"Billionaire, genius, engineer, philanthropist, submissive. Yeah, submissive. Any questions?"

OR

Yet another BDSM-AU.

Notes

I'm posting this story for my own prompt on the kinkmeme, because it simply wouldn't leave me alone... There are tons of fantastic BDSM AUs out there and I love them, but I wanted to take the tropes out for a joy ride and give them my own spin as well.

I love comments and hearing your musings, curiosities, loves and (when directed at the characters) frustrations. That said, I ask please not to receive concrit. (Sorry! It just really stresses me out...) Thanks for your understanding!
As a kid, Tony had always been on the small side. Almost diminutive.

So, his father told him about Captain America. Physical size wasn’t a perfect predictor—even when Steve Rogers was a ninety-pound asthmatic, Howard would say, he’d been *all Dom* and the serum had just brought out what was already there. He became the perfect Dom because he always had been the perfect Dom.

(Tony always thought that the moralizing, metaphysical mumbo jumbo was pretty far-fetched. He felt fairly certain the science of the thing would have worked the same way on anybody—the mechanisms of cellular rejuvenation and growth stimulation couldn’t actually look at the guy’s soul, for Christ’s sake… Even as a kid, though, he’d wisely kept his mouth shut on the subject.)

Howard told Tony that even when Captain America was frail, even when he wasn’t Captain America yet, he was a real Dom because he was always brave, assertive, and confident; he never backed down, even without the physical strength to back it up. That kind of inner strength marked him as a real Dom; muscles were overrated.

With a brain like Tony’s, mere physical stature wouldn’t matter, especially in a rapidly evolving modern society. Tony’d be able to project his dominance no matter what. It didn’t matter that Howard’s son was small. He’d be a good Dom anyway.

Apparently, the alternative had never occurred to Howard.
They found Captain America. It wasn’t public knowledge yet and, even though the expedition had been funded by Stark Industries (not by Tony of course—it was a subsidiary endowment that Howard had set up), SHIELD hadn’t bothered to inform him yet. Not that it mattered—Tony had seen plenty by hacking into their database and, okay, some traffic cameras and security footage. (Hey, if they cared about their privacy, they’d have better encryption. Besides, the traffic cameras were in public anyway.)

A week later when Fury called and invited him to come in and consult (i.e. Meet Captain America), Tony said no.

For a minute (okay, maybe a few minutes, spread out over many days), Tony considered hacking SHIELD’s security cameras for another peek, but decided against it. He’d seen enough of Captain America as a kid.

Of course, that had all stopped when Tony presented as a sub at thirteen. Howard ran the blood tests three times himself, then hired an expert for a second opinion before admitting his son was no Steve Rogers.

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Tony had been hoping to get in and out of SHIELD without too much fuss. Just drop by—the usual.

1) Pretend to listen to another of Fury’s pitches (bla bla national security, unknown threats, aliens, bla bla) before telling him there was no way in hell Tony’d give a suit to SHIELD. (Rhodey’s my special pumpkin pie honeybunch. And if War Machine’s gonna have a baby sister, she’s gonna be Pepper’s, not yours, Nicky-poo.)

2) Re-upload JARVIS into the SHIELD mainframe. Seriously—it was pathetic that it took them a full six months to notice and another six weeks to dislodge him…

3) See if he can escape the premises before ten Agents take the opportunity to insult him, bully him, or flatter him. (There was a betting pool on who would be the first to get the Stark Terror to submit, and which tactics would bring him to his knees. And they were dumb enough to think he didn’t know about it…)

It was 4 PM and Tony was answering email on his phone, waiting in a conference room for some of SHIELD’s R&D kids to come consult with him on something something defensive technology something blabla. It was fine. JARVIS was still hacking, so he couldn’t leave yet anyway.

Oh good. Only nine emails from Pepper today. So far. Maybe--

"Excuse me, Mr. Stark?"

Tony looked up, startled. A man towered in the doorway, 6’2” at least, with broad shoulders and bulging muscles, blond hair, blue eyes, and a cream complexion so flawless it was almost fucking luminous.

Tony stared. He hadn’t exactly forgotten that they’d found Captain America a month ago, but he hadn’t been expecting to see him either. He swallowed, and his pulse sped just slightly.

"Doctor James and Agent Lane are running a little late. They asked me to apologize and please let you know."

Tony was still staring. (So this is Captain America.) The man was gorgeous --and Tony had seen his fair share of beauty. (Pull yourself together, Stark.) He swallowed.

"Fine,” Tony said, pretending to go back to his phone. “Thanks for the message.”

The Captain drew his shoulders back a little and raised his chin ever so slightly. He took a step forward and held out his hand.

"Mr. Stark, please allow me to introduce myself,” he said. “I’m Steve Rogers and I—"

"—I know who you are,;” Tony interrupted, earning the barest hint of a frown. Tony hesitated a moment before he reluctantly gave Rogers his hand; the man’s handshake was gentle, just a warm little pressure. Tony wasn’t sure if he should be relieved (so many people liked to crush his hand in a shallow attempt at Dominance) or insulted (I’m not THAT fragile, mere mortal and sub though I may be).

The Captain was looking down at Tony, eyes bright as he said, “I’ve heard so much about you. It’s a real pleasure to meet you.”

"Is it?” Tony blinked and withdrew his hand. (Huh.) He leaned against the conference table and raised one eyebrow.
Rogers faltered. “Um, yes?” He didn’t seem so sure now and was fidgeting slightly under Tony’s unabashed stare. Tony may be a good bit shorter than most Doms and certainly shorter than Rogers, but he knew how to stare down an arrogant alpha (even looking up at him).

“All right then,” Tony said, not backing down. “What have you heard about me?”

“You’re Iron Man.” Rogers sounded earnest and impressed. (From someone else, it might have sounded fanboy.) His eyes flicked down to the arc reactor, then back up to Tony’s face with a hint of a smile. (And, huh, that’s kind of nice actually.) So, Captain America was more interested in Iron Man than--

“And you’re Howard’s son, and a sub who--”

(Yeah. Never mind.)

“Right,” Tony said, curtly, “got it.” Rogers stopped smiling but his eyes were still so big and wide. He had this confused ‘barely smart enough to breathe’ look on his face. Tony’s phone let out a soft ‘ping!’ (Good timing, JARVIS.)

“Nice meeting you, Captain.”

Tony turned and headed for the exit.

“Mr. Stark, please wait! I--”

Tony kept on walking. (I don’t have to obey you. Get used to it.)
"You're Howard's son . . ."

Tony frowned and clenched the blowtorch a little tighter.

"-- a sub who--"

"JARVIS, I changed my mind. No more Metalica. Get me some Black Sabbath. And volume up."

"Of course, sir."

"-- a sub who--"

It didn't work of course. Tony could still hear Captain fucking America's voice on loop in his head and it was stupid, really. He hadn't been expecting anything from him, nothing good anyway. He was the Dom of Doms, the most manly man of all, the living breathing embodiment of everything Howard Stark's son should have been but wasn't. Tony knew he'd be an asshole, but in that moral, perfect, upstanding way that everybody else loved. Big smiling emblem of the hetero-orientationally normative.

There was no reason to feel disappointed.

It annoyed Tony all the more that he was. The way Rogers had said "you're Iron Man," tone full of admiration, bordering on awe-- it had been such a shock that, without realizing it, he'd had the beginnings of a perception shift, a hopeful realignment. . .

"-- a sub who--"

. . . only to have everything jerked back into place where it belonged.

"I've heard so much about you. It's a real pleasure to meet you."

DUM-E bumped up against Tony's thigh like a demanding house cat and Tony realized that he'd been standing around with the blow torch running, staring into space and he'd forgotten what he'd been working on. With a disgusted little noise, Tony shut it off and set it aside. He pet DUM-E's claw absenty.

"Hey, JARVIS, give me the SHIELD mainframe."

He'd just snoop around a little bit. Okay. What kind of username would Captain America pick? Well, start with the obvious.

"Throw up every variation on Steve Rogers and Captain America."

The screen flickered, and there it was in bold: Steven_Grant_Rogers.

It was almost funny.

"Okay, Steven Grant Rogers," Tony said to himself, "let's see what you've been up to shall, we?"

Tony pulled up his files, bookmarks, and browser history.

Files: Boring and predictable. A decade by decade precis of American history that, judging by its amateur level of historiography, was drawn up by some conscripted SHIELD agent. A huge bibliography of works on American history, by period and theme. Cold War, Vietnam, Civil Rights Movement. Silent Revolution. About 200 eBooks downloaded to his imitation Stark Tablet. (SHIELD were a bunch of cheap bastards.) Handbooks on weapons safety. SHIELD ethics handbooks. (Ha! Those would a be a delightful exercise in fiction.)

Bookmarks:

Well, that was fast. Rogers apparently hadn't figured out how to use bookmarks yet.

Browser History:

Mostly predictable. All the stuff Tony'd probably google out of the ice too, along with stuff that must have been inspired by conversations with people at SHIELD: Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga; Tina Fey and The Daily Show; LOL Cats and Bill Gates.

He scrolled down and felt a little stab of pity at Rogers' first set of google searches: Peggy Carter, Bucky Barnes, D. D. Dugan, Howling Commandos, Howard Stark. Tony Stark.

Suddenly this didn't seem like such a good idea anymore, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. (Those who listen at eaves, may not like what they hear...)
Google: “Tony Stark.” Rogers had started with footage of Iron Man, then Tony’s last appearance on The Daily Show and a rant about him by Pat Riley on Fox News. More footage of Iron Man on youtube and, oh yeah, the CSPAN clip of Tony calling senators ass clowns.

Tony sighed and scrolled up again, considering and ruling out the idea of reading the guy’s email.

Something caught his eye just before he closed it. Seriously? Rogers had been watching “Bratty Subs Brought in Line”? Ew. Just ew.

It pretended to be an unscripted reality show, but it was as choreographed as a B-film and half as good. “Expert” Doms taught eager would be suitors how to woo bratty, feisty subs and force them to submit. It was all totally fake, but it made his stomach roil all the same. Master Marcus, the show’s beefy host, held Tony up as the quintessential brat and boasted that, if Tony had the guts to come on the show, he’d be on his knees eating out of Marcus’ hand in no time. (Tony had talked to legal a few times about getting a gag order on that, but the legal precedents weren’t in Tony’s favor. It would have caused a huge PR backlash anyway.)

Huh. Tony hadn’t expected a guy from the ‘40s to be more liberal than that, but he’d at least expected a little more class.

Tony closed the browser history and was about to throw away the entire luminous screen, when he noticed Rogers’ training modules. (Just a quick peek and then Tony’d back off.) Tsk, tsk-- Rogers was behind on compliance. He had twenty-two online courses and quizzes due and had only taken the first one.

Tony blinked. He’d failed the first compliance exam. Three times. With a 17%, a 36% and a 41%.

It was the Sexual Ethics section of the Employee Conduct Module. The one that gave absurdly obvious, boring, and PC advice on how not to sexually harass your co-workers, then had a “quiz” with things like:

“" That sub only got her promotion because she's so good on her knees.”

Is this a workplace appropriate comment:

a) sometimes
b) any time
c) never.”

The desirability bias of the questions (and the complete lack of nuance in the example scenarios) was practically a blinking red light, but companies used those sorts of training courses as a rhetorical gesture to minimize liability in the face of lawsuits and criminal charges.

Wow.

17%.

Was Rogers actually illiterate?

Tony shut the whole thing down. Fuck Rogers anyway. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you” my ass. He’d probably just been trying to make friends with Agent Dickface and Co. by out Dom-ing Master Marcus to win that fucking bet.

Screw them all.

***

Tony spent a week in the workshop nonstop finishing up the arc reactor for the tower, then gave the suit a new paint job for good measure. Only Pepper came down, just to ensure he got regular feedings. She used her befuddling combination of “I’m a Mistress obey me” voice and the “I’m a fellow sub who wants to nurture you” voice. (Not all switches could pull off both so effortlessly. It was a real feat.)

He was just about to finally celebrate his accomplishments in clean energy with his best friend (hush, Rhodey—you’re my best friend too…), when Agent showed up to interrupt.

“Stark. We need you to come in.”

“Uh, no. I didn’t agree to take orders from you,” he said smiling sweetly.

“There’s a situation.”

God damn it.

&*&&&

The others were already seated at the conference table when Tony arrived: Agent Romanov, Captain America, what’s-his-name the archer-- Clint Barton, that was his name-- and some new guy with salt-and-pepper hair and terrible fashion sense who hunched back in his chair so hard it
looked like he was trying to disappear into it. And of course Nick Fury, a gigantic Dom stereotype in his leather trench coat with a side of leather everything.

Captain America practically leapt to his feet when Tony stepped into the room.

“Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, with a smile, holding out his hand. “Welcome aboard.” And holy fuck, Rogers just said it so earnestly and warmly it had to be rehearsed. “Thanks for coming. Happy to have you on the team.”

(Overcompensating much, Captain. 17%? Guess you finally passed that training module, huh Rogers?)

Fury began to clarify, “Captain, Stark isn't actually--” but Tony cut him off, sidling up to Rogers right into his space.

“Who me?” Tony asked with coy surprise and batted eyelashes. “On a superhero team?” Tony looked down bashfully. “Don't be silly!”

Rogers frowned.

Tony bit his lip and looked up through his lashes. “I'm awfully flattered that you thought I could do something like that. Me! On a team with strong, brave Doms. I mean, I'm just Iron Man; I couldn't possibly--”

“Stark!” Fury growled. “That's enough!” He turned to Rogers. “Stark is here as a consultant, not a full member of the initiative, but--”

Rogers looked baffled then pissed. He looked back and forth between Tony and Fury.

“And, Mr. Stark's consulting hours are from--” Tony stopped short then blurted, “Holy shit you got Banner!”

Tony dropped the docile sub act completely and was around the table in a heartbeat.

“Holy shit!” he repeated closing in on the fellow scientist who was sitting nervously at the conference table in an appalling paisley shirt.

“Dr. Banner, your work on anti-electron collisions is unparalleled. It's a pleasure to meet you. At last.” Tony dropped into the chair next to him and shook his hand. “How the hell did these idiots get you? Seriously, whatever they're offering I can give you triple. Who'm I kidding? I can give you whatever you want. You, me, and twelve floors of R&D to play in!”

From the corner of his eye, Tony could see Rogers' face tighten up; it looked like he'd swallowed something unpleasant.

Banner looked a little overwhelmed, but gave him a nervous smile. “Uh, that's quite an offer. And, honestly, I wish I knew what I'm doing here. But, they said millions of lives were at stake, so--” he shrugged and gave a helpless little smile. “But, whatever it is, it's a pleasure to meet you too, Dr. Stark.”

Tony grinned. (Wasn’t that nice? Nobody bothered about his PhDs.)


“Bruce.”

Bruce. Hm. If Tony could get him out of those terrible clothes, he really was quite handsome. A few years older than Tony, but in good shape with strong facial features and, seriously, with a mind like Banner's everything else was just extra. Huh.

Shit. If Tony wasn't careful, he might blush.

“PEOPLE!” Fury roared.

“You yelled, Nick?” Tony gave an angelic smile.

“We have a threat level three-- unknown energy signatures just outside New York. Now do you want to focus on that?” Tony settled comfortably into his chair, kicking off his shoes under the table. Fury added, “Energy signatures that look like a cross between gamma radiation and arc reactor diffusion.”


Fury gave him a bland smile. “Now do I have your attention?”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for reading!
“Well, I’ll be damned,” Tony said, frowning as he looked at the results on Bruce’s tricorder.

“Yeah,” Bruce said with a rueful smile. “I was hoping he was wrong too.”

Tony glared at the tricorder, then the eerie energy field, then back.

The wan blue-grey energy field just hovered, shimmering about a foot off the ground; it was the size of an extra-thick king size mattress but did not give Tony a sexy-fun-times vibe.

It was a warm quiet evening in the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge, but Tony shivered a little looking at it. They were damn lucky the energy field had showed up somewhere isolated instead of some poor dude’s living room. Then again, maybe it wasn’t luck.

“It doesn’t make any sense!” Tony muttered, then shook himself. “Maybe with more accurate readings . . .”

Tony took a set of mini-orbitors from his bag and headed towards the force field.

Captain America, shield at the ready, was standing guard, and frowned at Tony’s approach. “Mr. Stark? I really don’t think it’s safe to get too close to that thing.”

“By definition, right?” Tony rolled his eyes and continued past him. “Well, keep your cool. I’m getting close enough, not ‘too close’.”

Tony set four mini-orbitors up around the Field of Creepy, then whipped out his StarkTab. “Okay, JARVIS, gimmie what you got. Make Daddy proud.”

“I shall do my best, sir.”

Beams of electric blue light surrounded the Rectangle of Creepiness, running up and down it. Huh. They didn’t actually illuminate the damn thing—it clearly made photons go . . . wack. (To be technical about it.)

“Huh,” Tony muttered, “it’s almost like . . . Like they’re breaking the—”

“—wave-particle duality?” Bruce finished from right behind him.

“Yes!” Tony cried, relieved to find that he and Bruce were on the same wavelength. “But that would mean that we’re not just dealing with an unknown energy source, but one generated from a space with radically different rules of electromagnetic radiation.”

Bruce nodded. “We’re gonna need to borrow a spectrometer.”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, good luck with that!”

Bruce shrugged. “I have a few friends at Berkeley who might—”

“Yeah, no. I’ll just build one. It’ll be way faster than waiting for them to argue about it and then deal with paperwork.” (Oh shit.) Bruce looked pretty damn impressed and it made Tony’s heart race just a little more. (Fuck, don’t blush. Too soon for that. Shit.) “JARVIS? Reach out to Pepper—tell her I’m gonna need some of the materials from Hangar 27 stat.”

“Sir? Might I suggest that, as your personal assistant, Mrs. Abrogast is a more suitable recipient for this message than the CEO of Stark Industries.”

“Shit. Yeah, all right. Fine, J. Just make it happen.”

“Was that—” Bruce began, gesturing to Tony’s tablet.

“Oh, yeah. JARVIS. My AI.”

“I’ve heard rumors of course, but you never published so I wasn’t sure . . .”

“Haven’t published, won’t publish. Nobody gets my tech. Well, not in this format anyway. The StarkSafes have elements in common with J, but they’ve got IQs of 70 or 80 to JARVIS’s 140.”

“Sir is too kind,” JARVIS said in a wry voice.

“Hey, J, meet Bruce.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Dr. Banner.”

“And you, JARVIS,” Bruce answered politely. Tony smiled. He liked people who treated J like a person. (As they should.) Bruce would probably like the Tower if he liked J and he wouldn’t be
weirded out by Tony’s relationship with technology. Tons of Doms seemed to be total luddites or wanted him to be, which made no sense. Or, okay, maybe it did—gross Doms always want him helpless, in a bad way, and his tech’s his power, so...

“Excuse me?” Tony nearly jumped at the sound of Captain America’s voice. He’d totally forgotten the guy was hovering right there. “Does this mean that you know what that thing is?”

And, huh, Rogers was addressing him instead of Bruce. That was a bit unexpected. And Bruce wasn’t answering for him! (Yeah, definitely liking this one.)

“Well, yes and no,” Tony said. “Look, there’s no point trying to walk you through the science, but the bottom line is that thing over there? It’s probably a portal. And it comes from someplace where physics doesn’t work the way it does on earth.”

“Like Mars or something?” Rogers asked.

“Not Mars—it’s actually pretty similar to earth in a lot of ways, so that wouldn’t alter photons—but another planet or dimension.” Rogers just nodded. Tony was sort of expecting him to freak out, had kind of been looking forward to it in fact. Tony raised one eyebrow and said, “You’re taking this pretty calmly.”

Rogers let out a rueful little laugh and shook his head. “Mr. Stark, I already woke up in a world like a science fiction novel.” He shrugged. “Doubt much can surprise me now.”

Tony squinted up at him and couldn’t quite resist challenging: “Five bucks says you’re wrong.”

Rogers took a sharp little breath and the expression of his face was... strange. (Huh? Weird.) The Captain cleared his throat before answering in an odd tone, “You may be right at that, Mr. Stark.”

Rogers shook his head, looked back and forth between Tony and Bruce, and asked them both, “So, if this thing is a portal, we can expect something to try and come through, right?”

Bruce nodded. “Afraid so. Tony and I will see about getting a spectrometer running so we can gather more data. That will govern how we interact with the force field. If it is a portal, I have a feeling we’d like to be able to close and lock it if we don’t like what comes through.”

“Right,” Rogers said briskly. “I’ll reinforce the camp and prepare a full guard rotation. Best to be prepared.” Tony tried not to roll his eyes. (Boy Scout. Duh.)

“Dr. Banner,” the Captain said briskly, reaching out to shake Bruce’s hand, then turned to Tony and bowed as he said (perhaps a little more softly?), “Mr. Stark.”

Tony snorted. He might have given voice to his outraged incredulity—(Ew. Gross. I mean, seriously? Who the fuck bows these days?)—but the Captain had already turned and walked away. Tony just grimaced and shook his head to clear it.

“So,” Tony said brightly, turning to Bruce, “wanna help me build a miniaturized spectrometer?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for joining me! Hope you liked it. :-)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos and kind words! Please accept another, longer chapter as a token of my gratitude. :-) See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At 3:23 am, as suddenly as it had appeared, the force field disappeared. Tony felt unexpectedly outraged.

"Rude," he said to Bruce, glaring at the now empty patch of dirt, "Just rude. It’s like inviting people to a party then canceling at the last minute. And, okay, fine, that thing was probably promising a pretty shitty party, but still."

"I’d feel better if we’d gotten more data before it vanished," Bruce said.

"Yeah, well, me too," Tony agreed, rubbing his neck. He sidled a little closer to Bruce on instinct, then froze when he noticed.

"You’d better not bail on my spectrometer building party! Just because the glowing guest of honor vamoosed, doesn’t mean my party’s canceled."

"Ah, sure," Bruce said. (After a moment’s hesitation. Was that hesitation? Shit.) "Sounds great. Maybe after some sleep, though."

And Tony was just trying to decide whether to make some innuendo out of Bruce’s remark when Captain America came striding over.

"Gentlemen," Captain America said. "If you’d like to get some rest, I’m sending half the force back to HQ. The rest of us will stay here in the event the anomaly returns and proves hostile."

Tony wanted to tell the Captain he wasn’t tired, wasn’t going anywhere, and could stay up just as long as a super soldier, but Bruce beat him to the punch saying, "Thank you, Captain. I appreciate it. Tony?"

(Damn it.)

"Yeah." Tony tried not to sound sullen. He wasn’t very good at it. "Sounds great."

&&&&&&&&&&&&&&&

Every time Tony tried to relocate his spectrometer party to the Tower, Fury would dick him around about bla bla proprietary data bla bla consultant bla bla. Tony’d have moved anyway and hacked in for any information he hadn’t collected himself, but Bruce said he’d had enough trouble with government agencies, so maybe they shouldn’t do that, thanks all the same. So they work on the spectrometer at SHIELD. Whatever. It was fine—the SHIELD Doms left Tony alone, probably because they were all afraid of Bruce. Well, all of them except—

"Mr. Stark?" Captain America’s voice rang through the workshop. (Seriously? Again?) After a few moments, Rogers added, "Dr. Banner?"

"If you’re looking for Bruce, you just missed him," Tony called from under the altimeter adjustor.

"Oh? Really? That’s too bad." Rogers cleared his throat. "I brought you both some more coffee."

Tony was out from under the adjustor in a flash.

"Good. Great. Awesome." Tony seized the coffee and burned his tongue, but didn’t care. It was seriously evil not to have a coffee maker down here for them.

"How is your work going, Mr. Stark?"

"Fine. We’re doing great. Spectrometer’s coming along—it’ll be ready soon for if the creepy force field comes back." Tony finished off his coffee and was eyeing Bruce’s. He grimaced. "We really should have a better name for that thing."

"How about ‘Bob’?"

Tony let out a startled laugh and looked up. Rogers was giving him this pleased little smile. Tony blinked. (You made me laugh. Weird.)

"Creepy Bob?" Tony said after a moment to recover. "Bobby C? Not bad." He caved to temptation and grabbed Bruce’s coffee too. Rogers made no protest. "Not bad," Tony repeated. He drained the last of the coffee, tossed the cups, and turned back towards the adjustor.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Rogers asked.
“Coffee!” Tony called, already on hands and knees.

“All right,” Rogers agreed.

“You can just send a minion next time. Coffee runs are a bit below your pay grade, wouldn’t you say?”

Rogers grimaced. “I don’t know. I don’t seem to be of much use yet in this brave new world. Everything’s so . . . I mean, I don’t—” And Rogers sounded lost and Tony remembered those first few Google searches; his heart twisted with pity. Rogers cleared his throat. “Anyway, I keep breaking the tech they give me; so far the coffee maker is the only thing holding up to repeat use.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that, so he just reached for his wrench.

“Well,” Rogers said a bit more briskly. “I’ll leave you to your work, Mr. Stark.”

Tony nodded and slid under the adjuster. “Later.”

********

Over the next few days, Tony and Bruce worked on the spectrometer and Tony found himself almost, well, happy. Even while at Shield. He had a tantalizing problem to solve and was working on it without the threat of imminent death. And he got to work on it with Bruce—Bruce whose brain was a delightful quicksilver, whose voice was gentle, but firm, strong . . . Bruce who was (despite his clothes) quite handsome. Things were good.

So, Tony flirted, but just a little. He didn’t want Bruce to think that he was after a quick fuck ‘n smack between friends. Bruce might actually be someone he could respect enough to accept a collar and, oh God, it’d been years since Tony’d been under properly, not since— (No. Stop. Don’t go there.) Tony couldn’t tell if Bruce was flirting back or not, which was unusual, but it didn’t worry him. They hadn’t even known each other a week. The attraction could simmer at the corner of his mind, a pleasant back buzz to the challenge of building a mini-spectrometer.

(Right. So, check all the attachments, then when Bruce gets the AC-23s we can—)

Tony heard footsteps in the hallway.

“Hey, you arrived just in time!” Tony called from under the adjuster. “Run the diagnostic again, would you, Bruce? I think I got the fluxator recalibrated.”

“I’m afraid Dr. Banner is still out, Mr. Stark,” a voice said politely from the entrance to the lab. “It’s me. Steve Rogers.” A momentary pause before he added, “But I’d be happy to help if I can.”

Tony snorted—the sound echoed loudly from under the spectrometer. “Uh, yeah. No,” Tony said, tightening the A-34 nut with a satisfying pull. “It’s not exactly a ‘flip that lever’ or ‘push a big red button’ situation. I’ll do it myself.” Tony double-checked the alignment on the B-33s and C-8s.

Good.

Silence for a moment. Then Rogers said: “Well then, I guess it’s a good thing I brought coffee.”

And Tony really wished that Bruce was back. Bruce would know what to say to Rogers. Tony opened and closed his mouth a few times, half-inclined to apologize, though unsure why. (Good thing he can’t see you—you look like a fish, Stark.) All the attachments on the adjuster and fluxator were perfectly aligned; Tony was tempted to stay under the spectrometer anyway. But he wasn’t intimidated by Captain fucking America, so that definitely wasn’t gonna happen. No way he’d hide.

Tony slid abruptly out from under the spectrometer, strode over to the diagnostics station, and started entering the recalibrations into their old data set.

. . . x 2.3644 . . .

“Mr. Stark?”

Rogers was holding out a steaming cup of coffee. Tony barely glanced at him.

“Just set it on the console,” Tony said absenty, then added, “I don’t like being handed things.”

Rogers’ look was inquisitive, but he didn’t say anything. He set a box down next to the coffee.

“The parts you ordered arrived,” Rogers added, “so I brought those down too.”

“What, you’re the delivery boy and coffee boy now?” Tony asked, still typing. “Does this mean you pick up the dry cleaning too? Are you the guy to call if I want donuts? ‘Cause I—”

Tony stopped short when he looked up. Rogers’ expression had shuttered, brow a painful little crease; he turned to look at the spectrometer. (Or just wanted to turn away.) Tony frowned. (Shit.) Tony turned back to the diagnostic, checked the equation one last time, then hit ‘run.’ He picked up his coffee and came to stand closer to Rogers. (But not too close, not close enough he’d have to look up at him. Not close enough their height difference would be more obvious.)
“Uh, anyway,” Tony said, taking a long sip. “Thanks. You know, for the coffee. And the AC-23s, the package.”

Rogers shrugged. “You’re welcome.” They stood watching as the various parts of the spectrometer lit up, one by one, in sequence. It was a beautiful sight.

“I have no idea how a spectrometer works,” Rogers said after a moment, eyes still fixed on the machine. “I mean, I read about it in the encyclopedia, but even cross-referencing all the unfamiliar concepts I still don’t actually know.” He shrugged again, watching the lights blink on and off. “I just ended up looking up more and more until everything became a bit of a blur. But, well, I know enough to realize that these things are usually ten thousand square feet.”

Rogers swallowed and his tongue darted out to swipe across his lip before he continued, “So, not only can you build one, Mr. Stark, you’ve made it small enough that we’ll be able to fit it in the clearing where the force field showed up. Or wherever else it might appear. That’s really—”

Rogers seemed to struggle for words before settling on, “amazing.” The word was soft, almost awed.

At last he turned to look at Tony. “So, if the only thing I can do to help is bring you coffee, I don’t mind. Because, this? This is amazing.”

Tony’s heart was racing and the air in the workshop seemed too thin. He took a long draught of coffee to compose himself.

“Pssh.” Tony waved his hand dismissively and made a skeptical noise. “Didn’t you get the memo? I’m good at miniaturizing all kinds of shit.” He tapped on the arc reactor.

Rogers’ eyes were very blue. “Yeah,” he said softly and took a tiny step closer, “I—”

“Hey, Tony? I was going to pick up the—” Bruce said, then went silent, frozen in the doorway. “Oh, hello, Captain. Tony, our package wasn’t there.”

Tony cleared his throat and walked back to the console, eager to put some distance between himself and Captain America. He waved the box at Bruce, then turned his attention (mostly) back to the scans flashing across the screen. “The good Captain delivered it personally.”

“Ah,” Bruce said, giving Rogers the Banner Contemplative Look # IV. “That was very good of you, Captain.” He shuffled into the lab with a smile.

“It was no trouble,” Rogers said. “And now, I should leave you gentlemen to your work.” He bowed to Tony, then paused and asked, his voice pitched only for Tony, “Mr. Stark? Would you really like donuts?”


(Really fucking eloquent, Stark.) The thought came unbidden and made his guts clench. (God damn it, I don’t have to impress him. You’re fucking dead, Howard, so just fucking—)

“All right,” Rogers said with a little smile, just looking at Tony and still bowing forward slightly.

(Seriously, Rogers? What do you want? Go away.)

Rogers checked his watch. “Well, it’s nearly my turn at Bob Watch, so I’d best go.” He nodded to Bruce, bowed to Tony again, and departed.

Bruce looked at Tony with a confused frown.

“Bob?”

Tony suppressed a chuckle. Then scowled.

(Fucking Rogers.)

Tony cleared his throat.

“Come on, Bruce! Circular polarization waits for no man!”

A few hours later, the diagnostics had returned almost perfect results. One of the 756-Js was faulty, so it had fucked up their data yield, but that was small potatoes. Tony was going at it with his most delicate tools—relishing for once his small, nimble fingers—while Bruce hovered, reviewing the output.

“Have you noticed that the Captain almost always brings us coffee when I’m out?” Bruce asked abruptly.

“Mmm?” Tony muttered absently, reaching for one of the meta-transistors and kneeling down to get a better angle.
“Four times in a row. Doesn’t that seem odd to you?”

“Mmm.”

(Shit. Gonna need more copper wire soon.) Tony grabbed the smallest screwdriver in the kit.

“Seems hard to believe it’s a coincidence. Right?”

“Mmm.”

( Maybe the gold-titanium alloy from the suit could replace 756-Js. Might help stabilize--)

“Yeah. I thought so too. I think the Captain likes you.”

Tony froze, dropping the screwdriver; it rolled under the arc diffusor.

“Yeah,” Tony grumbled with a dramatic eye-roll, voice heavy with sarcasm, “sure.”

“I’m serious,” Bruce insisted. “I think he has a little crush on you.”

“Doubt it,” Tony said with a snort. If the afternoon’s weirdness was about anything besides Rogers’ isolation, it was far more likely about the Doms’ of SHIELD Bet, the Gentlemen’s Wager, than anything romantic. Rogers was from the ‘40s. He’d hardly go for an infamous bitch slut like Tony, not with a 17%-- weirdo coffee deliveries notwithstanding. Still, none of those were things he wanted to admit to Bruce.

“I seriously doubt it,” Tony repeated, more emphatically, then added unthinking, “And anyway, he’s hardly my type.”

(Oh shit. Am I really gonna do this?)

Tony was already on his knees; he could feel his cheeks going a little pink against his will. He dropped his head down and to the side on instinct, then added a bit more softly, “I’ve always gone for brains, instead of brawn.”

“Me too.” Bruce’s voice seemed almost tender.

(Oh God.) Tony arched his back just a little. His heart was pounding and he could feel his cheeks heating up. Should he present his palms? (Too forward. Let him ask.) Or maybe--

“You know, Betty and I met in the labs at Columbia.”

Tony’s chest felt tight, but he held in the sharp little breath that almost, almost— (Fuck.)

Tony scrambled under the equipment, fumbling for the little screwdriver.

Bruce’s voice was so gentle. “You’ll like her—she’s twice as smart as I am, really.”

(Does he realize? Did Bruce see me--?) Tony bit his lip.

Bruce was still talking, the sound muffled a little now that Tony was under the adjustor. “I hope you don’t mind me speculating about the Captain. It did seem worth mentioning, right?”

Tony swallowed. “Mmm-hmm,” he muttered.

“Yeah,” Bruce plowed on, “Good. And, well, he seems like a really kind person. And I actually think he’s quite intelligent in his way.”

(Shoot me now.) Tony glared at the innards of their beautiful spectrometer. Tony slid a little further under the arc diffusor.

“He might surprise you,” Bruce said, over the sound of his typing. “Anyway, just thought I’d mention it.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “I’ll--” He took a deep breath. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Tony was grateful the diffusor muffled his voice.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for joining me! I hope you liked it. :-)}
Chapter 6

Thank you all very much for the positive response to chapter 5! It was very encouraging, so here's another chapter. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next time Rogers came to the lab, Tony was alone again. The Captain was wearing khaki slacks, a blue button-down shirt, and a brown leather bomber jacket. Tony couldn't help sneaking another look while pretending to work on his tablet at the console; the man was gorgeous. His eyes were such bright blue and the shirt brought it out all the more. Tony wondered if Rogers knew that and did it on purpose. Tony frowned and forced his eyes back down.

"Excuse me, Mr. Stark?"

And Tony really really wanted to ignore him, but he found himself looking up without entirely meaning to. "Yeah? What?"

Rogers held up a paper coffee cup and a little bag which read “Anonymous Donuts Ltd” in a retro-looking sans serif font.

"I know you said coffee was enough, but I was there anyway and these looked especially good to me.” Rogers smiled a little and set them both on the side table next to the console. “I wasn’t sure what you might like, so I just got an assortment.”

(Shit. Is he--)

Tony turned back to the console and gave a deliberately absent, "Mmm."

“It looks like the spectrometer will be done soon,” Rogers said.

“Mmm-hmm,” Tony muttered, trying to remember what he’d been doing before Rogers arrived. (We are not doing this. Whatever this is. Nothing; it’s nothing.)

“It’s amazing what you’ve been able to do in such a short time. Or at all, really.”

Tony deleted and retyped one of the altimiter equations exactly as it had been. Rogers kept talking.

“It has been a real pleasure watching you work. I admit that I don’t really understand the spectrometer— or well, more accurately, I really don’t understand it—but it’s beautiful. There’s something aesthetically pleasing about the design. You wouldn’t know this, but I once wanted to be an artist, so sometimes I think I see things with an artist’s eye instead of just a soldier’s.”

Tony bit his tongue. Snapping, “I know everything there is to know about you, thanks,” would only prolong this weirdness. He deleted and retyped another equation.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Mmm?” Tony kept his eyes fixed on the console, but Rogers didn’t continue. He was clearly waiting and Tony found himself powerless to resist—he looked up.

Rogers seemed almost nervous. He hesitated a moment, then asked, the words formal and precise: “Mr. Stark, may I have the honor of calling you Anthony?”

Tony stared at Rogers incredulously. (Should have seen it coming, but really? What the hell?)

Tony let out a sharp little laugh and shook his head. “First off, nobody calls me Anthony. Second, what the fuck? Who asks that anymore?” Tony looked at the man suspiciously. “You on a first name basis with Barton?”

Rogers looked confused. “Well, yes.”

“Did you ‘ask for the honor of calling him Clint’?”

“Not with those exact words, but I don’t.–”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Tony snorted. “Anyway, permission denied. Was that it, Rogers?”

The Captain looked almost pained, as he asked, “Could you call me Steve, please?”

“I could, but I won’t. Now what do you want?”

“Oh,” Rogers didn’t do anything so undignified as ‘slump,’ but his shoulders dipped slightly and
his face fell. He frowned at his shoes, then looked up at Tony again, “In that case, I guess, never mind.”

“No, what was it?”

“Well, you never came up to the canteen for lunch, so I thought you could use a snack.” He nodded to the donut bag.

“You’re a terrible liar,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “Just spit it out, Rogers.”

“I’m not lying,” Rogers insisted with a frown. He drew his shoulders back and his chin up. “I did bring you a snack.”

Tony stared him down. (From below, but whatever.) “Yeah. And—?” Tony prompted.

Rogers held his gaze, frowning, a few moments more, then looked away. (Ha! Win!)

“It’s getting late and I found a nice little bistro not too far from base. I was going to ask if I could take you out to dinner, but I suppose—”

Tony laughed. “Take me to dinner?” Rogers looked up sharply, brown creased. “You’ve got to be kidding. You do know who I am, right? I could buy half the restaurants in New York tomorrow if I felt like it.”

“I know that, but it’s no reason not to—”

“Look, Rogers,” Tony cut in. “Things have changed, not as much as they should, but you sure as shit don’t have to act all alpha at me just ’cause I’m a sub.”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“Like hell you weren’t,” Tony growled. “I can feed myself just fine, thanks. I don’t need you to provide for me.”

Rogers opened his mouth, clearly intending to protest— Tony was half looking forward to it, his heart pounding— but then Rogers just took a deep breath and said in an even tone: “All right, Mr. Stark. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Tony stared at him, waiting. He wasn’t really going to leave it at that, was he? Rogers just continued looking at him, frowning very slightly in what could have been confusion or irritation.

“I’ll take my leave of you, then. Have a good evening, Mr. Stark.”

With that Rogers bowed and left.

Tony scowled, launched the donuts in the trash, and then turned back to his calculations. Shit. Why had he deleted that equation? His stomach rumbled. (God damn it.) He stomped over to the bin, yanked out a donut, and bit into it savagely.

The donut was delicious. Somehow, that only made him angrier.

***

The fully actualized, mini-spectrometer was a gloriously satisfying sight, not least of all since it meant he and Bruce could get the fuck out of SHIELD. Tony had no reason to stay, and plenty of reasons to go. And once Tony made a decision, he liked to follow though, often abruptly. And loudly.

Tony flipped his sunglasses up and grinned at the Agent on duty. (Geez, are they recruiting kids now? He barely looks 19...)

“Well, that’s it,” Tony said, hoisting his shoulder bag back into position. He liked to travel light. Baby Agent looked confused and wide-eyed.

“Bruce and I are gonna peace out. Tell Fury to put the mini-spectrometer on the quinjet in case the Force Field comes back; we wanna be able to mobilize that thing quickly. Oh, and remind him that it’s our intellectual property, would you? It’s just on loan.” Tony grinned his most cheeky grin. “Great!”

The Agent, who’d looked more and more distressed as Tony spoke, now stepped in front of the door. Tony glared.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark,” the man said. “I’ll have to clear that with my CO.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Tony said, flipping his sunglasses down and crossing his arms.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark. Uh, Dr. Banner,” the kid looked nervously between them. “Would you please wait for just a moment?”

“Sure,” Bruce said politely as the agent turned to some sort of phone mounted on the wall. A
phone with a cord. Tony rolled his eyes.

“It’s routine for personnel on a military compound to be signed in and out, to have those things pre-approved,” Bruce said with a shrug. “We probably should have let them know.”

Tony nodded and kindly refrained from pointing out he’d spent plenty of time on military bases, what with being Merchant of Death and all, thanks so much. Sure, this was standard on some bases, but this time it just didn’t sit right with him.

A moment later Captain America rounded the corner. Tony assumed he was there to deal with their exit, but when he caught sight of them he made a startled face, then visibly collected himself. (That man should never play poker.)

“Mr. Stark. Dr. Banner,” Rogers said, with a nod and a glance at their bags, “Are you heading out?”

“Trying to,” Tony said, not caring that his tone was pissy.

“What do you mean?” Rogers asked, but Tony had lost interest in him. Fury himself was striding down the corridor with Romanov in tow. (Yep, definitely have a bad feeling about this.)

“Dr. Banner,” Fury said with a polite nod to Bruce. “I didn’t realize you and Stark were planning to leave.”

Tony bristled and answered before Bruce could say anything: “I didn’t realize that was something you needed to know.”

Fury frowned at him. “I don’t believe I was addressing you, Stark.”

“Oh shit!” Tony exclaimed in mock horror. “Did I speak without being spoken to? What was I thinking? Slipped up again—I’ll never find a Dom if I’m such a little brat.”

“I didn’t say a word about your orientation,” Fury said a little sharply.

“You didn’t have to,” Tony snapped.

Bruce cut in, defusing the situation, “Director, we finished work on the mini-spectrometer. Unless the force field reappears, I really don’t see what either of us can do at SHEILD to be of further assistance.”

“So,” Tony said, “we’re going to repair to the luxury of Stark Tower and get out of this shit hole.” And he couldn’t resist adding, with a sweet smile, “Bruce has kindly accepted my invitation to move in.”

“Dr. Banner,” Fury said, as if Tony hadn’t spoken, “we would prefer you to remain at SHEILD.”

Tony’s jaw nearly dropped, but Bruce only chuckled a little grimly.

“If he’s under arrest?” Captain America asked. Tony nearly jumped; the man was so quiet on his feet, Tony hadn’t noticed him circle around and get between them and Fury. At least Fury also looked a little startled by the question.

“Unless you’re charging him with a crime,” the Captain insisted, “you can’t just detain him.”

Tony let out a nasty little laugh and turned to look over (okay, damn it, up) at the Captain. “Haven’t gotten to Guantanamo Bay on the reading list yet, have you?”

“Huh?” Rogers gave Tony his ‘baffled puppy’ look.

“Are you really telling me I can’t leave,” Bruce asked Fury, so calmly it was terrifying—a whole new spin on ‘calm before the storm.’ Tony glanced around at the Agents, some of whom really shouldn’t be allowed on covert ops. Tony wanted to inch a little closer to Bruce, but Rogers had worked his way between them as much as possible without actually touching anyone.

God damn it. Tony really needed to invent an unobtrusive way to summon the suit...

“You really don’t want to tell me what to do,” Bruce said, breathing a little more heavily than before, but each breath steady and regular.

“You’ve gone two years without an incident,” Romanov said to Bruce, stepping forward around Fury, “I’m sure you don’t want to break that record.”

Bruce laughed. “Really? How sure are you?”

“Do you really want to go with Stark? Are you sure you trust him?”

“Of course I do!” Bruce roared, nostrils flaring. She didn’t flinch, but the agents behind her did.
“And do you trust yourself with him?” she asked more softly.

Bruce took a deep breath, ready to yell again, then glanced at Tony with a pained expression, raw and exposed.

Romanov went in for the kill: “We all know what you’re capable of.”

Bruce turned and looked away, head bowed.

“What the fucking fuck?” Tony yelled. He tried to get around Rogers who remained stubbornly in the way. “Bruce, Jesus, don’t listen to those A-holes. We’re good. Let’s just go.”

Bruce hesitated. “Maybe—” He still wouldn’t look Tony in the eye. “I don’t know, Tony.”

“Let’s take this conversation someplace a little more private,” Fury suggested. “Sit down. Discuss things. I have a proposal for you.”

“All right,” Bruce said and turned to follow Fury. Tony threw his hands up and growled. Rogers was still in his way.

“Un-fucking-believable,” Tony muttered.

He followed them all the same.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! You guys are the best!
Chapter 7

Tony was pretty sure that Fury chose the farthest conference room on purpose, though whether as an intimidation tactic (making them trail after him as long as possible, damn it) or to give Bruce time to calm down (sensibly enough), Tony wasn’t sure.

On arrival, Romanov and Fury sat on the far side of the conference table, facing the door with their backs to the window. Bruce hesitated before taking a seat opposite them. Tony hated sitting with his back to the door, but he also hated sitting any closer to manipulative dickbags than necessary. He’d just decided on the faux leather chair next to Bruce, the one angled slightly away from the door, when Rogers stepped in and pulled the chair out for him.

(Seriously?)

Tony glared. “I’ll stand, thanks.”

Rogers just nodded, unrepentant, and remained standing beside him, slipping into parade rest. Clearly Fury didn’t care if Tony was standing over him (just a sub, after all) and he saw Rogers as an ally (otherwise he’d stand for advantage too). Rogers’ eyes flicked from one person to the next; he frowned at all the Doms seated at the table.

(Does he really expect them to stand for me?)

“Now then, gentlemen,” Fury said folding his hands on the table. It did nothing to make him seem less menacing. “Dr. Banner and Mr. Stark would like to relocate to Stark Tower and take the spectrometer, correct?”

“That’s correct,” Bruce answered.

“And none of your business,” Tony said and threw his hands up.

“I think your plans to relocate SHEILD’s spectrometer is plenty my business,” Fury said.

“Oh bullshit! This isn’t about the spectrometer and you can’t distract me, but hey, I’ll run with it for a moment,” Tony said. “First, I bought all the materials; second, Bruce and I designed it. It sure as shit isn’t yours. Also, if you try to steal it? Refuse to hand it over or try to use it for something I disapprove of? I built a fail-safe. I can make the whole thing implode in a controlled detonation-- any time, any place.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Fury said, one eyebrow raised, though he didn’t sound terribly upset about it.

Tony gave him a shrug and a grin. “What can I say? Nobody gets my tech. Now tell me why you’re trying to hold Bruce hostage.”

In the chair below him Bruce took a sharp breath and clenched his fist on the table. Tony laid a hand lightly on his shoulder. Captain America was watching them both intently, minute frown on his face.

“We’re not trying to hold anyone hostage, Dr. Banner,” Fury answered. “We just want to make sure that you’ve fully considered what could happen out there.”

“Can happen here too,” Fury said, one eyebrow raised, though he didn’t sound terribly upset about it.

Tony gave him a shrug and a grin. “What can I say? Nobody gets my tech. Now tell me why you’re trying to hold Bruce hostage.”

In the chair below him Bruce took a sharp breath and clenched his fist on the table. Tony laid a hand lightly on his shoulder. Captain America was watching them both intently, minute frown on his face.

“We’re not trying to hold anyone hostage, Dr. Banner,” Fury answered. “We just want to make sure that you’ve fully considered what could happen out there.”

“Can happen here too,” Bruce said wryly.

“True, but here our agents have the training to help contain the Hulk. Stark Tower and its environs are vulnerable. So’s Stark.”

Tony threw back his head and laughed. “Are you fucking kidding me? I’m Iron Man. I can take care of myself. And don’t pretend for a minute, Nickey-poo, that this is about wanting to keep me safe.”

“Believe what you like, Stark,” Fury said sharply, then turned back to Bruce.

“Dr. Banner, I’m sorry to start this conversation under these circumstances. I trust by now you’ve read the briefing package I gave you on the Avengers.”

“Oh hey, I remember the Avengers’ Initiative,” Tony cut in. “I was shocked—shocked!—to hear that the only sub under consideration didn’t make the cut.” He gave Romanov a deadly look and
hissed, “You know, after a totally unbiased and transparent revision process.”


Fury nodded. “Yes. After careful consideration, we’d like to offer you a place on the team, Dr. Banner. We think that we’ll be able to help you find ways to control your impulses and eventually remain in full command during transformation. Is that of interest to you?”

“You know that it is,” Bruce snapped, then took a deep breath and relaxed his fist. “I am interested. Very interested.”

“Good,” Fury said. “Working with a team, getting really comfortable with them, will be crucial to that endeavor. That means lots of training exercises as well as personal proximity. It will be hard to forge that kind of bond as a unit if you’re commuting from another location. We’d like you all to live together on base.”

Fury paused and Bruce was silent. Tony could see him considering it and that hurt. It really hurt. Fine, so Bruce wasn’t going to be his Dom, but they’d had plans for inventions, projects, experiments and he’d been so happy to think of them sharing his beautiful (big, empty) Tower. It was almost better that Bruce wouldn’t want to dominate him—he could live with Bruce as an equal at all times without any power exchange to negotiate, just the friendship of like minds.

It was salt in the wound that Tony’d been considered and rejected for the Avengers.

“It’s a good offer, really,” Bruce said evenly. “I am interested in joining the Avengers Initiative. I want more detail in writing first, but—” Bruce’s tone was hard to read. He glanced up at Tony and added, “But I’m still going with Tony, thanks.”

“All right,” Fury said leaning back in his chair. “Stark Tower will house the Avengers’ Initiative.”

“Excuse me!? What?” Tony cried incredulously. “You want me to turn Stark Tower into a barracks?”

“Sir,” Rogers piped up for the first time, his tone disapproving, “forcing Mr. Stark to house military personnel would be a direct violation of the Third Amendment.”

“Thanks for the help, Captain Constitution,” Tony snapped. “I’ve got this.”

“I’m not forcing Stark to do anything, Captain,” Fury said to Rogers. “I’m about to make him a proposal which he is then free to accept or reject.”

“Talk, Fury,” Tony growled. “Get to the fucking point.”

“If you pass six months probation with the Avengers in Stark Tower, you get a place on the team.”

Fuck. Tony’d known that Fury thought he had a good carrot in his back pocket, but this? Tony’d been certain his spot on the Avengers went out the door for good when he had palladium poisoning. (Well shit.) He bit his lip.

“Publically?” Tony asked. He’d meant it to come out angry and challenging, but somehow it sounded a little breathy and hopeful instead. Goddamn it.

Fury nodded. “Full press conference. No behind-the-scenes consulting. You’d be on both the science division with Doctor Banner and a first responder— a combat position on the front lines.”

Oh Fuck. Tony’s heart was pounding. That was big.

Subs were allowed into the military now, sure, but they were still a miniscule percentage, rarely promoted and seldom in combat. The military did their best to keep them out of the press too, unless they were part of the medical corps—you know, something more befitting their gentle, pliant natures. If Fury was true to his word and put Tony on the team, he wouldn’t just be Tony Stark, the crazy untamed sub, playing hero in a tin can. Not anymore.

Fox News would shit a brick.

But Fury was probably just fucking with him. Tony shook his head.

“Probation? What’s to stop you taking over my home and then stamping me ‘not recommended’ again?”

“It won’t be my decision,” Fury answered. “As team leader, Captain Rogers would be making the final decision.”

Tony let out a loud bark of laughter. “And that’s supposed to reassure me?”

“It’s a decision he would make in consultation with the rest of the team: Dr. Banner, Agent Romanov, and Agent Barton.”
“Yeah, no.” Tony shook his head again. “Put me on the team now, and mi casa su casa. Otherwise forget it.”

“Not happening, Stark.” Fury crossed his arms.

“Then go to hell! I’m not letting you yank my chain again.”

“Sir, Mr. Stark raises a very reasonable objection,” Rogers said, cutting off whatever Fury had been about to say. Tony turned to look at him in surprise.

“You don’t say.” Fury looked at Rogers impassively.

“Yes, sir.” Rogers answered, all military. His tone was clipped, brisk. “It’s unreasonable to ask your officers to accept assessment without clearly delineated criteria for that assessment. There has to be a contract in place, with clear expectations on both sides.”

Rogers lifted his chin a little and looked down at Fury across the table. “I want Iron Man for my team, sir. I realize that SHIELD has some concerns. If Mr. Stark agrees, I propose making Iron Man a member of the Avengers immediately, with clearly delineated expectations— the same contract you would give myself or Agent Romanov. In the event of performance issues or breach of contract, SHIELD can remove any member of the team as required.” Rogers paused, then added a belated, “Sir.”

Tony’s mind was racing. What was Rogers up to?

Fury rose to his feet. “Stark has a poor track record, Captain. This could be a PR disaster.” Rogers tried to cut in, but Fury silenced him with a sharp hand gesture, “but, you make some good points. Here it is, Stark,” Fury turned to look down at him, “You’re on the team as soon as you sign that contract and the Avengers move in. If you stick to the contract for six months, then we announce that you’re an Avenger. Press conference, talk shows, the whole nine yards. Deal?”

Tony was swimming in adrenaline, excitement, hope, fear. (What would they put in that contract? Oh shit. Was that why Rogers was helping him?)

“Put it in writing, and we’ll see. Just—”

(—don’t expect me to be team whore. Or Captain’s bitch.) Tony bit back the words, somehow unwilling to bring his orientation into the conversation any more than it was already.

“—just know, I’ll be having a dozen lawyers look at it before signing.” Tony tried to give the room a dismissive look. “Great chat, guys.” He put his sunglasses back on. “Bruce? Shall we?” He turned to look at Fury over the rims. “Unless you object, of course.”

“Have a good day, Dr. Banner. Mr. Stark.”

Tony turned and strode from the room, without another glance.

(Well. That happened.)

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading this! Hope you enjoyed it. :-)

(And, if anybody has a few extra dollars for charitable giving that haven’t been allocated yet this holiday season, sub!Tony would like to suggest an RL version of the Submissives Rights & Protection Organization, someplace that helps to stop gender discrimination and violence... V-day, for example, does some really amazing work: http://www.vday.org/home. He just, you know, wanted to bring it to your attention, with his usual modesty and charm... *blushes*)

Again thank you so much for reading this story and for all the kind support you’ve given me. Writing this and sharing it with you is such a treat! :-) 

Happy holidays and a joyful new year to you all!
“Well this is a surprise,” Tony drawled, flipping his face plate up. “First to the party instead of fashionably late. Someone alert the press.” Tony unhooked his arm from Bruce’s waist and added, “Must be your influence, Bruce.”

Tony frowned. Bruce was looking a little green after their flight, but more with sickness than with rage. There were SHEILD agents maintaining a wide perimeter around the carousel, not that there was much of anybody in Central Park at 3 am.

“Dr. Banner, Mr. Stark,” Captain America said right behind them. “Glad to see you.”

The force field was hovering right between two horses and, Tony couldn’t be sure with the naked eye, but it seemed bigger. Its glow gave the motionless carousel horses a frightening, spectral appearance: their dead staring eyes, their open mouths ready to bite, or frozen in a cry of terror. Looked like they’d switched genres from sci-fi to horror.

“Where’s the mini-spectrometer?” Bruce asked, looking around.

“They were loading it onto the quinjet when I left,” Rogers said. “I set out on foot immediately.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Tony said. “I told them to have that thing locked and loaded when we left. Somebody’s getting demerits for preparedness.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said seriously. Tony blinked, surprised.

“Well,” Tony said, recovering quickly, “if the spec-o isn’t here yet, there’s nothing for me and Bruce to do except help guard Bob. So, phasers on stun everybody.”

“Phasers?” Rogers said with a little frown.

“Yeah, you know, like a ray gun, but with damage settings.”

Rogers frowned deeper. “I haven’t been issued one yet.”

Tony laughed. “It was a joke, Captain. They don’t exist.” Tony paused and considered explaining that his repulsor technology actually came as close to replicating the effect as had been (or could be) achieved, but whatever. Instead he just added, “Serious, man, you really need to watch Star Trek.”

Bruce let out a murmur of agreement. He was still breathing heavily. (Not a fan of flying, apparently.)

“All right, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said politely. He was still looking at Tony, running his eyes up and down the armor, glancing away, then back again. Uneasy, Tony flipped his face plate down.

“Uh, I’m going to go check the grounds,” Bruce said, still sounding a little off. “I want to look at the force field from the other side.”

Tony nodded, then said inside the suit, “Hey JARVIS, give me some scans of that thing, would you buddy?”

“Of course, sir.”

For the next few minutes, Tony was enclosed in the armor surrounded by the numbers and graphs JARVIS threw up. Nothing had changed since last time according to the current scans, except of course Bob’s location.

“You haven’t signed your contract yet,” Rogers said suddenly.

“Huh?” Tony cut JARVIS off. He flicked up the faceplate. “That’s right,” he told Rogers in a neutral voice.

“Is there—” Rogers hesitated, glanced over at Tony before turning back to the force field. “Is there something wrong with the contract?”

Tony snorted. “I’ve sent it to my lawyers and back to Fury nine times. So, yeah, I’d say there’s something wrong with it.”

Rogers’ brows knit together. “I don’t want to intrude, Mr. Stark, but if you think it appropriate, I’d like to be involved in the negotiations. After all, I’m Captain and will be acting CO for the Avengers.”

Tony was silent, considering.
Rogers added, “Perhaps if you just told me what some of the problem areas are, I’d be able to help.” Tony still didn’t answer. Rogers frowned and added, voice tense and low, “If there’s anything at all . . . improper . . . about the contract, I uh—”

Rogers’ fists were clenched, his expression tight. He may be an orientationist throw-back in general, but Tony felt pretty sure that he wasn’t faking his outrage. He didn’t seem like that good an actor.

Tony’s chest felt a little warm, though really what did he expect? Rogers was Captain America; he wasn’t actually going to write “sucking cock and bending over” on any sub’s duty roster. (Not even a male sub who couldn’t get knocked up.) Tony’s mouth twisted in a little grimace and he looked away. (Yep, male subs: the perfect whores. Dominate ‘em, fuck ‘em, and toss ‘em aside.)

“Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, voice intense, perhaps a bit distressed. “If they’re making inappropriate demands, I’ll report it. I won’t let them just—”

“Calm down, Rogers,” Tony said, jerking himself from his thoughts. “I know how to use a phone—I could call the Submissive Rights Organization myself. It’s nothing like that.”

(The SRO would hardly smile on Fury’s contract, but not for that reason.)

“Then what’s—?”

“Look, I don’t know what you’ve read about me,” Tony said. (A lie, of course, but he doesn’t know I hacked his browser history…) “But I don’t have a sterling reputation. Sure, I’m a billionaire, genius, engineer, philanthropist submissive. But I’m also a brat and a slut. The really naughty kind. Outspoken and uppity.” Rogers was frowning again. “Fury’s trying to make sure I’ll stay out of trouble, in my personal life and in the press.”

“No,” Rogers said slowly. “So, Fury’s making these sorts of demands in addition to requiring that you house the Avengers team?”

“Pretty much,” Tony agreed.

“Seems like all of this—the Avengers—would put a lot of restrictions and complications on your life, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said seriously. “But you still want to do it.”

“Obviously,” Tony said a little sharply. “If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have a dozen lawyers working on the contract.”

“About fucking time! Hey, Bruce, how about the south side entrance for the main spectrometer base?”

“Sounds good!” Bruce called over the hum of the quinjet.

“Mr. Stark?” Rogers called, running after Tony as he headed off to join Bruce.

“What?”

The hatch of the quinjet opened and an overly bright light poured out. Tony squinted.

“Yes, I realize that,” Rogers said. “But I’d still like to look at it and speak to Fury on the subject. If you’ll allow me, Mr. Stark.”

“Huh?” (Left engine seems like it’s humming a little louder. Shit. Better look at that soon.) Tony dragged his eyes from his creation to glance at Rogers. “I’ve got a stable of lawyers as my Negotiators.”

The hatch of the quinjet opened and an overly bright light poured out. Tony squinted.

“Huh? Yeah, sure,” Tony said, waving a hand in Rogers’ direction. (Shit. Yeah, the whole quinjet was too loud. It was supposed to be fucking silent for fuck’s sake.) “Whatever,” Tony said absentely to the Captain. “Knock yourself out, Rogers.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stark.”

“Hey, Bruce! Tell those morons to get it to the southside! And bring the fucking XE generator. We didn’t make the damn thing as a lawn ornament!”
Happy new year! Thanks so much for reading! :-)
Bob disappeared after thirty-seven minutes and, if anyone had doubted Tony’s volume and inventiveness in the field of swearing, they would doubt no longer. Seriously, it should be his seventh PhD. Some of the SHIELD agents even looked nervous Tony noticed with a certain savage satisfaction. Good. They should.

Bruce stood quietly, still staring sadly at the spectrometer’s incomplete data yield. He shook his head and muttered once again, “I just can’t believe it.”

Tony snorted and Bruce looked up. He frowned and repeated what they’d both been saying for the past fifteen minutes: “We only needed forty-five minutes. How could this happen?”

(Two’s a good question,” Tony said with a sharp smile. He’d already chewed out all the minions in the spectrometer’s immediate vicinity, but—ah! Mr. Star-Spangled Self-Righteous was standing a bit apart, his back to the carousel. (Locking onto new target now.) Tony grinned, eager to vent his frustrations.

(Okay, Captain Golly Shucks, let's see how your patriotic politeness holds up under pressure.)

Tony stalked his prey quietly, wanting the element of surprise. He realized as he drew near, though, that Rogers was speaking into his comm.

“—totally unacceptable. I told them to-- Yes, I realize that . . . Lack of preparedness has cost my team’s scientists valuable data, data that could save lives if the anomaly is hostile.”

Tony paused and watched as Rogers threw his shoulders back, spine stiffening.

“With all due respect, sir, this wouldn’t have happened if the chain of command-- No, sir. . . . No, sir! . . . For now, I’ll keep a force here with the spectrometer in case the anomaly returns. Though it seems unlikely.” A pause. “I’ll keep that in mind. Sir. Rogers out.”

The Captain wrenched his comm from his ear and spun on his heel, looking ready to throw the little headset at a tree.

“Mr. Stark!” he exclaimed, going still.

“See now, if you treat all your tech like that, it’s no wonder it keeps breaking, Captain Muscles.”

Rogers frowned at him, opened his mouth, then shut it.

Tony brushed imaginary lint off the armor.

“Sorry-- so do you want me to yell at you?” Tony said with a shrug, “but apparently you’re pissed too so maybe I’ll skip it.”

Rogers looked very seriously at him and then shook his head with a sigh. “No. I’m team leader. Ultimately, it’s my fault the mini-spectrometer wasn’t ready. If it had been, you and Dr. Banner would have at least the first set of readings, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “But from what I overheard—and by that I do mean ‘eavesdropped on’—it’s Fury and his minions’ who didn’t get it loaded.”

“That’s kind, but no.” Rogers shook his head again. “I should have confirmed that my orders were carried out. Our team is ultimately my responsibility and I have to make sure you get everything you need. Shifting the blame won’t get you that data.”

(Huh.) Tony blinked and cocked his head. “Sorry-- do you want me to yell at you?” Tony shrugged. “Okay, fine. You’ve been a naughty, naughty Captain. Bad. Bad Commander!” Tony grinned. “Feel better?”

Rogers let out a bemused little laugh, then looked like he regretted it. “Uh.” And there he was, almost fidgeting again.

“Right.” Tony said, “So, Bruce and I are gonna take our not quite enough data home to play with it. JARVIS transmitted everything to the Tower already.”
“All right, Mr. Stark,” he said, still looking a little baffled. “Please keep me informed.”

“Roger, Rogers! Peace out.”

***

24 hours later Tony was about ready to bang his head against the wall in frustration. And Bruce’s calm was really starting to get on his nerves. If only they’d gotten more data! Working with incomplete information was bullshit.

(Okay back to basics. \( \lambda = \frac{h}{p} \) What if--)

“I’m surprised the Captain hasn’t dropped by the Tower yet.” Bruce said suddenly. He poured two mugs of coffee and set one at Tony’s elbow. “To check in with us and, you know,” Bruce added, his tone amused, “bring you coffee. Or something.”

Tony rolled his eyes. He grabbed his mug and took a long sip. “We’ve got plenty of coffee.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Bruce murmured, walking to the other end of the console. Tony frowned. Bruce was really weird about the Captain. It was annoying. Tony held in a sigh. (Just ’cause you rejected me doesn’t mean you need to shove me at the nearest Dom.)

“But, he’s probably busy,” Bruce added a moment later. “Especially if there’s a power struggle with Fury like you said.”

“Mmm,” Tony murmured.

“I have to admit, it reassures me that he’s willing to confront Fury,” Bruce continued. “We’ll be in that position again, I’d expect, and it’s good to know he can stand up to command.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“It seems like we can trust him, don’t you think?” Tony said nothing, but Bruce went on unencouraged. “It’s weird to meet your childhood hero and find he isn’t a disappointment.”

Tony set his mug down a little too hard.

“Forget Rogers— I think you’re the one with a little crush.” He smirked at Bruce. “You sure you’re a Dom, Banner? Of course, rumor has it Carter was a Domme, but she went belly-up for the Super-Mega-Dom, so you wouldn’t be the first to solo-switch for Big, Blond, and Beautiful. Just, ya know, I thought you went for brains and tits not cock and—”

“Tony! Don’t be vulgar! That’s—” Bruce grimaced. “That’s not funny.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll keep the sexy words to myself, but what gives Banner? Rogers this and Rogers that?”

“Nothing, just—” Bruce mumbled, then said a little softly, “There’s nothing wrong with getting in more of a team mindset.”

Tony blinked. (Huh?)

“Listen, Tony,” Bruce said, in that gentle tone that Tony loved and hated. “I’ve never found it easy to make new connections.” He gestured around the lab. “Not unless there’s something to do, a scientific problem.” He swallowed and fidgeted slightly. “But, I do want to try. I saw some of SHEILD’s research and it matches my own and . . . Betty’s.” He stumbled over her name. “The secret to controlling . . . the Other Guy . . . might actually be bonding this team as a unit. So, I’m focusing on the positive. I think it will help.” He added softly, “It might help us both.”

“Right,” Tony said dubiously.

“Just think about it, Tony,” Bruce said with a little half-smile. He hesitated, then added, “But this is hard enough without . . .” He frowned and straightened. “I’d really like your support. I’ve tried dealing with everything alone, and it’s . . . not so good. So, I just. . . I want to try. Okay?”

(Oh shit.)

“Yeah, got it!” Tony said a little too brightly. “Good, great! Team! Bonding! Awesome. Will zip it on the cynical stuff and innuendo.” Tony swallowed. “But uh, if that’s enough feelings for you, then how about we go back to the good kind of bonding. Ya know: you, me, science, and machines? ’Cause I think I see a pattern in the fourth grid.”

Bruce brightened. “The collapsed wave-particle?”

“Yup. Come see.”

Bruce nodded eagerly and started over, then doubled back to refill his coffee cup. While his back was turned, he said, “And, Tony? Thanks.”

“Whatever. Come on, Brucie! Science!”
“Welcome back! The Entertainment Industry is still reeling from Beyoncé’s latest bombshell. This morning she dropped a surprise album, “I Am the Whip-Hand,” using it as a declaration of orientation. That’s right Beyoncé, American’s darling-on-her-knees, has outed herself as a Switch!

What will this mean for her career? For her marriage? Is Jay-Z a Switch, sub or just a beard? Text us your response at 888-text-tmw!”

Three days had passed since Bob’s latest appearance and prompt disappearance. Bruce was off doing something like eating or sleeping or “decompressing.” (He apparently didn’t do lab marathons anymore because they made the Other Guy cranky.) So Tony was down in his private lab for a bit, spending time with Dummy and crew. (Pepper called it “nesting,” but sometimes Pepper was full of shit. Starks don’t nest.)

There was some stuff Tony’d been putting off.

Tony picked up a pen (Mont Blanc, of course) then set it down again. Shit. Right. He needed a witness. And he should probably read the contract again. Sure, all twelve of his kids in legal had given him the green light and he’d read the damn thing five times already himself, but still.

Tony tossed back the contents of his mug with a grimace. Cold coffee. Ugh.

Tony stared at the papers on his workbench. Somehow, Rogers had done it. The entire “morality and public conduct” segment had been dropped. Every word of it. Tony flipped through the document again, half expecting it to reappear as if by evil magic, hidden in another section.

It didn’t.

“Hey, JARVIS? Get me Rogers on the phone.”

“No, you may not,” Tony interrupted. “Call him. Stat.”

The sound of a phone ringing filled the workshop. Hm. JARVIS must be pissed if he just called without replying first. Ring. Ring. Riiing. Jesus, where did Rogers keep his phone?

“Captain Rogers,” he said, tone brisk and a little out of breath. Tony had half expected him to answer “ahoy.”

“Hey, Captain.”

“Mr. Stark?” He sounded alarmed. “What’s happened? Are you all right?”

“Chill out, Rogers. You always this jumpy?”

“Well, it is—” a pause, “2 am. I thought it was an emergency.”

Tony blinked. “It’s 2 am?”

“As I attempted to point out. Sir.” JARVIS’ tone was withering.

“Uh, yeah,” Rogers answered. “2:16 actually.”

“Oh.” Tony frowned. (“Manners won’t kill you, Tony,” Pepper’s voice admonished.) “Sorry I woke you.”

“You didn’t,” Rogers said immediately. “I was up.” And Tony really wanted to ask about that, but was having trouble formulating the question and Rogers soon filled the silence. “How can I help you, Mr. Stark?”

“I got the contract.”

“Oh? Is it an improvement?”

Tony laughed. “You know damn well it is, since you got Fury to drop the morality clause. How’d you do it?”

“I just—“ Roger hesitated, choosing his words carefully, “reminded the Director of our real priorities.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”
“Care to elaborate a bit, Stars and Stripes? ‘Cause I still don’t see how that helped.”

“The Avengers Initiative was designed to protect America. And the world. Iron Man will do that. Everything else is secondary.”

(Seriously, is his earnestness a superpower?)

“And Fury agreed?”

Another pause. “I may have pointed out that there was no morality clause in my contract.” Tony laughed, trying to picture the look on One-Eye’s face when Rogers threw that his way.

“And I pointed out, well, what you said. You’re committed to the team or you wouldn’t be doing all this. You want a place on the team and you want it to be public; I told him I thought you’d do everything in your power to keep that publicity positive, but you can’t be expected to control the press. I really just repeated what you said, Mr. Stark.”

“But when you say it, people listen,” Tony said, a little bitterly.

Apparently Rogers didn’t know what to say, so the line was silent for several long moments.

(“He helped you. Say thank you,” Pepper’s voice urged in his head.)

Tony took a deep breath, but Rogers broke the silence first, asking, “Will you sign it?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.” (That’s sort of like ‘thank you,’ right?) “Anyway, go back to sleep and--”

“I wasn’t--”

“—I’ll let you know if we find anything conclusive in the data pull.”

Another long pause. Tony heard Rogers take a deep breath, then let it out a little too close to the mouthpiece. Silence, then eventually, “All right, Mr. Stark. Good luck.”

“Ok. Good. Gotta run! Over and out.”

Tony shoved the contract in a drawer. He’d sign it with Bruce as witness tomorrow.

“JARVIS? Metallica—no, wait. Actually, let’s rock some Beyoncé. And get up the blueprints for the Avengers’ floors.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

As part of my new strategy for incorporating my world-building into the actual story, I'll be including italicized sections of popular culture from this world: bits on the radio, tv interviews, advertisements, whatever seems to work. Please don't assume that the characters are hearing these particular bits of pop culture unless they mention it in the story, but please do suppose that it's what the world around them often sounds like. Hope you like the broader view of this world!

Thanks always to thatwhichyields, my Super-Beta! She makes Story happen. (Bird! Bird! BIRD!) All remaining mistakes are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Pat O'Connor (host of "The Zone" on Fox News) and guest Michael Dobson (best-selling sociologist, formerly Northwestern):

O'Connor: -- isn't the only problem with your study! There are plenty of professors-- not just at my alma mater, Notre Dame-- but at Yale and Princeton who I know would disagree with you on that, but let's turn our attention back a bit. Now, take Tony Stark for example. I think this is a prime case of a certain wild streak in a submissive-- particularly an uncollared submissive with no Dom to ground them-- who goes wild and, fueled by radical 'liberationism,' runs amok time and again. He lost his father at a young age and hasn't had a strong Dom in his life, especially since Obadiah Stane's tragic plane crash. I know the liberal media and even some of my guests may call this orientationist, but I wouldn't want to see one of my sons running around like Stark. You know, I never like to use rude words on the air—this is a family show—but I have to admit that if one of my own sons acted like Stark, I'd call him out for being a slut and try to put him back on the straight and narrow. Of course, my sons are all Doms, but I'm sure you take my point.

Dobson: Actually, I think you've rather made MY point. Tony Stark's exploits are the ones that are infamous. Now, I'm not saying I think more submissives should snort coke, be cropped, and receive penetrative intercourse from a string of Doms in public at a charity fundraiser. Not at all—that's maladaptive behavior. But I am saying it takes two to tango—

O'Connor: Or in Stark's case SEVEN.

Dobson: -- and THAT's what everyone seems to forget. There's a double standard and that--

O'Connor: Now wait, just a minute! There is lots of evid--

Dobson: No, please, let me finish! There's a double standard. Nobody's still talking about the Doms who topped Stark at the infamous fundraiser in 2005, but that event haunts Stark's public figure, and his alone, years later, even as Iron Man. So, if your sons—all Doms—were “running around” group-topping, you wouldn’t call them sluts, just the subs they were out.

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"Ms. Potts on the line for you, sir.”

"Put her through, J!” Tony said, tossing a wrench back in the toolbox.

"Tony?”

"Pepper! Peps! Switch of my soul!

"Hello to you too,” she said, sounding a little amused despite herself. “So,” a long pause, “when were you going to tell me that you’re remodeling the top six floors of Stark Tower? And not for Stark Industries’ use?”

“Uh. Today?”

“Right. You know we had plans for those floors.”

“Look, Pep, we can get more space somewhere else, but this is important. Okay?”

“What are you going to do with them, though? You already have the two penthouse suites and four floors of workshop space!”

“Uh.” Tony really only hesitation for a moment. “Remember that secret initiative you know nothing about?”
“The Avengers?”

“Yeah. I’m on the team now, but I have to provide headquarters for the Initiative.”

“Oh my God, Tony!” She gasped. “Please tell me you didn’t sign anything!”

“Not yet, but hey! Give me a little credit, I had a dozen of our top lawyers look at the thing. You can see it too if you want, though, uh, technically I think that might be a security breach.”

“Yes, well,” Pepper huffed. “I know how you like to play things by the book.”

“Exactly. So you’ll have a copy in about four minutes.”

Pepper sighed. “Well let me look at it, but assuming everything’s in order, when do you sign and when do they move in?”

“ASAP.”

“Right. So what’s the remodeling?”

“Most of it’s with contractors—turning office spaces into apartments, but one project’s really all me. I’m making a new gym. One that can hold up to Iron Man and super-soldiers doing training exercises together.”

Pepper gasped. “Shit. Wait, does that mean that Captain America—?”

“—is my new roomie? Yeah.”

“Are—” Pepper hesitated. “Are you okay?”

Tony bristled at her solicitous tone. (Sheesh, tell Pepper about your childhood one time and she remembers the whole goddam thing… Never talk to people who are good listeners, Tony. Never.)

“Fine, great—of course!”

“It’s just that—”

“So, when do you get out here? I miss you, Pep!”

“I’ll come out soon. I promise.”

“Stay at the Tower with me?”

“Of course.”

*********************************************

“So, boom, boom—there it is!” Tony said with a grin and a grandiose wave at the projections. He bowed deeply, then realized Bruce was sort of frowning. Tony spun and looked at the schematics again. “Wait, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Tony,” Bruce said hesitantly, still looking at the blueprints. “I don’t want you to think I’m ungrateful. Or that this isn’t amazing. It is and I’m especially excited for the zen garden and meditation room on my floor, but—”

“But what?”

“Well, if each Avenger has his or her own floor, I’m not sure how much team bonding we’ll really get from living together.” Tony frowned and Bruce continued. “I mean, we each have our own bathrooms, living rooms—even our own full kitchens—but no designated communal space.”

“We’re sharing the gym,” Tony pointed out a little peevishly.

“Sure, but how much time do people really hang out in the gym?”

Tony rolled his eyes. (Barton, Romanov, and Rogers? Probably a lot. Did they actually have any hobbies other than being big, buff, and deadly?)

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Bruce said, sincerely apologetic. “But you did ask me to look at the plans and make suggestions . . .”

Tony frowned, then shook himself a little. “Okay. Yeah, no problem. So what do you suggest?”

“Maybe a common floor? With a communal kitchen? And an entertainment room?”

Tony sighed inwardly. Yeah, maybe he didn’t need two floors all to himself. And he did like Bruce. If he were lucky, maybe the Doms of SHeiLD wouldn’t want to hang out in the common area very much.

Of course, Tony was seldom lucky.
The Avengers suites took shape quickly—amazing what money can buy! Tony actually enjoyed the challenge of designing a gym for a super-soldier and an archery range and training zone for crazy ninjas. Ha! Let’s see Barton keep his perfect record against Tony’s speedy little targets. (Good luck with that, Katniss.) So what if Tony gave up a private floor to communal use. Big deal—he had all the amenities he needed on the top floor and, let’s face it, he spent 80% of his time in the shop anyway. So, Tony told the three Doms that Stark Tower would be ready for them on Friday, any time after 9 am.

Rogers arrived at 9 am sharp, with a large army duffle slung over his shoulder, an artist’s portfolio obviously containing his shield, and one medium-sized cardboard box carried in his arms. He stood in the lobby looking a little wide-eyed, making small talk with Darla at the front desk.

“JARVIS? Have Darla send him on up to the Captain suite. Use the private elevator. I’ll meet him there.”

Tony tossed back a double espresso and stumbled into some clothes. (Seriously? Why didn’t I say noon? Ugh.) His hair was a mess, but at least his clothes were clean. (Wait. This was the clean hoodie, right?)

“Captain Rogers is in the elevator.”

(Okay, Tony. Here goes.)

Tony took the stairs two at a time and was waiting when the elevator doors opened. Rogers gave him a brilliant smile, his big blue eyes bright and his blond hair perfectly combed and shining.

“Mr. Stark, thank you for having me,” Rogers said warmly.

Tony bit back the “didn’t have much choice, did I?” and managed a mostly gracious, “Sure, no problem” instead.

The Captain stepped out of the elevator and glanced around the apartment curiously, eyes bright. Rogers’ dockers and plaid were horrible, but he wore them beautifully. (Definitely over 6’2. 6’4 maybe? And what the fuck with those shoulders?) Tony swallowed. (God damn it.)

“It’s beautiful,” Rogers said, looking around the living room. Light flooded in through floor to ceiling windows that offered an impressive view of the Brooklyn Bridge.

“Thanks” Tony said, waving a hand casually. “So, we’ll get you set up with fingerprinting and a retinal scan. That way, you can take the private elevator without having me okay it every time. Oh, and say ‘hi’ to JARVIS. JARVIS, this is Steven Grant Rogers, the one and only Captain America.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Captain Rogers.”

“Likewise, JARVIS,” Rogers said politely towards the ceiling. Well, okay, fair enough—that was where the speakers were located. But, boo! Somebody must have warned Rogers about JARVIS just to spoil Tony’s fun. Tony’d been looking forward to watching Rogers freak out a little.

“Oh, so, that’s JARVIS. He runs the tower and is eyes and ears on everything. I don’t just, like, sit around and watch the footage to spy on people or anything, but in the event of emergency we can call it up. There’s a privacy mode you can use on your own floor, but anyway, I’ll go over that in more detail when everybody gets here.”

Rogers just nodded, still clutching the cardboard box to his chest.

“Oh, and hey, I need your movers’ i.d.’s for security.”

“Movers?” Rogers asked, frowning.

“Yeah. With the rest of your stuff.”

“Uh, that won’t be necessary.” Tony stared at Rogers who looked a little uneasy. (Seriously? He’s gonna do it all himself?) Rogers shrugged his shoulders and hefted the box up. “This is it.”

Tony looked at the little box, the duffle bag, the shield. (This is it.) He must have stared too long because Rogers shrugged again and said, “I don’t have much stuff.”


“No, no! I’m fine. I have all that I—”

“Cool. Right, well,” Tony rambled. Seriously? He was supposed to be smooth. “So, I’d better give you the tour. Go ahead and set your stuff down.”

Rogers leaned the shield up against the sofa, set the box on the heavy wooden coffee table, and, after a moment’s awkwardness, left the duffel on the floor. Rogers smiled at him again.
“It really is beautiful, Mr. Stark,” he said, gaze appreciative as he looked around the suite.

For Rogers’ space Tony’d told the interior designer “classic, a little old fashioned, with clean lines, but not modernist” then okayed or nixed a few items she pulled up. (Wood, not metal and glass. Oak, not mahogany. Dark blues and earth tones, no orange, bright white, or black.) She’d taken it from there and whipped the place into shape with all the speed big bucks could buy.

“Glad you like it,” Tony said. “So, anyway—kitchen’s right there, nice open floor plan.” Tony felt like he should have more to say, but all he could think of was to point out the obvious as they walked around.

“Dining area,” he waved a hand. Rogers seemed to be drinking in the sights with a certain amount of pleasure, though he did also keep giving Tony these little looks that seemed—curious? surprised? Tony couldn’t tell.

“Yeah, so the bathroom and bedroom are down the hall, and there’s another room over there for whatever. No designated purpose yet, so yeah, maybe take a look?” Tony shrugged. “Then I’ll take you up to the common areas.”

“Pardon?” Rogers stopped and looked at Tony, perplexed. “Common areas?”

“It wasn’t my idea,” Tony protested, digging his hands into his pockets. “Bruce thought it would be good for team dynamics.” Rogers blinked and looked around the apartment again. “I’d have expected you to agree, quite frankly,” Tony added, feeling a bit put out.

“Wait, I’m sorry,” Rogers said. “You mean that isn’t the common area?”

“No. That’s just your living room.”

“My living room,” Roger repeated blankly.

Tony laughed. “Wait! You thought I lived here?” Rogers gave a little nod. “Aw, that’s cute, but nope. This is your floor.” Rogers looked uneasy, so Tony added, “But don’t get your equality-loving undies in a twist—no preferential treatment. Bruce and the ninjas each have a floor too.”

“Mr. Stark, that’s entirely unnecessary,” Rogers looked almost pained. “I really only need a bedroom. Access to a kitchen would be great, but it’s—”

“No big deal, really,” Tony said waving him off.

“SHIELD really shouldn’t be taking this much of your space. You must have had plans for—”

“Well, it’s done now!” Tony said a little peevishly, then regretted it. *(Hate it when people don’t wanna take my gifts.)* “Seriously, no biggie.”

And Rogers was kind of frowning at him now and it was sort of freaking Tony out.

“Anyway, done here? Great! Let’s go up to the common area.”

Tony wanted to twitch and fidget in the elevator. He wished he’d worn a suit so that he could adjust the cufflinks or something; instead he pulled the hood up a little higher across the back of his neck and shoved his hands into the front pockets. He could practically feel Rogers’ curious, uneasy little glances. It sucked. Tony charged out of the elevator.

“Yeah, so the rec room and stuff is right above your floor, and the gym is four floors down, below Bruce’s place.”

On the common floor—formerly part of Tony’s own penthouse goddam it—Tony followed the same routine calling out identifications: kitchen, gaming console, home theater, and so forth.

Tony’s space was all crisp black and white, sleek lines and sharp angles . . . metal, mirrors, and glass.

“It’s very impressive,” Rogers said, taking in the granite counter tops and black leather upholstery. “And very different.” And Rogers was giving him that little smile again.

“Yeah, well, variety’s the spice of life,” Tony said, suddenly uneasy that Rogers must have guessed that Tony had decorated for him (like a good little sub). Tony swallowed. He threw his shoulders back, and added with a little smirk, “And as you may have heard, I’m a big fan of variety.”

Tony turned, heading back to the elevator, “Anyway, now you know where all the basics are, so I’ll let you settle in. I’m going back to the lab.”

“Mr. Stark, would—” Rogers reached his hand out for a moment, brow furrowed. Tony paused, but Rogers had fallen silent, frozen with his arm outstretched. After a long moment, Rogers cleared his throat and dropped his hands limp at his sides.

“Yes, of course. Thank you for taking time to show me around.”
"Sure." Tony shrugged. "And I'll go over the security stuff and whatnot when the ninjas get here. No sense repeating myself."

Rogers nodded and bowed to him. "Good luck with your work."

Tony hopped into the elevator, not waiting to see if Rogers wanted a ride to his floor. Tony leaned against the wall, that uneasy feeling lingering under his skin.

"Workshop, J."

Twenty minutes later, that itchy feeling hadn't gone away.

"Hey, JARVIS, you helped Rogers back to his floor right?"

"Captain Rogers is still on the common floor, Sir."

Tony frowned. "Gimme visual."

(Whatever. It’s not really spying. He was in the public space, after all.)

Silently, JARVIS complied. Rogers was almost exactly where Tony had left him. He’d taken a seat on the large leather sofa, and was staring vacantly at the coffee table, unmoving, expression blank.

Tony’s chest felt a little tight.

"Shut it off, JARVIS."

Tony didn’t want to think about the Captain.

The spies arrived in the afternoon. Tony’d given them an uneventful tour of their new spaces—Barton’s sleek and modern, Romanov’s old-world refinement—and then had taken them up to get the JARVIS talk with Rogers. The Captain seemed pleased to see them and Clint soon dragged him off for a demonstration of the gaming console.

Tony took the opportunity to corner Agent Romanov. Of course, he probably hadn’t actually cornered her; she’d almost certainly set it up so he thought he’d cornered her when in fact she’d been giving him an opening. But whatever—he just wanted to say his piece without the rest of the team there.

"So tell me, Miss Rushman," Tony said with a sharp smile, "oh, I’m sorry—I mean, Ms. Romanov, tell me," he stepped closer, "was it SHIELD’s idea to send you under cover as a sub or was it your own inspiration?"

Romanov blinked, but refused to take a step back at his approach. She answered perfectly calmly, "The Law is a tough field for submissives; I thought you’d identify with a fellow sub who’d succeeded in a Dominated field."

"Were you right?" Tony asked, leaning into her space. "Did you have a good read on your mark?"

She looked down at him, three inches taller even when Tony wore boots. Her voice was calm, matter of fact: "My orientation brought me to Ms. Potts attention and it was easier to pass her vetting than yours. Your guard was down around me because of her."

"Yes," Tony agreed. "And what did you do with that access?"

She remained silent, though whether it was because she didn’t know what he meant (which he doubted), was ashamed (doubted even more), or because admitting it would be giving ground (most likely) he didn’t know for sure.

Tony stepped away and threw his shoulder back, chin up. "Every second of every day, every inch of my home is under video surveillance. There is no privacy mode in my presence. If you ever violate my person again, JARVIS and a stable of lawyers will make sure you never see sunlight."

"That injection saved your life," she said, voice and expression blank.

"Of course! You had my best interests at heart, right?" Tony asked bitterly. "A Domme clearly knows what I need better than I do. Why bother so much as telling me what it was before injecting me, let alone asking?" Tony shook his head. "We’re done here. You’ve been warned." He gave her a blinding smile. "Welcome to Stark Tower!" he exclaimed, and turned to walk away.

"Tony, wait." She didn’t say it loudly, Rogers and Barton were just in the other room, but she said it urgently.

Tony spun on his heel and found her, hand outstretched, expression too open for the Black Widow. She looked like Natalie again.
“Oh, I’m Tony again, am I?” he said in a snide voice.

Romanov frowned very slightly. “Are you really upset about the injection? Or that I’m not a sub? Or was it the eval I wrote?”

Tony smiled sweetly. “Do I have to pick just one?”

She shook her head. “I should have explained the injection—I’m sorry.” He tone was stiff, stilted. “But I can’t apologize for being a Domme since it isn’t something I control and my orientation isn’t about you. As for impersonating a sub at first . . . It was—” she hesitated a moment, “—necessary.”

Tony glared and his heart pounded. He backed away slightly.

Romanov continued. “It gave me access, access I needed to study you, to try and help you. I did get to know you on assignment and, though I doubt you’ll believe me, I did like you.” She continued softly, “You’re kinder than you let on. More generous— and not just with your money. Mentoring fellow submissives in Dominated fields is something to be proud of.”

She took a step closer. Her expression was sad as she added, “You probably won’t believe this either, but your orientation played no roll in my evaluation.”

Tony threw back his head and laughed. “It didn’t,” she insisted. “You were a wreck. How could I possibly recommend sending you into emergency response situations in that state? Into combat? You could have killed someone at your birthday party. If Colonel Rhodes hadn’t—”

“We’re done here,” Tony interrupted. He turned and started walking away, then added over his shoulder: “Worst. Apology. Ever!”

“I’m on your side, Tony,” she called after him.

Tony snorted. “Sure you are. Natasha.”

“Tony!” she called and he paused a moment despite himself, then hurried away. As he retreated, he could just hear her add softly, “You can still call me Nat.”

(Yeah right.)

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this longer-than-usual chapter! Thanks for joining me! And extra thanks to everyone who has said hello! Your thoughts and kind words are cherished.

:-)
“Sir, Dr. Banner is requesting you join him in the communal kitchen.”

Tony sighed. Hadn’t he done enough today? Tony’d retreated immediately after his chat with Natasha and had been working on the incomplete Bob readings ever since. Without any help from Bruce, he might add.

Tony mentally calculated his chances of being left in the workshop undisturbed. The odds weren’t in his favor—he felt pretty certain that Bruce would come get him if he lingered—though maybe the odds would tip if--

“Dr. Banner asks that I remind you of your need for sustenance, sir. He says dinner will be ready shortly.”

Tony snorted. “Hey, JARVIS?” Tony called, walking to the elevator. “When did Banner become the new Pepper?”

“I really couldn’t say, sir."

Tony rolled his eyes. When the elevator doors opened, the common area was pungent with spices. Cool. Bruce knew he liked curry.

Tony turned the corner and froze.

The ninjas were sitting on his vast leather couch, heads close together. Romanov was holding a glass of wine, Barton a beer. Bruce was in the kitchen, stirring a huge pot with a thick wooden spoon, then bending down to check something in the oven. Tony’s dinning room table, which he was pretty sure he’d never used, was laid out with all the utensils, china, and cups like a four star restaurant. And there was Captain America, refolding the cloth napkins that had mysteriously appeared along with all the fine china. (No, seriously, what? He knew he had forks, knives, and spoons, but . . . huh.)

Rogers looked up and saw him standing there, staring. The man smiled at him and suddenly Tony felt like he should have changed clothes for this, not shown up in a hoodie and ragged jeans. Then again, they hadn’t warned him. Then again (again?), if they had he wouldn’t have showed up.

“Oh good,” Bruce said, glancing over. “I was afraid we might have to pry you from the lab with a crowbar."

Tony looked at the formal dinning table again and took a deep breath. It didn’t actually look like a scene from Stark Manor. Not really. (Howard would never have served curry. And none of the furniture here was a priceless antique.) Tony shook his head.

“Yeah, well,” Tony said, going for a wine glass. (And those he knew how to find.) “Here I am!”

“Curry’s almost ready.” Bruce said. “And there’s daal and palaak paneer. Naan’s in the oven.”

“Can I help with anything else?” Rogers asked.

“Call everyone to the table!”

Rogers summoned the ninjas, who took seats side-by-side. Tony started towards the table, then realized there was grease on his hands from engine tinkering. Bruce was at the sink, so he went down the hall to wash his hands in the bathroom. (What? He’s an engineer, not a barbarian.) When he got back, Bruce had plated the food and everyone was seated—except Rogers. He was hovering and, as Tony approached, he pulled back the chair."

Tony rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to snap at Rogers, but when he saw Bruce’s nervous, hopeful expression, the carefully set table, he bit back the snide remark. He just snorted and took a seat. Rogers beamed.

“Looks great,” Tony said grabbing his fork. Beside him Rogers had his hands folded and head bowed. Seriously? Well, at least he didn’t expect them all to say grace together or something.

“Yeah, curry’s great Steve,” Barton said with his mouth full.

Rogers smiled. “Really, it’s all Dr. Banner’s doing.” He reached out for a piece of naan and passed the basket to Tony.

“Bruce!” Bruce corrected. “And don’t be silly—it’s your curry too. You’re a good cook.” Bruce
paused then added, “uh, team effort.” It was probably meant to be a statement, but came out with just enough up-speak to sound a bit like a question.

And, whatever, Tony didn’t care who had cooked it, just that it was delicious. Exactly the right amount of spice, rich and complex, the chicken tender and juicy. He abandoned his fork and scooped up another bite with the naan. He was starving and it was fantastic. Would go great with —oh yeah.

Tony got up to fetch his wine glass from the counter. Rogers got to his feet. He remained standing until Tony sat back down and then gave Tony this sidelong little glance, like maybe he thought Tony’d be pleased. Tony bit his tongue.

Overall, dinner wasn’t a disaster. Barton was easy going and unexpectedly teamed up with Bruce to try and keep the conversation flowing. They talked about Bruce’s travels in India. Rogers asked questions and listened attentively. Barton added a few stories of his own, and pulled Romanov in, asking her to remind him how such and such happened, or demanding, “hey, tell Steve about the time...” Bruce tried to do the same with Tony, but having a more limited knowledge to go on, he had a bit of a hard time. Tony was scrupulously polite—(proud of me, Pep?)—but far from gregarious.

They were all trying too hard. The tinkling of glass, china, and silver put Tony on edge. The whole thing felt like an awkward, but well-intentioned, group date. Which it was. Basically.

Tony’d eaten his food too fast and wanted to go back down to the lab, but couldn’t seem to make himself leave while everyone else was eating. He tried to tune it all out, run some calculations in his head, but all the politeness and distance, the china and the glasses, were getting under his skin. Finally he couldn’t hold it in any longer—

“Well, this was sure classy as fuck.”

Barton nearly did a spit take; laughing and choking in equal measure. The others looked vaguely disapproving. And maybe confused. Rogers looked confused a lot.

“What,” Barton asked, still chuckling, “you don’t eat like this for every meal, man? All fancy and shit with your silver spoon?”

“Hell no! Not in the Tower,” Tony shook his head, amused. “Silver spoon, meet Chinese take-out box. But, sure, this is cool too, I guess,” Tony waved at the place settings. “I mean, look at this! Desert spoons and little bread plates! Cloth napkins! Where did you even find napkins? Since when do I have napkins?

(But not soon.)

When Tony got to his feet, so did Captain America.

“You’re leaving?” Bruce was frowning. “But I thought you’d want to watch Star Wars with us.”

Tony stopped. “What?”

“Steve’s never seen it,” Bruce added. “We’re watching it after dinner.”

(Shit. Star Wars. Well played, Banner. Well played.)

Tony hesitated, but only for a moment.

“Nope, sorry. Got work to do for Stark Industries.” He didn’t want to see Bruce’s disappointed face, so he turned and gave Rogers a little slap on the arm: “At ease, Captain.”

Tony headed toward the elevator, then paused to add, “Oh, and you guys can just leave the dishes. The staff will get them in the morning.” He called over his shoulder, “Good night!”

Tony didn’t turn around until the doors had closed.

He took a long, deep breath. Then another.

“Workshop, J. Pronto.”

Tony rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the ache. He really wasn’t supposed to sleep in the workshop. Martina was going to yell at him—she was awful loud and bossy for a masseuse. Weren’t they supposed to be zen and shit? It was worth it though. He’d been on a roll with new hardware for the StarkTab 5. Nothing revolutionary, but smaller, lighter, with a longer battery life, all features in high demand that translated into a huge profit margin. Not bad for, uh, how many hours in the lab? Pep would be here soon and she’d be pleased. Well, not about the lab marathon without proper sleep, but about the result.
A quick snack, then a real bed. No, a shower then a real bed. No, no, bed then shower. But food first. Food. Tony rubbed his neck and stumbled a little bit on the way into the kitchen. He blinked.

There was someone in his kitchen.

Steve Rogers was in his kitchen wearing a ghastly suit and tie. (Seriously, was that Brooks Brothers?) It was so bad it was almost hipster, but Rogers didn’t wear it with irony. And Rogers was as far from hipster build as could be, ugly brown suit and navy tie or no.

“Good morning,” Rogers said, looking up to smile at him.

(Fucking gorgeous.) Tony paused.

“There’s coffee,” Rogers added. Tony shook his head. Rogers looked a little amused. “So, up late not early, I take it.” Tony nodded and Rogers looked vaguely pleased. “Yeah, didn’t have you figured for a morning person.”

Tony cleared his throat, still feeling disoriented. Maybe this was a bizarre dream?

“I was about to make eggs for myself,” Rogers said. He set the newspaper aside. “Would you like some?”

“Yes?” Tony said it like a question, but Rogers took it for a real answer and smiled at him. He broke six eggs carefully and whisked them with a fork. Added salt and pepper. Bruce must have showed him around—he knew more about Tony’s spices than Tony did. Rogers put four slices of bread in the toaster. Tony just sat at the kitchen counter and watched the whole thing.

Rogers’ trousers were too short for him. Of course.

“Bruce said Star Wars is one of your favorite pictures,” Rogers said as he cooked. “I can sure see why. It was really amazing.”

Of course he liked it. Everyone liked Star Wars. Bet he loved—huh. Good question. Probably Luke, the wide-eyed idealist, though Hon Solo was a real Dom’s Dom.

“Who was your favorite character?” Tony asked.

“Princess Leia,” Rogers answered instantly. “What a pistol!”

Huh. “Second favorite?” Tony asked.

“Obi-Wan,” Rogers said, then hesitated a moment, “I was . . . really, uh, sorry . . . that he died.” Rogers seemed lost in thought for a moment then pulled himself back to the present. “Who’s your favorite?”

“Darth Vader,” Tony said to get Rogers’ goat. (Really, it was Leia.)

Rogers’ goat was apparently hard to get, though, since he just said, “Yeah, he was pretty swell. I mean, evil, but every story like that needs a good villain, right? You want anything else with your eggs, Mr. Stark?”

Tony shook his head. There were scrambled eggs. And toast. And juice. Made by Captain America.

“Uh, thanks.”

Rogers shrugged. “Nothing much. I’m not half the cook Bruce is, but this counts as fuel.”

Tony devoured the food ravenously, more of his brain coming online as he ate.

“What time is it?”

“5:23, sir,” Jarvis answered automatically.

Tony stared. “Why the hell are you up at five am, Rogers? And wearing a suit no less.”

“Mass is at seven,” Rogers said with a little shrug. He took another sip of coffee. Tony just stared. (Mass? Like church?) Rogers must have read his expression wrong, since he added a bit sheepishly, “Well, of course they have mass at ten also, but then it’s in English.” Tony focused on his eggs.

Rogers gave him a tentative smile. “You should have seen my face when I found out Mass is in English now!” Rogers ate some of his eggs. Tony didn’t answer. Rogers took a sip of coffee. Then he gave a little sigh, shook his head, and said a bit sadly, “Seems like a shame to throw out nearly two-thousand years of tradition though.”

And it was on the tip of Tony’s tongue—“Yeah, cool. Tradition! Let’s bring back the chariot! Or better yet, slavery!”—but he bit it down. There was no point and he just didn’t have the energy.

“Mmmm,” was the most polite response Tony could muster.
“Uh,” Rogers said, rubbing his neck awkwardly, “I guess, you don’t really go to Mass.”

“Nope,” Tony agreed abandoning his plate and hopping down from his bar stool. “I’m one of those debauched atheists the nuns warned you about. Godless sinner all around.” Tony said it cheerfully, with a big smile. “Thanks for breakfast,” he added, “Enjoy your church thing.”

Tony didn’t wait for Rogers to reply, but heard him call, voice uncertain, “Have a good day?”

Tony could not do this shit on 38 hours without sleep.

******************************

Tony slept for ten hours. Pepper had arrived from California and settled into his guest room while he slept, then gone down to the tenth floor to work on something or other. Tony made coffee and hopped in the shower. (What? There’s a special ledge for his mug that keeps it out of the spray, okay? Efficiency, people. Efficiency.)

Tony was thinking about Rogers again and it pissed him off. Why the hell did that guy get under his skin so badly? (Okay, Howard might have something to do with it. Whatever.) Tony’s mouth twisted. Apparently mainstream Catholicism was too liberal for Rogers; he got up early to hear that shit in Latin with the Mel Gibson whackjobs. Tony snorted. Ridiculous.

Tony took a sip of coffee and lathered his loofa. The hot water felt good pelting against his back and aching shoulders.

Then again, maybe Rogers just wanted something familiar. That would make sense. The guy was a stranger in a strange fucking land, after all.

“17%, though” another part of Tony’s mind hissed. 17%!

Whatever.

Tony scrubbed himself angrily, pressing just a little too hard.

They didn’t have to be friends. He didn’t have to like Rogers. They just had to work together, and Tony had managed to do business with some of the most disgusting orientationist jerkbags Wall Street had to offer. Rogers was a kitten compared to Jordan Belford. They could work together.

And live together.

It was fine. Everything was fine.

As soon as he got out of the shower, Tony went to his workshop.

Again.

******************************

When Tony resurfaced, he found Pepper-- a vision of contrasts, her crisp white suit luminous against the black leather of the living room couch. She leaned heavily into the thick, padded armrest, her lap weighted down with papers and her StarkTab. She looked so beautiful. She always did.

At the sound of Tony's approach, Pepper looked up and smiled.

“You're working too hard,” Tony said. She rolled her eyes.

“You are too.”

Tony shrugged and flipped the kettle for hot water.

“The StarkTab modifications you pulled together look fantastic,” Pepper said. She looked back to her tablet. “It should give us a big bump in the third quarter. Enough for another sixty or seventy million for the Foundation if the projections I ran earlier are on target.”

“Your projections usually are,” Tony said. He reached up for Pepper’s favorite mug.

“Yes, well,” she said in that matter-of-face voice she used to conceal her pleasure at a compliment. “We’ll see.”

Tony padded over and handed Pepper her favorite, green tea with jasmine. She let out a little hum of surprise.

“Thank you.”

Tony smiled. Pepper had kicked off her five-inch stilettos, Tony tossed them aside carelessly and folded to his knees beside her. The carpet was so plush it was almost a cushion-- just the way he liked it. He pulled her left foot into his lap and began kneading it gently with his thumbs.

Pepper groaned and smiled down at him.

“Mmm. You're so good to me.”
Tony quirked a little smile. “Nah. My fault you're overworked. I'm the one who made you CEO.”

“Humph. Good point. All right then, foot massage is your just punishment.”

Tony smiled and let out a little purr of contentment. It had been a long time since he'd done something so service-oriented for a Dom(me) or Switch, even just a friend. It felt good. He savored the little sounds Pepper made, basking in the knowledge that this pleased her. (And safe in the knowledge she'd never hold moments like these over his head.)

As Tony's fingers worked Pepper's arches with firm, even pressure, his mind started to drift pleasantly.

“I've missed you, Tony,” Pepper said quietly. It made him feel warm inside. “I wish we got to spend more time together.”

“'Kay,” Tony murmured. “You're busy.”

“I'm sure.”

Tony shifted to her other foot.

“I worry about you,” she said softly.

“Don't.”

“I'll try.” A long pause.

“I met the Avengers while you were napping,” Pepper said tentatively. When Tony didn’t say anything, she asked, “How's it going?”

“Fine.” He paused. “It's . . . They're . . . fine.”

Tony didn't elaborate and Pepper didn't press him. She knew in moments like these Tony'd be more open than usual, but he didn't like to talk. When he was . . . open . . . like this he got quiet. Maybe he'd tell her about it later.

After a few more minutes, Pepper pulled her foot away with a murmured 'thank you.' Tony scooted closer to curl up against her, his head in her lap. Pepper carded her fingers through his hair, softly and gently. Not for the first time, Tony half-wished Pepper could be his Domme. It was silly, almost childish. They didn't fit together that way, much as they loved each other, but in these quiet moments (after the arc reactor, his mind whispered) he'd sometimes wished things could be different.

Long before Afghanistan, though, he’d known better than to try. Pepper was highly geared towards monogamy and a perfect 5 on the Kinsey Switch Scale. If she were a Domme, the monogamy would have been fine with Tony. If she were at all poly, subbing with her sometimes instead of for her would have been fine with Tony too. But no—they just weren’t emotionally and orientationally compatible. (And deep down, he knew it was relief he felt not disappointment—relief that they could never try, so he could never fuck it up.)

Pepper’s perfectly manicured nails scratched lightly at his scalp and Tony hummed in pleasure. He could hear her tapping one handed on her tablet, still petting him. The minutes slid by in comfortable silence and Tony hovered in that relaxed state right above subspace. (Which was as close to it as he got these days, ever since— No. Not thinking about that.) Pepper rubbed the sensitive spot behind his right ear and Tony let out a long contented sigh. He heard Pepper set her tablet aside.

“People don't know how good you are,” she said. “How sweet you can be.”

Tony shrugged and pressed his face closer into her thigh, feeling loose and unconcerned by it all. The praise made him blush, but it was just Pepper so he didn’t mind.

(PEPPER THINKS I'M GOOD. A GOOD PERSON. A GOOD SUB. THAT'S ENOUGH . . .)

He heard her shuffling papers in her lap, the scratch of a pen, but one hand stayed on him at all times, soothing and kind. Tony felt more rested by this than his ten-hour nap. He lost track of time.

“Mr. Stark? Are you-- oh! I'm sorry!”

Tony's entire body went tense at Rogers' voice, but he squashed the impulse to move, to scramble up onto the couch. So he'd seen Tony on his knees now-- so what? Tony had nothing to be ashamed of. (Fuck you, Rogers. I'm a sub. I kneel sometimes, when I want to.) Pepper pressed her fingers firmly to his neck for a moment, grounding and perfect.

“What did you want, Rogers?” Tony asked, voice hard and diction crisp, the soft, almost slurred tone he'd had with Pepper banished in an instant.

“Uh--” Rogers hesitated. “Clint and I were about to order some food and watch the next Star Wars movie. I thought you might like to join us. Ms. Potts, you'd be very welcome too.”
Tony nearly snorted. Well, at least he hadn't asked Pepper's permission to invite Tony.

"I'm good, thanks," Tony answered blandly, not bothering to lift his head from Pep's lap.

"I've already eaten," Pepper said politely, "and I really do have to get through these reports. Thank you for the invitation, though, Captain."

"Yes. Right. Of course," Rogers answered a little haltingly. "I'm sorry I intruded. Have a good evening."

Tony forced himself to stay still and let Pepper go back to stroking his hair, but it was hard. Tony wanted to get up and go back to his workshop, but he hated to admit that Rogers had the power to ruin such a perfect moment. Pepper-- wise, wonderful Pepper-- just stroked his hair and didn't say anything.

******************************************************************************

The next day, Rogers sought Tony out to apologize.

"I'm sorry for my behavior earlier, Mr. Stark," Rogers said awkwardly. "When I asked you to dinner, I thought you were single. I didn't know you were Ms. Pott's sub."

"You mean," Tony corrected, "you didn't know she was my Domme."

Rogers blinked. "Isn't that what I said?"

"Not really, no," Tony said with a snort, "but, whatever. Semantics." Tony waved it off. "But, you weren't wrong. I am single. Pepper isn't my Domme-- we're just friends. I don't have a Dom."

Tony refrained from adding, "and that's the way I like it!"

"Oh," Rogers said with a slight frown. (Disapproving? Pensive? Curious?) It made Tony want to explain despite himself. Made him want to tell Rogers that he loved Pepper, but they didn't work like that. That there were hints of power exchange in their friendship, but it wasn't erotic, just a kindness between friends. That he may be a slut, but he wasn't casual with people he loved—it would be too confusing and hurtful to be together but not.

Instead he said, "Anyway, lab's calling. Gotta run."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all your support! I'm going through sort of a rough patch and sharing this story with you makes things a little bit better. I'm very grateful for your kindness.

Up next, more world building! And awkwardness! And STEVE! :-)
Monday afternoon found Tony in a foul mood. Pepper had told him, as gently as possible, not to come to the Acquisitions meeting. He hadn’t actually wanted to go—he hated meetings—but he’d volunteered to be helpful. But apparently Pepper had a read on the committee, especially their founder and CEO Jacob Lang, and, well—things would probably go more smoothly without Tony there.

And Pepper had wanted to leave it at that, but Tony badgered her. Apparently, Lang donated heavily to the DOMSS (Defenders of Matrimonial Structural Stability), the OFTF (Organization for Traditional Families), and ORG (the Orientation Research Group—such an innocuous name for a dubiously legal organization dedicated to finding a chemical “cure” for male submission). Jacob Lang made Mark Huckabee look like a liberationist liberal. And Lang had always prided himself on running a “morality-based corporation,” so apparently Stark Industries had competition as a result. Hammer Corp also wanted to pounce on Lang’s crumbling empire and Pepper was struggling to snatch Lang Inc., first at the best price she could get. Reminding Lang of the “Stark” in Stark Industries wouldn’t help them.

And it wasn’t Pepper’s fault, but Tony snapped at her anyway. And she was so nice and sympathetic about it that he pushed and pecked until he ended up yelling, but Pepper (God bless her!) yelled back because he wasn’t fucking fragile.

“If we didn’t do business with assholes, we couldn’t do business at all!” Pepper’d yelled to cap off her rant. “Now, do you want me to go to the fucking meeting and take over that douchebag’s company, or not?!”

He fucking loved Pep.

Tony’d sent her off with a “go get ‘em, tiger!”; she’d given him her best shark grin then strode away in her most Mistress boots and Commander suit. (Seriously, it had military style lapels; Tony loved that thing…)*

So, it was fine, really. Mostly. And as Pep pointed out, the cheaper they bought Lang Inc, the more money they’d have for the Foundation. And the sooner they bought Lang Inc., the sooner that asshole’s name would be taken off a Fortune 500 company forever.

Tony shrugged. He couldn’t let it get to him.

Coffee and some time in the lab would help. Maybe he’d work on a project with Bruce.

“Hey, JARVIS? Where’s Bruce?”

“Dr. Banner is in the communal kitchen, sir.”

Perfect. Tony hopped in the elevator.

(Better send Pep some flowers. Or shoes. Flowers and shoes? Yeah . . . Apology Basket 3.)

“I promise, Dr. Banner,” Rogers was saying solemnly as Tony approached the kitchen.

“Bruce.”

“Right, of course. Bruce. I would have anyway, but I promise.”

Promise what? Tony asked sauntering in with a grin.

Bruce gave Tony a deer in headlights look, but Rogers just turned to him and answered seriously, “That I’ll make getting you clear of the Hulk my top priority if Dr. Banner ever has an incident.”

Tony stared at them. Bruce was looking guilty and embarrassed (as he should!), but Rogers was entirely unapologetic.

“Fuck you guys,” Tony said. He turned on his heel and left.
He went back to his workshop. Alone.

Bruce joined him ten minutes later.

“Tony?” he called, stepping into the workshop. “I’m sorry about that, okay? I should have talked to you first.”

Tony ignored him.

“Steve put his foot in his mouth—I don’t think he meant it the way it sounded,” Bruce said. Tony snorted.

“And either way, he doesn’t speak for me.” Tony wouldn’t look up. Bruce sighed, “Tony, I’d never forgive myself if I hurt you. I just want to be sure you get to the armor.”

Tony studied the glowing projections, with his body angled away from the door.

“Without the armor,” Bruce said in his reasonable voice, “you’re the most vulnerable person on the team.”

“Yep, that’s me,” Tony said without looking up, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Vulnerable.”

“Tony,” Bruce sounded some combination of exasperated and disappointed. “It’s a scientific fact that you have less muscle mass than a Dom—”

Tony looked up indignantly. “Just ’cause I didn’t get hopped up on domosterone at puberty doesn’t mean—”

“—and you know that. Besides, Steve has the serum—”

“—oh, it’s Steve now, is it? What’s with you and him?”

“—and Natasha and Clint have extensive training in evasion, concealment, and hand to hand combat.”

“Hey, I’m a good boxer!”

“So, if the . . . Other Guy shows up, they probably can get away on their own. I just wanted to know somebody would make sure you get to the suit.” Bruce stepped a little closer. “Not just because I worry about you, which I do—I’m your friend, I’m allowed—but also because Iron Man is really best equipped to deal with the Other Guy. It’s the best strategy, ok? It wasn’t an insult.”

And, well, when Bruce put it like that, Tony knew it wasn’t unreasonable. And Tony’d stormed off and made a scene.

(Don’t be so hysterical, he could hear Howard’s voice in his mind.)

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said. “We’re cool. Whatever.” Tony rubbed the back of his neck for a moment, then offered Bruce a tentative smile. “So, want to work on those readings? Because I’ve got another theory. If we fill our data gap with a theoretical reading, then . . . ”

That evening, Tony put up only token resistance as Bruce coaxed him from the lab. It had been a long day, Tony was beat (not the fun kind), and Bruce had promised him pizza.

Tony wasn’t stupid, though. This was obviously another “team bonding” thing, but he could do that. He was Iron Man. He could do anything.

Rogers and the ninjas were already in the kitchen when they arrived, but at least nobody had set the table.

“Hey, man,” Clint said around a mouthful of pizza. “Return of the Jedi. You want in or what?”

Tony grimaced. “Not as good as Empire—”

“Well duh,” Clint cut him off, “but we watched Empire Strikes Back already. We invited you for that and you skipped.” Clint shrugged. “So don’t bitch. Beer?”

Clint handed him a beer and Tony took a swig from the bottle.

“Fine,” Tony said. “I’m in. See, Bruce? I can be sociable. But only if we eat on the couch!”

“That’s the plan,” Clint said. He grabbed two more slices and headed over to the gigantic expanse of patent leather.

Tony lifted the lid—heaven in a box. Double sausage, extra cheese, and olives. Sombody’d
ordered his favorites. Tony piled three slices up on his plate and was considering a fourth when Rogers approached him with a frown.

"Uh, Mr. Stark?" Rogers said, "About earlier... I meant no offense. I didn’t mean to imply--"

"Sure, sure," Tony said, waving him off.

"—that you aren’t capable. I’ve seen footage of Iron Man and I hope you know that I—"

"It’s fine, Captain," Tony said more firmly. "Kinda allergic to apologies, so let’s just watch some ewoks."

"Ewoks?"

Tony grinned, "They’re cute. You’ll love ‘em. Come on."

Tony kicked off his boots (3.5 inch heels) and curled up in the corner of the couch, farthest from the others. Rogers took the empty seat beside him, leaving a little over a foot of space between them. He was looking at Tony with that "I’m thinking hard and it hurts" look he sometimes got right before opening his mouth.

"Roll it, JARVIS!" Tony called out.

Rogers turned his attention to the screen.

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more evenly and Tony would find himself wondering if it had all been in his head. So Tony watched Rogers like a hawk—at least until Rogers noticed, when Tony'd then pretend he hadn't been watching Rogers in the least. Rinse, repeat.

Rogers sat near Tony whenever he could, but never intruded on Tony’s personal space. If anything, he kept a respectful and formal distance, unlike Clint or Bruce who’d give Tony a friendly bump or brush past him casually. Rogers ate a lot and seemed to live in the communal kitchen when he wasn’t in the gym. He read paper newspapers, did the crossword in pen, and hummed to himself when he cooked. He had a self-deprecating sense of humor that would catch Tony off guard sometimes, and he didn’t seem to mind Tony’s occasional teasing about his outdated slang:

“Bees don’t have knees! Unless they’re mutant bees—and how would that be a good thing? Mutant bees with knees? What the-- Stop laughing, Rogers!”

“I’m ‘togged to the bricks’? Nope, no bricks here, and if there were I probably wouldn’t be ‘togged’ to them, since I don’t know how to tog. It sounds dirty, though, so maybe I do know how to tog after all, but just don’t have the vocab . . . . Wait, what? It means dressed up? How does that make any sense? You’re clearly a madman!”

“Did you really just call Princess Leia ‘killer-diller’? That’s a good thing, right?”

“ ‘Butter and egg fly?’ How the fuck does that mean good-looking sub? Who’d say, ‘hey baby, your hotness reminds me of food and insects?’ I think you’re making this stuff up, Rogers! I’m gonna start cross-referencing with JARVIS!”

Tony came up with theories about Rogers, one after another, then discarded them all. They could never accommodate all the available data points.

But it was fine. Good. Whatever.

Tony was still driving himself insane with the readings from Bob the Creepy Energy Field. He couldn’t help it. Sure, everything they came up with was hypothetical for now, but maybe he’d light on a solution that wouldn’t require . . . yeah, no, that wasn’t gonna happen. But still, he couldn’t just not work on it. Bruce was there on and off, but seemed pretty philosophical about the impossibility of coming up with a solution in the absence of fuller data. So Bruce would come down for a while, then leave for meals and sleep and zen crap. (“Life-work balance in a non-emergency scenario.”) Sometimes he dragged Tony with him, sometimes he didn’t.

Tony went back and forth between the Bob data and tinkering on some ancient engine. Today it was a BSA Super Rocket.

“Excuse me? Mr. Stark?”

Tony nearly hit his head, startled to hear Rogers in his lab.

“Yeah? What do you need?” Tony asked, rolling over on the floor so he could get eyes on Rogers—huh. Who was standing in the hallway holding a tray.

“May I please come in?” Rogers asked.

“Sure, knock yourself out,” Tony said, then slid out from under the engine.

“What’s up?”

“Bruce came up for lunch earlier. He was going to bring this down to you, but he read something on the Internet that made him, uh, need to go meditate. Immediately. So he suggested I bring it down instead.”

Rogers paused a moment, then asked, “Would you like some lunch?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Just set it over there.” Tony waved.

He watched as Captain America delivered his lunch, a heaping plate of Bolognese, and wasn’t it just a sight to behold?

Rogers’ hair was perfectly combed and absurdly shiny. His dockers were still terrible, but the white t-shirt stretched across his glorious chest left little to the imagination and more than made up for the dockers. With his ridiculous muscle mass, he should have been lumbering and awkward, but Rogers moved with a certain easy grace that—

Tony looked away.

(He’s hot. So what? Doesn’t mean anything.)

“Oh, and I made you some coffee,” Rogers added, gesturing to the tray.

“Cool,” Tony mumbled, wiping his hands on a rag only slightly cleaner than his hands. “You know I have a coffee maker down here though, right?”

“Oh. That makes sense,” Rogers said sounding a bit disappointed.
“And you do know I’ve managed to keep myself alive on my own, right?” Tony rolled his eyes.

“*On my own*—as in without a bunch of Doms to ‘look after me.’ ”

Tony looked at Rogers with raised eyebrows, a little challenging, but Rogers just smiled.

“Of course I know that,” Rogers replied, a hint of mischief in his voice, “but it was the best pretext I could come up with.” He shrugged. “I’ve been wanting a peek at your workshop.” He peered about curiously. “It’s pretty swell. What kind of bike were you working on?”

Tony blinked and picked up his fork. (I mean, food’s there now… and getting cold.)

“Old BSA Super Rocket.”

“Aces. I had a Norton Dominator** in the service. Loved that thing.”

(And, yeah, *of course* even his motorcycle had “Dom” in the name.)

Tony nodded. “Yeah, that was a good bike. I mean, nothing compared to what I could design, but not bad for the old stuff.”

Tony shoveled pasta into his mouth, then realized that Rogers might think he’d been screwing around. “I haven’t forgotten about Bob, though. I just tinker to clear my head.”

“Sure,” Rogers said. “Like me sketching. It takes my mind off things for a while, so I can come back to the problem fresh.” Rogers looked over at the glowing holograph with images of Bob, their readings, and some of Tony’s theories. “Besides,” Rogers added sadly, “without all the data you needed.” He paused. “Mr. Stark, I’m very sorry about that. I promise to--”

“Whoa there, we already did this,” Tony said, waving his fork. “We’re good.”

“All right.” Rogers looked like he might protest, but held his tongue.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Mmm?” Tony was demolishing the spaghetti at a breakneck pace.

“Would you have dinner with me?”

Tony’s mouth was full, so he contemplated his answer while chewing. Slowly. He was half tempted to pretend he didn’t know what Rogers meant—“Of course! The team is getting pizza again tonight!”—but that seemed unnecessary. Rogers wanted a date. With him. Tony swallowed.

“We already did this too,” Tony said with a shrug. “Answer’s still no.”

“All right, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said politely. He didn’t look very disappointed, which was good, but a little odd, right? Didn’t he want Tony to say yes? He almost looked like he was smiling very slightly, which couldn’t be right. After a pause hardly long enough for Tony to be be confused, Rogers followed up with, “You designed those floating projection screens, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Tony said, wrong-footed by the sudden shift in topic.

“They aren’t available to the public yet, are they?”

“No. Proprietary stuff. I don’t know how to make it affordable on the mass market. Plus, it’s good PR to have technology on display at HQ nobody understands.”

“Makes sense,” Rogers said nodding. “Can you explain it to me?”

“You won’t be able to follow.”

Rogers shrugged. “Probably not, but I’m curious and don’t mind getting lost. Give me a try.”

Confused but intrigued, Tony did. He explained the equipment that was required in the walls of the entire room so that they could create an illusory surface for the projected light to hit. The miniature cameras. The pixel density. Rogers asked a few decent questions—he’d clearly been reading since their chat about the spectrometer.

Tony finished the pasta while they talked. When he was done, Rogers said with a smile, “Well, I should let you get back to your projects, Mr. Stark. Thank you for inviting me in to see your workshop. And for the explanation. Really aces.”

“Sure,” Tony said, “No problem.”

Rogers left Tony thoroughly baffled.

(Weird.)

Chapter End Notes
* Pep's suit blazer looks like this: http://www.ebay.com/itm/290933324245?
   _trksid=p2055119.m1438.l2649&ssPageName=STRK%3AMEBIDX%3AIT
   (Yeah... I totally want this for me too. :-p)

**This really was the name of a 1940s motorcycle!

Thank you all for the kudos and kind words. They mean the world to me, especially in this trying time. You are so lovely and supportive. Thank you. And as always, hope you liked it! :-)}
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

World-building . . . possibly more than you wanted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Charlie Rose: As the 35th anniversary of the Silent Revolution nears, we’ve assembled a special roundtable to discuss the status of the submissive in modern America. Thank you for joining us. One of the first things that comes to mind, as something to get us started, is a simple question: is the Revolution over?

Pat O’Connor: First, let me just say that it’s a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me. Let me be clear: the Silent Revolution was a great thing for America and for the world. We are a shining beacon of hope for submissives around the globe and that is something we should all be proud of. But take a look around! There are more submissives employed in a wider range of fields than ever before and that is steadily growing. The Silent Revolution was a success.

Jean Dinshaw: Are you honestly saying that America has achieved orientation equality? When for example, MIT has a Physics faculty of 101, ninety male Doms, ten female Dommes, and one submissive. One submissive who, I might add, was just denied tenure.

O’Connor: Some fields draw certain types, orientations, and personalities; you can’t easily point your finger at the causes. And it’s certainly not something you legislate.

Dinshaw: Maybe not something to legislate directly—though that’s a debate worth having another time—but it’s certainly evidence of a hostile climate. Passive discrimination and—

O’Connor: But you have to keep in mind that some fields are dominated—no pun intended—by submissives.

Dinshaw: Of course. How could I forget—you mean, pornography? Modeling? Nursing?

O’Connor: Don’t you think your tone is dismissive there?

Dinshaw: If so, I’d apologize, but the fact you can list a tiny handful of careers that have a majority of submissives—careers, I might add, that are all related to the submissives’ supposed natural inclination for beauty and caregiving—is NOT evidence of equality. For every one field with a submissive majority, there are thousands being totally Dominated. Your orientationist bias shows you what you want to—

O’Connor: Orientationist? Now wait a second! I make a valid point and you immediately start throwing out offensive labels. This is the sort of cheap stunt—

Dinshaw: I call a spade a spade! Your show on Fox News is infamous for—

Tony stumbled blearily into the kitchen. Rogers was wearing his terrible suit and a red tie, looking like a parody of a 1950’s daddy Dom, a real paterfamilias with the team gathered around him at the counter. (Though, he was holding a spatula, so not exactly like a ‘50s Dom.) The others were perched on Tony’s chrome and leather barstools, serving themselves pancakes, bacon, and fruit from a set of platters Tony’d never seen before.

“Good morning,” Rogers said with a little smile. He poured a cup of coffee from the carafe and held it out to Tony.

Tony stared at it.

“Oh, right,” Rogers said, then set the coffee cup on the counter. “Would you like some brunch? I’d be happy to put another omelet on the stove for you, Mr. Stark.”

Tony picked up the coffee, but before he could answer Rogers’ question, Clint cut in.

“Seriously, Steve? You still won’t call him Tony? What gives, man?”

Rogers drew his shoulders back and lifted his chin very slightly. “Mr. Stark hasn’t invited me to that familiarity,” Rogers answered primly.

(Shit.)

Natasha looked curious, Bruce looked disappointed, and Clint looked frankly incredulous. He
stared at Tony a moment, then demanded, “What the fuck, dude? Seriously?”

Tony was still deciding whether to tear Clint a new one or just let Rogers call him Tony when the Captain spoke up.

“It’s entirely Mr. Stark’s prerogative to decide how people address him,” he said firmly to Clint, “and I don’t want to hear another word about it.” Then he turned back to Tony, asking, “Now then, would you like an omelet?”

“Uh. Yes please?”

Rogers smiled and pulled out a bar stool for him. Tony snorted and asked, “You know these are my bar stools, right? They’re not too heavy for me.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Rogers hummed. “Didn’t think they were.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but took a seat.

While he cooked Rogers hummed something slow, regular, and plodding. It sounded like the kind of thing you’d hear in Church. Tony blinked. Oh right. Church. This was Sunday brunch. Post-Church. Tony sipped his coffee, and looked around the counter at the rest of the team as they picked up their conversation and ate their pancakes and their omelets. Weird.

Whatever. Eggs are eggs. Tony clutched his coffee, holding it close to his chest. He stole glances at Rogers as he cooked, deftly chopping asparagus and grating cheese with dizzying speed. His trousers were a little too short and a little too tight and Tony wasn’t above enjoying the view, at least until he realized Clint or Natasha might notice. Tony focused his attention on his coffee once more, still too fuzzy to join in Bruce’s breakdown of the asinine science in “Day After Tomorrow.”

“—and water expands! If the water levels rose like that in New York and then froze, all the buildings would collapse because—”

Tony was pretty sure that Clint and Natasha were humoring Bruce, but he couldn’t actually tell. Which made sense, since, duh—spies.

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony looked up and Rogers smiled at him as he slid a beautiful omelet onto the counter for Tony. Something about Rogers’ smile made him nervous. It wasn’t bright or obviously happy; it was a quiet smile, subtly pleased. Tony looked at the omelet. Suddenly, Tony didn’t want it anymore; he forced himself to pick up his fork anyway. Rogers took a seat next to him and served himself some fruit and a pancake. He asked Bruce something about tornadoes.

Tony fiddled with his fork, running mental calculations. Interpersonal calculations, the kind of calculations Tony wasn’t good at. (And if ever you needed proof that subs aren’t naturally more socially and emotionally perceptive than their Dom counterparts, well, here he is!) He’d run all these calculations before, had a mental list of data points: that 17%; the distance between them on the couch; going to Mass in Latin with the extra-crazy crazies; calling him “Mr. Stark”; rushing to get the door; cooking for people; “I didn’t realize you were Ms Pott’s sub;” on and on, bits of conflicting information that never fit any one pattern. Rogers and Bob, Bob and Rogers. Two frustrating puzzles for which he was clearly missing key data points.

Tony stared at the steaming omelet for a moment. Methodically, slowly, he began dividing it into bite-sized pieces with his fork.

What did it all mean? The time Rogers delivered lunch? Or brought him some coffee? The omelet. The smile. There was something not just gentle, but coaxing about it. As if to say: *Don’t be afraid of me, little sub . . . I’d never hurt you . . . here, have some food . . . come a little closer . . .*. Like Tony was some wild doe to be tamed with scraps. Was making Tony an omelet a victory somehow? Did that mean Tony’d lost?

Tony’d considered the possibility that Rogers just wanted to get a leg over, but was too old fashioned to suggest they fuck without taking Tony to dinner first. The theory had a lot in its favor; even if Tony was a famous slut, Rogers seemed the sort to be polite about wanting a go. In which case, it wasn’t about Tony specifically— Rogers needed to get laid and Tony was nearest and easiest (in every sense of the word).

Nothing wrong with that, not really. Tony’d had plenty of casual sex and smack, but he couldn’t this time. Not like this. Not with the Captain.

And less and less with anyone else either. It was getting harder and harder to walk away from a night of casual fun with a random Dom knowing that while he thought “NSA pleasure for two” the Dom was often thinking, “I sure gave that bitch whore a seeing to.” He’d been militantly indifferent to what his hook-ups thought of him in the past, but it was getting harder to shrug off. Harder to feel like they hadn’t won.

Not that Tony thought Rogers’d use the word “whore,” but still. Rogers wouldn’t think of Tony the same way once he’d had him. Wouldn’t give him the same respect. He might even think he
could order Tony around whenever, wherever.

No. They were teammates for God’s sake!

(Fuck. Maybe as *Captain*, Rogers thought—) Tony took a long deep breath. (No. *No*. Rogers flipped his shit when he thought SHIELD was putting something—how’d he put it?—*improper* into the contract. He knows I’m not just team whore. Or Captain’s whore.)

There was another possibility, though. Was Rogers trying to *tame* him? Bratty Subs Brought In Line style, like a more genteel version of Master Marcus? Did he want to domesticate the great Tony Stark? *Reform* him? Was Tony some sort of project? Did Rogers think he could make Tony omelets, get his trust, get him under then pull the strings himself? Put Tony in his place—lock him up, pin him down. *Fuck*. That was—

“Mr. Stark?” Rogers’ voice pulled him from his thoughts. “Are you all right? Is there something wrong with the omelet?” Tony looked down and realized he’d been destroying the omelet, hacking it into smaller and smaller bites until it was ground all over the plate. “I can make you another if you—”

“Chill, it’s fine,” Tony said, scooping some of it onto his fork. “Sorry my table manners aren’t up to old fashioned standards.” He shoveled a bite into his mouth—*delicious*. It was a relief when his phone buzzed before Rogers could reply. Tony checked the caller id.

“Stark Industries,” Tony said by way of explanation, with his mouth full. “Excuse me.” He hopped off the stool and padded into the next room.

“Pep, my love! Tell me that R&D hasn’t fucked up my designs.”

After a productive talk with Pepper about the StarkTab upgrade specs—mercifully undamaged by their time with lesser engineers—and brainstormed marketing—which Tony was good at, but found boring—they’d rung off with a promise to talk about something other than business soon. Pepper ran to her next meeting and Tony returned to the common room.

Rogers was there. He sat hunched over and alone at the kitchen counter, surrounded by the detritus of everyone’s breakfast. Even with Rogers back turned to him, Tony could tell Rogers’ face was buried in his hands. Tony paused with a frown, the anxieties of breakfast momentarily forgotten.

“Rogers?” Tony called softly. “Are you all right?”

The super-soldier straightened instantly at the sound of Tony’s voice. He lowered his hands to the counter with a sudden motion, nearly knocking over a mug.

“Yes, of course,” Rogers said without turning around. “I’m fine.”

Tony hesitated for a moment then came closer. “Are you sure?”

“I’m fine,” Rogers repeated. He began gathering the dishes, and carrying them over to the sink. He turned on the tap and put a stopper in. The movements were the least coordinated Tony’d ever seen from the graceful Captain. Tony swallowed.

“Because it would be okay if you weren’t, you know?” Tony said. He meant to sound firm, but it sounded tentative instead.

“Jeeze!” Rogers said, the closest to swearing or snapping Tony’d ever witnessed. “I said, I’m *fine*, all right?!” He set the dishes down a little too hard on the counter and then took a deep breath.

“Okay,” Tony said. “Right. It’s fine.”

“Sorry,” Rogers said after a moment checking the plates for cracks; they seemed undamaged.

Tony hovered. “Here,” he said, “You don’t need to do that. I’ll call my cleaning crew. They’re just downstairs and—”

“Please don’t, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, sounding a bit more normal. “I’m happy to do it. I’m sure they’re busy.”

(Well, sure, but cleaning my place is always priority. Everybody’s offices can just wait.)

“Here, at least let me—” Tony picked up his own dishes. He put the mug and utensils in the dishwasher and emptied his plate into the trash. Rogers was staring.

“Was there something wrong with it?” Rogers asked again.

“No!” Tony reassured him hurriedly. “It was fine. *Swell* or whatever.”

“It was fine,” Rogers repeated blankly staring into the garbage at the entire omelet Tony’d just tossed.
(Shit. Yeah, throw food away in front of the guy who grew up poor in the Great Depression. Awesome idea.)

“Oh, right.” Tony swallowed, embarrassed and guilty. “I probably shouldn’t have thrown that away,” Tony conceded. “I, uh—“

Rogers turned away. “They’re your eggs, Mr. Stark. You can do whatever you want with them.” He picked up the scrub brush.

“Right,” Tony said, feeling judged and for once not able to disagree. Some ridiculous part of Tony’s mind wanted to make excuses—I wasn’t just wasting food without thinking, I was rejecting a symbol of you—but he wasn’t sure it was even true and either way that explanation was hardly going to make it better. Or maybe he should try, “hey, guess how many hungry people my foundation feeds in a year?”

Yeah. That was probably a bad idea too.

"After all," Rogers added softly, "we're not rationing for the war anymore."

Tony didn't know what to say to that.

Rogers began washing up. The silence was painful.

“I’ll be in the workshop.”

Tony fled. Again.

))))))))))))))))))))))))))


Ellison: Thank you for having me.

Rose: There’s a lot of talk around the anniversary of the Silent Revolution about other American social movements, particularly FreeDomism. Would you care to comment?

Ellison: Well, I think equality is at the heart of both movements. The FreeDom movement of the ‘50s fought against the white assumption that all non-whites are necessarily submissive at heart, perhaps not with each other, but in their relations with the “Master Race.” Most of us can now recognize that as unspeakable bigotry. That’s FreeDomism. Liberationism is the quest for equality between orientations and—

O’Connor: If I could just join in here—Mr. Ellison, it’s a pleasure to be here with you. Your father has always been one of my personal heroes.

Ellison (quietly): Really?

O’Connor: Absolutely! I just wanted to pick up, though, on what you were saying and mention that the Domina movement, which predates liberationism, already sought to remedy those orientation-based inequalities.

Dinshaw: Ha! THAT is simply false. I support the Domina movement and it played an important role in our nation’s history, but the Femme Dommes of the Domina movement had NO interest in the rights of submissives. It was all about having their status as fellow Doms recognized, as it should be, but it was NOT about orientational equality across the board. That’s what liberationists are fighting for now.

O’Connor: I really think you’re misrepresenting the Dominas, but can we just come back to this word: liberationist. I know I’m speaking for a lot of people over at Fox News—though maybe I shouldn’t mention my own network while on CNN—when I say that term has always rubbed me the wrong way. I’m a big advocate for “equalist,” as a more accessible term that doesn’t have that jarring association.

Dinshaw: It’s totally transparent why you hate the term liberationism—it’s because it implicitly reminds everyone of its opposite, the status quo: oppression. Equalist SOUNDS like a good term in theory, but throwing out liberationism effaces the hard work of the pioneers of the Silent Revolution you praised so formulaically a few minutes ago. It suggests that the fight for orientational equality is in fact over and that equality—not oppression—is the new status quo.

Ellison: Jean, I think you make an excellent point. FreeDomism, Domina-ism, liberationism—they’re all different fronts in a larger war against oppression, inequality, and injustice. Late in life, one of my father’s greatest regrets was that he didn’t do more across the board for Femme Dommes. I think if he could have lived to see liberationism and the progress we’ve all made, he’d be very glad, but he’d still be rolling up his sleeves saying, “Tom! There’s work to do.”

O’Connor: I’m sorry to—
Charlie Rose: Well, it's certainly still a passionate subject after thirty-five years! We'll be back shortly.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your kindness. Your kudos and encouraging comments mean a lot to me and make me tremendously happy.

This is a very personal story for me so, as a kindness, I ask that if you don’t like something in this story, or the way it relates to RL, or think I’m Doing Feminism Wrong—please don’t comment and say so. Please follow the “can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” rule. I know some authors solicit both positive and negative feedback, but I’m going through a rough time—particularly related to gender things which this story explores—so in this mental state, I’d like know that this is reliably a safe space. Thank you. I really don’t mean for this request to shut down musings, conversations, curiosity, or anything else. I love that! It makes my day! Also, I mean, this IS an AU and fiction— I'm not claiming to represent reality. :-) Okay, sorry for the long (possibly pathetic and nervous sounding) author’s note!

Thank you so much for reading! I promise there will be more Steve and Tony in the next chapter!
That which yields, my brilliant beta, suggests that I warn you for spoilers for The Hobbit, if you haven't read the book. (And if not, go read it! It's great!)

You are all wonderful! Please accept this longer-than-usual chapter as a humble offering of thanks. :-)

Tony was sorely tempted to avoid Rogers after the Guilty Omelet Incident, but he found he was unwilling to cut himself off from time with the team. Or, rather Bruce and Clint. (Natasha he wouldn't mind avoiding.)

So when Clint stampeded into his workshop the next day calling out that they were showing Rogers Terminator II, come quick, Tony ordered another pizza and came up to the common room. Rogers actually asked Tony if the seat next to him was taken before sitting down, the usual distance apart. As surreptitiously as he could, Tony watched Rogers watch the movie. Things were back to normal, whatever normal was living in a Tower with a defrosted super-soldier, two ninjas, and the not-so-jolly green giant.

Things were fine.

"Sir? Captain Rogers would like to meet with you," JARVIS announced, turning down AC/DC to be heard. "He asks when it might be convenient."

The wash of nerves Tony felt at that simple request was absurd.

Tony set down his welding torch.

"What's on my calendar today, JARVIS."

"You have a conference call with the CFO of the Foundation in half an hour. As I have already mentioned. Thrice."

"Right. And after that?"

"Your calendar is clear until tomorrow afternoon."

Tony frowned. He hated to leave the meeting with Rogers hanging over his head, but he couldn't blow off the foundation. Isaac would shit a brick.

"Set the meeting with Rogers immediately post conference call, ok J?"

"Of course, sir."

Tony reluctantly turned his attention from engineering to fiscal calculations.

2004 on the red carpet of the Gala for the Submissives Opportunity Fund

Paparazzo [breaking onto the red carpet & shoving a microphone in Stark’s face]: “Mr. Stark!? Mr Stark! You claim you’re committed to equality— so why does your scholarship fund discriminate against Doms?”

Stark: “Listen, sweetheart, when you’re giving away thirty million dollars, you can bestow scholarships on whoever the fuck you want, ok? I’m the one giving my money away, so I don’t see what right anybody has to complain.”
But, hey, since you ask: targeting submissives for scholarships IS promoting equality. In the sciences especially, orientation inequality is most radical, and I oughtta know. There is institutionalized, engrained, and even unconscious discrimination against submissives in the hard sciences. By giving subs access to scholarships and mentoring, I’m seeking to level the playing field. The goal IS equality and I’m targeting the people still struggling to get it. But, hey, sorry if Doms are feeling a little excluded—welcome to our fucking world!”

Tony’s call with Isaac and his team went well; it had been a good quarter for the Foundations’ investments. The dividends would be enough to fund the renovations needed at The Submissives’ Safehouse.

(In when Tony turned his parents mansion into a high security shelter for homeless and battered subs, Pepper’d suggested calling it “Stark House.” Tony declined; he hated to put his name on everything. Especially considering his less than sterling reputation . . . )

Isaac’s subcommittee was still looking for an affordable short-term facility for their current east wing residents, but he was confident they could find something appropriate before they’d need to begin the renovations. All in all, things were going well. Isaac and his team had a lot to be proud of.

In the elevator on the way up to the common room, Tony braced himself. Being summoned to a meeting with Rogers felt a lot like hearing a Dom say, “we need to talk,” and those words never boded well.

Tony was relieved to find the entire team assembled, sitting neatly around the formal dining table.

“Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, rising to his feet, “thank you so much for making time.”

“Sure thing,” Tony said and hurried into his seat before Rogers could pull it out for him. (Ha! Victory!)

“Well, as I think you know, Clint—no, sorry— Hawkeye, Black Widow and I have been training in the gym you designed. It’s been wonderful, but I think it’s high time to get us all together in one place to train and talk about what we bring to the team.”

Bruce let out a self-deprecating snort.

“My vast financial resources?” Tony suggested with a smirk.

Rogers—no, Captain America—frowned at him very slightly. “I was thinking more along the lines of ‘aerial support.’ I’ve seen a little of your firepower, but wanted to ask: can Iron Man carry a teammate?”

“Sure,” Tony shrugged. “I mean, I’ve carried people before on rescues.”

“Good,” the Captain said. “In the event of an incident, getting Hawkeye into a position above the battlefield will be crucial. We should practice aerial lifts.”

“Roger that, Rogers,” Tony said with a little salute.

“I have another question,” the Captain said. “I’ve been thinking about your projections and I was wondering—could you use them to make a . . . an illusory obstacle course, with projected targets that could move?”

“Like a virtual training ground?” Tony asked. “Sure. Give me a little while and, yeah . . .” Tony frowned in concentration, running some mental calculations. “I could probably program it so you can design the modules yourself, Captain. Well, with JARVIS to do all the actual coding.”

“That’s swell,” the Captain said, looking very pleased. “And I’d like Iron Man to join our sparing. We need to start learning each other’s fighting style if we’re going to coordinate in battle. Learn each other’s strengths and weaknesses.”

Tony nodded. At that point Bruce, who’d been scowling for the last few minutes, cut in.

“Uh, Captain—I really don’t think the . . . Other Guy should be joining in.”

The Captain nodded. “If SHIELD’s projections and your own are correct, it seems too soon, but the, uh, meditation thing you do? Could you try doing that while we spar, so you can get used to holding your calm while we’re fighting?”

Bruce considered it. He looked skeptical, but after a few moments gave a little shrug. “Sure. Can’t hurt, right?”

“That’s the spirit,” the Captain said encouragingly, then looked at the ceiling. “Excuse me, JARVIS? Could you project the chart I’ve been working on please?”

“Certainly, Captain.”
JARVIS put Rogers’ notes on the wall. The Captain still wasn’t typing—his chart was hand-drawn and handwritten with small, meticulous print.

“So, I’ve got lots of our weapons specializations and skill sets up there, but we should work on expanding it. Widow, would you like to go over your training?”

“We’ll work on it.” She gave them all a lethal smile.

Well, this meeting certainly wasn’t boring.

Tony whipped up a set of virtual training modules in no time and then had JARVIS modify them so that he wouldn’t know all the solutions. (Genius. Duh.) Their training gym was already a work of art, if Tony did say so himself; so no extra work required there. The ceilings were twenty-five feet high to allow Iron Man some maneuverability and the place had just about everything a super powered response team could want: climbing walls; perches and ledges; trapdoors that could bring props up or fall out from under their feet; D-rings in the ceiling for every manner of equipment. Rogers thought it was aces.

“I’m at fourteen!” Tony crowed. “What’s your count, Legolas?”

“Dude! Seriously, when will you drop the Lord of the Rings thing?!” And arrow whizzed past Iron Man’s sensors to hit the simulated baddy behind him. “And you get that in this analogy you’re Gimli, right? The short, hairy dwarf? But, hey, if that’s how you wanna roll—”

“Less chatter on the comms!” Rogers barked. His shield ricochet off the walls, took out five minions and returned to his hand.

“Nice, Captain,” Tony called. (Someday, Tony was gonna study the physics of that shield . . . it really made no sense.)

“Widow? Status report?” Rogers said briskly, barely out of breath the bastard.

“Nine down. No injuries. Getting into position for a sneak attack against main target.”

“Good. Hawkeye?”

“They’re swarming my perch. Gonna need to relocate soon. There are more of them than I can—”

“NONE SHALL DEFEAT MY SPIDER WARRIORS!!! DESPAIR, PUNY MORTALS!”

“Iron Man, can you get Hawkeye?”

“Little busy with the main boss, Cap!”

“Boss? Seriously?” Clint exclaimed. “I knew these were all modeled on World of Warcraft. Tony, you’re such a—”

“Hawkeye! Chatter!”

“Sorry, dude.”

“Iron Man, I’ll cover you—get Hawkeye to a new position in, three, two, one!”

“On it!” Tony left the dragon to Rogers and Romanov for a while.

“Shit!”

“Leap of faith, Hawk!” Tony called getting in position. Clint jumped from his ledge just as it was overwhelmed with giant digital spiders. Tony caught his chest harness in one gauntlet and flew him across the gym to the next ledge.

“YIPPEE KI-YAY, MOTHERFUCKERS!!!” Clint got four shots off mid-air. The spiders let out mechanical shrieks as JARVIS cut their projections. Tony dropped Clint on another perch, then turned back to the dragon.

“NO! THIS ISN’T POSSIBLE!” the dragon bellowed as the last of its spider minions collapsed. “YOU SHALL KNOW MY RAGE!”


“So you need cover?”

“Nah, I’m good, just lost flight capability apparently. No injuries. And, JARVIS, we’re gonna have words about letting the boss have a special ability it doesn’t use until the end—‘cause, seriously, if it can breath fire, why didn’t it lead off with that? Why do bad guys alway—”

“Chatter!”
“NOOOOOOO!!!” the dragon roared, then shattered into little shards of light. Tony blinked. Natasha was hanging from one of the ceiling ropes where the dragon had been projected.

“I think I won that round, gentlemen,” she said quietly and slid down the rope to land gracefully on the floor.

“Well done, team,” Rogers said beaming around the gym at them. Tony flipped the faceplate up and grinned. He hadn’t had this much fun in . . . well, he actually couldn’t remember the last time he’d had this much fun. (Especially such wholesome fun!)

“How’d you take the dragon out?” Tony asked Natasha.

“I figured JARVIS had a soft spot of *The Hobbit*.” She shrugged. “One hit—Widow’s Bite to the ‘patch in the hollow of his left breast as bare as a snail out of its shell.’” Tony stared at her, eyes wide. (Wow. That was . . . wow.) “Well,” she said with a little smirk. “I’m gonna hit the showers.”

“Coming, Nat,” Clint called, “cause, I’m not sure that killing the dragon automatically means you won that round. The way I see it—”

Bruce gave Rogers and Tony a shaky wave and followed the ninjas out. (His eyes were looking a bit green, but he seemed to be weathering their training pretty well.)

“Good fight, Iron Man,” Rogers said seriously. Only Captain America could seem dignified in a spangly outfit like that.

“Likewise, Cap.” Tony said, still grinning. Rogers grinned back.

“These training modules you and JARVIS come up with are sure something. Really something.” Rogers shook his head. “I know that you designed all of this, but sometimes it’s hard to grasp,” Rogers’ voice went a little soft, “I mean, it’s hard to believe it can exist at all, let alone that I know the fella who made it.”

Tony blinked. His heart sped a little and his cheeks felt slightly warm, but it was just the exertion of flying the suit. Contrary to popular opinion, it was quite physically demanding.

Rogers cleared his throat and glanced away for a moment.

“Your aerial work with Clint and Natasha is progressing really well. How did it feel to you?”

Tony shrugged; it looked weird when he did that in the suit, but he couldn’t stop himself. “Good, I guess. Though we should probably practice without the harness. We may not always have the luxury of suiting up.”

Rogers frowned. “But, if you’re in the armor, won’t we all be?”

“My armor can body con in less than a minute, right over my clothes,” Tony said, not bothering to conceal his smugness. “You guys actually need time to put on the kevlar and whatnot. Besides, I’m working on something that will let me summon the suit any time, anywhere. So we should probably run a few tests for catch-and-carry without the harnesses.”

Rogers nodded with a pensive frown. “It may be better to phase those out if we can anyway; having something for an opponent to grab hold of isn’t a great idea if we can avoid it. Maybe we should work on catch-and-carry a bit, if you have time. My uniform doesn’t have a harness and I’m more likely to walk away from a bad fall than the others.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said. “Sounds good.”

Rogers nodded almost eagerly then, and asked Tony what he thought the best approach would be. Tony flipped the faceplate down, beckoned Rogers closer, and showed him how he needed three limbs to steer properly. It took a little bit of brainstorming, but they eventually decided the best way to fly from a standstill would be for Cap to sling his arm over Tony’s shoulders and stand on one of Tony’s boots while Tony held his waist. (It didn’t look like a hug . . . not really.)

Tony didn’t believe in babying people, so he launched sudden and fast. He heard Cap exclaim, “Oh!” then repeat, his tone awed, “oh . . . oh geeze.” Tony laughed and did figure eights around the gym.

“How’s maneuverability, Iron Man? Can you still fire your repulsors?”

“One way to find out!”

Tony practiced sending stun beams for a few rounds. It was a little awkward, but hopefully he’d only have passengers briefly anyway. He picked up the pace a little and had JARVIS summon a few more projector villains to shoot at.

“Feeling pretty useless like this, Iron Man?” Cap complained while Tony took out all the baddies.
“Here—I’m gonna jump!”

Tony released his grip and Rogers vaulted off to land squarely on what would have been the ogre’s back. He made a stabbing motion with the SHIELD and JARVIS killed its lights.

“Hey JARVIS?” Tony called. “Surround the Captain with zombies, would ya?”

JARVIS complied. Tony heard Rogers exclaim something that sounded like “ack” as a horde of zombies appeared out of nowhere and began ambling towards him.

“Want a hand there, Cap?” Tony asked over the comm. “I thought we might practice evacuations.”

“Sounds good, Iron Man. These things are giving me the heebie-jeebies.”

Tony laughed. He couldn’t come up with a good quip to tease Cap about ‘heebie-jeebies,’ so he just said: “I don’t want to break your bones by flying in too fast.” Tony watched with a certain wicked glee as Rogers took out the first row of zombies with a well-tossed shield then realized that he’d hardly made a dent.

“So,” Tony said, “I’ll slow down and instead of grabbing you, I’ll grab the shield. So get a good grip on it, Cap, one that won’t break your arm.”

“Uh-huh,” Cap muttered, spinning nervously at the center of the zombies.

“Jump as high as you can, and I’ll catch the shield. When you’re ready.”

Okay. One, two, three!

Rogers vaulted into the air and JARVIS, who apparently had a certain dramatic flair, made the zombies swarm into the space Rogers had just left. Tony learned then that “as high as he could jump” was pretty damn high for Rogers; luckily it was easy to readjust Iron Man’s flight pattern. Tony caught the shield smoothly, then pulled Rogers up into the side hold. (Side hold. See? Not hug.)

“So, Cap, how’d you like your first flight?”

JARVIS killed the zombies and Tony touched down with Rogers still under his arm. The faceplate flipped up automatically on landing, so Tony heard with his own ears Rogers’ breathless, “That was amazing.” His eyes were bright as he looked down at Tony, standing close with his arm still around Iron Man’s shoulders. “Amazing.”

And somehow Tony didn’t think Rogers was just talking about the suit and— (Shit, shit, shit! Don’t blush. Fuck, don’t blush.) Tony flipped the faceplate down. Rogers looked startled.

“Go again?” Tony asked through the modulator.

Rogers grinned. “Please.”

They took off.

Excuse me, Mr. Stark?” Rogers called out, voice loud enough to carry over Black Sabbath. Tony was tempted to let it keep playing—Rogers probably hated it—but Tony wasn’t always a brat, so he called, “JARVIS, volume 25%.”

“What can I do for ya, Cap?” Tony asked, tearing his eyes away from the charts he’d been working on.

Tony caught his breath. There he was—big, blond, and beautiful—hovering on the threshold of Tony’s lab, actually waiting to be invited in. He still waited for Tony’s okay. Rogers’ stance looked a bit like parade rest, hands behind his back, feet apart at the width of his ridiculously broad shoulders.

“Yeah, sure. Come on in, Cap,” Tony said. He glanced away, then back.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark.” And the Captain smiled a gentle little smile, like being let into the workshop meant something, like it was special. He approached Tony’s workbench, taking one hand from behind his back to present a white bag from La Fleur Patisserie. “I was exploring the city this morning, getting reacquainted with it, and I stumbled across this bakery. I thought you might like these.”

Tony peeked inside the bag. Oh hell yeah, those éclairs looked good.

“You know I’m a billionaire, right?” Tony asked. Rogers cocked his head. “You can’t bribe me with baked goods,” Tony added pulling out an éclair and taking a huge uncouth bite.

Rogers smiled at him. “Can’t blame a fella for trying.”
Tony snorted, amused despite himself.

“Well,” Rogers said, rocking back a bit on his heels and putting his hands in his pockets. “I thought you might have missed breakfast.” He gave a little shrug.

Tony paused in his second bite. “So you brought me éclairs? I thought you’d bring a sub fruit and yogurt. Or muesli.”

Rogers wrinkled his nose. “Me? Nah. Thought we’d established I’m a pancakes and bacon kinda guy.”

“That’s almost as bad for me as an éclair.”

“But tastier than yogurt.”

“Fair point.”

Tony took another bite and Rogers just hovered for a few moments.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Mmm?”

“Would you have dinner with me?”

“Uh, nope,” Tony said around his mouthful of éclair. “Answer’s still no, Cap.”

Rogers nodded. Again, he didn’t look terribly disappointed. He gave Tony a little smile.

“All right, Mr. Stark. Thank you for inviting me in.”

Tony shrugged. He took another bit of éclair and looked back over to the schematics.

“Is that Bob?” Rogers asked softly.

“Yeah.”

“You’re still working on it?”

“Yeah.” Tony sighed. “I hate that I can’t figure it out and, sure, I don’t have the full data, but I can’t just not work on it, ya know?” Tony chewed on his lip. “I mean, if it’s a portal anything could come pouring out of there and if we don’t know how to close it . . . well, it—how’d you say?—it gives me the ‘heebie-jeebies.'”

“I’m glad you’re working on it,” Rogers said. “If anyone could find a solution, it’s you.” From anyone else it might have sounded like flattery; from Cap it just sounded like an observation.

Rogers’ tone was a little mournful as he added, “I just wish there were something I could do to help.” Tony’s eyes had already been drifting back to the schematics when Rogers added, “If there’s anything I can do, Mr. Stark, anything at all, please let me know.”

“Oh,” Tony frowned. “I can’t think of anything.”

Rogers nodded. “Yeah, I figured.” He shook himself a little as though dispelling his melancholy.

“Well, the best way to help is probably just to leave you to your work.” He smiled at Tony, that soft gentle smile. “Good luck, Mr. Stark.” He bowed, then walked away, seeming almost pleased.

Tony turned back to his schematics.

That guy was weird.

Finally, at two am, Tony had closed up all the Bob schematics and called Pepper. (To be fair, it was only eleven in California.) He missed her terribly. She was his touchstone, his true north, and all that other poetic stuff. So he called her to talk. (But not really.) They caught up on small things, worked a little on the fast-approaching fundraiser, agreed to go clubbing again when she visited. She’d taken up some new exercise regimen and Tony listened patiently to her enthusiastic explanations for a while before he started to fidget, his attention wandering. Now it was something about art.

“I can’t figure Rogers out,” Tony eventually blurted out, rudely cutting off Pepper’s description of the new Klimt exhibit at LACMA.

“Oh?” Pepper said. She liked doing that-- making an inquiring noise instead of asking a direct question. That way you’d tell her whatever was most pressing on your mind. It was one of her active listening techniques, designed to encourage dialogue and not dominate discussion.

(Pepper took communication very seriously. This rendered her friendship with Tony all the more mysterious.)
“Yeah.” Tony left it at that, because he honestly didn’t know what he wanted to tell Pepper or what he’d been hoping she might say. He’d never actually told her that Rogers had asked him on a date, let alone that Rogers might be making a habit of it.

There was a long pause.

“Have you two talked about Howard?” Pepper eventually asked.


“Do you want to?”

“No.” Tony had enough trouble wrapping his head around Rogers without dragging dear old daddy into the equation. That would just mess with his calculations.

“What have you talked about?”


“Mmm.” The silence lingered again. Tony wouldn’t break first, even under Pep’s communication voodoo.

Silence.

More silence.

“Have you considered the possibility that that might be the problem?” Pep asked softly.

“What might?”

“That that’s all you talk about. I know I only met the guy for a few minutes, but maybe it would be good for both of you to talk. And not just about superficial stuff.” Pepper’s voice was gentle, kind. “He must be so lost in the twenty-first century. I can’t imagine. Maybe you should talk about things you really care about with him.”

“I care about Stark tech!”

“And the Avengers, and Star Wars. I know you do,” Pepper said. He could tell from her voice that she was smiling. “And you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Tony sighed. Pepper waited silently, but Tony couldn’t make himself say it out loud. He was sick of trying to explain Liberationism 101 to thick-skulled Doms. It was exhausting and usually pointless since they either already got it or wouldn’t fucking listen. Talking had never been one of Tony’s strengths; he’d never been all that good with words and got frustrated and lost his temper too easily.

Pepper let the silence linger. Tony fidgeted, free to squirm and toy with his cuffs since it wasn’t a video call.

If they talked about the important stuff and Rogers disappointed him, if he turned out to be as big an orientationist asshole as Tony sometimes feared, then Tony couldn’t just cut him out. Rogers would still be there: in his Tower, his commanding officer, his Captain.

Tony swallowed heavily. He didn’t want admit that he’d rather fear the worst than know it for sure.

“Of course, you’re right, Pep.” Tony said eventually, but without conviction. “You always are.”

“Don’t be silly,” Pepper said primly. “I’m not always right. I’m only usually right.” Tony smiled; in that moment he missed her so fiercely he thought he could feel it in his bones. “Now then,” she said briskly. “You had a meeting with Isaac, didn’t you? What’s he planning for the renovations?”

Chapter End Notes

I am overwhelmed by your kindness and generosity. Your comments are like a big fluffy blanket of comfort and empathy. Thank you!
Rogers had moved into Stark Tower seventeen days ago.

For seventeen days, Tony’d let it slide—(Shocking, right?)—because, well, Rogers clearly wasn’t trying to be a dick. But it was still fucking annoying, so Tony’d done what he did so often: rolled his eyes, frowned, sighed, snorted. When Rogers couldn’t take a fucking hint, Tony had upgraded to explicit verbal snarking:

“Seriously, Cap? My wrists aren’t broken. I can pull out my own chair.”

“Relax, Cap. I’m just getting up for more wine, no need to leap to your feet and do the ants in your pants dance.”

“Oh boy! Good thing you rushed ahead to get the door. It looks sooooo heavy. My inferior musculature probably couldn’t handle it.”

“Hey, look—Bruce and Natasha are still sitting and haven’t been struck down by the vengeful gods of outdated etiquette.”

There was no change.

Really, they should sit down and have a mature, level-headed discussion— the kind Pepper would approve of. Yeah. A nice, calm discussion about outdated notions of chivalry and their intrinsically orientationist assumptions. Soon. Before Tony snapped.

Tony hated going to SHIELD. Hated the low hum of their air filters. Hated the industrial lighting that made him look old and tired. Hated the confusing, unmarked hallways. Hated the whole place with a wild, fiery passion that he wished would make it die in a fire.

But Pep was right. He did care about the Avengers. So, meetings.

“Tony Stark?”

Tony turned. The Dom smiling down at him could have walked straight out of central casting: Interchangeably Handsome Square-jawed White Dude Hero. (I mean, hello, handsome!, but seriously, could anyone tell those guys in Pacific Rim apart?)

“It’s really great to meet you,” Dom said stepping closer. “I was hoping I’d see you around SHIELD. I’m new. Just came on from the CIA.”

Dom held out his hand.

“So, what brings you to SHIELD today?” Harris asked.

“Meetings-- we all have to serve our time in purgatory.”

Harris laughed loudly. Tony raised an eyebrow and looked up at him consideringly. (It wasn’t that funny was it?)

“Nice.” Harris kept chuckling and shook his hand. “Meetings I don’t mind; it’s the paperwork that kills me.”

Tony shrugged. “I pay people for that.”

Harris laughed again. “I wish I could!” He took another step closer. “So, Tony, I’d love to chat some more. How about coffee?”

Tony blinked. (That was fast.) He checked the time, then shook his head; he didn’t even have to decide whether to make up an excuse or not.

“Better not,” Tony said. “My meeting starts on the hour, so I should probably head that way.”
“Aw, come on,” Harris said with a roguish smile. He had perfect teeth. “Nobody’s gonna expect Tony Stark to be right on time. I’ll get you out and back before you’re anything more than fashionably late.”

“I like to defy expectations,” Tony said, “sometimes by being punctual.” Tony checked his phone again. “Later, Harris!”

“Call me Chris,” the guy urged following Tony as he started to walk away.

Tony sighed a little. (Okay. Getting pretty tedious here.)

“I think I prefer Harris,” Tony replied, still walking. He picked up the pace a little.

“Seriously?” Harris’ voice was incredulous, then a little irritated, “Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?” Tony snapped.

“You’re not even giving me a chance,” Harris said, then added in a confidential tone, “You know, I think it’s great that they put a sub on the Avengers Initiative. Really!”


“Aw, don’t be like that. You know what I mean.” Harris was still trailing after him. A few agents paused to look at them momentarily, then went about their business.

“What’s the matter?” Harris asked, frustration edging into his tone.

“I’m a really nice guy—why’re you shooting me down so fast?” (Okay, that does it.)


Tony sped his steps again, eager to outpace Harris.

“Wait!”

Harris’s hand shot out, curling tight around Tony’s arm to slow him down. Tony’s eyes blazed.

“Grabbing me? Without my permission?” Tony hissed.

“That’s not very nice.”

Harris released him and held his hands up in surrender.

“Sorry. Look, we got off on the wrong foot. Can we just—”

“No. I’m telling you: back off.”

Tony strode away and this time Harris let him. Tony just wanted to get this fucking meeting over with. SHIELD was like a warren. Or a labyrinth. (The bad kind, with no David Bowie.) Tony checked the map on his phone. (Hm.) The break room, but more importantly the coffee machine, was on the way to conference room 22.

When Tony entered the break room, he saw Rogers talking with Agent Thomas “my friends call me ‘Dom’ ” Dommenick. Aka Agent Dickface, head of the Stark Terror betting pool.

(Seriously, SHIELD should fire the lot of them—they wrote emails about it. Emails with Tony’s full name in them. And they thought he wouldn’t hack in and find out? Morons.)

Tony ignored them and strode over to the coffee machine. Somebody had just brewed a new pot, but it had the sharp, acidic smell of bad institutional coffee, the kind that tasted burnt even when it was fresh. Tony didn’t really want it anymore, but maybe he should take some all the same. It was piping hot so, worst-case scenario, he could spill it on Agent Dickface if he got too close.

“Hello, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said politely. Tony startled. Rogers had somehow appeared silently at Tony’s side while he scowled at the coffee machine. Seriously, the guy was almost as quiet as Natasha, which was simply unfair. Rogers poured some coffee in a to-go cup, then asked, “Would you like some coffee?”

Tony shrugged. “It’s terrible, but, hey, why not?”

Rogers handed him the cup he’d just poured. Across the break room, Agent Dickface was smirking at him. His eyes flicked over to Rogers, then back; he raised an eyebrow and his smirk grew even nastier. Tony smirked back then flashed him a dazzling smile, just to fuck with him.

“Ready for the meeting, Mr. Stark?” Rogers asked at his side, seemingly oblivious to Agent Dickface.

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said, following Rogers out of the break room. (The door was already open.) As they walked side-by-side down the corridor, Tony tried to put the fucking SHIELD Doms from his mind. (Orientationist asshole sack of shit dickface moron . . .) He wasn’t having much
success. Tony gave a barely suppressed shudder of revulsion. To think he’d nearly given that jerk a tumble when they’d first met. (Ew.)

“It’s weird being back at SHIELD,” Rogers eventually piped up.

“Mmm,” Tony mumbled absently. (Shithead douchbag . . . should hack in and have him CC Fury on the betting chain. . . . Nah, Fury’d probably laugh. Maybe scramble the guy’s access card, let it malfunction and leave him in one of their interrogation rooms . . .)

“It’s really nice to live someplace a bit more homey,” Rogers added. “I’m grateful.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Tony shrugged. “I had the space. No big deal.”

They walked quietly a few more moments. Some event must have ended recently; the corridor was crowded with SHIELD Agents dressed in their full gear. Rogers stood out in his dockers and leather jacket. And, well, Tony always stood out there. Especially next to Rogers, who towered at least eight inches taller. (Not that Tony’d calculated or anything.)

“Room 22, right?” Rogers asked, checking the doors. Tony nodded, but as he neared the door Rogers dashed ahead, awkwardly dodged a pair of Agents, and got there first; he held the door open with a flourish, head high, shoulders back.

“Jesus!” Tony cried, freezing in place. “Stop doing THAT!”

Rogers stared at him blankly, still holding the door. A few agents paused, looking at them curiously.

“Sorry?” Rogers said.

Tony stood there a few seconds, not wanting to walk in, but people were staring at them so finally Tony caved. He stomped into the conference room and Rogers shut door behind them. The room was empty. They were the first to arrive, but it wouldn’t have mattered if he’d had an audience at this point. Tony was fed up.

“Just knock it off, would you?” Tony growled. “Just fucking stop it!”

“I’m sorry I—” Rogers fumbled. “Stop what?”

“All this! The door opening, chair-pulling, standing, and bowing bullshit!” Tony waved his hands angrily for emphasis; scalding coffee sloshed from the cup and burned his hand. “I keep telling you—I’ve got it!”

Rogers frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“They’re not displays,” Rogers said, brow furrowing deeper, “I’m just trying to be polite and—”

“—remind everybody as often as possible that Tony Stark’s a sub!”

“Maybe, I guess, but,” Rogers spread his hands helplessly, “how is that a bad thing?”

Tony blinked and stared for a moment before answering: “I can’t decide if you’re hopelessly naive or just stupid.”

Hurt flashed across Rogers face. (Shit. Goddamn fucking shit.)

Tony tried to moderate his tone, be a little less angry, a little less aggressive, but his blood was pumping fast and it wasn’t easy. “Look, Rogers—you wanna be polite? Fine. I’m telling you: knock it off. The door holding, pulling my chair, standing when I get up, bowing when you go. Just stop, okay?”

“But I—” Rogers started, then he snapped his mouth shut.

Rogers had that frustrated, confused puppy look on his face. He took a deep breath and let it out, blanking his expression.

“All right, Mr. Stark,” he said softly.

And, shit, now Tony actually felt sorry for the guy.

(God damn it.)

“Yeah, fine,” Tony said with a rush of guilt. “All right.”

He hated feeling guilty. He wanted walk out of there so badly, but he couldn’t; no way he’d miss the fucking meeting and prove that Tony Stark was an unreliable diva.
Tony took a seat as far away from Rogers as possible and glued his eyes to his phone. He tried to answer a few emails from Pepper and Isaac, but his concentration was shot to hell.

Luckily the rest of the team, Hill, and Fury arrived almost immediately.

“Stark,” Fury said as he entered. “Fancy seeing you here on time. Do we have the Captain to thank for that?”

“No,” Tony snapped.

Fury looked skeptical, but made no further comment. “Well, let’s get started.”

The meeting was boring, like most meetings. It was really just a check in. Rogers updated Hill and Fury on what the team had been doing. Strategies they’d developed, techniques. Told them about the training modules Tony’d made, at which point Fury got a speculative gleam in his eye, which Tony ignored. (No way he was making that stuff for SHIELD.) The ninjas talked about scheduling fieldwork for SHIELD and balancing it with Avengers’ training. Bruce scowled— he looked even angrier about being there than Tony, which was impressive. Fury called Tony “Stark”; Rogers called him “Iron Man.” Tony brooded. Rogers made a few attempts to draw him into the discussion, but everybody else was doing a fine job recounting a bunch of boring facts that could have gone in a memo; Tony felt no need to prolong things. (Seriously? They made me come here for this?)

Although it felt interminable, the meeting actually lasted only thirty-three minutes. Tony bolted from the room as soon as they adjourned.

He needed to go for a fly and have a shower.

Harris was lurking outside the conference room. He gave a tentative smile and said, “Mr. Stark, sorry about earlier.”

“No,” Tony said, holding his hand up. (Looks like firing a repulsor blast. Huh.)

“I told you I’m not interested, so,” Tony hissed, then yelled, “back the fuck OFF!”

Tony strode down the hall, practically breathing fire. Harris didn’t follow. Tony took vicious satisfaction in the way a pair of junior agents jumped nervously out of his way.

What a fucking day.

A quick shower and an hour looping around skyscrapers and coasting over the Hudson had done wonders for Tony’s mood. He’d considered calling Pepper, but he knew what she’d say so instead he called Rhodey to vent. It had gone straight to voicemail and Tony realized belatedly he didn’t even know which time zone Rhodey was in at the moment. Still, the crisp sound of “You’ve reached Lt. Colonel Rhodes. Leave a brief message.” made Tony feel a little better.

Tony headed home and walked down his frankly glorious landing pad, armor unfolding as he walked.

Rogers was sitting at the kitchen table alone when Tony entered. The Captain started to get up, then slammed his ass back down onto the seat; he dropped his eyes to the book open on the table.

And Tony’d had a lot of time to think on his flight, so he knew what he needed to do. (Then he could retreat to the workshop.)

“Look,” Tony said. “I shouldn’t have yelled. I have a temper. Sorry.”

(Jesus, shitty apology much, Tony?)

The words had all come out all wrong—clipped and aggressive.

Rogers looked up eyes wide and brow furrowed. “I’m sorry too,” he said miserably.

(See? That’s how apology’s done, Stark.)

They stared at each other for a few long moments.

“I am sorry,” Rogers repeated, then added with a sigh, “I just really don’t understand you.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. His heart was pounding and he wanted to get out of there. He stared at Rogers a moment, then shook himself a little.

“Well,” Tony said, starting to walk away, “if it makes you feel any better, I don’t understand you either.”

“Wait—” Rogers called, then said a little incredulously, “your response to that is to leave?”

Tony shrugged, but his shoulders were so tight it probably looked weird, jerky not calm and casual. “Yeah. Workshop’s calling. Lots to do.”
“Couldn’t we talk?” Rogers asked.

(Shit.) Tony froze. (“For God’s sake, talk to the man!” Pepper said exasperatedly in his mind. “Go on!”) Tony swallowed and frowned. He gazed longingly at the elevator.

“Please? Mr. Stark, I—” Rogers floundered a moment. When Tony turned, Rogers looked so frustrated, but also . . . sad. “I am trying,” Rogers said helplessly, spreading his hands.

Tony sighed and turned around. He started towards the table, then rerouted to the bar for two glasses of scotch. (What? It was 4:30— practically happy hour.) He slid one glass down the table to Rogers who looked at it intensely, like he didn’t know what it was for. Like it might be a test.

Tony flung himself sprawling into a chair at the far end of the table and raised his glass.

“Cheers.” Tony took a good long sip then a deep breath.

(Here goes.)

“Okay, I shouldn’t have yelled,” Tony said. “I really am sorry about that.”

(And, thank God, this time it sounded like a real apology.)

“Ask pretty much anybody—I suck at talking about things. Well, not things, but Things. So, yeah. But . . .” Tony rubbed the back of his neck then sighed again, trying to gather his thoughts. Rogers looked at him with a frown of concentration, waiting. (Clearly he knew some of Pepper’s voodoo.) Tony had a little more scotch.

“Okay, so, when you insist on opening the door, getting my chair, all that stuff,” Tony began, “they’re charged actions. You’re marking me out to everybody there as a sub.” Tony paused a moment, thinking. Rogers leaned forward a little, but remained silent.

“Doing that stuff,” Tony continued, “reinforces the idea that there’s a fundamental difference between us; that we’re not equal.” Rogers gnawed on his lip, brow furrowed, looking at Tony very intently.

Tony swirled his glass of scotch and waited. (Two can use the Pepper Voodoo.)

Finally Rogers said, “I’m sorry, I still don’t . . .” He shook his head, then asked, “Can’t we be different, but equal?”

“As in ‘separate, but equal’?” Tony asked pointedly. Rogers just looked more confused.

Tony blinked. Rogers clearly didn’t get the reference or what Tony meant by it. Shit. Rogers lived with Plessy v Ferguson; Rogers crashed that plane . . . what, ten years before Brown v Board of Education? Well shit. Put a few things in perspective.

(Ugly, shitty perspective.)

Tony sighed again and shook his head.

