that," Tony commented, watching her.

"I didn't, maybe Natasha did," Rhodey replied.

As soon as the jet was airborne, Natasha appeared in front of them. "Are you ready to be grilled?"

"I prefer to be toasted," he said, shuffling his notecards back into proper order. He slumped back in his seat and eyed her warily. "Do your worst."

She perched on a seat facing him and began quizzing him on portions of his statement. He had to refer to his cards a couple of times, but he thought he did pretty well considering his head was pounding (again? still? he didn't know) and he needed more coffee like he needed oxygen.

Rhodey watched the whole affair, silent until Natasha returned to the front of the jet as they prepared to land. "Have you taken anything for the headache?"

Tony regarded him out of the corner of his eye--actually turning required too much movement, and might also hurt. "Not recently," he admitted with a sigh.

"That's what I thought." Rhodey shook his head, pulled a familiar tin out of his pocket, and set it on Tony's knee. "Take something."

"You have water in there somewhere, too?" He picked through the tablets and selected two of something mild. "Have you had this since the U.N. meeting?"

"No. I dug it out of your other suit while you were in the shower." He asked, passing it back after swallowing the pills dry.

"As long as we're clear that I'm not your minder," Rhodey said lightly as the jet settled onto the landing strut with a small jerk.

"Aren't you?" Tony glanced over to where Sara was working on Rogers's face and was immediately impressed. "Rogers, you hardly look like yourself," he said loudly enough to be heard over the jet's mechanical noises as it powered down and was drawn into the building.

"There wasn't enough time to grow a beard," Rogers replied, keeping his eyes closed as Tony stood and made his way over.

"It won't fool facial recognition algorithms, but it will fool the human eye," Sara said, leaning back to
examine her handiwork, then leaning in to make a few tiny adjustments. "Having them hide in plain sight would be easier if your tower didn't have countermeasures for those digital facial masks."

"Natasha sneaking into S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters with one of those proved the need for recognizing and disabling them," Tony said. "There was no way in hell I'd leave a vulnerability that large unaddressed, especially while the tower was our headquarters. Did you use any prosthetics or is that just makeup?"

"Almost entirely makeup. The only prosthetic piece is on the bridge of his nose." She nodded and dropped the pencil and compact in her hands back into her bag. "You're all set, Steve."

"Thank you," Rogers said courteously as the ramp for the jet whirred open.

Sara glanced over her shoulder and waved to Mel, who was waiting with a suited man holding a silver case. "I'm sorry we're a few minutes behind," she called.

"I'll forgive you this once, but see that it doesn't happen again," Mel said with a laugh. "Come along, everyone. We don't have long to get you into position before the media starts showing up."

As the others filed off the jet, Tony hung back to take a few deep breaths and shake out his hands. He was growing unaccountably nervous. Rhodey waited for him without comment.

By the time he disembarked, the others were gathered around Mel and the suited man, who was saying, "--be careful with these, they cost more than you want to know."

Tony was taken aback; the voice sounded like . . . "Happy?" he asked in disbelief as he drew closer.

Happy acknowledged him with a nod before he handed the last pair of Security Sunglasses to Wanda. They were part of a set of three prototypes he'd cooked up for Happy when he'd first developed a simplified HUD for use with a pair of standard eyeglasses. That had been a side effect of his paranoia after the thing with Killian, though he'd found it useful to have Friday so close at hand on several occasions.

Happy's glasses didn't interact with Friday, of course, but even their simpler system could detect temperature variations, conduct limited scans for weaponry and explosives, and run facial recognition algorithms to compare with law enforcement databases. He should revisit that programming; the improvements to Falcon's equipment and his new scanning methods could be useful upgrades.

After a few more instructions, Happy directed the security contingent to take their places before turning toward Tony, the third pair of glasses sticking out of his breast pocket. "Hey boss," he said cheerfully. "Never thought I'd be telling the superfriends what to do."

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but the company can't seem involved--"

"I'm on leave," Happy said before he could finish. "When it came to the CEO's attention that I hadn't taken any vacation time in over a year, she insisted I take the next month off. Use or lose leave, you know how it is."

Tony frowned. "But the fiscal year just started."

"Pepper has it taken care of," Happy assured him. "So here I am."

"It's good to see you," Tony said, shaking his hand. "I'd ask how long you've been here and how long you plan to stay, but Mel over there keeps looking at her watch. Am I perplexing you, my
"Always," she replied immediately. "The lawyer with the accent is waiting downstairs, said he wants to speak to you before we get going and we're quickly running out of time."

"He wanted to come up here with us to meet you, but I turned him down. Security reasons," Happy added.

Tony clapped him on the back as they headed for the elevator. "Saving my bacon before I even know you're here. I like it."

The ride downstairs was quiet. Happy went off to check on things as soon as the doors opened, and Mel led Tony and Rhodey to the office where the lawyer had taken up residence.

Sara was waiting outside the door, a tall paper cup of store-bought coffee in her hand. "Mr. Stark, Mr. Mortimer requests a private meeting. He says it will take no more than a few minutes."

Tony scoffed. "Rhodey, you're coming with me," he said, then checked his watch. "Give us twenty minutes, then break down the door if you have to. And please tell me that coffee is for me. I would kill for some coffee right now."

"No need, it's for you," she said, handing the cup to Rhodey, who barely had time to steady it before Tony snatched it from his hand.

"Thanks." He patted his pockets one-handed, frowning. "Rhodey, did I have a tablet when we left my room?"

"Not that I saw, why?"

"Dammit, I had my notes on it. Guess I have to start over. Do you have any more cards?" he asked Sara briskly.

It was her turn to pat her pockets and she came up empty. Before she could apologize, Mel tore a sheet from her notebook and held it out without comment. Sara passed it to Rhodey, along with a pen, and asked, "Do you still have your cards, Mr. Stark?"

He produced them from his inside jacket pocket, then replaced them. "Let's get this over with," he said, pushing open the door and holding it for Rhodey. "Hugh! It's been ages. How have you been?" he said with false cheer as the lawyer struggled to his feet.

Hugh Mortimer, Esquire, smoothed his waistcoat primly before stroking his abundant white beard. "I requested a private meeting," he protested with an asthmatic wheeze that almost obscured his accent. Something British, and it would bother him terribly if he knew Tony had forgotten exactly where he was from.

"Rhodey is here to be my minder," Tony said breezily, moving a chair aside so Rhodey's chair would fit next to him. "You know I need minding from time to time."

"Very well," Hugh said with a resigned sigh, settling back into the chair he'd been occupying on the other side of the small round table and taking out a handkerchief to mop the sweat from his gleaming forehead.

Why an aging man with a serious perspiration problem insisted upon wearing three-piece woolen suits was a question that Tony didn't care to ask. "What did you want to talk to me about?" he asked, intentionally keeping his manner as informal as possible.
"I wish to discuss your planned responses to the questions likely to be raised," Hugh replied, straightening the sheets of paper in front of him. "Mr. Wiggins informed me of your telephone call yesterday on the matter."

"Then you know more than I do right now. Are those your notes? Pass them over," Tony said, sliding his hand across the table to snag the papers.

"Y-yes, sir," Hugh said, flustered, pushing the papers toward him.

"I assume you've read my statement. Anything you think we've missed?" Tony asked as he skimmed the lawyer's careful shorthand and motioned for Rhodey to pass him the paper and pen.

"It appears that you have identified the major points of concern," Hugh admitted.

"Good," Tony said absently, writing hurriedly. "Then why did you want to talk to me?"

"To request that you refrain from speaking off-the-cuff," Hugh said acidly. "Your legal defense is a far simpler task when you keep your remarks to a minimum."

"Rhodey, I think he's telling me to shut up," Tony said, feigning shock.

"Sounds like it," Rhodey agreed. "He's not wrong."

"I didn't bring you here so you could take his side."

"Sometimes that's what happens when you want me to be your minder."

"Spoilsport." He finished copying what he needed from the lawyer's papers and slid them back over the table. "How about this: if something is asked that we didn't anticipate, I'll look to you to signal whether I can answer it or not. Deal?"

"I suppose that will have to suffice," Hugh said grudgingly, straightening his pages once again.

"Then we're done here." Tony folded his page and stuck it and the pen into his pocket. Then he stood and took a swig of his coffee, letting Rhodey lead the way to the door.

The hallway was empty. The double doors to the lobby were a short distance away on the left; there was already a low hum of voices as the news crews arrived and set up their equipment for the event barely a half hour hence.

Tony headed down the hall to the right, passing empty offices, their occupants either involved in the press conference or sent home early. Halfway between the double doors and the end of the hall was a security monitoring station—one of several scattered throughout the tower—where two uniformed security personnel were keeping close watch on the building and the proceedings in the lobby. He hesitated momentarily in the doorway to peruse the screens, then moved on after one of the officers nodded in greeting.

He slowly paced the corridor, going all the way to the far end before turning on his heel and returning the way he came. He was trying to marshal his thoughts, mentally rehearsing those things he'd have to say or answer and trying to push everything else out of his mind with limited success. He couldn't afford to be distracted, it was going to take every shred of energy to get through the next hour or so as it was, especially since his headache was throbbing in his temples again.

In his preoccupation, Tony didn't realize Rhodey was following him until the wheelchair's tires squeaked on the tile as he turned around. He floundered for a response. "You don't have to--"
"I know," Rhodey replied steadily. "You okay?"

He waved dismissively with his empty coffee cup and continued his leisurely stroll. "I'll be fine," he said, trying to convince himself it was true.

Rhodey said nothing more until they drew near to the bathroom. "You might want to use the toilet. You can't pee in that suit without somebody noticing."

"How do you know about that?" he asked suspiciously.

"I was there, Tony," Rhodey said patiently.

He frowned and tried to remember. He recalled Rhodey kicking his ass in the War Machine armor but little more. Jarvis had to fill him in afterward on the notable details, like peeing the suit, which only came up because Pepper mentioned it in an argument about his hygiene. "I don't remember that," he admitted finally.

"I'm surprised you remember anything," Rhodey said dryly. "At least go in there and throw that cup away before you crumple it and drip coffee on yourself."

"Yes, mother," Tony replied sarcastically.

The heavy door closing behind him made him feel a little like he was being locked in a tiled prison that echoed each footstep ominously. He shook it off and dropped the cup into the empty trashcan. While he was there, he might as well heed Rhodey's advice.

His hands trembled as he straightened his clothing, the urinal flushing behind him. He washed his hands and splashed water on his face. God, he looked tired.

After a few deep breaths and vigorously rubbing his face with paper towel, he felt as ready as he would ever be.
When Tony stepped back into the hallway, Rhodey had been joined by Mel, Sara, and Happy. "It's almost showtime. You ready?" Mel asked.

He shrugged. "You tell me. Do I pass muster?"

Sara and Mel both looked him over. "You'll do," Sara said with a slight grimace. "I would have been happier with some makeup on you, but Natasha knows her business." She turned to Rhodey. "Let me show you to your spot."

"Front row, right? I think I know the drill." Rhodey seemed to hesitate even as Sara headed for the lobby doors.

"Go. I'm good," Tony said.

"Who said it was about you? Maybe I was thinking about using the bathroom," Rhodey teased, but turned to follow Sara.

"We'll go out in a couple of minutes, I'll introduce you, and then it's all you," Mel told him, moving her notebook from one arm to the other and back again. "Mr. Mortimer and I will be in the front row so we can signal if there are any questions you shouldn't answer. There is a cup of water on the shelf inside the podium, should you need it. Would you like me to tell them how many questions you'll take?"

"No, I want to see how it goes," Tony said, his hands straying to his pockets to check for his cards and his sheet of notes.

"Maybe there won't be any questions," Mel said hopefully. "The statement we prepared is quite thorough."

Happy snorted. "There are always questions."

Mel's watch beeped before she could reply. "We're up," she said briskly, her heels tapping rapidly as she led the way through the doors. A grey backdrop had been set up just beyond the doorway; Mel went around it, but Happy held Tony back with a light touch on his arm.

"Good afternoon and thank you for coming," Mel said, her voice amplified and slightly hollow-sounding. "My name is Mel Brooks and I am the Avengers Public Relations Coordinator. Should there be questions left unanswered at the end of this event, please reach out to me for comment. Without any further ado, I will turn over the mike to Mr. Tony Stark, a man who needs very little introduction. He will be presenting a prepared statement before taking a few questions."

Tony knew a cue when he heard one, so he stepped into the glare of dozens of cameras with Happy close on his heels. Natasha was in position on the far side of the platform and a handful of security personnel were stationed around the room; he identified Wanda and Rogers by their sunglasses. Rhodey, Sara, and Hugh were in the front row, with an empty chair in their midst that was likely for Mel. Happy took up a spot that mirrored Natasha's on the other side.

All this he noticed in the short distance to the podium. He held out his hand to help Mel down the small step and gallantly kissed her knuckles before stepping up onto the platform in her place. He looked no further than the podium and the half dozen microphones mounted upon it as he pulled the notecards out of his pocket, tapping them against the angled surface as he prepared to speak.
"I know it's been a while. Hello, I'm Tony Stark." He gave a little wave and there were a few scattered chuckles. "I'm sure you're wondering why you're all here, so buckle your seatbelts and bear with me while I read my statement and then we can get to the real fun." He took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the crowd while he let out the breath slowly. There were a number of familiar faces, and he lingered on them a little longer before turning his gaze back to the stark words on the lined cards.

"I am here to announce that the United States federal government is conducting an investigation into the tragic events in Sokovia as an act of terrorism and, to my knowledge, I am the sole target of this investigation. As a result, my assets have been seized and I have been asked to turn over a significant number of documents related to my interactions with the various individuals who have been members of the Avengers. In the interest of transparency, I will be releasing all but the classified files publicly. We will, of course, notify you fine people when those documents are available.

"Let me be clear: I have nothing to hide. I took responsibility for my role in the devastation of Sokovia soon after the event and have personally provided the funds needed to house the survivors and rebuild the city. I am painfully aware that money cannot and does not replace lives lost, but everything I am capable of doing is being done. Fortunately, these efforts and the many grants and projects funded by the foundations I have started will not be affected by the seizure of my assets.

"In order to make it clear that my company was not involved in the events being scrutinized, I have temporarily stepped aside as chairman of the board for Stark Industries. Similarly, I have informed the United Nations that Iron Man will only be available for emergencies until this matter is resolved. I will continue to assist in the efforts to revise the Accords in an advisory capacity.

"In short, I intend to cooperate fully with the investigation and have cleared my schedule to accommodate any demands that may arise. I hope I will be given the opportunity to address those responsible for the investigation directly to clear up whatever misunderstandings have brought us to this unpleasant turn of events." He slowly lowered his notecards to see nearly every audience member had a hand raised.

He took a leisurely sip of water and pulled his sheet of notes out of his other pocket as he considered his options. "Ben! Surely you're high enough on the totem pole by now to send a junior staffer to these things in your stead?"

"Yes, sir," the reporter replied. "But since it's you, I wanted to be here myself."

"That's very kind. What's your question?"

"It's two parts. First, will you confirm that you have been single-handedly funding the Avengers since the downfall of S.H.I.E.L.D.?

"Yes, that is true. I also supplied substantial funds while S.H.I.E.L.D. was still alive and kicking, but I suspect that's beside the point."

"Second, since you have been funding the Avengers, what happens to them now that your assets have been seized?"

"That is an excellent question." He paused for a moment to formulate his response. "The Avengers have some funds available to them in the short term. In the long term, the United Nations will be providing a percentage of the operating budget required by the team." He skimmed the faces until he found one he thought he'd noticed earlier. "Angie, you're looking well. What's your question?"

"With your health scare and now this investigation, have you considered giving up Iron Man for
"No, I haven't," he said flatly. There was much more he could say on that subject, but he was quickly growing tired of maintaining a somewhat cheerful facade over the exhaustion and the headache. "Next question. You, in the yellow shirt."

"Amir Shah, Daily Bugle. Will the lack of available funds hinder the Avengers' operations in any way?"

"Will there be minor activities that have to be deferred? It's entirely possible. But the Avengers will respond when called upon even if it requires taking out a few short-term loans. It's not like there's a shortage of collateral--Captain America's shield alone is worth more than several small countries."

"Who will be making those decisions?" the young reporter persisted even as Tony was looking for his next interrogator.

"The U.N. panel would make such decisions in consultation with the Avengers, specifically Colonel Rhodes and--" he faltered when Rhodey began shaking his head and gesturing. Tony took another sip of water while he fixed his eyes on Rhodey, trying to understand what he was getting at. Finally, Rhodey borrowed Mel's notepad and pen and scribbled the word 'Cap' with a no symbol over it. Tony cleared his throat and finally finished the thought. "--specifically Colonel Rhodes and any other personnel deemed pertinent to the discussion." He gestured for a woman in a floral headscarf to go ahead, but his thoughts were still stuck on what might have happened between Rhodey and Rogers so he missed her introduction and the beginning of her question. He refocused his attention in time to hear her conclude, "--be criminal charges against you?"

It seemed easy enough to fill in the blanks, but he glanced at Hugh to see if there was any objection to him responding. The lawyer simply shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Nothing has been said yet about filing charges, but I've only known about this for a few days. It seems reasonable to assume they think there's something worth pursuing or they wouldn't be doing an investigation, but I do not think my actions can accurately be described as terrorism and I am absolutely willing to go to court to argue that point if necessary."

As soon as he finished, someone else spoke up. "Mr. Stark, as I'm sure you're aware, there are segments of the population that do not agree with the decision to allow Captain Rogers and his allies to go unpunished for the amount of property damage and physical injury they caused in Europe. Your willingness to concede to the agreement is mystifying in light of your public opposition to Captain Rogers during those events. Surely you agree that justice must be served--"

"Let me stop you right there," he interrupted firmly, having finally located the speaker along the side of the crowd, a young man who looked like he wasn't even out of high school. Two security personnel shifted closer to the kid's location. "Some advice for you, since you evidently haven't attended or even watched a press conference before: First, you don't get to ask your question until you're called upon.

"Second, if you're called upon, get to the point. Save your editorializing for your audience; I'm not interested. Third, I am not here to comment upon the U.N. arrangement concerning Captain Rogers and the rest of them, and your rambling tells me you haven't done your homework on that arrangement in the first place. Now, if you promise to be quiet, you can stay to the end of this party. Otherwise, those very nice security people will be happy to show you the door," he finished.

The wannabe reporter visibly swallowed; despite his interest in the disgraced Avengers, he didn't
seem to recognize Rogers as one of the looming security guards. Tony vaguely recognized the other as one of the tower's regular staff. "I'll be quiet," the kid said meekly.

"Good choice." Tony sighed and surveyed the murmuring crowd of reporters. "I'd rather not end it there, so let's have one more question," he said. "You, in the green. Make it count."

"Andrea Clemente from CNC. Mr. Stark, what are you hoping to achieve by announcing the investigation publicly like this?"

"See, kid, that's a good question. And what can I say? I've missed my adoring fans," he joked.

The reporter looked unimpressed.

"Seriously, though, I'm doing this to emphasize what I said before: I have nothing to hide. I don't like the idea of a shadowy investigation, so I'm dragging this sucker into the light. That way we all can figure out what it is and if it's hiding some ulterior motive. If that answers your question?"

"It will do," she said.

"Thank you ma'am, everyone. Any remaining questions can be directed to Ms. Brooks over here, and hopefully I won't have to see you all again until we're announcing this mess is done and over with. Good evening." He turned on his heel and headed back the way he came, Happy falling into step behind him as he rounded the backdrop curtain.

Once they were through the door and into the hallway beyond it, Tony slowed his pace said, "I think that went as well as it could have. How did the kid get in?"

"He had credentials from some blogger news site," Happy replied.

"We're letting bloggers in now? Who the hell thought that was a good idea?" he asked sourly, punching the elevator button even though Friday had probably already summoned it for him.

"Ask your PR girl, she managed the list. I just enforced it."

"Whatever, it doesn't matter," he sighed warily, stepping forward when the doors slid smoothly open.

As the elevator ascended, Happy said, "Pepper would have come if you'd asked."

"No," Tony said shortly. "She needs to stay as far away from this as possible. I'm the only one who can deal with a mess of this size."

After a moment in which the only sound was the whirring of the elevator, Happy remarked, "I know you're the genius here, but that's stupid. A bigger mess means more people would get it cleaned up faster."

Tony waved dismissively as he turned to step out onto the Avengers common floor. "You don't understand."

Happy remained his persistent tail as he made a beeline for the nearest couch and dropped into it with a sigh. "You need me to get you anything, boss?"

"I'm good, Hap, just . . . check in, see if they need anything downstairs. I'll be fine," he said, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye so he wouldn't have to move his head from its cushioned perch.
Happy nodded and moved away. Tony threw an arm over his eyes to see if limiting the light would help his headache. He could hear Happy in a far corner of the room, talking in his comm; he'd meant for him to go back downstairs, but that also worked.

He felt limp and empty, the adrenaline of facing dozens of reporters draining away and leaving only exhaustion in its wake. He felt like he could sleep for a week.

Happy stopped talking and Tony could hear his footsteps coming nearer. They stopped a few paces behind him, but Happy didn't speak. After several slow breaths, he realized Happy was standing guard between him and the elevator.

With his arm still over his eyes, Tony lost all track of time though he would swear he never fell asleep. Every so often he could hear Happy shift his weight and clear his throat. His own breathing sounded harsh in his ears, but wasn't as jarring as the sudden whirring of the elevator. His heart rate sped up at the thought of someone else intruding on the peace and quiet, though he knew full well that anyone on that elevator was allowed into this part of the building.

The absence of footsteps and the sound of wheels thumping over the gap between the elevator car and the floor set him at ease. Rhodey greeted Happy and they spoke in low voices briefly, quietly enough that Tony couldn't hear what was said.

He must have spaced out for a minute, because the next thing he knew, Rhodey's hand was on his arm. "Hey, if you're going to nap, you might as well use the whole couch," Rhodey teased gently.

"What if I like completely screwing up my neck?" he grumbled, lowering his arm and squinting at the brightness of the room.

"At least do yourself the favor of taking something else for that headache before you add a neck ache to the equation," Rhodey said, holding out the tin of pills and a bottle of water.

He took the tin without comment. While he considered his options, Rhodey set the water bottle on the cushion next to his leg. "Has everyone left?" Tony asked before throwing back a pill and chasing it with a gulp of water.

"Nearly," Rhodey replied. "Most of the team was helping Mel clean up when I left."

"Were you sent to babysit me?"

"No, that's what Happy was for," Rhodey said without missing a beat. "I'm just not that good at stacking chairs anymore."

"That's what I pay the facilities staff for," Tony said, then corrected himself, "Paid. That's what I paid them for. I wonder if they realize they aren't getting paid."

"I think that's why the others are handling it," Rhodey said uncertainly.

"No, Rogers is enough of a Boy Scout that he'd help regardless. I'll have to check whose payroll covers this building. If it's ours, I might as well send most of them home until this blows over." He sighed heavily. "If it blows over."

"Of course it will," Rhodey said confidently.

There was a question he needed to ask, if he could only remember it. Something . . . Right. Rogers. "What happened with Rogers and the U.N.? I had them put both of you in charge, I thought, but then you're scribbling notes while I'm in the middle of an answer that he's not involved?"
"He declined," Rhodey said simply. "Said he didn't think it appropriate under the terms he agreed to when coming out of hiding."

"You don't mind being the boss-man?"

"I mind less than you did. Remember, I've had training for it. And if Rogers doesn't think he's fit for command, we're all better off for him admitting it."

"If you're good, then I'm good," he said, dismissing the matter from his mind.

Rhodey tilted his head slightly, appearing to listen to something. "They're on their way up," he reported as the elevator whirred to life again.

"Why didn't I get an earpiece?" Tony groused half-heartedly. "I'm the one who upgraded them."

"As if you needed the distraction of voices in your ear," Rhodey countered.

"I deal with way more input in the suit and do just fine," he said dismissively, letting his head fall back onto the cushion again. Sometimes it felt like his head was too heavy for his neck.

"Because you have an AI to help," Rhodey said.

He had already lost track of the conversation and what an AI had to do with anything. "Yeah, yeah," he said with a sigh. He would fall asleep right there if the pounding would only let up.

They could hear the sound of voices almost before the elevator doors opened. At first the words were lost as several people spoke over one another, but then Wanda's voice rose above the fray. "You don't understand. This is wrong!"

"What's wrong?" Happy demanded.

Tony could imagine what Happy looked like, suddenly on high alert, even without turning around to look, so he didn't bother opening his eyes as the conversation continued.

"All of this," Wanda said vehemently. It sounded like she was pacing. "This-this investigation about Sokovia. It is wrong."

"No, Wanda, this is politics," Clint said gently.

"Your government does not care about Sokovia. Why do they do this?"

"Because they can," was Clint's reply.

"Because Ross has it in for Stark," Natasha added.

There was a beat of silence, then Wanda said brokenly, "But it is also my fault."

Tony had to open his eyes then, and turned in his seat to peer over the back of the couch. This, he had to watch.

"What do you mean?" Rogers asked.

"Sokovia. Ultron. These are also my fault," Wanda repeated. "If there is to be an investigation, I must be a part of it too."

"What do you mean, it's your fault? How?" Clint asked.
Wanda cast a glance toward Tony before turning toward the others around her. She drew herself up straighter as she confessed, "I was there when Stark found the scepter. I infected his mind with fear before I let him take it. Pietro wanted to stop him, but I allowed it."

Tony noticed she didn't reveal the content of his vision and he was grateful. He wasn't sure his fears were quite the same anymore and revealing the old one wasn't likely to serve a useful purpose.

"Tony, is that true?" Rhodey asked, speaking up for the first time.

Suddenly all eyes were on him. He focused on Wanda's pale face as he said, "It matches what she told me once before."

"Damn," Clint said softly.

Rogers looked at him, then at Wanda, then back at him. "Stark, I have just one question."

"Only one? I'm surprised," Tony said sarcastically, then let out a breath as he felt Rhodey glaring at him. "Fine, carry on. What's the question?"

"Would Ultron have happened without that scepter?"

The choice of question surprised him just a bit. "Ah, no," he admitted. "Ultron was a thought experiment Bruce and I worked on, but even my AI expertise wasn't up to snuff for a project of that scale. The Iron Legion was as far as it went. But we needed to get the scepter for Thor, so it was pretty much inevitable I'd try something with it. That's what I do."

"Were you in your right mind when you did it?" Clint asked next, presumably thinking of how out-of-sorts Natasha, Thor, and Rogers had been after their encounters with Wanda's abilities.

"How would I know?" he replied with a shrug.

Footsteps approached from behind him, and he turned back around to see Wilson in his full gear approaching from the direction of the landing bay. "Everyone has left and we're all clear. Vision remained behind to keep an eye on things," Wilson reported. "What's going on?"

"I'll explain later," Rhodey said, then changed the subject. "We should head back to the compound."

"Why do you allow this to happen?" Wanda demanded, advancing in Tony's direction several paces before Clint stopped her with a hand on her arm. Red tendrils whirling around her hands and wrists expressed her agitation. "It is not just for you to bear the blame alone."

"Making yourself a target wouldn't accomplish anything besides getting yourself deported," Tony said patiently, resisting the urge to rub a throbbing spot near his temple. "If Ross wanted to make an example out of you, he'd already be doing it. He's not after you, he's after me. If Ultron were off the table, he'd find something else I've done and exploit that instead."

"Why does he target you? Why not all of us?"

"Because I have money?" He shrugged. "There are several possible reasons, but none of them really matter."

"They might," Natasha interjected. "If we can determine why he's doing this, we'll have some idea of how far he's willing to go with it and whether he's going to target all of us eventually. You said some of Fury's people are looking into it?"
"Yeah. Don't ask me who. Hill might know."

"Then let's get back to base and start doing what we can to unravel Ross's plans," Rhodey said briskly.

"Sure thing, boss," Tony replied sarcastically, not budging from the couch.

The others, however, began moving in the direction of the quinjet, talking quietly amongst themselves. Happy brought up the rear, looking wary.

"Hap, you got your glasses back?"

"Sure did. Where do you want me to be?" Happy answered, still watching the retreating Avengers.

Tony sighed and massaged his forehead. "Stay here, keep an eye on things for me? And tell you what, we'll have the staff do an inventory, top to bottom. That'll keep them busy for a while."

Happy looked skeptical but didn't comment. "Anything else, boss?"

Tony shrugged. "Don't think so." He glanced over to Rhodey, who hadn't left with the others. "You ready?"

"I'm waiting on you," Rhodey said evenly.

