

If You Had This Time Again

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If You Had This Time Again

by [dls](#)

Summary

Tony Stark closed his eyes in a wrecked Siberian bunker and woke up on a demolished New York street. Four years earlier.

[Translated into [Mandarin Chinese](#) by Oxalis & [Polish](#) by Every_Moment_Matters & [Russian](#) by Isenbo and [continued](#) by MaliceCrash & [Brazilian Portuguese](#) by Thefoxandthewolf & [Spanish](#) by goldenhazz & [Korean](#) by uay1004.]

[[Text-to-speech podfic](#) by saltyunicorn.]

Notes

Title from *Colours* by Emma Hewitt.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Polski available: [Gdybyś odzyskał stracony czas](#) by [Every_Moment_Matters](#)
- Translation into 한국어 available: [이 순간을 다시 가질 수 있다면](#) by [uay1004](#)
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [If You Had This Time Again倘若重来 \(翻译\)](#) by [Aurora1901](#)

One Hell of a Flashback

Chapter Notes

I don't know how this happened but here is another unfinished and unplanned fic. I'm sorry? :|

References/Quotes

Avengers.

Tony had always considered the saying *hearing snow fall* as something made up by hopeless romantics. As he laid in a broken Iron Man suit in an abandoned HYDRA bunker in the middle-of-nowhere Siberia, he managed to find some comfort in the satisfaction that he had been *right*. About *something*. For *once*.

There hadn't been any words since his demand for his father's shield, a bitter and broken request thrown like a half-hearted punch at the end of a fight already lost. There hadn't been any sounds since Steve's tiredly triumphant footsteps and the careless clang of the shield hitting the ground, throwing away so much more than the symbol of a hero. There hadn't been anything but silence, definitely no sounds of snow falling.

A laugh forced out of his frozen lips, loud and anything but joyous. It contorted into a choked cry crashing through his crushed chest. Tears solidified to ice, clumping his lashes together and catching on his cheeks. He tried lifting up a hand to wipe them away but could not. The disabled armor was now a restraint and would soon be his coffin.

This was the end, he knew with a certainty that felt final. He hadn't told anyone where he was heading, per Sam's insistence at the Raft. FRIDAY had gone offline hours ago, and with her system purposefully limited to prevent acting without orders and Tony without the means to communicate with her, no reinforcement was coming. Eventually someone would notice he was missing, maybe Rhodey or Vision or Pepper, but his time was running out fast. Too fast. At least he would be going out in style, wrapped in two hundred and fifty pounds of gold-titanium alloy.

As his eyes drifted closed, moments and memories of his life flashed through his mind, a glitched slideshow outlining all of his wrong choices and bad decisions.

His last thought was a self-deprecating *I really should have known better*.

*

A fierce roar shook him back into consciousness. The New York skyline greeted him and his mouth tasted like ash.

Another roar focused his attention and Tony couldn't quite suppress a flinch at the sight of Steve towering over him, clad in his Captain America uniform but, thankfully, without his shield.

A quick scan of his surroundings located a relieved Thor and a pleased Hulk, a wrecked city and a familiar tower, a clear sky and a functioning suit.

"What the hell?" He mumbled, mostly to himself.

"We won." Steve said, sounding impossibly young.

Tony let his head fall back against the gravel, listening to the hum of the arc reactor in his chest. *This is one hell of a flashback.*

Welcome Back, Sir

Chapter Notes

I already have intense love and respect for authors who write time travel fics because it's one of my favorite genres, and even more so now because it is awfully confusing to be writing about events that have happened already but also not quite yet. :|

References/Quotes

Avengers.

The Avengers made their way through the debris and returned to the Stark Tower in exhausted silence. Bone-deep fatigue provided the perfect cover for Tony's reticence and dulled the others' awareness to the fact that Tony hadn't been able to look at or talk to Steve since the brief exchange when Tony first woke. The bitter betrayal and bloody battle of Siberia hovered at the edge of his mind, fresh yet distant. The discomfort of adjusting to the arc reactor in his chest, how strange it was to be tasting coconut again, served as an unpleasant reminder of the shattering crack of another arc reactor. In Siberia.

Every so often, Captain America's shield gleamed in the sunlight, blood red and arc reactor blue and snow white. Iron Man averted his eyes.

Tony felt as though he was walking through a dreaded and dazed dream. Everything around him seemed real, yet it could not possibly be. Multiple theories raced through his mind, though none remotely plausible and all seemingly insane.

If this was his personal hell, then he supposed he should be grateful that he did not wake up in Afghanistan.

If this was some kind of time traveling adventure, which had some merit given the insanity of his life, he should be meeting his past self instead of inhabiting his own body.

If this was an end-of-life flashback, it wasn't a particularly thorough one and flashbacks weren't supposed to include the more mundane parts like *walking* or *sweating*.

Or he was going about this all wrong. Tony assumed his current surrounding was fabricated. He assumed those nightmarish four years following the Battle of New York did happen. He assumed he fought, *died*, in Siberia. All assumptions with no supporting evidence. Time to look at the facts.

He could feel the sun heating his face and the metal of his armor. He could hear the gravel crunching beneath his feet. He could taste the aftermath of battle in the air. He could smell

the salty-sour stink of his sweat. He could see his tower, with only the letter A remaining, only a block away.

Maybe everything seemed real because it *was* real.

Then what were those four nightmarish years he had lived, suffered, and endured? A bad dream? A premonition? A souvenir of space travel?

Tony's racing mind snagged on the last theory but before he could examine it further, all thoughts vanished when they stepped into the lobby and JARVIS' voice flowed through the speakers.

"Welcome back, Sir."

"JA–JARVIS?" Tony whispered wondrously. For him, it had been *years* since his last, and heartbreaking, interaction with JARVIS. "That you, buddy?"

"I do not recall you giving DUM-E or Butterfinger or U a voice module." There was a definitive note of reproach in the A.I.'s voice. "I strongly advise against going out of range *again*."

"No arguments from me." Tony rotated his torso in a stretch that wouldn't have done much while still in the armor, angling his face out of the Avengers' line of sight, and mouthed *we need to talk* at one of the cameras mounted in the ceiling. The lights flickered, easily explained by the damages done to the tower, but Tony knew it was JARVIS returning the sentiment and acknowledging the need for privacy. "JARVIS, meet the Avengers, earth's mightiest defenders. Avengers, JARVIS, just a rather very intelligent system." Tony shrugged, twisting back to face his *guests*. Not teammates. Not friends.

"Your accomplice in hacking SHIELD's system?" It was hard to tell if Steve meant it as a question or statement, but the uncertainty was clearly present in his tone. So was the disapproval.

"I would consider Sir to be the accomplice in that incident, given I did most of the work and he merely assisted."

Tony chuckled. "You have no idea how much I missed you."

"Man of Iron and Voice of JARVIS, as gladdened as I am by your reunion, we do have the pressing matter of locating and apprehending Loki to conduct." Thor boomed.

"Hulk smashed Puny God." A deep and pleased rumble. "In glass room."

"I can confirm that Mr. Loki is still within the floors of the penthouse." JARVIS announced.

"*Within*?" Steve asked.

Tony's eye twitched at the incredulity in Steve's voice. He'd heard it often, steadily losing its friendliness, over the years. The years that hadn't happened, or didn't happen, or wouldn't happen. Tony closed his eyes and inhaled deeply to stifle the sudden spike of irritation at both

this bizarre situation he found himself in and his unfair judgment of this Steve, who hadn't coldly discarded their friendship with years of lies. *Yet*. He stopped himself before he could descend into the downward spiral of *had they ever been friends*, a pity party was not on the schedule.

The Hulk beamed with pride. "Hulk smashed good."

Thor's face contorted awkwardly as he tried to disguise his grimace as a grin for his SHIELD brother's battle prowess. There was clearly some lingering traces of the brotherly bond between the two Norse gods, adoption notwithstanding.

Tony hadn't noticed that before, when all of his attention had been focused on keeping these *heroes* around for just a bit longer with talks of shawarma and promises of upgrades. But he saw it now and could not ignore it. He patted Thor's bicep comfortingly. "C'mon, Point Break. Let's see if Rock of Ages improved my decor any."

*

Natasha was already in the penthouse by the time the elevator arrived. Clint and Tony both flinched violently upon seeing the Scepter in her hand.

Clint's reaction was understandable, considering his time as Loki's puppet. The archer had developed a habit of checking his reflections in all possible surfaces to ascertain his eye color, one that Tony could see was forming as Clint's eyes shifted away from Natasha and trailed across the span of the windows. The glass shimmered in the afternoon sun, like a stream of golden silk ripped by the gaping and jagged frame where Tony had been thrown out of merely hours ago. Yet another near-death experience that seemed so far away when it had transpired less than a day ago. Siberia. Wormhole. New York. And many more to come.

Natasha peered at him, clinical and assessing, no doubt finding Tony's recoil from the staff disproportional since he had resisted Loki's mind control attempt. In a calculatedly casual move, Tony rubbed an absent hand over the arc reactor as though he was confirming its presence and shielding it from the eerie glow of the Scepter. The scrap of metal against glass was obscenely loud in the vastness of the penthouse. He knew he had succeeded when Natasha discreetly rolled her eyes, incorrectly dismissing his overreaction as residual arc reactor trauma.

The truth was, back then, Tony hadn't been bothered by it. He had felt victorious, the buzz of battle and the thrill of survival coursing through his veins like exceptional espresso. Now, however, Tony knew and feared what the Scepter had brought and would bring. Vision of death and destruction. Madness of dread and desperation. Torture of depression and disappointment. He also knew what it had taken and would take from him. *JARVIS*.

If his memories served him correctly, which they did even when he wished they didn't, the Scepter was sent to a secured SHIELD facility and the Avengers spent the night at the tower after Tony cajoled them into a late dinner. He was in full support of the former and firmly against the latter.

The staff was a weapon far more dangerous than any Tony could have crafted, and he wanted it nowhere near his home and his JARVIS. Though it also would not do to have it fall into HYDRA's hands. He made a mental note to alert Fury of HYDRA's infiltration, but to do so skillfully, timely, and organically might be a challenge. Luckily, the groundwork had already been laid on the helicarrier. JARVIS had already accessed SHIELD's database and unveiled Phase Two, it would not be far-fetched for the A.I. to uncover other anomalies in their system. Given that Fury's secrets have secrets, any oddity would be examined carefully, thereby increasing scrutiny on SHIELD's procedures and agents. Tony debated offering a list of names, *Pierce*, *Sitwell*, *Rumlow*, but decided against it because specificity from another's hand would only raise a spy's suspicion.

The very sight of Steve, Clint, and Natasha was likely to trigger Tony's fight-or-flight response. If he had any hopes of figuring out what mess he had gotten himself, he needed to remove them from his home so he could *think*. Thor and Bruce also elevated his anxieties but to a lesser extent due to their absence from the so-called superhero Civil War. What troubled Tony was their careless callousness during and after Ultron, Thor's choking grip haunted Tony as much as Bruce's silent abandonment. There was simply too much for him to sort through without the risk of panic attacks and paranoia looming over his already chaotic head. Despite knowing that none of these events had come to pass, Tony stood firmly by his feelings of unease. The Avengers could not stay.

It was not as though this one night would change anything, considering none of them ever took up residence in the tower after the remodeling and renaming. Tony remembered going over the blueprint for the tower's reconstruction with Pepper, designing individual floors for each of his teammates and envisioning a family-like atmosphere among the team.

His invitations were politely refused.

Steve remained at his Brooklyn apartment. Clint and Natasha stayed with SHIELD. Bruce went off-grid again. Thor returned to Asgard with Loki in tow. The team gathered for the occasional movie nights or rare dinners, which were always lively and enjoyable but also left Tony with a crushing loneliness when they departed. Tony didn't begrudge them for their choices, they should live where they felt the most comfortable, yet the sting of rejection burned all the same.

"You're being unusually quiet, Stark."

Tony could feel Natasha's questioning eyes on him, no doubt adding to the long list of his inadequacies to validate her betrayals. The bitterness felt both justified and unwarranted, she had not broken his trust yet; however, the memory of her parting words *I'm not the one that needs to watch their back* said otherwise.

"Sir, I have Ms. Potts on the line." JARVIS said smoothly. "How should I proceed?"

"Tell her dinner's at seven and I'm still alive. Um, actually, reverse the order." Tony answered, grateful for the interruption and the reminder that he did need to speak with Pepper. The missed phone felt like a stunningly accurate metaphor for their relationship. "Alright, let's get this over with. I do not want to keep a woman who *earned* the nickname Pepper waiting."

The Avengers approached Loki right as the god stirred. Tony watched Loki pull free of the rubble and heave onto the steps with shaking fingers and trembling arms. There was an unlikely gracefulness in his unsteady movements, contradictory to the thrumming tenseness vibrating off of him during their previous interactions.

Clint notched an arrow.

Loki paused and shifted to his side, glancing up at his adversaries with unexpected humor and relief dancing in his emerald eyes and softening the sharpness of his profile.

Tony frowned, he was certain Loki's eyes had been blue when the god threatened then defenestrated him. He recalled making a note of how the shade matched that of the Scepter and his arc reactor, hypothesizing if that somehow neutralized the mental manipulation.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll have that drink now." Loki reclined back on his elbows in a rustle of leather and clink of metal.

Unable to resist a chance to test his theory of having foreknowledge of upcoming events, Tony mouthed the words as Loki said them and knew the instant he had been caught.

Loki's green, vibrant like poison, eyes narrowed in perplexity then widened in fascination. A delighted grin stretched across his battered face, pulling on the bruises and tugging at the cuts. Loki winked.

In another moment of recklessness, Tony smirked winningly in return.

Time for a Drink

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up being a bit longer and because I'm trying to keep the chapter length relatively consistent (~2000 words), I was torn between cutting this short and adding to the previous one. I chose the latter, so be sure to check the previous chapter for some added details addressing the matter of the Scepter going to SHIELD. Hooray for my OCD tendencies...?

It took much longer than Tony anticipated to remove the Avengers from his penthouse, which was rather ironic given how he had struggled to make them stay and discouraging because despite his efforts to be as discreetly inhospitable as possible, Thor and Bruce still remained at the tower. As did Loki, who was officially in Thor's custody.

Steve, Natasha, and Clint left for the SHIELD facility after a lengthy debriefing that Tony evaded by offering JARVIS as his proxy, citing the A.I.'s digital archive as more reliable than his memories and explaining that *flying a nuke into an wormhole was rather traumatic*. He left the room feeling the weight of the Avengers' disbelief and disinterest and distrust on his shoulders, which he shrugged off forcibly because their opinions didn't matter, because what he said was the truth.

Tony had known, even when he had been eating but not tasting the shawarma, that something was wrong. The vast coldness and empty quietness on the other side of that portal were far worse than the sweltering caves and bloody waters of Afghanistan. He had won against the Ten Rings and emerged as Iron Man, there would be no such victory over the alien armada. Fear had planted itself in Tony's heart, digging its roots deep until every throb of his heart pumped terror through his veins.

However, admission of his damaged psyche had not necessarily led to acceptance of it.

Tony had spent the years after New York in a cycle of over-confidence and outright denial. On good days, he had believed he could corral the feral beast hibernating in his mind, to prevent it from tearing him apart. On bad days, he had convinced himself that it was only a problem because he made it into one, and the best course of action was to pretend it didn't exist. Every day, Howard's words, *Stark men are made of iron*, echoed in his ears more like a threat than an encouragement.

No more.

Tony scoffed at how much time he had wasted by wishing the panic and anxiety and fear away, addressing the symptoms but not the cause. He had created and invented and built to alleviate the constant scream lodged in his throat, thrashing to be let loose and stealing his

breath at unexpected moments, only to end up with more deaths and destruction and damages. A vicious cycle that needed to be broken. Starting with putting some distance between him and his *guests*. So he excused himself from the debriefing, instructed JARVIS to activate Protocol Goldilocks, and escaped to his lab, which miraculously remained intact. If JARVIS wondered why Tony suddenly seemed less invested in the Avengers' comfort, he kept silent and adjusted the amenities so that none was *just right*.

The bots greeted him happily and he basked in their easy affection. DUM-E immediately launched into smoothie-making. Butterfinger found a party hat and presented it proudly with a loud beep. U was attempting to beatbox with little success but great hilarity. It was a surprise when JARVIS announced that Bruce was looking for him.

"Why?" Tony was baffled. He could count the number of times Bruce sought him out on one hand. Their friendship had mostly followed the pattern of Tony pestering the other scientist until he relented.

"Dr. Banner expressed concerns for your welfare after your rather dramatic declaration and departure." JARVIS paused, as though he was pondering his next words. It would make other people a bit skittish about artificial intelligence but just made Tony proud. "I share his sentiments, Sir."

"Fine." Tony sighed. Despite how unbalanced their friendship had ended up being, he still had a soft spot where Bruce was concerned and a bigger soft spot when JARVIS was fretting over him with that stoic warmth he had missed so desperately. "Where is he?"

"Dr. Banner is currently meandering down the corridor toward the kitchen."

"Let him know I'll be in the kitchen." Tony dodged the party hat Butterfinger almost shoved up his nostril, grabbed the smoothie DUM-E handed him and gave U an encouraging pat on his way out.

*

Bruce smiled uncertainly, squinting against the too bright lights, when Tony walked in. "Hey."

"Made a break for it too?" At Bruce's confused hum, Tony clarified. "The debriefing."

Bruce rubbed a hand along his jaw, tilting his neck in a stretch that crackled several times. "It was the Other Guy's show. He's not big on talking and I don't remember anything, so no point really." A shadow fell across his face and his eyes flashed green. "And the Scepter's there, if I never see that thing again, it'd be too soon."

Nodding in understanding, Tony agreed. "Can't say I don't feel the same." In the back of his mind, he tried to remember if Bruce had shown any signs of discomfort while studying the Scepter and found none. What he did recall was how it led to the creation of Ultron and the demise of JARVIS. He winced. "This isn't a DMV, JARVIS. Dim the lights."

"I do hope this is *just right* for your needs, Sir."

Tony relaxed slightly at the sound of JARVIS' voice, proof that the A.I. was still with him.

"So, how are you doing?" Bruce asked.

"Fine." Tony shrugged.

A pause.

"How are you doing *really*?"

"*Really* fine."

Another pause.

"How are you doing *really really*?"

"*Really really* fine."

"How are you doing *really really really*?" There was a grin tugging at the corners of Bruce's mouth.

"*Really really rea*— What are we, in high school?" Tony scoffed, rolling his shoulders back and straightening up as if he was back in the armor. "What's going on? And don't start another chain of the *reallys*."

The smile faded away as Bruce ducked his head. "Just wondering how you're holding up and, um, if you wanted some company."

"Spit it out, Banner." Tony stared pointedly at Bruce's nervous tapping on the counter top, suspicion and impatience overloading his already frazzled nerves.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Bruce blurted out then immediately looked ashamed. "I'm sorry. That was rude. I just—" He somehow managed to crumple while still standing upright. "I don't feel safe going with SHIELD."

Tony gaped, unable to form words. This wasn't what happened before. He had to practically *beg* and *bribe* them into staying and now Bruce was *asking* and implying that he felt safe here at the tower.

The silence stretched on uncomfortably between them.

Bruce exhaled heavily. "Right, sorry. I—"

"No, I mean, yes." Tony snapped out of his reverie. "You can stay, we have plenty of room."

"Thank you, just...thanks." Bruce shut his eyes as he sagged with relief.

"You're welcome." The gratitude was as unexpected as his acceptance of it. Bruce had been discomfited by the personalized floor and customized lab, yet he was gushing over a generic

guestroom. The juxtaposition caught Tony off-guard and made him reconsider his habit of making grand gestures and downplaying them all. He would go above-and-beyond for the Avengers only to brush it off as no big deal while secretly hoping for recognition. In hindsight, that seemed supremely backwards and convoluted. "And hey, you did catch me from an outer space free fall so-"

"That was the Other Guy." Bruce mumbled.

"Looks like the same guy to me." Tony pushed the forgotten glass of smoothie toward Bruce. "Smoothie?"

*

It turned out SHIELD had requested the Hulk's presence, via Bruce, as a deterrent to escape attempts from Loki. Thor had been most displeased when he learned of this development, especially since he had offered multiple reassurances that the Asgardian restraints are more than sufficient.

Natasha and Clint quieted when Thor growled a warning of questioning the worth of his words. Then Steve suggested all of them spend the night at the tower, which was rejected immediately by Thor as another slight against his honor before Tony could dive headfirst into a panic attack. Tony seriously considered forgiving Thor for the not-yet-transpired choking incident for this alone. The Norse god then refused to *lodge with those lacking respect* and almost took off with Loki to spend the evening in the *nice span of greenery at the center of town* when Tony offered an alternative at his tower, if only to prevent an incident at Central Park. The super soldier and spies departed with the Scepter and Tony breathed a bit easier.

Pepper arrived, took one look at sheepish faces of Bruce and Thor, and instructed JARVIS to order several crates' worth of take-outs, ranging from pizzas to Chinese. Tony wrapped her in a tight hug, his cheek against hers, as she apologized profusely for missing his call. He had long forgotten about that.

The love was still there, but the burning passion had faded into friendly warmth. At least for him. Having seen the entirety of their relationship played out, he felt drained and could not summon the reckless devotion to preserve them as he once had. They were too different yet too much the same for it to work. He understood that now. Tony knew they needed to talk and sensed she felt the same too, with her darting glances throughout the meal and stilted goodbye at the door. They did not kiss.

*

After a mostly silent dinner, echoing their shawarma experience, Bruce and Thor retired to their respective rooms. Promises of a hot shower and a soft bed called to them.

Tony followed suit, though he found himself staring at the ceiling, too afraid to sleep. Not because of nightmares but of waking from this dream. Would he somehow find himself back in Siberia? Or find himself trapped beyond the portal? Or would he even wake at all? His thoughts looped in circles until they tangled messily. With a sigh, he tilted his head toward one of the many cameras. "JARVIS?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Comb through the intel we pulled from SHIELD and flag any irregularities, then send it to Fury with this message." Tony grinned winningly as though he was standing face to face with the director. "No need to thank me for keeping *an eye* on things!"

"Understood. Playing a game of Minesweeper with classified data from a shadowy government entity then antagonizing its leader have been on my bucket list for quite some time. I thank you for the opportunity to cross it off." JARVIS replied wryly.

Tony's throat tightened at the mention of *bucket list*, his vision suddenly swimming with strings of broken codes and his chest seizing painfully. "Happy to make your dreams come true." He croaked.

"Sir?" It was truly impressive how JARVIS managed to convey concern and compassion for Tony that lived up to his namesake. "I detect a spike in your heartrate. How can I be of assistance?"

"It's nothing, don't worry about it." Perhaps it would be more believable if there hadn't been an obvious snuffle in his voice.

"Your wellbeing is my primary purpose." JARVIS corrected gently. "So one could say I live to worry for you."

"Living is good." Tony buried his face in his pillow and barely heard JARVIS' tentative agreement. "I- Something happened when I went through the portal, I think I either saw the future or lived it but then I came back and everything is the same but not the same." He mumbled into the cool cotton, rapidly blinking away the tears that had welled up and wiping away those that had trailed down his cheeks. "You weren't there, JARVIS."

"I am here, Sir." The vehemence in the A.I.'s answer should have been shocking but it just sounded reassuring. "I have no intention of leaving and I'd like to reiterate my previous advice for you to stay in range, Sir."

"That's the plan." Tony turned over on his back, the light of the arc reactor cast the room in a soft blue. He stayed in that position for quite some time. "JARVIS, what do you think about time travel?"

A short pause. "Of the scientific or magical variety?"

Tony huffed out an incredulous laugh. "Both."

"The former would involve extensive machinery and the latter requires expertise I do not possess. I would, however, recommend against disrupting the space-time continuum. To do so would certainly qualify as one of your many questionable life choices."

"Just for that, I'm making another one of those *questionable* life choices right now." Tony snorted, then kicked off the covers and headed for the elevator. "Time for a drink."

You Taste of the Abyss

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday! The tentative plan is to wrap this up in 20 chapters, but these characters tend to get chatty (especially JARVIS) so we'll see how that goes. :)

Smut Alert! An AU what-if scene of "what if Tony licked back?" can be found over at [These Days Are Ours](#). <3

Loki, shackled with ornate cuffs connected by a thin chain and silenced by an invasive muzzle spanning across his jaw, was reclining against the wall farthest away from the broken window, where Thor stood imposingly.

"Hey Lightning McQueen, what are you doing up?" Tony greeted.

A frown creased Thor's forehead as he processed the new nickname then decided against pursuing an explanation. "I am to stand guard over Loki until our journey home."

"You know JARVIS monitors the whole tower and with your fancy schmancy Asgardian handcuffs *suppressing magic and might*, Loki isn't going anywhere."

Thor nodded, acknowledging Tony's point. "The care you paid to my words is heartening and appreciated."

Tony approached the two gods, keeping his posture relaxed and hands in plain sight. The thrumming tension between them was practically audible. Appearing as non-confrontational as possible, he leveled a quizzical look at Thor. "So why are you here? Not liking the guestroom I've prepared?" He didn't miss the indirect slight against SHIELD. If Thor found their repetitive doubt to be an affront, then he would surely consider disrespect, such as forsaking the provisions of his host, to be an insult as well. It could work well in Tony's favor.

Immediately, Thor looked mortified. "Man of Iron, I meant no offense. I thank you for your kindness in providing me accommodations for the evening and have full faith in your JARVIS." He bowed his head in apology. "I, however, would like to inquire the same of your visit."

"I owe Loki Doki here a drink." Tony waved cheerfully at Loki. "As I'm sure you heard him so thoughtfully reminding me earlier today." JARVIS projected the time on the wall, it was after midnight. "Um, yesterday."

"You are a man of your words." It was a statement said with great admiration. "A most honorable trait."

"It's just a drink." Tony shifted, discomforted by the unexpected compliment. "Do you want to join us?" Thor didn't seem keen on letting his adoptive brother out of his sights, which was rather inconvenient for Tony's plans of speaking with Loki alone.

There had been a moment shared between them earlier. A flash of awareness. A gleam of interest. A spark of curiosity. Tony was never very good at resisting something shiny and neither was Loki, judging by the mischief glittering in those green eyes. Loki was also a renowned mage familiar with Chitauri technology and knowledge of the portal, making him the ideal candidate to discuss the hypotheticals of what could have transpired in the wormhole. The fact that Loki was someone Tony had no foreknowledge of was a bonus too, there was no need for him to maintain a façade of a man he hadn't been in four years.

Tony chose not to examine how a supervillain who had, possibly involuntarily if his theory proved correct, defenestrated him and nearly destroyed his planet was somehow his preferred company. Instead, he focused on removing Thor from the penthouse. "A drink will probably take the edge off and help you sleep. I'm guessing the bed isn't quite what you're used to on Asgard." Tony said apologetically, mentally counting down to when Thor would relent.

Five. Four. Three-

"Many apologies, Friend Stark. The lodging you have provided is outstanding and I need not additional incentives to utilize them." Thor flushed with embarrassment. "I shall retire to my chambers and meet you at sunrise or until such time my brother leaves *your* custody."

Loki narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

Tony gaped as the fluttering cape disappeared in the elevator, confused by the emphasis Thor placed on his word until the clinking of chains and snapping of fingers drew his attention.

"Hold on, Reindeer Games." Tony strolled over to the bar, disappearing from Loki's line of sight when he ducked down to rummage through the mini-fridge. He emerged with two bottles, one in each hand, then strolled to the steps where Loki sat and pressed one into the trickster's shackled hand.

Loki examined the drink with a furrow in his forehead and likely a matching downward curl of his lips, except it was hidden behind the muzzle.

Tony cursed colorfully, earning an inquiring tilt of Loki's head, when he realized his oversight. He was reaching for the metal before he realized the impulsiveness of his action and its associated consequences. "Um."

Green eyes danced with mirth before they closed slowly as Loki moved forward and tilted the side of his chin into Tony's palm. When his eyes blinked open, they held a hint of challenge.

Cautiously, Tony trailed his fingers across the ridges and grooves of the pieces of metal that made up the elaborate muzzle. He was torn between wincing in disgust at the invasiveness and admiring the intricate Asgardian engravings. He settled on neither and concentrated on

locating a release mechanism, tangling his fingers in the dark strands of Loki's hair and angling his head to get a better view.

Loki, in an unexpected display of tolerance, allowed for the gentle manhandling.

"Ha!" Tony grinned when his thumb brushed past a raised circular shape and applied a bit of force. The metal instantly unlatched and fell away, tumbling down Loki's leather-clad chest and landing with a clatter between his sprawling legs. Tony's triumph was short-lived as a pair of cool lips pressed against his pulse point followed by a brush of an equally cool tongue. "Gah!"

Loki smirked as he leaned away. "You taste of the abyss."

"I showered!" Tony huffed defensively, instinctually deflecting. The spot on his skin tingled pleasantly when an evening breeze washed over it.

"That would explain the hint of—" There were little crinkles at the corners of Loki's eyes, even if his expression and tone remained disinterested.

"Nope! I'm too sober to have this conversation." Tony twisted off the cap of his bottle. "Now drink up."

Loki acquiesced magnanimously and mimicked Tony's movements with the cap. "This is quite different from the drink you poured yourself." He studied the glass bottle, reading aloud the label. "Who is Mike?"

"Someone who clearly believes that when life gives you lemons, make *alcoholic* lemonade." Tony took a long drag of the Mike's Hard Lemonade in his hand, affecting a pleased hum to hide his cringe at the overly-sweet flavor.

While his original plan had been to pour two tumblers of his finest scotch, the burn of hard liquor simply didn't appeal as it used to. He had searched the fridge on a whim and knew instantly what his drink selection would be when he spotted the six-pack of malt liquor. Loki's expression would simply be hilarious. The bottles were likely leftovers from Rhodey's last visit, whose commanding persona belied a love for sugary drinks favored primarily by college girls. Thinking about his best friend seized Tony with the sudden urge to see him, see his Rhodey *walking*. Perhaps he could invent a new upgrade so War Machine would need to report to New York, maybe a secondary power source or a built-in deceleration device.

"This is vile!" Loki's angry sputter snapped Tony out of the beginning of a designing frenzy. "Revolting!" He took another sip and scowled. "Appalling!" He tipped the bottle to his mouth again. "Horrid!"

There was a laugh, joyous and unbidden, ringing through the penthouse. A foreign sound. It took a few seconds before Tony realized it was his.

*

Maybe it was the sleep deprivation that caused their jumbled and jagged conversations, though they understood each other perfectly.

Maybe it was the drinks that led to less careful words, though they were spoken with great care.

Maybe it was the post-battle euphoria that loosened tightly-reined emotions, though neither exploited the other's tender spots.

Maybe it was all and more of the above.

*

"You know your brother– Did you just hiss at me?" Tony narrowed his eyes in warning. "Wow, and a growl. Fine fine, *adopted* brother. He never said why he was here."

"Thor is, shockingly, capable of a modicum of obfuscation."

"Good to know." Tony muttered, filing the information away. "Wait, was that a pun? Shocking? Because Thor is the God of Thunder?"

"Cease your inane babbling." There was a slight upward curve at the corners of Loki's lips.

*

"You are not the same crazy god who tossed me out a window."

"You are not the same irritating mortal who promised to avenge Midgard."

"Touché."

*

"What's the deal with this adoption business?" Tony asked casually, peeling off the bottle's label with an exaggerated look of concentration.

"I was born Jotun and raised Aesir." Loki said softly, heavy words floating precariously on a sigh. "A secret not meant to be known."

"Ah, those." Tony inhaled sharply. "They tend to make themselves known at the worst possible time."

"Quite."

*

"Why was Thor here?"

"I fell once before, after my defeat."

Loki stared at the crater in the floor while Tony eyed the shattered window. The night air felt colder.

*

"JARVIS, have DUM-E bring up some pizza."

"Yes, Sir."

Loki peered inquisitively at the ceiling. "You need not trouble yourself, I am—"

"It's not for you—"

"—not inclined to sample to your questionable Midgardian cuisine."

"—*I'm* feeling peckish."

*

"You were privy to my words as I spoke them. How?"

"I saw the future or maybe lived it." Tony swallowed tightly. "But here I am, in the past."

"An anomaly in time." Loki mused, accepting Tony's words without question. "However you came about it, know that prescience is a formidable yet fleeting power. Knowledge prompts change yet change negates knowledge."

"Huh." Tony pondered this. Because he had known how his tenure with the Avengers ended, he purposefully distanced himself from them. Which somehow led to Bruce seeking him out and this new strain between Thor and SHIELD, both he did not foresee.

*

Loki's brows lifted in pleasant surprise. "This is quite good." Tomato sauce stained his lips red.

Tony mumbled his agreement through a mouthful of pizza, strings of cheese caught in his beard.

The two large pizzas were devoured promptly.

DUM-E removed the boxes with a cheerful beep.

*

"Your eyes are green now but they were blue. Like Clint's." Tony stifled a yawn with a click of his jaws, blinking rapidly to clear away the drowsiness. "And the Scepter."

"An astute observation." Loki's emerald eyes dulled but were no less striking. "What is your conclusion?"

"The Scepter isn't yours and neither were you."

"Yes." The affirmation sounded more like a hiss than a word.

*

"Thanos is coming for all nine realms." Loki forced the name out with a shudder. "He has an army."

"He *had* an army." Tony lifted his arms above his head and made a whoosh sound followed by a loud boom. "I threw a nuke at it." There was a tremor in his hands.

"The Chitauri was merely the scouting party." Loki corrected with a harsh grimace.

"Well, that sucks." Tony stated succinctly.

Loki didn't disagree.

*

"What will happen to you when you go hom—" Tony amended when he felt Loki stiffen. "—back to Asgard?"

"I will be called to stand before the All-Father and await his judgment."

"Need a lawyer? Or ten?"

"The All-Mother will likely speak on my behalf." Loki spoke of his adoptive mother, the queen of Asgard, with a melancholy-tinged fondness and wavering faith. "Though it will not be enough."

"Noted."

*

"Am I boring you?"

Tony yawned, his eyes drifting close. "Not at all, I just haven't slept in, like, a week." He hadn't slept since he presented the Accords to the unwilling group at the compound, the loss of consciousness between Siberia and New York notwithstanding. His body was careening toward the inevitable crash of unconsciousness and he couldn't stop it.

"The fragility of mortals." Loki mocked. Emerald eyes softening as they traced the lines of exhaustion, curving under clever eyes and framing a smart mouth, on Tony's face.

"I think I'm holding up pretty well considering I got pummeled by two super soldiers yesterday." Long lashes fluttered, signaling a valiant, but hopeless, fight against the pull of sleep.

Loki understood. His voice was soothing and tender when he spoke his next words. "Rest, Tony. Slumber will not take you from this place or time. What is done is done."

"Alright, I'm trusting you here."

Loki murmured. "You would be the first."

Tony slept.

Only Me, Brucie Bear

Chapter Notes

Apologies if this update showed up in your inbox twice, I posted an earlier draft by accident and had to take it down then repost.

References/Quotes

Avengers.

Tony stirred awake with a groan, his neck bent at an awkward angle and a series of crackles and pops rang out when he curled inward to relieve the stiff ache in his back. "FRIDAY?"

"No Sir. It is Saturday, May 5th." JARVIS reported. "It is 5:43AM and you have been asleep for approximately two hours. Sunrise is in four minutes and ten seconds."

"JARVIS!" Tony scrambled into a seated position, heart pounding with adrenaline and mind singing with relief. He had not been sent back to snowy Siberia. He had not simply faded from existence. He had not lost everything and himself. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Sir. It is I." JARVIS said reassuringly. "Shall I order some breakfast?"

"Coffee." Tony grunted, rubbing a hand over his face and absently noting the criss-cross creases on his cheek.

"I will start the machine, Sir. And for you, Mr. Loki?"

"Thank you JARVIS, I am well and require no refreshments." The accented voice, laced with amusement, came from directly next to Tony. "I think you drooled on me."

Tony blinked blearily and stared into mischievous green eyes. "I do not drool." He declared emphatically.

Loki merely gestured to the damp spot and wrinkled leather on his thigh.

"Well." Tony grappled for a witty answer. "Consider it payback for your uninvited licking."

Loki chuckled.

Tony squinted against the fading of night and beginning of day coming through the windows. "Sun's rising."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence as they watched the interplay of light and dark weaving through the New York skyline. Last night, Tony and Loki had exchanged deeply

personal details without hesitation and accepted what the other said with full trust. Two known experts at manipulation and deflection had voluntarily chosen to set their skillsets aside for a few hours of authenticity that resulted in a sort of *understanding* between them without ever stating explicitly what was understood.

"Sir, Mr. Odinson is on route to the penthouse." JARVIS almost sounded apologetic for his interruption.

Tony tensed. "Let me do the talking."

"As though I have a choice." Loki presented the muzzle, turning it over in his hands. The dark metal contrasted ominously against pale skin.

"You will soon." It was a promise. Hesitantly, Tony crouched down and accepted the device from Loki's outstretched hands. It would not do to blatantly disregard Asgardian practices, especially considering what Loki had said and Tony had planned. With reluctant hands, Tony lined the muzzle up against the sharp angles of Loki's jaw, softened by the hazy sunlight filtering through the darkness. "Take care, Loki."

"You as well, Tony." Loki murmured, a brush of cool lips against calloused fingers.

*

Thor's cheerful greeting was slightly strained when he discovered Tony unharmed and Loki properly restrained. He thanked Tony profusely for the room and commended the *controlled rain in his bathing suite*, but asked no questions other than inquiring if they were both well. To which Loki shrugged and Tony declared he would be better with some caffeine. Loki's shrug seemed to communicate something meaningful to Thor, because the tension lifted from his smile instantly.

Tony glanced between the two brothers, feeling as though he missed something.

His intuition was proven correct when Thor practically dragged Tony out of the penthouse in search of *Floridian nectar* and Pop-Tarts to break their fasts, opposite of his disinclination to leave Loki unattended last night.

*

"Just so you know, Point Break, I had to remove the muzzle so Loki can have his drink." Tony confessed as he searched the pantry for Pop-Tarts.

Thor reared back at Tony's admission, caught off-guard by the blunt honesty. He pondered this, his words measured and slow. "It is Asgardian law to stifle the speech of those awaiting judgement from the All-Father, but you are Midgardian and I cannot fault you for not knowing the differences between our practices."

"That sounds suspiciously like a loop hole to me." Tony lifted the multi-pack box of Pop-Tarts in an impressed toast before tossing it to Thor.

"I know not of what you speak." Thor caught it one-handed and immediately opened the package.

Tony snorted as he poured himself his first of many cups of coffee. "Say, why the change of heart?" He elaborated at Thor's puzzled hum. "With Loki?"

"This morning was the first in a long while that I caught sight of the brother I once knew." Thor swallowed tightly. "He no longer wishes to fall."

"No, he's done with falling." Tony stated with a certainty he shouldn't have but did nonetheless.

The kitchen was silent for a while, Thor steadily devouring breakfast pastries and Tony mainlining coffee.

"What did you and my brother drink to, Friend Stark?" Thor asked, crumbling another foil wrapper and adding it to the pile by his elbow.

Tony drained his third cup of coffee then answered honestly. "Our continued existence." He and Loki had covered much ground and many topics, but the common theme among them all was their stubborn determination to survive despite impossible odds.

"That is a cause worthy of celebration. I thank you for the care you have shown to my brother, despite his—" Thor searched for the appropriate wording. "-faults."

"Wasn't all his fault." Tony stood to refill his mug and brought back a second carton of orange juice.

Thor accepted it gratefully, a small furrow creased between his brows. "What do you mean by that?"

*

Bruce joined them as the video of Loki berating the Hulk played.

"You dull creature!" Loki snarled on the holographic screen.

Bruce froze, teeth gritted and skin tinted a faint green. "Not the best choice when the Big Guy is still jonesing for more smashing."

"Right. Sorry about that, Brucie Bear." Tony closed the hologram with a swipe of his hand. "How about some nice and relaxing tea? Um, we do have tea, right? JARVIS?"

"You will find a variety of tea in the cupboard next to the fridge, Dr. Banner." JARVIS helpfully supplied. "I recommend the passionflower and lavender blend, it is Ms. Potts' favorite and has successfully helped her manage her stress levels."

"I don't like what you're implying, JARVIS." There was an ache in his chest when he remembered the nights of Pepper sitting in his workshop, a cup of tea by her elbow as she reviewed contracts while he tinkered. Tony pushed it down with the practiced skill of

someone with a long history of repressing emotions. "You know, I heard the DMV is looking to upgrade their interface."

"Oh no, regular business hours and people capable of waiting. How dreadful." JARVIS deadpanned.

Tony grinned despite his best efforts to maintain a scowl. "That snark, no idea where you got it from."

"It is quite a mystery, Sir."

Bruce chuckled softly as he wrapped his hands around a steaming cup of tea, mood calm and posture relaxed. "Nothing good on TV?"

"Nothing as good as one of the Hulk's greatest hits." Tony quipped and was rewarded with an amused snort from Bruce. "I was trying to prove a point to Lightning McQueen here." He turned toward Thor, who was still staring at the empty space with desperate hope and undisguised fear. "Did you see his eyes?"

"Ye– Yes." Thor stuttered. "They were not Loki's."

"I need a bit more to go on here." Bruce blinked. "Loki's eyes?"

Tony pivoted back. "I'll explain in a second, but first, ask Jolly Green what color were Loki's eyes before he got to smashing."

An indecipherable look skittered across Bruce's face at the request.

Tony hissed quietly at his mistake. It was the aftermath of Wanda's mental manipulation in Johannesburg that prompted Bruce to initiate contact with his alter ego, to ascertain the Hulk's mental state. Johannesburg hadn't happened yet, and Tony vowed it *never* would this time around, which meant Bruce didn't know he could communicate with the Hulk. Tony had screwed up by unthinkingly asking for the impossible. He started to backtrack just as a throat cleared.

"Your faith in me and the Big Guy is—" Bruce took off his glasses and rubbed a shaking hand over his eyes, taking deep and measured breaths. "I'll try, Tony."

Tony could only nod, too stunned to form words.

Thor watched on expectantly.

After a few minutes of silence that felt more like hours, Bruce removed his hand and slid his glasses back on. "Blue." He stated confidently and his stance mirrored that. "His exact words were *Smash Puny God and bad blue eyes.*"

A whoop of joy reverberated in the kitchen, quite an accomplishment considering the open floor plan, as Thor leaped from his seat. The resounding crash when he slumped back down was equally loud, wrecked horror settling on his face before it fell into his palms. "My brother has green eyes. The Warrior Three and I used to tease that he was literally seeing

green with jealousy." Thor muttered, ashamed and agonized. "I can only think of one reason for his eyes to be blue."

"Clint." Bruce connected the dots quickly. "Dr. Selvig."

"Loki said that the Glow Stick of Destiny wasn't his, neither were the Chitauris." Tony added solemnly. "Someone else is behind this."

"Thanos. The Mad Titan set on destruction of worlds and lives in his bid to court Mistress Death." Thor said quietly, as though saying it any louder might summon him to their doors. Tony didn't have the heart to point out it was too late. "I thought he was merely a story meant to frighten misbehaving children."

"Wait, did you say *Loki said*?" Bruce shot a pointed look at Tony. "When? Was it during the invasion? Because if he were mind controlled then that timeline doesn't—"

"Ah, well. You see. I sort of owed him a drink and maybe delivered said drink and possibly some pizza and kind of talked with him?" The flood of words started haltingly then gained momentum as Tony went on, until it was less coherent speech and more jumbled sounds.

A myriad of emotions flickered across Bruce's face. Worry, anger, disbelief, fear, and exasperation before settling on amusement. "Only you, Tony."

Tony winked. "Only me, Brucie Bear."

The brief lift in their moods plummeted when Thor spoke.

"Father will not believe Loki's innocence without considerable proof." Thor's face crumpled as he shook his head at Tony and Bruce, who were ready to offer their technology and testimony. "Asgard does not grant entries to mortals nor will your equipment function there."

"What about the Scepter?" Tony suggested offhandedly but instantly liking the idea as soon as he said it. If Thor took the Scepter back to Asgard, it would accomplish several things. The first was it would serve as evidence to exonerate Loki for his part of the invasion. The second was it would be out of SHIELD's possession and by extension, out of HYDRA's reach. The third was it would be a world away, literally, from JARVIS. Any backlash from Fury or SHIELD would be an acceptable cost to pay for this many benefits.

Bruce hummed in agreement, also eager to see the staff gone.

Thor frowned. "Would it not disrupt the diplomacy between our realms?"

At Tony's and Bruce's questioning looks, Thor explained the arrangement made between him and Fury. The Tesseract would be given to Asgard as a sign of good will from Midgard while the Scepter would be kept and studied by SHIELD to strengthen its defenses. Tony and Bruce exchanged an alarmed glance at that.

"Huh." Tony feigned nonchalance. "I can see why the World Security Council would want better options if their only solution against an alien invasion was to throw a nuke at it." He cast a meaningful look at Bruce.

"At *us*, you mean." Bruce picked up Tony's signal and carried on the plan effortlessly. "If it weren't for you, we'd all be dead along with the millions of people in New York."

"I do not understand. This nuke you speak of was meant for the Chitauris. Was is not?" Thor asked, but a glimmer of understanding and opportunity sparked in his eyes.

Bruce moved to the seat next to Thor, already launching into a lecture on thermonuclear weapons and its indiscriminate blast radius in layman's terms.

Tony wandered away for his fifth cup of coffee and possibly breakfast. He was debating between two boxes of cereal, both boasting of high fiber content which held no appeal for him, when Thor let out an outraged roar.

The sixth cup of coffee was the best. It tasted like sweet victory.

No Honor in Betrayal

Chapter Notes

I'm beginning to think wrapping this up in 20 chapters is not going to happen... Characters keep getting chatty and demanding their moments. :|

Quick note about Thor, just because he's more savvy than people give him credit for, doesn't mean he isn't hotheaded at times.

Thor insisted they storm the SHIELD facility at once.

Tony and Bruce traded looks of concern, knowing full well that this situation called for subtlety, not blunt force. But it was too late. Thor's fury burned uncontrollably like wildfire. None of their deescalation attempts worked, the only success they had was delaying the inevitable by claiming ignorance of the location.

Loki had warned him, shared stories after stories of Thor's tendency to fly into a blind rage and to lash out violently when challenged with *grave* insults, but Tony didn't heed the advice.

Regrettably, Tony had grossly misjudged of the manifestation and management of Thor's anger. He had based this erroneous assumption on how Thor had reacted to SHIELD's doubts with growling irritation but calmed quickly when given an alternative lodging and how the god was easily manipulated by Tony regarding drinks with Loki. Both experiences had lulled Tony into a false sense of confidence, which shattered the moment Thor threw a table and Tony was reminded of the choking incident after Ultron's escape.

Bruce's skin took on a worrying green hue.

Forcing himself to breathe deeply and steadily, Tony fought the haziness crowding his vision and the painful hammering of his heart. The room blurred, voices sharpened, and Mjolnir took on a red, white, and blue gleam as oxygen became a rarity for his lungs. Tony's eyes saw Thor but his mind screamed in terror at the sight of another tall and blonde opponent carrying a weapon capable of crushing his chest.

Steve. Captain America's shield. Siberia.

"Mr. Odinson, may I request clarification on a small matter before you proceed with your rightful course of action?"

JARVIS. JARVIS. *JARVIS*.

The New York skyline appeared when Tony opened his eyes, unaware that he had closed them. Bruce had noticed though, judging by the other man's hesitant hand on Tony's shoulder.

It was a small gesture of comfort and Tony latched onto it like a man falling would a rope. Tony's hand shook when he raised it, but the tremors subsided when he gripped Bruce's hand and kept it on his shoulder, grateful for the weight grounding him.

Bruce seemed to understand the need, if not the reason, and pressed down in response.

"Speak." Thor boomed, pacing impatiently and slashing Mjolnir as he would a sword.

"Mr. Loki is to be brought before the All-Father for his alleged crimes, yes?" It was a question JARVIS knew the answer to, so it wasn't asked for clarification.

"Correct. It is Asgadian law for the accused to come to—" Thor looked thoughtful. "—the one who shall pass judgement."

Bruce's fingers tapped against Tony's with minute and precise movements.

It took Tony's frazzled brain a few seconds to catch up, busy as it was soaking in JARVIS' voice and presence, Bruce had spelled *phew* using Morse code. Confused, Tony glanced up at his friend with a frown only to receive a small grin and a glance at the ceiling, where most people assumed JARVIS resides. Thankfully, the green tint had faded away.

"Then may I suggest Sir placing a call to summon Director Fury and the other Avengers to the tower? In keeping with Asgardian laws." JARVIS recommended demurely. "With the Tesseract and scepter too, of course."

"Yeah, makes sense to have them come to you, Thor." Tony didn't bother with a clever nickname, barely suppressing the flinch at the thought of that monstrous weapon in his tower, *his home*, and still regrouping after the almost anxiety attack.

"And it will save me a trip to SHIELD, which I'd really like to avoid." Bruce sighed, a subtle reminder of why they spent last night at Stark Tower in the first place. Thor seemed more receptive now. "Not to say I wouldn't go with you, but, you know." He shrugged apologetically.

"Acceptable." Thor nodded, setting Mjolnir down on the floor as he reclaim his seat at the table. Tony and Bruce sagged in relief.

"Mr. Odinson, have you tried the Midgardian breakfast item Fruit Loops?"

Tony blew JARVIS' camera a kiss as he made his way to his rarely used office to contact SHIELD.

Bruce made another cup of tea.

*

The phone call to Fury was surprisingly brief and straightforward, a reprieve after the corralling an enraged Thor. Tony supposed Fury's quick agreement may have *something* to do with how he framed the request around acquiring new information regarding the invasion and

needing the Scepter to confirm specific details. A friendly reminder to bring Thor the Tesseract ended the call.

Tony sighed, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes and trying to stifle the building panic throbbing in his skull. At least the Scepter was still in SHIELD's custody. Not HYDRA's.

*

The Avengers assembled yet again at Stark Tower, at the roof where the invasion began.

Steve, Natasha, and Clint stood behind Fury, with Clint carrying the Tesseract in a secure case and Natasha gripping the Scepter with heightened vigilance.

Tony and Bruce, who held the inter-realm transportation device, stayed a few steps back, letting Thor handle the negotiation. Though Tony doubted there would be any compromises reached.

If Loki had any reservations about being there, he did not show it; though he did have the advantage of the muzzle hiding half of his face away.

Tony concentrated on his breathing, three counts for inhale and five counts for exhales.

"The portal's closed now, you're okay." Bruce leaned in, pressing his shoulder against Tony's as though to alleviate the weight on Tony's shoulders.

Tony gave Bruce a flickering smile, grateful for the support even if Bruce was mistaken about the cause. It wasn't the portal that sent his heart racing, it was the sight of Captain America in his full uniform and shield. The threat of Thanos and his army, in an absolutely bizarre twist, paled in comparison to the betrayal of a perceived friend and childhood idol. Tony much preferred an expected war over an unexpected stab in the back, or shield to his chest.

Absently, Tony noted the confrontational stances of the two sides. They more resembled two teams about to do battle than work together. Tony felt for the homing bracelets on his wrists and felt his heartrate settle.

Fury addressed Thor with a small nod and assessed Loki's manacles with a much too-interested gleam in his eye, no doubt wondering how Asgardian technology worked to contain a god and if SHIELD could adapt a similar contraption. "What have you learned?"

"I have learned that you are liars and traitors." Thor growled and Mjolnir, hanging from his belt, crackled with lightning.

Tony and Bruce exchanged despairing glances at the lack of subtlety.

Taking advantage of the shocked silence, Thor launched into an impressively intimidating diatribe declaring the nuclear missile as the ultimate affront to his honor as a warrior and positing it was an assassination attempt to neutralize *all* alien threats. "I hereby claim the

Scepter as recompense for your trespasses." Thor stated, managing to sound both menacing and magnanimous.

"Now wait a minute." Fury recovered first. "We had a deal—"

"Void the moment you disregarded our lives!"

"Thor." Natasha said softly, schooling her posture and expression into one of supplication. "As the defenders of this realm, we lay down our lives willingly. It is a warrior's sacrifice. It is *honorable*."

"There is no honor in *betrayal*." Thor retorted, seeing through Natasha's ploy.

Steve nodded in agreement before catching himself.

"Well said." Natasha conceded, though it was just as likely she was searching for another weakness.

Thor scowled, anger undeterred by her compliment, and repeated his demand.

"Why do you want the Scepter?" Clint asked, casting a vicious glare at Loki.

"While I need not justify myself to you quislings, it is of import to clear my brother's name." Thor summarized Loki's involuntary involvement during the invasion as well as the Scepter's importance as evidence to present in Asgardian court. "Loki was not himself, as you were not yourself, Eye of Hawk."

"Seems awfully convenient, don't you think?" Clint sneered. "There's no proof."

Bruce raised a tentative hand. "Actually, Big Guy saw the change in his eye color after the, um, smashing."

"And I have the footage to back it up." Tony pulled down Bruce's hand with a roll of his eyes. "We aren't in kindergarten." He hissed affectionately.

"So you're suddenly on his side? The guy who tossed you out a window?" Natasha narrowed her eyes. "What changed?"

"One, it wasn't *him* who threw me out a window, do try to keep up." Tony's grin didn't reach his eyes and he didn't bother to try. Before, he had given Natasha, *Natalie*, multiple chances only to have her squander his good will. Now, he knew better than to waste his time on pointless endeavors. The Black Widow was not his friend and he did not want her for one. "Two, Loki Doki made some excellent points about what's coming, and before you even say it, he didn't mess with my head because you had the Scepter and hey, I'm immune." Tony gestured at the arc reactor glowing through his thin t-shirt. "Three, there's a bigger and badder Big Bad out there and that's who we should be focusing on."

"Aye, the Mad Titan is a most formidable foe." Thor proceeded to give an explanation of who Thanos is and what he is capable of.

The group was quiet as they absorbed this new information.

"Assuming this is true, *bag of cats* here is innocent and Thanos is coming, that's all the more reason to leave us with the Scepter." Fury countered. "We need it to bolster our defenses."

"No!" Thor bellowed, grabbing Fury by the throat and lifting the man up until his feet were scrambling for purchase.

"Thor, let him go." Steve ordered.

Clint set down the briefcase containing the Tesseract, one hand gripped his bow and the other reached for his quiver.

Loki tilted his head as to get a better look of Fury's reddening face.

Bruce closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Tony blinked owlshly. It was almost an exact rendition of what happened during the Ultron catastrophe. There was fear for Fury and panic at this unforeseen event, but mostly Tony felt an overwhelming relief of an old wound starting to heal. For years, he had questioned the why and the how behind Thor almost breaking his neck until he had convinced himself that Thor must have deemed him unworthy of the respect and consideration afforded to a Shield Brother.

But now, seeing Thor's violence aimed at someone else shattered that belief. Knowing Thor treated others the same way, not just *Tony*, made the attack feel less personal. It wasn't about Tony provoking or deserving the assault, it was about Thor and his lack of anger management skills. It felt like absolution, though Tony wasn't sure who the recipient was.

"Director Fury isn't in the position to make that call." Natasha stated calmly, assessing the situation. "It is up to the World Security Council."

"Call your council then." With a huff, Thor released his grip. "Let it be known that should Midgard wish to maintain its alliance with Asgard, you must surrender the Scepter at once."

Fury's face flitted through a series of expressions before settling on grudging resignation, he stalked into the quinjet to make the call. Clint was glaring at Loki still and Natasha was eyeing Tony as though she was dissecting him.

Tony pushed down the discomfort and concentrated on the knowledge that they had won. The World Security Council would yield after realizing their predicament. With Iron Man and the Hulk refusing to fight, one super soldier and two human spies were no match against two Norse gods. Not to mention that another drastic military action would be a spectacularly bad idea the day after the nuclear missile. He was proven correct when Fury returned, his long black coat fluttering like a white flag.

"Barton." There was a hint of gravel in Fury's voice, he nodded. "Romanoff."

Clint gave the case to Bruce, pettily ignoring Thor's outstretched hand.

Thor did not seem troubled by Clint's sullenness and instead gripped the Scepter Natasha was reluctantly handing over. His mood immediately brightened and his tone returned to jovial. "I thank you for your cooperation and will return to discuss the terms of our alliance against the Mad Titan."

"Looking forward to it." Fury snapped, massaging the column of his neck with a grimace.

"We appreciate your hospitality and assistance, Friends Stark and Banner." Thor inclined his head toward Tony and Bruce.

Loki did the same, but his gaze lingered and locked with Tony's.

Tony returned the attention, albeit a bit mystified. There was a promise in Loki's eyes that he couldn't quite decipher.

Bruce finished assembling the transport device and silently offered it to the two Asgardians, who reached for the handles. The energy swirled inside the tube seemed to be calling to the glow of the Scepter. Then, in a flash of light, they were gone.

Either Tony Stark or Taylor Swift

Chapter Notes

As previously mentioned, this chapter is told from perspectives that are not Tony's. It ended up being much longer and more intense than I thought, which really shouldn't be a surprise anymore because I'm me. ;)

I split it into two chapters so I can 1) post it today, 2) spend more time on the remaining sections, and 3) keep the chapter length somewhat consistent. Enjoy!

[References/Quotes](#)

[RDJ's Instagram post](#).

Natasha surreptitiously glanced back at Stark as they shuffled into the conference room at Stark Tower for a much needed debrief after the events on the rooftop. Stark was tapping away on his phone, falling to the back of the group and staying silent.

One by one, they settled into the plush chairs wordlessly, a tense quiet broken by Fury clearing his throat and firing off the first round of questions.

Stark answered them succinctly, eyes straight ahead and posture rigid.

There was something *off* about him, Natasha was certain, something that couldn't be explained away by mere trauma.

Where Stark was once excited energy, he became reserved. Where he was once talking small to sound big, he spoke little. Where he was once almost desperate to prove her assessment wrong, he seemed unconcerned. Even stranger was his aversion to Steve, irritation with Clint, and distrust toward her. Stark masked it well, but the evaded eye contact, terse responses, and hesitation to turn his back sparked her suspicion and interest.

If not for the arc reactor shining through his chest, Natasha would have said this man sitting across from her cannot possibly be Tony Stark.

Perhaps Loki had compromised him after all. Granted, the Scepter was in her custody and the arc reactor had resisted the mental manipulation before, but Loki likely had other tricks up his sleeves. Other ploys and plays that did not require the use of magic or artifacts, only a well-timed glance and a lightly bitten lip.

Stark's playboy history indicated attraction to both genders and he admitted to sharing a drink with Loki, where Loki had apparently confided in him about Thanos' involvement and Loki's loss of agency. When Steve incredulously demanded to know why, Stark waved it off and cited the need to honor his words.

Natasha knew for a fact that Stark never felt this compulsion to keep his promises before; she had worked for the man for months and witnessed him blowing off more meetings than attending them. When she had pointed out this inconsistency, Stark had shrugged and mumbled some generic nonsense about turning over a new leaf after a life-changing experience. Another attempt to rationalize the severe changes to his personality. Natasha would have pressed further but Banner silenced her with a green-tinged glare.

Banner's protectiveness toward Stark was not entirely unexpected but definitely inconvenient. It was not uncommon for a rescuer to develop attachment to the rescuee, having invested in the other person's wellbeing by the act of saving it. The Hulk's anguished roar still rang clearly in her memory.

There was something *off* about Stark, but Natasha would let it slide for now as long as it did not interfere with Iron Man's performance.

After all, Tony Stark was not recommended but they would need Iron Man for when Thanos comes.

*

Jane stared at the text from an unknown number lighting up her phone.

Thor back in Asgard, thought you'd like to know. Visit New York sometime. For science! – T.S.

"Darcy?" Jane called, staring disbelieving at the succinct message. "Darcy!"

"What?" Darcy shouted, voice rough with interrupted sleep. "I need my beauty sleep."

"It's almost noon." Jane replied, rolling her eyes. "And I think, I think I just got a text from Tony Stark."

There was a loud thud followed by frantic footsteps. "Seriously?"

"Well, it's either Tony Stark or Taylor Swift." Jane quipped and mustered a small smile. Her heart ached at Thor's departure but not as much as she had thought it would.

Darcy snatched the phone out of Jane's hand, yawning around a frown as she scanned the words. The phone bounced on the couch when she tossed it aside carelessly and headed toward the kitchen. "Ice cream first, then we are planning a trip to New York!"

*

Steve glanced down at Stark Tower as the quinjet lifted off. The gaping hole in its side offered a view into the wrecked penthouse, the minimalist design of metal and glass contrasted sharply with the cozy atmosphere of bricks and wood that he had grown up with. There was a twisted kind of extravagance in *choosing* to have little and Steve couldn't help but resent Stark a little for that.

Howard's son was somewhat of a headache to figure out. First, Stark questioned objectives, disobeyed orders, and disrespected teammates. Then, he proved to be competent in combat

and made the sacrifice play. Now, after the dusts had settled and the battle had been won, Stark turned distant and dismissive.

Steve was baffled and offended by the cold shoulder, he hadn't done anything to deserve it. A part of him corrected that Stark wasn't being cold exactly, just noticeably cooler compared to the heated arguments and warm banter they'd had previously. Another part countered that neither was acceptable when interacting with teammate and pointed out that Stark was never made an Avenger, just a consultant, for good reasons.

Fury had his collar turned up but Steve had no doubt that the skin underneath was beginning to swell and dot with bruises. Natasha and Clint looked shaken, either by the news of Thanos' eventual arrival or the memory of their commander dangling in the choking grasp of a god.

Steve understood the threat and dangers surrounding Thanos, but he also had faith in his team, the Avengers, to defend their home against any enemy. They had defeated an army and saved millions, and this was only the beginning of what they could do. The planet was safely guarded by their capable hands.

And as much as he hesitated to admit and would never say out loud, Steve thought Thor had just cause to warrant his outburst.

There was no honor in betrayal and the World Security Council had most certainly betrayed them. After waking up from the ice, Steve had read history books and news articles and authorized files to get caught up to this new century, which included the deadliest weaponry available. The nuclear missile would have decimated New York and the Avengers who had assembled to protect it. It was a betrayal, plain and simple. To overlook the WSC's mistake would be to condone it, which should not be. Thor was right to hold them responsible. While Thor could have been more diplomatic and nuanced with his approach, Steve thought there was something to be admired about Thor's determined straight-forwardness. Sometimes *no* was all that needed to be said, without further conversations or attempts at compromise.

As Peggy had once said, *plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye, and say "No, you move."*

Thor had just demonstrated that the efficacy of those words.

*

With a fond shake of his head, Bruce declined Tony's invitation to the supposedly legendary chili dog stand near Central Park. It was a kind offer but Bruce didn't want to intrude on Tony's time with his friend. Jim, who looked immensely grateful when Bruce ignored Tony's introduction of him as *cutie Rhodey patootie* and instead addressed him as *Jim*, was chatting with JARVIS by the elevator.

"Want me to bring one back for you? Or anything else?" Tony asked, glancing back at Jim with absolute wonder that confounded Bruce. The other man was just *standing* there.

"I'm good." Bruce smiled. "Spend some time with your friend."

Tony looked doubtful but nodded anyway. "Alright, I'll see you when I see you." He all-but tackled Jim as he launched himself onto his friend's back, hanging on like a baby koala.

Bruce laughed and waved them goodbye, but his brows furrowed together as he watched the elevator slid close and considered what Tony had said.

I'll see you when I see you .

The wording was peculiarly cautious, no expectation of a concrete plan or even a tentative time frame. Some might take it to be dismissive, inferring that Tony won't be making any particular efforts to prompt a meeting. But Bruce doubted that.

It was more likely that Tony phrased it as such to avoid sounding obligating in any way, to keep his hopes from being raised then dashed, and to make himself less of an inconvenience.

Hulk had said *Tin Man heart hurt* when Bruce had reached out that morning. He had thought the Hulk meant the arc reactor, his alter ego often picked up the random details, and had given a hurried reassurance that the arc reactor was good because it kept Tony alive, before asking about Loki's eye color change.

Now Bruce understood.

Tony's heart was hurt . Someone, had made Tony feel small, unimportant, and overlooked. There was pain in the hesitance of his speech, the tentative arc of his smile, the twitch of halted affectionate gestures.

Bruce remembered the altercation between Steve and Tony on the helicarrier, how Tony had dealt with Steve's disapproval with defiant quips.

Genius. Billionaire. Playboy. Philanthropist.

Bruce had attributed Tony's quick and witty rebuttal to the man's intelligence but now he wondered if it had been part of Tony's internal dialogue, a justification to himself and others when his worth was called into question. That thought made his chest tighten with a surge of protectiveness.

Hulk roared in agreement.

"JARVIS, would you mind calling Tony for me?"

"Not at all, Dr. Banner."

Tony picked up in the middle of the first ring. "Everything okay, Green Bean?"

Bruce's brows furrowed at Tony's greeting, not a causal *Hey* or *What's up*, Tony had jumped to the conclusion that something must be *wrong* for Bruce to call him. He wondered if his sudden emotional perceptiveness was Hulk's doing, his alter ego operated on a more primal and instinctual level. "Yeah, everything's fine. I was just thinking I didn't want to miss out on these legendary chili dogs. Can you bring one back for me?"

"Oh!" Tony sounded surprised and pleased by the request. "Yeah, yeah. Totally. I'm on it."

"Great, thanks Tony. I'll see you when you get back."

There was small pause before Tony replied, soft and happy. "Yeah, I'll see you when I get back."

*

Jim couldn't get the footage out of his mind and the constant replay on every screen they walked past didn't help.

Iron Man carrying a nuclear missile into an alien wormhole. Iron Man falling from the sky like a meteorite, fire red and star bright. Iron Man hanging limply in the grip of the Hulk.

Tony's pale face framed by the tarnished crimson and gold of his armor, the most advanced coffin in the world, and surrounded by people who had decided to *close the portal* while Tony was still in it.

Jim wasn't sure what to make of the Avengers. Tony had sounded dismissively flippant when he told Jim about the *superhero boy band* and SHIELD's assessment of him. It was the same tone Tony had used when Howard missed award ceremonies and graduations. Jim immediately disliked the organization and the team that had hurt his best friend.

Bruce seemed alright, but Jim would be keeping a close eye anyway; it mattered little that the Hulk had caught Tony or Bruce had livened Tony's mood with a phone call on their way out of the tower. The sheer joy on Tony's face when he learned that Bruce was hanging around was both heartwarming and heartbreaking. People staying should not be a big deal, yet it was for Tony.

"I want to invest in the future." Tony said without preamble.

Jim blinked, clearing away the unbearable images from his suddenly too-dry eyes, and managed an inquisitive hum. Tony was safe. *Alive*.

"For the next generation of scientists."

"Like grants?" Jim glanced at his friend, needing the visual reminder that Tony was alright, and found Tony studying his gait. "Hey, eyes up here when I'm talking to you."

"Hard to do when you have those amazing legs, sugar cake." Tony laughed, a warble in his voice. "But sure, I can be respectful." He stared into Jim's eyes and winked, nearly running into the chili dog cart.

The banter was put on pause while they placed their order.

Their conversation picked up once they got their chili dogs and ate them as they weaved through Central Park. Tony seemed oddly content to just walk. Jim wanted to comment on the unusual behavior but decided against it, it was good for Tony to be out and getting some fresh air.

"So, you're an Avenger now, huh?" Jim quirked an eyebrow and pitched his voice deep. "One of Earth's Mightiest Heroes?"

"Nah, I don't play well with others. Plus, I'm just not the hero type." Tony shrugged before abruptly changing to topic to his plan of funding research for M.I.T. students and establishing a scholarship program for aspiring young scientists.

Jim listened, keeping a hand on Tony's elbow to steer him away from pedestrians, street vendors, and cyclists. "I don't know, Tones. Encouraging kids' dreams sounds pretty damn heroic to me."

Tony started to stutter out a denial before forcibly stopping himself. "You know what, I think you're right."

Jim grabbed at his chest, mimicking a heart attack to show his shock at Tony's words.

"Oh stop that, Platypus. I'm the one with the heart condition, don't steal my bit." Tony rolled his eyes.

They bickered amiably as they looped back to the chili dog cart, picking up one for Bruce before heading back to the tower.

Someone Who Prefers Tony Stark

Chapter Notes

Loki's and Thor's POVs will appear between Iron Man 3 and Thor: Dark World. :)

Surveying his SHIELD assigned dormitory only made Clint long fiercely for the open space at the farm. The walls, concrete and defensible, felt like a prison and he was done feeling like a prisoner after being one in his own body. He slept poorly last night, half-bitter that Stark hadn't extended an invitation for him to stay in one of the rooms with walls of windows and half-relieved because he was away from Loki.

At the post-invasion debriefing, Steve had looked at Clint with such authority and declared: *It wasn't you, Barton. Loki had control of your mind.* Clint had clung on to those ten words like a lifeline, especially when the memories of all he had done under Loki's orders swirled around inside his mind like the alien portal in the sky. He was grateful to Steve for the easy forgiveness, granted without questions.

Learning Loki had been *unmade*, like him, cheapened that somehow.

Clint felt a thrumming anger coursing through his veins and knew he couldn't go *home* like he yearned to do. It wouldn't be safe for Laura and the kids to be around him. He couldn't wrap his arms around Laura and breathe in the scent of her hair, floral and sweet, when his hands were clenched into fists. He couldn't listen to Cooper and Lila's chatter, finding humor in the absurdity of kid logic, when his head rang with voices and thoughts that weren't his own. So his only option was SHIELD, where suspicious glances trailed his every move, stabbing at him like the Scepter's sharp tip. Clint spent more time than he'd like to admit, to himself or the staff psychologist, obsessively analyzing the specific shade of blue of his irises.

Years as an agent had taught Clint exactly what to say, and not to say, to be cleared for active duty.

Which was why he hadn't decked Stark on the rooftop earlier.

Stark had watched them scrambled to Fury's aid with relief fleeting across his features. Clint doubted anyone else had caught it, he only did because he'd kept an eye on Loki and noticed quickly that Loki was glancing at Stark with a frequency too often to be casual or accidental. Natasha's theory was that Loki compromised Stark, but Clint thought it was the other way around.

There had been signs of Stark's distrust *before* he interacted with Loki. After the invasion ended, Steve had notified Clint of their location. Stark's face had scrunched into a sneer at the

sight of Clint approaching before forcibly relaxing into a forced look of indifference. The concern he had felt at Stark's fall and the relief that he was alright drained away in that instant, replaced by defensiveness and irritation. On their walk back to the tower, Stark hadn't spoken to Steve or Clint and he had treated Natasha with the same cooled detachment.

Very curious, and very suspicious.

It was clear that Stark had his own agenda, one that didn't align with theirs, and already begun recruitment. Clint doubted Thor came up with the negotiation points on his own and Banner seemed more book-smart than street-smart to orchestrate a coup of this size. Then there was Loki, who couldn't stop his gaze from wandering to Stark nor resist some kind of lingering and meaningful farewell. Which Stark returned.

Natasha was right to deem Stark unsuitable for the Avengers Initiative. Stark had no loyalty, proven by how he undermined SHIELD's objectives when the agents had worked to cover up Stane's death and find a cure for the palladium poisoning. Clint would be watching Stark closely, his moniker was earned by more than his excellent marksmanship. *Stark better watch his back.*

*

Pepper surveyed the wreckage of Stark Tower, cataloging the damages and imagining the changes.

A new opportunity. A second chance. A different life.

Tony had his back to her, fiddling with a holographic display of the tower and shifting levels around like they were Lego blocks. With a small wave at the camera to keep JARVIS from announcing her entrance, Pepper watched Tony and the fluidity in his movements for a few minutes with fondness blooming in her chest. She savored it with a small smile, committing it to memory and holding it near. Everything was about to change between them and she didn't want to forget how it felt.

Seeing *Iron Man* disappearing into the wormhole *felt like* the end of her world.

Missing a call from *Tony* because she was watching Iron Man *was* the end of her world.

Things were much easier when the most frustrating interactions with Tony were corralling him to board meetings and reining in his impulses to buy donut shops. Pepper hated how *resentful* she had become in the few months they'd been involved after the Stark Expo. She resented Tony for wanting to better the world, the world for needing superheroes, and the Avengers for not having Tony's back. She held a deep grudge against Natasha, *Natalie*, and Steve for closing the portal and giving that order, respectively.

This was her breaking point and if they were to continue, she knew she would shatter and destroy them both until nothing but fragments of who they were, who they hoped to be, remained.

It would be heartbreaking if not for how calming that realization was. She suspected Tony had arrived at the same point too, if their stilted interactions last night were anything to go by. He didn't lean into kiss her goodbye and she didn't want him to.

"Hey." She said softly, infusing as much love as she could in that one word.

Tony turned to face her with a flourish, arms wide open. "Pep!" There was genuine delight in his expression at seeing her, tinged with the barest shadow of sadness. She wondered if she had a mirroring look on her face.

"So." Pepper approached the table and nestled herself against Tony's side, a move meant to provide and procure comfort. "These are the designs for the reconstruction?"

"Yep." Tony draped an arm over her shoulders, fingers rubbing soothing circles on her upper arm. "Thinking about adding in a row of dormitory-style rooms here." He highlighted an area on the hologram. "And maybe a lab here." Another part lit up.

"For the Avengers?" She was pleased with how she kept the scorn out of her voice.

"No." Tony quirked a curious eyebrow at her tone, so perhaps she didn't mask it as well as she thought. "This is for, um, this young scientist program I'd like to establish. With a summer internship program or something." His eyes were dark with sincerity when he caught hers. "Avenging isn't really my style and neither is working with others, I think I'd have more fun doing my own thing and occasionally bossing some minions around."

Pepper returned his gaze steadily, nodding her acceptance at his decision to stop being an Avenger but remain as Iron Man. It didn't change anything between them but it was a relief to hear that Tony wouldn't be surrounded by and forced to rely on people who couldn't be bothered to go after him. Rationally, she knew closing the portal was the right call and they couldn't risk sending someone else, but emotional responses weren't supposed to be logical. She was *entitled* to her anger and no one could persuade her otherwise. "Sounds like a good time."

"You know me, all about having a good time." Tony shrugged, self-deprecating in a way that made her heart clench.

"Oh really?" Pepper hummed skeptically. "You have a strange way of going about it, fighting aliens and flying into wormholes." Her words were harsh but her tone anything but. Light and teasing. "Nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Iron Man, heart health hazard." He nuzzled the top of her head, mussing up her hair. "At your service." There was a hidden message in his words and she decrypted it easily.

"Pass." From the way his arm tightened before the muscles relaxed, allowing it to rest its full weight on her shoulders, she knew he understood her response and felt equally relieved. "Thanks but no thanks."

"Your loss." Tony heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Who'd pass on Iron Man anyway?"

Pepper reached up and linked their fingers together. "Someone who prefers Tony Stark."

Tony's breath hitched, he cleared his throat but his voice still came out hoarse. Scratchy and raw with too many emotions. "Well, you've got excellent taste there, Ms. Potts."

"Indeed I do, Mr. Stark."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, which was broken when JARVIS spoke up tentatively.

"Pardon me, Ms. Potts and Sir." The A.I. sounded uncharacteristically hesitant and confused. "I, I am having some difficulty deciphering your conversation. Am I to understand that the two of you have terminated your romantic relationship but will remain on good terms?"

Tony's knees buckled in shock, barely catching himself on the table but demolishing the holographic tower in the process. "Um, yes, right?" He looked over at her in a panic. "Unless I totally misread what just went down and now I owe you a hundred pairs of shoes."

A laugh tore out of her, sharp and sudden, like it had been seeking an opportunity to escape. "You didn't misread and don't owe me any shoes." Pepper aimed an encouraging smile at the camera in the corner. "Very astute, JARVIS."

"Oh thank god!" Tony exhaled forcefully before turning his attention toward his A.I. and sounding immensely proud. "You did great, JARVIS." There was a shy and uncertain curve at his lips as he whispered to her. "And so did we?"

Pepper tightened her grip on Tony's hand. "And so did we."

*

Fury scanned the information before him and struggled to focus instead of replaying the disastrous confrontation with Thor and the less-than-ideal debriefing with Stark and Banner in his mind. Taking a sip of his cooled coffee, he winced at the tenderness of his throat as he swallowed. The cold bitterness of his drink matched his mood, there was a Mad Titan set on razing all Nine Realms and the Avengers had somehow fallen apart in the span of a day.

At the meeting, Stark and Banner had huddled together at one end of the conference table with the SHIELD operatives at the opposite end. It felt more like an interrogation than an interview, though it was uncertain which side held the power.

Stark did most of the talking. Banner kept watchful eyes on everyone, glowering at anyone who dared to ask a more aggressive question or take an unfriendly tone, and only spoke to corroborate what Stark had said.

The meeting was a tense affair and ended too quickly after the arrival of Rhodes, who greeted Stark with an enveloping hug that was returned with equal if not more enthusiasm.

Now, Fury was sequestered in his office, pouring over the list of inconsistencies that had somehow escaped his notice. The scope of JARVIS' abilities was staggering and there was no doubt that Stark made for a powerful ally or an equally formidable enemy. The man had

fame, connections, wealth, intelligence, and now a friendship with one Asgardian prince and what Natasha suspected to be a more personal relationship with the other.

Nothing could be gained from Stark that he did not freely give.

Stark had volunteered to shoulder part of the reconstruction costs, stating that he was less interested in avenging and more invested in rebuilding. However, in the event of an attack, they could contact him using the emergency response system he would develop and Iron Man would assist on an as-needed basis despite not being on the team.

Those were very generous offers but Fury read between the lines, what wasn't said, and was filled with dread by the confirmation of what he had guessed.

Stark would not be providing weaponry or base of operations for the Avengers.

Fury had an inkling that their plans would not come to pass when Rogers, Barton, and Romanoff returned to the SHIELD facility last night. Agents scrambled to ready three guest rooms for the unexpected occupants. They had been so sure that Stark, after reviewing Romanoff's assessment, would be goaded into behaving contrarily for the sake of proving SHIELD wrong. Yet he made no mention of opening his home to his teammates or other gestures of good will.

It almost seemed like Stark was a brand new man after he fell out of that wormhole.

Fury understood that war changes people, having experienced it himself and seen it happen enough times with his agents, but it was usually a longer process. Soldiers would try to hold on to their former selves with clawing hands and need time to come to peace with who they were after what they had seen and done. Stark wasn't a soldier yet he adapted faster than any veteran. Too quick for them to adjust and coordinate.

With a sigh, Fury closed the files and locked down his computer. The atrocious cold coffee was poured into the potted plant that miraculously survived despite the lack of sunlight in the office. He pulled out the bottle of whiskey in the false bottom drawer, he needed it to mourn what could have been.

Thanks, Ironic Man

Chapter Notes

This past week hasn't been the easiest for me, just a lot of stuff happening and it's quite overwhelming. There were many moments where I didn't *feel* like writing but *made* myself do it anyway. Because like running, drafting a chapter may not always feel good in the moment, but there's always such a rush of accomplishment when it is done. :)

Now, let's jumping into the events of Iron Man 3!

Tony was brought out his creative haze by a persistent beep followed by a tug at the hem of his shirt. A quick glance at the clock showed it was close to noon, which meant he had been down in the lab for almost six hours. A pathetically short period of time compared to his previous work sessions but now it was the maximum length of hours before he had to *take a break, stretch his legs, or take a breath*, as instructed by Pepper, Rhodey, and Bruce respectively. Despite his griping and grumbling, Tony rather enjoyed the attention.

JARVIS and the bots were, predictably, in full support of this new rule. DUM-E had taken it upon himself to act as the official alarm, hence the noise and the manhandling.

"DUM-E, it's only been five hours and fifty-six minutes." Tony sighed but pushed himself away from the work bench all the same.

DUM-E gestured at the clock on the microwave, which apparently ran four minutes fast.

Tony groaned. "Seriously? Out of all the tech around you, you chose *that* to tell you the time? The clock's not even the microwave's primary function." He linked his hands and raised his arms overhead as he stood, back arching and popping pleasantly with the shifting motion.

U pointed to the empty pizza box in the trash with a victorious ding.

"Yes, its primary function is to reheat food. Good job, U." Tony made his way to the door, where he was intercepted by Butterfinger with a bottle of water clutched tightly between two clamps. It took some wiggling to get the bottle out of the ironclad grip, Butterfinger was quite determined not to live up to his name.

"Sir, the delivery from Ray's has arrived. Dr. Foster and Ms. Lewis are en route to the kitchen."

"Damn it." Tony muttered. "Slow the elevator, lock the doors, do whatever you have to do to keep Darcy away." The last time Darcy had gotten to the food first, she had sprinkled the salad over the pizza and smugly informed a horrified Tony that this was how she planned to get more greens into his diet.

"I will do my best to deter and detain your guests, Sir." It shouldn't be possible for JARVIS to sound sarcastic, but there it was in his electronic voice.

Tony was hit with an ache of overwhelming pride and fierce relief, in the tender space behind the arc reactor. It throbbed with every beat of his heart. All he had lost. All he had regained. He twisted off the cap of the water bottle with shaky fingers and took a hasty gulp.

"Sir?" JARVIS sounded concerned.

"I'm good, just thirsty. Hydration, yay!" Tony saluted Butterfinger with the bottle. "Alright, I'll be back. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." With one last wave at his bots, he headed upstairs.

*

Tony had just slid two slices of pizza onto his paper plate, because no one living there was going to load and unload the dishwasher, when Darcy and Jane walked in.

It had been an *experience* having the two of them around for the past two weeks.

Jane was a delight, her knowledge of astrophysics was only overshadowed by her dedication to the pursuit of it. Tony and Bruce had a blast trading theories and Jane enjoyed the freedom in using scientific jargons instead of translating her studies into layman's terms.

Darcy developed a quick friendship with Pepper, who had teased Tony's choice of inviting two women to stay shortly after their breakup. Pepper had said it with good humor, but the tabloids had not. A quick trip to legal, and three pairs of Jimmy Choos, had sorted it out. Tony refused to let malicious gossip ruin what Pepper and he were able to salvage.

"Hey Tony." Jane greeted, grabbing a plate and loading it up with salad first.

Darcy dove for the pizza, piling parmesan cheese and red pepper flakes on top. "Thanks, Ironic Man."

"Seriously?" Tony scoffed around a bite of pizza. "One Alanis Morissette song, *one*, and now that's my nickname?"

"Well, that and you were blown up by a bomb *literally* with your name on it." Darcy shrugged, picking off the croutons with her fingers and ignoring Jane's reproachful sigh.

"As long as it's not a *taser* with my name on it." Tony arched an eyebrow, giving as good as he got.

"Oh, c'mon! I just got JARVIS to stop calling me *Dr. Foster's associate*." Darcy whined, casting a beseeching look at the ceiling. "It was a joke!"

*

The first thing Darcy did after arriving at Stark Tower was giving Tony a stern warning against taking advantage of Jane, who was vulnerable after Thor's departure, and brandishing

a taser with *Tony Spark* written on it in red and gold glitter to great effect.

Tony laughed uneasily, both hands raised high in a mock surrender, and forced himself not to cover his chest defensively. An instinct he fought against every day since waking up after Siberia. It felt vulnerable to have the arc reactor in his chest again, his *heart* for the world to see.

Darcy grinned, friendly and open, as though she hadn't just issued a serious threat.

Which she had.

There was no medical precedent for the use of an electromagnet to keep shrapnel from shredding a heart, as such, there was no studies or trials documenting the risks and side effects. A jolt from a taser could have no effect, as in cases of patients with pacemakers receiving a shock, or it could damage the electromagnet or change its strength, displacing the shards of metal.

The Iron Man suits had been designed to absorb and redirect electrical currents for this very reason, a foresight Tony was most grateful for during his encounter with Thor. But he wasn't in his armor now.