“I mean, sure,” Tony said, “we can be different and equal. I’m a liberationist—I believe in fundamental orientational equality, but that’s not a reality in the world we live in.” Rogers gave an acknowledging nod. Relieved, Tony continued, “There’s a hierarchy and subs are at the bottom. In the dirty real world, pulling out a chair isn’t just pulling out a chair; it’s a reminder that I’m the weaker orientation. Those little gestures reinforce the idea that you’re the one with power and authority— I’m your subordinate, designed for romance, fucking, and not much else.”

Rogers jolted at the vulgarity, erasing his previous scowl of concentration— his eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open.

“Wait,” Rogers said, looking more and more distressed, “wait, so . . . so, every time I did that, for days and days, trying to be courteous and treat you with respect, you thought I was insulting you?” Rogers gaped at him, wide-eyed and hurt. “I can’t believe you thought I was . . . was saying you’re not worth anything except for. . . except—” He waved a hand for emphasis; Rogers couldn’t even bring himself to say it. He was breathing a little too fast and his hand on the table had clench into a fist.

Tony’d never seen him so flustered and stammering. He cut in: “Calm down, Cap. It’s not like I heard “Hey, Tony, you worthless slut,” whenever you pulled out my chair.”

Rogers flinched. (Shit. Vulgarity really upsets the guy. Good to know.) Tony threw back the rest of his scotch.

“I didn’t think you meant it as an insult, okay?”

Rogers gave a tight nod and looked away. Then he jolted with new distress.

“Oh God,” Rogers muttered, “For weeks every submissive I met—and nobody said anything! I couldn’t even tell, and—”
“Uh,” Tony cut in feeling a little guilty, “I mean, if you actually get to the door first, then that’s fine. And some subs are still cool with all of it, even in 2012-- they think it’s romantic or chivalrous or something, even if tons of us think it’s orientationalist crap, so, uh, yeah. That could have been confusing.”

Rogers stared at Tony with a pensive frown for a few moments before looking away. He was biting his lip again. He stared down at the table, deep in thought.

When Tony got to his feet, Rogers looked up, startled.

“So,” Tony said, eager to be done, “You want to show me respect? Don’t do that stuff. Other than that, we’re cool. Okay?”

Rogers opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, expression anxious. After some invisible struggle, Rogers slumped a little.

“Okay,” he said softly.


“All right, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, with maybe a bit of hesitance. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yep,” Tony said, giving the guy a little salute. “Later, Cap.”

Tony walked to the elevator, rolling his shoulders a little as he went. He felt better, not coiled so tight as before.

(Yeah, yeah, you’re always right, Pepper.)

“JARVIS? Workshop.”

Chapter End Notes

Baby steps for Steve and Tony. Little . . . by . . . little . . . #slowbuildisslow

Thank you for all your support and affection! And thanks so much for reading. (I maybe agonized over this chapter . . . Just a little.) I hope you liked it! Thanks again!
“Good morning, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said as Tony entered the kitchen. (Tony hadn’t seen much of Rogers since their Talk.) The Captain hovered a moment, then turned back to what he was doing. “The coffee’s fresh,” Rogers added after a pause.

Tony helped himself to a cup and watched Rogers chop bell peppers and grate cheese.

“Looks good, Cap,” Tony said. Rogers shrugged; he didn’t offer to make Tony an omelet. Tony still felt sort of bad for snapping at the guy—as Rogers had said, he was trying—so Tony wracked his brain for a peace offering. A “hey, we’re cool, but let’s not do the whole Talking thing again anytime soon unless we have to” kind of gesture.

“So,” Tony said with sudden inspiration, “it seems like you like this kitchen better than yours, but you know if you want anything remodeled down there, just say the word and I’ll fix it up.”

“Pardon?” Rogers looked at him, expression a hint alarmed, his hand frozen mid-chop.

“I mean, that’s your floor, so you can do whatever you want with it, you know? Just thought, since you seem to like this kitchen better, maybe we should redo yours.”

“I’m sorry.” Rogers swallowed. “Would you rather I not cook up here?”

“What!? No!” Tony fumbled. (Shit. Miscalculated.) “No, it’s cool! Cook wherever. I don’t think this kitchen’s ever had so much cooking happen in it, really, which is pretty ‘swell.’ I just wanted you to feel at home to, I dunno, make changes or whatever in your place.” Tony paused a moment. “You do like it, right?”

“The apartment? It’s beautiful, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, still looking a little off kilter.

“Oh, okay. Good, good.” Tony hesitated. “But if you wanted it remodeled, you know with chrome and granite, something more like this, we could do it.”

Rogers shook his head. “It’s not that, I–” he paused. “My suite is beautiful and, uh, please don’t take this the wrong way, but well, I just wanted you to feel at home to, I dunno, make changes or whatever in your place.” Tony paused a moment. “You do like it, right?”

“The apartment? It’s beautiful, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, still looking a little off kilter.

“Oh, okay. Good, good.” Tony hesitated. “But if you wanted it remodeled, you know with chrome and granite, something more like this, we could do it.”

Rogers shook his head. “It’s not that, I–” he paused. “My suite is beautiful and, uh, please don’t take this the wrong way, but well, it’s more to my taste than this floor to be honest. But, well, this is where the team spends time so.” Rogers shrugged. He bit his lip, then added, “If you think I’m here too much, though, I can—”

Tony threw his hands in the air, exasperated. “I was trying to be nice, ok? Fix things the way you like them, not kick you out!”

“Oh. Sorry.” Rogers whisked the eggs. “Thank you. That’s kind.”

(Okay, try again.)

“So,” Tony asked, trying for a rakish grin and leaning his hip against the counter. “Any of that for me?”

Rogers silled for a moment. “Didn’t think you much cared for my cooking,”

(Jesus. Fine, whatever.)

“Nah, nothing wrong with your cooking,” Tony said, trying not to sound peevish. “But whatever. Anyway, I was headed to the workshop. Later!”

(Ugh.)

Thirty minutes later, Rogers called from the doorway a soft, “Mr. Stark? May I come in?”

Tony glared at Hypothetical 19, then sighed.

“Yeah, sure.” Tony called without looking, “Come on in.”

Tony frowned at the incomplete data columns a moment more then turned to Rogers. He was holding a heaping plate of food: a towering stack of pancakes surrounded with bacon, fresh fruit, and hash browns. Tony blinked. Rogers held up the plate and offered it to him with a smile.
“Kitchen tax,” Rogers explained jokingly, then added a bit sheepishly, “and, uh, sorry I was rude.”

Tony almost wanted to laugh—that was Rogers’ version of “rude.”

“No problem.”

Rogers held out the plate again and this time Tony took it. No eggs, he noticed.

Rogers gestured to the schematics. “Still working on Bob?”

Tony nodded. “Just filling in hypotheticals, then running various theories. You know, if \( x \) then \( y \); if \( k \) then \( h \). Bruce thinks it’s absurd speculation.” Tony cut up his pancakes while he talked. They had just the right amount of syrup. “He may be right—probably is—but I’m trying to think of it as an intellectual exercise. Can’t seem to stop thinking about it anyway, so—” Tony cut himself off with a bite of pancake.

“I think it’s admirable,” Rogers said earnestly. “You have so many demands on your time, but you’re still willing to work on the readings, even against the odds.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that, but his mouth was full of pancake so he didn’t have to decide.

“I’d be really interested to hear about some of the scenarios you’re imagining,” Rogers added.

“You won’t follow.”

“I’m used to that,” Rogers answered, then added with a little smile, “and who’s to say I won’t surprise you?”

And so, while Tony ate a truly outstanding breakfast, he explained some of the potentialities of the Bob data and how he’d been playing with it. From there, Rogers asked about Stark Industries, Tony’s inventions, and, of all things, how cell phones actually worked.

“You really don’t need to worry about that, Cap,” Tony answered with a laugh. “Everybody uses them, but hardly anybody knows how they work. You’re not behind the curve there, Big Guy.”

“Still,” Rogers said, with a smile, “I’m curious. And I like the way you explain things.”

“Nobody has said that to me before,” Tony said, shaking his head with a chuckle. “You’re a strange guy, you know that?”

“Yeah,” Rogers agreed amiably. “I may have heard that a few times.”

Silence settled in the workshop. Tony’s plate was empty; he’d finished the breakfast quite a while ago without noticing it.

“Mr. Stark?” Rogers said. “Would you have dinner with me?”

Tony swallowed. He shook his head.

“No. I, uh,” Tony shook his head again. “Still no, Cap. No thanks.”

“Oh.” And this time he actually sounded kind of disappointed, and maybe just the slightest bit surprised. His brow furrowed. “I see.”

Rogers swallowed. “Well, I’ve intruded on your work long enough.” He summoned a smile, seeming to recover some of his previous good cheer, “Thank you for indulging me, Mr. Stark.”

“Sure,” Tony said, feeling a little hesitant, “No trouble.”

Rogers collected the plate, holding it in both hands; he started to bow, then caught himself.

“Have a pleasant day, Mr. Stark. Good luck with your work.”

“No, you too,” Tony said, feeling unexpectedly guilty as he watched Rogers walk away.

“Hey, Cap?” he called out when Rogers was on the threshold. “Thanks for breakfast. It was really good.”

Rogers brightened. He smiled at Tony and said, “It was my pleasure, Mr. Stark. I’m glad you liked it.”

With that, Rogers departed. Tony gnawed on his lip and turned back to the schematics.

Tony had worried that after delivering Rogers’ latest rejection things might get awkward. He needn’t have worried.
When Tony resurfaced eleven hours later, he found Bruce and Rogers in the common room watching a documentary on Duke Ellison and early FreeDomism. Rogers was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, chin on his palms—a vision of rapt attention. Tony hovered a moment, then went to the kitchen for a glass of wine.

“Mr. Stark?” Rogers called, pausing the documentary with the remote. (He never talked over films. Ever.) “Would you like to join us? We’re watching a documentary about Mr. Duke Ellison.”

“We’re only ten minutes in,” Bruce added. “If you’d rather we restart it.”

“Nah. It’s good from there.” Tony plopped down on the couch between them. “Hit it, Cap.”

Rogers hit ‘play’ and that was that. No reproachful glances, no cold politeness; no nervous fidgeting, no flirtatiousness. Just Rogers’ usual earnest friendliness.

Back to normal.

(Weird, superhero normal.)

From the far end of the hall, Tony could hear JARVIS speaking softly, but couldn’t make out the words; his soothing voice was punctuated by louder, clearer exclamations from the Captain:

“1954!”

“President Kennedy, 1963!”

“1956-1975!”

As Tony walked down the hallway, he could hear the sound of footfalls, unusually heavy and hard, as Rogers paced. He heard the Captain recite:

“Political scandal of the early 1970s. The president and his administration broke into the DNC, performed illegal surveillance, and abused their control of the IRS, FBI, and CIA to harass their political opponents. The president resigned before Congress could impeach him and was pardoned by his successor. And the President was . . . was . . . Clinton?—no. No! Wait.”

Tony held his breath a moment, then crept closer. He was pretty sure he heard Rogers kick something, then:

“God damn it!”

Another smacking noise. A loud sigh, then resigned, “Okay, JARVIS. Go ahead and tell me.”

“It was President Nixon, Captain.”

“Damn it.”

“Hadn’t figured you for a swearing man,” Tony said, leaning up against the doorway. Rogers spun.

“Mr. Stark!”

“In the flesh.” Tony shrugged and came through the doorway. He swung by the fridge for a bottle of cold water before confronting Rogers

“So,” Tony said, “I heard that you’ve been giving hand-to-hand training to everybody. Well—” he took a long sip of water, “everybody except me, of course.”

Rogers looked surprised. “I thought you were too busy with the energy readings.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “Uh, it wasn’t just you, you know. Bruce isn’t either. I mean, he’s busy with scientific things too. I didn’t . . . not because, uh—”

Rogers cut himself off abruptly; he’d managed to stop just short of blurting out “it’s not ‘cause you’re a sub!”

“Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, brisk and composed, “I’d be happy to give you individual combat training if you’d like.”


Rogers expression softened a little as he replied, “Mr. Stark, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

(Huh.)

“Thirty minutes?”

“I’ll meet you in the gym.”
As Tony walked to the elevator, he thought about what he’d overheard.

“Hey, JARVIS?” Tony called as he rode down to his workshop. “You didn’t mention that you were giving Rogers history quizzes.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” JARVIS answered blandly. “I didn’t realize it would interest you.”

Tony shrugged.

It was strange to realize that Rogers had to actively study the present and recent past. Not that Tony hadn’t known it before—obviously the man had a lot of catching up to do, but now it felt more immediate. Rogers had to memorize things other Americans in 2012 just... knew. Even people who didn’t know their history at all knew about Watergate! And they knew it was Nixon, not Clinton. But for Rogers—for Captain America—those were all things to memorize, long lists of brand new names, blank of associations. But for him, it wasn’t just history, like it would be for an eighth grader, distant and remote. It had all happened in the blink of an eye while he slept and now here he was. The end of *Plessey v Ferguson*. Duke Ellison. The assassination of JFK. The Vietnam War.


“I don’t believe I’m at liberty to say, sir.” JARVIS paused—it was the closest he came to hesitation. “I fear the Captain would be embarrassed.”

“No the details,” Tony reassured. “Just—generally?”

If JARVIS could sigh, Tony was pretty sure he would have.

“The Captain is frustrated, sir.” Another pause. “With some of the material and the gaps in his knowledge. I believe he finds it... hard.”

The memory came to Tony suddenly:

*Rogers sitting on Tony’s large leather sofa, staring vacantly at the coffee table, unmoving, unblinking, his expression blank. . . . A stranger in a strange land. . . .*

Tony swallowed a lump in his throat.


There was nothing he could do about it anyway.

“Give me the Bob readings and hypothetical 41, would ya? I’ve got a while before sparring.”

“Just so you know, I won’t be pulling my punches,” Tony said, doing his warm-up stretches in the training room. “I’m not afraid to hit an old man.”

“I can take it.” Rogers grinned.

(Shit. Is he just teasing back, or saying I’m weak? Which, okay, yeah compared to *Captain America*, but still... ) There was a certain playfulness to the look Rogers shot him. Tony grinned back. (No, yeah, cool. Definitely teasing.)

“So,” Rogers continued more seriously, “how much training do you already have?”

“Spoilars? What’s the fun in that, Cap?” Tony waved him off. “Shouldn’t we just hit it and see what you can figure out?”

Rogers nodded. “Fair enough. Ready when you are, Iron Man.”

Tony gave a brisk nod, shook out his shoulders and relaxed into fighting stance.

(Ha! May not be super powered, but Happy knows what he’s talking about.)

Rogers took a cautious step forward, then paused, waiting to see if Tony’d take the opening. But Tony wasn’t stupid—his best shot at this was to use agility and speed, not rush a guy twice his size who had bulk and strength on his side. Rogers waited a little longer and Tony thought he saw a bit of approval on the man’s face as he realized that Tony wasn’t going to fall for it. (Headstrong, not foolish.)

He watched attentively and when Rogers tensed to rush, Tony tensed to dodge. Rogers was disturbingly fast and Tony barely leapt out of the way in time. The punch he’d aimed for Rogers’ gut hit his side instead and left Tony wide open; Rogers got a good one-two hit to Tony’s ribs. It was less of a hit, though, than a touch—a gentle “gotcha” that did no damage. Tony frowned and bounced away.

“I don’t break that easily, Cap,” Tony said.
Rogers shrugged. “We’re developing skills, Iron Man, not trying to leave each other a mess of bruises.”

And Tony still couldn’t decide between feeling pleased and patronized. (As if he’d leave Cap covered in bruises.)

“Try not to turn so much on your follow through,” Cap advised. “And try using your momentum to resituate for another shot. Okay, go.”

It was surprisingly fun. Different from the fun and games with the team, battling simulated zombies and giant robots, but fun. Tony was working up a decent sweat and, although Rogers was clearly taking it easy on him in some ways, it felt okay. Cap pulled his punches to avoid hurting Tony, but he didn’t ignore any openings. And Rogers was liberal with his praise—“Nice!” “Good shot!” even an “Ow. Shoot!”—but it was punctuated with frank criticism and advice. So it was good, really good and Tony was already looking forward to making it a regular thing.

“Again!” Rogers cried and rushed him. Tony almost scored a punch on the Captain’s side, but he was too fast for Tony. This time, though, when Cap dodged he didn’t get Tony with his usual tap—he spun out of the way and grabbed Tony’s wrist. That was new, but Tony rolled with it.

Tony knew better than to yank against someone’s grip on his wrist, so instead he went limp suddenly, hoping to let his weight work for him and throw the Captain off balance. It backfired—Cap stepped around him and used Tony’s own weight to pull his arm behind his back and pin him helpless. Tony grunted.

“Not bad,” Cap said, releasing him with an approving nod. “Next time, though, wait a little longer. Using your body weight to advantage is a good idea, but if you do it too soon, I can maneuver around it. Okay? Now, again”

Tony nodded, feeling irritated—though not with the Captain, but with himself. (Seriously? Two years of self defense training, and that’s what you’ve got?) Of course, most grabby jerks didn’t have Cap’s training, so there was that.

Tony shook out his shoulders and nodded.

“Again.”

Rogers managed to get him in an upright lock the next three times, but on the fourth attempt Tony managed to pivot then drop. He jerked the Captain a little off balance as he fell to the mat, but Rogers didn’t loosen his grasp. Tony rolled between his legs and got ready to knee him in the groin. (What? The guy had his wrist—they weren’t playing Marquise of Queensbury anymore.) No luck. Rogers saw that coming and drew his knees together, blocking the kick, then easily knocked Tony’s leg out of the way.

Fast as anything, Tony found himself pinned, Rogers’ legs holding his own immobile. He almost got a punch to Rogers’ chin with his free hand, but the angle was awkward and Cap was too fucking fast—he caught Tony’s other wrist in hand and pressed them both to the mat over his head. It brought their faces close together, but not close enough for Tony to try a head-butt.

Instead, Tony went limp, playing possum. Rogers stayed right where he was, panting slightly, eyes bright. Tony summoned his strength and made a final bid for freedom. Tony pressed his shoulders hard into the mat and struggled for leverage, but Rogers was prepared for the attack and too fucking massive for it to have mattered anyway.

(Damn it!) Tony hadn’t really expected playing possum to work on a trained soldier, but failure was infuriating all the same. Tony’s chest heaved, (What? fighting Captain America was a fucking workout—anyone’d be out of breath.) He was a sweaty mess, his muscles were pleasantly sore, and there was no way he’d be getting up until Rogers let him—not with Rogers straddling him, Tony’s thighs pinned under Rogers’ shins, and his arms stretched over his head, held firmly in Rogers’ massive hands.

(Damn.)

Tony relaxed into the mat again and closed his eyes. As soon as he caught his breath, he’d voice his surrender; since he’d played possum once already, Rogers probably wouldn’t let his guard down until then. Tony’s chest was still heaving a bit, but he was just getting ready to gasp out “I yield” or “you win, big guy” or “uncle!” when Rogers suddenly leapt off of him and backed away, putting distance between them.

Tony blinked and looked up at Rogers, who wasn’t quite meeting Tony’s eyes.

“Good fight, Iron Man,” Rogers said briskly, but sounding a little out of breath himself. “I think that’s enough for today though, don’t you?”

Rogers had a strange look on his face Tony couldn’t interpret. Tony propped up on his elbows and gave a little shrug.

“Sure, Cap. We can call it a day if I wore you out,” Tony said. “So, same time tomorrow?”

And with that Captain America rushed from the training room.

(Huh.)

Tony shrugged and began his cool down routine.

The next day, Tony showed up to the training room at three on the dot. (What? He could be responsible. Besides, he’d maybe been looking forward to reclaiming a bit of his pride. This time, Rogers was going down!)

Tony stopped short on the threshold.

“Clint?” Tony said bemused, looking around the room. The archer turned and grinned at him.

“Where’s Cap?” Tony asked.

“Dunno.” Clint shrugged. “He said you wanted more hand-to-hand training and asked me to step in.”

Tony frowned. “Why?”

“Beats me.” Clint shrugged again. “Didn’t say.”

Tony’s frown deepened to a scowl. (Why the hell would Rogers bail like that? Had Tony done something wrong? Was he so poor a fighter Cap didn’t want to waste his time on him? Or did--)

“Hey, what’s this, man?” Clint asked with a mock glare. “You too good to fight anybody but Captain America himself? Mere humans beneath you?”

Tony shrugged the worry off.

“You wish,” he replied with a grin. “Prepare for a fall, Birdbrain!”

“You wish, dude,” Clint said, rolling his shoulders. “Ready? Go!”

Tony fell into fighting stance.

He’d worry about the Captain later.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for joining me! I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Sorry for the delay--for some reason I found this chapter particularly hard to write. Kind of a mellow chapter, but I promise a bit more dramatic ‘oomph’ in the next two! :-}
Forbes Magazine

Pepper Potts: Switching Things Up at Stark Industries

Forbes: ... The trajectory of your career has been truly remarkable. You moved from Tony Stark’s personal assistant to replace Obadiah Stane as CEO after his tragic accident, a move that surprised many; the move itself, though, was perhaps less surprising than the success with which you made the transition. Your ascent has been truly meteoric. Many people have wondered though whether Mr. Stark was interested in the position of CEO himself. And, if so, what factors kept him from the boardroom?

Potts: Mr. Stark never wanted to be CEO and he spends plenty of time in the boardroom as it is—he would say, too much. Mr. Stark has an astonishing talent for business that often goes unremarked; he would have made a wonderful CEO. He probably would have become one of the top twenty businessmen in America, but he’s indisputably the finest engineer in the world, likely the best of an entire generation. [smiling] Tony and I are a team. We have very complementary skills. I can run Stark Industries, but if I had to design our products we’d be lost.

Forbes: You’re too modest.

Potts: I’m never modest. Modesty encourages people to underestimate you. Honesty is far better.

Forbes: Speaking of honesty, there’s something I’d like to address: Stark Industries’ hiring practices. There is a lot of speculation about reverse discrimination given your unusual employee demographics—the number of submissives and switches at your company. Would you care to comment?

Potts [sharply] I’m happy to comment. [She takes a sip of water and continues, her smile as genial as ever but her tone a little cold.] I’ll comment, but I’d also like to point out that I have addressed this in nearly every interview I have ever given as CEO. The answer hasn’t changed. Reverse discrimination is simply discrimination. Stark Industries does not now and never has operated on a quota system for so-called diversity hires.

Don’t get me wrong—ideologically I am a committed liberationist. One only needs to spend about twenty seconds in the presence of Tony Stark to realize how utterly wrong orientationist stereotypes are; a Stark Industries—an America—without Tony Stark, Engineer is unimaginable. He’s given us the StarkSafe, pioneered personal computers, and developed the first smart phone. Tony was admitted to MIT before he presented; they never had a chance to discriminate against him for his orientation in admissions, though of course we can’t know for sure if they would have consciously or unconsciously. That is how we operate at Stark Industries. All initial applications are made anonymously, without names, genders, or orientations attached to them. This ensures that no bias—conscious or unconscious—about orientation, gender, or assumed ethnicity can influence that first impression. Compared to our competitors, we have 33% more submissive employees, 42% more switch employees, and 27% more employees who are people of color historically excluded the industry. That’s not because we discriminate, but because everyone else does.

Let me be clear. As I said, I am absolutely committed to equality; Stark Industries’ doesn’t perform that commitment through patronizing tokenism. We’re the leaders in every field we engage in and command the largest market share of all our markets. We don’t have diverse hiring practices because we already dominate the field and can ‘afford to’; we dominate the market because of our diversity. Get a bunch of straight, white, male Ivy League Doms together in a room to problem solve and, coming from similar backgrounds, they are likely to look at things with similar perspectives. There’s the danger of sliding towards groupthink. Eliminating opportunities for discrimination of all sorts in the hiring process gives us a greater diversity of
talents to draw on. I’m first and foremost a CEO and the math is simple: diversity returns the highest dividends.

[continued on p. 137 . . . ]

Tony’d been feeling restless, so instead of getting a ride to SHIELD HQ, he flew there in the briefcase suit. Freed from the limitations of traffic, Tony left after the others and beat them there. Instead of dealing with the Dicks of SHIELD, he flew loops above HQ blasting Beyoncé and AC/DC, waiting for the other to arrive. When SHIELD’s ridiculous, unmarked bulletproof SUV pulled up, Tony landed and let the suit form itself neatly into the briefcase, revealing Tony’s magnificence in Armani.

Rogers was the first out of the SUV; he watched Tony’s landing and the reconfigurations with unconcealed awe.

Tony smirked. “Careful, Cap, you may start catching flies.”

Rogers snapped his mouth shut; the tips of his ears turned pink.

“That isn’t the Iron Man suit you wear in training,” he said with a quizzical look.

Tony shrugged. “Yeah. Surprised you can tell, actually. This isn’t packing the full guns, but it doesn’t require a landing strip,” Tony put on his sunglasses. “Of course,” he added, “I could just step out of the suit and leave it standing in lock-down if necessary, but I really don’t trust SHIELD around my suit unattended. No offense, Agents.”

Clint laughed. “None taken. My bow came from SHIELD and I still don’t like it when they get too close to it.”

Rogers looked around—everyone had gotten out of the SUV and stood in an awkward little clutch. “All right, team,” Cap said. “Shall we?”

Cap got the door and gestured them all through. Clint took the lead, Bruce and Natasha trailing slightly behind him talking quietly. Rogers was giving Tony an uncertain look—his eyes flicked to the door, then back to Tony.

(Seriously? If you get the door for everybody that’s cool.)

Tony walked through, then gave Rogers a challenging look over his sunglasses when the man followed.

“So,” Tony said, “I hear you can’t make time in your busy schedule to train with me so you’re pawning me off on Clint instead.”

“We’re still training together,” Rogers said a little blankly, then added with a bit of a smile, “You disarmed JARVIS’ giant robot so fast yesterday, though, there was hardly any point in having the rest of us there.”

“You know what I mean,” Tony said, waving his hands as walked down the corridor. “Why aren’t you giving me combat training anymore?”

“Hawkeye and Black Widow have far more training in hand-to-hand combat than I do,” Rogers answered, tone calm and reasonable. “They’re both better qualified to teach you than I am.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony muttered. (Didn’t really answer my question.)

Tony felt certain Rogers wasn’t being straight with him, but it didn’t seem like Tony could press the point since Rogers was right—Clint and Natasha did have more hand-to-hand training, but the way Rogers had just bailed felt . . . wrong. Tony didn’t like it.

“So,” Tony said, “any clue what this meeting’s about?”

Rogers shook his head. “I assumed it was just a check-in like last time, but they scheduled it for two hours and said there would be a guest presentation, so apparently not.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah. Well, at least I’m not the only one being left out of the loop.”

Rogers shook his head again, and Tony could tell he wasn’t entirely pleased by the lack of information himself.

When they reached Conference Room 22—Natasha got the door for the entire team—Fury, Hill, and an unknown Domme in a suit were already there waiting. Everyone exchanged bland greetings, then took their seats. (Tony pulled out his own chair, thank you very much.) Hill introduced the glossy looking Domme as “Melinda Alexis Carmichael, PR Consultant.”

“PR?” Tony asked, shooting Fury a dirty look. “Really? And you couldn’t give us a heads up? You know I have an entire PR department.”

Fury just stared back unmoved and silent.
“And Stark Industries Public Relations Department is outstanding,” Carmichael piped up, then gave a glinting, practiced smile, “but my work is a little more specialized.” She turned to the room as a whole. “I specialize in military-civilian relations and have done some preliminary impact studies for the Avengers Initiative. With your permission, Director, shall we begin?”

Carmichael began with a broad discussion of Clint and Natasha’s divided duties between SHIELD and the Avengers. She informed them that, since the Avengers were going to have to maintain a media presence, the Agents would either need to conceal their identities vigilantly in association with the Avengers or cease work on covert operations. (Wow! REALLY?) Tony tried not to eye-roll obviously, but seriously? Where’d they find this “expert?” Brown? Or worse, Princeton? Tony held in a snort. Sort of. Barely.

Tony wondered distantly how much input Carmichael’d had on Tony’s early contracts. (How can we get ahead of the Stark problem—the drinking, the slutting, the attitude? On a scale of one-to-ten, which of Stark’s bad habits would test lowest with Avengers related focus groups?)

Next Fury’s PR minion was on to Captain America: how to announce his survival; which talk shows he should do; what sort of preparation he’d need before talking to the press off script. Whether he would go on tour or not. If so, how long and where to. And Tony couldn’t help noticing that although Rogers nodded steadily, expression stoic, he looked a little ill at the prospect. It was getting increasingly difficult for him to hide his distress as Carmichael laid out the possibilities.

Tony couldn’t blame the guy—he was still adjusting to the future. (He had trouble keeping Nixon and Clinton straight, for Christ sake!) Rogers didn’t have the context for the magazines or talk shows; it would just be a bunch of names to him and she wasn’t exactly explaining, except to say they’d all eat him up. And, it had to be weird to hear himself described like that, turned into nuggets of grade-A PR gold.

Of course, she wouldn’t have such glowing things to say about Tony. His heart was already starting to speed up with nerves, knowing he wouldn’t like whatever she’d worked up for the Stark Terror and knowing even more definitely that he had to keep his cool.

“We’ll stagger the press releases,” Carmichael said decisively. “Three months after Captain America goes public and introduces The Avengers Initiative--once Mr. Stark’s probation is up, of course--we’ll bring on Iron Man.”

“No.”

Everyone’s attention whipped over to Rogers. It was pretty much the first thing he’d said the entire time.

“What was that, Captain?” Fury asked, arms crossed over his chest.

“I said ‘no,’” Rogers answered more firmly. “We shouldn’t make the announcement like that. We’re a team, we should all go public together.”

“Captain, it really is crucial that we introduce the idea of the Avengers and your survival first,” Carmichael said. “It’s big news and, to be frank, it will be entirely good press, which will help us get a baseline of support before introducing Mr. Stark’s more . . . controversial presence.”

Cap shook his head, frowning. “No. I disagree. We should present a united front. If we add Iron Man to the team late, it will look like he’s not ranked the same as the others. Like he didn’t make first cut.”

“He didn’t make first cut,” Fury said bluntly.

“I wasn’t around for that, sir,” Rogers said a little coldly. “Iron Man made my first cut.”

“Adding Stark will be controversial,” Fury countered.

“So don’t add him,” Cap said emphatically. Rogers started to say something more, then cut himself off and turned to Tony. “What do you think?”

Tony blinked, still startled by this sudden turn of events.

“L–” Tony cleared his throat, taking a moment to think. “I think it wasn’t very nice to spring this meeting on us unprepared. Especially since I have my own experts who’ve been working on this.”

Rogers nodded his agreement.

“And I think,” Bruce added from Tony’s left, “it’s outrageous that SHIELD is treating Tony like the problem child here. I kinda broke Harlem.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Carmichael said, her smile never wavering. “Hulk actually tests surprisingly well with certain demographics, when given the right presentation, and your reputation as a scientist is consistently well-received. Of course, the public is still fuzzy on the connection between the scientist Bruce Banner and the Hulk, so we’ll need to control that revelation very carefully. If you choose to remain on the team.”
Tony startled. “Excuse me? SHIELD strong armed him in recruitment and now you’re implying you want to drop him for PR?”

“Nobody is implying that,” Fury spoke up. He glared at Carmichael—or maybe that was just his usual expression.

“So, here’s a thought,” Tony said, putting his sunglasses back on. “Let’s have this meeting once we’ve actually had some time to think and prepare. You know, engage in a dialogue and all that shit.”

“But,” Carmichael faltered, “we haven’t even started going through the briefing packets I made you!”

“I’m sure we can be trusted to read them on our own,” Tony said. Bruce shot Tony a conspiratorial smile and picked up the pile of folders.

“So,” Bruce added, “shall we reschedule this meeting for a time when we’re all better prepared to discuss the matter fully?”

Cap seemed to hesitate for a moment, then got to his feet. The other Avengers followed suit. (Agents included.)

“Thank you for the presentation, Ms. Carmichael,” Cap said politely. “You’ve given us a great deal to discuss before the follow-up meeting.”

Rogers turned to Hill then Fury with a nod and a crisp, “Sir. Sir.” There was a lingering pause as Fury and Rogers stared at each other. Tony wondered what Rogers would do if Fury ordered them all to sit down, but he never found out. Instead Fury barked an abrupt, “Dismissed!”

Hill looked at Fury then back at them, and hastened to say, “Remember that your contacts require SHIELD approval for press releases and public disclosures. Failure to receive official approval would place you in violation of your contracts.”

She looked at Tony as she said it, but Rogers answered, “We remember. Good day, sir.”

The Avengers left the room like a well-formed phalanx behind their Captain.

“Great meeting!” Tony called over his shoulder. He thought he heard Cap laugh.

Tony stood in the middle of the common room like a maestro, surrounded by the glowing screens of his videoconference call: Linda Preston and Jonathan Chen from legal on the left, Katherine Winters and Michael Nguyen from PR on the right.

“If you are unable to reach a mutually approved strategy, it would necessitate official arbitration,” Johnny said.

Behind him, Tony heard the elevator doors open and the voices of his teammates. They went quiet when they saw the conference call. Tony turned to wave at them as Linda followed up.

“The steps of the arbitration process are in Section 42, subheading 8,” she said. “Assuming your own committees couldn’t resolve the issue, the matter would be referred to court-appointed negotiator.”

Tony nodded, then called over his shoulder to the team “Pizzas in the kitchen—help yourselves!”

He turned back to Linda, “And if I break contract?”

“A fine for breach of contract—the price point for various potential infractions is on page 144—or your removal from the Avengers’ Initiative.”

“Right. I remember.” Tony turned his attention to his right. “Okay, Katie, hit me. What have you two cooked up?”

The red of Katie’s lipstick matched the red of Michael’s tie; Tony wondered if that was deliberate. (The Katie-Michael team sometimes reminded Tony of the Pepper-Tony team; it made him happy every time he needed help with PR which, let’s face it, was pretty much all the time.)

“We have a lot of flexibility, especially with this sort of lead time,” Katie said. “Assuming of course, we’re able to maintain the current time frame; you’re a tactical first response team—so an emergency could change the game in moments and we’d have to use one of the contingency plans and adapt on the go.”

“But,” Michael continued, “assuming this timeline, there are several possible approaches.”

“Overall, you’ll want to think first about tone,” Katie picked up.

Off to the side, Tony could hear the team shuffling around, getting plates and opening beer bottles. Tony tuned them out.
On screen, Michael nodded. "We’ll tailor everything in more detail once we’ve heard from the whole team, but our preliminary recommendation is to begin with a strictly professional tone and set that as the baseline: keep everything very explicitly about your training, your complementary professional backgrounds, the operations of the team. Nothing personal in the official press releases. In interviews, talk about one another as coworkers, give as few personal details as possible."

"Of course, thanks to Fury, you are all living together," Katie said. She shook her head and made a little snort of disapproval. "We’ll have to be very careful to depict that as barracks-like not something more . . . intimate." She reached up to push a few stray locks of blonde hair out of her face. "The tabloids will make the usual nasty remarks, but Mikey and I can probably limit any potential spillover into mainstream media."

"We were expecting this," Tony said with a shrug. The PR team nodded in unison. In the kitchen, the team finished serving themselves.

"All right," Tony said nodding. "I should probably let you all get back to it. Sorry for stepping up our timeline—blame SHIELD."

Tony bade them each goodbye, closed down the projections, and then turned to his teammates who had settled on the couches behind him with their pizza and drinks while he’d wrapped up.

"Okay," Tony said, "I’ll introduce you to my A-teams next time. You’ll like them; they’re the best." He grinned, then rubbed his hands together briskly.

"My PR rockstars will send you a bunch of open ended questions to get a feel for your comfort levels; it’s some kind of magic—I don’t know how they use them exactly, but the results are genius. Then they’ll be here to do one-on-one conferences and come up with a proposal—then we kick it around with them until we’re all happy. Then we go to SHIELD, so let’s try and put Fury off for at least a week, ideally two."

They all nodded, listening attentively. Tony continued, "Also, if you want my legal team to look at your contracts, just let me know and I’ll get them on it. Some of you may have more PR wiggle room than I do, so that would be good to know, right? Right. Okay, great! And now, pizza."

Tony walked over to the beautiful cardboard boxes of joy, his stomach rumbling. Rogers followed.

"Thank you for taking charge of this," Cap said.

"Self-interest," Tony answered dismissively as he grabbed a plate.

"I’m still grateful. I—uh, it wasn’t fair of Fury to surprise us like this. Or for them to talk about you like that."

Tony waved it off and rooted around in the first box, looking for the slice with the most sausage. (Mmm.)

"I was wondering, though," Rogers said a little hesitantly, "what did your team mean about us living in the tower together? And the tabloids?"

"Oh, that? Meh. Even my dream team can’t control the tabloids. Bla bla, Stark’s a slut, bla bla.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Either they’ll say I’m serving the Avengers as team whore and you’re all banging me, or that I’m a seductive little minx who has lured you all into my den of vice as my harem of Dominants." Tony paused. "Actually, they’ll probably run one story, then the other—why choose?" Tony shrugged it off. "But, don’t let it get to you, Cap."

Tony walked back to the couch with his pizza.

"Brucie, my PR duo want a tete-a-tete with you asap. They’re used to my particular brand of PR disaster—you’re a whole new ballgame."

Tony flopped down next to Bruce and gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Katie’s probably over the moon; she especially loves a challenge. Anyway, they’ll want to get a read on how you want your publicity to go—Mean Green or not—stat."

"Yeah," Bruce nodded, then gave an awkward smile. "Uh, if possible, I’d rather just be Bruce Banner, scientist. If I do get to the point where I can control the Other Guy, well, I’d want us to be able to say that to the press with confidence—but only once we’re sure it works."

"Steve said you’d like to try transforming with us soon," Natasha said. "An isolated rural location would probably be best."

"I own a couple of ranches and shit," Tony said. "We could go to my home where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play."

Clint snorted. "Seriously? Seriously? Did you just say that?"

Tony grinned. "Nothing gets by you, huh, Hawkeye?"
“Damn straight. And, hey, man– thanks for the pizza. Bullshit makes me hungry.”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, that sucked big time, so, I don’t know about anybody else, but I was thinking movie.” Tony glanced around hopefully. “Movie?”

Bruce nodded. “Movie.”

“Sure,” Clint said, flopping back on the couch. “I’m in.”

“No romantic comedies,” Natasha said with a scowl, then smiled slightly, “but yes—good plan.”

Tony glanced around. Cap was still hovering a halfway in the kitchen, apart from the group.

“You in, Cap?”

“Uh, yes, thank you.” Rogers looked up startled from his thoughts. “Thank you, Mr. Stark.” He took a seat in the armchair on the left. Tony nodded.

“Hey, JARVIS? Surprise us!”

[Pepper Potts: Switching Things Up at Stark Industries; continued from p. 45]

Forbes: Now though, I’d really like to ask about a subject that has drawn lots of speculation in the business world. Since you took over as CEO, there has been a steady and noticeable increase in complaints of sexual harassment at Stark Industries.

Potts: Yes, I’m aware of that.

Forbes: Is that all you have to say? As one of the few switches running a Fortune 500 company, and one whose closest business associate is actually a submissive—well, some find that surprising.

Potts [with a bland smile]: If I told you that rape is one-hundred-thousand times more common in twenty-first century America than it was in twelfth century England, would you believe me?

Forbes: You mean, that in the Middle Ages--? I’m sorry, I’m not sure I follow.

Potts: Well, that’s what the official documentary evidence would suggest. Now, which seems more likely—that victim blaming in the middle ages silenced a vast number of undocumented victims, or that we’ve regressed and there is far more rape now than eight hundred years ago?

We take sexual harassment very seriously at Stark Industries. We have very explicit employee guidelines in place now; our expectations are clear and we have a well-developed conflict resolution process. The reason we have more employees go to mediation or come forward about harassment is because we have created an environment where employees feel able to go through this process without negative repercussions, where they trust us to assist them and deal fairly with both parties.

I’m not proud of the fact sexual harassment happens at Stark Industries, but I am proud that my employees trust us to help them deal with it. So, I ask you: is the silence at other companies the true absence of harassment, or merely the silencing of its victims?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Your kind words are an inspiration!!! These chapters are proving really hard to write... I hope you liked it!

*looks nervous; worries some won’t like where I’m going in the next few chapters...* So, uh, on that note-- if you *don’t* like the way this story is developing, just a reminder that I ask that you please keep that to yourself. It’s up to you whether you want to read this or not, but I’m not soliciting concrit; this story needs to be my escapist happy place to keep happening. Sorry to repeat myself– just feeling extra anxious today (because RL). Sorry & thanks! *fidgets awkwardly like Steve; gives a nervous smile*

Thank you all so much! You have brought me so much joy!
“Excuse me, Mr. Stark? May I please come in?”

“Sure, Cap!” Tony didn’t bother turning around, just kept his eyes on the circuits spread out on the table. He was tinkering again, a much-needed break from Bob. He’d been working away—come up with three more hypotheticals and started tinkering on a containment device that would attempt reverse polarity if—(Shit.)

“Hey, I haven’t lost track of time, have I? The team PR follow-up is tomorrow, right?”

“No. I mean, yes,” Rogers said awkwardly. “That is, no you didn’t loose track of time; yes, the meeting is tomorrow.”

“Good,” Tony said with an approving nod, leaning closer to the old motherboard. “Katie Winters is the best at SI, and that means the best; whatever she’s worked up for us is gonna kick Carmichael’s ass.”

Rogers was silent. (Huh.) Tony reached for his Stanley-66 screwdriver with a frown.

“So,” Tony said, glancing up for a moment, “How’s it going? Intake interview okay?”

The upside of having his PR team become their PR team was that they already knew how he liked things handled. Michael had shooed Tony off to the workshop shortly after their initial meeting; Tony had offered no resistance.

“It went well,” Rogers said a little stiffly. (Huh.) Tony reached for his Stanley-66 screwdriver with a frown.

“Oh yeah?” Tony said. “Do they still think you should come out first?”

“Yeah,” Cap said, voice heavy. Tony felt a twinge of sympathy. Rogers was clearly dreading it.

“I still think we should present a unified front,” Rogers had protested. “We’re a team.”

“True,” Katie had said with a nod, “but you’re the team leader. You have good instincts for PR, Captain; you’re quite right to think that adding Mr. Stark last implies he’s a second class team member. Your coming out before everyone else, though, will just help situate you as the team leader, the Commander, which is exactly what you are.”

“Then,” Michael had picked up, “Once the public has accepted you and the Avengers Initiative, you can introduce all your teammates together.”

“That sucks,” Tony said, fiddling with the motherboard. “Have they explained some of the options in terms of interviewers and talk shows and stuff?”

“Yes, Mr. Nguyen has been very patient.”

Rogers still sounded pained and unhappy.

“If you really really don’t want to do it, we can talk to them,” Tony said, yanking at a few loose copper wires. “Trust me, they can adapt. They’re used to me after all.”

“No,” Rogers said firmly. “Their strategy makes sense; it will be the best for the team. And as Captain it’s my responsibility.”

Rogers’ tone was grim. Tony frowned at the circuitry on the table and resolved to have a word
with Katie. Rogers seemed miserable—there had to be some way to make it less horrid for the guy. (Maybe if—)

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony looked up.

Cap was standing there, stiff and awkward, his brow furrowed.

I—” Rogers glanced away, then back. Cap looked unhappy, but not sad. Guilty. Tony frowned.

(Huh?)

“I’m here to apologize for my behavior,” Rogers said.

(Huh?) Tony looked at him blankly.

“I am profoundly sorry,” Rogers continued. He sounded at once more distressed and more stiffly formal than he had after the whole chair-pulling mess. Tony wrinkled his brain. (There’d been no chair pulling, no bowing, no—) Rogers went on: “I have the utmost respect for you and your place on the Avengers; I never meant to make you uncomfortable or show disrespect.”

(No, seriously, huh? What the hell is—)

Rogers met Tony’s gaze head on, expression miserable but resolute, like he wanted to look away but wouldn’t allow himself the luxury. He continued: “I didn’t—I wasn’t thinking about how you might feel with me asking you out over and over, living in your home and acting as your Commander. I should have accepted your refusal and not pressed you anymore.”

Tony startled visibly, eyes wide. Cap continued without pause; his speech sounded carefully prepared, recited from rote. “I hope you know that Iron Man’s place on the Avengers had nothing to do with your orientation and I had no—” for the first time, Rogers looked away, “—expectations beyond those expressed in the official description of Iron Man’s duties.”

“I didn’t think of it as . . .” Rogers swallowed. “—as sexual harassment, but . . . I—” Rogers faltered, then started again: “When you refused and I kept asking that . . . that was disrespectful of me. My behavior was inappropriate and wrong.”

Tony just stared at him, too startled to reply.

“It’s just, I thought that—” Cap began, his tone an entreaty, but he cut himself off abruptly. He shook his head. “Sorry. I came to apologize, not make excuses.” He looked away. “And, I wanted to say: it won’t happen again.”

Tony stared at him for a few long moments, trying to get his thoughts in order. He was pretty sure that Rogers was actually holding his breath, waiting for Tony to react or say something.

The silence lingered and Rogers looked more and more miserable with each passing second, so Tony finally just blurted: “Yeah, okay. Cool.”

Rogers blinked, opened his mouth, then closed it again. He looked hopeful, then uncertain, then miserable. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his ridiculous dockers and waited a few moments; Tony didn’t say anything more.

“Thank you,” Rogers said softly, with a sad little smile. “I—” He swallowed, blinked, “I’m so sorry.” Rogers gave Tony one last miserable glance, then left, head hanging, with a final muttered “sorry.”

Tony hadn’t touched the circuitry or the motherboard since Rogers left over an hour ago. He’d just been sitting, thinking.

Pepper would call it “processing.”

Tony sighed and shook his head. “Shut it all down, JARVIS,” he said and headed for the elevator. He’d take the express up to his own floor and his own scotch. (Rogers practically lived in that common room, so, yeah– no.) Eventually, they’d have to talk, but not yet. Not until Tony figured out what the hell he wanted to say.

The very faint sound of the elevator’s buzz on the way to the penthouse was a comfort, almost like a purr.

It wasn’t that nobody had ever apologized to Tony before. He’d gotten his fair share of, “hey, sorry about last night—I was super drunk; didn’t mean to come on so strong” apologies. Some sincere, some not; some he’d accepted, some not. But he couldn’t actually remember getting an apology from anybody so . . . unprompted.

The elevator doors opened silently onto the huge open floor plan of his penthouse and its vast windows. The view on was stunning—New York a vast expanse of sparkling glory. He loved the
At night, Tony poured himself a generous scotch and sat down, mind running in the same circles as before.

Sexual harassment.

Strange that Rogers would use that phrase when Tony hadn’t even thought of it. Not that Rogers was wrong exactly. Shit. If an SI employee had done that, Pepper would have thrown the book at him or her ages ago! Strangely, though, Tony hadn’t felt harassed. Perhaps since, though Rogers was his Captain, Tony didn’t depend on him for income— not by a long shot—and if Tony wanted out of the Avengers he’d go—and he could throw them all out of his Tower while he was at it!

Tony’s scotch was rich—dark and peaty, exactly the way he liked it with just a drop of water to open the flavor. (Never ruin a fine malt with ice.) Tony shook his head.

Tony’d been more pissed by the chair pulling than the repeated dinner invitations—obviously, since one produced yelling and the other he’d shrugged off. Besides, Rogers took rejection politely and didn’t actually press in the moment, unlike that dick Harris. And, sure—Tony’d wondered (okay, fine: worried) about Rogers’ motives at first, but apparently Tony’d started trusting Rogers (at least a little) without even noticing it. If Rogers was trying to play him, the man deserved an Academy Award—and Tony didn’t think he had it in him, either the maliciousness or the acting abilities.

Tony swirled his scotch and watched thick legs form around the edge of the glass. He chuckled quietly. Yeah, Rogers wasn’t one of the Dicks of SHIELD, bless his backwards, old-fashioned little heart. Rogers didn’t even get defensive after Tony snapped at him! He’d just apologized and asked Tony to explain—he liked the way Tony explained things—and Tony’d never gotten such heartfelt apologies from anyone, and one of them before Tony’d demanded it or even wanted it! And Rogers was just so earnest and even though of all people Rogers deserved a little leeway post-freeze, he never made excuses for himself or—

Tony glanced up; his reflection in the window was smiling, his soft muted smile, private and pleased, not his smirk or paparazzi grin. His cheeks heated. Tony glared at the floor and got to his feet.

Clearly, Rogers had been doing more reading. Or maybe he’d taken one of SHIELD’s training modules? Or maybe Katie or Michael had said something? (Yeah, seemed possible—maybe while prepping Rogers for the press?) Or Bruce. Or— (Whatever. Doesn’t matter.)

Rogers was learning. After all, Tony was pretty sure “sexual harassment” hadn’t been a phrase floating around in the ‘40s—back when Doms called their secretaries “sweetheart” and “doll,” and it was taken as a sign of affection not incompatible with being a respectful employer. Tony began to pace.

And fuck the ‘40’s—how many ‘romantic’ movies now showed the feisty beloved eventually submitting to the unflagging and frankly stalker-ish persistence of the Dom with a crush? The guy who asks her—(because, yeah, hardly any male subs or Dommes in the media)— out over and over and over again. The guy who shows up unannounced with flowers (possibly breaking and entering to deliver them); eliminates her other suitors with unscrupulous, yet ‘comic antics’; watches her with ‘protective’ ‘attentiveness’; and follows her around, thereby enabling him to rescue her from somebody even more creepy and rapey. “It’s not stalking! It’s love!” should be the tagline for half of those movies. (Ew.)

Tony was no closer to a script for talking to Rogers than before. He was sorely tempted to wait until tomorrow morning, but Cap had seemed so miserable . . .. and, well, Tony was feeling pretty wound up too. He’d just wing it and get it over with. Tony’d always been good under pressure. He grabbed the bottle of scotch, a second glass, and headed for the stairs. (Even Tony didn’t take the elevator for one floor.)

When he came into the common area, Tony stopped short.

“Where’s Cap?” Tony said.

He’d been expecting to find Rogers sitting at the kitchen counter with a book, or working a crossword puzzle, or maybe making something to eat, alone or perhaps in companionable silence with a teammate or two. Instead, he found Bruce, Clint, and Natasha, sitting in a row on the couch, sharing a bowl of popcorn and watching The Sting.

“Where’s Cap?” Tony repeated, peering around.

“Dunno,” Clint called, then added with a baffled frown, “Actually, I haven’t seen him since yesterday afternoon.”

Bruce shrugged. “I asked if he’d like to join us, but he said he had too much work to do.”

(Shit.) Tony’s stomach tightened uncomfortably.

Bruce looked at him with a raised eyebrow and added, “I asked you too through JARVIS, but you never answered.” Tony wasn’t really listening.
Rogers never turned down time with his teammates. Never. (Shit. Shit, shit, shit!)

Bruce gave him a quizzical look. “Is everything okay?”


Tony hurried to the elevator, relieved he hadn’t waited.

“Cap’s floor, JARVIS,” Tony said frowning, then remembered his manners, “Oh, uh, ask him if I can drop by, would ya?”

“Of course, sir.”

When the elevator doors opened, Rogers was standing in his living room halfway to the elevator, hands hanging awkwardly at his sides.

“Mr. Stark,” he said, brow pinched, “please come in.”

“Look,” Tony said, holding out a cut-crystal tumbler, “apology accepted, I don’t hate you, so—drink with me!”

Rogers stared at the proffered glass, looking a little bewildered, a little startled, and still a little worried. Tony waved the glass at him. “Go on. Go on, Rogers—Cap. We’re gonna drink. And talk. And stuff.”

After a long, lingering moment, Rogers took a step closer and accepted the glass. Tony poured them each a few fingers of scotch and clinked the crystal together. Tony raised his glass and fumbled around for a toast; Rogers waited, but made no suggestions.

“To the Avengers,” Tony finally said.

“The Avengers,” Rogers repeated and took a drink.

Tony nodded with satisfaction, then brushed past to flop on Roger’s couch. It was soft, but not too soft. (Of course. Tony’d picked it.)

Rogers hovered looking stiff, awkward, and nervous. It was a strange look on him. Tony didn’t like it.

“Relax, Cap, and sit down, would ya? I didn’t come down here to yell at you, okay?”

Rogers nodded and took a seat in the armchair across from Tony. He perched awkwardly on the edge of the seat, elbows on his knees, leaning forward. He cupped his scotch in both hands, expression intent. Tony sighed.

“So, look, apology accepted,” Tony repeated. “And, just so we’re clear, I wasn’t upset; you didn’t freak me out or piss me off.”

Rogers looked unsure.

“And I definitely don’t think you had ulterior motives about Iron Man or anything like that.”

Rogers looked relieved.

(And, seriously, that guy should never play poker.)

“But, I’m telling you that we’re fine. I wasn’t pissed and I don’t hate you. I mean, eventually, I’d have probably snapped—you know, like with the chair thing—and told you to back the fuck off, but, hey, you figured it out first! So, that’s good, right? Uh, well done.”

(Ouph. That came out wrong.) Rogers was staring into his scotch like it was an oracle, but not actually drinking it.

Tony frowned. He was really curious what had led to Rogers’ revelation about sexual harassment, but it seemed like asking would be rubbing it in. And part of him sort of wanted to ask if Rogers had been serious about the dinner qua dinner, or if he’d just been hoping to hook up, but it seemed even more cruel to ask about that, since Tony’d rejected him, what, four times?

“Thank you for accepting my apology, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, looking up at Tony with those earnest, big blue eyes for a moment, before dropping his gaze back to his glass.

“No problem,” Tony said. He looked around Rogers’ apartment, hoping for a new topic of conversation, but the place was uninspiringly barren. Rogers hadn’t hung any artwork or photos, hadn’t unpacked anything on the living room shelves. His kitchen was spotless and empty; there
weren’t even clean dishes on the drying rack, or a washrag hanging from the faucet. The only sign
that someone had been in the room recently was a sketchpad and a few wooden pencils on the
coffee table between them.

“Have you been drawing?” Tony asked, gesturing to the sketchpad.

“A little,” Rogers said softly after a moment’s pause. He set his scotch on the coffee table.

(Now we’re getting somewhere!)

“What do you draw?” Tony asked, hoping Rogers might offer to show him.

“This and that,” Cap answered, making no move for the book, showing no sign he might share it

And it wasn’t what Rogers said, but something about the wistfulness in his tone, the restrained
and private answer, that made Tony wonder “from before or now?”, but Tony swallowed the
words down unsaid—looking at Rogers’ expression, he was pretty sure he knew the answer. He
could imagine Rogers’ sketches with surprising vividness: a street in Brooklyn, teaming with long
skirts and sharp fedoras; wrought iron streetlights and boxy-looking trolley cars; Peggy Carter and
The Howling Commandos.

The silence lingered. Tony finished his scotch and cleared his throat.

“So, what gives, Captain?” Tony said, forcing a teasing tone into his voice. “I hear you turned
down The Sting. Who turns down a chance to watch The Sting?”

“I wasn’t in the right mood.”

“Bullshit,” Tony said, springing to his feet. “There’s no wrong mood for The Sting. It’s a classic!
You’ll love it! Come on—it’s team bonding, Cap.”

Rogers stood, but didn’t move. His brow was creased, a slight frown at the corners of his mouth.
“I’m not sure I—”

Tony cut Rogers off by grabbing his sleeve and pulling him towards the elevator. “Come on! The
longer you hesitate the more movie we’re missing. Vamanos, vamanos!”

Rogers allowed himself to be dragged into the elevator, murmuring a rather subdued, “All right,
Mr. Stark.”

The elevator doors closed. They were standing close together, Tony still holding the Captain’s
sleeve. He let go abruptly, but didn’t step away; Cap still had that pinched expression from before,
eyes a little unfocused, looking away. Tony swallowed.

“Cap?” he said softly. Rogers looked down at him uncertainly.

“You’re a decent guy, Cap,” Tony told him quietly, looking up.

The elevator doors opened and the moment was broken. Tony strode in to the common room and
called, “Look who I found!”

“Are you joining us after all?” Bruce asked Rogers. Rogers gave a hesitant little smile, a shrug,
and a nod.

The team wordlessly sprang into action, acting in perfect concert: Bruce stopped the movie; Clint
fetched two beers from the fridge; and Natasha grabbed two more bowls for popcorn.

“Glad you could join us, Captain,” Natasha said, handing him his ration of snacks.


“Here,” Bruce said, “we’ll start from the beginning—we weren’t that far in anyway.”

“Uh, thank you,” Rogers mumbled. And when Rogers settled a little stiffly, Tony made a point of
sitting next to him, a silent reassurance.

As the sounds of Scott Joplin filled the Tower, Tony glanced around the room at his team and
realized they belonged there. And it felt good. Surprisingly good.

He should have known it wouldn’t last.

Chapter End Notes

Ta-da! The chapter I was so nervous about. Hope you liked it! :-) Thanks so much
for joining me and for all your support!
If any of you lovely readers are also artists and would like to do artwork for this story, I'd be tremendously pleased and flattered; I'd be delighted to post a link! In fact, if anybody would like to do a few specific photo manips for the next chapter, please let me know! Thanks!!!

You are all wonderful and have been so kind and encouraging. Many thanks to you all!

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updated note (3/19/14): I'm going through a bit of madness at work and leaving on an unexpected trip-- this on top of finding the next chapter hard to write and being away from my lovely beta... so, please bear with the delay. I'll be back, hopefully in early April. Thank you for your patience!
Tony had a habit of losing track of the days of the week, unless he had some pressing reason (and external force to help him) do so. But when he wandered into his—the—kitchen the morning after they watched *The Sting*, he thought for a moment it had to be a Sunday because Cap was cooking breakfast. But, no. Cap was wearing his dreadful khakis and a white t-shirt, not his dreadful suit and striped tie. Clint was shoveling a pancake into his mouth, Natasha was sipping coffee from a cup clenched in both hands, and Bruce was staring a little blearily into space with a tattered burgundy bathrobe clutched tight around him.

When he caught sight of Tony, Rogers smiled warmly; then his brow creased, the smile dimmed, and he opened and shut his mouth a few times. He glanced down at the pancakes and bacon and then back.

Something reassuring. Tony should say something reassuring. He should, but he hadn’t had coffee yet, so that seemed like an impossible task. They stared at each other.

Tony was just opening his mouth to say, “Coffee?”—the only word he could come up with—when Natasha materialized at his side offering him a cup with a faint hint of a smile and an upraised eyebrow.

“Mmm,” Tony murmured into the cup, then took a long sip. “Yay!” he cried, brain suddenly back online. “Pancakes! Cap’s making us pancakes and it isn’t even Sunday—man, you spoil us.”

Rogers shrugged. “I wanted pancakes; don’t mind making extra.”

“If I snatch a piece of bacon from the skillet, will you rap my knuckles with your spatula?” Tony asked impishly.

“No.” Cap said it so seriously. “I wouldn’t.” A pause, then he added with a frown, “You really shouldn’t do that though; the grease is blistering hot.”

“Fine, fine,” Tony said, holding his hands up in surrender. He took a long swallow of coffee. He sort of wanted a way to touch Rogers reassuringly, a nudge with his elbow or a playful shove, but couldn’t quite figure out how, so he just took his seat. Looking around the counter, Tony had that feeling again—the ‘not-intruders, they kinda belong here’ feeling. It was all sort of . . . *domestic*.

Rogers was flipping a pancake when his ass started blaring a poor quality recording of reveille. Rogers jumped. He grunted and reached back for his cell phone grumbling, “Didn’t think the damn thing would be so loud.” He glanced at the screen, then answered, “Captain Rogers speaking . . . Yes, sir . . . I see. Where? I see. Yes, sir. We’ll be there right away.”

Cap turned to the team. “The energy signature’s back—it’s hovering over Central Park. Everybody, suit up!”

(Shit.) Tony threw back the last of his coffee—he’d need it—then said hopefully, “And pancakes after? Right?”

Rogers nodded and gave a slight smile. “Let’s hope so,” he said, shaking his head. “Let’s move!”

Bruce fidgeted. “You realize I don’t have a suit, right? That’s not how it works.”

Rogers’ expression went soft. “I know that, Bruce, but you’re on our science team. And, well, I assume you don’t want to go out in your bathrobe.”

Bruce blinked owlishly, looked down, and then back up. He gave a sheepish smile. “Yeah.”

Bruce said. “Kinda forgot about that. Okay. I’ll throw something on and meet you on the quinjet.”

“All right, team,” The Captain said, everybody already dispersing. “You’ve got ten!”

The situation in Central Park was less than ideal. The portal was floating some eighty feet in the
air—high enough that it was in plain sight for myriad rubbernecking tourists even SHIELD was having trouble keeping away. As far as Tony could tell, they were trying to tread a fine line between “cause mass hysteria” and “no, seriously, you need to get out of here.” You’d think the sight of seventy-five heavily armed people in Kevlar would do it, but apparently nope. And, oh, goody. News crews. (Shit. Better give Katie and Michael a heads up . . .)

The portal was far less spooky here in some ways—perhaps because daylight and no creepy carousel horses—but it was worryingly public and its pattern had changed. Tony didn’t like that at all. Last time, Bob had appeared near the ground, not high in the air. Also, it was now much larger.

Tony frowned and looked at the spectrometer’s readings on his HUD. It had only been fifteen minutes, so it wasn’t giving him anything new yet. He looked back up at Bob, shimmering blue-grey, almost undulating.

“It’s sort of beautiful, isn’t it?” Bruce said quietly at his elbow. It was just what Tony’d been thinking. He flipped the faceplate up and smiled.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “In a way, I guess. But I’ll feel better when we understand it.”

Bruce nodded. “We’ll have the full results in another thirty minutes.”

Tony grinned and gestured at the staring agents. “By then, their necks will all be sore.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Well,” Tony said with an awkward metal shrug, “It’s not gonna do something differently just ‘cause we’re staring at it. Wanna go back to the mini-lab on the quinjet and watch the readings with a cup of coffee? I’ve got all those hypotheticals loaded and few little devices I’ve been working on and—.”

Tony was mid-sentence when the spectrometer began blinking and JARVIS cut in: “Sir? The energy levels are spiking.”

(Shit.)

“Not good,” Bruce muttered, rushing over to their beautiful device.

“Iron Man? Dr. Banner?” Rogers said over the comm. “What’s happening?”

“Not quite sure yet, Cap,” Tony said. He hesitated, then added, “but I’d guess, nothing good. Be ready.”

“Understood, Iron Man.”

“Oh my God,” Bruce breathed, “Is it— Did the electromagnetic radiation just—I mean, the force carrier should be able to—”

“JARVIS,” Tony barked, “Start running all my hypos, stat. Cross the blanks with the new output as it comes in”

“Of course, sir. Running Hypothetical Analysis 1-83,” JARVIS answered. At that moment the energy field began to flicker. “Please stand by,” JARVIS said politely and then a dark shape emerged from the energy field, which was now officially a portal.

“Damn, Natasha,” Clint said, with a whistle. “You have some ugly relatives.”

The creature now standing in Central Park immediately below Bob looked like a giant spider. It was roughly six feet tall, with four legs on the ground, four in the air, and a segmented body. Its exoskeleton was dark blue. It had four luminous grey eyes and a pair of huge black fangs. It bobbed and spun in a circle, seemingly taking them in.

Tony felt a shudder of revulsion overtake his body; happily, it was concealed by his suit.

“Maybe it’s peaceful?” Bruce said uncertainly.

“Yeah, sure, maybe,” Clint said, “like Charlotte’s Web. Hey, Nat, you should welcome it!”

“Shut up, Clint,” Natasha said, at the same time Captain America barked, “Chatter!”

“Maybe we should—” Cap began, but he didn’t get to finish. A thick web shot from the spider-alien’s spinneret to wrap around a nearby agent, pulling him towards it with shocking speed. Black Widow sprang into action, glittering knife unsheathed in a second, ready to cut the web.

“Let him go!” Cap commanded. The alien proceeded unperturbed. “All right, open fire!”

And then everything happened at once: a flurry of bullets ricocheted off the creature’s exoskeleton; Cap’s shield went flying, but the creature ducked; the shield bounced off a tree and returned to Rogers like a boomerang; Clint’s exploding arrow (courtesy of one Tony Stark) found its mark and the creature chittered; Natasha was hacking repeatedly at the web with her sharpest
knife. Tony launched himself into the air and fired off two repulsor shots—one to burn the web strand (which worked) and one at the creature’s head (effect unclear). It seemed stunned, for a moment—Tony hit it again, while Clint launched another exploding arrow. The creature recovered and charged Widow and the fallen Agent, moving with terrifying speed on all eight legs.

(Bug, boot.)

Tony tried to land on the damn thing full force, hoping to squash it. It rolled out of the way at the last second— he missed its body and landed on its legs instead. The exoskeleton cracked and blood oozed forth; the thing chittered. Two of its remaining legs shot out and wrapped around Tony, pinning his arms to his chest. It squeezed. Tony shot one of his miniature shoulder missiles at it, but couldn’t get the angle right for a repulsor blast.

“Sir, under the current force, the suit can only withstand two minutes of this pressure.”

“Thanks, J,” Tony gritted out. “Little help!” he cried into the comm.

Cap, Widow, and Hawkeye were already advancing on the creature as one. It struggled away, dragging Tony with it—the damn thing was strong—but it was injured and didn’t get far. Widow dodged its remaining legs as they shot out at her and left a throwing knife in its eye; Clint pin-cushioned it with arrows, managing to pierce the exoskeleton at point blank range; and Cap bludgeoned it with his shield, finally smashing its head, then decapitating it. Its legs spasmed and Tony struggled free.

“You squashed a spider!” Clint told Cap with a grin. Clint turned to Tony to add, “JARVIS better not have a hand in this. I think his freaky Tolkien themed training module may have cursed us. I mean, seriously? Giant spiders? Ew.” He shook his head, then shrugged. “Well, that could have been worse. Not that bad really.”

“Clint,” Natasha said softly, pointing up, “Don’t jinx us.”

The portal was shimmering again. Tony braced himself for the next one.

But it wasn’t one—there were ten.

(Fuck.)

Chaos erupted. Agents sprang into action, some attacking the spiders in trios, some trying to hold the perimeter. Black Widow leapt onto one of the creature’s backs—her knife found the vulnerable joint between platelets; when she leapt away, the creature fell, belly-up, legs convulsing. Vibranium flew. Arrows exploded.

“Bruce!” Tony called over the comm. “I’m getting you to the jet! I need you in the lab.”

“Oh God,” Bruce murmured. He was looking a little green and backing away from the battle when Tony snatched him up one-armed, pulling the doctor close to his chest.

“Come on, buddy,” Tony said as they flew over the battle. “I need you on this. JARVIS is running all my speculative analysis. We’ve gotta find a way to shut that portal.”

Even as Tony said it, five more creatures landed in the park.

(Fuck.)

“I’ve got a bunch of devices I started on, but without the full data, who knows,” Tony said as they flew. “We’ll have to rework it on the fly.”

“I’m—I’m gonna lose it,” Bruce mumbled, shivering against the chest plate, “I’m more dangerous than they are. I can’t—I, Tony, I can’t—”

“If you Hulk out, it will be okay,” Tony said as they landed in the quinjet. He put all the conviction he could into his voice. “We trust you—we’re a team. Seriously though, buddy, if you can science for me now, that would be better.”

Bruce took a deep breath.

“Science isn’t a verb,” Bruce said softly, then ran over to the console.

Tony smiled and rushed back to the battle.

“Iron Man!” Cap called. “Report!”

“Banner’s on science, quinjet lab secure.”

“Good. Get Hawkeye into position!”

“On it!”

Below him, Cap’s shield soared. Tony’d lost sight of Natasha—no doubt she was in stealth mode
—but he found Clint facing off alone against a pair of spider things, retreating steadily while firing at point blank range.

Tony snatched Clint up by the harness they (thankfully) hadn’t gotten rid of yet. “Where to?” Tony asked. Clint pointed to a high tree with a long outstretched branch; Tony maneuvered them carefully, firing repulsor shots as he went. Clint got three shots off in transit, but remained silent.

Things were bad. Really quite bad.

Then they got worse.

Tony stared a moment as a chill ripped through his body.

“Did they just—” he murmured.

“Attention!” Cap called into the comm. “The spiders can jump. Repeat, the spiders can jump—twenty feet in the air at least. Three spiders leapt the perimeter and are headed for midtown. Repeat, headed for midtown.”

This—now this—was like Tony’s nightmares since he’d first seen the force field.

Tony shook himself. “I’m on it!” he yelled, and took off after the creatures, as a red, white, and blue blur leapt the perimeter and made chase.

“Lift incoming,” Tony said, swooping low. Cap jumped again and Tony caught the shield, then sped after the swiftly escaping spiders. The HUD picked up nearby electronic signals—cameras, cell phones—but he couldn’t lose his focus. Bystanders were distractions; the best way to keep them safe was to go after the spiders.

“JARVIS?” Tony yelled into the HUD, “Call SI. Order Evacuation Protocol, stat. And send updates to emergency services and the news stations if they don’t know already. Have them get people inside and lock the doors! Away from windows!” Tony swallowed. “This is gonna get ugly.”

“Of course, sir,” JARVIS answered, voice calm as ever.

“They seem to hate the repulsors,” Cap called over the rushing wind. “Let’s try the shield move on them.”

“Got it,” Tony said. They were overtaking the things quickly. “Launch in, three, two, one—now!”

Tony gave Cap a little toss and he vaulted in front of the creatures, braced with his shield in front of him. Tony fired the repulsors at its surface full blast in a hard continual stream, while Rogers redirected the energy to hit all three spiders. Tony shot two more shoulder missiles. One of them twitched, then flopped over, legs convulsing in recognizable death throes. Down to two spiders. Tony called the one on the right, leaving Cap the one on the left. Tony hovered in the air and hit his over and over with repulsor beams while Rogers hammered at his with the shield, using it sometimes as a bludgeon, sometimes as a projectile. Cap dodged and weaved out of the creature’s grasp, jumping nimbly away and back. He landed a blow between its body segments that sent it belly up just as Tony’s spider did the same. Tony landed and flipped the faceplate up.

“God job, Iron Man,” Rogers said, turning to him with a weary smile.

“Look out!” Tony cried.

The creature wasn’t dead. As soon as Cap lowered his shield and turned away, it sprang up, spinneret shooting a web that dragged Cap into its grasping four top legs. He tried to smash at it with his shield. He couldn’t get a good shot, but managed to keep the shield between him and its fangs—at least for now.

Tony couldn’t risk a repulsor shot or a missile—not with Rogers in its grasp like that—so he rushed it from behind. He dug the gauntlets into its eyes and squeezed its head with the armor’s full strength. It chittered and struggled, loosening its grasp on the Captain just enough for him to spring free. Rogers leapt into the air and used the force of his fall to drive his shield into the creature’s abdomen. The exoskeleton cracked and the creature convulsed once more.

Tony shot it a few times, just to be sure.

Rogers fell to his knees, panting. “Thanks,” he said heavily. “Nice . . . nice save.”

“Are you all right?” Tony asked, chest tight.

“Fine,” Rogers panted, still on the ground. “It’s just . . . got a strong grip. But I—I’m fine.”

Captain America pulled himself to his feet, a little heavily but not shaky. He wiped his shield off on the grass, leaving behind a smear of blood and guts.

“They can play possum,” Cap announced over the comm. “Repeat—they’re smart enough to play dead. Be careful.”
“Roger that,” various voices chimed back. He was linked to the SHIELD agents too now, apparently.

“How long on the National Guard?” Cap asked as they headed back to the main perimeter.

Maria Hill’s voice answered, “Another forty-five minutes.”

“Other reinforcements from the nearest military base?”

“We’re working on it, Captain,” Fury said.

“Bruce?!” Tony said. “How are the readings?”

“Still coming in. So far Specs 33 and 89 show most promise,” Bruce answered, voice tense. “I’ve been looking at your blueprints for a reverse polarity device, but I don’t know—I’m not an engineer, Tony.”

“I’ll tell you what to do—you know, like one of those tv shows where a doctor walks some random dude through performing a tracheotomy.”

“You know that would never work in real life, right?” Bruce asked, voice going a little shrill.

Tony shot at some more spider things, then dodged as one suddenly leapt into the air at him. (Fuck!)

“Yeah, well,” Tony said, heart hammering. “Spider aliens don’t invade in ‘real life’ either. It’ll work out.”

(It has to.)

A dozen spiders had broken the perimeter.

(To think, things had finally been going so well.)

Tony should have known it couldn’t last.

Tony lost track of time, each heart-pounding minute bleeding into the next. The wail of sirens in the distance; orders and questions barked across the comms, clear and close.

Worst of all, every so often there came the gurgling, gasping sound of someone dying—their last breaths harsh and grating over the open comm. Then (almost as bad) there was the guilty sense of selfish relief the next time one of his people spoke and he confirmed, no, that hadn’t been Cap, Widow, or Hawk. (As if that made it better.)

They’d discovered the creatures hated fire—their webs were particularly flammable—so now New York City was burning. Small controlled fires (for now) to help confine them to the park, but the smoke rising into the air filled Tony’s heart with dread. Too many memories.

(Concentrate. You just have to concentrate.)

The Agents fought in the perimeter for the most part, while Cap and Tony took hunter duty—speeding after the runaways before they could get to more populous areas, taking them down as fast as possible, then moving on to the next without getting too far from the perimeter.

“Tony, do I solder the B-27 wire to board K?” Bruce asked.

Of course, while fighting spiders, Tony was also reviewing data Bruce sent him. It looked like Hypothetical 79 was probably their baby.

Nobody was allowed to tease Tony for his obsessive tinkering ever again.

Tony shot another repulsor beam off Cap’s shield, stunning three spiders at once. A set of agents moved in for the kill.

“Yes!” Tony answered, “Good. Then you’re going to connect the red, yellow, and white leads.”

“One at a time,” Bruce answered tightly.

“You’re doing great,” Tony reassured him, flying low to pluck a fallen Agent off the ground and away from two oncoming spiders. Tony shot at them.

“Sir,” JARVIS said through the HUD, “may I remind you that energy reserves are growing low.”

It should have been a question; JARVIS made it a statement.

“No,” Tony said shortly, grateful that JARVIS at least silenced the comms before giving him those updates. Tony was just turning his attention to a new creature, hitting it with repulsor blasts in quick succession, when a new voice—familiar and comforting—spoke on the comm:
“What is this shit? Aliens invade, you’re first on the scene, and I have to hear about it from the Pentagon, Tones?”

“Rhodey,” Tony breathed into the comm. “I’m really glad to hear your voice.”

“Be even happier to see War Machine, I bet. Stand by—I should be there soon.”

“Good,” Tony said.


“No,” Tony said, taking another shot, “we’ll have to make a subset algorithm for it to test conditions on the other side of the portal and then auto-adjust. That’s what the yellow, red, and white cords connecting to the jerry-rigged StarkTab are for. I’ll just have to come fix up the programming.”

Five more creatures leapt through the portal.

“Avengers, report,” Cap ordered. He sounded exhausted. There was a long gash across his shoulder, uniform stained with blood and dirt.

“Holding outer perimeter,” Widow answered. “Using tree cover to take them by surprise.”

“Perch still hol—” Hawk began, then swore. “Shit— Nope, looks like they’ve figured out where I am and are headed my way. Iron Man?”

“Be there in a mo—FUCK!”

One of the spiders had leapt twenty feet into the air and wrapped its legs around him, squeezing. Its fangs slammed against the armor, looking for a join between helmet and shoulder. Tony’s flight went uneven with the sudden added weight.

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“Tony?” Clint’s voice was tight.

“Be there soon,” Tony said, casting about for a plan. He flew over a rock and cut the power, crashing down to break the spider’s exoskeleton against it. The thing released him as it split open like a crab, but Tony’s suit couldn’t dampen the force of the fall and still kill the spider. Tony’s head slammed against the helmet and his whole body exploded with pain.

(Fuck. Oh, ouch. Fuck, fuck—)

Tony’s ears were ringing. His head swam.

“Shit!” Tony heard Clint cry, then a pained gasp. Tony struggled to his feet, unable to breath.

(No, no, no, no . . . .)


“Fine,” Clint gritted out. (Tony took a deep shuddering breath.) “Had to jump before they swarmed, but I missed the landing and I . . . I think my ankle’s broken. Shit!”

“There in three, two, one,” Tony said, and gave Clint a lift, scooping him away from onrushing spiders. Tony flipped the faceplate up. “I—I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” Clint answered. He shot another arrow.

“I should have—” Tony tried again.

“Don’t.”

Tony nodded and got Clint into position. Below he could see Cap take out another spider then collapse to his knees, chest heaving. Tony nearly rerouted to grab him, but Rogers was already struggling to his feet. It looked like he might be limping.

Ten more spiders leapt through the portal.

(Shit. Shit, shit, shit.)

Tony tried to push the panic away. Tried to replace it with calculations—cold, calm, reasonable.

The aliens were coming through in alternating batches of five and ten every two minutes, but the gaps between waves were getting shorter. There were . . . a lot . . . of Agents down. Police. First responders. Spiders were escaping the perimeter and terrorizing residential districts—casualties unknown. The suit was getting dangerously low on power. Rhodey’d be there soon to take over aerial support. Widow’d gone radio silent, so who knew how she was. The National Guard still hadn’t arrived. Clint’s ankle was broken.
And Tony would need at least thirty minutes to program the reversion device to auto-adjust and self-detonate. Actually, he’d probably need more like an hour to be sure. Even then there was only one way to make sure the device would work (if it could work at all).

Turned out the math was pretty easy.

“Headed your way, Brucie,” Tony said. “Let me in the top hatch. It’s time to shut this portal.”

Tony’s landing and entrance went smoothly and spider free—a faint glimmer of luck in the shit storm.

Tony flipped up the face plate. Bruce was giving him this agonized, nervous look as Tony approached the worktable.

“Thing of beauty,” Tony said with a grin, looking at their franken-device with relief. “Look-- you get started on another in case this one goes to shit. I’m with you, 79 looks best, but it still might turn out to be 33 in the end.”

Bruce nodded. “On it.”

“Great,” Tony said. And he shouldn’t hesitate, but he couldn’t just--

“You did great,” Tony said softly. “You’re really amazing, you know that? We, ah, we’re lucky to have you on the team.”

Bruce looked at him pleased, but startled. “Yeah?” he said, a little puzzled. “You too.”

Tony grinned and turned to the reversion device. He checked it over (everything looked good) and then gathered it into his arms.

“Tony, what are you doing?” Bruce asked.

“Gotta run.”

“But, you haven’t programed the auto-adjustments! Or the timer!” Bruce said as Tony flew out through the hatch. He didn’t answer.

“Tony! Tony, what are you doing!!” Bruce asked again, but from the tone of his voice Tony was pretty sure he was starting to suspect.


“Tony!” Bruce yelled again. “Come back! I’ll help program it. Don’t.”

“Iron Man, report!” Cap repeated. Bruce had opened their conversation up to the comms apparently.

“Sorry, Bruce,” Tony said. It was one of the most sincere apologies he’d ever given; he was sorry. “You did great with the device, but the auto-adjust program would take too long. Be too unreliable too. I do my best work on the fly, you know, and this way I’ll have JARVIS.”

“Tones? What’s going on?” Rhodey cut in. Tony’s heart clenched. It felt like there wasn’t enough air in the suit. “Tony? I’m almost there with back up.”

Tony stayed silent. He didn’t want Rhodey on the line for this. Still, it was good to hear his voice. “What the hell are you doing?” Rhodey demanded.

“Gotta close the portal,” Tony said around the lump in his throat.

“By going through it?” Bruce snapped. “It’s crazy! You don’t know that the conditions on that side can sustain you, even in the suit!”

“If they can’t, then all the calculations on this device are off and it won’t matter anyway,” Tony answered. The suit was climbing fast, everything in Central Park shrinking below him. “I’ll take it through, make adjustments, and close the portal.”

“That—” Rogers hesitated, “That sounds like a one way trip.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that, so he stayed silent.

“TONY!!” Rhodey yelled.

“Sorry,” Tony murmured and flipped off the comm.

Tony vanished through the portal.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading! I hope it was worth waiting for. Action scenes aren't my forte, so where necessary please suspend disbelief. :-) 

Hope you liked it! Thank you all so much for the encouragement and support!
Chapter 20

JARVIS's voice in his ear . . . updates and calculations . . . flying up and up and up in space, out of range of the leaping spiders, buying more time . . .

cold, cool lines of calculations . . . a spaceship, bright blue and luminous against the infinity of space . . .

“Life support systems failing, sir.” . . . just a few more calculations . . . Done . . . 

There was no air. Everything moved in slow motion, every motion was a struggle.

Device about to detonate—close the portal—and just one last . . . last repulsor shot to the ship . . . its doors were open . . . feeling dizzy . . .


Something was beeping.
A steady, regular beeping: "beep . . . beep . . . beep . . . beep . . . beep.

Hospital. Tony was in the hospital. (Tony hated hospitals.)

He struggled to drag his eyes open, then winced and screwed them shut as the light seared his retinas and made his head pound.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice was a ravaged, rasping noise.

“Tony?” she repeated softly, reaching out to take his hand. “Can you hear me?”

Tony groaned and forced his eyes open into a little squint.

“Oh my God.”

And then Pepper was crying.

(Pepper never cried.)

Her tears left no make-up streaks; she wasn’t wearing any. She looked oddly small hunched over in a threadbare Cal sweatshirt three sizes too big for her.

“Thank God,” she murmured.

Pepper stroked his cheek, ran her fingers through his hair. It felt good, a warm soothing comfort, and he could nearly slip back under—but, no. Not yet.

“What?” Tony rasped, trying to shake the mist from his mind.

“They’re safe,” Pepper said softly. (She knew him so well.) “Rhodey and your team. They all survived the attack.”

Tony’s mind was fuzzy and unfocused, but there was more— More questions he needed to--

(Everything felt numb, his brain wrapped in cotton wool.)

Pepper swallowed. “You closed the portal.”

Yes, that. That was it.

“You did it, Tony,” she said, then repeated, “You closed the portal.”

Tony let out a sigh and slid back under.

When Tony woke again, things were beeping and Pepper was sitting at his bedside still (or again). Her lipstick was a muted but somehow cheerful shade of pink, and she had changed into a crisp green sweater. She was doing something on her StarkTab when he opened his eyes.

Tony’s whole body felt heavy and when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a rasp.

“Tony,” Pepper said, voice relieved as she looked up at him with a smile.

Tony let out another rasp and she turned to the side table where there was a glass of water with a straw. She offered it to him and Tony drank greedily. He wasn’t thirsty, but his mouth and throat
were parched raw.

Pepper stroked his hand with soft little caresses; it seemed almost unconscious. The world still felt a little blurry, but Tony forced himself to focus.

“What happened?” he asked.

Pepper took another deep breath and began. She seemed to trying for (but failing to recreate) the matter-of-fact tone she used for SI reports: “You’ve been in a coma for ten days, causes mostly unknown.” Tony stared. (Ten days?) “You had several bone fractures, bruised ribs, and a concussion, but none of that could explain the coma, particularly its length.” Pepper’s fingers clenched his hand for a second. “They weren’t sure if—” Pepper shook her head, blinking quickly.

“Pep—” Tony cut in. “Thank you.” He lifted her hand to his lips. Raising his arm took effort and Tony noticed for the first time that there were tubes leading into his veins. “Thank you for coming.”

Pepper’s brow creased. “I’ll always come for you.”

She held his gaze for a few long moments and some small part of Tony shied away at the sheer sincerity of that promise.

Then Pepper smiled, pulled her chair closer to his bedside, and resumed her report: “Rhodey caught you.” Her voice shook only slightly. “The portal was already closing when you came through, but you weren’t flying. You were falling. And Rhodey— Rhodey caught you.”

Tony shuddered. Pepper took a sip of water, then added with another smile, “He was here earlier. He sat with you while I freshened up—he’ll be grumpy that he missed you.” She pushed her hair back out of her face and continued. “Rhodey took you to the quinjet and Dr. Banner was able to stabilize you until they could manage a medevac. The portal was shut, but there were still a lot of the aliens on the ground and they changed their tactics when the portal closed. They jumped the perimeter and scattered. Many of them hid. They’re still looking for the last of them.”

Tony nodded, already trying to guess how long he’d be kept out of the suit and whether there were any sort of tech he could invent to locate the aliens more efficiently.

“They’re all fine though? You said my team was safe, right?”

“Yes. They were all injured, but nothing major. Nothing life threatening.”

Tony nodded in satisfaction, then asked, “And Stark Industries?”

Pepper hesitated and his throat closed up.

“They got your call in time,” Pepper said. “Spiders damaged the first and second floors, but that was after Jerry got everyone into the bunker, but—” Pepper’s eyes filled with tears, but her voice was steady. “He went back out.”

(No.)

“When he saw there were spiders in the area, he and Javier started making runs to get people off the street. They got an extra forty-five civilians to safety, but—Jerry stayed to guard the door. He—He didn’t make it.”

Tony closed his eyes tight and turned his face away. Jerry. Gentle with the tourists and fans who got too close, but scathing with the paparazzi. He’d made it home from two tours in Afghanistan, then died in Manhattan.

“His wife—” Tony said.

“I called her,” Pepper answered softly. Tony nodded. He steeled himself and turned back to her.

“How many?”

“They’re still not sure,” Pepper hedged. Her hands went tight—it was one of her only tells.

“But they have some idea,” Tony pressed.

“Tony, you closed the portal,” she said, “That was the best thing you could possibly do. You can’t take it on yourself when—”

“Damn it, Pepper! Just fucking tell me!” It was far from his usual roar, but it echoed in the blank, cold hospital room.

Pepper’s mouth went tight. “One-hundred and ninety.” She paused then added, “Over half of them SHIELD agents, local law enforcement, first responders, and the National Guard. The rest were bystanders.”

(190.)
Tony didn’t know what to do with that number. It seemed at once huge, yet on some level relatively small.

(The number 2,977 kept flashing through his mind.)

Pepper was talking again—something, something, did all he could, could have been so much worse, bravery, something something—but his mind was still spinning around 190 and Jerry and who else?

Tony tried to turn over, then winced in pain. Pepper leapt to her feet, expression tense. “Does it hurt? Do you want more of your drip? The nurse said you could administer your own dose.”

Tony hesitated. Normally he hated the fuzzy feeling of morphine or whatever the hell it was, but he hurt so badly and the drugs made him sleepy and sleep would mean . . . not thinking. It felt like weakness, but he nodded.

Soon, he drifted back under.

Tony woke up to find Rhodey in the chair at his side, sound asleep with his head and arms resting on Tony’s bed. Tony was tempted to wake him—to say thank you, to ask for news—but Rhodey looked so exhausted. From what Pepper’d said he and the team had been hunting aliens non-stop for days and days with only brief resting shifts; Rhodey needed the sleep.

Tony looked around restless and discontented until—ah ha!

He snapped up the tablet by his bedside, turned down the volume, and flipped it on. Apparently Pepper had been preparing a brief for him on recent events, all while multi-tasking—corporate mergers wait for no man, nor woman, nor alien invasion apparently.

A search for “War Machine Iron Man portal New York” gave him over eleven-hundred hits, many of them video. Tony hit play.

The portal was closing quickly, swallowing itself up, then he could see the Iron Man suit break through, falling fast, but War Machine was already climbing at full speed, then slowing for impact. They spun out of control for a moment as Rhodey corrected his flight to adjust for Iron Man’s dead weight, then War Machine had Iron Man draped across his arms, hugged against his chest, as he flew down to the quinjet and disappeared from sight.

Tony’s chest felt tight.

He hit replay.

And again.

Tony was so engrossed in the clip, he didn’t notice Rhodey stirring until he spoke:

“Don’t you fucking pull that shit again, man.”

Tony smiled. “Nice catch.”

“I mean it, man. Don’t,” Rhodey said gruffly. “My heart can’t fucking handle it.”

“No promises,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said with a nod. “I know.”

“How’s the round-up?” Tony asked.

Rhodey shrugged and stretched. “Slow. At this point, we’re hardly finding one a day, hiding away someplace dark, but we’re not sure if it’s time to call off the search.” He shook his head. “Banner put together a team and has been using our footage to calculate how many came through, then he and some guy in forensics have been trying to separate the goo and tally up the bodies. Looks like we should be done soon though.”

Tony nodded. “I’ll be out of here soon, give you a hand.”

Rhodey just laughed. "Bull-fucking-shit, man. No way. You’ve got fractured bones and had some sort of space coma. Don’t even think about it.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “We’ll see.”

“I mean it, Tones. Don’t.”

Tony held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay. At least give me more news. It’s boring in
Rhodey’s expression softened.

“Quite a team you’ve got, Tony. They’re good. Really good.”

Tony smiled softly. “I know.”

“Romanov kept fighting with a broken wrist,” Rhodey told him incredulously. “She hardly let up long enough for them to put it in a splint and give her shoulder seventeen stitches before going back out. Rogers didn’t like it, but seemed to know he couldn’t keep her down. Barton’s got a shattered ankle; I moved him from perch to perch a few times and he just kept on going. Other than the ankle, he’s fine.”

Tony only hesitated a moment before prompting, “And Rogers?”

“He seems fine, but really who knows?” Rhodey gave a little snort and rubbed the back of his neck. “He’d get hurt, then insist the serum had it covered and get back up. Pretty sure he had broken bones at a couple points, and there are big gashes in the uniform, but he never got or seemed to need stitches. Don’t think he’s seen any doctor either, except maybe Dr. Banner.”

Rhodey shook his head and let out an incredulous chuckle. “Captain America, huh? He’s a hell of a guy. Kinda lives up to the legend, doesn’t he?”

Tony hesitated, not quite sure what to say (or whether Rhodey was trying to imply anything), but he was saved from answering. Rhodey’s phone went off—it was the boson’s whistle from the Starship Enterprise, the big dork.

“Sorry, Tony,” Rhodey said, pulling himself to his feet. “Gotta get back out there.”

Tony nodded. Rhodey reached out to clasp Tony’s right hand in both his massive ones, dwarfing it by comparison. Rhodey held on tight.

“Stay put, man,” Rhodey said, his voice going a little raw for the first time. “No checking out early.”

And Tony knew he wasn’t just talking about the hospital.

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Idleness had never been good for Tony.

“Pepper, you give that tablet back, now!”

“No,” she said, tone clipped as she stepped away from the bed. Her four-inch stilettos clicked against the linoleum. “You’re obsessing and it isn’t healthy.”

“It’s not obsessing, it’s respect and if—”

“There’s nothing more you could have done,” Pepper said firmly, refusing to raise her voice. “And, yes, reading about the victims, mourning even for the people you didn’t know—up to a point that’s a healthy sign of respect, but I’m cutting you off.”

“Pepper, that’s—”

“No!” Pepper shouted him down. “You’re refusing your pain killers and resisting sleep to stay glued to this thing and watch as the death count’s adjusted. You’re not allowed to punish yourself for things that were. Not. Your. Fault!”

“Pep, be reasonable! I’m—”

“Anthony Edward Stark! Shut up!”

Tony blinked and complied, surprised by her vehemence.

Pepper glared at him. “I sat by your bedside for ten days while you were in a coma. I was half out of my mind at the thought you might never wake up. You will NOT jeopardize your recovery in a misguided attempt at self-punishment.”

Tony knew a losing battle when he saw one, but that didn’t mean he had to cave gracefully. He glared back.

Pepper added, “Jerry would have taken your tablet away ages ago.”

Tony winced. “That was a low blow.”

“Only because you know it’s true.”
“Fuck you,” Tony said without venom.

“Fuck you.”

Tony sighed. “I love you, Pep.”

She smiled. “I know.”

“You love me back though,” he said coaxingly, giving her his best doe eyes.

“Of course,” she said easily, “which is why I brought you this.” Pep held up another StarkTablet. “I loaded it with some of your plans for the armor, as well as various relevant interviews and news broadcasts. Ms. Winters would have a fit if she knew you weren’t following the fantastic PR she’s doing for you and your team.”

Tony gave a tight nod. He hesitated. (Winters, Jennifer, Age 27; Number 187.) “There was a Jennifer Winters on the casualty list. Do you know if—?”

Pepper’s brow furrowed with concern. “I don’t know.” Pep shook her head. “She hasn’t said anything. It’s a common last name.”

“Sure, yeah,” Tony said, once again feeling that uneasy guilt at his own relief.

Pepper set the tablet in Tony’s lap. He snatched it up eagerly as she turned to go, but at the last minute she turned back to him with a soft, hesitant, “Tony?”

He looked up startled.

She was wearing one of her usual, sharp military-inspired suits and high heels; Tony wasn’t used to seeing her expression so vulnerable while she was wearing her armor.

“Tony?” Pep repeated softly. He hated to see her nervous—it made him worry what she might say next. “Would you like me to— I mean, could I hold you?”

“Yeah,” Tony answered, relieved, then added, “please.”

The tension seemed to ease out of Pepper’s body at his quiet reply. She was efficient as usual: she kicked off her heels and laid her blazer neatly over a chair; she moved one of the drip racks out of the way and slid the side rail down; then, very carefully, she eased herself onto the bed next to him. Tony started to shuffle over awkwardly to make room, but Pepper scooped him up and resettled him herself. Soon, he was cuddled up to her, head against her stomach, legs curled around hers. Pep stroked his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp with her fingernails just the way he liked it.

“You’re the bravest person I know,” Pepper told him in a gentle murmur. Tony pressed his face closer to her stomach and closed his eyes. He didn’t answer—he didn’t have to when they were like this.

Pepper rubbed little circles on his neck with her thumbs, a firm and comforting pressure. “You’re the bravest person I know and I’m so proud of you, Tony.” Pepper’s body was warm and solid against his. Somehow she’d managed to arrange them both so his tubes weren’t pulling and none of his injuries were aggravated. (She was magic like that.)

“I’m so proud of you,” Pepper was murmuring ever-so-softly, stroking his hair with one hand and holding him close. Tony found the contact comforting, but even more comforting was the knowledge that Pepper wanted to hold him, that holding him could be a comfort to her.

“What you did was incredibly brave . . . .” Her words came slowly and Tony could feel himself starting to float ever so slightly. “I know you’ll scoff, Tony, but it was heroic. Truly heroic . . . You saved a lot of people’s lives. I’m proud of you . . . so proud to have you as my friend.”

Tony made a helpless little noise.

“You’re a good man, Tony Stark.”

His eyes were stinging. It felt good to be held, to let Pepper take care of him, even a little, but he’d been coiled so tight the thought of really letting go—

“I’ve got you,” Pep mumbled.

Tony cried quietly against her stomach while she petted him. He was pretty sure she was crying too, but the steady murmur of praise went on and on and Tony let everything wash over him. He lost track of time.

Eventually, there was a gentle chime from Pepper’s phone.

“Tony? You can have more of the painkillers now. Will you take them?”

He was exhausted and everything ached.
Tony nodded. Pepper let out a relieved sigh and turned the dial for him.

The pain eased and soon Tony drifted to sleep, curled in Pepper’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

I found this chapter really hard to write and I ended up deleting a lot of what I’d written and starting over. There was originally more about the attack’s various victims, but I kept making myself cry. . .

Sorry no Steve in this chapter! I promise he’ll be in the next one! I was originally going to write a big long chapter with all of this, and Steve, and the media, but it was taking a long time and I didn't want to keep you waiting. So, sorry no Steve, but, hey, no more cliff hanger, right? :-)

Thanks for reading. Your kindness and support overwhelm me.
Chapter Notes

Infinite thanks to thatwhichyields, my beloved beta! So glad she's back from the wilderness beyond the internet... :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The man standing on the steps was at least 6'2 with bright blue eyes, blond hair, and bulging muscles. He wore a Captain America costume, torn and blood stained. Reporters shoved microphones into his face, shouting a nearly incomprehensible barrage of questions.

“—vigilante?”

“—affiliated with the government?”

“Have they recovered the serum? Are there more—”

“—disrespect to the uniform for it to be used as—”

The man spoke over them in a clear, confident voice; the reporters quieted at the sound of it.

“There have been a lot of questions going around—and not a lot of answers,” the man said. “That’s mainly because we don’t have many answers yet. We don’t know where the attackers came from, why they attacked, or whether they might attack again.

There are other questions, however, that were left unanswered initially; it was neither the time nor the place for them. Now that the threat has been essentially neutralized, there are some things I’d like to tell you.

My name is Captain Steven Grant Rogers, code name Captain America, originally of the 107th.

The reporters shared a moment of silent shock then erupted into a cacophony of questions.

Rogers frowned at them and spoke firmly into the nearest microphone: “If you’d please be quiet for a minute, I’ll probably answer many of your initial questions.”

They settled.

“Thank you.” He gave them a polite nod.

In 1944 I crashed a plane into the Atlantic Ocean in the service of my country. Due to the properties of Professor Erskin’s serum, I went into some sort of suspended animation. Earlier this year, I was discovered and revived; since then a dedicated team have been helping me to acclimate to the twenty-first century, and for the past few months, I have been developing a special emergency response team. SHIELD calls us ‘the Avengers.’

We had been discussing when and how to introduce ourselves to the American people. In light of recent events and your many questions, it seems only fair to come forward now. So, please allow me to introduce myself and my team. First—acting as both a scientist and a fighter—is Tony Stark, code name Iron Man.”

The reporters went wild.

Tony was listlessly scrolling through videos he couldn’t quite bear to watch when Bruce knocked awkwardly on the open door.

“I dropped by earlier,” Bruce said, “but you were asleep. Can I come in?”

“Are you kidding?” Tony asked with a grin. “I hear you saved my life, but, seriously, if I can’t get out of here soon—or get on the fucking internet—I’m not so sure you did me any favors!”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed and his mouth went pinched.

(Oops.)

Tony held up his hands in surrender: “I kid! I kid!”

“Not funny,” Bruce muttered, entering Tony’s room and making a beeline for the clipboard at the foot of the bed. “Hmmm,” he murmured as he perused it.

“Hmm?” Tony said. “What’s ‘hmmm’?”
“Still no explanation we can find for your coma,” Bruce said, clearly displeased. He pulled a chair to Tony’s bedside.

Tony shrugged. “Space flu?”

“You’re making that up,” Bruce said. “And it’s not helpful.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Says the man who covers himself in motor oil on a regular basis.” Bruce turned his attention back to the chart.

“So, uh,” Tony said awkwardly, “I am glad—I mean, grateful, you know.” He paused, then clarified, “that you saved my life, I mean.”

Bruce nodded. “Glad I could help.” He stared at the chart in silence a few moments before adding, “I—it was . . . hard . . . to see you go up there and, you just—you wouldn’t listen to me!” Bruce frowned at him. “You could have waited.”

Tony shook his head very slightly. There was no point arguing about it. Bruce sighed.

“I almost lost it, you know,” he said softly. Tony had to lean closer to hear. “Seeing you go through, knowing you might not— I saw red. Er,” Bruce gave a nasty, self-mocking laugh, “green. Almost changed—as if the Other Guy could have jumped after you.” Bruce let out a long shuddering breath. “And who knows what would have happened then. He—I—could have done ten times as much damage as the arachnoids . . . or more.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Tony said softly.

“You can’t know that.”

Tony tapped his forehead. “Futurist.”

They were silent for a few moments, the only sound the beeping of medical equipment and the buzz of the florescent lights in the hallway.

(Tony would never stay in a room with florescent lighting. Obviously.)

“You had so much faith in me,” Bruce said finally. “It . . . It meant a lot. Means a lot.”

Tony squirmed a little in his hospital bed. (At least Pep had brought nice sheets—hospital sheets itch.) Tony bit his lip, unsure if Bruce would continue or if he ought to say something. Tony waited.

“Steve kept me calm,” Bruce said at last. He swallowed thickly. “He reminded me that you might come back through and need me sane to ‘help with the science’” Bruce sounded gently amused at that, but as his voice went serious as he continued: “or to act as a doctor. Turned out it was a bit of both.”

Tony hesitated. He didn’t really want to know. But . . .

“I was in some sort of quarantine, right?”

“Yeah,” Bruce answered heavily. “I managed to stabilize you—used a modified adrenaline shot, if you were wondering—but we had no idea what you’d encountered up there. I used a combination of procedures for containing infectious disease. Hazmat suits, the whole thing, until I was sure you weren’t contagious.”

“Glad I missed it,” Tony murmured.

“Wish I could have,” Bruce replied.

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

Tony hesitated. “Yeah. No, but I didn’t—”

“I know.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

And it was good, really. Bruce wasn’t the sort to hold a grudge. (Probably.) And, despite popular opinion, Tony didn’t always feel the need to crows when he was right.

(Pep’s right . . . I did all I could, but I had to close that portal. It was the right call.)

Bruce took pity on him (sort of) and got a chess set.
Tony was still in the hospital—without the internet—but it could have been worse.

Even if Bruce did beat him six times in a row.

“Mr. Stark? This is Mrs. Martina Rodriguez. Jerry’s wife? Thank you for your kind message . . . I, uh. Jerry always spoke very highly of you. He . . . he was fond of you too.

We had trouble scheduling the funeral because of . . . of recent events, but it’ll be Friday. He’d be pleased you want to come. . . . but, I . . . I talked to Ms. Potts and she doesn’t think you’ll be ready to leave the hospital and, well, I don’t want to risk your well-being or take the chance that the media . . . Sophia’s having a really hard time and I don’t want the paparazzi to show up and— I’m sorry. I’ll send directions to the gravesite so you can visit later. I hope you understand . . .

Good b—

Oh. In lieu of flowers, we’re requesting donations to the Veterans Assistance Association. They helped Jerry after Afghanistan, and— Right. Well, thank you for your message, Mr. Stark. I hope you make a speedy recovery. Good bye.”

Tony was working on the armor when Pepper stopped by. Of course, he was still on bed rest and didn’t have any tools, but Rhodey’d taken the armor home and JARVIS was giving Tony the readouts on the damage. It would take a lot of work to get in the air again. (Tony felt almost grateful for that. Now if he could just get out of here . . .)

Pepper was dressed in a flawless black suit, flats, and a dark purple blouse. Pep gave him a kiss on the cheek and peered at the tablet.

“Still working on the portal devices?”

“Hmm?” Tony hit ‘save.’ “No. Finished those. If those fuckers come back, we’ll be ready to shut the portal in a matter of minutes. By remote control. No, this is the suit.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, a hint amused. “Obviously.”

Tony shrugged and gave her a weak smile, fidgeting with the bed sheets.

“How was it?”

“Lovely,” Pepper said. “Mrs. Rodriguez sends her regards. And thanks for the VAA donation.”

“Yeah,” Tony said heavily.

“I told her about the monument,” Pepper told him gently, then a little amused, added, “she liked the idea of a fountain best.” Pep shook her head. “Told you a statue was . . . too much.”

Tony shrugged. “Okay. Thanks, Pep. But you should go. I, uh, need to work on the suit.”

“Of course,” Pepper said softly and gave him another kiss. “I’ll see you soon.”

Tony took a deep breath and threw himself into work.

Senator Brant stood on the steps of Capitol Hill wearing a navy suit with a red and white striped tie. “There’s only one possible response to a terrorist attack of this nature—swift retaliation,” he announced. “This is the only deterrent.”

“How do you propose to do that?” called a reporter. “The attackers’ origins and motives are unknown and the portal is now closed.”

“If they opened it, we can open it,” Brant answered. “I am founding an emergency appropriations committee to seek funding for this strategic strike initiative and I am assembling a list of top scientists.”

“Isn’t that a dangerous idea?” another reporter called. “Not to mention expensive?”

“Has Tony Stark shown any interest in joining your science team?” called a third.

“Stark is not currently on my team,” Brant said, “but let’s just remember that it’s easier to close something than to open it. Just because he closed it—with the help of Dr. Banner—doesn’t mean he could reopen it.”

“If not Stark then who?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified. No further questions!”
When Tony swam up from his next woozy drug nap, there was someone in his room.

Natasha was curled up in a thickly padded chair in the far corner, the one with the clearest view of the door and window. She was wearing a large blue sweatshirt and soft grey yoga pants. There was a book open in her lap, but she was watching the door. Her left wrist was in a cast.

“You didn’t inject me again, did you?” Tony asked, with no real suspicion.

Natasha turned to look at him and very slowly raised one eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Tony said, a little muzzily, rolling over. “Didn’t think so.”

She gave a little nod and the very slightest smile.

“Good,” Tony added heavily. “M’goin’ back t’ sleep now.”

“You do that, Tony,” Natasha said, her tone amused.

“Mmmm,” he muttered, beginning to drift off again.

“I’ll keep watch,” Natasha added, her tone soft. Tony wondered if he were dreaming.

When he woke up, she was gone.

Captain America stared out at the rowdy reporters, expression very mildly disapproving as they shouted.

“You’re placing Stark in an official combat position?!”

“Which branch of the military are you working under and did they agree to Stark’s presence?”

“What kind of screening process was there?”

“Did Stark apply for the position?”

“Does Stark really have the discipline for the military?”

Rogers stood silently and waited for the shouting to die down.

“Part of my acclimation to the twenty-first century was to study recent history,” Rogers told them. “This introduced me to Tony Stark and the story of Iron Man; the more I learned about him, the more I wanted Mr. Stark for my team. He is one of most brilliant scientists and inventors of the 21st century and he has repeatedly proven his bravery, ingenuity, and effectiveness in battle as Iron Man.”

There was a certain murmuring from the reporters, but Rogers pressed on.

“Let me be clear,” he said in a commanding tone, “without Tony Stark, that portal would have stayed open and the city would have been overrun. Not only did he invent the device that successfully closed the portal, he carried that device through the portal to make the necessary adjustments on the other side. Mr. Stark was willing to die to close the portal and he may still pay that price for his role in protecting New York. He has been in a coma for three days, condition unknown. Without the timely intervention of Lt. Colonel Rhodes and the medical innovations of Dr. Bruce Banner, Mr. Stark would certainly have died. So, to answer your questions, I think Mr. Stark has all the necessary qualities for this team. And then some.”

Rogers took a deep breath and continued over the reporters’ murmuring. “Now, I’d like to introduce the next member of my team: Dr. Bruce Banner, who--”

“Were you aware Stark is a submissive?” someone interrupted.

“I could hardly miss it while reading his media coverage,” Rogers said mildly. He paused, allowing the subtle reproach to linger. He then resumed, a bit more firmly, with clear disapproval: “If you’re trying to imply that Mr. Stark’s orientation casts doubt on his qualifications for active combat duty, I’d cite his recent heroism as more than enough evidence to the contrary.”

“Can you address the rumor that he’s a probationary member?” asked the Fox News correspondent.

Rogers’ eyebrows shot up, then he frowned slightly. “I have no idea where such a rumor could have started,” Captain America said, shaking his head. “I assure you, Mr. Stark is a full member of the Avengers Initiative and I find the suggestion to the contrary offensive. He was the first person I recruited.”

“So, you consider yourself a liberationist?”

“I’m still trying to figure out exactly what that means,” Rogers answered with a self-deprecating
smile, “but, if you’re asking whether I believe Mr. Stark and all submissives deserve the same rights and opportunities as Doms, then absolutely. And I always have. Now,” he added, tone still polite, but with a firm look on his face as he addressed the Fox News correspondent, “If we can return to essentials?

Dr. Banner brings to the team, a keen mind and scientific expertise complementary to . . .”

There were no further questions about orientation.

Something scratchy hit Tony square in the forehead. (Huh?) It happened again. He struggled to drag his eyes open. (Shit. Fucking meds… too slow. Fuck!) Tony flailed upright and blinked as another paper ball whapped his forehead.

“ ‘bout time,” Clint said. He was sitting in the chair Natasha’d taken earlier, crutches at his side. His ankle was in a cast and elevated across another chair back.

“Should have done that sooner,” Clint said. “Then you wouldn’t have missed Cap.” He threw another paper ball at Tony’s face; his reflexes were still too slow to dodge it. It hit him on the nose.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You’re like a kindergartener.”

Clint grinned. “It’s why you like me.”

“Hell yeah! Maybe you’ll help me,” Tony said, adjusting himself against a mound of pillows. “Seriously, man, I’m dying in this place. You’re here to help me sneak out, right?”

Clint laughed. “Are you nuts? Yeah. No.” Clint shook his head. “No way I’m facing the combined wrath of Banner, Cap, Rhodes, and Pepper Potts. Sorry, man.”

“I hate you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Clint waved it off.

“Did you at least bring me a cheeseburger?”

“Sorry, dude. Next time.”

“I hate you.”

Clint shrugged. “Then I guess you don’t want to marathon Lord of the Rings and eat Doritos with me.”

“So, maybe I don’t totally hate you, Legolas.”

“That’s what I thought,” Clint said smugly. He hobbled awkwardly over to Tony’s bed, dragging a bag full of chips, DVDs, and a laptop. “Budge over.” Clint climbed onto the bed next to him and started setting the laptop up on his knees.

Tony bit his lip and hesitated.

(She’d had more surgery yesterday, right? Clint would know . . .)

“Hey, Clint?”

“Mmmm?” he muttered, fumbling with a DVD case.

“Is there any update on Richards?”

Clint’s face went blank. (Shit.) A sharp jerk of the head, deep breath, then: “She didn’t make it.”

(Oh, fuck. But, Pep said they’d been optimistic and--) Tony’s heart was pounding. He’d liked Agent Richards. Clint’s ex.

“Fuck, Clint,” Tony fumbled, eyes stinging. “I’m so sorry, I--”

Clint slammed the DVD into the drive.

“Just shut up and watch the damn movie,” he mumbled.

“The world is changed . . . I feel it in the water . . . I feel it in the earth . . . ” Galadriel began.

Clint sat next to him, coiled tight, fists clenched.

“Hey, man?” Tony said hesitantly, scooting closer so they were touching. “We’re gonna skip the part with Shelob, right?”

Clint snorted. “Sure.” He relaxed very slightly.
“My hero,” Tony joked, leaning against him a little. Clint relaxed a slightly more.

“I still think JARVIS cursed us,” Clint muttered, voice a little rough.

“It began with the forging of the great rings . . .”

“Whatever you say, Legolas.”

Clint offered Tony some Doritos.

“Shut up,” Clint muttered. “Movie.”

Tony fell asleep long before they reached Shelob.

“Mr. Stark,” Katie Winters said, walking into his hospital room at a slower clip than her usual long-legged stride. (A nod towards the solemnity of the occasion, no doubt.) “How are you feeling?”

“I wish people’d stop asking me that,” Tony grumbled, then relented. “Fine. I’m fine. Better now that I’ve seen some of the PR you’ve been doing.” Tony let out a low whistle.

Katie gave him a little smile and shake of her head. “You took most of the challenge out of it. Saving New York is always good PR.”

“I do what I can,” Tony said with a grin. “Still, you managed to keep Rogers’ foot out of his mouth, so that’s a job well done.”

Katie blinked, then said slowly, “I didn’t.”

“What?” Tony asked incredulously. “I saw his first interview. Great stuff, really. I didn’t see any foot in mouth—I’m actually, kind of impressed he went for some of that.”

“No,” Katie said. “You misunderstand me. I meant, I didn’t—That wasn’t me.” Katie took a breath and shook her head, part aggravation and part wonder. “I didn’t prep him for that. It wasn’t a press conference—he just finished a patrol shift, washed his face, walked right over to where all the reporters were camped out and started talking!”

“That was extemporaneous?” Tony asked skeptically.

Katie gave an elegant shrug. “I doubt it. He’d clearly thought about what he wanted to say, but he didn’t talk to me first.” She gave him a rueful look. “Or to SHIELD—and I’ve gotten a real earful about that, thank you very much.”

Tony’s hands twitched for his tablet, wanting to watch the video again.

(Really? That was all Rogers? But… But . . . He . . . He said . . . Huh.)

“Now, for the moment, I recommend delaying your press exposure—”

Not that Tony thought Rogers was stupid. He didn’t. Just, well, he’d always assumed somebody wrote Captain America’s rousing speeches. Someone else. A professional. Now Tony wasn’t so sure.

“—certainly wouldn’t allow TV cameras into the hospital, but—”

(Was I really his first choice? And the way he shot those orientationist a-holes down! Not that I needed defending exactly, but it matters and if he really thinks--)

“Mr. Stark?” Katie asked.

“Huh?”

“Should I come back later?”

Tony pulled himself from his thoughts. “No! It’s uh, sorry. Meds, you know.”

She nodded. “Now, as I was saying, low exposure is probably—”

“Hey, Katie?” Tony interrupted, suddenly distracted once more. She nodded again, impatiently. “I, uh—” Tony hesitated, “on the casualty list, there was a Jennifer Winters. She wasn’t, uh—?”

“Related?” Katie asked steadily. “Yeah.” She blinked quickly a few times, then added: “My sister. Paramedic.”

Tony’s jaw dropped. “Jesus, Katie! What are you doing here?” He shook his head. “Why didn’t you say anything? PR can wait. Or Michael can handle it. Go home—he with your family.”

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Stark,” she said briskly. “Eventually, you’ll need to give an interview, but—”
“Katie, seriously, what the hell? You don’t have to keep—”

“Tony—” she interrupted urgently, voice raw.

“Let me do my job,” she said, voice firm, calm, and collected. Then she added a little more softly, “Please.”

Tony’s chest felt tight and his eyes stung—they were more alike than he’d known. She looked at him with the same haunted eyes he’d seen in the glass reflection of his workshop’s walls, that pleading look—_don’t make me, I can’t deal with this yet, work’s my only refuge_. Tony swallowed. He wouldn’t drag Katie Winters from her workshop.

Tony nodded. “Carry on.”

Katie looked relieved and perhaps a little grateful. She pushed her hair back and continued: “Now, as I was saying, we’ll wait on interviews, but a few photographs of you in the hospital might be wise to . . .”

Tony was working on the Iron Man suit again when Rogers showed up. He hovered in the doorway, wearing his terrible dockers and rubbing the back of his neck with one big hand.

“Mr. Stark?” Rogers said softly, “may I come in?”

Tony waved him in impatiently and pulled up the clip he’d been saving for this very moment. He flipped the tablet for Rogers to see and maxed the volume: “I assure you, Mr. Stark is a full member of the Avengers Initiative and I find the suggestion to the contrary offensive. He was the first person I recruited.”

“You.” Tony said, pointing at Rogers, “were _not_ supposed to tell them that. Fury gave you explicit orders.”

Rogers gave Tony his most guileless Captain America look and spread his hands.

(Oops!? Seriously? Is that what he said to Fury?)

Tony shook his head. “What is this shit? Captain America lying to the press? I thought you were like honest Abe. Or maybe biologically incapable of lying or something.”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Cap protested, then hedged, “well, not really. You _are_ an Avenger in every sense that matters and always have been, even if Fury and SHIELD were slow on the uptake.”

Tony blinked and stared at Rogers for a moment before asking curiously, “Are you in trouble for that little stunt?”

Rogers snorted. “What are they going to do? Fire me? Tell the press I lied?” Rogers shrugged. “They were worried about PR and I’m pretty sure saving New York City was good PR—” he said it with a grimace, “so why would they rock the boat? They’d be the ones making bad PR then.”

“Good point. Not as dumb as you look, are you?” Tony asked, a teasing voice to soften his words.

Rogers shrugged. “Didn’t always look like this,” he said mildly. “Besides, I’d expect you to know better than to judge by appearances.”

“Touché.”

They were silent. Tony’d watched Rogers’ interview dozens of times in the past few days—you’d think in all that time, he’d have figured out what he wanted to say about it. The silence lingered.

Rogers cleared his throat. “So, how are you feeling, Mr. Stark?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Sick of being asked that.”

Rogers laughed. “Oh, I understand. Trust me, I know.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna let me come home?”

“Not up to me,” Rogers said with an apologetic smile. “Bruce, Ms. Potts, and a legion of doctors are in charge of that. You can take it up with them.”

“Are you at least gonna bring me a cheeseburger?”

Rogers blinked and looked startled for a second. “Yes.”
Then Rogers smiled. “Yes, of course. I’d be happy to bring you a cheeseburger, Mr. Stark.” Then Cap gave him a suspicious look. “You’re allowed to have rich food, right? It won’t hurt your recovery?”

“Of course!” Tony cried.

“Uh-huh,” Rogers said, unconvinced. “I’ll see what Bruce says.”

“Spoilsport.”

“I’m not going to do anything to jeopardize your recovery,” Rogers said solemnly. The atmosphere in Tony’s hospital room changed suddenly. Tony swallowed.

“Mr. Stark,” Rogers said began seriously. “That was a great thing you did and I hope that you know that I--”

Rogers’ phone pinged. He fell silent, looked down at it and frowned.

“I have to go back.” Rogers said apologetically. Tony didn’t know if he was relieved or disappointed.

“Yeah, no worries,” Tony said, clutching his tablet as if it held all the answers.

Rogers took a half step towards the door, then paused.

“I’m glad you made it out, Iron Man,” Rogers said in a low voice. “Glad you’re awake.”

Tony’s breath caught slightly. He just nodded.

“Uh,” Rogers said, voice back to normal. “I’ll see what I can do about that cheeseburger.”


Rogers smiled, gave Tony a warm “feel better,” and took his leave.

Rogers was on the steps of the hospital, wearing dockers and a button down shirt. The press immediately began clamoring with questions. He made quelling gesture and, shockingly, they quieted.

“Since last we spoke, there has been a lot of discussion of the Avengers. Lots of footage of us in battle playing on the news. Lots of talk about our history and our lives. And I understand that. People are curious. It’s a shock for me to be here in the twenty-first century—nobody knows that more than I do, trust me.

But I’d like to take a moment to remind everyone that Iron Man, War Machine, Hawkeye, Black Widow and I were only a part of New York’s defense. As you know, Iron Man has emerged from his coma and shows signs of making a full recovery, but last night three SHIELD Agents—Agents Kirk, Chen, and Nguyen-- and two paramedics—Martin Thaler and Lucas Conrad—died of their injuries.

I wish we lived in a world where a small handful of biologically and technologically advanced individuals could defend the city alone and absolutely, without any casualties. But that world only exists in the pictures. We fought alongside SHIELD Agents, local law enforcement, and the National Guard. We received medical attention from selfless paramedics. One hundred and twenty two of these brave men and women-- Doms, switches, and submissives—have now given their lives in defense of this city and served without special costumes or special powers. Please don’t let them, their heroism and sacrifice, be forgotten. Thank you.

Rogers walked down the stairs, away from the hospital, the press trailing behind him, calling questions. “And now, if you’ll please excuse me, I’m on my way out. I promised Mr. Stark I’d bring him a cheeseburger.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it! I found it pretty hard to write. I wanted to do more media coverage, but it got too depressing and then the chapter was getting long and, well, here we are. I'm definitely looking forward to happier chapters ahead!

Things are really busy in my life right now with work so, although I'd like to be posting once a week, between my schedule and my beta's it will probably be more like every other week for the next little bit. Don't worry! I'll try not to leave you hanging for too long...
As always, thank you for your kind words and encouragement. They are a constant inspiration! Sharing this story with you is a real joy. Thank you!
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Dedicated to MsSparks who has returned at last! The internet was a sadder place without you, my dear.

Chapter Notes

Spoilers for Little Miss Sunshine. (If you haven't see it, go now! So good!)

Also warning for Westborough Baptist Church acting like the Westborough Baptist Church. Also, Fox News acting like Fox News. :(

Gratitude forever to thatwhichyields. Loves you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And now over to Shannon at Mount Sinai where Tony Stark is about to be released after nearly three weeks on bed rest. Shannon?"

"Thank you, Mark. I'm here at Mount Sinai hospital where fans and supporters eagerly await a glimpse of Tony Stark-- infamous genius, billionaire, playboy, and the sub who invented and pilots the Iron Man suit.

Unfortunately, we're not expecting Mr. Stark to stop for comments-- Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and Mr. Stark's former personal assistant, has already issued a statement saying that he'll be leaving directly for Stark Tower, now headquarters of the Avengers Initiative. You can see the path cleared to his car and personal driver, Mr. Happy Hogan, and six bodyguards at the barriers. Still it's an exciting moment since this will be the public's first glimpse of Mr. Stark since Lt. Colonel Rhodes, aka War Machine, brought him to the hospital while the city was still under attack.

Fans surround the hospital, bearing cards and flowers. The atmosphere here is ecstatic, but over to my left there are still a small number of protesters from the Westborough Baptist Church. To recap our earlier coverage, they take the arachnoid attack as a judgment from God on submissive promiscuity and liberationism.

The camera pans over to an eclectic group of protestors bearing colorful signs: "God Hates Slags," "Thank God for Arachnoids," "Stark Whore Going to Hell," "America is DOOMED."

A man wearing a Captain America hoodie and a girl in an Iron Man t-shirt are yelling at the protesters.

Suddenly, the crowd starts shouting out "Tony!" and "Iron Man!" and the camera pans abruptly back to the hospital doors.

Dressed in a suit and wearing sunglasses, Mr. Stark emerges holding Lt. Colonel Rhodes' arm and supported in part with an elegant walking stick. Ms. Potts walks to their right. Stark waves and grins at the gathered crowd; after a few words to his companions, he approaches the barricade to sign autographs and accept flowers and small gifts.

"Mr. Stark! Mr. Stark! How are you feeling?" the reporter calls. "What are your plans now that you're out of the hospital?"

Stark trades smiles and laughs with fans, but ignores the news crews and protesters. After a few minutes, he allows himself to be ushered into the waiting towncar by Ms. Potts and Lt. Colonel Rhodes.

Before getting into the car, he blows kisses to the members of the Westborough Baptist Church.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

"Wake up! Daddy's home!" Tony called into the silent workshop. The lights flashed on. Dummy whirred to life on his charging station and made an eager little clicking noise. "Lazy buckets of bolts," Tony grumbled. "Get over here."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "Yeah, go on. Act like you're not down here to dote on your robo-dogs."

"They're nothing like dogs," Tony sniffed. "And I'm down here to assess the damage on our suits. Then fix them. Yours included, so shut it."

Dummy wheeled up to Tony's side, claw head swiveling. Tony reached out to pet him as he
bumped his head lightly against Tony’s hip.

“Mmm-hmm,” Rhodey muttered. “Not doting at all.”

“Don’t you have someplace to be?” Tony asked, exasperated.

“All right, all right,” Rhodey said, holding his hands up in surrender. “But I’m coming back to make sure you eat dinner. You got that?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony said. Pro forma grumbling. “I can feed myself without help, you know.”

Rhodey snorted. “Sure you can.”

“Remind me why I’m letting you stay with me?” Tony grumbled.

“Because I’m the only person who loves the armor as much as you do?” Rhodey suggested.

Tony laughed. “Point,” he conceded, pulling up the specs on a blue screen.

Rhodey clapped him (lightly) on the shoulder and took his leave. “See you soon!”

Captain Steve Rogers emerged from Stark Tower dressed for a run. The reporters clamored as one:

“Captain! Captain Rogers! What do you have to say to the Westborough Baptist Church?”

“Captain, did you see the picket line?”

“Are you aware that the Westborough Baptist Church picketed Mr. Stark’s departure from the hospital? Any comment?”

“Captain! Captain!”

Rogers, who had started to jog away from the reporters, paused. He turned abruptly and walked back towards them, jaw clenched and expression tight.

A correspondent from MSNBC managed to get his microphone in Roger’s face.

“Do you know the Westborough Baptist Church picketed Mr. Stark’s departure from the hospital?” he asked again.

“Yes,” Rogers answered tightly. “I’m aware.”

“Did you see any of the signs?”

“Yes,” Rogers answered, expression even colder. “I saw them.” Rogers swallowed.

“Any comment?” the reporter prompted. Rogers seemed to struggle.

“Yes,” he said at last. “I want to go on record to say that I find the attitudes and tactics of the Westborough Baptist Church repugnant.” Rogers looked pained. “I think it is the most profoundly unchristian behavior I have witnessed in this century.”

Rogers took a deep breath and continued more forcefully, “They’re bullies. But they’re the sort of bullies who thrive on attention. So this is the first and last time I’m going to acknowledge their existence. By reporting on their protests, by putting those signs on television, by talking about them—it only gives them what they want. And I refuse to do that. So I’ll say this once only: their views are repugnant and unchristian; I utterly reject them and their bullying.” Rogers gave an amused little smile. “And, if they’re still around when the time comes, no doubt they’ll picket my funeral someday.” Rogers paused then said with a shrug, “Can’t say I much care about that.”

Rogers nodded to the assembled reporters, gave a brisk “good day,” and vanished quickly as he began his run.

Working on the suit was good. It was always good. Clean and comfortable, a labor of love; part relaxation, part redemption. Meticulous and all consuming. There wasn’t room for anything else.

Pepper dropped by with papers to sign. She stroked Tony’s hair, gave him a kiss, then left him to his work, exiting with the clicking of stilettos and a soft, “call if you need me.”

Tony made fifty more portal devices—with launchers and remote detonators. Bruce helped out with them quietly and coaxed Tony into drinking some smelly herb tea. It was apparently good for him. (If it tasted like that, it had better be good for him…)

Tony went back to work on the suit. Clint brought him donuts and badgered Tony to come drink with him. It was tempting—the blurry camaraderie of alcohol—but Tony wanted the clear, precise reassurance of engineering more.
Rhodey brought Tony sandwiches and junk food, and he goofed off with Dummy and You. He asked questions about War Machine’s repairs and upgrades; they argued about the guns—as usual, by rote. Rhodey tried to lure Tony from the workshop, but didn’t force the issue.

Natasha showed up silently with her Widow’s Bite one afternoon. She handed it to Tony, then settled in the corner of the workshop to do maintenance on her other weaponry, her motions fluid even with her wrist in a cast. Gun oil was a familiar smell (and not unlike Bruce’s smelly tea, come to think of it); the sound of sharpening knives should probably have felt more unsettling than it did.

The days slid by, one by one.

Rogers never came to the workshop.

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The days slid by, one by one.

Rogers never came to the workshop.

But sometimes Tony thought about what he might say if Rogers did come to the workshop.

(I don’t hate you. Thanks for the space, but, hey, let’s be friends.)

Tony checked the wiring on his left gauntlet.

(Sorry about before. Let’s be friends. Just friends though—no power exchange. Or sex. Just so we’re clear. Yeah.)

Tony checked the wiring on his right gauntlet.

(Good speech earlier. Sorry I thought you were an orientationist douchebag. My mistake.)

Tony picked up the soldering iron with a frown.

(It’s cool you lied to the press. You’re pretty fucking shrewd. Sorry I thought you might be a moron. But you’re not! Yay! Anyway, thanks for lying to make me look better. You’re all right.)

Tony sighed and put the soldering iron back down, then ran his dirty fingers through his dirty hair.

(I misjudged you. You’re a good man.)

Tony swallowed heavily. He picked the soldering iron up again and turned back to the gauntlet.

(You’re a good man.)

Rogers never came to the workshop.

But sometimes Tony thought about what he might say if Rogers did come to the workshop.

(I don’t hate you. Thanks for the space, but, hey, let’s be friends.)

Tony checked the wiring on his left gauntlet.

(Sorry about before. Let’s be friends. Just friends though—no power exchange. Or sex. Just so we’re clear. Yeah.)

Tony checked the wiring on his right gauntlet.

(Good speech earlier. Sorry I thought you were an orientationist douchebag. My mistake.)

Tony picked up the soldering iron with a frown.

(It’s cool you lied to the press. You’re pretty fucking shrewd. Sorry I thought you might be a moron. But you’re not! Yay! Anyway, thanks for lying to make me look better. You’re all right.)

Tony sighed and put the soldering iron back down, then ran his dirty fingers through his dirty hair.

(I misjudged you. You’re a good man.)

Tony swallowed heavily. He picked the soldering iron up again and turned back to the gauntlet.

(You’re a good man.)

Rogers never came to the workshop.

“...which is why, we’re bringing you this new segment: no seriously, what now?” Jon Stewart announced seriously. “And now over to a clip from our best ‘no seriously, what now?’ source: Fox News.”

*Pat O’Connor: If anyone needed more proof that racism in America is now over, well, we have a clip.

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Thank you for your email. I am currently out of the office on leave. If it is an urgent matter please contact my assistant, Martha Jones, or my partner, Michael Nguyen; otherwise, I will respond to your message on my return to the office, November 30th.

Sincerely,
Katherine Winters

_____________________
Public Relations Director
Stark Industries

Rogers never came to the workshop.

But sometimes Tony thought about what he might say if Rogers did come to the workshop.

(I don’t hate you. Thanks for the space, but, hey, let’s be friends.)

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Gay O’Connor: “So, not only do we have a black President, but Captain America—a patriotic symbol of this nation and our illustrious past—clearly doesn’t see color. It actually makes you wonder if in some ways the racism of the past has been overstated. But at the very least, racism is over—this is a post-racial America—and the Rogers-Rhodes friendship proves it.”

Jon Stewart made a skeptical face and gestured at the on-screen still of Pat O’Connor.

“Wow,” he said, shaking his head, “apparently Captain America ‘doesn’t see color’—but Pat O’Connor sees it plenty for both of them.” Stewart waved his arms, proclaiming in an over-the-top Pat O’Connor impersonation: “Captain America has a black friend! Cap’s friend is actually black! Racism’s over! His friend is black! I mean, African American, I mean—Racism’s over!”

Stewart frowned and said more seriously, brow creased, “Uh, I’m pretty sure that if you still think friendship between a white dude and a black dude is this noteworthy, then racism in America isn’t over.” The audience cheered. Jon Stewart made an incredulous face and looked back at the still of Pat O’Connor. “So, your evidence for the end of racism is ‘there’s a famous old white dude . . . who has an African American friend’?” Stewart looked surprised and asked, “Well, if that’s all it took to prove racism’s over, then why didn’t you end racism yourself years ago, Pat?”

Stewart smiled sweetly, “I mean, you do have one black friend, right, Pat?” Stewart paused. “You know, the friend you mention when you insist your jokes aren’t racist.”

“We’ll be right back.”

As Tony rode the elevator, he was mentally gloating. (See, Rhodey? I remember food on my own!) Tony was gonna turn the tables on Rhodes and drag him out for food.

The elevator opened silently and the deep rumble of Rhodey’s laughter immediately greeted him. Tony padded quietly down the hall then froze in shock at the sight before him.

Rhodey and Captain America were sitting on the living room floor, drinking beer, and laughing.

“What’d they do then?” Cap gasped out, eyes bright.

“What else could they do?” Rhodey answered, forcing the words out, breathless with laughter.

“Stood at attention under civvies and a brassiere, hopin’ to hell he wouldn’t notice!”

Cap shook his head, laughing and clutching his sides.

Tony backed away from the sight, suddenly uncomfortable with a horrid jumble of emotions: possessiveness (Rhodey’s my friend!); envy (of that certain bond between soldiers); surprise (that Rogers could laugh like that); unease (at such visceral proof other people’s lives had gone on in the weeks he’d been comatose, then bedridden).

Tony went back down to the workshop.

“Welcome back,” Jon Stewart said. “So, I may have given Pat O’Connor a hard time about some . . . remarks he made about the friendship between Lt. Colonel Rhodes and Captain Rogers. But hey, I confess, the sight of Rogers and Rhodes does—he made his flustered face and raised his voice an octave—‘does make my . . . my patriotic little heart go pitter-pat, pitter-pat.’ He sighed and fluttered his eyelashes, fanning himself. ‘They’re sooo dreamy!’

He straightened his tie and returned to his usual delivery, “But, okay, that actually wasn’t so bad,” Stewart conceded. “I was expecting worse. If that’s the most offensive thing you—” Stewart listened to something in his earpiece. “Oh, I see. We have another clip.”

“Pat O’Connor: And let’s not forget Steve Rogers created the first racially integrated military unit in American history.”

Stewart peered at the clip screen nervously from between his fingers. “True—Captain America invited Gabe Jones and Jim Morita to join the Howling Commandos in 1941, despite the legal prohibition on mixed units which wouldn’t be lifted until 1948 by Executive Order, six years before Brown vs. Board of Education. So, yes, that’s admirable, and is actually one of the things that has made Captain America such an appealing figure over time.” Stewart looked nervous again. “But I have a feeling you’re not done—go on . . .”

“Pat O’Connor: So, in a sense Steve Rogers—Captain America—really started the Civil Rights Movement and Free Domism. And that a good decade before Duke Ellison!”

The audience gasped and booed; Jon Stewart banged his head against the table. “I—Did he really? I mean—” Stewart banged his head against the table a few more times, then whimpered and clutched his head. “Ouch.”

Stewart turned to face the other camera and said, “And now, to discuss Fox News’ latest work of historical fiction, Senior Black Correspondent, Larry Wilmore. Larry Wilmore, everybody!”
“Hey, Tony? You hungry?” Rhodey called from the doorway. “Steve and I are gonna hit up Ray’s—wanna come?”

“Nope, I’m good,” Tony said a little too quickly.

“Really?” Rhodey drew the word out, skeptical.

Tony hesitated. He was hungry, and he did want to go to Ray’s—but he also didn’t want to. Rogers was . . . disorienting. The thought of Rogers and Rhodey together was even more so.

“Yeah,” Tony said at last, “Kinda in the middle of something here.” He’d hesitated too long. (Shit.) Tony shrugged, then added, “Have fun with Captain America.”

Rhodey stood, staring. After a few long moments, he asked, “Is there something you wanna tell me?”

“Huh? What? No!”

“Mmmhmm.” Rhodey paused. “’Cause, you know, I can’t help noticing Steve still calls you ‘Mr. Stark.’”

“What can I say,” Tony dodged, “he’s an old fashioned guy!”

“And for some reason he’ll never come down to the workshop,” Rhodey said. He walked into the room and paused. “Everybody else does, but not him. Even when I’m coming down to invite you to lunch with us.”

Tony shrugged.

“Are you avoiding him or is he avoiding you?” Rhodey asked shrewdly.

“Avoiding? Nobody’s avoiding!” Tony cried. He winced; his voice came out shrill. This did nothing to reassure Rhodey.

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine! Everything’s fine!” Tony said it too loud. (Shit.) Too little sleep and his defenses were down.

“Did something happen?” Rhodey asked, brow creased.

“No!” Tony protested. He waved his arms and knocked a screwdriver to the floor with a clatter. Tony scrambled awkwardly to retrieve it as Rhodey walked around the workbench to stand where he could see Tony’s expression more clearly.

Tony’s heart started pounding. (Do not want to talk about this!)

Rhodey’s brows were furrowed, expression pinched—part worry, part anger—as he asked, “He didn’t . . . try and pull anything, did he?”

“Jesus! No!” Tony cried, startled. “This is Captain America we’re talking about! Come on, that’s—”

“That doesn’t mean a thing,” Rhodey protested. “People aren’t always what they seem, and he’s from the ‘40s, so I just want to make sure you—”

“Honestly, we’re fine,” Tony insisted firmly. “Really.”

Rhodey was frowning. He took a deep breath and said a little more softly, “But, you know, if he weren’t great . . . if things weren’t fine—you could tell me. You know that, right?”

And how was it possible for Tony to feel so moved and so irritated at the same time?

Tony felt like the wind was knocked out of him when Rhodey continued, stumblingly awkward, “I mean, just ‘cause he’s Captain America, that doesn’t—I wouldn’t assume, uh—”

It bothered Tony that Rhodey fretted about him like that, that Rhodey worried about some big Dom “trying to pull something” with him; but at the same time Tony was grateful and unexpectedly relieved that if Rogers had harassed him, if Rogers had “tried to pull something,” Rhodey would have believed him. Wouldn’t have made excuses for the guy or thought Tony was asking for it or made it up or was being hysterical or--

“Rhodey,” Tony said urgently, cutting him off. “Cap hasn’t done anything wrong. Okay?”

Rhodey was still frowning, studying Tony’s face intently for any of his tells.

(Shit! Rhodey’s really worried…)

Rhodey’s muscles were still bunched tight, his expression intense and searching. He leaned a little
“Give it a rest, Rhodes!” Tony cried in exasperation, throwing his hands in the air. “Cap’s been great. And I can take care of myself, you know. If he’d taken a step out of line, I’d have let him have it. And I sure as shit wouldn’t cover for him afterwards!”

Tony’s fit of pique had chased some of the worry from Rhodey’s face, though he didn’t look quite ready to drop it. Tony sighed. “We’re good. I just . . . there’s nothing to talk about.”

“I’m not gonna push,” Rhodey said, still frowning. “But I’m not stupid, Tony. I know something’s going on.”

Tony sighed again. No sense denying everything; he was master of the half-truth.

“Look, it’s just—Howard, you know? It’s complicated.”

“Shit Tones,” Rhodey swore, “I should have realized. I mean—uh, you okay?”


Rhodey was still giving him a skeptical, worried look as he made his way hesitantly to the elevator.

“If you’re sure . . .”

“Cross my heart.” Tony smiled.

Rhodey hesitated, then added softly, “You know Howard isn’t Steve’s fault, right?” Tony rolled his eyes and nodded, making his best, “no, shit” face. Rhodey gave a little shrug and an apologetic look. “Just, he’s a good guy, you know? I like him.”

Tony nodded, then added, “Hey, uh, bring me donuts? There’s that bakery by Ray’s. Just a few blocks.”

“I’ll consider it.” Rhodey said it deadpan, but the words were followed by the slightest little smile.

Tony was definitely getting donuts.

The MTA is pleased to announce that all transit lines are fully operational again and have now returned to their usual service schedules. Thank you for your patience while we repaired the damage from the October First attack.

“Come on, man,” Rhodey said coaxingly from the doorway. “You’ve been down here for ages. There’s pizza! And a movie. Something Natasha picked.” Rhodey made a face. “I had a few suggestions, but she just went stony faced and said the movie was already chosen.”

Tony sighed. (Well, he and the workshop had had a good run.)

“She said, you’d like it,” Rhodey reassured him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony said with a shrug. He rolled out his shoulders and stretched, then headed to the elevator. “No need for the hard sell. You had me at pizza.”

“Oh. Good,” Rhodey bumped his shoulder into Tony’s. Tony smiled up at him. “You’ve got a good team, Howard.” Rhodey gave him a little shrug and an apologetic look. “Just, he’s a good guy, you know? I like him.”

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“Oh. Good.” Rhodey bumped his shoulder into Tony’s. Tony smiled up at him. “You’ve got a good team, Howard.” Rhodey told him again. “It’s good you’re coming up. Unit cohesion and all that.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Tony hummed. “G’night boys!” Tony called to the bots. “Shut it all down, JARVIS.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

“So, uh, speaking of unit cohesion,” Rhodey began awkwardly. “You know I’ve been hanging out with Steve, right?”

Tony nodded and gave him a doe-eyed look. “America’s Darling Doms!” He let out a theatrical sigh. “They’re so dreamy . . . I have a google alert for new photos.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhodey said. “Fuckin’ paparazzi.” He rolled his eyes, but didn’t look especially annoyed. Not entirely anyway. Tony nearly snorted. (Just wait, Rhodey-bear. It’ll get old soon . . .)

“Anyway,” Rhodey pressed on as the elevator doors closed behind them. “I just wanted to ask you something.” Rhodey hesitated. “See, I’ve told Steve just about every good story I’ve got from seventeen years in the service. Not the heavy ones, but the hijinks, you know? Guess how many stories he’s told me.” Rhodey paused for effect; Tony didn’t guess. “None. Not one.”
Tony felt a sudden protective swell of irritation. So what? Cap wasn’t spilling great stories of the HCs omitted from the history books—books Rhodey’d already devoured in fannish rabidity second only to his obsession with the Tuskegee Airmen.

Tony didn’t say anything; Rhodey was still talking.

"I just—that isn’t normal, you know? People in the service, they swap stories. Good ones, bad ones." Rhodey shook his head, then said more quietly, “Soldiers tell stories to each other, except when they can’t—when it’s too raw. So, I wondered, has he ever said anything to you about the war? Or about the past at all?"

Tony blinked and shook his head, ashamed he’d misjudged. Rhodey wasn’t after some juicy story from Captain America—he was worried about his new friend.

“Not a word,” Tony admitted. “Cap never talks about the war. And he hardly mentions the past.”

“Tones, that’s bad,” Rhodey said, brow creased. “Do you think he’s talked to the others?”

“Dunno,” Tony said noncommittally, though his first instinct was a firm ‘no.’ He doubted that Rogers was talking about feelings and loss and trauma with any of them.

(Well shit.)

Rhodey looked grim. “Tony, I’m shipping out pretty soon. You guys will keep an eye on him, right?”

(Shit.)


Rhodey gave an approving nod. The elevator doors opened.

Natasha was waiting. “We’re watching Little Miss Sunshine. There will be no debate.”

Tony shrugged. “Good movie. No objections here.”

(Huh. Not the movie I’d have expected Natasha to pick . . .) Tony shrugged again.

Natasha nodded and took a place in the armchair near Bruce, who was fiddling with the remotes and talking to Clint. Rhodey grabbed a beer and sat next to Bruce. Tony bent down to look under the counter for more of that Belgian ale Pepper’d brought him; he’d better put them in the fridge now if he wanted to have one later while--

“Mr. Stark! Nice to see you,” Rogers said warmly. Tony jolted and hit his head on the underside of the counter.

(Shit—where did he come from?)

“You okay?” Rogers asked. Tony nodded and received one of Cap’s most beautiful smiles. “I’m glad you’re here; Jim thought he could probably convince you to join us.”

Tony blinked and stood up, Belgian ale forgotten.

(Jim? Cap calls him Jim?!)

Rogers faltered, then added more quietly, “I mean, uh, I think Natasha’s right—we need to stick together.” Rogers cast a worried glance across the room. “Clint’s taking the losses pretty hard; it’s good to show him that we’re all here. A team.”

“Yeah, cool,” Tony said with a nod, then added more feelingly, “I mean right. We’re definitely a team. And we should, uh, support each other, right?”

Rogers nodded and gave him an approving smile. Tony opened the fridge and buried his head inside it. After a few moments, Rogers repeated a quiet, “I’m glad you could make it,” and carried the last tray of snacks over to the coffee table. Clint joined Tony at the fridge.

“Nat got to you too?” Clint asked him with an amused look.

“Huh?”

“I mean, I was going to skip this,” Clint said waving a hand over at the couch. “But,” he continued more quietly, “I think she’s right. Cap’s really struggling; we should show him we’re here for him and shit.”

Tony choked down a laugh, swallowed crooked, and choked for real.

“You okay, man?” Clint asked.

“Fine!” Tony gasped.

“Makes sense, though, right?” Clint continued, “Cap’s dealing with the future and now the media
frenzy. Probably good to show him we can still, you know, think of him as a person not just some icon.”

“Definitely,” Tony agreed and cast a look over at Natasha. Across the room Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.

(Well played, Romanov.) Tony shook his head. (Wonder what she told Bruce—that I'm the one having a hard time?)

Tony pulled a lager from the fridge, then put it back and grabbed an IPA, though it was a poor substitute for Belgian ale. Natasha was curled in the far armchair. Bruce was next to her on the couch, then Rhodey and Rogers with Clint in the opposite armchair. Tony wiggled in between Bruce and Rhodey and grabbed a slice of pizza.

“Hit it, JARVIS!” Tony called and the strains of Devotchka filled the living room. Tony’s mind wandered and he found himself watching his teammates as much as the movie.

Rogers looked shocked by the grandfather; Rhodey looked delighted by the teenager.

“Is that Nietzsche? You don't speak because of Friedrich Nietzsche?”

Bruce gave a sympathetic wince at Frank’s tales of woe in academia.

Clint smiled indulgently at the little girl (Huh.)

Natasha radiated lazy contentment like a housecat, glancing over to observe her teammates from time to time.

Watching the movie and its fucked up little family that loved each other anyway, Tony couldn’t help feeling a little twist of sorrow or envy or something—he’d pined for a brother or sister as a child. Howard had always been a bit of a shit—“Daddy hates losers”—then worse and worse after he presented. His mother, though . . . Mom had been wonderful. It was hard to believe that she’d been younger than Tony was now when she’d died in the crash. Only thirty-six.

Tony shook the thought away.

“I think you might be colorblind. . . . You can’t fly jets if you’re colorblind.”

Rhodey looked stricken; his eyes distinctly were misty. (Tony loved that Rhodey would cry at the movies.) Cap was leaning forward, rapt, hanging on every word. Bruce and Clint looked sympathetic, but relaxed—Bruce (probably) assisted by weed, Clint (definitely) assisted by beer. Natasha though . . .

Natasha still looked relaxed, curled up in the armchair. She looked like the very picture of relaxation. So maybe that’s why Tony looked again. And then again as the film continued.

It seemed like she was watching the film, but her eyes kept flicking away to check the windows. And the door. (Her seat had the best view of all points of entry, and that wasn’t seeming coincidental.) And when her eyes weren’t glancing from the screen to the entries, she was casting little glances at the others. Watching them as Tony had been. Mostly Clint, but Cap and Bruce as well. And Tony too, he guessed, though he never caught her at it.

Tony wondered suddenly whether the movie night was more for their benefit or Natasha’s. Or whether she knew herself. If she’d wanted them all together—this fucked up little team of theirs—would she have been able to tell them that? It was the closest he’d come to seeing vulnerability in the super-spy and something about that glimpse was warmly reassuring. (He remembered the hospital—“I’ll keep watch.”)

Full of pizza and beer, Tony relaxed back into the couch, then slumped over against Rhodey’s shoulder and drifted to sleep as the sounds of Sufjan Stevens washed over him.

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You are cordially invited to

The New York Restoration and Memorial Fund Gala

With Special Guests: The Avengers

Captain Steven Rogers, Dr. Bruce Banner, Mr. Tony Stark

and Agents Natasha Romanov & Clint Barton

Dinner and Dance tickets start at $10,000.

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Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much for reading! I couldn't possibly do Jon Stewart justice--I love that guy, and so much of it is vocal inflection and facial expressions--but I couldn't resist trying anyway. :-)  

More Steve in the next chapter! Hope you like it and thanks for your patience and good wishes!
“Have you decided what to wear?” Pepper asked over videoconference.

“Hmmm?” Tony murmured, a wrench between his teeth.

“To the Restoration and Memorial Gala. It’s this weekend. Remember?”

Tony spat out the wrench. Dummy made a mournful whirring sound from his lap.


“Yes, clearly,” Pepper said exasperated. “I’m meeting you there and it’s going to be huge for photo ops; I want to coordinate outfits. So what are you wearing?”

“Pfft,” Tony sniffed and waved a hand dismissively. “Clothes. You know I don’t care about that stuff. You decide. Or have Christina figure it out.”

“All right,” Pepper said, crossing something off on her tablet with her finger. “I talked to her earlier. She was thinking Versace.”


“Gotcha,” Pepper said with a little smirk. “It was terrible, wasn’t it?” She grimaced. Tony reached for the wrench sulkily.

“You know, though,” Pepper followed up more seriously, “there’s nothing wrong with having an interest in fashion. You’re aware how I feel about my Louboutins.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, fine for you. It’d ruin my image.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “I won’t tell anyone. But in all seriousness, what are you wearing?”

“I’ll just rock my usual flawless tux, red and gold details. No need for something new.” He rubbed his cheek, leaving grease in his goatee. He’d catch it later. “Maybe new accessories, though. We’ll figure it out later.”

Pepper huffed. “If you call Michael at the last minute again, he’s gonna flip.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “He’s such a diva now that he’s on TV. I think it’s gone to his head. But he’d do it if I asked since he’s gonna owe me always forever—I sent Captain America to him for a fitting.” Tony stretched. “Anyway, if I needed to ‘make it work’ at the last minute, I’d call Tim.”

Pepper smiled, then asked, “So any thoughts on the proposal I sent?”

Tony wracked his brain. “Uh. Looks great?”

“You didn’t read it.”

“Been a little busy.”

“Fine. I guess you’re off the hook for now, but it’s about the Lang Inc. merger.”

“Oh, let’s call it what it is—” Tony said with a grin, “a hostile takeover.”

Pepper grinned back. “A liberationist coup?” she suggested.

“I’ll read it right away, Commander.” Tony gave a little salute.

Pepper’s laughter lingered warmly in the workshop after they’d hung up.
Tony was primped, primed, and ready to go fifteen minutes early—he deserved a fucking medal. Or a scotch. Tony took the stairs from his private floor to the common area. (Maybe just a small glass before the limo…)

Tony wasn’t the first to arrive. There he was in all his glory: Captain America, six-foot-two & eyes-of-blue, wearing a magnificent tuxedo, hovering and fidgeting in the middle of Tony’s living room. Rogers looked ravishing, but somehow wrong in a tux: beautiful, but almost too big, although it was expertly tailored. Maybe it was just his stiff discomfort ruining the look. When he caught sight of Tony, he stopped pulling at his tie and gave a nervous laugh.

“Think anyone will notice if I don’t show up?”

“Sorry, big guy,” Tony said, “You’re hardly inconspicuous.”

“I could have the flu?” Rogers suggested hopefully. Tony laughed.

“Yeah, right. Captain America has the flu.”

“Yeah,” Rogers admitted sheepishly, “guess not, huh?”

“The donors want to see us all, Cap. It’s why they paid the big bucks.” Rogers nodded. “Yeah, no. I know.” He shook his head. Without seeming to notice it, he raised a hand to fuss at his bowtie again. “And I do want to help; it’s important. I just—I’m not very good at this sort of thing.”

“You’ll do fine,” Tony told him with a shrug. “You look great, Cap.” Tony raised an eyebrow and added, “Though, you’re messing up that bowtie.”

“Oh, shoot!” Rogers said fussing at it even more and turning about looking for a mirror. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Here,” he said, stepping closer. “You’re making it worse.” Tony batted Rogers’s hands away from the mangled tie.

Rogers stood stock-still. His eyes were very blue and very wide as he looked down at Tony reaching up to untie the tie. Tony swallowed—he’d forgotten how intimate it felt to tie a man’s tie for him. Rogers was holding his breath.

Tony tied the tie deftly with nimble fingers, then quickly took a step back.

“There,” Tony said. He couldn’t quite seem to break eye contact.

“Thank you.”

The moment lingered. Tony took a deep breath. “Cap?” he began, then fell silent.

(You’re a good man, Cap.)

“Yes?” Rogers prompted. He said it with such sweet openness—not quite hope, but something like it.

(Thank you. For what you said to the press.)

“Uh,” Tony faltered.

(I misjudged you. I’m sorry.)

Tony cleared his throat. “If you really want off the hook,” he said, “I’ll cover for you. I can tell them it was urgent Avengers business, Top Secret.”

Rogers smiled. “That’s kind. But, no. No, thank you.” Rogers let out an uneasy little laugh and joked, “I mean, if I can fight aliens, I can mingle and make small talk, right?”

Tony gave a wry smile. “Dunno, some of those society types are worse than aliens.” He laughed. “Trust me—I know. I’m one of them.”

A frown flickered across Rogers’ face before he smiled again and said, “Well, if they’re all like you, I have nothing to worry about.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that—insult? compliment?—so he stayed silent. (There’s a first.)

Rogers shrugged. “Ten thousand a head, though.” Rogers let out a low whistle. “Hard to imagine. I mean, sure, donating the money, but the big party just seems kind of . . . well . . .”
"—like a disgustingly conspicuous display of wealth? You bet." Tony grimaced. "And they want
their pound of flesh. It’s not really philanthropy for most of them; it’s networking or marketing or
hunting for a nice rich Dom. Well, richer." Tony shrugged. "But, whatever. I’m hardly one to
judge. Stark Industries makes lots of important connections at these sorts of things. Pep will be
there doing her CEO magic. It’s how things work."

"Mmm," Rogers murmured.

"Has Michael prepped you for this?"

Rogers shrugged, "Mr. Nguyen had been very helpful filling me in, but I don’t think there’s much
prep required. Smile, be polite, and don’t let them know if you’re bored."

Tony laughed. "Best social advice my mother ever gave me," he said with a grin, "was ‘everyone
thinks they’re fascinating, darling—just play along and they’ll love you.’ ‘Course, I didn’t listen to
that advice very well, as you can imagine, but it’s good stuff anyway."

Rogers opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment Clint called out, "Woo-hoo, look
at you two!" and walked in with Natasha and Bruce. (What? Had the three of them been primping
together?)

"Pardon?" Rogers asked, looking startled.

"You know," Clint said, "Spiffy dudes in tuxedos. You two clean up real nice."

Tony rolled his eyes.

"Shall we?" Natasha said, gesturing to the elevator. Tony braced himself.

(Here we go.)

On the way to the gala, Tony ran back through the notes of all the important people who would be
there. Who were the top donors. Who had political power. Who to avoid. All pretty basic stuff.
Natasha and Clint seemed bored—no doubt they already knew it all—while Bruce and Rogers
seemed to vacillate between finding the info-dump reassuring and panic inducing.

Finally, the limousine stopped. "All right, people, it’s show time!"

Tony took a deep breath and steeled himself. There would be people there he knew and disliked,
and people he didn’t know yet, but would dislike, but there were still a few he knew and liked—
so perhaps there would be some he didn’t know and would like? And, with a little more luck,
Tony might get lucky and not leave with the rest of the group . . .

Tony got out of the car first, all his usual swagger on full display. He’d been working the red
carpet for so long it hardly required thought. He smiled and waved and posed. Natasha sauntered
out next, effortlessly fabulous in Vera Wang. Tony sped up slightly to make sure there wouldn’t
be any pictures of them together—he didn’t want anyone to suggest he was her date. (And
therefore that she justified his presence on the team.) Hell, that was part of why he’d suggested
Rogers get out of the limo last. (Poor kid. He’d been only too happy to delay the inevitable.)

The Grand Ballroom was a glittering example of 19th century opulence with its crystal
chandeliers, gilt detailing, and lofty ceiling. Nice. Not really Tony’s style, but he was gonna bet
Rogers loved it. There were attractive, slim bodied servers gliding through the room bearing haute
hors d’oeuvres on silver trays and myriad glasses of champagne.

Tony kept an eye out for the tiny number of people he actually liked while schmoozing his way
through vague acquaintances and opponents.

“. . . Marcus, so sorry your stock took such a dive. The market can be so fickle . . .”

". . . Oh, really? Yes, Martina, do please introduce me. Mr. Samuels, how nice to meet you . . ."

"Alec—loved your interview. And don’t feel too bad. Lots of people don’t know which continent
Chechnya is on . . ."

". . . Katrina! What a surprise seeing you here! I thought you’d be in San Tropez . . ."

Tony made the rounds diligently. He could see Pepper in a glorious green satin gown across the
room, but it was still too early to retreat to the delightful and familiar. Tony was considering giving
in to the impulse anyway when a handsome man approached him with a wide smile. (Five
seconds alone and this is what happened.) At least he was easy on the eyes—a little under six foot,
not quite as muscular as Cap but still very built, and with dark brown hair and bright green eyes.

"Excuse me? Mr. Stark?" Big, Tall and Handsome said turning down his smile a few watts to be
within the realm of normal. His teeth were perfectly straight and very white. Tony looked at him
impassively. "I can’t believe we’ve never met before," the man continued. "If I may?" Big, Tall
and Handsome extended his hand and introduced himself: “Thomas Belford, CFO of Prima Corp
LLC.”
Tony took his hand. “Tony Stark. Stark Industries.”

Belford laughed. “And here I thought you might be some other Tony Stark.” He smiled, then added teasingly, “To be honest, I’m even more excited to meet Iron Man. Perhaps you can introduce me?”

“Sorry,” Tony said, playing along. “He’s taking the night off.”

“What a shame! He’s a real hero. I’d have liked to shake his hand.”

Tony held his hand up and examined it for a moment, then shrugged saying, “Hand, gauntlet, whatever.”

Belford smiled. “Maybe I could get you both a drink?”

Tony hesitated.

Belford added in a self-deprecating tone, “I may not work for a company with my name in it—yet—and I may not fight aliens on the side, but,” he smiled and leaned a little closer, “I may still be able to surprise you.” He shrugged, then added, “If you’ll let me.”

(Something about that little shrug reminded Tony of Rogers.)

Tony found he was amused despite himself. “Gin and tonic.”

Belford smiled, pleased. “I’ll be right back.”

Tony took a test paper from his wallet and hid it in his palm, then turned to survey the ballroom.

Rogers was standing awkwardly immobile while a trio of subs in miniscule dresses were entreating him towards the dance floor. Rogers looked apologetic and polite, but something about the lines of his shoulders and slightly pinched look at the corner of his eyes, told Tony there was a lot more misery and panic under that expression than Rogers wanted to show. Tony was tempted to go rescue him—Rhodey’s words lingering in his mind—but then he saw Natasha approaching Rogers with purpose and Belford approaching him with his drink.

“Cheers,” Belford said offering Tony his drink and clinking their glasses together.

“Cheers,” Tony replied and pretended to take a sip. Belford smiled again. Tony lowered his hand and discreetly dipped the test paper into his drink.

“So, Prima Corp. What are you working on these days?”

“The FDA recently approved our new anti-depressant. Designed to help combat Acute Sub Drop Syndrome.”

Tony nodded, then asked, “Is it only for sub drop?”

Belford nodded. “Domosterone inhibits the key psychoactive properties; we’re developing a separate drug for top drop.” Belford gave a little shrug and added, “though I’m hardly best qualified to go into detail on the neurochemistry—I’m only CFO.”

Tony glanced down at the test paper—clean. No drugs but alcohol. He raised his glass then hesitated—Belford worked for a pharmaceutical company after all . . .

Tony took a sip.

Jennifer designed that paper test for him, and Tony’d bet his Jennifer Chang against Prima Corp’s entire R&D Department any day.

“We’re an ambitious company, though,” Belford continued, “And still growing. Actually, we’d like to enter the medical technology markets.”

“Oh?” Tony perked up. “It’s funny you should mention that,” Tony said, though he knew it was no coincidence. “Stark Industries has been interested in expanding. Have you met our CEO? Pepper Potts?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“She’s here,” Tony said, looking around the ballroom. “I’ll introduce you—you two should talk.”

“I’d love to meet Ms. Potts,” Belford said, then pitched his voice lower, “but at the moment, I’d much rather talk to you.”

“Would you really?” Tony asked, tilting his head to look up through his lashes. (Things just might be looking up for the evening.)

“I confess, I’ve been a fan of yours for years, Tony.”

“Oh? You’re too kind.”
Tony’s mind was already leaping three steps ahead. It was far too early in the evening to let himself be monopolized by one person for too long or to try and slip out (even briefly), but he could do a little flirting then arrange to meet up at the end of the evening.

Belford stepped a little closer. His cologne was expensive—Versace’s Masterful for Men—but applied with too heavy a hand. Tony took a step back and a sip of his G&T. Belford angled himself closer into Tony’s space again. When Tony glanced up to look around the ballroom, he found Rogers’ eyes fixed on him, but as soon as he made eye-contact Rogers looked away suddenly. His expression was blank. Or perhaps it was a slight frown. Tony couldn’t tell, but he didn’t like it. And maybe the NYT’s gossip columnist—Scott or Sanders or whoever wrote their trash now—was watching him too.

“Have you seen the balcony here?” Tony asked Belford. “The view is lovely and I could use some fresh air if you’d like to join me.”

Belford looked surprised for a split second, then delighted. He drew his shoulders back. “With pleasure,” he said.

As they made their way to the balcony, Tony thought vaguely in the back of his mind about how exactly to frame his offer. Flirt a little, then maybe try a direct suggestion: “Let’s go home together, but not until the end of the evening and do let’s be discrete, yes? Now, come meet Ms. Potts.”

“Rather a dull party,” Belford said as they stepped onto the balcony. “I’m not sorry to step out for a while. Especially with you.”

The brisk evening air was helping Belford’s cologne to dissipate. Tony leaned closer. He tilted his head to an alluring angle. “Is that so?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Belford murmured. He ran his hand across Tony’s shoulder, then down his arm. “You’re the most interesting person here. And easily the most beautiful.” Tony let Belford pull him in a little closer. Tony gave a little shiver and his heart picked up its pace.

(He hadn’t gotten laid in far too long if this was all it took to give him a little jolt.)

“People don’t know how to party anymore,” Belford said with a little grimace. “Everyone’s gotten so boring. I’m sorry I missed the infamous 2005 fundraiser.”

Tony forced himself not to grimace in return. (Ew. Gross.) If he had a dollar for every time some asshole used that fucking fundraiser as a bad pick-up line he’d . . . well, who’s keeping track? He was already a billionaire.

“That’s not really my scene anymore,” Tony said dryly. He nearly sighed aloud—looked like Belford was a bust. And Tony’d had such high hopes for him.

Belford let out a derisive laugh. “Well I’d guess that can’t be your scene anymore, with Captain Conservative living at Stark Tower!”

And Tony almost said “he’s not conservative” or maybe “you don’t get to come up with insulting Captain Nicknames—that’s my thing,” but what he really wanted to do was get away and not need to say anything.

“Mmm,” Tony murmured noncommittally. He tried to take a step away, but Belford tightened his hand on Tony’s arm. “We’re missing the party,” Tony said, “and now I’ve gotten some fresh air. We should really head back in.”

“Now? When I’ve only just gotten you all to myself?” Belford said coaxingly, pressing up against him.

“Aww, come on,” Tony hissed, trying to be quiet. At this rate, asshole was probably gonna leave a bruise on his arm.

God, Tony hated this shit. If he made a scene it would be bad PR: “Tony Stark! Such a drama slut!” Tony had hoped to avoid TMZ, especially tonight—his first event as an Avenger. They were on the balcony, but the ballroom had a clear view of them.

Still, maybe Tony could manage this quietly.

“Vomit,” Tony said softly, activating JARVIS’ safety features on his cell phone, then he turned and said more loudly and very clearly, “I didn’t give you permission to touch me and I want you
to stop."

Tony suppressed a wince when Belford tightened his grip again and tried to maneuver Tony towards the corner rail. Ah, fuck. He didn’t want to be in full sight of the ballroom for a confrontation, but he didn’t feel great about being out of sight either. Lose-lose.

"Doesn’t the name Jason Hanson* mean anything to you, asshole?" Tony asked angrily, trying to pull away. Belford let out a little growl.

"Don’t be like that," Belford said.

"Get your hands off me or I’ll press charges."

"For what?" Belford asked skeptically.

"Sexual harassment and, if you don’t let go of my person in about five seconds, assault."

"You’re joking," the idiot laughed.

Tony smiled sweetly. "I’m bugged. This entire conversation has been recorded on a remote server and, under Title III of the Submissives’ Protection Act, it is admissible evidence in court. Now get the fuck off me."

Belford jumped away, but hissed, deadly quiet, "You little bitch. Why I ought to--"

"Get away from Mr. Stark, NOW!"

(Oh fuck.)

There he was, Captain America in all his Domly Dom glory, puffed up with righteous indignation. And, yep, his voice had carried and a little clutch of party-goers were turning their attention. Jesus. Rogers had probably run across the ballroom. (Ugh.)

Tony sauntered forward with a grin and a shrug. "Geeze, Captain, are you always so loud? Mr. Belford was just heading out." Tony took Rogers’ arm, and tossed over his shoulder, "Good chat, Jason."

With a light pressure at Rogers’ elbow, he moved them forward to the little gathered crowd. "Sorry," Tony told them with an apologetic smile, his tone subtly confidential, “we’re still all readjusting; nerves are still a bit on battle alert.” Tony pinched Rogers arm and he nodded along, then Tony steered them away, schmoozing as they went:

"Diana! Fabulous as ever in Versace!"

"Congrats on the upcoming merger, Mr. Fields; now I hope you’ll take the name of my tailor. M&A papers must be signed bespoke."

"Ms. Katzen! Your heels are fierce, but not half so much as your latest interview—took my breath away!"

Once Tony was sure damage control was a success, he steered Rogers toward the bar. Cap had seemed pretty surprised to have Tony on his arm and watch him schmooze, but he’d covered it up fast.

The bartender automatically handed Tony champagne, and turned to ask Rogers what he’d like. Asshole. Tony slid the champagne away. "Scotch," he ordered, “neat.” Tony thought his eyes flicked to the Captain for a second before making Tony’s drink, but he wasn’t sure.

"I’m fine," Rogers told the bartender, then turned to Tony solicitously, "Are you--"

"I’m fine," Tony reassured him. He took a sip of his scotch.

"But, tell me, Cap," Tony said, his polite smile at odds with his tight tone of voice. "What sent you rushing onto the balcony?"

"My hearing’s enhanced," Rogers said, "I was wondering where you’d gone, so I listened for your voice. When I heard what you said, I came as quick as I could. Are you sure you’re all right?"

Tony’s hand tightened on his glass and he turned to look out at the dancers gliding past.

"So, you heard the whole thing?"

"Yes. Does that--"

"Then what about that conversation made you think I needed you barging in and causing a scene?" Rogers was frowning, his stupid confused face, and something about it made Tony agonizingly frustrated.

Tony tried to keep his voice calm and explanatory, but he wasn’t very successful: "I had the situation handled. I had things under control. You rushed in and nearly fucked things up. Don’t
pull that shit again, okay? I don’t need *rescuing*. Especially not from the likes of that moron.”
Tony threw back his scotch. (I’m fucking *Iron Man*, all right?"

Rogers just looked so surprised! He took a deep breath and began, “Mr. Stark, I meant no disrespect.”

(And here we are again.)

Rogers was clearly gearing up to have a serious conversation, and Tony wasn’t a big fan of those—especially where they could be overheard.

“We’ll talk later,” Tony said with a resigned sigh, but Cap had that stubborn look on his face, confused and frustrated. He didn’t look like somebody keen to wait. Tony cast about for a means of escape.

(Aha!) Passing nearby, Tony could see a familiar bald head.

“I mean it,” he repeated, setting down his empty glass. “I’ll talk to you later, Cap.” And with that, Tony slid away from the bar.

“Sam Deetz!” Tony cried, grabbing the multi-millionaire’s arm as he walked by. “You naughty man, you haven’t said two words to me all night, but—” Tony dropped his head and looked up through his lashes—“when you look so dashing I can’t stay mad.”

“Mr. Stark,” Deetz said, leaning in to kiss Tony on the cheek, “Ravishing as ever.”

“You’re a fox,” Tony said, bringing a blush to his cheeks and tilting his head a little more. “We both know I’m getting old.”

“Not as quickly as I am, and we both know that.” Deetz patted his paunch.

Tony gave a dismissive wave, then said more seriously, “I was talking to Jacob earlier and heard about your generous donation to the Safehouse. You’ll do a lot of good for a lot of people.”

“You know how I feel. I like to help.” Deetz shrugged.

“If I make a joke about the size of your endowment, will I get myself spanked?” Tony asked with a smile.

Deetz laughed. “Only if you ask nicely, Tony.”

“Oh, you know me,” Tony said with a teasing tone, laying one hand flirtatiously on the man’s chest, “I’m no good at asking for what I want.” Tony let out a theatrical sigh. “I’ve been on the sidelines all night wishing someone would lead me around the dance floor a few times, but alas.”

Deetz held out his hand. “Would you do me the honor?”

Tony took Deetz’s arm. “It would be a pleasure.”

Tony grinned inwardly. He could probably talk Deetz into another ten million for the Submissive Rights Organization on the dance floor. He’d always liked Deetz. And the man had a deft hand with a single tail.

Tony spared a moment to feel a little sorry for abandoning Rogers, but when he glanced over his shoulder he found the man was already surrounded by a little clutch of diminutive subs in ravishing evening wear. Yeah. Tony held in a snort—Cap would be fine.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience! I've been looking forward to sharing this with you and really hope you liked this. Uh . . . I promise they will talk. Really! Thanks for reading!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for the amazing comments on the last chapter! I'm so sorry I haven't responded to them individually, but I was really busy with RL and so eager to write and post this chapter for you instead that it never quite happened. I hope you'll accept more story as an apology. :-)  

Also, I've been politely advised to offer you all a warning that this chapter contains Tony/OFC/OMC (though not very explicitly). I think it's good for the story and I'm happy with it, but if you hate the idea of Tony with anyone but Steve (even briefly), you can skip down to the phrase "Back at the tower" to avoid it.

“Sweetheart?” Deetz called out as they entered the Carlyle’s Presidential suite. “I’ve brought a friend.”

Rebecca Martinez turned the corner and her face lit up. She cut a striking figure, wearing a pink silk robe loosely belted so it fell open at the side. Her body was curvaceous, like a pinup girl from a bygone era. Her dark hair cascaded around her shoulders framing her round face and bright brown eyes. Beautiful.

“Sam,” she said, a little breathlessly, “I had no idea you’d bring me a present home from the gala.” She turned to Tony playfully, “You are for me, aren’t you?”

Tony laughed.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Tony said dropping his head to the side coyly.

He’d almost forgotten how much he liked Rebecca. Shame they didn’t live in New York. And that she seldom had patience for society events unless they truly required her presence.

“Damn!” Rebecca exclaimed, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “You look so good like that. After last time, I thought ‘if I get another chance, maybe I’ll sub with Tony instead of topping,’ but now I see you and—” She shrugged and walked over to run her fingers through Tony’s hair.

“Do you know what you’d like?”

“Something like last time?” he said a little hopefully.

“Did you make a contract with Sam on the way over?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Tony had made his proposition to Deetz on the dance floor, but they’d worked out the details between the gala and the hotel. (And had departed the ballroom discreetly and separately after Captain Overkill had already gone home.)

“Good,” Rebecca said. “Any trigger areas you want to tell me about, or shall I just read it?”


And Tony should just let her read the damn thing again for a refresher on the rest, but he found himself speaking anyway. Rebecca’s hand was firm and strong, fingers twinning in his hair, and Deetz was still holding his right wrist tightly in one hand.

“And don’t . . .” Tony stammered, suddenly tripping over his words. His heart started speeding. “Don’t . . . don’t try to put me under. It won’t . . . I mean, I still can’t . . . I—”

“Oh sweetie,” Rebecca murmured, face sad. She kissed his temple and tightened her fist in his hair. “Don’t worry.”

“We’ve got you,” Deetz whispered. Rebecca nodded then nuzzled Tony’s neck.

“Now then,” she said, pulling back, “come with me and you can put your safeword into our StarkSafe.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Tony said, eyes sliding shut. The pressure at his wrist, Rebecca’s fingers in his hair—it felt good, really good. Relaxing. Nothing like hitting subspace, but different from his usual brain buzzing. “I’m good.”

“No, you’re not,” Deetz said firmly, letting go of Tony’s wrist. “Go with Rebecca.” The Dom crossed his arms over his chest. “We won’t lay a finger on you until you’ve registered a safeword in the house system.”
Rebecca smirked at Tony and pinched him on the arm. “See? That’s what you get for hooking up with committed liberationists.” She looked over at Sam, her eyes brimming with affection and a certain sweet pride; Tony felt something depressingly like envy. The two of them were good together.

“Got it,” Tony said, not bothering to explain what he’d meant. JARVIS was way smarter than the StarkSafe and would be monitoring him the whole time from his cell phone, so it was kinda doubling up, but whatever.

“You’re in charge,” Tony added. Dom and Switch both nodded with satisfaction. Tony grinned and added, “And, I’m so glad to know that you buy my tech. I’d forgotten. StarkSafe it is.”

Rebecca gave Deetz a meaningful look, the kind of wordless code longtime partners used. (Totally not envy. Not at all.) She kissed Tony on the cheek and then led him away, her arm linked with his.

“Now, I was thinking,” she said brightly, “we could start you on Sam’s whip. Then, I could tie you down and ride you ‘til you scream. How does that sound?”

Tony whimpered; Rebecca giggled.

This promised to be a very pleasant evening.

Tony woke up in a strange place. The sheets felt wrong. It smelled wrong. JARVIS didn’t immediately greet him with time, temperature, and location. Tony remained absolutely still and waited for his brain to catch up.

It only took an instant—the delicate scent of honeysuckle brought it all rushing back: Rebecca Martinez, Sam Deetz, and all the delightful reasons for his wonderfully sore muscles. Tony let his eyes flutter open. No sign of Sam, but Rebecca was curled up in her pink satin robe to his right, a tablet across her knees and a mug of coffee clutched in her left hand.

Tony stretched and she looked over with a smile.

“G’morning, gorgeous,” Rebecca said. “Sleep well?”

Tony stretched again and rolled towards her with a little purring sound, then burrowed into the pillows some more. He nodded and let his eyes slip shut again.

“I’m glad,” Rebecca said. She reached out to stroke Tony’s hair. “Sam was very sorry he couldn’t stay in bed with us. He didn’t like to leave you sleeping, but I’m afraid he had an early meeting.”

Tony shrugged and sat up a little bit.

“How are you feeling?” she asked more seriously.

Tony took a moment to think about it—Rebecca would expect him to give the question sincere consideration. He answered decisively, feeling a little more awake, “Good. Really good.”