"Then let's rock and roll." He stood up from the couch and his vision went hazy for a second but quickly righted itself. The headache just wasn't letting up. He remained in place for a minute, trying to remember what else he'd intended to say. "Friday, is the armor still in the chopper?"

"Yes, boss."

"Move it to the armory when the chopper gets back to base." He couldn't remember if the chopper was on the list of seized property, but he knew the armor wasn't. Just in case, better safe than sorry, and all that.

He ignored her affirmation and finally headed for the landing bay, Rhodey rolling alongside. He was tempted to take the helicopter back to the compound rather than joining everyone else in the jet, but it sounded like Natasha wanted to ask him things about Ross and he might as well get that over with since she wasn't going to let it go until she had answers. Spies were annoying that way.
Headaches

Natasha was helping Clint with the pre-flight checks when Tony boarded the jet and dropped into a seat next to where Rhodey was securing his chair. Wanda still looked upset as she argued with Vision about something Tony couldn't hear. Rogers was seated on the other side of the jet while Sara carefully removed his makeup and prosthetic; Wilson was standing close by and it sounded like Rogers was filling him in on what happened. Mel was on Rogers's other side and chatting with Sara in between glances at her phone.

"Everybody buckle in!" Clint called back, and those standing quickly moved to seats, though most didn't bother to actually buckle up. Tony never did, either.

Natasha slid into the seat beside him once the jet was airborne.

"What do you want to know?" he asked wearily.

"You suggested there are multiple possible reasons that Ross is doing this. What are they?"

There was no accusation in her voice, but he still resisted the question. "Why does it matter?"

"Because it will tell us how far he's willing to go," she said patiently.

"The last time a guy wanted to get even with you, he blew up military families, the Chinese Theater, and then your house before trying to kill you in person," Rhodey commented.

"You think I've forgotten?" Tony retorted.

"Just because Ross is taking a different approach doesn't mean there won't be collateral damage is all I'm saying."

Natasha nodded in agreement. "If we know what he's reacting to, we have a better chance of anticipating and containing the fallout."

"Fine, fine." He sighed. "You already know about his visits to the compound. If you haven't listened to the recordings, those might help. So there are at least three things he might be mad about. When he calls, I always put him on hold for at least five minutes. I think that's why he started visiting in person so often. Any request he made for Avenger assistance, I've deflected or turned down. I mean, it was just Rhodey, Vision, and me, and Rhodey and I didn't have suits, so it's not like we could have done much anyway."

He shrugged. "And I think you already know that he's not a fan of the agreement that brought Rogers and company back. That hasn't changed. He's probably also mad that the U.S. delegate to the U.N. isn't on the Accords revision committee, but only the countries that signed are involved in the revisions."

"So there are personal reasons as well as political reasons," Natasha concluded.

"I think that's always true for guys like him," Wilson said.

Tony hadn't noticed that the others were listening to the conversation, but it made sense. And if it meant he didn't have to repeat himself later, so much the better. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and closed his eyes while the conversation continued around him.
"Now the question is, what does that mean he's got up his sleeve? What are the likely consequences?" Rhodey asked.

"You mean, what's the worst that can happen," Wilson said grimly.

Mel spoke up. "Since there's already an investigation, a possible worst case scenario would have Mr. Stark convicted of a terrorism charge. His assets would be forfeited to the government, and the Avengers team would be tarnished by association."

"We all know they'd put him on the Raft," Clint called back.

Tony shuddered. That conclusion hadn't occurred to him, probably because he was assuming his lawyers would be able to get him out of a conviction in the unlikely event that charges were filed. But if they couldn't . . . Clint wasn't wrong.

It was distressing and distracting and his mind circled anxiously around the idea until he dragged it back to the discussion. They were agreeing that Wanda would be taken somewhere to be experimented upon, though the public story would be that she was being held for her role in the Sokovia disaster. Vision, meanwhile, would be the subject of much scrutiny and possible experimentation, provided Ross and his collaborators could figure out how to keep him from escaping through the walls.

All of it was bleak and Tony didn't really want to hear it, but contemplating whether there was a substance that Vision couldn't phase through was interesting. He'd have to ask if Vision had ever tried passing through vibranium.

The jet landed at the compound shortly thereafter and he pushed himself upright with a sigh. Sara stopped beside him. "The medical staff requests that you stop by to have your blood pressure taken. They say it's by request of your cardiologist."

That's right, she did say she wanted it taken again. "Yeah," he said with another sigh. "Thanks."

Most of the others opted to take the stairs up, so it was just him, Rhodey, Mel, and Sara with her giant makeup bag in the elevator. When the car stopped at the medical floor and he got off, Rhodey followed. "Now are you being my babysitter?" he asked with mild exasperation.

"I'm keeping you company."

"I need company for the thirty seconds it takes to take my blood pressure?"

"I don't know, do you?" Rhodey grinned.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" Tony grumbled good-naturedly as he shrugged off his suit coat and dropped it into Rhodey's lap.

"Takes one to know one," Rhodey retorted as one of the medical personnel approached.

"Mr. Stark, please have a seat over here, this will only take a minute," the female doctor said.

He recognized her but couldn't remember her name, not that it mattered. He sat in the chair she indicated and she plucked a blood pressure cuff from a nearby basket. He didn't have time to roll up his sleeve before she was inflating the cuff around his arm and he shrugged, watching Rhodey carefully fold his suit coat and place it in his lap.

"A hair higher than your past readings, but well below the point of concern," the doctor said as she
efficiently stowed the cuff back where it belonged. "I'll send the information to Dr. Mann and we'll see you again tomorrow."

"Sure thing," he replied, already on his feet and heading for the door. He didn't remember Dr. Mann insisting that he get this done multiple days in a row, but he might as well cooperate and keep her happy.

Rhodey led the way back to the elevator. "Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes."

"I think I'll pass, thanks," he said, frowning. The thought of food wasn't the least bit appetizing. All he wanted was to shed his suit and fall into bed.

"You sure? You didn't eat all of your lunch," Rhodey said, letting him take back his coat once they were headed upward.

"I'm sure," he said. "I'm too tired to be hungry."

"See you in the morning, then. I put your pill tin in the right pocket of your coat. If you need anything . . . " Rhodey briefly hesitated in the doorway.

"I know, mom," he said, giving a mock salute before the elevator doors slid closed.

Changing for bed didn't take long. Calming his mind for sleep took a lot longer.

The dreams weren't a surprise but that didn't mean they were pleasant. However the dream got started, it shifted into the nightmare he'd had about Ross coming after him in the abandoned compound. The pounding on the door seemed to last for hours before the door gave way and he was physically dragged into a courtroom. The judge banging his gavel echoed painfully, then the scene shifted to the Raft, where he was locked in a cell, alone but for the car battery hooked with fraying wires to a heavy iron ring embedded in his chest.

The structure shuddered, then began to sink, and he became aware of water collecting in the lowest areas of the floor and rising quickly. The Raft was being lowered without being sealed and he was a dead man if he didn't get someone's attention soon. He yelled and banged on the bars, the walls, everything within reach as the water began circling around his legs. He climbed onto the cot, cradling the battery with one arm and pounding on the wall with the other, yelling to wake the dead, but there was no response to his distress.

The water was chest high and just about to reach the crude electromagnet when he woke up, heart racing, chest heaving, and head pounding. He was sweating like he'd run a marathon while dragging the suit behind him. He staggered out of bed, headed for the bathroom.

Two glasses of water later, the dream had begun to dissipate, though he couldn't bear to return to bed. "Friday, is anyone else up?"

"No, boss."

He winced at the sound of her voice. Headache, right. "Friday, suppress audio responses." His phone vibrated with her written confirmation of his request.

Without turning on the lights, he padded into the closet and patted down his suits until he found the tin in a pocket. He could almost sort through it by feel, but not quite, so he returned to the bathroom and turned on the shower light, wincing even at the amount of light filtering past the curtain.

He was out of the prescription stuff, leaving him with only two options. Rhodey would tell him to go
downstairs and get something better from the medical people, but ibuprofen had helped at the hospital. He might as well give it a try.

That sorted, he debated where to go next. The workshop, the office, and the common room were all reasonable options. He could even try going for a swim, see if getting the blood moving helped the headache, but then he realized being in the pool included chlorine smells and his stomach churned just thinking about it. Using a treadmill instead would involve too much noise for comfort.

The workshop and the office meant that if he fell asleep he'd be sleeping on a desk, and Rhodey would scold if he found him like that. Rhodey would probably also scold him for being awake and not waking him, but he knew it wasn't easy for him to get in and out of bed so he was reluctant to bother him unnecessarily.

The common room, then, since it had couches. Sleeping on the couch might make him ache, but it was better than a keyboard pillow. Assuming he was able to sleep. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to even though he knew he needed it.

Once he'd collapsed into a couch, he turned on the TV with the sound muted. He was greeted by a solemn news anchor and the ever-present crawling text across the bottom of the screen. Then a photo of himself at the press conference appeared beside her shoulder while the main text changed to "Tony Stark: Terrorist?" He groaned and shut the TV off.

Part of him wanted to check the headlines to find out which part of his remarks was the subject of most discussion, but the rest of him didn't want to think about the whole brouhaha for a while. It was easier said than done.

There had also been that nearly disastrous mission . . . not a much better topic for consideration, but that was kind of his life. Careening from one terrible thing to another, with the occasional bright spot here and there.

Speaking of bright spots, he should call Pepper. Not now, she'd kill him for waking her up. Maybe tomorrow.

"Friday, bring up the mission footage on the TV. I want to take another look at those jetpacks."

He paused the video several times to scrutinize the tech but doing so displeased his headache, so he had to give up before he could decide if HYDRA had used one of his designs or come up with something else. The odds seemed good that it was just a rip-off of something, but he didn't work on Falcon's gear until after S.H.I.E.L.D. was no more and he hadn't delved into proper jetpacks before that. He'd have to follow up when the possibilities didn't make his head pound, because if there was any chance Avenger intel had ended up with HYDRA . . . that was a whole new headache.

He closed his eyes and sighed, lingering flashes of brightness from the video flaring across his eyelids. Somehow it made him think of Rhodey's joke about bedbug-bots. Bots of some sort would have been a major help against the jetpacks. They wouldn't even need to be humanoid in form like the Iron Legion, they just needed propulsion and weaponry. Especially if he could rig them to blow up on contact with an enemy combatant. And if the propulsion was also the weaponry, like a repulsor? That definitely merited more thought when giving it more thought wouldn't cause physical pain.

"Friday, put 'repulsor bots' at the top of my project list," he said, dragging his eyelids open with effort. He hadn't realized how heavy they'd gotten. "Suck it, Ross. I'd like to see you invent something with a migraine," he muttered.
"Do you often talk to yourself in dark, empty rooms?" Dr. Tanya asked from somewhere beyond the couch area.

"It's best to do that in empty rooms, or people get the wrong idea," he said, sitting upright and pressing one palm against his forehead. Moving was a bad plan. "And the dark usually means no one knows you're there. Why are you here? Did Friday call you again?"

She chuckled, and a chair to his right creaked slightly as she sat down. "After your last mission ended the way it did, I asked Friday to alert me if any of you seemed to be in distress."

"In distress," he repeated. "Friday, you nut, I just have a headache."

"Yet you left your room when you would almost certainly be more comfortable in bed," Doc T said quietly.

"I had a bad dream," he said numbly, and the images he'd been ignoring returned with a vengeance. He shuddered and clenched one hand into a fist.

"Would it help to talk about it?"

"No," he said quickly, then shrugged and gestured dismissively as if she could see him. "It's from everything that's going on. No big deal."

"And your headache?"

"Stress. Too much going on and too little I can do about it. Why the interrogation, doc?" Stringing that many words together took more effort than he cared to admit.

"No interrogation intended, Tony. I always ask about how you're doing."

"Now you know," he said shortly. Even her quiet tone was grating on his irritated nerve endings. He needed silence and, preferably, a horizontal perch.

He was surprised when the couch cushion beside him sank. He'd completely missed Doc T standing up and coming over. "Would you like me to call someone up from the medical staff, or shall I go down with you?" she asked in an undertone.

"That's not-- I don't-- I'll just go back to bed," he stammered, swallowing hard.

"You're practically hyperventilating, Tony."

Huh. So he was. That was new. "All right," he said dully. "I'll go down there."

"Do you need help up?"

She was already standing. How did she do that? He slowly pushed himself up, feeling like he was moving through sand. When he was upright, he staggered a little, suddenly lightheaded, and she caught him by the arm.

"Easy, I've got you."

She didn't let go of him the entire way, and he wasn't inclined to protest. The lights along their route dimmed themselves, so the brightness of the medical wing was an unwelcome assault on his oversensitive vision. He tensed and Doc T pushed him into the closest chair, then vanished from his side. He closed his eyes and waited, hearing snatches of her voice between his unsteady breaths and the ticking of the wall clock. Why the hell were they still using an analog clock, anyway?
He heard her footsteps return. "They turned off a few of the lights. Can you make it over to the nearest bed?"

He cracked one eye open to look; the light was still too much, but the bed was only a dozen feet away beneath one of the extinguished lights. "Yeah, I can make it."

When he'd eased onto the bed, he closed his eyes again while someone took his vitals and started an IV. The feel of needle and tape on his arm made his skin crawl, but it was necessary if he was going to get any relief from the ache that threatened to pound its way out of his skull.

After a barrage of rapid-fire questions that he answered in single words, usually of the yes or no variety, his interrogator stepped away to retrieve whatever drug they were going to try first. In the meantime, someone else brought him a damp folded washcloth to put on his forehead. He unfolded it partway so it also covered his eyes.

"Would you like any other company?" Doc T asked after a long while.

"No, let them sleep," he said slowly. "You should sleep, too."

"Not until I'm sure that you are," she said.

It took three different injections into his IV before the pounding began to ease, and even then sleep was elusive.

Doc T was as good as her word and remained with him. Periodically she would touch his hand, then ask quietly how he was doing; it took him a while to realize she did that so her voice wouldn't startle him.

After she'd asked for what was probably the tenth time, a new pair of voices entered the room and he flinched. Doc T's warm hand settled on his arm reassuringly. "They can't see you. There's a curtain pulled around your bed."

He relaxed slightly, but the new voices were intrusive even though it sounded like they had been taken to the other end of the room. Then one of the voices was replaced by the sound of retching and his stomach did a sympathetic flip. He quickly plugged his ears lest he follow suit, but the faint scent that wafted his direction made him gag.

Almost as soon as he smelled it, something was placed over his nose and mouth. Curiosity overcame the urge to plug his ears and he cautiously touched it with one hand: a paper hospital mask. "I also have earplugs if you'd like them," Doc T said.

"Yes. Thanks, doc."

After that it didn't matter what else happened outside of his curtain, he was blissfully unaware of everything. He had no sense of when he finally fell asleep, but it probably wasn't long afterward.

He woke slowly, appreciating that the headache no longer shut out all other sensations. Some pain remained, but it was markedly reduced, and he was grateful for the improvement. Everything had returned to something closer to normal, except his hearing seemed to be impaired. An itch in his ear had him reaching up to scratch--ah, that's right, earplugs. Removing the earplugs proved his hearing remained somewhat sensitive to things like that dratted clock, but he could cope.

He gingerly opened his eyes. There were still curtains along the sides of his bed, but he could see past the end of the bed to the room beyond; probably so it was easier for them to check on him while he slept.
He was debating whether to try sitting up when a nurse paused by his curtain. He blinked, uncertain if he was supposed to say something first. She saved him the trouble. "Good afternoon, Mr. Stark. How are you feeling?"

"Better than I was. What time is it?"

"Nearly three. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"When can I leave?"

She chuckled. "The doctor on duty has to clear you. I'll fetch him. Anything else?"

He sat up carefully and realized there was definitely one more thing. "Toilet?" he said.

"Sure thing." She made the IV pole mobile, then helped him slide off the bed and led him to the bathroom. "If you need anything, just pull on the cord there."

He took his time doing his business and splashed water on his face afterward. Now that he was up and moving, he realized how tired he still felt, and the lingering ache seemed to have seeped into his bones. It was like a hangover, but without having fun first. He was not a fan.

When he returned to his curtained area, he found Rhodey and a doctor waiting. Rhodey didn't say a word, though his expression spoke volumes. The doctor had Tony sit on the bed before launching into a series of questions about how he was feeling that seemed vaguely familiar.

His responses were deemed sufficient to allow him to leave, so the doctor vanished and the nurse returned to remove his IV and take his blood pressure again. He left as soon as she finished, Rhodey silently accompanying him.

The first thing Rhodey said was not what Tony had expected. "You feel up to the common room, or do you want to go to your bedroom?" he asked as they headed for the elevator.

The common room meant people, which meant noise and possibly chaos and things he did not want to deal with, like everyone wanting to know where he'd been. "Not the common room."

"Bedroom, then," Rhodey said, and the elevator whirred to life around them. "Do you want a smoothie or something else?"

"I think I'm good."

"Not an option. Smoothie or something else," Rhodey repeated, his voice steely.

"Fine, mama bear. Smoothie."

"Friday, tell Wanda she's on."

There was no response.

"Friday?"

"Friday, resume audio responses," Tony said, belatedly recognizing the problem.

"Message conveyed, Colonel," Friday said.

"You muted Friday?" Rhodey asked with a hint of disbelief.
"Her voice was too loud," Tony replied nonchalantly.

Rhodey cast his eyes heavenward as the elevator doors slid open. "You couldn't stand the voice of your A.I. yet you never thought to have her call me?"

Admitting that he'd thought about calling Rhodey and decided against it would not help his case in the slightest, so Tony decided not to mention it. "Nothing personal. I didn't want company."

"Right." Rhodey was not persuaded. "Well, now you're going to have company whether you like it or not."

"You want to watch me sleep?"

"It's not that I want to, it's that you've left me no choice. How does Pepper put up with you?"

"She leaves the nannying to you. And Jarvis, when he was around. Friday isn't trained well enough yet." He was mostly kidding. "So what has everyone been up to all day?"

"Trying to unravel this Ross thing. And Sara and Rogers have been going through all those files that have to be turned in for the investigation."

"Do you need me for anything?" he asked as he sank onto the edge of his mattress, almost hoping the answer would be no. He was still so tired.

"I don't think so. The files will have to end up somewhere, but that doesn't have to happen right now."

"Have them talk to the server team about that. They'd need to be involved to make the stuff public anyway. But nothing is released until I've checked it over."

"Yeah, we know. Do you need to take your meds for today?"

"I don't know, is that something they'd have shot through the IV while I was sleeping?"

"I'll have someone ask."

"I think you're having entirely too much fun bossing people around."

There was a knock at the door. "You're just jealous that I'm better at it," Rhodey joked as he went to the door. Tony couldn't see who it was, but assumed Wanda when Rhodey returned with a plastic cup in hand. "Get your ass in bed and I'll give you your smoothie."

"You're assuming I want it," Tony protested, but swung his legs up into the bed anyway. "How have people reacted to the press conference?"

Rhodey didn't respond, instead staring at the cup he'd set on the bedside table. Tony sighed and picked it up. Rhodey still didn't speak and gave him a steady look until he'd taken a drink from the straw. "Mel's phone has been ringing off the hook all day. She had to borrow the website guy to monitor social media while she deals with everything else. I wouldn't even know that much, except that Sara got her to stop by at lunch. She could only manage to stay for twelve minutes. Remind you of anyone?"

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," Tony replied with a yawn.

"Of course not," Rhodey said dryly. "How are you doing?"
"I'll be fine," he said reflexively, examining his cup. Unfortunately it was clear, so Rhodey could tell how little he'd finished.

"I'm sure you will. How are you feeling right now?" Rhodey persisted.

"A little woozy and achy," he admitted. "And tired despite sleeping most of the day away."

"I'm not surprised. You were more than a little behind on your sleep," Rhodey said. "Finish that and I'll stop nagging."

It didn't feel worth the effort to continue objecting that he didn't want it, especially since the cup wasn't large and hadn't been full.

He made a face as he swallowed the last of it, then shoved the cup in Rhodey's direction.

Rhodey took it and said, "Are you going to make me actually watch you sleep, or will you promise to stay put and behave?"

"Do I look like I want to go anywhere?" He was already under the covers and quite comfortable, thank you very much.

"I'd tell you to call me if you need anything, but I know you won't call."

"I don't intend to need anything," he said somewhat peevishly.

"That's all right, I'm going to have Friday tell me every time you wake up," Rhodey said with a wink and a grin as he turned to leave.

"Traitor," he grumbled half-heartedly as he shifted so his back was to the door.

"Sleep well."

"Thanks."
Looking Ahead

Chapter Notes

There's a brief mention of an original character having committed suicide (in the past); I don't think it's enough to bother anyone, but I wanted to flag it up front just in case.

Tony woke up once to use the bathroom a few hours after falling asleep, but otherwise remained completely and blissfully unaware until morning. When he opened his eyes again, the sun had risen but the building felt still. "Friday, what time is it?"

"Six fifteen, boss."

"Anyone else up?" he asked as he shifted to dangle his legs off the mattress before standing.

"Captain Rogers is out--"

"--for a run. Of course he is." He meandered to the bathroom, stripping off his clothes as he went. A quick shower helped relieve the itch of day-old clothes and a careful shave had him feeling more like himself. He wandered into his closet afterward to haphazardly pick out pants and a shirt. He was out the door and into the hallway a few minutes later.

He needed to catch up on everything, but his first destination was the kitchen for coffee. While it was brewing, Friday piped up. "Boss, Wanda Maximoff left you a note on the refrigerator."

The note said simply, **There is more if you want it**, which could have been referring to any number of things except for the location and probable context. His hunch was confirmed when he opened the fridge to find a cup identical to the one he'd drained the previous afternoon.

He took the smoothie and his coffee as he headed in the direction of the office. As he neared his bedroom again, Friday nagged from his phone, "Boss, your medication."

He eyed the remaining pills as he fished one out. "Friday, when am I supposed to be done with these things?"

There was a pause while she checked his records. "Dr. Mann informed the medical staff that you are to continue taking the medication daily, boss. She will determine the appropriate course of action after she has received three more days of blood pressure readings," Friday reported as he swallowed his pill and resumed his trip to the office.

"So I have to go down to medical three more times?" he asked dubiously as he set his beverages down on the desk. He'd just sat down when he realized he'd left the tablet behind. Again. Dammit.

"Yes, boss."

He stalked back to his bedroom, fished the tablet out of the drawer where he'd hidden it, and headed back to the office. Again.

When he resumed his seat, he took a long drink of coffee, then pulled out his phone. It was far too early to call Pepper, so he sent her a message. *I'd like to apologize. Call me when you have a*
Then he pulled up his messages on the monitor and skimmed the list between slurps of smoothie. The first one to catch his attention was from Dr. Tanya: *I'd like to check in with you when you have time to chat*. He needed to thank her for the company during his migraine, so that sounded fine to him. Within a minute he had an appointment scheduled for later that morning.

The next message he opened was from Sara, reporting on what she and Steve had managed to accomplish in sorting the documents. Included was a list of items they needed his input on. He started going through them, quickly deciding whether they merited inclusion in the investigation batch, the public batch, or both.

He'd finished those, skimmed the list of files in both batches, and was debating whether to throw the Ross recordings into the public batch when Rhodey rolled in. "Feeling better?" Rhodey asked.

"Yeah," Tony replied. "Tell me, good idea or bad idea: I'm thinking of releasing all my Secretary Ross recordings with the other stuff."

"Bad idea," Rhodey said immediately. "It's time for breakfast, come on."

Tony frowned and checked the time. Somehow he'd been in the office for almost two hours. "I already had some smoothie," he protested.

"You need to eat solid food once in a while," Rhodey retorted, unimpressed.

He sighed and cleared everything from the screen. "Why is it a bad idea?" he asked as he stood and stretched before gathering up his stuff and following Rhodey out the door.

"Some of those conversations mention things that aren't public knowledge. If you hold those back, the rest won't make sense. Plus, you'd want your lawyers to weigh in before you go off and do something half-cocked like that."

"So we redact the classified parts. It's not like that's unusual. Wait a minute, has Ross done anything since the press conference?"

"No," Rhodey said flatly. "That's the other reason you don't want to release those yet. We're still waiting on his next move."

"Are there any bets on what that might be?" he asked as he stepped out of the elevator.

"We have a list but not a betting pool," Sam replied, pausing on his way through the main door to hold it open for them. "You're feeling better?"

"I am. Thanks," Tony said, waiting until Rhodey had passed him to go into the common room. He had to answer variations of that question several times before he made it to the table with more coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs, courtesy of Rogers. He made a mental note to put himself back on the food rotation. They must have taken him off when he was supposed to be taking it easy, but there was no reason he couldn't do his fair share now that he was on his last day of restrictions.

"So what has made it on the list?" he asked when Wilson took the seat across from Rhodey.

"I'd rather wait to talk shop until after breakfast," Sam said evasively.

"That bad, huh?" Tony continued conversationally.
"The options range from bad to worse," Natasha replied from a few seats down, managing to simultaneously answer the question and fail to reveal anything of use. He should have her do press conferences.

"Let me guess, me being arrested under some pretense is on there. Probably toward the less bad end, since I think most of you wouldn't mind being rid of me for a while." He took a bite and pondered while he chewed. "Being arrested and clapped up on the Raft would be worse than that. Which begs the question, is the list in ranked order, or just in the order you thought of them?"

"Give it a rest, Tony," Rhodey admonished, nudging him with an elbow.

"If you were absent for an entire day, wouldn't you want to know what dire outcomes they've imagined for you?" Tony retorted.

"Not all of it directly pertains to you," Rogers said, taking a seat next to Sam and across from Tony. "If you were arrested, it seems likely Ross would find some reason to take us into custody, too."

"He sure would," Tony replied, taking another bite, followed by a long swallow of coffee. "So what's the worst possible outcome you guys thought of? I'm curious if what I'm thinking is better or worse." He was thinking a lot of things.

"Some of us prefer to look on the bright side," Rogers said dryly. "The list will wait until we've eaten."

"Of course it will, but I have somewhere to be in--" he checked his watch, "--less than ten minutes."

"Why, you have a hot date with someone you met down in medical?" Wilson said with a wink.

"Bite your tongue, I wouldn't do that to Pepper," Tony replied dismissively. "I'm just going to have a chat with Doc T."

"Have you talked to Pepper recently?" Rhodey asked curiously.

He managed not to wince. "I, ah, not since, um, Tuesday night. But this morning I asked her to call when she has a minute. Why?"

"Ross making some sort of move against her or the company is on the list," Rhodey said matter-of-factly.

"I would have extremely strong words for my lawyers if he does," Tony said vehemently. "They've assured me repeatedly that Pepper and the company should be safe from Ross." He realized how ridiculous that sounded even as he said it. As if he needed a reminder how powerless he was.

He mentally reviewed his other connections for vulnerabilities and a knot formed in his stomach. There was someone who was most certainly not safe from persecution: all that stood between Secretary Ross and Peter Parker was the fact that no one save Tony and Happy knew who Spider-Man was.

"Excuse me, I just remembered I need to make a phone call," he said faintly, pushing back his chair and almost pushing it over in his haste. He gulped the rest of his coffee as he took his dishes over to the sink, then fled the room.

"Hey boss," came Happy's voice after two rings.

"Happy, I need you to keep a close eye on the kid," he said urgently, his pace slowing, though he
continued down the hall.
"Sure thing, boss. Did something happen?"
"More that I'm trying to keep something from happening. Let me know immediately if it seems like there are government types on his tail." He paced just outside the door to the stairs, mindful that stairwells were excellent for eavesdropping.
"You got it. You want me to step in if they get too close?"
"No," he said emphatically. "Notify me, but do not intervene. If they come sniffing, our best shot is to stick to the internship line, and there is no way we can make the head of SI security monitoring an intern seem normal."
"Right. Anything else, boss?"
"That's it. Thanks, Happy," he said, ending the call. He looked at his phone for a moment, briefly considering whether to try Pepper, but he had literally two minutes before he was due at Doc T's office and he expected the conversation to last longer than that. Or at least he hoped it would. She would be quite justified in ignoring his request to call after the way their last conversation ended.

He made it with a few seconds to spare. Doc T was at her desk, doing something on her reassembled computer, but when he arrived she looked up and smiled. "Tony. I am glad to see that you can endure normal levels of light again."

He closed the door behind himself and sank into the nearest chair, then dropped his phone on the table in front of him as an afterthought. "And sound," he said. "I'm back to normal there, too."
"How could I forget about sound?" she said lightly, moving to her usual seat across from him.
"Thanks," he blurted before she could say anything else. "For your company, and . . . everything. Have you had migraines? You seem to know the drill pretty well."
"I have not, but my sister started suffering from them when we were quite young."