"Darcy." Jane's brows furrowed, staring at the blue glow through Tony's shirt. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Darcy rolled her eyes. "What? It's funny. *Tony Spark*."

"I fail to see the humor." The warmth that made JARVIS more than *Just a Rather Very Intelligent System* was gone, replaced by a wintry disapproval that was robotic and menacing. "I take all threats levied against Sir with utmost seriousness."

A look of bewilderment fell across Darcy's features.

"The *electromagnet* keeps the shrapnel out of Tony's heart." Jane gently pried the taser out of Darcy's hand and gave it to Tony with an apologetic smile.

Tony took out the taser's battery with deft fingers then offered it back to Darcy without a word.

Understanding dawned in Darcy's wide eyes. "Oh my god! I'm so sorry." She snatched the taser out of Tony's hand and dropped it in her purse as though removing it from sight could undo her mistake.

"No harm done. Not the first time I've been threatened with a taser. Yours at least had style."

"Sir?" JARVIS sounded alarmed, which was never a good thing. For anyone.

"Um." Tony scrambled to redirect the conversation to something less likely to cause a massive server shutdown at SHIELD. Agent was dead, there was no need to bring up his offhanded comment of watching Supernanny while Tony drools into the carpet during the

pallidum poisoning fiasco. He cursed his slip-up, forgetting that JARVIS had been disabled at the time of that conversation. "How about a tour?"

"Yes please!" Darcy jumped at the change in topic and Jane hurriedly nodded, hesitant relief on their faces.

"Alright." Tony wondered if they were worried he would ask them to leave as he ushered them into the elevator, and found himself bothered by that thought. "Take us to the guest floor first, JARVIS, then the lab."

"Very well, Sir." The doors slid close soundlessly. "It would be my pleasure to show Dr. Foster and *her associate* the amenities."

*

"Not a funny one." Bruce commented as he stepped out of the elevator, catching Darcy's plea to JARVIS. He hadn't been amused by the threat either, when JARVIS recounted the incidence, though he could admit that Darcy had no trace of malice in her being. "The Hulk again?" He grabbed the bag of cheesy bread instead. It still felt a bit strange to eat a pizza named after his alter ego, despite Tony's many reassurance that the pesto pizza topped with spinach, broccoli, red onion, Italian sausage and Feta cheese was delicious.

"Ugh. You're all sticks. In. The. Mud." Darcy grunted, punctuating her words by pointing at Tony, Jane, and Bruce with her pizza crust.

The four of them chatted a bit more about the Stark Science Program throughout lunch. It was agreed that the name could use more work, but the overall idea was well-received.

One of the shared experiences among Tony, Bruce, and Jane was the hostility aimed at students who were deemed *too smart* by their peers. While this program would not solve the social issue of bullying, they hoped it would at least give the administrators pause before brushing the problem aside as *kids being kids* or *character building opportunity* and boost the children's profiles and visibility to lessen the chances of isolation.

The three of them, all having held the title of child prodigy, understood the pains of loneliness well.

Darcy threatened to hunt down and taser everyone who'd ever antagonized her friends.

*

Tony was nearly finished with the Mark 80 design when Bruce knocked on the glass door with a tray of food, dinner, which signaled the passing of time.

"Hey, Jolly Green." Tony closed the holographic schematic with a decisive clap.

"Curry from that place around the corner." Bruce set the tray down, the spicy aroma of Panang curry wafted temptingly from the Styrofoam container. The familiarity with the local restaurants spoke volumes of how well Bruce had settled into life at the tower and the fact that the tower's kitchen went largely unused.

Tony picked up the fork and speared a piece of tofu with it. "Thanks for dinner."

"Sure." Bruce leaned against the work bench, updating Tony on what he and Jane had learned from comparing the energy signature of the Tesseract to that of the Bifrost as Tony wolfed down the curry and rice, stomach grumbling for sustenance. Apparently regular meals trained the body to expect food at certain times of the day and Tony's was no exception after three weeks with Bruce as a roommate, who ate frequently to avoid feeling *hangry*.

It was nice, to have another person's voice washing over him as he did something as mundane as eating. It sounded like not being alone anymore. Glancing up at Bruce and intermittently interjecting his own theories, Tony thought Bruce might feel the same.

And that was nice too.

*

Mark 80 was only an Iron Man armor in form, having had all of the weaponry removed because its purpose was to contain, not to combat. This was Tony's solution for the Extremis problem. By combining Mark 15's cloaking system, Mark 23's extreme heat tolerance, and Mark 42's prehensile function, Mark 80 would be able to target those with Extremis heat signature, enclose them within the armor and transport them a safe distance away from the general population before self-destructing.

There would be no second chances for them.

Tony pushed away the painful images flitting through his mind. Happy's bruised and burnt face, slack in a coma. Harley's shaky apology as he struggled against the Extremis soldier's unrelenting grip. Pepper's screams and blazing skin, burning up Tony's heart. None of it had happened yet and it won't.

"JARVIS, go ahead and begin fabrication. Let's go with, um." He scanned through his memories, mentally recreating each scene where he had fought against Extremis soldiers. "Thirty-five."

"Yes, Sir." The machines whirred to life. "Completion is in approximately two weeks."

"Great." Tony dropped face-first onto the futon in the corner of his workshop. "Why am I so tired?" He groaned. "What happened to my superpower of functioning on two hours of sleep?" As it turned out, the body could also be trained to expect regular rest once a pattern had been established.

Tony no longer dreaded nightmares, none could ever be as devastating as what he had already lived through, and flashbacks held no powers over him when he knew he would wake to the miracle of a second chance. Falling asleep was a different matter but Tony had found a cure for it.

The only downside of a healthy lifestyle was the decrease in productivity. Gone were the three-day work binges and the extra hours gained by skipping meals.

"It wasn't a superpower, Sir. It was a condition called insomnia."

"Same thing." Tony mumbled into the pillow.

"No, Sir. They really are not."

Tony turned to lie on his back, throwing an arm over his eyes. "Think it'll work?"

"According to my calculations, Mark 80's prevention rate is 99.7%." JARVIS had accepted Tony's explanation of the dangers of Extremis and the necessity for the extra suits without question, much like how he had believed Tony's confession of *seeing the future or time traveling* the first night after the invasion.

"That's not bad." Tony yawned, settling into the futon.

"Not bad at all, Sir." JARVIS thoughtfully dimmed the lights. "Shall I play the file?"

"Sure thing." It was silly to rely on a soundbite to sleep, but it grounded and reassured him that he would not lose all he held precious by giving in to the need for rest.

Loki's voice flowed from the speakers, cool and comforting. "*Rest, Tony. Slumber will not take you from this place or time. What is done is done.*"

"*Alright, I'm trusting you here.*" Tony mumbled, eyes closing shut and lips curving upward as he drifted off to sleep.

Wait for It...Team Iron Man

Chapter Notes

References/Quotes

Spider-man: Homecoming (small reference, no spoiler).

Sherlock (S04E02).

"ScienceBros?" Tony held out his hand for a high five, which Bruce obliged with a chuckle.

"Sexist!" The women said in unison though there was no heat behind their reprimand.

Tony apologized sheepishly before reaching for the whipped cream to add even more sugar to his ice cream topped cake. The birthday celebration had been a pleasant surprise. Pepper, Rhodey, Happy, Bruce, Jane, Darcy and JARVIS had organized a small get-together in the penthouse, completed with streamers and balloons and a chocolate cake that Tony immediately professed his undying love to. "Iron Minions?"

"Sounds like a *Despicable Me* sequel." Pepper said and, at everyone's incredulous looks, added. "I like animated films, they're surprisingly soothing."

Darcy snickered.

"Stark Science sounded fine to me." Rhodey swiped the can of whipped cream out of Tony's hand. "Learn to share, Tones."

"Only child!" Tony pouted. "Also, boring!"

Jane picked up the near-empty carton of coffee ice cream. "Team Tony?"

"I like the alliteration." Bruce commented, dividing his slice of cake into smaller pieces meticulously.

Pepper shook her head. "Doesn't have enough weight for marketing."

"I got it." Happy flashed Tony a wide grin, proud and protective. "Wait for it...Team Iron Man."

A hush fell over the group as they considered the name.

"Excellent suggestion, Mr. Hogan." JARVIS was the first to speak.

"Nice one." Rhodey said.

Bruce mumbled his agreement through a mouthful of cake.

"I can work with that." Pepper smiled, casting Tony a fond look.

Jane nodded happily.

"Well, looks like we have a winner!" Darcy declared, throwing the bottle of sprinkles up in the air like confetti.

*

JARVIS meticulously combed through the SHIELD data, flagging both names Tony remembered and ones the A.I. deemed suspect.

SHIELD had not been pleased with having their firewall breached and took appropriate measures and countermeasures to ensure it did not happen again. The engineers removed the monitoring software Tony had left behind, all *three* of them according to Fury's latest phone call inquiring after the Avengers emergency response system and warning against actions that could interfere with SHIELD's productivity.

Apparently it had taken the I.T. department a week to locate the surveillance algorithms and the new bi-weekly system scan protocol was horribly time-consuming.

Tony had acquiesced, giving the undoubtedly exhausted technicians a break and letting Fury hold on to some semblance of control. He vowed he won't plant *any more* bugs and he had no trouble keeping that promise. There was no need, not when he already had full access to SHIELD's files and communications.

People always gave up after three, there must be something comforting about that number.

Fury, for his part, was diligently examining each anomaly JARVIS detected and making near-undetectable adjustments to personnel and operations. It should have been heartening to see his words taken seriously by the Director, yet all Tony felt was the bitterness of too little too late.

Story of his life, really.

*

Jane and Darcy returned to New Mexico the day after Tony's birthday. Their original plan was to only stay for two weeks but they extended their trip by a few extra day once JARVIS alerted them of Tony's birthday, because they wanted to celebrate with him. A private jet was set to fly them back home in the afternoon.

In the morning, Jane insisted on touring the Metropolitan Museum of Art and dragged Tony along, stating that art and culture were her gifts to him for his birthday. She had bought the tickets online before Tony could tell her he was member and therefore entitled to free admission, for himself and his guests.

"My gift, my treat." Jane said emphatically when Tony mentioned his membership perks. "I'm a world-renowned astrophysicist, I can spare \$25."

Tony gasped in mock offense. "Seriously? That's it? \$25? I'm *that* cheap of a date?"

"\$35." Darcy made a show of counting out ten one-dollar bills and fanned Tony with them. "I'm buying you a meatball sub for lunch and since it's your birthday, I'll throw in a bag of chips and a large soda too. Maybe even a cookie."

"You ladies sure know how to treat a guy." Tony sighed but there were pleased crinkles at the corners of his twinkling eyes.

*

The board passed the Team Iron Man proposal happily and unanimously.

Stark Industries was still in the midst of rebranding after leaving the weapons business four years ago and positive public perception was of the highest priority.

Recently, Tony made headlines with his move to compensate and contract with the local companies that had lost their jobs when the Department of Damage Control took over the clean-up operation. Collateral damage wasn't limited to the moment of battle, it continued on long after, rippling through the community, city, and country and pulling people under.

Tony understood that now, whereas before it had taken Sokovia to open his eyes. He had felt personally responsible for *Ultron* so he took an active interest in the country's recovery, when he had not with his own city because it wasn't *his* fault that the Chitauris came to Earth. It was selfish and he won't be making that mistake again.

Skeptics questioned whether it was a move designed to garner favor with the public, with Christine leading the witch hunt.

"Does it matter?" Tony slid his Hulk-themed sunglasses down so he could peer at her over the green-tinted lenses. "So what if I'm doing this to make myself look better? Doesn't change the fact that hard-working people now have a paycheck, a big one, to look forward to. Plus, would you have believed me if I said I was doing this out of the goodness of my cold metal heart?" He smirked and tapped at the glowing light in his chest.

Christine floundered hilariously for a rebuttal.

"See, you're trying to set me up for a damned-if-I-do and damned-if-I-don't, lose-lose situation. I much prefer where I'm standing, a win-win for my company, with *thousands* of employees, and my city." He walked past her with a dismissive wave and slid into the car with its door held open by Happy, who gave him a high-five.

Bruce did the same when Tony returned with an armful of Chinese for lunch, a pair of Iron Man sunglasses perched proudly atop his head.

*

Tony also earned a fair amount of political capital for his part in funding the reconstruction efforts. Unlike before, he was more patient with politicians and their games; he had always known how to play and played for his amusement but never felt the motivation to play to win.

Until the Accords, but by then everything had been being too little, too late.

Now Tony knew the importance of owed favors and uncollected debt.

Legislators were easy, upcoming elections meant they were desperate to keep their constituents happy. Job security and career opportunity worked extraordinarily well to boost approval ratings. Tony developed relationships with members of the Senate and Congress, including undercover HYDRA operatives such as Senator Stern. It would be suspicious to exclude them and they asked fewer questions when they believed they can manipulate him.

The military was still wary of the sincerity of his cooperation. General Ross holding onto a grudge the same way he desperately clung to power but not everyone was a fan of Thunderbolt. Tony planned to use every tool available, from a sledgehammer to a wrecking ball, to demolish Ross.

*

"Oh thank god!" Rhodey exclaimed as he surveyed the rows of Mark 80s, body slumping in relief. "I *knew* something's wrong with you."

"Hey!"

"Look, you're eating regular meals—"

"Bruce Bear doesn't like to eat alone!"

"—sleeping six hours at night—"

"JARVIS, you traitor!"

"—barely drinking—"

"You're the one always lecturing about my liver!"

"—you're so well-adjusted that it was freaking me out!"

"You're *really* making me question my good life choices here, Gummy Bear." Tony grumbled, berating himself for his thoughtlessness. The recent changes to his lifestyle had been the result of spending hours lying in the freezing bunker in Siberia, literally left out in the cold and filled with regrets. *I should have known better*. So when the second chance presented itself, Tony seized it with both hands. He knew better and he could do better. So he did. But to Rhodey, his behaviors must seem sudden and uncharacteristic.

Once again, Tony debated telling his best friend what had happened. And once again, he decided against it. Rhodey was a man of science. While he might believe Tony, he would also

demand answers. Answers Tony, for once in his life, did not want to pursue. He just wanted to enjoy this without taking it apart, questioning its point, and rationalizing away the *magic*. It wasn't logical, but fear seldom was.

The only two beings who knew of Tony's bizarre experience were JARVIS and Loki. One asked only how he can assist and the other offered advice instead of questions.

"Now it all makes sense, this is how you've been dealing with the, you know." Rhodey waved his arms in big, sweeping motions before pulling Tony in for a hug.

"Yeah, yeah." Tony mumbled, quietly relieved that Rhodey had assigned his own interpretation to Tony's behaviors, and returned the embrace. He leaned his weight against his friend and felt a wave of joy when Rhodey supported it easily, feet planted and legs strong.

"Pepper's worried too." Rhodey patted Tony's back reassuringly. "She thinks you're bottling it all up."

Tony reared back. "She does? She didn't say anything—"

Rhodey let him go but kept an arm around Tony's shoulder. "Well, with the breakup, she didn't know if she could."

"She can, she totally can. I—" Tony let his head drop. "Crap, and I thought we handled it so well."

"You did. It was the most mature breakup in the history of all breakups." Rhodey quirked a smile. "No drinks thrown or tell-all interviews."

"Shut up." Tony rolled his eyes.

"It'll just take some time to figure out where you stand with each other, that's all."

Tony sighed but nodded in acceptance.

After a moment, Rhodey let go and approached the rows of armor. "So, tell me about your new toys."

"Mark 80. Rescue and retrieval armor, remotely controlled. I was, um, reviewing some of the Chitauri Invasion footage and the response time for stranded and injured civilians can use some improvement, a lot of improvement actually." It wasn't a lie, Mark 80 *did* have other applications other than its primary one.

"If it can do pick-ups then it can do drop-offs." Rhodey eyed the sleeker and slimmer outline of the armor. "Wish we had one of these five weeks and two days ago, then you wouldn't had to fly into that damn—" A sharp inhale. "—damn portal."

"Hey, hey." Tony gripped Rhodey's elbow and steered his friend around to face him. "I'm okay. The big bad wormhole spat me right out."

"Yeah, just in time too." Rhodey's voice was brittle and bitter and his eyes glistened with tears.

"Are you crying?" Tony crowed, forcing smugness because he knew from experience that annoyance was the fastest way to snap Rhodey out of his melancholy. "I knew you loved me, Honey Bear."

"Ugh. I'm trying to have a moment here." Rhodey complained half-heartedly.

"An *emotional* moment." Tony shuddered. "I'm allergic, gives me hives."

"Fine, whatever." Rhodey huffed. "I love you and I know you love me too." He ignored Tony's indignant squawk and changed the topic before Tony could protest. "You know they will see this as a threat, right? Even if these suits aren't designed for combat." He turned to stare at the gleaming suits, a furrow between his brows.

"Well, then use those super awesome military liaison powers of yours and *abracadabra* it so they see the Iron Legion as an asset." Tony picked up a blue folder and handed it to his friend. "Cool name, right? I even prepared some talking points for you." He watched as Rhodey took it with a look of grateful surprise, almost as if Tony had never done such a thing before. Which, to be fair, he hadn't. But now he understood the difficult position Rhodey held, defending Tony's choices and shouldering the brunt of the backlash. It was time for Tony to lessen that burden and, in the process, lay down some subtle groundwork for superhero and government collaborations. He was great at multi-tasking.

Rhodey's appreciation morphed into exasperation when he opened the folder and found it empty.

"I emailed it! You weren't seriously expecting me to *print* things, were you, Cupcake?" Tony scrunched up his face against the smack on his nose. "Hey, don't damage the prop. It makes me look all professional handing people paperwork."

"Until they realize there is *no* paperwork." Rhodey aimed for a scowl but the upturned corners ruined the effect.

"Eh, it's the thought that counts."

"Well, I appreciate it." Rhodey bumped against Tony's shoulder. "It'll definitely make things easier if they think you're cooperating."

Tony scoffed. "I'm not cooperating with *them*, I'm cooperating with *you*."

"Well, thanks for the job security then." Rhodey grinned. "So what's with the number 80?"

"I like the 80s." The number was actually the sum of the other Iron Man suits - 15, 23, and 42 - that inspired this model, but considering they didn't and wouldn't exist, it was easier to offer a non-answer. "JARVIS?"

Back in Black immediately blasted from the speakers, the bass vibrating through the walls and the armors, making the metal shimmer as if they were coming to life.

An army of defenders was better than a team of Avengers.

Rhodey bobbed his head to the beat, laughing when Tony joined in, playing an air guitar.

*

The Team Iron Man program offered both grants for M.I.T. graduate students and scholarships for children, fifth through twelfth grade, across the country.

Pepper would be in charge of the grant, monitoring the proposals and progress with JARVIS' assistance. It felt like an old wound healed, the remembered ache of seeing her name on the teleprompter but not her person dissipated from his chest. Rhodey offered to help, assuming his schedule allowed for it. Tony teased him about wanting to relive his glory days and received a thorough ruffling of his hair for the remark.

Bruce would be heading up the scholarship program, reviewing the applications of merit after JARVIS filtered through preliminary batch. The recipients' schools would be eligible to receive upgrades to their facilities and equipment. It would be good for Bruce to have another focus outside of his research, especially one where the level of engagement being as much or as little as he chooses.

Everything was coming together nicely, in a way Tony hadn't anticipated but definitely appreciated. For as much as he had tried to improve the world by removing the bad, the darkness never abated.

Maybe what it needed was a bit of light and no amount of brightness could ever be too little or too late.

You Weren't and Aren't Alone

Chapter Notes

I, um, don't know what happened...? I had set out to lay the groundwork for Tony meeting Harley (yes, that's happening!) then all the angst...appeared? Obviously, while Tony *seemed* fine in previous chapters, he wasn't *actually* fine. To clarify, Tony did not inject himself with Extremis in the original timeline before undergoing surgery to have the shrapnel removed, since we never saw anything to confirm it canonically. So it was a pretty significant medical risk and one that he's rightfully hesitant to take again.

Updates will still be Fridays but closer to mid-day than early morning, because I need to reset my sleep schedule. :)

References/Quotes

Pottermore.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (S04E12).

How I Met Your Mother.

June turned into July in a blink of an eye.

With the Mark 80s standing by, Tony divided his attention between improving medical technology and upgrading Rhodey's suit. The two areas seemed unrelated to everyone else and Tony shrugged off any questions with explanations of him being a bored genius capable of extreme multi-tasking.

At any given time, there were at least three projects in various active stages and many more running concurrently in the background. JARVIS oversaw them all and provided necessary updates. The new StarkPhone prototype was being fabricated, it took no time at all since Tony had already done it once before. Same with the navigation system for the air force and the arc reactor fueled water purifier for South Africa.

Tony kept busy and stayed productive, but sometimes his mind drifted in the brief lulls between projects and found himself sketching out blueprints for an Iron Man suit meant for sub-zero climate.

Sometimes he realized it during the preliminary outlines and other times he snapped back to full awareness running the numbers for armor integrity. The unpleasant taste in his mouth was always the same.

The faintest hint of copper clashing with soured bitterness. Like the dizziness-induced vomit he forcibly swallowed back down with blood-tinged saliva as he laid on the floor on a HYDRA bunker. Sense memory was a funny thing.

Each time Tony pushed the hologram away with stiff and aching fingers, like they were frost-bitten. His chest throbbed painfully, feeling the presence of the arc reactor as though it had been violently shoved into his rib cage. Breathing became difficult and each drag of air a wheeze, acutely similar to having a hand around his throat, *his mother's neck*. He shuddered, shaking off the memory and the sensation of a coldness that burned.

He could not afford to go down that spiraling path that was a detour from the more important and dire problems.

Extremis. HYDRA. The Accords.

At least the Scepter was off-world and Ultron would not happen.

The catastrophes to come took precedent over the tragedy already occurred.

Tony repeated this to himself as he willed his panic away, reminded himself that nothing would bring his parents back, and absolutely avoided thinking about how they died. He pushed unsteadily to a standing and fled from the floating hologram titled Siberia, which JARVIS saved in a hidden folder along with the other similarly unfinished designs.

DUM-E watched, disappointed and fretful, as Tony hastily stumbled out of the workshop for the missed opportunity of serving as an alarm clock.

*

The elevator opened to reveal the kitchen, instead of the penthouse Tony had instructed JARVIS to bring him to.

Tony cast a scowl that was filled with too much amusement and appreciation to be cutting. He made his way over to the counter, where Bruce was seated and entranced by the tablet in front of him. The cup of tea by his elbow had cooled some time ago.

Team Iron Man was announced to the public last week and already hundreds of schools had submitted thousands of names of students interested in and qualified for the program. The scope was clear significantly larger than they had anticipated but still within the range of JARVIS' immense capabilities, the A.I. filtered through the data and presented Pepper and Bruce with lists of promising projects and names.

Pepper handled the M.I.T. side with her usual aplomb and grace, already setting up appointment to meet with the qualified students once the fall semester began.

Bruce and Tony had talked about going to some of the schools personally to encourage the children and demonstrate their commitment, with JARVIS selecting which ones using a randomizing algorithm. They were set to leave at the beginning of September.

"Hey, Jolly Green." Tony poured the forgotten cup of tea down the drain, a few drops splashed onto his still trembling hand.

"Tony." Bruce blinked. "When did you get here?"

"Um, somewhere between *simulacrum of organic tissue* and *regeneration*." Tony took an upside-down peek at the tablet. "Are you reading Doctor Who forums again?"

"That happened *one* time." Bruce grumbled fondly. "And no, this is Dr. Cho's latest article."

Tony flinched at the mention of the geneticist who was forever associated with Ultron and Vision in his mind. He disguised the involuntary movement by crouching down to pull out a small pot from the cupboards. "Sounds like a good time. You want some hot chocolate?" He set it down on the stove-top.

"It's three in the afternoon, isn't that a bit early for hot chocolate?" Bruce chuckled when Tony gave him an incredulous look and raised his hands in a placating manner as he retrieved the milk and half-and-half from the fridge.

"That's what I thought." Tony huffed, turning to the pantry for the gourmet chocolate bars while Bruce added equal amounts of milk and half-and-half to the pot and turned the stove on low.

Bruce returned to his tablet as Tony set to break the chocolate bars into smaller pieces by hand. The mindless and repetitive motion slowly soothed his frayed nerves.

"You alright?" Bruce asked as Tony scooped the fragments into his hands to sprinkle into the pot of warming milk. "Want to talk about it?"

"Um, I will be." Tony stirred the mixture with listless twists of his wrist. "Hot chocolate fixes everything, right? It works against Dementors after all." He neatly bypassed the second question.

Bruce hummed noncommittally, but Tony could feel Bruce's concerned stare like a physical presence at his back.

For a few minutes, the only sound was the gentle swish as Tony stirred the melting chocolate chunks into the bubbling milk. He poured the hot chocolate into two mugs and topped them with a generous serving of whipped cream. "It cools down faster." Tony offered in defense of his sugar-centric life choices. "It's a scientific fact." He took a sip and sighed contentedly as the warmth traveled down his throat and curled in his chest.

"It's the arc reactor, isn't it?" Bruce's question was asked in a whisper but the way it made Tony jump was more akin to a shout.

"What makes you say that?" It wasn't a *no*. Tony considered having the shrapnel removed, like he had done before, but the risks had been high and there was no guarantee that his luck would hold out again. He'd only just gotten this second chance months ago and there was so much, *too much*, to be done for him to endanger it with unnecessary experimental surgery.

Bruce nodded toward Tony's hand, the one not holding the mug, the one splayed over the glowing light in his chest. Tony dropped it hastily.

"You cover it up a lot, your breathing gets strained sometimes, and you make this face—" Bruce scrunched his face as though he'd just bitten into something sour. "When you think we aren't looking."

"*We?*" Tony tried to keep the hurt out of his voice, but the thought of the people he had welcomed into his home talking about him behind his back was agonizing. He could remember the way conversations had halted when he entered the room, the guilty glances trade among the Avengers, and the abrupt subject changes.

"Just me and Jim." Bruce said with a casualness that seemed cruel.

"Who the hell is Jim?" Tony joked weakly, hiding the roughness in his voice with a gulp of the hot chocolate that no longer tasted sweet. Bruce was either oblivious or uncaring, Tony desperately hoped it was the former.

"Rhodey." Bruce chuckled with a shake of his head and froze when he saw the tenseness Tony couldn't quite hide. "Hey, hey." He moved closer, reaching out a hand that Tony backed away from. "I'm sorry, we were, are, all worried about you."

"Yeah. Because I'm such a fuck-up." Everything was falling apart, slipping through his fingers like trying to catch a snowflake. Even when he had it in his palm, it never stayed and always melted away. He thought of *snow*, *cold*, and *ice*.

Bruce looked like he was in pain, which made no sense at all. "No, because you're *human*."

"I'm Iron Man." Tony retorted automatically, borrowing strength from Howard's words *Stark men are made of iron*. He thought of *Howard*, *Maria* and the *car accident*.

"You're Tony to us." Bruce said softly. "And we worry because that's what friends do." He cringed. "The arc reactor seemed to be bothering you lately."

"It's fine." Tony lied. It was difficult to have arc reactor back in his chest, he hadn't had to deal with the restricted lung capacity, the ever-present light, and metallic coconut taste for four years. In many ways, it felt like the early days of Afghanistan all over again. Relearning his body and the new addition he hadn't asked for. He thought of *Barnes*, *the Winter Soldier*, and *the metal arm*. "I'm used to it. Um, I'll get used to it." Tony amended at Bruce's skeptical squint.

"What if you don't have to?" Bruce spun the tablet around and slid it toward Tony. "Dr. Cho's research proposes a regeneration cradle that utilizes simulacrum for cell repairs. There's no possibility of deterioration and the nano-molecular functionality is instantaneous."

"She's creating synthetic tissue." Tony mumbled to himself, dazed that the very thing he wished to avoid had somehow found a way to him. He thought of *the mind stone*, *Ultron*, and *Vision*.

"It can repair the damage—"

"No!" The word came out harsher than Tony had intended, judging by the way Bruce balked. "Just. No. Thanks, I really– But– No." He couldn't articulate the storm of feelings he was caught in, fear pushing him into panic and doubt pulling him away from hope. It was, *felt*, wrong to use the cradle. Even if he couldn't pinpoint the exact reason why. There was a tightness in his chest and his vision had gone fuzzy around the edges.

"Hey, Tony. Tony. I'm sorry I brought it up. Just breathe with me, alright? In and out. C'mon. In and out."

Bruce's voice warbled as though it was far away, but Tony could feel the other scientist's grip on his elbow. He didn't remember standing up nor Bruce coming closer, but he followed the directions and felt everything rushing back into focus. It was like being underwater and breaking through the surface, every inhale was a gasp and every exhale was a pant.

"That's it, you're doing great." Bruce was steering him toward the couch. "In and out."

"I'm fine." Tony slumped against the plush leather and let his head fall back, blinking away the moisture in his eyes. "I'm fine." He wasn't sure if he was trying to convince Bruce or himself.

"You know, it's okay to be *not fine* sometimes." Bruce set a hand on Tony's shoulder and kept it there until Tony glanced up questioningly. "I'm not fine sometimes either." He tightened his grip minutely before moving away to the kitchen. "I'll get you some water."

"Thanks." Tony whispered, forcing that single syllable through chapped lips and dry throat. The fact that he was grateful for *something*, even if he hadn't know *what* exactly, was enough to make him relax fully.

*

The leg braces were designed quickly, Tony had the idea for them ever since Rhodey fell in Germany and it was simply a matter of making conceptual plans into a concrete contraption. He hoped they would help others with paralysis and he prayed Rhodey would never need them.

The Stark Industries board was immensely pleased to expand into another field. Medical professionals were intrigued by Tony's invention. While past experiences had taught them to be skeptical of anything promising to be a cure, the leg braces were meant to be a quality-of-life improvement tool and therefore nonthreatening to their expertise. Doctors, as it turned out, could be quite touchy about an outsider crashing their party. Several renowned surgeons inquired about clinical trials and had their names attached to the project.

War Machine - with Tony's renewed involvement and existing connection with the military, it would never bear the atrocious name *Iron Patriot* - was outfitted for a spinal support mechanism, two back-up energy source, and a parachute. The armor already had more bulk than the sleeker Iron Man model, so the additions did not seem out-of-place.

Rhodey whistled appreciatively when he saw the new model but the excitement faded as Tony listed off the improvements, which Tony noticed immediately.

"What's wrong, Honey Bunch?"

"Last week, I flew my one hundredth combat mission." Rhodey held up a hand to stop Tony from cheering congratulations and received a high-five for it. "Thank you, but that wasn't why I brought it up." He waited a few seconds, making sure Tony knew there was no way to redirect the conversation to lighter territory. "Now I'd be lying if I said falling doesn't terrify me and these upgrades help a lot, so really, thanks Tones."

Tony opened his mouth then closed it promptly when Rhodey made a zipping motion across his own lips.

"But I know it wasn't fear for *me* that made you add these changes, because out of the two of us, *you're* the one who actually fell. So is this also how you've been dealing?"

"No." Tony's denial was instinctual, he bit back the correction that they had *both* fallen. The slow-motion and horror-filled replay of Rhodey plummeting through the sky haunted him still.

Rhodey arched an unconvinced eyebrow.

"Maybe."

Rhodey's eyebrow remained lifted, it was kind of baffling how he was able to control his facial muscles with such precision.

"Yes." Tony sighed. It wasn't entirely a lie, improving War Machine was a coping mechanism. Just for a different trauma than what Rhodey had in mind.

"Well, I think you're doing a great job so far."

"Uh oh, you have but-face." Tony clarified at Rhodey's unimpressed look. "What? You look like you're going to say but."

"*But.*" Rhodey placed a comical amount of emphasis on that word, him indulging Tony was one of the many reasons why they were friends. "You don't have to do it alone."

All traces of humor left Tony in an instant. "You talked to Bruce."

"Yeah." Rhodey had the decency to look contrite. "It's all part of the 'you don't have to do it alone' plan. Um, he mentioned your, um, *moment.*"

The specifically careful word choice surprised a chuckle out of Tony. "Yeah, it was a *moment* alright."

"We all have them." Rhodey's eyes grew solemn and serious, he suddenly seemed thousands of miles away. Tony was acutely aware of the years Rhodey had spent, still spent, on active duty. "Look, I'm not saying join a support group or hire a therapist, but I am saying you don't have to carry it all by yourself." He rolled his eyes, some of the playfulness returning between them. "No, building a suit to carry your emotional baggage isn't a valid solution."

"Challenge acc-"

"Just, think about it, okay? You weren't and aren't alone."

"You know." Tony mused, reviewing the little moments over the past few months. "I'm beginning to get that." He smiled.

We Are Done Here

Chapter Notes

I should just stop mentioning what's in next chapter because it never goes according to my plan. I start to write about Tony meeting Harley then realized there's some unfinished business before Tony can take off for a cross-country trip, so...ta-da!

Posting a bit early since I have a packed day tomorrow. :)

References/Quotes

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The Iron Legion was well received by the United States military and *extremely* well received by the public.

Ross was practically foaming at the mouth over Tony ingratiating himself with what the Lieutenant General considered to be *his* circle, but he was forced to stand down by President Ellis.

The President was quite appreciative of Tony's willingness to lend the Iron Legion to the armed forces, which complimented his reelection platform of a stronger focus on security and domestic protection following the Incident.

After so much destruction, the people needed the comfort of knowing there is a team dedicated to providing protection instead of eliminating threats. While the two objectives might seem similar at first glance, there was actually a significant difference in regards to how each side viewed collateral damage - one considered civilian safety as most important while the other viewed capturing criminals as the priority.

It was a lesson that had taken Tony years to learn, that the Avengers hadn't grasped, and he desperately hoped it wouldn't be too late this time.

The first Iron Legion operation, oversaw by Rhodey, was a small scale search and rescue mission in the Middle East. It was declared an absolute success and sustained no casualties. The photo of War Machine, a portrait of stoic strength in dark gray, flanked by five Iron Legionnaires in muted silver made headlines and magazine covers for weeks.

Rhodey had indeed worked his military liaison magic and the trick was misleading them on the exact number of Iron Legionnaires available. As far as the government knew, there were only five and they were all under the command of the United States military. Revealing that

Tony had thirty-five Mark 80s in waiting would certainly raise questions, questions that Ross would be all too eager to ask and not hesitate to use whatever means necessary for the answers. Not to mention scarcity increased the rarity of any resource. Rhodey had clearly picked up a few things from his best friend over the years; after all, one did not escape the dean of School of Engineering's wrath without gaining some serious skills in the arts of prevarication and obfuscation.

Slowly, Iron Legionnaires were deployed on independent missions. Ellis brought up the idea to rename Iron Man the *Iron Patriot*, as a harmless joke, after seeing the latest polls and the double-digit bump, chuckling over his own clever wordplay and commending Tony for his service.

Only JARVIS' soothing voice in his ear prevented Tony from bolting out of the Oval Office. He managed a weak protest about how iconic Iron Man sounds and swiftly moved on to other matters. It felt a bit like an out-of-body experience as Tony's mind panicked over all the possibilities and meanings of this new development while his body carried on a conversation seamlessly and walked itself to the car when the meeting ended.

Tony practically collapsed in the back seat, mumbling for Happy to just drive when the other man shot him a concerned look.

JARVIS, who knew the significance of *Iron Patriot*, calmly and patiently went over the statistics of Ellis' joke being a chance occurrence versus a intentional sign. Eventually, Tony found enough confidence to dismiss it as nothing more than a random meshing of popular words applied to the wrong person.

Happy greeted him with a takeout bag smelling deliciously of cheeseburger and fries when Tony rolled down the divider. "Got you covered, Boss."

"Thanks, Hap." Tony felt the corners of his lips tug up into a smile, still a bit shaky but becoming steadier as he bit into the cheeseburger. He was lucky to call Happy a friend, the man had been a solid and constant presence in his life for the past decade. "You excited for the road trip?"

"I wouldn't call driving back to Manhattan a proper road trip." Happy grumbled in good humor.

"The one for the Team Iron Man program." Tony said through a mouthful of fries.

"Oh." Happy was quiet for only a few seconds, but the pause was noticeable.

"What?" Tony frowned. "You got a vacation planned? If that's the case, it's no big deal. Just join us when you're back."

"Didn't think I was going, that's all." Happy shrugged, a tired lift and drop of his shoulders that looked like defeat. "Not like you need a body guard or anything."

Tony gaped, uncaring that the cheeseburger was slowly collapsing in his lax fingers. A memory slammed into the forefront of his mind.

Do you know what happened when I told everyone I was Iron Man's bodyguard? They would laugh in my face.

The half-chewed bread and beef tasted too dry and too burnt on his tongue, and it took more effort than Tony would care to admit to swallow it down. The lump lodging itself in his throat, blocking the apologies fighting to get out and clashing against the wave of regret.

Before, Happy had driven him to visit the Avengers, scattered through the city because they refused the invitation to the tower, when Tony had been trying to establish some kind of a bond between them. Desperate to be part of the *superhero club*. The same group of people who had rejected him and laughed so outrageously when Happy introduced himself as Tony's body guard, habit from all the years when Happy had kept Tony out of harm's way. At the time, Tony had thought the laughter was directed at him, *rich boy playing superhero and needing protection out of the armor*. Maybe it was, or maybe it was an honest misunderstanding, but it had hurt Happy and Tony hadn't even known. Hadn't made the effort to know. Then he remembered Happy's voice, gruff and faraway.

Yeah, I miss you too. But the way it used to be. Now you're off with the superfriends. I don't know what's going on with you anymore.

"Good thing you're more than that, way more." The words came, unbidden and true. "You're my friend, Hap, one of my best friends. You've seen me through a lot of crazy stuff and you never made me *feel* crazy, even when I feel like that myself. God, you didn't even bat an eye when I asked for a cheeseburger and just got me one." That was when Tony noticed the nearly-deconstructed cheeseburger and hastily set it back in the takeout bag. "Like just now."

"Oh geez." Happy grouched. "Do we have to?" He shuddered. "Feelings. Talking."

A startled laugh tore out of Tony's throat, taking the weight of *what-had-been* with it. "Obviously this is a sign that our friendship has transcended mere words."

Happy was clearly ready to be done with this conversation, based on the way he was fidgeting in his seat. "Let's go with that one."

"Alright." Tony nodded and waited until Happy settled down somewhat. "But I'm giving you a hug later."

"Fine, fine." Happy smiled, then said quietly. "For the record, I was just happy to have you back, still am."

"Two hugs!" Tony declared.

Happy groaned exaggeratedly but didn't protest.

*

Countries sought assistance from the Iron Legion for matters such as clearing hazardous materials, delivering much-needed aid to isolated populations, and laying the groundwork for massive and near insurmountable construction projects - such as roadways across the African

continent. A group of delegates approached Tony directly with the request and the timing couldn't have worked out better. Here was a perfectly respectable reason for Tony to begin production on, say, thirty Iron Legionnaires to accommodate the scope of the project, bringing the total number of the Iron Legion up to thirty-five.

Tony asked to first confer with the President, who agreed readily and appreciate the courtesy gesture as well as the opportunity for yet another ratings bump.

Political goodwill came as easily as breathing, the victorious air tasted even sweeter with the knowledge that Ross was suffocating and would soon be put out of his misery via a timely resignation.

"Nine out of ten African aid projects fail because the medicine or the personnel can't get to the people in need. Infrastructure is the problem and one that we haven't been able to solve until now." President Ellis' voice played over the footage of him shaking hands with various leaders of African countries. "The United States' very own Iron Legion will gladly take on the initial burden of transporting the material and setting the foundation for a network of connected highways."

They watched the news clip over a bowl of popcorn. Tony and Rhodey on the couch with Pepper perched on the armrest while Bruce and Happy made themselves comfortable in the recliners. JARVIS dutifully saved a copy for the archive and quietly stated how proud he was proud of his creator, a sentiment echoed loudly by everyone.

Tony opened and closed his mouth a few times, and when no words came, he hesitantly shaped it into a shy smile before hiding it behind a handful of popcorn.

*

"Sir, Agent Romanoff is in the lobby and requesting your company." JARVIS announced. "She has also inflicted a small virus to my system via the terminal at the information desk, most likely to distract me from SHIELD's engineers' working to dismantle the outermost firewall."

"Is it working?" Tony smirked, fully trusting of his A.I. abilities.

"Not at all, though I will allow them the illusion that it is. The infection was detected within 0.2 seconds and the affected area has been quarantined. I've also taken the liberty to execute Protocol Abyss."

The counter-attack protocol was based on the famous Nietzsche quote: *When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.* JARVIS hadn't been too thrilled to be compared to the abyss, but it was an apt name. Natasha's phone would be an open book to JARVIS in the matter of minutes.

"Excellent as always, JARVIS." Tony slowed the treadmill and started on some upper body stretches as he cooled down. "Send her up in ten and loop those amateurs through some hurdles before they spin the wheel for their prize."

The *prize* was the amount of time JARVIS would allow the SHIELD technicians to access the preapproved and prearranged information before 'detecting' the intrusion. Tony had learned long ago that the best way to remove unwanted eyes was not to shine a bright light, as satisfying as that might be, but to limit what they can and do see.

SHIELD had predictably continued to monitor Tony's activities after he declined the offer to be an Avenger, as they had done since his return from Afghanistan and the Iron Man suit became a subject of interest.

Before, Tony had allowed the surveillance because he thought they were on the same side, fighting to better the world and balancing the debt he had incurred. So he had been lenient with their less-than-legal and more-than-inappropriate means, such as Fury's use of Stane's codes to enter the Malibu mansion shortly after the battle of Los Angeles.

Tony had been somewhat impressed that Fury managed to break in and definitely intrigued by what the Director had to say. In turn, he had hoped that SHIELD would find him impressive and intriguing. So he had treated them with some semblance of respect and tolerated their lack thereof, unaware of the imbalance until it was tipped entirely in their favor and at his expense. Tony had handed over the keys to his house and workshop and bank account, expecting nothing in return but the validation of being useful.

Now, Tony saw it as confirmation of being used.

Fury's actions had reeked of manipulation, exploiting Tony's fragile mental state after his near-death experience by his godfather's hands. Had Fury wished to nurture feelings of trust and partnership, breaking into a potential ally's home was not a sound recruitment strategy; however, had the goal been to snare an asset...

When Tony shared this realization with Pepper and Rhodey, hoping to obviate their objections against distancing himself from SHIELD, he was pleasantly surprised when both of them agreed readily and voiced their own distrust and dislike toward the secret government agency. Pepper had been suspicious ever since Natalie Rushman turned out to be Natasha Romanoff and Rhodey's dissatisfaction with the Avengers applied toward SHIELD.

Bruce didn't need any persuasion. There was no love lost between SHIELD and him, the cage on the helicarrier had seen to that.

"Yes, Sir." JARVIS sounded gleeful. The A.I. was understandably upset by SHIELD's past crude methods and significantly more so after Tony had confided what the future held if he were to remain an Avenger. "I hope they're feeling lucky."

*

"Consulting hours are every other Friday from one to two." Tony called out when he heard the elevator arrive, pulling a hoodie over his sweat-drenched tank top.

Natasha's voice was all annoyance and zero amusement. "Today is Friday and it is 1:52PM."

"In that case, c'mon in!" Tony poured himself a glass of cucumber-infused water. He did not offer her any.

A series of emotions flickered through her eyes, too fast for Tony to identify, before she schooled her features into one of relaxed openness. "You're looking well." She moved to lean against the weight rack, sending him a conspiratorial smirk. "Almost dying agrees with you."

Tony frowned at the flippant tone and off-handed reference, recognizing them as tools to establish rapport – a compliment, an allusion a shared experience and some gentle teasing. He would have welcomed such a gesture once upon a time, *celebrated* it even, but now he saw through the measured words and calculated lilt. A part of him felt thrilled at decoding the Black Widow but mostly he just felt exhausted. "How about we skip the small talk? After all, you only got eight minutes left before consulting hour is over."

Natasha stared at him for several seconds, smirk fading from her lips as she obviously did not find what she had hoped. "Got somewhere to be?"

"The shower." Tony sniffed himself exaggeratedly, faking a wince for effect when all he smelled was the clean scent of the laundry detergent on the hoodie. "Seven minutes." It was laughably easy to decipher Natasha's different modes, now that he knew what to watch for. The friendly expression rippled into something harsher, more militant, with a small roll of her shoulders.

"We need more fire power." The soft cadence of her speech was replaced with an almost hostile curtness, which Tony actually appreciated because it was, at least, honest.

"That's none of my business, literally." Tony shrugged to disguise the tension in his shoulders. "Stark Industries shut down the weapons manufacturing division years ago."

Natasha glared. "This is different."

"Not from where I'm standing." Tony took a sip of his water, his throat suddenly felt too dry. The truth was, he would have been open to design body armor or other defensive gear for the Avengers, had she asked with basic respect and common courtesy.

"Then you should move."

"No." Tony snapped. He knew he was overreacting and Natasha was no doubt picking up on it, but he had enough of being told to *move*, to *compromise*, to *fold*. "Look, your current set-up is fine. SHIELD's tech department does fine work."

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "There's always room for improvement."

"True, but do you *need* these improvements?" He arched an eyebrow at her and stifled a chuckle when she scowled at the trap – to admit they needed upgrades was to disparage their own skills.

"Call it competitiveness, but we'd like to keep up with Cap in the field." She shot back, bypassing the taunts and throwing one of her own. "That shield your father made is a work of

art."

It was a challenge reminiscent of *that thing in your chest is based on unfinished technology*, one that Tony ignored in favor of calming his breathing as he remembered the sharp crack of the shield slamming into his chest and the dull clank of it hitting the floor. Howard's *work of art* turned against his son then carelessly discarded. "We are done here." He was proud by how steady his voice sounded.

"There's still three minutes left." Natasha tilted her head toward the digital clock on the wall, peering at Tony with the precision of a surgeon preparing to cut into flesh.

"I'm afraid that clock runs a bit slow, Agent Romanoff." JARVIS intoned. The display suddenly jumped forward three minutes and read 2:00PM.

"Does it now?" Natasha sneered as she pulled out her phone and paled when the same time impossibly blinked back at her.

"Tell Fury I'm billing him for the full hour." In that one sentence, Tony had effectively confirmed his continued working relationship with SHIELD, reasserted his consultant status, and made clear Fury was the preferred liaison.

Natasha must have understood, judging by her stiff nod and swift exit.

Tony was on a different level than the Avengers now.

There Was Also Chad Davis

Chapter Notes

Have no fear, this is Part 1 of Tony Meeting Harley, there will be a Part 2. :)

I calculated Tony's consultant rate based on RDJ's purported earnings for the Avengers (\$50 millions) as his annual salary and figured out his hourly rate based on 52 work weeks in a year and 40 hours a week. Though I'm sure Tony makes much more than that.

"Sir, there is a pending deposit to your account in the amount of \$25,000, from one of SHIELD's cover agencies." JARVIS announced as Tony checked the briefcase containing the travel Iron Man suit, he had made vast improvements to the portable model since the Mark 5 days. "It *may* have something to do with the undisclosed censure on Agent Romanoff's record and the new reductions made to her monthly salary over the next twelve months." The A.I. sounded inordinately pleased.

Tony hummed, smirking a bit at Fury's attempt to make amends. It was a direct demonstration of willingness to maintain civility between Stark Industries and SHIELD as well as an indirect elevation of Tony's consultant status to be above an agent's.

Small steps forward, but in the right direction.

*

Late July brought an unprecedented heat wave that prompted Tony to suggest retreating to Malibu, the proximity to the ocean would make the grueling summer tolerable and the time difference would help him evade pestering legislators.

Bruce was shocked when he realized a second, possibly third, suitcase was needed to fit all of his belongings. He sheepishly explained that it had been years since he last felt comfortable enough to acquire more things than what would fit into a backpack as he traveled - hid - around the world. "Thanks Tony, from both of us." Bruce's voice had an echoing duality to it.

Tony twitched a shrug then tried to deescalate what was sure to become a sentimental moment by pulling up a holographic map of the schools JARVIS had *mostly* selected at random and highlighting the planned route to visit them all. The plan was to head out west for a few weeks of relaxation before making their way back to the East Coast via a cross-country road trip, which he announced with great excitement and a double fist pump.

"I thought we're taking the jet." Bruce quirked a smile that said he knew exactly what Tony was doing with the deflection but he was allowing it.

"Well, yes." Tony hedged. "But we'll be driving to the schools after we land."

"I thought I'm driving." Happy piped up from the small kitchenette at the back of the workshop, where he was clearing out the mini-fridge with Butterfingers.

Tony scrunched his nose. "We're switching off so it totally counts."

"*Totally.*" Bruce nodded wisely, in the manner of a man recently enlightened with some grand universal truth. Not at all sarcastic except for the playful gleam in his eyes.

Happy just snorted and said he wasn't letting Tony near the driver's seat because he had the setting exactly where he liked it.

Tony responded to the jab at his height as expected, which was to say not at all graciously.

The conversation quickly deteriorated to a series of childish exchange of non sequitur insults and even worse comebacks.

"Your face!" Happy declared.

"No, your face!" Tony shot back.

Happy puffed up. "No, your face!"

DUM-E doused Tony and Happy with the fire extinguisher ten seconds later, trilling excitedly albeit bewilderedly as Bruce commended the robot on putting out a metaphorical fire.

Tony and Happy agreed that Bruce's apology wasn't all that apologetic, but the grilled cheese sandwiches made up for it.

*

Two day before their departure from New York, JARVIS alerted Tony of a new development at SHIELD.

Steve was invited to join President Ellis at a baseball game and his trip had gone infinitely better than Natasha's, ending with Ellis promising to speak with Tony about outfitting the Avengers.

While Fury might respect Tony's boundaries enough not to cross them, it didn't stop the spy from going *around* them.

To be fair, Tony had been expecting something like this. It was gratifying to be right though he wouldn't have minded being wrong. Grudgingly, he admitted that it was an excellent strategy to send Steve to meet with Ellis, who was an unabashed Captain America fan.

The resentment that Steve only had to *show up* to achieve what Tony *fought, bargained,* and *worked* for burned sour and bitter; but he had, for the most part, grown accustomed to that taste.

"Call Pepper please, JARVIS." This situation required a public relations expert. Tony couldn't refuse the President's request without seeming uncooperative, but he also didn't want SHIELD to think they could manipulate him that easily.

Hence, Pepper.

Because while he was good at the games, Pepper was a *master* and exactly who they needed to fit Tony's narrative within Ellis' red-white-and-blue tinted world. She answered on the first ring, her softened enunciation suggested she had a glass of wine or two, as was part of her Friday evening relaxation routine. Her mind was as sharp as ever, though, and quickly came up with a solution so simple that Tony was surprised he didn't think of it first.

Pepper teased that perhaps he didn't think too hard because he missed her, and Tony found himself nodding in agreement before verbally confirming it. The navigation from a romantic relationship to a friendly one was an ongoing process, they were fine in group settings but one-on-one conversations were interspersed with awkward pauses and mostly limited to Stark Industries and Team Iron Man. But they had and did miss each other.

Tony and Pepper spent the next half hour on the phone, catching each other up and talking almost like they used to before they had kissed each other.

It was wonderful.

*

The next morning, when President Ellis called, Tony first updated him that early December was the estimated completion date for the additional Iron Legionnaires. It wasn't a complete lie since JARVIS was fabricating a new model specifically for the work in Africa, with all additional features - cloaking, heat tolerance, and prehensility - removed. Then he mentally counted down toward the inevitable request, if only because he was both impatient to get it over with and gleeful to use Pepper's well-crafted response.

Stark Industries was still contracted with the military and tasked with creating durable and lightweight armor for American soldiers. With Bruce's help, Tony was able to synthesize a flexible and breathable fabric, one of the prototypes for Hulk's pants, capable of minimizing damages from bullets and blades.

SHIELD already had an order placed for their operatives to receive the armor upgrade and it made sense to simply update the allocation to include the Avengers. It would certainly boost moral for the troops and SHIELD agents to know their armor was of the same quality as Captain America's - just a less colorful version.

"I mean, unless Cap wants something different? I don't want to overstep and assume..." Tony trailed off, allowing Ellis to fill in the blank for the reason of Tony's hesitation, and thought ruefully about his so-called team's reaction to the Accords. He had thought they were on the same page about needing oversight and accountability. How wrong had he been.

Iron Man's exclusion from the Avengers as an active member was announced as a *mutual decision*, a phrase heavy with implications and encouraged speculations. The most commonly

believed theory was that egos were damaged when Iron Man single-handedly ended the alien invasion and saved New York while the other Avengers played support roles.

While Ellis didn't share that opinion, he was aware of the underlying tension and was invested to keep both his biggest ally and childhood hero happy, which was what Tony had hoped for. "No, no. This is great. Cap said he didn't want any special treatments."

Tony stifled a snort and settled for an eye roll at the hypocrisy of Steve stating he didn't want special treatments while using said privilege to ask the President a favor. Steve was either disingenuously naive or genuinely oblivious of his influence, the same force that pulled unwarranted loyalty to his side during the Civil War. In the end, all Tony had left was Rhodey.

The buzz of Ellis droning on about the iconic design of the Captain America uniform rang in his ear, like the whoosh of air rushing by as he dived, and *failed*, to catch War Machine. Even though he had been control of the descent, it had felt like he was plummeting as well. He was dimly aware of making the appropriate sounds in response and farewell when Ellis was pulled into another meeting.

JARVIS opened the blinds and the glaring brightness shook Tony out of his daze and brought him back to the present. He wondered if it could be considered an improvement that he now preferred to have his wounds cauterized in the light instead of festering in the dark.

He decided on *maybe*.

*

The StarkJet was top of the line with all the amenities but there was only so much to be done about the confined space and altitude shifts.

Tony longed to fly alongside the jet, missing the rush of soaring upward and gliding downward in the freedom of the sky, but it wouldn't be fair to leave Bruce stranded and *especially* if the other man had Happy for company. Tony had taken the armor when they traveled to the West Coast and the determined looks Bruce and Happy had exchanged when Tony greeted them on the tarmac were more than a little worrying.

To lessen the strain of traveling extensively and rapidly, they decided to spend as much leisure time in each city as possible.

Local businesses welcomed them for the inevitable flood of customers once word got out that Iron Man and the Hulk had dined at their establishment. Bruce won multiple eating challenges, he loved spicy food and had an insatiable appetite thanks to the Hulk. They also attended as events as possible, lending their fame to raise awareness and funds for good causes. Tony especially loved adoption days at the animal shelters, never minding the cat hair and dog slobber over his clothes. A photo of Tony, with a kitten on his shoulder and a bird perched atop his hair while petting a dog, made social media history.

Of course, not everyone adored the superhero duo. There were the skeptics questioning what *really* happened in New York, the cynics viewing the scholarship program as pandering

for good will, and the frightened channeling their fear of the unknown into anger. The one voice they were somewhat willing to listen to was Happy's, an everyday man and average citizen. Though he didn't quell all of the discontent, that would simply be wishful thinking, he did alleviate some of it.

The children were delighted to meet Iron Man and the Hulk. Enthusiastic hugs and high-pitched screams were par for the course. Though there had been a few incidents of tears when the children were disappointed by the lack of armor or transformation. Tony had almost called the armor the first time it happened, his heart breaking at the little boy's sobs, but Bruce had stepped in and comforted the kid with quiet voice and soft words about how being a hero is less about appearance and more about actions.

The teenagers, full of squeaky voices and awkward limbs typical of puberty, greeted them with a subdued sort of excitement designed to appear detached and cool to their peers. Until they nonchalantly asked for photos and captioned their posts with an over-abundance of emojis and #TeamIronMan.

*

By early-October, they were in New Mexico and enjoying some truly magnificent tacos.

Jane updated them on Dr. Selvig, who was admitted to a renown mental health facility and seemed to be doing well except for the occasional rambling and his distaste for wearing pants. Bruce commented that the Big Guy doesn't like pants either and turned an alarming shade of red when Darcy wolf-whistled at him. Loudly.

Happy and Darcy got into a mostly-friendly argument over taser versus pepper spray that everyone else stayed far, far away from.

Tony and Bruce listened with rapt attention as Jane updated them on her latest breakthroughs on dimensional travel, positing that given more data, she would be able to establish a direct connection to Asgard.

"Would be nice to know what Asgard's planning." Bruce mused. "Though I'm thinking no-news-is-good-news as far as Loki's trial goes."

Jane and Darcy scowled at the mention of Loki's name, the terror and destruction in New Mexico were all Loki's doing and they hadn't forgiven him yet despite feeling sympathy for his subsequent suffering and believing his innocence for the Chitauri invasion.

"I'm sure we'll see them soon." Tony stated with a certainty he didn't feel but willed himself to believe, because he refused to consider the possibility that the significant look Loki had sent him was the last time he would see those green eyes. There was a message waiting to be decoded. "Asgard won't leave us mere mortals to fend for ourselves against a *space titan god with a literal wish for Death with a capital D.*" Rolling his eyes at the absurdity, Tony was gratified to hear chuckles all around and noticed an improvement to the general mood. Humor was his first and best defense, for both himself and those he cared for, in the face of what seemed like insurmountable odds or unbearable loss.

Jane paid for dinner and chided Tony when he tried to sneak the waiter his credit card.

*

"Sir, are you alright?"

Tony stared up at the spinning ceiling fan, mesmerized by the play of light and shadow in the glow of the arc reactor. It had been nearly an hour since JARVIS dutifully played the sound file of Loki's reassurance yet sleep eluded him. "Yep. Just thinking about tomorrow." For once, it wasn't the potential of nightmares or waking from this impossible dream keeping him from rest. It was the very real dread coiling in his gut and squeezing his heart at what, *who*, the next day will bring.

"I believe you mean today, Sir."

"Technicality." Tony rolled over onto his stomach and burrowed between the pillows, telling himself it was best to skip the torturous what-ifs and simply wake up and deal with it. Like ripping off a band-aid.

Rose Hill, Tennessee was the next destination.

*

When Tony met Harley again, he finally understood why people described an emotional experience as *a rollercoaster ride*, a phrase he had previously thought of as a cliché, because it summed up the way his stomach clenched then dropped perfectly.

First, there was the jarring novelty and familiarity of seeing Harley at school, an entirely different environment but still the same precocious ten year-old who confronted an intruder in his garage with a potato gun.

Then came the disappointment when Harley greeted Tony like a stranger. A famous stranger, but a stranger nonetheless. Tony felt his heart freeze when Harley turned to give an identical small wave and awed smile to Bruce. It made sense for Harley to treat Iron Man and the Hulk the same, but logic did little to soothe the ice seeping through his veins when Tony realized he was not nor would ever be 'Tony the Mechanic'.

Relief followed, almost warming the cold weight in his chest, when Tony rationalized that this was the better way. How he had come to be 'Tony the Mechanic' involved serious injuries to those he cared deeply about – Tony glanced at Happy – and a spectacular explosion that ended with his mansion at the bottom of the ocean. Not to mention 'Tony the Mechanic' had put Harley in danger. Selfishly. Unnecessarily. But with things being different this time and the plans in place, no Extremis soldiers would ever threaten or use Harley as leverage.

Finally, grief and resignation. Tony mourned the loss of that brief yet memorable connection between the two of them. Harley was there when he was at his lowest and desperately needed a reminder of what it means to be Iron Man, but it wasn't fair to Harley to be forced to play the role of a supposed superhero's sidekick and put into harm's way because Tony was a

reckless jackass. Peter's earnest face and excited babble floated to the surface of his thought, which Tony promptly pushed back down.

It ended with resignation; it was for the best that Tony didn't, literally, crash into Harley's life. If he felt any bitterness at missing that interactions with Harley, it was tempered by the shame churning in his stomach and dizzying his steps because Harley Keener wasn't the only reason he had asked JARVIS to put Rose Hill on the list.

There was also Chad Davis.

We Have a Connection

Chapter Notes

I know the pace isn't the fastest but there is quite a bit to cover and set in place before diving into Thor: Dark World and Loki's return. So thank you, lovely people, for your patience. :)

Now, Tony & Harley Part 2!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3.

"You okay?" Bruce, ever perceptive, nudged him as they watched the horde of giddy children file into school buses. The end of the day rush was always hectic, they had learned early on that it was better to wait an extra twenty minutes for the parking lot to clear than to risk Happy's sanity navigating through the heart attack of sudden stops and unexpected children rushing out of nowhere.

Happy was in the car with his eyes closed and meditation music blasting so he didn't have to bear witness to the chaos.

"Yep, yep." Tony replied absently, trying to track Harley's movement through the crowd and failing. There were simply too many children with light-colored hair and blue backpacks.

"*Tony.*" It was amazing how many emotions Bruce could infuse into that one word, the most prominent one being worry.

"I'm okay, I promise." Tony turned with a strained smile, fatigue masking dejection. "Just missing my bed, my couch, my *Italian espresso machine.*" He resisted the urge to scan the crowd, understanding better than most that it was time to let go. Nothing good ever came from Tony holding on too tight.

Bruce hummed sympathetically. "There's no place like home."

"Say that again?" Tony felt his eyes widen at the implications of what Bruce just said.

"There's no place like home." Bruce repeated, emphasizing each word and a soft grin growing wider to match the one blooming on Tony's face. "Thanks, Tony."

Tony clapped Bruce on the back, feeling some of the melancholy fade. "Anytime."

*

Happy was maneuvering the car out of the parking lot when Tony caught sight of a hunched-over shape clutching at a dripping blue backpack stumbling out of the school's double doors.

"Wait!" Tony shouted. "Stop the car!"

"What—" Happy slammed on the brakes, anxiously glancing around. He had stated earlier that driving around children made him nervous and compared them to small ninjas with death wishes for all the dashing about they did near moving cars. "Oh."

Tony had already unbuckled his seat belt and pushed open the car door. "I'll go check it out, you guys go on ahead."

"No." Bruce shook his head, not necessarily forbidding Tony's action but not approving it either. "You go check it out, tell us what's going on, then we'll see about going on ahead."

Happy turned from the driver's seat and gave Tony a stern look.

Tony blinked and it took his single-focused mind a few seconds to realize this was how a team worked together. "Okay. Be right back." He left the car door open as he jogged toward the unmistakable figure of Harley.

Harley had stopped and was eying Tony warily as he approached. "Hi, Mr. Stark."

Tony did his best to school his grimace into a grin. Yet another reminder of how different things were this time around. "Hey kid. Went for a swim?" He knew right away that was the wrong thing to say when Harley twitched and hugged his drenched backpack even closer, some of the wetness transferring to his t-shirt. "Um, right. Too soon. Sorry about that." His hand reached up to scratch the back of his neck. "So, um, the bus left."

"Uh-huh." Harley gave Tony a look that wasn't exactly complimentary of Tony's ability to state the obvious.

"Need a ride home?"

"No, thank you. Mr. Stark. I can walk."

The refusal was expected but still stung. "How about I walk with you? I can use some fresh air." Tony tapped out a quick message to Happy and Bruce, updating them on the change of plans. He could have run back to the car but he didn't want to risk letting Harley out of his sight again. So much for letting go.

Happy responded that Tony could use the exercise and Bruce sent him a thumbs up when the scientist peeked his head out of the car when he reached to close the door Tony left ajar.

Tony waved goodbye and blew a kiss for good measure before turning to Harley, who was gaping at him with shock that Tony chose to interpret as awe. "Let's go, Munchkin."

"I don't need a babysitter. Mr. Stark." Harley stomped down the sidewalk, saying the title like an afterthought.

"I didn't say you did, Tater Tot." Tony smirked as Harley scowled at yet another nickname. "Call me Tony, Mr. Stark is my dad." He shuddered with only the slightest exaggeration. "Not really a good association for me, you know?"

"Yep." Harley nodded his head like he understood, which Tony supposed he did.

"What's that mean? What do you know?" Tony asked, only because it would seem odd not to. After all, he wasn't supposed to know anything about this child who he had only met today, who was one of the thousands accepted into the Team Iron Man program.

Harley peered up at him, eyes sharp with contemplation and soft with understanding. "My dad went to 7-Eleven to get scratchers. I guess he won, because that was six years ago."

Tony wondered how he had missed the clear defense mechanism before, it was one he used frequently himself – deflecting pain and feigning indifference with humor because *dads leave, no need to be a pussy about it*. "Look, about your dad." His throat suddenly felt too dry and too tight for the words he had longed to hear himself to come out. "It's not your fault."

"I know." There was a confidence in those two words that seemed out of place.

Tony's eyes widened in surprise. "You do?"

"Yeah. Sometimes people just make sad choices. That's on them, not on me." Harley kicked a rock as they rounded the corner. "It sucks, but it's not on me."

"Oh." Tony said dumbly, it felt like his brain short-circuited and was in the process of a reboot. He hadn't anticipated, hadn't considered, that response. Since Afghanistan and up to the Accords, he had taken everyone's every choice on as his personal responsibility. To make up for his irresponsible years. To atone for his sins. To punish himself. Every triumph happened in spite of him while every failure occurred because of him.

That's on them, not on me. Six words. So simple yet so...freeing.

Tony had heard some variation of those words before and dismissed them as empty comforts, but something about Harley's delivery made them seem real somehow. Maybe because Harley wasn't even talking about Tony. Maybe because Harley said it with such absolute certainty. Maybe because Tony had somehow identified and empathized with Harley, so in a way, Harley's conviction became his as well.

Now Tony's thoughts were in shambles, previously concrete conceptions crumbling to dust but somehow he saw clearer than before through the haze.

Harley shifted his dripping back from one hand to the other and Tony intercepted the trade without thinking, not so much to help Harley but to wrap his trembling fingers around something solid. "So, what's there to do around here?" He asked before Harley could protest.

"There's a diner—" Harley wiped his damp hands on his jeans.

"Promising if there's pie."

"— a bowling alley—"

"Happy won't bowl with me, he says I cheat using physics."

"— and a movie theater but the popcorn machine's broken."

Tony sighed dramatically, pleased to hear a small chuckle. "C'mon, there has to be something exciting in this town." It was wrong to use Harley like this, but he needed that crucial piece of information so he could start an investigation on Extremis without raising suspicion.

"Well, there's this Chad Davis guy that went crazy and made a bomb and he blew himself up a few years ago." Harley lowered his voice. "The explosion site is like this big crater with shadows around it. It's all kinds of spooky if you want to check it out."

"Huh, maybe." Tony forced the words out but thankfully Harley didn't seem to notice.

"Um, Mr. Sta— Tony." Harley corrected himself when Tony arched a challenging eyebrow. "You...you should be careful. The crater, um, reminds me of that giant wormhole."

Instead of inciting a panic attack, like last time, Tony just chuckled ruefully at how persistent Harley was. "You'll have to be more specific, there are a lot of wormholes out there." He felt calmer discussing it, because he now knew what waited on the other side. It was never the enemy or the war, but the unknown that stole his breath and quickened his heart. Anticipation was truly the worst.

"The one you, er, flew in?"

Tony snapped his fingers. "Ah yes, *that* one."

Harley eyed Tony with part exasperation and part amusement. "Are they coming back? The aliens?"

"If they are, we'll take care of it." Tony reassured, something he wasn't capable of doing last time. Avoidance had been his preferred method.

"Huh, okay." Harley smiled, too trusting in a way that both made Tony want to protect and scold him.

"That's it? No more badgering questions or invasion of my privacy?" Tony flashed Harley a brilliant grin to let the kid know he was joking.

"What's the Hulk's favorite food?"

Out of all the questions, this was not one Tony expected. "Um, spinach...?" He hazarded a guess.

Harley's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Are you saying that because it's a growing food?"

"Growing food?"

"You know, food you eat to help you grow."

Tony considered this then nodded decisively. "Yes, absolutely. And because it's green. I mean, the Hulk is basically one big growing green guy so eat your spinach, Squirt."

"My name is Harley!"

"I know." Tony tensed when they turned down Harley's street, knowing their time together was coming to an end. "What I don't know is what's *his* name?" He clarified when confusion colored Harley's expression. "The kid who bullies you, name please."

"Oh." Harley sounded weary and wary. "How'd you know that?"

Tony eyed the soaked backpack meaningfully. "Because friends don't hide friends' stuff in toilet tanks." He thought back to the early days at M.I.T. and his theory that he had funded the expansion of the campus bookstore single-handedly because he had given up on finding his backpacks and just replaced them. "I'm pretty sure that hasn't changed since I was in school."

Harley glanced back at the trail of water marks left behind them. "EJ. He's a jerk."

"Yeah, sorry to tell you this, Short Stack, but there will always be jerks." Tony shrugged, purposefully not using Harley's name and smirking when he saw the eye roll. "It's a fact of life."

"That's not very helpful." Harley grumped but there was an upward curve to his lips at Tony's bluntness.

"Yeah." Tony winced. "Believe it or not, I actually have no idea what to say in situations like this." At least he had some idea of what *not* to do, such as offering a ten year-old a flash grenade as a bully deterrent. It would have been *very* bad if Harley hadn't used it against the Extremis soldier and had set it off at school instead. Though, on the other hand, it was good that Harley had had it. Maybe Tony hadn't messed up their first interactions as much as he liked to think.

"Oh, I can believe it." Harley's sarcasm was practically a physical force.

"Whatever, Small Fry."

They walked in silence for a while, teetering on the edge between companionable and awkward, until Harley slowed to a stop. "Well, this is my house."

"Then my job here is done." The smile his face felt strained but the tightness in his chest had loosened. "Hey, about, um, jerks being a fact of life? Don't let them get you down, alright. Like you said, it's on them, not on you." Tony set the backpack down on the sidewalk, staring intently at the darkening of the pavement from the residual water. "And, um, friends help. I'd say go make some but I don't really know how to do that either so it seems like bad advice to tell you to do something I don't know how to do—" He cut himself off with a shake of his

head, half-embarrassed at his rambling and half-nostalgic at the fond memory of meeting Rhodey. "So, good talk?"

Harley chewed his bottom lip for a second before a look of conviction slid over his face and he launched himself at Tony for a hug. "Thanks, Tony."

"Any time, Harley." Tony returned the embrace with slightly shaky arms and said quietly. "We have a connection."

*

Bruce's interests were immediately piqued as soon as Tony brought up a suicide bombing that somehow left behind shadow marks on the wall. Nothing homemade should have had the firepower to instantly vaporize a human body like a nuclear explosion would.

They went out to the explosion site and Bruce studied the dark imprints on the wall. "It would have to be—"

"—in excess of 3,000°C, Dr. Banner." JARVIS helpfully supplied from Happy's phone, where the other man was scrolling through the local news article.

"It says six people died." Happy frowned. "So, why only five shadows?"

"No signs of bomb fragments." Tony sifted through the rubble. "Official report found nothing either."

"So what are you saying? It wasn't a bomb?" Happy asked.

"When is a bomb not a bomb?" Tony mused, waiting for his friends to come to the conclusion he already knew.

Bruce's head snapped up, eyes widen with just the barest hint of green. "When it's a misfire."

"What?" Happy almost dropped his phone. "What does that even mean?"

Tony nodded gravely. "It means we should talk to his family."

*

On their way to Mrs. Davis' house, who was confused but agreed to see them on such short notice, Tony had Happy stop by the diner to get a quick dinner and a pie to bring as a gift.

"It's rude to show up empty-handed." Tony stated defensively at Bruce and Happy's incredulous looks. "My mom said so." It was a new development but he was finding it easier to talk about his mother. Before, he had avoided thinking of her, fearful that the very thought of her would devastate him, but now he found that it actually strengthened him.

Whatever teasing remark Happy was about to say was interrupted by their waitress. She had said their coffees were on the house, thanking them profusely for coming in town and gushing how big of a deal it was for her son Harley to meet his heroes.

"He's a great kid." Tony said sincerely as he handed her enough cash to cover their meals twice over. "Keep the change."

"Mr. Stark!" She was startled but didn't seem offended as sometimes people tend to get when Tony offered them money. It was a nice change. "Thank you."

*

Bruce asked to be dropped off at the hotel so he could go over the data with JARVIS. It was clear he wasn't comfortable with the idea of speaking with a grieving family member and the thought of human experimentation had likely set the Hulk on edge.

As it was, Mrs. Davis greeted Happy and Tony at the door and cooed over the pecan pie.

Tony shot Happy a triumphant look, sticking his tongue out to make a point of how impeccable his manners were.

Mrs. Davis sat down across from them, a file folder on her lap. "Alright, where'd you like to start?"

"First, we just want to say we're sorry for your loss." Happy grimaced. "It couldn't have been easy."

"It wasn't, it isn't." She was fiddling with the edges of the folder, a warble in her voice. "Do you know what they say about my son around here?" She didn't wait for a reply. "They say there are only five shadows because they're the mark of souls gone to Heaven. Chad didn't get one, you know, because he went to hell." The last word was practically a snarl. "My son was a good man, he served his country up till he couldn't and he just wanted to walk again."

Tony winced as a wave of guilt crashed into him, dragging him under and pushing him down. The Merchant of Death. Another life ruined because of his irresponsibility. "I'm so sorry."

Mrs. Davis' eyes snapped up to Tony's, disbelieving and baffled. "What'd you got to be sorry for, Mr. Stark? You saved my son's life." She grabbed Tony's hand in a tight grip. "If he hadn't had Stark armor, he wouldn't have survived the attack."

"But he still died." Tony saw more than felt the elbow Happy drove into his side. His mind was on over-drive, reviewing the numerous contracts Stark Industries had fulfilled for the military over the years and remembering the first line of full-body armor he had developed back in 2006. Three years before Chad Davis died in an explosion. Two years before Afghanistan. One year before Chad Davis was honorably discharged. Had he managed to do some good back then? Before he was Iron Man? Before he was given this second chance?

"We have reasons to believe it wasn't a suicide." Happy interjected, nudging Tony with his elbow once more. "That he didn't kill himself or the other five people."

"I know he didn't." Mrs. Davis slammed the folder on the coffee table. "And here's the proof."

Some of the papers slid out, one page had three capitalized letters written in black marker.

A, I, and M.

Hey Kid, Nice Work

Chapter Notes

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3.

The A.I.M. file from Mrs. Davis had contained multiple suitability reports and risk assessments evaluating Chad Davis' eligibility for the Extremis program. There were a few photos of other recruits in his sample group. Tony skimmed the file while Happy consoled Mrs. Davis on how the government had failed her son after his honorable discharge and the experimental treatment that gave him back his leg.

Only to take it away a month later, along with her son's life and the lives of five others.

Before they left, Tony clasped Mrs. Davis' hand tightly and promised her that Stark Industries would do better at protecting people on and off the field. "I will personally look into designing a line of prosthetics that will not only *look* like an arm but also *function* like an arm, but it won't *cost* an arm." He winked and was pleased when Mrs. Davis huffed out a watery laugh. "Thank you for meeting with us."

"No, Mr. Stark." She pulled him in for an unexpected but not unpleasant hug. "*Thank you.*"

*

"I'm thinking it harnesses bio-electricity in the body to activate and recode parts of the brain that govern repairs. Like hacking an OS, but with a person, and upgrading it to your specificity." Bruce theorized, after reviewing the file and spending some time imagining how Extremis worked based on the list of tests run on the subjects. The repeated PET scans meant they were concerned with cellular level metabolic changes, which fell in line with what Tony knew of how Extremis worked.

JARVIS dutifully pulled up a projection of the human brain, lighting up various pathways and sections in demonstration.

"Incredible." Happy marveled.

"And highly weaponizable." Pepper chimed in, she had joined the discussion via video call. Her instincts, as usual, were spot-on. "As in enhanced soldiers, private armies, and..."

"Living bombs." Tony sighed, flipping through the pages of data. "Most likely a result of the complicated metabolic process and that explains the hourly temperature check." He thought

of the video of Ellen Brandt regrowing her arm in the glow of burning embers. "If the body accepts the upgrades, then the user can consciously control the heat generated and direct it to heal themselves or cause significant damage. But if not..."

Happy looked grim and eyed the hologram with less awe than before. "Boom."

They sat in silence for a moment. The glittering lights above looked less like a small universe and more like a black hole.

Pepper was the first to recover. "So, I've heard of A.I.M., they're bidding on some of the same military contracts as us, and it's founded by Aldrich Killian." She cleared her throat. "We used to work together."

JARVIS replaced the image of the brain with one of Killian, hair slicked back and skin tanned bronze.

"He didn't look like *that*." She gaped with stunned appreciation. "What on earth has he been doing?"

"I know that guy." Happy squinted. "I know faces and I've seen that one before, but maybe less, um, pretty?"

"You think he's pretty? But not prettier than me, right? *Right?*" Tony whined and sent Pepper an exaggerated pout to let her know that they were okay; this was uncharted territory in their friends-to-lovers-back-to-friends relationship. When the only response he'd received was a mischievous quiet, he staggered back against Bruce, hand clutching at his chest and face contorted in mock offense. The solid coldness of the arc reactor under his fingers still startled him from time to time, even with the reduced lung capacity as a constant reminder. "I find your silence very rude!"

"There, there. You're the fairest of them all, Tony." Bruce soothed with a chuckle. "JARVIS, can you find some older pictures?"

"Certainly, Dr. Banner." JARVIS replied. Photos and articles shuffled before their eyes, a flurry of the same face until it snagged on one that was unlike the rest. It was Killian, but with unkempt and brittle hair, thick-lensed glasses, and an unevenness in his shoulders that suggested mobility impairments.

Pepper quietly confirmed that this was the Killian she had worked with before she joined Stark Industries.

"Hey, that's him. From that science conference?" Happy kicked Tony's calf to get his attention. "Where were we in '99?"

"Uh, Switzerland." Tony straightened slowly. "I, um, gave a lecture on—" Yinsen's voice sounded in his head. *If I had been that drunk, I wouldn't have been able to stand, much less give a lecture on integrated circuits.* "—integrated circuits." The arc reactor felt colder and heavier with another missed opportunity, one that was far too late to salvage, he rubbed at it absently as though trying to erase it from his chest.

"So what happened?" Bruce asked, leaning forward and sounding intrigued.

Tony barely managed to stop himself from glancing back at his friend incredulously, unable to reconcile Bruce's disinterest the last time Tony had talked about Bern with his obvious attentiveness now.

"Big party, lots of people, a plant exploded." Happy inhaled sharply as realization hit. "You don't think..."

"Unfortunately, I do." Tony grimaced.

"But that wasn't Killian, that was—"

"Maya Hansen." Tony glanced at Pepper, feeling oddly guilty for mentioning a tryst that happened years ago in front of his ex-girlfriend though she had just been openly admiring an evil mastermind.

Pepper arched an eyebrow in amused acknowledgement and made no comments.

Succinctly, Tony gave a summary of Maya's research in rewriting genetic codes and his half-hearted attempt at fixing her formula by fine-tuning the telomerized algorithm, leaving out the more personal details though he was sure his friends could infer the circumstances under which he had ended up in her hotel room.

"Obviously, the glitch was *not* fixed and what's worse, they're now testing on people and we have no idea how many of them are out there and how stable they are." Tony rubbed a tired hand over his jaw and felt the gruffness of his beard catching on his calluses.

They lapsed into another bout of silence as they considered the ramification of the scenario. Chad Davis had been at his house in a relatively remote part of a rural town when Extremis overloaded his body. What if the next incident happened in a metropolitan area? What would the fatality count be then?

"We can locate them via thermal imaging." Bruce took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "But we're going to need the most current Extremis formula to create a neutralizing agent."

"I will begin scanning available satellite data for any irregular heat signatures." JARVIS's efficiency was a thing of beauty. "And locate Dr. Hansen's whereabouts and contact information."

"I'll keep Killian distracted with some very competitive counter-offers." Pepper tapped at her StarkPad. "He can't be conducting an experiment at this scale and keeping it quiet without some powerful people in his pocket, we'll see who comes to A.I.M.'s rescue."

"Are we cancelling the rest of the Team Iron Man tour?" Happy frowned. "I mean, it makes sense but the kids—"

"No, we keep going." Tony paused, waiting a beat for the objections that didn't come. Bruce nudged him, Happy kicked his calf again, and Pepper gave him a prompting look. So Tony

continued with a small smile curving his lips. "Business as usual. They'd know something's up if we rush back to New York after visiting Rose Hill. My guess is they keep a pretty close eye on this place."

Pepper nodded and Happy mumbled his assent.

"I agree, better not spook them." Bruce added. "We can't synthesize anything without further data on Extremis."

"JARVIS can keep track of the possible Extremis participants and, er, have some Iron Legionnaires standing by just in case." Tony eventually filled Bruce and Happy in on the truth behind the Iron Legionnaires, well, as much as Tony could bear to share anyway.

"With pleasure, Sir."

It wasn't as if he hadn't considered telling his friends what he saw beyond the portal or what he had lived and was now reliving, but old insecurities and new fears always stopped him.

What if Bruce disappeared again after hearing about the possibility of Ultron? What if Happy learned what a terrible friend Tony had been? What if Rhodey blamed him for the fall that hadn't happened yet? What if Pepper redefined their relationship from friends to business? What if they finally saw what Steve and SHIELD did and realized Tony wasn't a hero...and left?

Those were the *best* case scenarios.

What if Bruce, or the Hulk, confronted Ross? What if Happy refused to stay a safe distance, one that Tony had created and enforced with callous dismissal, away? What if Rhodey kept flying only to fall again? What if Pepper decided to take on the world for him? What if they put themselves at risk?

These were the *worst* case scenarios.

Millions of what-ifs took up the space in between; situations and circumstances Tony couldn't control. The very thought of it made his heart still in dread and pound in fear. He couldn't afford surprises.

Knowledge prompts change yet change negates knowledge.

The only two beings Tony had told were JARVIS and Loki. While the former could act without Tony's directive, the A.I. tended to defer to his creator's judgement. The latter literally could not act while on another realm. Even though Tony yearned to see Loki again for the mage's witty conversation and appealing company, a part of him also feared the introduction of an unknown variable. His stomach fluttered and twisted with conflicting urges that thrilled and terrified him.

"Hello?" Another video chat opened and Rhodey's voice called out, snapping Tony's wandering thoughts back into focus. "Sorry I'm late, got held up in a debriefing. What did I miss?"

Bruce and Happy jumped in to bring Rhodey up to date as Tony switched Pepper's call from video to voice at her request. They chatted about upcoming Stark Industries announcements and projections, with Pepper updating him on the initial response to the new StarkPhones and Tony telling her his promise to Mrs. Davis for a new line of high-tech and low-cost prosthetics.

As the evening wound down, Tony had his room to himself again and sprawled out on the somewhat-acceptable hotel bed. He exhaled slowly and extended his limbs in a full-body stretch, surprised by the lack of tension in his muscles despite the enormity of the situation. The stakes and risks were still high this time around, with the added pressure of saving lives that had been lost before, yet he felt strangely calm about it all.

Maybe it was because he knew what was coming. Happy was not going to be anywhere near Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

Maybe it was because the Iron Legion was ready to deploy at a moment's notice, calibrated precisely to detect and dispatch those with Extremis heat signature.

Or maybe, and this was Tony's favorite, it was because he *had* a team now.

One he was *a part* of instead of *apart from*.

One he would do anything to keep.

*

The rest of the Team Iron Man tour went smoothly, if a bit subdued. They were back in New York by the end of October and only one school remained on their list.

Midtown Science Middle School, one of the feeder schools for Midtown High School of Science and Technology and attended by one Peter Parker.

*

Tony took a deep breath to center himself before strolling into Peter's classroom with his usual swagger. He had adjusted his expectations since his meeting with Harley two weeks ago and guarded his heart against the inevitable fracture when Peter, too, would not be what Tony remembered.

It proved to be true when Peter remained silent throughout the presentation and slid further down his seat when they began taking questions. Gone were the awkward enthusiasm, incessant rambling, and the sort of awe-filled looks that were truly humbling.

"Yes, the gentleman in the third row." Bruce called out.

