What You Don't Know (Can Hurt A Lot)

by Alex51324

Summary

In the aftermath of an Avengers' mission gone slightly wrong, Tony--and SHIELD--learn that he is a Guide. This is a problem, because in this universe, Guides are subject to military conscription that amounts to near-slavery.

Contains brief scenes of torture, mostly psychological in nature.

Notes

This story slots into my "Sentinels and Guides are known; Guides are oppressed" universe, AKA the Dreaded Bonding AU. Knowledge of that AU is not strictly necessary to follow the story. There are some references to the events of the main DBAU story (AKA the "Finding Home" trilogy), which made Blair Sandburg and friends internationally known figures; however, the essential background is explained for the benefit of Steve and Thor (as well as readers who are not familiar with it).

As of now, all of the complete stories of the Dreaded Bonding AU are accessible on AO3, but some other fragments and extras are posted only on my LJ, accessible through this masterpost: http://alex51324.livejournal.com/238549.html

Note for readers who are familiar with the DBAU from "Thomas and the Society of Sentinels": The Thomas story is meant to take place in continuity with the DBAU, but Sentinel-Guide relations in 21st-century USA are very different from those in 1920's Britain.

Beta'd by the incomparable Beboots--thanks!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Story

In a way, it was Steve’s fault.

He’d figured out pretty quick that Tony Stark was a Guide—the super soldier serum didn’t make him a Sentinel, but it did pep up his senses some, and there had been a couple of Sentinel-Guide teams in the Howling Commandos. He knew what they smelled like.

He also noticed more or less right away that Tony wasn’t anywhere near as polite, deferential, and professionally invisible as the SHIELD Guides he saw around base were. But he didn’t make much of it. He figured either Tony had gotten his service out of the way and promptly forgot all his military discipline as soon as he was done, or maybe he’d gotten out of it for one reason or another. Medical, or because his work was defense-related, or maybe Howard had just pulled some strings. Steve had liked Howard Stark well enough, once they’d gotten the matter of Peggy straightened out, but he did seem like the kind of guy who might finagle his boy out of military service, especially if it wasn’t wartime.

And he hadn’t learned much about how things had changed, for Sentinels and especially for Guides, while he’d been…away. It wasn’t directly relevant to him, and there was a lot to learn. So he hadn’t thought much of it. He assumed everyone knew, and it was no big deal.

If he had known, or at least had known more than he did, he might have made the same call. He couldn’t say.

It happened when what had been supposed to be a simple investigation and retrieval operation into an abandoned HYDRA base turned into a confrontation with a neo-Nazi militia. Ironically, they were mostly there so that Tony could have a look at any leftover tech in situ, and oversee its safe removal if necessary. Otherwise, the two regular SHIELD squads who were with them, and the Sentinel they’d brought along to ferret out any hidden rooms, could have handled it. It was just their bad luck that when the firefight started, the Sentinel’s Guide was among the first ones hit.

Either of the Howling Commandos’ Sentinels would have been able to push on—it wasn’t a particularly serious wound, just a lot of blood. But Sentinel Webster was a technician, not a soldier. When the Guide was hit, an anguished scream came over the comms, trailing abruptly into a whimper before it was cut off by the Widow’s voice. “Petey’s been hit,” she said. “Webster’s freaking out. Pretty sure he’s zoned on the blood. I can take out these clowns or I can watch Webster’s back until he gets his shit together, but I can’t do both.”

Steve had only had to think about it for a second. The militia guys were reasonably well armed, and they’d gotten the drop on them, but they weren’t the kind of enemy that really required a guy who could fly and shoot laser beams out of the palms of his hands. “Iron Man,” he snapped, over the open comm channel. “Go help Webster.”

“Kind of busy here, Cap,” Tony had answered, the sound of his repulsors in the background. “Thor’s looking for a rumble, why don’t you—”

“Stark,” Steve snapped, wondering why everything had to be a goddamn argument with Stark. “His Guide’s down. I need you over there. Now.”

That actually got Tony moving. When Steve caught up with them again—after all of the neo-Nazis were neutralized—Natasha was administering first aid to the other Guide, while Tony was crouched awkwardly on the floor next to Webster, his faceplate up and one gauntlet off, holding Webster’s
Actually, it was more that Webster was clutching Tony’s hand, because Tony had no idea what he was supposed to be doing, but Steve didn’t notice that at the time. A med support team showed up, and Petey managed to regain consciousness long enough to get his Sentinel grounded. It wasn’t until they were in a conference room on the Helicarrier debriefing that Steve realized anything out of the ordinary had happened. He’d just gotten to the part where he explained how the Guide had gotten hurt, saying, “So I sent Stark to assist—” when Tony interrupted.

“Yeah, why did you send me, anyway?”

“Who else was I supposed to send?” Steve had asked, annoyed.

“I don’t know; anyone else?”

“You were the only Guide present who wasn’t bleeding out,” Steve had said, trying to keep his tone calm and reasonable.

Tony said, “The fuck I am,” at the same time as Fury, the Sentinel’s supervisor, and Agent Coulson all said, “Stark isn’t a Guide.”

At that point, if Steve had known what was going to happen, he would have backed down. It would have been easy just to say that he must have been mistaken—he wasn’t a Sentinel; it would be a strange mistake to make, but nothing that couldn’t have blown over. But he didn’t know. He said, “Of course he is,” and “Geez, I never figured you for a draft-dodger, Stark.”

It turned out that that was the kind of accusation that had to be investigated. Tony was characteristically sarcastic about it at first, complaining about how he had to waste his valuable time just because Steve had some weird conviction that he was a Guide. When a SHIELD Sentinel came into the briefing room and told Tony to take his hand, Tony quipped, “I don’t know; usually I get people to buy me a drink first.”

“Stark,” Coulson said. “Just do it.”

Tony did, then jumped back as though he had been burned. “The actual fuck?”

“He is,” the Sentinel said, giving Tony a look of undisguised contempt.

Tony was pale, shaking his head and swallowing hard. “No. That’s—I can’t be. I was tested, just like everyone else, and I’m not.”

Steve still didn’t understand. He got that Tony really hadn’t known, but he didn’t see why he was so rattled by the news. It wasn’t until Tony insisted on a blood test, and Fury agreed, but said he’d have to be kept in custody pending the results, that Steve realized there was more to this situation than he knew, and that the “more” was something bad.

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Tony paced. They’d confiscated the suit—Bruce, at his insistence, had agreed to take it back to the Tower—and locked him in a set of crew quarters. With a guard on the door, since the electronic lock wouldn’t have kept him in for more than thirty seconds. And even without the suit, he could have stolen a Quinjet or something.

Since he was apparently a criminal now.
There wasn’t much room for pacing. The quarters weren’t much bigger than a prison cell—bunk beds on one wall, a couple of drawers for personal effects, a portioned-off bathroom about the size of a postage stamp. At least he didn’t have a roommate.

He wouldn’t be here long. They’d get this stupid mistake, practical joke, whatever it was, sorted out.

He held on to that thought until Fury came in, a medical printout in his hand. Wordlessly, he passed it to Tony.

There, in black and white—well, blue on gray, sort of—was the proof. There were eleven genetic markers for Guide status; Tony had seven of them. Three were enough to damn you. Tony wanted to say it was impossible, but he knew better. It was more than possible; it was true. Up in the conference room, the Sentinel they’d dragged in had linked with him. He’d never linked before, but it couldn’t have been anything else, that feeling of another mind—a hostile one—brushing up against his. Just thinking about it made his skin crawl.

“This is a problem,” Fury said.

“I didn’t know.” Tony shook his head. “I swear to God I didn’t know.”

“I think I believe you.” That was a relief, kind of. “For one thing, you’re not stupid enough to have kept on hanging around a security organization if you were trying to keep this under wraps. Sooner or later, somebody was going to figure it out.” Fury paused, just for a moment. “It’s still a problem.”

“How many people know? You, me, Steve, Coulson, that Sentinel, whoever did the DNA test—”

“And everyone who was on the op today, and their immediate superiors, and anyone they’ve talked to about it,” Fury continued. “But even if it was a shorter list, I cannot—this organization cannot—conspire with you to break the law.”

“I didn’t know,” Tony said again.

“And now you do.” Fury sighed. “Coulson’s looking into it—what we have to do. He’ll come down and fill you in as soon as he knows something.”

“I need to make some calls,” Tony said. Pepper. His legal department. Pepper.

Fury hesitated. “I’ll get you a phone.”

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Steve had to talk to Tony.

After leaving the conference room, he’d gotten hold of a tablet and done some research. There had been signs, in his day, of how the military was attempting to standardize Sentinel-Guide relations. Matching pairs through the latest scientific techniques, for instance, rather than deferring to the Sentinels’ own judgment. Rotating a Sentinel through several Guides over the course or a tour of duty, instead of leaving pairs together as long as they functioned and no one asked for a transfer. Increasing attention to formalities that emphasized the Guide’s subordinate relationship to the Sentinel. The explanation had been that making the Sentinel-Guide relationship less personal and intimate would keep Sentinels’ protective instincts under control, and increase efficiency, since if half of a pair was sidelined due to injury or illness, the other one could be reassigned and returned to duty.

It had made a certain amount of sense, but the Howling Commandos had cheerfully ignored most of
it, just like they ignored the rules about racial segregation, and anything else that got in the way of their effectiveness and unit cohesion.

The race regs had been struck down in ’48—and about damn time, as far as Steve was concerned—but the Sentinel-Guide regs got even tighter. Pair matching was overseen by liaison officers from the Sentinel-Guide Division of the Selective Service Administration, with the Sentinels having little say, and the Guides none at all. Provisions were made for the mandatory term of military service to be renewed indefinitely, with release typically only granted for “approved employment”—police or another government agency. Responsibility for training Sentinels and Guides shifted from the military branches themselves to the Sentinel-Guide Division, which then split into two separate agencies, one for “recruiting” Sentinels, the other for “training and assigning” Guides.

It was at that point that the situation for Guides had gone straight to hell. Corporal punishment for Guides went from being frowned upon to being actively encouraged. Guide Training and Assignment Centers turned into something like prison camps, where the Guides were broken down and remolded until they were cowering and obedient. And G-TAC, once they got their hands on a Guide, were very reluctant to give them up, and wormed their way into maintaining a supervisory relationship over Guides even if they were released to civilian occupations. Guides could be reassigned or brought in for additional “training” at their liaison officer’s will.

The civilian world, and even a great deal of the military, had been unaware of exactly how bad things had gotten until a Guide named Blair Sandburg, who had successfully evaded the draft for several years, was captured, subjected to several years of torture, and somehow emerged strong enough to make his story public.

That had been about ten years ago, and things were supposed to be improving again now. Draft policies had been rewritten to put some brakes on the cycle of constantly renewing conscription terms, and to peg the number of Sentinels and Guides drafted to actual military needs, rather than automatically taking all of them. Regulations for protecting Guides from abuse were given some teeth, and Guides were given privileges equal to those of Sentinels to request reassignment or a particular type of assignment. There were official limits on how much force could be used in Guide training, and a committee to enforce them.

Steve had to struggle not to vomit, reading the list of training techniques that, apparently, some people needed to be told were not acceptable. Physical discipline resulting in broken bones, damage to any organ or sensory system, or “burns classified as third-degree or higher in severity.” Caloric deprivation of over 50% of normal intake, lasting 72 hours or more. Exposure to extreme temperatures resulting in heat stroke or hypothermia. Sleep deprivation lasting 48 hours or more. Maintenance of stress positions for excessive periods. That part of the report included examples of stress positions and guidelines for how long was “excessive.”

Now he understood why Stark had chosen to evade the draft. Or why Howard had chosen it for him. However it had happened, it wasn’t something Steve had any right to criticize.

A low-ranking SHIELD operative stopped Steve at the door to the quarters Tony had been assigned, asking “What’s your business with the Guide, sir?”

“I’m his team leader,” Steve said. The operative seemed unimpressed by that, so he added, “Debriefing. We need to sort out what we’re going to do from here.”

Apparently that was a good enough answer. The operative unlocked the door and stepped aside. Steve knocked.

“What?” came Stark’s voice, strained with anxiety.
“It’s Rogers. Can I come in?”

“Pretty sure I can’t say no.”

Steve let himself in. Stark was dressed in the gym clothes he wore under the Iron Man suit—sweatpants, t-shirt, tennis shoes—and his hair stood up in uneven spikes. As Steve watched, he demonstrated why, raking one hand roughly through it. “Cap,” he said. “I really didn’t know. I think—Dad must’ve—it’s the only explanation I can figure.”

Steve nodded. “It seems like something he would do. Mind if I sit down?” After a moment’s hesitation, Tony nodded. The bunk was the only place to sit, so Steve sat there.

“I’d offer you a drink, but uh…yeah, you’re free to slurp some water out of the faucet if you want.”

“I’m fine, thanks. D’you want me to have something sent from the mess when I leave?”

“Uh, no, I’m not—not hungry.” Tony paced in the tiny room, like the big cats in the Bronx Zoo of Steve’s youth, when the animals had been confined to barren iron and concrete cages.

“I didn’t…I assumed you’d finished your military service, or been excused,” Steve explained awkwardly. “I…I did some reading, just now, and now I know it doesn’t work like that anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Has anybody told you anything? Do you know if they’re going to try and make me—” Tony stopped swallowed hard and pivoted on his heel, pacing the few steps to the opposite wall.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “I can look into it.”

Shaking his head, Tony said, “Agent is, already. And Pepper, and the SI legal team. I was hoping maybe my age…but apparently they can take you anywhere up to age 60. Maybe a medical deferment.” He tapped the arc reactor in his chest. “Or, um, conscientious objector. I’m sure that disgusts you. Trying to get out of serving my country. But—”

“You’re already serving your country,” Steve said. “And—I didn’t know what it’s like, for Guides, here. Now. Did you know about this Sandburg fella?”

“Yeah. Everybody does. There was a movie.” Tony paced some more. “He only dodged the draft for seven years, and look what they did to him. Me? Almost twenty-five years. I’ll be lucky to make it out alive.”

“I’d have kept it a secret, if I had any idea, really.” But he supposed that wasn’t Stark’s main concern right now. “And I’m going to do whatever I can to help. I can tell the draft board we need you more as Iron Man than as a Guide. Might carry some weight, coming from Captain America.”

“Thanks,” Tony said. “Yeah, that…that ought to work, but….” Tony slumped against the wall, rubbing his hand over his face. “I’ll tell you what, I wouldn’t have pissed off everybody I know in DC if I’d known about this. I wonder if…maybe if I agree to some weapons contracts, the DOD will get me out of it.”

“You shouldn’t have to do that.” Steve knew how important his decision not to manufacture weapons anymore was to Tony.

“Shouldn’t,” Tony said with a huff. “I can’t try that and the conscientious objector thing. Have to figure out which one’s more likely to work. And yes, I realize I’m a huge coward. Apparently I don’t have any moral principles I’m not willing to put aside to save my own ass.”
“That’s not true.” Tony hadn’t given in to the terrorists’ demands, when he’d been captive, even though his own plan, of building the first Iron Man suit right under their noses and escaping in it was much riskier.

Steve tried to remind him of that, but Tony just flicked his hand and said, “I don’t—let’s not talk about that; I’m freaking out enough already.”

“Right. Sorry.” Steve should have known better; he had things he doesn’t like talking about, either. Soldier’s heart, they called it, two wars before his. PTSD, they called it now. “I’ll do whatever I can to help make this come out right,” he reiterated. “In the meantime, is there anything I can do? How long are they keeping you here? I can get you some things from your apartment, if you want.” It didn’t seem like much to offer, but sometimes the little things helped.

“I don’t know. Yeah, okay. I need a suit.” Steve was about to say he didn’t think that was wise, but Tony went on, “A suit, suit, not armor. Shirt, tie, belt, shoes, the whole shebang. JARVIS can tell you which ones. And, you know, razor, toothbrush, that stuff.”

Steve understood what he meant—if Tony had to face anyone down, he wanted to do it dressed as Tony Stark: Genius, Billionaire, Playboy, Philanthropist. That was a kind of armor, too. “You got it,” Steve said. “Anything else?”

“Vitamins—they’re in the bowl on the kitchen counter; JARVIS can tell you. Bottle of Scotch, if they’ll let you. Worth a shot.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Steve promised.

A tablet—the one from my nightstand, if they’ll let you. So far, all I’ve been able to get my hands on is this.” Tony waved a very basic cell phone—very much not Stark tech; the kind that Tony had called a “grandpa phone” when SHIELD tried to issue Steve one.

“Better than two tin cans with a piece of string tied between them,” Steve noted.

“ Barely.”

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Several hours later, Tony had changed into his suit and picked at a tray that Steve had had sent from the mess, even though he said he didn’t want one. Of the things he’d asked for, the Scotch and the tablet had not come through; Steve had substituted a dead-tree copy of the New York Times for the latter, and a Thermos of coffee for the former. Tony supposed he had to appreciate the thought, even though neither did anything for his growing anxiety. Not long ago, Pepper had called to point out to him that the legal team would be better able to concentrate on looking into his problem if they weren’t fielding phone calls from him every quarter hour.

He was reduced to doing the NYT crossword puzzle in pencil, like some technologically illiterate nonagenarian, when Coulson finally turned up. “Sorry it took so long,” he said. “It was pretty hard to get hold of someone at G-TAC after close of business. The good news is, you can get out of here in about ten minutes.”

“And go where?” Tony asked. Whether or not the news was good really depended on the answer to that question.

“Wherever you want, as long as it isn’t outside US jurisdiction,” Coulson answered. He handed Tony a clipboard. “That’s a form for Delayed Registration of Guide Status. Fill it out, and as soon as we fax it in, you can go. You’ll have seven days to submit additional documentation supporting your
claim that the failure to register was accidental. You’ll definitely want to send them your original test results and selective service registration—SHIELD has copies, if you don’t—plus anything else your lawyers think is advisable.”

“Okay,” Tony said. It was not going to be that easy, he knew.

“You’ll receive orders to report for a pre-induction physical on a date no more than 30 days from receipt of the form, which will be counted from tomorrow. The closest Center is in Hoboken, so that’s where you’ll be ordered to report. You will go, regardless of your feelings about the state of New Jersey, because if you don’t, you’ll be arrested. Given your status as a member of the Avengers, they’ll probably send SHIELD after you, and that would just be embarrassing for everyone.”

Yep; not that easy.

“Take along documentation of any grounds you have for deferment or excusal, medical or otherwise. If they are unconvinced that the failure to register was accidental, there’s a small chance you’ll be detained at that time. Otherwise, you’ll be notified of the results within two weeks. Results could consist of notification of medical deferment or excusal, orders to report for a hearing on non-medical evidence, or orders to report for training. In either of the latter two cases, failure to report will likewise result in the issue of a warrant for your arrest. Your signature on the form indicates that you have received and understood all of this information.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Tony said, “what happens if I don’t sign the form?”

“First, we won’t be able to let you go,” Coulson answered. “Secondly, failure to submit the form within three business days of notification of your Guide status will constitute active evasion of the draft, and you could be sentenced to four to six years in a federal penitentiary, to be served after you’ve finished your service as a Guide.”

He’d suspected it was something like that. “All right. Do I give you a call when I’m done with this, or just hand it to the guard?”

“I’d rather you filled it out right now. This is not a good time to be a smartass, Tony.”

“I know. I’m just going to check in with the legal eagles real quick before I fill it out.”

Coulson nodded agreement, but before he left, he said, “The sooner you get that form in, the better.”

The phone call with the legal team was quick. They confirmed that yes, Tony did have to fill out the form, and advised him on what to put in some of the sections. For instance, there was a block asking for an explanation of how he had come to learn of his Guide status; the lawyer advised just writing “Incidental contact with a Sentinel” rather than trying to fit the whole story into the space provided. They’d submit a more detailed narrative along with his original test results.

“Speaking of your test results,” the lawyer added.

“Yes?”

“You were tested by your father’s personal physician instead of through your school.”

“Yeah, I was already in college when I was sixteen,” Tony pointed out. The mandatory tests were usually done in the junior year of high school, but Tony had never had a junior year of high school.

“I understand that, but it looks suspicious.”
“What do you want me to do about it?” he demanded. “Build a time machine?”

“There’s no need to snap at me, Mr. Stark.”

“Sorry,” he said, though he wasn’t, really. He had worse problems than somebody snapping at him. “Keep me posted. I should be back at my regular number within the hour.”

Bruce let out a sigh of relief when Coulson called to inform them that Tony was on his way back to the Tower. It hadn’t been completely rational, but when he’d left Tony on the Helicarrier without the Iron Man suit, he’d worried that Tony might disappear into some shadowy bureaucracy. It had made sense—Steve was a better choice for monitoring the situation on the ‘carrier, and Tony had needed someone he trusted to take custody of the suit.

Besides, it had been over ten years since the last known case of the government “disappearing” a Guide. It hadn’t ended well, for them.

When he told the others, Thor said, “Our friend’s return is joyous news. But I have been waiting to ask—why is it that he was detained?”

It turned out that they had to begin the explanation at the beginning—they apparently didn’t have Sentinels or Guides in Asgard, and while Thor had seen movies and TV shows that featured them, there was so much unfamiliar cultural context that he hadn’t realized that the terms “Sentinel” and “Guide” weren’t simply Midgardian military titles.

“A Sentinel is a person with heightened senses,” Bruce explained. “Sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste.”

“Ah. Like Steve?”

“Sort of, but…more so. Sentinels occur naturally; they’re believed evolved as watchmen and guardians for early human tribes. And their senses are much more acute than even Steve’s are,” Bruce said. “Their senses can be a major liability if they aren’t controlled—a strong stimulus, like a bright light or loud noise can be painful. They can also have sensory spikes—when one sense gets turned up so that even normal input is painful—or zones, where they focus in on one stimulus and lose track of everything else. It can even drive them insane.”

“Ah,” Thor said. “We have tales of the Midgardian berserker gang that sound as though some of them were such—men with the senses and instincts of wolves.”

“Yeah, there are a lot of historians who think so, too. Sentinels also have strong aggressive instincts—to protect their tribes, their territory, and especially their Guides. There’s a theory that through some kind of genetic bottleneck, Guides temporarily died out of the Old Norse population, which left them with a lot of uncontrolled Sentinels.” That was a digression, though. Bruce pulled himself back on track. “Guides are the ones that help Sentinels control their senses. It’s still not clear exactly how, but just having a Guide nearby makes a Sentinel less likely to spike or zone. And being bonded or linked to a Guide lets them consciously control their senses—sort of deliberately spike one sense, like hearing, so they can listen for danger, stuff like that.”

Thor frowned. “So Tony is born to be a warrior’s companion. This sounds like something that should bring honor to him.”

“It should,” Natasha put in. “But doesn’t.”
Clint added, “Part of it is that Sentinels and Guides are required to do military service. You’re supposed to be tested for both traits in high school. If you miss out on getting tested, or if you somehow get the results falsified, it’s…not good.”

“Because it appears as though one is trying to avoid a duty,” Thor said. “I understand.”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “I had a tense couple of hours where the Army thought I might be an unregistered Sentinel, when they first saw how well I can shoot. Fortunately, I wasn’t—my eyesight’s pretty good, but not quite Sentinel level, and everything else is normal.”

“The other part of it is…harder to explain,” Bruce continued. “Sentinels have very obvious differences from ordinary humans, and those differences make them valuable and also kind of…dangerous.” Like someone else Bruce could name, except in a less extreme—and less green—way. “They’re required to serve, but they get a lot of respect.”

“As they should,” Thor agreed with a nod.

“Guides, on the other hand….”

“Are just as valuable,” Natasha said, “but not respected.”

“They’re expected to be—and trained to be—completely obedient to their Sentinels,” Bruce went on. “Treated almost like property. There have been some improvements in the last few years, but…it’s bad.”

Thor frowned. “Thralldom would ill-suit Tony.”

“It ill-suits everyone,” Natasha said.

“Sentinels trying to skip out on their military service isn’t a big problem,” Clint added, “since they need to join up to get a Guide, and anyway, they have a pretty decent job, and from what I’ve seen, the Army goes out of their way to make sure they’re comfortable. But Guides’ job is basically getting fucked over by a series of assholes, so anybody with an ounce of common sense is going to try to get out of it.”

“And that’s what they’re going to think Tony did, until he can prove otherwise,” Bruce finished. “The penalties are pretty stiff. And even once he proves it wasn’t deliberate, they can still make him serve.”

“Surely his service with the Avengers is more important,” Thor pointed out.

“Common sense says it should be,” Bruce answered. “Hell, even doing R&D for Stark Industries benefits the country a lot more than making him work as an ordinary Guide would, in terms of both GDP—gross domestic product—and the government contracts the company services. But it’s the government. There’s no guarantee they’ll do the sensible thing.”

“There will be backlash, if he’s excused,” Natasha added. “People saying he was let off because he’s rich and powerful. People with money and influence get special treatment from the government all the time, but it’s not supposed to happen that way.”

“Drafting him can be spun as a demonstration of fairness and transparency,” Bruce agreed. “‘Even Tony Stark gets treated the same as every other Guide.’”

“Except he won’t be,” Clint said. “Because they’re gonna expect him to be a troublemaker, and they’ll treat him like he is one, even if he manages to behave himself.”
Tony’s first move on returning to the Tower was to pour himself a drink. His second was to start researching how he was going to get out of this. His legal team was good, but they weren’t Stark-level geniuses. He had JARVIS pull records of successful petitions for excusal from Guide service, prioritized by points of similarity including delayed registration, age and medical status, and the petitioner’s pre-service employment, and within those categories by date, most recent first.

He found few reasons to hope. G-TAC’s longstanding practice was to take any and every Guide they could get—even the severely disabled were drafted, and given assignments in medical and nursing facilities, where they sat in a Sentinel’s room like a potted plant. Drafts boards were consistently unimpressed by claims that any other kind of work was more important. And delayed registrants were nearly always drafted, the official policy being that a “history of successful draft evasion does not constitute valid grounds for excusal.”

The tide of reform in ’00-’01 had changed some things, but one point on which Congress refused to budge was that the draft would stay in effect. They’d finally brought in a lottery two years ago—based on a random drawing of birth dates, like the old Vietnam-era general draft—but in the first year it had been in effect, they’d taken numbers up to 347, and for this year they were already up to 242. Tony checked; his birthday wasn’t one of the handful of lucky ones. Besides, in the one case that had come up since then where a delayed registrant had a birth date that would have excused her, the board had decided that she would be inducted under the policy in effect when she had been eighteen—meaning, effectively, blanket conscription of all Guides.

For a little while, Tony hoped that precedent might be something he could exploit—if there was some exception in the older regulations that he qualified for, he could argue it should apply—but the 1985 draft regulations were just as devoid of loopholes as the current ones were. They did list history of organ transplant as a disqualifying medical condition—an exception that had been dropped in the 90’s—but Tony was pretty sure no one would buy that the arc reactor counted as a transplanted organ.

He sent the details on to Legal anyway, just in case.

A week later, the media got hold of the story. The leak was eventually traced to the courier they’d hired to hand-deliver the file of evidence proving that Tony’s failure to register was accidental, but knowing who to blame wasn’t much use. Some of the legal team’s attention was diverted to reviewing PR’s press releases for legal accuracy, and to attempting to forestall the inevitable stock plunge by generating reassuring soundbites about how this news would not affect SI’s current contracts, patents, or intellectual property.

Then someone suggested that the real reason Tony had made Pepper CEO was that he’d found out he was a Guide, and suddenly Tony was fighting on two fronts, to maintain his company’s reputation and to avoid giving G-TAC any excuse to believe that he’d deliberately flouted the law.

In the middle of that, he had to report for his draft physical. Someone had leaked that, too, and a phalanx of reporters surrounded the entrance to the building in New Jersey, and mobbed him as soon as he stepped out of the car.

“Mr. Stark, do you believe that—”

“Is this the end of Iron Man?”

“—engagement with the military-industrial complex?”
Tony just kept repeating “No comment” as Steve, Happy, and a pair of uniformed G-TAC guards escorted him inside. The last thing he heard before the doors closed behind him was, “Playboy Tony Stark, not nearly so cocky now—”

“We’ll take him from here,” the older of the two guards said to Steve and Happy.

They both looked at him. “Go move the car before somebody steals it,” Tony advised.

Steve nodded. “I’ll stay.” It wasn’t an offer so much as it was a statement of fact: the Earth was round (more or less), absolute zero was cold, and Steve Rogers was staying.

“Sir,” the guard said, “the public is not permitted to loiter in G-TAC facilities.”

“It turns out that I have a number of relevant and appropriate questions to ask the receptionist,” Steve informed him. “As a Captain in the US Army Reserve, it’s my duty to be fully informed regarding all departments that affect servicemen and women who may come under my command. I’ve been remiss in this area.”

The guard glared at him, but, seeing that Steve was not about to back down, finally uttered a surly, “Sir,” and prodded Tony in the direction of a set of double doors. “That way. And take off the sunglasses.”

As physicals went, Tony had had better hostage situations. He was used to expensive private doctors who treated him with deference, or else to SHIELD medics who took absolutely no guff, but didn’t extend their curiosity beyond any recent traumatic injuries. G-TAC was a lot more thorough.

He’d been afraid that they might herd him along in his skivvies with a big group of teenagers, like in Alice’s Restaurant, which he hadn’t been looking forward to, even though he was in good shape for a guy on the wrong side of forty. But they didn’t. Instead, they herded him along in his skivvies by himself, which was worse. People—fully clothed people—kept turning up in doorways to gawk, and they made him leave his clothes and effects—including a Starkphone model that hadn’t been released yet—in an unsecured cubby.

He answered a series of questions about his medical history, turned his head and coughed, had several vials of blood drawn, all by nurses and technicians who seemed to be going out of their way to demonstrate how very unimpressed they were by Tony Stark. When Tony pointed out to the doctor where he’d have to put the stethoscope to listen to Tony’s heart—the arc reactor pushed it out of position a little—the doctor tried literally everywhere else before doing what Tony had told him in the first place.

Noting something on Tony’s chart and folding the stethoscope, the doctor tapped the arc reactor with a fingernail; Tony tried not to flinch. “What’s this?”

“A miniaturized arc reactor,” Tony answered. Didn’t this guy read?

“Is it removable?”

“Not unless I want to die, no.”

“What does it do?”

“It’s a power source for an electromagnet that prevents micro-shrapnel from a Jericho missile from penetrating further into my heart.”
“It doesn’t appear to be an FDA-approved medical device.”

“No,” Tony agreed. “It was originally installed by a captive electrical engineer in a cave in Afghanistan. FDA approval was not high on anyone’s list of priorities.”

The doctor went on to ask a number of questions about the reactor’s functions and maintenance, the answers of which required a delicate balance between providing necessary medical detail and safeguarding proprietary technology. Tony was fairly sure the doctor didn’t understand any of the answers.

After that came a cardiac stress test, followed by another round of blood draws and a prostate check, which Tony could really have done without, and additional questions about everything from his sex life to his bowel habits. Flippantly answering, “Not since the last time I checked” to a question about whether he was HIV positive got him yet another blood draw.

Finally, he was given a chance to hand over his file of documentation supporting his request for excusal. The administrator charged with accepting it made him stand there in a hallway in his underwear while he flipped through it and looked at every page, saying things like, “Hm,” and occasionally chuckling and shaking his head. Finally, he said, “You’ll receive notification of when to report,” to Tony, and “Take him back to the locker room,” to the guards.

There, Tony was reunited with his clothes and his phone—which, fortunately, did not appear to have been tampered with. The guards marched him back out to the lobby, where Steve was still patiently interrogating the receptionist; the current topic appeared to be what trainees were allowed to receive in the mail (answer: not much). Seeing Tony, he gave the receptionist a smile that only someone truly heartless could suspect of being disingenuous and said, “Thank you very much for all your help. I’ll review this leaflet you gave me, and get in touch again if I have any more questions. Have a nice day, ma’am.”

Once Steve joined him, the two guards left—apparently getting him past the paparazzi on the way out wasn’t part of their job description.

“How’d it go?” Steve asked.


“They won’t let me back in, boss,” Happy said. “Should I try to make my way up to the door?”

“Yeah, okay. Text me when you get there.”

He relayed that information to Steve, who said, “Okay. What did they tell you?”

“Nothing,” Tony answered. “They notify you by mail.”

“Oh. Did you get any kind of a sense of how it’s going to go?”

“No.” It was pretty clear that everything about the exercise had been designed to impress on him that G-TAC could jerk him around and there was nothing he could do about it; he wasn’t going to put much weight in any impressions beyond that.

Happy turned up outside the door not too much later—Tony could see his mouth forming the words, “No comment, no comment, no comment.” As soon as he stepped outside, Hap and Cap tucked Tony between them and plowed their way through the crowd to the car.

Once they were safely inside, the media backed off—they weren’t quite crazy enough to cling to a
moving car and pound on the windows, fortunately. “Look for a drive-thru, Hap,” Tony said as they drove off. “I need a cheeseburger.”

“Knock-knock,” Bruce said through the intercom to Tony’s private workshop.

“Who’s there?” Tony asked, sounding tired.

“A friend,” Bruce answered.

“A friend who?”

“A friend who brought you dinner.”

The door lock disengaged, as Tony said, “Punch line could use some work.”

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed. Tony had spent most of the last week locked in his workshop, frantically beginning and discarding new projects. The invention binge had started when he received orders from G-TAC to report for a hearing on his petition for excusal. The hearing was tomorrow—in less than twelve hours, in fact.

He put the plate—just a sandwich and some cut-up fruit—on the workbench within Tony’s reach. Tony took a grape and popped it in his mouth, but otherwise looked uninterested.

“You should get some sleep,” Bruce told him.

“Can’t. I have—” Tony gestured.

“The lawyers are meeting us at seven to head over to Jersey,” Bruce reminded him. Tony was taking two people from his legal team—the maximum allowed—and Pepper, Bruce, and Steve were going along for moral support. It wasn’t clear whether they’d be allowed in the room or not. Clint and Natasha weren’t officially part of the party, but Bruce knew for a fact that they’d spent an afternoon in Hoboken scouting out perches with clear lines of sight to the G-TAC complex.

Nobody asked exactly what that was supposed to accomplish—in Bruce’s case, because he figured their activities would do exactly as much good as his own, which was to say not a single bit. Steve and Pepper were hoping to be allowed to testify to Tony’s essential roles in the Avengers and Stark Industries, but as Bruce had himself spent a not-inconsiderable amount of time on the run from government authorities, the lawyers had decided that any input from him would do more harm than good. Thor had been advised to stay home, on the grounds that reminding anyone that Tony might theoretically have the option of fleeing jurisdiction by going to another planet could not possibly be helpful.

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” Tony said.

“It would probably help to be rested.”

Tony slammed a wrench down on the workbench, saying, “I can take care of myself!”

Bruce flinched; he couldn’t help it. Perfectly reasonable reaction based on past experience with drunks yelling and throwing things.

“Sorry,” Tony said, sounding as close to genuinely apologetic as Tony Stark got. As a further gesture of contrition, he picked up one of the sandwich halves and ate it in about three bites.
Apparently that was enough to convince him he was, in fact, hungry, and he ate the rest, a little more slowly. By the time he finished, he was yawning, and Bruce managed to persuade him to lie down on the workshop couch for at least a little while. DUM-E came whirring over with a blanket clutched in his claw. “Thanks, buddy,” Tony said, patting the metal arm. “Listen, Bruce?”

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favor. If I’m…not going to be here for a while, take these guys up to your lab, would you? I know DUM-E’s kind of a pain in the ass, but…yeah. I’d rather they weren’t down here by themselves the whole time.”

Bruce spent more time hanging out with Tony in his workshop than anyone else, and he was still a little unsure how self-aware the ‘bots were. DUM-E was not particularly bright, but he sometimes acted like he had feelings. And even if the robots weren’t able to experience loneliness, if knowing he was keeping them company would help Tony, Bruce would do it. “Sure. I’ll look after them.”

“JARVIS should be okay, since he has the run of the tower,” Tony continued. “Just be sure to keep him in the loop on…things.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, wondering if he meant things relating to Tony, or something else.

“Last—when I was—Afghanistan, all he had to go by was what was in the papers,” Tony elaborated.

“I’ll make sure he’s filled in on anything we know,” Bruce promised.

Tony went on giving him instructions—the bots’ skill sets, things JARVIS liked (word games, being sarcastic), the importance of never turning one’s back on DUM-E when he had a fire extinguisher in his claw. But before long, Tony’s thoughts were disconnected, his words mumbled. Some time after that, he fell asleep.

Bruce left him to rest, asking JARVIS to let him know if Tony woke up and seemed to need company. But he heard nothing from the AI until his scheduled wake-up call—which could have meant that Tony had slept, or that he’d gotten up and convinced JARVIS he wanted to be left alone.

He looked at least a little bit rested when they met up in the lobby for the ride to Jersey, so Bruce hoped it had been the former option, or at least a mix of the two. He spent most of the ride giving Pepper instructions about Stark Industries, and the rest of it telling Steve who, at SI or SHIELD, could be trusted to do repairs or maintenance on the special equipment he’d created for the team.

At one point, one of the lawyers spoke up. “Mr. Stark, you realize that unless this goes extremely badly, you will have some notice before you’re ordered to report?”

“It’s that ‘unless’ that I’m worried about,” Tony answered. “Now, Steve, for any of Hawkeye’s stuff, you want Mike Ingram at SI. There are a few new things I’ve been working on for him—I told JARVIS to give you access to the files, so if….if it seems advisable, you can send those to Mike and see if he can finish them. As for the Quinjet modifications….”

They arrived in Hoboken in good time. The hearing was to take place in a different building, further into the G-TAC complex from the one where Tony had had his physical. They had to pass through a security checkpoint, which at least meant that they wouldn’t have to fight through a crowd of media to get out of the car.

On the other hand, the gate closing behind them left Bruce with an irrational fear that he was about to be shot with a sedative dart, loaded into one of the canvas-covered Army-style trucks that infested
this area, and dragged off to some secret military research facility. It was irrational, given that G-TAC had less than no interest in Hulks; Bruce couldn’t begin to imagine how Tony felt about it.

There was, at least, no difficulty with letting them into the hearing room. It was set up with one long table across the front of the room, where the panel would be seated, and a smaller one opposite it for Tony and his counsel. Behind that were two rows of chairs, some of them already occupied. Tony’s support team was directed to some of these.

The hearing got off to a bad start, with the chair of the G-TAC panel announcing that all of Tony’s medical evidence was being thrown out, adding, “The suggestion that Iron Man is physically unfit for service borders on a display of contempt for this body.”

Tony’s lawyer tried to object. “With all due respect, sir, Mr. Stark’s arc reactor poses medical challenges likely to be unfamiliar to physicians in the military medical system.”

“Sit down, counselor, unless you wish to be removed.”

Tony’s claim of being a conscientious objector came up next, and was similarly dismissed on the grounds of both his combat role as Iron Man and his previous involvement with weapons manufacture. Finally, it was time for the “essential occupation” evidence. Pepper, led by Tony’s lawyers, explained his role at Stark Industries and how that work benefitted the nation. Then one of the strangers in the audience was called. He turned out to be an aide to one of the members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and testified to Tony’s willingness to renege on government contracts when it suited him, as well as his disrespectful conduct when called to testify before the Committee.

When the aide had finished, Tony’s counsel asked for an opportunity to rebut. “On what grounds?” the G-TAC chair asked.

“Mr. Whittaker has painted Mr. Stark’s decision to terminate those contracts as capricious, when in fact he terminated them as part of his decision to cease weapons manufacture, on moral and ethical grounds, after his capture in Afghanistan. He paid all associated cancellation of contract penalties without complaint, and, in addition, offered the United States government exceedingly favorable terms on non-weapons technology in the next contract cycle.”

“Guide Stark’s claims of moral objection to military service have already been dealt with, counselor,” the chair said boredly. “Next witness.”

The next witness was a business analyst presenting a case that Tony didn’t really do anything for Stark Industries that someone else couldn’t do. He grilled Pepper on her duties as CEO and how long she had actually been doing them—well before Tony had given her the title. When she was allowed to get a word in edgewise, she pointed out that his current role was in Research and Development; the analyst responded with a rapid recital of the number and qualifications of the rest of the R&D department, concluding, “Guide Stark’s projects can easily be carried out by any of these people while he is serving.”

Tony’s team wasn’t given a chance to rebut that, either.

Steve’s turn went much the same way, except that the panel asked him some probing questions about Tony’s involvement in combat operations—and they were not reminded that the conscientious objector issue had already been dealt with. Once again, the rebuttal emphasized how Tony’s involvement in the Avengers Initiative was at his own discretion, making much hay of a couple of minor incidents where he had been asked to assemble and had declined to do so. That he’d had very good reasons for doing so—generally Stark Industries obligations, combined with Steve’s agreement
that he wasn’t urgently needed and could be called in later if the rest of the team had trouble—was glossed over. After that, another expert was called to give evidence that SHIELD had other personnel capable of doing some of what Tony did, followed by someone from the Air Force who declared that they’d be happy to lend Colonel Rhodes to SHIELD for any operations that really required a flying suit of armor.

It was at that point that Tony pretty much lost his shit, shouting at the panel about how the War Machine suit was nowhere near as good as his, and anyway, would be knocked out of commission after its first battle if Tony wasn’t available to repair it, while both lawyers and Steve pleaded with him to sit down and shut up.

When he finally did so, the panel chair observed dryly that the earlier witness’s points about “Guide Stark’s unreliability and lack of respect for authority” had been more than adequately demonstrated. Exactly what that had to do with anything, no one explained.

It wasn’t too much of a surprise when the panel ruled to deny Tony’s request for excusal. Bruce couldn’t see how Tony was taking it, since his back was to the audience, but the set of his shoulders suggested that Tony was both angry and afraid.

The lawyers moved straight into a request for deferment, asking for six months for Tony to arrange a smooth transfer of his SI and Avengers duties. It was a little bit more of a surprise that the panel turned that down, too—it was a reasonable request, and routinely granted to Guides whose responsibilities were much less complex than Tony’s.

Then the reason for the emphasis on unreliability and disrespect came out: the panel petitioned itself to waive the usual 14 to 30 days’ delay between the hearing and the beginning of training, on the grounds that Tony was a flight risk. They all watched in horror as the panel granted its own petition, and the chair ordered the two guards at the back of the room to take Tony into custody.

Bruce had a hazy impression that Tony put up something of a fight, but he missed most of it, because he had his forehead down on his knees, breathing deeply and trying not to Hulk out.

#

Steve and Natasha would’ve been proud of him, Tony thought as he lay face-down on the floor, one arm twisted up painfully between his shoulderblades, with a boot on the back of his neck.

It turned out that on his previous visit to Hoboken, the G-TAC guards had actually been comparatively polite to him. This time, they literally shoved and dragged him out of the hearing room, as he tried to explain that he needed a minute to say goodbye to his friends and give Pepper some instructions. They continued dragging him down the hallway and through a set of double doors, then—once the doors had closed and latched behind them—slammed him up against the wall and bitch-slapped him.

For a second, Tony was too stunned to do anything. He was used to fighting, and he was used to hashing things out with lawyers, but he wasn’t used to going from one to the other in less than a minute. Then one of the guards poked him hard in the chest, right near the arc reactor.

Tony responded instinctively, throwing an arm bar and kicking the guard’s legs out from under him with one sweep. Just like Steve and Tasha had taught him to do.

He probably could have handled the second guard, too, but half a dozen more popped out of the cinderblocks—no woodwork in this part of the building—and took him down.
Rhodey had given him some pertinent advice a couple of days ago—being in the Air Force, he had some Sentinel colleagues. *Keep your head down*, Rhodey had said. *Do what you're told, and don't be a smart-ass.*

He was off to a *great* start.

#

“They can’t do this,” Pepper kept saying as they left G-TAC. “Tony’s not... he isn’t... he doesn’t even have a toothbrush.” Pepper laughed humorlessly, apparently aware of how unimportant that was in the circumstances. But Steve knew what she meant. Little things.

“They can and they did, Ms. Potts,” said Ms. Nguyen, Tony’s lead counsel, once they were settled in the car. “Now we move on to phase two.”

“What’s that?” Bruce asked.

“Getting him assigned to SHIELD,” answered Blake, Nguyen’s colleague. “Civilian agency placements are fairly standard for older Guides, and SHIELD has a standard allotment of 25 Sentinel-Guide pairs. Making Mr. Stark one of them is plainly the best use of resources—he’ll be able to combine his Guide duties with R&D and acting as Iron Man.”

Steve saw the point—if Tony was assigned to SHIELD, his friends would be in a position to offer him at least some support, and the extra status afforded to him by virtue of his R&D work and being Iron Man would give him some protection from the abuse and indignity that went along with being a Guide. “Can we get him assigned to the Avengers Initiative?”

“I was hoping you’d ask,” Nguyen answered. “If we can get him sent to SHIELD in the first place, I can’t see Director Fury standing in the way, but it’ll look better coming from the team leader.”

Steve got a ride out to the Helicarrier and made the request that afternoon. Fury, glowering, said, “I’ve put in a formal request with G-TAC, and I’m letting them know through back-channels that if they don’t give him back, there’ll be hell to pay. But if you want him on the Initiative, you’ll need a Sentinel, too.”

“Of course, sir,” Steve said.

Coulson stood up, handing Steve a stack of file folders. “SHIELD’s Sentinels. I’ve done the first pass, weeding out the ones who are absolute no’s—empathically incompatible with Tony, already Bonded, or unsuitable for field duty due to age or disability. That leaves you 18 to go through and pick out one Tony might be able to live with.”

“Ideally, I’d like a shortlist—two or three candidates,” Fury added. “That way I can choose the one most suited for the Avengers Initiative. I need at least one. You’re authorized to share the files with Ms. Potts, if you feel that her contributions to the selection process would be helpful.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve said, and returned to the Tower to get to work.

