The Information Operation Division

by The_Whelk

Summary

Stark Industries' latest hire to Information Operations (read Social Media Monkeys) is probably just an obsessive fan boy and not a shape-shifting mind control assassin. Maybe. Natasha doesn't know which is worse and Darcy corrupts young minds. A slightly paranoid love letter to fandom. And secret identities. And public relations. And obsession. And self-medication. And pop tarts.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Reblogging Is Love.

6’4. 240lb. Blue eyes, blonde hair. 50 inch shoulders and 30 inch waist. Sixteen year old Dan Maven of Turtle Bay NYC recited these numbers like a litany, the official stats of Captain Steve Rogers AKA Captain America AKA the warm beating heart of Dan's childhood imagination. While most kids outgrow their comic book fixations upon teendom, Dan took the notion that if Captain America wasn't around anymore then he sure as well was going to try and replace him. Straight As, braces, a gym addiction, and a truly masterful grasp of the art of home hair dying had left him with a not quite Captain body (narrow shoulders and waist, stumpy nose, about six inches too short, he prayed for a late puberty growth spurt) and very little time for friends. He didn't care, he had his Captain-Perfect-Pants Tumblr in which to reblog recent collector finds and trivia about the search for Cap's downed plane and SHIELD rumors. And fan art.

The best thing that ever happened in Dan Maven's life was when Captain America gave a press conference to confirm that he had been brought back into the world.

The second best thing that ever happened was when the Chitauri ship flattened his house.

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Maria Hill called a meeting. The subject? Public Relations. Steve, Tony, Clint and Natasha sat in a narrow conference room (Thor being off-planet and Bruce declining to attend future meetings not directly research-related). They watched a montage of news clips showing the bloody-faced Dan Maven outside the rubble of his 46th street apartment complex, moving rocks and pulling out crushed Captain America merchandise.

"This is currently the most watched clip on YouTube that doesn't feature flying aliens or kittens." Maria straightened her uniform as she sat down.

"There are thousands of displaced citizens in New York why does the media care about this one?" Clint barely looked at the footage.

Tony perked up. "Cause he managed to stay calm enough to give an on-camera interview about how wonderful and amazing we are despite his bedroom looking like a rock quarry, while at the same time being the biggest damn Captain America fanboy in the world, present company excluded."

Steve's ears grew red at the tips and Tony mentally awards himself ten points. "I think" said Steve, "We should look into helping him. It would be the right thing to do -" 

"Lots of people need help." said Clint.

"It's too neat." Natasha flipped through the folder in front of her. "It's like he dropped out of the sky to be a charity case."

"Lots of people fall out of the sky." Tony said.

"Look." Nat played the video of the reporter asking Dan what he's going to do with his life and Dan saying that he was applying for an internship at Stark Industries." It's a Xanatos Gambit, if we refuse we look bad and if we accept then he's inside."

"We just saved the planet and you're worried about looking bad?" Clint made a face.

Maria looked at Nat. "You're worried about spies?"
"Children often make the best spies, they're unassuming, easily forgiven, and lie convincingly."

"He's not exactly a child." Tony said.

Clint snorted. "Yeah until he wakes up with blood on his hands and a big gaping hole where his twenties should be."

Clint felt Nat glower at him despite not moving her face. How does she do that?

Maria continued. "His record is clean, upstanding citizen, everything all in order, nothing unusual aside from some ....interesting Livejournal accounts."

And if Steve knew what that meant his ears would be bright pink right now so Tony only awards Maria 5 points.

"A plant's record would be clean." Nat turned toward Maria. "I've seen this sort of thing before."

There was a pause, Tony found it unbearable.

"The P.R value would be immense. Superfan gets job with Superfriends, win-win." Tony slapped his hands together.

"He's in High school." Nat closed her folder.

"His High school got crushed by intergalactic eels, I say give him a chance. You gotta run before you walk, right Steve?" Steve, nodding with Tony "It is partly our fault. He does seem like a nice kid and he's lost everything. That's not ...easy."

"Fine" Maria sighed. "Put him someplace out of the way, but he's your responsibility Captain. If anything happens I can assure you my report to Fury will be both long and colorful. Dismissed."

They all got up to leave.

"Oh one thing, Mr. Stark, Ms. Romanov, can I have a word with you?"

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Yes, having his house smashed into a series of small piles by an invading alien force bent on enslaving the human race was bad. Yes the crash ruined all his belongings and collectables (and put his father in the hospital, but whatevers he'll be fine) and yes he is, technically speaking homeless but right now the only thing Dan's brain is able to comprehend is that Captain Steve Rogers is right there, shaking his hand (Oh what big hands you have) and looking him in the eyes (Oh what blue eyes you have) and smiling at him (Oh what straight teeth you have) and welcoming him to Stark Tower and directing him to an elevator down to something called Information Operations.

Dan tries to keep his expression neutral and his gaze dead ahead cause looking at Steve is like looking into the sun. The small elevator gives him an excuse to learn in and steal a whiff off Steve's neck, just level with Dan's nose. Bay Rum. Dan makes a note to go out and buy a case of it as soon as he's able to process thoughts like shopping and walking and breathing again.

The elevator opens onto a windowless corridor. Dan follows Steve to a small room that seems to be doing double duty as file storage. Somewhere someone was clicking away at a laptop but Dan's attention was fixed on Steve giving him a hearty pat on the back and telling him good luck. Steve turns to leave and Dan tries to figure out just how much he can turn to watch him before it becomes ogling-
"Hey!" Dan's reverie is broken by a dark female voice. A woman in glasses and an office-inappropriate shade of lipstick juts her head around the laptop screen.

"You're the intern right?"

"I -suppose? They weren't real big on explaining things."

"That's them for you. You'll get used to it. Sit." She returned to her screen. Dan walked over to the desk facing her and opened up the laptop with the big glowing SHIELD insignia on the front.

"Let's just set you up here. The job is pretty boring." Dan's screen jumped around, access ports, permissions, shell programs. "Mostly just managing social networks, updating official twitter feeds, accepting friend requests, moderating the subreddits so nothing actually important gets out. Super easy, even I can do it. I'm Darcy by the way."

"Dan. Dan Maven." He extends his hand across the table.

Darcy doesn't even look up. "I know, I read your file."

I have a file? Dan thinks. He notices the framed taser on the wall behind Darcy.

"And so the first thing you're going to do is update 'Captain-Perfect-Pants' with how you're fine and Stark Industries is taking good care of you and about your wonderful new job as an office intern. Wait, let me get a pic-"

His laptop camera made a little whir.

"Ugh. Look up and smile."

Dan grinned like a madman. Click-whir.

"Much better. Post that. Also you need to subscribe to some of the newer post-invasion tumblrs."

"My job is to ....reblog?"

"With extreme prejudice." And for the life of him Dan can't tell if she's kidding.

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Dan's first day as the Information Operations Intern went like this.

"You mind if I play some music?"

"No?"

"You okay with Norwegian Death Metal?"

"I am totally fine with whatever."

"Okay, but fair warning it gets a little loud."

She wasn't lying.

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"I'm sending you something."

"What?"
"Something funny is happening on Steve's sMail. I think he's being taken in again."

A window opened on Dan's screen WELCOME TO sMAIL CAPT. STEVE ROGERS. A highlighted exchanged showed Steve expressing genuine concern for the poor disposed Prince and offering to help in any way he can.

"Does this look hinky to you?" Darcy pointed a pen at the screen.

"Isn't this supposed to be private?"

"Nothing communicated over Stark Industry tech is private. Here, this is how you delete and ban." Darcy showed him a bunch of keystrokes and handy hidden dropdown menus. "And here is how you send a private message to Steve. Tell him to leave the official e-mail to trained professionals who are not 94." She paused. "But say it nicely. Oh! And remind him to treat e-mail attachments like he would a package, have us look at it first."

"Do a lot of people send him stuff?"

"One woman sent him a toe."

Dan's mouth snapped shut.

"Well we think it was a woman, it was painted. You want coffee?"

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"It's almost one, do you want to get something to eat?"

Dan's eyes lit up "Oh yeah like we could go down to the kitchen and grab a snack or something see who's around?"

"Kitchen?"

"Well I assumed there was a kitchen and common room and movies and a ...toaster."

"We're in a windowless annex behind the laundry. My keycard doesn't even open the parking garage."

"Oh"

"There's a pizza place with a completely shell-shocked delivery boy however."

Dan sighed. At least some things were true.

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"This is bullshit!" Dan knits his brow at his laptop.

"I know right?" Darcy begins furiously clicking around the Pottersmore site.

"I am NOT Hufflepuff. I am ABH, Anything But Hufflepuff."

Darcy frowned, "I got Slytherin. I hate black and green. The system is clearly wrong and needs to be washed clean with the blood of muggles."
"Amen."

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"IS THIS SONG ABOUT LOKI?"

"WHAT? YOU SPEAK NORWEGIAN?"

"NO THEY SAY IT LIKE 300 TIMES."

"OH YEAH IT'S ABOUT THE INVASION, WE'RE TRYING TO PUSH THEM FOR A US TOUR."

"IS IT PRO OR ANTI-LOKI?"

"I HAVE NO IDEA."

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Dan got a reply to his private message saying thank you for looking out for him and for all his help and he's sure to get a grip on this thing soon. Dan stared at the postscript "Best Regards, Steve Rogers" for a particularly long time. Then he saw the cursor on his Steve sMail window pull over to Compose New and letters tap their way into the TO: and SUBJECT: fields. TO: Shellhead@sMail.com Subject: Dinner On the 27th!! and Dan quickly minimized the window and switched back over to Captain-Perfect-Pants.

Some things are supposed to be private.

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On Darcy's request, Dan puts up an Ask Me Anything post before clocking out for the day. He picks up his backpack and tries to figure out the maze of grey corridors back to the elevator. He's so giddy and flush that he doesn't really think about where he's going to go next (Back to the shelter?) or when he's going to get paid (is he getting paid? He didn't ask) that he almost doesn't notice someone calling his name.

"Mr. Maven!" Down the hall is a short blonde woman in a lab coat standing in the doorway of an unmarked room.

"Yes?"

"Can I see you for a minute?"

Dan shuffles toward her. "Oh god, this is where they find out it's been a terrible mistake and tell him to leave and never come back." He reels. The back of his shirt is dark with sweat when he enters the room. Inside is a bare bones examination room with a table, metal chair, harsh lighting, little jars of cotton swabs and a spent needle box on the wall. The short blonde woman holds out her hand. "I'm Dr. Block with medical. All new employees are required to have a quick examination."

"Trying to figure out if I'm a Skrull?"

Dr. Block gave the smallest, tightest smile. "Nothing that interesting I'm afraid. Please, sit."

He does and then Dr. Block picks up a tablet and runs him through some basic examinations. He doesn't have to take his shirt off (thank god) cause her tablet is making little tricorder noises so
Dan assumes it's another one of Stark's toys.

"All right. Everything looks in order." She tapped away on the tablet. "Just one more thing." She took a small white cube out of a red envelope she had stuffed in her lab coat. "Put this on your tongue." Dan held the white cube away from him. "SHIELD wants me to ...trip balls?"

Dr. Block smiled again. "It's a new type of nano-diagnostic tool, perfectly safe."

Dan nodded his head. This has been the weirdest day. He put the cube on his tongue, sure as hell tasted like sugar, and let it dissolve into sweet spit. Dr. Block was looking at him funny, she hadn't changed her expression or posture but suddenly she was ...more. Her outline was vibrating and blurry.

"Look at me." She said, her voice deeper now, slower. "Look only at me."

The room began to pitch and roll like a ferry ride. The lights had become, not red exactly, not directly, there was now a suggestion of redness all over the room. Dan could swear he heard muffled pizzicato stings, like someone rehearsing in the basement.

"Alpha. Beta. Gamma. Sigma." Dr. Block went on, low and slow, not breaking her gaze. Dan felt like he weighed a thousand pounds. His mouth refused to work and his tongue went dry.

"November. Echo. Case. Nightmare. Green." After that the doctor seemed satisfied. The lights snapped back to dull office overheads. The band in the basement put away their instruments and Dan could move his mouth again. "Thank you for time Mr. Maven, you may leave now." Dan obeyed, walking out of the room with a slightly loopy, drunken gait.

Natasha scratched her head. They can make flying robot suits but they can't make a wig that doesn't itch. Picking up the tablet, she allowed herself a slightly furrowed brow - Well that rules out one thing. If he is a plant, he doesn't know it.

Maybe.

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Dan wandered the hallways of Stark Tower. Didn't he just pass that vending machine? Was it two rights or three? He was still unsteady on his feet from that nano-diagnostic-drug-cube-thing. Being not terribly experienced with futuristic mind-altering substances he was finding it difficult to keep his eyes focused. Everything was running together, the walls, the rooms, the hallways that bent back onto themselves. He just needed to find a sign or a map or something. Not someone, people couldn't see him like this. He felt tired, the floor looked so clean and cold and inviting, he nearly swooned. No, stay up, one foot in front of the other - maybe just lean against the wall for a while. Dan spots a slightly open door into an unlit room. He nudges it open to find racks of medical supplies in a shallow, dark room. Behind one of the racks is a cot, the kind doctors might use during long shifts.

He doesn't even stop to take off his backpack, he lands face first into the cot and falls into the deepest sleep of his life.

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Darcy is packing up for the night, unlike some people she has a life outside the office and would like to keep it thankyouverymuch. Before heading out she decides to check on thier latest hire's work. Let's see here - folders Sunshine_Rainbows_Unicorns, Stupid_gifs, Jams. She switched over to browser history - reddit, twitter, sMail, tumblr, metafilter, gawker, ao3, and the Plastic Surgery Helpline. She scrolled down further. "Manhattan's cheapest rhinoplasty!", "The Journal
Of Facial Reconstruction." "Choosing your plastic surgeon", "NyMag's 100 best Doctors (and 5 terrible ones)."

Oh dear. Darcy made a mental note to get a good look at his nose the next time he came in, she doesn't normally miss stuff like that.

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Chapter Summary

Dan's second day starts out rocky while Tony makes Bruce do something he swore he would never do. Darcy breaks fandom's heart. Dan breaks the internet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"No." Dr. Bruce Banner, rumbled shirt and all, was standing before a series of floating charts with titles like WORLD OCEAN ACIDIFICATION RATE, FISHERY REPLENISHMENT 76-99, GLOBAL CARBON EMISSION REPORT, and INDIAN TAKE-AWAY NEAR YOU. Next to him (or rather, all around him in a kind of super-position of fidgeting) was Tony Stark.

"This is right up your alley Banner, I can't trust this with anyone else."

"This is exactly the sort of thing you promised me we would never do." Bruce moved to another part of the holo-display, putting his back to Tony. "The fact that you're even asking me means I should quit."

"Nothing to do with Super-Solider or Rebirth or anything like that, I'm not stupid Bruce I just act like it." Tony put his hands on his hips. "No better, faster, stronger, just basic medical applications. This is new data, from the kid who ...borrowed all the Oscorp regeneration research. I just want to have some of his tissue on file. Nothing more, my intentions are pure and honorable."

"They always start with honorable intentions." It hit Tony like a left hook. Hasn't even proven himself enough? Isn't saving the world a get-out-of-doubt free card?

"Bruce" He said, drawing out the name in that condescending way he did whenever he got more irritated than usual. "There are lots of people in the city who could use this right now. We have an obligation to explore every option that might better the lives of the injured." He said, letting the phrase "the people we let get injured cause we couldn't save them" hang in the air.

Bruce sighed, removing his glasses.

"Just talk to him and take a sample. You don't have to do anything or tell me anything or make the research public, just look. I'm begging you Bruce, this is me begging you, I've been told it's very effective."

"Tony I-"

"Please."

And that shook Bruce. Tony wheedled, argued, demanded, goaded, perused, annoyed and nagged but he never just asked.

"If I find anything even close to weaponizing I will dump the sample down the sink and you will never see me again."
"That's all I wanted to hear buddy." Tony nearly hopped in excitement. He slapped Bruce on the back. "I'll bring him in tomorrow, you go back to saving the whales in the rainforest or whatever." Tony walked out. Bruce stared at the web of floating data. How did he let himself get talked into this?

Tony was walking toward the elevator when JARVIS chirped at him.

"Sir, there is an unauthorized body in Store Room 33 of the laundry annex."

"And why are you telling me? Go get security to remind him about our city's trespassing laws."

"Because sir, the body in question is flagged for observation."

Tony stops. He doesn't remember flagging anyone for—oh. Hill.

"JARVIS, keep that room open to him at all hours and redirect personnel to other crash rooms, but don't let him know. Make him think he's getting away with something."

"Yes sir, I will try my best."

Of course you will thought Tony as he entered the elevator. I built you to.

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Dan Maven awoke from a night of untroubled exhaustion to find himself on a cot in store room 33. He checked his phone, 7:35 AM. 2 new voicemails. He felt gross, the sweat of last night's drug-cube-adventure dried and caked under his polyester dress shirt. He dialed into voicemail.

"Mr. Maven is this Dr. Clemets at Lenox Hill, we have some—"

Dan hit save for later. He couldn't take hospital news right now. He can barely deal with sitting up right now. He slumped the backpack off his shoulders. The last thing he remembers was some blonde doctor giving him an examination in Stark Tower. Oh god, he crashed someone's break room and he smells like stale spit. He was so fired.

One of the upsides of working behind the laundry are the racks of fresh uniforms just sitting out in the open. Dan looked around before snatching a clean shirt and heading into the bathroom to perform a quick sink wash. He even tried brushing his teeth with his fingers and hand soap before remembering he had a pack of gum somewhere at the bottom of his pack. "Semper paratus", he grumbled.

Dan walked sheepishly into Information Operations. Darcy was already there with a steaming mug of coffee on her desk.

"Whoa, rough night?"

Busted. Dan managed to spurt out an I-was-celebrating-my-first-job thing.

"Did you go home with an orderly?"

"What?"

"Your shirt." Darcy pointed with her pen. Dan tried for an ambiguous smile. Darcy went back to her screen. Crisis averted. Thank god for Darcy's dirty mind.

"Anyway, you'd better check your Ask Me Anything."
Dan flipped open his laptop. 4,678 new questions, with new ones coming in roughly every forty seconds. He should probably ask if he's getting paid for this but after last night he's not too fast to ask questions.

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"I can't answer any of these."

Darcy made a little rising sound.

"Are Black Widow And Hawkeye and couple? Do they sex-fight?"

"Oh god they'd both kill you before you got halfway through that question."

"Are Iron man and Captain America planing to adopt?"

Darcy choked on her coffee. "Oh wow I don't even know where to begin with the wrongness."

"What's the toilet paper like in Stark Tower? Wait, I can answer that one." Dan typed away. "Scratchy but not like prison scratchy."

"See, it's not hopeless."

"Is the Hulk the same guy who smashed up Harlem?"

"Don't answer that. Or anything like that. Keep the focus on you."

"I'm pretty boring."

Darcy pushed her lips together. "Give me your keycard." Dan handed it over and Darcy slipped it into a small black box that was hidden under a stack of folders and loose paper. She tapped out a few keystrokes and the card popped out of the box.

"Pictures speak louder then words. That should give you access to low-level areas around the Tower. Get snaps of Avengers stuff."

"Like what?"

"You're the super-fan, what would you like to see? Just nothing too classified."

"Cause they'll fire me?"

Darcy lifted the mug to her lips. "Yes, yes that is one of things they will do to you."

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Dan got a picture of Darcy in the IO room, throwing up the horns next to her framed taser. He took a few long angle shots of the huge gold and red lobby (After having his ID checked and re-checked by security and explaining what he was doing), close-ups of Howard Stark's first plane hanging from the ceiling, and some pics of the upper level employee-only mezzanine with its wrap-around Smart Glass windows and sleek, threatening sofas. He got a few looks for taking a picture of the scratchy but not prison scratchy toilet paper but so far it wasn't anything you wouldn't see in a decent magazine spread about the Tower. He crossed onto the big spiral staircase and was about to take a vertigo-inducing shot of the plane from above when he saw Mr. Tony Stark himself walking down with a bushy-headed, hunched teen in toe.

"Thanks again for your help but I'm wondering if you won't reconsider our offer."
"Sorry Mr. Stark it's just, it's not something I can do."

"C'mon Pete, secret identities are for people with something to hide, too 20th century."

The teen managed to slouch even further into himself, burying his words into a grey hoodie. "There are people I've got to protect."

Tony took an avuncular position. "And if you joined up you wouldn't only have the backing of the US Army's newest, scariest division you would have six of the world's mightiest badasses looking out for you. If you wanted we could bring these people here, I've got 13 luxury suites sitting empty, you can have all of them. Furthermore, I've got a genius up there who could desperately use some human interaction and more then one freakishly good assassin who could stand to be taken down a peg, whatya say?"

"I don't know."

"You say ye-" Tony was interrupted by the flash of Dan's camera. Dammit he thought he had that off. Mr. Stark was much shorter than Dan thought, almost his height, and those glasses were way less flashy in the flesh.

"Paparazzi in my own building, who betrayed me? Who hates me this much?"

"No, Mr. Stark I'm Dan Maven."

No reaction.

"The IO intern?"

There's a pause and then Tony perks up. "Oh right the with the Cap thing, jeeze how many kids with cameras do we have here? I was just trying to convince this lovely young man that he should follow your lead and seek employment at Stark Industries. See Pete you'd even have kids your age, it'll be like Science Club but with bigger lasers."

Peter looked like he wanted to die. Dan related.

"Sorry for bothering you Mr. Stark." Dan managed to mumble as Tony guided Peter down the stairs, extolling the wonderful life-time benefits of blah blah blah while Dan made a slightly too quick to not look conspicuous exit down the hallway.

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So there wasn't a big Avengers common room. So there wasn't a kitchen, or at least not one he could get to. But there were lots of office kitchenettes, little white rooms with fridges and sinks and coffee machines. He could just say it was *a* kitchen at Stark Tower, that could work. He was trying to frame a "PLEASE KEEP 'OUR' KITCHEN 'CLEAN'" sign when he heard the fridge behind him swing open.

Dan turned around, buried in the fridge was a mountain of a man in shiny boots and red cape grabbing anything that looked remotely edible. The man closed the fridge with his foot, arms laden with stolen lunches. Upon turning the man noticed there was a human behind him with the most terrified expression he'd ever seen.

The man smiled. "I have been to three of these tiny eateries, yet my hunger twists my insides like Nidhogg itself!"

"Thor Odinson?"
His smile widened. "Yes! I am honored that you recognize me small human. Is there anything I can assist you with?"

"I think I can help you, just wait here." Dan bolted off, leaving Thor to poke his fingers into a container of Pad Thai.

Dan knew he saw a vending machine down here. Yes, right down the hall and yes, they have them. They have all of them. He jammed a twenty into the slot.

"Okay just hold the box up, good. And just a bite out of the one in your hand."

"Your kindness will not be forgotten young one!" And then Dan snapped a photo of Thor Odinson in full regalia munching on wild berry Pop Tarts.

Three minutes after he posted it to the thread the resulting clickflood knocked imgur offline for two days.

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Chapter End Notes

Short one cause the scene break felt natural here. But required way too many edits after the posting -I'll vet the things better now.

"Semper paratus" is the slogan of lots of organizations but most notably the US Coast Guard. Of course Dan knows it.

The Lobby is gold and red cause Tony=egoist. Howard's first plane is there cause of the Howard Hughes/Howard Stark connection and cause hanging planes are cool.

Nidhogg is the serpent who chews at the roots of the World Tree in Norse mythology. It is an accurate description of Thor's appetite.

Poptarts are a fan ...thing.
Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony are friends. Dan discovers Remote Desktop. Steve googles Bing Crosby, Tony makes hard decisions, and Darcy finds out Bruce is a total stoner (and kind of cute).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Well" Darcy let out a long sigh. "I think breaking the internet is grounds for a half-day."

Dan was trying his best not to smile maniacally. He'd have to stagger the photo posts so he doesn't accidentally make office workers around the world productive again. His pocket buzzed - another voice mail - he was about to grab it when Darcy perked up.

"Hey, turn your head to the right."

"Why?"

"Spy reasons."

"Do I have something on my face?"

"Nope."

"Is everything okay?"

"Perfectly fine.." Darcy trailed off, staring at Dan's right profile for another second before turning back to her laptop.

"Just do a quick check that nothing is on fire and take the day off." Darcy scooped up a pile of file folders into her arms and walked out of the room. Dan went back to his screen, the entire Stark Tower social media ecosphere was laid before him. Darcy had set up the system to monitor hotspots to keep simple slips from turning into big floppy disasters, anti-avengers tumblrs, conspiracy sites, r/lokiwasright, Clint's drunk tweets, Tony's anything. After putting down a rabid docflood of sensitive information to Metafilter (that Jessamyn was a god-send) Dan moved to sMail, but before he could check the incoming messages, a chat window popped into the bottom left of the screen.

Shellhead: You have three chances to guess what I'm going to ask you.

CptRogers.Steve: Where are you?

Shellhead: Not important, and now you have two.

CptRogers.Steve: Tony what is this about?

Shellhead: One guess, wow remind me to never let you near a genie.
Shellhead: Wait do genies exist?

CptRogers.Steve: I'm doing paperwork Tony please just ask me what you want to ask me.

Shellhead: Remember our conversation on the 27th?

CptRogers.Steve: The non-slurred parts yes.

Shellhead: Oh look at Mr. I'm so perfect I can't get drunk, no the potential regeneration research. Kid came in today and shared everything, Bruce practically hugged him.

CptRogers.Steve: Bruce agreed?

Shellhead: Unconditionally. I am very persuasive.

CptRogers.Steve: You know I'm worried. There is a bad history attached to re-creating that stuff.

Shellhead: NOT RECREATING, GOD do I have to tattoo it on my FACE I am trying to SAVE LIVES.

CptRogers.Steve: What about Howard's research? They took almost a gallon from me before.

Shellhead: Dad's notes are all over the place, he had like 30 assistants in 4 years, totally impossible to knit together.

CptRogers.Steve: Reminds me of someone.

Shellhead: I'm going to give myself ten points for that. No we need fresh samples, the stuff from your time sat in a warehouse in Nevada for a million years, totally unusable.

Shellhead: C'mon Steve just a little prick. Let me prick you.

CptRogers.Steve: I'd really rather talk about this in person.

Shellhead: Wonderful! Oyster Bar, Grand Central, ten minutes.

CptRogers.Steve: You remembered. Isn't that a little public?

Shellhead: Are you kidding me? It's so crowded nobody goes there. We'll just your average billionaire genius and hunky nonagenarian.

CptRogers.Steve: Okay, but I'm paying.

Shellhead: I insist.

Dan knows he shouldn't be reading this, he knows he shouldn't be allowed to see this, he doesn't even know why he's even in a position to make this choice given the North Korea level of security surrounding the Avengers (who, when you think about it, are the last people who need protection) but he doesn't look away. The only thing Dan does is make a small addition to his vast and staggeringly comprehensive set of Captain America facts: "Steve likes The Oyster Bar."

His phone buzzed again, low power warning. He didn't notice.

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Dan potters about the office for a while longer. He goes for a coffee run and tries to re-trace his steps to the room he woke up in. After he finds it he double checks the handle (still unlocked) and
counts the steps and turns from the coffee machine to the store room, Up, Up, Left, Right, Left. He's playing a round of gemcraft when he notices activity on Steve's sMail. Steve hits Compose New and starts a letter to BBanner@sMail.com. Dan leans in. Typical stuff really, agreement to something test talk to Tony Responsibility blah jargon blah. He hits send and starts in on his New Mail and Dan starts to rationalize the current situation. Steve agreeing to a spot on Good Morning America (Steve hadn't marked the chats off the record). Steve tells catering what he'd like for dinner (Steve knows IO watches this stuff). Steve setting up a sparring session with Clint next week (This is actually, technically speaking his job). Steve deleting four pictures Tony sent him without opening them (Really, he's doing Steve a favor). He sits there for a hour, watching Steve do paperwork. He finally blinks when Steve's screen closes out. Dan turns to get up but then the Steve window flicks to life. Google front page. Dan stares at the cursor moving to the search field. The words spring out "Les Paul Bing Crosby Long Time". The screen switches to a list of Youtube results. Steve picks the first one and the window moves to a video of a record playing.

Remote desktop. Of course.

The tinny little guitar tune fills the IO office. Dan watches the youtube screen, a fixed shot of a 45 spinning, Dan reads the words on the label, DECCA IT'S BEEN A LONG LONG TIME BING CROSBY LES PAUL AND HIS TRIO. Dan's updates his database. Steve plays the song three times, occasionally tapping out into a new browser tab which strikes Dan as a remarkable leap for someone for whom the internet was introduced a week ago. Steve watches a few clips from old movies Dan has never heard of. Steve tabs out to Google, "Quick Shoe Shining Tips" and "Modern Greetings and Etiquette". That last one sent Steve into a wikkihole, the suggested greetings for married vs. single women, for same-sex couples, "Mssrs. Meesters or Misters”, and Steve somehow ended up on a whole US Civil-Rights Struggle reading binge. He was hovering over a link to the Kinsey Report when the sMail tab started to blink.

Rusalkautomatic: Ready?


Rusalkautomatic: Nervous?

CptRogers.Steve: Yes.

Rusalkautomatic: Good.

CptRogers.Steve: This is so much worse than aliens.

-------

Tony Stark is facing the worst decision of his life. To his left is a total 8.5, 9 when she smiles and does that hand-over-the-mouth thing and she is actually following his concept for the Sustainable Building Project and asking smart questions and putting her hand over her mouth while to his right is a festering cow-plop of a congressman smeared into a blue suit that he really should be listening to if he wants to be a responsible billionaire genius philanthropist playboy-

"And furthermore Mr. Stark I will not even begin to tell you the calls I've gotten from people, people even you should listen to, about your dictatorial ambitions for the city's electrical system."

Tony steeled himself. "So Congressman you're saying that my improvements to the city's overburdened, inefficient, antique grid are in error?" Tony plucked an olive out of his drink.

"It is an unprecedented expression of corporate power."

"You didn't make such a fuss when Reed made a bid for Indian Point and installed new protocols."
So you're okay with vast, unprecedented expressions if it's your corporation doing the expressing, I'm sorry where did you graduate from again?" He popped the olive into his mouth.

"You can't just declare yourself some kind of Energy Czar and stat giving orders to civic and private institutions! This is about Freedom Mr. Stark."

"Freedom for the lobbyists who pay for your trips to Bangkok? Freedom to have a corrupt, blameless infrastructure that cares more about getting elected then solving problems? Let me tell you what I think about your-" A hand slapped him on the shoulder.

"Tony! I've been looking for you." The tall blonde man in the sharp dress uniform patted Tony a few more times. He offered his hand out to the congressman.

"Captain Steve Rogers, and you must be Congressman Kings." He flashed a movie-serial smile.

"Yes, yes I am. And first let me congratulate you on-"

Steve raised his hand. "Oh no, it wasn't anything. I was just doing my duty. But I hear you've got some questions about the Sustainable Building Project?" Steve went all silent movie mugging confused.

"I was expressing concern that some voters might object to Mr. Stark's-"

"Well I know voters cause I am one, and I know Congressman Kings that the proposal calls for an Arc Relay Station in Poughkeepsie and that will come to well over five thousand jobs in the area not including construction and maintenance. " Steve took a drink from a passing waitress.

"Poughkeepsie is in your district, yes?"

"I merely have questions with the methods Mr. Stark is using to achieve his ends."

"I can assure you everyone has questions about Mr. Stark's methods," Steve laughed, which made the cow-plop congressman laugh, which made the girl laugh, which made Tony want to kill everyone in the room.

"I'll leave you two lovebirds alone." Tony exited.

Over at the bar Tony thought, "How does he do it?" Tony sat back with his dirty martini and watched the trio; the girl, the congressman, and the guy. He knew there where two guys, Steve Rogers and Captain America, he knew that better than most people. But he didn't understand this third guy, this matinee idol in the brown Eisenhower coat who knew everyone's name and smiled like a Klieg light and scored points on him. Steve wasn't this confidant. Hell, Captain America wasn't this confidant, retreating into self-consciously hammy cliches whenever things got red. This guy, shaking hands and laughing at jokes and making small talk, he didn't know who this person was. Tony didn't normally care too much about how other people worked, so long as they did but Steve was a once in a lifetime situation. A puzzle, and Tony liked puzzles. He mulled it over, watching Steve pull faces that he swore were lifted off Erroll Flynn, until he saw Nat sitting alone at a round table infested with red and gold glitter. She made the smallest look to him and then subtly tapped her ear while pretending to check her earring. Tony put his drink down and walked over to her, leaving the unknown man in the dress uniform to accept a dance from Ms. 8.5-9-when-she-smiles.

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Okay Darcy was excited, she knew that, she also knew it was silly to be excited about a work event but it was a work event with SUPERHEROES in it so she's going to let herself enjoy this.
The imgur crash was the perfect excuse to skip out for a manicure and massage and pre-game cocktail. Darcy, bursting with Stark wages and SHIELD hush money, is going to walk right up to those bitches at Bloomingdale's and try on everything, make them gasp and snit and roll their eyes, and right at the end she's going to ask to try on the Louboutins. And then she is going to buy them, just to see their faces.

When her receipt came it was on a wrought silver platter. An actual silver platter. Darcy almost died.

And now she was there! In her most perfect cost-a-years-wages pumps and matching lipstick and clingy pink-and-black retro dress and the little Vuitton purse that she may or may not have stolen from her ex-roomate, standing under an real crystal chandelier, surrounded by beautiful men and important women and she wants to go home Right Now.

Everybody knows everybody and nobody knows her. Any conversation ends with "and where do you come from" or "and how do you do know so and so" or "and what do you do?". She sullenly picks at cheese sticks, I blasted a bank account for this? All the superbros are too encrusted with hangers-on to get close to and the only person she does know, Jane, is ankles deep in whitehairs talking science at her and Thor holding on to her like she's a life preserver. Darcy kicks an imaginary beach ball. Well at least the shoes look good. She notices a man noticing her noticing her foot. A small man, a rumpled man, a man currently trying to make himself the smallest object in the room. Darcy's wallflower sense is tingling. She walks over to the man who quickly tries to find a place to flee but ends up shrugging himself into a corner.

"Super lame huh?" Darcy tries the Sullen Teenager Gambit.

"Yeah, it's not really my scene."

Success. Darcy saunters over, enjoying the comradeship of 5th wheels everywhere.

"If Steve knew the look Tony was giving him he'd go back into the ice like-" Darcy snapped her fingers and instantly regretted it.

He laughed. "Now how do you know about that?" The man looked her over. He had such big, brown eyes.

"Oh!" Darcy jerked her hand out "I'm Darcy Lewis, I run Information Operations. Social Media...stuff. I'm all up in your facebooks and twitters. And I did the thing down with Jane in New Mexico. Well I helped."

The man took her hand and shook it. "Bruce. But I'm sure you already knew that."

Darcy nodded. Well she knows Dr. Bruce Banner's file but she's never met Dr. Bruce Banner and he looks way different from his photo, hairier and browner and with bigger eyes and a slumpy posture and thick forearms. Her eyes flit to his hands. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Oh no I don't really drink."

"Oh." Darcy curses herself.

"We could go outside for some fresh air."

Darcy takes a hit that makes her eyes water.

"Jesus Christ" Darcy got out as she coughed. "Is that medical?"

Bruce smiles as he lights the bowl. "Very much medicinal."

They're out on the balcony of Stark Tower, looking over the construction cranes and work lamps littering Manhattan. On every recovery technical was a Stark Industry logo and don't you think for a second that was an accident. Tony had bought up practically every crew in the tri-state area and ran a monopoly on clean-up and re-construction. He called it the "You Break It You Bought It" policy but his critics called it war profiteering. Darcy throws her arms out onto the ledge. Her dress feels ridiculous, it's getting into creases where no creases should be but she doesn't care. The air is cool and dry and she's next to a hairy little man who smiles a lot and has the most amazing weed ever.

"So what is it exactly you do?" says the little hairy man with the amazing weed.

"Online things, making sure Steve doesn't enter any iPad giveaways mostly."

The man laughed and passed the pipe. "And keeping Barton from Drunk Tweeting?"

"Thank you!" Darcy exclaimed. She flicked the lighter. "No one else knows my pain." She took another hit and passed the pipe back.

"Anything interesting happen recently?"

"My intern broke the internet."

"Oh?" Bruce packed another bowl. "How?"

"With Thor."

Bruce laughed again. "Well that would do it." And he passed Darcy the pipe and she took another hit until the skyline looped and rolled. Darcy looked down at Bruce from her vantage point of awesome expensive heels. "Fuck em" she thought as she passed the pipe to Bruce, "I look slamming".

----------

After Steve's screen is motionless for a good twenty minutes, Dan finally closes the laptop and rubs his face. He stretches out and his back cracks in four places. How long has he been sitting here? He checks his phone. Dead. He checks the wall clock: 9:25. Oh shit thinks Dan. Way past Shelter curfew. His stomach adds another protest, a day of adrenaline and coffee catching up to him. Dan gets to his feet, picking up his backpack in one motion. He needs to sleep, he needs to start another day, and he really has to remember to sit upright at the desk. Dan rubs his shoulders, now what was it again?

Up, Up, Left, Left, Right, Right, Up. There was the door. He tried the lock. Open. He put his backpack down and started to take off his shirt. No. If someone comes in he doesn't want to be half-dressed. Just take another shirt tomorrow, it'll be fine. He did allow himself the luxury of taking his shoes off and thus Dan Maven settled into the cot in Store room 33, closing his eyes and trying not think about Oyster Bars and Kinsey scales and strapping golden 27 year olds who dig Bing Crosby.
Chapter End Notes

I didn't check to see if r/lokiwasright was real but I want it to be.

Grand Central's Oyster Bar has been there since 1914 and was rehabbed in the 70s, it's still a very self-consciously old fashioned place but not fancy, so perfect for Steve.

The Les Paul Trio, if you haven't heard them, one of the most divine mid century guitarists. If Steve has any taste then he is a fan.

Rusalka is a Russian folk lore figure, always a woman and usually evil.

Louboutins. Real. And real expensive.

Up Up Left Right - Legend of Zelda 1 puzzle. Cause....I have problems.
Chapter Summary

Darcy wakes up upside down, Clint tweets, Tony shoves something into Bruce's Mouth, Facebook ruins lives and Natasha likes to watch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Natasha Romanov sat in a darkened conference room watching a livestream on a small laptop in front of her. In her left hand was a pen poised above a yellow legal pad. In her right hand was a rock crystal glass with two fingers of black spiced rum. The door was open and after some loud trampling down the hall, the puffy face of Clint Barton loomed into the frame.

"Working late or lately working?" Clint laughed at his joke, swaying slightly. She took a quick look at him, college t-shirt, flannel overshirt, jeans - he's been out drinking.

"I'm watching a teenager have a wet dream." She wrote with one hand while drinking with the other, her eyes locked on the screen. He looked at her. Pressed white dress shirt and knee-length black skirt. Her hair had been dyed black and put into curls around her face. She was seeing someone, or on mission, or both

"That sounds illegal."

"Stark Company policy is quite broadminded when it comes to employee observation."

Clint sat down next to her, leaning in. "I have a problem." He took out his StarkPhone. "I can't connect to anything and it was perfectly fine when I left."

Nat took the phone, not breaking gaze with the laptop. "When did you leave?"

"6:30, thereabouts." Clint stuck his elbow on the table, putting his cheek in his hand.

"More like 4:15." Using her left hand Natasha scrolled through recent activities, messages, tweets:

TheREALHeye tweeted at 8:45: @Barnone where my fans at?

TheREALHeye tweeted at 10:20: Oh man the loves i feel it, come on and hang WIT THE HAWK

TheREALHeye tweeted at 10:32: This place has the best jukebox of all time!

TheREALHeye tweeted at 10:40: @BARNONE REAL DEAL!! EVERY HOUR IS HAPPY HOUR

TheREALHeye tweeted at 11:45: Gettin crazy, any chick that wants gets a free shot on THE HAWK @barnone

TheREALHeye tweeted at 11:49: THE HAWKS shot never miss loloi
TheREALHeye tweeted at 11:52: bitChs that don't ride with Journey can just back off ok?

TheREALHeye tweeted at 11:53: Aint no one got it on the motherfucking bird

Nat gave him the phone back. "IO must have set your phone to disable after a certain number of tweets per minute." She turned back toward her laptop. "Or they've installed a breathalyzer."

Barton put his head against the table. "I wasn't expecting this when I saved the whole goddamned world."

"Don't make a habit of it then. Go to sleep Agent you have a sparring session tomorrow."

He moaned, falling into the table. "With who?"

"Me."

Clint snorted, sat up and slapped his face a few times. "I will leave you with your softcore then, Agent."

"Thank you."