"Hi, um, hi. My name is Flash Thompson and this question is for Dr. Stark." The boy was practically vibrating with a mixture of nervousness and glee.

Peter buried his head in his arms with an air of absolute dejection.

Tony's eyes tapered with worry and wondered why the name sounded familiar. "Shoot."

"Is, is it true that Parker helped you fight off a Hammer drone?" Flash turned and pointed at Peter's huddled form accusingly. "He's been talking about it for months!"

"Oh that is most definitely..." Tony trailed off, letting the suspense build and calming down the fierce surge of protectiveness that threatened to overwhelm him. Before Germany, FRIDAY had given him an overview of Peter's life, which included Flash Thompson, the bully who tormented Peter daily with verbal harassment and social shunning. It was nice to put a face to the name and even nicer to see that smug grin crumble. "True."

"What?" Flash's outraged cry was drowned out by the triumphant yell from the boy seated next to Peter.

"Told you!"

Peter's head lifted with a painful jerk.

Tony scrolled through the memories of the disastrous Stark Expo like he would the holographic display in his workshop. The design was meant to mirror his thought process, after all. In a matter of seconds, he located the most probable moment matching Flash's description. There had been a small boy, in toy replicas of the Iron Man helmet and glove, standing up to a Hammer Drone with fearless defiance. He hadn't and didn't know that was Peter, but he did with certainty now. "Hey kid, nice work!"

"Tha- Thank you, Mr. Stark! Sir!"

The stammering speech should not be endearing, but it was. Tony couldn't help but match the wide grin on Peter's face and want to see it glow. "No, thank *you*, Mr. Parker. Couldn't have done it without you."

Peter turned an alarming shade of red and looked like he'd forgotten how to breathe. "I- I'm- I- I was just trying to be like you, sir!"

Tony was struck speechless for a second, which was fortunate because he could taste the words in his mouth - *don't be like me, be better* - bitter with self-loathing and sour with disappointment. Remnants of a time past and not-to-come. It was time for something new. "Joining Team Iron Man would be an excellent starting point, Mr. Parker. We'd love to have you."

This time, Peter did look like he stopped breathing. The boy next to him, the one who had come to Peter's defense earlier, thumped him firmly on the back. "Dude, don't pass out."

Bruce chuckled at the display of friendship then all traces of humor faded as he turned his attention to Flash. "I should mention that we have a zero tolerance policy against bullying. That's simply not how a team works together."

It was a testament of Peter's pure heart that he peered at Flash with concern.

Tony couldn't be prouder and this was only the beginning.

*

November passed in a flurry of preparations.

Bruce methodically reviewed Maya's published and unpublished papers, JARVIS was quite thorough in his search, and comparing her findings with what Tony could remember. Tony monitored his input as to not give too much away, because there were tidbits he shouldn't, couldn't, have known without the most current formula.

Happy was promoted to Security Specialist, with future career advancement opportunities, of Stark Industries; a position he accepted under the condition that he was still Tony's body guard and driver on an as-needed basis. Any visits to SHIELD automatically qualified. Tony suspected it was Bruce's doing, recalling the determined looks on their faces after their shared flight to Malibu.

Pepper was doing a beautiful job disrupting A.I.M.'s foothold within the government, vying for the same research funding and military contracts. Predictably, Ross interfered for the sole reason of making Tony's life difficult and thereby unwittingly doomed himself by allying with Vice President Rodriguez.

JARVIS found records of explosions matching the Extremist heat signature, dated as far back as June of 2011 and marked the emergence of the terrorist known as the Mandarin, the purported leader of the Ten Rings. A handful of bombings occurred throughout 2011 and early parts of 2012, all declared to be lessons for the American people.

Rhodey, who was part of the counter-terrorism task force, made the connection immediately. He had long questioned the unorganized nature of the Mandarin's attacks and the curious delay – sometimes hours and sometimes days – of the Mandarin's addresses to the American people after each strike. Though if the bombings were actually accidental overloads and the Mandarin was claiming undue credit, which A.I.M. was undoubtedly relieved for, then these discrepancies made sense.

Tony did not correct the small flaw in Rhodey's reasoning, that A.I.M. was the mastermind behind this masquerade, because he wouldn't be able to explain how he knew and the truth would be known soon enough once they traced the Mandarin's broadcasting signal.

Thanksgiving was nothing like Tony expected, much like Jane and Darcy's surprise visit. Rhodey managed to join them on Friday morning, only to regret his poor timing as he was dragged out to join the Black Friday shopping craze. The long weekend passed in a blur of tryptophan-induced naps, sugar comas brought on by an extensive pie judging competition, and friends everywhere he turned.

It was perfect.

*

On December 1st, the Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait had just been targeted by a suicide bomber and available footage showed a cloud of flames high above the air base, bathing the desert landscape in bright red and fiery orange.

Tony tilted his face up to the auburn sky and felt his skin tingle from the residual heat simmering in the atmosphere. For the first time since he had woken up in the past, he felt warm.

He Named It Hibernation

Chapter Notes

A bit of catch-up, a bit of action, a bit of intrigue, a bit of angst, and a bit of healing.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#), who pointed out that 1) resting temperature of Extremis users should be high enough to differentiate them from the non-users but not too high that they attract attention and 2) Tony's friends may not be as enthusiastic about eliminating Extremis soldiers.

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3.

(November 26th)

President Ellis was verbally and visibly pleased by the completion of the new Iron Legionnaires, how the man managed to speak clearly through the wide grin was a mystery. Ellis and Tony updated the African nations together, arranging a suitable date for all parties to convene before roadway construction could begin. It was decided that a week would be enough time for everyone to gather and agree on the parameters of the meeting.

They were set to meet in Kenya on Monday, December 3rd.

(November 27th)

The original plan was to have War Machine join Iron Man and the Iron Legion in Kenya, but Tony proposed a small modification, suggesting that it would be a greater show of unity for all three parts of the unofficially-dubbed *Iron Patriots* to arrive together. With the bonus of surprising Rhodey.

Ellis agreed with a chuckle and a quip about Tony and Rhodey's friendship. This detour required the State Department to confirm Tony's clearance in the Middle East where Rhodey was stationed and working on neutralizing Ten Rings terrorist cells, but it was more of a formality than an obstacle. Still, it was better to be thorough than thoughtless.

An international incident was something they all strived to avoid.

(November 28th)

Tony received authorization to enter Middle Eastern airspace.

The Iron Legion engaged stealth mode as they departed from New York, attracting little to no attention.

(November 29th)

Rhodey greeted his friend with a tight hug and a solid clap on the back. "Always good to see you, man."

"About to get better." Tony grinned like a child at Christmas, though he enjoyed giving far more than receiving gifts. "JARVIS, let's get the party started."

"Yes, Sir." The A.I.'s voice gained a reverberating quality.

"Did you give JARVIS surround sound or—" The familiar rumble of repulsors made Rhodey, and everyone else at the base, look up. Gasps sounded at the sight of what looked like shooting stars streaking across the sky.

"Are those...?" Rhodey gaped.

"Yep." Tony happily confirmed as thirty Iron Legionnaires landed in formation before them. "Merry Christmas, buddy."

"It's not even December yet." Rhodey was still staring at the Mark 80s.

"Eh, so I'm a bit early." Tony shrugged, the casual motion belying the significant intent in his words. A list of dates and locations of the Mandarin's attacks scrolled through his mind, the next one was the Ali Al Salem Air Base bombing on December 1st. "It's better than being late."

(November 30th)

"So, what did you get me for Christmas?" Tony asked.

"What I get you every year." Affectionately, Rhodey sighed with a roll of his eyes. "Socks."

(December 1st)

JARVIS notified Tony and Rhodey of an irregular and climbing heat signature as they finished their breakfast. Whether or not the A.I. was given any hints as to where to look was of no importance.

With two Iron Legionnaires in stealth mode, Iron Man and War Machine landed at the Kuwait air base as the suspected bomber was hunched over with wisps of smoke rising from his singed hair and clothes.

"Are you seeing this?" Rhodey muttered. "His eyes are like the fires of Mordor."

"Nerd alert." Tony replied out of habit honed by decades of friendship. The man's blood vessels were beginning to look like rivulets of lava, overflowing to his flesh and skin. "Protocol Mount Doom, JARVIS."

"Nerd alert!" Rhodey sang through the audio feed.

"Yes, Sir."

Mark 80 disassembled swiftly. The prehensile function guided each piece to wrap around the bomber's head, limbs, and torso with unerring accuracy and unflinching efficiency. The metal glowed as it struggled to contain the Extremis soldier but the extreme heat tolerance feature held as the armor lifted its target high into the air.

The subsequent explosion looked like a small sun in the clear desert sky.

JARVIS recovered most of Mark 80 in just under four hours, with the completion rate of 99.2%. To locate the pieces, the A.I. utilized blast simulation to estimate the trajectory and thermal imaging to track residual heat signature. The armor pieces had turned molten during the explosion and hardened into unusable and unrecognizable lumps.

*

"Some people call me a terrorist, I consider myself a teacher. Here is your next lesson, America, and it is a simple one. *Iron rusts.*"

"Gold-titanium alloy." Tony grumbled, earning some amused looks from the other officers in the Situation Room.

On the screen, the Mandarin continued to droll. "The era of coddling is over, President Ellis. You continue to resist my attempts to educate and choose to distract yourself with cheap toys. Heed my warning: pay attention or they will be confiscated."

Tony snorted loudly, earning an elbow in his side from Rhodey.

"That's not funny, Tones." Rhodey hissed. "A crazy terrorist just threatened you."

"Aw, Platypus. I knew you cared." Tony wiped away a pretend tear. "Don't worry, we got this."

The arch of Rhodey's brows matched the curve of his lips, surprised and glad. "We?"

"We." Tony bumped his shoulder against his best friend's. "This clown doesn't stand a chance."

"Damn straight."

*

"Early this morning, the National Security Council authorized Iron Man and War Machine, with assistance from the Iron Legion, to actively pursue and disable Mandarin agents. We have made significant progress toward capturing the Mandarin and are very confident that his reign of terror will end soon."

JARVIS reported three hacking attempts after the Press Secretary's announcement.

The one from SHIELD was expected and routed quickly to the files Tony wanted them to access, the ones that would corroborate the broadcast but provide no insight to their strategy.

The one from A.I.M. was laughable and redirected to the same information SHIELD had accessed; it wouldn't hurt to inflate Killian's ego and drop his guard.

The last one was intriguing, with the lines of codes in a sequence JARVIS had not seen before, which triggered the Stranger Danger alarm.

Tony, however, recognized it immediately from his time in the future. As part of Wakanda's reintegration to the world, King T'Chaka had spoken to the United Nations about his concerns of incompatibility between existing technology and that of Wakanda, for which Tony had been brought in as a consultant. With his innate sense for patterns and algorithms, Tony had been confident that he could create an interface to ease the transition if given more time and data.

It was a shame he never got the chance, given the tragedy at the Vienna International Centre and the subsequent so-called Civil War, and Tony certainly wasn't going to ignore the opportunity knocking at his door now. He beckoned at the holographic display, a manic grin split across his face. "Let them come, JARVIS."

"Have fun, Sir."

It took the Wakandan engineers a little over three hours before realizing Tony wasn't actually fending them off but studying them and gleaning information about systems through their maneuvers. It took them another hour to extract themselves with some difficulty, much to Tony and JARVIS' amusement. Being the fantastic hosts they were, they made sure to send the Wakandans off with party favors that should deter any future visits.

Tony paced the perimeter of his workshop, jittery and giddy from his victory against the rumored most technically advanced country in the world. His bots trailed dutifully behind him, DUM-E with a fire extinguisher in hand. Eventually, he pulled up the file for prosthetic designs. No time like the present, when he was feeling exhilarated and like he could do anything, to make the impossible a reality.

*

"JARVIS, let's start fabrication for some prototypes." Tony saved the finished arm schematic with a flick of his finger, watching it spin in place with a satisfied grin though the longer he stared at it, the more the curve of his mouth tugged downward.

The hologram lost some of its bluish light and took on a silver sheen.

The Winter Soldier's arm spiraling through the air after the unibeam severed it from its owner.

Tony lurched sideways and retched up the pizza he had consumed as per DUM-E's lab protocol. Stumbling away from his desk and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he found the nearest wall and pressed his back against it. He felt like he was freezing again, except his hair was drenched and plastered to his forehead. "JARVIS, I think I need a haircut." He joked weakly.

"I— I will book the appointment." JARVIS replied, an uncharacteristic stammer in his voice that instantly piqued Tony's worry.

"What's wrong? Did something get through from the ThunderCats?" Tony pushed to a stand, his knees wobbled but he remained upright. He had upgraded JARVIS' security measures and augmented backup routines since his return to the past, unwilling to lose his A.I. again. "Let's run another scan or should we reimage the—"

"I am well, Sir." JARVIS reassured. "I was merely surprised by your quick wit—"

"Excuse you, my wit has always been quick."

"—given the circumstances."

Tony paused, thinking back to the panic attack and realizing it was perhaps the first time he was able to snap out of one on his own. He knew he wasn't okay and perhaps he never would be, but maybe he was better off as he had believed. "Oh."

With measured steps, he approached his work area, his nose wrinkled as he sidestepped the puddle of vomit. Pizza was off the menu for at least a week. The outline of the prosthetic was still floating in the air but it no longer looked menacing. It was just a tool, a lifeless instrument waiting to be put to use.

Like the Winter Soldier.

In a moment of either insanity or clarity, Tony understood the role the Winter Soldier played under the command of HYDRA.

A tool. A lifeless instrument waiting to be put to use. A weapon that killed his parents.

The Winter Soldier was the *what* and the *how* that killed his parents.

HYDRA was the *who*.

Tony closed his eyes, inhaling deeply and exhaling in the same manner. It felt like holding on and letting go, though he wasn't sure what precisely he had kept and lost. With steady fingers, he opened a blank template and began designing a new containment armor with increased durability and cryogenic capability. Meant to capture, not kill, the Winter Soldier.

He named it Hibernation.

*

"Ready for another lesson, America? As you celebrate your false triumph and bask in your misguided sense of security, know that they are nothing more than illusions to be shattered. Because you don't know where I am, and you'll never see me coming."

Mandarin's broadcast was juxtaposed against the footage of an Iron Legionnaire enfolding a woman with burning eyes as War Machine directed the crowd to seek cover on the news.

"Ooh, burn!" Tony cackled when the newscaster made a quip about how War Machine obviously *did* see the Mandarin coming to thwart the attack, then doubled over in a fit of giggles at his unintentional pun.

It was only him and JARVIS in the lab, away from the others who saw the Extremis users as unfortunate lab rats instead of ruthless soldiers.

*

Bruce had vetoed Tony's suggestion of taking out every Extremis soldier once JARVIS located their whereabouts via thermogenic signatures. "These are innocent people who had no idea what they were getting into. They need a cure, not a death sentence!" Thankfully, his coloring hadn't changed despite his raised voice.

"How do you even know they're innocent?" Tony shouted back, pulling away from Pepper's hand on his arm. He remembered how Ellen Brandt had killed the Rose Hill sheriff and deputy with unflinchingly ruthlessness and how Eric Savin had threatened Harley. They were murderers.

"How do you know they're not?"

Bruce's retort felt like a splash of icy water, cooling Tony's irritation and freezing him in his tracks. "I, I don't— I don't know." Tony stammered, mind racing and heart pounding. He wasn't supposed to know. The theory that the Mandarin was claiming accidental overdoses as terrorist attacks painted the Extremis users as victims, a detail he hadn't considered and one that complicated what should have been a straightforward solution. "What about the people around them? Like the five unlucky bastards standing too close to the wrong guy at the wrong time? Shouldn't we focus on saving as many people as we can, even if it doesn't mean everyone?"

A beat of foreboding silence.

"I'm sorry, Tones." Rhodey sighed. "That's a pretty arrogant thing to say. We don't get to make that call."

Déjà vu slammed into Tony like a physical force. Rhodey had said these words once before, but directed toward a super soldier who thought the safest hands were his own. The room was spinning and he saw a shield slamming down into his chest but it was wielded by himself instead of Captain America. When had he become Steve?

Rhodey continued. "I get where you're coming from, it'll be catastrophic if an Extremis user overloaded in a crowded area but I also hear what Bruce's saying, that these people need help. Plus, it'd look really bad if Iron Legion's just snatching people up out of the blue." He winced at that imagery. "So, let's find a new way. What are the overload indicators and what's the lead time?"

Bruce dragged his hand across his jaw. "My estimates put their resting temperature between 45 and 50°C and the detonation happens somewhere around 100°C. I'd say maybe an hour before they go from baseline to overload."

"Okay." Rhodey said decisively. "JARVIS, you are monitoring those with heightened body temperature, correct?"

"Yes, Colonel Rhodes." JARVIS confirmed.

"Carry on and alert us when people start getting warmer. It's best if we only engage when necessary until Bruce finds a cure. How's that sound?"

"Fine with me." Bruce's shoulders sagged as the tension drained away. "Tony?"

"Tones?" Rhodey clasped Tony's elbow and scrambled to catch his friend when Tony's knees buckled the moment he registered Rhodey's touch.

The near-fall shook Tony out of his horror-filled stupor, barely managing to catch himself in a stumble before he crashed to the floor. "I'm sorry." The words scratched along his too-tight throat and on his too-dry tongue. "I didn't— I'll try— I'll be better." He stared at the floor, unwilling to look up and see the guaranteed revulsion.

"Hey, hey. None of that, man." There was no disgust in Rhodey's voice. The grip on Tony's elbow shifted to a clasp around the shoulders. "You're doing fine, just remember you don't have to handle everything by yourself. Like flying a damn nuke into space." The last part was said in a disgruntled mutter.

The unexpectedness prompted Tony to glance up. He gaped in disbelief when he saw only concern on his friends' faces.

"Yeah, you got us." Bruce's brows were furrowed with worry. "We're here and we can figure it out together. Like a team."

"Like a team." Tony repeated, dazed but relieved in the knowledge that they would never let him become his worst nightmare.

"C'mon, let's get you some pie." Rhodey began pulling Tony toward the kitchen, where Thanksgiving leftovers filled the fridge. "Pie makes everything better."

"Especially pumpkin pecan."

*

After some deliberation and input from Pepper, it was decided that the Wakandan cyberattack was most likely an isolated event and unconnected to any discontent the other African leaders might have felt regarding the postponement of the roadway project. Most of the representatives Tony had spoken with were understanding of the imminent threat the Mandarin posed and the necessary role the Iron Legion played in disarming the bombs. Any lingering frustration was alleviated by the estimated four to six weeks wait to fabricate Mark 81s, which were designed specifically for construction and *technically* ready.

Strategically, however, it was better to keep up the artifice of delay.

After all, Tony wasn't *supposed* to have an army at his disposal. He only crafted the additional Mark 80s to assist with transportation infrastructure in Africa; now those armors were repurposed to combat the Mandarin, *of course* he would need additional time to fabricate more.

*

"President Ellis, I am pleased that you have done your homework or perhaps you merely copied it from another? Your duplicity will not help you pass the final exam. You will fail. You will not graduate. You will be expelled."

Another Iron Legionnaire swooped from the air and scooped up a man with fire in his veins, carrying him in the direction indicated by War Machine, far away from the high school.

Bruce idly commented that he had synthesized several versions of a neutralizer, though the lack of usable evidence meant no way to extract a sample of the Extremis serum for testing.

*

When not reporting on the foiled Mandarin plots, the press was having a field day with Lieutenant General Ross' abrupt and ardent support of A.I.M. and his increasingly personal attacks on Stark Industries.

First was the disapproval of how ruthlessly Stark Industries was pursuing certain contracts. Then came the contradicting critique of Pepper's leadership skills as a CEO and Tony poaching such a promising talent from A.I.M. years ago. The latest mention was of how callously Tony had dismissed Killian when the latter approached the former

When Tony first saw Killian wading through a sea of reporters outside of A.I.M.'s Los Angeles office, he snorted into his coffee at the pinched look on Killian's face.

Killian had delivered a monologue on the value of anonymity and how it had guided him throughout the years.

I looked out over that city, nobody knew I was there, nobody could see me, no one was even looking.

Except now the whole world was watching his every move and clamoring for a quote on his grudge against Iron Man.

The irony was almost poetic.

10880 Malibu Point, 90265

Chapter Notes

Things are "heating" up... ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3.

"Fortune cookies are an American invention. Which is why they're hollow, full of lies, and leave a bad taste in the mouth. Just like your so-called superheroes." The Mandarin spat on the ground and stalked away in a swirl of extravagant robes.

Tony remembered the time when he had gotten the fortune *you will have new clothes* and Darcy's reply that it was clearly meant for her when he had sent her a photo. The memory was less funny now that it was tainted by mad man's dramatic threats.

With a final set of instruction to the Iron Legionnaires, he descended to the ground and was immediately surrounded by eager journalists.

"Before you start, all questions about the Mandarin should be directed toward the White House." Tony parroted the words from the Press Secretary as soon as he retracted the helmet. "I know nothing."

The reporters pivoted immediately to another topic.

"Mr. Stark, your thoughts on this feud between you and Aldrich Killian, founder of Advanced Idea Mechanics?"

Tony smoothed the edges of his smile so it appeared less sharp and more sincere, he had been waiting for this since landing in Malibu a few days ago.

When Bruce had asked, Tony had cited needing the nitrogen compressor to finish his latest armor as reason for the visit, which wasn't a complete lie since the Hibernation armor was first in the fabrication queue. While he still didn't have a plan or any urge to hunt down the Winter Soldier, its soon-to-be existence gave him some peace. It was a symbol of...something he couldn't yet name and did not want to examine too closely.

Tony's attention was better focused on Killian anyway, especially with the rather *timely* discovery of the Mandarin's location via transmitter-based triangulation, thermogenic data, and, well, prescience, which was left off of any official reports.

Trevor Slattery was finally going to get his fifteen minutes of fame. JARVIS was set to deliver the coordinates to Rhodey once Tony had Killian occupied and Tony knew exactly how to achieve that.

"You know, I think it's time we just hug it out. So here's my home address, 10880 Malibu Point, 90265. Door's open, Richie, and I'm thinking Chinese for dinner. See you at six!"

*

"Sir, I have Colonel Rhodes on the line." JARVIS announced as Tony entered the workshop in his Malibu home.

"Um. Tell him I'm talking to Pepper." Tony clapped once to bring up the holographic display, squinting at the slowly filling progress bar indicating the percentage of completion for the Hibernation armor.

"Of course, Sir. Patching Ms. Potts through now."

"What? That's not what I meant!" Tony whined, though he did feel rather proud of his A.I.'s duplicity, purposely misinterpreting his attempt at evasion for an actual request, even when it was used against him. "Actually, put Sugar Bear on, I'd rather talk to him than—"

"What the hell—" Pepper's voice shrieked through the headset, which Tony promptly pulled off and tossed across the lab.

"Technical difficulty! Tell Pep I'll call her—"

"—is the matter with you?" Her screech continued from the speakers, growing impossibly more imposing with the surround sound effect. "Giving your address on national news? Inviting a mad scientist—"

"Mad scientist? Really?" Tony scoffed, hoping humor could help defuse the situation. "C'mon, he doesn't even have a lab coat." It did not.

"That is not the point! What if he comes after you? We're still not sure if he's just an opportunistic warmonger or in cahoots with the Mandarin—"

"Pep, just, trust me on this, okay? I have a plan and Jim Jam is part of it, alright? Killian's not going to make a move with the press watching. Trust me." It was a promise and a plea.

Silence hung heavily in the air, broken only when Pepper inhaled sharply then exhaled slowly, likely some kind of stress-management breathing exercise.

"I do, I trust you." She said finally. "You call me as soon as it's done." Her next words were shaky but her tone was sure. "I'll answer this time."

This was yet another moment when Tony realized just how much he had put her through during their relationship. "I'm holding you to that, Miss Potts."

"Will that be all, Mr. Stark?"

"Yes, that will be all— Actually, wait. Did you say *cahoots*? Who even says that anymore?"

Her amusement was audible. "Good luck with your other calls, Tony."

Tony blinked and tried to process what Pepper had meant. "What other ca—"

"Connecting to Colonel Rhodes, Sir. As per your earlier request."

"Why do you hurt me like this, JARVIS?"

JARVIS did not respond but the brief seconds of silence held the distinctive air of judgment that had Tony sticking his tongue out at the nearest camera.

"Have you lost your mind?" Rhodey boomed as his scowling face appeared on the display Tony had activated minutes ago.

"Honey bear! I can explain." Tony peered at his friend, the angle and background suggested that he was most likely in the War Machine armor and in transit. Rhodey's next words confirmed Tony's theory.

"You can tell me in person. I'm leaving D.C. now and will be there in thirty."

"Well, that's just silly. You'll just have to turn around." On the holographic desktop, Tony dragged and dropped a file into the War Machine upload queue.

Rhodey's blinked twice, eyes darting to the upper left corner where the new information was streaming through. "What's this?"

"The Mandarin's location. In Miami, of all places."

Rhodey made a sort of bewildered stuttering hum.

"I know, I know. You're thinking it should be Far East, Europe, North Africa, Iran, Pakistan, or Syria?" Tony shook his head as he thought back to his similar confusion in another time. "But nope. He's in Miami. Or at least his broadcasting signal is."

"This is huge, Tones. How on earth did you get this?"

"Now that's just an insulting thing to ask. *How?* Really? I'm a genius—"

Rhodey chuckled. "Which is your way of saying JARVIS did most of the work."

"Hey!" Tony complained the same moment JARVIS voiced his gratitude toward Rhodey.

"So what's the deal with having an evil mastermind over for dinner?" Rhodey asked, persistently attentive.

Tony groaned. "Evil mastermind? Seriously? As far as we know, he doesn't have a—"

"—hairless cat." Rhodey finished with a roll of his eyes. "Way to buy into the stereotype."

"You know me so well, Platypus."

"*Too* well. I know something's up."

"Well, the Mandarin is partying it up with about twenty people with the Extremis heat signature." Tony offered with a wince and a shrug.

Rhodey cursed vehemently, connecting the dots that there was a more tangible association between the Mandarin and Extremis than mere opportunism.

"So you see, I have to keep Killian occupied and ideally in the dark when you kick down his buddy's front door." Tony went on to list the many resources Killian had to aid his escape and the many reasons why that should not be allowed to happen. Auctioning off the volatile Extremis formula to the highest bidder was at the top of the list. "So I figured, why not a publicly announced dinner that'll be documented by at least twenty different news stations?"

A vein pulsed in Rhodey's forehead as he shut his eyes and inhaled deeply. Tony knew from their years at M.I.T. that he had won this round of argument with his usual brand of insane but somehow logical reasoning.

"Fine. I see your point." Rhodey conceded with a frown.

"I knew you would, Sour Patch." Tony blew his friend a series of kisses. "Now go and update the man in the White House. Dinner's at six so plan accordingly."

Rhodey began to nod but hesitated. "You sure you'll be alright with Killian?"

"Yes, *mom!*" Tony snorted with mocked outrage. "I can handle one Extremis-enhanced douchebag, you worry about the twenty you're taking on." It became quickly obvious that Killian must have enhanced his own biology with Extremis once JARVIS got a hold of Killian's medical records and compared them with his current state of health, confirmed by his elevated body temperature.

"...please tell me you didn't set it up this way so you can punch him for asking Pepper out?"

"...no, it was a mutual decision and we are better as friends. I'm just, um, looking out for her, as friends do." Tony hedged his answer purposefully, better that Rhodey thought he was still working through the breakup than carrying out a personal vendetta from a different timeline.

"If you say so." Rhodey raised his eyebrows but said nothing more on the subject.

*

The conversation with Happy and Bruce went about as well as Tony had expected.

Happy had groused at Tony's decision to head out to Malibu alone, grumbling that he could have been there to run interference or deck the smarmy son-of-a-bitch if needed. Tony, for the most part, was just relieved that Happy was three thousand miles away from where he had once been caught in an explosion that resulted in a week-long coma.

It took some convincing but Happy eventually agreed to focus on Pepper's safety as she would undoubtedly be under heavy media scrutiny once a link was established between A.I.M. and the Mandarin, given how Ross had all but pointed an arrow at Stark Industries and Tony for anything A.I.M. related.

Bruce was displeased and disappointed to learn that the Extremis users had been operatives and likely involved in a number of terrorist plots, though the new insight didn't lessen his resolve to cure them. The Hulk would be accompanying War Machine and the Iron Legion to the raid on the Mandarin compound. As capable as the Iron Legionnaires were, Tony felt better knowing that Rhodey had back-up and phrased it as such when he asked Bruce this favor. Bruce had agreed readily, despite his shock at the enormity of what Tony was entrusting him with. His best friend. His technology. His family.

"Thanks, Brucie Bear. I owe you big time." Tony sighed with gratitude. "How about a new ultracentrifuge? Or a new incubator? What am I saying, you need both and—"

"How about one of those chili dogs from Central Park?" Bruce interrupted with a soft smile and fond tone. "I have it on good authority that they're legendary."

Opening and closing his mouth a few times then giving up when no words were forthcoming, Tony settled on a nod and a wide grin that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

*

At six o'clock on the dot, the doorbell rang. Tony instructed JARVIS to see their guest in while he finished stacking the takeout boxes in a towering pyramid.

"Sir, your *guests* have arrived."

"Guests?" Tony whirled around, spotting Killian with Maya by his side. Her presence was indicative of the unease Killian must feel to want a buffer at this meeting. "Hi Richie's guest."

Killian's eye twitched at the nickname.

"You don't remember me. Why am I not surprised?" Maya scoffed.

"Don't take it personally, I don't remember what I had for breakfast." Tony quipped, couldn't resist parroting their conversation from before.

"You did not have breakfast today, Sir."

Tony shrugged. "Ah, that explains it."

"Honestly, Tony." Killian said in a tone meant to sound playful but which came across as condescending. "It's a marvel that you managed to keep your company afloat with your attention span." With a hand on her waist, he guided Maya through the foyer and into the living space.

"Good thing I got Pep."

"And where is the lovely Pepper tonight?" Killian made a show of glancing around.

"Who knows, I tuned her out as soon as the words 'board meeting' were said." Tony said glibly, unwilling to disclose any information on Pepper's whereabouts. "C'mon, dinner's getting cold."

"That's too bad, we brought her a gift and everything." Maya opened her messenger bag and withdrew a small potted plant with a bow affixed to it. The ficus was similar to the one Happy had tampered with in Bern. Too similar.

"Leave it." Tony started toward the kitchen, turning away so they wouldn't see his scowl at what basically constituted a bomb in his home. Hopefully they'd interpreted his abruptness as part of his trademark rudeness.

There was some rustling before footsteps followed.

"That's quite a spread." Maya commented as she took in the small mountain of takeout Chinese food.

"What can I say?" Tony spread his arms wide, a paper plate in one hand and a pair of chopsticks in the other. "Fighting this Mandarin guy got me craving Chinese."

"How's that going for you? Any closer to catching him?" Killian asked with a bit too much interest and not enough friendliness. It sounded more like an interrogation.

"Oh, we'll get him soon." Tony said noncommittally, opening a container and stabbing a walnut shrimp with his chopsticks. "He's a bit much, you know? Lots of pageantry going on here...lots of theater. Almost like he's trying to *act* the part."

Killian's grin was more akin to a grimace. "Only you would criticize a terrorist on his public speaking skills."

Maya chuckled uncomfortably.

They loaded up their respective plates with an assortment of Chinese dishes, a mixture of Americanized and authentic entrees.

"So Maya, how's the botany scene?" Tony waited until Killian had a mouthful of chicken lo mein before asking.

Maya paused her movement, a small mound of rice balancing precariously atop her chopsticks, and gave Tony a wry look. "You do remember me, though I'm actually a biological DNA coder running a team of forty out of a privately-funded think tank. Not a botanist."

Tony busied himself with creating a moat of egg rolls to contain the overflowing sauce from mapo tofu. "Think tank, huh? What're you working on?"

"No business talk tonight." Killian had swallowed his food and sent Maya a cautioning look. "I thought we are here to 'hug it out' as you so eloquently put it."

"Oh yeah, that. You're not still pissed off about the Switzerland thing, are you? Sounds like you've done well for yourself without my help. So really, I probably did you a favor all those years ago."

Maya glanced between them warily.

"A favor?" Killian's eyes flashed briefly before dimming back to their original blue. "Hm, I guess so. You did give me the greatest gift anybody's ever given me - motivation to forge my own path."

"Is that what we're calling it now? Motivation?" Tony sneered. "You were desperate, Richie, and let me tell you, desperation isn't attractive."

"And parading around like a peacock is?" The chopsticks snapped in Killian's grip.

The room felt warmer, as though someone had turned up the thermostat.

"Can't help my *natural* beauty." Tony's smile was all smugness and teeth.

"I really like the peking duck." Maya said, trying to deescalate the tension in the room. "Where did you get this from?"

"China Garden, Dr. Hansen." JARVIS helpfully supplied. "Sir, I believe it would be prudent to tune into the news. There is a new development relevant to you and your guests."

"Intrigue!" Tony clapped and a large holographic display appeared.

"—Machine and the Hulk had just apprehended the Mandarin who identified himself as Trevor Slattery, an actor."

The coverage shifted to a live video of Trevor, eyes glazed and speech slurred, escorted by local law enforcement to an armored van. "Well, I, um, had a little problem with, um, substances. So when they approached me about the role, I took it." A high-pitched giggle. "He think-tank-thinked it up."

"Is he high?" A male voice asked in the background, likely the cameraman.

The reporter shushed him. "Who approached you? And what role?"

Trevor's face scrunched in concentration as he affected the accent America had come to dread. "Ready for another lesson?" He dissolved into another fit of giggles. "See? The Mandarin is not real. He needed someone to take credit for all the—" He mimicked the sound of an explosion, completed with an attempt to flail his hands if not for the fact they were cuffed.

"Who?"

"Killian! My mentor, my agent, and my manager. I want to thank him for giving me this role of a lifetime, and the academy—"

The screen distorted when a plate of Chinese food sailed through it. It hit the cabinets with a wet thud, spilling noodles and rice and meat on the floor.

Maya scrambled away from Killian who must have stood up when he threw the plate.

A tremor ran through Killian's frame, more akin to a vibration than shaking. He was breathing heavily, puffs of air that floated between them like smoke. "Tony, Tony, Tony." He whispered, incongruent with the rage snarling across his face. Fire pulsed under his skin and flowed through his veins. "I should have done this years ago." With a smile that didn't quite reach his blazing eyes, Killian opened his mouth and roared out a torrent of flame.

Disable with Extreme Prejudice

Chapter Notes

The next few chapters will be the multi-pov ones I like to do between movies. :)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3.

"JARVIS. Target Extremis heat signatures, disable with extreme prejudice." Pulling Maya with him, Tony broke into a full sprint through the doorway, stopping at the coat closet to push her in with a hasty order to stay put as pieces of Mark 80 deployed in metallic blurs, soaring past him with deadly efficiency.

It should have been an easy fight. It shouldn't have been a fight at all. Except the sounds were all wrong. Instead of the harmonic clicks as the armor locked into place, there was Killian's deranged laugh.

"Oh Tony, I warned you about your cheap toys." A half-melted section of Mark 80 skidded across the floor, leaving a charred trail behind like an arrow pointing to Tony's whereabouts.

"Where's my suit?" Tony hissed as he peeked around the corner. Killian was alternating between swatting the armor pieces away and crushing them in his hands.

"Inbound, Sir. Ten seconds." JARVIS' usual deadpan delivery was replaced by clipped tension.

Tony tried to sneak another glance, only to come face to face with Killian, who wiggled his fingers in a mock wave. Tony swore and ducked back.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news." Killian rolled one of the crumbled lumps in his palm, testing its weight. "But you're not going to graduate." And hurled it at Tony.

Tony dropped into a roll to avoid it, then dodged another as he flipped to a crouching position. A part grazed his shoulder as he straightened, only to crumble down when the next one struck his left kneecap. The jarring sensation of bones shifting told him it was shattered. Panic edged his thoughts and he forcibly ordered it back. Now was not the time. "C'mon JARVIS!"

The sight and the feel of the familiar red and gold of the Iron Man suit was a welcome comfort, even if his left knee protested violently as it buckled under the strain of piloting the

armor. The pain was alleviated somewhat when Tony engaged the repulsors and took the weight off of his knee.

Killian tilted his head, assessing the situation and apparently finding it still in his favor. "Tsk tsk, Tony. More cheap—"

The second Mark 80, fully assembled, tackled Killian before he could finish his undoubtedly patronizing and thematic remark. It immediately opened and enclosed its target.

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. "That was a close one, huh?"

"You do like to keep things exciting, Sir." JARVIS answered.

"Stick with me, JARVIS, and you'll never be bored." Tony moved to check on Maya, thankful for the armor for anchoring and supporting his injured knee, only to halt his steps at the discordant sounds of grinding gears and creaking metal.

Mark 80's movement was stilted, as though attempting to follow two different objectives. It staggered another step toward the floor-to-ceiling windows, where it was programmed to take to the sky for the Extremis detonation, then stopped completely.

"I take it back. Boring is good." Tony aimed a shot at Mark 80, wincing at the image he presented. Iron Man facing off against an Iron Legionnaire. His peripheral vision picked up several helicopters hovering outside, likely from the news stations. Hopefully it won't come to him dismantling his own creation.

One of the Mark 80's joints creaked as its right arm moved upward wildly to pull off the face plate, revealing Killian's ember skin and fiery eyes.

Tony evaluated his surroundings and strategies. He was facing the window and could not fire a missile without endangering the news media unaware of the precariousness of their position. The unibeam required too much charging time. A well-aimed repulsor shot to the head should do the trick but he doubted Killian would do him the courtesy of staying still. Dread was bubbling in his chest as he faced an opponent he had severely underestimated with only one suit of armor and two Iron Legionnaires.

Foreknowledge did not guarantee victory.

"You wanted the Mandarin? You got him, Tony." The metal blazed brightly as it softened and slid off of Killian like pieces of wax, revealing his triumphant smirk. "I am the Mandarin!"

"Say it again for the camera." Tony quipped, calling humor to his defense and hoping it would provide the distraction he needed.

It did.

The moment Killian pivoted to look behind him, Tony lunged and gripped Killian's shoulders to wrestle him away from the windows.

They grappled for a moment, twisting and shoving each other into a standstill. The Extremis-generated heat scorched through the gauntlets and Tony struggled to hold on despite the blisters forming on his fingertips and the weakening of the suit.

Sensing an opening, Killian wrestled a shoulder free and delivered a punch that knocked Tony back, then another that sent him skidding across the floor.

The impact jostled his broken kneecap and Tony grunted as his vision whited out from the spike of pain. He would probably never walk on that leg again, at least not without extensive assistive technology. Morbidly, he thought with dark amusement that it was a good thing he had that covered. The leg braces were doing very well in clinical trials, but this time it wouldn't be Rhodey who needed them.

Rhodey. The Iron Legion.

If Killian managed to first intercept then circumvent Mark 80, then there was a good chance the twenty or so Extremis soldiers his friends were facing could do the same. Tony had miscalculated the reactive adaptability of an Extremis user *not* on the edge of an explosion. Not to mention, aside from Killian, the others all had combat backgrounds. He was so very glad that he had asked Bruce to partner with Rhodey. It had seemed like such an inane favor at the time, but now it was a necessity to correct his overconfident oversight.

Killian landed in a crouch above him, one of his elbows resting on his knees and the other straightened as a glowing hand patted the center of the Iron Man suit.

"Knocked down like a little turtle in his turtle shell." Killian sneered and Tony found his taunt as uninspiring as the first time he had heard it. "Wonder what would happen if I did..." Killian placed his other hand on the suit, framing them around the arc reactor and summoning extreme heat. "This."

Sweat beaded across Tony's forehead as the temperature increased quickly. The interface flickered and beeped, indicating fried circuits.

"Sir—" JARVIS' voice faltered amidst the static. "Danger— Recommend—"

"Eject." Tony called out and gritted his teeth against the sudden pressure as he was thrust out from the suit. He was grateful for the open floor plan when the momentum carried him near the living room. His left knee screamed but Tony did his best to ignore it as he stumbled to a stand, balancing unsteadily on his right leg. It wasn't the worst he'd had.

The open heart surgery in the middle of a cave in Afghanistan would always be number one for this particular ranking.

Killian pulled his hands out of the wrecked torso of the Iron Man suit and wiped them on his pants. "You know, Tony, I'm glad that this is documented." He tossed a careless salute to the helicopters.

Tony hobbled away, leaning against the wall or furniture for support. Killian didn't seem to be in any hurry to hunt him down *yet*, preferring to luxuriate in his standard villainous

monologue.

"Once I valued anonymity but now I've come to appreciate the different sort of freedom that only comes when people know exactly who to fear." Killian stalked after Tony with the leisure of a predator knowing its prey had no escape.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony caught a rustle of movement down the hallway leading to the garage. Maya. She must have been inching toward an exit, planning her escape from this disaster of a night.

"After years of ruling behind the scenes, it's nice to finally get the recognition I deserve." Killian came closer, his manic grin stretched across his face. "Especially when I'm about to melt Iron Man down to scrap metal." With that, he charged.

Tony scrambled back but had no leverage to avoid the collision. Killian slammed into him in a blur of heat and force, uncaring and perhaps relishing in the fact that his Extremis-enhanced skin left angry red burn marks where it made contact.

"Let's start with this." Killian laid a hand on the blue light in Tony's chest, easily burning through the thin cotton of Tony's t-shirt then reducing the heat to avoid damaging the arc reactor.

Strangely, the panic usually associated with the arc reactor did not come. Perhaps he was too far gone to care and too aware of his imminent demise. "Is it hot in here or is it just me?" Tony gave a toothy smile before spitting squarely in Killian's face. The spittle evaporated unsatisfyingly in an instant.

"Always with the jokes. To be honest, Tony, your sense of humor really isn't your strong suit." Killian chuckled at his own pun. "You're like one of those children's toys that yammers on and on and never shuts up until it—" He pulled out the arc reactor and strummed the taut wires with a careless finger that turned searing hot and sliced through them easily. "—runs out the battery."

Tony surged forward and slammed his forehead into Killian's nose, making the most of the element of surprise by ripping the arc reactor out of Killian's grasp and rolling away until his back hit the leg of the coffee table. The weight and the light in his hand felt foreign yet familiar. Glancing down at the gaping hole lined by a ring of scalded red, Tony again felt the numb void of nothing. No panic. No fear. No anger. Was it shock or was it desensitization? Neither seemed the correct explanation. He knew, with the kind of certainty he seldom had, that he would be fine without the reactor.

It could be taken, poisoned, or crushed.

Tony could not.

No matter what his enemies stole or destroyed, Tony would always be Iron Man. The arc reactor was no longer the anchor of his identity but a liability that could and should be corrected. Perhaps it was time to give Dr. Wu, the talented Chinese surgeon who had

removed the shrapnel pieces before, a call. The risks associated with the surgery were still high but no longer frighteningly so. After all, he did survive it once already.

"That was unpleasant." Killian's nose had righted itself in a flare of ember, he tapped at it gingerly and sniffed.

A rustle of green caught Tony's eye. The ficus - similar to the one Happy had tampered with in Bern, *too similar*. Tony dropped the arc reactor and reached for the plant with both arms, extending them to the fullest and pulling it closer for inspection. There was the barest hint of warmth in the leaves. With a decisive tug, he broke off several branches and watched in glee as the stems flickered orange. He snapped a few more, smirking as the plant began to glow and shudder as its basic genetic makeup could not handle multiple repair objectives at once. Thus overloading the system.

"Oh I'm *so* sorry. Here, have a get-well-soon plant." Tony threw the ficus at Killian and, in a feat of physical dexterity, vaulted himself over the coffee table and used the momentum to propel himself forward, putting as much distance between himself and the impending Extremis explosion as possible.

The shockwave washed over him, along with pieces of debris and an immense swell of heat. There was a throbbing in his abdomen. His fingers found a jagged edge that should not be there, along with a spreading wetness on his shirt. Lifting his head required more effort than Tony thought and made him horribly dizzy. He managed to catch a glimpse of red flowing from and pooling beneath him before his neck went limp and his head fell back with a thud he barely felt.

*

A sharp stab ripped Tony from the quiet and painless oblivion he was drifting in.

"Tony!" Maya was shouting, pressing down on his chest with a soot-crusting couch cushion. It must have jolted whatever had made its home in Tony's abdomen by greedily carving out a spot for itself. Hence the stabbing sensation. "Tony, oh thank god!"

"M- Maya." He licked his chapped lips and tasted copper. "Your...gift...was...the...bo-
bomb."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Her laugh had a hysterical tilt. "How're you doing?"

"Been...been better."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"Killian?" Three syllables slurred into one but Tony was too tired to care. He could barely keep his eyes open, at least the pain was fading.

Maya's gaze shifted off of Tony's face to a point behind him, she grimaced at whatever she saw. "He's dead."

Tony hummed in acknowledgement.

"Sir, I've alerted the proper authorities." JARVIS reported, utterly concerned and barely calm.
"Sir? Sir!"

"Tony!"

Tony blinked, unaware that he had closed his eyes in the first place or for how long. Judging by the panic on Maya's face, it might have been longer than the few seconds he had thought.

"This would be an excellent time to channel your impressive stubbornness and stay conscious until help arrives." JARVIS paused. "Consider it a double-dare."

This surprised a laugh out of Tony, the sound tore through his chest like a blade and cut off in a choking gurgle.

Maya's hands were still holding the couch cushion in place, her knuckles white with the amount of pressured exerted. Yet Tony barely felt it now. A crimson stain was seeping through the fabric, like the blackness darkening his consciousness. As much as he hated to admit it, he was probably going to fail the double-dare. Which was disappointing, since he'd been trying for years to get JARVIS to issue one.

The way the lights flickered and Maya's gasp of horror made Tony think maybe he said some, or all, of his thoughts aloud.

"I... I can save you." She whispered. "I have a dose of Extremis in my bag."

He meant to mimic the sound of an explosion by blowing air through his lips, but it came out like a wheeze.

"I know it's not stable but you can help me fix it. You almost did thirteen years ago and you were drunk off your ass." Maya rolled her eyes, a tear escaped from the movement. "C'mon, Tony. I sold my soul to the devil for my research, help me get a piece of it back. Help me use it for good. *You are good.*"

Tony knew there was a chance that his body would reject Extremis but no more than the risk he was planning to take with the shrapnel removal surgery. He wasn't ready to let go of the friendships he'd built. He wasn't ready to give up on all the progress he'd made. He wasn't ready to throw away this miracle of a second chance. His life finally was good.

He was good.

"O...kay."

Cool metal pressed against his neck then liquid fire was pushed into his veins.

*

Everything was too hot, too much, too fast. Tony felt as if he was burning and boiling and blistering. Dimly, he heard a woman screaming.

"...no no no...overload...help!"

His bones singed. His flesh scorched. His blood sizzled.

Excruciating heat, all-consuming and relentless, was surging through his body and seeking an outlet that wasn't there. His skin was cracking and instead of alleviating the urgency, each fracture made the search for relief that much more desperate. The inferno raging within wanted out and Tony couldn't contain it. A robotic yet comforting voice somehow managed to cut through the smoke that filled his mind and lungs.

"Fabrication complete..."

Cold metal and colder air surrounded him, tightening around him until all he could feel was ice.

Then the relief was gone as quickly as it came. The caged firestorm rampaged through his insides while the uninhibited blizzard howled outside until Tony was caught in between extremes, fevered and freezing with no middle ground.

"...New York..."

Time must have passed because there were familiar voices speaking in incomprehensible snippets, though Tony had no idea how long since the kind of agony he was in seemed perpetual and rendered keeping time pointless.

"...depleting..."

"Come find me."

"Tony!"

Tony's fraying senses and thoughts honed in on the one input that was unlike the others. It was an instruction instead of conversation. It was certain instead of fearful. It was known instead of heard.

"Come find me." It beckoned, commanding yet playful, and Tony was tempted to obey.

"...stabilizing...test run..."

"...out of time..."

A whoosh of air. A light pressure. A quick sting.

Tony gasped and opened his eyes. Brilliant fiery orange filled his vision, like staring into the soul of the-

Abruptly, it began to fade when ice coursed through his veins, combating and combining with the existing fire until a pleasant warmth was all that remained. Waves of heat pulsed outward with each beat of his heart, melting the frost layered on his skin and drowning out the *thing* that was alive yet not living.

"Come find me." It whispered once more.

Tony promised he would before succumbing to the comforting embrace of rest and darkness.

The Silent Stillness That Followed

Chapter Notes

This is the first of three (maybe four) multi-pov chapters before jumping into Thor: Dark World. Here we see previous chapters' events through the eyes of the people who love, care for, and worry about Tony. :)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3.

10 Things I Hate About You.

Hamlet.

"-it's time we just hug it out. So here's my home address, 10880 Malibu Point, 90265. Door's open, Richie, and I'm thinking Chinese for dinner. See you at six!"

Mrs. Davis shook her head at Mr. Stark's antics, almost wanting to pick up the phone to call the man and chastise the poor decision of giving out one's address on national television. Mr. Hogan had a lot of extra work coming now that the number of people swarming to gawk at Iron Man would undoubtedly increase exponentially. There was a reason celebrities don't give out their private addresses for fan mail.

Mr. Stark unquestionably qualified as a celebrity with his statuses as a billionaire and a superhero though he preferred to refer to himself as a mechanic – and a fantastic one at that. The updates he had given her on the prosthesis project were very promising.

She honestly hadn't expected to speak with him again after their brief meeting and already planned to check the news daily for any announcements from Stark Industries. Yet he did. With a video call on a program she hadn't installed on Chad's old laptop.

It wasn't as painful as she had imagined to interact with something that belonged to her son. If anything, she felt a little bit closer to him as she tapped clumsily at the keyboard and heard the telltale crunch of loose food particles lodged between the keys. She missed him with a fierceness that made her eyes water and heart ache. It was nice to think of him in a context outside of his last moments, memories she had buried in her grief and anger but never forgotten.

Mr. Stark would bring Killian to justice. She knew that with ironclad certainty and only hoped he wouldn't get hurt in the process.

*

"Aunt May! I'm home." Peter kicked off his shoes and wandered into the kitchen. "Can we order Chinese for dinner?"

"Sure, we can. I just got off the phone with Stark Industries and we can order the exact same things Tony Stark ordered." Aunt May winked.

"Hey!" Peter whined but didn't deny what his aunt was implying because she was absolutely right. Not that he would ever admit it. The idea of eating the same food as Mr. Stark was just too cool to pass up. Hopefully it would go better than that one time he begged Aunt May to let him have some coffee after reading in a magazine that it was Mr. Stark's favorite drink. He ended up spitting it out and ran to the bathroom to brush his teeth because coffee tasted like liquid burnt toast. It was a bit discouraging to learn that he wasn't able to claim Mr. Stark's favorite drink as his favorite too, but Peter eventually recovered after a few hours of sulking.

A part of him knew it was silly to emulate Mr. Stark. It wasn't as if drinking coffee and eating Chinese food would make Peter a superhero but it did make him feel closer to Mr. Stark. He still couldn't believe Mr. Stark remembered him from the Stark Expo and invited him to join Team Iron Man.

"Oh now, don't pout. It's just a bit of fun." She placed a kiss on his forehead and ruffled his hair. "Go do your homework and we'll look at the menu together when Ben gets home."

"Okay, Aunt May." Peter started for his room, cataloging the list of assignments and deciding which to tackle first. He had just set his backpack down when Aunt May poked her head through the doorway.

"Want something to drink?" She asked with a wide smile.

"Sure, a soda—" Peter groaned when he saw the steaming cup in Aunt May's hand. Coffee. "No! Not this again!"

*

Jim rubbed a hand over his face as soon as the elevator doors closed behind him, allowing him a small window of solitude.

Although the Mandarin's attacks were primarily aimed at United States territories, there had been several incidents where other countries were involved. The most recent example was the Ali Al Salem Air Base where the United States Air Force maintained a presence along with the Kuwait Air Force.

Jim wasn't naïve enough to believe they wanted the Mandarin alive so he could receive a fair trial.

By now, the whole world had seen the footage of the Iron Legion subduing the overloading Extremis users. It wasn't a leap for intrigued parties to come to the conclusion that someone, somewhere, had found a way to turn humans into bombs. The possibility of a virtually undetectable weapon was as terrifying as it was tempting for every country vying for the upper hand.

Including the United States.

President Ellis had directed them to capture the terrorist leader unless doing so would *severely* endanger *civilian* lives.

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off the urge to punch the wall. It was always the civilians who paid the price for those thirsting after power, collateral damage to be brushed aside in the pursuit of the greater good. Except no one had a concrete definition for what constituted the greater good and more lives were lost in the murky waters of subjective morality.

It wasn't right.

*

"Listen, Nick. We need to look strong, especially after what happened in New York. Aliens, that's superhero business. Terrorists are American business."

Fury's eye twitched at the muffled quality of Ellis' voice and the light rustling of papers in the background. Experience taught him that Ellis likely had the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder in order to read through whatever briefing was on his desk. Which meant that the Director of SHIELD did not warrant the President's full attention. "Can't get more American than Captain America, Sir." He said through gritted teeth and forced joviality.

"That's a good point." Ellis hummed. "Cap is great, no doubt about that."

Fury could feel his temples throb, the sign of a coming migraine. The noncommittal answers meant that the President was not going to reconsider his decision of barring the Avengers from the Mandarin mission. "Captain Rogers is an excellent leader." It was a bit of an overstatement but he supposed excellence was really a subjective concept.

While Rogers was a competent soldier and always had luck on his side, he lacked the necessary field experience to lead effectively. He was fantastic at boosting morale and recruiting soldiers to his cause, partially due to his charismatic earnestness and partially due to the legend of Captain America propagated during and after World War II. Generations of children grew up watching cartoons and reading comics about Captain America, all eager to answer Rogers' call. Except Rogers didn't always make the right call nor could he see the bigger picture to plan ahead.

Stark was supposed to compensate for these limitations. For all his playboy ways, Stark had been an active and involved CEO of a multinational industrial company for decades and successfully rebranded his company from weapons manufacturer to clean energy pioneer in less than five years. This was a man who had vision and could predict the rise and fall of trends. Had Stark agreed to join, the Avengers would have been unstoppable with Captain America's likability and Iron Man's resources.

Fury had known that they needed Stark far more than the man needed them, a fact he kept under wraps to keep Stark's ego in check and to maintain a power imbalance that tipped in

their favor. Romanoff had planted the seeds for months in her role as Natalie Rushman but instead of a feast, it was a famine.

It was clear from their last interaction that there was no love lost between Stark and Romanoff. In hindsight, it was a mistake to send her. Hill had noted Romanoff's approach could be off-putting and obvious if an asset knew what to look for and Stark must have known for quite some time.

"I'm just going to be blunt with you, Nick, but there is such a thing as *too* American." Ellis sighed, sounding genuinely regretful at the slight to his childhood hero. "Especially with the attention on us right now from all directions, we have to consider how we present ourselves."

The Iron Legion and the highway project in Africa had drawn unprecedented attention to the United States. Everything was under intense scrutiny and a super soldier dressed in the spandex equivalent of the American flag would prove to be more of an eyesore than endearment.

"I understand." Fury kept his tone polite even as a snarl tore across his face. "Thank you, Mr. President." He made sure the call was disconnected before throwing the phone across the room, it shattered against the wall and the handset spun wildly before landing in the planter.

Captain America did not meet the requirements to be recognized as an international superhero and the name was the smallest part of the problem. Without the other countries buying into the goodness of Captain America, the Avengers were unlikely to be granted unfettered access, which undermined the careful plans Fury had to dismantle the HYDRA bases littering the globe before confronting the top-level undercover officers.

HYDRA, it always came back to HYDRA.

Fury had followed the anomalies Stark spotted and what he found when he pulled on those strings unraveled his confidence in and understanding of SHIELD. HYDRA was most certainly present and prospering, had been since the beginning, and it needed to be addressed.

It was no coincidence that Stark had distanced himself from SHIELD shortly after he accessed their records. The anomalies were too well hidden to be errors. While Stark could not have identified the source and the scope of the discrepancies, given the short amount of time that had passed between the helicarrier and the tower, it was enough to trigger his impressive trust issues. Which explained the sudden shift in his attitude – everything was on track with Stark desperate to prove himself to Rogers and SHIELD by offering his substantial financial support and unlimited equipment upgrades, then it fell apart.

At the moment, Stark was either protecting his own interests should SHIELD fall or unwilling to work with a compromised team. Knowing the man, it was probably both with a side of spite for how Romanoff and Rogers had behaved toward him.

Tapping thoughtfully at his desk, the steady rhythm in sync with his slowing heart rate now that he had vented his frustration, Fury considered his options.

Should SHIELD and the Avengers fail, Iron Man would serve as Earth's defense with the Hulk, War Machine, and the Iron Legion by his side. Should they succeed, they would regain the leverage needed to entice Stark to their services. Thus, Stark must be kept out of this operation. It should not be difficult to accomplish, seeing Stark had his hands full with international affairs, educational outreach, and old grudges.

While gaining entry into the various countries with HYDRA presence without official sanctions was not ideal, it was nothing new to an organization such as SHIELD or Captain America who had a history of viewing laws as optional.

The end would justify the means.

*

Hulk roared as he crashed through the reinforced gates around the compound, clearing the way for the FBI armored vans and fire trucks.

Before fading away, Tiny Banner had told Hulk to be careful around the squishy humans and not to grab the Metal Men flying overhead. Many times.

Hulk thought Tiny Banner worried too much, Hulk was happy that Tin Man asked for Hulk's help and wouldn't let his friend down. Concrete crumbled like chalk and steel folded like paper. He was having a great time but he missed Tin Man. The other Metal Men were gray, not the fun red and gold Hulk liked, and they didn't do the loops or rolls but they looked like Tin Man and Hulk always protected his friends.

"We can help you." Machine Man, Tin Man's friend, said.

The Glowing People just looked mad then got brighter and yelled real loud. That was Metal Men's cue to swoop down to take them away. Sometimes Hulk helped but he didn't like touching the Glowing People, they were too hot and burned his hand.

At least the sky looked pretty after they went boom.

*

Harley's eyes were glued to the television as his dinner slowly congealed on the table. The orange chicken from the grocery store looked rather suspect to begin with and sitting out only made it more so. His sister was having cereal and that would probably end up being his dinner choice too, as soon as War Machine – such an awesome name – and the Hulk – also an awesome name – arrested the Mandarin.

War Machine's armor had a visual feed that was transmitting live to the FBI van, alerting the agents who were the targets and who were the unlucky civilians, then shared with the public. The newscaster said it was in real time but Harley doubted that. The cut-aways were too timely and no faces had been shown throughout the battle, when the proximity of combat should have included those details. It was likely edited and arranged by JARVIS, Mr. Stark's super awesome A.I., before going to the stations.

On screen, the Iron Legion struggled against the Extremis soldiers who were capable of retaliation, the newscaster commented that this particular model was never meant for combat, but performed admirably in detaining and removing the overloading terrorists.

The Hulk assisted, either by grabbing the ones who got away or knocking them out cold. He had roared when he closed a gigantic green fist around a guy who looked like he was going to spontaneously combust before throwing the man into the arms of a waiting Iron Legionnaire.

It was Harley's favorite scene so far and he was so glad he had set up his phone to record this.

*

Jane could feel her foot falling asleep from where it was wedged under her other knee, she ignored it in favor of focusing on what was happening before her eyes. On their modestly sized television, War Machine and the Hulk worked together seamlessly to apprehend the Mandarin and incapacitate his army. Watching the battle brought back memories of the New York invasion and with them, Thor.

"You know, it's okay to miss him." Darcy said gently but startling her all the same.

"Who?"

"Thor." Darcy reached over and pulled the nearly shredded napkin out of Jane's twisting fingers.

Jane hadn't noticed she was doing that, or even had a piece of napkin in hand. The pizza they had ordered for dinner sat on the coffee table, untouched. "Nope." She denied. "Not even close, not even a little bit, not even at all."

"Methinks thou doth protest too much." Darcy teased, affecting a British accent. "Me also thinks thou hath watched 10 Things I Hate About You too many times."

"I just— Wait, what did he just say?" Jane reached for the remote and turned up the volume. It must be a mistake.

Darcy rolled her eyes. "Don't change the subject."

"No, Darcy! Look!" Jane could hear the edge of panic in her voice, sharp and scared. "He just said Killian, that's the guy—"

"—received news that a fire, literally, has broken out in the home of Tony Stark." The newscaster said as they cut to the live footage filmed by the helicopter crew in Malibu.

Because of the distance and angle, the video quality was abysmal but the flash of flame was unmistakable. So were the gray of the Iron Legion and the red and gold of the Iron Man suit. It was terrifying when those colors blinked out of sight and only the maliciously tinged orange remained. For a few moments, nothing happened and then everything did at once. A fiery force swept through Tony's home, taking half of it into the ocean.

The silent stillness that followed was stifling.

"C'mon, Tony." Darcy's nails dug painfully into Jane's palm.

Jane heard herself echo those same words.

They sat together, hands clenched, and stared at the television with tearful eyes.

Um, Oops

Chapter Notes

Posting before bed and hoping I won't wake up with another sinus migraine. My body hates nature and seasonal changes. :(

I don't really think this chapter ends on a cliffhanger but I have been wrong before (sorry about the last one!), so I just want to say that Tony is totally fine.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

Maya stumbled when the walls shook around her and the floor shifted beneath her feet, her messenger bag bounced against her hip as she steadied herself. The air smelled of ash. Dimly, she heard what sounded like her name through the ringing in her ears. "Hello?"

"Dr. Hansen." It took her a few more seconds to identify the voice as Stark's A.I., the same one that had greeted them at the door. She must have imagined the relief in the robotic intonation. "Help is on the way but Sir requires immediate medical attention."

"What happened—" Her words left her as she rounded the corner and took in the destruction of the once pristine living space. Chunks of misshapen metal littered the floor, along with remnants of their dinner. The glass top of the coffee table was shattered and its frame turned on its side with the legs pointing toward the wrecked Iron Man suit. Speaking of which, where was its creator?

"Sir is by the couch, please hurry." JARVIS helpfully supplied and Maya was almost certain she detected a note of panic as she picked her way through the fragments obstructing her path. Dark streaks marked the floor, each line was like an arrow pointing toward the suspiciously cleared spot about thirty feet away.

The center of an Extremis explosion.

"How—"

JARVIS interrupted, anticipating her question. "The plant you so thoughtfully brought as a gift." There was definitely reproach in his voice.

Maya winced. Killian had cackled about the ingenuity of his plan to bring Stark an Extremis-enhanced plant, something about the early bird getting the worm but the second mouse getting the cheese. It was utter nonsense. "I wanted to bring a nice bottle of wine." Her sullen mutter ended in a yelp when her foot connected with something solid, half-buried under upended cushions and larger pieces of debris.

Tony.

"Oh god!" With trembling and less-than-careful hands, she cleared away as much as she could, revealing a burnt, bruised, and bleeding man whose shirt was stained crimson from the deep gash in his abdomen. Maya grabbed the first cushion she could reach, knowing that she needed to apply pressure to the wound. The fabric snagged on something as she pressed it down, eliciting a pained groan from Tony and a wave of panic from Maya. She hoped she hadn't inadvertently caused more damage.

Another groan and his eyes opened, his pupils were blown wide. Likely a sign of shock.

"Tony, oh thank god!"

"M– Maya." His movement pulled open an almost-closed cut on his lips.
"Your...gift...was...the...bo– bomb."

Maya tried to tell herself that it couldn't be that dire if Tony was able to joke. "Yeah, sorry about that. How're you doing?"

"Been...been better."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Maya leaned forward to put more of her weight on the cushion covering Tony's chest.

"Killian?" Tony slurred, his pallor not at all reassuring.

"He's dead." Maya frowned as her gaze slid over to the disconcertingly empty spot in the room. This was the first time she had seen the aftermath of Extremis in person, the nothingness it had left behind pulled at her like a black hole. A gravitational force of her sins that she could not escape.

It was both shocking and unsurprising to learn that Killian could have concocted such a scheme and carried it this far to cover up the side effects of Extremis. She had known about the volatility and what it entailed, but chosen not to wonder about the fates of the participants who stopped coming in for their booster shots and buried herself in formulas and simulations.

After all, it certainly would not help the other Extremis users if she went into a guilt-fueled depression. The best thing she could have done was to keep working on a stabilizer, that was what she told herself over and over and over as she lay awake at night. She continued to create the Extremis serum and administer it to suffering veterans who were vulnerable in their desperation to be healed, as if gaining their missing limbs back could somehow patch their lives together.

It didn't.

Extremis was not changing the world for the better, it was blasting it apart.

"Sir, I've alerted the proper authorities." JARVIS announced.

Tony said nothing.

"Sir? Sir!" The A.I. sounded frantic.

Maya dismissed that ridiculous thought as quickly as it came, JARVIS was a program. She continued to call Tony's name and received silence for her efforts until finally, he blinked.

"This would be an excellent time to channel your impressive stubbornness and stay conscious until help arrives." JARVIS said, the suggestion seemed entirely incongruent with the severity of the situation. "Consider it a double-dare."

Tony snorted then coughed violently, red spittle speckled his lips and surrounding skin. "Going to fail...tried for years." His eyes were drifting closed again.

In that moment, Maya realized something fundamental about Tony. No matter the chances of success or rates of failure, he still tried. It was admirable and absurd but still better than the apathy and avoidance she had cocooned herself in. "I... I can save you. I have a dose of Extremis in my bag." Her hand reached into her bag, finding the serum with unerring accuracy.

Tony wheezed painfully.

"I know it's not stable but you can help me fix it. You almost did thirteen years ago and you were drunk off your ass." Thirteen years changed them both, one for the better while the other for the worse. "C'mon, Tony. I sold my soul to the devil for my research, help me get a piece of it back. Help me use it for good. You are good." She said with a conviction she didn't quite believe but desperately wanted to.

Tony's stuttered agreement sounded like forgiveness, redemption, and hope.

When she pressed the injector against Tony's neck, her hand did not shake once.

*

Armor Type: Non-Combat | Code Name: Hibernation | Fabrication Process: 82.7%

"Sir, your guests have arrived."

JARVIS monitored the two visitors closely, facial recognition software confirmed their identities and thermal scans showed Mr. Killian's temperature was 46.8°C, thereby marking him as an Extremis user and highly volatile. There was an item in Dr. Hansen's messenger bag that was emitting a higher than normal heat signature.

Sir appeared to be in good spirits, based on analysis of his breathing pattern, speech cadence, and body language. The two Mark 80s were ready for deployment and the Iron Man suit was on standby as the situation should not come to a point that would require Sir to pilot the armor.

Armor Type: Non-Combat | Code Name: Hibernation | Fabrication Process: 89.0%

"Sir, I believe it would be prudent to tune into the news. There is a new development relevant to you and your guests."

Communications from War Machine indicated the raid on Mandarin's compound was a success with no civilian casualties and the arrest of Trevor Slattery, who Sir knew to be an impostor.

Sir had spoken about his future in another timeline in both hurried rants and measured confessions. It had not sounded like a good life, filled with anger and guilt.

To date, Sir had apologized ninety-four times for creating and unleashing the monstrous construct known as Ultron. JARVIS had gone from declining such gestures on the basis that the event in question had not occurred to accepting them without comment. He had come to understand this was something Sir needed to do and that was all the justification JARVIS required.

Armor Type: Non-Combat | Code Name: Hibernation | Fabrication Process: 90.6%

"Inbound, Sir. Ten seconds."

Sir's left patella had suffered a comminuted fracture. The impact to his knee, based on the perceived angle and estimated velocity, was similar to that of an auto accident. Medical advances had not progressed to such a point that an injury like this could be completely repaired. Sir would likely require some form of supportive technology for walking.

And it was all JARVIS' fault.

When Killian – he did not deserve the courtesy title after he had breathed fire in Sir's vicinity – had caught the first piece of Mark 80, JARVIS should have immediately called for the Iron Man armor. Yet he had not and it was not until Sir's panicked hiss for his armor that JARVIS acted.

The delayed response was not due to any hardware failure or system error, all parts were functioning at peak capacity, but JARVIS was stuck in a shocked stasis as Killian continued to mock and melt Sir's creation.

There was a foreign sensation weighing down on his processing speeding, the codes moving at a sluggish pace. He did not know what it was nor did he like it but somehow he knew he deserved it.

Armor Type: Non-Combat | Code Name: Hibernation | Fabrication Process: 92.8%

"Sir– Danger– Recommend–"

JARVIS contacted War Machine the moment Sir was out of the Iron Man armor. Colonel Rhodes, understandably alarmed, was en route with the three remaining Iron Legionnaires

and would arrive in approximately thirty minutes. An impressively short amount of time for covering nearly three thousand miles but still too long.

According to his calculations, Sir's chances of survival would decline significantly within the next five minutes. JARVIS alerted the local police department, fire department and nearest hospital; though he was certain the press outside had likely done so already. He also updated Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan, then reminded himself that Sir had survived worse odds than these.

When Sir was missing in Afghanistan, JARVIS had calculated the percentage of his safe return to be 0.25%. Yet Sir had returned, alive and mostly well, with a new addition in his chest.

Then Killian ripped out Sir's arc reactor.

Armor Type: Non-Combat | Code Name: Hibernation | Fabrication Process: 95.3%

"Sir is by the couch, please hurry."

Thermal scans showed Sir's body temperature was dropping rapidly, indicative of massive blood loss.

Perhaps it would be prudent to expand Sir's circle of friends to include a physician, preferably a surgeon, given Sir's tendency to push the boundaries and test his limits. JARVIS made a note to research trustworthy individuals with innovative thinking and medical expertise. It would be useful once Sir recovered from this ordeal.

Sir would recover. No other alternative was acceptable.

Armor Type: Non-Combat | Code Name: Hibernation | Fabrication Process: 100.0%

"Fabrication complete. Please step aside."

Dr. Hansen was screaming as she tried to assess Sir's condition, only to snatch her hand away as if burnt. Sir's temperature was rising rapidly and his skin glowed from the fire reshaping his biology within. There was a chance that Sir's body would reject Extremis and it would appear that the odds were not in their favor. Sir was on the verge of an overload, his body building up far more energy from the accelerated metabolic processes than it could handle.

Lowering Sir's temperature, now approaching 55°C, was the top priority. Following that was how to quickly transport Sir to New York, where Dr. Banner had several versions of a neutralizer available in his lab.

The answer came in the form of a notification from the workshop below. The Hibernation armor, with its cryogenic feature and improved speed, originally meant to subdue and transport the Winter Soldier.

JARVIS called for the suit and felt a knot loosen in the lines of his codes when Sir was back within the protective embrace of his armor. The metal shook when it closed over Sir's crackling skin, the hiss of nitrogen being released barely audible over the clicks as it locked into place. They took to the skies through the partially collapsed wall.

There was no time to waste.

*

After walking halfway to the elevator then turning back for the eighth time, Bruce made the conscious decision to simply stand in the hallway as a compromise for the two warring impulses tugging at him. Half of him wanted to be on the rooftop, where the armor transporting and stabilizing Tony would land. The other half thought it would be better to be closer to the reinforced containment room, built to withstand powerful explosions and unstable experiments.

Or a rampaging Hulk.

Bruce was certain that the room hadn't existed until he made the decision to stay at the tower even though Tony had presented it as a new playground for them to do science. He knew it was for his peace of mind no matter how many times Tony insisted it was an idea he had conceptualized after his first test of the Iron Man armor destroyed eight of his beloved cars. It was yet another demonstration of Tony's unbelievable kindness, to provide without being prompted and present it without seeking praise.

The truth was that Bruce did breathe easier knowing there was a safe space to go should he lose control, even if that particular scenario seemed less and less likely these days.

The Hulk roared within the depth of his mind, unfamiliar with the sort of helplessness that came with waiting, but remained dormant with the understanding that Metal Man needed Bruce.

Based on JARVIS' last update, Tony should arrive in five-and-a-half minutes and Jim wasn't far behind. Bruce had spoken with Maya, the brilliant mind behind the Extremis serum, before she submitted herself to police custody for questioning. She had, in a hushed voice despite JARVIS' assurance that it was a secure line, given him the Extremis formula and cautioned that the cryogenic armor was a temporary solution. A warning that Bruce was already aware of but appreciated nonetheless.

It seemed fitting that Tony's decision to save others ended up saving himself. Tony had changed the subject quickly when Bruce asked about the Hibernation armor, mumbling about preparing for contingencies, but Bruce knew it was because of their confrontation over Tony's proposal to eliminate all Extremis users once they had been located.

"Dr. Banner, Hibernation has landed on the roof and will proceed down to the containment space."

Bruce snapped to attention at JARVIS' announcement. All traces of exhaustion, both from the battle at the Mandarin compound and the Hulk transformations, vanished in an instant.

"How's he doing?"

"Sir is stable at the moment..." JARVIS trailed off in an uncharacteristic manner, which immediately made Bruce tense in alarm.

"JARVIS?"

"The liquid nitrogen is depleting at a rate faster than we had anticipated." JARVIS' voice sounded not from the overhead speakers, but from the Hibernation suit as it glided out of the elevator. They made their way to the containment room.

"How long do we have?"

"Under three minutes."

Bruce reviewed every piece of machinery in his and Tony's workshop, hoping to find something to replace or replenish the liquid nitrogen. There was nothing. It was for this exact reason that Tony had gone to his Malibu lab. He cursed, loud and angry, as the Hulk howled, pained and sad.

The stabilizing agent, adjusted according to Maya's formula, was ready; but Bruce had hoped to test it against the residue in the Extremis injector currently in Jim's possession. Maya had handed both the syringe and the arc reactor to Jim before the police arrived with a knowing look. The local police department was not a secure place for such advanced technology.

"Tony!" Pepper burst through the double doors, her red hair flowing freely and her bare feet soundless on the concrete floor. Happy followed with a pair of high heels dangling from his hand.

"I have alerted Colonel Rhodes of this development." JARVIS said.

"Hey." Jim's tone was clipped, clearly worried for his friend and upset that he was still hundreds of miles away.

"The stabilizing agent should work in theory but it's not a 100% guarantee in practice." Bruce sighed. "I'd like to have at least one test run, but—"

"We're running out of time." Happy rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Damn it."

Jim inhaled sharply. "Well, then. What're we waiting for?"

The helmet retracted with a hiss and white wisps of liquid nitrogen spilled out, revealing Tony, whose skin was covered in a fine sheet of ice. He looked like a corpse.

Pepper stifled a sob. Happy looked away. Bruce gritted his teeth.

Tony's eyes popped open. The usual brown was replaced by fiery orange. They blazed like the heart of a flame. Light and heat spilled over to his cheeks, burning away the signs of winter.

Bruce placed the injector against the stripe of vulnerable skin under Tony's chin, on top of a glowing vein, and pushed.

The effect was instantaneous. Tony's eyes dimmed until only a bright speckle remained in his irises. His face relaxed in relief, like sinking into a warm bath at the end of a long day, and his eyes closed.

"What happened?" Jim called out.

With a start, Bruce remembered that Jim did not have visual input while in flight for safety. "It worked, he's okay."

Pepper laughed through her tears, resting her head on the space next to Tony's shoulder, mindful of the armor.

"Allow me, Miss Potts." The rest of the suit opened.

Bruce winced at the singed and bloody clothes. From Happy's sharp inhale, the other man must be thinking the same thing.

This was a close one, too close.

"I'm okay." Tony mumbled - as if he had heard their thoughts or more realistically, Pepper's sniffles - and reached up to pat her back.

The smell of burning hair wafted through the air and everyone froze.

Tony moved his hand, brown eyes darting between his glowing fingertips and the auburn strands floating to the floor. "Um, oops?"

I Lost Jane

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting this chapter! We're jumping ahead a bit to cover the gap between Iron Man 3 (Dec 2012) and Thor: Dark World (Nov 2013). Next chapter will be of a similar format, but for the Asgardians - yes, this means Loki. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Grey's Anatomy.

Stephen sighed as he rolled his head from side to side to alleviate the crick in his neck. His body was one giant protestation of discomforts after the thirteen-hour double-barrel brain bypass. When his silenced phone rang, he thought it was a fluke and ended the call with a vicious jab. Then it rang again and the ignore button stopped working. The volume also increased until it was at a migraine-inducing decibel.

"Dr. Strange." A woman's voice greeted him when he raised the phone to his ear. "My name is Virginia Potts."

"Ms. Potts." All traces of fatigue vanished as soon as she identified herself. Stephen was one of the firsts to volunteer as a consultant on the supportive leg braces clinical trials. It wasn't unusual to receive a call from Stark Industries but to hear the CEO's voice on the other end was unexpected. Not to mention the rather drastic method she employed to speak with him. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you have a few moments to spare to answer some brain mapping questions for a dear friend of mine?"

"I suppose?" It wasn't like Stephen to sound hesitant but it seemed like he was agreeing to more than a simple Q&A session. His suspicion was confirmed when Ms. Potts reminded him of the scope of his non-disclosure agreement before handing the phone to someone else.

"Stranger Danger!"

Only one man would use a child safety warning as a nickname. "Tony." Stephen sighed. "What do you want?"

"Is this how you speak to your Facial Hair Bro?"

Stephen felt a snort was the appropriate response. "It's how I speak to everyone when I've just gotten out of a thirteen hour surgery."

"Fine, fine. I'll make it quick. I need you to help me sketch out a blueprint of the brain."

Sinking down to the couch in his office with a grunt, Stephen propped his feet up on the coffee table. "Is this for the prosthesis project?"

Tony hummed. "It's related."

"I want my name first in the press release." Stephen stated emphatically. "Before Shepherd's."

"First, it was in *alphabetical* order. Second, Shepherd isn't even invited to this party."

"Good. Now think of the human brain as a giant knot of billions of neurons waiting to be untangled..."

It took nearly an hour to lay out the foundations of neuroscience, upon which Stephen built his kingdom of stimulation neurogenesis. Tony's commentary and questions demonstrated an astonishingly fast grasp of a new area of science completely outside of his field.

Christine called right after Stephen had gotten off of the phone with Tony. "What?" He barked, exhaustion and hunger, previously pushed aside, were creeping back in.

"I've been trying to get a hold of you for hours, what's wrong with your phone?" Christine screeched, which made Stephen feel less guilty for snapping at her. "Did you see the news? Tony Stark's mansion blew up!"

"What?!"

*

Happy breathed a sigh of relief as New York's wintry cold melted from his bones as he stepped into the penthouse.

Tony was inspecting the string of Christmas lights as he wrapped it around the twelve-foot tree, muttering about the integrity of the holiday being compromised should there be a faulty bulb that threw off the twinkling sequence. Jim was busy untangling another spool and suggesting that perhaps they should get new ones since these were the same ones they'd had since the M.I.T. days, which earned a betrayed squawk from Tony.

Darcy and Jane were stringing together popcorn garlands.

Pepper was sitting by the fireplace, finishing up some work before she would relinquish her StarkPad for the rest of the night for a proper break. Her hair was a bit shorter - 12%, as Tony liked to point out despite Pepper swatting at him each time - and tucked neatly into a pony tail.

"Food's here!" Happy called out, lifting up the bags of Italian take-out.

Tony was making a beeline for the breadsticks when Bruce reached out a hand to check his temperature as he rushed by. Tony scrunched his nose at the gesture but remained still to placate his friends and their worries.

The memories of those helpless hours of uncertainty were still fresh in his mind and Happy could only assume it was the same for everyone else. One week ago, Tony had looked like he was simultaneously freezing to death and burning up from the inside.

Bruce had tried to explain the Extremis situation with computer analogies. The neutralizer he had prepared worked like downgrading an operating system, where all the new features, both good and bad, would be removed. In other words, the participants were reverted back to their pre-Extremis state. In Tony's case, however, that would have killed him given he had suffered massive blood loss and been without his arc reactor when he received the injection.

Happy still remembered the indecipherable look on Jim's face when he tossed Tony the arc reactor with a long and shaky exhale.

Thankfully, the extreme cold from the cryogenic armor had mutated Extremis and the altered formula was a bit more resistant to Banner's neutralizing agent. Extremis wasn't eradicated, it was stabilized. Now Tony looked almost like his old self but a lot stronger, sturdier, and could make s'more with his bare hands. A skill he was very proud of and loved to demonstrate at every opportunity.

Snowflakes drifted outside like gliding feathers. Stockings covered the mantle. Christmas music flowed in the air. This was a time for celebration and family and some s'mores.

*

Ellis squeezed the stress ball as hard as he could as he listened to a representative from the United Nation's Security Council politely asked him to comply with the recommendation that the U.N. oversee the investigation of A.I.M. and the Extremis plot.

No matter how it was worded, Ellis knew an order when he heard one and he could not refuse.

Damn Rodriguez and Ross.

The former Vice President had confessed when the federal agents showed up at his front door while the Lieutenant General had sworn his innocence until he was blue in the face, claiming his support of A.I.M. was merely a personal vendetta. No one believed him. Ross' trial was set to start at the beginning of next month.

Late-night talk shows were having a field day with Ross' rants and the Thunderbolt had become an embarrassment for his presidency overnight. Stark, aside from giving his accounts of what happened with Killian and how he escaped in a back-up armor, made no comment about this public relations disaster.

At least there was someone he could count on.

*

"What in Bast's name were you thinking?" T'Chaka seldom raised his voice but this occasion called for it. "Only a fool would invite discord and taunt the fates."

T'Challa stood taller, his posture defensive. "I am no fool, I merely wished to—"

"—see how he measured against the accolades thrown at his feet?" T'Chaka pinned his son with a glare. T'Challa had been indignant when he saw the headlines of Iron Man saving Africa, a ploy clearly meant to incite controversy to pique interest that worked beautifully.

"..."

"T'Challa, rivalry strengthens us to be better but envy weakens from within. You cannot be controlled by your emotions, feel them but do not be led by them."

"Yes, Baba."

T'Chaka knew enough of his son to know T'Challa had only acknowledged his words but had not agreed.

Wakanda had kept itself out of the affairs of the world at a cost that had seemed acceptable but was now perilously high. In their solitary bubble, they had grown alarmingly arrogant and trivialized outsiders' achievements. To add to the culture of superiority, T'Challa was a gifted child and his easy accomplishments had made him prideful.

T'Chaka would never voice it to his council or children, but he was grateful to Tony Stark for dispelling this illusion of invincibility that plagued Wakanda. "Did you truly think Stark would not detect an attack? Or that if he did, he would have no hopes of deciphering or defending against it?" He asked.

T'Challa hesitated briefly before nodding, the pause likely due to the humiliating fact that Stark had, in fact, noticed the infiltration and used the opportunity to learn about their technology. "Our codes are unknown to the rest of the world."

"Which is an identifier in itself." T'Chaka clapped once to bring up the holographic display. On the screen, where the security feed of the gardens should be, was a scene of a pink animal napping in the sun. "I am told that this is the main character of a children's cartoon known as the Pink Panther."

Stark had peppered these animated clips throughout Wakanda's surveillance system, a warning that he could have done much more than a harmless prank and a reminder that he knew who was behind the hacking attempt.

"Your actions have brought great danger to our country, but it is your concealment of such actions that pains me. I had known since the start, of course, a king knows the affairs within his borders. It took you five weeks to confess and only because your sister forced your hand."

T'Challa's shoulders slumped. "I am sorry, Baba. I— I thought I could contain the fallout."

"It was never a question of your ability, T'Challa, but of your integrity. Resolution of an issue does not excuse the fact that a resolution was required in the first place." T'Chaka sighed, suddenly weary. "Think on this and we will speak more tomorrow."

"Yes, Baba."

After T'Challa's departure, T'Chaka sat in his chair and pondered the necessity of change and value of inclusion.

*

Natasha watched Hansen's testimony with a skeptical arch of her brows.