He felt ashamed that he'd never given a moment's thought to her family. "Does she still? Have migraines, I mean."
"Every so often, but not like she used to. The medications they have now have worked well for her."

There were so many questions he wanted to ask. "Do you have other siblings?"
"We had a brother. He was ten years older."

It was difficult to miss her use of past tense. "What happened to him?"
"He committed suicide a number of years ago," she said evenly. "He was in the military, went to Vietnam. He never talked about what he saw, but his note said what he went through haunted him until he couldn't bear it anymore. He's the reason I wanted to become a psychologist and work with veterans."
"I'm sorry for your loss," he said automatically, then added, "But you left the V.A. Why? No, wait, you don't have to answer that. You didn't ask me to check in so I could demand personal details."

Dr. Tanya laughed. "It's all right. Let's just say I was unprepared for the politics involved in working for the government. Still, I made the best of it for as long as I could."
"Politics will be the death of us all," Tony agreed, nodding. "And your parents? Are they still living?"

"My father succumbed to cancer not long after my brother died. My mother says the grief drove him to an early grave. She lives with my sister down in Virginia, where we were raised."

"And being reasonably close to them would have been a perk of working in DC," he mused. "If they ever need anything, just say the word. It won't be a problem."

"I appreciate that, thank you. Now I have a question for you. In the discussion with Steve earlier this week, you referenced giving a home, money, and technology to the team. You also mentioned funding the Avengers in your press conference. Would you elaborate further on what, exactly, you have been contributing?"

"It's not a big deal," he started, then provided a brief summary of his history with the team, starting with Fury's appearance at his home in Malibu and ending with the Accords, concluding, "You already know what happened after that."

"I see," she said slowly, her thoughtful expression not giving him any hint of what she was actually thinking. "So your contributions have been voluntary?"

Of all the possible questions she could have asked, he wasn't expecting that one. "Yes, of course," he said somewhat defensively. "I don't give things to the government when they're demanded of me."

"Why have you chosen to invest yourself and your resources so extensively into this single group of people?"

He shrugged and waved dismissively. "I have to spend my money somehow, and this is more constructive than gambling. Though honestly, I get more for my money when I gamble, but at the end of the day saving people's lives is pretty satisfying."

She studied him for a moment. "If saving lives was all you were interested in, there are charitable organizations all over the world that would be worthy--and grateful--recipients of your dollars. Yet you have poured your money and yourself into the Avengers and continue to do so despite misgivings about your place on the team. Why?"

He sighed. "Space aliens, that's why. Only a fool would think that they are going to leave us alone, and we're going to need the best people we can find and the best tech we can develop to have any hope of defeating them again. It was mostly luck that we managed the first time."

"I am trying to understand why you were willing to remain associated with the team even if only two people out of eight expressed support for you personally," Dr. Tanya explained. "I have heard many 'for the greater good' arguments, but I have to say, yours is one of the most extreme I've encountered."

"Thanks?" he said hesitantly when she fell silent.

She sighed. "That's not really a compliment. People who do things for those kinds of reasons tend to burn out, or die trying."

"Oh." His phone began to buzz on the table. He watched it vibrate its way across the smooth surface for a moment before picking it up to check who was calling: Pepper. He thumbed it silent and tapped out a quick message: *Talking to the doc, I'll call when we're finished.* He put the phone down again as he said, "Sorry."
"What happens now, Tony?" she asked quietly. "Two days ago you weren't sure how much longer you could do the team-player thing except for world-ending threats. Are you telling me you've changed your mind?"

"Yes. No. I don't know," he stuttered. He sighed deeply and ran a hand over his face. "I don't know," he repeated. "I still-- it still feels like I don't quite belong, but they're with me on the Ross thing, so I can't just quit now."

"Why not?"

"Because they need the tech and all that. Nobody else can make that happen."

"No one else can do it quite the way you do, perhaps," she corrected. "Their armaments came from somewhere, and in most cases it didn't start with you."

"Mine are better," he said staunchly.

"I never said they weren't," she said with a smile. "But let's say the aliens come back and you sacrifice yourself in the name of stopping them. What happens then? Will there no longer be a need for the Avengers?"

"No, they'll probably need to stick around."

"But you won't be there to outfit them with gadgets. What then?"

"I'm sure they'll figure something out. Maybe find a smart kid who can take over." He said it carelessly, but in the back of his mind he was thinking of high tensile webbing concocted using high school chemistry equipment.

"What if you started that ball rolling now?" she suggested.

"Like succession planning?"

"I was thinking more like making the distribution of duties a permanent thing, rather than just while you were sidelined. But yes, starting to groom a replacement wouldn't be a bad idea. You're not as young as you used to be and you won't be getting any younger."

"Hey," he protested. "I'm years away from aging out of the suit."

"Assuming you don't have another heart episode or something like it," she said mildly. "Or a catastrophic injury."

"You may have a point," he conceded grudgingly after a brief silence. It's not like he hadn't had similar thoughts in the not-so-distant past. "We've got more minions now, so that will help."

"As long as you remember that your 'minions' are only human, too." She sounded amused. "As you think about how to shift responsibilities in ways that are sustainable, I want you to carefully consider to what extent you will be involved with this team in the long term and how to maintain those boundaries no matter what happens."

"You mean, you want me to figure out how not to get drawn in again."

She nodded. "I wouldn't have put it in those terms, but yes. I believe your instinct to put some distance between you and the team is wise, under the circumstances. Even if it's only temporary."

"Which part of the circumstances makes you say that?" he asked wryly.
"All of it," she said lightly. "But especially the part that you aren't sure you really want to be here. I think you need to listen to your gut and figure out what that means for you going forward."

He found himself glancing at his phone as she spoke.

She must have noticed, because she added, "I suspect part of you already knows what you want. You just need to listen and decide how to shape your future."

"I've got several possibilities that seem most likely, with another half dozen backups and contingency plans in reserve. I'm always thinking ahead." He spoke confidently out of habit, mentally calculating how many plans he actually had. It wasn't that many. He shifted uneasily. "I normally do, anyway. Everything that's happened has made some things impossible or irrelevant."

For once, she didn't force him to elaborate on what had changed. "But do you know what you want to happen? What you want from life should be part of the equation or you're never going to be satisfied with the life you live."

"I've been living on borrowed time so long . . . All I can ask for is a little more time to try to make things right," he said wearily. "Satisfaction has nothing to do with it."

"What makes you say that you're still living on borrowed time? I thought your cardiologist was about to clear you for duty."

"Yeah, probably, but that just buys me however long we've got until the next end-of-the-world threat. I don't have a future beyond the next big fight, so why would I get my hopes up?"

"You have survived every fight so far, why are you assuming the next one will be the end of you?"

It sounded like he was vexing her. He huffed a chuckle and shook his head, staring down at his feet rather than look at her. "Because it should have been the end at least three times already and a guy like me can only get lucky so many times before the universe decides to even the score."

"Tony," she said softly, moving closer and resting her hand gently on his arm. "Then don't you think you should give it all you've got while you're still here? Let's say this is your last year. What do you want to have happened before you shuffle off this mortal coil?"

His immediate thought had the advantage of being something he was already working on. "I want to get right with Pepper. I . . . I don't know what that will mean, what we'll end up being, but I need to make things right."

"That's a good start," she said. "Take some time to think about whether there's anything else, and I'll ask again the next time I see you. I have every confidence that you can think big about this the same way you do about other things."

"Well, thanks for the pep talk," he said with forced cheer. "Does that mean we're finished?"

"Unless there's something else you'd like to mention," she said in a way that was inviting without being pushy.

"I think I'm good for now, thanks," he said quickly, picking up his phone and gesturing with it. "I should call Pepper back."

"Yes. And, Tony, I would also like you to think about having another conversation with Steve. I believe more dialogue would be beneficial for both of you."
"While you're there to supervise?" he asked as he moved toward the door.

"I would mediate, yes."

"I'll think about it," he said shortly.

"That's all I ask."

Her words followed him down the hall and seemed to echo in the stairwell. It was a big thing to ask. He had a lot to think about.
Out of habit--and what did it say about his life that it had become a habit?--Tony started heading for the office. He stopped himself halfway up the flight of stairs and reversed course. He needed some workshop time, and maybe having something to do with his hands would make the conversation with Pepper easier.

He tried her number twice and it rang repeatedly before switching to voicemail. He didn't leave a message; she'd know why he called. He sank onto the stool at his workstation and debated whether to wait or go back upstairs to find out the full story of what the others had been up to the previous day. At least, those were the conscious thoughts. His subconscious was busy brooding on what her failure to pick up could mean.

His phone buzzed and he had it in his hand before he'd fully registered the sound. Sorry, on a conference call. Will you be free when I'm finished?

Take your time. I'll be here.

He put his phone down and pulled up his project list in a much better frame of mind. At the top was finalizing the document releases, followed by the repulsor bots. "Friday, call up the IT office and put me on speaker."

He got up and started preparing coffee while Friday made the connection.

"Hello?" a weary voice said over the sound of rapid typing and indistinct conversations.

"Good morning, my minions," he replied cheerfully. The background noise immediately ceased.

"Good morning, Mr. Stark," came an obedient chorus of voices.

"How are we doing with the prep for the document release? Storage, you're up."

"The drive to be submitted to the investigators is locked and loaded, we just need the go-ahead on the files," was the soft-spoken, lightly drawled response.

"Thank you, Angie. Security protocols are being followed, yes?"

"Of course," she said, sounding slightly offended. "Level seven protocols are already being observed."

"At least two people will need to travel to Washington with the drive. Plus a security detail. I don't care who it is," he said, quickly checking a calendar. It was Friday, so there was no point hurrying to Washington with the thing right away. "Depart for the tower on Sunday, then finish the rest of the trip on Monday. Ground travel is fine. You'll have the go-ahead on the files by the end of the day."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, servers and networking. We're about to bring the world down on us when we make that batch public, how do we look?"

"We'll be fine, sir," was the immediate response. "Servers have been designated and isolated from the compound infrastructure so an overload won't take everything down. We'll mirror the content using the other server farms, and our testing of the content pages so far has produced no problems."
We haven't been able to subject the search pages to the same rigorous testing--"

"Because the search functionality hasn't been finalized," a peevish male voice interrupted. "We've had no--"

"No, no, you don't get to interrupt the lovely Paige," Tony interrupted, and chose to ignore the muttering that followed. "Please go ahead, my dear." He poured his coffee and returned to his perch while she resumed.

"I was only going to say the search pages haven't been tested as thoroughly yet because we haven't received guidance about the required functionality," Paige said simply. "We've taken our best guess, but . . ."

"What have you got? You may speak, Brandon," he replied, blowing on his coffee and idly opening a new file to start working on the repulsor bot idea.

"We have browse by date, participant, and type of file. We're assuming full-text search is wanted, but it seriously degrades response time and won't hold up to the level of usage we're projecting," Brandon said, sounding less sullen now that he was allowed to voice his concern.

"Not even with all of the servers we're throwing at this?" Tony asked somewhat incredulously.

"Not using the current architecture, and we don't have time to try a different one unless you would like to delay the release to the public," Paige said confidently.

"Then scrap it. If it won't work, don't include it in the initial release. Throw up what you have, and you can keep troubleshooting the other stuff afterward." He sighed and shook his head. He hadn't officially announced that the documents would be released that day, but they were so close he didn't want to delay any longer. Search seemed like it should be easy, but designing for the internet wasn't one of his many talents. Far easier to build his own infrastructure and run an AI to find things for him.

"In that case, once we have your approval on the content to include, we'll need about six hours to do final testing and indexing before it will be ready to go."

"Coordinate with Mel on flipping that switch."

"We're already in communication."

"Glad to hear it. Anything else?" After a beat of silence, he said, "All right, minions, back to work. Good luck and we'll be in business by the end of the day. You know where the good coffee is."

He did one last skim of each set of files as soon as they disconnected. Satisfied, he sent notifications to the appropriate people, including Bill so the lawyers would know what was happening.

That finished, he returned to the repulsor bots. He couldn't believe he hadn't had the idea earlier--it was similar in underlying concept to the prehensile suit he'd worked on a while back, but his focus then had been on suits, not a fleet of flying repulsors.

He was in the midst of designing the housing when Friday announced, "Incoming call from Pepper Potts, boss."

He immediately stopped what he was doing. "Friday, save everything, then pick up." He waited a beat, then said, "Hey Pep. How was the conference call?"
She sighed her aggravated sigh. "You don't need me to tell you how those things usually go."

"The board?" he asked sympathetically.

"Some of them. They are Very Concerned about your little investigation," she said, the capital letters evident in her tone. "So of course they wanted to talk to me about it first thing on a Friday morning as if I can do anything about what the government is up to."

"I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "If I could make it better, I would."

"I know you would," she replied, her voice a little less tense.

"I wanted to apologize for forcing you to choose between me and the company without having all the information," he said quickly. "At the time it seemed like the only thing I could do, but it wasn't fair to you. I'm sorry."

She didn't answer for a long moment. "Thank you, Tony," she said finally. "Now what?"

"Now what?" he repeated. "I don't know."

She waited.

"I don't know," he said more slowly. "Lately I, um, it's been hard to know what to expect after . . . everything. It's, I used to be able to anticipate. Cause and effect. Action and reaction. But now things are different and it's throwing me off."

"Oh, really?" she said dryly. "I hadn't noticed."

"And yet the doc wants me to think about what I want my future to look like," he confessed. "I don't know what to think. All I know is I hope you're a part of it."

"Doctor Mann?" Pepper asked, sounding confused.

"No, Doc T. Doctor Tanya. The therapist."

"Ah. Did she also suggest that you apologize?"

"No! No, I realized I needed to do that all by myself." He wasn't sure what it said about his ability to have relationships that she immediately suspected an apology would only come at someone else's behest.

"Well, that's good, Tony," she said encouragingly. "Thank you for apologizing. It absolutely wasn't fair, and it was also completely unnecessary."

"You said that before. I'm beginning to think you're right," he admitted.

"Of course I am. Between the two of us, I'm far better at getting along with people."

He chuckled ruefully. "That's true. It's one of many reasons that you're my CEO."

"And also, I hope, your girlfriend," she said softly.

"I would like that," he replied, grateful she had brought it up. He wanted to ask, but didn't think she'd appreciate his recent on again, off again approach to their relationship. He'd almost thought she would insist on keeping the breakup official.
"Then it's good the press never found out about that little hiccup," she teased.

"Even if they had, it's not like we haven't broken up before."

"Yes, we should probably work on that. Does your doctor also do relationship counseling? Oh, dammit!"

"What?" he demanded, straightening in his seat.

He heard her muffled voice call to someone and then bark a rapid-fire order. When she spoke again, she sounded normal. "It's nothing, really. We just had a little earthquake and I spilled coffee on my white skirt."

"Coffee is a bitch to get out," he said sympathetically even as he turned to his monitor and typed a command for Friday to check the recent earthquake reports.

"I have my ways, it will be fine."

There was a prolonged rustling from her end of the line and he finally asked, "What are you doing?"

"Changing my skirt so my PA can run water through the spot before it sets," she said casually.

"And you didn't turn on your video first?" he pouted.

"Aren't you still on that medication?"

"Yeah, so?"

She laughed and the rustling ceased. "I'm more than happy to let you watch the next time you're on this coast," she promised.

"I'll hold you to that," he said fondly.

"I'm not a girl who goes back on her word," she replied tartly, then sighed. "I should go. The shaking was strong enough to activate the earthquake protocols and I should be available."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I will. Don't be a stranger."

There were a lot of things she might mean by that, but the most basic was Keep in touch. "I won't."

He didn't move for a few seconds after the line went dead, then pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

He took a deep breath and examined the earthquake reports closely. To activate the earthquake protocols, the shaking would have been at least a three point five, and while those weren't uncommon for the area, there were always some concerns about the minor quakes triggering a major one.

In this case, it looked like it was a larger quake, centered to the south, and the ripples of energy had radiated past the L.A. area. Just as well for them but too bad for the schmucks in San Diego.

He dismissed the information as irrelevant and returned to his project. When Rhodey arrived to chase him up to lunch, he had a holographic prototype floating above the desk. "You like it?" Tony asked proudly.
"What is it?"

"Repulsor bot. They can help support things in flight, and also blow up on command. An array of them could keep the quinjet in the air if there's an engine failure."

"So it's a boot jet without the boot."

"Almost. These have self-contained power sources."

"Huh. And they blow up?"

"Look who you're talking to. Of course they can blow up."

"So if we'd had these on the mission, we could have attached one to each jetpack dude and then blown them up?"

"Now you're getting the idea."

"Nice. It's time for lunch, want to have show and tell?"

That, he could do. He saved everything and shut it down, following Rhodey to the door. "I insist you guys go first. I was never given the skinny on that list."

"We can do that," Rhody said gamely. "But I'm sure it's nothing you haven't already thought of, or I'd have told you by now."

"I still want to know how devious they are."

"Do you really think anyone on the team wants you in jail?"

"I'm thinking there are a few, yeah."

"You might want to think again."

There was nothing to say to that, so Tony changed the subject. "I talked to Pepper," he said casually as they stepped into the elevator. Rhodey was wearing his braces for once, but that didn't mean he'd want to scale multiple flights of stairs, especially when he looked like he'd just had physical therapy.

"Yeah? How'd it go?"

"Good. Really good. Probably would've lasted longer but there was some shaking that activated the earthquake protocols."

"That happens, what, every other week? Any damage?"

"We upped the threshold after that one month with four alarms and no problems, so it's been a while. But yeah, not a huge deal. No damage that I've heard."

"That's good. Why do you keep your headquarters in earthquake central, anyway?" Rhody asked idly as he stepped off the elevator.

"Where should it be, New York?" Tony scoffed, then had an idea. Stark Industries could afford to buy the tower from him if he decided to sell. The New York office could be moved there, and maybe Pepper could be convinced to make it her headquarters, even if the L.A. operations remained in place. It made a lot of sense and, selfishly, he'd have Pepper and Happy
much closer. He could live in the city, keep an eye on the kid, and still be at hand when the shit hit
the fan and the Avengers had to save the world again. Malibu could be his—their?—vacation home for
surfing or escaping New York winters.

It was the closest thing to a plan for his future that he'd had in a while. It felt good.

"Earth to Tony." Rhodey sounded like he was laughing at him.

He grinned back and sauntered through the door Rhodey was holding open. "Sorry, I had a
thought."

"Just one? I thought it took at least three simultaneously to derail you like that."

"Okay, so it was several things combined into one. Better?"

"Sure," Rhodey said amiably.

The conversation was dropped as they crossed the room and were drawn into the chatting in the
kitchen and around the table. Mel and Sara were both there, so the discussion over lunch centered on
show and tell of a different sort.

"So what's the story?" Tony asked curiously when Mel nodded in his direction.

"I think I've heard from every major news outlet in the country, to say nothing of the international
press," she said wearily, stirring her coffee slowly before taking a careful sip. "At the behest of your
lawyers, I've declined all requests for follow up interviews with you, by the way. So don't go talking
to anyone behind my back."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said innocently, taking a bite from his burger. "Why do you think I hired
you?"

"Right," she said doubtfully.

"What has the reaction been? I haven't been following the news," Rhodey asked to get the
conversation back on track.

"Overall? They like Tony, or at least Iron Man, so there has been a fair amount of pushback against
the government. There are some petitions asking for the investigation to be discontinued and the
Capitol Hill switchboard has been swamped."

"What about the people who lost someone in Sokovia? What do they think?" Tony asked somberly.

"That varies," Mel admitted. "No one has contacted me directly, but I get the sense from social media
that they want the investigation to continue to its natural end. A few want a public trial for your
supposed crimes against humanity."

"But it was Ultron who did this, not Stark," Wanda objected forcefully.

Mel shrugged. "Ultron isn't around to prosecute, plus I'm not sure a robot could be held legally
responsible anyhow. That's a can of worms the lawyers will have to deal with the next time
something like this happens."

"The next time? You think something like this could happen again?" Rogers asked.

"The Vision exists," Mel pointed out. "Who knows what else could be out there?"
Silence followed for several minutes. Tony almost commented that whatever else might be out there, it wasn't his fault, but he decided he didn't want to open that topic for debate. Eventually Mel ventured, "On a more positive note, a bunch of people say they've given money to the U.N. for the Avengers."

Clint barked a laugh and Mel shot him a glare. "Wait, are you serious?" he asked.

"I'm serious," she insisted. "There have been a lot of social media posts. I haven't checked with the U.N., though I passed word to your lawyer people so they can ask about it."

"That's . . . unexpected," Tony said thoughtfully. "Appreciated, but unexpected. I wonder if we can accept it."


"Do they? I've never paid attention," Tony admitted.

"Yeah, they do," Clint agreed. "Laura got on a mailing list once."

"Wait, you would get fundraising mail at your secret house?" Tony asked dubiously.

"My connection to Laura and the kids was the secret, not the house itself," Clint retorted. "The mail would come there just like anywhere else."

"Take it easy, I mean no harm," Tony said placatingly.

"This time, maybe. Or do you have that gauntlet up your sleeve?" Clint grinned and winked.

"Always."

"Has there been any reaction from the government, from Ross?" Natasha inquired.

"I haven't heard anything from Bill," Tony said, checking his phone as he spoke.

"No one who has asked for comment from Ross or the administration has received a reply," Mel reported. "Including me."

"So, what do you think he'll do?" Tony asked.

"Something dickish," Clint declared.

"I thought that went without saying," Rhodey said.

"It does," Tony agreed, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Sara was returning to the table with a tablet. When she'd left, he didn't know. A moment later, she slid the tablet onto the table next to his plate, a ranked list prominently displayed. "Thanks," he said with some surprise.

While he perused the list, the conversation continued without him. The things they'd thought of were the same or similar to what he'd considered, so there were no grand revelations. That worried him, though, because he had the feeling that what he'd considered wasn't dramatic enough to be Ross's true plan.

Then he heard his name and he looked up again. "What's that now?"

"Were you able to review the documents Sara and I pulled together?" Rogers asked.
"Yep, and the minions are doing their thing to put them where they need to be. The public batch will be ready by the end of the day."

"So what do we do if all of this doesn't make Ross react?" Rhodey asked no one in particular.

"I release the recordings of our amiable exchanges," Tony said carelessly, taking a bite of an apple and frowning when it turned out to be rather mealy. "I'll end up giving those to the investigators anyway. Might as well show the good people the assholery I've been putting up with."

"So what do we do for right now? I mean, is there anything else that can be done to help?" Sam asked.

Tony shrugged and looked to Mel, who also shrugged.

"What I'm hearing is that anyone who hasn't trained in the last twenty-four hours needs to hit the gym," Rhodey said.

Tony pretended to launch his crummy apple in Rhodey's direction and got a laugh out of Clint. Rhodey merely raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes, sir," Tony said sarcastically.

"Will it be a group exercise or individual?" Rogers asked earnestly.

"You're on your own, I've already put in my time today," Rhodey said.

"So has he. He's just being all teacher's pet about it, big surprise," Tony teased.

"My morning run doesn't count as training," Rogers objected.

"Whatever floats your boat, big guy," Tony said as he stood and cleared away his dishes and Rhodey's. He didn't actually object to having a little mandatory exercise, not when he hadn't done anything of the sort all week, but it was fun to annoy Rhodey.

Wanda was already taking care of the dishes, so he headed off to change. And have Friday report on his parts inventory to see if he could make a couple bot prototypes with what he had lying around. He reviewed the list on his way downstairs and concluded that it just might work.

He took one of the treadmills so he could perch his phone on the machine and poke at the schematics as he worked his way up from a brisk walk to a leisurely jog. He heard the others talking and machines humming around him, but he paid them no heed as he sank deep into thought.

"What is that?" a voice asked from right beside his elbow and he nearly stumbled in his surprise. A strong hand gripped his elbow as the voice said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

He glanced over at Rogers and moved his elbow away. "It's a repulsor bot," he said, uncertain if he should be wary of Rogers's interest or not. "I still need to build the prototype, but it should work."

"What does it do?" He sounded genuinely interested.

Tony reduced his treadmill speed and described it the same way he had to Rhodey. Rogers also immediately connected them to the recent mission. "Could they bring down something like the Ultron drones?" Rogers asked next.

"Depends on the strength of the power source, but yeah, the ones I'm planning to pilot test should have enough explosive force."

"How many would it take to kill those giant alien beasts from New York?"
"A lot. Using a Hulk is far more effective from multiple angles," Tony said, deciding to take the question at face value.

"It's too bad we don't have one right now."

"Maybe I should try making one of those next," he mused.

Rogers hesitated for just a moment before he responded in kind. "He wouldn't have much to destroy out here."

"And the compound needs renovating anyway. There's a thought: maybe I should test the explosive capabilities of these new bots on the particularly terrible parts of this building."

"Don't break anything you don't have the money to fix," Natasha said cryptically, passing by the front of his treadmill. He wasn't sure if she was mocking his idea or merely suggesting that he wait and he didn't want to admit his uncertainty and ask for clarification.

"She has a point," Rogers said after a beat in which he was probably working out the same thought.

"She often does," he replied.

"Did you realize you've been on this thing for over an hour?" Rogers asked, evidently giving up on trying to continue the banter. "That's why I came over, to find out what had you so engrossed."

He hadn't realized. The digital readouts had been unimportant while he was thinking, but they confirmed Rogers's comment. He slowed to a stop and shrugged. "I was thinking. It happens."

Rogers nodded and walked away without further comment. Tony watched him go and tried to remember the last time he had willingly participated in banter. It seemed to suggest Rogers was loosening up a bit, or at least relaxing toward him. It was a nice change.

He stepped down and did a few stretches before grabbing his phone and heading for the workshop. He had building to do.
Opportunity Knocks

By the time Tony finished constructing the prototype, he had a list of half a dozen things he wanted to change for the next version. The housing in particular needed tweaking and possibly a different alloy. But it was perfectly serviceable as a first attempt and building something completely new from scratch was satisfying in a way that almost nothing could match.

He was fine-tuning the control interface on his phone when Friday spoke over his music. "Clint Barton is at the door, boss."

He glanced up and Clint waved at him through the window. "Let him in." As soon as Clint stepped through the door, Tony turned his attention back to his screen and said, "Touch anything and I'm never working on your gear again. What do you want?"

He watched out of the corner of his eye as Clint stared at him with a knowing smirk and reached out toward a monitor, just to be a little shit. He sent the bot straight at Clint's face and grinned when he yelped and ducked, flailing at the small device. "I was just kidding, geez," Clint protested. "What is that thing?"

Tony explained.

"So it's like a drone, with a repulsor."

"Essentially. You like it?"

Clint watched it hover a few feet away, then dip and weave as Tony gestured with the phone. "Is it safe to show the kids? I think they'd love it. That's why I'm here, by the way. Lila was asking about you."

"I can make a kid-friendly version once I've ironed out the kinks. This one could blow up."

Clint backed away a few steps.

"I mean, blowing up is one of its functions. I'd rather have a non-lethal version around the kids."

"I appreciate that. Not blowing up my kids is definitely a good plan."

Tony landed the bot on the table and carefully picked it up to check all of the connections once more. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Uh, after naptime but before dinnertime," Clint said sheepishly.

"Friday?"

"It is four forty-five, boss."

"Well, that didn't take as much time as I would've expected," he commented, sweeping the scraps and odds and ends of the parts he'd salvaged into the bin he'd dumped out hours before. "Good to know I haven't lost my touch."

"Are you coming up, or do I have to go admit defeat?" Clint asked, remaining at a safe distance while he noisily cleaned up.

"I thought Lila was asking about me. Now you're telling me you were sent to fetch me?"
"That's usually what it means when Lila asks about you. But it's fine to say no. She has to learn how
to deal with disappointment sometime."

"I think I'll let you be the one to teach her that," Tony replied with a wink. "It's fine, I'm coming."

He expected that Lila wanted him to read to her again--it had been days since the last time--so he was
surprised when they arrived in the common room and Lila, Cooper, and Laura were sitting on the
floor, playing a card game. Wanda was minding Nathaniel a short distance away.

"Uncle Tony! Mama taught us a new game. Will you play with us?" Lila said excitedly without
moving from her spot, holding her cards awkwardly with both hands.

"Please," Laura reminded her gently.

"Please?" she parroted. "And Daddy, please?"

"I should take a turn watching your brother, honey," Clint said. "Why don't you ask Wanda to
play?"