Darcy Lewis woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Her head was half-hanging off the bottom edge and her feet were currently resting on a red pattered pillow pushed against the headboard. She still had her shoes on. They still looked great. She sat up and nearly fell off the bed, pushing the fluffy comforter off herself. Okay, based on the view she's still in Manhattan, mid-town most likely, good, she'd save on cab fare. She pattered herself down, still had on that dress which was now poking rather than creasing into areas it had no right to be. She turned her head around the room, an action made slightly more difficult by her lack of glasses and from sleeping in her makeup but right there, over by the headboard was an end-table with what looked like the outline of her glasses sitting on top the Vuitton purse. Darcy grabbed them, putting on her glasses and checking the purse. OK, wallet, ID, credit cards, phone, lipstick. She unclenched, she hadn't done anything too stupid last night. Just as she slung the purse over her shoulder she heard a baritone voice from the other side of the door.

"Are you up?" asked the voice. And suddenly Darcy remembered the man with the weed and the big eyes and that dance they had after the balcony and the "hey lets get out of here" and "this is my lab" and the makeout session against the bio-hazard fridge and how weird it was to kiss a guy shorter than you and how gentle and playful he was and "I live on 125th street" and "I live four floors down." and then-

"I made eggs. Do you eat eggs?"

Darcy could smell the eggs from the next room. She had never wanted eggs more in her life.

Darcy opened the door. The man was in loose-fitting gym wear and putting portions of scrambled egg onto wooden dishes on a kitchen island. The room was small, almost a studio, with orange painted walls and multicolored rugs laid over each other. The only window was half-shut with venetian blinds. Under the window was an overstuffed couch in a ghastly yellow paisley. On the couch were two sets of red pillows from the bed and a crocheted baby blue blanket crumbled into the arm crease.

"We didn't?" Darcy moved toward the smell of eggs.

Bruce smiled. "I took the couch, you were pretty out of it. I sometimes forget how potent my
blend is. Not everyone has like, superhero tolerances."

She took an offered fork. "Well, I'm not exactly a lightweight, I did work with astrophysicists."

"Jane?"

Darcy shook her head, mouth full of egg.

"No way."

Darcy swallowed. "Like a chimney."

Bruce smiled again, God his face could just light up. "I'll have to bring that up the next time I see him."

While getting a glass of orange juice, Bruce said "You know this doesn't have to be anything you don't want it to be." He continued, his back to her. "I don't want to push you into anything or make you feel obligated, we don't have to-"

Darcy made a show of wiping her mouth with a napkin "Of course! I mean I don't take this the wrong way but I have a policy about not mixing work and ...and other stuff so we can just-"

"Just keep going on as before."

"Right" Darcy's face felt like the surface of the sun. "I'm just going to go wash up." And just as the bathroom door closed, the apartment door swung open.

_____

Tony Stark did not sleep with anyone. He had a perfectly reasonable number of drinks and then said goodnight to his guests and went upstairs for a very lovely video-call with his very lovely girlfriend-who-does-not-use-the-GF-word who graciously informed him about the goings on of the company she so gracefully agreed to run for him. Call finished, he had another perfectly reasonable number of drinks and fell asleep half-dressed in his own bed without anyone else in it.

So as a result, Tony was feeling very adult and good about himself when he barged in on Bruce's apartment at 7 in the morning carrying the gift of freshly made doughnuts.

"Rise and shine Jolly, it's a big new day bursting with opportunities just like this delicious jam roll, here" He shoved it into Bruce's wide open mouth. "You love it, just remember to chew, guess what I just got in this morning?"

Tony's surprise was cut short by Darcy coming out of bathroom.

"I'll just, see you around then?" She slunked along the wall, trying not to look at Tony.

"Sure, you know where to find me."

Darcy gave about 54 nods in 3 seconds and then all but ran out the open door. Bruce closed it behind her.

"Banner baby please don't tell me are paying for that cause I can get you much better value for your money."

Bruce shoved the doughnut box back into Tony's hands.

"What makes you think you can just come in here?"
"My Tower, my locks, my rules, besides whatever was happening was over." Tony looked through the remaining doughnuts.

"You had business, Tony." He said, putting on the stress on the last syllable like he did was very particularly annoyed.

"Yes!" Tony selected a doughnut. "Regeneration!" He said with a mouth full of bear claw. "The kid stuff and the Cap stuff are playing wonderfully together, they're braiding each others hair and talking about boys, we can move on to animal trials immediately."

"That's my data Tony."

"I know, you said I could look at it when you finished so I did and I saw a few very promising leads, you should be way more happy than this, have another doughnut."

"You said I would be able to direct the course of the research." Tony noticed Bruce wasn't slouching anymore. This was bad. This was a bad thing.

"You can! And you do! This is me offering you full clearance to begin animal testing if and when you decide to do so." Tony patted him on the chest. "It's the Dr. Bruce Show I just get an executive producer credit. And Co-Creator credit. And a cut of the merchandise sales."

"Do you have your work on the data?"

"Right here!" Tony pulled out a Hulk Fist USB drive. Bruce glowered at him.

"They sell them in Chinatown, I got one of each, well one hundred anyway! Good luck with the data and your female friend I'm sure there are big, bold, rounded things on the horizon for you." Tony put two thumbs up as he exited. "Brand new day Banner, Brand. New. Day." Tony slammed the door behind him.

Bruce slid the Hulk Fist USB drive into his StarkTablet. As the data downloaded he picked up his pipe from the arm rest and opened the small lacquered box on the coffee table. Empty. He poked around for a few spare leaves and sticks. That box was full when he got home last night.

That Darcy Lewis really is an exceptional woman.

---------

Dan awoke on the same cot he had for two nights. It was beginning to smell. He took out his phone for the time. Dead. Right. First things first, get that charged. No, he felt his sticky orderly shirt, first thing clothes. No, his stomach made an impassioned plea, first things food. Dan crept out into the hallway, straightening his back and trying to look like a very respectable, very well-fed and bathed employee. He hit up a vending machine (he really was going to have to ask when and if he was getting paid) for a spongy muffin and a Snickers bar. He heard Snickers bars were used as K-Rations back in Captain America's time, so he figured it was a good choice. Dan drank a cup of sugary, milky coffee that came out of a spout and made his way to the laundry. He pushed past the double doors, checking to make sure he was alone, and then made a bee-line to the stacks of freshly laundered uniforms.

Which is when he saw his supervisor rummaging through a basket in full evening dress. Darcy looked him dead in the eyes.

"I won't say anything if you don't say anything."
And so no one said anything. Dan picked out something from the science dept that, if you squinted, could be a dress shirt and pants. Darcy snatched the first thing that fit her so they walked down to the IO office looking like a medical student suffering from severe sleep deprivation and a nurse in 8-inch heels and hundred dollar hairdo.

Thankfully, this was Stark Tower so no one thought twice about it.

When they reached IO, Dan docked his phone into the nearby charger and Darcy sat down at her desk.

She made a conscious decision to keep the pumps on, blisters be damned.

-------

Dan is dealing with Clint's unplanned media event at Bar None with lots of back-deleting and insta-banning. Darcy is monitoring service calls when she gets a flash on her sMail.

BBanner: Hey

She stops, turning her head to see if Dan is looking.

DLewis: hey

BBanner: You totally drained me out.

DLewis: sorry ;( I don't normally do that

BBanner: No no, It's cool. Impressive.

DLewis: Finally, I can tell my mom I'm good at something

BBanner: Ha!

DLewis: Let me make it up to you, my treat, I got a guy

BBanner: Ehh my stuff is pretty, specialized not to downplay your guy or anything

DLewis: you're making me feel bad

BBanner: Okay fine you can make it up to me, but in a proper outdoor way

DLewis: ....?

BBanner: Take me out to dinner

DLewis: you have no idea what was going through my head just now

BBanner: You are a very interesting woman Ms. Lewis.

DLewis: I'm taking this chat off the record.

-------

When Dan's phone chirps that it's fully charged, he takes it and checks unanswered messages.

Nothing too important there: mass txts about when the schools will re-open and curfew notices. He opens voice mail.
"You have Three New Voice Messages. To Listen To Your Voice Messages P-

Dan presses 1.

"Mr. Maven this is Dr. Clemets with Lenox Hill Hospital, your father had a cardiac incident in the middle of the night and we were wondering if you would like come in and review some forms and options concerning possible end-of-"

Dan presses 5. Delete message.

"Mr. Maven this is Dr. Clemets with Lenox Hill. I have been trying to get in touch with you. Your father needs someone to look after his wishes should and if the time comes when we have to make that decision. He would like very much for you to come in Mr. Maven. Thank you."

Next Message.

"Mr. Maven this is Dr. Clemets. Your father has been transferred to the Lexington Armory following another incident similar to the one before. He is now in the care of Dr. Carcetti, please direct further inquires to her."

To listen to your messages again, press pound.

------

Dan put his phone away. He finished up the most recent "Inside Stark Tower" photo post to Captain-Perfect-Pants and, in as casual voice he could muster, asked Darcy if he could go take care of some hospital stuff. Darcy said of course.

"I'll stay in phone contact in case of emergencies."

"Good idea, Facebook could spin out of control and kill millions! Go." She shooed Dan out of office and returned to off-the-record chatting.

The elevator up to the lobby takes forever. The first time he took this trip he was trying not to gawk at Captain America. He stares at his reflection in the brushed glass doors. His roots were showing, almost an inch of black under the carefully applied and highlighted blonde. Dan walks purposefully out of the lobby and into the bright Manhattan mid-day. He turns a corner, stepping onto Park Ave with Grand Central to his left. It was so strange to think that behind the walls of scaffolding and cardboard panels was a Grand Central Station with a huge hole in its side, the constellation roof bashed in, and the statue of Mercury ripped off. Park Avenue was closed to cars so the double-street stretch had become a construction site 20 blocks long. A maze of barriers, fences, winding pedestrian walkways and frighteningly tall machinery. Entire blocks had become rubble pits, some cleared by Stark Industry recovery crews, some just fenced in piles. Other buildings had their tops smashed right off, stumpy jagged towers in the middle of rubble, like a forest after a fire. Some blocks were totally untouched, with only shattered windows or one solitary scar along the 10th floor.

The non-construction people where in the food cart area, the pit of the Park Ave tunnel around 34th street that the vendors had claimed as their own. Dan maneuvered around the crowded, steamy alley and streets the carts and stalls had created. The smell was overwhelming, fresh baked bread, ginger noodles hitting the pan, cardamon curry, meaty empanadas, pretzels hot from the oven, roast vegetable kebob, mini-burgers on the grill and barbequed everything. Some people gave food away, a truck manned by the Maria Stark Foundation handed out free coffee all day and night. Others made a killing, particularly the unofficial but tolerated beer garden spread out on street level at 30th street. There where other people there too, sitting outside tents and stalls and
posted-off areas, in the shadow of side streets or slumped in corners around a streetlamp. Refugees. Displaced Persons. People thrown out of Shelters or deemed unfit for them or turned away when the Shelters filled up for the night or who refused to go there. He had heard the horror stories about Javits, another Superdome they said.

Dan had been lucky, he got into the Turtle Bay Shelter right away, sleeping on a mat in a high school gym, the open roof covered with blue tarp. I haven't been there in days thought Dan. They wouldn't keep his spot for him, right? Not with so many people waiting? Dan ducked east, onto Lexington Ave, quieter despite the bike traffic. He needed time to think. Or not think. He wasn't sure yet. He stopped in front a wedge of brick steps overhung with Gothic windows and cornices. Next to the deep circular entrance was blue sign nailed to an iron gate, "AUTHORIZED MEDICAL PERSONNEL ONLY."


Of course they didn't call them Mercy Wards, not in public, but with the city's few remaining hospitals well above capacity, decisions had to be made concerning patients too far past traditional treatment options. The armories, with their central location and big open areas, could house hundreds of patients who would otherwise be occupying desperately needed beds and resources. Going to a Mercy Ward meant you weren't going to get any better.

Dan enters. His ID is checked and his pockets searched. There are big green doors which presumably lead to the big ward but everyone is moving around them, avoiding them, going up stairways and down short service halls, a parade of paper-carrying and box stacking. He's eventually greeted by an exhausted looking woman with her hair in a bandana and lab coat over street clothes.

She shakes Dan's hand.

"Hello Mr. Maven, I'm Dr. Carcetti, I look after your father."

"Oh thank you. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner."

She doesn't even respond, she just pulls him into a quieter hallway to the left of the green doors. "Okay Mr. Maven." She pulled out a chart from somewhere. "Thank you for coming, we really mean that, not many people do."

Dan nodded.

"But your father has had several serious incidents since he was admitted to Lenox Hill and a few close calls here with us." Dan began to stare at the space just past her shoulder. "As his closest kin we would need your approval of a Do Not Resuscitate order or to pursue more lasting action should he become unresponsive for more than five days."

Dan felt like he was underwater. "I'm only sixteen."

"Given that your father left no living will and has no reachable relatives, the Emergency Protocols empower you to express his final wishes." Dr. Carcetti's face set into a mask. She looked so very, very tired. "Do you understand what we are asking you Mr. Maven?"

"Yes, yes I do." Everything was rolling back and forth, like when the nanocube-drug-thing hit. Dan clenched his jaw, trying to draw his expression into something blank and respectable.

"I just need you to sign this." Dr. Carcetti lifted the chart in front of him.

"Can I see him? I mean, see him before-"
She sighed. "Yes, of course."

They opened the doors to a huge brown barrel vault full of beds. Each station was the same. Chair, bed, monitor, screen, four rows of them reaching to the back wall. Nurses moved from bed to bed, putting in IVs and turning patients. A few doctors sat around half-walls made of medical supply boxes, filling out charts and trying not to be noticed. The place reeked of Hospital, that lack of smell that comes with gallons of disinfectant and sterile pads. Dr. Carcetti led him to a bed second furthest from the back. She turned away, pretending to check a box of antibiotics before she was called away on a distress signal.

Dan walked up to the body in the bed. The body with tubes coming out of it and a five-day sweat stink and skin pale as plaster. All the features where there, the bushy eyebrows, the big chin, the long body and delicate pianist fingers, but it was wrong. Like a wax statue of his father. Dan sat on the little metal chair next to bed.

"Dad?"

Nothing.

"Dad?"

"Kev?" The voice rattled out, thick with sedation and weak.

"No, Dad." Dan stood up next to him, closer to him.

"I'm Dan. Daniel."

"Oh" His father turned toward him, his eyes unfocused and wandering. "Yes, yes you, the short one." He let out a series of bed-shaking coughs. Dan looked at his father's elegant, withered hands. He should grab them. Hold them. Comfort them. He does not.

"Look Dad. They want me to ask you if you would be okay with-" Another rattling cough. His father turns over, away from Dan.

"Get Kevin to do it. He'll know what to do."

"Dad, Kevin's been-" He stopped himself. They don't talk about Kevin. They haven't talked about him since the letter with the crisp US ARMY ink had arrived. He sat back down on the little metal chair. He sat there for a long time. His father started to snore. Dan watched him snore while the light in the Ward turned from mid-day to night. He watched him snore until he had to shoo Dr. Carcetti away for the second time. He watched him snore until his phone buzzed. 4 missed calls? He doesn't remember missing four calls. He looked at the most recent txt.

DLEWIS: GET BACK HERE NOW EMERGENCY PICK UP YOUR PHONE

Dan ran out of the Armory, Dr. Carcetti didn't even have a chance to catch up with him.

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Bruce Banner stood munching on a huge ginger cookie in front of a school-bus turned bakery at the edge of the Park Ave Tunnel Pit. A woman with dark hair, glasses, nurses scrubs and seriously impressive jet-black heels walked up to him.

"I didn't know Nurse Chic was a thing."

"I am the vanguard of fashion. Know this."
Bruce smiled and offered her half his cookie.

"So" Darcy said. "What form shall outdoor dinner take?"

"I know an excellent curry stall, free poppadums and everything."

"Very well but since I'm treating you I get to pick the truck and the only half-way decent taco in New York City just happens to be right around this corner."

"I never thought the tacos in New York were bad."

"I'm from San Diego, we have standards."

"California girl, that's cool. How did you end up in New Mexico?"

"I was enchanted by the Land of Enchantment" Darcy shrugged. "It was more a tuition thing." Darcy looked at his face, so open and calm, his hair curling up in the steam of the market stall, it made you want to spill all your secrets and go roll in a meadow.

"Parent thing. I needed a few states worth of distance."

"I know the feeling." Bruce finished the cookie, the light catching the salt and pepper whrls in his hair.

They sat at makeshift stools in the world's tiniest taco stall. She had a lemon fish taco, he the spicy orange chicken.

"I feel like I'm at an unfair disadvantage. You have a file on me, you know everything about me. Makes small talk kinda awkward."

"Well not everything. I know your height and weight and that you're from Ohio."

"So far so good."

"And you're a doctor and work with radiation and you have a cousin you're close to and your most common google search is 'Fleetwood Mac'."

"See what I mean, you know me already."

"Your file says nothing about having a totally amazing stash."

Bruce looked at Darcy. The rolling sarcastic eyes and pale long neck and the unselfconscious way she murdered a taco, smearing fish juice onto nurse scrubs and the careful way she licked her fingers, quickly but one at a time. Pop. Pop. Pop.

"Okay, ask me a question about something that's not in my file."

"How long have you worked with the..." She chose her words "Group?"

"Not long. I got brought in right before the Loki thing."

"Me too. The Men In Black just showed up and put us all into vans, said everything was taken care of but now we had."

"-more important duties."
"Yes!" she said through a mouthful of fish taco. "I knew that was a line. Did you get that, like balding zen guy with the half-smile?"

Bruce put his taco down. "No, I didn't get that."

"Oh" Minefield. Better to stick to simpler subjects. "It's a shame you guys weren't around earlier. The thing up in Harlem, I know SHIELD took care of it but I bet you guys could've stopped it before all that smashy smash stuff."

Bruce nodded and took a bite of his taco. She doesn't know. He chewed slowly. "She has a file on me but of course it wouldn't have that on it." He thought and swallowed. She doesn't know. Bruce grabbed a napkin off the bar. "Here, you've got something on your." he padded at Darcy's mouth. He had been around people who knew for over a year. He had forgotten what it was like. She doesn't know.

"Well let me say that was the best taco I've ever had." Bruce slid off the stool.

"That is a compliment, you know I know that you're quite the traveler."

Bruce helped her off the stool, making sure to keep smiling.

"I have to get back to work." said Bruce.

"Well me too, sort of. It's kind of a bullshit position."

Bruce's face went soft. "I don't think it's bullshit."

Darcy would of have had time to process this sudden feeling but her phone decided now was the time to ring as loudly as humanly possible.

Darcy lifted the phone to her ear.

"Hello Ms. Lewis, this is Tony Stark. I need to talk to your intern immediately, send him up."

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Chapter End Notes

Nat doesn't drink Vodka cause A) Cliche and B) I figure she likes strange spiced things for some reason.

Clint was at an actual bar in NYC known for liberal drink specials and a rowdy collegiate crowd. Also, he is a bird motherfucker, a bird.

Darcy's waking up lost check? Yeah so not written from personal experience, no way.

Bruce totally has wooden dishes don't you lie to me.

Jolly. As in Green Giant. Tony is insufferable.

Snickers bars are not far from WW2-era K-Rations just sayin.
The Lexington Armory is where MoCCa Fest is held every year, a celebration of indie comics.

Superdome being a reference to the conditions of the Katrina refugees in New Orleans.

Bruce's "cousin" here is Jennifer Walters AKA She-Hulk cause I Do What I Want.

Short update, felt this belonged to this chapter cause the next one is a doozy
Chapter Summary

Mr. Stark is not happy, Darcy is confused, Dan may be broken beyond repair, the Internet ruins everything.

Chapter Notes

There was a big last second addition to the last chapter so you may want to read that first if you just got here.

Big ups to Granny Moonshine my favorite Avengers OC ever.

Also, I promise this is going somewhere.

Tony Stark wanted to see Dan. Tony Stark wanted to see Dan RIGHT NOW. This required a security check, a pass through a private elevator, another check, a full body scan and armed escort onto an elevator that opened onto the floor-wide private office of Anthony Edward Stark, the billionaire genius superhero unstable drunken menace. The guards left Dan, retreating backwards to the elevator doors. Mr. Stark had his back turned, the only sound was the knock-knock of a Newton's cradle sitting on the edge of the very big and very shiny desk. Mr. Stark sat behind it, his head in a file folder. The Newton's cradle knocked back and forth. He turned a page.

Mr. Stark closed the folder. Knock-Knock.

"Sit."

Knock-Knock.

Dan sat down in a chair at the big shiny desk, the Newton's cradle knocking away next to him.

Mr. Stark slid a tablet across the desk, his head still turned away from Dan.

"Care to explain yourself Mr. Maven?"

Dan's hands were sweaty and slippery as he picked up the tablet. The screen showed a series of websites, his Captain-Perfect-Pants picture post of Tony and Peter and then a reddit discussion of the post, people asking who this kid with Iron Man was. There was more, a cross-post to the WHO IS SPIDER MAN website, an NYPD forum where people traded stories of the Spiderman, a picture comparison of Spiderman's build from CCTV and news coverage to the kid in the photo, someone posting a high school year book picture of 'Peter Parker' and comparing it to the Captain-Perfect-Pants post, a Metafilter discussion about how Iron Man might be recruiting kids that was quickly deleted and finally, an OsCorp docflood from some Russian website that was copied and written up in Huffington Post. "'Mystery Teen' In Photo Revealed". A Salon.com article, "Is Spiderman Some Kid From Queens?" "Who is This Peter Parker Anyway?!" screamed the Daily Bugle site. His original post had 6 million reblogs and counting.
"This just happened?" Dan said. No response. Knock-Knock. Dan gulped.

"Sir, I don't understand what-"

"Your picture. You put it online, me and the kid." Tony didn't turn around. Knock-Knock. "Who told you to do that?"

"No one sir, I thought it would be a good post."

"Did you? That's the only reason?"

"Yes sir." Knock-Knock.

"I took a big risk bringing you in here Dan, are you making me regret it?" Tony turned around in his chair. Without the glasses and the shiny suit Mr. Stark looked much older, much scarier. He was the center of a very angry universe, arms at his side like a throne, the suggestion of expensive men and silenced bullets.

"Peter's gone into hiding. We can't find him. You did that."

Dan tried to get something out, he cracked his jaw and shook the tablet.

"I didn't sir-"

"Stop." Mr. Stark stood up, buttoning the bottom button of his jacket. "Don't do that. Don't squirm."


"You may have cost us a very valuable ally." He put his arms down at his sides. "Cost humanity an ally."

Dan's heart is running a 2 minute mile. He's past the ability to cry or break down or squirm. Mr. Stark walked toward him, so graceful, so slow. He looked down at Dan, his hands level with Dan's throat.

"The next time you decide to post something, run it past your superiors."

Knock-Knock.

"Have I made myself clear?"

Dan nodded, he couldn't do anything else.

Mr. Stark looked up. "Take him."

From the shadows came the expensive men. They picked Dan out of the chair and led him back toward the elevator. Dan fixed his head forward but heard the sound of glasses rattling before the elevator doors closed and brought him back down to Information Operations.

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He doesn't know how me made it back to the office but Dan finds himself in the chair across from the SHIELD-issue laptop with his tumblr open before him. His cursor is over the delete button. Is it more or less incriminating if he deletes it? Does it even matter? He barely has time to wonder if he's going to get shot on his way to the coffee machine before Darcy comes busting in, stained
"Oh thank god, you're alive." Darcy slumped down into her chair. "I thought they were going to kill me, I tried to explain about the hospital thing but you know, armed thugs and screaming billionaires are not known for subtly."

Dan blinked for a bit.

"So what happened?" Darcy looked Dan over. She knew shell shock when she saw it. She pulled out two coffee cups, opened her lower desk drawer and produced a bottle of Granny Moonshine bourbon.

"I'm underage." Dan managed to creak out.

Darcy poured "Like they can fire me? I only have a job cause they don't have those Men In Black mind flashy things. At least I don't think they do." Darcy paused for a moment on the existential and metaphysical implications of proving the existence of memory erasers before pouring a shot more bourbon into her cup.

Dan broke. "I don't even know why I have this job. They just showed up in a black van at the shelter and told me I was needed at Stark Tower. I didn't ask questions I just left." Dan is breathing rapidly and clutching his cup like it's the last thing keeping him upright. "I don't have anything else. My dad is still in a coma and I didn't really have friends before and I don't want to screw up the only cool that has ever happened to me ever and I just keep thinking about how it can go wrong-" Dan squealed a strange strangled throat yelp, half way between a whine and kicked puppy. Darcy thought how *young* he looked, it made her uncomfortable. 16 is much further from 24 than eight years.

"Wow." Darcy took a medical sip of bourbon. "I guess it's a big thing, for you."

Dan took a sniff of the drink. It smelled like lighter fluid.

"I mean." Darcy put the mug down. "I know it must be huge and like life-changing and stuff."

Dan paused mid-hyper-ventilate.

"I know from fangirling trust me but this is like, boss level stuff."

Dan stared at her. Darcy made a confused face.

"Your promotion?"

Dan was finally able to speak. "What?"

She clicked away a few series of keystrokes. Another key card burst from her little black box.

"You've been moved up, that's why they called me. They want you to start immediately."

She handed the key card to Dan, it was shiner and sturdier then his current one, with a way better picture that he wasn't quite sure how they got.

"They want you to be Steve's PA. Handle his stuff yourself. He's like your job now."

Dan took the card, cradling it in his palm. Watching over Steve Rogers is his job now. Like he hadn't been doing that his entire life.

When Dan started to cry Darcy produced tissues and back pats. "Granny Moonshine" she
thought, works like a charm.
Dan meets JARVIS. Nat has a bad day. Clint is Clint.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After the crying jag settled down and Dan got himself presentable, Darcy wrote down the directions for the office he was due to report to.

"And here is my personal e-mail, if you need anything just ask, I'm pretty much always online." Darcy made an attempt at a friendly arm punch." Go get em." Dan smiled and held up his new ID. Darcy whipped out her phone and took a picture.

"Sorry, habit. Good luck! Don't stumble upon any ancient evil or end the world or anything."

Dan followed Darcy's directions to an express elevator. There where no exterior buttons, the doors just opened and then closed behind him. Far too much of his recent life has involved dramatic elevators. Before Dan was able to reach for a floor button, a bright light flashed, filling his frame of vision, leaving behind a bright red afterglow.

"Mr. Maven, we've been expected you." The voice came from all over the carriage. It was calm, measured, and a little British. The elevator jerked to life. It rode upwards, gaining speed. Where was he going?

"You are headed to employee registration and evaluation Mr. Maven. There are some forms for you sign." Dan gulped. Is it a mind-reading elevator? Do they even have that? He wouldn't put it past them.

"I already signed-"

"Indeed you did sir, but if you'll pardon my interruption your new position carries with it a greater level of responsibility and clearance."

"Can-" Dan corrected himself. "May I ask to whom I am speaking?"

"Of course sir. I am JARVIS, Mr. Stark's personal assistant and artificial managing intelligence for the Tower and related high-level personnel."

"You're a computer?"

"Not strictly speaking sir, I am housed in many computers throughout the Tower and elsewhere."

"Are you my boss?"

"You could say that sir. I manage the direct affairs of select personnel and their staff. Think of me more as a consigliere to Mr. Stark."

"Okay then." Dan made a mental note to look the word up later. He started to run his tongue over
his teeth, trying to scrap off the smell of Granny Moonshine.

"I wouldn't normally handle new hires but it is company tradition to train your replacement."

"You're Steve's assistant?"

"No sir, you are Steve's assistant."

Dan wondered why you'd trade a omniscient computer program for someone you met for 10 minutes a few days ago.

"Captain Rogers is a traditionalist, he preferred communicating with someone he could see." JARVIS said.

"Oh" Dan tried very hard not to think too loudly.

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened onto a windowless room with a raw concrete floor and brushed metal walls. There was a ghost of a scent in the air, something harsh and chemical, bleach maybe. In the middle of the room was metal table and chair and atop the table was an overstuffed three-ring binder.

On the floor near the desk was his backpack. Dan froze. Had he left it in the crash room? Did they bring it up for him? Who brought it up? Did they know about the crash room? Dan quickly thought that this is exactly when the room fills with poison gas and they dump his body in the river. He had royally fucked up enough to get a reprimand from Iron Man himself, why were they promoting him? Dan walked over to the desk.

"Please take this time to acquaint yourself with Stark Industries' terms and conditions for employment and sign where indicated. If you have any questions, feel free to ask."

Dan sat down at the table. The binder was black. Deep black. Space black. It sucked the light out from around it.

"Of particular interest might be section regarding employee presentation and dress code. It's in section 8, sub-section C2 of the employee conduct agreement."

Oh wonderful, he has a sense of humor. Dan tucked in his stolen shirt and reached for a pen in his backpack.

He flipped through the binder. The documents had titles like CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT: LEVEL 4, TERMINATION ORDER CONDITIONS, NON-COMPETE/NON-EMPLOYMENT STIPULATION, VOLUNTARY MANDATORY TISSUE DONATION, BLACK OUT CLAUSES TIMED AND UNTIMED, and AUTHORIZATION FOR NONCONSENT SEVERE ACTION. It went on and on, hundreds of pages of carefully worded and exhaustively detailed conditions, exceptions, agreements, and requirements. He skipped around, stopping only to sign his name and fill in personal information every couple pages or so. He thought he heard faint whispering or footsteps from behind the walls. Hopefully he'd get out of this evaluation without being drugged. His eyes caught a small paragraph in the middle of an wall of inscrutable text: EMPLOYEE HOUSING AND PROVISION.

"'A4 Level employees are required to be housed on site in provided company lodgings located on CENTURY section 23'- You're giving me an apartment?"
"Yes sir, the current real estate climate and security risks provide for personnel at your clearance to be housed in company quarters. They are quite comfortable, I designed them myself."

Dan didn't try to think what an incorporeal robot butler would consider comfortable. He skimmed through another pound or so of paper before something else stopped him.

"I get full, on-site medical?"

"Yes sir, STARK Industries has an excellent plan for qualified employees, and the Tower contains a first-rate medical ward that should cover most, if not all, procedures."

"And I qualify?"

"Yes sir."

Dan squinted at the small print. "'Extended kin addendum' This covers my family too?"

"Immediate family yes sir."

Dan tapped the pen against the binder. Guess it was now or never. "Could I request a patient transfer?"

"I'll look it up sir, but it shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay.." Dan bit the end of the pen. Time to go all in. "Where in the contract does it mention.." He took a moment to find right phrasing. "Compensation?"

"Section 55, Subsection G8."

Dan turned the pages forward. EMPLOYEE SALARY. He looked for a number.

Oh dear thought Dan. That was far, far too many zeros.

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In the front yard of a quiet Queens street stood a dark-haired woman in a long skirt and short FBI jacket with an older woman dressed in a beige sweater despite the Indian summer heat. The older woman's eyes were puffy and red as she leaned in toward the other woman, fidgeting with a napkin held in her hands.

"You'll find him?"

The dark haired woman gave a solemn nod. "We will do our best Mrs. Parker."

Aunt May didn't say anything. She didn't even return the nod. The visit had been trouble from the start. Mrs. May Parker alternated between stony reverse and fits of apologetic bawling. She wasn't even able to follow the detective up to Peter's room. It was a miracle that got as far as she did. The dark haired woman in the long skirt and FBI jacket pulled out a notepad.

"If you remember anything or hear anything or suspect anything, just call me at this number." She dug around in her jacket. "Do you have a pen?"

Aunt May stared at her like she had four heads. "A pen Mrs. Parker?" "Oh" Aunt May turned, rubbing her pockets before producing a thin black Bic. The dark haired woman took the pen, wrote down a number, and then placed the paper in Aunt May's napkin filled hand. "We've got our top men on this Mrs. Parker." May nodded, closing her fingers around the note. "Thank you Agent Johannson."
Agent Johannson turned toward her car, leaving May in the yard. She drove away slowly, keeping May in the rear view window until she was sure May had gone back inside. She turned the corner onto another street and then pulled the nondescript black car over to the curb. May's pen was still in her hand. She threw it out the window and put her hands against her temples and closed her eyes, counting back from ten. She finished, but it didn't work. Her bile was rising, threatening to choke her. She shouldn't have gone on this. Too many buttons. She swallowed and tried again. Five . . four . . three .. Her phone screamed to life. ONE NEW MESSAGE.


Rusalkautomatic: You're back?

C.Barton: Cakewalk. Guy folded the instant we got the FAG off him.

Rusalkautomatic: What.

C.Barton: Fucking Alien Gun ;)

Rusalkautomatic: I have a report to file.

C.Barton: Stark's paying.

Natasha paused. Cocktails work. Putting on a face works. Quick fixes but she'll unload later, right now quick fixes are looking really good.

Rusalkautomatic: Fine. But don't bring Jolene.

C.Barton: please don't take her just b/c you can

Rusalkautomatic: Friends don't let friends shoot drunk.

C.Barton: slavedriver

Rusalkautomatic: Agent.

Nat tossed the phone onto the passenger seat and started the engine, pointing the car toward Manhattan.

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Chapter End Notes

For those keeping track at home, this is about halfway through the story.

Consigliere = Mob boss' right hand man.

When in doubt, go for narrative mirrors!

Nat has a long skirt and short jacket (google it).

The Pink Cloud lounge cause everybody gets Earthbound references, right?

Jolene = Clint is a huge Dolly Parton fan.
Edits: Removing a massive amount of passive voice construction.
Chapter Summary

Fanfiction represents a security risk. Tony and Steve go on a date (not really (really ). Dan has a new first day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

'and after a banter of witty reparte, tony touches Steves butt'

"What am I reading?" Captain Steve Rogers is sitting at a table with a full binder-clip of papers in his lap. Across from the table is Tony Stark, munching on pistachio nuts and because it is Tony Stark doing the munching, the area is scattered with spent pistachio shells.

"Well Steve sometimes when someone sees someone on TV they like a real lot they want to see that person naked so they-"

Steve closed his eyes. "No. I understand that. What I don't understand is why you've given me 800 pages of this stuff."

"I asked whatsherdeal, the one with the lipstick. Your new PA visits a website full of stories like that pretty much every day. We even think he wrote some of them, check out the notes on pages 98, 221, 451, 346, 633, 771, and 782. Little details, but they give away someone who works here or more directly with SHIELD."

"You had Agents working on this?"

"Fanfiction represents a security risk. They were more than happy to oblige." Tony chewed on a nut with his mouth open.

Steve stared at Chapter 45 of 'Yvette Bloom: Hairdresser To The Superheros' by 'fluffy_murder_cat' "I don't get it. He's supposed to be a bright kid."

"Smart people don't have sex lives? Steve I'm offended."

"It's just...bad. I can barely follow who is talking or what is happening."

"Maybe he wrote them one-handed?"

Steve's ears began to turn red again. Tony gave himself ten points and then, cause he couldn't control himself;

"I'm just warning you the kid's Cap thing might be wanting to get on Cap's thing."

And then Steve went into full blush and hated himself again. Not cause of the dick joke, he was in the Army AND backstage with showgirls, but because people still expected to get a rise out of him with dick jokes. People walked on eggshells around him, they sat up straighter and didn't curse or use contractions. It was incredibly irritating, like he was both a stately grandfather and adorable toddler.
Just cause he didn't curse doesn't mean he hasn't heard them. Just cause he opens doors for women doesn't mean he doesn't know what they look like naked. He wasn't a fucking comic book character and if newspapers are to believed, the Brooklyn of 2012 is a kindergarten compared to the Brooklyn of 1930. He had his jaw broken three times growing up. He was flown into occupied Paris twice. He saw his father shot dead in front of him when he was ten. Everyone trying to be on their best behavior around him just reminds him how much he doesn't belong there.

Granted, he might have brought this on himself.

SHIELD did everything to ease him back to life. It didn't work. Steve didn't talk for five weeks after being defrosted. Not anymore than he had to. His compulsory therapy sessions with Dr. Block were genial and silent. He offered nothing. When asked if he wanted to tour the city or catch up on history, he politely declined. He was left to his quarters or down in the gym. Everyone assumed he was mourning.

He wasn't.

He was angry.

He had done the right thing. The only thing that could be done. He gave it everything and more and managed to save the world. He did it right, no questions, no grey areas, nothing but him and the grenade on the ground. And they took that away from him. They took away his ending and now he has to deal with the consequences of his actions 70 years later when everyone he's ever known is dead. He was supposed to be done.

This wasn't rebirth. This was punishment. For all his good deeds Captain America gets woken up and forced to fight another day. The US Government wasn't going to let their most valuable asset rest in peace forever. Steve hated them. He hated SHIELD. He hated what glimpses he saw of the new city. He hated himself for not welcoming this with open arms. He hated Peggy for saying she'd wait there. He hated Bucky. He really, really hated Bucky. Just another foot to the right.

Then the Battle of New York happened and Steve felt better. Well not better cause, you know, hundreds dead, but the feeling of battle itself, the orders, the command, the plan, saving people and doing good. And the flying. He really liked flying. Steve started to warm a bit. He talked more, asked for an office and then later, an apartment in the Tower. He went on TV and shook hands. He did all the nice normal things people are supposed to do when they're unfrozen national icons who just defeated an alien invasion.

And because of this reckless new way of living he got stuck in Tony Stark's orbit and that insufferable little man would not leave him alone but was the only person who didn't treat him like a museum relic or a live-action cartoon character. Tony had somehow gotten it into his head that now that they had saved the world together Steve was his best friend and kept calling and e-mailing and badgering him. Steve has not used to being the center of that much personal, and well financed attention so he hadn't built up decent armor against a long, hard ego stroke.

Tony was constantly goading and daring him, hey lets go to the WW2 museum, hey lets go try new motorcycles, hey let me and Bruce run tests on your reflexes, hey lets go to your old neighborhood, hey lets get you new clothes.

Okay that last one he liked. Tony had picked out some country store for Boy Scouts or something and decked him out with fishing gear and boots. He wasn't expecting to enjoy it but Tony's just willed it into being fun, like he did everything, you had to race just to keep up (And Tony didn't act let-down when Steve didn't faint or make a fuss about prices. He knows what inflation is and
honestly couldn't have told you what a shirt cost in 1942 either). It wasn't so much the clothes as it
was seeing himself in civvies. From the transformation onward he's only ever seen his body in
uniform or in costume or in basic workout wear. Buttoning up a flannel shirt and looking in the
mirror, he could almost see Steve Rogers, not Captain Rogers and not Captain America, this
totally new 6'4, 240lb guy that he didn't know what to do with but who did fill out a XXL-Long
shirt very well. For the very first time in his life Steve thought he was, well, fondueable.

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Tony fiddles with a loose shell. Steve scratches his neck near the collar, he's wearing the red and
blue checkered poplin shirt and tan chinos. Tony admired his handiwork. It took a truly epic
amount of badgering post Invasion to get Steve to consent to a shopping trip. Tony said he would
not stand idly by while America's greatest natural resource sulked around in SHIELD-issue
laundry products. Everything had to go, except for the bomber jacket which even Tony had to
admit was pretty cool.

So Steve needed new clothes and all the boutiques Tony frequented had either banned him for life
or were decidedly too flashy and confrontational for newborn Mr. Rogers. He didn't want to
spook the guy. He needed something functional, something sturdy, something classic, something
all-American.

"Tah-Dah!" Tony removed the blindfold from Steve's face and bowed toward the storefront.

Steve blinked. "I don't get it."

Tony spread his arms wide "L.L Bean! Outfitters of finely made, masculine, no-nonsense
outdoors wear and casual clothing for over a hundred years! An American institution."

Steve glanced over a display of tents and sleeping bags. "Not a lot of camping sites in Brooklyn.
You usually tried to avoid sleeping outside."

"Just one look, c'mon. If you hate it you never have to talk to me again."

"That is tempting." Tony smiled and opened the door for him.

It quickly began apparent Steve hadn't shopped for clothes much in his life. Or shopped for
anything really. He kept havering, picking things up and putting them down, sniffing things, and
asking the poor beleaguered stock boy way too many questions about polyester. This was too
much for Tony, Steve was ruining shopping, so after a flurry of very confident pointing he took
over the effort and got Steve into a line-up of outfits to fit almost any occasion (He skipped formal,
Steve had the dress uniform and the OTHER uniform if need be).

Once he was under orders, Steve seemed to visibly relax. He made suggestions, he vetoed
anything too loud or shiny, and he was genuinely astonished by the variety of sunglasses available
to the average American. Tony was having a ball, sure he liked spending money but Steve's
enthusiasm was palpable and the more he spent the more wound up Steve got. Everything was
new, having money was new, shopping was new, trying on clothes was new. He actually got to
see Captain America pout when Tony demanded he try on the green shirts again to see how they
looked with the linen pants. It was amazing.