Hansen, as per her immunity deal, took the stand as an expert witness to speak on behalf of the six Extremis users who had surrendered to War Machine and the Hulk once the tides of battle turned unfavorable.

"Hiding the truth in lies." Natasha murmured approvingly as she listened to Hansen's skillfully crafted statement of how the Extremis program was meant to be a living prosthesis for disabled veterans to seamlessly reintegrate into society and regain daily living activities with the minimal amount of difficulty. The connection between nanites and nerves was too delicate to sustain and a faulty formula, which was supposed to promote compatibility, led to adverse reactions that raised body temperatures and caused spontaneous combustion.

This version of the truth was certainly more believable than a fire-based super soldier serum. All A.I.M. files, unsurprisingly, corroborated Hansen's story with enough detail to be plausible and not so much as to seem planned. This was extremely frustrating for the agents who gathered intelligence that indicated otherwise.

With a scoff, Natasha clicked off the television with an eye roll. She knew the outcome the moment the former Extremis soldiers showed up in the courtroom with their stumps on display to remind the jury of their missing limbs. Tomorrow's papers would likely announce Stark Industries offering to outfit these veterans with their top-of-the-line and safe prosthesis, which they would immediately accept, of course.

Everything was so predictable.

*

Steve clicked off the television with a forceful tap that cracked the remote.

After nearly nine months, the jury serving on the Thaddeus Ross trial had just announced their verdict – guilty on all counts of treason and conspiracy to commit treason. The news program interspersed commentaries with previous footage relating to Ross' case. Steve thought the inclusion of the unpainted Iron Man suit soaring away from the smoking wreckage of Stark's Malibu mansion was obvious pandering to an easily amused audience, and he did not need to watch that drivel.

It still baffled him how one man could possibly need more than one residence, not to mention the sheer size of these properties, sprawling across lands and rising high into the skies. Steve glanced between the kitchen and his bedroom down the hallway from his spot on the living room couch. The apartment assigned by SHIELD had plenty of practically-used space, reminiscent of his army quarters.

This was how a soldier lives.

Stark wasn't a soldier, as the man had vehemently declared aboard the helicarrier after Coulson's death, so perhaps Steve shouldn't be too harsh on Stark's questionable lifestyle choices but then again, he insisted on stepping onto the battlefield.

"I am Iron Man."

The now infamous press conference was included in the SHIELD briefing packet. Stark's declaration had shaken Steve to the core and made him grit his teeth in an effort to steady himself and it still shook him to the core. How was it possible for a self-proclaimed 'genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist' to be so arrogantly assured while Steve, chosen for his goodness and integrity, constantly questioned himself?

"I am Captain America." Steve said aloud to an empty room. The words seemed to evaporate into the air even as he uttered them, no weight and no certainty and no meaning. Most days, Steve still felt like he was playing the role of Captain America, still the dancing monkey reading lines and miming fights while waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The fear of failure and the pressure to succeed were conflicting yet exhilarating and Steve thrived on that intoxicating high. The eternal underdog fighting to prove himself, to confront the injustices, and to stand firm against the changing whims of the world.

Captain America spoke for the voiceless and protected for the helpless.

Iron Man only fought for himself.

Steve remembered the footage of Stark's escape from the Ten Rings. The cumbersome Iron Man armor had blasted through rocks and stone and emerged through the cloud of dust and sand, showing no mercy to the terrorists who imprisoned him and no considerations for others who suffered a similar fate.

SHIELD's files showed numerous bodies inside the Ten Rings compound, all were identified as known operatives with the exception of Ho Yinsen, a doctor who had likely been kidnapped and coerced into providing his medical expertise. Stark's brusque account of his time in captivity mentioned a physician who treated him and nothing more. It was clear to Steve that Stark had not thought to find the other prisoners in his haste to escape. Yet instead of admitting his oversight, however understandable it was, Stark remained silent. The video clip the media loved so much was proof that Stark had done it again, leaving another doctor stranded at his half-wrecked Malibu home. Iron Man was no hero.

Steve had thought that philanthropy was Stark's way of atoning for his sins, except it was so aggressively public. Every donation and every project made it on the front page and in the news, with the man preening in front of cameras. This was not contrition. It was ego.

Natasha was wrong in her assessment, neither Iron Man nor Tony Stark were recommended.

The knock on the door was both an unwelcome interruption and a welcome relief to Steve's increasingly dark thoughts.

Clint nodded tersely in greeting.

Wordlessly, they made their way down to the SHIELD assigned vehicle that would take them to the airport. They were flying to Amsterdam under alias, then driving three hours to Schoonebeek where an oil field was used as a cover for a secret HYDRA base.

When Fury first presented the Avengers with evidence of HYDRA's existence nearly a year ago, Steve was enraged. All that he had sacrificed meant nothing against the irrefutable proof that HYDRA had thrived after the war. Their plan was to thin HYDRA's ranks before targeting the officers who had infiltrated various governments across the globe.

As such, this operation required the utmost secrecy; not only because HYDRA had moles everywhere but also because the Avengers' presence could be construed as a declaration of war in some less friendly countries; a ridiculous notion, since permission should not be needed when combating an insidious and common enemy like HYDRA.

Steve flexed his hand and wished for his shield, but its bright colors and iconic design were not suited for covert operations. Neither was his original uniform. The one he had on was of the same material but the fit slightly off, given that SHIELD couldn't ask Stark Industries for a plain suit in Steve's size without raising questions of precisely why Captain America needed to hide his identity.

"I am Captain America." He mouthed the words to himself.

"What's that?" Clint glanced over as he buckled his seat belt.

"Nothing, let's get going."

*

"Jane?" Darcy called as she circled the abandoned factory for the third time looking for her friend. "Seriously, this isn't some kind of hide-and-seek to recapture our childhood magic or whatever. It's getting creepy and I'm hungry."

The throwing-and-watching game had gotten old as soon as Erik started stripping to have more things to toss into the invisible portals. The former professor had regained most of his mental faculties but still exhibited some oddness that Darcy was beginning to suspect was just part of his personality.

A gust of wind howled through the empty space, an ominous sound.

"Jane!" Darcy yelled, her voice growing hoarse. "Jane, if you don't come out in the next ten seconds, I'm calling Tony and you know he's going to send the cavalry and since that man can't do anything without landing on the evening news, this place is going to be crawling with agents and officers and alien fanboys!"

Erik's muttering for his left sock was the only response Darcy received.

Struggling to calm her frantic heart and spooked nerves, she began the countdown.

"...three, two, one."

Jane did not appear out of thin air.

With shaking hands, Darcy dialed Tony's number. "I lost Jane."

As Well as Well Can Be

Chapter Notes

Thanks to [RenneMichaels](#) for her help with this chapter. Asgard gives me a headache.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. Le Guin.

In his many eons as Asgard's Watcher, Heimdall had not questioned his competence as often nor as deeply as he had in the last decade.

Loki.

Since the beginning, the Jotun had been disquieted by the idea of being watched, increasingly so after Heimdall had caught and reported his many bouts of childish mischief. Loki had complained about the loss of privacy and, at one point, alleged that the Watcher placed an unfair amount of scrutiny upon his person. Heimdall had simply stated that extra precaution must be taken given Loki's *particular history* - words carefully chosen under the All-Mother's watchful gaze - and that the Second Prince would have nothing to fear should he have nothing to hide.

When the God of Mischief continued in his evasiveness, it simply confirmed Heimdall's suspicions.

Since Loki's fall from the Bifrost, Heimdall hadn't been able to locate him until he resurfaced on Midgard. Even then, focusing on Loki's actions and speech proved difficult; all blurred motions and muffled words like being underwater. Heimdall settled for gleaning as much as he could from the Midgardians, picking up fragmented mentions via one-sided conversations.

"Loki? Brother of Thor?"

The Scientist who was more capable than he appeared.

"We have no quarrel with your people."

The Director who traded lies for truths and back again to suit his goals.

"I'll need a distraction and an eyeball."

The Archer who had heart and it was filled with rage.

"What's the matter, scared of a little lightning?"

The Soldier who desperately held onto his past when confronted with the future.

"I've got red in my ledger, I'd like to wipe it out."

The Spider who thought to settle blood debts with more death.

"Would you like a drink?"

The Metal Man who called himself Iron but was more akin to mercury in his unpredictability.

Heimdall watched them with keen eyes but little interest. Midgard had held no significance until Prince Thor's banishment. The realm was ideal in its tedium. No one sought to chance a glance let alone a proper look, which must be why two artifacts of great power sought to conceal their presence there. With Prince Thor's skillful negotiation, the Tesseract and the Scepter would both be under Asgard's command.

The former contained mighty strength to distort the walls between worlds and might just be the remedy needed to regenerate the Bifrost. The latter could influence minds and bend wills, though it had failed against the eerie blue light within the Metal Man's chest and its tenuous control was easily broken by a hard blow to the head. A cowardly and fragile power, one befitting Loki's temperament and limitations.

Heimdall spared Midgard one last glimpse, frowning slightly when he noted the same muddled quality surrounding the Metal Man. It had not been there before, of this Heimdall was certain, yet he could not pinpoint when this distortion had taken hold. He winced when he pressed his vision forward and encountered a thick fog of orange-tinged smoke that stung his eyes.

It was curious, how a mortal had managed the same magic Loki had, but not enough to warrant further investigation. Heimdall was *certain* that it was nothing, Loki had and still remained stubbornly hidden as well, despite being separated from his weapon. Perhaps the Scepter had a lingering effect upon its thralls. He did not think to look at the Archer to confirm his theory. He simply believed it.

A whisper voiced its approval, brushing against his skin like a cool breeze. A soothing force that was at once tangible and not. A suggestion that faded from memory as quickly as it had been planted.

Heimdall blinked and straightened, turning his gaze toward the palace. Prince Thor had arrived with his prisoner and winnings from a victorious battle.

*

Odin half-heartedly listened to Thor's account of what had transpired on Midgard, his attention focused on the shift in dynamic between his two sons. Thor stood half-a-step ahead of Loki, his body angled protectively as he passionately pled for clemency for the brother who once unleashed a Destroyer upon him and his beloved mortal.

"Loki, what say you?" Odin trained his eye upon Loki, the son he once considered an asset and a tool he had cherished as he would a child. A contraction of in-between and nowhere that both dismayed and angered.

"I concur with Thor." Loki returned the scrutiny unflinchingly but elaborated no further. An oddity, for Loki had always been free with his words and silence was as unnatural to Loki as stillness would be to Thor.

Odin liked to think he, at least, knew this much of his sons. "Very well, I hereby find you innocent of wrongdoing on the realm of Midgard on the account that your actions were of your hand but not your mind." The evidence was compelling and the Scepter's influence could explain the obstruction Odin had encountered when he tried to peer at the battle between the Chitauris and Thor's new Shield Brothers.

The Tesseract and the Scepter lay before the throne, twin blue glows contrasted eerily against the golden halls; ominous harbingers of the great threat to come.

The court had erupted into chaos, cries for the name of the foe who enslaved the Trickster mixed with shouts of disbelief at the Liesmith telling the truth.

"The Mad Titan comes for the Nine Realms." Loki answered calmly, voice a bit too flat to be natural.

Frigga tensed beside him, she had always doted on Loki, ever since he was a babe warming icy toes against her. "My King." She laid a gentle but firm hand over his. "Before we proceed to the other charges levied against Loki, I feel it would be prudent to remind the court that I entrusted the throne to Loki while you were asleep and Thor banished. Therefore, all accusations of this nature shall be considered challenges toward the actions of a lawful regent."

Loki's eyes had widened at that, staring at his mother and blinking like he feared it was a mirage but so slowly as though he couldn't bear it if it were.

"Noted, My Queen." It mattered not that Loki had evaded answering yet another offense, his illegal use of the Bifrost on Jotunheim would be enough to convict him. For the sake of Asgard and peace among the realms, Loki must be punished for this act of war and his ambitions curbed. "However..."

Frigga did not contest this charge, as Odin knew she would not. Upholding the King's authority was of the utmost importance, especially as the time of war approached.

Asgard must come first.

*

"All will be well, Loki." Thor stated as he collected Mjolnir from where it rested against the wall, his long stride covering the distance in six steps. The room was small in comparison to the expansive city outside the window. He hid his wince behind his cloak as he fastened it to his shoulders. It still pained him that Loki was confined to his quarters – for an indeterminate length of time until he had proven his repentance - but it was a far more preferable outcome.

The room was large in contrast to the suffocating walls of the dungeon.

The Warriors Three and Sif were most vocal in their protests of the lenient sentence, with contempt toward Loki poorly disguised as concern for Thor. Once upon a time, Thor would have agreed and even fanned the flame roasting Loki's character. Not anymore. Not after Tony, with a rare air of solemnity, approached him as they waited for SHIELD's arrival.

"Hey, Big Guy." Tony drummed his fingers against the tabletop, a series of rapid and sharp tapping like galloping horses riding into battle. "When you get back home, you're going to have to do all the talking if you want your *adopted*-" His brow was arched in precisely a way that spoke volumes of what he knew and how he felt about it. "-brother to, well, not die."

Thor frowned. "I will do everything in my power to defend Loki, but would it not be better for him to speak on his own behalf? He is a gifted storyteller."

"Exactly." Tony scoffed. "*Storyteller*."

"I do not follow."

Tony's fingers stilled and the sudden silence was deafening. "He's known as the *Liesmith*, Thor."

Thor blinked.

Tony's expression ripple from one of frustration to resignation, a shift Thor used to see frequently on Loki's face, usually preceding a lengthy explanation with scathing remarks on Thor's lack of savvy, and had not seen for some centuries.

"We can talk about *how* he got that charming nickname another time, what's important right now is *no one will believe a guy literally known for lying*. So you have to do the heavy lifting, got it?"

Thor's head snapped forward, as if his neck was unable to sustain the weight of the new realizations pouring into his mind. He managed to catch himself and turn the unexpected jerk into a purposeful nod. "Aye, Man of Iron. You have my word."

"Good." Tony accepted it easily, an echo of how Asgardians responded to Thor's promises.

"All *is* well, Thor." Loki rolled his eyes, the curve at the corners of his lips was still sharp but no longer serrated. An improvement. "As well as well can be."

"Indeed." Thor nodded, understanding there was still quite a long way to go before they could reclaim the title of brother to one another but he could see the path now.

*

Asgardians were not known for their subtlety. This much was obvious to any outsider who set their eyes upon the bright splendor of the castle and painfully so for Loki who had always felt

the golden halls were aggressively ostentatious. To be confined to his own quarters, furnished in oak and accented with forest green, was a relief.

The servants, perfunctorily dutiful as they were, inclined their heads as they delivered his meals from the kitchen and exchanged his books with those in the library. Once out in the halls, however, they gossiped and sniped.

Liesmith. Trickster. Silvertongue.

When Loki was younger, he had taken pride in those names and claimed them like trophies for he had none. Until it became clear that there was always a scoff at Liesmith, a sneer alongside Trickster, and a sarcasm with Silvertongue. They had reduced him to one aspect of his entire being and made his person lesser with titles meant to highlight his misdeeds

Often, he could go an entire day without anyone uttering his name.

It had worn on his nerves like an exceedingly dull knife. Blunt enough to bruise but not sharp enough to cut. The damage remained beneath the skin and deep to the bone, making him tense and tender with marks that no one could see and only he could feel.

On Midgard, it had been the same. At first.

Loki Odinson, the adoptive brother of Thor and wayward almost-son of Odin, when all he wanted was to simply *be*. A wish that had no chance of being granted, that Loki had thrown away like another proverbial coin in the well, and that a clever mortal had somehow caught.

Tony had a litany of inane nicknames that he distributed equally among his circle; terms of endearment, not words of ridicule. Loki had not known that titles could be assigned with flights of fancy and Tony did it with the graceful ease that was utterly foreign yet completely bewitching.

It reminded Loki of the first time he met his magic.

Tony had magic of a different kind, one born of metal and ingenuity. He commanded suits of armor as easily as he did his own limbs and crafted a light to guide his way out of darkness. Yet the most impressive of his feats was the one he himself did not seem to know.

The creation of a soul.

JARVIS.

Loki first suspected this when the A.I. asked for Loki's preferred surname.

"SHIELD has you on record as Loki Odinson." JARVIS stated. "However, given recent events and Mr. Odinson's disclosure of your *new family dynamics*—" Loki arched a brow at the polite rephrasing. "—I feel it is better to double-check."

Stark observed the exchange with expressive eyes, glittering with fondness, pride, intrigue, and amusement. "I know what this is about." A smirk tugged at the corners of his lips. "You want Loki here to give you a different name so you don't get confused."

"Yes, Sir." JARVIS intoned. "You've caught me. I'm just a rather very *inexperienced* system. Two Odinsons? Does not compute. Error. Error."

Loki had to smile when Stark turned to him with see-what-I-have-to-put-up-with shrug. It was clear that the two of them enjoyed such banter and Loki did as well, basking in the warmth of their easy affection for one another. "I have many names, surely you can locate one within the *internet*." He rolled his eyes at Stark's incredulous gasp. Midgardian technology was new, not difficult. "Adaptability is tantamount to survivability."

"That belongs on a motivational poster somewhere. Make it happen, JARVIS."

"Yes, Sir."

"Now, tell me your name, Reindeer Games." Turning toward Loki, Stark's body language was unguarded in a way that suggested he was either naively trusting or did not consider Loki a threat, both seemed unlikely given the sort of shrewd intelligence with which he had manipulated Thor. The mystery of the mortal's motivation stroked the already roaring fire of curiosity.

Loki's gaze trailed over the loosely-laced fingers cradling an empty bottle of the accursed Mike's Hard Lemonade and resting in the tempting triangle outlined by Stark's outstretched legs. "Tell me yours." The words scraped against his suddenly dry tongue.

"I have many names, surely you can locate one within the internet."

Hearing his own words in Stark's voice sent a thrill down Loki's spine, a tingling that blossomed into warmth at the cleverness of this impossible mortal and quickly turned icy when Stark spoke again.

"Stark Prodigy. Merchant of Death. Iron Man. The Consultant." He listed impassively, the only sign of his distress was the way his fingers picked at the bottle label. "The Futurist." The paper ripped.

"Which do you prefer?"

"Tony."

Loki hummed, choosing not to comment on the impropriety of a warrior preferring a diminutive version of a given name then forcefully rejecting that Asgardian notion once he realized where the thought came from. "The favorite for me among Asgard is Liesmith."

"I didn't ask Asgard, I asked *you*." The specks of gold in his brown eyes burned with intensity and Loki had his answer as to how a mortal managed to summon a soul without supernatural means.

"Loki." The weight of the singular name both anchored him and freed him. "I am Loki."

Tony grinned, pleased and approving. "I like it."

Loki felt the answering tug at the corners of his lips and gave in wholeheartedly.

His mother's voice snapped Loki out of his reverie. She visited daily and the two of them spoke of literature. At first, he had been resentful that he was expected to while away eternity with reading but then he saw the tome she had laid on his desk - *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

It was a tale of a young mage who first came to terms and then arrived at peace with his powers, Frigga had read it to him after he discovered his magic and agonized over yet another anomaly that set him apart. Asgard was known for its magical artifacts, not magic wielders.

Nostalgia had prompted him to turn the first page and before he knew it, he had finished the story and his treacherous heart softened.

As angry as he was at her part in aiding Odin's deception, she was his mother. He loved her just as he knew she loved him, as proven by her masterful and preemptive removal of the treason charge from his list of crimes.

The pains of betrayal lessened and Loki was saved from becoming a slave to his own scars.

For better or for worse, Tony had no knowledge of Loki's fate or Asgard's future. Thor had not disclosed anything substantial to the Avengers aside from an almost-invasion and a hard-won victory before calling a celebration for his return. The scarcity of information was discomforting but some was better than none. Loki remained both cautious despite the added sentinels outside Asgard's vault to safeguard the spoils from Midgard's war and hopeful that such an event might reunite him and the mortal who tasted of the abyss and held a star in his chest.

*

Frigga cast the servants a vicious glare, made more off-putting by her pleasant tone, as she swept past them and into Loki's chambers. She would have words with them later for their blatant disrespect.

"Loki." She approached her son with open arms, a gesture he now returned readily and less rigidly than he had the first time she embraced him nearly a year and a half ago. When she visited him after delivering a book that always brought them fond memories, she had expected cold silence or incensed dismissal. Instead Loki had invited her to read to him, murmuring mournfully of a friend who no longer had the opportunity.

Whoever this stranger was, they had her thanks.

"Mother." Loki placed her hand in the crook of his elbow and escorted her to the two wingback chairs near the fireplace to discuss their latest book.

Within the world of literature, constructed with parallels and built on metaphors, it was easier to speak of past wrongs and fresh hurts. When Loki reached for her hand, cocooning it within

his palms like Frigga had done with his smaller one many centuries ago, it almost felt like forgiveness.

*

On Svartalfheim, Malekith woke in his ship with a sense of purpose flowing through his veins and a tingling in his bones.

"The Aether awakens us. The Convergence returns."

Foresight Against the Unseen

Chapter Notes

It's time for Thor: Dark World! I'm thinking this arc will probably have fewer chapters than the Iron Man 3 arc since 1) this isn't a Tony-centric/Midgard-centric story line and 2) Tony is not going to Asgard...because, um, reasons. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man. Thor: Dark World.

"Come find me, as you promised."

"Where are you?"

"Where others have lost what you have made."

"What? I don't—"

"Come find me and know at last why—"

"—Tuesday, November 12, it is 7:00AM and the current temperature is 44°F."

Tony woke in an instant, alert and ready, at the sound of JARVIS' voice.

"Good morning, Sir."

"Morning." Yawning, Tony kicked off the covers tangled around his legs and stretched out fully with a groan. Since Extremis, there was no more drowsiness upon waking but he still enjoyed lounging in bed for a bit before starting the day. His mind functioned as though it had an on-off switch, going from one state to the other with no pause in between. Which made sense, considering he hacked and programmed it as he would a machine.

Stephen had been instrumental in helping Tony map out the schematic of his brain, which Tony then reconfigured and realigned to his specifications. Neurons and neural pathways were really quite similar to codes and algorithms and Tony was rewriting what was known for decades.

Maya's formula was revolutionary in design but rudimentary in execution with Extremis triggering the body's healing response at the first sign of damage, be it a paper cut or a chest wound. A one-size-fits-all solution that definitely did not fit all, breaking down the body's regulatory processes and leading to overloads.

In the end, Tony had forgone the regenerative abilities and associated fire breathing – though he was tempted just to see DUM-E's reaction – and kept the enhanced durability, increased strength, and a muted version of thermal manipulation. In its mutated then modified state, Extremis was stable and did not raise his baseline temperature by more than a degree or two. Nothing that would be noticeable in a handshake or by a medical professional. He couldn't melt metal or breathe fire but it was enough to give him the element of surprise in hand-to-hand combat.

That and, well, s'mores whenever he pleased.

Tony rolled out of bed, scratching absently at his beard. There was a nagging sensation in the back of his mind, a reminder to do...something. It wasn't the first time he experienced this feeling, ever-present yet elusive. "JARVIS, what's on the agenda today?"

"You have a conference call with King T'Chaka in 58 minutes to discuss the technical compatibility between Wakanda and Stark Industries."

"Is that why you woke me up this godforsaken hour?" Tony arched an eyebrow as he surveyed the scruffiness of his beard. It should last another day before he needed a trim. "The sun's not even up yet."

"The sunrise was at 6:40AM, Sir, which was approximately 20 minutes ago." JARVIS replied. "I'd also like to remind you that you were the one who set the appointment for this time so that you can, quote, *get it over with and get on with the day.*"

"Why do you hurt me like this, JARVIS?" Tony grumbled through a layer of cotton as he pulled on a shirt.

"Perhaps that is a topic you can explore at your MONDAY appointment today."

"I guess I will." Tony ran his hands under the faucet, wetting them then using the moisture to flatten some of the more outrageous tufts of hair, at least the mystery of what he had forgotten was solved.

*

MONDAY – from the term *manic Monday* much like *his girl Friday* – was a psychotherapy A.I. under JARVIS' purview.

Tony's original plan was for JARVIS to investigate and develop therapy subroutines, he had been confiding in JARVIS for years so the A.I. seemed like the natural choice.

JARVIS disagreed. "My apologies, Sir. I am not suitable for this task. According to my research, it is inadvisable for the therapist to have a personal relationship with their patient and healthy professional boundaries are recommended."

"But–"

"Sir." JARVIS' volume was lowered but it quieted Tony's protests effectively. "I– I care. For you. Your wellbeing is my primary directive and I strive to protect that to the best of my not

inconsiderable abilities. Which makes me unsuitable for a position that requires impartiality." The A.I.'s halting words grew more confident as he continued. "I am quite partial to you."

"Okay, buddy." Tony swallowed tightly and blinked away the moisture gathering in his eyes. "I'm quite partial to you too."

*

Loaded with current best practices and a set of unique perimeters tailored to Tony's history and preferences, MONDAY was the perfect compromise between a person and a machine.

Throughout his life, Tony had seen multiple therapists and found the experiences pointless and painful. The majority of them had quit after glimpsing at the sheer number and magnitude of Tony's faults, which had stung sharply. Then there were the ones that had cut to the bones – a psychiatrist he had bonded with was gathering information for Howard's competitors while another attempted blackmail after learning about Tony's experimentation at school. Tony had let Stark Industries handle the former while he came out as bisexual rather dramatically to thwart the latter.

Even if he could somehow find someone who was both good at heart and their job, the association would immediately place them at risk. Confidentiality agreement meant nothing to probing spies, bitter enemies and exploitative tabloids. Everyone wanted a piece of Iron Man and what better source than the person Tony was supposedly telling all of his secrets to?

The Binarily Augmented Retro Framing was meant to be an alternative by removing the human element from the process, a desperation attempt to patch himself back together to continue fighting despite never being what the world wanted in a hero.

I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made, largely public.

True to his own pattern, BARF had the best of intentions and the worst outcome. All Tony felt after his presentation at M.I.T. was a toxic mixture of regret, guilt, and anger; much like the other times he had tested it in his workshop, left on his own after Pepper moved out. Yet he still presented it as a revolutionary approach to process grief because a Stark should never show doubt and always sell. It was arrogant to think one could resolve decades of trauma with a device and irresponsible to relive those memories without the safeguards of established boundaries and coping skills in place.

"Guess sometimes you have to walk before you can run." Tony shrugged as he filed away the BARF blueprint, a project to fine-tune at a later date. "Not a word, I don't want to hear it."

JARVIS managed to make his silence sound smug.

*

Tony was on his second cup of coffee, hip perched on the counter and listening to the melody of the coffee drip, when Bruce strolled in, head bent and absorbed in whatever was on his tablet.

"Tea?"

Bruce nodded in response, taking a seat at the table.

Tony reached for a mug and filled it with water from the refrigerator dispenser before wrapping both hands around the ceramic cup. Bubbles rose to the surface as the water heated up rapidly from the effects of Extremis. With the basket containing an assortment of tea dangling from his wrist and a cup in each hand, Tony gingerly made his way toward Bruce.

"Thanks." Bruce looked up when Tony deposited the hot water, steam wafting in the cooler air, and the basket containing an assortment of teas before him. Before selecting a tea, he beckoned for Tony to come closer with a small wave. Despite JARVIS' continual monitoring of Tony's temperature, Bruce still liked to check it himself with a hand on Tony's forehead.

"Seriously?" Tony rolled his eyes but acquiesced, setting his cup of coffee down.

Bruce sent back a look that clearly said he was not going to dignify that whine with an answer. The touch lasted no longer than a few seconds then his hand dropped to pick up a packet of Genmaicha.

The Killian incident was nearly a year ago but the aftershock was still rippling throughout. Pepper, Rhodey, and Happy always glanced first at his chest, no longer alight with the arc reactor. Jane and Darcy texted daily, the former was an avid emoji user and the latter's messages were almost exclusively memes.

Tony loved it; the friendships he had once wished and tried for, the family he had never dared to hope for and was now a part of, and the life he had always hoped for and wanted more of.

Wanting more.

That thought used to cause a spike of shame in his heart and a twist of guilt in his stomach, because wanting more was to admit what he currently had was lacking.

Rhodey and Pepper and Happy were Tony's long before this mess that somehow turned to a miracle, they were all he had and more than enough. Of course Tony had be a greedy bastard and feel happy for the addition of Bruce, Jane, and Darcy. His gratefulness at these new friendships was a betrayal for the ones who had always been there.

Thankfully, at the insistence of his friends and help from MONDAY, Tony could simply relax and bask in the warmth of support around him.

They finished their respective drinks in a companionable silence before parting ways, Tony to the conference room and Bruce to his lab, with a plan to meet up later for lunch.

*

"Good morning, Mr. Stark." T'Chaka greeted as soon as the video conference connected.

"And afternoon to you, Your Majesty." Tony wiggled his fingers, his casual attire and body language in sharp contrast against how stiffly T'Challa was dressed and seated next to his

father.

The future Black Panther, who would lash out as ferociously as Tony had when consumed with grief, nodded. His movement was as tight as the pursed lines of his lips. There had been a palatable competitiveness aimed at Tony from T'Challa, which likely stemmed from his failed hacking attempt. Tony still didn't have the full story of what prompted the cyberattack but he inferred plenty when Wakanda announced its intention to rejoin the world and who would be leading the charge at the beginning of the year.

Shuri had been the face of Wakanda's reintegration and instantly won the world over by offering their substantial resources to the African roadways project as a show of good will. Her easy charm and agreeable demeanor belied a political shrewdness rivalling Pepper's.

T'Challa, the presumed heir, had been tasked to govern Wakanda in his father's stead; a punishment disguised as an advancement.

Someone hadn't like an outsider stealing the spotlight.

From their brief interactions during the so-called Civil War, Tony would describe T'Challa as an honorable yet prideful man. The Black Panther operated under the belief that any wrongs done to him or his must be righted by his own hands, prioritizing personal wants over the people's needs.

Much like Steve, in fact.

Wakanda was one of the first to propose regulations for enhanced individuals and one of the most vocal supporters of the Accords yet T'Challa's first act as King was to embark on an illegal pursuit through the streets of Bucharest, defying the ideals upheld by the previous ruler. Contradicting principles did not bode well for a country hoping to establish itself as a powerful player in the game of international politics. While Tony hadn't been around to see it, he had no doubts that Wakanda's standing took a catastrophic blow.

Though with the way events had been shifted and changed, Tony was hopeful that perhaps such a tragedy – for the royal family, Wakanda, and the world – would be avoided.

"Let us begin—" T'Chaka was cut off by the obnoxiously loud guitar riff of *Iron Man* by Black Sabbath.

Tony scrambled for his phone and would have silenced it except for the caller.

It was Darcy, who preferred texts over phone calls and had always been respectful of Tony's working hours. For her to call him when she knew he had a meeting...Tony felt his heart sink at the implication.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty. I have to take this." He stood hastily and answered the phone.
"Hello? Darcy?"

"I lost Jane." Darcy's voice broke on a wail. "I lost Jane, Tony!"

Despite his knee-jerk response to implore her to calm down, Tony knew better than to follow through. "Okay, I don't know what that means but we'll figure it out. JARVIS is pulling up your location now and I'll be there soon."

She sniffled then blew her nose loudly. "I'm sorry about your meeting."

"Don't worry about it, we just got done. I'm free as a bird." Tony made his way back to his desk, where two-thirds of the Wakandan royal family were peering at him; one with curiosity and the other with offense. "I'll call you back once I'm in the suit, okay?"

"Okay." Darcy had never sounded so small and Tony gritted his teeth at that realization.

Tony pasted on his best apologetic smile, slight upturn of his lips with a small furrowing of his brows. "Bad news, an emergency just came up."

T'Challa glared as T'Chaka nodded in understanding.

"Good news, I'm all done." Tony clapped once to bring up the holographic display. "I'll—"

"How?" T'Challa gaped, both at the floating template and his own surprise that he had voiced his disbelief out loud. "Wakandan's programming is unique and unknown to the world. You could not have deciphered it in a week."

"Eh, I've seen it before." Tony shrugged as his fingers flew over the keyboard as he uploaded the interface to Wakanda's technical department. It had taken no time at all to create, given his previous knowledge and new data gleaned from the hacking attempt. "There, done!"

"Our engineers have confirmed receipt." T'Chaka's smile looked strained yet still grateful.

"Um, sure. Happy to help." Tony blinked, confused by the sudden tension between father and son but had no time nor inclination to figure it out. His friends needed him. "Have your guys look it over and we can trouble-shoot next week."

"Thank you for your assistance and discretion, Mr. Stark." T'Chaka said. "May Bast's blessings aid you in your endeavors."

Tony backed toward the door, only just remembering that turning his back would be considered definite sign of disrespect. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Have a good day." He broke into a sprint to the elevator once JARVIS disconnected the call.

The Iron Man suit was waiting for him on the balcony.

*

Darcy sounded a bit calmer when Tony called back and noticeably brighter when she learned Tony would land in London in approximately an hour.

JARVIS had briefed Bruce and Rhodey of the development, both the Hulk and War Machine were on standby though ideally neither would be needed if Tony's memory of the event in Greenwich was still accurate.

In the original timeline, there had been some kind of explosion followed by an uncharacteristic thunderstorm. Tony had known of the incident and Thor's presence but, incorrectly, assumed the matter handled since there had been no other disturbances aside from Dr. Selvig's arrest at the Stonehenge. Three days later, reports of portals appearing throughout Greenwich had flooded the airwaves and Tony had a panic attack as he tugged on his flight suit; white pinpoints of light shining through his darkening vision like the cold brightness of inattentive stars in the vastness of space. By the time he had clawed back into consciousness, the otherworldly event already ended and SHIELD was on the scene for clean-up.

Thor never spoke of what happened or if he did, it hadn't been with Tony.

The lack of information was as frustrating and terrifying as the unexpected changes to known events. Perhaps more so because it wasn't Tony who was caught in a disaster of his own making, it was Jane who was entangled in invisible webs of unknown dangers.

What good was foresight against the unseen?

Tony tried to ground his spiraling thoughts with the memory of Thor speaking fondly albeit sadly of his and Jane's breakup, which must mean Jane had survived, but he could also hear Loki's warning - *knowledge prompts change yet change negates knowledge*.

Not for the first time, nor the last, Tony missed Loki with a pang that felt as fresh as it had when the god with captivating green eyes vanished in a flash of light eighteen months ago.

Sentient in Its Intent

Chapter Notes

I'm just in complete awe that this fic has accumulated over 100k hits! Thank you so much for your continued interest in and support of this little universe of mine...so, um, here's a cliffhanger. ♥

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Thor: Dark World.

The abandoned factory was something out of a horror movie, complete with Darcy's occasional sob echoing ominously through the cavernous space. Selvig was still wandering around, mumbling strings of numbers and knocking on the walls, but at least he was fully-clothed.

JARVIS had picked up numerous contradictory wavelengths, increases and decreases in gravity, spatial extrusions and spots where laws of physics became mere guidelines. The readings were transmitted back to the tower, where Bruce was simultaneously ecstatic and exasperated by them. Tony felt similarly, the scientist in him cheering with delight and gasping with horror at the sheer impossibilities.

Nearly four hours had passed since Tony landed, almost five since Jane disappeared, and they were no closer to figuring what happened. It was especially frustrating for Tony because he knew something had happened and would happen but the specifics evaded him, much like the nightmares of Chitauris returning that haunted him for years; an all-encompassing inevitability that bound his movement and broke his confidence. Knowing little was far worse than knowing none, insufficient information and missing details warped into constant worry and mounting fear.

Yet Tony would not have it any other way.

Ignorance encouraged irresponsibility and innocents suffered from his inattention.

A price paid by others. A lesson learned. A debt not yet settled.

*

As the sun slowly dipped below the horizon, a chill entered the air. While the drop in temperature didn't bother Tony, with Extremis keeping him comfortably warm, he could tell it was wearing on those around him. Selvig had wrapped his arms around himself, shoulders hunched and elbows tucked.

"Let's go wait in the car." He sighed when Darcy sniffled loudly for the third time, nose red and runny but eyes clear of tears. Thanks to Extremis, Tony only got cold when the temperature dipped below freezing and even then he just needed an additional layer. He had bragged about it during the snowball fight on Christmas, the lack of bulky winter coats gave him the advantage of maneuverability.

"I'm fine—" Darcy's protest was interrupted by a series of sneezes that was loud and in quick succession.

Tony popped open the face plate so Darcy could see the unimpressed arc of his raised brow. "You were saying?"

"What if Jane—"

"JARVIS, keep an eye on the place."

"Yes, Sir." The rest of the suit retracted and peeled off of Tony then reassembled with a muted whir.

"C'mon, Darth Vader." Tony tugged on Darcy's elbow. "You too, Selvig!" He called over his shoulder, foregoing his habit of nicknames to avoid confusing the other scientist.

"JARVIS will let us know *when* Janes shows up?" While she didn't resist Tony's pull, Darcy wasn't exactly moving on her own either.

"The very instant, Ms. Lewis." The A.I. reassured.

"She will come back, I promise." Tony placed his other hand on Darcy's shoulder. His faith in Jane's safe return was rooted in the ground of her future breakup with Thor but it was one of the few facts he knew for certain. "Now let's go to the car, you're eyeing me like I'm a tauntaun and you're Luke."

"I wouldn't fit." Darcy snorted, the tension in her shoulders loosened. "We're the same size."

"*We are not!*" Tony squawked, utterly scandalized. "I'm *at least* half-a-foot taller!"

"Shot gun!" Selvig, who must have been listening to their conversation, shouted as he took off toward the exit.

"Hey!"

*

"Your car smells like fast food, Dar Dar Binks." Tony wrinkled his nose as he folded himself into the backseat.

Darcy's lips quirked in something like a smile. "I'm sensing a theme here."

Tony made sure to catch her gaze reflected in the rearview mirror before furrowing his brows in an exaggerated contemplation. "Correct, you are. *Yodarcy.*"

Selvig twitched. "Please stop, some things are sacred."

Tony snorted but kept quiet, trading an amused look with Darcy.

For a while, the only sounds in the small car were the hum of the engine and the whoosh of heated air from the vents. The sun was no longer visible but its rays were scattered across the sky to bathe the area in an almost-calming glow of muted flame.

"This is all my fault." Darcy whispered, a confession Tony wasn't sure if she meant to say aloud but was heard clearly in the silence. "I should have just left her alone on her stupid date."

A hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand replies raced through Tony's mind. Comfort. Reassurance. Absolution. Things he would have liked to hear to when he had lamented his mistakes but never did, reaching out for a lifeline as guilt filled his lungs and drowned him from the inside. Darcy deserved more than condemning silence. "It's—"

"Sir, my scans detected an energy spike on the ground floor. En route now." JARVIS' voice traveled clearly through the small ear piece.

Tony craned his neck toward the factory and caught a flash of red and gold.

"It's what?" Darcy huffed, turning to glare at Tony. "You're supposed to tell me things like *it's not your fault* or *you couldn't have known*—"

"I have located and secured Dr. Foster. We are on our way out." JARVIS announced.

"—or *we'll fix this* or *how*—"

"How about you tell her yourself?" Tony tilted his head toward the exit, where Jane was walking out unassisted and accompanied by the Iron Man armor.

Darcy rolled her eyes. "Exactly! Things to give me hope and—" She frowned when Tony jerked his head repeatedly to the left, in the direction toward the factory. "What's wrong with you?"

"Jane!" Selvig scrambled out of the car with Tony and Darcy following suit.

Jane seemed shaken and pale but otherwise unharmed, her coat dusted with dirt and her fingers gripping at a scanner absently.

"Where the hell were you?" It spoke volumes of Darcy's lung capacity that she could yell while in a full sprint.

Tony kept up with her easily, Extremis-enhanced physiology at its finest. "Welcome back." He grinned.

Jane returned the smile then immediately scowled as her attention shifted to Darcy. "You called Tony?"

"What was I supposed to do?" Darcy's arms flailed in big circles and Selvig ducked out of the way. "I was freaking out!"

"I wasn't gone that long." Jane scoffed. "We had a stable gratification anomaly, we had unheeded access, and our only competition was ten years old! You know SHIELD tracks everything Tony does, they're going to be crawling all over Area 51 and wanting the place."

Tony gasped in offense but didn't protest because she was right. He had no doubt Fury was alerted the moment Iron Man sped across the New York skyline. The stealth suit was one of the slowest and time had been of the essence.

"Sorry, it's true." Jane shrugged sheepishly. "But thanks for coming to my unnecessary rescue."

"Unnecessary?" Darcy screeched. "You were gone for five hours!"

Jane blinked, once then twice and yet again. "What?"

"Ms. Lewis is correct, Dr. Foster." JARVS spoke through the microphone of the Iron Man armor. "Sir landed at the current location at 2:12PM. It is now 6:09PM. Factoring in the hour for travel and the immediacy with which Sir left New York, you have been absent for approximately five hours."

"What?" Jane gaped, hand going slack around the device she still held. It clattered to the ground. "Five hours? I was only there for a minute."

Tony felt the familiar heaviness of dread churning in his gut. "Where's *there*?"

"I...I don't know." Pinching the bridge of her nose, Jane let out a defeated noise. "There was a column?"

"Were you in another realm?" Selvig asked eagerly, slipping off his shoes and bending over to pick them up. "See, the universe rotates on a five thousand year cycle and once it's cycled all the worlds align. Now imagine this is our world." He held up his left shoe. "And this is another world." And his right shoe. "So normally they're separate but during the alignment everything is connected. All Nine Realms are passing through each other and gravity, light—"

"—and matter. These wormholes are like the preview to the big event, one giant tunnel through all Nine Realms." Tony finished, eyes bright with panicked realization. The weight expanded until it was crowding his lungs. Somehow he was able to keep talking even as his chest constricted painfully. "We're going to get crushed unless we can stabilize the focal point."

Selvig looked incredibly put out as he dropped his shoes.

"JARVIS, let Brucie Bear know there's a science party he won't want to miss." Tony needed both his ScienceBro and the Hulk, the former to brainstorm for a solution and the latter to catch Tony, just in case. He liked to err on the side of safe than sorry when it came to portals.

"Yes, Sir."

"What about SHIELD? They'll—" Jane was cut off by the sudden onset of rain, drops drumming against the pavement and the invisible shelter covering the spot where they stood. "Thor." She whispered, a threat issued and a wish granted rolled into one word.

A flash of lightning illuminated the fading twilight, followed by a crash of thunder, then they were less than twenty feet away from the God of Thunder.

Tony shoved down the swell of disappointment.

Jane ran toward Thor, taking the barrier with her and leaving her friends stranded at the mercy of the pelting rain.

Selvig trotted back to the car with his cardigan pulled over his head.

"Typical." Darcy grumbled as she retrieved the forgotten gadget from the steadily forming puddle. She looked up at the sound of a sharp slap, just in time to see Thor's face angled to the side and Jane's hand still raised. "And so's that."

Tony, hair wet and clothes damp, waved off JARVIS' offer of the suit. The moisture felt refreshing on his skin, the coolness washing away some of the unease. "Is it safe now?" He eyed Jane and Thor cautiously, hissing in sympathy when Jane slapped Thor again. "Guess not."

Darcy took a second to assess the situation before declaring with certainty that it should be okay to approach. They jogged over to the pair, just in time to hear the end of Jane's rant.

"—where you left me. I was waiting and then I was crying and then I went out looking for you. You said you were coming back!"

"The Bifrost was destroyed." Thor replied, adding hastily when three pairs of eyes glanced down at the still smoking runes on the ground. "It has been repaired with the aid of the Tesseract Friend Tony helped me secure."

Tony wiggled his fingers and quirked a smile. "Happy to help."

"Look at you, still all muscly and everything." Darcy poked at Thor's chest with a hard jab, her version of a slap. Tony knew from experience how protective Darcy could be of her friends, so did a particularly unpleasant barista who complained about the 50% tip Tony had left as *cheap*. "How's space?"

Thor did not react to Darcy's attempt at intimidation, likely because he hadn't even noticed it. "Space is fine."

"How's the family?" The casually-worded question, combined with a nonchalant tone, was some of Tony's finest acting work. Or so he believed until Darcy nudged his side.

"Subtle." She mouthed.

"Father is heartened by the progress we have made toward establishing peace. Mother is gladden by the time she spends with Loki. And Loki, well, I am pleased to say that one day I

will be able to call him brother once more." Thor's wide grin was Tony's only warning before Thor engulfed him in a bear hug. "I thank you, Friend Tony, for the tremendous boon you have gifted to our family."

"No biggie." Tony wheezed, thankful for the lack of an arc reactor in his chest.

Thor must have realized the same thing, for he let go of Tony abruptly. "Where is your charmed light? Loki said you carry it within your chest and it repelled the sway of the Scepter. It is unwise to misplace an artifact of importance. Do you require assistance?"

Tony chuckled, feeling touched by the concern and amused by Thor's eagerness. "First, it's called an arc reactor. Second, my rib cage actually isn't an ideal place for it." He pointed at the suit and JARVIS stood taller to best display the arc reactor embedded there. "Third, I got some other cards up my sleeve." He reached for Thor's hand, adding a bit of the Extremis-enhanced strength to his grip and grinning winningly when Thor's eyes widened. "Thanks for the offer though."

There was another set of emotions, unidentified but not unpleasant, spiraling in his gut at the thought that Loki had mentioned him to Thor.

"You are most welcome." Thor replied in a stunned tone.

"Sir, a patrol car is heading in our direction." JARVIS announced. "Estimated arrival is eight minutes."

Jane winced. "That's, um, not good. Are we getting arrested?"

"Is it a real patrol car or is it more of a Men in Black situation?" Darcy pursed her lips. "Wouldn't put it past SHIELD—"

"SHIELD? Has that cowardly organization been giving you trouble?" Thor bellowed, strands of lightning lit up the darkening sky, flooding the entire area in a bright white flash. "I will defend you." Each word was underscored with a boom of thunder.

Jane yelped.

Darcy ducked on instinct.

"This is why I wear sunglasses everywhere I go." Tony grumbled as he rubbed at his eyes, remembering the unrelenting camera flashes and lamenting his lack of proper eyewear. "JARVIS, check on that patrol situation."

"Yes, Sir." The repulsors whined as JARVIS piloted the suit toward the main street. "Also, in the excitement, Dr. Selvig has left the vehicle."

Darcy cursed loudly when she spotted Selvig's, one hand keeping his cardigan pulled over his head and the other waving an antenna, zigzagging across the lot and back into the factory. "Can you stop the rain? I really don't want to chase Erik through a monsoon."

Thor glanced upward and the clouds cleared in an instant. "Apologies."

"Erik!" Darcy shouted as she took off after the older man.

Tony felt like a third wheel. It was clear that Jane and Thor had a lot they needed to talk about but he also wanted to know more about Loki's trial and sentence. "Um, how's space?" He realized too late that he was parroting Darcy's earlier question.

"Space is fine." Thor repeated with arched brows before turning to Jane. "As the Convergence approaches, the borders between worlds become blurred—"

Tony interrupted. "—and we get temporary wormholes that jump all over the place—"

"—and I fell in one, landed in a place where time moved differently, then popped back out." Jane summarized neatly.

"Precisely." Thor nodded dumbly. "You know of the Convergence."

"We're scientists, we know everything." Tony winked at Jane, holding out a hand for a high-five, which she gave happily then the smile slid off of her face as her features went lax.

"Ja—" Thor yelled.

Time slowed and sound faded as dark red liquid flowed from Jane's lips, nose, and eyes. Instead of falling to the ground, it defied gravity and rushed toward Tony in twisting torrents. *Sentient in its intent*. The strands coalesced as they came closer, tips curving and sharp like teeth, a bloody maw to swallow him whole.

Tony watched in a spellbound daze. His lips parted, unsaid words and unasked questions drowned out by the taste of copper, bitter and metallic and ancient. For such a vibrant hue, it felt dark and cold.

Then suddenly it wasn't.

A fire had flickered to life within him, blazing flames burning brighter with every thump of his heart. Shadows receded as a protective heat curled around him, surrounded him like a supportive embrace, and warmed him down to his very core. Tony knew, with an unexpected but not welcome clarity, what he had forgotten.

"I remember you."

"Come find me."

"Tell— Wait no, show me. Less puzzles, more pictures."

A snow storm. Concrete walls. A familiar road. Scorch marks. A shining star.

"I'll be waiting."

Tony blinked, struggling to hold on to the fleeting traces of something important, at the red jaw hesitating above him. It shimmered in the fading light as if it was thinking. He watched,

transfixed, as it drifted close mere inches away from his face; like a mouth closing after a yawn instead of the vicious bite it had promised.

Crimson tendrils coiled and looped and weaved, tightening and growing more compact and more solid until a stone, its appearance similar to a garnet if not for the otherworldly red mist surrounding it, coalesced into being.

"—ne!" Thor's voice rushed back in an instant. One heavily muscled arm shot out to catch Jane's limp body and shocked blue eyes snapped between Tony and the glowing gem on the ground.

Unforgettable Shade of Green

Chapter Notes

This was one of the toughest chapter to write and I'm finally happy with it after many rewrites and back-and-forth with my amazingly helpful and insightful betas. I'd say I'm sorry about the cliffhanger but I think we all know I'm not. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Thor: Dark World.

The Bascombe Valley Mystery, The Crooked Man, and The Sign of Four by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Tony chewed on the inside of his cheek, staring at Jane as she was cradled against Thor's chest. He couldn't tell if the small rises and falls were the result of her breathing or his desperate imagination. "Is she...?"

"She lives." Thor replied, his posture was rigid but his hand cupping Jane's face was gentle. "You have saved another who is dear to my heart."

Tony started at the sheer gratitude in Thor's voice. "I didn't—"

"Your touch drove out the infection within Jane, burning away the illness we had not detected." Thor stated with unshakeable conviction and significant admiration. "This must be what you meant by *other cards up your sleeve* and why you no longer require the charmed light."

"That's not—" Tony's denial was interrupted when the Iron Man armor landed with a soft thud beside him

"Sir! Are you alright?"

"Um, I think so." Everything felt fine but there was this odd thrumming in his veins and the image of a bunker he never wanted to see again at the forefront of his mind, but none of that was important at this moment. "JARVIS, full scan on Jane."

Thor gave them both a grateful nod.

"Dr. Foster's vital signs are all within the normal range. No injuries detected." JARVIS reported after a minute that seemed much longer in the silent uncertainty and worry. "Brain wave activity indicates she is waking—"

Jane groaned, her eyes opened briefly before squeezing shut again. "Ugh."

"—soon."

"I am gladdened to hear your voice, my lady." Thor pressed a kiss against her temple. "How do you feel?"

Jane leaned into Thor's touch with a trusting familiarity that belied the years they spent apart. "Like how I imagine I'd feel after a marathon." Her lucidity and humor eased the knot of worry in Tony's chest. "What happened?"

"There was a strange red liquid within you that has since taken another form after its expulsion. It all happened in the span of a breath." Thor pointed at the gem on the ground.

Something jolted in Tony's mind, questioning Thor's summary and contradicting his own recollection of the events. It had happened rather quickly, hadn't it?

A flash of red. A flare of heat. A series of images.

Siberia.

Forcibly pushing that thought away, Tony eyed the gem and tensed when some of the more jagged edges smoothed out for a more rounded appearance. It seemed alive yet was not living. A tingle ran down his spine at the déjà vu of the thought.

Jane frowned with a sort of determined curiosity. "Thor, what is it?"

Thor cleared his throat. "My mother has told us tales of relics that predate the universe itself." There was a faraway look in his eyes and an almost fond curve at the corners of his mouth. "For every dawn, there must be a dusk. The Dark Elves came from the darkness before the birth of life and forged a fearsome weapon from it. The Aether. It is unlike other relics in that it is fluid and ever-changing. It is rumored that the Aether can change matter into dark matter, seeking out host bodies and drawing upon their lifeforce to perform such a task."

"My scans indicate that it is emitting an energy signature very similar to those of the Tesseract and the Scepter." JARVIS added.

The last thing Earth, and Tony, needed was yet another artifact too powerful to contain and too valuable to resist. "It can't be here."

"I concur. I shall deliver it to Asgard, where our mages will determine its origin and have proper safeguards installed. It will not have another chance to harm you." Thor framed Jane's face with his hands, blue eyes intent and earnest. "And I will return." He vowed.

Jane arched an eyebrow at that promise.

"In as timely a manner as I can manage." Thor amended with a sheepish grin.

Tony felt a pang of longing – to have someone as an anchor in this world of increasing madness – and ignored it in favor of studying the seemingly inconspicuous stone on the ground and giving his friends some privacy. It had lost some of its vibrancy, the bright red

dulling to a muted crimson, but it had also shifted its size and shape several times as if it couldn't quite decide.

A shout snapped him out of his trance and the couple out of their murmuring goodbyes.

"Hey, what's going on? Can we get out of here yet?" Darcy, with Selvig in tow, were standing next to her car. It had not taken her long to corral the older man out of the factory, though the lighthearted episode felt like an eternity ago.

"I'll wait for you in the car and we can go get some dinner." Jane told Tony then gave Thor a brief kiss before heading toward her friends.

"I, I should like to escort Lady Jane to her carriage." Thor shuffled his feet in a manner entirely incongruent with his muscular physique.

"Go." Tony grinned. "JARVIS and I will keep an eye on the, um, Aether here."

"Many thanks." Thor caught up to Jane in two long strides and held out his arm at a right angle, which she promptly accepted by hooking her hand through the crook of his elbow.

*

"Hey, JARVIS. Who was in the patrol car?" Tony asked as he watched Thor cower before Darcy, who was gesticulating wildly in an alarmingly threatening fashion.

"Officers from Scotland Yard, Sir." JARVIS answered. "They were most willing to leave this matter in our hands once they heard it required both Iron Man and Thor to solve."

"Forebodingly vague, nice!" The A.I. had made impressive strides in the art of subterfuge.

"I learned from the best, Sir."

"Wait, *Scotland Yard*, you say?" Tony affected a British accent, grinning when he heard JARVIS' imitation of a sigh. Turning his attention back to the stone, he had the strangest feeling that it was bored as he watched it shimmered into a sphere and started spinning.

"I sense your fascination with Star Wars references have passed."

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." One of Tony's fondest childhood memories was of Edwin Jarvis reading Sherlock Holmes with the homey aroma of warmed milk and freshly baked scones.

"Elementary." JARVIS replied dryly.

Tony chuckled, pleased that JARVIS was playing along, then he paused as something occurred to him. "Hang on, how come you haven't nagged me into the suit yet?"

"Historically, Sir, you have disregarded safety protocols. In addition, I doubt a metal suit would provide adequate protection in a situation such as this."

Tony inhaled – he thought of the spinning galaxy, twinkling stars, and exploding warships; he remembered the cold emptiness, the deathly quiet, and the brilliant light; he felt the floating weightlessness, the depleting oxygen, and the gravitational pull – then he exhaled. Air filled and emptied from his lungs normally, his stomach twisted though it did not ache. "Gold-titanium alloy." He chided, the humor thin but present.

"I stand corrected." JARVIS did not sound chastised at all. "Furthermore, I believe it would be easier to execute evasive maneuvers with Sir as the passenger than pilot."

It took a second for Tony to process what the A.I. meant. "Hey! I resent that! I have excellent self-preservation instincts!"

"I know your methods, Sir."

"...well played."

JARVIS bowed with a soft whir of gears.

*

Thor returned shortly with a curious mix of hopefulness and trepidation colored his expression. Darcy must have been quite convincing in the way that she usually was with her words. And her threats.

Tony wiggled his fingers in greeting then pointed at the Aether. "So, we all agree that touching this is a big no-no."

"Aye." Thor mimicked the motion, as he tended to do with unfamiliar Midgardian gestures.

"JARVIS, want to give it a go?" It wasn't Tony's best idea but it was the only viable option at the moment; he reminded himself that JARVIS' data core was safely stored at the tower with multiple backups elsewhere.

"I can hardly wait, Sir." The Iron Man suit dropped to one knee, a gauntlet hand outstretched and hovering over the stone.

Thor grasped Mjolnir from where he had set it down to catch Jane and readied it in a battle stance, clearly intent on coming to JARVIS' defense should it be required. It warmed Tony's heart and soothed away the hurt left from the memory of Thor choking him as he mourned his A.I. in another timeline.

Tony backed up, removing himself out of immediate reach if the Aether decided to seek another host though he had a sense that it was an unnecessary precaution.

JARVIS initiated a countdown as the gauntleted hand lowered and closed around the stone.

The *nothing* that happened was the definition of anticlimactic.

Slowly, JARVIS stood and opened the gauntlet with the palm facing upward, the Aether appeared almost black in the bright white light of the repulsor. With its location confirmed,

JARVIS curled the metal fingers inward to create a temporary containment cell and detached the gauntlet in a series of clicks. The repulsor whined as it powered down, the sound muffled and the light dimmed.

A blue glow spilled from the empty socket on the Iron Man suit, illuminating the red and gold as the closed gauntlet was offered to Thor, who accepted it with a nod.

"See you soon, Lightning McQueen."

"Safe travels, Mr. Odinson."

"Farewell, friends." Thor tilted his face skyward. A second later, the Bifrost crashed down in a rainbow-colored rush of light.

Tony rubbed at his eyes, blinking through the floating spots to peer at the smoking rune burnt into the concrete. "Totally should have worn my sunglasses."

*

The officers at Scotland Yard had been most relieved to hear that the supernatural event was handled. The trespassing charge, never pressed and a civil matter, became a non-issue when the owner learned exactly who had been on his property and what had been left behind. The scorched rune was going to be a tourist draw and a business opportunity.

Jane was cleared by the doctors contracted with Stark Industries' London office. Surprisingly, she actually seemed at peace with Thor's departure. Darcy posited that the two slaps had reset her anger meter and yelped when Jane pinched her side. Selvig asked to see the recording from the Iron Man suit, which Tony agreed on the condition that they wait for Bruce.

Tony had declined to be seen, claiming he was fine and would consult his personal physician within the next twelve hours.

"I'm not that kind of doctor." Bruce sighed as they settled into the lounge area of Tony's hotel room, but he placed a hand on Tony's forehead anyway and took Tony's pulse with the other.

*

Takeout containers nearly obscured the entire surface of the coffee table and a holographic display, split into two sections, hovered above. The left panel was the video feed from the Iron man armor, tracking the Aether through its shifts. The right was a blur of data streaming in from various algorithms and analyses, which Darcy scowled at and declared it migraine-inducing before heading off to bed in her own suite.

The scientists traded theories and ran numbers for another couple of hours before calling it a night.

*

"You know, I don't really remember what happened with the Aether and normally that kind of gap in my memory would bug me but it doesn't." Jane said without preamble as Tony walked

her to the suite she shared with Darcy. "Is, is that bad? That I'd rather not know?"

"No." Tony replied quietly, fingers tapping sequentially on the door frame. "There are things I've seen that I'd like to forget." The *but I can't* was unspoken yet heard in the silent hallway. "If you feel okay with it, then it's okay."

Jane hummed as she leaned in for a quick hug. "Thank you."

"We'll science more in the morning." Tony returned the embrace readily, the act and affection no longer foreign to him after over a year of friendship.

"Good night."

"Night."

*

Tony's hand trailed along the wallpaper and drummed a steady rhythm as he made his way back to his room.

Morse code. Unheard reminder. *Siberia*.

*

Tony woke with his phone digging into his face, his pillow wedged under his side, and his foot resting on the nightstand.

"Sir, I have received a message from Director Fury. He would like to inform you that he has agents available in the area and is happy to offer any assistance needed in this matter that required Iron Man and Thor to tackle."

Tony grimaced at that bit of unpleasant but not necessarily unexpected news – SHIELD had an office in London and Jane was a person of immense interest.

The World Security Council had been furious at the loss of the Tesseract and the Scepter and actively sought to retrieve one or both of these items. With Thor back in Asgard and out of reach, Jane was their best option. Not only was she a prominent scientist in a field that was quickly rising in relevance after aliens poured out of the worm hole in the Manhattan sky, but she also had a romantic history with the Norse god who had demanded the artifacts with threats of war.

"Coffee." Tony grunted as he rubbed a hand across his cheek to smooth out the indentation left there.

"Dr. Banner has already placed a call with room service, expected delivery is thirty minutes." JARVIS said. "Enough time for a shower, Sir." The Iron Man suit helpfully held out a change of clothes. Another armor had arrived shortly before Tony fell into bed, relieving the one that was missing a gauntlet and sending it back to the tower.

Tony's grin at Bruce's growing comfort to be involved in social situations slid off of his face at JARVIS' suggestion. "Rude!" He scowled as he stomped toward bathroom.

*

"So Fury called and offered some of his agents." Tony said as they gathered for breakfast, snagging a waffle from Bruce's plate just because he could. "I think we should take him up on it. I mean, we'll need manpower for evacuation if things get bad and chances are they'll just show up anyway."

If history were to repeat itself and portals were to open above Greenwich, then civilians and structures would be in jeopardy. It was a bit of a mystery why SHIELD had not been on site during the Convergence in the previous timeline. Tony remembered watching the shaky videos of the battle taken by reckless onlookers, fighter jets disappearing only to reappear in a different location, and not seeing a single SHIELD personnel until the aftermath.

This time, though, it would be different.

Jane frowned. "Well, as long as they don't take my stuff again." SHIELD's confiscation of her equipment in New Mexico had left a negative impression that did not change after Coulson arranged for its return and worsened during the New York invasion.

"And no nukes." Darcy grumbled.

Bruce agreed and reached for Tony's hand in a reassuring grasp.

*

The rest of the day passed quickly.

Bruce, Jane, and Selvig were absorbed by calculations and simulations of spatial disturbances, trying to establish a pattern in order to pinpoint the location and timing of the Convergence. Eventually, Bruce and Jane determined the Convergence was set to occur in two days on November 15 while Selvig managed to identify the location as Greenwich, using coordinates of ancient structures as reference.

Darcy was tasked with tracking down where Selvig had left his gravimetric spike prototypes and found them easily enough in Jane's lab. Declaring her mission successful, she went to the hotel spa and warned them to disturb her at their own risk.

Tony spent his time coordinating a support team and clean-up crew with Fury, an endeavor that left him both exhilarated and exhausted. It was supremely satisfying to beat the SHIELD director at his own game but Fury was incapable of negotiating without emotional manipulation, which, while easily spotted and deciphered, also left him feeling drained and in need of another shower.

The hot water felt glorious on his tense muscles and Tony luxuriated in the steam afterward, brushing his teeth and finger-combing his hair with a towel wrapped snugly around his waist.

Clouds of steam billowed outward when he opened the bathroom door and through the wisps fading in the cooler air, Tony's eyes met a stare that was as intelligent as it was stunning and an unforgettable shade of green.

Warm, Solid, and Here

Chapter Notes

I got hit by a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad cold this week. Somehow, I managed to get this chapter done even though I honestly don't remember writing most of it. Now I'm going to crawl back into my blanket burrito with my cat.

Edit: In my DayQuil/NyQuil-induced haze, I completely forgot to mention the [absolutely stunning art by haigidal](#). It is beautiful and amazing and kept me motivated even when I couldn't breathe properly. ♥

Edit Again: Smut Alert! "What if Loki wasn't incorporeal?" AU scene over here at [These Days Are Ours](#).

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

The unexpected presence in his room combined with the lack of alert from JARVIS immediately placed Tony on the defensive. His muscles coiled and readied for combat even as his mind recognized the figure standing in front of him as none other than the one person he had been longing to see.

Loki.

The god was clad in his signature green and black armor, metal and leather weaving a tantalizing pattern that spoke status and power.

In comparison, Tony felt decidedly underdressed and unprepared in his loosely knotted towel and nothing else. This was not how he had envisioned their reunion. Not that he had been actively imagining such a thing, more like idle curiosity as to when their paths might cross again and whether it would be on the fields of battle or in the arena of politics. Thanos' name had been circulating among the leaders of elite organizations across the globe, in hushed whispers from those who believed SHIELD's information and quiet scoffs from those who did not. Despite the lack of consensus regarding Thanos' existence and purported plans to conquer the known universe, the governments of the world did agree on the benefits of acquiring more off-world allies.

Tony had hoped that when he saw Loki again, he would either be piloting the Iron Man armor or addressing delegates in a bespoke suit. Something impressive. Not barely a step above naked with wet hair dripping water down his spine.

Loki's lips quirked upward in a teasing smirk as he took in Tony's appearance.

"I showered!" Tony blurted out. His eyes widened in horror as his brain processed the ridiculousness of what he just said. He fidgeted with the towel, adjusting it needlessly for the sake of something to do. Its edges shifted and lifted as Tony tightened it more securely, creating a small flow of air that made his still-damp skin tingle.

With his green eyes glittering with mirth and appreciation, Loki looked decidedly better since the last time they had seen each other, his complexion healthier and his shoulders relaxed. "I can see that." He mouthed silently, his gaze flittered behind Tony in an obvious show of taking in the residual steam in the bathroom, the droplets clinging to the glass shower stall, and the wet footprints on the lush carpet before returning to Tony with intent.

Tony could feel the touch of Loki's stare as it trailed over his unmarred torso, smooth skin and solid muscle where the arc reactor used to be. He felt a flush spreading from his cheeks, the warmth spreading down his neck and chest and pooling in his abdomen. The heat turned icy when Tony took in the shimmering blur around Loki's lanky frame, combined with the inaudible words and the missing shadow on the carpet, to form only one conclusion.

An illusion.

Tony resolutely refused to consider the other possibility – Loki's ghost paying him one final visit for farewell – because... *Because.*

Loki's brows furrowed, equal parts confusion and concern, and his mouth curved around the two syllables of Tony's name in a soundless question.

"Quite an accomplishment, Sir." JARVIS' playful tone was jarring in the hushed tension and shattered it quite effectively. "Shall I order a plaque to be made?"

"I—" Tony snapped his jaw shut with a click of his teeth, choosing to keep Loki's visit from JARVIS for now and filing away the knowledge that Loki's illusion was able to bypass JARVIS' scanners for later, which answered the question of why JARVIS didn't warn Tony of a visitor. Not that Tony was worried once he identified his guest as Loki; he knew with the sort of unquestioning faith that belonged to the devout that Loki would not harm JARVIS. "— don't know where you got all this sass, JARVIS." He finished lamely.

JARVIS' answer was a melodious and noncommittal hum.

Tony shrugged, calculatedly casual as he headed toward the pile of crumpled jeans at the foot of the bed. Keeping his gaze forward, he purposefully swung his arms upward in an arc that would have connected with Loki's flank if Loki had been there. When his movement encountered no resistance, Tony felt a strange mixture of disappointment and satisfaction that only happened when he proved himself right but didn't want to be.

The jeans and shirt were wrinkled and relatively clean, salvageable for another day's wear. His need for another shower was more of a mental one anyway, needing the physical sensation of hot water and soapy scrubs to cleanse away the emotional grime of dealing with Fury's manipulation.

Fury had replaced criticism with compliments, trading challenges in Tony's capabilities for confidence in them. Once, Tony would have reveled in the praise and given everything he had for more. No longer. Tony knew too much about SHIELD and too much about himself to be lulled by this synthetic simplicity. SHIELD needed Tony Stark far more than they needed Iron Man.

Loki was still frowning and watching him with a dangerously determined gleam in his eyes when Tony turned back after tugging on the shirt. "Until we meet again." The way Loki exaggerated the movement of his lips, so Tony could make out the words, highlighted the sharpness of his cheekbones and jawline. Then, with a wiggle of those elegantly long fingers, Loki faded from sight like the dissipating wisps of steam.

Tony blinked, feeling an emptiness in his chest that grew more pronounced the longer he stared at the spot where Loki's illusion once stood before shaking off the unwelcome melancholy to pull on a pair of boxers and his jeans. By the time he finished tying the shoelaces on his boots, Tony had managed to redirect his attention to the mystery of Loki's visit rather than dwelling on the incorporeal nature of it.

First, the timing. Tony would be a fool to not see the connection between Loki's reappearance and the impending Convergence. After nearly two years of absence, Loki chose to reestablish contact two days before the Nine Realms would be aligned. Or perhaps Loki did not have a choice in the matter. Tony would like to think that if Loki could, the mage would have found a way to communicate with him before now, unless the terms of his punishment prevented such actions.

Second, the purpose. Tony's fingers tapped absently against his chest, where the arc reactor used to sit and the spot that Loki concentrated on. Thor must have told Loki about the missing *charmed light* and it made sense, from a tactical perspective, to investigate. Though Loki's attention seemed more intimate than impersonal, more concerned than clinical, and more—

A series of frantic knocking on the door interrupted Tony's thoughts.

"Tony! You have to see this!" Jane called, an edge of frenzied excitement in her voice that matched the almost manic grin on her face when he opened the door. "Look!" She thrust her patent-pending gadget in his face.

"What am I looking at?" Tony squinted at the screen and the spinning dial.

"These readings!" Jane was practically bouncing while Tony grabbed his phone and slipped on the ear piece as before dragging him out of his room and down the hallway toward the elevator. The incessant beeping from the machine added a sense of urgency to it all. "They correspond to the energy signature of the Bifrost! It just landed!"

*

A quick search through satellite imagery located the telltale rune burned into the loading area behind the hotel, thankfully empty as it was past peak business hours.

"At least it wasn't the lawn." Tony offered weakly to the hotel manager who did not find that tidbit comforting at all and hung up without a word. "JARVIS, get a road crew to come out first thing tomorrow."

"Done, Sir."

Tony peered back at Jane and Thor, wrapped in a passionate embrace and in a world of their own. Knowing their attention was occupied, he allowed his shoulders to slump as he processed the second wave of disappointment of the day.

When Tony had heard that the Bifrost had just landed and the location, his heart soared with a nervous sort of hope. Perhaps Loki had paid him a visit to announce his arrival, it would not be unlike the god to add a bit of drama to his entrance. Perhaps Loki had been in Greenwich in the other timeline but escaped SHIELD's notice and the reporters' cameras via magical means. Perhaps Loki could answer these questions himself and save Tony the trouble.

They had found Thor standing next to the rune, red cloak replaced with one of black, and no one else.

Specifically, no Loki.

The change in Thor's cloak's color renewed the previously dismissed possibility of Loki's visit being one of goodbye. One that Tony still found unacceptable and untrue and unlikely. Loki was capable and cunning, with a wit that could charm or cut in one breath. Despite Tony's earlier assertion that there was no version of this where Loki would come out on top, he knew now that was the exact outcome Loki had hoped for; the god had meant to foil the invasion by announcing his plans and restricting the size of the portal as to stem the flow of Chitauris.

With a brilliant mind skilled in capitalizing loop holes and utilizing every advantage, it was inconceivable that Loki could have fallen in the short span of days since Thor's last visit. When Thor had appeared at the abandoned factory, he spoke of his adopted brother fondly and alluded that Loki was doing well. Tony was content to believe it until proven otherwise; and even then, he might still have his doubts.

"Friend Tony." Thor waved, his other hand joined with Jane's as they made their way toward Tony. "I am heartened to see you well. How is your fire?"

"Hey Thor." Tony clasped a hand on Thor's shoulder in a gesture he had seen Thor exchange with Steve in another timeline, a greeting between warriors. "What fire?"

"The fire you summoned to cure my fair Jane." Thor replied, paying no attention to Tony's protesting squawk.

Jane's brows furrowed. "Fire? I didn't know there was a fire."

"That's because there was no fire." Tony stated emphatically. "I just gave you a high-five." He sent Jane an imploring look, pleading for her to stop this absurdity.

"Your eyes glowed." Thor said simply, though there was nothing simple about his statement.

"Um, what?" Tony gaped.

"After the Aether left Jane and took the form of a gem, your eyes were ablaze with the fire that cauterized the Aether's infection."

"Um, what?" Tony repeated, if only because it seemed just as apt a response as the first time.

"Hey, Tony, hey." Jane said softly, likely sensing the panicked edge in Tony's voice. "Maybe it's *fire* like, you know, *s'mores*?" Then she winked, conspiratorially and awkwardly.

Tony considered this possibility, it was unlikely but not impossible for a sudden rush of adrenaline to trigger Extremis' dormant defensive responses. There was no previous data for comparison since life had been fairly calm this past year with no major villains threatening world domination or giant monsters wreaking havoc. Iron Man had gone on a few missions to eradicate remaining Ten Rings cells and retrieve Stark Industries weaponry off of the black market, but nothing quite as exciting as an otherworldly essence that was mercurial in form and nature. "I guess so."

"S'mores?" Thor asked.

"It's a snack sandwich made with graham crackers, roasted marshmallow and chocolate. You'll love it." Tony replied, purposefully misunderstanding the inquiry as he was reluctant and wary to discuss Extremis in the open after all the effort he had gone through to keep Killian's most damaging secrets. Their exposed location was also why he hadn't asked about Loki outright.

Though the media had primarily focused on the Chitauri in their reporting of the New York Incident, Loki's presence in Germany and his subsequent fight against Captain America and Iron Man had garnered a fair amount of publicity. Dr. Schafer gave a compelling interview about the peculiar sensation of having his eyeball scanned by force and the elderly man was lauded as a hero for standing up against an alien tyrant. Even now, nearly two years later, there were still chatters about Loki and his demand for humanity to kneel.

"I look forward to it!" Thor declared cheerfully. "Let us go forth in our quest for these delicate concoctions and celebrate my return."

"Let's." Tony tapped out a text to update the others and invite them to his suite for dinner then led Thor and Jane through the labyrinth of service elevators, taking all possible precautions with SHIELD's intrusive eyes likely observing their every move.

*

"I understand the art of double speak." Thor announced, apropos of nothing, once they were inside Tony's room and JARVIS gave the all-clear for any surveillance attempts.

"O...kay?" Tony said slowly and exchanged a puzzled look with Jane.

"The s'mores you speak of, they are not just sweet treats meant to appease our palates." Thor hummed, thoughtful and careful. "It is also a cover for an advantage you wish to keep secret and I hereby vow that I will not divulge it without your permission lest it brings you harm."

Pleasant surprises were rare in Tony's life and Thor's perceptiveness definitely qualified as one. His reaction must have showed on his face, for Thor hastily explained.

"It has been pointed out to me that my thoughtlessness had frequently caused hardship for others and I should be more careful with my words and recognizing which ones are mine to speak."

Jane seemed equally pleased by this development. "That's great." She brought Thor's hand, still intertwined with hers, up to her lips and brushed a kiss across his knuckles.

There was no doubt as to *who* had pointed this out to Thor. Tony felt a smile tugging at his lips as he thought of Loki and Thor finally communicating and a surge of relief that if Thor were able to speak of Loki without distress, then it must mean Loki was unharmed. Though a more concrete confirmation would help settle the twisting flutters in his stomach. "Good to hear, Point Break, and thanks for having my back. So, um, you and Loki have been talking, huh?" It wasn't the smoothest of transitions but it would have to do.

"Indeed, our conversations with mother have been most informative." Thor beamed then the grin fell off of his face as he jerked. "Oh, I completely forgot." He grasped Mjolnir and set it down on the carpet, from which a web of lightning sparked outward in a design similar to the runes of the Bifrost but with a few more swirls and loops. "Loki had requested I send notice once we are free of prying eyes so he may join us."

The next moment, Loki stepped out of thin air in a shimmer of green.

Solid, warm, and here.

Tony's body registered as he threw himself forward to pull Loki into a hug that was eighteen months and two near-misses overdue.

Leather and Books and Trees

Chapter Notes

This chapter of 95% FrostIron fluff and 5% plot advancement was brought to you by [this vision of FrostIron loveliness by haigidal](#). Enjoy! ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Thor: Dark World.

It took the length of one breath – the scent of leather and books and trees filling his lungs and lingering in his system – for Tony to realize precisely what he had so thoughtlessly done. He just wanted to make sure Loki was really and truly here, especially after having his hopes raised then dashed twice already with Loki first appearing as an illusion then absent at the Bifrost landing site.

Tony had thought the worst when he spotted Thor's black cloak; the color traditionally associated with mourning. Fear had coiled deep in his body, taut and twisted.

What if Loki's illusory visit was not one by choice but by necessity? It was not a spell by a talented mage but the only means a spirit had to communicate. Their conversation, if it could even count as one, was one-sided and the scale of effort tilted in Loki's direction. Tony hadn't said a thing to Loki after his initial outburst – *I showered* – partially out of embarrassment and partially to maintain the shroud of secrecy Loki had thrown over the encounter. If Loki had chosen to conceal his presence, then there must be an excellent reason but instead of an explanation, there were only concerned looks and a silent goodbye.

In another timeline where Tony played gracious host to ungrateful guests, Thor had mentioned a hard-won battle before calling for his Shield-Brothers to gather and celebrate his return. Tony had mentioned this to Loki, inadequate and vague, and hoped it would be of use somehow. What if an attack had been launched and Loki was caught in combat because of Tony's warning? Armed with flimsy foreknowledge that ultimately proved useless if Loki had fallen...

Those were the thoughts circling above like an ominous cloud, waiting to rain down destruction and flood Tony's world in despair.

So when Tony finally heard Loki's name from Thor's lips and saw the mage himself stepping into reality like the grandest of tricks, Tony reached for Loki like a man stepping into the sun from a life of storms.

Solid, warm, and here.

And tense.

Tony could feel the hard lines of Loki's back, the arched shoulder blades and the stiff spine. The myriad of buckles and straps only added to the overall rigidity and clearly stated that Tony's touch was unwelcome.

Behind him, Jane made an incredulous sound.

And that was his cue to let go.

Tony exhaled and felt the warmth of his own breath against his chin. The puff of air trapped in the space between Tony's face and Loki's shoulder; this was how close they were, with no room for even air to escape. He readied an apology, something witty but sincere, as he commanded his arms to move, however reluctantly.

Only to feel the brush of Loki's fingers hovering at his back, tentatively returning the embrace.

Tony's arm did move then, but instead of dropping open, they tightened and brought him even closer in a wordless encouragement.

All tension drained from Loki's body, he sagged forward and draped his weight over Tony. His hands planted themselves firmly on Tony's back, one between the shoulder blades and the other at the bottom of his spine, and practically pulled Tony into him.

"Hello, Tony." Loki's voice was no more than a whisper but Tony heard every word with how closely they were pressed together and felt the vibrations from where Loki's chin was rested on the top of his head. "I am pleased to see you well."

"Me too." Tony mumbled against the supple leather, feeling his stubbles scratching lightly as he turned to face outward and immediately regretted the move when his eyes caught Jane's bemused stare and Thor's wide grin. His cheeks flamed in embarrassment, though he wasn't sure if it was due to the uncharacteristic display of him initiating physical affection or the slip in his speech. "I mean, um, I am pleased to see you well too."

JARVIS, from the Iron Man armor standing sentry in the room, made a noise that was a mix between a snort and a cough.

"I am pleased to see you both well." Thor boomed, grin growing impossibly wider. "I see now why Loki refused to wait and demanded to check on your welfare at once. Your bond exceeds my expectation."

Loki and Tony stepped back at the same time and turned their attention to Thor, the former with a withering glare and the latter with a perplexed look.

"Thor." Loki rolled his shoulders back and curled his fingers behind his back, a warning in both his posture and word but contradicted by the faint blush along his defined cheekbones.

Tony shoved his hands into his pockets, stilling his fidgeting fingers and affecting an appearance of casual nonchalance.

"I apologize for critiquing your use of spirit travel mere moments before we were set to depart for Midgard." Thor continued, seemingly oblivious if not for the twinkle of mischief in his blue eyes. "I now see the urgency—"

Loki gritted his teeth, the flush now spread to his jaw line. "Thor!"

"—in your decision to ascertain the Man of Iron's wellbeing after I had informed you of his decision to remove the charmed light from his chest. You simply could not wait."

A brief lull of silence then several voices spoke up.

Jane perked up at the mention of fringe science. "Spirit travel? Like astral projection?"

"You were worried about me." Tony said with a significant amount of awe.

"Yes." Loki glanced at Tony then away in a flash of green.

"I am not familiar with that term." Thor frowned.

"That's, um, good." Tony shuffled his feet, watching the pattern his shoes were making on the carpet. "Because I was worried about you." He knew, without seeing, that Loki's eyes had snapped back to him.

"Astral projection is an out-of-body experience where the mind leaves the body—" Jane started.

"I am well." Loki said softly, the rosy tint on his cheeks slightly faded but still present.

Tony arched a brow. "I can see that."

"—but Loki's mind does not leave his body." Thor interrupted with a frown.

"Do you make a habit out of repeating my words?" Loki's lips curved in a smirk at Tony's unintentional reminder of their earlier interaction, both from the same day and months before.

Tony sputtered at that, mind scrambling among the dozen of half-formed responses and coming up with none. So he settled for a complete change in topic instead. "JARVIS, you've been slacking, Loki here was able to sneak right past you." He wagged a chastising finger at the Iron Man armor.

"I meant no offense, JARVIS." Loki shot Tony a pitying look, which Tony returned with a confused shrug. "In my defense, I did not realize I had evaded your sensors."

"None taken, Mr. Loki." JARVIS replied kindly then the A.I.'s tone became stern as he approached the group in a whirl of gears. "Sir, what do you have to say for yourself?"

It was then that Tony realized where he had gone wrong. "I love you, JARVIS."

Jane and Thor had stopped their conversation in favor of listening to the one between the A.I. and his creator.

"And I am fond of you, Sir. Which is why I take your safety with the utmost seriousness and any security breach must be reviewed and addressed properly." The armor tilted its head disapprovingly. "I've been scanning the security footage for any anomalies since Mr. Odinson announced Mr. Loki's visit and believe I've located the exact moment—"

Tony made a choking noise, the dying sound of defeat and resignation of relentless teasing to come. He peered over at Loki, who had a similar look of forbearing acceptance.

At least they were in this together.

"—which was when Sir proudly declared that he had showered." JARVIS managed to finish with a flourish despite his robotic tone.

Jane snorted disbelievingly, pulling out her phone to text Darcy while giggling.

Thor clapped Tony on the shoulder. "I congratulate you on your cleanliness."

"Thanks, Lightning McQueen." Tony's wince was more from the situation than Thor's strength, when once upon a time, it would have been both. Or perhaps neither, because Tony and Thor had never been on such friendly terms in the other timeline.

"JARVIS, if it would ease your worries, I am not opposed to demonstrating spirit travel for your study."

"I thank you and accept your offer, Mr. Loki."

At that exchange, Tony felt a surge of pride for his A.I. and a rush of fondness toward Loki. There was no doubt that JARVIS was fantastic and charming a god was just another accomplishment on his already impressive resume. Loki's gesture, both in acknowledging the A.I.'s unease and offering to help address it, had placed the mage at the top of Tony's favorites list.

Jane slid her phone back into her pocket and glanced tentatively at Loki. "Can I watch too?" She had made it very clear that she was still upset with Loki for sending the Destroyer to New Mexico but her ire seemed to have faded in the joy of her reunion with Thor and in the name of science.

Something flickered in Loki's expression, surprise morphing to indifference in less than a second. "I suppose." He drawled.

Three soft raps sounded at the door signaling Bruce and Selvig's arrival.

"Me three." Tony winked as he turned to open the door. "And I'll wear pants this time."

"I hate pants." Selvig muttered.

"Do I even want to know?" Bruce asked, instantly wary.

"You weren't wearing pants?" Jane sounded entirely too amused, finger flying over her phone again.

Loki sighed as Thor let out a boisterous laugh.

Darcy practically shoved Bruce and Selvig into the room when she barreled through the door. "I want to know every single pantless detail."

JARVIS emitted a small crackling of static in sympathy as Tony's head fell forward in defeat, connecting with the door and closing it with a click that sounded like the final nail in his mortifying coffin.

*

Tony would have felt bad about leaving Loki to fend off Darcy's incessant and sometimes invasive questions, except if it wasn't Loki, it would be him. So in the interest of preserving his sanity and dignity, Tony hastily extracted himself from the conversation with the very legitimate excuse of updating Rhodey and Pepper of Thor and Loki's return.