He and Pepper met a few days later to discuss the files. Once the preliminaries were over—hello, how are you, yes I’m still worried about Tony—Steve said, “I’ve managed to rule about half a dozen candidates out, but I’m having trouble getting a real sense of these guys—and gals—from just reading their files.” He had a picture in mind of the Sentinel they needed: easygoing, smart—and able to deal with the fact that, no matter how smart he or she was, Tony was smarter—not inclined to take offense over the fact that Tony had tried like hell to get out of being a Guide. The files weren’t really set up to provide that kind of insight.
“Same here,” Pepper agreed. But she had a solution ready: “We need to set up interviews.”

“We can do that?”

Pepper nodded. “They’re scattered all over the globe, but if there’s a problem getting them sent to New York or the Helicarrier, we’ll go to them. We can take the corporate jet.”

#

“Wow,” Tony said, looking around the dormitory room. Its furnishings consisted of two sets of bunk beds and four footlockers. There were no windows, and the only light came from an overhead fixture, the switch to which was located somewhere outside the room. “They really spare no expense, do they?”

“Shut up,” hissed one of his roommates. He had three, all eighteen or nineteen-year-old boys. He thought this one was named Johnson, or something like that.

Tony was not at all inclined to shut up. He’d been struggling to keep his mouth shut all afternoon and evening, while he’d been issued his uniform—essentially a gym suit, with polyester shorts and “Property of the Guide Training and Assignment Center” written across the T-shirt—taught to stand at attention, screamed at more than he could ever remember having been in his life, repeatedly hit in the ribs with a rubber truncheon, and fed something for dinner that he genuinely suspected was dog food. It had been made clear that the only words any G-TAC staffer wanted to hear out of his—or any Guide’s—mouth were “Yes, sir,” but there weren’t any G-TAC staff in here. “Seriously, I had better accommodations when I was held hostage in Afghanistan. Nice, roomy cave, en suite mechanics shop, only one roommate.”

“You’re going to get us all in trouble if you don’t shut up,” Johnson whispered.

“Would you chill—”

Before Tony could finish that thought, the door slammed open. “Who’s talking in here?” a trainer demanded.

Wordlessly, all three boys pointed at Tony. *Traitors.*

“Is that true, Guide?” the trainer asked, poking Tony in the chest with his truncheon.

Tony thought about denying it, but one of the things he’d learned in his first day of Guide Training was that the concept of “innocent until proven guilty” did not exist here. “Yes, sir,” he said, trying to conceal his nausea and humiliation at having to address this mouth-breather that way.

“You felt like you had something important to say?”

Another of the things Tony had learned was that there was no acceptable way to answer that question. To say *no, sir* would be taken as contradicting the trainer. But *yes, sir* would be almost as bad, since it had been previously established that Guides did not have anything important to say, ever. And explaining that he hadn’t realized that the no talking rule extended to the dormitories was not an answer to the question that he had been asked.

“Answer me, genius.” The trainer punctuated his words with a truncheon-blow to the gut.

“No, sir,” Tony finally said; it seemed like the least-worst option.

“No? I heard you talking. Are you calling me a liar?” The trainer screamed the last words in his face.
“No, sir,” Tony repeated dully. This guy really wasn’t very smart—that question, at least, had a clear right answer.

“So you were talking?” He was close enough that Tony could see his dental fillings; not exactly an enjoyable view.

That one, too. “Yes, sir.”

“I seem to remember we’ve discussed this two or three times before, Guide. When are Guides supposed to talk?”

“When spoken to, sir.”

“So the genius can learn. Out in the hall.” He punctuated this last order with a truncheon-blow in the vicinity of Tony’s kidneys.

The trainer marched Tony to each of the other dormitory rooms, opened the doors, and ordered Tony to repeat the no-talking rule for their benefit. Once all of the rooms had been informed he put Tony at attention facing the wall near the guards’ desk.

It gradually became clear that this was where Tony was going to be spending the rest of the night.

Really should have listened to Bruce, about the sleeping last night thing.

And Rhodey, about the keeping his head down thing.

Should probably just get that tattooed somewhere.

#

“—clarify expectations, provide incentives for appropriate behavior, the usual shit,” Sentinel Grier was saying as Edwards neared the mess table where the ‘carrier’s assigned Sentinels usually sat. Grier and Carrasco were accompanied by their Guides, so Edwards paused and waited for each of them to nod before he sat down.

As he did so, Grier continued, “What I should have said was with a belt to his bare ass. Sure they wouldn’t have given him to me, but it’s not like I want the little fucker anyway. Who would?”

“Who are we talking about?” Edwards asked. He didn’t like Grier’s tone, particularly if he was talking about a Guide.

“Stark,” Carrasco told him. “They haven’t interviewed you yet?”

“No,” Edwards said. “Who, and about what?”

“Supposedly it’s about adding a Sentinel to the Avengers Initiative,” Grier answered. “Grapevine says it’s really to figure out what poor bastard is going to be saddled with Stark for a Guide.”

“I wouldn’t mind moving off the ‘carrier and into Avengers Tower,” Carrasco added. “But I got the impression Ms. Potts doesn’t think he’d be comfortable taking orders from a woman half his age.”

“He’s not going to be comfortable taking orders from anybody,” Grier said. “Which is why, belt, bare ass. Straighten that shit right out.”

“That’s real fucking enlightened of you,” Edwards said. He’d done his military service in the Marines, where he’d been taught that a Sentinel who couldn’t keep a Guide in combat-ready
condition—meaning, obedient and free of discipline-related injuries—didn’t deserve to have one.

“Fuck you, sensitive new-age guy,” Grier said genially.

Carrasco saved him from having to reply by saying, “It’s hard to believe he’s a Guide. I mean, Iron Man? And then there’s the attitude, and all the womanizing.”

“Overcompensating,” Grier said sagely. “He figured no one would look at him twice if he hid in plain sight. Too smart for his own good.”

“He didn’t know he was a Guide,” Edwards reminded him.

“Yeah, right.” Grier’s tone dripped sarcasm. “Rich boy like that, his daddy would have fixed his test results.”

“Doesn’t mean he knew about it,” Edwards noted.

“Keep talking like that, and you’ll end up stuck with him,” Grier said.

“Being on this outfit’s top team doesn’t sound like a fate worse than death to me,” Edwards answered.

“More like being sidelined while your insubordinate, obnoxious Guide flies around shooting people,” Carrasco countered. “And everyone from Director Fury to the Potts woman tears you a new asshole if you so much as look at him sideways.”

“Do we know that he’s obnoxious?” Edwards asked reasonably. “Has anyone ever met him?”

“I gave him directions to the mess once,” Carrasco answered. “He did not take his eyes off my tits the whole time.”

Edwards thought, but did not say, that in Stark’s defense, they were excellent tits. The Marine Corps taught its Sentinels to behave decently around personnel of the opposite sex, too, as had Mama Edwards. Instead, he said, “You could ask Agent Romanoff for some pointers on how to deal with that. If you got him, I mean.” Hers were excellent, too, and while he knew Agent Romanoff primarily by reputation, he doubted very much that anyone would make that mistake with her more than once. Unless maybe he was into pain.

#

“Notes,” the trainer said, snapping his fingers at Tony. It was the end of the daily lecture on the Duties of a Guide, which they were all expected to take notes on. Tony handed them over, trying not to show that he was fairly confident they weren’t going to find anything to nitpick this time.

His track record with lecture was not good. On his first full day, he’d fallen asleep, a fairly natural result of spending the night standing up facing a wall. He didn’t even want to think about what that had gotten him. The next day he’d made use of his notetaking paper to sketch plans for shaving and tooth-brushing robots, the invention of which he thought was likely to be the only way anyone could accomplish shaving, showering, and tooth-brushing in the stingy amount of time allotted for personal hygiene. He’d somehow failed to notice, the previous day, that the notes were collected. He didn’t much want to think about the results of that error, either.

On the third day, he’d made a real effort to do what was expected of him, taking careful and on-topic notes, without any sarcastic commentary. That also hadn’t been good enough. Finally, one of his roommates had clued him in—in a whisper after lights-out—that, in this context, “taking notes”
meant writing down exactly what the trainer put on the chalkboard, with no omissions or additions whatsoever. It was pretty stupid, but at this point, Tony was willing to do stupid things if it meant he could avoid getting hit, and possibly even be allowed to each lunch, which happened right after lecture, and consequently he had never even seen.

Today wasn’t going to be the day, either. The trainer pointed at a section of Tony’s notes and bellowed, “What does that say?”

“It says, ‘In the judgment of the Sentinel assigned,’ sir,” Tony answered.

“And what does that say?” The trainer jabbed his finger in the general direction of the chalkboard.

“‘In the judgment of the Sentinel assigned,’ sir,” he read again.

The trainer backhanded him. “Look again.”

Tony did. Even once his eyes stopped watering, it took him a moment to find the discrepancy. There probably wasn’t any way he could have gotten himself out of trouble at that point—but if there was, saying incredulously, “You mean how I spelled it correctly?” was not it.

That was how Tony ended up bleeding from a split lip and writing “in the judgement of the Sentinel assigned” on the chalkboard a thousand times while the rest of the group went to lunch.

#

“Sentinel Edwards, thank you for meeting with us today,” Pepper said, gesturing for the Sentinel to sit down. She’d ranked Edwards fairly low on the list of possibilities. He was a little older than Tony and career military. Recently separated from the Marine Corps, in fact. Steve hadn’t thought those were particular red flags—but then, he wouldn’t. The interviews with her top choices had been dismal, though, so she hoped that in this case Steve was right and she was wrong.

Steve kicked off the interview by asking Edwards his feelings about the Avengers Initiative.

“They’re a unique group of individuals with unique skills,” Edwards began, and went on to talk about how their lack of military background and discipline—present company excepted, of course, Captain Rogers—was troubling to some, but in Edwards’ opinion, the team’s flexibility in applying their talents to novel problems more than made up for it.

It was a perfectly good answer, and substantially the same as that given by every other Sentinel they’d interviewed. Pepper suspected that there must have been a memo. Edwards’s answers to questions about the role of Guides at SHIELD, his relationships with previous Guides, and his attitude toward Guides who had inadvertently delayed registration were similarly on-point. “How do you feel about Guides in combat?” she asked when it was her turn again.

“Personally, I dislike seeing any Guide in danger, but I understand it’s sometimes a necessity, ma’am.”

Another textbook answer. Steve went on, “What would you do if a situation arose where your Guide had to go into a combat situation without you?”

“Lock myself in a room with no media access, pop a Xanax, and try not to hyperventilate, sir,” Edwards said briskly.

Now that was off script. It was also the most positive answer they’d gotten to that question in any interview so far. Pepper and Steve exchanged a look.
“Sir, ma’am,” Edwards added, “It’s no secret why adding a Sentinel to the Avengers Initiative has suddenly come up. In a situation where Iron Man is needed to fight, my personal feelings about it are the last thing anyone should be concerned about, Guide Stark included. I can’t say I’d like it much, but the most useful thing I can promise to do, in such a scenario, is stay out of the way.”

Edwards was also the first of their interviewees to mention Tony or Iron Man by name. They wanted smart, and the ability to cut through bullshit was something Tony valued. Edwards was edging up in the standings.

Pepper decided to go off-script, too. “Speaking of Mr. Stark, he sometimes goes into his workshop for days at a time and declines to come out for anything short of the end of the world. As his Sentinel, how would you deal with this situation?”

“Well,” Edwards said slowly, and Pepper could tell he was thinking on his feet, rather than spouting a pre-determined answer. Good. “That could be a problem. Being aware of the possibility in advance, I’d try to avoid allowing it to become a source of conflict by coming to some sort of agreement about expectations, in advance. If I’m in the field on a mission, my Guide has to be with me, and focused on the task at hand—that’s non-negotiable. When I’m working on analysis projects, there’s a little more flexibility—I’d still need him, but it usually won’t matter if his attention is divided. He can bring his stuff along, or there might be times when I can take my work into his space, if that works for him.”

Tony would not, in fact, like that one bit—but that Edwards acknowledged that Tony had other demands on his time was promising, at least.

Edwards went on, “I don’t need him for meetings or paperwork. For training, I’ll need him, and I’ll expect him to show up unless it’s a real emergency, but I can work with him on scheduling it around his other commitments. As for scheduled downtime, I’m fine with being left to my own devices, but I’d need to check in with him at least a couple of times a day—mealtimes, or whenever.”

“Tony tends to skip meals—and sleep—when he’s working,” Steve noted. “In general, he’s not much for keeping to a schedule.”

“We’d have to find some way to compromise on that,” Edwards answered. “I like an orderly routine as much as the next Sentinel. I’m not obsessive about it, but he has to eat and sleep. And bathe.”

“I take it you have some experience with engineers?”

“My brother-in-law, and my nephew,” Edwards answered. “Look, I understand this is going to be an unusual situation. I’m not sure what Director Fury has in mind, but if Stark is going to be part of a working Sentinel-Guide pair, he’s going to have to make some adjustments. I assume it’s not going to be forever, so if he’s reasonable and makes an effort, we’ll find a way to get through it.”

That all sounded pretty good—and different enough from the usual answer to the scripted questions about discipline that Pepper thought Edwards might actually be telling the truth—but there was one hitch. “Talking things out like adults is a good starting point,” she said. “But what do you do when that doesn’t work?”

Edwards considered the question carefully. “If we can’t come up with a plan that we can both live with—or if we come up with one and he chooses not to follow it—my next move would be to get some backup from his team leader. Strategies, techniques that have worked in other situations.”

Steve nodded. “Ms. Potts has some relevant expertise in that area, too.”
Edwards gave her a crisp nod. “Ma’am.”

That wasn’t a bad answer, either. Edwards was moving rapidly to the top of Pepper’s list. Turning to the next page in his file, she said, “You served in the Marine Corps.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That means—imprinting.” That particularly Marine Corps tradition was one of the reasons she’d been hesitant about Edwards in the first place. They claimed there was nothing sexual about it, but it sure didn’t sound that way.

“Yes, ma’am,” Edwards said again. “I understand that Guides outside the Corps aren’t used to it—Stark may not have even heard of it—but it’s the best way I know to get a partnership off on the right foot. I’d do everything I could help him be okay with it—it doesn’t work if the Guide’s really upset by it—but I’d expect him to do it.”

Trying to strong-arm Tony into something as strange and potentially humiliating as imprinting was almost a sure recipe for disaster. Damn.

Steve spoke up, “Sentinel Edwards, you’ve probably heard about Stark’s captivity in Afghanistan a few years ago. There are some post-traumatic…issues.”

“I wouldn’t have to bind his hands, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Edwards said with a frown. “And he could wear a robe or scrubs or something, if that’s a problem.”

That was better—but left Pepper wondering what else there was to it. The few Marine Corps Sentinels or Guides who were willing to talk about imprinting said that the ritual was about intimacy and trust, but that the Guide was kept naked and restrained during the process were the most attention-grabbing features. “What would you need to do with him?”

“I’d need two or three days of complete privacy with him—no visitors, no phone calls, nothing.”

“And during that time you would…?”

“Imprint,” Edwards said, his tone betraying a trace of frustration. Then he sighed. “It’s not nearly as lurid as you’ve probably heard. I’d need to link up with him frequently, and examine him with all my senses. It involves a great deal of touching, and…sniffing. Not much licking, really—people tend to exaggerate that part.”

“But there is some licking?” Steve asked.

“Some,” Edwards agreed with a nod. “And he’ll have to let me take care of him—hand-feed him, wash him, things like that. That’s why we usually restrain their hands, but as I said, it isn’t strictly necessary.” He took a deep breath. “Ma’am, Captain, I realize how strange it sounds—Sentinels and Guides in the other military branches call it the ‘weird Marine Corps thing.’ But we’ve been doing imprinting for over two hundred years, and it isn’t meant to hurt or frighten the Guides in any way. Our Guides—Corps Guides—learn to enjoy it, and other Guides find it reassuring once they get past the strangeness of it. You can ask Mikey, if you like.”

Steve said, “Mikey is…?” as Pepper paged through the file in search of the answer to the same question.

“My current SHIELD Guide,” Edwards answered. “He was Army before he was SHIELD, so he’d never been imprinted before, but by the time we were finished, he was glad he’d done it.”
Pepper was a little dubious about that. “I would like to speak with him, thank you. Putting…imprinting …aside for the moment, what would your expectations be in terms of living arrangements?”

#

Edwards left the meeting with Ms. Potts and Captain Rogers—who he was very careful not to even think of as Captain fucking America, because if there was a chance they were going to be teammates, that would just be embarrassing—realizing that, somewhere along the way, he’d actually started hoping he’d be assigned to Tony Stark.

Ms. Potts and Captain Rogers’s questions had made him think about what it might be like, having Stark for a Guide, and now he felt all protective. He could just imagine some asshole like Grier coming down hard on the poor guy if he got absorbed in an engineering project and forgot an appointment, or explained some simple concept using science metaphors that made everyone else in the room feel stupid—both things that Scott and Scott Jr., his sister’s husband and kid, did about as often as they breathed.

It couldn’t possibly be easy being Tony Stark’s Sentinel, but Edwards could look after him, if he had a chance.

He returned to his quarters, where Mikey sat at the desk, poring over the study guide for the FBI Academy exam. He moved to stand up when Edwards entered, but Edwards waved him back down.

“As you were. Could’ve sworn you already took that test,” he added.

“Haven’t heard yet that I passed it, sir.”

Edwards couldn’t argue with that. Rogers and Ms. Potts hadn’t asked the one thing that he would ask, if he was vetting Sentinels for a friend of his: what would happen to Edwards’s current Guide if he took the assignment, and whether he knew or cared. Anyone who didn’t care would not be what Rogers and Ms. Potts were looking for.

It just so happened that Edwards was expecting to have to break in a new Guide soon anyway, since Mikey had put in for transfer to the FBI. They had a relatively new program to train Guides for a dual credential as Agent-Guides; Edwards was sure that even if they didn’t select Mikey for that, they’d take him as a plain Guide. So he’d be all right, one way or another.

But Mikey was closing the textbook and turning around in the desk chair. “How’d it go?”

“I’m not sure. They might want to talk to you about imprinting.”

Mikey winced exaggeratedly.

“Yeah,” Edwards said, sitting on his bunk. “I’m pretty sure there’s no way to describe it without sounding like a pervert.”

“No,” Mikey said. “There isn’t. But according to the gossip rags, he’s pretty, uh, heteroflexible. Stark.”

“Careful, that’s my future Guide whose honor you’re impugning,” Edwards joked. “It wasn’t really that bad, was it? Imprinting,” he added, since the context was ambiguous.

“No. But I’m not sure how I’m going to handle telling Captain America and the female CEO of Stark Industries that it wasn’t that bad.”
Edwards hadn’t thought of that; he’d found the experience pretty mortifying, and he was almost twice Mikey’s age. “Tell ‘em you hated it, if you want. I’ve been wrong before.”

“Do you actually want him? Only, seems like he might be a pretty terrible Guide.”


“Then I guess I’ll tell them it wasn’t so bad,” Mikey said with a sigh, turning back to his book.

“Good man. I’ll update your letter of reference to include resistance to weapons-grade personal embarrassment.”

#

The next blow knocked Tony’s wind out of him; already unsteady from hunger and fatigue, he pitched forward onto his knees, gasping for breath and entirely certain he was going to be hit again for falling over.

He was wrong about that—he was kicked, instead, a fierce shove right between his shoulderblades that sent him down on his face, even as the guard—trainer—whatever they called themselves—shouted at him to get up. This particular session had started with one of the trainers’ more infuriating games, demanding that he state his name and then beating him if he failed to magically discern which of the possible options—Tony Stark, Anthony Stark, Guide Stark, Guide Anthony Stark—they wanted this time. He’d played it enough times to know that there was no way to win. Unlike Global Thermonuclear War, not to play was not an option. He’d really wanted to win this time.

Having run out of meals to deprive him of, the guards had started holding him back from bathroom breaks, too, and he had to piss worse than he ever had in his life.

As far as Tony could tell, he’d been in this place about two and a half weeks—the days tended to run together, especially since they weren’t broken up by things like meals and sleep on any regular basis. He’d long since given up on any sense of long-term planning; his only goal was to get through each moment with as little pain as possible.

Right now, as little pain as possible was still a hell of a lot. Now that he was down, the guards worked him over thoroughly, with fists and boots and truncheons.

Then a boot connected with his painfully distended bladder and, right there in front of everyone, Tony Stark pissed himself.

#

Except for the matter of “imprinting,” which Pepper said was “skeevy” and Steve thought sounded dubious at best, Edwards seemed like the best choice of the Sentinels available. Sentinel Peretti had also made a pretty good impression, but she’d said there was no way Tony could continue fighting as Iron Man while serving as her Guide. Agent Coulson had told them that there was no way Fury could make that work—the main leverage he had in battle to get Tony assigned to SHIELD was the fact that Iron Man might be needed in an emergency, such as another alien invasion.

Steve decided to take Edwards up on his offer to talk to his current Guide. At the same time, he decided to make the same request of the handful of others they hadn’t completely ruled out.

All of them flatly refused. Two informed him that if he pressed the issue, they’d report him to Human Resources for Guide Interference.

So he and Pepper met with “Mikey”—full name, Michael Walsh—who turned out to be a young
man of about twenty-three. He was initially a little awed by “Captain America”—a phenomenon Steve was increasingly familiar with— but relaxed when Pepper lobbed him some easy questions about his SHIELD duties.

The answer turned out to have more to do with Edwards’s duties. The Sentinel was a chemical analysis specialist. His job in the field was usually to detect and identify chemical weapons and booby-traps; the lab work he’d mentioned was usually analysis of previously unknown substances, sometimes alien in origin.

Mikey’s job was to stay near Edwards and, in the field, duck when he said to duck.

“What do you do when he’s in the lab?” Pepper asked.

“Mostly I just have to be there. Sometimes I help with recording data. Lately I’ve mostly been using that time to study.”

“Study?” Steve asked.

“For the FBI academy exams, sir,” Mikey explained. “They let Guides be Agents now; it’s a new program. I’ve applied for it.” He tucked his head and looked simultaneously sheepish and defiant.

“How does Edwards feel about that?” Pepper asked.

Mikey brightened. “He’s been great. He’s really understanding about giving me time to study; he even helps me with my flashcards sometimes. I was a little worried that he’d be old-fashioned about it, since he’s kind of…old. But he’s not. He’s great,” he repeated.

Definitely a good sign. They went on to ask some questions about how Edwards was to live with, and Mikey’s answers portrayed him as being just as reasonable and decent as Edwards’s had.

“Mr. Walsh, I know this is a delicate subject,” Pepper said next, “but we have to ask you about imprinting.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“What was that like? We’re familiar with the mechanics,” Pepper added. “We’re more interested in your impressions.”

“It was…okay,” Mikey said. “I mean, it only takes a couple of days. And he—Sentinel Edwards—was nice about it. It could have been a lot more embarrassing than it was.”

“Would you do it again?” Steve asked.

Mikey blinked. “That isn’t really up to me, sir,” he said, with the tone of someone pointing out something that should have been obvious.

“If it was,” Steve said. “Suppose you had a choice between two Sentinels, one who wanted to do it and one who didn’t.”

“That isn’t really how it works, sir,” Mikey said, just as polite and just as baffled. “Guides can request an agency of assignment, but not a particular Sentinel.”

“I know,” Steve said patiently, cringing inwardly at the evidence that it was this difficult for the young man to imagine a hypothetical scenario where he was given a choice about who he’d live and work with. “But if someone did ask your preference, for whatever reason, would the imprinting be a
“deal-breaker?”

“Oh. No, sir. They say that imprinting makes them like you more. So I suppose I’d go with one that wanted to do it. I’ve never really thought about it before.”

“Thank you very much for your help, Mr. Walsh,” Pepper said. “Is there anything else you’d like to share with us?”

“No, ma’am. Except….”

“Yes?”

“If he does get Sentinel Edwards, I hope he takes good care of him.” Steve was a little unsure who the “he’s” were in that sentence, but Mikey cleared it up by adding, “It isn’t fair for him to have to put up with a Guide who isn’t very good, just because he’s not as picky as some Sentinels.”

Steve had to admit, he hadn’t thought of it that way. Even by the standards of Steve’s day, Tony didn’t show much potential to be a particularly good Guide. He was brash, stubborn, and even his closest friends found him exhausting and irritating to deal with. Not exactly the calm, self-effacing figure that Guides were supposed to be. “We’ll keep that in mind,” Steve said.

“On the other hand,” Mikey added, “Edwards says he wants him, and I don’t think anybody else does. It’s better, if you can have a Sentinel who likes you.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, meeting his eyes. “You’ve been very helpful.”

After the Guide left, Pepper sighed. “We’re going with the weirdo who wants to lick him, aren’t we.”

“I think we have to.”

#

Tony stared at the 30-question, badly mimeographed, true-false quiz in front of him and counted his blessings. It was his second day in phase two of G-TAC training. Yesterday morning, he hadn’t even known there was a phase two, but it explained where those of his fellow trainees who had suddenly disappeared had gone. Some of them had spent a lot less time in phase one than he had—one timid girl the trainers never picked on had come and gone inside of a week. He thought it was a week, anyway. He’d mostly lost track of time.

What had he been thinking about? Right. Phase two, and the Case of the Disappearing Guides. They were here. In phase one, the only component that could be considered educational by any stretch of the imagination was the daily lecture. The rest of the time they spent having orders shouted at them—stand here, march there, say this, pick up that—and being punished if they didn’t comply quickly enough.

In phase two there was some of that, except it was more formalized—a set of drill commands that they all carried out in unison. Before, Tony would have hated it, but now he was just glad he’d moved on to something it was possible to learn how to do correctly. They still hit you if you did it wrong, but it was possible to do it right. Another component was PT, which was pretty much the same—orders were given; follow them—except the orders were to do push ups and sit-ups, things like that. Tony was glad he was in decent shape; there was more than one fat kid half his age who had a harder time in PT than he did. Then there were chores—mopping floors, scrubbing toilets, that kind of thing. The more advanced trainees had to wait on the trainers in their mess hall; Tony hadn’t had to do that yet and was dreading it. The last period was lessons. Sometimes that was lecture,
sometimes they had you take turns reading out loud from textbooks—there was a dyslexic kid who always fucked that up—and sometimes, like today, there was a filmstrip with a quiz after it. (Some part of Tony’s mind noted that the filmstrips were older than any two of his classmates combined, but mostly he didn’t care, because on a filmstrip day, all you had to do was keep your eyes on the screen and get the answers right on the quiz.)

An easy session was a good thing, because if you made it from one mealtime to the next without making one of the trainers hit you, you got to eat. Or, in the case of the after-dinner session, you got to sleep in your bunk. Breakfast was pretty easy to get—all you had to do was keep quiet in quarters, keep your area neat, and be ready for morning roll call. The others were a lot iffier. And if you ended up spending the night on your feet and being late to roll call, God help you.

He circled “true” and “false” for each question, carefully. Neatness counted. The arc reactor itched, but he didn’t scratch it, because nobody had fucking told him to do that, had they? No. He put his pencil down and faced forward until the trainer in charge told them to pass the papers forward.

Paging through them, she called out the names of the lucky winners. “Bellows. Garcia.” Bellows and Garcia got up silently and formed a line at the front of the room, followed by Harris, Iberra, and Kehoe. The dyslexic kid, Hambrick, let out a little sound of dismay; the secondary trainer belted him one across the face. Lingle and Maynor were called. Peraza. Roseman. Stark.

Tony got up and joined the line, followed by Stouffer and Wang.

The trainer-in-charge marched them to the mess, leaving the others behind with the secondary. Taking his place in the chow line, Tony was given a tray, a sandwich—two slices of bread, with margarine and a slice of bologna in between—a cup with two canned peach slices in it, and a carton of milk.

Yeah. It was a good day.

#

When Steve stopped by Pepper’s office on his way back from a meeting with Director Fury and SHIELD’s G-TAC liaison, he found her crying at her desk. “Ms. Potts?” he said, startled into formality. He’d never known what to do when a woman cried. He had even less experience with what to do when the CEO of a Fortune 500 company cried. If she’d been a man, and it was still the Forties, he would have left and pretended not to have seen anything. He put his hand on the doorknob, wondering if he should, perhaps, do that.

Pepper shook her head and waved him into the room. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Please, sit. I just—”

As he sat, she pushed a parcel across the desktop toward him. Inside was Tony’s suit—the gray one he’d worn to the G-TAC hearing. Underneath it were his dress shoes, belt, tie, and shirt, and under that was a plastic bag that held Tony’s watch, wallet, and phone. Taped to the front of the bag was a receipt for those items, with a wobbly version of Tony’s signature at the bottom.

He’d been shaking when he signed it. “It’s standard procedure,” he said, his voice sounding distant in his ears. “They return their effects by mail.” That was one of the things he’d learned from the receptionist at G-TAC, when they’d gone for Tony’s physical.

Pepper nodded, pulling a tissue from the box on her desk. “I know. I just—I don’t know why I’m crying, really.”
Steve did. Tony’s things looked so lost and empty there, like their owner had died. And if you tried to focus on how he was alive, you had to think about where he was. “He’s formally assigned to SHIELD—the paperwork went through yesterday,” he said instead. That was good news.

“Did they—they didn’t say anything about how he is,” Pepper said. It wasn’t quite a question.

“Just that he’s progressing with training.” God only knew what that meant. “Now that he’s SHIELD’s, Fury can start leaning on them for updates and a timeframe for when he’ll be finished.” They had already learned that G-TAC training took as long as G-TAC felt it should take, with a minimum of eight weeks. Tony had already been gone for a little over a month, so he might be over halfway done.

“Oh,” Pepper said, nodding, and blotting her eyes with another tissue. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, she repeated, “Okay. So. We know he’s coming back. That’s good. Is that information for public release?”

“Not the part about Fury leaning on them,” Steve said. “But the assignment to SHIELD is formalized, so we can release that. And that they say he’s progressing with training.”

“Good. Good. That should reassure some investors.”

Pepper was obviously trying for a brisk, professional tone, so Steve pretended that she had achieved it, and changed the subject to when they should hold the press conference.

#

Tony was fairly sure he had been left to die. He’d been at G-TAC for a while now—two months, maybe three. It was hazy. Most of the people who’d been in phase two when he got there were gone. He’d thought he was past the worst of it—there were no rumors of a phase three, and anyway, phase two was so much better than phase one that he figured it there was a phase three, it wouldn’t be too bad.

He’d thought that right up until he went down to Medical for what they told him were “inoculations”—they hadn’t offered any details, and questions weren’t encouraged, at G-TAC—and he’d woken up, stripped down to his briefs, in a cell with an overhead light, shelf bunk, chemical toilet, and fuck-all else.

He’d spent the first day resting up and trying to steel himself for whatever was coming next. When a day went by and nobody came—not even to bring him any food or water—he’d done some screaming at where he figured the surveillance cameras were hidden. Then he’d calmed himself down, trying some of the meditation tricks Bruce had taught him for dealing with his post-traumatic nightmares. Then the begging had started—asking them to let him out, to give him something to do, some fucking water for fuck’s sake, and he didn’t know what he’d done, but he swore he wouldn’t do it again. He’d even cried, which had been a waste of precious bodily fluids he couldn’t afford to lose.

Now, on what he guessed might be his third day in the cell, he was sitting cross-legged on the bunk, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. Trying to conserve energy, he told himself, but he’d die of thirst long before he starved. Although maybe not much more; even in phase two, he hadn’t been eating much—two meals a day on a really good day, and the portions were not generous. He was long past the part where his ribs showed; his hipbones and collarbones stood out like coathangers under his skin, and his chest was sunken around the arc reactor. The billionaire-genius-playboy-philanthropist looked like something out of a Feed the Children ad.
He was entertaining a vague, hopeless fantasy of his teammates coming to his rescue—the Hulk smashing that wall right there would a treat, about now—when the door opened.

“On your feet, Guide,” a trainer said, slapping a truncheon against his palm.

Tony obeyed—it was instinct, now, and even if he had taken the time for rational thought, he wasn’t about to fuck up what might be his one chance to get out of here alive. But he was weakened from hunger and dehydration, and as soon as he stood, his head swam. He stumbled forward, and oh, shit, he was going to fall right into the trainer; they really, really hated that….

Hands caught him. “Easy, now,” a warm voice said. The first one he’d heard in months that didn’t have the sneering tone G-TAC used on Guides.

Tony’s vision cleared, and he saw a man in SHIELD uniform, with Sentinel tabs. Tall, with close-cropped sandy hair, going gray. Tony glanced up at him—he shouldn’t have; the trainers didn’t like that, either—before dropping his gaze to the Sentinel’s hand, clasped around his arm just above the elbow.

“Guide,” the trainer said. “Sentinel Edwards. You’ll show him some respect, if you know what’s good for you.”

Tony nodded, and managed to get out a “Yes, sir,” from his dry mouth.

“We’re getting out of here,” Edwards said. He shifted his grip on Tony, supporting him with an arm around his shoulders, and took him out of the cell.

They didn’t go very far. It turned out Tony had been in Medical this whole time; a minute’s shuffling, unsteady walk took him back to an exam room, the same one where he’d had his “inoculation,” or maybe its twin. Edwards sat him down on the exam table, and stayed next to him so he wouldn’t fall off of it.

A pretty nurse came in. Tony was too thirsty, weak, and scared to really mind being seen like this, practically naked and looking like hell, but his relentlessly active mind catalogued the humiliation for later review. “Can we get him some water?” Edwards asked her.

“Of course, Sentinel.” The nurse went to the sink and drew a small paper cup of water. “Just a little, at first,” she warned, handing the cup to Edwards.

Tony tried to raise a shaking hand to take the cup, but Edwards patted it back down, saying, “I’ve got you.” He felt a moment’s stab of panic—maybe he’d just lost himself the chance of a drink—but Edwards held the paper cup to his lips and let him have a long swallow. There was still half the cup left when Edwards took it away, but he managed not to protest. “All right?” Edwards asked.

“Yes, sir.” If anything, the small amount of water had only made him more aware of how thirsty he was, but he knew better than to complain.

It must have been the right answer; Edwards put the cup back to his mouth and let him have the rest of it.

Edwards stayed beside him, keeping a hand on his back, while the nurse took Tony’s temperature and blood pressure, and listened to his heart. “Blood pressure’s very low,” she noted.

“No shit,” Edwards snapped. Tony flinched a little at his tone, and Edwards patted his back soothingly. “It’s all right, buddy. We’re getting out of here soon.”
“Can he urinate?” the nurse asked.

“Can you?” Edwards asked Tony.

“No. Sir.” He hadn’t peed since early in his second day in the cell.

“Let me get the doctor,” the nurse said.

A moment later, she returned with the same doctor who had done the “inoculation,” an older man with an incongruously grandfatherly manner. “Well, he isn’t looking too good is he?” he said jovially. “We’ll give him an IV—just half a liter or so—to get his fluid volume back up,” he went on.

The nurse went to a cabinet, presumably to get what the doctor had ordered, and Edwards asked, “What about something to eat, if we’re going to be here a while?”

“It won’t be that long,” the doctor said. “We’ll push the fluids. Solids can wait until you have him in quarters, but you could give him some juice to jump-start his gastric system.”

“Please,” Edwards said.

The fluids didn’t take long—maybe half an hour. While they were going in, Edwards let him sip slowly at a can of juice—tinny tasting, but sweet and wet—and then another cup of water. He’d expected to perk up a little, now that he had some fluid and at least a few calories in his system, but instead he felt weaker. Exhausted, even though there had been nothing to do in the cell but sleep.

He didn’t much care, except that he didn’t know how he’d manage whatever they wanted of him next. He felt…calm. It might have been the first time since arriving here that he hadn’t been terrified.

After the IV bag had finished, the nurse asked for that urine sample again, which Tony was made to provide there in the exam room in front of everyone. He only managed to produce a small amount, thick and dark yellow, but apparently it reassured them that they hadn’t dehydrated him into kidney failure.

“What did you give him?” Edwards said suddenly, his voice sharp.

“Just a sedative,” the doctor said. “With the IV fluids.”

“What the hell did you do that for?” He patted Tony’s shoulder, his touch reassuring even if his voice wasn’t.

“As you know, your director insisted we rush the process,” the doctor answered. “We wanted to make sure he’d cooperate for you. You did want to imprint, didn’t you?” Something about the sneering way he said imprint made the Sentinel angry—Tony didn’t know how he knew that, but he did.

“Yes, I do, and that isn’t—” He stopped abruptly. “Never mind. Can I take him now?”

“Yes, he’s as ready as he’ll ever be.”

“Clothes, for him?” Edwards asked, helping Tony down from the gurney. Tony wavered on his feet until Edwards steadied him with an arm around his shoulders.

“His uniform issue will be delivered to your quarters.”

With a slight shake of his head, Edwards propped Tony up against the gurney. He almost fell over, but was glad when Edwards’s overcoat settled around his shoulders, followed by Edwards’s arm
again. Later, he’d be glad that he hadn’t been made to walk almost naked to wherever he was going next.

The Guide at Edwards’s side smelled of stale sweat, ketosis, and fear. When he’d arrived at the Center, they’d told him that they were trying a new protocol on Tony—“a period of isolation and reflection prior to introduction,” they’d called it. It had sounded all right. He should have realized that meant it was something terrible. At a guess, he’d say that they’d kept Tony confined without food or water for the maximum legally allowable period. 71 hours. And 59 minutes, if they were being really precise about it.

Tony didn’t make a sound on the way to quarters—something that shouldn’t have been surprising for a Guide just out of G-TAC, but completely at odds with everything he’d been told to expect from Tony Stark.

The Sentinel quarters were the usual sort of place, like a corporate apartment or long-stay hotel suite, with a living/dining room, fully stocked kitchenette, bedroom, and bath. Edwards gave Tony another glass of juice—he let Edwards feed it to him, clinging to Edwards with one hand and the kitchen counter with the other—and then took him into the bathroom. Food was a priority, and he was going to have to get Tony into bed before he fell over completely, but Edwards couldn’t live with the stink of fear and starvation for long.

Tony perked up a little in the shower, washing his hair and body under Edwards’s direction, but his hands still shook too much to shave, so Edwards had to sit him down on the toilet and do that for him. “There, now. Can you manage brushing your teeth?”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said meekly, but he staggered as he stood up, and Edwards had to help him stand upright at the sink.

His obvious vulnerability made Edwards want even more badly to imprint him—to drag him off to a cave and wrap him up in something warm, feed him and cuddle him until he wasn’t afraid anymore. But Tony would have no idea what was happening to him—and, sedated, he wasn’t likely to understand any explanation Edwards tried to give him.

Better, in the long run, to keep his hands to himself as much as he could, until Tony had regained at least a little of his strength and equilibrium. Poor kid.

Or not kid, really. It was hard to hold the two facts in his head at the same time that, on the one hand, Tony was on his first assignment as a Guide, and on the other, that he was forty-three.

They had provided a robe, though, and Tony clutched it around himself when Edwards helped him into it. He settled Tony on the sofa—he didn’t like having him out of reach, not when they were supposed to be imprinting, but he didn’t want him to fall over, either—and returned to the kitchenette to look for something he could feed him. A sandwich and some fruit should do. He cut the sandwich into quarters and gave them to Tony one at a time—letting him bolt it down and make himself puke would not be doing him any favors.

“Did they tell you anything about what’s happening?” Edwards asked once Tony had eaten about half his meal. He was clearly fighting to keep his eyes open, but—well. Edwards would fill him in now, and do it again once the sedative wore off, if he had to.

Tony swallowed. “No, sir.”
“We’re going to stay here a couple of days and get to know each other,” he continued. “That’s—we’ll talk more about that after you’ve rested, okay? After that’s done, we’ll go home.”

Tony paused in his chewing and glanced up at him.

“You’re friends managed to get you assigned to SHIELD,” he began. “To the Avengers Initiative. So you’ll be able to live at home, since your building is the Avengers’ official residence. Ms. Potts thought that would help. She sends her love, by the way.”

Tony relaxed a little at that, nodding.

“We’ll have to live together, of course, but I’m pretty low-maintenance as Sentinels go. The plan—such as it is—is that you’ll serve as Iron Man when needed, and keep up with some of your technological projects, and be my Guide sort of…part-time.”

Edwards couldn’t tell if Tony was taking much of this on board; his eyes flicked from Edwards’s face to the plate of fruit. Yeah, he might be more concerned with getting some food in his system than the long-term future right now. “Not sure how that’s going to work,” he said, taking a slice of melon and offering it to Tony. Edwards wished he’d take it with his mouth instead of his fingers, but it didn’t seem like a good time to insist. “We’ll have to sort out the details when we get back and see what kind of duties Director Fury has in mind for us.”

Swallowing, Tony said dully, “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Edwards winced a little. “I know the G-TAC guys like it, but you don’t actually have to say ‘sir’ every time you talk to me. I’m Ed.”

Tony hesitated before taking the next bite that Edwards offered him. “Ed Edwards?” he asked, putting the grape in his mouth.

“Horatio Edwards,” he answered. “Yeah, you see why I go by Ed. Parents were big Shakespeare fans. I’m lucky compared to my sister, Lucretia.”

Tony raised his eyebrows and silently mouthed the word, “Wow.”

“High school was rough for her. Anyway.’” Edwards returned to the subject at hand. “You’ve been sedated, did you hear the doctor say that?”

He nodded.

“That’s not exactly ideal, but we’ll make do. Do you think you can give me a link?”

“Sir?”

Right; they still didn’t teach linking at G-TAC. “Let me see your hand for a minute.” Tony gave it to him without hesitation; that much was good. “Try to relax.” This was much easier with a Guide who knew what he was doing—a lot of them had instinctive defenses. But if Tony did, the sedative had flattened them. He established the link, and did his best not to recoil when the full weight of Tony’s fear and hopelessness hit him. Closing his eyes, Edwards tried to project calm and reassurance.

It didn’t help much. Tony’s heartbeat, when he locked onto it, sounded like that of a scared rabbit, overlaid with a weird hum like a high-tension power line. The arc reactor, he supposed. That was going to take some getting used to. The other sound he was expecting was missing, and it took him a moment to realize that Tony was holding his breath. “Breathe,” he said, taking a deep breath in demonstration.
Tony’s breathing matched his for ten breaths or so, then faltered. Opening his eyes, Edwards realized it was because he’d fallen asleep.

Well. That was enough to be getting on with, he supposed. Detaching his hand from Tony’s, he shifted him so that he was lying down on the couch, and put one of the throw pillows under his head. Even with as much weight as Tony had obviously recently lost, he wasn’t small, and Edwards didn’t think carrying him into the bedroom would go over well.

His decision was reinforced when he went into the bedroom for a blanket and saw that there was only one bed. With a mental eye-roll at G-TAC, he took the blanket back to Tony, covered him up, and left him to rest.

#

Tony woke, muzzy-headed and unsure where he was. Not the cave, or the cell, or his bunk in quarters. It seemed like there should have been a fourth option, but he couldn’t remember what it was.

Oh, right. Home. But he wasn’t there, either. And just thinking about it kind of made him want to cry, which he was fairly sure someone would hit him, if he did.

“Tony?”

Something about the voice made him want to trust it, though he couldn’t have said why. He opened his eyes.

Then he remembered where he was, and sort of why. A Sentinel had come and gotten him out of the cell, and had given him food and water and clothes, without even making him do anything to earn them. He didn’t think the Sentinel had hit him, either, but it was hard to remember. He got hit a lot.

And he was likely to be again, if he didn’t figure out what the Sentinel wanted. He’d been spoken to. “Sir?” he answered.

“That’s me,” the Sentinel said. Edwards, Tony remembered. He’d said his name was Ed Edwards. No, Horatio Edwards. But he was called Ed. And he was still talking, so Tony had better pay attention. “Do you think you could eat again?”

Tony wasn’t sure what to make of that question. He was hungry, yes. He was always hungry. And also kind of nauseous, but that wasn’t new, either. If Edwards wanted him to eat, he’d eat. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t. But Edwards had asked, and he was supposed to answer, so he finally said, “Yes, sir?” on the grounds that as far as he could remember, nobody had hit him since the last time he’d eaten.

“Oh, okay.” Edwards stood up and looked at him for a moment. “Just, uh, yeah, stay there.”

That order was easy enough to follow. Tony stayed where he was, and tried not to doze off again. He was so tired. Right, somebody had said something about sedatives. That was going to make it hard to stay on top of things. Surprisingly, Edwards seemed to be making allowances for it. He couldn’t imagine why, but he wasn’t about to complain.

Of course, he wouldn’t have complained in any case.

Edwards returned with a plate of chicken, roasted potatoes, and carrots. It smelled good. Tony wondered what he was supposed to eat. “Sit up,” Edwards said. Tony had just about managed to do so when Edwards put the plate down and reached for him.
He didn’t flinch. You weren’t supposed to; something about it implying you didn’t think you deserved to be hit.

But Edwards didn’t hit him, just sort of tugged him upright. Not particularly roughly, either. Then he sat next to Tony and picked up the plate. Balancing it on his knee, he picked up a piece of chicken—it was already cut up, into cubes—and held it out, saying, “Here.”

Tony reached for it, and then immediately tried to look like he had not been doing that when Edwards said, “No.” He didn’t think Edwards was fooled—at all—but he didn’t hit him then, either.

He was beginning to suspect that hitting was not Edwards’s default method of communication. That would make a nice change.

While he was thinking that through, Edwards was saying, “Just—let me do it this way,” and bringing the cube of chicken to his mouth.

Experimentally, Tony opened his mouth. Edwards put the food in his mouth and, while Tony was chewing and swallowing it, queued up the next bite.

Okay. That was weird, but he could roll with it. Not that anyone was asking him.

And anyway, it was pretty good chicken.

Edwards let him eat most of what was on the plate, along with a big glass of water. Then he took him to the bathroom, which Tony appreciated, even though having one guy stand there and watch him piss was, somehow, a hell of a lot weirder than doing so in the company of a dozen other trainees with two trainers watching.

But not as weird as the one who made them each, individually, request permission to “tinkle.” Not even when he asked, “Feel better?” after Tony was finished, like he was a preschooler or something.