“Excellent,” she said with clear satisfaction. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Tony murmured and made grabby hands for her mug. She ruffled his hair and handed her coffee over with an indulgent smile.

Tony sat up and drank it with a little sigh of pleasure, taking stock of himself.

It had been an excellent evening. Slight bruises from Rebecca’s rope work were already blossoming at his wrists and elbows, and he was looking forward to seeing the marks from Sam’s whip latticed across his back. There was a happy ache in his muscles and a twinge in his ass. He shivered. It had been a while since he’d done a spit roast—the memory of deep throating Sam while Rebecca pegged him would be making his jerk off material for quite a while.

(Mmmm.)

“Shall I order us room service?” Rebecca asked.

Tony finished off the coffee. “Nah,” he said with a shrug. “I never have an appetite first thing in the morning. And I should really go home and get to work.”

Rebecca gave a theatrical pout. “So, I won’t get to feed you breakfast?” She sighed. “Well, all right. I suppose I’ll live.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tony said, handing back the empty mug with a little smile as he slid out of bed naked. Last night, they’d pulled him into the shower and washed him sweetly before dragging him to bed where they’d curled up around him for the night. Sam had left Tony’s tux neatly folded across the back of a chair, ready for the morning.
Rebecca went to the kitchenette for more coffee while Tony dressed.

“You sure you don’t want to stay for breakfast?” she asked when he emerged once more wearing his sumptuous tux. Tony shook his head a little regretfully—he was eager to get home.

“I’m heading to the Morgan in about an hour,” she said. Her face lit up as she added, “I’m working on their latest acquisition: a trunk of fifteenth century Flemish manuscripts. Simply phenomenal.”

Tony smiled. Sam Deetz and Rebecca Martinez met at the fundraiser for an exhibit of medieval manuscripts she’d helped curate. The paleographer and the industrialist: a match made at the Met.

Rebecca shook her head as she continued, “Ockerman’s convinced he’s found Erasmus’ hand in the marginalia of MS.47-79f. I’m pretty sure it’s wishful thinking, but we’ll see. Anyway,” she gave a little shrug, “I’ll have my cell phone on me at all times and will be able to pick up within five minutes—I just have to leave the reading room. The number’s in your phone.”

Rebecca set her coffee down and laid both hands on Tony’s shoulders, then reached up to caress his cheek. “You call me immediately if you start to feel low or have any drop, all right?”

Tony rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. Rebecca gave him a little pinch on the arm. “Don’t give me that,” she scolded, then added more gently, “You deserve consideration and tenderness, Tony. Everyone needs care.” She took a little step closer and entreated, “Promise you’ll call me?”

Tony nodded. Rebecca’s words made him feel warm, both with embarrassment and with pleasure. “Yeah. All right,” Tony said, glancing away. “I promise.”

Rebecca kissed Tony softly on the cheek. “I’m glad you came over.”

Tony gave her a sincere smile. “Me too.” And with that, he took the elevator down to the lobby where Happy was now waiting with the car.

Back at the Tower, Tony went straight to his suite to change. He had projects in the workshop and plenty of acquisitions paperwork to review. He tossed his tux in the laundry bin, threw on a tank top with a fraying pair of low-slung jeans, then tied a holey grey hoodie around his hips just in case.

“Workshop, J,” Tony said, stepping into the elevator. He’d only made it half way down when he remembered he was out of coffee in the workshop and the new machine hadn’t arrived yet. “No, wait. Back up, J. Communal kitchen. And start the coffee.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony hovered impatiently by the coffee maker and rolled his shoulders, savoring the ache.

(Oh!)

While the coffee brewed, Tony walked over to the common room mirror hanging above the bar. He pulled his tank top up and twisted awkwardly to look. Tony’s cheeks heated at the sight of the delicate and precise rows of whip marks across his shoulders and down his back. Sam Deetz really was a master—they were evenly spaced and straight, 1.5 inches apart. Sam’s stripes were the perfect compliment to Rebecca’s lovely rope marks on his arms and at his neck.

Tony heard a sharp breath behind him and spun. (Shit.)

Tony hastily pulled his shirt down as Rogers averted his eyes. (Shit!) “Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, with a bit of a stammer still looking away. “I’m sorry. I, uh—”

“No, no. It’s the living room! I’m—” Tony struggled into his hoodie, motions awkward with nervous haste. “It’s fine.” He pulled the sleeves down to cover the bruises on his wrists. (Tacky, Tony. Fucking tacky.) Tony felt his cheeks heat, now with embarrassment rather than remembered pleasure. (Couldn’t wait until you were in private, stupid?) Tony shook his head.

“Sorry,” Tony said, “I’m still not quite used to this being a common area.”

“I’ll go,” Rogers said. He sounded miserable, still not quite looking at Tony. “I’m sorry for intruding on—”

“No! Don’t. I’m not trying to chase you out,” Tony said, then added with suppressed impatience, “I’m never trying to chase you out.”

Tony walked into the kitchen, took down two mugs, and poured them both coffee.

“Here,” Tony said, holding out the second mug. “Coffee?”

“I—” Rogers finally looked at Tony. His brow was still creased, uncertain, his blue eyes wide and
perhaps a bit startled. “Ok.” Rogers took the coffee, then held it close to his chest in both hands. Tony drank his deeply, scalding his tongue, but Rogers just clutched at it and hovered. Usually Rogers seemed willing, or even eager, to take the bull by the horns and talk, but today (perhaps for the first time) he looked desperately like he wanted to flee and the only thing holding him in place was that cup of coffee.

Tony waited for Rogers to speak, but it was starting to look like he’d be in for a long wait.

“So,” Tony said at last, pulling a stool up to the counter. “I promised we’d talk.”

Rogers nodded, but didn’t say anything. Tony took a seat and tried to gather his thoughts. (Well, gather them beyond, ‘shit.’) Rogers did not sit. The silence lingered for a few long moments until finally Rogers spoke. (Oh thank God!)

“I never seem to get things right with you,” Rogers said softly, staring down at his coffee. Then he looked up to ask, “Are you angry with me?”

Tony sighed. “No.” He shook his head and sighed again. “No, I’m not angry.”

“I don’t understand how I upset you,” Rogers said in an even tone.

“I know, Cap.” Tony rested his face in his hands for a moment, then rubbed at his forehead. “I know.” He took another sip of coffee. (Really not prepared for this conversation.)

Cap hesitated then asked, “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Tony nodded. “I’m fine. I appreciate the concern,” Tony added. (He even managed not to sound grudging.) “But I’m fine, and I had it handled, okay? I can take care of myself.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

“Excuse me?” Tony said incredulously.

“Isn’t this more like a relationship where you expect to take care of me?” Rogers said hastily, “you shouldn’t have to deal with that. Nobody should treat you that way.”

Mollified, Tony nodded. “Yeah, well. It happens. He’s an asshole, etc., but I had it under control. I was pissed because you charged in anyway and nearly caused us bad PR. Because, trust me, if that little incident had made it into the press, I’d be the one they made look bad and we—I— don’t need that kind of PR.”

Rogers looked incredulous. “I don’t care about PR,” he cried, outrage stamped on his face. “I thought you were in danger. I thought he was going to hurt you. I don’t give a good goddamn about PR compared to your safety. What the hell do you think of me?”

“Well, I do care about PR, okay?” Tony said emphatically, trying not to let his frustration show. Rogers’ hands clenched his coffee cup so tightly Tony wondered if it might shatter in his grip.

Cap was digging his heels in. “I won’t apologize for wanting to look out for you,” he said mulishly.

“I’m not asking you to,” Tony said with muted exasperation. He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “You said you heard the conversation. Did you know what Title III of the Submissives’ Protection Act is?”

Rogers nodded. “I read up on it and other things while I was—” he hesitated, “catching up.” Rogers shook his head. “But if he’d already broken your arm or . . . or worse . . . I don’t see how that’s much help.”

“It’s actually a pretty major deterrent,” Tony said. Of course, Rogers wasn’t wrong—fear of legal repercussions could only do so much. (And after damage’s been done . . . well.) Rogers looked ready to protest, so Tony held up his hand and conceded, “But I’m not saying to ignore harassment. If I’d overheard somebody talking like that asshole, I sure as shit would go over and check on things and offer assistance if necessary.” Rogers gave an approving nod. (A little too satisfied, actually.) Tony continued, “But I wouldn’t make a scene or assume the other person can’t handle it.”

Tony shook his head and added, “I don’t need you to fight my battles because you’re a big strong Dom and I’m some sweet helpless little sub.”

Rogers gave him a look half hurt and half frustration. “Not everything is about orientation for me any more than it is for you.” He frowned. “It’s not because I’m a Dom and you’re a sub, it’s because I’m a person and you’re my friend.” Rogers paused then added softly, “And I don’t have that many friends here.”

The admission caught Tony off guard. It was as close as Tony’d ever heard him come to saying, “everyone I cared for is dead.” (How hard was it to say that out loud?)

“And, I doubt anybody’d ever call you ‘helpless,’” Rogers ventured, then added with a cautious smile, “Or ‘sweet.’”
It was a feeble attempt at a joke, but Tony was willing to accept it as the peace offering it seemed like. He let out a deliberate chuckle and smiled back.

"Too fucking right," Tony said. Cap finally took a sip of coffee. They were quiet for a few moments.

"You know," Rogers said, frowning and hesitant, "I wasn’t always ‘a big strong Dom.’ " He gestured up and down his body, then said more softly, "I know what it’s like to get backed into a corner.” He frowned as he added, voice firm, “And I don’t like bullies.”

Tony managed not to laugh, but only barely. In every comic book, cartoon, movie, or documentary ever made about him, Captain America always said that.

"Yeah," Tony said, still trying not to laugh. Then he asked with sudden inspiration, “and when you were standing up to a bully back then, how’d you feel if somebody stepped in for you?”

Rogers blinked, looking surprised by the question. As he considered it, he seemed a little amused and then more than a little wistful. He looked away.

"Had him on the ropes," Rogers muttered to himself under his breath with a sad smile, then looked up at Tony. “Getting help wasn’t my favorite thing,” Cap admitted, “but it sure beat having my brains bashed in.”

"Fair enough.” Tony gave a little nod and a shrug.

Rogers looked pensive, staring at his coffee with unfocused eyes, and Tony wasn’t sure what else to say. He hadn’t been planning to have this conversation yet. (Especially after he’d gotten caught admiring his marks in the fucking living room . . .) Tony got up and turned away to refill his coffee cup.

Tony wanted to take refuge in the calm stability of his workshop, but he couldn’t quite make himself leave yet. It felt unfinished. Whatever his other faults, Rogers listened. And that mattered. It mattered a lot. Tony took another sip of coffee. (Had he explained clearly enough? Did Rogers get it?) Tony bit his lip. (There were other things he needed to say too, Rogers' Knight in Shining Armor Act notwithstanding.) Tony remembered what he’d wanted to say last night, when he’d tied Rogers' bow tie. (You're a good man, Cap . . . Thank you for what you said to the press . . . I'm sorry I misjudged you.)

Tony was still struggling with how to begin, when Rogers gave him an out and (like a coward) he took it.

“I came up here to make a mid-morning snack, since I was feeling peckish. Would you like something?” Rogers asked. "I was thinking I’d make a couple of tea sandwiches.”

(What the hell’s a tea sandwich?)

Tony shook his head. “I’ve got lots of work to do and should really be getting down to the workshop.”

(Crap! The sandwich isn’t just a sandwich.)

"Of course, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said, tone stoic. "I realize you’re very busy.”

(If you don’t mind me taking it down with me,” Tony said, tone amiable, “it would be good to have something to nibble on while I work.”

Rogers brightened. “Of course! Shall I bring it down when it’s ready?”

"Nah,” Tony said, sitting down at the counter again. “I can chill for a few minutes.”

Rogers nodded and smiled, pulling food from the fridge. They shared the kitchen in comfortable silence while Cap prepared Sandwiches of Reconciliation.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading and for the thought-provoking responses to the last chapter! Several of you had asked earlier about healthy BDSM relationships in this world, so I hope the interlude with Sam and Rebecca helped give more insight into the world and the possibility of sex-positive, non-exploitative power exchange in this AU, as well as some additional information about Tony.

I'm afraid it's still baby steps for Steve and Tony here, but I promise there will be more talking and (eventually!) sexy times. Really! :-). Slow build is so slow, but we're making progress and I'll try not to leave you hanging too long . . . Thanks again for all your kindness and support! (And patience!!!) You are the best!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING! Hidden behind rot13 to prevent spoilers. Copy and paste into rot13.com if you have trigger concerns. Qrfpevzvangvba bs cnfg qvfertneqrq fnsrjbeq naq aba-pbafrafhny uvggvat, n sbez bs frkhny nffnhyg (ng yrnfg va guvf jbeq). Nyfb, aba-tencuvp qvfphffvba bs cnfg fbpvny vawhfgvpr vapyhqvat rpbabzvp qvfpevzvangvba, frkhny pbrepvba, qbzrgfvp nolfr, naq pncvgny chavfuzrag.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Excerpts from Orientation and History: An Overview

Although the scientific revolution brought empirical evidence of male submissives and female Dominants, this empirical evidence did not bring the sweeping social change many groundbreaking eighteenth- and nineteenth-century researchers had hoped for.* These changes would not begin to be realized until the Domina Movement and Silent Revolution in the later half of the twentieth century. This leaves over one-hundred-fifty years of profound social liminality for the newly scientifically-validated exceptions to hetero-orientational normativity: female Dominants and male submissives.

In this section, I examine the unique challenges faced by male submissives in the early twentieth century. As described in the previous chapter, female Dominants were at a profound social and economic disadvantage prior to the Domina movement. This often made it difficult for them to provide for a submissive and establish a traditional household. Dommes with switch inclinations, even those who favored the Dominant end of the spectrum, often chose to identify as submissives and marry male Dominants instead of struggling against societal expectations and very real economic hardship. (For the history of S/switch identity, see chapter six.)

By ten a.m., Tony had signed a bunch of paperwork, corrected nine errors in the latest phone specs from R&D, and read over four of Pepper’s reports only to agree wholeheartedly with her projected course of action. As he worked through it all, Tony’s eyes kept drifting over to the end of his table where two-thirds of a BLT sat waiting for him to regain his appetite. (Turned out “tea sandwich” meant “BLT.” At least in this case.)

The morning press had contained no mention of Rogers’ Knight in Shining Armor act at the gala, not even a hint. Coverage of the fundraiser had been extremely positive. The Avengers clearly hadn’t lost their shine and they were still riding their understandably high PR wave after saving New York City—and possibly the country and the world—from aliens. Apart from a few predictable remarks about “Mr. Stark’s controversial appointment” the coverage had been unambiguously positive, and Tony wasn’t above basking a little in descriptions of his exquisite appearance and a politely censored list of his most famous achievements. No proper news outlet had even lowered itself to mentioning the 2005 fundraiser, which considering he’d been attending a fundraiser made it frankly low-hanging fruit. (The blogosphere wasn’t so polite, but that was no surprise and nothing new.)

All in all, things were looking good.

Tony stretched and rolled his shoulders, feeling the pleasant pull in his muscles again. (He was tempted to send Sam and Rebecca flowers. Or a cactus.) Now that he’d cleared all the pressing issues from his docket, he needed a new project.

“Hey, JARVIS? Give me the specs on SHIELD’s latest body armor.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony’d been wanting to upgrade his teammates’ gear for a while. (Ever since October First, surprise surprise.) Actual Kevlar was obviously too heavy and bulky to be practical for hand-to-hand fighters like Widow and Cap, but SHIELD’s substitute material sacrificed a lot of protection for its increased flexibility. Tony was pretty sure he could do better. (Who’s he kidding? Of course he can.)

As Tony studied the projected statistics, he grunted with disapproval. SHIELD had only upped Kevlar’s para-aramid ratio from 5:1 to 5.7:1. Pathetic. Who the hell did they have on R&D? Tony rolled his eyes and caught sight of the BLT at the end of his table.

(“—you’re my friend . . . And I don’t have that many friends here.”)

Tony turned away.
“Hey, J? Throw the stats for gold titanium alloy up on the left.”

(“I wasn’t always ‘a big strong Dom.’”)

“My pleasure, sir,” JARVIS said. Tony took a deep breath and read over the familiar numbers once more.

(“Not everything is about orientation for me any more than it is for you.”)

“Now gimme the cunniff formula and analysis, would ya?”

(Come on, Tony. Focus.)

JARVIS didn’t answer, just complied.

“And let’s get images of Cap and Widow’s uniforms on screen ten, ok? Post battle. I want to see the damage.”

“On ten, sir.”

Widow’s uniform was in surprisingly good shape, but Cap’s was a mess. The worst damage was a wide gash across his stomach, but there were sizable cuts across his right shoulder and left thigh as well. Tony glared. Rhodey’d reported that Cap insisted the serum had it covered and never saw a doctor, but with gouges in the uniform like that and the amount of brown caked to it that wasn’t dirt— (Jesus.) Tony shook himself. (Well, that shit ends here. Gonna make a uniform out of something other than fucking paper mache . . . )

“Okay, take those pictures down. Just leave me the data sets.”

(Calm down, stupid. They’re both fine.) Tony’s eyes flickered from screen to screen running mental calculations.

“If I hybridize the current aramid with scale mail gold titanium alloy, maybe . . .” Tony mused to himself. His eyes strayed to the BLT. (The ‘tea sandwich.’) He jotted down a few equations.

(“I won’t apologize for wanting to look out for you.”)

Tony took a deep breath and tried to lose himself in the creativity of invention and the clarity of stats and specs. Somehow it wasn’t quite working.

(“I never seem to get things right with you.”)

“Likewise,” Tony muttered. He shook his head as if that would clear his mind and squinted at the data sets floating luminously in the air.

Eventually, Tony finished off the BLT so he’d stop thinking about Rogers.

It didn’t work.

Fifty cups of coffee and forty-eight hours later, the bruises on Tony’s wrists were fading away and his plans for a 7:1 para-aramid body armor were shape up. (Turns out knights thought chainmail was a pretty great invention for a reason.)

“Give me the refortified tensile readings, J . . . hm, ok. I’ll need to adjust the calculations to include the SAPI plate . . .” Tony muttered.

“Okay, J. Run those calculations for me and let’s see what we’ve got.”

“Knock, knock?” a voice called from just outside the workshop. Tony pulled the hoodie’s sleeves down over his wrists as he turned.

“Bruce!” Tony said. “Long time no see.”

Bruce smiled as he strolled into the shop. “I was wondering where you’d disappeared after the gala. Should have figured.”

Tony shrugged. “You know me.”

“Yeah. May I?” he said, gesturing to the newly arrived workshop coffee maker.

“Knock yourself out.”

“I’ll try not to, thanks,” Bruce said with a wry smile. He waved at the schematics. “So, what’s all that? Looks like you’ve been testing tensile strengths.”
“You’re pretty close. It’s the new para-ararmid I’m working on.” Tony took a sip of coffee and kicked his spare wheelie stool. It rolled its way over to Bruce who looked amused. “Here—I’ll walk you through it.”

Bruce wasn’t an engineer—which was fine, really, since once you have Tony Stark why have anybody else?—but he was a scientist with a creative mind. They bounced ideas around and in not too long Tony had, uh, *finessed* his way towards military research on the mantis shrimp’s cell composition, which naturally turned into watching youtube clips of mantis shrimps and the mimic octopus, then surfing the best animal videos on the internet.**

(Okay, maybe coffee *isn’t* the same as sleep.)

“That was fun,” Bruce said with a smile. He rolled his shoulders and gave a luxurious stretch as he stood up. “Maybe the mantis shrimp will inspire another new element or something. But, now it’s six and I should go see if Steve needs a hand with dinner. He’s roasting a chicken and I thought we might watch *All About Eve* after. Will you come up?”

Tony’s eyes flicked back to the glowing screens. He was *finally* on a roll with this body armor. (Youtube break notwithstanding.)

“No, don’t think so. I’m really in the zone, you know?” Tony bit his lip. “But, uh, tell Cap thanks, would you?”

Bruce nodded, but Tony added, “No, seriously, make sure you do. Big guy gets sensitive about the whole food and cooking and eating thing.”

Bruce laughed. “I won’t forget, Tony.”

“Okay. Cool.”

“See you later, Tony. Good luck with the armor.”

Sir? Captain Rogers asks if you would like him to bring a plate of dinner to the workshop.”

Tony hesitated. “Uh, he needn’t bother.”

“Captain Rogers says it is no bother at all, but that he does not wish to intrude.”

“Yeah, sure. All right.” Tony added, “But no rush. Whenever.”

“The Captain is on his way.”

(Of course he is.) Tony smiled. Then double-checked that all his marks were covered.

“Mr. Stark?”

Rogers always greeted him from the doorway to the shop.

And he always called him Mr. Stark. No nicknames. No plain old Stark like Fury did. He never dropped the full “Mister.” (Tony’d been half waiting for him to give up on the formality, invitation or no, but he didn’t. And that . . . that felt curiously like respect.)

“May I come in?”

And Rogers always explicitly asked permission—and waited for an answer—before entering. (Even before the “I think I kinda sexually harassed you and am really really sorry” thing.)

“You bet, Cap! Come on in.”

Captain America was wearing a grey and white checkered shirt with a pair of glorious jeans Tony suspected Katie Winters had picked out for him. (Gorgeous.) And he was carrying an actual tray with a huge glass of water, an unopened beer, and a plate heaped high with chicken, roasted potatoes, and veggies. Cap set it carefully at the far end of Tony’s workbench.

“Smells fantastic,” Tony said with undisguised enthusiasm. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” Cap said with a little smile.

Tony cracked the beer first, vaguely surprised Rogers had brought him one, and raised it with a little salute.

Tony looked at the steaming plate and said, a little bemused, “You really are all about feeding people, aren’t you, Cap? What’s with that anyway?”

“It just seems like a nice thing to do,” Rogers said with a shrug. He took a step back.

Something about that step, the little pause, the slope of his shoulders, and the way Rogers blinked all made Tony think that there was more to it than that. It only made Tony more curious.

Tony was still formulating his follow up question when Cap added a little sheepishly, “Maybe it’s just an old habit. There wasn’t that much I could do to help my mother as a kid—or even when I
got older. Taking care of the cooking was often all I could manage. So maybe this is just a bit of the same.”

And was it Tony’s imagination or could he hear hints of “I still feel useless here in the 21st century” in that admission?

Rogers nudged the tray closer with a bit of a smile as he confessed a little wistfully, “Not that we could have a whole chicken except maybe on Christmas.”

Rogers shook his head, as if clearing the melancholy away. “Besides,” he said with another shrug, “I liked Home Ec.”

“Home Ec?” Tony repeated incredulously. “You took Home Ec?”

“What’s wrong with taking Home Ec?” Rogers asked a trifle defiantly, chin up and Brooklyn lilt coming out with a vengeance.

“Nothing!” Tony said, hands held up in surrender. “Just, I thought only subs took Home Ec in the ’30s.”

“Oh, right,” Rogers said a little abashed. “They did. But, I presented real late so when September came around and I still hadn’t shown they guessed based on my build.” He hesitated. “I really liked the cooking lessons though. My classmates there were real sweethearts and cooking seemed like a useful skill for me, so I petitioned to stay until the end of the year.” Cap made a grimace. “I wasn’t exactly built for heavy labor back . . . before.”

Tony blinked. (Not that he didn’t know Cap had been small—it was part of the legend—he’d just never supposed—)

“Well,” Rogers said, straightening. “I should let you get back to work and go rejoin the others. I bet Bruce is making them wait for me.”

“Oh, right, sure.” Tony blinked again and shook his head as if to clear it. “Well, thanks again for dinner. And the delivery service.”

Rogers just smiled and took his leave.

(Huh.)

Tony shook his head and tried to focus. He could reread the para-aramid stats while he ate, then play with some cellular diagrams. Maybe he could have a prototype within the week.

Tony took an absentminded bite of chicken, then moaned.

It was delicious.

In early twentieth century America, male submissives shared much of the adversity of their female counterparts; however, as orientationally liminal figures, they faced additional challenges and paradoxes like the female Dominant. Male submissives—like females—faced severe discrimination and abuse in the workplace, however their domestic options were limited by the continued discrimination against female Dominants.

Despite widespread acceptance of bisexual experimentation, long-term homosexual couples were rare, in part due to continuing stigmas against adoption and surrogacy. Male submissives were eroticized objects of Dominant desire, but were unable to bear children; therefore, they were often courted as lovers, not spouses. (In the nineteenth century particularly, they were widely stereotyped as sexually voraciously and promiscuous, but neither domestic nor nurturing.) In these strained circumstances, some male submissives became sex workers. There were no explicit legal prohibitions in place at the time and, unlike female sex workers, male submissives were in no danger of unwanted pregnancy. However, these socio-legal conditions also enabled some unscrupulous employers to negotiate barely-legal employment contracts that required their submissive employees to provide sexual favors as a condition of employment as a secretary, receptionist, sales clerk, etc. Although these contracts were dubiously legal by any standard and explicitly illegal if coerced in any way (under title III of the Fair Labor Act of 1921), uninformed submissives often fell prey to such tactics and even those informed of their rights often found themselves with few alternatives.

By midnight, Tony was exhausted in a way coffee and naps on his shop cot couldn’t cure. (Well, unless they had to, but new body armor wasn’t that urgent right now…)

Time to get a nightcap then call it a night. (And maybe see if there was any more of that amazing chicken in the fridge.)

The TV was on in the common room. Rogers sat alone in the middle of Tony’s sumptuous leather couch, frowning with concentration (or perhaps disapproval), a small spiral notebook in his left
hand, pencil in his right.

“Hey, Cap,” Tony said with a little wave from the refrigerator.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said a little distractedly. (Yep, he never dropped the Mister.) Cap jotted something in his notebook. Apparently it was “acclimation time.”

Rogers had confessed to Clint once, who’d repeated it to Tony, that he tried to watch a little TV every day to try and adjust to the future, but he found most of it so awful he had to change every few minutes. Tony certainly knew the feeling.

Tony found the chicken well demolished, but he still managed to pick off a little more meat. He nibbled on it cold, standing up in the kitchen. (Oh, fuck that was good.) By the time he was done, the carcass was pretty thoroughly stripped and Tony considered throwing it out for a moment. Knowing Rogers’ sense of economy, though, he was probably saving it. To make stock with it. Or cook with the marrow. Or something. (Did people do that?)

“Mmmmm...” The sub on TV made ecstatic “chocolate-noise” and the camera zoomed in on her brightly painted mouth. Rogers changed the channel. Tony rinsed off his fingers, fixed himself a scotch, and wandered over to the couch.

A sultry sort of ambient music with a bit of a Latin backbeat filled the room. A Dom in a crisp black suit parked his red sports car and went into a decadent white marble bank. “All the style and luxury you need...” the narrator intoned. The Dom emerged to find a beautiful sub posed seductively across the hood, wearing a miniscule red satin dress that seemed to merge her into the image of the car. “To get you wherever you want to go.”

Rogers let out a disgusted noise. “Aw, come on! What the heck was that!”?

“Oh, car commercial?” Tony suggested

Rogers shook his head with another disgusted noise and waved his hand angrily at the TV. “All I know about that car is that it comes in red! What kind of engine does it have? How much horsepower? Features? Price?” Rogers let out an exasperated sigh and changed the channel.

“Advertisements used to be informative,” Rogers grumbled.

“Sure, but full of unsupported lies,” Tony said with a shrug. “Some things don’t change.”

Tony settled on the edge of the couch. “Besides, that ad told you all you need to know: buy this car and you’ll attract sexy subs!”

Rogers scowled and changed the channel again.

A chipper news anchor announced the latest puff piece:

“Up next: what your safeword says about you! How to pick the perfect code for you and your partner!”

Now it was Tony’s turn to let out a disgusted snort. Rogers gave him an inquisitive look and muted another car commercial.

“That sort of thing is bullshit.” Tony rolled his eyes.

“What is?”

“Reading things into people’s safewords. It’s like those fake science studies of what your sleeping position means to your relationship, or how your favorite foods predict romantic compatibility or bullshit like that.” Tony shook his head. “My safeword is ‘safeword.’ ”

Rogers seemed to hesitate a moment, then asked, “Isn’t that sort of... impersonal?”

“You’re real cute, Cap.” Tony said with a smirk. “Just because—” (I’m playing with-- No, wait.) “Just because people are playing together doesn’t mean it’s not impersonal.”

Tony took a sip of scotch. “But all that aside, ‘safeword’ holds up best in court.”

Rogers looked pained. “I hadn’t thought about that,” he admitted quietly.

“Yeah.” Tony took another sip of scotch, deliberating for a moment before he added, “And I oughta know. Firsthand experience and all that.” Tony shrugged. “You can read about it, you know. On wikipedia and whatnot. Hell, there are dissertations written about the trial transcripts alone.”

Tony felt a certain fierce pride at the thought. How many people were invited to give talks at technical conferences the world over AND were sought after by Orientation & Gender Studies Departments? He’d been a regular Oscar Wilde on the stand, giving that orientationist fuck of a defense lawyer the witty run around. And he’d only been threatened with contempt of court five times!
"I know."

Tony'd zoned out for a moment there, but Rogers had his full attention now.

"What?"

"California v. Hansen," Rogers said seriously. "It's a landmark case. I read about it, and the StarkSafe (TM) when I was--" Rogers hesitated, "catching up."

Tony blinked, feeling a little silly. Cap had been awake for months now, reading up on everything he’d missed. Of course he’d read about it. Why had Tony assumed that he wouldn’t know?

Cap set aside his notepad and turned off the TV abruptly. They sat in silence. Tony finished his scotch.

Tony honestly didn’t think about Jason Hanson very often these days, that handsome, arrogant, sack of shit. For a trial that dragged on for weeks, the actual events had taken mere moments. The intricate rope bondage had been secure and felt great, but then he’d hit Tony—hit him with a force far beyond the ‘light slapping’ Tony had okayed in their negotiations on the way home from the bar. Tony’d “yellowed.” Hanson hadn’t stopped; he’d started hitting Tony as hard as he could. Tony’d safeworded and struggled to get free. Hanson hadn’t stopped. Tony safeworded again.

JARVIS had called security and the fucker’d been restrained within minutes, looking ridiculous in handcuffs with his dick hanging out of his trousers. (Yeah, and thank God-- no, thank JARVIS--Tower security had arrived before Hanson'd moved from the non-consensual hitting to non-consensual other things...)

The press had been vicious, but the evidence was so ironclad no amount of orientationist bias or victim blaming could save Hanson. Three years in jail and a lifetime restraining order for that asshole. It was good to be a billionaire genius with in-home security. And a loyal, omniscient AI as your fairy godmother.

It had only taken a couple of months to get the first generation StarkSafe on the market-- a miniaturized, limited function JARVIS smart enough to recognize a safeword and call 911 within ninety seconds once triggered unless given a customized deactivation code. Stark Domestic's stock soared. (And Tony'd made sure that the Maria Stark Foundation had a special endowment to provide them free to low-income submissives.) According to a national survey, non-con and contract abuse dropped by thirty-three percent the year the Stark Safe went on the market.

(In the dank cold of that miserable cave it had been a comfort to know not all of his legacy would be drenched in blood.)

“Conviction for abuse was almost unheard of when I was growing up.”

Tony jolted at the sound of Rogers’ voice. He’d been so lost in thought he’d almost forgotten the Captain was there.

Rogers continued quietly, staring at the blank TV screen: “Not that it didn't happen--of course it did, but people didn't say and it was almost impossible to prove ‘beyond a reasonable doubt.’ There was no StarkSafe to give people privacy and safety. Doms got away with it all the time.”

Rogers swallowed. “And if a sub did--” Rogers took a deep breath. “New York v Jacobs. I was twelve.”

Tony blinked.

(Well shit. He hadn't thought of that.)

It had been billed as the trial of the century. Despite days of testimony about her Dom's systematic abuse, they’d thrown out the self-defense plea and charged her with premeditated, first-degree murder. Three people were killed at protests the day Mary Jacobs was hanged. Later liberationists adopted her as a martyr and a rallying cry.

Rogers looked up at Tony, expression sad. “I was only twelve; I wouldn’t present for two more years. And, like I said, I was so small, everyone assumed—I mean, I did too.” Rogers fell silent for a moment, then said softly: “My mother prayed for Mary Jacobs. She prayed for me too.”

Rogers set the remote down very carefully on the coffee table and stood. Tony's heart was pounding and his mouth was dry.

Rogers paused for a moment as he passed.

“Tony Stark was a hero long before Iron Man.”

Tony felt like the air had been knocked out of his lungs. He couldn't find the breath to reply as Rogers bade him a quiet “goodnight, Mr. Stark” and slid away.

Chapter End Notes
So, I really hope you liked that! Steve’s speech about Mary Jacobs was one of the foundational snippets I jotted down over a year ago when I was first thinking about this AU and conceiving of his backstory. Needless to say, I’ve been eager to share it with you! And I promise more revelations and good stuff to come! (Yes, even le kinky sex. Eventually…) Also, this story was originally going to be short—all done in 25 chapters. Ha ha ha. So, I’m guessing it will now be more like 50 something. You’ve been warned! :)

And thank you for being such wonderful readers! Your supportive words, shared responses, and thoughtful comments mean the world to me. This story has been a labor of love and healing for me, and it has brought me true joy to share it with you. Your kindness keeps me going! Ever onward! Thanks for reading. (And now back to the grindstone on RL work. Ouph.)

P.S. * Yeah, yeah. I know. The scientific revolution’s start date is contested, but it was NOT in the eighteenth century in RL. But, hey, this is an AU so I starts the scientific revolution when I wants to. :-) ** What Bruce and Tony were looking at.

UPDATE: June 24th I've been trying to post every 10 days or so, but it looks like chapter 26 is going to be a bit behind schedule. Life has been pretty busy--mostly my job--and I need to make sure that I draft or outline at least four or five chapters ahead before posting 26 so I don't accidentally write myself into a corner. Sorry for the delay! Never fear--I'm not on the verge of hiatus or anything. See you soon!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning:** youtube comments written by evil sexist, orientationist, pigs with evil attitudes about body image, beauty, and gender. Also slut shaming. They are not me!!! Seriously triggy. (I accidentally kinda triggered myself a bit writing it.) To skip the actual comments, just pass over the italics section under the youtube video heading. The content, as well as death and rape threats, are mentioned in Steve and Tony’s conversation and/or thoughts, though I think in a far less triggy way. Still, if you’d like to read the chapter with those sections redacted, just leave me a comment with your email address.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Stark Manor, 1986**

The door to Howard’s study was very slightly ajar. Tony crept forward very carefully, ears straining, careful to dodge the squeaky floorboard.

“--can’t keep giving him the cold shoulder! You have to talk to him.” His mother’s voice was firm, but tight. Howard only grunted in reply. “I mean it, Howard. It’s like you’re punishing him, but he hasn’t done anything wrong.” More mumbling from his father, then his mother exclaimed exasperated, “I never understood why you were so sure he’d be a Dom!”

“He’s a boy!”

“Just because ninety-five percent--”

“And he’s always been so bright!”

“And I suppose all subs are idiots?” her voice was poisonous.

“Now, don’t be like that, Maria. You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” she snapped, “you mean, he reminded you of yourself. God forbid he be his own person, not Howard Stark in miniature to continue your legacy.” The last word was sneered.

“It’s your legacy too, damnit!”

“No. Stark Industries and the Stark Foundation—those are a legacy. Tony is my son. Our son.”

Tony could hear the clink of bottles at the sideboard.

“Is that what bothers you?” she asked. “That maybe he actually has a little of his mother in him?”

“It’s different.”

“Because he’s a boy?”

“Yes!”

There was a long pause. “I expected better of you, darling.” She sounded so sad. “He’s the same person he was six months ago. I’m not saying it won’t be hard for him, harder than it would have been, but how can you give up on him so easily?”

Tony couldn’t hear Howard’s mumbled reply.

“I’m disappointed too,” she said. “And it’s not with Tony.”

>>>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

It was three in the morning. Tony was in the workshop, staring blankly at glowing blue projections of poly-aramid ratios and tensile strengths, a tall glass of scotch clutched in his right hand. (It was a rule—he could bring a glass down to the shop, but not a bottle. He’d never broken that rule. Yet.) He took a sip. (He had some very large glasses.)

Tony couldn’t stop thinking about Rogers.

Tony’d almost run after him. Almost. But instead he’d just stood there, frozen, for who knows how long while Rogers’ words echoed in his head. ("Tony Stark was a hero long before Iron Man.") It made his chest feel tight. ("I was so small, everyone assumed—I mean, I did too.")
Recent revelations and old conversations ricocheted back and forth across his mind.

“I was wrong about you, Cap,” Tony muttered into his scotch, then shook his head. (Doesn’t count if he can’t hear you, stupid.) Tony squinted.

“Hey, JARVIS? Enlarge the stats on the left.”

“Yes, sir.”

(Okay. Cuniff formula.)

\[ v_{50} = \left( \frac{U}{*} \right) \frac{1}{3f \left( \frac{A_d}{A_p} \right)} \]

His eyes ached.

("I was so small, everyone assumed—I mean, I did too."

Fucking Howard. Tony took a sip of scotch. Fucking Howard and his fucking obsession. His old man said he knew everything there was to know about Captain America, but Tony was starting to think he hadn’t known Steve Rogers at all.

Tony glared at the glowing screens, his concentration shot to hell, his eyes burning.

\[ v_{50} = \left( \frac{U}{*} \right) \frac{1}{3f \left( \frac{A_d}{A_p} \right)} \]

Tony sighed. “Shut it all down, J. The glare’s getting to me.”

“Of course, sir.” The workshop went dark. A pause. “Perhaps sleep would be restorative.”

Tony shrugged.

Dummy wheeled over with a whirring noise, tennis ball clenched in his claw.

“Dummy, no,” Tony scolded. “Do I look like I want to play ball right now?” Tony took another long swallow as Dummy let out a low bee-boop and started to roll away.

“Hey, no, don’t,” Tony entreated. “You don’t have to go. Just, no ball now. Here. Come on.”

Tony fumbled his through the dark workshop over to the beat up couch in the corner, beckoning Dummy to follow. Tony flopped down low on the couch so Dummy could rest his claw on Tony’s thigh.

“There. Okay?” Tony murmured. “Sit tight, buddy. There.” Tony pet awkwardly at the claw, glad Rhody couldn’t see him now. The scotch burned going down in the best possible way.

("I was so small, everyone assumed—I mean, I did too."

Tony’d fallen for Howard’s entire shtick about Captain America—that even as little Steve Rogers, tiny and frail, he’d been the most macho Domliest Dom ever because courage and perseverance and all those other Important Dominant Virtues that proved he was no sub. And sure, the movies and comics and stuff showed he was small and never said, “Hey, guess what, folks? He thought he was gonna be a sub and so did everyone else!” but it was Howard, Howard who went on and on about how fucking Dominant Steve Rogers had been, muscles or no, over and over, and how obviously Tony would be a Dom just like The Captain was.

Tony’d bought it. Tony’d bought it even when his mother quietly tried to plant seeds of doubt. Even when, more importantly, she’d point out that he could be all those wonderful things—smart, brave, determined, heroic—no matter what. Without even knowing it, Tony had taken in Howard’s brash orientationism over his mother’s soft-spoken, modest liberationism.

For Tony, presenting had been a horrible downgrade, a fluke, a failure. (You can’t hear me, but I’m so sorry, mom. So fucking sorry . . .) Had Rogers been relieved? Overjoyed? Numb? Confused? Had he, against all the odds, actually been disappointed? What was it like growing up then as a sub? Tony wanted to know everything about this Steve Rogers, not Howard’s Captain America.

Tony finished his scotch in his darkened workshop, Dummy at his side.

She’d found him brooding in the window seat of her salon—the only room in the house Howard never entered.

“You were listening at the door, weren’t you?” she asked.

Tony considered lying, but there was no point with mom. He gave a tight nod.

“Oh, darling,” she said softly. She sat down beside him and gathered him into her arms. Pink Chanel and the soft floral scent of Anais Anais.

“Mo-o-ooom!” Tony protested, squirming. “I’m thirteen!”
“And you’ll always be my baby.” She kissed the top of his head.

(Howard isn’t here to see . . .) Tony stopped squirming and settled back into his mother’s arms, but they couldn’t keep the overwhelming sense of disappointment at bay. (You were supposed to be a Dom. How could this happen?) He felt sick. He’d felt sick for days and days.

“Come on, sweetie, it’s okay. Why so disheartened?”

Tony didn’t answer. The silence lingered.

“Don’t tell me,” his mother said gently, pulling Tony from his gloomy thoughts, “that you’re ashamed to be like your mother.”

“No!” Tony cried startled. He looked at her wide-eyed. “But I don’t--” Tony floundered, “I mean--”

She shushed him. “You’re still you, darling, I know you don’t want what I did.” She smiled at him and rubbed little circles on his back like she had when he was very little. “I wanted you and your father, society life and charity fundraising. The things I wanted were the things everyone thought I should want.”

She shook her head. “You want MIT and Stark Industries and engineering, so it will be different for you. Harder.” She stroked Tony’s hair. “But it will be all right. I’ll help you.” She gave him a little smile, “You still are and always will be my beautiful, brilliant, brave little boy, and now you’re a fellow sub too. And I am so tremendously proud of you.”

“The world is changing, darling,” she said and kissed his hair. “You’ll change it.”

Tony woke in the workshop with Dummy by his side and a blanket spread across his legs. He looked down, expecting a shattered mess—but no. His scotch glass was on the floor, upright, over by Dummy’s charging station.

“Thanks, buddy. Good boy.”

Whiiirrrrr. Bee-boo?

Dummy offered him the tennis ball. Tony smiled and gave it a gentle toss.

“Hey, JARVIS? Get the poly-aramid stuff back up here. And start the coffee, would ya?”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony rolled his shoulders, feeling pretty good despite sleeping slumped over on the couch. (He’d only had one glass, after all.) He glanced down at his wrists; his marks were so faded they were nearly invisible. Soon the ones on his back would disappear too, as if they’d never been there. It was reassuring—a clean slate—but somehow disappointing too. There’d been a time when Tony hadn’t passed a day without somebody’s marks on him (or several somebodies’). It was becoming a depressingly rare pleasure to have those little reminders scattering his skin. And an even rarer pleasure to feel so unambiguously happy by them.

Tony tossed Dummy’s tennis ball for him again and went over to the bathroom to wash up.

New day, new start. Brooding done. Over. No more.

Time to revolutionize body armor technology!

Man’s voice over: “Because you won’t slow down . . .”

POV shot of a woman running across a desert, up a ravine; heavy breathing, accelerated music

Man’s voice over: “. . . because you don’t give up . . .”

POV shot of a woman rock climbing, rowing crew; heavy breathing, accelerated music

Man’s voice over: “. . . you need an antiperspirant strong enough for a Dom . . .”

Long shot of a stunning sub in a backless evening gown surrounded by Doms in tuxedos

Woman’s voice over: “. . . But designed just for you.”

The beautiful sub lifts her arms to embrace a handsome Dom, then looks over her shoulder to smile at the camera.

Woman’s voice over: The New Dove Switch Stick; strong enough for a Dom, gentle enough for you.
“Sir?” JARVIS said, volume at minimum. He startled Tony anyway. “Captain Rogers asks if you will be joining the team for dinner and, if not, whether he may bring a tray to the workshop.”

“No!” Tony swallowed. “I mean, uh, say, ‘thank you, but no need.’ Tell him I already ordered a pizza, so I’m all set, okay? Just working away.”

“Yes, sir.” JARVIS paused, then asked, “Shall I order a pizza for you, sir?”

Tony glared. “Is that judgment I hear in your voice, J?”

“Perish the thought.”


“Side salad?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Pepper told you to ask that, didn’t she?”

“I am not programmed to take orders from Ms. Potts.”


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Youtube: Iron Man flying figure-eights over Manhattan

Comments:

Miss_Diamond_sub

Beautiful footage of a beautiful machine! Stark’s a dreamboat. I’d Switch for him any time! (And I’m a 9.9 sub on the Kinsey scale…!) *sigh*

Tip-Top-10:

Iron Man FTW!!! Dude, so fucking awesome! Thanks for posting, Miss-Missy!

Man-oh-man-17:

Soooooo cool. Seriously, best thing ever! Iron Man and War Machine are my heroes. (And is it just me, or would they be the HOTTEST COUPLE EVER!????! OMG.) I am totally applying to the Air Force Academy in the fall….

Biggg_Dude_xxx

cool vid, but he shulda put a fuck hole in the back of the armor so he could have gangbangs in the suit… slut needs to be filled, rite? I’d top that bitch—no pride, lolz. don’t mind a sloppy hole…

Topper_69

heh, yeah, Biggg—he’d be great at parties, right? people talk smack about stark, but I like a bitch who knows not to be picky and just give it up for Tops, let all you’re friends have a go. brat talks big, but he gives it away every time

Miss_curvey_queen

Topper_69 and Biggg_Dude: You guys are pigs. I hope you never get your tiny limp dicks near any subs. Stark’s a hero—show some fucking respect.

Biggg_Dude_xxx

miss_curvey_queen, u some bitchy fatty, all bitter nobody wants u. bet youd drop for cock if a Dom offered, lolz

Miss_curvey_queen

I love my body, fucktard. You just wish you could get a piece of THIS! And “biggg dude?” Seriously? Compensating much, asshole? I hope the next time Iron Man is rescuing people and putting his life on the line, he lets you DIE IN A FIRE.

4everRedskinsFan

Seriously? I search “Iron Man Tony Stark hot action slut gangbang” and get this shit? Where the
Tony should really check his data one more time before manufacturing the initial prototype, but his attention was wandering again. He had hundreds of questions for Rogers, curiosities about his life, his experiences.

So, naturally Tony was still holed up in his workshop.

He couldn’t just walk up to Rogers with a casual, “Oh, hey, so apparently you thought you were gonna be a sub back in the old days. So, tell me, just how bad did things suck back then?”

(Yeah, no.)

“Hey, J? What time is it?”

“1:37 am, sir.”

“Huh.” Tony almost followed up by asking what day it was, but decided it didn’t really matter anyway. Whatever the answer, he felt pretty sure it was time to get out of the workshop for a bit. (See? Pep? Bruce? Life-work balance, right here!)

He should probably go to bed and try to get some sleep, but he was feeling kind of wound up for that. Maybe lifting some weights or going for a run would help work off the tension. (And the pizza . . .) Besides, working up a sweat might help him sleep, and was undoubtedly better for him than more scotch. (Again—see, Pep? Healthy choices!)

“Sleep tight!” Tony called to the bots and took the elevator up to the gym.

When the doors opened, Tony was surprised to find the lights on and the gym in use. There was a muffled thud-thud-thud noise. Rogers. Tony paused—he could go. Rogers hadn’t seen him. He could get back on the elevator and go straight to bed.

He could, but he wasn’t going to. He was going to go in there and work out and maybe have a little chat with the Captain.

Rogers was pounding the punching bag with a ferocity Tony’d never witnessed before. The punches were almost frantic, not the controlled steady blows Tony was used to seeing. The Captain hadn’t broken the reinforced adamantium chain on his boxing bag, but it was looking like a near thing.

“Jesus, whoa there,” Tony said. “What did it do? Insult your mother?”

Rogers entire body went stiff for a moment. “Oh, hello, Mr. Stark.” He turned, gave Tony a polite nod, and went back to battering the most heavily reinforced punching bag on earth.

“Are you okay?” Tony asked, half worried that he’d done something wrong. It wasn’t like Rogers to leave his back turned to someone. “What’s gotten into you?”


“All of it?” Tony blinked. “Or did something in particular get a bee in your bonnet?”

“Yes,” Rogers bit out.

“Uh, that was an either-or question, Cap.”

The adamantium chain rattled and Tony thought he heard something tear. (Impossible.)

“Yes, it’s something specific.”

“Care to share with the class?”

“No.” WHAP! “It’s not something—” Thud-thud. “That can be repeated in polite company.” THUD!

Tony rolled his eyes and considered cursing a blue streak to desensitize the Captain or maybe snarkily reminding him that Tony does in fact use the internet too. Then he thought better of it. Cap seemed really upset. Like, really. There was a tablet over on the bench. Tony wandered closer and saw that the screen was cracked, but it was still working. Tony picked it up and skimmed the youtube comments.

(Ah. Cap was pitching a Rhodey.)

Tony made a tsking noise and said casually, “Now, see, people who get they’re, their, and there
confused, shouldn’t be allowed to call me a whore.”

Rogers spun to look at him in wide-eyed distress.

Tony continued, “I mean, seriously. ‘Their—t-h-e-i-r--’ is no way I’d let my cock near that STD slag hole? And, honestly, I’ve been an outspoken advocate of safer sex for years! Do your research, ‘xxx-top-loz5’.” Tony shook his head and tsk-tsked again.

“Oh, and here—‘it’s and its, though at least that one could be a typo. Still. Proofread, people!” Tony shook his head again. “Gosh, no wonder you’re having a fit, Cap. Writing instruction really has gone downhill! I mean, we used to have quality tolls on the internet. Grammar and everything!”

Rogers’ mouth was opening and closing silently. His face was an unflattering shade of red.

“How can you joke about it!” Rogers cried. The man floundered. He looked like he wanted to rip somebody’s arms off. “It’s—it’s—”

“—it’s better than the alternative?” Tony cut in. Tony shook his head and set the tablet aside. “I’m a busy guy. I don’t have time to get in a froth and kill punching bags every time some idiot is an orientationist, sexist, racist douchebag on the internet. I’d never do anything else.” Tony shrugged, then asked, “Why were you even reading youtube comments? No good can come of that!”

(And why were you watching footage of Iron Man? You get the real thing …)

“It’s—” Rogers shook his head. “What they said . . . . It’s disgusting.”

Tony shrugged again. “I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to be. Nobody should.”

And at that, the fight just seemed to bleed out of Rogers, leaving him exhausted. He slumped back against the punching bag for a moment, eyes closed, taking long deep breaths. Tony sat quietly.

“They’re pigs,” Rogers said.

“Yep.”

“How dare they?” The question seemed less angry than sad.

“Dunno.” Tony shrugged. “Not being an orientationist piece of shit myself, I find it pretty hard to imagine the mindset.” He said it jokingly, but Rogers didn’t crack a smile.

Rogers sank to the floor, knees pressed to his chest. And it was strange—he looked smaller like that somehow, huddled in on himself. Not Captain America, just Steve.

And if this was his response to comments on youtube, Tony was glad he hadn’t mentioned the really nasty stuff, like routine death threats. Or rape threats. Or the coverage of the Hanson trial. (Then again, maybe Cap had already found that stuff too.)

“Sometimes, I hate it here so much,” Rogers mumbled against his knees. He looked up at Tony and said, voice wrecked, “Everything is supposed to be better.”

Tony’s heart twisted a little.

“Things are better,” Tony said, very softly.

Rogers sighed. “I know that too, I guess. I just—it’s all so . . . disorienting. Lots of things are obviously better—so much better—but then some things seem worse and then it’s like this punch in the gut to see it because of all the other things that have changed.” He frowned. “I mean, sure, people made nasty remarks before too. Called each other names. But—” He gestured at the tablet. “—not like that. Not that I heard.”

Tony nodded. “The power of anonymity,” he said with a wry smile. “And distance. Most of them would never say things like that in person or with their real name. Never in a million years.”

Rogers nodded. “They’re bullies. And cowards.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed.

The nastiness of the internet was familiar to Tony—after all, his public infamy predated the internet itself—and he was pretty well inoculated, but he wondered about Cap again. As a kid or young teen, had anyone called him a bitch? A slag?

“I wish there were something I could do,” Rogers said, sounding defeated.

“You really are a good guy, aren’t you?” Tony said softly. It was the sort of thing he’d usually say snidely or at least half as a joke, but tonight alone in the gym with Rogers it was a gentle observation.
“I don’t know,” Rogers mumbled looking away. “I try to be.” The tips of his ears went pink.

“You are.” Tony smiled, one of his real smiles. “I’m a genius, but sometimes I can be slow on the uptake. About people. You…you really are a good guy.”

Rogers looked up at him from under his lashes and Tony was quick to deflect, “Though I doubt your poor StarkTab would agree. It’s not the tablet’s fault there’s crap on the internet.” Tony joked, “Don’t shoot the messenger, man!”

Rogers snorted. “That one has nothing to complain about. It’s still working!” He cracked a bit of a smile and shook his head. “You should see the tech they gave me at SHIELD early on. They said to be careful with it, but they kept giving me these stupid tests that pissed me off, so I pushed too hard and put my finger clean through the tablet!”

Tony blinked. “Wait, did he mean—?” Rogers shook his head, expression amused. “That really was an accident, but they kept making me do the damn paperwork on this mini-device with a touch screen and, I mean, I’ve got such huge hands now and I’d never even imagined something like a touch screen before… I kept bumping ‘a’ when I meant ‘b’ or ‘c’ when I meant ‘d’ and then spent so long trying to undo it, the whole test, quote ‘timed out’ while I was only on question thirty-something.”

(Seriously? But then that means…)

Rogers’ eyes glimmered with mischief and he added in a conspiratorial whisper, “Breaking the second one wasn’t an accident.” He shrugged. “They let me take tests and do paperwork by hand after that. At least for a while.”

Tony threw back his head and laughed.

(17% Oh man! 17%)

Rogers gave him a baffled look, but didn’t seem offended by Tony’s sudden outburst.

(Wow. 17%… this whole time.) Tony shook his head still laughing. (Well, that’ll teach you to go snooping…)

“Are you all right?” Rogers asked, bemused.

Tony nodded and just kept laughing. His sides hurt.

Finally Rogers said, “Uh. I think you might need to get some sleep, Mr. Stark.”

Tony shook his head, trying to catch his breath. “Not tired,” he insisted.

“It’s two in the morning,” Rogers said with a bit of a frown.

“No.” Rogers hesitated, then added, “I was having trouble sleeping.”

“Great,” Tony said, setting the damaged StarkTab aside. “So let’s go not sleep together. I’m thinking Star Trek and Chinese food.”

“It’s two in the morning,” Rogers repeated.

“You say that like it precludes Chinese food!” Tony waved his arms extravagantly and leapt to his feet. “Come on, hollow leg, don’t tell me you couldn’t eat after pounding those bags.”

“I could eat,” Rogers said, tone verging on shamed confession.

“Great!” Tony grinned. “JARVIS, order my usual everything and then some from Park Chop Suey.”

“With pleasure, sir,” JARVIS said and Tony thought he could detect a hint of approval. “Done.”

“Thanks, J,” Tony said. “So, come on—what do you say?”

Cap nodded, getting to his feet. “I’d be happy to join you.” He glanced down at his sweat drenched gym clothes and taped hands. “I’ll just need a few minutes.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said. Cap fumbled a bit with the tape and Tony felt this sudden need to—

“Here, allow me,” Tony said, stepping forward.

Cap looked at him, startled for a second, then held out his hands. Tony almost teased him—“Velcro fasteners? So modern!”—but he kept quiet, afraid it would sound mocking.

Tony unwound the tape carefully, peeling back the layers of fabric protecting Cap’s hands. They were large, strong hands—no surprise there—but soft and smooth, no calluses. (Must be the serum.) Tony’s hands were small, rough, and littered with tiny scars, the marks of his carelessness over long years in the workshop.
Unwrapping Cap’s hands was a small gesture, but it felt good.

“There,” Tony said. He finished recoiling the last of the tape and handed it to Rogers.

“Thank you,” Cap said, looking down at Tony with an uncertain little smile.

Tony stepped away. “No problem.” He scratched the back of his neck. “So, yeah, why don’t you grab a shower and change, then meet me upstairs and I’ll reveal the wonders of Star Trek.”

“Sounds good,” Rogers said, heading for the stairs. “See you soon.”

Tony took the elevator. (What? It’s five floors!) He gave his armpits a little sniff on the way up and changed course from common area to penthouse—he’d better grab a quick shower too. And clean clothes.

In the comfort of his own luxurious bathroom, the water was hot and wonderful, but the wait gave Tony time to get nervous. His first impulse was to call Pepper. Which was ridiculous because there was nothing to be nervous about. (And it was two in the morning.) And what would he say? ‘Making new friends is scary’? What is he, a kindergartener? Tony rolled his eyes. He gave one last vigorous scrub and reached for his towel.

Besides, he should have tried this sooner. He’d promised Rhodey he’d look after Cap and he hadn’t exactly been living up to his word.

Tony smiled as he toweled his hair dry. No wonder Rhodey and Cap got along so well—they obviously had a lot in common: neither of them could shrug off shit they read on the internet. Rhodey’d go batshit and hit the shooting range. (Pepper’s outrage in contrast was a brief and quiet affair; she was far too efficient and restrained to waste time and energy on trolls.) It had been the worst during the Hanson trial. Tony tried to push the memories away. The death threats, rape threats—some of them amazingly lurid in their detail.

Rhodey’d gone into Rambo mode. He’d used all his sick days and vacation time to play bodyguard bestie 24/7, barging in if another Dom got up in Tony’s space uninvited, hovering around if a Dom even looked at Tony crooked. It’d nearly driven Tony up the wall and they’d fought a bit, but in the end Tony’d let it go. (Rhodey loves me.) He was willing to take it as the annoying affection of an overprotective friend not the patronizing act of an orientationist douchebag. (And, well, he was being threatened . . . )

Tony grabbed a clean but battered pair of jeans, worn down and soft.

Maybe Cap had been thinking of Jason Hanson when he’d come running at the gala. Hanson’s bullshit had happened over a decade ago for Tony, but Rogers had only known about it for a couple of months, tops.

(“I thought he was going to hurt you. I don’t give a good goddamn about PR compared to your safety.”)

Tony shrugged the thoughts away and pulled on a long-sleeve t-shirt. (The AC/DC one that was a little too big and had extra long sleeves.)

No need to be nervous. Star Trek and Chinese food! How chill is that? And Star Trek is awesome. Cap was gonna love it. As long as Tony started him on a good episode.

(Oh, hm. There was a question. “The Naked Time”? “Balance of Terror”? Oh! “Devil in the Dark.” That’d be a good one. Hm.)

Tony checked himself over one last time. His marks were all properly covered, his hair clean but damp, and his goatee in need of tidying, but he was not shaving for this. Chinese food and Star Trek.

Nothing to be nervous about.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

UPDATE: Friendly reminder that I am explicitly asking not to receive concrit please.
Thank you so much!
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Let's try this again! Hopefully fixed the formatting....

Chapter dedicated to: noman, thatwhichyields, and phage with thanks for hand-holding and encouragement. :-)

Chapter Notes

So, Tony and I may have gotten a bit carried away by our love of TOS Star Trek and Nichelle Nichols. Please forgive us. :-)

Sorry about the horrible formatting glitch. I have no idea how that happened, but apparently trying lots of different online RTF-HTML convertors eventually produced one that worked around whatever glitch was in my word file. Baffled and really frustrated, but at least it's fixed. Thanks to Michelle for the first very sweet heads up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony arrived in the common room just a few moments before Rogers. Cap’s hair was still wet and he was wearing a navy blue t-shirt and matching pair of sweatpants. It sort of made Tony wish he’d opted for sweats instead of jeans. (But what if Rogers had shown up in khakis and a button down or something?)

“Beer?” Tony called from the fridge.

Rogers hesitated a moment before nodding. “Thank you.”

Tony rummaged around looking for the Sam Adams he knew was Cap’s favorite. (Yeah. Even his beer preferences were patriotic.)

“Thank you for inviting me to join you,” Cap said as Tony handed him a beer. “So, what’s this we’re watching?”

“Star Trek!” Tony said with what was probably a manic gleam in his eye. He helped himself to a Tsing Tao. “It’s amazing. You’ll love it—and that’s mandatory.” Tony checked his phone; food should arrive soon. “Just kidding,” Tony added, “But seriously, you’ll love it. This is groundbreaking American television!”

“How so?” Rogers asked, with no hint of skepticism, just frank curiosity.

“Star Trek tried to imagine a future of equality. It did so imperfectly, but took some steps in the right direction against racism and orientationism.” Tony took a sip of beer, then elaborated. “Nichelle Nichols—Officer Uhura, communications expert, and sub—was the only black woman on television back then who didn’t play a maid. And when she was younger she sang with Duke Ellington and then after Star Trek she was a NASA Recruiter, inspiring subs and minorities to join the space program and become astronauts. Really amazing woman.”

“Gosh,” Rogers said, nodding. “That is really impressive.”

“And George Takei!” Tony grinned and perched on a bar stool. “He’s Sulu, a Japanese-
American sub, pilot, and officer. And Takei’s a sub in real life too, not just on screen, so Sulu was the first male sub actually played by a male sub instead of a Dom putting on a fake tenor. Sulu was the only one on TV who wasn’t a secretary.” Tony took another sip of beer, then added, “or a hooker.” Cap made a pained face. (Shit! meant to get his mind off the crap online, not remind him!) Tony rushed on, “Anyway, it’s about this amazing crew exploring space together and making all sorts of discoveries and stuff and it had a diverse cast unlike anything in the sixties.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Who am I kidding? It had a more diverse cast than lots of TV and movies now.”

Rogers took a seat across from him and rested his elbows on the counter, leaning forward a little. (Pepper would call it “active listening.”)

“The episodes were all written by different sci-fi writers,” Tony continued, “so sometimes it’s awesome and progressive and smart, but sometimes it’s brainless, offensive bullshit.” Tony shrugged and took another sip of beer. “Overall, awesome though, and don’t worry—I’m picking the good ones for you. I know it forwards and back.”

Cap looked kind of amused. “You must have watched it a lot then.”

“Yeah.” Tony smiled and looked away, a little wistful. “It was my mom’s favorite show,” he said quietly. Had he ever told anyone that before? He couldn’t remember.

(Tony still had the elegantly framed photo of her with Nichelle Nichols at a fundraiser, the one she’d kept at her writing desk. It was tucked away in the workshop where he could find it easily, but not out in plain sight.)

Tony’s phone pinged. He hopped down from the bar stool and headed for the elevator. “Food’s here!” he called over his shoulder.

As Tony waited he wondered who Park Chop Suey would send this late on a . . . whatever day of the week it was. Jonathan Yuen usually just sent his son.

The elevator doors opened on a gangly nineteen year old in a battered hoodie valiantly trying (and failing) to grow a moustache and carrying two gigantic bags of take-out.

“Hey, Tony,” the kid said.

“Hey, Tony,” Tony answered back with a little smirk.

“So, have you been practicing?” Tony Yuen asked, making no move to hand over the delivery bags.

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said with a shrug, holding out his hands, “but I can’t possibly remember it when I’m weak from hunger. Gimmie, gimmie.”

“Dude, it was your idea! We had a deal!”


“Wǒmen dào yīnggài gǎndào róngxìng,” Tony Y. answered with an approving nod.
“Uh,” Tony fumbled, then replied, “Nǐ tài kègìle?”

Tony Y. shook his head and corrected, “kèqìle.”

“Damn,” Tony frowned, then asked, “but I’m still getting better, right?”

“Uh,” Tony Y. hesitated. “No offense, man, but Mandarin’s really not your area. I mean, my accent’s still not perfect—” he rolled his eyes then corrected, “or as grandpa says—” he made a grim frowning face and imitated in a deep voice, “very bad, very disappointing—” Tony Y. shrugged, “—but, wow, your accent’s, like, really bad.”

“Thanks, hey, don’t spare my feelings or anything,” Tony said ruefully.

“My advice? Always have a translator.” He held up the bags. “Now, where do you want ‘em?”

“Oh, my shitty accent is still good enough I get my order?”

Tony Y. just rolled his eyes and entered the penthouse. “Fucking heavy! Why the double order? Hosting a bachelor party?” He took a few steps towards the kitchen then blurted, “Holy shit! Captain America!” Then murmured, “Oh man, my girlfriend is gonna be so jealous.” He set the bags on the counter and mustered his composure.

“Hello, I’m Tony. Tony Yuen,” he said holding out his hand. “It’s an honor to meet you, Captain.”

“Steve, please,” Cap said with a warm smile. “Nice to meet you too.”

Tony started unpacking the bags, looking for the spring rolls first. Tony Y. was still looking a little star-struck—Tony snorted and joked, “Hey, you know I’m a superhero too, right? Iron Man?”

“Pft. I’m used to you,” Tony Y. said, and Tony Stark found himself oddly delighted by that.

“Anyway,” Tony Y. said turning to the elevator, “I should leave you to your two a.m. dinner or whatever. It was nice meeting you, Captain—uh, Steve.”

“Hey!” Tony cried. “I don’t get another phrase?”

“You can barely say what you have now!” he protested, but at Tony’s pout he gave in. “Fine.” He grinned, “Here—something you shouldn’t have any trouble with. Try: Gāngtiě xiá zuì bàng le.”

“Gāngtiě xiá zuì bàng le,” Tony repeated slowly. “What did I just say?”

“Iron Man rocks.”
Tony laughed. "JARVIS, did you record that? I'm definitely practicing that one."

"Yes, sir," JARVIS said, tone a bit disapproving.

"Have a good night!" Tony Y. called from the elevator.

"Later," Tony answered.

"Drive safe!" Rogers called. "Have a good night!"

After the elevator doors closed, Rogers turned to Tony with a little smile. "He seemed like a nice kid."

"Tony? Yeah. I've known him for years—he started delivering for his dad's restaurant as soon as he turned sixteen. He's one of the only people Jonathan—the owner and head chef—trusts to deliver here." Tony shook his head. "So, I said in an interview once that Park Chop Suey's my favorite delivery joint, which was good for Jonathan's business, but apparently also meant a bunch of crazies tried to get jobs there so they could get into Stark Tower. But Jonathan took care of it and vets all his driver very carefully." Tony shrugged. "Anyhow, yeah, Tony's a good kid."

Tony rooted around in the delivery bags. "So, we've got a bit of everything: spring rolls, chow mein, garlic dried green beans with pork, potstickers, onion pancakes, beef and broccoli—you name it, I probably ordered it. Twice."

Tony carried the bags over to the coffee table. "Come on!" he called. "We're eating from the cartons. It's tradition! And grab me another Tsing Tao, would you?"

Rogers brought him his beer and settled next to him on the couch, leaving his usual eighteen inch buffer zone between them. Tony handed him some chopsticks. Rogers frowned.

"If I go get a fork, are you gonna make fun of me?"

"Hey! Would I do that?"

Cap gave him an incredulous look. Tony coughed.

"Yeah, okay, fine—I see why you might think that, but no. I won't make fun." He hesitated a moment, then said, "Or I could show you how. If you want."

"Okay," Cap said with a smile, "I'd like that." Then he added a little ruefully, "Though I may still need a fork."

"Here," Tony said, taking his chopsticks and demonstrating. "Hold this one like you'd hold a pen, then slide the other one here, like so. It stays stationary and you move the top chopstick like this—see?"

"Like this?" Rogers asked, showing Tony his grip.
“Yeah—just move that one more like this . . . and, yeah! There!” Tony held out the open carton of beef and broccoli. “Now, grasp it between the two and—there! See? Not bad for a noobie.”

Rogers smiled awkwardly around a big bite of broccoli.

“Hey, JARVIS? Start us on ‘The Naked Time,’ would you?”

“Of course, sir.”

Suddenly nervous, Tony turned to Cap and said, “Oh, by the way, it’s pretty slow paced sometimes and the special effects are really bad, but bad campy not bad bad. Just so you know.”

Cap gave him an amused look and said, perhaps a little ruefully, “You do realize that I remember when moving pictures got sound, right? As in, talkies?”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, okay. The special effects are awesome! And it has sound! And was shot in color!”

Rogers chuckled and waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah. Go on,” he grumbled good-naturedly.

“Here,” Tony said, “Have one of these spring rolls soon—they’re great hot, kinda good lukewarm, and nasty cold. And I love them, so if you don’t have one now you won’t get a chance.”

“Okay,” Rogers said, “thanks.” He carefully reached into the bag with his chopsticks. (Tony used his fingers for these, but hated to discourage the guy.) It took Rogers a couple tries but he got it.

“The food’s delicious,” Cap said quietly. “Thank you. And thank you for taking the time. I really appreciate that you—”

“Sure, no problem,” Tony cut in, uneasy with Cap’s halting gratitude. “Hey, quiet! It’s starting!”

Cap loved Star Trek.

Of course he did! Because Star Trek is awesome! And Tony managed to (mostly) restrain his editorializing and remembered always to pause before speaking—Cap hated it when people talked over the dialogue:

“Oh, yeah, so early on Bones says some kind of racist shit like that to Spock, which sucks, but he gets over it as the show goes on. And he’s never racist to Uhura or Sulu or anything. Just, don’t hate him forever, okay? Anyway, uh, sorry I stopped it.”

“So, Spock’s actually biracial. I mean, Leonard Nimoy is Jewish, but the character is half-Vulcan and half-human. And this episode actually aired before Loving v Virginia. Oh, shit, do you know about—oh, right. Sure, of course you read about it. Uh, sorry I stopped it again.”
“I always liked that moment—that when Kirk’s being kind of a jerk, Uhura’s willing to push back; she doesn’t just cringe. Er, yeah. Sorry. I’ll stop—really!”

At first, Cap had seemed awkward about eating from the same containers, but Tony had no qualms about leaning over to dig his chopsticks into whatever Cap happened to be holding if he wanted it. (Because stealing your food is a universal sign of friendship. Worked with Rhodey, right?) Although Cap clearly preferred to just trade cartons than lean over and fish around in whatever Tony was holding, he’d do it if Tony held out the carton and encouraged him to try something.

So, *Star Trek* was officially “swell” and Cap wanted to watch another episode if Mr. Stark could spare the time and wasn’t too tired. (Please—who needs sleep when there’s *Star Trek* and Chinese food?) Tony lined up three more episodes. They drank beer and demolished their chow mein and pot stickers; Cap got more confident with chopsticks; Tony editorialized and Cap started asking questions.

It was fun. Really it was, but in the back of Tony’s mind there was this insistent little voice chastising him. And there was this guilty little knot in his stomach that wouldn’t go away, even when plied with beer and pot stickers. After the second episode, he’d wanted to say something, but failed, unable to find the words.

So, during the third episode, Tony was unusually quiet as he thought things through.

(Hey, Cap, so I was thinking . . .)

(So, the thing is, Cap . . .)

(Steve--)

(Remember when we first met? Well, I wasn’t really--)

(I should have done this sooner, but better late than never, right? So--)

Tony pretty much missed “Lost Flight” because he was so lost in his own thoughts, but by the time the end credits were rolling he’d decided not to worry about the perfect words and just say what needed to be said: content over style.

Tony turned down the volume and kept his eyes fixed on the TV as he said, fidgeting a little, “So, I was thinking, Cap . . . We’re teammates and, like you said, well, now we’re friends. So you should probably call me Tony, yeah?”

Nothing.

Silence.

Tony frowned.

“Cap?”
Rogers had slumped over into the corner of the couch and was sound asleep, breathing deeply with his mouth slightly open. Tony snorted. (Figures.) Tony shook his head. (God damn it! Gonna have to try again.)

Tony gathered the left-overs quietly and put them in the fridge, then came back for their empty bottles. He paused. Captain America was always beautiful, but asleep like that Rogers was kind of adorable too. And he looked so young. How old was Rogers anyway?

Cap shivered. Tony only hesitated a moment before pulling Bruce’s big fuzzy afghan off the armchair. Moving slowly, Tony spread the blanket over him very cautiously. Cap twitched and frowned a little in his sleep, but didn’t wake up.

Tony placed their bottles very carefully in the recycling and went up to bed just as the sky began to turn light.

OR244: Articulating Difference: Orientation, Gender, and Language
Cross-listed as: LING232, HIST299, ANTH297, and LIT204

This yearlong interdisciplinary course brings together the methodologies of linguistic, literary, and historical study to examine the shifting language of orientation. In over four thousand languages—including Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Mandarin, and Hindi—the words for man and Dominant, woman and submissive were the same or used interchangeably until the eighteenth century. As non-orientationally normative individuals—known derogatorily for centuries in English as the “inverted”—gained recognition, many languages have shifted to accommodate a desire for greater linguistic specificity. In gendered languages, like French for example, this was achieved within pre-existing grammatical structures with relative ease: Dominant te and soumis e. English in contrast has not yet formalized a comparable system for simultaneously relating gender and orientation.

Shifts in language at once reflect and enable societal change. In this course, we will examine these historio-linguistic developments within their broader social contexts and engage with the larger questions these changes generate, including but not limited: Where and how have shifts from gender designations to orientational designations occurred? In languages where there is no double-signifier, how does vocabulary use vary by context? How has the shift from gender—with its emphasis on physical sex and genitalia—to orientation—with its more subtle physical differentiation and its increased emphasis on the psychological and interpersonal—engaged with emerging conceptions of individualism, subjectivity, and interiority? How and where has this linguistic change been a gesture of inclusion—inviting the so-called “inverted” into their orientation group—and how exclusion—separating the “orientationally other” from their gender group?

In the second semester, we will place these social, historical, and linguistic studies in dialogue with a broad range of more belletristic literary texts, including excerpts from Shakespeare, Moliere, Li Bai, Al-Mutanabbi, Vikram Seth, Langston Hughes, and Margaret Atwood.

For more information, contact Professors Ellis, Bhaskar, or Thompson.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it! Sorry short chapter was short, but I hated to make you wait... And sorry for the terrible glitch in formatting earlier. Thank you all for your extreme
kindness and generosity! I'm honored to share this story with you.

Many thanks to aries_taurus, carzla, Moonlit_Lampshade, and charmeandering for translation help! All continuing errors are my own...

In the Mandarin above, Tony is trying to practice phrases he might use on a business trip. It goes roughly like this:
Tony S. "Thank you. Welcome to this place. Your coming causes us to feel great honor."
Tony Y. "We should be the ones to feel honored."
Tony S. "You are too kind." (but mispronounced)
Tony Y corrects his pronunciation

:-)

UPDATED Author's Note: July 24, 2014: Sorry for the delay on the next chapter! I've been struggling with work and a big deadline coming up, am now out of the country for an ill-timed vacation where internet is very spotty, and the next chapter is proving a challenge. All in all, sorry for the slow progress, all is well, story not abandoned, and I should be back with you in early August. Sorry and thanks for your patience!
Chapter Notes

I’m back! Sorry for the delay! Travel, work, struggling to get this chapter right. (Or, mostly right.) And I learned how to use photoshop for this!

Anyway, please have this longer-than-usual chapter to make up for my absence.

My love to phage for giving this an extra-beta read and laughing in all the right places.

Warnings: inappropriate joke about self-harm, affectionate, reappropriated use of the word “dyke”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rogers was already in the kitchen the next morning when Tony wandered in wearing the same jeans and AC/DC shirt as last night. (Well “morning.” It was, like, 11 am, but whatever.)

“Good morning, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said with a smile, looking up from his honest to god black-and-white newsprint newspaper. The kind that smelled and got ink on your fingers.

(Mr. Stark. There it was.)

Rogers was still talking—something thanks, breakfast, coffee something something—but Tony wasn’t really listening and it must have showed because Rogers frowned and asked, with a hint of concern, “Mr. Stark?”

“Tony,” he corrected, and Rogers’ eyes went wide. “My friends call me Tony. So, yeah. I mean, we’re teammates and friends, so, yeah, you should . . . you should call me Tony.”

Cap’s face lit up with this big, beautiful earnest smile.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Calm down, Cap. I’m not—” (“-- asking you to leave your boot prints all over my ass or anything.”) Tony held in the crude words and cleared his throat, hunching in on himself a little. “It’s no big deal.”

“Please call me Steve,” Rogers said warmly.

“Steve. Yeah, sure.” Tony paused, then added, fumbling around for one of the big coffee cups, “Still gonna call you Cap, though.”

Rogers grinned. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t. Tony.”

There was something sweet about the way Rogers—no, Steve—said his name, like he was testing it out or savoring it or actually felt honored or privileged or whatever the polite convention said he was supposed to feel.

(“May I have the honor of calling you Anthony?”)

“Did you want some breakfast?” Cap offered again, setting his newspaper down. “I ate a while ago, but could make something.”

“Nah,” Tony waved him off, savoring the coffee. “I’ll heat up left-overs in a bit.”

“Oh, right.” Rogers—no, Steve—glanced away. “I’m sorry I fell asleep and left you to clean up. I really was enjoying Star Trek! But I guess the workout caught up with me unexpectedly.”

Tony shrugged. “No worries. We can watch that one again if you like.”

“That would be nice.” Cap sounded pleased.

“Cool.” Tony glanced around. Bruce was almost certainly in his lab, but where--? “Hey, where are the super agents?”

“Physical therapy,” Cap said with a serious look.

“Still?”

“Yeah. Natasha’s wrist is almost back to normal, but Clint’s ankle still gives him a little trouble. Better safe than sorry. They should be cleared for active duty soon though.”

“Good.” Tony finished off his coffee. “That reminds me. I’ll have something for you soon.”

“Something for me?” Steve said in surprise.
“Yeah.” Tony said, pouring himself a second cup. "I’m upgrading your body armor. I mean, all the body armor of course. So, yeah. New uniform on the way.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Steve said slowly. Tony shrugged.

“If you’re already making changes…” Steve began hesitantly, frowning, “uh, do you think you could make it not quite so tight?” His voice lifted up hopefully.

Tony frowned. “Are there any particular problem areas?” Then he called out, “JARVIS, get me a screen with Cap’s suit, here.” Tony slid the glowing blue screen over where Steve could see. “So, what’s the problem? Chafing? Impaired mobility?”

“Oh, uh, nothing like that.” Steve said peering at Tony from around the screen. “Just it’s, well, it’s awful tight.” The tips of Steve’s ears were pink. “Makes me feel kind of… exposed.”

Tony managed not to laugh, but only barely. (Seriously? This guy had nothing to be embarrassed about!)

“Sorry, Cap,” Tony said. “It’s gotta body con for practical reasons.”

“Oh, of course,” Steve said. “I understand. And it’s fine—really.”

“So, uh,” Tony said taking another sip of coffee. “I’ll let you know when I get a prototype ready. It shouldn’t be too long. By my current calculations the poly-aramid ratio’s up to 6.7:1; once I hit 7, we’re golden.”

Tony took a carton of chow mein out of the fridge and topped off his coffee. “Well,” he said, “Better get to it.”

“Good luck!”


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"Okay, JARVIS,” Tony said around a bite of chow mein, "send that over to Leo in manufacturing. Bump it to the top. Priority One, ASAP Code thingie.”

“Done, sir.”

“Mmmm,” Tony murmured, pulling another big bite of noodles into his mouth with a slurp. The specs on the poly-aramid looked great. He hated not to do the whole thing from scratch, but the workshop wasn’t set up for that kind of manufacturing. Besides, Leo was the best. He’d take care of it. And fast.

Tony drummed his fingers on his workbench. Maybe he’d go check on Bruce in his lab, where Bruce pretended that he wasn’t still looking for a way to eliminate the Hulk. (Tony played along and pretended not to know, because he was nice like that.) Tony considered it for a few moments, but decided he was too fidgety for anyplace with test tubes.

“Dummy! Get over here.” Dummy obeyed eagerly. (What? He can ascribe adverbs to his bots if he wants to…) “Yeah, good boy. Let’s check you over, ok?”

Tony sat cross-legged on the floor and grabbed his special tool kit—the one he only used on the bots—and tipped the little guy over. And now that he had something to keep his hands busy, maybe he could consult an expert about that other thing . . .

“JARVIS! Get Rhodey on the line, would you?”

“Ring-ring-click!”

“Mmmm?”

“Hey, Sourpatch! What’s up?”

Rhodey groaned. “Do you have any idea what time it is here?” he mumbled into his phone.

“Uh, no. Where are you anyway?”
Rhodey humphed. “You’re not cleared for that information.”

“Well, then you can’t blame me for waking you up!”

“Give me one good reason not to hang up on you and go straight back to sleep.”

“You asked me to keep an eye on Cap,” Tony blurted. “I don’t think I’ve been doing a very good job. Maybe need your help.”

Rhodey sighed audibly. “What have you tried so far?”

“Uh . . .” Tony oiled Dummy’s right front wheel.

“So, nothing?”

“No! We watched Star Trek and ordered Chinese last night.”

“Aw, man! You introduced Steve to Star Trek without me?”

“Sorry,” Tony said without any real contrition, moving to tighten Dummy’s J-75 joint.

“Whatever.” There was a pause, then Rhodey laughed and said teasingly, “Wait, Star Trek and Chinese? Please tell me you’re not chasing him around the Tower 24/7 trying to get in his pants.”

Tony clenched at the screwdriver in his hand.

“Fuck you,” Tony snapped, “I’m not sixteen anymore and I said—”

“Tony, you were fourteen and I’m only teasing. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“—I was sorry for that years and years ago. I’m not a dumb teenager anymore OR some sex-crazed nympho who can’t keep it in his pants for ten minutes! For god’s sake, he’s my Captain! I’m not—”

“Tony!” Rhodey barked through his rant. “Jesus! I’m sorry, okay? I was only teasing. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Tony glared angrily at Dummy’s motor.

“I didn’t realize it was still a sore spot, ok?” Rhodey hesitated. “And, you know I didn’t really mind much anyway. I thought it was kinda sweet.”

Tony poked sullenly at one of Dummy’s wheels.

“Anyhow,” Rhodey continued apologetically, “it all turned out ok for us in the end, right?” He cleared his throat. “It sounds like you’re doing just fine with Steve.”

“Yeah, but—” Tony fumbled. “Now what?”


Then Rhodey added with clear exasperation, “And for God’s sake, Tony, let the man use your first name!”

“Oh, that. Pfft. Did that ages ago.”

(“Ages.” Like, five hours…)

“Good.” Rhodey sounded satisfied.

The silence lingered.

“So that’s it?” Rhodey asked. “You called to ask me how to make new friends?”

Rhodey said it in a gently teasing tone that took away the words’ potential bite.

Tony winced anyway. “When you say it like that, it sounds stupid. Just—” Tony shrugged, “—I don’t— it’s been a while, you know? Come on, Rhodey— when was the last time I made a new friend?”

“Uh, just now?”

“Huh?”

“Dr. Banner.”

“Pfft.” Tony waved it away. “He’s a scientist. Doesn’t count.”

“Like hell it doesn’t!”

Tony didn’t answer.

After a few moment’s silence, Rhodey said, “I know you think you’re crap with people, but
you’re not. At least, not always and I think—” he paused a moment, considering, “you’ve got a
really good team, Tony. I didn’t get to know them all very well, but Steve, well . . . Steve is a
really good guy and I could tell he admires you. And, hey, that’s a more illustrious beginning than
we had! So, don’t sweat it, Tones. You’re fine. Really.”
Tony gnawed on his lip.
Rhodey cleared his throat and Tony recognized it for what it was: a hearty “is that enough talking
about feelings and interpersonal shit? Please?”
Tony smiled and changed the subject. “So, how’s the suit?”
“Oh, fine! Sure! Go ahead and ask about your baby instead of your best friend. I see how it is.”
They fell into the old, familiar groove of good-natured teasing, and all was well with the world.

"I believe all submissives deserve the same rights and opportunities as Doms . . ."
Liberationism is really sexy.

"... and I always have."
Later that afternoon, Dummy was tossing a ball against the wall and running his dexterity protocols while Tony tinkered away with the TV playing in the background.
“You like Project Runway?”

Tony spun. Bruce stood in the doorway to the workshop holding a thermos of coffee and two cups.

Tony squinted at him. “So what if I do? I’m the king of Making It Work. What do you want?”

Bruce shrugged. “I brought some coffee and wanted to see how operation Mantis Shrimp is coming along.”

“Sent the prototype off to manufacturing earlier. Come see!”

Bruce poured them both coffee and listened as Tony ran through the specs, rehashed the bits he’d borrowed from the mantis shrimp research, then showed him the plans for turning the high tech fabric into an actual suit.

“So, the joints are always the most vulnerable, obviously, so I’ll—“

“Forgive the interruption, sirs,” JARVIS said, “but there is a call for Dr. Banner at the main Stark Industries switchboard asking to be put through.”

“At Stark Industries?” Bruce asked squinting. “Who would call me there, I wonder.”

“Dr. Betty Ross, Dr. Banner.”

Bruce took a sharp breath, his expression pained. “Oh.”

“Shall I put the call through?” JARVIS asked.

“No! No, don’t!” Bruce swallowed. “And don’t—don’t record a message. If you have to say something, say I am unavailable or unreachable. And block any future calls from . . . from Dr. Ross.”

A pause.

“Very well, Dr. Banner,” JARVIS answered in an entirely neutral tone.

Tony just stared. Bruce wouldn’t meet his eyes and seemed to be breathing a little quick, a little shallow. Tony swallowed.

“Uh, I hate to pry,” Tony began.

“Then don’t,” Bruce spat. He slammed his fist down on the workbench, making Tony’s tools jump and clatter. The harsh clang echoed through the shop.

Bruce took a long deep breath, then said, “Sorry. Sorry, Tony. I shouldn’t have . . . I’m sorry,” and began deep breathing exercises, face turned away.

Bruce was famous for his anger—supposedly it was what had created the Hulk—but this was the first evidence of it Tony’d ever seen. It was startling, but not frightening, though maybe it should have been.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Tony said. Bruce had both his hands resting, palms down, on the workbench; Tony ducked under his arm to get in close and give Bruce a hug.

Bruce froze. “You really shouldn’t,” he warned. “I’m dangerous.”

Tony shrugged and rested his head against Bruce’s chest. “You wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Yes, I can.”

“I have an unpredictable temper,” Bruce said.

“Pfft,” Tony said. “I hit that bench all the time. Didn’t scare me.”

“It probably should,” Bruce said, body still tight. “I didn’t think about it, just lashed out.”

“But you hit a table,” Tony shrugged again, then said in a high, tremulous voice, eyes wide, “Oooh, wait! You’re right! I’m so scared!” Then, teasingly, “Better hold me and comfort me, poor delicate little thing that I am. Come on, big guy.”

Bruce let out a choked laugh and wrapped his arms around Tony, squeezing tight.

Little by little, the tension left Bruce’s body as they breathed in unison. Bruce rested his cheek on the top of Tony’s head and rubbed his shoulders. Tony smiled. Bruce, Rhodey—the Doms in his life were all the same: they only seemed to take comfort by offering it, even if it was an illusion. They’d rather be the one giving the hug, playing the big spoon. Tony wondered vaguely if there were actually some sort of neurochemical aspect to it, or if they were just socialized only to accept comfort indirectly. In the end, Tony supposed it was unknowable and he didn’t particularly care
since he’d figured out how to do what he could for the Doms he cared about.

“Sorry, Tony,” Bruce mumbled, starting to pull away. Tony held on tight.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Tony asked quietly.

“No,” Bruce said. He let out a long sigh, then answered anyway, “Betty just won’t let it go.”

Tony wasn’t sure if it was polite to press, but he did it anyway, keeping his voice soft, “When you first talked about her, I thought the two of you were together, but then you never brought her around or said anything about her, and I hated to ask . . . Did you break up?”

“Essentially. We, well—we can’t be together.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Bruce repeated incredulously. “You’ve seen footage of the Hulk, right?”

Tony nodded.

“A Dom has to be in control,” Bruce said, then let out a bitter laugh. “I can’t think of a creature less in control than the Hulk. He’s—I’m—angry and violent. Totally out of control.”

“Have you ever Hulked out with Betty?”

“Not when we were—uh, together. But it doesn’t matter.” Bruce shook his head. “She’s better off staying clear. She shouldn’t be so trusting.”

“But she does trust you,” Tony insisted.

“I don’t trust myself!” Bruce took another deep breath. “I’d never forgive myself if I hurt her.”

“Can she make her own decisions,” Tony said.

“And I can make mine,” Bruce said calmly. He let Tony go and stepped away. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Tony worried his bottom lip a moment. He glanced around the workshop. Dummy was still playing ball, unaware of the tension behind him. (Lucky bot.) Tony cleared his throat.

“Hey, so did Cap tell you I introduced him to Star Trek?”

Bruce smiled, perhaps a little grateful. “Oh really? Original series?”

“Duh. Obviously. Anyways, I think we’re gonna watch a few episodes tonight. You should come hang out. If you spend any more time meditating on your floor I’m gonna think it’s emo instead of Zen. So, yeah, come hang out.”

“I’ll do that. Sounds fun,” Bruce said, then added a little more softly. “You’re a good friend, Tony.”

Friend. Tony expected to feel a little pang, but he didn’t. Just a warm sort of pleasure.

Rhodey was right. He didn’t totally suck at making friends. He had this shit under control.

“Hey, JARVIS? Get Cap on the line.”

“JARVIS, end call. And order pizza, my favs. You know the drill.”

“Hey, JARVIS? Get Cap on the line.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain Rogers speaking,” Steve answered briskly.

“Hey, Steve, at ease. Just me. So, hey, I was wondering what time you want to watch Star Trek. Like I said, we can start with ‘Lost Flight,’ since you slept through part of it.”

“I—” Steve paused. “You want to watch it tonight?” He sounded surprised.

“Sure. Why not? I mean, unless you’ve got plans.”

“No, not at all!” He still sounded surprised, but pleased too. “That sounds lovely. I can meet you whenever it’s convenient.”

“Great! I’ll order pizzas and meet you in the common room in fifteen. Just wrapping up here.”

“All right, Tony. Sounds good.” A pause. “Thank you.”

“JARVIS, end call. And order pizza, my favs. You know the drill.”

“Salad as well, sir?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yep. Sure. And shoot Pepper an email with a big picture of the salad. Tell
her I’m a good boy, eating my greens.”

“Sarcasm detected, sir. Is that an actual instruction as well as a pleasantry?”


Tony sent Dummy back to his charging station, threw out the now empty cartons of Chinese take-out, and skimmed over his Stark Industries email, then headed up to the common room.

When he got there, Steve was already sitting on the couch, notebook in hand and an extra pencil behind his right ear. When he heard Tony approach, he quickly closed the book and turned to look over the back of the couch.

“Must be excited about Star Trek,” Tony said. “You’re early.”

Steve shrugged. “So are you.”

“I’m here to get the pizza and stuff set up.”

“I’ll help.” Steve put the notebook—a generic looking spiral pad labeled, quality acid free drawing paper—on the coffee table and got to his feet.

“Honestly, when you said we could watch that episode again, I didn’t expect you’d have time for quite a while,” Steve said with a smile. “I’m glad you can take the time. You work so hard.”

Tony waved it off and pointed to the notebook. “So, what’s all that?”

“Oh, nothing.” Steve shrugged. “Just a hobby.”

Tony opened his mouth, but JARVIS spoke first, announcing, “Sir, your pizzas have arrived. Identification authenticated; shall I allow elevator access?”

“Yup! Send him up.”

Steve reached into his back pocket and took out a small brown leather wallet.

Tony held his hands up. “Whoa, what’s that?”

“It’s a wallet,” Steve said, deadpan. “Pretty sure you still have wallets in the twenty-first century. They hold money, used to pay for goods and services.”

“Ha ha,” Tony said. “Next thing you’ll be saying you want to pay cash.”

“Uh,” Steve fidgeted.

“Cash? Seriously?” Tony laughed. “These days wallets mostly hold credit cards and membership cards, but either way, I already beat you to it. I paid and tipped by card when I placed the order.”

“Oh.” Steve looked vaguely disappointed. He started opening his wallet. “Well at least let me—”

“Oh my God, seriously, put that away,” Tony said. “Billionaire, remember?”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Cap said, the beginnings of his Stubborn Look creeping over his face, “but that’s no reason to always stick you with the bill. I have a job. I’m not some--”

Steve stuttered a little, grappling for the right word, but Tony’s mind was leaping ahead to supply possibilities. (“--charity case.” “--freeloader.” “--lazy bum.” Shit.) Tony blinked. (“You can’t just throw your money around at people, Pepper hissed in his mind.)

“No, hey, that’s not—” Tony cut Steve off. “Look, just, you’re always cooking, you know? And trust me, you do not want to eat the food I’d cook us, so I order out. No big deal. Just hospitality. But, hey, if you like, next time you can order the Star Trek provisions. I’ll even show you how to do it online and pre-pay with your card and stuff.”

Cap nodded and returned his wallet to his pocket. “All right,” he said, smiling again. “I’d like that. Thanks, Tony.”

The elevator doors opened on a pretty, plump teenager with short blue hair and lip piercings.

(Oops. Her, not him.)

“Hello, Mr. Stark,” she said, in a polite professional voice. “I have your order right here.”

“Great!” Tony said, trying to remember if he’d met her before. (Maybe before her hair was blue?) He collected the boxes and checked her blouse for a nametag. No luck.

“So we’re all sorted?” Tony asked.

“Yes, sir.” She hesitated, seeming to struggle for a moment, then added, “But, I think there might have been a mistake on the tip field. It was, uh—”
Tony almost laughed. (Yeah, she must be new.)

“Nope, not a mistake,” Tony said with a grin, “Welcome to Stark Tower!”

She blinked. “Thank you!” she said, a little too loud. Then she seemed to gather herself. “Thank you, sir. And thank you for choosing Piacci Pizzaria this evening. Have a good night.”

“Yes, you too.”

With that she disappeared back into the elevator. When Tony turned, Steve was just giving him this . . . this look, a muted not-quite smile, like he was trying to hold in a grin or something.

(Huh.)

Tony carried the pizza over to the coffee table. The stairwell door opened.

“Hi, Steve,” Bruce said, walking into the living room. “Tony mentioned you were watching Star Trek. Mind if I join you?”

“Oh, hi, Tony,” Bruce said, turning toward the kitchen and catching sight of him. “You didn’t mention that you were getting pizza.”

Tony shrugged. “I counted you in and got a half pesto anyway.”

“Thanks,” Bruce said. “Would you like a hand with that, Tony?”

As Tony gathered bowls and utensils (even napkins!), then picked out the best beers for their pizzas, Steve and Bruce chatted about Star Trek. Steve’s voice was warm, genial; he sounded truly pleased to see Bruce and to have him joining them for Star Trek. Something relaxed inside Tony that he hadn’t even known was a little bit tense.

(He really wants to be friends.)

“All right!” Tony said, settling in the middle of the couch and handing them each a bowl of salad. “Let’s boldly go! JARVIS, roll it!”

“Good morning, sir. The time in Stark Tower is 9:53 am, current temperature outside fifty-seven degrees.”

Tony stretched. “Morning, J,” he said around a yawn, trying to remember when he’d gone to bed. The three of them had binged on five—no, six—episodes of Star Trek and even more beer, so . . . Eh, who cares. He got plenty of sleep.

Tony stumbled towards the bathroom, scratching his butt. (What? Nobody could see him.) Tony brushed his teeth and frowned at his reflection in the mirror. He was looking a little . . . unkept.

Tony rinsed and spat.

“Hey, J! Make an appointment with Jackie for me, would you? Haircut and all the extras.”

“May I remind you that Mr. Lee has an extensive waitlist for his services?”

“Just make it as soon as he can fit me in. Or should I call Jackie myself?” Tony asked, frowning up at the ceiling, then stripping and heading into the shower.

A few moments later, JARVIS announced, “Mr. Lee says you’re in luck. He has an opening this afternoon at 4. There was a cancellation.”

JARVIS’s tone sounded oddly reproachful. Tony wanted to be irritated that his AI had these little partialities and loyalties, but mostly he just felt proud.

“Great,” he called with a grin. “Thanks, J!”

Jackie Lee was probably the most stereotypical girly boy sub Tony knew, though there were some beauticians in SoCal who would happily give him a run for his money. Jackie was enthusiastically flamboyant in his performance of a certain stereotypical version of subby; it was so overt it neared
post-modern parody.

(Twenty years ago, Tony would have despised him, or at least avoided him like the plague. Now, he hoped he knew better than to dismiss someone based on appearance or mannerisms.)

Today Jackie was wearing tight white trousers, electric pink platforms and a matching pink chiffon blouse. The instant he saw Tony he gasped.

“Tony, you promised me you wouldn’t do this anymore!” Jackie stepped forward to peer at Tony, nimble despite the chunky heels. “Tony, baby, the next time you’re feeling low, you call me. I’m here for you. You don’t have to cut!”

Tony rolled his eyes.

Jackie ran his fingers through Tony’s hair, clucking his tongue. “What did you use in the back, a weed-whacker? What kind of billionaire cuts his own hair?”

Tony shrugged. “The kind busy building world-saving technologies.”

“Fine, fine.” Jackie patted the salon chair and Tony settled, ready for a nice long scalp massage and a hot shampoo.

“Mmm,” Jackie murmured, examining Tony’s face. “Better do something about those eyebrows too.”

Tony shrugged and Jackie gave a satisfied nod, before asking as always, “So, are we just doing the usuals today? Or are you gonna get with the modern age and let me fix you up nice?”

“Just the usual,” Tony said, as always. Jackie sighed.

“So, how’s Theresa?” Tony asked, eager to distract Jackie from the million beautifying procedures he didn’t want.

“She’s great.” Jackie said coating his hands in scented oils and beginning Tony’s massage. “My darling dyke* finally let me update her old butch cut. Sleek and sophisticated, but low maintenance. Half Wall Street, half Greek goddess. Artemis on the warpath.”

After Theresa Williams—the famous managing partner of the even more famous Williams Law Firm—married Jackie, Tony’d expected him to give up his salon, but five years later his beauty empire had only grown.

“Anyway, enough about my gorgeous queen,” Jackie said, pressing his thumbs firmly to Tony’s temples. “Got any good gossip for me? Any news? FYI, if you missed it—like you always do—Perez Hilton laid into you for wearing the same tux again to that gala, but I was like, hello? Charity fundraiser. Not showing off the wealth—donating it to a good cause, unlike everybody else on that red carpet. Boom! So, go on, baby, spill.”

Jackie was a superb stylist, but his greatest currency was information.

“Bla bla the usual,” Tony said with a shrug. “Beautiful people, mean people, self-absorbed people, sprinkled with occasional idealists. You know I’m fond of Sam Deetz and Rebecca Martinez, right?”

“I think you’ve mentioned that.”

“Well, I’m only getting fonder. If I could write a yelp review, they’d get five stars.”

Jackie laughed. “Oh good. I’ll put them in the Rolodex. And you know who else I just added, on the word of two very reliable little birdies? Harry Silverstein.”

“I know him.”

“Mmm, hmm. Way I hear it, everybody with prejudice against bald Doms is making a terrible mistake with those two.”

“Well, they do have more domosterone,” Tony said with a shrug. “Harry seemed like a good guy when we met. Chews with his mouth open, but there are worse things. He’s at Goldman Sachs, right?”

“Nope. He dumped them for a promotion over at Morgan Stanley when they pushed out Zuckerman.” Jackie scratched at Tony’s scalp with just the right amount of pressure; it made Tony want to purr. “Theresa worked with Harry once on a big M&A.” Jackie laughed “He’s a Dom with a dick, but she actually doesn’t hate him, so he must be doing something right!”

“Anyway,” Jackie said, doing something magical with his fingers. “There must be more gala gossip than that!”

“Yeah, I guess.” Tony frowned. “Thomas Belford . . .” He hesitated for a moment, looking for the right words. “He’s a creep. Feel free to spread it around.”
“Damn,” Jackie said, massaging Tony’s temples. “Okay, you’re not the first person to say less than glowing things about him. You ok? How bad?”

“I had to sic Title III on him.”

“Ough.” Jackie made a sympathetic little sound.

Tony laughed, then added wryly, “And I’m pretty sure Captain America wanted to throw him off the balcony.”

“Next time, sweetie, you let him. I’ll tell the girls—three strikes, Belford’s out.”

“Quiet though,” Tony cautioned.

“I’m the soul of discretion!” Jackie cried with affront. “But speaking of Captain America, why haven’t I cut his hair yet? And more importantly, why haven’t you set me up with that gorgeous specimen?”

“Wouldn’t Teressa mind?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow.

Jackie tutted. “The Captain’s been on my list since 1988. For him, I bet she’d make an exception and co-Top in her star-spangled panties.”

Tony laughed, not quite sure if Jackie was joking. Jackie tilted the salon chair back and guided Tony’s head to rest in the marble washbasin.

“Mmm… I would climb that man like a tree! Those shoulders! That jaw. Those arms!” Jackie whistled. “Jesus. He is sex on a stick. How can you stand it? How have you not thrown yourself at him yet? I doubt I’d last five minutes.”

Tony didn’t say anything. The water felt a little too warm.

Jackie raised his eyebrows. He gave Tony a playful shove and said teasingly, “You dog! You already did, didn’t you?” Jackie gave a performative sigh. “I see how it is—you won’t set me up because you want him all for yourself! Well, in two weeks you’ll be over it, so when he’s crying into his pillow, you give him my number, baby.”

“It’s not like that,” Tony snapped.

Jackie raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “And since when are you such a prude, Tony Stark? I’ve never seen you to hesitate to verbally drool over the celebrity Dom with the best butt and prettiest tits.”

Tony grimaced. “Look, it’s weird, ok? Steve’s my friend.”

“I thought he was Captain Self-Righteous Rogers, Pain in the Ass, which was the only good thing about him?”

Tony winced and, hating his own embarrassment, went on the offensive, snapping: “Just, knock it off, ok? He’s Captain America. Show some fucking respect.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Jackie murmured in that tone that said I know everything and you can’t fool me. (It reminded him of Natasha.)

Jackie turned the water on and put a hand carefully against Tony’s forehead. (He never let any water spray onto Tony’s face.)

Then after a moment’s silence, Jackie asked brightly, “So, honey, you sure you’re still not interested in anal bleaching?”

Tony groaned.

“At least let me wax you!”

“Legs only,” Tony insisted, waving his hands. “If God wanted me to have a hair-free anus, he’d have made it that way!”
“God, Tony? You want to drag God into your anus?” Jackie let out a startled laugh. “Oh wow, that went somewhere filthy fast.”

Tony couldn’t hold it in—he burst out laughing.

“Well, I’m an atheist—I don’t want God near my anything.”

“Point. I’m an atheist—I don’t want God near my anything.”

“Point. If you don’t want God near your anything, maybe you shouldn’t be an atheist anymore.” Jackie winked. “Keep that in mind the next time somebody has you moaning, ‘oh God! Oh God! Oh God!’”

Tony chuckled. Jackie launched into a riff on Madonna and ‘sexy Jesus’ and Tony was glad to have everything back to normal. (And Captain America banished from the conversation.)

Chapter End Notes

*re: dyke. This was probably clear from context, but just to clarify: in this AU dyke is slang for a female Domme. Though historically used as a pejorative, the word has undergone a process of reappropriation and is now often (though not always) used as a term of self-identification or affectionately in re: Dommes who like to use the term themselves.

--------------------------------------------------------------------

Thanks so much for joining me, everybody! I hope you liked it! Since I continually find myself tempted to write really rambling author’s notes and since several of you who don’t have AO3 accounts have asked about my update schedule, I’ve now made a tumblr. Yay! On it you will find thoughts about this AU, updates on its progress, occasional anecdotes about me, RL liberationism, BDSM, and some funny stuff as well. I’d be delighted to have you join me. I’m http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/ Hope to see you there!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for your patience and support! And thanks to everybody who decided to join me on tumblr.

Trigger Warning: slut shaming, orientationism, sexism, mentions of psychological trauma, but if you've made it to chapter 29 none of that will probably surprise you by now...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was beautiful, simply beautiful, even if Tony hadn’t made it.

“Send Leo a bottle of Glenlivet would you, JARVIS?”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony ran his hands across the bolt of poly-aramid fabric and grinned.

“I’ll need projections with the patterns for SHIELD’s last version of Cap’s suit and Vanessa’s report on reinforcing Kevlar seams. Oh, and turn on the coffee and, what the hell, let’s rock some Project Runway in the background.”

“I regret that you are out of coffee, sir.”

“What?”

“You have already consumed all the coffee stored in the workshop, however, I believe there is a supply remaining in the kitchen.”

“Dummy, if you were useful,” Tony grumbled, “you could go up there and fetch it for me.”

The bot, still asleep on his docking station, made no reply.

“You might ask one of your teammates to wait on you, sir.”

“Was that sass?” Tony asked, heading for the elevator, “cause that sounded like sass.”

“Perish the thought.”

Tony rolled his eyes. When he stepped out of the elevator on the common floor, Steve was sitting at the dining room table with his laptop (a sleek StarkPro, thank god), a tidy stack of papers, and a large glass of milk. (Seriously? He actually drinks milk?) Tony watched as Steve held up a piece of paper, tapped the computer, and smiled, making a thumbs up. Bing-bing-BING: snap.

Steve looked at the ceiling. “So, that picture will print on the printer down in my rooms, right?”

“Yes, Captain. It should be ready shortly.”

Curious, Tony padded closer, coffee momentarily forgotten.

“What’s up, Cap?”

“Hi, Tony,” Steve said, looking up with a little smile. “Just catching up on some correspondence.”

The pile of papers were all letters addressed to Captain America, most of them in various shades of marker. On the computer was a picture of Steve, holding up a crayon drawing of Captain America and Iron (WO) Man drawn in colored pencils, along with a photograph of them in their homemade Halloween costumes (big grins, missing teeth), enclosed by Mr. and Mrs. Mohammed.

(They were adorable. Tooth-rottingly adorable.)

“Would you like to take a picture?” Steve asked. “I bet Jamila would appreciate it.”
Tony grimaced. “I’m under-caffeinated and look like shit.”

“Don’t be silly—you look great. Er—” Steve faltered. “I mean, you look perfectly presentable.”

“Well, if you say so.” Tony gave him a little smile. “Fine. Photo. Count me in, but I wanna hold the drawing.”

“Deal!”

Steve started the timer on Photobooth. Tony leaned on his shoulder with a grin, reaching around to hold the drawing up in front of them both, while Steve gave two thumbs up.

Bing-bing-BING: snap.

It was a cute picture. Tony smiled. HE took his arm from Steve’s shoulder and stood up, handing the drawing back.

“That’s real sweet of you, Cap,” Tony said. “Gonna make those kids pretty damn happy.”

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” Steve said, shrugging. Tony looked at the pile of letters and wondered how many of these Captain America answered.

“Well, I came up for coffee. Got work to do and stuff.”

“Of course. Good luck with it.”

“I’m pretty good at the internet, you know.”

“Tonight?” And was it just surprised pleasure in Steve’s expression, or maybe a bit of relief?

“You’re not too busy?”

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve got projects and work and stuff, but, you know, Bruce and Pepper have been on my case about life-work balance and making sure I eat and stuff, so, you know. Dinner and Star Trek. If you’re game.”

“Well, I have work to do and stuff.”


“Sure, whenever. And, let me know when you decide what you want to order. I’ll help you figure out ordering online and stuff.”

“I’m actually pretty good at the internet, you know,” Steve protested mildly, gesturing to his computer.

Tony grinned. “Cool! Well, I eat pretty much anything except squid, so whatever you want.”

“All right,” Steve said. “I’ll think it over and ask what Bruce might like.”

Tony saluted and went back down to the workshop.

He had a new Captain America uniform to design.

>>> “No, seriously, who makes these things?” Tony asked JARVIS angrily, steamrolling ahead before his AI could answer. “I don’t care who it is—Have Pepper find out and buy their company then fire them! Machines this shitty are a disgrace to machinery!”

Tony groaned. “How can the presser foot be jammed again? I just unjammed it!”

More angry rustlings, a mechanical whirr soon aborted.

“And now the bobbin thread broke. What the fuck?”

Tony grimaced as he threw back the last of his coffee—long since gone cold and bitter—and scowled at the sewing machine.

“Great. Now I have to rethread. Have I mentioned how much I fucking hate rethreading this thing?”

“No, sir, I don’t believe you have.”

“More sass, JARVIS? Everybody’s against me! Seriously, call Tim Gunn. No Michael Kors. No, both of them!”

“I trust you are joking.”

“Actually, forget this whole thing. I should just make him armor. I’m hella better at welding than I am at this needle-and-thread bullshit.”

Tony took a deep steadying breath, then pushed down gingerly on the presser foot; the machine
whirred to life.

“FUCK!”

The thread broke.

“I hate my life.”

“Deepest sympathies, sir.”

“Okay. Fuck this. We’re starting over.”

“Livin’ easy
Lovin’ free
Season ticket on a one way ride…”

“Sir? Captain Rogers asks if sushi would be acceptable for this evening.”

“Askin’ nothin
Leave me be
Takin’ everythin’ in my stride…”

“Mmm,” Tony muttered, switching the bit on his screwdriver.

“Shall I take that as assent, sir?”

(Okay, where the hell did I put those tiny fucking screws?)

“. . . My friends are gonna be there too
I’m on the highway to hell
On the highway to hell
Highway to hell
I’m on the highway to hell”

“Sushi is confirmed, sir. Perhaps you’d like me to turn down the music?”

“Mmmm.”

(Now if he could just adjust this stupid fucker . . . then . . . then . . .)

“Tony? Hey, Tony? Are you still— Is that a sewing machine?”

Tony startled at the sound of Bruce’s voice.

“Uh, yes?”

Bruce squinted. “Did you just build a sewing machine?”

“Well, the one I bought sucked!” Tony cried indignantly.

Bruce laughed and shook his head.

“Look, JARVIS, said you weren’t answering him anymore, so I came down. Are you still coming up for sushi and Star Trek or not?”

Tony blinked. (Sushi? Star Trek?) Tony blinked again. (Oh yeah.)

“What time is it?”

“Quarter to eight.”

(Shit.) Tony nearly tripped over the cord of the presser foot on the way to the elevator.

“Yes!” Tony said, waving his hands. “Why didn’t you call me sooner?”

Bruce grimaced. “We did.” Tony opened his mouth to protest, but Bruce held up a hand, adding, “But, I should have come down before. Steve worried we might interrupt you in the middle of something delicate.” Bruce said it like it was a silly concern.

In the elevator, Tony started worrying at his lip, then stopped abruptly. He refused to worry. There was nothing to worry about. (What’s a few hours tardiness between friends?)

Up in the kitchen, Steve was putting the final touches on a tray: sushi nicely arranged on a plate, bowls of rice and miso soup off to the side, with a beer and even a little pot of tea.

“I’m here! Hey, sorry, really,” Tony said. “Just, you know, got kinda caught up, but I’m here. Sorry, sorry!”
“Oh, it’s fine,” Steve said. “I know your work’s important. I was just about to bring this down to you.”

And Steve didn’t sound pissed at all, or even reproachful. (Which kinda made Tony feel worse.)

“No! No need. I’m here,” Tony protested. “I was in the groove and, well, I’ve gotten kinda good at ignoring JARVIS sometimes without really knowing I’m doing it. I just—see, the top thread kept breaking and it was driving me crazy, and then the bobbin was getting tangled all the time!”

Steve grimaced. “Oh, gosh, I hated that. Rethreading was the worst.” He hesitated. “You probably already checked this, but was top tension wound too tight?”

Bruce was looking at them both in wide-eyed surprise.

“He took Home Ec,” Tony explained, then turned back to Steve, “Yeah, I tired adjusting the tension, but the real problem was the damn machine wasn’t designed to do materials more heavy-duty than Kevlar which, okay, fair enough since there weren’t any until I invented them this week, but still!” Tony shook his head disapprovingly, then shrugged, “Anyway, so I was designing a new sewing machine.”

Steve grinned. “Of course you were.” It sounded fond, rather than mocking and something about it left Tony feeling flatfooted.

“So, uh, sorry I’m late?” Tony grabbed his tray and headed for the couch. “Anyway, come on, Star Trek! And food. Yay, sushi! Let’s go!”

Tony set his tray on the coffee table and flopped down in the middle of the couch. Bruce was giving them a kind of funny look. (Sheesh—we know about sewing machines. Not like it’s thermo-nuclear-astrophysics.)

“Hey, Bruce?” Tony said with a raised eyebrow, “I was thinking it might be time for tribbles.”

“Oh, yes,” Bruce said, amused. “I agree.”

***

Steve smiled and chuckled through “Trouble with Tribbles,” and they were barely five minutes into “Shore Leave” when Clint arrived.

“Getting Steve caught up on Star Trek? Nice,” Clint said, wandering into the living room and hovering behind the couch. Steve grabbed the remote and paused it. (Yeah, he hated people talking over dialogue.)

“Let me know when you hit TNG,” Clint added, waving his hand at the screen. “Oh, or the recent reboots. I liked those.”

Tony glared at him as Bruce muttered, sotto voce, “Uh-oh.”

“J.J. Adams’ Shit Trek will not be playing here,” Tony told Clint venomously.

“Wait, there are new ones?” Steve asked Bruce. “I thought the last movie was made twenty years ago?”

“Forget you heard that,” Tony said sternly, cutting in. “They’re crap and we’re gonna pretend they don’t exist. Just like the recent Shit Wars trilogy.”

Steve looked baffled. Bruce leaned forward to whisper something in his ear.

“I’d have thought you’d like them,” Clint said to Tony with a puzzled look, then added after a moment’s hesitation, “Uhura and Sulu both get more screen time. And Sulu actually saves Kirk and Spock!”

“By fucking an alien!” Tony yelled, leaping up off the couch. “What the fuck? Sulu managed to do his job and even save the day sometimes in TOS without bending over for anybody, be it officer, crew, or alien.”

Tony waved his hands in sharp angry gestures. “But, oh well, apparently all we’ve learned since 1969 is that subby boys are such useless sluts, it’s really all he could do to be helpful. Adams might as well have tattooed ‘only good for fucking’ on his forehead!”

Clint was staring at him in something akin to shock and actually took a step back when Tony jabbed a finger at him. “Not to mention that Adams played it for laughs! As if being raped to save your friends’ lives is funny instead of tragically self-sacrificing.”

“And Uhura!” Tony cried, still on a roll. “My beautiful Uhura! The only way they gave her more screen time was by making her the nagging, emotional girlfriend. It’s fucking bullshit, Clint. In TOS the subs were officers in their own right; no fucking, no boyfriends!”

Tony let out a disgusted noise and shook his head, then flopped back down onto the couch. “They may have gotten an extra ten minutes of screen time in the new movies, but it was at the expense
of their fucking dignity.”

“Wow,” Clint said. “Uh, tell me how you really feel.” Tony glared and opened his mouth again, but Clint held his hands up in surrender. “No, no—point taken! I hadn’t really noticed that, but yeah. Ok. I see what you mean.” He paused. “So, maybe I should join you for some Original Original Series.”

“Grab a beer,” Tony said, waving at the kitchen and patting the seat next to him magnanimously. “I’m picking all the best episodes.”

“Also,” Natasha said, out of nowhere (no, seriously, when did she get there?), “the Femme Domme villain in the reboot was an absurd cliché.”

Natasha draped herself across the armchair and pulled knitting needles and yarn out of a small canvas bag.

“Thank you!” Tony cried, at the same time Clint said, looking worried: “I’m really not living this down any time soon, am I?”

“In this at least,” Natasha said, voice flinty but with mirth in her eyes, “you are very observant.”

Three days later, Tony stood back to admire his handiwork and savor a steaming cup of French roast. Dummy was wheeling gleefully around the workshop playing with some of the fabric scraps and making little whirr-beeps; Tony should really shoo him over to this dock before Rogers arrived to--

“Incoming call from Ms Potts, sir.”

“Put her through!”

“Hi, Tony,” Pepper said, face flickering up on a screen. “How are you?”
“Pepper-pie! Good, great, fine--what’s up?”

“I was just calling to see how you’re doing.”

“I’m good,” Tony repeated, smoothing out the suit, then asking (suddenly remembering his manners), “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m very well, thanks,” she said. There was a long pause. (Huh.)

Eventually Pepper asked, “So, have you read the Quarterly Report? What did you think of—”

“Hey, hon, sorry to cut you off but now isn’t the best time to talk about the Quar—”

“I knew it! You still haven’t read it, have you?”

“—terly Report, ’cause Steve’s coming down to the workshop soon and I—”

“Steve?” Pepper said, puzzled. “Who’s Steve?” Then, before Tony could answer, her face lit up and she asked, “Oh my gosh, Tony, are you dating again?”

“What?! No! Fuck, no!” Tony shook his head. “Steve Rogers, as in my Captain? Captain America?”

“Oh,” Pepper sounded disappointed. “Right. How is all of that going anyway?”

“Good.” Tony considered leaving it at that, but found himself elaborating because, well, it’s Pepper. “Really good. In fact, we’re kinda friends now? I introduced him to Star Trek so we’ve been hanging out, watching an episode or two in the evening with take-out. Bruce too. And the others a little. It’s . . . nice.”

Pepper gave him a warm smile. “I’m glad.”

“You send me the nicest presents,” Pepper teased.

“Does inventing a highly marketable poly-aramid fabric get me off the hook for the Quarterly Report?”

Pepper gave him a sly smile. “I’m open to negotiations.”

“What if I throw in a new industrial sewing machine?”

“I’ll consider it,” Pepper said very seriously.


“Miss you too,” she said, voice warm. “I’ll come visit soon—maybe Thanksgiving?”

“Awesome!”

“You’re sure you’re doing okay?” Pepper asked looking worried.

“Sure! Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Nothing. Well, I mean—”

“Tony?” Steve’s voice called hesitantly from the doorway.

“That’s Steve, Pep! Gotta go!”

“Oh. Right. Bye, Tony.”

“Bye! JARVIS, end call.”

When Tony turned he found Steve bending over to look at Dummy who was energetically waving a fabric scrap at him.

“Hey, Dummy, leave him alone!” Tony called. Steve looked up at him with mild reproach.

(Shit! Not you, uh—)

Before Tony could explain, Steve said mildly, “Don’t you think it’s a little mean to call your pet robot names?”

“He’s not a pet!” Tony said indignantly. “He’s a helper bot. And not a very helpful one.”

Dummy trilled sadly.
"I'm sure he didn't mean that," Steve said, crouching down to look at Dummy. "Jim says he's very fond of you."

"Jim?" Tony grumbled. "Can't believe you call Rhodey 'Jim.'"

Dummy had dropped the fabric in favor of bumping his claw against Cap’s knee. Steve looked a little confused, pet him gingerly on the top of his claw, then offered Dummy his hand. With a gentle care nineteen-year-old Tony had worked hard to teach him, Dummy closed his pinchers lightly on Steve’s hand and moved up and down.

Steve grinned. "Nice to meet you, uh--?" He looked at Tony.

"Dummy."

"You named him Dummy?!"

"It's an acronym, not an insult!"

"Oh yeah? What's it stand for?"

(Shit.)

"DUM-E," Tony said, "It's Dexterous... uh—" (Crap!) "Dexterous Utilitarian Mechanical Extension."

Steve squinted at him, considering. "Huh."

"Anyway, he should go to his charging station—chop chop!—" Tony made a shooing gesture, "-- and you should come try on your beautiful new suit. Behold!"

"Gosh," Steve said, stepping over to the workbench to run his fingers across it. "It looks amazing."

"Aw, shucks," Tony said in mock embarrassment, then impatiently, "Well, go on! Try it on!"

Steve raised his hands to unbutton the top button of his shirt, then glanced around the workshop. His ears turned pink and he paused.

"What are you waiting for?" Tony asked. Seriously, he'd been working on this thing non-stop (except for Star Trek) for days—he wanted to know if it fit!

"Uh, is there a bathroom or something where I could—?"

"Huh? Oh!" Tony cried. "Right! Yeah, uh, bathroom's over there. Just go ahead and, yeah—"

"Thank you," Cap said, gathering the uniform and beating a hasty retreat.

Tony shook his head. It wasn't like Steve needed to get naked, just down to his undies. (Unless he went commando. Ha! Howling Commandos!) Come to think of it, though, Tony'd never seen Steve changing in the locker room with him and Clint. Guy must be pretty shy. Tony tapped impatiently at his workbench while he waited for Steve to change.

Steve emerged wearing his new uniform and a broad smile.

(Beautiful.)

"It's amazing," he said, eyes bright. "It isn't stiff like the old one."

"Pfft." Tony waved a hand and stepped closer to examine it. "I should hope not. I designed that, not the morons at SHIELD. How's the mobility?"

Steve stretched and twisted, still grinning. "Great so far!"

"Does it pinch anywhere?"

Steve shook his head.

"Wanna take it up to the gym and put it through its paces? I could—"

"Sir, you have a call from Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes," JARVIS interrupted.

(Shit. They'd just talked.) Tony felt a sick swoop in his stomach. (Had Rhodey been hurt?)

Tony hesitated, looking over at Steve.

"Go ahead, Tony," Steve said. "I'll go test out the suit while you talk to Jim. Tell him I said 'hi.'"

"All right," Tony said. He felt a vague sense of disappointment as Steve left— he'd been looking forward to the test run (first trial was always one of the best parts of inventing!)—but it was overshadowed by his concern for Rhodey.
Tony nodded and Steve headed for the elevator.

“All right, JARVIS,” Tony said, “put Rhodey through.”

Rhodey’s face flickered up on screen. He looked fine. (Thank God.)

“Hey, Rhodey, are you okay?” Tony asked urgently, stomach still in knots.

“I’m fine, Tones. How you doin’?”

“Good, fine,” Tony said, squinting at the video feed. “What’s up?”

“Just, you know, calling to see how you’re doing,” Rhodey answered.

“Great,” Tony said, puzzled. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Rhodey looked uneasy. Pepper had called earlier, now Rhodey. It was weird.

“Just wanted to see how you’re holding up,” Rhodey said.

(Shit.)

“Fine,” Tony said, then took a wild guess and added, “Seriously, you know shit in the press doesn’t get to me. You and Cap take it worse than I do.”

Rhodey looked relieved and Tony felt smug.

(Nailed it!)

“Good,” Rhodey said, visibly reassured, “I’m glad to hear it.”

Tony shook his head. “You big lug. Haven’t you learned what a thick skin I have?”

“Yeah, just,” Rhodey hesitated, “I dunno . . . I thought this might be different.”

Tony shrugged and made a mental note to look this shit up later. Or not. (Yeah, maybe not.)

“So other than making sure that the big bad meanies in the press haven’t sent me into an emotional tailspin, what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much.” Rhodey shrugged, then continued, faux-casual, “But, hey, since you ask . . . well, I was thinking Thanksgiving’s not that far off and I’ve got a leave coming, so I might come to New York.”

“What? What about your mom?”


Tony frowned. “Okay, what’s going on? You always go to Boston for Thanksgiving.”

“Uh . . .”

(Wait, I know that look . . .)

Tony’s eyes went wide. “Oh my God! It’s a girl! You met a girl. And she lives in New York! Am I right? I’m right. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Rhodey squinched up his eyes, then tilted his chin up. Tony crowed inwardly—it was one of Rhodey’s most obvious tells.

“Well,” Rhodey said, drawing the word out long and slow, a smile breaking over his face, “there might be a certain smart and talented submissive who I’ve been corresponding with.”

“Seriously? ‘Corresponding?’” Tony laughed. “You from the ‘40s now too? No, whatever—just tell me everything! Come on, Rhodey baby, spill!”

Rhodey grinned and began, “Well, her name’s Miranda . . .”

(And if Tony felt a shameful little burst of jealousy, he tried to smother it. He could be happy for Rhodey. Besides, lovers came and went, and Rhodey’d never abandoned him.)

Tony sauntering into the gym where Cap was running one of JARVIS’ simulated obstacle courses then stopped in his tracks. Tony’d read some absurdly poetic sports coverage in his time, the kind that claimed Roger Federer was ‘poetry in motion on the court’ and all that crap, but as he watched Steve leap, spin, and dodge, Tony thought for the first time it finally made sense.

(Gorgeous.)

When Steve noticed Tony hovering in the doorway he abandoned the obstacle course to run over to Tony with a grin.
“Hey, Cap, sorry!” Tony said. “Rhodey was gushing about his new lady love and it’s rare to hear him like that, you know, so I hated to shut him down and besides I’m sort of his confidante on that sort of thing. Sorry I was slow.”

“Please don’t apologize,” Steve said. The slightest pause, then, “I’m glad Jim’s met someone special.”

(And, okay, it was probably projection, but maybe Tony wasn’t the only person who got kinda bummed when his fellow singleton friends started pairing off…)

“She does sound pretty great, though, and I’m hard to please,” Tony admitted with a rueful smile. “Apparently she’s a military historian at Columbia. She read Rhodey’s Masters Thesis on the Tuskegee Airmen and wrote him a letter about it so they started nerding out about history and media representation and stuff. Apparently, she only just realized he’s The James Rhodes, as in War Machine, so it’s not like she’s just into the celebrity or whatever. So, uh, yeah. Anyway, looks like Rhodey’s coming for Thanksgiving to see his girl, and his mom’s coming too.”

“Thanksgiving?” Steve asked, looking oddly startled. “Is it really that late?”

“It’s November twelfth.”

“Wow,” Steve breathed, seeming stunned. Then he added, sort of sad and wonderingly, “Time’s gone so quickly… I… I actually lost track of the days.”

Then Steve got this unfocused, far away look that Tony didn’t know what to do with.

“Anyway,” Tony said, charging ahead, “Thanksgiving. I thought we might make a thing of it—order a turkey and whatnot.”

Steve blinked, seeming to come back to himself.

“I can roast a turkey,” Steve said cautiously.

“Yeah?” Tony asked, grinning. “As a man who loves your roast chicken, I have no trouble imagining that. Oh my God, now I’m actually imagining it and it’s delicious! With pie. You make pie right? Apple pie? And, okay, now I’m hungry. You hungry? Of course you are, you’re always hungry and, look, it’s seven! How about burgers? Burgers and Star Trek.”

Steve chuckled at Tony’s ramblings and said with a smile, “Sounds good, Tony.”

“Great!” Tony grinned. “JARVIS, order my usual with a side of everything else. And check with the rest of the gang.”

Tony clapped his hands and turned back to Steve. “Okay, tell me about the suit. We can run through it while we wait for dinner to arrive.”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

It had been a good day. Cap loved the suit and it only needed a few minor tweaks to fit perfectly. (S H I E L D’s measurements had been flawed, obviously.) Steve and Tony had devoured burgers and watched Star Trek, then one by one the other Avengers had filtered in, drawn to the wonders of old school sci-fi. Sitting on the couch between Bruce and Steve, with Natasha and Clint nearby Tony felt pretty contented. And Tony found himself getting ridiculously excited about Thanksgiving, not that he cared about Thanksgiving qua Thanksgiving, but at the thought of having his favorite people together with him in his home. It had been far too long since he’d seen Mrs. Rhodes and he almost never got to spend time with Pepper and Rhodey at once. He wasn’t ecstatic about having some new person—Miranda—in his home, but if Rhodey liked her she’d probably be pretty cool. Maybe.

Clint went to bed the moment “To Catch a King” ended, while Bruce lingered a little, exchanging pleasant ‘good nights’ before turning in. Natasha was still curled in the armchair, knitting. Tony poured himself a small glass of scotch then reached for his tablet.

“Well, I should probably head to bed,” Steve announced vaguely.

Tony pulled up the patterns for Clint and Natasha’s suits. (Shit! Was there enough fabric on the bolt?)

“It’s late,” Steve added.

“Oh, yeah,” Tony said absently, “‘night, Cap!”

As Tony started an email to Leo, Natasha asked, “Have you finished Eagle Against the Sun yet, Steve?”

“No,” he said apologetically. “Maybe I’ll go read a little of it before bed.”

“You could read up here,” Natasha suggested. “It’s not like we have a curfew,”
Steve chuckled. “Right. Well, if you’re sure you and Tony don’t mind . . .”

“Huh?” Tony looked up from his tablet. “Uh, no. Common floor’s for everybody, no matter what time.”

“All right then. I’ll go get my book.” Steve seemed eager, pleased.

Tony frowned at the patterns for the Agents’ body armor. Sure, Clint needed the full range of motion in his arms, but did they have to be completely bare? It was a wonder those guns weren’t a mess of scars if this was how SHIELD equipped him. Tony shook his head.

“May I?”

Tony looked up. Steve was back, gesturing to the seat beside Tony on the couch.

“Huh? Of course,” Tony said, nodding and turning back to his tablet as Steve curled up with his book and Natasha’s knitting needles tick-tick-ticked in the background.

(Maybe an even lighter poly-aramid for the sleeves; sacrifice some protection for flexibility, but still better than bare skin.)

Tony tried to focus on the body armor on his tablet, but something was tugging insistently at the back of his brain. Pepper and Rhodey had both called. The junk press (TMZ, the Star, People Magazine, US Weekly, Fox News…) wrote (or implied) hideous trash about him all the time—”tops from the bottom”; “cheating slut”; “liberation Nazi”; “gets fucked by robots,” etc. Pep and Rhodey didn’t usually call him about that though, did they?

Tony activated internet stealth mode. He may click on their website, but like hell he’d let them know and get advertising money for it! He searched “Tony Stark” and under his Stark Industries profile and wikipedia entry, there was “news for Tony Stark” with a cover graphic from The Star.

His stomach dropped.

There it was: a picture of him and the caption, “Thinks subspace is beneath him!”

(Oh God.)

Tony took a pained little breath, cheeks heating with shame and anger and—

“Tony?” Steve said softly, brow creased, “Are you okay?”

Tony flipped hastily to the body armor specs.

“Just made a stupid miscalculation,” Tony said, fastening his eyes on the tablet.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Steve said, then offered vaguely, “if there’s anything I can—?”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, no. I’ve got this.”

His heart was pounding, which was ridiculous. Calm steady breaths.

(“Thinks subspace is beneath him!”)

“Fuck this shit,” Tony said, tossing the tablet aside. “I’m going to bed.”

With forced calm—slow, deliberate motions—he left. He could hear Steve saying something, but he just needed to get out of there, get out of there right now. He took the emergency stairs because he couldn’t bear to wait for the elevator.

(“Thinks subspace is beneath him!”)

Tony felt ugly laughter bubbling up, but he choked it down afraid it would sound hysterical.

In the privacy of the stairwell, he pressed his forehead to the wall.

“JARVIS?” he gasped, hating the sound of his voice echoing off the concrete.

(Fuck. Get a grip, Stark.)

He thought he was immune to the shit they said about him—that there was nothing left they could say to get under his armor. Apparently he was wrong.

Tony could hear loud, heavy footfalls approaching the stairwell—a hand jostled the doorknob. Tony considered dashing up the stairs so Steve wouldn’t see him upset, but maybe it would be okay—he could just say it was the sewing machine, or a bad day, or that this time some youtube comments got to him and maybe he needed to destroy a punching bag. The door opened and closed again with a click.
“You forgot your scotch.”

Natasha was standing in the stairwell holding out Tony’s glass.

(But Natasha always moved silently.)

She climbed one step, then another, moving sinuously. Tony thought maybe she’d trained as a dancer. Or was he making that up?

“The Star,” she said softly, not quite a statement, not quite a question. Tony gave a slow nod. She held out the scotch.

It was tempting—not that tiny glass, but a whole bottle—which was why he shook his head. He watched in surprise as Natasha threw back the scotch herself, then vanished the glass into some sort of pocket.

She gave him a little nod and just looked at him seriously, nothing pitying, nothing unusually soft in her expression. Just calm. Open. The seconds slid by.

“It’s not . . . arrogance,” Tony told her roughly, hating himself a little for wanting to explain.

“Tony,” she said, tone firm. “I know.”

And if Tony believed in telepathy or psychic projection or any of that crap, he might believe Natasha had it. How could the slightest furrow at her brow, the tiniest twitch of her lips express without words, I know, I understand?

They stood in the stairwell for long moments and Natasha just waited. (She’d eased into the corner a little—it had the clearest sightlines.)

Little by little, Tony’s breathing evened out and his heart rate started to slow again.

Eventually he spoke: “I think . . . I think I should go to bed.”

Natasha nodded, then in a swift and fluid motion, pulled something out of a concealed pocket or holster or something—she’d moved too fast for him to track it, but he hadn’t flinched when she moved. (Huh. I guess that’s trust.)

“Here,” she said, holding out a tiny dagger in a black leather sheath. It was slim, delicate—you could pick a lock or pierce a man’s heart with it.

“I never go anywhere without one,” she said, eyes intense as she offered it to him hilt first.

“Never.”

Tony’s heart skipped a beat.

Again, he could hear her unspoken words: I never let my guard down either. It wasn’t exactly the same, no of course not, but it was enough.

Tony reached up tentatively to take the dagger; Natasha’s fingers curled around his, a firm pressure. They held the dagger together. Her hand was warm.

“Don’t you need it?” Tony asked.

“I have others,” she answered, the ghost of a smile playing at the corner of her lips.

“Okay.” Tony swallowed, then said, “I should go to bed.”

Natasha released his hand, nodding. “Sleep well, Tony.”

“Good night.”

He lingered a moment before turning and walking up the stairs to the penthouse. He didn’t have to look back to know that Natasha waited in the stairwell until he was all the way to the top.

In his bedroom, Tony stripped out of his clothes and crawled into bed, naked and drained. He’d set the little dagger on his nightstand.

He was fine. He should have known something like this would surface eventually. Tony’d put it in every contract he’d written since . . . since 2009 . . . that he wouldn’t go into subspace and they weren’t allowed to try and put him under. He didn’t necessarily say he couldn’t, not to random hookups, not to strangers. He didn’t want their pity. This was better, right?

“Shit.”

Tony squeezed his eyes shut and curled up, gathering the covers tight around his body.

Of course they spun it around, like he’s some liberation-Nazi Dom-wanna-be who scorns subspace and his fellow subs. (Fucking assholes.) But he couldn’t exactly explain without telling them--

Tony shook his head. Better they call him arrogant than broken.
Tony reached out to touch the dagger again. Some people would understand, wouldn't listen to that garbage. He was fine.

“JARVIS?” Tony called.

“Sir?” JARVIS answered with the volume turned down, soft. Gentle.

Tony swallowed thickly. “Talk to me, would you, J?”

“Certainly, sir. On any particular subject?”

“No—just. Just keep talking.” Tony closed his eyes. “Keep talking until I fall asleep.”

“Perhaps I might read you Ms. Potts’ Quarterly Report?”

Tony laughed.

“Sure,” Tony said, pressing his face into the pillow. “Sounds good.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading and for your patience! Comments are cherished and adored. Sorry slow writer is slow. Your encouragement feeds the muse!

For an author’s note on the inspiration for this chapter (including an adorable Chris Evans story, Sikh Captain America, et al) maybe check out my tumblr, here: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/ms-meredith-milton/ Come on over and say hi! :-)
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Chapter dedicated to onemadeofglass for epic cheer-leading! Thank you, dear!

Chapter Notes

Warnings: sexism, orientationism, and ableism, but if you’ve made it to chapter 30, I doubt that will surprise you in this world…

I’ve particularly agonized over this chapter, so uh, yeah. Hope it works! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tony woke up JARVIS was still reading Stark Industries’ Quarterly Report, though he must have been on the thirtieth repetition by then. Tony’d slept for eleven hours.

“. . . thirteen-point-two-five percent increase in revenue from--”

“Okay, JARVIS, we’re good. You can stop reading that now, buddy,” Tony called.

“With pleasure, sir.”

There was a tiny dagger on his nightstand. Tony smiled and threw back the covers. Ten minutes later, he was scrubbed, dressed, and on his way to the workshop where JARVIS had coffee ready and waiting.

(Time to get some shit done!) Tony ran his fingers through his wet hair. (Fuck those assholes, anyway.)

“Put us in lockdown, J” Tony said. “I need to focus on finishing Cap’s suit, then getting Widow and Hawk up to speed. No time to lose. They’re being cleared for duty soon.”

“Of course,” JARVIS said smoothly. “Shall I inform your teammates?”

Tony hesitated.

“Nah. It’s need to know, J. If they start pestering me, we’ll deal with it then.”

“Do you have an alternate plan for nourishment, sir?”

“Hey! Just because I’ve been letting Bruce and Cap feed me lately doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten how to call for delivery myself. Sheesh.” Tony rolled his eyes. “So, speaking of, breakfast burrito, stat.”

“Ordering now, sir.”

In the workshop, Tony unrolled the bolt of poly-aramid and cracked his knuckles.

“AC/DC and here we go!”

(Maybe he’d start with Natasha’s.)

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

“Oh my God, Tony, I’m so sorry! I had no idea when I did the interview. He said that he was a freelance journalist and that the story was gonna. I dunno, humanize the Avengers or something and it would be good PR about how you’re, like, not a snob and stuff. If I’d known he was writing for The Star or he would edit what I said like that, I swear I never would have talked to him, not even for the money. I’m really, really sorry. Please don’t hate me. Seriously, I had no idea. Okay, but do hate what’s-his-face—Marco— because he’s a douche and did it on purpose. Seriously, if he ever comes back to the restaurant, I’m gonna pee in his soup. That reporter too! Anyway, I’m really sorry . . . Oh, it’s Matt, by the way. Matt Clark? From The Lion? I’ll try you again later I guess. Sorry. Uh, yeah. Bye.”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Tony had already done all the piecing and pinning on Natasha’s uniform and was about to start stitching.

Tony considered calling Rhodey or Pepper a few times, but he’d already talked to them and sworn
he was just fine; he sort of hated to undo those reassurances, so he stayed in the workshop with AC/DC, Beyonce, and Dummy, insisting he was fine.

And little by little, he was.

(Fuck those assholes. Who fucking cares?)

"Hey, Dummy, pass me the bobbin tray, would you?"

A lot of people have already eloquently called The Star out for its sensationalist August issue in which "normal" people expose the supposedly shameful secrets of the celebrities they dated. The two elements that have gotten the most attention so far have been (1) the shaming of Ryan Gosling for failing to conform to orientationist expectations; The Star’s implication being that if he’d just “Dom up” he wouldn’t get Top drop and display emotions or vulnerability, which are too “subby.” (2) the fact that submissives who put restrictions on subspace or cannot reach subspace often have been the victims of abuse / assault / suffer from PTSD; since Tony Stark’s traumatic experiences are a matter of public record The Star especially should have shown more compassion and awareness. This has sparked an important conversation about orientationism, subspace, and trauma. The points above are important and valid, and I in no way wish to diminish them, but I’d like to add another.

Doms are not entitled to subspace. Doms are not entitled to subspace, just like they are not entitled to sex. Putting a sub under is a privilege, not a right. It is even more intimate than sex and requires far more trust, particularly from the submissive. So why did most of the Doms interviewed about Mr. Stark describe his rejection of subspace as if it were a personal slight or a failing? On many comment boards, there are people defending Mr. Stark by arguing that his past trauma makes him unable to go into subspace and that it’s not a choice. But why would it be bad if that were his choice? Why does he need a reason other than “I don’t want to go into subspace with you”? And since these Doms were willing sell his intimate details for personal gain, it seems to me there was very good reason for Mr. Stark not to trust them.

Submission in any form is a beautiful gift subs give to their chosen Dominants. Subspace is not a Dominant’s right. Let’s recognize the culture of Dominant entitlement for what it is. The first step to ending it is recognizing it.

#liberationism #Dominant_ally

"Sir, Mr. Clark has left a fifth voicemail."

"Hey, what is this shit?" Tony asked peevishly. “I thought I said lockdown?”

"Lockdown protocol allows me to alert you of personal communications I deem relevant,” JARVIS answered, then added a little coolly, “unless, of course you choose to modify my programing.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, yeah. Okay. I’ll email him later or something. Put the kid out of his misery.”

Tony’d been surprised to see Matt had talked to The Star about him, though his comments really only sounded bad with The Star’s spin. (After all, it was true Tony had gone on a second date to The Lion with hedge fund manager Marco Paolini, then decided Paolini was an asshole and ditched him to go home with their handsome waiter instead.) Matt was a sweet kid. They’d hooked up (or dated or whatever) for the next week or two. Tony remembered Matt fondly (though he wasn’t the brightest). Tony wasn’t exactly surprised that he’d fallen for The Star’s act.

“Also, Dr. Banner and Agent Barton have both asked again to visit the workshop.”

“And?”

“And I informed them you were in the middle of a delicate project and asked not to be disturbed.”

“Thanks.” Tony paused. (JARVIS would have said something if anyone else had tried to visit, right? Right. No need to ask.) Tony took a sip of coffee, then asked, “And Steve?”

“Captain Rogers has made no attempt to visit the workshop.”

“Oh, okay. Good.”

And Tony knew why Natasha wasn’t trying to visit—her spider senses recognized that he was in his lair for a reason and didn’t want visitors—but Steve . . . In three days Steve hadn’t asked after him? Or wanted to watch Star Trek? Or tried to come down and feed him?

Tony shrugged. Whatever. Just as well. He was busy.

Sexology, Prof. William Walding, M.D.
The fierce and indomitable energy of the American people, which has survived the most mighty social and political revolution of this world, has seized upon the bauble of Woman’s (or as some say “Submissives’s”) Rights, and bids fair to dignify it into a terrible engine of destruction. The mere discussion of such a revolution as a possibility, the bare toleration of the idea, is sufficient in itself to injure the mind and to operate powerfully upon the imagination of these impressionable creatures—to excite in them feelings of indignation and dissatisfaction with their present condition. Every argument that ingenuity can suggest, is brought to bear in assuring them that they are deprived of certain inherent “rights” by an unjust and tyrannical age.

We cannot imagine how Dominants can be reformed by investing submissives with the ballot, but we can readily believe that many submissives would thereby become debased. The chivalric veneration with which man now regards woman, arises from the distance, as well as the difference, between them; in fact, from the advantages she possesses as woman. This would vanish with her political equality and she would lose that respect and deference with which she has hitherto been so generously endowed; she will be treated rather as man than as woman; “she cannot have the advantages of both sexes at once.” Nature, not legislators, has assigned to the two sexes and orientations their respective spheres. (30-32)*

Tony emerged on Thursday. He headed up to the common room and didn’t realize he’d been expecting to find Steve there until he was disappointed. Tony made a sandwich and lingered a while before going back to the workshop, emerging from time to time to raid the refrigerator. When Tony didn’t run into Steve or anyone else around the Tower all day, he had JARVIS ask Steve if he wanted to watch Star Trek. JARVIS replied that “Captain Rogers regrets he is unable to join you this evening.” Tony shrugged and ended up suggesting Spinal Tap to Clint; Clint recited every line while Tony puttered on his tablet.

On Friday, Clint and Natasha invited everyone out for drinks with a bunch of other SHIELD agents, but Tony could think of few things less delightful than alcohol plus agents, so, nope! He heard Natasha on the phone with Steve, trying to coax him out and saying in a significant tone that Christine hoped he’d come, but to no avail. So, when Bruce and Tony had JARVIS suggest Star Trek and Thai food, Tony was kinda surprised to get another, “Captain Rogers regrets he is unavailable, but thanks you for the invitation.”

Saturday disappeared in a whirlwind of work for Stark Industries, urgent calls from Pepper, and trying very hard not to yell at anyone in R&D. By eight pm Tony was exhausted and just wanted to relax. Pepper was in Chicago, Rhodey was still abroad, Clint was out drinking with agents again, and, oddly enough, Bruce and Natasha were at the ballet. Tony had JARVIS call Steve with the usual offer of Star Trek and felt at once irritated and disappointed when he got another, “Captain Rogers is otherwise engaged, Sir.”

Tony frowned.

“Did he go out?”

JARVIS paused a moment before answering, “Captain Rogers has not left his floor.”

Tony shook his head. Cap had projects of his own, right? Maybe he was working on something and didn’t want to get out of the groove. Well, Tony knew what that was like. He’d ask Steve about it next time he saw him.

sexology, prof. william walding, m.d.

Copyright 1904

Now we come to the somewhat delicate and sad topic of the “Inverted:” the Female Dominant and male submissive. You may know some personally, though the condition is happily rare. It is a profoundly sorrowful and at times shocking outcome for young people at presenting and those near them should do all they can to soften the blow. The inverted are in a tragic position and, as Science has now shown they have no control over this outcome, they deserve compassion rather than derision. Show them the same kindness you would show to a barren couple, the crippled, or the disfigured. Here is Woman blessed with some of the instincts and inclinations of the Dominant, but deprived the full strength and reason of Man! Here is a gentle and sensitive submissive, bereft of Life-giving potential, blessed with none of Woman’s soft, familial gifts, and yet plagued by Man’s more bestial passions.

At nine am the next morning, Tony padded into the communal kitchen, still in his pajamas. Clint and Natasha were talking quietly and picking at some cantaloupe, while Bruce stood by the toaster.

Tony stopped short.
No Steve.

“Isn’t it Sunday?” Tony blurted.

Clint laughed. “They don’t call you a genius for nothing.”

Bruce was already handing him a cup of coffee—because Bruce was the best—while Tony glared at Clint.

“Cap makes brunch on Sundays,” Tony said.

“Not this Sunday apparently.” Clint shrugged. “I think he deserves to sleep in for once. He shouldn’t have to cook for us losers all the time.”

Tony chugged down some coffee then shook his head. “No. No, that’s not—”

Something was wrong. Cap liked cooking brunch. He always hummed whatever crappy church music they’d played that week. He’d been trying out new recipes from the Big Book of Brunch cookbook he’d checked out at the Public Library even though there are tons of free recipes online. Steve smiled more at Sunday brunch than just about any other time.

Tony bit his lip.

“Actually,” Bruce said with a pensive frown, “I haven’t seen Steve in a few days. You?”

Clint nodded. “Yeah. Maybe Wednesday? He’s been busy with something.” He shrugged again, but was frowning a little now too.

Bruce shook his head, then asked, “JARVIS, is Steve okay?”

“Captain Rogers is in excellent health,” JARVIS answered. And, yeah, that wasn’t at all ominous.

“Maybe he just wants some time to himself,” Natasha said quietly, her expression perfectly neutral, that look that said, I know all the answers but I’m not going to tell you because I don’t feel like it. Tony stared at her for a few long moments then let out an exasperated noise.

“Whatever,” Tony said, turning for the elevator. “Later!” he called over his shoulder.

“Sir.”

When the elevator doors opened, Rogers was waiting, barefoot and dressed in his navy blue sweat suit. (Definitely not right.)

“Mr. Stark,” he said, body stiff, “What can I do for you?”

Tony blinked. “Mr. Stark? I come visit you and all of a sudden I’m ‘Mr. Stark’ again?”

“Sorry. Uh, Tony.” Steve gave him a wan smile. “Did you need something?”

Tony shrugged and wandered a little further into Steve’s apartment. It was unchanged since his last visit: no art, no brica-brac, no nothing. He hadn’t even rearranged the furniture. Except for a few things on the coffee table, it looked like the showroom of a furniture store.

“What’s going on?” Tony asked. “You’ve been kinda scarce lately. No Star Trek, no visiting the workshop, and now no brunch?” Tony gestured. “No church either, by the looks of it.”

Steve’s eyes narrowed. “I think God’ll forgive me for missing Mass once every blue moon.” He frowned. “And I’d hardly have expected you to judge.”

Tony clutched his coffee in one hand and held the other up in surrender. “Not judging,” he protested. “Just saying. It’s not like you.”

They stood there, looking at each other uneasily.

(Okay, Tony, now what?)

“Are you okay?” Tony asked eventually.

“I’m fine,” Steve said, instantaneously, by rote.

“You don’t really seem fine,” Tony said hesitantly. “What’s the matter? Maybe I could . . . help?” (Ugh. Didn’t mean for it to sound so uncertain.)

“No.” Steve shook his head with a sad smile. “But thank you for stopping by.”

Steve turned away, clearly intending it as a dismissal, and went back to the couch where Tony now noticed he’d set up a little nest of blankets and pillows. His notebook and sketchpad were on the coffee table, along with a big pitcher of water and a small cup.
(Shit, shit, shit.) Tony hovered indecisive, really wishing Pepper were there or he had a brain-to-brain link that would let her give him advice without anybody knowing. (Ugh, weird. Anyway . . .)

Steve hadn’t actually asked him to leave . . .

Running on instinct, Tony crossed the room to stand beside the couch. Steve looked up, maybe a little surprised, but mostly he just seemed exhausted. Tony laid a hand on his shoulder and asked again, wishing he could come up with something better to say, “Steve? Are you sure you’re okay?”

Steve shrugged and looked away. After a few long moments, he said, “It’s November 19th.” There was a long pause, but Tony didn’t press. (His heart was racing.) Steve swallowed, then cleared his throat, and added softly, “Today. It’s Bucky’s birthday, my best friend. He’d a been 29. In 1942, anyway.”

(Shit.)

Steve seemed to gather himself. “So, that’s why,” he said. “I haven’t been feeling very . . . sociable.”

Tony hesitated. Steve still didn’t ask him to leave. So Tony walked over and took a seat on the far end of the couch. Steve glanced over at him in surprise or maybe confusion for a moment, then fixed his gaze on the coffee table again.

“Wanna watch Star Trek?” Tony asked.

Steve laughed. It was a sharp brittle noise. “No. Not really in the mood.”

Tony bit his lip.

“We could order brunch,” Tony suggested. Steve shook his head.

Tony swallowed. “You could tell me about him,” Tony offered softly. “Your best friend.”

Steve’s brow creased; he didn’t look at Tony or speak. Tony added, “I mean, sure, Bucky Barnes, Howling Commando, he’s in the history books and the cartoons and that exhibit at the Smithsonian, but that’s not—” Tony shook his head. “I mean, there’s a lot of press out there on War Machine, but that’s not really him . . . not my Rhody. So, if you wanted to tell me about him, your best friend . . .”

Tony paused. Steve just frowned at the coffee table in silence. Tony shifted uneasily.

“Or, I could leave you alone—sorry I—”

“He was tough,” Steve said quietly, eyes still unfocused. “And brave. And loyal.” Steve gave a wistful smile, “He taught me to fight. He said, ‘You tuck your thumb into your fist like that, you’re gonna break it. Thumb on the outside or you’re gonna hurt worse than the other guy.’”

Steve turned to look at Tony. “Do the books ever say how we met?”

Tony shook his head, half afraid to speak lest he say the wrong thing and make Steve close up again, but Steve seemed to be waiting for an answer, so he said, “Childhood friends, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve said with a sad little smile. “We met when I was eight. He was my first friend, at least my first friend my own age.”

Steve went quiet again.

“How did you two meet?” Tony prompted quietly after a few moments.

Steve seemed to come back to himself. He turned to Tony and pulled his knees up onto the couch.

“Do you really want to hear this?”

“Yes,” Tony said. “If you don’t mind telling me.”

“I—I guess I could start at the beginning? If you’re sure you wanna hear it.”

“Very sure,” Tony said emphatically, and scooted a little closer.

Steve nodded and seemed to gather his thoughts. He poured himself a glass of water, and took a sip.

“Bucky lost his mom when she was bringing him into the world,” Steve began, “and his father, well, I never knew the man, but he had a reputation in Brooklyn. He was a boxer, won some big prize fights, but had trouble with betting and drinking so he lost money faster than he won it. He wasn’t very happy with his life and he’d take it out on people—” Steve hesitated, and his voice went low, “sometimes Bucky, I think, though he never said so. Eventually, when Buck was ten his dad was killed in a bar fight—knifed in the side—so Buck went to Magdalene House, the orphanage next to the hospital where my mom worked. It was attached to St. Mary’s where we
went to Mass and where the school was.”

Tony nodded. Steve glanced away and continued, eyes a little unfocused, “You know I was real sickly as a kid. I missed almost a full year of school when I was seven and I couldn’t play outside because of the smog and dust and, well, I couldn’t have kept up with the other kids anyway so I was mostly inside. But my mom was at work a lot, weekends too, so a lot of the time it was just me and my books and my drawing things.” He shook his head. “Lucky I was a strong reader,” then he shrugged, “then again, lots of motivation and time practice I guess.”

Steve looked over again as if to confirm Tony was still listening; Tony nodded and took a sip of his coffee. Steve smiled.

“There was this priest at St. Mary’s, Father Gabe, who would visit the parishioners too sick to come to Mass. He’d make the rounds and always come visit me for a bit. We all adored him. He had a limp ’cause he’d been injured in the Great War, but he cut a pretty dashing figure—young for a priest. His sweetheart died of tuberculosis while he was in the trenches and he went into the clergy.”

“Anyway, Father Gabe also worked with the kids at Magdalene House and Bucky’d just arrived and was giving them hell. He had his father’s temper and some of his fight training and was pretty mad at the world, ya know? He’d had free run before, since his dad was never around much, and now there were all these rules and other kids, and he was angry and a real big guy for his age and—well.” Steve grimaced. “He wasn’t adjusting well.”

Steve toyed with the edge of a pillow as he spoke. “Father Gabe, he just had this way of seeing people. He knew Buck wasn’t a bad kid, just angry and hurting. And being cooped up for the first time wasn’t helping, so the next time Father Gabe made his rounds, he brought Bucky along.”

“While Father Gabe talked to mom, he asked Buck to go check on me. He’d hardly said two words to me when I had one of my spells—coughing, and I couldn’t breathe right—and I was real small, and Bucky panicked and thought I was gonna die right then and there in front of him.” Steve rolled his eyes. “I guess Father Gabe’s theory was that since I was about the furthest thing from a threat a kid could be, Buck wouldn’t feel like he had to try and pull rank or keep up the pecking order around me or something.”

“Anyway, the attack passed—they always did eventually—but I’d given Bucky a good scare. He asked Father Gabe if he could stay and sit with me instead of going on to Mrs. O’Connors. Mom said, okay, so Buck stayed. We played checkers. I showed him some of my drawings.” Steve smiled, his expression distant.

Tony could picture it somehow—Steve tiny and sick, Bucky this big strong kid, a dingy tenement walk-up. In his mind, they sit together in a window seat, looking down at the street, the bustling city little Steve is too sick to join. Tony’s throat felt tight.

“Bucky wasn’t a very good reader yet, even though he was older than me, so eventually I helped him with homework. And he’d tell me about the fights his dad had won and how to throw a punch and we listened to the Lone Ranger on the radio, then made up the story ourselves whenever the reception cut out.”

“Pretty soon Father Gabe had given Bucky special permission to come visit me every day after school and bring over my assignments. It was—” Steve’s voice went rough and Tony thought he saw tears shining in Steve’s eyes before he turned his head. “It was a good thing he did for two sad little boys, one so angry and the other so lonely he—”

Tony felt a sharp twist of sorrow for Steve—at all he’d lost—but also a shameful and unexpected jolt of envy. The summer Tony’d turned seven he’d actually managed to make friends with the new maid’s daughter. They’d climbed trees and played hide-and-seek all over the grounds for three glorious weeks. She’d been enraptured with the robot Tony made for her birthday. But Howard didn’t approve of a Stark being friends with the help. He’d offered to pay for daycare and little Sarah never came back.

“Father Gabe gave us each a little St. George medallion before we left for Basic Training and we wrote to him from France,” Steve said, tone wistful. He gave a little shrug.

“Mom said we were good for each other,” Steve continued, “said that a little of my gentle rubbed off on him, and little of his tough rubbed off on me.” Steve smiled, adding, “And we were both already plenty stubborn to begin with.”

“Guess it worked a little better than he’d meant it to,” Steve added with a rueful chuckle. “Once we got older, he was always giving me guff for getting into fights and having the shit kicked out
of me.” Steve actually looked nostalgic for getting beat up, which was weird, but Tony kinda got it.

Tony’s coffee had gone cold. He drank it anyway.

“And Buck was always making plans, from the time we were little. We were gonna go West to California and strike gold. We’d get a flat together; I’d draw for the newspapers and he’d work in construction. Or he’d go into fighting, like his dad, and win a real big fight with tons of money and we’d be set for good. Or we’d open a gin joint together and live above it. But it was always—he’d say, ‘you and me, Stevie, ’til the end of the line.’” Steve swallowed heavily. “I always reckoned I’d go out young, wouldn’t have to face things without him. Even with a war on, even once I had the serum—it seemed impossible that he’d . . . He was just so strong, larger than life, and—” Steve squeezed his eyes shut and took a few deep breaths.

“I just—” Steve looked over at Tony, his eyes red-rimmed and his voice rough, “I just miss him so damn much, you know?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, nodding. His own eyes were prickling, thinking of Rhodey. “I know, buddy.”

Steve was all curled in on himself, knees up to his chest, arms tight, body closed off. Tony wanted to crawl across the couch and wriggle into Steve’s arms, offer him some human contact, some comfort, but he felt blocked—like he just . . . couldn’t.

It made Tony feel helpless and he hated that.

Pathetic terrible platitudes—hollow philosophical soundbytes, religious reassurances Tony didn’t believe in—raced through his mind, and he rejected one after another after another.

The silence stretched, heavy and doleful.

Steve glanced over at Tony, then looked away, shoulders hunched. ”Uh, sorry, for talking your ear off like that.”

“What? No,” Tony said, urgently and a little too loud, ”no, thank you. For telling me about him. Don’t—” Tony reached out and grabbed Steve’s hand; he startled at the touch, but when Tony squeezed, he squeezed back. ”Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you told me.”

Steve nodded and gave Tony a tentative smile.

He took a deep breath, then said, “I’m—I’m gonna go to the bathroom, but then . . . then maybe we could watch Star Trek? And you said something about ordering brunch?”

Tony nearly tripped over his tongue in his eagerness to agree.

And if Steve’s eyes were bloodshot when he came back from the bathroom, Tony wouldn’t dream of mentioning it.

After a while, Tony said, "I have to go to the bathroom, too. Do you want me to go first?"

Steve shook his head weakly, his eyes closed. "No, just go. I'll be fine." He pulled away the covers from his head. "Steve, come on, you're not going to fall asleep on me."

Tony slid closer, trying to get a grip on Steve's shoulder. "Try to stay awake, okay?"

Steve’s eyes flicked open. "I promise. I promise, Tony."

It was then that Tony noticed the tears streaming down Steve’s cheeks, which he hadn’t even noticed before. He felt a stab of guilt, realizing that Steve had been through so much already. He reached out and wiped a tear away. "I’m here, Steve. I’m right here."

"I know," Steve whispered, his voice husky and pained. "I know you."

Tony felt a rush of relief and love for this moment more precious than he could ever have imagined. He held Steve in his arms as gently as he could, rocking him, trying to soothe the terrible pain that was so clearly evident in his eyes. He was there for Steve, no matter what. He always would be. And he would make sure that Steve knew it. And that no matter what happened, he would always be there, always love him.
building-for-power-and-paradox. The other two sections I made up, but with conscious imitation of Wm. Walding's style and attitudes.

I have such high hopes for the Thanksgiving chapter, but it's proving particularly hard to write. Add in that the next six weeks are going to be some of the busiest, most important, and most stressful in my career, and I'm feeling a little low, anxious, and very busy. So, uh, any extra cheer-leading you want to send my way, here or on tumblr, would be extra extra appreciated. (And please don't worry--this story won't be abandoned. I have the bulk of it plotted and a good bit drafted already...)

You're all simply wonderful! Thank you for reading this!
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving: Part 1

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your patience! I hoped to finish the entire Thanksgiving section for today, but couldn't quite make it. So there will be a second chapter dedicated to Thanksgiving. Not sure this came together as I'd been hoping, but really want to post today.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!!!

Thanks for sticking with me!

Trigger warnings: fhvqvpqr nggrzcgl ol n pryoevgil; qyphhffvbba bs pbairfvba gurencl decode at rot13.com

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve fell asleep while they were watching a fourth episode of Star Trek. Tony'd cherry picked the episodes to make sure none of them were too dark or conceptual—just fun action and shenanigans in space, with an emphasis on the crew all looking out for each other. (Not that he put a lot of thought into that stuff or anything like that…) The scattered remains of their brunch lay cooling in carryout containers on the coffee table. Tony'd ordered far too much food, counting on Steve’s amplified metabolism—he’d seen the man eat! —and though he’d put away a good amount for anyone else, for the super soldier it wasn’t much. Tony sighed and glanced over to find Steve frowning in his sleep.

“JARVIS?” Tony called softly. “Would you keep playing that last episode on loop, volume on low until he wakes up?”

“Of course, Sir,” JARVIS replied just as quietly.

Tony started to leave, then paused for a moment. He turned back to gather up the delivery containers and put the leftovers in Steve’s refrigerator. It was practically empty: just some milk, a beer, and two glass bottles of Coca-Cola.

Tony slowly headed for the elevator, but couldn’t shake the feeling he’d still left something unfinished. He paused as the elevator arrived and opened almost silently, then he walked back to the coffee table again. Tony picked up one of Steve’s pencils and his notepad. (He nearly grabbed the sketchbook, but he couldn’t let himself touch it—if he did he’d cave to temptation and look at the whole thing. Whatever the press said, he wasn’t actually a total douchebag.) He flipped to the very back of the small spiral notebook for a blank page and wrote:

Hey Cap-- I hated to wake you. I hope you don’t mind that I—

Ugh. Tony tore the page out and crumpled it up.

Dear Steve, I thought you could use the sleep. Sorry to leave you and—
Ew. Even more ew. How the hell did you write somebody a “hey, sorry you’re waking up alone” note that didn’t sound suggestive or downright post-coital? Tony glared at the notepad and geared up for a final attempt:

_Cap— Gotta run, but figured it was cool to leave you napping with the_  
crew of the Starship Enterprise. Lemme know any time you want more

_Star Trek or brunch or whatever._

(“Whatever” is clearly code for “talking about feelings” not something else, right? Right.)

Tony clenched the pencil, feeling like he should say something more. Something profound. Something . . .

Tony shook his head and finished the note with a quick –Tony and set it down before he could change his mind.

“Workshop, J,” Tony said, stepping into the elevator.

“Naturally, sir.”

>>>>

“My loneliness is killing me (and I)  
I must confess I still believe (still believe)  
When I’m not with you I lose my mind  
Give me a sign  
Hit me baby one more time!”

>>>>

Tony woke slowly, neck stiff.

“Hello, sir. It is eleven-fifty two p.m. in New York,” JARVIS informed him, tone soft and reassuring.

He’d fallen asleep in the workshop again. Tony stretched and rubbed his cheek, which held the fabric print of Natasha’s nearly-completed new uniform. At the far end of his workbench, there was a cup of coffee. Tony blinked.

The coffee was still steaming, resting on one of those cheesy little keep-warm devices for individual mugs. The coffee smelled a little burnt, but rich and strong.

“Huh?” Tony mumbled, rolling his stool closer.

Under the hot-plate was a note:
“JARVIS?” Tony called. “Care to explain all this?”

“The Captain wished to bring you coffee. This seemed a reasonable variant on Protocol 387-J12, however, on finding you asleep he had no wish to wake you. The additional presence of the small electronic device with which he returned still seemed in compliance with Protocol 387-J12 and was therefore permitted.”


“I performed a retinal scan,” JARVIS said primly. He paused, then added, “If my actions were in any way unacceptable, sir, you are entirely able to set new protocols.”

Tony picked up the coffee and let the mug warm his hands. His eyes fell to the note.

Tony-- Thanks for everything. –Steve

He smiled.

“Nah, we’re good, J.” Tony rolled his eyes again for good measure. “Gimmie some AC/DC—time to finish Nat’s uniform!”

Tony squinted at the triple reinforced seams of Natasha’s uniform, making sure nothing was out of place.

“Sir? Ms. Winters is calling once more. She is . . . most insistent.”

(Shit.)

“Yeah, go ahead and put her through.”

“Mr. Stark,” Katie Winters began briskly, “you know it’s much easier for Michael and me to do our job when you return our phone calls. Or emails.”

Today, the entertainment industry is reeling in the wake of shocking news: thirty-three year old singer Britney Spears was rushed to the emergency room at 5:26 this morning when one of her staffers found her incapacitated in her bathtub. Paramedics stabilized her in her home and she was rushed to the ICU. Her condition is labeled ‘critical.’ No further medical information has been released at this time, but there is already growing speculation about the possibility of a Scene gone wrong, whether with a partner or solo. We’ll have an update from the hospital, after this commercial break.
“Yeah,” Tony said a little sheepishly, then shrugged, “but I didn’t want to dignify The Star with a response so, meh.”

“Even so,” Katie said, stern voice full of things unsaid.

“Right,” Tony said. A long pause, then, “Sorry?”

Katie Winters was too professional to sigh into the phone.

“Michael and I have a few suggestions for upcoming PR, if you have a moment.”

Okay, maybe Katie was related to Natasha, because Tony heard the “you’d better have a moment” loud and clear through her professional tone.

“Of course!”

“Good. There are four charity galas I recommend you attend. The Firefighter’s Association was actually on your calendar before, but they rescheduled after the October attack—the original date was for the 4th and the venue had been damaged. They’ve rebooked everything and I think you should still attend.”

Tony nodded, then remembered he wasn’t videoconferencing, and said, “uh-huh.”

“Excellent. You were originally on the guest list as ‘plus one,’ but even after the attack they haven’t sold all the tickets and would love an extra bump. Their publicist asked if all the Avengers might be willing to attend as a group and, if so, if she’s allowed to leak that to the press.”

“Uh, let me get back to you on that. I’ll ask the team.”

“I’ll contact them each directly.”

“Sure. Whatever they want’s fine. I’ll be there.”

“Excellent.” Katie paused. “Shall I send you the other events by email?”

“Great! Yes. Email. Awesome.”

“Mmm,” Katie made a skeptical noise—a you’d better reply this time noise—then said hesitantly, “There is one other thing. Just . . . an idea.”

Tony frowned.

“The Safehouse Thanksgiving celebration—”
“No.”

She rushed on, talking fast. “—and your involvement would be great for public relations both for
the Safehouse—”

“No.”

“—and for you personally. It would be good for your fundraising efforts, the Avengers, and
deliver a subtle rebuke to The Star for their recent piece. Michael and I already ran a few possible
scenarios that—”

“Katie!” She fell silent. “We’ve been over this before. I don’t want some media circus at the
Safehouse.”

“No, no media circus,” she said firmly. “Not even a photographer. Just a small human-interest
story. One reporter, one outlet—somebody we trust. Small and tasteful.”

Tony shook his head. "Look, people already know I fund the Safehouse, and that’s as close as I
want it. I’m not gonna use them to polish my image.”

Katie was quiet for a moment. “You know your generosity could inspire others to become more
involved, to give back to the community.”

Tony let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah. Sure it could. Look, the Safehouse is still off limits.”

The phone was silent and Tony could practically hear her weighing words in the silence.

“Of course, Mr. Stark,” Katie said briskly. Another pause, then more softly, “People don’t know
half the good you do.”

Tony shrugged. “Let’s keep it that way.”

“I’ve emailed the précis of the other events and coverage we recommend, to you and your team.
I’ll expect to talk to you shortly.”

“Got it. Later!”

“Good bye, Mr. Stark.”

Welcome back. We are now able to confirm that Miss Spears condition is currently stable.
Paramedics pumped her stomach and she has received seven stitches, allegedly at her wrists,
which has turned speculation from Scene to suicide attempt. Miss Spears publicist has been
unavailable for comment, however, as you may recall the singer has a troubled past of mental
health issues . . .

+---------------------------------------+
"Tony? Are you—uh, may I come in?"

(Shit. Steve.)

Tony was sweaty and greasy-haired, stripped down to an old tank top that nearly showed the top of the arc reactor. (And surrounding scars.)

"Hang on!" Tony called, fumbling for his hoodie. Industrial shears, patterns, and polyaramid fabric were in organized chaos across the workbench.

"Of course. Um, I can go, if you’d rather I—"

"No, no, we’re good," Tony called, turning as he zipped it up all the way. "What’s up, Cap?"

"Tony, I—" Steve took a step into the workshop, eyes wide and hand outstretched for a moment, before he drew it back. Cap swallowed, looked at Tony intently for a few seconds, and fell into parade rest. He gave Tony a little half-smile and a shrug. "I was thinking about ordering Thai food and watching an episode of Star Trek. Thought you might be able to recommend something. Or maybe you have time for a break?"

It was obvious, of course, utterly transparent that that wasn’t what Steve had originally started to say, but Tony was grateful anyway. He could apparently, maybe, on occasion offer comfort to a grieving friend, but talking about feelings and gratitude and friendship and stuff afterwards would probably push him across the line.

"If you give me twenty minutes and order me pad thai with prawns, I’ll bring my Star Trek expertise to the episode selection process."

Steve grinned. "Deal," he said, with a brisk nod and turned to go. "See you soon!" he called over his shoulder.

"Yep!" Tony smiled, then sniffed himself. Yep. Time for a shower. Then Thai and Star Trek.

Eh. He needed a break.

"Is that the new poly-aramid you promised me?"

Tony looked up startled, then grinned.

"Pep!" he cried. "You’re early!"

"I’m really not." She quirked an eyebrow at him and tossed her ponytail. "It’s the twenty-fifth, Tony."

(And he thought he’d been so efficient, finishing everyone’s suits in . . . however long he thought it had been. Well, fuck.)

Pepper’s stilettos clicked against the workshop floor as she approached, holding out a paper cup. “Coffee?” Tony asked, taking it with a smile and mock surprise. “How did you know?”

Pep rolled her eyes. “When have you ever refused coffee?”

“Point.” He took a sip. “Good to see you, Pep.” It came out more softly than he’d intended.

“Good to see you too.” Her voice was warm and serious.

Pepper was always tall; in the Leboutins she loved, though, she positively towered. Somehow, Tony found that reassuring. He took a little side step closer.

“Come see for yourself!” Tony waved at Clint’s and Natasha’s uniforms. Clint’s had been a particular challenge. He insisted that he needed bare arms for mobility with the bow; Tony insisted that was bullshit and he could design something light but strong that would protect his fucking arms.

Pepper took a step closer and leaned forward, putting an arm around Tony’s waist as she examined his handiwork.

“And it’s got a 7:1 tensile ratio?” Pep asked, reaching out to touch Nat’s uniform consideringly.

“Yep,” Tony said, leaning back into her embrace. “Except for the arms on Clint’s uniform. Sacrificed some strength to mobility—only 5.6:1, but feel how lightweight it is.”

Pepper reached a hand inside the sleeve to manipulate the fabric.

“Tony, this is amazing,” she said almost reverently, then gave him a little hug and asked half-playfully, “So am I going to get fancy body armor?”

Tony laughed, then frowned. “Not a bad idea. Maybe the 5.6 version. You could wear it to conferences, when security isn’t up to par.”

“I was joking, Tony.”

“Well I’m not!”

“You worry too much.” Pepper said, waving a hand.

“Death threats, Pep! I know you get them.”
"Now now, don’t overreact. You know that we all—"

"I’m not overreacting! And don’t you dare accuse me of overreacting!"

"Tony, I didn’t mean it like that," Pepper said firmly. "You know how it is, though. Famous people get death threats. I may just be a CEO, not a proper celebrity or superhero, but it happens. They’re idle threats and, well, if I start taking them seriously I’ll never live my life again."

Tony shook his head. "Jesus, Pep, I’m not asking you to lock yourself in a bunker! Just wear body armor to those shitty conventions and conferences when you do big presentations. Seriously, I can think of about two-thousand ways to smuggle a gun past their shit security."

"Should that worry me?" Pepper asked archly.

Tony flashed her a smile. "Definitely." Then he continued seriously, "Come on, Pep! Feel how light this is! I’ll even model the design on Wonder Woman for you—you’ll hardly notice you’re wearing it. Hell, it’ll be so fucking sexy and awesome you’ll wanna do your scenes in it!"

Pepper rolled her eyes, then conceded, "I do love Wonder Woman."

"As you should," Tony said with a nod. "Come on. Let me do this for you. Gotta protect you—think what my stocks would do if you died?"

"Well, when you put it like that."

Tony hadn’t realized how worried he’d been until Pepper caved and he felt like sinking down in relief. "Great. I’ll have it ready for the big conference in Berlin. Their security isn’t as bad as Milan’s but it—"

"Tony? May I come in? I brought you some—" Steve stood in the doorway of the workshop holding a steaming mug and a small plate. "Oh! Hello. I’m sorry to interrupt."

"Steve!" Tony called. "Come on in! I’m showing Pep the new uniforms. Come see." Tony paused when Steve seemed to hesitate. "You remember Pepper, right?"

"Yes, of course," Steve said, approaching the workbench. "Hello, Ms. Potts."

"Captain Rogers," she said politely, nodding.

"Oh, please, call me Steve," he asked with a smile.

"Pepper," she returned. He smiled a little wider.

"So, what did you bring me?" Tony demanded.

"Oh! Right. Just, JARVIS mentioned you hadn’t eaten in a while, and I was making some sandwiches anyway, so . . ." Steve held out a plate of artfully arranged little sandwiches—tea
sandwiches, he’d call them—with bits of tomato and bacon sticking out.

“Great!” Tony said, taking the plate eagerly.

“I brought some coffee too, but it looks like you already, uh—”

“This?” Tony asked, shaking the paper cup. “I’ll be through this in no time. Just drop the mug on the hotplate, would ya, Steve?”