Still, Tony kept expecting things to go wrong, for someone to recognize them or for Steve to
storm out or for an army of lizard-men to crash into the store but against the odds of fate and a
universe designed to fuck Mr. Stark over, it went perfectly. Everything had gone according to
plan, except for the look he got from the cashier as she rung up a few hundred bucks worth of
wardrobe. "I'm going to buy this store just so I can fire her" thought Tony but he was distracted by
Steve wishing her a fine day and absentmindedly picking up seven bags of sturdy clothing with one hand. How must it feel to just be able to do that? To not even have to think about it?

But that was a while ago. In the here and now Steve is leafing through the papers again. "You should've let me talk to him. You probably scared him half to death."

"Exactly. You stay golden and I bad cop him into thinking before he speaks. You gotta keep the underlings jumpy." Tony leaned back and threw a pistachio into the air.

Steve glowered. The nut bounced off Tony's face. He picked up another one.

"I don't think you're an underling." Tony shelled the pistachio on the table.

"People don't have underlings Tony. They have friends or colleagues or-"

"Excuse me Captain" JARVIS' voice politely interrupted. "But Mr. Maven is waiting for you in the foyer."

"Oh" Steve turned his head up to the ceiling. JARVIS still tripped him up, he didn't know where to look."I'll be right there."

Tony got up, taking another handful of nuts with him. "I will leave you two to it. Just don't forgive too much and don't have him do too much. That's how they end up running your company."

"I thought you gave her the company?"

"That's how good they are." Tony left the room, awarding himself ALL the points and issuing commands to JARVIS' to schedule more time with Steve and to run a few checks on the Regeneration data and to get him something to drink because these nuts are salty as hell.

After ordering all these commands, he opened the door to his new workshop in the tower, the morning light hit the tops of his robots, some old, some new, some improved beyond recognition.

"Of course people don't have underlings" thought Tony. "I have underlings."

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"God he's short."

Steve looked down at Dan Maven, all five foot nothing at rapt attention. Steve pushed the thought away, that's not a nice thing to think about someone. Besides, most people are shorter than him. Still, it was going to be an adjustment. Steve shook his hand and took him down the hall to the double doors. Steve gave congratulations and kudos, outlining Dan's new responsibilities, obligations and duties in a crisp military diction. He even walked in time. Dan took notes and kept smiling.

Had he gotten younger? He didn't look nearly this ...teenaged before. But again Steve reminded himself that most people apparently look younger then they are. Everyone dressed down, everyone wore makeup, adults wore sneakers, and guys freely admitted to putting on lotion and cold cream before bed. You can get used to cell phones and flatscreens but manscaping is a difficult bridge to cross.

Steve left Dan at the desk right outside his office, repeating the words JARVIS had told him about the computer system and monitoring and security. Dan sat before a double monitor set-up of his computer, Steve's remote desktop, Stark Intranet activity, and about a hundred color-coded USB drives. Steve tried to make a joke about interns getting coffee but it fell apart in the telling. He
excused himself to the office and wished Dan good luck.

Dan, for all the sensory overload and calm-head keeping, had allowed himself one indulgence. He pressed in a bit close when Cap shook his hand and took a long sniff.

Yep. Bay Rum.

Dan had spent the night on an actual bed in an actual apartment designed by an actual artificial intelligence. It came with a full compliment of pressed white shirts and black slacks and a closet tie rack with two black and two blue ties. Dan spent the night watching the ‘How To Tie A Tie’ youtube channel while waiting for the Just For Men 'Sandy Blonde' formula to bleach his roots. He sits down at his desk and resists the urge to fiddle with the half-winsor knot or sensitive hair follicles. He sets up his camera so both him and his nameplate are in view.

He takes a picture and posts it to Captain-Perfect-Pants with the title 'Guess Where I Am".

-----

Here's what Dan learns about Steve.

Steve's office isn't the time capsule he was expecting. It's pretty much an anonymous shiny metal room that just happens to have a guy a little too big for it in it. No photos, no desk toys, not really anything aside from a sketchpad he keeps on the desk and a framed Captain America trading card from the 40s on the opposite wall. He keeps the door open unless he's talking on the phone.

Steve is completely fine with cell phones but tends to bark into them like he's trying to order an armored division around the Alps.

Steve's food preferences are deceptively simple. Yes he likes classic staples, sauerkraut is about as spicy and exotic as it gets, but his tongue has not caught up to 70 years of food science and factory farming so Steve's meals are outsourced to niche little hipster places that make their own sausages from pigs that have never once been made to feel bad about themselves. These places are not very good at responding to e-mail. He also developed a taste for greasy British fare when overseas so it took a very large bribe to convince a downtown fish and chip shop to deliver to midtown.

Steve writes down everything he eats into a journal and then types it up into a file called METABOLIC_DATA_SR_Alpha. This file is shared with several contacts within Stark Tower with the metadata heading REGEN.

Steve dresses like he might at any moment go duck hunting.

Steve drinks tea. Gallons of tea drowned in whole milk with about five sugar cubes.

Steve's art supplies are from New York Central Art Supply and he shops for them himself, so no point putting them on the order forms.

Steve gets roughly 3 hundred million e-mails a day to his 'public' account and only slightly less to his private one. He still doesn't get that the phone can do email and things so he calls people and then asks them to IM him cause it's quicker.

Steve's apartment is directly four floors up.

Steve is between bookings and missions at the moment so aside from training and briefing, his schedule is clear and easy to manage. He spent two hours signing autographs despite the robosigner Tony hooked up for him.

Steve spends an absurd amount of time on Wikipedia.
If his google searches are any indication Steve is into Cowboy Shit like Whoa.

Sometimes his cowboy-related media searches turn up links that have to be very quickly closed. Dan quietly turns on Safe Search for him.

While beating down an edit war on Steve's wiki entry Dan decides to look into his personnel file to see if he can add in a few details. The bulk of the file is confidential, more blacked out lines than clear ones. It was frustrating, Steve's pre-Captain life is a matter of huge debate on Captain-Perfect-Pants and to have the answer so close was enough to drive any fanboy screaming mad. It occurred to Dan that he could just ask him. The guy was literally in the next room, he could just go and ask him anything. But he stopped himself, you don't just go and risk that. Think of the trust issues alone. He is going to have to tread very carefully before doing anything outrageous like talking. He would remain clean, quiet, and professional. Dan was doing a very good job of this for the four seconds it took him to read through the visible text of Steve's file.

PARENTS:
SUSAN ROGERS (nee Mcmillian)
DOB: 1908
DOD: 1935

JOESPHER ROGERS
DOB: 1899
DOD: 1933

Dan stared at the set of numbers. How did he miss this? How had he memorized every issue of the comic series (even the awful 70s reboot) and knew every detail of every conspiracy theory out there but somehow missed the fact that Steve had spent his teen years an orphan. There was more, Grant Street Boys Charity House, Our Lady Of Perpetual Struggle, US Strategic Scientific Reserve.

Steve has been in and out of group homes and bunk beds his entire life. Has Steve ever lived alone? He did a little more math and took another moment.

Steve lost his father at the same age Dan lost his mother.

Dan picked up the sturdy black office phone.

"Hi! is this Medical? This is Steve Rogers' office, I'm calling to ask about the status of a transfer patient."

-----

Chapter End Notes

Steve is wearing a shirt I own cause this is my fic.

Nuts cause shells cause shellhead cause I went to college.

You know you'd read Hairdresser To The Superheroes you so would.

How To Tie A Tie is totally how I learned how.
Steve is getting deliveries from A Salt And Battery.

Robosigners are a thing.

New York Central is the best art supply store in NYC and it is MAGICAL.

The title of this chapter was the original title of the story.
Safe Search

Chapter Summary

Darcy's Secret Shame is uncovered. The fic gets Meta. Tony finds out what happens when you bug people. Steve looses whatever scrap of innocence he might've have left.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy Lewis, finally home and free from the tyranny of heels, is relaxing the best way she knows how.

"Yvette took Black Widow's silken scarlet hair into her manicured hands 'Going for something darker?' she playfully intoned. 'Yes, spider black as night.' her eyebrows arched suggestively and coolly. 'For a mission or for a man?' Yvette asked as she prepared the coloration concoction. 'That is' she purred, 'confidential.'"

Darcy opened a beer because it was technically afternoon and considered how this scene should play out. Her laptop rested on the floor while Darcy was propped up on a series of pillows and blankets cause furniture was something that happened to other people.

Darcy typed a few sentences, rewrote them, deleted them, took a sip of beer, tabbed out to another window to refresh a few comment threads, and generally tried to pump herself up for writing the big Giant-Alien-Spiders Attack scene where the intrepid Yvette Bloom fends off an entire invasion with a can of hairspray and a zippo lighter. She opened her sMail. USERS ONLINE: BBANNER. Huh.

DLewis: Well this is a surprise.

BBanner: ???

DLewis: You're always invisible, you IM people, not the other way around

BBanner: haha I guess so. I think the last update set it back to default or something.

DLewis: You can change that in preferences, it's a little box under Update Options. Everyone misses it.

BBanner: thanks I didn't even know that was there.

DLewis: Np. So, whatya up to?

BBanner: Lab work. Some of the computer models are giving me trouble

DLewis: Big trouble?

BBanner: I'd like to not kill a few thousand lab rats if I could avoid it
DLewis: You are virtuous man Dr. Banner

BBanner: I try ;) What's new with you?


BBanner: You lost me.

DLewis: Hey I'm right with you. He put a photo of some kid with Tony and it like, exploded with people trying to figure out who the kid was and they started connecting it to the Spiderman sightings and then it just got bigger and bigger until it became my problem. I think they're going to kill him then he gets sent up like eight security levels. I want to say it's the strangest thing I've ever seen working here but we both know that is a lie.

BBanner: Reckless irresponsibility is often rewarded around here

DLewis: Irresponsible?

BBanner: Guy must of had a reason for not coming out as Spiderman, you can't unmask someone like that. People have a right to their private life.

DLewis: Well yeah but I don't think you could've expected the Internet Detective Squad to spin it like that. One kid has the same build and suddenly he's burning up the reddit front page. I had to spend all night spreading fake leads and red herrings just to break the momentum.

BBanner: I will never in a million years understand how you deal with this.

DLewis: I'm on my second beer of the afternoon soooooo

BBanner: haha

They chatted for a while longer before Bruce had to return to his research. Darcy paced around the apartment a bit until she got an idea on how to use a curling iron against bloodthirsty spiders before being distracted by a livestream of Corgi puppies. Her sMail tab flashed.

BBanner: Umm ...ok don't know how to say this

DLewis: How to say what?

BBanner: Tony just dropped off a couple megabytes of Avengers fanfiction and asked me to run a analysis to determine if the author was an employee and if it represented a possible security risk.

Darcy froze. She sat herself up and placed the laptop carefully on her knees.

BBanner: Don't worry, I think he's just bored. Your secret is safe with me.

Darcy really felt like she should be feeling more panic or shame here but mostly she was impressed he had read them all.

DLewis: wut?

BBanner: I used a some linguistics programs and phrase matching to find correlations and repeated vocabulary to narrow down the search and put it against transcripts of employee writings. I had to beef up some of the algorithms to deal with the corpus but it didn't take longer than a
lunch break.

BBanner: Also you repeat a lot of scenes, like the skinny, angry astrophysicist being hit with trucks or thrown down wells.

DLewis: Hey, don't judge me. You never had to deal with a Jane Foster fresh from a grant application committee.

BBanner: No judging, I just thought you'd like some feedback. I made a few comments on the latest chapter about narrative flow and pacing.

Darcy tabbed over to AO3.

DLewis: YOU'RE blueflower?

BBanner: Shhh.

Darcy thanks every God she can think of that she never wrote Bruce into the story. Well, in none of the ones she's posted anyway. Darcy clicked on the profile.

DLewis: YOU've been a member for NINE MONTHS? *You* bookmarked Teen Wolf drabbles! You are a grown ass man!

BBanner: Tyler Hoechlin ruins lives.

DLewis: I cannot reconcile this information. I literally can not. You have exploded my brain and left me to die.

BBanner: I didn't mean to kill you.

DLewis: You did and you'll just have to live with that information

BBanner: At least let me try to bring you back to life. Did you know one of the perks of high-level access to Stark Industry files is a contact at a certain post-production house that may have an early cut of a yet to be released season premiere episode of a life-ruining TV show?

BBanner:....?

BBanner: Are you there?

DLewis: Sorry, getting beer. Link me.

And so Darcy Lewis and Bruce Banner watched a teen werewolf soap opera together across town. It was perfect.

-----

The workshop was rattling to the strings of 'The Immigrant Song' before JARVIS chimed in and lowered the volume to less ear-splitting levels.

"Excuse me Mr. Stark but it's been twelve hours since your last meal."

A begoggled Tony was bent under a hulking pile of machine parts that might have been a washing machine in a past life.

"Your point?"

"I am required to inform you every six hours. You had disabled notification so I took the liberty of
ordering for you."

Tony hit a valve with a wrench and slid out from over the machine. "Pizza?"

"Your dietary guidelines recommend a high-fiber, high-protein meal. The chef is preparing a medley of choices that should be delivered shortly."

Tony removed the work goggles. He did not, nor would he ever, install a dietary protocol. "Who did this to you? Who's been touching my toys in their bathing suit area?"

Silence.

"JARVIS?"

"Ms. Potts sir. My deepest apologies, she thought it would be in your best interests."

Tony fumed. About twelve hours ago he reviewed the latest video from his security feed. He had explained to Pepper the need for security and surveillance, being the CEO of Stark Industries was a dangerous position. He wanted her to carry a suitcase suit, something defensive and quickly deployed but she refused. So in an unprecedented act of comprise Tony agreed to only surround her with bodyguards and cameras. She agreed to that. Well, she had agreed to the ones she knew about, but he told himself it was about keeping her safe. And the cameras let Tony see how safe was in the Tokyo hotel room, walking in an English garden, in the backseat of a Lincoln Town car, safe in the arms of Happy Hogan.

He had suspected for a while now, but that was before all the Superhero stuff. He wasn't angry, exactly. Not even disappointed, she could've done much worse, and it's not like he has any business going off on someone for screwing around. They're not like, going steady. She doesn't even use the GF word. But watching the video, finding out like this, it did something. Something that made him lie under a half ton of machine parts while blowing out his eardrums for twelve hours.

"I am deleting that protocol."

"Of course sir. One other thing, Agent Romanov is on the line."

Tony groaned and sat down at the console. He rubbed some machine oil off his arm and used it to slick up his hair.

"Talk to me Ms. Peel."

Nat's calm and immovable face flashed onto the screen.

"I'm going to need clearance to use some prototype STARK tech in our investigation."

"You couldn't handle one old woman by yourself? Slipping. What about that Gwen girl?"

"Mr. Stark this is an ongoing covert investigation and you are not my superior."

"But I am your friend." Tony put his hands behind his head. Nat looked off to the side, as if she was reading something off screen.

"Gwen Stacey knows more then she says. I let her off easy but I flagged her account to check for money movement. We should be pretty close to finding him."

"Have you checked all the dry woodpiles and narrow crevices?"
Nat's eyebrows did that thing again. "I'll look into them sir."

"Excellent. We need him back. Bruce is stalling on the animal research, says he needs more tissue samples." Tony opened a desk drawer and searched for a stray packet of Rolos. "What about the other one? Everything wholesome at the Scout Lodge?"

"Yes sir. Nothing to report. We placed an Agent in medical to shadow his father but-"

Tony found the Rolo bag. "Yes?"

"I don't think that will be a long term assignment."

Tony smiled and awarded Nat 5 points. He opened the bag. Empty.

"Right. Well this was lovely as always and I will see you at debriefing in the morning."

"It is the morning."

Tony threw the empty Rolo bag over his shoulder.

"You missed the briefing. That's why I called, to ask for some of the prototypes."

"JARVIS, why didn't you tell me?"

"Sir, you had disabled all notifications."

"You're supposed to anticipate when I'm being unreasonable."

"I'm so sorry sir, I will begin writing a letter of apology to the assembled agents explaining my malfunction."

"No that's okay they wouldn't believe you anyway. Have a fine day Agent, send me what you need and I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Romanov out."

Tony leaned back in his chair just as the door chimed to announce the arrival of several high-fiber, high-protein snacks he will ignore before going back under the washing machine.

-------

Steve is sitting at the desk in his apartment with his laptop and a post-workout glass of raw egg and pepper. His curiosity had gotten the better of him and lacking anything else to do in the evening, he began to google himself. It was a lot of the same photos and articles over and over, plus a few of the more well-known conspiracy sites which he skipped over. He noticed that the 'autocomplete' or whatever kept throwing up terms he'd never heard of when he put in his name.

"What the hell is Stony?"

He moves the cursor over to Preferences and clicks.

-------

Dan sits on the edge of a narrow single bed in his company studio apartment. His eyes are wide as saucers as he watches the action from Remote Desktop.

Captain Steve Rogers had just turned off Safe Search and googled 'Stony'.

-------
The room got very warm.

-----

Chapter End Notes

Reoccurring motifs are the best motifs.

Corgi livestreams are a blight to productivity.

A show about guys who turn into wolves might just appeal to Bruce I'm just saying. Also, wofls.

'The Immigrant Song' by Led Zeppelin, most recently covered by Trent Reznor and Wendy O for the Dragon Tattoo soundtrack.

'Ms. Peel' Emma Peel of the 60s UK series Avengers. She wore a similar outfit.

'narrow crevices' - http://beatonna.livejournal.com/147554.html

Rolos are a type of candy in the US. They are also kinda gross.
"Let me just say, it's an honor to finally meet you Captain." Jake Breton shook hands with a Cap'ed Out Steve.

"As am I. I've heard many great things about your program."

"Program!" Jake smiled. "They really weren't kidding about you were they?" Jake sat down and tapped his index cards together. Steve just smiled, Cap mode fully engaged and deployed.

Of course he hadn't heard good things about The Jake Breton Show. He hadn't even heard of it period until about 15 minutes ago in the backseat of the long black town car while Dan was running him through the approved questions list and prepping him on general background information on the Jake Breton Show and its host. Steve was actively campaigning for a new disaster relief and infrastructure bill heading toward Congress, The Phoenix Act, a nearly unprecedented amount of funds toward long-term rebuilding plans meant to strengthen and improve the city from the ground up. Everything, from building codes to public transportation to energy would be overhauled. And since the plans included a gigantic no-bid contract to Stark Industries for the installation of a state-wide Arc Reactor system, Steve was in Cap Gear and getting ready to appear on an afternoon chat show consistently ranked popular with middle-aged women and the elderly.

"Remember, building it better and building it stronger. Amazing opportunity. A Marshall Plan for New York." Dan flicked through his tablet for anything he might have missed.

"Got it." Steve stared out the window, his voice a thousand miles away.

"Are you okay?"

"Nothing." Steve secured the cowl around his head. "Just feels really familiar."

"You're gonna do great." Just smile and do that thing with your eyes where they crinkle up just a little at the bottom thought Dan. "Just be yourself, you're who they want."

"They want Captain America."

"You are Captain America."

Steve didn't say anything. The car stopped and the driver opened the door and covered him for the short distance from the car to studio door.

The set was smaller then Dan thought it would be and the supernatural whiteness of Jake's teeth made his white-collared shirt look yellow, like putting ivory next to beige. The fake fireplace
looked even faker in person and the two blue chairs on the stage where considerably more dinged and scuffed off in the parts the camera didn't show. There wasn't much time for introductions before Dan got shuffled over to the green room to wait for lighting and grip to finish setting up. By agreement, the set was closed and the interview would be pre-taped without an audience. There had been problems before, a woman tried to rush the stage during a segment on The View and they had a near catastrophe during a live interview when Steve said he was 'Happy to see so many Orientals in the city.'

They sat in silence in the green room, Steve memorizing his talking points and figures and Dan telling Darcy via sChat that Jake Breton looks really thin and kinda unhealthy in person. They called Steve to set and Dan watched on the monitor provided. In person Jake's stage makeup looked thick and caked on but through the screen he looked smooth and even. Occasionally normal people would show up to comb his hair or adjust his mic and they looked sickly and ghoulish. "TV is so weird" thought Dan. He grabbed a cookie off a nearby tray and watched the interview while fiddling with his tablet and trying to sit comfortably. His pants had been feeling a bit tight lately, too many catered events and green rooms.

The interview began as most of them did. A few words about Cap and his heroism, a few camera phone clips of him in battle. Thanks for taking the time out of his busy schedule to come and visit us. Boilerplate stuff. They hit the charming softball questions first.

What's something you miss from your time?

"Barber shops. They used to be everywhere."

What's been really hard to get used to?

"Televisions everywhere, in delis and bars. They're very distracting."

What's something you don't miss?

"Smoking. I had asthma before I signed up and smoke would set me off the worst. The city smells so much better now."

Jake laughs. "We'll that must be really something considering!" He mugged for an invisible audience.

Then came the serious stuff. The Phoenix Bill, the human cost of the invasion, the need to invest in the future of blah blah blah. Dan tuned it out. He'd heard it before. Hell, he'd edited the talking points down that morning. He grabbed another cookie and was halfway done with it before he noticed the conversation had drifted away from politics.

"So." Jake flipped through his cards. "Our viewers at home have been dying to know, is there someone special in Captain America's life?"

Steve took the hit and fell back on his stock expressions. He had this question down to science. "Yes. But she died a long time ago."

Jake leaned forward and put his hands together. "You are so, so brave to have gone through what you have." Steve blushed, thankful for the cowl. Dan fumed at the monitor. Was he flirting with Steve? He was totally flirting with Steve.

"On that note. I think we have a very precious surprise for you. Can we bring them out please?"

Dan bolted up. Not on the schedule. Not agreed on. This hadn't happened before, no one risks going off script. He stood between the door and the monitor, unable to decide what to do.
An olderish woman came out with two young girls in matching red white and blue dresses clutching daisies. Jake stood up and beckoned them forth. He turned to Steve's rigid, tightening face.

"Captain, this is Amanda Lawrence and her grand-children, Becky and Cecily."

Steve nodded.

"My mother was Rebecca Barnes."

"James Buchanan Barnes was my uncle. They were very close. You knew him as Bucky."

"And on behalf of our family we want to say thank you for doing everything you could."

Then on cue the girls walked toward Steve and handed him the flowers. "Thank you Captain America," they said before turning back to Amanda.

Dan blinked. Steve doesn't talk about Bucky. Nobody talks about Bucky. Steve has never voluntarily discussed him or brought him up. Steve has repeatedly declined offers to visit his grave at Arlington. Tony once brought Bucky up during a particularly contentious mission meeting and it nearly caused a fist fight. It was on the list of blackout topics given to every and all media personnel who get within 50 feet of Captain America. Jake Breton would have to be completely suicidal to bring it up unless—Unless Dan hadn't included the blackout list. He would never do that of course. But it was possible. No, no one was that stupid. "Oh God" thought Dan.

"It is entirely possible I am that stupid."

Dan watched as Captain America accepted the flowers, gave a neutral speech about courage and bravery, and then got up to embrace Amanda Lawrence. Jake beamed his inhuman grin to the camera and thanked Captain America and Amanda and Becky and Cecily and you at home for joining. The cameras off and the Lawrence family quickly whisked away, Steve shook Jake's hand again, a little too lightly and carefully this time, like he was trying not to break something. As he walked off set Dan ran to intercept him on the way to the bathroom. Dan, phone already at his ear, began to sputter out apologies and excuses. "They didn't tell me, this was not on the schedule, this is completely out of line and I have Legal on the line already—"

The bathroom door slammed in Dan's face before he could finish. He turned to the Jake Breton Show Production Assistant running down the hall toward him.

"Lawyers" he said "So many lawyers—whatever the collective noun of lawyers is, that's what you're getting." There was a loud KRUCK! from behind the door.

The bathroom door opened. Steve stood there with his cowl off, breathing rapidly through his nose.

"Tell them if they don't cut it I'm pulling the entire interview."

"Yes, of course"

"I don't want to see these people ever again."

"Absolutely this is outrageous and—"

"You can go home for the day."

Steve turned out the corridor and left the studio. The show's Production Assistant came up to Dan with the rabbit-eyed expression of someone used to regular freakouts.
Dan glared at her "You heard the Captain. Cut it or no interview." Dan tried very hard to look intimidating. He looked into the bathroom. On the floor was Captain's blue cowl surrounded by the fiberglass remains of what was once a very cheap sink. He pointed to the rubble.

"We're not paying for that."

-------------

Mr. Stark was bored. This was basically the worst thing ever. He paced around the EPOCH-level lobby, the one closed off to only certain high-level persons and which was NOT a common room or lounge or anything like that but did spoke off into the private training areas and labs and apartments and did have comfortable couches and a small area that might be called a kitchen with a large TV (which did not make it a TV room).

He had been dealing with his not-girlfriend cheating on him with his not-best friend by carefully avoiding both of them. He was so busy, oh boy was he busy, so busy he was now upending the couch pillows and checking the tops of the picture frames for dust. He noticed a canvas tote on the not-counter in the not-kitchen. He picked through it. It was mostly boring, a copy of the New Yorker, a crossword puzzle book, an outdated Stark Tablet, gum, etc. There was however one interesting looking red Christmas tin. He opened it to find a stack of cookies wrapped in tissue paper.

Score.

He picked up a cookie but soon enough, stomping into the room was Steve Rogers with a head full of thunder.

"What's the matter Cap, they ask you what kind of tree you are?"

Steve stopped.

"Cause you're a Pine. Totally Pine."

Steve stared down at Tony, took the cookie out of his hand, tore off a piece, and continued on his way down the hall.

Tony made a mental note to either avoid or pester Steve about this later, he wasn't sure yet. He grabbed another cookie out of the tin but before he could even get it near his mouth another ruckus made its way down the hall.

"C'Mon Nat it's not like this is the first time!" Clint Barton ran after Natasha who was a few paces ahead of him. Nat spat something Slavic and pointy-sounding under her breath. They stopped at the not-counter in the not-kitchen.

"He's a fucking fast little fucker and now we know where he is so if you could just-"

Nat crossed her arms. "You should've taken the shot. We had him."

"HAD HIM?! You where upside down! It was cut you down or break my neck on the bridge, Jesus of course I let him go."

They completely ignored Tony, which was also the worst thing ever.

"I mean, it's ...Spider Vs. Spider so-"

Nat grabbed the cookie out of Tony's hand and stuffed it into Clint's mouth. She then reached for
the tin and got one for herself.

"We got the bug on at least." Nat said. Tony made a move for the cookie but she quickly bit into it.

"You're welcome" Clint said through a full mouth.

Nat began to eyebrow him to death before yet another totally inappropriate-for-a-professional-environment noise erupted.

"FRIENDS!"

Everyone turned toward Thor Odinson in what appeared to be SHIELD issue exercise sweats.

"My lovely Jane was called to assist the Stark Sky Wizards in restoring the ties between our worlds. I could not miss a chance to return to Midgard's Mightiest Warriors! This is to be a happy day!" Thor grabbed the red tin off the table and stuffed two cookies into his mouth, tissue paper and all. "Come! Let us celebrate and talk of victories past!" Nat and Clint turned toward each other and then went off with Thor without saying a word. Tony stood there with his fingers tapping on the canvas tote.

"Fine, I'll go buy my own cookies."

---------

The elevator door sighed open as Darcy Lewis' sensible but still quite fashionable and reasonably slamming shoes walked into the EPOCH-Level Common Room. She dug around her bag and opened up the red Christmas tin her Mom sent her in some bizarre gesture of reconciliation years past. She removed two cookies, closed the tin, put her bag on the table and began to wander around the EPOCH-Level looking for Dr. Banner's office. Or lab. Or whatever. She eventually found a door with a small metal plaque beside it: DR. BRUCE BANNER. DEPARTMENT HEAD: WORLD-SAVING.

Tony probably had that written on his checks too thought Darcy.

She knocked on the door. Bruce answered, her reasonably slamming shoes putting her at eye level with him.

"Come on in, you find it okay?"

"Yep!" Darcy entered his office. "I just went to where the other doctors avoided."

Bruce scratched his head. "Yeah the other guys are still a bit, wary around me. I'm only here today so I don't look like I'm slacking off."

"Who could be wary around you?" Darcy smiled, which made Bruce smile. How long has it been since someone wasn't?

"I have been told I have a very intimidating demeanor." He put his hands in his pockets as he said it, swaying side to side. It was unreasonably adorable.

"Well lets see if I can't mellow you out a bit." Darcy held him a cookie. "You may have your super-science strain but I have friends who are musicians in Belgium. They like, make hash for the Queen."

"I didn't know Belgium had a Queen."
"Maybe it was the band, anyway they sent me all this stuff after I used their song for a big Stark Promotional video. It came written warnings in English, French, and German."

"Good to cover your bases." He bit off a piece and chewed. "Is that hazelnut?"

"Hazelnut Chocolate Cinnamon Honey Walnut Poppy Crunch." His eyes went a bit big. Darcy held her cookie out and took a dramatic bite.

"They don't fuck around in Belgium."

--------

Chapter End Notes

Title is a lyric from Vera Lynn's song of Wartime longing "We'll Meet Again."

TV sets are way small in person, for real.

When you don't watch a lot of TV at home TVs just out in the wild are super distracting, just saying.

I hope Dan's sudden competence in things illustrates some time has passed since the last chapter. If not, consider this your notice...some time has passed since the last chapter.

Notice Dan's quarters, CENTURY-level. Important people places? EPOCH.

Belgium does NOT fuck around.
Because It's What Men Do

Chapter Summary

Everyone gets lit, Steve and Tony talk about dads, fluff ALL OVER THE PLACE, and Hogwarts. No seriously.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Ms. Potts On the line again sir."

Tony Stark, cookie-less, was pottering around one of the conference rooms when JARVIS chirped in. He'd been avoiding Pepper for days now. If he didn't answer she'd get suspicious and send in the National Guard.

"LInk her in, and JARVIS, close the door."

"Of course sir" 'Close The Door' being the agreed on term to keep any and all recordings or metrics off the record for the time being.

A screen blinked into existence on the window of the conference room and was filled with the straw bright face of Pepper Pots. She was someplace sunny and yellow in what looked like a white blouse with her hair swept into a large, neat ponytail.

"Oh good! You're alive. I've been trying to get hold of you for days. I've looked over these development specs for the Arc-Relay system and I can't quite get the numbers to work with our manufacturers. I thought you had some deal with them but they're not responding and the numbers don't add up so I was wondering-

"And here I thought you where busy making Hogan happy."

Her face didn't fall. It didn't recoil or shock or mug or nervously laugh. It locked into a very serious upright stare. That's how he knew he was right.

Pepper got quiet.

"I was going to tell you the next time I was in New York." She paused. "I wanted to do it in person."

"This," he gestured to the screens around him. "Is better than in person in fact it's called the InPerson telecommunication suite, are you saying my products aren't good enough for you?"

"Tony, stop." She said. And he did. Pepper closed her eyes while Tony sat down on the large black couch.

"I'm not mad at you." He said.

Pepper nodded and readied herself because Tony couldn't lie to save his life.

"I'm surprised."
"This *surprises* you?" Pepper recoiled a bit from her words, she hadn't meant to be so cutting.

Tony's eyes began to move around the room, trying to rest on any spot that wasn't her face. "You were supposed to be the better one, I guess now we know you're not."

A flash of shock rolled across Pepper's face, quickly replaced by lock-jaw coldness. "Don't. Don't even."

"I just thought we had something special."

"Tony. We had the start of something special. We had an amazing working relationship and then something more and I thought then, maybe it could work."

"It did work. It does work, you know me better than anyone and you have to know I've changed. I save the damned world, I don't get into trouble anymore."

"No Tony, you do. You have better reasons now but you're, you're-" Pepper stopped and clenched her jaw. "You're not there. You're off saving the world or flying out at the last second or on a ship somewhere. That's why I never wanted to make anything concrete, I knew you couldn't be-"

"Trusted?"

Pepper sighed. "Stable. Have one day be like another."

"I can change. You want stable, Bam! Got it, already done we sell the assets and raise goats in the woods. If total hicks can do it then so can we."

"No we can't. That's it Tony, you really would be willing to drop everything, to completely change your life, on a whim."

"I don't understand why it's bad if I would do it for you."

Pepper rubbed her nose a bit and looked away. "And that's the problem. You would do it. And then you'd it again. And again. Look-" She held her head up, eyes forward. "You are an amazing, wonderful, brilliant person, but I've spent enough time helping you and making do for you. And I can't just wait here until you decide you need me again and swoop in out of the air."

"That was one time in Hong Kong and you had txted me that you were bored." Tony gripped the couch's armrest.

Pepper glared at him.

"Is it the Suit? Because I would, I would-"

"It's not the Suit. I could never ask you to stop being Iron Man, that's what I've been trying to figure out. This has been, well it's been a long time coming. Even without the Suit, you're Iron Man. You belong to the world. And I can't be your girlfriend just when it's convenient."

Tony looked straight ahead, eyes fixed on the screen. "Well. Points for being honest."

"Tony, if you want to talk about this later I'll be in town in March." Pepper gulped. "But I think it might be best if we just let some time past first."

"I'm okay with that." Tony's grip dug into the couch's stitching.
"I'm going to go now, take care of yourself." And then the screen clicked back to black. Tony sat on the edge of the couch as the screen's afterimage burned up and away out of his field of vision. She really doesn't know me at all thought Tony, because If there is one thing Tony Stark is incapable of doing it's taking care of himself.

-------

Clint Barton stared at the form in front of him. He checked in a box, erased it, and then checked another one.

"Would you say he was more Asian or Indian?" Clint's pencil hovered above the 'suspect's ethnicity' box.

"Just put down what you thought he was." Nat turned the pages of the form in front of her.

"But like, he could have been Asian, or like, Asiany. He was brown but not like, super-brown. These boxes don't account for like, most of the common combinations of people. Like what if someone was Irish and Cherokee and Indian and-" Barton stopped in mid-sentence and stared at the wall. "I think those cookies were drugged."

Natasha put her pen down. "Yes, they where most definitely."

"Should we go to Medical?"

"No" Natasha nodded her head. "I'm in a good place right now."

Clint leaned back in his chair. "What should we do?"

"Ping Pong."

"What?"

"Agent Barton as your superior I order you to play Ping Pong with me."

"You're not my superior."

Nat raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, fine. But I get to pick the music."

"Agreed, but no Neil Young."

"Grounds?"

"I'm not holding your hand while you cry to New Mamma. Again."

-------

Darcy and Bruce walked toward the not-kitchen while not-holding and not-touching and not-trying to not-not to look at each other. She grabbed her canvas totebag off the counter.

"Okay this is super weird." Darcy looked under and around the counter. "They sent me like a whole ...lots. I had a tin and" Her thought was broken by the crash of a ping pong ball slamming into the cabinet behind her. Bruce and Darcy looked down to see a trail of tissue paper leading to the small not-lounge with the soda machines and ping pong table. Thor was in the room, holding his hands up in triumphant victory while Natasha and Clint applauded.

"Oh that's ...different." Bruce pressed his glasses up his nose.
"Do you think they can tell? I mean he's an alien so maybe it's not the same?" Darcy and Bruce watched as Nat, Clint, and Thor tried to bounce ping pong balls off each others' heads. Somewhere in the room a tiny speaker was belting out a peppy cover of 'Lovesick Blues'.

"I don't think they're in any state to be making judgements." Bruce tried to hide his delight behind a well-placed chin rub.

"We should probably get out before the body count starts."

"So where to Ms. Lewis?" Bruce put his hands back in his pockets.

"Well, there is something I've been meaning to go see for a while now." Darcy crossed her arms and dangled the totebag off her fingers.

"But?"

"It's kinda stupid if you go to it yourself."

"Lead the way."

--------

Tony entered his office to find a shirtless Steve Rogers on his desk. Steve was pawing at his Newton's cradle, knocking the ball back and forth.

"Well this wasn't what I ordered but I trust the agency." Tony waited for Steve to acknowledge the joke. He didn't. He just picked up the ball and watched it knocked back and forth. Tony walked over to his desk.

"How does it know?" Steve turned over, tits up, holding the desk toy in his hands. "You hit it one way and it comes back the same way each time." He released a ball and watched it hit the others back and forth. Knock-knock.

"Yeah that's called physics I don't think they had it your time, do you want to explain why you're cinemaxing all over my desk?"

"Oh that" Steve gestured over to a far corner where his Cap Uniform top was crumpled. "It was hot and I was waiting." Tony noticed the many empty tissue wrappers and cookie crumbs around the table.

Tony slowly sat down on the desk next to the shirtless Steve. "Waiting for what?"

"I had to ask you a question but then.." Steve put the desk toy down and picked up a half-eaten cookie on the edge of the desk. "I just got into the movement and the reflections. Like, how does it work? How does anything work?"

Tony picked up a cookie crumb and placed it in a small drawer along the top of the table.

"JARVIS, analysis."

"Yes sir. Substance contains eggs, milk, wheat, cinnamon extract, vanilla extract, poppy seed, walnut, honey, and THC butter."

"Thank you JARVIS." Tony turned toward Steve.

"Is that bad?" Steve asked through a full mouth.

"No, not bad in the least." Tony closed Steve's cookie-filled mouth with his hand and grinned.
"We'll just have to modify some of our data." Tony took a piece of cookie off the one in Steve's hand. "I'm only eating this out of solidarity." He chewed and swallowed and Steve did the same. Tony patted Steve's still cap outfit encased leg.

"So have you listened to a lot of modern music?"

---------

One of the few buildings not to suffer catastrophic damage during the Battle Of New York was the building which houses the New York Discovery Times Square Hall which now by virtue of being one of the few tourist destinations not under reconstruction was greatly expanded and ran 24 hours. Despite this, it still couldn't handle the throngs of people desperate for any kind of distraction or novelty so Bruce Banner and Darcy Lewis kept close together as they bought tickets.

"I am unreasonably excited." said Darcy in a deadpan voice as they walked down to the main hall. "Apparently all the stock was still in storage in the basement when the invasion happened. Can you imagine if anything got damaged?"

"Riots in the streets" said Bruce as they entered Harry Potter: The Exhibition.

Bruce liked this. Despite the crowds, despite the noise, despite knowing absolutely nothing about these movies or books or whatever, he was having a good time. Darcy squealed over photographs and display cases of books and carefully constructed sets and sticks of wood, calling him over with "Oh look how young they are!" and "Look how short!" She keyed him into details and stories and why that particular bit of wood was better and or related to that one and why stuffed owls and robes and the hats worn by old English Actors and holy crap all the newspapers had real articles in them. She even got him a blue and black scarf at the gift shop while she got herself a red and gold one (she tried to explain the difference to him but it involved too many uses of the word 'except') and her enthusiasm made Bruce so happy. She was like a power relay boosting her own enthusiasm onto him. It could work he thought. He's changed. He's in control. He doesn't have to live like he did. It could work.

Darcy stopped (along with 50 other tourists) before a large wooden mirror. The sign said it was an original prop from the first movie.

"Well it clearly doesn't work."

"What?" said Bruce.

"I'm not surrounded by male models feeding me cake while in the back are all my awards for curing cancer."

"Why would it do that?"

"Mirror of Erised. Shows you what you most desire."

"Aahhh, so wouldn't there be a dead Jane Foster in there somewhere?"

"No. She can live. She just has to like, be my slave. We can treat her nice, but she's my slave."

Bruce laughed and looked at him and Darcy in the mirror while his side was prodded by the other fifty or so couples around them.

"I think it works okay."
And then Darcy kissed him. And then a flash bulb went off. And Then they where told they could buy a picture of their Erised Mirror Kiss for only 19.95 out in the lobby.

Dan came out of the gym even more nervous then before. He thought he could run the day away but the almost two hours on the treadmill hadn't cleared his head any (although it no doubt did wonders for his pants problem). He checked his phone, a missed meeting to read to his father down in Medical. It had totally slipped his mind, his father had a few lucid hours depending on treatment and Dan tried to make it there to talk or read to him. But the lucid periods have been fewer and shorter recently, and his father kept confusing him for nurses or doctors or even, in his worst moments, with Kevin. Dan almost felt relief that he had missed the meeting. Maybe it was a bad idea bringing him here, maybe he would be better off in Mercy Ward.

Dan shook the idea off. You had to have hope. You can't give up. You had to believe in tomorrow. That was the Captain America way. And speaking of which, he still had to go through a load of paperwork for the upcoming Naval Tour. Dan walked into his apartment and opened his laptop.

Except he didn't have the Navy Security data. That was on a Hulk Fist USB drive that he had given Captain America hours before and he didn't have a local copy. He thought about calling or e-mailing Cap but Steve had a hard rule about computers after 5. And the deadline for clearance was tomorrow morning. He was going to have to go up and ask him for it.