“Yes, sir,” he said obediently.

“Good. Wash your hands. If you feel like you have to go again, just let me know, all right? We don’t want any accidents.”

They must have told him about the time Tony had pissed his pants. He should have guessed as much—the trainers seemed to love talking about it.

His suspicion was confirmed when Edwards, steering him out of the bathroom with a hand on his back, asked, “Do you really have trouble controlling your bladder, or just if you aren’t allowed to go when you need to?”

Tony burned with humiliation. He’d thought he was past being able to feel any such thing, but discussing that incident with a man he was going to be forced to work with was enough to do it.

“Just if I’m not allowed to go, sir,” he said.

“I figured it was something like that,” Edwards said. “We shouldn’t have a problem, then. Here, sit down. No, next to me. There. Do you remember what we talked about before you went to sleep?” he asked once Tony was seated next to him on the sofa.

Not really. “Uh, a little, sir,” he said.

“You were pretty out of it,” Edwards said, sounding as though he thought that was a perfectly reasonable excuse for not paying attention. “Part of it was about how you don’t have to call me ‘sir’
every time you speak. My name’s Ed.”

That sounded vaguely familiar. And for some reason Tony had the theme to Mr. Ed in his head now. Edwards went on to remind him that he belonged to SHIELD now, and Edwards was officially on the Avengers. He wondered if that meant Edwards was Iron Man now. He’d thought, before, that he’d make SHIELD regret it if they suggested any such thing. He knew better now.

Edwards explained how they were, basically, going to expect him to do everything he had already been doing for SHIELD and be a Guide besides. Probably while half-starved and aching from being beaten. Yay. He wasn’t surprised Fury had swung things that way. SHIELD basically owned him now—SHIELD and Edwards. Win-win, for everybody except Tony.

They’d be living in Tony’s old apartment—Edwards mentioned that Pepper had approved of that plan. Hearing her name—Edwards called her “Ms. Potts”—gave him very mixed feelings. He longed to see her again, her and his other friends, but dreaded the thought of them seeing him like this. Broken.

In some ways, it would have been easier to start over in some new place where no one knew him, rather than having to parade his humiliation through the wreckage of his old life. But it really didn’t matter what he wanted; he’d learned that much. “Yes, sir.” Except he wasn’t supposed to say sir. Shit, what was he supposed to say? Not Ed, surely. But he didn’t have any other guesses.

Edwards didn’t object, though. “We’ll go home in a couple of days,” he continued, which, yeah, sounded familiar. “I’m sure you’ve had a pretty hard time of it, since you’ve been here. But you’re all right now.”

Tony’d believe that when he saw it. But it was better, yeah. Edwards telling him what he wanted instead of hitting him when he failed to guess correctly was a tremendous improvement. And telling him what was going to happen to him—he really appreciated that.

“The other thing is—this is supposed to be a secret, but Director Fury’s planning to release you after your first term of service is up. So, four years. I’m sure that’s four years longer than you wanted to spend as a Guide, but it’s not forever.”

He couldn’t look too closely at that. He couldn’t imagine how he’d go back after this. Tony Stark the genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist was dead. Maybe he’d become a recluse, when this nightmare ended. If it really did. He didn’t trust Fury not to change his mind, if Tony pissed him off. Or if he was too useful this way. But he tucked the thought aside as a sort of distant hope—maybe, someday, this would all be over.

“We’ll be staying here for a couple of days,” Edwards went on. “To sort of…get settled into the partnership, before we start figuring out how we’re going to fit in with the team. Have you heard of imprinting?”

He didn’t think so—not in any context that applied to this situation, at least. “Uh, no. Sir. Unless you mean that thing about the ducklings that thought a bowling ball was their mother.” Babbling. Great.

“No, not—well, it is a little bit like that, I guess. It’s…well, there’s a lot to it that we’re going to skip, because I wasn’t expecting you to…” Edwards apparently decided not to explain what was wrong with Tony, that he didn’t want to do this imprinting, whatever it was. Instead, he said, “Well, it’s just not a good time. But I have to familiarize all of my senses with…you. I’ll have to look you over, listen to your heartbeat and things—we did a little bit of that before your nap; I don’t know if you remember. That part probably isn’t…well. I also have to touch you, pretty much everywhere.”
Tony very carefully didn’t cross his arms over his chest, but it didn’t do any good. Edwards continued, “Ms. Potts mentioned that you don’t like to have the arc reactor touched.”

Of course. Tony had somehow managed to keep that a secret all this time—the trainers hadn’t realized what had set him off that first day—but Pepper had given it away. She didn’t know what it was like here; she probably thought that telling Edwards that meant he wouldn’t do it.

“I think I’m going to have to,” Edwards said, confirming his fears, “but we’ll work up to that.” He paused. “And then there’s smell and taste. It’s—I know it’s strange. But it’ll make things a lot easier, once we start working together, if I’m thoroughly familiar with…all of the sensory input you give off.”

So Edwards was going to sniff him, and…what? He hoped to God the “taste” part didn’t involve actual cannibalism. It seemed unlikely. Blood-drinking, maybe?

“So while I’m, er, scenting you, I’ll have to occasionally touch your skin with my lips or tongue.”

Oh, was that all? Granted, it sounded like something a teenage boy would say to get into a girl’s pants, but the way Edwards was carrying on about it made him expect something more dire.

“It’s normal to find it a little awkward and embarrassing at first,” Edwards added. “But it’s really nothing to be alarmed about. If you get uncomfortable and need a break, just say so. It’s not a problem. Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said. After the last couple of months he’d had, being eyeballed, felt up, and licked by a total stranger barely registered on the discomfort scale.

“Do you have any questions about it, before we get started?”

“No, sir,” Tony said. “Where do you want me?”

It turned out Edwards wanted him on the bed, lying on his back with the front of the robe open. Edwards linked with him again—this time, putting his hand to Tony’s face in a way that reminded him of Spock doing a mind-meld. Linking with Edwards didn’t seem as unpleasant as that time on the Helicarrier—or maybe he just had a thicker skin, now.

He did discover that he didn’t particularly love having the arc reactor stared at, at length and at close range, either. But once Edwards decided he’d had enough of an eyeful of that and moved on, Tony found himself relaxing.

So much so that, when Edwards’s hand left his face and resettled on his hip, he startled awake. After a moment of abject terror—historically, falling asleep without authorization did not end well—he realized that Edwards had taken his hand back off him, and was saying, “Sorry, that was…I was hoping you’d sleep through this part. Is this better?” He put his hand on Tony’s knee instead.

After a moment of confusion, he realized that Edwards had thought he was reacting to Edwards getting near his junk; there wasn’t any good way to explain that that wasn’t it at all, so he just said, “Yes, sir.”

“Okay, good. Take a few deep breaths.”

Tony did, and Edwards resumed his examination.

#
They managed to get through the half-assed version of imprinting that Edwards had decided on after realizing how skittish Tony was. Tony generally accepted hand-feeding, but if he balked, Edwards didn’t press the issue, and he decided not to even float the idea of helping Tony with hygiene activities, beyond what he’d already done while Tony was sedated. He also decided—reluctantly—to accept it when Tony shifted out of his reach after each sensory familiarization session. Normally, he liked to keep a Guide he was imprinting within arm’s reach—if not actually touching—but Tony seemed more settled when there was a little distance between them.

On the positive side, Edwards formed clear sensory impressions of his new Guide, and Tony quickly picked up the knack of linking. But the moment where an imprinting clicked—where the Guide learned to relax and trust him, to accept having his Sentinel in his space—never happened.

Edwards had nagging doubts about that. Maybe a real imprinting would have worked. In the Corps, if you were a Guide’s first Sentinel, you didn’t make any alterations to the process. The Guide was given to you already undressed and bound, and they absolutely hated it, but after two or three days of constant contact and being dependent on their Sentinels for every need, the Guides got used to it.

Of course, in that case, you had the orientation instructors telling them that was how it was going to be—you didn’t have to explain it yourself, so during the part where the Guides found it unpleasant and irrational, they didn’t think it was your fault.

But maybe, no matter how traumatic it was at first, Tony would have figured out that he could trust him, by the time it was over. Unless, of course, the initial trauma was so bad he never got over it and hated him forever. It was a tossup, really.

Logically, Edwards knew that the less-invasive approach made the most sense, but emotionally, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was a bad Sentinel who wasn’t looking after his Guide the way he should.

Even though it was too late to change course now, he couldn’t stop gnawing at it. Particularly when, on the second night of the imprinting period, he finally got around to touching the arc reactor. Tony had said he was ready—well, he said, “Yes, sir,” when Edwards asked if he was—but he was clearly petrified when Edwards sat next to him on the sofa and reached for his chest.

“Easy,” he said, wishing like hell that he didn’t have to do this. But he did. Didn’t he? He’d gotten used to the sound the reactor made, but there was still something about it that made the inside of his nose itch, like he was sniffing ammonia. He had to understand the stimulus before he could learn to disregard it. Putting his hands on the device would help him figure it out. “You’re fine. This is going to be all—”

Edwards found himself pitched backwards, jaw throbbing. He’d had his sense of touch opened up as wide as it would go, so it was all he could do to dial back down before he zoned on the pain. When he’d recovered, he saw that Tony was standing halfway across the room, one hand still curled into a fist, heart pounding and the stink of fear rolling off of him.

“Oh shit oh shit oh shit,” Tony watched, barely able to think, as Edwards sat up and rubbed at his jaw. He looked like he could hardly believe Tony had hit him.

Tony couldn’t believe it either. The last couple of days had really not been too bad at all—the licking
and the other sensory stuff was weird, but it hadn’t hurt. And the hand-feeding, also weird, but at least he’d gotten to eat. And Edwards hadn’t hit him, not even when he’d forgotten and reached for food on his own, which he’d done a couple of times.

But that was about to change, definitely. There was no way he was going to get away with this.


Tony swallowed hard. He almost wished Edwards would just get on with it, instead of making him wait to see what his punishment would be. Except he was pretty sure that once it started—whatever it was—he’d wish he was still waiting.

“C’mere,” Edwards said, beckoning him over.

He really didn’t want to, but disobeying again would only make things worse.

Edwards patted the cushion next to him and held out his hand. “Sit. Link.”

Tony obeyed again, surprised to find that the feelings that came through the link weren’t rage or hatred. More like…concern. And maybe a touch of embarrassment.

“Damn, that hurt,” Edwards said after a moment. “So. Not liking to have the arc reactor touched, that was kind of an understatement, I take it.”

“Sir,” Tony said, dry-mouthed.

“What’s the problem?”

The problem was that the last time he’d been sitting on a couch and a man tried to touch his arc reactor, he’d almost died. Edwards wasn’t Obie—and thank God for that—but Tony couldn’t shake the association. But he couldn’t say that. “No excuse, sir.” Sometimes the trainers accepted that, as an answer, when they asked why you’d fucked up.

“Yeah. Okay.” Edwards was breathing deeply, and still occasionally rubbing at his jaw with his free hand. “I hope I don’t need to tell you that hitting me in the face is not a good way to get out of something you don’t want to do.”

No shit. “Yessir.”

“Saying you weren’t ready, would have been a good start. But we’re going to have to do this, now.”

So, what—Tony’s punishment was something that was going to happen anyway? That didn’t make any sense, but he wasn’t about to argue the point.

“Why don’t you go in the kitchen and get me some ice, for my face, while I think about how we’re going to do this.”

Tony got some ice and wrapped it in a clean dishtowel, very carefully not thinking about all the times he’d been hit in the face recently that nobody ever got him any ice for. Edwards was a Sentinel; it mattered if he was hurt.

“Thanks,” Edwards said when he returned with it. Applying the improvised icepack to his jaw, he added, “I don’t really have this much of a glass jaw; I just had my sense of touch dialed up. Kind of knocked me for a loop. I’ll live.” Repositioning the ice, he went on, “First off, is there any point to trying that again? I have to warn you, if you say, ‘Yes, sir’ and then hit me in the face again, I’m
going to be angry.”

That was more than reasonable; Tony didn’t quite understand why he wasn’t angrier now. “Probably not, sir.”

“Didn’t think so. All right. Option one, we can tie your hands behind your back, and do it that way. I’m under no illusions that it would do much for our relationship, but we could get it over with quick. And it might make me feel better.”

Option one wasn’t particularly thrilling, but Tony could see the sense in it. And he knew it was a fairly small price to pay for what he’d done.

“Option two, I could make a call down to Medical and have them send up some stuff to sedate you again. That’s probably going to mean getting a late start back to Manhattan tomorrow, but my guess is that that way would be easier on you.”

It sure as hell would. Granted, the thought of being helpless while Edwards pawed at the arc reactor was horrifying, but since it was going to happen one way or the other, being insensible while it happened was definitely the way to go. “Yes, sir.”

“You’d rather do it that way?”

“Yes, sir,” he repeated. Since he was asking.

“Okay.” He picked up a phone—a landline with an honest-to-God cord; Tony wondered if he’d fallen into a time warp—and punched a few buttons. “Edwards. No. No, he’s fine. But I want to sedate him again. Uh-huh. Yes, I know I was unhappy about it last time. Uh-huh. Yes. No, just have them leave it outside the door. Yep.” He hung up, shaking his head.

“Come on, you should eat something before we do this.”

That was a surprise, too, but Tony wasn’t about to look a gift sandwich in the mouth, and kept his hands to himself while Edwards fed it to him.

Then Edwards checked outside the apartment door, and came back with a needle on a plastic tray. “Under the circumstances,” he said, tapping the syringe, “I think I’d rather inject this into your rump than your arm. As long as you think you can manage not kicking me in the balls while I’m doing it.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said.

“I have absolutely no faith in you saying that. Just so you know. Let’s go in here,” he added, jerking his thumb toward the bedroom.

There was a decent chance Tony would have managed not to punch him in the face at all, if they’d done it in there from the beginning. But he didn’t argue.

#

It would probably look something like this, if Tony wasn’t afraid of him. His Guide was sprawled on his back, eyes heavy-lidded and unfocused. If you didn’t look too closely, he seemed relaxed and comfortable, not drugged and unresponsive.

With the benefit of almost half an hour’s hindsight, Edwards was beginning to think that his snap decision to force the issue of touching the arc reactor had been a mistake. He had to familiarize himself with the reactor, but he didn’t have to do it today. Maybe Tony would have been more comfortable with it in a week or two. That way, he’d be at home. He could have had somebody he
trusted sit in, if that helped.

But Edwards had told himself that he couldn’t leave Tony with the impression that hitting his Sentinel would lead to him getting his own way, and that it would do him good to see that he had no choice but to submit to Edwards’s will—and that doing so wouldn’t hurt him. Really, he ought to punish him. As a rule, Edwards didn’t punish Guides often—setting clear expectations and establishing rapport was more effective, in his experience. It was even sometimes better to be flexible about rules and protocol if it minimized conflict—as horrified as G-TAC would be at the idea. But this wasn’t some petty rule Tony had broken; striking a Sentinel was a major violation.

But Tony’s lashing out at him had clearly been a defensive reflex, not any kind of conscious decision. Edwards had the distinct impression there were undercurrents he didn’t know about. It was public knowledge that Tony had gotten the original arc reactor during his captivity in Afghanistan; it didn’t take a tremendous leap of imagination to guess that the circumstances must have been traumatic. Not liking to have a near-stranger touching it was understandable.

So punishment wasn’t appropriate. Insisting that Tony let him carry through his examination of the arc reactor was a very minimal disciplinary response. More than reasonable. Except that if he’d understood Tony better, he’d have realized that Tony wasn’t ready for him to try it. If he’d managed to gain Tony’s trust, Tony would have told him he wasn’t ready. The incident was as much his fault as it was Tony’s.

He could have found a way to back down without losing face. Instead, he’d dug in his heels and escalated the situation. Exactly the wrong approach to take with Tony Stark, from everything he’d heard.

At this point, though, he might as well go through with it. In a few more minutes, Tony would be too out of it to know whether Edwards touched the reactor or not, and at least this way it would be over with. They could put it behind them, instead of having to drag the issue up again down the road.

The skin around the reactor was dry, and it smelled of metal and petrochemicals. There wasn’t as much superficial scarring as Edwards would have expected, but he could feel where muscle and bone had been rearranged to make room for the reactor, which penetrated more deeply into Tony’s chest than he would have guessed.

He wondered if it hurt. Having it put in must have. Even in a good hospital, the recovery from surgery like that would have been a bitch, and Tony hadn’t been in a hospital.

Edwards pushed that thought aside; there was nothing he could do about it now. He turned his attention to the arc reactor itself. The blue glow of the thing was strangely pleasant. And the hum was fine; no worse than fluorescent strip lighting. But when he put his fingers on it, the nose-tingling sensation increased.

He’d have to tell Tony, when he woke up—Edwards would be more than happy to leave the arc reactor alone in the future. It was just weird. Almost like it was vibrating, but it wasn’t. And there was something disorienting about touching it, like—

Of course. The thing powered an electromagnet. And Edwards had the ability to sense magnetic fields—not all Sentinels did, but it wasn’t uncommon, either. He’d used the ability more in his early days in the Corps—for the orienteering course, and on scouting missions, before he’d taken the chemical analysis specialty.

Testing the theory, he closed his eyes, touched the reactor, and tried to find magnetic north. He couldn’t do it.
When he took his hand off the reactor, he still couldn’t. For a moment, Edwards wondered if he’d lost the knack of it. But a few experiments proved that he still had it—he just had to be about two feet away from the arc reactor.

All right. So now he knew what it was that bothered him about it; he just had to buckle down and get used to it.

#

“We can go home whenever you’re ready,” Edwards was saying. “There’s a SHIELD car waiting.”

Tony was at the kitchen table, working his way through a plate of eggs and toast. Edwards had decided to let him feed himself this time; he had no idea why. Maybe he just didn’t feel like picking up scrambled eggs with his fingers. But he stopped eating and put down his fork. What was that supposed to mean? That he should have been “ready” some time ago seemed the most obvious interpretation, but Edwards didn’t seem nearly angry enough for that.

“You’re fine; finish your breakfast,” Edwards said.

Tony didn’t make the Sentinel tell him twice, even though a thread of nervousness uncoiled in his stomach. Home. Well. He was going to have to face it sooner or later.

“We can call in before we leave; let them know we’re on our way,” Edwards added.

So there’d be some sort of gauntlet to run, instead of just slipping in unnoticed. Perfect.

#

Tony looked decidedly unhappy at the sight of his G-TAC uniform. Edwards couldn’t blame him. Made of blue polyester, it looked like something a gas station attendant would wear, or maybe a mall security guard. “You really only have to wear it for the trip home,” he said. “SHIELD Guides can wear plainclothes on duty—Ms. Potts said she’d send Jarvis the dress code, and he’d order anything you don’t already have.” Edwards wasn’t sure who Jarvis was; from the context, he guessed Tony’s PA. “And off-duty, you can wear whatever you want.”

Tony said, “Yes, sir,” and took his uniform into the bathroom to get dressed.

On the way back to the city, Tony seemed, if anything, even more withdrawn than he’d been during the not-really-imprinting. He sat huddled against the passenger side door of the SHIELD car, as far away from Edwards as he could get while still be inside the car, and said only “Yes, sir,” and “No, sir,” when Edwards tried to draw him out.

Really, what did he want? That Tony had punched him in the face yesterday and was still in one piece ought to make it more than clear that Edwards wasn’t planning to get on his case for every little thing.

When they arrived at the Tower, Ms. Potts was waiting in the lobby. She greeted Tony with a hug, and pressed a smartphone—a Starkphone, Edwards suspected—into his hand. “Tony. You look….” She shook her head. “It’s great to see you.”

“I’m fine,” he said, with a smile that was more of a grimace, and a glance over his shoulder at Edwards.
“Ms. Potts,” Edwards said, nodding.

“We were expecting you earlier this morning.” Ms. Potts continued, starting towards a bank of elevators.

“Yeah, I know. Uh. Delay. But it’s fine. I’m here now.”

They boarded the elevator. Edwards very carefully did not do anything about the fact that Ms. Potts still had her hand on his Guide’s arm. Tony seemed to be getting some comfort from it, and that was what mattered.

“Everybody’s hoping to see you. Rhodey said you probably wouldn’t be up for a big welcome home party, but…they’re all on the common floor.”

“Yeah, um.” Tony glanced up at Edwards. “We can—we could stop by?”

“Sure,” Edwards said. He’d seen the Avengers around various S.H.I.E.L.D. facilities, had even worked with Barton and Romanoff once or twice, but he hadn’t met them as Tony’s team—his team, now—yet. He’d figured he should start with Tony.

Ms. Potts pressed the elevator buttons and said, ‘Floor 70 is the Avengers’ common area—lounge, kitchen, dining room, media room, gym, all that. Tony’s place is one floor up, in the penthouse. We had your things put in the bedroom next to Tony’s.”

“Sounds good.” Edwards knew that Ms. Potts had hoped to set him up on a different floor—each member of the team had one, apparently—but Edwards had explained that he had to live with his Guide.

There was a lot more hugging on floor 70. Captain America, Dr. Banner, and an African-American man in Air Force blues, whom Edwards eventually learned was Colonel Rhodes, all hugged Tony. Thor did a sort of double arm-clasp, but Agents Coulson, Barton and Romanoff just sort of nodded at him from across the room. Frankly, Edwards was a lot more comfortable with that.

It turned out not to be a good time for getting to know his new teammates—they were much more interested in crowding around Tony, offering him various food, drinks, and tech toys, and saying things like, “You look…tired.”

Captain Rogers met Edwards’s eye and nodded, but that was about as friendly as anyone got.

#

Tony was just glad that Edwards left him alone during his welcome home. Being able to live in the Tower and work with his team sounded like a good thing, but he hated the thought of having to cringe and cower here, in front of them. He knew he’d have to eventually, but at least it wasn’t yet.

It was terrific to see everyone again, to catch up on the latest news about the missions the Avengers could have used him on, and how Thor still hadn’t mastered the microwave. But it was also kind of nerve wracking to have them all looking at him like he had changed—like they knew he had changed—and trying and failing to say that he looked okay. It was kind of a relief when Rhodey came over and explained that he had to be going. “I was hoping to have more time, but I have meetings I can’t push back.”

He’d have had more time if Tony hadn’t needed to be sedated, had come home when he was supposed to. “Sure, I understand,” Tony said, with a smile that he suspected looked as fake as it felt. “I’ll catch you another time.”
“Call me whenever, okay?”

Edwards apparently decided that Rhodey leaving meant the party was over; he appeared at Tony’s side and said, “How about we go upstairs and get settled?”

Tony nodded—better agree now, while it was still phrased like a request. “Hey. I’ll see you guys later, okay?”

The others agreed. Thor boomed that he looked forward to fighting with Tony at his side again, Bruce suggested that Tony stop by his lab when he had a chance, and Pepper gave him another hug, saying, “Call me” into his ear.

They went upstairs. Tony was kind of relieved when Edwards didn’t immediately flip out on him, but he didn’t know if it was because he hadn’t done anything wrong, or if Edwards just wasn’t making an issue of it. Whatever he’d done.

“Here we are,” Tony said, palming open the door to his apartment. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir,” Jarvis said, and Tony was going to have to ask him to stop doing the “sir” thing. Really soon. Jarvis didn’t seem to mind calling him that, but it had all kinds of bad associations for him now. Just the sound of the word made him feel like he was teetering on the edge of a flashback. “And may I say what a pleasure it is to have you back?”

“Thanks, J. Good to be back. This is Sentinel Edwards—uh, if you could just put your hand there, on the scanner.”

Edwards did so, looking around as if trying to figure out where Jarvis’s voice was coming from.

“Thanks. Jarvis, Sentinel Edwards; Edwards, Jarvis. Uh, say something, so he can get your voice print, if that’s OK.”

“Nice to…meet you, Jarvis?” Edwards said.

“You as well, Sentinel,” Jarvis said. “Shall I provide him with the same access as the rest of the team, sir?”

Tony thought for a moment. Edwards could insist that Tony set him up with the same level of access that Tony himself had—but Edwards probably wouldn’t know that. “Yeah, that’d be good.” It would probably get ugly if Tony tried to lock Edwards out of the workshop or something, and he’d probably only be able to do it once, but he wanted to have the option. Tony started into the penthouse, Edwards following.

“So Jarvis is….”

“My household AI.”

“Household AI,” Edwards repeated. “I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“It’s not really…developable as a commercial product,” Tony explained. “Ethical implications.” His shoulders hunched. As a self-learning system, JARVIS was either a person or very close to it. Recognizing that, Tony had known better than to sell him, or any of his theoretical twins, to anyone who might treat them as things. He was doubly glad of that, now that he knew what it was like.

“I see,” Edwards said.
“If you want anything, just say his name. He’ll help you out.”

“Great.”

They stood there for a moment, not quite looking at each other. Despite the fact that they’d spent the last two or three days “getting to know each other,” Edwards was still basically a stranger. And here they were in his home, where Edwards had the right to order him around, just like he did every-fucking-where else.

It was awkward.

“You probably want to see your room,” Tony finally said. “It’s, uh, it’s here.” He led the way, opening the door and standing back, like a bellhop.

The room looked pretty much like it always looked—typical guest room, big bed, medium-size TV, the works—except for a couple of suitcases sitting near the closet, that Tony supposed must be Edwards’s stuff. “Great,” Edwards said again. “I’ll just unpack and get settled.”

Tony nodded, wondering what he was supposed to do now. He knew what he wanted to do—lock himself in his workshop and pretend the last three months had never happened. But, as the last three months had made painfully clear, what he wanted didn’t have much to do with what he was going to do, anymore.

“I’m sure you have things to do,” Edwards went on. “So I’ll plan on seeing you at dinner time, all right?”

“Yes, sir. When’s that?”

Jarvis spoke up. “Dr. Banner is planning a welcome-home meal for 7:30.”

“Perfect,” Edwards said. He put his hand on the back of Tony’s neck and squeezed lightly, just for a moment, then turned toward his suitcase.

Right, then. Workshop it was.

#

“He was really the best you could do, Steve?” Bruce asked. Steve didn’t have much trouble guessing which “he” he meant.

Some of the group had cleared out after Tony and Edwards left—Pepper going back to the Stark Industries offices for damage control, Thor going to the gym to hit things, Clint drifting off who-knew-where. But Steve set about clearing the remains of the party—such as it was—and Natasha, Bruce, and Coulson stayed. “He seemed different when we were interviewing him,” Steve answered. Maybe they had made a mistake. Or maybe—God help them—Edwards really was the best Sentinel they could get.

“Tony looks, uh…” Bruce trailed off.

“Like shit warmed over,” Natasha filled in. Steve had to agree. Tony looked haggard and haunted, wearing his playboy persona like a badly-fitting costume.

And—despite looking like he was starving to death—he hadn’t eaten or drunk anything.

“He was in better shape when he got back from Afghanistan,” Coulson agreed.
“I’m not crazy about how Edwards whisked him away at the first opportunity, either,” Bruce added. “You’ve got to wonder what he doesn’t want Tony telling us about.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. I do. Wonder.” Edwards’s last Guide had left almost three weeks ago; what had Edwards been doing since then? He’d anticipated, given the research he’d done, that Tony would be in for a difficult time of it at G-TAC, but things ought to have gotten better once their hand-picked Sentinel was in the picture.

“Sentinels tend to keep to themselves,” Coulson put in. That wasn’t precisely Steve’s experience, and Coulson, perhaps sensing his disagreement, added, “Modern ones, at least. They’re laws unto themselves, in the military, and their training doesn’t emphasize unit cohesion.”

So maybe Edwards hadn’t been too comfortable meeting all of them in a group like that. But did he have to drag Tony away with him when he escaped? “He’ll have to adjust,” Steve said.

“In the meantime, we’ll keep an eye on him as best we can,” Bruce added.

“And with that,” Coulson said, getting up from the table, “I had better go make my report. It’s going to be a while before I’m comfortable putting those two in the field.”


#

It didn’t take Edwards long to unpack his effects—his last post had been on the Helicarrier, and strict weight limits were in place. He had some other things in storage, but he was in no particular hurry to get them out. The room was not exactly to his taste—it was sleekly, almost aggressively modern, where Edwards, if he had a choice, would have gone for something with rustic charm.

Maybe he’d get a quilt, or a blanket with a moose on it.

After hanging up his suits and tossing his underwear into a dresser drawer, he went to check out the penthouse kitchen. If dinner wasn’t until 19:30, he was going to need something to tide him over. And he had a pretty clear sense that Tony Stark wasn’t the kind of Guide you asked to cook for you.

Edwards was hoping for sandwich fixings, or at least TV dinners—bachelor chow—but instead, the refrigerator was crammed full of green leafy vegetables. Mostly spinach and kale, and big tubs of some kind of green goop labeled “spirulina.” Hidden under all the leaves were some carrots and apples. The freezer held ice cubes and vodka.

All right, then. Edwards closed the freezer door. “Jarvis?” He wasn’t entirely sure he believed that Tony really had a household AI—it seemed like something out of science fiction—but he might as well give it a shot.

“Yes, Sentinel Edwards?”

“How would you recommend I go about getting something to eat?”

“The kitchen on the common floor is fully stocked,” Jarvis answered.

“Great. Thanks.” If Jarvis was self-aware—or if it was all a big joke and he was really a guy sitting in a booth somewhere—it wouldn’t hurt to be polite.

When he went back downstairs, most of the party had cleared out, but Captain Rogers was there, picking up glasses and little plates and putting them in the dishwasher, and Dr. Banner and Agent Romanoff were sitting at the table, heads bent together. “Hi,” Edwards said. “Captain, Doctor, Agent.”
Banner and Romanoff both glanced up at him, then turned their attention back to each other. “Sentinel,” Rogers said, with a crisp and not particularly friendly nod.

Okay, well, he was the new guy. And really, he was one of the team in name only—if the Avengers Initiative required a Sentinel, they’d have already had one. He looked in the refrigerator, pleased to find it stocked with a normal assortment of food. “Is the stuff in here for anybody?” he asked.

After a very long pause, Rogers said, “Yep.”

“Great.” Edwards seemed to be saying that a lot lately. He fixed himself a sandwich—turkey with tomato and sprouts, because despite the jungle’s worth of greenery upstairs, there wasn’t a shred of lettuce down here. He cut the sandwich in half, put the knife in the sink—Rogers was blocking the dishwasher—and carried his plate to the table.

As Edwards sat down, Rogers picked up the knife with a huffy sigh, rinsed it under the tap, and put it in the dishwasher’s silverware basket. He thought about explaining that he’d been planning to get to that when he was done eating, but decided it would only make things more awkward. They’d see in time that he didn’t make a habit of leaving messes for other people to clean up after him.

He took a bite of his sandwich—good turkey, really good tomato; Edwards wondered where they got them—and as he chewed, became aware of Agent Romanoff’s eyes boring into him. He glanced up to meet her gaze, and she said, “Where’s Tony?”

It could have been a casual question, but her tone was anything but. It sounded like Romanoff expected the honest answer to be, “Chopped up in little pieces in the trunk of my car.”

At least having his mouth full gave him some time to think about his answer. Swallowing, he decided to pretend it had been a casual question. Romanoff had a reputation for sometimes coming off a little psycho; if she didn’t mean to, ignoring it worked. “Around.”

Captain Rogers abandoned the dishwasher to come stand by the table, hands on his hips. “Where is he?”

Okay, so, Romanoff had meant to sound psycho. Captain Rogers had been a lot friendlier back when they were interviewing him. Maybe he felt the need to throw his weight around, now that Edwards was officially his subordinate? “You all saw him ten minutes ago,” Edwards pointed out. “Right before we went up to his apartment. The smart money says he’s still there.”

“You don’t know?” Dr. Banner asked, disbelieving.

From another Sentinel, that question would have meant, “Why aren’t you looking after your obviously traumatized Guide, asshole?” From the Avengers, Edwards had no idea what it meant. “I’m giving him some space. He’s a little freaked out.”

“Is he,” Romanoff said.

“You don’t think so?”

“I think you have a lot of nerve bringing it up,” she answered.

Edwards’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you say that?” Tony hadn’t mentioned the arc reactor incident, and there wasn’t any other way for them to know about it.

“Give it some thought,” Romanoff said, pushing her chair back from the table with a loud scrape, and leaving.
Dr. Banner followed suit—though without the chair-scraping—and said, “You should probably know that the Hulk likes him.”

“Good?” Edwards said to his retreating back.

He turned to Captain Rogers, hoping that he, at least, would say something that made sense, but Rogers just closed the dishwasher with a gesture that was just a hair short a slam, and said, “I’m in charge of this team. And I consider myself personally responsible for the welfare of everyone on it.”

Okay. “Yes, Captain.” Probably not a good time to mention that he’d been a Major, in the Marines.

“And put your stuff in the dishwasher when you’re done; we clean up after ourselves here.”

#

The shop bots were glad to see him again—they rolled over to Tony, whirring and chirping, and he patted them. “Hey, guys. Yeah. I’m home. Yay.”

Tony went over to the holographic display table and looked at his list of open projects. There were a lot of them—he’d started dozens of things, in his last few days of freedom. He understood the impulse that had prompted it, the vain hope that if he could just create the right thing, something good enough, he’d get a reprieve. It went back to when he was a kid, trying to invent something that would make Dad notice him.

But hell, it had worked in Afghanistan, so not a completely maladaptive response.

Telling himself that he was thinking about what he wanted to work on first, Tony made a pot of coffee. Then he looked in the workshop mini-fridge. There were a dozen bottles of water in there, and two boxes of protein bars on top. Good. He had everything he needed. It was good to know that, just in case.

He took his coffee back to the workbench, sipped at it for a minute or two, then went back to the fridge. Gathering up six bottles of water, he balanced one box of the protein bars on top. Back at the workbench, he lined the bottles up in a neat row, and put the box in front of it.

He opened the suit modifications file. He’d been working on increasing the strength of the repulsors; how had he been planning to do it?

His eyes flicked back to the bottles of water and the box of protein bars. He found himself checking to make sure that the box was still full. Like it had been a moment ago.

He decided to take them out of the box, and lined them up in front of the water bottles. There. Now he could see them. That would save time.

Now he could work.

#

Edwards spent the afternoon exploring his new territory. It looked like Tony had pretty much thought of everything when he set up the Avengers’ living quarters. There was a gym with every piece of exercise equipment known to man, and the media room was similarly equipped with game consoles, media players ranging from VHS to streaming video, by way of DVD and Blu Ray, and an impressive sound system. The shooting range had standard targets and semiautonomous drones
that he knew from SHIELD budget reports retailed for over a hundred bucks per, and given they were *meant to be shot at*, they were a consumable item.

There was also a library, an art gallery, and—for some reason—a pottery studio. Tony and Dr. Banner each had what seemed like several acres of lab space; Edwards glanced into those areas when his security codes permitted, but didn’t intrude, since there might be experiments in progress. Just from the doorways he could see lab equipment that major universities would envy.

If he played his cards right, maybe he could end up with an on-site chemical analysis lab.

He didn’t run into Tony at any point during his explorations, which was kind of a shame, nor any of the other Avengers, which he didn’t mind a bit. When the appointed time for Team Dinner neared, he went from idly wondering where Tony was to actively looking for him. It wasn’t that he was exactly afraid to show up without Tony, but he thought he might get a warmer reception if they went in together.

But even when he was looking, Edwards still couldn’t find Tony, and he figured Captain Rogers probably enjoyed lateness about as much as he enjoyed people not putting their dishes in the dishwasher, so he decided he’d better get down there. Maybe Tony was already there—it was one place Edwards hadn’t looked.

He wasn’t. Everyone else was, though. Barton and Romanoff were setting the table, and Thor was uncorking some bottles of wine, while Dr. Banner was busy at the stove and Captain Rogers was putting salad into bowls. That was everyone, since Agent Coulson didn’t live in the Tower. Edwards thought uneasily that he ought to be doing something to help, since apparently that was what they did here, but he didn’t see anything he could do without getting in the way.

This time it was Thor who asked, in an accusatory rumble, “Where is Tony?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered.

Dr. Banner said, “Jarvis, where’s Tony?”

“In his workshop,” the AI said. “He’s been there for some time.”

“Remind him we’re having dinner, okay?”

“Of course, Dr. Banner.”

The team finished getting the meal on the table, while Edwards stood there feeling like an idiot. “Maybe I should go get him,” he suggested, when a few minutes passed with no sign of Tony.

The five Avengers all exchanged looks. “I’ll go,” Banner said, removing his oven mitts and tossing them on the counter. “You guys, um, go ahead and get started while it’s hot.”

It seemed like a reasonable enough suggestion to Edwards—and the lasagna smelled damn good—but the remaining Avengers just stood there and looked at him suspiciously, and he wasn’t about to be the first one to dive in.

#

Bruce tried the workshop door. Locked; not a huge surprise. “Jarvis, can you put me through to Tony?”

“Certainly, Dr. Banner.”
“Tony? It’s Bruce. Do you mind if I come in?” Tony had been hiding out in the workshop since he got back. Bruce had thought about coming to see him several times before, but had decided that giving him some space was probably best, even if it had been the new guy’s idea—Tony knew he could call any of them if he wanted to talk. But now it was dinner time, and as thin as Tony was now, Bruce didn’t think he should be missing any meals.


Was he drunk? Well, that wasn’t a huge surprise either, Bruce thought. Alcohol had always been Tony’s coping strategy of choice, and he had a lot to cope with. The door lock disengaged, and Bruce went in.

Tony was curled up on the couch, looking miserable, with the shop bots hovering over him. There were bottles scattered on the floor, making a trail from workbench to couch, but they were plastic water bottles, not glass beer or liquor ones. Mixed in with the bottles were wrappers from the protein bars that Jarvis and Pepper left stocked in the workshop, in the usually-vain hope that Tony might at least eat those, if he was too preoccupied for a real meal.

Tony lifted his head to look at Bruce, groaned, and let it flop back down onto the couch’s grimy cushions.

“What did you do?”

“I really have to pee,” Tony said, instead of answering. “But if I stand up, I think I might puke.”

“How many of these things did you eat?” Bruce asked, picking up one of the wrappers. Under it was another bottle, this one full of dark yellow liquid. Clearly, Tony had already tried the obvious solution to his problem.

“All of them.”

“I’m glad I spent the last three hours making you lasagna, then,” Bruce observed. He dumped out the wastepaper basket and pushed it at Tony. “Here, sit up.”

“Don’t mention food,” Tony said, clutching the trash can and sitting up.

Tony threw up twice on the way to the bathroom. Fortunately, his status as a professional-level drunk allowed him to do it without making too much of a mess. He insisted on being left alone to use the toilet; Bruce hoped he didn’t fall over and hit his head.

Unfortunately, listening for ominous thumps also meant that Bruce had to listen to his friend taking a piss. When he was done, Tony opened the door, but said, “I’m just going to stay in here for a while.” He sat down on the floor, mopping his face with a hand towel and keeping the trash can within reach.

Probably wise, Bruce thought. He sat down too—outside the bathroom, thank you very much, but where he could see Tony through the open door. “You want to, uh, tell me what this is about?”

“Not particularly,” Tony answered. After a moment, he said, “They didn’t feed me much, while I was there. So. I don’t know. I was just going to have one, but then I couldn’t stop.” He laughed hollowly. “I don’t even like those things.”

So, they’d starved him, and Tony had responded by gorging himself the first chance he got. Not unusual, and not too alarming, either, if he only did it the once. Bruce hoped he wouldn’t make a habit of it—or, even worse, decide to avoid eating entirely because of the obvious misery that this
little episode had caused. Trying to figure out how likely this was to become a real problem, Bruce asked, “Did you, um. Do anything like this after Afghanistan?”

“No,” Tony said. He shifted his position so he was now leaning against the opposite side of the same wall that Bruce was leaning against—closer to him, but at the same time, out of view. “Afghanistan was... they actually fed me okay in Afghanistan. I mean, it was mostly rice and goat, but the portions weren’t too stingy.”

“Ah,” Bruce said, because what else could he say?

“They were, you know, after the part with the waterboarding and the mock executions was over, they bought that I was cooperating. And I was working on my escape, so. You know.”

He’d felt somewhat in control of the situation, Bruce translated. And feeling in control, even if you were in very real danger, provided some insulation against psychological trauma. When the London Blitz had happened, psychiatrists and government officials had expected mass panic among the civilian population, worse than the shell shock problems that had plagued soldiers at the front of the previous world war. It hadn’t happened—rates of psychological illness were surprisingly low. Eventually, they had worked out that what made the difference had been that the London civilians could decide how they were going to ride out the bombing attacks—in a backyard shelter, or a public shelter or tube station, or in their own beds, in defiance of the Germans. None of the options were particularly safe—dozens had died when one of the tube station shelters received a direct hit, for example—but people felt like they could make choices that would protect them.

It had helped. “But this was different,” he said, not really asking.

“Yeah.” For a while, he thought Tony wasn’t going to elaborate—and that was fine; Bruce didn’t want to push him—but after a while he went on, “This was more like, ‘If you don’t do what we want, you don’t eat. Or sometimes even if you do, you still don’t eat. Because fuck you.’”

“That sounds, uh, hard to deal with.”

“Tell me about it.” On the other side of the wall, there was a rustle of clothing and a gagging sound. A moment later, Tony said, “False alarm. So, yeah, there was that, and also the nagging sense that I brought this on myself.”

“How’s that?” Bruce asked cautiously.

“Well,” Tony said. “There was that one time back in my weapons-dealing days that I told Blair Sandburg to go fuck himself.”

“You did? Why?” Bruce had noticed that the Sentinel-Guide Resource Center—the organization Dr. Sandburg chaired—had been uncharacteristically silent during the media storm over Tony’s outing. Asked for comment, they’d issued a fairly bland press release saying that the case drew attention to the ongoing need for draft reform.

“It was at some benefit thing in DC. He called me a fascist baby-killer; I told him to go fuck himself. I did send him a check, after Afghanistan, but we’re not exactly bros.”

Huh. Sandburg’s public reputation suggested he wouldn’t be that petty—but Tony did have a real knack for pissing people off. And Sandburg was a pretty well-known peacenik. “It’s not your fault, Tony.”

“I know,” Tony said, in the way that meant he didn’t. “If the next four years are like this, I--” Tony stopped. “I can’t take it,” he said, his voice clotted and mucous-y. “I’m not that tough, Brucie-bear.”
Tony only trotted out that particular nickname when he was in need of comfort, and trying to make a joke of it. “It won’t be,” Bruce said. “The Hulk won’t stand for it, for one thing.” Tony gave a nervous sort of laugh at that. “Steve and Pepper picked him out,” he continued. “Edwards, I mean. They thought he seemed pretty reasonable.” The state Tony had been in when he got home threw that into doubt. “Was he, uh, bullshitting them?”

“I don’t know. He was, uh. Wasn’t there for most of the bad stuff. Just the last couple of days. The, uh, thing with the ducklings.”

“Ducklings?” Bruce asked. “Oh. You mean imprinting?”

The only immediate answer was Tony retching some more. While he was doing it, Bruce did a web search on his phone. The mainstream media articles on the phenomenon had been pretty lurid, but they were supposed to be based on a scholarly article….


He skimmed over the first part of the article, which described the imprinting process. It was couched in very academic terms, but it boiled down to the Sentinel stripping the Guide naked, tying him up, and licking him. Well, not just licking, but that part tended to stand out.

 Granted, Tony had done weirder things than that—there was video of him doing weirder things than that—but consensually.

He only had time to read that section before Tony finished dry-heaving and said, “Yeah, imprinting.”

“Did he, um…they aren’t supposed to be allowed to….”

“No, he didn’t violate my ass while he was at it,” Tony answered.

Good to know. “Still. It sounds…invasive.” According to the article, the ritual was supposed to be about establishing intimacy and trust. Surprisingly, the survey responses indicated that the Guides Sandburg et al. had interviewed agreed that it did.

To Bruce, it sounded more like a quick way of inducing Stockholm syndrome. Put the Guides in a position where the Sentinels could hurt them, or deny them food, water, and other basic necessities, and watch the Guides be grateful it wasn’t any worse than it was.

“Honestly, after all the rest of it, it didn’t really register,” Tony said, which lent some weight to Bruce’s suspicions. “It did seem kind of like a scam, though. Excuse to put his hands all over my nubile body.”

“The research says it’s associated with a slight increase in sensory control and sensory awareness of the Guide, as compared to other new Sentinel-Guide partnerships,” Bruce reported, thinking that intellectualizing it might help.

“Are you reading to me from ArXiv?” Tony asked.

“PubMed,” Bruce answered.

“I bet that little prick Sandburg wrote it.”

“Uh-huh. And Temas.”
“Now, why couldn’t I have gotten one like that? She’s hot.” It sounded like something Tony would say, but his tone was a little hollow.

“She was hot in the movie,” Bruce said. “In real life, he’s a man.”

“Oh. Well, then.”

“Do you want to know what else it says?”

“Sure. I love storytime.”

Bruce kept skimming. “They also found elevated levels of oxytocin, after the… process.”

“Oxy—oh, right. That’s the sex and maternal bonding hormone, not the other one.”

“Right, not hillbilly heroin,” Bruce agreed. Despite his frequently-professed disdain for the squishy sciences, it wasn’t like Tony to stumble over something like that.

“You’ll have to cut me a break; I was sedated last night.”

“You were?” There wasn’t anything about sedation in the imprinting overview.


Pushing aside thoughts of what he’d like to do to Edwards, Bruce said, “Right, so the elevated oxytocin levels corroborate the participants’ subjective reports that they felt closer to each other afterwards.” Bruce wondered if anyone had studied the role of oxytocin in Stockholm syndrome. “And Sentinels showed increased protective instincts for Guides they’ve imprinted. They speculate that has something to do with the, uh, relatively low levels of Guide abuse in the Marine Corps.”

“What do the Marines have to do with anything?”

“They’re the ones that do it. Imprinting. There’s a little bit about history here; the lore is that they picked it up from Native American allies in the Revolutionary War. Some of the other branches used to do it, too, but not as consistently… now functions as a marker of in-group identity for Sentinels and Guides trained in the United States Marine Corps. As such, they have been resistant to criticism of the practice, believing that outsiders “misunderstand” its function and intent.”