Lila turned her pleading eyes on Wanda. "Please? More people works better."

"I'll play," Tony said to give Wanda time to decide. "Where should I sit?"

"Next to me, Uncle Tony," Lila said, patting an impossibly small section of carpet between her and
Cooper.

"We need to make the circle bigger, Lila," Cooper said as he scooted backward to make more room
and accidentally kicked over the stack of cards in doing so. "Oops. I'll pick them up, Mama."

"Thank you," Laura said.

"I will play also," Wanda decided.

As they settled on the floor and Laura shuffled and dealt the cards, Cooper leaned over to Tony.
"She doesn't always play nice, Uncle Tony," he warned, looking at his sister. "I'm glad I'm not next
to her anymore."

"I think I'll be okay," he said, amused.

The game commenced and, though the direction of play could change, Tony came after Lila for the
first several turns. After three consecutive turns of having to draw cards rather than playing them, he
could see what Cooper meant.

He lost the first round, thanks to all those cards, and didn't fare much better the second round. The
third round lasted long enough that Wanda had to concede so she could help make dinner; Wilson
was making fried chicken and she wanted to learn. Tony eventually won, despite having to draw
what seemed like half the deck over the course of the round. Another round seemed like a bad idea
so close to dinner, so Laura had the kids put everything away instead.

Lila returned from picking up with a book in hand, which made Tony chuckle. "I don't think we
have enough time for that, little bit," he said as she climbed into his lap. "Why don't you tell me what
you've been doing since I saw you last?"

"Yesterday we went to the library and saw Miss Cathy," she said eagerly, then launched into a story
about storytime and he listened with interest. He'd had no exposure to that sort of thing as a child, so
he had no idea that libraries did that stuff or that kids enjoyed it so much.

Then Lila stopped abruptly and scrambled out of his lap, saying, "I have to go potty." She ran off and Tony got up, not sure if he should follow or tell Laura or Clint or what.

By the time he found Laura, she was already heading in the direction that Lila had gone. Rhodey came in as she left and Tony debated whether he had time to fetch the new bot to show it off before dinner, but then Friday spoke. "Boss, you and Colonel Rhodes have an incoming call from the President of the United States."

"Why would the President be calling you directly?" Clint asked doubtfully.

"I think we're about to find out," Tony said with studied indifference even as he was imagining a whole range of possibilities while moving across the room toward Rhodey. Some of those possibilities involved Ross, but the call involving Rhodey seemed to rule that out. "Where do you want to take it?"

"Conference phone okay?" Rhodey asked, nodding toward the table and its speakerphone.

"Sure, I'll have Friday turn on the sound dampening if it turns out to be something private," he replied loud enough that the others could hear. He slid into a chair and had Friday connect the call while Rhodey also took a seat.

"Good evening, Mr. President," Tony greeted. "To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"Good evening, Mr. Stark," President Ellis replied. "Is Colonel Rhodes with you?"

"I'm here, sir," Rhodey answered.

"Good, good," he said with a heavy sigh. "I'm calling to ask a personal favor. You do not have to say yes, but I would appreciate your thoughtful consideration--And I'm getting ahead of myself."

Tony exchanged a glance with Rhodey as the President interrupted himself. The man had never been particularly eloquent, but he was normally capable of following a thought from start to finish.

President Ellis continued. "I don't know if you've been following the news today, but a strong earthquake struck the west coast near the Mexican border this morning. The damage in the area around San Diego is substantial. They've already confirmed more than two dozen people are dead. I just spoke with the President of Mexico and the conditions in Tijuana are worse."

As he spoke, Tony wordlessly had Friday bring up the video feed from a U.S.-based cable news channel on the display. Collapsed buildings, wrecked streets, and people digging through the rubble featured heavily, along with images of fires and one brief clip of a wave sweeping up over a boardwalk and carrying at least four people away.

"Since your organization is now international, we--that is, President Alvarez and I--were hoping you might be able to help with the search and rescue. He is calling the U.N. to officially request your assistance in Mexico, and seeing how I have directly benefited from your exemplary efforts in the past, I wanted to ask unofficially that you, ah, carefully consider that request."

Rhodey spoke first. "We cannot make any promises, Mr. President, but we will certainly discuss it with our team and the U.N. panel."

"That's all I ask, Colonel."
"Under normal circumstances I'd at least consider writing a big fat check, but I'm afraid that's not an option this time," Tony commented dryly.

"Yes, the timing is unfortunate," President Ellis replied. "Thank you, and good luck."

"Thank you sir," Rhodey said smartly, and the line went dead.

Tony turned his back to the images on the display and stared at his folded hands, thinking of Ross and all the times he'd tried to call in the Avengers for government business.

"What are you thinking?" Rhodey asked in an undertone.

He sighed and looked up, searching Rhodey's expression for a hint of his opinion. "As much as I would like to help, natural disaster relief isn't part of the Avengers mission and it's not a precedent we want to set."

"Agreed. If we help with this earthquake in an official capacity, we'd have a hard time saying no to the next one."

"To say nothing of the hurricanes, or the blizzards, or whatever else."

Rhodey pushed back his chair and stood. "Let's see what everyone else thinks."

Everyone else had, of course, been listening in on the entire conversation. Someone had turned on the TV, so a low murmur of the latest casualty figures served as the backdrop while they gathered around the dinner table. Tony had Friday shut it off so they could eat in peace.

"You're all taking food before we talk about this," Sam ordered as he set down the platter of chicken.

Once the food was passed around, no one seemed to want to be the first to bring up the elephant in the room. Cooper seemed to understand that something was going on, but Lila chattered happily about whatever came into her mind.

When the kids were finished, Clint said, "I agree with Nat about the earthquake thing. C'mon kids, it's bath time." With those parting words of wisdom, he and Laura herded the protesting children out of the room.

Tony looked down the table at Natasha. "So what's the super-spy opinion?"

"We can't do it," she said firmly. "The Avengers exist to respond to superhuman and extraterrestrial threats. An earthquake is neither."

"Yes, but it feels wrong not to do something," Rogers said.

Tony privately agreed. "Let me check with the head of the relief foundation. She can call for volunteers, ship over supplies, that sort of thing," he said.

"Who would be allowed to volunteer?" Vision asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know, who normally volunteers for something like this?"

"Would Avengers personnel be free to volunteer?"

"You mean, like our medical folks, our techs, people like that?"

Vision inclined his head. "Or perhaps members of the team, if they feel strongly about assisting."
"So we could help without 'The Avengers' helping," Sam said.

"A loophole. I like it," Tony said. "I don't know, we'll have to see what the U.N. folks think of that."

"If they allow it, there would be a limit on how many of us could go," Rhodey said.

"We'd have to have some people ready to respond if something happens," Natasha agreed.

"Exactly," Rhodey said with a nod.

"Like homicidal robots," Sam said, grinning.

"Or the aliens finally decide to try again," Tony shot back.

"Will they?" Wanda asked, sounding bewildered.

"Eventually," Tony replied. "But probably not tonight."

"Colonel Rhodes, you have an incoming call from the United Nations," Friday reported.

"Of course I do," Rhodey said.

"Here you go, buddy," Tony said, setting his phone on the table in front of Rhodey.

The conversation started out exactly as Tony would have expected, with the chairman of the panel reporting on the request from the Mexican president and Rhodey providing their rationale for declining. "I am relieved that we agree," the chair said.

"Sir, if I may, we did have a question about volunteering to help as private citizens rather than Avengers," Rhodey interjected before the chair could hang up. "Assuming a portion of the team remains available should an emergency arise, would that be permitted?"

"That is an excellent question, Colonel," came the reply after a stretch of silence. "Let me consult with the panel and notify you of the response."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now we wait," Tony said, standing and stretching before collecting the dirty dishes in his immediate vicinity and taking them over to the sink.

He continued helping clear the table until that was finished, then stepped into the hallway. He could head to the office, but doing so seemed pointless for a conversation that may not last long. He slowly paced the hall as the phone rang.

"Stark Relief Foundation, this is Carmen Castillo Sanchez," came the response just as he thought the call would go to voicemail.

The rebranding must not be official yet. That made things infinitely easier. "Carmen, my dear, it's Tony."

"Yes, Mr. Stark, I am aware," she said. "What is the purpose of this call?"

Formal address meant either she was having a bad day or there were others witnessing her side of the conversation. "Have you heard about the earthquake?"

"Yes, I have heard." Her response was clipped, almost cold.
"Good." He was about to continue, but the way she replied was uncharacteristic and he had a guess as to why. "Do you know someone affected?" he asked instead.

She hesitated just long enough that he knew the answer was yes. "My brother's family and his wife's relatives live in Tijuana."

"Are they safe?"

"I do not know, I have not been able to reach anyone."

"I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "I'm calling because we want to send help to Mexico. I'm officially giving you permission to do whatever the foundation can afford to do."

"I will activate my team immediately."

"We'll be allowing some of our personnel to volunteer, so I'll have Agent Hill contact your people about what roles would be most useful."

"Only if they can speak Spanish," she replied distractedly over the sound of rapid typing in the background.

"Anything else important?"

"I do not understand."

"Is there anything else you need from our personnel? Or anything else I can try to provide?" When there was silence from her end, he rephrased the question again. "What is the biggest need right now besides search and rescue?"

"A place to put everyone," she said immediately. "The people are out in the streets. Either the buildings have collapsed or they might still collapse so no one goes back inside."

He could picture it, and knew without her saying so that these people would not feel safe indoors for weeks, not while the possibility of aftershocks meant the possibility of more structures failing. With the mental image of buildings crumbling came the memory of Sokovia, of the people fleeing their homes with nowhere to go and nothing but the clothes on their backs.

And he had an idea what to do about it. "Let me see what I can do. Good luck."

"Thank you," she said. It might have been his imagination, but she sounded just a little less tense.

Not a moment later, he was contacting Hill. "I need you to get in touch with the Stark Relief Foundation's volunteer coordinator," he said without preamble. "Put out a call for Spanish-speaking staff who can help meet whatever needs the coordinator specifies. But keep enough people here to maintain readiness. And staff the helicarrier. I want to send it over as temporary housing for people displaced by the earthquake. The foundation should be able to help with supplies."

There was a moment's delay as if Hill was waiting for him to continue. "Right," she said finally. "And I suppose you want all this to happen yesterday?"

"Don't be ridiculous, as soon as humanly possible is fine," he scoffed.

"How generous."

"I do have that reputation," he said airily, finishing his sixth lap of the hallway. "Also, some of us may be volunteering off the record for search and rescue, so we'll be taking a tech or two."
"I'll take that into account. Anything else?"

"Nope, I'm done." He hung up, sent a message to Carmen about the helicarrier, redirected a surveillance satellite over the target area, and headed back to the common room. It was nice to have something he could do to help despite his restricted funds.
Mobilizing

Tony re-entered the common room to find everyone (except Clint, who was still off doing the family thing) arrayed around the conference table, attentively listening as multiple voices spoke heatedly over the speakerphone. He quietly took the closest empty chair, which happened to be next to Rogers. "What'd I miss?" he asked, his voice pitched low so it wouldn't carry.

"The entire panel called back," Steve murmured. "Right now they're debating whether planning for the next HYDRA attack should take precedence over volunteering as search and rescue."

"They have a point," he replied. "But if we're splitting up, why can't we do both?"

Steve grimaced. "Rhodes tried to suggest that, but none of the panel acknowledged the idea. I think they'd prefer to argue amongst themselves."

"Yeah, they do that sometimes." Rogers gave him a pointed look, but he brushed it off, instead leaning forward and speaking toward the phone. "Excuse me, folks, sorry for the interruption." One by one, the voices fell silent. "I was fashionably late, so would anyone care to fill me in on the argument?"

Rhodey started to speak, but Tony gestured for him to stop.

"There is a difference of opinion about the team's priorities," the panel chairman said diplomatically. "Helping earthquake victims is admirable, but some think your focus should be on wrapping up the HYDRA cleanup."

Tony pointed at Rhodey and waved his hand for him to go ahead.

"We can do both, sir," Rhodey said, his tone not betraying the exasperation Tony could read in his posture.

Tony nodded in satisfaction and leaned back in his chair as the panel finally saw sense and the conversation turned to the stipulations for their participation in the relief effort. "Up to four of you may go, and the usual limits apply--team members in good standing cannot be outnumbered by those on probation."

"Are we clear to use our gear even though it's not a mission?" Sam asked, leaning forward toward the phone to make sure he was heard.

When there was no immediate response, Tony spoke up. "The panel approves our activities, but we decide what equipment is appropriate. The gear and whether we use it is up to us. Am I interpreting that correctly, Mr. Chairman?" He knew he was right, but the confirmation would reassure everyone else.

"That is correct," the chairman replied.

"Understood, sir. Is that all?" Rhodey inquired.

"That will be all, Colonel. Let us know when you would like to conduct your next mission."

"I will, sir," Rhodey said respectfully. He released a long sigh, then looked around the table. "All right, we talked a little about who might go, but those conditions mean we have to adjust the roster. 
Anyone want to back out, or should I make an executive decision?"

Tony spoke up before anyone else could. "For the benefit of those late to class, would you care to share who's currently on the list?"

"Vision, Steve, Sam, and Wanda would like to go. I thought this might be a good time to try your new scanning capabilities again, but I'm not going to speak on your behalf," Rhodey replied.

"No, it's all right, you can order me around, gumdrop," Tony said. "Yeah, I'm in. It's not a mission and I'm off medical restrictions now, so I'm available." He hesitated, glancing across the table. "And Wanda, I'm sorry, but you should stay behind. We'll be crossing the border and with the immigration stuff up in the air . . . I don't think we want to give Ross that opportunity. Don't get me wrong, you'd be a great asset, I just don't think it's worth the risk."

Wanda's expression remained solemn, but her fingers nervously played with a piece of paper, folding and unfolding and refolding it over and over again.

Steve's objection seemed to startle her. "She's left the country for missions, how is this different?"

Tony's gaze left Wanda to skim the other faces at the table as he replied. "On missions she's under the protection of the U.N. And it's not like Ross can pop onto the quinjet when you're flying in. But it would be no trouble at all for him to have someone nab her in Tijuana, especially in all the chaos from the earthquake."

"Wouldn't that be illegal?" Sam asked doubtfully.

"Didn't stop him from keeping you on the Raft."

"But how would it be worth his time or energy--"

"I will stay," Wanda said emphatically, putting an end to the developing argument. "I do not wish to be a distraction."

"Then that's it," Rhodey said. "Let's do this." He looked over at Tony and Steve. "Do I need to designate who's in charge or can you figure it out yourselves?"

Tony shifted his attention to Steve, who was studying his clasped hands on the tabletop. He was very curious what Rogers would say.

"I don't think I know enough about the new scanning things you have to give you direction," Steve admitted, turning minutely in Tony's direction but still gazing at his hands.

"I'll have to give the rundown to the techs we bring anyway, so you could sit in," he offered. As if a conversation held within the confines of the quinjet wasn't already going to be overheard by everyone present. "It's pretty easy to use."

"I'll take you up on that, but it would be best if you take the lead for now," Steve said. "Once we assess the situation, we can decide if that still makes sense."

"Deal. Quake folks, be on the jet at the top of the hour. Pack for at least four days away."

Rhodey shook his head and held up seven fingers.

Tony raised his eyebrows. "A week? All right, scratch that and make it seven days. Anything else you want to correct me on in front of everyone?" he teased.
"No, I'm good," Rhodey said, grinning. "You'll figure out the rest."

"Of course I will, I'm a genius," Tony retorted with feigned offense.

As everyone dispersed, Vision approached him. "Since I do not need to pack, is there anything you would like me to do?"

He took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips as he considered which of the half a million things that needed doing could be delegated. "Check over the quinjet, get everything started up so we can leave as quickly as possible. We'll be taking the one you used for the mission a few days ago." That, at least, meant he wouldn't have to do any last-minute code debugging.

Vision nodded and disappeared through the floor. Tony would probably never get used to that. He pulled out his phone and sent a message to Hill, requesting that she have Toni the mechanic and a quinjet pilot report to Vision on the jet for the rescue effort. So much the better if either or both of them spoke Spanish, since his knowledge of the language was limited and someone was going to have to coordinate with the people already on the ground.

On his way to his bedroom to do his own packing, he had Friday move the Iron Man armor to the jet and start running a set of diagnostic scans, just to be sure. He'd get there faster if he flew himself, but he had to train the techs (and Steve) on the new scanners. And with how long he'd been out of the suit, he honestly had no idea how long he'd last before he needed a break and it would be just his luck that flying out there would be enough to tire him out.

Packing his pills reminded him of the blood pressure monitoring, so he stopped to see the medical people on his way out of the building and tell them this would be the last they'd see of him for a few days at least. The doctor he talked to seemed unbothered and promised to pass the word along to the staff and Dr. Mann.

When he arrived at the quinjet, Steve was already there, his stuff piled neatly out of the way. Tony went over to where his suit stood stiffly near the wall and dropped his duffel at its feet. "Friday, how do we look?" he asked the faceplate.

"All systems are within expected parameters, boss," she reported.

He patted the shoulder. "Good. Put 'er in standby and we'll be ready for showtime." Only then did he look around to see what everyone else was doing.

Their pilot was standing behind the driver's seat with Steve, who was bringing him/her (he couldn't tell which from behind, just that the person had cropped dark hair and was moderately tall) up to speed on the situation. Vision and Toni were standing a short distance behind, listening. Toni seemed amused, though Tony had no idea why.

He approached her. "Thanks for joining us," he said, offering his hand.

She shook it firmly. "Thanks for asking for me, Mr. Stark," she replied. "Dare I ask why you need a mechanic on this trip?"

"Here, it's Tony," he said. "And there will be any number of things that could using fixing at the other end. Plus you never know what will happen to this bird along the way. We have a tendency to find trouble."

"Usually because you go looking for it," she said wryly.

"You're not wrong," he admitted cheerfully, then nodded his head in the direction of the pilot's seat.
"So what can you tell me about this guy? Gal? I don't even know."

She laughed. "Jordan is definitely a guy. And he's pretty good. Former Air Force."

"More military. Figures. I should ask Hill how many of our people started as civilians, because it seems like we're severely outnumbered."

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not. I'm just feeling a little fish out of water here." But then, he's pretty much always been the odd man out for a whole host of reasons, so that wasn't anything new.

"Let's get this party started, the snacks have arrived," Sam announced as he stepped into the jet, his bags on one shoulder and his other hand carrying one handle of a large cooler.

Clint was carrying the other handle. "Courtesy of Sara and Laura. Apparently only the ladies ever remember that people need to eat," he joked.

"However did we manage to feed ourselves before they came along?" Sam asked dryly.

"I don't know about you, but I have an AI to remember that sort of thing," Tony retorted.

"Most people aren't mad programming geniuses," Clint said as he and Sam set the cooler down next to the Iron Man armor. "I'll see you all on the flip side. Good luck."

"Tell Lila I'll read to her as long as she likes when I get back," Tony said quickly.

Clint nodded to him, then saluted everyone and hurried back down the ramp.

Brief introductions were made as the ramp was raised. Tony took a seat, turning his attention to a few last things he needed to do.

The message to Pepper was simple enough: Guess who's coming back to the west coast? If she wanted more details, she'd ask.

The email to Bill took a little longer, since he had to explain what he'd heard from Mel about possible donations for the Avengers before asking what would be possible to do with it. He included his thoughts on the matter, then left the decision in Rhodey's hands as the man in charge.

That sent, he realized he forgot to talk to one more person before leaving, and this was something best handled verbally.

"This is Mel."

"Remember how you wanted me to warn you the next time I was going to do something that would end up on the internet?"

"Yes?" She sounded wary, and who could blame her. She was still dealing with questions from the press conference, those documents had been released while he and Rhodey were talking to the President, and he was about to drop something else in her lap.

"We're off to do something that will end up on the internet," he said and walked her through everything, from the volunteering to the helicarrier.

"Well, okay," she said. "Do you want me to announce that you're doing this, or merely confirm your presence if I'm asked?"
"Just confirm. The attention needs to be on the people who always respond to these sorts of things. And donations should go to them, not us, if anyone asks."

"Got it. Thanks for the warning."

"I'm helpful like that."

She snorted and hung up.

"So how is this going to work?" Sam asked. "It's more difficult to do search and rescue in the dark and there won't be much light left by the time we get there."

"That's where I'm hoping my new scanning program will come in, combined with the usual x-ray and infrared options." He explained how and why he'd developed it, and had Friday bring up the scans from the last mission as an example of what it could do. "It's still a prototype, but I'm hoping it will give us more detail of the areas where people are trapped so we can figure out how to retrieve them more quickly, and which buildings are in the most danger of collapsing so we hit those first.

"If that doesn't work as planned, or even if it does, Vision can phase through the buildings as reconnaissance in addition to what my armor and your drone can figure out before we go in. Wanda would have been helpful to move things or reinforce weak spots, but we'll have to make do." He'd also brought his repulsor bot to field test, but he didn't mention it. No point in showing it off when he had no idea how well it would actually work.

"Have you contacted Lang? He might be able to help with moving things if he can stay big that long," Sam suggested.

"I haven't, but if you want to give him a call, that's fine with me. I know you two have history," Tony replied with a wink. "Pym would have to come, too, to keep the U.N. happy. I can send the chopper for them if they want in."

"Then there would be more than four of us," Vision commented.

"There are still only four Avengers," Tony countered. "I don't think the U.N. panel was including Lang. But if we want to stay true to the letter of the law, either Rogers or Wilson can step back while Lang is working. Then there will only be four in action."

"Assuming he's willing and able to help. We don't know if he's capable of what you're thinking," Steve said.

"I'll find out," Sam said, moving across the jet to gain some semblance of privacy and minimize the disruption to the ongoing conversation.

Tony's phone rang a moment later and he knew without looking that it was Pepper. "Excuse me," he said, already moving away in the opposite direction. "Hey Pep."

"Please tell me you're not in the suit," she said without preamble.

"I'm not in the suit," he said obediently as he leaned his shoulder against a bulkhead, his back to the others. "Why?"

"Because it would be just like you to go from not flying for months to crossing the country on a whim, to hell with your doctors," she replied. "Why are you coming?"

"We're going to help in Mexico. Unofficially. Well, we were asked officially but we're going as
volunteers. Some of us. And I'll have you know I'm as good as cleared when it comes to the doctors."

"Of course you are." She sounded amused. "And here I thought you might be coming because I teased you earlier."

"Oh, I still expect you to make it up to me sometime," he said, grinning.

"Come by after you're done being a hero and I'll see what I can do." Her voice took on the timbre that he'd only ever heard her use when whispering dirty things into his ear.

"It is patently unfair of you to take that tone of voice with me when I can't do anything about it, Ms. Potts," he protested.

"Feel free to make a note in my file, Mr. Stark," she said lightly. "I would relish watching you explain such a complaint against your CEO to the board."

"Let's not and say we did, but I love the way your mind works," he said, glancing over his shoulder when he heard Sam's voice join the others'. "I should go."

"Be careful. Do I need to ask Rhodey to keep an eye on you?"

"Rhodey's not with us. He's back at base being in charge."

"I suppose I'll have to trust your questionable instinct for self-preservation, then."

"I won't do anything stupid when I have you to look forward to."

"Forgive me if I'm not convinced. I've seen you do some pretty stupid stuff while I've been around."

"That was then." He hesitated before adding, "I love you."

"I love you too, Tony," she said, her voice soft.

He took a deep breath before turning to rejoin the others. In his absence, Steve and Vision had Friday pull up a map of the target region and overlay it with what was known about the damage. Along with Sam, they were studying the hologram projected from the center console and periodically focusing in on particularly hard hit areas.

When Tony approached, Steve straightened and said, "I thought it would be a good idea to find out what we'll be dealing with. If that's all right." He sounded strangely uncertain.

"Of course," Tony replied with a nod. "Friday, do we have any satellite data to add to what's here?"

"The scans just finished, boss," she reported, and an additional layer of imagery appeared.

"If you want more detail of any area, just ask Friday," Tony said, clapping Steve on the back as he headed for the pilot's alcove. "Hey there, how's it going?"

"It's all good, Mr. Stark," the pilot replied, glancing at him only briefly before returning his attention to his displays.

"You can leave it alone for a few minutes. I promise the autopilot is reliable. I coded it myself," Tony said genially. "Your name is Jordan, yeah?"

"Yes, sir," Jordan said uneasily, turning his chair around to face the rest of the aircraft.
"And you speak Spanish?"

"Only a little, sir."

Tony examined him quizzically, wondering what made him so nervous. Before he could formulate a question, Toni spoke up.

"I'm fluent," she said.

"Good, because I'm better with French and I'll make a hash of this by myself. Is there anything you don't do well?" he joked.

"Pretty much everything else," she said cheerfully.

"All right, Jordan, at ease, return to your post, yadda yadda. I'll let you know when you're needed." Dismissing the pilot as irrelevant for the moment, he gestured for Toni to join him as he sat at the communication station. "You're familiar with the equipment here? Of course you are, you maintain this thing."

"I could use a refresher," she said.

"We can do that. You'll need to know what you're doing if you're going to be coordinating up here while we're on the ground."

It took maybe five minutes to cover the basics he thought she'd need, then he had her take point as they began reaching out to the operations control center in Mexico. He observed for a while as she persuaded the person on the other end to let her talk to his supervisor, then turned away. She had it under control, and she'd call if she needed him.
Arrival

Silently Tony joined the others studying the holographic representation of what awaited them. Steve and Vision were discussing terrain and strategy, but Sam was just watching and listening, so Tony sidled up to him. "Will they be joining us?"

Sam shook his head minutely, glancing at him briefly before turning back to the holograms. "Pym isn't confident Lang can hold it long enough to be useful without hurting himself. And Lang's daughter's birthday is in two days."

"Kids get upset if you miss their birthday," Tony said with an understanding nod. "We'll be fine without them."

"It's a pretty big mess," Sam said doubtfully. "We'd be better off if they came."

"We'd be better off if everyone could have come, but we'll still do some good with what we've got."

"Look at you being all optimistic," Sam teased. "Is that what happens when you talk to your girl?"

Tony shrugged. "I don't think so, but we'd have to do more experimentation to be sure," he said good-naturedly. "But the outcome can only be improved by us being there. That's not usually the case, so it's a nice change of pace."

"Mr. Stark?" Toni called.

He crossed the distance to the comm station in two strides. "What's up?"

"I was punted over to the U.S. Consulate and the duty officer wants to speak with you to verify my story," she said, sounding frustrated as she took off the headset.

He normally didn't bother with the headset, but the subtle noises of the jet in flight could be distracting to people not used to the sounds, and foreign telephone connections weren't the best for clarity as it was. "This is Tony Stark."

"Good evening, sir. I am sorry for the hesitation, you must understand that the situation is far from ordinary," the duty officer equivocated.

"I am very aware," he said dryly. "What's the holdup? We were asked by the President of Mexico to provide help and we're getting the runaround. Now can you connect us to the people in charge of the earthquake response in Tijuana or not?"

"I am not-- I do not--" the officer began to stammer.

"Then get me your supervisor. Or your supervisor's supervisor. No, scratch that. I want to talk to the person that's in charge over there."

"The Consul General?" the officer almost squeaked.

"Yeah, the Consul General. Let me talk to--"

"Him," Toni prompted from the information about the Consulate she'd pulled up.

"--him," he finished. "Unless you'd like to go ahead and send us over to whatever city official is handling things."
There was a long pause. "I will see what I can do," the voice said finally. "Please hold."

Tony huffed in frustration as staticky hold music blared into his ears. "I should've asked Carmen who to call, this is ridiculous," he muttered, flicking through the information Toni had found about the Consul General. After a few minutes, a clicking interrupted the music and a tenor voice spoke. "Mr. Stark, this is an unexpected pleasure."

"I'm glad you think so," Tony said shortly. "Did your underling explain the situation?"

"He did. Had we been notified that you were coming by my superiors, this process would have gone more smoothly."

As part of the State Department, the man's ultimate superior was, of course, Secretary Ross. Whether this failure of communication had anything to do with Ross or not, Tony wasn't sure and didn't particularly care, but it was a possibility. "I don't fault you for that," he said reassuringly. "I'm only interested in what you can do to fix it."

"My staff are already reaching out to the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública to confirm who you'll be working with."

"The what now?" he asked. He could figure out roughly what it meant, but clarity would be helpful. "My apologies, the Ministry of Public Security," the Consul said. "We are also communicating with my superiors."