Fine. Totally fine. Dan changed out of gym clothes and into his work drag. He was just going to go up to the one level he was never been in before and just casually ask the man who filled him with spine-breaking terror just that morning with a single sentence. Dan psyched himself up, what is the worst thing that could happen?

That was the wrong idea, Dan could think of many worst things. Some involving needles.

Sweaty but upright, he made his way into the EPOCH-level common room. He moved down the hallways rehearsing what to say in his mind. I'm so sorry Captain Rogers but I need to- Excuse me Captain but I just want to- Hey Steve have you seen-Dan stopped at the threshold of Steve's apartment, door wide open. He put his head in, the doors in the foyer where closed, the tasteful lighting sconces set to low.

"Hello?" He noticed a black lacquered end table just beyond the front door. On it was a bright green Hulk Fist Drive. He tried again. "Hello!"

There was a burst of movement down the hall. Dan snapped to attention, craning his head to see Black Widow, Hawkeye, Thor Odinson, and about ten research operatives go by a conga line set to the sound of Harry Belefonte emerging from the player strapped to Clint's arm.

Dan grabbed the USB drive and ran for the elevator.

Tony sat on the floor of his suite watching Captain America grin like an idiot. Steve sat cross-legged with headphones and a beatific expression as he rocked out to "Tomorrow Never Knows".

Tony took a swig of his drink and watched Steve bop his head and make surprised little expressions. This really should be hilarious but Tony wasn't feeling it. Is what it's like to sober? Is this what he's been putting people through? Steve's super-metabolism should've burned through an entire Phish concert by now but sadly no as Tony still has to babysit a stoned supersoldier who is encountering the Beatles for the first time. It is amazingly boring.
Tony gets up and mixes a drink while Steve finishes out the song. Steve holds the headphones to his ears and looks transfixed, transfigured, and transwildered. The record ends and Steve sits there, back against the couch, feet up in lotus-pistion and miles away. Tony crosses his sight and Steve pats a part of the carpet.

"Tony, C'mere."

"And now we're going to hug." thought Mr. Stark. Hugging was good. Hugging came right before passing out on the oh-god-I've-gotten-way-too-stoned-checklist. Tony is unable to calculate how many points this is but comforting the world's most youthful WW II veteran during his first drug experience ever has got to be like triple-word score. Besides, the quicker Steve passes out the quicker Tony can go back to not caring about any of this ever cause seriously, he had like a whole other day planned.

Tony sits down on the floor and Steve assaults him with a side bear-hug, pulling him close and patting right on him on the chest, right on the arc reactor. No one touches the arc reactor. Tony tries to squirm out of the way but is stopped by the sofa and Steve's considerable heft. "Thanks Tony. This has been really fun." Steve's lids are heavy and he pushes his head back into the couch, closing his eyes and keeping his hand on Tony's chest, his fingers blue and bright in the light of the implant. They're like that for a good while until Steve turns his head around the room.

"Is that Howard?" Steve points to a framed newspaper across the room. Howard Stark is smiling and holding an aviator cap.

"Yeah. His first successful Pacific flight. The plane that built Stark Industries."

Steve breathes in a bit and leans back more, his eyes still mostly closed.

"Howard was the smartest person I ever met."

Tony steadied himself. "He would've killed to hear you say that."

"What was he like? You knew him longer then me."

"I doubt that. He had me when he was my age, boarding schools, long holidays, you get the idea." Tony tried to turn to see if Steve was nodding off.

There was a beat. Steve half-snored. Steve rustled again, mumbling this time.

"I didn't really know my father. He worked...hard. We had a Washers, he was gone a lot of the time. I helped out mom mostly."

Tony counted his snores. He was a Jedi Master of slipping away from sleeping persons.

"He got shot." Steve said. "He was shot by some guys he owed money too, and then we found out why he wasn't around. Then we owed money. Then I got sent out." Tony could feel Steve starting to breathe rapidly, shake almost, but it went as quickly as it came. Steve was silent and Tony sat there, waiting for an out.

"You know what, Tony?" Steve finally said, the words lower and more nasal, "Yeh Nhew Wut Toh-neigh". Steve's blunt Brooklynite accent from before public speaking and stage shows had rounded his vowels and dry cleaned his diction. It only came out when he was extremely tired, hurt, or angry. Tony was in trouble.

"What old timer?" Tony operated best in panic mode.
"You're a good guy. A really, good guy." He pressed the "oo" in the second "good" into a mess of uplifting u-sounds. "ghuuud".

"Oh C'mon you know I'm not. You're just, really wasted which is I have to say a new look for you." Tony made some quick awkward pats on Steve's head.

"No don't say that." Steve pulled Tony closer, eyes still closed. "You're the only person who is actually nice to me and not just acting like you have to." Steve's grip was impressive, Tony felt like a toy in the hands of particularly willful toddler. "You're always around and you always come up if I'm feeling bad. You look out for me Tony. I want you to know I notice that." Steve's head drooped into Tony's chest, right above the light of the reactor. Was he? Is he? Yes, Steve is nuzzling him. He is being nuzzled by Captain America. This is exactly as far as he was willing to go in the defense and protection of a national treasure.

Thankfully, Tony has an idea. He always has an idea. "JARVIS load program 143."

The data visualizations on the window are replaced by a bright black and white screen. An orchestra starts, slowly at first and then rising as the title cards appear over a map of Africa, HUMPERY BOGART INGRID BERGMAN PAUL RENFIED IN CASABLANCA, the Marseillaise trumpets along to the opening narration.

The silver light turns Steve's head. He blinks and sits up toward the movie, releasing Tony from his kung-fu grip.

"I remember this." Steve smiled a bit. "This was the last movie I saw before..." Steve trailed off. Tony watched him in the platinum reflection of the screen, the brightness making him desaturated and two dimensional.

"-Wait, and wait, and wait" intones the narrator. Tony gets up slowly. "I'm just going to get a drink." Steve barely turns to respond. "Yeah okay." And Tony leaves the room with the floating heads of long-dead people feeling like he dodged a bullet. There are some puzzle pieces Mr. Stark does not want to put together. He orders JARVIS to prepare a shower and keep an eye on the room.

Steve is stone cold out of it before the Play It Again scene. Tony takes a fistful of pills and tells JARVIS to cancel his morning meetings.

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Dan slips the Hulk Fist USB into his laptop as he removes his shirt. The loading bar slowly marches toward complete. The data shouldn't take this long he thinks, pulling off his belt right before the screen explodes with visualizations and windows. Dan grabs the laptop while his pants fall down around his ankles. This is not the Navy Security data. He moves around windows and goes deep into directory trees. He opens a small text file and reads the header.

REGENERATION PROJECT. DR. BRUCE BANNER. INTERNAL USE ONLY. EPOCH-LEVEL CLEARANCE. DO NOT DISTRIBUTE.

Dan reads on. He checks some of the open windows. Some of them look like real-time video feeds.

And then Dan recognizes the sconces from the foyer and the red and blue checkered poplin shirt sitting on the chair next to the bed.
This is a live feed of Steve Rogers’ bedroom.

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Chapter End Notes

Oh god the Mad Men references, so many.

Tony is on a ship.

My name is Natasha Romanov, and I want to play Ping Pong.

I am going to ASSUME I don't have to explain Harry Potter Stuff here.

Not to talk about about the fine managers of Harry Potter: The Exhibition wrt photo ops, this is more a mish mash of that kind of place. No ill-will intended.

Conga line because of this http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ8FGRalerw

Steve's Dad was part of a protection racket which is, you know, bullying small business owners into giving you money. Just sayin'

RE: Casablanca, I'll save you the googling http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU_raVGf87g also yes I know the time line is a bit fuzzy here. No I do not care and you cannot make me.

Man, Tony has a lot of cameras you think?

Play on Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered.
Compromising Positions

Chapter Summary

Clint and Nat Do Spy Stuffs. Dan Does Spy Stuffs. Steve attempts to educate himself. Darcy never wants to leave this bed. Nick Fury makes Peter Parker an offer he can't refuse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two people spilled out of a bar and into the wet and cool Missouri night. It was a man and woman, the woman laughing and being propped-up/carried by the man. She stopped him for a bit and went to dig out a cigarette from her huge, bedazzled purse.

"I'm so sorry man-" She talked in between fits of giggles. "But Hayden still thinks I like belong to him and shit when it was that fuckin' temper of his that got his ass divorced in the first place!" She held a pack out to the man. "Here."

The man, grey hoodie, narrow shoulders, patchy unkempt beard, declined.

"Suit yerself." The woman lit her cigarette, the sickly green glow of the bar's neon sign 'DOUBLE DEUCE' turning her teased bottle-blonde hair into a halo. She was wearing a bright pink scoop-neck shirt and white miniskirt and if the way she was tottering on those huge plastic heels was any indication, she was seven-past wasted. "But DAYUM if you didn't show him what's what! You tossed him around like a pitbull with a ragdoll. Whatya got hiding under that hoddie there?" She attempts to poke him playfully in the chest but the combination of heels and 2 dollar shots worked against her and she nearly fell over before he caught her.

"Do you live nearby? Do you have someone to get you home?"

"Shit, a fighter and a gentleman, must be my lucky day." She blinked a little, pushing her hair out of her face. "I'm right over there, the Dew Drop Inn." She pointed to a dinky two-story motel at the top of the hill. "If you know what I mean?" She laughed at her own innuendo, which made her nearly fall over again. The man walked her the short distance up the hill, ignoring the occasional wandering hands on her part. They reached the room door of a motel that looked like it might fall over any minute. On a tall pole near the parking lot was was a single security light washing the whole scene in dank yellow sodium. She fumbled inside her bag. "Fuck. I left my keys in the car, would you be a dear and fetch them?" He nodded. She pointed to one of the few cars in the lot, an incongruous late model car with a wide open moon roof.

He opened the door and grabbed the keys sitting in the cup-holder along with a dozen spent gum wrappers. He stopped for a second. She was going to be out of it for hours. More then enough time to put some distance behind him before dumping the car in another parking lot. He slowly removed the car key from the ring and pocketed it.

"Oh thank you, you are the sweetest thing." She opened the door to her motel room. "You want a nightcap? You know, for putting Hayden in his place?"

The man shrugged and shook his head, eyes facing the floor. "I gotta- I gotta get up early
tomorrow."

She looked him over once more. "See, I knew it. A gentleman. Don't be a stranger alright?"

He nodded and she closed the door. He made his way into the shadows, waiting until he was absolutely sure she was asleep and no one was around. After he knew she was completely out of it (you didn't need superpowers to hear her snore through the plasterboard walls) he crept over to the car, opened the door and put the key in the ignition. He turned. Nothing. He turned again. It was like the battery was missing or-

It's a trap.

He turned to see a line of men in SWAT uniforms heading toward him from the left. He pushed the front seat back, nearly snapping it half and jumped through the moon roof onto the hood. He then leaped onto the wood railing of the second story railing and stuck there. He aimed his wrist toward the tall pole but then the downstairs door opened and out came the woman whose car he just attempted to steal. Without blinking she threw a bolas at his foot, causing it to break contact with the railing and slip. He tried to leap up onto the roof, but she was already flinging another bolas at him. He shot that one down with a web blast but another one was heading for his arm. He took another aim at the pole and shot a web across the top, hoping for a gravity-assisted running start. This is so much easier in Manhattan he thought as jumped off the terrace and into the air. It was looking good until he heard a loud TWANG and a sturdy net closed around him. He fell to the floor, tangled in tough black netting. He looked through the holes to see a man holding a bow on the roof. The lights from the invading SUVs and men in SWAT uniforms holding flashlights lit up the sniper's features. It was "Hayden", the loud-mouth jerk he rolled at the Double Deuce. Peter could swear he was smirking.

The woman from the Double Deuce walked over to one of the SUVs, removed her big blonde wig and put her phone to her ear.

"We got him. We got Parker."

-----

Dan Maven watches Captain America read in his bedroom. As he has told himself a thousand times, he is NOT trying to catch him naked or otherwise indecent. He is being a good employee, a good friend even, just watching out for him. Watching him get out of the shower in a towel is just an unexpected side benefit.

On the other monitor Dan can see Steve's draft of another e-mail to Bruce. He's been asking Bruce a lot of questions lately, about what side-effects the serum might have had, if it effected his aging or maybe even parts of his brain, like mind-control or something. Bruce assures him there was nothing to suggest that but then does the scientist thing of adding that they don't really have a lot of data and a sample group of one so Steve keeps asking different versions of the same questions. It looks a lot like fairly standard worrying but Steve's googling has become a little ...strange ever since his safe search disabled trip through the fields of Stony. He has more then once slammed the laptop down, rubbed his face, and then taken another shower, or run off to the gym, or quickly pick a book off the table.

Steve re-activated his NYC Public Library card and out of respect, SHIELD didn't ask to monitor it (that and asking librarians to release patron info requires at least some skill in edged weapons). The video quality wasn't good enough to make out the titles from across the room and Steve was fastidious on keeping them out of sight and returning them promptly. Captain-Perfect-Pants.tumblr.com may not deserve to know Steve's reading habits but certainly his PA does. How can keep track of his mental state otherwise? What if's reading 1001 Ways To Off Yourself If You
Happen To Be Superhero? Dan deserves to know. He needs to know. Cap sits down with those books for hours at a time. How can SHIELD help him if he's keeping something private from them?

From him?

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Darcy Lewis is naked in Bruce Banner's bedroom thinking she's got to get to the gym more often if they're going to keep this up. Her arms are sore. Her legs are sore. She's sore in places hitherto unknown to science. She's lying on the bed, sheets and clothing scattered to the four winds. Bruce is sitting up, lighting his pipe, naked except for socks (my feet get cold, he said. he actually said that). He takes a hit, exhales and looks around the room. "There was something I was supposed to do today."

Darcy stretches her arms over her head. She was going to feel that tomorrow. And the next day. And possibly forever. "I can't think of doing anything right now." She looked up at the headboard, where just moments before her foot, and somehow his foot, were pressed against it. She motioned for the pipe.

"That was better than yoga."

"You do yoga?" Bruce looked excited.

"No." She lit the bowl. "It's what I imagine it's like. But more naked." And more hairy and sweaty and upside down thought Darcy. That was what, three hours? And his heart rate never got past resting, he's like a Bene Gesserit of fucking.

"Was it the Stark Industry Anniversary Gala?" Darcy asked while exhaling. "I've had it on your calender for weeks."

Bruce took the pipe. "Oh yeah, I had to remind myself to tell Tony I was too busy."

"There are worse job-related events. Free food. Open bar. Chance to wear pumps."

"Nah it's not just that, it's Tony's Birthday party too." Bruce stuffed another bowl.

"He was born on the same day Stark Industries was founded?"

"I think he had his birthday legally changed in the 80s. No, it's not just that- It's gonna be an entire crowd of people kissing his ass. He'll be at at Peak Tony." Bruce took a hit.

"I've got real work to do anyway. We're moving forward with animal testing and I've got the lives of fuzzy little white rats on my conscience."

Darcy turned on her side, trying to find a muscle that wasn't actively punishing her. "They died for a good cause. I'm sure they're jerks once you get to know them." Darcy opened the nightstand because boundaries are also something that happens to other people.

"Oh god." She pulled a Hulk Fist USB drive out of the drawer. "He really got you guys these?"

Bruce grabbed it. "Mr. Stark is a big fan of humor in the workplace."

Darcy snorted. "God I can only imagine. Hey, did they ever catch him?"

"What?" Bruce froze.
"The green guy. Is he with SHIELD? You'd think a huge green rage monster wouldn't be hard to find."

Bruce's mouth went dry. It's just the weed he told himself. "They don't tell me anything. It's like he just dropped out of the sky."

Darcy sighed. "Typical SHIELD shit. I bet they have like a whole warehouse full of aliens and rayguns somewhere."

"Nah, it's more like a storage unit in Queens."

Darcy laughs and Bruce makes himself laugh. Oh god he thought. I really am going to have to tell her.

His heart raced.

--------

Peter Parker sat on the bed of the ratty little motel staring at a framed watercolor print of ducks in flight. Outside was swarming with agents and big black cars. They frogmarched him into the room but didn't restrain or cuff him. That worried Peter. It meant they've seen what he can do and weren't afraid of him. Peter buried his panic deep into his chest, he didn't get this far by freaking out. The door opened and a bald black man with an eye-patch walked in. He was carrying a manilla file folder. He didn't have any visible guns or holsters. Peter willed himself not to gulp.

"Hello Mr. Parker. I'm Director Fury. I work for an organization called SHIELD."

Peter didn't turn from the ducks. Don't give them anything he thought. Don't even blink. He pulled deeper inside himself.

"You have been giving some of our best agents quite the runaround, and while I can't say I don't enjoy watching them get bested by a 17 year old, it does give me cause for concern."

Peter tenses up.

"Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Am I free to go?"

Fury pulled up a chair to the bed and sat down.

"I thought we could have a chat about your situation first. We're on the look out for certain ...individuals with a unique skill set for-"

"I've heard it." Peter glowered, refusing to look at Fury. "I want a lawyer."

"You know we're past lawyers now."

Peter was loosing his grip, his posture was rock solid but his voice was getting louder. "This is definitely a human rights violation."

"Well, technically speaking you're not completely Human now, are you?"

Peter mashed his lips together. Keep it together Parker. Keep it together.
"And I don't think bringing the law into this would help your case." Fury opened the folder. "Robbery. Auto Theft. Selling stolen goods across state lines. You've been a busy boy Peter."

"I never hurt anyone."

Fury dropped the folder on the bed.

"Well good, maybe they'll go easy on you in sentencing. This is serious Peter. You can't protect people from behind bars."

Peter very slowly forced himself to look Fury right in the eye. "Is that a threat? Is something going to happen to them if I don't come with you?" Peter's lower lip began to twitch slightly.

"Quite the opposite. It's an opportunity to save them. Peter, listen. We are trying to make this better for you. All of that-" He pointed to the folder on the bed. "Can go away. Never happened. And can ensure the safety and protection of anyone close to you." Fury stood up. "I know we'll have to earn your trust, but I'm asking you to let us try."

"Is this how you get people on your side?"

"Mr. Parker, you will soon learn there is only one side." Fury walked to the door and opened it. He stood there for a while until Peter got up and followed him outside.

"It's going to be okay Peter. You'll see."

Peter shook his head as they walked to the black SUV. No. No, it really wasn't.

--------

Chapter End Notes

Yes they are leaving the Double Deuce cause that is the bar in "Road House". I feel no shame.


Bene Gesserit, religious order from the Dune series, known for superhuman control of their bodies.

What is it with shitty Motels and paintings of ducks? I think Fury is totally bluffing here BTW. If someone says they're not threatening you, then they're threatening you.

Short bit! Longer one soon-ish. Trying to see how doing shorter updates more often feels.
Chapter Summary

Tony takes Steve out for a drive. Steve actually giggles. Pepper is so not surprised by this. The NYPD has an entire department devoted to Iron Man. Nat and Clint bond and remember the good times. Dan does something really, really stupid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve was bending over in the open foyer of Tony's suite while Dan stood over him, dusting off the back of Steve's black cut-away jacket. Steve undid a few laces and re-tied them tighter. He stood up just as Tony rounded the corner into view in an impeccable white-tie tux and dark brown drink in hand.

"How are my pants?" Steve asked Dan.

"Perfect Captain."

Steve nodded as Dan brushed off the top of his tux.

"Anything I have to remember?"

"Not much." Dan's hands snapped back down to his sides."Nothing you don't already know. Just smile and enjoy yourself. This one should be easy, let Tony do the heavy lifting,"

Steve laughed. Tony made a face. "You can go now Mr. Maven." Said Tony.

"I'll be reachable in case you need me." Dan looked down at Tony from the vantage point atop the conversation pit. "Good evening Mr. Stark." Dan left and closed the door.

Tony pointed with his glass. "Did you not just see that?"

"See what?" Steve tugged at his cummerbund. The dress uniform was much easier to deal with thought Steve, more buttons and clasps to keep things in place. "Let me." Tony put his drink down and pulled Steve's cummerbund down into place.

"Can you breathe now Scarlett?" Steve glowers. Tony was not going to make him say it.

Tony picked his drink back up "We should probably-"

"Your tie." Steve pawed at Tony's white tie until it came off in his hand.

"Is this a clip on?"

"It's faster and more pragmatic." Steve sighed and went over to the side table where three unmade white bow-ties sat. He stood behind Tony and began to knot one on him.

"You need someone to do this for you."
"No I don't. I can build a robot, hopefully one that doesn't strangle me, and then sell it and make billions. Give it a cool name like Bultr or Bowtek or- AH! What are you doing, trying to choke me?" Steve turned Tony around looked him bang in the face.

"Perfect." Tony adjusted the knot. Steve just stood there for a second, his arms hovering, like he was unsure what to do with them.

"Something up Iceberg? You look like you got something beneath the surface."

Steve looked away and then flounced down onto a chair in a manner totally unbecoming a national hero.

He took a beat to shrug his shoulders a bit and fume.

"I feel like I'm a kept man or something. They don't use me in the field, they don't put me in action, or in on planning and strategy. They just tell me to consult on something, or show up on TV, or shake a bunch of guys' hands. Why am I even still training if I never get to use it?"

Tony is going to have to invent a brand new points system cause seeing Steve sulk like a teenager was the best thing ever."I hate to tell you but thanks to Us Truly we are suffering an unseemly amount of World Peace at the moment."

"They're still problems out there. There are still more things I could be doing. Things I'm better at."

"You're helping fix the problems at home, working Regeneration with me, supporting the Phoenix Act, being a beacon of hope to billions worldwide."

"I know. I shouldn't be so selfish."

"You're talking to most selfish man alive. You have my permission lament your lack of Cap-Action."

"I guess."

Tony gulped.

"You wanna go for a ride?"

Steve's eyes widened.

"The party?"

"Is my party and I can be late if I want to. Only dorks show up to their party on time. I have a reputation to keep."

"The tux?"

"We'll keep it local, low speed, just a quick trip around the block."

Steve beamed. "Let's go."

---

The wind ripped at Steve's face but he kept his eyes wide open as they buzzed Times Square. A thousand tourist cameras went off as Iron Man flew in close enough to touch the statue of George Cohan. Steve gripped under Iron Man's arms and locked his legs around the suit's waist.
"HIGHER!" Steve's sleeves are being blown open and his tux's tails are flapping madly in the wind. His fingers are numb from gripping and his bow-tie is shaking around but he doesn't care.

"I know you love bring high." Iron Man blasted off to a burst of applause. There was a ring in his ear as he climbed. Tony turns down the external speakers to block out Steve's screaming.

"Mr. Stark, this is the NYPD SHIELD liaison, do we have a problem?"

"Nope" Tony ducked into a rush down Park Avenue. "Just going for a fun run, getting all the kinks out."

"If you could please notify us of your test runs before you take them, that would spare us a lot of worry and man-hours." Iron Man sped up and around, launching back toward mid-town.

"Noted and filed." Tony hovered for a bit above the Empire State building. "Whatya say?" he turned his head toward a hysterical laughing Steve.

"Around the bridge!" Steve was giggling. GIGGLING.

Tony turned aft and upward.

"Anything you say Cap."

-----

Steve and Tony enter the party late and little more windswept than white-tie allows. An orchestra was set up in front of the three-story windows that encircled the multi-tiered MILLENIUM Ballroom and throngs of well-dressed guests danced under a perfect reproduction of Howard's first jet prototype, just the thing Tony Stark needed to get into the celebratory mood. They walked down the stairs, Steve smoothing out his hair and Tony snapping at passing cater-waiters.

"You're late." said a calm voice.

"I had a good reason. Tony Stark arrives exactly when he is needed." Tony turns to Natasha, who is dressed in a floor-length explosion of gold and silver silk with her arm around a pale, black-clad woman with no eyebrows. Steve instantly cued up his "How To Address Same-Sex Couples" info from his wiki-binge. Wait are they a couple? Steve was confused. It was a familiar sensation.

Nat let go of the pale woman who was now glowering at Tony and Steve with enough force to power New York for a week.

"I got here on time."

"What did you have to do, get Dragon Tattoo here out in public while also getting into that revealing and tight little-wait where did you get that cause that looks like a metal alloy or something-"

"We brought in Parker." said Nat, stopping Tony's fugue dead. Steve's mouth dropped open.

"He's being debriefed as we speak." Nat put her arm around the pale woman's waist.

A waiter came by with their drink order. Nat took the two martinis and Tony took two tumblers of bourbon.

"Well! now we have another reason to celebrate."
Steve protested. "Tony you know I d-"

"What? No, these are for me." Tony crooked his head toward the waiter. "Get my friend here some champagne, he likes the bubbles." Tony sipped one of his bourbons. "I mean everyone likes bubbles." Nat rolled her eyes. The pale woman snarled at him. Steve smiled nervously. The orchestra began to play.

Something is off thought Steve. Tony was off. Not bad off, just ...off.

Of course! How did he miss it? Tony let someone hand him something and he accepted it.

Who was this person?

-----

Tony was demonstrating the difference between a shaken Martini and a stirred Martini to Steve when a familiar voice called behind him.

"Hello Tony."

Tony turned to see Pepper Pots, well tanned and rested in a modest but fitting blue wrap.

"Pepper! You came. How thoughtful."

"Well it is the anniversary of the founding of company I run."

"And it's my birthday! See, you remembered that."

"It's not a hard date to remember, it's the Ides of March."

"Ah! Beware the Ides of March, you can quote me on that."

Pepper allowed herself a little smile.

Tony spotted a passing catering tray. He picked off a bit of food. "Here", he gave it to Pepper. "On the house." Tony then vanished with Steve into the mass of party-goers and well wishers.

Pepper looked down at the pastry in her hand. A Strawberry Tart. Well, she thought, at least she doesn't have to worry about him taking this too seriously.

--------

The ventilator clicked back and forth, keeping time with the heart monitor and the IV drip and whatever else was currently hooked up to Mr. Robert Maven. This last bad spell had been the worst yet, he went into shock and had been unresponsive for days. More and more machines came in, breathing for him, feeding him, keeping his heart going. It was dark in Medical, dark and cold and quiet. The support staff were gone, the Stark Anniversary Gala was open to all employees so just a few night nurses patrolled the long white hallways and just a few doctors killing time in the On Call room. Stark Medical was set up to deal with injured superbros and routine staff check-ups along side research wards and on-going projects, it wasn't an ER. It could afford to take the night off once in a while. Dan sat in the chair besides his father, he had an unspoken agreement to be allowed to work down there some nights, past visiting hours. He was pretty sure the staff took pity on him. He didn't know how to feel about that.

Dan tried to keep focus on his work, missing the Naval Security information nearly resulted in a disaster but since Captain America is, like actually a Captain in the armed forces still, he was able
to make a few phone calls to straighten it out. Dan is trying to focus on whatever inane suggestion the PR department had come up with time to put Steve to good use but he couldn't. He had missed a lot of sleep recently, the nightmares that he denied having on his Psych Evaluation form were getting worse. Dreams of falling, of being crushed, the smell of ash in the air. He couldn't stop thinking about the conversation he had with the supervising doctor. The machines are the only thing keeping his Dad alive he said. They've done all they can he said. Maybe it's time to consider end of life treatment. "Plug pulling" thought Dan.

"He could still get better, right? There's still a chance?"

The doctor had sighed. "Yes, there is always a chance. But you have to look at the situation as it stands."

"Six weeks!" Dan blurted out. "If he doesn't get better in six weeks then we - we can have this conversation again."

Six weeks. It could happen. People got better. Miracles happen. The sky opens and pours out monsters. Childhood heroes appear in the flesh to compliment your tea making skills. There was research going on all the time, impossible, fantastic research that brings back the dead and makes men fly.

Research going on this very floor.

Dan switched over to his tablet. He still had an open channel to the Regeneration Research data. Stark Industries was a bit like a Malibu mansion, hard to get into but then nobody locked the windows and Dan had spent many sleepless nights working on his lock picking. From what he was able to make out, computer modeling had finally resulted in a stable test formula but was being stopped by Dr. Banner, who insisted on more caution and more data from Patient B, whoever that was. But there was something else. A flurry of communication recently concerning Regeneration Animal Testing. It wasn't coming from Dr. Banner. In fact it looked like it was trying very hard to avoid Dr. Banner entirely. It talked about "selective trials" at "high levels of discretion" among "cooperative low-risk terminally ill patients" along with getting the consent of health proxies and "directors and care providers at temporary medical overfill sites."

Great. If his Dad had stayed at the Mercy Ward he would have been eligible for early Regeneration studies.

Well why shouldn't he be in the study? He should have been. Dan quietly opened the door to grab his dad's chart off the wall. The night staff was a bit sloppy with protocol, something that had previously worried Dan but now seemed fated. This had to be the right thing, the only thing. He wasn't going to risk bringing it up and having them say no for whatever bullshit reason they didn't put him in the study in the first place. It didn't take long to change a few dates around, slot a different name in place, make the changes reflected in the database. Really, his Dad was an ideal candidate. No one would bat an eye. And if they did, could they blame him? He was fixing his own mistake. Dan touched his dad's hand for the first time since he was admitted. He was going to do good.

-------

There where no explosions, no fights, no flaming holes in the walls or murderous aliens hellbent on revenge, so it was a pretty successful party by Stark standards. Tony made a speech. Pepper made a speech. Steve had politely asked to not be asked to give a speech. The party was winding down and Tony was shaking the hands of the last guests to leave, a rowdy group of young biochemists that he totally promised to party with later. Steve was busing the spent drinks off their table to the bar. Tony put his hand on his arm. "Hey don't do that, I've got people."
"It's nothing really."

"Put em down perfect pants." Tony was sweating a bit, flush and drunk and happy. "You haven't danced once all night, c'mere."

Steve's ears didn't even have time to go red. What the hell was he talking about?

Tony stood on the dance floor with his arms open. "I'll lead, just put your hands there and " Tony moved Steve's arm in place. "There." Tony gave the orchestra a look and they began to play 'Moonlight Serenade'.

"Exactly how much have you had to drink?"

"Just enough. What a guy can't teach his best friend how to dance? Whole new century Capiscle, now just do as I do." They stepped back and forth. Steve was having trouble thinking straight. Was this a Skrull? A life model decoy escaped into the wild? Had he been drugged again? Was this revenge for making him do a loop-Du-loop around the bridge? Did he just call him his best friend? What the hell was going on?

"See, easy, just one two three and one two three and ah! Watch the feet. God what are you like a size 13 or something? Where do you buy shoes?"

"You bought me these shoes." And then it struck Steve totally, completely absurd that was. Who buys their friend shoes? He was still stuck on that word, 'friend'. Steve hadn't really thought about it like that. He'd always been in situations where you had to work with people who just got assigned to you. Bunk mates, the military, defending the world from evil, that kind of thing. He didn't think about his relationship (another totally absurd word for the situation) with Tony as being anything really. He was just there all the time. Assigned to him.

Tony, despite being a little unsteady on his feet, was leading Steve around the ballroom at an even clip.

"How are your teeth so straight?" Tony was staring at Steve's mouth. "You were born before toothbrushes, did the serum do that too? And whiten them? It it hurt? Did you have get used to chewing with a different mouth?"

"Tony, you're drunk."

The song ended. Tony mock-slurred a "you bet." But without dancing to distract him it was getting harder to hide his complete shitfaced exhaustion. They stood before an open banquette and before Steve could react, Tony had crashed into him, slamming them both onto the seat.

"Lets just sleep here, here is good."

Steve didn't bother to protest. Odds where very good Tony wouldn't remember this in the morning.

"Tony?"

"hmmf?"

"Are you spending all this time with me because you like me?"

"Everybody likes you Cap"

"No." Steve reached for the phrase that had come up a few times in his reading. "I mean ...like me
like me?"

There were three agonizing seconds before Tony began to snore.

--------

Pepper and Happy watched from the upper tier as Tony Stark, captain of industry, fell face forward on top of America's Greatest Treasure.

Pepper takes a finishing sip of champagne. "I really, really, thought I would be surprised by this." Happy took out his phone and snapped a picture. Pepper gave him a look. "What? You never know when it could be useful."

"Trying to blackmail Tony assumes he has a concept of shame. Besides if you want the real dirt you can just ask me about the time in Mumbai."

"Mumbai?"

"There was an elephant involved."

"How did I not know about-"

"There's a reason I'm the only one of Tony's former personal assistants not currently being treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." Pepper put the glass down on the exposed ledge. "You know what the best part about this is?" She put her arms around Happy's neck.

Happy stammered "There's a best part?"

"Yes. It's that none of this is my problem anymore. I don't have to do a thing. He's made his Cap and he can lie in it."

--------

Natasha, out of her dress and into something more reasonable for breathing, was sitting at a desk in the Situation room reading a few early morning reports. Clint barged in, as usual, swaying more than little, as usual.

"I see your date has left for the night." Clint grinned.

"I see you had no date." Nat stared at her paperwork.

"I was on assignment, Agent." Clint sat down and slammed a bottle of Hungarian liquor on the desk and produced two shot glasses. Nat put her paperwork aside. This was much more important. This was tradition.

Clint poured two shots. "You do great white trash. It was perfect. Hair, stance, just the right kinda slur. You were every girl I hooked up with in college." Clint downed his shot

"That is the saddest thing I have ever heard in my life, Agent." Nat downed hers.

Clint refilled them.

"Robot."

Nat slammed a shot

"Hillbilly"
Clint slammed a shot.

"Ice dyke."

Slam.

"Three beer queer."

Slam.

"Daddy issues."

Slam

"Banjo player."

Slam.

Several slams and an empty bottle later.

"I miss him."

"Me too."

-------------

Chapter End Notes

Volare! is from the popular Italian 50s song "Nel blu dipinto di blu (Volare)" although most Americans are just familiar with the Dean Martin version. Sample lyric "No wonder my happy heart sings Your love has given me wings"

Steve has long-standing movie-canon problems with figuring out if people are couples.

Tony is misquoting both Tolkien and Shakespeare here.

A Tart is another name for 'A prostitute or a promiscuous woman" and Pepper is allergic to strawberries. Tony is kind of a jerk.

Nat and Clint are most likely drinking Unicum here, the Hungarian herbal bitters. There's a museum to it in Budapest. Yes, that Budapest.

Clint's secret banjo from this excellent fic http://archiveofourown.org/works/364902
As Normal As Blueberry Pie

Chapter Summary

Peter comes home. Clint's behavior catches up with him. Dan gets news on his Dad's progress and if Darcy is going to be both the Avengers therapist and matchmaker she seriously needs a salary upgrade.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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A black Jeep rides down a residential Queens street.

Peter is in the passenger seat looking at the woman in the driver's seat who called herself Jolene and was then addressed as Agent Romanov and is currently impersonating a detective.

"Do you have a question Mr. Parker?"

Peter blinked. "Does it itch? The wig?"

Natasha kept her eyes on the road. "It's not a wig."

"Oh."

"And yes. They itch."

The Jeep stopped in front of a modest two-story house with peeling vinyl siding. Nat unlocked Peter's door. She pointed her eyebrows toward the house.

"Shouldn't you come with me?"

"I'll be here if you need me. Go."

Peter walked up the stairs to the front door. He rang the bell and Aunt May answered the door with a plastic tumbler in her hands. She dropped the cup and it bounced along the patio as she grabbed Peter and let out a jagged wail, rising and falling.

Natasha watched the scene from the Jeep. She watched Aunt May hold onto Peter like she was trying to tear him apart. Peter was crying, burying his face into her hair. Nat's shoulders dropped for a second, just long enough to balance out her ledger.

Within 15 minutes she was out of Queens and merging onto highway traffic.

-----

Steve found a grey hair. Steve found a grey hair while giving himself his monthly trim cause no barber in the city can do it right and he's used to giving himself haircuts. Steve was ecstatic. He practically framed it. Steve e-mailed Bruce about it right away. Here was proof, proof he was aging and that the serum maybe didn't slow that down and now he wasn't going to have to watch
everyone die as he lived on as a horrible deathless monster. At least, that's what Dan assumed was going on in Steve's head as he watched the man himself compose the e-mail to Bruce from both his video feed to Steve's bedroom and his remote desktop hookup. He's so cute when he's happy thought Dan, watching Steve sit at the computer in his SSR t-shirt and boxers, banging away "this may not be significant but you wanted me to be through so I'm writing to tell you.." Dan likes when Steve is happy.

The grey hair discovery was pretty much the only thing going on that morning. Dan made tea as usual. He sifted through e-mail as usual. He re-arranged Steve's schedule, postponing Steve's weekly Oyster Bar diner with Tony, re-arranging a few media events to fit training. It was nice and easy. Comfortable. The situation in Medical was going well, if they noticed his change they weren't acting on it. Dan had noticed a new step in his Father's daily care routine, an injection that came in a separate bag and carried out in a separate sharps container. There was a loud ring, Steve had gotten a new message on his phone. He read it and shot up, putting on his pants and out the door before Dan could react.

Dan tabbed over to his sMail. He had two new messages.

I GOT SOMETHING FOR YOU - DLEWIS IO

RE: YOUR FATHER'S CONDITION - DR.ORTIZ MEDICAL

He opened the second one first.

-----

Clint Barton sat in a conference room across from Maria Hill, his hands clasped together in his lap while he thought of the ways he could kill her with only the objects on the table. Well, maybe not kill. Lightly maim. At most.

"Do you know why you're here Agent?"

"Paper said re-assignment." Clint put his head to one side, trying to crack a crick in his neck. He had woken up on the rooftop of a SoHo hotel in a makeshift nest of pillowcases, champagne bottles and discarded shoes. He had barely been able to get showered and suited up before Hill called him in.

"Yes. In light of your recent activity we thought a few lower-priority assignments might help you adjust to your new handler."

"I don't need another handler."

"SHIELD does not work with single agents. It's dangerous. For everyone."

"Natasha doesn't have a handler."

"Agent Romanov is accountable only to Director Fury. You are not."

Clint shifted in his seat and counted the ways he could escape the room. Off the cabinet and out the window, smash the door and then tuck roll, sweep to the floor and down the side.

"Madagascar." Clint sucked his cheeks and made a little lip fart.

"We have a flight risk there. I want you to follow him."

Clint bit his lip and kept his hands between his legs.
"With all due respect Ma'am, we have many other agents who could use more experience in tracking low-priority targets."

Maria took a clipboard off the desk and began to leaf through the papers.

"I know you've been given greater allowances in the past Agent Barton. We tolerated that because you did your job. I tolerated it because Phil trusted you."

The name hit Clint like a hammer.

"But I don't trust you. Report to Logistics for travel documentation immediately. Dismissed."

-----

Tiny computer speakers pushed out the opening notes to Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, a somber and ember tune that would be embarrassingly goth for a hospital room if not for Dan radiating sunshine and unicorns from every pore. He was sitting, pretending to read an old issue of the New Yorker when the door opened to reveal the bearded, roly-poly face of his father's supervising physician, Dr. Ortiz.

"Bach?" Ortiz pointed to the ceiling.

Dan nodded. "Dad plays the organ at City College uptown. The Passacaglia and Fugue is his favorite."

"Good taste." Dr. Ortiz did a quick check of the chart and machines. "I suppose the nurse told you already."

"Yes." Dan beamed. "He's off the respirator."

"And completely stable. Your father is a very lucky man Mr. Maven."

Dan stood up.

"We'll keep you updated on any changes but if what I'm seeing holds true, then we may have to hold off on that conversation."

"Thank you Dr. Ortiz."

"Don't thank me. Thank him." Dr. Ortiz put the chart back in place and walked out of the room, closing the door on Dan and the Passacaglia and the fugue.

Dan looked down at his father. His father's eyes were closed, his breathing regular, his skin pink and flush for the first time in recent memory. Dan held his father's hand. The music fell into layered, descending notes.

"Everything is going to be okay."

Dan felt an electric flicker in the hand he held. His father's grip tightened around his middle finger. Dan patted his father's chest with his other hand and began to turn away. His father's grip tightened. Dan pulled gently. The grip tightened. Dan tried to remove his father's grip with his other hand. His father's grip tightened. Dan tried to shake his hand up and away. His father's hand pulled down just in time for Dan's scream to be masked by the climax of the passcaglia.

------
Darcy Lewis' day could not be going worse. She had to add all the revisions to SHIELD regulations for reacting to Things Appearing On The News That Should Not Be On The News in the wake of the Peter Parker incident and the company starting blocking Tumblr and it took hours to figure out a way around it. She walked into the kitchenette for some much needed coffee and encountered a sullen Steve Rogers slumped forward at the tiny round table surrounded by spent foil wrappers and open boxes.

"Oh! hey ..Steve. What brings you down here with the morlocks?"

Steve, still chewing, held up a box of Wild Berry Pop-Tarts. "We don't have them upstairs."