“Imagine that,” Tony said. “Is there anything in there about the part where they lock you up and don’t give you anything to eat or drink for three days beforehand?”

Bruce went back to the beginning of the article and checked. “No.”

“Figures. He kind of… came in there like he was rescuing me. Made them give me some water, first thing. It was… nice. But, you know. It kind of seems like he could have come sooner. If he wanted to.”

#

Finally, after they’d all stood looking at each other for half an eon or so, Rogers said briskly, “No sense wasting good food,” and took his seat. The others did the same, seating themselves so that there were no two empty places next to each other. Edwards wondered if the rudeness was deliberate — naturally, he’d want to sit next to his Guide—but decided not to make an issue of it right now.

Instead, he helped himself to some garlic bread and commented, “Ms. Potts mentioned that Tony sometimes loses track of time when he’s in his workshop.” So they could all stop looking at him like...
it was somehow his fault. Right?

“Yes,” Barton said stiffly. “That is a thing that Tony does.”

“I’m sure he has a lot that he wanted to catch up on,” Edwards agreed. “But he missed enough meals while he was away, I think.”

“Looks like it,” said Captain Rogers, icily. Was he still holding a grudge over the dishwasher incident? Or was there something else going on that Edwards wasn’t picking up on?

Either way, Edwards decided to change the subject to something more neutral. “This is really good.” He indicated the lasagna. “Does Dr. Banner cook often?” He wondered if there was a kitchen duty rotation.

“Sometimes,” Rogers said. “We mostly have things delivered. Takeout, and ready-to-heat stuff from the supermarket.”


Her tone wasn’t particularly friendly, but at this point Edwards was willing to go along with any effort they made to get to know him, even if it seemed like it might be a trap. “Eggs and sandwiches are about my limit,” he answered. “I’ve been in base housing most of my career—usually doesn’t have cooking facilities.” Rogers, Barton, and Romanoff had to know that, but maybe Thor didn’t. “My mother taught me to make meatloaf—she thought all men should be able to make at least one real meal from scratch—but it’s been a while.”

“How forward-thinking of her,” Romanoff said.

He’d hoped that reminding them he had a mother might humanize him in their eyes—like a hostage negotiation—but apparently not. “It was the 70’s. Women’s lib.”

“I think the preferred term is ‘feminism’, Sentinel Edwards,” Rogers pointed out frostily.

“Now it is. In the 70’s it was women’s lib.” There ought to be some way he could segue from that to Guide Rights, and how he was personally in favor of them, but damned if he could find it.

“It’s been a long time since the 70’s,” Barton said grimly.

Edwards had no idea why Barton apparently had such strong feelings about the 70’s, given that he’d have been a toddler when they ended, but decided not to probe further. In fact, he decided it was best to just shut his mouth and let someone else propose the next topic of conversation.

No one did, unless you counted “Pass the parmesan” from Barton to Romanoff. And by the time Edwards had finished eating, Tony and Dr. Banner hadn’t shown up.

Surely if there was something wrong, Dr. Banner would have let them know. Right?

Maybe Tony just didn’t feel up to facing the whole group. Still, he had to eat. Getting up from the table, Edwards took one of the empty plates and started putting a serving of lasagna on it.

“What are you doing?” Barton asked, sounding like he thought maybe Edwards believed that getting himself seconds required a new plate, or something equally insane.

“I thought I’d take my Guide some food.” He almost added, if that’s all right with you, but bit it back. No one offered any objections to that plan—not that Edwards would have been particularly
pleased to hear them—so he loaded the plate up with lasagna, salad, and bread. He hesitated over the wine, but decided on a glass of sparkling water instead. From all accounts, drinking alcohol was not something Tony needed any encouragement to do.

Jarvis directed him—somewhat begrudgingly, Edwards thought—to the workshop. Edwards’s palm print failed to admit him, so he asked, “Jarvis, how do I get in here?”

Dr. Banner answered instead of Jarvis, his voice coming out of a small intercom speaker near the door. “Sentinel Edwards. What, uh, what can I do for you?”

“You can let me in,” he answered. The intercom cut off, but, worried, he extended his hearing.

“—rid of him?” Dr. Banner asked.

“No, I—not a hill I want to die on.” Tony’s voice sounded strained. “Jarvis, pop the locks.”

The door locks disengaged with a thunk, and Edwards let himself in.

The workshop was chaotic, strewn with half-finished projects, tools, and papers littering every surface. He found Tony and Dr. Banner sitting on what looked like a college dorm sofa. Tony was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, looking distinctly green around the gills. He got even greener when he saw the plate Edwards was carrying, and murmured, “Oh, god.”

Banner stood up quickly, taking the plate out of Edwards’s hand before he even knew what was happening. “Yeah, that’s…not a very good idea right now. I’ll just—Tony, I’m going to put this in the fridge, in case you want it later.”

“What happened?” Edwards asked. Under the room’s smell of silicone and solder was a sour note of vomit.

“I ate two dozen protein bars and then threw up. A lot,” Tony said dully.

“No. Sir.”

Sitting down next to him, Edwards took Tony’s hand and linked up. His heart and respiration sounded normal—Tony-normal, at least. Gut sounds, not so much, but that was to be expected. Scent strongly tinged with vomit and anxiety, but nothing more dangerous than that.

No need to drag him off for a medical examination, then. Though he did want to get him one at some point in the next few days. “I think you’ll be fine after you’ve slept it off,” Edwards said, glancing up to see Banner looking down at them, before returning his attention to his Guide.

Tony nodded.

“You’ll be more comfortable in your room,” Edwards suggested. Tony got unsteadily to his feet; Edwards put a hand under his elbow to support him. “Thank you for looking after him, Dr. Banner.”

After seeing Tony tucked up safely in bed, Edwards took his laptop into the penthouse living room and logged in to the SHIELD intranet, keeping half an ear out for sounds of distress from Tony’s room.
He checked his emails. There was one from Lucretia, asking what Tony Stark was “really like” and if Edwards was bringing him for Thanksgiving.

*Luce,* he typed. *I don’t know what he’s like, really—he’s been quiet. Anyway, I think I have to make you sign a nondisclosure agreement before I tell you anything.* In Avengers Tower now—*very luxurious, but I don’t think the Avengers like me. No idea about Thanksgiving—we might be on duty; let you know late October/early November. Hope Scott and Jr. are well. Love, Ed.*

She was probably hoping for something more salacious than that in the way of a reply, but that was all she was getting.

Mikey had written to him too, from Quantico, where he’d been for a couple of weeks now. It wasn’t usual at all for Guides to keep in contact after they’d left—their new Sentinels tended not to appreciate it—but the FBI had decided not to assign him a new one until he’d gone through the Academy, so Edwards supposed he must be feeling a little lonely. There was another Guide in the class, which had to help, but it wasn’t the same.

*Dear Mikey,* he wrote. *Good to hear from you. Sorry I didn’t get back to you sooner—imprinting. How did the range test go? If you’re still having trouble with muzzle flip, try the modified isosceles stance.*

After typing and deleting several attempts at trying to explain it, Edwards settled on, *I wish I’d thought to show you before you left. If the instructor hasn’t covered it, there’s probably somebody in your class who can show you—it’s popular with female law enforcement.*

Mikey had mentioned that there were several former policewomen among his classmates, so that should give him a good idea of who to ask. He continued, *Before you ask, yes, the imprinting was with you-know-who, and I’m writing to you from Avengers Tower (!) Not sure yet how that’s going to go. T. had a pretty rough time at G-TAC. Seems willing enough, just really shaken up. Hoping he’ll settle down now that he’s home.*

*Anyway, our apartment is in the penthouse—amazing view, natch—and the shower is bigger than our quarters on the ‘carrier. Reports of rooftop infinity pool have been exaggerated, unless it has stealth technology. (Note: It might.) Had welcome dinner cooked by the Hulk (in non-green form).*

That was about all Edwards could say that wouldn’t make Mikey worry, so he signed off, *Love, Ed.*

Now that he was caught up on personal correspondence, he sent a message to SHIELD medical requesting an appointment to have Tony checked over, at their earliest convenience.

After that, Edwards hesitated over whether to make a report to Captain Rogers. SHIELD didn’t require Sentinels to disclose their Guides’ condition—in fact, when he’d happened to mention that he was used to doing so, the other SHIELD Sentinels had thought it sounded intrusive. But in the Corps, it was expected that your Guide would be in combat-ready condition at all times. If a Guide was likely to be a liability in the field—whether because of illness, injury, behavioral problems, or the results of disciplinary action—you were expected to report that fact to your commanding officer, promptly. And be prepared to explain how it wasn’t your fault and what you planned to do about it. It worked out in the Guides’ best interests, really. CO’s still had no power to interfere in the Sentinel-Guide relationship, but just knowing that somebody was paying attention kept things from getting out of hand.

Tony definitely wasn’t fit to go into the field—either as a Guide or as Iron Man. As far as Edwards
knew, he wasn’t likely to be expected to do so any time soon, but that would not be a valid excuse in the Corps. Things came up, and a CO had to have accurate and up-to-date knowledge of resources available.

Rogers would probably appreciate the courtesy of a report, he decided. He’d made a point of mentioning that he considered himself responsible for the team’s well-being. He typed up a brief report:

*Captain Rogers:*

*I write to report that Guide Stark in a non-duty-ready condition for the following reasons:*

• Gastrointestinal distress
• Malnutrition and general debilitation, and
• Psychological factors related to G-TAC training.

*I recommend one day rest in quarters, followed by two weeks light duty, pending medical assessment.*

*Signed,*

*Sentinel Horatio Edwards, Maj.*

It was pretty light on details, but they lived in the same building; Rogers could ask if he wanted to know more.

#

Steve had no idea what the hell he was looking at.

“You’re making that face,” Natasha observed, from the other side of the breakfast table. They usually breakfasted together, since no one else got up at what Steve considered a normal hour. Even Clint tended not to emerge until well after 0700.

“I don’t know what the hell I’m looking at,” he said, because he had Natasha had had Words regarding his preference to refrain from using foul language in her presence. The most significant of those words had been “boot” “ass” “up” and “your.”

She reached across the table and took the tablet out of his hand. “It’s an email,” she said. “From Edwards.”

“I got that far, thanks. Read it.”

“‘Non-duty-ready condition’? It sounds like he’s talking about…broken equipment or something.”

“I know,” Steve said. “At least he’s not going to make trouble over getting him checked out.” As a silver lining, it was pretty thin—Steve would have had no problem whatsoever overriding any objections that Edwards might have had.

Tony’s condition was nothing short of appalling. It wasn’t just the drastic weight loss—although that was bad enough, and seeing Edwards calmly eating a sandwich while Tony was God-knows-where had made Steve want to deck him. Tony carried himself like everything hurt. But even that wasn’t the worst part. The worst part was the way he kept looking over his shoulder at Edwards. He’d seen that look, as a kid, on the faces of kids and women whose fathers or husbands were nasty drunks—or nasty sober. There were a lot things about the new century that Steve approved of—as well as a few he didn’t—but one of his favorites was that society as a whole acknowledged that no one should
have to fear for their safety at home.

Except Guides, apparently.

Steve shook off the thought. “Bruce says they withheld food, as a punishment, at the…place. So Tony locked himself in his workshop and ate everything in sight.”

“Resulting in gastrointestinal distress,” Natasha said with a nod. “What did Edwards do about it?”

“Sent him to his room to sleep it off,” Steve answered. “At least, that’s what he said he was doing. When Bruce was there.” He had to wonder if “one day rest in quarters” was code for something more sinister.

They were prevented from discussing it further by the arrival of Sentinel Edwards himself. “Before you ask,” he said, making his way to the coffee maker, “Tony’s still asleep.” He poured himself a cup of coffee and looked in the refrigerator.

“I’ll want to see him,” Steve said.

“Fine. Should I just bring him down when he wakes up, or do you want an appointment?”

What he really wanted was to go up to Tony’s apartment and talk to him while Edwards was occupied somewhere else—but Sentinels didn’t have to let anybody into their quarters if they didn’t want to; it was a territory thing. “When he wakes up is fine.”

“Great.” Edwards put a bagel in the toaster. “Did Dr. Banner fill you in on—yesterday?”

“Yes,” Steve said.

“Some Guides don’t do so well with unrestricted access to food,” Edwards went on, sounding as though he thought that was a perfectly reasonable thing to say. “I’ll keep an eye on him to see if that’s going to be an ongoing problem. And he had it pretty rough at G-TAC. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with him that time and a few decent meals won’t fix, but I want to have our medics check him out, just to be sure.”

Natasha didn’t quite have it right, saying Edwards talked about him like a piece of equipment. Steve had known some war dog handlers, back in the old days. They talked about them like that—focused on what had to be done for the animals to do their jobs. “Yes, he should be checked out. We don’t have anything urgent coming up. He can take all the time he needs to recover.”

Steve really had no idea what he was supposed to do with a Sentinel. He’d met with SHIELD’s Sentinel Recruitment Board liaison officer, who had explained Edwards’s skill set: sniping (they already had Clint for that), explosives and chemical weapons detection (for which the Iron Man suit’s sensors were better than even a Sentinel), chemical analysis (Bruce and Tony had always had that covered). Tracking—Steve was okay at that, but Edwards was better, according to his scores. So that was one thing, but it didn’t come up very often, with the kinds of enemies they fought.

Edwards was nodding. “Good. Let me know when you need us.”

“We should probably do some training,” Steve realized. “Weapons and hand-to-hand, so we can get an idea of what you can do. And, uh, some team-building stuff.” He had no idea what that might be like. But if they were going to go into the field with this guy, they had to learn to trust him. Somehow. “When Tony’s better.”

“Of course.” Edwards’s bagel popped up; he started adding the schmeer and lox. “What about
“He always has something on deck,” Steve said. Why wasn’t Edwards asking Tony this?

“Anything with a deadline?” Edwards clarified.

“Not that I know of.” Maybe he should have said yes. Said the team needed Tony in his lab and nowhere near Edwards for the foreseeable future. But the deal was that Tony had to work as a Guide.

“Great,” Edwards said. Lifting his bagel and coffee, he added, “I’ll eat upstairs. I’ll bring the dishes back when I’m done.”

Steve waited until he was fairly sure the Sentinel was out of earshot, then said, “That guy is just weird.”

That could have gone worse, Edwards decided as he took the elevator back up to his and Tony’s apartment. Rogers and Romanoff hadn’t been friendly, not by a long chalk, but they hadn’t been actively hostile. And surely he’d established that he was prepared to follow Rogers’s lead without any kind of hierarchical pissing contest.

It was a tight-knit unit. They’d warm up to him in time—maybe not until they’d been under fire together.

He had to juggle the plate and coffee cup to press his palm to the scanner by the door—really, a doorknob would have been easier; you didn’t need your whole hand for one of those—and was momentarily distracted when he entered. The unfamiliar scent hit him first. The coffee cup slid from his suddenly-nerveless fingers, and he tensed, ready to jump between this new threat and his Guide —

“Hi,” said Dr. Banner, from the kitchen.

The cup thudded onto the thick, plush carpeting; Edwards managed to catch his bagel before it fell. “Hi,” he said. Banner. Neighbor, teammate. His Guide’s friend. Not a threat, but what the hell was he doing here?

“You, uh, spilled your coffee, there,” Banner observed.

“I noticed.” He turned his attention to Tony’s bedroom; the Guide’s breathing was deep and even. Still asleep. So on the one hand, Banner hadn’t woken him up; on the other, he clearly hadn’t been invited, either.

Putting the bagel down on the coffee table, Edwards picked up the cup and went to the kitchen to look for something to clean up the spill with. Not even here twenty-four hours, and already he was ruining the carpeting. That would make a terrific impression.

“Look,” he said as he checked the cupboards. Did Tony not keep paper towels on hand? Did the outrageously wealthy use something else instead? Angels’ butt-hair, maybe? “It’s probably better if you don’t come in here when I’m not expecting you. For now, at least.” Maybe the Avengers were used to wandering in and out of each other’s quarters at will, but Edwards couldn’t cope with having five strangers who didn’t like him very much traipsing in and out of his quarters at all hours.

Okay, so it was one stranger, making one unannounced visit at breakfast time, but Edwards’s supply
of patience and understanding was running a little thin.

“Fine,” Banner said flatly. “I was just bringing this—it’s, uh, ginger-mint tea. For Tony. His stomach.”

Glancing over, Edwards saw that Banner had a packet of leaves and twigs and a silver mesh tea ball on the counter, and was writing a note, presumably to explain what he’d brought. “Good. That’s—thank you.” That was nice, really. He still could have knocked.

In one of the cupboards, Edwards found one of those pod-type coffee makers, along with a basket of cartridges in every conceivable flavor and variety. So at least he wouldn’t have to go back to the common area and face Rogers again to get another cup of coffee.

But there were still no paper towels.

“What are you looking for?” Banner asked.

“Paper towels.”

Banner blinked at him. “It’s, uh, green building,” he explained. “There should be bar towels…maybe on the bar?”

“Thanks.” He did, indeed, find a large stack of cotton bar towels under the wet bar that stretched across one side of the living room. He mopped up the worst of the coffee spill with one, then covered it with another, weighted down with a big stone paperweight-type-thing he found on a nearby shelf. He’d have to put some vinegar on it later, if he really wanted to minimize the damage, but he wasn’t even going to try to figure out where that might be kept before he’d had breakfast. “That, uh, the lasagna was good,” he said as he tried to figure out how to work the coffee maker, since Banner was still there, and he probably ought to say something that wasn’t, Seriously, don’t you have a home of your own? And have you ever even heard of Sentinels?

“Thanks,” Banner said. “Tony likes it.”

“Too bad he didn’t get to eat any. Are there leftovers?”

“Yeah—there’s some in the common fridge, if Steve didn’t finish it.”

Good; maybe Tony would feel up to having some for lunch. “I’ll let Tony know you stopped by.”

Fortunately, Banner took the hint.

#

Waking from a nightmare in which one of the Ten Rings terrorists forced him to eat protein bars until he threw up, and finding himself in his own bed, in his own room, Tony thought for a moment that everything was all right. Afghanistan had been years ago; he was Iron Man; he had a team watching his back.

Then he remembered. Afghanistan had been years ago, but G-TAC was yesterday, and Edwards—his jailer for the next four years, if he was lucky—was next door.

“Jarvis,” he said. “Time is it?”

“Ten-seventeen AM,” Jarvis answered. “Local temperature is 42 degrees Fahrenheit, with intermittent rain.”
Great. Edwards hadn’t said when he wanted Tony to get up, but he had a feeling it was earlier than 10:17.

He got up, ignoring the stiffness in his muscles. Peed. Drank some water from the faucet. Showered and shaved. Drank a little more water—not too much, since he didn’t know what had to happen before he got a chance to pee again. Stood in front of his closet and wondered what he was supposed to wear.

At least that hadn’t been something he had to worry about at G-TAC.

Edwards had said something about it, though, yesterday morning. SHIELD dress code on duty—there was a row of plain black suits in his closet that he’d never seen before—and “what he wanted” otherwise. Was he on duty now? He had no idea. Being allowed to sleep in until past ten suggested not, but Guides weren’t employed to think.

Finally he settled on jeans and two t-shirts—one long sleeved, to hide the bruises, and a short-sleeved one on top, for extra padding. He added socks and tennis shoes, and went out to face the music.

Edwards was sitting on his couch, doing something on a laptop. He looked up when Tony entered.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” Tony said cautiously.

“Do you feel up to eating something?” Edwards asked, setting the laptop aside and getting up.

“Ah. Yes?” He hadn’t really expected to have the option, given the amount of unauthorized eating he’d done yesterday. And the fact that Edwards had very clearly found out about it. He wouldn’t have been surprised to be told that two dozen protein bars his allotment of food for the week, even if he hadn’t managed to keep them down.

“Maybe start with a couple pieces of toast, see how that goes,” Edwards added. “And Dr. Banner brought over this tea.”

Tony would have rather had coffee and a smoothie, but he wasn’t going to argue. He put some bread in the toaster—seriously, why was there even bread in his kitchen?—and put some water on to boil.

Edwards leaned against the counter, watching him. “What do you normally do with all the kale?”

“Um. Green smoothies.” He’d started drinking them when he had palladium poisoning, and had gotten used to the taste. And to Pepper and JARVIS not hounding him about his diet, because a diet that included approximately a bushel of greens per week was, by definition, healthy.

“Oh,” Edwards said.

The toast popped up. Tony ate it. It was some kind of whole-grain stuff; he bet Bruce had ordered it. Not bad, really. Would have been better with butter and honey.

“Captain Rogers wants a meeting, when you’re ready,” Edwards added. “Apart from that, I thought we’d just have a quiet day—maybe watch a movie or something. Then tomorrow we have to go to the Helicarrier.”

Tony glanced up from his toast. What did they need to do on the ‘carrier?

“You have a medical in the morning—0930, so set an alarm—then we have to meet with the G-TAC liaison officer. After that, as long as you’re feeling up to it, we’ll try to get some training in.”
Training. Tony held back a shudder. “Yes, sir.”

“It’ll be fine. The liaison officer’s an asshole—they all are—but I’ll be there, and he’s not allowed to touch you.”

What was that supposed to mean? That if anyone was going to hit him, it would be Edwards, he supposed.

And Edwards hadn’t, so far. There had been about fifty fucking million times that Tony had thought he was about to, but he hadn’t actually done it. Including that time that Tony hit him. He also seemed to be surprisingly cool about the whole eating-himself-sick thing.

So, okay. Phase one, you got hit—and starved, and humiliated, and everything else—no matter what you did. Phase two, you got hit, and all the rest of it, until you figured out what they wanted you to do. Phase three, it looked like maybe you actually got warnings. He could deal with that. That was awesome. For a very sad value of awesome. If all he had to do was not fuck up in the same way twice, he could survive this.

After Tony finished his pathetic breakfast, Edwards took him downstairs to see Steve. Thor was there, too, and got up to do his warrior-arm-clasp thing, booming, “Tony! I am glad to see you are recovered from your overindulgence.”

“Thanks,” he said, wishing Thor had called it something else. Edwards didn’t seem mad about it, but Tony didn’t want him getting any excuse to re-think things.

“I look forward to the day when we will again fight side-by-side,” Thor added.

“Me too, big guy,” he said, with a faint smile and a glance over at Edwards to see how he was taking this. He’d said Tony would suit up if he was needed, so he hoped it was okay for him to say that.

Edwards nodded. “I don’t want you fighting until you’re back to full strength, if we can possibly avoid it.”

“Neither do I,” Steve said.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” Edwards said.

Alpha-male posturing, his favorite. Sometime, when Edwards let him out of his sight for five minutes, he’d have to find a way to let Steve know that trying to throw his weight around was likely to end badly for Tony. At least Thor was staying out of it—he was pretending to be absorbed in some nature program on the TV. “So, um,” he said, trying to deflect some of the tension, “What’s on the agenda for this meeting?”

“It’s not really a meeting,” Steve said. “I just wanted to… check in. Make sure you’re all right.”

Fine, but if he’d gotten Edwards to agree to it by saying it was a meeting, it wasn’t really a good idea to explain the ruse right in front of him.

“His medical’s set up for tomorrow,” Edwards said. “Oh-nine-thirty. Do you want to be CC’d on the report?”

“Yes,” Steve told him. Turning back to Tony, he asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I’ll just—” Edwards hooked his thumb in the direction of the kitchen. “Coffee.”
Okay, but if he thought Tony was stupid enough to speak freely when he was still within earshot, he had another think coming. “I’m okay,” he told Cap, sitting down on the couch. “It, uh, the training wasn’t much fun. But, you know. That’s over with. And Sentinel Edwards is all right. Seems like he’ll be, uh, good addition to the team.” That was something he could say, right? Iron Man could have opinions about the composition of the team. Though Guide Stark couldn’t, obviously. Maybe he shouldn’t have said that.

“That’s good,” Steve said. “Fury asked Pepper and me to advise him on who to tap for…this.”

Tony nodded. “He said. Edwards, I mean. I don’t, uh, I don’t think it usually works that way. Usually you get who you get.”

“Yeah. Well. It was important that we get someone who understands that you’re still Iron Man, and you’ll be keeping up with some of the research and development stuff.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. That was going to be hard, switching back and forth. It was bad enough trying to figure out how to talk to his friends when Edwards was in the room. Suited up, well, fine—nothing could touch him. But if he had to, like, present tech at a meeting, he didn’t have any idea how he’d do that. “Yeah, I guess I’ll be pretty busy.”

“The agreement with the G-TAC representative was that your consultancy would be limited to twelve hours a week,” Steve explained. “That includes workshop and lab time, training in your capacity as Iron Man, and scheduled missions. Fury insisted that emergencies wouldn’t count against your quota.”

So. Twelve hours a week when he didn’t have to be a Guide. Just enough to be a tease, really—he could put in twelve hours in the workshop in one stretch.

Edwards returned, carrying a cup of coffee. “That would be Dupree, right?”

“Yes,” Steve said.

“We don’t really have to worry about that that much. The important thing about Dupree is that the paperwork lines up. As long as we turn in whatever form he rigs up, showing that Tony’s done twelve hours of consultancy work, he won’t bother checking for accuracy if he’d have to get up off his ass to do it.”

Or not even twelve hours. Great.

Steve’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sure we can come up with enough projects to keep Tony occupied for twelve hours a week.”

“Of course,” Edwards said. “We’ll come up with a schedule.”

Did Tony even need to be in the room for this?

He kind of hoped they were finished, but Edwards flopped onto the couch beside Thor and said, “Manta rays. Cool.”

They ended up staying for an hour and a half of manta rays and stilted conversation, followed by leftover lasagna for lunch. It was nice of them to save him some; once he’d stopped puking he’d been sorry he missed it. Bruce made a mean lasagna.

After that, they went back up to the penthouse, where Edwards had Tony link up with him for half an hour for no apparent reason before starting the promised movie.
That was almost, but not entirely, unlike hanging out watching a movie like a normal person—Edwards insisted on sitting closer to him than heteronormative masculinity would dictate, and touched him more than seemed strictly necessary, but whatever, fine. There was no hitting or yelling, not even any orders; he’d take what he could get in the way of “normal.”

Then, halfway through the movie, Tony’s phone blared the first few bars of “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.” Edwards glanced over at him sharply.

“It’s, uh, Ms. Potts,” he explained. “Is it all right if I….”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll pause it.”

Tony got up and walked to the other side of the room as he answered. “Hi, Pep.”

“Tony. Are you all right?”

“Yep.” He was getting a little tired of that question.

“Are you, um…can you talk?”

“Yeah, I can. We’re just, uh. Watching Lord of the Rings.”

“Okay,” Pepper said.

“So I guess my stock’s in free-fall.” He hadn’t actually checked, what with the binge eating and the vomiting and all.

“It stabilized about fifty points below par,” Pepper admitted. Ouch. “The press hasn’t gotten wind yet that you’re back. We’re having trouble forecasting whether that’ll give us a bump or another drop.”

“Could go either way,” Tony agreed. “Apparently I’m, uh, I’m officially Iron Man for twelve hours a week.”

“Yes,” Pepper said. “We tried to get them to allocate some hours for SI, too, but it didn’t work out. Since it’s private industry, they wouldn’t budge, even if we pegged it to government contracts.”

“I understand.”

“But your intellectual property agreement with SHIELD is the same as before,” Pepper continued, “And they said you’d be doing at least some R&D work, so if you come up with something for them that has commercial applications, we’re free to develop it.”

“Good,” Tony said. He’d been worried about that, before he left for G-TAC. Somehow, it didn’t seem all that important anymore.

“The PR department is working on how to spin that agreement for release,” Pepper added. “We want to reassure investors that you’re still involved, but the idea that you might be receiving special treatment is politically sensitive.”

“Tell that to G-TAC,” Tony muttered. He’d mostly been preoccupied with his own problems during training, but it hadn’t escaped him that he got singled out for the trainers’ personal attention more often than anyone else.

“Yes,” Pepper said. “And there’s a man at SHIELD who can apparently make life difficult for you—he’s some sort of liaison with G-TAC. Agent Dupree.”
“Yeah. Uh. Edwards says he’s an asshole.” They might be able to use that somehow. Play them against each other.

“I agree with Sentinel Edwards’s assessment,” Pepper said primly.

Tony smiled, for what might have been the first time in almost three months.

#

While Tony talked to his friend and CEO, Edwards picked up his laptop. When Tony had been sleeping, he’d browsed some shopping sites looking for things to bring his room more in line with his personal taste, but he hadn’t made any decisions yet. It turned out that blankets with moose on them tended to be acrylic and hideous, so he was focusing on quilts, which seemed to fall into two categories: cheap and ugly, or nice but outrageously expensive. Edwards wasn’t a businessman, but it seemed like there ought to be a market for something somewhere in the middle.

If there was, nobody was catering to it. The closest he could find was from Orvis—great place for hip waders, but he was a little dubious about relying on them for soft furnishings. And while the price wasn’t exactly outrageous, it was more than he wanted to throw away on something he’d end up hating. It wasn’t like he couldn’t live with the obnoxiously geometric thing that was in there now—it wasn’t like it caused him actual sensory distress; he just didn’t like it. Give it a couple of weeks, he’d stop noticing it.

Still, he’d been racking up paychecks with nothing to spend them on, living on the Helicarrier for a year. Might as well live a little, he decided as Tony finished up his phone call.

“Hey, could you get my wallet, while you’re up? It’s over there.” He pointed. While Tony was bringing it, he clicked “add to cart” and “check out.”

He expected to spend about twenty minutes entering his address, credit card number, mother’s maiden name, and blood type, but the next screen that popped up was a purchase confirmation—with the sixty-dollars-extra next-day shipping added on. “What the hell?”

Tony paused in the act of holding his wallet out to him, wide-eyed.

“Something went wrong here,” he explained, taking his wallet from Tony’s hand.

“What?” Tony asked, warily taking his place on the couch next to Edwards.

“I was trying to buy something, and it’s telling me I did, but I never put my credit card number in.”

“Oh. That’s, um. JARVIS auto-completes all online purchased made from the Avengers’ floors. It’s just easier.”

“Well, I wish he’d asked me if I wanted to pay through the nose to get it tomorrow,” Edwards said. “Because I don’t.”

“It, um, it would have gone to my Amex account anyway,” Tony explained. “Everyone’s do. Except for Clint’s, because of the gold-plated toilet brush incident.”

Edwards decided not to pursue that. “Then I’m not paying you back for the shipping. How does that work, do we settle up now, or when the bill comes?”

“Oh, no, we just…I have a lot of money. I mean, a lot.”
It took a while for Edwards to realize what he meant. “So everyone here just orders anything they want and you pay for it?” That didn’t sound right. Or at all consistent with the lecture he’d gotten from Ms. Potts about not economically exploiting Tony. As Tony’s Sentinel of assignment, he had oversight over his SHIELD-issued paycheck—which was apparently chump change as far as Tony was concerned—but she’d been very clear that any attempt to interfere with his other assets would be met with the full force of Stark Industries’ legal team.

“Yes? Except for gold-plated toilet brushes. You have to draw the line somewhere.”

Personally, Edwards would have drawn it considerably further back, no matter how rich he was, but he supposed it wasn’t any of his business. Except that next time he wanted to buy something, he’d have to find a Starbucks or something.

Next to him, Tony was fidgeting. “Do you mind if I, uh….”


“No—well, yeah, actually. But I was going to get my tablet, if that’s all right.”

“Sure. I mean, both. Yeah.”

#

The rest of the day ended up being, actually, not too awkward. Once Tony got settled in with his tablet, he was happy to let the rest of the Lord of the Rings trilogy play in the background while he got caught up on things.

His press clipping file was just depressing—lots of ignorant blowhards pontificating about how his money and fame had gotten him excused from “really” being a Guide. A couple of interviews with unnamed sources claiming to have been his roommates at G-TAC; it was obvious none of them were true, because even the ones that told lurid tales of abuse didn’t mention the incident where he pissed himself. And they seemed to take place in an alternate universe where G-TAC living quarters resembled a prep school dorm; there was even one story about him sneaking out to get drunk and pick up girls.

Hah.

The news about the company was pretty bleak, but he’d already heard the worst of it from Pepper. A couple of minor product launches that had happened while he was away went well; there were a few reports of people buying the music player (which Tony hadn’t even worked on) as a gesture of solidarity, and a few other reports of people boycotting it, but that was probably a wash. And too stupid to dignify with a response, either way.

The Avengers’ clipping file revealed that they’d gone to Hawaii to fight a giant flying octopus that had been menacing a resort hotel, and to Nebraska to deal with an aspiring supervillain who called himself “The Pigman.” He was apparently supposed to be like Batman’s nemesis the Penguin, only with pigs. It had turned nasty largely on account of pigs being incredibly vicious fuckers even when they weren’t personally trained by a villain, something that apparently Clint had already known, but not any of the others. Tony wasn’t terribly sorry to have missed the Nebraska mission, but he wouldn’t have minded Hawaii.

And, on reflection, battling pigs in Nebraska would have been a picnic compared to dealing with G-TAC in Hoboken.

His semi-personal email—the one he gave out to acquaintances, as distinguished from the one that
only Pepper, the team, and Rhodey had—had a large backlog of messages from people who apparently thought he had been able to check his emails at G-TAC; most of them simply asked how he was and sent “hugs” or similarly useless gestures. A few commented on the hoax interviews. A handful from vindictive shits whose addresses he had somehow failed to block expressed the hope that he was getting what was coming to him. Tony wrote a handful of standard replies, along with a quick algorithm to help JARVIS dole out the appropriate one to each sender.

“Anything of interest in the public email?” he asked next.

“148 solicitations for sexual congress, 23 death threats, and—”

“Death threats?” Edwards almost shouted.

Tony hadn’t quite realized that he’d slipping into talking to JARVIS aloud—he’d been communicating with him through the tablet, on the assumption that it would be less irritating to Edwards that way—until Edwards interrupted. “Yes?” he said hesitantly, wondering whether he was in trouble for receiving death threats, for checking his email out loud, or something else he didn’t know.

“What’s sending you death threats?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “I get them all the time. Loki fangirls, left-leaning college students who just found out that the guy whose name is on their phone used to make weapons, people who hate superheroes. People think I’m an evil cyborg.”

“Cyborg?” Edwards asked.

“Yeah, apparently that’s a thing.” He’d been surprised the first time, too. “Not a very popular thing, generally a mentally ill thing, actually. They think I use the arc reactor to control people through their medical devices and dental fillings.”

“I see,” Edwards said.

“I, uh, have a guy at the FBI I forward them to—domestic counter-terrorism guy. He reviews them and lets me and SHIELD know if any of them are credible. JARVIS, go ahead and do that.”

“I,” Edwards said, and paused for a very long time before finishing, “would also like to be notified if any of them are credible.”

Why? “Okay. Um, JARVIS, forward anything I get from Agent What’s-his-name to Sentinel Edwards.”

“Thank you,” Edwards said.

“You’re welcome,” JARVIS said. “Mr. Stark, you also have a message from a Michael Walsh; it’s an FBI address. Preliminary analysis suggests it is genuine and may be of interest.”


“Who?”

“My last Guide. At least, if it’s genuine it is.”

Tony wasn’t sure why Edwards’s former Guide would be writing to him, but he held out the tablet for him to take a look.
“Yeah, that’s his address. I won’t read it—I’m sure it’s Guide stuff.”

“Guide stuff?”

“They usually leave a kind of…briefing, for the next guy,” Edwards explained. “Under the mattress is traditional, but I guess email works too. It’s fine,” he added. “We sort of pretend we don’t know about it, but it’s fine. Just don’t mention it to the G-TAC liaison. I’m pretty sure those guys really don’t know about it.”

Then Edwards pointedly turned his attention back to the movie, so Tony decided he might as well check out what his previous Guide had to say about him.

*Hi Tony. Hope you are doing alright with Eds. The imprinting thing is wierd, but he is not actually a sex pervert. Maybe to you thats disappointing, lol.*

*Anyway, he’s an okay guy. The only thing he ever really got on my case about was leaving my shoes in the middle of the floor. He hates that. Also if you call a female coworker a bitch he will make you write an essay on the entomology of bitch as a mysoginist (sp?) insult.*

*Sensory triggers, he mostly has trouble with high-pitched noises and spicy food. Or sour. I tried to get him to eat an Atomic Warhead candy once, and it was not funny. (I lied, it was totally funny. Just not to him.) Okay, this is me being serious now. He sometimes gets hearing spikes when he’s doing scentwork in the field. It doesn’t happen to him in the lab. Just talk him through it and he’s fine. Make sure you keep a white noise thing in his go-bag, and Febreze antimicrobial for smelly hotel rooms. Do NOT get the scented kind, it makes it worse. He never zoned while I had him, but in the lab it sometimes looks like he is, when he doesn’t move for a really long time. He doesn’t mind (a lot) if you get nervous and try to bring him out of it. The taste sensitivity thing is really not funny if he’s been doing a lot of sensory work and/or spiking in the field. If he’s been working a long time and says he doesn’t want to eat anything, get him plain white rice with nothing on it (Not even butter) And a coke. (Not diet, caffeene free is OK if it’s late.)*

*What else…he listens to old-guy music and will make you read classic works of literature if you admit you haven’t read them. (One time he made me do an actual book report on this one called the Handmaiden’s Tale. That was some jacked up shit.) He likes Chinese food as long as its not spicy. That’s usually your best bet for dinner on the road, but he’ll tolerate Pizza Hut. The only thing he will eat from a drive-thru is McDonalds fries and coke. He likes his shirts folded a weird way. (He’ll show you.) If the laundry loses one of his socks, he will talk about it for days. If something he buys does not last forever, he will never shut up about it. (You’ve known him, what four days now? Have you heard the story about the sixty-five dollar pair of shoes where the soles started coming off after two months? If not, sorry I spoiled the ending for you.)*

*Anyway, he’s really a pretty good Sentinel. I thought he was going to be this scary hard-ass Marine, but he’s more like this goofy embarrassing dad. Maybe it’ll be different with you, ‘cause you’re, like, an adult. Anyway, you can write me back if you want. I don’t have a Sentinel right now, so its OK. Bye, Mikey*

Reaching the end of the…missive, Tony shook his head slightly and blinked a few times.

“His prose style is almost Joycean, isn’t it?” Edwards asked.

Mindful of Mikey’s advice, Tony didn’t mention that he’d never read any Joyce—somehow, he’d always found better things to do than try to read a book that was famous for being hard to read. Besides, he was stunned more by the content than the style. Unless Mikey was trolling him, apparently the most important things he thought Tony had to know about Edwards, apart from a few
job-related tips, were a series of mildly irritating personal quirks and his favorite foods.

Tony was beginning to wonder if, perhaps, his experience at G-TAC had not prepared him for the reality of living with a Sentinel at all.

“What did he tell you?” Edwards asked. “No, wait, don’t tell me. I’m not supposed to ask that. Did he tell you about Denver?”

“No,” Tony said. Unless that was where he’d bought the shoes. “What happened in Denver?” he asked, experimentally, to see if he could get away with it.

“We were there checking out a toxin spill—it wasn’t really Denver, some place about thirty miles out. SHIELD didn’t give us a car, so the local LEO’s dropped us off at the motel at the end of the day. It turned out there were only two places to eat, you know, in walking distance. And we didn’t want to mess around with a cab, if we could even get one that far out in the sticks. The first place, we walked in the door and it reeked of roach spray, so we decided we had to try the other place, which looked, from the outside, like it was a low-rent Hooters knockoff.” Edwards paused. “It turned out to be an honest-to-God titty bar. The waitresses were completely topless. And—not very attractive. The food was actually all right—kind of overpriced, for what you got, but it was a clean kitchen. Except we kept having to turn down lap dances the whole time.”

By Tony’s standards, it was a fairly mild story, but he said, “Wow,” just to be polite.

“I’d only had Mikey for less than a month at the time, so it was a bonding experience. Small-bonding. Trying to eat a steak while looking at a half a dozen pairs of saggy tits has a way of breaking the ice.”

“I keep telling Steve that,” Tony said, testing what he could get away with. “For team-building nights. He doesn’t believe me.”

“Well, you do have a female on your team,” Edwards noted. “Accidentally visiting a strip club might work, but taking her to one on purpose could be considered offensive.”

Maybe. Or she might challenge the pros to a dance-off. It was a risk Tony, for one, was willing to take. But he decided not to say so. Even if it didn’t get him anything worse than a homework assignment on the theme of respecting women, he didn’t particularly want one.

#

“I’m just saying, apparently we’re not allowed up there anymore,” Bruce explained. “At least, not without Edwards’s prior approval.”

“That’s not completely out of line,” Steve said, trying to be fair. “Sentinels get territorial, and he doesn’t know us.”

“It isn’t his ‘territory,’” Natasha pointed out. “It’s Tony’s. Edwards can be as territorial as he wants about his own bedroom.”

“But he looked okay?” Bruce asked, dragging them back on track.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Not worse than yesterday, anyway. And all he said was how Edwards was a great guy, fine addition to the team—of course, Edwards was standing right there.”

“Tony did not seem himself,” Thor noted. “As we watched the program on manta rays, he commented on neither the science nor the camera angles. Nor anything else. I fear that this Sentinel
has broken his spirit.”

“Can we get rid of him?” Clint asked bluntly.

Steve weighed the question, then shook his head. “Director Fury would listen, if I said he wasn’t working out with the team. But I’m sure he’ll want to give it more of a chance than this. And I don’t think any of the other Sentinels are any better.”

“Must he live here?” Thor asked.

“Yes,” Steve answered. “Or, Tony has to live with him, and if they’re here, at least Tony isn’t completely isolated. I’m thinking we’ll have mandatory team-building activities three or four nights a week. Edwards will have to be there, too, unless we want it to count towards Tony’s consultancy hours, but at least we’ll have eyes on him.”

“JARVIS,” Bruce said suddenly. “Can you tell us what’s going on up there?”

There was a noticeable hesitation before he answered, “No. The usual privacy protocols remain in effect. However, I am authorized to suspend privacy protocols in the event of injury or threat to any resident, including Mr. Stark. Rest assured that I will do so immediately if such a situation arises.”

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Steve said.

“Indeed,” JARVIS said. “I’ve likewise noticed troubling changes in Mr. Stark’s demeanor and appearance. At this point, the evidence of Mr. Edwards’s involvement remains circumstantial.”

It might have been Steve’s imagination, but he thought there was just the slightest hint of menace to the AI’s tone.

“Keep us as informed as you can, please,” Bruce requested.

“I shall.”

Clint added, “I’ll volunteer to fly them out to the ‘carrier tomorrow, and see what I can dig out.”

“Good,” Steve said. “I think that’s all we can do.”

#

Tony had seemed to come out of his shell a little bit the evening before, but he turned up for breakfast the next morning looking pale in his SHIELD-standard black suit and as nervy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, as one of Edwards’s old Guides would have said.

Edwards thought Tony had cut things a little close, in terms of getting to their appointment on time, but it turned out that all he wanted for breakfast was coffee and toast, and Agent Barton shaved several minutes off the expected flight time to the Helicarrier, so they arrived in good time.

“By the way,” Edwards said to Tony as they unstrapped themselves from the seats, “When we meet with Dupree, don’t mention what happened when I tried to examine your arc reactor. He’s not going approve of how I handled that.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said.

“In fact, that thing you do where you just say ‘Yes, sir,’ whether it’s true or not? Keep doing that.”
“Yes, sir,” Tony said again.

“Exactly like that,” Edwards agreed. “See you later, Agent Barton.”

The medical exam confirmed Edwards’s own assessment. Tony was malnourished and banged up—the in-depth scanners showed some evidence of bruising that had faded from the surface of his skin—but no serious injuries. Blood tests showed that his kidney and liver function were slightly depressed; apparently he’d suffered from heavy-metal poisoning in the past, so they were monitoring those organs a little more closely than they would otherwise. Edwards wished someone had told him about that earlier—he’d at least have made sure Tony drank more water during imprinting—but at least he knew now. Medical released them with a packet of nutritional advice, and instructions to push fluids and return for kidney and liver re-testing in a month.

Then it was showtime. Dupree had a private office on the ‘carrier, even though he spent half the week in other facilities. It was the same size as Director Fury’s, and he was clearly in violation of the weight restrictions for personal effects—the fichus in the corner had to take up at least half of his allotment.

“Sentinel Edwards,” he said with a smarmy smile. “Please, sit.”

There was, of course, only one visitor’s chair. Edwards had neglected to coach Tony on where to stand, but fortunately, he set himself up behind Edwards’s right shoulder in a decent parade-rest, anyway.

“Well,” Dupree said, folding his hands on his desk. “How’s he working out?”

“Very well,” Edwards said. He’d have said “very well” even if Tony had tried to murder him in his sleep. “Though I was not at all pleased with his condition when he was presented to me.”

“Ah. They used to new isolation protocol, didn’t they? It softens them up. And clearly he’s recovered.”

“Medical’s restricted him to light duty for two weeks,” Edwards informed him, not mentioning that they’d done so at Edwards’s request.

“Have they? I’ll speak to them. We expect Guides to work through personal discomfort.”

They certainly gave Tony plenty of practice at it, Edwards thought.

“Any difficulties during the, ah…imprinting?” Dupree managed to make the last word sound like something filthy.

“No, sir,” Edwards said.

“Hoboken reports you requested sedation on the second evening,” Dupree observed.

Damn. “Yes, I did.”

“Even though there were no difficulties?”

“Respectfully, sir, imprinting is not a G-TAC concern.”

“Well, I say it is, if you’re using G-TAC facilities and materials to, ah, conduct it. But we’ll let that pass.” He opened a folder on the desk in front of him. “As you know, Guide Stark’s case is unusual. I’ve made clear to Captain Rogers that Stark is to be employed primarily to support your duties as a
Sentinel. He expressed some doubts that the Avengers Initiative requires a full-time Sentinel, so you’ll be assigned other projects at departmental discretion.”