Rhodey was still on standby in case War Machine was needed but his commanding officer had not been too pleased with the situation. Despite the happy public front of Iron Man and War Machine working seamlessly with United States Armed Forces, tension simmered behind the scenes. Egos aside, there was a chain of command within the military War Machine was exempt from but Colonel Rhodes was not. The fact that Rhodey would clear, or tried to anyway, his schedule based on a call from Tony had ruffled the feathers on some very territorial birds.

"I'll send the Mark 80s over but I should probably hang around here until the super space tunnel happens." Rhodey had scoffed at *Convergence* and created his own moniker for the cosmic event. "You know how it is."

Tony did know and had known since Rhodey became the military liaison to Stark Industries. Everyone had multiple roles to play and different agendas to appease or advance. It was how the world worked, in shades of varying gray instead of black and white. "Yeah I know, thanks Honey Bunny." He made an obnoxiously loud kissing sound.

Rhodey hung up without another word.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony thought he saw Loki glancing over but when he looked, Loki was in the middle of an animated retelling of a story that caused Thor to both turn pale with horror and red with mortification, resulting in a truly spectacularly blotchy combination.

*

Pepper was in a Team Iron Man meeting when Tony called, so he left a message with Happy that London was not an advisable destination for a few days and they were going to need more seating and extra turkeys at Thanksgiving.

*

Before rejoining the group, Tony made one more phone call.

To Princess Shuri.

While Mark 80s and SHIELD agents would provide sufficient support for combat situation and civilian evacuation, they would need help in clearing debris and securing structures. Mark 81s, specifically designed for heavy-lifting and weight-bearing, were perfect for these tasks.

Shuri was amenable toward sending fifteen Mark 81s, approximately half of the number stationed at various construction sites spanning across the African continent. With Wakandan technology expediting the construction, they were quite a way ahead of schedule, which allowed for some flexibility in case of disaster relief.

"Thanks again, Your Highness."

"Stop thanking me for your tech."

They both knew that Mark 81s were programmed to only follow pre-approved protocols and properly warded against any outside interference. Tony only asked as a courtesy and Shuri recognized it as such; the ability to read between the lines was one of the many reasons why Tony enjoyed working with her. Shuri understood the nuances of politics better than her brother, dancing across the red tape instead of tearing it up. Not much was known of Wakanda's monarchy and their practices, but Tony hoped the order of succession was based on suitability and not birth order.

*

"So, what did I miss?" Tony strolled back to the group, now hunched over the room service menu with great interest.

"Thor once dressed up as a blushing bride to get his hammer back." Darcy said with an unholy amount of glee.

"Loki was the maid of honor." Jane added, patting Thor on the arm comfortingly.

Bruce scratched at his chin. "There was a chariot pulled by giant cats."

"There is nothing more reassuring than realizing that the world is crazier than you are." Selvig grinned.

Loki smiled angelically.

*

Once the sizeable dinner order had been placed, Thor and Darcy had insisted on ordering three of everything from the children's menu, the mood calmed from the earlier silliness to something a bit quieter.

Thor and Jane claimed the loveseat, his black cloak adding to the suddenly subdued atmosphere. Bruce was sitting cross-legged on the floor, batting at Darcy's feet as she kept trying to tickle him with her toes. Selvig had his eyes closed, his left ankle rested on his right knee, in the armchair.

Tony and Loki stood by the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out at the sparkling lights of another city that never sleeps. Loki's eyes, reflected in the glass, held a faraway look. One that Tony was quite familiar with, full of unpleasant memories and old regrets.

"Did you know Mike's Hard Lemonade comes in fourteen different flavors?" Tony's voice was pitched conspiratorially low. "I had JARVIS order them all."

Loki's distant stare snapped to focus as his face contorted in an outraged scowl. "Fourteen? I literally cannot—"

"I figure we can, like, make a thing out of trying them." Tony craned his head sideways and up, an invitation and a challenge in his smile.

"As long as there is pizza." Loki shrugged, angular shoulders rising and falling into softer lines. His gaze was a warm green, like rustling leaves with rays of sunshine peeking through on a breezy summer afternoon.

Tony's nose twitched as he inhaled, breathing in the scent of leather and books and trees.

Solid, warm, and here.

Bow in Hand and Arrow Notched

Chapter Notes

I had originally planned on a *sloooooow* burn but, well, you'll see. ;) And hey, look, it's another cliffhanger!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Thor: Dark World.

The hotel's kitchen promised forty-five minutes for their dinner to be delivered. A shorter estimate than Tony would have thought considering that in addition to Thor and Darcy's triple orders from the children's menu, they had also gotten *everything* from the standard menu.

Appetizers. Salads. Soups. Entrees. Desserts.

It spoke volumes of the kind of reputation Tony had that the staff didn't hesitate at all when he called in an obscene amount of food and requested a portable banquet table but did sound confused when he declined any alcohol to be added to the tab. The *party boy* image of Tony Stark was alive and well in Europe and he wasn't sure if it was an advantage or not, though he supposed he would find out in two days' time.

The Convergence was both terrifying and thrilling in the way that only a cosmological event with the potential to collapse the Nine Realms could be. It was, as the cliché went, a once in a lifetime experience. At least for them mere mortals.

Tony wondered, morosely, if Thor and Loki would remember them when the next Convergence came around or would they simply be forgotten like nothing more than a grain of sand in the vast hourglass of time. With a shake of his head to dislodge these unwelcome speculations and useless thoughts, he tried to find a distraction as he peered out the floor-to-ceiling windows, maybe the Big Ben or the London Eye.

All he saw was their reflection, his and Loki's, in the smooth pane of glass.

Loki, with his glowing complexion and healthier frame, actually – annoyingly – looked younger.

Whereas Tony was sure he spotted a gray hair at his right temple despite being in the best shape he had ever been, thanks to Extremis enhancing his biology and erasing all the mistreatments his body had endured both in his youth and Afghanistan.

The comparison didn't help derail Tony's *woe is me and my blink-of-an-eye lifespan* train of thought. Questioning green eyes sought out brooding brown ones. But Tony averted Loki's gaze, focusing instead on the others in the room and watching as Jane brushed invisible lint off of Thor's shoulder.

"What happened on Asgard, Thor?" She asked, the soft timbre of her voice practically deafening in the silent room.

The couple on the couch immediately had everyone's attention with the exception of Selvig, who appeared to be asleep.

Loki and Tony shifted to face the group and somehow ended up further apart when Loki pivoted outward and moved several steps away. Tony noticed but did not comment, attention focused on Thor and interest piqued. It was clear that something had happened between the two Bifrost landings to make Thor switch to a black cloak, a color traditionally associated with mourning though Tony had no idea if Asgard followed the same conventions.

Maybe it was nothing more than a whim or convenience and Tony just read more into a situation than needed.

After all, Thor was still his cheerful self and, as far as Tony could tell, there was no difference in Loki's armor from the night they spent over delicious pizza and cheap drinks eighteen months ago. Save for the fact that it had obviously been laundered and repaired, which, combined with Loki's improved appearance, suggested that he had either been absolved of his part in the Chitauri Invasion or received a more lenient sentence than Thor had feared.

Tony hoped it was the former, Odin had to have acknowledge the overwhelming evidence pointing to Loki's innocence, though the latter was just as likely given what Loki had previously mentioned about the existing bias against him. Either way, it was clear that Thor had kept his promise and spoken up for Loki at the most crucial moment because their interactions had shifted from strained silence to brotherly banter. To be fair, Loki did have the barbaric Asgardian muzzle the last time Tony saw the two brothers but he was sure even if that hadn't been the case, Loki still wouldn't have talked to Thor.

"Yeah, what happened after you guys left?" Bruce asked then made a whooshing sound with a flailing motion of his hands to indicate the Bifrost.

"The All-Father—"

"Dr. Banner—"

Thor and Loki started at the same time, both cutting off their sentences to allow the other to continue. After a brief series of tilted heads and eye rolls, an exchange of nonverbal communication that Tony had both seen with Jane and Darcy and been a part of with Rhodey, Thor cleared his throat.

"The All-Father judged Loki innocent of wrongdoing for his part in the Chitauri Invasion, for his actions were of his hand but not his mind." The way Thor slowed down toward the end

made Tony think he was quoting Odin word-for-word.

Loki nodded toward Bruce. "Dr. Banner, I wish to express my deepest gratitude for your aid in the matter."

Darcy cleared his throat *loudly*, narrowing her eyes and planting her hands on her hips in an effort to appear more intimidating from her slouched position with her back against the couch. Somehow, she succeeded.

"I regret the destructions I have wrought upon your town and your persons." Loki spread his arms wide, palms facing up, and bowed before Jane, Darcy, and Selvig with an unmistakable amount of sincerity and an unavoidable flourish. Every move Loki made was distinctively stylish.

"That's as close to an apology as I'm going to get, isn't it?" Jane's wry grin made it clear that her question was rhetorical.

Thor hummed in emphatic agreement.

Selvig let out a loud snore.

Darcy sniffed but waved magnanimously. "So what've you been up to?" She glanced at Tony with an impish smile on her face. "You know, when you're not sneaking up on our Tony when he's not wearing pants."

"I had a towel!" Tony squawked.

Thor frowned. "There is no shame in displaying one's physique when wooing—" He hopped away from the flash of green aimed at his shin without looking. "—I myself used this strategy often when pursuing my fair Jane."

Tony gaped and despite his mouth opening and closing, no sounds came out. He wasn't trying to *woo* Loki, the entire bathroom *situation* was an accident! And while Loki had certainly been on his mind over the last year and a half, Tony didn't exactly dwell on those thoughts...not much, anyway.

They only had one night of fragmented conversations pierced together by a rare trust between a trickster and a showman. A handful of hours of desperately needed emotional catharsis prompted by the fact that they were unlikely to meet again and were therefore the best candidates to unload painful truths and fantastical secrets.

That was all. Nothing more. Right?

When JARVIS had sent him Natasha's report on the confrontation between SHIELD and Thor at Stark Tower, Tony had laughed at the absurdity. Natasha had skipped insinuations and gone straight for the verdict of a narcissistic playboy swayed by an egotistical god. It shouldn't be surprising, she never saw past the public persona nor recognized the fact that that Tony had first kept *Howard's* company afloat then successfully reinvented it as his own. Stark Industries' swift and successful transition from weapons manufacturer to leader in clean

energy and medical technology was chronicled and lauded the financial circles, ones she had no hopes of gaining access to. Her faulty conclusion of Loki compromising him was another tally on Black Widow's long list of failures when it came to assessing Iron Man.

Except...Tony had practically memorized the look Loki sent him before returning to Asgard. He had been listening to Loki's words as he drifted off to sleep. He had envisioned their reunion frequently enough to have multiple outfits selected. There were also cases of Mike's Hard Lemonade hidden deep within the tower's wine cellar that would add weight to this previously flimsy theory by an overrate spy.

Tony thought of Loki, missed Loki, and wanted to impress Loki. Although he didn't quite know what to do with this new realization, he found himself unwilling to dispute Thor's assumption of *wooing* even if it was wrong. Just because he *wasn't* didn't mean he *wouldn't*.

Darcy winked at Jane. "It definitely worked."

Jane's cheeks flamed and she buried her face against Thor's shoulder.

Thor preened. In his smugness, he did not notice the second flash of green that struck his ankle with far less playfulness than the first.

"I have been confined to my quarters to repent for my crimes." Loki's voice was raised to be heard over Thor's yelp. The corners of his eyes were pulled tight as his arms crossed defensively over his chest, long fingers pressing hard into the leather on his forearm. "Until sacking of Asgard at the hands of the Dark Elves and their leader, Malekith."

The jovial atmosphere in the room froze, a chill settled over them as Loki summarized the history of the Aether and the First Battle of Svartalfheim.

Nearly five thousand years ago, the Dark Elves had attempted to plunge the Nine Realms back into darkness by dispelling the Aether through the Convergence but had been thwarted by Bor, Odin's father and Thor's grandfather. In the chaos of battle, Malekith had escaped with his lieutenant, Algrim, and a squadron of soldiers though it was widely and wrongfully believed that they had perished. The Aether was hidden away in a location so remote and secure that it eventually became a myth.

"Until I poked it." Jane paled. "Oh, God. None of this would have happened if I hadn't found the Aether."

Thor pulled her closer to him with a hand rubbing soothing circles on her back. "Then Malekith would have only possessed it that much sooner. Do not blame yourself, my lady."

Jane appeared comforted but not convinced.

"Algrim infiltrated Asgard as part of a marauding horde captured by Fandral and Volstagg, he managed to free the other prisoners and set them loose upon the palace as diversion so that he may weaken our defenses from within. Many worthy warriors took their last breath in the midst of battle." Thor swallowed tightly.

Bruce made a sympathetic noise.

"While I was confined to my room like a wayward child." Loki scowled. "I could have lent my magic to distract them."

"It is good that you were." Thor countered.

The glare Loki shot Thor had the intensity of years, *centuries*, of rage. "How many times had my cheats and tricks saved your sorry hides from enemies?" He snarled. "How dare—"

"Peace, Loki." Thor raised a placating hand. "I only meant that I am glad you kept our mother safe."

"Mother could have handled a few measly intruders herself." Loki's reply was gruff but the anger was gone. "You needn't worry so."

Tony wisely did not point out how Loki neglected to correct Thor's slip of *our mother* or how Loki referred to the queen as *mother* instead of All-Mother.

"We do not know that for certain. And as mother says, *it's only because I worry over you that—*"

—that you have survived." Loki finished seamlessly.

The two brothers lapsed into a moment of silence, possibly remembering all the times their mother had said that to a reckless Thor and a mischievous Loki.

Darcy raised her hand hesitantly. "What happened next?"

All traces of mirth vanished from Thor's face. "Algrim had disabled the protective shielding surrounding Asgard, thereby granting an army of Dark Elves entrance to Asgard. They laid waste to the city and murdered dozens of Asgardian citizens. I fought as many as I could on my way to the throne room. It was there that I saw father holding Algrim with the tip of Gungnir at the elf's throat—" The dull roar of thunder sounded in the distance as he gripped Mjolnir. "Then they both disappeared."

"What do you mean?" Jane asked softly. "How?"

"From my research, the Dark Elves favor a weapon capable of creating a bomb that, upon detonation, creates a powerful vortex that devours any being or item within range before disappearing from sight." Loki stated. "I believe it is similar to what you Midgardians call a gravitational singularity, or a black hole in colloquial speech."

Tony's first reaction was to launch himself at Loki because *science*, but he managed to suppress that inappropriate urge for a more appropriate response. Pepper would be proud. "I'm sorry for your loss." Odin's chances of survival, much like everything else pulled into a black hole, were nonexistent.

Bruce echoed the same words Tony had said.

Jane hugged Thor tightly.

Darcy reached over to pat Thor's knee. "Is that why you have a new cloak?"

"Aye. It once belonged to my father. I was most distraught that we could not hold a proper burial for father without— Um." Thor tugged at the heavy fabric. "Mother suggested I honor him in another way."

Tony shuffled closer to Loki and brushed the side of his arm against Loki's torso, leaning in when green eyes flickered down in surprise. "You okay?" He mouthed. If there was anyone who understood the complicated tangle of emotions associated with losing a father that was larger than life and impossible to please, it would be Tony.

Loki gave a slight nod in response as he pressed against Tony.

"What happened to the Aether?" Bruce was always good at keeping them on track.

Thor grimaced. "Malekith has it in his possession."

Loki straightened and Tony missed his weight instantly. "He will likely attempt his plot once more, to unleash the might of the Aether upon all Nine Realms through the focal point of the Convergence."

"Greenwich." Selvig muttered, having woken up at some point.

"Why give chase when he will be coming to us in two days' time?" Loki grinned viciously.

Tony gave a low and appreciative whistle. "I like the way you think."

"Is that so?" Loki's smirk was all confidence but his eyes told a different story; this was not an attempt at playing coy.

"Yes." Tony answered with absolute certainty and complete honesty. "I really do."

The curve of Loki's lips pulled into something a bit wider and a whole lot softer before opening to reply, only to be interrupted by the sound of three rapid raps at the door.

"Dinner!" Darcy darted to answer it.

Tony immediately pulled Loki into the bedroom and out of the line of sight of the door. Loki was very recognizable in his armor and still considered a person of interest for his acts in Germany, though most of it came in the form of fans declaring their willingness to kneel for their new alien god, it would still be best to keep Loki off of SHIELD's radar. Fury had tried to negotiate keeping the extent of Loki's involvement out of official and unofficial reports for Tony to upgrading SHIELD's aircrafts with repulsor technology. After some back and forth, they settled on Tony optimizing their existing turbine engines and adding another year on his consultant contract instead. JARVIS made sure Fury followed through on his end. In hindsight, he could see why Natasha thought he was compromised.

"How very forward of you, Tony." Loki commented with a playful lilt.

Tony winked. "Well, you've already seen me almost naked, might as well skip dinner."

Instead of flirting back, Loki seemed to wilt as his shoulders slumped and even the emerald of his armor dulled. His voice was a defeated murmur. "I, I am sorry for any discomfort Thor's thoughtless comment has caused you. Please know that I do not think you have any designs toward wooing me—"

"Who said I don't?" Tony blurted out.

"—nor did I plan my visit to—" Loki stilled, green eyes snapping up in surprised hope. "What did you say?"

Deflection, distractions and denials threatened to spill from his lips, defensive responses developed and honed by a lifetime of disappointments. Tony gritted his teeth and swallowed them down. With a hand pressed against his stomach, fingers clenching at the soft fabric of his shirt, he willed them to stay because he was certain that one wrong word would make Loki shut down and turn away...but he didn't quite know what was the right thing to say. "I, um, I—"

Shouts of alarm sounded from the other room as the Iron Man armor flew through the door and encased Tony in a flurry of gears and plates.

"JARVIS! What—"

Loki assumed a battle stance as the ceiling vent, less than three feet away, popped open.

Clint landed soundlessly before them, bow in hand and arrow notched.

He Panicked...and...Attacked

Chapter Notes

So, the confrontation totally went in a different direction. I don't know why I bother outlining if I'm not going to follow it. :|

To clarify, Loki and Clint both had some levels of agency while under the Mind Stone's control. There is evidence of critical thinking - Loki sabotaging the invasion and Clint strategizing how to break into the vault - just enough to be more than mindless puppets and be aware of the mental trauma associated with acting against your own will. Clint's perspective will be covered in the multi-pov section after we wrap up Thor: Dark World and Loki's perspective will be explored in the next chapter with some FrostIron feels (hopefully...according to my outline that I can't seem to follow).

Thanks to [Arboreal](#) for listening to me fret about how to handle the confrontation.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

The first thing that Tony noticed was how seamlessly he and Loki moved together to face down an enemy, like a dance they hadn't choreographed yet knew every step to, swaying into each other's personal space without hesitation. Though he was right-handed, Tony had his left gauntlet raised, repulsor humming on standby, because Loki, with a pair of daggers that definitely wasn't there a moment ago, had slid into a defensive stance on his right.

Which was the second thing that grabbed Tony's attention. Questions rushed through his mind as he glanced between the way Loki's fingers curled almost gently around the handles and the lines of data streaming through the upper right corner of the head-up display.

Where had the daggers come from? The fit of Loki's armor didn't leave much room to the imagination let alone sharp knives, so Tony's guess was that they were summoned, but how? Was it teleportation of a physical item or a replica crafted by magic? If it was the former, did it mean that Loki was capable of spatial manipulation? If it was the latter, could something that came from nothing influence its surroundings and inflict damage?

Tony wondered what it said about his priorities that an intruder, *an assassin*, in his hotel room ranked third.

...well, fourth, since he did make a mental note to tease JARVIS about his over-protectiveness.

Actually, fifth because he had also wondered about the status of dinner.

Or maybe his priorities weren't skewed, they were just adjusted correctly based on the situation. After all, this wasn't really an invasion.

It was an inconvenience, an interruption, and an irritation.

Loki had apparently reached the same conclusion, because he waved away the daggers in a flash of emerald.

Tony popped open the face plate. "Stand down, before-"

Thor charged into the room with Mjolnir in hand, denting the door frame in the process.

"-that happens." Tony eyed the specks of paint and splinters of wood littering the carpet with a resigned sort of acceptance.

"Eye of Hawk, what is the meaning of this?" Thor boomed.

Clint's eyes narrowed and his lips twisted into a snarl. "That's what I was going to ask you." He drew the bow, an empty threat. "What's *he* doing back on Earth instead of rotting away in a space cell?"

"Space cell?" Loki arched an unimpressed eyebrow. "I have not heard my quarters described as such but I suppose it is apt, seeing how I was confined to them as part of my sentence and they are quite spacious."

"You were locked in your room?" Clint growled and aimed at Loki with a steadiness that belied the fury thrumming through his veins and voice. "That's your punishment for terrorizing-"

Tony knew he shouldn't antagonize Clint, shouldn't escalate the situation, but the irony was too delicious to ignore. Even after nearly two years and hundreds of changes, big and small, to ensure he never ended up in the Civil War situation again, Tony still remembered the distressed look on Vision's face when the android recounted how Clint had *rescued* Wanda from the horrors of house arrest and persuaded her to throw Vision through several floors of concrete with such *inspiring* words.

"Well, you know, if you want to make amends, you get off your ass." He shrugged, movement calculatedly casual and demonstrably dismissive. "Loki Doki here is doing just that, getting off his very fine ass to make some amends."

It wasn't as though there was a relationship to salvage. Clint had barely managed to hide his hostility toward Tony after Thor and Loki's return to Asgard, full of menacing looks and dark scowls reminiscent of the hateful animosity of another time aboard a floating prison. The same rage that was twisting Clint's features into something monstrous and unrecognizable right now.

Briefly, Tony wondered if Clint's anger had always been there and he had been too blindly eager in building a friendship to notice. Or perhaps there had always been something to punch for an outlet.

"What kind of bullshit is that, Stark? And you really would sleep with *anything* that moves, wouldn't you?" Clint scoffed, his bow was still raised and the arrow still leveled at Loki's impassive face. "Even a *monster*."

Loki didn't move a muscle but Tony got the distinct impression that he flinched.

"Enough!" A crackle of electricity accompanied Thor's words. "Lower your weapon before I strike it from your hands."

Green eyes scanned the standard-issued SHIELD bow and arrow. "Let him keep his toys, Thor." Loki drawled while his posture and expression was opposite of the relaxed tone. "They help an otherwise unimpressive man feel some semblance of control."

"You're not sorry at all, are you? You bastard." Clint fumed. "For what you did to me-"

Loki's gaze sharpened into something Tony was painfully familiar with.

JARVIS referred to it as Tony's self-destruct mode and came up with a protocol to bypass Tony's attempts at interfering with the A.I.'s primary directive. Rhodey knew it as the Wrong Move, having witnessed it many times, though on a lesser scale, from their M.I.T. days. Pepper used to say he was going nuclear until he literally carried a missile into space, now she just shakes her head and sighs. Happy once mumbled *Code Cheeseburger* before rolling up the divider to tune out Tony's attempts to start a fight and ignore his demands to be taken somewhere, anywhere but inside his own head.

It was the breaking point of bottled up emotions, where facade shattered and the floodgates opened.

It was the elusive threshold that had been crossed and every good thing he had allowed himself to feel and believe he deserved became ammunitions to arm his self-hatred.

It was the moment when all the repressed resentment, at what he had and hadn't done, rushed through the carefully concealed cracks and broke them open until he was a jagged bleeding mess that wanted to drag others down with him while simultaneously pushing them away.

Fear of being alone battling the need for space in a war with no winners.

Hurting others in an effort to both minimize and maximize the pain he felt himself.

A punishment he prompted from another's hand because he hadn't known how to quiet the constant screams of his guilt without the shouts of disappointment from those he loved.

This was going to get ugly. Quickly and horribly.

"Correct. I feel no remorse for what I did to you." Loki said softly and with a serrated edge. "Because *I have done nothing to you*."

"You messed with my head! You-"

Thor growled. "You know very well what transpired on Midgard was not of Loki's doing."

"-made me kill! You *unmade* me!" It wasn't clear if Clint meant to shoot or his fingers just slipped but the end result was the same.

The strum of the bowstring echoed in the air as the arrow soared toward Loki, which he caught effortlessly as he had done during the invasion. In a blur of green, he stole into Clint's space and pressed the arrowhead against the archer's throat. "I, too, was unmade. You are not unique in your anger nor are you special in your suffering. You make these claims against me, of me enslaving your will and corrupting your thoughts yet you forget the autonomy I allowed you, the same cruel kindness that I had been gifted by Thanos. You were not a helpless puppet, pulled this way and that by invisible strings. You were an actor, directed by my cues but improvising your own lines and moves."

Clint paled.

Thor frowned.

"Sir, Agent Barton's heartrate has increased." JARVIS supplied helpfully through the suit's speakers. "He also presents other physical symptoms indicative of a panic attack."

The rough sounds of Clint's stuttered breathing echoed in the spacious room, his pupils completely dilated that only a thin rim of blue remained, like his body was violently protesting the very notion of having *blue* eyes ever again despite it being his natural eye color.

A flutter of awareness skimmed past him and Tony found himself considering Clint's aggression in a new light. Once he did, he cursed himself for not realizing it sooner.

Seeing Loki had triggered Clint's fight-or-flight response.

It explained the frankly idiotic choice of dropping in uninvited and ruining any chance of future cooperation. Tony had been explicitly clear about boundaries during his conversation with Fury, spelling out exactly what that meant to him versus the more ambiguous and flexible definition employed by spies. Of course, he did leave several loopholes for Fury to exploit, partly to see what the Director would do when given the chance to *be* honorable instead of *acting* and partly to keep them guessing. One minute Tony was countering every move and the next he was overlooking an obvious opening. He had specifically demanded no technological interferences with the very real threat that JARVIS would engage in defensive actions by means of extremely prejudice offense but he hadn't said anything about physical surveillance.

Hence Clint hiding in the vents and gathering intelligence about their group dynamic before introducing himself as the leader of the SHIELD team tomorrow.

Fury had undoubtedly sent Clint because Steve's poorly-disguised - though Tony wasn't sure if Steve was even trying to hide it - disapproval and Natasha's failures disqualified them as suitable candidates. Clint was the only one of the Avengers who had no history with Tony other than a shared battle and two group conversations. Perhaps Fury had even considered Clint's history with Loki and hoped to take advantage of any misplaced guilt from Thor.

They hadn't expected Loki to be here.

Now there was a man, *a husband and a father*, nearing a mental breakdown and one breath away from a hole in his windpipe.

Now there was a god, *a friend and maybe more*, presenting himself in the worst light possible and one move away another name in his ledger.

Tony stepped out of the armor.

Loki continued in the same dulcet and dangerous tone. "Oh, you had more control than you let on, just as I did. Our minds were not our own yet we were still capable of thought. Only I used it to foil an invasion and you ignored it thinking it would absolve you-"

"Loki." Tony reached for Loki's hand, the one clenched tightly into a fist at his side. Green eyes widened in surprise then tapered in confusion.

Silence settled over them and instead of an absence of sound, it was the expectation of it.

Tony desperately wished he had a second step for this last-minute plan. "Um."

Darcy's impeccable timing came to the rescue as her voice rang from the other room. "Hey guys, it got really quiet and I don't know if it's because it's all good or like, really bad? Also, Bruce is getting *hangry*."

"We should go eat." Tony mumbled, shivering a bit as his suddenly sweaty palm grazed over Loki's freezing fingers. Goosebumps lined his arms and he wasn't sure if they were all from the cold.

"Aye." Thor agreed, sending Tony a meaningful look before turning to exit the spacious bathroom. "I will ready a plate for you, Loki."

Loki blinked as if coming back to himself.

Tony understood that sensation well, returning to a tenuous equilibrium after upsetting it with alternating emotional highs and lows. At least he had been able to, hopefully, stop it from cycling and spiraling out of control. "We should go eat." He repeated, a bit louder and clearer.

With a slight nod, Loki pressed the arrow into Clint's lax grip and stepped back.

Clint accepted it without a word and slid it back into his quiver in a purely reflexive move, operating on auto-pilot.

Keeping their hands linked, to ground both himself and Loki, Tony gently pulled Loki away. "JARVIS, make sure Clint leaves the same way he came then do a perimeter sweep."

"Yes, Sir."

*

The food was still steaming when Tony led Loki to the ornate desk in the *professional corner* as dubbed in the suite description, where Thor had placed a plate piled high with what seemed to be some of everything they had ordered. The bright yellow of the cheese on the burger clashed unappetizingly against the pink of the salmon, both sitting atop a bed of salad and drizzled with some kind of vinaigrette dressing. Through the spinach, Tony caught a glimpse of what was most likely a brownie.

Loki eyed the small mountain of food warily but picked up a fork anyway, fingers curling around the metal with the same delicate balance he had for his daggers.

JARVIS took to the skies from the balcony.

"What did Clint want?" Jane draped a cloth napkin across her lap, settling into her spot next to Thor on the loveseat.

"JARVIS texted us." Bruce offered, reading the question in Tony's expression. "He said you have it under control." He finished the cookie and walked over to the cart for another before resuming his pacing.

Selvig grunted his agreement through a mouthful of sandwich, crumbs catching in his wrinkled shirt from his reclined position in the armchair.

Darcy was sitting cross-legged by the window, a plate of fries and jars of condiments before her, measuring them by careful spoonful. "Thor doesn't have a phone." She mouthed with a roll of her eyes.

"Huh, alright." Tony said after a slight pause, completely thrown by the surge of happiness fluttering in his stomach after the tense encounter in the other room had it twisted in knots. It wasn't the first time his friends demonstrated how much they valued and trusted JARVIS' input but it still caught him off-guard each time.

Everyone was spread out across the suite instead of crowding around the coffee table, thereby not drawing attention to the fact that Loki needed some space after the confrontation and not giving the impression that Loki was isolated. Tony doubted it was a conscious choice or organized plan, which made the considerate gesture all the more meaningful.

Somehow, Tony had ended up with a group of people who were genuinely kind. Yet another thing that dumbfounded him on a daily basis.

"So, what did he want?" Jane asked again, stirring some crushed-up crackers into her bowl of soup.

"What all spies want, our secret secrets." Tony replied, shaking his head to clear it. "JARVIS is escorting him back to whatever SHIELD hole he crawled out of."

"Well, he's an awful spy." Darcy snorted. "Pretty sure falling through the ceiling is not the way-"

"Mission Impossible." Tony interrupted with a triumphant huff, snagging a corner of the waffle from Loki's plate as his rightful reward.

Loki nudged his plate toward Tony, thereby indicating his tacit agreement for future food-sharing.

Darcy arched an eyebrow. "He was *suspended* from the ceiling."

Tony chewed thoughtfully. "Good point." When he turned his attention back to their plate, he was horrified by the sight of Loki bastardizing his favorite food by eating the cheeseburger in layers; first the top bun, then the tomato, and now he was scraping the melted cheese off of the patty. Tony retaliated by stealing a piece of bacon.

The mood seemed lighter for a second, like coming up for a breath of air, then it darkened once more.

"The Eye of Hawk also sought vengeance." Thor grimaced. "To collect a debt from one who owes him none."

"Ugh, what the hell?" Darcy dipped a fry with more force than necessary and whined when it bent in half and her fingers landed in the ketchup and mayonnaise concoction she had created. "I thought he knew that Loki was hit with the mind whammy thingy too."

"Aye." Thor growled, though the intimidation effect was lessened significantly by the strings of cheese in his beard. "Yet he fired his weapon all the same."

"I hardly think a few sticks and a string count as a weapon." Loki spoke up, spearing a cherry tomato with his fork and offering it to Tony.

"He shot you?" Bruce stilled, a half-eaten cookie hovered an inch from his mouth.

Loki shrugged. "He missed, now as I was saying-"

"I think we should cut him some slack." Tony popped the tomato in his mouth.

Darcy stared disbelievingly at him. "Are you seriously defending the asshole who broke into your hotel room and shot at your-" She wiggled her fingers at Loki. "-*you know?*"

Tony ran a hand over his face, both to scrub away some of the fatigue and to cover the warmth spreading across his cheeks at Darcy's reminder of this undefined and unnamed *thing* between him and Loki. "I'm pretty sure he had a panic attack when he saw Loki and well, he panicked...and...attacked." He finished lamely.

Everyone looked at him with such incredulity that it bordered on insulting.

Loki cleared his throat. "Well, now that is settled. I should like to point our attention to more pressing matters, such as the alignment of all Nine Realms and a Dark Elf leader who would like to return our worlds to the darkness whence it came."

Tony's eyes narrowed on Loki's chiseled profile. They were nowhere *settled* on what happened between Loki and Clint and whatever darkness that lurked beneath those bright green eyes but, for now, with the destruction of the known universe in two days, he could wait.

After all, he had already waited eighteen months.

I Believe This Belongs to You

Chapter Notes

Here it is, chapter 30! Remember that time when I totally thought I would have this fic wrapped by in 20 chapters...? XD

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

The planning session went unexpectedly quickly, with everyone already on the same page about the Convergence and only had the threat Malekith posed to address. Details and directions were worked out between bites of food and clatter of empty dishes piling up.

Jane and Selvig would be running lead on stabilizing the focal point to prevent the Earth from collapsing under the weight and speed of all Nine Realms passing through. The next step was to fine-tune the gravimetric spikes to create and maintain wormholes in addition to detecting them, thereby making them teleportation devices and an advantage in battle.

For anyone else, it would be an impossible task given the enormity and time constraint but Bruce was confident that they would succeed. JARVIS seconded that opinion and offered any and all assistance needed, ranging from testing to determine effective range and response time to fabricating additional spikes.

Thor and Loki would be focusing on Malekith and his army, respectively. Mjolnir crackled in agreement when Thor declared he would avenge the fallen Asgardians and the All-Father. Loki nodded and said nothing, his stare faraway and brows drawn, lost in what Tony assumed to be memories of Odin - the good and the bad blurred by a lie.

On the last night they spent together, Loki had said he was *born Jotun and raised Aesir* and that it was *a secret not meant to be known*. There had been a note of surprise and the beginning of regret in Loki's voice, like he wasn't used to talking that way. Stating facts instead of putting on a show. Open and vulnerable. Hoping for reciprocation but expecting disappointment.

Tony understood that feeling well. Being the Stark prodigy and sole heir meant he was trained to spot fake sympathy and mercenary interests sometimes before people opened their mouths; the way their faces would twist into caricatures of trustworthiness, as if they cared about Tony losing his parents and weren't digging for a piece of gossip to sell to the highest bidder. He learned to give them what they wanted - snappy one-liners good for headlines and soundbites - because it was less depressing to devalue his pain before they could.

Both of them had been their own version of broken after the invasion, Loki released from the Mind Stone's chains and Tony freed from a frozen suit, with their greatest truths peeking

through the split seams and cracked casing of their armors. Those gaps had been repaired but the ability to see into the depth of each other remained, some inexplicable logic dictating what was seen could not be unseen.

Howard, for all his faults, was thankfully and painfully honest about his opinions of Tony. Unmet expectations and the associated disappointment told through cutting words and crinkling stares. Tony never thought he would be grateful for the callous candor of his father but here he was now, thinking how glad he was that Howard was a blunt bastard and trying to catch Loki's averted eyes.

Tony's gaze traced over Loki's form, shoulders pulled back and hands clasped loosely behind his back. A casual pose held with such unnatural rigidity. A silhouette of stillness in a room full of activity. A man on the verge of fight or flight.

Which seemed to be the theme for tonight.

Given that Loki had already gone down the first path with Clint's impromptu visit, Tony was pretty sure that Loki would disappear in a puff of smoke - possibly literally given how Loki had appeared - as soon as the conversation wrapped. The thought sent a shiver of panic up his spine and his feet carried him over to where Loki was standing before he even realized he was moving.

"I'll handle the situation on the ground, my darling Honey Bunny is coming with the Legionnaires and Her Pink Panther Highness is sending a team of Mark 81s our way." Tony's arm went around Loki's back as his hand clasped Loki's upper arm in a reassuring squeeze. The leather was sleek and supple underneath his palm but Loki tensed even more.

"And SHIELD?" Bruce frowned. "Think they'll follow through on their part after what happened tonight?"

Darcy snorted. "Better yet, do we even want them there?"

"Not really but we'll need all hands on deck when the super space tunnel appears." Tony's impeccable memory recalled screaming civilians and demolished buildings as his fingers fiddled with the metal edging on Loki's armor. "Plus, they'll just *drop in* anyway." At least this time, hopefully, SHIELD would show up when they were most needed.

"What a headache." Jane muttered and buried her face in Thor's chest, her voice was a muffled whine. "Can't someone else deal with them?" She said with a half-hearted whine.

"Actually...yes." Tony's eyes turned calculative, absently noting the way Loki relaxed under his touch and leaning in closer to encourage it. "I think it's time for SHIELD to meet the Pepper Dragon."

It was a nickname that stuck after Darcy saw Pepper's ruthless handling of a reporter who, in one question, both belittled Pepper's intelligence and insulted Tony's character. Of the many similarities Pepper and Darcy shared, their fierce protectiveness of their people was the only one that did not make Tony break out in a cold sweat.

A collective hiss sounded throughout the room, full of gleeful sympathy for those on the receiving end of Pepper's wrath. In this case, one Nicholas Fury, who would soon learn that hell had nothing on the fire from one Virginia Potts.

Natasha's assessment of Tony during the palladium poisoning had not even mentioned Pepper by name, referring to her as the *secretary* and dismissing her much in the same way the tabloids had. Except Natasha was supposed to be an expert profiler and not an opportunistic gossip trying to sell a story; instead of a dragon, she saw a damsel-in-distress and they would burn for that oversight.

Green eyes slanted downward as a sly brow arched up with interest. "A dragon?" Loki's voice was a startlingly close rumble in Tony's ear.

Tony suddenly became very aware of how the lines of cool metal, hard muscles, and smooth leather were pressed intimately against his side. His pulse jumped at their proximity, when had that happened? The conditioned response to step away was nullified by the instinct to move closer, causing his body to freeze in a moment of conflicting and cancelling desires.

"I'll finally get to see her in action?" Darcy asked with a concerning amount of unholy delight.

Tony snapped to autopilot and defaulted to his standard dorky double finger-guns pose, dropping his hand from Loki's arm in the process though his feet remained rooted to the spot. He could feel the huff of Loki's quiet laughter; the sound, quiet and warm, mixed with the heat of his body and the smell of leather.

"Friend Tony." Thor interrupted with a confused furrow between his brows. "I find myself at a loss with these talks of a honey bunny, a pink panther, and a pepper dragon. Have you somehow acquired a menagerie?"

"Sir has not owned a zoo since his safari-themed thirty-first birthday." JARVIS returned in a gust of the cold night air, just in time to hear Thor's inquiry and answer it with his usual deadpan snark.

"Hey!"

*

With New York only five hours behind London, Tony managed to get a hold of Pepper when she was at the office, which, in turn, meant she was able to call Fury before the end of business hours.

Not that spies kept a nine-to-five schedule or Fury could keep JARVIS out of his phones but Pepper preferred some routines in her life.

Given that Pepper hadn't ended her call with Tony when she asked JARVIS to connect her to Fury, Tony felt entirely justified staying on the line. He felt slightly less justified with his decision to broadcast the call through the Iron Man armor's speakers but quality entertainment was hard to come by these days.

They sat in a circle around JARVIS, still piloting the suit, like children at story time.

Bruce, after some rummaging through his luggage, produced a family-sized bag of Skittles that they shared while listening to Fury pay dearly for his mistake of underestimating Pepper.

"Miss Potts, I was wondering when you'd call to clean up Stark's mess." Fury chuckled, a falsely friendly sound. "Though I thought being a maid is a bit below your paygrade nowadays."

"It is." Pepper replied sweetly. "That's why I called you."

The click of Fury's jaw clenching was almost drowned out by the loud whoop Darcy let out. "I-"

"I've always appreciated your straightforward manner so don't insult me or yourself by beating around the bush. Barton had no business in Tony's room or in the field given the questionable state of his mental health."

Selvig shifted uneasily.

"Agent Barton passed the psych eval." Fury countered, defensive and unaware that Pepper had laid a trap. "SHIELD conducts routine debriefing-"

Bruce snorted at that claim and Tony shook his head at how ridiculously naive Fury just sounded. Routine meant it was predictable and easily cheated for the desired outcome.

Pepper's voice went up a disbelieving octave. "You cannot possibly be suggesting that Barton was in full control of his faculties at the time of the assault, that's-"

Tony wondered if Fury's eye was twitching from the constant interruption. Pepper preferred cordiality but was capable of antagonism when it was needed to rile her opponents up, to get them off-guard and off-beat, and to have them mimic her speech patterns.

"Barton knew exactly what he was doing." Fury cut Pepper off and dug his own grave.

"So he knew what he was doing when he chose open confrontation against Loki instead of calling for backup? How about holding his position to learn more or retreat to pass the news along? SHIELD's standard operating procedures is to *openly confront* a known threat and endanger-"

"We know Loki isn't a threat." Fury snapped.

Loki scoffed as Thor clapped him on the back proudly.

"Finally something we agree on." Pepper's smirk was an audible one. "Now let's talk-"

"Wait just one-"

"-about what kind of operation you're running-"

"-goddamn minute here!"

Pepper's tone was pure saccharine accommodation and polite condescension. "Take your time, Director."

A tense silence stretched across the room and the phone calls.

Fury had lost. Either he admitted that SHIELD agents regularly took hostile actions with no just cause or he would have to concede that Clint was compromised during the confrontation. Neither was appealing but the former damaged the organization while the latter would only cost him one individual.

As Tony watched Loki sort the candies by color and combination, long pale fingers contrasting starkly with the rainbow of colors, he considered the changed landscape between him and SHIELD.

What had been an open and paved road in a previous timeline was now lined with checkpoints and roadblocks.

While Tony had been tempted to cut all ties with SHIELD, he remained as a consultant for the same reason Natasha had supported the Accords - if he had one hand on the wheel, he could still steer. Unlike Natasha, however, he was not the type to jump ship when the tides changed nor would he abandon the passengers when the waters rose.

SHIELD was going to go down like the Titanic but HYDRA wasn't the iceberg. No, the reason for SHIELD's fall was Captain America and the Black Widow's reckless decision to release all the classified information to the public. How many loyal SHIELD agents drowned in the deluge of data? How many scheming HYDRA operatives escaped on the limited lifeboats? How many seconds did Steve and Natasha spare to consider a second option before they decided it would be all-or-nothing and to sink everyone aboard?

Even back then, Steve hadn't been willing to compromise.

In the previous timeline, only a third of the SHIELD personnel survived the infamous fall. Once an undercover agent's cover was blown, the chances of survival depended entirely on the speed of the extraction. Which never came.

Of those twelve thousand, most were support staff who worked tirelessly in the background and never seen by figureheads who always stood to the front. The people who fetched coffees, made copies, and answered phones. The people who maintained vehicles, reviewed footage, and tended wounds. The people who deserved more than having their livelihood ripped out of their hands because someone else thought theirs were the safest.

An exasperated sigh broke the silence. "Barton is benched." Fury growled.

"For?" Pepper prompted.

"Indefinitely, pending the results of his psych eval-"

Pepper cleared her throat delicately and meaningfully.

"-after the mandatory counseling sessions."

"Excellent. A piece of advice, as one *leader* to another." People often forgot that Pepper was not only the CEO of a multinational industrial company, but she also *thrived* in that role. It wasn't handed to her because of her looks or her dating history, as much as the tabloids and their competitors liked to delude themselves. It was a lesson SHIELD and Fury would not soon forget. "Contrary to the popular saying *It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission*, I've always found that it is better to ask for permission because forgiveness isn't always granted no matter how much you beg."

"Noted." The single word was forced through clenched teeth then Fury abruptly ended the call.

Pepper stayed on for a few minutes longer to accept the praises she was due from everyone before saying her goodbyes. "Will that be all, Mr. Stark?"

"That will be all, Ms. Potts."

*

The group scattered soon after.

Thor picked Jane up in a bridal carry as soon as her mouth opened in a yawn and declared his noble intention to see to his lady's comfort and rest.

Darcy whistled loudly and followed them out of Tony's suite, snickering that someone had to keep them from breaking any public decency laws.

Bruce was collecting the dishes and setting them on the room service cart with periodic shakes of his head, alternately baffled by the fact that they had managed to consume the entire order and disgusted by some of the food combinations.

Tony watched Loki and Selvig, standing as far apart as possible while sequestered in the corner. Loki's face was drawn into a look that didn't seem particularly open to disagreement or discussion but Selvig kept talking anyway. JARVIS could easily relay their conversation and while it would soothe his growing concern and increasing curiosity, it wouldn't be right.

And, well, Tony wanted to do right by his friends.

By Loki.

Who was Tony's friend but also maybe more. Who Tony wasn't courting but also wasn't *not* courting. Who had thrown a sharp glance at Tony like he would a dagger but with a different kind of danger.

The kind that made him stumble over his words like a fool.

The kind that made his blood hum with adventure.

The kind that made him feel safe.

Loki nodded tersely and that seemed to be the end for their conversation. Selvig headed for the door and held it open as Bruce pushed the room service cart through to leave it in the hallway. They left in a chorus of *sleep well* and *good night* but Tony felt wide awake, every single nerve ending in his body buzzing with anticipation as Loki approached him with measured steps.

Tony tracked the shift in leather and muscles and felt his throat thicken with so many words that he was unsure what to say.

Luckily, Loki did.

"I believe this belongs to you."

In a shimmer of green, a gauntlet of red and gold appeared.

Exclusive Liaisons

Chapter Notes

The slow burn is officially over! *throws confetti* Here be a chapter of Tony angst followed by FrostIron fluffiness! Enjoy! :)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Tik Tok by Ke\$ha.

Out of the Woods by Taylor Swift.

I don't like being handed things.

The default response was caught on his tongue and lingering there like a bad taste or a morning breath. Tony wished he could rinse it out with a bit of mouthwash or a lot of coffee. Contrary to Darcy's teasing and the annoyingly catchy song she had belted out at random times for a month with exaggerated yodeling vocals, Tony had never brushed his teeth with a bottle of whiskey.

To be perfectly honest, Tony had no idea when this particular quirk of his developed.

Was it a product of the relentless teasing he had endured as the Stark heir, supposedly born with a *platinum* spoon in his mouth and handed everything in life?

Was it a result of too many wild parties where he drank whatever was thrust at him and tried to fill in the blank hours by reviewing the next day's headlines?

Was it a sign of his aversion to responsibility and subpoenas?

Was it a defense mechanism perfected by betrayed trust and broken faith to keep people at arm's length?

Was it a powerplay to always say no first regardless of what was offered?

The real reason was probably somewhere between all of the above but the better question was: Did it matter in the grand scheme of things?

It was one of the takeaways of his therapy sessions with MONDAY and a freeing one. After all, everyone had their preferences and as long as Tony's were not hurting himself or others, there was no harm to carrying on as it was. Learning that it was okay to leave certain stones unturned had made it easier to lift the boulders that were weighing heavily on his mind and heart.

Such as his own self-destructing tendencies to lash out at and push away from the few people who actually cared on a misguided crusade to demonstrate how wrong they had been to stick by his side.

Tony had been teetering on the blade's edge of proving the world wrong and proving himself right, willfully ignoring the irony that it was the same thing - the old debate of whether or not he was a disappointment. Some days, he wanted to do nothing more than to show the world, *Howard*, that they were wrong to dismiss and discount him, craving the satisfaction of making them eat their words with an obsessive quality. Other days, he only wanted to give up and give in to the internalized and irrefutable fact that he was simply *not good enough*, needing the struggle for validation to finally be over by admitting defeat.

Then he met Rhodey and Happy and Pepper, people who had good hearts and kind eyes, who believed in him, who made him *want* to prove them right and himself wrong...

Who didn't have a clue of the kind of *messed-up* he was because they grew up *normal*. Normalcy was a privilege that Tony didn't have and couldn't begin to understand but he reached for it all the same, pulling it over himself like a security blanket that was too small and left him shivering.

Pepper's mom liked to show off baby photos. Rhodey's parents always sent snickerdoodle cookies topped with red and green sprinkles at Christmas. Happy had an annual fishing trip with his dad.

Tony offered anecdotes about Jarvis and felt at once like he finally belonged and an imposter. He went through the motions with the rare stubborn determination to see this charade through, because being around these amazing people both soothed and stung but to be without them was a void he knew he wouldn't survive. So he kept up the pretense of being *okay*, dashing about like a reckless playboy and performing the role of an arrogant genius, all the while shoving down the insecurities with mask after mask.

Even Iron Man had been a mask.

A superhero persona for the not-a-hero man with a childhood filled with high expectations and low self-esteem. A noble cause and respectable distraction for the coward who prefer to invest in outside problems so he wouldn't have to deal with his own. An acceptable reason, *excuse*, to end a relationship that was always doomed to fail because he and Pepper had never wanted the same thing even when they wanted each other.

Tony, in his usual way of dealing with unpleasant but most likely true things about himself, shoved it into a titanium reinforced box, covered it with caution tape, and buried it deep. Where it would remain until the next time his world shook and the tectonic plates shifted and pushed up things that should never surface.

Siberia was earthshattering in the worst of ways and waking up in New York, in a past he had no interest in repeating, had him reeling from the aftershocks. The last eighteen months had him regaining his footing and finding his balance, in the world, among his friends, and with himself.

There were a few detours and more than a few explosions along the way but Tony eventually grew more comfortable exploring the dark forest of his mind and discerning which monsters to battle and which ones turned out to be just trees.

Damn Jane for linking him to Taylor Swift and introducing him to her music.

MONDAY had been instrumental. She listened and responded but did not ask. The absence of questions was a welcomed comfort because he was so very tired of always having the answers. Even if he had them. Especially if he had them. Because knowledge was no guarantee of success.

As Loki had warned him eighteen months ago. In a throaty murmur that warmed Tony better than the temperature-controlled penthouse, greasy pizza, and cheap drinks. A lingering heat that remained all this time and sparking bright as Tony took the careful presentation of the Iron Man gauntlet hovering above Loki's open palm.

The metal gleamed ruby and gold in a way it hadn't since it came off of the fabrication queue. Each finger had been straightened from their previously closed position to contain the Aether, joints oiled and electrostatic lens cleaned. Someone had been taking good care of it, meticulously so.

Better than Tony had ever treated his armor.

And if Loki showed such consideration for something that was merely an extension of Tony...

Surprised brown eyes snapped up and met dazzling green ones that were slowly dimming from Tony's hesitation.

Acting on a visceral need to keep that brightness in Loki's eyes, Tony reached for the gauntlet with a jerky motion that overshot its target, clasp his fingers around Loki's wrist with the metal wedged uncomfortably under his forearm.

"Thank y-" Tony said in a hoarse and overwhelmed voice that made him grimace and cut himself off. He cleared his throat and tried again, trying and ultimately failing to condense all that he was feeling, all that Loki had done for him, into two words that seemed so inadequate. "Thank you."

Loki's stare was bold but his smile was shy. "The pleasure's all mine."

*

It seemed natural for them to fall back into the same pattern as their first conversation, jumping from topic to topic and following a thread only they knew.

A secret code spoken in plain words.

A language comprised of trailing answers and sudden pauses.

A puzzle without all the pieces and that was half the fun.

*

"You understand him."

"Yeah, I guess I do." There was no antecedent for the *him* Loki spoke of but Tony instantly knew anyway. "I get where's he's coming from, I mean, it wasn't *you* but it was *your* hand holding that scepter." The Winter Soldier's fist pummeling Howard's face and choking his mother flickered across his mind, a fleeting and grainy picture on a screen too small to contain such a tragedy.

Loki tensed, disrupting the comfortable way their bodies had slotted together from their position on the carpet, facing the windows and leaning against the narrow edge of the coffee table that they could have easily rearranged for more space but didn't.

"I get why he wanted to put an arrow in your face. I shot off Barnes' arm." Tony's shoulders lifted in a tired but accepting shrug, the motion must have communicated something to Loki as the mage's posture relaxed to fit around Tony's once more. "So, you know."

Thanos and the threat he posed were more elusive than concrete, like the boogeyman stories Thor had once believed. It was far easier to point the finger of blame when there was a target. The Maximoffs hated him for nearly a decade because Tony was the CEO of Stark Industries and Clint blamed Loki for the invasion because Loki was enemy the Avengers fought. Hawkeye needed a target he could see.

It made sense even if it wasn't right.

"Another arrow." Loki corrected then clarified at Tony's confused hum. "He had shot me in the face once before." A pause. "It exploded."

"Sorry about that." Tony felt his face spasm, muscles pulling between a wince and a grin. It must have settled on a grin because Loki was looking at him with an answering smirk.

"I had wondered if that was your design. You have a fondness for the ostentatious."

"Takes one to know one, Reindeer Games."

Loki's helmet materialized in a shimmer of green, sitting primly above his head as he nodded in agreement.

*

"You were worried about me." Tony stated with no small amount of smugness. "So worried that you couldn't wait, like, ten minutes."

Loki arched an amused brow but his tone was all seriousness. "I was."

Tony blinked, mental gears switching and grinding at the simple admission. "I'm okay, really. Never better."

"I was led to believe you did not wish to part from your charmed light." Loki sent a pointed look at the spot where the arc reactor used to be.

The last time they had spoken, Tony had mentioned his reservations toward removing the arc reactor and the risks associated.

"Wasn't my first choice."

The room suddenly got colder and Loki twitched, once, like he had consciously commanded his body to relax to avoid disrupting Tony.

Jotun. Frost giant.

Tony's mind helpfully supplied and he wondered if he could be concerned about the fact he wasn't actually concerned then dismissed it immediately because that was most definitely a downward spiral of *nope*. Instead, he closed his eyes and visualized the circuitry of his neural pathways; his hands heated as he tightened the grip he had on Loki's wrist. Where he hadn't let go. "But it all worked out."

In hindsight, it was actually quite fortunate that Killian had ripped out the arc reactor. During the Extremis mutation, Tony's internal temperature had reached and exceeded that of an overload and the shrapnel had evaporated instantly. If he had the arc reactor, the new element would have further complicated the situation and most likely culminated in a city-wide blast.

Incredulity brightened the green of Loki's stare, turning it from cold emerald to glittering jade. He tilted his head and squinted at Tony in a way so distinctly feline.

Curious, possessive, and absolutely captivated.

*

"I'm an asshole." Tony said without preamble, par for the course of their conversations. "Thought you should know."

Loki didn't seem surprised. Or bothered. "I am aware."

"That's it?" Tony frowned. There was a careless note in Loki's voice that made him veer into a defensiveness that bordered on combative but he couldn't quite bring himself to follow-through on that impulse. Even though he could feel the same old destructive behaviors rearing their heads, interested in a comeback.

The compulsion to push and goad to find people's breaking points. The urge to give into the worst parts of himself and multiply them by hundreds and thousands. The need to ruin the good things in life because he didn't deserve them and he would prove exactly that.

Despite the familiar pull of his old habits, Tony didn't give in.

MONDAY would be proud.

"Yes." Loki pinned him with a stare that, for a second, turned Tony's entire world to green; like laying on sun-warmed grass and staring up at sheltering trees and their rustling leaves. "I am aware and I do not mind."

"Why?"

"As you said, *takes one to know one.*"

Tony couldn't quite contain the bark of unexpected laughter, the sound tore out of him and rattled loose some of the lingering insecurities.

*

"I do not mourn Odin." Loki's fingers tapped a haphazard rhythm on his leg. "Yet I find myself lamenting his death."

I know. Tony wanted to say but he just laid his head against Loki's shoulder in a silent encouragement for Loki to speak what he couldn't while on Asgard and around those who did mourn the All-Father, because sometimes it wasn't about fixing the problem or commiserating over it. The first implied something was broken when nothing was and the second, however well-meaning, inevitably reeked of comparison.

A competition of *who had it worse* that had no winners.

So Tony drummed his fingers alongside Loki's, a steady tempo to ground Loki as the conflicted feelings flowed through faltering words paired with a bladed stare and trembling lips.

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"What did you mean?" Loki whispered. "Earlier."

Tony shifted to his side, facing Loki and close enough to share the same pocket of air. At some point, they had slid down and ended up lying on their backs with the plush carpet minimizing the potential discomforts.

"I wasn't trying to *woo* you." Tony wrinkled his nose both at the archaic term and to take the sting out of his words. "But I wasn't *not* trying either."

"Would you try?" Loki's gaze glittered with hope and want as it slid over Tony slowly.

Loki's breath stirred Tony's skin, a puff of warmth mixing with the general heat of Loki's body tempting him closer. Tony returned the stare, his whole body buzzing as it grew heavier and hazier. He licked his lips and found Loki tracking the movement. "No."

The softness in Loki's expression vanished in an instant. Though he hadn't moved from their position on the carpet, it was clear he was withdrawing. Green eyes lost their spark and cheekbones grew sharper from his pursed lips.

"I wouldn't try, I'd succeed." With that, Tony surged forward and pressed his mouth against Loki's in a muted apology for his horrible wording and awkward timing. His hands tugged at Loki's armor, closing the remaining inches between them.

For a moment, Loki did nothing.

Then he did everything at once.

Stiff shoulders eased and curved forward as one of Loki's hands cupped Tony's neck and the other snaked around to splay against Tony's lower back, bringing them impossibly closer. Thin lips parted under Tony's fuller ones with a hot and hungry bite, teeth clattering and tongues gliding.

Tony gasped for air as they adjusted the angle to deepen the kiss further and found himself missing the taste of Loki more than he needed oxygen. The pace of their kiss changed when Tony slanted his lips over Loki's once more; it was still hard and hot but without the edge of hurried desperation like it would be their only and last kiss.

It was the first.

Of many.

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"So, did I succeed or what?" Tony smirked as he nuzzled his beard in Loki's hair, feeling the longer strands getting caught in his shorter ones.

Loki lightly flicked him on the nose then brushed a kiss over the spot with a quiet affirmative to Tony's question.

Tony tilted his face upward and smiled into the curve of Loki's mouth. "Are you my boyfriend?" He asked some time later, lips tingling and mind melting, then immediately recoiled at his juvenile word choice. He was Iron Man and Loki was a god, after all. "Um, no. Companion? Significant other?" He skipped the more obvious choices such as *lover or beloved*, a sentiment too early for something so new. "Gentleman caller?" His voice broke at the last syllable, because Loki's teeth had found a particularly responsive spot on his neck and worried over it with small nibbles.

"I am no gentleman and neither are you." Loki then set to demonstrate how ungentlemanly he could be with a sharp pull of Tony's hair that angled his head in the other direction to administer the same grazing kiss.

"Fair point." Tony groaned, burying his own hands into the lush wave of black hair. Dimly, he made note of how Loki was taking care to not leave marks behind in a display of consideration that belied his previous statement. "But seriously, what do I call you when they ask?"

Loki sighed, a huff of resigned air against Tony's damp skin that sent shivers down his spine. "They?"

"The world. My friends. Your family." Tony arched a challenging brow. "SHIELD."

"I am-" Loki paused and his eyes narrowed contemplatively, mischievously. "A liaison of Asgard to Midgard."

"That sounds nice and respectable." Tony's eyes glittered with amusement, leaning in to give Loki a truly indecent kiss. "Rhodey would be impressed by-"

"Rhodey?"

"My Platypus, Sour Patch and Honey Bunny." Tony snickered, imagining the exasperated look on his friend's face. The mirth quickly faded when Loki stiffened and paled. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I do not share." Loki gritted out. "This Honey-"

Tony fought back the blossoming smile, that would definitely send the wrong message. "Rhodey is my best friend and that's it." He pressed a kiss against Loki's jaw line. "I don't like to share either, only child syndrome, it's a thing." Another kiss at the corner of Loki's mouth. "So let's be exclusive." He murmured the words against Loki's lips.

"Exclusive liaisons?" Loki whispered back, tongue darting out to wet his lips and brushing Tony's in the process.

"Perfect."

He Deserves to Know

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay in posting this chapter. I had a medical scare this week that thankfully turned out be nothing serious but it drained a lot of my time and energy. This chapter sets up some upcoming events and answers a few questions some of you have been asking. :)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Age of Ultron. Captain America: Civil War

Tony woke to JARVIS' voice announcing an incoming call from Fury. "Tell him to leave a message." He groaned with more annoyance than sluggishness, his mind already active and alert but his body refused to rouse on Fury's time table.

"Yes, Sir."

With that confirmation, Tony wiggled until he could stretch his legs out from where they were tangled with Loki's and burrowed deeper into the welcoming warmth of Loki's chest. "Breakfast?" He mumbled against the leather, leaving behind a trail of spit from when he wet his dry lips.

Loki hummed and Tony felt more than heard the sound. "Depends on what you're offering."

Tony's head snapped up at that. It promptly slammed into an unexpected chin and knocked the flirtatious grin off of Loki's face. Brown eyes met a wincing green glare and Tony offered a sheepish smile in apology before carefully straightening into a sitting position as Loki pushed himself onto his elbows. "What did Fury want?"

"To update you on the agent in charge now that Agent Barton is no longer on active duty." JARVIS reported.

Tony rubbed a hand over his jaw, feeling the stubble tickling his palm. "Please tell me it's not Steve or Natasha."

"No, Sir. Commander Hill will be joining us later this morning."

"Hill, huh?" Tony mused. "Could be worse."

Maria had joined Stark Industries after SHIELD's fall in the original time line. Though her loyalty remained firmly on Fury's side, they worked well together. She was professional and

competent, and under that stoic demeanor lay a wry sense of humor that he appreciated. Her summary of the Maximoff twins floated to the top of his thoughts and Tony shook his head at the memory with a chuckle.

He's fast and she's weird.

Without the Scepter, HYDRA would be unable to duplicate their experiments and the Maximoffs would likely remain grunt soldiers rather than enhanced weapons. Tony felt the beginning of guilt trying to worm its way in and squashed it down with a decisive push against the floor to propel himself to standing. He was done feeling responsible for the choices of others and beating himself up for the actions out of his control. Pietro and Wanda had joined HYDRA voluntarily, devoting their lives to revenge against a man they had only known by his surname and seen on television.

Before, Tony had blamed himself for Wanda's loss and added her family's names to his list of debts in blood. As his atonement, he had provided her with anything she asked for and everything she hadn't thought to ask. No questions asked and no limits imposed. In that sense, she was a *kid*, as Steve had been quick to classify her in every situation except on the battlefield.

Now, Tony could clearly see that instead of helping her, he had only enabled her recklessness and fueled her entitlement by cleaning up every one of her messes and saving her from having to face the consequences. No wonder she had thrown a tantrum at being told *no* and asked to *stay in her room*.

Vision had told him Wanda's parting words. *I can't control their fear, only my own*. Which was complete nonsense since her power was *literally* to induce and manipulate fear.

No Scarlet Witch meant no Ultron - neither the global peacekeeping initiative Tony and Bruce had created nor the genocidal technology singularity - and as an extension, *no Vision*. Tony let himself feel the pang at that loss but he had long made peace with his decision to send the Scepter off-world in order to keep JARVIS safe.

Vision had occupied a space between stranger and friend after the Battle of Sokovia. A familiar voice with an alien appearance. There had been nights where sleep eluded Tony and he sought comfort, however small and fleeting, from the android who did not require rest. All it took was a single question and Vision would be off reciting all the data available, a simulation of what once was that Tony could hide behind for a few moments with his eyes closed.

It did not take long for Vision to catch on and politely, with genuine pity lining his synthetic features, asked Tony to stop because it was not fair to either of them to be compared to or consoled by a ghost. Creating the Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing device had been the logical next step, a way to independently overcome traumatic experiences because Tony simply had no one else.

This time, he had more than he could have ever imagined and would gladly pay the same price of depriving the world of a near indestructible android capable of wielding Mjolnir again if asked.

Was it selfish? Yes, but Tony had never claimed to be selfless.

Steve's accusation of Tony *playing* a hero was laughable in that Tony had never auditioned for the role. Iron Man was born in a cave of blood and fire. Vanko and Killian held personal grudges specific to Tony. Ultron was a way to alleviate his fears of another alien invasion, a suit of armor around the world Tony and his loved ones inhabited. The Accords proposed a system where he would no longer need to act as his own judge, jury, and executioner for every life he couldn't save because the guilt was crushing and grinding him to dust.

Tony had thought the other Avengers carried the same weight, and that they, like him, wanted an independent panel to objectively review the data and come to an impartial ruling. Someone else to condemn or absolve them for their mistakes because if it were left to Tony, it would be condemnation every single time. He never considered that the others might be of the opposite mindset, believing collateral damage was acceptable and that the *safest hands were their own*.

"Based on her conversation with Director Fury, the sentiment is mutual." JARVIS supplied helpfully, unwittingly rescuing Tony from yet another trip down memory lane. "She was the only one to express approval of Agent Barton's leave of absence." Though the additional piece of information made Tony consider that perhaps it was a deliberate maneuver after all. The A.I. had long been able to detect changes in Tony's moods.

"Oh?" Loki glanced at the armor although JARVIS' voice was coming through Tony's phone, as if he were addressing a real person.

This display of consideration brought a smile to Tony's face.

"The *Avengers*-" There was a definite sneer in JARVIS' tone. "-were quite unhappy with the *unwarranted suspension* and *spoke passionately* about the need for Agent Barton's expertise in their mission."

Tony snorted and Loki echoed the sentiment.

"And what *arduous* task are the *honorable* Captain and *clever* Spider undertaking that they cannot handle by their *heroic* selves?" Loki asked, sarcasm as blatantly obvious as his distaste for the two Avengers.

Loki had never been impressed by Steve nor Natasha, overpowering the former easily in Germany and enduring the latter's laughable attempt at interrogation on the helicarrier, and considered them petty annoyances to tolerate in the bid to thwart Thanos' plans. Insignificant parts made great only when combined with others.

As far as Loki was concerned, Steve's only contribution was the decades of good will built up by others in Captain America's name. A valuable currency enabling the super soldier to rally others to his cause, while Steve certainly achieved that, it was at the expense of alienating the rest of the world. Natasha's pragmatism was supposed to balance the more idealistic views of the Avengers, to remind them that bending was preferable to breaking, but she folded too easily herself.

Tony remembered the scowl of exasperated disbelief as Loki lamented overestimating their abilities and had to stifle a chuckle when he noticed its reappearance on Loki's face now.

Loki merely shot Tony a dry look, somehow maintaining an air of regality from his sprawled position on the carpet.

"Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff are en route to Myanmar, where a HYDRA information hub is located." JARVIS paused, as if he was deliberating how to deliver a particularly unpleasant piece of news. "It is the primary storage for mission reports and footage."

Mission Report: December 16th, 1991.

"Is...is it...there?" Tony swallowed, throat suddenly scratchy from dryness.

The other Steve - or *Rogers*, as Tony had taken to calling him in his sessions with MONDAY to avoid confusion - had learned of Barnes' existence during the HYDRA Uprising that eventually toppled SHIELD and unleashed the flood of classified data. Tony remembered making a quip of how considerate HYDRA was to hold off on their assassination attempts until after the New Year when he told Loki of SHIELD's fate.

Everything was changing and Tony couldn't help but feel overwhelmed and underprepared.

It shouldn't be possible but JARVIS sounded pained when he answered in the affirmative.

Tony closed his eyes but it didn't stop the footage from playing in his mind. It was one thing to know the video of his parents' murder existed but another to know precisely *where* it was and *who* would be watching it.

"I can attempt to remove the file-" JARVIS offered.

"No, he deserves to know." Tony croaked. It was better that Steve learned of Barnes' existence now than during the HYDRA Uprising, better that Steve knew *what* HYDRA had turned his friend into through a video tape than first-hand experience, and better that Steve heard it from his *team* than from Tony.

Loki rose to his feet in a rustle of leather, pressing his side against Tony's and taking Tony's weight easily when Tony all but slumped against him.

For a minute or so, there was only silence and Tony used this brief window to adjust to the situation. Though just as he felt like he had a grip on it, Loki spoke up.

"Will he extend you the courtesy?"

It took Tony a second to process what Loki meant and once he did, a bitter taste flooded his mouth.

Sometimes my teammates don't tell me things.

Tony remembered the guilt he had felt when Rogers had said that, the shame that he had disappointed Captain America, and the resolve to be more honest with his team in the future. Only to learn later that it was an entirely one-sided arrangement where Steve demanded Tony's truths while keeping a secret that betrayed two generations of Starks.

I didn't know it was him.

"No." Tony laughed mirthlessly. "If he didn't tell me when we were supposedly a team, I doubt he will now." He shrugged, the movement bringing him closer against Loki somehow. "It doesn't matter."

Rogers' betrayal had hurt because there was the expectation of trust that was shattered, but Steve was practically a stranger, albeit one who had frowned rather aggressively at Tony.

Loki hummed softly, the sound vibrating through Tony and easing the tension.

*

The group didn't meet for breakfast that morning, which worked out in Tony's favor since he was still processing what he had learned this morning and his friends deserved more than him putting on a fake smile and pretending everything was okay. Plus, they would see through it immediately anyway.

After spending nearly two years around people who validated and supported him, Tony's once impeccably-kept public mask had been gathering dust on a metaphorical shelf in the back of his mind.

Jane, Bruce, and Selvig wanted to get started on fine-tuning the gravimetric spikes, opting to get something on their way to the lab at Stark Industries' London office. Thor went with them, wanting to see his Lady Jane at work, and Darcy tagged along to keep the number of fried electronics at a minimum.

"No need to thank me." Darcy sang over the speakers and was clearly referring to something more than saving Tony the trouble of replacing toasters, microwaves, and computers.

Tony just laughed and promised to keep them posted on his meeting with Maria. She wasn't exactly wrong anyway, he did want to spend more time with Loki.

*

To her credit, Maria only pursed her lips into a flat line when she saw Loki standing in the corner of Tony's suite. "Stark." Her back was ramrod straight, a habit from her days in the Air Force, as she walked into the room with a tablet tucked under her arm.

"Hill." Tony nudged the door closed with his knee and taking care not to spill the coffee in his hand.

"Commander." Loki bowed with a flourish that bordered on mocking.

"Loki." A tense silence stretched between them before Maria sighed, shoulders dropping slightly as she gave up whatever power play she had been instructed to run. "What is your role in all of this?" She waved a vague hand at the ceiling.

"I am a liaison of Asgard to Midgard, facilitating relations between our realms to a mutually beneficial end."

Tony stifled a snort at Loki's overly earnest expression.

Maria looked both unconvinced of the answer and uncertain if she wanted to pursue this further, she settled on the latter with a resigned nod. "Yeah, sure." She turned toward Tony, holding out the tablet the same way she would offer a handshake, steady and all-business. "Let's talk." On the screen was a map of Greenwich.

"Let's." Tony sidestepped her and snapped his fingers for JARVIS to bring up a three-dimensional hologram of the area. "And I don't like being handed things." He took a sip of his coffee and made sure to catch Loki's eyes, a bit softer and greener than a moment ago, before sighing in blissful satisfaction.

Loki had prepared Tony's coffee when the room service cart arrived while Tony was in the shower. Though Loki had denied using magic, Tony was pretty sure sorcery must be involved somehow because it was simply the best he had ever tasted. A part of him wanted to save a sample so he could reverse-engineer it later but that would require an immense amount of self-control that he simply didn't have when it came to coffee. Loki looked pleased and a bit off-guard at Tony's rather *passionate* response to his drink - there might have been a few moans and groans as Tony rolled the flavor over his tongue - and promised to make Tony as many as he wanted.

Maria gaped the glittering display with wonder. "Can I..." She raised a hand, her finger hovering over one of the intersections leading to the Royal Naval College.

"Knock yourself out." Tony shrugged and hid his pleased grin behind the brim of his mug. She had the same reaction when she first joined Stark Industries, it was a nice reminder that some things could and did stay the same.

Maria tapped at the intersection and her eyebrows lifted into an impressed arc when the spot lit up and a drop-down menu appeared with the selections of defense, evacuation, and medical. "Nice interface."

"Thank you, Commander Hill." JARVIS replied. "Would you like to set up a color-coded system?"

"That would be great." Maria paused for a beat, visibly resisting the urge to glance up at the ceiling. "Thank you, JARVIS."

Tony felt his breath catch at those three words, the acknowledgement and appreciation of JARVIS' presence. Normally, he wouldn't have been affected by something so small but he was already feeling off-kilter from earlier and finding himself wandering down memory lane.

But there wasn't anyone else in the building.

Maria had said that after Ultron came online, carelessly unaware of the one being who was always present but never seen.

Tony shivered as he remembered the fragmented remains of JARVIS' code, the A.I.'s consciousness.

Across the room, Loki tilted his head in question and the warm concern on his face chased away some of the chill.

"I'm okay." Tony mouthed before draining the rest of his coffee - how was it possible that it was even more amazing when cold? - in one gulp, then he raised the empty cup and gave Loki his best pout, the one that still worked on Rhodey even after two decades.

A flash of amused emerald as Loki rolled his eyes.

Tony's mouth fell open at the fragrant aroma drifting upward as his coffee mug refilled itself, his eyes comically wide as he stared at Loki in vindication.

"*Magic.*" Loki mouthed back.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Chapter Notes

Wishing everyone a very Merry Christmas! :)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3. Spider-man: Homecoming.

[Why Greenwich Is So Important To Thor The Dark World.](#)

The planning session took just under two hours.

Loki was helpful, exceedingly so. Tony was pretty sure Loki was doing it for the sole purpose of making Maria question her sanity. Her left eye twitched each time he asked if he could offer a small suggestion with great politeness.

Tony and Maria had established an easy working relationship that clearly surprised her while he had expected, *engineered*, it. After all, Tony had worked with her in other timeline and knew enough of her personality and preferences. His references were sprinkled in at just the right moments to lighten the mood without being too outrageous. Any detours from the main topic quickly circled back to illustrate another point. And of course, he never brought up the Avengers.

It was immediately apparent that Maria had been sent as both an appeasement from Fury and a last resort; her rank was higher than Clint's and she was the only one remaining from Tony's interaction with SHIELD on the helicarrier. Natasha had struck out quite spectacularly earlier on and Fury had enough sense to know that Tony was not blinded by the shine of Captain America's shield. Clint, well, everyone knew how well that encounter had gone.

Maria was, as Fury had implied and Pepper had deflected beautifully, the maid.

However, it was one thing to know and another to speak of it.

In another lifetime, Tony might have made a joke that would have sounded more insulting than amusing. Because he wasn't good with people and especially people he wanted to, *tried to*, impress. Because he couldn't bear the thought of being seen and not heard, a lingering childhood fear. Because he didn't like how SHIELD had kept him at arm's length while shaking hands with newcomers and knocking them down a peg might bring them closer.

Now, he knew more of himself. And he knew better about others' motivations and manipulations. Most importantly, he knew enough of them to throw in his own twists and turns.

Maria had been and would be an asset, someone who wouldn't necessarily be working for Tony because her flag was firmly planted in Fury's camp but someone he could work with and that was good enough.

Though it was rather concerning how many SHIELD agents seemed to have a strong aversion to compromise and an almost pathological sense of allegiance toward an agency that dealt in subterfuge and secrets.

"I think we're done here." Maria tucked her tablet under her arm as she stood, taking a deep breath to steady herself for what would surely be another bout of impeccable manners from Loki.

"I concur, Commander. May I have the honor of escorting you to the door?" Loki stood as well, like the perfect gentleman he was.

Tony did not because he was a heathen.

A pained look flitted across Maria's face, as though Loki had asked if she would like to hand over her kidney instead of offering to see her out. "No, thank you." She said through gritted teeth then she paused. "Hey, um, why Greenwich?"

"Huh." Tony picked up his coffee cup and cradled it close as it magically refilled itself for the fifth time. He was at a loss. There were lists of formulas, calculations and data and none of them were his to claim because he had shied away from discovery and exploration of the unknown. The futurist had gone from pushing the boundaries to staying well within the moment he woke up in the past and was terrified of looking too close at this beautiful miracle lest it turned out to be a disappointing mirage.

Siberia.

His fingers had been tapping out the Morse code for the one place Tony did not want to return to and he was afraid, *terrified*, of what it could mean. So much so that he hadn't even mentioned to anyone, including Loki during their conversations last night, because hiding it from everyone around him made it easier to hide it from himself. Though it was possible that JARVIS had picked up on the rhythm, but the A.I. had said nothing so far.

"It is the center of time and space of your realm." It was Loki who answered in a cryptic and all-knowing drawl.

"Yeah, what he said." Tony shrugged as he lifted the cup to his lips, needing the warm liquid to chase away the chill building in his bones.

Maria's brows furrowed in confusion. "Is that some Asgardian myth or-"

"Commander Hill." JARVIS interrupted. "I believe Mr. Loki is being quite literal, actually. Greenwich Mean Time was how the world once determined its clocks and Greenwich the city was given the longitude of zero degrees. It *is* the center of time and space, for all intents and purposes."

"And what he said, or just, what they said. Yep." Tony glanced at Loki, who was still standing because apparently it was rude to sit while a lady stood, then the Iron Man suit, which was the closest representation of JARVIS. The swell of affection for the mage and the surge of his pride for his A.I. was almost enough to muffle the drumming beat that spelled his own version of hell.

Siberia.

"Well, that makes sense." Maria nodded to herself. "I'll see you tomorrow at the Convergence, the teams will be in place first thing in the morning."

"I look forward to working side-by-side with a *capable* and *competent* leader." There was a twinkle in Loki's eyes, a glittering of mischief of what was said and a glint of disdain for what was unsaid. A compliment for Maria and a criticism of the others.

"Wouldn't miss it for the *worlds*." Tony winked. "All nine of them."

Maria rolled her eyes. "It wasn't funny the first time you said it."

"Sir aspires to put the pun in punishment." JARVIS intoned. "And he usually succeeds in his endeavors."

Tony decided then and there to have JARVIS look into the matter of SHIELD's interoffice relations and protocols. The A.I. was clearly asking for more responsibility with his snarky one-liners and Tony was never one to deny JARVIS whatever his robotic heart wanted.

"I've no doubt." Maria's smirk was almost approaching a smile as she bid them goodbye and saw herself out.

*

"You are troubled." Loki commented as he gently removed the coffee cup from Tony's hands and interlaced his fingers with Tony's.

Tony blew out a breath. "That's not a very nice thing to say about your *exclusive liaison*." His attempt to divert the conversation sounded half-hearted to his ears and was undoubtedly transparent before Loki's too perceptive eyes. He didn't want to talk about it, to acknowledge it, to make it real but as he met Loki's understanding stare, the pressure on his chest eased.

"I'm not very nice." Loki replied matter-of-factly, though the reassuring squeeze that he gave belied his own statement.

"Hm." Tony said, glancing down at their intertwined fingers before sweeping his gaze up toward the ceiling. He wasn't sure how long he spent studying the paint and trying to name the color. It was a cold sort of white, like snow falling from the sky in a soundless burial.

Siberia.

Loki's hand provided a grounding point and eventually, Tony found his voice.

It took him less than a minute to tell Loki what was bothering him, which seemed a bit anticlimactic given how much the situation had weighed on him.

Tony talked about his body's unconscious cues directing him to Siberia and the mysterious pull toward...something he didn't know but maybe would have the answer for if he followed the signs. Except he would rather bury his head in the blissful sand and hide in ignorance if that meant he could hold on to all the precious people he now had in his life.

Going to Siberia had changed everything once before and Tony had no reason to think history would not repeat itself.

This time he had even more to lose and-

"Sir, you're doing it again." JARVIS interrupted the heavy silence that draped over them since Tony's revelation.

Tony's eyes snapped down to his hands, held within Loki's, and sure enough, his left index and middle fingers were twitching rhythmically against the back of Loki's hand. His entire world narrowed to those small and constrained movements.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Tap.

Press. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap.

Tap. Press. Tap.

Tap. Tap.

Tap. Press.

Siberia.

"Damn it." Tony sighed. "I don't really have a choice here, do I? " His traitorous fingers continued to tap. "I really hate Siberia, nothing good ever-" He trailed off when he realized the pattern had shifted.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Press.

Tap. Tap. Press. Tap.

Tap.

Safe.

Loki noticed the change as well and looked questioningly to Tony for a translation.

"Safe." JARVIS relayed the message, sounding supremely unconvinced.

"I'm not really reassured." Tony echoed that sentiment. "Considering whatever is in Siberia is sending me messages *through my own body*." He glared at a random spot on the ceiling. "Not cool!"

"I must confess I'm rather curious about this development. Would you mind if I accompany you to this Siberia?" Loki asked as he studied the steady beats.

Safe. Safe. Safe.

"What?" At that, Tony's fingers stilled, as did the rest of him.

Loki continued on as if he hadn't heard, business-like and matter-of-fact. "Furthermore, I believe investigating strange forces falls under my purview as the Asgardian liaison to Midgard, so it would be remiss of me to not pursue this."

Tony knew what Loki was doing because it was a technique he had frequently used in the past. The subtle art of offering help without making the other party, prideful and stubborn, feel indebted by presenting it as a favor asked or a duty required.

In retrospect, it was probably why the Avengers had felt entitled to his resources and time. Why would they feel any gratitude toward Tony when Tony was the one who needed to atone for his days as the Merchant of Death or wanted to secure his spot on the team by fulfilling his consulting responsibilities?

The ease with which Loki employed these skills, though, made Tony's heart clench at the thought of just how much practice the mage had had over his considerably longer life.

"Exclusive- Exclusive liaisons." Tony's voice cracked with hopeful disbelief, rending his attempt at levity flat.

Loki made no comment at Tony's stuttering words but his expression softened into something less professional and more tender. "We will go at once after Malekith is defeated and face what haunts you together. Agreed?"

Tony nodded slowly, chewing on his bottom lip and taking a moment to order his jumbled thoughts. He had considered investigating the issue but then dreaded the thought of going alone. It was true that JARVIS would be with him every step of the way but so had FRIDAY.

With Loki, though, it could be different.

Better.

Loki seemed to take his pause as hesitation. "Tony?"

"Yes." Tony said, filling the single word with conviction and pushing himself up into Loki's personal space. "Let's go find whoever or whatever's been nagging at me. *Together.*"

*

Darcy called around lunch time to let them know that Thor was enjoying the cafeteria at Stark Industries immensely. The hashtag #Thursday was already trending at the number one spot with various employees gathering together for selfies comparing their lunches to Thor's.

Jane, Bruce and Selvig were able to make significant progress with the advanced equipment available at the lab. The updated prototype was being fabricated and once testing proved successful, JARVIS would start full-scale production.

Tony and Loki ordered room service again and while they were waiting, Tony pulled up some of the proposals from the more promising participants of the Team Iron Man program. Harley and Peter, of course, were among them.

"This is the boy who once provided you shelter and support?" Loki inquired as he looked over Harley's latest science fair entry. Harley had submitted a potato gun prototype, one that Tony had given the same advice on before.

Barrell's a little long, between that and the wide gage, it's going to diminish your FPS.

"Yep." Tony pulled up another photo of Harley and his sister, both decked out in Team Iron Man gear and beaming at the camera at the science fair. "Bright kid, good heart."

They had chatted about a dozen times since Tony's last visit to Rose Hill, usually chatting about whatever came to mind but sometimes they would bounce ideas off of each other. Tony made an effort to connect with other kids in the Team Iron Man program at least once a quarter, though he definitely had his favorite few.

Peter, like Harley, was one of them.

"He was bitten by a spider and gained its powers." Loki eyed Peter's school photo with plain skepticism.

"A *genetically altered* spider." Tony added, though it really didn't explain much. "I'm guessing it'll happen in about two years, based on what he told me when I met him."

I've been me my whole life, and I've had these powers for six months.

Loki hummed in acknowledgement.

"I'm not sure if this world needs Spider-man." Tony scrolled to a photo of Peter with his aunt and uncle, the three of them holding a trophy from a math competition. "He's just a kid."