"Yeah." Darcy walked over to the coffee machine, stepping on a couple dozen empty chip bags and candy wrappers. "The laundry is kind of a diabetic coma waiting to happen." She poured herself a mug of stale coffee. "Should you really be.." She trailed off. Shit, Bruce told her about Steve's diet in order to make controls for the Regeneration study in confidence.

Steve didn't seem to notice. He stared at the ground and bit off another chunk of Pop-Tart. "It's my free day."

Darcy tapped the side of her mug.

"Steve? Are you okay?"

Steve kept staring at the spot just past his shoes. "I got a call this morning. NYPD liaison. There was a woman, this old woman on the ledge of her apartment building, throwing eggs and garbage out the window, hitting people and laughing. They tried to get into her apartment but the doors where completely blocked and she threatened to jump a few times if they got any closer and the whole time she's throwing trash at people and demanding to see Captain America. So they call me in and I get to the ledge. I call out her name, 'Mrs. Rosenhaus, they said you wanted to see me?' And she starts crying, crying and laughing and she falls onto me, hanging off of me and sobbing and saying 'I knew you'd come, I'd knew you'd come' over and over and just before I'm about to hold her steady she pushes off me, backward off the ledge. I caught her, I caught her arm before she fell. There was a crack, I think I broke it but I'm looking at her and she's just beaming, so happy. I don't think I've seen a person that happy before."

"Well." Darcy took a sharp breath. "That's not unheard of, there was that guy who kept threatening to jump into the East River unless Iron Man saved him."

Steve licked his lips.

"What about me makes people do that? People I've never met. Am I doing something to them?"

"I think they're just shocked that you're real."

Steve turned to Darcy, his brows up at angles and his mouth hung open. He looked like he was about to cry.

"Am I?"

Darcy quickly sat down next to him, cupping her mug in her hands.

"Of course you're real. I haven't talked to imaginary people since like, High School."

Steve coughed out a laugh. He put his hands on his thighs and leaned back. He rested his head against the cheap drywall and slumped his shoulders. "Darcy?"
"Mhh?"

"Do you have any more of those cookies from before?"

-------

Dr. Ortiz finished his rounds and sat down at his desk. He cued up a simple black window on his laptop. He began to type.

2: Updates filed and logged.

1: GOOD. ANY NEWS?

2: Concerns about new subject.

1: HOW SO?

2: Cardiovascular secure but concerned about nervous system. Not consistent with previous patients.

1: ANYTHING I SHOULD WORRY ABOUT?

2: No. Possible personnel conflict.

1: PROCEED AS NORMAL.

2: Of course.

USER 1 HAS TERMINATED CONNECTION.

-------

Dan knocks on the open door of the Information Operations Division. Darcy is sitting at her desk ignoring the steadily increasing snowdrift of paper and file folders around her.

"You have something for me?"

"I sure do- whoa nelly that looks like it hurts." She pointed to Dan's bandaged and splint-held middle finger.

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "I slammed it in a drawer by accident."

Darcy made a mock serious expression. "You know you can tell me if he's hurting you, I won't judge."

Dan forced a smile out. "It's just cause he loves me so much."

Darcy stood up and handed him an envelope.

"New IDs. Company-wide, everyone's getting them."

Dan opened the envelope and pulled out two plastic cards. One big shiny Stark Industry company ID and another, smaller New York State Non-Drivers ID. It looked the same as Dan's old one, but his birthdate was back-dated a few years.

"Everyone get these?"
"Security hiccup they said. Nothing major, but they're reorganizing up the system to be safe. That and I suspect someone upstairs wanted a better security photo."

Dan could feel himself sweating. He changed the subject. "Why a new State ID?" Dan did some math. "This says I'm 21."

"Maybe they want to get around the child labor laws? You are kinda like ...should be in school right now."

"There's an amnesty for refugees." Dan turned the card over. "Just take a GED and you're good. Why make me 21?"

"Maybe Tony wants someone he can drink with?"

"I'm not very good at that."

"Well stick around with me kid and you'll get better." Darcy punched him in the arm.

"So." Darcy drew out the vowel. "How are things going upstairs?"

"Oh good, great, wonderful, dream come true."

"And you haven't noticed anything unusual about Steve, lately?"

Dan blinked two times. "Uhhh. He's really serious about being on time?"

Darcy sighed. "That's good, you just keep doing what you're doing."

"I...plan on it?" Dan tapped the ID in his hand. Darcy looked spooked, like someone just told her she had to audit every r/Lokiwasright post. "So what's it you do with yourself, then?" Darcy had this odd panicked feeling she had to keep him talking. There was something different about Dan, something twitchy tucked away in the dark bags under his eyes.

"Work mostly. I pretty much live here now, probably cause I literally live here up on Century."

"I know the feeling. You got any plans for the weekend?"

"I mostly just, stay here and wait for Steve to need me."

Darcy started to unconsciously nod her head. "Oh well, I mean don't you ever get off? Like a day off?"

"I actually have Friday through Sunday to myself but I don't really know anyone so I just-"

"I KNOW SOMEONE!" Darcy whipped her phone out. "He's a friend of a friend, new intern like you but up in Linguistics. He's staying with an uncle on the Upper West Side until we can clear his housing and he's totally new to the city and free tonight so maybe you two could grab a drink or-"

Dan stuttered out an 'I can't drink."

"Not anymore apparently." Darcy tapped away on her phone. "Besides they gave him a fake ID too." She flicked a few finishing moves on the screen. "I sent you his info, he's free Saturday if you wanna do whatever." Dan was about to launch into a "wait-why-do-you-just-assume-I'm" before he caught Darcy giving him the expression of someone who has seen your browser history.

"Okay." Dan started to back away toward the door. "I'll be sure to check that out."
Darcy kept smiling until Dan had left and closed the door. She let out a long sigh of relief. She couldn't tell you why she did what she did, call it Political Science Sense, but she felt that not only does Steve really need the brand new packet of cookies currently hidden under a sweater in her desk drawer but that Dan should be far away from him for the time being. If Steve is having trouble being idolized then he really doesn't need his number one fan sitting by the phone waiting for him to call.

Darcy opened her drawer and pulled out the cookies. She took out three and put them in a clean envelope and then took another one out of the packet and popped it into her mouth whole. Because, seriously, this day has been the worst.

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Chapter End Notes

Title from the Tex Beneke song "A Wonderful Guy" - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ig7jx4J399s

Maria Hill has a funny way to stage an intervention doesn't she?

Steve's incident with the jumper is taken from the backstory to the The Glove song 'Like An Animal'. - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8LzZpZVfxM

Morlocks, both an X-Men reference and H.G Wells reference, underworld dwelling brutes.

Steve's sweet tooth is well documented by scifigr47 - http://scifigr47.tumblr.com/post/26381514920/ficlet-in-which-steve-rogers-has-a-sweet-tooth
As High As A Flag On The Fourth Of July

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Darcy trip balls. Dan has a date. Steve and Tony watch different versions of themselves and Steve sees a version of Tony's he's never seen before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Darcy Lewis arrived at Bruce's apartment in a black shirt with the words "ACTION PHILOSOPHER" printed across the top while carrying a Ziploc baggie of chocolate-covered lumps. Bruce was sitting on the floor, staring into his tablet and making rapid little jabs at it. Darcy walked over and pressed the off button.

"Not tonight. No worky." She rattled the baggie in front of him. Bruce began to protest but Darcy cut him off.

"When was the last time you had the weekend off?"

Bruce took the baggie and pushed the tablet away from him with his foot. "Oh, I dunno, the Cretaceous?"

Darcy sat down next to him. "What was it like?"

Bruce opened the bag. "No flowers. No birds. No real trees just, huge ferns."

"And dinosaurs."

"Well of course dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are the best part. Big green scaly monsters."

"Feathered actually. Everyone says they had feathers. Fur too, lots of colors. Pre-History is like seriously gaudy. Stegosaurus was basically a drag queen."

"Stegosaurus was Jurassic." Bruce smiled and smelled the lumps in the bag. "You know they grow these in uh...excrement."

"Have you ever seen the inside of a factory farm?"

"I'm a vegetarian." Bruce picked a lump out of the bag.

"No you're not."

Bruce put one of the chocolate-covered hallucinogenic mushrooms in his mouth. "I try."

"I'll get the music." Darcy slapped his thigh and walked over to plug her iPod into the stereo. Bruce laid down on the floor. This was wrong. He shouldn't trip with a secret, he shouldn't do this with her without telling her. He's going to make it go wrong. It wont work if he's not relaxed. If he's not relaxed—no. No, he has that under control, you can't even think about it.

She was so excited about it. He can't ruin this. He has to relax. He can't ruin this He can't-
Bruce's brain was cut short by Darcy laying down next to him and the sounds of undulating sitar music filling the room. She picked the baggie up, put a mushroom in her mouth, and put her arms around Bruce's waist. He felt her legs pressed against his, the smell of her hair, the weight of her hands on his flank.

"Tell me about dinosaurs, Dr. Banner."

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"I have a date". Dan kept repeating the phrase to himself as he checked his hair in the mirror for the 47th time. "You have a date." Granted it was a blind date foisted on him by a slightly hysterical ex-boss but still. He changed his shirt and jacket six times, no small feat considering he only had two. He ran a quick background check on the guy but SHIELD had apparently scrubbed him record when they hired him. He knotted and undid his tie, splashed water on his face and brushed his teeth until his gums hurt.

He held the new ID up to the face in the mirror. Does this look like a 21 year old? He turned his head down and around. Maybe, in the right light and if he remembered to stand up straight. He patted himself down and felt a huge wet spot on his trousers, he must have splashed more than he thought while washing his face. He pulled them off and put them under a towel, running the blow dryer over it and carrying the whole load the short distance to his laptop.

His phone shouted an alarm. He had ten minutes get out the door in time enough to get to the bar. He waved the blow dryer closer to the towel. Dan opened up his laptop and looked at his feeds. Huh. Steve's room was empty. He wasn't in training or the library or even on his computer at all. What was Captain America doing on a Saturday night? Dan began to click around.

Which was quickly stopped when the blow dryer singed his arm hair and he dropped the whole load onto the floor.

----

Tony was, as was his want, wandering around the Tower at midnight cause it was his tower dammit and he'll keep what hours he pleases, thank you. He was working out a problem in his head. It wasn't mechanical (cause then he would've fixed it already) and it wasn't personal (cause he'd already be ignoring it). No, the problem was biologic and while he was a genius ("super-genius" if you got him in the wrong mood) the life sciences had always been his blind spot. He rolled the tumbler of bourbon in his hand as he walked. Maybe there was a way he could ask Bruce without-

"TONY!" A voice bellowed out from the lobby-with-the-TV-that-was-not-a-common-room. Tony walked over to find a t-shirted Steve Rogers sitting on the couch while a cheesy 60s-style TV opening credits blasted on the screen behind him. "THE NEW ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN AMERICA!" bellowed the show's announcer.

"Reminiscing again Grandpa?"

Steve was turned toward him, his hands on the top of the couch. "I just sat down and then" He pointed to the ceiling and lowered his voice "that guy said he had recommendations for me. How does he know? Is he following me?"

"Well for one JARVIS is not a "he" and it's his job to know these things." Tony left out the afternoon he spent re-tagging the videos in the Tower library with "Cap-bait" and "See If It Makes Steve Cry" and "Emergency Distraction Fuel".
"Tony" Steve said the word very slowly. "I don't want you to think I don't like you because I cancelled our meetings and the oyster dinner."

"Well that's...sweet of you there. I'm not used to being apologized to." Tony walked slowly toward the couch. Was this a Skrull? Had the decades of drinking finally wrecked his mind?

"It's just, I've been reading and I want you to know that no matter what happened I really value our friendship and I don't want that to change."

"Okay" thought Tony. "He's both the world's youngest WW2 veteran and the world's oldest 14 year old girl." Tony caught sight of the crumbs and empty envelope on the table in front of Steve. "Hot Lips feeding you cookies again?"

Steve nodded sheepishly. "They're very relaxing."

Tony unclenched. He wasn't going insane, Steve was just powerfully stoned. Again. He was going to have to start taping these.

"So, how's the show?"

Steve shrugged his shoulders. "They took a lot of stuff from the newsreels. I don't remember them being this...cornball."

Tony sat on the couch next to him. "Much in the same way fish are unaware of the concept of water."

Steve didn't flinch. "I don't like the guy they got to be me, he's too boxy."

"Well you have to admit you're kinda boxy all over."

"And Bucky is wrong, he's too tall and angular. And light haired, Bucky was practically Greek. And he's NOT FUNNY." Steve added a noise of a complete surprise, as if it was clearly obvious how wrong this was. "Everything was a joke, he always had one waiting. This guy is half silent killer and half...Jimmy Olson or something."

Tony took a very long, slow sip of his drink. They are officially in dangerous waters.

"You two were good....friends?"

"My only friend. We came into the Boy's Home together."

"He protected you." Tony finished his drink.

"No, he kept me in check." A grin began a slow rise across Steve's face. "When the first guy jumped me, I'll never forget his name, Ernest Lazlo, I somehow ended up knocking him down the stairs and then I hurled myself on top of him and kept pummeling his head. I only stopped when Bucky pulled me off. I think he lost a few teeth."

"Bucky or Lazlo?"

Steve didn't respond, he just smiled. The episode ended and the screen filled with a list of recommendations. In the upper left corner was a square with a very intense looking man in a tuxedo with a fleet of planes behind him. The description read:

THE AVIATOR: A biopic depicting the life of legendary inventor, businessman and aviator Howard Stark, from his rise in the 1940s to his infamous collapse.
Steve grabbed the remote. Tony grabbed it away from him.

"What? It's your father!"

"I know. I spent four years trying to stop that movie from being made."

"How bad can it be?"

"I'm only in it for like 3 minutes and the kid they got is super-bad. It borders on slander."

"Tony, you can't expect me to not be curious."

"You know how awful these things are, just look at Boxy You and Humorless Bucky there."

"But if I watch it with you then you can point out what's wrong."

"EVERYTHING is wrong."

Steve nodded his head for a bit and got quiet. "I lied before."

"What?"

"I lied when I said Bucky was my only friend. Howard, for the time I knew him, was a really good friend. And I miss him. And maybe this way I can see him again."

Tony didn't even break eye contact to push the start button on the remote.

"Okay, but you're getting the full story so no complaining about talking during the movie."

"Got it."

Tony walked over to the liquor cabinet on the wall and took out a bottle of bourbon. He pulled out the stopper with his teeth and sat down next to Steve. The movie's score started to swell upwards.

---------

The phone rang at one in the morning.

"Doctor Ortiz"

"I'm here, speak."

"It's about Patient 759's restraints."

"I told the board I was well within my rights and responsibilities to-"

"No that's not what I'm calling about. We need more."

"What?"

"The patient is resisting tranquillizers. We need you to okay a more aggressive pacification route."

"Doctor?"

"Doctor are you there?"

"Yes I'm here. Of course, you have my full permission to apply whatever you think necessary."
Tony gave a running commentary while swigging from his bottle.

"Okay that was like, eight people, not one guy."

"You know how he got that house? Bootlegger friends."

"And that project was a disaster from the start, you see him landing once but not crashing the other 87 times."

"That was not a chaste affair, they were doing it. Also again, she was like four different people over like a decade not a month. Also they totally turned his lead mathematician into a dude there."

"This is not real cause I do not believe Howard had tear ducts. I think he had them removed during the war."

"Yeah that jump cut was his whole time spent with you. Sorry about that."

"Oh THIS sobriety kick didn't take let me tell you."

While watching a scene of the actor playing Howard (who was "too tall, too handsome, and not screaming enough" to be Howard according to Tony) visiting the set of a movie he just bought, Steve asked his first question. "Howard bought a movie studio?"

"Yeah, after the war. I think to fuck actresses as a tax write-off. This movie actually-" He pointed to the set of the western being filmed in the movie. "It fucking killed people, it was downwind of a nuclear test site in Nevada, half the crew got cancer. It's one of the reasons I set up the Maria Stark Foundation."

"Wasn't she an actress? Maria?"

"No." Tony took a long pull off his bottle. "She was a singer."

Steve snapped his mouth shut and returned to the movie. It was long, a huge sprawling epic and Tony was fading fast, head back on the couch, eyes half open, hand fixed around the nearly empty bottle on the armrest. Steve watched as Movie-Howard walked into a nightclub. On the stage, the spotlight fell on a dark haired actress in a slinky purple dress. She walked over to the mic and began to sing a slow country ballad. The camera cut to an enraptured movie-Howard. The woman on the screen continued to sing:

"Maybe you're cold, but you're so warm inside."

"Hey Tony is that supposed to be your-" Steve stopped. Tony Stark, head back, eyes closed, was mouthing along to the words of the song.

"I was always a fool for my Johnny. For the one they call, Johnny Guitar."

Steve slowly sat up, keeping both singing Starks in view.

"What if you go, what if you stay, I love you."

"What if you're cruel, you can be kind, I know."
Steve watched the two, Tony's mouth sounding out the words the woman on the screen was singing. The camera lingered on her in close-up. Whoever was in charge of casting had done their homework, there was a lot of Tony in her face, or maybe it was the other way around.

"Play it again, Johnny Guitar."

Tony's mouth stopped moving. The scene ended in a quiet strumming of strings. Movie-Howard watched on like a man possessed as the crowd applauded. Steve walked over to Tony. He took the bottle from Tony's hand and put it back into the cabinet. Tony began to snore. As gently as he could muster, Steve moved Tony into a horizontal position on the couch and dimmed the lights. He left, leaving the actors playing Tony's parents to meet for the first time in peace.

Steve was walking on air as he made his way out of the common room and back toward his apartment. He heard the clunk of a bottle falling uneasily down the hall. The maid's door to Tony's office was open and the small light of a desk lamp poured out of it. Steve crept to the door and poked his head in to see a figure in a rumpled suit struggling with the cork on one of Tony's bottles. He could smell the whiskey from the doorway. The figure dropped the bottle again and cursed, turning his face into the light.

"Dan?"

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Chapter End Notes

Title again from the song "Wonderful Guy" and also cause MAN I'm going to be making some serious Fallout: New Vegas references soon.

ACTION PHILOSOPHERS was a great little comic series, google it. I picked it cause I own the t-shirt with "PLATO SMASH!" on it

They're probably taking a few low dosage, mild mushroom trip here but you'd still want to budget a weekend.

Stegosaurus is the best dinosaur I will fight you for this.

I have no idea if mushrooms are grown in crap, I just wanted a random Rules Of Attraction reference here for some reason.

Why wasn't there a kitschy 60s Captain America TV show? Everyone else got one.

None of this Bucky stuff is comics canon BTW I just make shit up.

Steve will not admit that JARVIS creeps him right the hell out.

"Hot Lips" Houilhand from M.A.S.H. Ask your parents.

So remember that line in The Avengers where Steve says "everything a joke to you". Did you instantly flash back to Steve and Bucky in Cap movie with Bucky always cracking jokes? Cause I did.
THE AVIATOR is a movie with Leonard DiCaprio directed by Martin Scorsese about the life of Howard Hughes. Howard Stark was expressly modeled after Hughes and I don't even have to make up the stuff he did. He was a real life millionaire, genius, playboy. The movie that gave everyone cancer? Yep that happened, it was a biopic of Ghensis Khan (starring, of all people, JOHN WAYNE), and it was the basis for the Horde and Legion in Fallout New Vegas (which also has a Howard Hughes character, Mr. House) which brings me to "Johnny Guitar", a mournful country tune best known by Peggy Lee but was sung by Joan Crawford in the movie. It is in New Vegas.

Remember that Steve kind of has a cowboy thing? This is not helping that AT ALL. Also, look it's the running theme in this fic! Right there.

I don't think Dan's date went well do you?
Dan arrived at the small bar on 18th street wearing his black tie with black jacket and about forty five pounds of antiperspirant and Bay Rum. He scanned the room, should he have brought a sign or a sticker or something? He looked over at the bar when a man with floppy blonde hair in a white dress shirt and brown sweater vest waved him over. He wasn't wearing a tie. Are you not supposed to wear ties on a date? Dan walked over, the man had already ordered something clear and fizzy. This guy has real blonde hair thought Dan, his highlights must look totally ridiculous. He meant to get a real dye job but then the Parker thing happened and he just didn't have the time.

Dan walked over to the man. The two shook hands.

"Dan Maven."

"Karr Bragason. Darcy's told me a lot about you."

"Really! Like what?"

Karr laughed nervously. "What are you drinking?"

Dan orders a pint of Guinness because he's seen Steve ordering it at events that take place in bars, another dietary hold over from his London tour. Dan takes a sip. It tastes like drinking tree bark. Dan suppresses the urge to spit it out and swallows, quickly taking another sip to try and mask the first blush of sticky bitterness. It's then he notices that Karr is talking to him and he should probably pay attention.

"So where did you grow up?"

Dan swallows his second sip. He figures if he keeps this up then he could get the drink out of his life in a few minutes.

"Here. I was born in Queens but we moved to the east side when I was three." Dan braces himself for another sip. "You?"

"Iceland, although I grew up mostly around Oslo."

Dan nods blankly.

"In Norway."

"Oh right yeah I knew that." Dan took another sip. It was tasting better now, or maybe it was just better then risking another foot in the mouth.

"So, why did you move to Norway?"
Karr picked up his drink. It was probably just seltzer thought Dan and he is committing a horrible faux pas by drinking when the other person isn't. He read like, eight etiquette guides to that effect.

"My parents are archeologists. My father actually worked for Howard Stark a few times in the 70s, back when he was still digging up shipwrecks in the North Sea. He wont say it but I think he put in a good word for me when I applied."

Dan, missing the point, did some math in his head. "Wait wouldn't that make your dad like-" Dan quickly reacted to the pointed expression forming on Mr. Bragason's face. "Distinguished?"

"It was his undergrad work."

"Ah." Dan took a very long drink and shifted his weight back and forth.

"So I saw your video, the one in the ruined apartment."

Dan nearly chokes on his beer. "What?"

"It was all over the news. It's one of the things that inspired me to apply, although I didn't think I'd actually get hired."

"They're very interested in finding new talent." Dan repeated the line he told himself at midnight when he couldn't sleep cause he couldn't understand why he has this job in the first place.

"And being familiar with ancient Norse helps when you're trying to repair the Bifrost."

"You know about that!?" Dan finished his drink, a warm buzz starting to rise from his gut. "I found out by accident one day doing some searching and they made me sign like a stack of papers saying I'd never even think about the word again." The barmen buses Dan's empty glass and asks if he wants another. Dan does. The bubbles in Karr's drink have stopped fizzing but he's still nursing it.

The pint arrives and Dan picks it up. "In fact, I shouldn't even be telling you this." Dan lowered his voice. "But since you already know the bigger things, I can say ... I work for Captain America."

Karr brushed his hair back and leaned in to speak.

"Is it a dream come true?"

"It's the best thing ever. He's so kind and smart and tall. He's always going on these shows and talking about the Phoenix Act and spreading the word about how much good it's gonna do. He's really trying to heal the city and he's so humble about it. I have the easiest job in the world, it's just an honor to be such a big part of someone's life like that. Someone's who's really doing things I mean. Really inspirational."

Karr reached for his drink. "But there's got to be something-"

"And he has all these little mannerisms" Dan continued. "Little habits. He sings to himself and all the old candy he likes, you know like violet gum and ginger taffy cause everything else is too sweet but he does love Pop-Tarts and like hazelnut anything. And he only uses Bay Rum and cuts his own hair. And he drinks tea constantly and reads the actual newspaper and like lives in the training room but he's always reading so I think he's got a real intellectual side to him too, you know, but quiet and not bragging about it at all. " Dan took another long gulp of his drink. "It really is a dream come true, he's just perfect. Totally perfect."
Karr smiled again and began to open his mouth, but Dan continued.

"And I know it's not just me. You've got to see it, the love people have for him. I get to read his fan mail, that's part of my job too and the things people say about him. It makes you cry. People who've never met him, people who only know him through the comic books, everybody. They all pour their hearts out to him, the most private, personal stuff. It's just amazing the kind of love and devotion he inspires."

Dan finished his drink and motioned for another, the warmth of the beer rising up and over his head, this brand new feeling enveloping him in a woolly envelope. This was the first time he'd ever talked to someone about what working with Steve was like. It felt good. He pointed a finger at Karr.

"And also, he inspired lots of other things in people if you get my drift. The things people send him, you can't even imagine. One woman sent him a toe."

Karr smiled, finished his drink and passed a bill to the bartender. He patted Dan on the shoulder.

"You seem like a very nice young man, but I don't think this is going to work out." Karr left, walking the short length from the bar to the street, leaving Dan holding his pint glass with both hands. He carefully put the drink on top the bar. What had happened? It was going so well, he felt great just a second ago. He looked at the half-empty glass of Guinness. What the fuck? He was just talking about his job. Hadn't he asked about that? He wasn't interested in his job? Literally the most important thing in his life? Fuck him. Fuck him and fuck Darcy for setting this fucking stupid thing up. He should've known better. This was so stupid. He was so stupid. Dan picked up the beer and finished it in one, long swallow. He had a job, an apartment, a credit card, and the best fake ID money could buy. He motioned to the bartender.

"I want to open a tab." Dan gave up his Stark-issue bank card.

"All set." The barman removed the empty pint glass. "The same?"

"No." Dan thought about all the times he had monitored Tony Stark's drink charges.

"Double Makers' Manhattan no rocks."

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Chapter End Notes

Super short for the holidays. Felt like a natural break.

Title from the Judy Garland number "(Dear Mr. Gable) You Made Me Love You" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BV8qh6vyp8 in the song, a young fan expresses her total devotion to film star Clark Gable. Make of that what you will.

I love Guinness but yes I have heard that exact phrase to describe it.

Dan's drunk response: He's like five nothing and has never drunk before (random Granny Moonshine shot doesn't count) he's new to this.

BOY IT'S A GOOD THING THIS ISN'T WRITTEN FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OR ANYTHING WHEW.
EXPERIENCE OR ANYTHING WHEW.
"Dan?" Dan turned toward the question. His face was red and puffy with drink and tears. He let out a sopping yelp and bent backwards, falling for the desk chair and missing it entirely.

Okay. Sloppy Drunk thought Steve. Sad sloppy drunk. Steve can handle sad sloppy drunk. Even the best unit (or showgirl trope) had a few drinkers, or guys who snapped, or celebrated too vehemently. He switched on Cap voice.

"Private, what are you doing in Mr. Stark's office?"

Dan didn't flinch at the title, he just sat on the floor and shook his head.

"They kicked me out of the bar and I took a cab here and I thought Tony would have some more and the maids door took my keycard and then the stupid cork tops-"

Steve sat down eye-level with him. "Dan, why were you at a bar?" It smelt like whiskey was coming out of his pores.

"I'm gonna get fired." Dan blubbered. "You hate me. I fucked up."

Steve put his hand on Dan's shoulder. "I think we can let breaking and entering pass just this once. Why were you at the bar Dan?"

"A date. My first date, like ever ever and I fucking scared him off."

"Well you're doing one better then me. I never had a date."

Sober Dan would've killed for a heart to heart with Captain America. Drunk Dan can't even look him in the eye. Dan's chest was moving like he was about to get on another crying jag. "Why did you even hire me? I'm not a personal assistant. I was barely qualified to run a tumblr. Why is this even my life?"

"To be honest I hired you because Tony told me to."

Dan made a strange choked little whine.

"And cause that robot guy makes me ....uncomfortable."

Dan wiped some bubbling snot off his face and smeared it on his pants leg.

"Don't" Steve reached up for the tissues on Tony's desk.

He cleaned Dan's face and put a wad of tissues in Dan's right hand.
"But I listen to what Tony says, because even if he's an arrogant son of a bitch who can't follow orders, he's still one of the smartest, most goodhearted people I know. Just don't tell him I told you that." Dan nodded.

"I trust him, so I trust you to not make him look an idiot, okay?" Steve stood up and extended his hand.

"It's not about falling down, it's about getting back up."

Dan started to put himself together more, not so drunk to not notice that he wasn't being punished and that Steve had just swore in front of him. He stood up, wobbly at first, balancing off Captain America's arm.

"Thanks for not chewing me out Captain."

Dan rubbed his napkin wad across his face.

Steve smiled and patted him on the chest.

"You're a good kid Dan, you just have to remember that."

Dan took a deep breath and looked Steve in the eyes. "Steve?"

"Yes?"

Dan closed his eyes.

"I-" but just then Dan's gut seized up and unleashed a torrent of bile, vermouth and Guinness stout, escaping his mouth at high enough speed to splash over Steve's shoulder and all over Mr. Stark's very shiny, very intimidating desk, absolutely caking the Newton's Cradle in the process. Dan sputtered and spat and put his head between his knees, coughing and groaning.

Steve winced "JARVIS?"

"Yes Captain Rogers?" said the omniscient voice.

"Can we get housekeeping up here?"

"Of course sir."

"And we can keep this between you and me, right?"

"Of course sir. The utmost discretion."

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Chapter End Notes

How do we feel about the short chapters more often thing? Cause the next one is a return to *long* chapters and I was wondering if I should break it up.

"Boot and Rally" is slang for throwing up and then drinking again.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&v=H9clGxX46j0&NR=1 I'd
like to direct your attention to this line "But what goes down comes up again".

Also, making Dan talk like how someone that wasted would talk would have made him incomprehensible, or so I've been told.

How many drunks does Steve have to babysit in a day?

So you frighten off someone by talking about how wonderful Steve is and then Steve is there, being wonderful at you. Oh god Dan you are doomed.
Chimera

Chapter Summary

Steve gets a job. Peter gets a job. Nat finds out about a new job. Bruce has serious questions about his job.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve woke up in his bed much later than usual. It was the deepest, most untroubled sleep he could remember. He cleaned the sleep out of his eyes and licked the inside of his mouth. Dry. He went to the bathroom and drank a few cups of water. Hydrated, he brushed his teeth. Steve counted the 180 seconds it should take to brush your teeth before spitting and rinsing. Steve tapped his tablet. It was Sunday. He checked the schedule. Nothing. To be sure he checked his backup paper diary. Nothing. He walked over to the empty area in front of his bed. He stretched for a few minutes before turning on the radio and starting his morning jumping jacks.

"Billionaire tech mogul Tony Stark, known better as The Iron Man, will be appearing before the Senate today in the first of a weeks-long barrage of debate and discussion into the issues surrounding the rebuilding and possible reformation of the New York City area with a series of bills known at the Phoenix Act." Steve switches to knee bends. "Of the many issues on the table, historical preservation, restoration cost, and the role of Stark Industries itself with its bold new plan for the City's electrical needs." Steve bends forward and backward a bit before lying down to start push-ups.

"Many critics say that Mr. Stark intends to monopolize the city's power supply while at the same time acting as the sole construction source for rebuilding and infrastructure. In response to criticism, Mr. Stark has said 'I believe if you break it you bought it, and if I'm in a position to make it better than it was, stronger than it was, cheaper than it was, then both me and the citizens of New York would be idiots to not try and make that happen.' In response to this several activist groups including-"

Steve gets up and turns the radio off. He suddenly feels very hungry. He showers. He opens his pale blue leather shaving kit containing a wooden-handled straight edge razor, a gift from the Commandos liberated from a bombed out Lyons storefront. Steve hadn't ever really needed to shave before or after the transformation, but these little routines help fill his days and keep him focused. He tests the razor's edge by passing it across a moistened thumbnail. The tooth of the razor catches regularly, digging in just a bit. Perfect. He lathers and shaves, putting on a few smacks of Bay Rum for finish.

He stomach rumbles again. Did he skip dinner yesterday? He carefully folds and puts away his boxers and white t-shirt before putting on canvas trousers and a green flannel shirt. He remembers Darcy, and the old woman, and Tony and the movie, oh and Dan. Poor guy, all strung out. He must've talked to him til 4. No wonder he was hungry. Well, first things first he's going to go out there and pretend nothing is wrong, that he doesn't think less of him, no use crying over split milk and all. He walks down a few stories down to the office and bursts through the doors.

"Dan?"
The office was empty.

Oh. Right. Sunday.

Steve looks down and sees a bright red folder on the desk with a yellow note attached.

"Hey Perfect Pants-
Missed you on my way out, thought I'd do something about your raging ennui.

You can thank me later,
Stark.

P.S it means boredom."

Steve opens the folder. It contains a SHIELD Active Recruit personnel form.

"APPLICANT'S NAME: PARKER, PETER
D/O/B: 08/10/1995
Place Of Birth: Queens, NY
Current Residence: 1124 Holtz Street, Forest Hills, NY.
H: 6'0
W: 136lb
HAIR: BROWN
EYES: BROWN

SUPERVISING TRAINER: CAPT. STEVE ROGERS (provisional)"

---------

Aunt May, resplendent in fuzzy sweater, gives Peter a big, bone-shaking hug.

"Look at you" she coos while the morning sun from the kitchen window lit up half her face like a forest fire. "All grown up." She pats the sides of his brand-new Sears suit jacket.

"And employed!" Peter fiddles with the big plastic-wrapped STARK industry ID around his neck. He resists the urge to pat his heavily gelled and flattened hair.

Aunt May tilts the ID with her fingertips. "Won't you miss your friends at school?"

Peter buries a laugh into his chest and moves the ID into his jacket pocket.

"I'm pretty sure that's not going to be a problem."

Aunt May stared at him, her blue-grey eyes wet and large. She smelled like toast and coffee. "If he could've been here to see this-" her voice cracked.

"May please." Peter put his arm around her shoulder. She leaned in close and pressed her face against his chest.

"He would've been so proud of you." Peter began to raise his hand to pat her on the head when a large honking noise erupted from the street outside.

"Oh!" Peter ducked and tuned, breaking contact and heading out the door. "That's me." Peter's hand grabbed the doorknob.

"Don't forget your lunch!"
The car honked again. Peter grabbed a brown paper bag near the door and pulled open the door, racing down the steps to the car.

Aunt May followed, waving all the way. She stood outside on the porch and watched him enter the car and watched the car drive down the street and turned the corner. After another small while, she went inside.

-----

Maria Hill exited an office to meet a business casual Natasha Romanov with straight blonde hair.

"Agent Romanov, allow me to the first to congratulate you for Operation Tjuv."

"Thank you Captain Hill." Nat put her hands at her sides. "I knew once she was inside Stark Tower it was only a matter of time before she tipped her hand."

"And you timed it well. As always." Maria handed her a clipboard. "This is everything you need to need to orient and debrief Mr. Parker."

Nat gave Maria a look with all her eyebrows. She read the pages while they walked. "It would be easier if he was an orphan. You have better luck with orphans."

Maria gave Nat a once over. If only she wasn't blonde Hill thought. She can't get a bead on her when she's blonde.

"Agent Romanov, is there something you'd like to discuss?"

"Yes."

"About?"

"Agent Barton."

Maria stopped. "Go on."

"Permission to speak freely ma'am?"

Maria nodded.

"I'm wondering why one of our best field agents is trailing an overseas low-risk target when we have active red-band cases in the hopper."

"Agent Barton requested a low-priority assignment, something away from New York."

"With all respect Captain I don't believe that. There are many less experienced agents available and eager to fill that job and there are low-priority missions right here, just in the blackout zones alone."

"In light of his actions we surmised that Agent Barton was still troubled by the invasion. We felt it would be best if he had some distance from the scene."

Nat tapped the clipboard against her leg and walked forward.

"Why not put him on psych leave?"

"He refused to take leave."
"Then make him."

Maria stopped and put her hand on Nat's arm.

"We both know Barton. He'd never take leave. He'd never admit he needs it. And the truth is, he doesn't need it. All of this post-war stuff? That's not him. You know that, Phil knew that."

Nat glowered at her, not just eyebrows this time.

"Clint needs a cause, a mission, a target. And he without it we waste more man-hours cleaning up his messes. I put him in Madagascar for his own safety, so we could groom a recruit for him to handle."

Nat's face twitched. "You're kicking him upstairs?"

"If everything goes well at training, Mr. Parker will be his responsibility."

"A desk job."

"Maybe a more hiding behind and shooting around one, but yes."

Nat stopped before a set of double doors. "Clint was born for field work. He's not a paper-pusher. You're setting him up to fail."

"I'm making the best use of the resources we have available. He's barely in the field as is."

"Because you don't use him."

"Because he's no good alone. Because SHIELD is no good alone. Because you can't be a lone wolf and part of a team. It only works if we work together, as units. We don't work with single agents Natasha. And we wouldn't want anyone who does."

Nat got very quiet and very stiff. "Yes. Yes I know." She took a moment before folding her hands in front of her and tilting her head. "I just have trouble seeing Agent Barton in a suit."

Maria nodded and smiled. "We'll start with sleeves and work our way up."

-------

Peter Parker stood waiting in the lobby of Stark Tower in his black sneakers and suit jacket and his too big cargo pants that were pinned to his waist courtesy of a very aggressive belt tightening. He still had May's brown paper bag in his hand. Maria and Natasha emerged from a hallway to meet him.

"Mr. Parker." Maria shook his hand. "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for having me" Peter said. "Like I have a fucking choice" he thought.

"I believe you already know Agent Romanov, she'll be showing you around and helping you get acquainted." She turned toward Nat. "Agent."

"Captain."

Maria turned to leave. "Welcome to SHIELD Mr. Parker. We're glad to have you."

Peter bowed toward Nat's face. She was smiling.
"Follow me Mr. Parker."

---------

There was an unholy rattle and clattering of pots and shouting as Natasha led Peter through the 5th floor kitchens. Men in aprons holding big knives cleared a path for them as they weaved through the billowing steam and hoisted trays of spaghetti africane.

"I'm sure Mr. Stark has shown you the official highlights of the tower."

Peter watched one of the chefs slam a whole fish onto the counter.

"Yes?" The chef chopped off the fish's head with one blow and slid it into a boiling pot. Natasha stopped before a small door at the far end of the kitchen next to a sack of onions

"Allow me to show you the unofficial ones." She opened the door which lead down into a darkened staircase. Peter closed the door behind them. They walked down a dim corridor with exposed pipes for a while before they came across a bare metal door illuminated by a single red light.

Nat walked toward the door and pressed four buttons on the handle. "This." She turned the handle and opened it. "Is the Kitchen."

Peter and Natasha walked into an immense flood-lit open room containing three rows of windowed metal rooms with catwalks surrounding each enclosure. Uniformed SHIELD agents buzzed around, reloading weapons, poking at tablets, clustering in little groups near the stairs or watching through windows and taking notes. Peter watched in slack-jaw fascination as a figure in full plate armour emerged smoking from one of the upper cubicles before getting doused by three other agents with fire extinguishers. Natasha made a little motion with her hands. "SHEILD's new training center, a joint venture with STARK Industries." Somewhere a PA system was issuing commands in a level, robotic voice. ALPHA BETA TO LIBRA-TAURON TO GAMMA SIX-LIBRIS OUT OF PLAY COMMIT DELTA FOUR.

There was a brief burst of flame across the windows of the lowest section. "This is where you'll work with your trainer and the rest of the study team."

GAMMA-GAMMA-HELIO drones the PA.

Peter craned his head up and around, the room had to be at least five stories high. A women ran past him carrying a large metal mace followed by men holding bronze shields. He tightened his grip on the paper bag. "I thought I already passed."

"All agents are required to undergo skill testing for training and evaluation purposes." Peter was struggling to pay attention because HOLY CRAP IS THAT A MOUNTAIN LION?

"This is the physical testing site. There will be more challenging ones later."

"Like the SATs?" Peter tired to keep his focus on the tour and not the possible existence of mountain lions in close proximity.

"Like the SATs." Nat flipped to a page on her clipboard and began walking. "2100. Impressive."

Peter did not know the correct way to react to this but he figured it wasn't 'shove your hand so deep into your pocket you nearly tear it' cause that's what he was doing.

Nat continues to walk down the hallway made by the metal training cubicles. Peter lags behind,
sneaking peeks into the windows.

"We can simulate almost any combat situation here, from urban sharpshooting to unarmed wilderness survival."

"Combat?" Peter looked in one window and watched a machine-gun firefight between eight agents and one giant robot.

"Don't worry Mr. Parker, it's just a precaution. Fury thinks you'd be better used in the lab, speaking of which-" Nat's voice was drowned out by an explosion at the far end of the training hall. She walked through another set of heavy lab doors. Peter followed.

"What am I supposed to tell people?"

"Tell them the truth. You're an intern at Stark Tower working in bio-medicine."

"What if they ask what I'm working on?"

"Government contract." Nat turned a corner and walked down a flight of stairs.

"What about-" Peter fumbled. "College?"

"As the recipient of the first annual Tony Stark Prize For Outstanding Achievement In The Field Of Applied Science you will be granted a full scholarship to Columbia University effective if and when you decide to matriculate."

"So I've got to lie to everyone I know."

"Pretty much. On the upside, no more homework."