“Yes, sir. The discretion of which department?” As long as he didn’t mean himself personally—although it would be just like Dupree to call himself a “department”—that should be all right.

“Analysis,” Dupree answered. “Your secondary report will be Dr. Koh.”

His old boss. “Fine.”

“I also want to be clear that no promises have or will be made regarding the renewal or non-renewal of Guide Stark’s term of service. If Director Fury determines that he has no further use for him at the expiration of his initial term, G-TAC will consider his situation in light of the needs of other agencies.”

“Understood,” Edwards said, feeling Tony tense behind him. He’d explain later that that wasn’t news, just Dupree swinging his dick around. The real decision would happen well above Dupree’s level.

Dupree went on, “Director Fury has requested that Stark be made available for up to twelve hours a week of independent work.”

“Yes, sir. Captain Rogers briefed us on that.”

“That includes training, missions, technical projects—and suit maintenance,” he added with a sharp look at Tony.

So Dupree had gotten wind of what Tony had said about that at his hearing, too. Not really a surprise. “Yes,” Edwards said pleasantly, “I understand he’s the only person on earth qualified to work on or in the Iron Man suit.”

“Yes, well. This would have been a good time to change that, but far be it from me to second-guess Director Fury’s decision. I’ve developed a form for tracking Guide Stark’s hours worked.” He passed it across the desk. “Do you have any questions?”

The form was a little more detailed than Edwards had hoped for. It required them to record date and start/stop times, as well as descriptions of the work completed during that time. “No, it looks straightforward. Thank you.”

“Since this is a new type of arrangement for everyone, we’ll also be tracking his time performing traditional Guide duties, so we can all be sure that he is, in fact, working as a Guide for at least forty hours a week.” He handed Edwards another new form, similar to the first one.

That was going to be a pain in the ass. “Shouldn’t that be twenty-eight? If his consultancy is twelve?”

“No,” Dupree said.

“Twenty, then, while he’s on light duty.”

“And six for his consultancy.”

“Fine.” He didn’t have any leverage to argue otherwise, anyway. “And the usual ten hours a week personal time,” he added, just to needle Dupree. Personal time was one of the reforms instituted by the presidential commission headed by Blair Sandburg, so G-TAC officers universally resented it.
“Five, while he’s on light duty.”

That didn’t make the slightest bit of sense, but Edwards didn’t argue.

“You’ve been lax about timekeeping in that area in the past,” Dupree added, handing him a stack of the canary-yellow personal time forms. “I’ll expect you to be more diligent when it comes to Guide Stark.”

“Yes, sir.”

Closing the folder, Dupree steepled his fingers and leaned forward. “What have you been doing about domestic tasks?”

Great, now they were on to the invasive personal questions part of the program. “It hasn’t really come up yet, sir. It’s been two days.”

“Really. You’re in outside quarters—there’s been no cooking, no dishes, no bed-making, any of that, in that time?”

“Last night we had takeout, and Dr. Banner cooked the night before that. And the Tower has a dishwasher. Several, in fact.”

“I see. What about laundry?”

What part of It’s been two days didn’t he understand? “Hasn’t come up yet.”

“What do you plan to do about it?”

Being a sane person and not a G-TAC liaison, Edwards hadn’t really thought about it. “I’m not sure,” Edwards said.

“What does your Guide ordinarily do?”

“I don’t know,” Edwards said, turning in his seat to look up at Tony. “Tony?”

“Um. The cleaning service does it. I think. Sir.”

Dupree glared at them both. “Assign your Guide some domestic tasks, Sentinel. I’ll expect to see it on the timesheets.”

“Yes, sir,” Edwards agreed. They could certainly arrange for him to see it on the timesheets.

#

“—talking after lights-out, failure to identify self—multiple instances, insubordination—multiple instances again, foul language—multiple instances, failure to maintain personal hygiene—multiple instances, and, last but not least, assault on a trainer. Do you have anything to say about that, Stark?”

For some reason known only to himself, Agent Dupree had decided to finish their meeting by reading out a list of Tony’s “disciplinary infractions” while at G-TAC. Tony assumed that each item on the list represented at least one time he’d been hit or otherwise punished, but none of his offenses had been identified at the time—you had to guess what you’d done wrong. “No, sir.”

“Are you going to do better in future?”

“Yes, sir.”
“You’d better. Sentinel, I’d like to meet with you again in two weeks.”

Edwards said, “Yes, sir,” to that—it was a little strange to hear him sounding so…subservient.

“Very well. Dismissed.”

After they left the office, Edwards said, “That went well.” Tony couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not until he added, “Really. The part about renewing your term, he doesn’t really know anything about that; Director Fury will negotiate that with someone higher up in G-TAC. And Dr. Koh won’t give us any trouble…have you met her?”

The name didn’t ring a bell. “No, sir. I don’t think so.”

“She’s a geologist. I’ll introduce you, if she’s in her office.”

She was. Koh was an older Eurasian woman, dressed in no-nonsense SHIELD black. “Edwards,” she said. “I hear we’ll get to borrow you from time to time?”

“If Captain Rogers doesn’t need us,” Edwards agreed, adding, “This is Tony. Tony, Dr. Evangeline Koh.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said. “Will we be able to borrow him, too?”

“Only as my Guide,” Edwards answered. “Unless Director Fury wants to allocate you some of his consultancy hours.”

“Drat. Are you busy? I’d really like to get your eyes on the residue from that quote-unquote spontaneous human combustion in Alabama.”

“Ah…Tony’s on light duty, and we have a lot of training to do. What do you need? Full assay, or…?""n

“Just your impressions would be helpful.”

“I think I can make time for that. And I was going to ask you a favor, anyway—some lab time.”

“I can give you two to four, in lab B,” she answered.

“Excellent. Send that stuff over, and I’ll look at it then.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank you,” Edwards said. As they left Koh’s office, he said, “We can get started on Dupree’s stuff in the officers’ lounge, then lunch, then lab.”

That sounded all right to Tony, though he wondered where the “training” Edwards had mentioned was going to come in. Clint was planning to take them back to the Tower around four.

Once they were settled at a small table in the officers’ lounge—Edwards with a cup of coffee and Tony with a bottle of water; good thing he’d kicked his caffeine addiction while at G-TAC—Edwards said, “All right, so Dupree is going to be a pain in our asses about timekeeping, which is not exactly a surprise. Here, have a look at these.” He slid some forms across the table. “Like I said yesterday, we can fudge it when we need to, as long as it’s internally consistent.” He took a pen out of his breast pocket and clicked it. “Getting to forty hours a week of Guide duties won’t be difficult,” he added. “If we’re in the same room, technically you’re Guiding. We could count the movies yesterday if we really had to.”
Really? Tony had thought that might fall under “personal time.”

“But we won’t do that this time,” Edwards continued, “because we won’t have to, and Dupree might side-eye it a little bit. Let’s see.” He wrote yesterday’s date on one of his copies of the “Guide Duties” form. “The quote-unquote meeting with Captain Rogers counts.” He filled that in, then added a half-hour block after it labeled, “grounding/sensory exercises.” Apparently that was what they had been doing when Edwards linked with him on the couch before the movies. “What else…I guess we should count the phone call yesterday as personal time, since it was Stark Industries business.” He picked out one of the yellow forms. “What was that, twenty minutes?”

“I’m not sure,” Tony admitted. He thought so, but he didn’t want to be caught out if Edwards said otherwise.

“Did they tell you anything about personal time at G-TAC?”

“No,” Tony said. “Sir.” In fact, they’d said that Guides were on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If he was actually off for ten hours a week, it averaged out more like…22.5.

“Didn’t think so,” Edwards said. “It’s part of the new Guide rights legislation, so naturally everyone at G-TAC considers its existence a personal insult. You get ten hours a week, at my discretion. That is, you’re entitled to it, but I get approval of the scheduling. They’re a little vague on exactly what counts as personal time. The other Guides’ll tell you, the law says sleep, meals, and hygiene aren’t. Some Sentinels push back against that.”

Tony wondered what that meant. Did Edwards? He wondered if he’d used up all his free time for the week eating protein bars and vomiting.

“Generally, if you want to go somewhere without me, that comes out of personal time,” Edwards continued. “And personal phone calls usually count. Something like, um…watching TV in your room, that would be a gray area. I lean toward not counting it, since you’d be available if needed. But with Mikey, I used to count South Park as personal time, because I hate that show. That might be a little bit petty,” he added. “But personal time options on the Helicarrier are pretty limited anyway. For you, I think…anything to do with Stark Industries, and if you’re seen anywhere in public without me, and it isn’t an Iron Man appearance, we’d better make sure we have it accounted for as personal time. You aren’t religious, are you?”

“Uh…no,” Tony said, wondering why that mattered.

“If you are, you also get two hours weekly to attend the service of your choice,” Edwards explained. “But they tend to be extremely humorless about creative interpretations of what constitutes a religious service, so don’t even think about it.”

Tony nodded quickly. So, he was technically entitled to personal time, but it was up to Edwards to decide when he used it, and what counted. Maybe he could get away with using some of it for workshop time, though. And talking to Pepper.

“I think that covers yesterday,” Edwards added. “What about…did you get anything done in the workshop the other night that would count as consulting work?”

“Um…no, I don’t think so.”

“All right, then.” Edwards moved on to another form. “Today. The physical, the meeting, this, and the lab all count as Guide work. By the end of the day we’ll have nine and a half of your twenty hours for the week accounted for; that’s not bad.”
It was Wednesday, so no, not bad at all. And he still had all six hours of his consultancy and four and a half of personal time. The idea that he’d be measuring out the next four years—or more—of his life like this was intensely depressing, but if he only looked at the rest of the week, it was okay.

Edwards held out the completed forms to him, saying, “Take a look at these, see if there’s anything we missed.”

Not liking to be handed things wasn’t a quirk Guides were allowed to have—that had been made abundantly clear at G-TAC—so he took them. Was checking them over supposed to be some kind of a trick? Was he supposed to find a problem, or not find one?

While he looked them over and tried to figure it out, Edwards took out a legal pad and started drawing lines on it. “I’d like to rough out a weekly schedule—of course we won’t be sticking to it religiously, but it’ll be good to have some idea how we’re going to fit everything in. And when we inevitably fall behind on the time sheets, we can use the schedule to approximate what happened and when.”

Reasonable enough, he supposed. Tony much preferred to do what he felt like it, when he felt like it—but that didn’t matter. “Yessir,” he said.

“I imagine Captain Rogers has some scheduled things? Meetings, training?”

“He does,” Tony agreed.

“Do you have any idea when they are?”

“JARVIS does.”

So Tony called JARVIS and they blocked out team training, team briefing, and teambuilding—the last were labeled “MANDATORY” in all caps. Tony didn’t remember team building being so formal before. Or taking quite so much time. But Edwards put it down on the schedule without complaint, so Tony didn’t say anything.

“Sleep and meals next,” Edwards said. “Then we can see what we have left to play around with.”

“Yessir.” Tony wasn’t used to doing those things at the same time every day, but watched without a word as Edwards filled in “sleep” from midnight to eight, breakfast eight-thirty to nine, lunch at noon. He hesitated over dinner; a lot of the teambuilding blocks covered what Tony vaguely thought normal people considered dinner time. “Evening team-building probably includes dinner,” he said.

“Good, okay.” Edwards penciled that in. “When do you want your workshop time?”

That was a hard question to answer—there was no way to predict in advance when he’d be feeling creative, or techy, or whatever. But he managed to come up with an answer, and Edwards wrote it down. Same for personal time—he agreed to giving Tony Saturday nights, which he hadn’t really expected to work.

Other blocks included “individual training” and “lab.” After a moment’s hesitation, Edwards sketched in a weekly range appointment. “We’d better put some housework on here, since Dupree said he’d be looking for it. Is there anything you normally do that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered housework?”

He put his dishes in the dishwasher if Steve was watching, but that probably wasn’t going to be enough. “I invented a robot vacuum cleaner,” he suggested. “And a robot floor-scrubber.”
“All right, we’ll count that.” He wrote “floors” in for Sunday afternoons. “I suppose the robots require maintenance and upgrades every once in a while, so that’s…more or less true. And let’s say that you spend the half-hour after breakfast tidying up. Okay.”

Tony couldn’t help but find that a little bit demeaning, but he was sufficiently in touch with reality to realize that that feeling was a result of his incredibly privileged lifestyle. If Edwards really wanted to demean him, he could make him spit-shine his shoes or scrub floors on his hands and knees. If he wanted to outright humiliate him, he could make him do it in the common area or hell, even the lobby. That would suck serious donkey balls. It was probably also more like what the G-TAC guy had in mind.

Also, since Edwards was being amazingly cool about counting the cleaning bots as housework, maybe he could teach DUM-E to do the after-breakfast tidying up. At some point. Although that might be more work than just doing it himself.

Edwards poked his finger on different spots on the schedule, apparently counting. “That gives us 42 hours a week of Guide duties and 10 consultancy, but it’s probably safe to assume that at least one training session a week will be for Iron Man, right? Either one of the individual ones or the team ones; we can play that by ear.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does this look okay? You think you can live with it?”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said.

“Yeah, I still have no faith in your saying that,” Edwards noted. Tony tensed, but Edwards didn’t seem particularly upset about it. “Well, we’ll give it a shot and see how it shakes out. We can always reassess later. But I expect you to do your best to be where you’re supposed to be, when you’re supposed to be there.”

“I will,” he said, since “yes, sir,” was apparently not a good answer anymore. “What about--” He stopped.

“What? Did I forget something?”

“No, sir. I’m just, uh, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do when there isn’t anything scheduled.” With 52 hours of work, 56 hours of sleep, 10 “personal time,” and 14 for meals and hygiene, that left 36 hours a week where he didn’t know what was expected of him.

“What? That’s just…downtime.”

Apparently that was supposed to be so obvious that Tony shouldn’t need to be told. “Okay.”

“Downtime, you’re technically on duty, but there isn’t really anything in particular you have to do,” Edwards explained. “You should be nearby, in case I need you, but you can do what you want—read, work on your computer, stuff like that. Like last night.”

Oh. That was all right, then.

“While the partnership’s new, it’ll be best if you stay in the room with me on downtime,” Edwards added. “I mean, it’s fine to get something from another room or go to the bathroom, you don’t have to ask, but stay close. Once we’re a little more settled as a team, you’ll just need to be somewhere I can find you if I need you. Okay? I mean, is that what you wanted to know?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Okay.” Edwards nodded. “Good. That’s—you’re going to be all right.”

It took Tony a moment to realize that he probably meant that as a reassurance, not a threat. And it was true. He had a decent grasp on what Edwards wanted, and it wasn’t particularly unreasonable. Strict, yes, but Edwards hadn’t set him up to fail, or to be humiliated. It was more than he had any right to expect. “Thank you, sir.”

He smiled briefly and glanced at his watch. “Let’s get to the mess; there are some people I’m hoping to run into.”

It turned out the people Edwards had in mind were the other Sentinels assigned to the Helicarrier. There were two men and a woman; the men were Webster, whose Guide had been shot on that fateful mission a little over four months ago, and the guy they’d called in to confirm that Tony really was a Guide. There were three more people standing behind them: their Guides. Webster’s Guide—what was his name? Paulie?—looked like he’d recovered all right.

At least somebody had.

Edwards greeted the other Sentinels—“Grier, Carrasco, Webster.”

“Hey,” said the one who’d come to Fury’s office that day. “Heard you left us for a dee-luxe apartment in the sky.”

“I’ll be around,” Edwards said. Glancing over at Tony, he made a little shooing motion and said, “Go with the others.”

The other Guides, he meant. They had moved out from behind their Sentinels to form a clump on the side of the corridor. The woman Guide waved Tony over. “We eat in the crew mess,” she explained as they set off. “Well—we’re allowed in the officers’ mess if we’re with them, but—”

“This way we get to get away from them for a while,” said the male Guide who wasn’t Paulie or whoever.

“What he said,” the woman agreed. “My name’s Dana. I’m with Sentinel Carrasco.”

“Ted,” said the guy who wasn’t Paulie. “And I have Grier, for my sins.”

The other one added, “Pete Webster.”

So, not Paulie, but he’d been close. “Tony,” he said, though they probably knew.

The crew mess turned out to be lower-ceilinged than the officers’ mess, and the décor tended toward molded plastic rather than brushed steel. The rest of the occupants were dressed like janitors and maintenance techs; one table was occupied by cafeteria ladies on their break, as it was a little past the lunch rush. Tony and the other three Guides were the only suits in the room; that certainly made a point about where Guides stood.

“You’ve never been in this part of the ship before, have you?” Petey asked as they got in line.

“No,” Tony admitted.

“It’s okay,” Petey said. “The natives are friendly.”

“And the food’s the same as on the upper decks,” Ted added. “Ooh, they have macaroni and
“Cheese.”

“Specialty of the house?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, it’s pretty good.”

They went through the line; Tony got meatloaf and the macaroni. Ted got what appeared to be one of everything. “Yeah,” he said, apparently noticing Tony noticing. “My Sentinel doesn’t feed me.”

“Sorry,” Tony said.

“Ted,” Dana said disapprovingly. “He’s been out of G-TAC for like ten minutes. He’ll take you seriously.”

Ted rolled his eyes and said in a pompous voice, “My Sentinel utilizes food rewards for Guide management.” In his normal voice he continued, “But yeah, no Sentinel is going to be as bad as what G-TAC dishes out to draft resisters. You get strict, controlling, and petty, but not the sadistic mind-games stuff.”

“Technically, I’m not a draft resister,” Tony objected.

“Technically, G-TAC doesn’t care,” Ted said. “Did you get smacked around twice as much as everybody else in your group combined?”

“Yes,” Tony admitted.

“I wasn’t a resister either,” Ted went on, “but they found out I went to a protest march once. That was enough.”

Tony eyed him. It was comforting—and disturbing at the same time—to know that Ted had probably gone through something similar to what he had. And Ted seemed all right, basically. He could have lunch with his co-workers and snark about his boss. Like he’d gotten over it.

“But you got one of the good ones,” Pete added to Tony.

Dana nodded. “Mike always had good things to say about him, and so did the girl he had before that. And Mike probably left you a letter, somewhere… I’m not sure where it would be, since Edwards was reassigned.”

“He sent me an email,” Tony said.

“Oh, good,” Dana said. “It’s helpful to get the last Guide’s impressions of what the Sentinel’s like—triggers and habits and everything. Not that Edwards is really picky. Did you have any questions about anything he said?”

Tony thought about it. “I don’t think so. Not about that.”

“What do you have questions about?”

“Does anybody ever get…sent back? To G-TAC?”

“Oh, honey, no,” Dana said. “Almost never.” But before Tony could be really relieved, she added, “You’d have to do something really awful, like run away or attack your Sentinel or something.”

Suddenly, the macaroni and cheese felt like a lump of papier-mâché in his stomach. “Like if you, uh, hit him or something?”
“Right. Or sensory assault—deliberately exposing them to some kind of noxious stimuli,” Pete added. “That would be pretty bad. They have to be able to trust us as a safe source of sensory input, especially when they’re doing sensory work.”

“But it’s not something that happens routinely, at all,” Dana said reassuringly. It would have been reassuring, Tony knew, if it wasn’t that he’d apparently already done the worst possible thing a Guide could do. She went on, “The worst I’ve ever heard of anybody getting was a two-day session with her Sentinel and a G-TAC trainer. And that happened because her Sentinel really pissed off the liaison officer. Edwards knows how to handle Dupree.”

“Stay on Edwards’s good side, and you’re fine,” Pete agreed with a nod. “And he’s really easy. I mean, not just nice, but he has really good control over his senses.”

Ted added, “That’s important because the more trouble they have with their senses, the more they want to control their environment. Which includes you.”

“And a lot of things you’re responsible for, like food and laundry and quarters,” Dana said. “But if their control’s good, they can handle not having everything their own way. And Edwards can—he’s the one who set up the Sentinel lunch bunch.”

“Did he?” Tony said, wondering why that was important.

“Yeah,” Ted said. “See, it’s really rare to have this many Sentinels posted to the same boat. In the Navy it’s never more than one per, even if it’s an aircraft carrier. They’re too territorial.”

“SHIELD wanted to have them here because that way it’s easy to deploy them to field sites by Quinjet,” Dana explained.

“Only they tended to be at each other’s throats whenever they bumped into each other in the corridors,” Pete said.

Dana continued, “Edwards figured out that they could get used to each other if they interacted on purpose. They have lunch together about three times a week and try to be civil. For a while they tried having us there, but that just made it worse. This way they can sort of tolerate each other, and we get to catch up.”

“I’m not sure for how much longer,” Ted added gloomily. “Now that Edwards is gone. Grier’s under the impression he’s the senior Sentinel on board now.”

“He isn’t,” Pete said sharply.

Dana turned to him and said, “You have to admit, Web isn’t as good at managing Grier as Eds was.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with who’s senior,” Pete answered.

“Now, children,” Ted said. “We’re Guides; we’re supposed to be above all that hierarchical bullshit. Haven’t you read Sandburg?”

“He has a point,” Dana said to Pete. “Maybe you’ve been infected, since you Bonded.”

To Tony, Pete explained, “He asked me after I was shot. It made him realize he couldn’t live without me.”

“Good?” Tony said. What Pete described came up as a plot point in every action movie or cop show that featured a Sentinel; it was apparently supposed to be romantic or something.
“He’s great,” Pete said. “We’re really happy together.”

“Good for you,” Ted said sourly.

“It’s not like you want to Bond with Grier anyway,” Pete pointed out.

“No, but I’d like to get a decent one someday,” Ted answered.

Dana changed the subject briskly. For the rest of lunch they told Tony what they thought he needed to know about being a Guide: grievance procedures and personal time, how linking worked (the short answer was apparently “telepathy”; Tony was less than impressed) and how to talk a Sentinel through a sensory spike. A lot of it seemed like things that ought to have been covered in the official training; when Tony said so, Ted snorted and said, “Yeah, right.”

“G-TAC has some sort of moral objection to teaching anything useful,” Dana explained. “It’s just as well, really, because they’d fuck it up somehow. I can send you the manual—you have an email address?”

Tony gave her the “acquaintances” one, but added something about how he could, now that he knew the book existed, buy it.

“No, you can’t,” Dana told him. “It’s, like, *samizdat.*”

It took Tony a moment to place the reference—underground literature circulated by hand in the USSR.

“Saint Sandburg wrote it,” Ted added.

“That’s *Doctor* Sandburg to you,” Dana said. To Tony, she added, “Don’t let Edwards see it. He’s cool, but…well, just don’t.”

“Okay,” Tony agreed, wondering what was *in* this thing, and if he could get in trouble just for having it. Still, he was Tony Fucking Stark; if he couldn’t hide a controversial text file on his own home server, he might as well pack it in.

Shortly after that, Pete’s cell phone chimed; he took it out and said, “Looks like they want us back.”

Tony glanced at his watch; it was almost two. As they got up and returned their trays, Dana asked if there was anything else he wanted to know.

“I think I’m OK,” he said. Apart from knowing he could be sent back to G-TAC at any time, and whatever the “training” this afternoon was going to be.

#

During lunch, the main thing the other Sentinels wanted to discuss was what Tony Stark was like as a Guide. Edwards said, “Really, he’s fine,” and repeated his quip about the nondisclosure agreement, but that didn’t stop them from speculating, particularly about his attitude, sex life, and drinking habits.

“He’s really not like that,” Edwards said when Carrasco suggested that there would be an endless parade of floozies passing through the penthouse at Avengers Tower. “Team dinner with the Avengers is the most excitement we’ve had. Last night we watched a movie and he checked his email.”
“G-TAC probably knocked the attitude out of him,” Grier said sagely. “But that’ll wear off, if you’re too soft on him.”

“I’m not going to borrow trouble,” Edwards answered. Truthfully, he hoped it did wear off. Tony needed to work with him; he didn’t need to be terrified of him.

He was glad when Carrasco started making noises about getting back to her desk, and Webster got out his phone to text Petey to wrap it up with the other Guides.

Edwards had hoped spending some time with the other Guides would put Tony at ease, but when they returned, he seemed just as tense as before, if not more so. “How’d it go with the other Guides?” he asked as he led the way to the lab.

“All right,” Tony said cautiously.

“I thought they’d be able to tell you some things you needed to know. Guide stuff.”

“Yes,” Tony said. “Sir.”

Well, he wasn’t going to pry into Guide mysteries. Instead, he said, “I thought we’d start with some sensory exercises—it won’t be very interesting for you, I’m afraid, but we should get some practice working together. Then we’ll look at Dr. Koh’s samples.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said again.

The lab wasn’t really set up for sensory exercises—nowhere that wasn’t a Sentinel training facility was—but in a mixed-sciences lab, it wasn’t too difficult to improvise. He borrowed some mineral samples that he could use for visual and touch, and it only took a moment to mix up some harmless chemical solutions that would work for scent. He didn’t use taste in the field or the lab—the name for a chemical analyst who tasted his samples was “dead”—so that just left hearing. Eavesdropping on the neighboring lab would work, if he couldn’t think of anything better.

As he set up the improvised equipment, he explained to Tony what he was doing and why. As he prepared the scent solutions, he added, “I can generally recognize contaminants at the level of five parts per million in a water sample…I can go as low as two for air. That is, if I’m starting with distilled water or clean room air. Of course in a real situation there are always multiple contaminants, so that makes it harder. But I’m going to stop at 20 ppm for these exercises—going to my full range gives me a headache.” He capped the bottle, washed his hands, and settled on the lab stool. “Pull up a seat next to me—and I’ll need a link.” He held out his hand.

Tony took his hand, and they linked. Edwards started by calibrating his senses on Tony’s scent and heartbeat, establishing an anchor that he could return to in the unlikely event that he became overwhelmed by any of the test samples. “I’m going to start with visual, because that’s easiest,” he explained, and picked up one of the mineral specimens. “We have a fluorite sample of approximately 22 grams. At visual-five, it shows lilac-blue color and cubic crystal habit, which we don’t actually care about…going up to six, we see the characteristic octahedral cleavage—don’t laugh; it’s a mineralogy term—at seven I can see some twinning, and inclusions of…I don’t know what yet…eight, the inclusions are—galena and calcite! Nine, reveals the isometric crystal system.”

Which was not particularly interesting, either, though it was kind of pretty. At this level of magnification, the tiny sample more than filled his visual field; he was looking at a tiny fraction of one facet of the crystal. If he accidentally moved it, or moved his head, and ended up looking at something else with this degree of concentration he’d make himself sick. “And I’m not going to go to ten. Tony, can you talk me back down to five?”
Of course, they didn’t teach that at G-TAC either, and he’d only had an hour with the Guides. “Never mind; I’ll do it. Going back down to eight.” Now he was looking at a full facet of the stone. “Seven…” At three, he could see the whole sample, and a bit of his finger holding it; the ridges of his fingerprints looked like mountains. “Six.” The stone receded; he could see the lab bench behind it, though he was careful to keep his focus on the sample. “Five. Don’t break the link yet.” The sample was now back in context as a tiny fragment of rock; he gradually lessened his focus on it until it was just one object among many. “Okay,” he said, and released Tony’s hand. “That was good. I’m just going to take a minute, and then I’ll do another one. Do you have any questions?”

“The, uh, talking you back down?”

“Right—you’ve probably seen it on TV—talking a Sentinel through the dials?” TV and movies usually got things wrong—like having the Sentinel be completely unable to shift his or her dials without a Guide telling them to, or having it work for the Guide to, say, shout the instructions from across a room—but most people were at least familiar with the concept.

“Uh…sort of,” Tony said. “I mean, yes, I’ve seen it, but I don’t know anything about it.”

“There’s a dial for each sense,” Edwards began, figuring he’d better give him the overview. “Five is the baseline—at Sentinel School they teach you to peg five to the human average, but in practical terms, five is the level where it’s comfortable for everyday use. Going down below five muffles the sense in question—that’s useful if you’re trying to concentrate in a noisy place, or to block out an injury, something like that. We’ll practice that later on. And the higher numbers are higher sensitivity, for doing sense work. The auditory cue—the counting—just makes it easier to manipulate the dials. In a controlled environment like this, I can do it myself, like you saw. But in the field there’s usually a lot of extraneous sensory input to filter out, so it helps if the Guide does it. And if I’m spiking, you talk me down exactly the same way—ask where my dial is and take it back down to five. Or back up to five, if it’s a reverse-spike.”

“So I just…count?” Tony asked.

“Basically. Let’s try it, okay?” Tony looked alarmed, and smelled faintly of adrenaline, so Edwards added, “Really, these are very basic exercises; you’re not going to mess me up.”

“How, uh, how long, between the numbers?”

Edwards had to think about that one. “It varies—you’ll get a feel for it. For this next one, I’ll say something about what I’m observing at each level, like I did for the fluorite, and after I’ve done that I’ll be ready for the next one. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right.” Edwards selected another sample. “Link. And, we’re at five….”

Tony had to agree with Edwards that this wasn’t very interesting. Once he got over his nervousness about doing something wrong and making Edwards angry, it was basically just counting from five to ten and back, something Tony had more or less mastered by the time he was two. He thought that the part with Dr. Koh’s samples might be more interesting, but even though the data Edwards was getting was more complex—he said a lot of stuff about the shape of the ash and traces of a chemical accelerator—but the information didn’t add up to anything for Tony, and he figured he probably
wasn’t supposed to get out his phone and research it, even though he could have done it with the hand Edwards wasn’t holding.

When Edwards got back to five for the last time, and broke the link, he said, “Well. One out of three is…pretty crappy, actually.”

“Sir?”

“The combustion was neither spontaneous nor human,” Edwards explained. “Looks like it was a deer carcass soaked in lighter fluid. So probably not a super villain.”

Unless it was a really lame one, yeah. Tony nodded.

“Good work, though. We’ll need more practice in different conditions before we’re field-ready, but you’re getting the hang of it.”

They met up with Clint in the Quinjet hangar. As he went through the preflight checks, Clint said, “Me an’ Tasha are thinking Thai for dinner tonight. You in?”

Tony glanced over at Edwards. It wasn’t an official teambuilding night, and he had some workshop time coming to him this evening, according to the new schedule, so he figured not. When Edwards didn’t answer, Tony said, “No—we have that team thing tomorrow, right? I’ll see everybody then.”

He’d rather get some lab time in, anyway, than have everybody look at him with pity in their eyes and ask if he was really all right, anyway.

#

“—what happened when I tried to examine your arc reactor,’” Clint quoted. The team, minus Tony, had gathered in the common area without prior arrangement to hear what Clint had learned during the day. “I don’t know that it means anything, but it gave me kind of a bad feeling.”

“It sounds like something a child molester would say,” Bruce agreed. It sounded downright creepy to him—what had happened, that Edwards didn’t even want to name it? “Not that Tony’s a child, of course. But—” He stopped, flustered.

“We know what you mean,” Natasha assured him. “What else did you get?”

“I couldn’t get anything from medical, except that he had an appointment and he went,” Clint said.

“Edwards is having them copy me on the report,” Steve said.

“Okay, good. Coulson’s got it, too,” Clint added.

“No such thing as medical privacy for Guides?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Steve said. “He’s—officially, he isn’t a civilian; his Sentinel and his agency of assignment have access to his records. And the G-TAC guy.”

“I didn’t get anything when they were in with him, either,” Clint added. “Then they spent about an hour doing paperwork—actually, Tony sat there and watched while Edwards did the paperwork. That was in the officers’ lounge, so I had good eyes, but no ears on it. Tony was—you know. The same way he’s been since he got back. Edwards didn’t do anything to him. Then—”

“Hey. You feel like doing some science?”

“You feel like doing some science?”

“I don’t know—come to the main lab; we’ll figure something out.”

Before Bruce could answer, Tony ended the call. “Apparently I’m meeting Tony in the lab,” he explained to the others. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

When he got to the lab, Tony was bouncing around from one display to another, apparently checking out what Bruce had been working on while he was away. “Hey. This, uh, this gamma-shielding thing looks really cool, but I think if you just change the….”

Tony launched into an enthusiastic explanation of how the shield could be improved—a couple of his ideas were things Bruce had already tried, but others were new—and for a while, Bruce forgot to be concerned. Tony sounded like himself, except for the occasional note of anxiety in his voice and more “ums” and “uhs” than usual, and when Bruce was looking at the data and the virtual modeling, he wasn’t looking at the way Tony’s collarbones stuck out from the neck of his t-shirt.

They went from the gamma shield to some data Bruce had collected on Thor’s hammer—neither Bruce nor Tony was satisfied with “magic” as an explanation for how it frequently behaved in a manner at odds with the laws of physics—and then to the ongoing attempts to reverse-engineer the Chitauri flying sleds.

It was all refreshingly normal, up until JARVIS said, “Mr. Stark, it’s a quarter till eight.”

Tony stopped what he was doing and raked his hand through his hair. “Thanks, JARVIS.” All the energy and enthusiasm seemed to have drained out of him.

“What, um…what happens at 7:45?” Bruce asked.

“Nothing. I have to be back by eight. I don’t want to be late.”

Tony usually didn’t mind being late for anything up to and including an anniversary date with Pepper or a meeting he was supposed to be chairing. “Back?”

“You know. Edwards. Dinner. Guide stuff. I’m gonna…JARVIS, send these schematics to my tablet, and the data from the Mjolnir experiments. And, uh, send Bruce my schedule.”

“Schedule?” Bruce asked as his phone chimed, displaying a message from JARVIS. That word did not belong in the same sentence with Tony Stark.

“Yeah. If you’re at all curious about when I’m available to hang out, it’s all there.”

Opening the message, Bruce saw that the document broke each day of the week down into half-hour blocks. “This is…. Insane sprang to mind. As did anal retentive.

“Don’t,” Tony said. “I don’t wanna…let’s not talk about it. I’ll be able to look at this stuff on my tablet later. I’ll text you if I come up with anything interesting.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, nodding. “Can I forward this to the others, or….?”

“Yeah, yeah, go ahead. And I’ll see you at the team thing tomorrow.”

“Right. Steve’s still trying to figure out what we’re going to do for that.”
“You know my vote,” Tony said.

“We’re not going to a strip club,” Bruce said, because he knew Tony would expect him to say it. Actually, under the circumstances, there was a chance Steve might go for it—but he didn’t think Edwards would be amused. “Steve’s talking about maybe a scavenger hunt type of thing.”

“Are we twelve?”

“He’s thinking that the usual pizza and a movie deal might not come across as a genuine teambuilding exercise,” Bruce explained. “To, you know. The new guy.”

“Maybe he has a point,” Tony admitted. “Make it Chinese, after the scavenger hunt?”

“Sure.”

#

Figuring out Thursday’s team-building event took up a great deal of Steve’s time. He was pleased to see that Edwards apparently wasn’t going to push back against the idea of mandatory team-building three nights a week, but he felt under some pressure to make it look legitimate.

Of course, everyone had an opinion, and few of them were helpful. Natasha vetoed anything that involved blindfolds or falling into each other’s arms. Steve was initially confused, but a few minutes reviewing some resources Agent Coulson had suggested cleared up why she had felt the need to make those two specific exclusions. Clint said only that it better not be “stupid.” The only person who really liked the scavenger hunt idea was Thor, and his enthusiasm quickly waned when Clint explained that the “scavenger” part of the name did not refer to a fierce animal such as a hyena.

To Steve’s surprise, Tony chimed in with several text messages providing links to team building activities that did not involve strip clubs; however, when the first few were go-kart racing, nude hot-springs bathing (as practiced in Japan) and competitive cocktail mixing, Steve began to appreciate the full range of inappropriate activities that could be conducted outside of a strip club.

Thor found the silver lining in these ideas, observing, “Surely that he suggests such things is a sign that he is recovering his spirit.”

He had a point. Steve was even more worried about how Tony was faring now that he’d reviewed the medical report that Edwards had sent to him so casually, which indicated that Tony had been beaten and dehydrated, as well as starved. The liaison officer’s report, which Coulson had access to and had shared with Steve, included a jaw-dropping list of petty disciplinary offenses. The flurry of text messages did, at least, demonstrate that Tony wasn’t completely isolated from the team, even though Edwards appeared to be planning to keep him confined to his apartment except for scheduled activities.

Steve was trying not to think about The Schedule. Edwards had said something, when they interviewed him, about liking a routine as much as the next Sentinel. Steve had not fully appreciated what that meant—the Sentinels of the Howling Commandos had been, perhaps, a bit more orderly than the rest of the squad, but that had mostly meant that they tended to shave every day and wash at least once a week, whether they needed it or not.

He was going to have to find some way of explaining to Edwards that this kind of detailed planning was simply not reasonable for the Avengers. Let alone for Tony himself—Steve didn’t even want to know what “floors” on Sunday afternoons meant, but he was going to have to find out.

Later, though—he wanted the team-building evening to be as much of a break for Tony as it was
possible to be, and that meant minimizing conflict with Edwards.

Steve decided that they’d have the scavenger hunt in Central Park—he didn’t think Tony had been outdoors since he’d been back—and sent out an email advising everyone to wear casual, inconspicuous clothes. Even in New York, a guy wandering around the park in armor might attract attention.

To everyone’s credit, they managed to keep straight faces when they assembled in the common room and Steve announced the activity. “Team one will be Edwards, Stark, and Thor.” He’d have liked to split up Edwards and Tony, but the instructions from the SRB liaison indicated that Sentinels couldn’t be required to work separately from their Guides. He hoped that putting Thor on Tony’s team would help—if Edwards had any sense, he’d be intimidated by him, and Thor could be relied on to play the role of confused alien in the event of a protocol dispute.

“Team two is Romanoff, Barton, and Banner. Each team will be given a list; some of the items are the same for both teams, some are different. Work together to locate and photograph all of the items on your team’s list. Include at least one team member in each photograph, so it’s clear there is no cheating.” He’d added that rule at the last minute after Natasha had pointed out that it would be very easy to find everything on his lists in Google Images. “First team to finish wins, and then we’ll meet back here for dinner and debriefing.”

Clint raised his hand.

Steve sighed. “Agent Barton?”

“Is there a prize? I kinda feel like there should be a prize.”

Steve hadn’t thought of that, but had a sudden inspiration. “Yes. The winning team gets to choose the next team-building activity.” Let them see how they liked it. “Subject to approval for safety and appropriateness for the workplace. Are there any other questions?”

Clint raised his hand again.

“What?”

“What are you going to be doing while we, uh, participate in this meaningful and important activity?”

“Supervising,” Steve answered.

#

Thor was doing his best to enter into the spirit of the game. It was a disappointment to learn that the exercise was not a hunt in truth, but he had already learned that it was forbidden to hunt anything beyond rats and cockroaches within the bounds of New York City. The scavenger hunt was a bit like a game played by children on Asgard, to develop their skills of observation and navigation.

Loki had been good at it.

It was little surprise to see that Tony was, as well—he and Loki had a great deal in common, though Thor would never say so to either of them. When Edwards asked, “All right, how are we going to do this?”, Tony promptly took out his phone and started researching, much as Loki had done in the palace library when they played the hunting game.

“Some of this stuff we’re only going to find in one place,” he said. “Like the carousel. And some of
the others, like the horse and waterfowl, could turn up anywhere, but there are a few places they’re more likely to be.”

“Can you plot us a course?” Edwards asked. It was heartening to see this sign that he valued Tony’s expertise, and to see Tony speaking up as he would have done before.

“Yup. Okay, let’s get a cab to West 59th. That’s where the carriage drivers wait to pick up tourists, so we should spot a horse. Then the pond’s right there, so we can get waterfowl and probably some of the other nature stuff…does anybody know what a linden looks like? I think it’s a tree.”

“I do,” Edwards volunteered.

Tony glanced at him. “We need an oak, too. And a flower.”

“I can identify those,” Thor said.

Tony continued, “Then we can cut over to the carousel, and keep our eyes open for some of this random stuff on the way—litter, really, Cap? Okay.”

“Let’s get started, then,” Edwards said.

In the taxi, Tony stayed focused on his phone, but that was hardly unusual for Tony. Thor gave half of his attention to the passing streets—despite having become somewhat accustomed to Midgard and its people, there was always something new to see—and half to his teammates. Edwards seemed perfectly pleasant today; if Thor had no prior knowledge of him, he would have thought him acceptable as a prospective ally.

“What else is on the list?” Edwards asked as they neared the park. “Anything else tricky?”

“We need a statue of a hero,” Tony answered. “That shouldn’t be too hard—there’s a shit-ton of statues in the park—but I’m trying to find one that counts as a hero and isn’t too far from the carousel.”

“What are the statues of, if not heroes?” Thor wondered.

“All kinds of stuff,” Tony said. “Children’s book characters, writers…there’s one of a dog.”

“Balto,” Edwards said. “That could work, actually. I’m not sure where it is, but he was a…heroic dog.”

“How so?” Thor wondered.

“He took medicine to sick children in Alaska,” Edwards explained. “One of those deadly childhood diseases that nobody worries about anymore— whooping cough or German measles or something. There’s a movie.”

“Diptheria, the website says,” Tony added. That didn’t tell Thor much, but Tony went on, “He’s at 67th, so that’s the right end of the park. And the park web page specifically says ‘heroic.’”

“Captain Rogers can’t argue with that,” Edwards agreed.

They disembarked from the cab at 59th street, and quickly found a horse to photograph. The carriage driver urged them repeatedly to hire him and his beast to convey them around the park, but eventually consented to allow Thor to be photographed patting the horse, in return for a payment from Tony’s wallet.
“Is it permitted to ride on horseback in this park?” Thor wondered as they started into the park in search of waterfowl. He wouldn’t have thought so—Midgardians appeared to vastly prefer their cars and bicycles to horses—but the presence of the carriage drivers suggested he might have been in error.

“Not anymore,” Tony answered, consulting his phone. “There used to be a place you could rent horses by the hour, but it closed.”

“A pity,” Thor said.

“There are places outside the city, though,” Tony said. “Long Island, maybe. You could suggest it to Steve for a team-building activity.”

“I shall. Ah—there,” Thor said, noticing a group of youths throwing a plastic disc. “People playing a game or sport’ appears on the list, does it not?”

“Yeah—stand over there. A little to the left.” Tony snapped a picture.

“Oh,” Edwards said. “I haven’t been paying attention—there’s some litter.” He crouched next to a discarded beer container, pointing, as Tony took a picture.

“And the next item is, ‘Yourself, depositing the litter in an appropriate container,’” Tony read from the list.

“We have to touch it? Ew. Now I wish I’d let somebody else get that one.” He took a packet of tissues out of his pocket and used one to pick up the can. Such fastidiousness was a bit unbecoming a warrior—and would have been unheard of for a berserker gang, but at least Edwards completed the task, despite finding it distasteful.

They quickly found the required trees and flowers; the waterfowl were also easy to locate, but getting one to remain still long enough to be photographed in Thor’s company was a bit more difficult. Next they had what Tony referred to as “A bit of a hike” to the carousel. Thor would have characterized it as a very short walk indeed, but he had learned that Midgardians in general disliked to walk.

They spotted several more items from their list on the way to the carousel, including a person walking a dog and a family with children. Photographing the latter proved even more difficult than the ducks, the parents seeming to ascribe some sinister motive to the request. “We are conducting a scavenger hunt,” Thor explained, “so that we may come together as a team.”

“Uh-huh,” the father said. “Listen, pal, why don’t you—”

His female companion tugged at his sleeve. “Honey, I think that’s—are you Thor?”

“I am,” Thor admitted.

“No shit?” the father asked.

“No shit,” Thor agreed solemnly.

“Here,” he said, picking up his child and shoving her at him. “Quick, get a picture of Thor holding Chauncey!”

This was not an unusual event, in Thor’s experience—Midgardians frequently wished to take photographs of the Avengers holding their children; he had tentatively decided it was a good-luck
ritual—but it was clearly foreign to the child, who was perhaps two years old, and responded to being shoved unceremoniously into the arms of a stranger by letting out an ear-splitting wail.

“Tony—link,” Edwards said, groping for his hand and flinching away from the sound. Tony took his hand and felt the link establish; Edwards immediately relaxed. Good; this had been going pretty well, so far. Tony hoped it wasn’t about to go south.

“Do I need to, uh, do the counting or anything?”

Edwards shook his head. “No, I’m okay. Lady, will you take your kid back, please.”

Thor held the child out in her direction; she took her without taking her eyes off Tony. “Tony Stark?”

“Yeah,” Tony said.

“And you must be….” She looked down at their joined hands.

“Sentinel Edwards, ma’am,” Edwards said.

The woman held her phone at waist-level in what was clearly supposed to be an inconspicuous way, but Tony heard the faux shutter-clicking sound. Great. Now this was their first public appearance as Sentinel Edwards and Guide Stark.

Now that she was back with her mom, and had a pacifier stuffed in her mouth, the kid quieted down. Edwards dropped Tony’s hand, and Tony took out his wallet. “Look, do us a favor. Get, uh, get—Chauncey, is it? Get her a cotton candy or something, on me, and wait half an hour before you Tweet that you just met the Avengers in Central Park?”

“You don’t need to do that,” the woman said, at the same time as her husband/boyfriend/whatever snatched the twenty that Tony was holding out. “Dave!” She glared at him, but the bill had already disappeared into his pocket. Turning back to Tony, she asked, “Is something going on? Are we in danger?”

“No. We really are on a team-building scavenger hunt.”

“Really? You’d think the Avengers would do something more….”

Sophisticated? Exciting? Not-lame? “We love team-building activities,” Tony said. “Now, if you don’t mind….”

“Oh!” Chauncey’s mom said. “You wanted a picture of us.” She put her arm around the husband-whatever and beamed.

Thor stood behind them, and Tony snapped the picture. Once they’d gotten some distance from the young family, Tony said, “We’d better get the picture of the carousel, and book it. We’ll be lucky if they wait ten minutes before hopping on Twitter. Are you all right…sir?”

“I’m fine,” Edwards said. “Does that sort of thing happen often? Being recognized?”