"Of course you are," Tony grumbled under his breath. More loudly, he said, "You'd do better to contact the U.N., but do whatever you like."

"It's procedure. You understand," he replied blandly.

"It's also procedure for my subordinate to be handling the communication," Tony said acidly, letting his frustration seep into his tone. "So I'm sure you won't mind if I let her do that."

"Not at all. Thank you for indulging us, Mr. Stark."

He pulled off the headset and handed it back to Toni. "They should connect you to the people we actually need. Let me know if they keep dicking around."

"Yes, sir," she said smartly. After a brief pause she was speaking to the folks at the other end of the line.

Tony lingered nearby briefly, just in case, until she switched from English to rapid-fire Spanish and began relaying their position and ETA. Only then did he return to where the others were still studying the holographic city. "Any insights? Or are you just trying to look busy?" he quipped as he stopped beside Rogers.

Rogers all but glared in his general direction, but didn't manage to retort before Vision spoke up. "With Friday's assistance, we have identified areas of significant structural damage that have not yet been reached by emergency personnel."

Friday highlighted those areas in red. "Why haven't they been reached? Damage to the roads?" Tony mused.
"That, and the natural topography. The city extends over many ridges and valleys."

"And there's only so many emergency personnel to go around," Sam added.

"Which is why we're on our way and my foundation is rounding up volunteers," Tony said, double-checking their position on a display. "We're still a couple hours out, so if anyone wants to take a nap, now's the time."

Sam met his glance and nodded, turning toward a bank of seats and folding down the backs to make a bunk. "I'll be right here."

"Vision, you and Friday keep an eye on what's going on down there. We'll want to have a clearer idea of where we can be useful in ways the ground-level folks can't by the time we arrive. We'll also want to have a good idea where we should scan first for survivors."

"I understand," he replied gravely.

Tony felt like he was being watched and glanced over at Rogers to find him staring. "What?" he demanded defensively.

Rogers didn't answer for a moment, but seemed to blush. "Will you be napping?" he asked finally.

"Yeah, I have the misfortune of not being super and also being old," he said glibly. "But it's up to you whether you want to hang out with the holograms or get a bit of shut-eye. I won't tell you what to do."

Rogers's expression did something Tony couldn't interpret, but his only response was, "All right."

Tony flipped down the bunk closest to his armor and sank down onto it, but didn't lie down just yet. He had one more thing to do. No, two. He quietly asked Friday to bring up everything they had on the pilot, then typed a quick message before skimming the results.

_I have a bad feeling about Ross. He's going to try something, I just don't know what._

Hill's response came as Rogers quietly passed him in the direction of an unoccupied bunk. _We'll be on our guard. Shall I bar him from the compound?_

_No, that would be more trouble than it's worth. Just . . . be cautious._

There was nothing out of the ordinary in the pilot's files, though their brevity made him a little suspicious until he found a note about a change in legal name and gender a few years back. No big deal, and the previous name was also squeaky clean. Nothing that would fully explain Jordan's obvious unease. Maybe he would ask Toni later.

The feeling of disquiet about Ross kept Tony awake longer than he would have liked, but he managed to get some sleep before the alarm he'd set went off, vibrating his watch and phone simultaneously. It was the don't-startle-the-assassins alarm; audible alarms they weren't expecting tended to have unpleasant consequences.

He paid a visit to the small bathroom to take a leak and splash water on his face, then checked in with Toni. She had been able to obtain coordinates for the field command center and the name of the person to contact when they arrived, which had only taken conversations with four more people after Tony had left her to her own devices. Jordan reported they were thirty minutes out from the coordinates.
Tony took in this information silently, then clapped his hands and rubbed them together vigorously.
"All right, so we'll do a flyover of the area before we report to the coordinates and I'll show you and
Rogers how the new scanner works and what I'm hoping for. In the meantime, both of you should
take a breather and I'll mind things here. Once we arrive, there's no telling how long it will be until
your next break."

"Yes, sir," they replied, almost in unison.

When Jordan slipped out of the pilot's seat, he made a beeline for the bathroom. Tony stopped Toni
from stepping away with a light touch on her arm. "What's his deal?" he asked quietly, nodding in
the direction of the empty seat. "Is he always so jumpy?"

"No, he's just nervous about making a good impression. He'd never met an Avenger and now there's
four of you, and he's always thought highly of Captain Rogers... He won't let you down, I can
promise you that."

"Tell him to chill and we'll be good, then," he said with a smirk.

She nodded and moved away. Tony stepped into the cockpit to glance over the screens and readouts,
then nodded in satisfaction and moved over to the station Toni had been occupying. On one of the
blank displays he brought up the multi-dimensional scan controls. The Tony-has-a-heart scanner?
Super-penetrating scan? The Peeping Tom protocol? He needed to come up with a good name for it,
preferably with a better acronym than B.A.R.F.

"Friday, when we get a decent read on things, save it where I can use it from inside the suit. That
will be our best bet for navigating the mess down there." Even with his satellite in place, it was best
to assume he'd lose the connection somewhere along the line.

"Yes, boss," she said.

He idly ran a quick test, but they were too high up to get a read on anything, and the emitters weren't
aligned in a way that would allow a scan of the quinjet interior. Too bad; it would have been
amusing to spy on the others like that. Not that he particularly cared what they were up to.

Speaking of the others... he came to a stop beside Vision, who stood unnaturally still, his gaze
seemingly fixed on the map. When Vision didn't acknowledge his presence, he went around to the
other side of the display, thinking perhaps the android would react upon seeing him. He didn't, and
Tony was admittedly a little concerned when he saw that Vision's lips were moving but no sound
was coming out.

"Vision? You flaking out on us there, buddy?" Tony ventured. Vision seemed to startle, and the
abrupt twitch from the previously motionless being was almost as alarming as the earlier stillness.

"I am well," Vision hastened to assure him, as if sensing his unease. "Friday and I have been using
the quinjet's radio capabilities to eavesdrop on the efforts already underway. I am learning a great
deal of colloquial Spanish as spoken in the region."

"Ah," Tony said, not sure if he liked the idea of the android and his AI colluding. At least it was
providing potentially useful information... "How's it going?"

Vision tilted his head as if listening to something--which he probably was--then replied, "Slowly, but
they just freed the last person trapped in an elder care home."

"That's good news. Any thoughts on where we ought to start?"
Vision gestured and a shaded region of the map expanded to show more detail. "This valley and the adjacent hillside. The winding roads will be difficult to clear adequately in time for ground personnel to arrive, and comparing old satellite imagery to the most recent scans indicates significant structural damage."

A sample before-and-after image appeared, and Tony could immediately see what he meant. "Right. Seeks like a good plan," he said, already imagining what it might look like on the ground. He only hoped they'd be doing more rescues than recoveries.

He returned to the pilot's area and sat down. Nothing had changed since he'd taken a look before. As he thought more about what they would find, what damage like that could mean in terms of the unsuspecting people inside those buildings, he took over for the autopilot, nudging their speed just a hair higher. Jordan had it set at the top speed allowed in the safety manual, but Tony knew the jet could go a bit faster for the short time they had left without risking a malfunction. And if he did break something, well, Toni and her tools were right back there. They could fix it, no big deal.

It was worth it when arriving sooner could mean lives saved.

There were some shuffling noises from the direction of the bunks when they were only fifteen minutes out, then Rogers loomed behind him. Rogers didn't speak at first but Tony could see his reflection in the windows, so he broke the silence. "What's up, sleeping beauty? Was there a pea under the pallet?"

Rogers's reflected expression seemed perplexed. "You're mixing metaphors again," he said finally. "What are you doing?"

"Mixing metaphors," Tony replied cheekily. "And also flying this bird. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Why?"

"Last I checked, breaks were allowed during a duty shift. And once we arrive, I don't expect they'll have a chance to pee for a good while. Might as well let them do what they need to do before all hell breaks loose."

There was no response at first, though he knew Rogers hadn't left. "That's a good idea," Rogers said at length. "I should have thought of that."

"Yeah, well, I'm in charge at the moment, so no harm done. You want to wake Wilson and retrieve the children? It's almost time to give my scanner its first real challenge."

By the time his audience had gathered, he'd dropped the speed significantly and descended to a lower altitude as he followed the U.S.-Mexico border toward their destination. They'd have to drop much lower before the scanner would work, but they were still miles away.

He said as much when Jordan showed up behind him, hovering anxiously just behind his left shoulder. "And take it easy, kid," he said with some exasperation. "I promise I know what I'm doing, and I might as well save you some time in the saddle. You'll have it all to yourself soon enough."

"Yes, sir," Jordan replied, but didn't budge, apparently content to watch.

"If you're going to keep standing there, would you do it on the other side so I don't have to talk to Toni through you?"

Jordan obediently shifted to behind his right shoulder instead. Tony sighed and rolled his eyes, then
straightened in the chair and gunned the engines just a little to make a point. "All right, Toni, you'll have an audience, hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, sir," she said sounding amused.

He walked her through finding and initiating the right protocol, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on the rapidly approaching city through the windows. "Hold on, everyone, I'm taking us down over this lovely little suburb."

The 'lovely little suburb' was a scattering of houses along what looked like dirt roads before they reached the more built up areas belonging to the outskirts of the city. "Tell me what you're seeing, Toni. I don't actually know how close I have to get before we'll get something usable," he said when they could make out large letters painted on some of the corrugated roofs.

"It's--I think we're going too fast," she said, sounded confused.

"Just a sec," he said, studying the structures below them until he found one that looked abandoned. He gracefully parked the quinjet several hundred feet above it. "How about now?"

"Can we get closer?"

"Tell me when." Slowly he let the jet sink down.

"Closer . . . closer . . . now! Yes, that's much better."

"Friday, can you show me what she's seeing?" he asked. One of his readouts was replaced by what looked almost like a blueprint of the building below them. "What about the other data? Can you make something useful out of it? Maybe combine it with output from the normal methods?"

"Are we going to have to hover over every single building for this to work?" Rogers' voice inquired from right behind his seat.

"I don't know yet," he said irritably, his train of thought disrupted by the unexpected question. "Even if we do, It would still be better than doing it the old-fashioned way."

"What if we start with thermal scanning to figure out where the people are and then use this to find them within the damaged buildings?" Rogers asked.

Wilson's reply was almost immediate, "Thermal scanning doesn't work that way."

Tony let him explain the difference to Rogers while he worked with Friday to adjust the technique. They could do things the old-fashioned way, of course, but that would take so much more time. Taking a few minutes now to do the fine-tuning could save them hours.

When it seemed like he was onto something, he eased the jet into a hover over a building that might have people in it. A church, as it turned out, identifiable from its interior architecture and the arrangement of the people inside. Whether it was a regular service or a collection of earthquake-frightened people praying to their god for mercy, Tony couldn't say, but it had served the purpose of proving his idea could work.

"Let's get this show on the road," he said with no small amount of satisfaction as he set course for the city proper. "Toni, get back on with central ops and tell them we're nearly there. Jordan, it's all you, buddy."

As soon as he was free of the pilot's alcove, he stretched and went over to investigate what snacks
were in the cooler. He came away with blueberries, some cheese, and a bottle of water, which he methodically consumed.

"Mr. Stark, we're clear to work wherever we like as long as we keep them notified of our location," Toni announced after they arrived at the coordinates and officially checked in. "They're mostly just grateful for the help."

"Good, at least that went smoothly." He sidled over to Rogers. "We're at the orders-giving stage. You still want me in charge?"

Steve's hand tightened as if clenching around an invisible shield strap. "Go ahead," he said almost inaudibly.

"Mr. Stark, we're closing in," Jordan called back.

"All right, let's do a flyby, see what we've got," he said confidently, moving toward the cockpit.

Seeing the damage via satellite was bad enough; seeing it in person was staggering. Buildings that still stood had visible cracks in the walls or open spaces and piles of debris indicated where less fortunate buildings used to be. The visible people were either clustered in the middle of dusty streets or huddled around the wreckage, digging out other survivors.

Some areas seemed to escape with minimal damage while others were devastated. Very few people bothered to look up at the sound of the quinjet's engines.

The slopes of the valley were littered with damaged cars, crumpled homes, cast-off tires and splintered wood and devastation in every direction. Winding roads were barely discernible underneath it all, some of them merely dirt.

"Friday, are we getting this?" Tony murmured, overwhelmed by all there was to do and ashamed that he hadn't given the earthquake victims a moment's thought until directly asked to help.

"Scans are underway, boss," she replied. "Preliminary data is being uploaded to the suit."

He mentally shook himself and refocused his attention on what they could do. "All right, everyone, here's the drill: Jordan and Toni will drop us off and do a thorough scan to locate the survivors. We'll work our way down, clearing the roads and helping with rescues as we start getting information. Vision and Rogers, you're our heavy lifting department; move as much out of the way as you can. Wilson and I will be the aerial rescue crew to retrieve as many people as we can while the roads are being cleared. Got it?"

Around him, there were nods of understanding and assent.

"Any questions? Comments? Snide remarks?"

No one spoke.

"Okay, suit up, comms in."

As soon as their attention wasn't focused on him, he stepped over to the suit, which opened obediently without him saying a word. "All systems check," he said as the suit closed around him.

"All systems go," Friday said as the HUD lit up.

"Comm check," he commanded, then listened as Rogers, Wilson, Vision, and Toni checked in. He
scanned the others' faces, seeing grim determination and resolve, then nodded to himself and began to turn away, only belatedly noting the headlamp Rogers had strapped over his helmet. He grinned but didn't comment; Rogers was the only one without any capability to see in the dark, so the lamp actually made sense. He only wondered where Rogers had found it.

"Unloading in five," Toni said, and the hatch began to lower.

Tony watched as the ground grew steadily closer. "That's good enough," he said when the ramp was a few feet off the ground. "We can take it from here. Let's get out there and do what we can, people."

He waited until the others had jumped or flown out, then carefully leaned forward into a gentle glide out of the quinjet and into the evening light.

It felt damn good to be back in the suit, regardless of the circumstances.
On the Ground

Chapter Notes

Some portions of this came out darker than I was expecting, but when you're talking about the human toll of a natural disaster... it made sense.

The quinjet slid into the shadows as it pulled away from the bend in the road where they had disembarked. Tony jetted higher to regain his bearings in relation to the projections they'd been studying.

Friday helpfully cleared the HUD of everything but a map and indicators pointing out where they were and where the preliminary scans said people might need rescuing. There was also a huddle of people about a quarter mile down the road, which seemed likely to be a group of locals. He nodded in satisfaction and drifted toward to the ground, already relaying this information to the others.

"We'll work our way to those people, and by then we should have more data from the quinjet scans. Wilson, you're our pointman for injuries until the medical folks on the ground can get through."

"I've got some kit," Sam acknowledged, patting a belt pouch he wore instead of his guns.

"Let's hope we won't have to deal with anything major by ourselves," Tony said. "All right, Wilson, we're up."

Sam said nothing, but his wings snapped open and he joined Tony in the air while Steve moved forward down the road and Vision drifted behind him.

Tony took the lead, headed for the nearest marker on his display. The structure had been a single-level house but was now two walls, a collapsed roof, and a pile of tumbled stone.

"Are we also doing recovery?" Sam asked grimly, nodding toward a motionless hand peeking out from the rubble of a fallen wall.

He only paused a second before answering, and spoke into the comm to keep the others in the loop. "We're here for the living, not the bodies. We can move them if it makes sense during a rescue, but otherwise it's a waste of time better spent keeping more people from turning up dead."

"Acknowledged." Rogers said, the word concluding with a grunt of effort.

Tony resisted the urge to turn and see he was up to, instead focusing on the building in front of him. Sam was also studying it via Redwing circling the wreckage.

"I'm getting one, maybe two, in the southeast corner there," Sam said.

Tony nodded; that matched up with what he could determine. "The south wall is unstable, our best bet is to lift the roof."

Lifting the roof was not difficult. The corrugated metal was largely intact, which made it feel a little like peeling open a very large can to reveal the ruins of a bedroom. The repulsor bot held the roof up and out of the way.
Coaxing the two terrified children out from under the bed took longer than any other part of the process. Tony was ready to just flip the bed frame up and grab them but Sam managed to draw them out by teasing them with Redwing. Once the young boys emerged, they each grabbed one and lifted them to safety, carrying them up the hill to the nearest aid station.

By the time they returned to the house, the southern wall had also collapsed, crushing the bed.

Tony stared at it for a long moment before turning away and murmured, "Friday, log where we find the bodies so they can be retrieved later."

A little white cross briefly appeared on the image of the house before the next marker flared brightly on a building across the street and a few paces down.

They settled into a rhythm as they moved from one building to another, scanning, planning, then working together to dig out the survivors and relocate them to safety. Sam didn't ask about the bot until they started in on their third building. Once Tony explained, all he said was, "Redwing is still cooler."

"Of course it is. Redwing isn't meant to blow up on demand."

After an hour or two, Steve and Vision reported they'd made it to the knot of people Tony had pointed out. Toni notified the officials that the way was clear for additional rescue personnel, so a team of volunteer workers arrived and began tending to those survivors while Steve and Vision resumed clearing the road. Hours passed, each pair absorbed in their tasks but periodically checking in with each other and the jet.

By the time the hillside road was clear enough for the rescue workers to get through to the bottom, enough of the scanning had been completed for Steve and Vision to shift their attention to rescues with Toni directing them from the jet. Tony kept tabs on them via his display, which Friday quietly kept up-to-date.

Encountering dazed people digging frantically in the rubble was commonplace. Sometimes, they were able to rescue whomever had been trapped and it ended in a joyful reunion and the survivors being escorted to the aid station.

Others weren't so fortunate. Then, a shake of the head from Tony to Sam and a move toward the next crumbling structure was met with wails and pleas from the frantic mother or brother or cousin to just try to rescue their loved one, please. Please.

Worse, though, was tagging a building with multiple bodies and no one lingering outside and realizing no one was present to mourn the loss.

It was dirty, tiring, depressing work. Seeing a marker disappear with each person rescued was encouraging, but too often the white crosses seemed to multiply exponentially faster than the markers vanished.

As they progressed down the road, the rescues became progressively more complicated and hazardous. There, buildings were stacked atop one another, marching vertically up the hillside. Failures in supportive walls had sent multiple structures tumbling to the ground, laying waste to anything in their way, from other buildings to vehicles to people unlucky enough to be within range.

And some of the houses were little more than cinder block, plywood, and tarps. That kind of construction had no hope of standing up to the devastating force of an earthquake even a tenth of the strength of the one they'd experienced.
Shortly before dawn, Tony and Sam rescued a man whose leg had been crushed, so Sam flew him to the nearest hospital while Tony went to help Steve and Vision finish digging out a family from the middle building in a stack of three. That was three more markers off the map, but there were still so many more . . .

And there hadn't been any shaking since they arrived, which could only mean there might be an aftershock at any time. "Friday, identify the structures in greatest danger of collapse," Tony ordered, heaving a weary sigh when there were more than a dozen within a few blocks' radius. "How many have more than one occupant?"

That narrowed the possibilities somewhat, but it didn't feel right to base the decision on the number of poor bastards trapped. "Which ones could be rescued by the local personnel without risking their lives or limbs?" he asked next, and was pleased to see it was about half.

"Send that list to the jet," he ordered, then activated the comm line. "Toni, I'm sending you a list of rescues that the ground folks should be able to do," he said and explained how he'd narrowed it down.

"Understood," she said smartly. "Don't get crushed out there."

"I won't. I have a shiny metal suit to keep me nicely uncrushed."

"It's not so shiny at the moment," Sam joked as he returned, his own gear looking much worse for wear. "Where are we headed next? And are we doing it together or splitting up again?"

Tony studied the schematics of their first few targets, as determined by distance from their current location. They'd nearly reached the base of the hill they'd been working down, and roads extended out from the bottom like a spider's web. "Together might be the fastest, at least for now."

"Where are we going first?" Steve asked.

Tony led the way rather than answer, and they got to work again in the brightening daylight.

The fifth building they tackled began to crumble before they'd finished extricating an old woman and her small, yapping dog. Tony inserted himself as a pillar to make up for the wall that had given up while Rogers threw the woman over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and bolted out of there. Sam managed to chase the dog in the direction of the street. Tony was mentally measuring how much further they'd have to go to get out of range of the falling building when Vision appeared beside him.

"Go, I will hold it. The collapse won't injure me."

"Right. Thanks," Tony said and jetted out of the line of fire, a billowing cloud of dust following his boots.

After that, the target buildings were in two opposite directions. "Vision, you can get the results of the scans from Friday, right?" Tony asked as soon as it was obvious that splitting up would be more efficient.

"I can," Vision confirmed.

Tony watched Rogers and Wilson return from dropping off the old woman and her dog with the aid people. Wilson looked almost as tired as he felt, and even Rogers seemed like he could use a breather. "All right, we're splitting up. Wilson, you go with Vision. Rogers, you're with me. We'll get through these next few buildings and take a break. Unless another earthquake stops us first."

"What, are you tired of my jokes?" Sam asked with mock offense.
"You call those jokes?" Tony shot back. "But maybe I'm just throwing my weight around. Because I'm in charge."

"Sure you are," Sam replied, then gave him an exaggerated salute and a grin. "Sir, yes, sir!" he barked as his wings snapped open and he took to the air again.

Tony waved him off and picked a direction, gesturing for Rogers to follow.

Their first rescue as a pair involved a lot of rubble-moving to reach two people huddled against the back wall of a former two-story that creaked around them while they worked. As Rogers moved deeper, clearing a narrow tunnel to the victims, the bot's energy output wasn't enough to keep the second floor from sagging, so Tony had to stop hauling debris out of the way and let the suit serve as additional reinforcement.

Being a human pillar was, of course, quite tedious, so he decided to ask something he'd been wondering since they'd all been on the jet. He switched his comm to a private line and said, "What's got you spooked, Rogers?"

There was a pause and Rogers passed him, dragging some twisted metal pipes out of the way. "What are you talking about?"

"You've been acting strange since we got on the jet. All uncertain and, dare I say it, compliant."

There was the sound of wood snapping, then Rogers said tersely, "I've got them. Coming out now."

A cat scampered past where Tony stood, followed closely by a woman probably around his age, though her dark hair was so dusty he couldn't tell if it was greying or not. She didn't even look at him as she hurried to safety. Rogers was helping the other woman, who was limping badly and had blood caked down the side of her face.

When their markers were clear of the building, Tony carefully released his hold on the support beam and beat a hasty retreat, catching the bot as he passed it.

Rogers was a short distance up the road, carrying the injured woman while the other clutched the mewing cat and looked back at what remained of the house, weeping.

"Should I take her?" Tony asked, coming around to hover beside them.

"Thank you," he said in Spanish to the volunteer, who replied something that sounded like 'you're welcome.'

Tony stopped where a teenaged volunteer was setting out cups of water and popped his faceplate long enough to gulp one down, watching out of the corner of his eye as Rogers followed his lead.

He quickly flew her to the medical tent being set up at the bottom of the road they'd cleared and lingered until she was seated on a cot, shakily answering questions as a young man in a white coat examined her head wound. When he emerged from the tent, Rogers was escorting the other woman up to the tent.

He walked back in the direction they'd come, waiting to make sure Rogers was following before he took to the air and examined their next target. "So what's the story, Rogers?" he asked conversationally while Friday highlighted the most promising path into the building.
"It's nothing," Rogers mumbled, sounding perhaps a bit aggravated that he wasn't letting the subject drop.

"Is it? You know I won't hesitate to bench you again if it's needed."

"There's nothing wrong with how I'm performing." Now Rogers sounded offended, which was quite a feat given that he was also jogging toward the building Tony was hovering beside.

"You remain quite capable of hefting large rocks," Tony agreed, lifting a large chunk of what used to be a cement-and-rock retaining wall away from the side of a house it had nearly crushed. "But I have to admit that you not questioning my every order is putting me a little on edge. It's not like you, Rogers. So what's up?"

"What's the approach for this building?" Steve asked.

Tony rolled his eyes and told him the plan. When they had settled into a rhythm of Rogers clearing away obstacles and Tony moving them where they could help reinforce what remained of the house, Tony debated whether to continue needling Rogers or leave him alone for a while. That Rogers was still more than capable of pulling his weight in doing the rescues was obvious, so maybe it didn't matter that his demeanor in doing so wasn't quite as uptight as usual.

"Dr. Tanya challenged me to respond to your orders as if they came from Wilson," Rogers finally confessed.

That was interesting. He could almost see it. "But why the walking on eggshells? You acted like I would scold you for looking at the maps without me."

"I thought it might look like I was taking charge even though you were officially in command," Steve admitted, looking a little sheepish.

"Oh. Well. At ease, soldier, I have no problem with making yourself familiar with whatever we're facing." He considered adding a quip about not hiding anything but thought better of it.

There was a brief silence, and when Steve spoke again, it was purely business. "Is it safe to move this?"

"Give me a minute," he said, carefully making his way over to where Steve was waiting.

The passage through the wreckage was narrow, so he stayed back and let Friday assess the situation for him. The odds of a major shift in the rubble was about fifty-fifty, so he summoned the bot to help support the ceiling, then placed himself where he could come to Steve's aid if needed.

"I won't promise nothing will happen, but that's the quickest way to the two survivors, so have at it," Tony said when he was as ready as he'd ever be. What he didn't mention was that the heat signature of one person was cooling rapidly; shock, probably, and if they didn't hurry up they would be recovering a body.

Steve nodded and took a deep breath, balancing himself before heaving up one side of the concrete slab and pulling it open like a door. He froze when the house gave a mighty groan and Tony stepped forward in preparation, but nothing came crashing down immediately. "Go," he said urgently, and Steve poked his head into the small space, the light of his headlamp glowing in the dimness.

"Hello?" he called. He backed out of the space with a motionless toddler in his arms and said urgently, "The mother is stuck. You'll have to cut her free."
"Get him out of here," Tony replied with a nod at the child. "I'll take care of it."

Steve retreated and Tony peered into the space, the reactor casting stark shadows over the bloody body. He had to swallow hard and look away for a brief second when he took in the scene; the woman had been impaled by a piece of shrapnel—a piece of a grate that had been over the window, from the looks of it—and it held her where she'd fallen. He quietly cut the metal rod as close to her body as he could manage, then gently gathered her into his arms, trying not to disturb her injury. "Rogers, are you clear?" he barked into the comm.

"Clear," Steve replied instantly.

"I'm going out the top," he said as he did so, barely feeling the impact of his back hitting what had been left of the ceiling and roof on the way out. "Friday, I need Toni."

"Yes, boss."

"I read you, Iron Man," Toni said a heartbeat later.

"I have a serious injury, where should I take her?"

It took what felt like ages for her to relay questions to him and his answers in return, but it was maybe a minute before she directed him to a hospital closer to the city center that was equipped to deal with trauma.

He landed on the helipad, where he was met by a pair of harried-looking medical personnel with a stretcher. Both had blood on their smocks, and he could only guess how many serious injuries they'd seen since the earthquake.

There wasn't anything he could do once they took charge of the patient, talking rapidly over her as they pushed the stretcher into the building. As he took off again, he said, "Friday, do they even have electricity?"

"This block is operating on generator power, boss," Friday reported.

"Right. Estimated time until the power grid is back up and running?" he asked curiously as he headed back to where the others were working.

"Unknown, boss. The aftershocks will interfere with repair efforts."

Which he knew, but it was still a grim reminder that the city would take time to get back to something close to normal. Cleaning up the rubble would take months, minimum, and restoring the power, water, and natural gas lines wouldn't be much faster.

"Rogers, status?"

"I'm ready when you are, shellhead."

"Next target is around the corner from our last position." When he braked in front of the building, he could see Rogers a short distance away, jogging up the street.

The target structure looked like it used to be two stories tall, its concrete defaced by graffiti and its windows blocked with plywood. The concrete had begun to crumble in the quake, and the walls bulged outward as the building sagged beneath its own weight. A narrow alley between the first story and the retaining wall that kept the ridge from encroaching on the building had filled up with debris and now seemed to be holding the structure together, such as it was.
"It looks abandoned," Steve said doubtfully as he approached.

"There were four heat signatures here when the jet went through," Tony replied, examining what he could detect in the building against the earlier scan. "From the looks of it, there's no way they've gotten out since then."

"Kids," Steve said, looking up and down the street before returning his focus on the heap before them. "Kids would play in a place like this. It's exciting because it should be off limits."

"They probably wish they'd picked a different spot," Tony said dryly.

"So what's the drill?"

Tony sighed heavily, examining Friday's analysis from every angle. "There's no good way in. Anything we do, we run the risk of bringing the whole thing down."