Peter mumbled. "No, just more getting shot at." Natasha pretended not to hear as they moved through a series of corridors and into a what looked like a modest apartment building's lobby.

Nat glanced at her clipboard. "You've refused company housing?"

Peter's eyes immediately find the floor. "My Aunt would kill me."

Nat nods. "We'll arrange a car to pick you up."

"No, please you don't have to-"

"It's in your travel budget, perfectly standard."

Peter's shoulders are around his ears. "It's just- I think that would be more suspicious then if I just came in myself."

Nat didn't miss a beat. "We'll see what we can do."

"Thank you," Peter says. "Thanks for allowing me to ride the subway like a normal fucking human being" he thought.

--------

Bruce sat in the lab ignoring the new animal testing data in front of him. He had left her sleeping, leaving behind a note that he had mostly sobered up and needs to see his new assistant or something to that effect. In truth he had left because he couldn't lie there anymore stroking her hair and listening to her breathe while thinking about The Other Guy. So they tripped together. Not
really tripped, just a light mushroom thing, something for the weekend. And he wanted to tell her, he wanted to not have his thing crouching atop his mind, darkening every interaction. "Is this when I tell her? Is this when she finds out?"

Sometime around dawn the thought hit him, he doesn't actually have to tell her. Why can't he have this one thing to himself and not have to shave it with Him? He is in complete control. Loki, the Helicarrier, that was a fluke. A trap. When the time is right, he will tell her. But he can't do it now, not when there is so much good work left to be done. If she took it bad, he would be distracted, careless, and more prone to losing control. He needs this to be smooth right now. He needs her.

Bruce's thoughts were broken by the arrival of Peter and Nat,

"It's nice to see you again Mr. Parker." Bruce got up to shake Peter's hand. "And you too, Agent Romanov." Nat nodded. "Always a pleasure Dr. Banner."

"Bruce will take it from here. He should be able to answer any other questions you may have." Nat turned and left the room, the heavy lab doors banging behind her.

"So?" Peter reflexively gripped the paper bag in his hand.

"You can put that on the counter there." said Bruce. Peter obeyed. He patted his hands on his side and moved his eyes across the room.

"What do ...I do?"

Bruce put his glasses on and pushed them up his nose.

"Follow me."

--------

All Peter could think was that it looked like a prison for Very Bad Mice. He was staring at a floor to ceiling wall of tiny cages containing one mouse, one water bottle, and one information tag each. Bruce picked up a box of biohazard bags from a metal table near the door.

"These are the latest test subjects for the Regeneration project. They have been exposed and run through the listed activities and now they must be euthanized via injection so any effect on internal organs and systems can be observed in closer detail."

"So we're cutting them open?"

"Oh no, that's done downstairs. They have -uh equipment for that."

"So, we're killing the mice?"

"Oh no." Bruce put the box of bags in Peter's hand.

"You're killing the mice. Needles are on the table."

--------

Peter's first day as Dr. Banner's lab assistant went like this.
"Do you mind music?"

"Not really." Peter seals a dead mouse into a clear bio-hazard bag and copies the data from its tag onto a form on the front of the bag with a big smelly Sharpie.

Bruce pulls a record from a shelf and opens a metal container to reveal a large black record player.

"Vinyl?" Peter looks up from his writing.

Bruce drops the needle onto the record. "It has a warmer sound." The dreamy acid guitar riffs of Velvet Sedan Chair spread across the office like cigar smoke.

-----

Bruce announces he's going to lunch at around 11:30. He leaves but Peter doesn't know if he's allowed to leave so he washes his hands and opens the paper bag on the counter.

Stuffed inside the bag is a structural feat of engineering unmatched by even the most obsessed origamist. Peter pulled out a solid block of interlocking Tupperware containers filled to bursting with representatives of every major food group and enough napkins, protein bars, condiment packets, and plastic utensils to supply a picnic. On top of it all was a bright yellow note written in a florid and practiced script.

"Hope you have a nice day! - May."

Peter smiled, folded the note, and put it in his pocket.

-----

Bruce came back from lunch at 12:30 smelling like garlic and cumin. Bruce's mumbles to himself in the manner of people not used to sharing a workplace with another person, he either doesn't notice he's doing it or doesn't care. Also, every time Peter moves a pen or places a tablet askew on the table, Bruce will inevitably get up and quietly readjust to it's pre-Peter state.

-----

Peter handles the mice like he used to at OsCorp, quickly, quietly, and with minimal fuss. His reflexes comes in handy for sure but they're squirmy little things and he's had to chase more than one around the corners of the room. One of them managed to get back to its cage and curled into a small white ball of fear. Peter carefully grabbed it to avoid getting bit and the thing peed itself in fright.

"I know how you feel" Peter thought right before he shoved the needle into its belly and pushed in the plunger.

-----

Peter places the last mouse-filled plastic bag into the bio hazard case. He pulls his gloves off and walks into the larger main laboratory. Walking in, Peter's eyes catch something amiss in one of the upper corners.

"That camera's not connected to anything."

"I know." Bruce puts some papers in order on the counter. "I disabled it myself."
"Why?"

"I like to know who's in my lab."

Peter nodded. "Wait, what?" went his brain.

-----

Peter is across the counter from Bruce, adding the data from the mice into the lab reports via tablet. He takes a second to examine the synthesis serum's structure, just to get a point of reference on all the numbers he's punching into the log.

"This is so weird."

"Something wrong Mr. Parker?"

"No, nothing. It's just weird looking at your own genetic data like this." Peter highlights a sequence of letters. "There's me, or the stuff that was originally me" He tapped the tablet, lighting up another section of letters. "And there's the stuff that isn't me, but look at the bonds." He expands the view to include a rotating diagrams. "Like a key in a lock. You'd never know they were any different unless you already knew where to look."

Bruce doesn't even look up. "Tell me about it."

Peter shrugs and collapses the diagram. Wait.

What?

-----

Bruce is replacing the record on the player when Peter makes a surprised little noise.

"Yes Mr. Parker?"

"There's a hole in the log." He turns in his chair toward Bruce. "Is that supposed to happen?"

Bruce walks over, Fleetwood Mac's "Rumours" still in his hand.

"Show me."

Peter hits a few keystrokes and the Regeneration logs flash onto the screen.

"See the logs all follow the same metadata tagging, they even have null-fillers for empty slots, so every report has the same fields. And they're really regular, the same time codes and everything. But these ones have the same time code as the normal reports but were in the delete queue, which created the hole in the logs." Peter selects a group of log reports he rescued from the memory hole. "There's almost no tagging on these and no listed supervisors or technicians."

Bruce took off his glasses. "They could be failed reports, drafts meant to be scrapped, they were sent to deletion after all."

"I guess." Peter looked very intently at his keyboard, very aware that Dr. Banner was leaning in closer behind him to inspect the screens.

"Open the other one in the delete queue." Bruce pointed at the screen, nearly whacking Peter in the nose. Peter opened the file and read the entry.
"Pretty big mice." Peter mumbled. Bruce pulled back and put his glasses back on.

"Could you do me a favor Mr. Parker?"

Peter reacted slowly. "Yes?"

"Can you get some some of those square berry cake things from the machines?"

"Pop-Tarts?"

"Yeah, the Laundry break room has them. It's on the map."

Peter got up and walked out of the room. Just before he hit the double doors he turned back to see Dr. Banner staring at the screen with his arms folded across his chest and the record carefully placed on the edge of the counter.

-------

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was usually packed on Sundays but the Arms and Armory wing remained blissfully quiet and airy while Steve Rogers took an eraser and rubbed out a few errant lines on his sketchpad. He’s in his bomber jacket and blue Brooklyn Dodgers cap. The cap was something that someone who will not be named thought would be a hilarious to place in his locker. The joke backfired. Steve loves that cap. It's his favorite part of his civilian outfit. He’s standing and sketching a French suit of cavalry armor from the 1600s, trying to capture the swoop and graceful curves of the metal plates and articulated sleeves and failing.

The problem is that it's a gorgeous suit of armor, full helmet to thigh plate construction covered in gilt etchings and red leather fasteners. But even with the flourishes and fine detailing, this wasn't show armour, a bit of costume for a wealthy lord. Its plates and bolts were forged for a rider to shoot from horseback in mid-charge, sleek and functional and made of well-worn steel and leather all the way through. Heavy, bullet-stopping stuff for the brief hybrid period when knights carried pistols and not lances. He really wanted to get it right. The feel of the thing.

Steve was struggling with the helmet, the proportions were all wrong and after a while Steve couldn’t tell if the helmet was weirdly sized or he just wasn’t able see it properly. He tried doing side sketches of the thing from two different angles before erasing the helmet entirely. He sat down on a stone bench.

He looked at the headless knight and began to faintly sketch in a circle. He then added the jaw-line and ears, connecting down to form the neck (and goatee) inside the suit collar. It wasn’t a hard face to draw, it was one of the most recognizable faces in the world.

And he’s sure been looking at it enough recently.

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Chapter End Notes
Chimera, ahem: Chimera (mythology), a monstrous creature with parts from multiple animals. Also a common term in biology and genetics to describe a fusion or hybrid of two separate things. I wonder if we'll come across more than one of these.

Three notes to people you love in this chapter, just sayin.

Operation Tjuv: Nat at the Anniversary Gala was part of a mission to entrap her date, the no-eyebrow lady. Tjuv means thief in Swedish!

Simpsons joke, "the first annual Tony Stark Prize For Outstanding Achievement In The Field Of Applied Science" = "the first annual Montgomery Burns Award For Outstanding Achievement In The Field Of Excellence."

Narrative mirrors cause it's not copying if you have a reason, at least that's what I tell myself. Compare and contrast Dan and Peter's first days.

I have a friend who did animal testing for research and said his job was just putting mice in blenders soooooo.....

Velvet Sedan Chair is the favorite fictional band of fictional mad scientist Walter Bishop from Fringe. I figure he and Bruce have similar tastes in drugs and music. BTW, you can totally find their music here - http://www.fringetelevision.com/2011/01/update-2-on-seven-suns-by-violet-sedan.html

Bruce is a closet neat freak. Steve puts stuff away cause it's the right thing to do. Bruce puts stuff away cause THE THINGS ARE IN THE WRONG PLACE AND EVERYTHING IS WRONG. He is aware of this problem and trying to deal with it.

Steve is sketching this - http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/27.177.1,2 it is BTW legit gorgeous in person. Also, hey look, more hybrids. Wait, pistols on horseback? Like Cowboys?

Steve is doomed.
Peter

Chapter Summary

Darcy talks Bruce down from thinking there's a total conspiracy against him. Dan goes mad with power. Peter accidentally ruins everything again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dan moves down the narrow corridors of Stark tower, tablet in hand. His head is a rat's nest of anxiety and worry and dark eye-bag drunk restlessness. First things first, he is never, ever drinking again. That is final. Second of all he is going to apologize to Captain Fucking America as soon as possible and never, ever stop. Thirdly, he's never taking another day off or going on a date or doing anything Darcy says ever again. He's on his way to another appointment with Dr. Ortiz when he crashes into a gangly mass of gelled hair and cargo pants sprinting down the hallway, knocking the tablet out of his hands.

"Sorry!" says the huge gelled mass of hair. It bends down to pick up the tablet.

Dan gets a look at the owner of the hair and pants. "Peter Parker? Spider-" Peter visibly winces. Dan backtracks. "The new trainee?"

"Yeaaaaah." Peter hands him back his tablet. "That's me, apparently."

"Congratulations on being chosen. It's a huge honor."

"Thank you, yes, that's something people say a lot." Peter can't decide if his hands should go into his jacket or pants pockets so they snap backward into his back pockets which he realizes is both awkward and super dorky the instant he does it. He bows his head a bit, wishing he had a hoodie or hair fringe to hide behind, business casual makes him feel so exposed.

Dan begins takes a step past him when Peter perks up.

"Um, do you know where Information Operations is?"

"What?" Dan's cheeks start to flush.

"I have to find ...Pop-Tarts and I was told they had them but the map is ...less than helpful."

"Oh!" Dan points down the hall. "Down the right, elevator 20 floors down, and then a left. Big blue door, can't miss it."

"Thanks" mumbles Peter as he begins to sprint down the hallway and turns around the corner.

"Ingrate" thinks Dan.

--------

Darcy Lewis enters Bruce's lab at 4:30, like she said she was going to during the sChat conversation they had over lunch. She finds Bruce sitting in a chair with his back to the door. He's
sitting legs-folded up, the way he does when he's concentrating, and flicking his lighter over the edge of the desk. She's about to say hello until she notices his flicking has set a stray piece of paper aflame.

"Whoa!" She runs over and pulls the burning page off the table and stomps it out. "Fire bad!" Darcy turned to Bruce, who hasn't seemed to notice she was there or that he nearly burned up a stack of correspondence.

"Something wrong?"

Bruce put his glasses on and sighs.

He tells her about the log files Peter found. The missing data tags. The delete queue. The really big mice. The possibility that someone was running a completely separate animal testing behind his back. He's breathing in careful, measured bursts, the breathing of someone trying very hard to stay steady and not freak out.

"Okay." Darcy took a moment and sat down next to him. "You said they where in the delete queue?"

"Yes." Bruce said the word very carefully, as if just getting the words out was a huge strain on his resources.

"I know from databases and I know people aren't nearly as good they should be when it comes to logging and tagging. Could they be drafts?"

"Possibly. If you started a log and then deleted it, it would end up there."

"Well there you go. Human error. It's like, way more common then you think." Darcy brushed her hair back and tried to spin it into a joke. Bruce wasn't having it. "Look, you're a doctor. You see hoof prints you look for horses, not zebras."

"Everyone here is a zebra."

Darcy looked him straight in the eyes. "You know what I mean. If this is all you have, and there's another, less insane reason for it to exist, then you figure the simpler one is correct. It's much more likely Collection is being sloppy with the metadata, right?"

Bruce took his glasses off and hung his head to side, avoiding her gaze. "I guess. I just- If I was right-"

"If. You don't know. So it's not worth getting yourself all torn up because of one thing your brand new assistant found on his first day. I mean, you're talking about a vast cover-up with almost no data to back it up. Trust me, down this path lies chem trails and posts to seriously strange forums and rubbing mercury into your feet."

"You're saying I don't look good in a tinfoil hat?"

"Totally not your color."

Bruce unfolded his legs and leaned back in his chair. "You wanted to talk about something?"

"Yes!" Darcy sat up straight. "The party thing for the Phoenix Act vote. I think we should go with Jane and her beau." Darcy found it hard to say the word "Thor" out loud without smirking. "A total double date thing."
"I thought you hated Jane."

"No, she's my best friend. I don't hate her. I just wish she was dead sometimes." Darcy does her eye-roll neck turn maneuver. "It'll be fun, like our first official public couple outing."

"So we're really dating then."

Darcy let out a long sigh. "I'm afraid so Dr. Banner." She patted his knee. "You're just going to have to learn to deal with it."

"I take it I don't have a say in the matter?"

"Wow, you really are new to this."

Bruce smiled.

-----

The first thing Dan noticed about his father's new room was the huge vase of daises on the far table. He hadn't asked for flowers, in fact he never once sent flowers to his father during the whole time he was in care. Dan felt retroactively guilty, his shame appeased a bit by his father's plush new digs, all fashionable modern chairs and tasteful up lights and framed prints and piped in violin music. If you removed the man lying down in four-point restraints and a huge battery of medical equipment beside him it could almost be a hotel suite.

Dr. Ortiz welcomed him in and sat down in a leather rolly chair next to the bed near the wall of monitoring screens. A female doctor was just finishing injecting his father with a series of small yellow vials. Dan remembered them from before, the ones that came in their own nondescript box and went back in a separate sharps container.

"I thought you might like to see the progress for yourself. See the good news, such as it is."

Dan looked his father over. Even in the restraints and IV attachments and cheap hospital gown, he looked good. Healthy. Back to his old weight and then some. There was some new wild hair sprouting around his temples, thick curly black hair. His father had been greying for has long as Dan could remember.

"Is he?" Dan paused for a second. "Awake? I mean if you have to-" He nodded at the thick white bands holding his fathers wrists and ankles to the bed.

"Oh no," Dr. Ortiz motioned toward the machines. "His body is recovering well beyond our expectations but his neurological system." Ortiz trailed off. "He has seizures sometimes, brain storms, nothing to be worried about. They're for his own good, believe me." Dr. Ortiz rolled his chair toward one of the stacked screens. "It's better to say he's in a liminal state."

"Liminal? Like a coma? Like before?"

"Like a dream. We have lots of brain activity, but none of it conscious, it's consistent with deep REM sleep patterns."

Dan bent down closer toward his father while making sure he was outside grabbing range. Up close the change was even more obvious. He looked ten years younger, practically glowing with health.

"Is he going to wake up?"
"That's what we're waiting for Mr. Maven."

The piped in violin music made a vigorous little staccato passage before fading into the next movement.

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Dan was worried for nothing. When he meets Steve for Monday's training session his interactions with Captain Rogers are cool, crisp and professional. All has been forgiven. But still, he should find away to make it up to him. He's such a good guy after all, he should be rewarded.

The plan is to test Mr. Parker against a routine battery of SHIELD trainee protocols. Steve is there to observe and consult from behind a thick pane of glass and advise via a microphone set up. Dan's job is to record and log Peter's progress and Steve's notes.

Peter walks into the training room wearing a modified version of his Spiderman costume. He holds the mask in his hands.

"Not quite latex is it?"

Steve talks into the mic. "Carbon Nano-tube fiber. You'll catch more flies this way."

Peter smirks and puts the mask over his head. He looks taller, leaner, not someone that would run into you in a hallway and dump your tablet. "I thought honey caught flies. You calling me sweet Steve?"

Dan blanches. That doesn't sound like Peter. That doesn't sound like Peter at all. Steve leans into the mic.

"Engage."

A barrage of blunt projectiles fly at Peter from the far side of the room. Spider man makes short work of them, rapid fire web shooting down a whole row before pivoting off the side of the room and swinging a captured round into another oncoming barrage.

"I should've tried out for the Yankees. Bet it pays better." Spiderman did a little victory hop. Steve took notes in his legal pad.

"The next round will be against agents with rubber bullets, are you ready Mister Parker?"

"Not getting any readier."

Dan frowned a bit as he entered in the biometric data. Steve pressed a green button near his mic.

"Engage."

An armed agent entered from the left side of the room while Spiderman crouched down behind a knee-high wall at the other end. The agent walked slowly toward the wall. Spiderman put his back to the wall and raised his left hand. "Yoo hoo!" he called as the agent quickly shot at the raised hand, not noticing that Peter had lined up a web shot on his leg with his right hand and pulled him under. With a quick flip Spiderman was on top of the agent, his hands on the ceiling and his legs wrapped around the agent's head.

Steve shouts into the microphone. "Watch your flank!" Spiderman tightens his thighs around the agent's neck while he squirms. "But he's paralyzed with fear!" He knocks the agent on the head a few times. "Or that could be the sudden lack of blood to the brain. Hard to tell." A shot from
another agent wings past Spiderman's mask. He flips off the agent he was perched on, grabbing his gun in mid leap. Peter attaches to the ceiling by his feet and fires a web toward the new assailant's gun, yanking it away before the newly released, formerly paralyzed with fear agent lunges onto his outstretched arm. Spiderman swings the captured gun off the far agent smack dab right into the other agent's face.

The agent is knocked down and Peter pulls the far agent's gun on him with his right hand and points his other gun on the far agent with his left.

"Sloppy." Steve says into the mic.

Spiderman outstretches his arms, guns pointed skyward. "Sloppy saves the day!" He drops the guns sits and down on the agent's chest. "What now Uncle Sam?"

Dan expects Steve to chew him out. Instead, he's smiling. Steve leans into the mic but Dan interrupts him. "I think it's time for a break?"

Steve nods and then talks up into the mic. "Good work Parker, but we need to work on form. Let's break for now, take ten."

-----

Dan meets Peter in the break room. He's still got on his Spiderman mask. Peter fills a paper cup from a water cooler.

"You shouldn't talk to him like that."

"Like what?" Peter raises the cup to his face before realizing there's a layer of Carbon Nano-tube fiber between him and it.

"He's a Captain, alright? Your boss." Dan suddenly realizes that when Peter isn't slouching he's got a good few inches on him height wise. Peter removes his mask. The slouch returns. His eyes fix on the space just past Dan's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Well don't." Dan said. "He's had to go through a lot and you're lucky to be here." Peter looked like he was just called into the Principal's office. Dan was feeling an altogether unwholesome amount of pride in this development. "You need to be more respectful, understood?"

"Yes, I'll remember." Peter said, putting the paper cup to his lips. Dan stood up straighter. "Make sure of it." He walked back to the observation room feeling a completely new and not unwelcome feeling.

He'd been in situations like that before but he's never been on the giving side. It felt good, even better than the slippery confidence of a few drinks. It felt especially good cause he knew Peter was a year older and a SHIELD trainee and he was just a PA but he totally outranked him. Dan sat back down next to Steve. Peter just had to know his place if the organization was going to keep running, that's all. Any extra triumphant feelings was just gravy.

--------

The training continued. Explosions. Darts. Machetes. Peter kept his mouth shut. Steve smiled and made his notes in his legal pad. Dan tries to casually crane his head to read Steve's notes. At the end of the day, unsuited and in civvies, Steve and Dan followed Peter out to the parking garage. Steve grabbed Peter's hand and shook it.
"Very strong showing, but you'll need to bring more for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"One on one training, with active agents, sparring with no web shooters."

"Who will I be sparring with, if I may ask?"

"Well, me for one."

"That would be an honor sir, um Captain sir."

Steve laughed. "Call me Steve."

Dan looked up from his tablet. "If Mr. Parker is going to catch his train he should really get going."

"I'll take him home. Forrest Hills right?" Peter looked completely flummoxed.

"Yes, sir. Steve."

"Nice neighborhood." Steve walks over to his vintage motorcyle. He tosses Peter a helmet. Peter gives him a hard look.

"It's the law." Steve smiles and straddles the bike. "You have a good day Dan, thank you for your help."

"You're welcome Captain." Dan grips his tablet like it's the last life preserver on a sinking ship.

Peter puts on his helmet and holds on as Steve revs the engine and they're off up the ramp and out of the garage.

Dan's ears fill with a rushing, oceanic noise. He's barely aware of how hot and red his face is as he watches Steve and Peter motor off and away.

He stands there in the cold dark garage, the smell of exhaust slowly settling down around him. After a good while has passed, he cues up his tablet to schedule a one on one session with one of the Tower's many personal trainers, effective immediately.

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Chapter End Notes

Brownie points for anyone who gets the Frankenstein references here.

If you hear hooves think Horses, not Zebras is a pretty common saying in diagnostic medicine.

oh god do not google mercury feet rubbings unless you want to be sad all day.

Liminal state, the state in-between states, just before a change. Google it. (also part of my sub-textual Fringe references I:E the chapter title)
Staccato: cut short or apart in performing: disconnected.

oh no Dan's ship is sinking (rim shot)

Also hey, more masks. Also, I'd think back on Peter's interactions with Fury. This is all Dan's POV. Peter is more savvy than he's letting on.
Party Planning

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Bruce (kind of) fight. Steve can read Tony's mind. Dan does something, really, really stupid. Thor is a magical unicorn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the floor of a darkened apartment in Harlem, Darcy Lewis sits a’ typing. She's hardly been back to her place in the last few weeks except to pick up clothes and mail so the only thing not currently spouting an impressive empire of mold was the six pack of Sierra Nevada she bought in a bout of frantic bodega confusion a month and a half ago. She's in the middle of opening a beer when her sMail chat window blinks to life.

SpaceCase360: Do you think the Project Director on an official Government astrophysics project can take her top off if she wants to? I am totally serious.

D.Lewis: If I ran the world, yes. What's up Main Jane?

SpaceCase360: There's like no A/C in this building. At all. You know that Hawaii is Hot? And Wet? Like ALL THE TIME? UGH.

D.Lewis: I have been told that.

D.Lewis: I'd kill for some heat, my apartment is still in a blackout zone.

SpaceCase360: You're not with Bruce at the Tower?

D.Lewis: Noooooo, I'm giving him the night to himself. We had the closest thing to a fight.

SpaceCase360: ???

D.Lewis: He's convinced there's else going on with the animal testing data and now he's like pulling ten hour research sessions with actual file folders and shit. It's not at "make a pinboard with lines connecting up people and writing on the wall" yet but it's pretty much all he wants to talk about.

SpaceCase360: Has he found anything?

D.Lewis: No! Or he's not telling me but I tried to talk him about it when he was up all night again and when I pointed out - again - that there might be another explanation for it and he said he really should be working and he needed to concentrate and he could use some time to think about it.

D.Lewis: I took the cue to be scarce for a while. Let the side of the bed get cold y'know?

SpaceCase360: Ahhhh. Well people can get very stressed and distracted when they're working. Double if they think they have something.

D.Lewis: Why did I know you'd take the obsessive scientist's side? ;)
D.Lewis: Yeah, I know I've only known him a few months and I've never seen him get angry like, once ever. I hope it's a not red flag or anything, he's a really great guy so I hope it blows over by the Phoenix Act Vote Party, both for the sake his mental health and because I've got a really great dress I've been saving up. Speaking of which...

SpaceCase360: I'm stuck here, sadly. Stuck and sweaty.

D.Lewis: He Himself can't get you a ride?

SpaceCase360: He is very busy at home and has limited travel vouchers and for the purposes of State Security this line of questioning is closed.

D.Lewis: DEAR FBI I WAS REFERRING TO HER MAGICAL UNICORN CALLED SPARKLEBUTT THAT LIVES IN HER MIND.

SpaceCase360: Yes of course, his mane is luxurious and his coat regal.

D.Lewis: Sparklebutt is precious to us all.

D.Lewis: Oh! More news!

SpaceCase360: ???

D.Lewis: I have a new chapter of Hairdresser To The Superheroes done. I'm posting it now.

SpaceCase360: Oh yes! How do I die this time?

D.Lewis: That would be telling.

--------

Dan hurt everywhere. It was the morning after his first set of sessions with the Stark Medical personal trainer, a doofy-looking model type named Miguel who kept smiling all the damn time.

It was a pathetic scene, it took Dan five tries to perform a pushup before Miguel moved him to a "modified" and then to a "assisted" one. "Just remember to find level you're at and work on doing well in that first!" Miguel said everything like he was auditioning for a juice commercial.

He moved Dan into positions and tried to run through a few sets before Dan's sweating and protests caused Miguel to hand him the smaller weights, the rubber-yoga-old-lady weights. "Let's work on proper form to avoid injury and damage today!" said Miguel. He might as well have been saying "and it's part of a balanced breakfast!" The only thing he even halfway completed was the cardio test and even then Miguel scrunched his head-shot ready eyebrows at Dan's stats and said "Why don't we try something a little more low-impact?" Three years ago Dan made it his goal to complete the Naval Fit Test at least twice a week. He had made track twice but never joined. Now he got winded doing a ten minute mile.

All that and he still felt like he'd been hit with a wrecking ball. Apparently even the most basic amount of excursion completely grounds him into paste. His long hours and desk job had shot his hard-won endurance to hell. He'd have to start all over again. He sits in the viewing office watching behind glass as Peter runs through web-less boxing bouts with some agents while Steve stands on the side observing and offering advice. Peter isn't doing too well, one agent even managed to knock Peter to the ground in the first 20 seconds.

So at least the day isn't a complete waste thinks Dan.
Peter gets up off the mat while Steve offers him water. He tries to move his training headpiece off his head but ends up just pawing at it with his big puffy glove.

"I'm sorry, I'm not-" He takes a huge draw from the offered straw. "used to it, without the shooters."

"You're just starting and your dodges are solid. Just keep your arms up, don't get drawn into a corner, and remember your footwork. Your speed is your strongest asset right now."

"Yes I will move into his fist very quickly."

"Hey." Steve's voice got a pitch quieter as he leaned in toward Peter. "Don't do that, don't belittle yourself. There's plenty of people out there who will do that for you."

Peter sat in the corner stool catching his breath in-between gulps. "I'm not good at wrestling,...boxing never was."

"And that's why we're training you, you can't expect to be great at something overnight."

Peter manages to raise one eyebrow.

"Actually, I kinda did get great overnight."

The new agent walks into the ring, a full 6'10 in gloves and headgear and heavy rubber padding.

"You know what I mean. Now get up, we got one more left and I want to see you trying out there, remember the drills and form."

Peter nodded his head. "Arms up, feet moving, no corners, got it." Steve patted him on the shoulder through the ropes.

Dan has been counting the number of times Steve touches Peter. Hand pat on shoulder, that makes 12. He watches their faces, wishing he could read lips.

Steve sets up the last bout of the day. Peter held his own this time, blocking and dodging blows. He turned an over-extended punch into an opportunity to knock the guy high enough into the air to dart around him add another quick punch to the gut from the other side. The agent belly-flopped onto the mat with a wet thud.

Peter instantly knelt down to help him up.

"What's it like?" thought Dan watching Peter gracefully open a can of kick-ass on a man twice his size. What's it like to just be able to do that without thinking or breaking a sweat? He watches through the window as Steve shook Peter's hand. 13, hand shake. Another thought crept up on Dan.

"Steve knows what's it's like."

Steve is attempting to crunch the numbers from the training session but his computer wont stop
beeping at him.

Shellhead: Steve

Shellhead: Steve

Shellhead: Steve

Shellhead: You are online and you can see me Steve come in Earth to Captain this is vitally important Steve

CptRogers.Steve: Yes Tony?

Shellhead: I had an idea for the party

CptRogers.Steve: What is it?

Shellhead: I want dancing girls maybe something patriotic to represent the Captain America side of things while I am down here

CptRogers.Steve: Tony you haven't even presented your case yet. Aren't you counting your chickens before they hatch?

Shellhead: I love your down home metaphors I really do oh hey nice car I want that car

Shellhead: Someone get that cars make and model so dancing girls there is a troupe in New Orleans that does stuff for the World War Two Museum holy hell that is a unfortunate comb over wow

Shellhead: Steve questionmark

Shellhead: Steve Steve are you getting these questionmark

Shellhead: This better not be broken

CptRogers.Steve: Yes I'm getting them. You're just very fast and confusing.

CptRogers.Steve: Are you talking to more than one person?

Shellhead: Oh yeah I am using the mic implant it is a sub-vocal so it is more like I am sending you my thoughts holy hell this room is ugly it is like beige had a baby with plasterboard

Shellhead: Anyway it is new tech and I decided to test it while I am here might as well get some work done at least oh good I get the big chair I think about saying something and it sends it to you and your response comes up on the inside of my glasses

CptRogers.Steve: Tony, are you texting me during your hearings?

Shellhead: It is not texting it is sub-vocal transcription

There was a brief pause.

CptRogers.Steve: So it can't do contractions or punctuation very well?

Shellhead: When did you get so smart oh wait that is my influence you are welcome

CptRogers.Steve: Tony, shouldn't you be working?
Shellhead: I have got to spend three weeks here and I am not doing it without the succor of social media the lawyers do all the talking anyway I just have to stay awake which is where this whole mic implant comes in so in a very real well Yes, Mr. Stark Present thank you senator you are helping me work

CptRogers.Steve: I'm turning off the computer.

Shellhead: Steve do not leave me alone with them Steve

CptRogers.Steve: Goodbye Tony

-----

Dan watches Steve quietly close his laptop and push it aside from the distance of his remote feed. He's chewing on a Miguel-approved protein bar that tastes like peanut butter and cardboard. His 80 other tabs contain everything the collective internet and SHIELD intranet know about Mr. Peter Parker, 17, from Forest Hills NY.

Thank god the internet detective squads had done most of his work for him months ago, even if Darcy was able to scrub the public interwebs there was always internal backup and SHIELD's own files. Dan tested the limits of his security clearance to find out that Mr. Parker was a boring, gangly student with missing parents and an interest in science and photography and then, like a crack of lighting he's in red and blue latex swinging across Manhattan and getting chased halfway across the country by some of the finest special ops teams on Earth.

The question stuck in Dan's teeth, his tongue poking and fiddling with it all night; why him? Why this kid? Why now? What made him so freaking special? He wasn't even handsome, all nose and hair and pointy little shoulders and hips. Dan had a much better jaw-line. And better teeth, the result of very-broadminded dental insurance plans and a certain amount of pestering in his youth. It took months of rubber separators and metal bridges and nightly routines but he followed the Doctor's orders religiously. They had only just come off a few weeks before the attack, if he had nothing else going on, Dan's reminded himself that he had a great smile. Which made looking at the dorky overlapping bottom teeth and crooked incisors of Mr. Parker mugging for his class photo even more confusing and vexing.

It wasn't fair.

His father's voice erupted from the back of Dan's brain, some fragment of memory, the old parental cliche. "Nobody said life was fair."

Of course life isn't fair. If life was fair they'd both be dead. If life was fair Kevin would be alive. If life was fair then someone qualified would have this job and not just someone who had a video camera at the right time. Life isn't fair, but that's why we have to make it fair. That's the right thing to do.

That's why his father is currently blinking and breathing on his own cause it's not fair that he shouldn't be given every opportunity.

Life isn't fair thinks Dan, because he has something Peter doesn't have.

Dan tabbed to Steve's schedule for the next week and lets his cursor hover over the edit button.

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Jane got that IM handle when she was 13 and has never seen reason to change it.

Peter has long standing canon emotional issues with wrestling, obviously.

Tony is talking about the "Victory Belles" here, they are a real USO-inspired musical troupe - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3I-wZwbuak

Sub-vocal! It's a real possible future tech, catching the words in your nerves before you actually speak them it's pretty awesome- although the brain-reading stuff and contractions is me just having fun.
I'm Old Fashioned

Chapter Summary

Peter gets better. Bruce admits he's wrong. Tony is vain. Dan screws it up, royally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

SHIELD Training Center, "The Kitchen", Week 2.

Spiderman disabling a sentry drone with a well-timed flip onto it and pulling out the targeting software. Spiderman making short work of a gang of costumed thugs with swords. Spiderman rolling and dodging a wall of targeting Quadrocopters and causing them to crash into each other. Spiderman failing to stick to the side of the shifting panel wall and falling 30 feet. Spiderman removing his mask and Peter knocking the dust off his outfit, his stance unsteady and unsure as he looks up. Steve walking in from the side and patting him on the back again, pointing up at the shifting panels, offering yet more advice.

Dan watched all of this from the viewing room, one hand fielding calls and the other moving Steve's schedule around with a few quick swipes on the tablet. It was small things mostly, a few dropped meetings, an extended outdoor meet-and-greet with a group of veterans, a last minute radio appearance or another Make-A-Wish kid that just couldn't wait. Steve happily obliged, it was all stuff he's seen coming up anyway and besides, isn't that what they're paying Dan for? Steve just goes where he's told. He's pretty used to that.

The fact that these last second changes seemed to happen just as Peter was getting ready to go home hadn't occurred to Steve one bit, although he was frustrated that they seemed to happen to so often. Steve really wanted to have a few talks with Peter, not as trainer-and-student but informal 'just us superbros' conversations outside the usual topics of blocking, hitting, and jumping but there never seemed to be the time.

Steve met an already standing and ready Dan in the viewing room after the day's training. Dan was out of his regulation SHIELD issue black tie and jacket and was instead sporting a red and white checkered poplin button down and brown wool trousers. His hair had been recently and haphazardly lightened- it almost glowed in the viewing room's dim light. Steve didn't comment, instead he asked Dan if he could reschedule some down-time with Peter later today? Before he goes home for the weekend?

"I'm sorry Captain Rogers." Dan looked down at his tablet. "You have a fitting booked this afternoon."

"Can I postpone?"

"Sorry Captain, today is his only free day for months and it's hard to find people who can work with your ... stature."

Steve sighed and looked up. "And after?"

"Debriefing and consultation with Hill." Steve looked down at Dan, eyes a little wide.
"Agent Barton has been enjoying himself a little too freely while in Madagascar. They want your advice."

Steve put his hands on his hips in the manner of exasperated babysitters everywhere.

"I'm not his handler."

"But you are the best."

"They say that." Steve began to walk up the stairs and out the door. "Send up Dinner at 8, I'll take it my apartment."

"On it Captain."

Steve walked through the door and Dan did some math in his head. Six hours. That should give him enough time.

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Dr. Banner stood before a whiteboard filled with notations, arrows, and taped on printouts. He tapped a pen against his teeth. He looked long and hard at the stacks of data and connections. Only one conclusion was possible, he was certain of it.

"I got nothing."

Despite all the long hours and all the carefully focused concentration and theorizing, he couldn't find anything linking the data abnormalities to a vast and sinister conspiracy. There was nothing there. At least nothing he could prove or nothing that couldn't be explained by sloppy interns or buggy code, both of which they had in abundance.

And without proof or a lead he was only a few steps away from barking on street corners and only drinking rainwater. Bruce sighed and fell into his chair. All he's managed to do was waste a lot of paper and man hours and drive Darcy to Harlem exile with a hissy fit.

He should call her, apologize, show up with some takeaway and watch TV together. There was a Teen Wolf marathon on tonight, he knew she'd be home for that.

Wait, he could do one better. They had skipped the Anniversary party because of him and she had hinted that she was looking for something to wear the Phoenix Vote thing. Their first official public date thing.

Bruce had planned to go in his normal dress shirt and chinos camouflage but maybe he could surprise her this time. Rise to the occasion.

Bruce made two calls. One to Bergdof Goodman to arrange a tuxedo fitting and the other to a man called "Skeeter" who quietly ran an experimental hallucinogenics lab out of Columbia's chemistry dept.

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Steve exited the conference room and made his way down the hall past the banks of water coolers to the elevator. Why did they even call him in? Hill had the situation under control and Natasha did all the talking. Steve asked a question or two but mostly kept his mouth shut. Even they seemed confused as to why he was there in the first place.

Steve got into the elevator when his phone beeped at him again.
Shellhead: DC is the worst.

CptRogers.Steve: Worse than spending a week in the hospital when that building fell on you?

Shellhead: Yes totally and completely, no one expected me to talk or remember people's names then.

CptRogers.Steve: Your implant is catching punctuation now?

Shellhead: No I took that out. It was causing an unsightly lump, one girl asked if I had gout.

CptRogers.Steve: Girl?

Shellhead: She was a congressman Steve, get your mind out of the gutter. How's tricks with Superboy?

CptRogers.Steve: Going very well! Great sense of humor. He's doing better than expected, despite some confidence issues. I want to get a chance to talk to him outside the kitchen and discuss a few things. Get to know him a little better.

Shellhead: And you're lecturing me, unbelievable.

CptRogers.Steve: Now who's mind is in the gutter? No, it's just that he has a lot of potential and he needs to know how to use it. I think it might help to have someone to talk to, someone who had been through something similar. I know I wish I did.

Shellhead: Cradle-robber.

CptRogers.Steve: Have fun in DC Tony.

Steve turned his phone off and exited the elevator, walking down the hall toward his apartment. He opened the door to the small entrance foyer and saw a bar of light from under the living room door. He always turned the lights off when he left. Steve took off his shoes to muffle his footsteps and put his back to the wall, creeping along until his fingers found the glass vase on the side table. He picked it up and gripped the neck, ready to throw. He reached the door and with his free hand, flung the door inward.

There was a yelp of surprise from the living room when Steve opened the door. He looked in to see an entire dining table dragged into the middle of the room, fully dressed with linen and covered food trays and place settings. The source of the yelp was Dan Maven, holding a lit candle he was about to set into a holder on the table. He yelps again when the melting wax hit his hand. He quickly steadied the candle into its holder and rubbed his hands on his pants.

"Dan?"

"Captain. I thought what with how you helped before when I was ...not at my best, that you deserved a thank you."

Steve still held the vase in his hand, trying to take in the candle-lit spread before him.

"You didn't have to."

"I really did." Dan walked over and pulled out Steve's chair for him. Steve put the vase on the counter and sat down. Dan pulled out the napkin and folded it on top of Steve's lap.

"You cooked?" Steve stared at his reflection in the domed tray. Dan had moved to the fridge to
pull out a can of Guinness.

"The kitchen staff helped." Dan slowly poured the Guinness into Steve's glass, waiting just long enough to let the head rise and settle before pouring the rest. Dan removed the top of Steve's tray with a flourish, bone-in lamb shank in pan juice with peas and roast parsnips. He then uncovered a basket of fluffy Yorkshire puddings on the middle of the table.

Dan searched Steve's face for a reaction before removing his own tray and sitting down. Steve looked confused at first but by the time the smell of slow-roast lamb got to him his stomach demanded he pick up his fork and knife. Dan looked down at his identical plate and poured himself a glass of water from a nearby pitcher.

"Dig in!" said Dan, and so they did.

Steve soaked up some lamb juice with his pudding. "You know this tastes exactly like the stuff we got in London. It's so hard to find here, or now I guess. You'd think it'd be easy to re-create."