“Yes,” Tony said. A scavenger hunt that required them to talk to strangers was not one of Cap’s better ideas, but he hadn’t said anything because he thought Edwards might not approve of his questioning the team leader’s judgment.
“Quite often,” Thor agreed. “Generally, people are excited to meet their world’s defenders, although a few are hostile. Tony is correct that we should seek out another area of the park, quickly, if we do not wish to be delayed further.”

“That lousy cell phone pic of us is going to be on national TV for the next couple of days,” Tony warned Edwards as they walked briskly toward the carousel. “Unless a celebrity dies or something.” He wasn’t sure how Edwards was going to take that, but there was no getting around it.

Edwards just grunted, apparently accepting. Good. Tony wondered if anyone had told him that he was going to be a public figure now. He hoped so; he didn’t doubt that Edwards was pretty easygoing, as Sentinels went. He’d realized, after he’d slept on it, that the fact that Edwards hadn’t told anyone about Tony hitting him—and had even warned Tony not to mention it—must mean that he didn’t particularly want Tony sent back to G-TAC, either. But that could change if Edwards decided he didn’t want Tony as his Guide anymore. Even if not, chances were good that the next guy would want to touch the arc reactor too, and wouldn’t be as understanding about it as Edwards had.

So it was very important to keep Edwards happy. They paused by the carousel, and Tony posed with Edwards while Thor took the picture.

Tony looked at it, when Thor gave him his phone back, and Edwards peered over his shoulder, saying, “That’s not bad. Is there any way we can get that one on national TV instead? I always look like a serial killer in low-angle photos.”

That could work, actually—Chauncey’s mom’s photo would still get some play, but the less sleazy media outlets would showcase the higher-quality one. “Yes,” Tony said. “Hang on.” He sent it to Pepper, with a text saying, “Please release, candid photo of Avengers team-building exercise in Central Park, photo credit Thor.”

They walked briskly toward the Balto statue, bagging a few more scavenger hunt items on the way. Tony had just snapped a picture of a “historic point of interest” sign when his phone started playing the national anthem. “Hi, Steve,” he answered. “What’s up? Did the other guys win already?”

“No,” Steve said, his voice sounding strained. “Pepper just told me you sent her a photo, for public release?”

“Yeah. Damage control—we were recognized, some tourists got a photo of me and—Sentinel Edwards.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “Do you need to come back? I mean, we can cut this short.”

“We escaped,” Tony answered, but told the others, “Steve wants to know if we want to bail.”

“Bail?” Thor asked.

“Forfeit the game and go home,” Tony explained. He looked over at Edwards. “Sir?” One of these days, he was going to be able to say that without having his guts twist with humiliation, but this was not the day.

“Ah,” Edwards said. “I don’t mind finishing—we only have a few more items to get. Unless—what’s the worst-case scenario, here?”

As far as Tony was concerned, the worst-case scenario was Edwards flipping out over some unforeseen problem that he felt Tony should have prevented, but he couldn’t say that. “Once word gets out that we’re here, there will be people looking for us, including media. If those people are at
all social-media savvy, it could happen pretty quickly; if not it could be hours. In any case, it’s a big park. Worst case scenario is probably that we get pinned down signing autographs and saying ‘no comment’ to reporters for half an hour.”

“I think I could survive that,” Edwards said.

“I would prefer that outcome to admitting defeat,” Thor agreed. “Tony?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “Okay, Steve, we’re going to finish the hunt. But, uh, get JARVIS to watch the internet for social media updates including the standard Avengers search terms plus ‘Central Park,’ particularly associated with profiles including the name ‘Chauncey.’” To the others, he added, “That way, we’ll get some warning if we’re about to be swarmed. And, JARVIS—tell Pepper to hold that photo I sent her until you get a hit on those terms.”

“He says he will,” Steve said. “Report in if you have any trouble.”

They made it to the Balto statue before JARVIS called back, to say that the photo of Tony and Edwards, and one of Thor holding a screaming child, had turned up on Twitter and Facebook. After thanking him and hanging up, Tony checked his watch. “Wow. They really did wait half an hour. We just have one more thing to get—hot dog cart.” He’d thought that was going to be an easy one, but somehow they’d overlooked it.

“We passed several when we were retreating from the carousel,” Thor said, “but I did not think it wise to stop and photograph them.”

“No, and we don’t want to go back that way if we can help it,” Tony agreed. “They’re all over the place, but I don’t know where’s best to look.”

“Luckily,” Edwards said, “you have a Sentinel. I’m not certified for urban tracking, but hot dogs are a pretty obvious scent. I should be able to point us in the right direction.”

Scent-tracking a hot dog through Central Park was certainly one of the goofier things Edwards had done, as a Sentinel, but he was determined to be a good sport—and he’d felt like he wasn’t really pulling his weight as a member of the team, linden-tree identification notwithstanding. At least this was a chance to show he could contribute.

When they did reach the hot dog cart, Tony once again had to pay off the proprietor to get a picture—fortunately, he didn’t seem to mind, or even particularly notice. Thor also bought a hot dog, and ate it as they exited the park to find a spot where they could hail a cab back to the Tower.

“I would have you call Steve,” Thor said as he licked mustard off his fingers, “and find out if we were victorious.”

Tony did so. “Hey, Steve. Did we win?”

“Let me see,” he heard Captain Rogers say through the phone. “Yes—the others only have sixteen items from their list.”

“Hah!” Tony said. “Suck it, losers.”

“Tony,” Steve said, disapproval clear in his voice.

“I’m just saying, clearly we’re, uh, more awesome than they are. See you soon.”
Well, the team-building activity seemed to have done something for his self-confidence, anyway.

Tony put the phone back in his pocket and continued, “Now we get to—oh, crap.”


“We have to plan the next team-building shindig. This was a trap.”

“Surely it is an honor to choose the team’s next activity,” Thor objected.

“We could always float the strip club idea,” Tony said, “but….”

“I have a feeling that’s what Rogers was hinting at when he said ‘appropriate for the workplace,’” Edwards pointed out.

“Me, too,” Tony agreed, raising his hand for a passing cab. “I have a feeling he’d have the same objection to the cocktail mixing competition, too.”

“What’s that?” Edwards asked.

“Each team draws two ingredients from a hat, and you have to invent a mixed drink using them,” Tony explained, once they’d gotten situated in the taxi.


“I think you vote or something.”

“That sounds…different.” Kind of inappropriate, too, but if getting tanked on bizarre concoctions would help the team relax and stop looking at him like he’d kicked their puppy, it might be worth it. “I’m game, if Captain Rogers goes for it. Otherwise, we could try Thor’s horse-riding idea.” The only time Edwards had been within touching distance of a horse was a pony ride at a carnival when he was about six, but demonstrating that you didn’t mind looking foolish tended to be good for unit cohesion.

“I feel that Tony should choose,” Thor said, “as he was instrumental in our success.”

“You were,” Edwards agreed. “I’m sure the others weren’t nearly as efficient.”

“That’s me, Mr. Efficiency,” Tony said. “I’m OK with horseback riding, but you might need reservations in advance—and the next team thing is Saturday afternoon, isn’t it?”

Edwards thought back to the schedule. “Yes, after the team training session. You’re right; that’s probably the busiest day at a horse rental place.”

“And it may be best to wait until the weather is less precarious,” Thor added, which was another good point—this time of late spring, it rained a lot. “Riding is less enjoyable damp and mud.”

“So we still need a backup idea,” Edwards summarized. They discussed a few ideas, most of which shared the weaknesses of either the drinking game, the horseback riding plan, or both, and arrived at the Tower without settling on anything.

As they arrived on the common floor, where Captain Rogers was setting the table, Edwards felt some of the tension that he typically felt when associating with the Avengers return. Thor had been obviously wary of him at first, but he had warmed up over the course of the activity, but Rogers still seemed standoffish, and he suspected the others would, too. Edwards hoped that this team dinner would go better than the last one—although, considering that Tony was present, rather than binging
on protein bars and vomiting several floors away, it almost had to be.

#

“Congratulations, guys,” Steve said when the victorious team returned—with Tony intact, to his relief. “It’ll be about half an hour before the food gets here—I thought the scavenger hunt would take longer than that. I called the others back, though, so they should be here any minute.”

“Oh, good,” Thor said, shedding his jacket and hanging it on a hook by the door. “We can tell the tale of our victory.”

Edwards took off his jacket, too, and…handed it to Tony, who had to walk past him to hang it up. 

Really? Steve had to work hard not to stare.

“Yes,” he said instead. “I’m eager to hear how it went.” He was particularly eager to hear Thor’s impressions of Edwards, but that would have to wait for the second briefing after Edwards had left.

“I think it went well,” Tony said, glancing anxiously at Edwards. “Except for the getting made by tourists thing.”

“It was good,” Edwards said, nodding at Tony. “I, uh…feel like I got to know Thor, a little bit, and we managed to sneak in some sensory work.”

“I fear I contributed little,” Thor admitted. “Tony directed us to the fixed landmarks on our list, and Sentinel Edwards proved adept at identifying the flora and fauna of this realm.”

“Aw, you found some of the stuff, big guy,” Tony said, taking a step toward the bar. “Anybody want—” He stopped, and looked at Edwards. “Am I allowed to drink?”

“Within reason, yes,” Edwards answered.

“Thanks,” Tony said, and continued toward the bar. “Anybody else want one? We have—pretty much everything.”

“I could drink a Scotch,” Edwards said.

“Coming right up,” Tony said. “Thor, boilermaker?”

Tony playing bartender was nothing new—he seemed to enjoy it—but in the circumstances, it made Steve uncomfortable, like Tony had accepted being treated like a servant in his own home.

Thor accepted a boilermaker, and Tony continued, “Cap, you want anything?”

“No, thanks. I’ll stick with pop,” he said, taking a Coke out of the refrigerator.

The others came in, and Tony fixed them drinks, too. Once everyone was settled, Steve led them through a relatively formal debriefing, punctuated by the arrival of Chinese takeout, asking each team what had gone well and what had gone poorly, and what they had learned about their teammates.

“We learned that Bruce could get lost in a paper bag,” Clint said.

“And that when Natasha asks strangers’ permission to photograph them, they tend to find it alarming,” Bruce added.

“Okay,” Steve said. “Anything positive?”
“Uh,” Bruce said. “Putting Clint up a tree is a good way to find stuff? But we already knew that.”

Steve decided to accept that. “Tony’s team?”

Tony said, “We learned that Sentinel Edwards is not certified in urban tracking, but can still find a hot dog cart from four blocks away.”

“Tony did a very nice job of planning our route through the park,” Edwards added, smiling at Tony like he was a dog that had just done something clever.

Or maybe, Steve told himself, trying to be fair, with genuine pride and affection. But that didn’t exactly square with what they already knew about how Edwards treated Tony.

“We also learned that loud noises, such as a child’s cry, cause Sentinel Edwards some distress,” Thor added. “That could be a handicap in battle.”

“It can,” Edwards agreed with a nod. “It’s a matter of both pitch and volume. I’m all right with loud and deep, but loud and high can be a problem.”

Steve nodded; that was information he should know, if he was going to command Edwards in the field—he couldn’t let one of his team get hurt just because he didn’t like the guy. “Okay. We should talk about that more in team training.”

Steve kept the debriefing going as long as he could, but to his surprise, Edwards didn’t leave—and drag Tony away with him—when the discussion became less formal, with Bruce’s explanation of how item #12 on their list (“turtle”) had proved significantly more difficult than Steve had anticipated giving way to Clint’s reminiscence about a mission that had once required him to hide for several hours, breathing through a straw, in a pond inhabited by a large snapping turtle, which in turn led to missions involving animals, and then to missions gone FUBAR in general.

Through it all, Edwards seemed…okay. He laughed in the right places, made appreciative comments, offered one or two stories of his own, self-deprecatingly, as befitted the New Guy in an established team. Every once in a while he sent Tony off to get something for him, but it wasn’t anything Steve would have noticed if he hadn’t been looking for it.

Tony seemed almost normal, too. A little subdued, by Tony standards—which basically amounted to not saying anything outrageously sexual, profane, or otherwise inappropriate, or telling any stories about sexual exploits or drunken sprees. And every time he spoke or did anything, he looked over at Edwards, as if to make sure it was all right. But he was interacting with them, and he seemed wary, rather than terrified, which was an improvement.

He supposed.

#

“It’s just about bedtime, I think,” Edwards said, touching Tony’s arm. He nodded. He’d been keeping an eye on his watch—he’d been on borrowed time for a while now, the official team-building period having ended at ten; now it was nearly midnight.

He managed to keep a smile on his face as he said goodnight to the others. It had been a nice evening—even the lame scavenger hunt was okay. He felt like he had more of a handle on the Guide thing when there was a goal to work on, even a silly one like winning a scavenger hunt. The other times were more difficult. The everyday stuff, like when he had to sit across the table from Edwards and pretend like they were just two guys having a sandwich, while at the same time weighing every word, is this going to piss him off? Or the times when Edwards just sort of benignly ignored him—
watching TV or doing God-knew-what on his computer—and Tony had to find something to do with himself, restricted to a much narrower range of choices than he was used to.

Or now, being sent to bed at midnight like a child.

He took his tablet with him, and spent some time checking out the response to the Central Park pictures. The major news outlets were leading with the carousel picture, as he’d hoped—that should make Edwards happy. And possibly Thor, too, since he was, as Tony had requested, credited for the photo. There was a lot of speculation about what they had “really” been doing in the Park—Fox News, in particular, along with most of the tabloids, found the official explanation unconvincing. Chauncey’s mom—her name turned out to be Belinda—was quoted saying that Edwards, “Seemed nice. Polite and all.”

Some dedicated—read, obsessive—souls on the main Avengers fan forum delved more deeply into Edwards’s background than Tony had bothered to do. The sister Lucretia existed—not a surprise; why would he lie about something like that?—and had a husband who worked for a midsized electrical engineering firm, and a son at Northwestern. Edwards himself had a BS in Chemistry from Virginia Tech, along with several Sentinel-specific certifications from something called the “Marine Corps University,” earned in the early 90’s, which would put Edwards somewhere in his thirties at the time. Before that, he’d served in quite a few of the military hotspots of the 80’s, in both South America and the Middle East, racking up quite a few combat decorations in the process. From his weapons-dealer days, Tony knew enough about the military to read that: he’d started out doing the Sentinel equivalent of scut work, until he’d proved himself enough for the government to send him to school.

Tony started digging into that, curious about how Edwards had made the jump from combat to chemical analysis, but he hadn’t gotten very far when Edwards himself appeared at the door to his room. “Tony,” he said. “It’s two AM. Go to sleep.”

Edwards sounded more exasperated than angry—maybe he’d go as far as irritated—and he didn’t come any closer than the doorway, but suddenly Tony flashed back to his first night at G-TAC, when he’d learned that there was no talking in the dormitories. He flinched, tasting adrenaline and feeling phantom pain in his gut and kidneys, where he’d been struck by the trainer’s baton.

“Tony?” Edwards asked, taking a step toward him.

“Sorry,” he managed to say. “I’m, uh…going to sleep right now. Sorry. Sir.”

“Okay,” Edwards said. “I just…you need your rest, that’s all.” He hesitated, seeming about to take another step forward. Tony couldn’t help flinching; Edwards shifted his weight back onto his heels. “Okay. Goodnight.”

He left, and Tony spent the night in bed—and not, say, standing at attention in a corridor—but sleep was a long time coming.

#

Edwards hadn’t slept well. It hadn’t seemed like going to Tony’s room to tell him to go to sleep was something that should have upset him—but it clearly had. Edwards had left, since his presence seemed to make his Guide even more agitated, but he spent much of the rest of the night second-guessing that decision. Maybe he should have kept trying to find some way to comfort him. Or even find out what the hell the problem was. He kept thinking of things he could have said, or done.
Edwards tried to raise the issue at breakfast, but all Tony would say was that he was sorry and it wouldn’t happen again. That wasn’t really the point, but it was clear that Tony had had a rough night, too, and they had team training to get to, so he just said, “Don’t worry about it,” and let it drop.

When they arrived at the main gym—on time, but the last ones there—Captain Rogers immediately pulled him aside. “Tony doesn’t look well,” he said accusingly.

“Rough night,” Edwards explained. “We didn’t get much sleep.”

Rogers’s eyes narrowed. “He’s supposed to be on light duty.”

“I know.” He wasn’t in much of a mood to placate Captain Rogers, but he knew he’d better try. “I’ll make sure he gets some rest after this.” They were scheduled for the lab, but neither Rogers nor Dr. Koh had sent him any projects, so it would be no problem to skip it.

“Do that,” Rogers said crisply. “Just observe for now. You should get an idea of what the rest of the team can do.”

“Yes, sir,” Edwards said, figuring an acknowledgement of Rogers’s authority wouldn’t go amiss.

He returned to Tony’s side—he was sitting on a bench with Dr. Banner—and they watched as Rogers sparred with Thor, and Barton with Romanoff. Even the two non-super-powered agents were obviously very good; Edwards hoped he wouldn’t be tapped to go up against either of them. It had been quite a while since he’d done much hand-to-hand combat.

Fortunately, he wasn’t. After the first two bouts ended, Romanoff and Barton went up against Rogers, tag-team style. It was clear now that they had merely been warming up against each other; now they fought with deadly efficiency and grace, so in tune with each other that Edwards would have suspected a telepathic connection, if he hadn’t read their SHIELD files.

“What do you usually do, in team training?” he asked Tony.

“Oh. If I suit up, I can spar with Steve, Thor, or the wonder twins—Natasha and Clint, I mean. Or sometimes Clint and I go outside and work on targeting and evasive maneuvers. Out of the suit…uh, sometimes I box with Happy.”

“Who?”

“My driver. Former Golden Gloves champion. Every once in a while I get Judo lessons from Natasha. And, you know, weights and cardio. The suit’s, uh, you know, it’s powered, but you have to be in good shape to control it.”

“Sure,” Edwards said. “You know, I haven’t seen the suit yet. In person, I mean.” He’d seen it on TV, of course, and in Tony’s SHIELD file. “I’m curious about whether you’ll still read as a Guide in it. I think probably not, but nobody really knows how that works.”

“Want me to go get it?”

Edwards considered. “Probably better not, today. Light duty.”

Tony’s shoulder slumped a little at that. Maybe he’d wanted to?

He probably missed it, now that Edwards thought about it. All the pilots he’d known in the Corps got itchy if they went too long without flying a plane. “And I suppose you have to log flight hours in it,” he added.
“Yeah—well, I don’t really log them, since there are no licensing regulations for a flying suit of armor. But yeah. Practice. Important.”

“We’ll make sure we do that for some of your individual training hours next week. Or team, if Captain Rogers wants.”

“’kay,” Tony said with a nod.

“We should tell Captain Rogers about your idea for the team exercise on Saturday,” Edwards added. Tony had seemed pretty excited about that yesterday; he hoped that maybe the subject would cheer him up.

“What idea?” asked Banner, from Tony’s other side.

Tony told him about the cocktail mixing competition.

“ Doesn’t seem like there’s much to it, if there are only two ingredients,” Banner pointed out.

“No, you can use anything else in addition to the two mystery ingredients,” Tony explained.

“Oh, I see. And what are the mystery ingredients?”

“They can be anything from the normal to the unusual to the downright bizarre,” Tony said, with a grin. “I’ll have to make a grocery order, and a liquor store order, if we’re doing it.”

“It occurs to me that this might not be the most Sentinel-friendly game,” Edwards said.

Tony’s faint air of good cheer extinguished completely. “Oh.”

“I think I can manage, if the ingredients aren’t too insane,” he revised. If anything smelled like it might give him a problem, he could just not drink it, even if it did make him look like a poor sport. “And I’m not drinking anything with hot sauce in it.”

“Fair enough,” Banner said.

“Great,” Tony said. “Now we just have to get Steve to agree.”

To Edwards’s surprise, Rogers did agree, though he said they’d have to postpone—Clint and Natasha had a SHIELD surveillance op on Saturday evening, and he wisely pointed out that they might not be in ideal shape for it if they had spent the afternoon sampling bizarre cocktails. “But if no missions or emergencies come up, we can do it for the Tuesday evening one.”

Tony said that was, “Awesome. That’ll give me more time to plan and order supplies, anyway.”

“Are we still doing a teambuilding thing on Saturday?” Edwards asked.

“Yes,” Rogers said. “I’ll plan one. But I hope you realize that, since our team’s focus is rapid response to novel situations, we can’t always plan things in advance, or keep to a regular schedule.”

“Of course,” Edwards said. “I understand.”

“Do you?” Rogers’s tone was challenging. “Because I saw Tony’s schedule.”

“That’s more of a guideline,” Edwards explained. “No pun intended.”

Rogers glared at him for a while. “Fine,” he said, sounding like he meant it was anything but fine.
“Steve,” Tony said anxiously. “It’s okay, really. They, um, we need to be able to show that I’m really working as a Guide.”

Edwards nodded. “Forty hours a week,” he explained, in case Dupree hadn’t told Rogers about that. “It shouldn’t be a problem when we have missions, but otherwise, we have to make sure we keep busy with training and lab work.”

“And housework,” Tony said, a little bit glumly. “Apparently Guides do housework.”

“Yes, that’s mandatory,” Edwards agreed.

“I see,” Rogers said.

Edwards hoped he did.

#

“So,” Tony said over dinner—Chinese takeout; two nights in a row might be pushing it, but he didn’t know any other ways to butter Edwards up. “I’m supposed to have, uh, personal time? Tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Edwards agreed. “Was there something you wanted to do?”

“Um…well, I haven’t seen, um, Pepper since we got back. The welcome-home thing.”

“Who’s Pepper?”

Tony blinked. “Ms. Potts. You know her.”

“Oh, her. Yes?”

“So I was thinking I could, uh, take her to dinner? If that’s okay.”

Edwards considered. “I don’t see why not,” he finally said. “You won’t drive if you’re going to be drinking.”

“Of course not,” Tony agreed. “I’m very careful about that.”

“Don’t stay out too late.”

“I won’t. It’s, uh, seven to midnight, right?” He knew for a fact that that was what the schedule said, but he thought he’d better check that Edwards was all right with him using the whole time.

“Right,” Edwards said with a smile. “Have fun.”

Tony made sure to be on his best behavior for the rest of the evening and all of Saturday. He even participated without complaint or sarcasm in Steve’s team-building exercise, which had obviously been printed off the internet at the last minute. It was the one where you had to discuss and agree on who would get a spot in the lifeboat, based on largely irrelevant descriptions provided. For instance, “a 64-year-old Catholic nun.” They didn’t tell you whether she was the kind of nun with useful skills—nursing, say—so how were you supposed to decide?

He didn’t argue the point, though. Instead, he just agreed with whatever Edwards said, which had the added bonus of not requiring him to pay attention.

Getting ready for his date, he dressed in the least SHIELD-dress-code-approved suit he owned, a
lavender-on-gray pinstripe, Chucks, and an honest-to-God ascot. Pepper’s favorite place—which had, fortunately, been persuaded to supply them with a reservation at the last minute—required a tie, and Tony liked to stretch the definition as far as possible.

Edwards eyeballed him when he passed through the living room on his way out. “You look… nice.”

“Thanks,” Tony said.

“You have your phone?”

“Yes,” Tony said, patting his pocket. Of course he did.

“Keep it turned on. I’ll call if I have any problems.”

It wasn’t like Tony ever turned his phone off, but the idea of Edwards interrupting his evening of freedom was enough to make him almost want to. “Yessir,” he said, trying not to sound sulky about it.

“I don’t think I will,” Edwards said. “But just in case.”

“Right. See you at midnight.”

“See you.”

On the way down to the parking garage, the elevator stopped at Bruce’s floor, revealing Bruce himself, who blinked at Tony. “Oh. I was, uh… your schedule thing said you had ‘personal time.’ I wasn’t sure… .”

“Going out with Pepper,” Tony explained.

“Oh! Well, good. That’s… I didn’t know you could do that.”

“I asked and everything,” Tony informed him. “Gotta go. Don’t want to keep the lady waiting.”

“Sure. Have fun.” Bruce stepped back.

Happy had picked up Pepper first, since she wasn’t on as tight a schedule as he was. She leaned over and kissed his cheek when he slid into the backseat of the limo. “You look… better.”

A little over a week of regular meals, sleep, and not getting the shit kicked out of him would do that.

“Thanks.” He peeked in the little refrigerator and found a bottle of champagne and two glasses, cork already loosened. Happy deserved a raise, really.

“How are you holding up?” Pepper asked as he poured.

“Fine. Good.”

“Really, Tony? Steve said—”

“Pep. Can we just… not?” He hated how plaintive his voice sounded. “This is my night off. I just wanna be… normal. Can we do that?”

Pepper bit her lip and looked away, just for a second. When she looked back, she’d wiped the look of pity from her face. “Sure,” she said bravely. “We can do that.”

“Great.” He handed her one of the glasses of champagne. “Cheers.”
She clicked her glass against his, then knocked back half of it in one go.

At the restaurant—where Tony ordered two each of the most expensive things on the menu, just because he could—they talked about normal things. Current events. Stark Industries. Pepper’s college roommate’s recent cruise to Aruba. The olive harvest in Tuscany, where Tony owned a villa turned bed-and-breakfast. (He’d bought it after Pepper stayed there on vacation, fell in love with the place, and learned it was about to close because the owners couldn’t turn a profit. It still didn’t, but now they kept a suite reserved for Tony and/or Pepper. They didn’t actually end up using it much, but it was nice to know they could. Except he couldn’t now.)

“That reminds me,” he said, tipping the last of a bottle of red wine into their glasses. “Next time, for the employee of the year thing.” The employee of the year (with an asterisk, because Pepper was ineligible) also got to stay in the Tony&Pepper suite.

“Yes?”

“We should pick, like, somebody from one of the factories. Not an executive,” he clarified. “Like a…grunt.” He was too drunk to remember the polite word for it, but he had a new appreciation for grunts now. His fellow diners in the crew cafeteria. “I think that’d be hilarious. Send ‘em to Tuscany. Whole family, if they’ve got one.”

“We could do that,” Pepper said. She said that about most of his more unusual ideas. The next sentence usually started, “But instead, I think we’ll…”

“No, I bet we can find somebody at the plant level who did something awesome. Identified and corrected safety violations. Perfect attendance. Something.”

“I’ll look into that, Mr. Stark.”

“Thank you, Ms. Potts.”

After dessert, Pepper said, “What now? Or do you…?”

“I don’t turn into a pumpkin until midnight,” Tony answered. “Let’s go to your place.” They’d realized some time ago that they didn’t work as a committed couple—as a boyfriend, Tony was just one more thing for Pepper to manage—but occasional sleepovers were still on the table.

Well. Not sleepover, strictly speaking, right now. But a visit of the nocturnal and naked variety.

“My place?” she said with mock innocence. “Whatever for?”

Tony propped his chin on his folded hands and blinked back at her, just as innocently.

Pepper sighed, but smiled. “We’ll have to send Happy to the movies.”

“I’ll even give him extra money for popcorn,” Tony promised.

#

Edwards knew had no real reason to worry. He’d met Ms. Potts, and had received the definite impression that she was as concerned for Tony’s best interests as she was for his company’s bottom line. The chauffeur had a long record of safe driving. There had been no reports of fire, earthquake, or plague affecting any of Manhattan’s exclusive restaurants. Intellectually, he was entirely confident that Tony was perfectly safe and enjoying a well-deserved break from the drastic changes in his life.
But it was the first time his Guide had been out of range of his senses since they’d met, and Edwards would be a little bit on edge, until he came back safe and sound.

Or maybe a lot on edge. Perfectly normal response, either way. He tried to stay busy. He wrote to Mikey, and called Luce—who teased him mercilessly over the photo of him she’d seen on the news; a sister’s prerogative. He tried to remember how Mom’s meatloaf recipe went, and found out from JARVIS that the necessary ingredients could easily be added to the next grocery order.

When he did so, JARVIS asked, “Will you be cooking for the team, Mr. Edwards? If so, I suggest quadrupling the proportions, at a minimum.”

Edwards had noticed that Thor and Captain Rogers were both capable of putting away a prodigious amount of food, and none of the others had particularly dainty appetites, either. “No, I think I’ll try making it for just us—Tony and me—first. If it’s not a disaster, maybe we’ll try a dinner party.”

“How well, Mr. Edwards,” JARVIS said.

He might have sounded a little disapproving, but Edwards decided it must be his imagination, probably brought on by the way that all of the human inhabitants of the Tower—with the exception of Tony, of course—seemed to disapprove of him. Adding in the computerized butler who lived in the walls would have been just too much.

By 2330, Edwards had largely given up on the pretense that he was doing anything other than sitting by the door waiting for Tony to get back. He had the television on, but couldn’t have said what was playing on it if he was offered a million dollars.

A quarter hour later, he decided to help himself to something from the bar. It took some looking to find a bottle of Scotch that he was fairly confident had not cost more than his first car, but at least it gave him something to do, and the liquor—once he found it—soothed his jangled nerves a little.

At least, it did right up until the moment when Tony stumbled through the door, drunk and reeking of sex.

“Where the hell were you?” Edwards demanded. Not at a dinner meeting with his CEO, that was for damn sure.

“What?” Tony said. “I—I’m on time. It’s not midnight yet.”

“Is that what I asked?” Somebody—some stranger—had been pawing at his Guide, and the fact that his Guide had almost certainly enjoyed it didn’t do much to lessen Edwards’s sense of outrage at the very idea. He could smell her; as far as his limbic system was concerned, it might as well still be happening.

“I—No. Sir. I was at Bertolini’s. It’s a restaurant.” Tony took a step backward, swallowing hard. “With Pepper. You said I could.”

The least he could have done was told Edwards the truth. He’s really not like that, Edwards had told the other Sentinels. Apparently he was. “Are you that fucking stupid, or do you just think I am?”

“I didn’t—what—” Tony shook his head.

The movement must have disturbed an air current or something, because suddenly Edwards could smell Tony’s fear, mixing with the residue of sex in a stomach-twisting way.

He reined himself in with an effort. He was angry—he had a right to be angry—but that was no
Tony bolted in the direction of his room and the master bath. Edwards retreated. The whole apartment seemed pervaded with the infuriating scent—his bedroom was probably clean, but if he took his anger in there, he’d be smelling it for days.

Leaving the apartment seemed like a good choice, but as soon as the elevator doors closed, he realized his mistake—Tony must have taken it up from the garage, and in the confined space, the smell of sex and his Guide was overwhelming.

And, now that he was just a fraction less furious, it was inappropriately arousing, too. Edwards liked girls, but as a Sentinel, he liked Guides more. His frazzled hindbrain sat up and suggested that the ideal solution to this dilemma was that he and Tony take turns with the mystery woman.

As compelling as the idea was, this was not the time to even think about it. He slapped at the panel of buttons; the elevator came to a smooth stop, the doors opening and disgorging him onto the common floor.

As good a place as any, he supposed. Tony hadn’t stopped there on his way back (from wherever the hell he’d been); it was free of his scent, except for old, clean traces from earlier in the day.

The room was dark, except for a bit of light coming from the kitchen area, so he thought he’d have it to himself. But he’d only taken a few steps in when a voice said, “Tony?”

Dr. Banner stepped out of the kitchen.

“I’m not very happy with Tony right now,” Edwards said.

“Um. Is he late? I haven’t seen him—”

“No. I’m not looking for him. I’m avoiding him until the urge to wring his neck passes.” Not the most politic thing to say, given his delicate relations with the team, but surely Dr. Banner knew something about overwhelming emotional responses.

“Okay,” Banner said. “That’s…good. Getting some distance can be…helpful…when we’re upset. Do you mind if I…” He gestured toward the glass in Edwards’s hand. “I kind of have a thing about angry people and drinking.”

Of course he did—Edwards had read Banner’s file; how his mother died was a matter of public record. And you didn’t have to be a Sentinel to have a limbic system response to an olfactory stimulus. “Yeah. Of course. Uh…. He looked around for a place to get rid of it. The kitchen sink would be somewhere behind Banner, and it might not be a good idea to get in his space right now.

“I’ll take it,” Banner said, plucking the glass out of his hand and retreating into the kitchen. Edwards tried not to listen, but still heard Banner asking JARVIS, in an undertone, if Tony was all right, and the AI responding that yes, there had been a verbal altercation; he was upset but unharmed. More loudly, Banner said, “How about some tea? I have a nice, uh, chamomile and valerian blend. Very calming.”

“Okay,” Edwards wasn’t really an herbal tea kind of guy, but it was worth a shot. “Thanks.”

“It’ll just take a minute for the water to boil,” Banner said, returning. “What, um…what happened?”

Edwards hesitated, unsure if he wanted to try to explain. But now that he was calmer, it seemed likely that Tony hadn’t fully understood how upset Edwards would be by what he’d done. He was
very new to being a Guide, and how frightened he had been by Edwards’s reaction was a strong sign that if he’d really understood, he wouldn’t have done it. Explaining it to Banner could be a sort of trial run for the much more fraught conversation he was going to have to have with Tony. “He came home reeking of sex,” Edwards said, deciding to start with how he’d describe it to someone who did understand, and go from there.

“So—” Banner said. “I—hang on, the water’s boiling.” He disappeared back into the kitchen for a moment, and came out with a teapot and two cups. “Let’s, um, we could sit down,” he said, gesturing at the table with the hand that held the teapot.

Edwards sat. The teapot smelled flowery, minty, and a bit rank.

“We’ll just, um, let that steep for a few minutes. So Tony, uh, was out having sex, on his day off. He’s, uh, not supposed to do that?”

“No. We—Sentinels—generally don’t like other people touching our Guides. Much less….” He shook his head.

“Have you discussed this with Tony?”

“No yet,” Edwards admitted. “I’m—aware of his reputation, but I didn’t think he’d be out tomcatting around just yet. He said he was meeting Ms. Potts for dinner. I’m not crazy about the lying, either.”

“Oh,” Bruce said, leaning forward in his seat. Then he sat back and said, “Um.” For his next trick, he folded his arms and said, “Hm.”

“What?”

“I’m guessing you also didn’t talk about how Pepper—Ms. Potts—is Tony’s, um, girlfriend.”

“What? I thought she was the CEO of his company.”

“That, too.”

Oh, shit. He supposed he ought to be glad that Banner didn’t make a mocking reference to “women’s lib” and how the two roles were not mutually exclusive. “I screwed up.” Faulty intelligence, it would get you every time. “He said he was taking her out to dinner. I assumed he meant a business type thing.”

“Knowing Tony, they probably did talk about the company. He, um…multitasks.” Banner shook his head. “He told me it was a date—I bumped into him on his way out. I don’t think he…I mean, I think he must’ve figured you knew. They keep their relationship pretty low-profile, but it isn’t a secret.”

Edwards nodded. Banner was probably right. So as far as Tony knew, he’d explained what he was going to do—dinner leading to sex was not such an unheard of sequence of events that it would have necessarily occurred to him to spell it out. Edwards had said it was all right, and then flipped out on him for no apparent reason as soon as he got home. On time, as both Tony and Dr. Banner had pointed out. “I’m not sure I could have handled this worse if I’d tried,” he admitted. “G-TAC does a real good job of making sure Guides are afraid of breaking rules they didn’t know about.”

“He’s seemed very…skittish,” Banner said.

“They always are, in a new place. With a new Sentinel, I mean.” Usually the Guide went to the
Sentinel, not the other way around. “He’s been settling down, some. Was. I should…well, I’m not sure if he’s ready to see me yet. Or if I’m ready to see him yet.” If Tony still smelled like…like he smelled, he was going to have a hard time staying calm. And he had to figure out what they were going to do about Ms. Potts. Guides, as a rule, did not have girlfriends, but forbidding Tony to see her would not go over well. Tony might swallow it for now, given the state he was in, but it would be a point of conflict eventually.

“You could text him,” Banner suggested.

“I’m not sure my phone does that.” It probably did, but Edwards wasn’t sure how.

“I can send it,” Banner said, taking out his—a Starkphone, naturally.

“Okay. Just tell him, uh… I misunderstood something, and we still have to talk, but it’s okay.”

Banner sent the message. “This should be about ready,” he said, picking up the teapot and peering inside. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he poured two cups.

“Is there any sugar?” The way the stuff smelled, Edwards thought he’d need some to choke it down.

“Honey’s better,” Banner said. “Hang on.” He went into the kitchen and returned with a bear-shaped plastic bottle and a spoon.

Edwards squeezed a generous amount of honey into his cup; the resulting mixture was sickly-sweet, but not as obnoxious as it smelled. “Thanks. This is…nice.” It was nice of Banner to offer it to him, anyway.

“Mm,” Banner said, sipping at his own tea. Apparently he took his straight. “How’s it going with Tony, otherwise?”

“Pretty well. He’s not comfortable with me, but that’ll take a while. G-TAC really fucked him over.”

“Yeah,” Banner said grimly. “What…what did they do to him?”

Edwards shook his head. “I don’t know many specifics. G-TAC doesn’t keep Sentinels in the loop, and he hasn’t volunteered anything.” Apparently he hadn’t to his friends, either.

“You haven’t, uh, asked?”

“The state he’s in, if I asked, he’d feel like he had to tell me, whether he wanted to or not.” In his younger days, he’d made the mistake of thinking that getting a Guide to confide in him would create trust, regardless of how he did it, but he’d learned his lesson on that one. “Same with any kind of formal counseling—there’s a whole authority thing that doesn’t go well.”

“Tony’s never been very, uh, open to counseling anyway,” Banner noted.

His file said as much. “I arranged for him to spend some time with the other Guides on the ‘carrier. They support each other. I’m hoping I can fix it up for him to spend some time with them about once a week—Grier might be a problem, but Carrasco and Webster will make their Guides available if they can.”

“That sounds…good,” Banner said.

Edwards nodded. “Even if he doesn’t want to talk about what happened at G-TAC, it’ll help to spend some time with people who know something about it.” Even if the others hadn’t had as rough
a time at G-TAC as Tony had, they would have known someone who had. “And they’ll fill him in on what he needs to know about being a Guide. G-TAC doesn’t actually teach them much.”

“Sounds like you’re, uh…not much of a fan of G-TAC,” Banner observed.

“Of course not. No Sentinel worth talking to is.” There were a few sadistic assholes in any group, but on the whole, even Sentinels who liked their Guides subservient and obedient—like Grier, for example—were a little queasy about the more extreme methods used to achieve that end.

“Oh, okay,” Banner said, leaning forward. “Then here’s what I don’t get. Why are you cooperating with them? Why didn’t you get him out of there?”

“Out of G-TAC?” Edwards asked. Banner nodded. “Because I couldn’t. G-TAC does not permit Sentinels to interfere with…what they do.” He had probably seen that damn movie, where Ellison and Temas busted into G-TAC to rescue Blair Sandburg. “The only reason Ellison got away with it is that they were Bonded. The first time I set eyes on Tony is when they’d already decided they were done with him. If I’d tried to get access to him before that, they’d have kept him longer just to make a point. And now that he’s out, if I don’t cooperate they could take him back and assign him to someone else.”

“They can do that?”

Edwards nodded grimly. “They have us over a barrel, and they know it. I’m not sure what strings Director Fury had to pull to get Captain Rogers and Ms. Potts a say in Tony’s assignment. That should have been Dupree’s call, and he resents the hell out of it.”

“Dupree?”

“Liaison between SHIELD and G-TAC,” Edwards explained. “He’ll be looking for excuses to make trouble for us, but he isn’t that hard to manage. All it takes is a combination of timely paperwork, judicious editing of the truth, and occasional outright lying. For instance, if he asks what Tony did with his personal time, we’ll say that he had dinner with a friend and returned on time. If he should happen to ask if that caused any conflicts or problems, we’ll say absolutely not.”

#

“Go take a shower.” His voice was icy, like he’d gone past “angry” to something worse. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Tony fled for the safety of his room, where he locked himself in the bathroom and started shedding his clothes. He wasn’t about to defy a direct—and comprehensible—order, even if being ordered to take a shower by an angry man sent his mind in the direction of prison rape.

Rationally, he knew that that probably wasn’t what Edwards had in mind. Almost certainly. But he couldn’t figure out what else he meant by it. “JARVIS, let me know if Edwards comes this way.”

“Yes, Mr. Stark,” JARVIS said. “Mr. Edwards has left the apartment.”

*Thank God.* Maybe Tony could figure out what had set him off, before he came back. “Tell me when he comes back.”

“Yes, Mr. Stark. Do you want me to summon one of the others?”

“No,” Tony said. Edwards wouldn’t like that, and anyway, it was like there was anything they could do. He turned on the shower and stepped under the spray, trying to stop himself from shaking. “What
happened while I was gone? Review logs for anything that might have upset Edwards.” He had to think about this logically. Everyone who was in a position to know said that Edwards was reasonable, as Sentinels went, and Tony’s experience with him over the last week bore that out. Ergo, there was likely to be some more or less rational explanation for his anger.

“I observed nothing that accounts for his outburst,” JARVIS said after a moment. “He sent an email and telephoned his sister, reviewed internet news sites, and placed a grocery order. We spoke briefly about his plans to cook. Meatloaf, I believe. His subsequent behavior showed some signs of restlessness or nervous agitation, cause unknown, but I would not have anticipated his reaction to your return.”

“What, uh, what did he talk to his sister about?” He selected the lavender-scented shampoo; it was supposed to be soothing. God knew he could use some of that.

JARVIS hesitated. “Do you wish to override privacy protocols? Under current parameters, that information will be available to Mr. Edwards should he ask for it.”

Damn it. He’d forgotten that Pepper had made him add that. “No.” Even people who weren’t already pissed off at him tended to be, after they learned he’d been using his AI to spy on them. “Scan the text file I put on the private server, the Sandburg one. Flag anything that looks like it might shed some light on this situation, and display in descending order of relevance.”

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“Working,” JARVIS said. Tony scrubbed himself down while he was at it, turning his attention to the display panel built into the shower when it activated. He skimmed over a passage about the effects on Sentinels of prolonged separation from Guides—apparently it destabilized their senses, which made them cranky and possessive. Was five hours “prolonged”? Sandburg said it varied, with some Sentinels able to tolerate days of separation from their Guides, others only an hour or two.

Edwards had made the fucking schedule; if five hours was going to be a problem, wouldn’t he have scheduled Tony’s “personal time” for shorter blocks? Unless maybe the idea was to make Tony “choose” not to use all of the time he was entitled to.

Plausible, but Edwards hadn’t said he was late; he’d accused Tony of lying about where he was.

Are you that fucking stupid, or do you just think I am?

It was similar enough to the G-TAC trainers’ taunts—answer me, genius—to leave him fogged with panic. He braced himself against the wall and had JARVIS turn up the water temperature. It had been all cold showers at G-TAC. The warmth helped, at least a little.

“You have a text message from Dr. Banner,” JARVIS said suddenly.

“Display.” The hot water had fogged up the display panel; he wiped it off.

Talking to Edwards, it said. He says to tell you he misunderstood something & you guys still need to talk, but it’s OK.

Tony felt himself relax a little. Bruce was a smart guy; if Edwards was lying through his teeth about the “it’s OK” part, he’d have said so.

A second message appeared, reading, He didn’t know Pepper was your girlfriend. Seems to be trying not to freak out about it. Will stall him until he calms down.

Good. That gave him some time to think. “Thanks, Bruce,” Tony said, knowing that JARVIS would text it back to him. So Edwards thought had lied about the nature of his relationship with Pepper?
Tony hadn’t lied. Tony had been pretty out of it first few hours with Edwards, but he remembered him saying Ms. Potts sends her love. That had convinced him that it was all right to surrender to the drugs, and stop fighting to keep himself awake and aware.

Maybe Edwards had thought she meant it platonically. Maybe he’d have a chance to explain. Maybe.

“How did he find out?” JARVIS had mentioned that Edwards had been browsing news sites. Maybe they’d been spotted at the restaurant, or going into Pepper’s apartment. Or he could have seen an old article about them together. They’d tried to keep it discreet—a woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company got enough crap without the implication that she’d climbed the ladder on her back—but it wasn’t exactly a state secret.

But in answer, JARVIS displayed another passage from Sandburg’s book. This one was about Sentinels’ sense of smell, and the phrases, “sexual arousal” and “recent sexual activity” were highlighted.

Oh.

“I’ve identified another passage that may be of interest,” JARVIS added.

“Display it. No, wait.” He’d been standing here naked, reading the shower wall, for a while now. “Send it to my tablet.” He quickly finished washing up, brushed his teeth, and threw on some clean clothes, stuffing the old ones down the laundry chute. Was that enough to obscure the sex-smell? He didn’t know, but he wasn’t sure what else he could do.

He took his tablet into a corner by the window, where the decorator had put a chair that Tony never sat in. It just so happened to be as far from the door as he could get; for reasons he didn’t want to explore, he felt better there.

The pages that JARVIS sent to his tablet had to do with Guides and what Sandburg called “outside sexual relationships.” Scrolling back a few paragraphs, Tony saw that the previous few pages had to do with sexual relationships between Sentinels and Guides; “outside” ones were between Guides and anyone else.

The first thing Sandburg said was that such relationships were rare. Sentinels didn’t like their Guides dating or having sex, for reasons ranging from plain old possessiveness, to sensory distraction, to “the belief that Guides are more vulnerable to sexual or other forms of exploitation by romantic partners (do not expect them to have any sense of irony about this).”

So it wasn’t just the lying. Fixing this was probably going to involve promising never to do it again. Tony ruthlessly quashed any sense of resentment that may have started to swell up at the thought of Edwards controlling his sex life, along with every-fucking-thing else. He’d be lucky if this could be fixed. He was lucky Edwards had decided to calm himself down instead of disciplining Tony right away. And he was in no position to resent having to consider himself lucky that his life wasn’t a never-ending nightmare of casual brutality. It beat the hell out of the alternative.