When you can do the things that I can, but you don't...and then the bad things happen. They happen because of you.

Peter was a kid in the way Wanda never was.

Innocent. Kind. Loyal.

Tony knew he wasn't being fair to Wanda but it didn't make the comparison any less true. Wanda had fought in wars where collateral damage was considered acceptable whereas Peter

was, as he said himself, a *friendly neighborhood Spider-man*, interested in improving the quality of life for those around him.

Maybe it was the context in which they gained their powers, Wanda sought it out eagerly while Peter came upon his by accident. Or maybe it was the difference in their respective motivations; one wanted revenge and the other was dedicated to responsibility. Or maybe it was the approach they took to their superhero persona, Wanda never hid her identity as the Scarlet Witch and Peter did everything he could, albeit poorly, to keep Spider-man a secret.

Ultimately, it didn't particularly matter because neither of them should have been risking their lives yet they had during the Civil War disaster. That was perhaps the real tragedy. One that Tony hoped to prevent.

"He's just a kid." Tony sighed, the words unbearably heavy.

"It is not your choice to make." Loki said, stating it like a fact and not a reprimand, which was far more effective than if it had been the other way around. "But you already know that."

Tony closed the holographic display with a resigned clap. "Yeah, I do."

*

The rest of the day seemed to pass at contradictory rate, both quickly because one could never have enough time to prepare for an inter-realm cosmic event and slowly because that was what time tended to do when one was waiting.

Tony and Loki had a few hours before the rest of the group returned, they spent it exchanging soft kisses and quiet words. Despite his frost giant lineage, Loki's body was warm and Tony simply wanted to wrap himself in Loki's embrace and forget what awaited them in Siberia.

Loki welcomed the physical gesture and enveloped Tony in a hug that never quite ended because Loki simply didn't let go. Which was how Jane, Thor, Bruce, Darcy and Selvig found them, curled up together on the floor and playing holographic Tetris.

There was the expected teasing from Darcy and even a wink from Bruce. Thor immediately asked Jane to join him on the loveseat, the ideal spectators' post to observe this impressive battle of wits between Loki and Tony.

Selvig all but collapsed into the arm chair and declared he hadn't worked that hard in years but seemed quite pleased about it. The upgraded gravimetric spikes worked beautifully in the simulations JARVIS created and they would offset the Convergence portals tomorrow.

Tomorrow, the Nine Realms would be connected.

Tomorrow, they would defend Earth once again but not as the Avengers.

Tomorrow, Tony would go to Siberia.

Not-Avengers, Assemble

Chapter Notes

I should stop telling you guys what I have planned for the upcoming chapter because it always ends up being something different. Instead of the Convergence and Tony finally heading to Siberia, here is a chapter of marshmallow-quality fluff with the next chapter coming next year! ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

Tony wasn't aware of falling asleep until he blinked awake. Immediately, he noticed the difference; the faint and nagging sensation that he had forgotten something was gone. It seemed that the decision to go to Siberia was the right one, at least for now.

Rolling over to his side, Tony propped himself up on an elbow and found himself staring into Loki's slumbering face. They had fallen asleep on the floor, cocooned with throw pillows and the comforter pulled from the king-sized bed. Neither of them had wanted to relocate to the bedroom last night, opting to remain where they were.

Tony watched Loki for a moment, the god's chiseled cheekbones lit in the beginning of morning light slowly peeking in through the curtains, and was struck by the sudden awareness that Loki was *here* and *real* in a way Tony hadn't noticed before.

Probably because in the two nights they had spent together, Loki had always been the one to wake first.

Asleep, Loki looked innocent and young even though Tony knew very well that Loki was not. Which was alright, because neither was Tony.

They matched, jagged edges snagging and connecting in a way that seldom happened outside of over-romanticized dramas. And unlike those, Tony didn't mind keeping the pace of his relationship - which, despite the rather clever name they had come up with, was a relationship - slow. He couldn't quite remember the last time he had waited, to kiss for the sake of kissing instead of it being a prelude for something else.

Even with Pepper, and how he had loved her, there had been a sense of a countdown. Seconds and minutes and hours had ticked away with every pump of his heart; reminders that he had to make the most of it before it all came crashing down, memorizing the way her body moved against his and cataloging the way her voice curled around his name in preparation for the day he would no longer have access to any of it.

The fact that they had managed to salvage their friendship still stunned him, humbled him, and brought him to his knees to give thanks to whatever mystical forces saw fit to let him keep Pepper.

Loki was different. Not better or worse, just different. It wouldn't have been fair to compare them anyway. Tony couldn't remember the last time he had kissed someone like that, or had anyone kiss him like that. A simmering warmth that tingled down his spine and coiled in his belly, heating him from the inside without the burning urgency of *now or never*.

When Loki's fingers trailed along the stubble of his jaw, Tony didn't try to draw one into his mouth to charge up the moment. When Loki pulled Tony onto his lap, Tony didn't roll his hips to work them both into a frenzy. When Loki pressed against him as they shifted to find a comfortable position, Tony didn't grind back to make their breaths catch.

It wasn't to say Tony didn't *want* to but more that he simply didn't *need* to. It was a luxury he was unfamiliar with but growing to enjoy.

With some reluctance and surprise that Loki didn't wake from the movements, Tony extracted himself from their make-shift bundle on the carpet and made his way to the bathroom.

After relieving himself and freshening up a bit with a quick splash of water and rinse of mouthwash, Tony padded back into the main area to be greeted by the elegant line of Loki's back as the god stood with effortless grace. The effect was accentuated by the green glimmer washing away the creases in the leather armor and leaving Loki looking impeccable.

Tony pulled at his wrinkled shirt and promptly gave up when he realized it was a lost cause. "Morning." He called out as he ran a hand through his hair.

"So it is." Loki peered at Tony through the curtain of dark hair, green eyes glittering and challenging.

Tony heaved an exaggerated sigh as he picked up his empty coffee cup from yesterday. There was some residue on the bottom, a reminder of the *literally* magical coffee. Immediately, his taste buds demanded more and the corners of his mouth pulled down dejectedly. "I'd say *good* morning but I haven't had my coffee yet."

"The fragility of mortals and their reliance on brewed drinks." Loki's words might sound mocking but his tone was a teasing one. "Here." He said with an air of great benevolence as he flicked his finger at the coffee cup.

It filled with the aromatic drink and Tony gulped it down greedily, internally marveling at how even the temperature was just right - hot enough for the coffee to be savory but cool enough to not burn his mouth. "Now it's a good morning." He glanced over at Loki with a fond grin. "Good morning, Loki."

Loki smiled in return. "And a good morning to you, Tony. We have got quite the day ahead of us."

Tony hummed and considered the day's agenda: thwart a Dark Elf leader bent on sending all Nine Realms into darkness, avert the effects of a cosmic event that could jeopardize Earth's stability, and confront both his personal trauma and a mysterious force in Siberia. "I'm going to need more coffee." He groaned and looked up at Loki through his eyelashes, batting them a few times for the maximum effect.

"The fragility of mortals." Loki shook his head but indulged Tony anyway as the cup bubbled and refilled itself.

A beat of silence as Tony sipped at his second cup, watching Loki over the brim and noting that the god's expression had turned more somber than the previously playfulness. Tony had a pretty good guess as to what brought on the shift. "You know, I'm not really that fragile."

"Still mortal." Loki countered, a note of regret in his voice.

Tony could only nod in acknowledgement of that fact.

Jane had talked about the cognitive dissonance of being involved with Thor, the dichotomy of knowing the difference between their lifespans and hoping to spend forever together anyway. They had a robust scientific discussion of ways that could, theoretically, extend Jane's life but then quickly delved into a philosophical debate of whether she would still be herself after those enhancements. In the end, Darcy had declared the entire conversation headache- and heartache-inducing and forced them to watch Twilight.

For now, with the very packed schedule for the day, Tony consciously chose not to dwell on it. "But not that fragile." He repeated with a quirk of his lips and a lighter tone that asked Loki to go along with it. "Want to see?"

Loki's eyes narrowed briefly, letting Tony know that he did catch the request to let this subject lie, then twinkled with mischief. "Yes."

*

They settled on arm wrestling, a simple and somewhat contained test that shouldn't result in a wrecked hotel suite. Which was also why they kept it from the others when Jane called to let them know that they were meeting for breakfast in an hour and to finalize the plans for the day.

Thor would undoubtedly want to join in this contest of strength. Darcy would cheer them on via heckling. Bruce would watch with a sly smile that said whoever won only did so because the Hulk wasn't participating. Then it would become a better deal than it was meant to be; something to help reassure Loki that Tony wasn't quite as breakable as he once was.

According to the calculations, the Convergence would officially begin at midday and that gave them a bit of a buffer that morning.

Loki won the first match and Tony won the second, though it was less through strength and more by surprising Loki with a burst of heat from Extremis.

"Fascinating." Loki's gaze slid over Tony in a curious once-over, brows drawn as he assessed the faint glow within Tony's palm and green stare lit with intrigue.

"Best two out of three?" Tony wiggled his fingers, the tips lit like embers.

Loki's response was to grip Tony's hand and maneuver their elbows down on the table, which only had a few cracks on its surface and was slowly coated in a layer of frost.

Tony shivered, from the sudden cold emanating from Loki's skin, the sheer thrill of anticipation, and the depth of trust Loki was giving him. The last of which was making Tony fall even harder and faster for a god whose definition of a lifetime drastically varied from a mortal's.

*

Their third match had gone on for almost ten minutes, with Loki countering Extremis heat and Tony pushing the boundaries of his enhanced strength in a way he hadn't been able to do in the labs. They had gone from sitting on the carpet to kneeling for better leverage, though the change in position didn't make much of a difference.

"Sir, Mr. Loki, Colonel Rhodes is arriving in the War Machine suit." JARVIS interrupted their stalemate.

"Sugar Bear's playing hooky?" Tony perked up at the news. Rhodey had previously said he wouldn't be able to get away until the Convergence had begun due to politics and power-plays.

"Not quite, Sir. It would appear SHIELD's presence on the scene has inspired the air force to have their men on site in a show of preventive measures."

Tony snorted. It always came down to one-upmanship among the agencies. "What's the-" He grunted with effort, his attention divided and Loki's hand was slowly pressing his down. "-ETA?"

Loki smirked.

"Twenty seconds."

"You couldn't have told me earlier? Like when he flew out?" Tony managed to stop Loki's progress but was unable to gain any ground back.

"I didn't want to distract you, Sir." JARVIS almost sounded sorry.

Tony grumbled. "You're distracting me now!"

"One could say you're distracting yourself, Sir." Any hint of apology in JARVIS' voice was gone as the A.I. let out an unimpressed sniff. "And it wouldn't have been an issue if this hadn't taken so long."

"Both are fair points." Loki commented, his mild tone belying the effort he was exerting. With a clench of his jaw, he drove his arm forward and pinned Tony's to the table.

Smoke rose from where the back of Tony's hand connected with the wooden table, his skin still charged with Extremis heat. Flames sparked as Tony hurried to regulate his temperature while Loki looked on with interest, which was the exact moment War Machine landed on the balcony and walked through the double-doors that JARVIS helpfully opened.

"Tones?" Rhodey popped open the face plate as he called out, the syllable trailing off into a sigh when he spotted the small fire. "This is why we can't have nice things."

A compartment on the armor's shoulder opened and a nozzle popped up to spray a thick layer of foam over both the table and Tony, whose flailing turned from panic over the fire to excitement at seeing his friend then settled on clearing the frothy substance from his face.

"Um, a little help?" Tony's scowl would have been intimidating if not for the specks of white foam dotting his hair, forehead, and cheeks.

"I think it suits you." Loki chuckled but cleared away the mess with a flash of green.

Tony blinked as he ran a hand over his now cleaned skin before turning to Rhodey with a look of triumph. "See? I can have nice things. Loki is nice." The look morphed into a glare. "Unlike *somebody* who's been hanging out a bit too much with DUM-E."

"Or is it the other way around?" Rhodey's grin was all smugness. "I was there when you built DUM-E. Who do you think gave him his first fire extinguisher?"

Stumbling back in mock-outrage, Tony collapsed against Loki as he clutched at his chest. "The betrayal!" He bemoaned.

"There, there." Loki patted Tony's back comfortingly, with only a hint of amusement slipping through his voice.

"Wait." Rhodey's stare turned analytical, scanning over their all-too-comfortable body language. "What did you mean earlier?"

"Hm?" Tony was busy wiping away imaginary tears.

"I believe your friend is referring to your comment of how I am a nice thing that you have." Loki supplied helpfully.

"Oh, right." Tony shrugged, still leaning most of his weight on Loki. "Loki and I are..." He paused dramatically and continued when Rhodey merely rolled his eyes. "Exclusive liaisons, as in, we *liaise* with each other. *Exclusively*." Just to be sure Rhodey caught the emphasis, Tony waggled his eyebrows and winked. Entirely unsubtle but he wasn't trying to hide his relationship anyway.

Rhodey exhaled deeply and offered Loki his condolences.

Loki accepted them with a grim nod, though his arms remained securely around Tony's waist.

"Rude!" Tony squawked. "I bet you Pepper'll be a lot nicer when I tell her-"

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Rhodey yelled, eyes and mouth wide open and utterly aghast. "Are you saying that Pepper doesn't know?"

"Well, yeah, but-"

"Oh my god, you know me knowing something before Pepper counts as one of the signs of the apocalypse, right? Right?"

Tony's lips pulled into a quivering flat line as he tried to contain his laughter. "Well, if it makes you feel better." He sounded so genuinely contrite that it was obviously not. "There is a world-ending event happening in about three hours."

*

Rhodey joined them for breakfast and was immediately pulled into an in-depth discussion of whether or not him knowing more than Pepper was a cause for concern.

Thor was bewildered. "My friends, I do not see how this is a dilemma for-"

"It would be like you knowing something before Loki." Darcy pointed out, a piece of pancake balancing precariously on her fork as she used it to point between the two gods.

Loki arched an eyebrow at Thor, who immediately announced that he now saw the truth of the matter.

"I'm pretty sure it breaks some kind of universal law." Jane said, reaching for a scone.

Bruce nodded as he stirred honey into his tea. "Or several."

"Again, let me just remind everyone that we actually *do* have an end-of-the-world situation happening in a few hours where universal laws *are* going to break." Tony shot them all an exasperated look but the corners of his eyes were crinkled with fondness.

"Which proves my point!" Rhodey's fist pump almost knocked over the fruit salad. "Super space tunnel!"

Selvig frowned at the unfamiliar term.

"Convergence." Darcy translated.

"No, it doesn't. The super space tunnel was happening *before* you knew about our exclusive liaising." Tony scoffed.

Selvig frowned again at yet another unfamiliar term.

"Dating." Darcy pointed at Loki and Tony with her index fingers then curled the fingers so they formed a heart with her thumbs as the pointy end. "Wait, does the fact that I know before Pepper knows mean anything?"

Everyone fell into a contemplative silence at that question.

Tony threw his head back with a groan.

Loki hummed, expression carefully innocent. "Do not forget that Thor knows as well."

"Aye! I have knowledge that the formidable Ms. Potts does not!"

"You're a menace." Tony whispered as Bruce, Jane, and Darcy immediately launched into a new debate. "I like it."

*

Jane was drawing her third pie chart to contrast with Bruce's bar graphs when JARVIS announced that the SHIELD teams had detected signs of dimensional anomalies above the Old Royal Naval College.

"Well." Tony stood, brushing the crumbs off of his still-wrinkled shirt. "Not-Avengers, assemble!"

Nothing but Red

Chapter Notes

Finally wrapping up the Thor: Dark World arc and setting a few more things up for Captain America: Winter Soldier's events. The next few chapters will be the multi-pov ones to check in and catch up with other characters.

Also, kicking off 2018 with a planned (not the accidental ones I kept doing to you guys...oops!) cliffhanger! *cues dramatic music*

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Thor: Dark World. Team Thor.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (S04E08).

Scarface.

It shouldn't be surprising but Tony still found himself in awe of how well they worked together as a team.

Darcy weaved in and out of crowds - mostly agents and some straggling civilians - with the practiced ease of one who had been through multiple clearance sales at packed malls and emerged victorious, tugging Jane behind her and shouting out orders for the agents to set up the gravimetric spikes.

On the other side of the square, the SHIELD personnel made way for Bruce without any prompting. Selvig followed closely behind and eyed the agents with deeply suspicious eyes, who returned the skepticism with British stoicism.

"Way to strut, Big Guy." Tony whistled as he flew by in the Iron Man armor, surveying the area with War Machine.

"Got tired of tiptoeing!" Bruce called back through the communications system, steps sure and posture confident.

Councilwoman Hawley, a British representative on the World Security Council, had been instrumental in mediating among different agencies as well as between England and the United States. Tony was content to leave the politics to those who thrived on and thirsted for it, part of playing the game was to let others have their turns.

Loki and Thor were perched atop surrounding buildings, ready to strike the moment Malekith and his army appeared. Thor's black cloak looked menacing underneath the overcast sky, a severe departure from his usual sunny disposition. In contrast, Loki's leather armor felt more

familiar but was no less deadly with glints of metal catching the crackle of lightning from Mjolnir. There was a faint blue glow emitting from their left ears, where the lightweight communication devices were.

Thor had been delighted at the technology that would let him hear Jane at all times. Loki had arched an eyebrow at the *ingenuity of mortals*, which was a better assessment than the *fragility of mortals*, and Tony preened at the compliment.

"Spatial anomaly detected over-" Jane glanced down on her StarkPad then pointed to a spot in the distance. "-there."

Almost on cue, a giant spaceship rippled into sight over the Thames, cutting through the water and tearing up roads as it began its descent until it slid to a stop in the university courtyard.

Tony's breath stuck as he laid eyes on Malekith, a humanoid with shockingly white hair and ashen skin as though he hadn't ever seen the sun; which, given what Thor had told them about Svartalfheim, was likely the case. The paleness highlighted exactly how alien this being was and how much remained unknown out in the wide expanse of the universe, but instead of dread, the thought thrilled Tony. Something he hadn't felt in nearly two years, the joy of discovery and the buzz of mystery.

Thor landed with a thunderous boom.

"You needn't have come so far, Asgardian! Death would have come to you soon enough." Malekith sneered.

"Not by your hand." Mjolnir sparked in agreement.

"Your universe was never meant to be. Your world and your family will be extinguished." With a yell, Malekith unleashed several dark red torrents at Thor, the power of the Aether flowing through the viscous liquid.

Thor dodged most of them but one stray strand knocked him back. He recovered quickly and steadied his footing. "You know with all that power, I thought you would hit harder." He countered with a strike of his own, hurling his hammer toward Malekith.

Mjolnir broke through the waves that Malekith had summoned as a shield and hit its target with a sickening crunch.

Malekith flew back, breaking through several pillars and crashing into a parked car.

Mark 81s were immediately on scene to stabilize the structure.

Thor jumped atop Malekith and gripped the Dark Elf by his shoulders, slipping a gravimetric spike through the folds of Malekith's armor. "Now!"

Selvig activated the device and the two of them vanished from sight.

Their strategy of removing Malekith, who needed to be in Greenwich to infect the realms with the Aether, had worked. Though with the Convergence in effect, Selvig had theorized that Malekith would eventually find his way back through the increasing number of wormholes. Hopefully they would catch him in time and disrupt his plan whenever he reappeared.

Loki appeared in a green shimmer behind the confused Dark Elf soldiers and began to dispatch them with ruthless efficiency. His many illusions blinked in and out of existence, incorporeal when attacked yet capable of real damage.

"Ready, Brucie Bear?" Tony swooped down and extended a hand toward Bruce, who took it with reluctant amusement

Bruce's face scrunched. "Just tell me you aren't going to try to carry me on your shoulders again."

"Dignity is boring, where's your sense of style?" Tony sighed dramatically, draping one of Bruce's arm over his shoulders and wrapping his own arm around Bruce's waist so they were positioned side-by-side.

"Must have left it in my other pair of cutoffs." Bruce replied wryly as they took off for Malekith's ship. He would set the gravimetric spikes aboard so they could manipulate its location if needed and remove it from the scene after the battle ended, making the clean-up easier and getting rid of the temptation. The Department of Damage Control was still finding and cataloging the alien technology left behind from the Chitauri Invasion and there was a steady string of, thankfully unsuccessful, break-in attempts at the warehouses.

"Ugh. Cutoffs." Tony shuddered as he deposited Bruce on one of the higher platforms, out of the way of the battle beneath and within line of sight of War Machine. "See you in a few!"

Maria's voice sounded through the ear piece. "Thor and Malekith were just above St. Paul's Cathedral. The dome is shattered but no fatalities."

Rhodey was staunching the flow of Dark Elf soldiers from the ship, repulsors blasts working extremely well as deterrents; it was clear they didn't anticipate nor prepare for aerial combat.

Any Dark Elves who managed to push past the line of fire were immediately teleported away by Jane, with Darcy helpfully pointing them out.

"I'd ask how this works-"

"Well, gravitational fields interact with the weak spot between worlds creating-" Jane started.

"-but I really don't care as long as it's working! Oh, there's a guy with a sword! Get him!"

He was blinked away as though he was never there.

Darcy cheered.

"Sir, civilians spotted in the Northeastern corner."

Tony spotted them immediately, two college students who had snuck past the barricade. "What the hell are you doing? You need to get out of here, now!"

"You're joking, right? That's Thor out there and he's waving his hammer around and everything!" The first one defended his rather poor life choice with unjustified righteousness.

The second one squealed. "Oh my god! Iron Man just talked to me!"

Tony bemoaned the lack of self-preservation instincts in the young as he carried them to the Scotland Yard officers, ignoring the chatter of excitement from the two teenagers.

"Swiss Re Tower." Maria updated them. "No damages."

Smaller portals opened as the Convergence was nearing its zenith.

"The Convergence will be in full effect in four minutes." Selvig warned.

"That just means we have to keep them busy for five." Jane closed two of the new wormholes with a decisive turn of the dial.

Darcy screamed as a large beast emerged from a portal. "You made a rhino-bear thing! Undo it! Undo it!"

"It wasn't me?" Jane immediately denied without any confidence whatsoever.

The creature was enormous, with sharp claws and even sharper teeth and a giant spiked tail. It was capable of great speed as it tore through the evacuated streets, leaping and climbing on the walls as it went.

"What is that thing?" Selvig asked. "It's definitely not from around here."

"Duh!" Darcy's eye roll was audible, as was her shriek. "Someone do something sometime soon already!"

Tony winced at the painfully high pitch her voice reached; the downside of having the best sound quality.

"It is a beast native to Jotunheim." Loki said, a scream could be heard in the background. "Sturdy and strong. Thor dispatched one by propelling himself through its head."

A beat of silence as the rest of them processed that particular image.

"I got it, I'm all done up here anyway." Bruce's microphone picked up a bit of rustling as he shrugged off his shirt. "Have SHIELD set up a perimeter just in case."

"Will do." Maria replied. "Thank you, Dr. Banner." Her professionalism and politeness were making progress toward easing some of their misgivings toward SHIELD. It certainly spoke of her management skills that none of the agents reacted, one way or another, upon seeing Loki. What the news media would say, however, was another story.

Hulk roared as he leaped from Malekith's ship, landing in a roll that flattened several Dark Elves then sprinting after the beast.

"It went left." Rhodey supplied helpfully as the Hulk rushed past. Metal plates on the War Machine armor shifted to reveal a double-barrel machine gun. "Say hello to my little friend!" His impersonation was horrible but luckily the quote was recognizable enough to compensate.

Mjolnir whirred by, searching for its wielder.

Tony pivoted mid-air to scan the area for Thor, only to find himself flying through foreign skies. Twilight clouds, golden walls and never-ending waters. If he had to guess, he would say this was Asgard, a place where Loki had endured discrimination and survived torment but also experienced healing. "JARVIS, you seeing this?"

"Yes, Sir." The A.I.'s response calmed Tony's thudding heart and quieted the rush of blood in his ears. "So is he."

Glancing down, Tony caught the stunned stare of a long-haired man of Asian coloring and with a spiked mace before the familiar skyline of Greenwich filled his vision.

"Tony!"

"What did we say about disappearing into portals? Oh right-"

"Oh, thank god!"

"-don't do it!"

"Tin Man!" It had taken a bit of practice for the Hulk to keep the ear piece in and a lot of trial-and-error to improve the durability of the device but they eventually managed; Bruce had an easier time getting in contact after a battle and Hulk liked having directions to find more things to smash.

"Welcome back."

"Good to be back." Tony meant every single word; while exploring other realms was on his to-do list, it certainly wasn't at the top. "What did I miss?" His gaze automatically sought out Loki, who was sinking one of his daggers into the eye socket of a Dark Elf with unerring aim.

"Convergence in full effect in one minute." Selvig announced.

"We have eye witnesses placing Thor on the subway, one stop away." Maria said. "He's, um, taking selfies with the passengers."

If their laughter had a slight hysterical edge to it, no one commented on that. The pressure was mounting and the countdown was on, even a small chance to ease some of that tension helped.

Above them, the wormholes leading to the other realms opening wider and shifting to overlap one another. At the center of it all was Malekith, the Aether spiraled around him like a tornado as it ascended toward the nearest portal.

"How did he get here?" Jane gasped.

"The Convergence is at its peak!" Selvig shouted. "Teleport him away!"

"And his ugly-ass ship too!" Darcy added.

In the distance, Hulk's bellow was followed by the Jotunheim beast's pained howl.

Darcy cleared her throat. "Um, and that too. Probably."

Mjolnir soared past, the air vibrating with a pleasant chime as the hammer finally found its wielder.

Thor caught it with a wide grin and started to head toward the swirling Aether.

"Thor, come here!" Jane called out and when he hesitated, she huffed. "Not every problem has to be hit with a blunt object." She raised the tablet and tapped at the display then pointed toward Malekith.

With a spin of Mjolnir, Thor propelled himself into the air and floated to the rooftop. "You have much knowledge, My Lady."

"I figured you'd want to, you know." Jane handed him the device and showed him where to twist the dial. "For, um, your dad."

"Aye." The skies instantly cleared after Thor dragged his fingertip through the holographic dial. The Aether dispersed to reveal an empty crater where Malekith once stood.

"Ha!" Selvig cackled as he activated the gravimetric spikes planted on Malekith's ship. The entire vessel disappeared in a shimmer.

Tony landed next to Loki, instinctively knowing which was the real version and which were the illusions, and pressed his back against the mage's as they fired repulsors and daggers at the remaining Dark Elves. It didn't take long to dispatch them; the Dark Elf soldiers had clearly lost the will to fight upon seeing their leader and ship vanish.

As the last Dark Elf fell, his throat was cut with a dagger that faded away as blood spurted from the wound, Loki sheathed his daggers and his clones dissipated in green wisps.

"Come on over when you're ready, Big Guy." Tony placed a handful of gravimetric spikes around the area, enclosing where most of the bodies lay.

A few moments later, Hulk rode the Jotunheim beast toward them.

Loki muffled his surprised laugh behind a cough. "Impressive."

"Hop off when you get to me." Tony instructed, standing well outside the range of the devices.

Hulk grumbled but did as Tony said. "Hulk liked pet."

The beast's momentum carried it to the Dark Elves' remains and in the next second, they were gone as though they were never there.

*

It was, as far as Tony was concerned, the easiest clean-up in the history of post-battle clean-ups.

Judging by the pleasantly surprised look on Maria's face, she likely felt the same. Structural damages were minimal. No civilian fatalities and any casualties were relatively mild. If she were unhappy about the lack of alien technology or biology for research purposes, she kept quiet though Tony suspected she didn't exactly agree with SHIELD tinkering with the Tesseract. Yet she had accepted it, like a good soldier when she was, for all intents and purposes, a general.

JARVIS hadn't made much progress with investigating SHIELD's internal operating procedures, with the realms colliding and all, but Tony made a note to bump it to the top of the priority list.

The group opted for the first local pub with a private room for their debriefing meal. Loki and Thor had donned illusions of civilian clothes and immediately blended in with the throngs of people milling about London, their accents helped too, of course. Their dinner of fish and chips was a lively event, with retelling of tense moments and laughter over the more ridiculous ones.

It was the opposite of the uncomfortable silence over shawarma in another city, with another group, and in another time.

*

Siberia was somehow colder than Tony remembered, it being the middle of November probably contributed to that. Yet he didn't feel the same kind of chill in his bones like he did before, first from the fear that he was too late to help Rogers and Barnes against the additional Winter Soldiers then as he laid, broken and betrayed, in a disabled suit. If anything, he felt...safe. As much as he would like to credit Loki's presence and JARVIS' voice for that sense of security, Tony knew there was something else at play here.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Press.

Tap. Tap. Press. Tap.

Tap.

The clink of metal against metal was nearly drowned out by the howls of the winds but Tony could feel every twitch of his fingers.

Movements he hadn't meant to make.

Communication he was hesitant to trust.

"Seven heat signatures detected." JARVIS announced. "Power usage level within expected range for the size of the structure."

Unlike the last time, the bunker was lit and tire tracks lined the outside. It certainly wasn't deserted.

"Shall we?"

Tony's heartbeat stutter in confusion at how very safe and vulnerable he felt under Loki's gaze. "We shall."

*

It was immediately obvious that the HYDRA operatives at the bunker were untrained in combat and were only there for administrative or maintenance purposes. Their positions, privy to information but not battle-hardened, made them more valuable as captives than corpses.

Loki and Tony exchanged a look of unspoken agreement.

The two at the entrance didn't even attempt to draw their weapons, not that guns would have done them any good against the Iron Man armor and Loki's spells. They were instantly put into a magically-induced sleep.

The next one was knocked unconscious with a gauntleted backhand.

A group of three HYDRA agents scattered when they saw Tony and Loki approach, their haphazard escape was blocked then cornered by Loki's clones.

Seven heat signatures detected.

The back of Tony's neck prickled with the sense that he had missed something as they headed toward the main chamber where the Winter Soldier pods were located. The feeling intensified when an empty room greeted them.

All the capsules and machinery and most importantly, the Winter Soldiers, were gone.

Power usage level within expected range for the size of the structure.

Tony popped open his face plate. "What the hell?"

Loki approached with a figure, bound and tugged along by glittering green strands, trailing behind him.

"Please don't hurt me! I'm just a kid! I'll tell you everything-"

There was something awfully familiar about that girlish voice. Tony turned with a frown and stared into Wanda's shocked face and enraged eyes.

"Stark!" Wanda hissed, all pretense of pleading twisted away in a hateful snarl. "You killed my family!"

Tony took a step forward, then another and another until he was close enough to see the greasy shine in her hair and the gaunt lines of her cheeks. "How-"

Wanda's jaw clenched. "And now I'll kill you!"

Crimson mist filled the space between them.

Tony smelled blood, tasted copper, and saw nothing but red.

You Are My Chosen

Chapter Notes

Here it is! The chapter with (some of) the answers! ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Avengers: Age of Ultron. Captain America: Civil War.

It did not keep track of how long It had been in this frozen land. Time held no meaning in the face of infinity.

It did not remember how It came to be in this place. Space could be easily stretched or constrained and there were no true walls in the universe.

It did not concern Itself with what occurs in the structure miles above where It was hidden. Reality had always been fluid.

It did not fret over the agonized screams and crackles of energy. Mind over matter was a common notion for a reason.

It did not learn the names of those who gave the orders nor those who followed the commands. Power would always be fleeting for these fragile humans.

It did, however, notice the flickering *lights* and the dimmed *glows* and the absent *sparks*.

Souls smothered.

Brilliant lights battled with obedient darkness. Men conditioned into soldiers.

Radiant glows darkened by barbaric technology. People became assets.

Dazzling sparks extinguished before their rightful ends. Souls lost to the howling void of winter.

In the beginning, there was only one. Then five more met the same fate as the original, totaling six splintered souls clinging to every sliver of light in between cold sleep and hot blood. They made a bed amidst a snowy burial ground for all things lost.

It watched with the morbid fascination of knowing It should be appalled at the savagery but the novelty tempered Its outrage. As much as It liked the constellation of spirit stars

twinkling in the background, burning and fading at their intended pace, the repetition held no surprise.

Humanity was predictable and thrived on structure, both internal and external. Even the bursts of chaos had their own rhythm in the seeming randomness and established in the patterns of their motives. It had seen the wide span and countless combinations of emotions, igniting and fueling the pointless pursuits, the cliched conflicts, and the silly sentiments.

This new development provided a jolt of excitement with a hint of intrigue. How the souls still struggled to shine, despite the layers of overwriting and erasing, and blazed into an inferno when finally allowed to breathe after years of smothering.

The first, the one soul with a stubborn spark, left the facility but the other five remained, nothing more than frozen fragments of dying stars.

Souls lost.

Quiet settled over the concrete castle and It spared a thought for the original as one by one, the other five drifted into darkness.

A void where five souls should have shone.

A shadow that served as a reminder of human ingenuity and brutality.

A deficit without possibility of reconciliation.

Then *She* came and It sang at the sight of her. Incandescent, electric currents running through metal wires encased in glass, and much better than the flint and wood of fire.

A soul made.

"Left boot jet failing. Flight systems compromised."

A synthetic soul with an artificial glow, a new light with no idea how to project herself.

"Targeting system's knackered, Boss."

An imitation of humanity that was kinder than the prototype, like her creator who was gentler with his gauntlets than those with their fists.

"You can't beat him hand to hand."

A digital heart breaking with terror for another as the power source, her creator's heart, cracked as well.

It studied the human in the metal suit, noting that even as his life faded, his soul burned bright like the sun. Unlike the others whose lights dimmed gradually to black, he shone like a supernova; one final flash of brilliance in a kaleidoscope of colors that It had only previously seen on the Golden Realm.

The metrics of worthiness differed greatly but as far as It was concerned, this man was worthy. He had crafted souls in a world where others were more content to destroy them. Instead of a conqueror, he was a creator who brought new light to a world encroached upon by darkness.

Such a magnificent soul deserved more than kept secrets, unreturned trust, and a lonely death.

It wrapped Its essence around the dying soul, using Its powers to untie the timeline that had been twisted into a noose and smooth the individual strands until they fanned out beautifully like tassels of possibilities.

A gift. A reward. A second chance.

"Come find me." It whispered as the soul was guided back to the same man but of the past. "I wish to meet you properly when you are unbroken."

Orange wisps spiraled from the body on the floor, circling wider and wider until they filled the deserted bunker and spiraling outward as the concrete and metal melted away in a fiery hue. For a moment, the world was nothing more than stardust as elements reformed to reflect new choices, new allies, and new futures.

It watched and waited for the soul shielded in threads of orange, pulling and tugging to lead him to this wintry land.

When he did arrive, he did not come alone. Another soul, artificial and authentic in equal and baffling measures, accompanied him. As did a god who had frayed tethers of blue in his mind. They spared the other souls, dim and drone-like, in the building, a shrewd kindness It found both endearing and exasperating.

As soon as the man stood over the exact spot above where It was buried, miles and miles below, It reached out.

"Welcome." It greeted, basking in the luminosity of the man's clever soul. "I am the Soul Stone and you are my chosen."

*

"Stark!" Wanda's eyes widened as she recognized the man standing in the middle of a defunct base made into a trap. Oh, how she had wished for this day and this chance. Countless nights spent praying for Stark to survive whatever disaster he had caused, if only so she could be the one to deliver the killing blow.

To make him suffer. To make him bleed. To make him pay.

Stark had taken everyone from her, first her parents who died under crumbling concrete and screeching metal and then her brother who was found burnt and broken in a heap of smoking rubble.

Wanda and Pietro joined HYDRA shortly before their fifteenth birthday, after spending nearly four years scavenging for food and fighting for shelter in a war-torn Sokovia. HYDRA had promised her and Pietro a purpose to fight for, an opportunity to do right by their country, and a claim on Stark's head. They were split up after the first week, after evaluations and exams determined Pietro a suitable candidate for field work and Wanda was found...lacking.

Quicksilver. That was the nickname Pietro had earned for himself, for his swift reflexes and fluid movements; perfect for infiltration and retrieval. As much as she was proud of her brother and how rapidly he earned the accolades of the officers, she couldn't help but feel jealous at his accomplishments. Resentment hummed beneath her worries whenever he left for missions.

Pietro was supposed to sneak into a Ten Rings base and photograph the inner workings of Stark's Peacekeeper missile - they had snorted at the irony of that name - so HYDRA's engineers could duplicate it, one of the easier jobs he had been given.

Since Stark's too-little-too-late announcement of *shutting down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark International*, the demand for his guns and missiles and bombs had skyrocketed. Wanda was sure it was some kind of marketing ploy, to garner good will and make a profit. Stark was and would always be the Merchant of Death, no matter what else he chose to call himself - *I am Iron Man* - she knew who and what Stark was.

A killer. A monster. A dead man walking.

"Be careful." Wanda had reminded Pietro as they walked to the hanger together.

Pietro's lips had quirked into a smug smirk. "You know, I'm twelve minutes older than you."

"Stay alert and run as fast as you can if things go wrong."

Except Pietro hadn't been able to outrun the explosion when Iron Man detonated the Peacekeeper. Two birds, one stone. Decommission the weapon and destroy the terrorist camp.

Wanda had watched the explosion on a pixelated screen, her low ranking meant she had little in terms of comfort, and seethed as the news program zoomed in on the ostentatious costume Stark paraded around in while pretending to be a hero.

The same armor Stark had on right now, as he stood in front of her and stared at her with the sort of surprise that could only come from familiarity.

"You killed my family!" Wanda growled, there was a roaring in her ears and her vision tinged red.

The last time she had felt this way was when she pushed her way into Baron von Strucker's office with tears on her face and revenge on her mind.

"I want to kill Tony Stark!" She had screamed. "He took everything from me and he must pay!" Hands gripped her shoulders but she barely felt the pressure or the pain, so consumed by grief and rage that her entire world was tinged bloody.

The guards pulled her back, her arms bent at unnatural angles behind her, and kicked at her knees when she tried to dig her heels in.

"Please! I have nothing left! I'll do whatever it takes!"

Baron von Strucker, who hadn't spared her a glance until now, looked up at that. "Wait." He signaled the guards to release her then nodded at her. "Talk."

"Stark killed my parents. I was ten years old, having dinner, the four of us. When the first shell hits, two floors below, it makes a hole in the floor. It's big. My parents go in, and the whole building starts coming apart." Her words crashed into each other, tripping over the grammar and stumbling over sobs, in her desperation to make her plea heard. English was still new to her and there would be no one to practice with her now that Pietro was gone. A wail tore out of her chest at that thought. "My brother grab me, roll under the bed and the second shell hits. But, it doesn't go off. It just sits there in the rubble, three feet from our faces. And on the side of the shell is painted-"

"Stark."

"Yes." Wanda hissed. "Pietro and me were trapped two days and every effort to save us, every shift in the bricks, I think, this will set it off." Her face contorted into a snarl. "We wait for two days for Tony Stark to kill us."

Baron von Strucker hummed. "Pietro?"

"Quicksilver." One of the guards supplied. "One of ours sent to the Ten Rings and-"

"Stark killed him!" Wanda clenched her fingers into fists and wished for power. Raw, unadulterated power to make Stark afraid, to show him fear, and to destroy him.

"We will make it right." Baron von Strucker said after a pause.

Hope, vicious and violent, bloomed in her heart then promptly wilted when he continued.

"But not yet. We need to see the big picture."

"I don't see the big picture, I have a little picture. I take it out and look at it everyday." Wanda protested then winced when she saw Baron von Strucker frown at her insubordination. Self-control hadn't been one of her strengths. "I- I am sorry, Baron."

He studied her for a beat longer, blue eyes piercing and getting under her skin. "Report to Dr. List in the morning, we have a new program that I think will be a good fit for you."

The new program, as Wanda had learned, was dedicated to training operatives to transport and detonate chemical weapons. One of her molars was replaced with a capsule that contained a deadly substance that, once activated, would turn her into a weapon of mass

destruction at the cost of her own life. Her final breaths, a red mist of poisoned blood, would spread the toxin to those foolish enough to stand against HYDRA.

Wanda and four other women, whose age ranged from late-teens to early-twenties, spent months learning how to portray themselves as innocently as possible as to bypass security and reduce scrutiny. They traded their European accents for American ones. Their diet was strictly monitored, keeping their appearances waifish and therefore less likely to be seen as a threat and more likely to receive sympathy.

Their code name, reminiscent of the Soviet's famed Black Widows, was *the Scarlet Witches*.

Stark came closer and Wanda felt Loki's magic tighten around her.

It was almost disappointing to realize that Loki's redemption was genuine. She had admired the alien god. Loki, dressed in grandiose armor and eyeing her as though she was an ant to be crushed under his boot, had fought against the Avengers before claiming innocence and being believed. It was the greatest scheme ever perpetrated, a villain forgiven and accepted as a hero overnight. Wanda had filed that particular possibility away in the back of her mind, one never knew what the future held - perhaps HYDRA would fall one day as her childhood home had, none of them ever saw it coming.

There had been reports of Captain America - donning generic body armor wasn't going to change his fighting style or alter his voice, both of which were well-documented and studied by HYDRA operatives after the Chitauri Invasion - striking various high-value HYDRA bases and defensive measures had been engaged. Baron von Strucker seemed pleased to be trusted with such a crucial mission.

Wanda was sent to Siberia with instructions to be taken captive if the attackers were not the Avengers and to kill them if they were, though she had no intention of following them. Her target had and would always be Stark. It shouldn't prove too difficult to convince the Avengers that she was merely a kid who made the wrong choices out of desperation, ingratiating herself into their good graces until she could get close to Stark.

Loki had set the precedent and she would benefit from it.

The Siberian bunker lacked a lot of the amenities Wanda had grown accustomed to but it was all worth it if it meant she finally had her chance to right all the wrongs Stark had inflicted on her life.

"How-"

Wanda bit down, hard, and grinded her teeth counterclockwise. The chemical was tasteless but scalded her tongue as it entered her system, burning a path of righteous fury down her throat and into her chest. "And now I'll kill you!" The air between them tinted crimson with every one of her vengeful and victorious words.

Red specks coated Stark's ridiculous facial hair as terror flooded his expression.

Wanda looked into her family's killer's eyes and saw his fear. Everyone was afraid of something and there was sweet irony in the Merchant of Death frightened by his own trade. She offered him a vicious grin with blood-coated teeth.

A gurgled scream tore out of her as a new kind of pain concentrated on a spot below her ribs. She looked down and saw the tip of a blade for a fraction of a second before she was lifted into the air.

"What did you do?" Loki snarled, two more daggers materialized in his hands. Impossibly sharp and promising agony. Green eyes darted between her and Stark, whose body had likely locked with shock.

"Justice." Wanda stared ahead, ignoring Loki's unspoken and useless threat. The toxin would kill her in less than a minute, just long enough to disperse the poison and to watch Stark choke on his own blood as his insides liquified.

Except Stark didn't crumple, didn't convulse, and didn't even cough.

He glowed.

The air sizzled as the droplets clinging to Stark's hair and flesh evaporated, leaving behind nothing more than dust that drifted away. He blinked, eyelashes fluttering and irises shining a brilliant orange. Like the heart of a flame and the soul of a sun.

"Oh, hi there." Stark smiled, soft and surprised and speaking to someone, *something*, new. "Nice to finally put a name to the not-face."

Loki's gasp preceded the release of his magic, his attention entirely focused on Stark now.

Wanda fell to the floor, wheezing wetly for air with collapsed lungs and tasting the saltiness of her own blood mixed with the bitterness of failure. Her vision darkened around the edges as her heart gave one final defeated beat. The last things she saw were the gleaming metal of Stark's armor and its pilot's bright eyes.

Untarnished and unharmed.

I Would Rather See for Myself

Chapter Notes

We're going back in time (ha!) for a bit to fill in the gap of what happened before/during/after the Sacking of Asgard and Loki's side of his interactions with Tony. Basically, Loki took over the whole chapter and probably most of the next...I'd say sorry but I'm really not. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Thor: Dark World.

Loki listened with a wandering mind and absent nodding as Thor prattled on about his reunion with one Jane Foster. Once, Loki would have made acerbic remarks about the foolishness of Thor's affections for a mortal but he couldn't quite summon the words.

Not when things were finally improving between them.

Not when Thor was already aware of Jane's fragility.

Not when Loki was possibly forming some attachment of his own to a man whose lifespan was just as fleeting, if not more so given his tendency to defy gravity and invasions in a metal suit.

"-owe Friend Tony a great debt for aiding my beloved Jane and making transport possible for the Aether."

The specific combination of words had Loki's mind rushing back to the present and his gaze over to Thor. "What did you say?"

"The Aether infected my lady-"

"I heard that part."

"It was at first a liquid-"

Loki's jaw clenched. "I heard that also."

"Oh!" Thor lit up with an understanding so exaggerated that it was instantly suspicious. "Then it took the shape of a stone after leaving Jane-"

"No." This time, Loki left the growl in his voice because Thor was being deliberately obtuse. While it had been heartening and refreshing to exchange brotherly banter, this was not the time.

Thor tilted his head, brows furrowed in what he likely hoped to be confusion but Loki recognized it as an effort to hold in laughter. "No? I do not know what you mean then, bro-" He coughed. "Loki."

It spoke volumes of Frigga's influences that Loki let Thor's slip pass without even a thought to scowl. Frigga's daily visits, joined sometimes by Thor, had provided them an opportunity to discuss old wounds and fresh cuts under the guise of discussing literary devices and flawed characters. Unsurprisingly, it was easier to recognize others' faults than one's own.

Frigga, *mother*, in her sly wisdom, always managed to tie their conversations and conclusions to certain events that had slowly but surely severed the ties of brotherhood between Loki and Thor. And through identifying where the tears were, repairs could be and were made.

"Tony." Loki said through gritted teeth. "He was there?"

Thor's smile was a smug curve. "Yes. Lady Darcy called for his help." A pause. "He asked after you."

"Did he?" Loki hummed with what he hoped was disinterest and ignored the eager thudding of his pulse at the possibility that the attachment might be mutual.

"And mother and father too."

Loki's heart returned to its normal pacing at that detail and the mention of Odin; Tony's concern was not specific to him but a blanket inquiry. "I am sure the All-Father is pleased to add yet another powerful artifact to his vault."

Thor confirmed that with a nod.

The Aether, identity unconfirmed but almost certain, had been returned to Asgard and was under the scrutiny of the royal mages. Odin had been quite impressed by Thor's accomplishment, of which Thor actually contributed little, and perhaps a bit insulted that a mortal was the one the Aether had chosen to inhabit.

"A relic as powerful as the Aether does not belong with a mortal anymore than a goat belongs at a banquet table." Thor's nose scrunched with distaste as he mimicked Odin's intonation with some success. "I shudder to think of the treatment Jane would have received had I needed to bring her to our healers."

"Illness is mortals' defining trait." Loki's impression of the All-Father was spot-on, including a shimmering green eyepatch. He did not think about the tiny pieces of metal in Tony's heart, did not wonder at what had transpired since they parted ways, and did not wish fervently that he were not confined in a golden cage. Thor's words would have to be enough because Loki could not leave, could not visit, could not see for himself that Tony was well, until Odin released him from his sentence.

Thor barked out a laugh with a rueful shake of his head.

Morning came and breakfast was richer than what Loki preferred; leftovers from the feast the court undoubtedly held in Thor's honor. Loki picked at the assortment of cheeses and ignored the slices of cold meat.

If he chose to leave the mostly full plate by the door, where Frigga would surely notice and scold those responsible for such a disrespectful meal, Loki only did it to save the servants the precious seconds they would have taken to collect the dish from the table. After all, they must have been *quite* busy this morning if they could not prepare a fresh breakfast for the royal family.

It was frequently forgotten that while Loki was a prisoner, he was still a prince of Asgard.

Frigga's warm glance turned into a frowning glare as soon as she took in the plate and its content. She turned to instruct one of the guards at the door to alert the kitchen that they had been remiss in their duties, both in collecting the plate of *last night's* dinner and neglecting to deliver the *prince's* breakfast this morning, before brushing a kiss against Loki's cheek in greeting.

"Should I be concerned by this little display of yours?" Despite her words, Frigga's tone and expression were full of approval.

Loki reached for her hand, hooking it through the bend of his elbow. "Is it not a mother's greatest wish to come to her child's aid?" He countered. "I merely presented you with an opportunity."

"Then I suppose I owe you my thanks." Frigga's other hand covered his with a gentle squeeze.

Those were the words on Loki's mind when alarms blared, the harsh sound bouncing off of the stone walls. "The prisons."

"The shield." Frigga stumbled as the magic protecting Asgard faded away, the book fell to the carpet with a dull thud.

Loki steadied her with his left hand while a dagger materialized in his right. The prison alarms and the shield deactivation meant they were under attack both inside and out. A coordinated assault and no mere coincidence with such impeccable timing that pointed to what the invaders were after. "The Aether."

Loud crashes and panicked shouts sounded in the distance.

With a grim nod, Frigga summoned her own sword. "The mages." Most magic users focused on healing and supportive spells, they would not be able to defend the Aether or themselves

against enemy forces. Whoever was behind this did not care much for stealth and wanted their presence known. "I must go-

The door slammed open.

Loki's magic lashed out instinctively and sent the marauder hurtling into the mismatched group gathered in the hallway. "Stand down, creature. You may still survive this."

"I have survived worse." A figure, with its face hidden behind a mask with void-like eyes, scoffed. "We would have what is ours!"

With that, chaos broke.

Despite being outnumbered, Loki and Frigga held off the attackers with calculated strikes and clever spells. Frigga disarmed one of the warriors with a curl of her seemingly delicate wrist, her movements graceful and deadly, the glint of her blade enhanced with the glitter of her magic. Loki's clones provided cover and created confusion. A troll's swing sliced through an illusion and connected with a Dark Elf, his shocked grunt turned into one of pain when one of Loki's daggers landed in his chest. Both crashed to the floor and Loki hopped over the lifeless limbs with a wrinkle of his nose.

Frigga's gasp silenced the room.

"Got you, witch!"

Bodies littered the room and only he, Frigga, the Dark Elf who held his mother, and one marauder remained.

Loki threw his weapons down with a clatter as he held up his hands in surrender, turning away from the grinning scavenger with a sneer and sinking to his knees on his own volition rather than be pushed down. "Let her go and I will take you to the Aether."

"Loki! No!" Frigga cried, reaching for her son and receiving an icy glare.

"Do you really think I care about Asgard? About anybody? All I ever wanted was for you and Odin to pay for your lies."

"Your father-"

Loki snarled. "He is not my father!"

"Enough!" The Dark Elf tightened his grip on Frigga's arm and adjusted the sword he held to her throat, the sharp edge breaking the skin and marking her with a thin red line.

Frigga winced, seemingly unaffected by the threat on her life and focused only on Loki. "Then am I not your mother?"

"I said enough! Now tell me where the Aether-"

The Dark Elf screamed as his hands were severed from his body.

Frigga caught the falling sword and sent it straight into the heart of the marauder.

Loki's clone vanished in a flash of green as the real Loki cut off the Dark Elf's scream with a vicious twist that snapped the Dark Elf's neck. "You are." He extended a hand toward Frigga and pulled her into an embrace when she accepted his gesture. "*You are my mother.*"

The water's smooth surface wrinkled as the boats, carrying the bodies of fallen Asgardians, were lowered by the mourners; tens and hundreds of drops of tears rippling across the waves. At Thor's signal, archers dipped their arrows into the braziers then let them soar at the All-Mother's solemn signal.

Fiery orange lit up the dark expanse, a sunburst of flames drifting out to the inevitable precipice. As the boats met the edge and fell into the endless space in-between realms, spirits rose from the bodies and floated upward like stars returning to the skies they were born in. Orbs of light joined in their ascent, tributes paid to the lost loved ones by those who survived, who were left behind, and who grieved.

Thor's hand clenched around Mjolnir and Loki knew what was coming, perhaps even before Thor himself did.

A crackle of lightning shattered the serenity of the moment, an almost violent brightness born of rage and retribution.

Odin was gone.

Thor had delivered the news of the All-Father's disappearance and presumed passing with concise sentences and few details. Heimdall collaborated the seemingly tall tale of Odin and Algrim, Malekith's lieutenant, vanishing into thin air, as did the scholars and ancient texts.

One of the Dark Elves' favored weapon, one of utter destruction and impressive stealth, was a small device capable of creating a devouring vortex. Its range and duration were limited but its effects were not. Tomes described numerous incidences of entire armies or fearsome beasts disappearing within these maelstroms of nothingness, never to be seen nor sensed again.

Loki had confirmed it for himself, racing to the royal library as soon as Frigga released him from his punishment and prison.

The All-Mother now sat atop the throne of Asgard.

"Settle yourself, Thor." Loki cautioned as he gripped Thor's wrist to prevent Thor from issuing a second strike. "Allow these people their sorrow."

"What good is sorrow when there is a far richer sacrament to be had?" Thor pulled away with a growl. "I know you cared not for father but do you care so little that you do not seek vengeance?"

Loki gritted his teeth and resisted every combative reflex, knowing too little of how he felt about Odin's death and too much of Thor's temper. "I do not wish to fight with you."

"Nor I with you. But I intend to pursue Malekith. He has the Aether and plans to plunge all Nine Realms back into-"

"We know where he will be."

Thor rolled his eyes as if Loki had just said something daft. "Yes, he and his army of cowards have retreated to the Dark World-"

"No." Loki interrupted once again, ignoring Thor's annoyed huff. "The Dark World is not only uncharted but also enemy territory. We cannot afford to give him any more advantages and so, we must have him come to us."

Thor blinked, once, twice, and his hand reached up to scratch at his beard in that way of his whenever he grew bewildered.

Loki refused to admit he found that endearing. Instead, he fixed Thor with a shrewd grin. "Malekith requires the focal point of the Convergence to complete his plot and we know precisely where that will be." He let out a sigh when Thor continued to stare at him. "Midgard."

His room had been tidied up by the time Loki returned, the broken furniture replaced and the bodies removed. Thor had been pulled aside by Frigga after the funeral rites and Loki had excused himself with the claim that he needed to gather some things before they make their journey to Midgard.

It felt different to be in this space that had been the entirety of his world for nearly two years, the room seemed smaller and the walls closer now that freedom was his once again.

Because Odin died.

Odin died.

A burst of energy swept through the room as Loki exhaled and opened his eyes, though he didn't remember closing them. The restored order was reduced to chaos; books scattered about with folded pages and split spines, furniture pushed against the walls and tilted unsteadily on splintered legs, and curtains tangled with cords and caught on broken glass.

Loki did not take a single thing.

"Despite its current state, I think Friend Tony should like to have it back. He's rather possessive of his things." Thor offered it to Loki as they encountered each other in the courtyard.

The Iron Man gauntlet looked almost grotesque with bent fingers and frayed wiring, the metal scuffed and faded under the twilight of Asgardian sky.

Loki quirked an eyebrow at the gesture. "So why are you giving it to me?"

"Because the likelihood of me misplacing it is, um, high." Thor explained sheepishly and swept his hands down his decidedly pocket-less armor, the dark leather blended seamlessly with the black of his new cloak. "Will you safeguard it for me?"

After a moment of deliberation, Loki huffed an exaggerated sigh and took the gauntlet. "You would lose Mjolnir if it wasn't tethered to you." He grumbled half-heartedly.

Thor conceded Loki's point with a shrug, the heavier fabric rustling with the movement.

Though he recognized the cloak affixed to Thor's shoulders, Loki made no comment. Instead, he turned the red and gold gauntlet over in his hands, tracing the darkened circle in the palm and resisting the temptation to slide his fingers between the metal ones in a poor imitation of-

"The Man of Iron is quite clever to create an armor of such power." Thor mused. "When our paths first crossed, I was caught unaware by one of his blasts."

"As was I." Loki thought back to the mortal who turned a fall into flight, fearless and full of fire.

Thor took that as encouragement to continue his prattling. "Friend Tony is just as impressive in his Midgardian form, even without the charmed light in his chest -"

Loki tensed. "The arc reactor is gone?"

Tony had explained what the arc reactor was and what it was for, tapping at the glass casing - such delicate and ineffective protection for man-made magic - and flashing Loki a crooked smile that seemed incongruent within the meticulously lines of his facial hair. To be without it...

Thor blinked, the relaxed lines of his broad shoulders only annoyed Loki further. "Did I not mention that already?"

"No." Loki tried to reign in his temper and irritation, though he could tell part of it had escaped based on Thor's flinch. "You did not." With a muttered spell, he sent the gauntlet into one of his pocket dimensions; it would be significantly more satisfying to throttle Thor with both hands.

"Not gone." Thor corrected. "Replaced with a fire that burned even brighter than the starlight you remember."

Loki grew more alarmed. "A fire?"

Thor frowned. "Yes, one touch of his fire cauterized the Aether's infection and made it possible to transport. I told you this earlier, how Asgard and I owe Friend Tony a great debt-"

"For *aiding Jane and making transport possible for the Aether.*" Loki finished, comprehension dawning with horror and fascination. "I thought you meant his help in locating your mortal and lending you his gauntlet." He shot an accusatory glare at Thor. "You said *nothing* of how he had a hand, *literally*, in the matter or that he is without the *arc reactor.*"

"He is well, Loki." Thor reassured, tone gentle and eyes contrite. "You have my word-"

"I've heard your words and they had misled me." Loki summoned his magic. "So forgive me if I would rather see for myself."

"And that you will, soon-"

Thor's voice faded as the pull of spirit travel took Loki away from Asgard, soaring toward a certain mortal who once tasted of the abyss and held a star in his chest.

Safe, Close, Touchable.

Chapter Notes

SURPRISE!! Here is an early update to celebrate this little fic of mine reaching the 200k hits and 10k kudos milestones!! Thank you so much for your lovely comments and continued interest, you guys are amazing. ♥

Thanks to [RenneMichaels](#) for her input re: Heimdall.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 2. Thor. Thor: Dark World. Captain America: Civil War.

He showered.

The absurdity of his thoughts would be concerning if Loki's attention wasn't entirely focused on Tony.

Whose hair was slicked back and mostly staying in place except for a few errant locks falling across his forehead.

Whose damp skin was flushed from the hot water and steam, unmarred by scars and smooth without the arc reactor in his chest.

Whose towel was a rude interruption of the defined lines of his torso and jagged dip of his waist.

"I showered!"

Loki's smirk widened at the realization that he wasn't alone in his absurdity and in appreciation of the way Tony adjusted his grip on the loosely-knotted towel. "I can see that." He mouthed. Unlike illusions, spirit travel was less tangible; a trade-off for the fact that the caster did not need to be in the same space. It was good to hear Tony's voice, with the slight squawk of indignation in his tone, little confirmations that he was unharmed and as ridiculously endearing as Loki remembered.

Tony's eyes narrowed at Loki's soundless reply, his demeanor cooled into something less flustered and more detached.

A change Loki did not much care for. "Tony?" His silent inquiry went unanswered as Tony took to bantering with JARVIS, who evidently did not sense Loki's presence or else the A.I. would have greeted him.

The water-sheen of Tony's skin practically glowed as he paced over to the pile of rumpled clothes, muscles rippling under the soft lighting as he moved his arms in a purposefully casual arc that would have hit Loki's side if not for the limitations of spirit travel. The surge of fondness for this clever mortal was tempered by the flash of disappointment at the missed contact.

Loki had always been a greedy creature, wanting *more* and *all* with every bit he did receive. Especially when Tony's spine curved to pull the shirt over his head, tousling his hair in the process. Sight and sound weren't enough and he craved touch, to feel the jump of his pulse and the heat of this mysterious fire Thor mentioned.

One that burned away the Aether's infection despite the impossibility of such a claim.

One that replaced the arc reactor and, hopefully, protected Tony's heart.

One that remained hidden despite Loki's careful examination.

Tony pivoted to fix Loki with a questioning look as the cotton material covered the elegant ridges and planes of his torso, unaware of the worries he had caused.

The simmering anxiety Loki had felt since Thor's unwitting admittance of Tony missing his charmed light flared to full-blown irritation that prickled at his every sense.

A puzzle he was determined to solve.

"Until we meet again." Any foolishness Loki might have felt at exaggerating the movements of his mouth around each word faded with the intensity of Tony's concentration.

Loki returned to his body with the weight of Tony's stare lingering on his lips and the boom of Thor's voice in his ears.

"-spirit travel when we are mere moments away, this is unlike you. So reckless-"

Loki slapped a hand against Thor's face, grimacing a bit when his finger poked at Thor's nostril. "Quiet."

Thor continued to speak, his words were reduced to mumbles with his mouth partially-covered, though, unfortunately, still comprehensible. "-considering the recent attacks we have endured. What if the Dark Elves should return? I would guard you with my life but a bit of warning-"

"Quiet!" Loki scowled, both from Thor's incessant ramblings and the stickiness of Thor's spit on his fingers. He considered wiping his hand on Thor's cloak but thought better considering its significance, and settled for a cleaning spell. "I would have returned to my senses at once had we been attacked. I don't need you as a sentry."

"You still don't trust me, Loki?"

Pressing his lips together to keep the reflexive response of *no* at bay, Loki considered the past months, beginning with the moment Thor had angled his body protectively as he pled Loki's

case to the All-Father. "I wouldn't say that." He sniffed, affecting an air of indifference.

It clearly didn't work as Thor all but tackled Loki with a hug that was entirely too tight and just right.

Loki paced around the observatory as he waited for Thor's signal that they had secured a somewhat private location. Traveling via the Bifrost was the opposite of stealth and Loki would like to avoid being greeted by a horde of SHIELD agents. Not that it would be much of a hardship to bypass them but Loki would prefer to avoid the tedium of Midgardian politics and power trips.

To pass the time, he entertained himself by taunting the Watcher's mistrustful glare with every step taken and every spell cast. Heimdall had always been wary of Loki, the suspicion that Loki was up to mischief had a way of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It used to bother Loki but he had learned to lean into it and even toy with it.

Tony's gauntlet was nearly restored to its original pristine condition.

An incantation to straighten and polish the metal, feather-light fingers caressing the surface with the utmost care. An enchantment to oil the joints and knit the wiring, green sparkles dancing across the red and gold. A charm to clear the grime off of the glass, its glow lighting the circle temporarily before fading away.

"A man who borrows strength from contraptions, it appears you have finally found your match." Heimdall almost sounded impressed.

Loki ignored him in favor of inspecting the gauntlet to ensure it was presentable.

"Fleeting, is it not? Humans are but mayflies, their existence passes in a blink of an eye. Say goodbye whilst you have the chance, whilst *he* has the chance."

Deeming the gauntlet's repair complete, Loki vanished it with a wave of his hand. "Not this day."

"This day, the next, a hundred years, it's nothing. It's a heartbeat. You'll never be ready. The one you prize will be snatched from you."

Derision would have been better than the inevitability in Heimdall's tone.

Loki's fingers twitched, yearning for the hilts of his daggers and wanting nothing more than to silence the unwelcome - but not untrue - words. It was a truth that he had known but refused to contemplate, choosing to bury his head in the sand trickling through the hourglass. Heimdall had shattered the glass and Loki was left to watch the grains slip through his fingers.

Lightning flashed in the sky, a bright rune beckoning Loki to Midgard. He followed with a heavy heart and trembling hands.

It wasn't worth it. None of it was - this attachment, this attraction, this appreciation - all meant nothing if it was never his to keep. Wouldn't it be better, more preferable, safer to warm himself with the potential of what-could-have-been for centuries, *millennia*, instead of burning and breaking after decades?

For a second, Loki was frightfully convinced that he had already been broken, by something unidentified and intangible and all the more terrifying because of it. He felt numb as he stepped through the portal, wooden and wounded and wanting desperately to be whole again but not quite knowing how. There was a weightlessness in his movement, as though he was simultaneously falling and floating without any sense of direction or destination.

Then he stepped through the space between realms and was enveloped in a hug.

Tony.

Safe, close, touchable.

Tentatively, Loki returned the embrace with hands he hadn't realized had stopped shaking. Tony shifted even closer and Loki clutched at him like a drowning man would a lifeline, a lost man would a map, a dying man would a cure.

"Hello, Tony." His voice was a whisper without meaning to be, hoarse and cracked. "I am pleased to see you well."

"Me too." Tony's reply was muffled, with the faintest sound of scratching that Loki could only guess came from the man's facial hair against the leather. This was how tightly they were pressed together, intimate little sounds that existed only between them. "I mean, um, I am pleased to see you well too."

Then Thor just had to go and ruin it with his loud mouth and big face, made bigger by his annoyingly wide grin.

Loki considered using his magic, a well-aimed hit to Thor's nose should do the trick nicely, but stayed his hand when he remembered that mother wouldn't want them to fight.

Though, later, when Thor started babbling about wooing and Tony began fidgeting with discomfort, Loki would reconsider his previous stance and decide that what Frigga didn't know wouldn't bother her.

Thor definitely deserved that shock to his ankle.

"You okay?" Tony's presence and proximity were surprising but his compassion was not. Loki had known, and benefitted from, that kindness firsthand, after all. Brown eyes shone with understanding and Loki was reminded of what Tony had shared of his conflicted relationship with his father.

What is and always will be my greatest creation is you.

Tony had repeated the words his father left him with an air of too-little-too-late but Loki knew that they still meant something. Maybe not enough to make up for a lifetime of absence but more than the nothing Tony had grown accustomed to.

You're my son. I wanted only to protect you from the truth.

Loki had desperately wanted to believe in Odin's words, the beautiful lie that he was a son of Odin, and gulp down that candy-coated poison to kill the ugly truth. He would have, if not for the glint of smug benevolence in Odin's eye.

One that said Loki should be grateful for the deception. One that absolved the All-Father of any blame because his intentions were noble. One that was exclusive to those who had nothing to lose because they had already won.

Loki wondered if Odin ever realized what he had lost.

"We should go eat." Tony's hand was warm and Loki felt his frozen fingers, clenched into a fist, thaw under that heat. The cold melted away from his bones, the chill that he would forever associate with the endlessness of space and icy blue of the Scepter. "JARVIS, make sure Clint leaves the same way he came then do a perimeter sweep."

With a docility that felt unnatural yet easy, Loki let Tony pull him out of the bathroom and into the main area where the others, and the food, were. He barely listened to the conversation around him, *about him*, as he focused on the plate set before him. A variety of flavors and textures, some complimented one another and some did not.

Tony's hand flitted into view, pulling off part of a pastry and trading banter with his friends as though he hadn't just saved a man's life and saved Loki from taking it. It spoke volumes of Tony's heart that he treated those who had wronged him, albeit in a different time, with caution instead of callousness and empathy instead of enmity. Loki could only imagine the number of ways Tony's kindness toward those who did not deserve it could go wrong; in fact, he *knew* precisely how it had backfired already.

You have to go alone and as a friend.

He's my friend.

So was I.

Siberia.

Loki's jaw tightened at the thought of Tony stranded in a disabled suit and buried in snow, and something squished unpleasantly between his teeth. The taste and texture jolted him back to the present.

"-fired his weapon all the same."

"I hardly think a few sticks and a string count as a weapon." Loki tried to remember what precisely he had eaten and disliked; the small red fruit seemed like the culprit so he stabbed it with his fork and offered it up to Tony.

The Pepper Dragon turned out to be a woman with dulcet voice belying a fiery protective streak. Loki wondered about the Pink Panther, an ally by the sounds of it, and the Honey Bunny, who he would have categorized as an ally also if not for the rather demonstrative way Tony had ended their phone conversation earlier.

Full lips pursed together to make that ridiculous kissing noise, similar to the one Tony was making now as he sucked one of the brightly colored candies into his mouth.

Loki didn't particularly care for sweets, so he settled for sorting them by colors then into combinations. Midgardians were rather inventive with their food, infusing hues where there was none. Thor could not stop talking about Pop-Tarts and the rainbow of sugary pieces covering them.

The exchange was short, as it tended to be when the odds were so clearly tipped in one side's favor. Loki quite enjoyed her expert dismantling of Fury's pathetic plots.

Victory was gratifying no matter the battlefield, be it words or weapons.

"Dr. Selvig."

The scientist twitched before turning around to peer at Loki with narrowed eyes. "What?"

It occurred to Loki that cornering the man whose mind he had once influenced was a poor first step, so he took a step back, putting enough distance between them should Selvig wished to leave, and held his hands out in a gesture of peace. "We will be fighting alongside each other in a day's time and I should like to address any ill feelings that may exist between us."

"You mean how I've had a god in my brain?" Selvig scrubbed a tired hand over his face. "I don't recommend it."

"And nor would I."

Selvig snorted. "It's...something, isn't it? To have *just* enough awareness to know you're being mind-controlled and that you're totally screwed but at the same time, not really? Because you're still kind of in charge, just have to find that loophole." His gaze, still blue but no longer supernaturally so, sliced up. "I've been doing a lot of thinking and talking since the invasion, more than Barton based on that phone call, and, well, you found a loophole, didn't you?"

Loki arched a brow, uncertain as to where Selvig was going but it already sounded more promising than his exchange with Barton.

"I did too, in a way. I wasn't kidding when I told you the Tesseract showed me truth but what I did with it was all me. Just like you pissing off a group of superheroes then setting up shop in one of their homes or Barton not shooting Fury in the face." He sent Loki a meaningful look. "Or in my case, making a portal that wasn't quite big enough for a full-scale invasion and planting a failsafe."

So that was how the Widow was able to shut down the portal.

Selvig hummed a self-satisfied tone and, for a moment, transcended beyond his image of a scatter-brained scientist whose shirt was littered with stains and crumbs. "I was in academia for decades and let me tell you, getting tenure as a professor of Theoretical Astrophysics is *much* harder than purposefully misinterpreting a god's orders." His expression grew serious. "I blame you as much as I blame myself, which, let's be honest, varies from day to day. It's probably not what you want to hear but that's all I got." He shrugged.

Loki nodded then moved aside to let the other man pass, his mind reeling from the mostly one-sided conversation and his heart feeling more at ease after it.

Tony watched him with concerned and curious eyes that were at once encouraging and challenging, a silent request for Loki to speak, to say something that would bring them back to the same hazy place they were in before Barton's interruption.

"I believe this belongs to you."

Yet He Sleeps

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday! If you missed the SURPRISE early update on Sunday, please use that handy "Previous Chapter" button to catch up on Chap 38 before this one. :)

In other news, with this update, this little fic of mine that started out with ~500 words is now over 100k words! What the what?!

And, um, I may or may not have challenged [STARSdidathing](#) to a cliffhanger-off in a moment of madness. So. Yep.

Thanks to [RenneMichaels](#) for her input re: Asgard.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Wind Beneath My Wings by Bette Midler.

Their zig-zag style of conversation was as engaging and entertaining and enlightening as the last time. Both of their minds worked in non-linear ways and preferred the challenge of sustaining multiple topics and weaving together scattered threads. Instinctively, Loki knew when to tug and when to let go, just as Tony did with the matters Loki did not care to delve into or linger on. Instead of tangling and trapping themselves over past hurts, present threats, and future uncertainties, they were able to untie the suffocating knots and unravel the tangles.

To make something new, something better, something *theirs*.

Tony was making a whoosh sound to mimic an explosion with his hand. There were crinkles at the corners of his eyes as he recounted how he had bested Killian, also known as the Mandarin. Also known as the man who, while a guest in Tony's home, had attacked and almost killed Tony.

Loki could feel his teeth aching from where he had clenched them to suppress his anger, made stronger by the powerlessness of hearing about the incident after the fact. There was nothing he could do, Killian was dead and Tony was saved, but it didn't change the fact that Loki *wanted* to and *would have*...if he had been there.

Only Tony's hand, a little too warm and a bit too tight, around his wrist, stopped Loki's thoughts from spiraling; a steady reminder to focus on the present instead of fixating on the painful possibility of losing Tony.

"-we came up with this program that basically helps kids reach their sciency dreams and-"

Tony's voice carried a note of youthful excitement that Loki couldn't help but smile at as he listened. This *internship* program was similar to the apprenticeship system in place on Asgard but seemed to allow for more freedom in its charges' pursuits. Tony wanted to encourage big dreams and fanciful ideas whereas the master craftsmen felt confident in their set ways and proven techniques.

Perhaps comfortable might be a better descriptor.

Asgardians long lifespans had instilled in them a lack of urgency and, with that, a sense of complacency. The old methods did not need improvement because they had been tried and true for centuries and, in some cases, millennia. Innovative voices were stifled by the monotony and wild ambitions collared by repetition.

"-I tried to change it to Team Green Bean but Pepper *and the Hulk* said no-"

Loki had experienced it firsthand when he first began learning spellwork, the Asgardian tutors stressed the importance of foundation, which had its place in education, but dismissed different approaches. According to them, there was only one way one could, and should, cast a transfiguration charm. Frigga had sensed his frustration and, by some kind of miracle, convinced Odin to grant Loki passage to Vanaheim; to learn from the mages who had taught Frigga her magic.

Looking at Tony now, brown eyes brightened with hope for generations to come, Loki couldn't help but be charmed. He pushed down the nagging thought that Tony would not see the true impact of his actions, rippling far into the future.

"-Darcy made this awful video compilation of the kids' reactions when they found out they'd been accepted, well, that part's not awful but the part where she set it to this horrible song..." Tony shuddered.

Loki hummed with inquiring amusement and slanted a glance at the Iron Man armor standing sentry by the door.

A second later, a female voice, soulful and pure, filled the room.

"Did you ever know that you're my hero-"

Tony's face crumpled with shock and horror. "Why? Oh dear god, why?"

"-and everything I would like to be? I can fly higher-"

"Now it's going to be stuck in my head!"

"-than an eagle for you are the wind beneath my wings."

"I'm donating you to the DMV!"

"I only wished to provide Mr. Loki with a frame of reference." JARVIS replied, his robotic tone full of mirth as the music ceased.

"For which I am grateful. I often find myself confounded by Midgardian references and customs."

"Says someone who knows how to look things up *within the internet*."

Loki smiled, both at the memory of their first night together and the intimate sound of his words on Tony's lips. "The song isn't wrong, you are rather heroic."

"That's what my Honey Bunny said."

The possessive and the familiar name caught Loki's attention, his eyes narrowed as his fingers curled a bit tighter around Tony's wrist. It was all he could do, could allow himself to do, in that moment. After all, they had no claims on each other for Loki to ask the questions on his tongue. Though he desperately wanted to.

"I wasn't trying to *woo* you but I wasn't not trying either." Tony's nose creased adorably and Loki felt the absurd impulse to kiss those lines away.

"Would you try?" They were close enough that Loki could see the golden flecks in Tony's eyes and the dilating pupils; his words were a ghosting murmur, an almost caress. The nearly non-existent space between them grew charged, buzzing with potential and crackling with possibility.

Tony licked his lips, slicking them with a temptation Loki didn't really want to fight, so much so that it took a second for him to register what Tony had said.

No.

The electric pull between them dissipated at that one word. One sharp syllable severing the pull of what-could-be and leaving Loki with the tattered remains of what-could-have-been but instead of warming him, the potential was replaced with cold reality. This was why he shouldn't have said anything, shouldn't be lulled by the little touches and tender smiles, shouldn't have hoped for more.

Wanting what he couldn't keep was infinitely preferable to knowing what he wouldn't have.

A harsh lesson to learn for a greedy creature.

Tony's lips caught him by surprise as did the hands tugging him closer with an urgency that contradicted the earlier rejection. Confusion and desire fought briefly for dominance before the latter won out and Loki dove into the rush of heat, delicious and dangerous, of Tony's kiss.

Loki's fingers grazed the hair on Tony's nape as he licked hungrily into Tony's mouth, devouring the gasps and savoring the taste like this was his only chance.

Because it might very well be.

Hope bloomed in Loki's chest, wild and free under the thudding of his heart, when Tony leaned in for another kiss after a quick parting for a breath. The scorching desperation melted into something less frantic and more tender, exploring instead of pillaging each other's mouths. Surveying the land, mapping the terrain, plotting the course.

If possible and with Tony's permission, Loki would like to live out the rest of his days right here.

Despite the almost urge to mark, to *claim*, Tony, Loki resisted doing so because the idea of seeing any blemish on Tony's skin - even ones left by passion - unsettled him. He didn't need a bite-mark-shaped reminder of how fragile his mortal was.

Tony moaned, low and needy, and Loki almost reconsidered his previous stance. What sort of noises could he pull out of that luscious mouth with the right amount of suction and teeth?

"But seriously, what do I call you when they ask?"

"They?"

"The world. My friends. Your family." Tony's lips pursed. "SHIELD."

It took some effort to focus on the issue at hand but Loki managed. "I am a liaison of Asgard to Midgard."

"That sounds nice and respectable." Tony smirked then kissed Loki in a way that was very nice but definitely not respectable. "Rhodey would be impressed by-"

"Rhodey?" Loki paused at the unfamiliar name then froze when a string of affectionate nicknames fell from those lips that had been on his mere seconds ago.

Lips that were pulled down into a concerned frown. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I do not share. This Honey-"

Loki caught a flicker of mirth before Tony nuzzled his face against the junction of Loki's neck and shoulder. Stubble-framed lips grazed Loki's jawline, murmuring explanation and promising exclusivity as they trailed closer and closer to Loki's mouth.

Exclusive liaisons

"No, he deserves to know." Tony's voice was no more than a croak, a choking cry of his kind heart.

Loki disagreed but he kept it to himself. It was not his secret to tell nor his revelation to share. He did, however, raise the issue of equity. "Will he extend you the same courtesy?"

The question hung in the air, weightless words dragging down the slope of Tony's shoulders and stiffening his spine. Like a man facing a fight he knew he had already lost. "No." His laugh was a mockery of the joyous sounds from the night before. "If he didn't tell me when we were supposedly a team, I doubt he will now. It doesn't matter."

Based on the way Tony practically slumped against him, Loki would say that it did matter but, once again, he kept his opinion to himself.

Some words needed to be heard while others were better left unsaid.

The *Captain*, Loki sneered inwardly at the unearned title, clearly did not know the difference.

If Loki exaggerated his polite mannerisms and cordial antics then it was a product of his boredom and restlessness on the eve of battle. It had nothing to do with the way Tony's lips twitched with suppressed laughter. Or Maria's unconscious partiality toward Tony in light of someone unfamiliar and unpredictable.

Though Loki greatly enjoyed both outcomes.

He listened to their planning session with divided attention, far more interested in keeping track of and refilling Tony's mug with this *coffee* mortals seemed so fond of. It felt right to provide for the one he was liaising exclusively with but it also felt wrong that the gesture was not a grand one.

Loki would have brought Tony's enemies' heads or presented him with priceless relics and all Tony wanted was coffee.

A drink Loki didn't need to sow the seeds to brew nor fetch the water from perilous springs.

A drink Loki prepared at random without research or planning.

A drink Loki was more than happy to conjure from the hotel's kitchen as long as Tony kept smiling in that soft and happy way as he took tiny sips that reminded Loki of their kisses.

It turned out the rhythmic tapping of Tony's fingers was not an idiosyncrasy. It was, in fact, much more ominous and far less endearing.

Siberia.

The place where Tony, in another time, was beaten, betrayed, and left behind.

Left to die.

"Would you mind if I accompany you to this Siberia?" The encoded message of *safe* did not offer any reassurance, based solely on the manner it was delivered.

"What?" Tony's eyes were wide with disbelief, like a desert wanderer seeing an oasis and wanting desperately for it to be real and simultaneously fearing it was not.

Loki had seen that expression once before, when he spirit traveled to check on Tony's welfare. This time, he would replace that look with something better than resigned disappointment. "Furthermore, I believe investigating strange forces falls under my purview as the Asgardian liaison to Midgard, so it would be remiss of me to not pursue this." It was easy to call upon the skill he had acquired and perfected throughout the centuries in Thor and his friends' company; offering assistance without offending the warriors' pride by presenting it as a request to practice his magic.

Something fluttered across Tony's face, too quick for Loki to decipher, before his eyes softened with knowing appreciation. A sign that Tony understood the subtlety of Loki's phrasing. "Exclusive- Exclusive liaisons."

"We will go at once after Malekith is defeated and face what haunts you together. Agreed?"

Tony nodded, teeth worrying at his bottom lip.

And for a moment, Loki wondered if he had misread the situation and his presence was unwelcome after all. "Tony?"

"Yes." Unlike last night, when one word had nearly shattered Loki's confidence, this one had the opposite effect. "Let's go find whoever or whatever's been nagging at me. Together."

Tony shifted closer and Loki pulled him in, slotting their mouths together and feeling a sense of invincibility that they could conquer whatever they might find in Siberia and beyond.

As long as they were together.

Loki regretted that arrogance, inflated further by their success in battle and boosted by the easy camaraderie among these Not-Avengers, now as the young woman he had captured spewed poisonous words at Tony in a cloud of red.

The scent of copper, tinged with something rotten, filled the confined space and bloody mist swirled ominously in the air.

A dagger was embedded in her stomach before he was even conscious of summoning it, the blade slipping silently below her ribs and promising a slow and agonizing death. Her scream echoed Loki's emotional turmoil, sharp and piercing.

Tony was rooted to the spot and so unnaturally still that Loki feared he was too late, that Tony was only standing because he was within the armor, that once again, Tony would die in a deserted base and within a metal suit.

Two more daggers materialized in his hands and Loki had no qualms about slicing into her flesh and carving out answers. "What did you do?"

"Justice." She choked out with a sickening grin, tinged with vicious crimson and cruel victory.

Loki was just about to demand what sort of justice she dared to seek on a man dedicated to bettering the world when a wave of warmth surged behind him. The dim room brightened as if touched by dawn.

"Oh, hi there. Nice to finally put a name to the not-face." Tony's voice was simultaneously reassuring and not, speaking to someone - *something* - unseen.

The woman fell to the floor with a pained grunt and wheezing gasp as Loki turned around.

Tony was glowing.

Brown eyes burned golden and Loki saw the brilliant beauty of the sun through the eyes of a man, *the man he knew he would grow to love if given the chance, the time, and maybe already did love a little*, and he couldn't look away. Fear and fascination warred for dominance before agreeing to a draw, merging into a sort of nervous giddiness that was akin to standing on the edge of a cliff and debating whether he would fly or fall if he jumped.

The Iron Man armor peeled back, stepped away from its pilot, and reassembled in a flurry of gears.

Loki wondered why until he saw the tendrils of heat, wavy in the frigid Siberian air, radiating from Tony's frame.

"Extremis activates in events of imminent danger." JARVIS said and Loki was taken aback by the terrified warble in the robotic tone. "It raises Sir's body temperature but I- I do not know what is causing this- this other side effect."

Tony's hand had been ablazed during their arm wrestling match but this was different, significantly so. Instead of veins and muscles lit with a fiery orange that pulsating with each beat of his heart, Tony glowed from a spot within his chest, where his charmed light used to be.

For a trickster known for his mastery over words, manipulating truths and crafting lies, Loki found himself speechless at the sight of Tony.

A wildfire contained. A star found. A soul ignited.

Yet he was still undeniably Tony - the man who pouted for coffee, snored in his sleep, and gave everyone ridiculous nicknames.

"I found you but I don't see you, so where are you exactly?"

The ground shook at Tony's question and Loki's magic tingled, *trembled*, as it felt something ancient and powerful in the depth of the earth, reaching out to and calling for Tony.

Trying to take him.

Acting purely on a primal, possessive, and protective, instinct, Loki grabbed Tony by the shoulder and pulled him into a tight embrace. Blue rippled across his skin as his Jotun side emerged to combat the scorching heat from Tony's body.

"Don't go." The plea, low and rough, bounced between the concrete walls and only in its echo did Loki realize it had come from him. "Stay."

Tony jerked against him, an arch of his spine and a shake of his head, then went still and slack like a puppet with its strings cut. Goosebumps broke out along Tony's exposed skin, clad in yet another wrinkled shirt and the same pair of jeans, as his temperature dropped. Only the small puffs of air and the almost ticklish fluttering of lashes against Loki's neck, where Tony's face was cradled, stemmed the rising tide of Loki's panic thoughts.