“Sure.”

“And come see! I just finished the uniforms. Was checking the seams when Pep arrived.”

Steve picked up the sleeve of Clint’s uniform, turned it carefully inside out, and peered at it closely.

“Beautiful stitching. Did you use a baste-stitch to start?”

“Yes, then double reinforced with a full seam though.”

“It’s fantastic. And you got the fabric so light! Clint’ll be thrilled.”

“Birdbrain better love it—stupid macho Dom, trying to go bare armed.” Tony rolled his eyes. He tilted back a bit to bump into Pepper. “So, think we can come up with a market for any of this stuff?” Tony joked. “Think the board of directors might like this?”

“Are you kidding?” Tony opened his mouth to answer, but Pepper held up a hand for silence and rushed on, “Yes, Tony, I know you are kidding, but to be disgustingly honest the board nearly ppeed themselves at the very mention of Stark and polyaramid. And at the first hint of a rumor about it I started getting calls from top Army brass asking about DOD contracts.”

Tony sighed. Not that it was unexpected or even unreasonable.

“Well,” Steve said, “I’ll leave you to your business. The suits are really amazing, Tony. Just grand.”

“But are they swell?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said, with that little smile. “They’re definitely swell.” He turned his gaze to Pepper. “It’s nice to see you Ms. P—I mean, Pepper. I’m glad you’re joining us for Thanksgiving.”

“Thank you, Steve,” Pepper said, in the ‘warm but formal’ voice Tony thought of as ‘Nice CEO.’ “I look forward to getting to know you.”

Steve looked half embarrassed, hunched his shoulders a little, then bade them both a little goodbye and made his retreat.
Alone again, Pepper looked down at Tony with a quizzical look.

“What?” Tony asked, half-bristling instinctively.

“So that’s Captain America,” Pepper said in a neutral tone. “Steve.”

“What? I told you we’re friends now.”

“Yeah. Just I didn’t think—” She fumbled for a moment, then blinked. “Tony, he brings you sandwiches.”

She said it as though sandwiches were one of the great mysteries of the universe. Tony shrugged. “He has a thing for feeding people. Who do you think’s gonna roast this ridiculous turkey?”

“He’s roasting the turkey?” Pepper repeated, then laughed and shook her head. “Well, what could be more fitting? He is Captain America after all.”

Pepper didn’t sound mocking, not really, but something about it seemed wrong.

“Yeah, but it’s not just that,” Tony said, not quite sure how to put it into words. “He just . . . he really likes cooking. And feeding people. He makes this fantastic roast chicken and potatoes. And he and Bruce like to make Indian food together. It’s—I guess, it’s kinda his thing.”

Tony frowned. He clearly wasn’t describing Cap in a way that clarified his Steve-ness.

“I think it’s one of his ways of looking after his team. You know, off the battle field.”

Pepper was smiling. “That’s great. I mean, not what I’d imagined, but it sounds good.”

Tony felt like there was still something missing, but the moment slipped past and Pep turned her attention back to the uniforms, saying, “So, walk me through the manufacturing.”

When Tony and Pep took the elevator up to the common floor—previously part of Tony’s penthouse—they found Steve staring wide-eyed at the kitchen counter while Clint laughed nearby.

“Oh,” Tony said, “everything okay there, Cap?”

“Tony,” Steve said sounding a little shell-shocked. “You ordered a thirty pound turkey. For ten people.”

“Um, Yes?”

“I didn’t even know you could get a thirty pound turkey!”
Tony waved a hand. “You can get anything if you know the right people. Or if your people know the right people.”

Steve shook his head and pointed at the counter. “And sixty pounds of potatoes. And twenty pounds of butter.”

“Oh, sure,” Tony said with a shrug. “I wasn’t sure how much you’d need.”

“I—I—” And, yeah it was kinda funny the way that Steve was gaping at him, but Tony was almost afraid he’d offended the man’s sensibilities. (Should I apologize? I—)

“Steve?” Pepper said stepping up to the counter. “Tony does this kind of thing, I’m afraid. He has a tendency to go a little overboard.”

And now Steve was smiling and shaking his head.

Tony threw his hands up. “Well, I wanted to be sure there was enough food!”

“You could feed an army with this,” Steve said, still smiling.

“You’ve never seen Rhodey at Thanksgiving,” Tony shot back.

Clint laughed. “Oh, I can take him! You’ve never seen me at Thanksgiving. Seriously, I’m gonna demolish an entire bag of those potatoes.”

“Oh, I can probably beat you at potatoes,” Steve said, tapping his stomach. “Irish Catholic, you know.”

As Clint and Steve fell to teasing each other and putting away the dozens—(okay, hundred)—pounds of food, Tony felt kinda warm.

Thanksgiving was gonna be good. (For once.)

”Remember, Rhodey’s mom can’t eat spicy food! Gives her an upset stomach,” Tony reminded Bruce for the fifth time.

He nodded absently as he diced some more tomatoes for the aloo-gobi and Clint cut the cauliflower.

“So tandori actually is the name of the oven?” Steve asked. On the far side of the room Pepper and Natasha were talking quietly with their heads close together. Pep often seemed to gravitate towards Femme Dommes. At the moment, Pep’s pale cheeks were turning red, so maybe they were trading topping tips for ladies? (Okay, probably not, but it was a nice idea.) Tony turned his
attention back to his tablet and let the sounds of his team and The Beatles wash over him. (Clint was adamant that The Beatles were Thanksgiving Eve music.)

“Sir? Lieutenant-Colonel Rhodes and Mrs. Rhodes have arrived.”

Tony leapt from his chair, tossed the tablet aside, and bounded over to the elevator, ready to pounce. (Shit!) He took a moment to check himself over in the mirror to make sure he was presentable. He ran his fingers through his hair and straightened the cuffs on his shirt.

The elevator doors parted to show Rhodey wearing a suit—one not made of metal—and carrying a large box, probably full of his mother’s cooking supplies. (She’d learned she couldn’t trust Tony to have obscure kitchen implements, or even the items she declared ‘standard.’) Rhodey was a solid foot taller than his mother, but she filled the space with sheer presence. Maryanne Rhodes was always poised, dressed with a simple elegance that needed no fancy designers to validate it. Clean lines, polished and precise: red blouse, white cardigan, black skirt.

“Mrs. Rhodes,” Tony said, taking both her small hands in his and kissing her on each cheek as she stepped from the elevator. He made a show of studying her, then declared, “You’re more lovely every time I see you. It’s simply unfair.”

Mrs. Rhodes clucked her tongue at him. “Nonsense. Don’t suppose me some vain old woman. Leave that smile-at-the-cameras charm for people who don’t actually know you. Now give me a proper hug.”

She was barely 5’2, so even Tony had to lean down to hug her, but despite her small frame she somehow made him feel fully enveloped. It was a long hug: a firm squeeze with a slight side to side motion that reminded Tony of the way she’d held him after--

“Good to see you,” he mumbled into her shoulder.

“You too, dear.”

Twice Tony made a vague attempt to pull away, but Mrs. Rhodes would have none of it; hugs were over when she said they were. (It felt good to be held.) Finally, she let her arms drop and Tony pulled back to say, “Come on in! Make yourself at home!” and give Rhodey an awkward half-hug around the cooking box.

“Looking good, Rhodey,” Tony said, then glanced around. “Where’s this Miranda I’ve heard so much about? Is she—”

Rhodey face went a little tight for a moment, then he shrugged. “Oh, yeah, change of plans. Sorry for the short notice. She had a friend emergency, so she won’t be making it.” He said it so casually Tony knew he was upset.

“Really? Wait, what happened. Is she—“

“Steve! Hey, man! Great to see ya!” Rhodey dodged away from Tony and went over to the kitchen.

“Mom,” Rhodey said, hurrying over with a certain understandable eagerness, “I’d like you to meet my friend, Steve Rogers.”
“Nice to meet you, Captain Rogers,” Mrs. Rhodes said politely.

“Mrs. Rhodes,” Cap said, with a wide grin and unmistakable enthusiasm, “it’s such a pleasure to
meet you. And, please, call me Steve.” He took her small hand in his giant one. “Your son is a
wonderful man—it’s an honor to serve with him. You must be very proud.”

“I am,” she said simply. She turned to Tony. “I brought my pastry cutter and all the other
essentials for pie with me this time, but please tell me you remembered to buy butter.”

Steve let out a strangled laugh.

“There’s plenty of butter,” Tony assured her. She gave a satisfied nod.

“Mom?” Rhodey said, clearly pleased to be superintending introductions. “This is Dr. Bruce
Banner.”

She shook Bruce’s hand and said, “You saved Tony’s life. We’ll always be grateful to you.”

Tony smiled as Bruce blushed and stammered, trying to dodge both praise and gratitude.

Maryanne Rhodes had a way of doing that to people.

Tony was full of a warm, lazy pleasure. Mrs. Rhodes, Pepper, and Rhodey had settled in
seamlessly and everyone seemed in awe of Mrs. Rhodes, particularly Steve. For all her small size
and advanced years, she had a commanding way that any general would envy. She’d been an
office manager for AT&T for many years and had run her division with truly military efficiency.
Dinner had been full of easy conversation and Tony’d managed not to look at his phone or tablet
once. (Mrs. Rhodes hated people checking their phones during dinner.)

As Steve and Pepper started to do the clearing up, Mrs. Rhodes took a photo out of her purse and
handed it to Tony. He laughed. She’d brought a picture of him at seventeen, Rhodey twenty-two:
both of them looking like sullen teenagers, forced into photographs sitting down at a beautifully
set Thanksgiving table.

Tony felt a pang, part gratitude, part melancholy. After his parents had died, the Rhodes had
offered him a place in their family, invited him for Thanksgiving, Christmas, family vacations, but
he’d never quite let himself accept, not fully. He’d come around sometimes, pushed them away at
others, by turns too needy and too proud. (Obie’d said they wanted his money, but Tony’d never
thought that.) Tony’d mistaken kindness for pity and couldn’t bear to accept it.

Tony passed the picture to Rhodey.

“We were a pair of brats, weren’t we?” Rhodey said, chuckling.

“How long have you known each other?” Bruce asked, as the picture made its way to him.
“We go way back,” Rhodey said, with a grin.

“Longer than I’d care to admit,” Tony said, fluttering his eyelashes and giving Bruce a playful look.

“How did you two meet anyway?” Clint asked, waving a hand at them.

“At MIT,” Tony said with a shrug, hoping they’d drop it.

“Yeah, but how?” Clint asked, turning to Rhodey. “There must be some sort of story.” He glanced down at the photo and handed it on to Natasha.

(Shit, shit.) Tony sent Rhodey a pleading look, one he hoped said, please, please don’t tell them the whole story. It wasn’t one of his proudest moments—especially after all the warnings mom had given him—and he didn’t need a lecture from Cap or Bruce about what a dumb kid he’d been.

“Intro Chemistry,” Rhodey said, then added with a grin, “it was the only subject where Tones actually took the intro levels.”

Tony let out a relieved breath. It wasn’t exactly a lie. They had taken Chem I together . . .

But before they started sitting together in Chem or spoken or learned each other’s names, Rhodey’d found him passed out drunk at a freshman party. He’d rolled Tony over so he wouldn’t die choking on his own vomit and started to leave, but then Rhodey’d remembered a story his older cousin had told him, about a sub who’d passed out at a frat party at Yale . . . Rhodey’d carried Tony back to his own room instead of leaving him there and they met for the first time the next morning when Tony woke up in a strange bed with a pounding headache, took one look at Rhodey and blurted, “Oh, God, please tell me we fucked!”

(Even worse, he’d followed it up with a hideous attempt at a seductive purr of: “Because I like my Doms like I like my coffee—strong and black.” Jesus he’d been a moron. It was a miracle Rhodey hadn’t hated him.)

Rhodey had a Star Trek poster in his dorm room, and Tony kinda fell in love on the spot. (Or imprinted on him like a sad little duckling—falling for the first handsome, trustworthy Dom he’d ever met.) He’d refused to believe that Rhodey wasn’t attracted to boys for a solid six months after that; Tony’d tried every pathetic romcom ploy imaginable to make him change his mind. (God he’d sucked at fourteen.)

“Right, Tones?” Rhodey said.

“Huh?” Tony snapped out of it.

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Come on, man. Star Trek.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely,” Tony said, with no clue what he was talking about. “Star Trek.”

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Stuffed with Bruce and Steve’s delicious Indian food, but not quite ready to go to bed yet, it was
quickly determined that everyone should watch a movie. It was not quickly determined what that movie should be. Everybody made at least five suggestions from *Casablanca* to *Ghostbusters* to *Lawrence of Arabia*—except Steve and Mrs. Rhodes. Steve just said, “I’m sure I’ll like whatever you pick,” and Mrs. Rhodes seemed to be waiting for a consensus.

After twenty minutes of suggestions, however, Mrs. Rhodes finally said, “I’ve always liked *Sabrina,*” and so *Sabrina* it was. Tony made a trip to the bathroom while everyone poured second drinks and got settled.

When he rounded the corner, he found everyone settled: Clint and Natasha on the loveseat, Mrs. Rhodes in his armchair, and Steve, Bruce, Rhodey and Pepper in a tidy row on his long couch.

“Tony, I’m so sorry,” Steve said, getting to his feet when he realized the seating was full. “Please take my seat.”

Tony hesitated for just a moment.

“Nah, I’m good,” Tony said, sauntering past.

“Please, I insist,” Steve said, gesturing again to the spot on the couch. Tony shook his head, and Steve suggested, “Or I can run down and get one of the armchairs from my suite. It’s no trouble. I’ll be right b—”

“Chill out, Steve,” Tony said, walking over to Pepper, “I’m good. Just toss me that pillow, would ya?”

Bemused, Steve complied. Tony dropped the pillow against the couch at Pepper’s feet and folded to his knees beside her. She let out a pleased little murmur.

Bruce grabbed the remote and flipped on the TV.

“... casts her recent suicide attempt in a new light. The expose reveals that at the age of twelve Miss Spears—now Ms. Spears—was sent for orientation therapy at The Good News and Holy Works Therapy Center by her father. Testing performed in 1992, indicated she was a 9.5—almost a full Dominant-- on the Kinsey scale, however—”

Tony’s heart started pounding.

“JARVIS?” Clint called out. “Start the movie, would ya? Nobody wants to watch this shit.”

“Of course. Commencing the film now.”

Pepper’s hand was firm and grounding on Tony’s neck. He took a deep breath. Then another.

(Shit. Orientation therapy.) Tony swallowed. (That poor girl.)

*Sabrina* began, but even though he’d seen it several times, Tony couldn’t seem to catch any of the dialogue. Audrey Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart glided past, but couldn’t hold his attention. Tony’s hands felt clammy. Pepper’s fingers scratched lightly at his scalp, but couldn’t distract him.
from his thoughts.

(“Full sub. Not even a ping up the Kinsey scale.” Howard shook his head and looked up from the latest round of tests. “Well, there’s nothing to be done about it, I suppose.”)

What if he had pinged, even half a point? Would Howard have sent him to orientation therapy?

(“Well, there’s nothing to be done about it, I suppose.”)

At least now the government had banned electroshock and aversion therapy. And you had to self-enroll and be over eighteen years old; parents couldn’t ship their kids off at twelve anymore, like poor Brittney.

(“Well, there’s nothing to be done about it, I suppose.”)

Tony’d seen the pictures, read about the suicides: 67%. Howard had been a bit of a shit, but surely he hadn’t actually been that evil. Right?

Tony pressed his cheek against Pepper’s knee. She rubbed little circles at the base of his skull

Whatever. Mom would never have let Howard do it. (But if anything had happened to mom . . .)
She’d never had much of a chance to help him; Howard’d never had much chance to sabotage him. They’d both died seven months after he presented.

Someone patted clumsily at Tony’s shoulder. He looked up to find Rhodey smiling awkwardly down at him. You ok? Rhodey mouthed. Tony nodded and reached up to squeeze the man’s hand for a moment.

Something onscreen made Steve laugh out loud. Tony smiled and curled more closely against Pepper’s legs, trying to pick up the thread of the movie.

Everything was fine. He was with his family. His friends. His team.

And he could kneel if he wanted.

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yawned and blinked. Apparently he’d nodded off during Sabrina. Other than Sam and Rebecca, Tony hadn’t knelt with anybody—friend or lover—since . . . wow. Since Pep’s last visit? Maybe. It was nice.

Clint, Bruce, and Natasha were puttering around the kitchen. Rhodey was frowning at his phone, jabbing at it as he typed out a text. Pepper’s head was tipped back against the couch and she was breathing deeply, sound asleep.

“Have you seen these yet, James?” Mrs. Rhodes asked, flipping through her phone. “Your little cousin Benji had his presentation party last weekend.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Rhodes replied with a cordial nod.

And, yeah, that kinda made Tony pleased—that Steve said congratulations without asking how he’d presented, like it was a celebration either way. (Unlike Ho— No. Shit. What was with him today?)

Rhodey looked up from his phone, half-startled. “Wait, what?” Rhodey shook his head. “Benji? Man, he’s that old already?”

“If you were better about checking your email and Facebook, you wouldn’t miss these things,” his mother chided. Rhodey rubbed the back of his neck, looking guilty. He took his mother’s phone and blinked.

“No kidding?” Rhodey said, with a grin. “Rhodes family finally has its first boy sub.”

He flashed the photo at Tony. A grinning little boy with Rhodey’s nose and Mrs. Rhodes’ eyes sat in front of a gigantic cake, covered in candles. (White candles. White candles for subs—purity—and blue candles for Doms—honor.)

“Well,” Mrs. Rhodes said, with a subtle glance Tony’s way, “not quite the first.”

Rhodey, subtle as an aircraft carrier, turned to Tony with an even bigger grin, nodding effusively. “Yeah. Not quite the first, huh?”

Tony smiled and got to his feet twisting and stretching. (Fuck.) He knew what Mrs. Rhodes was doing. Knew why she chose that moment to show off those pictures, to reassure him and to—

Tony pressed a little kiss to Mrs. Rhodes’ cheek on the way past her. “I think it’s time to get some air,” he announced to the room at large, in a casual tone.

He fled, taking refuge on the balcony.

To be continued . . . .

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your support! Things have been rough in RL and your unflagging kindness means so much to me. This story is dear to me and it has been sad to be away from it for so long.

ps. So sorry I still haven’t written back to comments on chapter 30! Am trying to balance answering comments and writing the next chapter, but I promise you I cherish all your kind words! :-)
Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving Part II: still no turkey, but talking and bonding and more fluff than anybody asked for...

Chapter dedicated to thatwhichyields and all the kind and generous readers who have helped keep me motivated. You are wonderful!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Joy of Submission

Vol II: The Male Submissive

by Melissa Keller and Jonathan Schwartz

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----------------------------------------------------------------

To my darling boy who is becoming a man,

a small gift on the joyous occasion of your presenting

Remember—you can always talk to me about ANYTHING.

I'm delighted to have another sub in the family. I'm so proud of you, Tony. I love you more than I could ever say.

xoxo, mom

----------------------------------------------------------------

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A Bit About Biology: Presenting, puberty, and physical change

Exploring your body

What is submission?

It was cold outside, even wearing a thick sweater. He really should have gotten a jacket. JARVIS flipped on the heat lamps without asking. Tony shivered and leaned against the railing as he looked out at the New York skyline. His breath misted in the chill air.

It wasn’t very long before Tony heard the glass door slide open and closed again.

Tony held in a sigh. Mrs. Rhodes meant well. (Maybe she wouldn’t wanna talk about it outright? Or maybe it was Rhodey and--) Tony glanced over.

It was Steve.

Tony turned his attention hastily back to the skyline. If he ignored him, maybe Cap’d leave.

No luck. Steve wandered down the balcony a little ways, maybe six feet from Tony, then leaned against the railing to look up at the moon.

Tony braced himself for questions or an awkward ‘sure is nice out’ or something, but the moments turned into minutes and Steve just stood there silently, gazing at the moon, not even glancing in Tony’s direction. (Not that Tony kept glancing at him to find out or anything.)

Tony’s shivering abated as the heat lamps kicked into full swing. The air was crisp, cold but not punishing. Tony looked out at the dark expanse of Central Park. Over across the city, stood the mansion he’d grown up in, ostentatiously claiming a whole city block. He’d be going back there tomorrow morning. Back to where Mom and Howard--
“Wanna know what my old man said when I presented?”

Tony hadn’t meant to say anything but suddenly the words were pouring out of his mouth. Tony turned and Steve answered with a solemn nod.

“First round of tests, he said, ‘It’s obviously a mistake’ and patted me on the shoulder, but once they came back the same again and again—full sub—he wasn’t so confident. There was this new test—hypersensitive, just brought over from Geneva. His last hope.”

Tony laughed and shook his head, turning back to the cityscape.

“Looking at the final round of results Howard said, dazed—like he was in a state of shock—right in front of me, like I wasn’t even there anymore: ‘But he was supposed to change the world.’”

Tony grimaced. He could still see it, the look on Howard’s face as if—

“You have.”

Tony’s head snapped up: Steve looked embarrassed, glancing away as if he hadn’t meant to speak. Tony laughed, not the bitter ugly sound from before, and Steve turned with a tentative smile.

“Yeah,” Tony said, with a bit of a smirk, leaning his hip against the railing, “I guess I have a bit, haven’t I?”

Steve nodded and just looked at him, smiling. Tony glanced away, feeling uneasy. The silence stretched between them.

“It’s weird, you know?” Tony said eventually. “I was supposed to be you, and now here you are.”

“What?” Steve looked bewildered.

“I was small growing up,” Tony said, shrugging. With a laugh, he added, “Still am, I guess. But Howard always talked about how the greatest Dom he’d ever known had been small too at first, and I’d be a great Dom just like his best friend Captain America and on and on.” Tony swallowed. “I had posters of you in my room as a kid.”

(Of course, they came down when he’d presented; Cap was supposed to be his role model, not his pin-up fantasy.)

Steve swore under his breath. It sounded pained.

Tony wished he’d brought out a glass of scotch or something.

“Sorry,” Tony said, wishing he hadn’t spoken. “That’s not on you. I shouldn’t have said anything, just, it was weird, you know? Meeting you. The guy he wanted me to be. Just, you know . . . weird.”

Tony waved a hand dismissively, trying to find a way to change the subject, when Steve blurted:

“He didn’t even like me.”

“What?”

“Howard. I didn’t even think he liked me.”

“Really?” Tony asked, intrigued. It seemed impossible.

“Yeah. I can’t believe he called me his best friend.”

Steve hastened to add, “Not that we didn’t go on some missions together and get along okay. I liked him fine—I did—but just . . .” Steve frowned. “I could never shake the feeling I was this fascinating experiment to him, proof of his genius. And he was so worldly and sophisticated and beyond brilliant, and I was just this—”

Steve cut himself off, shaking his head. “Sorry.”

Tony stared at him. (Holy shit. My old man made Captain America feel inadequate.) Part of him wanted to laugh.

Steve turned to Tony, with his full on Earnest Face. “Tony, I’m sorry. I didn’t know— He, uh, I mean—” He fumbled along awkwardly until Tony cut in, waving his hand.

“No, no don’t. It’s fine. Wasn’t so bad, really,” Tony said, suddenly self-conscious. (Jesus, it was decades ago. Poor little rich kid.) “And Mom was great.”

(‘Great.’ How fucking inadequate was that?)

“What was it like when you presented?” Tony asked, at once curious and eager to shift attention from himself. “Were you relieved? To be a Dom?”

Tony let out a little snort. “Sounds like you were more willing to be a sub in the thirties than I was in the eighties. How fucked up is that?”

“It’s not the same,” Steve said, adamantly. “I was just a poor kid from Brooklyn. I wasn’t heir to an empire or famous or anything.”

And there had been a point not that long ago when Tony would have thought his whole “just a poor kid from Brooklyn” line was false modesty or a jab at Tony for his wealth and privilege. Now he knew Steve meant every word, neither proud nor ashamed, just stating a fact as he saw it.

“I mean,” Steve went on, “nobody was gonna care how I presented. There was no Howard. And if I’dda been a sub, it wouldn’t have been a surprise—we always figured I’d be inverted.”

Tony suppressed a wince.

“Uh, Steve?” Tony said, “We don’t say ‘inverted’ anymore. It’s considered pretty offensive, actually, since it implies there’s a right way to present and Femme Dommes and male subs turned out wrong.”

Steve was giving him that startled look of his: big blue eyes, tight drawn eyebrows. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean—”

“No, no,” Tony cut him off. “I know you didn’t. Just, I figured you’d want to know. If you want to talk about Femme Dommes and male subs as a group, we usually say ‘minority orientation,’ or ‘presented minority.’ Not a value judgment, just statistically more rare. Get it?”


“So, what did everybody think when you turned out a Dom?” Tony asked, hoping for a distraction. He took a couple of steps down the balcony, closer to Steve.

Steve shrugged and turned to him. “Mom just kinda blinked and then said, ‘I only have white candles for you.’” He smiled, gaze going soft at the memory. “But our friend, Mr. Schultz, brought a beautiful cake, a huge lekach, and he covered it with dark blue candles. He even brought hamentashen for everybody. Not that we needed many; it wasn’t a big party or anything. Just me, mom, Mr. Schultz and . . . Bucky. Father Gabe dropped by too.”

Steve looked lost in thought, expression wistful for a moment, then concluded with a shrug, “It was lovely.”

Tony was brimming with curiosity, but struggling to formulate a question, when Steve turned to him and said, “I bet you had a really swell cake and—” He’d begun smiling, but looked uncertain as he finished, “—a great party?” His voice trailed up, almost a question.

Tony shrugged. “My presentation cake was some huge seven layer monstrosity: lacy vanilla icing and a bazillion white candles. And Mom wanted to do some sort of chic soirée with a ton of society guests, but Howard put his foot down. Said presenting was just biology; it wasn’t an accomplishment to be proud of.”

(Of course, he just meant being a sub wasn’t something to be proud of.)

Tony shook his head laughed, at least partly with sincere amusement. “At least he saved me from some hideous cotillion. I’d have hated it. So, there’s that.”

Steve was frowning, pensive, but Tony didn’t want to talk about Howard anymore, so he hurried to say, “So, was Bucky surprised that you were a Dom?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered softly, “he was surprised.”

Steve’s expression went pinched as he stared at the skyline.

(Shit! Why’d you ask about the guy he’s mourning, stupid?) Tony bit his lip, wondering if he should apologize. Change the subject? Suggest they go inside to join the others? (Shit.)

“I told you, right, that I presented real late?” Steve asked quietly, turning his gaze to Tony again. His eyes flicked down to the arc reactor and Tony realized he’d been tapping at it nervously. Tony placed both hands firmly on the rails and nodded.

Steve continued: “It took ages for me to show even a hint of a Dominant’s notch, and we figured my voice was breaking because I’d been so sick on and off that spring. We only found out I’d presented ‘cause mom sent in a round of tests to be sure I was really over the sweats and could go back to school; they saw the spiked Domosterone in the results and let her know.”
Steve swallowed thickly. “Bucky was working two jobs after school, so I wasn’t seeing him much then. I left a note for him at Magdalene House, just saying that I’d presented and my party was on Sunday at eight. I wanted to see his expression when he found out.” Steve sighed.

“I didn’t stop to wonder until years later, if maybe that ‘punched in the gut’ look on his face wasn’t just shock when he saw the blue candles.”

Steve shook his head. “He disappeared on me for a while after that. Started chasing skirts left and right all of a sudden, became a real smooth ladies’ man. Always ladies.”

Steve sighed and smiled a sad little smile.

“It was years later, talking to Father Gabe, I finally wondered if all those times as kids Buck had talked about the two of us opening a shop, going to California, just him and me ‘til the end of the line, if—” Steve swallowed and his hands went tight on the railing for a moment. “--if maybe he’d been picturing it different from me.”

“So, yeah,” Steve said, voice heavy, “he was surprised.”

The wind whipped up suddenly and Tony shivered.

“It’s getting cold,” Steve said. “I think I’ll head in now.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Good idea. I’ll be in in a minute.”

Steve nodded and turned away. Tony listened to the glass door sliding open and shut.

He took a long deep breath and let it out very slowly.

(Heavy shit.)

He took another breath. (Jesus.) Steve. Bucky. (Fuck.) He was tapping the arc reactor again.

Pepper’d be proud, though, right? They’d finally talked about Howard! And wouldn’t you know it, dear old dad was even a condescending dick to the man he later called his best friend. Name-dropping bastard. Tony grimaced.

Tony could hear laughter inside, even through the thick glass.

Yeah, time to go in.

Pepper had woken up to chat with Rhodey on the couch. Natasha and Clint were on the loveseat having a tete-a-tete while Bruce, Mrs. Rhodes, and Steve stood in the kitchen.

“There you are, dear,” Mrs. Rhodes said as he entered. “We were just discussing your bird.”

“Uh, is that a euphemism?”

She frowned at him. “No. Tony, dear, you bought a thirty pound turkey. Do you have any idea how long that’s going to take to roast?”

“No?” Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“So,” she said, mouth quirking up a little, “I take it you didn’t invent a new type of oven to roast it efficiently?”

“No,” Tony said haltingly, “But if I started now—”

Mrs. Rhodes patted his hand reassuringly and shook her head, clearly amused. (Oh, right. She was teasing.) “Don’t be silly, dear. The oven you have is fine. Just want to be sure there isn’t an arc reactor in there to mess up the timing on my pies.”

“Nope! Just an oven,” Tony assured her. “But if you wanted a special oven and could describe—”

Mrs. Rhodes shook her head and waved a hand to shush him, then turned to Steve. “Well, Captain, you’ll have to get an early start on that beast. I hear you volunteered to roast it.”

“Well, sure,” Steve said uncertainly, “I mean, yes, but I’m sure you have far more experience and—”

“With a thirty pound turkey?” Mrs. Rhodes said incredulously. “I don’t think much of anybody has experience with that. But we can calculate it, I’m sure. Now, Bruce, you were going to make the green beans, right? And a green salad?”

Tony drifted away from the kitchen as Mrs. Rhodes marshaled her troops and gave them their marching orders. She knew better than to let Tony cook—Christmas 1991 has pretty much put an end to that. (What? He’d paid for the damage!)

“It’s really not a bad sign, Rhodey!” Pepper was saying.
“What’s not?” Tony asked, plopping on the couch between them.

Rhodey sighed. “Miranda. She was supposed to be here, but she bailed at the last minute.”

“For a good reason.” Pepper cut in.

“Yeah, just—” Rhodey sighed again and explained to Tony, “So, her best friend from grad school, Jen, was engaged to be married this spring and two days ago her fiancé dumped her. Out of the blue, just walked out, called off the wedding, and took back his collar.”

“Shit,” Tony swore. “No offence, but this girl, uh?” He waved a hand.

“Jen.”

“Yeah, Jen seriously needs her more than you do right now.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Rhodey said, “But I offered to come with her, and she said no.”

“Come on, Rhodey! You’re smarter than that,” Tony said. “Of course she said no.”

“But we never get to see each other,” Rhodey protested. “Between her teaching schedule and me overseas—”

“Rhodey, the last thing her friend needs to see right now is a new couple in the honeymoon phase!” Pepper cut in.

“Please say you were cool about it,” Tony said. “It’s good she takes care of her friends! That’s a good thing.”

“Yeah, no. You’re right,” Rhodey said a little sullenly.

“Please say you were cool,” Tony repeated.

“Yeah, I think so.” Rhodey sighed. “I just really wanted her to meet you.”

And, yeah, that made Tony feel warm and jealous all at the same time. (Shit. It’s serious.)

“Hey, where is she anyway?” Tony asked.

“Williams College. In Massachusetts.”

“Hell, man, that’s not far! Have Miranda tell you if she gets a little time free. Like, once Jen’s cried herself to sleep, you could swing by in War Machine!”

“You think?” Rhodey asked hopefully.

“Yes!” Pepper frowned at Tony, then said firmly, “Or if you’re going to try that, don’t ask. Just tell her that you can get to Williams in—however long it takes—if she would like you to. But that if she’s too busy with her friend you understand.”

“Er, yeah,” Tony said with a grimace. “You should probably listen to Pepper on this stuff.”

“James?” Mrs. Rhodes said, coming over to them. “It’s getting late and we’ll have a long day tomorrow. I’m heading to bed.”

Rhodey gave his mom a hug and a fond, “’G’night, mom.”

“You got settled in the guest suite okay, right?” Tony asked. “Sorry! I should have showed you instead of JARVIS. Does it have everything you need? I can—”

“It’s lovely, dear,” Mrs. Rhodes cut him off and wrapped him in her arms. She held him in a long, lingering hug. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Mrs. Rhodes, ever a trendsetter, started the chain of good nights. One by one, Bruce, Natasha, and Clint took their leave. Steve lingered a few moments, then waved kinda awkwardly at the couch and said, “Good night! See you tomorrow.”

“Well,” Pepper said, getting up and stretching. “I guess it is time for bed.”

Rhodey nodded agreement.

“What? No!” Tony cried. “You’re kidding me with this shit, right? How often are the three of us actually together?”

“Tony, it’s been a rough quarter,” Pepper protested.

“All the more reason!” Tony grabbed a bottle of scotch. She smiled.

“All right, man,” Rhodey said with a grin. “But just one drink.”
The Joy of Submission

Section II:
Support networks: family, friends, and fellow subs

Discovering your preferences

Dating Dominants: fact and fiction

Communication, communication, communication!

Consent, safewords, and silent alarms

Domination vs. Abuse: recognizing the warning signs

“Hey, Pep?” Tony said, pouring them each a generous scotch. “What’s going on with What’s-His-Face? That guy.”


“That sucks,” Rhodey said, patting her hand awkwardly.

“What?” Tony cried. “I thought he was promising.”

“Me too,” Pepper grumbled. “Turned out he was an asshole.”

“Well, shit.” Tony frowned and nudged her glass closer. “Uh, drink?”

“Just really wish she were here, you know?” Rhodey said, gazing into his scotch. “You’d like her, Tones. She’s super fucking tough. You know, people think the Humanities are all sub-friendly and shit, but not History. That shit is still fucking Dominated, and twice as bad in military history. She’s up for tenure soon and they still ask Miranda to do the catering!”

“Fucking bullshit,” Tony agreed, pouring them another round.

“And, Jesus!” Rhodey cried, waving his hands. “Her advisor at Harvard propositioned her!”

Pepper scowled. “That’s disgusting.”

“Makes me wanna go down there in War Machine and give him a piece of my mind,” Rhodey said, throwing back the scotch. A dopey grin spread across his face: “Except Miranda’d rip my balls off if I tried it.” He sounded incredibly pleased. “You’re gonna like her, Tones. You too, Pepper.”

“Well, I’ll drink to that!” Pepper said raising her glass.

“And it’s same in the boardroom!” Pepper cried, she waved her glass and a little scotch sloshed over the right edge. “As if I need double Domosterone to run Stark Industries! It’s like I can’t let my guard down for even a minute!”

“We have awesome vacation benefits!” Scotch sloshed over the left edge. “I know: I overhauled that program! But when did I actually manage a proper vacation, huh?”

“Damn straight!” Tony cried.

He poured them another round.

“To shoddy journalism! To the dubious morals of tabloids! The smarm of celebrity rags!” Tony cried. “Fuckwits all!”

“Yeah,” Rhodey sighed heavily. His shoulders slumped.

Pepper’s face went tight. “Tony, I’m so sorry that they—”

“No,” Tony cut her off, raising his glass. “No talking. Just venting. And drinking! Shots!”

They’d switched to gin when the scotch ran out.

“Shots,” Pepper and Rhodey agreed solemnly.
“Okay! Happy things! Miranda and Rhodey!” Tony got shakily to his feet, glass raised high. “To bringing down Lang Inc! The liberationist coup! The Avengers!”

“Hear, hear!” Pepper and Rhodey answered, clinking their glasses together.

“JARVIS! Give us some music!” Tony demanded. “I want Britney and Beyonce!”

“Of course, sir.”

“JARVIS!” Tony called out on sudden inspiration around one in the morning. “Wake everybody up! Let’s share this party!”

“NO!” Rhodey yelled, waving his arms. “Belay that order, JARVIS! Do NOT wake up my mother.”


“Toooooonny,” Pepper whined from her perch on the coffee table. “You said you’d sing with me!”

Things had gotten pleasantly fuzzy halfway through the gin, but Tony was pretty sure he and Pepper were bouncing on the table together, belting out “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” when the other Avengers arrived.

Though maybe it had been when Rhodey, yielding to Tony’s entreaties, had been passionately flailing his way through “Smooth Criminal.” (Again, fuzzy.) Rhodey really was a terrible dancer, but he loved Michael Jackson.

“I believe we’re behind,” Natasha said to Clint as she fetched Tony’s vodka from the bar.

“If you think I’m going to try and out vodka a Russian, you’ve got another thing comin’,” Clint called.

Bruce mumbled something about multivitamins and maybe just one G&T; he was wearing a gigantic plaid dressing gown over matching pajamas.

(Wait. Wait, where was—?)

“Tony!” Pepper called, grabbing his wrist. “Dance with me! JARVIS, give us something good!”

JARVIS chose “All the Single Ladies.” Pepper cried out in delight and started singing along as Tony did his best to recreate the famous dance. Pep gave a little catcall and swatted Tony playfully on the hip as he put on a show for her. Alcohol tended to loosen him up, so his hip action was pretty fucking fantastic—until he overbalanced and crashed right into Pepper, who saved him from falling off the table. She clung to him, giggling as she lowered them both to a seated position.

“Shit. Shit. Tony, Tony, Tooooneeeee.”

It was Rhodey: kind, strong Rhodey! Tony loved that guy!

“Tony,” Rhodey said, very very seriously, leaning heavily on the table, “you’re drunk. You’re—we’re—we’re really drunk. Water. You need to water. More. Here. I’m—I’m gonna . . . gonna get you some water.”


“Uh, how about I bring all of you some water?” a familiar voice chimed in.

(Steve!)

Tony smiled, then frowned. (Shit. Steve. Steve was there.) Tony took stock of himself. At some point he’d ditched his button-down shirt, leaving only a threadbare tank top. He felt this was a problem somehow. A Steve problem, but he couldn’t remember why.

“Here. How about drinking some water?”

Tony stared the glass of water for a moment, then took it carefully in both hands and focused on drinking it. Pepper was a comfortable weight at his back. Still bobbing along to “Single Ladies,” she almost made him spill. (It was a good thing drinking a glass of water didn’t usually call for so much attention.)

“Pepper? Jim? I brought water for you too.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey said, “Good idea.”

Rhodey promptly offered Tony his glass of water.
“No, no,” Steve said, “That one’s for you. Tony already has some water. See?”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Okay.” Rhodey drank deeply from the cup. “Hey, Steve, have you heard any Michael Jackson yet? ’cause he’s the shit.”

At some point, Tony made his way to the couch and sat watching the team. (His team.) Pepper was flailing around (or maybe trying to dance with?) Natasha who was holding a nearly empty bottle of vodka, looking perfectly poised and sober. Clint was showing an owlish-looking Bruce how to make some fancy cocktail, lecturing loudly in slightly slurred tones about the proper use of egg whites. And Rhodey, well, Rhodey was trying to teach Steve how to moonwalk. It was not going well. Rhodey was far from smooth under the influence, and though Steve was making a game attempt, he was horribly stiff-limbed. (But he was so graceful in the training room . . .) Steve glanced over at Tony; his ears turned pink.

Tony smiled at them all and let himself drift.

“Here,” Steve said, sitting down next to Tony on the couch and holding out a cup. “Better have some more water.”

(Oh yeah. Steve.) Tony drank the entire glass of water then dropped it on the floor, frowning.

(Shit. Steve.)

“Steve, I—” Tony bit his lip. “I’m sorry. About . . . about before.”

Tony wasn’t sure if he meant for asking about Bucky or something else, but looking at Steve he felt a wave of regret.

Steve just looked at him, puzzled. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that, so it was a good thing Rhodey started calling out, “Hey! Hey, Tones! I’m gonna call Miranda!”

“No!” Tony cried. He slapped Steve on the arm. “Don’t. Don’t let him.”

“Uh, should I go take his phone?”


“Hey, Jim? Could you let me see that for a second?”

Steve left to intervene.

Soon thereafter, Tony fell asleep.

“I’m pretty sure he’s fine sleeping on the couch, Jim.”

“Nah. Gotta . . . gotta help ’im t’ bed. ’s m’job.”

A warm, strong hand settled on Tony’s shoulder.

“Tones?” Rhodey’s voice was too loud, though obviously trying to be quiet. “Time for bed!”

Tony wiggled closer. “Sleepin’,” he protested. (Mmm. Rhodey pillow.)

“Nuh-uh,” Rhodey said. “Gonna . . . gonna help ya t’bed.”

“I really think he’d be fine right there,” Steve objected again as Rhodey started trying to pull Tony up off the couch. He overbalanced and stumbled, flopping back down. After a moment’s fumbling, Rhodey got his shoulder under Tony’s arm and started to heft him up.

“ ‘C’m, Tones. Bed,” Rhodey coaxed.

“Ok, ok,” Tony mumbled, offering loose-limbed compliance. They staggered off the couch and nearly toppled—

“Oh, geeze!”

—but then there was another strong hand on Tony’s shoulder. His cheek squashed up against a firm chest.

“Hey, how about I give you both a hand, okay?”

“Mmm,” Tony murmured.

“ ‘C’m, Tones,” Rhodey mumbled into Tony’s hair, pulling Tony’s arm over his shoulder.

“Member at MIT?”
“Mmm-hmm.”

(Mmm. Rhodey. Rhodey was the best.)

Slowly and awkwardly, half-leaning on Rhodey, Tony stumbled along to the elevator, then down the hall. (Why was his bedroom so far from the elevator, anyway?) They started to tip forward, but—

“Careful! Okay, I’ve got you, Jim. Here we go.”

Tony and Rhodey resumed their awkward shuffle. Once they finally reached his bedroom, Tony let himself go boneless and flopped face-first on the bed. (Ouph. Should’a done that more gently . . .)

“Ok, Tones,” Rhodey said, rubbing Tony’s shoulder blades. “Bed.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Missed you, buddy.”

Already drifting off to sleep, Tony heard Rhodey staggering away.

A moment later someone un-tucked the duvet and folded the covers over him, saying a soft:

“Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I was eager to share more of this story with you! Comments are cherished and inspiring! If you had a favorite bit in this chapter I’d love to hear it!

Also, FYI: On my 16th birthday, my mother gave me a copy of The Joy of Sex with an almost identical inscription. My mom is awesome.

Thanks to evil_kneazle whose astute comment inspired some of Mrs. Rhodes’ dialogue! :-)

Also, there is now a flashback story about Steve’s Presentation Day, told from Bucky’s POV. You can read it, here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/4474262
“Sir?” JARVIS called. “Sir, I am very sorry to wake you, but it is noon.”

Tony’s head ached and his stomach roiled.

“You are expected at the Safehouse in roughly an hour.”

“Guhhhh,” Tony mumbled into the blankets.

“There is a glass of water and two ibuprofen on your nightstand.”

“Mmmmm,” Tony mumbled. He pulled the covers over his head.

“You should depart in roughly thirty minutes to avoid being late.”

“Uh-huh.”

A long pause.

“Do you require assistance, sir? Shall I summon Mrs. Rhodes?”

“No!” Tony tossed the covers back abruptly, then winced. Maryanne Rhodes disapproved of excess.

“I’m up,” Tony insisted.

“May I remind you that you have a glass of water and two ibuprofen on your nightstand?”

“Thanks, J.” Tony swallowed the pills with small, careful sips of water. He took stock of himself.

A bit hungover, but all in all not so bad; he was pretty sure it wouldn’t show today. And in the end it was nothing a little time and a few pills couldn’t cure.

Tony smiled. Oh Rhodey and his obsession with giving Tony water when drunk! It was sweet of him to leave painkillers and water, though Tony was kind of surprised that Rhodey’d had the presence of mind for it, really, considering he’d been pretty smashed too. Tony remembered both of them nearly falling down while Rhodey was helping him to bed and—

Tony froze. He looked at the glass of water.

(Steve.)

Tony searched back through his slightly clouded memory. He was pretty sure that Steve had been the one helping Rhodey put Tony to bed. And he was probably the one who left the water and ibuprofen too.

Tony’s cheeks heated.

Shit. Yeah, that was pretty embarrassing. It was one thing for Rhodey to do it—he’d been looking after Tony’s drunken ass since he was too young to drink, so it was practically tradition—but Steve . . .

Tony was nearly forty, for fuck’s sake! He oughtta be able to hold his liquor by now. (After all, he’d had lots of practice.) And for Steve who was, shit, like fifteen years younger, to be hauling him to bed . . . that was just ridiculous.

Tony sighed. At least he was still wearing his jeans.

“Sir, it is now ten after.”

Normally, Tony’d serve JARVIS some sass right about then, but the hangover was a bit of a distraction. He shuffled to the bathroom.

He definitely needed a shower. His hair was a mess and his eyes still looked a smidge bloodshot.

His tank top was gross and sweaty and—

Tony paused. The tank top was threadbare—leaving the light and the contours of the arc reactor clearly visible—and it drooped low, revealing the topmost scarring, thick and knotted. (Shit.)
He took a deep breath and let it out. He turned on the shower, nice and hot, and stripped.

Whatever. Everybody knew it was there. It was fine that the team—(and Steve)—had seen it.

It was fine. Everything was fine.

"Hey, JARVIS? Ask the new guy to grab me some breakfast for the car, would ya? Gotta get this show on the road. And coffee! Lots of coffee!"

"Already taken care of, sir."

The Onion

Staff at the Cincinnati soup kitchen, Our Daily Bread, say that they couldn’t be more pleased by the Thanksgiving volunteer turnout. “It’s just great to see so many people giving up a whole five hours of their time on Thanksgiving,” said the kitchen’s founder, Angela Picola. “They’ll shake the dirty-handed homeless then, without even washing that hand, some of them turn around to pat themselves on the back!”

Volunteers could be seen spilling out the doors of the overwhelmed kitchen, tenderly taking pictures of themselves with the less fortunate and posting them on Instagram and Facebook.

“Of course, it’s normally just me and Angela,” said young Sam Daniels, who also runs an outreach program for African American youth. “Usually, the two of us do all the kitchen prep, and the cooking, and the cleanup of making dinner for about sixty people a day. It’s a real treat to have so many well-off white people here on Thanksgiving, vaguely peeling carrots, being confused by scrub brushes, and taking pictures!”

Asked if they might like to have a few extra volunteers on every shift, rather than 120 on Thanksgiving, Picola shrugged, “Well, sure, I guess. But we can’t actually expect people to do that. On Thanksgiving, I’m just thankful to see how many people care so much, for five hours every year.”

Happy had gone to New Jersey to spend Thanksgiving with his folks, so the new guy, Francis, had volunteered to drive Tony over the holiday weekend. (Tony was famous for his generous holiday pay, after all.) Francis was a very slow, very cautious driver and, since he was still recovering from his hangover, Tony was grateful.

Tony slumped heavily back into the rich padded leather as they made their way from the former Stark Mansion. The Safehouse was always exhausting. In a lot of ways, it was good. Good to see that ostentatious house providing a safe haven to so many people. To see the older subs looking out for the younger ones. Tony had a special soft spot for the teens, often male subs who’d run away from home.

In theory, Tony came on Thanksgiving to help with the preparations, but mostly he just wandered around and chatted with people, trying to keep the atmosphere chill. He joked about what a terrible cook he was and told silly stories about being banned from various kitchens, his mother’s included. He’d be back in a couple of weeks to help with another workshop on coding and basic programming, something he was far more comfortable with. (One of the Safehouse’s best innovations—they most disadvantaged guests were far more likely to get back on their feet with new job training.) In fact, he’d spent longer than he’d intended to holed up in the library with a group of guests who’d asked him to take a look at their code and to take them through the Stark Industries hiring procedure and standard interview questions. (Even on a holiday, many of them were hard at work.) They’d been short on career development volunteers lately—Tony’s talk to Isaac about hiring more staff.

Not that all the subs at Safehouse were more broadly disadvantaged and needed career training. Isaac had told him once about a beautiful sub in her forties, a top-notch accountant. She showed up in a crisp business suit carrying a briefcase and offering to volunteer her services for the Foundation, then asking softly if she could stay the night. She was afraid to go home.

Tony’s stomach felt tight; it wasn’t the hangover.

Various people asked him to say for dinner, but it always felt like an intrusion and he declined politely. Tony both loved and hated spending time at the Safehouse. The employees and volunteers swore up and down that he was always welcome, that their guests were always happy to see him, but it felt so hideously awkward. But not just awkward—gross, like he was some disgusting parasite, swooping in to use their tragedies and hardships to make himself feel like a good man, not just another rich asshole. Like he was showing up to collect his due of gratitude and groveling. To force himself on their consciousness and remind them just who paid for what, and whose house that was, just by being there, no matter what he actually said or did.

Tony sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“You all right back there, sir?” Francis asked. “Need me to go more slowly?”
“No. No, thanks,” Tony said, “I’m fine.”

(He closed his eyes and tried to nod off.)

(Mom would have loved the Safehouse . . .)

“Penthouse, J,” Tony called when he got back to the Tower, then thought better of it and asked, “Actually, where’s Pep?”

“On the communal floor, Sir.”

“Okay, let’s head there instead.”

Steve, Bruce, and Mrs. Rhodes were clustered together in the kitchen, deep in conversation. Rhodey, Clint, and Natasha were out on the balcony under the heat lamps; and Pepper was stretched out across the couch, book in hand and washcloth on her forehead. After a moment’s hesitation, Tony crossed the room to squeeze in next to her on the couch.

“How’s the hangover?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said with a shrug. “You?”

“No real regrets even if he’d had a rude awakening. At least, no regrets caused by the hangover.”

(No real regrets even if he’d had a rude awakening. At least, no regrets caused by the hangover.)

It had been great to see Pep and Rhodey unwind. They clearly did it so infrequently. The team, though . . . He wasn’t sure--

“How was the Safehouse?” Pepper asked.

“Fine,” Tony said, curling up to put his head on Pep’s stomach. He breathed steadily in and out, matching his breaths to hers. Pepper turned her gaze back to her book, reading while she waited.

(No real regrets even if he’d had a rude awakening. At least, no regrets caused by the hangover.)

Then he sat up a little and added with a wry smile, “I’ve done way more demanding stuff way more hungover. Their coding lessons still seem to be going well, but I think we need more tutors. Isaac and I have a meeting soon, so we’ll work it out.” Tony adjusted his cuffs, then added, “Gina asked me to bring the Avengers around.”

“Funny you should mention that,” Pepper said, bookmarking her reading. “Nat and I were talking earlier and she had an idea. She suggested that the Avengers could offer a self-defense class at the Safehouse. Something designed specially for the subs there.”

“Yeah,” Tony said eventually, “It was fine.”

Then he sat up a little and added with a wry smile, “I’ve done way more demanding stuff way more hungover. Their coding lessons still seem to be going well, but I think we need more tutors. Isaac and I have a meeting soon, so we’ll work it out.” Tony adjusted his cuffs, then added, “Gina asked me to bring the Avengers around.”

“Funny you should mention that,” Pepper said, bookmarking her reading. “Nat and I were talking earlier and she had an idea. She suggested that the Avengers could offer a self-defense class at the Safehouse. Something designed specially for the subs there.”

“Oh, Nat had an idea, did she?” Tony asked. He shook his head incredulously. “I still can’t believe how buddy-buddy you are with her now, after— Well, you know.”

Pep flashed him her shark grin. “Oh, Natalie Rushman and I reached an understanding while you were in the hospital.”

Pep could be truly terrifying when she wanted to be. He inquired no further.

Pepper continued: “Anyway, we floated the possibility to the Captain and he had a few ideas too. Seemed very enthusiastic.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tony said with some reluctance, “but we already did a self-defense class.”

“Well sure,” Pepper agreed, “But, you’re The Avengers! People pay thousands of dollars to attend lavish benefits where they’ll get a chance to meet you. Even if they don’t learn any particularly unique moves, I think the Safehouse residents would enjoy the experience.”

“Okay,” Tony said, pensively, “I’ll talk to Gina.”

Steve approached from the kitchen. Tony tensed up with nerves and hoped Pepper couldn’t tell. He forced himself to relax.

“Hi, Tony,” Steve said, giving him a warm smile, his voice a little soft.

“Hey,” Tony said, trying to be casual. Unembarrassed.

“Dinner won’t be ready for quite a while,” Steve told him with an apologetic smile, “but we’ve got lots of snacks if you’re hungry. Can I get you anything?”
“Nah, I’m good,” Tony said, waving his hand. “I snacked at the Safehouse.”

And Steve’s smile changed at the mention of it, somehow softer and warmer.

“That’s good,” Steve said. He paused then asked, “Uh, how are you feeling?”

“Me?” Tony said, eyebrows raised. “Fine. I’ve felt great all day,” he lied. It was on the tip of his tongue to protest that he hadn’t been that drunk, but it was such a cliché it could only make him look worse.

“Well,” Steve said, looking surprised, “that’s good. Pepper, can I get you anything?”

“A cup of tea would be lovely,” she said.

“Sure thing. Milk and sugar?”

“Yes, please. Just a dash.”

“Be right back.”

Pepper smiled at Tony. “Mild headache aside, I’m glad we got a chance to celebrate last night.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, returning her smile. “Me too.”

“Wish I had some of our duets on video,” Pepper added, sounding amused. “For private consumption only, of course.”

“Yeah,” he agreed faintly. (Shit.) He was pretty sure the whole team had seen him doing his best stripper dance, shaking his booty left and right on the table and maybe gyrating about the living room. Tony’s cheeks flushed with unwilling embarrassment. (Whatever. There was nothing to be embarrassed about, damn it. He hadn’t done anything wrong.) Tony curled up around Pepper again, trying to hide his blush.

(Not wrong, but still. Not exactly professional behavior.)

Tony tapped absently at the arc reactor.

(But that didn’t matter now. They were friends.)

Tony frowned.

“Hey, are you ok?” Pepper asked, looking concerned. Tony stopped his tapping abruptly.

“Yeah. Of course.”

Pepper raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

“I . . .” Tony hesitated. “Some of last night’s a little . . . fuzzy. Just hoping I didn’t do anything to embarrass myself.”

“Tony, we were all letting off steam. It was a party.” Pepper’s eyes flicked to the kitchen, and she added: “If anybody would judge you for it, they have poor judgment. And that’s not on you.”

Tony bristled and sat up again. “I know that.”

“Here you go, Pepper,” Steve said as he approached with a steaming mug. “Are you sure I can’t bring you anything, Tony?”

“Nah, I’ll skip the spoilers. I’ll see it when it’s done.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, smiling again. He glanced down at his watch—an actual wristwatch—and said, “Well, time to baste.”

Tony watched as Steve stopped to exchange a few words with Mrs. Rhodes before heading to the elevator.
“Later, Pep,” Tony said, hopping off the couch and sauntering to the kitchen. Mrs. Rhodes was rolling out piecrusts, wearing a red-and-white-checkered apron she’d wisely brought from home.

“You make the best pies,” Tony said. “Can’t buy pies as good as yours—trust me, I’ve tried.” Mrs. Rhodes shook her head. “I’m making all your favorites already; no need to butter me up. Enough butter in the crust.”

Tony chuckled. “You’re as terrible with compliments as I am.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Rhodes said, sprinkling more flour on the counter.

“So,” Tony said, bumping his hip playfully against hers. She swatted him away with a little shooing noise that made Tony grin. He leaned back against the kitchen counter. “You don’t seem especially overwhelmed to be cooking Thanksgiving dinner alongside Captain America. Not impressed to meet a living legend?”

Mrs. Rhodes set down her rolling pin. She turned to give him a look, mouth quirked and one eyebrow raised. “Honey,” she said, the vowels drawn out. She shook her head. Then she lifted her chin and said a little fiercely, “My son is Lt. Colonel James Rhodes, War Machine.” Her look softened as she added, “And my other boy is Iron Man. Takes a hell of a lot to impress me.”

With that, Mrs. Rhodes turned back to her piecrusts.

Of course, she’d said things like that before—plenty of times—yet it always left Tony wrong-footed, touched but awkward.

“Honey, my hands are a mess,” she said, breaking the moment. “Get some ice from the freezer for me, would you?”

Tony hastened to comply.

“I’ll say this for Thanksgiving at the Tower,” Mrs. Rhodes said. “It sure is nice to have enough ovens! It’s always a pain with just one. And considering the bird you got?! Well, I’d have had to make all the pies yesterday.” She chuckled. “Captain Rogers is a fair hand in the kitchen, to my surprise—I’ll give him that—but left to his own devices I fear we’d have been eating that bird of yours at midnight. Good thing I was here.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “He seems nervous about it.”

“I’d say that’s understandable,” she said with a shrug, then added matter-of-factly, “He wants to impress you.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that, so he reached out to pinch off a piece of the piecrust and popped it into his mouth. (Mmm. Buttery.) Mrs. Rhodes scowled.

“My mama would have rapped my hand with the rolling pin if I’d tried something like that.”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, but you’re too nice.”

“Oh, go on!” she cried, waving her rolling pin at him. “Get out of my kitchen!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tony said, still grinning as he retreated with hands held up in surrender.

“If you want to pester somebody’s cooking, go pester the Captain!” Mrs. Rhodes added as Tony walked away. He paused.

(Steve had invited him to come see the turkey.)

Tony turned his steps towards the elevator, but as the doors closed he hesitated. Tony bit his lip.

“Workshop, JARVIS.”

And was it all in his head or did JARVIS’s habitual “sir” sound distinctly disapproving?

After an hour of tinkering with Dummy in faithful attendance, the tension had eased somewhat from Tony’s shoulders. The Safehouse was fine. His teammates were fine. (Probably.) He doubted anyone had noticed his absence yet, brief as it was, but he’d hate to disappoint Rhodey or Pepper, so he hopped on the elevator.

When he reached the penthouse kitchen, he found everyone had been put to work. Natasha and Pepper were coring and slicing apples, while Steve, Rhodey, and Clint peeled a mountain of potatoes nearby. Bruce was showing Mrs. Rhodes five heads of some wholesome looking greens. They were playing The Beatles again: “Hey you’ve got to hide your love away / How can I even try / I can never win . . .”

“Here you are, dear,” Mrs. Rhodes said catching sight of Tony, “I was starting to wonder where
“There you are, dear,” Mrs. Rhodes said catching sight of Tony, “I was starting to wonder where you’d gotten to.”

Steve looked up at Tony with a brilliant smile.

(Beautiful.)

“So, any jobs for me?” Tony asked Mrs. Rhodes, though he really despised cooking.

Rhodey laughed. “Can you be trusted?” he teased. “I seem to remember a fire and a——”

“Once! One time!” Tony squawked.

“You can start dicing those potatoes.” Mrs. Rhodes said. She set a cutting board and a kitchen knife down at the empty spot next to Steve. “We’ll be boiling and mashing them in a bit, so just make them into cubes like this.”

“Oui, mon capitane!” Tony said, saluting Maryanne Rhodes and grabbing the potato Steve had just peeled. Pepper was humming along to The Beatles:

Help me if you can, I'm feeling down
And I do appreciate you being 'round
Help me get my feet back on the ground
Won't you please, please help me

Tony just couldn’t resist ribbing Clint a bit—he’d taken Hawkeye for a Stones type—and soon they were bickering playfully the age-old question of Beatles vs. Stones, each trying to win Steve over.

Steve listened with amused interest, occasionally asking questions that made Rhodey laugh and Mrs. Rhodes smile, things like “But The Beatles and The Rolling Stones are both after Michael Jackson, right?”

Soon the whole team was giving Steve a mini-history of pop music, calling requests out to JARVIS, and fact-checking wikipedia for disputed trivia. Potatoes were diced. Apples were sliced. Mrs. Rhodes’ orders were followed with prompt obedience.

To Tony’s surprise, every few minutes Clint would whip out his phone to take pictures of every dish and everybody on his Starkphone. Tony opened his mouth to tease, but there was something oddly sweet about Clint’s sudden inclination to photograph the team. Tony wondered if Clint had many happy memories of previous Thanksgivings for comparison. Somehow he doubted it.

Rhodey kept tapping furtively at his phone and making this pleased little noise whenever it lit up with a reply. Tony resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. Rhodey kept the ringer on silent and put his phone surreptitiously under the table to text, but he might as well have taken a megaphone and shouted “I’m texting with my new girlfriend and I’m crazy about her!!!” It was sweet (in a disgusting sort of way that totally inspired neither jealousy nor envy).

Tony observed Steve out of the corner of his eye, still watchful for some sign of disapproval about his antics the previous night, though he was no longer bracing for a direct remark. But next to him, Steve just kept smiling, every now and then casting Tony this soft little look that Tony didn’t know what to do with.

So when Steve wiped his hands on a towel and announced, “well, time to go check on the turkey again,” Tony hopped up to join him.

“Decided you want the, uh, ‘spoilers’ after all?” Steve asked as they approached the elevator.

“Yeah, why not?” Tony said with a shrug. “Besides, the potatoes were making my hands all weird and starchy feeling. Could use a break.”

As the elevator doors opened, the aroma of roasting meat and spices made Tony’s mouth water.

“Smells good,” Tony said, following Steve to the kitchen.

“Seems to be going okay. Well, I hope so at least. Mrs. Rhodes has been very helpful.” Steve frowned as he opened the oven. “The skin still isn’t done crisping though.”

“Really?” Tony asked skeptically, peering at the turkey’s golden, glistening skin covered in herbs and coarse salt. “Looks good to me.”

“Hmm.” Steve consulted some handwritten papers he had on the kitchen counter.

“Advice from The Matriarch Rhodes?” Tony asked, peering at the notes. Steve nodded. Tony smiled. “She’s the best.”

“Agreed. I’m very glad to make her acquaintance,” Steve said, the formality of his diction an odd match to the earnestness and warmth of his tone. “I’m glad she and Jim could come visit.”

Steve hesitated. “It was nice seeing you and Rhodey together last night. And Pepper. Having fun.”
The nervous little knot in Tony’s stomach that had been slowly unwinding all afternoon finally came untied.

Steve added, “I’ve been wanting to thank you. It was very kind of you to include me, Tony.”

(Huh?)

Tony felt off balance again. “You’re welcome?” He hadn’t meant for it to sound like a question.

“Seriously, no biggie.”

Steve turned his attention back to the turkey, taking a weird looking giant eyedropper thing and dripping turkey juice all over the bird. (That’s ‘basting,’ right?)

“I hope I wasn’t intruding,” Steve added eventually, pulling Tony from his thoughts.

“Huh? No! Of course not! I invited you.” Tony protested. “I was glad you came.” Tony said, just meaning to reassure Steve, who was apparently as nervous about the evening as Tony had been.

(Or got nervous because Tony was nervous?) As he spoke, though, Tony realized how entirely he meant it. He was glad Steve had joined them, drunken silliness and all.

And it was sort of sweet—though ridiculous—that Steve was nervous. Tony’d been worried that Steve had thought—what? He wasn’t even sure what he’d worried about exactly. (That he’d think I’m a slutty dancer? That I’m an irresponsible drunk? That the scarring’s ugly? That arc reactor makes me a freak?) Okay, so he did know what he’d worried about.

But Steve had worried too. That he was intruding. That he didn’t fit in? Tony watched Steve dribble juices over the turkey and wondered what else Steve might have worried about.

“You and Rhodey,” Steve said. “It was good to see you together. You two reminded me of….” His smile went a little wistful. “Of me and Bucky. It was nice.”

Tony wondered if Steve knew how right he was, if it had taken Bucky as many years to get over Steve as it had taken Tony to get over Rhodey.

Tony swallowed. “Sounds like he was a hell of a guy.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, pulling out the meat thermometer. “He was.”

He blinked rapidly a few times, then looked up at Tony with a smile. “Hey, I think this turkey’s almost ready!”

Bruce and Pepper set the table with all the fancy china and cloth napkins and stuff Tony was still pretty sure he hadn’t purchased himself. (Must have been the decorator.) The table was overflowing with food: mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, green beans, salad, cranberry sauce, stuffing, all in gigantic serving bowls. There were five pies cooling in the kitchen. Clint had taken a dozen pictures each.

When the elevator doors parted to reveal Steve carrying their turkey on a giant silver platter, the room burst into applause. (But, no, seriously? Who bought these things?)

“Holy shit!” Clint called. He took four pictures in rapid succession. “Now there’s a sign of super muscles—just carrying that massive bird is an act of patriotic heroism! Dude, Tony, did you order a dinosaur? Looks like a pterodactyl.”

“You’d know, bird brain.”

“Seriously? This again? It’s a code name.”

“Everybody, take your seats,” Mrs. Rhodes directed. “Captain, would you carve?”

“I can certainly try, Mrs. Rhodes.”

“Hope the salad isn’t too bitter,” Bruce mumbled.

“It’s going to be hard to save room for pie!” Pepper told Natasha.

Rhodey laughed at something on his phone, then looked sheepish.

“Start serving yourselves, while Steve and I work on the turkey,” Mrs. Rhodes directed and they sprang into action. Tony started to eat a huge forkful of potatoes while Mrs. Rhodes’ back was turned, but when he caught sight of Natasha’s expression he set his fork back down as stealthily as possible.

Tony’d insisted that Mrs. Rhodes take head of the table, but she’d put Tony at her right, Steve at the left. Then Rhodey and Pepper, Clint and Natasha, and Bruce opposite her, as a fellow chef. Tony’s foot tapped under the table and his stomach rumbled. (Hurry up, people?)

“Would you like to say a few words, Tony?” Mrs. Rhodes asked as she took her seat. (He knew
“Nah, I’m good,” Tony said, with a shrug. “But you go ahead.”

“Would you say a blessing, Captain?” Mrs. Rhodes asked.

“Uh,” Steve fumbled. His eyes flicked over to Tony, then back to Mrs. Rhodes. “Sure.”

Steve bowed his head and Mrs. Rhodes did the same. Tony looked down, feeling a little awkward, as Steve said softly, “Bless us Oh Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” Mrs. Rhodes repeated, as a smattering of the Avengers echoed it with varying degrees of awkwardness. Tony reached for his fork.

“Lord,” Mrs. Rhodes said, head still bowed and hands folded. Tony put his fork back down. “I’d like to give thanks here for family and for friends and for the bounty at this table. Thanks too for the bravery of all the men and women who risk their lives to protect this country. We give thanks for the good things we have as we continue to strive for prosperity, peace, and justice for the world. Bless and keep us all. Amen.”

“Amen,” Rhodey, Steve, and Natasha answered. (Okay, Rhodey and Steve made sense, but Tony was kinda surprised by Natasha.)

“Uh, amen,” Clint mumbled.

Tony glanced over at Bruce with a tentative smile. Organized religion made them both a little nervous, but Tony knew Mrs. Rhodes didn’t mean to make anybody uncomfortable and, well, everything she said was so earnest and nice Tony would have been kinda sorry to miss it. Bruce smiled back.

“Now, everybody, let’s eat!” Mrs Rhodes said. “Happy Thanksgiving!”

“Happy Thanksgiving!” they answered.

Steve raised his glass. “To friends.”

“To friends!”

Dinner passed in a pleasant blur of food and chatter, warmth and contentment. And now they’d reached the after dinner dilemma: which movie would they watch?

“Top Gun!”

“The Sound of Music!”

“Amelie!”


“I have the perfect suggestion!” Tony proclaimed, raising his arms. Clint and Rhodey groaned.

“How dare you doubt my taste! Besides, Rhodey, you’re gonna love it.”

“Okay, Tones. What is it?”

“Star Trek marathon. You were pissed I started Steve on TOS without you, so why don’t we—can I get a drum roll?!—Wrath of Khan?”

Rhodey brightened. “Ooh! Did you already watch ‘Space Seed’?”

“Sure did!”

“Count me in,” Nat said.

“I’m always up for Star Trek,” Bruce said with a shrug, then shook a finger at Tony, “No reciting the dialogue though!”

“I’ll be good!”

“What do you think, Cap?” Tony asked.

Steve smiled. “Sounds great. I’ve liked all the Star Trek you’ve picked out so far.” He paused. “Wait, is Wrath of Khan the movie you told me not to read about on The Internet?”

“Sure is! It’s kinda legendary.”

“What do you think, Mrs. Rhodes?” Steve asked politely.

Her mouth quirked up as she said, “I like Star Trek just fine and I’ve been indulging my boys’
obsession for decades now, so it feels like a holiday tradition at this point.”

“Well,” Steve said, “I have been wonder—“

Steve’s phone blared an electronic version of reveille and he fell silent. He took it out of his pocket and frowned at it for a moment before saying, “Please excuse me,” and heading to the far side of the room to answer it with a brisk: “Captain Rogers speaking.”

“I’m too stuffed for popcorn,” Clint was saying, “but I still kinda want it. Because movie.”

“If we watch Wrath of Khan,” Bruce said, “You know we’re going to have to watch the next two movies.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey agreed, “Otherwise it’s a horrible downer.”

“I did say marathon,” Tony told them distractedly. He was watching Steve. He could tell, even with Steve’s back to them, the way his shoulders had drawn tight.

“Well, I couldn’t possibly eat any popcorn,” Pepper announced, “But I am interested in a cocktail. You’re a good bartender, Clint. What shall we make?”

“Yes, sir.” Steve said on the other side of the room and put his phone away. As he approached, their amiable chatter faded at the sight of his expression, tight and drawn.

“What’s up, Cap?” Natasha asked softly.


Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading this! Hope you liked it! Sorry for the little cliffhanger. I hope to have the next chapter written more quickly! Cheer-leading appreciated as always. :-(


The mini-spectrometer was still safely stored in the quinjet, so The Avengers—and bonus War Machine—were ready to go in the time it took to change into their gear.

“Wasn’t sure the armor’d fit after all those potatoes,” Rhodey joked, but his voice was tight and nobody laughed.

Mrs. Rhodes and Pepper accompanied them to the launch pad.

“Don’t you dare pull that stunt again,” Pepper told Tony firmly, using her best commanding CEO voice.

“Deal,” he promised, offering to shake on it, but Pep threw her arms around the armor for a clattering hug.

“Wow,” she said, with a rueful smile, “being here to see you off actually kinda sucks.”

Pep stepped aside as Mrs. Rhodes approached.

Mrs. Rhodes reached up to touch Tony’s cheek through the faceplate and said seriously, “You look after James out there, you hear?”

Tony nodded solemnly. “Cross my heart.” He stepped onboard.

“Final sweep. Do we have everything?” Steve asked the team as he strode onto the quinjet.

On the other side of the launch pad, Mrs. Rhodes was giving Rhodey a hug and touching his cheek. Tony couldn’t hear over the wind, but didn’t need to hear to know that she was saying: “You look after Tony out there, you hear?”

“Where are we headed, Cap?” Natasha asked, stepping into the cockpit.

“New Jersey,” Steve answered. “Coordinates are at the comm.”

“Only an alien invasion could get me to New Jersey,” Tony joked.

“Snob,” Clint scolded from the pilot’s seat.

“Good luck!” Pepper called. Tony waved as the hatch closed and Rhodey darted onboard.

Rhodey’s phone chirped and he laughed. “Lousy fucking timing,” he said, shaking his head and showing Tony his phone.

Miranda:

Jen’s finally asleep. Does your offer to fly over still stand?

Tony winced and patted Rhodey on the shoulder.

“How’s the suit?” Tony asked Natasha.

“Good.” She rolled her shoulders and nodded.

“I was planning to tweak those seams a little for you,” Tony said, half apology. “And I had a new double plating in the works.”

“Tony,” she said firmly. “It’s good.”

“Well, that’s all fine for Nat. You gave me sleeves!” Clint bitched without venom. “I told you bare arms!”

“And I told you, my ultra light polyaramid won’t get in the way of your Legolas impersonation, so calm down.”

“Come on, team,” Steve said sternly. “Stay focused.”

“We’re plenty focused.” Tony shrugged, trying to hold that sick sinking feeling at bay. “We fly in, deploy one of my handy dandy devices, and fly out. We’ll be back in time for Star Trek and a
third round of pie. Easy, breezy, beautiful Covergirl.”

Steve frowned. He pulled something or other up on his tablet and sat down abruptly.

Feeling like a naughty child, Tony went to join Bruce at the computer bay.

“Okaaaay,” Tony said. “Let’s go ahead and review the hypotheticals from last time. Just in case.”

The rest of the ride to New Jersey was tense, but mercifully short.

The energy field—Tony was too pissed to think of it as “Bob”—was glowing with a bluish light about ten feet off the ground in a clearing of Wharton Forest. It was bigger than at its first appearance and smaller than the last. Tony was grateful they were miles from the nearest town.

There were already a few SHIELD agents on the ground wearing heavy SWAT gear. Tony was pretty sure that it would slow them down more than it would protect them, but he wasn’t the one in charge of that sort of thing. (And, yeah, okay—they totally need his new poly-aramid too . . .)

As soon as the quinjet touched down, everyone sprang into action, moving the mini-spectrometer into place.

“Status report?” Cap called to the ranking SHIELD officer as they emerged.

“The anomaly arrived at exactly twenty-one-hundred hours, sir.”

Tony tuned out the rest of their conversation as he and Bruce watched the readings start to come in. He hooked an extra monitor up to the spectrometer so he could have an extra visual interface with JARVIS.

“JARVIS, run a comparison of the data points. First sign of a blip away from the last readings, I wanna know. If we get one, start running the hypotheticals asap.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony looked up at the blue energy field, trying not to picture spindly arachnoid limbs and the vast expanse of space beyond a glowing grey ship. Tony shuddered and refocused on the spectrometer readings.

Tony blurted out “shit” at the same moment JARVIS said, “Sir? The readings have varied.”

“Bruce! Do you see this?”

Bruce squinted at the screen through his reading glasses, shaking his head. “The photons . . .”

“Yes,” Tony scowled. “It’s like this thing’s not even breaking the wave-particle duality anymore.”

“And the electromagnetic radiation has actually decreased,” Bruce added, bringing up the old data points at the second console.

“Fuck!” Tony started typing frantically. “Why would it be doing this?”

His eyes darted across the new readouts, mind racing.

Tony was so absorbed in the data, he jumped when Cap approached and asked for a report.

“Little busy here, Cap,” Tony said, typing furiously.

“Basically,” Bruce answered, “the photons are normalized, with a reduced electromagnetic radiation, so the arc reactor diffusion and gamma radiation are no longer breaking the wave-particle duality.”

Uh--?

“Uh--?”

“He means,” Tony cut in, still typing, “the readings have changed enough that if that thing starts spewing aliens, my device won’t be able to close the portal until I do a lot of recalculating.”

“Understood,” Steve said briskly. “I’m calling for reinforcements.”

“Roger, Rogers,” Tony said, refocusing on his mental calculations. He was distantly aware of Steve’s voice issuing brisk orders, agents moving around them, and the eerie glow above, but he tried to shove it all away. (Focus.) Numbers flowed across the screen and Tony lost track of time.

Tony distantly registered Rhodey and Cap talking.

(\(g = h / p\))

“What’s the delay, Cap? Should have had reinforcements by now.”
But wait . . . Wait. x -- p

“Agreed.”

(Maybe Hypothetical 66? It had supposed the lowest radiation ratios . . . )

“I’ve got an update, Jim. The power’s out. The entire grid is down—they think it’s some sort of accident on the power lines. The generator kicked in at the SHIELD base, but the local staging ground doesn’t have one.”

“The gamma level’s spiking!” Bruce said.

“I see it!” Tony snapped. “Fuck!”

There was a sudden blinding light, then everything went dark.

For a hideous, disorienting second, Tony thought he’d blacked out, but he could still hear Steve and Bruce and soon his eyes were readjusting. As he recovered from the unpleasant flash-blindness, he found the glowing force field gone.

Tony wasn’t sure if he felt relieved or disappointed. On the one hand, it looked like they were nine minutes shy of a full reading, but on the other hand they weren’t battling aliens and probably wouldn’t be for at least a little while. So that part was good.

“Okay, Bruce,” Tony said, “Let’s get to work on these hypotheticals, shall we?”

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Tony stayed in his lab for three days straight.

Mrs. Rhodes had brought down plates of left over Thanksgiving dinner and stayed to make sure he ate them. Pepper brought him coffee, but didn’t try to draw his attention away from work with small talk. (In fact, he might have missed her presence entirely and drunk the coffee on autopilot, except for the occasional hug.) Bruce worked with him in his lab on and off. Eventually, Pepper had to go back to Malibu, Mrs. Rhodes to Boston, and Rhodey to his previous (undisclosed) post. Tony said goodbye to them all in the lab.

Bright and early on day four—after creating seventy-nine altered hypotheticals—Tony ran out of coffee. (Unacceptable.) Also he was vaguely aware that he probably hadn’t eaten since Mrs. Rhodes left. (In fact, nobody had brought him coffee since Pepper. . . and that was a day ago! Where was Steve? )

As Tony shuffled into the shared kitchen, he was surprised to see Steve wearing his full Captain America gear, bent over the dining room table. It was covered with files, papers, a tablet, and his laptop. Tony blinked. Steve was scowling down at something, left hand clenching a steaming mug.

“Hey, Cap,” Tony said. Steve’s head snapped over to look at him. His expression was tight and something about it made Tony nervous.

“Tony,” Steve said, with a nod. He turned back to his papers. (Huh.)

There was already coffee in the coffee pot. Tony poured himself a mug and opened the refrigerator to find it rather bare. (Unsurprisingly, the team had demolished their Thanksgiving provisions.) To his left, Steve set down his coffee and grabbed a pencil, scribbling away.

Steve liked to do paperwork at the dinner table—after all they seldom used it for formal dining—and he liked that his teammates would drop by and chat. So that was nothing out of the ordinary, but he usually didn’t change into his uniform to do it.

Tony took another sip of coffee and came a little closer. There was dirt on Steve’s boots and dirt on the left knee of his uniform.

Steve would never put on a dirty uniform. Which meant he’d never taken it off. (And Steve’s hair wasn’t fluffing up at the back the way it usually did; actually, it looked kinda greasy.)

Tony frowned and inched forward to peer at Steve’s papers. They were reports on the Battle of October 1st. Notes on the qualities and characteristics of the aliens. The best strategies to fight them. The most effective unit formations. Weapons. Gear.

“Hey, Steve?” Tony asked, voice quiet and tentative. “How long have you been at this?”

Steve didn’t answer, just scribbled something down on a large piece of graph paper.

Tony swallowed. “Cause, it kinda looks like you’ve been right here for four days, not even changing out of the uniform.” Still no answer.

And, okay, the irony of this wasn’t lost on Tony, but he couldn’t help saying, “Don’t you think you should maybe get some sleep?”
That got his attention. Steve snapped, “I slept for seventy years—don’t you think that’s enough?”

Tony blinked. (He’s never heard that tone from Steve before.) He was still trying to figure out how to answer, when Steve added bitterly, “And, apparently, I’ve been asleep at my post for weeks.” Steve shook his head. “I should have been preparing.” He glared at Tony. “And you’re one to talk—don’t tell me you’ve been getting a decent night’s sleep since that thing came back.”

(Fair point.) Tony just shrugged and Steve snorted. (Hey! At least I got some sleep.)

“I should have been preparing for this,” Steve insisted.

“Nobody expected the force field to come back,” Tony said.

Steve let out a mirthless laugh. “Oh really? I suppose that’s why you made dozens of portal devices. And upgraded everyone’s armor.” He shook his head. “You expected it.”

(And, okay, Tony can’t argue with that either.)

“I just sat around while you did all the work,” Steve bit out. He was nearly vibrating with nervous energy. “I’m supposed to be the leader. And even if it hadn’t been the force field, I should have been expecting something. What’s the point of a first response team if their leader isn’t even ready?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Tony said. “You’ve had a lot to adjust to. That’s hard work. It’s not just something you can—”

Steve’s fist clenched; he snapped the pencil in half. “Don’t make excuses for me!”

“For fuck’s sake, you’re only human!” Tony snapped back. “Or do you actually think you’re some sort of resurrected demi-god who can bear the world on his shoulders? ‘Cause that’s pretty fucking arrogant if you do!” Tony waved his hands, and narrowly avoided throwing his coffee. He jabbed a finger at Steve, coming closer. Steve took a step back.

“And, okay! Fine!” Tony cried. “Maybe you should have gone back to battle reports and training modules right after rounding up the last stray aliens. Maybe there is more you could have done, even while two of your teammates were still in physical therapy and the others were generating tech. Fine. But I seriously doubt beating yourself up is making you a more effective worker and if you’ve gone eighty hours without sleep, it looks to me more like some fucked up kinda Catholic penance than actually getting shit done!”

Tony wasn’t entirely sure how he’d expected Steve to respond to his outburst, but he hadn’t expected him to deflate and sink heavily into a dining room chair. Steve turned away and stared blankly ahead for a moment, then said softly, “I just . . . I keep seeing those aliens pouring out of the portal, and all those people who—” He closed his eyes.

(Shit.)

“I know, buddy,” Tony said softly, resting a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I know.”

Steve twitched. For a second, Tony thought Steve was going to reach up and hug him, or press his face to Tony’s stomach, but the moment passed.

“Have you eaten today?” Tony asked, voice still soft.

Steve hesitated. “Maybe? The serum—I, uh, I don’t know.”

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” Tony said. “I’m gonna order us a gigantic pizza. While we wait for it, you’re gonna have a shower and change—because, frankly, you stink—and then you can join me in the workshop for food. Then, if you think you can sleep, you should go sleep. If not—and, trust me, I do understand—then we can work together in the shop. Okay?”

“Okay,” Steve answered softly, eyes downcast. Tony squeezed his shoulder. Steve reached out to grab Tony’s hand, looking up at him with wide blue eyes. “Thank you, Tony.”

Tony nodded and stepped away. “See you soon.”

(Huh. Apparently, I’ve turned into Pepper.)

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

“Hey, Tony? I think I—”

“Shhhhh!!!”

Tony leapt out of his chair and raised his left index finger to his lips while waving frantically with his right hand. Bruce looked at him like he’d gone insane. Tony gestured to his lab couch.

There, surrounded by papers and files, Steve was slumped against the armrest, sound asleep. There was a plate at his feet speckled with a few lingering pizza crumbs. His laptop had been folded up at set aside to his left.
Bruce blinked and looked back and forth between Steve and Tony a few times. (And, okay, so Dummy’d wanted to cover Steve with Tony’s lab blanket, and Tony didn’t want the bot to wake the guy up, so maybe maybe Tony’d covered Steve up himself. It was no reason for Bruce to be making that weird face, and besides Bruce didn’t even know that.)

Bruce came closer to whisper, “Is he okay?”

“Yeah. He’s just overworked,” Tony answered quietly. “Worried we aren’t prepared for another attack. And he’s had trouble sleeping.”

“So you invited him to your workshop,” Bruce said in a measured voice.

“It’s not like I’m unfamiliar with that problem.” Tony shrugged. “I thought if he had a friendly face and a comfy couch he might nod off while he tried to work. I’ve done it myself often enough.”

“Right.” Bruce said. He glanced back over to Steve. “Makes sense.”

“So, have you found anything?” Tony asked, eager to shift Bruce’s attention.

It took a few moments for Bruce to return his gaze to Tony, shaking his head a little.

“Maybe,” he said, pushing his reading glasses up on his nose. “I had an idea for a variation on Hypothetical 72.”

“Okay,” Tony said, grabbing his coffee and calling up the hypos. “Why don’t you walk me through it? Quietly.”

A vast black expanse, dotted with stars . . .

“Why couldn’t you be a good boy, Tony? Why’d you have to start interfering where your lot doesn’t belong?”

Spindly limbs and flashing mandibles.

Tony jolted awake abruptly—he’d fallen asleep at his workbench again.

“It is 5:33 pm on December 2nd,” JARVIS informed him, volume abnormally low, “and you are in New York City.”

Tony nodded and took a deep breath, trying to expel the disjointed dream. He took stock of himself. He was fine, though a little sweaty, with crick in his neck from slumping over at his desk. (He really should try to make it to the couch if he’s gonna—Oh right.)

Tony smiled. (Good man, JARVIS.) Steve was still sleeping on Tony’s work couch, lips slightly parted. He’d been even more exhausted than Tony’d realized. (And, really, the super soldier serum must be the only reason that Steve hadn’t had the most massively hideous dark circles under his eyes. Terribly unfair really.) Steve’s chest rose and fell deeply in a steady rhythm. (He looks so young.) A few more files had fallen from the couch as Steve shifted in his sleep.

Silently, Tony pulled up the schematics he’d been working on earlier. Soon it would be time to start making the skeletons for the new range of portal closure devices, but first—coffee.

Tony frowned at the coffee maker and glanced over at Steve. (Would it wake him up?) Tony grabbed his coffee tin, unplugged the coffee maker and carried it to the bathroom. (No big deal.) As the coffee brewed, perched awkwardly on the toilet tank with the door firmly shut, Tony took a few minutes to wash up. (With a facecloth—he still didn’t like to splash water on his face.)

Coffee in hand, Tony hastened to get back to work.

(What if the diffusion readings dropped by intervals of ten picometers?)

Tony wasn’t sure how long he’d been working, when he heard Steve begin to stir. Steve’s eyes fluttered open and his gaze immediately fell on Tony. His lips curled up into a beautiful sleepy smile and he murmured, “Tony?”

Tony’s throat felt a little tight.

“Hey,” he said, smiling back. “Did you sleep okay?”

Steve blinked a few times. As he grew more alert, his smile faded and he sat up. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Damn. How long was I out?”

Tony waved a hand dismissively. “You needed the rest.”

Steve sighed and, after a few moments, nodded.
Steve checked his phone and shook his head. "Clint and Natasha have finished their survey of the perimeter in New Jersey. Nothing. They're back at SHIELD now."

Tony nodded. "It's what we expected."

"Yeah," Steve agreed with a sigh. Steve looked down and touched the blanket. He gave Tony a questioning look.

“So, hey,” Tony said, “I’m going to start building the devices soon, but first I’m gonna need some food. I was thinking Thai. You want Thai?”

Steve gave a hesitant nod and Tony rushed on, “And then, if you want, we can keep working. I put your laptop over there so it wouldn’t fall, but I left the files alone. And, hey, if you don’t mind giving me a hand with a few little things on the devices, that would be great.”

“Really?” Steve’s ‘shocked but pleased face’ was kind of adorable.

“Yeah. I figure you’ve got steadier hands than DUM-E and I can’t actually do everything myself. Yet.”

“I’d be very pleased to help you,” Steve told him seriously, with the air of a promise. “But I don’t really know anything about—” He waved a hand vaguely at Tony’s schematics.

“Well, duh. I’ll tell you what you need to know. Don’t worry.” Tony took a sip of coffee. “So, Thai food?”

Steve nodded. “Can we get pad see ew?”

(Predictable.)

“Yeah. And pumpkin curry, medium. Tom Kha Gai. And spring rolls. Double spring rolls, JARVIS! And mango with sticky rice. Thanks, J!”

“Of course, sir.”

Steve was carefully folding up Tony’s ratty workshop blanket and arranging it against the back of the couch.

“Thanks, Tony,” Steve said, running a hand over the blanket. Tony turned back to Bruce’s variations on Hypothetical 72.

“I really appreciate it,” Steve added softly, then asked in a worried tone, “But did you get some rest too?”

“Me? Yeah, yeah. Sure. I slept.”

(If the gamma waves increased on # 72 . . .)

“Did you go up to sleep?”

“Mmhm-hmmnm.”

(So, suppose the gamma waves increased, but the diffusion decreased then maybe--)

“Oh yeah,” Tony told Steve absently, “there’s coffee in the bathroom.”

“Huh?” Steve tilted his head quizzically. “In the bathroom?”

(Oh, right.) Tony shrugged. “I didn’t want the machine to wake you up.”


He grabbed his mug and headed for Tony’s en suite. As he returned he let out a long sigh and groaned. “God, I needed that!”

Steve was clutching at his ‘cup of Joe’ like a dragon with its hoard. (Or, like Tony with a cup of coffee.)

“I thought caffeine had no effect on your super-metabolism,” Tony said, raising one eyebrow.

Steve shrugged. “Never underestimate the power of the placebo effect.”

“Understood.” Tony clinked his mug to Steve’s. “Coffee is sacred—I should never have questioned you, Captain.” Tony gave a joking salute.

“At ease, soldier,” Steve said, with a smile. “Ok. We had better get back to work.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much for reading! Hope you liked it! :-)
Chapter Notes

Slow chapter is slow, but extra long! Infinite thanks to beloved beta, thatwhichyeilds, who patiently let me run through FIVE drafts and rewrites with her. Also, all the nifty behind the scenes world-building with Katie and Mikie was inspired by her too. Seriously, somebody get this woman a beer!

This chapter was extremely hard for me to write and contains some triggery stuff. It probably won’t surprise you, having read the previous chapters, but here it is:

WARNINGS: self-destructive behaviors; drug use; slut shaming; shitty media being shitty; elements of dub-con (though Tony doesn’t think of it in those terms); internalized slut shaming.

Also, major SPOILERS for Star Trek “The Devil in the Dark,” one of my all time favorites. BUT you can watch it here for free! Highly recommend!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkkvY1ei5eQ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear Mr. Stark,

As previously discussed, the time has come—really, we’re badly overdue—for The Avengers to host a press conference. I’ve been fending off interview requests for weeks and if we don’t respond soon, they will start taking their coverage in directions we may not approve of. Hosting the press conference ourselves is the best way to control the line of questioning. I have also contacted the rest of your team, but since you employ us on their behalf we like to consult with you first. Below are a few dates that seem convenient and dovetail nicely with your other public commitments and charity galas.

Please be in touch as soon as possible. I’d like to issue press invitations and releases soon.

Sincerely,

Katie Winters

“Okay, Steve! Can you just hold that steady while I screw in these bolts?”

“Of course. Like this?”

“No, that’s good.” The tip of Tony’s tongue poked out between his teeth as he affixed the K-52’s. “I mean, I could set up a frame to hold them, but this is a lot faster. And you’re more trustworthy than DUM-E.”

“Of course. Like this?”

“Okay, Steve! Can you just hold that steady while I screw in these bolts?”

“Of course. Like this?”

“Yeah, that’s good.” The tip of Tony’s tongue poked out between his teeth as he affixed the K-52’s. “I mean, I could set up a frame to hold them, but this is a lot faster. And you’re more trustworthy than DUM-E.”

“Hey Mikie! Give me a call when you hear back from Tanya and if you have any new in’s with the shit rags. It’s your turn to play Bad Cop to the bottom feeders. Oh! And I’m following up on a lead. We may be able to work a new—and less hostile—contact at The Star. After the backlash about PTSD, I think they’re hesitant for their story to become a story again. I’ll see what I can come up with and I’ll start emailing the top dogs. Talk to you soon!”

“Tony? Are you at a stopping place?” Steve asked.
“Just a sec . . . okay. Sure. What’s up?”

“Would you look at this for me?”

Tony peered at Steve’s meticulously neat sketches and notes.

“Is that my LHOL wire netting?”

“Yeah. Not what SHIELD’s been using it for, I know, but I was thinking about the retiarius—you know, the Roman gladiator?—and it seemed like it might adapt well.”

Tony nodded and turned to the formation diagram. “You’d group them in teams of three?” Tony said tapping the paper.

“Right. Those spider things were strong.”

“Agreed. I think this would work really well. Especially—”

“Hey, Tony? Do you need a hand bolting—”

Tony looked over at the doorway where Bruce had arrived.

“—the K-52’s?” Tony said, finishing Bruce’s sentence. “Nope! Steve gave me a hand this time. But I’m glad you’re here, Brucie Bear! I wanted to ask you about the Compton scattering of the synchrotron radiation.”

Steve checked his phone. “I’ll leave you to it, gentlemen. Natasha and Clint are back from SHIELD with an update. And I’d like to show the retiarius to them and see if we can do some trial runs.”

“Sounds good, Steve! See you later!” Tony smiled.

“Later, Tony. Bruce.”

Steve gathered his papers and left with a polite nod.

“Okay, Bruce! Come check it out!”

Tony spun the glowing schematic for him. Bruce opened his mouth, brow creased, as though preparing to say something momentous, but instead he just shook his head and got out his reading glasses.

Hey Katie,

Still no word from Stark! Seriously, where does that guy disappear to?! I swear, if he doesn’t respond within the next hour—I’m nice like that—I’m gonna sic Potts on him.

I’ve attached a draft of the talking points I’m proposing. Also, I think Captain Rogers and Anderson Cooper would really hit it off. We could get him a short appearance on CNN before giving him a full segment on Oprah or Ellen or whatever. Though I think that Karen Jones might be a better fit for him. But press conference first.

Anyway, let me know what you think.

--MN

—-MN

“Scan it, JARVIS!”

“Running hypothetical analysis now, sir. Estimated time to completion 2.25 hours.”

Tony nodded with satisfaction. Just for fun, he had the schematics for every single hypo up in a glowing screen so he could watch all the beautiful calculations scrolling by. There were twenty four shiny variations on portal closure devices lined up on his work desk. (He figured he might need six, so he doubled it then doubled it again for good measure.)

“Sir? Might now be an opportune time to get some rest?”

“Pfft.” Tony waved his hand dismissively. “Not that tired.”

“In that case, sir,” JARVIS continued smoothly. “Perhaps it is an ideal time to catch up on your correspondence. You have seventy-nine new emails. 22 marked urgent from Ms. Winters and nine from Ms. Potts.”

Tony groaned. “You know, maybe I’m tired after all.”

“I had a suspicion you might be, Sir.”
Steve was back at the dining room table when Tony and his prodigious bedhead stumbled downstairs from the penthouse. (The penthouse, where he’d gotten a normal night’s sleep in an actual bed.)

“Hey, Tony,” Steve said, looking up from his notes with a smile. “You weren’t in the workshop when I dropped by. Guess I know why now.”

Tony fumbled his way towards the coffee pot and was grateful to find it full of the strong brew Steve favored. He poured himself a mug and took a long sip before answering.

“I’m way too old to sleep hunched over in the workshop if I don’t have to. And, well…” Tony hesitated, clutching the coffee to his chest. “Workaholic sleep deprivation isn’t gonna do much without some new data. I’ve done everything I can think of for the portal devices, so…” Tony trailed off with a shrug.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Steve asked, frowning into his coffee cup. “Going into high alert and then all this waiting?”

“Isn’t that what they say about the army? A lot of ‘hurry up and wait’?”

Steve looked over with a hint of a smile. “No less strange, for all that it’s a cliché.”

“What about you?” Tony asked, gesturing to Steve’s notes. “How’s that going?”

Steve shrugged. “Fine. I’ve been running some training modules with Clint and Natasha. If you can spare time from inventing, we should really start going through them as a team. Get on a regular training regimen again now that Clint and Natasha are cleared for duty.”

“Sure thing, Cap.” Tony took another long drag of coffee. “Sounds good.”

“I’ve got a few more training sessions scheduled at SHIELD with some of the strike teams, showing them the retiarius move,” Steve said, opening up an old-fashioned leather-bound agenda. “But other than that—” he shrugged, “—I guess things are starting to go back to normal.”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Guess so.”

“Sir? Perhaps now would be a good moment to remind you—once again—of Ms. Winters’ emails.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I got those too,” Steve said, looking guilty. “I’ve been meaning to reply. We’re supposed to schedule a press conference soon. And there’s a gala coming up, then another one.” Steve bit his lip. “Do you think we should still go?”

“Sure, Cap. Like you said, things are going back to normal. If we get called out, we go. But otherwise, better show up at the gala and give the people what they want.”

Steve groaned and dropped his head in his hands.

“I was really hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

Dear Mr. Johnson,

I am pleased to see that you will be covering the Firefighter’s Fundraiser Gala. Mr. Stark and the Avengers, as you know, will be in attendance and will no doubt be pleased to see you and your photographer on the red carpet. As always, I’m sure I can count on your journalistic integrity and the high-mindedness of your publication, regardless of the gala’s venue.

We will be finalizing the press invitations for the Avengers’ first press conference shortly and you are, of course, presently on the list. I will have more details for you after the upcoming weekend’s gala.

Sincerely,

Ms. Winters

Katie—

Ha! You used to be subtle, but I guess if you were too subtle it wouldn’t count as a warning. But subtle or not, well played. Get me a press invite and there won’t be a peep about the 2005 gang bang in my column, even if your boy IS going back to the Pierre for the first time in almost a decade. Don’t forget to get us a photo pass.

--Kevin
“Nice work, team!” Steve said, beaming at them. The bastard wasn’t even sweating, despite their grueling training session.

Tony landed gently on the training room floor. (He’d learned that lesson the hard way, thank you very much.) Bruce sat cross-legged on the floor, right where they’d been training, dodging, weaving and shooting. (No sign of the Other Guy.)

“And thank you for the simulations, JARVIS,” Steve said, looking up at the ceiling. “You did a great job making it seem like the hologram opponents were actually trapped in the nets.”

“A pleasure, Captain Rogers.” JARVIS actually sounded pleased.

“The net launcher looked pretty good,” Tony said to Clint, flipping up the faceplate. “How’d it feel?”

“It’s not a bow: so awkward.” Clint shrugged. “But fine.”

Steve frowned at Clint very slightly, then said to Tony with utmost sincerity. “I just can’t believe how fast you whipped up the prototypes!”

“Aww, shucks,” Tony joked, playfully bashful. “Well, I had your drawings to work from.”

(Were the tips of Steve’s ears turning faintly pink?)

“They’re well engineered.” Natasha said, looking at her launcher approvingly. “Though I prefer a knife over a net and spear.”

“We’re adapting to the targets as needed,” Cap said with only a hint of reproach. He turned to Bruce. “You did really well. How are you feeling?”

Bruce gave him an irritated look. “All I have to do is sit here.” He shook his head. “No offense, Steve, but I don’t think that this is getting us anywhere. I mean, it’s not exactly hard to keep my cool sitting in a training room surrounded by my own teammates.”

“Could you honestly have said that three months ago?” Steve asked.

Bruce paused. “Okay. Maybe not. But I think we’ve gotten all we’re going to get from this particular exercise.”

Bruce sounded bitter. He always did when he was talking about the Hulk, even indirectly.

“I agree!” Tony exclaimed, clasping his hands together. Steve and Bruce looked at him in surprise. “It’s time for you to Hulk out, buddy.”

“No,” Bruce said softly.

“Absolutely not.” Steve said at the same time, face going tight.

“Aww, come on!” Tony said, waving a gauntleted hand. “We’ve talked about this before! We’ll go out to my ranch. Far from civilians. Controlled setting. You can let it all hang out—oh, hey, I guess that’ll be pretty literal since you lose your clothes! We can see what he does. Maybe he’ll flop down and make daisy chains with his new best friends!”

Bruce got abruptly to his feet. “Or maybe,” he said, voice deadly quiet, “he’ll kill you.”

“Pfft,” Tony scoffed, taking a step closer. “You’d never hurt me.”

Bruce backed up. “You don’t know that.”

“Of course I do,” Tony said, still smiling reassuringly. He took another step closer. “You’d never hurt me.”

“Stop saying that!” Bruce yelled, hands clenching hard into fists. Steve’s eyes went wide with surprise and he took a step between them, as if reflexively. Tony glared and he immediately backed off.

Bruce took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Sorry. Sorry, Tony.”

“Hey, it’s cool, man,” Tony said. “But I’m right. You’re so not going to hurt me. And it would be good training.”

“I agree with Tony,” Natasha said softly. Tony turned to her in surprise. She quirked an eyebrow at him and continued, “Well, not in everything. But the Hulk could be a powerful ally, almost infinitely powerful, if you can keep him on task. On the other hand, if you lose control sometime, Bruce, and he isn’t cooperating, we need to think ahead about ways to minimize the damage and neutralize him. Without civilian casualties.”

“That’s not gonna—” Tony began, but Bruce interrupted.
“All right.” Bruce took a long shuddering breath. “Yeah. If anybody is going to stop him from hurting people, it would be the four of you. I’m just—all of you could get hurt in the process.”

“You won’t hu—” Tony began again, but Bruce held up his hand.

“Stop,” Bruce said softly. “Please stop, Tony. I—” He gave Tony an agonized look. “I can’t bear to disappoint you.”

With that, Bruce hastily fled the room.

“Bruce, wait!” Tony called, starting to step out of the armor.

“No, I’ll go,” Natasha assured him and, light and swift on her feet as ever, she glided after Bruce.

Tony continued shucking his armor, eager to follow them. (Shit.) Steve was frowning at the doorway.

“Tony,” Clint said, hand landing heavily on Tony’s shoulder as he started to pursue. “Let Nat do her thing. She’s good at it and she’ll talk him down. Just give Bruce some space.”

Tony glared. He felt guilty—like his faith in Bruce was a bad thing—and he didn’t like that feeling.

“Fine,” he huffed. Tony rolled his shoulders and tried to shake it off.

“So, hey,” Tony said, “now that we’re back in training mode, how about some more hand-to-hand work? What do you say, Steve?”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Steve said with a little nod, “But I need to go check in with SHIELD.”

“What, now?” Tony asked, incredulous.

“Yeah. Now,” Steve said. “Besides, we agreed you’d get better hand-to-hand training from Clint or Natasha. Please excuse me.” With that, Steve strode purposefully from the room.

Tony frowned, then turned to Clint. (That’s fine. Whatever.)

“So, how about it, birdbrain?”

“Oh, sure,” Clint drawled, “ask me to prom second and insult me as you do it. But, yeah, okay. As punishment I’m not pulling my punches for you this time.”

“As if! I was going easy on you,” Tony said. “I’ve just been waiting for you to be cleared for active duty to smack you around again. Wouldn’t have wanted to start an unfair fight.”

“As if sparing with a looser like you counts as ‘active.’”

“Insults?!” Tony cried. “After I landed you on your ass three times?”

“You were being sneaky!”

“And spider aliens totally play by Marquise of Queensbury rules. They’re really known for sportsmanship.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Riiight.”

“Okay, brat, you’re on,” Clint said with a grin. “Where did we leave off last time? Getting out of a Thompson Hold?”

“Yeah. I’ll go change out of the under suit. Meet you in the main gym in ten.”

“You’re on!”

Tony grinned. He liked sparing with Clint.

(And he wasn’t disappointed Steve still refused to train him.)

Sir? Ms. Potts is on the line. She is most insistent.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, J. Put her through. Video.”

A screen popped up in front of him and Pepper’s worried face appeared.

“Tony!” she cried, with the beginnings of a relieved smile.

“That’s me!” he proclaimed with a cocky grin. “Hey, Pep!”

“How are you?”

“Fine. No battles or new appearances by that thing that’s top secret and you know nothing
“I’m pretty good.” She hesitated. “Well, I was a bit worried when I couldn’t reach you, but JARVIS swore you were okay.”

Tony nodded, feeling a little guilty. “You can count on JARVIS.”

“Thank God for that!” Pepper smiled, then hesitated again. “I’m still coming to New York for the Firefighter’s gala, so I thought I’d come visit.”

“Of course! My Tower is your Tower!” Tony fluttered his lashes. “I’m positively spoiled lately.”

“Are you still going to the gala?”

“Of course. I think Katie Winters might wring my neck if I tried to back out. Or she’d get Michael to do it.”

Pepper brushed her bangs out of her eyes and said, “You know, though, if you really didn’t want to go, I’d deal with Katie and Michael.”

“Huh?” (Pepper usually dragged him kicking and screaming to important networking events.)

“If you don’t want to go, you have my support,” she told him. “Really, the firefighters have plenty of important guests already. So, just, it’s whatever you want.”

“Pep, you’ve lost me.” Tony squinted at the screen where Pepper was giving him this funny smile. “Why wouldn’t I want to go? I mean, besides the obvious ‘high society events are tedious and self-congratulatory’?”


Tony’s stomach dropped with a sick sort of swooping.

“I’m sorry, Tony. I thought you knew.”

Tony took a deep breath. He reached for a screwdriver, wanting to have something in his hands. Eventually he said, “It was a long time ago.”

“That’s true,” Pepper said, giving him her encouraging smile. (She tactfully doesn’t remind him he’s refused to set foot in The Pierre for years.)

“And I said I’d be there,” Tony said, beckoning for Dummy. “The whole team is going.”

“Well, good,” Pepper said, nodding. “And I’ll be there too. Do you want to ride over together?”

Tony paused. He did want to ride with Pepper—hold her hand in the limo, let her pet his hair and fuss over him—but it was probably important for him to arrive with The Avengers.

“Nah. I’ll go with the team.”

“Okay. Can I take you to dinner Friday?”

Tony waved his screwdriver at the screen. “Only if it’s someplace they serve real food. None of your trendy raw, vegan crap.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Once Tony! Once!”

Tony grinned. “See you soon!”

She smiled back. “Take care of yourself. Bye!”

“JARVIS, end call.”

Tony let out a long, shaky breath. (Shit. The Pierre.)

“Tony?” It was Steve. “Knock knock? May I come in?”

Tony took a deep breath to steady himself, then called, “Sure thing, Cap! Come on in!”

Steve had brought him coffee. Tony made grabby hands and Steve presented it with a smile.

“How is your work going?” Steve asked.

“Got twenty-four little babies over there,” Tony said, gesturing to the skeleton portal devices and their tidy row of modified StarkPhone detectors and calibrators. He took a long satisfying sip of coffee. “And I’ve got some training robots that should be ready for our practices soon. JARVIS can pilot them for us.”

“Wow. That sounds amazing.”
Tony waved the praise away and asked, “So what’s up?”

“I thought you might like some coffee. And, well, it’s getting near dinnertime. I was thinking I’d cook for the team and you might have time to come up to eat? And maybe watch some Star Trek? It’s been a while.”

Tony hesitated. It had been a while, but he wasn’t sure he was up to people. (The Pierre. God dammit. Why—)

He must have seen something on Tony’s face, because Steve was already backtracking: “Sorry. I know how busy you are. I’m happy to bring a plate down to the works—”

“No, no,” Tony cut in. He hated to disappoint Steve. “Yeah, dinner sounds good. Just let me know when to come up.”

“Really?” Steve brightened. “Great! See you then!”

Tony took a deep breath and looked at his plans for the training robots as Steve took his leave.

(Focus.)

The Pierre.

(Godamnit.)

“Hey, Dummy? Come closer, would ya?”

BEEE-boo?

“Don’t give me that! Just gonna check you over, buddy.” Tony grabbed the oil can. “Come on. Oil?”

BOOOOO! Dummy wheeled over enthusiastically.

Tony humphed. “Yeah. Thought so.”

The Pierre. (Fuck. Ha! Literally.) Tony hated that place. Not that the experience at the Pierre had been unpleasant—he’d enjoyed it in the moment. (Whole thing had been his idea, after all.) No, it was the aftermath that hurt, when—

(No. Focus.)

“Hey, this joint really needs it, doesn’t it?” Tony asked softly. He unscrewed Dummy’s 88-bolt and eased the oil can in. The little bot let out a whirring noise.

Tony shook his head and sighed as he oiled Dummy.

He hadn’t even had the decency to keep it on the down low in a coatroom or a bathroom stall, let alone to get an actual hotel room like a mature adult. (It would have been so fucking easy too. They’d already been in a hotel for Christ’s sake!) No, Tony just grabbed what’s-his-name by his tie, hopped over that little side railing right on the dance floor, stripped and—

Tony dropped the screwdriver. “Fuck!”

Dummy picked the screwdriver up very carefully in his claw and held it out with a hopeful whirrr.

“Good boy.”

That night at the Pierre a couple of people had asked Tony he was feeling okay, said they didn’t think it was a good idea. They tried to intervene. Tony was . . . less than appreciative.

Tony hadn’t looked Myra Goldstein—let alone her venerable mother—in the face since. He’d had no right to drag the other gala attendees into his scene like that. (It wasn’t a play party, for fucks sake!) He could have been arrested for indecent exposure, not to mention the drugs. Sometimes Tony was sorry Myra hadn’t called the cops, if it could have cut things short. Maybe there wouldn’t have been so many photos. Or videos. (Taken on the revolutionary first generation StarkPhones, of course!)

(Focus.)

“This 77 bolt is getting worn down, huh, Dummy? Let’s just replace that, shall we?” Tony grabbed a fresh screw. “See? Shiny and new.”

Booooooooooop!

Tony smiled, but it was a brittle thing.

(Focus.)

Screwdriver. Oil can. Fresh bolt.
Tony didn’t know who had eventually gathered him up off the floor of the ballroom where he’d been shivering—everything had gotten fuzzy—but the man had folded him into his giant great coat and carried him out of the ballroom. He’d called for Mr. Stark’s driver, saying that Mr. Stark was “indisposed,” then helped Happy bundle Tony into the car. The stranger hadn’t left Tony his card or any way to contact him. (Tony hoped it was because he had no expectation of thanks rather than wanting nothing to do with somebody like Tony.) Tony still had the man’s coat and sometimes he remembered his hands, large and strong and warm when Tony’d been shivering.

Happy had gotten him home and helped him to bed, trying to look after him. “Fuck off, Happy, I’m fine!” (High out of his mind, on endorphins and coke.) Tony’d fallen asleep almost immediately.

JARVIS was reading to him when he woke up, like he always did on Tony’s solo, post-scene mornings. Usually it was fine. JARVIS was better than a stranger, even a corporeal one. When Tony woke up though—still half under—he’d had seven voicemails from Obie marked ‘urgent.’

“. . . What the hell were you thinking? Do you have any idea what a hit our stock has taken? NINETY-SEVEN points since the market opened and it’s only nine-thirty! . . . ”

“. . . What about the new Stark Industries Safehouse Initiative you wanted to fund? Your actions have consequences, Tony. Consequences for other people—people less fortunate—not just the board and our investors. When our stock takes a hit, so does the Foundation. And do you think Doctors Without Boarders is the big story in the news today? No! Here, listen to this . . .”

“. . . I care about you, Tony my boy. You know I do. And I’ve intervened with the Board of Directors for you over and over. This reflects badly on me too, you know. I’m very disappointed. I’ve always had your back, haven’t I? Ever since your father died.”

“TONY!!! MACC just pulled out of the merger! How could you do something so stupid and selfish? I’m coming over—I’m in the car now.”

“What the hell?! You can’t even maintain your building. How the hell can all the elevators be down at the Tower? Your AI just called. Is it broken too? Well, we’ll have to shelve this for now, but I expect you at tomorrow’s board meeting and it better be good!!”

Obie had not been pleased. And he’d oh-so-helpfully read all the worst of the news coverage and comment boards.

Tony listened to it all.

He dropped. Hard. So hard, JARVIS called Pepper.

(The elevators worked for her.)

She found Tony crying quietly, curled in a little ball, hiding his face in his hands, still reeking of sweat and cum. Without a word other than—“JARVIS? Please cancel all my meetings for the day.”—Pepper stripped out her sumptuous suit, changed into one of Tony’s giant sleep shirts, and climbed into bed with him.

“Shhh, it’s all right,” she murmured, stroking his hair and holding him close, “Everything’s gonna be all right.”

She never told him how stupid he’d been. Or complained about losing the merger she’d been working so hard on. Or mentioned the hit their stocks had taken.

(And that was so fucking unfair. Tony never got full credit for his work in R&D until people were afraid he wasn’t at the top of his game; then the investors and partners ran for the hills.)

“It’s gonna be okay . . .” Pepper promised him softly, gentle hands petting his hair. “I’ve got you, Tony . . . You’re so good and sweet and beautiful . . . Everything’s going to be okay . . . Shhh . . . It’s okay . . . You’re good . . .”

“Tony?”

Tony jolted back to the present.

It was Bruce, hovering in the doorway of the workshop. Tony startled, realizing suddenly he wasn’t actually working on Dummy anymore, just sitting there petting him who was making soft whirring noises. Tony cleared his throat.

“Brucie bear!”

He beckoned Bruce in.
“Steve sent me to tell you dinner’s ready.”

“Cool!” Tony wiped his oily hands on a rag, then dabbed at Dummy as best he could.

“Uh, Tony?” Bruce said, fiddling with his glasses. “About the other day . . .”

“Pfft,” Tony waved it away. “It’s fine.”

“No. I’ve been meaning to apologize.”

“You really don’t need to—”

“Please,” Bruce interrupted, hand outstretched. “Let me. I’m sorry. Just—” Bruce fumbled and gave Tony a strained smile. “It’s a lot to live up to. But it means a lot to me, that you trust me. I, uh. Thank you.”

Tony smiled. “You’re welcome.” He shook his head and added quietly, “And trust me, I know how expectations can be a burden. But yeah!”

Bruce shrugged into his hoodie. “Anyway, we’re cool, right? Great! Food!”

Bruce laughed and followed him into the elevator.

As the doors opened on the common room, Clint and Natasha were walking over to the couch, carrying large, steaming bowls.

“I thought we would eat at the table,” Steve said plaintively.

“It’s a Tuesday night and we’re watching Star Trek,” Clint called back. “Besides, you served us dinner in bowls! That means couch.”

“But you need to eat it with a knife and fork,” Steve protested.

“Smells good,” Tony said, sauntering over. “What did you—” He stared at the bowl. “Chicken Parmesan?”

Bruce laughed. “Home Ec?!”

Bruce glared at him.

“Uh, I mean, it’s really good,” Clint said. He shoveled a huge forkful into his mouth.

Steve turned his attention back to Tony. “No—we didn’t learn any Italian in Home Ec. I picked it up later on.”

“My mother made chicken Parmesan sometimes,” Tony said, voice going soft with reminiscence. “We had a cook, but mom wouldn’t let anybody else make Italian food in her kitchen. If it was Italian, mom made it herself.”

“That sounds nice,” Steve said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Tony said, then added a little wryly, “though it meant I didn’t get Italian food very often.”

Tony shook himself.

“Give in and eat on the couch, buddy.” Tony patted Steve’s arm. “I picked out some awesome Star Trek.”

Steve frowned down at his bowl, then sighed and started cutting the chicken into bites at the counter.

Tony grabbed a nice Chianti and a couple of wine glasses.

“For the chef,” Tony said, offering Steve a glass and clinking his own against it.

Steve made a pleased murmur. Tony grabbed a bit of chicken Parmesan right out of Steve’s bowl. (What? It was already cut up.)

“Oh my God, that’s good.” Tony stole another bite. “Really, really good.”

“Glad you like it.” Steve looked pleased.

“Come on!” Clint called. “Apparently we only watch old-school sci-fi in this household and Steve insists you have to be the one to pick out Star Trek, so get your butt over here and work your magic, Stark.”

Tony rolled his eyes and claimed his usual spot on the couch, wriggling a little closer to Bruce than usual. (See? We’re cool!)
“JARVIS, give us ‘Devil in the Dark,’ would ya?”

“With pleasure, sir.”

Bruce murmured with approval. “That’s a good one.”

Natasha nodded in agreement.

The episode began:

MINER: “Who’s there?”

OFFICER: “It’s your relief. See anything?”

“Okay, I’ve just gotta say it: it’s weird that you three have seen every episode and know them by name,” Clint said.

“Shhh!” Steve shot him a reproachful look.

MINER: “Not a thing.”

OFFICER: “Nobody ever does. This thing’s already killed fifty men!”

“Poor red shirts,” Tony whispered to Bruce.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!”

“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.”

Tony ate his chicken Parmesan, surprised to find he had such an appetite. It really was delicious. He shouldn’t be so surprised—Steve made lots of good food—but he was anyway; it wasn’t exactly an Irish boy meat-and-potatoes dish.

Tony snuck a look over at Steve. There was something almost child-like about how intently he watched Star Trek. (Adorable.) Tony had Devil in the Dark memorized; he’d known every line since he was a little boy, so it was almost more fun to watch Steve than the show he knew by heart. But as he finished wolfing down his food, Tony found his mind starting to wander. Back to . . .

(“Is that a threat or a promise?” Tony’d asked with a smirk. “Or both. ’Cause I’m insatiable. I could take you, one right after another, right here on the ballroom floor . . .”)

“Okay, seriously, why is it always the dilithium crystals?” Clint complained.

“Shhhhh!”

(“Are you gonna disappoint me or are you gonna really put your back into it? Come on, you’d better fuck me like a whore, really fuck me up, handsome.”)

Tony finished his wine and poured himself another glass.

(“Are you okay, hon? What are you doing? Jesus, Tony! You’re in public!” “Oh, fuck the fuck off, would you? Don’t be such a prudish bitch. Try fucking the stick up your ass for a change!”)

(“Oh, and by the way, gentlemen, my safeword is ‘safeword,’ but I guess you knew that. *Everybody* knows that.”)

SPOCK: Captain, there are approximately one hundred of us engaged in this search, against one creature. The odds against you and I both being killed are 2,228.7 to 1.

KIRK: 2,228.7 to 1? Those are pretty good odds, Mister Spock.

SPOCK: And they are of course accurate, Captain.

KIRK: Of course.
“Does Spock remind you of anybody?” Clint stage whispered to Natasha, glancing at Bruce and Tony. She rolled her eyes, but looked indulgent. Bruce looked rather pleased. Tony smiled at him and took another sip of wine, trying to focus on the TV instead of . . .

(“Don’t worry, I always bring enough to share with my friends! Who wants to do a line off my ass?”)

(“Fuck! You like that, bitch? Yeah, I bet you do. That hard enough for you? Smile for the camera, baby. Hey, James, take his mouth. Really choke him on it. See? He likes that.”)

(“You’re so nice and tight, baby. Yeah, fuck back on my cock. Are you getting this, Henry? Yeah, do a close up. Christ he’s gorgeous taking two dicks.”)

Kirk: It's not making any threatening moves, Spock.

Spock: You don't dare take the chance, Captain. Kill it!

Kirk: I thought you were the one who wanted it kept alive, captured if possible.

Spock: Jim, your life is in danger. You can't take the risk.

(“What were you thinking? Can you imagine how Howard would feel? Or your mother? I’m just glad they didn’t live to see this.”)

(“This is going to haunt you for the rest of your career! Did you even think of that? Tony, Tony my boy, I only want what’s best for you . . .”)

“Interesting fact,” Bruce said, “this was the first episode where Spock uses the mind meld.”

“Mmmm,” Steve murmured, not looking away from the screen.

“Okay, why doesn’t Bruce get shushed when he talks over Star Trek?” Clint demanded.

Spock: Pain! Pain! Pain! (he staggers back) That’s all I got, Captain. Waves and waves of searing pain. It’s in agony.

Kirk: (reading the words the creature wrote) ‘No kill I.’ What is that, a plea for us not to kill it, or a promise that it won’t kill us?

(Shivering, curled in a little ball, muttering, “so stupid . . . I’m sorry, I’m sorry . . . stupid, stupid, stupid.” “Sir? Sir!!? SIR!!?”)

(Pepper had smelled like lilacs as she rocked him back and forth. “It’s gonna be okay. . . You’re okay. . . You’re good. . . Shhh, I’ve got you . . .”)

Tony startled as Bruce bumped his shoulder against him. His brow was creased in concern.

“You okay, Tony?” Bruce murmured softly.

“Yeah,” Tony whispered, smirking. “I’m great.”

Bruce looked uncertain; Tony nodded emphatically and bumped his shoulder back against his friend’s.

(Yeah, I’m fine.)

Kirk: Help it. Treat it.

McCoy: I’m a doctor, not a bricklayer!

Bruce and Tony both laughed at the much-parodied line. Steve shot them a confused, slightly disapproving look. Tony waved at him and mouthed, “I’ll explain later.” Steve smiled and turned back to the screen with that rapt attention Tony was so fond of—and that Steve only gave to tv programs he particularly liked. Tony leaned over, leaning his head against Bruce’s shoulder. Bruce smiled.

Vanderberg: You know, the Horta aren’t so bad once you’re used to their appearance. Well, that’s about it, Kirk. Thanks for everything.

[Bridge]
SPOCK: Curious. What Chief Vanderberg said about the Horta is exactly what the Mother Horta said to me. She found humanoid appearance revolting, but she thought she could get used to it.

As the episode came slowly to its idealized conclusion, Tony looked over at his team.

(The Pierre was a long time ago.)

Clint was whispering to Nat again and she was giving him her faux frown, the one that didn’t touch her eyes or her brow, just a quirk of her lips.

(It was a long time ago. Before Afghanistan.)

Bruce was looking at the TV screen and fiddling absentmindedly with his reading glasses, turning them over and over in his hands as he so often did.

(Before Iron Man.)

Steve was watching with visible pleasure, lips slightly parted and curled up in a little smile.

(Before the Avengers.)

“Wow,” Steve said as the theme music concluded the episode. “That really was a good episode, Tony.”

Steve was looking at Tony with wide-eyed admiration, as though Tony’d made the episode himself.

“Oh, well,” Tony said with a shrug, looking away. “It was always one of my favorites.”

“I can see why,” Steve said. “Though, I’m not sure I could have been as forgiving as the Horta. And it seems like the miners get a way better deal in the end.”

Tony nodded. “True. The episode’s more about cultural relativism; not so self-aware about the intrinsic injustices of colonialism. Still groundbreaking for its time, though.”

Steve nodded, expression turning a little melancholy as he said, “Seems like there are some lessons we never quite learn.”

Steve shook his head and stood, smiling again. “I was thinking I’d make hot chocolate. Who else would like some?”

“Always,” Natasha said emphatically, following Steve to the kitchen.

“Can I put Kahlua in mine?” Clint asked, gathering their dirty bowls from the coffee table.

“Um, sure?”

“Then hell yeah!”

“Have you ever tried making it with cayenne pepper?” Bruce asked Steve, joining them in the kitchen.

“Oh, yeah, that shit’s good,” Clint jumped in. “Remember that place in Tulum, Nat?”

“You mean the place you had so much tequila I had to get you home in a fireman’s carry?”

“Oh, no. The other place in Tulum.”

“Wait,” Steve said, “cayenne pepper? In hot chocolate? And, uh, sorry—where’s Tulum?

“Mexico. Mexican hot chocolate is traditionally spicy,” Bruce explained.

Tony watched the team settle into friendly chatter. Clint loaded the dishwasher. Natasha got five of the big blue mugs down from the cupboard and laid them out on the counter.

(I’m fine. It’s all gonna be fine.) Strangest of all, he was pretty sure he meant it.

“Tony?” Steve called. “Would you like some?”

“Yeah.” Tony smiled and joined them in the kitchen. “Sounds great, Steve.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh, wow. Such a relief to post this! I rewrote it, uh, quite a few times, really
struggling with tone and form. (I wanted to replicate Tony’s vacillations between past and present formally, but not in a way that would actually confuse readers…) And the subject matter at the Pierre was really hard for me to balance. So, thank you very much for your patience!

Comments and musings are a delight, and if there are any particular bits that you especially liked I’d love to know what they were! (As you know, I find negative concrit paralyzing, but I learn a lot by hearing what your favorite parts are…)

Thank you for all your kindness and generosity. There’s no way I would have produced 120,000 words without you!!!

p.s. There will probably be a rambling author’s note about this chapter on my tumblr in the next few days, if you’re interested in that kind of thing and you’d like to check it out. ☀️ https://www.tumblr.com/blog/ms-meredith-milton

And now there’s a companion piece here on AO3 about the Dom with the Coat: http://archiveofourown.org/works/3308483
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Warnings: carryover from the previous chapter, so elements of past self-destructive behaviors; drug use; slut shaming; shitty media being shitty; elements of dub-con; internalized slut shaming.

New to this chapter warning: (but a bit of a spoiler, so behind rot13 code): Gbal unf na vagenybyva jvgu n Qbz ng gur tynq gung ur svagf irel frkhnyyl guerngravat, ohg gurer vf ab nifnyh be bireg guern (vr. gur Qbz zvtug abg rira emyvnr un’f ernqvat nf zrannvat gb Gbal, gubhtu un’f orvat n frevbhf wrex ryvure jnl)

INFINITE GRATITUDE to thatwhichyeilds who made the photomanips for this chapter. Aren’t they lovely, folks?

Also, I wrote a companion piece for chapter 36 about The Dom in the Coat that you might like to read. Not necessary to understand chapter 37, but might enrich the experience. You can find it here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/3308483

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Pep! You’re early!”

She smiled at him and shook her head. “You keep saying that. Trust me, Tony—it’s Friday.”

Tony scratched the back of his neck. “Oh?”

(Huh.) The past few days had really flown by, packed full of:

1) Avengers’ training (“That’s great, Iron Man! Okay, let’s practice those lifts again. Widow, get into position.”)


3) Star Trek (“No, seriously, how can the dilithium crystals be in crisis AGAIN?” “SHHHHHH!”)

and, well, (4) Steve.

(“Tony? I was about to head out for some fresh air. Maybe visit a hot dog cart. Any interest?”

“In a trashy hot dog? Always! I’ll grab my coat.”)

(“Hey, Tony. Do you need any help with the K-52’s again?”

“Nope! No assistance required. Done with those. Just working on the specs for the training robots.”)

“Oh, okay. Sorry to interrupt.”

“Hey, hey, that doesn’t mean you have to leave! Unless you want to. But, yeah, you can chill on my couch again if you’re looking for somewhere new to hang and don’t mind that I’m off in robot world.”

“Maybe I could get my sketchbook?”

“Yeah, sure! I’ll even pick out some new music for you. No heavy metal, promise—you’ll like it!”

“So . . . How’ve you been?” Pepper asked solicitously.

Tony pulled himself from his vague calculations of the passing days to find Pepper giving him a watery smile.

“No,” Tony said, mock stern. “If you’re going to look at me like that then I’m only going to dinner long enough to throw a drink in your face.”

She laughed; Tony smiled at her.

“Now, get out of my workshop,” he ordered, waving his hands, “I’m on a roll! Besides, it may be Friday, but it’s not dinnertime. See you then!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Unless you wanna come see the training robots I designed.”
"I do love robots," Pepper said musingly, "But it sounds like I'd be in the way."

"No, no!" Tony protested, then backtracked, "Uh, well, actually—"

"Yeah, yeah." Pepper shook her head. "I’ll head in to the office, then if . . . you're sure you don’t need me."

Tony didn’t look up from his schematics. "Are you making that face?" Tony asked, waving his hands, "None of that face! Get out!"

Pepper laughed again and came over, heels clicking, to kiss him on the cheek. "See you after work."

Pepper had click-clacked her way to the exit when Tony blurted out, suddenly nervous, "You do know I love you, right?"

Pep quirked her head. "Of course. I love you too. See you at six."

Tony smiled.

(Okay. Back to work on the training bots. Steve had sounded pretty excited about them.)

Pepper came up to the penthouse to fetch Tony for dinner sumptuously dressed in a navy blue Vera Wang; it wasn’t nearly so formal as the gown she’d wear tomorrow night, but decidedly elegant.

"Nope," Tony said, waving a hand at her. She raised an eyebrow at his jeans, plain grey hoodie, and baseball cap. "Go change."

"Bossy, aren’t we?"

"Very. I demand casual soul food and going incognito. And, since you’re taking me out to dinner to comfort me because I’m a poor vulnerable little darling in need of soothing, I get what I want." He fluttered his lashes.

"Oh! I thought I was just taking you out to dinner because we're friends and I'm terribly fond of you. Good to know that my motives are more altruistic."

"Yep! Now scoot off and change. I'm hungry!"

"I take it we’re going to Jake’s?"

"Yep!" Tony popped the ‘p’ and rocked back on his heels. "And then I wanna go to some cheap bar. Someplace we’d never go. And no yelping! We’re just gonna find it."

Pepper looked amused, lips quirked. "And are we taking the subway?" she asked archly.

Tony held his hands up. "Let’s not be too crazy! Taxis. No chauffeur."

Pepper laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "Be right back."

This was gonna be awesome.

Katie— If I ever got myself into trouble, I’d try to hire you. Seriously, well played. Genius. You even got them to make it look spontaneous. --Kevin

The next morning Tony stumbled into the kitchen, bleary as usual. (Ok, maybe very very slightly hungover. But not actually hungover. Just, post-tipsy.) Steve was reading the newspaper—smelly newsprint and all—while Bruce read The Economist and sipped his green tea.

"Morning, Tony," Steve said brightly. "There’s coffee in the pot still, if you’d like some. And pancakes."

Tony poured himself coffee and settled at the counter. Damn, the coffee was strong. Steve must have made it—he heaped coffee into that pot like a man who remembered coffee rationing. Tony took another long gulp.

Natasha slid into the kitchen.

"Did you have fun last night, Tony?" she asked. He nodded sleepily, clutching at his coffee.

Natasha smirked. "Good. Also, your night out is trending on twitter."

"Yeah, man," Clint said, "The internet is fucking obsessed with you right now."

"Here." Natasha presented him with a StarkTab and turned up the volume.
There it was: slightly shaky, slightly grainy footage of him and Pepper bouncing and shaking around on the karaoke stage, singing:

\[
\text{I go on too many dates} \\
\text{But I can't make them stay} \\
\text{At least that's what people say} \\
\text{That's what people say . . .}
\]

Someone off screen said loudly, “I told you it was Stark! So that’s totally Pepper Potts! Holy shit! Holy shit! Are you taping this?”

“Shhhhhhh!”

Tony sang:

\[
\text{It's like I got this music} \\
\text{In my mind, saying it's gonna be alright} \\
\text{Cause the players gonna play, play, play} \\
\text{And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate} \\
\text{Baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake} \\
\text{Shake it off . . .}
\]

Tony couldn’t help the little smile that formed as he watched. (God, they looked happy. And, oh, hey—Pep was right, their timing wasn’t off.)

“Also, has anybody told Pepper she looks like Taylor Swift?” Clint asked. “The black skinny jeans and red lips really do it.”

“Heartbreakers gonna break, break, break
And the fakers gonna fake, fake, fake
Baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake
Shake it off, Shake it off
Shake it off
Shake it off . . .”

“Ooh, is that us?” Pepper asked, stepping into the kitchen. On screen, they were shimmying their butts and shoulders in unison, then shaking their hands.

“Yeah. Tony’s been outed as a Taylor Swift fan,” Clint said. “And you’re trending on, well, everything.”


Tony shrugged, then turned to grin at Pepper over his shoulder, saying, “But if they don’t like it —”

“Shake, shake, shake, shake it off,” Pepper joined him, waving her hands. They started laughing.

When he turned back, Steve was giving him an amused, happy little smile, but edged with confusion.

“Oh, man,” Tony said, “has anybody introduced you to Taylor Swift yet? Here! We’ve gotta watch the video. It’s too fucking adorable. You’ll love it! And, hey, did you say something about pancakes?”
As they emerged from the limousine, Tony braced himself for the press and photographers and the inevitable, “How does it feel to be back at the Pierre?”

“Tony! Tony! Over here!”

“How can we get one of you with Potts?”

“With the Captain? Beautiful!”

Grin, wave, autograph. Nobody asked about the venue. (Huh.) Soon enough they were all inside, checking their coats. As they ascended the grand staircase to the ballroom, Natasha was close at hand. Beautiful smile still in place, she muttered, “So, did you bring the dagger I gave you?”

Tony shook his head.

“Well,” she said, “I have mine.”

“Noted,” Tony said.

A pause, then she added still smiling, “Though having it’s always a danger at these things; so boring I’m tempted to stab myself.”

Tony laughed.

(Oh! The Carmichaels had arrived.) Tony actually liked them.

Time to mingle.

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Time to mingle.
For the first thirty minutes, Pepper hovered nearby—until Tony glared at her enough she took the hint. Natasha always seemed to talking to somebody near him too, but that always looked like a coincidence. (But it would, wouldn’t it? She was a spy after all . . .)

The evening seemed . . . fine. People looked at him, but they always did. Tony was not only rich—they all were at these sorts of things—but famous. (Infamous too.) So, Tony talked to people he knew (whether he liked them or not) and let new people introduce themselves (whether he wanted to meet them or not). Politeness prevailed. The evening felt no different from dozens of others he’d had at The Regency, The Plaza, or The Carlyle. Little by little, Tony started to relax. He went to the bar.

“Scotch, please.” The bartender nodded, but as he turned for the bottle Tony amended, “Actually, make that a soda water.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Mr. Stark? May I join you?”

Tony turned. The man who’d spoken was bald, tall, and thin—almost lanky—wearing an immaculate tuxedo and small wire rim glasses. He looked familiar, but Tony couldn’t place him.

“We’ve met briefly,” he said with a self-deprecating smile, “But it was a while ago. No reason you’d remember.” He held out his hand. “Harry Silverstein.”

Tony shook Silverstein’s hand, still trying to remember. He’d heard the name recently. (Oh! Right. Jackie. Jackie’s little birdies had commended him.)

“No, of course I remember you, Mr. Silverstein,” Tony said politely. The bartender handed Tony his drink. “You recently left Goldman Sachs for Morgan Stanley, I believe.”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said.

“And how are you liking it there?”

“Well enough.” Silverstein shrugged. “I confess I’m reluctant to talk about Morgan Stanley with you though.” He gestured to the ballroom expansively. “All anyone wants to talk to me about here is Morgan Stanley; I sought you out since I’m pretty sure you’re the only one here able and willing to talk about the most recent Fields Medalists.”

Tony perked up.

“You’re interested in mathematics?”

“Finance is a family tradition,” Silverstein said with a slight grimace, “but mathematics is my love. Did you read any of Smirnov’s most recent work? I thought his proof of the conformal invariance of percolation might particularly interest you.”

“Yeah, amazing stuff! It works for the planar Ising model too.”

Silverstein nodded. “I’m not as strong on statistical physics, but as I understood it . . .”

“And, I think it’s pretty clear Artur Avila will win one next year,” Tony said, grabbing a third tonic water.

Harry—(you couldn’t talk about mathematics so joyfully for so long without inviting first names)—nodded agreement.

“So, who else would you predict?” Tony asked.
“Maryam Mirzakhani,” Harry said decisively. Tony made a skeptical face. (No sub had ever won the Field Medal.)

“I know she’s still quite young,” Harry said, “but have you read her work on the geometry of Riemann surfaces and their moduli spaces? It’s amazing! Took me ages to work my way through it—my graduate studies were a long time ago—but her work is a masterpiece. Honestly, I thought she was passed over last time and her latest work was even stronger. Mark my words: Mirzakhani in 2014.”

(Tony was still skeptical, but he wasn’t as into Geometry, so maybe . . .)

“I’ll be rooting for her.” Tony lifted his glass. “To Mirzakhani in 2014.”

They clinked their glasses together.

“Harry! There you are. Oh, and Mr. Stark. Hello.” The elderly woman who approached looked startled to see Tony and glanced back and forth between him and Harry a few times. Tony nodded. She turned her attention back to Harry, saying, “Oh, Harry, you really do need to come talk to the Johnsons. They’ve been looking for you for quite a while.”

“Would you excuse me, Tony?” Harry asked, with what seemed like sincere regret, adding sotto voce, “duty calls.”

“Oh, of course,” Tony said. “It was a pleasure talking with you.”

“And you.” Harry lingered. “Perhaps we could chat again sometime--?”

“I’d like that.”

They smiled and parted.

Tony found himself alone and, against all the odds, in positively high spirits. Harry Silverstein was a delight. (Seriously, how had nobody introduced them before?) Buoyed by their chat and the overwhelming normalcy of the evening, Tony found himself drifting from the bar to the stage. He knew he shouldn’t. It would be foolish to go to that end of the ballroom, to be photographed between those columns, by that railing, but Tony drifted over as if against his will.

(It’s fine.)

Over the years, Tony had forced himself to revisit that night over and over, trying to recreate his mental state and answer—in his own mind at least—the question everyone had asked: “What the hell were you thinking?”

He still wasn’t sure.

Standing at the edge of the ballroom, looking at the railing he’d hopped over, the spot where he’d stripped off his clothes and whipped out a bag of coke, he felt so remote from it, like it had been another man in another lifetime.

(It was a long time ago.)

Tony suppressed a smile.

(It really was, wasn’t it?)

Tony could feel people looking at him—maybe even staring—but it didn’t matter. He was fine. Better than fine—he was Iron Man. An Avenger. The new improved Tony Stark.

Calmly, casually, he headed for the nearby Men’s Room. (He didn’t actually need to pee, just wanted a moment out of sight.) At the Pierre, there were no mere toilets; even the men’s facilities were vast and sumptuous, beginning with a plush lounge featuring full-length mirrors, overstuffed armchairs, and even a chaise longue.

Tony washed his hands, splashed some water on his face, and dried off with a hand towel, grateful to have the washroom to himself. He was just deciding whether to guarantee his privacy by stepping into a stall, make himself at home for a few minutes in the decadent lounge area, or return to the gala—the door swung open.

“Feeling nostalgic?”

Tony’s whole body went stiff.

The Dom leaned casually in the inner doorway that separated the lounge area from the bathroom proper, and he was giving Tony a leer he no doubt considered a charming smile. He looked to be roughly ten years Tony’s senior, though his face had the tight, high look of plastic surgery that made it hard to guess. Regardless, he had five inches and a good seventy-five pounds on Tony. (Not that he’d done anything threatening—yet—but Tony ran the calculation on instinct whenever he got that vibe.)
"I have no idea what you’re talking about," Tony said stiffly.

"No need to be coy," the Dom said, with a certain unctuous approximation of charm. "After all, the blushing virgin routine isn’t really your st†ck."

Tony clenched his hands into fists.

"No," he agreed, aiming for casual. "I suppose it isn’t."

"I’m still sorry I wasn’t there in 2005," the Dom said with an apologetic smile, as if Tony had missed out. (The Dom’s teeth were unnaturally, synthetically white.) "My brother was there, though. Said you were magnificent."

"Talking about your sex lives together?" Tony asked, arching an eyebrow. "Isn’t that a little House Lannister?"

The guy shrugged, unperturbed. (Clearly not a Game of Thrones fan.)

The Dom showed no sign of moving (or actually using the bathroom); he just stood in the doorway, blocking the exit. Tony’s pulse was starting to speed up a little.

"I know what you want, Stark," the guy murmured, voice pitched sultry. "You need it, don’t you? Need to be put in your place."

"Actually, I’m good, thanks," Tony said blandly. "Vomit," he added softly, activating JARVIS’ security protocols.

"You’re not good, Tony," the Dom growled in what he probably thought of as his sexy voice. "You’re very bad."

The Dom took a step closer, still blocking the exit, and Tony’s heart slammed into his chest.

Tony swallowed. (Calm down, stupid. You can throw Clint. You’re fine.) He shifted his stance.

"But I know what to do with naughty little sluts," the Dom growled, "the kind who’re always desperate for a good, hard—"

"When I said I was ‘good,’ " Tony interrupted with a grimace, "I meant, ’I’m not interested in you.’"

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Stark!"

(Steve!)

Tony almost resented the rush of relief that shot through his body at the sound of Steve’s voice. (Ridiculous. You were fine.)

"Ms. Potts has been looking for you. There’s someone she would like you to meet.” Steve paused, glancing at the other Dom who had spun to face the newcomer, then turned back to Tony. “If you’re done here—?"

"Yes," Tony said, “I’m done.”

Tony paused, then added pointedly to the Dom in the doorway, “Won’t you excuse me?”

The man stepped aside, expression one of muted anger.

Tony slid past and left with Steve.

Back in the ballroom, Tony breathed easier, though his heart was still racing. He took a deep breath.

“Who’s Pep want me to meet?” Tony asked.

"Uh, well,” Steve fidgeted.

Tony laughed; it sounded a little giddy. (Of course it wasn’t an accident Steve showed up at that very moment.)

"You made that up, didn’t you?” Tony asked.

“Yeah.”

Steve said it so earnestly that Tony wondered if he could lie. (Well, clearly, he could, but somehow Tony found it hard to imagine Steve lying to him.)

“My hero,” Tony said jokingly, fluttering his eyelashes.

"Was that . . . okay?” Steve asked with a nervous little frown.

“Yeah.” Tony laid a hand on his arm and smiled up at him. “Thanks for the assist, Cap.”
Steve replied with a blinding smile.

“Any time, Iron Man.”

“Come on!” Tony pulled at his sleeve and heading for the bar. “I want a scotch.”

From across the ballroom, Tony saw Pepper was in deep conversation with two people. Pepper towered over the younger woman; the older man towered over Pepper. Tony might have passed them by, but he saw Pepper’s eyes were bright with the enthusiasm of exciting business deals or new friends. He approached.

Tony recognized the man as he turned, saying “Ah, Mr. Stark. Won’t you join us?”

William Tyrone Macmillan III was starting to look . . . old. Tony felt a strange sense of shock at the realization; Tyrone was so famous in New York’s business and society scene as something of a timeless lion. His famously blonde-red hair had long since gone white and his posture remained ramrod straight, but his skin was showing the papery thinness of age, lines and creases deep. At Tyrone’s side was a diminutive sub, very attractive, in her mid or late twenties, wearing a modest green sheath dress. (Knee-length, sweetheart neckline.) Even in her heels, she made Tony feel tall. (Huh.)

Tony’d heard Margaret Macmillan was Tyrone’s right hand, and had been since he married her late in life; surely he hadn’t—

“I don’t believe you’ve met my daughter,” Tyrone said, chin up, shoulders back with visible pride. “May I present Ms. Sylvia Margaret Macmillan. Mr. Anthony Stark.”

(Ah! His daughter. Somehow, Tony had assumed she’d be another towering Domme . . .) Tony looked at them, father and daughter, Dom and sub and felt a certain pleasure that Tyrone had introduced her as Ms not Miss, old lion though he was.

Tony smiled, offering his hand. “Ms. Macmillan. A pleasure.”

“Sylvia, please,” she replied with a smile.

“Tony,” he allowed with a smile.

She had a firm handshake. The emerald at her throat perfectly matched her demure dress. (An heirloom, no doubt.) Her red-gold hair was tied up in a simple bun.

“I was just telling Ms. Potts,” Tyrone Macmillan said, “That Sylvia is Executive Vice President of Macmillan Corporation and the head of our new research division.”

Pepper was smiling. “Yes. But I’m afraid since leaving weapons, we haven’t done much business with Macmillan.”

“America isn’t building the railroads anymore,” Sylvia said. “We’re more than a steel and manufacturing firm.” She turned to include Tony. “In fact, we’re working on a new transparent aluminum carbon polymer. For electronics. I thought you might be interested.”

Tony held in a yawn. (Everyone at the gala was developing a new product “for electronics” that might interest Stark Industries and their head of R&D . . .)

“I’d be happy to take a look at your specs,” Tony said vaguely. “Send them over Monday if you like. I won’t quiz you on the technical details.”

Sylvia quirked an eyebrow. “Mr. Stark,” she began, then corrected herself at his look, “Tony. I’ve personally recruited some of the finest minds from MIT, Berkeley, and Cal Tech; some of them your Stark Scholars. This is my division and my project. Ask me anything about the specs. I’ve made it my business to know them inside and out.”

Tony perked up. (The suits usually didn’t know jack shit about their tech.)

“But,” Sylvia added, with an amused smile, “I trust you’ll understand if there are questions I decline to answer. Your reputation precedes you—I’m hardly going to give you the opportunity to engineer it yourself after the gala, when I’m very much hoping to make a deal with Ms. Potts.”

Tony laughed. The look of happy anticipation on Pepper’s face was starting to make sense: a business deal and a new friend.

“Do please forgive the interruption,” an elegant woman in her mid-fifties said. (Ah. Margaret Macmillan.) She was stunning in a full skirted, scarlet dress that, like her daughter’s, had an understated sweetheart neckline. Her dark hair was liberally peppered with grey, swept into a Gibson tuck. She looked up at her husband with an apologetic smile. “Tyrone, I’m afraid you really should come say a few words to the archbishop.”

Tyrone Macmillan smiled at his wife. “Of course, my dear.” He turned to Pepper and Tony. “Won’t you excuse me?”

[50x803]
They murmured their acquiescence. Tony’s jaw nearly dropped at the sight of William Tyrone Macmillan III leaving a serious business negotiation for a trivial social nicety.

(It had to be true. Tyrone was leaving his empire to his daughter.) There had been some scuttlebutt about him pushing his eldest child—the son, the Dom—out for his daughter, but Tony’d never taken it seriously. Dynastic families were so traditional.

Tony watched Mr. and Mrs. Macmillan as they moved slowly across the ballroom. If he hadn’t been watching so closely, Tony would have missed it when Tyrone’s hand started to shake very slightly and Margaret reached out to hold it steady. Pepper and Sylvia were getting down to details—Pepper, of course, was always strong on the tech—but Tony couldn’t quite stop watching Tyrone.

Tyrone was younger than Howard, of course, but they were somewhat of an era. Tony couldn’t help but wonder . . . (If Howard had lived . . . if he’d been there to see Tony’s finest inventions . . . if Mom had been there to guide him as he grew up and to help Howard onto the right path . . .)

Tony swallowed thickly.

(If—? Might Howard have proudly introduced Tony as his successor one day?)

Tyrone turned with a smile to look at his daughter and noticed Tony staring at him. Tyrone nodded. Tony returned the nod and looked away.

He didn’t want to think about Tyrone. (Or Howard.)

“—which reduced production costs, but brought the PPI up to 220—“ Sylvia was saying.

“Wait,” Tony cut in, “You’re getting 220 from twisted-nematic LCDs?”

“Actually, they’re a hybrid of the old TN LCDs and the new IPS models.”

Some old business bore was droning on at Pepper, only occasionally sparing Tony his attention to say, heavy-handed with innuendo, ’How very glad everyone was that Tony’d turned his life around . . . and so dramatically!’ Tony let his gaze wander around the great hall; Bruce was at the bar, deep in conversation with Harry Silverstein who nodding effusively at every word; Clint was over by the balcony laughing raucously with a stocky looking switch in a suit; Natasha was nowhere to be seen.

Tony caught sight of Steve across the ballroom, surrounded by a bevy of admirers. Six or seven subs were clustered close and some big beefy Dom kept grinning and slapping Steve on the back, grandstanding. As Tony watched, Steve’s shoulders seemed to creep higher and higher, tighter and tighter. Steve took a tiny step back, and they crowded forward.

“Won’t you excuse me?”

Tony abandoned Pepper to her fate.

(Shit.)

The closer he got, the more obviously Tony could see signs of strain, though Steve was trying to cover it up. His smile was tight, his brow was pinched, and—though Steve was usually pretty intense about maintaining eye contact—at the moment his eyes were darting from person to person, then around the ballroom as if—

(Well, as if he were looking for a way to escape.)

“Hey, JARVIS?” Tony called softly, taking out his StarkPhone. “Give me some Star Trek sound effects would you? And throw up some of the phone specs as a scrolling data read-out. Make it look all fancy and shit.”

JARVIS didn’t answer, but his phone started making “beep-beep-pew-pew-beeeeep” noises.

Tony caught Steve’s eye as he approached; the look of relief on Steve’s face made him feel warm. (And it definitely wasn’t wishful thinking.) Tony gave Steve a grin and a wink, then schooled his expression to serious.

“—really, though, ladies,” the Dom was saying, loudly, voice carrying, “he’s looking damn good for a ninety year old, isn’t he?” He slapped Steve on the back again and opened his mouth to say something else, but Tony cut in.

“Excuse me, Captain?” Tony said briskly, doing his best at a military bearing. “I’m sorry to bother you, but this just came in. It’s probably nothing, but I wanted to bring it to your attention.”

Tony held his phone out to Steve. When his admirers tried to get a look, Tony pulled it away.

“I’m afraid that’s confidential,” Tony said seriously. “Shall we, Captain?”
“Yes, of course, Iron Man. Let’s find someplace more secure.” Steve turned to the throng, who looked at once disappointed and titillated, “Please excuse me.”

They made a speedy departure.

“Those were tricorder noises, weren’t they?” Steve asked as Tony led him to the edge of the ballroom.

“Yes!”

Steve let out a strangled little laugh. Tony paused to grin up at him, but found Steve’s expression pained. (Shit.) Steve’s shoulders were still tight, his movements stiff. Tony hopped over one of the little railings by the west balcony; he pulled Steve to where the drapes would partially obscure them from the main room. Steve’s breathing was a little shallow and he blinked just a little too much. The noise of the party swirled all around them.

“Let’s get outta here,” Tony said. It was cold out—too cold to stay outside long without their coats—but it would guarantee them privacy, at least for a while. Tony reached for the doorknob.

“No!” Steve said, grabbing Tony’s wrist. He took a deep breath and shook his head, letting go of Tony abruptly. “Sorry. Just, it’s too cold out. It’s fine. We’re fine here.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked uncertainly.

Steve nodded, letting out a long shuddering breath. He leaned back against a column. “Yeah. It’s fine.”

Tony sidled a little closer. Steve’s fists were clenched. Tony started to lay a hand on his arm, then thought better of it. He wanted to ask, “Are you okay?” or maybe “Do you want to talk about it?” but they both sounded so stupid that Tony just stood there, hands hanging awkwardly at his sides.

“Thanks,” Steve said eventually, looking over at him. “For coming to get me. Sometimes, I just . . . I get so mad, you know?”

Tony nodded, but he didn’t know. His mind was racing with possibilities, though . . .

Tony waited.

Steve looked away, expression hard and voice harsh. “I’ll come here and be polite and drink and make small talk, because it’s the right thing to do and I want to help, but I’m not gonna sing and dance on command.” He took a sharp breath. “I’m not a performing monkey, not anymore; left that behind with the USO tour. They can’t just . . . Just . . .”

(Oh fuck.) Tony’s chest felt tight. (Also, he’d like to go back and punch those morons.)

“You tell us a story about the war”—like it was nothin’! Like it was some entertaining anecdote. And the others joined in with all these questions—“What was it like?” ‘Did you ever see Auschwitz?’—and then that big guy—Thomas?—he asked if I remembered the—” Steve swallowed; his voice dropped. “—the crash. And . . . after.”

(Oh fuck.) Tony’s chest felt tight. (Also, he’d like to go back and punch those morons.)

“What’s the matter with people?” Steve asked, half angry and half sad.

Tony shook his head, at a loss. (He knew what it was like. The questioning.) Tony wanted to give Steve a hug, but he didn’t.

Steve let out a long sigh and pressed his hand to his forehead as if he had a headache. He leaned against the column, head tipped back, taking deep breaths. After a few moments, he gave Tony a weak smile.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t be hard on them,” Steve said, “They’re so young.”

Miss. High Society Blue Dress was probably only two or three years younger than Steve—who was, what? 25? 26?—but Tony knew what he meant.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. (Fuck. It was easy to forget how young Steve was.)

“That’s no excuse, though,” Tony said. “They should have thought.”

Steve nodded his subdued agreement. “They don’t mean to be cruel,” he murmured. “They’re just curious.”

Curiosity was better than cruelty, sure, but that didn’t make it fine.

Tony shuddered. He remembered the curiosity after Afghanistan. There were apparently more veiled ways to ask “Were you raped?” than Tony’d ever imagined! It had been the question everyone wanted answered, but wouldn’t voice directly. “Did they torture you? What kind of torture? How long, how bad? Any permanent damage?” were all next on the list, though the news
coverage made all of that pretty clear, so—

Steve laid a hand gently on Tony’s shoulder.

“Thanks again for the assist,” Steve said with a smile. (A real smile, that reached his bright blue eyes.)

“Any time, Captain.” Tony smiled back at him.

“Not gonna lie,” Steve said, rubbing his forehead again. “I’m counting down the moments till I can get out of here.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Nat and I were talking about it—she wants burgers from Freddie’s. Those canapés aren’t really food, you know? Late night burgers and Star Trek are sounding pretty damn good to me right now. You want in?”

“You bet!” Tony checked his watch. “Give it another twenty minutes for politeness, then we can beat it.”

“Thank God!”

Tony was congratulating Joseph and Janine Jabobs on their daughter’s admission to Harvard—Another Harvard student in the family! Oh boy! What a surprise!—when Clint caught his eye and gestured to his watch. And, look, he’d already collected Bruce!

Tony extricated himself from the Jacobs and was heading for the coatroom—dodging would-be conversational partners with a carefully averted gaze and selective hearing—when he ran into Harry. Tony couldn’t ignore that eager smile.

“Are you heading out?” Harry asked.

Tony nodded.

“I was thinking of going in a few moments myself,” Harry said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. (The gesture reminded Tony powerfully of Bruce.)

“I so enjoyed our conversation earlier, and well, uh—” Harry adjusted his glasses again needlessly. “Dr. Banner was just telling me about Villani’s work on the Boltzmann equation and I’d love to hear your thoughts. Perhaps you’d like to join me for a drink? They serve really wonderful cognac at the Spirit Lounge just a few blocks away.”

“Perhaps some other time,” Tony said sincerely, with a kind smile. He squeezed Harry’s hand. “It was lovely chatting with you, but I’m quite eager to get home. It’s been a long evening.”

“Ah, of course,” Harry said, a little downcast. “Have a safe trip home. And, uh—” Harry fumbled in his pocket. “My card. In case you’d like to get together sometime.”

Tony thanked him and bade him goodnight. (Harry Silverstein was totally confused about the proofs of nonlinear Landau damping, but a sweet guy nonetheless.) Tony bit his lip pensively. (Maybe Harry’d like to be a trustee for the mathematics branch of Stark Scholars Fund?)

Tony was almost to the coatroom, waving, nodding and smiling as he went when he heard a familiar deep velvet voice intone: “Tony, darling.”

“Veronica!” Tony said with a grin, turning to look up at her. She was six feet tall, even before donning her stilettos or piling her sumptuous braids high on her head; counting those, she was probably the tallest person in the room. Tonight she was sporting a stunning tuxedo with red piping and tails that accentuated her long limbs. Her crimson lipstick was brilliant against her dark skin and matched both shoes and piping.

“You look stunning,” Tony told her sincerely, perhaps a trifle breathlessly. He held out his hand and she folded it in both of hers.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving so early,” she said. “I only just found you!”

Tony smiled. “Hardly my fault you arrived so fashionably late.”

“I was hoping we could catch up,” she said, still holding his hand. “It’s been a while.”

Veronica ran her thumb lightly across Tony’s wrist. The gesture went straight to his cock with a rush of happy memories. She leaned a little closer.

“I’ve got a bottle of Veuve Cliquot chilling in the executive suite,” she said softly. “Are you sure I can’t entice you to join me?”
The tilt in her voice, the curve of her lips, the arch of her eyebrow all promised a shattering evening of mutual pleasure. A promise Tony knew she could keep. She'd hold him hovering on the brink, bound tight, begging and gasping and desperate for—

Tony swallowed.

(He could text the team to go on without him.)

Veronica waited patiently, brown eyes warm, expression open.

(It’s tempting, so very tempting--)

After a few moments, though, Tony shook his head. “I think I’d better head home.”

“All right,” she said, smile perhaps a little regretful. She squeezed his hand. “Take care of yourself. And let’s do catch up soon, Tony.”

“I’d like that.” He went up on tiptoes to kiss her on the cheek.

Tony hurried to fetch his coat and catch up with his team. It was time to go home.

Without a backward glance, Tony left The Pierre behind him.

Chapter End Notes

In 2014, Maryan Mirzakhani became the first woman ever to win the Fields Medal, often called the Nobel Prize of mathematics (since there isn’t actually a Nobel for mathematics, surprisingly enough). She is awesome and you can read about her here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryam_Mirzakhani

I worried the pacing was a bit off in this chapter, so I cut another little scene at the gala. If you’re curious—and the sort of person who watches delete movie scenes—you will find it on my tumblr shortly: ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com

Anyway, there you have it. Hope you liked it! As always, comments are cherished and I love to know your favorite bits! Thanks so much for reading! (And, yes, I have a massive crush on Veronica Williams...)
Chapter 37

Tony woke suddenly, heart pounding and palms sweaty. He flailed out from under the covers.

"It is 9:22 am on December 13th and you are in New York City, sir."

And he could move.

"Thanks, J," Tony croaked when he finally found his voice. Deep breath. He rolled out of bed and headed for the shower.

It was Sunday, so Steve would be making brunch.

"Hey, JARVIS? Tell them they'd better save me some bacon."

"Captain Rogers has already set some aside, sir."

"Good man."

Tony smiled.

Ten minutes later, he ambled into the kitchen, mostly clean and mostly awake. (What, who could bother to wash their hair before coffee? Especially after a post-gala Star Trek binge with the team...)

"Good morning, Tony," Natasha said, automatically handing him a cup of coffee.

"Mmmm," he murmured, taking a sip. "Morning."

Steve smiled and took a plate out of the oven for him.

"I saved you some bacon. Because I'm nice like that," Clint said, looking up from the paper.

Bruce snorted into his tea and Clint added, "Bruce and Nat were gonna eat it all!" Steve let out an exasperated huff.

Tony rolled his eyes. Steve handed him the plate and Tony started in on the bacon with gusto.

"Oh, hey, listen to this," Clint called, turning back to the paper and reading out: "'Ms. Romanov was dynamically sublime in a curve-hugging Versace gown; the emerald satin V-neck paired beautifully with her auburn hair to give her the air of an exotic flower.' Hear that, Nat? You're dynamically sublime. You know, like an exotic flower or some shit."

Nat raised an eyebrow. "I am not amused."

(Oh, right. The news.)

Steve served him a pancake with a smile, but Tony's appetite was diminishing.

"Aww, don't be such a spoilsport!" Clint said, looking up from the paper.

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Nat raised an eyebrow. "I am not amused."

(Oh, right. The news.)

Steve served him a pancake with a smile, but Tony’s appetite was diminishing.

"Aww, don't be such a spoilsport!" Clint took a long chug of orange juice and began again, "Best for last—'Clint 'Hawkeye' Barton, looking dashing in a custom Gucci tuxedo, greeted fans and guests on the red carpet with the ease and charm of a practiced entertainer.' Wait? That’s it? No simile? This is bullshit. I’m cancelling my subscription! I mean—"

Clint was off on a good rant, all hyperbole and silliness, that had Bruce and Natasha chuckling, but Tony—

He swallowed.

"Hey, can I see that?" Tony asked, gesturing to the paper.

"Definitely!" Clint said handing it over. "It’s beneath my attention. Why can’t I be like a flower? Or a Venus Fly Trap! Some badass carnivorous plant or cactus. Even Cap got a simile and—"
Tony skimmed the article, looking for his name and bracing for the worst.

(Surely it couldn’t be that bad, though, if Clint wasn’t angry and—)

“Returning to the society scene for the first time since his hospitalization following the attacks on New York, Tony Stark attended the gala accompanied by his fellow Avengers and long-time friend and business partner, Pepper Potts. Stark wore a custom Gucci tuxedo with red and gold accents in homage to his famous Iron Man armor. . .”

Tony stared. (Really? That was it? Huh.)

“Hey, Bruce,” Tony said, abruptly. “Could I use your tablet for a second?”

Bruce shrugged and handed it over. Tony minimized The Economist and started a new search.

One by one Tony checked all the papers and sites that had covered the gala.

“Mr. Stark, in the company of his teammates, was a vision of loveliness in an haute couture homage to the Iron Man armor so instrumental in the defense of New York...”

“No stranger to society life and the red carpet, Stark was at ease in exquisite Gucci while.”

“Accompanied by Captain Rogers, Dr. Banner, Agents Barton and Romanov, Tony Stark took command of the red carpet, marshaling his teammates and...”

(Huh?) Tony stared at the tablet with a bewildered frown. (Not even a snide subordinate clause!? Had they really—)


“Huh?” Tony blurted, looking up abruptly.

“You’re frowning,” Steve said, then gestured at his plate. “And your food’s getting cold. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Tony said, nodding—still half disbelieving. “Everything’s great.”

Application for: J.E.A. Mabelle Crake & Mellon Lewison Foundation Fellowship

Dissertation Title: “Revise and (Re)submit: Proto-Liberationism as Fantasy in the Dime American Store Romance Novel, 1930-1955

This dissertation examines the orientationism of early 20th century American romance novels not from the perspective of the submissive—a well-explored area of critical inquiry—but rather from the perspective of the Dominant. This genre’s Dominant “heroes” are essentially interchangeable blank-slates: rich, handsome, and physically powerful. As Gail Sedgwick and Martina Dwerkin have famously argued, these Dominants’ range of emotional expression is limited to confidence, anger, possessiveness, and lust. In their account, Dominant opportunities for tenderness, empathy, and compassion—the supposed emotional terrain of the submissive—are all replaced with depictions of passionate sexuality... .

Delivery confirmation: 1 case of Veuve Cliquot

To: Michael Nguyen and Katherine Winters

From: Pepper Potts

Note attached:

Congratulations on a job well done! We’re very lucky to have you. Please don’t hesitate to let me know if there’s anything you or your team need. Congratulations and best wishes, Pepper

In the privacy of his workshop, Tony combed over the coverage once more. Not a thing.

Of course, if he went on Twitter or hunted through the comment pages, it would be another story—but he wasn’t a moron. If you turned over the rock, you’d find nasty crawling things. He knew to leave the rock in place.

“Hey, Jarvis?” Tony called, pouring another cup of coffee. “Gimmie the specs for the training robots. And let’s get some Taylor Swift going.”

“With pleasure, sir.”
My third dissertation chapter examines constructions of orientation in Janine Rollins’ *The Honorable Captain* (1951); it argues that this unusual and obscure novel represents the struggles of post-war America to come to grips with its own trauma and that it imagines, but then ultimately rejects, a more equal mode of orientational relations.

Synopsis: In *The Honorable Captain*, decorated war hero, Jonathan Grant, returns from The Second World War and becomes a New York City detective. His new career, however, is short lived when he is injured in the line of duty and forced to retire. Unemployed and struggling with chronic pain and a permanent limp, Grant is forced to rent a room in a seedy Brooklyn boarding house. There he meets Irene, a fiercely independent submissive who worked in a factory during the war, but now struggles to make ends meet with various odd jobs. Plagued by trauma from the war and self-doubt regarding his new disability, Grant only decides to court the remarkable Irene once he sees her pursued by unscrupulous Dominants. Despite frequent rejection, Grant perseveres; Irene eventually accepts his gentle but persistent courtship and his clear admiration for her high spirits and independence. They marry and struggle together to make ends meet, acting as equal partners. In the novel’s concluding epilogue, however, Grant miraculously recovers from his injuries, rejoins the NYPD, and becomes sole provider while Irene welcomes their first son into the world, leaving her flourishing career as a journalist behind.

Although the novel ultimately concludes by re-inscribing normative orientational roles, it first imagines another possibility. The only dime store romance of the mid-century told in alternating point-of-view from the Dominant’s and submissive’s perspectives, *The Honorable Captain* allows its Dominant an unusual range of emotions, depicting not only pride, honor, independence, anger, and possessiveness, but also the stereotypically submissive characteristics of vulnerability, self-doubt, empathy, and even fear. I argue that Rollins’ novel represents a struggle to reconcile orientational norms to the realities of post-war America where submissives—like Rosie the Riveter—filled gaps in the workforce and where returning soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome were displaying new levels of vulnerability. Rollins not only dramatizes this struggle, but romanticizes it, making it the locus of a profoundly sentimental and conventional narrative, thereby incorporating post-war realities into erotic and romantic fantasy.

> It was 3 in the morning and Tony was actually sleeping. Or he had been until JARVIS woke him.

> “Whaaaa?” Tony asked, still shaking off sleep.

> “I am sorry to wake you, Sir, but my Self-Harm Protocol has been triggered.” JARVIS’s tone was apologetic. “As you are not the trigger, I have no directives on whom to contact.”

> “Shit,” Tony said, stumbling out of bed, heart hammering in his chest.

> (“I got low . . . put a bullet in my mouth; Other Guy spat it out . . .”)

> “Bruce?”

> “No, sir. Captain Rogers.”

> (Really?)

Tony shook his head. He shouldn’t be surprised.

> “Talk to me, J,” Tony said, pulling on a sweatshirt. “Status report?”

> “Captain Rogers has been at the edge of the upper balcony for twenty minutes. He has made no move to climb over the railing; however, he is not wearing a coat or boots and he appears . . . distressed.”

Still in a lurch between half-asleep and high alert, Tony fumbled his way into his winter boots and grabbed a coat for Steve. He made it half way to the door before remembering with a hint of panic Steve would never fit into one of his coats. Tony dashed back and snatched up his comforter instead.

> (Shit. Upper balcony?)

> “Have the suit standing by,” Tony called, scrambling down the hall. “But don’t startle him with it! Send it to the floor below.”

> “Of course, sir.”

> (You can fly, stupid. If he-- Tony took a shuddering breath (You can fly; you’ll catch him if--)

The stairs weren’t really faster than the elevator, but Tony couldn’t bear to be still. He took the steps two at a time down to the common floor.

When he tumbled out of the emergency stairs, Tony was unprepared for the sight that greeted him. Steve was outside, standing barefoot in the snow, wearing only boxers and a t-shirt. His body shuddered violently and his fists clenching the railing.

Tony took a deep breath, then another. He needed to at least seem calm to do this, though his heart
was racing.

An icy blast hit Tony as he slid the balcony door open. *He should have put his coat on. Stupid.*) Steve didn’t turn around. Even over the sound of the wind, Tony could hear Steve’s choked breathing. He was crying.

“Steve?” Tony called softly, clutching the duvet he’d brought.

No response.

“Steve?” he called a little louder.

Steve jolted and whirled around, chest heaving. His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks streaked with tears. He stared at Tony for a moment, wild-eyed, then stumbled from the railing.

“Oh God,” Steve gasped. His voice was rough.

(Tony felt a sharp surge of relief at every inch Steve put between himself and the ledge.)

“Hey, it’s okay, Steve,” Tony said gently, “Why don’t you come inside, yeah?”

Tony pulled the door open wide and stepped out of the way. After a moment of tense hesitation, Steve slunk inside, keeping his face and his body turned away from Tony’s.

“Sorry,” Steve mumbled, “sorry. I shouldn’t have—I’ll go. I’ll just go—sorry, sorry.”

But there was nothing to apologize for and Tony wasn’t about to let Steve out of his sight in this mood. He pulled the door shut and approached Steve with the blanket. Steve’s exposed skin was bright pink with frostbite

“No, don’t go. It’s okay,” Tony said again. “Here. You must be freezing.”

Steve turned, chest heaving. It looked like he was preparing to bolt.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Tony murmured, stepping closer to hold out the blanket again. “It’s just me.”

Steve let out a choked little sound. “You’re the last person I want to see me like this.”

Tony didn’t know what to do with that admission, so he just murmured again, “It’s okay, really.”

Tony got between Steve and the exits, still holding out the fucking blanket.

“I should go—I’ll just—” Steve stammered, starting to slink around Tony and head for the stairwell.

(Oh, fuck that shit!)


It was a split second decision and, sure, he probably could have caught his balance, but—

Tony fell, landing heavily on his hip. Steve spun back around, wide-eyed.

“Tony!” Steve crashed to his knees beside Tony, landing so hard the dishes rattled in the kitchen. “Oh Christ! I’m sorry. I—” He looked stricken. “Are you all right?”

Tony nodded. (Yeah, okay, that was maybe a little manipulative, but whatever. He wasn’t above using all the tools in his box.)

“I’m fine, Steve.” Tony said. “Just tripped. No big deal.”

Tony reached out to lay a reassuring hand on Steve’s arm, then said: “Jesus! You’re freezing! Come on: onto the couch, under the blanket. Up, up!” Tony dragged Steve, now pliant, onto the couch.

“What are you even doing up here?” Steve asked, head down still refusing eye-contact. He was shivering.

Tony hesitated a moment before answering, fussing with the covers, pulling them up over Steve’s shoulders.

“JARVIS has a self-harm protocol.”

Steve snorted. “It isn’t that cold out. Hey, what’s the worst that could happen? Maybe I’d fall asleep for another seventy years.” He said it bitterly.

“Steve.” Tony gave him a significant look. “You spent twenty minutes at the edge of the balcony.”

Steve stared blankly a moment, then looked horrified. “I wouldn’t! I didn’t even think of—” he stammered.
“Okay! I just—you asked what I was doing up here. That’s why.”

Steve gave a tight nod. He didn’t ask why there was a protocol. Tony was tempted to tell him how bad it had been—that Rhodey and Pepper had worried he’d walk off the ledge one day without his suit. They’d begged him to modify JARVIS and eventually he relented, though he was certain they were wrong to worry. Even at his worst, he’d been too angry about dying to check out early on purpose; he did it for them anyway.

Tony kicked off his boots to settle on the couch and, after a moment’s deliberation, slid under the duvet next to Steve.

“Christ it’s cold!” Tony said, wriggling closer to Steve. “I was only out there for a moment and I’m freezing.” (It wasn’t entirely a lie . . .) He gave a little shiver and worked his way under Steve’s arm.

Steve went completely still. Tony waited, on high alert. (Was Steve holding his breath?) Tony gave it another moment. (Maybe Steve was just startled.) Tony’d figured that—like Bruce and Rhodey—Steve would find it easier to accept physical comfort under the polite fiction that he was the one giving comfort, but—(Shit.)

Just when Tony was about to pull away—because, unwanted physical contact is obviously uncool—Steve let out a shuddering breath and seemed to melt down onto the couch. Ever so gently—(as if afraid he might break?)—Steve let his arm come down around him. Tony curled closer, bringing his knees up onto the couch. He leaned his head against Steve’s chest and could hear his heart beating wildly.

Little by little, Steve’s chilled skin grew warm and his shivering subsided. His breathing, though still a little ragged, was starting to calm. His pulse slowed. The minutes slid by.

Eventually, though, Tony had to pull away—because, unwanted physical contact is obviously uncool—Steve let out a shuddering breath and seemed to melt down onto the couch. Ever so gently—(as if afraid he might break?)—Steve let his arm come down around him. Tony curled closer, bringing his knees up onto the couch. He leaned his head against Steve’s chest and could hear his heart beating wildly.

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“Sometimes I dream about it. The war. The crash.” Steve’s expression was pinched.

“I wish to God I’d banged my head hard enough to black out when the plane hit, but I didn’t. I just felt sick and disoriented after, my ears ringing and my sight all blurry.”

Steve gave a wistful smile as he said, “I’m supposed to be so strong now.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t even get out from under the debris.” Steve’s breathing was speeding up again; Tony squeezed his hand as Steve’s words came tumbling out, “I just kept squirming, pinned there while the water rose, and I wanted to get free and break the glass, try and swim, even though it was too cold to make it far and I wouldn’t know which way to go, but . . . but it would have been better than just letting the water rise higher and higher. And it was cold, so cold, like the forest but worse.”

Tony’s heart was hammering in his chest; his palms started sweating. (Oh, fuck. Drowning, water, cold . . . cold . . .)

Steve’s voice dropped to a whisper so low Tony could barely hear him: “They say freezing’s a pretty quiet way to go, almost gentle . . . but the cold didn’t get me first, not till I was breathing in ice water and it burned my lungs and it was so cold and I couldn’t— Couldn’t—”

Steve tipped his head back and squeezed his eyes shut tight.

“When I woke up, tonight, after the dream I thought, I just—I just have to master my fear. Go out there and face the cold, take it like a—”

Steve didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to (--and take it like a Dom.) Tony’s heart clenched, not with a sharp pain, but more of a bitter melancholy.

“It’s all right,” Tony said, hating himself a little for how utterly inadequate the words were.

Steve sighed and pulled away, taking his hand from Tony’s. He looked away and his voice was heavy as he said, “I’m sorry you had to see me like that.”

Tony was still trying to find the right words to reply when Steve suddenly looked alarmed. He shook his head and said, urgently, finally looking at Tony, “It hasn’t happened often or anything! I’m really fine. It won’t interfere with the team. I can still do my duty. You can still trust me to—”

“Of course I can trust you,” Tony cut in. “If having nightmares about combat debared you from service, the entire military’d have to resign tomorrow.”

Steve didn’t look particularly reassured.

“There are lots of ways to get wounded,” Tony said, finally summoning some of those phrases he hadn’t needed in years. (Phrases he’d learned for Rhodey.) “There are lots of types of wounds, on the battlefield and off. Pain while you’re healing, even chronic pain, doesn’t make you weak, no matter the type of wound.”

Steve was still frowning, but it looked at more pensive than pained. He’d stopped trying to pull away.

(You can tell him. You said you trust him, so show it.)

Tony swallowed. “I get nightmares too,” he said. “You don’t think I’m weak for it, do you?”

“No, of course not.” Steve protested, “but you—” He cut himself off.

Tony felt a rush of disappointment. (“—but I’m a sub?”)

“I what?” Tony asked heavily.

“You . . . you were tortured,” Steve whispered.

(Oh! Oh.)

They were silent.

“Rhodey gets nightmares too,” Tony eventually blurted.

Steve looked a little surprised. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Tony nodded. “It was especially bad after his first tour abroad; he was afraid to sleep. Still gets them sometimes.”