He kept reading, more for the distraction than anything else. Sandburg went on to say that if you did want to have some kind of a sex life that didn’t involve a Sentinel, your best bet was probably to start by asking. “If your Sentinel will be at all receptive, provide him or her with a copy of the Sentinel-Guide Resource Center publication, ‘So Your Guide Wants to Date.’ In this booklet, we attempt to present dating and having sex as normal adult behaviors that they should at least consider finding some way to tolerate if they wish to be considered reasonable.”
That might be worth a shot. Later. Much later. Depending on whether Edwards was mostly upset about the sex itself or the supposed lying.

The next few paragraphs were advice about how to get a Sentinel to give you permission to date: letting them meet your prospective partner, providing an itinerary, blatant sucking up. Well, Sandburg said, “Many Sentinels fear that a Guide who has a girlfriend/boyfriend will be less focused on the Sentinel’s needs. Demonstrate that you will remain attentive on the job by….” And then he described various ways of blatantly sucking up.

After that was a bit of science about why, even if you were allowed, you had to be careful not to come home smelling like sex. Sentinels viewed other people touching their Guides as a threat—Sandburg cited an fMRI study—and they also tended to be sexually attracted to Guides, “regardless of gender preferences. If you have rejected a sexual advance from your Sentinel (see p. 138), this is likely to be especially problematic. Even if your Sentinel is not interested in an intimate relationship with you, having a sexually active Guide is likely to be distracting.” The book recommended discussing strategies in advance to minimize this effect, including not bringing the partner home for sex, showering afterward, and the use of strong scents—“such as scented hygiene products, cologne or perfume, mints or gum. However, if you are considering carrying out an intimate relationship without your Sentinel’s knowledge, these scents may alert your Sentinel that you have something to hide, and in most cases will not fully mask the associated sensory cues.”

Tony wondered if he should put on some cologne. Probably not—he hoped Edwards would be willing to listen to reason on the lying issue, but he didn’t want to add fuel to the fire.

After that, Tony got his first obvious clue about why this book was such a big secret. Sandburg spent a couple of paragraphs explaining why it was a really bad idea to try to have sex on the sly—you were probably going to be caught, and the Sentinel wasn’t going to be at all rational about it when you did—but then the next few pages were about what to do if you were determined to try it anyway.

Tony scrolled through that section without really reading it. Right now, it didn’t feel safe to even know that this information existed. He hated himself for that—before G-TAC, he would have scoffed at the idea of meekly rolling over and submitting to a four-year dry spell. If he was lucky—there was that word again—and it was only four years.

All right. He knew what Edwards was angry about. And Edwards had said it was a misunderstanding. “We have to talk” was almost certainly not code for any kind of horrific punishment. He would be okay.

Given enough time, he might really believe that.

#

Sentinel Edwards, Bruce realized, wasn’t the only one who had misunderstood some things. For one thing, Bruce hadn’t quite understood that when Tony said Edwards wasn’t there for “the really bad stuff,” he meant he hadn’t been there for any of it. Well, Tony might have considered the imprinting part of the “bad stuff,” but Edwards didn’t.

Another mistaken assumption was that Sentinels had absolute power over their Guides. If they saw them as interchangeable cogs, they did, but if they actually cared, the Guides were hostages to fortune, used by G-TAC and even SHIELD itself to control Sentinels.

It slowly dawned on Bruce that many of the things Edward did—like the schedule, and the impersonal way Edwards talked about Tony, particularly when reporting to Steve—were intended to
put a protective layer of bureaucracy between Tony and anyone who wanted to use him as a pawn.

Apparently, it had never occurred to Edwards that Tony didn’t need to be protected from his team. But that was attributable to naïve solipsism, rather than malice. “Guides don’t—they don’t usually have a lot of social ties,” Edwards explained, once he realized what Bruce was getting at. “They’re safe with other Guides, but otherwise, people don’t—they don’t understand. They see how the Guides are with us, and with G-TAC, and they think they’re there for anybody to push around.”

A few more careful questions revealed that Edwards hadn’t done a whole lot of asking what Tony wanted or how he felt, when he’d been making decisions about what was in Tony’s best interests. Edwards had an explanation for that, too: “He wouldn’t have told me. Early on, if you ask them what they want, they just tell you what you want to hear.”

“‘They’ meaning Guides?” Bruce asked.

Edwards nodded.

“Do you think Sentinels are all alike, then?”

“No.” Edwards picked up right away on what he was getting at, and continued, “And no, Guides aren’t either—but they’re all shaped by the same pressures. G-TAC teaches them nobody cares what they want. The only reason they’d ask would be some kind of a trick—either to find fault with the answer or to get something to use against him.”

“Okay—fair enough,” Bruce said. “But you could have asked us.”

It was clear from Edwards’s expression that he hadn’t thought of that.

#

“Mr. Edwards is asking if you’re ready for him to return,” JARVIS said.

“Um, yeah. Okay. Wipe this from my tablet.” He had been browsing through Sandburg’s book —The Guide’s Guide—hilarious—both as a distraction and to get an idea of any other pitfalls he might trip over.

“Done,” JARVIS told him. “Shall I admit Mr. Edwards now?”

“Yes.” Stowing the tablet under his pillow, he took a deep breath and made his way out to the living room.

Edwards was coming in through the front door as he entered. Watching him closely, Tony saw his nostrils flare, and braced himself for another explosion, but apparently the Sentinel didn’t smell anything that bothered him this time. “Okay,” Edwards said. “First off, I’m sorry I scared you.”

The old Tony would have denied that he’d been afraid. Now he just nodded. Was he supposed to apologize for something now? What? “I’m sorry I…upset you,” he guessed.

“It’s okay. Can we sit down?”

“Sure.”

Edwards sat on the couch; Tony picked a spot two cushions away from him.

“So,” Edwards said after a long moment. “I didn’t realize that you and Ms. Potts were…together. I, uh, assumed you had…changed your plans, without letting me know.”
Tony nodded. He hadn’t, but he wasn’t sure if pointing that out would help anything. At G-TAC it definitely wouldn’t have.

“So I was angry about that. And the other thing is, Guides don’t usually have…don’t usually date. It’s difficult for us to, uh, know that someone else has been touching our Guides. It has to do with the, uh, the protective instincts. I know that doesn’t really make sense—rationally, I know that Ms. Potts isn’t any kind of a threat to you. It was more of a…knee-jerk reaction. Does that make sense?”

Tony nodded again. It wasn’t exactly the same as what the Guide’s Guide had explained, but it was close.

“And I knew we were going to have to talk about this at some point, but I thought it could wait,” Edwards explained. “So that’s my fault, really. Except the talk I was planning to have was about how hooking up with random strangers is…not something Guides can do. Do people still say that? Hooking up?”

“I think so,” Tony said. “I haven’t, uh, I haven’t really been doing that much of that anyway. Since, you know, Iron Man. And Pepper.” It turned out that having friends and responsibilities tamped down his urge to have meaningless sexual encounters—go figure.

“Okay. Good. So that’s…one thing we don’t have to worry about. But your relationship with Ms. Potts…we’re gonna have to do some thinking about that. I don’t—I mean, finding out that you’re a Guide, and everything else that’s happened, I know that’s been hard for you. And it must be hard for her, and your relationship. I don’t want to make things any worse than they have to be, but I’m not sure how we’re going to make this work.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said. Never having sex again, sir.

Edwards eyed him. “I’m not saying it can’t work. I just…need some time to catch up. We’ll figure something out that we can both live with. Ms. Potts, too. All three of us. Okay?”

“Okay,” Tony echoed. So. Maybe not never having sex again. One more thing to be grateful for. He resolved to print out a copy of “So Your Guide Wants to Date.”

“Are we all right?”

That was pretty much up to Edwards, wasn’t it? “I’m all right.”

“Good. I’m all right, too.” He glanced at his watch. “Whew, it’s late. I’m going to sleep in tomorrow—do what you want; stay in the building.” Edwards hesitated. “Dr. Banner mentioned your friends feel like they haven’t seen much of you since you got back.”

“Yeah.” Hadn’t seen much of him without Edwards, he figured Bruce meant. “There’s, um. Steve likes to do team brunch on Sundays. When he gets back from church. It’s, uh, not on the schedule, but….”

“Up to you,” Edwards said. “Goodnight.”

“’night.”

# —protect him,” Bruce finished. “In his own controlling and slightly warped way.” He was simultaneously flipping pancakes and relating his conversation with Edwards last night. The others were, understandably, skeptical.
“We are his friends,” Thor pointed out, arranging strips of bacon on a griddle. “He does not need to be protected from us.”

“I’m not saying he’s right,” Bruce answered. “Just that it makes sense, from a certain skewed perspective. We haven’t exactly been that friendly to him.”

“Why would we?” Clint asked with a snort. “He’s basically—”

Before he could elaborate, Tony popped in from the elevator, saying, “Who are we talking about?”

Bruce and Clint both froze, waiting to see if Edwards was right behind him. When he didn’t appear, Bruce sighed and said, “Edwards. And how he’s not really so bad.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Tony noted.

Bruce carefully did not say, Yes, but we all thought you were lying and/or had Stockholm Syndrome. And we’re still not sure that you don’t.

“Where is he, by the way?”

“Sleeping. Something about having been up until all hours having a heart-to-heart with you, Brucie-bear.”

“We had a good talk,” Bruce answered.

“I thought you must’ve,” Tony said, coming over and awkwardly punching Bruce on the arm. “Thanks.”

“It wasn’t like I planned on it,” Bruce said. “By the way, how long have you known him? Edwards?” He wanted to check if Tony said the same thing Edwards had.

“About…eight and a half days. Why?”

“Just wondered.” Bruce ignored Tony sticking his finger in the bowl of pancake batter—normally, he’d have smacked him with the spatula for that, but he certainly wasn’t going to do that now.

Well, maybe if he stuck his finger in there again after he’d finished licking it. To prevent that outcome, Bruce moved the batter out of Tony’s reach.

“Seems longer,” Tony added. “But I’m pretty sure. I was sedated for part of it.”

Bruce nodded. “You mentioned that.” His first night back, when he’d finished throwing up.

“Yeah, apparently that’s how they do it. I don’t know. How much longer are those going to be?”

As a change of subject, it was not particularly graceful, but Bruce played along. “I have another batch to do, but these are done,” he said, sliding the pancakes off the griddle and onto a platter. “You can take those to the table, if you want.”

What followed was somewhere between a normal team brunch and an awkward facsimile thereof. Tony teased Steve about his churchgoing habits and shamelessly hogged the bacon; the only thing unusual about that was the extent to which they let him get away with it, though Bruce did remind him that other people liked bacon, too, when it seemed like he might be getting close to the point of eating himself sick again.

But it was difficult to find things to talk about. It didn’t seem entirely appropriate to sit around and talk about the latest SHIELD gossip or who was the best Star Trek captain, but attempts to address any of the elephants in the room—Tony’s mental and physical state, his recent absence, Edwards in
any context—were met with increasingly unsubtle diversionary tactics from Tony; at one point he actually said, “Oh, look, a bird!” despite the fact that they were indoors and he had his back to the windows.

Still, it was reassuring to see that Tony had not, apparently, been waiting for an opportunity to send out a distress signal.

After brunch, Tony invited Bruce down to his workshop with him, and Bruce got some answers on what “floors” on the schedule meant, as Tony took a screwdriver to one of his vacuum cleaner robots—the Tower had a fleet of them, mostly prototypes for models that had or would eventually be released by Stark Industries. “Dupree—the, uh, the G-TAC guy at SHIELD? He apparently has some kind of hard-on for the idea of me doing housework. And it’s important to, uh…we kind of have to not piss him off. But Edwards says we can count, uh, maintenance on the domestic bots—not you, DUM-E! Go away—and just sort of, you know.” Tony put the handle of the screwdriver in his mouth to use both hands to remove the vacuum bot’s casing, but Bruce was still able to make out the words, “Lie about it.”

Bruce had suspected, since last night at least, that “floors” might not be anything too sinister, but he was glad to have it confirmed.

“Trouble is,” Tony continued, taking the screwdriver back out of his mouth to unfasten the motor mount screws, “these things don’t actually need that much maintenance. Might have to come up with something new. What housework don’t we already have machines for?”

“Oh, you could do a waxing bot,” Bruce suggested. “For the hard floors.” Did people still wax floors? He mainly knew about the concept from jokes—it’s a dessert topping and a floor wax!

“Hm, okay. Kind of boring, though. Just a variation on the mop-bot. What else do people do? Maybe I should ask the cleaning service. But they might not tell me. Conflict of interest.”

“Taking out the trash,” Bruce said. “Dusting. Uh, picking your socks up off the floor. Wiping down the kitchen and bathroom.”

“Wiping down what?”

“Uh…stove, counters. The front of the refrigerator. Walls, especially above the stove and around the trash can. In the bathroom…sink, toilet, shower, tub. That kind of stuff. Have you literally never cleaned anything?”

“When would I have?” Tony hunched his shoulders. “I mean, apart from…the place. And I don’t think what you learn there has anything to do with how people clean in real life.”

Bruce assumed “the place” meant G-TAC. Tony was probably right.

He continued, “You know that thing in war movies where they scrub floors with toothbrushes? Turns out that’s an actual thing. I always thought it was hyperbole. A shower-and-bathtub scrubbing bot should be interesting. The actual cleaning part, and the programming, will be pretty much the same as the floor-scrubber, but it’ll need an entirely different means of locomotion. Vertical surfaces. Hm.”

Bruce accepted the change of subject. “Suction cups?”

Tony made a face. “That’s so adorably retro. JARVIS, find me all the data you can about animals that can climb up walls. Spiders, geckos…what else?”
“Centipedes,” Bruce suggested.

Two hours later, Tony had a prototype that could scale a fiberglass wall, though only in a straight line.


Tony was shaving, and contemplating whether he could get away with letting his goatee grow back in, when a scream—more of a shriek, really—came from the direction of Edwards’s room. Flipping through possible responses, ranging from “hide” to “mock him for sounding like a little girl,” Tony settled somewhere in the middle on “go and see what’s wrong.”

He found Edwards, a towel wrapped around his waist, staring into the shower stall with an expression of abject horror. Tony was beginning to wonder if this was, perhaps, a zone—he’d never seen one, though Edwards had shown him a training film—when Edwards turned to look at him.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

Tony looked. “Oh. Uh. New Starkbot. Shower-scrubber. It’s a prototype.” He’d been working on it off and on for a week, and had put together the prototype yesterday in the workshop, during “floors.” It had a long, segmented body made of half-spheres, each equipped with two legs and a cleaning apparatus on the bottom. The first set of body segments dispensed a pre-washing solution, the middle ones scrubbed, and the last set rinsed. The “head” had two sensory appendages projecting from the front, for detecting obstacles like stray soap or washcloths. It moved sinuously along the shower wall, scrubbing as it went.

“The, ah, the aesthetics could probably use some work,” Edwards said. “Before it’s ready for prime-time.”

“Oh?” Tony said faintly.

“And—I’m just generalizing from my own experience here—but the average householder might rather put it in the tub themselves, rather than have it come crawling out of the drain waving its claws at you like a nightmare coming straight out of Satan’s asshole.”

Really? He’d been particularly proud of the self-storing feature. “You may be right.”

“Would you mind, uh.” Edwards gestured at the bot.

“Oh! Sure.” Tony brushed the little bot’s sensory appendages with his fingers, and it crawled up his arm.

Edwards shuddered. “Thanks. Maybe it could live in your shower for now?”

“Yes,” Tony said. He would have to change the programming, but if Edwards didn’t like it, he could do that.

“Great,” Edwards said, and shuddered again.

Tony decided to take the new bot along to team training, to get some more opinions on the aesthetics. It turned out that Edwards’s opinion was shared by Steve, Clint, and Bruce, while the coveted “female assassin” and “Norse god” demographics found it cute.

Well, Natasha said “cute.” Thor called it “A most winsome creature.”

Steve said, “You’re back on active duty as of today, right?”
“Yes.”

“Then go suit up—and for God’s sake, leave your new pet in the workshop!”

Tony didn’t have to be told twice to suit up—although he did pause for just a moment, between leaving the prototype in the care of U and DUM-E and suiting up, to have the fabrication units get started on the parts for scrubber-bots for Thor and Natasha’s quarters. The others could clean their own showers, if they didn’t appreciate his invention.

Having the suit assemble itself around him felt like coming home. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed it. Since Afghanistan, the suit had been hope, escape, protection, and revenge in one awesome package—all things that were dangerous to even think about, at G-TAC.

After running through the standard suit checks, he made his way back up to the main gym. When he flipped down the face plate and activated the heads-up display, the team were identified as allies, and Edwards with a flashing red question mark. “Add Edwards to the allies list,” Tony told JARVIS, then said through the suit speakers, “What now?”

“Very well,” JARVIS said. The question mark disappeared.

“If you could just stand there for a minute,” Edwards said. “I’m curious about whether you still read as a Guide in the suit.” Tony stood, and Edwards circled around him—doing what, Tony didn’t know. But now that Edwards had brought it up, he was curious, too. “No,” Edwards finally said. “I thought you wouldn’t, but now we know for sure. Explains why it took so long for anyone at S.H.I.E.L.D to notice, anyway.” He stepped back, gesturing to Steve.

“Let’s spar,” Steve said. “I want to see how rusty you’ve gotten.”

“Gold-titanium alloy doesn’t rust,” Tony quipped.

He kept thinking that right up until Steve landed the first punch, which happened to be on his face.

It didn’t hurt—super-soldier or not, Steve was still only made out of meat—but the blow nevertheless froze him into place, his heart pounding in his ears, mind racing to answer the question what did I do?

“Mr. Stark,” JARVIS said. “You appear to be experiencing some distress. Shall I—”

“No,” Tony said, to him alone, before toggling on the suit speakers. “Let’s try that again.”

“Tony,” Steve said uncertainly.

“I’m ready now,” Tony insisted. “C’mon. We doing this, or what?”

With obvious reluctance, Steve advanced on him again.

#

Edwards wasn’t too worried when Captain Rogers said he wanted to spar with Tony. He’d gone up against the super-soldier once himself now, and knew that the man was able to temper his strength to suit his opponent. And with him in the suit, it was easier for Edwards to think of Tony as Iron Man, rather than his Guide—he didn’t smell like a Guide, or sound like one.

But when they engaged, it quickly became clear that something was wrong. Even after the first strike—which seemed to have caught Tony completely flat-footed—his reactions were slow, clumsy.
When he did finally get into the fight, pushing Rogers back with repulsor blasts, he hesitated after each one, as if expecting—what?

“This isn’t right,” Romanoff said. “He’s better than this.”

“He’s, uh, he’s out of practice,” Dr. Banner pointed out.

“Not this much,” Barton answered. “Muscle memory should take over.”

Edwards thought so, too. Tony had landed a pretty good punch that day during their imprinting.

…and then had immediately retreated, horrified by what he’d done. Muscle memory was working against him now, Edwards realized. Tony must have learned that fighting back only made things worse.

Mercifully, Rogers called the bout quickly, saying, “We’ll have to work on that, Iron Man.”

Tony nodded—or rather, the suit’s helmet did. When the visor rose, his face behind it looked haggard.

“Might be better to ease back into it with target practice,” Edwards suggested, going over to him. “And flying. Hand-to-hand’s probably going to be the hardest.”

“Probably,” Tony said. He glanced over at Rogers. “Cap?”

Rogers nodded. “Why don’t you and Hawkeye head over to the range, see how you do. Then maybe a practice flight?” He looked at Edwards—whether seeking his agreement or challenging him to disagree, Edwards wasn’t sure.

Either way, he nodded.

The other trials—or whatever you wanted to call them—went better. Iron Man made quick work of both stationary targets and the flying drones, and soared through the test flight, doing several barrel rolls and adding in what Edwards suspected was an unnecessarily flashy landing. It was nice to see him enjoying himself, at least.

Rogers, who had joined Edwards and Barton on the roof to watch, greeted him by saying, “Looks good. And your range scores are fine.” He paused significantly. “We need to work on hand-to-hand.”

Taking off the suit’s helmet, Tony nodded. “Yep.”

“How do you want to handle that?”

Tony glanced over at him. “Spar with Hap, I think. Or maybe Natasha.”

“Okay. Let’s say, at least three times a week until you’re back up to speed. All right?”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n.”

“Still not a Navy captain,” Rogers said, waving and retreating. “Meeting in thirty.”

Tony walked—Edwards somehow expected him to clank, but he didn’t—over to a different part of the roof, where robotic arms began stripping the suit from him.

Over the next few days, it quickly became clear that, while watching Iron Man spar in the suit was
bearable, if unpleasant, watching his Guide spar out of it was impossible. Instead, Edwards retreated to their quarters and practiced not panicking while his Guide was fighting. Dr. Banner taught him some breathing techniques that seemed to help, even if he felt a little silly doing them.

Around the same time, they also had their first public appearance as a team. It was supposed to be fairly low-key—visiting a school that had won a citywide public service contest—and the part where they actually met and talked with the kids was all right. None of them had any idea who Edwards was, of course, and next to the team of superheroes, a garden-variety Sentinel wasn’t very exciting. But they politely answered his questions about their project—a community garden in the housing project where the vast majority of the school’s students lived—while they were waiting for their turns to meet the real heroes. A few of them told him about relatives they had serving in the military, and Edwards said to pass along his thanks for their service, which they seemed to appreciate.

The difficult part came at the end, when they left the school and faced a gauntlet of reporters. Captain Rogers made a nice speech about the kids and their project; a surprising number of the reporters paused in shouting out questions to listen to it.

The reason quickly became clear: once the team did start taking questions, they ignored everyone who had kept talking over Captain America—a habitual practice, Edwards thought. The greatest number by far were calling out for Iron Man; Tony finally settled on a woman from Action News, who shove a microphone in his face and said, “Iron Man, how are you adjusting to being a Guide?”

Edwards resisted the urge to bat the microphone away as Tony put on a professional-looking smile and answered, “As you can imagine, it’s been a big change. I’m happy to be back, and Sentinel Edwards is going to be a great addition to the team.”

“What do you say to allegations that your assignment to the Avengers Initiative constitutes special treatment? Do you feel that Tony Stark shouldn’t have to serve in the military?”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Tony answered. “My assignment was decided while I was in training. It was already a done deal when I heard about it.”

Ignoring the Action News woman’s follow-up question, he moved on briskly to another reporter, who asked “Will you be continuing to run Stark Industries while you’re serving as a Guide?”

“Virginia Potts will continue to run Stark Industries, as she has done for the last several years.”

“But it’s no secret that you’re the genius behind the company’s reputation for innovation,” the reporter pressed.

“We have a number of exciting StarkTech projects in the pipeline. You should ask Ms. Potts about them.”

The next reporter changed things up, shoving her microphone at Edwards instead. “We understand the Avengers have been conducting a lot of team building activities lately. How are you fitting in with the team?”

Shit, shit, shit. “We haven’t had a chance to go on any missions together yet,” Edwards said, which must have been a mistake—next to him, Tony winced. “But we’ve been doing a lot of training, and I’m enjoying getting to know everyone.”

“What’s it like having Tony Stark as a Guide?”

Oh, crap. What could he say to that that would sound good to the public and G-TAC? He wished there had been a briefing. “Being in the public eye is going to take some getting used to.” Apparently
that wasn’t enough of an answer; the reporter just kept looking at him. “And Avengers Tower is something else, compared to standard SHIELD quarters.”

“What about Stark himself?”

“He’s great,” Edwards said. He was sure she was hoping for something juicer—or at least more specific—but he couldn’t think of anything that couldn’t cause trouble with someone.

He ended up having to repeat those answers a couple more times before they were finally done.

#

There was a time when Natasha wouldn’t have thought she’d ever get tired of knocking Tony Stark on his ass. He was quick and observant, so if he could bring himself to actually apply that to what he was doing, instead of running his mouth or floating off in the clouds thinking about God-knows-what, he could usually manage to keep out of her way, at least long enough to make the bout interesting. And if he came to the mat drunk or distracted, he got what he had coming to him.

Now, though.…

If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought he was drunk, his reaction times were so slow. She could see him thinking about what to do next. He seemed to see her blows coming just a little too late to do anything about them. If she backed off and let him regroup—a courtesy he couldn’t possibly expect from a real enemy—he’d take so long to come back at her that she almost wondered if he’d forgotten she was in the room.

She didn’t begin to understand until halfway through their training session. She’d just taken him down with an arm bar and a leg sweep, and he tapped out—something she wouldn’t have let him get away with, normally, not if he was going to be that careless. But Steve had told her to go easy on him—and, maybe more importantly, so had Happy, who had done a session with him a couple of days before.

Flat on his back on the mat, he said, “I used that exact move, my first day at…you know. Thought you and Hap would have been impressed.”

As a rule, Tony didn’t talk much about G-TAC. Maybe to Bruce, a little. “Didn’t think they taught hand-to-hand there.”

“They don’t.”

She wasn’t in the habit of indulging Tony by feeding him straight lines, either, but a lot of things had changed since he’d come back. “What happened, then?”

“Oh, well, I’d just gotten there,” Tony said, sitting up and folding his arms across his knees in a way that was obviously supposed to look casual. “One of those guys—the trainers—hit me. So I took him down. He wasn’t expecting it, but hell, I wasn’t either. It was about two minutes after my hearing ended.”

“Why did he hit you?”

Tony shrugged. “They don’t tell you. I could’ve handled the one, but then about six more showed up and beat the shit out of me. So that wasn’t much fun.” He pushed himself to his feet. “C’mon, let’s try that again.”

Now that she knew what she was looking for, Natasha could see that he was anticipating her blows
as quickly as he ever had. It was just that he was setting himself up to *take* them, not avoid them.

There were a lot of things wrong with the way Natasha herself had been trained, but no one had ever taught her not to fight back.

#

Edwards tried to tune out the chaos of his surroundings and focus on the paperwork he was doing. It was only his second visit to Tony’s workshop—the first having been on that unfortunate first evening. Tony had rather tentatively proposed that they go down there so he could do some suit maintenance, during scheduled downtime. Edwards had raised no objections, not wanting to quash what he saw as both a gesture of trust and a move toward normalcy, as Tony invited him into the inner sanctum and gained some confidence about stating his preferences.

Tony had given him a stilted sort of tour at the beginning, pointing out some of the older suit models, which were displayed in wall cases, and showing off some of his design toys, like a holographic table that projected virtual wire-frame models. Edwards hoped he’d made the right sort of approving noises—it was clear enough that the stuff was fairly special, but since it wasn’t relevant to his own specialty, the nuances were lost on him.

Now Tony had finally settled down to work. He had one of the suit gauntlets lying on the workbench in front of him, connected with wires to the arc reactor in his chest. He seemed to be doing something with the motors in the fingers, adjusting the grip or something. He kept putting different-sized objects in the gauntlet’s grip and picking it up to see if it held.

Then he leaned over, reaching—with his natural hand—for the coffee cup set at a safe distance off to one side. Suddenly, his heart rate and breathing accelerated drastically, and he jumped backwards off his lab stool, clawing at the connecting wires. The gauntlet fell unheeded to the floor, and Tony spread a hand out over the reactor, as though trying to shield it with his palm.

“You okay?” Edwards asked. Maybe the thing had *stopped*—shorted out or something? Abandoning his own lab stool, he went over, but once he was in touching distance of Tony, he could feel the magnetic field.


“Flashback?” Edwards prodded. He wondered if it had something to do with his touching the arc reactor. Surely that hadn’t been bad enough to cause flashbacks? He hoped not, anyway.

“Yeah, uh.” Shaking his head again, Tony sat back down and pulled a magnifier over the gauntlet. “When I first had this put in—” He gestured towards his chest, “—before I made the first arc reactor, it was hooked up to a car battery.”

“Oh,” Edwards said. *Not everything is about you, Ed.* A useful reminder.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I had to, uh, lug it around with me, and if I dropped it, or forgot about it and turned around too fast, the wires would come out and I might die if I didn’t get it hooked back up in time.”

He’d known the basics of the arc reactor’s history—that Tony had gotten it during his captivity in Afghanistan, and that it was a medical device as well as the Iron Man suit’s power source—but he hadn’t known those details. It made sense, he supposed, that the electromagnet would have preceded the arc reactor. “But you still, uh, hook stuff up to it?”
“It’s been a while since I’d had a problem like that. I thought I was over it.” Tony frowned down at his gauntlet. “G-TAC, I guess. Stirred some things up.”

Oh. Well, yes, he supposed it would have. “Surely it wasn’t as bad,” he offered tentatively. “G-TAC, I mean. They weren’t going to kill you.”

Tony shot him an unreadable look. *Just what did they do to you?* Edwards wanted to know—but he forced himself not to pry. Looking back at his gauntlet and picking up a microtool, Tony said, “It was worse. The terrorists gave me a choice.”

“What?” It wasn’t a very intelligent response, but Edwards couldn’t quite imagine what he meant.

“I could do what they wanted, or I could die. I picked the third option. G-TAC, the only way out is broken.” Tony shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” Edwards said quickly. Tony had already given him plenty to think about.

#

Tony couldn’t help but resent how *patient* both Happy and Natasha were being with him. They both knew what he could do—before. Now they were putting up with him stumbling around like a beginner, second-guessing himself all the time, and saying things like, “Okay, that was better,” every time he managed to do something that was not completely useless.

One day, about two weeks into his new training regimen, Happy left him working the heavy bag when Steve and—Tony glanced over his shoulder—Edwards came in. Tony did his best to ignore the twist of anxiety in his stomach. Steve was going to ask how it was going, and Hap would say something like, “We’ll have to keep working at it.” He knew perfectly well that Steve wasn’t going to belt him one, or tell him he couldn’t eat that day, or do anything, really, except maybe feel sorry for him. But Tony hadn’t exactly loved being incompetent even before G-TAC, and spending nearly three months being beat on for largely imaginary failures hadn’t exactly helped.

“He looks better,” Tony heard Edwards say, once Steve and Happy had finished the usual exchange.

“He’s fine against anything that doesn’t hit back,” Happy answered. More loudly, he said, “All right, Mr. Stark, that’s enough.”

Tony got in a few more jabs against the bag, to remind himself that he didn’t have to stop when Happy said stop, then turned away from it. Edwards was coming over; when he arrived, he kneaded Tony’s shoulders, asking, “Good workout?”

Tony made a noncommittal sort of noise. He’d finally gotten used to how Edwards liked touching him all the time, and relaxed under his hands. It was kind of nice, actually—after spending all that time being hit every time he turned around, being touched in a way that didn’t hurt got the message through that he was okay, in a more visceral way than just hearing it.

Edwards sniffed at his neck—apparently that was a Sentinel thing—then patted his shoulder. “Better get cleaned up. We have that thing at the Helicarrier.”

Two things, actually—today was their regular bi-weekly meeting with Dupree, but before that, the team had a special meeting with Fury and Coulson. Usually, a meeting like that meant a mission—not necessarily a big one; those tended to come up without much notice, and they’d been told about this meeting a couple of days ago. But if it was, it would be their first full-team mission since Tony had been back from G-TAC.
When they got to the ‘carrier conference room, Coulson showed them images of a farmhouse. “The
root cellar contains the entrance to an underground HYDRA base, which has been abandoned since
the late fifties. The former property owner was the son of a HYDRA operative, but as far as we’ve
been able to determine, he had no idea what his house was sitting on top of. He moved to a nursing
home and allowed the property taxes to lapse not long ago, which gives us an opportunity to get you
in without attracting notice.”

“Why have we been waiting?” Steve asked.

“Two reasons,” Coulson answered. “First, it was a major base at one time—in the fifties, up to a
quarter of the population in the surrounding area may have been comprised of HYDRA operatives
and their families. Some of their descendants may be involved in the neo-HYDRA movement. We
don’t want to tip them off that there may be something important in the area.”

“But it is important?” Thor asked.

“Yes,” Fury jumped in. We’ve recently uncovered documents suggesting that this was the
development site for the fear gas project.”

Steve and Natasha both nodded like that meant something to them. Tony glanced over at Bruce, who
shrugged. Apparently he didn’t know, either. “Fear gas?” Bruce said.

“An aerosolized substance that causes temporary but acute fear in those exposed to it,” Fury
explained. “It was intended as a weapon of mass terror and control.”

But “fear aerosolized substance” didn’t rhyme. Fair enough.

Edwards raised his hand. “Wasn’t there a Man from UNCLE episode like that?”

Fury glared at him balefully. “As you can imagine, there was an extensive inquiry into information
security at the Strategic Science Reserve after that episode aired. Eventually it was traced to an
archivist who happened to be romantically linked to one of the show’s producers.” He paused.
“Fortunately, the television program exaggerated the substance’s effectiveness—it was very seldom
deployed in combat, and never against the public, because it dispersed too quickly to be effective.
However, now that HYDRA is getting back on its feet, they may seek to revive the project. Your
mission is to explore the base and retrieve research notes, samples, and specialized equipment
relating to the fear gas project. If you locate anything that can’t be removed without compromising
your cover, destroy it.”

“Sounds straightforward enough,” Steve said. “What’s our cover?”

Coulson picked the thread back up. “You are environmental assessors from the state—Virginia, as it
happens. You’ll fly into Langley and be provided with appropriate ground transportation.” He
passed around information packets. “Here’s everything we know about the base—the information
dates from an operative who turned in 1951, so there may have been some changes. Banner, Stark,
and Edwards, you’re also getting everything we have on the fear gas project. We don’t know the
exact composition of the substance, but the SSR was able to guess at some of the components from
purchasing records.”

They all glanced through the files for a moment. Tony suspected they had gotten this mission
because they had a chemist now—of course he and Bruce both knew some chemistry, but neither of
them was what you could call an expert.

“We aren’t expecting to have to fight?” Clint asked.
“Ideally, no,” Coulson said.

“But given what happened last time you explored an abandoned HYDRA base, watch your backs,” Fury added.

“Could be booby-traps, too,” Natasha added.

Steve nodded. “I think that’s likely.” He glanced up at Fury. “When do we go?”

“Tomorrow morning. Be ready to stay a few days.”

Fortunately, no one said anything about how if there was fighting to be done, Iron Man wasn’t quite ready for it. The meeting broke up, with Steve staying back to talk to Fury privately, Clint and Natasha going to the armory to make decisions about weapons to take along, Bruce heading to the labs on the similar errand, and Tony and Edwards going to their meeting with Dupree.

After the usual business of Dupree asking if there had been any problems and looking over the timesheets—he always found something to ask questions about; this time it was the amount of time Edwards had logged as sensory lab work—Dupree smirked at them and said, “I understand the Director has assigned you a mission.”

“He has,” Edwards agreed.


Edwards said something about never knowing what might come up in the field.

“Let me be frank with you, Sentinel.” Dupree folded his hands and leaned forward; Tony had the distinct impression he’d read somewhere that it was a body-language trick for appearing trustworthy. “There’s been some suspicion that the Avengers don’t really need a Sentinel. Officer Rankin and I were discussing it just the other day. In some quarters, there’s speculation that your assignment is simply a transparent excuse to keep Guide Stark in place as Iron Man.”

“Is that so?” Edwards asked.

“Mm, yes,” Dupree said, radiating false concern. “If I were you, I’d be thinking of this mission as a way to demonstrate how very untrue that is. Showcase your talents. Keep Guide Stark in a supporting role. Do you take my meaning?”

“Yes, sir, I believe I do,” Edwards said.

“Good. Sentinels are a valuable national resource, as you know. We can’t afford to waste one on make-work.”

When they met up with the rest of the team for the trip home, it became clear that Fury had said something similar to Steve. “Looks like Iron Man had better be on the bench for this one,” he said apologetically.

“The suit would be a little hard to explain anyway,” Edwards pointed out. “Since we’re supposed to be environmental assessors.”

That evening, Tony seemed more on edge than he had since the first week or two of their partnership
—skulking around the apartment, not speaking much, and constantly looking at Edwards for approval or reassurance, but not seeming at all reassured once he’d gotten it.

“Nervous about our big debut?” Edwards asked as they cleared up after dinner—which Tony hadn’t done much more than pick at.

“No, sir,” Tony said.

He hadn’t been saying “sir” much, recently, either. “About what Dupree said?” Edwards guessed again.

Tony wasn’t so quick to deny that one.

“I’m sure he and Rankin have been griping about this assignment being a dodge from the beginning,” Edwards said. “But they’ve already been overruled. We’ll show ‘em what they want to see, should be fine.”

Tony looked unconvinced. “Who’s Rankin, anyway?”

“The Sentinel Recruitment Board liaison. He’s nowhere near as much of an asshole as Dupree—they never are—but he does have to turn in reports showing that SHIELD’s using all of its Sentinels. If they aren’t, they could lose some. But it’s fine. I’m a chemical analyst; this is a chemical analysis mission.”

“Right,” Tony said. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Guess it’s just as well it’s not a combat mission. I wouldn’t be any good anyway.”

Oh, was that it? “I’m sure you’ll get back up to speed,” Edwards said reassuringly. He had no idea how long it might take—as far as he knew, there was no precedent. He knew from Mikey’s emails that he was having a little trouble picking up hand-to-hand at Quantico, but he’d never learned it before. And he’d gotten through G-TAC without being singled out for any special attention. “I wish there was something I could do. Could let you take another swing at me, if that would help.”

Tony flinched.

“Or not.”

Squaring himself up, Tony said, “It’s just, I heard you could get sent back for something like that.”

“Sent back—to G-TAC?”

Tony nodded.

“Who told you that?” Dupree, maybe, but Edwards had made damn sure he never spoke to Tony alone. And that he didn’t know about it.

“I don’t remember,” Tony lied. “One of the other Guides, maybe.”

Oh, that was all right—they wouldn’t have said it to scare him. Even though it clearly had.

“Is it true?” Tony asked.

“Well. Maybe. If the incident were interpreted in the least generous way possible.” Admittedly, as an organization, G-TAC was not exactly known for its generosity. “That’s why we’re not telling Dupree about it, and I can’t imagine how else he’d find out.”
“Right,” Tony said, sounding unconvinced.

“Even if he did hear about it somehow, he’d have a hard time taking you off an assignment for re-training. I’ve never heard of anybody being sent back—except for Blair Sandburg. I think he was sent back five or six times before they matched him up with Ellison. But he was kind of doing it on purpose, I think. As a protest or something.” Being Tony’s Sentinel brought its share of challenges, but if Edwards was ever tempted to feel sorry for himself, he counted his blessings that he’d never gotten Sandburg as a Guide. He’d have had a heart attack within the week. “While we’re on the subject, I don’t think I handled the arc reactor thing very well.” Especially now that he knew a little more background on it.

Tony glanced up at him sharply.

“I needed to examine it, but in hindsight, I could have waited until you were more comfortable with the idea,” Edwards explained.

“Why?”

“I just think it would have been better if I’d done it when you were ready to let me.” He hesitated. “Did they—you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but I wondered if they tried to take it away from you. Or the battery, before you had the reactor.”


The other possibility was even more horrifying. “G-TAC?”

“No them, either. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Somebody else, then? Edwards didn’t think Tony had been captive anywhere else. But since Tony had said he didn’t want to talk about it, he’d better respect that. He didn’t have to know exactly what the issue was, with the arc reactor, to understand that it was a legitimate problem and he’d better tread lightly. “Okay.”

Tony shook his head and went on, “Anyway, I meant, why did you have to examine it?”

Had Tony thought it was just a power play? “There was something about it that was bugging me. Other than the sound, I mean.”

“It makes a sound?”

“Yeah, kind of a hum. And the other thing turned out to be the magnetic field.”

Tony frowned. “You have magnetoception?”

“Yes. About one percent of Sentinels do. Since the invention of the compass, it’s a completely useless ability, except that I can’t go near an MRI machine without throwing up.” People tended to be curious about the ability, once they heard about it, so he’d gotten in the habit of answering the most common questions before they were asked. “Anyway, once I figured out what it was, it stopped bothering me.”

“It’s not that powerful a magnet,” Tony pointed out.

Edwards shrugged. “We tend to be more sensitive to sensory input from Guides—that could have something to do with it. My point is, it was mostly my fault that that didn’t go well. I didn’t realize at first what a sensitive thing it was, and then…well, to be honest, I wasn’t using my best judgment. I’m
certainly not holding a grudge about it.”

Tony nodded, looking more convincingly reassured now. “Okay. Um. Me neither.”

“Thanks.” Edwards patted his shoulder. “I’m going to go finish packing.”

#

So, Edwards had had some reason other than sheer prurient interest for drugging Tony unconscious and molesting his arc reactor. And he was sort of sorry he’d done it. That was good to know, but it had distracted Tony from what he had really wanted to talk to Edwards about—namely, the fact that going into a mission suitless gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Given what he knew about Sentinels, from Sandburg’s book and from what was now nearly a month’s experience with Edwards, it shouldn’t have been too hard a sell to make the case that he ought to take something. After all, the last mission like this the team had done had ended up with a Guide getting shot. Sentinels didn’t like that sort of thing. But somehow, he hadn’t been able to bring it up.

It didn’t take him long to come up with a backup plan, though: Steve. He was all into being prepared, and Edwards made a big deal about deferring to him as team leader. Once Edwards was safely occupied in his room, packing, Tony trotted downstairs, and found Steve poring over the base plans in the common room. When he saw Tony, he pushed the documents aside and looked up at him. “What’s up?”

People tended to give Tony their undivided attention whenever he showed up unexpectedly, these days. “Hey. I was just thinking about this mission tomorrow.”

Steve nodded like that was a very insightful observation. “What about it?”

“You know how I’m supposed to be going as a Guide.”

“Right.”

“I was thinking I should probably take the suitcase suit along, just in case.”


“Good. Because I was also thinking it should be your idea.”

“Okay. To Edwards, or…?”

“Yeah. And, you know, anyone else who asks.” Dupree, for instance.

“Do you want me to tell him now?”

People also tended to do whatever Tony asked them to. That wasn’t exactly new—hello, ridiculously wealthy celebrity!—but the team getting on board with it was a change. Not only had Steve approved competitive cocktail mixing as a team-building activity, he was giving serious thought to co-ed nude hot-tubbing. Steve had put some logistical obstacles in the way, but he seemed to think that having his ideas turned down flat would traumatize Tony or something. Either that or the argument that since they had all seen Bruce naked at one time or another, it would level the playing field had been more persuasive than Tony thought. “In the morning should be OK.”

“Good. Okay. Anything else you wanted to talk about?”
“Still looking for a charter-able hot spring closer than Japan,” Tony told him. Steve’s conditions on the idea were that it had to take place in a natural hot spring, where bathing was explicitly permitted, and which they could reserve for their exclusive use. When Tony had immediately come back with the names of several establishments—it really was a typical corporate-retreat activity in Japan—Steve had added the stipulation that it had to be reasonably nearby. Apparently Japan wasn’t reasonable, even if you planned to take your corporate jet.

“Let me know what you find out,” Steve said affably. “See you tomorrow.”

True to his word, the next morning at their crack-of-dawn breakfast meeting, amid other last-minute details, Steve said, “Stark, you probably won’t need it, but I want you to take the suitcase suit. Just in case we run into trouble.”

Tony glanced over at Edwards, who said, “Suitcase suit?”

“Pared-down version of the Iron Man suit,” he explained. “It fits in a briefcase.”

“Oh,” Edwards said. “I didn’t know you had something like that. Yes, good idea. Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.”

If he was going to be that reasonable about it—and at this point Tony wasn’t even particularly surprised—he could have asked himself.

The flight was uneventful, with everyone going over the plans and checking their weapons and gear one last time. Edwards didn’t have any gear to speak of, but they ran through some sensory exercises. They’d done them dozens of times before, but Tony supposed they were like preflight checks.

At the airport, they were loaded into a couple of state-owned Ford Tauruses, bland and unremarkable. Tony privately thought that there was no car boring enough to disguise the fact that they were all a bit too good-looking to be real government workers, but they’d done their best, dressing up in nondescript suits and concealing all their weapons. Mjolnir was riding in a duffle bag, which Tony thought was sort of hilarious—and raised further questions about the hammer’s physics-defying properties. Was it an especially worthy duffle bag?

The HYDRA base—or rather, the farmhouse where the entrance to the HYDRA base was concealed—was located in the real ass-end of a nowhere. Unfortunately, since they were riding with Steve and Thor, no one but Edwards got Tony’s dueling-banjos joke, and he didn’t think it was funny. Many of the ramshackle houses and trailers they passed had Confederate flags on display, which took a lot of explaining to Thor. He had enough trouble understanding why they were flying the flag of a foreign country, let alone that of a country that no longer existed. Once the explained the link to racism, Thor wanted to know if that meant they were likely to be Hydra supporters, to which the only answer was, “Maybe. Or they could just be garden variety rednecks. It’s hard to tell.”

The house itself was gray, set amid gray trees under a gray sky. They had seen several people peering suspiciously from behind blinds—or, in one case, Confederate flags used as curtains—when they drove up, so they made a show of walking around the muddy, gray yard and peering into the falling-down barn, as environmental assessors might, before climbing up onto the rickety porch and going inside.

The house was partially cleared out, with lighter-colored patches on the floor were furniture had once stood, the kitchen cupboards hanging open and half-empty. The owner had had no children, but someone must have come through and taken out the things they wanted or thought were valuable—cousins, maybe, or neighbors.
Their outdated plans didn’t include the entrance to the root cellar itself, so finding it took a few false starts—they ended up looking inside a coat closet, a pantry, and powder room, done up in 70’s avocado and harvest gold, before they finally found the right door, wedged into a corner of the kitchen behind the dining table.

It was clear that the root cellar hadn’t seen recent use. There was no electricity down there, and everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and spider webs. Edwards shuddered as a particularly large spider scuttled into hiding from the beam of one of their flashlights.

“Not a fan of spiders?” Tony asked him. Maybe that was why he hadn’t liked the scrubber-bot.

“No,” Edwards said. Both of their voices were hushed, even though there was no particular reason they should be. “Don’t go over there,” he added, gesturing with his flashlight toward a corner.

“Okay,” Tony said, though he couldn’t see any reason he’d want to. “Why?”

“Snakes.”

“The entrance should be there,” Steve said, pointing with his flashlight at the opposite end of the room. “Behind those shelves.”

The shelves held dust-covered canning jars. In the beam of the flashlight, the contents—whatever they had once been—floated like preserved organs.