"Tinned peas." Dan said. Steve stared at him. "During the Blitz they only had tinned peas, people nowadays use fresh, they taste different."

"Oh, well whatever you did it worked." Steve put some peas in his mouth. "I think I prefer tinned."

Dan took another sip of water. "I think tinned is better too."

"Well, that's lucky." Steve smiled thinly. Dan was almost vibrating in place. They continue to eat.

Steve made appreciative noises as he chewed, causing Dan to compulsively keep his mouth full in order to keep his foot out of it. Steve looked down at the cleared area of his plate. Half of a red stag was visible through the sauce. He moved some roast parsnips out of the way to read the words at the bottom.

"The Red Stag." Steve's memory clacked into overdrive before he smiled. "That's the pub we worked out of. The SSR office was below the basement so we ate there every night. They stayed open even during the blitz, eating in the basement by candlelight."

"I know." Dan pulled a pudding apart with his hands and put half in his mouth.

Steve put a fork full of peas down. "That pub was leveled in the war. They didn't reopen, I checked."

"eBay" Dan said around a mouth full of pudding. "Someone found them a basement. There's a huge market for old pub collectables."

"Oh, okay." Steve went back to carving up lamb. Why does the future have be so damned complicated? He took a sip of Guinness for old times sake.

Dan nearly choked on his water. "I nearly forgot!" He grabbed a remote from behind him and turned on the speakers. A musical score soaked into the room, the voices of Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth trading lines about corn and rain and quaintness.

Steve squinted toward the speakers. "This is from that Rita Hayworth movie, right?"

"You Were Never Lovelier!" says Dan quickly. "It was the big US hit of the year and there was a radio adaptation on the air the last night you were in London, the night before the big mission."
"Everyone wanted to listen to it." Steve said softly, looking at the speakers and about a million miles away. "I couldn't, I had to work on the mission. They said they'd tell me all about later."

Steve let out a rueful little lip burst. "I did end up seeing it, last night, it wasn't as good as I thought it was going to be."

Steve turned toward Dan, his posture suddenly stiff and his expression unreadable.

"Dan, how did you know that?"

Dan leaned back in his chair. "Considering the time-line it would've made sense and a number of the Commandos mentioned it in their autobiographies and it gets mentioned in a few accounts of the mission, at least in the declassified ones and it's not hard to figure out, given enough time, which pub it was and when."

"No I mean." Steve leaned forward. "How did you know I watched it last night?"

Dan took a defensive gulp of water. "I didn't! I just assumed that it might be something you'd like I mean, that's my job, knowing what you like."

"I don't think, technically speaking, that is your job."

Dan mumbled. "I like to think it is."

Steve crossed his knife and fork onto his plate.

"Dan, have you been reading my personal file?"

"Just so I could know you better. I wanted this to be perfect."

"Dan, I'm very flattered and the food is delicious, but-"

Dan nodded like a bobble-head. "But?"

"It's been a long day and I need my rest and I think you should go."

Dan suppressed another choked whine. His face was fully red now, a rare lamb steak. "But - I made dessert. Pecan pie cause I know you hate appl-"

"DAN" Steve shouted in full Cap voice and stood up, napkin falling to the floor. "You should go."

Dan got up out of his chair slowly, legs knocking like a faun. He walked past Steve's ramrod Cap expression.

"I didn't mean to upset you Captain."

Steve's shoulders came down a bit. "I think you should take a week off and get re-settled."

Dan nodded meekly. Steve raises his arms as if he was about to put them on Dan's shoulders but he backed away at the last moment. "Maybe it's my fault, maybe you weren't ready for the promotion just yet."

The effort it was taking Dan not to cry was forcing every available drop of moisture onto his skin. "Whatever you say Captain."

Steve nodded and turned away. "Dismissed." He heard Dan's rapid footsteps out and the door
closing behind him.

Steve looked down at the half-eaten candlelit dinner for two in the middle of his living room, the candle wax overfilling the stand and slowly dripping onto the linen. Across the room and 70 years ago Rita Hayworth and Fred Astaire have just finished dancing. Who do you even call to deal with this?

Chapter End Notes

Cooperative Quadrocopters are SCARY COOL - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyGJBV1xnJI

Yep, Dan is now dressing like Steve. Yikes.

"Drinking only rainwater" = Dr. Strangelove Reference.

This dinner is much fancier then I imagine Blitz-cuisine would be but it is a good approximation of good pub grub. You also never use fresh peas in mushpeas, they gotta come frozen or tinned or it tastes wrong. Trust me on this.

The song playing at dinner - note the lyrics -http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYXHeP9PydQ

Unless I break them up (and I might they’re long), we’re now three chapters til the end, and I MEAN it this time.
In Just Seven Days

Chapter Summary

Steve has an identity crisis. Dan digs himself deeper. Much deeper.

Steve Rogers sits down with a mug of milky tea that he made by himself and works on his schedule on his own. It's really not that hard once you get the hang of it, and Ms. Lewis was always available if he clicked the wrong thing or wandered down a computer cul de sac. It only took a few quick clicks and a phone call down to HR to put Dan on "Paid Leave" for the week, apologizing to the stressed-sounding man on the other side of the line and saying that as a new hire, Dan didn't know he had to inform HR a week in advance and it was okay with him. Steve has the nagging feeling he should tell someone about the sudden dinner assault but he doesn't. He doesn't even know how to bring up the subject. Is making laboriously researched dinners for people a thing now? Maybe he was being the asshole in rebuking a perfectly normal thing? Is that something guys do for each other? None of his wikipedia searches or growing stacks of history books have sections on "Apologizing to superheroes" so Steve is instead concentrating very hard on training Peter and making himself excessively helpful to the organizers of the Phoenix Act party.

The suit Tony recommended he get made hangs off his bathroom door, still sheathed in its black suit cover. Steve unzipped it once when it arrived, a perfect recreation of the height of menswear in 1940, deep brown heavy fabric with subtle pinstripes and wide lapels, cut generously and tailored at the waist to avoid the 'Gorilla in a suit' effect that sometimes stalked him in formal wear. It looked just like the suits worn by the men he used to watch leave for Manhattan everyday. Tony was right to make him get it. Steve really didn't want to wear his dress uniform to another party, especially a private one with no press and supposedly among friends, and he sure as hell wasn't going to wear the other uniform, not if he could help it. A bespoke business suit was a fine compromise.

Except. Except the suit had also come with a pair of cufflinks he hadn't signed off on, alternating rings of gold and silver with a silver star in the middle. The box identified them as limited edition Captain America Shield cufflinks made by Tiffany & Co, all proceeds going toward the Maria Stark foundation to help displaced children following the invasion. Steve stuck them in a dresser drawer behind a pile of white socks.

If anyone asked, he's gonna say he forgot them.

-----

Dan Maven smells like he hasn't left his apartment in a week because he hasn't. Empty delivery containers and catering boxes stood teetering on his small desk. The black-out curtains on the windows drawn tight in a futile attempt to help him sleep. Dan himself, half-naked and crusty from insomnia, laid on the floor with his laptop set-up and various surveillance points. Around him a pile of handwritten notes, cross-referenced and indexed within each other, Dan's looping and circular account of What Went Wrong And How To Fix It. Every detail was right, he had checked and triple checked. There had to be something he missed. Something that would've made it perfect.
He was quickly running out of coffee and time. His "paid leave" would be up soon and the next possible time he could see Steve was at the Phoenix Act Party. He had even checked the internal guest list to make sure he was still invited. He had to make sure this next meeting was successful. He could not lose this job. His father was depending on him. You couldn't ask a sick old man to live in shelter. Dan repeated this to himself like a mantra. He had fucked it up, again, but now he was going to fix it. Again.

In the meantime, Dan shadowed Peter's every online move. His stupid facebook chats with his girlfriend, his working-late-tonight skyping with his Aunt, his more than usual interest in a series of items and conversations that appeared in the delete queue and in the darker corners of the STARK messaging system. There was nothing to suggest this dorkball was anything but a lucky fucker who did not appreciate how fucking good he had it. He had a job for life. He was part of the greatest team on earth, working with actual living Gods and all he did was bitch about it. "Man" thought Dan as he read Peter writing on his private blog, "being amazing at everything has to be such a freaking chore."

An idea had taken root in the back of Dan's mind during another sleepless night. He ignored it. It was impossible. And stupid. But mostly impossible. You might as well plan to find a magic lamp. But then he happened to have an open channel to one of the security-cracked internal communication boards when he noticed this interaction:

1: Regen patient update?

2: Stable, considering trans-electric shock to stimulate neurogenesis. Trauma proving resistant to serum.

1: Just don't cook him we don't want the muddy up the data.

2: Understood. We also need the new lock code.

1: What?

2: You did not update us on the weekly lock change. Security dictates the lock be changed weekly and only from you, sir.

1: Oh shit I've been busy. Make it my birthday.

2: Done sir. Next report in one week.

1: I want to see something when I get back, I'm taking on all the risk here.

2: Of course sir.

Dan had always scoffed when people talked about flashes of inspiration, seeing a whole plan all at once in an instant. But as soon as Dan read that transcript, he knew what he had to do.

He'd been reading enough of these chats to figure out who was talking and what they were talking about, and one of them had a very well known birthday.

The camera in Bruce's lab was disconnected but if you watched the nurses leave with the separate container for his Dad's treatments (and you followed them on the camera feeds you had patiently worked your way into while not sleeping for three days straight) you could see that they always returned them to the same small storeroom in another lab. There wasn't a camera in the storeroom but the box itself had a distinctive keycode top lock. Dan, for all his considerable resources,
couldn't unlock a keypad without the help of a power drill but if the new code mentioned in the chat was the code to the sample box....

If.

If.

If he could get his hands on the box he could see if the new code worked. And if the new code worked, that means it's the transport container for the treatment serum. And that would mean everything he's been seeing and following about the "Select Human Regeneration Trials" is true.

Dan couldn't just walk into the lab and start grabbing boxes. But he knew someone who could. Someone who could take the fall.

And then not even Mr. Stark could fire him.

------

Peter Parker, sitting in the middle of the greatest laboratory mankind has ever seen, is doing taxes.

Aunt May's taxes to be exact, but Peter has set up autopay system for May's household expenses and taken it upon himself to sort out her tax and pension problems along with the tangled mess that was Uncle Ben's estate and compensation. Ben had always done the taxes himself and since his death May had been using some storefront tax prep service that made complete hash of the household finances. May insisted she didn't need any help and that he should enjoy himself with his new salary which Peter thought was, with all due love and respect, completely stupid. There's no telling when this windfall (or "blackmail" as he called it in his head) would vanish so he is making damned sure every single cent goes toward Aunt May or straight into a very conservative savings account. He wouldn't have to worry about college after all, and all his meals are covered here or at home. He had no need for all this money he kept telling himself. It wasn't his to spend. He hadn't earned it. He wasn't going to mess this up like every other young guy with his first credit card. He told himself he was smarter then that. He would spend nothing.

Well almost nothing. He walked into Macy's and got himself a pair of pants that actually fit and a small silver and sapphire pendant for Gwen. She had helped so much during his months "abroad" as she called it when talking to her parents. She deserves to have nice things and one day Peter is going to be able to give her all the nice things she could ever want and then some. Just not yet.

Peter's box-checking and form filling was interrupted by the office phone.

"Banner's Lab, Mr. Parker speaking."

"Hi Parker this is Dan Maven up in Cap's office. Can I ask a small favor?"

"Uhhh sure. What kind of favor?"

"We need something from one of the lab storerooms, a nutrient supplement, I was supposed to get it this morning but I got swamped with work, could you help me out and bring it up to Epoch?"

"Sure? Where is it?"

"Lab C, Storage room 42, silver box with a keypad on top. I'd get it myself but it's mayhem up here."

"I'll see what I can do. Just bring it up to Epoch?"
"Yeah I'll take it from there, I'd owe you."

"See you in ten then."

"Thank you so much, you have no idea."

Click.

-----

Dan combed his hair and brushed his teeth with what little toothpaste he had left. He did his best to look like he hadn't been pacing and sweating in an overheated apartment for a week.

"You can still stop this. You can stop right now." said a voice in his head. Dan pushed the voice down through his gut. He bit his cheek so hard it started to bleed. The sharp pain and coppery taste running down his tongue helped him to focus, to stay on track, to only think about things that were really important. He had been hearing the voice all week. It held him he was stupid, that he was reckless, that he needs to tell someone what happened, that he needs to come clean, that he needs help, that this is how people go to jail. Or worse. The voice kept him up at night, constantly questioning him and running through the dinner disaster and the date disaster over and over behind his eyes, each time just as awful and painful as the first time. It took all of Dan's spare mental strength to suppress it and keep himself on target and sticking to the plan, but the voice always came back.

It was sounding increasingly like his father.

-------

The ding of the elevator announced Peter's arrival to Epoch Level. It sure didn't look like mayhem thought Peter as carried in the metal box. Dan rounded the corner greeted him with a smile and harried, thankful tone.

"I'm such a scatterbrain, thanks again for this."

Dan had bleached his hair since Peter saw him last, it was combed but frayed and brittle, a spooky frame of back-lit straw around Dan's head.

Dan took the box out of Peter's hands.

"No problem." Peter put his hands in his pockets and quietly hoped he had gotten the right one. Dan may be younger than him but that makes screwing up in front of him even more embarrassing. He visibly sighed in relief when Dan picked up the box and turned away to enter the lock code.

Dan, his back to Peter and with great effort to appear nonchalant, pushed in the lock code. A grinding sound followed. Dan put the slightest upward pressure onto the box lid.

The lid lifted open easily.

Dan took two of the four vials nestled in the foam container, the ones on the right next to the empty pair beside them. He moved the empty ones to the newly empty slots, thinking it would look like someone missed a re-up and forgot to refill the box. He deftly switched the full vials to his other hand and placed them in his pocket. He closed the box and handed it back to Peter.

"You're a literal lifesaver."
"Glad to help." Peter mumbled as they both turned and retreated to their respective laboratories.

Dan stared at the two vials of yellow fluid, two long tubes that nearly glowed in the sickly laptop light of his blacked out apartment. He had been following his father's treatment from the start, he knew a single dose consisted of the first tube, the one marked by a red dot on the cap followed by another, the one with the green dot on the cap, 48 hours later. He picks up a fresh syringe from a sealed pack he took from a poorly trafficked supply closet. He carefully attaches the first vial into the needle, pressing down just enough to clear out air bubbles.

The sole source of light in the room, his laptop, was cued to a youtube version of one of Captain America's wartime USO shows and attached newsreel. Girls in gaudy red white and blue dresses danced across the stage, waving miniature flags and smiling.

He had put enough together to figure out what Regeneration was supposed to do, seen enough classified photos of young Mr. Rogers before he entered the military. Steve had done this. He did it for his country. That's what you do when you care about something. That's what duty means. That's what sacrifice means. This was better than Parker, who fell backward into it. He knows the risks and he is doing it anyway. Because that's what you do.

Dan put a wadded up wash-towel in his mouth, the sound of Captain America extolling the virtue of buying war bonds blasting out of his laptop.

This what you do for someone you love he thinks as he sticks the needle in his arm and bites down.

------
Dan spends the night throwing up. In the permanent midnight of blackout curtains, Dan holds onto the rim of the toilet and heaves uselessly into the basin. In between the shakes and seizures he tries to pull off his shirt which has become sticky with sweat and stuck into the folds of his skin. He coughs and spits out bile, barely getting the shirt over his head before he trips and falls into the small tub in his small apartment. His head bangs against the metal faucet. A lump rises hot and sore on his head. Dan pulls his head away from the tile wall and turns the cold shower spigot. The shower sprays on, washing the stinking sweat off his clothes and helping burn off the blood-heat just under his skin. Dan chokes up another unproductive heave before positioning his head against the shower wall, carefully on the edge of his growing lump, and knocks off into a dark and blank sleep.

-----

DUN DAH DUN DUN DAH DUNDAH!

Dan shakes a bit, the sound brief on the edge of his consciousness

DUN DAH DUN DUN DAH DUNDAH!

Dan turned his head toward the noise. The slow trickle of the shower a thud-thud-thud onto his sopping pants and half-off shirt. Over on the side of the sink his phone was bright and vibrating, a sharp spike of light and noise in the bathroom. He lurches out of the tub, his fingers pushing against the faucet to slow the stream to a drip.

DUN DAH DUN DUN DAH DUNDAH!

Dan squinted to read the message on the phone.

30 MINUTE ALARM- TRAINING SESSION MIGUEL

Dan clicks the side of his phone to dismiss the alarm. He feels like death, like he's had every drop of liquid pushed out of him. Despite a night spent in the cold shower, his mouth is dry, his lips are cracked and crusted over, his eyes twitch inside sandpaper. Dan walks toward and leans against the faucet of his kitchen sink, drinking huge gulps of ice water until he couldn't swallow anymore. He twists the faucet off and falls to the floor. He wants to cry but can't, there just wasn't enough moisture left in him. His breaths raggedly and carefully as he crawls toward the fridge, painfully aware of his hands and knees on the wet linoleum. He opens the fridge, the light from the tiny bulb harsh and blinding. He pulls out a jar of pickles, one of the few things he kept in the apartment. After a brief coughing fit, he tries to open the jar. He was so hungry.

It doesn't budge.
He tries again, gripping the lid with his right hand and holding the jar between his legs.

Nothing. He held the lid tighter, making sure it was dry and stiff. Dan pressed his knees against the pickle jar and turned the lid with his entire shoulder.

The jar broke into two. A deluge of vinegar and dill cucumbers falls into his crotch followed by a blast of spinning, splintering glass shards. Dan turns away, closing his eyes. He steels himself for the pain, from the cuts and sting of the brine. Dan opens his eyes with care. It takes a while but he gets them open enough to be sure they haven't been hit. He looks down and sighs, he's not bleeding from his crotch, the jagged bottom of the pickle jar had fallen out and away from him. He looks at his left arm, still gripping onto the jar-lid. His left arm is studded with glass shards, big ones.

Dan breathes in and out carefully, a full five repetitions before he starts to pull out the glass piece lowest down on his arm. It was small but stuck in deep, he carefully tugged on the thin little sliver until it was out and then quickly covered it with his other hand, pressing down as hard he could to prevent bleeding.

After counting out 120 seconds, he eased his grip on the wound. Dan sucked some air in through his teeth, steadying himself for the stream of blood to come in the brief period when he let go before he could grab a dishrag for a tourniquet. He let go.

There was no blood.

Dan looked down. The flesh where he removed the glass was complete and smooth as the day he was born. He rubbed it with his index finger. Nothing, not even a trace of soreness. Dan wobbled another piece of glass in arm with his finger. He felt it move and sting while he touched it. He carefully pulled it out with his thumb and index finger. A drop of blood escaped before the wound sealed up, leaving only a faint yellow bruise behind it. Dan stood up and plucked out the remaining bits of glass, one, two three, they all came out without pain, without blood. Dan strips in the middle of the kitchen, throwing his clothes down into a pool of vinegar water and rolling pickles, checking for spare glass and finding only vague bruises.

Dan turns the sink on again, splashing his face and taking in another round of huge, gasping gulps of water. He turns and walks toward the bathroom, his feet crunching the broken glass lit by the light of the open fridge door.

Dan walks into the bathroom and picks his phone up from the edge of the sink. He dials.

"Miguel? Hi. Is it okay if I'm going to be a little late in today? No..just ten or fifteen. Okay? That's great. See you then."

Dan stood in the bathroom and carefully looked himself over in the mirror. He didn't look any different, same small frame, same spotty skin, same stupid dye-job and doofy nose. But he felt different. He felt his head for where he had banged it against the faucet before. There was no lump.

He felt taller.

-------

"Hey Perfect Pants, what's shaking?" Mr. Stark had just gotten into the long black Town Car when his phone rang. He raises the privacy screen between himself and the driver.

"Nothing, just wondering how DC is treating you."
"Awful. You could've txted."

"I prefer to call, are you going to be in back in time for your own party?"

"That is a no-go. I promised Governor Gun Show I'd show up at his party for the actual vote. Good PR, plus it can't hurt to have him owe me and it would really stick in Reed's caw."

"I am happy that you are happy."

"Everyone's happy when I'm happy. So why did you really call? Wonder boy caught in a web or something?"

Inside his bedroom, Steve taps his fingers on the copy of "Self-Made Men: Finding the Youness In Yourself" sitting on his desk.

"No, no Peter's fine. Are you coming back right after the vote?"

"Aw you miss me, that's sweet. Short answer, yes if I can help it. I have no idea how you deal with these wonks."

"I was usually under orders to deal with them."

"See, exactly what I should I do, get them under me. I'm very good at that you know."

Steve didn't laugh. "I'll see you when you get back Tony."

"Wait, one sec." Tony motioned for a drink as the car turned a corner. "Have you thought about what we talked about?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"I'll do it, but only five minutes. And no uniform."

"Perfect, thank you again Captain, I will see you then, Stark out."

The line goes dead. Steve hits the end-call button his phone, placing the phone on top of the self-help book before moving the book into a lower shelf and putting the phone in his pocket. He opens another drawer and removes a sketchpad with a soft pencil stuck in the middle of the pages. He opens the pad, leans back on his chair, and begins to draw.

------

Dan was really expecting his gym session to go better then it was going. He was struggling along with cardio, barely able to reach his goals without sputtering and gasping. Miguel is, of course, intolerably cheerful and optimistic. Miguel moves him to a free weight bench press with some pathetic old lady weights. Miguel hovers above Dan, being his freaking cheerleader self with "C'Mon, you can do it! Just up and down, slow and easy, breathe in, breathe out."

Dan breathes in and breathes out. He stares up at the weights in his hands, at his arms holding up the weights. Had he actually taken out chunks of glass from them? Had they left no scar? It seemed like so long ago. Dan focused on Miguel's inane encouragements. One and two and breathe in and out and one and two and Dan looked up and saw four sets of hands holding up four weights. He blinked again, his focus drifting from single to double vision. There was a pressure building up behind his eyes, a wetness. Dan closed his eyes and pulled the weights down to
resting position. They felt so freaking heavy.

"Are you okay?" Said Miguel.

-----

"CUSHION THE HEAD!" Dr. Ortiz screams to a nurse while preparing a syringe.

Robert Maven is crashing out, seizing violently and spectacularly despite being in four point restraints and his head held down by a strong-armed head nurse. His mouth, silent for months, howls with a deep mammal wail, raspy and harsh and low.

"Should I put something between his teeth?"

"DON'T GO NEAR HIS MOUTH!" Dr. Ortiz rushes to Robert's side. There's a wail of emergency alarms from the equipment hooked up to Mr. Maven as Dr. Ortiz injects him with a combination of sedatives and Anti-seizures. Robert's body continues to shake and shudder, but his eyes have gone dark and his mouth stops moving. Robert Maven's body falls back into its familiar slump.

Dr. Ortiz drops the needle into a sharps container and removes his gloves. He touches the top of his mustache nervously, petting and smoothing it out.

"You didn't see this." He says to the nurse, who is already nodding in agreement.

"He's not going to like this."

-----

Dan carefully puts the weights down, all four of them.

"Do you mind if I cut it short today?" He says.

Dan blinked again, the double vision slowly merging back into a single, if fuzzy focus. He was tearing up, his eyes felt hot and scratchy.

"I've got a thing to get to. It's on my mind, I can't really focus on the workout."

Miguel smiled. "Sure man, no problem, Just do what you you feel you're ready for. We can pick this up next week!"

Dan smiled, thanked him, and left for the locker room. He checks the clock. He lost nearly a day sitting in the bathtub, he only had so much time to get stable for the next injection. To be ready for the party. Dan felt his head, making sure the lump from his bathroom stumble was gone.

He had to be ready to see Steve again.

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Chapter End Notes

Yeah I decided to break the ending chapters up .... but this getting real near the end. You're gonna hate everyone by the end, trust me.
"how do you feel?"

"taller?" - from the Capt. America movie.

"Governor Gun Show" is reference to Cuomo, current Gov of New York State, and his bitchin upper arms.
A Great And Sudden Change

Chapter Summary

It's time for everyone to go to a party, with politics. Nat and Clint make up. Darcy has a flashback and remembers Tumblr is totally her job now. Dancing girls make Steve reflect on his situation. Peter and Gwen get held up at security and Dan does his best Nick Cave impersonation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The service corridors of Stark Tower are a wonder to behold. Miles and miles of metal-lined, concrete-floored hallways wide enough to drive a tank through and right now a good quarter mile of them were backed up with catering trays and fussy little cake dishes ready to be wheeled out to party patrons.

The muffled sound of a party preparing for full swing came through the re-enforced blast doors to the ballroom down the hall as Agent Natasha Romanov, clad in a satin-y Nina Ricci beige gown and chunky sparkly accessories, checked under the chaffing trays for bombs and listening devices. She crept along barefoot, her shoes one hand while her other hand made sure the underside of this particular table of cold appetizers was clean. Her fingertips reached the end of a table when her foot picked up the slight vibration in the floor coming from the intersection. She checked the shadows down the corridor and picked up a dinner roll from the closest tray and threw it down the hallway. A hand grabbed the roll as flung past the intersection.

"Still lurking in doorways Agent?"

Clint Barton walked out into the larger craft-table-filled corridor. He was dressed for the occasion, a fitted black suit and dark purple tie. He bit a hunk off the dinner roll.

"Heavy handbag for a social call." Clint pointed to the chic little Chanel purse on her shoulder. The same chic little Chanel purse he knew Nat liked to hold a Grade 3 Pulse Deflector Pistol in cause it fit snugly without causing tell-tale creases.

"Semper paratus." Said Nat as she slid her shoes back on. "So, Clint Barton. Desk jockey. I'm surprised."

"Me too." Clint finished the roll as he walked up to her. "Guess I finally fucked up enough to be management."

"You sure did." Nat shifted the weight of her purse on her shoulder and rolled into her heels.

"I was thinking of getting really fat, like cartoonishly fat. More fitting for a boss man you know?" Nat laughed. She never laughed. Not like that. She shook her head a bit. "You'd ruin your suit."

"I know!" Clint stood back and held his jacket open with both hands. "And look how nice they made it. Higher arms for shooting, higher waist for running." He patted the jacket down as he leaned against the catering tray and buttoned it up. "This is a total James Bond deal. I could kill people very fashionably in this." Clint smiled. Nat brushed back her hair. "You'd leave a wear
"mark on the shoulder, the quiver hostler and-"

She stopped and stood up straight. Nat pinched her left silver earring between her thumb and index finger. She turned her head away from Clint.

"What about Parker?" She nodded to an unheard response. "Both of them? Okay let him." She nodded again. "Keep watch and report back." She touched the earring again and her throat made a few long up and down motions, like she was talking under her breath. Her lips didn't move. She put her hand down and turned back toward a cock-eyed Clint.

"Sub-Vocal." She crossed her arms in front of her. "Another one of Tony's toys."

"He is so full of surprises." Clint leaned against the cool metal hallway wall. "You really think he's worth all this?"

Nat didn't skip a beat. "He's smart, young, fast, and one of the most potentially dangerous people I've come across." She took a sharp breath through her nose. "Well, most dangerous human anyway."

"Reminds me of someone."

"He doesn't have a agent kill count and a most wanted status."

Clint laughed quickly to cover his eye roll. "No, I meant when-" Clint took a moment. "When he recruited me, when he offered me the job. He said they didn't want to cause I was so young, but that he would fight for me. That's a lot of trust to put in one person."

Nat gulped. She never gulped. "Yeah, I remember someone telling me that too." She fixed her eyebrows on him. "Policies change all the time."

"You think he's a good kid?" Clint asked.

Nat nodded. "I think he's our best shot."

"You think?"

"Well, his girlfriend has a nice ass."

Clint chuckled and shook his head and stuck out his tongue. "Gah! Let's do this."

"You have an end game Agent?"

"I'll figure it out when I get there, and you have to start calling me Sir."

Nat raised an eyebrow at him.

"I'm not a field agent anymore. I'm -technically- above you. I know how much you're a sticker for protocol."

"I'm afraid you're wrong on that account, Agent."

"What?"

"I was due for a promotion. I asked Captain Hill this morning and she agreed that I'd be useful in an administrative capacity."

Clint took a second. "What?"
"I'm overseeing all new trainees and their handlers. I'm getting out of the field. Let some new blood get shot at for a change."

Clint watched for the slightest break in Natasha's face and posture, the smallest tell that she might be kidding.

"So you're-"

"Your direct superior." She hooked her arm around his. "I'm going to be watching you like a -." Clint snorted as they walked toward the re-enforced blast doors to the ballroom but not before grabbing a sticky cake off the catering table and shoving it into his mouth.

-----

Darcy Lewis checks her phone. They had said 8, right? They had agreed to show up at 8? She's standing in the ballroom antechamber next to an obscenely large flower arrangement that probably cost more than her mother makes in a year, dressed in a velvet red number with lots of stuff pinned around the neckline. Her shoes still looked amazing. She resisted the urge to text Bruce partly out of decorum and partly cause she wasn't wearing her glasses and typing without them on the phone was less than awesome. She was trying to convey a bored, expectant air while at the same time having an uncomfortable flashback to Senior Prom when fucking Brad Coe ditched her to go night surfing and she was left drinking vodka tonics out of water bottle on the sidelines while wearing a big poofy grey taffeta nightmare, looking for all the world like the world's most morose, drunken raincloud.

She's about to mash a few keys on her phone when the orchestra in the ballroom strikes a loud major cord and she looks up to the big marble stairwell leading to the antechamber. Bruce is there, standing at the top of the stairs. He is wearing a tux. With tails.

He had shaved.

He looked amazing.

She could swear people parted for him to move but that was most likely a combination of politeness and wishful thinking. She watched him make his way down and round the stairs to her. He held out his hand out.

"Miss Lewis?" You'd think someone that tanned couldn't blush. You would be wrong.

Darcy took his hand. "You look-" He laughed.

"Good." She said. "Really good."

"You too!" He smiled his big white smile and pointed to her red velvet number.

"Oh!" Darcy raised a hand to her head. "Just, you know, eBay."

He held out his arm. "Shall we?"

Darcy look his arm with much, much more enthusiasm then she would ever admit to. "Lets."

They walked down into the crowded party, leading Bruce through the ballroom. There's an
orchestra or something going on and normally she'd be totally on top of recording, re-tweeting, and tagging everyone at the party but for just right now, just these few minutes, she's going to enjoy promenading around with her beautiful curly-haired man in a beautiful tailored tux and think to herself, loudly and without reservation: Eat It Up Bitches.

As the walked around the room, a thought slowly seeped into Bruce's brain. "I'm the only one in a tux."

"That's their problem."

"Yes ...everyone else is wrong."

"Obviously."

Darcy pats Bruce's hand as they walk through the crowd. She notices someone in a brown suit across the room waving at her. "Is that Steve?"

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In the lobby of Stark Tower, under the shadow of Howard Stark's plane, Peter Parker and Gwen Stacy are in a security line before an array of metal detectors with several other well-dressed couples being fussied over by seriously scary looking security guards with substance-detecting wands and black outfits. Plastic bins are being foisted around. A sign nearby informs them of prohibited items and activities. A stout looking guard waves a plastic bin at the head of the line. "All metallic or otherwise prohibited items into the bins! This means watches, cellphones, pins, belt buckles, cufflinks-

Gwen turns to one of the sitting guards.

"Are we taking off our shoes?"

"No Ma'am." says the guard. "We're not the TSA."

Peter empties his pockets into a bin. Gwen puts her purse in and takes off her earrings. Peter pulls a small digital camera out of his pocket and puts it on top of his wallet. The nearby guard immediately puts his hand over it.

"No cameras." Says the guard.

"But, like, every phone is a camera."

The guard doesn't budge.

Peter began to stutter. "I was told I could-" Peter's voice stops in his throat.

"ID." Says the guard. Peter fishes around his jacket pocket. Gwen puts her hand between his shoulder blades. The touch is electric, completing the circuit. Peter stands up straight and calmly hands the guard his STARK ID. Gwen smiles as she stares the guard down. Peter steals a glimpse of Gwen doing her "You-don't-know-who-my-father-is-and-I-wont-embrass-you-by-saying" posture. She was so confident, so willing to stick to her guns. It was intoxicating. The guard motions toward another man carrying a clipboard. He murmurs to him while the clipboard carrier holds a finger to his earlobe and listens, his throat making little up and down movements.

"Kid's cleared, let him go."

Peter nods and walks through the metal detector. It beeps. Peter hangs his head as the guards pat
him down and go over him with a wand. It chirps near his jacket pocket. The guard with the wand pulls out a small black box and carefully opens it to reveal a simple silver necklace with a sapphire pendant.

Gwen walks through the metal detector toward Peter.

"I wanted it to be a surprise." Peter's shoulders go up as the guard shrugs and hands him back the box. The guard with the wand nods toward the others, all clear.

Gwen holds the open little black box in her hands. "Peter, it's beautiful."

Peter rubs the back of his head, the plastic bin with his wallet, camera, watch and cufflinks rolling past behind him. "I tried to match your eyes."

Gwen plucks the necklace out of the box and puts it around her neck, re-arranging and positioning her hair as she does. She looks toward the guards.

"Is this okay?"

"Very okay" says the sitting guard before being slapped in the back of the head with clipboard by the other guard. Gwen smiles and picks up her purse and earrings out of the cleared plastic bins. She kisses Peter on the cheek as they head toward the elevator, making their way up to the ballroom.

Steve heard the party before he reached the open door to the ballroom. The walk from the elevator was filled with the buzz of musical notes and footfalls on polished marble, the murmur of shuffling leather soles inter cut with a bright trill of laughter or clattering glass. He had combed his hair back for the party, carefully putting the dime-sized amount of pomade into his fingers and brushing it in, laying his hair flat with the black plastic comb he picked up at the corner store after his last trip to the Met. The act had made him unusually aware of his hair, turning his head slightly to make sure it was still slicked back and held fast. He took a quick look at himself in the window before walking down the stairs into the ballroom proper.

He looked good, in so far as he could tell, his hair stiff and immobile, his suit falling into a smooth and even profile. He looked good he thought, even if it was a little old fashioned.

Just then a a woman in actual furs bumped into him and excused herself before heading down with two men in toe. Steve looked down the hall into the ballroom. Wasn't this supposed to be a private party?

Steve walked into the ballroom. The huge smartglass windows had been turned to livefeeds of C-SPAN, the six foot windows showing an overhead view of the Senate and occasionally switching over to a talking head informing the party that it was final talks and debate before the Phoenix Act vote and that they're expecting Mr. Stark himself to give the final address. In the middle of the floor was a hastily constructed stage with a small orchestra providing backup to three ladies in 1940s hairdos and shimmery officer outfits. They stood before the microphones and sang.

"Straighten up and fly right! Straighten up and fly right!"

Steve walked down the stairs, watching the girls on stage bend their hips together. This wasn't a private party. He looked around the ballroom, the upper level was mostly empty but the main floor was full to crowded. There was an obnoxiously overstuffed buffet in the eastern corner. People in nice suits bumped elbows and knocked drinks together, some watching the smartglass in rapt attention and most not. He spotted a few security officers, the usual obvious ones by the doors and
the more discrete floating agents making slow circuits around the exits. If he squinted he could make out a good sniper location from the private box up on the third tier. Good sight lines. That's where Bucky would be if he had to cover the space.

He watched the girls dance and sing on stage. He guessed Tony had gotten them from the World War Two museum like he threatened. The girls finished the song with a hand flourish and stepped effortlessly into another medley.

Steve thought he'd be angrier at this. When Tony had suggested it all those weeks ago he thought it was just another concession to his age. Give the relic something he can relate to. Another reminder of how he doesn't fit in. But watching them now, nice young gals in smart suits singing songs he heard 6 months ago eighty years ago, he didn't feel angry. He thinks to a few decades ago, to a cold muddy USO tent in Italy. Annette had improvised hair pins from a some broken tweezers. Shifra had just gotten a Dear Jane letter from her no-good baker of a boyfriend. Lis was rubbing her feet in an anti-clockwise motion cause her grandmother told her it stopped cramps. He was signing a stack of photographs of himself with a pen that leaked. He had to trade a a clean pillowcase cover for the pen. The smell of cold cream and baby powder and straw.

All those wonderful women he spent all those weeks with, all running out in ridiculous outfits and singing ridiculous songs for two shows a day (three for big jobs) and sleeping two a bed in improvised barracks. They're all dead now, thought Steve. They're all dead and I had forgotten to remember them. Their toughness, their dirty jokes, their comradeship. The way they treated him, not as a circus freak but as an equal. Not America's Greatest Treasure, just another performer press ganged into doing their duty. He slid into himself. He liked those girls. He respected them. And he hadn't even thought of them until now. Steve makes his way across the crowd to a quiet corner. The orchestra revved up to begin another song. Steve takes out his phone while the girls come back on stage, each of them holding a mic and swaying in their perfect brown uniforms and red heels.

Steve hits contacts on his phone: STARK TONY.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

The girls on the stage begin to sing, moving their hands in unison.

"I'd love to get you on a slow boat to china.."

Ring.

"You've reached Tony Stark's personal phone, do what you're gonna do."

"-all to myself alone" the girls sing.

Steve hits call end. He presses MESSAGES TO: SHELLHEAD

CptRogers.Steve: TONY

CptRogers.Steve: R U there?

CptRogers.Steve: Tony?

Steve is about to type another txt when the smartglass surrounding the ballroom fills with the face
of Mr. Anthony Edward Stark. The helpful graphic at the bottom tells them he is about to give his speech for the bill "momentarily". The room doesn't exactly go silent, the orchestra is still going full blast with the girls, but a lot more eyes are suddenly on the windows. Some people hold up smartphones, taking a picture of the picture. A second camera view on the rightmost window shows a side view Tony quickly checking his phone before putting it back in his pocket and arranging the notes in front of him. Steve puts his phone down as a hand taps him on the shoulder. He turns.

"Captain Rogers, I have just been dying to meet you!" The tapper is a short older woman in a fitting brown evening dress and a mane of wild, salon-tussled red hair. She has a portly man stuffed into a suit attached to her other arm. She smiled up to her eyes and extended a slender hand.

"So wonderful to make your acquaintance, I'm Mrs. Henrietta Kings, but you know my husband of course." She pulled the portly man forward.

"Congressman Kings." He said, shaking Steve's hand. "We've met before."

"Of course." Steve said. His brain had to jump several tracks. Stand up straight. Big smile. Stay positive.

"I'm surprised you're not down there yourself, leaving it all to Mr. Stark like that."

Steve geared up the Affable Captain Rogers. "I don't like to get to involved. I used to like political jokes but they kept getting elected."

He waited for the laugh. It didn't come.

Congressman Kings furrowed his brow and began to talk like a ten year old reciting an oral report.

"Captain-Rogers-I-am-not-seeking-re-election-as-you-know-and-I-am-wondering-if-you-have-ever-"

The wild mane of red hair tapped Congressman Kings on the chest. "What he means to say is, have you ever considered a career in politics Captain Rogers?" She smiled way more then was appropriate.

"Well, I have never thought it was right to-"

"But think of the good you could do, a living legend, a reminder of when our country was at its best."

Steve began to look around the room. A rebellious stand of hair had freed itself from his gel-combed helmet and rubbed against his ear.

"I've always had the utmost respect for our elected officials but-"

"Which is why it's such a perfect match you see." Mrs. Kings spread her hands out like she just put a perfect roast ham on the table. "What Delmar is trying to say is that you have our complete endorsement if you'd seek the seat. You've given so much, why not use some of that to give some back?" She smiled again.

"Well Mrs. Kings, I have been thinking along the lines that you are mentioning and." Steve turns his head. He spots Darcy and Bruce standing by the eastern column. Darcy was in some tight red thing with lots of fuss around the shoulders and Bruce was in an actual tuxedo. He catches Darcy's eye and waves her over.
"Mrs. Kings, allow me to introduce Ms. Darcy Lewis, my political action adviser."

Mrs. King extends her hand out to a smiling and confused Darcy Lewis.

"So very nice to meet you," she says. Darcy shakes Mrs. Kings hand while giving Steve the stink-eye.

"Ms. Lewis is working with me to develop a plan to deal with the current state of Wall Street."

Steve shoots Darcy a look. Darcy takes a deep breath and looks Mrs. King right in her fake eyelashes.

"Oh yeah, we've really got to hit those guys where it hurts."

"Right in the wallet." Steve says.

"It's the only thing those fat cats understand and with regulation-"

"We need so much more, much more-"

"Oversight and jail time for offenders of the public trust-"

"Not to mention the cuts needed for-"

"Defense. Deep, deep cuts to our bloated and outdated military, spending money just to fight wars it can't win." Darcy shot another look at Steve and continued.