Tony wondered momentarily if he’d just betrayed Rhodey’s confidence, then dismissed the idea. If Rhodey were there he’d be offering Steve the same reassurance.

“Maybe you could talk to Rhodey?” Tony suggested. “He . . . he helped me . . . after.”

“Maybe I’ll do that,” Steve said vaguely. The silence turned awkward.
“I’m sorry I woke you,” Steve said, starting to fidget.

“Steve. Please. There is nowhere I’d rather be right now.” Tony gave him a tentative smile. “You’re my friend.”

Steve wasn’t showing any overt signs of distress anymore, not like he had been. Now he looked self-conscious. Embarrassed.

“And, hey, tell you what,” Tony said, bumping his shoulder into Steve’s and aiming for casual, “next time I have a nightmare, I’ll wake you up and you can return the favor.”

“Really?” Steve asked, something wide-eyed and hopeful coming into his expression.

“You bet.”

Steve finally—finally—smiled.

“I’d like that.” He hesitated. “But, really? You promise you’ll wake me?”

“Cross my heart, promise-promise,” Tony said with a grin. “I’ll have JARVIS call you.”

Steve nodded.

He pushed aside the blankets and got to his feet.

“What? Where are you going?” Tony asked.

“I should let you get some rest.”

“Rest? I’m not even tired. I thought we’d watch Star Trek!”

Steve frowned. “Star Trek isn’t the solution to everything.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked. “Come on, Steve. We can watch Trouble with Tribbles again. Just to help us get sleepy. You love that one!”

“I—” Steve hesitated and Tony couldn’t tell if his expression were embarrassed or guilty, but after a few moments he sank back down to the couch.

“Just one episode.”

“Just one,” Tony agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it! As ever, comments are cherished. (And, yeah, I remain weirdly obsessed with hearing which parts / lines you liked best / hit hardest / etc...)

The next chapter has been proving particularly hard to write, but hopefully I won't be stuck for too long. Musings, curiosity, and cheer-leading welcome at my tumblr: ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com

Thanks so much for reading.
Finally! Sorry was so slow! Thanks for all the kind words and support and to thatwhichyields for tons of hand-holding and working me out of writer's block.

The Morning Show Today, July 21st, 2007


“Thank you for having me, Kitty.”

“So, I’m just going to get right to it. We single subs hear tons of advice—what to do, what not to do—books, tv, websites, radio. How is your advice different?”

“Well, Kitty, it’s all about balance and restraint. You think, ‘I’m an empowered sub—I’m gonna go after the Dom I want, I don’t have to wait around.’ But that’s not how Doms think. You have to be yourself, but also be the you he imagines too. So, demonstrate interest, but not aggressiveness or desperation. Dom’s want a sub vulnerable, but not needy; attentive, but not fawning; smart, but not a know-it-all. This seems obvious, but it’s a mistake a lot of subs make, especially professionally successful ones.”

“Sounds like good advice, but I really wanted to follow up with you about chapter nine. There’s been some criticism of that chapter, particularly in the blogosphere. What’s your take?”

“I think we all have to face the reality that Doms want to be the more experienced party. It’s a natural part of power exchange. Now, I’m not saying you have to be a virgin—not at all—but again it’s about balance. Be experienced, but not too experienced. Now, it’s normal when you’re drawing up a new contract to go through your experiences so he’ll know what you like and don’t and where to be extra attentive for triggers. But you don’t have to share exactly how much rope bondage or caning you’ve received, so when you’re filling out whatever questionnaire you agreed on, just remember what its real goal is and never disclose more than necessary.”

“I see. You know, some people have accused you of encouraging submissives to lie to their Dominants and in potentially damaging ways.”

“I’m aware of that, but I completely disagree. Never lie to your Dom. Power exchange is based on trust; lying destroys that trust. But not disclosing certain personal details or presenting them in the most advantageous light—that’s your prerogative, and not because anybody’s making you. You’re just being a goal-oriented submissive: and you want to get married. It’s like grocery shopping—nobody wants to take home the tomato everybody picked up and squeezed.”

“So basically, you don’t want to look like a Tara Reid or a Tony Stark?”

“Exactly. Just to be clear: those are their bodies, their lives, and their choices. But you have to face facts—they aren’t the kind of submissives Dominants want to marry. So if you’re a sub looking for a spouse, that behavior or too much openness about it in your past is a losing proposition.”

Tony woke to the sun streaming in through his vast panoramic widows. (He was alone.) He winced and squeezed his eyes shut, calling out a plaintive, “Jarvis?”

“I’ll just lower the blinds, shall I, sir?”

“Mmph.”

“It is 7:13 am and thirty-three degrees in New York City.”

Tony rolled over and pressed his face into the duvet. (Wait . . . why was he in the common room?) Tony frowned. (Steve?)

Tony pried his face from the blankets and asked vaguely, “Steve?”

“Captain Rogers awoke at 6:22 am and returned to his quarters.”

Tony frowned. Normally, Tony (and JARVIS) made every effort to keep the Tower safe without spying, but--
“Did he go back to bed?” Tony asked.

JARVIS was quiet a moment before answering. (Triggering the self-harm protocol authorized JARVIS to report liberally on its trigger, but that didn’t mean he didn’t care about privacy anymore.)

“It appears he is attempting to sleep.”

Tony nodded and rolled off the couch.

“If he does anything—anything—that worries you, let me know. Okay, JARVIS?”

“Of course, sir.” Another pause. “I shall be most attentive to Captain Rogers’ wellbeing.”

Something about the way JARVIS said it, a subtle shift of inflection or a hint of a pause, reminded Tony that JARVIS was Steve’s friend too.

“Yeah,” Tony said, voice a little thick. “I know you will, buddy.”

Tony was sorely tempted to go down and check on Steve right then, but he felt rough and exhausted and far from ready. Besides, Steve’d be in good hands with JARVIS. Tony gathered up his duvet and went back to the penthouse.

“Time for a little more sleep, J. Just wake me if things go south.”

“Without hesitation, sir.”

Tony curled back up in bed and before too long, surprisingly enough, fell asleep.

He didn’t dream.

Tony woke slowly.

“It is now 10:12 am, sir.”

Tony stretched and headed for the shower.

“How’s Steve?”

The tell-tale pause.

“Captain Rogers shows no overt signs of distress, sir.”

Tony frowned.

“Is he sleeping?”

“No, sir. He seems unable to sleep.”

Tony nodded, lathering his hair with shampoo. He kept his face out of the spray as he rinsed, formulating a plan.

“Tell Steve I’m going to try and learn to make myself an omelet and he should come join me. If I succeed, I’ll feed him; if I fail, he can save me from myself and put out the flames.”

“I’ll inform him, sir.”

Tony finished his shower in pensive silence while JARVIS apparently talked to Steve.

“Captain Rogers regrets he is unable to join you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Indeed, sir.”

Tony hurried into his clothes.


“All right, sir.”

The elevator was too slow. Tap-tap-tap of his fingernails against the arc reactor.

“Okay. Tell him now, J.”

(And, sure, visiting with a scant thirty-seconds of warning probably counted as dropping by unannounced, but whatever.)

The elevator doors opened on Steve standing awkwardly in his entryway in a white undershirt and
sweatpants. His eyes flicked up to Tony, then skittered away.

"Your lack of faith in my omelet skills wounds me to the core, Captain," Tony said casually as he sauntered in. "What? Won’t even give me a chance?"

Steve’s Dominant’s notch rose and fell as he swallowed thickly.

"Tony . . ." Steve mumbled, half-entreaty, half-chiding.

"Seriously, Steve, you should come help me with these eggs," Tony said, tone his usual brazenness but volume a little lowered. "I mean, what if I get eggshells in there? Are eggshells poisonous? See? I don’t even know these things!"

"What do you want, Tony?" Steve asked, voice heavy. "You don’t even like omelets."

(Actually, the ’Tony doesn’t like eggs’ thing was a big misunderstanding, but--)

Steve wouldn’t make eye contact. The embarrassment Tony’d seen on his face last night had deepened into shame again.

Tony decided to try undisguised honesty. "I want to spend time with you," he said.

Tony came a few steps closer. Steve went stiff, but he didn’t step away so Tony was counting it as win.

Steve shrugged. "I’m not feeling very sociable. Maybe you should go." He gestured to the elevator, then added, "I’m fine."

"But it’s okay if you’re not," Tony told him softly.

"Okay. I understand that," Steve said slowly and deliberately. "But I’m fine."

Steve shrugged. "I’ll see you later, Tony." Steve was obviously aiming for casual, but falling severely short—he was still avoiding eye-contact.

(Bullshit.) Tony pivoted and stepped around him, getting between Steve and the patch of rug he’d been staring at, forcing himself into Steve’s gaze.

"Look, if you can honestly say that you want to be alone because it’s best for you, I’ll leave you alone. I’ll respect that,” Tony said. "But please don’t hide."

Tony’s hand reached up as if to touch Steve’s cheek, before settling on his shoulder. "Don’t hide."

Tony swallowed then added softly, "Not from me."

Steve took a deep breath and finally—finally—looked at him properly. His eyes were wide and searching. Tony tried not to shy away from that gaze, but it took an act of conscious will. Finally, Tony squeezed his shoulder and stepped back.

"So, here’s what I propose," Tony said. "Why don’t you bring your drawing stuff down to the workshop? Or we can watch some more Star Trek? Then, a little later, I was thinking hot dogs. You love street hotdogs!"

"You don’t have to do all this."

"I know. But I want to."

"Right." Steve was smiling, but there was a sadness lingering around his eyes. “Thank you, Tony. I’m lucky to have such a good friend here."

And he didn’t doubt Steve’s sincerity—because Steve was sincerity—but he got the feeling there was something else haunting Steve’s thoughts. (Bucky? Shit. He must miss his old friends so bad-)

"So, what’ll it be? Workshop? Star Trek? Something totally different?"

"Are you gonna laugh if I choose Star Trek?"

"Never! Star Trek is serious business. JARVIS? Roll the next episode on the list. And order us some brunch, would ya?"

"With pleasure, sir."

"What about learning to make omelets?" Steve asked with a hint of a smile.

"You got me," Tony said, hand on his heart. "It was a pretext. Besides, why would I learn to cook brunch when I’ve got you?"

And maybe it was his imagination, but Steve seemed to look pleased by that.
Tony got Steve to watch an episode of *Star Trek* and eat a stack of JJ’s waffles before Steve suddenly remembered it was a Monday and somehow this meant he should be doing something productive. Tony convinced him that productivity levels in the workshop were “Epic! Legendary!” and Steve should definitely read briefing packets and work on a new training module with JARVIS there. (Where Tony could keep an eye on him.)

And it was nice, in a way, having a quiet presence in the workshop. Tony sometimes let Pepper hang out in the workshop, but she found it too distracting there to focus on her own work so instead she liked to fill the quiet with conversation—which required his participation—or vague murmurings about whatever light reading she’d brought—which got on his nerves. Rhodey in the workshop was always clamoring for his attention or watching him so intensely he got self-conscious and had to insist they go out. Bruce worked well with him, but that was collaboration. Steve was different. He could be there, a steady, comfortable presence that didn’t demand anything, and yet wasn’t directly engaged in what Tony was doing like Bruce, but was just there. It was nice.

Steve looked up from his papers—reports of some sort—and Tony turned away, suddenly aware he’d been staring.

“Tony?” Steve said.

“Mmmm?” Tony mumbled, pretending absentminded abstraction.

“I think I need a break from this reading. I was considering sketching for a while and I was wondering—would you mind if I drew the workshop? Or maybe did a sketch of one of your robots?”

Before Tony could answer, Dummy wheeled over with an excited whirring noise.

“Well,” Tony said with a bit of a smirk, “I’d hate to come between you and an eager model.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, little guy.” Steve smiled at Dummy. “Never was all that talented and now I’m terribly rusty.”

Dummy wheeled away suddenly.

“Well how’d ya like that?” Steve asked shaking his head. “Lost interest already. That’s what I get for warning him. Now what am I gonna do for a model? Oh wait, he—”

Tony stifled a laugh as Dummy wheeled back to Steve and offered him—

“Is that an oil can?” Steve asked bemused.

“I apologize for him,” JARVIS said. “I’m afraid the older bots have a poor command of figurative speech, Captain Rogers.”

“Oh!” Steve grinned at the ceiling, then turned his smile on Tony. (Beautiful.) He laughed.

“Golly. Thanks, little guy,” Steve said to Dummy, accepting the oil can and patting him on the head. “It’s very thoughtful of you to offer me your oil. Very generous of you to look after me . . . And I’m grateful.”

Steve looked up and said to Tony, “You must be very proud. The little guy takes after you.” He said it facetiously, but it didn’t quite sound like a joke. Not entirely.

Tony tried to shrug it off. He snorted. “Do your best to capture the family resemblance.”

“I’ll try,” Steve promised.

Tony turned back to his schematics, but could feel Steve’s gaze lingering on him.

---------------------------------------------------------------

Tony worked on the training robots while Steve alternated between sketching in his notebook and working his way through a stack of reports.

But there was something that’d been buzzing urgently at the back of Tony’s mind. Something Tony’d been putting off—worried he’d mess up, that he’d do more harm than good, that he’d damage their new friendship—but it was important enough he had to try. (Because who else was gonna say it?)

“Hey Steve?” Tony said tentatively, glancing over to where Steve was shading something with a red colored pencil.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. After SHEILD found you, did you . . . talk to anyone? I mean, a professional? A therapist?”

Steve looked down and went still. “Yeah. Yeah, SHEILD sent me to talk to a shrink already.”
“Oh. Okay.” Tony fiddled with a screwdriver he absolutely didn’t need for anything. “How was it?”

“Fine.” Steve resumed the steady scritch-scritch-scritch of his pencil.

“So it helped?” Tony pressed.

Steve shrugged. “Sure.”

“Not very convincing there, Steve.”

“Well what do you want me to say, Tony?” Steve snapped.

“The truth. I’m trying to help.”

“The truth? It was awful.” Steve’s entire body tensed. “He kept asking me these questions and writing in his little notebook and I was terrified if I said the wrong thing SHIELD would lock me up instead of letting me go to active duty, when the chance to serve my country again was all I had to keeping me going!”

(Shit.)

Steve pressed his lips together, scowling at the floor.

“Yeah,” Tony said, trying to keep everything casual, normal. (It is normal. That’s the point.) “I wouldn’t trust a SHIELD therapist either, even if they’re legally required to keep everything confidential. But honestly, if you do want to see someone—a doctor I trust—I just think it would help.”

“You think I’m sick,” Steve said woodenly.

“No!” Tony hesitated. “Just . . . healing. Like me.”

Steve looked up, eyes a little hopeful, expression softer.

“I’m a lot better now,” Tony told him, “but for a while, it was bad. I still go in every couple months. Like, for a check-up, you know?”

Steve nodded.

“There’s nothing wrong with therapy. But for it to work, you need to have trust, which I couldn’t give a SHIELD therapist either.” Tony smiled. “I’m way too paranoid. But Rhodey helped me find someone I could work with. I could put you in touch.”

Steve looked skeptical. He toyed with his pencil.

“No!” Tony hesitated. “Just . . . healing. Like me.”

Steve looked up, eyes a little hopeful, expression softer.

“I’m a lot better now,” Tony told him, “but for a while, it was bad. I still go in every couple months. Like, for a check-up, you know?”

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“There’s nothing wrong with therapy. But for it to work, you need to have trust, which I couldn’t give a SHIELD therapist either.” Tony smiled. “I’m way too paranoid. But Rhodey helped me find someone I could work with. I could put you in touch.”

Steve looked skeptical. He toyed with his pencil.

“Yeah, sure,” Steve said vaguely. “Maybe I’ll go in sometime.”

“I think it would be good for you,” Tony said gently, then almost winced. (Ugh. That came out all wrong. Patronizing and just . . . ew.)

“Anyway,” Tony said, trying to recapture his usual tone. “One bad experience with some SHIELD guy shouldn’t poison you against an entire profession.” Tony appealed to Steve’s sense of justice, adding, “That hardly seems fair, you know?”

Tony rambled on, bringing in a familiar rant: “And, seriously, you know SHIELD’s always cutting corners! They won’t pay for Stark tech, but expect the crap they buy to work just as well. So knowing them the guy was probably cut-rate!” Amusement flickered across Steve’s face for a moment.

(Good sign…) Tony waited.

“And you think your guy is better?” Steve asked, eyes on his sketchbook.

“Gal, actually,” Tony corrected with a smile. “Sharon Jefferson. She’s the best! Rhodey got me in touch with her after—” Tony swallowed. “After Afghanistan. She’d helped him after his first rough tour.”

Steve looked up. “Rhodey saw her too?”

“Yeah. He’s actually the one who convinced me to go see her, because she’d helped him so much. I, uh—I didn’t want to go at first, for stupid reasons, but Rhodey can be damn persuasive.”

(Fuck. You moron, Tony. You should have had Rhodey call Steve!)

Tony fumbled around for something more to say, and added enthusiastically, “And I can guarantee nobody will ever get Dr. Jefferson’s files; I redid her practice’s encryption myself.”

Steve let out a little laugh. “Somehow I’m not surprised,” he said with a wry smile.

Tony saluted. “You know me so well.” A pause. “So, hey, should I have JARVIS call and set up
an appointment?"

"Now?" Steve looked startled.

"Or not," Tony said, holding his hands up in surrender, "I just thought, you know, since you said
you’d maybe be open to meeting her, just to give it a try, that there’s no time like the present. Just
a preliminary meeting. To see what you think."

Tony tried not to hold his breath as he waited for Steve’s answer.

"Uh, sure," Steve said. He was frowning, but it looked more pensive than distressed. Tony forced
himself to wait. His heart was speeding.

After a few moments, Steve looked up and said more decisively, "Yeah, why not? JARVIS, if
you don’t mind?"

"Of course, Captain Rogers. If I may consult your calendar?"

Steve nodded.

"Thank you, Captain. I’ll add an appointment with Dr. Jefferson to your schedule shortly."

"Thank you, Jarvis." Steve’s tone was subdued. He took a new pencil—bright yellow—from its
case. *Scratch-scratch-scratch.*

Tony felt a sharp jolt of relief; its intensity startled him. He took a deep breath.

(Steve’ll be fine. Dr. Jefferson will know how to help him.)

Tony went to the coffee maker for a refill and grabbed a second mug.

"Coffee?" Tony said, offering Steve his chipped and cherished “I heart NYC” mug.

"Sure."

Tony gestured to Steve’s sketchbook; he’d flipped it over at Tony’s approach.

"I don’t get to see?" Tony asked with a pout.

"Not yet." Steve took a sip of coffee.

Tony turned to go back to his workbench, but Steve laid a hand on his arm. ‘Thank you, Tony. I
—uh, thank you.’

Tony nodded. Totally irrationally, his heart started pounding again.

Steve cleared his throat. “Better get back to work.”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

"Hey, no," Steve said, trying to be quiet, “Don’t bother Tony with that!”

Tony looked up from his calculations as Dummy whirred over to him excitedly with a piece of
paper clutched in his claw.

"It’s okay," Tony said. “I’m at a stopping place.”

Beeeeep!!!

Tony took the offered paper and laughed. Steve had drawn a pair of cartoons: Dummy with a
goatee and Dummy as Iron Man.

“The resemblance really is striking,” Tony said, smoothing out the crumple that Dummy’s tight
grip had put into the page. “Nice work. Dummy’ll probably insist I frame it.”

“Oh, it’s nothing special,” Steve mumbled. Tony opened his mouth for a rejoinder, but Steve’s
stomach rumbled, cutting him off.

"I can take a hint," Tony said with a little laugh. “Time for a food break. I’m a little stir crazy
anyway. How about we go for a hotdog?"

Steve blinked. "You want to go . . . out?"

"Come on, Steve," Tony said. "I’ve never known you to pass up a street hotdog."

“Do we even have time before our meeting?”

Tony gave him a blank look.

“Oh! Right,” Tony said, waving a hand and heading for the coffee maker. “Sure, we’ve got plenty of time before we meet with Katie and—”

(Oh!)

Tony stopped in his tracks.

“And Mr. Nguyen?” Steve asked, looking quizzical.

(Stupid, stupid Tony.) Tony shook his head. (Since when are you so naïve?)

“Not Mr. Nguyen?” Steve looked more puzzled.

“Yes! I mean, no,” Tony said distractedly. “I mean, yes, Mikie and Katie.”

(The press didn’t forget 2005, stupid. You just have a crack PR team on the job to muzzle them.)

“Are you okay, Tony?” Steve asked with a frown.

“Yeah,” Tony said, trying to shrug it off. He set his coffee mug down a little too hard. “I just forgot something. No big deal.”

(Well, it was still progress, right? No power on earth could have muzzled them five years ago. After all, his team wouldn’t have had a bargaining chip back then, would they?)

Tony forced a smile. “So, hot dogs, right?”

“Right,” Steve said dubiously. Tony blazed ahead.

“Great! I’ll go grab my coat. Meet you on your floor in ten?”

Steve gave a hesitant nod and Tony hurried off before Steve could explicitly change his mind.

(Fresh air would clear his head. Right?) Tony tapped absently at the arc reactor. (Fuck it. Who cares why the press hadn’t mentioned 2005? They hadn’t.) Tony took a deep breath.

“Hey, JARVIS? How’s the weather out there?”

“Light flurries and thirty-one degrees Fahrenheit, sir.”

“Damn. That’s chilly.”

Steve’s hesitation about going out seemed a bit more understandable, but now it seemed all the more important. Tony hurried into his winter things and grabbed an extra scarf before taking the elevator to Steve’s floor.

Steve was standing in the foyer wearing boots, coat, and a frown.

“Yay hotdogs!” Tony exclaimed, beckoning Steve into the elevator. Steve gave him a halfhearted smile as they began to descend.

Tony gestured at Steve’s unbuttoned coat and said, “For God’s sake, bundle up! It’s freezing out there. Can’t have Captain America catching pneumonia on my watch.”

Steve grimaced, but complied.

“Pretty sure I’m immune to pneumonia now.” Steve paused. “Or, at least, Captain America is.”

“Well, let’s not test that theory. I, uh, brought you an extra warm scarf. Just in case.”

Tony tossed the extra scarf to Steve and wrapped his own scarf high around his neck. He added softly, gaze fixed on the floor, “You know, people assume deserts are always hot. But, at night? They actually get really cold. Even colder in caves.”

Even knowing how ridiculous it was, Tony still couldn’t quite make eye contact. He cleared his throat and added, “So, yeah, not liking the cold. I get it.”

The elevator dinged and opened onto Stark Industries’ immaculate lobby.

“Come on!” Tony cried, charging ahead. “Hotdogs!”

With a warm smile, Steve let himself be dragged out into the cold.

In the end, Steve and Tony were the last to arrive.

(They hadn’t meant to linger over hotdogs, but Steve got to chatting with the vendor, then they needed hot chocolate and it was a bit of a walk—anyway.)

The other Avengers were assembled in the common room. The indigo satin of Katie’s stilettos
matched Mikie’s tie and cufflinks. As Tony walked in, Mikie raised an eyebrow at her.

“Ah, Mr. Stark,” she said in a voice very reminiscent of Pepper’s. “Joining us after all?”

“Naturally, my dear Ms. Winters!” Tony exclaimed, plopping down in an armchair. “Wouldn’t dream of missing it. Uh, even if I never wrote back to your emails. Which, knowing me, I probably didn’t.”

(Oh shit. Didn’t send them a thank you gift either.) Tony bit his lip. (Pepper probably did, but still . . .)

“I’m so sorry,” Steve said. “I hope we’re not late.”

“Not at all, Captain Rogers,” Mikie reassured him with a kind smile. “Please have a seat and we’ll get started.”

Natasha looked at the PR gurus with polite interest; Bruce with ill-concealed discomfort; and Clint with an expression oddly like guilt. Steve, of course, gave them his rapt attention, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“I trust you’ve all had time to read the media analysis and strategy reports we sent around?” Katie said.

Bruce, Natasha, and Steve nodded; so did Clint, but his nod was far from convincing. (Ah. Hence the guilty look.) Tony didn’t even bother pretending.

“Any questions about the overall strategy?” Mikie asked. “We still have two days to make adjustments if necessary.”

The room was quiet for a moment before Steve said, “It looks like a very sound strategy to me. I’m only concerned about execution. And thank you both for the additional reading materials. I found them very helpful.”

“I’m glad,” Mikie said, still smiling at Steve. “It’s our pleasure.”

(Okay, somebody was definitely a Captain America fan.)

“Well then,” Katie said. “Let’s get started.”

The Morning Show Today, July 21st, 2007

“Welcome back. Maryanne Martin will now be taking just a few more questions and comments from our studio audience. We’ve heard from a lot of subs already, but I actually see a Dom up there in the back with a question. Yes, go ahead.”

A man, 6’3 with broad shoulders, a handlebar mustache, and a denim vest, approaches the mic.

“Yeah. So, I just have to say I think you’re selling submissives a load of crap. What the hell does it mean to ‘be yourself’ but also ‘be the you he imagines’? How can somebody do that? And subs aren’t tomatoes—or apples or pears; they’re not for sale. I mean, I don’t get it. Is the whole ‘balance’ thing just code for ‘don’t be a rude, obnoxious asshole’? Because, duh.”

“Well,” Miss Martin said primly, “I really don’t think—as a Dom—you’re in a position to understand the delicate balancing act of dating as a submissive. So.”

“Yeah, all right,” he said with a shrug. “I can’t argue with that—but you claim that you know what Doms want. So, I have to say: you don’t speak for me. I want a sub who is completely honest with me. If I ask a question she doesn’t want to answer, I want her to tell me that. I want a sub who owns her experiences, is proud of who she really is, and trusts me to feel the same way. But, hey, you’re probably right—there are some Doms who think like you say. But to anybody watching, ask yourself this: will you be happy in the long term married to a Dom who does?”

“Oh, and ps? Tara Reid and Tony Stark are sexy talented people. I’d go out with either of them in a heartbeat, whatever anybody else says.”

Chapter End Notes

*The Dominant's notch is this world's version of the Adam's apple and is the product of domosterone, so Dominants of either gender would develop one while switches might have a subtle one or not depending on the levels of domosterone they have and their particular bone structure. (Thanks to those who kindly mentioned that I'd *ed it but forgot to put a note. Oops!)*
Apparently my solution to massive, hideous writer's block about the Press Conference was to shove it into the next chapter... (But at least now I have a plan! It's progress, friends.)

Thank you so much for the comments and kindness. As always, it's great hearing from you. If you have a favorite bit, do please let me know! It really helps inspire me and has, in some cases, helped shape the trajectory of the story.

Thank you all sooooo much!

p.s. The bit about 'nobody wanting to take home the tomato everybody picked up an squeezed' is actually a quote from a morning TV show. It appears in the 'dating advice' episode of Target Women here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TenP1GDh1w
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

I HAVE CONQUERED THE PRESS CONFERENCE AT LAST!!!

I may not have escaped unscaithed, but here it is. All praise and gratitude to thatwhichyeilds for her unfailing awesomeness and patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Call for you from Lt. Col. Rhodes, sir.”

“Put him through!”

“Hey, Tony,” Rhodey said. Tony could hear him smiling. “So, you comin’ for Christmas?”

Tony set down the wrench he’d been using to attach the core for a training robot’s arm.

“You know,” he said, “Einstein’s definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Rhodey snorted. “A: every year is a new year with new variables; someday you might change your mind. B: Einstein didn’t actually say that. It’s a famous misattribution.”

“Oh, whatever.”

Tony grabbed his wrench and went back to work.

“So, I take it that’s a no?” Rhodey prodded.

“You know I always sit this one out. Thanksgiving, New Year’s, whatever else, I’m down. I’ll even do Easter!”

“Yeah, no thanks. Never again. Your mechanical Easter bunny made my nephew cry and the kids only found three of the eggs you hid.”

“They were supposed to learn persistence! Besides, they weren’t that hard to find.”

“Tony, the twins were in kindergarten!”

(Okay, maybe eggs in the storm drains had been a little over ambitious…)

Rhodey huffed. “And you’re sidetracking me.”

“Christmas—” Tony sighed. “It’s just not my thing. Thank your mom for me though, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Rhodey grumbled. “But Miranda’s coming! Can’t that tempt you?”

“Sorry, honeybunch. But don’t worry about me! Honestly, I’ll probably be down in the workshop and forget the date. Besides,” Tony added impishly, “you know I’m a godless heathen.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony could practically hear Rhodey rolling his eyes. “But what about your team? Do they have plans?”

Tony frowned. He hadn’t really thought about it.

“I don’t know Clint, Natasha, or Bruce all that well,” Rhodey said, a little hesitant, “But Steve—Steve seems like a Christmas kind of guy.”

Tony worried at his bottom lip.

(Of course Steve was a Christmas kind of guy. He was Catholic. He’d been going to mass and lighting the advent wreath for the past, what? Three weeks? Shit—)

“—just wouldn’t want him to feel alone, you know? And mom’s always happy to have one more—or five, or six—and she likes Steve.”

Rhodey paused, apparently waiting for Tony to say something, but he’d lost the thread.

“But, you know,” Rhodey continued, “I didn’t want to cut in if you’d been planning something special.”

“What? No. I don’t do Christmas.” Tony swallowed. “And, yeah. You should invite him. I don’t think it would be good for Steve to be alone.”

“What do you mean?” Rhodey asked sharply.
“Just, I know people get low at the holidays and, it’s rough for Steve here.” Tony hesitated a moment before saying quietly, “He has nightmares too. About the war. The crash. SHIELD gave him some useless therapist immediately post-defrost, but he didn’t go back once he was cleared for duty. I got him an appointment with Dr. Jefferson.”

“Shit, Tones,” Rhodey breathed into the phone. He sounded pained. “Shit. I should have talked to him. Why didn’t I think of that? Fuck. I’m the one who asked you to look out for him! And I got you to Dr. J! What the hell was I thinking, not--”

“He’s okay,” Tony cut in. “He’s going now. Don’t beat yourself up. But, yeah, Christmas—he’d like that.”

“Yeah. I’ll call him.” The line was silent for a moment, then Rhodey said, “Yeah, actually, I’d better call him now.”

“Cool.”

“Talk to you later, Tones. And, uh, thanks. For the head’s up. For being there for him.”

“Uh, no worries.”

“Ok. Later.”

“Later.”

Tony frowned down at the training robot he’d been working on.

It wasn’t that he hated Christmas, or didn’t love the Rhodes. (Rhodes? Rhodeses?) But Christmas was the time when Matriarch Marianne Rhodes gathered her entire clan.

When Rhodey’d first invited Tony over for Christmas that miserable winter after his parents died, he’d been about to accept until Rhodey got to describing all the glorious attractions: stockings, two trees, traditional cooking, church—quite a bit of church—and grandparents and uncles and aunties and a veritable horde of cousins. Just hearing about it had nearly sent teenage Tony into a social anxiety attack.

(Mom loved Christmas. She sang Tu scendi dalle stelle and Gesu bambino as she helped Jarvis decorate the house herself. And she’d always taken Tony to midnight Mass over Howard’s objections about ‘that superstitious rubbish.’)

At fourteen, he passed it off to Rhodey as an atheism thing—not a ‘can’t bear to be around a huge, happy family at Christmas’ thing—and had stuck with that approach ever since. And, to be totally honest, he had spent Christmas in his workshop several times without so much as noticing the date.

Dummy offered him a new wrench, pulling him from his thoughts.

Tony snorted. “Is that a hint, Dummy? I’m supposed to be working?”

Beeeep!

Tony shook his head and shrugged.

Steve would fit in at Mrs. Rhodes’ place.

(Tony made a mental note to see if JARVIS could find him a salvageable Norton Dominator anyway. There probably wouldn’t be any in working order, but maybe the body . . . He could do the rest.)

When Tony went up to the kitchen a few hours later, he found Steve working at the dinning room table. He was reading a huge PR briefing packet—printed on actual paper—and he was taking notes in the margins.

“How’s it going?” Tony asked.

Steve looked up startled, then gave a rueful smile. “I think I need 70 years to study.”

Tony shrugged. “You’ll do great tomorrow. They already love you.”

Steve frowned at that.

“But what if I say something wrong?” he asked. “Or use the wrong terms? Or get the presidents mixed up?”

Tony laughed. “Okay, nobody is going to ask you about Clinton or Nixon or anybody else; as long as you can remember Obama is our current president, you’re fine. And your terms sound okay to me. Just remember ‘presented minority’ and hyphenated-American, if it comes up. Oh! And presented minorities have pretty solidly reappropriated ‘twink’ and ‘dyke,’ but given the
origins and you coming from the 40’s, I’d steer clear just the same.”

Steve’s eyes went wide; he looked pretty appalled, really. (Oh. Okay. Apparently, he hadn’t heard
twink or dyke used affectionately yet.)

“You’ll probably only get a couple of questions where this stuff might come up anyway. Like
Mikie said, they’ll probably ask you about procedural stuff, our training, and your impressions of
the 21st century. Pretty basic.”

“If you say so,” Steve said, frowning down at the papers.

Tony opened the refrigerator and pulled out roast beef and cheddar. He put two slices of
sourdough in the toaster, then thought better of it and added two more. Tony started slicing a
tomato.

“So, hey,” Tony said casually, “You talked to Rhodey lately?”

“As a matter of fact,” Steve answered, “Jim just called me. But I get a feeling you might have
known that.”

Tony shrugged and started assembling his sandwiches.

“Jim invited me to spend Christmas with his family in Boston, but it sounded kind of . . .
crowded.”

“Oh! Don’t let that stop you!” Tony said, waving emphatically with the bread knife. “They can
always make room and Mrs. Rhodes loves company.”

“I believe the invitation was sincere, just—” Steve hesitated. “It’s a lot of people, you know?”

Tony managed to hold in a little laugh. (Oh man! Steve doesn’t wanna go for the same reasons I
don’t!) Tony was about to promise Christmas with him in the Tower would be chill when Steve
added.

“But I had already made a commitment anyway.”

“Oh, really?” Tony said, with an inquisitive upward lilt. Steve didn’t elaborate, just nodded.

“So, how are the training robots coming along?” Steve asked.

“Corporeal!” Tony said enthusiastically. “Getting there anyway. Physically manifest now. Not
exactly bodies yet per se, but yeah. I’m almost done assembling the first one. You could come
check it out if you like.”

Steve smiled for a moment, but a glance at the pile of papers dimmed his smile. “I’d better keep
studying.”

Tony approached, plate in hand.

“You can bring that with you. Hey, if you draw Dummy on your break again I’ll even give you
one of these sandwiches.”

“I don’t know,” Steve said, with a sly smile, “something tells me you’d give me a sandwich just of
the asking.”

“Nope! No drawing, no sandwich.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Stark.”

“I’m not a billionaire for nothing.”

“And I’m not an idiot,” Steve said playfully. “Half in advance.”

“Done!” He handed Steve half a sandwich. “Now come on! You’re gonna love my new robots.”

Standing in the antechamber to the Stark Industries’ auditorium (now holding a swarm of blood-
sucking journalists), Tony checked himself in the mirror one last time: his Van Dyke was crisp
and trim, his suit perfection. (And some well-applied concealer hid the dark circles from too much
engineering and too little sleep.) Next to him Natasha pinned back a wayward curl.

“Looking ‘dynamically sublime’ there, Nat,” Clint teased. She rolled her eyes and turned to Bruce
who looked like he was somewhere between a meditation exercise and a nervous breakdown.

Steve looked perfect and was fiddling nervously with his cuffs. He wore a plain white collared
shirt with a subtle grey stripe, modern but not aggressively so. (Katie had proposed Steve appear
in uniform, but he’d put his foot down—Clint and Nat weren’t going in their cat suits, Tony wasn’t wearing the armor, and what would Bruce wear? A lab coat? Tony’d backed Steve up vociferously.

“Don’t worry so much,” Mikie said, coming over to rest a reassuring hand on Cap’s shoulder. “You’ll do great. I lit a candle for you.”

“St. Anthony?” Steve asked with a wry smile.

Mikie shook his head. “Archangel Gabriel.”

“Thanks. I need all the help I can get!” Steve crossed himself, expression playful. Mikie smiled and went to say something to Bruce.

Tony gave Steve an inquiring look.

“Mr. Nguyen’s Catholic too.” A pause, then Steve said, “Did you know over thirty-five percent of Vietnamese-Americans are Catholic? I didn’t know that.” He admitted a little sheepishly, “I’d assumed he was Buddhist.”

(Mikie was Catholic? Huh.) Tony never would have guessed that.

“So, are you ready?” Steve asked.

“Cap, I was born ready!” Tony grinned.

“All right, Avengers,” Katie said, motioning to the stage door of the auditorium. “Go!”

(Show time.)

It was hardly Tony’s first rodeo—he could barely muster the energy to be nervous anymore—and even with Katie and Mikie running the show, the style of questions was deplorably predictable:

“Captain, please tell us about your team’s training regimen.”

“Hawkeye—why the bow? With the array of weapons at your disposal, why something so archaic?”

“Widow, what’s it like being the only woman on the team?”

“Tony, we’re all dying to know—what’s your secret? Do you have a special diet to stay sleek, slim, and battle ready?”

“Dr. Banner, how did you manage to invent the portal closing devices while under fire?”

(And yeah, that burned. Of course Bruce gave Tony credit for engineering and foresight and everything, but still.)

Within that predictable framework, everyone played their parts.

“Captain Rogers? What has impressed you most about the twenty-first century? Any pleasant surprises?”

“Off the top of my head?” Steve asked, squinting. “No polio’s pretty amazing. We’ve had an Irish Catholic president, something I never thought I’d live to see, and now an African-American president, something I definitely never thought I’d live to see.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck, then added, “And, gosh, the internet! So helpful. Really aces. I could go on and on, but I know we’ve got limited time and I’m sure you have important questions for my teammates.”

Steve gave the reporters his bashful act and they ate it up. (Well, it wasn’t really an act. More that he was ‘letting them see his bashful side.’ Steve was devastatingly sincere; it was, as Tony had long suspected, one of his superpowers.)

“Agent Romanov, there are no records about you—birth, immigration, school, employment, social security number—until 2011. This has led to widespread speculation that, until your appointment to the Avengers, you were in espionage. Is that correct?”

“I am unable to comment.”

“If your training is in espionage, though, taking a position on the high-profile Avenger’s team would have to be the end of your involvement in any covert operations, right?”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. “That would be the logical conclusion to draw if one accepts your initial premise.”

“But you can’t offer any comment? Any comment at all?”

“Well, my favorite color is blue and I’m a sucker for Steve’s pancakes, but I doubt that’s what
Natasha had somehow mastered the art of aloof yet charming; the reporters seemed to hang on her every word. (And only asked a few questions about being a Domme on a team with so many Doms.)

Bruce got very few questions, happily, since he looked on the verge of a breakdown or Hulk out. Committed as ever to keeping his connection to the Hulk quiet, Bruce was often at a loss with the reporters.

“So, if Mr. Stark is responsible for the engineering, what exactly is it that you bring to the team, Dr. Banner?”

“Uh . . .” Bruce fiddled nervously with his ballpoint pen. “Theoretical physics and training in medical research? Dr. Stark and I worked together on the theoretical models behind his portal closure devices.”

Tony had to jump in, “And, uh, in case you’ve forgotten, Bruce’s knowledge of both theoretical physics and medical research is the reason I’m still here to answer questions. Maybe I’m biased, but I’d say that’s a pretty major contribution.”

Clint enthusiastically took the role of a lovable joker: “Yeah, and let’s not forget Bruce introduced Cap to Indian Food! That’s not nothing either. And, hey, how come nobody ever wants to know what I like to eat? You all always ask Tony, but I’ve got a very sophisticated diet. Prominently featuring brunch foods cooked by Captain America himself. They’re seasoned with patriotism.”

The vast majority of the questions, predictably enough, went to Steve:

“What can you tell us about the selection process for your team, Captain?”

“Commander Nick Fury began the process. He recruited Agents Barton and Romanov and first reached out to Dr. Banner. Once I was recovered and revived, he invited me to join and made me team leader. I then recruited Mr. Stark. I also invited Lt. Colonel Rhodes to join us, but due to his commitment to the Air Force he declined and will only be acting as an auxiliary member.”

“So you recruited the only submissive and the only person of color. It that Affirmative Action? Are you trying to make a statement?”

“Statement?” Steve rubbed the back of his neck and gave them a bemused smile. “Gosh, I’m not really sure what you mean by that. I made my choices based on their outstanding qualifications. It’s pretty straightforward.”

The press seemed eager to get Steve on the record saying something they could spin as controversial, but he had a gift for spinning their premise out from under them.

“Captain, you’re a practicing Catholic, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Steve’s answer was mild and polite as always, but Tony could see that his shoulders had gone tense.

“There’s been a certain amount of controversy about Pope Francis, particularly within the Catholic community. Do you have an opinion?”

“Has there been controversy?” Steve asked mildly. “From what I’ve seen, His Holiness emphasizes love and compassion for all people and the moral imperative to help the poor. I’d hardly call that controversial, no matter what religion you practice—” a subtle glance at Tony “—or whether you practice any religion at all.”

The reporters looked eager to pounce and Tony could practically feel Steve bracing himself, so he cut in: “Which is a great opportunity to remind everybody that Avengers toys and collectibles make great gifts this holiday season and all the proceeds go to fighting poverty and domestic violence!”

And of course, Tony’s questions were the most predictable:

“Tony, how does it feel to be the only sub on the team?”

“Okay, first, let me say: it’s 2012 and my presence on this team is still noteworthy because I’m a submissive. That’s disappointing. Lots of people have been pointing to me on the Avengers and calling it progress, but I’d say that very fact shows how far we’ve got left to go.”

Tony paused. “Of course, you’re right. I am the only sub on the team, but I never feel like ‘the only sub on the team’ or even ‘a sub on the team’ until somebody asks a question like that.”

“With my teammates, I’m myself. My orientation never comes up; I’m not ‘the sub.’ I train with my teammates, both in unarmed combat and as Iron Man. I invent protective gear and equipment upgrades for them. I work with Bruce on the theoretical science of interdimensional defense. They’ve never treated me as anything less than an equal. I’m one of them.” Tony smirked, then
said, “Or, they’re one of me.” He tapped his chest and winked at the reporters. “Narcissist, you know.”

As soon as Katie and Mikie came on stage to wrap things up, Bruce practically sprinted for the door. Natasha sauntered gracefully and Clint blew kisses to the reporters. Tony left with casual bravado and held the door for Steve who smiled and waved a little awkwardly.

“Hey, so I want a burger and a beer,” Clint said immediately. “Anybody else want in?”

“Yes,” Bruce answered. He looked a little queasy. “I want a drink.”

Natasha patted him on the back and gave a sympathetic smile.

“Ray’s?” she asked.

“You want to go out?” Bruce asked voice tight. “Couldn’t we order in?”

“The fresh air will do you good!” Clint exclaimed. “Besides, all the reporters are busy now. Nobody’s gonna notice us going out for burgers.”

“I guess so,” Bruce mumbled with a frown.


Tony shrugged. “I always want a burger.”

Steve seemed to hesitate. “I guess so.”

“Great!” Clint waved his arms. “Avengers assemble! For burgers. Hey, you wanna come too?” he called to Mikie and Katie as they stepped into the room.

“Pardon?”

“Oh!” Mikie said. “That’s sweet of you to invite us. I—” Katie nudged him and gave him a look.

“But, uh,” he said, “No. We have work to finish up here.”

“Thanks for the invitation, though,” Katie said, “and the other Avengers joined in thanking their PR gurus for their excellent coaching and for keeping the top douchebags out of the reporters pool.

“Okay, so, burgers?” Clint said plaintively. “Go grab your coats! Meet in the living room.”

As Tony went for his winter things, he found himself smiling unexpectedly. It had gone well. Really well. Katie and Mikie had earned their no-doubt many-zeroed salaries. (Though, Tony actually had no idea what SI paid their PR rockstars... Huh) The reporters had asked way fewer obnoxious questions than he’d expected and, though it was too soon to say for sure, he had a feeling they’d all be happy with the tone and how the team was presented.

Tony was the first to get to the common room. He was still smiling a satisfied smile when Steve entered, frowning.

“Tony?” Steve said, hesitant and awkward. “I’m sorry.”

Tony blinked. (Huh?)

“You thought of me as an equal,” Tony said, tone reassuring. “The implications of your vestigial gallantry notwithstanding. I know that now, so—water under the bridge.”

Steve was still frowning. “I still don’t like the idea of you lying for me.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “I seem to remember somebody saying he had no idea where the rumor I was a probationary member could have started and that I was always a full Avenger from the beginning.”

“That’s different!”
“If you say so, Cap,” Tony said with a smile, patting him on the shoulder. “When it comes to the press, sometimes honesty about the details gets in the way of the truth.” Tony shrugged. “They heard the important part. That’s all that really matters.”

Steve opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and just smiled for a moment before saying softly, “Thank you, Tony.”

The elevator doors opened and Clint called out, “Burgers assemble!”

Tony laughed and gestured to the elevator. “Shall we?”

Steve smiled. “With pleasure.”

Chapter End Notes

So, the press conference was super hard to write, but I’m finally willing to accept the results and post so I can move on to the next part of the story. Hope it works for you!

I fear spoilers, so I haven’t seen RDJ walk out of his interview, but on hearing about it I totally thought of Tony. Luckily, our Tony had Katie and Mikie to help keep things under control. They are rock stars.

And re: the saints: St. Anthony is patron saint of the lost (also of women looking for a husband!) Gabriel the Archangel is patron saint of “diplomats, ambassadors, communications workers, postal workers, emergency dispatchers, police dispatchers, broadcasters, messengers, and radio/television workers.”

Thank you all so much for your patience support and enthusiasm. I’m blown away by my readers. As ever, I love hearing from you. THANK YOU and I hope to have more soon….

Also, there’s now an outtake conversation where Rhodey calls Steve as promised. :) You can read it here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/4511202
The Avengers’ press conference was a consummate success. Almost as good as if the team had written the articles all from start to finish, give or take a few vexing subordinate clauses. The film clips posted online were fantastic and, though carefully constructed, looked informal and personal.

*Vanity Fair* had the best spread, not least of all because they got to cap off their story with some amazing candid shots of the team joking around, having burgers, and looking like one big happy family. Caption: *The Avengers unwind together after their press conference with burgers and milkshakes at Ray’s Diner.* (And, yep, there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that Katie and Mikie had sent Danny to Ray’s themselves, but he couldn’t even be annoyed. Danny’d been so discreet about it that the team hadn’t even noticed him and the photos really were great press.)

The articles and the clips all had a good bit of judicious editing. The journalists, unsurprisingly, never exposed their own idiocy, though, some of the more liberal outlets delighted in commenting on the conservative one’s patronizing questions.

Tony sent Katie and Mikie two cases of champagne and a bonus *without* Pepper’s reminder. (So there!)

Tony’s coverage ranged from neutral to glowing, along with the others, but Captain America was their golden boy, their beautiful darling and the bulk of the coverage was devoted to him.

It was strange: the reporters’ descriptions of Steve—earnest, forthright, humble, sincere, fair-minded, kind, generous —were no less than he deserved, but it left a bitter taste in Tony’s mouth. It was true of course: Steve was earnest and humble and generous and all of it, but they saw all that in Captain America. He was an icon, an emblem—they were never going to see anything else. Somehow it cheapened Steve’s utterly remarkable *Steveness* —the rarity of someone truly possessing those characteristics, day in day out, not as an allegorical figure, but as a flawed, breakable, beautiful human being, constantly striving to be his very best.

The journalists couldn’t possibly capture that. Their articles were flat; it was like reading about a friend and a stranger at the same time.

“Sir?” JARVIS called. “A Mr. James is here with a delivery.”

Tony threw away the glowing screen with Time Magazine’s cover story and shook himself a little.

“How?”

“The Norton Dominator you ordered and the various parts. They have arrived.”

“Great! Better warn me if Steve is coming down to the workshop, buddy.”

“I doubt it will be a problem, sir, but might I suggest you place this project in the side shop all the same?”

“Good idea.”

(Time to indulge in a little side project.)

> Nice work, Avengers! Steve called as they finished the training module. Steve looked up and added, “And thank you for your assistance with the holograms, JARVIS.”

“Always a pleasure to be of service, Captain.”

“How did that feel?” Steve asked the team.

“Boring,” Bruce said, with a grimace.
“I’m sorry, Bruce,” Steve said with an apologetic smile. “We’re scheduled for training at Tony’s ranch in January though. We’ll get you more involved then.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Bruce mumbled.

“I think we should go through aerial evacuation lifts on our next module,” Natasha said. “We may need Iron Man to evacuate an incapacitated teammate, preferably without doing further injury.”

“Good thinking. I’ll talk to SHIELD medical and get some procedures we can adapt.” Steve turned to Tony. “Can you and JARVIS do a diagnostic scan on the field?”

Tony raised the faceplate and nodded. “Yeah. A basic one, but it would at least give some parameters for the evacuation.”

“Any other suggestions?” Steve asked. Clint shook his head. Bruce shrugged. “Great! Then I guess we can call it a day.”

It had become a bit of a habit for Steve to come down and work on his reports in the workshop after training; Tony fumbled around for an excuse to brush him off. (He’d left the Norton Dominator in plain view of the main shop and wanted to get back to work on modifying the engine, so he couldn’t exactly have Steve hanging out on his couch.)

“Again,” Steve said to them all, “Nice work. And now, I’m gonna go hit the showers.” He waved. “See you later!”

(Huh.)

It was just as well Tony hadn’t needed an excuse for Steve. But, come to think of it, Steve hadn’t asked to come down to the workshop after their last training either. Tony shrugged it off. He needed to get back to his projects.

>>>>

“Hey, Bruce!” Tony called breezing into Bruce’s suite. His voice was loud over the burbling serenity fountains.

Bruce startled, spinning away from his desk to frown at Tony.

“What are you doing here?” Bruce asked, voice tense.

Tony’s smile dimmed. “Uh, picking you up for our science date? You said we’d go over the Thanksgiving data again, remember?”

“Oh right.” Bruce gave a sheepish smile. “Sorry, Tony. I lost track of time.”

Tony shrugged and approached Bruce’s desk. It was littered with crumpled stationary. The wastepaper basket was full, and one balled up paper had fallen on the floor. Tony picked it up to shove back in the basket, but first--

“Dear Betty, Merry Christmas. I hope you’re having a wonderful time with your mother. I miss you, but I can’t see you. I wish things were different and we —”

“Tony!” Bruce yelled, leaping up and snatching the paper away. “What the hell’s the matter with you?! That’s private!”

“Sorry!”

“How dare you!?”

“Sorry! Really!”

Tony held his hands up and took a tiny step back. Bruce’s eyes went wide, horror replacing anger. Bruce turned back to his desk and dropped his face in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce said, voice muffled. He took a deep breath.

Tony ran a soothing hand across his shoulders. “It’s okay,” Tony murmured. “You’re right. Uh, boundaries and stuff. I shouldn’t be so nosey.”

“I shouldn’t lose my temper.” Bruce mumbled. “I can’t lose my temper.”

“You didn’t. It’s really fine.” Tony rubbed the back of Bruce’s neck with his thumb. “No damage done by loud noises, you know. Well, not until you get to—”

“160 decibels.”

“And no offense, buddy, but your grumpy voice doesn’t even come close.”

Bruce let out a strained laugh.
“So, hey, why don’t you come down to the lab and we’ll give those results another look. We can make a pot of that smelly tea you like!”


In the elevator on the way down, Bruce was awkward and fidgety. (More so than usual, that is.) He probably shouldn’t try it, but Tony couldn’t resist saying:

“So, hey, you know if you ever want to talk about anything, I’m a way better listener than reports might lead you to suspect.”

“I know that, Tony.”

“So, if you wanted to talk through your stuff with Betty, I—”

“No.” Bruce said it firmly, but without anger. “No, thank you.”

“Okay. So, uh, smelly tea, right?”

“Right.”

“—You’ve improved,” Clint said, grabbing a towel. “You’ve got the Duke hold under control. A little more strength training would be good though. Might help you throw me after a Gibson.”

Tony nodded and took a long drink from his water bottle. Clint had really put him through his paces.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“So,” Clint said, toweling sweat from his hair, “on a scale of 1-10, how gross would it be for me to go up and devour some sandwiches before showering?”

“Probably an eight, but I’m gonna do the same thing so no judgment.”

Up in the kitchen, they threw together a heap of sandwiches and dug in, devouring them in companionable silence. Clint grabbed his tablet; Tony checked messages on his phone.

(Thanks for the champagne from Katie; update on the Foundation renovations from Isaac; ’congrats; sweet press conference’ from Rhodey; etc.)

“Hey, Tony?” Clint said around a partially masticated bite of sandwich. “You’re in the tabloids again.”

Tony sighed. (Yeah, okay. His press had been too good to last. Something about The Pierre after all?)

“Well, you and Steve,” Clint said with a little laugh flipping the tablet for Tony to see. “Check it out. What a bunch of morons.”
Tony blinked.

Clint continued, with a loud snort, “Iron America romance? Seriously? I mean, fine, they write trash and are total assholes, so obviously they’re gonna pair the only sub on the team off with somebody, but Steve? Steve?! Mr. 1940s Big Catholic Wedding, Femme Sub in a White Dress?”

Tony chewed at his roast beef on rye. Clint swiped at the tablet, skimming the article with a frown and shaking his head. Tony swallowed and, after a moment’s hesitation, took another bite.

Clint grimaced at the tablet, took a long drink of water, then said, “I figured they’d pair you up with Nat—both minorities, you know?—or with Bruce, because scientists, or with me, duh. ‘Cause I’m the handsome one.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“But Steve? Seriously? I mean, I love the guy—honest—but he seems like, well, kind of a prude. And you’re—”

Tony raised an eyebrow at him. (A slut?)

Clint coughed. “—uh, *not*.”

Tony snorted. (Meaning I’m a slut. Thanks, Hawk.)

Clint had the good grace to look momentarily sheepish.

“Maybe they thought putting this crap out right after the press conference would give their B.S. a credibility boost?” Clint speculated.

Tony shrugged.

“Wanna see the article?” Clint asked, offering his tablet.

Tony wrinkled his nose and set down the rest of his sandwich. “I make it a habit never to read drivel and am frankly surprised to find that you do.”

Clint shrugged. “I have a google alert for all of us. Seems good to stay informed.”

“So seems exhausting,” Tony said, shaking his head. He waved Clint’s tablet away. “Well, now that I’m not on the verge of collapse, I’m overdue for a shower.”

“Wear you out, did I?” Clint asked with a grin.

“You wish,” Tony snarked. “Later!”
“Later!”

“Take me to the workshop,” Tony said, stepping into the elevator. “I’ll use the shower there.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony waved to the bots as he crossed the threshold and called out, “JARVIS, give me *Life & Style*.”

“I thought Sir was going to shower.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony cut him off rolling his eyes, “No sass, buster, just do it!”

“Drivel as ordered, sir,” JARVIS said as he pulled up the tabloid.

“What did I say about sass?” Tony muttered.

The cover was, frankly, a bit of a mess. They’d used separate close-ups of Tony and Steve instead of a picture of them standing together. (Maybe the blocking was meant to imply that, secret romance or no, they were so incompatible they couldn’t share a frame?) Tony shook his head. (Don’t overthink it, Stark.) The cover looked like exactly what it was: a fiction cobbled awkwardly together. Tony scrolled to the inside, though, and felt a jolt of shock and recognition at the interior photos.

In the first, they were wearing street clothes on 8th Ave going on one of their hotdog runs. Steve was laughing with his head thrown back. Tony remembered—he’d been trashing the iPhone vehemently and hyperbolically (for Steve’s amusement) and he’d gestured extravagantly while holding his hotdog; the relish went flying off and scattered a little clutch of pigeons on landing. In the photo, Tony’s eyes were very bright, laugh lines squinting up at the corners.

The next photo was from the gala; he knew the exact moment. (“Thanks for the assist, Cap.”) Tony had a hand on Steve’s arm and was looking up at him with a soft smile. Steve’s answering smile was joyful, blinding.

(Well.) Tony took a deep breath. (The tabloid had certainly found the right photos to make it look . . . to make it *seem* like . . . like they were . . .)

Tony swallowed. His eyes flicked over to the text, key remarks bolded in large font:

*Opposites attract? Will Tony’s past interfere? Can the Captain save Tony from himself?*

He didn’t want to read it.

“Shut it down, J.”

JARVIS complied silently. Tony shook his head. His hands felt clammy. (Duh. He was covered in sweat from training with Clint.) He took a deep breath.

“Time for that shower.”

Who cares what some stupid tabloid wrote about him.

And like Clint said, nobody would believe it; they were way too improbable a match.

Tony frowned.

(But when we first met, Steve had asked . . . He’d wanted to . . .)

Tony swallowed thickly, then shook his head.

“AC/DC, JARVIS. And make it loud.”

Dear Captain Rogers,

First, thank you so much for consulting with me and Mr. Nguyen before sending your letter to the editors of *Life & Style Weekly*. As you so graciously pointed out, we are trained professionals and it is our job to help manage these sorts of issues for Mr. Stark and the Avengers.

Although Mr. Nguyen and I were both impressed by the eloquence of your letter and thoroughly agreed with your sharply worded critique, we strongly advise you not to send it. It is Mr. Stark’s stated policy that false allegations and unflattering characterizations of him in tabloid publications go unremarked and unaddressed.

Moreover, giving the editors of *Life & Style Weekly* a letter penned by Captain America to print would only bring their false story and its unjust characterizations of Mr. Stark into greater circulation. They would make a profit off of your justifiable outrage. Instead, I suggest you consider tabloids beneath your consideration, for the same reasons you articulated regarding the Westborough Baptist Church.
Tony took a step back to admire his handiwork. Pepper’s Wonder Woman body armor was ready to be wrapped and it was perfectly designed to inspire envy in top army brass and cosplayers alike. (Not that he expected her to wear it out without Vera Wang or Chanel over top, but she’d look fabulous if she did.) He’d ordered Mrs. Rhodes another Ferrari, scheduled to arrive on Christmas Eve. (It was a little game they played—he bought her something extravagant, she called and scolded him, then made him return it and send something deplorably ordinary, like a stand-up mixer.) He’d gotten a receipt from MIT for his annual donation in Rhodey’s honor, funding three more talented students for the James T. Rhodes Scholarship. (Rhodey’s middle name didn’t actually start with a T, but Tony couldn’t resist making the man one step closer to Captain James T. Kirk when he filled out the forms.) And across the workshop, the Norton Dominator glistened and gleamed in the light. Outwardly, it looked like something from the 1940s, but its new engineering would make any modern gear head drool. He’d really been in the zone with this one.

Tony took a sip of coffee, feeling smug for a moment before a wave of panic washed over him. “JARVIS, what’s the date?”

“December 21st, sir.”

(Oh thank God.) It wouldn’t be unlike Tony to work right through Christmas and miss the whole damn thing. Not that they had plans or anything. In fact, Steve had some sort of mystery plan, but Tony still wanted to give him his new Avengers equipment on the 25th.

Come to think of it, Tony hadn’t spent much time with Steve lately; if fact, he hadn’t so much as seen him outside of training in days, not even working at the dinning room table as usual. (Huh.) Tony frowned. Steve wouldn’t avoid him because of that ridiculous tabloid, would he? Even if Steve were worried about their image, that surely wouldn’t affect his behavior in the Tower and it’s not like he would blame Tony for the tabloid, right? (Right. The idea was ridiculous.)

Tony raised his coffee cup, then paused as an equally ridiculous explanation for Steve’s absence shot through his mind: maybe Steve had found a submissive and was keeping his new girlfriend top secret—even from his team—so she wouldn’t be a target for violence or pestered by the press and that maybe she was his mystery Christmas plan. (Absurd.) Tony laughed at himself. There was no way Steve could keep a secret that well.

“Hey, JARVIS? Where’s Steve?”

“The Captain is in his suite.”
Well. He had said to drop by any time, right?

Tony took a considering sip of coffee, then headed for the elevator.

“Cap’s floor, please, J.”

The elevator doors opened on the living room, pristine and impersonal as ever with one small exception. There was a small Christmas tree made of carved wood sitting on the kitchen counter. From down the hall, Tony could hear a rich baritone singing:

“. . . and ransom captive Israel / That mourns in lonely exile here . . .”

Tony’d never heard Steve sing properly before, just the low hum that went with cooking Sunday brunch. He had a lovely voice, untrained but melodious.

“Steve?” Tony called out. “O Come O Come, Emmanuel” came to an abrupt halt.

“Tony?”

“Yeah. Can I come back?”

“Uh, sure. I guess so.”

The door to Steve’s spare room was open. Inside, there was a large table overflowing with colorful paper and ribbons in reds and golds and greens. A mountain of carefully wrapped boxes stood on Steve’s left and an equally high pile of items waited to his right: art supplies, picture books, toy chemistry sets, building blocks, dolls, scarves and hats and mittens.

“Please tell me you didn’t get me a coloring book,” Tony joked. Steve shook his head, looking a little uneasy. “Oh, good! I’m definitely a building blocks kinda guy. But Clint seems like the coloring book sort.”

Steve chuckled a little.

“So, what is all this?” Tony asked, though he had a pretty good idea.

“I called Mother Superior and offered to bring toys to Magdalene House on Christmas dressed as St. Nicholas,” Steve said with a little shrug. He finished tying a bow, then added, “Uh, she said the kids would probably appreciate a visit from the real Captain America more than a pretend St. Nick, but yeah. She gave me all their wish lists, and the teachers added some notes. So, Jessica asked for a doll, but shows an aptitude for science according to Sister Margaretta, so I got her the chemistry set too. Stuff like that.” Another shrug. “It’s been fun. And we haven’t been that busy lately.”

Tony nodded. “I think you must have bought out an entire toy store, though! No wonder wrapping has taken you a while; I was starting to wonder where you’d disappeared to.” Tony frowned. “But, hey, why are you doing all this down here? Why not set up at the dining room table upstairs?”

“It’s an awful lot of clutter,” Steve said. “And Jim told me that you don’t celebrate Christmas; I didn’t want to impose.”

“What!? No! I mean, yes, I don’t celebrate Christmas, because atheist, but I don’t mind you celebrating! I’m not, like, allergic to Christmas stuff.”

“Really?” Steve frowned. “But Jim said—”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony cut in and fidgeting a little. “I might have overstated the atheist anti-Christmas thing to Rhodey. Just a bit. But Christmas with the Rhodes is so full of strangers! And this big thing! With all these traditions and lots of Church and stuff. So, uh, that Christmas is too much for me.”

“Yeah,” Steve said with a shy smile. “It did sound pretty big.”

Tony nodded and rushed ahead, “You can definitely wrap Christmas presents in the common room. And we can get a tree! You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“It might be nice,” Steve admitted hesitantly. “If you’re sure you don’t mind . . .”

“Definitely,” Tony enthused, rapidly gathering steam, “and I’ll have Vera Wang or Martha Stewart do the decorations! Or, no, wait. Maybe we should do that ourselves? That’d be nice, right? We can decorate it together and drink mulled wine and eggnog and stuff. And, if you get back from Magdalene House in time, we can all eat dinner together or something. How does that sound?”

“Good,” Steve said softly. “I’d really like that.”

“Awesome! Super! Leave it to me.”

“So, uh, hey,” Tony said, “I’m on a break right now. You want a hand with those?”


“Seriously, Steve. I have multiple doctorates; how hard can wrapping paper be?”

“Okay, this is ridiculous! It looks terrible. It looks like it was wrapped by an eight year old on speed. Yours look like they were wrapped by Martha Stewart. Martha Stewart? Oh, she’s kind of a legend and . . .”

“Tony, you can’t write ‘sucks’ on a note to a seven year old. Sister Theresa would scold him for language; you can’t be a bad example.”

“Stinks? Can I say, ‘Hope you like your Christmas present; sorry Iron Man stinks at wrapping?’”

“‘Stinks’ is fine.”
Ta-da! Hope you like it!

Things are rough for me in RL right now, so if you want to take a moment to tell me your favorite bit (or two or three...) it will be even more extra majorly appreciated than usual—and it usually makes my day to begin with. [If you want, you can read about RL here: http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/post/118061232911/sad-news-in-merediths-life] Thanks to everyone who has sent kind words and support.

Thank you so much for joining me in the world of P&P! It has been such a wonderful, happy, healing place for me and it's a joy to have you here with me. Thank you. *gives you a bashful Steve smile*
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Christmas: Part I

Chapter Notes

Originally, I planned to make Christmas one big long chapter, but it was starting to get too unwieldy so I decided to break it down.

Here is Part I!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As Tony stepped onto the common floor that evening, he could hear Natasha saying, "I thought you were pulling my leg."

"Nope," Clint answered. "He actually got a tree! And a really awesome tree too."

"It must be for Steve," Natasha said consideringly.

A little embarrassed, Tony announced his presence by cutting in, "It's for everybody!"

"Well good," Clint said. "Uh, 'cause I maybe really like Christmas trees. Maybe. Are we gonna decorate it?"

"Sure are."

"Sweet! I wanna put the star on the top. I called it! I'm putting the star on the top!"

Natasha looked at him suspiciously. "You're going to put it on top with your hands, right? Standing on a ladder like a normal person?"

Clint froze. "Uh, yes?"

"Good," she said sternly. "I thought so."

Tony couldn't quite stifle a laugh—then again, he hadn't been trying that hard.

(This was gonna be fun.)

>>>>

"Hey, Tony," Steve called from the doorway to the workshop. "Knock, knock?"

Tony checked frantically that the Norton Dominator was fully concealed before calling, "Come in!"

"Natasha, Clint, and I are going shopping for Christmas tree decorations and—"

"What's wrong with the ones I ordered?" Tony cut in, frowning.

"Nothing! The red and gold glass is really beautiful, but, well, we thought it might be nice to pick out a few extra ourselves for variety. It'll be fun! Wanna come too?"

Tony paused. "Uh, no. No, I'm good."

"Oh, okay," Steve sounded disappointed. "Any special requests?"

"For Christmas tree decorations?" Tony let out a scoffing little laugh. "Nope, not really my area. I'm sure whatever you pick out will be fine."

"All right. Mulled wine at eight still, right?"

"Yep! Unless Bruce changed his mind, which seems unlikely. I wasn't expecting him to be so excited about it, but he seemed pretty pleased."

"I'm glad," Steve said with a smile. "I'll see you soon."

"Yep, later!"

Steve took his leave.
Tony shook his head. They were going to decorate a Christmas tree soon. And drink mulled wine. And the team would probably want to play Christmas music.

What had he gotten himself into?

Tony turned back to the training robot he’d been working on, this one a crisp Storm Trooper white.

“Okay, JARVIS, I think it’s ready. Animate arm, full rotation exercise.”

As he watched the robot rote and pivot its arms in smooth, precise sequence, a woman’s voice, a sweet, soft soprano flitted through his mind.

(“Tu scendi dalle stelle, / O Re del Cielo, / e vieni in una grotta, / al freddo al gelo.”)

Tony swallowed. “Okay, uh. Give me the left leg, then the right.”

JARVIS obliged; the robot’s left leg jerked and shuddered. Tony frowned and tipped it over on the workbench.  

“Don’t worry,” he muttered, “We’ll fix you up.”

(“O Bambino mio Divino / Io ti vedo qui a tremar, / O Dio Beato / Ahi, quanto ti costò / l’avermi amato!”)

Looked like one of the inner circuits was shorting, or the K-873 was rubbing its femur. Carefully and methodically, Tony started unscrewing the paneling to get a better look.

(“A te, che sei del mondo / il Creatore, / mancano panni e fuoco; / O mio Signore!”)

Tony frowned and set his screwdriver aside. Then picked it up. Then set it down.

“Hey, JARVIS?” Tony called hesitantly.

“Sir?”

“There was a box of Christmas tree ornaments—a special box—at the manor. Did—Uh, did we move it over to the Tower?”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS answered, volume dropping to sixty percent. “It’s currently on Level B-5, in Storage Crate 3, Box 7.”

“Okay.”

“Would you like me to call up the map and directions?”

“No. No, I was just wondering.”

When Tony arrived on the common floor, Bruce was peering into a steaming pot while Nat King Cole soulfully wished everyone a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

“There you are,” Bruce said with a smile. “I was half afraid I’d have to come get you from the workshop.” Bruce cast a glance over to the large table where Natasha and Clint were helping Steve wrap presents, bickering playfully about their relative gift-wrapping skills. Bruce lowered his voice and added, “I think Steve was starting to worry you’d changed your mind. About the Christmas stuff.”

“I’m not that late am I?” Tony asked, vaguely alarmed.

Steve looked up and smiled brightly. “Tony!”

“Hey, Cap,” he said. “Sorry I’m late.”

Steve shrugged. “You’re fine. We’re not on a deadline or anything. Here! Come see what Nat and I got at the Christmas market.”

“And what I got at the Dollarama!” Clint added.


“Everybody should get to pick out some ornaments for the tree,” Steve said, with the tone of man repeating himself. (Or a patient dad.)

Natasha rolled her eyes and Tony laughed at the cheap plastic Avengers Clint had gotten.

“Nat got this beautiful star for the top of the tree,” Steve said.

“Which I’m putting up,” Clint cut in.
“And I got these,” Steve said, showing Tony a lovely set of hand-painted ceramic birds: a peacock, a wren, a chickadee, and a bluebird.

“No bald eagle?” Tony teased.

Steve laughed and shook his head. “No, but I did get this,” he said, fumbling around in his bag. “Uh, I thought you might like it.”

Steve handed over a wooden Starship Enterprise. Tony grinned. “I am definitely hanging this one myself.”

“Speaking of,” Clint said, “Can we get started? Let’s get started. I wanna put mini-me in the tree!”

“You have no taste,” Natasha told Clint, rolling her eyes again. “Steve, you’re an artist—why won’t you back me up?”

“You know why. Besides, I think the mini-Avengers are kinda cute.”

“To be fair,” Tony said, “That tree is so big five little Avengers will hardly stand out. It’ll be like Where’s Waldo in there.”

“Mulled wine is ready!” Bruce called and they assembled eagerly—except Clint, who had already dashed over to the tree. Appropriately, “O Tannenbaum” came on as the rest of the team approached the tree to join him.

Tony hung the Enterprise first and heard the electronic “click” of Clint snapping a picture.

Steve gestured to the cardboard box Tony had dropped off near the tree earlier. “What’s all that?”

“Oh, just some old stuff that was lying around the Tower,” Tony said casually, “JARVIS reminded me that we had some ornaments after all.”

“Really?” Steve said curiously, peering into the box. “May I?”

“Sure. That’s what they’re for.”

Tony hung a red and gold glass ball while Steve took out one of the bundles of yellowing tissue paper and began unwrapping it very carefully.

“It’s beautiful,” Steve said, almost reverently, holding up the blown glass star. Venetian glass.

(“Only the best for my beautiful wife. Made in the workshop of an Italian master.”)

“May I hang it?” Steve asked.

“Like I said, that’s what they’re for,” Tony shrugged.

“Okay,” Steve said. “I just thought they might be special.” He hesitated, then began softly, “Tony, did these belong to your—”

“You have to hang Black Widow!” Clint cried. “Don’t be such a spoilsport!”

“Fine,” Nat retorted playfully, “But I’m hiding her like a good spy—where no one will find her.”

Tony turned away from Steve to jump in, “Go on, Nat! Don’t be a tree snob!”

Steve was unwrapping more of the ornaments in the box and handing them out. He gave Bruce a wooden sleigh to hang. Tony paused.

(“Don’t be silly, Howard. The wooden ornaments match the glass ones nicely. And this way there are some for Tony to hang that he can’t break and cut himself on.”)

Tony took a sip of mulled wine and watched his teammates. Clint took a few more pictures. Steve unwrapped another wooden ornament and Tony’s chest felt a little tight.

(“Here, Tony, why don’t you hang the rocking horse? My nonnino carved it for me when I was a little girl.”)

Steve turned the ornament over in his hands a few times, admiring the delicate carving.

(“Up! Up! I wanna hang it higher!!” Howard rolled his eyes and gave an indulgent smile. “All right, little man. Here we go.” He hefted his son up to reach higher in the tree.)
“Hey, Cap?” Tony said, voice a little hoarse. He cleared his throat and held out one of the glass balls. “Trade you?”

“Sure,” Steve said softly, handing Tony the rocking horse.

Tony hung it very carefully in the center of the tree. He cleared his throat.

“I’m gonna get more mulled wine,” he announced, and retreated to the kitchen.

Tony rested his hands on the counter and took a deep breath. (“But Mom said I could only have two cookies.” A large scarred hand ruffled Tony’s hair. “But three’s my lucky number, kiddo. Just don’t tell Mom. Look, I’m having another too.”)

Tony heard shuffling footsteps behind him.

“Tony?” Steve said, voice soft and tentative. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just needed a refill.”

Tony turned with a smile. “Hey, let’s go finish decorating that tree.”

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“Now one of Nat and Tony in front of the tree.”

“Now Bruce and Tony. Step a little to the left.”

“Now Tony and Steve. Smile!”

“Okay, now everybody. Huddle in. No, leave a spot for me there. I’ll set the timer.”

Tony shook his head. “Never figured you for such an avid photographer, Clint.”

Clint shrugged. “I like shooting things.”

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The team had sprawled around the living room to finish off the mulled wine and admire their newly decorated tree.

“We should really make a shopping list for Christmas dinner,” Steve said. “How about—”

“Chinese food!” Tony and Clint cried in unison.

“—goose,” Steve finished awkwardly. He paused then said, sounding a little stricken and incredulous, “Chinese food for Christmas dinner?”

Tony immediately backtracked. “Er, no, we don’t have to. We can do something else.”

“No, no,” Steve said, “Chinese food would be fine. Sorry. I was just surprised.”

“No, really, we order Chinese food pretty often,” Tony said. “We can do something more traditional.”

“You’ve already done so much,” Steve said. “I don’t mean to impose. We can—”

“Argh!” Clint cut in. “Gah, you two are ridiculous.”

“What time do you get back from Magdalene House,” Natasha asked Steve.

“Oh,” he said with a little frown. “That’s a good point. I probably don’t get back in time to cook a goose anyway.”

“I could do the cooking,” Bruce volunteered, “But I’m also happy to order Chinese.”

Steve hesitated. “No, no. We all love Park Chop Sui so let’s just— Wait, will they be open on Christmas?”

“Yep! Always are,” Tony said, “I always order from them on the 25th. We’ll just quadruple my usual order.”

Steve nodded. The team seemed content, but Tony was uneasy. As Bruce and Natasha turned conversation to eggnog recipes, Tony turned to Cap, “Steve? You sure that’s okay? We can still do something more traditional.”

“Oh, I dunno,” Steve said with a shy smile, “New traditions are good too. Park Chop Sui it is.”

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When Tony resurfaced the next evening, all the lights were out and the quiet strands of “Once in Royal David’s City” on Classical guitar floated through the living room. Steve was standing
alone, illuminated only by the light of the Christmas tree.

(Shit! Christmas eve! Were we supposed to be doing something?)

“Steve?” Tony called softly. Steve turned and smiled at him, but in the dim light Tony couldn’t tell if it looked happy or sad. Steve was wearing a white dress shirt with a dark suit and tie.

“Were we supposed to do something now?” Tony asked uncertainly.

Steve shook his head. “No. Not until tomorrow.”

“Got all dressed up to gaze at the tree alone in the dark, did you?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow.

Steve shook his head and let out a little chuckle.

“Don’t be silly—it’s not dark with the tree shining like that.” Steve shrugged. “I just wanted to spend a little while enjoying it before leaving for midnight Mass.”

“Oh, right,” Tony said.

(duh. Mass.) Tony shook himself a little. (he’d been on the verge of asking Steve to watch an episode of Star Trek.) Tony bit his lip. (Steve went to Mass alone all the time, but was it depressing on Christmas Eve? should he maybe offer to go too?) Tony grimaced. (ugh.)

“It’s a beautiful tree,” Steve said. “Thank you for getting it for us, Tony.”

“Sure. No problem.” He smiled a little and came to stand next to Steve. “It is pretty, isn’t it?”

The guitar switched to “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and out the window the city lights looked like thousands upon thousands more little white Christmas lights.

(Tony hadn’t been to Mass on Christmas Eve since his mother died.)

“Are you excited about giving the kids all their presents tomorrow?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said, smiling.

“You gonna wear the suit for them?”

Steve’s face fell slightly. “I, uh—no. Mother Superior suggested it, but, well, if I was gonna dress up I wanted to be St. Nicholas, not—” Steve cleared his throat, then continued, “So I’m just going, you know, as myself. But I’ll bring the shield for the kids to pass around so they aren’t too disappointed.”

(oh fuck.)

Tony was halfway to saying, “No one could ever be disappointed by you, Steve Rogers,” but the words got stuck in his throat and then Steve gave a little laugh and said:

“I think I might have gone a little overboard with the presents.”

“Wait,” Tony said, with sudden concern. “How are you gonna get all those presents to Brooklyn?”

“I’ll take the subway,” Steve said, “and I borrowed a dolly for the presents. Mr. Thompson—he works in custodial for SI—was very helpful.”

“Oh God, Steve, you’re killing me. I have a fleet of awesome cars! Usually, I’d send a driver, but obviously, they all have the week off, so I’ll drive you over myself. Parking’s always a mess and I doubt your destination has valet.”

“Oh, you don’t need t—”

“The thought of you on the subway with a custodial dolly is breaking my heart and making my cars sob.”

“I like the subway,” Steve said a little defiantly, Brooklyn accent surfacing.

“Of course you do,” Tony said, unable to stop a smirking little smile from quirking up, “but you should still let me drive. We’ll take the Lotus.”

“There are a lot of presents, Tony. The Lotus is the little fast one, right? I don’t think they’ll fit in that.”

“All my cars are fast! And don’t underestimate my cars or my packing abilities!”

“Okay, Tony,” Steve said, obviously humoring him. “Though, I really think it’s gonna be too small.”

“Well, I’ll just show you tomorrow!”
“All right,” Steve said, clearly still amused. (And clearly still humoring him).

“All right then,” Tony echoed with attitude.

The guitar turned to “O Come All Ye Faithful” and they both fell quiet, looking at the tree together. After a moment, Steve checked his watch.

“Do you want some mulled wine?” Tony asked.

Steve shook his head. “I’ll be heading out soon.”

“Right.”

(Ask if he’s okay going alone. No, ask if he’d like company.) Tony couldn’t quiet keep the frown from his face. (But I fucking hate Church. And it’d be hypocritical!)

Steve was humming along softly to the music.

(How fucking selfish are you? At least offer to go with--)

The elevator doors opened.

“Steve? You ready?”

Tony turned to find Natasha, luminous in the light of the elevator, with a fur coat over her arm and wearing a beautiful burgundy dress with black velvet trim. Steve grabbed his coat from the back of the couch where it had lain unnoticed.

“Good night, Tony. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah. Good night. And, uh, merry Christmas?”

Steve smiled.

“Merry Christmas.”

The elevator doors closed, leaving Tony alone with the tree.

Fine, Steve,” Tony said, taking a huge armful of brightly colored packages out of the back seat. “So you were right about the Lotus. I’m big enough to admit it—even with my god-like Tetris packing skills, there was no way. But we’ll be fine in the Audi.”

“Tony, I really don’t want to be late. Why don’t we just take that big one?”

“Tony, I really don’t want to be late. Why don’t we just take that big one?”

“Not that I own any less than awesome cars, but the Audi is even more awesome than the Rolls Royce!”

“Okay,” Steve said, expression very serious, “but if they don’t fit we won’t have time to repack the car again, so Iron Man will have to fly the presents to Magdalene house in a giant bag over his shoulder.”

Tony paused.

“And the Rolls it is!”

They must have made a funny sight, arms loaded with presents making repeat trips up the front steps of Magdalene house: Tony in his Burberry greatcoat and scarf; Steve in a sensible (not designer) navy pea coat, with the shield strapped to his back.

(No wonder the old man walking to the bus stop paused to stare at them for a moment.)

“Is that everything?” Tony asked, checking the Rolls one more time.

“Yep, I think so,” Steve said, shifting the last of the packages in his arms.

“Great! You call me when you’re done here and I’ll come get you.”

“Tony, I’m taking the subway.” His tone was mulish.

From the corner of his eye, Tony could see the old man at the bus stop was holding up his phone. (Damn.)

“Okay, okay. Subway it is,” Tony said. “Have fun with the kiddies.”

“I will,” Steve assured him, but he sounded a little nervous. He glanced at the door and back to Tony. “Okay. Well, I’ll see you later.”
“Yep! Later!”

Tony glanced aside again and, yeah, bus stop guy was definitely taking surreptitious photos. Steve turned to wave from the door and Tony waved back with a grin. As soon as Steve was safely inside, though, Tony spun to approach the bus stop.

The stranger was younger than Tony had initially supposed from a distance: his close-cropped hair all turned to silver, his dark skin wrinkled and creased, but he had a robust build, broad shoulders, and impeccable posture. His eyebrows shot up in surprise when he saw Tony approaching. The surprise annoyed Tony.

“Did you just take our picture?” Tony asked. The man nodded, still taken aback, and Tony rushed on, “Yeah, okay, how much do you want to delete it? Name your price.”

The man looked at him dubiously. “Why would you want the photos deleted?”

“Look,” Tony said impatiently, gathering himself for a full on rant, “you sell those to the press, put them online, or whatever—then this place is gonna be overrun. There’ll be fans and paparazzi, you name it, and next thing you know it’ll be a circus out here and those poor kids won’t get to enjoy their Christmas or their special visitor in peace. And it’ll look like some ‘Captain America visits orphans’ PR bullshit not that he’s here because Steve is a nice person who seriously just wanted to make some kids happy and spend time with them on Christmas—something he can’t do with the press howling at the gates. So, how about it? Name your price.”

The stranger made a disgusted grimace. “Is that your answer to everything? Throw money at it? You could have just asked. Said that if word got out it’d ruin Christmas for a bunch of kids.”

Tony faltered under the man’s disapproving gaze. “I—uh, I—”

“Anyway,” the man said, shoulders back and head held high, “I took the picture for my grandson because I knew he’d be excited. I wasn’t gonna sell it or some nonsense.”

“Oh.” Tony swallowed. “I’m sorry. I, uh, shouldn’t have assumed.”

The old man humphed. “No, no you shouldn’t have.” He shook his head and added grudgingly, “But I guess it is a little rude to take a stranger’s picture without permission.” He gave a little shrug and continued, “And your heart was in the right place. Wanting those kids to have a nice Christmas.”

The man gave Tony a speculative look then asked, “They didn’t want to see Iron Man? You just the chauffeur?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m not that good with kids,” Tony rambled awkwardly, “and this is kind of Steve’s special place, since his best friend grew up here. It was his idea and he’s the one who went out and selected all their presents and wrapped them himself—well, I mean, I tried to help, but it turns out I really su—er, stink at wrapping presents and writing cards, so, uh, no—this, not really my thing. Uh. I just gave Steve a ride.”

The stranger nodded.

Tony hovered. “So, hey, uh, you waiting for the bus?”

The old man gave him an unimpressed look and said, “That’s usually what a man standing at a bus stop is doing, yes.”

“Why don’t you let me give you a ride? To make up for my stupid.”

The man hesitated.

“Come on, your grandson would probably get a kick out of you having the same chauffeur as Captain America.”

The man smiled; a reserved kind of smile, but warm nevertheless. “You know, I believe you’re right. Thank you, Mr. Stark.”

“Tony.”

“Henry.”

They shook hands.

“Hop in. My Rolls Royce is at your service.”

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Chapter End Notes

Since that's only Part I and short, I'm hoping to follow swiftly with Part II. Think of this as the appetizer--main dish to come. Hopefully quickly--wish me luck!

Hope you liked it! And much much gratitude to everyone who has left me comments and love. If you're wondering, there's a little update about RL here: http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/post/119578102236/merediths-rl-update

Thank you so much for all your kindness.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Christmas Part II

Warnings: may contain too much fluff and too little plot; reader beware

Chapter Notes

ta-da! the main course...

Vast thanks to everyone who leaves me delicious, nourishing comment cookies to feed the muse. You are wonderful!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony’d had a nice (if kinda awkward) conversation about Brooklyn with Henry on the way over to his daughter’s place. Henry’s grandson—Todd, eight years old—had gone saucer-eyed to see his grandfather being chauffeured in a Rolls Royce by Tony Stark and ran out still only halfway into his coat with his boots unlaced. Tony’d answered Todd’s excited questions about the Avengers (mostly Captain America) and chatted with Mr. and Mrs. Jackson (who were clearly bemused by Tony Stark’s presence, but were waiting to ask Henry about it once he was gone). Tony steadily refused their polite invitations to come inside for a minute. (They had a nice Christmas planned and didn’t need Tony Stark swanning in on it.) They parted with a firm, amiable handshake.

Back at the Tower, Tony headed for the workshop on autopilot, but changed his mind halfway there to reroute for the common room. He found the kitchen counter covered in cooking things: pans and bowls and flour and sugar and stuff.

“What’s all this, Bruce?” Tony asked.

“Christmas cookies,” he said with a little smile. “I know Steve said Chinese was fine tonight, but I thought he would appreciate having something a little more traditional.”

“Can I help?”

“Sure.”

“Tony, I don’t understand how you could burn them!” Bruce cried in dismay. “I wasn’t even gone that long. And, wait? Are those scorch marks? Was it on fire!!?”

“Uh,” Tony began, a little shamefaced, “I maybe got an idea for that efficiency oven for Mrs. Rhodes and tried to multitask, and then spilled the—”

“Never mind,” Bruce cut him off, throwing his hands in the air. He took a deep breath and said more calmly. “Knowing will only make it worse. Just use the cookie cutters on the next set of dough, okay? Then you can decorate some when they come out. And stay on that side of the counter!”

Half an hour later, Clint slunk stealthlessly to the Christmas tree with a set of messily wrapped packages in his arms. Tony felt a wave of relief that he’d planned ahead with presents, even though nobody had actually said that they were exchanging gifts.

“Oh, hey!” Clint said, coming over. “Christmas cookies? Can I help?”

“Definitely!” Tony said enthusiastically as Bruce put another sheet in the oven. “I need to tap out—time to make my calls. Oh, and don’t set them on fire. Bruce doesn’t like that.”

“You’ve reached James Rhodes. You know the drill. Go!” BEEP

“Rhodey!” Tony cried into the voicemail. “Merry Christmas! I know you’re not picking up because you’re busy with your family, but merry Christmas to you and them. Hope you’re having fun! Call me later.”
Tony tossed a tennis ball for Dummy and watched the bot wheel off after it. Somebody had gotten the little guy a Santa hat. (At first, he’d suspected Steve, but on further reflection it seemed more like a Clint thing to do. That guy was unexpectedly into Christmas.) Tony made his next call; she picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Pep! Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Tony.” He could hear the smile in her voice.

“Did your present arrive safe and sound?”

“Yes,” she said, teasingly. “The Wonder Woman armor is ridiculous.”

“But awesome?”

“But awesome.”

“How’s your mom doing?”

“Mum? She’s great—she says ‘hi,’ by the way—but I may murder Aunt Maggie.”

“What’s she done now?”

“Nothing that unexpected,” Pepper snorted. “Did you know I’m not getting any younger? And, I’ll never find a man and have kids unless I accept that men want a sweet subby girl in public even if they’re Switches.”

“Do you need Iron Man?”

“I need a drink.”

Tony’d let Pepper rant her way through a stiff double scotch then, when her familial duties drew her away, hung up and rejoined his team. They had assembled in the living room to drink Natasha’s poinsettia cocktails and wait for Steve. Not that they said they were waiting for Steve, but it was obvious the way they all kept glancing over at the elevator. After all, they wouldn’t start without him. And pretty much everything was ready. Tony had hauled his badly wrapped presents under the tree a few hours ago. (Well, all except Steve’s of course.)

“Why not?” Clint asked. “It’s a Classic!”

“It’s so corny,” Natasha protested.

Tony shook his head. “I can’t believe you want to watch It’s a Wonderful Life.”

“It’s a Classic!” Clint repeated.

“Please could we not,” Bruce asked, sounding pained. “Really. Anything else.”

“Also,” Natasha began, with the air of a woman delivering an indisputable argument, “think of Steve.”

“What about Steve?” Clint asked, frowning. “I bet he’d love it!”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You want to show Steve a movie in which a guardian angel shows a man what the world would be like if he hadn’t been around to live in it, but ends with him being restored to his loved ones and living happily ever after with them?”

“Oh.” Clint said. “Oh, okay. Maybe not.” He paused and took a sip of his poinsettia, then suggested hopefully, “Die Hard?”


The elevator doors opened.

“Steve!”

“Hey, Steve!”

“Merry Christmas!”

“Welcome home,” Tony said, hopping off the couch to greet him. “How was it?”

Steve looked happy but just one notch shy of exhausted. There was a smudge of blue marker on his chin.

“Really good. Uh. Kinda tiring, though.”

“Make you a drink, soldier?” Tony offered with a quirked eyebrow.
Steve gave him a grateful smile. “Please.”

“Coming right up!”

As Tony mixed up another batch of poinsettias—cranberry, vodka, and champagne—the team eagerly encouraged Steve to add still more items to their Park Chop Suey order, extolled the virtues of *Die Hard*, and quizzed Steve about his trip to Magdalene House.

“Cocktails assembled!” Tony called. “Got yours right here, Cap. Everybody else, bring your glasses. Time for a toast.”

They raised their champagne flutes.

“To the Avengers! And merry Christmas!” Tony proposed.

“To the Avengers! And merry Christmas!” the team chorused.

Things were off to a good start.

“I don’t think the math games—what’s it called? The numbers in boxes.”

“Sudoku?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Steve said, “I don’t think the sudokus I got Sarah were nearly hard enough. She was through a third of them before I left. But Jason really took to the colored pencils and was sharing them sweetly with Kevin. Sister Claire set up a drawing space for all the kids with new art supplies. Everybody kept trying to get me to play dodge-ball with them in the gym—and I did, for a little while—but honestly I was happier at the drawing station.”

“Sir? Your order from Park Chop Suey has arrived.” The team cheered. “And Mr. Yuen requests permission to bring his delivery assistant.”

(Huh?)

“Yeah, okay. Sure,” Tony said, a little bemused. “Send them on up.”

The elevator doors opened on Tony Yuen—who had wisely ditched the teenage scraggle beard since last Tony saw him—and a pretty girl with bright green eyes, sprinkled freckles, and curly red hair that screamed ‘poster child for Irish-American.’ They were both carrying a large bag of delivery food in each hand.

“Hey, Tony!” Tony Y called cheerfully, heading for the kitchen counter. “Hi, Steve! Hi, Avengers!”

“Hey, Tony!” Tony called, heading for the kitchen. The others waved and offered a chorus of hellos.

“We have your order right here,” the girl said, clearly aiming for professionalism but looking more than a little star-struck. She glanced back and forth between Tony Y. and the Avengers a few times.

“Here, let me give you a hand,” Steve said smiling at them both. “How have you been, Tony? How’s school?”

Tony Y. grinned. “This semester’s grades were so good even Grandpa couldn’t be disappointed.”

Tony seemed suddenly to remember himself. “Uh, Steve? May I--? Uh. I’d like to introduce Ms. Katherine O’Conner. Katie, this is Captain Steve Rogers.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Ms. O’Conner,” Steve said shaking her hand.

“Katie, please,” she said, blushing bright Irish red.

“Steve,” he said warmly. “Are you at school with Tony?”

While Steve made amiable small talk with Katie and the other Avengers finished their debate about Bruce Willis, Tony started getting out plates and forks and chopsticks.

When Tony reached into one of the bags, rooting around for a spring roll, though, it drew a cry of protest.

“Hey!” Tony Y. said indignantly. “You didn’t give me a sentence yet!”

Tony grinned—he’d been practicing—and rattled off: “Gāngtiě xiá zuì bàng le!”*

“All right,” Tony Y. said grudgingly. “Should have known you’d nail that one.”

“You’re both looking very smart this evening,” Steve was saying to Katie.

Katie blushed even more; Tony Y. threw his shoulders back a little and announced, putting his
arm around her, “I’m having Christmas dinner with the O’Conner’s. Just wanted to make this del—er, one last delivery. Now we’re off for the night.”

Tony nearly laughed. (“Delivery assistant” my ass.)

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Katie,” Steve said, taking her hand again. “Merry Christmas.”

“Oh! And merry Christmas to you! All of you! Have a wonderful dinner.”

They all called out good byes and merry Christmas’s and the teenagers took their leave. In the elevator, before the doors closed, Tony saw Katie throw her arms around Tony Y’s neck while he stared at the wall with a big dopey grin.

“They seem so sweet together,” Steve said with a little smile as he dug out the serving spoons.

“They do, don’t they?” Tony agreed. They stood smiling at each other for a moment. Tony blinked, then turned and called, “Okay, Avengers! Come and get it!”

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“So that’s why you keep saying ‘yippe ki-yay—’ Uh. And so on.”

“It’s yippie ki-yay, mother fuckers, Steve,” Clint said with a huge grin.

“Cap doesn’t like that kind of language,” Nat scolded Clint with a teasing glance to Steve, who looked a little embarrassed.

“I did really enjoy the movie,” Steve insisted.

“Of course you did! It’s a classic!” Tony said. He turned to Bruce. “Do you want to finish off the chow mein? I know it’s a favorite of yours.”

Bruce laid a hand on his stomach. “I don’t think I could eat another bite. Unless I’m willing to miss out on the you know.”

“Oh! Speaking of you know— is it time?” Clint cut in.

Everybody done with dinner?” Bruce asked. They nodded. “Then I think it’s time.”

Steve was looking between Clint and Bruce, bewildered. “You know?” he asked.

Natasha chuckled as Bruce went to get the beautifully arranged tray of cookies and presented it to Steve.

“The boys baked you cookies,” Nat said, clearly amused. “All afternoon. Careful though! Don’t eat any that Tony made!”

“Hey!” Tony squawked. “We threw out the ones that caught fire!”

“Some of them caught fire?” Steve said with a look of concern, then shook himself and said, “Well, these look wonderful! Thank you.”

“Oh, and there’s eggnog,” Bruce offered, heading to the kitchen.

“Gosh. You went to all this trouble.” Steve was beaming at them. “Thank you so much.”

Something about Bruce’s smile was . . . off. Tony hopped up and followed him. When he didn’t know anybody was looking, Bruce looked sad.

“Need a hand?” Tony asked.

“Sure, Tony.” Bruce summoned a smile.

(Shit. What do I say?)

“Hey, Bruce?” Tony said, softly.

“Yeah?”

“That letter you were working on . . . Uh, did you ever send it?”

Bruce’s expression went pinched; his hand tightened on the ladle. “No.”

Tony swallowed. “But, maybe after we go to the ranch, if everything goes well, maybe then you could? Right?”

“Maybe.” He paused. “Maybe if it went very well.”

“It’s gonna go great. And we can go sooner, so we can get started,” Tony said. “I can make a few calls and—”
"No, it’s fine. We’re going soon enough," Bruce shook his head. "Besides, not much point flying there and back for the gala then back again for the big meeting with SHIELD." He grimaced. "And I have a feeling they scheduled that to be before the grand experiment on purpose."

"It’s gonna work," Tony said. "We’re a team now. Really." Tony bumped his shoulder into Bruce’s and added, "I mean, look at us! We baked cookies together for fuck’s sake!"

Bruce laughed. "Thanks, Tony."

"What’s the hold up?!" Clint called from the tree where he’d gathered the others.

"You’re like a toddler!" Natasha said. "A drunken toddler."

"And about to get drunker!" Tony called. "This is heavy on the rum."

As the team served themselves little plates of star and tree shaped cookies, Clint nudged four rectangular packages out from under the tree with his foot.

"So, hey, maybe now’s a good time for these," Clint said, attempting casual but failing even to Tony’s ears.

"Oh, I didn’t think we were—" Bruce faltered. "And I don’t actually celebrate Christmas. Uh-- I made cookies?"

"That’s cool," Clint said. "No worries. I mean, these are no big deal."

"You got us presents?" Steve asked, looking torn between pleasure and dismay.

"Look, it’s fine if nobody else did," Clint said, looking a little embarrassed. "I just had these little things and—"

"Don’t worry, Legolas!" Tony cut in. "I got you something. And it’s awesome."

"Yeah?" Clint looked pleased. "Sweet."

"And I’ll give you a present on January 7th," Natasha promised. "Nobody gets Christmas presents early from me."

Steve laughed.

(Huh?)


They’d all taken their seats around the tree and Clint was fussing over which package to give out first.

("Okay, open that one from Mom first, then this one. No, wait. This one! That one over there— that one’s last. Best for last. Okay, kiddo! Go!")

Tony collected his oddly assorted packages from under the tree. As he did so, he caught sight of the little rocking horse ornament once more. He smiled and fiddled absently with the bows he’d glued to his teammates’ presents.

("Howard, I thought we agreed to wait until he turned six!")

"No harm starting him off just a little early. And look! These tools were designed for kids, none of them have sharp edges—I checked—and Tony’s got really steady hands, don’t you kiddo?"

Tony bounced with excitement. "Now can I come to the WORKSHOP?!?"

"Er, not quite yet. Gotta be a little older, buddy. See that? Mom’s making her scary face.")

"Actually," Clint declared, "you might as well all go at the same time. They’re all pretty much the same. Anyway, merry Christmas. It’s nothing much."

Tony ripped the wrapping paper with gusto while around him Nat, Bruce, and Steve opened their packages more gingerly.

Inside, there was a cheap plastic photo frame—the kind designed for collages and that always came with a generic sample page full of weddings, and children, and anniversaries. This frame was filled with photos taken at the Tower: Pepper and Tony lounging on the couch at Thanksgiving; Rhodey and Tony laughing and peeling potatoes; Mrs. Rhodes and Steve examining the turkey; Natasha knitting on the couch next to Bruce reading a book; Bruce and Tony looking at schematics at the kitchen counter; Steve and Tony smiling and hanging Christmas tree ornaments side by side. There was even a little picture of Dummy in his Santa’s hat.

"Clint," Steve said, almost reverently, "They’re beautiful."
Tony looked up; everyone had a photo collage, but with slightly different photos.

“Seriously, it’s nothing.” Clint protested, shrugging.

Natasha shook her head with a smile, then leaned over to kiss him on the cheek.

“Thank you, Clint,” Bruce said. The smile on his face managed to reach his eyes for once.

“Hey, man,” Tony said, “Open yours now!”

Tony set his frame down very carefully, even though he knew the plastic covering wasn’t breakable, and then slid a narrow box over to Clint. Clint tore at the wrapping paper with glee, tossed the lid aside, and discarded the layers of tissue paper.

“Oh, hey,” Clint said, clearly trying to mask his disappointment. “Green Arrow. ‘Cause I’m an archer, right? Cool. I get it. And I do really like comics, like we were talking about. Thanks, Tony.” Clint smiled, but it seemed a little sad. “Like I said, I used to try and collect Spider Man as a kid, whenever I could, but yeah. Anyway. Good idea to give some DC a try for once, right? Thanks, Tony.”

Tony had expected Clint to call him a jerk or laugh or somehow know it was a gag—his polite disappointment made Tony’s stomach twist. As if Clint didn’t expect Tony to remember that he’d collected Spiderman and totally despised DC.

“Dude, I’m just messing with you,” Tony said, trying to keep the tone light. “Look underneath.” Confused, Clint set aside the Green Arrow Tony had laid on top. His eyes went wide.

“Holy shit! ‘The Punisher’? Tony, wow!” He turned to the others and explained with excitement, as he wiped his fingers on his shirt, “It’s a really rare one—1974 and this one’s in great condition too! Where did you—?” As Clint lifted it out of the box, he caught sight of the one beneath and fell silent, mouth slightly agape. “Amazing Fantasy: Introducing Spider Man? You’ve gotta be kidding— How did you even—? Oh wow!”

“Is that actually the first issue of Spider Man ever?” Bruce asked.

Tony gave a bit of a nod and a shrug.

“Thank you, Tony,” Clint said, more earnest than Tony’d ever seen him. “This is really amazing.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “I know how much you’ve been looking forward to the latest Green Arrow. Just threw in that old Marvel crap as filler.”

“Asshole,” Clint said affectionately. Tony laughed.

“I really had you there for a minute.”

Clint nodded. “Asshole,” he repeated.

Tony just grinned and turned to the others, “So—who’s up next? How about you, Bruce? Yep. Here we go!”

Tony slid a box across the floor.

“Gosh,” Steve said, as he watched Bruce pull off the bow. “I wish I’d realized we were exchanging gifts. I’m so sorry I didn’t—”

“What are you talking about?” Tony said. “You got me the Starship Enterprise.”

“That wasn’t a Christmas present! It just made me think of you.”

Tony shrugged. “That’s even better.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Bruce said, smiling at him with something akin to relief after reading the card.

“What did you get?” Clint asked, tearing his eyes away from “The Punisher.”

“Rare teas,” Bruce said, holding up one of the neat little packets. “Including ‘Iron Goddess of Mercy’ and ‘Monkey Picked Oolang.’ Really wonderful.”

Bruce didn’t tell the others what else Tony’d gotten him, and Tony was just as glad. He wouldn’t even have told Bruce, except that after the quake Bruce had been so worried about the village where he’d lived in Nepal; Tony wanted him to know they were okay—well, as okay as money could make them—and everything was being rebuilt in his village.

“Thank you, Tony,” Bruce said again. Tony shrugged and handed an envelope and a small box to Natasha: season tickets to the ballet and a small emerald pendant. (One of his mother’s more modest pieces.)

“It’s beautiful.” Natasha held up the pendant. “To wear to the ballet?”
“If you like,” Tony said. “Wear it wherever you want. I just thought it would suit you.”

“Thank you, kotyonok.” Natasha leaned down to kiss him on the cheek. She smelled of spruce and bergamot, something rich and spicy.

“You’re welcome. No biggie,” Tony said, trying to shrug it off. He turned with an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, Steve,” Tony said, “you have to wait a little longer for yours. Doesn’t exactly fit under the tree. Now, who wants more eggnog?”

“Me!” Clint said, offering Tony his empty mug.

Tony hopped up; Steve followed.

“Tony,” Steve said softly, “I think I already know what my present is.”

“You do?”

(Shit! Did he get a glimpse of it in the garage when he came home?)

“I thought you might be embarrassed if I said something in front of the others, but Mother Superior thanked me,” Steve said, eyes bright. “She said there was an anonymous donation of five million dollars for Magdalene House—enough to fix the roof, redo the insulation for the dormitories, and hire all the additional staff they’ve been needing. Even enough left over to start a scholarship fund for the older kids. She suspected my influence and thanked me, but it was all you, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Tony fibbed. “It’s an anonymous donation, right? Could be anyone, really.”

“It could be,” Steve agreed softly, “But it wasn’t.”

Steve was smiling. He laid a hand very gently on Tony’s arm and added, “It was the best gift you could ever give me, and you don’t even want credit, do you?”

Tony shrugged and stepped aside to refill Clint’s mug.

“That wasn’t your present; your present’s in the garage,” Tony said.

“The garage?” Steve asked, looking bemused.

“Yep! But first, let’s drink some more eggnog with the team. I’ll take you down later.”

“We’re out of eggnog and mulled wine, but there’s the rest of my liquor cabinet at our disposal,” Tony offered.

Bruce had gone to bed a few hours ago, but the rest of the team had stayed up drinking around the Christmas tree.

“It’s late,” Natasha said, shaking her head. “Time for bed.”

“Hey, how about some Star Trek?” Tony suggested. Steve nodded.

“Ugh,” Clint said. “Okay, if you two are going to nerd out over retro sci-fi, I’m calling it a night.”

“Oh, we don’t have to,” Steve said, eager to be inclusive.

“Nah, it’s late. And I’ve got sweet new comics to reread obsessively in bed.”

“Good night! Merry Christmas!”

“Yeah, good night, guys,” Clint said, gathering his comics with great care. “And Tony? Thanks again. Really, man.”

The elevator doors closed on Clint and Natasha.


“Nope, not that I know of, but there are some good ones left—don’t worry. I’ll pick something upbeat,” Tony promised, then said, casually, “Oh, hey, but before we get settled with Star Trek, why don’t you come down and open your present?”

“If you like,” Steve said after a moment’s hesitation. “I feel terrible that I don’t have anything for you though.”

“Pfft,” Tony said, waving it away. “I already told you—it’s fine. And you got me the Starship Enterprise! And gave me drawings of Dummy. Really, what more could a guy ask for? Now,
come on! Chop chop! Your present awaits.”

Steve followed Tony to the elevator. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Maybe,” Steve said, “if you wanted, I could draw something else for you. Like on a commission —whatever you want.”

“I’d like that,” Tony said. (He had a feeling anything else would seem like rejection to Steve; he was big on reciprocity.)

“Good.” Steve said, seeming reassured. “Just let me know what you’d like.”

The elevator doors opened.

“But first,” Tony said, beckoning Steve to the side. “Your present!”

Tony grabbed the dust cloth and drew it back with a flourish. “Ta-da!”

“Oh wow,” Steve said, gazing at the motorcycle with what looked like surprised nostalgia, maybe edged with sorrow? “A Norton Dominator? It’s like my old bike.”

“Yep! That was the idea,” Tony said, not quite with the tone of a grand announcement he’d been aiming for. But, then, Steve wasn’t exactly showing the rapturous delight Tony’d imagined for this moment.

“I can’t believe you found one,” Steve said, shaking his head and looking at the sleek machine. “I figured a bike like this would be . . . obsolete now. Scrap.”

(Shit!) That was definitely sorrow; Steve’s whole body seemed to deflate at the word obsolete.

“Does it even run?” he asked turning to Tony.

“Does it even run!” Tony repeated, sputtering with mock offense. “Would I give you a decorative motorcycle? Of course she runs! And, not that she wasn’t a great little bike back in the day, but a genius engineer can definitely teach an old dog new tricks. Wanna take her for a spin? State of the art tech in old fashioned style.”


“Of course I did! You don’t actually think I’d let somebody else—some lesser engineer!—work on your bike do you?”

And, for some reason, that drew a little smile from Steve. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“You think somebody else could have done this? Just look at her!” Tony said, waving his hands dramatically. “She’ll purr at 155 on an open road. I was gonna give her 300 horsepower, but then technically she’d be illegal on public roads and I figured you’d frown on that; so she’s only got 250.” Steve whistled, low and impressed. Tony pointed to the engine and launched into an excited (if nervous) babble about shock absorption, LHT breaking technology, her turning radius and maneuverability.

As he rambled, Steve’s smile grew warmer and wider, chasing the sad shadows from his face, until he finally laid a hand on Tony’s arm. Tony fell abruptly silent.

“You did all that for me?” Steve asked.

“Uh, yes?”

(What is this, a trick question?)

“Thank you. Thank you, Tony.” Steve glanced at the bike, then back to Tony and licked his lips. “She’s beautiful.”

“You’re, uh—” (It’s like there are Beams of Earnestness shooting from Steve’s bright blue eyes, like Superman, only--) Tony lost his train of thought for a second. “Uh, you’re welcome?”

They stared at each other for a few moments.

(Awkward. It was getting awkward, right? Shit. Say something. Come on, say something, stupid.)

Steve swallowed and turned a little to look at the bike and run his fingers across the smooth leather seat. He turned back to Tony with a boyish grin: “You said something about taking her for a spin?”

“Yeah, go for it!”

“You coming too?” Steve asked, swinging a leg over the bike and testing the weight.

“Me?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “Only seems fair.”
“I’m not really dressed for a motorcycle ride at night in December.”

Steve shrugged. “Me neither, but your garage is immense. Figured I’d just drive her around, slow and easy, for a few minutes to get a feel. Can get my leathers and take her out proper tomorrow if the weather’s decent.”

Steve turned the key and she purred to life.

“Oh, wow. You weren’t kidding about the purring.”

“Figured you’d need her quiet if we were taking her on a mission.”

“Good thinking.” Steve revved the engine and grinned. “So, you coming?”

Tony swallowed. The garage felt too warm.

Tony gave a hesitant little nod and swung his leg over the bike; he reached back for the rear brace before remembering (duh, stupid) this model didn’t have one.

“Hang on tight,” Steve said over his shoulder with a grin.

Tony scooted closer, until his chest was flush with Steve’s massive back. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist.

Steve kicked off.

“Here we go!”

“Tony? Knock knock?” Steve called from the doorway to the workshop the next day.

“Come on in!”

Tony grabbed a rag and made a vague attempt to wipe his hands, leaving a dark grease stain on it. He’d been working on the training bots again, refining their interior engines.

“Hi,” Steve said, smiling.

“Hi.”

“Uh. So, the weather’s supposed to be decent today.” Steve shoved his hands into his pockets. “So I thought maybe it would be a good time to take the Dominator out for a ride. You busy?”

Tony’s eyes flicked over to the robot open on his workbench, like a patient on an operating table.

“Well, kinda busy,” Tony said, gesturing.

“Oh sure! Of course,” Steve said with a nod, “I mean, it doesn’t have to be right this minute. Maybe a little later?”

“I dunno,” Tony said. “This is probably gonna take me quite a while, Cap.”

“Oh. Okay. Some other time then?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.” Tony picked up a wrench. “But you should take her out. Give me a full report—I wanna know how she rides.”

“Right. I’ll do that. And, uh, you should let me know what you might like me to draw.”

“Right.”

“Right. Okay. Well, I’d better leave you to it.”

“Okay. Later!”

“Yeah. Later.”

Steve seemed disappointed as he left the workshop. Tony almost called out after him—he hated to disappoint Steve—but he hadn’t worked on the training bots in ages and really he was terribly busy. He’d already spent lots of time on all the Christmas stuff. He was absurdly behind with his projects. The training bots. The latest StarkTech upgrades. A new round of arrows for Clint. Lots of stuff really. He couldn’t just hop on the back of Steve’s bike and—

“AC/DC, JARVIS! And pump it. Time to finish these bots!”

When Tony finally surfaced, there were twelve training bots ready to take out to the ranch. He’d really been in the groove and—once all the details had been worked out—it hadn’t actually taken that long to put the finishing touches on all the old skeletons. It was soothing, pleasant work. He
hadn’t gotten to the Stark Industries tech yet, but there was lots of time. Besides, who could say—maybe R&D would actually come up with a worthwhile upgrade on their own this quarter. (Anything’s possible. In theory.)

Steve had brought him left over Park Chop Suey once—or maybe twice? He’d kinda lost track—but now he was ravenous. Tony took the elevator up to the common floor.

“Or Christine in statistics; she’d be thrilled to go,” Natasha was saying to Steve as Tony turned the corner into the kitchen. They were sitting together at the formal dining table, a tea pot and teacups between them. Steve shook his head emphatically.

“Okay,” Natasha continued. “Too modern with the lip piercing? How about Jenny from accounting. She’s nice, she’s pretty, and I get the impression she’s kinda old fashioned too.”

Tony felt a sudden rush of . . . something. Something sharp and unpleasant and suspiciously like jealousy. (But it couldn’t be jealousy, because that was ridiculous. There was nothing to be jealous over!)

Tony sauntered in, saying, “I’m hurt, hurt, Steve that you’d go to Natasha for a date instead of coming to me.”

Steve looked up at him, eyes wide and expression shocked.

(Huh? Oh. Oh, Shit!)

“To set you up with a date,” Tony clarified. “I’m a way better person to set you up. I know all the best people!” The shock faded from Steve’s face, and his brow creased. He looked away.

Tony continued, “My metaphorical rolodex, oh wait—have you seen one of those yet? They held these little index cards for contact info in the eighties and, anyway-- My, you know, little black book, is ten times the size of Natasha’s. So, just set some basic parameters and I’ll do a way better job finding you a date. Is it for the gala?”

“Nobody is setting me up,” Steve said firmly. “Not for the gala or anything else.” He glared at Nat before turning back to Tony. “Natasha’s been trying and won’t let it go, even when I said I’m not interested.”

“Tsk tsk, Agent Romanov. I’m very disappointed in you,” Tony said, “No means no.”

She rolled her eyes at him then turned back to Steve as she stood up. “If you change your mind, let me know. I’ll be in the gym.” She paused, then added with a little smile, “And, honestly, Steve—I really do think it would help.”

With that Natasha gracefully took her exit, teacup and saucer in hand.

“Help?” Tony asked, puzzled.

Steve sighed. “I told Nat how much I’ve been dreading the next gala. She thinks I’d be more comfortable at big events if I had somebody ‘modern’ at my side to help me navigate. And to discourage, um . . . admirers.”

Tony smiled at the sight of Steve’s ears turning pink with embarrassment.

“It’s not a terrible idea, you know,” Tony admitted, even as his gut churned uneasily.

Steve frowned. “I’m not gonna use some poor sub as a human shield.”

Tony snorted. “You could have a battalion of eager volunteers for the job who wouldn’t mind.”

“I’d mind.” Steve shook his head. “I’m not gonna ask someone on a date if I don’t mean it. And I couldn’t actually—I mean, I’m not —” Steve looked away again.

There was something tense and heavy in the air. Tony tried to dispel it with his usual flippancy.

“Yeah, well,” Tony agreed, jokingly, ‘dating basically blows, but it’s still the necessary first step for Big Church Wedding, White Picket Fence, and Bouncing All American Babies, so you’ll have to suffer through it eventually.”

“What?” Steve’s head snapped back over to Tony, frowning and unamused. “Fence? Babies? What are you talking about?”

Tony waved his hands. “You know, apple pie and the all American dream. Kids. Suburbs.” Tony was fumbling and he hated it. His voice turned exasperated without meaning to. “Isn’t that what everybody wanted back in the day?”

“I guess lots of people did, but I never expected that.” Steve looked sad. “I mean, I hoped for some of it but . . . I wasn’t exactly . . .” He shrugged and shook his head again, then fell silent, looking down at his hands folded on the table. There was something distant and melancholy in the gesture; Tony hated it.
Tony licked his lips and took a breath. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Steve gave a half-hearted smile. “I shouldn’t.”

“No, really. Tell me.”

“Tony,” Steve said, shaking his head with a rueful smile. “You don’t want to hear about that.”

“Actually, I do,” Tony assured him, taking a seat. “I really do. Tell me?”

Tony’s heart started to pick up the pace.

Steve’s reluctance was obvious, some sort of inward battle taking place, but after a few moments he took out his wallet and handed Tony a small, very old black and white photograph that had been folded inside. It was a picture of Steve, thin face, tiny shoulders, sunken chest. Steve before the serum.

“That’s me,” Steve said, gesturing to the photo. “I keep it to remember where I came from. Who I really am, you know? Well,” he shook his head, “you can see, I wasn’t exactly the sort of Dominant people were looking for back then. Or now either, I guess.”

“But I wasn’t just small—I had health problems. Sometimes they made it hard to hold a job. I couldn’t have provided for a spouse, let alone children, so I figured it was just as well I always fancied fellas more than ladies.”

“I never wanted a wife and kids. Never expected I’d find a husband either, but—” He looked wistful, turning his gaze away, expression distant. “But when I hoped, I hoped for a special fella. Smart, strong, self-sufficient. Somebody who wouldn’t have wanted to stay home, even if I coulda supported him; somebody who liked having a career and wouldn’t see it as a burden. Somebody fierce and independent, who’d been glad I wasn’t the kind of Dom who’d insist he quit if we got married.” Steve’s voice was soft, almost reverent, “Somebody who’d let me take care of him, but wouldn’t need me to.”

Tony’s heart was pounding in his chest. He stared at Steve, who was looking away with unfocused eyes, as if at something in his distant imagination. After a few moments, Steve gave a little sigh as if coming back to himself.

“Sorry,” he said abruptly, looking back at Tony. “I didn’t mean to go on and on.” He grimaced, embarrassed and apologetic. “Or talk about that. To you.”

“No,” Tony said, mouth dry. “I asked.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, looking away again. He was having trouble meeting Tony’s eyes.

“Anyway,” Steve said, standing abruptly. “I’m so sorry. I lost track of time. I—I’d better go. There are some errands I’ve been putting off.”

With that, Steve beat a hasty retreat, leaving Tony alone in the living room, staring at the yellowing photograph.

Chapter End Notes

So, the Chinese is the phrase Tony Y taught him back in chapter 27 and means “Iron Man rocks.” (Also the chapter where Tony Y said his girlfriend would be SO jealous he met Captain America... :-)

Ta-da! Extra long chapter is extra long (and moderately speedy)!!! I hope you like it. Do please cheer me on / let me know your favorite bits if you have time and inclination. :-)

Thank you all for the kindness and love!

UPDATE: Because I’m presenting at an international conference soon (!!!) and then going on a hiking trip, there won’t be an update until the first week of July at the soonest. Please don’t worry! Story in NO RISK of being abandoned, but I won’t be around until July. See you then!
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, STEVE!!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It only took Tony four hours to get to Malibu in the suit. Initially he was just out for a fly to clear his head, but the thought struck him after about twenty minutes looping around the Statue of Liberty that he hadn’t checked on the LA office in a long time. And Pepper would probably appreciate a friend after what sounded like a challenging Christmas. And he’d left some projects in the Malibu workshop. And the weather would be fantastic; no snow or ice in Malibu.

(Steve hates the cold. Maybe he should take Steve to—)

Tony swallowed.

The picture of Steve—Steve before the serum, the picture Steve had abandoned after their . . . chat—was tucked away in Tony’s wallet for safekeeping. He’d give it back to Steve soon, but he couldn’t just leave it lying around on the table, could he? It seemed private. So he’d put it in his wallet. For safekeeping.

Tony banked sharply and flew in a little loop. Flying was good for thinking. Or for not thinking. Whatever he needed in the moment, flying was good. Flying was always good.

Somewhere over Cincinnati, Tony remembered to send the team a message through JARVIS, to let them know he was on a quick trip to visit Pepper and the LA headquarters, and that he’d be back in time for the gala. He started sending a message to Pepper too, then aborted it—she was always so much fun to surprise.

When he arrived it was late (or, depending on one’s perspective, early) so he didn’t call Pep, he just headed straight for the workshop. He’d left a bunch of silly little side projects lying around and figured they’d make a good distraction. (Well, okay, a full color e-ink touch screen was far from silly, but it was hardly inter-dimensional defense, was it?) A break from Avengers engineering might be good though. Just for a little while.

(I’m not gonna ask someone on a date if I don’t mean it.)

Tony walked out of the armor, glad the landing pad in Malibu was still up and running. It wasn’t the same, showing up in a workshop without the bots to greet him, but there were pentalobe screwdrivers, soldering irons, and take one of the new e-ink display. Those were good company. And he’d see Pepper soon too. It would be good.

(. . . when I hoped, I hoped for this special fella. Smart, strong, self-sufficient . . .)

Tony rolled up his sleeves and rummaged around in the toolbox under the workbench for a few minutes before calling up his first round of schematics. The failed prototype Stark Screen Select—S3? Stark Something . . . ok, name needed work . . . -- was still on his bench, its dissected interior visible under a plastic sheet Pepper had no doubt placed there to protect it from dust. (Darling Pepper!) Tony whisked the cover off with a flourish and stared down at the mess of chips, processors, and circuits.

(Somebody who’d let me take care of him, but wouldn’t need me to.)

Tony swallowed.

Coffee. He needed coffee. Pepper better not have moved his workshop stash.

(Yeah. After coffee he’d . . . Yeah.)

Tony nodded with satisfaction. (Okay. The problem was balancing processing speed and energy expenditures. If he wanted a single charge to last twelve hours then—)

“Don’t move! Put your hands up—slowly!”

Tony obeyed as directed, and turned with a grin saying, “Hey, Pep!”

His jaw dropped open at the sight before him: Pepper was wearing her Wonder Woman armor with nothing over it and pointing an old Stark Industries Glock 17 at his head, her hands perfectly steady.
"I ought to shoot you for your stupidity," Pepper said, lowering the gun to point safely at the floor. "I thought you were some criminal here to steal Tony’s tech. I could have killed you."

"But you didn’t," Tony said, unperturbed. "And may I just add how incredibly lucky I feel to see you in your Wonder Woman outfit holding a gun? I’m more than a little turned on right now. Don’t let word get out—you’ll have a string of switches and subs breaking in, willing to risk death for the sight of you like this."

Pepper glared and smoothly pulled the cartridge from the Glock. Tony blinked.

"It was loaded?"

"Of course it was loaded!"

"Huh." Tony shouldn’t have been surprised, but he was. "Never realized that you had these skills."

"Tony," she said, obviously vexed, "when I started at Stark Industries, we manufactured weapons. Of course I know how to handle a gun."

(Oh. Okay, right.)

Pep pressed a finger to the bluetooth Tony now noticed in her ear and said, "Yes, stand down and call off the dogs, Happy. No security team required. It’s just Tony being a complete and utter idiot." A pause. "Yes, I’ll tell him you said so. Talk to you tomorrow." She shook her head at Tony. "Happy says it would serve you right if I’d shot you."

Tony shrugged.

(But, yeah, okay—after some of the shit they’d all been through, maybe not a good surprise for Pep…)

"So, tell me," Tony said. "Do you sleep in the Wonder Woman armor? Because I’ll be flattered if you do."

Pep rolled her eyes and pointed up the stairs to the main house.

"Come on—I’ll make us coffee," she said. "And, no, of course I don’t sleep in the armor. I woke up wanting a glass of water. When I went into the hall, I was certain I heard an intruder in the workshop but JARVIS just said, ‘I regret I am unable to answer your question, ma’am.’"

"J! Why would you do that?"

A recording played from the ceiling, Tony’s own voice: "Forget the email, JARVIS. We’re gonna surprise Pep! Top Secret! ‘Surprise Party Protocol 10’ levels of surprise."

"Oh." Tony gave Pep a sheepish smile.

Pepper raised one eyebrow. "You see why I was concerned? Anyone who could get past your security protocols would have to be dangerous. It only took two minutes to put on the suit—the added protection seemed wise. At least until my SWAT team arrived."

Pepper reached up onto the high shelf—the one Tony couldn’t touch without a stepstool, damn it—to take down the coffee.

"So," Pepper said, filling the carafe with water. "What brings you to my doorstep in the middle of the night, unannounced?"

"I’m not feeling the love here, Pep. And anyway, it’s really my doorstep."

"You gave me this house," Pepper said, handing him a mug. "It’s rude to keep pretending it’s yours."

"Well, the workshop is still mine. Technically."

"Technically. Now, stop deflecting and answer the question."

"It’s cold in New York! Besides, aren’t you happy to see me? I thought you could use a friend—you know, after Aunt Maggie and all."

"Uh-huh." Pepper was making her unimpressed face. The coffee maker steamed and whirred.

"So you’re not happy to see me?" Tony said with a pout. "I’m hurt."

Pepper rolled her eyes and leaned down to kiss him on the cheek. "Of course I’m happy to see you."

"Great! I thought maybe tonight we could hit up one of the swanky clubs you like!"

"You mean one of the swanky clubs you like."
“Potato, pah-ta-to.”

Pepper poured them each a mug of strong aromatic coffee. They sipped it quietly for a few moments.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Pepper was giving him a worried look.

“Yes! Really. Things are great.” Tony shrugged. “Just wanted a change of scene.”

“Okay.” Pepper pursed her lips. “But if you did want to talk . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. Got it.” Tony took another sip of coffee. “So, wanna hear about Stark Industries’ next must-have product?”

Pepper grinned.

“Always.”

The club was exactly what one would expect of LA: chic, minimalist, dim and crowded, populated by the wealthy and fashionable or the young and beautiful. (Tony was no doubt the oldest sub the bouncers had let through the door. But, hey, he was Tony Stark.) He and Pep breezed in through the VIP entrance.

When Pepper, who wouldn’t stop giving him these annoying little looks, saw Mallory across the club, Tony’d shooed her off to say ‘hi.’ Within moments, Tony had settled into one of the lavish corner booths, ordered a magnum of Dom, and was holding court over posers, gold-diggers, and the occasional sincere fan.

“Oh, wow! I’m Kendrick. I can’t believe I get to meet you! You’re seriously my hero. Wow! Oh wow. Oh, I’m Kendrick by the way—no, wait, I already said that. Sorry. Uh . . .”

“Your photos don’t do you justice. And I’ve seen all your photos.”

“No, seriously, I like admire you sooooo much. Like as a fellow sub. I really hope I look that good when I hit your age. Really, you look amazing! Like, for a forty year old.”

“May I buy you a drink? It would be an honor to buy a drink for Tony Stark.”

“I’d be happy to give you more details about our start up, but maybe we could talk someplace a little more . . . private? I’m sure you’d find it fascinating.”

(How had he ever found this shit fun?)

When Tony excused himself to use the bathroom, turning down four offers to ‘escort him’, he took his opportunity to blend back into the crowd.

(What was he even doing here?)

“Mr. Stark, if I may?” a deep voice said beside him.

(So much for blending in.)

When Tony turned, he found himself looking up at another Hollywood handsome doppelganger. Like what’s his name. That Agent.

Tony took a sip of his drink and nodded to the stranger.

(Harris! That was his name.)

“I have a proposition for a pleasant way to spend the evening—I promise you won’t regret it—but first, I feel I should ask,” his expression had the look of a man ready to laugh at his own joke, “you’re not really dating Captain America, are you? 'Cause I’ve taken jiu-jitsu and taekwondo and can hold my own in a fight, but even I wouldn’t want to risk the wrath of a jealous Captain America.”

Tony’s guts clenched. He fixed the Dom with his coldest most contemptuous look, raked his eyes up and down the man’s body, then walked away without a word.

(Make of it what you will, asshole.)

Across the room Tony saw a flash of bright blond hair, broad shoulders, and pale skin. But, no, of course that man was a stranger. Tony wandered closer and with every step the differences became more apparent: he had the air of a perpetual body-builder, his neck fully the width of his jaw; his voice was loud as he spoke to a little cluster of subs, his tone thick with the braying machismo Tony’d always deplored. His eyes were dull.

“Having fun?” Pepper asked, her smile a little bemused and rapidly trending towards a frown as she looked at him.
“Let’s get out of here.”

“Wanna get a midnight burrito?” Pep asked with a smile.

Tony smiled back. “You read my mind.”

Tony worked on the new color e-ink displays. Pepper texted him reminders to eat and, when he didn’t answer, ordered delivery for him from that sushi place on Santa Monica he loved. It was good. He was making progress.

And when his ridiculous craving for a hot dog got too intense to be ignored, he called Happy; they went to Big Doggy and ate foot longs on the pier, talking about nothing much (after Hap yelled at him for the whole unannounced visit thing). Happy gave him three crushing hugs before dropping him back at the workshop.

He worked hard on the e-ink displays. It was good. And, well, if he was a little distracted sometimes there was nobody there (sitting on his couch, drawing quietly, reading a paper book) to notice.

Tony bit his lip and frowned at the schematics. He couldn’t get the capacitive touch screen and the ink display’s negative charge particles to function in such close proximity. Maybe if--

His phone rang. Tony was about to toss it across the workshop when he saw the caller. A little break would be good for him, but he hit ‘answer’ a little harder than necessary all the same.

“Hey, Tones! You doin’ ok?”

Tony’s glare was lost on the phone.

“I’m starting to resent the frequency with which this question is asked of me, you know.”

“That’s not much of an answer, man,” Rhodey said.

“I’m fine. In fact, I’m great!”

“Okaaaay,” Rhodey said, syllables drawn out. “So you wanna tell me why I had Captain America on the phone wanting to know if you’re okay and asking me to check on you?”

Tony’s stomach gave a little flop.

“Dunno,” Tony said, with a shrug, then added, “Cap’s a worrier. You know that.”


“Yep!” Tony said, with a shrug, then added, “Pep needed cheering up.”

“Did she really?”

“Yep.”

“All right then.”

“Yeah.”

The line was silent for a moment, then Rhodey said expansively, “Soooo what’s this I hear about Christmas celebrations in Stark Tower? Courtesy of one Tony Stark, atheist?”

“It’s Avengers Tower now; and it was for the Avengers, not for the Stark.”

“Mmmm-hmmm.” Tony could practically hear Rhodey’s smirk. “You sure it wasn’t for the Steve.”

“Well, maybe, but could you say no to Captain America making puppy dog eyes?”

Rhodey snorted. “Probably not.”

“Well, there you go.” Tony toyed with his wrench. “Besides, it wasn’t a big Christmas thing. Mostly Steve was taking presents to an orphanage and volunteering and stuff.”

“Of course he was,” Rhodey said with a laugh.

Tony smiled, a little relieved. He didn’t want to hurt Rhodey’s feelings.

“Oh, hey, that reminds me,” Rhodey said. “Did you get mom’s message? She wants an armchair.”
Tony perked up. Armchairs could be extravagant! Some of them might even come close to a Ferrari!

“And she already picked it out. It’s at CB2.”

Tony groaned. “She’s killing me.”

“And it’s not red or gold.”

“Killing me, I tell you!”

Tony heard noise in the background and after a moment, Rhodey said, “Hey, Tones? I’m gonna have to let you go. But do me a favor, would you? Let Steve know that you’re doing fine, okay? He sounded pretty worried.”

“Yeah, okay. I’m flying back for the gala tomorrow anyway.”

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“Hey kiddos! Daddy’s home!”

Dummy whirred to life and wheeled over with an eager boop.

“Sir? Agent Romanoff noted your return. She asks that I inform you the team will meet for the gala in the common room at 7:40.”

“Got it.” Tony started a pot of coffee. “I’ve got tons of time! Give me the specs from Malibu, J. And some Iron Maiden.”

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The new screens weren’t going well. It was almost like revolutionizing computer screen technology was hard or something. Tony frowned and bit his lip.

The new specs were only giving him a projected 45 Hz refresh speed—worse than a fucking iPhone! (Pathetic.) He rubbed at his eyes.

“Sir? Perhaps now would be an opportune time to remind you once more that you need to prepare for the gala.”

“Huh?” Tony blinked. “Right. How much time do I have?”

“Less than an hour. It is now seven o’clock.”

“What?! Shit! Why didn’t you say something?”

JARVIS’ silence was eloquent.

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Repeatedly, sir.”

Tony sighed. “Sorry, J.” He shook his head. “Fucking screens. Okay, yeah. I’ll come right back to this after the gala. But now I’d better dash.”

(Shit.) He needed to shower, deal with a messy goatee, do his hair, and—fuck! which tux was he going to wear?

Tony tapped his foot in the elevator. After all, he needed to look his best; there would be tons of photographers on the red carpet.

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Tony strode into the common room at 7:43—(ha! just three minutes late!)—only to find it empty. He frowned and turned to examine his reflection in the mirror for any last minute adjustments. His hair was well styled, his goatee immaculate, and a masterful dab of concealer had obscured the worst of his dark circles (and nascent wrinkles). He did look amazing. (For almost forty.) He adjusted his cuff links.

“Tony!” Steve stood frozen in the doorway, beautiful and awkward in his sharply tailored tuxedo. “You’re back.”

Tony laughed. “Don’t sound so surprised! I just went to Malibu for a few days to visit Pepper.”

Tony finished adjusting his cuff links.

Steve approached slowly, expression that guilty-hesitant-earnest look Tony hadn’t seen in quite a while.

“How are you?” Steve asked as though the question were significant rather than a pleasantr
“Good. Malibu was gorgeous; Pep and I worked on our tans.” Tony shrugged. “Of course, I’d be even better now if we could skip this gala, but it’ll probably be fine once we get there.”

Steve nodded.

They were quiet for a moment before Steve said, “I’m glad you’re back.” He swallowed thickly. “I wanted to apologize. For the last time we spoke, before you left. I’m sorry for that. I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

“What? No! Of course not!” Tony waved a hand dismissively. “Why would I be uncomfortable?”

“I just thought, when you left that I’d crossed a line.” Steve reached up to fiddle with his bow tie then stopped short. He put his hands in his pockets. “I hope you’d tell me if—”

“Can’t a man go on an impromptu vacation without getting the fifth degree?” Tony asked, a hint of exasperation coloring his voice.

“Of course! I’m sorry I—”

“There you are!” Tony exclaimed as Natasha and Clint stepped out of the elevator. “Let the record state I was here and ready before you were. Even before Steve.”

“Duly noted,” Natasha said with an amused smirk. She was wearing a green strapless evening gown with a mermaid train (and his mother’s pendant nestled at her throat).

“Hey, man! Welcome back,” Clint said, thumping him on the back. “I can’t believe you missed our sparing match to frolic in the California sun with Pepper.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You can’t?”

“Hey! I’m just as pretty as Pepper! But I’ll admit the weather here sucks—so, fine.”

Tony laughed.

The elevator opened again.

“Wait, you’re all up here?” Bruce said, frowning and pulling at his tux. “I thought we were meeting at the limo.”

Natasha shrugged into her fur-trimmed coat. “All right team—Avengers out.”

As they all piled into the elevator, Tony felt warm.

It was good to be home.

Tony very deliberately got out of the limo first, smiled and waved to the press, but didn’t stop at their cries of “Tony! Tony, over here!”

Inside the Carlyle, there was a band on the main stage, a silent auction to the right, and a giant Tiffany monstrosity for the ball drop. Tony blinked—he’d half-forgotten that this fundraiser was also a New Year’s Eve party.

The team split up to do their duty and mingle—after all, that was why they were there. Not just PR for the Avengers, but to help boost fundraising for The American Association for Homeless Outreach.

“Oh! Mr. Stark! So pleased to see you here,” said an elderly woman dripping in diamonds.

“Yes, well, I’m sure Briana will have no trouble at Yale,” Tony said, eager to get away from the Fitzpatricks. “Won’t you please excuse me—I see an old friend and simply must say hello.”

Tony threaded his way through the fashionable crowd, skirting the now-busy dance floor. If Veronica Williams ever wanted to leave executive finance, she’d have no trouble starting a second career as a model. Tonight she had her braids down and was wearing her trademark stilettos to tower over the room; she was sporting a spotless white skirt tuxedo with red piping that matched her lipstick, her dark skin positively luminous, her brown eyes bright and lined with gold. (Gorgeous.) Tony hastened toward her and she welcomed him with a smile.

“Tony, darling,” Veronica said, taking his hand and leaning down to kiss him softly on each cheek. “I was hoping to see you here. We hardly got to say hello-goodbye at the last one.”

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“They prospect of seeing you, beautiful boy, gave wings to my feet,” she said teasingly. Tony...
chuckled.

Veronica glanced out at the dance floor where high society twirled by in an elegant waltz. She raised one eyebrow and then bowed to him with an ironic little smirk, and asked by formula: “Mr. Stark, may I have the honor of leading you across the dance floor?”

Tony fluttered his eyelashes and bobbed demurely, answering with a fake southern accent: “Oh, it is ah who would be honored.”

They moved seamlessly together, joining the other dancers.

“It’s good to see you, Tony,” Veronica said sincerely, all the playful irony gone.

“You too.” He craned his neck to look up at her.

“I’ve been meaning to apologize. I should have called or visited you in the hospital.”

“I got your flowers,” Tony said, as she directed him into an elegant spin.

“It’s not the same. I should have come in person.” She shook her head, lips twisting a little. “I didn’t know what to say. There’s no Hallmark card for when your friend throws himself on a grenade to save millions of lives.”

Tony cleared his throat. “Stop. You’ll make me blush!” he said lightly.

“It needs to be said,” she answered, hand firm at the small of his back. “You’ve always been so brave in your life; nobody should have been surprised by your heroism on the battlefield.”

(“Tony Stark was a hero long before Iron Man.”)

As Veronica led him into another twirl, Tony saw Steve standing at the bar, watching him dance, but when Tony caught his eye Steve looked hastily away.

“I’m proud to know you, Tony,” Veronica said. “If I can ever be of help to you, just call.”

“Okay,” Tony said softly. He cleared his throat again.

“So,” he asked. “How was your trip to Japan?”

Veronica was always a trendsetter: after her dance with Tony, he never went more than a few minutes without a dance partner or the offer of one. He generally said yes, since he actually liked dancing and had always been good at it. (After all, Howard and mom had started his ballroom lessons at age eight so he’d be a refined Dominant.)

Tony danced with Jamal, a good friend of Veronica’s who had a charming laugh and a strong lead. He danced with Mr. Klein (the old goat!) because he was a good connection for Stark Industries, and trod heavily on the man’s foot whenever his hand strayed too low. He danced with a Dom he’d never met before who clutched at his hand far too tightly and led with stiff limbed brutality—Tony excused himself for the powder room half-way through the song. And he had an enjoyable dance with a Dom he was sure he’d slept with, but whose name he couldn’t remember. (Really, all Tony remembered about him was that he’d failed to impress in bed, but whether it was indifference to a sub’s pleasure or pure incompetence Tony’d never decided.)

Tony hadn’t danced with any of his teammates, but he’d seen Nat—and even Clint!—on the dance floor a few times. Bruce had magically disappeared into the crowd (or hidden in the bathroom), but Steve had been on the sidelines all evening, watching the dancers and chatting with anyone who came by. Tony’d seen a string of pretty young subs entreating him to dance, but Steve never set foot on the dance floor.

“Of course, we’ve had tons of venture capital just pouring in, but to take it to the next level, you know—”

Tony’s partner—some start up hot shot (or wanna be) from Silicon Valley—was droning on and on. Tony glanced over his partner’s shoulder to see Steve shaking his head again and giving an apologetic smile to a lovely young sub in an indigo tuxedo. Their eyes met for a moment, but Steve quickly looked away again.

Tony felt a sudden pain in his left big toe. (Ugh.) Start up dude was too intent on wooing Tony’s money to focus on dancing. Tony gave another gentle push to keep them from colliding with another couple.

“Stop back-leading!” the man hissed when Tony took matters into his own hands.

“Then lead competently,” Tony shot back. “Actually, never mind. And, no, before you ask—I won’t be investing in— Sorry, what was it called again?”

Tony strode off the dance floor and headed for the bar.
“Scotch,” he ordered briskly, then remembered his manners—the bartender wasn’t the jerk—and added, “please.”

“Hi, Tony! So good to see you!”

It was Harry Silverstein. Tony smiled up at him, relieved to see a friendly face.

“And you,” Tony replied. “Actually, I was thinking of you just the other day.”

“You were!?” Harry looked overjoyed.

Tony took a sip of his scotch and nodded. “Yeah. I was going over some of the Foundation’s reports and it turns out we’re looking for a new trustee for the Stark Scholars Fund. Our mission is to support talented submissives in highly dominated fields, and I thought you might be interested.”

“Oh.”

(Huh. Not the enthusiasm he’d expected…)

“It’s hard to find someone who has a practical knowledge of finance, but also has expertise in math or science,” Tony explained. “You’d be perfect! And I know how much you miss spending time with math and mathematicians; it would be a great way for you to stay in touch with developments in the field and meet inspiring young scholars.”

Harry nodded as Tony spoke, then pushed his glasses back into place.

“We’re only recruiting one additional trustee at the moment,” Tony said. “But of course, if you’re not interested . . .”

“No, no! I’m honored,” Harry said hastily. “It’s just unexpected. I’d love to be involved. Perhaps,” he hesitated, “we could talk about it more over dinner tomorrow night?”

(Dinner?) Tony blinked. (Oh! Oh. Stupid.)

Tony gave a regretful smile and shook his head.

“I’m afraid my schedule is very busy for the next few weeks,” he told Harry gently, “and, now that I’m an Avenger, I’m not that involved in the day-to-day management of the Stark Scholars. But you’d have a chance to meet and help select our brilliant guest speakers—some of the finest mathematicians in the world. There would be lots of opportunities for you to share your love of mathematics with others.”

“I see,” Harry said, disappointment ill-concealed. His attempt at a smile looked forced, but well-meaning.

“You’d be a welcome addition,” Tony said, “if you’re still interested.”


Tony nodded and took another sip of scotch, unsurprised but relieved Harry took rejection well. (It was a good—and all too rare—quality in a Dom.) He looked out over the crowd, giving Harry a moment to process (as Pepper would say), and caught Steve’s eye. Before the man could look away, Tony smiled at him; Steve smiled back, look a little uncertain.

They stood smiling at each other across a crowded ballroom until a beautiful brunet in a red gown touched Steve’s arm, drawing his attention away. Tony turned back to Harry.

“So,” Tony said, “Have you listened to the podcast of Mirzakhani’s talk at MIT yet?”

After indulging Harry’s enthusiasm for ergodic theory and talking up the Stark Scholars a bit more, Tony left the main bar to mingle, though he was feeling a bit weary of the whole thing. Luckily the band was on break, so nobody could ask him to dance. (He needed a break too.)

Tony wondered how Steve was holding up. He knew Steve had been nervous.

(Having a date might help . . . “I’m not gonna ask someone on a date if I don’t mean it.”)

Tony scanned the ballroom for Steve’s broad shoulders and blond hair, but he’d moved and it was a bit like where’s Waldo in the vast ballroom. Still, after a few minutes of diligent searching, Tony spotted him: he was tucked away discreetly in a corner near the bandstand, obviously avoiding the crowd. Tony grinned and went to the side bar.

“A scotch and a Sam Adams, please, if you’ve got it.”

“Yep,” the bartender said, rummaging around in the bottom fridge, “though we don’t get many requests for it at events like this.”

Tony shrugged. “My friend’s a man of simple tastes.”
He left a large tip in the jar and made his way stealthily towards Steve, skirting the back of the bandstand to avoid attracting attention. Tony grinned at Steve as he approached, waving the Sam Adams at him. Steve’s answering smile was lovely, at once happy and relieved.

“How’re you holding up?” Tony asked, handing over Steve’s beer.

Steve grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. “That obvious, huh?”

“Yep. Sorry, big guy,” Tony said, patting his shoulder consolingly and clinking their drinks together. “Cheers.”

They drank quietly for a moment before Tony took a step closer. He laid a hand on Steve’s arm as he looked up and asked seriously, “But really. Are you doing okay?”

Steve looked down, expression a little surprised, and nodded. The lingering tension in his shoulders started draining away.

Steve took a sip of beer and shrugged. “Guess I’m still intimidated by being here with all the swells.”

“Swells!” Tony repeated in delight, then asked, “Am I a swell?”

“Absolutely.” Steve said, taking a long drink.

“You’re also a really grand hoofer,” he added mischievously.

Tony laughed. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Good dancer,” Steve clarified.

“Yes, well. I’ve had lessons since I was a kid. Mom insisted and father agreed.”

Steve nodded. “Of course they did.” He added with a teasing smile, “Because you’re a swell.”

And now the musicians’ break was apparently over. As Tony finished off his scotch and discarded the glass, they shuffled back on stage and leafed through their sheet music. Tony was suddenly aware of just how close to Steve he was standing, but he didn’t step away. The band began to play a slow, loping waltz and the dance floor began to fill.

“Well, aren’t you going to ask me to dance?” Tony demanded, tone playful. Steve just smiled at him.

“Sounds awful traditional,” Steve teased. “Why would I have to ask you?”

Tony was about to speak when Steve rushed on: “But either way, I’m afraid I can’t. I don’t know how to dance. I’d just embarrass us both.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know how to dance?”

Steve gave a rueful smile. “People weren’t exactly lining up to dance with a Dom they might step on, you know.”

Tony swallowed. He thought of that photo. It was still in his wallet, not that Steve needed to know that, and Tony found himself picturing Steve back then: five feet tall, thin and fragile looking, standing alone at the edge of the dance floor, watching all the happy couples twirl by.

Tony cleared his throat. He hesitated for just a moment, before saying, “It’s leading that’s hard. Any idiot can follow.”

Steve was clearly waiting for him to say something more; he hadn’t made the leap Tony was considering. Tony studied him for a moment, then held his hand out with a flourish and a bow.

“May I have the honor of leading you across the dance floor?” Tony asked.

Tony intended the gesture and formalities to be playfully extravagant, but his heart started hammering in his chest the moment the words left his lips. Tony stayed in a slight bow, hand outstretched, as he looked up at Steve with a smile and slightly raised eyebrow.

Steve was giving him deer-in-headlights look. (Okay, well, he’s startled. Fine. Give him a moment.) Steve seemed to be holding his breath, his eyes wide and his body frozen stiff. He made no move to take Tony’s hand.

(Oh.)

Tony’s stomach plummeted.

Neither of them moved.

(Fuck.)

Tony hadn’t realized how badly he wanted Steve to take his hand until it didn’t happen. He
wasn’t exactly surprised, but he realized—his heart still pounding and his mouth dry—he was disappointed.

Tony gave a little shrug and, pulling his hand back, started to turn away.

(He’s not going to dance with you, stupid. Especially if you’re asking to lead! Not after everything. Not in public. Why the hell did you think—?)

“Tony,” Steve said urgently. Tony looked back to him, startled; Steve swallowed thickly, his Dominant’s notch bobbing.

“I’m afraid I’ll step on your feet. But—” He reached for Tony’s hand and gave Tony a hesitant smile.

Tony stood, staring up at Steve, trying to remember to breathe.

“So,” Tony said after a long moment, “you’re saying I should wear steel-toed boots in ballrooms as well as the workshop.”

“Yes, Steve said affectionate and chiding, “you barely wear your boots in the workshop. Not half as often as you should.”

“Ridiculous! I have excellent workshop safety protocols. Ask JARVIS.”

“Who do you think told me?”

“Traitor,” Tony said, without ire. He set Steve’s beer aside with his scotch glass, feeling soothed by their familiar banter.

Tony glanced out at the dance floor, and asked, “So, shall we dance or do you want to discuss my workshop safety protocols some more?”

Steve nodded and let Tony lead him towards the dance floor, emerging from their little shelter.

“Okay, but you may need to institute some dance floor safety protocols,” Steve mumbled, looking a little bashful.

Tony grinned. “I promise: nothing fancy. The waltz is an easy one.”

Tony led the way, shoulders back, head held high.

“Okay, put your left hand on my shoulder, and I take your right hand, like this,” Tony said. He put his left hand at the small of Steve’s back, drawing them together.

“Now, it’s a simple step—just mirror me and remember, stay loose and follow my lead. Got it?”

“I’ll do my best,” Steve said.

“Good,” Tony said with an encouraging smile. “You go: back, side, together, then forward, side, together. See?”

It was a chic gala; no one was gauche enough to gasp outright or take photos with their phones, but a startled little titter ran through the ballroom as Tony took the lead and showed Steve the basic box step.

“Here: listen for the beat—one, two, three; one, two, three.”

“One, two, three,” Steve mumbled, frowning down at his feet, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“Right. Back, side, together; front, side, together,” Tony prompted.

“Back, side, together; front, side, together,” Steve repeated.

“Good!” Tony said.

They stayed in once place on the outskirts of the dance floor, just practicing the box step.

“How does that feel?” Tony asked.

“Okay,” Steve said, still frowning down. He glanced up for a moment and faltered, losing the rhythm. “Wish I weren’t tryin’ to learn this with everybody watching though.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Tony said. “Just focus on me.”

Steve missed another step, but smiled as he answered softly, “All right. I can do that.”

“...And you said you couldn’t dance!” Tony exclaimed as he moved Steve across the floor in their second waltz. “Look at you now!”
“Pretty sure you’re doing all the work,” Steve said, glancing down at his feet again as they spun. He promptly over-compensated.

“Little steps!” Tony reminded him. “Just a quarter turn. There. Good!”

With a sharp little turn, Tony kept Steve from bumping into the Dom who’d just strode towards them with purpose. He was a big, broad, muscle-clad mass; like a brunette version of Steve. (But nothing like Steve.) Gorgeous and he knew it. He tapped Steve on the shoulder and Tony brought them to a halt, letting the other couples glide past them.

“Usually, when I cut in,” the Dom said with an amused smirk, “the other Dom is leading.” He gestured to Tony and asked Steve, “If I may?”

Steve frowned, but answered mildly. “That’s not for me to say.”

They both turned to Tony. The dark-haired Dom gave a dazzlingly bleached smile.

“Tony, I’m Bradford Johnson. I’ve been looking forward to speaking with you all evening.” He held out his hand. “If I may?”

“You’re very bold,” Tony said, tightening his hand around Steve’s. He cast Steve an amused little look, then added, “And I don’t remember giving you permission to use my first name.”

Johnson’s eyebrows shot up with surprise and perhaps a hint of indignation. (Tony had a reputation of a certain sort, after all.)

“Mr. Stark, may I have the honor of calling you Tony?” Johnson was clearly aiming for polite, but impatience colored his voice.

“No,” Tony said, with a sweet smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, Steve and I were dancing.”

Johnson flushed with anger, but had more class than to make a scene—or more of a scene. He nodded to Steve, bowed to Tony, and left the dance floor with a practiced indifference.

“Now where were we?” Tony asked Steve. “Right. One, two, three; one, two, three.”

Steve fell back into step easily, pivoting as Tony directed. Tony shot him a grin and said, “Here, let me spin you!”

Steve ducked awkwardly, hunching down to make it under Tony’s arm, and trying visibly not to step on his partner’s feet.

“Not bad!” Tony said, feeling light hearted, almost giddy. (Jesus, fuck, this was fun!)

“Tony?” Steve said. “I’m really glad you didn’t let him cut in.”

“As I recall he asked you first,” Tony said, with a little snort.


“Yep!” Tony grinned back. “Here! Spin again!”

As he came back into the main hold, Steve misjudged the distance a little and they ended up nearly chest-to-chest. Tony swallowed and tightened his grasp on Steve’s waist before Steve could step back.

“And this,” Tony said softly, “is a closed hold.”

“Oh.”

Tony’s heart was speeding up again; he licked his lips and looked into Steve’s wide blue eyes —

The music stopped; everyone began clapping.

“Thank you all so much, ladies and gentlemen! Aren’t they wonderful? Now the band is going to take a last break while we give you the results of the silent auction and take a few moments to thank our generous supporters. Don’t worry, though! We’ll be back to the music before the ball drops.”

Tony’d nearly hidden in the bathroom for the count-down and ball drop, but he’d luckily found himself in Veronica’s friendly arms again and was the contented recipient of one very chaste New Year’s kiss. (Her quirked lips and raised eyebrow offered more, but she let it go at the very slightest shake of his head.)

The fundraiser was declared a success, 2013 was welcomed in style, and Tony was ready to go
home. His feet hurt, the socialites’ faces were starting to blur together, and there were three newly-
offended Doms to avoid in a ballroom that felt smaller by the minute. But he couldn’t find his
team.

Tony wasn’t sure how it had happened, but somehow he’d been separated from Steve after their
dance and every glimpse he got of blond hair was wrong, all wrong. He scanned the crowd with
single-minded focus. (Steve, Steve, Steve--)

“Hey, man! You ready to head out?” Tony jumped when Clint tapped him on the shoulder.
“Cause the others are all pooped out on all this swanky shit. You coming home with us or what?”


On the limo ride home, Bruce chatted enthusiastically to Tony about the developments in
symplectic geometry he’d discussed with Harry; Clint and Natasha spoke quietly, their heads close
together; and Steve stared out the window, watching New York crawl by.

“--but, of course it would still have to be isomorphic according to Darboux’s theorem, right?”

Steve’s eyes were unfocused, fuzzy on the middle distance. (Pained or pensive?) Tony felt a pang
of worry. (Was he--)

“Right?” Bruce repeated.

“Huh?” Tony blinked. “Oh, uh, right.”

As they poured out of the limo exchanging ‘good nights’ and thanking Francis for driving, Tony’s
eyes kept straying to Steve. Steve smiled.

“Oh God, I’m old!” Clint groaned in the elevator. “It’s barely one a.m. on New Year’s and I’m
about to go to bed. Alone!”


“Or Dubai!” he answered and they both laughed.

“Well, I think it’s understandable we’re tired,” Bruce mumbled. “Socializing is exhausting.”

“True words,” Tony said, then blinked when JARVIS automatically took him to the workshop.
(Oh. Oh, right.)

“Uh,” Tony said, “Night. I guess this is me.”

Dummy booped eagerly when Tony stepped into the workshop. As Tony turned to offer the team
a final ‘good night,’ the elevator doors closed and Tony just caught a glimpse of Steve’s furrowed
brow.

Tony sighed and sat heavily on the bench.

“May I wish you a happy and prosperous new year, sir?” JARVIS asked.

“Yeah. Thanks, J.”

Tony pulled off his bow tie and dropped it on the floor. He looked at the chaotic mess of floating
schematics; the gutted Stark Tabs, their chips and wires exposed; the soldering irons and wire
stripers and--

“No,” Tony said, standing abruptly. “No.”

(No, it was all wrong.)

Tony started to pace; Dummy followed, offering him his bow tie. After a few laps up and down
the workshop, Tony knelt next to the bot and accepted it.

“JARVIS?” he called.

“Yes, sir?”

Tony tied the bow-tie around Dummy’s K-joint.

“Can you tell me where Steve is?”

“Captain Rogers is in the common room, sir.”

Tony took a deep breath and strode to the elevator.

“Common room, J. Stat.”
The elevator felt slow, even though he knew it wasn’t, and it took active effort not to pace the small space. When the doors opened the common room was dark except for the white lights on the tree they hadn’t taken down yet.

Steve was standing alone at the huge bay window, looking out at the skyline.

“Hey, Steve,” Tony said softly as he approached.

Steve glanced over and gave him a fleeting smile. (Hesitant or sad or pensive or—?)

“Hi, Tony.”

Tony’s heart was racing. He came to stand next to Steve and look out at the city with him.

“Thanks for the dance earlier,” Tony said, voice still quiet.

“My pleasure,” Steve said with a shrug, eyes still fixed on the horizon. A few late (likely illegal) fireworks went off, blossoming into brilliant reds and whites. Tony studied Steve’s face in the glass reflection, but couldn’t read it: sad, pensive, tired, he didn’t know, but he need to--

Tony bit his lip. He wanted to drop his head, tilt it to the side and look up at Steve through his eyelashes—it required active effort not to do something that felt not only natural, but real, not like a show to be put on, just something he should do because it felt right to him in the moment. He took a deep breath and pushed his shoulders back, but still kept his gaze down.

“Hey, Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking . . .” Tony’s mouth felt dry. “Maybe—if you still wanted to—you could ask me to dinner again sometime.”

He’d meant it to sound casual, nonchalant, but it came out hesitant.

Tony swallowed.

“All right.” The words came out softly. “I– I’d like that.”

Tony glanced over, looking up from the corner of his eye, and found Steve smiling down at him, eyes bright and shining. It looked like hope. An answering smile—gentle, almost shy—spread across Tony’s face. They stood, the moments sliding by, just smiling at each other in silence.

Eventually, though, Steve blinked and cleared his throat.

“Is there any place in particular you’d like to go?” Steve asked.

Tony shook his head; his chest felt tight.

“Nah,” Tony said with a little shrug, and his pulse shouldn’t be racing over such a tiny thing, such a minute surrender, but his heart slammed in his chest as he said: “You’re in charge.”

Steve’s breath hitched again. The air was thick and heavy around them and then suddenly it was all too much.

“Uh, what time shall I--?” Tony asked, waving a hand.

“Seven.” Steve said it firmly, decisively. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“All right then.” Tony stood uncertain, hands suddenly awkward at his sides. “Well, good night.”

“Good night.” Steve said, smiling and smiling. “Oh, and Tony? Happy new year.”

Chapter End Notes

Like I said, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, STEVE!!" :-)

Ta-da! There it is. Finally. FINALLY! I really hope you liked it. Uh, maybe let me
know? Favorite bits? Stuff that surprised you (in a good way)? Comments are love!

*falls over exhausted*

Added July 5th: There was some concern earlier that the story is now over. Don't worry! The story is definitely NOT over--far from it! They have to date. And figure things out. And I promised you kinky sex, remember? And there's more Avengers plot. So, yeah, far from over. Unless, you know, y'all have lost interest... (Okay, I said that like a joke, but I've kinda worried that everybody would be 'over it' once they kiss. So yeah.) But THERE'S LOTS MORE!!!!!
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

chapter dedicated to all the kind people who have encouraged me in writing this, and especially to Noman and anonymous who talked me out of my funk / anxiety pit about this chapter

(hugs)

Chapter Notes

potentially unnecessary disclaimer: Just a little reminder that this is an AU. Liberationism overlaps with and invokes lots of concepts from feminism, but I by no means wish to imply that all women do or should desire to submit. ABSOLUTELY NOT (as I hope is already clear from the story) The AU is not a 1:1 translation. I’m a feminist submissive myself and we’re turning to the part of the story that deals more Tony’s desire to express his submissive identity (in what I think is a liberated way), but please don’t suppose the echoes of feminism in liberationism represent some sort of gender essentialism on my part. It’s an AU and Tony is an individual within it.

Sorry—anxious writer still a little anxious....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Dating: be a Dominant and a Gentleman

c. 1954

Make decisions. Many submissives find decision-making very stressful, particularly if left trying to guess which answer will please you most. You should select restaurants and events. It is fine to ask for your submissive’s preference for one thing or another, but do not ask open ended questions like, “Where would you like to go?” or “What would you like to do?” You are taking your sub out—show that you can take the initiative!

Never misrepresent yourself or your position. Do not take your date to a restaurant you can barely afford in an attempt to show off. It will spoil the evening for you to be worrying about the bill and is unfair to your date, both to put that much pressure on the evening and the lack of honesty about what you are able to offer. If you cannot afford the restaurant or event, do not go. On a first date especially, do not take your date somewhere far outside your normal means. It can make your date feel pressured to see you again or to allow you liberties she does not sincerely wish.

Ask for permission, and ask first! This should be common sense, but far too many Dominants assume they know what their date wants and does not want. If you’re unsure, ask! Never take advantage of a submissive’s gentle and pliant nature to give yourself pleasure that may not be mutual.

>>>I’ve done something stupid,” Tony blurted.

“You know, it’s after midnight out here,” Pepper pointed out. “I could have been sleeping.”

“Were you?”

“No, but—”

“Emergency, Pep!”

“All right, fine. What’s this something stupid?”

Tony bit his lip. Behind him, Dummy was wheeling about in little circles still wearing Tony’s bowtie.

Tony swallowed thickly. “I told Steve to ask me on a date. And he did. And I said yes.”

“Wait! Wait, What?” A pause, then, “Tony, I’m putting you on video.”

Pepper’s face flashed up on a glowing screen. She was wearing her navy blue pajamas, the ones with the white piping that Tony’d given her for Christmas two years ago. She looked baffled.
“Wait, so you asked Captain America on a date?”

“Steve,” Tony corrected, trying to slow his racing thoughts enough to explain to Pepper.

He’d been so happy when he came down to the workshop, but somehow he’d started getting tangled up in the details and the ‘what if’s’ and the thousands of ways everything could go to hell and--

“Is this what your sudden Malibu trip was all about?” Pep asked, squinting at him.

“No! Maybe. Probably.”

“So,” Pepper prompted after a moment. “You asked Steve on a date and he said yes.”

“Sort of,” Tony said, running a hand through his now-messy hair. “Well, he asked me first ages ago, but then I kept saying no and he apologized and stopped asking, so I figured I’d better say something since I really want to.” Tony swallowed. “To go on a date with him.”

That soft little smile was threatening to bubble up at the thought of it—Steve, a date with Steve—but the noise in his head crowded it away. Tony started pacing. It always drove Pepper nuts when he’d do that, bobbing in and out of frame, but he couldn’t help it.

“Shit. I should call Katie Winters. I should have called her first. I’m an Avenger! What was I thinking? We work together!”

“Tony, slow down!”

“This was stupid. Maybe I should cancel. Shit!” Tony waved his hands, unable to keep any part of himself still. “The press is going to go crazy! They’ll make it gross—like I’m bending over for my Captain or I’m team whore. Or maybe they’ll say Steve demanded it like some creepy droit de seigneur and—”

“TONY!”

He drew up short.

Pepper was looking at him with a concerned frown, brow creased. “Just take a deep breath, okay?” He nodded and she continued, “You’re jumping all over the place.”

Obedient to Pepper’s sensible advice (for once), Tony took a few deep breaths. She gave him a sweet smile.

“Look,” Pepper said, “apparently I’m behind on developments at the Tower—and don’t you dare think you’re getting away without spilling details!—but what I just heard is that you like Steve. And you want to go on a date with him.”

Pep gave him a sly smile and asked, “And when the hell has Tony Stark ever let somebody else’s opinion or the press or anything else stop him from doing exactly what he wants?”

Tony laughed, half-nervous and half-giddy.

“Seriously. The press will behave badly, but they always do. So, all you really need to decide is whether or not you want to date Steve. And if you do, don’t let anything stand in your way.”

Tony’s eyes were prickling, but his heart-rate was starting to slow down at last. When he found his voice again, Tony asked in a joking tone, obviously deflecting, “Does that mean we have your blessing?”

“Yes,” Pep said seriously, “not that you need it. Finally—finally—you’re going on a date with somebody almost good enough for you.”

His chest felt tight again, but in a good way.

“Now,” Pepper said in her faux bossy voice, “here’s what we’re going to do: you’re gonna get your workshop Ben & Jerry’s stash, I’m gonna make myself a margarita, and you’re gonna spill! I want the blow-by-blow, gorgeous, gory details from the beginning. I’m living in a romantic wasteland and apparently you’ve been holding out on me!”

Tony shook his head and laughed. “If I start at the beginning—beginning, pretty sure we’ll both sound like idiots. Or assholes. We got off to a rocky start, you know?”

“So much the better!” Pepper cried. “I’ll make popcorn. So, are you in?”

Tony smiled. “Yeah.”

“So start at the beginning!”

“See, the first time we met . . .”

<<<<<<<<<<<
“Good morning, sir. It is 11:10 am on the first of January.”

Tony yawned; he’d slept in. He really shouldn’t be surprised—he’d been on the phone with Pepper until nearly 5 am.

11 am meant he’d missed brunch with the team—Steve always made them brunch on Sundays—but perhaps it was just as well. What would he have said?

Tony frowned as he pulled on a pair of jeans.

Would they tell the team they were going on a date? It was just a date—not like they needed to make a big announcement! It would be weird to tell them like it was a thing. Then again, maybe not telling them would make it seem like a thing. They weren’t keeping it a secret or anything—or were they?

(Shit.)

No. No, if they actually started dating they’d be open about it (at least, he thought so) and tell the team, and SHIELD, and Katie & Mikie, and have a PR strategy and--

Tony’s hand twitched for his phone, but no. Pepper was busy and, anyway, for now it was just a date.

A date with Steve.

Tony smiled.

“Okay, J! Start the coffee in the workshop,” Tony called. “Date’s at seven, so tell me to get ready at six. No! Five-thirty.” Tony licked his lips. “Yeah, five-thirty.”

“Of course, sir.”

And was it just him or did JARVIS sound amused?

“Knock-knock?”

Tony looked up at the familiar sound of Steve’s voice and took in the sight before him: Steve in nice slacks and a polo shirt, looking a little nervous or maybe sad. Tony felt a sweep of panic.

“Shit!” Tony cried. “Am I late for our date? Did I miss it? I’m so sorry! I was in the zone with my project and must have lost track of time. Please don’t think I—”

But as he rambled an apology (and silently rued the greasy state of his hair) Steve started grinning.

“You’re not late,” Steve said reassuringly, stepping closer. “It’s only 2 pm.”

“Oh, okay,” Tony said. “Good. Just, sometimes, I get into an engineering zone and don’t notice . . . stuff. Even when JARVIS reminds me. Bad habit.”
“I know that, Tony,” Steve said, still smiling.

“Good.” Tony fiddled with the screwdriver he’d been holding. “So, what brings you to my workshop? Something I can do for you?”

“You already did it,” Steve said.

Tony squinted. “Huh?”

Steve shook his head, lips twisting a little ruefully as he said, “See, I’ve been wrong before, especially in this century, so I just wanted to make sure that this—tonight—really is a date. That I didn’t misunderstand. I mean, right after we talked, I was positive! But the more I thought about it and the later it got, well . . .” Steve gave a sheepish smile and trailed off with a shrug.

“It’s a date,” Tony said. “I mean, if you want it to be.”

“Yes! That is, if you do.”

“Yes! Definitely.”

“All right,” Steve said, smile breaking out again. “I’ll come by your suite at seven. All right?”

“Good. Great!” Tony said, then remembered to ask, “Wait! Casual or dressy?”

“Oh, uh,” Steve said with a frown. “I’m not very good at this, but I was gonna wear a suit. But not the fancy one. Definitely not a tuxedo.”

“Got it! Good. Great. See you at seven!”

Steve nodded and turned to go with a soft smile and a quiet, “Looking forward to it.”

Tony shivered.

“Me too.”

Tony jumped from his bench at five-thirty, the moment JARVIS said, “Sir, you asked me to remind—”

“On it!” Tony answered, not letting him so much as finish. (He hadn’t forgotten; not at all.)

Up in his suite Tony had a luxurious bath and was extremely thorough with his grooming. (He hadn’t visited Jackie in a while, so he double-checked and touched everything up himself.) He was very much planning to invite Steve up for coffee, so he needed all the details to be in order.

Bathed, groomed, and naked, Tony studied his reflection. He looked good: his shoulders and arms were nicely toned, but not bulging; his legs were strong and muscular (apart from his soft, fleshy inner thighs); his stomach was still (basically) flat and his hairless chest had good definition (interrupted by the arc reactor). He stepped closer to the mirror.

The arc reactor, in itself, was beautiful. It was a virtual miracle of engineering, wrought from pain and his own raw genius. The design was elegant, the blue of its glow arresting. It was the way it interrupted his chest (sudden, unnatural), the jagged ridges of scars that cried out—though it was beautiful—‘this doesn’t belong here.’

He had, through sheer genius, gotten the metal rim of the arc reactor down to one centimeter in width and redesigned it so the device stood only 0.5 cm out of his chest.

Just 5mm! It sounded so small! But it was enough you could see its outline under his clothes unless he dressed in layers; enough that it would mark a person’s skin if it pressed down, cutting off circulation. (He’d given the damn thing a rounded rim after napping across Pepper’s lap and leaving a nasty mark where the sharp edge bit into her thigh.…)

Maybe he’d wear the thick half-vest he’d designed to cover it after Afghanistan? The one he’d worn when he wanted to hook up with some random Dom for a night, eager for some pleasure, some distraction from the memories of the cave and the— (No!) Even as the possibility occurred to him, Tony recoiled from it. (No. Not with Steve.)

Tony ran his fingers across the knot of scars, rough and thick. He thought of the photo in his wallet and stepped away from the mirror. (Steve wouldn’t care.)

Tony rubbed the back of his neck. (Christ, he was getting maudlin in old age.)

“How can we get some Beyoncé up in here, JARVIS?” Tony called. “Gimmie some good primping music!”

Tony rolled his eyes as JARVIS started ‘All the Single Ladies.’

So. Underwear. Nothing too filthy. But nothing too dull either. After a moment he slipped into
well-fitted black silk boxer briefs (no lace trim, no nonsense) that showed him to advantage. Tony grinned and gave a little shimmy. His dick was certainly nothing to be ashamed of! Rather larger than one might expect from his build. This tended to please Dommes, but annoyed Doms if they felt outclassed. (Seriously, Tops constantly said that *subs* were size queens, but who got all in a huff about comparing dicks anyway?) Well. He doubted Steve would have any issues in that regard. (Mmmm…) 

Tony cleared his throat. (Right. Clothes.) 

First Tony put on his favorite charcoal suit and a burgundy tie, then decided it was too much and changed into his favorite black slacks and a burgundy dress shirt. Then decided it was too casual and changed back into the suit. He wanted to change again, but he wasn’t fucking fifteen anymore so he refused to give in. 

Tony inspected his goatee and plucked a few stray (grey) hairs, then decided to ditch the tie and unbutton the top two buttons of his dress shirt. He had a strong jaw line still (thank God), and a good neck, slim and long. He’d been told he had a delicate throat—the kind a Dom daydreamed about collaring—and he wasn’t above flaunting it. (Never mind that Steve had seen him in a messy, scoop-necked wife-beater plenty of times; it wasn’t the same. This was a *date.*) Tony unbuttoned another button and arranged his burgundy pocket square. Then he did up that last button again; he didn’t want to look tawdry. 

“Sir? It is now seven. Captain Rogers is in the elevator.” 

“Thanks, J.”

Tony gave himself a final check in the mirror and ditched the pocket square. 

“Tony?” Steve called down the hall from the elevator. “I’m here. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Be right there!” Tony called back.

He took a deep breath and sauntered down the hall. 

He found Steve waiting in the foyer, standing at parade rest. (He did that when he was nervous.) He was wearing a beautiful navy blue suit—not one of the cheap ones he’d bought before moving into the Tower and being set up with Tony’s tailors. It was classic but modern, with a hint of 40s traditionalism; elegant but not overwhelmingly dressy. (Michael Kors had really outdone himself. Then again, with a model like Steve, who wouldn’t?) 

“Hi, Tony,” Steve said. He smiled. 

(He was always smiling at Tony lately it seemed.) 

“You’re looking very smart,” Steve said after a moment. 

“Oh? Thanks,” Tony said, with a shrug. “You’re pretty *smart* yourself.”

Steve ducked his head, then asked, gesturing to the elevator, “Shall we?”

Tony nodded and followed. In the elevator, he watched Steve start to fidget, stop, and fall into parade rest. 

“I hope Italian’s okay,” Steve said. 

(He was always smiling at Tony lately it seemed.) 

“You’re looking very smart,” Steve said after a moment. 

“Oh? Thanks,” Tony said, with a shrug. “You’re pretty *smart* yourself.”

Steve ducked his head, then asked, gesturing to the elevator, “Shall we?”

Tony nodded and followed. In the elevator, he watched Steve start to fidget, stop, and fall into parade rest. 

“I hope Italian’s okay,” Steve said. 

“I love Italian,” Tony assured him, stepping a little closer. 

“Good. And I thought we’d take a cab,” Steve said. “At first, I wanted to take us out on the Dominator, but then we’d be wearing bike gear and the weather’s pretty rough, so, yeah. I thought a cab.”

Fidget, stop, parade rest. 

“Sounds good,” Tony said with a little smile. 

It was like Tony was seeing double. There he was, *Captain America*, glorious and gorgeous in his suit, but under the surface Tony could see the scrawny guy in that black and white picture: the guy who didn’t have a fella, couldn’t get a dance. It was so achingly obvious that *that* was who Tony had a date with, not the 6’2 dreamboat who had to hide from a legion of eager suitors at every high society gala. 

This was *Steve* who came to the workshop, not quite able to believe tonight’s dinner with Tony could really be a date. 

Something about Steve’s nervousness put Tony at ease. It would be fine. They were friends; Tony trusted Steve. No stupid little thing could go wrong and ruin this. He wouldn’t let it. 

“Hey,” Tony said softly, laying a hand on Steve’s arm. “I’m really glad we’re going out.”

Some of Steve’s tension seemed to ease away.
“Yeah.” Steve smiled down at him and said, “Me too.”

Their cab was ready and waiting as they crossed the Stark Industries’ lobby on the way to the street. Tony fussed with the top button of his coat and rearranged his scarf. (Fucking New York winter…) Steve got to the door first and held it open for Tony, head high and shoulders back; he seemed happily proud for a split second before hunching down and looking self-conscious. Tony was sorry to see the change.

“So, Cucina Paradiso?” the cabbie asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Thank you,” Steve answered climbing in next to Tony and off they went.

Steve started to fidget, then took a deep breath and visibly forced himself to stop.

Tony simultaneously loved and hated seeing Steve so nervous. He hated that it was detracting from a happy moment for Steve, that he felt stress on their date, that this wasn’t just like a happy hotdog run. But (selfishly) Tony loved that Steve cared that much about their date going well (cared that much about him); loved seeing little Steve Rogers in black and white under all the glamorous muscles. Besides, this way he could be the one to calm Steve’s nerves (instead of being distracted by his own).

Tony scooted closer and reached out to take Steve’s hand. Steve smiled at him and gave his hand a little squeeze.

They were quiet in the cab. Tony worried it was awkward, but he didn’t know what to say. Steve looked like he might say something a few times, but instead he just smiled that smile at Tony or looked out the window or stroked his thumb lightly across the back of Tony’s hand. (It was terribly distracting.)

As they approached the Brooklyn bridge, though, Tony couldn’t hold back an amused little snort and a wry, “Brooklyn, babe? Why am I not surprised?”

“You gotta problem w’ Brooklyn?” Steve asked, turning up his accent and knocking his shoulder playfully against Tony’s.

“No problem. No problem at all!” Tony said, drawing a crisscross over his heart. “As long as the Brooklyn boy doesn’t have a problem with a Manhattanite.”

“I hear they’re all a buncha swells,” Steve said consideringly, then added, “but this one don’t seem so bad.”