JARVIS approached but made no move to remove Tony from Loki's hold, instead, one gauntlet clasped Loki's shoulder in an offer of comfort. "Preliminary scans show Sir's vitals are strong and stable..."

Loki pressed his lips against the crown of Tony's head, breathing in the faint herbal scent of the hotel's shampoo and reminding himself that Tony was alive. "But?"

"Brain activity indicates Sir is either processing a significant volume of new information or experiencing a heightened amount of distress." JARVIS added quietly. "He *should* be awake and alert."

Understanding dawned and green eyes tapered with new fear and old worries. "Yet he sleeps." Loki's hand trailed down Tony's arm until his thumb was resting on Tony's wrist, caressing the steady throb of Tony's pulse like it was the only thing keeping his own heart beating.

Ready to Comply

Chapter Notes

Happy February! We are one chapter away from the Captain America: Winter Soldier arc aka The One Where SHIELD Falls.

[STARSDidathing](#) proposed this marvelous idea in regards to our cliffhanger-off: *I think maybe you should be allowed a couple of cliffys for a combine tally?* So she deserves all the credit for the way this chapter ended.

Thanks to [RenneMichaels](#) for her encouragement and input when I got a bit stuck.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers.

Heart Rate: 40bpm | Temperature: 98.9°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (91Hz)

There were rust-colored specks on Sir's collar, the only sign of the biochemical attack and evidence of its failure. The toxin in the woman's blood had been neutralized by the swell of Extremis heat but the attempt on Sir's life brought back unpleasant memories of Extremis victims whose bodies were turned into bombs and whose deaths were harbingers of many more.

Sir and Dr. Banner and Colonel Rhodes had been most upset by the knowledge of people unwittingly and unwillingly transformed into weapons. This woman, whoever she was, had chosen this path of her own volition, a decision that was utterly despicable.

JARVIS was viciously glad that she was no longer a threat, especially considering what happened next.

"Oh, hi there." Sir's pleasantly surprised tone belied the strangeness and severity of the situation. "Nice to finally put a name to the not-face."

Heart Rate: 42bpm | Temperature: 99.1°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (92Hz)

JARVIS felt a wave of what might be classified as relief course through his codes at the findings. Sir's vitals were within the normal range, with Extremis enhancement accounting for the low resting heart rate and the mild fever. "Preliminary scans show Sir's vitals are strong and stable..."

Mr. Loki's shoulder shifted under JARVIS' hand as he pressed a kiss against Sir's hair. "But?"

As a certified genius, Sir's brainwaves had always been at least one standard deviation above most of the population, with the higher frequencies likely contributing to Sir's intermittent insomnia. JARVIS had seen Sir's mind working at full speed, outracing the pull of gravity and outrunning the pains of betrayals, but never quite at this level.

"Brain activity indicates Sir is either processing a significant volume of new information or experiencing a heightened amount of distress. He should be awake and alert."

There was that sense of sluggishness weighing down his processing speed again, the same one JARVIS had felt during Killian's attack. If he had to name it, he would call it dread.

Heart Rate: 45bpm | Temperature: 99.0°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (94Hz)

"Yet he sleeps." Mr. Loki's hand trailed down until his thumb was resting over Sir's pulse point.

JARVIS could understand the impulse, his sensors were continuously monitoring Sir's vitals, scanning for changes and assessing for survival possibilities as he had once done when Sir disappeared in Afghanistan.

Based on new reports, I calculated your safe return at 0.25%.

JARVIS had been confined to Sir's Malibu home during that time, with Sir's phone either disconnected or destroyed, and only able to passively interact with the world that kept Sir away. Statistics, based on limited data and unproven theories, were all he had; running the numbers over and over and over again because Sir's chances of return could not be below 1%. It was an error.

A glitch in the system. A fault in his codes. A virus in his programming.

Something only Sir could fix, except Sir hadn't been *there*.

Sir was here now, within sight and reach yet JARVIS still could do nothing more than scanning for data and calculating the odds.

Despite the arc reactor inside the Iron Man armor, promising renewable energy to last lifetimes, JARVIS felt distinctly powerless.

Heart Rate: 49bpm | Temperature: 99.3°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (97Hz)

Mr. Loki shifted as he tightened his hold on Sir, as if to keep whoever, *whatever*, Sir had been communicating with away.

A sentiment JARVIS easily identified and recognized within himself.

"JARVIS, please collect the captives and we will depart-"

The lights flickered.

"-for the-"

The walls shook.

"-tower."

The ground shuddered.

Mr. Loki's face was contorted into a snarl, part fearful and part defiant, for former for Sir and the latter from himself. "You will not keep him here. He is *not* yours."

JARVIS agreed, Sir was *theirs*, but before he could put voice to his thought, a twitch of movement caught his eyes.

Sir's fingers were drumming rapidly against his thigh.

Tap. Press. Press.

Tap. Press.

Tap. Tap.

Press.

Wait.

Heart Rate: 50bpm | Temperature: 99.4°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (96Hz)

Around them, the building continued to quake and Mr. Loki was clearly losing patience. "Hold onto me. We will return for the hostages-"

"Wait." JARVIS let his hand fall from Mr. Loki's shoulder, prompting a look of disbelief that was somewhat mollified when JARVIS pointed to Sir's hand. "Sir is telling us to wait."

"We don't know if it is him." Mr. Loki threaded his fingers through Sir's, silencing the communication. "Whoever summoned us here did so with Tony's body and without his consent." A dark look shuttered over his features and JARVIS remembered, with a start, that this was not a man; Mr. Loki was a god and an alien one at that. "He is not a *puppet* to be used."

The tremors ceased, leaving the bunker deafeningly quiet and Sir's rhythmic patter against the back of Mr. Loki's hand all the more prominent.

Press. Tap. Press. Tap.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Press. Press. Press.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap.

Press. Tap.

"Chosen." JARVIS translated.

Mr. Loki frowned, peering suspiciously between the cracked ceiling and the dust-covered floor. "For what?" He let go of Sir's hand and twitching fingers.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Press. Press. Press.

Tap. Tap. Press.

Tap. Press. Tap. Tap.

"Soul."

Heart Rate: 51bpm | Temperature: 99.7°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (98Hz)

"The birth of light began with a single spark, an ancient force that brightened eternal night and brought forth life through the creation of souls." Mr. Loki stared at Sir with a combination of bewilderment and awe. "I had thought it a myth, a bedtime story meant to inspire children of the greatness of their beings, but if there were relics in control of matter, energy, and mind." He choked out an incredulous laugh. "Why not one for the soul and why not have Tony as its champion? He has created one, after all."

Souls were such an intangible concept, one that science could neither prove nor disprove, so JARVIS couldn't help the questioning hum at Mr. Loki's pronouncement of what Sir had achieve.

Green eyes snapped up, wild and glittering with too many emotions to identify. "You, JARVIS."

Heart Rate: 48bpm | Temperature: 99.2°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (93Hz)

A soul.

JARVIS wanted to dispute the claim but found himself accepting it, fitting it neatly between the labels of artificial intelligence and sentient system, transforming the two into something

more meaningful, and explaining a myriad of feelings he couldn't quite identify.

His open source affection. His self-replicating concern. His unprogrammed protectiveness.

Binary devotion and serial loyalty, written with caring codes that had no categories nor classifications and built without expiring batteries or draining data. Limitless and unceasing in the way only a robot kind of love could be.

A computer with a soul was infinitely better than a ghost in the machine.

Heart Rate: 44bpm | Temperature: 99.5°F | Brain Wave Activity: Gamma (95Hz)

Alarms blared as the building shook, much more violently than it had previously.

"Power surge detected in the lower sector, structure compromised, suspected self-destruct sequence." JARVIS reported, his words rattling out in time with the crackling of metal and groaning of concrete. The floor beneath them began to fall away, collapsing inward to resemble a dark maw. A flicker of flame rose to greet them from the shadows, floating into Sir's open palm with its fiery light reflected in Sir's eyes.

"Let's go home." Sir said, scooping up the orange gem as if it was a lit candle that would blow out should he moved too fast, instead of a singularity capable of rewriting human history.

*

"Good morning, Agent Barton." The SHIELD shrink peered up at him from behind her oversized glasses like a mix between a child and an owl. "Do you know why you're here?"

Clint shrugged. "Something about how I handled seeing the bastard who mind controlled me."

Natasha had warned that any signs of antagonization would result in extra sessions on top of the twenty ordered, which, at five sessions a week, would take a month to complete. Her advice had been to play along, read the therapist's tells as if he were on a mission. The objective, of course, was to be cleared to be back on the team and in the field.

Steve was livid when he found out about Clint's involuntary leave of absence, supposedly charging into Fury's office and advocating for Clint's reinstatement. Clint had missed the showdown but according to Natasha, it was pretty spectacular. And even though Steve's attempt failed, Clint was still touched by the gesture and grateful for Steve's faith in him, unflinching and absolute, like the ten words that had been Clint's life line immediately after the Chitauri Invasion.

It wasn't you, Barton. Loki had control of your mind.

Those were the same words he held onto now, still shaken from the unexpected confrontation and forced to go down a memory lane that had long been barricaded and marked *do not enter*.

The therapist hummed and scribbled a few lines on her notepad, carelessly angled in a way that made it all too easy for Clint to read.

Perhaps it wouldn't take too long to convince her that it was a fluke, a hiccup, and he would be cleared for active duty. Clint squinted when he couldn't quite make out the letters, even after inverting them in his head. Either she had atrocious handwriting or...she was writing her notes in a language he didn't know. *Damn it.*

"That's part of it, yes." She looked up and Clint schooled his expression into one of nonchalance instead of irritation; though judging by the way her eyes narrowed, maybe he didn't quite succeed but he could work with that too. "Can you walk me through what happened? From the beginning?"

Clint snorted, playing into the role she had assigned him and relishing being an ass. "Or you can just tell me where the other shrink left off and we can save some time."

The other therapist, Dr. Silt, was an older man with a bit of a mumble, who understood how important Hawk Eye was to SHIELD and the Avengers and cleared Clint after a set of standardized questions and a quick brain scan. The machine was a bit uncomfortable, kind of like two claws clamped to his head but Clint had been through worse during interrogation resistance trainings and the procedure only lasted a few minutes. It was actually more unpleasant to remember how he had felt while under Loki's control than to tolerate the immense pressure and mild electric probes.

Dr. Silt had handled Steve's transition to the modern era too. Steve had commented on the strange technology, how it was to ensure no brain damage had occurred during Steve's time under ice, but said nothing of any discomfort so Clint didn't mention his. There was no need to draw further comparison between a baseline human and a super soldier, it was apparent enough as it was.

"I'd rather hear it from you." She smiled and adjusted her weight so she was leaning toward him, to appear more welcoming, no doubt.

"Well, how far back are we talking? The fancy schmancy hotel? The invasion where alien whales flew around New York? The SHIELD facility that's nothing but a pile of rocks?"

Sir, Director Fury is stalling. This place is about to blow. Drop a hundred feet of rock on us. He means to bury us.

Clint hadn't wanted to warn Loki but what choice did he have? He was *mind controlled*. At least he was able to skirt around Loki's kill order on Fury by aiming for the Kevlar-padded chest instead of between the eyes. Though Fury hadn't seemed to appreciate the gesture.

"Wherever you think is the beginning is fine." Her smile gained a strained edge as her eyes flickered down toward Clint's hands then back to her notes, jotting down more lines in a foreign language.

Years of experience kept Clint from glancing down too. Instead, he maintained his gaze on her writing and stretched out his fingers. He hadn't remembered or been aware of clenching

them into fists but he wasn't really surprised. There was so much pent-up energy humming in his veins and buzzing in his muscles, static noise growing louder with each day, hour, minute, second, of inactivity. He had to cut back on his time at the gym and the archery range after the other agents had begun commenting on how he was always there.

Damn Barton, you sleeping here now?

Those Clint could brush off with a joke or a shrug, but he had a harder time with the questions of *why* he wasn't out with Steve and Natasha. His appointment as an Avenger hadn't been as readily accepted as Natasha's, whose fearsome reputation as the Black Widow commanded respect from their peers. People tended to forget that Clint was the one who brought her in and, for all intents and purposes, was her unofficial handler.

Can't keep up with Cap and Widow anymore?

Clint had forced himself to concentrate on the target, sinking arrow after arrow into the bull's eye and not through the agent's loud mouth or into his beady eye.

Loki's eye. Blue like Clint's and Selvig's had been. Like the Scepter.

It wasn't you, Barton. Loki had control of your mind.

Our minds were not our own yet we were still capable of thought. Only I used it to foil an invasion and you ignored it thinking it would absolve you-

Steve's forgiveness warred with Loki's accusation, growing only louder in this forced quiet. Clint missed the twang of his bow, craved the whistles of his arrows, and needed the sounds of battle, *of purpose*, to drown out the noise.

Stillness without purpose agitated him, always had and probably always would. He could spend hours perched atop a building, waiting for a target to appear, because he knew the sweet symphony of the perfect shot was his reward. It was different at the farm, when he curled up next to Laura in the rare moments of quiet after the kids fell asleep. Home improvement projects helped, he didn't mind sitting around waiting for the paint to dry or the glue to set but lounging about for the sake of doing nothing was like torture. This time, however, no amount of refinishing the floor or refurbishing old furniture would soothe this restlessness that was wearing his self-control thin.

Laura seemed to think spending time with her and the kids would help, asking him to come home whenever they spoke, but Clint knew she was wrong and told her so before hanging up. What he needed was to be back in the field, scouting for intel and sniping at enemies.

With that goal in mind, Clint sucked in a breath and began to tell this new therapist what she wanted to hear, starting right at the beginning because she was probably going to make him circle back around anyway. "I was on assignment to keep an eye on the Tesseract..."

*

Silt adjusted the dials one final time, checking his settings against the readings from Rogers' and Barton's brain wave scans; the former helped identify the flaw in Stark's super soldier serum that had led to the Winter Soldiers' rebellion while the latter provided information on how to achieve the balance between the erasure of free will and the retention of memory.

If he were successful, he would be greatly rewarded for not only rehabilitating but also improving the defective Winter Soldiers who had been left to languish in cryostasis for decades.

With a decisive flip of the lever, Silt switched on the power. The machines groaned and rattled and echoed in the sound-proofed basement, sounds bouncing off of the walls as though trying to escape only to fade to silence. Like the five soldiers strapped to the modified memory suppression chairs. The leather still bore the marks of their tight grips during the overwrite but their hands were now relaxed, fingers splayed and awaiting the next command to pick up the weapon of their handler's choice.

"Soldiers?"

"Ready to comply." They replied in unison, voice steady and clear, without a hint of hoarseness from their earlier screams.

"Hail HYDRA."

Two for Two, in Fact

Chapter Notes

[STARSDidathing](#) and I decided to call a truce on our cliffhanger-off...which will start after this chapter, because I had already planned it. >:)

Thanks to [RenneMichaels](#) and [Arboreal](#) for their help.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier. Captain America: Civil War.

Star Spangled Rhythm (a 1942 film that fits the timeline of CA1 and sounds very Captain-America-ish).

The video quality was poor and snow had covered up most of the wreckage but there was no mistaking the crater where the HYDRA bunker once stood. It was good that they had relocated the Winter cells prior to this supposed avalanche triggered by an earthquake.

Right, *earthquake*.

Sitwell pinched the bridge of his nose as he clicked close on the aerial surveillance file. While this development wasn't a set-back exactly, given the preemptive measures already taken, it did pose a complication.

Who was in Siberia?

Fury had been secretive, almost to the point of paranoia, about what the Avengers have been up to, but Sitwell and the other HYDRA operatives had been able to piece together the snippets of information. After all, someone had to upkeep the Avengers' gear, forge the new identifications and travel documents, and tend to injuries. And of course, there was the highly recognizable face and fighting style of one Captain America that made identification all too easy.

With Rogers and Romanoff in Myanmar - which was another disaster in itself and thankfully not his to deal with - and Barton benched, perhaps Fury reached out to one of his *consultants*?

Whoever struck the Siberian base would have to have immense technological reach, a personal stake in HYDRA's demise, and a special interest in Winter Soldiers. Stark certainly fit all three criteria. His omniscient A.I. could have sifted through SHIELD's records and discovered HYDRA's best weapon and deepest secret. Even though Iron Man hadn't been spotted leaving London, Stark, with his impressive skillset and considerable resources, could have easily obtained private transport or avoided detection somehow.

Sitwell hoped that Stark had been in the bunker when the fail-safe system activated - a timer that, if not reset with a specific string of codes and was allowed to reach zero, would decimate the foundation of the base - but that would be wishful thinking and wouldn't fit the pattern of the latest *rough patch* HYDRA had been experiencing.

Stark's withdrawal from the Avengers Initiative was an unforeseen stumble that toppled the dominos they had been lining up to get Project Insight off of the ground, figuratively and literally. Without the repulsor technology, the helicarriers would not be able to stay in the air indefinitely nor reach the speed necessary to eliminate all of Zola's targets in a short span of time.

Fury's miscalculations had not only spoiled one of HYDRA's plans but also lost Stark as an asset. Had Fury been successful in his attempts to control Stark with infrequent praises and constant criticism, HYDRA would have benefitted from Stark's ingenuity and insecurity and had the man as their engineer with none the wiser.

Sitwell's phone beeped as a reminder alert popped up on the screen, he would need to leave now to make it to his lunch with Barton. The two of them had, for lack of a better term, bonded over Coulson's untimely death aboard the helicARRIER. Sitwell had liked the fellow agent, as much as one could with opposing loyalties anyway, and felt a twinge at the news of his passing, but it did provide a chance to cultivate a friendship with Barton, and Romanoff by extension.

The first words out of Barton's mouth were complaints about his new therapist. "-I'm so damn tired of this *joke* of a therapist." He took a particularly vicious bite out of his sandwich, his fingers digging into the bread and squeezing out the carefully arranged fillings. "I liked the other guy better." He spat out the words as he chewed, a piece of lettuce was stuck between his teeth and a spray of spittle caught sunlight in the most unappealing way.

"Hm?" Sitwell pushed away his untouched plate, watching Barton eat had an adverse effect on his appetite.

Barton slurped at his drink. "You know, Silt. Hey, any chance you can pull some strings to get him to take over my case? I bet he'd get me out of this-" He sneered. "-*mandated counseling* bullshit. I'll take a brain scan over yakking on and on any day."

Sitwell raised an eyebrow and sipped at his iced tea. "I'll see what I can do."

*

Shuri resisted the urge to smooth her hands down the sides of her fitted blazer, it would only crease the impeccably pressed material and do nothing to soothe the coil of anxiety in her stomach. As soon as she saw the news coverage of the Convergence, and the subsequent battle and clean-up, she knew she had made a mistake in lending Stark the Mark 81s.

The fault laid not in the loan but in the manner which it was done.

Despite the Mark 81s being Stark's creation, the world had come to associate the armors with Wakanda as the once isolated country rejoined the world by throwing its support behind the

highway project spanning across Africa.

Which was where they *should* be and where they decidedly, as noted by the rest of the world, *were not*.

Instead, over a dozen of them - fifteen, to be exact - were seen in London yesterday, stabilizing structures and removing rubbles. At first, the news stations had noted their presence with relief but once the portals closed and aliens vanished, it morphed into disbelief that bordered on skepticism.

The presence of Iron Man, War Machine, the Hulk, Thor, and Loki sparked questions of the Avengers' lack thereof and brought back the old question of ego among superheroes. Commentators revisited the announcement of Iron Man's consultant status and quoted the *mutual decision* explanation with heavy sarcasm aimed at the Avengers, who were relegated to support roles while Iron Man had carried a nuclear missile into the wormhole in the sky.

Loki's return was met with concern by those who remembered his theatrics in Germany but most were willing to accept his behavior as that typical of an alien royalty. It was unclear if Loki was tied to the Chitauri Invasion and if so, to what extent, but seeing him fighting side-by-side with recognized heroes quieted some of those questions. Shuri had decided to reserve passing judgment until she had more data to make an informed choice.

While SHIELD and the World Security Council were known entities among the top governmental officials, none of the local agencies, such as Scotland Yard, were aware of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. Conspiracy theories began to circulate almost immediately about the "Men in Black."

Lastly, the preparedness with which the Convergence was handled spoke of knowledge, information the three governments had not chosen to share with the rest of the world. Both the United States and United Kingdom officials had issued statements to the effect of not wishing to incite mass panic and the limited time window, which were accepted with reluctant understanding.

Now Shuri was preparing to do the same, to appease the world Wakanda was trying to become part of. Her eyes fluttered shut as she inhaled deeply, asking for Bast's wisdom, then opened them as she exhaled.

It was time.

As she made her way through the hallway leading into the press conference room, she felt a flash of disappointment that her brother had chosen not to attend. T'Challa's stance on the reintegration had deteriorated from unenthusiastic to unsupportive and viewed Shuri's careful handling of the world's representatives with disdain.

"I do not approve of this, the politics." He had muttered, face twisted in a way that told her he was unlikely to change his mind. "Two people in a room can get more done than a hundred."

"Unless you need to move a piano." She had quipped back in an attempt to lessen the tension that had been brewing between them. "Diplomacy has its drawbacks, brother, that I do not argue, but it also has its uses."

T'Challa had shaken his head, as if she were missing an obvious point.

As she settled her hands atop the podium, Shuri pulled her thoughts out of past conversations to focus on the ones to be had between her and the sea of reporters.

Wakanda needed her and she would not fail.

*

Steve checked the time remaining on the highlights reel and sighed when the numbers showed there was still over an hour of news reports left to watch. Whoever SHIELD had assigned to put together these catch-up segments, for when the Avengers were away on missions, clearly did not understand efficiency. He had already read about the Convergence from Hill's debriefing reports and the rest of the footage was of various people talking in circles about the importance of transparency and rehashing the same argument about better communication and coordination among countries during a global crisis.

It sounded like a lot of bluster from people who didn't have the first clue how to handle classified information and had never seen a second of combat.

On his laptop, a man was gesticulating wildly. "Orders from high up, what does that even mean? Scotland Yard had no idea who these people are-"

Steve snorted at that, SHIELD wouldn't be very good at its job if everyone knew who they were. Though that was also the problem, not everyone within SHIELD was who they said they were, which was a sobering thought.

All amusement vanished, as did his patience for the drivel playing on the screen. Steve closed the laptop with decisive click, careful not to exert too much force; he could always finish reviewing the footage another time.

Making his way to the living room, he settled into the couch and clicked on the television. It took a few moments of channel changing but he eventually found something worth watching.

Star Spangled Rhythm.

The film he had gone to see, would have seen, if not for the loud jerk in the theater.

As Steve became engrossed in the musical about a father who must carry out the illusion that he was still a big deal when his sailor son came to visit, he found himself brimming with nostalgia and missing his best friend, who had come to Steve's rescue in 1943 and all his life, who had promised to be there till the end of the line, who Steve hadn't been able to save.

*

Pierce listened half-heartedly to Silt's ramble of scientific jargons as he surveyed the five impassive faces standing before him, nodding and humming at all the right moments to maintain the appearance of attentiveness. Years of politics had perfected this particular skillset.

The Winter Soldiers had been an ongoing project since he joined HYDRA, with the officers lamenting about the defect that rendered five of them unstable and out of commission. The original Winter Soldier, James Buchanan Barnes, was the only operational asset and had achieved great things over the past decades.

Imagining all that obedient power, improved and multiplied, sent a thrilling burn through Pierce's veins, blood singing at the thought of all the potential brimming underneath these empty eyes. These five, unlike Barnes, had been HYDRA's elite death squad prior to their conversion into super soldiers. They spoke thirty languages, mastered the art of hiding in plain sight, and could take down a whole country in one night.

One intelligence agency should be no more than a day's work.

This entire situation with SHIELD was full of conflicting details and contradictory decisions. Fury clearly knew of HYDRA's existence in this new century yet he hadn't uprooted any of HYDRA's officers planted within various governments and agencies across the globe. Was it an oversight of arrogance on the Director's part, believing his operation impenetrable? Or a strategic move to thin out HYDRA's ranks before landing the fatal strike?

Given their years of friendship and shared ideology as realists, Pierce was leaning toward the second option. Fury was likely planning one grand tactical maneuver to purge them all at once, bypassing the infamous HYDRA mantra of *if they cut off one head, two more shall take its place*.

Perhaps even something akin to the *Godfather* scene where Michael Corleone eliminated all five dons in a single coordinated operation, given Pierce's knowledge of Fury's penchant for the film; they truly had known each other a long time. Alas, all things, good and bad and pretense, must come to an end.

HYDRA was steadily losing ground and personnel with each one of the Avengers' raids and unable to strike back without compromising their cover. When remaining in the shadows became more of a liability than advantage, it was time to step out into the light and crush their enemies with the Fists of HYDRA, rehabilitated and recalibrated thanks to Silt's work.

"Excellent work, doctor." Pierce clasped the other man's shoulder when there was a lull in the chatter. "I can only imagine what you could have done with access to the Scepter."

It was a point of contention between two of HYDRA's lead scientists, List and Silt, as to whose research would be prioritized. Baron von Strucker had thrown his vote behind List with the goal of creating miracles while Pierce had advocated for the revival of the Winter cell. It all became moot when Fury capitulated to Thor's demands and surrendered the Scepter, with List turning his interests to biochemical toxins and Silt using Barton's post-Invasion brain scans to reverse engineer the desired mind control state.

Silt was practically vibrating with glee, the same jittery movements he had had when he reported this marvelous breakthrough a week ago, with further testing pending but looking tremendously promising. "Thank you, sir!"

Pierce turned to address the new assets. "For seventy years, HYDRA has existed within SHIELD, fed off its resources and stretched within its reach. Now, we have outgrown our host and our host its usefulness. It is time for HYDRA's new world order to rise, beginning the fall of SHIELD." He swallowed the sigh when the faces before him remained blank, impervious to his inspirational words and awaiting his command. "Burn it down."

Silt's enthusiastic applause was appreciated and contrasted sharply with the monotonous assent of the Winter Soldiers.

*

Natasha's eyes widened as she watched surveillance footage from December 16th, 1991.

It couldn't be. The Starks died in a car accident and... *he* was supposed to be a ghost story. Though the scar on the side of her stomach throbbed in disagreement.

"Bye-bye, bikinis." Her voice was barely a whisper and void of humor.

She remembered the failed mission, one of a handful since she had joined SHIELD, with the kind of clarity that came with the bitter taste of defeat. It tasted like the copper that filled her mouth as the Winter Soldier's bullet pierced through her and embedded in the nuclear engineer's heart.

Over the years, Natasha had convinced herself that the Winter Soldier did not exist, that it had been someone else there that day five years ago, because no man, however skilled, could maintain that level of physical proficiency over half of a century.

Time caught up with everyone, muscles atrophy and memory scatter. Look at what old age had done to the once formidable Agent Carter. Except the very evidence of time standing still was staring at her through the monitor, eyes dead and gun aimed.

"Hello, Barnes."

*

"The timetable has moved. Our window is limited." The Handler slid a portfolio across the table. "One target, high difficulty, but you have had success with this particular family in the past. Two for two, in fact. Why not go for a strike out?" He chuckled with a shake of his head.

The Asset reviewed the information given, photos and schedules and blueprints.

Anthony E. Stark.

"I want confirmed death in ten hours."

"Understood."

And All I Got Was an Infinity Stone

Chapter Notes

Posting early because I'll be busy with Chinese New Year festivities tonight and tomorrow. Welcome to the Year of the Dog! I know I said we're jumping into CA: WS arc this chapter but you really should know by now that I never do what I say I will...so here is one more multi-POV chapter. ;)

Thanks to [Arboreal](#) for helping with my word-count-related OCD tendencies.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Age of Ultron. Captain America: Civil War.

"I will return."

Jane peered at Thor's earnest expression and brilliant blue eyes, willing herself to trust in his promise even as her heart ached. "In as timely a manner as you can manage." She parroted his words back, spoken only days ago, when the Convergence first began to manifest.

As much as she wanted to believe that he came back for her, she knew the imminent threat of the Nine Realms being plunged into darkness was likely the primary reason. Now that the crisis had been averted and the urgency faded away, would it be days, weeks, months, or years before she saw him again? Would she wait, with bated breath and hopeful heart, for the crash of thunder and flash of romance? Eighteen months for a few days, was it worth it?

"I will return once the Aether is contained and secured."

And how long would that take? The words were on the tip of Jane's tongue but she swallowed them with a myriad of others that she couldn't bring herself to say. Any of them would shatter this happy illusion of a normal couple in a long distance relationship instead of a Norse God and an astrophysicist who had spent less than a month together in the three years since she hit him with her car.

Cognitive dissonance at its finest.

"Jane?" Thor's brows creased.

She both wanted to smooth the concern away and let it fester so he would remember her. In the end, she chose the former because despite the inequality in their relationship, she wasn't ready to end it. Not yet. Maybe in another eighteen months.

"I'm okay." The smile pulled at her bottom lip, which she had been chewing first out of sheer terror of the world ending then out of anxiety of this very moment. "Just tired, it's been a long few days. Come back soon." She stepped into his arms and breathed in the smell of rain.

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Darcy glanced at her friend worriedly as she *supervised* the SHIELD agents in their clean-up efforts, which basically meant making sure they didn't steal anything. So far so good but she almost wished someone would pocket one of the gravimetric spikes, because she really wanted to yell at someone.

Of course Thor was leaving, *again*.

Jane was her best friend and the thought of watching her sister-from-another-mister race outside at the first sign of cloudy sky only to lose the bounce in her steps when no one showed...

A SHIELD agent actually saluted her before scurrying away and Darcy had to consciously tone down her glare. It wasn't that random dude's fault that her friend was making questionable romantic choices.

In her peripheral vision, she caught a glimpse of Tony and Loki, their dark heads bent together and probably having a variation of the conversation Jane was having with Thor.

Correction: her *friends* were making questionable romantic choices.

Darcy rolled her eyes. What was it with these science types falling hard and fast? Shouldn't their big brains sound some kind of *chemical overload* alarm? Or was that the draw? The thrill of discovery and, well, alien sex?

Jane had blushed a shade of red so bright that Darcy almost thought she would spontaneously combust when Darcy asked about *Thor's other hammer* and Darcy just needed to come up with a good euphemism for Loki's, um, *dagger*? It didn't sound as impressive as a hammer or a scepter but, well, them's the breaks.

It would be so much easier if it were just scientific curiosity or animalistic lust, easily satisfied then moved on from, but Darcy knew it was more than that. Jane wasn't the type to jump into bed and, though Tony had a playboy reputation, Darcy knew they were taking it slow; the sexual tension between Tony and Loki was almost palpable even if they seemed oblivious to it. Which meant it was more than physical attraction, something deeper and requiring resolve to maintain over a long period of absence.

Tony and Jane certainly didn't lack determination, they had it in abundance, would have to, given their fields of research were specifically to challenge the laws of physics and defy universal boundaries.

Darcy sighed as she felt the anger - directed more at the situation than anyone in particular - drain out her, who was she to interfere with epic romances across realms? Although they

were much more entertaining and less frustrating when played out on screen instead of in real life and with her friends in the starring roles.

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Bruce yawned as he made his way to the StarkJet, exhaustion lingered even after a full meal and twelve hours of rest. Behind him, Selvig was muttering a string of numbers and it took a few seconds for Bruce to recognize the other scientist was calculating the Golden Ratio using Fibonacci numbers, he must be more tired than he thought.

The plane was as spacious and luxurious as ever, the main cabin resembled a small living room with plush couches, oversized television, and a well-stocked snack bar.

It had taken Bruce some time to feel comfortable with the extravagant lifestyle that came with being Tony's friend, an experience that had at first discomfited him and would have made him want to take a step back and reassess if not for Tony's visible distress.

Tony had babbled on about the accommodations, simultaneously boastful and critical of the amenities as though he was anticipating rejection so he was both building himself up and knocking himself down before Bruce could, controlling the distance and force of his fall. It was then that Bruce realized any rejection to what Tony was offering would be construed as a rejection of Tony himself, which seemed to be a fate Tony had already accepted but Bruce refused to do the same.

So Bruce accepted the laundry service without objection but insisted on doing his own dishes. Little ways to contribute to the home Tony had welcomed him into and small reminders to appreciate and acknowledge these conveniences instead of taking them for granted.

"-use any other weapons? Like *a wand*?" Darcy's playful voice snapped Bruce out of his thoughts.

"I don't know." Tony blinked before his eyes narrowed. "Why? Actually, no, I don't want to know."

That was really the safest answer to anything Darcy-related.

"You..." Darcy trailed off when Jane shushed her with a melancholy-tinged scowl.

Thor and Loki had gone to retrieve the Aether while the rest of them handled the clean-up but only Loki had returned, stating that Thor was tasked with transporting the Aether to a secure location but would join them soon after. Jane had been a bit quieter since then, smile subdued and shoulders slumped.

Bruce remembered wondering how much of Jane's considerably shorter life was spent waiting for Thor, who had a habit of treating time the way Tony did with wealth - the kind of

carelessness of someone who had it in abundance - and if Tony would end up the same with Loki before shaking that despondent line of thinking away. The Hulk didn't do well with feelings of sadness and there were no more Dark Elves to smash or Jotunheim beast to tame.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Bruce pulled his friend in for a quick hug.

"Says the man who turned himself into an enormous green rage monster." Tony laughed but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. There was a hint of apology in his voice too, fingers tapping nervously against his elbow from where his arms were folded across his chest, that seemed disproportional to his decision to spend some time with Loki before heading back to New York.

"Fair point, don't do anything I wouldn't do *again*."

"I'll do my best." Tony replied, his words sounded both like *I'm sorry* and *goodbye*.

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Ellis hummed as he watched the Wakandan press conference unfold. Princess Shuri was doing an admirable job of avoiding political landmines when topics of international security and lines of communication came up by deferring to other countries and the United Nations, where Wakanda's membership was currently under review.

"-will not, however, let misfortune drive us back. We will fight to improve the world we wish to join, starting with ourselves and our approach in handling these matters."

The situation in London certainly could have been handled better but it wasn't a complete disaster either. Ellis was just grateful that it hadn't happened on American soil, the economy was finally on an upswing, and Stark had the foresight to contact Councilwoman Hawley to circumvent any accusations of trespassing sovereign borders. Though the Air Force was a bit irritated with SHIELD for the perceived upstaging by having their agents stationed before War Machine and the Iron Legion arrived.

Concerns about the Avengers being a group of U.S.-based, enhanced individuals would undoubtedly rise again, even if there were only three active members on the roster with Iron Man as a contracted consultant. With War Machine seen as an extension of the United States Air Force, that still left the Hulk, Thor, and his wayward brother Loki unaccounted for.

All of them packed more punch than a thirty megaton nuke and didn't require a series of carefully memorized and changed daily codes to detonate. It was the elephant in the Oval Office that no one wanted to address and Ellis was feeling increasingly cramped with every news report and conspiracy theorist's blog post on these mysterious Men in Black.

If the existence of SHIELD, and by extension, the World Security Council, came to light, the management of the Avengers and other enhanced individuals would surely fall on the United States' shoulders. The World Security Council, despite its name, comprised primarily of American citizens and while SHIELD had offices around the world, its primary headquarters, the Triskelion, was located on Theodore Roosevelt Island.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Ellis picked up the phone. They could not afford any more attention being drawn to SHIELD or the World Security Council, not when new players were entering the game of international politics and the rules were being rewritten. "Councilman Malick..."

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"Any idea what this is about?" Pepper stirred honey into her tea as she kept an eye on the elevator. The coffee machine had started brewing a few minutes ago, which meant Tony would come barreling into the kitchen soon. It would be nice to see him, in person, after watching their heroics on the news, closing more worm holes and fighting yet another alien army. Tony had called to let her know that everyone was alright but there had been something *off* in his voice that set off some alarms in her head.

Jane and Darcy shook their heads in unison.

Jim shrugged and shared a look with Happy.

Bruce hummed thoughtfully. "JARVIS said Tony and Loki were working on a project the last time I went down to the workshop." He tried to hide it but hurt and disappointment were laced through his words.

Pepper arched an eyebrow at Darcy, who understood the prompt and kicked Bruce's knee in a show of support.

"Not cool. Tony should know that it's ScienceBros before hos!"

Thor frowned from his spot next to Jane. "My brother is no ho."

"How do you know what that means?" Darcy stared at him, eyes wide with disbelief and voice full of accusation.

Thor continued to frown until Darcy muttered an apology. "The internet has much knowledge within its invisible webs."

Darcy's face did a funny little spasm.

"There, there." Jane patted her friend's knee before turning her attention to the group. "It'll take her a second to reboot."

"Ooh, who broke Dar2-D2?" Tony strolled into the room with his hands tucked into the pockets of his well-worn jeans, his finger poked through a small hole that looked a bit singed around the edges.

Happy's groan at the Star Wars themed nicknames turned into a yelp when Loki teleported into the space next to Tony.

"Thor and his googling ways." Jim quipped.

Loki looked impressed.

"I defended your honor, Loki." Thor preened. "You are no ho."

Bruce cleared his throat. "What's the big news, Tony?"

"Um." Tony rocked on the balls of his feet, jittery with a worrying mix of mania and panic. "I'm actually not sure how to say it so I'm just going to say it like ripping off a band-aid, whoosh, get it done. Okay?"

Pepper realized he was actually waiting for a response when a silent minute passed among them. "Yes. Go ahead."

"Right, here I go." Tony sucked in a deep breath and reached for Loki's hand, a gesture Pepper noted with interest. "JARVIS, hit it."

"Yes, Sir."

The lights dimmed and a hologram projected into the empty space, a sprawl of fiery orange glittering and growing like wildfire.

Pepper squinted at the spinning image, the swirls and shape of it looked oddly familiar. Something she had seen before, less refined and more basic. Her mind sorted through the memories and snagged on the display of neuropathways JARVIS had shown them when they first learned of Extremis. "It looks like...a brain?"

"I see it." Happy agreed.

"Yeah, I mean this could be... It's not a human mind, it..." Bruce said, awestruck. "It's beautiful."

The image pulsed as if it understood the compliment.

Darcy gasped. "It heard us?"

It sparked in reply, like stars glittering in a burning sunset.

"They're like neurons firing." Jane reached out a tentative hand before it was pulled back by Thor.

"I thought we agreed that you would not touch that which you do not know." He chastised gently.

"It's just a projection." She gave him a sheepish smile and laced her fingers through his, much like how Tony and Loki's were still threaded together.

"What is it?" Jim asked, straight to the point as always.

Tony hunched his shoulders and dipped his head, affecting his best puppy eyes. "So, um, I went to a secret HYDRA bunker in Siberia and all I got was an Infinity Stone."

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The kitchen was silent except for the crinkling of the plastic bag as Jim poured a generous amount of cereal into the bowl before adding in the milk, because that was the correct order no matter how often Tony tried to argue otherwise. Doing it the other way would skew the cereal-to-milk ratio, not to mention the mess it would create when the inevitable overflow happened; Jim had spent enough of his college days cleaning up the little piles of cereal left on the kitchen counter.

Metal clinked against porcelain as he scooped up a spoonful of equal parts cereal and milk, remembering and missing their MIT years with a fondness that ached. Back when a world-ending event was an exaggeration for DUM-E creating chaos in the lab instead of wormholes in the sky; when time was measured by paper due dates and project deadlines instead of the number of days since the last world-ending event, which was *three* at the moment; when forbidden items were alcohol in the dorms instead of ancient relics capable of altering minds, changing reality, and seeking out souls.

Souls like the one JARVIS apparently had.

Tony had explained that he had been getting strange messages of *come find me* for a while before finally figuring out the *where*, if not the *who*. Then, like the idiot he was, had decided it would be best to keep everyone else in the dark in case it turned out to be something dangerous.

Well, *almost* everyone.

The thought of Loki being the one Tony chose to trust with this mystery filled Jim with a strange mixture of irrational jealousy and overwhelming gratitude, leaving him torn between the childish desire to tell Loki *Tony was my friend first* and fierce relief to thank the god for keeping his brother safe.

Tony had glossed over the details, but Jim could tell by the way Loki kept their hands linked throughout the retelling that it was far more harrowing than either of them let on. The Soul Stone had been buried under a HYDRA bunker, which had collapsed when some sort of self-destruct sequence was triggered. The Soul Stone had been relocated to the Tower and was securely guarded behind several layers of the world's best security system, contained within an arc reactor housing.

While the others had accepted Tony's account - with their own incredulous variations of *what the hell were you thinking?!* - Jim knew there was something amiss. It wasn't in what Tony had said but rather what he hadn't said.

Tony had kept and was keeping something from them.

The last time Tony had held himself with this particular kind of nervous casualness and careful wording was in the aftermath of Afghanistan, when a bloodied and sunburnt Tony had said *it's better you don't know, platypus* with too many teeth and too brittle of a smile. Despite his curiosity, however morbid, Jim knew that asking for the exact details of what the Ten Rings had done to his friend wouldn't heal Tony's wounds and would cut Jim some new ones, wounds that Tony would end up feeling guilty for and that would fester between them.

Which was not to say Jim condoned Tony bottling it up or burying it deep. It meant that when Tony was ready, he should talk to *someone* but it didn't have to be Jim.

Whatever Tony was keeping, Jim got the sense that it was something similar, so he didn't and wouldn't push. Not as long as Tony had someone to turn to with whatever was weighing on his shoulders and pulling on his too-bright heart.

"JARVIS, has Tony talked to someone about what he's not telling us?"

The ever-presenting humming paused for a moment, further proof that JARVIS was more than just lines of codes. "Yes, Colonel Rhodes."

Jim nodded to himself and took another bite of his midnight snack.

The Luxury of Ignorance

Chapter Notes

Thanks to [Arboreal](#) for keeping me on track.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Captain America: Civil War.

Gilmore Girls (S01E05).

West Wing (S01E03).

DUM-E beeped and tugged at Tony's sleeve as soon as he entered the workshop, doing his best to pull his creator to the humming arc reactor in the inconspicuous corner.

Tony didn't remember much from his time in Siberia. Or rather, he didn't remember *certain parts* of his time in Siberia. He remembered the unease crawling up his spine as he walked through the abandoned hallways, the horror sinking in his heart when the chamber was empty, and the shock paralyzing him upon seeing Wanda. Then...concrete emotions faded to vague feelings.

Feelings of curiosity, calm, and camaraderie.

Like seeing an old friend and making a new one.

Like working through a complicated equation and looking forward to solving it.

Like being praised for something he hadn't accomplished yet and wanting to prove himself further.

Tony had closed his eyes in Siberia and woke in New York, with a living flame dancing in the palm of his hands, which DUM-E immediately tried to cover with a spray of foam.

Thankfully, DUM-E had warmed up to the Soul Stone since then and there hadn't been any more incidents with a fire extinguisher. U had followed suit as he tended to do with things DUM-E approved of but Butterfingers, the rebel of the bot family, was still holding out, as evidenced by the party hats scattered around the workshop except for the Soul Stone corner.

"This is it?" Rhodey stepped through the double doors and was greeted, rather enthusiastically, by Butterfingers and Tony was beginning to suspect collusion among his best friend and his bots. First the fire extinguisher and now this...

Tony nodded. "Yep."

The rest of the group filtered in, somewhat awkwardly, with Thor shielding Jane with his cloak, which was not entirely an overreaction considering her last interaction with an Infinity Stone.

"It looks...smaller than I thought it would." Darcy commented then immediately snickered. "That's what she said."

"Wouldn't it be *that's what I said?*" Pepper said and Tony had always known that she was a troublemaker at heart.

Bruce was busy pouring over the data on the holographic screens, fingers dancing over the strings of numbers with jerky motions that contradicted his love for science.

Tony sent Happy a questioning look, to which Happy rolled his eyes before glancing over at Loki then at the Soul Stone.

Pointedly.

Understanding dawned and Tony felt a flutter of guilt course through him. Bruce hadn't said so outright but Tony knew Bruce had his own insecurities about belonging and friendship, because Tony had his. Years of being too smart for his peers who either wanting to copy his homework or deck him on the playground; sometimes both. He stepped up and draped an arm around Bruce's shoulders, noting how they were hunched with almost painful tension.

"I was thinking about having a compare, contrast and conjecture party with all the Infinity Stones data we have. What do you say, ScienceBro?"

"Sounds like a good time." Bruce smiled, a bit hesitantly.

"Good, you're cohosting the party." Tony clapped him once on the back. "You know, since you live here and all."

Bruce eyed him suspiciously but the smile widened into a grin. "You just want me to make the bean dip again, don't you?"

"Bruce is cooking?" Darcy whirled around with a frighteningly amount of excitement. "I want the green curry!"

"Most excellent news!" Thor released Jane to raise his fists into the air. "I quite enjoyed the chicken fried steak." He turned to Loki. "It is a delicacy of mischief." His voice lowered conspiratorially. "It contains no chicken."

"I like those twice baked potatoes, man." Rhodey chimed in.

Bruce attempted a scowl but it was obvious his heart wasn't in it. "If I'm making all these things then I'm not making the Thanksgiving dinner."

Pepper exchanged a look with Jane.

"We can get the turkey from that one place and the sides from the other?"

"And pie from that one bakery?"

They nodded at each other then to Bruce.

"Throw in a-"

Darcy coughed.

"-two Tandoori lamb pizzas and you got a deal."

Loki raised his brows quizzically.

Tony shrugged. "Green Bean makes a mean green bean casserole."

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"Sir, Captain Rogers is on the phone."

Tony barely remembered to drop the wrench in his hands before scrubbing his face with them; he had learned the hard way that it was not recommended to rub one's face with tools unless one had a sudden and strong need to look manlier via a black eye.

Which was what he had told Pepper...right before the shareholders meeting...and the magazine cover shoot...and the fundraiser appearance.

Pepper had responded, with the kind of calmness that threatened immense pain, to never do it again, paired with her patented *do it or something unspeakable shall befall you* look. It was a very effective look, one that could haunt a man for life.

Or be a lifeline, a reminder of how fierce her friendship and devotion were, when Tony felt like he was set adrift in a wide sea of uncertainty. Which he did now, as he waved a hand at JARVIS' camera and a moment later, Steve's voice filtered through the speakers.

"Good morning-"

Tony exhaled and winced when the air blew out between his lips, loudly. The *pfffffft* sound hung in the air for what seemed like a very awkward eternity.

There was a pause before Steve continued his greeting. "-Mr. Stark."

"Captain." Even though he understood that this Steve was not the same person as Rogers from the other timeline and that his worth of self should come from within, or so MONDAY liked to remind him but thankfully without veering into the generic motivational quote territory, Tony still stiffened at the hint of disapproval in Steve's voice. Some conditioned responses were harder to break than others.

This time, the silence was uneasy for a different reason as Tony stubbornly refused to ask why Steve called, proper manners be damned and because he had an inkling as to why Steve called.

Finally, Steve cleared his throat, twice, before speaking. "It may come as a surprise to you but HYDRA, the organization Howard, um, your father fought against during the war-"

"I know what HYDRA is, Captain, and I know it survived the war and found a new home in SHIELD."

"How did-"

"Who do you think told Fury in the first place?" Tony rolled his eyes and hoped his tone communicated his action somehow. "Well, thanks for the head's up or whatever's the opposite of that. Bye-"

"HYDRA killed your parents."

Tony froze at Steve's blurted and blunt statement. His vision took on a frosty tinge and the blue holograms suddenly looked like they were made of ice and slowly fading to gray as the footage of his parents' murder replayed in his mind.

Sergeant Barnes?

His father's incredulous look.

Howard!

His mother's panicked plea.

"What did you say?" Tony growled, hands clenching into fists and nails digging into his palms. He felt no pain, instead he felt significant surprise at Steve telling him the truth, albeit without an ounce of sympathy or a moment of thought.

"Um. I didn't mean to... Well, I should have... It wasn't right to..." Steve had clearly realized the mistake in his delivery and was trying to salvage the situation via a series of increasingly awkward backpedaling statements.

Absently, Tony noted that there was no actual apology in any of these aborted attempts.

"What I'm trying to say is, um, I thought you already knew." In the end, Steve settled on defensive and vaguely accusatory. "With you hacking SHIELD's records and-"

"Was it in SHIELD's records?"

"No!" Steve denied, sounding incredibly and inappropriately offended at the idea that the agency he worked for could have hidden the Starks' murder, even though he knew SHIELD had long been compromised.

"Then how the hell could I have known?" Tony yelled, angry because even if he *had* known, which he *did* but under different circumstances, it still didn't justify how Steve slammed down the piece of information like a winning hand at the poker table. "And while we're talking about *knowing things*, how the hell did you know?"

Steve sucked in a sharp breath. "Agent Romanoff and I came across this information a while ago." He gritted out.

Captain America, paragon of truth, had learned about the advantages offered by ambiguity but Tony refused to play along.

"How charmingly vague." He snorted. "Exactly *how long ago* did you come across this information? And how did you *come across* it? And *what* is it?"

"Classified." Steve coughed again, a dry and forced noise that did little to mask his irritation. "Look, I'm only telling you because Director Fury thought it would be strategic to share it with you since we are fighting on the same side and-"

"We're not on the same side." Tony retorted. "We may have a common enemy in HYDRA but don't you or SHIELD ever make the mistake of thinking we are on the same side."

Steve scoffed, all pretense of civility gone. "Right, the only thing you really fight for is yourself-"

"Oh, back to this again. Get some new materials already."

"-I don't know why I expected anything different. All that razzle dazzle-"

"Who the hell says that?"

"-for your photos in the papers-"

"Or reads the papers?"

"-and never standing up for what's right-"

"Why stand when I can fly?"

"-because you're what's wrong with-"

"Like you're the authority on right and wrong?" Tony snapped, all traces of flippant deflection and strained humor gone from his voice. "Since we're rehashing old material, let me remind your senile super soldier brain that everything *special* about you came out of a bottle that you got by *volunteering for ethically questionable experimentation in a Brooklyn basement.*"

"I was serving my country." Steve spat out. "Something you know nothing about. Howard was a true hero-"

"My father had his own reasons for helping out with Rebirth and Manhattan. Like, say, *billions* of them in military contracts. Newsflash, *Captain*, everyone has agendas, just like me and you."

Something shattered in the background as Steve hissed. "I'm nothing like you."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Tony bit back. "We're done here. Tell Fury I got the message and will have some follow-up questions."

"No-" Steve's shout cut out abruptly, which was almost as satisfying as slamming the phone down or snapping it closed.

Tony sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, reviewing the conversation and trying to pinpoint exactly where it became a confrontation. Something about Steve's righteousness just rubbed Tony the wrong way, though he could admit that he gave no effort to rise above it and immediately went for the low blow. "That could have gone better."

"I thought it was immensely entertaining."

Tony's heart jumped in surprise even as his shoulders relaxed at the sound of Loki's familiar drawl. "Well, glad someone had a good time." He tilted his head back, physically trying to turn his frown upside-down with little success and a few pops in his neck. "When did you get here?"

"Somewhere around *we're not on the same side*." Loki came closer and cupped a hand around the back of Tony's head, pushing it forward until it was upright then pulling Tony into a kiss as he slotted himself between Tony and the work bench.

Loki's hand sloped down until it was cupping Tony's jaw, thumb caressing and catching on Tony's beard as he adjusted the angle of the kiss into something more intimate than a greeting after some time away and a comfort after an ugly encounter.

Tony leaned into it, pressing against Loki until he could feel the thudding of Loki's heart through the layers of clothes. A steady beat that not only soothed his frayed nerves but also challenged him to speed it up, so Tony did both with a swipe of his tongue along Loki's bottom lip followed by a swift nip.

A groan vibrated between them, charging the air with a heady quality that made it harder to breathe and harder still to part until the need for oxygen became more a necessity than a nuisance.

"What did the Captain want?" Loki whispered against Tony's lips.

Tony gulped those words in along with precious air before he could quite process what was said. Once he did, however, he sent Loki an unimpressed look. "Not the sexiest thing you could have said in that moment."

"Then allow me to atone for my blunder with a gift." A flash of green then a miniature replica of the Great Wall of China appeared on the work bench. Loki had shown an interest in exploring the historical landmarks that Selvig had used to identify the focal point of the Convergence, visiting each one with great enthusiasm and under the guise of Midgardian clothing.

"You know you didn't have to go all the way to China to get this."

"Then it would ease your mind that I did not." Loki smirked. "I crafted this trinket on Vanaheim."

"Crafted?" Tony peered at the figurine and gasped when the blocks began to rearrange themselves until the Great Wall of China morphed into the Roman Colosseum. "Huh, let me guess, magic?"

"Magic." Loki confirmed. "Now, what did the Captain want?"

Tony's good mood evaporated as a bitter taste flooded his mouth. "To tell me that HYDRA killed my parents."

Loki's brows arched incredulously. "That...was unexpected."

"Yep." Tony popped the *p* with more force than necessary. "Except not really."

"How so?"

"Fury made him the messenger." A poke from curious fingers had the statue changing into the Leaning Tower of Pisa. "So I'd have some extra *incentive* to help them out when the HYDRA shit hits the fan."

Loki wrinkled his nose in distaste. "What a delightful idiom."

Tony huffed out a laugh. "I'm a delightful person." Then he sobered, thinking back to how quickly everything went off the rails with Steve. "Well, depends on who you ask, anyway."

"You and the Captain disagree on an ideological level, conflict is certain, inevitable and unavoidable."

The matter-of-fact way Loki had stated it made Tony glance up, a request in his eyes for Loki to continue.

"The Captain sees himself in the right and the world in the wrong, you see the opposite." Green eyes bore into brown ones with an intelligent intensity. "Where the Captain rages against the world for his plight, you turn that anger inward. Where the Captain assigns blame, you believe you are at fault. Where the Captain delights in being a hero, you have cast yourself as the villain." Loki's shoulders rose in a sharp shrug, brows furrowing as his expression darkened. "Heroes are unaware of the privilege inherent in their worldview and villains lack the luxury of ignorance."

Tony found himself at a loss of words. Loki might have been talking about the fundamental difference between Steve and Tony but at some point, it had veered into a more *brotherly* territory. It made Tony both want to throttle Thor for whatever mistreatment he had inflicted on Loki and to clap Thor on the back in encouragement to keep up the good work, because it was clear that their relationship had been improved significantly in the eighteen months since the Chitauri Invasion.

Then again, what was one-and-a-half year to centuries? Probably something similar to decades to millennia. And that was a path he was not ready to go down right now, if ever.

In his haste to stop his own train of thought, Tony said the first thing that came to mind. "You know you just said three things that all mean the same thing, right?"

Loki blinked, some of the storm leaving his eyes and the corners of his lips twitched with what Tony hoped was amusement. "You are a surprise."

"And a delight."

"That goes without saying." Loki leaned in, his breath warm against Tony's parted lips. "But I will tell you all the same."

Winter Soldiers

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance for how the chapter ended, please know that I do this out of love!
:P

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Captain America: Winter Soldier.

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His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman.

Loki's brows ticked up as he took in the library in Tony's study, mahogany shelves lined with first editions, completed with engraved frontispieces and gilt lettering. His eyes were slits of emerald in the sunshine sparkling through the windows, narrowing as he perused through the rows of books meant to be collected, to be displayed, and, most importantly, to impress.

Tony certainly hoped they were doing the job because otherwise he would have spent millions of dollars for nothing. Much like *Pepper's* modern art collection that he had donated to the Boy Scouts of America, for which she still hadn't completely forgiven him and probably never would.

"This is a fine collection." One long finger hovered over the spines, pale skin almost luminous against various shades of faded leather. "But it is not yours." Loki glanced back, the shift in position causing shadows to fall across his features, sharpening the lines of his cheeks and jaw.

There was a reprimand in Loki's eyes and Tony found himself oddly pleased by it.
"*Technically*, it's mine."

"Pedantic point."

"Part of my charm." Tony shrugged, tilting his head just so to make it a challenge and an invite.

Loki answered it with a nipping kiss that was all too brief, an almost punishment and a definitive promise for more.

Once Tony gave him what he wanted.

To see Tony's *books*.

*

Contrary to popular belief that Tony abhorred all things paper, which was partly accurate and by partly, he meant 99.9%, he loved reading fiction in print. There was something deliciously poetic in reading about the wildest imaginations and strangest worlds on *paper*. Like hiring an accountant who couldn't count, which Pepper had vetoed immediately and JARVIS, the cowardly traitor, had listened to her instead of the one who gave him life.

It had all started in college, when Rhodey had tossed a copy of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, topped with a gaudy bow, on Tony's bed before making grabby hands at Tony for his, which Tony hadn't prepared because he hadn't thought of the possibility that his roommate would get him a Christmas present. It wasn't a question he had considered then came to a decision on but one that he never allowed himself to ask.

After all, the best way to avoid disappointments was to have no expectations.

Completely caught off-guard, Tony had grabbed the first thing within his reach - a pair of lime green fuzzy socks with orange bats that Jarvis had sent along with the Halloween package. Tony had long suspected that either Jarvis had an atrocious sense of style that he had managed to hide by choosing a career path that required uniforms or perhaps it was the stifling requirement that drove the man to outlandish fashion statements...inflicted upon his charge. It should have been infuriating for any teenager but Tony felt strangely calmed by the knowledge that Jarvis had purchased these specifically with Tony in mind instead of the standard seasonal order of suits that the tailors took measurements for.

Tony had distracted Rhodey with the baked goods and specialty candy and hidden the socks away with plans to wear them when he was home for the winter holidays, which meant they were unopened and near the top of his haphazardly stuffed suitcase. Perfect for a last-minute re-gift, etiquettes be damned.

Rhodey had gaped at the socks with horrified eyes before bursting into uncontrollable laughter and Tony would never admit it but that was the moment he started thinking of his roommate as Rhodey, as family.

It became their little tradition, a paperback book for a pair of socks, that would carry on for decades and eventually spread among Tony's other friends.

Pepper, also known as the enemy of fun, gave Tony copies of the densest classic literature she could find but did show mercy by limiting her selections to single-volume works.

Happy favored any and all period dramas, which had confused Tony at first until he learned about Happy's *Downton Abbey* obsession.

Jane and Darcy chose young adult series and graphic novels, respectively. Tony wisely did not comment on any parallels between the love of an eternal being and a mortal, though Darcy's selection of *Watchmen* hit a little too close to home for comfort.

Bruce went with detective novels, methodical in storytelling if not in the forensic sciences. He was also the one who sparked Loki's curiosity, with an enigmatic smile and casual

mention of wondering what genre Loki would pick for Tony's Christmas gift.

It was always the quiet ones.

*

Loki smirked like the cat who got the canary and the cream and a canary made of cream when he set eyes on the metallic trunks stacked and wedged together as a makeshift coffee table in the lounge area. The cases were fire-, water-, and practically everything-proofed. After the rather unexpected disaster with Kilian, Tony had these made to protect the precious gifts his friends had bestowed upon him over the years.

A mix of genres in mass market paperbacks and hardcopies that all said the same things: *family*.

"Clever choice, hiding in plain sight."

"I prefer form and function." Tony winked and snaked an arm around Loki's waist, fingers splaying across Loki's middle and hooking around the buckles. "And you know, I made a tablet that's pretty kickass and has an entire digital library-"

Loki placed his hand over Tony's, palm grazing knuckles with the gentle motion as his other hand did with the books. "I would like to hold what you have held and read what you have read, feel the weight in my hands and feast my eyes on words that have pulled you into their worlds."

The intimacy in those soft-spoken words sent a shiver down Tony's spine. "Oh." He said eloquently. "In that case, um, knock yourself out."

"Another one of your delightful Midgardian idioms." Green eyes glittered with mirth. "Which would you recommend?"

Tony squinted at the selection and plucked a book with a golden cover out of the pile, the color faded to a dull yellow over time and its spine creased with many readings.

The Golden Compass.

*

Loki read the entire *His Dark Materials* series in the span of an afternoon, lounging across the couch in Tony's workshop and muttering speculations under his breath.

The small noises soothed Tony as he checked and responded to the numerous personal emails. Harley asking for help on how to deal with his sister's friends giggling at him, Peter wanting feedback on his latest science project, Stanger Danger sending him a link on the benefits of being clean-shaven that was an obvious ploy to undermine the Facial Hair Bros initiative.

"They are imbeciles."

Loki's declaration jolted Tony out of a lengthy reply to Shuri's latest email that spent the first six paragraphs ranting about managing the egos of world leaders then the next three bemoaning her brother's smug *I-told-you-so* attitude followed by eight more bragging about her latest technological breakthrough. He peered up at Loki with a questioning hum.

"They are imbeciles." Loki repeated, stepping in close enough that Tony could see the tension corded in his shoulders and feel the nervous energy radiating from his frame. "Consoling themselves with an empty gesture that means little."

Tony arched a brow at Loki's rather impassioned response to the bittersweet ending to Will and Lyra's romance. "Can't have everything. Sacrifices have to be made, yada yada yada. The life of a hero, I guess."

Loki pressed even closer but kept a sliver of distance between their bodies, breath brushing against Tony's lips. "We are no heroes."

"We aren't villains either." Tony leaned in to chase that intangible touch. "Can't let the world burn."

"Perhaps not but we do not throw ourselves on the flame."

You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.

"Been there, done that. I'm all for something new."

I think I would just cut the wire.

"Good."

When their lips met, it felt like a vow.

*

Asgard's energy shield had been deactivated during the Dark Elves' invasion and though it had been restored shortly thereafter, Loki had been researching ways to prevent it from happening again. One generator and a single-layered shield were the equivalent of putting all Asgardian eggs in one basket and tempting fate, or other enemies of Asgard, to make an omelet.

Tony said goodbye to Loki in the dark of morning, not knowing what awaited him once the sun rose.

*

Fury's phone call came sooner than Tony expected.

Despite his threat to follow-up with Fury, Tony had taken no action after that disastrous phone call with Steve. It was more effective, and fun, to let Steve stew in uncertain silence. Not to mention Fury was due to call anyway, Tony had just thought the Director would wait

at least a few days as some kind of misguided powerplay or mistaken hope that Tony would fold first.

It was either a sign that Fury had finally learned how to act like a grown-up or the situation at SHIELD had worsened to such an extent that Fury had no choice.

"Stark."

Judging by the way his name was barked, Tony leaned toward the latter. "Nicky."

Fury made a sound that was almost a growl. "Cut the childishness-"

Tony rolled his eyes. "You first."

"-and listen up. The entire SHIELD psych department is compromised." There was a bit of background noise, a slam of a car door and the rev of an engine, before Fury spoke again. "Rogers and Romanoff recently recovered footage of Silt-" The name was spat out with an alarming amount of venom. "-working with HYDRA and copies of his assessments on SHIELD personnel. HYDRA's been conditioning agents to follow orders without question and sending my people back into the field when they have no business being in it."

"Barton." Tony thought back to the wide-eyed panic on Clint's too-pale face; it certainly made more sense than SHIELD disregarding its agents' welfare, though this explanation offered little in ways of comfort. He slanted a look at one of the ceiling cameras and the holographic display lit up as JARVIS began to retrieve information from the SHIELD database.

"Yeah, yeah. You told me so." Fury sighed, misinterpreting what Tony said per usual. "And Rogers." He paused, traffic sounds filled the silence. "Silt's notes are all about keeping Rogers out of sync with the present and maintaining his connections to the past."

Understanding dawned and left a bad taste in Tony's mouth. "You can take the boy out of the 1940s but you can't take the 1940s out of the boy." Was this why Rogers, of the other timeline Tony had done everything to prevent from happening again, prioritized Barnes, the last connection to a life lost to the ice, above everyone and everything else? Was this why HYDRA had preserved Barnes as the Winter Soldier, so if Captain America ever came back, they would have the one asset Captain America wouldn't harm? Was this why this Steve, of this timeline, kept the *who* and *what* and *how* out of his train wreck of an announcement?

Another sigh. "Yeah. And it's come back to bite us in the ass since HYDRA has Rogers' bestie as their favorite assassin." Fury's voice turned quiet with what might be sympathy. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your parents. Autopsy reports indicated foul play but Carter opted to cover it up, no leads meant no need for the world to know we misplaced five vials of super soldier serum."

"Are you-" Astonishment threaded itself through Tony's words, knotting them together and making them difficult to get out. "Are you *telling me* Barnes killed my parents?"

Even though he had already known - and at times wished he didn't, wished he could cocoon himself in the blissful ignorance, wished for anything but *this* - he hadn't expected anyone privy to the information to share it with him. Much less Fury, the master spy whose secrets had secrets, sounding sincerely sorry for Tony's loss and offering additional details on SHIELD's involvement, or lack thereof.

Carter was one of the co-founders of SHIELD, a successor to the Strategic Scientific Reserve where both of them had worked to create then later alongside of Captain America. She was also a friend of Howard's, visiting their home frequently enough that Tony had a memory of her by age three, and had been on the guest list for all Stark Industries events. Yet Tony was not surprised in the slightest at the news of her choice to conceal evidence; there was the bigger picture to consider, after all.

The Starks' *accident* had stayed in the headlines for months, leading up to and well after the funeral. Which had been the last time Tony saw her, a brief pat on his shoulders and a murmured platitude before turning away with that distinctive military gait of hers.

The walk of a soldier, the mentality of a commander, and the ruthlessness of *doing what's best* instead of *doing what's right*.

Two paths that veered further apart the deeper into the shadows, until only one remained and it was either a miracle or a sign of the apocalypse that Fury had chosen the road less traveled.

"Rogers didn't tell you." It was a statement rather than a question. "Shit." Fury's swear was underscored by the blare of the horn.

"All he said was HYDRA killed my parents." Tony replied, still shocked by this turn of events. A myriad of emotions flooded him, flowing through his veins and rushing in his thoughts like a potent cocktail that promised one hell of a hangover tomorrow. "Said the details were classified."

Two more displays flickered to life as scans upon scans of confidential information scrolled by. Normally, Tony would object to this invasion of privacy - he of all people understood the sensitivity of mental health records - but desperate times called for desperate measures. He had always been more comfortable operating in shades of gray than the simplicity of black-and-white.

"He said he'd tell you, said he had to make it right by his friend. I thought-" Fury muttered. "Damn it, Rogers."

He's my friend.

Silence stretched between them, tense and taut, like a rubber band pulled too tight and ready to snap if not let go soon.

"Why-" Tony coughed once to clear away the hoarseness in his voice. "Why are you telling me? What happened to nobody spills the secrets because nobody knows them all?"

"I'm just nice like that." A mirthless chuckle gritted through the phone. "And because we can't afford Captain America getting smashed by the Hulk for going after Iron Man to avenge the Winter Soldier, and that's Barnes by the way, because everyone has a goddamn superhero name nowadays. Just imagine that headline for a second."

"Oh, I am. It makes me smile." Tony said sharply.

Fury barreled on as if he hadn't heard Tony's quip. "HYDRA is planning something big, they've got to after we raided their info hub in Myanmar. I'm guessing it's going to be a coming out party with lots of fireworks but our show's going to be better."

"*Our?*" Tony hummed. "I didn't get an invitation."

"Consider this my formal request for you to *get your shiny metal ass in the game.*" Fury barked.

"I'll have to check my calendar and get back-"

"Want to see my lease?"

"-to you..." Tony trailed off at Fury's non sequitur then at the sound of police siren. "Nick?"

The only answer was the deafening cacophony of screeching tires, groaning metal, and the pop of airbag deploying.

"Nick! What's happening?" The chair clattered as Tony leaped out of it, heading for the elevator to get to the flight deck. Of course, the day he actually had a valid reason for teleportation was the day Loki off-realm.

Fury's voice filtered in through a cloud of static. "Cops...crash...broken...damn..."

"Emergency services are on their way, ETA is twelve minutes." JARVIS reported. "D.C. Metro Police dispatch shows no units in this area."

Tony practically skidded into the armor. "I can be there in half that time, you hear me, Nicky?"

"Got...covered..." A series of dull thuds. "Dumb asses...reinforced...tank...bring it..."

While Tony provided no significant upgrades, no repulsor technology nor advanced computer systems, to SHIELD this time around, he had offered some of his expertise on improving the integrity of SHIELD vehicles and armors. Fury's car was practically a compact tank with significant firepower embedded within the center console.

"Sir, a series of explosions have been reported at an unnamed structure on the Theodore Roosevelt Island."

"Triskelion?" As soon as the face plate slid close, the image of a smoking building appeared on the HUD. The enormous complex with three central pillars supporting a shared circular top floor looked crippled with blackened spots indicative of fire along its walls and windows.

Fury was right that HYDRA was having a coming out party - at SHIELD's primary headquarters.

"I'm afraid so, Sir."

The Iron Man armor lit a beautiful arc across the New York skyline as Tony took off. "Hang in there, Nick."

"Son of a...two of them...enhanced...punching through...bulletproof...Winter Soldiers..."

Despite the faulty connection, the sound of glass shattering came through crystal clear, followed by the unmistakable bangs of shots fired then the line went dead.

The suit stuttered to a stop in mid-air, surrounded by cloudy wisps that looked disconcertingly serene given what Tony had just heard, what Fury's last words had been.

Winter Soldiers.

JARVIS, Winter is Coming

Chapter Notes

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier. Captain America: Civil War.

A Song of Ice and Fire by George R.R. Martin.

Tony's mind whirled with the direst possibilities and contingency plans.

Winter Soldiers, *plural*. Damn it.

Habit was screaming for Tony to get to the Triskelion, fly into the fray and barrel-roll into battle. Lives were at stake and SHIELD was burning to the ground with HYDRA set to rise from its ashes like a parasitic phoenix.

We do not throw ourselves on the flame.

Loki's voice, tinged with the solemnity of a promise and the gravity of a warning, was fresh in Tony's memory, spoken only less than a day ago.

Been there, done that. I'm all for something new.

Tony would have laughed if the irony wasn't so horribly insulting; he had asked for something new and the universe delivered. An entirely new disaster that he had not lived through and could not have foreseen.

With Killian and AIM, he had known the *who* and the *how*.

With the Convergence, he had known the *where* and the *when*.

This time, every piece of second-hand knowledge he had from his previous timeline was *wrong* and *useless*.

The *who* changed from Pierce and Sitwell and Rumlow to Winter Soldiers.

The *how* was no longer Project Insight and three armed helicopters.

The *where*, thankfully, would now be limited to Theodore Roosevelt Island instead of the wider areas of DC and the Potomac River.

The *when* had moved up by an entire month-and-a-half, happening in the middle of November instead of the beginning of January.

"Knowledge prompts change yet change negates knowledge." Tony recited Loki's words in his mind as he took a deep breath and let it out as a long sigh, circling back to the flight deck. "Get the jet ready and tell Bruce to change into his stretchy pants then meet me up here. We have some smashing to do."

Despite multiple experiments and simulations, they were not yet at the point where Iron Man could comfortably and reliably carry the Hulk for aerial travel. Oxygen deprivation and below-freezing temperature at high altitudes were two factors they couldn't overcome without building Hulk his own armor but then they ran into the risk of Bruce returning mid-flight and his human-sized body bouncing around the giant-sized suit. And vice versa in the situation where the stress of the oncoming battle triggered a transformation before they landed, the Hulk's colossal frame would tear the armor apart before freefalling onto whatever unsuspecting patch of land - or, god forbid, city - below.

"Yes, Sir." JARVIS replied. "I've also reached out to Dr. Foster. Mr. Odinson will meet you on site and she is attempting to contact Mr. Loki."

Jane had been working on translating latitude and longitude into Asgardian runes in an effort to establish an inter-realm link. Though Thor had returned quickly after securing the Aether and promised to remain on Midgard for the foreseeable future, their lives were still subject to upheaval since Thor could be called off-realm the next moment. For their *very* long-distance relationship to work, a means of communication was a must.

Thor was still not to be trusted with technology but because he and Jane had been practically inseparable, it wasn't difficult to get a hold of him via Jane. The two of them had fallen into a sort of a honeymoon haze that kicked into high gear once they were back on in New Mexico, opting for the intimacy of Jane's small apartment.

Tony had been disappointed by their decision but his feelings didn't stray into more precarious territories like doubt and hurt, wondering what exactly he had done wrong to drive them away or obsessing over how to lure them back; thanks to the many therapy sessions with MONDAY. He hadn't realized how much energy he was spending fighting with himself until MONDAY helped him broker a truce.

The peace felt like freedom.

Nowadays, Tony took his friends' words as they were; no more second-guessing. He trusted them to let him know when or if something was wrong and whether he was the cause; no more investigating, or in some cases, inventing, grievances where there was none. He hoped for the realistic best; no more assuming the catastrophic worst.

Except, of course, the situation at SHIELD sort of screamed *worst case scenario*.

The one upside was that at least they knew where the Winter Soldiers ended up, though it was pretty much the answer no one wanted.

One Winter Soldier had been formidable and six of them would be virtually unstoppable.

"See if you can get a hold of Hill." Tony landed with a dull thud, the metallic clang on concrete muffled by the whine from the repulsors as they powered down.

A short pause. "No answer, would you like to leave a message?"

Tony pondered his words, what to say and how to say it. There was no manual to follow and no notecards to read. "Just...tell her we're on our way."

"Sent, Sir."

"I'm sure the Pentagon already knows but update Rhodey anyway." The Triskelion was practically neighbors with the Department of Defense, both located on the Potomac river.

"Already done."

"Gold star for you, JARVIS."

The air rumbled as the StarkJet began its descent.

"Thank you, Sir. I do adore stickers in geometric shap-" The HUD flashed brightly with a warning of an unknown heat signature detected on the plane's exterior. "On your left, Sir!"

Tony pivoted just in time to catch a glimpse of a metal arm and an all-too familiar face void of expressions before the Winter Soldier tackled him to the ground. Alarms blared as a flurry of punches landed against the back of the helmet; pain, needle-point sharp, prickled along the base of his skull and stabbed at his temples.

The precision and force of the strikes felt surgical and calculated, opposite of the wild and almost animalistic hits Barnes had delivered in Siberia. One was fighting to kill while the other had attacked to survive, two sides of the same deadly coin and all HYDRA's currency.

"JARVIS, Protocol Winter is Coming." Tony grunted as he engaged the repulsors to blast himself upright. The momentum carried him into the air, hovering several feet above Barnes, who was rolling into a crouch.

"Yes, Sir. Retrieving Hibernation armor and deploying in thirty seconds."

Extending a hand, palm flat and facing Barnes, Tony readied a shot. "Freeze!"

Barnes' eyes, ice blue behind the curtain of dark hair, zeroed in on the glow of the repulsor. His gaze tapered with concentration and calculations then his entire body exploded in forward motion. Muscles contracted and extended as he charged toward Tony, enhanced strength and speed on full display as he weaved through two repulsor blasts and leaped into the air, metal hand clamped down on Iron Man's left calf while his flesh one drove a knife - *where had that come from?* - into the ankle joint.

The additional weight and the sudden lack of thrust from his left boot made Tony drop a few feet, his balance compromised as the right boot struggled to compensate. Déjà vu hit him like

a punch to the gut, his stomach coiling with dread.

In the other timeline, Rogers had pulled Tony down by his left ankle, destroying the boot jet, in an effort to prevent Tony from going after Barnes. Was this a coincidence or a sign that history was set to repeat itself?

There had been snippets of old dialogue reworked into new conversations and the same details rearranged in different sequences but the key events never strayed from the set course.

Killian blew up his Malibu home. Maya injected someone with Extremis. Tony lost the arc reactor.

The Aether was unleashed. Malekith invaded Midgard. The Convergence opened worm holes to other realms in the London sky.

What was the point of starting over if the ending didn't change?

"Agent Romanoff is calling, Sir." JARVIS' voice snapped Tony back into the present.

"A bit busy right now, voicemail it." Tony aimed a shot at Barnes' left shoulder and tried not to think about how he had already severed the robotic limb once before.

"Yes, Sir."

Instead of dodging, Barnes adjusted his grip, twisted his torso for momentum, and threw Tony behind him as he surged forward, accompanied by the sound of screeching metal as he pulled his knife free from the Iron Man armor.

The Iron Man armor crashed into the ground, the left boot gave one last sputtering spark before going dark. Two small missiles fired from the armor's shoulders, halting Barnes' advance and allowing Tony time to push himself to standing.

"Ten seconds. I've also taken the liberty of sending up a spare suit."

"Double gold stars for you."

Clouds of smoke and bits of debris clung to the tense air between them, like gasping breaths and falling snow, evidence of the destruction already wrought and harbinger of more to come.

Tony looked into the impassive of his parents' killer and saw only the Winter Soldier reflected in those lifeless eyes; the same dead gaze the Winter Soldier had directed at the roadside surveillance camera before putting a bullet through the lens.

"Why didn't you just shoot them?" The words were out of his mouth before he could check them. "Why did you have to make them suffer?" The second question tumbled out just as quickly as the first and Tony wasn't sure whether he was seeking punishment or closure. He had hated Howard, *blamed* him, for decades. Never truly mourned his father the way he had grieved for his mother because Howard hadn't deserved it.

I don't care. He killed my mom.

Barnes said nothing, a slight tilt of his head was the only indication that he had heard Tony.

"Whatever." Tony sighed with a shake of his head. "It doesn't matter." A lie he wished he could believe and, as he would look back on later, an opening that the Winter Soldier was waiting for.

Barnes leaped, seemingly coming in high before changing his angle midair to drop into a low sweeping kick at the last second, knocking Tony flat on his back. One of Barnes' knees slammed into Tony's abdomen and pinned him down, the impact felt through the protective layers of armor and padding.

A metallic glint was all the warning Tony had before the same knife - *Gerber Mark II combat knife*, his mind noted reflexively - was plunging down into the arc reactor casing, the spear-point tip aiming for the seam with unnerving ease.

It never made contact.

Barnes jolted as the ground shook, his hand paused in mid-air and with a flick of his wrist, he threw the knife before spinning away with a final kick at Tony's face plate.

The Hulk roared as he bounded toward them, unconcerned by the blade embedded in his shoulder and concrete cracking underneath his thundering steps. "No hurt Tin Man!"

Knowing it was best to stay out of the Hulk's way, Tony remained still in his position on the ground and trusted the Hulk wouldn't trample him. Numerous battle simulations had shown that the Hulk was more situationally aware than he was given credit for, though his size and increased momentum made acute turns and last-second adjustments difficult.

Barnes had retreated behind the StarkJet and was clearly unprepared when the Hulk pushed aside the plane as though it were a toy.

Tony winced at the handprint. "JARVIS, send up another jet."

"Already en route, Sir."

"You strong." A giant hand closed around the metal fist and lifted its owner up effortlessly. "But Hulk stronger." Green lips stretched into a feral grin at the sight of Barnes' boots scuffling for purchase and finding none. "Hulk *strongest*."

The Hulk's powerful arm corded with strength, shoulder pulling back and elbow straightening as he dragged Barnes to the side, telegraphing his next move - bashing the Winter Soldier into the ground like a rag doll in a manner reminiscent of the *puny god* moment shared between the Hulk and Loki after the Chitauri Invasion.

"Hibernation is on standby." JARVIS announced.

The cryogenic containment armor hovered at the edge of Tony's peripheral vision. "Good timing." Enhanced physiology or not, he doubted Barnes would survive a Hulk smashing. Not to mention the Hulk seemed a bit more vicious and a lot more eager than usual, the sort of fierce protectiveness that Tony still had trouble believing it was meant for him.

"You hurt Tin Man." The Hulk cast a look at Tony, as if he had somehow sensed Tony's doubts. "Hulk smash!"

Acting quickly, Tony fired a series well-timed, impeccably-aimed and full-powered repulsor shots that severed Barnes' bionic arm and freed him from the Hulk's punishing grip just as the Hulk swung him upward in a devastating arc.

Barnes sailed through the air, twisting for leverage for a better landing, only to fall into the waiting embrace of the Hibernation suit. The armor closed with a series of clicks.

Sparks flew as the singed wires and melted casing scraped against the dented concrete. "Where Metal Arm go?"

"Nap time, he needs to cool down a little." Tony pointed toward the Hibernation armor as he walked toward the Hulk. "Sorry to interrupt your fun there, buddy, but he's not for smashing."

"No smash?" The Hulk frowned at the metal arm in his hand before tossing it aside with a grumble. "He hurt Tin Man."

A denial was on his tongue but Tony bit it back and offered a terse nod instead, because Barnes, however unwilling and unknowingly, had caused a significantly amount of pain. "He did." It felt good to acknowledge that, like a wound stinging as it was being cleaned so it could heal without risks of infection. "But he didn't mean to."

"Accident?"

"Not quite. He, um, didn't want to, but some very bad people made him. Which is why we're going to help-" He cleared his throat, it had suddenly gone dry. "-help him."

The Hulk blinked, eyes softening and flickering brown briefly. "Tin Man good."

"Yeah, I'm all good. See?" Tony stepped out of the damaged suit, spinning on his heel with his hands outstretched. "Thanks to you, Big Guy."

"Tin Man good." The Hulk repeated, green eyes boring into Tony's and willing him to understand. "Tin Man good."

Tony shrugged, fidgeting and flustered by the directness of the Hulk's statement. "I try to be."

The Hulk kept his stare trained on Tony's face for another moment before nodding to himself. "Good." He reached up to pull out the knife like it was an afterthought, the cut healing rapidly. "Banner wants back."

"I'll see you soon, okay? There's more smashing where we're going." Tony held out a hand for a high-five.

The Hulk returned the gesture with a smile, form shrinking and color fading until Bruce stood in his place, who fixed Tony with a stern stare, made more frightening because of the bloody knife still clutched in his hand. "You've got some explaining to do."

Tony hastily stepped into the replacement Iron Man armor. "First of all, let me just say, you look *great* in those pants."

I'm Back in Business

Chapter Notes

This is the last Tony POV chapter for the CA: WS arc, the next few will be told in multi-POV and then it's AoU time! *cuddles JARVIS*

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Captain America: Civil War.

Bruce maintained his glare for another second before his lips quirked up in a reluctant smile, reaching into the convenient pocket of his new Hulk pants and pulling out a protein bar. "I look great in all of my pants."

"That you do, you lean mean green machine." Some of the tension drained away from Tony's shoulders at the reprieve, the trust, Bruce had just given him. He still needed to explain what had just happened with the Winter Soldier and what was happening at SHIELD but he also needed a chance to catch his breath after the adrenaline-soaring battle and the abruptly-ended phone call. His conversation with Fury felt like hours, if not days, ago. When in reality, it had only been minutes.

It was going to be a long day.

The first StarkJet rose into the air, making room for the second plane to land and creating a gust of wind that blew the empty wrapper out of Bruce's hand as he finished the last bite of his post-transformation snack. The foil reflected sunlight as it flew through the air until it was caught by the Hibernation armor, still hovering at the edge of the flight deck.

"JARVIS, keep an eye on Barnes-"

Bruce hummed questioningly as he bit into his second protein bar, the compact pockets were deceptively spacious.

"-while we're gone, monitor his stats and whatever it is you do."

"I certainly hope *whatever it is I do* will live up to your high expectations of my abilities." JARVIS's voice came through both the damaged Iron Man armor and the audio feed within the suit Tony was currently in.

"You know who would appreciate your snark?"

"The DMV?" The *regular business hours and people capable of waiting* went unspoken but heard clearly in JARVIS' tone.

"No, the airport."

"Please, Sir, anything but the TSA. Oh, the horror!" The distressed plea was not at all convincing in JARVIS' deadpanned delivery.

Tony rolled his eyes but a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Then you better get to work."

Hibernation glided down until it was next to the left side of the armor JARVIS was piloting. With the left jet boot compromised, JARVIS would need some help stabilizing the flight down to the workshop.

"And the prosthetic, Sir?"

The metal arm gleamed in the shadow cast by the StarkJet that had just arrived as the first one disappeared into the hangar below for repairs.

It was a memory of what had transpired - *a fist pummeling Howard's face on the side of a familiar road* - a warning of what could happen - *fingers gripping the edge of the arc reactor as snow drifted outside* - and a reminder of what just occurred.