"Step carefully, got it. Can you direct me through it from out here?"

"From out here? Which one of us is wearing a metal shell? If only one of us goes in, it won't be you." His retort was almost purely on reflex, his attention focused on figuring out a way into the mess that wouldn't crush the kids inside.

"After you, then," Rogers said sarcastically, waving him forward.

"Easy there, Boy Scout. I almost have it." He approached the building, warily eyeing the metal railing dangling from what used to be a small balcony. The center area of the facade had the least damage, so he blasted aside the pile of rubble that had fallen from the second story and peeled off the plywood that was somehow still affixed over a broken window.

He punched out the remaining glass and gingerly stepped inside, rocks and gravel crunching under his boots. Steve followed him in, and for a moment they stood awkwardly close together.

"Don't touch that wall unless you want to get squished," Tony said finally, gesturing at the partially intact wall that ran perpendicular to the one they'd just come through.

"What about that one?" Rogers pointed to the other interior wall of the room.

"I don't know yet, but I wouldn't risk it if I were you."

"The kids are somewhere on the other side of it."

"I'm aware of that," Tony snapped. The strain of what they'd already seen, what they still needed to do, and working nonstop for over twelve hours were taking a toll on his patience.

"Sorry," Steve said after a moment of silence. "I just don't know what to be doing right now."

"Join the club," he replied heavily.

It was reassuring that all four heat signatures appeared to be at the proper temperatures, but it was maddening that they remained on the other side of at least one highly unstable wall. Finally he thought he had a plan and had Friday direct the bot to shadow their progress, keeping between the ceiling and Rogers' head. As he stepped away from Rogers, he said, "If you hear any rumbling, run."

This time, Tony was moving the rubble and passing it to Rogers, who piled it out of the way. It was exacting work but he did it as quickly as he could manage, carefully clearing debris away from a mostly intact doorway rather than punching through the wall like he was tempted to do.
When they emerged into the next room, a veritable landslide of cinder block, concrete, and random piping stood where the side wall of the building used to be.

"What's keeping it up?" Steve asked anxiously, looking up toward the cracked ceiling and blinking against a sudden shower of dust.

"Friction and not much else," Tony said grimly, already moving toward the back of the room at the edge of the heap. Even a dozen bots to hold things up wouldn't make him feel at ease with the situation. "Hello?" he called.

High-pitched voices responded in rapid Spanish, and he found the hole in the wall the kids had used to reach their hideaway. The hole was in the back of the building, so the kids were actually sheltered in the narrow alley behind it; only chance had kept the rubble from the collapsing building from crushing them.

Now that they were this close, he felt a rush of energy and began digging through the debris with less care than was perhaps warranted. Rogers joined him, and soon they had enough of a gap that the children could climb through.

Three emerged, two boys and a girl who looked to be around the same age as Cooper and Lila. They looked up at their rescuers with wide eyes before they began pointing back into the hole and chattering excitedly.

It took a moment for Friday to pick out the gist of their words. "The other girl is trapped by rocks, boss," she reported succinctly.

He passed the information to Rogers. "Get them out of here, I'm going in after the other one," he ordered.

Steve hesitated briefly, then nodded smartly and ushered the three youngsters out, talking to them in a mix of halting Spanish and English.

Tony stuck his head through the hole to see what he could see; Friday had already scanned what she could, but he still wanted to see it for himself. The remaining girl was sprawled on her front, her head resting on her arms, her legs disappearing beneath a pile of rubble much like the one on the other side of the wall. She peered up at him with wide, dark eyes, looking terrified. A pile of smaller rocks a short distance away led him to suspect the kids had done what they could to free their playmate.

"I'm coming," he murmured in English, and lifted the faceplate so she could see his face. "I'm Tony, what's your name?" he asked in Spanish.

"Maria," she whispered. Her dark braids were unruly and dotted with small rocks.

He looked at her and saw Lila, saw the little girl in Gulmira, and his heart broke. What was her home like, that she would play in and around an abandoned building? Were the other children her siblings? Other relatives? Or just kids from the neighborhood?

Not that it mattered. She was trapped, she was injured, and he needed to get her out of there five minutes ago.

But the suit couldn't fit into the narrow crevice where she was, leaning through the hole wouldn't get him far enough in to clear away what pinned her down, and getting out of the suit to move the stuff would be suicide. "Rogers, I need you back here, pronto."

"On my way." Almost as soon as he said it, he was standing next to Tony. "What have we got?"
"The suit doesn't fit, but I think you will. Her name is Maria."

Steve stepped forward without hesitating, and slipped through the wall. He said hello to the girl and began shifting the rubble, handing it through the hole to Tony.

It didn't take as long as it felt to clear away enough that Maria could be pulled carefully out from under the remaining rocks. She wrapped her arms around Steve's neck and whimpered as he climbed back through with her in his arms. Tony averted his eyes from her battered legs with a wince.

Steve had just stepped through when there was a rumbling from the back wall; he took another step forward and crouched protectively over the girl. Cursing his foolishness, Tony moved between them and the wall, crouching over both of them as rocks pinged off his armor.

An alert flashed in the corner of the HUD: ground sensors had detected an earthquake and it would hit in seconds.

"Rogers, get out now!" he shouted, grabbing his shoulders and shoving him toward the exit.

Rogers instinctively resisted being forced out of his huddle, but soon was moving under his own power, hurrying toward the wall and the window beyond. Tony saw the ceiling start to fracture and inserted himself between it and the crouching soldier, flying overhead while spreading his arms and legs to shield them from whatever might collapse next.

He had to wait for Rogers to climb through the wall first, watching in slow motion as the wave indicating the earthquake swept past their position. If Rogers had been clear of the building, he would have just fired his boot jets and gotten out of there, to hell with the consequences, but he couldn't bring everything down on unprotected bodies.

He was halfway through the wall and ready to hit his thrusters as soon as Rogers was clear of the window, when everything collapsed. "I always knew I'd die in the suit, but I didn't think it would be like this," he joked as the sudden weight of the building crushing him drove the air from his chest.
Stunned by the impact of what felt like the entire building heaping itself upon the suit, Tony took a minute to regain his bearings. Or maybe it was several minutes, because the rumbling and grinding had completely stopped by the time he took a deep breath and said, "Friday, status?"

There was a pause, then she said, "Communication system reboot complete, boss. You have multiple incoming calls."

"Belay that. What's the status of the suit?"

"All systems functional, boss."

He decided not to question the communication reboot just then. A full system check would be needed later anyway. "Will I hurt anyone if I blast myself out of here?"

"Captain Rogers is perilously close to the rubble. He is trying to contact you."

Pity, he'd been enjoying the peace and quiet. "All right, patch me back into comms."

"--Man, report! What's your status?" Steve's demand was cut off but he didn't need to hear the rest.

"Aw, Cap, don't worry about little old me," he responded sarcastically. "Shiny metal suit, remember?"

"When the last thing we hear from you is talk about dying in the suit and then nothing for a good five minutes, it makes a guy wonder," Sam retorted.

He hadn't intended for anyone to hear that wisecrack, but evidently everyone had. Ah, well, it wasn't the first time he'd said something he regretted. "Wonder no more, I'm coming out. Rogers, back off unless you want to be a pancake," he said as Friday displayed the recommended path and speed on the HUD. He blinked acknowledgment and the suit roared to life, erupting from beneath the building as soon as it was clear.

He landed neatly on the road beside Steve, looking around with dismay at the added damage from the latest quake. "Quinjet, we're going to need updated scans. Friday, which at-risk buildings haven't been cleared?"

Part of his display changed to a map with a handful of scattered markers.

"How many of them have collapsed since the last scan?"

The number of markers didn't change and he sighed heavily. "We didn't get to them all in time. Let's start with those while the jet is getting new data."

"You need to be checked out by a doctor," Steve objected. "You might have a concussion."

He hesitated, the compulsion to keep going as long as there were people they could save warring against the profound weariness that was catching up to him now that he was standing still. His vision momentarily blurred and he blinked until it cleared.
A hand landed on his shoulder heavily enough that he could feel it through the suit. "We can't save them all," Steve said softly.

"We have been on the ground for sixteen hours, twenty-seven minutes, and thirteen seconds," Vision offered. "All of you should rest or your effectiveness will suffer. I will assess the structures that remained on our list and communicate with the local personnel."

"Thanks, buddy," Tony said with a sigh. "Jet, come and get us. Has the cavalry shown up yet?"

"The helicarrier arrived less than an hour ago with supplies and personnel," Toni replied, somehow not sounding like she'd been awake for over twenty-four hours. "Both search and rescue and medical reinforcements are being deployed. We're on our way to you now."

He nodded tiredly, then looked back at the collapsed building. "Friday, where's my bot?"

A marker popped up on his display. "The repulsor was deactivated when structural integrity was compromised, boss."

He picked his way into the rubble, then awkwardly hefted the concrete chunks aside until he could wedge his hand in and retrieve the bot's wreckage. "Analyze the points of failure and incorporate fixes into the redesign," he instructed Friday as he flew the short distance to where Steve was silently watching.

Sam swooped in to join them moments before the quinjet emerged from behind the ridge. "You can remain airborne if that's easier," Tony said, watching skeptically as the jet narrowly avoided buildings in its careful descent.

"I've got it, sir," Jordan said confidently. The aircraft landed gently in the dirt a moment later, the hatch already opening to admit them.

Tony retracted his helmet as soon as he stepped foot in the jet. The opening mechanism for the rest of the suit hesitated but eventually spat him free. "Friday, full diagnostic. Was that just dirt in the gears or is there something bigger going on?"

"Scanning, boss," she said obediently.

"Where to, sir?" Jordan called from the cockpit.

"The carrier. I don't want to impose on the locals." A bottle of water was shoved into his chest as he finished speaking. He nodded and took the bottle, then Wilson moved on to offer water to Toni and Jordan. Steve was already gulping his down and Tony followed suit. He hadn't realized how thirsty he'd gotten.

It was a short trip to where the helicarrier was anchored as close to shore as the water depths would allow. Toni directed Jordan where to land on the deck amidst the pallets of supplies and busily scurrying people. "Injuries can go to the medbay, otherwise they request that we remain aboard our vehicle as the best place to stay out of the way," she reported, taking off the headset and rolling her head from one side to another with a sigh.

"Right. Well, I guess that's my cue," Tony said, twisting the cap back on his now empty water bottle and dropping it into the trash bin. "Hopefully this won't take long."

"Hey Stark, catch," Sam called, and Tony reflexively reached out to snag the package tossed his way. Dried blueberries. He smirked and mock saluted before turning to leave.
He didn't look back as he descended the ramp until he heard footsteps following him. A glance over his shoulder showed Steve a few steps behind him. "You feeling all right, Rogers?" he asked wryly.

Emerging from the shadow of the jet was like walking into a wall of warmth and Tony grimaced. The heat rising up from the deck was visible in shimmering waves and the slight breeze off the water was little help. Inside the suit, he had been insulated from the rising temperature. No wonder Wilson and Rogers had looked like they were going to wilt.

"I thought I'd have them give me something to put on these scrapes," Steve replied easily, displaying his scratched and bleeding fingers.

"You realize we have stuff like that on the jet, right?" he said, tearing open the blueberries and popping a few in his mouth.

"Yes, but then you'd be wandering around unsupervised," Steve teased.

"Would you look at that, Cap is still worried about me," Tony said lightly. "I know this carrier almost as well as I do my tower, just for the record." He reached the door first and held it for Steve, who hesitated before stepping inside ahead of him.

"Still, I don't think having both Sam and me on the jet while you and Vision are elsewhere is quite what the U.N. had in mind."

Tony flapped his hand dismissively before grabbing more blueberries. "You were accompanied by my minions, it would have been fine. I trust that you wouldn't do anything as stupid as steal a quinjet and go on the run again while we're here on a humanitarian mission." He glanced over at Rogers calculatingly as they stopped to wait for a procession of loaded medical carts to pass. "Are you saying that my trust is misplaced?"

"No," Steve replied immediately. "You're right, I wouldn't have done anything like that."

"Good," he said, the small part of him that had been suspicious now satisfied. "That would have been an especially stupid move." He had installed trackers on all the jets after Siberia, so he would've known exactly where to find a fleeing Rogers.

The rest of the trip to the medbay passed in silence. Their arrival went unnoticed at first, and the sound of arguing could be heard from beyond a doorway to the left.

Steve took a step in the direction of the voices, but had to step back quickly when a woman in a jumpsuit and white coat bustled into the room, talking over her shoulder to a man following her. "See? I told you we'd be getting people in here any minute." She stopped abruptly in front of them and beamed. "What can we do for you?"

Tony had been reconsidering his decision to come, so he didn't immediately have an answer to the question. Steve answered for both of them. "He might have a concussion. I just need help cleaning out my hands."

She took one of his hands and examined it without comment, then turned to Tony and gestured for him to follow. "What happened?" she inquired pleasantly as she led him to a bed and indicated he should sit.

Steve had followed and again spoke first, this time because Tony was chewing the last of his blueberries. "A building collapsed on him and he was out for several minutes."

"My communication system was rebooting," Tony said irritably, folding the blueberry packaging and
shoving it in his jeans pocket. "It's not a big deal."

"Better safe than sorry," the nurse commented, pulling a penlight from her pocket and shining it in his eyes without warning.

He flinched away and blinked rapidly. "Can we not do that?" His watch beeped and he quickly silenced it. Whatever Friday wanted, it could wait.

"It's part of the procedure," she said, making a note on a screen at the head of the bed. "Captain Rogers, my colleague can tend to your hands, if you would like."

"I'd rather stay," Steve replied.

"At ease, soldier, I'm not going to keel over on the spot," Tony said wryly. His watch beeped again and he dismissed it with a gesture.

"If you stay, I must ask you not to answer any questions on the patient's behalf while I am conducting the examination," she said.

Steve saluted and Tony rolled his eyes in exasperation. Why had he agreed to be checked out? Right, setting a good example, blah blah.

The nurse launched into an extended interrogation, demanding his name, the date, the current President, what had happened, how he was feeling, and all manner of details both relevant and seemingly nonsensical in a rapid-fire barrage. He answered readily, except when he yawned, and Friday tried to get his attention twice more.

The questions ended as abruptly as they'd begun, and the nurse nodded briskly. "Please wait here, Mr. Stark, while I fetch the doctor. Captain, if you'd follow me."

Tony watched as she led Steve to a station where the other guy was waiting, then disappeared from sight briefly. She returned with a different man, who wore a sweater vest beneath his white coat and large glasses that had been out of style for at least a decade. "Mr. Stark, I'm Doctor Fine," the new guy said languidly, offering his hand, which Tony shook. "I'm going to ask you some questions, if you don't mind."

"Whatever it takes to get me out of here," he replied. His watch beeped yet again; he resisted the urge to swear and instead lifted the watch close to his face. "Mute," he snapped, "Or I'll turn you off."

"Is the technology misbehaving?" Dr. Fine asked dryly.

"You could say that," Tony said, sighing. "Ask away, doctor."

The doctor launched into a series of questions that closely mirrored the earlier interrogation. Tony could feel his irritation growing as the questions went on and on, but he managed to keep himself under control. It wouldn't do to lose his cool when he was the one in charge, especially when Rogers was already judging him for being insufficient or whatever.

Then Dr. Fine tested his balance and coordination, which seemed a lot like a roadside sobriety test, and he felt vaguely ridiculous. Steve was watching again by the time that absurdity concluded.

"If there's any damage, it's mild enough that I don't think any scans are necessary," Dr. Fine concluded. "Take it easy and stay where others can check on you for the next day or so, just in case."
"We'll keep an eye on him," Steve promised solemnly, then stepped forward to shake the doctor's hand. "It's good to see you again, Doctor."

"Always a pleasure, Captain," Dr. Fine replied.

There was a commotion from the direction of the door as someone injured and bleeding was rolled in on a stretcher. As soon as they could leave without being in the way, they slipped out of the medbay and headed back to the quinjet. When Steve didn't offer any information, Tony asked about how he knew the doctor, and the explanation lasted until they stepped back out on the deck.

They were halfway to the quinjet when his phone vibrated in his pocket as his watch emitted the series of chirps that meant someone wanted him urgently. The phone was in his hand before the sound stopped and he noted the list of alerts on the screen even as he accepted the call. "What's going on?" he asked without preamble, his mind already scrolling through the possible explanations for half a dozen perimeter alerts, two messages from Rhodey, and three missed calls each from Bill and Hill.

"We have a situation," Agent Hill said crisply.

"I noticed. Ross?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve stiffen at the name.

"Yes, and he wants to talk to you. Do you want the rundown before or after?"

"Fill me in. I have no problem making him wait."

"The compound is surrounded. As far as we have been able to determine, they're National Guard, called up to provide reinforcements for the county sheriffs. They claim they have orders to evict us from the premises, but no one can provide the paperwork. Your lawyer is working on that side of things. Rhodey wants me to tell you everything is under control."

"Which means nothing is on fire, at least not yet," Tony said dryly, pausing outside the jet's open hatch. He didn't want to disturb anyone who might be sleeping. Steve went in without him, then stepped back out and waved him in without a word. He nodded and came inside, listening as Hill continued.

"Non-essential personnel have been secured. Tactical teams are posted around the perimeter. Ross arrived about an hour ago and demanded to talk to you. He claims he had no idea this was going to happen, much less today. Your lawyer isn't impressed with him, from the looks of it."

"Bill is there?" Tony asked in surprise.

"No, the other guy. The one who was at the press conference."

"Right. Of course you're watching. And listening, no doubt."

"Wanda and I are monitoring the situation, yes."

He paced the interior of the jet as he decoded what she'd said. Wanda was there to keep Ross from making any sudden moves. Why Hugh was at the compound was a mystery, but that was hardly his top concern. Non-essential personnel meant the Barton family and Dr. Tanya, plus whatever IT minions weren't required to keep everything running, and possibly a handful of others. That they were 'secured' could mean a couple of things. "Where are the non-essential personnel secured?"

Hill hesitated. "Their location is known to Rhodey, not me."
Compartmentalization. "Fine." He switched to speakerphone so he could check the messages from Rhodey. The second one had the information he sought: Laura has gone fishing. Laura's grandfather had been one of those survivalist types, so she'd inherited an upstate lakeside cabin complete with a hidden underground bunker to house a dozen people, which she and Clint kept stocked just in case. She'd told him about it after he took her and the kids to the compound and, with her permission, he'd added a few more security features, including the stealth camouflage.

He nodded in satisfaction. They would be quite safe there. "Is Rhodey nearby?"

"I'll call him."

Another thought occurred to him. "And Mel, I need her too."

There was a moment of silence from the other end and he sank into the seat at the comm station, debating whether to finish this over the headset. But Steve and Sam and even Jordan and Toni were watching him without being subtle about it. He shrugged and turned to the displays, pulling up the screens he needed with a few deft movements.

"How's the earthquake?" Rhodey asked in greeting.

"Shaky. Dumped a building on me already. Is anyone outside the compound aware of what's going on right now?"

"Other than you and your lawyers? No."

"I'm going to drop the camouflage. People need to see this."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Rhodey asked doubtfully.

He ignored the question and began shutting down the emitters on the main portion of the compound complex. "Is Mel there?"

"I'm here, Mr. Stark," she said.

"Friday is going to connect you to Christine Everhart. You know who she is, right?"

"Of course I do," Mel sounded almost offended.

"You're going to give her the exclusive on what's going on while Friday tips off the other networks that something is happening. Rhodey, expect news choppers in the area within, oh, five to ten minutes. Please tell our folks not to get trigger happy." He was already done with the message Friday would send by the time he'd said it. A few more gestures and Friday took over.

"Our guys won't be making the first move, they're too well trained for that," Rhodey shot back.

"Sure they are, but everybody gets nervous. Speaking of nervous, how's our buddy Hugh faring?"

"He looks uncomfortable, but he's staring Ross down better than I would have expected," Hill said, sounding amused.

"All right, I'll talk to Ross. Friday, put me on the speakerphone in the guest conference room and follow the usual recording directives. Any observers to the call--Hill, that means you, Rhodey has better things to do--should be muted."

A chime indicated when he was connected. "Mr. Secretary, when you leave, would you be so kind as to point our military visitors in the direction of the highway? They seem to be quite lost."
Ross chuckled. "You know, Tony, I find it interesting that I came here to talk to you and you are nowhere to be found."

Ross's tone and the familiarity with which he said his name made Tony bristle, but he smiled pleasantly. Never mind that the connection didn't include video. "You know, Mr. Secretary," he said, emphasizing the title, "I find it interesting that you came to the compound and expected to find me there. I had a nice chat with your guy in Tijuana last night; I'm sure there's a voicemail or a memo or something to that effect waiting for you at your office."

"Are you accusing me of failing to do my job?" Ross inquired darkly.

"Not at all," Tony replied lightly. "I am merely saying that you have the means to verify that I am not in town at the moment. So, Mr. Secretary, now that you have me on the line, may I ask what was so urgent that you came in person to upstate New York talk to me?"

There was a pause and he knew he had Ross seething. He guessed that Ross had come to needle him about his restricted funds and maybe to threaten him not to release any more information publicly, but he couldn't do either of those things while a lawyer was in the room. It wouldn't be wise to do so even without the lawyer, not when Tony was recording every word they exchanged, but Ross still seemed somehow oblivious to that practice. It was almost like he didn't realize who he was up against.

He grinned in silent glee as Friday flagged two incoming news helicopters. They were going to get quite a show. He flipped one last switch, then prompted, "Mr. Secretary? Why did you come?"

"I came to . . . provide some information," Ross replied, obviously weighing his words with care. "I wonder if you're aware that one of my duties as Secretary of State is to manage which groups are deemed Foreign Terrorist Organizations."

"I wasn't aware," Tony answered honestly. "What does that involve?" He was already skimming the information Friday helpfully pulled up.

"The entire process is quite interesting, but I won't waste your time with the full explanation. In short, I decide, based on information provided by my staff, if a foreign group or organization poses a terrorist threat to America or her interests. If they do, I notify certain Congressional committees and the group is added to the list of notables like the Ten Rings and ISIS."

Tony was of distinctly two minds about this information. On one hand, the threat underlying Ross's words was clear: the entire Avengers team was in danger of being branded as terrorists. On the other hand, Ross spelling all of this out in front of witnesses could only end badly . . . for Ross.

He decided to help Ross dig his own grave. "I'm just guessing here, but let's say a member of an organization is currently the subject of a terrorism investigation. That wouldn't make the organization look too good, would it?"

"You're absolutely right, it wouldn't." Ross sounded delighted that he'd made the connection.

"So why does it matter if an organization is on this little list?" He already had a pretty good idea from his brief skimming but he might as well let Ross enjoy his moment of apparent triumph.

"Oh, you know, asset seizure, non-citizen members currently in the U.S. can be immediately deported, support of any kind provided to the organization by U.S. citizens or businesses is a federal crime, that sort of thing."

"Of course. We take terrorism very seriously," Tony replied sarcastically, doggedly keeping his
focus on his readouts and the conversation in spite of the concerned whispers he could hear right behind him. He waved them back impatiently. "There's something you haven't mentioned, though: how does an organization know that it's being put on the list? Is there any recourse?"

"Appeals can be made to the courts in D.C., naturally, but once the notice appears in the Federal Register, it's as good as over."

"Mr. Secretary, are you threatening my client--" Hugh's much belated response came sputtering over the line and Tony had a hard time trying not to laugh.

"It's all right, Hugh," he said quickly. "Mr. Secretary, thank you for that . . . information. I have something I need to tell you, as well."

"What's that?" Ross sounded smug.

It wasn't quite fitting for the situation, but he couldn't resist. "Smile, you're on candid camera."

There was a brief pause. "I beg your pardon?"

"This entire conversation was broadcast to the compound and the two--oh, there's four now, hello--news teams currently hovering overhead. Be sure to smile and wave as you leave. You always look so dour when you're on the news."

Tony ended the broadcast and had Friday terminate his connection with the conference phone. "Hill, please escort our guest off the premises. If the news crews want to come onsite, they're welcome, just keep to the usual protocols. Mel will handle our official response to any questions."

"Got it," she said. "I think we can handle it from here."

"I know you can. Oh, and give Hugh a private office. He's going to have a meltdown any minute."

"He's nearly there already," she agreed.

He sighed as he cleared the screens of everything he'd been monitoring; there was literally nothing more he could do now. He chuckled as he imagined Ross's expression, and the chuckle turned into a self-perpetuating laugh that he couldn't stop if his life depended on it and that turned slightly hysterical as it continued. After a few minutes he wasn't even sure how he was still breathing in spite of it, but it carried on, so he must be. Somehow.

"Dude," Sam grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him a little as if that would make him stop. "Don't crack up on us now."

"Too late," he joked, but the worry in Sam's face sobered him just enough that he could regain control of himself. "Well, at least that's over," he said, taking a deep breath.

Sam looked him over, then nodded and stepped away.

The hand he dragged over his face was shaking. "What time is it?"

"Almost two in the afternoon, local time," Toni said.

"What will you do?" Steve asked curiously.

"He's going to eat something and we're all going to sleep for a while," Sam answered, returning with a package in each hand. "Protein bar or rations?" he asked Tony.
"Ew, not the rations," Tony replied, and had to react quickly to catch the protein bar tossed in his direction. He unwrapped it as he continued, "And yes, we all need some sleep. I'm thinking six hours, and we'll get back out there after that."

"I thought you'd want to go back to the compound," Steve said.

He shrugged and finished chewing the bite he'd taken before he answered. "Why? Ross has shown his hand, the others have things under control, and we can still do some good here. Do you disagree?"

"No, I agree completely," Steve admitted.

"And that makes you wary because you're not used to agreeing with me," he teased. "I won't take it personally."

"It's not like that," Steve protested.

"Sure it isn't," Tony said, rising from his seat to toss his wrapper into the trash. He didn't believe it for an instant, but he also didn't want to have that conversation at that moment, or with those witnesses. It wouldn't do to have the children see them argue. "Wake-up call at eight, everyone. Use the time wisely."

He retreated to the same bunk he'd used before, and the others silently followed suit.

When his alarm went off a few minutes before eight, Steve was seated at the comm station, watching what looked like a news broadcast. Tony quietly approached, trying not to disturb anyone but at the same time not trying to sneak up on Steve. The video was muted with captions scrolling across the bottom of the screen, but it finished playing before he could catch anything meaningful.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

Steve glanced up at him, his expression solemn. "Ross was fired by the President a few hours ago. They're saying the FBI will be investigating him."

"Sounds about right," Tony said with a nod. "And let me guess: the White House has apologized for the debacle at the compound, Ross' immediate underlings are also out of their jobs, and, hm, the sheriff involved is on administrative leave while the state government checks into what happened."

"How did you know?"

"That's how this sort of thing usually goes," he said wryly. "Was there anything major in the news that didn't involve Ross, me, or the Avengers?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to find out what they were saying about your conversation with Ross."

"Is your curiosity satisfied?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then let's talk search and rescue. Friday, tell Vision to contact us." He gestured for the maps to spring back to life in the center of the cabin, and he grinned to notice Steve was immediately at his side in examining the holograms. Despite what was still between them, at least they could work together when it mattered.
The Foreign Terrorist Organizations list is a real thing, and the Department of State coordinates it. There are fine points to the process not mentioned in the chapter, so if you're curious, here are my sources:

https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1189
https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm
https://world.wng.org/2016/06/what_is_an_fto_designation
The 'lows' in the title have to do with people who died in the earthquake. There's nothing graphic, but it is sad. (I swear, I didn't intend to make the earthquake stuff so depressing!)

Over the next several days, their efforts extended from one edge of the city to the other. Jordan and Toni in the quinjet were almost continually scanning or re-scanning a section of the city and relaying the information to the Avengers or the local rescue workers.

Tony had to pay a visit to the jet around noon on their second day. The building collapse the afternoon before had jarred something loose in the helmet's communication system that he'd ignored until it finally quit, so he left Steve helping set up some makeshift shelters and retreated to make use of his tools on board. He listened as Toni painstakingly described the scan output to someone on the ground, raising an eyebrow at how long it was taking and how frequently the other person seemed to misunderstand what she was saying. When he'd finished the repair, he had Friday run a diagnostic to double check while he made his way over to Toni.

"Why aren't we just giving them the data to display down there?" he asked when her conversation seemed to pause for a moment.

She shook her head. "Believe me, I've asked. They said they don't have the power to run that much equipment and, even if they did, their lines were disrupted by the quake."

"Find out what they need, equipment, personnel, or both, to evaluate what's going on and get back to full capacity. I know a company that specializes in energy, so there are some strings I can pull," he said with a wink.