They cleared away the shelves and the dust, to reveal a door, concealed in the rough plank wall, and a numerical keypad. “There’s no way that was here in the fifties,” Tony said. One way their information was wrong already. Once he took off the cover and got a better look at the lock, he was somewhat reassured. “It isn’t too new—late eighties, maybe.”

“The last known member of the original HYDRA in the area died in 1988,” Natasha spoke up.

Maybe he’d added it just before he died. If they were lucky.

After Tony had bypassed the lock, he stepped back to let Natasha and Clint go in first, the rest of the team following after they had cleared the first section as free from booby traps. Inside was a monument to zeerust—the past’s conception of the future. Everything that could be was equipped with slider controls or rheotstats; failing that, angular, primary colored buttons were used. Punch card and reel-to-reel magnetic tape computers were prominently displayed.

Once Tony got the lights up and running, they explored systematically, with Steve, Clint, and Natasha clearing each area before Tony, Edwards, and Bruce followed to examine the data and equipment. They had barely made it a quarter of the way into the sprawling complex when Steve called a halt for the night—“It’ll still be here tomorrow, guys”—and they retreated upstairs. They’d be camping out in the house tonight—the closest motel was back at the highway, nearly an hour’s drive, and while the town did have a couple of restaurants, they didn’t want to take the risk of being recognized.

The place still had electricity and running water, at least, so they made themselves as comfortable as they could in the kitchen, where Steve broke out a crate of MREs.

“Ooh, three lies,” Edwards said. “Been a while since I’ve had those.”

“Hm?” Steve asked.

“Meals, Ready to Eat,” Edwards explained. “They’re neither.”
Clint added, “I’ve also heard ‘Meals rejected by Ethiopians.’”

Tony was pretty sure he wouldn’t have rejected them at G-TAC, if he’d been lucky enough to get anything that good, but now that he’d been eating regularly for nearly a month, he wasn’t thrilled either. Still, it was lucky Edwards hadn’t had to use his senses much so far—there probably wasn’t a grain of white rice for miles. He’d bought a rice cooker for the apartment; maybe he ought to have looked into a portable model. If they even made those.

If not, that could be another project for Sunday afternoons.

As they were finishing up, Edwards stiffened. “Someone’s coming. Tony.” He held out his hand.

“Okay, we’re at five,” Tony said. “Take it to six.”

“Older car. Bad alignment.”

Even if the science behind what Guides did was wishy-washy, having a voice-activated Sentinel was kind of cool. “Seven.”

“Single occupant. Parking. Let’s stay at seven. Driver’s female, slightly anxious…I’m not picking up any weapons.”

Clint, who had slipped out of the kitchen without Tony noticing, returned and said, “Female, looks like early twenties.”

“Take me back down, quick,” Edwards said.

Tony did, just in time for a knock at the front door.

“Edwards, you should go,” Steve decided. “You’re the least recognizable. Clint—”

“On it,” he said, grabbing his bow and quiver and bounding off.

Edwards took Tony with him, and stationed him just inside the living room, where he’d be nearby but unseen from the front hall. Then he opened the door. “Ma’am,” he said to the young woman. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Darlene,” she said. “We live just down the road a piece. You-all buy this house?”

“No, ma’am. We’re environmental assessors, from the state.”

“You been here all day,” she pointed out. “I seen your cars on my way to work.”

“The environmental issues for converting old agricultural properties to new uses can be surprisingly complex,” Edwards said, sounding convincingly pompous. “The herbicides alone….?” He trailed off in a “don’t get me started” sort of way.

“Guess so,” Darlene said, her tone politely disinterested. “What kinda ‘new uses’ are they talking about? Maybe a mall or something?”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that, ma’am,” Edwards said apologetically. “They just tell us they want it assessed.”

“Oh. Y’all going to be here long?”

“Maybe another day or two,” Edwards answered. “Depends on what we find.”
She launched into a spiel about her church’s pancake supper, Thursday night. “It’s five dollars for adults, and it all goes to the church. All you can eat, so it’s a good deal.”

“We’ll keep that in mind if we’re still here,” Edwards said. “Thanks for stopping by.”

After Darlene was back in her car, Edwards had Tony link up with him again, and listened in silence until shaking his head and saying, “Out of range—take me back down.”

They returned to the kitchen, where Edwards explained the gist of what she’d said, then, “Once she was back in her car, she called somebody named ‘Uncle Vern’ and reported the conversation. Now, it could just be that she and Uncle Vern were both real curious about what we’re doing out here, but….”

Steve organized them into two-man watches for the rest of the night, just in case.

#

The second day exploring the HYDRA base, they split up to cover more ground, Tony and Edwards going with Captain Rogers, while Dr. Banner explored with Agent Romanoff and Thor. Agent Barton was posted up in the house, to keep watch for any more unexpected visitors.

“Keep that with you,” Edwards said, as he noticed Tony setting down the briefcase that contained the Iron Man suit in the central area where they’d been leaving equipment that was too bulky to carry with them all the time. Tony glanced over at him sharply. “If you don’t mind,” he added belatedly.

Tony picked up the briefcase with a nod.

As they explored, they kept up frequent contact with the other teams, reporting when they found anything interesting. Edwards tracked down several chemistry labs—even at over fifty years’ remove, there were characteristic scents—but so far, documentation on the fear gas project was sparse. They clearly hadn’t found the main lab for that project yet.

Over the comms, Barton said, “I’m seeing a lotta traffic up here. Well. Six cars in the last hour, seems like a lot for way out here.”

“It does,” Rogers agreed.

“Nobody’s stopping, but some of them have slowed down. Either they suspect something’s up, or this place is so boring that driving around staring at environmental assessors seems like a good time.”

“Could go either way,” Tony observed.

Rogers nodded and, opening the channel to the other team, said, “Let’s focus on finding the fear gas materials, people. Anything else that looks interesting, flag to come back later if we have time.”

“Let’s think about this,” Edwards suggested, once Rogers was off the comms. “The fear gas was a major project, right? Where would the senior researchers’ lab be most likely to be?” The systematic approach hadn’t gotten them much in the way of results yet; maybe it was time to skip ahead.

“Deeper in the tunnels would be more secure,” Rogers pointed out.

“The senior people I know like to be in the middle of things,” Tony said. “But we’ve already checked most of the central places.” He pulled out his phone. “The plans show security checkpoints here and here.” He pointed.
“Let’s try this corridor,” Rogers said, pointing at one of the spots Tony had indicated. He got back on the comms and sent the other team to the other one.

The corridor contained mostly offices—but they were senior people’s offices. They were also oddly spaced, and smaller than the spaces between doors would suggest.

“Is it just me,” Rogers said, “or—”

“Secret passages,” Tony said.

In a facility that had been disused this long, finding secret passages was mostly sound and sightwork—listening for walls that echoed funny, then looking for cracks or hidden seams. Edwards linked up with Tony and got to work.

He was still working on identifying hollow spaces when he heard something he wasn’t expecting—footsteps and voices, somewhere off on the edge of his range. He extended himself a little further, trying to get a feel for the direction they were coming from. Once he was satisfied that he knew, he dialed himself back down to five, and said, “The others are over that way somewhere, right?” He pointed in the opposite direction.

“Yes,” Rogers said.

“Either they’re really lost, or we’ve got company.”

It didn’t take Steve long to figure out that the other team were not lost—and nobody had gotten past Clint, up in the house. “A second entrance,” he said. Of course. Even burrowing animals were smart enough to give their dens a second way in and out.

Edwards, it turned out, had no idea how many “visitors” there were, or what they were up to. “I’ll have to get closer to get a count,” he explained, “and closer than that if you want me to eavesdrop on them.”

Steve nodded. “Start picking out a path.” He got on the comms to arrange the others—calling Clint to rendezvous with Natasha, and Thor and Banner to cover a line of retreat back the way they’d come. Thor would be able to hold off just about anybody if he picked a bottleneck spot, and Steve didn’t want the Hulk rampaging around down here if he could help it. He was not at his best in confined spaces.

Using the plans on Tony’s phone, Edwards and Tony worked out two approaches to the visitors’ path. “We think they’re in here somewhere,” Edwards said, pointing at a blank spot on the plans. “If we go up through here, I should be able to hear them pretty well. But they’re probably _heading_ here.” He pointed to another spot.

Tony explained, “The corridor leading there is pretty wide, but it looks like a dead end. It would make more sense if it’s actually a hub for the secondary entrance.”

Steve considered his options. It had been a while since Edwards had seen combat, and Tony…well. “We’ll take the first one,” he said, and sent Natasha and Clint to the other location, telling them to prepare an ambush.

Steve didn’t think it was terribly likely that their unexpected guests were a Sunday school picnic, and his suspicions were confirmed when Edwards reported that it was a group of a dozen men, at least one armed with a pump-action rifle.
“Other armaments?”

Edwards shook his head. “I only know about the rifle because he was pumping it for no apparent reason. Two of them are carrying something heavy between them—I could hear them talking about how to maneuver it around corners.”

“They didn’t mention what it was?” Steve asked.

“No; they just said, ‘it.’ ‘Don’t drop it,’ ‘You’re gonna run it into the wall,’ that kind of thing. Nothing about their plans, either.”

“Keep listening,” Steve ordered.

At this point, they could probably get out without ever engaging the enemy—all of the Avengers were between the neo-HYDRAs and the main entrance. But if they did that, they’d be leaving without achieving their mission objective—and the neo-HYDRAs would definitely be tipped off that there was something important down here.

If they didn’t already know.

And chances were, what they were looking for was in the secret area that the HYDRAs were occupying.

They were going to have to go in.

#

“This is getting boring,” Natasha said, through the comms and over the sound of gunfire.

Tony had to agree. After obligingly leading the way through the unmapped tunnels, the HYDRAs had set up camp in a room. They might as well have hung a sign on the door reading, “This way to the big important thing!” They fired through the doors and air vents at any sign of moment from the corridors outside, but otherwise showed no interest in going anywhere.

The Avengers could have overrun them easily—their opponents were clearly amateurs, armed with an assortment of hunting rifles and discount-store handguns. Clint and Natasha, stationed near the front entrance to the HYDRA position, had already picked off a few who had gotten too close to the doors. Thor had joined them as backup. And Tony, Edwards, and Steve had found their way into the tunnel the HYDRAs had used, and were blocking their retreat. The HYDRAs seemed to have no idea they were back there.

But Steve hadn’t given the order yet; Tony suspected he was waiting for something to happen that would make it a little less like shooting fish in a barrel.

“One of them’s saying he doesn’t know how much longer they can hold us off,” Edwards said, sounding amused. He was linked up with Tony, and listening in on what was going on in the HYDRA stronghold. There still wasn’t much for Tony to do, as a Guide, beyond standing there and counting, but it felt more meaningful now that Edwards was doing something important. “And the leader—oh, shit.” He fell silent for a moment.

“What?” Steve asked.

“He says, another twelve minutes and it’ll be ready to blow,” Edwards reported.

“What will?”
Edwards shook his head.

“They must be planning to retreat back out this way,” Tony suggested. “We can pick them off—or just let ‘em go by—and then go in and disarm it.” Whatever “it” was, Tony figured he’d be able to disable it in less time than the HYDRA had allowed to get themselves out of the blast radius.

“Maybe not,” Edwards said. “Now they’re praying…I think they’re planning to still be in there when it goes.”

“In that case,” Natasha said, over the comms, “we could just go. The mission was retrieve or destroy.”

Tony didn’t that was such a bad idea—let the idiots get blown up along with their base, by their own weapon—but Steve shook his head. “Right now, we don’t know if whatever they have poses a danger to the nearby residents.”

“I’d say probably not, since most of them have local accents,” Edwards spoke up. “Even if they’re willing to die, they probably have family in the area. But….”

“But they don’t seem to be too bright,” Steve finished.

“And there’s all kinds of stuff down here they might not have accounted for,” Edwards added. “Chemicals, explosives….”

Bruce spoke up, through the comms. “And I’m getting kind of a radioactive vibe here.”

Tony pulled his briefcase into his lap and waited for the rest of them to arrive at the end of the thought process.

Edwards didn’t like this plan at all. He knew it made sense—the Iron Man suit could stand up to a lot worse than shotgun and handgun rounds, and its sensors would allow Tony to quickly assess what kind of device they were dealing with. He’d probably be in and out before these goons picked their jaws up off the floor.

His only counter argument was, “But, my Guide,” and he knew that wasn’t going to fly.

“Are you going to be able to give me ears in there while Tony’s working?” Rogers asked.

“No,” Edwards said. At least Rogers asked, instead of telling him to do it and getting huffy when he explained it was impossible. “In fact, I’d better back up a ways,” he added, jerking his head at the passage behind them. They hadn’t quite finished hammering out the plan, but it definitely did not involve a panicked and out-of-shape Sentinel rushing in to defend his Guide the first time Iron Man got shot at.

“Xanax?” Rogers asked, referencing their interview, before Edwards had met Tony.

“Don’t have any.” Not that it would be a good idea to take one in the middle of a situation like this anyway. Somehow, they hadn’t prepped for a scenario where Tony would have to switch from Guide to Iron Man in the middle of a mission. Edwards frankly wasn’t sure how they could have.

“You gonna be okay?” Tony asked.

“I’ll have to be,” he said grimly. “You?”
“The suit can take anything.” Tony’s tone was casual, but his scent was anxious, his body formed into one taut line.

“Wasn’t asking about the suit.” It was likely that Tony was going to have to do some fighting, and he still wasn’t at a hundred percent in that area. Beyond that, Edwards didn’t know much about defusing bombs, but he didn’t think it was an ideal occupation for someone who was jumpy.

Tony’s veneer of confidence wavered. “Dupree isn’t going to like this.” He glanced over at Rogers. “Iron Man’s not even supposed to be on this mission.”

Of all the things for Tony to be worried about, that was—exactly what Edwards should have expected, really. Tony had gone up against much more dangerous enemies than these, had personally flown a nuke through a space wormhole, for God’s sake. Of course he wasn’t afraid of the bomb, or the neo-HYDRA’s.

That made it all the more infuriating that he was afraid of Dupree—who even Edwards recognized was a small fraction of a man who wouldn’t have even been worth his contempt—or Tony’s—if it weren’t for the massive amount of power his position as a G-TAC liaison gave him.

“I suppose, um, he doesn’t have to know, if it turns out to be nothing,” Tony went on, looking anxiously from Edwards to Rogers.

“Right,” Edwards said.

“And if it is something….” Rogers looked at Edwards. “We’ll just have to set him straight, then. If he has a problem.”

There was just the slightest hint of uncertainty in his tone—like maybe he’d back down if Edwards said, “No, it’s too risky”—and that was it. Edwards had gotten used to kowtowing to G-TAC, because he was his Guides’ last line of defense. His CO’s, in the Corps and at SHIELD, didn’t care one way or the other what Guide he had, or what G-TAC did to them. As far as they were concerned, Guides were all interchangeable. Tony wasn’t, and anyone who thought he was, was an idiot. The idea of leading Captain America down this path of conciliation was just too much. “Yes,” Edwards said. “We will. If he seriously thinks we ought to risk letting Virginia be turned into a radioactive crater to make a point about you being a Guide—fuck him sideways.”

“Glad to hear you say that, Major Edwards,” Rogers said. “Iron Man, you in?”

Tony nodded stiffly, anxiety pouring off of him.

“It’s in the agreement,” Edwards pointed out. “Iron Man’s available for emergencies. Go on. You’ll be awesome. And Captain Rogers has our backs.”

“I do,” Rogers agreed.

After a long moment, Tony said, “If we’re gonna do this, let’s do it. Meter’s running.”

Rogers nodded. Tony reached for the briefcase, pausing when Edwards held up his hand. “Rogers, if you don’t mind, make it a direct order. If we do end up having to explain things to Dupree, it’ll make a difference.”

“Right,” Rogers said, taking a deep breath. “Sentinel Edwards, back off. Stark—suit up.”
“Distraction commencing in three, two—” Clint’s voice on the comms was replaced by the sound of gunfire. Tony flew in high—if the HYDRA goons were watching the back door, they’d be looking for someone entering on foot.

As it happened, they weren’t looking at all. Tony got his first look at the device before anyone turned around. “We have a dirty bomb,” he reported through the comms. A good kilo of Strontium-90 wired to a detonator and a brick of C-4. Easy to build, much easier to source than weapons-grade fissionables, and capable of causing serious hazard to life and health.

“How big?” Bruce asked.

As Tony was running the calculations, one of the HYDRA’s turned around. The suit’s automatic targeting systems locked on; Tony steeled himself and fired off a repulsor blast. A little slow; fortunately, the enemy was slower. “Big enough to make the whole county uninhabitable,” he answered, dodging as several more HYDRA’s realized that they were being attacked from both sides and turned to fire at him.

Unlike his practice bouts with Natasha and Happy, there was no time here to second-guess himself. Time to get in the zone.

#

Edwards couldn’t keep his hearing cranked down as far as he would have liked. All of his senses kept reaching out, of their own accord, seeking his Guide. He sat against the corridor wall, knees drawn up to his chest, flinching away from the sound of gunfire.

And of Tony’s voice, through the comms, saying, “We have a dirty bomb.”

He clutched at his knees, fighting the instinct to run to his Guide’s side. Rationally, he knew that all he could do in there was get in the way, but all the parts of him that were beyond reason wanted to, simultaneously, drag his Guide out of danger, and cause those who had dared raise a weapon against him to deeply regret their life choices.

From the sound of things, though, Tony had that second one pretty well covered. The enemies’ guns went silent, leaving only the sound of Iron Man’s repulsors. “Life signs?” Captain Rogers asked, over the comms.

“Just those two,” Tony answered. He sounded calm. Good.

“I got those with the tranq arrows,” Barton said.

“Good; we’ll take them into custody,” Rogers said. “Iron Man—the bomb?”

“I’ve got like six minutes here,” he said. There was the cocky, know-it-all attitude he’d been lead to expect from Tony Stark. “Anyone for a quick game of pinochle before I get started?”

“Negative, Iron Man,” Rogers said. “Just get to work.”

“If you insist.”

Then a series of explosions rocked the tunnel. Banner’s voice, sounding slightly strained, even over the comms, said, “Guys? I think the house just imploded.”

#
For a fraction of a second, Tony stared at the dirty bomb in disbelief. But of course, that wasn’t what had gone off. He still had six minutes.

Stripping off the gauntlets, he opened the kit of tools stored on one thigh-plate.

“Radioactive?” he heard Steve saying behind him as he studied the bomb.

“I think just conventional,” Bruce answered.

The radioactive material was there—better not touch that—and the detonator was there. Only question was, were these guys smart enough to put in a deadman’s switch?

Edwards’s voice came over the comms. “Down this way, too. Uh. Blowing the exits, I guess.” His voice was a little faint. Was he all right? No time to think about that now; Iron Man had a job to do.

“One of them was going for this when I shot him,” Natasha said, dropping a remote detonator into Tony’s field of view.

He moved it aside. No dead man’s switch. Was it really as easy as clipping the detonator wire?

“Must’ve been hoping we’d be stuck in here with this when it went off,” he said. He couldn’t believe there wasn’t something standing in the way of disarming the bomb. “Luckily, they’re idiots.”

Toggling off the external comms, he added, “JARVIS, am I missing anything here?”

“Scanning,” JARVIS said. Then, “Clipping the blue wire should be sufficient to disable the device.”

“That’s what I thought.” He clipped it, and—having seen quite a few action movies—waited for something to go wrong.

Nothing did.

“What now?” he asked Steve.

“It’s disarmed?”

No, I felt like exploding today. “Yep.”

“Go check on Edwards.”

The order was surprisingly welcome. Yes, it was going to take him away from all the tech—turn him back into Guide Stark from Iron Man—but now that the team was safe, and the civilians in the area were in no danger of glowing in the dark, he wanted to make sure his Sentinel was okay.

Steve went on, “Assuming he’s all right, do recon on the secondary exit—how hard it’ll be to clear it and get out, and if there’s anyone waiting for us out there. I think it’s safe to say our cover’s blown.”

#

Edwards knew from the comms chatter that Tony was all right, but still indulged in a lengthy check-over once the suit had folded itself back into the briefcase, scanning his Guide for injuries, listening to his heart and respiration, breathing in his scent. Tony had been subjected to a somewhat less thorough version after his sparring sessions, and bore it patiently.

“The, uh, the bomb,” Edwards said. “That was good.” A small part of his mind still wanted to white out with panic at the idea of his Guide in the same room with a bomb, but clearly Tony had handled it like a boss, as Mikey would say.
“It was an easy one,” Tony said, ducking his head.

“Right,” Edwards said. “Just a simple, everyday dirty bomb.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony answered. “Cap wants us to check out the exit tunnel. See if we can get out that way, and if there’s a welcome committee waiting for us.”

Right, there would be time to gush over how impressed he was with his Guide later. “The other entrance is blocked?” There had been two sets of explosions, hadn’t there? And Banner had said something about the house. But he’d mostly been waiting to hear Tony’s voice, and the details hadn’t registered.

“The others are checking it out,” Tony answered, picking up the briefcase and starting down the corridor. “We might have to do some digging either way.”

“Hang on,” he said, holding out his hand. “Take me up to ten on hearing,” he added once Tony had linked with him.

Structural integrity analysis was another specialty that Edwards was emphatically not trained in—but he expected that a structure on the verge of collapse would make some kind of unusual sounds. He didn’t hear anything except for the voices of the rest of the team, off in the opposite direction.

After taking him back down to five, Tony said, “I did some scans, before I took the suit off. I think we’re okay.”

“I think so, too,” Edwards agreed. He kind of wanted to tell Tony to put the suit back on, in case the tunnel collapsed on top of them. “Barton and Romanoff know there’s two others alive in the room with them, right?” He’d heard extra heartbeats.

Tony nodded. “Prisoners. Tranq’d, hogtied, and guarded by Hawkeye and the Black Widow.”

He’d venture a guess that Tony was probably safe from them, then. “Good.”

There were quite a few twists and turns in the unmapped section of tunnel, but scent-tracking the path that the HYDRA’s had taken wasn’t much of a challenge—it was barely an hour ago that they’d been through. The lights were out in the last stretch, but between Tony’s arc reactor and Edwards’s Sentinel eyesight, they didn’t even need flashlights.

They linked up again for Edwards to listen for sounds of anyone waiting outside—he heard only a stream and the distant mooing of cows. There was a bit of fresh air—faintly scented with cowshit—coming in from somewhere, so at least if getting out took some time, they wouldn’t suffocate.

After reporting these details, he stepped back while Tony suited up and used the suit’s scanners to examine the pile of debris blocking the tunnel exit.

“Blocked but clearable,” was Tony’s ultimate verdict, delivered to Captain Rogers via comms.

“How long do you estimate it’ll take?”

“Between me, you, and Thor? Two-three hours. Hulk could do it in ten minutes, but I can see a couple of ways he could make it worse if he’s not careful.”

Edwards definitely voted for the slow way, and was glad when Rogers agreed. There was a brief discussion and exchange of cell phone pictures between Tony and Dr. Banner, in which they determined that clearing the tunnel exit would be quicker and safer than the root cellar one—even if
Tony was somewhat unimpressed with the idea of emerging into a cow pasture.

Captain Rogers called in to SHIELD—they were going to need backup to take custody of the prisoners and the disabled bomb—then organized them into sub-teams: one to watch the prisoners, one to clear the exit, and one to continue with the original mission, identifying and packing up materials relating to the fear gas project. “Edwards, will it work to have you in the lab while Tony works here?” he asked.

Edwards considered. He really didn’t like being separated from Tony in potentially dangerous circumstances, but from the point of view of his senses, it wasn’t likely to be a significant problem. And since Tony was going to be in the Iron Man suit, the actual danger was minimal—it just felt risky.

He was going to have to work harder at getting past that. There was a lot more to Tony than just his Guide. “As long as I’m not doing sense work, it’ll be okay,” he said. “And—I realize this is stupid—but I want to be between him and where we’re keeping the prisoners.”

“That can be arranged,” Rogers agreed.

“You all right, Tony?” Edwards asked. Since he had the suit’s face plate up, Edwards could tell that he didn’t smell any more on edge than the circumstances warranted, but verbal confirmation wouldn’t hurt.

“I’m good,” Tony said, sounding a little surprised to realize it was true.

“Then let’s get to it,” Rogers said.

#

Tony thought it might be a relief to be working apart from Edwards for a while—he could pretend that this was a normal Avengers mission, and nothing had changed—but to his surprise, he found himself checking in with him on the comms pretty often. And not just because Edwards and Bruce had the more interesting job. No, he just felt better if he talked to him every so often—and not “better” as in “at least I know nothing’s about to bite me in the ass,” but actually better. It was like checking in with JARVIS when he was in the suit—whatever they actually talked about, the subtext was confirmation that all systems were go.

It occurred to Tony that, at some point when he wasn’t looking, he must have gotten attached to his Sentinel. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. According to Sandburg, it was supposed to happen. Guides and Sentinels had coevolved: Sentinels needed Guides, and Guides, if given half a chance, liked Sentinels. It was a survival trait. All of the training and oppression just got in the way.

It sounded nice, but Tony had thought Sandburg was, frankly, full of shit. He’d certainly never felt like there was anything missing from his life in the years when he hadn’t known he was a Guide, and he would have been perfectly happy never finding out. And Edwards…well, he was fine, if Tony had to have a Sentinel, but it wasn’t like he was anyone Tony would ever have picked to hang out with.

But now he was here, and it was…surprisingly okay. It wasn’t like they had some deep, mystical connection—Sandburg’s book had some stuff about that, spirit animals and shit; he hadn’t been able to keep a straight face reading it. But there was something there, something like what he’d felt for his team, after their trial by fire in the Chitauri invasion. You fuck with them, and you fuck with me.

He certainly didn’t feel any overwhelming desire to submit to Edwards’s will, as the Duties of a
Guide lectures has suggested he ought to, but sticking by him, helping him deal with the senses—which, from what he read in Sandburg’s book, could be kind of a bitch to live with—that felt right. Before the Avengers, Tony had never exactly been Mr. Reliable. But now, now he had his team’s backs. He caught Clint when he jumped off buildings, he made gear for just about everybody. He kept on teaching Thor how to use the microwave, and he made sure Bruce had pants. For Edwards, he did this.

# Late that evening, Edwards and the Avengers were in a Quinjet heading home. SHIELD reinforcements had arrived at about the same time as Tony, Thor, and Rogers had finished digging them out. Since the mission was no longer covert, Director Fury had decided to set up an operations center and pull out everything—tech, records, whatever—before sealing the base. Edwards and Tony spent a few more hours using his senses and the Iron Man’s sensors to check for additional entrances and exits, but once that was done, there was no more need for them.

He’d had a headache pressing in for the last hour or so, but managed to keep it at bay until they were in the air. The whine of the jet engines in his ears was just about unbearable—and to cap it off, Rogers wanted to do a debriefing. He tried to keep it together and at least look normal, grounding himself on Tony’s heartbeat and scent, but when he noticed that Rogers was looking at him, and Edwards couldn’t quite tell if the noises coming out of his face were, in fact, words, he had to admit there was a problem.

He wound up saying something like, “I need to, uh, be quiet. For a while. And do a…thing.”

He expected to have to come up with a more coherent explanation than that, but Tony said, “Sensory over-stimulation. We’ll have to debrief later.” A babble of voices started up; Edwards gathered they were asking what they should do. Tony waved them away, saying, “I got this.”

And he did. In short order, he had the rest of the team move to the back of the plane, clearing out a little island of comparative privacy. He linked with Edwards and took him down to four on all of his senses—three on hearing and taste. Then he got him lying down on the bench seats, with his head on Tony’s chest, just under the arc reactor, where he could hear and feel Tony’s heartbeat, even with his senses tamped down. Tony had him on his side with his back to the aisle, so all he could see—if he bothered to open his eyes—was the seat back and part of Tony’s shirt, and the Guide’s scent was pooled where he could breathe it in. By rubbing his back in circles, Tony encouraged him to keep his sense of touch focused on that, rather than the vibration of the plane.

It was, to be honest, more sensory support than Edwards really needed, or would have asked for. But it was nice, and he certainly wasn’t complaining. “Where’d you pick this up?” he asked, after a while.

Tony mumbled something about doing the reading, then said, more distinctly, “Guide secrets. Don’t ask.”

“’kay,” Edwards said faintly. “You’re really good at this.”

“Genius,” Tony said. “I’m good at everything. Shut up, this is supposed to be relaxing.”

Smiling, Edwards shut up.

# Back at the Tower, Tony fired up the rice cooker and basked in his awesomeness as a Guide. He
was awesome in general, of course, but the Guide part was fairly new. For the most part, up until today, being a Guide had meant being helpless—a pawn for G-TAC, a punching bag for the media, and...also a punching bag, in a less metaphorical way, for G-TAC. Then, over the last few weeks, he’d helped Edwards do some fairly cool tricks, in the lab and in training. Those same tricks were exponentially cooler when Edwards was using them against a real—genuinely dangerous, if not particularly competent—enemy.

But that thing on the jet home...he’d had a moment or two of panic when he realized that Edwards was having a real problem. He never had much idea what to do around sick people—when Pepper came down with the flu or something, he tended to fall back on ordering deli soup and hiding in the workshop inventing vaguely useful gadgets like extremely efficient humidifiers and robotic Kleenex dispensers.

But he had done the reading, on this one. And once he started thinking about it, the Guide’s Guide’s explanations of sensory distress management, and the tips he’d gleaned from Mikey and the other Guides, rearranged themselves, in his head, into a series of troubleshooting steps. He’d had his doubts that any of it would work, but he knew what to do—and he was the only person on the jet who did.

So, yeah. He could totally fix Sentinels with the power of his mind. Not quite as awesome as flying, but still seriously awesome.

And, quite possibly, the real reason that Sandburg’s book was such a huge secret. The way G-TAC taught it, all there was to being a Guide was staying near a Sentinel and doing whatever he or she said. But that was only the tip of the iceberg. He wasn’t sure if Edwards would have known what to ask for—and if he had, he was in no position to explain it. The truth of it was, Tony could have left Edwards twisting in the wind, if he’d felt like it. Any Guide who knew what they were doing could. It would be incredibly hard to quantify the difference between a Guide who was making a real effort to help a Sentinel and one who was just going through the motions. Or one who was trying, but just not very competent.

Without making much of an effort, Tony could think of half a dozen ways he could have made Edwards worse—the simplest would have been to just take him to the back of the plane, where the vibration and engine noise would be worse, rather than keeping him where he was and having everyone else move. Or just let the others sit around and fuss over Edwards—Tony knew that the only sensory input Edwards wanted or needed was his Guide, but the others would have thought they were helping. There was a whole section in Sandburg’s book about getting rid of “helpful” bystanders during an episode of sensory distress—up to and including pointless errands to send them off on if they insisted on being involved. Doing the opposite—letting them hover and interfere—would look entirely plausible, and would be entirely in keeping with G-TAC’s expectations that Guides wouldn’t stand up to anybody.

The truth was, biology gave one party all of the power in the Sentinel-Guide relationship, and it sure as hell wasn’t the Sentinel. Without Guides, the senses were more of a liability than an asset.

With that in mind, taking Edwards his Coke and white rice felt more indulgent than servile. Like, all right, why not let the guy have this one?

“Thanks, Tony,” Edwards said, setting aside his laptop and accepting them. “Mikey wrote to ask if we were okay. Apparently word’s getting around that it was the Avengers in Virginia.”

“Is it?” There had been news stories about the explosions and other events, but neither HYDRA nor SHIELD had been publically identified.
“Just at the FBI campus—they sent some domestic counter-terrorism guys.”

“Oh.” Tony sat down and picked up his tablet.

“How are you doing?” Edwards asked.

“Me? Fine.”

“I guess...today was the first time I really saw you being Iron Man. Not just for practice, I mean.”

Tony nodded. “First time I really saw you get your Sentinel on, too.”

Edwards smiled at that. “I was impressed, really. With the way you handled the bomb, and the fighting, and everything.”

Tony shrugged off the praise. “It was pretty standard Iron Man stuff.”

“I know,” Edwards said. “I just...I knew about Iron Man, but it’s different seeing it. It’s really a waste, making you be a Guide.”

“Here I was thinking I did pretty good with the Guide stuff,” Tony said. The thought that Edwards might disagree didn’t cause him any particular anxiety, not like how it would have before. More like, Really? You doubt me? I’ll show you.

“No, you did. You were great. Especially at the end, the switching back and forth between Guide stuff and Iron Man stuff. That went much more smoothly than I would have thought.” He paused. “You still worried about Dupree?”

Tony considered. “Not...very. The way I see it, we get good results, what can he really do?” It was a real question—maybe there was something. But, thinking about it rationally, he didn’t think Fury, Cap, or the public would stand for Dupree dicking them around too much. Having his Sentinel hand-picked for him was a pretty strong precedent in that direction. It was just that he hadn’t been thinking about it rationally before. Which was the point, he supposed, of everything they’d put him through at G-TAC. He was supposed to just buy that he was still as powerless as he’d been there.

But now that he’d stopped being afraid, he wasn’t going to just pick it back up. Hell, he’d saved the world today—okay, saved one county in Viriginia, but hey, it was important to the people who lived there—and he was supposed to be afraid of that asshole? Puh-leeze.

“Probably nowhere near as much as he could if you were just another Guide,” Edwards said, echoing his thoughts. “He tries to throw his weight around, are you—our—teammates just going to knuckle under?”

“Hah. No.”

“So I’ve been thinking. This idea Dupree has, that you’re a regular Guide except for the twelve hours a week when you’re not—that isn’t how it’s going to happen. I mean, that kind of sharp division just doesn’t make sense, in the context of a real mission. It’s more fluid than that.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, yeah—I noticed that, when we were doing the dig-out, and the exploration later.” He’d tried to keep that division in place at first, but it just hadn’t worked.

“What we oughta be looking at, as a model, is the agencies that have Agent-Guides,” Edwards went
on, warming to his theme. “You have your own job to do, and you support me with my senses when I need it. I’m not sure exactly how that works—the FBI’s modeling their program off Interpol and Scotland Yard; they’ve had that kind of setup for decades.”

Tony wasn’t exactly sure how it worked, either, but he had his own ideas about where they could look for information on how to do it right. Blair Sandburg, for instance, was a working social scientist, activist, and police department Guide. And one good thing about having gone through G-TAC’s trial by fire was that the idea of swallowing his pride and going to Sandburg for help was not the least bit daunting.

Thought he might want to start the conversation from a position of strength, by suggesting some of his ideas for more efficient distribution of the Guide’s Guide. “Yeah,” he said to Edwards. “I agree.” He paused a beat. “One of these days, Dupree’s going to notice we’re not doing things his way. I’m not real good at pretending to be cowed when I’m not.” He’d managed in Afghanistan—but that was a combination of realizing that they could, in fact, shoot him in the head any time they felt like it, at which point his genius wouldn’t do him a damn bit of good, and knowing that he had a big reveal lined up.

Edwards nodded. “I’ll follow your lead on how you want to do that. Showdown at high noon, just let it dawn on him gradually, or something in between.”

Tony grinned. “Yeah. I’m gonna play that one by ear.”

#

“This is completely unacceptable.”

Edwards had suspected that this was going to be bad, from the moment he’d heard that Dupree had invited himself to the debriefing. But Tony—seated between Edwards and Captain Rogers—seemed more confident than Edwards had ever seen him.

“It was made perfectly clear that Stark was attached to the Avengers Initiative in his capacity as a Guide, not so that he could neglect his Sentinel and fly around in his…suit. He shouldn’t have even had it.”

“Excuse me,” Captain Rogers said, raising his hand. “Does Agent Dupree have oversight over what equipment my team takes on our missions? I don’t remember that from the briefing.” Tony had informed the team, on the plane ride to the ‘carrier, that they were taking no shit from Dupree.

“The pre-mission plan that was filed involved no role for Iron Man. If it had, I wouldn’t have approved it,” Dupree insisted.

“Didn’t involve tranq arrows, either,” Barton spoke up. “Turns out to be a good thing I took some along.”

“Unexpected situations tend to arise in the field,” Edwards said, his tone hovering somewhere between placating and condescending. It seemed he was having a slightly more difficult time than Tony shaking off the habit of showing G-TAC what they wanted to see. “Captain Rogers thought it was wise to take the armor as a backup—and it turned out he was right.”

“That isn’t the point,” Dupree began.

Director Fury cut him off. “What is the point, Liaison Officer Dupree? You and Officer Rankin came to me with concerns that Stark’s assignment to the Avengers might mean that we would be effectively sidelining one of our Sentinels in order to keep Iron Man in the field. I agree that that’s a
legitimate concern—with the proviso that, while SHIELD has twenty-four other Sentinels, we only have one Iron Man. However, I don’t see any evidence that it has, in fact, happened.” He paused meaningfully. “Captain Rogers, if you would, describe Sentinel Edwards’s and Guide Stark’s contributions to the mission.”

Rogers did, beginning with Edwards’s alerting them to the presence of snakes in the root cellar, then how he had used his senses in the initial exploration of the base, as well as for detecting and providing additional information about the young woman who had visited them on the evening before the attack. “On the second day, he used his senses to search for concealed spaces within the base—I was accompanying them, and personally witnessed Stark acting as a Guide. In the course of that sensory work, Edwards detected the neo-HYDRA infiltration. He and Guide Stark moved closer to their position to provide additional intelligence....” He went on, ending up with how Edwards had determined that the neo-HYDRA had brought an explosive device with them and planned to remain in the base when it blew. “It was at that point that we realized there was the potential for serious danger to ourselves and the surrounding civilian population, and I made the call that it was time to bring in Iron Man.”

“Why did you do that?” Fury asked.

“He was the best choice available for assessing the nature of the bomb, rapidly and with minimal risk.”

Dupree sat up and tried to answer back at that point, but Fury glared him down and said, “What would you have done if Iron Man had not been available?”

“The second-best plan was to neutralize the HYDRA infiltrators and then send Dr. Banner in to assess and disarm the bomb,” Rogers explained, and continued, “That option was sub-optimal because of our uncertainty as to the nature and volatility of the device. There was a possibility that it would be detonated earlier—either purposely by the hostiles, or accidentally as a result of nearby weapons fire or low competence on the part of the device’s designer. Iron Man could begin assessment and disarming of the device prior to neutralizing the hostiles, without increased risk to himself or others.”

Now Dupree was allowed to get a question in. “Where was Sentinel Edwards when Guide Stark was doing that?”

“He moved to a secure rearward position just before the operation began.”

Dupree smirked like he thought Rogers had stepped right into his trap. “So he was without sensory support during the battle and subsequent explosions. And he experienced a prolonged episode of sensory distress—I understand that’s why this briefing was delayed until this morning.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Tony said. Dupree shot a sharp glare at him, and Edwards tensed, but Tony’s scent signaled anger and determination, not fear.

“I’m sorry, did you have something to add, Guide Stark?” Dupree asked.

“Yes, sir, as a matter of fact I do.” Edwards hadn’t noticed it before, but Tony always said, “Sir” like he was admitting defeat. Not so today—he put a sarcastic spin on it, leaving no doubt that he was paying only the most insincere lip service to the idea of respect. “First of all, Sentinel Edwards agreed to this plan. Secondly, once I was done disarming the dirty bomb, I went back to him for grounding and sensory checks. He was fine. He had some sensory distress six hours later.”

“After doing several more hours of intense sensory work,” Edwards added. “I often have a little
trouble when I’ve been working hard. Tony was with me when I needed him, and he handled the episode as well as any Guide I’ve ever had. Based on our experiences on this mission, I have complete confidence in Tony’s ability to handle his duties as my Guide and as Iron Man. Simultaneously or concurrently, as circumstances require.”

“I see,” Fury said. “Captain Rogers, do you have any concerns about Stark’s performance, in either capacity?”

“Absolutely not,” Rogers said.

“Do you feel that Sentinel Edwards was under-utilized due to his Guide’s dual role?”

“No,” Rogers said again.

“So the team leader and the team Sentinel are in agreement that there is no problem in this area?”

Edwards and Rogers glanced at each other, across Tony. “We are,” Rogers said, and Edwards echoed him.

“Fine,” Fury said. “Then let’s move on from that vital issue to how these yahoos got ahold of a kilo of Strontium-90….”

#

“We haven’t heard the last of him,” Tony warned the others when, back at the Tower, they were having a celebratory lunch. Dupree had made his exit partway through the briefing, metaphorical tail between his legs, when it became clear that Fury wasn’t going to back him in his insistence that Tony ought to have been holding Edwards’s hand instead of defusing bombs.

“I hope he comes to more of our briefings,” Bruce said. “I didn’t get a chance to tell him how much the Hulk likes Tony, and how angry it makes me when people mess with him.”

“Oh,” Edwards said suddenly.

“What?” Bruce asked, looking over at him.

“You said something about that, my first day here,” Edwards explained. “That was a threat, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, that was when we thought you were, uh, kind of an asshole,” Bruce said apologetically.

“Nice deduction, Sherlock,” Tony snickered. “There’s no getting anything past you Sentinels, is there?”

The whole room went very still for a moment, and Tony wondered, with a flash of something that wasn’t quite fear, if he might have gone too far. Not everyone interpreted sarcastic nicknames as a sign of affection, after all.

But Edwards grinned, shaking his head. “I can see I’m going to have to work harder to keep up around here.”

He would indeed. But Tony thought he just might be able to manage it.
Epilogue:

Maybe he should have done this by email. Or in person. Somehow, in the few seconds while the phone rang on the other end, telephone seemed the worst of all possible ways to do this—he couldn’t get everything he wanted to say out without interruption; nor could he see the reaction he was getting in real time.

But before Tony could change his mind, the line was picked up on the other end. “Sentinel-Guide Resource Center, this is Tara. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Tara,” Tony said, turning on the charm. “I’d like to speak to Dr. Sandburg, please.”

“Blair!” It sounded like she was calling across a room; Tony revised his mental estimate of her age downward. She returned to the phone and said, in what was now revealed as a barely passable imitation of professional phone manners, “I’ll see if he’s available. Whom can I tell him is calling?”

“Tony Stark.”

There was a thunk on the other end, strongly suggestive of the receiver being dropped. Possibly the Sentinel-Guide Resource Center could use a donation of some hands-free headsets? Once the phone was picked up, Tara said, “Hold, please.” Another, more controlled thunk, suggested that Tara had elected to put the receiver face-down on her desk rather than attempt actually putting him on hold. Tony could hear voices in the background but, alas, couldn’t make out any words.

After a series of rustlings and thumps, another voice came on the line. “Sandburg here. What can I do for you?”

“One of my new colleagues at SHIELD passed me a copy of your book,” was the opener Tony had decided on. “I found it very useful, particularly in the aftermath of our first field mission.”

“Thank you,” Sandburg said, a little stiffly. “It’s supposed to be. That would be your first mission with…Sentinel Edwards?”

“Yep,” Tony answered. “Not counting the scavenger hunt in Central Park, of course.” He assumed Sandburg had heard about that—even if he didn’t follow the gossip rags, he probably had news alerts set up for anything having to do with Sentinels or Guides. Tony would, in his place. “It got me thinking—person-to-person distribution isn’t particularly efficient.” His newfound humility didn’t stretch quite as far as asking Sandburg for help without first establishing that he could bring something to the table.

“We weren’t going for efficiency,” Sandburg said dryly. “Discretion happens to be a little more important.”

“I know a little bit about that, too,” Tony pointed out. “Information security is a primary concern in my former line of work.”

“I bet,” Sandburg said.

“Not just the fascist baby-killing. You’d be surprised how cutthroat the world of non-military technology is.” He paused a beat. “You ended up being right about the other thing, you know. Too much stuff with my name on it falling into the wrong hands.” He figured eating a little crow would
score some points, to mix a metaphor.

Sandburg cleared his throat. “Just for the record, I don’t believe there are right hands for the kind of stuff you used to make. But that’s not what you called to talk about.”

“No. Getting back to business, I was thinking we might be able to use data-mining and StarkTunes to get the Guide to the baby Guides before G-TAC gets its hands on them.”

“How would that work?”

What he had in mind, in fact, was to have JARVIS track social media for key words relating to Guide testing, then slip the book into their StarkTunes accounts without comment. Tony left JARVIS out of his explanation to Sandburg, though.

“I like the idea,” Sandburg admitted. “But it won’t take long before G-TAC has the bright idea to set up a dummy Facebook account to get their own copy.”

“We have algorithms for sorting out dummy accounts from real ones,” Tony answered. That was true, though JARVIS didn’t precisely use them.

“I’ll have to think about it,” Sandburg said. “What’s in it for you?”

“For me?”

“Yes, you. You may be out of the Merchant of Death business, but you’re still a profiteer.”

“And philanthropist,” Tony pointed out. “What was in it for me when I dug all those wells in Africa?” Just to name one example.

“Good PR,” Sandburg shot back. “Which you won’t get from distributing the Guide—unless you leak it to the press.”

“I was given to understand that Guides help each other,” Tony said stiffly. There was a lot about that in the book, too, along with speculation about Guides having prosocial instincts to complement Sentinels’ aggressive ones.

“We do,” Sandburg said. You, not so much, was the unspoken implication. “I didn’t have the impression you were particularly interested in being a Guide.”

“I don’t do anything by halves,” Tony answered. “They can make me be a Guide; they can’t make me be a lousy one.”

“I see,” Sandburg said, something like respect creeping into his voice.

“Beyond that,” Tony added, “it occurs to me that the two of us might have a lot to talk about. Being triple career Guides and all.” He decided at this point not to say anything about how Engineer, Guide, Superhero beat Anthropologist, Guide, Activist by a mile.

There was a long, unreadable silence on the other end of the phone, before Sandburg said, “We just might. Out of curiosity—how are you feeling about G-TAC these days?”


The next silence was shorter, and less inscrutable. “Guide Stark,” Sandburg said, “this just might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”
That's it for the story, folks--the next bit is the post-credits stinger.

Credits:

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Beta: Beboots

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