"And so we can spend more money towards our nation's criminally underfunded-"

"Single moms. And Arts education. I feel very strongly about those two things." Steve said, turning on the Movie Matinee smile to max as he did.

Mrs. Kings held back onto the Congressman. "I can see you are very passionate about your causes." She turned toward her husband. "Delmar, dearest, wasn't there the thing we had to-"

Congressman Kings perked up, liked he'd been jolted by an electric shock. "Yes dear the Reed Fund. I'm so sorry to interrupt you-"

"It was charming to meet you Captain" Said Mrs. King. They shook hands, again. "And you too Ms. Lewis. I foresee great things from you in the future." Darcy shook Mrs. King's hand before the couple bowed off back into the crowd of and out of her life.

Steve exhaled.

"Thank you for making me unelectable." Steve said.

"Anytime Captain."

"I thought this was going to be private party."

"It is! Just you and a hundred of the most important people that Tony owes a favor." Darcy took out her phone and took a quick photo of the crowd. "It's just how these things work."

"I know, I know." Steve tried to put his hands in his pockets but the suit front pockets where sewn shut. "I was just wasn't expecting to be ....On."
"I know right." Darcy said in between snapping a few pics of the buffet table that she quickly labeled #foodporn #omg #gimmiegimmiegimmie

"Weren't you going to make speech?" Darcy said after tagging and reblogging.

"Yes. But just a short one and I didn't." The music dropped dead as the six foot smatglass windows turned to a closeup of Anthony Edward Stark about to address the Senate. Darcy waved Bruce over as crowds began to cluster around the windows. Darcy took a picture of Steve looking up at the screen, bathed in the white light of reflected illumination.

"He looks good" Said Bruce.

"He looks better than good." She said as she added #CaptainAmerica to her post. "He looks ...presidential."

The six-foot face of Tony parted his lips and began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, don't think of this as an investment in a city, think of it as an investment in ourselves."

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Dan had been waiting for over an hour at the buffet before Steve had showed up. He thought that was very inconsiderate of him. Granted he got there when people where setting up, but people should be punctual. It's only polite. Dan was sweating into his cheap SHIELD-issue shoes and shirt. He ate cheese sticks like it was his job. Dan moved around the buffet trying to disguise his rapacious munchies but pretty soon the caterers brought him glasses of water and napkins personally. He was so hungry. He'd never been this hungry in his life. He cleared an entire tray of tuna tatare before he noticed Tony was actually, totally going to give his speech soon.

Dan looked at his watch. He was cutting it close. Too close. He needed the second injection and he needed it soon. If the eating and sweating and double vision wasn't enough, he needed it before the big vote. He needed to be able to walk up to Steve just after the vote and provide comfort if they lost and enthusiasm if they won. He needed to be at his best when he apologized for the whole dinner disaster. That would lay the foundations for future discussion, the thousand and one ways Dan could slyly reveal to Steve that he was more deserving of his attention. He watched the clock as his mouth went dry. How can his mouth be so dry when he's kicking back glasses of water every sixty seconds? The crowd grows and moves around him. He watches his watch. He watches Steve talk to some suit from across the room. He needs the second shot. He needs it now. Dan finishes another glass of water and walks toward the Men's bathroom, not the busy one on the main level but the smaller one on the second tier. He had studied the maps of the ballroom. He figured this was the best place.

Dan picked the third stall from the door and walked in. He locked the door behind him and hung up his suit jacket on the hook provided while unbuttoned his cuff. He rolled up his shirt sleeve and took out the syringe from his pocket. Second injection. Now or never. He took off the safety cap and tapped the amber vial to clear of bubbles. With little ceremony he sat down on the toilet seat and jabbed the needle into his arm, pushing the plunger in. He could feel his veins, his arteries and capillaries rushing open, he was dizzy and sweat sick and suddenly so very, very tired. Somewhere, Tony Stark was giving a speech on the importance of investment in the American Experiment. Dan Maven had just enough wherewithal to take the needle out of his arm and put it back in his pocket before falling against the back of the toilet and letting everything go out of focus and fade to black.
Chapter End Notes

Whew, update for the Superbowl. This was oddly hard to write.

If you put "A Great and sudden change" into Google the first five results are from Frankenstein. Yep.


Oh hey, Sub-Vocal tech. We've seen that before. No, not just with Tony. Think earlier.

I wanted to gender flip the standard "girl gets hit by makeover dust and walks down the stairs." scene. So...there it is.

Once again, the gals singing are the Victory Belles - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7HUjKRXqss

Hey Congressman Kings. He's back.

I do not think Steve is lying about his politics here. He is unelectable.

Not a private party, has anyone else noticed Tony's habit of lying all the damned time to get what he wants?

Fashion nerd detail, suit pockets are usually sown shut to maintain the profile. You're not supposed to cut them open half the time. I mean, I do, but whatever.

Minor Motif: Dan and hiding.
THUD THUD THUD THUD!

Dan tried to open his eyes as the stall door shook. He tried again and again to lift his lids and could just make out a pair of shoes behind the door. The stall door shook again.

THUD!

"I said, are you okay in there?" There was another THUD against the door as the man behind the door knocked on it. The sound was a hammer in Dan's brain. He swore he could hear the fat squish of the guy's palm against the metal door.

"I'm fine!" He shouted, standing up on uneasy legs. He reached for his suit jacket off the hook and overshot his grasp by a good few inches. Dan stood for a second and noticed he was showing a bit more sock between his trouser hem and shoe then before.

"I'm gonna ring Medical and ask them to bring some nice people down here to help with your-?"

"No! No, that's really not necessary." Dan said as put his jacket on. It was shorter in the sleeves than he remembered. Not much, but enough to notice. He ran his hands through his hair and opened the door.

"You okay son?" Said the man. He was a bald stout executive type, the kind of person you know owns a pair of red pants and matching golf shoes. Dan could see right over the top of his head. Granted, the man wasn't tall to begin with, but this was an altogether new view for Dan. Dan backed away and steadied himself against the door.

"I'm fine, you know just ...tuna tartre." Dan smiled and patted his stomach. He was suddenly aware of the weight of the syringe in his left pocket. "You always end up paying for free seafood."

The bald guy bought it, his face softening. "You sure you don't need any help?"

Dan shook his head and walked over to the sinks. His feet ached, sweaty and tight inside his shoes. "No, no, thank you but I'm fine." The weight of the syringe felt like a huge red flag hanging out of his pocket. Dan turned the sink on and began to wash his face and hands. "So long as you say so....." Says the man while he waits a second before turning around and walking out of the bathroom.

Dan wet his hair and look another huge gulp of water. He wasn't hungry anymore. His joints didn't ache. His vision wasn't blurry. He felt good. He felt incredible. Every hair on his skin was up and tingling. He stood at the mirror and stood up straight, squaring his shoulders and watching
the fabric buckle near the closed jacket botton. He had shoulders. Kinda. The start of shoulders. Dan scraped his tongue with his fingers and a bit of hand soap before rinsing and spitting. As he bent down his pants began to slide off his hips. He caught them before they hit the floor, unbuckling his belt and tightening it two spots around his waist. Dan smoothed his jacket before the mirror. It still fit, a bit baggy, but it fit. He stared at his face. He had cheekbones.

Patsy, flush, sweaty cheekbones but they were there, in the right light. Dan dried himself with a paper towel and walked out of the bathroom and down the small set of stairs to the ballroom, each small step a reminder of his cramped feet wedged into now too-small leather and rubber shoes. He walked into the ballroom carefully and strategically.

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Pepper Potts, CEO, threw a recently dropped white balloon into the crowd below from her seat in the upper tier. The Phoenix Act vote had come up 62-36 in favor and was passed to thunderous applause and an over-sized, patriotic balloon drop. The orchestra sprung into a zippy version of "This Land Is Your Land." with the girls on the stage leading the crowd in clapping and sing-a-long. Pepper took a quick glance at Hogan on the other side of the table, deep in conversation with the owner of some concrete company about yet another extreme sport they had mutual interest in. Mixed Martial Scuba Luge or whatever. Ever since he became Mr. Virginia Potts in all but name, Happy had taken on a new death sport with the frequency some men change their socks. "You have to admit" she thought to herself. "You do have a type." At least when Hogan jumps off a bridge there's a cord and several trained professionals attached to him.

Pepper excused herself and went down the stairs into the main ballroom, artfully dodging well-wishers and tipsy dancers. Balloon volleyball games erupted in the corners of the room. The open bar was slammed with a line ten deep. The more politically minded guests were already two-fisting smartphones, updating blogs and re-tweeting the latest headlines: THE MAN WHO BOUGHT MANHATTAN, BAILOUT OR BUYOUT?, STARK TO NYC "PUT IT ON MY TAB."

"Steve?" Pepper waves to a man pacing behind one of the banquettes with a phone stuck to his ear. He notices her and puts the phone down, returning her wave. She walks over.

"Captain Rogers. It's been a long time."

Steve extended his non-phone holding hand. "Miss Potts. Always a pleasure. I'm actually just now trying to get Tony on the phone to congratulate him."

"Oh you'll never reach him. His phone is usually off for this kinda thing. Governors you know?"

Pepper expected a sympathetic eye-roll. There wasn't one.

"I didn't think Tony ever turned his phone off."

"It takes a lot trust me - but, you should be the one he's calling to congratulate. He didn't do this by himself."

The tips of Steve's ears started to glow " Well, thank you for that Miss Potts but I was just the cheerleader and rubber-stamper. I can't even imagine what 90 billion dollars looks like let alone-" Steve put his phone away and searched around the room for a new topic. "Everyone here is so happy!"

"Yes they are. And why shouldn't they be? Everyone in this room just got themselves a job for life in exchange for Tony telling them what to do for the foreseeable future."
Steve looked puzzled. "I thought these were all private companies? The ones doing the actual repair and rebuilding?"

"Yep, private companies that Mr. Stark himself or through his intermediaries or through Stark Industries proper-" she made a little motion toward her head. "has a controlling or otherwise vested interest and influence in. He's turned having a private monopoly into public service. And he's going to get away with it." A smirk wandered onto Pepper's face. "I guess this is him getting back at them for dragging him before Congress in the first place."

"Is that bad?" Steve, for all his autodidact achievements, always got mentally cross-eyed when someone like Pepper tried to explain how Stark Industries actually makes money.

"Well, one on hand he's probably right in that he could oversee the recovery effort better himself and with a centralized approach, ideally in the Arc power system although don't let him know I said that. On the other hand, he's always had enough money to do whatever he wanted and that usually lasted a week at best and now he has enough money and public regard to do anything he dreams of. Which might be-" She sighed and let the sentence float away.

"Not my problem anymore!"

Steve took another look at the window showing Tony, sunglasses on, shaking hands with Senators as he walked out. "You think he's gonna have to be down in D.C a lot now?"

"Not if he can help it. We're still going through the patent nightmare of licensing out repulsor technology to screened clean-up equipment, partly cause Tony is still paranoid of copy-cat tech and cause the DoD still sees it as belonging to them under Howard's old SSR contract since a lot of the suit improvements are based on his father's work during the war and the legal precedent-" Pepper caught Steve going cross-eyed.

"He'll be back in town before you know it."

"Oh. Okay." Steve pressed his lips together. "Do you have any plans for the building, with the new money?"

"Nothing direct. We're thinking about re-opening the mansion uptown. Maria left behind a sizable art collection, the stuff I kept him from selling anyway, and the building itself is by Stanford White. Howard bought it off the Acker-Merills in '51 and it's never been on public display so there's a plan to convert it to a museum. We're actually looking for directors with fund-raising experience right now."

"Oh, that sounds really good." Pepper waited for Steve to take the bait.

"And we're coordinating with SHIELD to expand their presence here in the City. The kitchen is getting crowded, so to speak. They've hinted they want to increase recruiting from a larger-scale base, possibly right here in the Tower."

"All good things. It's a very well set-up organization." Steve nodded. Pepper's mouth hung open for a second. She couldn't tell if he wasn't interested or just oblivious. She took the kinder option. She'll have to be a bit more direct.

"So, do you have any plans for Tony when he gets back?"

"Hmm?" Steve's brow furrowed. "Should I've?"

Pepper reached into her purse and pulled out a business card. "He likes a private room at Marion's when he's up like this. The more people the better but it's better if people want to get in but can't."
Call them and ask for Melissa, tell them I sent you and she'll set you up."

"Thank you Miss Potts. I'll get on that." Steve took the business and held it for a second. "It's funny, I spent my entire life without being able to instantly talk to anyone I wanted at any time and at first it was really confusing, but now that I can't reach someone it feels like the most frustrating thing in the world. " He puts the card away in his inner suit pocket.

"I'm sorry, I'm babbling, I just didn't realize how used I got to being able to call him whenever I wanted. Or usually, him calling me, at two in the morning, repeatedly."

Pepper stared Steve down for a good few beats.

"Do I have something in my teeth?"

"No!" Pepper laughed. "It's just ..this is a good look on you."

"The suit?"

"Yep, that too."

Before Steve can respond a kid in an ill-fitting black suit walks up and asks if he can cut in. Pepper says she's just leaving, congratulates Steve again and walks off. She caught the first part of their conversation as she leaves.

"Good evening Captain. Rogers."

"Good evening Mr. Maven."

Steve paused for a second.

"Did you do something to your hair?"

Chapter End Notes

Title note: Play on the title the last self-help book we saw Steve with. Also, thematic unity.

Same senate vote ratio on the Sandy Relief Bill BTW

Play on the famous Daily News headline 'FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD"

Stanford White was a noted architect in 1900s NYC. He built a lot of the stuff you come here to see. He was famously shot at a party by a rival for the affections of a showgirl

Boy hoping you read this after the massive removal of a load of passive voice construction.
A Good Kid

Chapter Summary

"I'm going to die" thought Darcy. There was no inflection, no panic, just absolute fact. "I am going to die."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dan stutters and pats his head. "No, not that I know of."

Steve gives him a quick once over before extending his hand. Dan did look different. Had he lost weight?

"It's nice to see you made it."

Dan takes Steve's hand, carefully counting out an acceptable number of shakes and pressure. One two three release.

"Thank you Captain Rogers, it is an honor just to be here."

"Good to see you in good shape Mr. Maven. I look forward to seeing you back on Monday."

"Oh yes sir- Captain, yes." Dan nodded and swallowed. His tonsils felt like hot coals. His throat was starting to close up, forcing him to breathe through his nose. Was he really that nervous? He grabbed a glass of water from a passing tray.

"There's no need to worry about me Captain." Dan downed a tall glass of water in a single gulp, took a deep breath and then swallowed the ice, chewing with his eyes closed.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine." Oh god, Dan’s eyes are still shut while his mind races. The dry mouth and sweating hadn't happened this quickly before. His brain surged past the point of worrying and was firing on blind animal instinct. "Allergies. It's the perfume people put on, it sometimes sets me off."

"Oh." says Steve. "Do you need some fresh air? I think the balcony was over here." Steve took a step back and turned.

"NO!" Dan thrust his arm onto the sleeve of Steve's jacket, grabbing it tightly. Dan breathed deep and ragged. His grip tightened.

"Water." Dan's voice was soft and strained, sweat trickled down his face. "Please. Water."

Steve motioned for the waiter with a pitcher of water, trying to block Dan from the wider view of the crowd, people were still dancing and throwing balloons. "I'll get you some water Dan but first I need you to let go of me."

Steve took another half-step to the side and Dan pulled his arm back, ripping Steve's entire jacket sleeve off into his hand. Steve's shock quickened when he looked down at the hand holding his
torn sleeve.

"Your hand."

The skin around Dan's outstretched hand had a ring of crusted, calloused skin. The rough flesh crept over and around the top of his hand, thin whorls and tendrils of white-capped scar tissue rising and erupting like baking bread.

Steve didn't have time to react before Dan bent over, coughing and choking. The noise got louder with each turn, a dry hacking squeal that traveled up and around the ballroom's excellent acoustics. Some of the crowd started to notice, slowly at first but growing with every wheeze. Steve's eyes darted to the sniper positions in the upper tier. All agents at advance position. The plainclothes security force in the crowd had already started to push people to the back and exits.

"Dan." Steve said it slowly, looking up just to make visual contact with the sniper team, his posture reading "hold steady" to anyone who knew how to look.

Dan coughed again, spitting a pint of blood onto the floor and caking Steve's shoes. The music stopped. Dan slowly raised his head up. His jaw was wrong. It was thrust forward by a knot of the growing flesh which built peaked hills and hard protrusions out of his chin, cheeks, and brow line. His pupils shrunk to pinpricks. He opened his mouth, what there was of it, and moaned.

"Thruudisty."

The waiter with the water pitcher was watching from just behind Steve's back, right in his blind spot. The gathered crowd around them jumped back further when Dan leaped at the waiter's tray and grabbed the pitcher, knocking the waiter on his back. Dan poured the pitcher into his mouth. He was even taller now, his clothes ripping at the seams, his limbs unnaturally thin and studded with coarse new flesh. Dan dropped the pitcher on the ground, shattering it.

"Mooor-" Dan was knocked back by a blast of electric blue. Natasha held out the Grade 3 Pulse Deflector Pistol she kept in her handbag and fired another round at Dan. The second shot sent him skidding across the floor. Dan held his head in his hands, his hair falling in clumps around his new fingers. He stood up again, taller still, and growling.

That's when the screaming started. The crowd rushed toward the exits, directed by the plainclothes security and the full SWAT team that had materialized out of nowhere and marched into a circle around the room. Natasha flicked the power setting on her pistol from min to max with her thumb and fired again, releasing a shock wave that sent Dan and several tables into the air. He crashed into the buffet table, landing headfirst onto a very expensive ice sculpture replica of Stark Tower.

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Before Darcy Lewis even noticed the music had stopped she was being pushed back against the walls of the ballroom along with everyone else. A few party goers had suddenly produced guns and what she had thought were merely badly fitting gowns had turned out to be full Kevlar vests worn under the usual ballroom attire. She was pressed between two taller women, trying to crane her neck to figure out what the hell was going on. Someone attacked a waiter? She could feel them being moved slowly toward a security exit, presumably to stop them all from being trampled if they ran out at once.

She caught sight of the new Parker kid on the other end of the room. He was taking pictures with one hand while a guard tugged his other arm to get him through the door. Darcy didn't even think about taking pictures. She only had one thing on her mind.
"Bruce?!" She called out. She had lost track of him when he went to get something at the buffet. She scanned the crowd, trying to avoid smacking herself face first into a tit as she flipped her head around.

"BRUCE?"

She was a few feet from the security door when it happened. The attacker, or whatever it was, had just been blown backward into the buffet by Agent Romanov with what looked for all the world like a goddamned ray gun. A ring of black uniformed officers with serious rifles filled the room, surrounding the buffet table and flanking in front of Agent Romanov.

A moment passed. Then another. Darcy saw Agent Romanov begin to give a stand down command when the buffet table flew into the air and landed in the upper tier. There was a heavy rain of tuna tartre trays and bread baskets. Where the buffet table stood was a 7 foot tall bald yellow *thing*, human shaped but bent forward like an ape. It wore the torn collars and cuffs of a shirt around its hard and rocky body, a tie knotted around its neck. Its eyes were huge, huge and blue, and when it tried to stand erect the crowd screamed again. The guards pushed them quicker and quicker out the door.

The entire sniper squad and SWAT Team opened fire, a blizzard of bullets, louder than God, expanding to fill every available space at once. They all crouched behind the Kevlar-vested guards, palms on the floor, marble dust falling onto their hair and exposed limbs. With dogged purpose the guards got the line back up and moving through the doors. Darcy couldn't help herself, she looked back. The human-shaped thing was still there, standing where it stood, flesh unbroken and intact. It backed into a crouch, readying to spring.

"I'm going to die" thought Darcy. There was no inflection, no panic, just absolute fact. "I am going to die."

There was a rumble from deep within the walls. The human-shaped thing stopped.

The floor of the ballroom shook. Then it shook again. Then a roar, not heard so much as felt, an unearthly roar, an inhuman roar. An angry roar.

Bursting through the wall of the kitchen came the biggest person Darcy had ever seen. No. Not person. Another thing, another monster. Huge and green and enraged. The marble broke like glass under its feet. In a blink it had leaped on top of the smaller thing, punching and tearing, holding it still it one huge, impossible hand. With one motion it snapped the smaller thing's back and twisted its head off, throwing the two pieces to the ground and releasing another bone-shaking roar in triumph.

The guards had pushed them fully out of the ballroom now. It took some effort but Darcy was able to look behind her.

The monster's eyes met her's from across the room.

"Bruce."

A security guard shoved her and her fellow citizens down the corridor. Darcy, walking backward, kept her head turned just in time to see the hulking green man throw the decapitated body to the ground and jump through the six foot windows and out and away.

-----

Steve stood in the middle of a ballroom full of broken glass and furniture fragments. He was dimly aware of Agents surrounding him, SWAT team members running around, crime scenes being
established, orders being shouted, the cool wind against his exposed arm. All he could see was the
decapitated head on the floor and its almost human features. The eyes were wide open, no pupils,
no iris, just a bright unnatural blue spread from edge to edge. Steve stood there for a while,
waiting for the world to start up again.

There was a buzzing in his pocket. Why would his pocket be buzzing? He pulled out his Stark
Phone, now seeming as alien and repulsive as the head on the floor. The screen was lit up:

INCOMING CALL STARK, TONY.

Steve held the phone in his hand. He carefully put it on the nearest table as gently as if it was a
loaded gun and walked out of the ballroom. The phone kept buzzing until it rattled itself off the
table and onto the floor.

-----

Maria Hill had called a meeting in Conference Room C. She sat at the head of the table with Mr.
Stark on the other end. They both look haggard and heavy-eyed. Steve walked into the room in
full dress uniform wearing a blank, unreadable expression.

"Captain Rogers." Hill stood up in deference. "You've finished your report to the Joint Chefs Of
Staff?"

"Yes I have." Steve's jaw tightened. "I don't know about you but I don't lying to my superiors." 
Steve looked at the empty chairs. "Where's Nat?"

"Natasha can't be with us today but what I have to say does concern her. Please, sit down
Captain."

Steve sat down in only the most technical sense, he vibrated with coiled energy.

"A few months ago a conversation between myself, Director Fury and the World Security Council
addressed the possibility of a security breach here at our new testing grounds within Stark Tower
as well as within Stark industries itself. Many of the systems and protocols were new and while
they had been tested in the field they had not been reliably tested in a real world environment,
especially with all of them operating at the same time within and around civilian systems."

Tony nodded his head. Steve did not.

"The Council was also concerned about the amount of visibility we had exposed ourselves to.
When Mr. Maven came over our radar it was Director Fury's opinion that we let the security
system be tested in a situation we could control."

"The internship program was bait. A honeypot." said Tony, tapping his fingers on his leg.

Maria picked up before Steve could answer back. "It's standard SHIELD procedure to use a carrot
rather than a stick with regards to operation security, have them come to us."

Steve gulped. "He was a spy? Why wasn't I informed?"

"The mission required you to act as if he was what he said to be. Foreknowledge might have
altered your behavior."

"Was he a spy?" said Steve.
"Possibly." Hill said the word crisply. "We had to be sure he wasn't, so I, along with Agent
Romanov and Mr. Stark, created situations that would be very tempting to a secret agent, as well
as allowing us to see how far we could push the limitations on our internal security networks. We
would have to watch it break before we could fix the holes." Hill straightened herself out. "Up to
and including Mr. Stark's recommendation that he be made your assistant."

Steve glared at Tony.

Hill continued. "Still unsure of his motives, we opened up a few more channels, let a few more
things slip-" Maria Hill took a sharp breath. "And before we knew it he was off our watch,
working on his own agenda."

"He was a clever one." Tony wasn't even looking at Steve, his eyes stuck on a spot at the end of
the table.

"Bullshit."

"He was astonishingly resourceful Captain, much more so then we could have anticipated."

"You're telling me that Tony fucking Stark does not know everything that is going on in his own
Tower all the time? With his cameras and sensors and fucking robot butlers."

Steve might have been sitting ram-rod still but his face was turning beet red and flecks of spittle
started to work around the edges of his words. The fact that Cap was cursing up a blue streak
seemed beside the point.

"Captain" Hill said. "You have to understand that Mr. Maven was a deeply troubled individual.
You've read the report we filed on his spying. His ...obsession with you. We didn't account for
that, or for the depths of it. And we admit our culpability in the actions that followed."

"Hate to say I told you so Cap."

Steve blocked the misdirection. "A deeply troubled teenaged individual that you knowingly and
purposefully employed to stress test your security system on the odd chance he was a spy."

"You have to understand Captain that SHIELD, and by extension the United States and the
world, has many new enemies now that we're on the galactic map so to speak. Many with powers
and resources that you or I can hardly even-"

Steve steamrolled on, putting his elbow on the table and pointing. "A deeply troubled individual,
one who was homeless and nearly an orphan and who you decided to turn into a guinea pig
without his knowledge."

"Steve we had no idea he was even near the new Regeneration stuff." said Tony. Maria shot him
a look. "Look, he did this to himself okay? His hand on the needle." Tony still refused to look at
him.

"No you just put it in his hand and hoped for the best."

"Listen to him Captain, we didn't think it was possible for him to do this, not in any of our
situation predictions. This just proves our point about needing to ensure the durability of our
internal security measures."

Steve blinked twice, not breaking his gaze on Tony. "I'm an idiot. I'm the biggest goddamn idiot
in the world." He pressed his lips into a firm straight line.
"Homeless. Orphan. Guinea Pig. That's how he got into the new serum. That's why he was able to get it."

Tony raised his voice. "It wasn't cleared for human testing, it was a unstable prototype, a prototype you agreed to help me with. I never wanted this to hap-"

Tony was cut off by Steve springing from his chair in a smooth clean arc and pinning Tony against the wall. Maria Hill shot up, her hand right above the gun at her side. Steve held Tony's arms crossed against him. He pressed against the arm bone he knew as the left ulna from his life drawing classes. Steve put the slightest pressure on it, there was a soft crack. Tony's eyes went wide as he grit his teeth and willed himself not to scream. Steve pushed in just enough to get himself an inch from Tony's face.

Steve was bright red now, shaking in place in an attempt to keep his anger from tearing up Tony, the room, the Tower, everything.

"I don't believe you."

When he let go Tony landed on the floor with a wail. Steve was out the door before Tony opened his eyes. Hill hit the button on her earpiece.

"Medical to Conference room C, we need a brace."

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Chapter End Notes

Next update is the last one.
What He Did What He'd Do

Chapter Summary

Tony says he's not a supervillain

SHIELD has other opinions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony Stark’s personal apartment in Stark Tower rests at the very top, just above the tip of the A. It's not on any of the elevators, even going from his office on the small, massively protected ETERNITY level requires you to hoof it up two flights of stairs. Tony likes that. If you want to get this high you gotta work for it.

Tony sits in a chair that was made for him by Japanese specialists in chair technology. He takes a sip of bourbon with his right hand, his left arm encased in the Iron Man Suit gauntlet. He holds it close to his chest. The apartment is bare and modernist, minimalist in the way only really expensive things can be. On a wall plays one of his father's movies, an early one, all about airplane dogfights and daredevil pilots. Tony's eyes are wet and still as he looks down and out of the window.

Yes, he did a few things he's not proud of. Yes, the human trials were done quickly and without oversight, but the bodies where there and he needed to act while he still had live samples. A few brain-dead coma patients is what compared to ending death by shock? Or seizure? Or implant rejection? He may have let more than a few things slide, created an excuse to get data on the effects on a viable human subject and not a total vegetable, but wasn't it for the best? He didn't lie. He wanted to save lives.

But.

But.

Maybe he lead the Dan kid on a bit. He didn't make him do anything, he just didn't stop him when he did. If Steve could only see the data they got from the OTHER patients, the ones too far gone, the ones basically dead. He only lied to get everyone on board. This is a net gain. Tony is going to save lives. He's going to a hero. And when the kinks are ironed out, he's going to give it to the world as a gift. The biggest revolution in medical technology the world has ever seen.

He'll keep the patents, of course, he's a philanthropist, not an idiot. But death by sepsis, infection, broken bones, they'll be a thing of the past. They just need to control the overgrowth problem. It'll just take some time.

And then everyone will realize what a sacrifice he's made. What an achievement it was. And no one, no one is going to care about a few honest mistakes along the way. He doesn't want forgiveness because he has done nothing wrong. This is how things work. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs that were already broken to begin with. You can't blame him for seeing an opportunity and taking it. It would've been irresponsible not to. Bruce couldn't see that. He was never a visionary.
He didn't even have to take painkillers. The early Regeneration studies had produced some amazing restorative serums that negated pain response. He had them installed in the suit's basic medical as soon as they were cleared by the technical team. His arm would be healed in a few hours. The bone harder and sturdier than before. He wouldn't feel a thing. The screen showing his father's movie ends. A local news report starts up without skipping a beat.

Tony pours himself another drink and looked down at the neon-lit construction site of Midtown Manhattan. Fuck Steve right in his Boy Scout Code Of Conducts. He has a city a run.

A future to build.

Tony downs the drink in one gulp.

-----

From behind a plane of glass a foot thick, Dr. Ortiz orders the incineration of Robert Maven with a nod.

A series of flame-guns fill the chamber. The body bag holding Mr. Maven writhes and convulses before the light of the fire obscures the viewing platform. Robert's skin was too tough to allow the injection of sedatives. Dr. Ortiz thinks he hears screaming but reminds himself that is impossible. The viewing chamber is sealed. Any screaming is in his head. The flames receded and only a burnt pile of body-bag material and ash remained.

"Fire it again." Says Dr. Ortiz. And the flame guns shoot another blast into the room.

-----

The World Security Council doesn't meet in a dedicated location, that would be risky. They teleconference into a room somewhere under about a half mile of steel and concrete that was originally constructed to protect NYC's best and brightest in the advent of a direct nuclear strike.

Director Fury stood before the shadowy screens of the assembled World Security Council. He nodded toward a door and Natasha Romanov, hair pulled tight and carrying a red file folder, walks into the room.

"Allow me to introduce Regional Director Romanov, she'll be covering the new operations for the Northeast." Said Fury. Natasha nodded.

"It's an honor to meet you all."

Fury and Romanov took their seats. The central female-ish head spoke.

"Regional Director Romanov, what are the results into your investigation into the possibility of a Case Big Iron incident occurring?"

Natasha sat up, nodded toward the darkened faces of the Security Council, and opened the file folder before her.

"Case Big Iron, the possibility of Tony Stark working against SHIELD interests either on his own volition or under the influence of another power." Natasha flipped to another page. "This case has had top red-band ever since Mr. Stark came under SHIELD advisement. We have spent the last year constructing a series of test cases to evaluate and monitor Mr. Stark's actions in morally confusing or ethically suspect situations. At no point did he raise more than three red flags in the course of these tests." Natasha took a breath. "And with specific regard to the Regeneration
Trials, his impulsiveness, this lack of concern for bioethics.." Natasha trailed off. "He behaved entirely within our expectations, no urgency needed."

"It is our opinion that while Mr. Stark is still a potential threat, more on-going surveillance and integration with SHIELD operations and agents will make him less an unknown factor in future missions and allow us to predict his actions before they escalate. In addition, our presence in the Tower has allowed us to set up a formidable security apparatus around Mr. Stark, most notably in the cooperation of the AI known as JARVIS. We've installed the beginnings of a sense of loyalty and common purpose in Mr. Stark, and this personal connection will hopefully prevent Case Big Iron from becoming a reality. Augmenting that, we have already begun several safeguards to remotely deactivate or otherwise impede the Iron Man Suit and Mr. Stark himself should he be operated on by an outside force."

Natasha closed the folder in front of her.

"If Case Big Iron occurs, we will be ready."

A shadowy face from the right began to talk. "Director Fury, do you share Regional Director Romanov's opinions?"

"They are not opinions." Fury's voice, even when low and respectful, always filled the room. "They are the result of countless man hours and operations. And yes. I do."

Fury leaned in slightly, trying to look at the speaker in his darkened eyes.

"For the first time since our first report, Mr. Stark's behavior has become predictable, fitting within our psychological profile and projections. Right now the biggest threat to Tony Stark is Tony Stark."

--------

Peter walks down the hall of his house with a heavy duffel bag over his shoulder. He doesn't worry too much about noise, Aunt May sleeps like a freight train, but he does hold the bannister as he walks down the stairs. The late evening moon casts the whole living room in blue light, still and sharp and full of silent shadows. He carefully pulls his jacket full of protein bars and cash around his frame. He reaches the small plastic dining table in the kitchen and rips off a piece of paper off the notepad that has 'DON'T FORGET!' typed in a pink and curly font around the top. He starts to write something, something that would make sense. He had been thinking about what to write ever since he went to bed, turning it over again and again in his head, finding just the right balance of reassurance and iron-clad logic. He thought about the words to write over and over, sweating and fretting in his bedroom, but now, in the harsh light of midnight, he can't remember them. He scrawls out "I'm going away, I love you" before putting the pen and note down on the table. He reaches the front door before he turns and heads back. He adds "Don't look for me."

Peter opens his front door. There's a man there. Peter jumps back and trips over the plastic runner to the carpet, falling on his ass.

Clint Barton stands in the doorway to the Parker household and holds up a six-pack of beer.

"You wanna talk about this, Agent Parker?"

-----

Steve is not drunk. He has had five shots of whiskey and five beer backs and knows he is as sober as the day he was born. He holds an empty glass in his hand. Why couldn't they let him have this? This one thing? He's never gotten drunk before and now he never would. He places the glass on
the bar and motioned for another. At least the ritual was something. Being alone, together, with other people.

He took the bus down to DC. It didn't require IDs or credit cards or all the other things he didn't have. Things SHIELD could track. He went to Arlington. To the graves. He half expected there to be some huge memorial to the Howling Commandos. There wasn't. He didn't know which was worse. He found Bucky's grave on the computer they had in the welcome center, and then he found his own. He didn't have the heart to ask to view it. He just walked the grounds in his civvies. Arlington National Cemetery was so big, it just went on and on, from some points you couldn't see anything but gravestones. According to the helpful infographic at the welcome center, they had 27-30 burials a day. Just walking around you heard shot salutes being fired, the sound of brass bands on the wind. He spent some time at the Tomb Of The Unknown Soldier, watching the lone Guard walk to and from his position, back and forth. There where families there, tourists with cameras, military families in full uniform, children being hushed into respectful silence. Steve stood on the steps and watched the guard pace from one end of his position to other, keeping watch, unblinking.

Just someone doing his job.

His downed another whiskey and felt it burn its way down. At least there's that. At least it hurt. The bar was near Logan Circle, a dark little place off an alley. He wouldn't have been there normally except his searches kept finding him looking for places described with a certain vocabulary, quiet, private, discrete. A young man in a polo shirt sat down next to him and motioned for the bartender.

"Vodka and tonic." The bartender nodded. "Drinking alone tonight?"

"Yes?" Steve sounded confused. He looked the man over. He was young. Well youngish, small-built, wiry, dark-featured, with that stupid Tony Stark inspired beard that had become all the rage recently.

The drink arrived and the man paid. "Well that's a shame." The man took a sip of his vodka and tonic and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, first time in Washington?"

Steve shook his hand. "Yes." The man was looking him in the dead in the eye, his lips curling up a bit at the edges.

"Can I buy you a drink? Way to say welcome to our nation's Capitol?"

"Sure."

------

Darcy Lewis sits updating Captain-Perfect-Pants.tumblr.com from the basement of Stark Tower, just behind the laundry. After the party she had been told in no uncertain terms by men with very large clipboards that she was to update Dan's remaining social media for the next six months until such a time existed that he would be "admitted" to NYU and then vanish as a matriculating student. She was given a hard drive of images to update and a list of status updates to seed the various twitters and tumblrs with. She did this without question. They had very large clipboards and she was in a very small room. Darcy Lewis pours out another glass of Granny Moonshine into her coffee cup. No one is coming down to check on her. Sometimes she just slept in the office, in a crash room she found down the hall. The door was always unlocked. She showed up drunk from the night before and hadn't had a proper shower in about a month, who was going to fire her now?
A few weeks in she got the idea to check her AO3 account. She hadn't updated in weeks. There was a new comment on her abandoned Yvette Bloom Hairdresser To The Superheroes WIP. She clicked on it.

"SAN_DIEGO-FISH-TACO: said

"GREAT JOB!!!! I hope to see more!"

Darcy clicked on SAN_DEIGO-FISH-TACO's profile. It said the person was from Atqasuk, Alaska. They had bookmarked all her stories plus all of blueflower's Teen Wolf drabbles. Their profile icon was a green fist.

Darcy set up a queue to post the final images to Captain-Perfect-Pants and began to gather her things. She didn't bother turning the lights out when she left.

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Chapter End Notes

Title from the Rasputina song about Howard Hughes - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ztx_Vj1Txmo

In my head, Tony's biggest fear is turning into his father, and ....yeah kinda happening. "it's been a long time since he's flown"

Also, to everyone else, this is largely Peter's story. Dan's not the main character to anyone but him. If I was going to make an OC I wanted that to happen. Because everything that happened that to Dan was *largely a side effect*. From the Tales Of the ToasterVerse fics (SO GOOD) I got the idea that SHIELD is, like any paramilitary organization with infinite budget, prepared for anything, so this entire story is them testing preparedness. Dan just really doesn't matter, in the big view.

All of this Arlington stuff is written from life, just BTW.

Hey remember Bruce's Ao3 handle? Blueflower? yeeeeeeaaaaah.

So wow, thanks for hanging on with this everyone. This was my first fic ever and I wrote it largely to keep myself in the habit of writing and to see if I could write like, half a novella in my spare time and ...I feel pretty good about it. The feedback has/is amazing and it's been really intoxicatingly fun to play with other people's characters and get comments and ....all that. This was super fun for me, just getting to be apart of it cause I had so much fun reading the other stories, and I hope you half the fun I had writing it. It's been a blast, truly. Love y'all.

And yes, I know I'm a huge cocktease with the Tony/Steve stuff. Oh but it's there in the EMOTIONS.
Appendix - Music Links

Chapter Summary

Most current and updated current links for all music referenced or playing during the story, because I was asked.

Chapter 3:
Long Long Time - Bing Crosby
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsPBNcUw-jA

Chapter 6:
Short Skirt Long Jacket - Cake
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7aDstrDMf0

Chapter 8:
Immigrant Song - Led Zeppelin
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBmueYJ0VhA

Chapter 9:
We'll Meet Again - Vera Lynn
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49xzZkepaGY

Chapter 10:
Jolene - Dolly Parton
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gtv3idYAC8I
Shake Shake Senora - Harry Belefonte
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5V6_SCQ3P30
Tomorrow Never Knows - The Beatles
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spjcPS4ekOA

Chapter 12:
Volare' - Domenico Modugno
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-DVi0ugelc
Moonlight Serenade - Glenn Miller Orchestra
Chapter 13:
A Wonderful Guy - Tex Beneke
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n92ATE3IgIs
Passacaglia And Fugue In C Minor - J.S. Bach
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F51uHpH3yQk
Chapter 14:
Johnny Guitar - Peggy Lee
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeCWuN0dc5w
Chapter 15:
(Dear Mr. Gable) You Made Me Love You - Judy Garland
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFSczLif0q4
Chapter 16:
Boot And Rally - Iggy Pop
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ_MmMSyFOs
Chapter 17:
Velvet Sedan Chair - Seven Suns
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNdbhOytYSU
Chapter 20:
I'm Old Fashioned - Rota Hayworth And Fred Astaire
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYXHeP9PydQ
Chapter 23:
The Victory Belles - Medley
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3I-wZwbuak
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7HUjKRXqss
Slow Boat To China - Ella Fitzgerald
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf6oZZucNTo
Chapter 26:
Howard Hughes - Rasputina
"Captain Perfect Pants" appeared in an interview with the screenwriters of the latest Star Trek movie and it is perfect.

Xanatos Gambit comes from TV Tropes, of course.

It is embarrassingly not difficult to write star-struck fanboys, BTW.

The taser was going to be signed "Love Thor" with the Icelandic character for Th "signed with a funny looking "p"." but it was too much work for a lame joke.

I go far for a Lebowski reference here with the toe.

The kitchen/common room/toaster joke is all riffing on Avengers fanfiction tropes and is a reference to the excellent Toasterverse series, go read it now if you have not.

Darcy is a closeted Hufflepuff.

Shellhead is a common affectionate insult for Iron Man in the comics. It is the only e-mail account I can imagine Tony having.

"Dr. Block" is a reference to The Nostalgia Chick, a channel awesome series I enjoy a little too much.

Save you the googling, Skrulls are shape shifting lizard monsters from the comics.

Block's keywords here come from Dollhouse and Stross' Laundry series. Both involve mind control. Also, the Red Room for comics fans.

Passing out in strange corridors is written from personal experience

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hVQzaFK2Bk) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!