It took a moment for her expression to shift from perplexed to amused as she realized what he meant. "Of course, Mr. Stark," she said with a smirk. A beep from her console and a chirp from Friday came almost simultaneously. Toni cocked her head to the side as she listened to someone at the other end of the line, and Tony turned away to look out the cockpit windows as he tapped his watch for Friday to go ahead.

"Diagnostic check is clear. All systems go, boss," she said.

"Excellent. Jordan, get ready to release the hounds. I'm going back out there," he said.

"You're plural now, sir?" Jordan asked.

"I wish. I'd get a whole lot more accomplished if there was more than one of me." Like with the suit. He sighed at all of the dust and dings, then stepped in. It looked every inch the tin can that it was. He already had ideas for the next round of improvements, provided he ever had time to invest in the development. A sleeker profile was a must, with less bulk in the shoulders so he could fit into tighter places; he'd been progressively shaving it down, but it wasn't good enough yet or he'd have been able to rescue Maria himself.
Self-repairing functionality would be ideal, as would being able to modify the suit's profile and functions to fit the current need, which pointed to nanotech as the solution. Possibly with modifications inspired by Extremis. He'd have to tinker with it a while, but the SI R&D guys were doing some cool stuff with nanotech and it had him inspired.

"Friday, how are we looking?" he asked as the HUD scrolled through the usual startup frames before switching back to the now-familiar map.

"Local personnel require assistance, boss," she said, a marker blinking the location, then displaying the building scan over the map.

"Where'd I leave Rogers?"

A tiny image of Cap's shield appeared southwest of the target marker.

"Remind me to change that icon." He switched to the pilot's line. "All right, Jordan, cut me loose."

"Releasing the Kraken, sir," Jordan said dryly as the hatch began to open.

Once he was outside the jet, he contacted Steve. "Rogers, prepare for airlift."

"I'm ready when you are," Steve said readily.

"Brace yourself, I'm coming in hot," he said, already almost in range of Steve's motionless figure. Steve must have seen him out of the corner of his eye, because he turned his head slightly and nodded. Tony took that as consent and grabbed him by the harness, bolting into the sky.

They helped clear at least a square mile before moving on to another section of the city. Sam and Vision also roamed wherever needed, and one hour melted almost seamlessly into the next.

Tony knew they should stop to rest, should have stopped hours before, but the rapidly-decreasing number of markers for people trapped was more than enough motivation to do just one more building until the one had become ten. It seemed entirely possible they'd finish before the daylight ran out, even with a minor aftershock in the early afternoon that encouraged a few more structures to give up the ghost. Finishing was a heady possibility and they all seemed to feel it, so no one suggested that they stop for a while.

The two pairs regrouped at a partially collapsed apartment building where several people had become trapped in the aftershock. The aftershock had also proved the final straw for a gas main right in front of the building, so the locals were tending to the erupting flames before the whole block was set ablaze.

Vision had already done reconnaissance by the time Tony and Steve arrived, so they quickly established a plan. Vision would go into the building and coax the residents toward the nearest windows, then Tony or Sam would pluck them from danger and set them down a short distance away where their neighbors were congregated. Steve focused on the ground floor, where a few people could not leave due to rubble blocking the exits.

They worked efficiently, everything going exactly to plan until Steve didn't reappear after going in for the last person. "Rogers, report," Tony demanded when no word was forthcoming. Nothing had collapsed that he could see with his sensors, but there were a lot of things that could happen and not show up. Noxious fumes, for starters.

"I'm right here," Steve said, finally emerging from a cracked doorway, escorting an elderly woman and gingerly dragging a small dog that had latched itself to his boot. "The dog wouldn't let go, and
she insisted on walking out herself," he said sheepishly.

It was a little generous to call her stride ‘walking’, but Tony was more interested in the dog. "Couldn’t you taze it or something?"

"With what?" Steve demanded with exasperation as he guided the woman's shuffling steps over the uneven ground.

"Is there anyone else?" Sam asked.

"Friday?" Tony said when he didn't see any more markers on his screen.

"All residents have been retrieved, boss."

"Where to next?"

His map adjusted as she processed the data, eventually zooming out so he could see the whole city and the absence of any markers. "All buildings previously identified with occupants at risk are clear, boss."

"All of them?"

"Yes, boss."

"Guys, that was it. Congrats Rogers, you and the woman were the last ones out."

"The very last would have been the dog," Vision said helpfully.

"The last? Of everyone everywhere in town?" Sam asked doubtfully.

"Yeah, we're done, at least until more buildings bite the dust," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "All right everyone, time to crash. Figuratively. No need for actual crashing. Jet, come get us. Vision, are you going to stay out here again?"

"Yes, there remain things I can do," he said solemnly.

"Sounds good. Just . . . let us know if anything goes wrong."

"What might go wrong?" Vision asked curiously.

"I don't know, you get hurt or something."

"I do not think that possible, but if it does, I will certainly notify you."

"Unless you're going to come to the jet, you're going to have to move down the road," Jordan said as the roar of the jet approached. "That fire is too close for comfort."

"You're going to let a little bit of fire stop you?" Tony scoffed. "Falcon, go ahead. I'll retrieve Rogers."

Sam nodded and took to the air. Tony followed suit, headed in the direction Steve had gone. When he found him, Steve was missing a glove but had shed the dog from his boot.

"Did you have to make a trade?" Tony asked.

"I have more gloves, but I really like these boots," Steve explained.
When they got to the jet, Tony wanted to step out of the suit and straight into bed, but everyone else was eating, so he probably should too. He slouched into a seat, where he got as far as unwrapping his protein bar before he decided to send Pepper a message to say hello and also to ask unofficially if SI was considering sending any generators and also maybe volunteers, because he just happened to have a list of things needed that he knew the company could fill.

His phone rang moments later. "Hey," he said wearily, leaning back into his seat and tucking the phone between shoulder and ear.

"Hey you," Pepper said warmly. "You sound exhausted."

"Yeah, it's been a long couple of days."

"Then I won't keep you. Generators and people to run them are already on their way to both San Diego and Tijuana."

"You're the best," he said gratefully.

"I know," she teased. "Now go get some sleep."

"Believe me, I intend to. I love you."

"I love you too, Tony."

He sighed and let his head drop back against the bulkhead, only half paying attention as the phone slid into his lap. "God, I'm tired."

"You'll sleep better in your bunk," Sam commented. "But if you want to stay there, that's cool too."

"Need a hand up?" Steve asked, already rising from his seat, a hand outstretched.

"Nah, I'm good," Tony said, waving him away without making any effort to get up. He heaved a sigh and disinterestedly finished eating his protein bar, then finally forced himself onto his feet. He didn't groan aloud, at least, but there were definitely bruises he'd forgotten about.

"Be up and ready to go again at, um, eight a.m. sharp," he said after squinting at his watch to check the time. Eight o'clock would give him just over twelve hours to sleep, and he might even use all of them.

After eleven hours in bed and a shower that could only have been more satisfying with a Pepper involved, he felt almost prepared to go back out and face whatever they needed to do next.

Vision had busily collected information while they rested and appeared promptly at eight to report on what he'd learned. In the almost three full days that had elapsed since the earthquake, various aid organizations had mobilized their personnel and were addressing the survivors' needs for food, shelter, and medical care. Teams of local workers and volunteers from a range of sources, including from Stark Industries, were beginning the daunting task of assessing the damage to the city's infrastructure and restoring what utilities they could so the hospitals and temporary shelters could more easily do their work.

"The largest task that remains unaddressed is recovering the deceased so the wreckage can be cleared away and repairs made," Vision concluded. "Since we have the log of locations and are less vulnerable to injury should the debris shift during our efforts, I have informed the authorities we are willing to serve in this capacity."
"Dead bodies," Tony said bleakly. "They want us to dig up the dead bodies."

"There will be others doing the same where they are able," Vision hastened to add. "There will also be personnel clearing away the debris we displace."

"Somebody's gotta do it," Sam said soberly. "Do we have any idea how many we're talking?"

All eyes turned to Tony. He didn't want to think about it, so he said, "Friday?"

"Preliminary estimates place the death toll well in excess of three thousand, boss," Friday said. "Nearly one thousand coordinates of deceased persons were logged during the rescue efforts." A map of the city with the white crosses they'd plotted came up for their examination.

"Jesus," Jordan muttered under his breath.

"How are we doing this?" Steve asked.

Tony frowned at the map. "Friday, check the scans and include any other building that seems likely to have bodies, then sort out what the ground crews can handle. Plot possible routes that hit all of the places we'll need to do. Are we better off splitting up or staying together?"

"We should stay together," Sam suggested before Friday answered. "We don't know what we'll have to move to get at these people."

Tony looked at Steve, who nodded slightly. "All right, we'll stick together. Friday, plot a route that minimizes retracing our steps, keep count of what we find, and share the info with the jet. Jordan, Toni, we may need new scans of some areas, so pitch in elsewhere as you can, but stay close. Toni, share the other list with the local folks in whatever way is most convenient. Friday, feed our first coordinates to the pilot, and Jordan, take us away."

"Yes, sir," Jordan said, scrambling into the cockpit.

Tony started to head over to the suit, but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder. He turned and raised an eyebrow at Steve, who quickly removed his hand and asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

Steve's jaw clenched for a brief second. "Yes."

Tony nodded shortly. "Good talk," he said, stepping into the suit.

They started along the coast and worked inland, shadowed by a trio of Tijuanan sanitation workers with a large flatbed truck. The workers put up a construction barricade at the end of the road where the Avengers were working, and one of them stood guard to deter anyone from getting in the way. The other two would take charge of each body as it was recovered, wrap it in a length of fabric, and attach a tag to the toe with the address where it was found, then carefully place it on the truck.

In some neighborhoods, they retrieved people faster than the workers could tag them, and the guard helped wrap them so the sight wouldn't further upset the small crowd of onlookers that wept at a safe distance. Sometimes Sam also stepped in to help, which the workers protested at first but eventually accepted as necessary.

Other neighborhoods didn't need their attention at all, the houses having been built more recently and out of better materials. There was one such neighborhood at the top of the hill overlooking the area where they had first worked on rescues. The contrast between the intact houses above and the
wreckage just down the slope was discouraging, and Tony found himself contemplating building codes and sustainable housing and how these people could afford to rebuild when they had so few resources before the quake.

It was far easier to consider rebuilding than to dwell on the rapidly-increasing tally he finally had to tell Friday to remove from his display, easier than counting the number of times the truck left full and returned empty only to be filled again. He'd have to find out what charitable group would spearhead reconstruction and funnel resources in that direction, once he had his money back. Surely he'd regain access soon, now that Ross was gone and the investigation would be revealed as a sham.

They worked for nearly ten hours with a break for a half-hearted lunch, then returned to the helicarrier for the night. With no need for haste, Tony bowed to Sam's suggestion to limit their time in the field. They were tired, in body and in spirit, and Friday's estimate that it would take at least three more days to complete their task was, at minimum, disheartening. Their stash of food--rations notwithstanding--was running low, so they joined the helicarrier crew for dinner in the mess.

The second day went much like the first: long, dusty hours spent extracting the lost from their unexpected resting places. Once or twice Sam tried to make a joke that Tony ordinarily would have either run with or mocked him for, but he didn't have the heart to participate, not when they were surrounded by death and destruction. He'd seen plenty of both in his life, of course, but this was different. This wasn't warfare, it was normal people living their lives, taken by surprise and utterly devastated.

Late in the afternoon, their route brought them to a primary school where the concrete roof had collapsed and crushed an unknown number of children and adults. Tony distracted himself from the horror of the scenario by closely watching Sam and Steve, observing the grimness in Sam's expression and Steve's clenched jaw.

It took them the better part of two hours to clear the building; by the time they finished, a much larger crowd of onlookers had gathered. A priest from the church down the road had also come, and he was leading the gathering in some sort of recitation, at the end of which they all crossed themselves. The priest continued speaking after that, while many in his audience wailed or fell to their knees.

"He is asking God to welcome these little ones to heaven, as he promised," Vision informed them over the comm as they stood and watched at a respectful distance.

"We'll stay until he finishes, and then we're done for the day," Tony said quietly.

"There are still several hours of sunlight--" Vision started.

"We're done," Tony interrupted firmly. "You can stay and do more if you like, but we need the break."

Tony wouldn't have been sure when the priest concluded except that the sanitation workers who had been motionless beside the truck during the proceedings put their hats back on and climbed inside it, the engine roaring to life. "Let's go," he said to the others, and they quietly left the scene, in wordless agreement that having the jet pick them up there would be disruptive.

The atmosphere on the jet was solemn, and at first no one broke the heavy silence. They were nearly to the helicarrier when Steve said, "How many were there? I lost count."

"Twenty-six," Tony said grimly as he stepped out of his suit. "Twenty-six kids between five and eight years old. And the three adults."
A long silence followed his response. Steve pulled his gloves off, then ran a hand through his hair, not looking at either Tony or Sam. Sam's eyes looked sad, but he seemed to be holding up okay. Tony decided he needed some air. As soon as the jet settled into its spot on the carrier, he was opening the hatch. "I'll be outside," he said, not bothering to look back for a reaction.

Tony lingered in the shade of the jet to stare over the water, his hands in his pockets. They didn't disturb him for a while, but eventually Steve came out to ask, "You coming to dinner?"

"No," he said shortly. "I'm not hungry."

"We'll bring you something," Steve said, already walking away so there was no point in protesting.

Tony shrugged and returned to his study of the water, feeling very small and insignificant against the expanse of the ocean, the fathomless depths of space, the number of dead from this and other disasters. How could anyone believe there was a god when something this wrong happened?

"Mind if I join you?" a familiar and unexpected voice asked, startling him from his reverie.

"Not at all, doc," he said, stepping aside so she could join him in the shade. The sun had nearly set, and bright colors streaked the sky in its retreat.

Dr. Tanya stood silently beside him, within arm's reach but not close enough to touch.

"I didn't know you speak Spanish," he remarked finally, still looking ahead.

"I don't," she said with a smile in her voice. "I'm here for the volunteers."

There wasn't anything he could say to that, so he didn't.

"How is it going?" she asked after a long pause.

"There are so many. Too many. We found a bunch of kids today. They shouldn't be gone but they are and . . ." he couldn't figure out what he'd meant to say, so he shrugged instead.

"It frustrates you," Doc T offered.

"Damn right it does," he said fiercely. "There's nothing I can do to fix this, yet here I am and they're gone. No one will know what they might have been capable of. And yet I'm responsible for the deaths of many kids like them, so what business do I have being upset about them?"

"Your past has nothing to do with this earthquake," she said gently. "It is very human to grieve the deaths of children. Your teammates feel the same way."

"Hmm," was his only response.

"How well are you sleeping?"

He had to think about it. "I haven't had nightmares since the migraine, if that's what you're asking."

"And you've slept every night?"

"Not exactly. We worked through the night when we first arrived. More might have died if we hadn't," he said, feeling like he had to defend himself even though her manner was far from accusatory. Realizing he was probably overreacting, he stopped talking and took a deep breath instead.
"I understand," she said simply.

They lapsed into silence again, then Tony heard footsteps approaching and he finally turned his gaze from the water.

"We got you some carry-out," Steve said, displaying a white paper bag before setting it down on the deck near Tony's feet. "Sam said he'll eat it later if you don't."

His curiosity piqued, he bent and picked up the bag. Peering inside wasn't helpful in the dim light, so he pulled out a foil-wrapped sandwich of some sort and partially unwrapped it. The smell was unmistakable. "You brought me a cheeseburger?" he asked, more than a little surprised.

Steve shrugged self-consciously. "We weren't sure what you'd want and I remembered there was something in your file about cheeseburgers, so . . ."

Tony chuckled, shaking his head. "Cheeseburgers were the first thing I wanted when I came back after Afghanistan," he said, mostly for Dr. Tanya's benefit. Apparently Steve not only already knew that, he'd remembered it in the midst of all the other details he'd probably seen and forgotten. The smell was making him hungry, so he took a bite rather than putting it back. "Thanks," he said honestly.

"You're welcome," Steve said, seeming genuine. He lingered awkwardly for a moment, then headed back the way he came.

"I don't suppose it comes with a beverage?" Tony teased.

"You'll have to come inside for that," Steve retorted as he glanced back with a grin.

"What terrible service," Tony called in Steve's direction, not expecting a response. He didn't get one, and Steve vanished around the curve of the jet, the sound of his firm footsteps echoing faintly as he ascended the ramp.

"You seem easier around him than before," Dr. Tanya commented.

"We weren't exactly on our best behavior the last time you saw us together," Tony said dryly, contemplating the cheeseburger and whether he wanted to finish it or save the other half for later. He wrapped it back up and returned it to the bag.

"What makes the current situation different?"

He shrugged. "We have a job to do. And he's not pushing back on what I say all the time. Apparently you're to thank for that."

"Would you be willing to have another conversation with him?"

She'd asked that before, and his response had more or less been to dismiss it by claiming he'd think about it. He hadn't then, but he did now.

Part of him still scoffed at the idea that more talk would budge Steve's strongly-held opinions. At the same time, there had been small signs that maybe, just maybe, Steve was thawing toward him a little bit. And if it went poorly, well, that could be the final reason to cut ties completely and move on to whatever post-Avengers life might look like for him. "Yeah, sure. Couldn't hurt, right?"

"I don't think you'll regret it," she said. "How long do you plan to stay?"
"As long as they have things we can do better than whoever else has shown up."

"What will you do when you're done here?"

"I haven't exactly made plans, but I'd like to see Pepper while I'm this close."

"That's a start. Anything else?"

"I need to talk to my R&D people. They're doing some stuff I want to borrow for my suit. And I need to improve my bot and make more of them." As he spoke, ideas and thoughts that had been lurking in the back of his mind began to slot into a more coherent plan, though it wasn't developed enough yet for him to explain to anyone, even Doc T.

"Yes. I'll go and see Pepper, stay in Malibu for a week at least," he decided aloud. "I can spend some time at headquarters, do some work, and see what Pepper thinks about a few things I'm considering for when I get my money back."

"Good," Dr. Tanya said approvingly. "Let me know when you're planning to leave and we can have that conversation before you two go your separate ways."

"Yeah, okay. It's a date," he said with a nod. "Thanks, doc."

"Anytime," she said, shaking his proffered hand.

"Do you have a place to sleep?" he asked as they took a few steps toward the jet's hatch. "We've got room, if you need it."

"I'm all set here on the ship, but I appreciate the thought. Good night, Tony," she said, heading back across the deck.

"Good night," he called, then glanced into the jet as he considered his options. The others were sprawled on the floor, playing a card game. Toni was unsuccessfully hiding a grin behind her hand of cards, then Sam said something Tony couldn't hear and both Jordan and Toni laughed while Steve blushed.

Tony nodded in satisfaction and sat on the edge of the ramp to finish his cheeseburger and tell Pepper he'd be seeing her soon, probably within a week. He was already looking forward to it.
Making Amends

As if invited by the conversation with Dr. Tanya, bad dreams woke Tony twice during the night. The first time occurred a scant two hours after they'd all turned in, and whatever had woken him receded into forgetfulness as soon as he opened his eyes. He went back to sleep easily enough, lulled by the sound of snoring from somewhere in the cabin.

The second nightmare had more staying power despite its familiar elements: a heap of Stark weapons over which were splayed the dead bodies of Avengers. This time, the team included everyone from Steve to Nat to Clint to Thor to Bruce—not Hulk, but Bruce—and Rhodey, Wanda, Sam, Bucky, T'Challa, Peter, and even Vision, all dead. All because of him, which he knew without a doubt in that confident certainty of dreams.

And surrounding them, civilians. Yinsen. The kids in Gulmira. The kid from the Expo. All those people in New York. Harley from Rose Hill. The people of Sokovia, plus Charlie front and center. Laura and Nathaniel. Cooper. Lila. The people they'd rescued from the quake. All those kids from the school.

*I remember all of them.*

And at the very top stood Maria, terrified, pleading with him in words he did not understand. She wore what could only be a bomb vest, and the cords snaked their way down the pile, leading to the trigger in his hand. It was his hand and yet not his hand, familiar but not under his power. He could feel the button beneath his thumb, feel the pressure of striking it, even as he echoed Maria's cry of anguish.

Immediately he was restrained, taken into custody for his terrible deeds, and he struggled against the grip even as he knew to the depths of his soul that he deserved whatever consequences were coming. A hand clamped over his mouth though he hadn't been aware of trying to say anything, and he instinctively fought back as he was dragged toward a gaping portal into nothingness.

"C'mon, Tony, wake up!" a voice hissed in his ear.

The voice was sufficiently out of place in the hellscape that he was startled into stillness and he murmured, "What the hell?"

"That's what I'm saying. Why'd you bite me?" the voice replied.

He blinked, then blinked again, but all he saw was the vaguest of shapes in the darkness. He still felt a tight grip around his chest and he tried to fight free.

"Whoa, whoa, take it easy. Are you with me now?"

He finally recognized the voice as Steve, and he went abruptly still. "Fucking hell," he said, his words muffled by the hand over his mouth. He was debating whether to lick it out of spite when the hand moved and the grip around his chest was reinforced.

"Tony?" Steve sounded almost worried.

"Unhand me, Boy Scout, or I'll write you up for wrongful imprisonment," he growled. Waking up in Steve's arms might have been funny if he were in the mood, but right now it just pissed him off.

The arms around him relaxed but did not disappear completely. "Are you okay? It sounded like you
were getting ready to scream, and you nearly fell off the bunk."

"It was a nightmare," he said shortly.

"Must've been quite a dream," Steve said sympathetically, finally withdrawing his arms. He came around to where Tony could just make him out in the dimness and see that Steve's palms were held toward him in a 'I won't hurt you' gesture. "I promise I meant no harm," he added softly. "I didn't want you to hurt yourself or wake the others."

"Thanks," Tony said reluctantly, taking a deep breath and looking anywhere but at Steve, embarrassed by the entire situation.

"Do you have those often?"

"What's it to you?"

"Hey, it was just a question. I have them too, you know. Not as often as I used to, which is nice, but I know how it feels."

He sighed and clenched his fists. "Sorry. I'm still weirded out," he admitted, then ran a hand over his hair. "Yeah, I have them kind of often. I'm not sure how long it's been since I made it a week without one."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why are you awake? Did I wake you?" When Steve hesitated, he groaned. "I did, goddammit."

"Not exactly. This is about the time I've been waking up," Steve assured him.

He blinked down at his watch. It was just after five thirty, local time. "You always have been an early bird."

"At the compound it's eight thirty, so this feels like sleeping in."

Steve sounded way too cheerful about it, Tony thought, given the hour and the images still lurking in his mind. "Do I even want to know what you do with yourself while you're waiting?"

"I go out on deck so I don't wake anyone," he replied, glancing around the cabin.

Tony decided to take that as a hint. "Well, you might as well lead on. I'm not going to try sleeping again."

"Do you need to change first?"

He glanced down at his sleeveless undershirt and loose cotton pants, puzzled. "I'm fully clothed, what's the problem?"

Steve seemed disconcerted, but he pulled open the floor hatch and dropped down on to the deck. At least that explained how he'd leave without putting down the ramp and disturbing everyone.

Tony followed less gracefully after shoving his feet into his shoes, grumbling about people with long limbs and young backs. Steve was beside the jet, looking out over the water as he stretched a bit.

"I wouldn't want to be outside in my pajamas, that's all," Steve said when Tony caught up to him. "But sometimes I forget how much things have changed."
"When people have been sneaking pictures of you your whole life, no matter what you're doing or wearing, you either get used to it or you become a hermit."

Steve remained silent for a moment. "Have you ever not been in the public eye?"

Tony barked a laugh. "No," he said shortly. "I have always been scrutinized and gossiped about and photographed with or without my knowledge."

"Is that why you record everything?"

Tony sighed and debated for a moment before deciding there was no harm in continued honesty. "No, that was Jarvis's idea. I was, um, drinking heavily when I brought him online and he got tired of me not believing him when I asked what happened during the periods I couldn't remember."

"So he'd play back the recordings."

"He sure did, the cheeky bastard. And then I realized recordings could be useful sometimes, so I made it a regular thing. Don't worry, anything not related to Ross is deleted or archived on a rolling basis. I don't have anything on you that you're not aware of."

"I wasn't worried."

"Then why the twenty questions?"

"I was just wondering."

"So, what have you been doing other mornings when you don't have me to interrogate? Go for a run around the perimeter?"

"No, I'd stay close to the jet, do some warmups, check in with the compound, things like that. I wasn't sure if there was some kind of tracking to make sure I wouldn't wander off unsupervised, and I didn't want to ask."

"There's not," he said, uncertain whether to be amused at the excessive caution or insulted at the insinuation that he spied on people. "When you said you weren't going to do anything stupid, I believed you."

"That's good to know," Steve said after an awkward pause. "I think I'm going to go for a run now."

"Knock yourself out," Tony said dismissively, pulling out his phone. He walked a few leisurely laps around the jet before settling down cross-legged near the front landing strut, all the while sifting through his messages.

Bill had started sending him a daily update on lawyerly things, so he started by skimming those. The terrorism investigation was still ongoing, the leaders having decided in consultation with Tony's lawyers that the best way to clear his reputation would be to carry out the process to completion, at which point everyone expected there would be nothing to prosecute. Unfortunately, that meant his funds and property remained in limbo, though Bill assured him that negotiations were underway to remedy that situation.

At the same time, his cooperation was being sought by those responsible for the inquiry into Ross's shenanigans (not the term Bill used, but Tony considered it accurate). The lawyers had already shared the recordings and all documentation they possessed, and it was likely he would be asked to testify before long. That was all well and good, he was more than willing to tell them everything they wanted to know and then some.
The update from the evening before had him calling Rhodey even as he finished reading it. "Let me guess, you need something," Rhodey teased when he answered the phone.

"I have good news for you, bossman," Tony retorted. "Do tell."

"You are no longer in danger of being branded a terrorist."

"Come again?"

"Ross's threat about the Foreign Terrorist Organization thing? It was dead in the water the whole time. He's supposed to have approval from other departments but they refused."

Rhodey gave a low whistle. "That's not going to help his cause. Why would he risk pulling that stunt when it wasn't going to go anywhere?"

"To get us to do something stupid, I guess. The more contact I have with him, the less I feel like I understand what the hell he's trying to accomplish."

"Does that mean he might be plotting something else?"

Tony sighed. "I wish I knew. He's discredited, out of a job, and staring at the possibility of jail time once this inquiry finds out all the shit he's pulled, so it doesn't seem like there's much he could do, but . . ."

"But if it was you, you'd still have ideas," Rhodey finished grimly.

"Obviously, but I also wouldn't have been as stupid as he's been, so it's not a fair comparison."

"We'll be on our guard. How are things going out there?"

Tony gave him the rundown of what they'd been doing and the conversation ended shortly after, when Rhodey had to go to physical therapy. Then he stared out toward the horizon, considering Ross and his foreboding dream and what it all might mean. In thinking about the dream, he wondered about Maria, and told Friday to find what she could.

It didn't take long before she reported, "No records found, boss. The facilities in this city do not appear to be using electronic medical records at this time."

"Of course they aren't," he muttered. He'd had a sneaking suspicion that would be the case.

Right on cue, Steve returned, sweating but not even breathing hard. "You're still out here?"

"I could say the same to you. What happened with Maria?"

For a moment, he thought Steve was going to ask why he wanted to know, but Steve just nodded. "I gave her to the first medic I found. I don't know where they went after that, I was too busy getting back to the building that had just collapsed with you in it."

"Right." He sighed and checked the time. The others would be waking up soon, so he should get moving.

Steve wordlessly offered him a hand up, which he accepted, and they climbed back into the jet to change.
They were still on body recovery duty that day, and the next, and the next. Sometimes Tony couldn't help but wonder about the people they were retrieving, what they had been doing when their lives suddenly ended. Other times, he was on debris duty, moving things and breaking up the largest pieces into smaller bits that could be moved more easily by the city workers and potentially reused somehow in the future. He didn't mind that job; it was purely an engineering problem, and he was good at those. Well, Friday was good at those, but the execution required a steady hand and a certain amount of knowledge that he happened to possess.

Every evening, he called Pepper. It felt like the right thing to do in the face of all of the recent reminders that his life could end at any point, and he'd rather not regret anything when it came to her. She seemed alternately exasperated and amused that it took being confronted with widespread death and destruction (again) for him to contact her regularly.