Tony opened his mouth, then blinked and closed it, distracted from his witty repartee by the way Steve’s thumb had strayed to caress the underside of his wrist.

Okay! Here ya go—Cucina Paradiso!”

Cucina Paradiso it turned out was a few steps below street level, with small windows that looked up towards the sidewalk. It was modest real estate and Tony steeled himself for horrific checkered table clothes, candles in chianti bottles, and limp overcooked pasta. (Tony loathed bad Italian food, but for Steve he could put a brave face on any culinary disaster.)

Steve paid their cabbie (in cash, the dork) with an uncertain little glance at Tony, as though Tony might object. (What? He’d said Steve was in charge and he’d meant it.) Tony could practically feel Steve getting nervous again—the way his shoulders bunched up and his eyebrows scrunched together ever so slightly.

As Tony slid out of the cab, he was struck by a brilliant idea. Something he could do for Steve. (Something he wanted to do for Steve.) Even as Tony’s plan took shape, there was a part of him that rebelled against it—(What will people think?)—but that muttering voice was crowded out by the others. (This is Steve . . . Steve who let you lead in front of everybody . . . Steve who respects you . . . It’s your choice.)

Tony dawdled on the stairs; Steve got the door.

Inside Tony was pleased (ok, relieved) to find a certain cozy elegance: one wall stucco, the other richly colored brick housing a bright wood-burning pizza oven; the ceiling’s exposed wooden beams were decorated with Tuscan pottery; and the tables were lovely wood, uncovered, with a rustic finish and matching chairs. The myriad bottles of wine and liquor behind the wooden bar were an appealingly tidy jumble. It was warm. Welcoming. Worthy of the name ‘cucina.’ (Though ‘paradiso’ had yet to be determined.) And, although the restaurant was small, Tony was happy to see the tables were still a decent distance apart. They hung their coats on the hooks in the entranceway.

“We have a reservation. Name of Rogers.”

The hostess’ eyes went wide for a split second, then her features smoothed out into a polite smile as she said, “Of course, sir. Please follow me.”
Steve shot him a (nervous?) little smile and Tony reveled in his plan.

“Here you are, gentlemen,” the hostess said, “I’ll give you few minutes with the menus and then Maria will be over to take your order.”

Tony paused next to the table and made no move to take a seat. Steve, who had been on the verge of sitting, shot him an uncertain look and straightened. Tony smiled at him.

“I thought you might like to pull my chair out for me,” Tony said, lowering his eyes flirtatiously.

“What?” Steve gaped at him, eyes and mouth almost comically wide.

“I thought you might like to get my chair,” Tony repeated.

“But,” Steve frowned, “you hate it.”

“Sure, I hate it from a coworker, or at SHIELD—” Tony said with a shrug, “—but this is a date and I just gave you permission. So.”

Tony’d expected Steve to practically trip over himself in eagerness, relieved and happy, but instead Steve looked even more uncertain as he stepped forward to pull Tony’s chair out for him.

“Is that okay?” Steve asked falteringly, as if he might have pulled the chair out incorrectly or with sub-par skill.

“I just thought it might be nice,” Tony said, as he took his seat and smiled up at Steve reassuringly.

He’d expected it to help put Steve at ease, but it seemed to have done the opposite. Steve was frowning as he took a seat across from Tony. (Shit!)

“Tony?” Steve said, “Sorry. Uh, I think you need to explain this one to me. ’Cause, gosh! Now I’m really confused. Before—”

“Before, you were doing it just because I’m a sub—at work and in front of our teammates—and you didn’t have my permission. It was—”

(non-consensual power exchange; you took, but I didn’t give—)

Tony snapped his mouth shut.

(Shit! Don’t say that! He already felt bad; don’t make it sound more rapey.)

“—context inappropriate. And without my permission. But,” Tony shrugged, trying to keep it casual, “I just gave you permission and this is a date. It can be like any other consensual form of power exchange.” He leaned a little closer. “Like foreplay.”

The tips of Steve’s ears went pink and his eyebrows shot up, surprised but . . . pleased?

“But this isn’t the new normal!” Tony said urgently, already backpedalling and leaning back in his seat. “Still none of that stuff at home, day-in-day-out, and definitely never at SHIELD! And not at high-profile events.”

Steve chewed his lip, brow furrowed.

“Tony,” Steve said doubtfully, “we don’t have to do it at all. It doesn’t matter.”

Tony frowned and blinked, then rushed on his voice intense and urgent: “I like you just as you are. You know that, don’t you? I don’t expect you to change for—”

(ARGH!)

“No, I’m expressing myself badly,” Tony interrupted, frustrated. “I’d like to give it a try because—”

Tony struggled to articulate why he wanted this. It made no sense for it to matter to him when Steve was clearly happy to let it go, but it did. It mattered to Tony.

After a few long moments, Tony gave up on explaining it and just gave a casual shrug and a smile.

“I just thought maybe sometimes we could have old fashioned date night and do all that stuff,” Tony said. “Not every time we go out—just like a special occasion. Agreed in advance.”

Steve was sort of frowning down at the table, not meeting Tony’s eyes.

(Shit! Tony swallowed. (Okay, Tony, way to imply that you’re dating on your first date and make it sound like . . . like you assume there will be tons of dates, and this is a thing. Maybe he doesn’t even want to—)

“So,” Steve said, looking up with that shy smile Tony was starting to love, “Every now and then,
I’d just say, “Tony, may I take you out for an old fashioned date tomorrow?” and you’d let me know if you’re in the mood.”

“Exactly!” Tony exclaimed a little too loud, body virtually tingling with relief.

“Okay,” Steve said, smile going wider and warmer, “We could try that.”

They opened their menus and Tony was pleased to see a traditional Italian menu: antipasti, primi, secondi, contorni, and dulci. (Maybe the risotto for primo, then--)

“But you’d like that, right?” Steve asked, as if he couldn’t help himself and had to double-check.

“Old fashioned date nights?”

Tony nodded, feeling at a loss for words.

Steve was smiling as he asked: “Tony? May I take you for an old fashioned date? Tonight?”

And it was absurd the way Tony’s heart jumped as he nodded and murmured sottovoce, “I’d like that.”

“Good evening and welcome to Cucina Paradiso,” their server said with a smile at them both.

“Are you ready to order?”

Steve shook his head. “I’m afraid we haven’t even looked at the menu properly.”

“Please take your time,” she said, then added to Steve, “Can I start you off with drinks? Or a bottle of wine?”

They’d given Steve the wine list. (Of course.)

“Tony’s the wine expert,” Steve said with a little shrug, handing him the leather folder across the table. “Tony? What do you think?”

“Maybe give us a few minutes,” Tony told the server.

“Of course. Take your time.”

None of the vintages were familiar to Tony—all far too modest—but he knew varietals and regions well enough to have a suggestion that Steve might like. (Nothing too acidic or complex…)

“A light Montepulciano might be nice,” Tony suggested.

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy whatever you pick for us,” Steve said.

They spent the next few minutes absorbed in the menu, discussing the merits of various items and what they might share. Tony expected to translate the Italian culinary terms, but Steve seemed quite at ease.

“Do you have any questions about the menu?” their server asked.

Steve shook his head. “I think we’re ready to order. Tony?”

“We’d like a bottle of the Montepulciano d’Abruzzo and I’ll have the risotto a la Milanese, followed by the costolette di agnello vino rosso and patate.”

“And I’ll start with the gnocchi burro e salvia,” Steve said, “and then the pollo parmigiano and the sautéed vegetables please.”

“Excellent choices,” the server said with a smile, “And I’ll bring the wine right out to you, gentlemen.”

“This place looks amazing,” Tony said. (And actually meant it. Seriously--there was an elderly couple speaking Italian at the next table!) “So, how did you pick it?”

Steve hesitated. “It had really good yelp reviews.”

“Yeah. See? I was right to stay in Home Ec,” Steve said. “I did kitchen prep and washed dishes.”

Tony looked around the restaurant with new interest and said, “You must have liked it if you wanted to come back now.”
“Yeah. They were good to me here.” Steve shook his head and let out a little laugh. “I couldn’t afford to dine here properly back then, but Luca was always sending me home with leftovers or feeding me tidbits.”

Steve leaned forward and gestured, putting on a subtle Italian accent—not the heavy exaggeration of comedy, but a careful, affectionate imitation—as he said: “You grow up on bad Irish food, and look! You’re skin and bones, Stephano! Lasagna! Carbonara! We fix you up. Take, take, but don’t tell Anna!”

Steve grinned, and shook his head as he continued, “And, you know, the next day, it’d be Anna saying,—he spread his hands, palms up—‘Lasagna, Steven. Won’t be any good tomorrow for customers. Here, here. But don’t tell Luca—he’s so tight-fisted, my husband. Madonna!”

Steve’s eyes were brimming with remembered affection.

“They were really good to me,” Steve said. “And the food was always amazing.”

“Wait,” Tony said, struck by a sudden realization, “Is this where you learned to make chicken parmesan?”

Steve blinked. “You remember that?”

“Steve, a man always remembers good chicken parmesan!”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah. Anna showed me. She thought I had the makings of a decent cook, but that’s one of the only dishes I had time to learn.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, I only worked here a few months.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, well—” Steve looked sad. “I got sick. Really bad, for weeks. Eventually, they had to replace me.”

“You couldn’t come back once you were better?” Tony asked.

Steve shook his head. “It wouldn’t have been fair to ask them to fire Ruth, especially since she had two children to feed. Really, she needed Anna and Luca more than I did.”

Steve shrugged.

“Anyway,” Steve said, looking down bashfully and lowering his voice, “I used to have this little daydream. My health’d get better, and I’d have a really good job—drawing comics and political cartoons. And there’d be this sub, see? Smart and witty. All fiery and independent, and, god, just so handsome! And I’d bring him here on a date, introduce him to Luca and Anna, and we’d have this amazing dinner and then I’d leave them the best tip ever, just loads. And after dinner, this sub—my special fella—he’d let me steal a kiss at the door.”

“No theft necessary,” Tony said. He reached across the table for Steve’s hand. “I’m pretty sure he’s eager to kiss you.”

“Aw yeah?” Steve asked, Brooklyn lilt coming out full force. He gave Tony a shy smile. “That’s good to know.”

“But, that’s still only got it up to 54 hertz, which is just the sciency way of saying ‘times per second’.”

“Wait, it’s refreshing 54 times per second!”

“Oh well! The iPhone! That’s terrible,” Steve said with a grimace. “If a Stark product can’t even match the nadir of engineering fiascos . . .”

“Look, I got you a Stark phone right away, so you’ve never had to deal with the horror of—”

“SHIELD gave me a Motorola.”

Tony gave a theatrical shudder and Steve grinned as he added, “It had buttons.” A pause. “I liked the buttons.”

“You’re hopeless! A lost cause! Touch screen technology is—”

Tony was startled to find that being on a date with Steve felt normal. Natural.

Tony teased Steve and Steve teased back, just as they had done for what felt like forever but was probably only a few weeks. Now that Steve’s first bout of nerves had passed, it felt stunningly
familiar except for occasional little moments: like that shy, happy smile Steve had when there was a pause in conversation and he sat, just looking at Tony, like he was drinking him in; or the way they each left a hand on the table, so they could sometimes reach out to emphasize a point with a little pat or a squeeze or a subtle caress, eager to touch and relishing the newfound liberty but not quite willing to venture so far as to sit there holding hands.

Tony’s lost his train of thought.

Because it was so much the same, but so utterly different. Because he knew what it meant to Steve. And now he knew what it meant to him too.

Tony’s heart started beating faster and there was a warmth spreading from his chest and—.

(Shit! Don’t blush!)

“Would you excuse me?” Tony asked politely, gesturing down the hallway to the facilities.

“Of course.”

When Tony rose from the table, Steve stood with a shy, questioning look and Tony’s breath caught in his throat at how Steve it all was. As Tony gave Steve a sweet answering smile, it sent a thrill racing through Tony’s veins to think this conventional ritual now had a personal history, a special meaning intelligible only to the two of them.

“Be right back,” Tony murmured.

In the men’s room—or rather, ‘Signiori’—Tony used the facilities and splashed water on his face. His heart was beating a little too fast and it felt too warm; he unbuttoned his shirt a little more and, yep, there it was: a bright flush, the sub’s blush. (Fuck!) Tony swallowed. (Goddamn hyper-vasodilation.)

(“What are you whispering about!” little Tony demanded petulantly.

Two bright spots of color rose to his mother’s cheeks and Howard chortled, swinging his wife about playfully in his arms: “Ho-ho! See? This is why Mama can’t run the company—can’t keep a secret! Her pretty wanton cheeks would give up the game in the board room!”

“Hoo-waaaaaard,” Maria protested, batting at him with a little huff. “Honestly!”

Howard nuzzled her neck and added, “But we wouldn’t want her any other way, would we, Tony?”


Tony buttoned his shirt up all the way. He checked his phone, half expecting it to blare the Avengers Assemble or to be bursting with urgent R&D disaster emails from Pepper. There was nothing. Just his wallpaper: a photo of him with Pep and Rhodey squeezed into the frame, grinning like fools.

(Damn.) He was not going to tell Pepper that he got flustered on an amazing first date for no good reason and hid in the bathroom. (Whatever—he’d peed! That meant it wasn’t hiding . . . yet.)

With a defiant flick of the wrist, Tony undid the top two buttons of his shirt again and arranged the lapels, leaving his throat exposed. He returned to the table with a swagger and a swish in his step.

“No, Steve,” Tony said, waving his fork in the air, “it’s not just ‘good!’ Hot dogs in the park are ‘good!’ This is—”

(--‘orgasmic.’) Tony blinked. (Maybe use a different word . . .)

“—sensational! And I swear to God, if you take one more bite of my risotto, I’m stealing your last gnocci!”

“I always liked charcoal, and it was nice and cheap, but all the fixers made my asthma worse so —”

“Wait,” Tony said, “Fixers?”

Steve nodded. “Charcoal’s really soft—it’s a very pliant medium—but if you want a drawing to last, you have to treat it. So it was easier to go straight to pencils. I used to go to the Met and do pencil studies of the famous works. Even once we shipped out, I was drawing all the time. Just silly little sketches—you know, of the men or the countryside. Nothing special.”

Tony didn’t tell Steve that these drawings of his—‘nothing special’—were on display in the Smithsonian.
“Maybe we could go to the Met sometime,” Tony said, already thinking about which pieces in his fabulous (Pepper-curated) art collection Steve might like in his suite.

“Yeah? I’d like that,” Steve said, smiling.

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“Have you gentlemen decided on dessert?”

“I’ll have a cappuccino and the panna cotta,” Tony said.

The server looked expectantly at Steve who was hesitating.

“There used to be this amazing chocolate cake,” he said, glancing down at the menu again, “but I don’t see it.”

“Chocolate cake?” she said. “Not since I’ve worked here, I’m afraid.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Steve said hastily. “My mistake.”

“If you were interested in something like a chocolate cake, may I suggest the tiramisu?”

“Yes, thank you,” Steve said. “That will be fine.”

“You know I’m going to steal some of your tiramisu, right?” Tony asked as their server took her leave.

“Sure. Turnabout’s fair play,” Steve said, smiling.

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They lingered over coffee. The tables were mostly empty now and, over the course of their meal, the other diners had either kindly left them alone or failed to notice them entirely.

“Whenever you’re ready, gentlemen. Please take your time,” their server said, setting the bill down on the table and retreating.

“May I?” Steve asked, reaching for the check.

“Sure,” Tony said, “if I get to take you out for dinner tomorrow.”

Before Tony could even realize that tomorrow might seem a little over-eager, Steve had already said, “I’d be delighted” and given him a bright, happy smile.

Steve paid in cash again. Tony didn’t bother sneaking a look at the bill and the tip like he usually did. Tony judged a Dom on whether they’d stiffed the server—always a bad sign—but was unconcerned about Steve.

“Shall we?” Steve asked. Tony nodded and rose from the table, then felt a flicker of uncertainty about whether he should have waited for Steve to get his chair. Happily, Steve didn’t seem fussed about it.

“May I get your coat?” Steve asked, voice pitched low as they stepped into the little vestibule. He was standing very close. Tony’s heart gave a little jump as he nodded.

Steve pulled Tony’s long greatcoat from the hook and shook it out a little before holding it open and lowering it carefully to Tony’s height. Tony put his hands into the sleeves and Steve slid the coat up, then smoothed the fabric across Tony’s shoulders. Tony thought he might be near to blushing again. It was strangely intimate to let Steve help him into his coat. He’d had no idea—probably because he’d never let anyone do it before.

Steve shrugged into his own coat and held the door open, then hailed them a cab. As he held that door for Tony too, Tony realized he’d really never done this before: given someone permission to observe these sorts of courting rituals, agreed to this type of power exchange. Tony Stark—who’d checked just about every box on a master contract at least once, who’d been whipped, and caned, and banged hundreds of times in dozens of countries, who’d been there done that—had found something he’d never done, never wanted to.

(But he wanted to now. With Steve. And it was ridiculous to romanticize it, but—)

“200 Park Avenue, please,” Steve said to the cabbie as he took a seat.

(Don’t overthink it if it feels good. And everything was good and he wanted everything.)

“That’s Stark Tower,” the driver said with a snort.

(They were headed home.) He shuddered with anticipation, then frowned. (Shit! He hadn’t given Steve a contract! It had seemed too forward, but—)

“Yes, that’s right.”
(No, it was fine. They could talk through the ground rules, make a short contract, when they got back, it’d be fine. He’d—)

The driver looked at them in his rearview mirror.

“Ah! Right! Uh, Stark Tower. Commin’ right up!”

Steve looked down at Tony with an amused smile, but Tony was flustered and distracted. Steve’s smile fell.

“Tony? Everything okay?”

Deep breath. Tony swallowed.

“Yeah. Everything’s great.”

Tony scooted over and, after a moment’s hesitation, Steve put his arm around him. Tony curled closer and rested his cheek against Steve’s massive chest as Steve reached out to caress his hand.

There was something profoundly good about nestling in Steve’s arms and Tony found himself going loose and relaxed even as his mind raced with tantalizing possibilities: images of Steve’s naked body, a wide expanse of creamy skin; the thought of rope or restraints, secure around his wrists; the sound of smacking flesh and labored breathing. Tony licked his lips. There was warmth pooling in his belly, low and tight.

“Stark Tower.”

Steve checked the meter and handed over a bunch of bills. “Keep the change.”

“Wow! Thanks, man.”

Steve climbed from the cab, still holding Tony’s hand, holding him close, as they went into the Tower and crossed the lobby.

“May I see you to your door?” Steve asked in a low voice, as they stepped into the elevator.

“Please,” Tony said, head dropping down to the side. Steve was still stroking the back of his hand. It was terribly distracting when Tony was trying to make plans: what sort of contract to offer (maybe just set out the firm limits?) and how best to frame his invitation to please come inside . . .

At the penthouse, they walked hand-in-hand down the hallway, Steve’s other hand a warm pressure at the small of Tony’s back. When they reached the threshold to Tony’s bedroom, Steve paused. Before Tony could start talking contracts, firm limits, and seductive offers, Steve said softly: “I believe you offered me a kiss.”

“So I did,” Tony murmured and draped himself alluringly against the wall.

With a smile, Steve bowed and brought Tony’s hand to his lips, kissing it just above his knuckles.

“A kiss like that?” Steve asked as he straightened once more. There was something boyish and playful dancing in his eyes and lingering in his voice. Tony was delighted.

“Oh,” Tony purred, “you can have more than that.”

“Golly!” Steve’s eyes went wide. “Can I?”

Steve smiled as he took a step closer, coming into Tony’s space. He braced one hand against the wall and slowly leaned down to kiss Tony on the cheek. Just that—the warmth of him, the smell of him, the touch of his lips, his body so close—sent Tony’s heart racing.

“Oh,” Tony repeated as Steve drew back, only half-feigning breathlessness, “you can have more than that.”

“Aw yeah?” Steve asked, his accent all Brooklyn, his warm breath ghosting against Tony’s cheek.

Tony shivered and closed his eyes.

Steve pressed a little closer, the length of his body so close Tony could practically feel it. (He wondered if Steve were growing as achingly hard as he was, but couldn’t make himself move to find out; he wanted to let Steve . . .) Tony dropped his head to the side, exposing his neck.

“Tony,” Steve murmured. He reached up to caress Tony’s cheek with a large warm hand, then tipped Tony’s chin up. Tony’s eyelids fluttered up and he found himself looking into Steve’s wide blue eyes, their faces close together.

“You’re beautiful,” Steve whispered, stroking Tony’s cheekbone with his thumb. He licked his lips. Then his eyes slid closed and he tilted his head to the side, cupping Tony’s face tenderly in his hands as he brought their lips together.

It was just the barest brush of lips before Steve drew back for a moment, his breath hitching. He moved a hand to cradle the back of Tony’s neck, then leaned down again to press his lips firmly to
Tony’s.

Tony let out a helpless little noise. He parted his lips, wanting Steve’s tongue in his mouth, hot and demanding, wanting Steve’s body curled over his, taking him and—

Steve pulled away.

(Huh?)

“Wow,” Steve breathed, their faces still close together. He ran his thumb over Tony’s cheekbone again, then took a little step back.

“Thank you so much for a wonderful evening,” Steve said, still sounding breathless. “I had a great time. But it’s late now; I should go.”

(Wait, no— What?)

Steve leaned down to kiss Tony on the cheek again, faster, more chastely, half-furtive as if he just couldn’t resist.

“I’m already eager for tomorrow,” Steve said warmly. He looked shy as he added, “Thank you for asking me.”

Tony nodded very slightly, mind still racing; Steve let go and took two steps away.

“Good night, Tony.”

Tony’d been ready with the sultry invitations, the “you can have more than that” again and again until the joke got old, but now all that came out was a soft, “Good night, Steve.”

Steve’s smile looked like happiness—not a blinding, flashy sort of joy, but something soft and shy and gentle—and Tony could feel his own smile matching it, even as he watched Steve walking away and the elevator doors closing on his smiling face.

It was all right. It had been a good date. A wonderful date.

And they had another tomorrow night.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit of a struggle (as you may have seen on tumblr). So—because I'm feeling anxious—just a polite reminder that I ask not to receive concrit. When I post a chapter I consider it final and negative comments just get me down. If you object to something in the chapter, I ask that you kindly not tell me so. Thank you!

Thank you for reading! I really hope you enjoyed it!

*fidget, stop, parade rest*
WARNINGS: racism, including new modes of historical racism unique to this AU

There is a lot of world-building to do in the next few chapters and there will be more, so if there are some things that are unclear in this chapter they should become clearer as the narrative progresses… Particularly there will be more about contracts.

Huge massive thank you’s to all my cheerleaders and idea-bouncers, especially Ergane, thigmotaxis, and Nonymos, who wrote me beautiful gift fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Naomi Jacobs’ outstanding book, Seeing Beyond: the Life and Work of Samuel Freedman, tells the story of Samuel Freedman (nee Thomas) and his anthropological work on race and colonialism in the 1920s. Born into a wealthy plantation family in South Carolina, Samuel Thomas—later Freedman—had every educational advantage his family could provide, even after he presented as a submissive. He attended Harvard for both his B.A. and his Ph.D. and—unable to secure funding for travel abroad—did his doctoral work on his family estate, interviewing former slaves and their descendants. Through a combination of interviews and attentive reading of historical documents, he theorized that differences in methods and medical practices between cultures created a misperception of “extreme kink.”

As Samuel Freedman’s research revealed, the Europeans who practiced blood play historically did so without proper hygiene or adequate medicine, leading the practice to have a high rate of infection and giving blood play a reputation as a brutal and savage practice that put submissives at risk of severe harm or death. In the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, however, strong hygienic practices and an advanced understanding of available medicinal herbs, made blood play and ritual scarification a low-risk and widespread practice. Early European anthropologists—misunderstanding or indifferent to the difference in methods and results—used the widespread practice of blood play to characterize African Dominants as barbaric, cruel, and dangerous. (The much criticized Ericson Scale, which ranks sexual practices from ‘mild’ to ‘extreme,’ perpetuated and entrenched these misconceptions.) Moreover, Freedman suggested that Europeans had failed to distinguish between the patterns of scarification marking the achievements of Dominant warriors and those bestowed on submissives at marriage (an assumption that, as later scholarship demonstrates, was used as evidence for the African Dominant’s ‘secret desire for submission to a Master race.’) Freedman theorized these ‘cultural errors’ in his doctoral studies in 1921 and developed his work into a monograph. As a graduate student, Freedman faced systemic orientationist discrimination and was ultimately unable to secure academic employment or funding for his research. Neither these findings nor his refutation of the Ericson Scale were published and they went unacknowledged until now.

When Tony ambled blearily towards the kitchen early the next morning—he’d had no one to keep him up late, after all)—he could hear Steve singing softly to himself.

“Don’t stay out late . . . got no place to go . . . I’m home about eight, just me and my radio . . .”

Steve was making eggs—Tony could smell them frying—and just hoped Steve had made coffee. Lots of coffee.

“Ain’t misbehaving . . . savin’ my love for you, for you, for—"

Steve went quiet and turned at the sound of Tony’s footsteps. He smiled at Tony. (That smile. The special one.)

Tony smiled back, then opened his mouth in a jaw-cracking yawn. “Morning, babe.”

“Good morning, Tony.” Steve said the words, soft and intent, like they were code for something more profound and he just keep gazing and smiling and--

The eggs in the skillet hissed and Steve turned hastily back to the stove, saying over his shoulder, “I’m making eggs, but can fix you something else. And there’s coffee in the pot. I’m guessing you’d like some.”

“Mmm,” Tony mumbled vaguely, shuffling closer.

With his right hand, Steve reached up for the chipped I<3NYC mug Tony loved while still tending the eggs with the spatula in his left. Tony plastered himself to Steve’s back, cheek pressed to Steve’s shoulder blade, and looped his arms about the man’s waist. Steve took in a startled little breath and went stiff. Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve’s back and gave his middle a little squeeze; Steve glanced over his shoulder at the doorway.
“Uh,” Steve said, flipping his eggs. “Did you want some breakfast?”

Tony sighed and unpeeled himself.

“Just coffee,” he said, but he’d hardly taken a step away when Steve grabbed his hand and darted down to place a chaste, furtive kiss on Tony’s cheek. Tony smiled.

“Just coffee,” Steve said. “Got it.”

He poured it and set it on the counter for Tony. (Though, really, Steve could have handed it to him. Wouldn’t be a problem.)

Tony took a long sip of coffee and leaned against the counter, watching Steve fuss over his breakfast.

“So,” Tony said, with a bit of a smirk as his brain started coming back online. “It’s my turn to take you out for dinner tonight.” Another sip of coffee. “Any ideas where you’d like to go?”

Steve shrugged. “Nope. I’m not picky.”

“Mmmn.”

“I’m sure anything you pick out will be lovely.”

The coffee was strong; it always was when Steve made it.

“So hey,” Tony said as Steve plated his eggs. “Here’s a thought! How about we start things up a little early—I was thinking we could go to the Met this afternoon and then go for dinner. What do you think?”


“Appointment?” Tony repeated. “What appointment? We haven’t got anything with SHIELD for almost a week. Unless they’re bringing you in for special solo meetings which, depending on their reasons, might be a crappy thing to do and—”

“No. Not with SHIELD.” Steve reached for the coffee pot, then paused. “With Dr. Jefferson.”

“Oh!”

Steve poured himself coffee and went to sit at the counter.

“Oh, great!” Tony said, a little too brightly and a little too enthusiastically. ‘Hey, say ‘hi’ to her for me, would you?”

Steve nodded, still looking kinda uneasy.

“So,” Tony said, “what time shall we go dinner? Seven okay again?”

Steve relaxed a little and nodded. “Seven sounds good to me.”

Tony reached across the table for Steve’s hand, wanting to touch and reassure him that—

“Hey, Cap! Smells good,” Clint said, wandering into the kitchen and yawning.

Steve and Tony jerked their hands apart.

“You make enough for two?” Clint asked.

“Not really,” Steve said apologetically, “but I could make more.”

“Nah. Cereal’s cool.” Clint grabbed a bowl. “Hey, Tony. We still on for sparring this afternoon?”

“Yep,” Tony said, trying not to resent Clint’s arrival. “Gonna crush you.”

“You wish, man! Nat and I have been working on new moves. You won’t know what hit ya!”

Tony rolled his eyes and took a sip of coffee.

“Sir? A call from Lt. Colonel Rhodes for you. Shall I put him through?”

“Ok! No, wait. I’ll take it in the workshop; tell him I’ll call him back in five,” Tony said, relieved to escape the awkward air of the kitchen. He looked at Steve and Clint and shrugged, “I’d better take this.”

“Later,” Clint said, diving into his Cornflakes.

“I’ll see you later, Tony,” Steve said. Tony paused and stood for a moment, smiling.

“Yeah,” Tony said, holding in the breathy looking forward to it that tried to escape.
As Tony headed for the elevator, he held back a frown. They should really decide when—and how—to tell the team they were dating. And soon. Otherwise it would get weird. (Weirder than that just was.)

And Tony needed to give Steve a contract—preferably well before their date. (Like, with enough time in advance that Steve could read and digest it and make his own plans . . .) And Bruce wanted Tony to come for lunch and stop by his lab to look at something. And he had training with Clint. And he needed to actually plan a date!

(Shit. Today was looking busy all of a sudden.)

But first things first—time to call Rhodey.

Tony snorted. He had a pretty good idea why the man had called.

“Boooop!”

Tony gave Dummy a little salute and readjusted the bowtie.

“Okay, J,” Tony called. “Video call to Rhodey.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Hey, Tones. How you doin’?” Rhodey said as his smiling face flashed up on a glowing screen.

“Pepper called you, didn’t she?” Tony asked with a grin.

Rhodey snorted. “Oh, she mighta done that thing I hate where she calls and says, ‘so, have you talked to Tony lately?’ and when I say it’s been, like, a week she’s all ‘okay, nevermind, talk to you later!’ making it damn clear that she was only calling to talk about you AND that it’s about something you called to tell her first,” Rhodey shook his head with clear disapproval.

“Not that I’m competitive or anything!” Rhodey added. “If Pepper and I did have some sort of weird friend rivalry—which we don’t—I’d obviously be winning, as the one who has known you for, like, a decade longer.”

Tony smirked. “I think Pep would resent you rounding up from six years to a decade.”

“No. See this? We’re not doing this,” Rhodey mimed grabbing something from the air and throwing it away. “So, are you gonna tell me your news or what?”

Tony glanced down. He could feel the telltale tingling that meant he might blush, but it was just Rhodey so whatever. (Seriously, he’d spent most of college blushing at the man, so yeah. Whatever.)

Tony smiled, and looked up as he said, “I had a date last night.”

Rhodey’s face lit up. “Aaaaaand?”

“And it was really good.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Of course it was! You wouldn’t be making that face and telling me about a bad date.” A pause. “So? Who’d you go on a date with?”

Tony was still smiling as he said, “Steve.”

“Whoo-hoo!” Rhodey whooped and fist pumped. “I knew it! I fucking knew it!”

Tony blinked.

“You did?”

Rhodey was grinning.

“Oh,” Rhodey admitted, holding his hands up. “Maybe I didn’t know know, but just watching him with you I was pretty sure there was something there, at least on his side. And I just thought, ‘Finally, a Dom worth Tony’s attention.’ Was just hopin’ you’d notice.”

Tony fidgeted a little as Rhodey looked at him, expression soft as he added, “I’ve only ever wanted to see you happy, Tones. Ever since MIT.”

(’Ever since I broke your heart,’ you mean.)

Tony swallowed.

“Well,” Tony said with a little huff, “don’t start humming the wedding march or anything. It was one date; we’re not on the verge of riding off into the sunset.”

“Yeah, sure,” Rhodey said with a shrug. “But a good date is a good date. Now tell me ‘bout it.”
Rhodey’d had to go soon—family stuff again—but he rang off with a soft “good to see you so happy, Tones” that made Tony blush again.

(Okay. Time to tackle that to-do list.)

Tony poured himself a fresh cup of coffee.

(First things first.)

“JARVIS? Make a reservation for two at 7:30 at . . . .” He frowned. “Let’s just try every restaurant in New York City with three Michelin stars.”

There was a long pause.

“There are currently six restaurants with three stars in the area,” JARVIS replied. “You wish a reservation at each of them?”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know what kind of food Steve will be in the mood for.”

“I suppose it’s impossible to inquire.”

“Lay off the sass! I like the idea of giving him some options in the moment.”

“Very well, sir,” JARVIS said. “Might I remind you that such reservations are notoriously hard to get?”

“Oh please,” Tony waved the remark away. “Make it in my real name.”

These sorts of restaurants all catered to the rich and famous, but Tony was super-rich and super-famous, so there was no way—

(Shit.) Tony frowned and bit his lip.

Highly rated Michelin restaurants were know for their clientele—the chances of an optimistic paparazzo getting a shot of them on the way in was high. Their fellow diners probably wouldn’t bat an eyelash at their illustrious co-patrons, but ‘probably’ was still leaving things to chance.

“Nevermind, J! Only book the places that have private rooms. And arrange for us to come in through a more discreet entrance if possible. Let me know what they’ve got.”

The food was gonna blow Steve’s mind.

Unless the pretentious menus were too much of a distraction—who wanted potato to be a “foam” anyway? Idiotic ’swells,’ that’s who.

(Shit.) Tony frowned and bit his lip.

Miss Martin’s Guide to Etiquette and Dating for the Sophisticated Submissive

Many bright young submissives have asked me if they may approach the delicate topic of a fiancé’s—or sweetheart’s—particular marital desires. We may know from intimate conversations
with our mothers, sisters, or married friends the array of possibilities for these marital pleasures.
(The more provocative of our reading material alludes to such delights as well!)

From this, many a young submissive takes a particular liking to certain acts or items—the use of rope or rod, perhaps—or an aversion to these things. This is on some level understandable. They ask, ‘Miss Martin, how can we know if our suitor’s preferences match our own, lest we ask?’

Some even suggest adopting the exotic and legalistic customs of the Orient!

To these inquisitive young things, I say think first of your love. Is he kind? Gracious? A good provider? Respectful? If not—if you fear (like an Oriental sub) you’d require a binding contract to curb his brutality—he is no fit husband! In these modern times and with the freedom of an American, you are able to choose only the sort of Dominant who will cherish your submission like the gift that it is.

But if he is a good man and you wish to marry him—and only then, I trust would his desires be relevant!—would something so petty as a prejudice for (or against) rope or rod truly be an obstacle to your love? A kind and loving husband will not inflict any form of Domination you cannot embrace. But you are as yet unschooled in these things. You may find that after an initial reluctance you come to love the rod or rope and your initial apprehensions were groundless. And wherever possible, isn’t your love such that you wish your desires to mold to his? His pleasure will be your own pleasure. Surely it is right that we strive to yield all we can to those worthy Dominants who care for and cherish us so dearly!

So, gentle readers, be not prejudiced. Trust the goodness and gallantry of your Dominant and marital affairs shall work themselves out joyfully in time!

It had taken two pots of coffee and more brain-ache than he’d like to admit, but he’d finally managed to cross something off the list. Date: check! Now on to the next thing . . .

“Jarvis?” Tony said.

“Sir?”

Tony bit his lip and nearly dropped his head to the side, which was ridiculous because it was just him and JARVIS, and yet—

“Would you pull up the Master Contract for me please, J?” Tony asked, voice a little softer than usual.

JARVIS, insightful as ever, replied at the same volume: “Of course, sir.”

Tony was bathed in the blue glow of his floating schematics, surrounded entirely with charts, rows, columns, and notes. It was a huge amount of data. After all, a Master Contract was meant to be exhaustive.

Tony spun in a slow circle, taking it all in. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever looked at the whole thing at once before.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He’d looked at it the first time around, typing it by hand—compiling it from sample charts in honest-to-God paper books that he’d gotten from the library at MIT in the days before the internet. Thinking like an idiot that if he could give his crush a full, grown-up contract—

(“Why won’t you take it?” Tony asked desperately, holding out the thick sheaf of paper. He’d followed Rhodey out into the hall.

Rhodey groaned. “You know why! Come on, Tones. Knock it off. We’re just not compatible.”

“We could be! I’m into lots of stuff! Even blood play!”

Rhodey’s expression went pinched and he asked sharply, “Why you assume I’m into that?”

“No reason! I don’t! Uh, I just mean, I’m into some really intense stuff! But we don’t have to do all that. Low-scale stuff is good too! Just think about it!”

Tony tried to press the contract into Rhodey’s hands and watched helplessly as the Dom took a hasty step back.

“Tony, you’re fifteen! You shouldn’t even be reading about some of this stuff yet!”

Rhodey shook his head, more sad than angry.

“I don’t know what else to say, but this has gotta stop. It’s not about what you’re into or not into or how old you are. I told you: I’m only attracted to female subs. That’s not gonna change, Tones. If you can’t accept that, then we can’t be friends.” He shook his head again and held up his hands. “Up to you. But this? This has gotta stop. Your call.”

Tony stood, wringing the contract in his hands, watching silently as Rhodey turned on his heel.
Tony swallowed thickly and shook the memories away. (Seriously, what had Rhodey ever seen in him?) He’d burned the paper copy as soon as he got back to his room—and nearly set off the dorm’s fire alarms—but he couldn’t bring himself to delete the file. The optimistic little voice whispering ‘maybe for somebody else . . .’ somehow managed to win against the clamorous shouts of ‘if Rhodey doesn’t want me, nobody will ever want me’ and ‘I’ll never want anybody ever again!’ After all, he told himself he could always delete it later.

But he never did.

Instead, once he’d created JARVIS, he’d just added little notes and corrections, one at a time as he discovered new things that worked or didn’t.

Really, the Master Contract was for JARVIS. Just a master file where Tony stored notes and preferences from which J could help him whip up a speedy little contract for a night or a weekend. A template. J was the only person who’d ever seen the whole thing.

The rows of the first chart listed various kinks; the columns, Tony’s enthusiasm for them. Some people liked to give these things rankings, but Tony preferred to present his kinks alphabetically for his Dom’s convenience and since, really, his enthusiasm for a kink depended so much on the scene or the person.

The next chart repeated the alphabetical list of kinks while the columns detailed Tony’s experience levels with them. There were links to various little notes like “historically, didn’t combine well with a blindfold” or “particularly enjoyed with suspension bondage.”

And for extreme extra clarity, there was an entire chart that repeated hard limits, the things Tony had taken entirely off the menu: scat and subspace. Scat because the thought of excrement in play gave him a shudder of revulsion—not the sexy, humiliated kind—and subspace because—

“Tony?”

“Screens blank!”

JARVIS complied and Tony spun to face Bruce with a (perhaps somewhat manic) grin.

“Hey, Bruce!”

Bruce blinked. “Ah, am I interrupting?”

“Nope! It’s fine! Just a side project. But you’re early, aren’t you? I thought we were meeting around lunchtime.”

“Tony, it’s 1 pm.”

“Oh.” (Huh.) Must have been on the phone with Rhodey longer than it seemed . . . And planning that date took forever. (Mostly through indecisiveness. Once he’d finally thought to call Leila things came together pretty fast, though.)

“Okay! Well, I’m free now. Food? And what’s this project you wanted to show me.”

“Just something I’ve been working on,” Bruce said.

“Little vague, Brucie Bear.”

“Well, let’s get some lunch.”

When they got to Bruce’s floor, Tony smelled his favorite pizza even before he saw the boxes, but

“I don’t see any salad,” Tony said, tone accusing. “You always try to make me eat salad. What’s going on?”

Bruce spread his hands helplessly and made an apologetic grimace. “I know when to pick my battles? Sorry. Apparently, I’m totally transparent. Have some pizza.”

Tony pulled two slices onto a plate, long gooey strings of cheese making a mess on the counter.

“I’m not gonna like this project, am I?” Tony said.

“Who could say, really?” Bruce said, then shook his head. “I have a feeling you’ll hate it.”

Bruce picked up a slice of pizza and looked at the ceiling. “JARVIS? If you would?”

Tony squinted at the floating screens, while Bruce rambled nervously:

“So, I was going to name it—something like ‘the sentinel’ or ‘the watchman’ or something, but all of that sounded sort of evil sci-fi and I didn’t want to jinx it. You know, in case giving it a name that could sound creepy might make it develop a mind of its own and turn to evil and then we’d—"
“Is this a containment unit?” Tony asked incredulously. “For the Hulk?!”

Bruce’s look was pained and sheepish.

“What are those vents for and—oh my God, those are spigots! And that chemical formula?! You—” Tony was halfway between openmouthed gaping and good old fashioned yelling: “You want to build a containment unit and try to gas the Hulk??”

“No?”

“Tony—”

“No! Nope. Nuh-uh.” Tony waved at the diagrams. “Bad idea! We already have a plan!”

Bruce grimaced. “The magical power of trust and friendship and love?” Bruce glared. “Forgive me if I’d like to have a backup plan!”

“I’m sorry, am I the only one who got the memo? Isn’t the Other Guy’s whole deal that he’s indestructible?”

“Doesn’t mean he can’t be contained.” Bruce said, urgently, “Between my chemical knowledge and your engineering genius, we—”

“I’m flattered, really I am!” Tony said, tone snide. “But if you think that I can build a containment unit strong enough to withstand the Hulk and hold in whatever toxic fumes you think are strong enough to sedate him, well, you ought to have your head examined! And when—not if—he breaks the seal on my device, where do you think these chemicals will go?”

“Okay, good. Good! We’re brainstorming! You’re right.” Bruce said, voice frantic, “So, it has to be an injection—direct into the—”

“Oh my God, do you hear yourself?!” Tony slammed his hand down on the counter. “If this is the attitude you’re gonna take then of course we’re going to fail!”

Tony took a deep breath and tried to speak more calmly. He wasn’t good at it. “Look. We’ve been over this. We have a plan. The plan is good. For once, there’s a plan and I like it. It’s a good plan. Hear this? This is me. Wanting to stick to a plan!”

“Yes, right.” Bruce agreed, looking so agonized Tony felt his heart twist. “The plan! Agreed. It’s good. I’m not saying we should abandon it, just we could build something that—”

“My God man!” Tony burst out. “I’m an engineer, not a miracle worker!”

Bruce blinked, then let out a startled laugh.

“Did you really—? Did you just pull a Bones?” Bruce asked, starting to laugh a little harder.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I did.”

They both laughed and it maybe sounded a little nervous, but it still cleared the air.

“Look.” Bruce said softly when they’d calmed. “I didn’t mean to disrespect the plan. But Tony, I’m begging you. Help me create something. Anything at all—as a back-up measure.”

Tony sighed.

“As a last resort?” Tony asked. “If we’re absolutely desperate and need to help you before someone comes to dire harm?”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

“Fine.” Tony picked up his pizza. “I’ll play around with it for you. With you. But the plan stays in place.”

“Absolutely! Agreed.” Bruce sat down at the counter. “Thank you, Tony.”

Tony snorted. “There’d better be ice cream.”

It was good. Working with Bruce was good. At least, it was after he let Tony name the project ‘Operation Security Blanket’ and swore a few more times that he hoped they wouldn’t need it and
had (at least some) faith in The Actual Plan.

The deployment satellite for Security Blanket was easy—there were plenty of those around they could just adapt. It was the unique mechanism that was hard to come up with.

“Maybe something like a capsule? That would close on the ground under his feet too?”

“Or what about a dome with really deep spikes? He’d have to dig out, but it’d slow him down . . .”

“Or a net maybe?”

“What about an actual blanket? Hmm? A security blanket?!?!?”

That was the tricky part: the actual mechanism. But unexpectedly, it was kinda fun. And, really, the idea of Big Green wriggling around in a fuzzy pink and blue blanket with duckies on it made of triple reinforced adamantium and elasticized poly-aramid was . . . well. It was a lot less depressing than the way the whole thing had started out, that was for damn sure.

They finished the ice cream.

And, every now and then, if Tony was a little distracted and took out his tablet to deal with a few little things before getting back to work . . . well, Bruce certainly didn’t complain.

Dear Steve, Here’s my contract. Just in case you were wondering. All best, Tony

(Ugh.)

Hey, Steve! So, here it is. I know it’s really long, but no pressure. You know—we scientists like to be thorough. Anyway, there it all is. No

He’d started to type ‘no big deal,’ but it was. This was his full contract. It was a big deal. But he wanted Steve to have it.

“I know we were just joking around,” Bruce said, pulling Tony from his thoughts. “But I honestly am starting to like this elasticized poly-aramid idea. Is that crazy? It’s crazy, right?”

Tony grinned. “No more crazy than Big Green.”

“Sir? Agent Barton asks that I remind you of your training appointment. It is nearly four.”


Tony clutched his tablet to his chest, heart kicking it up fast.

“Sorry, Bruce. Gotta dash. And change and, you know, emails. And stuff.”

“Huh?” Bruce looked back up from his schematic. He pushed his glasses into place. “Yeah. Sure. And Tony? Thanks. Thanks for working on this.”

“Yeah. We’ll figure something out. But, uh, now I’d better go. Later!”

(Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!)

He should have sent his contract to Steve hours ago. In the elevator, he tapped his fingers against the arc reactor, a staccato of shit shit shit shit shit.

He still didn’t know what to say.

Up in his suite he hastily changed into his workout clothes and then perched on the edge of the bed, tablet balanced across his knees.

Steve. Ever since

Dear Steve, There’s no one else I’d

Dear Steve, So, here’s my contract. I hope you like it. Just let me know if you have any questions. I know this is a lot. It’s fine if you’re only into some of it. None of it is required or anything. I just wanted it to be complete. Really. I’m very flexible about—

(FUCK!)

It was too warm. The thought of sending it made his heart race and his cheeks heat; the thought of not sending it made something cold and painful twist in his belly.

Tony deleted every dumb, pointless word he’d barfed up so far.

“Sir? Agent Barton asks—”

“Tell him I’m almost there! I just need a couple of minutes!”
But that was a blatant lie. Hours more and he still wouldn’t know what to say so—

Tony typed five little words and hit send.

A tremor ran through his body.


He felt a little lightheaded. (Must have stood up too fast).

In the elevator, he took off his sweatshirt and was relieved to find his temperature (and color) dropping to normal again. Another deep breath.

“You ready?” Clint called as soon as Tony stepped into the training room.

“Born ready!” Tony shot back.

“Good. ‘cause I’m gonna kick your ass extra hard for being late.”

“You wish!”

Clint rolled his shoulders and said, more seriously, “Ok. We were working on rushes, so you start then we’ll trade.” Then he grinned and waved his hands. “Come at me ‘bro!”

Tony snorted and stepped onto the mat.

(Focus.)

Tony lunged.

“Focus!”

“Ouph!” Tony hit the mat hard. Clint grinned down at him.

“Where’s this ass-kicking I was promised?” he asked.

Tony sighed (hoping it sounded defeated) then looped a leg through Clint’s and used the shoulder lift Natasha’d showed him.

Clint blinked, surprised, as Tony flipped him over hard.

“HA!” Tony cried, triumphant but in seconds he hit the mat again.

“Gotcha.” Clint grinned. Tony huffed and tried the leg move again but Clint expected it and blocked him. (Damn it!)

“Not bad,” Clint said, standing and offering Tony a hand. Tony glared at it and glanced over at the clock. 4:45. (Would Steve have read his contract by now? Probably, right? I mean, you didn’t just leave something like that sitting in your inbox, right?)

“—went well, but your focus and follow through needs to be more consistent. Hey!”

Tony stood abruptly.

“You okay?” Clint asked, squinting at him.

“Yeah! Of course.”

“Then get your head in the game.”

Clint rushed him.

Clint threw a towel at Tony’s face while he took a long drink from his water bottle.

“Now you know I try to be a supportive trainer,” Clint said.

Tony grunted.

“But today, was not that awesome. Seriously, man, what gives? You sure you’re okay?”

“I just felt bad for beating you so badly last time,” Tony said. “Had to let you reclaim some dignity.”

“Oh is that all,” Clint said. “Well in that case I guess I should be grateful.”

(It was well after five. Steve must have read it by now, right?)

“—with Nat and really ought to see about a group session with Cap—”
Maybe he’d write back? Maybe there’d be an email in Tony’s inbox. Maybe Steve was making plans . . .

Tony wiped his face. (Shit! Don’t blush.)

Tony turned and refocused on what Clint was saying.

“—but we can sort that out later with the others.”

Clint tossed his towel in the basket.

“So,” Clint said, “apparently there’s a new burger joint super close to the Tower. Supposed to be good. What do you say? Wanna go check it out? Grab burgers and beers?”

“Tonight?” Tony asked startled.

“I mean, after we shower, but—” Clint shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“Oh. Uh, tonight I can’t,” Tony said fumblingly. “There’s a thing.”

“No worries. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said, resisting the urge to check email on his phone. “Tomorrow’s cool.”

“Sweet. Well, I’m gonna hit the showers. Later, Tony!”

“Later!”

Tony dashed for the elevator and looked at his phone. No new emails. (Well, none that mattered.)

“JARVIS? Has Steve gotten my contract?”

“He has, sir.”

Tony’s stomach gave a little flop.

“What time is it, J?”

“5:27, sir.”

(Darn.)

“Workshop, J.”

Time to kill some time.

> To: Steven Grant Rogers
> From: Tony Stark
> Subject: my contract

I trust you.

yours,

Tony

Attachment: tony.stark.master.contract.siif

Tony squinted at the notes for project Security Blanket. (Maybe he needed an hour to get ready too?)
“Ms. Ahmadi confirms your reservation for dinner and has marked a parking place for you behind the restaurant.”

“Great! Thanks, J!”

Tony bit his lip. He’d showered after training and laid out his clothes for this evening, but maybe he should go up and start—

(No. That was ridiculous. He’d spent an hour and a half grooming yesterday; it couldn’t possibly take an hour. He wouldn’t let it.)

“Hey, J! Gimme Bruce’s notes on the dome model.”

Tony checked his email on his phone. Still no reply.

“Of course, sir.” A pause. “Would you also like to set a timer or reminder?”

“Nah, it’s good. Not going deep here.”

(Maybe if they combined the dome model with the—)

“I see,” JARVIS said. “Very well, sir.”

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Tony glared at the schematics and sketches spread before him. Wasn’t like him to be so indecisive, but—

“Sir? Ms. Potts is on the line.”

“Put her through!”

“You might also like to know it is now quarter-to-seven.”

“What?! Shit!”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Hi, Tony,” Pepper’s voice filled the elevator.

“Pep! Pepper-pie! Pep my love!” Tony cried. “I’m kinda running late. Can I call you later?”

Pepper let out a little ‘humph.’

“I thought you’d call me earlier,” she said.

“Are you pouting?” Tony asked. “It sounds like you’re pouting.”

“Will you at least tell me if it went okay? I was starting to worry.”

“It was great! Awesome! Amazing! Like I told Rhodey, it was the perfect date.”

“So you talked to Rhody,” Pep said somewhere between teasing and exasperation.

Tony rolled his eyes and stripped out of his workshop clothes.

“Are you two doing that thing again?” Tony asked. “Because I seriously love it when you fight over me, but it would be even better if you could wrestle right in front of me. Preferably in skimpy little outfits. Or maybe—”

“Tony! Don’t be absurd. I was just concerned. And a little surprised you didn’t call.” A pause, then she said rather primly, “I’m glad you got to talk to Rhody about your date.”

“Date was perfect, Steve’s perfect, I promise I’ll tell you more later, but I’ve gotta finish getting dressed.”

Tony examined his goatee in the mirror; it was still perfect. Satisfied he left the bathroom and grabbed his trousers.

Pepper gasped. “Is it your second date already?! Now? The day after?”

“Yep!”

“What are you wearing?”

“The pale grey suit with a white shirt, two buttons popped open, onyx cufflinks, black Prada belt and dress shoes.”

“Mmm.”

“What do you mean, ‘mmmm?’” Tony asked indignantly, doing up the buttons on the white shirt a little more slowly.
“I just thought you’d wear the burgundy button down with the charcoal.”

“Wore it last night.”

“Oh! Well then.” Pep sounded pleased. “The light grey one is very nice. No tie?”

“What can I say? I’m a naughty boy. And Pep, I love you, but I’m—”

“—running late. Okay. Call me tomorrow?”

“Will do!”

“Good night. Have fun.” There was a definite leer in her voice.

Tony grinned. “Oh, I plan to.”

Tony checked his reflection over and grabbed his great coat.

(No time to obsess!)

Tony hurried for the elevator, swiping his phone open as he walked just to check.

“JARVIS? Tell Steve I’m on my way to pick him up.”

No new email. (That was fine, though. Totally fine.)

Tony tapped his fingers against the arc reactor: tap-tap-tap-tap-.

(Better to talk than email.)

Tap-tap-tap-tap.

(And actions spoke louder than words, so maybe Steve didn’t have anything to say, but he’d been thinking about what to do.)

Tony took a deep breath and put his hands in his pocket. The elevator doors opened.

“Hey, babe! You ready?” Tony called, stepping onto Steve’s floor.

“Coming!” Steve called back from down the hall. He hurried out wearing a lovely black suit and holding a large bouquet of flowers. Tony stared at them: red roses, yellow roses, and white stargazer lilies.

“I know you’re taking me out on a date tonight,” Steve said, a little shyly, “but I was on my way back from my appointment and passed a flower shop and thought it would still be okay to get you these.”

Tony’d gotten plenty of red and white roses in his time, but couldn’t remember getting yellow. (Or getting flowers before they’d gone to bed together.)

“I mean, I’m pretty sure people still give flowers in the twenty-first century, right?” Steve said it jokingly, but there was an underlying ripple of uncertainty as he stood holding out the flowers.

“Of course. They’re lovely,” Tony said, stepping forward to take them. “Thank you.”

Tony buried his face in the blossoms and looked up at Steve from the corner of his eye with his chin tipped down to the side.

“Saw the bouquet in the shop window and simply couldn’t resist?” he asked, a little teasingly.

“Oh no. I put these together myself.”

(Of course you did.)

Tony smiled and breathed in the heady scent of roses and lilies.

(And, yeah, he’d be looking up ‘language of flowers’ on his phone in the bathroom first chance he got, ‘cause that seemed like exactly the sort of thing Steve’d do . . .”)

“But, like you said, I’m taking you on a date,” Tony said. “So, why don’t we put these in some water and—”

Steve rushed to put the flowers in a pitcher, grabbed his coat, and hurried back to join Tony in the elevator. Tony found Steve’s haste ridiculously endearing; he rather liked seeing Steve sweetly flustered for him.

“So,” Tony said softly, sidling closer so his body almost brushed against Steve’s, “which car shall we take?”

“Whichever you like?” Steve said with a little shrug. “Uh, you’re taking me out, as I understand it.”
“Yeah,” Tony agreed, high and breathy. “But—” Tony laid a hand lightly on Steve’s chest and let his thigh brush against Steve’s as he murmured “—I’m asking which might please you most. The Benz? The Audi? The Lotus?”

Tony tilted his head down to the right and drew his left shoulder back just a little, showing off the taut muscles of his neck, the bare skin of his throat. He let his voice dip lower as he added, “Because I do so want to please you, Steve.”

Steve’s breath hitched. Tony glanced up and saw his Dominant’s notch bob slowly as he swallowed. The tips of his ears were pink.

“Uh, maybe the—” Steve swallowed again. “The Lotus?”

The elevator doors opened on the garage.

“Great!” Tony said brightly. He grabbed Steve’s hand and pulled him from the elevator.

“Follow me!”

Naomi Jacobs’ account of Samuel Freedman’s pioneering historio-anthropological research is outstanding on its own; however, Seeing Beyond also tells a remarkable love story, deftly balancing the two elements of the narrative.

In 1919 Lydia Freedman, a South Carolina Dominant of African heritage, met Samuel Thomas while he conducted interviews with her father and uncle early in his academic career. A brilliant and widely read autodidact, Ms. Freedman was struck particularly by his “bashful sweetness and fierce intelligence,“ and she courted him in a series of breathtaking letters that Jacobs has beautifully reproduced. After a prolonged courtship by correspondence, the couple met once more and formalized their engagement. They then fled South Carolina for New York where they married and Samuel took his Domme’s last name. After a period of initial struggle, they settled in Harlem where they opened a successful jazz café together and raised two children, Constance and Jeremiah.

Seeing Beyond: the Life and Work of Samuel Freedman is an outstanding book that shares the important work of a marginalized scholar and a story of love in adversity well deserving a place alongside the Lovings. It makes an important contribution to essential conversations about race, orientation, and history. We are delighted to welcome Ms. Jacobs’ work into the American History and Culture Series for 2013.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry there was so little Steve! And no date and no sexy times. But, you know, Tony has other friends and does other stuff and has a life and so on . . . . so yeah. And he needed some time to make plans. More world-building about international and historical kink to come! (And some racism-rebuttal!) And, you know, also a second date. Anyway, hope you liked this . . .

.siif = Stark Industries interactive file. :-) 

The love story between Samuel Thomas and Lydia Freedman was inspired by the true story of Nichelle Nichols’ grandparents and told in her autobiography, Beyond Uhura. Her grandfather, born Samuel Gillespie in 1849, was the son of a rich slave owner; Lydia Myers was the daughter of ex-slaves. They married in 1878 and took the last name Nichols. Nichelle writes that they “loved each other passionately” and describes her grandfather as “a man of unshakable resolve and clear moral vision.” Her account of their love filled me with hope. I highly recommend her autobiography.

I decided to start putting the out-takes and snippets all in one place and wrote one about Bucky and Steve. They can all be found here:
http://archiveofourown.org/series/297383

ALSO! Nonymos wrote the most beautiful story set in an AU of the P&P AU about D/D Steve/Bucky. WONDERFUL! You can read it here:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/4508121

Thanks so much for reading and for all your kind support!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

My thanks to Simurgh and Leila for their help and inspiration re: Persian cuisine! Shout outs also to: thatwhichyields (beta extraordinaire!); thigmotaxis (editing awesomeness!); and noman (who already knows why...?). All remaining mistakes are my own. And thanks to everyone for their kind and insightful comments on this story. They mean the world to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Dominant's Reader for Marital Matters

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Chapter 2

Having now completed the sexual reproduction section of this course—we trust you have taken to heart the gravity of these matters!—we now move on to recreational marital practices and safety.

A Few Ground Rules:

1) Do no harm. Only a cruel and stupid Dominant does lasting harm to his submissive—be it intentional or accidental—and he ought rightly be reviled by all the world for failing in his duties.

2) You are the Dominant. You must be in control, first and foremost of yourself. If you cannot be in absolute control of yourself, what right do you have to take control of another?

3) Conduct yourself in all things to command respect. It will be your submissive’s duty to submit to you; it is your duty to be worthy of that submission. You must be King, but never Tyrant.

4) Due to your submissive’s delicate and sensitive nature, she has emotional needs that may be foreign to your more resilient temperament. Show her kindness and patience, particularly in marital matters.

This course shall address only those sex practices rated at 5 or lower on the Ericson Scale. These practices pose little risk of harm, even in the hands of an inexperienced Dominant. We STRONGLY ADVISE AGAINST acts rated above a 5. Should you desire to undertake such acts—though we do not advise it—be aware that it will require a thorough course of study and, ideally, instruction from a trustworthy mentor or professional trainer. We repeat the first and most important of our ground rules: do no harm.

“So,” Tony said, as the Lotus purred down the street, “We’ve been doing quite the tour of international cuisine together, take-out-wise. Let’s see, we’ve hit Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Korean, Moroccan, and Mexican, right?”

Steve nodded.

“Yeah. So, since you’ve seemed pretty into it, I thought we could add another cuisine to the list. Normally you can’t get a reservation here the day of, but I know the owners so, even though they’re fully booked, they were kind enough to set something up.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “I hope they didn’t go to any trouble.”

Tony smiled and checked his rearview mirror. “Nah. If it were too much trouble, Leila’d have no qualms about telling me to piss off.”

Tony dodged and wove around a few slow moving cars; he took a sharp and daring left into the alley next to the restaurant, then left again into the parking lot. As promised, there was an empty spot labeled “For Tony S.”

Tony led Steve to the back door of Café Leila and knocked.

An attractive man with lovely brown eyes and a neatly trimmed beard answered the door, wearing the white dress shirt and black slacks of a server’s uniform.

“Mr. Stark?” he asked.

“The one and only.”

“Do please come in,” he said. “I’ll let Ms. Ahmadi know that you and your guest have arrived.”

Steve glanced around the back hallway and took a deep breath. His eyes went wide.
“Smells amazing!” Steve said.

“Yep! You’re in for a treat,” Tony began, but now Leila was striding down the hall to greet them. Her hair was pulled back in a French braid. Her crisply pressed, plum colored blouse matched her lipstick.

“Mr. Stark,” Leila said, approaching with a quirked eyebrow and a sideways smile.

“Ms. Ahmadi,” Tony replied with a teasing little bow.

“Captain Rogers,” she said, turning to Steve with a polite nod. “It’s nice to meet you. Please follow me.”

“I could have found the upper solarium on my own, you know,” Tony pointed out as they trailed after her.

“Of course you could,” she agreed, “but then I wouldn’t get to ask if you’ve bothered to look at the year end report yet.”

“It’s only been the new year for two days!” Tony protested indignantly.

“And our fiscal year ended in November,” Leila reminded him. “Which you’d know if you bothered to open the mail we send you.”

“What’s with all the women in my life nagging me about financial reports?” Tony complained. “You! Pepper! Who’s next?”

“No doubt the next woman with whom you do business,” Leila said, leading them up the stairs to the solarium. It was usually—and understandably—closed in the winter, largely due to the expense of heating it to a pleasant level for seated customers. Tony had promised to make good on any extra expenses; Leila’d just sniffed and told him to be on time.

“Oh wow,” Steve said, eyes wide as he drank it all in. And with reason.

The solarium was beautifully designed to feel like a Persian garden on a small scale. At the center, stood a fountain and a pool of water lilies bordered by flowerbeds; around that were gravel paths, where the tables were arranged, and then another boarder of flowerbeds and small blossoming trees. The north, east, and west walls and had a trompe-l’oeil of a portico adorned with a vertical garden of succulents; the south wall was one huge window looking out on the park. It was less glorious than usual—only a few of the flowers in bloom—but lovely nonetheless.

Leila turned to Steve. “Mr. Stark tells me that this will be your first encounter with Persian cuisine, so Amir and I have taken the liberty of arranging a tasting menu for you both. Farhad will take good care of you. Welcome to Café Leila, Captain. Nooshe jan.” She turned to Tony. “Do try and open your mail, Mr. Stark.”

With an amused smile, Leila took her leave. Steve stood for a moment, blinking after her, then said with a grin, “So, I’ll bet she and Pepper get along.”

“Got it in one.”

“Thank you for bringing me here on our date,” Steve said looking around the solarium. “It’s amazing already.”

“Shall I get your chair?” Tony asked with a teasing smile. “Since I’m taking you on a date?”

Steve, who had already started to sit down, stood up. He cocked his head. “Would you like to?”

Tony paused for a moment then shrugged. “Not really.”

(He was glad Steve wouldn’t have minded, but really the idea did nothing for him.)

They took their seats without further ado. Their server arrived.

“My name is Farhad and it will be my pleasure to serve you this evening,” the handsome bearded Dom said with a slight bow. “To start, Mr. and Ms. Ahmadi would like to welcome you with some sangak and mast moosir.”

“Thank you,” Tony said.

Farhad took his leave.

“Dip the bread in the sauce—it’s delicious! Yogurt with wild garlic and awesomeness.”

Steve followed his lead and let out a happy “Mmmmm!!!”

Tony nearly preened. (Ok, stupid, it’s not like you actually made the food…)

“So, I take it you’re involved with the restaurant?” Steve asked, scooping up another generous portion of mast moosir.
Tony nodded. “Leila and Amir used to have a food truck near Stark Industries and Pep and I used to eat there all the time. It was so good it melted our brains. I used to get the shawarma—though, as it turns out that isn’t actually Persian, just something Americans expect from a Middle-Eastern-looking food truck. Oh! Have you had shawarma yet? We’ll get you some shawarma another time.”

“Anyway, Pep and I couldn’t believe they didn’t have a sit-down restaurant yet. Eventually found out that it was because they were having trouble with start-up capital and finding a space in such an expensive city and other morons eating their food hadn’t pounced on the investment opportunity. We did and they started Café Leila later that year.”

“That was really good of you,” Steve said, smiling at Tony.

Tony shrugged. “I know a good investment when I see one. Or in this case, taste one. Really, something had to be done. If they couldn’t get the startup capital for a New York restaurant, they were going to move to Chicago. Chicago!” Tony gave a mock shudder. “Anyway, I’ve been reaping the rewards ever since: Amir’s food in New York and a very tidy return on the original investment every year.”

“How can you sure about that?” Steve teased. “I thought you didn’t read the reports.”

Tony’s indignant retort was cut off by Farhad’s return with paneer sabze and dolmas for them to share.

(Things were off to a good start!)

“So,” Tony said, toying with his glass of shiraz once their pleasant chatter about the solarium, the Ahmads, and the food had died down. (What did you think of my contract?)

“Oh, how was your appointment?”

Steve’s eyes squinched up and his gaze dropped to the table. “Fine.”

(Oops. Well, no backing out now.)

Casually, Tony asked, “Did you remember to say ‘hi’ to Dr. Jeff for me?”

“Yeah.” Steve was frowning at the table. He did not elaborate.

“This was your third appointment, right?” Tony asked. “So, how are things going with her?”

“Fine.”

Tony held in a sigh.

Steve looked up after a few moments and added, “Pretty sure I’ve enjoyed that trip to the Met with you a lot more.”

Tony smiled, relieved. “We can go soon! I’ve got a project on tomorrow with Bruce, but soon. After all, the Met’s not going anywhere.”

“Thank God!” Steve said with a wry smile. “Don’t know what I’d do if that had changed too.”

“And we don’t have to stop at the Met!” Tony enthused. “We could fly to Paris! Or Florence if you want! Go to the Louvre or the Uffizi or wherever else!”

(Shit! Overkill!)

“Er, though,” Tony said, feeling awkward, “you’ve maybe already been.”

Steve gave a rueful smile and shook his head. “Wasn’t a lot of time for art when I was in Europe,” Steve said softly.

“Right,” Tony said, feeling like an idiot. “Of course.”

“I did get to see something while I was there, though.” Steve got a sort of far away look and his smile turned warmer. He took a sip of his wine. “We’d taken shelter on a farm in Northern France. It was winter—bitterly cold—and we were in occupied territory, and this old farmer made space for all fourteen of us, spread out in his cottage. He stayed up, smoking his pipe and watching the road for any sign of trouble, letting the men rest. I couldn’t sleep, so I was sketching.”

Tony nodded and leaned a little closer, afraid to do anything to shatter the moment. Steve hardly talked about the past, let alone the war. It felt significant. Special.

Steve continued: “He said, ‘Vous êtes artiste?’ I tried to say that I love art, but wouldn’t presume to call myself an artist. Even with Gabe’s lessons, my French probably wasn’t up to the task, but he still got up and said ‘suis moi.’ He led me into the loft of the barn where he showed me a large wooden crate. He told me to open it ‘doucement, très doucement.’”
Steve swallowed and blinked very rapidly a few times. "And there she was: Leonardo’s *Madonna on the Rocks*. Hidden in a barn to keep her from the Nazis. I stayed up with her all night. She was so beautiful and—" Steve took a rough breath and said thickly, "And there’d been so little time for beauty."

It was so easy to forget that for Steve the war—*World War II*—had been less than a year ago.

Tony had no idea what that particular painting looked like, but he could picture the rest of the scene so vividly: Steve on his knees in the hay with a lantern, gazing on the Madonna with rapt and hopeful devotion, tears standing in his eyes.

"I read about it when I woke up," Steve said in a low voice. "Did you know that not a single piece of art went missing? After the War, all the treasures of the Louvre made their way home. That farmer—he had a da Vinci. He could have been rich. Beyond rich! But instead he returned it. They all did." Steve smiled as he picked up his wine and took a sip, but the smile faded as he set it down and added, "The Jewish collections weren’t so lucky."

"Some of it has been successfully returned," Tony said tentatively after a moment of melancholy silence. "The Klimt portraits of Adele Bloch-Bauer were returned to her descendants."

(Thank you, Pepper, for that information.)

"Yeah," Steve said with a sad sigh and unfocused eyes.

Tony wished he had something more to say. Something hopeful. (How had their date turned so sad? Was this what Steve talked about in therapy?)

"Yeah," Steve repeated. "That’s something at least." He sort of shook himself and gave a dim smile. "Let’s talk about something else."

Tony nodded his wholehearted agreement.

(Oh, hey, speaking of trust . . . wanna talk about my contract?)

"Uh . . ."

"How was your day?" Steve asked, smile growing brighter. "What were you working on?"

"But it’s so frustrating, you know?" Tony said, waving his hands. "I kinda wanted to smack him!"

"Maybe don’t do that," Steve suggested with a hint of a smile.

Tony huffed. He kept trying to describe the engineering work he’d done earlier, but instead he just kept circling around to rant about how pissed he was at Bruce for his lack of faith in the plan.

"Just saying, his emo shit is so not cute. The plan is great. I like the plan." Tony shook his head. "And his own research shows it’s the best plan too! It’s not like I’m just dancing around singing ‘kumbaya, love, peace, la-la-la-la-la!’"

"I see why you’re frustrated," Steve said. "But I also understand why Bruce is worried. The Hulk is really powerful. And I don’t think Bruce knows where he ends and The Hulk begins; that’s a scary thing. It’s not just about trusting himself. And even if it were, sometimes it’s harder to trust yourself than the people you care about."

Steve gazed pensively into his wine glass.

(Oh, hey, speaking of trust . . . wanna talk about my contract?)

"Hey, Steve?" Tony began softly. Steve looked up with an attentive smile. "I, uh—"

Farhad arrived with their next course: a large plate of *tah dig* topped with *fesenjoon*.

"Since you are new to Persian cuisine, Captain," Farhad said, "Ms. Ahmadi suggested that I might explain the dishes to you."

"That would be great!" Steve said with bright enthusiasm.

Tony hated Farhad a little bit.

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**Section 3: Subspace**

*Submissives are capable of a passive erotic rapture—*raptus submissium*—known as ‘subspace.’*
Also, more colloquially known as “going dropsy,” “blushing out,” “spacing,” or “dipping,” among other more vulgar terms here omitted.) In this state, she is flushed and warm, and despite reaching a heightened state of erotic pleasure, her heart-rate will slow. Her eyes are dilated beyond their usual ability. You may recognize this state from great works of art—or—though we hope not—lewd photography.

This rapture is the crowning jewel of her womanly charms. She is beautiful, pliant, open: truly submissive. You will feel the complementary thrill of power and protectiveness, with heightened Domosterone and adrenaline, an accelerated heart rate: truly Dominant. A union of the orientations brought to highest perfection.

This state of heightened submission is an expression of her own natural desires; moreover, it is an expression of the faith she places in you to care for her. Every submissive is different—for some, this state comes quite easily, even perhaps unexpectedly at a firm word or a masterful touch. For others, it is a more delicate affair, one you must make every effort to cultivate, as we shall discuss in the following section. Sickness, lack of trust, and alienation of affection will prevent her from reaching this happy rapture and you from savoring this beautiful state.

In subspace, she is at her most lovely, but also her most vulnerable. Your blood will be up, but self-restraint is now of the utmost importance! A cutting word or sign of displeasure from you will wound her most deeply when she is in this most beautiful of states. Under no circumstances should you leave her alone! It is cruel and—depending on the acts you have initiated, like rope or manacles—dangerous to her wellbeing. On awakening from this state, she will be prone to hysteria and chills. Be comforting and gentle; have a blanket at the ready. She will long for your praise and affection, will thrill at every compliment; do not withhold your appreciation. As she ‘loves, honors, and obeys,’ you must “love, cherish, and protect.”

The food was magnificent; the wine, delightful. They’d talked about art, Stark Industries, engineering, cooking, and cuisine. At no point had Tony found an easy segue to his contract. A couple of times Steve had gotten this sweetly nervous look on his face and Tony’d felt certain that he was going to broach the topic, but no. Nope. Nada. Not yet.

(Fine. But at least there was something he could satisfy his curiosity about . . . )

“Would you excuse me, Steve?”

“Of course.” Steve twitched—(almost stood up?)—but he kept his butt planted in his seat and looked up at Tony with a smile.

Tony made his way to the facilities and barely managed to keep his phone in his pocket until he got there. Just for good measure, he went into a stall and closed the door. He whipped out his Stark Phone and searched: “yellow roses flower language.”

The first five results were unanimous: “friendship.”

Tony blinked. He’d gotten plenty of red roses—no need to look that up, romantic love & passion, not that many of them had meant it—but never yellow roses. Friendship. Paired with red roses? Tony swallowed thickly. It left him feeling more flustered than it should have.

Next he searched: white stargazer lilies flower language. (Probably something submissive or innocence or purity or—)

The top results were unanimous again: “hope.”

Love. Friendship. Hope.

Tony’s throat felt a little tight and, without meaning to, he found the words arranging themselves into speculative sentences:

Our friendship makes me hope for your love.

I hope for your love and friendship.

Or maybe even:

Your love and friendship give me hope.

(No—it was dumb to speculate.) Tony glared at his phone. (Why didn’t flower language have any conventions for syntax? It wasn’t a language without syntax—just a bunch of flexible bullshit symbols!)

Tony resisted the temptation to search “flower language syntax.” He should focus on the big picture: love, hope, friendship.

Of the three, the yellow roses felt the sweetest.

Tony used the facilities, checked himself over in the mirror (fabulous), and went to rejoin Steve. Steve: the last person in New York City who didn’t take out his smartphone when his date went to
the bathroom. He just sat quietly, looking around the restaurant.

(Dork.) Tony felt a ridiculous surge of affection for the man. As he returned to their table, Tony ran his hand across Steve’s shoulders and, when Steve looked up with an inquiring smile, leaned down to kiss him chastely on the lips.

Steve blinked up at him with a look of surprised pleasure. “What was that for?”

Tony shrugged. “No reason. Do I need a reason to kiss you?”

“No,” Steve said, smiling. “No you don’t.”

“Oh well, in that case,” Tony said and pressed another kiss to Steve’s lips. He was sorely tempted to tease with his tongue and press for more, but now was neither the right time nor the right place and he was capable of self-restraint. (Sometimes. Sort of.)

Tony took his seat. Steve’s smile was as sweet as ever, but perhaps a little flustered around the edges.

(Good.)

Tony felt rather smug.

They had just devoured the *koobideh* and chicken *shirin polo* Leila’d sent up as their sixth course and were lingering over their latest wine pairing.

“Tony?” Steve said in a low voice.

“Mmmm?”

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you about.”

(Finally!!!)

“Go ahead,” Tony said in a sultry tone. He dropped his gaze and tilted his head down.

“How would you feel about telling the team we’re dating? I mean—that we have been on a few dates?”

(Oh.) Tony blinked. (Well, that was good too.)

“I think we should tell them we’re dating,” Tony said, looking up again.

“You do? Oh good!” Steve looked so goddamn happy. “I’m so glad. After all, they’re our friends. And our teammates. When do you think—?”

“How about tomorrow?”

“Yes! Great. Maybe we could make breakfast for them together?”

Tony shrugged. “Sure.”

“I’m so glad,” Steve said. A moment later his smile faded and he added, “And I guess we’ll have to tell SHIELD eventually.”

“Yeah.”

Tony’s fist clenched under the table. Steve would win the fucking bet—not that Tony’d thought for a second Steve was in on that shit. (Ok, fine: he didn’t think that anymore.) Maybe Agent Dominick Dickface would greet Steve as a conquering hero, first to fuck that uppity Stark and get him on his knees.

(Of course, technically, as the first and only Agent Tony’d ever subbed for—before Dom started the damn bet—Agent Ishida could have claimed the glorious title years ago. But because he was a fucking class act he’d never said a word.)

“Tony? You okay?” Steve asked. “We don’t have to tell them if you don’t want.”

Tony held in a sigh.

“Yes, we do,” he said. “It’s fine. Better to tell them on our own terms, but—” (“the thought of being called your good little bitch, finally brought to heel is kind of a buzz kill.”) “—that’s a problem for Cap and Iron Man so—”

“So, let’s not think about it now?” Steve suggested tentatively. Tony nodded. “Yeah. Now we’re just Steve and Tony.”

“Yeah.”
“So, Tony,” Steve said, smiling, “what can you tell me about Persian dessert? Because, I’m not gonna lie, my expectations are pretty high after this dinner.”

Leila’d seen them off with a brisk, “I’m so glad you enjoyed it, Captain; read your mail, Stark.” In the car, Tony put on the Old Timey Music Mix he’d asked JARVIS to make earlier. As he cut in front of a truck turning out of the alleyway, the band struck up. Steve turned in the passenger seat to gaze at Tony’s profile, humming along under his breath.

“Thank you for a wonderful date, Tony,” Steve said.

“My pleasure,” Tony said. “So glad you enjoyed it.”

(Heading home, so maybe now he’d want to talk about it?)

Ella Fitzgerald crooned:

“Here I go again, I hear those trumpets blow again.
All aglow again, takin’ a chance on love . . .”

(Maybe there was nothing to say? Maybe Steve didn’t have any questions.)

“I thought that cards were a frame-up, I never would try
But now, I’m taking the game up, And the ace of hearts is high . . .”

Steve shifted in his seat again, eyes still fixed on Tony’s face.

“I keep wanting to touch you,” Steve confessed quietly, “but I shouldn’t trouble you when you’re driving.”

“Well,” Tony said, a little breathless. “We’re almost home.”

“Things are mending now, I see a rainbow blending now
We’ll have a happy ending now, Taking a chance on love . . .”

Tony was a speedy driver in general; tonight the Lotus purred and zoomed.

“On the ball again, I’m riding for a fall again
I’m gonna give my all again, Taking a chance on love.”

Something about Steve just looking at him, not even touching, left him flustered and full of anticipation. As he raced into the garage, Tony couldn’t bear it a moment longer. Really, he should have at least gotten out of the car first—or waited until they were in the elevator—but the instant he turned off the engine, Tony blurted (trying for a sultry voice and failing): “So, did you get my contract?”


(‘Thank you?’) Tony’s stomach dropped. (That was it?)

“Oh,” Steve said, fidgeting in the car seat. “May I walk you home?”

(Oh thank God. That was more like it!)

“Yes, please,” Tony purred.

(Finally.)

As they walked across the garage, Steve knocked his shoulder against Tony’s with a little smile. His right hand found Tony’s left, hand in hand, they stepped into the elevator.

“Thank you again for a wonderful evening,” Steve said.

“Thank you,” Tony murmured, sidling a little closer, desperate for Steve to do something.

He didn’t.

The elevator doors opened on Tony’s floor and Steve walked him down the hallway; the hallway to his bedroom had never felt so long. At the door Steve paused, but he wasn’t pulling away. He just stood there, smiling down at Tony. Steve licked his lips.

(Steve had his contract, so surely now he could…)

Tony slid gracefully to his knees, bowed his head, and offered Steve his hands, palms up. He heard Steve gasp, but he didn’t look, just kept his head demurely tilted down to one side. His heart was pounding, but he forced himself to wait.

After a few moments, Steve slid to his knees beside him. He took each of Tony’s wrists in a large hand. (Steve’s fingers easily circled his wrists with room to spare.)
“You’re really offering yourself to me?” Steve asked ever so softly.

Tony felt like maybe he should say something—though whether to remind Steve that he could withdraw his contract at any time or to babble yes, anything, please, please, please, he couldn’t say. His mouth was dry and his heart was in his throat; Tony nodded.

Steve drew Tony’s hands up, one then the other, and kissed his palms. He spoke softly: “Then I accept.”

Tony shuddered, the tremor shaking his whole body in a wave that he realized distantly was relief.

“You’re so brave,” Steve said, his voice full of wonder. (Brave? Huh?) Tony peeked up at him from under his lashes. Steve’s eyes were wide with amazement, his smile soft.

“I trust you too.”

As Steve stood, he pulled Tony to his feet with a gentle pressure on Tony’s wrists. Then—once they were both standing—slowly, fluidly, Steve pulled Tony’s arms above his head and pinned his wrists to the wall. Tony’s heart leapt.

Steve leaned close to kiss Tony on the cheek. He squeezed Tony’s wrists and murmured into his ear, “Do you like that?”

Tony let out a startled little gasp and nodded. Steve pressed kisses to his throat and gathered both Tony’s wrists in one hand, holding them tight, pressed to the wall. Steve lowered his other hand to caress Tony’s cheek.

As Steve studied his face, Tony let his gaze drop. There was something almost too naked in Steve’s expression—awe, affection, tenderness—and Tony didn’t like to think what Steve might see in his own eyes. (At the very least, a mind addled with lust, that was for sure.) He closed his eyes and pressed his face into Steve’s hand, kissing his palm.

“You’re beautiful, Tony,” Steve told him. It did something funny to Tony’s stomach and he suddenly felt too warm.

Steve drew in a startled little breath and Tony knew, he just knew that he—

“You’re blushing,” Steve said, sounding truly surprised. (Had he never noticed it before?) Tony felt soft and open and a little embarrassed, but not exactly in a bad way.

“Are you blushing for me, sweetie?” Steve asked, something amazed in his voice.

And there was really no point denying it, so Tony gave a tight little nod, still not meeting Steve’s gaze.

“My God, you’re perfect,” Steve said, running his fingers through Tony’s hair. “How can you be so sweet?”

(Sweet?)

Tony was pretty sure people didn’t think of him as sweet. Luckily, he was also pretty sure Steve wasn’t expecting an answer.

With a gentle pressure on his jaw, Steve tipped Tony’s chin up and kissed him, mouth warm and soft. Tony parted his lips with a sigh and felt Steve’s tongue tentatively skim his bottom lip.

(What was really sweet was Steve: having received free license to whip, fuck, and choke him—among other things—Steve still treated French kissing like something to initiate with cautious inquiry.)

Steve squeezed Tony’s wrists harder against the wall and let his tongue dip into Tony’s eager mouth. Tony’s blood was pounding in his ears, his heart thundering in his chest.

Their kiss was clumsy, both too eager and frantic for finesse. Steve pressed closer, thigh against Tony’s, but not where he wanted it. Tony pressed up hungrily wanting more, wanting Steve’s cock rubbing hot and heavy against his body, wanting heat and slick and—

Steve pushed him firmly back against the wall. Tony’s blood surged; a wave of heat sweep over him, leaving him nearly lightheaded. (Yes, yes, please, please, please . . .) Steve’s tongue was hot and heavy in Tony’s mouth.

Too soon—far too soon—Steve pulled back. He pressed light, wet kisses to Tony’s lips, his cheek, his forehead, then dropped lower to Tony’s exposed throat. Tony nearly whimpered, half-thrilled and half-embarrassed. A firm hand and a little kissing had never left him so desperate before.

“You’re beautiful, Tony,” Steve mumbled into his ear and drew back. He lowered Tony’s wrists from the wall.

Tony swallowed. (What? No.)
Steve kissed first his left hand and then his right. He stood there, smiling down at Tony. Tony stood there blinking stupidly up and trying to catch his breath.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening,” Steve said again, still smiling.

Tony felt a swoop of disappointment. (Again?)

Steve tipped their foreheads together and stood, breathing deeply in time with Tony.

(Really? That was it? Was he really . . . leaving?)

Eventually, Steve drew back.

“It’s late. I should go. Let you get some rest.” Steve squeezed Tony’s hands, then said, “Good night, Tony. Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He must have looked a little off, though, because Steve paused as he backed away. His brow furrowed and he asked, “Are you all right, Tony?”

Tony shook off his lust haze (and disappointment) and nodded.

“How about petulantly, “You’re going the wrong way! Come back and f**k me!” but it was a near thing.

(Maybe a cold shower.) Tony snorted. (Oh, who the hell was he kidding?)

He barely made it into his bedroom before shoving a hand down his pants.

Chapter End Notes

Steve’s story of the Louvre’s treasures hidden from the Nazis is a slightly mythologized version of WWII history. The greatest treasures were indeed evacuated, entrusted to civilians, and then returned, but my research suggests they were mostly housed in illustrious private chateaus not with humble farmers. In P&P, I took poetic license and opted for the more sentimental version that my grandfather—a WWII veteran—told me as a tribute to French integrity and love of art.

In the 1930s, Steve would have learned more about actual reproduction and biology than many kids in the USA today; there was no such thing as “abstinence only sex education” back then.

There’s more world-building (particularly re: international kink / racism / cross-cultural practices) coming up, but it didn’t fit here thematically. Sorry!

Shit’s about to get real in my bill-paying career (aka insanely high-stress and sleep-deprived-making). Extra cheer-leading is extra appreciated for the next couple of months! (Like, maybe, if there’s a little detail you especially liked in this chapter...?) I’m hoping I can keep on my 3-4 week posting “schedule”, but that may be overly optimistic. I promise I’ll let you know if I’m vanishing for more than a month at a time, though, and I’ll give you an expected return date.

Sorry I’m so ramblely! Really hope you liked it! Thanks so much for reading!

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Update! Won’t be back to writing properly until after Nov. 2nd, so a new chapter will probably be ready in the first week or two of November. BUT! I have posted a teaser for chapter 47 on my tumblr so you can get a little taste and don’t worry this is abandoned. :) Hope you like! Kind words are cherished extra much while I’m in manic work mode!

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Not sure I got this chapter to do exactly what I was aiming for, but I doubt obsessing over it will actually lead to further improvement at this point. So here it is. AT LAST!!!

Thanks for sticking around while I dealt with all the madness in RL. It's great to be back to writing at last! Hope you like it. :)

Extra special thanks to those who have showered me with love and encouragement during my trying time at work. (Y'all know who you are! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony woke up early, before his alarm even went off, still feeling tired. He'd slept badly, waking often and tossing in his bed. (Alone.) But things were fine. Tony hopped into the shower.

So what if Steve wasn't the kind of Dom who topped on a second date? Considering how late Tony'd sent his contract, Steve probably hadn't even had enough time to digest it. Or make plans. But he'd seen it. He'd even accepted it—accepted Tony—officially. And it wasn't like Steve hadn't topped him at all! (Mmmm . . . firm pressure on his wrists, thigh to thigh, tongue pressing against his . . . ) Steve had Dominated him, at least a little, so it wasn't like Steve didn't want him, right?

And Steve wanted to tell the team. They were going to tell the team they were dating this morning.

So things were good. (Right? Right.)

"Hey, J?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is Steve in the kitchen?"

"Yes, sir," JARVIS answered. "He has begun cooking breakfast."

Tony pulled on an old pair of jeans, then changed into the tighter pair. (The ones that showed off his 'pert little butt.') Black fitted T-shirt, favorite grey hoodie.

"Tell him I'm on my way."

(Things were good. And, hey, wasn't 'no sex 'til the third date' an old timey rule of thumb? Pretty sure it was.)

Tony tapped the arc reactor in the elevator.

(Yeah. So, time to set up a third date!)

"Morning, babe!" Tony called as he stepped into the kitchen.

Steve was dressed for his morning run and checking on something in the oven. At the sight of Tony, he smiled That Smile.

"Good morning, Tony," Steve said. He held out both of his hands and Tony obliged him. Steve kissed first his left hand, then his right and, after a moment's hesitation, cupped Tony's face with both hands and kissed him softly on the lips.

"Good morning," Steve repeated, then stepped away, adding, "Bet you'd like coffee!"

Before Steve could set the freshly poured cup on the counter for him, Tony took it from his hands and gulped it uncouthly. Steve blinked, then grinned.

"Thanks, babe," Tony said, glancing around the kitchen. "So, what are we making and how do I help?"

"The frittata's in the oven, so all that's left really is toast and melon. And I was gonna fry you some bacon to go with it."

"I'm good with frittata," Tony said. "Uh, actually, Steve? I really like eggs. I've even tried to make omelets myself! So don't worry about serving them to me."

Steve looked at him quizzically and opened his mouth, then shut it. Tony grabbed a knife and started cutting up the melon.
“Got it,” Steve said after a moment. He laid the table.

“Ready?” he asked Tony, who nodded in reply.

“JARVIS?” Steve said to the ceiling. “Could you please tell the team that Tony and I are cooking breakfast for them and ask them to please join us?”

“Of course, Captain.”

Tony had just cut the melon and was putting toast in the toaster. Maybe that counted as ‘cooking breakfast’ in Steve’s eyes.

Bruce arrived first. He gave them an uncertain smile, squinting a little.

“Team breakfast on a Saturday?”

“Sure. Why not?” Tony asked with a shrug, handing him some coffee.

“And you’re cooking,” Bruce said, glancing back and forth between them. “Together.”

Tony was pretty sure Bruce had at least an inkling of what was going on—after all, he’d noticed Steve’s crush before Tony had.

“Grab a seat, Bruce,” Steve said.

Natasha arrived next, with the faintest hint of a smile on her lips.

“Good morning,” she said, voice perhaps a little smokier than usual.

“Morning!” Clint said. He gave a jaw-cracking yawn and took a seat. “Tony, man, you know I love your creations, but not when they come from a kitchen—so I’ll have whatever Steve cooked.”

“Rude! So rude!” Tony cried. “You see what I put up with?”

“I made a frittata,” Steve said, ignoring their bickering. “But first, there’s something I—we—want to tell you.”

Bruce looked hopeful, Nat looked smug, and Clint looked curious.

“I want you all to know up front,” Steve began seriously, “that it isn’t prohibited in our contracts and will in no way impair our performance in the field. We’re telling you as our teammates, but more importantly, as our friends. See, Tony and I— We, uh—”

Tony cut in: “We’re dating, it’s awesome, have some breakfast!”

“Mazel tov!” Bruce burst out with a grin, as if he’d barely been holding it in. Nat smiled. Clint’s look of shock was comical. He kept glancing back and forth between Steve and Tony.

“You and Tony?” Clint said.

“Yeah,” Steve said, looking bashful. He glanced over at Tony with that shy smile and added, “I’m a little surprised myself.”

“Oh please,” Tony said with a little huff. He grabbed a plate and turned to the counter. “You brave enough to eat food I’ve served, bird brain?”

When he looked back, expecting an answer, Clint and Natasha were having one of their conversations conducted purely in facial expressions.

“Uh, yeah,” Clint said at last. “Sure. I was only kidding.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Obvs.”

“Let’s eat!” Steve said, and together they started serving the food. And, now that the team knew, Tony had no trouble at all coming close. He laid a hand on Steve’s arm and tilted his head, demanding; Steve obliged, dropping a little kiss on his cheek. Tony felt a thrill. It was hardly high-level exhibitionism, but the team could see them and that made him feel good.

When he turned to offer Clint a plate of food, Bruce’s grin was so wide it looked nearly giddy. Tony was startled to realize how touching he found it—that Bruce could be so enthusiastically, truly happy for Tony’s romance, even when he was hurting over Betty. He gave Bruce the plate instead.

Tony’d expected a squawk of protest from Clint, but he was unexpectedly absorbed in the newspaper that Steve had left out on the counter.

“So,” Natasha said smiling (or perhaps smirking). “Dating?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Tony took me to the most amazing restaurant last night! Have you ever had
“Ooh! I love Persian cuisine.” Bruce said. “Did you have tah dig?”

“Uh . . .” Steve turned to Tony who nodded.

“That was the crunchy rice,” Tony explained. “We had it with the pomegranate sauce.”

“Oh, yeah!” Steve nodded. “I really liked that one.”

Breakfast passed in pleasant, casual chatter: mostly Steve and Bruce, mostly on the subject of food, with occasional additions from Tony and Natasha. Tony’d expected Clint to begin ribbing them immediately and to keep up a merciless string of teasing; he was surprised to find Clint serious, distracted with the newspaper, eating his frittata quietly.

Tony’d never realized there were so many little ways he could touch someone over breakfast: and hand on Steve’s arm, asking him to pass the salt; his knee against Steve’s under the table; a hand running down Steve’s back as he got up for more coffee. He couldn’t seem to stop smiling.

As breakfast wound to a close, Steve got up to start on the dishes. Before Tony could offer his help, Bruce leapt up.

“No, no, no,” Bruce said, taking the scrub brush. “You cooked.”

Steve hesitated a moment.

“Thanks,” Steve said, checking the time on his watch. “I’ll take you up on it. I wanna get to my run. I’ve sort of got a new running buddy and I don’t want to miss him.”

Clint got up too. “Hey, Cap? You got a minute?”

“Well,” Steve said, frowning a little. “I did want to meet my—“

“Yeah, no worries,” Clint said. “Only take a minute—I’ll ride the elevator with you.”

“Ok,” Steve said. He turned to Tony and said, with a hint of uncertain up-speak, “I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, tilting his head for a kiss. Steve gave him a peck on the cheek and headed to the elevator with Clint.

Natasha was frowning very slightly as she brought the rest of dishes to the sink. (Doesn’t she approve?)

“Tony?” she said.

“Mmmm?”

“Good for you.”

With that she slid away.

“So,” Tony said as he picked up a dish towel. “You gonna say ‘I told you so’?”

Bruce smiled. “Why should I when you’re willing to do it yourself?” He shook his head. “I’m just happy for you, Tony. You and Steve both.”

“Me too,” Tony said softly. He dried the casserole dish.

“Looks like it’s . . . good?” Bruce said, a little tentatively.

“It is,” Tony said. “It really is.”

(Huh.) Tony looked around his kitchen uncertainly. (Where did—?)

Bruce took the casserole dish and put it in the cabinet by the refrigerator.

“Do you maybe, uh,” Bruce asked, “still want to work on the Security Blanket today?”

“Yes! I’ll make a fresh pot of coffee and we’ll get to it. But this time, we’re working in my workshop, k?”

“Deal.”

(The day was off to a good start.)

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It was always nice having Bruce in the workshop with him: he was sweet to Dummy (“Oh, no thank you. I think Tony’s bowtie looks far better on you.”); he could be silent for long stretches of time (“. . . . . .”); and he spoke at least some of Tony’s language, though admittedly with a
funny accent (“—not an engineer, but it sounds like the poly-aramid needs to function like the macro of a covalent bond, but allowing for fragmentation?”).

Tony frowned at the current equations for the Security Blanket. And, okay, it was strong and it was stretchy, but if it was *really* gonna restrain the Hulk—Well. He was a genius, of course, but (as Bones would say) not a miracle worker.

Tony lifted his empty coffee cup to his lips for the second time. The coffee pot was still empty. And, hey, they’d been down there for hours and Steve still hadn’t brought more coffee.

(Not that Tony needed a Dom to bring him coffee.)

“Hey, Bruce? Take a look at Projection 23. I’m gonna make us more coffee.”

“Tony?” Bruce said, drawing his attention from the tensile graphs. “It’s getting late. We should have some lunch.”

(Oh right.)

“There’s left over pizza,” Bruce said. “Is that okay with you?”

“Sure.” Tony shrugged. “Sounds good.”

(He’d kinda thought Steve might bring them lunch—it was such a Steve thing to do—but this was fine too.)

“I’ll be right back,” Bruce said. “And I’ll grab some hummus and veggies. Would you look over my work on number 27?”

Tony frowned at the screen as Bruce stepped into the elevator. Seriously, Bruce was a genius for sure, but he was unreasonably slow to grasp the necessary physics of poly-aramid construction.

There was the quiet hum of the elevator approaching, much too soon to be Bruce with their lunch ready, so—(Steve!) Tony looked up with a bright smile.

It was Clint.

“Hey, Tony,” he said as he sauntered out of the elevator.

“Hey,” Tony said, trying not to sound disappointed.

“How’s it going down here?” Clint asked, glancing around at the glowing schematics.

Tony shrugged. “Fine.”

They were quiet a few moments. Tony cocked his head; Clint didn’t usually come down to the workshop.

“So, just wanted to check,” Clint said eventually, reaching back to scratch at his right shoulder blade. “We still on for burgers?”

“Yeah,” Tony said with another shrug. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“No reason—just making sure. So, uh, what time?”

“Bruce has some tests on a chemical compound running up in his lab,” Tony said. “I’ll ask him what time they’ll be done; we’ll be free after that. Not sure about Steve’s or Natasha’s schedules.”

“Right. I’ll ask and let you know.”

“Sounds good.”

Tony nodded. He expected Clint to leave; he didn’t. Instead, Clint took a few steps closer. He looked anxious; it was a weird look on him.


Tony squinted at Clint, feeling a little lost. He hadn’t taken Clint’s surprise poorly, had he? There’d been nothing to offend him. Though now that Clint was apologizing . . .

Clint pressed on: “And before. What I said about the tabloid. It wasn’t anything bad about you. I just thought—he’s always seemed so old fashioned! I didn’t think you’d be his type.”

Tony snorted. “What, ’cause I’m too big a slut for Steve?”

“No!” Clint shook his head urgently, then grimaced. “Well, yes—but not like that! Just with all the purity bullshit back when Cap was growing up, I figured, even if he always seemed like a basically decent guy there was still . . . stuff. Under there.”
Tony’d never heard Clint so stuttering and awkward. He shifted from one foot to the other and reached back to scratch his shoulder again—right where his quiver would be.

Clint continued: “And you! You’re so assertive and independent! I just thought Cap’d want some sweet, soft-spoken, doting little woman who’d—”

Tony burst out laughing. Clint looked a little sheepish.

Once he’d calmed down a bit, Tony shook his head and said, “If that’s what you thought, you really don’t know Steve at all.”


“You an’ me?” Tony asked. Clint actually looked worried.

“Yeah, birdbrain. We’re cool.”

“Awesome! Good! Great,” Clint nodded effusively. (Huh. He was really worried?) “So, I’ll see you for burgers, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

As Clint disappeared into the elevator, Tony shook his head again.

Well. That was weird.

“I’d better go change and get my coat,” Bruce said, “if we’re going to meet the others in fifteen minutes.”

Tony blinked. (It was that late already?)

“Good plan,” Tony said with a nod.

Tony was only too happy to stop hammering at the damn Security Blanket with his brain. He was on the verge of an engineering headache. Seriously, it was never gonna be strong enough.

“I was wondering,” Bruce said. “After dinner, would you mind looking at the compound I’ve been working on? I think if we could find a way to combine it with your poly-aramid—or maybe use it as a part of the stuffing, like a quilt?—it would give us at least a 22% tensile bump.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said, trying to feign more enthusiasm than he felt. “Happy to take a look.”

“Great!”

As Bruce left, Tony glared at the readouts. He hated to say anything to Bruce, but it all seemed pretty hopeless. This was The Hulk they were talking about. The Hulk! Tony closed all the glowing screens with an angry wave of his hand. It was nearly six and they’d made no real progress.

Better go change too. Maybe the green button down? With the heather grey sweater? No, no; too dressy. It was just a team outing for beer and burgers. Jeans and a Stark Industries sweatshirt?

He hadn’t seen Steve since breakfast. Not that it was such a long time, but usually he’d drop by the workshop at some point. With a coffee. Or donuts. Or lunch.

But it was cool. Nice really. Steve was just busy. Like Tony! They both had stuff to do.

Tony brushed his teeth again—there was garlic on that pizza after all—and fussed over his hair for a few moments. (Ok, five minutes.) He checked his ass in the huge floor-to-ceiling mirror (nice) and rummaged around for a top. Not that it mattered—it wasn’t a date. And Steve had seen him sweaty and gross with motor oil on his cheek already. There it was: the MIT sweatshirt that was just a little too small for him. (Perfect!) Tony pulled on his nice ankle boots, the ones with chunky heels. He looked great. Not that it mattered. Tony sauntered to the common room, opting for the stairs.

Natasha and Bruce were standing at the counter looking at something on her tablet while Steve hovered nearby, staring at the elevator doors and looking gorgeous in a dark green sweater and jeans.

“Hey,” Tony said. Steve’s head whipped over to him.

“Tony!” Steve exclaimed with a big grin. “I—uh, hi.”

Tony smiled back and joined them all at the counter. He wanted to kiss Steve hello, but they were standing very close to Bruce and Natasha and he wasn’t sure if it’d be weird.

Steve reached for Tony’s hand then pulled him a little closer, giving him a little squeeze and a smile.

“It’s really not that far,” Bruce said, looking at the address. “Maybe we should just walk. It’s not
that cold out.”

Steve’s expression went tight for a second, before he started to nod.

“Absolutely not,” Tony cut in. “It’s too cold. Also, I have drivers on staff. What’s the point if they don’t get to drive us? Francis might feel rejected!”

Tony thought Natasha’s eyes flicked to Steve for a second before she agreed, “And we’re less likely to attract unwanted attention if we don’t go for a thirty minute walk before dinner.”

“Ok, sure,” Bruce shrugged. “It was just a thought.”

“What’s the hold up?” Clint called from the elevator, already bundled up in his coat. “Fall out!”

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equation. “We’ve been assuming this ratio, but what if—”

Tony held back a sigh. (So much for a night off.)

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Tony’d begun the evening on edge, wondering how it would be different now that he and Steve were together, but it all seemed the same. In fact, so much the same Tony would almost have worried if it weren’t for the occasional sweet and intimate smile Steve gave him when he thought nobody was looking. Clint seemed a little antsy (he’d picked the outing—probably wanted to make sure everyone had fun) and Bruce was about to drive him insane obsessing over the Security Blanket, but other than that it was nice. The food was delicious, Rosie was a peach, and nobody bothered them. (Tony suspected Rosie’s hand in that, but couldn’t be sure.)

Tony paid for the team—assuring them it came from the Team Budget—and they started bundling into their winter clothes while Francis brought the car around. Steve sidled over to Tony with that shy little smile of his and said very quietly, “Uh, Tony?”

Tony smiled up at him. “Yes?” he prompted.

“It’s still early,” Steve said, “so I was wondering if you might like to—” He licked his lips. “—uh, spend the rest of the evening with me?”

(YES!)

“Yes,” Tony said, then added in a low tone. “I’d love to.”

(Thank God!)

On the ride back to the Tower, Tony could barely focus on Natasha and Clint’s amiable chatter. All he could think about were Steve’s ardent kisses. The pressure of his strong hands circling Tony’s wrists. The warmth radiating from his body. The intoxicating smell of his skin. (Don’t blush!)

They all piled into the elevator. Tony bade Clint and Natasha a distracted ‘goodnight.’ When the elevator stopped at Bruce’s floor, he looked at Tony expectantly.

“Tony?” Bruce said, “Aren’t you coming to look at the new compound with me?”

“Shit!” Tony turned to Steve, then back to Bruce, then back to Steve. “Steve! Sorry. I forgot I’m supposed to look at something, but I can be done in—Twenty? Thirty minutes?”

“That’s fine, Tony,” Steve said with a little smile. “Don’t rush. That’ll give me time to make some arrangements.”

Tony’s heart leapt. (Arrangements?)

“Okay,” he said. “See you soon.”

It took great force of will to follow Bruce.

Tony tried to be a patient man—(Sort of. Sometimes.)—but Bruce was rapidly pushing him to the end of his patience.

“Look, Bruce,” Tony said, after thirty-four minutes of reviewing the compound specs. “I realize the irony of me saying this, but I think you need a break. A watched pot never boils. Is that the right cliche? I dunno, but my point is you need to give yourself space to actually think or you’re just going to go crazy pushing yourself. We’ll get there. I mean, we’re geniuses, but maybe it’s time to let the Security Blanket marinate for a while. Ok?”

Bruce sighed and minimized the latest readouts. He gave Tony an amused little smile.

“Say hi to Steve for me.”

(Shit.)

And Tony’s expression must have told Bruce exactly what he was thinking, because Bruce hastened to add, “Really, go! It’s fine. You’re probably right Tony. We need a break. I’ll go meditate and get an early night.”

Bruce had the distinct impression that Bruce was fibbing. It was the kind of thing he’d said to Pepper so very often (well, not the meditating part, obviously), but there was no point trying to call Bruce out on it.

“We’ll figure it out,” Tony assured him. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Tony’s heart started speeding up as soon as he stepped into the elevator.
“JARVIS? Tell Steve I’m on my way, would ya?”

“Of course, sir.”

Steve met Tony at the elevator doors. (Like an old fashioned gentleman, the big sap.)

“Hi, Tony,” Steve said softly, reaching for Tony’s hand and leaning in to kiss him on the cheek.

“Hey,” Tony said, smiling.

“How are things going in the lab!”

“Slow. Fine. We’ll figure it out.” Tony shrugged. Then he stepped closer. “So, what’s the plan, big fella?”

Steve shrugged. “Nothing set in stone. Is there anything in particular you’d like to do?”

Tony shook his head. “Nope.” He dropped his head to the side and looked up at Steve through his lashes. “I’m entirely in your hands,” he murmured.

“Oh. Okay.” Steve blinked. (And maybe his ears turned slightly pink?) “I mean, uh, good.”

Tony sidled closer still. He rested one hand on Steve’s chest and purred, “You’re in charge.”

Steve took a sharp breath.

“Do you like the sound of that?” Tony asked quietly, tilting his chin down a little more.

“Yeah,” Steve answered. He sounded more than a little breathless. He gently tipped Tony’s chin up and gave him a lingering kiss, but when Tony parted his lips Steve pulled back.

Steve cleared his throat. “So,” he said, “I was thinking we could just spend the evening relaxing, maybe watch the next episode of Star Trek.”

(Seriously? I give you almost carte blanche and you want to relax with TV just like usual? Huh. Okay.) Tony gave an inward shrug, an outward nod, and a murmured, “Whatever you like.”

“Oh, okay. Great!” Holding Tony’s hand loosely in his, Steve led Tony over to the couch. “So, I thought maybe you’d like to—” he gestured.

There was a cushion on the floor. For Tony.

Tony froze.

Steve’s expression went from hopeful to worried in a heartbeat. He immediately backpedalled. “Sorry, sorry. Do you not like—?”

Tony gave himself a little shake.

“What?” he said, summoning a smile. “No, no. Just surprised. I mean—you’ve read my contract, right?”

“Yes,” Steve said, word hesitant.

“Well then!” Tony said. “Let’s settle in. Star Trek. Great!”

Steve looked at him carefully for a few moments, frowning, before his expression cleared. He nodded and said, “Okay. Uh, good.”

Steve sat down on the couch with his back against a mountain of cushions so he was sitting far forward, leaving lots of room for Tony to lean against his legs.

With a sultry look and a little hip wiggle, Tony folded gracefully to his knees and tipped his chin. Steve reached down to caress his cheek for a moment, then guided Tony over to rest his head on Steve’s knee.

“JARVIS, would you please start the next episode of Star Trek?” Steve asked the ceiling.

Tony turned to face the TV and curled up against Steve’s legs.

“ ‘Landing party, prepare to beam down . . .’ ”

Steve generated an insane amount of body heat and the texture of his ridiculous khakis was surprisingly smooth under Tony’s cheek. Steve’s hand settled in his hair, carding his fingers through it gently. Tony tried to relax.

“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before . . .”
Tony resisted the urge to shift restlessly at Steve’s feet, a nervous twisting in his stomach.

“Captain to the bridge. Repeat, captain to the bridge!”

Really, though! The contract Tony’d sent Steve offered him virtually free reign—pretty much everything was on the menu except scat, sounding, messing with the arc reactor, and trying to put him in sub space.

“I don’t understand it, sir. We’ve lost contact!”

Steve’s fingers wandered from Tony’s hair to stroke his neck, his shoulders.

“Damn it! I want answers! Any theories, Lieutenant Uhura?”

“Come in, Enterprise! Do you copy? Second Lieutenant Chekov speaking. Come in, Enterprise! Do you read me?”

Tony frowned. Had Steve found his contract off-putting? Had it been too much, just offering him everything all at once like that?

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was hesitant. Tony held his breath, frozen. “Are you okay? I’m sorry.” He swallowed, then asked, “Is this no good for you?”

“Tense!? No, I’m not!”

Steve just raised an eyebrow—clearly a look he’d learned from Natasha. (Or Tony.)

“Okay,” Tony conceded. “Maybe I was a little tense. But my mind was just stuck in the lab! We’re good.” Steve looked unconvinced. “This is really, uh, nice,” Tony added hesitantly, then with his usual brazenness, “Now shut up and pet me— we’re missing the dialogue!”

Star Trek was only 51 minutes, after all. Plenty of time for other things afterwards . . .

Tony laughed as Tony flopped back over to look at the TV and dragged Steve’s hand back onto his head. He obligingly resumed stroking Tony’s hair, then a moment later brought his other hand down to give Tony a proper massage, rubbing little circles at his temples then down his neck. Tony let out a long sigh.

Steve just wanted to cuddle (from the top). And why shouldn’t he? It didn’t have to be a bad sign.

Tony unwound little by little, giving a certain lazy attention to the TV. Together Uhura and Spock were inventing a new interference-canceling communications device. Tony’d forgotten what a good episode it was—he always liked it when Spock and Uhura worked together.

Halfway through the episode, Tony had eased into that lax contentedness somewhere between normal and subspace. Steve was a warm sturdy presence, his caresses firm and constant. Tony’s eyes slid shut and he let out a murmur of contentment.

On screen Uhura and Spock were using their new device to combat the obstructing frequencies of the Kranuh trying to trap Chekov and Sulu on their planet. (The redshirts in the landing party were already dead—no hope for them.)

Tony shifted forward to pull one of Steve’s bare feet into his lap. He wanted to kiss it but also didn’t want to—so instead he kissed Steve’s knee and got to work on his foot, pressing carefully with his thumbs. Steve let out a pleased noise and Tony felt a little rush of pleasure.

Tony noticed distantly that Steve had ridiculously large feet. They seemed large even for a man who was a solid eight inches taller than Tony. (Tony hoped very much that the saying was true.)

Tony kneaded the smooth skin and thick tendons in his hands. (And he hoped to confirm his theory tonight.) Though he did love giving foot massages as an act of service, Tony didn’t have a foot fetish per se. That said, he felt like Steve had particularly beautiful feet. (And Tony was pretty
certain he had an even nicer something else.)

Sulu and Chekov were restored to the Enterprise and Kirk gave Uhura a solemn “well done,” with a sizable undercurrent of unspoken “sorry I was a dick, thanks for saving the day.” Uhura was gracious about the whole thing, but shared this look with Spock. (Tony felt smug on her behalf.) Steve chuckled; Tony smiled, pressed a kiss to Steve’s knee, and kept kneading his arches.

“Mmm,” Steve let out a little murmur and the sound of it went straight to Tony’s gut, hot and sharp. He rubbed his face against Steve’s thigh.

“Mmm.” Steve let out that rumbling little noise again and reached down to caress Tony’s neck. Tony pressed up closer against Steve’s leg, then couldn’t resist turning to look at him.

Steve’s eyes were wide, intense, his lips slightly parted as he looked down at Tony. Tony’s eyes scanned his body and he noticed with a rush of heat that Steve’s cock was erect, pressing up against the fabric of his trousers.

Oh fuck, Tony wanted it. He wanted the thick, hard weight of Steve’s cock stretching his mouth open, the wet heat of it moving in and out, Steve’s fingers in his hair, hand on his neck holding him in place, as he took Tony’s mouth. . . Or maybe he’d hold back, just watch Tony suck him and make Tony work for it . . .

Tony licked his lips and nuzzled Steve’s thigh, letting his warm breaths fall on Steve’s pants. He ran his hands up Steve’s leg in a long smooth caress. Steve’s breath hitched and the sound of it went straight to Tony’s dick. He stroked Steve’s thigh with his hand, up and down, then let his fingers brush across Steve’s cock as he reached for his belt buckle.

Steve’s hands closed around his wrists and pulled Tony’s hands down away from his belt. Steve shook his head, his expression serious.

Tony frowned and dropped his head to the side, gaze fastened on the carpet.

(Huh? Why?) He blinked. (Steve had his contract now…) “You’re so beautiful,” Steve said softly. “So good, kneeling like that for me.”

(If I’m so good, why won’t you let me . . . ?) "Tony was still frowning. (Was it too forward for Steve? Him taking the initiative like that?) Steve leaned down and curled his hands tight around Tony’s arms.

“Come up here, sweetheart,” he said, urging Tony up into his lap, both legs off to one side. “Come on.”

Steve pulled Tony closer, until his head was laid against Steve’s massive chest. Steve stroked his hair.


Steve’s body was warm and solid; he ran his hand up and down Tony’s back. Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve’s pec and Steve took a sharp little breath.

“Nice getting to touch you,” Steve continued in a low voice, still caressing Tony’s back. “I wanted to so badly sometimes when we’d watch Star Trek—just to hold your hand or have your head on my shoulder. When you’d curl up next to Pepper or Rhodey, I’d wish it was me. I’d stopped hoping, but I, I still wished . . .”

Tony nuzzled Steve’s neck.

“I’m right here,” Tony murmured. “You’ve got me.”

Steve’s breath hitched again. He pressed a kiss—hard and urgent—to Tony’s lips and his fingers clenched down on Tony’s arms. When Tony’s lips parted with a little gasp, Steve’s tongue pressed in, hot and heavy. (Yes!) Tony met him, stroke for stroke, returning every caress. Steve ran his hands up and down Tony’s back, his hips, his shoulders, as they kissed and kissed. Tony’s cheeks were scalding.

Steve’s fingers carded roughly through Tony’s hair and caressed the back of his neck, stroking the sensitive spot behind his ears.

Tony moaned and swung one leg to the side so he was straddling Steve’s lap. Steve gasped.

“Tony . . .”

Steve swallowed heavily and pulled back. He was panting.

“Tony,” he murmured again, nuzzling Tony’s neck. He kissed Tony’s cheeks, his neck, his forehead, then—breathing a little calmer—murred in his ear, “Tony? How about I take you up to your place?”
(Huh.) Tony blinked a few times and took a deep breath.

Tony’d figured that Steve would want to do their first scene at his place—they were already there, after all, and he’d mentioned arrangements—but lots of subs were more comfortable in their own space, so maybe Steve was trying to reassure him? (Not that Tony cared one way or the other, but it was the thought that counted . . .)

“Whatever you like,” Tony whispered, then nipped Steve’s earlobe.

Steve rose from the couch, picking Tony up with him in a smooth motion, supporting Tony with one arm under his butt, one at the small of his back. (Phew—ok, that was hot… It was like he weighed nothing to Steve.) Tony wrapped his legs around Steve’s waist and couldn’t resist rolling his hips a little, getting some much-desired friction.

Steve let out a little gasp and carried Tony swiftly to the elevator.

“God, Tony . . .” Steve muttered against his neck. “You’re just so . . . so . . .”

He took Tony’s mouthagain in a passionate kiss and, up at the penthouse, strode down the hallway with long, urgent steps. At the threshold to Tony’s bedroom, he paused for just an instant before entering.

Very carefully, Steve bent to lay Tony on the bed, then knelt on the floor beside him. Steve was looking at him very seriously, blue eyes wide and earnest. He reached out to caress Tony’s cheek, his touch soft and lingering.

“Tony,” Steve said, his brow creased. He paused and licked his lips. “You are—” he swallowed, “—you’re very dear to me. You know that, don’t you?”

Tony blinked and nodded.

“Good.” Steve smiled at him. “I—I—” He cut himself off to press a kiss to Tony’s lips. Tony propped up on one elbow and grabbed the back of Steve’s neck, pulling him closer, opening the kiss, pressing and teasing with lips and tongue and—

Steve pulled away.

“I—I—” His Dominant’s notch bobbed as he swallowed. “I should let you get some rest.”

(Wait, what? Again!?)

“Good night, sweetheart. I, uh, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With that, Steve placed a chaste—almost furtive kiss—on Tony’s lips, stood abruptly, and strode from Tony’s bedroom. Tony thought he heard Steve’s footsteps pause halfway down the hall, but Steve didn’t return. A few moments later, the elevator doors opened and closed.

Tony flopped down on his bed, frowning.

He’d really thought that this was it—that Steve would Take Him To Bed, not just take him to his bed. Third date, right?

Tony sighed and rubbed his eyes, then dragged himself to the bathroom. As he brushed his teeth, Tony caught sight of his scowling face in the mirror. This really wasn’t the end he’d predicted for his evening. Tony splashed water on his face. Then again, his predictions about Steve had been off pretty often.

Clearly, this called for drastic measures.

Like talking.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for joining me! And, yes, I promise Tony follows through on the plan to Talk to Steve in the next chapter. Honest!

It’s good to be back! Thanks for sticking with me. Hope you liked it! (hugs)

Also, now there’s an out-take! What *did* Steve and Clint talk about in the elevator?

Read it here!

http://archiveofourown.org/works/5213537

Also another out-take of Steve with his running buddy!
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Tomorrow marks P&P’s 2 year anniversary! I posted that first chapter 2 years ago, having no idea what an amazing (and loooooong) journey I was setting out on. Thank you for joining me and making the last two years so amazing.

Chapter Notes

I was going to wait and post this on the anniversary tomorrow, but I think it’s as good as it’s gonna get and I don’t wanna wait!!! Hope you like it!

If you haven’t seen it already, you might want to go back and read "Missing the Mark," an outtake story about Steve and Clint’s conversation in the elevator. :) Read it here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/5213537

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What about this one?” Bruce asked, sending a blue schematic floating across the workshop.

Tony tried not to roll his eyes. Really it was a good thing that Bruce had pounced on him after his first cup of coffee, eager to work on the Security Blanket. Again. (Constantly. Obsessively.) It kept Tony from fretting. (Constantly. Obsessively. About St—)

“Or maybe this one?” Bruce asked, sending over another set of diagrams.

( Maybe Steve was—)

“Right,” Tony said, taking a deep breath. He squinted at the schematics.

(Yep. Definitely not fretting.)

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

By lunchtime, Tony had managed to not consider a wide array of possibilities: that he’d been too forward; that Steve was just shy; that Steve wasn’t attracted to him; that he’d done something taboo; or . . . or (absurd! ridiculous!) Steve had simply changed his mind.

(“You’re very dear to me. You know that, don’t you?”)

“Bruce?” Tony said with an apologetic smile. “There’s something I need to take care of. I’m gonna head out for a bit.”

“Sure,” Bruce said, pushing his glasses back into place. “You’ve already spent a lot of time on this and—”

“No! It’s fine! I can feel it: I’m on the edge of a breakthrough. But now, I’ve gotta, yeah—just gotta take care of something.”

“Good luck with it,” Bruce said distractedly, already sinking back into the blueprints.

In the elevator, Tony tapped his fingers against the arc reactor. He sighed. When he hit the penthouse, Tony poured himself a scotch then realized it was 1:35 pm and set it back down under the imagined weight of Pepper’s disapproving stare. (Damnit.)

He started to pace.

They needed to talk.

“We need to talk.”

(Agh! No. Never open like that.)

“Why won’t you fuck me?”

(Nope. That wasn’t it.)

“Why wouldn’t you let me suck you off? I want to! Why won’t you—”

(Nope. That wasn’t it either.)

Tony sighed and headed for the kitchen. Maybe coffee would help.
("Don’t use accusing language," Pepper reminded him in his head. "Focus on your feelings, not the other person’s actions.")

Tony took a deep breath and tried it out, his gaze fixed on the coffee pot: “I feel like you don’t want to—” (Fuck me.) “Uh, be intimate with me.”

(Not bad.) He poured the water into the carafe and fitted the pot in place, thinking the words he couldn’t say out loud, even alone.

(Why don’t you want me?)

“I feel like you don’t want to be intimate with me. Why not?” Tony asked the ground coffee, then shook his head and tried again. “Is everything okay?”

Tony measured out six scoops of coffee and hit the button a little harder than necessary.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Tony frowned. “I feel like we should talk about it.”

He started pacing again. Okay. That wasn’t so bad. And waiting would only make it worse, right? Wasn’t that what Pepper always said?

“JARVIS?” Tony said, heart hammering in his chest and palms going a little sweaty. He forced the words out, “Would you ask Steve if he’d please join me in the penthouse for a cup of coffee?”

“I regret, sir, that Captain Rogers is not presently in the Tower.”

“What? No.”

Tony dropped his face in his hands.

“According to the communal calendar, he has two meetings at SHIELD followed by an appointment with Dr. Jefferson, sir. His estimated arrival time at the Tower is six-fifteen pm.”

“Fine. Great. Good,” Tony muttered, then shook his head. “Order Park Chop Suey—all Steve’s favorites—and ask him to join me for dinner in the penthouse when he gets back, okay, J?”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony sighed and poured himself a mug of freshly brewed coffee. He cast a longing glance at the scotch.

Might as well get back to work.

>>>Sexology<<<

Sexology
Prof. William Walding, M.D.
copyright 1904

From chapter 14: Regarding the Wedding Night:

“You may talk of the instincts of nature, but in you these instincts are brutalized; in her they are artificially suppressed. . . . By proper caution and delicacy on your part they may yet be harmonized, and perfect accord be thus secured. Your first words should be those of re-assurance and sympathy. Assure her most positively that her apprehensions are groundless, that no consummation shall occur this night or, indeed, at all, until on that, as you trust on all other subjects, your wishes and hers shall exactly harmonize; above all inform her that whenever your happy marriage shall be consummated, neither violence nor suffering shall attend it, but perfect and reciprocal happiness shall crown the act. You should know that gentleness, moderation, but more than all, due and reasonable cultivation of her womanly passion will enable you to fulfill your pledge to the very letter. You should know that in rare cases days or even weeks must elapse before entire consummation can be effected, but that when it does occur the slight pain she will suffer will be of such a character as shall increase rather than diminish her pleasure. You will discover by experience, that with due deliberation and prudence, nature will co-operate in your favor to relieve you of nearly all the trouble you anticipate.

We cannot be more explicit than this, but you will readily comprehend our meaning when you obey these instructions. The slightest intimation of pain or fear should warn you to desist, being determined that under no circumstances shall more violence be used than is obviously invited and shared. In one word, beware of committing a veritable outrage on the person of her whom God has given you for a companion. From all we can learn, and the instances from which we derive our conclusions are very numerous, the first conjugal act is little else than a legalized rape in most cases. Let nothing interfere with your determination to wait for and obtain entire reciprocity of thought and desire, and let this always be your guide.” p. 64
At five-fifty-nine pm., Tony had set the dining table in the penthouse with good China (& both forks and chopsticks), placed all the food in elegant covered serving bowls (which he’d found unexpectedly looking in a back cabinet for the reserve beer), and was now trying not to watch the clock. Tony forced himself to sit down and answer some Stark Industries email. (There. Look. Productive!)

“Sir? Captain Rogers has returned and is in the elevator to the penthouse.”

Tony went to the elevator to meet him, heart beating a little faster with every passing moment.

The doors opened on Steve, still wearing his winter coat.

“Hi,” Steve said. He gave Tony a half-hearted smile; his brow was creased, his expression tight.

Tony’s stomach dropped. In that instant, all his worst fears flashed before his eyes. (Steve’s through with you, it’s just not a good match, you’re too —)

Steve took two swift steps from the elevator and wrapped his arms around Tony. Tony could feel the cold lingering on Steve’s jacket, as he leaned down to press his chilled cheek to Tony’s neck, arms squeezing him tight. Tony reached up and hugged him back.

“Hey,” Tony said a little uncertainly, rubbing his hand up and down Steve’s back. Steve just squeezed him tighter. Tony bit his lip, then asked, “Rough day at the office, babe?”

Steve let out a weary chuckle and pulled away, shaking his head.

“Doesn’t seem like just talking should be so hard, but—” he shrugged, not meeting Tony’s eyes.

Tony blinked. (You idiot. Steve’s just come from therapy.)

Tony reached up to touch Steve’s cheek.

“Of course it’s hard,” Tony said, then gave him a reassuring smile. “Trust me, I remember.”

“Right,” Steve said uneasily, then looked at the dining table and whistled. “Golly, you’re sure putting on the Ritz. What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, you know.” Tony said, with theatrically affected cool, “There’s this fella I’m sweet on. Gotta make a good impression.”

“Oh, well then,” Tony said. Steve seemed exhausted, so Tony added, “In that case, maybe he won’t mind eating on the couch and watching Star Trek.”

Steve looked maybe a little relieved as he answered, “He could probably be persuaded.”

“Great! Gimme your coat, take off your boots, and hit the couch. I’ll bring over your favorites.”

Steve blinked, eyebrows up. “Uh, sure. That sounds nice.”

Tony shooed him over to the couch. “Singha or Sam Adams.”

“Whichever.”

“Sam Adams, then.”

He brought Steve his favorite beer, dished out two heaping plates of food, and joined Steve on the couch.

“You know the drill, JARVIS!”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony was relieved to find that the next episode in their lineup was a light and pleasant one. An alien race mistook Spock for a long-lost Philosopher King to (mostly) comic effect, while Sulu and Chekov engaged in a generally good-natured pilot rivalry.

As they watched, Tony grabbed bites of beef & broccoli off of Steve’s plate and fed him a few choice tidbits from his own now and then. By the end of the episode, they’d finished their beers, discarded their plates, and cuddled close. Tony was nestled against Steve’s side, head on his chest, with Steve’s arm around him, fingers absentely stroking his hip.

“I must confess Captain,” Spock said, “it was truly a fascinating experience.”

Steve smiled and rested his cheek on the top of Tony’s head as the end credits played. He let out a
long sigh, but it seemed (Tony hoped) more contented than melancholy.

“That was nice,” Steve said. “Thank you, Tony.”

“My pleasure.”

Tony was a little afraid that the often-heard “I'd better let you get some rest now” would be next, but instead Steve sank a little deeper on the couch and kept stroking his hip. So maybe now was the time?

(Steve, I think we should talk about—)

(I would very much like to go to bed with you. So, what do you think?)

(I feel like you’re hesitating to be intimate with me and I’d like to talk about it. Please.)

“Tony?”

“Yeah?” Tony asked. But instead of answering when Tony looked up, Steve placed a tender kiss on his lips. (Oh?) Steve’s fingers clenched at his hip, pulling him closer. Tony stroked his hands across the broad expanse of Steve’s chest, as Steve’s tongue caressed his lips, soft and inquiring, and Tony met him eagerly.

They sat on the couch, trading long leisurely kisses. Tony was sorely tempted to climb into Steve’s lap again, but that hadn’t worked out as he’d hoped last time and he wasn’t eager to make the same mistake twice. Instead, Tony pivoted incrementally (stealthily!) as they kissed until they were facing one another, his left thigh pressed to Steve’s right.

Little by little, Steve’s kisses grew deeper and more urgent. This was going well! (Maybe they wouldn’t have to talk?) Steve’s hands closed around Tony’s wrists and dragged Tony’s arms behind his back, pinning them. Tony’s heart leapt. He let out a low moan and—

Steve let go. He pulled back and kissed Tony on the cheek.

“Thank you again for a wonderful evening,” Steve said. He swallowed roughly and glanced to the elevator. “I, uh, I should probably go . . .”

“Steve!” Tony said urgently. His hand fisted in Steve’s shirt to hold him there. (This had gone on long enough.) Tony cleared his throat.

“Wouldn’t you like to stay?” Tony’d meant to fill the words with lush sexual promise (or he thought he’d meant to), but instead it came out uncertain.

“I—” Steve glanced away again. His whole body seemed tense. “I shouldn’t.”

(And “I shouldn’t” was a far cry from “I don’t want to.”)

Tony reached up to cup Steve’s cheek with his palm.

“Why not?” Tony asked quietly, and this time the tone came out right: open, curious, patient.

Steve sat, tightly coiled, for a long tense moment then seemed to melt forward. He took Tony’s face in both his hands and tipped their foreheads together.

“I’m so afraid of messing things up with you. That I’ll ruin this,” he confessed.

Tony’s lips curled up. Just a little. (Was that all?)

“You won’t,” he said calmly.

“You can’t know that,” Steve said, pulling back with a frown.


“I’ve messed up before,” Steve reminded him.

“We both have,” Tony corrected. “But I know you now, Steve. I trust you. I’m not going to shut you out over some little thing.”Steve didn’t look reassured.

Tony buried his face against Tony’s neck, clutching at him, grip tight, almost painful.

“God, Tony,” he said harshly against Tony’s skin. “Sometimes I want you so badly—all of you, every way I can have you—it . . . it scares me.” Steve took a deep breath. “What if I lose control?”

(Huh?) Tony was glad that Steve wasn’t looking at him just then, since he was pretty sure his bewildered face wasn’t what Steve needed to see right then. (Is he afraid he’ll go into some sort of
uncontrollable Dominant lust frenzy and take leave of his senses?) The idea was so silly—it was like something out of a nineteenth century novel. (Or rape culture—okay, that went someplace depressing fast.)

“What if I hurt you?” Steve asked with the same tone of misery.

Tony swallowed down the words “I’ll be disappointed if you don’t;” he knew what Steve meant and doubted he’d appreciate the glib reply in his current mood.

Steve lifted his head to look at Tony.

“When I first got the serum,” Steve said, rambling fast, with an urgent tone of confession, “I kept running into things and breaking things, because I hadn’t mastered my new body. And I’m still really clumsy sometimes! And I break punching bags—even the ones you redesigned for me!”

“Are you going to hit me like a punching bag?” Tony asked, with one eyebrow raised.

“No! God, no!” Steve looked horrified.

“Then what are you worried about?”

“I’m just—I sometimes forget how strong I am now. After the serum.”

“Did you hurt any of your other lovers after you got the serum?” Tony asked it calmly, careful to keep his tone well clear of accusation. More rhetorical.

(Of course, it was possible Steve had gone too far accidentally—it was a mistake lots of Dominants could make, especially as novices—but a Dom was unlikely to do any irreparable damage unless acting negligently and Tony couldn’t picture Steve like that. Then again, most Doms only had to adjust to a new body gradually at puberty, so maybe . . .)

“Nooo,” Steve admitted slowly, like the word was being drawn from him against his will.

“Then why are you so worried now if it wasn’t a problem before?” Tony asked.

“There weren’t any,” Steve said. His ears were bright pink. “Any lovers.”

“After the serum?”

Steve swallowed.

“Or before. Or . . . ever.” Steve looked mortified and hid his face in his hands. “Oh, God, Tony I should have told you sooner.”

Tony stared blankly.

(Steve’s a virgin. You’re Steve’s first lover.)

Tony felt like a complete idiot. How had he not realized that ages ago? It all made perfect sense. He’d assumed that in wartime a babe like Steve post-serum—a walking wet-dream—surely had gotten laid, but well . . . he was still Steve, right?

Tony nearly shuddered with relief. (That’s all? First time jitters? Oh thank fucking God, thank—)

“Really, I’m sorry,” Steve was saying, then added with an uneasy laugh. “I, just, I’ve never—and I’m so worried I’ll disappoint you or worse I’ll hurt you or something and—.” He let out a miserable sigh. “I’m supposed to know what I’m doing, but . . .” he shrugged.

“What, because you’re the Dom?” Tony asked, with a teasing little smile. “Well, if we’re playing by those rules I’m supposed to be some wide-eyed virginal ingénue fifteen years your junior, so I guess we just can’t get anything right.”

Steve cracked a hesitant smile and took Tony’s hand.

“You’re not too disappointed?” Steve asked. Tony shook his head; his chest felt a little tight.

There’d been a time ten—even five—years ago when Tony would have found Steve’s bashfulness and inexperience a gigantic turn off. (In fact, he was embarrassed to remember, he had actually kicked a few Doms out of bed for it . . .) But experience and confidence hadn’t exactly guaranteed the best results. And Steve was just so . . . Steve.

“Not disappointed at all,” Tony said, squeezing Steve’s hand.

They sat in silence for a few moments, holding hands.

Eventually, Tony said: “So, I guess this is why we haven’t been, ah—”

“—knocking boots?” Steve suggested with a rueful smile. Tony chuckled.

“Yeah.” He stroked Steve’s hand and added, “You know it’s okay to be nervous? Most people are. And, well, if somebody isn’t at least a little nervous the first time, that’s probably a bad sign.”
“I guess so.”

“Definitely!” Tony hesitated a moment before suggesting an obvious solution—he wasn’t sure what they’d thought of it in the 1930s. But he had to say: “If you want, though, I’d be very happy to hire you a top notch personal trainer who could—”

“Oh no! No, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Ok, sure. It’s not for everybody,” Tony said reassuringly. “That’s fine. It’s not required or anything. I just thought you might like—”

“Thank you, but no I don’t think—”

“Totally! No problem! But, well, there are lots of really great books, you know. Don’t even have to go to the bookstore! You can order them online or just get an e-copy. JARVIS can give you a list if you like. He knows my favorites.”

Steve nodded, looking relieved.

“And I can see not wanting a professional who’d be a stranger, but you could ask for advice from—” (Tony was about to start suggesting names—Rhodey’s right at the top—but that would be weird, right? Right.) “—from a Dom you trust.”

“Right.” Steve nodded. “I really should have done that already.”

“It’s fine! I mean, all of this has been pretty sudden. We can take it slow. It’s—” Tony swallowed. “It’s fine.”

(Oh God, please not too slow…)

“And, you know,” Tony said, “if what I’ve sampled so far is just you running on instinct, I’d say you’re a natural.”

Steve bit his lip, looking pleased but embarrassed. He opened his mouth as if to protest, but Tony cut him off.

“Believe it, babe!” Tony insisted, “You’re amazing. You have a real gift, Steve. And I am one lucky sub.”

“I’m the lucky one.” Steve mumbled.

“Well, shucks, I guess we’re both lucky,” Tony said, with mock bashfulness, then added with a rakish smile, “And speaking of getting lucky… Kidding, kidding! I get why we’re not ‘knocking boots’ yet, but I have truly enjoyed everything we’ve done so far.” He let his voice drop a little. “How about you?”

Steve swallowed. “Yeah. Very much.”

Tony dropped his head down to the side and bit his lip. He smiled. After a moment’s indecisiveness, he ran his thumb across Steve’s wrist to caress the delicate skin.

“In fact,” Tony murmured, “I was really enjoying what you were doing earlier.”

“Aw yeah? Were you really?” Steve said with a hint of teasing. “I wasn’t quite sure.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony murmured, running a slow caress up Steve’s arm.

“So, here I am, big fella,” Tony said in a low voice, pressing his thigh against Steve’s. “Yours to do with as you please—whether you’re tucking me into bed, picking up where we left off, or … something else.”

“I’m still not ready, to uh—” Steve made a vague gesture. “Hate to wind you up for nothing.”

“For nothing?” Tony repeated incredulously, then said in a more seductive tone, “Anticipation can be its own pleasure, darling.”

“Oh can it?” He was pretty sure Steve was teasing him. “Well, in that case—”

Steve pressed a soft, fleeting kiss to Tony’s lips—then his cheek, his throat. Steve caressed Tony’s forehead, cheekbone, jaw, ran his fingers lightly along Tony’s neck and shoulders.

There was something slow and deliberate about the way Steve touched him, as if it were all part of a detailed and carefully considered plan. Steve kissed Tony again and stroked his hands up and down Tony’s back, as if mapping his spine, sides, shoulder blades, tailbone.

Tony parted his lips in a contented sigh and Steve nipped at his lower lip before pressing in a little with his tongue. Tony’s heart started picking up the pace. He was sorely tempted to deepen the kiss himself, but now more than ever he wanted to let Steve lead, even in the little things.

As they kissed, Steve ran his hands across Tony’s shoulders, then down his arms and up again.
Steve stroked Tony’s collarbone with his thumbs. Large warm hands skimmed Tony’s chest, his abs, his hips, then up again to his shoulders. The light touches made Tony shiver; Steve’s kiss grew more ardent in response.

Tony let out a little noise unbidden when Steve’s fingers closed firmly around his wrists again and with a slow pressure, pinned them behind his back. (Yes!) He could feel Steve smile against his lips.

Steve nuzzled his neck and murmured: “Do you like that, sweetheart? Do you like it when I take your wrists?”

Tony gasped. He felt unexpectedly lightheaded; all the blood seemed to be rushing from his brain to his cock.

“Answer me,” Steve insisted in a soft voice, squeezing down on Tony’s wrists. Tony nodded emphatically.

“Answer me properly,” Steve murmured into Tony’s ear between kisses. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes!” Tony gasped.

Steve took his mouth in a deep kiss, hard and heavy. He pulled Tony’s wrists closer together, so he could hold them both in one massive hand. Then, as they kissed, he pressed forward, bending Tony back and back—until for one jolting moment Tony thought he’d fall. But he didn’t. (Of course he didn’t.) Steve’s other hand was between his shoulder blades, holding him up. Tony relaxed into it; Steve moaned.

Bowed back and supported by Steve’s strong arms, Tony thrilled with every kiss, as time became a blur. Tony shivered with pleasure.

At last, Steve broke away with a gasp. Panting heavily, he pressed his lips to Tony’s throat and jaw, then murmured again, “Do you like that, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” Tony gasped, feeling laid bare by that single word. There was something almost humiliating about being forced to verbalize his pleasure. It brought an unexpected blush to his cheeks with a rush of lust.

“Do you like me to hold you like this?”

“Yes!”

Steve pressed him back still further; Tony’s thighs went taught with the effort of holding position.

“Is this good?”

“Yessssss.”

“Say my name,” Steve ordered, his voice a low seductive rumble.

“Steve.” It came out in a half-moan. Steve’s breath caught.

“Yeah, oh God! Tony.”

Steve kissed him almost desperately and Tony swam muzzily through the waves of pleasure. Kissing, gasping, writhing in Steve’s firm grasp, on and on. . . It wasn’t subspace—(of course not, stupid)—but it was relaxing and warm to take pleasure from Steve and to give it in return.


“Steve,” Tony answered softly. Steve’s breath hitched again.

“My God, you’re perfect,” Steve said. He tipped his forehead to Tony’s and promised, their lips close together, “I’m gonna be so good to you.”

Steve took a long slow breath, then another; Tony matched his breathing.

“I’m gonna learn all that there is,” Steve whispered. He kissed Tony’s forehead.

“I’ll never hurt you,” Steve promised, “except the ways you want me to.”

There wasn’t enough air; Tony’s chest was tight.

Steve eased Tony upright again and brought his wrists forward. Steve bent to kiss his left palm, then his right palm. Steve rubbed his cheek against Tony’s hand as he swore, “I’m gonna take such good care of you.”

Steve swallowed thickly, then added: “If you’ll let me.” He looked up at Tony, wide blue eyes shining and intense as he whispered, “Please let me."

(Oh fuck!)
Tears were pooling in Tony’s eyes. (Why? What the fuck? What’s the matter with you? Nothing to cry about, stupid.)

Tony opened his mouth—wanting to answer out loud, the way Steve had told him to—but he couldn’t get the words out around the lump in his throat. He closed his mouth again and nodded.

Steve looked so overwhelmingly happy Tony had to close his eyes. Tony took a long deep breath. (Jesus—why was he such a hormonal wreck? He’d blame it on having a bit drop, but of course he never went under. Couldn’t. Not since—)

Another deep breath.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Steve said, pulling Tony into his arms. “I’ve got you.”

(I’m not usually like this. I don’t know what’s the matter with me! I—)

Tony opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Steve just murmured, “It’s okay; I’ve got you,” again. Tony swallowed thickly and laid his head against Steve’s chest. Steve let out a happy little murmur and stroked his neck. Tony curled closer and tried to match his breaths to Steve’s deep, calm breathing: in-out, in-out, in-out. As Steve held him, Tony let his eyes slide shut, suddenly aware of how absurdly tired he was. (He hadn’t realized how worried and tense he’d been all day . . .)

“You’re lovely,” Steve mumbled, kissing Tony’s hair. Tony smiled and curled a little closer, muscles going lax as he took another deep breath of Steve’s now-familiar scent.

Tony blinked a few times and yawned as Steve shifted under him. (Had he dozed?) Steve worked one arm under Tony’s knees and the other behind his back, then carried Tony to his bedroom as if he weighed nothing. (Mmmm…) Tony hadn’t bothered to make his bed—he rarely did—so Steve set him gently down on the sheets like he had the night before, pulled the covers over Tony, and knelt beside him.

“You’re gorgeous,” Steve whispered, stroking Tony’s hair. Tony let out a long sigh.

“Thank you for being so patient with me,” Steve said softly, still stroking Tony’s hair. Tony wanted to say something to reassure Steve, but words were hard to find. Instead, he took Steve’s hand and brought it to his lips for a lingering kiss, trying to put all his tenderness for Steve into his gesture, his eyes. Steve smiled at him. “Thank you.”

(Everything was fine. Good, even.)

Steve could see the tear tracks on Tony’s cheeks, but he didn’t care. (It was fine. Good.) Steve just knelt there, stroking Tony’s hair in a slow steady rhythm as Tony’s eyelids grew heavier and heavier until eventually sleep took him.

**Chapter End Notes**

This section of Sexology is lifted VERBATIM from the actual book of the same title. In addition to having tons of insane, absurd, and offensive views of sex and gender, one of the book’s main goals was to prevent marital rape and educate young turn-of-the-century men about consent. It’s a fascinating and (at at times) infuriating read!

I really hope you liked it! (Some of you totally called Steve’s virginity. ;) And, hey, if you wanted to leave a little anniversary present for me... maybe comments? Maybe let me know if there as a bit you liked best? (This remains my predictable obsession.)

Thank you so much for joining me!
“Good morning, sir,” JARVIS said, as Tony blinked himself awake. “It is 9:17 am on January fifth.”

Tony yawned. “Thanks, J.”

Tony let out a long contented sigh and rolled over, half hoping to find Steve curled up—on top of the covers, fully dressed—asleep at his side. His bed was empty, but it left him more eager for the future than disappointed by the present.

Tony smiled as he stumbled towards the bathroom. (Steve.) He turned on the shower and poured himself a cup of coffee. (Yes, he put a coffee maker in the bathroom and JARVIS turns it on. So?)

Tony took his first cup of coffee into the shower.

“Sir, Captain Rogers asked to be informed when you were awake. Permission to relay this information?”

“Sure. Bet he wants to make breakfast.”

“I am at liberty to confirm Sir’s suspicion.”

Tony smiled a little wider: Steve was crazy about him; he was a shy, conscientious virgin; and Talking was The Best Idea Ever.

“Hey, J?” Tony called. “Send Pepper a magnum of Veuve Clicquot, would ya? And . . . and a dozen yellow roses! No, two dozen. Note to read: ‘You give the best advice.’”

“Of course, sir. A most sound decision.”

“And tell Steve I’ll be down for breakfast in ten!”

Tony lathered his hair with shampoo and let the hot water pelt against his back.

(“Do you like that, sweetheart? Do you like it when I take your wrists? Answer me. . . . Say my name.”)

“Steve,” Tony murmured to himself, then nearly blushed—but there was nobody to hear him but JARVIS. Tony swallowed thickly and fumbled for his coffee cup.

He hadn’t expected to skim with Steve last night. Even if they’d had sex he’d have been surprised to skim the top of subspace like he had. (It was the closest he got to subspace since—) Tony took a deep breath. (No.)

He usually didn’t skim in erotic scenarios; that warm, extra-relaxed state normally came from service-y cuddling with Pepper and (maybe once) with Rhodey. But Steve’s firm affection and tender Dominance had gotten him there effortlessly. It was nice. A good sign. (Maybe someday he’d—) Tony shook his head. (No. Stop.)

It was good. What they had was good.

(“Do you like me to hold you like this?” Firm pressure at his wrists, back bowed, thighs straining and Steve holding him, all around him, heat and strength and—)

As the pleasurable memories washed over him, Tony’s cock began to stir. He bit his lip, then turned the water colder.

Steve was waiting for him for breakfast. Besides, there was pleasure to be had in pleasure deferred. It could wait. (A little.)

When Tony wandered into the kitchen, he found Steve standing at the stove, spatula in hand, wearing a suit and tie. (Ah!) Tony’d forgotten it was Sunday.
“Morning, babe,” Tony said. Steve turned and stood smiling at him, this warm intimate smile, just a little shy.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Steve said softly, sweetly. “Did you sleep well?”

“Mmmm-hhhm,” Tony murmured with a nod, sidling closer.

“I’m glad,” Steve said, then said more quietly, “You looked so beautiful it was hard to leave you.”

Tony pressed himself under Steve’s arm and looked up at him.

“Next time, don’t,” he suggested. “You’re welcome in my bed.”

Steve looked surprised and perhaps a hint uneasy? (Huh? Oh.) Tony caressed Steve’s back and clarified in a more playful tone, “Open invitation—with or without ‘boot knocking.’”

Steve smiled. “Well, maybe I’ll take you up on—shoot!”

He turned his attention suddenly back to the stove where the pancakes were getting a little scorched. While Steve hastily removed them from the griddle, Tony poured himself coffee and reassured Steve that “Clint actually likes the burnt ones.”

“No, no, I think they’re fine,” Steve said, frowning down at them. “And the bacon should be good. You ready for food? I was about to call the team, but I’m not above giving my fella special treatment.”

“Nah, I’m good with coffee for now,” Tony said, savoring the sights and smells of Sunday brunch: bacon, eggs, pancakes, fruit, and Steve in a suit and tie. (A suit and tie. Because he got up early and went to church.)

“All right, sweetheart.”

(You’re dating someone who calls you ‘sweetheart’ and actually goes to Church.)

Tony shook his head and downed some more coffee.

“JARVIS, would you please call the team for brunch?”

“Certainly, Captain Rogers.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.”

(I’m dating a virgin who goes to church, and cooks brunch, and wears a suit, and is scrupulously polite to my AI.) Tony nearly laughed into his coffee cup at the thought, then froze. (Wait–)

Steve was humming some church-y sounding music and piling pancakes on a platter. He turned to smile at Tony for a moment before looking back to the stove. (Wait. No, wait.)

Tony downed the rest of his coffee, but it sat uneasily in his stomach. Suddenly, discrete lines of data were shifting and sliding: what if rather than coincidence or correlation, there was causation?

Did Steve disapprove of pre-marital sex? Was it uneasiness more than nervousness?

“Good morning, Steve. Tony,” Bruce said, arriving with a smile.

(Well, Steve couldn’t disapprove that much or he wouldn’t want to date Tony, who was pretty much the antithesis of virginal, right?)

Tony bade Bruce a distracted good morning, poured himself some more coffee, and settled at the counter, watching Steve fuss over the last of the brunch preparations. (It was fine. Right? Right.)

Natasha arrived next with Clint in tow.

(Okay, so, Steve didn’t seem to mind other people—Tony—having pre-marital sex. But maybe he didn’t approve of it for himself?)

“Good morning, all.”

“Good morning, Natasha,” Steve answered. A pause, then, “Good morning, Clint.”

“Uh, good morning. Steve,” Clint said.

(Maybe Steve wanted to save himself for marriage or whatever it was religious people said.) Tony frowned at his coffee. (Oh, shit.) Jesus. (Ha. Jesus.)

“Those pancakes look wonderful, Steve,” Bruce said warmly. “Did you put blueberries in them?”

“Yeah. I saw we had some, so I thought it might make a nice change.”
“It’s so nice of you to cook for us like this every Sunday,” Bruce said. “I was thinking I might try taking a day too. Maybe a mid-week breakfast? I mean, nothing this fancy, of course, but—”

“That sounds lovey!” Steve said, as he put a platter of bacon on the table. “I enjoyed the porridge you shared, when was it? Last week maybe? The one with—”

As Bruce and Steve chattered about food, and everyone served their plates, Tony couldn’t quite shake the feeling that everything maybe wasn’t quite fine after all.

“Tony?” Steve said. “Would you like more coffee?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah. Thanks.”

“How about food?” Steve asked, as he poured the coffee and laid a hand lightly on Tony’s back. “Maybe some pancakes? You mentioned liking them with blueberries . . .”

“Thanks, babe,” Tony said, as Steve served him several of his favorites.

(Well, obviously things weren’t super un-fine either.)

“Pretty intense training schedule we’ve got coming up,” Natasha said. “How were the meetings at SHIELD yesterday, Steve?”

“Fine. But the new training for us isn’t from SHIELD. Something I worked out with JARVIS.”

Tony munched on his pancakes, listening with barely half an ear as the talk turned to the joys of training simulations with JARVIS.

(Steve had tensed up at Tony’s invitation to bed.)

Tony felt the guilt resting uneasily in his stomach.

(Well, obviously things weren’t super un-fine either.)

(If he disapproved of sex on religious grounds, he’d have said so when they talked last night.)

Tony’s felt his stomach plummet again.

(But would he really say something? Tony had a certain reputation, and he’d made it pretty clear that he expected them to have sex. Steve had found it hard even admitting he was a virgin! What if Steve didn’t—)

Clint nudged Tony with his elbow.

“You okay, man?” Clint asked with a frown.

“Yeah,” Tony said with a shrug. “Just distracted.”

(Shit.)

“Would you like some bacon?” Steve asked. “Or how about some fruit?”

Tony accepted and tried to focus on the conversation. (Shit. Shit! No, don’t panic.) Tony forced down a bite of melon. (Goddamnit—this meant more Talking.)

Finally, the team had demolished the food and started putting their plates in the dishwasher and thanking Steve.

“Thank you for cooking brunch, Steve,” Clint said, oddly formal.

“Oh, of course,” Steve said. A pause. “It’s a pleasure. As always.”

Tony hovered. As soon as Bruce was gone, he said, “Steve? Do you have a minute?”

“For you? Always,” he said, but his smile dimmed a little at the look on Tony’s face.

“No, it’s fine!” Tony reassured him. “I’ll come down later to look at what you’ve got. I think I might be getting near a break-through too. But, I’ll come down later, ok?”

“Great! Good. Sure. I’ll get started,” Bruce said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Thanks. Uh, right. See you soon. Thanks for brunch, Steve.”

Tony hovered. As soon as Bruce was gone, he said, “Steve? Do you have a minute?”

“For you? Always,” he said, but his smile dimmed a little at the look on Tony’s face.

(No. Stop worrying about nothing, stupid.) Tony drained his coffee. (Steve hadn’t said anything disapproving about sex last night, right? Right.)
“Great!” Tony said, trying to act normal. “Let’s sit on the couch, ok?”

“Sure,” Steve said, looking a little puzzled as he followed Tony.

“So uh,” Tony began awkwardly, sitting next to Steve. “Uh, last night. When we talked about sex. And topping. Just, I know you said you’re inexperienced and worried about your strength—which is fine! really!—and I don’t mind waiting for you to be comfortable. But, well, I was wondering—is that all it is?”

Steve just looked confused.

“I mean, you do want to, right?” Tony asked vaguely.

“Oh, course I do.” Steve was frowning, still looking confused.

“You do?” Tony asked. “Really?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck.

“Uh, pretty sure I oughta be embarrassed by just how bad I want to,” Steve admitted, then asked, “What’s brought all this on?”

“Just, I know you’re Catholic and you’ve never had sex, so I thought maybe you think sex outside of marriage is sinful or something.”

Steve looked equal measures amused and embarrassed. “I’ve never had a fella before either.”

Tony felt a flood of relief, quickly followed by uncertainty. “So you don’t have a problem with it? Or think pre-marital sex is sinful?”

“Well,” Steve hesitated a moment, “I mean, in an ideal world I guess I’m supposed to, uh, have the . . . patience to wait.” The tips of Steve’s ears were turning pink.

Steve hastened to add, tone urgent, “I mean, if you felt that way—about waiting I mean—I’d definitely respect that! But . . .” Steve shrugged. “You don’t see any reason not to, as I understand it and, well, I don’t want to wait, so . . .”

And he knew he should let it go, but somehow Tony couldn’t stop himself from saying, “But you do think it’s sinful?”

“I guess maybe a little?” Steve shook his head, then gave another shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

“But it’s a sin,” Tony pressed, like a moth to the flame. (Oh, god, shut up . . . stop talking!)

“Maybe?” Steve shrugged again. “I dunno—I haven’t really thought about it much. I mean, I’m a sinner now, I’ll be a sinner later, but on the list of sins that’ll weigh on my mind? Making love to you outside the sacrament of marriage isn’t gonna make the list.”

Steve reached out and took Tony’s hand, twined their fingers together, then kissed Tony’s knuckles. He smiled softly, the sweet intimate smile Tony doubted other people had ever seen. “I won’t be . . . I don’t want to be lustful. I want to be loving. So marriage, no marriage; it’s a technicality. And I’ve committed worse sins.”

(Hardly a rousing, ‘Yes let’s get it on like bunnies!’ . . . Was this what they meant by “Catholic guilt?”)

Steve shrugged again, but Tony must have been visibly skeptical, since he added, “For God’s sake, Tony, I’ve killed people.”

“That’s totally different,” Tony said, thrown by the sudden change in topic.

“You’re the one who brought up the subject of sin,” Steve said, voice going a little harsh as he jerked his hand away. “You wanna talk about sin? ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”

“It was war,” Tony said, feeling totally off kilter.

“They were still people!” Steve said, sounding angry. His body went tense. “Even SS Officers, even those horrible men running the Hydra camps.” He took a deep breath and looked away. “But those aren’t the only people I killed.”

“Some of them were just soldiers, you know?” Steve’s voice went quiet. “They were just boys, and I wondered sometimes, was he drafted or did he volunteer?” The words came pouring out faster and faster. “Does he love Hitler or just his country or is he simply afraid? Did his mother, sister, little brother pray every night for him to come home safe? Hans or Fritz or Kurt or whatever his name was I’d left bleeding in the mud.” Steve’s hands were clenched together, twisting in his lap. Tony’s throat felt tight as Steve kept rambling:

“Sometimes there were Italians, and I thought of Anna and Luca, and their family still in Italy. I heard one of them—a sentry—say, ‘Madonna!’ just like Anna used to; I tried to knock him out, but it was hard to know how much force was too little to keep a man down, and how much was
too much and I didn’t mean to if I could help it, but sometimes I’d hear a neck snap or skull crack and the wet sound of—"

Steve cut himself off, breathing hard. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed thickly, turning away.

(Fuck.)

Tony scooted closer to put his hand on Steve’s shoulder, half afraid he’d be shaken off, but he shouldn’t have worried. This time, Steve leaned into the touch, breathing deeply. Tony wrapped his arms around him.

(Was this what he talked about in therapy?) Tony’s heart twisted sharply. (Somehow, he’d imagined Steve talking about culture shock in the modern world. PTSD from the crash. Not that sick guilt, the self-loathing, the thought that the blood on your hands would never come off, the clinging stench of death, it would always be there, and that even if—)

Tony took a deep breath and held Steve a little tighter, resting his head against Steve’s chest as Steve gathered him in his arms. Steve pressed his cheek to the top of Tony’s head and just held him quietly for a few minutes. Tony could hear his heartbeat.

Tony lost track of the minutes slipping by. Finally, Steve said quietly, firmly: “You’re right. It was war. I’m proud I served my country. I’m glad we won. If I had to do it again to defeat Hitler, I wouldn’t do it differently. But I’m still sorry they died. That I killed them. Their deaths are on my conscience—I’m still working on penance.”


“So, to answer your question,” Steve said quietly. He tipped Tony’s head up with a gentle finger under his chin and looked down with a sad smile. “When there’s still war and poverty and cruelty . . . even if God minds, I don’t think what we get up to in bed is gonna rank too high on His list. Or mine neither—whether the Church says it’s technically a sin or not.”

Steve smiled at Tony, then stroked his cheek.

“And trust me,” he said, voice going low. He tightened his grip slightly on the back of Tony’s neck, nipped his earlobe, and whispered: “I really really want to.”


“What about this one?” Bruce asked, sending a floating screen of diagrams over to Tony.

Tony took another sip of coffee and tried not to sigh audibly with impatience. They’d been at it for hours. (After their talk, Tony’d had a satisfying cuddle with Steve, until eventually Bruce pinged him through JARVIS. As Steve had set out for his run, he’d added tantalizingly, “Besides—I should go. I’ve got shopping to do. And a research project I’m eager to start . . . .”)

Tony hoped Steve’s research was going better than his was. Ugh. Bruce’s diagrams were all becoming a blur. (Also, please be sexy research, please be sexy research! Surely that’s what Steve’s rakish smile and husky voice meant, right?)

“Did you change the compound again?” Tony asked Bruce, squinting.

“Yeah—just a few tweaks. It should increase elasticity.”

“Okay.”

Tony was feeling more and more like Sisyphus. But Sisyphus with a deadline—they’d be leaving for his ranch soon and would need time for manufacturing before they could go.

Tony typed in a few equations and waited for them to run.

“I dunno,” he said, shaking his head as scanned the results. “It looks like it sacrifices too much strength. Unless—"

“—we can cross it with polyaramid plates?”

“Yeah. But every joint would be a weak point. What if—”

Steve’s voice blared over JARVIS’s speakers:

“AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!”
Sorry for the short chapter, but I hated to keep you waiting and the next bit has been a struggle and now I'm off celebrating Christmas with my family. I'm hoping to post the next part of what was going to be chapter 49 before my big interview Jan 7th (or right after) so although this was short I hope to have more sooner than usual.

Also, uh, about that ending: please don't hate me!

Hope you liked it! Comments are cherished!
“What have we got, Cap?” Natasha asked as they boarded the quinjet.

“According to the report so far: ‘Strange weather patterns and a shimmering light in the sky,’” Steve said, stepping aside so Natasha could reach the pilot seat. “Scientists at SHIELD think it’s a nascent portal. Coordinates are on the display—upstate New York.”

Tony joined Bruce at one of the consoles to see what they’d sent over.

“Crap,” Bruce muttered.

“Fasten your seat belts!” Clint called from the co-pilot’s seat as they took off with a muted whoosh.

“Is it bad?” Steve asked peering at the console.

Tony flipped the faceplate up and skimmed over the data.

“Well,” he said, “it’s changed again. Not the same as any previous versions—unless, of course, this is just a stage we’ve never caught before, in which case who knows.”

“Look at that wave-particle duality,” Bruce said, tapping the screen. “It’s way off from any of our projections.”

“Yeah.” Tony glared at it.

“Sorry, this had to interrupt your research,” Steve said.

Tony hesitated a moment, then said sotto voce with a little smile, “I’m even more sorry this had to interrupt your research.”

The tips of Steve’s ears went pink. He turned away abruptly, tapping his comm.

“Director Fury, sir,” Steve said briskly. “Yes, we’re en route.”

“Okay,” Tony said, turning back to Bruce. “Looks like this new data is most similar to . . . hypothetical 36. Agree?”

“Prepare for landing,” Clint called, then added, “Please ensure that all seatbacks are returned to their upright position and all tray tables are locked and stowed. We thank you for choosing Quinjet Air and hope you’ve enjoyed this eleven minute express flight.”

Tony laughed, but the sound was brittle. Steve frowned, looking both confused and disapproving.

“Well,” Tony said, looking up at the blue-ish energy field crackling high in the sky above the tree line. “That sure looks like the start of a portal to me.”

The number “190” kept flashing through his head; he reminded himself there probably weren’t 190 people in a fifty mile radius up here.

Once they landed, he tossed his mini-orbiters around the field to start collecting more precise data while they got the mini-spectrometer in place. (SHIELD’s crap looked like something from a meteorology center by comparison.)

“Bruce, it’s on your StarkTab in three-two-one!”

“Got it. It’s running Hypothetical 36. Do you think we can just add a patch to the current devices to close it?”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Tony said.

“SHIELD forces are just a few minutes behind us,” Steve said.

“At least we’re in the middle of nowhere again,” Clint said softly.
“Yeah.”

They all nodded their agreement.

Tony focused on the data, tuning out the arrival of their SHIELD reinforcements, and all the chatter around them.

“It’s spiking!” Bruce said urgently.

The blue overhead started to go green-ish violet, like a tornado sky, then began sputtering and crackling like a tv tuned to static. The hair on the back of Tony’s neck stood up.

(Shit!)

Tony could hear feet thudding all around him and Steve’s voice commanding, “Take your places! Weapons at the ready! But remember, if something comes out, you hold your fire for threat assessment.”

There was a blinding flash of light as the portal ripped open and something fell to earth with a horrible high-pitched noise.

“Hold steady!” Steve barked.

Directly below the portal, fully encircled by Avengers and SHIELD agents with pointed guns, was something. It was a sickly greenish-grey, about six feet wide by three feet tall, and most closely resembled an amoeba with five tiny tentacles, covered in some sort of gelatinous ooze that shimmered in the light. Tony shuddered. (The Blob meets creepy, dismembered octopus.) It skittered in a tight little circle, then froze.

“I said hold steady!” Steve repeated, actually knocking back one of the SHIELD Agents who had started running towards the Blob.

“JARVIS?” Tony said, heart pounding. “Shift two of the mini-orbiters to scan that thing.”

“Scanning, sir.”

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Tony’s blood thundered in his veins. The creature remained entirely still in the haunting light of the portal still crackling and spitting above them. Tony glanced up at it nervously.

“Well,” Tony announced after skimming the readings, “whatever it is it isn’t one of those spider things—not related to them in any way as far as I can tell. They weren’t carbon-based organisms and this one is. Sending it to you now, Bruce. You’re the better biologist.”

“Hmmm.”

The silent stillness stretched on.

“It’s made no hostile move,” Steve said consideringly.

“That we can identify,” a SHIELD agent muttered.

“Hasn’t really moved at all,” another agent said.

Steve took a few steps closer to the creature and said in a clear voice, “My name is Steve Rogers, code name Captain America. This is planet earth. We mean you no harm. Can you understand me?”

“Hmm.”

The silent stillness stretched on.

“It’s made no hostile move,” Steve said consideringly.

“That we can identify,” a SHIELD agent muttered.

“Hasn’t really moved at all,” another agent said.

Steve took a few steps closer to the creature and said in a clear voice, “My name is Steve Rogers, code name Captain America. This is planet earth. We mean you no harm. Can you understand me?”

Tony heard a couple of agents snigger, but he couldn’t help smiling. It was just so Steve.

“It’s moving!”

The creature was getting taller and narrower, gathering itself up. Tony braced for an attack and readied his repulsors on stun; his heart started slamming into his chest, even faster than before. As the creature grew, it was changing color too, from that slick, repellent greyish-green to a muted red, grey, and blue.

“What do we—?” an Agent blurted, as the creature started changing faster and faster.

“Hold steady!” Steve repeated urgently.

Two of its tentacles were getting thicker and longer on the bottom, then another two, thinner and longer above, and the fifth curled tight into a circle on top. Tony blinked and felt the unexpected
urge to laugh.

"Is it just me or—" Clint said, in a strangled voice.

"Not just you," Tony said.

"Wow."

The creature now looked remarkably like a five year old’s drawing of Captain America: colors in sort of the wrong places, one leg too thick, one arm too long, no nose, no mouth, eyes too big, but still recognizably Cap.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Steve said.

“Eeeewww iiiiibbeeeeee dnnnnnnnndddddddd,” the creature emitted, tone slightly less shrill than before. The sound came from what would be Steve’s stomach.

“Hello?” Steve said, taking a tiny step forward.

“Eewwwwooooo?”

The creature took a tiny step forward too.

“My God,” Bruce said. “It’s mimicking you!”

“Well,” Natasha said. “This is unexpected.”

“I’m really not sure what to do,” Steve said, on the Avengers’ private comm. “It doesn’t appear to be hostile though.”

Steve cocked his head.

The creature tipped its balled up tentacle to the side.

“Hello?” Steve tried again.

“Eewwwwooooo?”

“What do we do, Captain?” one of the agents asked briskly.

“We wait,” Steve answered her, sounding decisive. Then added, glancing over at Tony, “What I wouldn’t give for a Vulcan who could mind meld.”

“Nerds,” Clint coughed into the comm. Tony’s heart was starting to slow to something closer to normal.

“Clearly we’ll have to come up with an alternate mode of communication,” Bruce said.

“Pictograms?” Steve suggested. “They’re non-verbal, though I’m not sure it would do much without a common frame of reference.”

“Eeeehverensssssss.”

“Well if anybody’s going to play pictionary with alien life forms, it’s gotta be Cap,” Tony said. “He’s an artist, you know.”

“Uh, doubt that will be of much help here, Iron Man. But it does--”

Suddenly high above them, there was a blood-curdling shriek, shrill and terrible. Two greenish grey creatures appeared at the mouth of the crackling portal. Tony couldn’t suppress a shudder, thankful that (in the suit) nobody could see it. The creature on the ground answered with a long, wavering screech.

Tony’s heart picked up the pace again. (Damn it.)

“Do you think that’s their language?” someone asked on the comm.

“Seems like a fair guess,” Bruce answered.

The creature on the ground was shrieking louder and its form started to undulate and recover that unctuous shine—then suddenly it leapt ten feet into the air.

“Holy shit!” exclaimed an agent.

Tony’s guts clenched. (No. It was fine.) The hair on the back of his neck stood up. (Just because it could jump like an arachnoid, didn’t mean it was hostile like them…)

“Is that one coming through the portal?” Clint asked.

Tony zoomed his vision to examine the portal’s opening, but Steve was already answering: “Not quite. I think they’re lowering a rope!”
“Um,” Tony said. “Not exactly, Cap. I think that other alien is just sort of . . . stretching itself out.”

“Ew,” Clint said.

“Clint,” Bruce chastised mildly, as Steve went on to say:

“I don’t think these creatures are hostile and I don’t think this one wants to be down here. Is there any chance that portal opened up accidentally?”

“Possibly,” Tony said, frowning at the data. “Too soon to say.”

The creature leapt again and missed the rope—its friend?—by a good twenty feet. It wailed.

“All right,” Steve said. “We may have a serious communication barrier, but I’m sure this . . . being . . . wants to go home. Iron Man, do you think you can safely touch it to fly it up there?”

“Probably,” Tony said, shrugging awkwardly in the armor. “But the problem is communicating our intentions.”

“Maybe I could draw you flying it up there,” Steve said.

“Cap,” Natasha said, “It’s been mimicking you. Why don’t you just have Iron Man fly you up as a demonstration?”

“Good thinking, Widow. Sound ok, Iron Man?”

“You bet,” Tony said publically, then added to Steve alone, “Never expected to demonstrate the Hug and Fly for an extraterrestrial.”

Steve laughed as he looped his arm around Tony and they took off.

“Don’t actually go through the portal,” Steve ordered, voice a little soft.

“Wasn’t gonna,” Tony said. “No interest in going through one of those ever again if I can help it.”

“Good.”

As they approached the tentacle rope creature it started turning red and gold. They got close enough to be almost in reach, then landed again close to the creature on the ground.

Tony approached the alien on the ground. It solidified its resemblance to Steve—this time it had a line for a mouth—and when Tony got into position it put one tentacle around him. Up this close, Tony could see that its entire body was covered in teeny-tiny suckers, like the bottom of an octopus’ arm.

“Hello,” Tony said, as he assumed the hug and fly.

“Eewoooo,” the creature said.

“Okay, Eewoo,” Tony said. “Prepare for lift off!”

They took flight. It was odd. The Eewoo turned out to be much much heavier than its size would suggest. The Iron Man armor was up to the unexpected challenge, but probably looked about as graceful as a chicken in flight.

As they approached the red and gold, rope-shaped alien, both aliens started emitting terrible, shrill screeches. (Oh man, yikes.) Tony reminded himself that to The Eewoo, Steve’s lovely baritone probably sounded horrible too.

Once they were in range, his Eewoo passenger started growing a longer and longer tentacle until it could reach out for its compatriot. Then, suddenly and swiftly, it detached from Tony and entwined itself around its comrade. Both creatures hurried through the portal with astonishing speed, making the loudest, most high-pitched, dreadful noise Tony’d ever heard. He chose to believe it meant “thank you.”

“Well done, Iron Man,” Steve said as he landed.

Tony shrugged.

“Now what?” an Agent asked, giving voice (whiny, irritating voice) to what Tony’d just been wondering.

“Do you think you’ll be able to close the portal?” Steve asked, looking at Bruce and Tony, then back up to the sky.

“Tony—er, Iron Man—thinks a patch from Hypo 36 might work,” Bruce said.

“It’d take a while to work it up, but I think it should,” Tony confirmed.

“Captain,” an Agent (another Tony didn’t know) said, “Shouldn’t we do some reconnaissance? Send Iron Man through the portal to learn more?”
“Absolutely not,” Steve said decisively. Tony frowned inside the armor. (Okay, like, he didn’t want to go through more portals, but . . .) “We have no idea what the conditions are beyond that portal nor how his appearance would be interpreted. For Iron Man to enter might be construed as an act of aggression; we should avoid the appearance of hostility at all costs.” (Oh. Well, that made sense.)

“Tony, look!” Bruce cried. Tony looked at the readouts. All the energy levels were dropping. The portal started flickering.

“May not have to after all, Cap,” Tony announced, watching as the readouts from the mini-orbiters fluctuated wildly. “Looks like it’s about to—”

“Vanish,” Clint finished as the portal did exactly that.

“Avengers,” Cap said, “Prepare to fall out. We’ll debrief at the Tower. Agents, tomorrow at SHIELD.” Everyone started shuffling off to their respective ships, but Steve added, “Agent James—a word.”

The already pale agent got even paler.

“He’s in for it now,” Clint muttered. Bruce looked at him inquisitively.

Natasha clarified, with the slightest hint of a smile: “Cap’s very passionate about threat assessment.”

Tony collected his mini-orbiters, boarded the Quinjet, and turned to the data readouts with a smile. Of course they hadn’t gotten all the data they’d need—the portals always seemed to close too soon for that—but it was pretty close and they could probably fill it in with the old specs Tony’d had JARVIS running.

After a few minutes, everyone took their places on the Quinjet for the trip back to New York.

“So hey,” Tony said with a grin. “Do you think we’re gonna be myths and legends of Eewoo culture?”

“Eewoo?” Steve said, puzzled.

“That’s what I’m calling our unexpected guest.”

“That’s funny—I was calling her the Horta.”

“Nerds!” Clint called.

“I guess it depends on if an extra-terrestrial encounter was as rare for them as it was for us,” Bruce said seriously. “And their narrative traditions. And the status of that particular Eewoo. And, really, a host of cultural issues we can’t properly imagine.”

Clint laughed. “Okay—I’m not overthinking this. Iron Man is totally a hero in Eewoo culture! Ballads. There’s gonna be fucking ballads.”

“Sweet,” Tony said. “That’s what I wanna hear.” Tony grimaced, then added, “I mean that’s what I want to hear metaphorically—that it’s going to happen. I do NOT want to hear their ballads.”

Clint laughed.

Steve was frowning—Tony’s smile faltered a little.

“Hey, Cap?” he said softly. “What’s up? I mean, we got there in record time, nobody was even injured, and we helped the Eewoo get home. So, victory, right?”

Steve kind of shook himself. “Yes, of course,” he said to Tony, then addressed the Quinjet more generally, “Good job, team. Successful mission.”

Tony couldn’t quite dispel the uneasiness in his stomach.

“Okay, Bruce,” he said. “Better get started on this data.”

Back at the Tower, Steve gave them ten minutes to change out of their uniforms before convening at the dinning room table for a debrief. Tony arrived first—aftar all, he just had to step out of the armor.

Steve arrived next, scowling.

“You okay, babe?” Tony asked softly. Steve jolted, obviously surprised. He let out a long sigh and scrubbed a fist across his face.

“Yeah. Of course.”
Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow and Steve looked a little sheepish. He stepped closer.

“Just—I like an enemy I can understand,” Steve said. “Things I can study and master and then develop a strategy to defeat. This makes me feel . . . useless.”

“I get it,” Tony said. “But you are so far from useless. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, with an unconvincing shrug. Then he added, “We’re gonna have to meet with SHIELD soon.” He frowned then asked, “How much longer until we can go to the ranch do you think? Are your projects almost done?”

“Yes,” Tony answered decisively.

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised, mister!” Tony said, tapping Steve’s chest with hyperbolic indignation. “I said I’d made a breakthrough.”

“Oh. Okay. Great,” Steve said, then added with a hint of a smile. “Good job with the Eewoo.”

“You too,” Tony said and really now wasn’t the time to be feeling all mushily romantic, but Steve was looking down and smiling at him and his hair was shiny and his eyes were—

“Okay, let’s do this! Debrief time!” Clint called.

Tony snapped out of it and sat at the table.

“So,” Steve said briskly as everyone took their places. “What do we know about these portals?”

“Well,” Bruce began, “what we know for sure is that none of these portals have been the same. The first three appearances were in the same—genre? type? class?” He shook his head. “Whatever we call it, those first three all look related. Each instance was an intensification of the original traits. For one thing, gamma radiation and reactor diffusion. But the energy disturbance on Thanksgiving and now today are radically different.”

“What do you think it means?” Steve asked.

Tony frowned. “It’s hard to say. We’re never getting a complete data pull and I haven’t been able to accelerate the intake process. Those things really need to stay open for 45 minutes to get a full read. And they never seem to.”

“The first two look to me like failed attempts,” Bruce said, “that culminated in the third and the attack. But the new ones . . .” He shrugged. “I hate to speculate, but they seem more random.”

“What does that suggest to you?” Natasha asked.