He asked Toni to find out what she could about the girl Maria and how she was doing, and it took her over a day to track down the right child in between other tasks. Eventually she produced the address of a hospital near the border and he debated how to check up on her in a way that would yield trustworthy information with a minimum of disruption.

In the end, Vision went to the hospital and returned with news that she'd had surgery to straighten out her legs with pins and things, and she was in relatively good spirits. Her prognosis was unclear and depended upon a lot of factors, but even in the best case, she would at least have a limp and it would be a very long time before she'd be able to walk without assistance.

Tony's call to Pepper that night included a conversation about the medical technology branch of SI and the possibility of donating assistive devices to those in need after the earthquake, both in Mexico and the U.S. Pepper teased him about being very free with other people's money before agreeing to have her people start investigating the best way to make it happen.

By the end of their fourth day doing retrievals, Tony was getting the feeling that they had just about reached the end of their usefulness. The list of places left to check for casualties was short enough they should be able to finish the following day, and the aid organizations were better equipped to handle the remaining needs of the city's beleaguered residents than four volunteer Avengers, a pilot, and a linguistically talented mechanic.

He broached the topic when they returned to the quinjet after dinner. "I'm thinking it's almost time for us to be done here. Unless there's something I'm missing."

"I think you're right," Sam said with a sigh. "Tomorrow we'll have been here a full week, and I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm tired."

"How long will it take to finish what we've been doing?" Steve asked quietly.

"We should be able to finish tomorrow unless another big one rolls through," Tony replied.

"I don't think the command center will have anything for us once that's done," Toni added. "They've never been entirely sure what to tell you to do. Will Vision be leaving with us?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"He's always kept himself busy, so I thought I'd ask. You'll have to warn him so he can say goodbye to his admirers."

"Vision has admirers?" he asked with confusion.

Toni glanced around, puzzled that no one else seemed to know what she was talking about. "You
mean you haven't noticed that he's very popular with the Tijuanans? They call him the Purple Angel."

Tony couldn't hold back his surprised laugh.

"Purple angel, huh? That's a good one," Sam said, grinning. "We'll definitely have to use that again sometime."

"So we'll finish our work tomorrow and leave after that?" Jordan asked when no one else spoke.

"We'll stay tomorrow night," Tony replied, casting a glance at Steve and wondering if he knew they would be having a chat. "Just in case something comes up. If not, we'll leave Saturday morning." He considered mentioning that he wouldn't be going with them, but he wanted to tell Rhodey first.

"Sounds good, boss," Sam teased. "Now, are we playing something else, or is someone going to sit out?"

"I'll sit out," Tony said immediately, rising from his seat. "I have some calls to make."

He went out and sat against the landing gear, enjoying the residual warmth of the day and the sound of the water against the helicarrier's hull. He sent a message to Doc T about leaving, then called Rhodey, slightly perplexed when there was no answer. He wasn't bothered enough to ask Friday about the goings-on at the compound, however, because there were plenty of reasons Rhodey might not pick up, and it certainly wasn't an emergency. He didn't leave a message.

Pepper, by contrast, answered almost immediately. "Hey stranger," she said lightly.

"Hello, pretty lady," he replied warmly. "I'm calling to warn you that your days of peace are numbered."

"I wasn't aware I had any," she retorted, her smile evident in her voice. "You'll be here soon, then?"

"Saturday sometime, probably lunchtime or later," he said easily. "I won't impose on girls' night."

"Am I going to have to fluff up my couch?"

"Only if you know something I don't about the penthouse. I hope you'll abandon your solitude and join me for a few nights."

"I will if you drive me to headquarters in the mornings."

"Deal. I'm already planning to put in a few appearances, do some work in whatever space in R&D I can commandeer."

"I have a call with the board on Wednesday. Can you find room in your busy schedule to sit in?"

There was a hint of command underneath the teasing tone, and he responded accordingly. "Sure, I think I can manage that. Is it in the morning so you won't have to let me out of your sight until it's finished?"

"Fortunately, yes. I couldn't have moved it even if I wanted to, I'm that busy next week."

"You won't have to change a thing on my account," he assured her. "Though I hope we'll have time to talk about some things. Future stuff."

"We can do it over meals, so I can be sure you're eating," she teased. "Does Rhodey know you're
abandoning him yet?"

"Not yet," he admitted. "Don't roll your eyes at me, I tried to call him before I called you."

She took a deep breath and sighed. "I should go. There are things I need to try to finish before
tomorrow."

"You can't get your people to do them for you? You know, what's that word, delegate?"

Pepper laughed. "I think I know how to delegate. But as you know, there are some things you have
to do yourself."

"If you must. Good night, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I'm not sure I want to know what prompted that comment," she said wryly.

He shrugged carelessly even though she couldn't see him. "It's a general word of advice. Not that
you need advice from the likes of me."

"No, I don't. Good night, Tony," she said fondly.

"Good night," he echoed. He grinned at nothing for a moment, grateful that she was giving him
another chance.

Doc T's comment about deciding what he'd want to do before meeting his end was floating in his
mind again and, though Pepper topped the list and always would, there were other things that had
begun to surface. Making sure Peter and Harley, and the Barton kids, wouldn't have to worry about
paying for college or whatever else they decided to do was one, though doing it in a way that May
wouldn't suspect Peter's secret ties to the Avengers might be a challenge. Establishing a fund for kids
like Maria to pay their medical bills or school expenses or whatever was another possibility. He
needed to re-examine his lengthy list of real estate holdings and update his will, for sure.

He was sending a note to Bill about the latter when Rhodey called back. "Sorry I missed you, we
were busy."

"How dare you have a life devoted to things other than answering my calls," Tony said dryly. The
background noises made him tilt his head in curiosity. "Where are you?"

"Quinjet. We just finished tackling the next HYDRA location."

"You went on a mission without me?" he pouted.

"We've gone on three without you now," Rhodey retorted. "And I thought you were sidelined until
that investigation goes away."

"I am. How'd it go?"

"Fine, but there wasn't much to find. Seems like they cleared out most everything a while ago, only
left a couple of guys behind to keep up the ruse that it was an active base."

"Shit, they've gone to ground. I mean, they'd be incompetent if they hadn't, with how long it's taken
us to deal with them, but-"

"We hoped they'd be that incompetent," Rhodey said grimly. "But you don't hide your organization
that long without knowing how to keep things on the down low. We can talk it out when we're all
back together. What did you want?"
"To tell you I won't be coming back with the others. I'm going to spend time with Pepper, do some company stuff, that sort of thing."

"Ah. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. Do you know yet when the others will be back?"

"Should be Saturday, as long as all hell doesn't break loose."

"Right."

"I should go, you sound tired."

"So do you. Be careful out there."

"You too."

He stood and stretched and nearly jumped out of his skin when he turned around and Dr. Tanya was right there. "Are you real?" he blurted, then felt foolish for asking.

She merely held out her hand and he hesitated before touching it just enough to confirm her presence.

"Sorry, that was stupid. You startled me, is all."

"I apologize, I should have announced myself. I knew you were preoccupied, I heard you finishing your conversation."

"Are all shrinks so good at sneaking around?" he asked sourly.

She laughed. "I wouldn't even say I'm good at sneaking around. I came to tell you that Steve is willing to have a conversation tomorrow evening. I take it you're still willing."

"Yeah, we might as well get it over with."

"Then I'll tell you what I told him: between now and then, I want you to think about what you feel needs to be said or done or answered in order for your relationship as teammates to be on firmer footing."

Tony digested that for a minute, then said, "I'll think about it."

She didn't say anything else at first, just studied him silently. "How are you doing?" she asked finally.

He shrugged. "Being an undertaker sucks, but we're almost done. I'm looking forward to spending time with Pepper. Had some nightmares, but I was due for some, so whatever. No big deal."

She nodded. "Good," she said simply. "I will see you tomorrow. If you need to talk before you come back to the compound, you know how to reach me."

"Yes. Thanks."

She left as quietly as she'd arrived, and he went inside the jet, where the others were between rounds of whatever card game they were playing. "I won't be going back with you," he announced without preamble.

"What are you going to do?" Sam asked curiously.
He explained his plans, and they accepted it without giving him a hard time. "Have fun with Pepper," Sam said with a grin and a wink. "You want us to deal you in?"

"No thanks." He had things to think about.

They only played one more hand, then Jordan claimed victory and they all got ready to sleep. Tony remained awake for a while after the lights went out, his thoughts mostly stuck on how the conversation with Steve might go. How did he want it to go? Did he really want the excuse to cut ties with the team completely? Or was that just the backup plan? He was going to take a step back from the Avengers, no matter what, and it would start with this second visit to Malibu.

Their last day on duty in Tijuana passed unremarkably, and they retrieved the last body they could locate around mid-afternoon. There were still dozens of people unaccounted for, but some of the other volunteers who had worked earthquakes before said that was normal, that many of the missing were simply at a different shelter than their families and friends and would be reunited as soon as a full census of the displaced people was complete. The alternate explanation, that the missing were among the as yet unidentified dead, remained unspoken.

When all was said and done, the casualty count wasn't as high as it felt when they were confronted with the seemingly endless supply of people to retrieve, and it seemed certain that the rapid rescue of those trapped prevented the number from being even higher. Still, three thousand one hundred forty-seven was a staggering number, and as soon as Tony heard it he tried to forget it in favor of the six hundred sixty-eight rescued with the aid of his scanning system, two hundred and ninety-eight of whom had been rescued by the Avengers directly.

When the quinjet returned to its spot on the deck of the helicarrier for the last time, it was both hard to believe they'd been there a week already and hard to believe it had only been a week. After they all trooped to the carrier's workout facility to shower, they went to dinner.

When the others got up from the table to return to the jet, Tony checked his watch and exchanged a wordless look with Steve, who nodded and gestured for him to lead on. It was time.

Dr. Tanya's door was open, so Tony knocked lightly on the door jamb before stepping inside. The doc had been assigned a suite large enough to have a table and chairs in the front room; the door to the bedroom was closed.

"It is good to see you both," she said warmly, waving them toward the chairs at the table as she finished pouring water into a mug from her electric kettle. "Tea?"

"No thanks," Tony replied as he sat with his back to the wall and the doorway to the hall in his peripheral vision. Steve echoed the sentiment and closed the door before sitting across from Tony.

"Who would like to go first?"

Tony looked at Steve, who met his gaze without flinching. "Go ahead," he said. "I think your list is longer than mine."

Steve frowned and glanced at Dr. Tanya, who nodded encouragingly. "No matter what else happens, I want you to understand that I can't agree to support the Accords until the revisions are
final. You got upset when we talked about it in New York, but I'm not budging on that," he said, seeming to gain confidence as he spoke. "I'll hide out again if I have to."

Tony was a little surprised that he'd started there, but it wasn't news. "I know," he said carelessly. "Hell, if the revisions get canned entirely, we'd all need to go on the run or retire. Better than than have to hunt you down when I agree with you on some of it."

"If you agree with me even a little bit, why did you sign?" Steve sounded frustrated.

He shrugged. "Because it made the most sense at the time. Documents can be amended, like I told you in Berlin, and the benefits seemed greater than the costs. And I thought you'd agree."

He could read something like surprise on Steve's face. "Would you have signed if you knew I wasn't going to agree?"

"Knowing only what I knew at the time? Probably."

"Are you saying you wouldn't sign them again if you knew what would happen afterward?" Steve persisted.

Ah, he'd caught on to what Tony hadn't been saying. Even so, he hesitated before admitting, "Not without certain assurances. I would have asked for some of the things we're trying to change now to be changed before I'd commit. And I appreciate your help on the edits, by the way, though I've always wondered if you realized how much we actually agree on where they're concerned."

"I haven't always, no," Steve confessed. "But at that meeting, I heard from several people on the committee how you'd been fighting for some of these changes since the beginning, even before you contacted me about it. I was . . . surprised."

Tony gestured dismissively. "I have hidden depths. But you and I both know that what happened wasn't just about the Accords. It was about one person in particular." Despite time and distance, something in him shied away from speaking the name.

"That's true," Steve said staunchly. "And you were wrong to go after him. It's not his fault, he wasn't in control of his actions."

"I'm aware, and if you'll remember, I wanted you to sign in Berlin so he could be treated in the U.S. rather than be shipped off to a Wakandan prison. I was on your side there, but you couldn't see it because you were too blinded by your devotion to him. How's that for irony? I was trying to help you."

"Help me? By promising Ross there would be consequences? Do you really expect me to believe that was helping?" Steve shot back.

Tony took a deep breath and tried to explain. "He wanted to take custody of Barnes--and you--under the guise of making sure there were consequences for what happened. I had to assure him there would be consequences as dictated by the Accords. Letting him think he'd get your gear in the process was a necessary ruse."

"So you weren't going to hand over the shield to the government?"

Tony scoffed. "Do I look stupid to you?"

Steve was silent for a moment. "That doesn't change the fact that you shouldn't have gone after Bucky the way you did in Siberia."
"Maybe not," Tony agreed. "But I don't think even you can fault me for reacting poorly to the way I found out the truth about my parents' deaths."

Steve's silence lasted longer this time, and he shifted uneasily, seemingly unwilling to look in Tony's direction. "I'm sorry," he said at last. "I should have told you."

"Damn right," he replied shortly. Part of him waited for the excuses to start.

"I'm sorry," Steve repeated, finally looking up at him.

"Thanks," he said awkwardly when it became clear that Steve wasn't going to say any more. "And look, I don't agree with what you did, but I understand why you did it. With Barnes, with the Accords, with all of it."

Steve nodded jerkily, glancing down at his hands briefly before looking at Tony again. "I think I'm starting to understand why you do things the way you do," he said slowly. "All this time, I had a certain opinion of you . . ." he trailed off, his expression somewhere between perplexed and sad.

"What changed?" he asked, curious in spite of himself. He wasn't sure that question would lead anywhere good, but he trusted Doc T to intervene if necessary.

Steve shrugged and chuckled half-heartedly. "I started paying attention to what was in front of me instead of what was in your files. What S.H.I.E.L.D. had on you before we met wasn't very flattering."

"I'll bet. You got, what, press coverage from my many missteps and their intelligence from right after Afghanistan? Plus when I was dying. Yeah, that wasn't my best look. Honest question, did the stuff you saw include the sex tapes? Jarvis tried to clean up after me once the whole Iron Man thing started, but once something like that is on the internet, it's never really gone."

"N-no, I don't recall seeing anything vulgar," Steve said, flushing with embarrassment.

"That's comforting, I guess. But that also explains why you thought I might mind being seen in my very modest sleepwear."

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat, seemingly unable to look straight at him after that disclosure.

Tony took pity on him and changed the subject slightly. "What made you finally look past your terrible first impression?"

Steve took the bait gratefully. "Rhodey said some things when you were in the hospital, and that got me thinking." He glanced at Doc T. "And I've been talking with Doctor Tanya. She has helped me understand some things about myself and how I get along with people, especially the team."

That Rhodey had taken Steve to task was new information, but Tony wasn't really surprised. He'd been on the receiving end of Rhodey's scolding more times than he cared to count. "So does that mean you're not going to be on my case about everything?" he asked, a touch of sarcasm creeping into his voice. It really would be too much to hope for.

"Not necessarily, I still think Ultron was a terrible idea," Steve was quick to reply, then he turned hesitant. "But I was hoping . . . I mean, I was wondering . . . is it possible that we could try to start over?"

"Like, pretend none of this happened?" Tony asked doubtfully. There was no way he could be on board with that.
Steve frowned. "Not quite. More like turning over a new leaf. I'll start by not jumping to conclusions about what you're up to."

"That would be nice."

"And if you could slow down a little, long enough to explain what you're doing and why, that would help a lot. You're at least six steps ahead of me sometimes and I feel like you think I'm judging you when I ask questions to understand what you're doing."

"Well, yeah, when the question sounds like an accusation, I'm going to think you're being critical."

"I'm working on that. You can call me out on it, if that would help."

"I will definitely take you up on that." Not that he needed an invitation to push back, but knowing Steve would listen changed things.

An awkward silence followed, and then Dr. Tanya spoke up for the first time since they'd started. "Thank you both for your honesty and cooperation. Did either of you have anything else you wanted to say?"

Tony shook his head. "All I wanted was an apology with no excuses."

"I've said the things I wanted to say," Steve said, then looked to Tony. "So . . . a fresh start?" he asked as he stood up and held out his hand.

"Clean slate," Tony affirmed, rising from his seat and shaking Steve's hand firmly.

"It is a pleasure to work with you, Mr. Stark," Steve said formally.

Something in him felt a little lighter. "Please, call me Tony."
Huge thanks to Browarod, who has read every word multiple times in the process of helping me proofread and critique this story, to say nothing of the verbal debates we have occasionally had as a result. <3

Many, many thanks also to those who have commented along the way! Seeing the story through your eyes in your comments has improved it considerably.

It's been a pleasure to share this thrilling and exhausting experience with you. Thank you for coming along for the ride.

"I have something I want to ask you and it might sound crazy, so I want you to promise that you'll think about it before you answer."

Pepper immediately looked wary. She glanced around the busy restaurant as if checking for paparazzi, then leaned toward him and hissed, "You'd better not be proposing to me right now."

"What?" Tony asked in genuine confusion, mentally reviewing what he'd said and realizing how she'd drawn that conclusion. "No, no, this is company-related," he assured her quickly.

She didn't seem convinced. "Go on."

"You know I'm streamlining my properties, shedding the stuff I don't use for anything."

"Which I don't entirely understand, when you can be getting rents that more than cover your costs."

He waved that away. "I'm simplifying. It's not like I don't have gobs of money already. So, there's this property I think SI might be interested in. More specifically, I think the CEO would benefit from relocating there. Great location. No earthquakes, a better time zone for meetings with European stakeholders, a helipad for easy commuting--"

"Tony," Pepper interrupted. "You're rambling. Spit it out."

He blinked, then obliged. "SI should buy the tower from me."

Pepper carefully set down the glass of wine she'd been about to sip from. "You're selling the New York tower and you want the company to buy it."

"Yes," he said simply. "The Avengers have the compound, so I don't need it anymore. It would be great as the company headquarters. It's a nice proof of concept for the energy side of the business."

"Until the next time aliens invade and destroy Manhattan," she said sarcastically, picking up her wine glass again. "Do you seriously want me to literally live at work? Because that's what it's sounding like."

"I mean, you could stay there if you needed to, but I was kind of hoping you'd bunk with me again."
"Don't tell me you're going to be living at the compound right after you've been talking about taking a step back from the team."

"Of course not. I'm going to live in the old family mansion. After I remodel it to my satisfaction. Haven't I told you about the mansion?"

"You haven't talked about it for a long time. I thought you sold it years ago."

"Nope, it's been quietly decaying under my neglectful care," he said cheerfully, watching their waiter approach with a tray. "Just think about it. I know you don't like to talk shop while you eat, and here's our food."

"I think you're letting having your money back go to your head," she teased fondly.

That may have been partially true; the euphoria of the afternoon call from Bill that his assets were back under his control hadn't fully worn off. He'd immediately contacted Hill to have her put right the Avengers' financial situation, starting with the paychecks, and he was busily plotting at least six projects to do now that he had money again.

One of them was to transfer a good portion of the proceeds of his real estate sales into an account to make sure the Avengers' funding stream wasn't put in jeopardy like that again. Another was remodeling the compound like he'd threatened, after which he'd donate it to the Avengers organization officially, assuming the nonprofit status was official and his accountants could do their tax deduction magic (he may be generous, but he wasn't stupid). And, of course, remodeling the mansion, after which he'd pursue rebuilding in Malibu. Then there was the kids' college fund, and the foundation to help with medical needs for the earthquake victims, to say nothing of the resources it would take to make the nanosuit that was only a half-formed idea but he knew he could get it to work.

He watched Pepper as she was distracted by the food placed before her, as she smiled at the waiter and thanked him politely, as she turned back to him and flushed when she noticed his gaze. He chose not to comment on her discomfiture, instead waiting until the waiter departed before asking slyly, "Why were you so bothered by the idea that I might be proposing? Does that mean you'd say no?"

She flushed a deeper red and took a hasty sip of wine. "I would have to think about it," she said evasively. "And I'd like to not be blindsided with it in front of complete strangers."

"So maybe you'd prefer a secret engagement, or even eloping," he said, nodding as he picked up his fork to prod at his meal, trying to remember what he'd ordered. "We could make that happen anytime, you know," he added just before taking a bite.

Pepper was becoming downright flustered, which was fascinating as it was so rare. "Why are you making a big deal out of this?" she demanded. "You asked me to have dinner, a little celebration for the things that went well today, and now you're pestering me about marriage? We've been back together for less than a month!" She punctuated her statement with a jab at a grape tomato in her salad, which promptly shot off the table and rolled away in the direction of an older couple who fortunately didn't notice. If she could have turned any redder, she would have.

Tony reached over and gently placed a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry," he said seriously. "I only wondered because you brought it up."

She huffed a sigh and took a long drink of water. "I know. I had to deal with a lot of reporters hounding me while you were incommunicado in Mexico, and now you're here and they're all speculating we're not only together but we're married or having a love child or some nonsense. It's
annoying in the extreme."

"Believe me, I know. But I would've thought you'd be used to them by now, having been around me
all these years."

"I haven't always been the focus of their attention."

"Oh, yes you have. You just weren't always aware of it."

Pepper wrinkled her nose as she chewed. "Paparazzi are the worst," she declared.

"All the more reason to move to New York with me. I've gotten pretty good at keeping them away."

"What about my condo?"

"I'm pretty sure you can rent it out," he replied with a wink.

She laughed and changed the subject, and they spent the rest of dinner debating his remodeling
plans. They returned to his penthouse afterward and spent a while in the hot tub.

Pepper inquired idly about what he was doing with the nanotech team, and he told her in broad
strokes as he massaged her neck and shoulders, then turned the conversation to what she had going
on the next day. Upon discovering her first meeting of the day had been cancelled and the next
wasn't until eleven, he not so subtly hinted that she should tell her PA she'd be in late and she asked
curiously, "Are you propositioning me?"

He paused a moment. "I just thought you could use more sleep, but if you'd like that added to the
evening's agenda, it can be arranged," he said, kissing the spot on her neck that made her shiver.

She sighed languidly. "I need a shower first."

"The hot tub isn't good enough for you?"

"Not for cleaning," she retorted. "Unless you want soap suds all over your hot tub."

Which he didn't, so he gallantly helped her out of the tub and escorted her to the shower, where she
had him join her.

Tony woke up from a nightmare, as he had every night since the bad one in Mexico. It was early
enough that Pepper wasn't awake yet and wouldn't be for at least a half hour, but late enough that
trying to go back to sleep was only going to make him more groggy when the alarm went off.

It was also late enough that everyone should be awake back at the compound, so he carefully slid out
of bed and padded into the living room. Mel had left him a message the previous day, and he'd
wanted to ask her about a couple of things anyway. He slouched into the couch and jabbed at his
phone.

"Mel's phone, this is Sara."

His train of thought was halted abruptly by the unexpected voice. "Um, hi," he said awkwardly. "Is .
. . everything all right?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Stark," she assured him.
"Then why are you speaking so quietly?"

"Mel is still sleeping, and it would be better if she stayed that way. She's been too busy lately."

He glanced toward the bedroom, understanding all too well, then realized the implications of her statement. "Wait, are you in her room?"

There was a long silence, then Sara cleared her throat and answered, "Yes, Mr. Stark."

That she didn't try to qualify her statement told him a lot, and he raised his eyebrows. "Well, that's nice for both of you," he said carefully. "Do me a favor?"

"Of course, Mr. Stark."

"First, call me Tony. Second, tell Mel she can call me back whenever it's convenient. No hurry."

"I will pass on your message, Tony," she said, hesitating on his name.

"Thanks." He hung up and shook his head with a chuckle, then made another call.

"Bored already?" Rhodey teased.

"I can't want to bother you?"

"So you want something, then."

"All I wanted was to hear your sexy voice," Tony retorted with a laugh. "But seriously, fill me in on how everything is going. And no, I haven't read your emails."

"Did you at least see the message from the chairwoman about the meeting next week?" Rhodey asked with exasperation.

"I did. You and Steve have seen the new language?"

Rhodey hesitated just long enough for Tony to notice. "Yesterday. And I have to tell you, I think they've got it."

He sat up straighter. "Seriously? The definition revisions finally work?"

"I think they do, but you know how legalese makes my brain hurt. We sent it to your lawyers yesterday for a second opinion, but the U.N. legal liaison has already approved."

The real test, however . . . "What does Steve think?"

"He thinks their suggestions make sense. As usual he won't guarantee anything, but he says he can support it if nothing else changes."

"Holy shit," he murmured. "That's--that's huge."

"Yeah. You know what else is huge?"

"My ego?" he joked absently, not quite ready to believe they were so close to fixing the Accords.

Rhodey ignored him. "The very first thing Rogers did when he got back was apologize to me for his part in my injury."

The surprises just kept coming. "Huh," he said eloquently.
"Yeah. And he's been acting less uptight and now apparently he's Steve to you instead of Rogers, so I'm wondering what the hell happened out there."

"Well, we saw some gritty stuff and then Doc T supervised while we got a few things off our chests."

"Were you satisfied with what he said? Because I'm not sure what to think about this change of heart."

"I think he thinks he means it," he said slowly. He'd been mulling over the conversation a lot in the intervening days. "There were some things he shouldn't have said, but he apologized and that's enough for me to be willing to work with him to see if he actually walks the walk now that he's talking the talk. And if what's coming is as big as I think it will be, we're going to need all hands on deck."

"So you think he should stay on the team."

"They're all on probation, but yeah. If you have a different opinion, though, you're the boss."

"For how much longer?" Rhodey asked bluntly.

"As long as you want it."

Then there were additional voices in the background, and as they came closer he could tell it was the kids. Tony could hear Rhodey talking to them, then Rhodey spoke to him again. "Lila wants to know if she can talk to you for a minute."

"Sure, put her on," he said, grinning.

"Uncle Tony, when will you come back?" Lila asked plaintively.

"I don't know, little bit," he said. "It will be at least another week."

"And then will you read to me? You promised." She was pleading but not whining, and he felt guilty for disappointing her.

"I did promise, and I don't break my word. We'll read as long as you like and as long as I have a voice when I come back, okay?"

There was a moment's pause, and it sounded like she was sighing. "Okay, Uncle Tony," she said reluctantly.

After some rustling, Rhodey was back. "She's got you wrapped around her little finger."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Tony said defensively.

"Nah, I think it's cute. I never thought I'd see you do so well around kids."

"I can deal with them in small doses. And I might as well humor her while I'm still living at the compound."

Rhodey was silent for a moment. "When will that change?" he asked cautiously.

"When the mansion renovations are done."

"So when you said I'm in charge as long as I want to be, you meant it."
"Don't I usually mean what I say? On second thought, don't answer that. But yes, I meant it."

"We'll have to talk in person about what that looks like. I'm not interested in supervising the administrative nonsense you've got Hill doing."

"We can hash out whatever you want."

"Uh-huh. Is there anything else you've got going on that I should know about? Like, speaking as the guy in charge of the Avengers, will Iron Man be in play?"

"I'm not giving up the suit," he said immediately. "But I'm shaving it back a bit. Alien invasions, potentially world-ending events, that sort of thing, I'm definitely still on board. And I'll keep improving the team's tech, that won't change."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Rhodey said dryly. "You've said similar things about stepping back before."

"That was before . . . all that crap. Things are different now. My priorities have shifted somewhat."

"Of course they have."

Tony could hear in his voice that Rhodey was just humoring him. "You'll see."

"Sure. So what have you been doing, if you're not reading my messages?"

"Oh, you know. I've spent time with Pepper, talked a lot with the doc. I saw Dr. Mann on Tuesday and got a clean bill of health. I had to meet with the board yesterday which was annoying but I was messaging with Happy so it wasn't as bad as it could've been. I've improved my repulsor bot design, and I'm starting designs for a nanosuit."

Rhodey was very interested in the nanosuit idea and he eagerly explained in more detail than he had for Pepper, who wandered out of the bedroom and quietly laughed at him as she headed to the kitchen. He watched her go, very interested in the fact that she seemed to be wearing a t-shirt and nothing else.

"It's always good to see you busy," Rhodey was saying when Tony dragged his attention back to the conversation. "I think I know the answer, but I want to hear it from you: with everything that's gone on, are you all right?"

He thought about the long conversations with Dr. Tanya and the nightmares and the lingering feeling of foreboding they left him with, weighed against Pepper and the team and the kids and the things he wanted to do and make, and there was only one answer he could give. "Not yet, but I will be."

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