Steve looked confused, so Tony clarified, “Like global weirding—the better name for global warming, since it’s really all about the disruption of weather patterns, not a universal temperature increase.”

“So, let me see if I’ve got this,” Steve said. “Either, it looks like other aliens saw the arachnoid invasion and are trying to copy them. Or these are semi-natural phenomena, randomly occurring in the environment, kinda like a tornado.”

“Those are our two current theories, yes?” Bruce said.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t like either of them.”

“In light of the latest anomaly,” Bruce said, “I’m inclined to think it’s actually a combination of the two theories.”

Tony nodded pensively and said, “So, the hostile and deliberate portals opened by the arachnoids created a disturbance that is now creating a ripple effect and weirding in the interdimensional or interplanetary environment. Which would explain why the arachnoids had been poised to attack but the Eewoo seemed confused and frightened.”

Steve nodded.

“Do you think your closure devices will still work on future portals?” Clint asked Tony.

He hesitated. “Yes. Probably. Now that I’ve worked out all those hypos, hopefully I’ve predicted every data category that would be relevant, in which case the mini-orbiters collect new data and slot it into the hypotheticals to predict the necessary customized patch. I’d make the patch on the spot and add it to one of the closure devices I already made. Bam—closed portal.”

“Good,” Steve said nodding decisively. “If it’s random we’re less likely to encounter further hostilities, but let’s not make any assumptions. So, two objectives: first, prepare for additional
attacks, repeated by arachnoids or perpetrated by as-yet-unknown forces; second, determine and address the root cause of these . . . disturbances.”

Everyone nodded.

“I’ll coordinate with SHIELD,” Cap said. “Widow and Hawkeye, join me tomorrow for their debrief?”

“Agreed.”

“Yes.”

“Meanwhile, science team—work on fitting the latest readings into a pattern.”

“We’ll get right on it,” Tony promised.

“And let’s do our best to accelerate the new training planned at the ranch,” Cap added. Everyone nodded—even Bruce, though he looked pretty miserable about it.

“All right,” Cap said, standing up. “Dismissed.”

Steve headed abruptly for the elevator.

“Don’t go too far!” Tony called. “JARVIS ordered us pizza—should be here soon.”

“Dude,” Clint said to the ceiling, flopping back down in his seat, “you’re my favorite.”

“You are too kind, Agent Barton,” JARVIS answered blandly.

Steve was standing with a frown, halfway to the elevator; Tony sidled up to him.

“Stay for pizza?” Tony asked softly.

“I was going to hit the gym,” Steve said, brow furrowed.

“Sandbags will still be there tomorrow or after dinner,” Tony said. “Stay for dinner and a movie; unwind post-mission. It’s good for your troops’ morale.”

“Dinner and a movie, huh?” Steve said after a little pause. “Guess we could do that.”

Tony caressed Steve’s hand and added, “I’ll even cuddle with you.”

Steve gave Tony that smile as he said, “Oh, well, in that case I’ll definitely stay.”

Soon the kitchen was full of bustling as everyone got out plates and drinks and napkins. Tony met the pizza guy—oops, blue-haired girl again—at the elevator and once again assured her that his generous tipping habits weren’t a typo.

“So, this is your rodeo,” Clint called to Tony from the couch. “That mean you’re picking the movie?”

“Yes!” Tony cried. “Something thematically appropriate!”

The team looked at him inquisitively. He proclaimed with delight: “ET!”

Clint laughed. “Eewoo phone home!”

Steve looked on with smiling confusion.

“Don’t worry, babe,” Tony said, patting his massive chest. “You’ll love it.”

Natasha took the big armchair; Tony noticed her knitting things in a bag at her feet. Clint and Bruce were side by side on the couch and Steve took a seat at the far end, leaving room for Tony. His heart gave a little jump as he looked at the space at Steve’s feet. He swallowed.

“Everybody got a drink?” Tony called from the kitchen.

“Oh, no, I—” Steve began, starting to get up.

“I’ve got you, Sam Adams, sit tight.”

As he plucked another beer from the fridge, Tony thought of the warmth of Steve’s leg pressed against his cheek, the satisfying weight of Steve’s hand in his hair, stroking his neck. Tony felt the first tingling of a blush on his cheeks. (The others would see . . .) He bit his lip. (He’d already knelt with Pepper!) Tony grabbed an extra slice of pizza and sauntered to the living room.

Tony swallowed and glanced at Steve’s feet—hesitating only a moment—before taking a seat on the couch and cuddling up to Steve’s side.

(Too soon . . . There’d be time later, for all of that.)
"Here you go, babe," Tony said, giving Steve a little kiss on the cheek as he handed over the beer. Steve smiled brightly and pressed his lips to Tony's temple.

"Thanks, sweetheart."

Tony glanced over and found Clint giving them a strange look. Tony raised his eyebrow and Clint looked away abruptly.

(Huh.)

"Okay, JARVIS!" Tony called. "ET please!"

"With pleasure, sir."

There was work to be done, of course—finishing the security blanket, analyzing the new portal data, refining their combat training—but as he shook off the last jolts of anxious adrenaline from their mission and let its success really sink in, Tony felt a bone-deep contentment to be in the Tower, with his team, and Steve's arm around his shoulders.

It had been a good day.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for your kind words and well-wishing! I had my big interview yesterday and I think it went extremely well. If they don't offer me the job, it won't be because I was poorly prepared or gave a bad interview. It's out of my hands now, but I feel like I did my best. So that's a good feeling!

Hope you liked the new chapter! There's plenty more to come and comments are a delight as always. Any favorite bits you'd like to let me know about? :)

And, if you're curious, the Eewoo was inspired by the Horta from Star Trek and this amazing video about the mimic octopus: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTWFnGmeg Enjoy!

Thanks for joining me! :)
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

RL is kicking my butt... So, uh, here's a new chapter!

Chapter Notes

RL is kicking my butt... So, uh, you get a chapter a little earlier than expected.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(Warm. Wonderfully warm.)

That was Tony’s first thought as he drifted up into consciousness. He smiled as he blinked himself awake.

His cheek was pillowed on Steve’s massive chest, which rose and fell in the deep steady rhythm of sleep. Steve’s arm was a solid weight across the small of his back. Someone—maybe Bruce?—had covered them with a blanket and let them stay on the couch. They’d sprawled sideways in the night and one of Tony’s legs was curled around Steve’s. It should have been uncomfortable.

It was glorious.

The first light of dawn was peeking in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Tony closed his eyes again, nestling down in Steve’s arms. Maybe he’d fall back asleep.

(He’d better finish the Security Blanket soon—they needed to get to the ranch. Maybe mini-arc reactors? It sounded plausible at least . . .)

Tony squirmed a little.

(And he could plant it in one of the satellites he already had, of course. That wouldn’t be too hard. Just a matter of adjusting the hatch . . .)

Tony frowned and bit his lip. He had work to do, but he couldn’t bear to wake Steve. And, really, he didn’t want to pull himself away from that warm embrace.

His tablet was on the coffee table. Maybe, if he moved very veeery slowly, he could grab it without waking Steve?

Trying to mimic the natural rustlings of someone asleep, Tony rolled slightly further on top of Steve and worked his right arm closer and closer to the coffee table. Whenever Steve stirred or murmured in his sleep, Tony went still. Inch by inch Tony was getting nearer his goal.

Tony’s fingers closed around the edge of his tablet at the same time his thigh brushed against—

“Mmmmm,” Steve murmured in his sleep.

(Oh fuck!)

Tony licked his lips. That was Steve’s cock—hard and huge and glorious—brushing against his thigh.

Steve shifted a little, hips hitching restlessly. He rubbed his cheek against the couch cushion and let out another breathy little sex murmur.

Tony’s blood shot to his groin. He took a deep breath.

(You will NOT molest your Dominant in his sleep.)

He wondered if he should get up, but hated the idea of leaving Steve to wake up alone. No, he’d just . . . behave.

Tony took the tablet and eased his way back to Steve’s side, shifting slowly and carefully, until he could get both hands on his tablet while still cuddled up against Steve. (He’d always been a master of Tetris.)

Tony pushed away his arousal as best he could with a few deep breaths.

(Okay. Here we go—time to make some good-looking schematics.)
(10J-m⁻²-Hz⁻¹—which was weird after the last portal.)

“Mmmmm…”

(May the wave particle duality was interacting with the anomalous diffusion readings?)

Tony tapped at his tablet, scowling.

(M-L⁻¹-T⁻³ / K * 2.45Mx. . . Or . . . or maybe–)

“Mmmm,” Steve mumbled, running a warm hand up Tony’s back.

Tony looked up to be met with a smile.

“Working in bed?” Steve asked in a husky voice.

“Technically, we’re on a couch,” Tony said. He tapped ‘save’ and set his tablet down.

“Mmmm-hmmm,” Steve murmured, nuzzling his cheek against the top of Tony’s head.

Steve stroked his hands up and down Tony’s back, then gripped Tony’s hips to pull him up closer for a warm, lazy kiss. Tony ran a hand over Steve’s chest, brushing his nipple, and opened his mouth, inviting Steve in, teasing with his tongue.

Tony’s blood rushed as Steve reached down to caress his ass; Steve’s hips rolled up against his.

Steve pulled away from their kiss, panting. He pressed his mouth to Tony’s cheek, his temple, his hair and took a deep breath.

“I can’t think of anything more wonderful than waking up like this. With you,” Steve said softly.

Tony felt his cheeks heat. He was half-tempted to say, “That’s just because you haven’t fucked me yet,” but figured Steve would take it the wrong way. Instead, Tony just kissed Steve again, but Steve kept it chaste.

“I should get up,” Steve said with a sigh. “Gotta debrief with the Agents at SHIELD and give them some more training.” He snorted. “They have some trigger happy children running around there—I can’t see how Fury lets it fly.”

“Everyone’s a little jumpy after the arachnoids,” Tony said.

“No excuse,” Steve said, shaking his head. Tony shrugged.

“I should get up,” Steve repeated, burying his face against Tony’s neck.

“Mmmm-hmm,” Tony murmured and (because he’s terribly naughty) rolled his hips against Steve’s. Steve groaned and took his mouth in a deep kiss and—

The elevator doors opened and Tony sat up abruptly.

“Good morning, boys,” Natasha called over her shoulder without looking at them as she headed for the kitchen.

“Morning, Natasha,” Steve said, sitting up and sounding a little sheepish.

Tony got up and sauntered to the kitchen. (How he’d made it this long without coffee was a mystery.)

“You always up at the ass crack of dawn like this?” Tony asked her.

“I like to vary my schedule,” Natasha answered with a smirk. “Routines can be dangerous—they make a person predictable.”

Tony really couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

“You’re an angel of mercy,” Tony said. She rolled her eyes.

“Hardly,” Tony drawled, then realized he didn’t have a single follow up quip. Luckily, Steve cut in.
“SHIELD at 9 confirmed?” he asked.

Natasha nodded, then added with a quirk of her lips, “Do try not to flay Agent James again.”

“I never flay anyone,” Steve said. “I merely had a few . . . serious words with him.”

Tony almost felt for the guy. Almost.

Natasha filled Tony’s ‘I <3 NYC’ mug nearly full to overflowing and set it on the counter for him. Tony snatched it up eagerly.

(Oh yeah . . . That’s better.)

“Well,” Tony said, taking another long gulp of coffee. “It’s stupid-o’clock in the morning and I’m awake, so I might as well get to work.”

“Going down to the workshop?” Steve asked.

Tony nodded.

“Good luck with your work today,” Steve said.

Tony smiled and ran his hand across Steve’s back as he passed.

“Yeah. You too.”

“Hey, sleeping beauty!” Tony called as Bruce stepped into the lab.

Bruce frowned slightly. “Tony, it’s only 8:15.”

“Well, I’ve been up and working for hours,” Tony said with a grin. “And good news! I solved the problem with the Security Blanket!”

Bruce looked at him with open shock.

“You did?”

“Yep! Solution was glowing right under my nose the whole time. Arc reactors!”

“Arc reactors?” Bruce said, frowning a little. “How does—”

“The whole thing needs to be strong, but also flexible. It was missing an integrated power source!” Tony cried, trying to not to go overboard with his ‘manic-genius-inventor’ enthusiasm.

Bruce was still frowning.

“So, here’s the deal,” Tony said, growing a little more serious. (Deep breath.) “I’m ready to finish the security blanket—using the hybrid we created with a few polyaramid micro-fibers and embedded arc reactors—it’s genius! I don’t really need any more help with it.” Tony gave Bruce an apologetic look.

“What I think we do need,” Tony pressed on, “is someone studying the worldwide energy readings and weather patterns, like Steve said—and I know jack shit about climate science compared to you. So, here’s what I suggest: division of labor. Me, take care of the engineering. You, work on figuring out what the hell is going on with the intersections of global and interplanetary weirding. See if these are natural phenomena, then work on how to fix it from there. Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure,” Bruce bit his lip. “Just, I—are you really sure about the Security Blanket? I thought—”

“Bruce, come on! I told you I had a breakthrough. Do you want to see all the schematics?” Tony flashed them up on the screens, then said with a frown, “I mean, I could try to walk you through it I guess. I’d have to catch you up on arc reactor technology to understand it, which would take you away from the weirding patterns, but if you don’t trust me to engineer the—”

“No! Of course not, Tony!” Bruce exclaimed, holding up his hands in surrender. “Of course I trust your engineering. I was just surprised, that’s all. I didn’t realize you were that close to a solution.”

Tony shrugged. “Once I thought to add mini arc reactors, the whole thing kinda solved itself.” He paused. “Okay, so I got in touch with NASA—they owe me big time—and they’re sending all their recent studies. Should hit your tablet in ten.”

“Oh!” Bruce exclaimed, gazing into his teacup. He looked up, sad-eyed. “Tony? I didn’t mean to imply—I mean, I know how hard you’ve been working on all of this for me and—”

“No, no! Don’t—”
“I’m sorry if it sounded like I doubted—”

“Not at all! Totally understand,” Tony said, shaking his head emphatically. “Don’t even think of it. And, hey, look! Data’s all up on your tablet.”


With that, Bruce settled in with the NASA data.

Tony suppressed a sigh of relief.

“Tony?” Steve called into the workshop. “Knock, knock?”

Tony hastily switched from the energy readings to the Security Blanket schematics.

“Come in!”

“No Bruce?” Steve asked, glancing around.

“Nope! Got frustrated about an hour ago and went to meditate,” Tony said with a shrug. “Something about coming back to it fresh, something yoga something something.”

“Then I’ll bet you haven’t had dinner,” Steve said.

“It’s way too early for dinner!”

“Tony, it’s seven.”

“Oh. Okay.” Tony squinted. “So, dinner?”

Steve laughed.

“I’m done for the day—don’t think there’s much of anything more I can do,” Steve said. He glanced over at Tony’s schematics, the gutted satellite, and little pile of arc reactor type things. “I was going to see if I could take you out for dinner, but it looks like you’ve still got a lot to do.”

(Damn.)

Tony hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

“Yeah. Better keep working,” he said with regret. “But I should still eat!”

“I could bring dinner to the workshop? And maybe I could join you?” Steve asked. “I’ve got some reading to do.”

“Yes please!” Tony said with a grin, then made grabby hands at Steve. Looking puzzled, he stepped closer; Tony pulled him in for a kiss. “Thanks, babe.”

Tony’d been alternating between poking through the energy data from NASA and tinkering his way through assembling Security Blanket Mark 1—(hopefully, Mark Only)—while Steve read something on his tablet. (Gasp! Not an ink and paper book!)

They’d eaten dinner together quietly. Tony suspected there might still have been left over pizza, but he wasn’t going to complain about the heaping bowl of (much healthier) pasta with chicken and vegetables in a light lemon pepper sauce Steve brought. (Steve had probably been talking to Bruce about Tony’s vegetable consumption. Or Clint had eaten all the pizza. Again. Whatever.)

It was nice. Sometimes Tony’d look up from his work, lost in thought, and would find himself staring at Steve: the way his brow furrowed very slightly when he was concentrating on his reading; the way his blue eyes caught the light of Tony’s schematics; the way his tongue would dart out from time to time to cross his lower lip; the way he’d move his head very slightly to the beat of the Duke Ellington Tony’d put on for him. And if Steve caught him looking, Tony’d just smile and Steve’d smile back.

Sometimes, though, he’d glance up to find Steve already looking at him with that soft, affectionate little smile.

It was nice.

(Hm… $M \cdot L^{-1} \cdot T^{-3} / K \times 2.45Mx$ Still didn’t make any sense--)

Tony fiddled absently with the wrench he’d been using on the Security Blanket and glared at the screen.

(Goddamn. Was gonna give himself frown lines at this rate.)
“Tony?”

(Maybe he should ask Bruce to cross check the diffusion spikes with nearby storm patterns. Maybe lightning would—)

“Sorry—Tony?”

“Oh?”

Tony looked up. Then blinked.

(Were Steve’s ears a little pink?)

“Sorry,” Steve said with an apologetic smile. “Just, it’s getting a little late, so I think I’d better go. And I want to, uh, talk to somebody . . . about something I was reading before bed, so, yeah—”

Steve swallowed. His ears were definitely pink.

(Oh!)

Tony’s heart gave a little ‘whump.’

(Had Steve been working on the research he’d postponed yesterday?)

Tony swallowed.

(Please be sexy research! Please be sexy research!)

“But,” Steve added, “I’ll see you in the morning before we go to our SHIELD meeting, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, resisting the temptation to ask Steve about his mysterious reading. (Or forget about work and throw himself at the guy…) “Yeah, for sure. See you in the morning.”

“Great! Good.” Steve smiled at him. “Good night, Tony.”

“Good night, Steve.”

Steve gave him an exceptionally chaste little good night kiss and high tailed it out of the workshop.

(Definitely sexy research.)

Tony smiled. And somehow he managed not to chase after him.

(Work then play.)

“JARVIS? Start another pot of coffee would you?”

Time to finish the damn Security Blanket.

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now that you’re my fella. I can be professional. They won’t—"

Tony shook his head.

“Babe, it’s ok,” Tony said. “That’s not why I was frowning. I mean, I’m not excited about telling
SHIELD because they’re assholes and I have a feeling they’re gonna give us shit, but—” He took
a deep breath. “Maybe we should just tell them. Today. Get it over with. Since they’ll find out
eventually and if we don’t tell them it may look worse. Like we’re not being above board. Or like
we think we have something to be ashamed of—which we don’t.”

“Really?” Steve said, looking tentatively pleased.

Tony shrugged. “Sure. I mean, they’re spies and they probably won’t approve, so it’s not like
they’re gonna leak it to the press.”

“No. No, I doubt they’d do that,” Steve agreed. “Are you sure?”

Tony bit his lip and Steve added, “Really, I’m happy to do whatever you think best here. After all,
you’ve dealt more with SHIELD than I have.”

The twisting in Tony’s stomach eased a little.

“Yeah. We tell them,” Tony said decisively. “But first I get in touch with Katie and Mikie. Plan
ahead for when—er, if—we want to be out to the general public. Keep Fury from trying to foist
his PR idiot on us again.”

Steve nodded and looked down at Tony with a soft little smile.

“Whatever you think best, sweetheart.”

Tony squeezed his hand for a moment before dropping it.

Steve threw his shoulders back and said, in his Cap voice, “All right, Avenger. Let’s go join the
others.”

“Of course, Captain,” Tony said, giving a little salute. “Wouldn’t want to be late.”

To: Katherine Winters / kwinters@starkindustries.com
From: Michael Nguyen / mnguyen@starkindustries.com
FWD: PR strategy re: personal developments in Avengers Tower
YOU OWE ME A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE, K!!!!
Seriously, I told you so. Nailed it.
#neverdoubtmeagain
--Mikie

-------------------------------
Wanted to give you two an early heads up about a probable PR situation re: developments at
Avengers Tower. Steve Rogers and I have started dating.
At present, we’re not ready to share this information with the general public, but we’re disclosing
our relationship to SHIELD and telling them they have NO PR input.
Anyway, know you love a challenge. Good luck with this one!
--Tony
p. s. Steve says ‘hi!’
*sent from my StarkPhone12.2
-------------------------------
God, Tony hated SHIELD: hated the macho posturing; hated the smell of industrial disinfectant;
hated the bad lighting that made him look old and sad; hated Agents 004-099 who stared at his
ass. (It was a great ass, but still.)

Right now, though, more than anything he hated them for wasting his time. Seriously, the whole
damn meeting could have been a memo. Not to mention Steve had gone in yesterday with
Natasha and Clint to debrief the Agents who had been there for the Eewoo. Why the fuck
couldn’t Hill and Fury have shown up for that one and spared them all the pain of redundancy???
Tony alternated between playing with a pen under the table—just something to keep his hands
busy—and trying to make an ‘I Am Politely Listening (to Things I Already Know)’ face. One thing to be rude to SHIELD; another to be rude to Steve. (He was pretty sure Steve hated repeating himself almost as much as Tony did, but still…) 

Tony played with his pen, mind running through possible barometric correlations with portal appearances. (Oh, hm, better ask Bruce if—)

“. . . in order. All right,” Fury said, getting to his feet with a nod. “If you’ve nothing further to report?”

Tony looked up.

(Yes! Finally.)

Everyone stood.

“Sir? Will you be at this afternoon’s meeting?” Steve asked the Director.

(Oh. Right.) Tony’s guts gave a little twist. (Shit.)

“I wasn’t planning to be,” Fury said. “Why?”

“Well, in that case, before you go,” Steve began awkwardly, with a glance at Tony, “there’s something Iron Man and I—”

Steve’s ears were going pink, Tony noticed with frustration.

“That is, Tony and I . . . we feel we should inform you that we, uh—”

(Oh God, he couldn’t watch.)

“What Steve’s trying to say,” Tony cut in deftly, “is that we’ve started dating. We’re letting you know as a courtesy; we’re not asking for your permission or your input. Nothing in our contracts prohibits relationships between teammates and we’re consenting adults. We’re forming our own PR strategy in consultation with Katherine Winters and Michael Nguyen. Again, we’re just informing you as a courtesy.”

Fury was stony faced. Maria Hill’s eyes flicked back and forth from Tony to Steve to Fury, her face a vision of disapproving incredulity.

“Have you really thought this through?” she asked eventually.

“Of course not,” Tony said. “Since we have no previous experience with life in the public eye, we’ve given absolutely no consideration to the various complications, obstacles, and PR backlash we may face.”

Her frown deepened into a scowl. “Director, do you—”

Fury cut her off.

“We appreciate being informed,” he said with a nod to Tony and Steve. Then he addressed the team, “I believe you have about an hour for lunch before your next meeting.”

The team nodded and made their way out of the (bland, colorless) conference room to head for the (deplorable, depressing) cafeteria.

Fury turned to Steve. “Captain? A word.”

Tony glared at Fury; Hill glared at Tony.

“You all go on without me,” Steve said. “I’ll meet you in the dinning hall.”

“See you soon, Cap,” Tony said and walked away with Bruce.

(Fuck.)

As they all went down to the cafeteria—preemptively complaining about the food—Tony tried not to think about what Fury might be saying to Steve.

Bruce laughed as they looked at the menu options.

“Wow. They have penne all’arrabbiata,” he told Tony. Tony laughed as Bruce launched into Eddie Izzard’s ‘Death Star Canteen’ routine and Clint joined in. Natasha watched with an indulgent smile.

Really it didn’t matter what Fury said to Steve.

“No the food is hot,” Clint said with a cockney accent. “You’ll need a tray to put the food on. . .”

“. . . I thought you were challenging me to a fight to the death,” Bruce said, in a deep voice.
“Fight to the death?” Clint said. “This is the canteen. I work here.”

Tony grinned. They were (mostly) distracting him from the churning in his stomach. (SHIELD food—it gave you indigestion before you ate it!)

Even Eddie Izzard references couldn’t tempt Tony to eat institutional pasta though. In the end, Tony just had a sad looking salad, toast, and coffee. The coffee tasted burnt. It always did.

“You seem nervous,” Natasha said to Bruce quietly.

Bruce shrugged, pushing his penne around on his plate. “I just hate these meetings. Every time we meet with SHIELD it puts me on edge, and the next one will be worse. We actually have to lay out our plan for training with . . . the Big Guy.”

“Nothing to be on edge about,” Clint said around a mouthful of pasta. “Maria’ll be bad cop, Fury’ll be impassive cop, and we’ll all be good cops who band together, cementing team bonding, and doing exactly what we’d planned from the beginning.”

Tony paused mid-bite. Bruce looked at Clint, eyes wide and surprise obvious.

“Is that what they’re doing?” Bruce asked.

Clint shrugged. “Who knows? It’s Natasha’s theory. That’s how it went down with whosit—the PR idiot.”

“Carmichael,” Natasha reminded.

(Huh.)

“Hey, did you see if they have jello today?” Clint asked. “I could really go for some jello.”

Tony took another bitter sip of coffee.

A tall Domme with broad shoulders and a shock of red-gold hair strode across the cafeteria towards them.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stark,” the agent said in a smooth alto. “When you’re finished with your lunch, Director Fury would like to speak with you in his office.”

(Fan-fucking-tastic.)

Bruce gave him a sympathetic look and Tony replied with a grimace.

“Now’s good,” Tony said, setting his fork down abruptly. “Just lost my appetite.” And he hated to ask, but they kept moving things around and none of the hallways were marked, so: “Where is it now?”

“I’ll take you,” she said. Tony shrugged and followed her from the cafeteria.

“Katie McKinny,” she said, holding out her hand. Tony shook it.

“Nice to meet you,” he said by rote.

“I know how you feel, going to Fury’s office,” she said, with a grimace. “It’s really the worst. He’s the only person I know who can make ‘Have a good afternoon, Agent’ sound like a threat.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, noncommittally as he joined her in taking a left turn. She was walking quite close; it made it impossible not to notice how much taller she was.

“If you ever need anything, you let me know,” she said. “Orientational minorities have stick together around here, you know? We never get the respect we deserve.”

Tony frowned. She’d come to a stop next to a large grey door, unlabeled like the hallways, and took a little step closer.

“And a wild boy like you must have certain . . . needs, after all,” she said with a smirk. Tony took
a sharp breath; his guts clenched.

“But,” she said softly, leaning down, “I’m a very discreet person, so if you were ever—” she ran her hand down his arm in a familiar caress, “—up for a frolic, my lips would be sealed. I wouldn’t breathe a word to the others.”

Tony hissed and plucked her hand from his arm by the sleeve. She looked surprised and leaned back a little.

“So,” Tony said, voice cold. “This is Fury’s office?”

“Yes,” she said, reaching into her pocket for—(Oh my God! Her phone number.) “If you’re ever up for that frolic here’s my—”

“I won’t be,” Tony said curtly. “Ever.”

She blinked at him, still surprised. (Had she really thought the ‘ooh, we’re both minorities and I’m so discreet’ was gonna have him eating out of her hand?)

“I have a meeting,” Tony said.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Tony cut her off, hissing, “And never touch me again without my explicit permission.” He gave her a nasty smile and added, “Do be a darling and tell ‘the others’?”

Tony opened the door without bothering to knock and stepped inside.


Agent Already Forgot Her Name was still standing there in surprise as Tony slammed the door in her face.

“So,” Fury said, drawing the word out, long and expansive. Fury was sitting at an imposing mahogany desk. He gestured for Tony to take a seat in the low leather chair opposite; Tony remained standing instead. Fury did not get up. “You’re dating Captain America.”

Tony grimaced.

“I’m dating Steve Rogers,” Tony said. “He’s more than that goddamn uniform, you know.”

Fury didn’t react, just looked at Tony with that motionless impassivity that made Tony want to fidget. But he fucking refused to fidget. Tony refused to look away first too. So he just stood there, staring Fury down. He didn’t know what was going on yet, but he’d be damned if he’d let Fury win.

Fury reached out to toy with the glass pyramid paperweight on his desk, breaking eye-contact.

“I know SHIELD got off on the wrong foot with you,” Fury began. Tony snorted and Fury glanced up at him for a moment with a wry look.

“I did too,” Fury admitted. “But, whether you believe me or not, I like you Stark. Always have. I underestimated you, but you’ve more than proven yourself and it’s not a mistake I’d make twice.”

Fury looked down again, turning the pyramid onto a new side, pausing, then turning it again.

“I know there isn’t a lot of trust between us, but I hope there are some things you don’t doubt, Stark.”

Tony’s mind was racing. (What the hell kind of game was Fury playing?)

Fury turned the pyramid again, then looked up.

“I hope you know you could come to me, if anything were wrong, and you would trust me to deal with it.”

(Huh? Did—)

Tony’s jaw fell open for a moment before he snapped it shut.

“Are you asking,” Tony said in a tight voice, “if I’m being sexually coerced by a teammate in my own home?”

Fury set the paperweight down very gently and looked up, expression intense.

“Are you?” Fury asked.

Tony threw his hands in the air. “By Steve Rogers? Captain America?”

“I note you’re not actually answering the question.”

“Fuck you and your concern,” Tony growled. “Where was your concern when—” He snapped
his mouth shut, nearly vibrating with outrage. “Tend your own goddamn house, Fury.”

“Still not an answer, Stark.”

“Ask Agent Romanoff,” Tony hissed.

“Her judgment’s been off with you before.” Fury said it softly, almost gently, his brows creased. It threw Tony entirely off kilter.

Fury was really asking. Really concerned.

Tony blinked. Then swallowed.

“Steve Rogers,” Tony said, voice soft and vehement, “has more respect and decency in his pinky than all your fucking agents combined.”

Fury nodded solemnly and Tony added with a sneer, “Permission to get the fuck out of here? Sir?”

“Just one more thing,” Fury said. “If anything were to change, if you did run into problems or needed to renegotiate your contract—you could come to me. I hope you would.”

Tony gave a tight little nod and left, closing the door firmly behind him.

(Fuck.)

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed the new chapter and, hey, if you did now would be an extra sweet lovely time to write me a comment to say ‘hi’ or leave me with your musings, loves, curiosities, favorite detail, or whatever.

In the past 72 hours, my partner of 1.5 years and I broke up AND I heard through the (pretty reliable professional rumor mill) that I'm NOT a finalist for that job. So, I'm feeling pretty low. Kind words doubly appreciated at the moment.

This story is such a source of comfort to me and so are all of you. K. Gonna stop before I get gushy. THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Added 1/28: I wrote a thing on tumblr about self-care and thank you! http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/post/137889918376/thank-you-self-care

And I'm happy to report, I'm now on a little trip visiting my perfect, wonderful, amazing beta and she's taking fabulous care of me! And this means more P&P drafting and brainstorming while I'm visiting! YAY! I'll get to answering comments soonish, but in the meantime just, like, THANK YOU!
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

I’m BAAAAACK!!!! :)  
Also:  
This chapter dedicated to N---. I hope you’re dancing with David Bowie. We miss you.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who sent me kind words of support and encouragement while I struggled my way through RL and grieving, exhaustion, and stress.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Fuck.)

Tony wanted to see Steve. Tony wanted to see Steve right fucking now.

(Fuck!)

He got turned around on the way to the conference room, but he’d be damned if he’d ask for directions. As he strode down the halls, virtually breathing fire, a few agents hopped nervously out of his way. It was a satisfying sight and helped to calm his rage. (A little. Sort of.)

By the time Tony arrived for their next meeting it was too late to get Steve on his own without making a big scene. And--(Oh, awesome.)—Agent Dominick was there. And he was talking with Steve, who had his ‘serious professional face’ on. Well, Tony could put his game face on too.

“Ton—uh, Dr. Stark?”

Tony turned.

“Johnny,” Tony said with a tense smile, trying hard to set aside his anger. “I mean, Agent Ishida. I didn’t realize you would be at this meeting.”

The handsome agent shrugged and a strand of jet-black hair fell across his forehead.

“I was a last minute addition,” Johnny said. “I didn’t do any of the presentation prep, but I’m happy to be here. I asked to work with the Avengers a while ago.”

“How’ve you been?” Tony asked, smile growing more real with every moment. (He’d always liked Johnny…)

“Really well,” Johnny said. “The twins just turned two.”

“Oh wow! Has it really been that long?”

Johnny nodded and, with a furtive glance over at Steve and Agent Dominick, took out his phone to pull up a photo.

“How’ve you been?” Tony asked, smile growing more real with every moment. (He’d always liked Johnny…)

“Really well,” Johnny said. “The twins just turned two.”

“Uh, yes.”

Johnny nodded and, with a furtive glance over at Steve and Agent Dominick, took out his phone to pull up a photo.

“Kelly,” he said pointing to the adorable grinning toddler on the right.

“And Mariko,” he said, pointing to the equally adorable kid making a scrunchy face on the left.

“Oh, hey, are those photos of your kids?” Clint asked, barreling over. Johnny seemed surprised.

“Uh, yes.”

“Sweet! Can I flip through them?” Clint asked eagerly, holding out a hand.

“Sure,” Johnny said, looking bemused as he gave Clint his phone. Clint cooed a little as he swiped through the pictures.

“And how’s—” Tony scrambled mentally. (Jason? Joel? Jeremy?) “—your lovely husband?”

“Busy,” Johnny said, smiling. “It’s his first semester back since the girls arrived. Poor Jake’s finding it a hard adjustment, but he really loves teaching.”
(Jake! Yeah, that was it. A kindergarten teacher and a black belt.)

“And you?” Johnny asked. “How’s life as an Avenger?”

“Well,” Tony said blandly, with something between a smile and a grimace, “it’s never boring.”

“Don’t you think we should get started?” Agent Dominic asked loudly. He glanced around the room at everyone, but it felt like he was particularly looking at Tony and Johnny.


Everyone took a seat, except Johnny and Dominic who stood at the head of the table near the screens. Like the military, SHIELD loved their fucking PowerPoint.

“The agenda for this meeting,” Dominic said briskly, bringing up the first slide, “is to review findings by the Avengers science team, go over the proposed—”

The door opened.

“Director!” Dominic exclaimed, visibly surprised as Nick Fury entered the room, “I didn’t think you were scheduled for this meeting.”

“I wasn’t,” Fury said. “And yet here I am.” Fury tilted his head ever so slightly, and asked, “That a problem, Agent?”

“No, sir. Of course not,” Dominick said turning back to the slides. “As I was saying, the agenda is to review the science team’s findings, the Avenger’s proposed off-site training exercises, and SHIELD’s support measures.”

“So, Dr. Banner,” Agent Dominick said, turning to Bruce. “Why don’t you start by telling us what your team has come up with?”

“My team?” Bruce said, sounding incredulous.

“Fair enough, Dr. Banner,” Dominick said with a shrug, still looking only at Bruce. “What have you and Stark come up with?”

“Three,” Tony said, with a slight smile.

“Three.”

(Yeah. He’d always liked Johnny.)

“Fine. Doctor Stark,” Dominick said with obvious irritation. “Can we get on with it?”

Bruce was taking deep, angry breaths. Tony laid a reassuring hand on his knee under the table.

“Oh, yes,” Tony said, “By all means, let’s get on with it. I know how SHIELD hates wasting people’s time with long, pointless meetings. So I’ll lay out the abridged essentials of our findings, dumbed down to layman’s terms and using small words for you. Unless, of course, SHIELD would just accept a report—for maximum efficiency?”

Dominick glared at Tony, opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

“Bullet points it is then,” Tony said with a smirk.

Tony made absolutely no effort to craft a briefing accessible for the layman—at least, until Johnny asked some intelligent follow-up questions. After that, Tony ignored Dominick and he, Bruce, and Johnny had a pretty enjoyable (or at least painless) chat before handing things over to Steve who was explaining the strategy the Avengers had come up with for their training.

Steve didn’t bother standing to give his presentation. After all, he hadn’t discovered Powerpoint or hadn’t cared for it—thank God!—so they all sat around the table while Steve described the maneuvers they had been practicing in the training facility at the Tower, the role Dr. Stark’s training robots would play, and the team’s plan for incrementally acclimatizing first Dr. Banner and then the Hulk to cooperation in simulated battle conditions. Agent Dominick listened with a little smile on his face, nodding frequently; Tony hated it.

After a few (blessedly few) minutes, Steve looked around the table. “Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

The Avengers all shook their heads. Agent Dominick got to his feet immediately.
“Thank you, Captain,” Dominick said, in a condescending tone. “Your plans for training are admirable; however, we’ve identified a few areas where you would benefit from SHIELD support.”

Dominick clicked on his Powerpoint.

“Already?” Tony said in mock surprise, as Dominick pulled up a new slide. “That was fast! I’m amazed you could make PowerPoint slides while Captain America was talking.”

Dominick ignored Tony.

“I’m happy to hear your suggestions,” Steve said mildly. Dominick smiled.

“In anticipation of the Avenger’s first confrontation with the Hulk, we have earmarked the following equipment and personnel.”

Dominick pulled up his PowerPoint slide:

**TACTICAL SUPPORT (slide 1):**

- SHIELD SWAT Team 004
- SHIELD SWAT Team 027
- SHIELD SWAT Team 091
- SHIELD SWAT Stealth X Team 022
- NSS-345 Semi-Automatic Tranquilizer Rifle
- 400 units LXM-355 Drochloride
- 400 units Maxatozin Haloperidol
- Armored Vehicle SW-4458 (4)
- Hammer 5000 Anti-aircraft 477 Missiles (9)

“We’re not going out for a confrontation,” Tony said. “It’s a training exercise.”

“It’s still the Hulk,” Dominick said, “You don’t know how your ‘training’ will go.”

“Well, if you throw a small army of total strangers at him, I know how it will go and it won’t be a training exercise anymore. Have you even read your own research, let alone ours? The goal is trust.”

“Are you Captain of the Avengers now?” Dominick asked.

“That’s enough,” Steve said firmly, looking at the Powerpoint very seriously. “I appreciate the offer of added resources, but I have to agree with Iron Man. The . . . support . . . you’re proposing is at odds with our training strategy.”

“With all due respect, Captain,” Agent Dominick said, implying just the opposite. “I don’t think you’ve considered the wellbeing of your more vulnerable teammates.”

Tony let out an indignant noise.

“Uh, when it comes to the Other Guy,” Bruce said quietly, “everybody is vulnerable.”

“And I don’t think you’ve considered that a paramilitary presence is what would put us in danger!” Tony added.

Tony glanced over at his other teammates, surprised by their silence, and blinked. (Huh?) Clint and Natasha didn’t look angry. (What the fuck?)

In fact, both Clint and Natasha looked actively bored. (Was Clint still looking at pictures of Johnny’s kids? Seriously? And from his current angle it looked an awful lot like Natasha was doing Cat’s Cradle under the table.) For a moment their indifference almost made Tony angrier until he remembered what Clint had said at lunch about SHIELD’s ‘bad cop, good cop’ routine. Tony took a deep breath.

“Besides,” Tony said, rejoining the conversation, “we don’t need your technical support. Dr. Banner and I have created a temporary containment unit in case the Hulk has an . . . incident.”

“You think it will hold?” It was the first time Fury had spoken since his arrival.

Tony fixed Fury with a steely gaze. “Trust me.”

“What’s it made of?” Fury asked.

“Proprietary materials.” Tony smiled an unpleasant little smile. “I’m sure you understand.”

“Again,” Steve said mildly, cutting back into the conversation and drawing all eyes to him. “I’d like to thank SHIELD for offering additional support for our upcoming training exercises, but as you can see my team has everything under control. And the proposed ‘resources’ would in fact be counter productive.”

“Captain, you really haven’t considered—“
“I assure you I have,” Steve said sharply. Though it was Dominick who had spoken, Steve turned his gaze to Fury as he added with a bit of an edge, “I have considered it very carefully. We all have. And I believe we’re committed to this course of action. If that will be all?”

“No, we’re—” Dominick began.

“Very well, Captain,” Fury said, rising to his feet. Dominick looked at him, momentarily flummoxed and outraged, before schooling his features blank.

“Before you go,” Fury added as he was leaving, “Hill would like a word with you, Captain.”

“Of course, sir.” Steve turned to the Avengers and added, “I’ll meet you at the car. Shouldn’t take long.”

For a moment it looked like Dominick was going to follow Steve or try to get into it with the lingering Avengers, but Johnny gestured pointedly at his watch and announced, “We’re sorry we can’t linger. Agent Dominick and I have another meeting in a few minutes. Best of luck with your training, Avengers.”

And, though Tony wouldn’t have minded another quiet word with Johnny, he wasn’t sorry to see him herding Dominic away post-haste.

Clint yawned. “Let’s get out of here. I’m bored as fuck.”

Tony laughed.

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“You were great back there!” Tony told Bruce exuberantly, patting him on the back.

“Thanks. They—Some of what they said made me pretty mad.” Bruce grimaced. “Do you ever get the feeling they enjoy playing with fire around here?”

Tony grinned. “Well, to be fair, so do I.”

Bruce huffed.

“And,” Tony said, still smiling, “I’m looking forward to meeting Big Green.”

“Might get burned,” Bruce muttered.

“No way. Gonna be great. And we’ve got the Security Blanket for extra back-up! Not that we’ll need it. At least, I hope not.”

Bruce immediately looked alarmed. Tony regretted his remark when Bruce asked, “Do you think it might not hold?”

Tony gave Bruce a playful shove. “It’ll hold all right! I just think you’ll feel pretty silly being defeated by blue and pink super-plaid with fuzzy duckies on it.”

Bruce laughed and it echoed through the garage.

“You didn’t really . . .?” he said.

“I most certainly did!” Tony said smugly.

“What did I say?” Clint called as he strode across the garage to join them. “Was I right or what? Also, I want a hot dog.”

“You always want a hot dog,” Natasha said, startling Tony as she appeared from nowhere behind him. He glared at her; she shrugged.

“Well, yeah,” Clint admitted. “But really, the hot dog—the New York hot dog—deserves to be its own food group, because—”

Tony caught sight of Steve. He was standing in the doorway to the garage, deep in conversation with Maria Hill who had a hand on his arm as if holding him in place. He was frowning.

(Crap.)

“Back me up on this, Tony!”

“Huh?”

“Hot dogs,” Clint prompted.

“Oh, sure. Right.”

Tony watched as Steve shook his head, nodded curtly, and strode across the garage.

“All right, Avengers,” Steve said. “Let’s fall out.”
In the car on the way back to the Tower, Steve seemed tense. Angry. But maybe a little nervous too? While Clint and Bruce did a reprise of their Eddie Izzard routine, Steve acted like he was focused on them, but he kept darting these little looks at Tony. It was starting to make Tony nervous.

Natasha parked the car and they all piled out.

“I’m going back to work on the environmental readings,” Bruce said. “Can you look at what I’ve got so far, Tony? It’d be good to bounce some ideas around.”

“Sure,” Tony said, holding back a sigh. (Damn.)

“Just lemme swing by the kitchen and make a sandwich first,” Tony added with a little glance at Steve.

In the elevator on the way up the Tower, Steve still seemed tense. Clint and Natasha hit the gym and Bruce went to his lab. Steve turned to Tony urgently the moment they were alone.

“Tony,” Steve said. “Do you have a minute?”

“For you?” Tony asked with a smile as they stepped out of the elevator. “Of course.”

Steve followed him into the kitchen, looking something at a loss.

“I just wanted to make sure,” Steve began, then ran his tongue across his lips and swallowed. “That we’re still—”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. His brow was knit, eyes big with worry, though it looked like he was trying to hide it. (He wasn’t very good at hiding it.)

Steve took a deep breath.

“Do you still . . .?” Steve trailed off with a vague gesture; Tony just stared at him. After a second, Steve seemed to gather himself and said, “I know you met with Fury. I just wanted to make sure nothing he said made you change your mind. About us.”

Tony laughed. But Steve looked terribly serious.

“That’s ridiculous,” Tony said, waving his arms. “You’re being ridiculous. Totally ridiculous!”

Tony grinned and added, “As if Fury could make me change my mind about anything.”

And now Steve laughed, but his shoulders were still bunched up tight and tense. Tony pressed himself into Steve’s arms and said a little more softly, “He couldn’t change my mind. Especially about you.” Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve’s massive chest and Steve let out a long deep sigh.

“Ridiculous,” Tony mumbled again. Steve stroked his neck gently and Tony paused. “Why would you even ask something like that?”

Steve held him tight.

“Just making sure,” Steve said.

“Why?” Tony asked, pulling away a little. “Are you having doubts?”

“Never,” Steve said, the word warm and vehement against Tony’s neck as Steve pulled him close again. With a firm caress, Steve’s hands mapped Tony’s shoulders, his back, the curve of his ass, holding Tony tight against him.

Tony pulled back just enough to offer his mouth to Steve for a kiss, a little surprised when Steve kissed him rough and deep and demanding. (He didn’t mind.) Tony’s blood rushed as Steve pressed him up against the refrigerator, his mouth never leaving Tony’s, their kiss all tongues and teeth and possession. Tony could feel Steve’s cock, huge and thick against his hip as they kissed. (Christ, Steve was hard already. Magic serum?) Tony nearly laughed at himself. (Or, ya know, just the fact Steve’s only—what? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? Jesus.) Steve clutched at Tony’s wrists; Tony moaned and shamelessly pressed up against Steve’s hard-on.

Eventually Steve pulled back, panting a little.

“Let me take you out tonight,” Steve said urgently. He caressed Tony’s cheek with gentle fingers and added more softly, “Please? Please say yes.”

“Yes,” Tony gasped. “God, yes!”

He leaned up to seal their mouths again for a hot and frantic kiss when—

“Tony? Are we still—Oh!”

Steve’s ears turned bright red as he hopped away from Tony; Tony was sure his cheeks were no
better off. Bruce was looking at pretty much anything but them.

“Yep, Brucie Bear!” Tony said breezily. “Be right there.”

“Right. Yeah,” Bruce said to the thick pile of Tony’s luxurious carpet. “I’ll just go. Wait for you. There. In the lab. Yeah.”

With that, Bruce hurried away.

Tony licked his lips—he could see Steve watching as he did it.

“Well, I guess I’d better get going,” Tony said without enthusiasm.

Steve nodded, but caught Tony’s hand again as he turned away.

“Tonight?” Steve said. “Dinner? At seven?”

“Yes,” Tony said, a little flustered. “Can’t wait.”

Steve kissed his hand.

After a long moment, Tony pulled away to go join Bruce.

“Tony?” Steve called.

“Yeah?”

“What kind of sandwich did you want? I’ll bring it to you.”

There didn’t seem to be any pattern correlating weather patterns and portal-like disturbances. It was driving Tony crazy. Almost as crazy as waiting to talk to Steve. (What the hell had he been thinking? Dashing off to help Bruce with research before finding out what Fury and Hill had said to Steve and why the hell Steve was asking stupid questions…)

Tony checked the time for, oh, maybe the fifth time in as many minutes.

6:33.

Well. If Steve’s kissing had been anything to go by, he sure as shit hadn’t changed his mind. He’d seemed pretty riled. And, hey, maybe he had exciting plans for tonight?

Tony firmly told his libido to chill. (Some more sexy making out seemed damn likely though. And getting Steve’s shirt off maybe?)

What time was it?

6:35.

“Well,” Bruce said, taking off his glasses with a sigh. “None of these theories seem to be playing out. And,” Bruce added with an amused little smile, “judging by how often you’ve checked the clock, I bet you’re hungry again. Want to order Thai?”

“Oh. Uh, no. Can’t,” Tony said, refusing to blush at being caught out. “Steve’s taking me out for dinner.”

“That sounds nice,” Bruce said, with a smile.

Tony swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Things seem . . . good?” Bruce asked, a little questioning but very hopeful. Tony nodded.

“I’m glad,” Bruce said. “They, uh, seemed good.”

Tony fought down a blush.

“Well,” Bruce said with a sigh, “I’m calling it a night. Start over fresh in the morning. See you later, Tony. Enjoy your date.”

“Thanks,” Tony said. “Good night!”

In the elevator, Tony frowned.

“JARVIS? Could you ask Steve about tonight’s dress code?”

“Captain Rogers says it is flexible,” JARVIS answered after a moment. “A button down shirt would be acceptable; no need for a tie.”

Tony made a dash for the shower, feeling sorry he hadn’t left himself more time. He mentally reviewed his wardrobe as he bathed thoroughly. (Very thoroughly. Again. Hey, a guy could
hope!) Burgundy shirt. No! The red one. No, wait. He grabbed three pairs of trousers, trying them on in rapid succession. (Absurd.)

“Time, JARVIS?”

“6:49, sir.”

Tony frowned at the ridiculous pile of rejected clothes scattered over his bed. He pulled on the black Armani trousers that fit nice and snug, and the red shirt with French cuffs, then ripped off the shirt—the bright red, paired with the tight trousers, made him look a little tawdry for a classy night out. Burgundy shirt and a conservative blazer. No, wait—

“Tony?” Steve called. “Are you ready to go?”

(Shit!)

“Yes! Be out in a second!”

Tony scooped all the crumpled clothes up in his arms and tossed them into the closest, out of sight. (Again, optimism.) He slipped into his three-inch boots, grabbed his great coat, and hurried towards Steve, who met him with an appreciative gaze.

“You look great,” Steve said, with a smile.

“You’re looking pretty good yourself, handsome,” Tony said, leaning up to kiss Steve’s cheek.

“So, where are we headed?”

“Well,” Steve said, a little hesitantly, “we’ve got several options, but I was thinking, since you seemed to like the food, maybe you wouldn’t mind going back to Cucina Paradiso again?”

“Mind? I’d be delighted. This time I’ll get the risotto!”

“Great! Lovely,” Steve said as they stepped into the elevator, he still sounded uncertain.

“Tony?” he said after a moment.

“Yes?” Tony prompted, stepping closer.

“Just so I know what we’re doing—” Steve said. “Is this an old fashioned date?” He rushed to add, “I’m fine either way. I just wanted to be certain.”

“Sure, baby,” Tony said, with a little smile. “Sounds nice. You can take me on an old fashioned date—if you ask nicely.”

Steve smiled and reached out to take Tony’s hand. “Tony? May I take you on a date this evening?”

Tony dropped his gaze and bared his throat. “I’d be delighted,” he whispered.

And this time there wasn’t much that could by called shy or uncertain in Steve’s manner. The hand at the small of Tony’s back was firm. (Masterful.) He didn’t hesitate at the doors or over paying for the taxi. Tony had given him clear permission and he was happy to accept. There was something decidedly sexy about Steve’s new confidence.

At Cucina Paradiso, the hostess led them back to a table far from other diners (who still ignored them) and Steve immediately drew back Tony’s chair for him, head held high, shoulders back. Proud. Tony took his seat gracefully and looked up at Steve through his lashes.

“Thank you, darling,” Tony said.

Steve smiled and took his seat.

“So,” Tony said, unable to resist a minute longer. “What did Fury say to you?”

Steve’s expression clouded. Tony was almost sorry he’d asked, but well, he really did want to know…

“That it wasn’t right,” Steve said, “for me—as Captain of the Avengers—to . . . how did he put it? Expect ‘certain things’ from you?”

Tony frowned, but it wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen it coming.

“He all but said I was abusing my power by entering into a relationship with you,” Steve said stiffly. “Pretty much asked if I’d coerced you.” Steve stared down at the table. “Or at least if I was certain that I hadn’t coerced you.”

“What did you say?” Tony asked, truly curious.

“I said that—despite a few early misunderstandings—I felt confident I had not abused my power, and that if he had any doubts he should speak to you directly.”
Tony nodded. He’d expected talking about it to make things less tense, but Steve still seemed coiled tight.

“Is that it?”

Steve visibly hesitated before shaking his head.

“No.” Steve took a deep breath. “Then he said that this relationship would draw heavy fire when it went public—which it would because it’s impossible to keep something like this a secret, especially where we’re concerned. Said people wouldn’t like us together. I told him, rather more delicately, I didn’t give a damn.”

Steve swallowed thickly and looked down at the table for a moment before meeting Tony with a clear, steady gaze: “He said our relationship might draw my role on the Avengers—my ability to serve my country—into doubt and I should consider it carefully.”

Tony growled. (Manipulative son of a—)

“I told him to go to hell.”

Tony smiled. “Verbatim?”

Steve shrugged. “I was angry.”

(Oh, ok. Verbatim apparently.)

Tony’s surprise must have shown since Steve added with some pique, “They’ve got no right! As if my personal relationships have any bearing on my ability to serve my country. And then Hill! Hill gave me an earful about how I shouldn’t be selfish, how I should think of you—that I might be damaging your reputation—”

Tony laughed out loud.

“My reputation?” Tony repeated, shaking his head. “As if dating Captain America could damage my reputation.”

Steve opened his mouth, then shut it with a frown and asked, having clearly changed his mind: “So, what did Fury say to you?”

“Oh, he took your advice all right,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “Wanted to make sure—” (I wasn’t being harassed by my own Dom, never mind his fucking agents who—) “—uh, everything was above board.”

Steve nodded. “Honestly, I can’t fault him for that.” Steve sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. “We may not be a conventional unit, but I’m essentially your CO. The potential for abuse is right there and, well, I have thought about it.”

A little smile came to Tony’s lips. (Of course you have, baby.)

“Honestly,” Steve continued, “I’d think less of Fury if he hadn’t talked to us. But to . . . to try and meddle with what we have, in the absence of any wrongdoing, that’s not . . . that’s . . .”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. Steve was glaring daggers at his bread plate. “Hey, sorry I asked. We’re on a date. So, no more work talk, all right?”

Tony stretched his leg out and rubbed his foot up against Steve’s ankle.

Steve looked up with a smile.

“All right.”

It took them a while to find their stride, because when they were both preoccupied with the Avengers and SHIELD and work it was hard get out of that little bubble. But a few sweet questions about MIT from Steve and Tony was off and running; a little gentle inquiry about Steve’s cooking lessons in Home Ec, and SHIELD faded from their minds. They reveled in the food, trading bites across the table, and sometimes fell into comfortable silence. Tony slipped his left foot out of his boot and caressed Steve’s ankles under the table with his foot; it made Steve lose his train of thought with a smile. (And, sure, when he’d been younger, Tony’d would have been aiming a bit higher, but he knew better now . . .)

“Are you kidding?” Tony asked, waving his nearly empty wine-glass. “Do you really think Mrs. Rhodes would let us get away with—”

“Excuse me?” A plump, attractive, and very Italian looking woman in her late forties approached, wearing the white apron of a chef. “Please forgive the interruption. I, uh— How is everything this evening?”

“Wonderful,” Steve said.
“Delicious!” Tony cried. “Seriously amazing!”

“Thank you so much,” she said, turning back to Steve and sounding a little hesitant. “I’m very glad to hear it.” A pause. “I’m Francesca the chef and owner.” Another pause. “I heard from my staff that this is the second time you’ve dinned with us recently so—” She shifted from foot to foot, eyes only for Steve. “Sorry, this is probably a ridiculous question, but you see when I was little my grandparents used to tell me these stories and—”

Steve’s face lit up. “Anna and Luca?”

“Oh my God.” Francesca raised a hand to cover her mouth, eyes wide. “Did you really—”


“And—” Francesca asked, a little faltering, “did Nona Anna really teach you to cook her, uh—”

“—chicken parmesan? Yeah.” Steve smiled and shook his head. “I was so nervous, I almost dropped the first one on the floor, then broke a dish when I was trying to save it. Did they tell you about the times I got beat up in the alley out back? Luca always came running with a broom. That was kind of a recurring theme for me back then,” Steve said with a wry grimace.

Francesca nodded, still looking stunned.

“Everyone used to say they were just making up stories to amuse me or trying to sound important, but you really—” Francesca was shaking her head in disbelief and looking decidedly misty-eyed. “Nonno Luca used to say that you’d have wasted away without them, so really they saved New York.”

Steve laughed. “Sounds just like him!”

“And,” Francesca said softly, “Nona Anna lit a candle for you every Sunday. Every Sunday without fail, for over forty years.”

“Oh! That—” Suddenly, there were tears in Steve’s eyes. Tony reached out and took his hand; he gave it a squeeze and Steve squeezed back as he took a deep breath and found his voice. “That was very kind of her.”

Tony watched as Steve and Francesca lingered, looking at each other, a matching wistfulness on their faces, lost in memories of two people they’d both lost. After a few moments, Francesca shook herself a little.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to have an old friend of theirs here,” she said. “I’m so happy to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Steve said warmly.

“I’ll let you finish your dinner,” she said. “I hope we’ll see you again.”

“Definitely,” Steve assured her. Tony nodded vigorously.

Francesca took a few steps back towards the kitchen, then doubled back to them abruptly.

“If you call ahead,” she said, “the next time you’re coming in, I’ll make Nona’s chocolate amaretti cake. It hasn’t been on the menu here for thirty-five years; I only make it for family. But if you call ahead, I’ll have it ready for you.”

“We’d be honored,” Steve said, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

“Thank you so much,” Tony added.

“Of course,” Francesca said. “Have a wonderful evening.”

And with that, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Steve seemed lost in his thoughts; Tony waited quietly and looked away as Steve passed the back of his hand across his eyes.

After a few moments, Steve looked up with a smile.

“You were saying? Mrs. Rhodes?”

It was a good date. A lovely date.

Steve was quiet on the ride home, one arm around Tony’s shoulders and one hand on his knee. Their silver-haired cabbie was playing a Golden Oldies station, singing along badly and unselfconsciously, with a heavy accent from the Bronx. Tony laid his cheek against Steve’s massive chest and tried not to fret about what might (or, more like, might not) come next.

(Steve had been so passionate that afternoon though! That could be a good sign?)
Steve rested his cheek on the top of Tony’s head with a little sigh and squeezed Tony’s knee. Tony ran his fingers up and down Steve’s thigh, squirming closer, but when Steve’s muscles went tense Tony stopped. (Shit.)

The driver was mangling The Shirelles’ sweetly anxious “Will you still love me tomorrow?” as they pulled up to the Tower. Steve told him to keep the change and gave Tony his hand as they stepped from the cab. It was freezing out; Steve stepped around him to block the wind for the short walk into their private entrance. (Sap.)

“May I see you to your door?” Steve asked softly as they entered into the elevator.

“Please,” Tony answered, stepping into Steve’s arms.

(“To your door…”)

Tony pushed away his disappointment.

(He’d still get a good night kiss at least, though, right?)

Steve kept his arm around Tony as they walked from the elevator to Tony’s bedroom door, where Steve paused and took a step back. Tony glanced up and found Steve biting his lip. For the first time all evening, he looked like he wasn’t on solid ground.

“Tony?” Steve asked, sounding uncertain and apologetic.

Tony held in a sigh.

(It’s not rejection. We’re just taking things slow. For Steve. Because Steve’s a vir--)"

“I realize I haven’t been studying very long,” Steve continued falteringly, “so I will understand completely if you’re not comfortable with the idea, but if you’d like—if you wanted—I’d be honored to, uh, spend the night. With you.”

Tony’d been so certain that he was going to bed alone—and telling himself firmly that it was fine—it took a moment for his brain to catch up with Steve’s words. Steve was already filling Tony’s surprised silence with his backpedalling: “But if not, that’s fine. I won’t be offended if you’d rath—"

“Yes!” Tony blurted. ‘Yes, please.”

Then, since actions often spoke louder than words in moments like these, Tony sank to his knees, bowed his head, and offered Steve his upturned palms.

“Oh, God, Tony,” Steve murmured. He knelt beside Tony and took his wrists to kiss first his left palm, then his right. Tony kept his head bent, eyes down, a picture of submission.

“You’re beautiful,” Steve said, “Look at you. You’re so—"

Steve cut himself off and took a few deep breaths before he raised Tony’s chin with a gentle hand and said, “Now, I need to go get a few things from my quarters, all right?”

Tony nodded.

Steve leaned in to kiss his cheek and said, voice rough, “I want you to kneel beside your bed and wait for me. Will you do that for me, sweetheart?”

Tony licked his lips and nodded again. Steve smiled and kissed his forehead.

“Good,” Steve said, pressing a soft kiss to Tony’s lips. “I’ll be back soon.”

Chapter End Notes

So sad and sorry to be away from this story for so long. RL was sad and stressful, but things are steadily improving and I hope to be back on a semi-regular writing schedule until at least October.

Thank you so much--more than I can say--to everyone who has cheered me on and left me kind words of encouragement. Your generosity helps keep me going.

Hope you enjoy the new chapter! Any favorite bits? Let me know?.)

THANK YOU!!!!
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, STEVE!!!

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a struggle! I worry it’s too long and the pacing is off and it doesn’t do what I meant for it to, but, um, here it is! And only a few hours after Steve’s birthday. ☺ Really hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony blinked and took a deep breath.

Steve was going to get “a few things.”

He wanted to "spend the night."

(YES! Thank fucking God!)

Tony shivered and licked his lips again. His stomach gave a little flop. His heart was racing, a confused jumble of anticipation and anxiety.

( “I want you to kneel beside your bed and wait for me. Will you do that for me, sweetheart?”)

Tony got awkwardly to his feet, his heart thumping heavily in his chest, then he had a moment of uncertainty before shaking it off as absurd.

(If Steve wanted me to crawl, he’d have said so—besides, he’s not even here to enjoy it.)

Tony’d hastily tidied his bedroom before their date, so there was nothing for him to do. Nothing except kneel and wait for Steve, like Steve had asked. (It hadn’t been an order, not quite.) Tony kicked off his boots and socks and sank gently to his knees beside the bed, then wondered if he should present himself naked. It was the sort of thing lots of Doms would expect, but with Steve he decided it felt presumptuous. He said “kneel” not “strip and kneel”—if Steve wanted him naked, he’d have said so. Besides, just because Steve had gone to get “a few things” and was going to spend the night didn’t necessarily mean sex and nudity were on the table. Though it probably did. Maybe. Probably. Right?

Tony shook his head and couldn’t quite hold back a little chuckle at how absurd he was being.

(Steve’ll be here soon, and then you’ll find out.)

Tony took a few deep breaths and, wanting to do something, bowed his head and raised his palms.

(It was a Classic pose for a reason.)

After a few long, even breaths and the strange lurching in his chest began to fade.

There was something soothing about being on his knees, head down, palms up.

(For Steve.)

“You look gorgeous like that.”

Steve’s voice was soft and sweet, but nearly startled Tony. He hadn’t heard Steve approach. He wasn’t sure if he should look up or not—it wasn’t traditional—and (God damn it!) since when did he get in a fluster over such minor—

Steve crouched down and tipped Tony’s chin up for a kiss, gentle and chaste.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Steve murmured.

Tony smiled, chasing Steve’s lips for another kiss, but the Dom drew back.

“Tony? What’s your safeword?”

Tony’s heart leapt; he licked his lips.

“Safeword,” he answered.
“And your check-in’s?”

“Red, yellow, green.”

“Good,” Steve said, stroking his fingers through Tony’s hair. He took each of Tony’s wrists in his massive hands, holding them tight, as he raised them to his lips for a kiss, like he had before. Then, with a firm grip, Steve pulled Tony to his feet and into his arms. For a few moments, Steve just held him, hands stroking across Tony’s back in a steady rhythm.

“Tony?” Steve asked, nuzzling at Tony’s throat. “I want to see you.”

Steve’s hands went to the top button of Tony’s shirt, then paused. “May I?”

Tony swallowed thickly before answering, “Yes, please.”

(Leave it at that.)

Steve was kissing his throat and unbuttoning one, two, three buttons and—

(Don’t. Just shut up.)

Tony took a deep breath and let it out, but couldn’t hold the words in. As Steve took hold of the button over the arc reactor, Tony murmured softly, “Just . . . some of it isn’t pretty, you know.”

Tony swallowed as Steve looked at him with wide blue eyes full of concern.

(Stupid!)

Tony cracked a smile and gestured to himself as he added, “I mean, it’s a great little machine, even if it is an older model, but the mileage is getting up there and it’s had some wear and tear.”

Steve looked a little sad as he leaned forward to kiss Tony softly on the lips and asked again, “May I?”

Tony dropped his head to the side and whispered, “Please.”

One by one, all Tony’s buttons came undone; Steve stroked his shoulders as he slid the shirt off. When Tony looked up through his lashes, he saw Steve’s eyes fixed on the arc reactor. He didn’t touch it—if of course not, that was in Tony’s contract—but he looked and opened his mouth to say something (no doubt something kind and reassuring). But after a moment’s pause, he shook his head and leaned in to kiss Tony again, hands mapping the bare skin of Tony’s back, shoulders, arms.

Tony was grateful for the silence.

Tony raised his hands to the top button of Steve’s shirt, but before he could undo it Steve pulled his hands away again with a little smile.

(Oh!) Tony blinked. That was unexpected.

Steve stroked his back; his hands were warm against Tony’s skin and Tony realized it wasn’t at all cool in his room like usual. He wondered distantly if JARVIS had taken the initiative or if Steve had asked him to raise the temperature. (It seemed like something Steve would remember.)

As Steve reached down to undo Tony’s belt, he wondered if it was actually getting a little too warm.

(Oh fuck.)

And then Steve actually knelt to unbutton Tony’s trousers.

(Oh fuck!)  

Steve’s hands stroked up Tony’s back, then down over his ass as he carefully lowered Tony’s trousers and silk boxers. Tony was half-ashamed to realize he wasn’t fully hard, which couldn’t exactly escape Steve’s attention from that angle. (He couldn’t help it—he was nervous damnit and they hadn’t fooled around much yet. He was thirty-eight for Christ’s sake! He didn’t quite spring up for it like he did in his twenties anymore . . .) Steve ran his thumbs across Tony’s hipbones.

Steve laid caresses on every bit of skin he exposed—Tony’s ass, his flank, his thighs, his knees, his ankles. With a little nudge he got Tony to step out of his trousers, tossed them aside, then resumed his meticulous explorations.

When Steve pressed a kiss to Tony’s jutting hipbone, his breath warmed Tony’s groin and Tony wondered with a jolt if Steve might actually suck him. Then again, his half-limp dick didn’t look that appealing (not even to him) and it wasn’t exactly the sort of thing that male Doms tended to like. They usually thought it was too “subby” to suck cock—and, well, apart from that it was hardly something a beginner like Steve would gravitate towards first, right? So, Tony wasn’t surprised or disappointed when Steve left a lingering kiss on his stomach and got to his feet, kissing a trail from Tony’s hip back to his neck.
“You’re gorgeous,” Steve told him, rubbing his cheek against Tony’s. “God, Tony, you’re so beautiful.”

Steve took a few steps back to look Tony up and down; Tony could feel the blush spreading down his neck to his collarbone. He dropped his head lower and resisted the temptation to squirm under Steve’s rapt gaze.

Everything felt hot and fluttery.

“You’re so beautiful,” Steve repeated. “I’ve always loved looking at you. Sometimes I had to remind myself not to stare, not to look too much.” Steve’s voice went rough. “But I can look at you now—like this—can’t I, sweetheart?”

(Oh!)

Tony’s blood rushed and he nodded. Suddenly the exposed-embarrassed-awkward feeling that had been churning uneasily in his gut shifted, coiling hot and tight in his belly with that good-hot-shivery sense of not-quite-really humiliation.

Tony shuddered and Steve pulled him into his arms.

“Cold?” Steve asked.

Tony shook his head and pressed his face to Steve’s crisp white shirt. He shuddered again.

Steve held him tight and stroked his back.

“You all right, sweetheart?” Steve asked.

Tony nodded emphatically and leaned up for a kiss.

Steve obliged him for a moment then stepped away to sit down on the edge of the bed. He was looking at Tony again and, yeah, that was clearly A Thing for Steve. Tony’s cock gave an eager twitch.

“Would you kneel for me again please, Tony?”

Tony sank gracefully to his knees at Steve’s feet. Steve rummaged around in the duffle bag he’d brought and produced a long thick line of meticulously wound rope.

(Woo hoo!)

“Wrists, please,” Steve said and Tony complied eagerly.

Steve’s rope was thick and soft, a luxurious jet-black that would make a vivid contrast against Tony’s skin. He took one of Tony’s wrists in a large hand and, with a frown of intense concentration, set two fingers against Tony’s pulse and laid out the bight.

It was a column tie, the simplest tie in all of bondage. One that even Tony could do it in his sleep and like most (though not all) subs he had little to no interest in tying other people up. But Steve was giving it the rapt attention one expected for brain surgery, as he looped the rope around Tony’s wrist and his own fingers, brow furrowed biting his lip just a little.

There was a time Tony would have chuckled at that or said “Hurry up, stud, it’s not rocket science.”

It didn’t seem funny to him now.

As Steve finished the tie on Tony’s left wrist, he asked softly, “How’s that?”

“Good,” Tony answered, leaning forward to press a kiss to Steve’s open palm.

(It was actually a good deal looser than it needed to be, but there was no need to nitpick. Looser was always safer.)

Steve leaned down for a kiss then took Tony’s other wrist and wrapped it carefully, meticulously with the soft thick rope.

“And that?” Steve asked when he was done.

“Good.”

Steve nodded with satisfaction and patted his knee.

“Come here, Tony.”

Tony blinked. (Did he--?)

“Come sit on my lap,” Steve clarified, then added with a glimmer of nervousness, “You liked sitting on my lap last time, didn’t you?”

Tony nodded and licked his lips,
Steve was sitting with his knees a bit apart, so Tony had to spread his legs wider than before to sit on Steve’s lap. It left his ass exposed to the air and made Tony very aware of his nakedness. Once Tony was sitting, Steve used the leads at Tony’s wrists to pull his hands behind his back. He rubbed his cheek against Tony’s again and nipped at Tony’s throat. Tony’s heart sped.

Steve tilted him back in his arms a little and took his mouth in a kiss. It was gentle and slow, like Steve had all the time in the world to keep Tony naked and spread in his lap, tied and wanting. Steve’s tongue was hot and heavy in his mouth, his hand solid and firm at the back of Tony’s neck.

Tony squirmed and pressed into Steve’s touch. His cock—now fully hard—throbbed and twitched, bobbing in the air, sometimes brushing against Steve’s clothes. Tony realized with a hot humiliated rush that he was leaking pre-cum all over Steve’s nice black dress pants. It might stain.

Steve tilted him back further still and asked softly, “Do you like that?”

Tony nodded and Steve nipped his earlobe.

“How’s that?” Steve asked softly.
“Tony?” Steve said pulling back, brow furrowed. He looked worried.

Tony blinked and licked his lips.

(Oh, right. Words. Out loud.)

“Good,” Tony said. “Good, I—Steve, please.”

“Please what, sweetheart?” Steve asked gently. “What do you want?”

(What did he want?)


“You’ve got me,” Steve said, taking Tony in his arms. “I’m right here, sweetheart.”

Tony shivered.

“I’ve got you,” Steve whispered into Tony’s neck, hands stroking soothingly up and down Tony’s back.

Tony’s eyes were prickling again. (Absurd! Steve hadn’t even started . . . whatever it was he’d tied him up for.)

“Are you good?” Steve asked.

Tony took a deep breath and nodded.

Steve stepped away, biting his lip. He hesitated.

“Can I get a check in?”

“Green,” Tony said urgently. “Green, green, green.”

Steve smiled, hesitance bleeding away. He took a few long deep breaths, shrugged out of his blazer, and draped it over the back of a chair.

“Look at you,” Steve said, looking Tony up and down, admiring his handiwork.

Tony felt his blush spreading hot down his chest again, cock jumping and jutting between his legs.

“So beautiful,” Steve murmured, unfastening his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves.

He stepped closer and stroked his thumb across Tony’s throat.

“It’s already starting to bruise,” Steve said.

Steve kissed him, soft and tender on the lips, then murmured, “You’re so good for me, aren’t you, Tony?”

Tony hesitated—(was he?)—then gave a little nod.

“Of course you are,” Steve whispered. “You’re perfect. So good for me.”

And then they were kissing, slow and sweet. Steve’s clothes felt rough against Tony’s sensitive skin, reminding him he was naked. (Naked for Steve’s pleasure.) Tony let his arms sag down into the ropes so he could feel the pressure—Steve’s bonds—at his wrists as Steve kissed him and stroked hot strong hands over his naked flesh until he was shivering and half-dizzy again. He wanted to rut up against Steve’s thigh, but that sort of thing was seldom allowed and he wanted so badly to be good. (For Steve.)

“Tony?” Steve said, pulling back again. Tony chased after him, eager to keep kissing, but Steve had moved out of reach. “You can safeword or check in any time, ok? You don’t have to wait for me to ask.”

Tony blinked. (Well, duh.)

Tony’s stomach gave a little lurch, part eager and part nervous. (Was Steve about to get ambitious?) Steve kissed him again, his fingers carding through Tony’s hair. (What might he use? Flogger? Paddle? Crop?)

Steve was stroking his ass, his hips. (Or was he planning something more ambitious? Cane or single tail?) Tony shivered. He loved a good whipping, but without the right training and practice whip work could go south pretty easily. And Tony was tied facing out into the room, so Steve didn’t have access to his buttocks or back, the safest targets for most impact play.

Tony felt a sharp jolt of anxiety as Steve stepped back to check the ropes at his wrists again, clearly preparing to move on.
Steve’s been nothing but slow and careful with you, stupid.) Tony took a deep breath. (Have a little faith.)

Steve nipped at his mark again and started kissing a trail down Tony’s chest to his hip until he was kneeling at Tony’s feet. Tony blinked.

Steve kissed Tony’s hip bone again, gave Tony’s balls a firm dizzying caress, and then licked a hot wet stripe up Tony’s cock.

“Ah!”

Tony’s mouth fell open as Steve took the tip of Tony’s dick into his wet, warm mouth.

“Ah!” Tony cried out again, twisting a little in the ropes. Steve grasped his hip firmly in one hand to hold him still. He eased his mouth further down Tony’s cock with a soft, slick slide, then pulled back before easing down again.

Tony’s breath whooshed out too sudden and too much, leaving him breathless like he’d been punched.

Steve was really sucking cock. His cock. With determination and (it seemed) pleasure. Fully clothed. On his knees.

(Oh fuck! Fuck, Steve was actually— He was really--) Steve gave a firm, deliberate suck to his cockhead and Tony lost his train of thought.

Then Steve pulled off his dick suddenly.

“Tony?” Steve whispered, looking up at him with wide blue eyes. His lips were slick with spit and pre-come. “Say my name.”

(So fucking beautiful.)

“Say my name,” Steve repeated.

Tony swallowed thickly and obeyed: “Steve.”

Steve bit at his hip bone, then licked the bite mark.

“Again,” he insisted. “Say it again.”

“Steve,” Tony answered breathlessly.

Steve lapped at his balls, little strokes of hot wet tongue.

“Again.”

“Steve.”

Then Steve was sucking his cock in earnest, a wet hot slide, up and down, in a steady rhythm.

“Steve . . .”

Steve clutched at Tony’s hip with his right hand, his fingernails leaving little crescent moons in the skin; his left hand roamed up and down Tony’s thighs, caressing his balls, his ass.

“. . . Steve . . .”

Wet hot mouth, up and down, up and down.

“. . . Steve . . .”

Rope around his wrists—Steve’s rope—holding him there, tied in place.

“. . . Steve . . .”

Tony tried desperately to fuck into Steve’s pliant mouth—wanting it faster, harder—but that strong, relentless hand clamped down on his hip and held him still. (Yes.)

The pressure was building, tighter and hotter, in Tony’s gut as he twisted in his bonds, gasping a helpless litany of “Steve . . . Steve . . . Steve . . . .”.

When Steve’s questing fingers dipped between his cheeks and brushed against his hole, it took everything Tony had not to come.

(Fuck, fuck, fuck . . .)

“Steve!” Tony cried desperately. “Fuck! I—Steve, I’m—”

Steve pulled back to look up at Tony through his lashes, but didn’t take his mouth entirely off Tony’s dick. (Oh fuck!) He paused, waiting for Tony to speak.
“I . . .”

Tony was panting heavily; it was hard to press words out.

“If you keep that up,” Tony gasped, “I’m not gonna last.”

Steve pulled off Tony’s cock to speak.

“Ok.”

Steve said it quietly, with a shy little smile.

(Wait, what?)

Then Steve swallowed, drew his shoulders back, and said firmly, “Good. I want you to come.”

Steve’s hands left Tony’s ass and balls and he made a show of sucking on his fingers, laving at them wety, as he looked up at Tony. (Fuck.) Tony’s breath hitched and his hips twitched restlessly, cock bobbing. Desperate to touch or be touched, he pulled at his restraints, putting more pressure on the column ties, which sent a rush of pleasure through him again.

“I want you to come for me, Tony.”

Then Steve was sucking his cock, wet and hot, while a slick finger caressed his hole, not pressing inside—not yet—just stroking over his entrance in a steady rhythm that matched the dizzying drag on his dick. Tony felt lightheaded and breathless, like the only things holding him up were the ties at his wrists and Steve’s hand at his hip.

“Steve. Steve!” Tony cried. Steve moaned around his cock in reply.

Then Steve breached his hole with just the tip of his finger—Tony came with a cry.

Sharp pleasure hit him in waves and he watched helplessly as Steve swallowed thick pulses of come, his Dominant’s notch bobbing. (Fuck, fuck, fuck . . .)

Tony trembled and sagged into his bonds.

Then Steve was standing, holding Tony in his arms and kissing him, mouth still heavy with the taste of his seed.

“You’re perfect,” Steve murmured.

With a quick pull to the loop knot, Steve untied Tony from the top post, scooped Tony into his arms, and laid him out across the bed. Then he climbed into bed too, stretching out beside Tony’s limp, naked body. Steve pulled a blanket up around them.

“So good for me, sweetheart,” Steve said, running his hands over Tony’s body. “So beautiful.”

Even this far from subspace, Steve’s words gave Tony a warm thrill; Tony stopped his mouth with a kiss.

The room was quiet as they traded long, slow, lazy kisses.

Tony’s body was loose and warm, content like a cat in front of a fire.

Time trickled by slowly.

Eventually, Steve pulled back a little to ask, brow creased, “How are you feeling?”

Tony smiled and looked at Steve with half-lidded eyes as he said, still a little breathless, “Wonderful.”

Tony took Steve’s hand and kissed it; his chest felt warm and tight with tenderness.

Steve smiled and said, a bit shyly, “I’m so glad.”

Then with a little frown of concentration, Steve started to untie the leads at Tony’s wrists. Tony kinda wanted to protest—he liked the ropes—but held it in. Steve studied the small pink indentations where Tony’d let his weight pull on the bonds, then he kissed them tenderly once he’d assured himself all was well. (It was unbearably sweet.) He stretched out beside Tony again and resumed slowly stroking his back.

Face pressed against the fabric of Steve’s shirt, Tony frowned. It felt an awful lot like Steve was wrapping things up. But that couldn’t be right. Right? They were just taking a breather.

But the longer Steve pressed kisses to Tony’s hair, murmuring little words of affection, and gently stroking him, the more it felt like this was concluding aftercare. (But Steve hadn’t— Didn’t he want—? Wasn’t he still—? )

Tony gave an experimental little wriggle. Steve took a sharp breath when Tony brushed his still-hard cock. Tony perked up, feeling steadily more alert.

Tony rolled his hips up and said coyly, “Hi, sweetheart.”

Steve swallowed thickly.
“Hi,” he answered.

Tony waited. Steve didn’t initiate anything else, but even Tony’s massive grab bag of insecurities couldn’t convince him that Steve was already bored with him, repelled by his appearance, or had changed his mind about banging such an infamous slut. It was a little surprising for a Dom to be denying himself an orgasm, instead of somebody else, but Steve probably just needed some encouragement. This was his first scene after all.

(And, oh man, if that was his first attempt, Tony was one very lucky sub.)

As they cuddled warmly under the blankets that Steve had immediately wrapped around them, Tony contemplated how best to broach the subject.

("I will cry if you let that gorgeous hard-on languish.")

("Your hard-on is an affront to my talents as a submissive.")

("I will literally die if you don’t let me suck you.")

Okay, not those exact words.

Tony stroked his hands along Steve’s chest, and initiated another long glorious kiss. (He loved kissing Steve—the right amount of sweet and the right amount of dirty.) Steve hummed with approval, but didn’t take control of their kiss. Or move things along in a more orgasm-producing direction. (Hm.) Tony pushed the kiss a little hotter and more urgent before pulling away.

“So,” Tony said in a low, seductive voice, stroking his hand down to Steve’s groin. “What are we going to do about this, hm?”

“Oh, uh,” Steve said awkwardly, shifting his hips away. “You don’t have to.”

“Have to?” Tony repeated incredulously, propping up on his elbow. “Have to?” He raised one eyebrow. “We seem to have a fundamental misunderstanding here—of course I don’t have to. I want to.” Tony let his hand stroke lower. “You have no idea how much I want to.”

Tony palmed Steve’s hard cock through his trousers, exulting inwardly when Steve’s hips jerked. Tony’d always been good at this, able to find just the right pressure, just the right angle to drive a partner wild.

“Don’t you want to come?” Tony asked in a sultry voice.

Steve’s ears were bright pink. He gave a tight little nod.

“Good,” Tony murmured, still stroking him, “because I want you to. I want to make you feel so good. I want to serve you.”

Steve’s Dominant’s Notch bobbed and Tony kissed his throat.

“What do you want, Steve? Hm?” Tony asked. “Please—tell me how to serve you.”

Steve bit his lip, looking flummoxed, his ears positively red. And for a guy who’d been so beautifully in control twenty minutes ago, he was looking pretty lost now. It wasn’t exactly sexy, but it was terribly, achingly sweet.

(Leave it to me; I’ll be so good. I’ll take care of you, baby.)

Tony smiled.

“How do you want me? Do you want me on my knees?” Tony murmured. “Sucking your cock soft and slow?”

Steve took a sharp breath.

“Or you could just take me,” Tony continued, in a soft sensual voice. “Pull my hair and fuck my face, rough and fast. Would you like that? I would.”

Steve gasped and looked at him wild-eyed; Tony tried not to seem smug. (After all, if he hadn’t come so recently, the dirty talk and begging would have gotten him just as desperate.) He gave Steve a firm squeeze, then whispered, “I want to take your big beautiful cock down my throat. I may not be able to at first—you’re so big—but I’d like to. Like you to choke me with it, really fuck my throat, make me feel it.”

“Ung,” Steve let out a little grunt and squeezed his eyes shut, bucking up into Tony’s hand. Tony felt a sudden heady rush. (Steve liked it, it was good, he was good, he’d make Steve feel good . . .)

Steve’s breathing was speeding, steadily faster and faster. Tony wanted to drive him wild, needed to show how badly he wanted Steve to have him.

“Or you could spread me open with your fingers,” Tony whispered, bringing their bodies together
so they were aligned from head to toe. “Hold me down and fuck me, long and slow or hard and fast. Fill me up with your gorgeous dick and make me take it.”

“Ah!” Steve cried out, one hand clutching down on Tony’s hip as he ground their bodies together.

(Yes!)

“Please, Steve,” Tony murmured. “Please. Tell me how to serve you.”

Steve was panting harshly against his neck.

“Please,” Tony whispered, eyes downcast, “give me an order. How do you want me?”

“Knees,” Steve gasped.

(Yes!)


Tony slid down the bed to kneel with alacrity as Steve hurried to stand beside him. Steve fumbled urgently with his belt buckle, but Tony batted his unsteady hands away. He made short work of Steve’s belt, trousers, and briefs, sliding them down Steve’s legs just enough to free his cock.

(Next time, Tony’d draw things out, show off, make it long and torturously good, but now he just wanted to see Steve shake apart.)

Steve’s dick was just as beautiful as Tony’d been picturing, big but not monstrous, uncut and leaking. Tony lapped at the head for just a moment before sliding his mouth down Steve’s full length.

Steve groaned. Tony savored his response, the sound of Steve’s labored breathing, the feel of the cock in his mouth, the taste of salty-bitter pre-cum.

“Mmmm,” Tony hummed.

Steve clutched at the bedpost.

Tony palmed Steve’s balls, massaging and tugging a little, testing the response—Steve’s hips jerked again, to Tony’s delight. (Good to know.)

They must have made quite a sight: Tony, naked and spent, on his knees; Steve, big and beautiful and fully clothed, towering above him, stretching Tony’s mouth with his dick. (Mirrors. Why didn’t he have mirrors anymore?)

It felt good, so good. Kneeling. The cock in his mouth. The sounds of pleasure he dragged from Steve as he dragged his mouth up and down his Dominant’s cock.

“Oh God,” Steve gasped.

(This wouldn’t last long.)

Tony looked up at Steve through his lashes and swirled his tongue artfully around Steve’s cockhead.

“Ah!”

Tony felt a warm, echoed pleasure.

“So good,” Steve choked out. “Tony, Tony, so good . . . so . . .”

Steve’s hips gave a sudden jerk, pressing a little harder into Tony’s mouth. (Yes!) Tony pulled at Steve’s ass, encouraging him to move. With a keening noise, Steve gave a more deliberate little thrust.

Tony moaned. (And meant it.)

Steve thrust again, his thighs quivering, and Tony gave another encouraging moan. Tony sucked eagerly, as Steve fucked into his mouth with stuttering little movements. (Please, please . . .)

“Ah!” Steve cried out again, as Tony brought his hand into play too, twisting and squeezing, moving faster and faster, urging him on.

“Tony, Tony—so good, so—ah!”

Steve came suddenly, flooding Tony’s mouth with cum in thick, heavy pulses. Tony tried to swallow it all, but a little tricked down his chin as Steve panted and shook above him.

When he looked up, Tony found Steve gazing down at him with awe (as if Tony had personally invented both orgasms and blow jobs, just for Steve). Tony licked his lips and dropped his head, embarrassed by the intensity of that look.

Steve crashed to his knees beside Tony, apparently misunderstanding his downcast gaze. Steve gently lifted his chin. He caressed Tony’s cheek with a shaking hand and stroked his cum from
Tony’s skin.

"Are you ok?" Steve asked softly.

"Absolutely," Tony answered with a smile and a nod. He kissed Steve’s palm, but Steve bit his lip, brow still creased.

"I didn’t . . . hurt you?"

And Tony wasn’t even tempted to give Steve any incredulous snark, just answered, "No, Steve. You didn’t hurt me."

"Ok."

Steve gave a little shudder.

"You didn’t hurt me," Tony repeated. He added, voice a little thick, “You were wonderful.” He touched Steve’s cheek the way Steve loved to touch his rim and murmured, “You’re so good to me.”

Steve shrugged and glanced away. He gave another little shudder and Tony felt a jolt of worry. (Top drop?) Tony climbed into his lap so Steve could fold him in his arms.

"Hey, babe," Tony whispered, pressing his cheek to Steve’s neck. "Hey, big guy . . . I’m right here . . . You’ve got me."

For long minutes, they held each other, rocking slightly, curled up on the floor next to the bed. Steve stopped shuddering.

"So, sweetheart," Tony said eventually, putting a softly joking lilt into his words. "What’s it gonna take to get you out of these clothes and into my bed?"

Steve huffed out a little laugh.

“Come on, handsome,” Tony said, squirming and giving Steve a little tug. “Let’s get in bed.”

Steve nodded and now it was Tony’s turn to strip him bare, button by button and thread by thread. Steve’s body was perfect—chiseled muscles, flawless skin, stunning proportions. (Tony felt a little grateful Steve had done their first scene clothed.) Steve silently let Tony tend to him, watching with a hint of a smile as Tony undressed him, folded his clothes (badly), and set them aside.

“You’re gorgeous,” Tony murmured, stroking his hands over Steve’s shoulders. Steve just shrugged.

He was (sadly) too spent from his own wrenching orgasm and the reflected satisfaction of Steve’s to be ready for another round yet, but Steve’s body was an inspiring sight. (Maybe in the morning.)

Tony pulled back the covers and coaxed Steve in to bed, then curled up against his chest. Steve wrapped his arms around him and let out a deep sigh. He turned to give Tony a long, lingering kiss.

Tony smiled, warm and relaxed. (It was good, he was good, they were good . . .) He didn’t usually go to bed so early—and he’d probably wake up in the night—but it had been a long day and, well, there was nothing wrong with having post-scene drowsiness. He let his eyes drift shut.

“Tony?”

“Mmm?”

"Was it really—" Steve hesitated. "Was it really ok?"

Tony leaned up to give Steve another kiss.

"Better than ok," Tony said. "It was perfect."

Steve let out a long breath and started stroking Tony’s hair. He began to nod.

“Tony?”

"Hmmm?"

"I—I—" Steve swallowed, cutting himself off. "Just—you’re my special fella. My sweetheart, you know?"

“Mmm-hmmm,” Tony mumbled. “You too, babe.”

Steve was still stroking his hair and murmuring indistinct terms of endearment as Tony sank into a warm, contented slumber.
Thank you so much for your patience and support! This chapter was a struggle to write, so if you liked this chapter or had a favorite bit, or maybe have nice or curious ramblings in response, I’d really really love to hear from you. (I may write a meta about their scene on tumblr?) Anyway, I really hope you liked it. *blushes, stammers, hides*
Chapter 54

At 3:33 am, Tony blinked himself muzzily awake with a frown. His throat was parched and he needed to pee. Steve had rolled to the far side of the bed in his sleep so luckily Tony didn’t need to disentangle himself; still, he was careful not to shake the bed on his way out. Steve needed his sleep.

Tony had a quick piss and a long drink of water in the en suite. He smiled. (Steve.)

But as his eyes adjusted to the 7% lighting JARVIS provided when he woke, Tony realized that Steve hadn’t just rolled away. He was curled up tight at the farthest edge of the bed. The covers had slid down to his waist and he was shivering.

“Steve?” Tony whispered as softly as he could, padding back to bed. “Are you awake?”

No answer. He could see Steve’s shoulders rise and fall too fast, breathing too hard for normal sleep.

“Steve? Babe?” Tony said a little louder. He slid into bed. Steve didn’t answer him; his eyes were screwed tightly shut.

Tony wondered with a pang if he were dreaming of the crash again.

After a moment’s hesitation, Tony pulled the covers back up and ran his hand lightly down Steve’s back. Steve didn’t startle, so Tony eased closer and pressed his warm body to Steve’s chilled skin. He stroked his fingers through Steve’s hair.


It was hard to play big spoon when he was so much smaller, but Tony did his best.

Little by little, Steve’s shivering abated and he began to relax, the rigid tension sliding from his muscles as Tony warmed him under the blankets. Tony stroked his hair and murmured soft words, drifting halfway back to sleep himself.

Eventually, Steve rolled over—almost onto Tony—and surfaced from sleep just enough to murmur, “Tony?”

“Right here, big guy,” Tony whispered.

Steve smiled. He pulled Tony back into his arms, tucked him against his chest, and settled again.

Together, they drifted back to a dreamless slumber.

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The next time Tony awoke, he felt warm and well-rested. Steve made a little snuffling noise in his sleep; Tony smiled and closed his eyes again.

There was a super-soldier spooning him and, though Tony didn’t know the time, he felt certain he could afford to doze. All he had left to do on the Security Blanket were a few cosmetic changes—embellishments, really—and he was pretty sure Bruce wouldn’t need to look inside, so there was that basically done.

Then there were the training robots—those just needed to be packed for the ranch—and a few more diagnostics he might be able to use on their latest data pull. Had Bruce factored portal height into their schematics? Or humidity? Really basic, but for conducting energy it might—

(Damn.) More sleep was probably not happening. (Ok, fine.)

Steve’s arm was snug across Tony’s waist, but at least this time his tablet was easily in reach.

He checked the time.

6:21 am.
Steve would probably wake up soon to go for his run, but Tony might as well get a start on his day just the same.

As Tony tried to focus on work, though, his mind kept drifting back to the night before.

("You’re perfect . . . so perfect like this, bound and gasping . . .")

Tony tried not to squirm.

("Do you want me to mark you? Want my mark on your skin?"

Tony swallowed and licked his lips.

(Ok.)

Deep breath.

(Ok, so, the Eewoo’s portal had energy readings starting at $10 \text{J} \cdot m^{-2} \cdot Hz^{-1}$ and . . . and . . .)

And that blow job!

(Hand tight on his hip . . . fingers biting into the skin, warm slide up and down . . .)

The blow job—totally unexpected. It made sense in a way. Steve was so worried about his enhanced physical strength, but it wasn’t like he’d accidentally suck cock too hard, right?

Tony let his tablet rest on the bed, his grasp on it going loose.

In fact, Tony realized, most of Steve’s expressions of Dominance hadn’t involved physical force: the clothed/naked power play, the rope bondage, the biting/marking, and the verbal commands (often phrased as requests).

("Would you kneel for me again please, Tony?" “Wrist please . . .” “Come sit on my lap . . .” “I want you to come for me, Tony . . .” “Say it, Tony. Say it for me . . .”)

It was getting a little warm under the blankets. Tony took a deep breath.

It was cute how often Steve said ‘please,’ though Tony really hoped Steve would get a bit more . . . forceful . . . in future scenes. He hadn’t even planned his own orgasm! (Luckily, Tony had no qualms about begging.) But it had been good. Very good! A wonderful scene really, especially for a Dom’s first time. (Mmm . . .)

Tony smiled and stroked Steve’s hand very lightly, not wanting to wake him. Steve let out a long sigh and pressed his face closer to Tony’s neck.

Really Tony should have known that Steve wouldn’t leap instantly to the riskier, high scale kinks. A little knot of guilt coiled darkly in his stomach as he remembered his bout of nerves when Steve tied him to the cross beam. (Steve was inexperienced, not negligent, stupid . . .)

Deep breath.

(It was okay to be nervous.) His eyes were prickling anyway.

But Tony’d never given anyone his master contract.

(Or, at least, no one had ever accepted it . . .)

It was all there, laid bare in the Master Contract—anything and everything Tony would embrace or allow, all at once, a virtual carte blanche on a silver platter. (For Steve.)

There was a reason he’d never done that before.

Individual scene negotiations were a way to maintain control, to know what was coming—if he only agreed to fucking, bondage, and a riding crop, then that was what he’d expect. (And if a Dom/me went off contract, JARVIS was ever vigilant and ready to call security. Or, these days, the Suit.)

But Steve had everything—from humiliation to whips, from needles to breathplay. Tony’d okayed it all—and of course he still had the right to withdraw consent, to say ‘not now’ or to change his mind, but it was all there. On the table.

(For Steve.)

It was exhilarating.

And, to be honest, more than a little terrifying.

Steve stirred again, murmuring in his sleep as he pulled Tony closer.

Tony smiled and closed his eyes.
(Maybe Steve was waking up?)

He waited. Steve let out a snuffling little snore—nope, not yet, apparently.

Tony’s tablet had long since blanked to power saver mode; he swiped it open.

Really, he should look at the data analysis again.

He frowned.

Or maybe he should look at the specs for the poly-aramid body armor one last time. Just in case he’d missed something. (Was the cardiac trauma plate thick enough?)

He pulled up the specs—color-coded in red, white, and blue.

(7:1 tensile ratio was good, but what if . . .)

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Tony lost track of time, swinging between his distractingly arousing memories and the tables of APIs, tensile strengths, and trauma plate densities. Eventually, Steve began to stir and pulled him from his thoughts.

The blankets rustled as Steve shifted with a deep, sleepy sigh. Steve’s hand drifted from Tony’s waist to his hip; Tony wondered if Steve were actually awake yet. When his thumb swiped slowly across Tony’s bare hipbone then back, it seemed pretty clear that he was.

Steve kissed the back of Tony’s neck and pulled him closer.

“G’morning, sweetheart,” Steve mumbled into Tony’s hair.

“Morning, Steve,” Tony replied with a smile, saving his progress on the diagnostic scan.

Steve stroked his hand down Tony’s thigh and back up, his hips twitching a little. Steve’s hard cock brushed against his ass.

Tony dropped his tablet; it landed on the floor with a resounding ‘thud.’

Steve paused.

“Should I be letting you work?” Steve asked softly, and Tony couldn’t quite tell if he was serious or teasing, but Tony’s answer was the same.

“No, nope! It can wait.”

“Good,” Steve mumbled, nuzzling Tony’s neck.

“I’m so lucky,” Steve murmured drowsily. He lifted Tony’s hand to his lips and kissed his palm. “To be here. Like this. With you.”

Not sure what to say, Tony turned in his arms and offered Steve a kiss. Steve hummed with approval.

It was a slow kiss, lazy and deliberate. Languorous with affection. Steve’s hands wandered over Tony’s hips, sides, and arms in a soft caress. Occasionally he let out a drowsy murmur of pleasure, seeming happy to take his time.

But Tony’s cock was a pulsing weight between his thighs and the longer Steve kissed him heavy with tongue, the more urgent Tony’s desire became. Tony shifted closer, trying to bring their erections together. He grabbed at Steve’s hip to pull him on top, but Steve plucked his hand away and pinned it lightly to the bed.

Tony groaned.

“Yeah?” Steve asked with a little smile. He squeezed Tony’s wrist and nuzzled his neck again.

“You like that?”

Tony nodded, feeling himself blush.

“And how about,” Steve said slowly, “this?”

He pressed Tony’s other wrist down to the bed.

“Yeah,” Tony answered, a little breathless.

Steve studied him for a long moment.

“God, you’re beautiful, Tony.”
Steve’s mouth was hot and lingering and Tony pressed up eagerly into the kiss, wanting it harder, faster, rougher. Steve refused to be rushed.

When at last Steve pulled back, both of them panting and out of breath, he looked at Tony’s collar bone. Steve groaned.


Steve nipped at the spot and Tony arched eagerly.

“Please, Steve. Please .”

Steve bit down on Tony’s neck, and Tony arched eagerly.

“Please, Steve. Please.”

“Yeah,” Steve breathed, then threw his leg over Tony’s thighs, climbing on top of him.

Tony shuddered.

Steve rolled his hips and his dick pressed against Tony’s.

“You like this?” Steve asked softly.

Tony nodded. He could feel the blush spreading down to the arc reactor.

With another little murmur of approval, Steve pulled Tony’s arms up above his head, holding them pinned to the bed as he started to roll his hips lazily against Tony’s. The friction on his cock was delicious, but too slow, not enough as Steve kissed him on and on.

This. This was what he needed: Steve hot and hard above him, pinning him down, holding him as he pleased.

Tony wanted to beg, but his mouth was too busy with Steve’s, trying to coax more from his Dom with hot and urgent kisses.

When Steve broke their kiss to worry at Tony’s mark with his teeth, Tony couldn’t hold it in.

“Fuck me!” he gasped.

Steve froze; the tips of his ears went pink.

(Oops. Shit.). Tony swallowed.

“I mean,” Tony said awkwardly. “If you want. I mean, whenever you’re ready, I’d really like that. And, if you wanted-- there’s lube in the nightstand, for, uh--”

(Fuck! Words, sentences. Stupid blurt-thing-out sex-brain. I shouldn’t--)

But then Steve was holding both Tony’s wrists in one hand and fumbling for the nightstand drawer with the other and Tony’s heart skipped a beat. He held his breath.

Steve was looking at the bottle curiously, then shifting his hips off of Tony’s.

Elation and nervousness dueled in Tony’s mind and sent a knot to his stomach.

(Would Steve really--? Just like that--? And--fuck!--did he even know about prep? Shit) Tony licked his lips. (He must, right? He wouldn’t just try to shove it in. But he could walk Steve through prep! It was fine, he’d--)

Steve let go of Tony’s wrists to open the bottle, then commanded as an afterthought, “Don’t move.”

Tony shivered.

Steve coated his palm in slick, wrapped his hand around Tony’s cock, and gave a gentle tug.

(Yes, please please . . .) Tony struggled to stay still, not to lift his hips and squirm, as Steve stroked his cock, slow and deliberate, grip not quite tight enough to satisfy. (Be good! Don’t move, don’t move .).

Steve poured some more lube over Tony’s cock, then his own and looked around awkwardly. He held up his mess of hands for a moment before noticing the towel in the drawer and using it to clean off. Steve pinned his wrists again and climbed on top of him.

“Ah!”

Tony cried out as Steve rolled his hips, thrusting up against him, the slick heat of cock against cock. (FUCK! SO GOOD SO GOOD . . .). Steve’s grasp tightened on his wrists and he pulled Tony’s arms up just a little higher. Tony’s blood rushed and his head swam. Steve nipped at his collarbone.
“Ah!”

“You like that, sweetheart?” Steve asked, thrusting against him and sounding a little breathless himself. Tony just gasped, but Steve pressed down and commanded, “Answer me.”

“Yes,” Tony said, trying to squirm and arch up against his Dom—Steve pressed him harder to the mattress. “Yes!”

Steve thrust faster and took Tony’s mouth in a deep kiss that left his head spinning. The weight and power of Steve moving between his thighs was intoxicating. It was easy to imagine Steve fucking him hard and deep, holding him down, taking what he wanted. (Yes, please please, fuck me, make me take it, wreck me . . .).

Tony’s cock was leaking desperately, covered in slick, jerking against Steve’s dick, rocked by his thrusts.

“Steve!”

(Did he need permission to come? Was it allowed?)

“Tony. Tony!” Steve’s thrusts grew more urgent, speeding faster and rougher.

“Steve? Please. I want-- Can I--?”


Steve pulled his arms taut, almost to straining, as he thrust rough and hard, murmuring Tony’s name.

Steve bit down sharply on Tony’s neck; Tony came. Steve thrust frantically against him as Tony gasped and shook with his orgasm; Steve’s cock slid wet and hot through Tony’s cum.

Steve froze, then came shuddering, his lips pressed to Tony’s mark.

After a few shaky moments, both breathing deeply, Steve rolled to the side and dragged Tony up into his arms for a long, tender kiss. He used the towel to wipe off the worst of the mess, then tossed it aside.

“So beautiful,” he murmured into Tony’s hair. He held Tony to his chest and stroked him with kind, gentle hands as the minutes slid by. “So perfect . . . God, Tony, so good for me . . . so lovely.”

Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve’s chest like a cat. (If he could purr, he would.)

“You’re perfect,” Steve whispered, stroking Tony’s hair. “So perfect . . .”

Tony swallowed thickly, feeling more flustered by Steve’s praise than remotely made sense. “I’m so lucky to have you, sweetheart,” Steve said, pulling Tony up for another kiss.

Tony smiled and caressed Steve’s cheek.

“Me too,” Tony mumbled and Steve’s face lit up with that sweet, hopeful smile. There was something so achingly young about that look. Vulnerable. (Don’t fuck it up.) Tony felt a surge of protectiveness. He usually wasn’t good at putting things into words, but he had to try.

“You’re so good to me, Steve,” Tony said, trying not to sound as awkward as he felt, “So sweet.”

(He and his casual Doms were usually sparing on the Affection, Affirmation, and Reassurance (AAR) chatter.)

“You’re gorgeous,” Tony said softly, stroking his hands over Steve’s chest. Steve glanced away, seeming embarrassed; Tony was amused to think Steve was almost as bad with compliments as he was.

(So fucking sweet.)

Tony kissed him and grinned.

“So, here’s a thought,” Tony said, propping up on one elbow. “How about we stay naked in bed forever? Right here, never leave. You can do with me as you please, whenever you like, and JARVIS can order us sustenance to be delivered right here. Deal?”

“Never leave bed, huh?” Steve asked in mock consideration. “Sounds pretty swell.” Then he added more softly, “But then I wouldn’t get to bathe you. Or feed you breakfast. Was kinda looking forward to that. What do you think?”

Tony blushed. “I-- I’d like that.”
"Aw yeah?" Steve said, all boyish smile and Brooklyn lilt. "Then, sweetheart, just give me a minute to run the bath." He kissed Tony on the forehead. "Be right back."

Tony listened to the sound of Steve humming softly to himself as he fussed over the bath. He smiled. He felt amazing—well rested, loose and lax from orgasm, warm and content. Tony gave a long, luxurious stretch.

"Damn, you look good like that," Steve said when he emerged from the bathroom. Before Tony could return the compliment—a naked Captain America was a commanding sight—Steve blurted, "I'd like to draw you."

Steve immediately looked embarrassed, as if he hadn’t meant to share that.

Tony grinned. "You wanna draw me like one of your French girls?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Dumb movie."

"Oh."

"Sure. You can draw me sometime if you like," Tony said, then added in a low tone, "I'll pose however you want me." "You could even tie me up."

And from the look on Steve's face that was an idea he liked very much. He swallowed thickly.

Steve knelt beside the bed and cupped Tony’s cheek in his hand.

"I'd be honored," Steve murmured and then they were kissing again.

(Never get tired of kissing you.)

To think he was Steve’s first kiss. First everything.

(Damn, you’re a fast learner.)

"Bath?" Steve asked when they broke apart.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. But before he could get out of bed, he found himself scooped into Steve’s arms in the proverbial bridal carry, as if he weighed nothing. Tony’s arms came up around Steve’s neck as if of their own accord and he curled closer. (Absurd.) It felt good. (But he could walk, of course.) Steve was warm, strong. (But being carried was silly—he wasn’t a child.)

"I can walk, you know," Tony said, rolling his eyes.

"I know." Steve stilled. "Do you want me to put you down?"

Something twisted in Tony’s gut. He held Steve’s neck a little tighter.

(No.)

It was hard to force the word past the tightness in his throat and the irrational shame churning in his gut.

"No."

It came out a rough whisper.

A long pause, then Steve asked softly, “Is this ok?”

Tony nodded, face pressed against Steve’s neck. Steve held him close.

"Let me do this for you, sweetheart," Steve whispered. It sounded more like an entreaty than an order. Tony gave another tight nod and Steve carried him into the en suite to Tony’s luxurious Jacuzzi tub.

Steve tested the water with his foot and, finding it acceptable, stepped into the bath. He lowered Tony carefully into the warm water with a tender kiss, then sat down next to him on the bench.

"How’s this?" Steve asked, and Tony thought he meant the water temperature, but when he asked again, "Is this okay?" it felt like a much broader question.

Tony just nodded and leaned up for another long kiss.

Steve reached out for the sponge and a bar of Tony’s sandalwood soap. He was smiling that sweet, shy smile.

"May I?"

Tony tipped his head down, cheeks going pink, and answered softly, “Please.”
And just that little word, that permission, seemed to make Steve so happy. He lathered the sponge carefully and started on Tony’s shoulders, still smiling.

There was no room for shame here. No games. Tony let a out long breath. He wondered if bathing his sub was one of Steve’s oldest fantasies. It seemed like it would be, he realized with a rush of affection. Tony leaned into Steve’s touch and let out a murmur of appreciation. Steve kissed his forehead.

*Of course* Steve was a doting Dom.

Tony soaked up the attention, the warmth and gentleness of Steve’s hands, the careful concentration he gave to soaping and rinsing every inch of Tony’s body, the sweet caresses and little kisses.

It made Tony feel warm. But restless at the same time. He wanted to do something for Steve, wanted to tend to his Dom.

“Can I wash your hair?” Steve asked.

(Shit.)

“Yes, of course,” Tony said, then hesitated, heart speeding. “Just . . . I don’t like water. On my face.”

“I’ll be careful,” Steve promised.

Tony nodded. He took a deep breath, trying to banish the twisting in his stomach.

Steve’s fingers were glorious, massaging his scalp in firm circles as he worked the shampoo to a lather.

“Mmmm,” Tony murmured.

Steve pressed a little at Tony’s temples, then worked down to massage his neck. (Damn, he’s good at that.)

Steve filled a cup with fresh water from the tap; Tony tried not to tense up.

“Close your eyes and tip you head back for me, would you, sweetheart?”

Steve cupped Tony’s forehead with one hand to shield it, then poured the warm water against his scalp to rinse his hair. He filled the cup again and repeated the process.

Once he decided he’d gotten all the soap out, Steve took a small towel and dried Tony’s forehead and hair.

Not a single drop of water had landed on Tony’s face.

His chest felt tight.

“Your turn,” Tony murmured, taking the sponge.

“If you like,” Steve said, a little hesitantly.

“Of course I’d like,” Tony answered.

Glancing down, he realized Steve was hard. (Really he shouldn’t be surprised. Even without the serum, Steve would have a young man’s refractory period.).

“Oh, uh,” Steve mumbled, following his gaze. “Sorry. It’ll go away.”

“Do not apologize,” Tony said. “Please.”

He started washing Steve, enjoying the feel of warm, wet skin, the smell of the soap, the little sighs of pleasure he pulled from his lover—but he was also considering how to approach Steve’s lovely hard-on. He had a feeling Steve wasn’t about to order him to his knees for a morning blow job without a little coaxing. (“I’ll go away.” Ugh. What a waste!) There was a warm want in his belly, even if his dick wasn’t quite ready to bounce back so fast.

“Shall we rinse off?” Tony murmured, pulling Steve to his feet. Steve nodded, but looked confused.

Tony pulled the drain on the tub, then called to JARVIS, “Rain setting, J.”

The shower heads in the ceiling came on and the warm spray rained down on them (with JARVIS carefully altering the spray patterns as Tony moved so it never fell directly on his face).

Tony leaned up to kiss Steve, openmouthed and dirty, as he ran his hands along Steve’s naked body. Steve made a little noise of what might be surprise, but he kissed back eagerly, tongue rough and heavy.
Eventually, Tony broke away and knelt.

"May I? Please? I want to suck your dick."

"Uh--"

Steve’s ears were pink and he looked flustered but excited and maybe a hint guilty.

"You don’t need to, uh--"

(Yeah, duh.) Tony held back a disappointed sigh. (Babe, you need to get way more comfortable accepting pleasure…)

"Please?" Tony asked. (Good thing he enjoyed begging…) "I want it. I want it so bad. I’ll make you feel good. Let me suck your gorgeous cock." Tony rubbed his face against Steve’s hip. "Fuck my mouth. Please. Please, Steve?"

"You really--?"

"Yes! Please!"

"Yeah," Steve answered breathlessly.

Tony took Steve’s dick in his mouth as far as he could.

"Tony!"

It wasn’t his most artful blowjob, but it felt good to have Steve’s cock in his mouth, to drag up and down, sucking and working it with his tongue. Wet and sloppy, warm water pelting on his back, Steve breathing heavily above him.

Tony ran his hands up and down Steve’s thighs, his ass—fondled his balls, tugging just a little, and wondering if Steve would like being fingered. (Doms often got super weird about it, so better tread lightly.)

Tony savored every involuntary twitch of Steve’s hips, every harsh breath that turned into a gasp. (Good boy, good . . . ) His taste was musky and intoxicating on Tony’s tongue. Tony sped his strokes.

"Ah!"

Tony hummed around Steve’s cock and shifted his stance, looking for the right angle and willing his throat to relax. (Hardly his first rodeo, after all, but Steve was big . ) Tony brought his hand into play while looking for the right spot to—there!

"Oh geeze!"

Tony worked the thick head of Steve’s cock past his gag reflex—from there it went down easy for a few more inches. He couldn’t breathe around it, but that was fine. He didn’t need air yet. (It was the good kind of not breathing.). Tony eased up and down, up and--

"Tony! Tony . . . "

—down, with Steve’s cock in his throat.

(Good, so good . . . )

Steve’s thighs were trembling.

Tony had to be careful and move slowly or he’d gag, and soon he’d need air, but he wanted—

Tony hummed.

Steve came.

(Yes!)

Tony eased back and swallowed it all, then stayed kneeling at Steve’s feet, his face pressed to Steve’s hip.

Steve’s hand settled in his hair, stroking it gently as he murmured, “Thank you, Tony. God! That was—it was amazing. You’re amazing.”

Tony just smiled, savoring the praise and Steve standing tall above him, his fingers in Tony’s hair, stroking and petting him. Eventually Steve knelt beside him and tipped his chin up for another of those long, lingering kisses. Then he pressed their foreheads together and whispered, “You’re perfect.”

(And you have had exactly two blow jobs in your life. Just might be coloring your vision.)

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Tony murmured, giving Steve a little kiss.
Then Tony hopped out of the bath to grab the spare robe. (The one four sizes bigger than Tony’s.) He shook it open and helped Steve into it as he got out of the tub, then pulled the robe closed and carefully tied the sash.

“Thank you, Tony.” Steve said. He caressed Tony’s cheek and added, voice full of soft amazement as if a spare robe were the most miraculous luxury, “You’re so sweet to me.”

Tony shrugged.

“It’s just a robe.”

“Sure, Tony,” Steve said. (Sounding . . . amused?) He leaned down to give Tony a kiss on the cheek.

Feeling silly, Tony hurried into his own robe and started to turn away, but Steve pulled Tony into his arms. He rested his chin on top of Tony’s head and swayed back and forth playfully as they stood.

“Are you hungry yet?” Steve asked. “I bet you’d like some coffee first! But after, anything special you’d like for breakfast? Whatever you want! Sky’s the limit, well, that and my cooking skills, I guess.”

“Captain Rogers,” JARVIS cut in. Steve frowned. “Please forgive the interruption, but your calendar alert request has been triggered. You have thirty minutes before your meeting begins at SHIELD.”

“God damn it,” Steve muttered, then said more audibly to the ceiling, “Thank you, JARVIS.”

Steve sighed.

“I guess I don’t have time to feed you, like I’d planned,” Steve said glumly. “I’m so sorry, Tony.”

Tony shrugged.

“Then again,” Steve continued, consideringly, “I’ve been on time for every meeting we’ve ever had, so it wouldn’t kill them to wait a little for once. Yeah, why don’t I just--”

“Don’t be silly!” Tony shook his head. “Really don’t worry about it.”

Steve’s arms tightened around his waist. “I don’t like the idea of just dashing off and leaving you after--. After--”

Tony huffed. “Honestly, I’m not even hungry and--” he gestured, “--JARVIS already made coffee.”

Steve stared. “You have a coffee maker in your bathroom?”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Tony asked. Steve laughed.

Tony gave Steve a kiss and a playful shove.

“Now, go on get,” Tony said. “Scoot or you’ll be late to your meeting.”

“Do I have to?” Steve muttered from the doorway.

Tony poured himself some coffee and sing-songed, “Have a good day at the office, dear!”

Instead of laughing or leaving, though, Steve blurted, “God, you’re perfect.”

Tony blinked. (Huh?). Next thing he knew Steve was at his side once more, pulling him close for a kiss (and nearly spilling the coffee).

“What happened to never leaving bed, huh?” Steve mumbled into Tony’s hair.

Tony shrugged. “Oops? Spell broken! Changed my mind! I’m notoriously fickle and, hey, I’ve got work to do too.” Tony added, teasingly, "You know, if my grabby Dom ever lets me get to it.”

“All right, all right,” Steve said, hands held up in mock surrender. “I’m going.” He leaned down to kiss Tony on the cheek.

“I’ll see you later, beautiful,” Steve said, but made no move to leave. He just stood, looking rapely at Tony’s face. Tony quirked an eyebrow.

“Right,” Steve said. He gave himself a little shake. “Good luck with your work today.”

He gave Tony another little peck on the cheek and rushed from the room, like he’d lose his will to go if he didn’t hurry. (The big sap.)

Tony stood there for a few moments, staring absently into his coffee after Steve left. When he
finally looked up, the sight of his own besotted smile was enough to make him blush.

(Ridiculous.)

He fingered the mark on his collarbone.

“Okay, JARIS!” Tony called. “Time to get this day started; time to get some shit done! AC/DC! Stat!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Hope you liked it! Comments, musings, and speculation are loved and adored! Hope it wasn't too much porn for you! :p

Work remains busy and we're now in the part of the story I had only very very loosely plotted when I began this so long ago. As a result, chapters may be even slower than before, but I'll let you know on tumblr when it's taking over a month to write.

Thanks for all your love and support!

Edited to add: I've invited questions about the world of P&P to try and jump start some more world building and to see what you're curious about. Feel free to ask over at my tumblr post (http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/post/149419545576/questions-about-pp) or here if you'd rather. Thanks! :)

Edited to add on 9/19: So sorry everybody! Life things are happening--annoying work things--so the new chapter is kind of on hold. I am hoping to find time to finish & post it in the first week of October. Thanks for your kindness and patience! :)
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

With thanks to all those who have cheered me on while writing this story, and especially for SciShonagon whose insightful comments helped inspire some of this chapter's worldbuilding.

CW: discussions of ableism

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 55

Blog Post: Awesome New Adaptive Technology!!!

by The Liberated Subby Daddy Chef, Sammy

Great news! Remember the partnership between Stark Industries Domestic and the Active Life Non-Profit we like so much? Their first collaboration just hit the market and we LOVE IT: a cross beam bed with motorized, adjustable beams! Danny’s over the moon (though, duh, he’d never use that dorky Dad expression)!

So, as you may know from my other Daddy posts, my Domme and I want to foster a safe, sex-positive space for our sons where they can start learning to be responsible Dominants before leaving home. (If you disagree with empowering teenagers to learn about their sexuality, just keep on moving—I’m not having this debate again.) So when Kevin turned seventeen, we got him a cross-beam double bed. Last year, when Danny turned seventeen, we did the same thing even though the cross beam was mostly symbolic. (He can’t reach the top beam to use it in a tie, but for a lot of teens that bed’s a rite of passage even if they’re not planning on or able to use it.)

So we LOVE the new Active Life Bedframe (though we just keep calling it the Stark Bed, since Danny’s had a HUGE crush on Tony Stark for years…)! A very simple switch low on the bed controls a small motor that will lower the cross beams for easy access, then slowly raise the beam again once the ties are securely arranged. So awesome! Of course, people with mobility issues have been practicing an array of alternate tying methods for ages, but it’s really great to see adaptive technology expanding people’s horizons.

As Tony put finishing touches on the altered satellite that now housed the Security Blanket, memories of his morning with Steve kept flashing across his mind.

(Steve’s heavy breathing and heady scent . . . the slick slide of cock-against-cock . . . the taste and feel of Steve’s dick in his mouth . . . the weight of it down Tony’s throat, taking his breath away . . .

Tony wiped his brow and fumbled for the M-6 screwdriver.

His jeans were distractingly tight.

(Oh, fine! Now you’re ready for action.) He frowned down at his dick. (Traitor.)

Tony heard the elevator approaching. He glanced at the clock—noon. Maybe it was Steve! Maybe he was bringing lunch! (Maybe he’d be up for a bit of fun?)

“Hi, Tony,” Bruce called. “I brought chana massala; figured you forgot about lunch.”

“Oh, hey. Yeah,” Tony said, trying not to seem disappointed. “Sounds good!”

“And I thought we could work on some of my data scans together,” Bruce added. “If you’re done with the Security Blanket, I mean.”

“And just finished,” Tony said, sliding awkwardly from under the satellite. “And, sure. Let’s tackle the data together. My concentration hasn’t been the best this morning.”

Bruce’s smile was a little too knowing.

By 3 pm they’d made some good progress on the hypotheticals, so Bruce left to practice yoga, earnestly inviting Tony to join him. (“Good for mind and body!”) Tony waved him off, but he was feeling sort of jittery. His usual workout routine had taken a backseat lately, what with the Avengers and the holidays, so maybe Bruce had the right idea. (Not yoga. Nope! But a workout . . .)
“Save it all, J! Time to go pump some iron.”

“Oh of course, sir.”

Tony looked down at his inner thighs with a frown. (Yeah. Gym.) He sighed. (Better go for a run.)

When Tony arrived in the gym, he froze at the sight that met his eyes: Steve, Clint, and Natasha were training. No, not training. Fighting. Fighting with an intensity he’d never seen from them before.

Tony realized with a rush of embarrassment just how completely Clint and Natasha had been pulling their punches and slowing their movements with him.

(And—almost as embarrassing—he realized that he’d assumed Steve wasn’t home, since he hadn’t dropped by the workshop.)

The three were moving so fast Tony could hardly track the individual motions as they fought, apparently each one for themselves in an intense three way battle. It was never clear if they were being thrown or jumping away, but as they dodged, punched, spun and slid the sheer physicality of them all was staggering.

Tony’d known Steve was strong. Strong and graceful, but he’d never seen him like this before, not when he had the luxury of standing there to watch.

Suddenly, all Tony could think of was how easily Steve could throw him around, wrestle him down, pin him to a wall, to the mat. Heat pooled in his stomach.

(“Do you yield?” “Never!” “I’ve got you pinned—you’re not going anywhere. You just have to take it, whatever I dish out.” . . . and then he’d struggle and maybe Steve’d rip his pants off . . . “I’m in charge, understand?” “Yes, yes, sir! I—")

“Ouph!”

Clint landed an especially nasty blow to Steve’s sternum and Steve charged him like a bull. But there was something about it that was starting to leave Tony unsettled. Something not just intense or fierce in their looks, but angry. Just a little too much.

Tony frowned, fantasy fading. Natasha pounced, spinning Steve around in her grasp, kicking Clint away. Steve threw her to the matt and caught sight of Tony in the doorway.

“Tony!”

Clint took the opening to pound Steve in the solar plexus, making him grunt and stagger; Natasha escaped his hold with ease.

“I think that’s enough for now, don’t you, boys?” Natasha asked, springing back to her feet.

After a moment’s pause, the two Doms nodded.

“Uh, wow,” Tony said awkwardly. “What the hell was that? I’ve never seen you spar like that before.”

“Just working through some frustrations,” Natasha shrugged and sauntered out. “Good practice.”

“Yeah,” Clint said, holding out his hand. “Good fight, Cap.”

They nodded solemnly and shook.

“Gonna hit the showers,” Clint said, sniffing his shirt with a grimace. “Later, Tony!”

Tony approached Steve uncertainly.

“What was that?” Tony asked.

Steve shrugged. “Just working off steam.”

“You seemed upset.”

“Just–” Steve sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “Sometimes I really hate SHIELD.”

Tony grimaced in sympathy. “Bad meetings?”

“You have no idea,” Steve muttered darkly. He shook his head and asked abruptly, “Do you ever think we’d be better off without SHIELD?”

Tony blinked, visibly startled.

“Uh, no.” Tony frowned. “What’s brought all this on?”

“When’s the last time they offered a good suggestion?” Steve retorted.
Tony laughed, but Steve was glaring.

“I mean it,” Steve said stubbornly, with a bit of venom. “I’m starting to think they enjoy wasting time— all the poking and prodding at the lab? I mean, I know I’m a scientific oddity, but even so. And all those pointless meetings and trainings and meddling—trying to mess with our training plans with Bruce. And half those Agents have no sense, no discipline, and no basic human decency! They’re barely helpful and it’s a . . . it’s a . . . a nasty place.”

Steve was practically spitting.

(Fuck. Had something happened to him?)

“I mean it! We could break ties,” Steve went on. “Do our work on our own! What is it they offer us anyway?”

“You can’t be serious.” Tony shook his head.

“Do we need their funding?” Steve asked.

“Money? No.”

“Then what? What do they offer?”

“Legitimacy. Accountability,” Tony said firmly. “Without them, we look like vigilantes, running wild, doing whatever we want. I know. I’ve been there and it wasn’t pretty. With SHIELD oversight, when people say ‘who authorized that?’ we can say. ‘SHIELD—and behind them, your own elected officials. Congress. The Commander in Chief. That’s what they offer.’” Tony paused for a moment, then added: “I mean, other than all the agents who fought and died with us in New York. I suppose you remember them.”

It was a low blow; Steve winced and looked away.

Tony’s stomach twisted, immediately sorry. He approached to lay a hand on Steve’s massive shoulder.

“Hey,” Tony said gently. “That’s no reason you have to put up with whatever shit they’re throwing your way though. What’s going on, babe?”

“Nothing. It’s fine.”

“Doesn’t seem fine,” Tony murmured, pressing himself into Steve’s arms.

“No, it is,” Steve insisted, then amended, “Or it will be. Maybe.”

Steve showed no signs of elaborating, just folded Tony gently in his arms.

“I didn’t realize they’d been sending you down to the labs,” Tony said, hoping it would be enough of a prompt.

“It could be worse,” Steve said stiffly. “They’re very polite about it at least.”

“But you hate it,” Tony speculated.

“Yeah,” Steve admitted with a huff.

“We can get them to back off,” Tony said, stroking Steve’s back. “You shouldn’t have to do that.”

“No, it’s fine.” Steve shrugged. “They’ve probably got all the samples and statistics they could ever need by now and will be done with their study soon.”

Something about it felt off. Steve was still tense. Tony wanted to press, but didn’t want to add any stress. (Maybe he could ask Natasha?)

Steve sighed and held Tony tighter.

“Just, sometimes it makes me feel like a . . .” He waved a hand vaguely.

(“A scientific oddity.”) Tony nearly winced. (A lab rat?)

“We can leave for the ranch tomorrow,” Tony said. “At least get a break from them.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed with another sigh. He kissed the top of Tony’s head. “Thanks, sweetie.”

“And I mean it,” Tony said fiercely, “if they don’t back off when you say so, I’ll sic the lawyers on them. Serum or no, they don’t own you. There are laws you know!”

“Lawyers, huh?” Steve said, considering. “Well, if things go badly, we can keep that in mind.” He shrugged it off, then asked, “But, hey, how did your work go today?”

“Good!” Tony said with a grin. “Did a little fine tuning on your uniform and the Security
Blanket’s done! Training robots are packed and ready to load on the Quinjet. All that’s left is packing my suitcase, so I was coming to the gym for a break—lift some weights, use the treadmill.” Tony placed a hand on Steve’s chest and tilted his head down as he added in a low voice, thick with innuendo, “But maybe you could give me a workout instead.”

Steve’s silence seemed a little stunned, so Tony continued encouragingly, “You could show me a few moves, let me practice what Clint and Natasha were teaching me. Maybe throw me around a bit . . .”—Tony’s heart was racing just with the words—“toss me down on the mat and pin me there . . . helpless . . . at your mercy . . .”

“Uh.” Steve glanced around and swallowed thickly. “I’m not sure that’s appropriate.”

“Why not?” Tony asked. (Oh! Of course. Shy baby.) “Don’t worry—JARVIS can put the gym in lockdown. Nobody’ll come in.”

Reassurances offered, Tony tried to rekindle the mood, lowering his voice again, “Wouldn’t you like that? Like to work up a sweat and wrestle me down? Panting and pinned, helpless beneath you?”

Steve took a tiny step back.

“I did like it,” Steve said, sounding pained. “I liked it too much.”

(Huh?)

Steve looked upset as he said, “It wasn’t appropriate.”

(Huh? Oh. Oh!)

Tony’s jaw dropped.

“Oh my God!” Tony laughed. “That’s why you had Clint take over my training?!”

Steve gave a stiff nod. His mouth was tight as he said, “It wasn’t right.”

Tony resisted the temptation to laugh again; instead, he stroked a hand gently across Steve’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Tony said, reassuringly. “You didn’t do anything to me. It was fine.”

“It wasn’t right,” Steve repeated stubbornly, glancing away.

(Oh, for fuck’s sake.)

“So what?” Tony said, with a shrug. “You liked me—we were training and you, what . . .? Got a little turned on? There’s nothing wrong with feeling that way. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“It wasn’t right.” Steve insisted again, like a broken record. “And I got—” His ears turned pink and he made a vague gesture down his body. (A hard on?) “I should have more control.”

“Steve? You’ve got plenty of control, ok?”

Steve was still frowning.

“You didn’t do anything to take advantage,” Tony said. “And then you tapped out of training me anyway, right? It’s fine.”

Tony reached up to caress Steve’s cheek.

“And, we’re together now,” Tony continued. “So, what do you say, big guy? Wanna show me some moves? The training mat’s nice and soft if I take a tumble . . .”

“I don’t think—”

“Are you decent!?” Clint called from the doorway of the locker room.

Steve jumped back a step, looking guilty.

“Har-har, Birdbrain,” Tony called.

(Damn it, Clint!)

Clint emerged towel off his hair.

“So, here’s a thought,” Clint said, “every time you call me Birdbrain, I’m gonna call you ‘Lovebird.’”

“That’s wildly inappropriate,” Steve said flatly.

(Oh for fuck’s sake!)
“Kidding, kidding!” Clint said, hands up in surrender. “Anyway, are we shipping out tomorrow? Yeah? So, how about team pizza and movie night before we go. Last chance for proper New York pizza for a while. You two in for some team bonding?”

(Noooo! I want Steve to myself. Preferably naked.)

“Sure, Clint,” Steve said. “Sounds like a good idea.”

“Yeah, great,” Tony said. “Good idea.”

“Cool. See you later then,” Clint said, then paused for a moment. “And Steve? Good fight earlier. I—Yeah. Good fight.”

“Likewise,” Steve answered. They exchanged a solemn nod and Clint took his leave. Steve went straight to the taping station and began to wrap his hands.

Tony held back a sigh. (Guess that’s a ‘no’ to sexy foreplay—or fucking—in the gym.)

Tony grabbed a water and headed for the treadmill. At least it had a good view of Steve’s punching bag.

Sexology
William Walling

Part VII: The Physiology of Wedlock

The Dominant may be by nature kind considerate and loving but the whole tenor of his thoughts on marital consummation are connected with violence—indeed dynamic consummation is, as he falsely believes, the true idea of mercy. And with this disparity between their forces—the shrinking timidity of the submissive and the ungoverned boldness of the Dominant—the match anticipated by Juliet is won and lost. Lost indeed for the poor creature left mangled and terrified—nay infinitely disgusted! Love, affection even, are well nigh crushed out of the stricken submissive whose mental ejaculation, "O that I had not married!" is the key note to her whole after existence. And so through the long hours of that dreary night she listens to the heavy respirations of her gross companion whose lightest movement causes her to shrink with terror. She is fortunate indeed if her miseries be not renewed ere she escapes from the “bridal chamber;” and the day which follows, filled as it is with forebodings of the coming night, seems all too short for the contemplations which crowd upon her. She is far from friends and kindred with no one to whom she can tell a word of her strange sorrow with him who is miscalled her protector, revealing by his every look and act the bestial thoughts which fill his breast. What wonder is it that twenty four hours of marriage have been more prolific to her of loathing than the whole previous courtship of love!

Again and again these nights of horror are repeated each if possible more hateful than the first until her monster rests from sheer exhaustion and nature cicatrizes the wounds of body and soul. The wounds received by the latter are serious indeed. Passion is forever killed. His greed, lust, and carelessness has snuffed forever her delicate flame of desire.

Tony ran for about an hour while Steve battered his specially reinforced punching bags. Steve alternated between scowling furiously at the sandbag, landing wild, brutal hits, and then casting these soft little glances over at Tony (trying—and failing—to be subtle about it) and landing lighter more methodical blows.

It was all terribly distracting.

Then again, running on a treadmill was boring as fuck so the distraction was probably good for him. (And Steve’s physique was a thing of beauty, in motion especially.) Tony could tell Steve was still upset about SHIELD. (And maybe still feeling guilty about that long ago sparing match?)

He hated it when Steve was upset.

The odometer flashed eight miles and the machine ground to a halt as he finished his cool down.

Tony sauntered over to Steve. He smiled at Tony’s approach.

“Hey, handsome,” Tony said.

“Hi,” Steve said, still smiling sweetly.

“You about done here?”

“Sure. I could be,” Steve conceded.

“Great!” Tony reached for Steve’s hand and asked more softly, “May I?”
Steve smiled. Tony slowly began to unwrap the tape, layer by layer to reveal Steve’s hands. They were large—so much larger than Tony’s—soft and smooth, but strong. It felt good to have Steve’s hand in his, to do this small thing for him. Tony felt more breathless than he should, just unwrapping his lover’s hands, winding some tape. The first hints of a blush tingled on his cheeks.

“Thank you, Tony,” Steve whispered, voice rough. He caught Tony’s hand and raised it to his lips for a kiss.

Tony swallowed thickly.

“I’m sorry you had a bad time at SHIELD,” Tony said. He leaned up for a chaste kiss. Steve squeezed his hand.

“Maybe I can take your mind off SHIELD?” Tony said lightly. “See, I’m a gross sweaty mess, so I’m heading up for a shower. I thought you might like to join me?”

“Oh, uh.” Steve bit his lip. “I don’t expect—I mean, you don’t have to, uh—”

“I know that, babe,” Tony cut in, holding back an exasperated snort. (Ok. Rephrase this.) Tony took a deep breath. “I’m going up for a shower and—no pressure—but, I’d like it if you’d join me.”

“Really?” Steve asked. Tony nodded.


. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

It was swell.

It was absolutely swell.

Steve let Tony lead him up to his luxurious shower, kissing softly in the elevator on the way. They’d stripped each other of their sweaty clothes, still kissing, which made it a little awkward. (Steve didn’t want to stop kissing long enough to get his shirt off—it was kind of adorable.) Tony was already hard—had been since the elevator—and he could tell from the way Steve’s gaze lingered between his thighs that Steve liked that. Liked it a lot.

Tony’d washed Steve off with his favorite louffa—exchanging wet, soapy caresses, more affectionate than cleansing—and now Tony was eager to get things moving along in a more sexwards direction.

“You’re so beautiful,” Steve was murmuring softly, running his fingers through Tony’s hair again. “So amazing.”

“You too, gorgeous,” Tony answered, then stopped his mouth with a kiss. He shifted to press his hip to Steve’s leaking dick.

“Ah!” Steve broke away with a little gasp, then clutched Tony close.

“I—” Steve swallowed and took a breath, then mumbled hotly against Tony’s neck. “You’re so precious to me. You know that, right? So dear. I’d never—never—” His fingers clutched at Tony’s arm.

Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve’s chest.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I’ll be good to you,” Steve said. He ran his hands up and down Tony’s back and pressed a kiss to Tony’s hair. “Gonna be so good to you, sweetheart. Always.”

Tony probably wasn’t blushing—it was just hot in the shower, right? He slid gracefully to his knees.

“Tony.” Steve breathed the word reverently; he stroked Tony’s cheek. “What would you like, sweetheart?”

Tony’s brow creased.

(Uh, you weren’t so into my latest suggestions—to fuck me, to throw me around in the training room . . . Besides, what I really want is—)

With his head tilted down, Steve couldn’t see his frown.

(It’s easy to beg for the little things, the specifics—pin me down, take my ass, fuck my mouth—but so much harder to really ask for—)

“Sweetheart?” Steve prompted softly. “What do you want?”

(Do with me as you please. I want to serve you—don’t want to make the decisions.)
Tony bit his lip. He was definitely blushing now, the heat of it spreading down his neck to the arc reactor. But he’d already—they’d already— (It was ridiculous to be nervous!)

Tony lifted his arms and offered Steve his upturned palms.


“Yeah,” Steve said roughly. “I—”

Another deep breath.

“Sweetheart? What’s your safeword?”

Tony’s heart leapt.

“Safeword,” Tony answered promptly, then added (just to be thorough), “And my check-ins are ‘red,’ ‘yellow,’ and ‘green.’”

“That’s good, sweetheart,” Steve said, still stroking his hair. Tony could hear a smile in his voice. “Very good.”

Tony turned his face to kiss Steve’s hand.

“I’ll take care of you,” Steve murmured.

Tony’s breath caught and he felt a (ridiculous, absurd) swell of gratitude. Steve’s feet were there—big and solid and there—and he kind of wanted to kiss them, but his stomach was twisting and he also didn’t, so instead he pressed a burning cheek to Steve’s calf.

“I’ve got you,” Steve promised. He crouched down beside Tony and kissed his forehead, then his left palm, then his right.

“Wait for me a moment, sweetheart,” Steve said. “Just like this.”

(Yes, Steve.)

Tony nodded and Steve stepped from the warm shower. Tony could hear him drying himself with brisk, military efficiency and then going into the bedroom. Tony knelt, palms upturned, head down, breathing deeply.

It was good. (Steve’s in charge.)

Tony smiled.

Blog Post: Abelism and my original post re: “Awesome New Adaptive Technology!!!”

by The Liberated Subby Daddy Chef, Sammy

Okay, I’ve been getting an awful lot of comments all in the same vein on my last entry, so I’m going to answer them here. First of all—and I really shouldn’t have to say this—Danny’s a Dominant. Yes, I’m sure. Yes, he’s sure. Yes, he presented physically. Yes, he has a full Dominant’s notch. No, he doesn’t wish he were a sub. These are all hideously offensive questions. Having a disability doesn’t make a Dominant any less of a Dom/me.

And second, there was an absurd amount of panic in the comments about “What if the motor breaks and he can’t get his sub down because he’s in a wheelchair!?!?!?”

Everybody calm down!

All kinky play has risks and the responsibility of every Dominant is to minimize risk as much as possible. But life has risk too. Danny’s girlfriend is thousands of times more likely to be killed or injured in a car accident driving to our house than during a low-scale play date with her boyfriend. If the motor on the frame failed while she were tied and he couldn’t get her down, it would probably be no more than a really embarrassing irritation. Danny could call his brother. Or me. Or one of their friends. Or, if it were more urgent and nobody were near, he could call emergency services. Danny’s car is more likely to stall on a busy street than that little Stark motor is to give out at a bad moment. (Seriously—he drives a Ford! J ) His girlfriend is more likely to be injured driving over to our house than because the little motor in his bed stalls.

All these commenters instantly leapt to a highly unlikely worst case scenario because Danny’s in a wheelchair. Because he’s in a wheelchair, they don’t think he’s really a Dominant; they don’t think that he deserves to express his Dominance with another person; they don’t think that he can take care of a submissive (or even himself). Possible mechanical failure is just a front for trying to diminish his sexuality because of their ableist assumptions about what it means to be a good Dominant. (Disabilities Activist Maria Ocampo is way more eloquent on this subject than I am—you can read more here: http://www.mariasacampo.org/unpackingableismandorientationism )

Scenes run by Dominants with disabilities have no higher instance of kink related accident or
injury than those run by their able-bodied counterparts. In fact, according to a 2010 study, the rate is lower. Fully-able Dominants were 47 times more likely to oversee a scene in which a submissive was seriously injured or killed than were Dominants with disabilities. If I were given to speculation, I’d say it’s because Dominants with disabilities aren’t as arrogant about their invincibility as other Dominants so they’re more likely to plan for the unexpected, but I don’t have any concrete data—just a hunch—so I’ll just share this fact: one of the most common causes of accidental kink-related submissive death is when a seemingly healthy Dominant suffers a sudden heart-attack mid scene, leaving their submissive fully tied with no outside safety checks in place. In 2011 in the United States alone, nineteen submissives died of dehydration when they were unable to call for help after their Dominants experienced a sudden health crisis.

So, back to the inspiration for this post. The little motor in Danny’s new bed is unlikely to fail. If it did, it would be more of an annoyance than a safety hazard. All kink involves risk and the added risk of having a mechanized cross bar is truly negligible. And, even if something did go wrong, Danny could call for help. And, since our boys are learning to be good Plan-Ahead Dominants, they both have a Stark Safe in their bedrooms—if either of them had a health crisis and needed his girlfriend to call for help while tied, she could reach 911 by voice command. Danny is a kind, strong Dominant who deserves to express his Dominance just like his brother or his mom or any other Dominant.

So, the takeaway of this post? Dominants with disabilities are still Dominants—great, loving, conscientious Dominants. And adaptive technology is a wonderful and amazing thing. It helps all of us silly little humans experience things we couldn’t experience without it and it helps keep all of us safer.

p.s. I know a lot of people come to this Blog for my decorating advice and recipes, not expecting a few tablespoons of disabilities advocacy. There’s a lot I didn’t know before Danny was born. I’m just a stay at home sub and blogger—but I learned, am still learning, and so can you. Please take the time to educate yourself! It will make you a better person and a better parent.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Really hope this chapter worked for you--it was harder to write than I expected! Comments are cherished and adored! Any favorite bits? Curiosities? Musings?

And some of you will be excited to hear that the next thing I post will be a certain long-awaited out-take starring Steve... It will shed light on what exactly happened at SHIELD. :) UPDATE: the out-take is ready: All Hail the Conquering Hero can be read here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/8450386 . Enjoy!

Edited to add: I forgot to mention that the Sexology portion in this chapter is VERBATIM—the only emendations I made were to change man/woman to Dom/sub and to add the closing sentence to cap the section off. He goes on at length. Mind blowing, isn't it?

UPDATE: January 2017:

The short version: things are really rough right now and I can't write. But I'm hoping things get better and I can post the next chapter on April 1st!

Chapter 56

I'M BAAAAAAAAACK!!!

"Did you miss me, Agent Romaov?" ;p

Chapter Notes

Infinite thanks to everybody who has waited SO LONG for this chapter and sent me so much love, encouragement, and kindness! This chapter was going to begin flashing forward to the Ranch, but then Tony just demanded that this part get written too. So here it is. I hope you like it!

Thank you for all the kindness and support. It means the world to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Guide to Wedded Bliss for Loving, Modern Husbands

By Mr. & Mrs. Uriah Prescott

1936

But having now offered the strongest of cautions on this subject—and exhorted you to the utmost protective zeal, training, and caution—my most darling wife has a few gentle reminders to offer as well.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Mrs. Prescott: I do indeed and welcome the opportunity to address the gentlemen my husband guides in that brave art of Domination.

By no means would I wish to disagree with or retract any of my husband’s urgings. God forbid! Would that every Dominant in America were trained as he proscribes—and so loving and gracious as he! What a world of sorrow might be saved for many an unfortunate submissive!

Rather, my soft urging is this: do not forget your submissive’s tender longing to be subject to your will. It is in our nature—our glory!—to serve our chosen Dominants, to feel pleasure in your pleasure, to be liberated in our submission. When, as Mr. Prescott has already exhorted, you have acquired a thorough understanding of your wife’s heart, have built that glorious trust that is the root of all marital felicity, have seen the particular places where her desires and yours are in perfect concord, do not—dear Dominant!—neglect to accept her lovingly offered submission.

Do not, as some few have at times done before you, show your tender concern for her wishes by neglecting your own. Please do not bring doubt to her mind that her submission is truly desired. There is no happiness for her there. Please do not leave her uncertain or rejected. Do not overwhelm her with choice at every turn and leave her to guess which answer it is will please you best when her truest wish is to bring you joy, particularly on those occasions she has knelt in supplication and put herself fully in your hands.

O reader, I implore you—do not leave her in doubt that her submission is accepted and treasured.

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Tony was a little surprised when, instead of tossing him onto the bed, Steve set him on his feet beside it then sat down.

“Would you kneel for me, Tony?” Steve asked. Tony complied with a little flutter in his chest; he shivered.

“Are you cold?” Steve asked softly.

Tony shook his head. Steve reached out to caress Tony’s cheek and asked again, “What are your safewords?”

“Safeword,” Tony answered. “Red, yellow, green.”

“That’s good,” Steve said. He leaned down to kiss Tony on the forehead.

“Wrist please.”

Tony bowed his head and lifted his palms—presenting them to Steve again—and then couldn’t resist arching his back a bit more. (Showing off.)

“Beautiful,” Steve murmured. He kissed first Tony’s right palm, then his left, and then held Tony’s wrists in a firm grasp.

“You said you wanted whatever I want—is that right, sweetheart?” (Well, as long as it’s not forbidden in my contract, but that goes without saying, right?)

Tony nodded.

“You want me in charge?”

Tony nodded again.

Steve squeezed Tony’s wrists a little harder. “And I want you to answer ‘yes, Steve’ or ‘no, Steve’ when I ask you a question. Will you do that for me?”

Tony’s heart sped as he obeyed: “Yes, Steve.”

“Good.” There was a lingering pause.

“So, I’m in charge,” Steve said, “but if you don’t like something—if it’s uncomfortable or no good for you, I want you to promise me that you’ll ‘yellow,’ even if it’s something small. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, Steve.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, Steve.”

“Good.” Steve said it with a certain satisfaction, then added, “Now stay there, just like that.”

Steve let go of his wrists and Tony knelt still, his palms raised in offering.

Tony swallowed, his mind racing back over his contract as Steve rummaged through his little black bag. (Restraints? Paddle? Crop? Clamps?) Tony couldn’t really picture Steve going higher up the scale than that on a random afternoon, but Steve had surprised him before.

The touch of thick, luxuriously soft rope made him smile as Steve laid the bight out on his right wrist. Tony was sure that if he looked up, Steve would be making that adorable face of furious concentration, but instead Tony closed his eyes and relaxed into it.

(Steve’s in charge.) The feel of Steve’s rope at his wrist. Hands on his skin. The sound of Steve’s breathing. Tony let out a long sigh.

As Steve slowly tied his wrists, Tony’s cock was still a throbbing weight between his thighs, but his arousal felt distant, non-urgent.

Steve slid a finger under the bindings and asked, “Is that good?”

Tony nodded then remembered and answered softly, “Yes, Steve.”

“Good,” Steve said decisively.

Then he pulled Tony to his feet by the ropes at his wrists, spun and pushed Tony onto the bed. With a speed and strength that left Tony rather breathless, Steve hauled him into position, tied his wrist leads to the headboard, then pulled him down the bed until he was fully stretched out, arms high above him. Steve had never manhandled him like that before.
Tony blinked in surprise as Steve stepped away.

(Huh?)

Steve moved to stand at the foot of the bed. Staring at him.

Steve’s eyes were dark and hooded and his cock jutted out proudly. He crossed his arms over his chest as he continued to stare, letting his eyes wander up and down Tony’s body.

With someone else, Tony might have put on a show—canted his hips just so, arched his back, exposed his throat. (Reclaiming control.) But Steve had put him where he wanted him and was looking at him with such a serious, earnest gaze that—

Tony dropped his eyes.

It didn’t matter, though—he still knew Steve was looking at him, studying him in that way of his.

Tony squirmed without meaning to, then went still.

After a few long moments, Tony glanced up from under his lashes. A hint of a smile was playing at the corners of Steve’s mouth. Tony looked down again.

“Beautiful,” Steve said at last, breaking the lingering silence. “Someday, I’m going to draw you like this—I’ll fill page after page of your gorgeous lines, learn your every proportion and angle. The jut of your hip bones. The arch of your foot. The curve of your shoulders.”

Tony swallowed.

“You’re beautiful,” Steve said, then added, “And you’re blushing.”

Tony licked his lips and took a long breath. He knew it was true; he could feel the hot tingling in his cheeks, down his throat, across his chest, and that not-quite-humiliation of being examined and exposed.

“Are you blushing for me, sweetheart?”

Tony licked his lips again—for a moment, it was hard to form words.

“Yes, Steve,” he whispered.

“Good. I like to see you blushing for me.”

Tony watched Steve run a hand up and down his cock and felt a sharp jolt of wanting. His mouth fell open without thinking; he hoped Steve would let him suck it.

Then Steve poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the dresser and took a long drink. Tony watched his Dominant’s notch bob.

“Are you thirsty?” Steve asked, approaching.

Tony considered it for a moment.

“Yes, Steve.”

With one strong hand under Tony’s shoulders, Steve lifted him a little and brought the cup carefully to his lips. He tilted it very gradually and Tony took a sip, then another.

“Enough?”

“Yes, Steve.”

Steve set the water aside and ran his fingers through Tony’s hair; Tony pressed up into the caress, anchored by Steve’s touch.

“Now, I—” Steve said, then paused. He swallowed thickly, then said in a rough, low voice: “I’m going to do with you as I please.”

Tony’s breath hitched.

“Please.”

It was half whisper and half gasp, a small helpless sound of want that Tony instantly wished undone. His brow furrowed. (Off script.) He frowned. (Was he allowed to—)

“You’re good,” Steve reassured, voice full of warmth (and wonder?). Steve stroked his hair. “I like hearing you.”

Tony smiled up at him. And then Steve’s body was warm and solid against Tony’s and he was kissing him, sweet and soft, then harder with teeth and tongue. Tony gasped into his mouth.

(Good, good, so good, Steve.)
Steve’s hips rolled against his, not enough to satisfy, only pushing Tony’s desire higher and higher. He kissed Steve urgently and time slid by.

Tony panted as Steve pulled away to nip at the mark on his collarbone.

“Do you like that?” he asked. “Like wearing my mark on your skin?”

“Yes! Yes, Steve.”

Steve worried at the mark, raising the bruise to high color, then started another—a twin mark on the other side. Hot sharp prickles ran up and down Tony’s spine as Steve bit and sucked.

“So beautiful,” he murmured.

Tony jolted as Steve caressed then lightly twisted his nipple.

“Ah!”

Steve bit his earlobe then sucked on it, still stroking Tony’s sensitive nub with light fingers. Tony whined.

“Is that good, darling?” Steve breathed into his ear.

“Yes, Steve,” Tony gasped. “Yes, please.”

Steve drew back and looked down at him, smiling. He caressed Tony’s cheek and asked, “Can I get a check-in?”

“Green!”

Steve’s smile widened and he began kissing his way down Tony’s chest. When Steve sucked on his nipples, Tony arched off the bed. Steve held him down with strong hands.

Tony shuddered.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart,” Steve promised, rubbing his smooth cheek against Tony’s hipbone. His warm breath fanned Tony’s eager cock.

“Ah!”

Steve smiled as he held Tony’s hips still and planted a row of kisses up and down his inner thighs, never touching where Tony wanted him most. Up and down, down and up.

Steve drew back to stare raptly at Tony’s face, then let his eyes rove across his body again.

“Gorgeous,” Steve murmured and leaned down to kiss Tony’s cock.

Tony tried to buck up into Steve’s caress, but his hands were like steel. Tony pulled at his ropes and strained up for a better view as Steve licked his dick, tonguing the head. Tony panted and bit his lip as Steve began to suck him, moving up and down oh so slowly.

(Yes, yes, fuck, Steve, ah!)

Steve’s pace was sweet torture. He’d suck Tony a while, soft and slow, then pull off his dick to smile up at him. Kiss his thighs, his hips. Nose at his balls and the sensitive spot behind them. Then back to sucking cock with a lazy pleasure Tony had never seen in a Dom before. Then, he’d draw away again, leaving Tony gasping and whining.

Clearly, he was trying to drive Tony insane.

When Steve’s fingers brushed lightly against Tony’s entrance, he moaned and struggled to tilt his hips. Still sucking, Steve looked up at him and did it again. **(Inquisitively?)** Tony was eager to give an answer.

“Steve, Steve, please,” Tony gasped out.

Steve rubbed deliberately—not pressing inside—just caressing the perineum in tantalizing circles.

“Yes, Steve. Please! Please!”

Steve gave a firm, deliberate suck on Tony’s cock, then pulled away.

Tony whined in protest—then gasped as he realized that Steve was reaching into his bag and—

**(YES!)**

Steve flipped open the cap on the lube and poured some across his fingers, frowning in concentration. Tony tilted his hips eagerly and held his breath.

Slick, gentle fingers caressed Tony’s entrance; it sent his heart pounding at breakneck speed, all eager anticipation. But even more than that it was the rapt look on Steve’s face—so beautiful, his
eyes bright and that furrow of concentration pulling at his brow.

Tony was so caught up in looking at Steve that the first press of a finger took him by surprise.

He gasped. Steve looked up.

“Color?” Steve asked.

“Guh,” Tony gasped, feeling a little silly for being so tied up over one fingertip. Steve went still and Tony realized he hadn’t answered properly. “Green!”

Steve kissed his inner thigh.

“Good, sweetheart,” he said, “You’re so good.” And then Steve bent down to take Tony’s cock in his mouth again.

“Steve, ah!”

The dual sensations—the warm wet pressure on his dick, and that tantalizing finger pressing very slowly in and out, not far, just a little, fucking into him gently . . .

“Steve.”

“Mmm,” Steve hummed in answer, giving a little suck, and Tony wanted so badly to touch him. To run his fingers through Steve’s hair while he sucked cock, to stroke his body everywhere he could reach, wanted to flip them so he could get Steve’s dick in his mouth, wanted to feel full and aching, to choke on it.

But Steve had tied him to the headboard—in his ropes—so he also didn’t want to. Wanted to want to and wanted not to be able. To be denied.

Steve pressed in a little harder, deeper and Tony cried out, seeing stars.

Tony jerked and pulled against the ropes; he tossed his head back.

Steve drew back to look at him, brow furrowed with concern. Then he smiled.

Another finger pressed up against the first and Steve added more slick. The lube was cool, but not unpleasantly so when Tony felt so hot, flushed, and aching.

Tony licked his lips.

“Please? Please?”

Steve was smiling.

“Tony?” he said softly. “Say my name.”

“Steve,” Tony breathed out and pushed himself back onto Steve’s fingers, until he caught Tony’s hips in a firm grasp and held him still once more.

“Steve!” Tony cried (part petulance, part supplication).

And then two glorious fingers were fucking in and out of him as Steve bent to suck his cock again.

(Mad. He’s trying to drive me mad with pleasure.)

Steve chuckled around his dick and Tony realized he’d said that part out loud.

It was torturously, maddeningly slow.

A gentle soft slide in and out, and up and down.

. . . in and out . . .

. . . up and down . . .

. . . while Tony gasped and moaned Steve’s name.

Then Steve’s fingers pressed firm against his prostate and Tony cried out.

“Fuck me!” Tony gasped, unable to hold the words in. “Please, please Steve. Fuck me. Oh, God, fuck me!”

Steve went still and Tony held his breath.

“What did you say you wanted earlier?” Steve asked in a low voice.

Tony blinked, confused—struggling to gather his thoughts.
“Earlier,” Steve reminded him, “you said that you wanted ‘whatever I want,’ didn’t you?”

Tony swallowed and nodded, then answered properly: “Yes, Steve.”

“That’s right,” Steve said approvingly. He gave Tony an intense look, eyes dark and hooded as he added, voice going rough, “And I want to make you wait.”

Tony shivered.

(Yes, please, please . . .)

Steve returned to his ministrations:

He moved his mouth up and down . . .

His fingers in and out . . .

Tony lost himself in the sensations.

up and down . . .

in and out . . .

Then Steve started moving faster, with purpose, winding Tony higher and higher until he was whimpering with every motion.

Close. Tony was getting close.

(“I want to make you wait.”)

Tony gasped.

(Shit.)

Tony licked his lips and tried to form the words, to warn Steve who was moving faster and faster —

(Don’t come without permission . . . wants you to wait.)

Embarrassment flooded through him and Tony wished he had a cock ring. He didn’t want to admit—

“Steve?” Tony whispered.

“Mmm?”

“S—Steve?” he repeated.

Steve looked up abruptly.

“Color?”

“I—green, but I . . .” Tony fumbled for the right words and tried to string them together. “If you don’t stop soon, I won’t be able to— I’ll . . .” His cheeks went dark. “I won’t be able to wait.”

Steve smiled and looked up at Tony with such tenderness that—

His chest felt tight.

“You’re perfect,” Steve said, pressing in with his fingers again. “And I want you to come for me. Come whenever you’re ready, darling.”

Tony felt a wash of unexpected relief and his eyes prickled. (Fuck.) Steve kissed his thighs and pressed against his prostate, sliding in and out, firm and slick and good . . .

When Steve’s mouth closed around him, he came.

Hot sharp sweet, the waves of pleasure went on until it turned to almost pain, as Steve kept lapping at his over-sensitive, softening cock. Tony twisted his hips away and Steve allowed it.

“So beautiful,” Steve murmured, easing his fingers free oh-so-gently from the hot clutch of Tony’s body. “So gorgeous.”

Steve kissed his way up Tony’s body, caressing his thighs, hips, sides, chest with lips and hands as Tony laid spent and shuddering beneath him. Steve pulled a blanket over them both, holding Tony in his arms and nuzzling his neck.

“You’re perfect,” Steve whispered and kissed Tony tenderly and gently. “So pretty when you come. So beautiful, sweetheart.”

Tony leaned up for a kiss and Steve obliged him, a soft slide of tongue just the way Tony liked it
when he was loose and lax. On and on, warm and soft, until he slumped back into his pillow.

“You’re so good for me like this.” Steve rumbled into Tony’s neck. Then he leaned back to fix his earnest gaze on Tony’s face. “Thank you. Thank you for giving yourself to me. For letting me have you like this.”

Tony swallowed and his cheeks heated again.

It wasn’t just the usual Affection, Affirmation, and Reassurance (AAR)—Steve was off that script, and he said it all with an intensity that made Tony feel overwhelmed.

(Almost ashamed.)

Steve stroked his cheek.

(Didn’t even go under but Steve’s still—no. Stop it.)

Tony pressed his face into Steve’s hand and a long-lingering tear escaped his eye to slide down his cheek. Steve kissed him.

“I’ve got you, Tony,” he promised. “I’ll take such good care of you.”

Another tear threatened to work its way loose and Tony demanded a kiss, not wanting to let it, not wanting more praise. Steve complied, kissing sensuously. Tony opened under him, eager for more and wanting Steve to take it.

Steve’s body was hard and heavy against him, and as they kissed he moved his hips—lazily at first, then faster. Tony urged him on with nips and kisses, too spent to join him a second time so soon, but wanting Steve’s pleasure for himself, wanting the hot spill of Steve’s body smeared against his, filthy and good.

Tony’s mind leapt ahead to imagine what it would be like once Steve was ready to fuck him—that gorgeous cock, not just against his hip, but deep inside, hammering into him. Feeling spread open, taken, possessed.

Tony moaned and Steve clutched at Tony with strong hands, fingernails biting at the skin.

“God, Tony,” Steve gasped against his throat.

“Steve!”

Tony moved under him, eager to urge Steve on, but his Dom pinned him down, holding him helpless, immobile.

“Yes, Steve, please,” Tony whimpered.

(Use me . . . take me, take your pleasure . . .)

“Tony, I—” His words turned to an incomprehensible gasping, muffled against Tony’s throat, as Steve came slick and hot across Tony’s belly.

Tony pressed kisses to every bit of Steve he could reach—his ear, his cheekbone, his hair—and wrapped his legs around him, as Steve shuddered and panted through the aftershocks, holding Steve close (Well, as close as he could, still tied securely to the headboard.)

“Thank you. Thank you, Steve,” Tony murmured softly, in a soothing litany. “Sweetheart . . . thank you . . .”

Steve shivered and took a rough breath. He laid, curled around Tony, with his face pressed to Tony’s neck for a few lingering minutes. When at last he drew back, Tony thought his eyes looked a little wet.

“Thank you,” Steve whispered. “You were—are—perfect.”

Tony smiled and said jokingly, “Nobody’s perfect.”

Steve grinned. “I got that reference!”

Then his face went serious again. He kissed Tony on the forehead and said, “But you’re perfect for me.” Tony didn’t know what to say to that so he didn’t say anything.

“I’m gonna untie you now, sweetheart,” Steve said, “then get us cleaned up.”

As he carefully unwound the ropes, Steve checked the pink marks and indents on Tony’s wrists where he’d pulled and struggled.

“Were—” Steve began, stroking him. “Were these ok?”

“Wonderful,” Tony said, giving a luxurious stretch. “Everything was wonderful.”

“They didn’t bite or scrape the skin,” Steve said consideringly with a hint of a frown, “but it
looks like the pressure might be enough to bruise.”

“I hope so.”

“Oh!” Steve looked at him with pleased surprise, then murmured a breathless, “yeah” and they were kissing again, long and lingering and tender. Finally freed, Tony wrapped Steve in his arms and savored the opportunity to caress his back, neck, hair.

(Mmm. Steve.)

“Pardon me, Sir. Captain,” JARVIS began. Steve yanked away from Tony, looking embarrassed—as if they’d been walked in on. (Well, in a sense. Hm. Better update JARVIS’s bedroom etiquette for Steve.)

“Yeah, J?” Tony called.

“Agent Barton is most insistent,” JARVIS said. “He asks when movie night will begin and if he is permitted to select the film.”

Steve groaned. “Do we have to go?”

Tony laughed. “Hey, you’re the one who said it was a good idea! I wanted to spend the day in bed.”

“I see the error of my ways,” Steve mumbled.

“Hey, J? Tell Clint, we’ll come at 7.” Tony said. “And he can pick the movie—but on his head be it if Bruce or Natasha object to the choice.”

“I shall convey your message, Sir.”

“Now then,” Tony murmured, drawing Steve close. “Where were we?”

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CAN WE PLEASE TALK ABOUT WHAT A GEM CECELIA PRESCOTT IS???

Okay, I’ve seen a few posts with hella reblogs making fun of some passages (usually out of context) from A Guide to Wedded Bliss for Loving, Modern Husbands.

And ok fine like some of it is kinda hokey and old fashioned sounding. To us. Now. In 2013.

But, like, DUDE. It was 1936.

So, seriously, people—it’s 1936. The Prescott Guide (as it became known) is the ONLY kink book for Dominants CO-AUTHORED BY A SUB.

I’m gonna repeat that : In 1936, the Prescott Guide WAS THE ONLY KINK BOOK FOR DOMINANTS CO-AUTHORED BY A SUB.
I'm gonna repeat that: In 1936, the Prescott Guide was the only kink book for dominants co-authored by a sub.

Until 1966, she was the only sub to be a credited author on a kink book that addressed Dominants.

So, lemme fill you in.

The Prescotts wrote their guide in 1929. “1929, you say? But the copyright is 1936.”

That’s right, my little chicks! That’s because every publisher they went to for seven years said the same goddamn thing: “It’s a great book! It’ll be a best seller! But you have to cut all the parts where the sub gives advice. It’s unseemly.”

And the Prescotts said, “Um, dude? That’s kind of the point? See we’re doing this whole ‘leading by example, showing a respectful relationship with good communication, where the thoughts and ideas of both partners are valued’ thing.”

“Nope!” the publishers said. “Just rewrite it so that all the advice comes from Mr. Prescott, even if it was Mrs. Prescott’s ideas.”

“Yeah, no. No fucking way,” said the Prescotts.

“Or, at least,” greedy Publisher Y said, “if she has to have opinions, just have Mr. Prescott communicate them. And take her name out of the publication credits.”

“Aww, FUCK NO,” CeCe said.

Off they went looking for a new publisher. For seven years.

Having “Mrs. Prescott” on the cover of that book is a big fucking deal.

So, now let’s look at some of the prose, m’kay? How about p. 198 since it seems to get quoted and mocked a bit.

Rather, my soft urging is this: do not forget your submissive’s tender longing to be subject to your will. It is in our nature—our glory!—to serve our chosen Dominants, to feel pleasure in your pleasure, to be liberated in our submission.

See what she did there? “To serve our chosen Dominants”? Emphasis on CHOICE. Because subs have strength and choice. Also her emphasis on the idea of being “liberated.” Sound familiar? Yeah—some of the subs who made signs in the early days of liberationism read this book.

“TO BE LIBERATED IN SUBMISSION

WE MUST BE LIBERATED FROM OPPRESSION.”

Get it? Some of that diction is my gal CeCe.

I could go on and on. And I will—I’m gonna reblog a passage of this book every Friday with commentary.

But for now, I’ll just add that on the personal front, in contrast to her mild mannered husband—who was in training to become a minister when he met CeCe and had second thoughts—she was a total pistol and she challenged tons of stereotypes! She wore trousers and did her make-up in public. She drove cars fast and often and could even fly a plane. She smoked cigarettes and a pipe and had a reputation for beating fancy publishing house swanks at pokers. I mean, look at her!!!!
Thank you for reading! I really hope you liked it and that--after the SO VERY LONG WAIT--it wasn't a let down. (I had an unusually hard time getting back into the story after hiatus and reconnecting everything--Steve especially was giving me trouble. And then I just "couldn't" get the tumblr images to align properly and was too fed up to keep working on it when I've got so much work and am moving across country. Besides, better focus on the next chapter, right? :)

Anyway, I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and that it came together in the end. I've been struggling to find the emotional energy to write, so encouragement much appreciated! And, you know me, if you have a favorite bit I adore hearing that.

Sorry I was gone for so long! And THANK YOU for sticking with me! :)
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

There's a new out-take set during chapter 55 that's relevant to some of the character dynamics in this chapter. If you'd like to read it, it can be found here:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/10834428 :)

As always, infinite thanks to everyone who cheers me on with comments and my incomparable beta, thatwhichyields.

EDITED TO ADD: A reader has politely suggested that some might appreciate the following warning: sregvyvgl / cneragubbq phygher . (Use rot13.com to decode)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(“You’re perfect,” Steve said, pressing in with his fingers again. “And I want you to come for me. Come whenever you’re ready, darling.” )

Tony smiled and his fingers drifted to his wrists.

(“. . . might be enough to bruise.”)

“If hope so.”

Steve murmured a breathless, “yeah” and—)

“Are you ever planning to move?”

“Huh?” Tony looked up abruptly. Bruce was giving him an amused little smile as he gestured to the board.

“I took your pawn nearly five minutes ago.”

“Uh,” Tony swallowed, “right.”

Bruce huffed. “It was your idea to play chess to pass the flight, but if—”

“No, no! I’m ready. See?” Tony hurriedly took Bruce’s knight with his bishop. “Sorry. Was lost in an engineering puzzle.”

“Mm,” Bruce murmured. He sounded incredulous.

Over Bruce’s shoulder, Tony caught Steve’s eye on the other side of the Quinjet as he glanced up from his sketchbook. Were Steve’s ears a little pink? Tony looked back to the board as he felt the telltale tingling on his cheeks. (Damn it.) He checked that his sleeves were down over his wrists—in the lab he was always rolling them up, so sometimes he did it without thinking.

Bruce took his bishop with a pawn and raised one eyebrow.

Tony snorted.

“No, no, really,” Clint called. “Just have fun back there, snacking and playing and hanging out. I’ll just fly us there. No worries.”

“Last time I flew,” Natasha said, “you complained the whole time that you were bored and wanted to fly.”

Tony tried to focus on the game. (Not on remembering hot naked Dominating Steve.)

“There’s another chess board,” Natasha offered, looking up from her book. “I’m sure you could multitask.”

“I hate chess,” Clint said shortly.

Tony took a sip of water. He hoped everything was set up at the Ranch as requested. He moved a Castle and mentally ran through the checklist he’d sent the caretakers one last time.

(He’d remembered food, right? That had totally been on the list. Food.)

“I could read you your twitter feed,” Natasha said.

(It was fine. He’d definitely remembered food. Who’d forget food?)

“Twitter is bullshit,” Clint said. “Anyway, I’m flying.”
Natasha frowned and turned back to her book.

Bruce took another Bishop.

(And even if he did forget food, Gina would remember. So, really, everything would be good.)

Tony took Bruce’s Castle.

“Check.”

(Shit.)

Tony moved his Queen. Bruce shook his head.

“And, mate.” Bruce grimaced, then muttered, “You know, if you didn’t want to play…”

“Sorry,” Tony said, a little embarrassed.

Bruce shrugged.

“It’s actually sort of sweet that you’re bad at chess,” Bruce said with a mischievous look.

“I’m not bad!” Tony protested.

Bruce just looked down at the board and raised his eyebrow again.

“I wasn’t concentrating,” Tony said sullenly.

“It’s okay,” Bruce patted him on the hand. “You can’t be a genius at everything. If I want a challenge, I’ll keep playing Steve.”

“Steve?”

( Didn’t know Steve played chess.)

Bruce pointedly picked up the copy of Nature he’d been reading earlier.

Steve’s pencil scratched across the paper. Tony stood and stretched.

Steve was sitting in the back on the Quinjet’s low bench, his knees splayed as he sketched. (It would be the perfect height.) Tony looked at the spot at Steve’s feet. He wanted the warmth of Steve’s knee under his cheek, Steve’s hand in his hair, the sound of Steve’s approving murmuring.

But they were on the Quinjet—hardly the time or the place.

Tony sauntered over and sat down next to Steve on the bench. Steve pulled his drawing close, out of Tony’s sight.

“It’s not very good,” Steve said. “Or done.”

“Show me anyway?”

Steve nodded and lowered the notebook. It was a sketch of Bruce and Tony playing chess. Bruce was just a series of loosely connected circles and crosses, the board and background a placeholder of dim lines. But Tony was drawn with vibrant detail: there was a hint of a smile at the corner of his lips, but a furrow in his brow. His eyes were bright, lashes long and dark. Even his hand, reaching out to take a pawn, was well defined and delicately rendered. (Were his wrists really that dainty?) Tony noticed with a rush of warmth that Steve had drawn him with his sleeves rolled up just enough to hint at the rope marks he now wore.

“I’m not very good,” Steve said, starting to turn a blank page in front of it.

“No,” Tony said, putting his hand over the drawing. “It’s good.” He added softly, “I like it.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, voice low and deep.

“Definitely.” Tony licked his lips and added very softly, “Maybe you can draw me in another pose sometime soon.”

“Yeah,” Steve breathed. Tony was pretty sure that it wouldn’t take much more for Steve’s breathy yeah of agreement to be hardwired directly to Tony’s dick.

(Fuck it!)

Tony curled up on the bench and rested his head on Steve’s shoulder. Steve let out a pleased, surprised little noise and put his arm around Tony’s waist.

Tony smiled.

It was good. Things were good. The Ranch would be good for them.
“Well, here we are, gang!” Tony called. “All the modern conveniences!”

“You called it a ‘Ranch House’,” Bruce said skeptically, looking around.

“Er, yes?”

‘Ranch Mansion’ doesn’t have the same ring to it,” Clint said with a laugh. “Well, whatever we call it, I love it. Where should we put our stuff?”

“There are 7 bedrooms, so wherever you want except the Master suite—it’s already full of my stuff.”

Clint, Natasha, and Bruce started carrying their things upstairs, but Steve lingered.

“Tony?” he asked, hesitating. “Where do you want me?”

“Where would you like to be?” Tony asked, intending sultry but sounding uncertain.

“I’m fine anywhere.”

Steve looked at him expectantly. (Hopefully?)

“The Master suite is huge,” Tony said, taking a little step closer.

“Oh?” Steve asked, a smile tugging at his lips. Tony nodded. “You inviting me to bunk with you, sweetheart?”

“Got it in one, soldier boy,” Tony teased.

“Then lead the way,” Steve said, hoisting his duffle, then added in a low murmur, “I’d like waking up with you.”

Tony grinned. “How about going to bed with me?”

Steve smiled. “That too.”

“Well then,” Tony said, taking Steve’s hand. “Follow me—Master suite’s down the hall.”

“And that’s pretty much it,” Tony said with an awkward shrug, “Home away from home.”

“Still can’t believe you have two Jacuzzis here,” Clint said, joining them at the kitchen table and leaning back in his chair.

Tony wanted to point out that indoor and outdoor hot tubs were very different and, in any case, he wasn’t the one who had installed them. But he didn’t. Everything was feeling kind of awkward. (The change of location?) Maybe Clint and Natasha were still pissed at each other about movie night yesterday—they’d seemed super weird and tense about movie selection. And pizza toppings. (Whatever.)

“So, what’s the plan, Cap?” Clint asked, tipping forward with a thud.

“It’s too late in the day to start our main training plans,” Steve said consideringly. “And we should probably ease into our—” he considered his words for a moment before settling on “first encounter.” He turned to Bruce and added, “Don’t you think?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Bruce said. “Ease into it. The slower the better.” His voice dropped to a morose undertone: “Maybe never?”

Tony poked him in the ribs, making him jump. Tony grinned. “Don’t be like that, buttercup! I’m looking forward to Big Green!”

Steve leaned forward towards Bruce, resting his hands on the table with a concerned frown.

“I thought we were all in agreement about the Hulk,” Steve said. “But if—”

“No, no,” Bruce said, shaking his head. “We are. Don’t listen to me. It’s . . . habit. We have a plan. I agreed to it.”

“You still have the right to change your mind,” Steve said.

“But you shouldn’t,” Tony cut in, poking Bruce again. (Come on, stay with me, buddy.) “It’s gonna be awesome. And we’ve got the Security Blanket, which is—if I do say so myself, and I do—a work of unparalleled genius. Don’t tell me I did all that for nothing!”

“No, of course not,” Bruce said. “I appreciate it, Tony, of course I do, and—”

“Great!” Tony interrupted. “So when do we start?”
“Well, if we’re in agreement,” Steve said, eyes flicking over to Bruce as he left a lingering pause. (Damn it, Steve! If you keep offering Bruce opportunities to back out, soon he’ll think you want him to.) Tony nearly sighed with relief when Steve finished, “then, how about now?”

“Good,” Natasha said, breaking her silence. “What did you have in mind?”

“We haven’t tested our winter gear yet,” Steve said. “So how about some training outside to put it through its paces?”

“I made that gear,” Tony said indignantly. “It doesn’t need testing!”

“Apologies,” Steve said with a smile. “How about we practice with our new gear and put each other through our paces.”

“That’s better,” Tony huffed.

“All right, Avengers! Meet outside in ten!”

Training in the snowy Wyoming fields of Tony’s ranch rapidly became a high powered, high tech snowball fight. One that was started (much to his surprise) by Natasha and soon picked up (to his even greater surprise), not by Clint, but by Bruce. Tony hesitated for a minute—(Steve hates the cold)—but when Bruce lobbed a snowball at Iron Man with a grin he concluded resistance was futile. (Really, anything to put Bruce more at ease.) Apparently Steve decided the same thing and Clint soon followed suit.

“Fall back!” Steve called, ducking behind his hastily erected snow fortification.

“Twenty-two!” Clint shouted as a snowball slammed into the back of Natasha’s head. “Shouldn’t let your guard down.”

“I thought we were allies,” Steve objected when Natasha turned her aim on him.

It was fun. Ridiculously fun. A timeless childhood pastime. (For children with friends.)

“Still think it’s cheating for Tony to use the suit,” Bruce grumbled.

“Ha! Missed me!” Clint gloated.

“Okay, I’ll even the playing field,” Tony said. (After all, he had his thermal under-suit on.) “JARVIS? Power the suit for me, would you? I want him building my arsenal.”

Tony grinned and stepped out into the cold.

“Oh, come on!” Bruce protested. “The suit’s making your snowballs for you? Cheating!”

“All’s fair in love and war!” Tony retorted, launching one of the perfectly packed spheres at Bruce.

“That’s a terrible saying,” Steve grumbled.

Tony couldn’t resist any longer—he dashed behind the fortification and launched himself at Steve, half-hug & half-attack, and sent them toppling into a snow bank.

“Gotta,” Tony said. Steve’s cheeks were pink with cold and there were snowflakes on his eyelashes.

“Do you now?” Steve asked and, next thing he knew, Steve had flipped him over and pinned him in the snow with a grin.

“I surrender,” Tony said dramatically, tossing his head back. “Do with me as you will, O mighty conqueror!”

Steve’s ears went pink and he gazed down intensely and Tony started to hope that he’d—

“BLECH!” (Cold wet terrible damn it!)

“Shouldn’t let your guard down,” Bruce said smugly above them. He and Natasha had used an emergency blanket to carry over Tony’s entire arsenal and dump it on them.

“Dude, you better have hot cocoa,” Clint said with a theatrical shiver. “You do right? And smores?”

“Of course I do!” Tony huffed. (Probably. Sounds like something Gina would remember.)

“I could go for cocoa,” Bruce said.
“Okay then, I’m calling it!” Clint said. “Everybody back to the Ranch Mansion. I won, so I get hot chocolate first.”

“Won?” Bruce protested. “By what metric?”

As the others turned back to the house, Steve seemed hesitant to let Tony up.

“How you doin’, babe?” Tony asked softly, looking up at him with a smile.

“Good,” Steve said, smiling back, expression almost dreamy. He cleared his throat and got up, pulling Tony to his feet too.

“Good,” Steve repeated as they started following the others. “Would you believe that was my first snowball fight?”

“Yeah?” Tony said.

“Well, I couldn’t handle the cold very well as a kid. I used to watch the other kids from the window and wish . . .” He trailed off for a moment. “Then after, well—” Steve grimaced and shook his head. “It wasn’t exactly the time.”

Tony’s heart twisted a little. It was so easy to forget—Steve: sick, struggling, The War.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. He took Steve’s hand. “It was my first too.”

“Really?” Steve sounded surprised.

“Well, we didn’t need to go outside. We had a snowball fight in the living room, and―” Tony started.

“Guess we’ve got quite a few firsts left to explore together,” Steve finished. His ears were pink; Tony was pretty sure it wasn’t the cold.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

“And now we go to Senior Analyst Leila Kapoor for another perspective on Senator Brant’s surprising and controversial remarks on the Space Program. Dr. Kapoor, thank you for joining us.”

“A pleasure to be here.”

“Senator Brant is under fire for his recent promise to bring NASA under direct Pentagon control. Many are suggesting this would essentially militarize what has been largely perceived as a scientific and exploratory body. Your response?”

“Brant’s remarks are troubling on several levels, though it’s worth remembering that the Space Race was originally tied up in an essentially militaristic Cold War rivalry. But NASA is already working hard to bring about the types of scientific understanding and inventions that are—indirectly—of tremendous benefit to national security. For Senator Brant—who has no training in even the most basic sciences—to be promising his constituents that we’ll be guarded by “nukes in space” is absurd. Although the seemingly interplanetary or interdimensional arachnoid attack on New York has rightly heightened our concern for extra-global security, we have every reason to proceed with caution.

And we should all remember that, despite the tragedies of that day, the death count on October First was significantly below similar intra-human attacks, like 9/11. The Avengers—with support from SHIELD and the military—were successful in defending New York and Earth. They have been very generous in sharing their defensive technology internationally, helping to bolster global protection.

Politicians like Senator Brant are now spinning the arachnoid attacks as an unmitigated catastrophe, when in fact The Avengers gave us a win.”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

“But don’t you think we should have dinner before making smores?” Bruce protested. Clint just snorted and kept rummaging through the pantries—the many many pantries—for the marshmallows.

“I’m happy to throw together some dinner,” Steve volunteered.

“And I’ll build the fire for smores!” Tony called.

“Do you need me to chop or carry any—” Steve began, but with the flick of a button Tony set the giant gas fireplace roaring to life. Steve frowned slightly.

“Huh.” Steve said. “Feels kind of like cheating.”

Tony grinned. “Admit it! You just wanted to show off those muscles chopping wood.”
“Shucks,” Steve said, snapping his fingers. “Saw right through me.”

Tony sauntered closer and purred, sotto voce, “Don’t worry, babe. I can think of plenty of other ways for you to impress me.”

Steve’s ears went a little pink and he licked his lips.

Bruce cleared his throat, then said loudly, “Looks like there’s lots of pasta! That would be quick and easy.”

“Film after?” Natasha asked.

“I’m down,” Clint called, then added with a glare at her, “But you’re not picking. You always pick the movies.”

(Yeah, apparently he was still on about that.)

In the end Steve made Carbonara and they agreed to watch *Fellowship of the Ring*. (Bruce suggested it, saying he thought Steve would especially like the hobbits. Tony suspected that was a reference to Steve’s former stature, but he wasn’t sure if he should be amused or indignant on Steve’s behalf.)

The rug under the couch was rich and plush—the sort of fake fur extravaganza that had been all the rage back in nineteen-ninety-something, back when a decorator had redone the property in preparation for some wild party Tony’d thrown for a bunch of corporate bigwigs & fuckable friends. (Obie’d suggested that—nope.) It was the kind of rug that screamed ‘for a sexy, naked, kneeling sub!’, but in the end Tony’d never used it.

As Steve settled, still grumbling about eating a ‘proper meal’ on the couch, Tony stared at the luxurious rug and the enticing spot at Steve’s feet.

He swallowed.

But, well, there was Carbonara and it would be hard to eat kneeling. (The team was there.) Tony settled next to Steve on the couch and resolved to indulge in a little footsie later.

In the end, two servings of rich pasta and two glasses of wine were his undoing. Tony was sleeping, head on Steve’s shoulder, before the Mines of Moria.

Tony awoke in a strange bed. He stayed frozen, feigning sleep, for a few tense moments before realizing he was at the ranch and everything was fine. Steve must have carried him to bed. (Mmm. Speaking of Steve--) Tony reached across the bed. He sighed when he found it empty. (This seriously reduced the chances of morning nookie.)

Resigned to his fate, Tony rolled out of bed with a luxurious stretch. (Perhaps he could still lure Steve back to bed?) Tony pulled on lounge pants and a sweatshirt and padded down the hall.

Steve was plowing through a giant omelet at the counter. At Tony’s approach, he looked up with a sheepish smile and mumbled around a mouthful, “Sorry--woke up hungry.”

Tony shrugged and kissed his stuffed cheek.

“Just want my coffee,” Tony said with a yawn. He poured himself a big mug and settled at the counter next to Steve. After a long contented sip, he added more quietly, “At least for now. Apparently you stripped me last night and I wasn’t even awake to enjoy it!”

“Sorry?” Steve said, looking a trifle concerned.

“I’m glad you did—but I’d very much like a repeat.” Tony gave a sly grin and said in a sultry tone, “How bout you finish that omelet, soldier, then carry me back to bed and strip me again?”

“There better still be coffee,” Clint grumbled, stumbling into the kitchen.

(Damn it.)

“Oh, yeah,” Steve answered.

“Morning,” Bruce said, entering the kitchen with Natasha right behind him.

As everyone began drinking coffee and starting breakfast, Tony bade a fond farewell to enticing Steve back to bed. Tony accepted a bagel with cream cheese and tried not to pout as conversation turned to their training program for the day.

“Should it trouble me that you’re siding with the robots?” Clint asked, firing another arrow.
“Somebody has to,” Tony answered, as he rebooted another training dummy.

“We’d be done pretty fast otherwise,” Natasha pointed out.

“Hey!” Tony said indignantly. *(You try designing training robots that pose more of a challenge.)*

Clint asked, “Why not just play PVP?”

Steve smashed into one of the robots with his shield and barked, “Chatter!” then added a moment later, “What’s PVP?”

“Player vs. player—video game reference,” Bruce answered and shot a robot with a stun gun.

(Bruce was getting kinda into it now! Tony knew it was the right call to model the training robots on storm troopers. Who doesn’t want to join the rebel alliance?)

Clint shot down another robot and grumbled, “We should just spar with each other for a real challenge.”

At that moment, another robot fired a repulsor stun and hit Hawkeye full in the chest, sending him flying.

“You were saying?” Tony asked sweetly.

“We agreed,” Steve said, clearly tired of repeating the point, “that Bruce—and then the Hulk—should see us cooperating more first.”

“Looking forward to Big Green!” Tony called again. Bruce didn’t answer. (Typical.)

“On your six, Widow!”

“Got ’em, Cap!”

“If this were a real battle,” Clint said, rolling and dodging two robots, “you’d just give the robots a virus *Independence Day* style and we’d all be having dinner by now, right Tony?”

“That’s not how viruses work!” Bruce and Tony answered in unison.

“Chatter!” Steve yelled, then sighed. “Should we just call it a day?”

A text message popped up on Iron Man’s view screen.

(Shit.)

Pepper only asked if he was busy before calling when she was upset.

Like, really upset.

“Hey, guys?” Tony said, flipping up the faceplate, “I’ve gotta take this call. Very important. Stark Industries! I’ll meet you back at the house. JARVIS can reboot the training robots if you’re not done yet.”

Tony headed for the workshop. (A pale imitation of his other workshops, but good enough for tinkering.)

“Get Pep on the line, J.”

Tony stepped out of the suit and grabbed a sweatshirt.

“Of course, sir.”

“You weren’t busy, were you?” Pepper said as soon as the phone connected.

“Nope!” Tony answered, popping the ‘p’. “Not busy in the least, O light of my life! O Pepper of my soul! Oh Mistress of the Universe! So, uh, what’s new?”

There was a long pause; Tony resisted the temptation to ramble.

“I won an award from the Parental Advocacy Association,” Pep said at last in a dull, flat voice. “It’s for the work I’ve done revising our parental leave at Stark Industries. To ‘create a family-friendly work environment that fosters life-work balance and provides outstanding medical care.’”

Tony frowned. Pep should be over the moon! She cared so passionately about all that stuff.
Pepper took a deep breath and continued: “When Samia told me, she said I was basically the godmother to dozens of babies by now, or should be since these reforms have helped so many people start their families.” Pepper was talking faster and faster, the way she did when she was upset. “And then Aunt Maggie called and then Jeremy texted me and I—”

(Oh, shit shit shit.)

From the sound of her voice, Tony could picture her vividly: the tip of her nose turning pink, unshed tears in her eyes, and trembling lower lip.

“Pep, Pepper, darling,” he said, voice gentle. “It’s ok. It’s gonna happen for you.”

“How will I ever be a mother, when I can’t even manage a proper vacation?” There was a hint of a tremor in her voice. ‘Everybody jokes and calls Stark Industries my ‘baby’ and Jeremy used to do it all the time, even after I told him about Aunt Maggie’s, ‘only one she’ll ever have’ cracks and how much I hate it.”

“Jesus, Pep! What an asshole!”

A pause and a little sniffle.

“I know, right?” And, okay, maybe now she was smiling just a little. “Good thing I dumped him.”

Pepper sighed heavily and added, “I used to think I could manage it, if I had the right co-parent, but that feels even more hopeless.”

“Pepper, honey, don’t,” Tony pleaded. “You’ve got this. You wanted to run a Fortune 500 Company? You did it. You wanna be a mom? You can do that too. With or without a partner.”

There was the sound of another sniffle at the other end of the phone and Tony felt his eyes pricking in sympathy. His chest ached.

Tony felt helpless and fumbly. He started pacing, faster and faster. “Pepper, really. It’ll be okay. And so what if you aren’t partnered up? There are tons of awesome single parents out there! And, you know what? Lots of them work at Stark Industries. And if you go solo you don’t have to worry about some shit guy interfering all the time!”

There was a more pronounced sniff.

That did it.

“I’m gonna tell the team there’s an emergency and head out in the suit,” Tony said. “I’ll be there in two hours. Tops!”

“Tony, no!” Pepper protested. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Sorry, what?” Tony called. “Can’t hear you over the sounds of flying to Malibu.”

“Tony, no. I mean it,” Pepper said firmly. “You have training. I know this time at the ranch is important for your team.”

Tony paused. “Yeah,” he admitted heavily.

Then his face lit up and he exclaimed, “So come join us!”

“What? No. I can’t possibly.”

“Of course you can!” Tony cried, starting to get excited. “And it’s good practice. It’s the weekend. Just come out here and take the weekend off. You can hang out with the team! It will be awesome! We’ve got tons of booze and ice cream.”

“I’ve got the meeting with Langdon Corp and Boeing on Tuesday.”

“Oh, please,” Tony said, “you can wheel and deal them with your hands tied behind your back. Besides, I bet that you’ve had your pitch and negotiations ready for days and, even if not, Samia’s a boss and can help finish up the prep. And you can practice delegating.”

“I’d be in the way,” Pepper objected weakly.

“Nope! I’ve got an empty bedroom just for you,” Tony promised. “Come on! Nice fresh air at the ranch would do you good—get you away from L.A.”

“It would be good to see you . . .” Pepper mused with a hint of longing.

“I’ll pick you up in the quinjet—super fast and environmentally friendly!”

“Just . . .” Pep was probably biting her lip. (Or, if she were extra anxious, her hair.) “You won’t tell your team, right? I know it’s silly, but it makes me feel like such a stereotype and a bad Domina to—”
“What? No!” Tony cut her off. “That’s such shit.”

Tony waved his hands in frustration. “You are the best Domina and liberationist I know, so don’t even,” Tony said, a little more harshly than he’d meant to. He added more softly, “But, no, I won’t tell them. Not because there’s anything wrong with it, but because it’s private, you know?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Tony.” He could hear the clatter of drawers opening. “I’ll pack my bag and come out in the corporate helicopter. And, Tony? Thank you. Really. For being so supportive; I know you don’t want kids.”

“Well, yeah. But you do.” Tony shook his head. “Besides, I have a totally super selfish interest in your mom-hood! If you’re not a mom, how the hell am I gonna be a cool uncle? Seriously, who else would be crazy enough to trust me with a little kid? And I am gonna be an awesome uncle.”

“Yeah. Yeah you are.” He could tell from her voice that she was smiling. “Thanks, Tony. I’ll see you soon.”

“You bet! Mwah!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! I’m so excited to be back to writing. Another chapter in less than a month? (Ok, that’s still slow, but good for me! :)

Really hope you liked it! Musings and curiosity welcome as always! Favorite bit? Fav line? Lemme know! :)

THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH!

*goes off to work on chapter 58*

EDITED TO ADD: June 21--Well, so much for speedy updates! Turns out moving across the country for a new job is lots of work and having visitors makes it hard to write. All the usual--story not abandoned, your kind words VASTLY APPRECIATED, etc--and I hope to have more soon(ish). More blather about my life (and my cat!!!) available here: http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/post/162160625556/tl-update-pp-delays-big-suprise. Thanks so much for your love and your patience!
“Knock, knock?” Pepper called from the outer workshop door.

“Pep!”

Tony tossed his screwdriver aside with a clatter and hopped up to greet her properly. He tucked himself against her, folding under her arms with his face against her collarbone. (So fucking tall.) He wrapped his arms around her slender waist and squeezed tight.

“Here,” Tony said after a few moments. He gestured to the bags she’d left in the doorway. “Why don’t I carry those over to the house and get you settled in with—”

“Or,” Pep said hesitantly, “we could just sit here for a bit? I know you said that the team didn’t mind my sudden visit, but maybe—”

“Yes, of course!” Tony said. “There’s no rush. Why don’t I make you a nice cup of tea?”

Pepper sighed against his hair. “That would be perfect.”

“Great! Take a load off. The love seat’s ugly but comfy.”

Pepper smiled.

“You do know that you’re a billionaire, right?” she teased curling up on the ugly plaid thing. “You know you could buy fancy furniture for the workshop, ruin it, and replace it without difficulty, right?”

“It’s part of the workshop aesthetic.” Tony shrugged. “Don’t mess with my mojo, Potts.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Stark.”

They went quiet as Tony filled the kettle and set it on the hot plate to rapid boil. He grabbed one of his MIT mugs and rummaged in the back of the mini pantry for Pep’s favorite green tea with jasmine. (It had to be there somewhere—he kept some in all the kitchenettes of all his properties in case she visited.)

“Thank you for the invitation, Tony,” Pepper said softly from the loveseat. “It’s nice to see you.”

“Of course,” Tony said pouring boiling water. “I’m glad you came.”

After letting the tea steep for a bit—though probably not as long as he should have—he plucked out the tea bag and padded over to where Pep had curled up.

“Your tea, Ms. Potts,” he said, presenting the mug.

Pepper smelled it and let out an approving murmur.

“My favorite,” she said, looking up at him with a pleased smile. Tony tossed one of the throw pillows on the floor and folded to his knees at her side.

“Glad you’re here, Pep,” Tony said, resting his head on her knee. “You’re the best. It’ll all work out for you. You’ll see.”

Pepper sighed. “Thanks, Tony. You’re so sweet to me.”

Tony shrugged.

“Nah,” he murmured. “I’m always coming to you for help—nice to have the chance to lend you a little support. Even if it’s just tea.”

“Pft,” Pep let out a dismissive sound. She stroked a hand through his hair. “You do plenty. So, tell me—how’s training going so far?”

“Pretty good,” Tony said with a shrug. “We’re just getting started. I want Bruce to let go; it’ll be good for him and for the team. Hulk’s a force to be reckoned with—will be a real asset. But we have to get past Bruce’s walls first.”

“Well, you’re very good at that,” Pepper said with a smile.

They were quiet for a while as Pepper sipped her tea and absently pet Tony’s hair.

“And how’s Steve?” Pepper asked at last. “Is he treating you right?”
Tony let out a contented sigh and looked up at her with a dopey smile.

“That good, huh?” Pep asked with a smile when she saw that look. “I’m glad.”

Tony pressed his cheek back to her knee, still smiling and maybe starting to blush.

“He’s—” Tony fumbled around for words. “He’s so... good. Good to me. And, just, good.”

“You deserve it,” Pepper said.


He twisted to look up at her and hesitated a second before adding: “You know... I’ll do anything in my power to help you be a mom. Anything at all. Just say the word.”

Pepper ran her fingers through his hair affectionately.

“I know. Thank you, Tony,” she said. “I appreciate it. Maybe someday, but...”

“I know. You want a partner,” Tony said. “But if you’re going it alone...”

“Thank you. Truly,” Pepper said. “I’m honored you’d even consider it.”

Tony shrugged and settled against her knee once more.

“Coolest uncle ever,” he mumbled. Pepper laughed.

They lapsed into a peaceful silence as Pepper drank her tea and absently rubbed Tony’s shoulders.

There was a time when Tony would have pressed her, but he was getting better. Better at recognizing not everything needs an engineer to question and test and solve it. Some things can’t be fixed; and not everything is broken that isn’t perfect yet.

Tony’s lips twisted up in a wry smile.

(Wisdom score has definitely gone up.)

He took a long deep breath.

(Older and wiser, not quite old and not quite wise.)

Tony smiled.

“Hey, Tony? Do you know if-- Oh!” Steve was standing in the doorway that connected to the house, frozen with surprise.

Tony’s stomach dropped.

(Fuck.)

For a while the workshop was uncomfortably silent. Pepper’s hand rested frozen on Tony’s shoulder, though he’d jolted his head up off her knee in surprise. (Looking guilty much?)

“Uh,” Steve looked away. “Sorry. Never mind. Dinner’ll probably be ready in a hour if you want. Uh--”

Steve left abruptly.

Tony scrambled gracelessly to his feet.

“Tony, wait,” Pepper said, grabbing his hand.

He paused for a moment. She looked upset--maybe a little angry?

“You shouldn’t have to change,” she said, voice tinged with helpless frustration. “We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

“I know that,” Tony snapped. “But it-- We--” He shook his head. “I have to go.”

Pepper gave a tight nod and Tony chased after Steve.

(Fuck, fuck, fuck.)

The man moved fast when he wanted to, damn it.

Natasha was in the living room reading a book when Tony rushed in. She looked up and raised an eyebrow.

(Extra fuck.)
“Steve?” Tony asked.

She gestured down the hall.

Of course. The master bedroom. Their room.

Steve was standing still, with his back to the entrance.

Tony closed the door behind him.

“Steve?”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, turning with a smile. It looked strained.

“Are you ok?”

“Of course!”

Tony licked his lips. His stupid heart was pounding. He took a hesitant step forward.

“You left pretty abruptly.”

“Sorry.”

Steve looked a little sheepish.

“You know there’s--” Tony sidled closer and began again. “You know there’s nothing going on between me and Pepper, right?”

“Of course I know that.”

“Ok. Just, I know that it looked bad--” Tony said. “That most subs don’t--”. He waved a hand vaguely.

(Don’t kneel platonically with other Doms or Switches. Alone. When their Dominant isn’t around. And doesn’t know about it...)

“There’s nothing going on,” Tony repeated.

“I know that, Tony.”

“But--”

(You left upset.)

“Were you jealous?” Tony asked softly.

Steve’s face went pinched.

“Yes.”

(Oh!)

Tony blinked.

He’d known of course—the look on Steve’s face made it obvious—but he hadn’t expected such a blunt answer. It left him unbalanced.

(But hey, honesty’s good, right?!) Let’s not talk about this.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, looking sad.

“Sorry?” Tony repeated.

Steve nodded.


“And it shouldn’t even have been a surprise,” Steve added, sounding frustrated. “I’ve already seen you kneel for Pepper at the Tower. I know you two are--” he paused, searching for words, “--like that.”

“No, it’s not--” Tony frowned. “I’m not kneeling for Pepper; just with her. It’s different.”

“Ok.”

Steve agreed readily, but it was clear he didn’t understand.

“It’s totally different,” Tony insisted. “It’s not an offering to her, just a way of being affectionate. It’s not like kneeling in a scene or--”
He almost said “for a Dominant,” but that wasn’t quite right.

Of course it was different, but kneeling for most of the Doms he’d fucked had meant basically nothing, far less than the affection of kneeling with Pepper. But Steve--

“Oh,” Steve said. “It’s ok, Tony.”

But it clearly wasn’t ok. And the wrongness of it left Tony’s stomach twisting and his cheeks heating with (stupid, irrational) shame. His throat felt tight.

Tony shook his head and licked his lips. He tried to start over.

“When I kneel for you, it’s a gift,” Tony said softly. “Because-- because you’re my Dominant.”

Tony took a hesitant forward and looked up at Steve hopefully, willing him to understand what Tony meant without hearing it put into words.

Steve opened his arms and Tony pressed himself eagerly to Steve’s chest. He let out a long sigh when Steve wrapped him tightly in his arms and kissed his hair.

Tony felt the overwhelming, aching urge to apologize, to beg for forgiveness, but he couldn’t apologize for being himself with Pepper.

“I’m not telling you to change.” Steve whispered.

Tony nodded; he swallowed.

“I’m sorry I upset you,” Tony said. (That was true at least.)

Steve ran gentle hands up and down Tony’s back, carded his fingers through Tony’s hair.

“I’m sorry I got jealous.”

Tony squeezed Steve’s waist tight and they stood, holding each other.

Little by little, Tony’s heartbeat slowed to normal again.

“Tony?”

“Mmmm?”

Steve drew back to stroke Tony’s cheekbones with his thumbs and hold his face in his hands.

“I’m honored to be your Dominant,” Steve said solemnly.

Then he leaned down to kiss Tony softly--first on the forehead, then his right cheek then his left.

“Are we ok?” Steve asked, brow furrowed.

“Yeah.” Tony smiled. “We’re great.”

He leaned up for a kiss and asked throatily, “How long until dinner, did you say?“

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Senator Marlborough (R-MT): Now, I want to be clear about this. I have nothing but the greatest admiration for the Avengers. Like most little boys in this great nation, I’ve looked up to Steve Rogers for as long as I can remember. And if he thinks that Tony Stark has what it takes to be on his team, I’m willing to trust his judgment.

CNN Correspondent Irene Dalhousie: Senator Marlborough, does that mean you’re retracting your previous critical remarks on--

Senator Marlborough (R-MT): Not at all. [smiling] If you’d let me finish. Geeze! You TV types always cutting in! Now, like I was saying, I’m joining General MacIntyre’s calls for Stark to surrender the Iron Man armor, not out of disrespect to his or Captain Rogers’ judgment, their heroism, or their loyalty. I hold Stark in such regard, I think his invention is essential to the security of our nation. So why does he have the only suit?

CNN Correspondent Irene Dalhousie: I’d like to remind the Senator, that Stark provided the War Machine armor which--

Senator Marlborough (R-MT): Yes, yes, there’s Rhodes. But he’s usually abroad, or in D.C. or in L.A. And the Avengers are in the Big Apple. So that’s all well and fine for all these fancy, liberal coastal elites. But what about Nebraska? Idaho? My own great state of Montana? What kind of response time could we expect? Do they really think that the lives of city folk in Manhattan are worth more than a rancher in Wyoming. I don’t think they do. THAT is why I’m joining Senator Brant and General MacIntyre in calling on Stark to do his patriotic duty and protect this
When Steve and Tony emerged from the master bedroom (only slightly rumpled), Pepper had joined the others in the living room and somebody had opened a bottle of red wine.

Pepper frowned at Steve as he came in, but Tony caught her eye and shook his head. Her expression lightened.

“Hi, Pepper,” Steve said with a smile that looked perfectly genuine. “Glad you could join us. Did you have a nice trip over?”

“Yes, thank you,” Pepper said, a little primly.

She got up to pour a second glass of wine and Tony hurried over for a hug.

“Everything ok?” she whispered.

Tony nodded. “Yeah,” he whispered softly. “We’re good.”

Natasha was giving them a considering look, but said nothing.

“So, hey, it time to eat yet?” Clint asked. “Lasagna smells damn good.”

“Always thinking of your stomach,” Natasha said with an eye roll.

“With his stomach,” Bruce corrected with clear amusement.

Tony perked up.

“Lasagna?” Tony asked, turning to Steve. “Your creation?”

He nodded and Tony grinned.

“Is this a Cucina Paradiso recipe?”

“Yeah.”

Tony pumped his fist.

“Oh, Pep! You picked the right time to visit!” Tony exclaimed, nudging her affectionately. “Steve makes the best Italian food an Irish boy can make!”

“High praise coming from you!” Pepper said with a little smile.

“He was the sous chef at this amazing joint back in the day.”

“Tony,” Steve said, with mild rebuke, “‘I was the dishwasher. Ana just shared a few recipes.’”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s amazing,” Clint said. “So, like, can we eat it yet?”

“Should be ready in twenty minutes,” Steve said, checking the timer. “So let’s start setting the table. And, yes! We’re eating at the table. We have a guest and should eat like civilized humans.”

“Huh?”

Tony laughed.

“We bullied Steve into serving us his Carbonara on the couch last night,” he explained.

“Carbonara on the couch!?” Pepper said with obvious disapproval.

“See?” Steve said, gesturing emphatically to Clint.

Pepper and Steve exchanged approving looks and Tony felt warm.

(Yeah. Things are great.)

Dinner was delicious and the conversation light and pleasant.

Tony had two lovely glasses of the pinot and was feeling good. Relaxed. Content. (Mostly.)

“So shall we watch Two Towers?” Clint asked, carrying his empty plate to the sink.

“We watch an awful lot of movies,” Bruce observed mildly as he started to help Steve clear up.

Clint shrugged.
“We could play poker,” Natasha suggested.

“I’d be game,” Pepper said.

“Nope!” Tony cried. “Not playing poker with a spy.”

“Maybe gin?” Steve suggested.

“I didn’t think you liked hard liquor,” Tony said.

“It’s a game, Tony,” Steve replied.

“A game mostly played by grandmas,” Clint added.

Steve shot Clint a look of mock hurt. “You wound me,” he said, hand on his chest.

“Come on, man,” Clint said to Bruce. “This is hardly fair. You can’t leave poor Steve hanging with Pippin & Merry in the hands of the Uruk-hai!”

“Two Towers!” Tony cried. “I demand hobbits! And popcorn!”

“Cards tomorrow,” Natasha said.

“No, Return of the King tomorrow.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine. You drive a hard bargain, Stark,” Natasha said. “Cards the next night.”

“Deal.” Tony held out his hand to shake, then added, “Not poker.”

“It’ll be poker,” Natasha said with great conviction. Tony nodded, acknowledging defeat, and went to help Steve with the dishes now piled in the sink.

“Lend you a hand there, soldier?” Tony said.

“I was a dishwasher before I was a soldier, remember?” Steve said with a smile, rubbing cheese from one of the plates.

Tony searched for a witticism in reply, but he couldn’t find one so he just said, “I don’t mind helping.”

“Almost done,” Steve said with a shrug.

“Tony?” Bruce called.

“Do we have another bottle of red?”

“No I have more wine?” Tony cried, “Silly question! What were you thinking?”

When Tony got back from selecting a few favorites from the wine cellar, the dishes were done and everyone had settled on the spacious couches around the TV. There was an open spot on the three-seater between Steve and Pepper, clearly left just for Tony.

His heart sped a little and there was a hint of a tingle in his cheeks as he opened the wine and set it on the coffee table to breathe.

Tony swallowed thickly and caught Steve’s eye. He smiled. Tony smiled back, then folded elegantly to his knees at Steve’s side.

“Ok, roll the film, J!” Tony called.


“Mmmm-hmmm,” Tony answered. “Just hand me one of those cushions, will ya?”

“Yes, of course!” Steve hastened to arrange one of the luxurious pillows on the floor for Tony as the camera skimmed the majestic mountains of the Mines of Moria.

Tony curled against Steve’s legs and glanced surreptitiously around the room. His teammates were all focused on Gandalf’s battle with the Balrog, but as he looked up Bruce glanced over and smiled warmly at him. Only Pepper had a slight furrow at her brow--she raised an eyebrow when he caught her eye. Tony grinned and gave her a little thumbs up; she smiled and turned her attention to the screen.

Tony let out a long sigh.

It wasn’t a big deal. He could kneel if he wanted to. (For Steve. In front of everybody.)

After a few moments he reached up for Steve’s hand, pulled it around to kiss his palm and then moved it to his head. (Hint hint.) Steve chuckled and began to stroke his hair.

It was officially a very good night.
Steve loved *The Lord of the Rings*. (Of course. The man has taste.) And, as with *Star Trek*, Tony found it touching how transparently moved he was by the film. He would gasp, squeeze Tony’s hand, and even wipe his eyes a few times. Tony felt his own prickle in sympathy; he hoped the Battle of Helm’s Deep didn’t bring back painful memories of The War.

Once that thought occurred to him, Tony curled around to keep an eye on Steve, checking for signs of real distress, but he seemed fine—just emotionally engaged and moved. Nevertheless, Tony stroked his legs soothingly and rubbed his cheek against Steve’s knee like a cat during the more intense portions. He reveled in the sense that his presence at Steve’s feet was a comfort and that satisfaction helped ease him toward that lax, loose state of relaxation that he didn’t have a name for. (Warm. Comfortable. Hazily content.)

Keeping an eye on Steve and playing a bit of footsie was all that kept Tony from drifting off during the movie again; he knew every shot so well, he hardly had to watch it and could just savor Steve’s reactions, the feel of Steve’s knee against his cheek, Steve’s hand absently stroking his hair, his jaw, his neck.

It felt good, so good to be on his knees for Steve, to show affection and submission so openly in front of the others. He hardly wanted the movie to end—except for the hope that his offering had pleased Steve as much as it pleased him to make it and that Steve might show his appreciation in private with something . . . special. Tony tried not to let himself focus too much on that possibility lest he make an embarrassing display of his anticipation.

(Down, boy.)

At last the end credits began to roll and the team chatted pleasantly about the film—the quality of the acting, the CGI, the emotional impact of various scenes.

“You’re awful quiet,” Steve murmured softly after a few moments, leaning down to Tony as Clint rehashed his old critique of Legolas’s absurd technique. “You ok?”

Tony nodded and gave Steve’s hand a little peck and a squeeze. The Dom smiled.

“Sleepy?” he asked.

Tony answered with something between a nod and a shrug. He wasn’t sleepy exactly, but it was as good an answer as any. Pepper caught his eye and furrowed her brow questioningly, but at Tony’s (probably dopey) answering smile her look softened.

(Always looking out for me, huh, Ms. Potts?)

Little by little, conversation wound down and everyone said their goodnights until it was just Steve and Tony remaining in the living room.

“Tony?” Steve asked softly. “How’re you feeling?”

Tony looked up at him with a warm smile and rubbed his cheek against Steve’s knee again. Steve smiled back at him, but he looked troubled.

“Good,” Steve said, a little falteringly. “I just— I’m honored that you knelt for me tonight. In front of the team. But you really didn’t have to.”

Tony held in an exasperated snort.

(Yeah, I know. I don’t HAVE to do anything.)

He rolled his eyes, but Steve seemed not to notice.

“I just—” Steve fumbled again. “I’d hate to think that you did it because of earlier.” An awkward pause. “Because of how I reacted to Ms. Potts,” Steve clarified. “If you felt forced to—”

“I wanted to,” Tony said, abruptly finding his tongue. “I wanted to,” he repeated emphatically.

“I’ve wanted to for a long time,” Tony added more softly. Steve’s face brightened.

“Really?”

Tony nodded. He took Steve’s hand and kissed his palm, then leaned his cheek into that large hand and closed his eyes. Steve stroked his hair with his left hand and even without looking Tony knew he was smiling that smile.

They lingered in the living room, Tony on his knees on the plush carpet and the decadent pillow (the one Steve had selected and arranged on the floor for him). Eventually Steve broke the lazy silence.

“Tony?”
“Mmmm?”

Steve’s fingers caressed his neck then tipped his chin up as Steve leaned awkwardly down for a kiss. Tony knelt up to meet him and parted his lips eagerly, inviting more. Steve let out a little noise and pressed into Tony’s mouth, drawing him closer, hands roaming Tony’s body with new urgency.

Tony shivered and his blood rushed.

Steve drew back to ask roughly, “Tony? May I take you to bed?”

Tony smiled up at him and murmured, “Please.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait and that it's such a short chapter! The next scene was getting really long and I was getting stuck, so I decided to go ahead and post what I had to get a little bit of wind in my sails. Your enthusiasm always inspires me! Life has been crazy busy, but here's hoping I'm back to a place where writing can be a regular reality.

Cheer leading always appreciated--favorite detail? question? musings?-- but both kitty and I are actually doing pretty well right now, so it's not dire. :)

p.s. I know ALL the image hosting is messed up right now. Photobucket changed their terms, so I'll have to hunt up my images and then find them a new home. Very sorry! I'll try to fix it soon....
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

AT LAST!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wasted no time—he scooped Tony up into his arms as if he weighed nothing (goddamn super serum), carried him down the hall to their bedroom, and slammed the door behind him with his foot.

“So good, so beautiful,” Steve mumbled, pressing Tony against the wall and kissing him breathless.

Tony yanked at Steve’s shirt and soon they were fumbling urgently at each other’s clothes, too eager to be naked for slow stripping.

Nude at last, Steve tossed him on the bed and stood looking at him with a marvelling smile.

“You’re so amazing,” Steve said, “God, I--”

Words apparently failed him, so he pounced onto the bed and kissed Tony passionately until his head spun and he was rutting up helplessly against Steve’s thigh.

Steve drew back gasping and pressed his face to Tony’s throat, then pinned Tony’s hips with a strong hand, depriving him of that delicious friction.

Tony whinned.

“Tony?” Steve murmured softly, propping up on one elbow to look down at him.

His brow was furrowed, a hint of a frown at the corners of his mouth. “I--”

Steve cut himself off, licked his lips and began again: “Are you mine?”

Tony blinked.

“I mean,” Steve hastened to clarify, “Can I say that? That you’re mine?”

Tony felt an unexpected tremor run through his body.

Possessiveness was a definite kink for lots of Doms. For Tony too. (It got the official green light in his Master Contract.) Tony had happily called out, “Yeah, I’m yours, yours, all yours, own me, fuck me, yours,” while a one-night-stand plowed him grunting, “mine, mine, mine!”

It didn’t feel like that was what Steve was asking. Not exactly anyway.

“I’ve wanted to ask for a while,” Steve said, filling Tony’s silence, “It’s not because of earlier with— It’s not that. And, I mean, not in front of other people. Not in public—that is, unless you’d like that? But here? When it’s just us? If--”

Steve was talking faster and faster, clearly nervous; Tony cut off his rambling with a kiss.

“Yeah,” Tony said, heart slamming into his chest. “I’m yours.” He kissed Steve again. “Please . . . call me yours.”

Steve let out a long breath and pulled Tony close. He kissed him tenderly on the forehead.

“There. You’re so good for me, aren’t you sweetheart?” Steve asked, caressing Tony’s face, running rough fingers through his hair. “You’ll be so good, won’t you?”

Tony nodded.

“Answer me.”
Tony swallowed and answered as commanded, “Yes, Steve.”

“Yeah, of course you’ll be good for me,” Steve said, still stroking Tony’s face. “You always are. And I’ll be good to you.” Steve kissed his forehead and nipped at his earlobe, then whispered, “Because you’re mine.”

Tony shivered.

“Don’t move,” Steve repeated as he got up and went to fetch his bag.

(Yes, yes, yes!)

Tony’s hips jerked into the air.

“I said, ‘don’t move,’” Steve growled and Tony felt his cheeks go crimson in response.

Steve drew the familiar lengths of rope out of his bag and Tony’s blood rushed.

“Please,” he whispered again.

Steve took a long, deep breath.

“Lift your arms to the headboard for me please, sweetheart.”

Tony hastened to obey.

“Good,” Steve said, as he laid out the bight against Tony’s wrists. “That’s good.”

Light bondage was something Tony’d done too often to count. He’d done it with Steve quite a bit too, but it felt different tonight. After kneeling. After saying “I’m yours.”

Once Steve had finished the last knot, Tony pulled a little at the ropes, wanting to feel their weight at his wrists. To his delight, he found that Steve had tied him more securely than usual. Not too tight, but with less of a gap--he couldn’t just slide his wrists free, as he probably could have on previous occasions. (Not that he’d wanted to, of course.)

Tony was truly securely tied. His toes curled and he luxuriated in the sensations--the physical feel of the rope and the feeling that Steve was becoming more confident, easier in his Dominance.

Tony arched a little and threw his head back, showing his neck, exposed and enticing.

“Tony,” Steve gasped against his throat, kissing and biting to raise a new set of bruises to life on Tony’s skin.

(Good, so good, yours . . .)

Steve’s hands seemed to be everywhere. He scratched lightly down Tony’s arms and legs, raising delicious goosebumps, then caressing and soothing them away.

“So good, gorgeous . . . sweetheart,” Steve murmured as he laid kisses all along Tony’s body.

“Please,” Tony begged.

Steve was fumbling for his bag again and Tony’s expectations soared. He gasped and tossed his head when he saw Steve taking out the lube.

(Or take him long and slow, sliding his cock in and out, luxurious and patient until Tony was sobbing for relief and--)

“Please?”

Steve spread Tony’s legs, holding them open as far as they would go, and just knelt on the bed for a moment, staring at Tony--at his leaking cock, the swell of his ass, his exposed hole.

“Beautiful.”

Finally Steve pressed a hot, slick finger to Tony’s entrance; Tony canted his hips eagerly, trying to press back on it to hurry things along.

“Behave,” Steve admonished and swatted him lightly on the ass.

Tony moaned.
“Yeah?” Steve asked. “You like that?”

“Yes, oh God, yes. Please!”

“Mmmm,” Steve murmured, a contemplative noise, but he didn’t smack Tony again.

Tony might have begged or protested at that, but a moment later Steve was pressing into him with two slick fingers and it was so good he couldn’t think of much else.

Steve dragged his fingers out, then pressed back in, finding the spot that made Tony gasp and see stars. Steve was watching him avidly and something about the heat of his gaze made Tony blush even harder, half thrilled and half embarrassed by having his own helpless arousal on display.

“Look at you,” Steve said, pushing in and out of Tony’s tight, hot hole. “Blushing for me so pretty—the way you open up for me, give yourself to me.”

Tony swallowed thickly.

“Gorgeous,” Steve said, “Tied up in my ropes with my mark at your throat. You like that, don’t you sweetheart?”

Tony nodded breathlessly.

“Answer me, darling,” Steve ordered, dragging his fingers out until he was barely holding Tony open, barely inside him. He lingered there, teasingly. “I want to hear you.”

“Yes! Yes, Steve! Please.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, roughly pushing his fingers back in with a satisfying thrust.

Steve’s ears were pink and his eyes dark and dilated. “You love it, don’t you?”

He bent between Tony’s spread legs to lick his cock in a wet, hot stripe that made Tony cry out.

“Mine.” Steve growled, then took Tony in his mouth.

Tony quivered as Steve sucked his cock and thrust in and out of him with thick, glorious fingers.

In and out, and up and down.

In and out, and up and down.

In and out, and up and down.

In and out, and up and down.

In and out, and up and down.

Slowly.

In and out, and up and down.

In and out, and up and down.

Steve’s patience might be the death of him.

“Please, Steve,” Tony babbled, “Please! Oh, fuck me. Fuck! Oh,--ah, please! Steve!”

Tony fucked back on Steve’s fingers as best he could, meeting each rough thrust as much as his Dom would allow—needing more, but trying not to lose himself in the wet heat of Steve’s mouth and come too soon, come without asking if--

“Please, ah! Steve,” Tony gasped. “I’m almost--please let me? Please--I want to come on your cock, please, baby? Can I--? Let me?”

At last Steve drew back.

“Mine,” he said again, hot and low. “I want you to come for me.”

It didn’t take much. Steve’s fingers were deep and rough, his mouth wet and hot and--

Tony shivered, threw his head back, and came. Steve swallowed.

“So good, Tony,” Steve groaned. Tony’s cum lingered at the corner of his lips. “So beautiful. Mine!”

“Yours,” Tony gasped, still shuddering with orgasm.

Steve kissed Tony’s thighs as he carefully eased his fingers free of Tony’s trembling body. He wiped his hand on the sheets and pressed a trail of urgent, wet-hot kisses up Tony’s body.

Steve panted heavily as he stretched himself across Tony, his weight pressing Tony down into the mattress. Steve’s cock slid slick and hot through Tony’s cum. (Yes!)

Tony was lax with post-orgasmic haze and he realized distantly that he was skimming. Definitely. And had been for a while.

(Huh.)
Tony sighed, reveling in the sounds of Steve’s pleasure, the feel of his hard body rutting and taking above him.

It was so good. Steve was so sweet, so tender, so earnestly heartrendingly trustworthy.

(Was it any wonder he was skimming?)

“Mine,” Steve panted against his neck, “God, Tony--sweetheart, gorgeous, mine, ah--”

(Had anyone ever treated Tony like this before? Said ‘mine’ and meant it quite like this?)

Tony rolled his hips up lazily against Steve’s as Steve chased his orgasm, panting and murmuring his devotion and possession against Tony’s throat.

(No, of course not. Nobody.)

The pleasant haze faded from Tony’s mind. He swallowed, his throat tight.

“Yeah, Steve,” Tony murmured encouragingly, rolling his body up against his Dom’s. “Yours, baby, yours . . . take what you want, Steve . . . yours . . .”

“Tony, God! So perfect, sweetheart . . . darling . . .”

Steve came shuddering and gasping against him, adding his cum to the sticky mess across Tony’s stomach.

Steve covered Tony in kisses, caresses, and praise. (Always so goddamn sweet.) Tony leaned up, offering his mouth, wanting to return Steve’s every kiss.

As he came down from the aftershocks, Steve’s kisses turned lazy and soft. He pulled the blankets up around them and let his hands map Tony’s body with light touches.

“You were so beautiful for me, Tony,” Steve murmured. “So good.”

He stroked Tony’s arm. Ran his fingers through Tony’s hair. Held him close.

Tony let out a vague answering murmur and tried to recapture the lazy, floating contentedness of a few minutes earlier.

(Steve’s happy. It’s fine. Good!)

Steve leaned up to kiss his forehead.

“I’ll get you cleaned up now, darling.”

Steve reached into the nightstand for a wipe, cleaned the mess off Tony’s stomach with gentle touches, and carefully untied the bindings at Tony’s wrists. (Always so careful.) Once he was free, Tony folded Steve in his arms and caressed his back, drawing out a happy sigh.

“You’re so sweet to me,” Steve mumbled again.

Tony gave a wry smile. (The bar must be low.)

“You’re perfect,” Steve said, then propped up on his elbow to look down and say very seriously, “Thank you for being mine.”

Tony’s chest was tight and he felt himself blushing as he whispered, “Thank you for having me,” then kissed him--kissing was always better than talking. (He didn’t want to hear all that.)

They settled into a gentle rhythm of kisses, caresses, and the murmured praises that kept falling from Steve’s mouth. Tony enjoyed it, of course he did, but as it stretched on and on Tony grew more and more uneasy. It seemed extravagant for a-- for him.

It seemed extravagant for what they’d done. Tony didn’t exactly need the full AAR anymore, did he?

As Steve held him close, murmuring, “You were perfect . . . I’m so lucky. So lucky,” Tony’s stomach flopped and he blushed with embarrassment. (Halfway to ashamed.)

They settled into a gentle rhythm of kisses, caresses, and the murmured praises that kept falling from Steve’s mouth. Tony enjoyed it, of course he did, but as it stretched on and on Tony grew more and more uneasy. It seemed extravagant for a-- for him. For what they’d done. Tony didn’t exactly need the full AAR anymore, did he?

“Huh?” Steve tilted his head and looked down at him puzzled.

“Did they not call it that before?” Tony asked. “‘Affection, Affirmation, Reassurance’--all that praise chatter aftercare stuff. It’s meant to prevent sub drop, but I don’t go under so--”

Tony shrugged and held in a bitter laugh, “-- it’s not like I’m gonna drop, not really. You don’t have to go the whole nine yards; I don’t actually need it.”

Steve’s lips parted in surprise and his eyes went wide with hurt and confusion for a moment before he blanked his expression.

“I—” Steve swallowed and licked his lips. His brow furrowed and he looked away. “Sorry. I
Steve’s voice sounded oddly small; the warm, contented laziness vanished from his tone. Tony’s heart twisted sharply.

( Fuck, fuck, fuckity, fuck! )

“No, no!” Tony said hastily. “I just—I mean, if you were making yourself talk because you were worried about me, I just mean that you don’t need to.”

“Oh,” Steve said, still frowning. “I wasn’t worried. I was just--” Steve shook his head and asked instead, “Do you mind it? If I want to talk?”

“No! That’s fine.”

“Just,” Steve said fumblingly, “you really were, you know? Beautiful. And--and good for me.”

“Yeah?” Tony said, dropping his gaze as his skin began to prickle from cheeks to chest.

Steve’s murmurs were all words Tony’d heard before—with varying levels of sincerity—but even from people he liked (Sam, Rebecca, Veronica) they never had the sheer depth of feeling that Steve managed to project. They’d been a part of the script.

The way Steve said it felt special. Like it was a truth Steve couldn’t hold in if he tried. Profound.

(Frightening.)

“Yeah. I mean it, Tony. You’re so perfect and beautiful for me,” Steve said, He bit his lip. “So, it’s okay? For me to praise you? You don’t think it’s patronizing or something?”

Tony shook his head; the blush blossomed on his cheeks, part pleasure part embarrassment.

“I like it,” Tony confessed softly.

Steve’s praise didn’t have any real utility—it wasn’t preventing drop, wasn’t medically necessary. It was just affection. Somehow that made it even nicer. (And wanting it even more embarrassing.)

“Me too,” Steve said softly. “I like telling you how I see you. I think... I think sometimes you don’t know how amazing you are. How sweet. How lucky I am.”

Tony laughed. “God, I don’t deserve you!”

“Of course you do,” Steve said with a little smile, stroking Tony’s hair. “That’s what I’ve been telling you.”

Tony’s heart was pounding as he forced himself to find words.

“I-- I know you were anxious about being--” (A virgin.) “--inexperienced, but you’re--” he licked his lips-- “you’re a great Dominant. Truly.” He smiled and squeezed Steve’s hand. “I wouldn’t trade your instincts and tenderness for decades of practice, Steve Rogers.”

Tony’d meant it to come out at least half joking or teasing, but couldn’t manage it--the words seemed raw and honest. (Like they were.)

Steve kissed him tenderly.

“Thank you, Tony. I lo--” He smiled. “I’m glad.”

Tony settled back into Steve’s arms and, after a few moments, Steve resumed the soft petting and nuzzling he’d been reveling in earlier.

Steve adored him. Respected him. Steve was the kindest, most trustworthy person Tony’d ever been with.

He still didn’t go under.

(Of course not. What did you expect, stupid?)

“You were so good for me,” Steve murmured. “So good.”

(A magic healing cock and fairy tale ending?)

“So beautiful, Tony . . . So good.”

Tony shivered and pressed closer into Steve’s arms; Steve gathered the blankets up closer around them.

Even knowing Steve meant every word, it was hard not to feel unworthy of Steve’s praise.
Tony awoke slowly. After their conversation, he’d expected to toss and turn, but he’d drifted off in Steve’s arms without even registering his fatigue. He rolled over a little, meaning to check if Steve was awake, but as soon as he stirred Steve murmured, “Good morning, my darling,” and drew him close.

“Your darling, huh?” Tony asked.

“Yes?” Steve said, with an inquiring lilt.

“I like it,” Tony answered and leaned around for a kiss.

Eventually Steve pulled back and asked with a grin, “Would my darling like me to bring him coffee in bed?”

“Hm. Your darling was rather thinking that he might like to keep you in bed.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up in mock surprise. “Even more than he’d like coffee?”

“What can I say? I like you in bed very much.”

Steve’s stomach chose that moment to rumble. Loudly.

Tony let out an extravagant sigh.

“But I’d hate for you to waste away in my sex bed, starved and deprived . . .”

Steve looked endearingly torn.

His stomach rumbled again.

“Go on, soldier,” Tony said with a laugh. “I’ll take that coffee now I guess.”

Steve gave him a kiss and slid out of bed.

“Back in a minute,” he promised, pulling on a t-shirt and sweatpants.

Tony sighed and rolled over.

(Maybe Steve would get back into bed after bolting down a bagel?!)  

“Bagels in bed!?” Tony called hopefully.

Tony knew he should probably get up and brush his teeth. Have a shower. No doubt he reeked of sex. Instead, he tried to fall back asleep.

“Sorry for the delay bringing you your coffee,” Steve said, startling Tony back out of a half doze.

“Were you eating your weight in food?”

Steve shook his head.

“Oh?”

Steve nodded but didn’t elaborate.

(Hm.)

Tony tried to pull Steve down into bed, but he resisted with an apologetic smile.

“I offered to cook brunch,” he said. “Better grab a quick shower.”

“Can I help you with that?” Tony asked archly.

“Er,” Steve bit his lip. “I was gonna try and be efficient.”

Tony snorted. “I bet 20 bucks I can have you coming down my throat and off to cook brunch in ten minutes or less.”

Steve blinked. His ears turned pink.

“Uh. Wow.” Steve swallowed, then gave a little smile. “Guess I win either way.”

“We both do,” Tony said with a grin.

Steve laughed.

The day was off to a good start already.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>
Tony savored his coffee and the sight of Pepper and Steve laughing and washing dishes together. He let out a long contented sigh.

“Tony?” Natasha asked, settling into the armchair next to him. “How much longer is Pepper staying?”

Tony frowned at her. “Just ‘til Sunday afternoon. Why? Looking to get rid of her?”

Nat shook her head. “Not at all. I’m just concerned for Bruce.”

“Bruce?” Tony repeated. “Why?”

But even as he asked the question, Tony realized how oddly Bruce had been acting at brunch—quiet then snappish by turns, at least for him—and how abruptly he’d left.

“The waiting . . .” Natasha said. “I think it’s hard on him—the limbo before we start training with Hulk.” She looked at the floor, scowling with concentration for a moment before she said decisively, “But Monday should be fine.” She looked up again. “I just wanted to make sure that plans hadn’t changed in light of—” her lips twitched and she glanced over to where Steve and Pepper were talking about Whistler with considerable animation, “—ah, recent developments. I think it’s important for Bruce.”

Tony nodded, feeling bad that he’d been so focused on Pepper and Steve and Pepper&Steve that he hadn’t noticed his friend the way he should.

“I’ve got this,” Tony said, getting abruptly to his feet and heading for Bruce’s room.

It made perfect sense. Tony was very familiar with dreadful anticipation…. Things could be so wildly amplified in the waiting—for good or ill.

“Hey, Brucie-bear!”

“Yeah?”

“Can I come in?”

“Sure. Yeah, sure,” Bruce called through the partially open door. “I guess.”

“Awesome!” Tony entered and flopped down on the foot of the bed, looking up at Bruce where he was leaning up against the headboard, reading Nature.

“So, I was thinking,” Tony said. “Why don’t we go ahead and jump in with training! I mean, waiting is silly! We all know what we’re gonna do. So let’s just get out there and go!”

“What?” Bruce startled visibly.

“You know me,” Tony said, “The impatient sort. What do you think? Get Big Green out to play?”

“While Pepper is visiting.” Bruce said it slowly, incredulously.

“Why not?”

“Why not?!” Bruce hissed. “I can’t believe you. What do you mean, why not?!” Bruce’s voice was rising towards a shout. “Do you have any idea how dangerous this will be?!!?”

“Bruce, it’s gonna be fine,” Tony said firmly. He laid a hand on Bruce’s ankle, but he jerked away.

“I’ve got you,” Tony promised sitting up again. “I trust you. I know Pepper will too.”

“You didn’t even talk to her first? What the hell Tony!” Bruce leapt off the bed. He shook his head violently. “I used to think that you trusted me and were just . . . that trusting. Now I’m starting to think you can’t treat this seriously, that you have no idea what the risks are. That it’s not even trust—just stupidity!”

“No! It is trust!” Tony insisted, trying not to lose his temper. “And—and we have the Security Blanket! As back-up. Right?”

Bruce was still glaring at him, and he knew it was low, but--

Tony added, “Or do you think I’m less of a genius than advertised? And the Security Blanket won’t work?”

“Oh of course not,” Bruce snapped. “You’re every bit the arrogant genius, but sometimes that backfires on people. Overconfidence run amuck. So forgive me if I’m not willing to throw caution to the wind! And do experiments in unsecure lab conditions! And dispense with safety equipment! And endanger other people!!!”
Bruce left his room and slammed the door behind him.

(Shit.)

Tony scrambled after him.

“Sorry,” Tony said to Bruce’s retreating back. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

(Shit. No way Natasha wouldn’t notice this little kerfuffle.)

Bruce didn’t answer. Tony raked his fingers through his hair and followed Bruce into the (tiny, pathetic) basement gym.

“You’re going to do great,” Tony said, “and I just thought it would be easier to get it over with. Like . . . Like a bandaid.”

Bruce sat down abruptly on a bench and rested his head in his hands. When at last he spoke, the words were soft and sad: “Nothing about this is going to be great. Or easy.”

Tony sat down next to Bruce; he didn’t know what to say. For once he stayed silent.

“Nothing about this . . . About me . . . About him . . . is ok.”

Bruce took a long, deep breath. Then another.

“It scares me that you’re not afraid,” Bruce said.

“I trust you.”

Bruce’s laughter was bitter.

“I know you do,” he said. “And that scares me more.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

The silence stretched long and sad between them. Tony wanted to touch Bruce--was half tempted to curl at his feet to see if it might help--but something told him it wouldn’t be welcome. Not now. Not like this.

“Promise me,” Bruce said, in a rough voice, “Promise you won’t do anything stupid.”

Tony nearly laughed and said who me?, but knew better.

“I promise.”

Tony wasn’t quite sure what he was promising, but it seemed important. And, though it was the last thing he wanted to say, he had to make the offer . . .

“If you can’t do it, Bruce,” Tony began, “if it’s just too hard--we’ll understand if you--”

“No!” Bruce jerked himself upright and looked at Tony for the first time since sitting in the gym.

“No. It’s fine. I want to do this. Just . . . Just no jumping the gun. Monday, ok?”

“Ok. Monday.”

Tony gave Bruce an awkward little side hug.

“It’s gonna be ok.”

“Thank you for a wonderful visit,” Pepper said with a warm smile as she climbed into the helicopter. “It helped. Really.”

“Anything for you, oh salt and pepper of my earth!”

Pepper groaned. “That was bad, even for you.”

“What do you mean even for me? I’m famed for my wit.”

“Well, famed wit, take care of yourself. Try not to do anything stupid.”

“I make no promises,” Tony said with a grin.

Of course not,” Pep huffed. She kissed him on the cheek with a murmured little, “Bye,” and got into the helicopter.
Tony sighed as he watched her vanish, keenly aware of the rest of the team waiting on the porch behind him. After a few moments, he turned with a manic grin and asked, “Who’s ready for Big Green??!”

“...”

“And remember,” Bruce said, anxiously into his comm and spinning in the middle of their circle. “Be careful. And don’t be afraid to use the Security Blanket!”

“We will, we will,” Tony promised again, trying not to sound impatient. “If we need it JARVIS and I will have the fuzzy ducky blanket falling from the sky in no time. See?” Tony pointed to the hovering satellite above them. “Locked and loaded.”

“Right. Ok. Ok.”

“Bruce are you sure—?” Steve began, but fell silent at Tony’s frantic neck cutting gestures behind Bruce’s back. (WE TALKED ABOUT THIS! STOP MAKING IT TOO EASY TO BACK OUT). “Uh. Everyone in position? Confirm.”

“Hawkeye at three o’clock, confirmed.”

“Widow at six o’clock, confirmed.”

“Captain at nine o’clock, confirmed.”

“Iron Man at twelve o’clock, confirmed.”

“All positions confirmed, ready, and active,” Steve said in his Cap voice, then a little more gently, “Ready when you are, Bruce. On your three.”

“Right then,” Bruce said. Even from this distance, Tony could see as Bruce reached up to the bridge of his nose to fiddle with his glasses—his nervous tick—but his face was empty. He’d left his glasses at the house so they wouldn’t be destroyed.

“One.”

Bruce took a deep breath, loud over the com.

“Two.”

Tony’s treacherous heart was racing. (I’m not scared. This isn’t fear. It’s anticipation.)

“ThrEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Bruce’s final count got lost into an animalistic cry as the transformation ripped him apart before Tony’s very eyes. His stomach flopped. It was . . . It was . . . It defied belief.

It was like Bruce had melted away or bubbled up into this vast and monstrous thing, all bulging green muscles, impossibly massive and alien. Bruce’s snowsuit was shredded on the ground. The creature howled, its head thrown back, shaking its arms like King Kong.

Someone gasped into the com.


Tony was pretty sure Steve’s voice shook.

Tony’s palms were sweating and he felt cold all over. He’d given Steve a hard time for insisting they maintain a 1/3rd mile distance, but as he watched The Hulk spin in an angry, confused circle he was glad for it.

Tony swallowed thickly and took long, practiced breaths.

From such a distance, it had been hard to discern Bruce’s expressions without the suit magnification. But the Hulk was so much bigger, so vast, that his face was easy to read across 1742.2 feet. It was contorted, enraged, but somehow still . . . Bruce-like. At least, until it started sniffing the air like an overgrown and terrifying puppy. It snorted and spun, sniffing and growling in a way that seemed half angry and half inquisitive.

Whatever his Hulkeish senses found as he sniffed around the loose and distant circle of Avengers it seemed good. Really good. Tony was about to make a pleased (or possibly smug) remark into the com, when he roared. Bellowed with rage and— (FUCK.)

Hulk went barrelling toward him at full speed. (Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck fuck.).

“Iron Man!” Cap cried. “Evade!”

Tony shot into the sky.

“On it, Cap. All good here.”
(His voice didn’t shake, damn it.)

Hulk leapt up towards him, still bellowing, but the suit had gotten him out of jump range.

Tony flew north and Hulk followed.

"Rage Monster appears full of rage," Tony observed into the com. His heart was beginning to slow again. "Taking him due north as discussed."


“Uh, not exactly tempted to do otherwise,” Tony agreed, putting on a burst of speed then hovering a while to see if Hulk would follow. “But yeah. Out of range.”

Follow the Hulk did.

“And confirmed. Hulk in pursuit.”

“Widow, here,” Nat said in a steady voice. “Rest of the team standing by in the quinjet. Call as needed.”

“Gotcha,” Tony said, turning his latest Hulk evasion into a figure eight high above Mean Green’s head.

As Tony flew north, occasionally leading Hulk in loop-de-loops to make sure they didn’t run out of Stark-owned ranch, he started to relax. It felt like playing an incredibly high-stakes, terrifying game of tag. As long as he paid attention--like, 15% attention--there was no way Hulk would outmaneuver him in the suit. And he did love to fly . . .

So he flew.

And flew.

And flew.

Finally, Tony opened a private channel with the exterior speaker.

“So, hey, buddy,” he called, flying in an elegant spiral. Hulk screamed.

“Fine. Be like that,” Tony said. “But I’ve really gotta ask, pal, should I be flattered or offended that you’re chasing after me? I mean, the others hardly got a proper yell and you went all ‘catch the Tony’ on my ass right away. It’s a sign of love, right?”

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!!!!!!!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Tony said. “So, hey, how long does this game go, do you think? ‘Cause I’m kinda hungry. And eventually I’ll need to pee.”

Hulk took a sudden leap at him and Tony’s heart skipped a beat.

(Aaaaand, flying a little higher now.).

“Just flying around like the pied piper. I’m fine. Relax.”

“Location?”

“Sending you my coordinates now. Check the quinjet console and it’ll give you my tracking. But, like I said, everything’s fine. I’m fine.” (And kinda getting bored.)

“All right. Stay in touch.”

“Roger, Rogers.”

“Flying in pursuit,” Nat said, “Will not engage unless required. Trailing you at a half-mile.”

Tony let out an exaggerated yawn. “If you insist.”

“For superior response time,” Nat said and he could see her Mildly Irritated But Not Wanting to Be Too Explicit face.

“All righty,” Tony said, hovering while Hulk leapt and screamed below. “Uh . . . Don’t suppose we have any idea how long it takes to get Bruce back?”

“There are too many confounding variables for previous transformations to be predictive,” Natasha said.

Tony huffed.

“Well, ok then,” he said resignedly. “Guess I’ll be flying around in circles for an unknown period
then."
"RAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!!"
Tony sighed.
"My feelings exactly."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! We finally got to the HULK!!! Yay!

My new job is about to explode with extreme crazy, but hopefully I'll still find time to write. Do please PLEASE cheer me on if you can by telling me if there's stuff you especially liked in this chapter. Musings, curiosity, and predictions about future chapters also welcome. Basically anything to tell me that helps remind me to live in this world from time to time is a huge help.

I truly TRULY could not have written over 200K and stuck with this story for over 4 years without your mad, loving supportive generosity. YAY! And THANK YOU!

p.s. I've slowly been restoring the images I can still find post-Photobucket hostage situation. Sadly, I had a computer death somewhere in there and I can't find the cover art I made for Life & Style and several other things. If you have saved copies of the art for P&P, I'd be very very grateful if you could send them to me. Just leave a comment and I'll get in touch. Thank you. It breaks my heart some of those images are gone....
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

I'M BACK!!!! Finally.

My infinite gratitude to thatwhichyields, Mary, pandowl, shards-of-divinity, and lilragekitten for EPIC beta reading and cheer leading!!!!!!!

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with me for so very long. I hope you enjoy the new chapter. It was quite a struggle!

My infinite gratitude to EVERYONE WHO HAS CHEERED ME ON! I really couldn't do it without so many kind words from so many kind people. I'd have given up long ago without all of you. But especially I'd like that thank thatwhichyields, Mary, pandowl, shards-of-divinity, and lilragekitten for going above and beyond with their EPIC beta reading and cheer leading!!!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I really am sorry about your tree, Tony,” Bruce apologized for the twentieth time.

“It’s honestly no big deal--like I said, I was about to go bats flying around in circles,” Tony assured him with a grin. “If ripping apart one of my firs and playing impromptu, solo Jenga is what it takes to power down Big Green for the day, well, I’m 100% ok with that.”

Bruce was still frowning. He shivered in the blanket that Cap had wrapped around his shoulders and clutched his mug of smelly tea a little tighter.

“To be honest, buddy,” Tony added lightly, putting his feet up on the coffee table, “I thought it was kinda cute.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Bruce snapped. “There’s nothing cute about it. He tore that giant tree from the ground and snapped it into twigs with his bear hands like a toothpick.”

“Oh, come on it was at least a little funny,” Tony protested, “I especially liked the part when--”

“I think the most important thing,” Steve said, cutting in and shooting Tony A Look. “Is that it was a successful first trial. You did really well, Bruce.” Steve smiled reassuringly and laid a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “The first time is always the most stressful, but everyone stayed calm and we did well as a team, right?”

Bruce gave a tight nod.

“More tea?” Natasha asked.

“There’s fancy cheese!” Clint called. “I know you like the smelly ones.”

Bruce perked up.

“Blue?”

“Yep! Smells thoroughly rotten,” Clint answered with a grin. “And hey, you can pick the movie tonight!”

(Oh god, not a--)

“Well, there is a documentary on peat bogs I’ve been meaning to watch.”

(--documentary.)

“Uh, right.” Clint’s grin faltered. “Sounds fun.”


“Eh, I’ll pick out something new.” Tony said and joined Steve at the fridge.

“You’re sure you’re ok?” Steve asked softly.

“Who me? I’m great,” Tony said. “Are you ok?”
Steve blinked. “Yes, of course.”

“Well, great!” Tony grabbed a stout from the fridge for a change. “So, do we actually have a copy of this peat bog documentary? ’Cause something like that might be hard to--”

“I already checked!” Bruce said. “We’re in luck. It’s available on Netflix.”

“Great!” Tony said brightly, then muttered, “That’s a relief.”

Steve squeezed his hand and gave him a sympathetic smile.

Well. At least he’d get to cuddle with Steve.

If he was going to watch a documentary about bogs, he was at least gonna kneel and have his hair pet while he did it.

“Ok, I’m big enough to admit,” Tony said around a mouthful of omelette the next morning, “the bog bodies were really interesting.”


“See?” Bruce said, with pleased vindication, “I told you it was interesting.”

As they rehearsed the wonders of ancient cadavers and carbon sinks (and Tony thought about scotch), the team rapidly demolished the gigantic breakfast Steve had prepared.

Natasha pushed her plate back after a second serving of hash browns, leaned back in her chair, and let out an expansive, “Sooooo…?” She glanced between Steve and Bruce. “When do we start?”

Bruce insisted that they do the dishes first, and Steve agreed. Though he may have regretted it.

Tony’d never seen anyone wash dishes as slowly as Bruce managed to.

Eventually, though, there was nothing left to scrub and the dishes, countertops, and even the sink were indisputably clean.

So at last they made their way out into the field.

“Places, everybody!” Clint called. “Take two!”

“Actually,” Steve said into the com, adjusting his dorky chin strap. “Bruce and I were talking and we’d like to try something slightly different. Same configuration, but rotate everyone’s relative positions. I’ll take the twelve o’clock, and we rotate from there.”

Tony shrugged—or tried to in the suit. “Works for me. Iron man at three o’clock.” He flew into position. “Confirmed.”

“Widow at nine o’clock, confirmed.”

“Hawkeye at six o’clock, confirmed.”

“And Captain at twelve o’clock, confirmed.”

“And, uh, I’m in place,” Bruce said. “In the middle of the clock.”

Steve gave a little chuckle. “Ready when you are.”

“Right.” Bruce fidgeted, awkward and bulky in his soon-to-be tattered snowsuit. “Well, like you said. First time was the hardest. Uh.”

Tony took long, deep, even breaths.

(Nothing to be nervous about.)

The suit reported elevated heart rate. Must be a glitch.

(Heck, they’d already done this once)

And yet, Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever really get used to the sight of that . . . thing . . . ripping out of Bruce, like it was tearing him apart. The way his skin rippled and stretched as it turned green. The anguished scream that turned into an animalistic roar as the change reached his vocal chords. The way its giant nostrils flared and quivered, scenting the air. The way--

(Fuck.)

The way it charged straight at him.
“Iron Man!” Steve called into the com, but Tony was already off like a shot with Hulk bellowing rage behind him.

The inoffensive patch of ground where Tony’d been standing a few moments before was now a crater left by Hulk’s fist.

“You know,” Tony said through the loudspeaker, “I’ve been wanting to do some landscaping—something moonscape inspired. What are your rates?”

“RARRRR!”

“Hm. That seems a little steep.”

“RARRRR!”

“Ok, I’m working on my counter-offer.”

“Iron Man?” Natasha said into the comm.

“All’s well, team,” Tony said on the Avengers’ channel. “The sequel is always boring. Taking Big Green north again.”

“Empire Strikes Back isn’t–” Clint began to protest.

“Isn’t a sequel because it’s part of a trilogy,” Tony cut in.

“Chatter!” Steve yelled.

Tony sighed.

[Black and White shot of a Caucasian sub in khakis, a sweater set, and pearls, looking out the window at a winter landscape.]

Male Voiceover: “Are you in a rut? Does everything you try seem the same? Is it hard to get out of your routine? Is it dragging your Dominant down?”

[Fades to color]

Male Voiceover: “Well now there’s hope!” [Flowers bloom and the sub turns to the camera smiling] “With MiriSub! Our step-by-step guide and unique blend of herbal remedies of Ancient China, can help you break the cycle of submissive depressive rut and rediscover the joy of your submission, for just $49.99 a month. That’s just $49.99!”

[Color shot of the submissive walking out large double doors directly into the field of flowers.]

Soft Swiftly Spoken Female Voiceover: Supplements are not medication; as such, not subject to approval by the FDA, SDA, or Submissive Medical Association. Discontinue use if you notice symptoms like nosebleed, heart palpitations, fever, diarrhea, rash, numbness, or dizziness.

Male Voiceover: Break the cycle—TODAY!

[Black and White shot of a Caucasian sub in khakis, a sweater set, and pearls, looking out the window at a winter landscape.]

“Ok,” Steve said into the comm. “New variation. We’re rotating again and let’s set Iron Man another quarter mile out, since Hulk seemed especially drawn to him.”

“Widow at twelve o’clock, confirmed.”

“Hawkeye at nine o’clock, confirmed.”

“Captain at three o’clock, confirmed.”

“And Iron Man at six o’clock minus a quarter mile, confirmed.”

(Here we go!)

“Take four!” Hawkeye called into the comm with rather forced cheer.
“Iron Man, head out an extra quarter mile since Hulk pursued you again last time,” Steve said. 
“And I’m at six o’clock—rotating from there.”

“Widow at three o’clock, confirmed.”

“Hawkeye at twelve o’clock, confirmed.”

“Iron Man at nine o’clock minus a half mile, confirmed.”

(Perhaps this time it would be different?)

[Black and White shot of a Caucasian sub in khakis, a sweater set, and pearls, looking out the window at a winter landscape.]

Male Voiceover: “Are you in a rut? Does everything you try seem the same? Is it hard to get out of your routine? Is it dragging your Dominant down?”

(Or not.)

“RAAAAOOOOOAAARRRRRRRR!!!!!”

As Hulk charged him yet again, Tony had the powerful urge to start singing Herman’s Hermits.

(“Second verse, same as the first!”)

“Heading north,” Tony said with a sigh.

[Black and White shot of a Caucasian sub in khakis, a sweater set, and pearls, looking out the window at a winter landscape.]

Male Voiceover: “Are you in a rut? Does everything you try seem the same? Is it hard to get out of your routine? Is it dragging your Dominant down?”

“It’s fine,” Bruce said. “We’ve already watched all the documentaries I had on my list.”

Clint shrugged. “But I bet you could find another one.” He took a long swig of his beer. “I mean, we’re kinda on a roll and I can’t remember the last time I learned so much random shit that has nothing to do with archery or espionage.”

Steve looked up from a tablet with a smile. “There’s a new documentary about the Egyptian pyramids. How about that?”

“Sure,” Bruce said without enthusiasm, sidling towards the hallway. “But, I think I need to meditate first. If that’s what you want to watch, maybe I’ll join you later, but you could pick something else. I just need to—you know. Meditate.”

“Of course, Bruce,” Steve said. “Whatever you need.”

And with that Bruce vanished.

Tony jumped to his feet, keen to follow, but Steve grabbed his hand.

“Sweetheart?”

Tony paused and Steve pulled him closer.

“Give him time, ok?”

Tony hesitated, eyes flicking from the hallway to Steve and back. Eventually he sighed and nodded.

“So, hey,” Clint said, brandishing a deck of cards, “if it’s not a documentary night . . .”

Natasha slammed a bottle of vodka down on the table with a grin.

“Poker,” she said decisively.

Tony groaned.
Tony struggled weakly in Steve’s arms, gesturing back to the kitchen.  
“One more hand,” he objected muzzily into Steve’s shoulder.

“Nuh-uh,” Steve said, shaking his head and smiling. “Bed time.”

“I can beat her! I can!” Tony protested. “I’m starting to learn her . . . her . . . what-chama-call-it?” He fistaved vaguely at Steve’s shirt. “Her tells!”

“Sure you are, darling.”  
Tony squawked with tipsy indignation. “I am!”

“Uh-huh,” Steve murmured, nuzzling Tony’s neck.

“I’ll show you,” Tony said, squirming in Steve’s arms. “Just one more hand and I’ll--”

Steve nipped at the sensitive spot below Tony’s earlobe.

“One more and I’ll--”

Steve trailed a line of kisses down his neck.

“And I’ll . . .”

Tony’s breath hitched.

“Ok.” Steve set him down abruptly. “I’m off to bed.”

Tony launched himself back into Steve’s arms.

“I’ll beat her later,” he said.

Steve’s laughter was muffled by Tony’s insistent kisses.

>>>-

“You’re lucky we were playing for chips and M&Ms, billionaire,” Nat said with a wolfish grin as Steve handed Tony his morning coffee.

“I’d just worked out your tells,” Tony retorted. “I was coming back to crush you, but Steve made me a better offer and spared your reputation.”

Nat arched one eyebrow with amused mockery.

“How’s your head?” Clint asked around a mouthful of toast.

“Fine,” Tony said. (Since Steve brought me aspirin in bed…) “I was hardly even tipsy.”

Clint snorted.

Steve kissed his temple.

“I’ll have you know--” Tony began, gathering steam.

“Good morning, Bruce,” Steve said with warm solicitude. “What can I get you for breakfast?”

“I’m not really hungry,” Bruce said with a shrug and a smile. “It looked forced.) “Just some green tea.”

“Of course, Bruce,” Steve said, smiling. “I’ll make some.”

Tony tried to remember the quip he’d been planning, but it had vanished from his mind. Bruce seemed to be moving under his own personal storm cloud and it spread to the rest of the team, dampening even Steve’s morning-after good cheer.

They ate the remainder of their breakfast in silence and didn’t bother with the dishes.

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“All right,” Steve said into the comm. “Let’s give this another try. Everyone in position?”

Tony held in a sigh as he flew slowly away from the others, opening the circle.

“Widow at three o’clock,” she said, voice calm.

“Hawkeye at six!”

“Iron Man at twelve o’clock minus one mile.”
“Captain at nine,” Steve said briskly, then added in a softer tone, “Ready when you are, Bruce.”

“Right,” Bruce said and Tony could hear the grimace he was making. “Right.”

There was a long pause. Nothing happened. The Avengers all stood in position.

Tony could hear someone breathing heavily into their mic; he suspected it was Bruce.

Tony opened his mouth to make a playful wisecrack, then snapped it shut again already hearing Steve’s gentle chastising and Bruce’s angry hurt. So he waited.

They all waited.

It felt like a long time—though it was likely only a few minutes—before Steve finally said, “Bruce?”

“Right,” Bruce said. “I just–do we really think there’s any point in doing this again? It seems–”

A long pause in which Tony’s mind supplied a rapid fire of possibilities—‘dangerous,’ ‘hopeless,’ ‘ridiculous,’ ‘futile’—before Bruce finished:

“—pointless.”

“I don’t think it’s pointless,” Steve said firmly.

“One definition of insanity,” Bruce said, “is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results.”

“Einstein didn’t actually say that,” Tony cut in.

“And I didn’t attribute it to Einstein,” Bruce snapped.

“But we’re not actually doing the same thing,” Steve pointed out. “We’re adjusting Iron Man’s position every time; taking new approaches. That means getting new . . . data.” Steve said the word like it was unfamiliar.

“And, uh, no offense to the unknown originator of that quote who wasn’t Einstein,” Clint cut in, “But there are a hell of a lot of things where doing the same thing repeatedly is what produces different results; it’s called practice. So, maybe Hulk training is less like a science experiment and more like a sport or playing an instrument. Because that shit depends on repetition.”

“Huh,” Tony murmured, then said into the comm, “That’s actually a really good point.”

“Hey! Don’t sound so surprised,” Clint protested.

“Right,” Bruce said, sounding extremely sceptical. “I guess we can try—can practice—again. I just don’t—” He let out a frustrated breath. “Nevermind. Okay. Give me a countdown, Steve?”

“If that would help—?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” Steve said after about one beat too many. “Countdown to one then.”

Deep breath.

“Five.”

It was stupid the way Tony’s heart raced.

“Four.”

They’d done this a lot now after all.

“Three.”

But there was something . . .

“Two.”

. . . disturbing about it anyway.

“One!”

Bruce threw his head back and what began as a very human yell, turned into a reverberating, inhuman roar. His clothes split apart and green muscles came tearing forth, rippling and bulging. It was unlike anything Tony could imagine in terms of his own body, but it still made his arc reactor ache with phantom pain.

“Everybody, just stay put,” Steve said in a low, calm voice, “until we see how this will go and then—”
Hulk spun in an angry circle, like he always did, and though Bruce had started with his back to Iron Man it only took a moment for Hulk to see him. He took a deep, shuddering breath that made his nostrils quiver and he gathered himself for the charge once again.

Steve was saying something into the comm, but Tony wasn’t even parsing the words while complex webs of data points fell suddenly into alignment. He could see it as clearly as an equation, could feel it in his gut. It was perfect.

“Stay put; nobody panic,” Tony said into the comm and heard the beginning of Steve’s answering “What do you m--” before he lost the connection in the suit.

Tony stepped out of the armor.

Hulk didn’t slow down.

Tony shivered in the cold as he watched Hulk charge.

(Fine. It’ll be fine--it makes sense, it--)

Tony could feel the ground shaking under Hulk’s thundering strides, still bellowing and snorting like an enraged bull.

(Logical. This will work. It will.)

Hulk looked like Bruce—some of the angles of his face, the proportions—and yet so very not .

(He wanted to call, “Hey, buddy, it’s me,” but somehow no sound came out and his jaw was locked shut.)

Tony could hear someone shout, but it was as if from a long tunnel and then suddenly, somehow Steve was there—cutting off the Hulk, getting between them, spinning with the shield and--

(No!) Hulk batted Steve aside like an irritating fly.

Steve landed in a crumpled heap of red, white, and blue; Tony thought his heart might burst, but in a split second Steve was up and running again.

(Thank God.)

But Hulk was still running and suddenly the scale of his miscalculation—(Impossible, I never miscalculate; but human factor, unstable variables, fuck fuck fuck)—hit him and it was too late to get back into the armor, too late to evade. Tony couldn’t move and he thought of the Hulk-fist-crater, six feet deep in the frozen ground, the depth of a grave and he couldn’t move and--

Hulk took a deep breath and paused.

He sniffed the air, nose wrinkling.

He cocked his head to one side, staring down at Tony, then bent down low—squinting at him with a huge green eye, the size of Tony’s head. Warm breath wafted over him and Tony expected it to smell foul—expected Hulk to smell foul—but he smelled oddly, comfortingly of Bruce. Ginseng and green tea.

Tony swallowed harshly and croaked out: “Hey, buddy. Just me.”

Hulk let out a snort.

Then with a little growl, he reached for the armor. He picked it up between two fingers and held it to his face. He sniffed it, frowned, and tossed it over his shoulder.

Hulk leaned down close again. Tony realized he was shaking uncontrollably.

Hulk poked him with a huge forefinger and sent Tony stumbling back with the force of it, but before he could fall Hulk caught him with his other hand. Then he cupped them together and lifted Tony up into the air, holding him to his face.

“RRRMMM,” Hulk rumbled.

“Hey, buddy,” Tony said again.

“HHRRRMMM.”

Hulk cocked his head and blinked a few times very quickly before starting to walk north. Tony shivered as a vicious wind whipped up, but Hulk blocked it with a vast hand.

“Wow. Okay,” Tony said, leaning into his palm. “You’re, like, really warm, you know?”
“HRM.”

“So, hey, where are we going?” Tony asked.

Hulk didn’t answer, just kept walking north. It was the direction they’d gone on all their rounds of ‘chase the Iron Man.’ After a long expanse of open ranch land, it turned into a nice fir grove where Hulk had played his strange game of calming jenga. Maybe if Tony was lucky, he’d do the same thing again and it wouldn’t be a long cold, boring day hanging out cupped in a pair of big green hands.

Usually, Tony would doubt his luck, but today he was feeling pretty damn lucky. He could hear the quinjet following at a discreet distance again. He waved at them with a cocky grin—though they probably couldn’t see it—and settled down to wait out the big guy.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Tony lost track of time.

The armor’s undersuit was designed to be good in a wide range of environments, but it wasn’t exactly a snowsuit. Still, the Hulk put off a truly impressive amount of body heat, so he wasn’t actively uncomfortable.

Mostly, he was just bored. And wished that he had a comm link to chat with the others. He could summon the armor with his new wrist bracelets—probably, possibly, if they worked—but didn’t want to do anything to alarm the Hulk. (Stupid. Stupid not to be fitted with an additional earpiece. Well, live and learn…)

They’d already walked to the fir grove, but Hulk had no interest in another round of jenga. He’d been entranced by the birds peeping and floofing in the trees, but after what seemed like hours and was probably thirty minutes, he’d wandered off again, back in the general direction of the house.

So until the big guy went on standby, it was just the occasional wave to the quinjet whenever Tony thought he was in view and a steady rambling monologue to the Hulk, punctuated by intermittent “RAAR”s and “HRRRM”s.

“But see, that’s where I really think Pepper’s wrong,” Tony rambled. “Just plain wrong about Dolce and Gabbana. I mean, their last line was outrageous. It was too weird and artistic to be wearable, but as actual art it was utterly pedestrian. The uncanny valley of art vs. fashion, as it were.”

“HMMMMRRRRRR,” Hulk rumbled. He’d started blinking a lot and—was it just Tony’s imagination—or was the big guy moving more slowly?

“And don’t even get me started on Michael Kors,” Tony said, pitching his voice a little softer. “He’s gotten full of himself since Project Runway, but some of those looks are basic. I mean wearable is great, but this is basic.”

Hulk set Tony down and then sat in the snow.

“Uh, yeah, fashion’s pretty boring,” Tony said. (Bruce wouldn’t remember his rambles, right?)

“Agreed. But I’ve kinda already filled you in on all my projects. I guess I could explain Mechanical Engineering 101—or better yet 7000—if you wanted, but—”

Hulk was looking at his own hands with fascination: peering down at them, then holding them to the light, moving them in and out, then wiggling his fingers. Frankly, he looked like a kid on ecstasy.

“Yep,” Tony said. “Those are hands all right.”

Hulk held a hand out to Tony and tipped his head to the side. On a sudden impulse, Tony put his tiny hand in Hulk’s giant one and started to stroke his palm very gently. (It was something his mother had done for him every night when she put him to bed. On the nights she’d been home, she’d sat on the edge of the bed, stroked his palm, and hummed to him very softly.)

Tony began to hum—the lilting, aimless sounds he remembered from so long ago—still stroking Hulk’s palm.

After a few long, peaceful minutes, the Hulk put his other hand on top of Tony’s, holding it between his palms. He blinked at Tony slowly, like a lazy housecat with big, round brown eyes.

(Wait—brown?)

And then it was like someone had let the air out of him, and he was shivering and shrinking—green giving way to peach and brown and Bruce.

Somehow they were still holding hands.

Bruce swayed on his feet, squinting in confusion.
“Tony?” he said, then collapsed in a naked heap in the snow before Tony could catch him.

“Shit!” Tony yelped.

He activated the bracelets and mumbled, “Hurry, J! Skip the spinning rims!”—not that JARVIS could hear him until he had the suit.

It arrived in mere seconds—Tony hadn’t realized he was so close to their starting point. Even despite his concern for Bruce, Tony felt a wave of reassurance as the suit assembled around him.

“What’s wrong,” Tony asked urgently. “Give me a full bioscan, J.”

“Dr. Banner has lost consciousness,” JARVIS said. “Readings suggest exhaustion, rather than injury or disease, though he is becoming dangerously cold.”

“Oh thank God,” Tony said, hurrying to take the emergency blanket from the suit and wrap it awkwardly around his friend.

“Repeat! Come in, Iron Man,” Cap was saying into the comm.

“Right,” Tony said, gathering Bruce into his arms. “Right here, Cap. I’ve got Bruce. He passed out, but JARVIS’s scans say he’s fine. I’m flying him back to the ranch now to get him warm and will meet you there.”

There was a long pause. Then Steve answered in his Captain America voice: “Confirmed, Iron Man. Rendezvous at the Ranch.”

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Tony should have realized that it would be pretty damn awkward flying a naked, blanket wrapped, unconscious Bruce back to the ranch, into the house, down the hall, and putting him in bed. Still, he managed it. Tony had JARVIS run a few more scans, then stepped out of the suit to pile blankets on top of Bruce, turn up the heat, and put a glass of water by his bedside. (Would he get Hulk drop? Was that even a thing? Unclear, but he’d seemed to like it when people gave him blankets and tea post-transformation.)

After he was certain that Bruce was ok, Tony hurried into his parka and went out to meet the team.

“Bruce is fine, I’m awesome, you’re welcome!” Tony called as the others stepped down the ramp from the quinjet.

Clint and Natasha hung back, but Steve barrelled towards him.

“Tony!” Steve said, ripping off the hood and helmet. His face looked . . . off; his movements were stiff. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“OK?” Tony cried with a grin. “Are you kidding!? I’m great! I did it!”

Steve’s mouth dropped open with shock for a moment and he stared at Tony wide eyed. He shook his head in disbelief, then erupted:

“What the hell were you thinking???”

Tony took a startled step back.

“Of all the stupid, reckless, things to—” Steve yelled. “You could have gotten yourself killed!”

“But I didn’t,” Tony said, trying to stay calm. “I made a major breakthrough and nobody was even injured.”

“You were way out of line, Iron Man,” Steve said harshly. Tony bristled at the code name. “You should have talked to us!”

“There was no time!” Tony snapped. “It was a sudden inspiration.”

“Bullshit. There would have been other training sessions,” Steve said. “We’re a team; you have to act like one.” Tony glared, but Steve pressed on, voice rising. “You should have talked with us! Explained your plan!”

“If I’d waited to do that, you never would have agreed!”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Tony knew he’d said the wrong thing.

“All the more reason!” Steve shouted. Tony took another step back and Steve took a deep breath. “What you did was wrong,” he said in a more level tone. “If you knew we wouldn’t agree, you had no right to make that call.”

“I’m the one who would have gotten hurt!” Tony protested angrily.

“And Bruce is the one who’d have to live with it.”
Tony blinked, startled, and took a sharp breath.

"It was wrong," Steve said, voice low and vehement, expression furious. "If you knew we wouldn’t agree—if you knew Bruce would refuse—how dare you? How dare you take that choice away from him."

Tony’s stomach fell. (Bruce . . .)

Tony shook his head angrily, as if to clear it.

“Stop pretending this is about Bruce!” Tony sneered, jabbing a finger at Steve. “This is about you and your stupid fucking Dominance being threatened! Now that I’m your sub you can’t handle me thinking for myself in the field!”

Steve’s jaw dropped, stunned for a moment, then outraged. “What the hell, Tony!?”

Steve shook his head and spoke, part frustrated and part imploring: “How can you say that? I thought we were past this, and—”

“Oh, hey, I guess not,” Tony cut in, body thrumming with adrenaline and words pouring from his mouth, not listening to Steve.

“—that you trusted me now.”

Tony waved his hands, all frantic energy as he yelled over Steve’s soft entreaties: “Sorry I’m such an uppity little thing! If you expected me to become some sweet obedient angel, don’t hold your breath.”

“What are you talking like this? I would never—”

“I’m still the same disobedient brat,” Tony snapped, “even now that we’re fucking.”

Steve recoiled, but Tony was on a roll.

“So go ahead! Yell at me! Jump in and assume I don’t know what I’m doing and need a big strong Dom to protect me from—”

“DAMNIT, Tony!” Steve roared, cutting a hand sharply through the air. Tony went quiet with surprise.

“God DAMN it, I love you! How can you say—”

Steve cut himself off, face going tight.

Tony felt like he’d been doused in ice water.

“I didn’t mean to say that,” Steve said, voice low and rough. “I didn’t mean to say that. Like that.”

(Fuck.)

“Steve, I—”

Tony wasn’t even sure how to finish that sentence. (I won’t hold you to it? I’m sorry? I do trust you. I lo—) Tony took a step towards him.

“I can’t do this,” Steve said, backing away. “I—I can’t—”

With that, Steve turned and strode away from the house, towards the southern copse of fir trees.

Tony stood staring after him.

(“God DAMN it, I love you!”)

His heart was pounding.

(“God DAMN it, I love you!”)

Tony tried to swallow, but his throat was dry.

(“—I love you!”)

His eyes were watering with the cold. (Fuck.)

(He loves me . . .)

Tony wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing there—seconds? minutes?—when he heard crunching in the snow behind him. He turned to see Clint and opened his mouth to say—he wasn’t sure what—but Clint cut him off.

“Don’t even,” he growled. “I am so fucking pissed, I can’t even. What the hell were you thinking, asshole?”
“Uh--”

“Go to hell, Stark,” Clint snapped and strode away, following Steve towards the little copse.

Tony was finding it oddly hard to move from where he stood. It was as if he was frozen, rooted to the spot while his mind raced furiously and his stupid body coursed hot with adrenaline. He felt torn in twenty different directions, everything a horrible jumble.

The sun emerged from behind a cloud and Tony snapped his eyes shut, snow dazzled.

Tony heard the soft crunch of snow approaching from the house; it had to be Natasha.

“I suppose you’ve come to yell at me too,” Tony said bitterly, opening his eyes with a wince.

Natasha shook her head, expression solemn.

“No,” she said. “What you did was . . . efficient.”

She held out a shot glass. Vodka. Of course it was vodka.

Tony drank it.

It reminded him once again he didn’t much care for straight vodka, but when Natasha held out the bottle to pour him another he accepted. She settled on the front step of the ranch and he joined her.

They sat in silence for a while.

Really, they should go inside. It was absurd to be sitting outside in the cold like this, his cheeks and fingers tingling unhappily.

“Well, I’m glad at least you’re not mad at me,” Tony said morosely, staring into his glass.

Nat shrugged. “It was efficient. And effective.” Her voice was light. “Sometimes that matters, even if the process is . . . imperfect.”

Her eyes lingered on Tony’s neck for a moment and she made a little gesture with her clenched fist.

(I suppose we’re alike after all. Guess I can’t hold the needle-without-warning against you anymore, huh?)

(Shit.)

He’d been enraged over that needle.

(Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.)

Tony’s stomach fell.

(Bruce. )

Tony groaned and threw back the vodka.

(Fuck.)

“Tony?” Natasha said softly. “Let’s go in.”

Tony frowned, staring into the copse of trees.

(“I can’t do this.”)

There was no sign of Steve.

(“I can’t do this.”)

“Tony?” Natasha repeated.

(What did Steve mean?)

Natasha pulled gently on Tony’s sleeve.

“Give it a while,” Nat said. “But now, it’s time to go in.”

Tony gave a tight nod and followed her into the ranch.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I really appreciate it. *collapses in a heap*
I'm SO HAPPY to finally be back! At last, I carved out time for P&P and managed to get around all the stuff that made this chapter tricky to write. I really hope it worked! By now you are very familiar with my addiction to knowing which lines or bits you liked best and reading any ramblings or curiosities you might have in response. (I may answer slowly, but I truly do love it!) Nothing feeds the muse like your kind words. I really wouldn't have been able to keep this up for nearly four years without you.

Thank you so much for making this such a magical journey. <3 <3 <3
It was very quiet in his--their--bedroom.

Tony sat on the edge of the unmade bed; it still smelled of last night's frolicking.

His mind flipped between memories of their happy panting--full of laughter, fumbling their way to climax--and this afternoon's disaster.

("I can't do this.")

The words rang in his head over and over. (But Steve couldn't mean . . . could he?)

Natasha had brought Tony a plate of sandwiches and a big mug of coffee. (Had she been taking lessons from Pepper?) He'd barely touched them. (Steve said "love". He couldn't mean . . . "This" couldn't be them, could it?)

Tony alternated between sitting morosely and pacing furiously.

(He could fix this. He had to fix this.)

Tony growled. He'd made the right call and yet somehow he'd still fucked it up.

"Jarvis?"

"Yes, sir?"

It felt too terribly pathetic to ask "Is Steve back yet?"; if he was but hadn't come to find Tony, he didn't really want to know.

"Is Bruce still ok?"

"Dr. Banner's brain activity on current medical monitoring indicates that he is sleeping deeply," JARVIS answered.

"Ok. Well, when he wakes up, let me know," Tony said, then amended it--not eager to talk to Bruce. "Or, well, when he gets up."
“Of course, sir.”

Tony downed some more of the coffee.

(“I’m not willing to throw caution to the wind! . . . And endanger other people !!!”)

The coffee was bitter and had long since gone cold.

(“Promise me,” Bruce had said, in a rough voice, “Promise you won’t do anything stupid.”

“I promise.”)

The coffee roiled in Tony’s stomach as he remembered his conversation with Bruce.

He wanted to talk to Ste-- to someone. For once he didn’t want to be alone with his thoughts. (Waiting for the other shoe to drop.). He grabbed his phone and tapped “M” in his contacts. His finger hovered over the letters: MISTRESS OF THE UNIVERSE.

(Fuck.)

What the hell would he say to Pepper?

Tony scrolled down to “R.”

What the hell would he say to Rhodey?

Tony threw his phone back on the end table with a clatter. He couldn’t stay there, couldn’t just wait. He rushed down the hall, grateful to find the living room empty, and slammed the door to his little workshop.

It was cold and silent. The bots were in New York.

“JARVIS? Give me all our data on the portal energy signatures.”

“I regret, Sir, that this workshop is not yet equipped with holoscreens.”

Tony wanted to scream with frustration.

(He had to fix this.)

“Just give me Led Zeppelin. Loud.”
Tony was disassembling an old Mark IV gauntlet when he noticed a silent shadow fall across the floor from the doorway. It sent his heart racing and a shaky jolt of adrenaline bursting through his veins.

“Silence the music, J.”

Tony set his tools down very carefully and stepped away from the workbench.

“May I come in?” Steve asked stiffly.

Tony nodded and Steve entered, closing the workshop door behind him. They stood staring at each other in silence for long, painful moments. Steve was still wearing his uniform, but must have left his snowy boots in the boot tray when he came in. He’d changed into his house slippers; they looked ridiculous with his combat uniform. Any other time Tony might have teased him about it.

“We need to talk,” Steve said.

Tony felt like he’d been punched; his stomach fell and the air rushed from his lungs so fast it left him half-dizzy.

(No!)

“Steve . . . ?”

Tony held out a hand imploringly.

(I have to fix this.)

Tony crashed to his knees, landing so hard on the concrete that he gasped as pain shot up his body. He bowed his head and lifted his palms. He heard Steve take a sharp breath.

“Get up.”

(Fuck.). Tony shook his head and raised his hands. Steve took a step back.

“Tony, get up.”

Tony didn’t move.

“We have to talk. I can’t . . . I can’t talk to you like this. Not when I’m angry; it’s not right.”

Tony still didn’t move.
“Come on, Tony,” Steve said, voice suddenly soft. “Get up. We have to talk.”

Tony struggled to his feet, cheeks flaming with humiliation.

“Are you breaking up with me?” Tony asked roughly.

Steve looked startled, then he shook his head and answered, voice low and vehement: “Never.”

Steve’s arms opened a little and Tony pressed close; they stood clinging to each other. The body armor was still cold from outside, hard and unyielding, but Tony didn’t care as he nearly sagged with relief.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper,” Steve whispered against Tony’s cheek. He rubbed Tony’s back for a few minutes. Eventually, he added with a sigh, “But we really do need to talk.”

Tony gave a laugh that was almost giddy with relief.

(Never say “we need to talk,” Steve.)

“Ok.”

“Look,” Steve said uncomfortably, “We need to have two conversations: Captain America and Iron Man, and then Steve and Tony, ok?”

“Fine,” Tony said, recovering some of his composure and stepping (reluctantly) from Steve’s arms.

“I’m sorry I had to go cool off,” Steve said. “I was . . . upset. By our, uh, conversation.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Fight.”

Steve nodded in acknowledgement. “By our fight.” He sighed again. “But now that you’ve had some time to think, can’t you see that what you did was wrong?”

“Yes,” Tony agreed easily, trying to look contrite. (What did it matter? It wasn’t like he’d have to test the same theory that way again.)

Steve glared.

“You still think you were right,” Steve said stiffly. His brow knit and his mouth went pinched.

“No!” Tony protested, then looked away and admitted softly, “Well, yes. I mean--I could feel it. Couldn’t you? Bruce was so discouraged; we were losing him. And then I realized! Hulk was smelling us. But he couldn’t smell me in the suit; it was like he thought Iron Man was a danger to the rest of the team. If I’d waited to talk it through, we’d never have gotten Hulk to a place he could start joining the team.”
“Why’s it all or nothing with you?!” Steve asked with frustration, running his fingers through his hair and shaking his head, clearly agitated.

“Come on,” Tony protested, getting annoyed again. “You would never have agreed!”

“To you jumping out of the armor, with no backup and no place to retreat to? Damn straight we wouldn’t have agreed.” Steve said, getting louder with every word. “But that’s not the only way we could have tested your theory!”

Tony snorted and Steve scowled at him.

“You couldn’t have just put the faceplate up first?” Steve asked.

(Shit. Why hadn’t he thought to . . .?)

“It was about a radical display of trust,” Tony said.

“I thought it was about letting Hulk smell you.”

“That too.”

“It still would have been worth trying before risking your life,” Steve ground out. “Or we could have put you further out, no suit, with all of us between you and Hulk. Or you could have been on the ramp of the Quinjet, ready to run in if things went south. Or you could have just skipped a training session and we could have seen what he did without Iron Man. There were other options. But you didn’t have the patience to wait or the trust in your team to present your theory and talk it through.”

Tony didn’t really have anything to say to that.

“This isn’t about us,” Steve said. Tony raised an eyebrow. “I mean, it sort of is—but we’re still teammates. We have to work together in the field. All of us. We have to communicate.”

Tony nodded stiffly.

“If you have another theory—get another sudden inspiration—can I trust you to talk it through with us first?”

“Yes.”

Steve frowned at him. “Why do I feel like that was too easy and you’re just placating me?”

“Because you’re a very suspicious Captain?”

“Tony . . .”
“Fine. I—” he took a deep breath. “I promise that if it’s at all possible I’ll talk to the team before changing a training or a battle plan.”

Steve looked skeptical. “Do you mean that?”

“I swear on JARVIS’s servers.”

Steve’s mouth quirked up at the corners.

“I’m holding you to that, Iron Man.”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

And just like that, Steve seemed to go limp. The stiff, stern, terrible set of his jaw and posture—the thing that had sent Tony panicking—seemed to flow out of him. He opened his arms again and Tony hurried to hug him. Steve shuddered.

“Jesus, Tony,” he said into Tony’s messy hair, his voice wrecked. “I really thought I was going to watch you die right in front of me.”

Steve clutched him so tight it almost hurt, but was still comforting.

“I’m sorry,” Tony murmured. He stroked his hands across Steve’s back, then—desperate for skin—reached up to where the cowl hung down so he could touch Steve’s neck and run his fingers through his hair.

Steve shuddered again and breathed in deep as if trying to memorize Tony’s scent.

“What you said earlier . . .” Steve began softly, words halting. “Did you mean it?”

Tony blinked. (What I said earlier?)

Steve took a sharp breath and pulled back so he could see Tony’s face, putting distance between them.

“Did you mean it, Tony?” he repeated. It looked like Steve was bracing for a blow. “Is that really what you think of me? Still?”

(Oh! Oh fuck.)

“No!” Tony answered urgently and too loud. “God no! Of course not, Steve.”

Steve was still frowning, brow knit with worry. He stepped out of Tony’s arms.
“But you said that--”

“I didn’t mean it,” Tony said, taking a step closer. “I shouldn’t have said that. Any of it. I didn’t mean it.”

“But if there weren’t something there,” Steve said, “if at least some part of you didn’t think that--”

“No! It was . . .” Tony shook his head. “Habit. From the past.” Tony’s voice went light and breezy, trying to lighten the mood, “Don’t take me so seriously.” Tony shrugged. “I didn’t mean it. It was nothing.”

Steve stared, blank and uncomprehending for a few long moments then repeated, “Nothing” with a slight upward lilt.

Tony shrugged and gave a (hopefully) apologetic smile.

“Nothing,” Steve repeated again, a storm gathering across his face. He glared.

“Damnit, Tony,” Steve’s voice was practically vibrating with frustration. “I’ve been so careful with you, so afraid I was going to muck it up! Walking on eggshells, terrified I’d do something awful that I couldn’t even understand, couldn’t anticipate, because I’m all wrong here--two left feet and five thumbs-- and then you throw it all in my face and now say it’s nothing! How can you--”

(Fuck.). Tony’s stomach flipped again. (I really hurt you.).

“I’m so sorry,” Tony cut in urgently. He grabbed Steve’s hand and started to kneel again.

Steve jerked, pulling him up before Tony’s knees could touch the ground.

“Stop doing that,” Steve hissed.

(Fuck, fuck, fuck.). Tony’s heart kicked into high gear again.

“You can’t just kneel to get out of talking to me,” Steve said, low and vehement. “When we fight, we fight. We talk--like this. Equals.”

(Oh, what--we’re not equals when I kneel?). Tony bit back the bitter words he doesn’t even mean, the kind that got him into this trouble in the first place.

“When you kneel, I can’t--” Steve shook his head. “It’s not right--not right to be angry when a sub’s kneeling. It’s all wrong when you’re like that, so it’s like forcing me to--”. He let out a frustrated breath, searching for words. “It’s like shutting me up and forcing me to forgive you and say I’m ok, even when I’m not.”

Tony swallowed roughly. (I believe the term you’re looking for is ‘emotionally manipulative.’). But Tony didn’t say it out loud. (Unhealthy orientational dynamics 101, ladies and gentlemen!)
Tony licked his lips and took a cautious step closer, not breaking eye contact. Steve was still holding his hand; Tony squeezed it.

“You’re right,” Tony said quietly. “It’s not ok. I shouldn’t do that to you. And I shouldn’t have said what I did.” Looking up at Steve, Tony felt a sharp stab of guilt that made his eyes prickle.

“It was cruel,” Tony said, dropping his gaze in shame then forcing himself to look up, not to seem like he’s performing another act of manipulative submission. “I lashed out. Because I was angry that you were right—I didn’t think about Bruce, but I didn’t want to admit it, even to myself.”

Tony took a sharp breath; he could feel his throat go tight and his cheeks flame.

“You’re—” There were tears pooling in Tony’s eyes; he tried not to blink, not wanting them to spill. “You’re the kindest, most trustworthy, respectful Dominant I’ve ever—”. His breath hitched and he couldn’t finish, couldn’t force the words past the lump in his throat.

Steve’s expression was soft and tender as he cupped Tony’s face in his large hands.

“I meant it, you know,” Steve murmured, gazing down into his eyes. “I’ve been holding the words in for so long. Wasn’t how I meant to say it, but I do mean it.” He licked his lips and smiled.

“I love you, Tony Stark,” Steve said solemnly, like a vow. Tony blinked. Two tears rolled down his cheeks, and Steve brushed them away with his thumbs. “I love you so much.”

Tony gasped, finding his voice again.

“I love you too.”

It was a raw, choked out noise, as he crashed into Steve, desperate to be kissed and taken and owned.

Tony’s hands scrabbled at the uniform as he nipped and kissed, gasping out “I’m sorry” and “I love you” and “Steve!” Steve was slower, more deliberate, gentler in his answering, “I know,” “It’s okay; we’re ok,” “I’ve got you,” “I love you, Tony.”

“Please,” Tony begged, his heart pounding and his cock impossibly hard as he rutted against Steve, desperate for every part of them to be together. “Steve, please!”

Steve worried at his throat, bringing a mark to life, and Tony moaned.

“Fuck! Steve, please, oh God. I need you,” Tony gasped. “Fuck me!”

“Yeah,” Steve growled. He hoisted Tony into his arms like he weighed nothing and Tony wrapped his legs around Steve’s waist, rutting his hard cock up against Steve’s body.

“Yes!” Tony moaned. “Please! Take me hard. Fuck me, own me, please!”
“God!” Steve gasped, slamming Tony into the wall and sending the breath out of him with a cry. “Tony, fuck. I want you, want you so bad.”

“I’m yours. Please, Steve, please. Don’t make me wait.”

“Mine!” Steve growled and he bit down hard on Tony’s shoulder. Pain shot through Tony’s body, pushing him higher. He whinned.

Steve grabbed his wrists and pinned them hard above his head, crushing them into the wall, powerful and inescapable and fuck!

“Fuck me!”

“Yes…”

Steve kneeded his ass, pushing rough fingers against his crack through his trousers for a moment before ripping his pants open and touching bare flesh.

“Fuck!”

“Tony,” Steve said, voice raw but controlled. “Don’t move your hands. Can you do that for me, baby?”

Tony nodded.

“Good boy,” Steve crooned. Tony shivered with pride and pleasure.

“Tony? What’s your safeword?”

Tony blinked, heart pounding.

(Safeword?)

“Sweetheart?” Steve said, “I need you to tell me your safeword.” He squeezed Tony’s wrists. “Answer me.”

(Oh right.)

Tony licked his lips. “It’s . . . It’s ‘safeword.’”

“Good,” Steve said softly. “Good boy.”

Tony felt a rush of heady pleasure. (Good, good boy. . .)
“And can I get a color?”

Tony blinked. It was hard to focus. He licked his lips. Steve shifted his weight slightly and the movement rubbed Tony’s cock against his abs. He gasped.

“Green! Fuck, Steve. Green! Please!”

“Mine,” Steve growled. “Keep your hands right there; don’t move.”

Tony kept his hands above his head, pressed to the wall as Steve released them, bringing his hand down to caress Tony’s cheek. Then, very gently, Steve wrapped his hand around Tony’s throat.

(Good, so good, please please . . .)

Steve kissed his forehead. Then his left cheek, then his right—his hand a warm, steady weight around Tony’s exposed throat.

“I love you,” Steve murmured against his lips. “I love you so much, sweetheart.”

“Please,” Tony whispered. Steve’s hand tightened, not enough to restrict his air, but enough to be felt—a strong pressure. “Steve”

“Yeah,” Steve answered. “Good boy.”

And then Steve was moving him, moving against him, so every motion rubbed Tony’s cock, trapped and leaking between them.

It was delicious, dizzying. There wasn’t enough air. He was moaning and whining as Steve held him up against the wall, rutting and kissing. Steve’s tongue was rough and heavy in his mouth and Tony sucked on his tongue desperately, wanting Steve inside him every way he could have him, wanted to suck him, take him in, get fucked raw and hard.

“Ah!” Tony cried out, pulling his mouth from Steve’s, panting for breath as Steve moved him faster, up and down against his hard body.

“Yeah,” Steve growled. “You’re gorgeous, so gorgeous like that . . . Give yourself to me . . . let go, baby . . .”

“Ah!”

“Suck,” Steve ordered, pushing two fingers into Tony’s mouth. Tony obeyed eagerly, desperately, like sucking on Steve was the only thing that could relieve this ache. He was half ready to beg for Steve’s dick, wanting it to choke him, hard and thick down his throat, when Steve pulled his fingers away.

“Good boy.”
Tony made a noise of protest as Steve deprived him of something to suck, but then those lovely fingers were rubbing at his hole, slick and insistent and he thought his heart might burst.

Steve kissed him, rough and demanding and Tony matched him stroke for stroke as those clever fingers pressed urgently inside him and Steve pushed and pulled, moving Tony up and down against his body again and again and again.

It was overwhelming, hot burning chaos and he thought he might fly apart.

“Steve! Steve, I’m close-- I’m--”

“Come for me Tony,” Steve ordered, fucking his fingers into him hard. “Come for me.”

Tony whined. It was almost-- almost--

Steve bit his throat and he came, dizzy and gasping; his body clenched hard on Steve’s fingers as he spilled between them.


“Love you,” Tony answered muzzily, his whole body lax.

“I’ve got you, darling,” Steve promised, pulling Tony’s hands down around his shoulders. He kissed Tony tenderly. “I’ve got you.”

TBC . . .

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your love and support. I'm home for Christmas with my family, which for me means thinking a lot about love and gratitude. I'm grateful for you, for giving me the opportunity to share my writing and for helping me to think deeply about social justice, gender, and sexuality. This story has brought me through some rough times. Thank you for every kudo, comment, and just plain reading the darn thing.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Hoping to have the rest of this (somewhat abridged) chapter to you soon!

Xoxoox
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY!!! :)

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience. Slow author is always slow.

Infinite thanks to all the usual suspects. Y'all know who you are, you generous comment leaving lovelies! ((hugs))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve carried Tony over to the workshop couch and sat down heavily with Tony straddling his lap. Steve fumbled around for the ratty lap robe tossed across the backrest; he wrapped it around Tony’s shoulders, letting it hang down to cover his ruined trousers and bare ass.

Tony blinked, pulling a little further from his post-sex lethargy.

Steve’s cock was still hard between them. Tony frowned.

“Steve, please--You didn’t? Let me. I want--”

“I’ve got you,” Steve murmured soothingly.

“I still want you to fuck me,” Tony whispered, nuzzling Steve’s throat. “Want to feel you inside me.”

Steve moaned and his hips twitched up eagerly. Tony planted open mouthed kisses down his neck and behind his ear.

“I want you so bad, Steve,” Tony said, not ashamed to beg. “Please, please fuck me. Don’t make me wait.”

“God, Tony,” Steve said in a rough voice. His fingers clutched at Tony’s arms for a moment, digging in hard, before releasing him abruptly and stroking gently up and down.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me,” Tony promised, then amended: “You won’t injure me . . . And I like to hurt.”

“Fuck,” Steve gasped. His entire body went tight under Tony’s.

“Would you like that?” Tony asked, voice low and seductive. “Would you like to hurt me?”

Steve’s Dominant’s notch bobbed as he swallowed hard.

“I--” Steve’s ears were pink and he looked at Tony wild-eyed. He took a long, deep breath.

“I want you so much it scares me,” Steve confessed roughly against his neck.

“I’m yours. Take me. However you want,” Tony said simply. “I trust you.”

Without meaning to, Tony dropped his gaze and tilted his head down as he felt the blush spread across his cheeks.

Steve was breathing harshly and Tony knew if he took Steve’s pulse he’d find it racing.

Suddenly, Steve surged up, tipping Tony back across his lap and taking his mouth roughly in a deep kiss. Steve’s hips rocked up and he let out a little gasp. His left hand supported Tony between his shoulder blades and his right reached up to caress Tony’s neck.

Tony let out an encouraging little murmur as Steve plundered his mouth and he relaxed back into Steve’s embrace. (Steve would never let him fall.). He loved it when Steve bent him back like this, surrounding him, supporting him, holding him pinned and helpless . . .

When Steve’s hand closed around his throat, Tony moaned and writhed against Steve’s body. It was far too soon for him to get hard again, but it felt so good, so very good to feel a warm pressure around his neck and the evidence of Steve’s passion.
Steve’s movement was growing more urgent, something almost frantic to it, and Tony felt a sharp burst of desire. He wanted to get Steve off. Wanted Steve to use his body and take what he wanted, wanted to have his mouth fucked, then stumble to bed and start over again, to come with Steve’s cock deep inside him and--

Tony moaned and urged Steve on. He pulled at Steve’s back, eager to get him to move, but Steve grabbed his wrist and pinned it behind him.

“Ah!”

“Mine,” Steve growled, biting down on his neck again and pulling at the flesh with his teeth. “Mine.”

“Please,” Tony whimpered. “Steve, I want--”

“Apologies,” JARVIS said making Steve bark in shock. He turned vibrantly red and looked up in horror at the ceiling speakers.

“Dr. Banner is awake,” J announced softly. “He is asking--”

“Tell him I’ll--” Tony cut in eagerly.

“--for you, Captain.”

“--be right there.”

“For me?” Steve said.

“Yes, Captain Rogers.”

Tony’s heart sank. “Did he say anything to me?”

“I regret not, sir.” JARVIS said it gently.

Tony sighed.

“I’d better go,” Steve said, still holding Tony close.

The moments slid by, neither of them willing to let go.

At last, Steve released Tony’s wrist, but didn’t move away. His breathing was still ragged, his dick hard in his unyielding uniform pants.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. Steve still didn’t move; he actually looked nervous.

(Shit. Why would Bruce ask for Steve instead of--)

“I shouldn’t keep him waiting,” Steve said.

“Nope,” Tony agreed. He slid off Steve’s lap with reluctance and a long sigh.

Steve nodded and got stiffly to his feet. He stood, breathing deeply, expression stoic. (Mentally preparing for Bruce? Willing his hard-on away? Both?)

“Uh, Steve?” Tony said.

“Yes?”

“There’s cum on your uniform.”

“Oh geeze,” Steve swore, looking down at the mess of Tony’s spend across the red, white, and blue armor.

“Sorry,” Tony said, with a lopsided smile.

“No, it’s fine,” Steve said, “I just, uh--”

Steve looked awkwardly around the workshop--ears still bright pink-- and suddenly Tony couldn’t help it. He started laughing and, after a momentary look of startlement, Steve joined in.

Tony hopped up with a grin and grabbed one of his clean(-ish) work rags.

“Don’t worry,” Tony said, “I designed it to be easy to clean.”

Tony wiped at the uniform with the rag, poured some water from his water bottle on it, and (most of) the lingering evidence of their passion was gone.

“I’d better go,” Steve repeated, glancing at the door with a frown.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, wanting to say something else but not finding the right words.
Steve leaned down to place a quick kiss on Tony’s cheek and then disappeared down the hall.

Tony sighed.

Then he glared up at the ceiling. “Seriously, J? You couldn’t have waited a few minutes?”

“Dr. Banner’s request seemed . . . most urgent.”

Tony sighed again.

(Talk about a buzzkill.)

He really should go and get himself cleaned up. And get a new, unripped pair of trousers. Tony poked his head out the workshop door. (Coast is clear.) He wrapped the blanket around his waist and went to the master bedroom to change.

And to wait.

He hated waiting.

After about five minutes, he couldn’t wait any more. Couldn’t just sit there.

Tony went back to the workshop.

(He’d momentarily considered heading to the kitchen for coffee, but Clint was in there. Clint scowled so hard at the sight of him, he pretended he’d been going straight to the workshop to begin with.)

He had a Mark IV gauntlet to play with.

Without coffee.

(Soooooo…. Bruce.).

Tony opened the gauntlet’s rear plate with his favorite #2 screwdriver.

(About earlier. I’m sorry. If you’re mad.)

Tony toyed with a loose screw for a moment before setting it the parts teacup. He glared at the old wiring. (No. That was no good.) Some of the interior plates and transistors had corroded. Tony took a deep breath and yanked the circuits free.

(I broke my word and disrespected your wishes.)

Tony nodded and bit his lip. Better to just get it all out at once, full abject and abashed.

(Bruce, I can’t apologize enough.)

Tony smiled and grabbed a fresh set of plating.

(I can fix this.)

*****

Tony jumped when there was a light knock on the workshop door. (Bruce!) He tossed his soldering gun aside eagerly.

“Come in!” Tony called.

It was Steve. He looked . . . exhausted. He gave Tony a wan smile. Tony grimaced in sympathy, heart sinking.

“How is he?” Tony asked.

Steve sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Not great,” he admitted. “He’s . . . He’s pretty upset, Tony.”

“I can fix this,” Tony said confidently and strode towards the door.

Steve caught his arm.

“Tony—” Steve sighed again and shook his head. “He doesn’t want to see you.”

“I’m going to apologize,” Tony assured him, trying to shove past.

“Ok. I’m glad,” Steve said, not letting go. “But, Tony: he doesn’t want to see you. He said so.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tony said, jerking his arm free. “You’ll see. I just need to—”

Steve physically blocked the door.
“What the hell, Steve? Get out of the way.”

“For God’s sake, Tony!” Steve threw his hands into the air. “He said he wants to be left alone! Why can’t you just listen !?”

Tony glared. Steve took a deep breath. Again.

“He’s angry you disrespected his wishes,” Steve said firmly. “So your solution is to do it again? You’re smarter than that.”

Tony wanted to scream at Steve, but didn’t. Because Steve was right and he really should know better.

Tony sagged with disappointment. (And guilt.)

“Shit,” he said, dejected.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, folding Tony in his arms. “Shit.”

Tony sighed and glanced over to his workbench, where the old gauntlet laid partially repaired and surrounded by his tools and spare parts. He sighed again.

(Goddamnit.)

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! And for sticking with me for all this time. Happy valentine’s day, friends. I’m happy to spend this holiday with you and Steve and Tony and my lovely beta who made time for a last minute reading.

The Muse has been a little difficult lately, so musings (heh), questions, and curiosity are extra encouraged and appreciated. Thanks and more thanks. <3 <3 <3
The next few days were hell.

Well, ok. Not hell exactly. (He’d spent three months in hell...) But deeply unpleasant.

For three days, Bruce didn’t leave his room. The rest of the team rehashed old training exercises without him. Clint called him "asshole," instead of "Stark" or "Tony." (At least he did until Steve caught him at it and snapped for him to "Knock it off, goddamn it." After that it was always "Iron Man" in a tone that still meant asshole. Part of Tony wanted to apologize to Clint too; but most of him was too pissed to do it). On the field, Steve coped with all the weirdness by being deeply stilted and formal. Only Natasha shot Tony the occasional raised eyebrow or smirking little half smile like usual.

So training sucked. His down time sucked too.

For whatever reason, it seemed like Bruce only wanted to see Steve after The Incident, so Tony hardly saw his Dom. Steve was almost always in Bruce’s room, talking in a low tone (not that Tony tried to eavesdrop because eavesdropping is wrong) about something he didn’t share with Tony. (Trying to keep Bruce on the team? Working on new safety protocols? (Hopefully) smoothing the way for Tony’s (increasingly abject) apology?) And when Steve came back he was always exhausted and a little melancholy.

So Tony was fucked.

Or rather, decidedly un-fucked. Steve’s ‘thank god you’re not dead, I’m gonna finally put my dick in you’ energy after their first ‘I love you’s’ had faded without any additional make-up sex. (Tony was definitely holding a grudge against JARVIS for his epic cockblocking.) In his weaker moments, he considered begging for it--something nice to distract from all the shit--but it felt wrong. Steve was well aware of Tony's desire in that area, so Tony just had to accept that Steve wasn’t ready and he couldn’t (or at least shouldn’t) badger the man he loves into fucking him.

At least he had the workshop.

And lots of dead time to practice a really good apology.

On day four, Bruce emerged from his room. (Or at least, emerged when Tony was around; presumably he hadn’t been resorting to a chamberpot all that time.)

“Good morning,” Bruce said a little hesitantly, waving to everybody.

“Bruce!” Tony cried. Totally unable to play it cool, he instantly blurted: ‘I’m so sorry.’

Clint was scowling and Natasha ignoring him. Tony nodded over his shoulder and entreated Bruce, “Can we just go . . . talk?”

“Let’s just have coffee,” Bruce said, a little stiffly.

“But I really want to tell you how--”

“I know,” Bruce said, holding up one hand. “Later. Ok?”

Tony nodded tightly, suffocating on words he wasn’t allowed to say. Steve entered the kitchen and, before Tony could get a word out, Bruce had exclaimed his name and asked him to come to talk privately.

“Of course, Bruce,” Steve said. He patted Tony’s shoulder as he went past, but didn’t stop.

“I’ve gotta . . . go,” Tony said with a vague gesture, not looking at Clint or Natasha before retreating to his workshop once more.

Tony wasn’t sure how long he’d been tinkering when Steve knocked on the workshop door and stepped inside. Tony knew it was bad; he’d brought the coffee carafe.

“Refill?” Steve asked, with an apologetic smile.
(Tony didn’t actually want more coffee—it was sour in his stomach—but he knew an expression of affection when he saw one and was eager for what he could get.)

“Sure.” He held out his cup.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Steve said, putting an arm around him and kissing his temple.

“For what?” Tony asked.

“I know it’s been hard. That Bruce won’t talk to you.”

“Not your fault.”

He could feel Steve shrug above him.

“Tony? Bruce thinks he’s ready to go back to training,” Steve said. It sounded like good news, but Tony could tell from his tone of voice there was a big ‘but’ coming.

“But he wants to try the transformation without Iron Man. To test your theory.”

“Right,” Tony said dully. (Sure. Testing my theory. Definitely not punishing me.)

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“It won’t be for long, but I think it’s the right call to train without you a few times.”

Tony’s mouth twisted, but the words (mostly) didn’t sound bitter when he said, “Aye-aye, Captain.”

“Don’t worry, Tony,” Steve said, giving him another kiss. “He’ll come around.”

Tony just nodded.

But it was too much. To hear the team training the next day and know he wasn’t welcome.

He couldn’t stand it. He wanted to jump in the suit and disappear.

At least he told Steve instead of just flying off. (Progress!)

“Is that really necessary?” Steve asked.

“Look,” Tony said, “I’m not being useful and it—” (hurts) “—sucks to just sit around while you train. Pepper could use the help, I could use the change of scene, and you can tell me when I’m out of the doghouse.”

Steve looked at him with big sad eyes, but nodded.

Tony didn’t stay to explain to the others.

He arrived in California in a flash.

“Tony!” Pepper cried in alarm when he set down at the landing pad later that evening. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” Tony said. “Why does something have to be wrong? Can’t a man visit?”

Pepper scowled for a moment, then looked worried again. She asked softly, “Did you and Steve . . .”

“What? No! God no.” Tony said, shaking his head emphatically. “Steve’s great. We’re great. Let’s go out!”

Pepper crossed her arms. “Maybe I have plans, Tony? Did you think of that?”

“Oh,” Tony said, trying not to droop with disappointment. “Do you?”

“Well, no,” Pepper admitted with a grimace. She gestured behind her at the piles of paperwork on the kitchen counter. “But I could have.”

“Let me help?”

“Only if you tell me what’s going on,” she said. “And call the next time you’re coming, damn it!”

<<<<

Pepper was great. The very best. She didn’t press him for details—though he could tell she was tempted—but (tough talk aside) let him get away with a vague, “I went off book in a training exercise when I shouldn’t have and now Bruce is angry with me. So I’m giving him space.”
It was a cop out. He knew it. She knew it. But she allowed it. (She was always too kind.)

They had a nice bottle of wine and Tony helped sort through some paperwork. He hated it, but he wasn’t half as bad at the business side of Stark Industries as some people assumed he was. He reviewed the Marketing Department’s proposed campaign for the next StarkTabs. (Pepper agreed wholeheartedly that there weren’t enough subs or POC in the campaign and was planning to have A Word with Jenny to have A Word with the New Guy.)

Tony didn’t fret. Much.

A text from Steve lit up his phone. Tony looked at it surreptitiously.

*Steve: Miss you already, sweetheart. I explained to the team.*

*Tony: Thanks. Sorry.*

A pause.

*Tony: I miss you too.*

*Steve: Good night. I love you, Tony.*

Tony sat smiling at his phone for a moment before beginning to type a reply. (It felt weird to just put it in words. Into writing. Had he done this before?)

*Tony: I love you too. Good night.*

Tony set his phone aside and realized Pepper was staring at him with a little smile.

“What?”

“You’re blushing.”

“What? No.”

“Mmmm-hmm.”

She looked back down at her report.

California was good for him. It felt soothing to be helpful (even if he suspected Pepper was giving him harmless busywork).

Three days later, Bruce called.

“Hello?” Tony said cautiously.

“Hi, Tony.”

“Hi.”

There was a long silence; Tony braced himself.

“Please come back,” Bruce said softly. “It’s not the same without you.”

“I’ll be there in time for dinner.”

As Tony closed in on the ranch, he saw a long figure standing outside, gazing up at the sky. He assumed it was Steve.

It was Bruce.

Tony landed and flipped up the faceplate, ready to pour out his apology (he’d practiced in his head the whole flight back), but before he could say anything--

“I forgive you.”

Tony stared at him in shock. “Bruce, I’m so sor--”

“I know.”

Tony frowned. “What is this? Some ‘love means never having to say you’re sorry’ bullshit?”

Bruce laughed, loud and smiling.

“I owe you an apology,” Tony said, “whether you need one or not. I shouldn’t have done that without your permission. It was wrong. It won’t happen again.”

Bruce nodded. “Good. I’m glad you understand that.”
Tony hesitated. “I didn’t,” he admitted, shamefaced. “Steve had to help me see it; but now I do. I’m sorry.”

“I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

They stood, side by side, watching as the vibrant red-orange light streaked the clouds and bounced off the snow, then slowly deepened towards purple.

Tony swallowed and glanced over at Bruce.

“Probably too soon to point out I was right, huh?”

Bruce let out a startled laugh, almost a shout, then turned to Tony with a sour expression.

“Your trust in me is terrifying,” he muttered. Then added, “And yes. Too soon. And too soon to admit that that pissed me off too.”

“Got it,” Tony said, something inside him quietly unwinding. “Too soon.”

“Bruce? Tony?” Steve called from the front porch, a dish towel thrown over his shoulder. “You two wanna come in? Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Yeah,” Tony called, smiling at his lover. “Hell, I’ll even set the table.”

With that, they walked inside.

“So, I take it you two are best buddies again?” Clint said wryly. (Or snidely? It was hard to tell.)

“Obviously,” Tony retorted. “I’d have already apologized to you too if you hadn’t started being such an asshole.”

“I wasn’t being an asshole,” Clint said, then added deadpan, “I was being more of a dick.”

“Asshole.”

“Dick.”

“Children, please,” Natasha said rolling her eyes.

“We good?” Tony asked more softly.

“We’re good.”

“I believe you offered to set the table?” Steve said.

“On it!” Tony called.

And it was nice.

Nice to be together.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there we go! Got them past that hurdle. Coming up next more training, more Steve, and going back to New York!

Thanks for reading! I couldn't keep writing this monster without you. Four years and counting...

p.s. “Love means never having to say you're sorry” is an iconic line from the hit 1970 film "Love Story" about a cross-class love story, love, forgiveness, and mortality. It's a memorable film, but this line always struck me as absolute bullshit.
Chapter Notes

I'm BACK! With extreme gratitude to lilragekitten who heroically figured out my timeline so I could focus on writing new chapters. The timeline revealed that Tony and Steve went on their first date just THREE WEEKS ago. Feels like years, doesn't it? Oh, right. In RL time it has been years. *face palm* I've gotta finish this story soon....

NB: I did a minor ret-con on the end of the last chapter; might help to go back and read the end bit... Sorry!

To: toystark@starkindustries.com, Tony Stark
From: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters
On: 27 January, 2013
Re: re: re: following up re: Maria Stark Foundation Fundraiser

Dear Mr. Stark,

I’m writing again to follow up with you about the arrangements for the Maria Stark Foundation Gala.

The venue has been finalized and we have a proposed menu and guest list for your approval. There are a few items where we need your input; they’re highlighted in red on the attached SIIF. Most urgently, we need to know if you can do pre-gala interviews again to publicize the event. Also, we need to know if your full team will be in attendance and whether you will be making a speech we should put in the program.

The Gala is quite soon so our inquiries are increasingly urgent. I look forward to your reply.

I hope this finds you well. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Katherine Winters.

>>>>

“You know, I really feel like we’re making up for a lot of things I missed in my childhood right now,” Tony said.

“Chatter on the comm,” Steve chastised half-heartedly.

“Seriously, though, am I the only one?” Tony asked, ignoring Steve’s admonishment. “Everybody else played catch as kids?!”

“BAAAAA!” Hulk yelled, tossing the ball way over Natasha’s head.

“Aww,” Tony said. “Think Big Green’s first word might be ‘ball’? I was counting on ‘Tony’! Or maybe ‘Da-da’ to Steve.”

“Not ‘Mama’?” Clint snarked.

“Steve’s hardly the ‘mama’ type and Nat’d kill him if he tried it,” Tony answered, tossing a new ball over to the Hulk.

“Who said I was thinking of Nat?”

“Ok, Birdbrain, if you’re implying I—”

“CHATTER!” Steve yelled, leaping into the air to catch Hulk’s (much gentler) toss, then sending the ball sailing smoothly to Nat who sent it to Clint then back to Hulk.

“Don’t you think,” Nat asked in a wry voice, “we could make an exception to the ‘quiet on the comm’ policy while playing catch ?”

“One might argue,” Tony jumped in, “that team banter is a key part of our cooperative dynamics and hence an asset to the Hulk acclimation process.”
“What he said!” Clint added.

“Fine,” Steve said with vague exasperation. “Just keep it cordial.”

“Don’t we always?” Tony asked sweetly.

“Absolutely!” Clint added. “Speaking of, have I mentioned what a . . . fascinating . . . fashion statement you’re making right now, Iron Man?”

“Yuck it up, fuzz face,” Tony said. “It’s working, isn’t it? Who cares if the aesthetics of partial armor are a bit . . . off.”

“BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB!” Hulk roared and tossed the ball back to Tony. Well, towards Tony. It sailed over his head by about ten feet and he’d have needed more than the gauntlets and chest plate to catch it.

“Gentle, Hulk,” Steve said in a patient voice. “Like this!” He demonstrated the soft underhand toss again.

“Da-da,” Clint snorted into the comm.

“RAAAAAAAAARRRRR!”

“You could say that again,” Tony said with a laugh.

“How long have we been at this?” Steve asked.

“Somewhere between ‘eternity’ and ‘forever’,” Tony answered.

“Long enough it’s time for dinner?” Clint said hopefully.

“Ok,” Steve said. “Why don’t I go start getting dinner on while Tony works his magic?”

“I’ll help!” Clint volunteered. “I don’t need to see Bruce’s naked body again.”

Nat set the ball down on the ground while the other two Doms went into the ranch.

“All right, Big Guy,” Tony said gently, approaching Hulk who was frowning at the stationary ball.

Tony pulled off his gauntlet and held out his hand, humming tunelessly.

“HHMMMMMMMMM.”

Hulk tried to give him the ball.

“Thanks, buddy,” Tony said, setting it down again. “Now then, how about you gimme your hand?”

“MMMMMMMMM.”

Tony’s humming became more and more deliberate. He realized it was turning into a down tempo version of “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” but he figured Bruce like The Beatles, so that was fine.

Very carefully, Hulk reached out his hand, holding it up to Tony’s.

“HMMMM.”

Hulk’s eyes turned brown and--in a now familiar transformation--he seemed to fold in on himself, leaving Bruce naked and trembling in his place. Nat hurried forward with his (redesigned) thermal robe.

“How’d we do?!” Bruce asked, looking around a little wild-eyed.

“Did great,” Nat answered with a smile.

“Did we--” Bruce frowned, stepping into the boots she handed him. “Were we playing catch?”

To: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters
From: mnguyen@starkindustries.com, Michael Nguyen
On: 30 January, 2013
Subj: new bet?

Okay, K. I’ll raise you twenty and dinner at Thompson’s that Stark won’t answer any emails--not
only for another week--but also until there’s direct intervention from Potts. Deal?

Also, I think I’ve got the ground feeders under control for the gala. Where are you with the Times. Bring notes to lunch? Also, I booked him on This Morning Today for February 6th--always easier to cancel than to book last minute. Do you want to pick one more? Just don’t send him to Parsons--he hated that guy last time.

Mikie

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>.>>>>>>

“Another?” Natasha asked with a smirk, throwing back the last of the vodka.

“Deal ’em!” Clint cried.

Bruce sighed. “Why not?”

“Deal me out,” Steve said. He stretched. “I think it’s time for bed. You coming, Tony?”

“And let her win again? Nope! This time, I shall be victorious!”

“Oh?” Steve asked, with a little smile. “Well, uh, I’m off to bed.”

Tony realized Steve’s ears were a little pink.

Oh.

Oh!

“One second thought,” Tony cried, throwing his cards down. “I’ll take pity on all of you. My luck was about to turn, but, uh, I am pretty tired so . . .”

Clint snorted, but Tony didn’t even care as he followed Steve eagerly to their bedroom.

(Finally.)

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

To: mnguyen@starkindustries.com, Michael Nguyen
From: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters
On: 30 January, 2013
Subj: re: new bet?

Deal! Direct intervention from Pepper before a reply. I’ll raise you 100 and a bottle of Highland Park.

And I practically own Bess at the Times at this point. She’s on Team Stark 100%. I’ll bring the guest list to lunch. Looking very good. The Macmillians will all be in attendance, which means big fundraising and better coverage. More to follow.

K

P.s. Let’s send him on Ms. Rodriguez after This Morning Today. It broadens our demographic and would be good for the online campaign.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Tony felt no shame ogling his Dom’s fantastic ass while he made another omelette and wondered how the fuck he’d gotten so lucky.

(“So good for me, sweetheart . . . Tony, fuck, gorgeous . . . Love you so much, baby . . .”) It had been such a sweet little scene last night: the ropes, the blowjobs, fingering and frottage.

(“Mine! My mark on you, fuck Tony, mine, ah!”)

Tony ran his thumb across his thigh, knowing there was a mark there under his jeans—bright purple, where Steve had nipped and sucked . . .

Of course, he’d hoped Steve might be ready for something more, but--

“Tony!”

“Huh!?”

“I asked you to pass the salt,” Bruce said with a little smile. “Three times.”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>
“Is everyone in position?” Steve asked briskly, all Captain.

“Aye-aye!”

One by one, everyone reported in.

“And no surprises, anybody,” Steve said sternly. “We’ve got a plan—everybody stick to it.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said. (He couldn’t even be miffed Steve’s words were so clearly for him.)

“When you’re ready, Bruce,” Steve said.

It was hard to believe that seeing the Hulk burst out of Bruce’s little body was getting to be familiar, almost to the point of routine. Then again, he’d stopped screaming with anguished rage when he arrived and now let out something closer to a grumpy cat’s yowl, so maybe that was part of it seeming less disturbing. He’d also stopped trying to destroy Tony. Probably.

“Hi, buddy,” Tony called, with no voice modulator. He was wearing the full suit except for the helmet, which he held in his arms. Hulk sniffed at him, bored.

“Hey, Big Green,” Tony called again. “Here? Wanna hold the helmet?”

“MMMMRMM.”

Tony tossed Hulk the helmet calling, “BAAAAaAAA!”

“BAAAAAAA,” Hulk answered as he caught it, then threw it to Steve.

“Nice toss, Hulk!” Steve called. He tossed the helmet to Clint who returned it to Hulk who threw it back to Tony.

“Hey, buddy,” Tony said, lifting it slowly. “Look at this!”

Hulk watched with lazy attention as Tony fitted the helmet in place with the faceplate up. He sniffed at Tony again and yawned.

“I’m putting the faceplate down now, ok?”

It snapped into place and Tony prepared for an escape maneuver, but Hulk just yawned again and picked up one of his balls. He threw it to Natasha.

There was a loud whistling noise over the comm; Tony was pretty sure it was Steve letting out a relieved sigh.

“Ok, everybody,” Steve called. “Let’s go!”

Bruce had his hands wrapped around a steaming cup of smelly tea, still huddled deep in his giant plaid bathrobe. Clint had made the rest of them hot chocolate with way too many marshmallows.

“I think it went really well,” Steve reiterated.

“I just have this flash that he--” Bruce mumbled.

“He didn’t,” Tony insisted. “We were playing. It was tag. It’s obviously progress. Honest! Even Steve doesn’t think he was trying to attack me.”

“It’s just,” Bruce rubbed his brow. “I get snatches of it, sometimes, after--or maybe during? It’s weird.”

“Must be disorienting,” Natasha said softly.

“Litotes there,” Bruce muttered.

“Huh?” Clint asked.

“Term from Classical rhetoric,” Tony explained, “the art of understatement.”

Clint looked surprised. “Thought you were a science dude.”

“Fancy prep school. I also know Ancient Greek.” Tony shrugged. “But anyway, who’s ready for a movie? Because I found a documentary about cats in Istanbul and it looks awesome.”

To: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters, mnguyen@starkindustries.com, Michael
Sorry sorry! I meant to reply. Training’s been busy and stuff.

Yes--all the plans look good. Venue, guest list, etc. I can do a few interviews--wherever you think best--as part of the lead up. I finally updated my calendar, so just send me where you need to.

(Just, god, please not that asshole again--you know. The one I hate. Whatshisname?) We’ll be back in New York soon and I can always make a special trip in the suit. And, yes, the whole team will be there--talk it up. Everybody wants dinner with Captain America and the hero gang.

Sorry again. You’re the best! If you need anything, just let me know. Ok, who are we kidding--CC me and go to Mrs. Abrogast.

Thanks sorry,

Tony

P.s I really am sorry. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful or make your jobs harder than they already are. Truly.

Pps. Do you have any strategy notes re: me and Steve that I should look at? If you already sent them, sorry. Not sure what our timeline is, but let’s be real we can’t wait forever, right?

P.p.s. Could we get some floral arrangements with red roses, yellow roses, and white lilies at the gala? I want one at my table especially, not the usual Valentine’s day stuff.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

To: kwinters@stark.com, Katherine Winters
From: mnguyen@stark.com, Michael Nguyen
On: 1 February, 2013
Subj: DIRTY FUCKING CHEAT

I can’t fucking believe you. No way did you win! You owe ME Highland Park!

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

To: mnguyen@stark.com, Michael Nguyen
From: kwinters@stark.com, Katherine Winters
On: 1 February, 2013
Subj: Re: DIRTY FUCKING CHEAT

Mr. Nguyen,

I’m shocked--shocked!--by such unprofessional language from you. Kindly remember this is a workplace.

As for your absurd accusation, I complied with the terms of our agreement. I didn’t recruit Ms. Potts for Stark roundup.

Sincerely,

Katherine Winters

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

To: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters
From: mnguyen@starkindustries.com, Michael Nguyen
On: 1 February, 2013
Subj: Re: re: DIRTY FUCKING CHEAT
Ha-fucking-ha, K.

Captain America DEFINITELY counts as outside intervention!

That scotch is rightfully MINE!

To: mnguyen@stark.com, Michael Nguyen

From: kwinters@stark.com, Katherine Winters

On: 1 February, 2013

Subj: Re: re: re: DIRTY FUCKING CHEAT

Mr. Nguyen,

I repeat--do please use professional language. Also, kindly review the exact terms of the bet: the external intervention of Ms. Potts specifically.

Scotch mine.

Sincerely,

Katherine Winters

P.s. Suck my dick.

With just two weeks until the big day, don’t forget to follow us on Twitter as we get ready for one of the biggest society events of the year: The Maria Stark Foundation Gala! The hottest Valentine’s Day event in the city! Celebrities! Fashion! Music! We’ll give you the insider’s guide right here at TZM NYC! #StarkGala

Chapter End Notes

Comments and cheer leading always appreciated! Let me know if you have a favorite bit! :)

I’m also trying to make my works more welcoming for people with disabilities by adding image descriptions to all my fic so that people using screen readers won’t be left out of the loop. If you’d like to help with this project, you can read more here: http://ms-meredith-milton.tumblr.com/post/174388984626/help-make-my-fiction-more-accessible-for-the . Any help much appreciated!

Tons and tons of love to everyone who has stuck with me for all this time and a warm welcome to any new readers!
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to all the kind cheer leaders who have kept me going and above any other my amazing beta. Where would I be without you, love?

This chapter touches on issues previously dealt with in the story, especially so PTSD and harassment.

Also, the end of chapter 51 and out-take “All Hail the Conquering Hero” are relevant to this one. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I really do think the change of scene will be helpful,” Bruce said as the quinjet glided towards New York. “I was starting to miss the city.”

“Me too!” Clint called. “I missed the noise and the pollution and the crowds!”

“No need for sarcasm,” Bruce said mildly.

“Who says I’m being sarcastic?”

“We’ll be back to the ranch soon anyway,” Tony said. “We can go back between SHIELD and the gala if you want. Or you all could go and I’d catch up after. Either way, not that long.”

“No,” Steve said. “I think we all need a break from training with Hulk, though we have been making steady progress.” Steve continued more quietly to Tony, “And I don’t like the idea of you here on your own dealing with the press.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Even so.” Steve shrugged. His phone let out a small ‘ping’; he checked it and smiled.

“I can’t believe you forgot to mention that your gala is on Valentine’s Day,” Clint griped from the cockpit.

“I said it was the 14th!” Tony called.

“How is that not telling you it’s Valentine’s day?”

“Just saying,” Clint said, “I RSVPed to a party offered under false pretences. What if I have a hot Valentine’s day date?”

“Do you?” Natasha asked.

“Bring your date!” Tony called.

“A stuffy night of hors d’oeuvres and rich people wouldn’t be my first choice for V-day with a special sub, man,” Clint complained.

“I repeat,” Natasha said. “Do you actually have a Valentine’s date?”

“Fuck you.”

Steve said nothing.

“Want to lose at chess, Tony,” Bruce asked. (Probably wanting to change the subject—Tony knew he wouldn’t be bringing Betty.)

“Last time was luck,” Tony said.

“By that do you mean the last five times?” Bruce asked, voice sweet.

Tony glared. “I’ll crush you this time.”

“This I want to watch,” Natasha said, leaving her affectionate ribbing of Clint to saunter over to the back table. “Anybody care to lay bets?”

As they set up the board, Tony let the teasing chatter wash over him, distracted by the gala.

He’d always liked that they scheduled the Gala for Valentine’s day weekend—and this year the fourteenth actually fell on Saturday and the gala itself—because it meant he was always booked. No need to make excuses not to go off on some absurd ‘romantic getaway’ if he was seeing someone, no need to feel at loose ends if he wasn’t. (And he’d often started the gala solo and left it plus one or two . . .). But this year, for the first time, Tony sort of wished the Gala fell on a different day.
He sighed and moved his Queen’s pawn forward.

Clint lost three bags of chips to Natasha as a result of Bruce’s chess victory.

On arrival at the Tower, the team dispersed: Bruce to his lab; Natasha to her suite; Clint to the wii console; and Steve for a run in central park. And Tony--

“Hey, kids! I’m home!”

DUMMY let out an excited whirring noise and wheeled over.

“Miss me?”

Tony pet him for a few moments, then tossed a ball across the workshop for him to fetch.

“You know, you’re halfway to being an Avenger now, DUMMY?!” Tony said when the little bot brought him the ball. “Say it with me: ‘Baaaaaaaaaaa.’”

“Ok, J!” Tony called.

“BAAAAAAAAAA.”

“Say it with me: ‘BAAAAAAAA.’”

Tony wiped motor oil from his hands and surveyed the fully functional robots with pleasure.

“Hey, Jarvis?” he called.

“Is Steve back from his run?”

“Hey, Jarvis?” he called. “Is Steve back from his run?”

“Of course, sir.”

The elevator glided silently up to Steve’s and the doors opened on the foyer, letting in an unexpected burst of men’s laughter.

The man had a slim, athletic build, beautiful bone structure, light brown skin, and close cut hair. There was a little gap between his two front teeth when he smiled. He was very handsome. (And young.)

“Tony!” Steve exclaimed, catching sight of him standing stupidly by the elevator.

Uh—“ Steve glanced back and forth between Tony and his guest, unexpectedly awkward, almost guilty.

Tony felt a flicker of nervousness.

Tony wiped motor oil from his hands and surveyed the fully functional robots with pleasure.

“Hey, Jarvis?” he called.

Tony smiled and headed for the elevator, then doubled back to wash up properly. (Steve liked him all workshop messy, but it didn’t exactly scream ‘wanna fool around?’). Tony even put on a clean shirt.

“Steve’s please, J!” Tony said. He unbuttoned two more buttons.

The stranger hopped off the bar stool and headed to Tony. He extended his hand with a warm smile, saying, “Mr. Stark! Such an honor to meet you. I’m Sam Wilson. I’ve been Steve’s running buddy lately.”

“Nice to meet you Sam,” Tony said abruptly coming unfrozen. He shook Sam’s hand with a smile, definitely not feeling a rush of stupid, idiotic relief at the sight of Sam’s subtle Dominant’s notch. (Probably a switch.) “Please call me, Tony.”

“Won’t you join us for coffee, Tony?” Steve asked, getting out another mug. “The pot’s fresh and strong.”

“Sure,” Tony said, sauntering over. He had a strong, gut feeling Sam was someone Steve trusted and that he could too. “When have you known me to turn down coffee, babe?”

Feeling a giddy thrill at the risk (but eager to stake his claim), Tony gave Steve a little kiss on the cheek for good measure. Steve looked delighted.

Sam, who’d watched them with a pleasantly amused smile, exclaimed, “Why Steve Rogers! Do you mean to tell me that the brave, mysterious genius sub you’re crazy about is none other than Tony Stark?”

Tony barely stifled a laugh.

Steve turned to Sam, his face a massive apology. “I wanted to tell you! But I wanted to talk to Tony first, since our relationship isn’t public yet and—Oh. Ha-ha.” Steve grimaced. “You’d guessed already, hadn’t you?”

“Naaw—how could I?” Sam asked with a grin, “You were so subtle.”
Tony laughed. “I just bet he was. Subtle as a tank.”

Sam nodded and winked at him.

“What are these?” Tony asked, looking at a set of black and white photos laid out on the counter.

“Presents for your boy there,” Sam said, gesturing to Steve. “Turns out my great auntie was real good friends with one of Steve’s besties from the old days.”

“Back then Aunt Angie was still working as a waitress, trying to get onto Broadway and struggling against the shit roles they’d let her read for.”

Tony picked up another photograph: Peggy and Angie dressed to the nines, carefully posed elegant 1950s ladies with matching hats, coats, and shoes. In the next one, they’re laughing, arms around each other, looking happy and carefree. Sam peered at them.

“Those are at the opening of the Harlem Shakespeare Festival. Auntie A. founded it with some friends—that first season, she played Ophelia, Beatrice, and Juliet.”

“They’re coming up on their 59th season,” Sam said, with visible pride. “You know, if you wanted to give their fundraising and ticket sales a boost sometime…”

“We’d love to!” Steve said, brightly. “I love Shakespeare.”

“Of course you do,” Tony said, more affectionate than grumbling.

“So, Sam,” Tony began, pulling out the bar stool next to Steve and settling in. “How’d you meet Steve?”

They answer in unison, Steve saying, “On your left!” and Sam, “Don’t say it!” and then fell into laughter.

(Yeah--Tony was pretty sure he liked the new guy.)

“...And remember! There’s still time to put something unforgettable together for your sub this Valentines. So don’t go anywhere. After the break, we’ll have pro-tips for those of you who’re still racking your brains for a way to celebrate with the old ball-and-chain!”

“I’m so glad you liked, Sam,” Steve said in bed later that evening.

“Of course I did!” Tony replied. “He’s great! And I’m glad you’re making friends besides the team.”

“Yeah. And I trust him--he won’t tell anyone about us.”

“I trust your judgement, babe.”

Steve smiled. “And it’s been really good to talk to Sam, even if I was always leaving gaps in what I said.”

“Mmmmm-hmm,” Tony murmured, propping up on one elbow. “But I gotta ask--how did you describe me?”

Steve grinned.
“Brilliant,” Steve said, pressing a kiss to Tony’s palm. “A genius.”

“Brave,” he added, kissing Tony’s wrist.

“Handsome,” he continued, mouth on the crook of Tony’s elbow.

“Flatterer,” Tony murmured. “But I doubt that’s how Sam guessed it.”

“Clearly you,” Steve insisted, looking up with a smile. Tony raised one eyebrow.

“Well, I did say that my sub didn’t get the respect he deserves,” Steve confessed, looking sheepish, “and people say nasty things about him and I get pretty angry about it.”

“Oh! There we have it! Obviously Tony Stark.” Tony laughed, then added, “You shouldn’t let it get to you, though. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Steve insisted. “But I know you can handle it. Still wish you didn’t have to do interviews tomorrow.”

“I don’t have to,” Tony said, “I want to. It’s good for the Foundation. And honestly, I’m used to it.”

“But,” Tony added with an impish smile, “You could lend me some, ah, morale support . . . tonight . . .” He wiggled closer and rolled his hips against Steve’s thigh.

“Mmmm. I could be persuaded. What exactly did you have in mind?”

Tony batted his eyelashes and then dropped his gaze.

“I’m all yours. Whatever you want.”

Steve pounced.

Tony awoke with a panicked jolt. Something had hit his face. He gasped and sat up, heart pounding.

“It is 2:35 am, sir,” JARVIS greeted him instantly. “You are in the Tower in New York.”

Steve was tossing and whimpering in bed beside him.

“I regret I have been unable to awaken Captain Rogers,” JARVIS added, voice worried.

“I’ve got it,” Tony croaked. He tried to swallow; his throat was very dry,

He took a deep breath. The glow of the bare arc reactor across the bed soothed Tony’s nerves a little.

“Steve?” Tony tried softly, then repeated a little louder, “Steve?”

It had no noticeable effect. Steve was gasping and flailing.

“STEVE!” Tony yelled.

Nothing.

Tony took another deep breath and weighed his options. It looked like a real doozy of a night terror, but that meant that Steve might not come fully aware if Tony woke him physically. Tony knew from experience that he himself sometimes came out of a nightmare swinging. (Given Rhodes a black eye once, right after Afghanistan.) And he knew Steve’d take it very hard if he hurt anyone, especially his sub.

“Steve!” Tony called again. “JARVIS, give me lights at 100%!”

The lights came on, flash blinding Tony for a moment, but Steve didn’t awaken. His body had stilled somewhat, but he was making this wounded, choking sound, tears streaming down his face.

Tony couldn’t bear it. Heart slamming in his chest, Tony called his name again and grabbed a hold of Steve’s hand, holding it tight.

“Steve!” He called desperately and squeezed Steve’s hand as hard as he could, keeping his body at a distance.

Steve took a gasping breath and his eyes flew open.

“Steve, it’s ok, I’m here—you’re safe,” Tony said urgently, still clutching his hand.

Steve shuddered violently, squeezing his eyes shut. After a few long, shaking breaths he turned.

“Tony?” he gasped.
“Yeah,” Tony said softly. His eyes were tingling with tears. “I’m right here, babe. I’ve got you.”

Steve melted into his arms, still wracked by tremors. His skin was cold; Tony pulled the duvet up around him and rubbed his back and arms, trying to warm him up.

Steve gave another little choking gasp and buried his face against Tony’s chest, cheek mashed up against the arc reactor. Tony realized he was still crying, but trying to do it quietly. Tony’s heart twisted.


“I’m sorry,” Steve gasped. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.”

Tony signalled JARVIS to lower the lights again and settled in to hold Steve and stroke him gently—until he’d cried himself to sleep if necessary.

The minutes slid by and Tony lost track of time, comforting Steve as best he could.

“Did—” Steve spoke at last, suddenly breaking Tony’s mumbled litany. He sniffed. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, sweetheart,” Tony said, smoothing back Steve’s hair. “Don’t worry. Everything’s ok.”

“It’s not,” Steve said, voice wrecked. His fingers dug hard into Tony’s hip, then let go abruptly again.

“Fine,” Tony said gently. “Maybe everything’s not 100% ok. Maybe you’re not totally ok—and neither am I. But that’s ok too.”

“Right.”

“Come on,” Tony said gently. “Breathe with me, ok? In . . . . and out . . . . in . . . .”

Tony led Steve in the breathing exercises he’d learned from Dr. Jefferson. Little by little, Steve seemed to loosen up.

“Better?” Tony asked at last. Steve shrugged. “Do you think you could sleep?”

Steve shook his head in a tight, sharp little motion.

“Oh,” Tony said, then called out, “Can we get ‘Trouble with Tribbles’ projected on the wall here, JARVIS? Volume at 40%.”

“Of course, sir.”

The episode began and Steve clung to Tony with a little less desperation as time passed, though he didn’t really seem to be watching the show.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” he said abruptly, pulling Tony out of a light doze.

“Nothing to be sorry for;” Tony repeated.

Steve kissed him on the forehead and took a long shuddering breath.

“Thank you, Tony. I—I love you so much.”

“Love you too.”

“I’m so lucky to have you,” Steve whispered. “Every day, I thank Go— I’m thankful to have you in my life.”

At a loss for words, Tony just hugged him again and murmured another “I love you.”

“Do you think you could go back to sleep, sweetheart?” Steve asked at last.

“Maybe,” Tony said around a yawn.

“Drop the volume please, JARVIS,” Steve said. He reached into the drawer of his nightstand for something. “Get some rest, Tony.”

“Mnmnm.”

Tony buried his face against Steve’s warm body and drifted off to sleep.

When he woke the next morning, he had a blurred memory of Steve murmuring softly to himself with a set of beads clenched in his hands.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>
“Welcome back to ‘This Morning Today’ where we’re sitting down with Tony Stark to talk about the upcoming Maria Stark Foundation Gala. Thanks for joining us, Tony.”

“You’re welcome.” Scattered laughter; Stark grins. “Oh right! I mean, thanks for having me.”

More seriously: “But truly, thank you for the opportunity to talk about the Maria Stark Foundation—it’s something I’m really passionate about.”

“The charity is named after your mother, right?”

“That’s right,” Stark says with a smile. “My mother was about my age when she died, which seems younger to me every year, and I still feel the loss keenly. People talk a lot about my dad—the great Howard Stark—but very few people give my mother the credit she deserves. She was a remarkable woman, passionate about helping those in need. The Foundation is the best way I could find to honor her values and her legacy.”

“Why don’t you tell us a bit about her?”

“Well, she was a more traditional submissive than I am.”

Audience laughter; Stark turns to them with a wide smile.

“I know? Shocking, right? But she always supported me. She never tried to force me to be something I’m not—except possibly someone who remembers not to wear white after labor day.”

Audience laughter.

“Working with other organizations behind the scenes, my mom raised millions of dollars for medical research and to support the arts, and we continue supporting those causes in her name as well. But I wanted to fill in some of the gaps I saw in charitable giving offering fellow submissives the kind of support mom always gave me: a safe, stable environment and all the academic opportunities submissives are so often denied.”

“So, she’s the inspiration for the Safe House?”

“Absolutely,” Stark answers, “But not just that. We’ve provided nearly a hundred thousand Stark Safe devices to low income subs who couldn’t afford them unassisted. And we’ve helped fund thousands of students who might otherwise have been overlooked academically.”

“And those funds come from events like the upcoming Gala?”

“In part. And don’t get me wrong—it’s a great party! Best Valentine’s Day date in the City—heck, in the country! If you can come, come. If not, make fun of all the fashion failures of the glitterati the next day on the internet. But we’ve got three other campaigns online. For a more modest donation, you can win some pretty exciting prizes.”

“What kind of prizes?”

“You and a guest could win a self-defense lesson and dinner with Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers. That’s right! Captain America himself! And another lucky winner will get to join us for Avenger’s team dinner and an archery lesson with Hawkeye.”

“That’s amazing! And what about Iron Man?”

“I’ll be taking someone for an aerial tour of New York City. Travel in style! Usually only Avengers get to experience the hug-and-fly. So give generously. The information’s right there on your screen.”

“You heard it, ladies and gentlemen! Some amazing prizes and an amazing cause!”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

“Is it just me,” Bruce asked quietly, “Or does SHIELD feel kind of . . . empty?”

Tony nodded.

It was weird. Maybe there were a lot of Agents on a mission or training module or something? Empty or not, Tony was wearing his full (metaphorical) armor, ready for anything, as always at SHIELD.

Steve led the way as they walked briskly to Conference Room C, with Clint bringing up the rear. (Maybe it was all in his head, but Clint seemed weirdly on edge . . . ) The few agents they saw nodded to Steve and quickly got out of the way.

When they got to Conference Room C, Agent Johnny Ishida was sitting alone at a long table, looking at his tablet. To his left, there was a catering tray with coffee, bottled water, bagels, and fruit. He got up with a smile.

“Hello,” he said. “Welcome back, Avengers. Please help yourselves to some refreshments.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, shaking his hand. “Good to see you again, Agent Ishida.”
As everyone helped themselves to the little breakfast spread, Tony took his coffee over to Johnny.

“How’s the family?” Tony asked.

“Good, good,” Johnny said, beaming. “Twins were sick last week, but they’re better now. Seems like there’s always a bug going around and if one of them gets it the other inevitably will too.” Johnny took a sip of his coffee, then added, “Ian saw you on ‘This Morning Today’—bought a raffle ticket for the lesson with Hawkeye.”

“Thank him for me, would you?” Tony said. “It’s a good cause, but you know I could probably sweet talk Clint into a lesson for your lovely husband.”

“You’re too kind,” Johnny said, “I know he’d love that.”

Johnny took a look around the room; everyone had gotten coffee and nibbles and started taking their seats. “Well, it looks like everyone’s ready, so let’s get started.”

“Shoudln’t we wait for Agent Dominick?” Bruce asked, peering around.

“He won’t be joining us,” Johnny said. Was it all in Tony’s head, or was there a certain amount of pleasure in his eyes as he added, “Agent Dominick recently left SHIELD.”

Tony nearly dropped his bagel in surprise.

“A new agent may join me on your liaison team soon, but no one was available for today’s meeting,” Johnny explained, then added, “There’s been some turnover lately. A lot of new hires—to replenish some . . . abrupt resignations.”

Clint and Natasha looked bored and Steve looked mildly interested. Only Bruce looked as surprised and confused as Tony felt.

“So,” Johnny began, “Today’s meeting was scheduled to go over your recent training in Wyoming, your progress with the Hulk, and to identify possible areas of SHIELD support. Would you like to begin, Captain?”

“Certainly,” Steve said briskly, taking out a little notebook. “At Iron Man’s suggestion, we initially—”

The door opened suddenly and Fury entered in a swirl of leather.

“Sorry for the interruption,” he said, taking his seat.

“Not a problem, Director,” Steve said politely. “We’d just begun. As I was saying—”

The meeting was boring. Tony added clarifications a few times to the others’ reports, but for the most part it was smooth, boring sailing. Agent Ishida offered them some SHIELD support tech and Tony politely didn’t laugh in his face at the idea that they might ever want any outside tech.

And Tony didn’t ask what the hell he meant ‘Agent Dominick recently left SHIELD.’ And he also didn’t ask about the “abrupt resignations.” Yet.

“Well, if there are no further questions?” Johnny said at last. The room was silent. “That’s a wrap.”

Tony jumped to his feet, wanting to grab Fury, but Johnny approached him saying softly, “Dr. Stark? Do you have a moment?”

Tony blinked, surprised by the formality. He hesitated a moment before saying, “Of course.”

“There’s a rumor circulating at SHIELD that you’re dating Captain Rogers,” Johnny said briskly. “Is that correct?”

Tony frowned.

“It is,” Tony answered a little sharply.

“May I ask—?” Johnny hesitated. “Is he good to you?”

Tony smiled a little and felt his cheeks start to heat.

“The best,” Tony answered softly.

Johnny gave him a warm smile and he said in a low voice, “I’m glad for you, Tony. But I wanted to say, as a friend, everyone knows: from the junior agents to the paper pushers to the custodians. And a secret like this doesn’t keep itself for long. If you want to break the story yourself, I’d do it soon.”

From the corner of his eye, Tony saw Fury leaving the room.
“I--” he fumbled, attention divided. “Thank you, Johnny. I appreciate the head’s up. You’re a good guy! I’ve just gotta catch the Director real quick and, uh--”

Tony made a break for it and dashed after Fury.

“Hey!” Tony called. “Director!”

Fury turned around, leather fanning out dramatically around him.

“Yes, Stark?”

“SHIELD looks like a ghost town,” Tony said. “And Ishida’s telling us about lots of new hires? Abrupt mass resignations? What the hell’s going on around here, Fury?”

“Figured it would be obvious. Especially to you,” Fury growled, then added in a lower voice, “I’m tending my own goddamn house.”

And with that, Fury strode down the hall, leaving Tony wide-eyed behind him.

Tony’s heart was pounding and mind racing.

(Had he really--?)

Someone touched Tony’s shoulder, making him jump.

“Ready to go?” Steve asked softly.

Tony squinted up at him.

“Why do I get the feeling,” Tony asked, “that you have something to do with Agent Dominick’s sudden departure and SHIELD’s mass resignations?”

“Who, me?” Steve said mildly. “Why would I have anything to do with it?”

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but Clint cut him off calling: “Hey Avengers! It’s lunch time! Burger o’clock. Let’s move out before we get stuck eating here!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading. I'm honestly not doing very well at the moment, but I'm here, I'm queer, and I'm doing what I can. Comments especially appreciated in these dark days. I hope this story is a comfort.

If there are things you especially liked here, you know how much I love hearing about them. Thank you so much. I'm so grateful for all the kindness.

And, it's been a while (like, years) since chapter 51, but when Fury takes Tony aside to make sure that Steve and his relationship is above board and he's not being coerced, Tony says: “Fuck you and your concern,” Tony growled. “Where was your concern when—?” He snapped his mouth shut, nearly vibrating with outrage. “Tend your own goddamn house, Fury.” :). Also, this out-take: https://archiveofourown.org/works/8450386 .

p.s. I had the idea for POC Angie while watching Season 1 of Agent Carter--it would have been such an elegant (and easy) way to introduce an intersectional element to the show's feminism. So, that's my head canon. I've been sitting on it for YEARS. :)

p. p.s. Beta and I sent a bug report about the embedded image descriptions not working; still waiting to hear back. Hopefully we can make progress on that project soon!
They stopped at a new burger joint on the way back to the Tower, but Tony didn’t have much of an appetite. He wanted to get Steve all to himself.

“Tony?” Steve said softly leaning over. “You ok?”

Tony nodded, lost in thought, picking absently at his fries. Conversation rambled on around him and Tony managed (probably) to smile at all the right moments.

Back at the Tower, Tony followed Steve to his suite.

“Steve?” Tony asked, feeling oddly nervous as they stepped into the living room. “Can we talk?”

“Oh of course,” Steve said. He looked at Tony expectantly, waiting as Tony gathered his thoughts.

“Agent Ishida gave me some advice--as a friend,” Tony began, then struggled to find the right words.

Yesterday--heck, even just two hours ago--Tony would have said that of course Steve was eager to make their relationship public--because that’s the kind of guy Steve was--but now that it was starting to feel like a real possibility and Tony anticipated the backlash, it was hard to feel so certain.

(Dumb. You’re being dumb. Nothing’s changed.)

“So,” Tony began again, “Johnny said that everyone at SHIELD knows about our relationship. We only told Hill and Fury, but apparently news got around. He thinks this secret won’t keep itself for much longer.”

“Yes,” Tony began again, “Johnny said that everyone at SHIELD knows about our relationship. We only told Hill and Fury, but apparently news got around. He thinks this secret won’t keep itself for much longer.”

“So, he thinks if we want to break the story ourselves, we’d better do it soon.” Tony took a deep breath and concluded: “And I agree.”

Steve was still frowning. “You don’t have to do this, Tony,” Steve said. “I’m sure if we talk to Fury that he could redouble his efforts to keep things under control. After all, since we submitted the information as part of an Avengers report that makes it classified information, doesn’t it? There would be consequences--I mean, Fury could make it clear--again--that if anyone breaks confidentiality they’ll, well, there will be consequences. You don’t have to--”

“I want to,” Tony blurted.

Steve fell silent, mouth open in surprise.

“If you do,” Tony added.

Steve just stared at him and Tony rambled into the silence.

“I mean,” Tony continued, “I think Johnny’s right--we should get ahead of the story. Control the narrative. But over lunch, I kept thinking,” Tony licked his lips, “it’s one thing not to tell everybody we’re together because it’s none of their goddamn business, and it’s another to be there at my mother’s gala, with you, and to pretend that I’m not with you.”

Steve was giving him that heartbreakingly hopeful look, all wide blue eyes and softly parted lips, and Tony rushed on, admitting quietly, “I’ve hung off the arm of dozens of meaningless Doms at that fundraiser, year after year--but I’ve never gone with someone special. With my Dom.”

(Someone I’d have introduced to my mom . . .). “So, if you’re willing . . .”

“Tony,” Steve said in an ardent voice, pressing his hand to Tony’s cheek, “I’d be honored to attend the gala as your Dominant.”

Steve pulled Tony in for a hug and rested his chin on the top of Tony’s head; Tony looped his arms around Steve’s waist, holding tight.

“I love you, Tony Stark,” Steve murmured. “And I’d be glad to shout it from the rooftops.”

(Big sap.)

Tony leaned back and looked up with a grin.

“About that, I’ve got a few ideas.”
To: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters; mnguyen@starkindustries.com, Michael Nguyen

From: tonystark@starkindustries.com, Tony Stark

On: 6 February, 2013

Subj: let’s do this

Call ASAP. We’re ready to rumble.

--Tony

To: kwinters@starkindustries.com, Katherine Winters

From: mnguyen@starkindustries.com, Michael Nguyen

On: 6 February, 2013

FWD: Subj: let’s do this

K-- I FUCKING NAILED IT! HOPE YOU DIDN’T ALREADY START DRINKING THAT SCOTCH, BECAUSE I WIN, IT’S MINE, AND I TOLD YOU SO!

Sincerely,
Your esteemed co-worker,

Michael Nguyen

And don’t worry! For those of you getting a late start on Valentine’s day, not every magical plan requires weeks of prep. Stick around and we’ll show you how to wow your Dom on a tight schedule and a limited budget.

“I think it’s a good strategy,” Steve said softly, running his hands absently up and down Tony’s back and holding him close.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed with a long contented sigh. He stroked his hand across the flawless plain of Steve’s bare chest.

“I’ll just try to keep it vague when the host asks questions,” Steve said. He kissed Tony’s palm, then his wrist where fresh bruises were blossoming from his latest rope work. “I mean, the details—those are for us. People—the public—they aren’t entitled to the whole story.”

Tony nodded and leaned up to press a lingering kiss to Steve’s lips. He was still warm and lax and sated from their love making, reveling in the warmth of Steve’s bare skin, but he could tell Steve’s mood was turning brooding.

Steve sighed and added with a grimace, “And I guess it would just confuse ‘the narrative’ if I admitted that I began by harassing you.”

“It’s none of their business,” Tony reiterated. “Like I said after the first press conference; sometimes the details distract from the truth.”

Tony stroked Steve’s cheek and added reassuringly, “And you know I didn’t actually feel harassed.”

“Even so, I shouldn’t have—”

“No,” Tony agreed, “you shouldn’t have. And I appreciated the apology, even if I was surprised by it. But we’re past all that.”

Steve let out another sigh, looking away and Tony should really change the subject, but he’d always wondered . . .

“Why did you keep asking?” Tony asked. He propped up on one elbow.

“What do you mean?”

“After you asked me out to dinner and I said ‘no,’” Tony clarified. “Why did you keep asking?”

Steve frowned. “It’s stupid. I see that now and—”

“I’m not asking for another apology,” Tony cut in. He pressed a reassuring kiss to Steve’s
knuckles. “I just wondered. Why keep asking?”

Steve shrugged.

“Not rocket science,” he said, looking away awkwardly. “I liked you. I hoped you’d say yes.”

“Did you think I secretly liked you too?” Tony asked, genuinely curious.

“No.” Steve shook his head. “Not exactly. I thought . . . I thought you were undecided. I didn’t think you knew if you liked me or not, so you were testing the situation. To see if I’d get pushy or angry or impatient, like some Doms, or just . . . move on.” Steve gave him an embarrassed look. “I just—I wanted to get to know you because I thought you were . . . are so amazing. And I wanted you to know that I wasn’t some fair-weather friend. That I was sincerely interested in you and that I could be patient, steadfast and respectful. I didn’t want to pressure you, but I thought—I thought I was demonstrating that, even though I didn’t know you very well yet, my regard for you was quite genuine and I wasn’t looking for a— a—”

Steve glanced away. “I mean, I heard the way some of the Doms at SHIELD talked, some of the things they said about you. I wanted you to know I wasn’t just—uh—”

“Trying to get laid?” Tony supplied with a wry smile. “Why didn’t you say any of that more explicitly?”

Steve shook his head with a grimace. “You can’t just out and tell a fella you think he’s the most amazing guy in the whole world and, if waiting patiently on the sidelines is what it takes, you’ll do it and gladly if he’ll just give you a chance someday.”

“I love you, Tony,” Steve told him, something urgent and odd in his voice. Tony frowned.

“Are you ok?”

“Me?” Steve asked. “Of course.”

Steve sighed. “The interview. I just worry it will go badly. That I’ll say something wrong. I still feel . . . off here. A lot. And I think about all the things I didn’t know and am still trying to figure out. What if I say the wrong thing?”

Tony shrugged. “Then you say the wrong thing. I have—on numerous occasions. We issue a correction and go on with our lives. Not the end of the world.”

“Steve,” Tony cut him off. “Don’t worry. We’ll meet with Mikie and Katie tomorrow. Get professional advice and prep. But seriously—don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

JJ<3'sBB: hey. question for the forum--my sub says she doesn't want to do anything for valentine's day. says it's a big corporate money grab and she just wants to hang out with me. but like i already got her a stuffed animal i thought she'd like and made reservations at her favorite italian joint. is it rude to give her a present and take her out to dinner if she said she's not into v-day? it's not like the ritz or something--just a place i know she likes. is that still cool? she's awesome and i don't wanna fuck this up. help!

Truth_Speaker: don't be an idiot, JJ<3'sBB! IT'S A TRAP! Some subs say shit like that, but they never mean it. It's just an excuse to make sure we have to surprise them and so they get to look like they're not shallow and stereotypical. She's being all 'I'm not like other subs,' but don't fall for it. They all fucking love that V-day crap, even when they say they don't.

Pep-goes-the-weasel: OMG JJ<3'sBB you are a sweetie! And Truth_Speaker is an IDIOT. Do not listen to that guy! If you're not sure what your sub wants just ask her. Truly! Communication is what great relationships are made of! And surprises are often dramatic in movies, but suck in RL.

She said she doesn't want to celebrate Valentine's and it's cool you're trying to find ways to respect that, but you don't have to read her mind. a) just ask if going to That Italian Place is too
much V-day celebration and (b) if YOU want to do something special it’s ok to say so and see if there’s a middle ground. And you can always surprise her with the stuffed animal sometime random when she’s had a bad day. Happy V-day! You seem like a good Dom. Best of luck!

To: Steven_Grant_Rogers@shield.gov
From: mnguyen@starkindustries.com
On: 7 February, 2013
Re: media strategy

Dear Captain Rogers,

I just wanted to write to you to reiterate Ms. Winters’ and my concerns about Mr. Stark’s proposed media strategy. This isn’t to suggest that it’s a poor strategy per se—and it certainly has his characteristic flair for the dramatic—but as we pointed out it leaves many unanswered questions. And when basic information is left undisclosed, people generally start making up their own ‘facts.’

I understand that you want to defer to Mr. Stark’s wishes in this matter, but we respectfully request that you discuss the strategy again with him. I would also like to suggest—especially if you stay with Mr. Stark’s proposal—that you find something substantive that you would like to talk about. Your first solo interview is likely to reach at least a million viewers, if not in the initial broadcast then certainly recirculating online. I understand that the prospect can be truly terrifying, but it also gives you a powerful platform to use your tremendous influence for good. Although Mr. Stark feels strongly about foreclosing certain topics and details, there are others at your disposal and I encourage you to think about something you’d like to share with the public or bring to their attention.

Respectfully yours,

Mikie Nguyen

P.s. My mom says thanks yet again. It really meant a lot to her. I think that EVERY one of the ladies at St. Joseph’s has seen her birthday card and the photo of us. :)