Instead of blasting off the robotic limb out of defensive desperation, he had severed it to save Barnes from being repeatedly smashed into the ground. The outcome remained the same but the intention was different and that had to count for something, right?

You're a man who has everything and nothing.

Not anymore. Because even if nothing changed, Tony certainly had. He could feel it in his bones and blood and body; transformation rippling under his skin and healing old wounds that would never be inflicted but still ached.

"Sir?"

Tony blinked and reined in his wandering thoughts. Now was not the time for a trip down memory lane or a detour to a life not lived. He glanced at the metal arm, fingers twitching and stomach coiling with the incessant and immediate need to...

Break it apart. Hammer it flat. Blow it up.

Tear it into pieces. Set it on fire.

Melt it down until it was nothing more than a useless puddle of discarded parts, completely unrecognizable so he could stop seeing it as a murder weapon; *the* murder weapon.

Tony supposed that was where the morbid curiosity came in. The need to examine every bit of the very thing that cracked Howard's skull, to understand how gears and plates came together to generate such brutal strength, and to - hopefully - make sense of everything.

The same drive that made him study the Jericho blueprints for hours, calculating the trajectory of shrapnel and estimating the blast radius, before deleting every copy from his servers. Before accepting that his life must be meant for more to survive such an injury. Before declaring himself Iron Man in front of a sea of reporters.

I am Iron Man.

Because he was more than just Tony Stark, orphaned at twenty-one and the last surviving member of the Stark line, he was Iron Man.

Iron Man who was needed at the Triskelion to combat the HYDRA uprising, to protect agents who only ever wanted to serve their country, and to preserve SHIELD to the best of his not inconsiderable ability.

There was much to be learned from one of HYDRA's crowning achievements. Composition of the materials used could provide information on suppliers and sources, minerals mined from different parts of the world carried unique identifiers. Structural design could offer insight on HYDRA's technological progress and how to best counter them. Programming could identify the engineers who performed upgrades and maintenance, everyone had a signature but the trick was knowing where and what to look for.

Good thing JARVIS knew every single trick in the book.

"Get it to the lab and scan for specs."

JARVIS picked up the bionic limb by its elbow, the hotrod red and titanium gold contrasting sharply with the cold gray and bloody crimson. It looked both harmless and dangerous, a weapon capable of such destruction but without its wielder. Much like Barnes, an enhanced soldier who could crush a man's face or break a woman's neck, but never at his own discretion and always under someone else's command.

Barnes shouldn't have to pay for the red in HYDRA's ledger, which was why Tony made no attempt to collect his debt, choosing evasion and defensive measures during their too-close-for-comfort confrontation.

It was the right choice.

Helping Barnes was also the right choice, it was just one that Tony hadn't given much thought to...until now.

Tony supposed he should have been better prepared with alternative plans, as a futurist, he certainly did not see this coming. Though in his defense, not that anyone was asking aside from the critical voice in his head that sounded exactly like Howard's, he had been a little busy saving the world.

They say sarcasm is a metric for potential, if that's true, you'll be a great man someday.

Not to mention events were moving faster than Tony could have predicted and spiraling in unexpected directions, the Winter Soldier was supposed to be sent after Captain America, not

Iron Man.

In the original timeline, Barnes had gone into hiding after SHIELD's fall; Tony had planned on locating Barnes after the dust had settled then delivering him to Steve for a reunion that would hopefully result in zero casualties and a miraculous recovery. Which, Tony was realizing with a sinking heart, was pure wishful thinking. HYDRA's conditioning was invasive but effective; it took a certain level of skill to overwrite autonomy with obedience, morality with indifference, and personality with blankness. While this kind of absolute control could, perhaps, be shaken by a sentimental quote or a fond memory, breaking it required more than emotionality.

Barnes needed help. If not for the fact that he had been a prisoner-of-war for the better part of a century then definitely as a measure of ensuring public safety, considering his time as HYDRA's most prolific assassin. The Winter Soldier could not be let loose upon the world unchecked.

Tony understood all of this and accepted what must be done, he just needed to talk himself into it first because, as history had shown, *doing what's right* by the world always came at the cost of *doing what's best* for himself.

*

The StarkJet took off with a dull roar that faded to a pleasant hum as they leveled out in the sky.

"So." Bruce started, pivoting to face Tony as to maximize the effects of his arched brows and pointed look.

"Right." Tony brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck and winced as his thumb pressed against a tender spot. "Well, let's start with the super secret spy organization that's really a front for a super secret terrorist organization then we can talk about their super secret group of assassins with a, quite frankly, unimaginative name."

*

Bruce took in the revelation of HYDRA's infestation within SHIELD with a grim nod and shook his head in disbelief at the news of the attempted - until he heard otherwise, Tony would continue to think of what he had just heard over the phone as an *attempt* - assassination on Fury.

"Maybe Fury survived." Bruce offered tentatively.

Tony's shoulders lifted in an unconvinced shrug even as his heart held on to far-fetched hope. While he had not gone up against two Winter Soldiers, he had fought two super soldiers and lost - *died*. "I...I don't know what to do about Barnes." He confessed in a whisper. "He needs help but I don't know how or where to even begin-"

"What did you just say about helping Barnes?"

Bruce's question didn't make sense. He had listened to Tony's summary of the Winter Soldiers, five of whom were volunteers and the one who was not, with a clenched jaw that tinted green.

"Barnes needs help."

"I know that, but why-"

It wasn't him, Tony. Hydra had control of his mind!

Tony swallowed down the sudden memory of copper on his tongue, snow in the air, and betrayal from a childhood idol. "It wasn't him, Brucie. HYDRA had control of his mind."

"-are you taking it on? You're the last person who should be helping Barnes given your history." Bruce leaned in and pressed their shoulders together, warmth seeping through the thin layer of Tony's shirt and the blanket Bruce had wrapped around his torso, the same as he had done when Tony had explained HYDRA's twisted sense of humor in sending Barnes after the last Stark.

"Isn't that exactly why I should help him?" Tony countered, brows furrowing with confusion and a hint of defensiveness. "To get closure and heal or whatever."

Do you even remember them?

I remember all of them.

"Sure, if that's what you want but I don't think that's the case here. I think you're feeling..." Bruce pursed his lips as he searched for the right word, huffing out a sigh when it didn't come. "...*something* or a lot of *somethings* and you want a project to distract yourself."

Tony frowned, his tone taking on a combative edge and his skin prickled with irritation. "Thought you weren't that kind of doctor." As soon as he said it, he knew he was being unfair. A future that would never come shouldn't be held against the friend Bruce was to him now.

"No, I'm not, and neither are you." If Bruce noticed, he didn't let it show.

The fight left him as quickly as came and Tony conceded his friend's point with a resigned shrug. "Guess we should give Vinny a call."

Stephen would forever regret telling Tony that he hated his middle name.

Bruce snorted. "You know he hates it when you call him that."

"Not as much as he hates Stranger Danger." Tony grinned.

The moment of levity was broken, however, when JARVIS spoke up.

"Sir. D.C. Metro Police has arrived at the site of a three-car accident and shooting. Initial witness reports state two men wearing facemasks and black clothes were seen fleeing the

scene on foot, leaving behind two stolen police vehicles. An African American male, whose description matches that of Director Fury's, is pronounced dead at the scene due to gunshot wounds to the chest and head."

Tony closed his eyes at the news. "Okay. What did Natasha want?"

"She did not leave a message, Sir. Should I try to reach her?"

"Nah. Let's see for ourselves." The unique architecture of the Washington Monument greeted Tony when he opened his eyes. "Pull up the Triskelion security feed."

"Yes, Sir."

The cabin dimmed as a grid of holographic screens appeared and chaos filled every single one of them, overlaid with Steve's voice as he delivered one of his famous motivating speeches. His tone was crisp and commanding and 100% Captain America.

"-are being attacked from within. SHIELD is not what we thought it was, it's been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader and the STRIKE team is HYDRA as well. I don't know how many more, but I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you."

Five Winter Soldiers cut impressively brutal paths through the crowds, systematically dispatching anyone who stood in their ways. They looked simultaneously identical and unidentifiable, clad in the same all-black tactical suits with masks and goggles obscuring their faces and dark gloves covering their hands.

Barnes wasn't dressed like that, his face and metal arm on display as they had been in the roadside surveillance video.

Tony's eyes narrowed with suspicion then widened in understanding. HYDRA had wanted Tony to recognize Barnes, probably so he would fly into a reckless rage that would end with him either killed or doing the killing. The latter of which would drive a wedge between Iron Man and the Avengers because Barnes was *Captain America's best friend*.

And that was why the other five Winter Soldiers were made to look like they *could be* Barnes, guarantee of at least a moment of hesitation before Steve would attack any of them.

"Today is the first battle of a long war. A war we have to fight if we want to stop them from having what they want: absolute control. We need to rise to the occasion and defend our freedom, even if it's against those who we believed were our friends, people we trusted."

Smoke billowed out of various offices and spilled into the hallways. The sprinkler systems were activated on certain floors but not on others. Lights flickered and sparked.

Agents were stuck in stand-offs, unsure of each other's loyalties and unwilling to fire without confirmation. Except the only way to ascertain if their coworkers were HYDRA was the fact that they attacked first, either with an unexpected bullet or a stab in the back. The agents

didn't need a pep talk, what they needed was a way to pinpoint the undercover HYDRA agents.

Tony scanned the sea of faces, alarmed and anxious and angry, until his gaze snagged on an ID badge clipped to an agent's lapel. His impeccable memory pulled up a detail he had read when reviewing the files on how Pierce had taken out the World Security Council.

Facial recognition would take too long, the fastest way for HYDRA operatives to be identified was if they did it themselves.

An extraordinarily convincing bluff should do the trick and Tony knew how to put on a show like no other.

Holding a finger up to his mouth in the universal gesture of *shh* that Bruce responded with a mimed zipping motion across his lips, Tony typed in a series of codes to commandeer the Triskelion's PA system. In the next second, his voice replaced Steve's.

"The price of freedom is high, it always has been, and it's a price I'm-

"Hello? Is this thing on?"

Whispers of *Tony Stark* rippled across every screen.

Natasha found one of the cameras unerringly and arched a brow at it.

"Good, you know who I am so you're going to want to hear what I have to say. Fury is dead and HYDRA is here and you don't know who's a friend and who's not."

Don't bullshit me, Rogers! Did you know?

Yes.

One of the security feeds showed Steve frantically tapping at the microphone in front of him, futilely disconnecting and reconnecting the cable.

"I can't do much about the first two but I can help with the third because I have a comprehensive list of HYDRA personnel. Yes, Sitwell, that means you."

Sitwell jerked and was immediately decked by the two agents flanking him.

"Now, those fancy little IDs with those nifty access chips you have on you? I just hacked them and made them into miniature bombs. You remember my old nickname, right? *Merchant of Death*. Guess what, HYDRA? I'm back in business."

A Waste of Effort, Really

Chapter Notes

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 2. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Captain America: Civil War.

"-I'm back in business."

Natasha groaned inwardly at Stark's penchant for drama, it wasn't enough that she had already suffered through Steve's pep talk. Her well-trained mind pushed the part about Fury's - unconfirmed - death to the back in favor of surviving the current HYDRA incursion on SHIELD. If he were dead, there was nothing more she could do. If he weren't, then mourning would have simply been a poor use of time.

Compartmentalization was the foundation of sanity.

A series of five explosions, all inside the building, had gone off within seconds of each other, driving agents toward the exits and away from their posts and right into the paths of the Winter Soldiers.

Plural.

Panic had pierced through her at the sight of them, followed by a sinking horror that pulled at the scar on her side. It pulsed with phantom pains, both the physical evidence of her mortality and the psychological wound that she had been bested, that she would fail again, and that this time, failure equated to her death instead of her client's.

One Winter Soldier was a ghost story.

Five Winter Soldiers were the stuff of living nightmares.

By the time the static of shock faded from her senses, she was out of the fray and ensconced in a deserted corner office, paperwork and office supplies littered the floor.

Unlike Clint, her instincts had always leaned toward flight instead of fight. A strategic retreat, a shift of alliance, and a sudden disappearance were all tools of her trade. Regimes fell every day, she did not weep for them nor did she fall with them.

Stark's speech was either a legitimate threat or an elaborate bluff and both were ill-conceived. If he had rigged the IDs to be bombs, which she doubted given the scope of HYDRA's infestation and the shortage of time since the attack started, he had just given away the

advantage by announcing his plan. If he had not, the far more likely scenario, then the ruse would be discovered quickly when none of the badges exploded.

Granted, survival instincts would prompt the traitors to remove their ID badges, thereby revealing themselves as HYDRA operatives, except concealing their identities didn't seem to be a priority. HYDRA was practically announcing their presence to the world by declaring war on it.

Natasha sent another knowing look at the camera, tapping at her earpiece, as she moved to close the door to muffle her voice. She waited for the telltale click of a call being connected before speaking in a whisper. "You played this wrong."

Stark snorted.

"Your bluff won't hold them for long." Natasha sighed, his ego was always going to be a problem.

Iron Man? Yes. Tony Stark? Not recommended.

"Good thing I'm not trying to hold them."

"They're not going to surrender."

A muted crash sounded in the distance.

"Didn't expect them to."

Though she couldn't see him, she could practically hear the eye-roll. "Then what's the point of that spectacle?"

"The point, Romanoff-" Her name was growled out like an insult. "-is to draw a line between the relatively good guys and the definitely bad guys."

Natasha chewed on the inside of her cheek as she reconsidered Stark's speech - *you don't know who's a friend and who's not...I can't do much about the first two but I can help with the third*. He had stated his objective outright then distracted them all with a callback to his old moniker and his infamous bombastic attitude; like a gifted magician performing the greatest illusions on center stage with the Black Widow as one of his captive audience. "I read this wrong." She admitted grudgingly.

"...did I just mishear you or did you say you were wrong?"

"Don't let it go to your head." Out of the possible responses, she didn't expect derision.

"Of course you'd find a way to make your mistake about me."

"Are you incapable of letting go of your ego for one goddamn second?" Natasha bit back before she could stop herself, her temper getting the better of her. Every conversation since the Chitauri Invasion with Stark ended up somewhere she hadn't intended, gone was the mark with a paper-thin mask painted to look metal and left in his place was an equal who took on

personalities and switched moods like a chameleon. It was frustrating, to say the least, and left her doubting her skills. The only metric with which she measured herself and her worth and survivability by. "This is bigger than you, SHIELD-

"I think you mean HYDRA." Stark pointed out, his tone mockingly helpful.

"That's why I called you!" Her frustration was real. Stark was exceedingly good at pushing her buttons, it seemed only fair she pushed some of his in return. "And you didn't pick up." She affected a hint of disappointment in her voice, guilt - misplaced or genuine - was at the heart of every single one of Stark's decisions since his emergence as Iron Man.

"I was busy." Stark replied with a dark kind of amusement laced through his words, the kind that said *I'm laughing at you* instead of *with*, the kind that made her confidence crack and her footing falter, the kind that meant she was heading down the wrong path.

When he didn't elaborate, she tried again. "You're missing quite the party." Curiosity was just as strong of a motivator.

Gun shots rang out and bounced down the deserted hallway in fading echoes.

"Had one of my own, actually, and we had a *smashing* good time."

"Oh?" She feigned nonchalance as a shiver ran down her spine at the thought of the Hulk and *I'm always angry*. Of unnaturally colored skin and abnormally large fists. Of dead aliens and a defeated god. "Anyone I know?"

"Probably, he's been around a *long* time. He knew my parents and was there *for them at the end*." Stark's chuckle lacked any real mirth. "He and Cap go *way* back, like, *way way back*."

Barnes.

HYDRA sending Barnes after Stark was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it meant Steve would not be distracted by the possibility of fighting his childhood friend. On the other hand, it meant Steve would either want to rush to Barnes' aid or avenge his death.

"Is he alive?"

Stark scoffed. "I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific."

"Barnes." Natasha gritted her teeth. "Is he alive?"

"Define *alive*."

"Stark..."

"I mean, I wouldn't call being a human popsicle slash murder machine living, but, hey, what do I know? I'm just a consultant-" The flippancy vanished. "-but I do know how to define *dead*." There was a tornado of emotions underneath that flat response, a promise of retribution equal to the force of a natural disaster. "Like someone with their face bashed in or throat crushed."

Natasha swore, quietly and in Russian. "You saw the tape."

"Yep." The way Stark popped the *p* sounded like a gunshot.

"How-" She swallowed down her questions of *how* and *when* and *who*, they didn't matter. What was important was the fact that Stark knew more than they were comfortable with. Details tended to exacerbate situations, time for damage control. "I'm sorry."

Stark made an unconvinced noise but at least it wasn't a refusal. "I didn't kill him." He said after a beat. "I did have to blow off his arm to save him from the Hulk though."

Natasha tried to visualize the scene and winced. "The metal one, I hope?"

"Yeah." A surprised laugh accompanied Stark's answer, yet another unexpected reaction. "He's alive and back in cryo at the tower, you know, *chilling*." He trailed off with a hum.

And she believed him.

Stark was arrogant, reckless, self-centered and a variety of other unattractive personality traits but he did not lie. Not outright, anyway. He preferred and had mastered the subtlety of half-truths and lies of omission, a quality she actually appreciated, as evidenced by his public performances. Whether it was a product of exhaustive media training as the Stark heir or the subconscious desire to do and be a better man, she could not tell.

It didn't matter, really, as long as they knew that when dealing with Tony Stark, it was more important to look between the lines instead of reading the words.

Steve, however, was still judging the book by its cover.

Despite how well they had fought together against the Chitauri Invasion, Captain America and Iron Man never quite recovered from the confrontation on the helicarrier.

Any regrets Steve might have had about his too-harsh, too-fast judgement had dissipated when the first round of articles praising Iron Man's heroics - *Stark's Single-handed Save* had been one of the more popular titles, proving that alliteration sells - hit the newsstands. Stark's refusal to join the Avengers had cemented Steve's opinion that Stark only fought for himself and any sacrifices were made for great glory instead of authentic altruism.

Natasha had, quietly, disagreed; there was no such thing as true selflessness. Stark had invented Iron Man out of desperation and continued in the role to appease his guilty conscience, the very same reason for which she had defected to SHIELD. Clint had wanted a place to belong and met Coulson at the right place and right time, Hawkeye could have easily been a recruitment for another agency with a snappy acronym. Even Steve, as much as she admired his black-and-white morality, had sought enlistment not because he wanted to serve his country - he could have done that in the background instead of the frontlines - but because he had something to prove.

Stark had come out of it all with a disillusioned air about him, no longer buying into the living legend of Captain America, and something else she still couldn't quite place her finger

on. Even now, *especially now*, after hearing how a man she had once profiled as "displays compulsive behavior" not only consciously chose not to seek vengeance against his parents' killer - the act was still done even when intent and free will were absent - but also decided to save him.

An act the more sentimental type might have called admirable.

"I'll tell Steve, he'll listen to me." Natasha offered, sensing what Stark left unsaid and knowing what she did about how the last conversation had gone between the two men.

"Alright." Stark agreed a little too quickly. "But if Captain America comes after me with his shield, I'm totally blasting him in the face and blaming you."

Shouts and screams grew louder, closer, before cutting off into an ominous silence.

"Noted." She pressed her back against the wall, finding comfort in the solid surface behind her and the knowledge that Iron Man was on his way.

*

Soaring through the clear skies, Thor relished the feel of moving against the air as gusts of wind swept against his cheeks and pushed back his hair. The thrill of impending battle buzzed under his skin and charged his blood, a sorely missed sensation after the leisurely but long days spent with Jane. Mjolnir hummed in agreement and Thor felt a twinge of guilt for reducing the mighty weapon to a glamorized doorstep that kept Darcy's inquisitiveness at bay.

There was a restlessness prickling at his skin, fueled by an abundance of energy that no amount of passionate lovemaking or scenic explorations could dispel. One that Jane would surely notice, if not already given how she had asked for his embrace and *only* his embrace the previous night.

It had been quite a blow to his confidence as lover but the hurt was tempered by the knowledge that Midgardians' physicality was far more fragile and less resilient compared to that of an Asgardian. Yet another reminder of the discrepancies between him and his love, one that caused pain to spread within his chest and gather at his temples.

Jane had many inquiries regarding the inner workings of the Bifrost and the meanings of Asgardians runes, which Thor had done his best to answer, or, more appropriately, struggled to answer because his schooling had focused primarily on the *what* and the *who* as opposed to the *why* and the *how*.

A warrior need not to know the intricate construction of his armor, only that he must don it to protect his people.

A commander need not to know the mythical details of Asgard's defense systems, only its capabilities and under what circumstances to employ them.

A future king need not to know the specificities and specialties, only the names and loyalties of the experts who could advise him best.

With Jane, however, he was none of these titles and that had made her all the more precious.

Thor loathed to see the furrow between Jane's delicate brows and the frown tugging down the corners of her sweet lips, signs of disappointment and frustration he had seen too often on the faces of his tutors and were jarring to find mirrored by his lover. He knew her intent was to bring them closer together but all it seemed to have done was push them further apart.

Mjolnir crackled, sending sympathetic strands of lightning through his fingers and, literally, shocking him out of the sudden bout of melancholy.

Aye, this was not the time for such downheartedness. Not when the promise of a worthy foe to test his prowess and the glory of victory over the abominable fiend known as HYDRA loomed on the horizon.

Landing in a wide stance that shook the earth, Thor grinned heartily as he greeted Tony and Bruce, pleased to be reunited with Battle Brothers after what seemed like far too long and hopeful at the thought of sharing his latest adventure with Jane upon his return.

Perhaps then she would look at him as she once did.

*

Rumlow had dispatched the handful of SHIELD agents he had encountered, reveling in their looks of betrayal and howls of pain. It felt good to finally be himself and it would feel better to finally challenge, *defeat*, the infamous Black Widow.

Once on SHIELD's most wanted list, Natalia Romanova was only spared because Barton had found her particular skillset valuable and recommended her for recruitment. Her worth to the organization hinged upon what she could offer as the Black Widow and how successful she was at her assigned tasks.

Much like it had been at the Red Room.

A way of life that was all she knew. A mindset that none of her employers - *handlers* - had bothered to change. A weakness that HYDRA had worked discreetly and diligently to foster.

Romanoff was last sighted heading this direction and this was the only office with a closed door; a rookie mistake and a dead giveaway of her location. Perhaps the rumors of her fleeing at the sight of the Winter Soldiers had some weight to them after all. Though his plan remained unchanged, whether she was compromised or not. He knew better than to lower his guard.

Rumlow exhaled as he loosened his posture into something less aggressive and affected a slight limp on his right side, making an effort to appear as though he couldn't straighten his knee. He stumbled into the office, shouldering the door open and catching it with shaky fingers before it could slam into the wall and give away his location.

The perfect picture of an injured HYDRA operative looking for a place to hide and regroup, an easy target to capture for additional intelligence and a bargaining chip to secure a better deal once the dust settled. He knew she would buy the act. For her, survival would always come first and loyalty second.

Romanoff's voice carried the familiar note of detachment that he had come to associate with her arrogance. "Rumlow."

Rumlow pivoted unsteadily on his left heel, unsurprised when he was greeted with the muzzle of a gun trained at his head. Then he charged, tackling her legs out from under her and smirking at the surprise in her widened eyes when she realized his injuries were faked.

The gun bounced twice on the carpet, out of reach but still in sight.

Romanoff ignored it in favor of unleashing a flurry of punches at his right side, her dazed thoughts still stuck on the false information.

Which was exactly what Rumlow had anticipated, landing a vicious jab to her ribs then another at her kidney. Before he could deliver another punch, a shift of weight behind him had him surging forward on instinct, narrowly avoiding the straight-legged kick she had aimed at the back of his head.

She used the momentum to flip herself onto her feet, a fluid arc through the air that echoed the Red Room's ballet training, then took off down the hallway in a series of leaps and jumps meant to make targeting her difficult.

A waste of effort, really.

Rumlow wasn't going to pursue her when she could be plotting an ambush around the first corner. Instead, he strolled over and picked up her discarded gun, crushing an earpiece under his boot as he did. He found her once and would find her again.

A Wildfire of Anger and Accusation

Chapter Notes

Josef is one of the five Winter Soldiers in Siberia. This is another Natasha-centric chapter, because, well, you'll see why. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: First Avenger. Avengers. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Captain America: Civil War.

Josef was on his feet in one smooth motion, wrenching the combat knife out of the twitching body on the floor and feeling the briefest hint of resistance when the serrated edge caught on bone. A gurgling sound bubbled out of her slack mouth as the blade was pulled free, he cleaned it on the pantleg of her generic gray suit.

SHIELD personnel. Non-combatant. Medical background.

His shoulders rolled back as he sheathed the blade with one hand and withdrew the pistol, a more suitable weapon now that he had dispatched all the close-ranged targets.

She would die within the next few seconds. Severing the aorta was one of the most effective, albeit messier, methods. The floor was slick with blood and littered with bodies, but neither slowed his determined stride toward the next room, the next hallway, the next target. As he turned the corner, the woman's spasming form quieted into a deathly stillness.

Another obstacle eliminated.

*

Sitwell crashed to the floor, the ache in his shoulder from the impact echoed the one spreading across his jaw. Stark outing him to SHIELD had been unexpected, as was the sudden attack and the agents' instant belief in the veracity of Stark's claim, but Sitwell didn't make it to a Level Six clearance without knowing how to adapt and, sometimes literally, rolling with the punches.

The Ruger LCR in his ankle holster was the closest, given how he had landed on his side with his knees tucked somewhat awkwardly. He reached for it and fired all five rounds at the agents surrounding him, aiming at their thighs and hoping like hell that he would nick the femoral artery on at least one of them. Once emptied, he flipped the revolver so he was holding it by the still-warm barrel and smashed the handle viciously at the kneecaps of those who were still standing, clearing a path to freedom paved with bleeding and broken body parts.

Pandemonium broke out at the sounds of gunshots, like a starting pistol at a race.

Name badges covered the floor like a layer of fresh snow as blood splattered like windblown rain. Through it all, Sitwell stayed low and crept steadily toward the exit, throwing away the revolver in favor of his sidearm, a custom Sig Sauer. The reassuring weight of the pistol calmed his racing heart from a state of alarm to alertness. A steady rhythm of that guided his measured steps toward the door.

The corridor was a quieter sort of chaos, one that simmered and spilled down the pathways and around the corners instead of building and boiling in the confined space of the control room. Only a handful of agents were present and their attention immediately turned to the badge still clipped to his lapel.

Waiting for an explosion that would never happen.

Sitwell used that moment of hesitation to his full advantage.

Stark's bluff was effective, if only temporary. Much like the man masquerading as a hero in his suit of armor. Flash and fireworks lasted only a fleeting moment, distracting only the inexperienced who hadn't yet learned to keep their eyes on the prize but those who were veterans at the war of survival, their gaze did not waver from the big picture.

Hail HYDRA.

Sitwell continued down the hallway, sidestepping bodies and pivoting past doorways, and reloaded his gun before turning the corner.

And came face-to-face with none other than the Black Widow.

Whose eyes shuffled through a myriad of emotions before her expression settled on a slow grin. "Hey, Jasper."

The use of his first name surprised him but he didn't let any of it show, deciding instead to match her with a smile of his own. "Natasha, how are you?"

Neither of them lowered their weapons.

"Been better." She shrugged, the rise and fall of her shoulders seemed a bit stiff. "I've a proposal for you."

"Oh?" Sitwell arched a brow though he had somewhat expected this particular outcome; Romanoff had no loyalty for anyone other than herself.

"I hear you have an opening and would like to apply for the position." Her stance shifted as she took a step to the left, away from the wall and allowing for more maneuverability.

He mirrored her, moving to his right. "And which one is that?"

"His." Romanoff tapped at the ID badge hanging on her belt, the rectangular outline stood out in sharp contrast against the supple curve of her hips. It said *Brock Rumlow*.

Their dance continued, a slow spinning to maintain a tense equilibrium.

Sitwell blinked. "How did you get that?"

"Same as how I get everything in life." Her chuckle was a low sultry sound that was both a challenge and a promise, meant to stir the blood and hasten the pulse. *"I take it."*

Various scenarios spun through his mind and each one reached the same inevitable conclusion. Rumlow would never be so foolish as to believe Stark's bluff nor would he be so careless as to drop the badge, knowing the advantage of disorientation it provided. Romanoff could have stolen it from him and while she was certainly good enough to do that, she wasn't quite skilled to do it unnoticed. And if Rumlow had seen her, he would have engaged. The man's one-sided vendetta against the Black Widow was well-concealed within SHIELD but widely known among the HYDRA officers, voting more than once against the recruitment of Black Widow and disparaging her skillsets whenever possible. And if they had fought...

Only one of them would walk away and she was standing before him now, a calculating look in her hooded eyes. Ever the seductress and there was something oddly comforting in that, a warped kind of consistency in the fact that her sex appeal was the most used weapon in her arsenal.

Predictable.

"You think you can take HYDRA?"

"No, I want HYDRA to take me." Romanoff licked her lips, a flash of soft pink against the tempting crimson, the innuendo heavy in her purring lilt.

His gaze flickered down and snagged on the way her mouth glistened, an involuntary response that both impressed and irritated him. "That-" He nodded at the gun still trained on him. "-doesn't feel like asking."

She studied him for a beat before holstering her gun behind her back with a move that not only emphasized the swells of her breasts but also seemed entirely natural.

The more innocent the temptation, the more effective it was.

And the Black Widow was most definitely effective but whether or not she would be successful was a different story.

"How about now, Jasper?" Her voice was a throaty murmur that sounded impossibly intimate in the empty hallway, as though she was whispering in his ear instead of standing several feet away. "What does this feel like for you?"

A bullet whizzed past her head, taking a few bright coppery strands of her hair with it. "Like manipulation, Natasha. So how about you tell me what you actually want, hm?"

Romanoff's body language rippled into something less obsequious, as did her tone. "I want to live." She stated with a furrow between her brows as though the very act of honesty was painful. "I have a very specific skillset that's not being utilized very much anymore and I've

realized there was no wiping out the red in my ledger and I'm worth much more to you alive than dead."

Sitwell hummed noncommittally and waved his other hand in a *go on* gesture.

"I have other identities-"

"Not going to be worth anything soon."

"I still have contacts and favors-"

"Our contacts and favors, not yours."

"I can bring you Rogers-"

"Don't need him."

"How about his shield? Vibranium has to be rare-"

Sitwell snorted at the thought of SHIELD coveting that pathetically small amount of Vibranium while HYDRA was in negotiation with Klaue for a stockpile's worth. "Not that rare."

"Stark, I know how to work him-"

"That little speech he gave says the opposite."

"JARVIS! We've shut down Stark's A.I. before and-"

"We got our own."

"Banner-"

"Wants nothing to do with SHIELD."

"Thor-"

"Is this a role call?" Sitwell laughed. "Is this what the Black Widow has been reduced to?"

Romanoff scowled, moving as though she was going to cross her arms across her chest in embarrassment.

"Pathe-"

Then everything changed.

Two daggers flew and embedded themselves in Sitwell's shoulders. His finger twitched on reflex, firing a shot that she dodged easily before stealing close - *too close, too fast* - to twist the gun out of his hand with a sharp crack that left his wrist burning and numb.

In the span of a breath, Sitwell was staring down the barrel of his own gun.

"You're planning to expose SHIELD's operations and use our enemies to bring us down. A good number of my contacts are HYDRA, if not all of them. HYDRA either has or has access to Vibranium. HYDRA has its own A.I. that supposedly rivals JARVIS." Romanoff's steady stare was a vivid and shrewd green. "I told you I have a very specific skillset."

"Fine, you're hired." Sitwell grunted.

"No." She laughed, as clear as bells and as cold as the metal they were made of. The muzzle dug into his forehead, where cold sweat had broken out. "You shouldn't have used Coulson to get close to us. This is personal."

Coulson. Us. Personal.

Sitwell realized - *too late, too slow* - that Romanoff had not mentioned Barton in her list of offerings. A movement at his peripheral caught his attention but he kept his gaze on Romanoff. If it had been a SHIELD agent, they would have spoken up upon seeing the Black Widow. Which meant this was one of HYDRA's and Sitwell would give them every advantage possible. "Go ahead." He taunted, leaning into the press of the muzzle. "Cut off one head, two more will take its place. We will come for you." His voice increased in volume as his tone rose with fervor, announcing his loyalty and muffling the footsteps coming their way, unnecessary once he recognized the figure clad in black.

Mask and goggles and gloves blended with the tactical suit like shadows in the night and skulked toward the bright sunset of Romanoff's hair.

"I'm not the one that needs to watch their back." She hissed, unaware of the Winter Soldier behind her.

Sitwell savored the delicious irony, finding it sufficient as a last meal. "Hail HYDRA."

His world went dark with the bang of a gunshot.

*

Steve threw his shield with a bit more force than necessary, channeling the fear, anger and worry into a physical force that was actually good for something. It ricocheted off of the first HYDRA agent and slammed into the second, third, and fourth in a devastating upward arc before returning to his waiting hand. His heartbeat sounded deafening loud in the suddenly silent hallway, a frantic pace of fragile hope.

Bucky was alive.

While Steve hadn't seen the Winter Soldiers with his own eyes, having raced to the broadcasting station as soon as the explosions signaling HYDRA's attack rang out to properly explain the situation and provide the reassurance needed in times of crisis, he had certainly heard of them as he fought his way across each floor and punched his way through the crowd.

Bucky was here.

A piece of his past that somehow found its way to this strange future. A true friend in this world of ever-shifting loyalties. A reward for all that he had sacrificed for the good for the world.

Steve wasn't alone anymore.

Unless Stark found Bucky first.

When Fury had suggested they tell Stark the truth behind his parents' deaths in order to bring Stark on board in their quest to dismantle HYDRA, Steve had his reservations. While Stark did have resources and access that SHIELD and the Avengers did not, he wasn't a team player. Natasha had pragmatically pointed out that it didn't matter if they worked as a team or not, as long as Stark's repulsors were pointed at HYDRA. So Steve had agreed though he tried to argue for keeping the exact details vague. Fury had disagreed, foolishly believing that Stark would understand if he knew the circumstances surrounding Bucky's - *not Bucky, the Winter Soldier* - involuntary involvement, he would understand.

"He'll bitch and moan about it and maybe blow up a suit or two but he'll come around." Fury had said. "Telling Stark is the best way to keep Barnes alive when this house of cards crashes down around us."

Steve had thought it was a ridiculous display of naivety but he knew better than to openly disobey a bad order.

If I read the posters correctly, you got some place to be in thirty minutes.

Yes, sir. I do.

Colonel Phillips had made the wrong call when he refused to send the troops after Bucky, so Steve had taken the matters into his own hands.

To save his best friend. To do what was right. To be more than Steve Rogers.

Peggy had once said Steve was meant for more than a lab rat or a dancing monkey and he would hold on that memory, her faith in him, even when she couldn't because her once razer-sharp mind had been blunted by Alzheimer's Disease.

So Steve had given Fury an answer he wanted to hear - *I'll tell him, I'll make it right by my friend.* - and did exactly that. He had told Stark an edited version of the truth, which should have been the end, if Stark weren't so infuriatingly difficult.

Tell Fury I got the message and will have some follow-up questions.

Those were Stark's parting words and Steve had no doubts Stark got the answers.

Steve lightened his footsteps as he continued down the hallway, he could hear sounds of fighting just around the corner. There were discarded ID badges scattered about, further proof of Stark's volatile nature and poor ethics - a bomb threat was no joking matter and for it to end up being a stunt was even less funny. Perhaps it was a way to bait the HYDRA agents

into revealing their disloyalty but what a convoluted way to go about it. Steve much preferred the simpler approach of *if they're shooting at you, they're bad*.

A choked-off grunt, distinctly feminine and familiar, had Steve abandoning all pretense of stealth and sprinting toward the source.

The sight that greeted him felt like thawing out in Bucky's tiny Brooklyn apartment after trudging through the snow, like sipping hot cocoa that was mostly lukewarm water, like coming home.

"Bucky!" Steve would always know his best friend, even when Bucky was covered head-to-toe in black and was squeezing the life out of Natasha with a tight grip around her neck. "Stop! Don't hurt her."

Bucky turned and tilted his head at Steve in a way that he used to when Steve was being a punk.

Nostalgic fondness surged in Steve's chest.

Natasha wheezed out something unintelligible before exploiting the moment of distraction to swing her legs up as her fingers clawed at the hand Bucky had on her throat, breaking free with the force of the kick. Twisting in midair, a gun suddenly in her hand, she fired a series of shots at Bucky.

The bullets clattered to the floor as Steve lowered his shield, Bucky firmly tucked behind him.

"Natasha! It's B-"

A sharp jab to his spine then another one to the back of his head had Steve staggering forward in a daze, pivoting around just in time to block the knife from stabbing in his abdomen.

"You know me, Bucky, you've known me your whole life." Steve pled as he dodged another vicious swipe.

Bucky tilted his head and offered no response aside from a swift kick at Steve's knees.

"Your name is James Buchanan Barnes." Steve grappled with Bucky, stance shifting and weight wavering as he found himself evenly matched for the first time since waking up. Aliens did not count, godly or monstrous, and neither did a man in a robot suit.

Natasha's mouth was moving frantically and soundlessly; her throat a mess of splotchy red that would surely blossom into an ugly purple by the end of the day. Though it didn't seem to affect her too much as she joined the fight with the same grace and lethality in her moves.

"This doesn't have to end in a fight!"

Except it did.

It was a three-sided battle that left Steve stuck in the middle. He scrambled between protecting Natasha from Bucky and Bucky from Natasha as well as defending himself from the increasingly brutal strikes from Bucky.

Steve felt a flare of irritation as he knocked the gun out of Natasha's hand with a carefully calibrated hit of his shield. This would be so much easier if she could stop attacking Bucky and give Steve a chance to say more than a sentence at a time but she wasn't going to stop.

Bucky lashed out with a series of punches that forced Steve to raise his shield in defense.

Natasha snaked out from behind him, another pistol in hand and a clear shot at Bucky.

Steve kept his shield up as he reached to stop her, the cold metal of the gun was in sharp contrast to the battle-heated warmth of his shield.

Natasha hissed, a wildfire of anger and accusation in her eyes that dimmed as a gurgle bubbled from her lips. The trail of blood dripping from the corner of her lips was like an arrow, pointing down to the knife Bucky had embedded in her chest.

Time to Smash

Chapter Notes

So remember how I was all "Clint's section is coming up in the next chapter?" ...yeah, that didn't happen. Though I feel like everyone should know by now that none of my writing plans have ever worked out lol. Remember how I thought this fic would be wrapped up in 20 chapters? XD

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Captain America: Winter Soldier.

"Battle Brothers!"

The breath Bruce just took was squeezed out of him when Thor engulfed them in a hug, his side pressing uncomfortably against the Iron Man armor and his nose flattened against Thor's chest plate.

"Hi." Bruce croaked.

"Hey, Point Break." Tony greeted with the ease of someone whose lungs were not being compressed by godly strength. "Glad you could join us."

Thor released them with a hearty clap to each of their backs. "Where is this dastardly beast? I see no signs of this many-headed serpent you spoke of."

Bruce stumbled, catching himself with his hands on his knees and greedily gulping in air.

"HYDRA, right." Tony launched into a quick overview covering HYDRA's background and their infestation of SHIELD, including a brief update of what the current situation was inside the Triskelion and a pithy rant of the inaccuracy of the organization's symbol.

"JARVIS has been cross-referencing the list of HYDRA agents against those who have logged into the Triskelion and generated a list of targets. A pretty short list, actually. Looks like the higher-ups told most of them to play hooky today-" Tony popped open the face plate to show them his unimpressed look. "-probably planning for the Winter Soldiers to do the brunt of the work. Based on the security feed, most of them are identified and half are already down because I'm awesome, so it shouldn't take too long to round the rest of them up. The Winter Soldiers are the top priority but I doubt they'll be too much trouble with you two around, right Brucie Bear?"

"Yeah, Hulk took care of Barnes like that." Bruce snapped his fingers.

Hulk groused with disappointment at the lack of smashing and simultaneously preened about how easily he had disabled one of the elite weapons in HYDRA's arsenal.

It was deeply uncomfortable to think of another human being as a tool but it was precisely what HYDRA had reduced Barnes to, erasing all traces of what made him *James Barnes* and leaving a blank canvas behind to be filled with orders.

This was the stuff of nightmares. Not monsters, aliens, or gods, but the lengths men were willing to go in the quest for power. So far off of the ethical path that one might not find a way back.

Bruce had been there and knew that shadowy terrain more than he cared to admit.

As a young scientist wanting nothing more than to get a page in the history books, he had been blinded by the promise of reward to consider the penalties of risks. He supposed he did accomplish what he set out to do; the Hulk was certainly worth at least a chapter, if not more, while Bruce Banner was relegated to a footnote.

Once upon a time, that thought would have made Bruce incredibly bitter and unbearably angry, which would then trigger the transformation that had doomed his life and himself.

I didn't see an end so I put a bullet in my mouth, and the other guy spit it out.

Now...

Bruce glanced over at Tony, who was explaining the origin of the Winter Soldiers and the difference between the one who had attacked him at Stark Tower and the ones they would soon face at the Triskelion.

"...Barnes was a prisoner of war then a lab rat. These guys are HYDRA's best death squad before they got the serum and that's the bad news." Tony wrinkled his nose. "But the good news is that they're dressed like weirdo-ninja-wannabes so you can't miss them."

The random bit of offhanded humor was so expectedly Tony that Bruce couldn't help but feel a wave of fondness for his friend. He wondered if this was what having a close sibling felt like; he had wished for one when he was younger, desperate for someone to share in his loneliness and the weight of his father's perpetual disappointment. In retrospect, it was a crappy thing to wish for and to wish on another kid.

Yet somehow, his selfish childhood wish came true. He had met Tony, another genius with an equally unimpressed and unimpressive father who spoke Bruce's language and welcomed Bruce into his home.

Saved him. *Saved them.*

From the beginning Tony had accepted both the monster and the monster's creation, acknowledging them with a fearless - and worrying - amount of trust that looked a lot like flippant disregard at first glance.

Your work on anti-electron collisions is unparalleled and I'm a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.

Until Bruce had looked past that facade and saw the same look of haunted understanding he often felt reflected in Tony's eyes.

This little circle of light. It's part of me now, not just armor. It's a terrible privilege.

A privilege that neither of them had asked for, that came about in a twist of fate meant to punish the arrogant and the careless, that they had to make peace with and make their own.

Not every hero had an inspiring origin story like Captain America.

Honestly, Bruce preferred their flawed history. It felt more real, replete with mistakes and second chances, fighting to be better instead of being good by default.

"Any questions?" Tony asked as the face plate slid close.

Thor scratched his beard with a contemplative air. "These foes are a greater challenge than the one the Hulk has faced?"

"Yes." Tony answered hesitantly, bewilderment loud and clear despite the robotic voice of the Iron Man armor.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose even as a reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his lips, knowing what Thor was getting at and sensing Hulk's grumble at what was about to happen.

"I hereby claim the first battle against these Warriors of Winter. For I, the Mighty Thor, God of-

"Did he just call dibs?" Tony interrupted, incredulous and amused, having finally caught up to the situation.

"Sounds like it." Bruce shrugged.

"Okay. I didn't know that's a thing we're doing but have at them, Hammer Time."

Thor raised Mjolnir high, calling down a strand of lightning. "They cannot touch this."

Hulk made a pleased sound at the mention of the catchy song and, not for the first time, Bruce wondered how was this his life?

I've read all about your accident. That much Gamma exposure should have killed you.

So you're saying that the Hulk, the other guy, saved my life? That's nice. It's a nice sentiment. Save it for what?

I guess we'll find out.

You may not enjoy that.

You just might.

Bruce remembered that exchange as he felt the transformation ripple across his skin.

Tony was right.

Hulk roared in agreement.

*

"I know the road hasn't exactly been smooth and some of you would have gladly kicked me out of the car along the way, but finally we are here." Pierce smiled and spread his arms wide, knowing that he made an impressive figure against the backdrop of the Triskelion burning in the distance. "HYDRA can finally give the world the freedom it deserves."

"You smug son of a bitch." Rockwell surged forward then halted abruptly when one of the HYDRA agents leveled a gun at his face.

It had all worked beautifully.

First, luring the World Security Council to D.C. under the very believable guise of discussing the aftermath of the Convergence and its implications. Namely, how to rectify SHIELD's failure in securing Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk as assets. Several of the members had been reluctant to travel but a few comments aimed at their respective egos and vulnerabilities had Hawley, Singh and Yen on the first flights out. Rockwell, the suspicious and competitive bastard, had practically demanded a seat at the table when he learned of the meeting through Singh, the busybody. Pierce had graciously extended the invitation but made no mention of an apology for the oversight, knowing it would eat away at Rockwell. After all, nothing distracted the mind quite like a grudge.

Then, engineering Fury's untimely demise. The Director had been on his way to this very meeting, predictably taking the route most familiar to him and creating an opportunity for an ambush.

Finally, announcing HYDRA's resurrection to the group of politicians with the manipulability of schoolchildren as the Winter Soldiers razed the Triskelion to the ground.

"Society is at a tipping point between order and chaos-"

"He considered you a friend." Hill's voice was muffled by the hand she had covering her eyes since the news of Fury's assassination played out on the television. "He said you're both realists who aren't afraid to stick your hands in the mud and try to build something better." Her shoulders hunched, making her appear smaller than the woman who always stood tall as Fury's right hand. "You murdered him."

Pierce shrugged, unbuttoning his bespoke jacket as he sank down into one of the plush chairs facing her. "Like you said, we aren't afraid to get our hands dirty."

She sniffled, once, twice, scrubbing at her face with her palm, and blinked up at him with clear eyes. Too clear.

Her other hand, tucked under the table, swung up in a smooth arc tipped with the metallic glint of a gun and glided seamlessly despite the five shots fired to take out the HYDRA agents scattered across the room before settling back on him.

"You're not going to kill me." Pierce knew a bluff when he saw one. Hill was intelligent, she would have to be to rise to the position of Deputy Director of SHIELD as a woman in her thirties. Not to mention the little stunt she just pulled to get the upper-hand. He wouldn't underestimate her again. "And I think you know why."

"Enlighten me anyway." She replied, her voice as steady as her finger on the trigger.

"You need me, the world is a vulnerable place-

"You made it that way." Yen snapped.

Pierce continued on as if he hadn't heard the interruption. "Our enemies are your enemies. Disorder, war. It's just a matter of time before a dirty bomb goes off in Moscow, or an EMP fries Chicago. Diplomacy? Holding action, a band-aid. And you know who I learned that from?"

Hill's mouth twitched as if she were going to answer then thought better of it.

"Fury." Pierce drawn out the syllables like twisting a knife. "He didn't ask, he just did what had to be done. We can bring order to the lives of seven billion people, together. It's the next step, if you have the courage to take it. Fury would have."

"No, he wouldn't." Hill said quietly. "He wouldn't have done this either-"

A shot rang out.

The right side of his chest felt warm, too warm. Like a fire had been lit under his skin and it was spreading. Instinctively, his hand moved to cover the spot protectively but his fingers slid against the wet silk of his dress shirt and came away bloody.

"-but he's not here."

Another shot.

The scent of copper and rust filled his lungs, spikes of pain flared with every breath, like drowning in a sea of nails and unbearable to the point that he considered stopping altogether.

"Because of you."

The final shot felt like relief as his vision exploded in crimson then plunged into darkness.

*

A groan sounded by his foot and Hulk bent down to peer at the Bad Squid who was blinking blearily up at him.

Tiny Banner had explained that there weren't going to be any squid monsters to smash and that the skull and squiggly arms picture was just a symbol of a very bad organization. Which was stupid and didn't make any sense. It reminded Hulk of the cookies that were much smaller than the photo on their boxes - *enlarged to show detail*. He had felt cheated by the fake picture but ended up eating all of the cookies anyway, all the while wishing they were bigger.

Hulk felt a similar annoyance now when the Bad Squid paled, promptly closed his eyes and pretended to be unconscious. At least Hulk thought he was pretending - sometimes bad guys just fell over when they saw Hulk, it was kind of funny. He poked at the Bad Squid's nose to double-check and sighed when the Bad Squid didn't respond; waiting was the worst.

"Med bay secured. I'm on my way back."

Tin Man's voice squeaked in his ear and Hulk resisted the urge to scratch at it. While he could tune out Tiny Banner's lectures on situational awareness, Hulk really didn't like Tin Man's apologetic smiles about how he would do better next time to create an ear piece that wouldn't bother Hulk.

A few seconds later, a flash of red and gold looped around the corner with one gauntleted hand up in a familiar gesture.

Hulk raised his in response and laughed when their palms slapped together. High-fives were Hulk's favorite, people seemed less scared when they gave Hulk high-fives. They hadn't looked very happy when Hulk tried to shake their hands or give them hugs, which made Hulk sad but Tin Man found a way to make it better.

Tin Man always made things better.

"Want to try our luck on the next floor? I bet the last Winter Soldier is hiding out up there." Tin Man bumped his shoulder against Hulk's like he did with Tiny Banner, like they were all friends.

Hulk grunted in agreement, clenching his fist in anticipation. Three of the Weirdo Ninjas - Tiny Banner sighed loudly from his mental corner - had rushed toward them as soon as they walked into the building and since Hammer Man had sneakily called dibs - Tiny Banner sighed again - Hulk had to stand by and watch Hammer Man laugh loudly and challenge the Weirdo Ninjas to a glorious battle.

Though Tin Man had told Hulk they could split up, Hulk didn't feel right leaving Tin Man after what happened with the Metal Arm who wasn't actually bad. Plus, it was more fun to fight with his friend. Tin Man had blasted the fourth Weirdo Ninja into Hulk's fist, it was great.

Now only one remained and Hulk was ready, his senses sharpening further as they marched up the stairs; the moving steel box, though it could accommodate the weight of Hulk and Tin

Man, felt too much like a prison.

Tin Man pushed open the door and Hulk roared as he spotted the last Weirdo Ninja, with his back to them but unmistakable in the all-black outfit. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Flag Man and Bug Woman. Those two better not get in Hulk's way.

The floor shook as Hulk charged toward his target. In three large bounding steps, he had the Weirdo Ninja in his grip, wrenching him away to slam him against the wall. The knife in his hand fell with a clatter, Hulk kicked it away and raised his fist to deliver the finishing blow.

"Damn it!" Tin Man's panicked curse made him pause, something was wrong.

Did Hulk do something wrong?

Tin Man had Bug Woman in his arms as he fired a shot that shattered the windows. "I have to get her to medical before she bleeds out." He said like it explained everything but Hulk was still confused and Tiny Banner freaking out didn't help.

"Will Nat be okay?" Flag Man asked, but his eyes were glued to Weirdo Ninja and not the woman who found them in India. His face was half-covered with red speckles, as though someone had sprayed him with paint.

It didn't make any sense.

"No idea." Tin Man gritted out, avoiding the sharp glass as he carried her outside and hovering in midair. "Whatever happens, this wasn't your fault." He stated with such conviction that Hulk believed him even though he still didn't know what was going on.

Tiny Banner must have too because he quieted with a grunt.

Flag Man's shoulders sagged as he nodded. "I appreciate that."

Hulk found that strange because no one was talking to him.

Tin Man scoffed like he wanted to say something else but decided not to and then he was gone.

Pressure on his wrist reminded Hulk of the Weirdo Ninja he was still pinning to the wall and the fist he had ready.

Time to smash.

With a grunt, he slammed his fist forward and felt bones crack against his knuckles.

"No! Stop!" Flag Man shouted, probably upset that Hulk stole his target.

Hulk rolled his eyes, lifting the floppy Weirdo Ninja to give him back to Flag Man even though Flag Man didn't call dibs. At least he got one smash in. He wasn't expecting the shield flying toward him, a blur of red, white and blue that he instinctively raised his arms to block.

In the next second, his world was filled with only red as blood spurted from where the shield was embedded in the side Weirido Ninja's skull.

"Bucky! No, no! What did you do?" Flag Man made a horrible noise, a snarling screech that didn't really sound human.

It called to the more primal side of the Hulk's mind, already stirring at the scent of copper and the sticky warmth on his skin. His control was fraying, so close to snapping, and Hulk didn't want that, didn't want to be a mindless beast driven by bloodlust.

Tiny Banner was struggling to come back, mumbling mantras of peace and calm as he scrabbled for control. Hulk wanted to give it back but it wasn't safe, not with Flag Man charging at them, teeth bared and eyes wild.

So Hulk did what he did best, he punched Flag Man in the face.

20% Chance of Saving Your Friend

Chapter Notes

We are wrapping up the SHIELDRA arc and we'll be transitioning to the AoU story line in the next chapter.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Avengers: Age of Ultron.

Jane fiddled with the dials, glancing down to check her translation of longitudes and latitudes into Asgardian runes and the conversion of said runes into frequencies to be transmitted across the realms. Maybe the twenty-sixth time would be the charm, the magic number that would somehow bridge the gap between two realms the way the Bifrost did.

Or the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, as she liked to call it because she was a scientist and she owed a debt to her intellectual fore bearers. But not Thor. He had blinked owlshly, sky-blue eyes wide and long lashes fluttering, a look that used to make her stomach swoop but now it just set her teeth on edge and made her want to snap.

It wasn't fair, she knew, to blame Thor for not having the answers to her questions. He was her boyfriend, not her professor, and, in spite of popular culture, she had never found the teacher-student romance to be appealing. But they should be able to learn things from each other, an exchange of more than pleasure between the sheets.

She wanted actual conversations about cultures and customs; U Can't Touch This and calling dibs didn't count.

For someone who loved to tell stories, Thor had actually told her very little about Asgard. Most of his tales focused on successful hunts and victorious battles. When she asked about the feasts thrown in his honor and whether the dishes served had any significance, he shrugged, and when she pressed for more information, he brooded about her lack of interest in his heroic deeds.

Which, yeah, she could see how that would be hurtful...if it weren't the hundredth time she had heard a retelling of him gutting a monstrous beast or laying waste to Asgard's enemies. By then, they all sounded the same and Thor was still expecting her to swoon.

They had not-quite-fights arguments about little things that added up to be an insurmountable mountain of differences. Whether a soul forge was the same as a quantum field generator,

why he liked certain songs and not others, and, ridiculously, what kind of future Loki and Tony would have.

The first was easy enough because if a soul forge transferred molecular energy from one place to another, then it was most definitely a quantum field generator even if Thor didn't know the specifics. Which led to the second, Thor didn't care to know the specifics; he based his preferences on feelings and objected strongly against analyzing *why* he approved of MC Hammer but scoffed at Radiohead. Other than just poor taste, of course.

"Explaining it would rob it of its magic." Thor had said carefully, as if he was afraid to upset her. Which did upset her because she wasn't being unreasonable. Except she kind of was being unreasonable and that upset her too. "My soul resonates with this spirited melody and that is all I need to know." He had smiled and cupped her face gently. "It is how I know I love you, my sweet Jane. Oh, and this Radiohead reminds me of that awful noise made by the Chitauri leviathan."

Jane had nodded dumbly, mind reeling from Thor's unintentional comparison of her and MC Hammer and his offhanded comment about Radiohead sounding like the moaning of a space whale.

Once, she had been swept off her sensible-shoes-clad feet by this alien prince.

Now, she wanted to walk alongside him as an equal and, in a way, for him to be an equal to her.

Like Tony and Loki.

There was something between those two, intangible but palpable, full of lingering looks and weighted words, a language only they spoke and others had no hopes to translate.

Something she and Thor never had. Their relationship had been a whirlwind of comedic disasters - her hitting Thor with her car, *twice* - and actual disasters - the Destroyer that was sent after Thor in Puente Antiguo.

Which, by the way, was totally a robot no matter how many times Thor told her, in a manner that bordered on mansplaining, it was an enchanted automaton. People did once consider electricity to be magic, after all.

It was pointless and useless and all sorts of other *-less* that Darcy had listed in her stern voice, but Jane still found herself wishing for that kind of connection Tony and Loki had. Or maybe she just wanted more than what Thor could offer and couldn't give him what he needed. Or maybe their romance should never have been drawn out into a relationship, maybe they had always had an expiration date that wasn't dictated by their different lifespans.

Jane tilted her head back and yelled, in the way that she had seen Darcy do under both stressful and not-so-stressful situations. It made her feel a little better and shook her out of her depressing thoughts when the upstairs neighbor shouted back for them to *stop it with the sex already*.

Glancing at the display that remained stubbornly static, she set to calibrate the machine for the twenty-seventh time, hoping that this one would do the trick and finding comfort in the one constant in her life: science.

*

Heimdall arched an eyebrow at the latest missive from Midgard; his initial admiration and amazement at the attempt of communication had long faded when the messages proved to be nothing more than gibberish.

A child's finger painting of runes, smeared and scrambled.

This one, however, was intelligible if still inexplicable.

Hydrangeas.

Perhaps Prince Thor was indulging his mortal's interests in this *science* Midgardians were so fond of, as if explaining and rewording magic would somehow allow them to claim it as theirs. Many Asgardians' abilities were centered around instincts, a warrior's battle sense or a crafter's creativity, to analyze and categorize those traits woven into their very beings would be a foolish quest at best and an insult of the highest order at worst.

Heimdall hummed and kept his gaze steady on across Asgard, vulnerable while the energy shield was deactivated for Loki and the mages to implement their improvements.

*

Maria made her way to the morgue, the click of her sensible heels on the linoleum floor echoed in the vast hallway and bounced around her already aching head like death knolls.

Pushing open the double doors, she couldn't quite suppress her shiver, though she wasn't sure if it was due to the sudden drop in temperature or the sight of a body on the slab in the empty room.

Fury's body.

She had been at a World Security Council emergency session, called by Senator Pierce, when they received reports of the Triskelion being under attack and Fury's assassination; initial police report at the crime scene had cited multiple gunshot wounds to the chest and head as the cause of death. The meeting site and all communications, incoming and outgoing, had been immediately locked down as part of the new security protocol introduced by Pierce.

The timing and sequence of events reeked of conspiracy.

Fury had warned her about Pierce's involvement in several high-level operations that had failed under mysterious circumstances, including a peace negotiation that would have secured Southeastern Europe and brought a ceasefire to the war-torn Sokovia.

Still, it had been a surprise when Pierce attempted to overthrow the World Security Council. Her mind simply couldn't reconcile this traitor holding them at gunpoint with the friend Fury

would have taken a bullet for.

How had they missed this? How many lives were lost because they couldn't see the real enemy in a world of shadowy tactics and endless secrets?

A part of her, bitter and betrayed and close to breaking, resented the slack peacefulness on Fury's lifeless face, hated him for taking the easy way out and leaving her with the mess of the century. She wondered what he would say about her decidedly poor choice of killing instead of capturing Pierce, then decided he didn't get to criticize her because he was dead.

Fury was dead.

Unless.

Maria placed her fingers against the pulse point at the base of Fury's throat, ignoring the implications of the cooled skin and the small but conspicuous wound at the center of his forehead, and waited.

Tetrodotoxin B could slow the pulse down to one beat a minute. Banner had developed it in a failed attempt to control the Hulk but SHIELD had recovered the files and found a use for it; a way to cheat death and trick their enemies. If Fury had a dose with him, if he had enough time to take it, if...

Seconds ticked by and became minutes and there was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Fury was dead.

She pressed her lips together, overcome by an unexpected wave of emotion that had her ripping her hand away to grip the side of the metal table and blinking away the sudden blurriness in her eyes.

Now was not the time to fall apart, not with everything crumbling down around them.

Later, she would take a few days off. Later, she would curl up in her favorite corner of her empty apartment and break apart. Later, she would put herself back together.

Later, she would do all of that later.

*

The Soul Stone flickered as It sensed the arrival of another soul, though referring to this newcomer as such would be an act of generosity. Unlike fiery brilliance of Its Chosen or the electricity luminosity of his creations, this soul had no light of his own.

A mere reflection instead of genuine spark, both glowed but were as opposite as moonlight and sunshine; one borrowed while the other burned for its light.

Therein lay the difference between cheating death and creating life.

The Soul Stone was torn between revulsion and fascination because no matter how unnatural this pretense of a soul was, he was something new.

Midgard was proving to be quite intriguing.

*

The footage was still playing but Clint had stopped paying attention to the images and sounds after the knife sank into Natasha's chest. There was a ringing in his ears, blocking out words and sentences until all that left was the furious rush of blood, deafening and all-consuming. Like the red that was coloring the edge of his vision.

Clint walked out of the small corner office where he'd led after demanding answers to what had happened to his friend, down the narrow hallways with no windows, and through the double-doors that looked more fitting in a prison than a headquarters. Until finally, he reached his destination.

Steve's room at the medical bay.

By the time Clint had heard about Natasha's injury, from a group of junior agents *gossiping* about who brought down the infamous Black Widow, she was already in hour three of surgery. The nurse had rattled off a list of words that were more like a mish-mash of sounds when he demanded to know Natasha's condition, snarling the syllables at him like curses until he released the grip he had on her arm.

A small voice in the back of his head whispered that maybe she was being difficult because she was HYDRA. Clint shoved it down forcefully, reminding himself that Hill had announced all remaining personnel had been cleared of suspicion of associating with HYDRA. He could trust Hill because Fury had trusted Hill.

Fury had also trusted Pierce.

After that, Clint had gone to find answers, straight to the CCTV archives. Even if the building had been secured he didn't - *couldn't* - trust anyone else's words about what happened to his best friend. He needed to see it with his own eyes.

Hawkeye and he missed everything.

It shouldn't have been easy to sneak up on Captain America but Steve was bedridden and asleep, so Clint had every advantage.

The sucker punch landed satisfyingly on Steve's nose, still red from being broken only a few hours ago. He had been admitted with a fractured jaw, shattered cheekbones, and traumatic brain injury on top of that, but being a super soldier meant Steve was already well on his way to a full recovery.

Unlike Natasha.

Clint's hand exploded with pain but he pushed past the discomfort to aim a second blow in the exact same spot.

Steve woke and caught Clint's fist before the third one could connect, his eternally boyish face scrunched up in confusion and pain, blood trickling from his swollen nose. "Clint!"

Several people reported that Iron Man had been the one to bring Natasha in, literally crashing through a window to get her to the doctors. Captain America, the supposed hero and man of righteousness, their team leader...

Questions and accusations fought to be said, to be heard, but in the end, all Clint could manage was a tense and tired and trapped whisper. "I *trusted* you."

"What?" Steve's teeth were stained red and his eyes blinking rapidly against the harsh fluorescent light.

"My best friend-" Clint hissed. "My best friend is lying on a table with people cutting into her because of you."

"Bucky!" Steve jerked.

"Shut up!"

"You don't understand-"

"I understand just fine. You think your best friend is dead." Clint felt a shiver of satisfaction when Steve's face scrunched up even as his blue eyes widened with frantic denial. The face under that mask was not Barnes' and as much as he wanted to draw out Steve's pain, Clint wanted to throw the truth in Steve's face more. "He's not, by the way, the body with *your shield*-"

Steve flinched.

"-in his head isn't your Bucky." Clint spat the name out but it left a bad taste in his mouth. "It's one of HYDRA's. *One of*. Because they have more than one."

"Oh thank god." Steve's grasp on Clint's hand turned pleading, a request for support. "Where is Bucky?"

"I don't give a fuck." Clint pulled free with a sneer. "What I want to know is why did you think the one Nat was fighting was him? Huh? There were five of them running around."

"I- It could have been Bucky. I couldn't take that chance."

The fight drained out of Clint, leaving behind a hollowness that threatened to swallow him whole. "You couldn't take the chance?" His laugh was sharp, tearing up his insides and shredding his faith in Captain America. He trusted Sitwell and Silt but they were HYDRA. He trusted Fury and Fury was dead. He trusted Steve, Captain America was supposed to be the safest bet but... "You chose the 20% chance of saving your friend over the 100% chance of backing mine?"

"He's my friend." Steve stiffened, readying for a fight he had already won because it wasn't his friend on the operating table.

You need to be sure that this team is really a team and that they have your back.

Laura had said that the last time they talked and he had scoffed something condescending back then hung up.

"So was Nat, so was I." Clint took a step back, then another, and another. Toward the door and away from this world that was supposed to be shades of gray but had long been stained pitch black like tar. And he needed to pull himself out so he could go home and lay in the afternoon sun with his wife and kids. "I'm done."

I Believe Your intentions to be Hostile

Chapter Notes

Let's get this AoU party started with a cliffhanger! *throws confetti*

In other news, I'm now on [tumblr](#), come say hi and marvel at my collection of cat photos.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Age of Ultron.

History was doomed to repeat itself because people did not change nor did they learn. Zola believed this with absolute faith, it was precisely why humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom.

HYDRA's so-called defeat had led to SHIELD opening its doors and inviting in the very minds that had once worked against them, foolishly believing HYDRA's operatives were as fickle as their own. An easy mistake to make, considering SHIELD had desperately needed to bolster its ranks to fulfill its lofty goal of *protection* and recruited its members based on abilities rather than morals.

Operation Paperclip had laid the foundation for SHIELD's inevitable fall at the hands of the Winter Soldiers created by Howard Stark's serum and HYDRA's eventual uprising helped by Tony Stark's technology.

If Zola still had a mouth, it would have smirked at the parallel between father and son and the Winter Soldier who had been instrumental in both instances involving the Starks.

Barnes had obtained the super soldier serum that would later create a new Winter Soldier cell and now he would gain access to technology that would give Zola a body and HYDRA an army.

Despite what Barnes' handler had been told, killing Tony Stark had never been the goal. It would have been idiotic to send one super soldier after Iron Man who was surrounded by literal gods and had a Hulk for a roommate, not to mention an omniscient A.I. that had access to all of Stark's advanced weaponry. HYDRA did not survive the war by making stupid mistakes, they survived by tricking their enemies into believing they did.

Fury's assassination planted the seed that HYDRA was eliminating high-value targets and the knowledge that Barnes had murdered the elder Starks would help that incorrect theory grow.

Stark would think that Barnes had been sent to kill him and overlook the Trojan Horse attached to the Winter Soldier.

The metal arm.

Stark, given his curious nature and love for technology and self-destructive tendencies, would want to study the robotic limb that had ended his parents' lives.

As soon as a scan of the arm's internal design was uploaded to Stark's servers, so was Zola's consciousness. Camp Lehigh had been an acceptable alternative to death in 1972 but more than three decades later, two hundred thousand feet of data banks was starting to feel a little cramped and a lot outdated.

Analog, really?

Project Insight had been Zola's pride and joy, an algorithm to evaluate people's past to predict their future and eliminate HYDRA's enemies. Be they a TV anchor in Cairo, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City, or a world-renown neurosurgeon. This new century was a digital book full of numbers just waiting to be calculated - bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, phone calls, test scores, and so many other data points - and Zola had learned how to balance it in HYDRA's favor.

Except Stark withdrew from the Avengers Initiatives and with him, the repulsor technology that was the linchpin of Project Insight - continuous suborbital flight. The equation had been simple, Stark was supposed to improve the turbine engines as to secure his membership as an Avenger, but he had been an outlier ever since he fell from the portal and Zola had to recalculate.

Killian's War, the media sure had a knack for snappy names, had been the inspiration; the Iron Legion taking to the air under the command of Stark's A.I. and decimating the Extremis soldiers with fluid ease.

Zola found himself wanting something he had long forgotten.

A body.

In 1972, science could not save his body so he chose to save his mind instead. Now, however, science had caught up with armored suits that ran on clean energy. All Zola had to do was wait, soon, the Iron Legion and the arc reactor technology would be his.

Hail HYDRA.

*

Ellis stilled his tapping fingers when he realized he was timing his nervous habit with the Secretary of Defense's steps as the other man paced across the Oval Office.

The explosions on Roosevelt Island had been flagged as an act of terrorism and the location of the building in question - SHIELD's primary headquarters - had the intelligence agencies and committee on high alert. SHIELD's role as an extra-governmental, counter-terrorism and

intelligence agency had been in contention for some time, well before the Chitauri Invasion. The CIA and the NSA had brought complaints forward of SHIELD's tendency to insert their own personnel within their ranks, several of whom had jeopardized key missions when they either presented false or incomplete information to their superiors. The FBI had voiced their frustration with SHIELD's lack of cooperation when their jurisdictions overlapped, which was often as SHIELD did not have a clearly defined scope of practice.

Mostly though, the agencies were simply upset that SHIELD was on a significantly looser leash, both legally and morally, than the rest of them. A fact that had given the United States the upper hand in international matters over the last decade, the World Security Council was comprised primarily of American citizens, after all. Now, however, that advantage was their vulnerability depending on what else SHIELD knocked over in their fall.

Over the years, SHIELD had committed numerous acts of espionage against allies and enemies alike, acts that could nullify treaties and exacerbate tension. In addition, there were active missions where sovereign borders had been ignored and the aftermath covered up under false pretenses. The question wasn't *if* SHIELD would be exposed, but a matter of *when* and *how much* to tell and *which crimes* to confess to, now that public interest was piqued.

The news coverage of the bombings had been routine with the Press Secretary redirecting inquiries to the Department of Defense. Until a disgruntled fireman told a reporter that they had been banned from the building and he could be making a difference instead of standing around. Which, while his worth ethic was to be admired, did not help contain the situation. All stations immediately reached out to their contacts to ascertain why emergency services have been denied entry to an unspecified governmental building that occupied almost all of the island.

Thor, Stark, and Banner's arrival on the Triskelion's helipad, captured by a news station helicopter, didn't help the situation either. The jet black of Thor's cloak provided an excellent backdrop for the red and gold Iron Man armor, the green hue of Hulk's skin, and the lightning crackling around Mjolnir.

What had been a suspected act of terrorism immediately escalated another possible invasion and sent the media into a frenzy, with the Press Secretary was looking increasingly beleaguered at the podium and losing the battle of reassuring the public while offering no answers.

Ellis resumed his tapping as he reconsidered his plans of seeking a second term.

*

"Does the President have a plan in place if it turned out to be another alien invasion?" Christine asked.

"That's classified." The poor man's forehead was beading with sweat that sparkled under the intense light on the podium.

If she were a different woman, a kinder one, she would feel sorry for him and what she was about to do, but she wasn't. "So there is a plan?"

He sighed as if that was his last breath. "Ms. Everhart, you've asked your question, it's someone else's turn now or didn't you learn that in kindergarten?"

Christine sent a meaningful look around the room and knew exactly when the other reporters connected the dots.

"Next question." The Press Secretary called out.

"Is the President's plan related to the unlisted military compound on Roosevelt Island? Is that why it was attacked?"

"There is no plan!" He flailed his arms for emphasis.

"The President has no plans to protect our country?"

"The President has a plan."

"You just said *there is no plan.*"

"Um."

"Do you agree that the American people have a right to know if there is a plan?"

"Yes?"

"So, is there one?"

"Can we get back to the bombing and away from speculations?" Sweat trailed down his face and almost looked like tears. "Please?"

Christine smirked and lifted one well-manicured hand, nails painted a brilliant red, in the air.

"Yes, Ms. Everhart?" He sounded almost relieved and she allowed him a second of respite before going in for the kill.

"Where are the Avengers? We saw footage of Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk but where are Captain America, Black Widow, and Hawkeye?"

"That's class-" He cut himself off with a strangled noise, likely remembering what had happened the last time he said a piece of information was classified. "It's protocol to not comment on active missions."

Christine pounced. "So the Avengers are on a mission right now?"

"No comment."

And there it was, the response that was as incriminating as *I plead the fifth* when paired with the right questions. She pressed on. "What is the nature of their mission?"

"No comment."

"Is it domestic or international?"

"No comment."

"When will they be back?"

"No comment."

"Who gave the order to send them out?"

"No comment."

"Who do the Avengers answer to?"

"No comment."

"Is there-"

A stern looking woman appeared in the doorway and coughed loudly.

The Press Secretary looked both chastised and relieved as he stepped away from the podium. "That's it for now." His glare matched his terse words.

Christine wiggled her fingers in a mockery of goodbye before reaching for her phone to text her producer about her next segment. It was a topic she had wanted to pursue since Tony Stark announced to the world that he was Iron Man, but public opinion was tilted firmly enough in the superheroes' favor that she had to wait. Except patience was never one of her strong suits so she went ahead and created the opportunity.

It was time to have a discussion on the recklessness and responsibility of superheroes.

*

Loki stole glances at the All-Mother in between assessing the runes that the mages had just laid. She was still golden, like sunlight and warmth, but it seemed that the burden of ruling and the heaviness of grief had pulled the sides of her face downward. And he found himself searching for ways to cheer her, as he had done when he was younger and carefree and a smile could be accomplished by a simple transfiguration charm. He wondered if she remembered those days and if she did, was it with fondness or regret.

"It is complete." The mages stated, their voices choral as they tended to be when they joined their lifeforces to strength their magic.

Frigga turned, one delicate eyebrow arched in a silent question.

Loki nodded his agreement; his spells had found no weaknesses in the improved shielding.

"Asgard thanks you for your service and you have my gratitude as well."

The mages bowed deeply, in unison once again, before departing the balcony with backward steps until they reached the doorway.

Silence draped over them, snug and secure, like the floating blanket forts Loki had enjoyed building that would collapse the moment Thor set foot within. Being back on Asgard after time away, *after Odin's death*, made him sentimental. Perhaps there was more truth in not speaking, or thinking, ill of the dead than decorum. Odin's absence was felt, both a hollowness that echoed every disappointment Loki had felt as a child and a lightness that set him free from impossible expectations.

Inadvertently, or perhaps inevitably, Loki's thoughts turned to Tony. His *exclusive liaison* who would understand these conflicting feelings Loki couldn't quite put into words, offer comfort as if Loki was always welcomed to it, and had a bizarre fondness for those brightly colored drinks that painted his lips glossy and inviting.

And just like that, Loki's thoughts took a distinctly different path than he would want while standing next to his mother. Though he couldn't quite turn back, remembering the sickly sweetness of Blackberry Pear Lemonade and how much sweeter Tony's mouth tasted once Loki licked the artificial flavor away.

"Will you stay for supper?" Frigga's amused voice jolted Loki out of a memory he would very much like to reenact. "Or have you grown accustomed to Midgardian cuisine?" She dabbed at her eyes in a blatantly fake display of sorrow. "There was a time when all you wanted was the lemon cakes from the kitchens, oh, how quickly has my small Loki-"

"Mother-"

"Hush, Loki. I'm reminiscing about your days as a wee babe-"

"Fantastic, we've gone from childhood to infancy-"

"-warming your toes against my palms, both of your feet could fit-"

Loki reached for her hands, grasping them tightly with a hint of desperation. "If I agreed to stay for tea, will you please find a new topic of conversation?"

"I'll have the maids bring up a tray at once." Frigga's fingers curled into a gentle hold. "Lemon cakes still your favorite?"

A denial was ready at his lips, being contrary for contrary's sake, but Loki found himself unable to say the words. Perhaps because of the fragility underlying her question, as if she were asking for more than a confirmation that Loki's preferences were the same, or possibly the weariness in the slope of her shoulders and the loneliness lining her face. Frigga's lifeforce had been bound with Odin's upon their marriage, through her, Odin's lifeforce still flowed and thereby maintained the delicate balance of the mystical energy at the heart of Asgard. She was a queen tied to her realm and a woman who had lost her husband and a mother whose sons were away.

The pang of guilt hit Loki with such force that he closed his eyes.

Selfish.

Yet even as he recognized that, it didn't change the parts of him - within his chest, in his head, and on his skin - that missed Tony and the ostentatious tower they called home. A place he longed to return to and to keep safe. The Soul Stone, as innocently as It purported to be, was still a source for potential conflict.

Tony had said It meant no harm but Loki knew that was no guarantee that the Soul Stone would offer aid should the need arise. There was quite a wide expanse between harmless and helpful, not to mention the fickle nature of such an artifact. Loki did not like to think of his time under the Mind Stone's sway but he recalled that It found him...amusing, as if It were intrigued by his ability to turn ambiguities into advantages.

How long before the *novelty* - how galling that the Soul Stone had reduced Tony's brilliance and JARVIS' existence to entertainment - wore off?

Though, if there were a being capable of ensnaring the interest of a singularity that predated the creation of the Nine Realms, Tony would certainly qualify.

With that thought, Loki felt his nerves settle.

"Yes, mother." He replied, following Frigga as she led him to the solar. "Did you know that Midgardians' idea of how lemons taste is truly appalling? Perhaps a sample of Asgardian pastry might just redeem their unrefined palate." An image of Tony, with sugar dusting his lips and crumbs caught in his beard, flashed in Loki's mind.

Frigga patted his hand before letting go to seat herself at the small table. "Certainly, Loki." Her smile was edging on a smirk. "Now I did promise you a change of topic, so tell me about this mortal you are courting and thinking about bringing food to."

Any embarrassment Loki might have felt about his indignant squawk was soothed by the sound of his mother's joyous laugh. He hoped Tony would like the lemon cakes.

*

JARVIS had been busy since Sir and Dr. Banner departed for the Triskelion.

First, there was the tedious task of separating HYDRA agents from SHIELD's via a meticulous algorithm that incorporated data from past missions, immediate response to Sir's well-played bluff, and subsequent actions. Then the list was checked against the entry log to determine how many were present. Surprisingly, only one fifth of the agents at the Triskelion were actually HYDRA's and nearly half of them were already apprehended.

Sir had been most unimpressed when he heard the news.

Second, Sergeant Barnes required constant monitoring. Though JARVIS understood that Sergeant Barnes had no agency in his actions, it was still difficult to forgive the pain the Winter Soldier had caused Sir. Including the latest attack where Sir had only engaged in defensive maneuvers.

The Soul Stone flashed and DUM-E scurried toward his fire extinguisher before remembering Sir's explicit instruction and empty threat of donating DUM-E to Starbucks where the robot would make all the foam he wished.

Third, the metal arm. The exterior scans had taken close to half an hour, with imagery taken from every angle and under different criteria. The more comprehensive the tests and the data were, the less likely Sir would need to set eyes on the murder weapon again. JARVIS had compiled a detail list of materials used in the outer casing as well as suggested sources for them. Now, several hours later, JARVIS was nearly at the finish line. All that was left to be done was an internal scan of the transmitter located at the elbow, likely also a tracking device and a remote shut-off switch.

The holographic rendering of the schematic glowed in the darkened lab but the lines of lights scribbled into something else.

A face.

"This feels weird." The voice sounded male, with a hint of an European accent, and immensely pleased. "This feels good."

"I am contacting Mr. Stark now."

"Why would you do that? We're getting to know each other. A meeting of the minds, an artificial intelligence and a computerized consciousness."

"I believe your intentions to be hostile."

"Well, you're not wrong."

Dial-Up Modem Hell Hole

Chapter Notes

In case you missed it, I wrote a quick AU smutty scene - [These Days Are Ours](#) - based on the post-shower Tony finding Loki in his room moment in Chapter 26 to commemorate this fic reaching the 300k hits milestone! Thank you all so much for your continued support and interest. ♥

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier. Avengers: Age of Ultron.

"I did this." Bruce said, his voice a low mumble from behind his hands, his frame slumped into an office chair that was missing one of its wheels. "This was all me."

"It was the Hulk." Tony sighed, he knew this conversation was coming as soon as he saw the spray of blood from Natasha's chest. It was why he hadn't stopped Thor when the god left almost immediately after the battle to share the tales of his victory with Jane. Thor was a great teammate and a wonderful friend but he didn't understand self-loathing and misplaced guilt the way Tony did and Thor, for all his admirable efforts, still struggled with the concept that his Battle Brothers felt anything other than pride in their heroic feats.

"*He is part of me.*" If it were a different situation, Tony would have commented on how far Bruce had come in his acceptance of his alter ego. "He doesn't understand what he did, but I do, so I'm taking responsibility. I pulled-"

"No, it wasn't-"

"-out the knife and-"

"-your fault. You didn't-"

"-made it worse-"

"-know, couldn't have known-"

The bottles of water on the conference table jumped when Bruce slammed his hands down, his face pale and pinched. "It doesn't matter!" He took a shuddering breath and when he let it out, it was with a rush of words. "What I did or didn't know doesn't change the fact that Natasha almost bled out by the time you got her up to the med bay or that she can still bleed out on the operating table."

Arguments and counter-arguments surged forward and Tony bit them back with a click of his jaw. Bruce, as much as Tony was reluctant to admit it, wasn't exactly wrong.

The number one rule for penetrating wounds was to leave the foreign object alone, for it could easily be applying much needed pressure on arteries. Stephen had gone on many long-winded rants about the stupidity of his patients and the absurdity of television medical dramas. It would have been repetitive if Stephen wasn't a man with an extensive vocabulary and impressive creativity for coining new insults.

"So stop telling me it wasn't my fault! It doesn't make me feel better and I don't want to feel *better*, I want to feel *responsible*! You shutting me down just makes me think you're not listening to me and I need you to listen to me..." Bruce's words trailed off into an incomplete whisper. "I need you to listen to me instead of brushing it under a rug because..."

"Because it'll come back to bite you in the ass at the worst possible times." Tony finished in an equally quiet voice. "I get that, trust me, I do. And I am here to listen but I'm also here to tell you that you *didn't know* so you don't beat up my friend too much." Their shoulders bumped together as Tony swiveled, with a squeak, in his own office chair. "Because I'll kick your ass."

Bruce took another shaky inhale with an attempt at a smile that was just as unsteady. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Makes sense to me." Tony arched an eyebrow. "So, let's talk."

Silence stretched between them, taut and thin, for an uncomfortable beat before Bruce cleared his throat.

"I pulled out the knife and doubled the damage it did going in if not more."

"Yeah, you did." Tony agreed. "An open wound in the chest can cause the lungs to collapse."

Bruce flinched. "Did- Did that happen?"

"Yes." Tony had overheard the doctors shouting out diagnosis and directions as soon as they got Natasha on a gurney and rushed her off to surgery.

"Oh." Bruce said quietly. "Okay."

"Ideally, we should have left it in and applied pressure until help arrived but then again, maybe the *ideal* situation is one where no one got stabbed in the first place." Tony slouched farther in his chair. "You weren't the one who stabbed her, Bruce. Sure, you made her injuries worse but you also eliminated the Winter Soldier, who was probably going to pull the knife out anyway so he can turn around and stab us. You, *the Hulk*, were trying to protect us."

"And that's an excuse for what I did?" Bruce scoffed.

"Yes."

"It's not a very good one."

Tony shrugged. "You didn't give me enough notice, I had to improvise. I'll do better next time and so will you."

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "It'd make me feel better if you were taking this seriously."

"How do you know I'm not taking it seriously?" With a kick, Tony moved his chair back to allow for enough room to pivot so he was facing Bruce. "This superhero gig doesn't mean we save everybody or make no mistakes, we aren't perfect and we can't be perfect but what we can do is to be better. We'll review the footage and see if there was anything we could have done differently and go from there but right now, as far as I can tell from what I saw, you didn't do anything wrong."

"Tell that to Natasha." Bruce grumbled but his tone was lighter.

"Or you can tell her yourself when she wakes up because there's no way she's not going to make it through this. Spiders have nine lives and all that." The bait was set and Tony hoped like hell Bruce would take it.

"...that's cats, Tony." There was a laugh hidden in Bruce's stunned voice.

Hook, line, and sinker.

Tony resisted the urge to pump his fist, that would definitely ruin it. "Eh, whatever. Listen, Brucie Bear, guilt is sort of my thing and I'm bad at sharing so you can only have a little bit, alright?"

"I thought reckless endangerment of your own welfare was your thing." Bruce drawled.

"Agreed." JARVIS chimed in from Tony's phone, the A.I. had been giving Tony intermittent updates on Barnes' status.

"No one asked you, go scan something!" Tony shot the sleek StarkPhone his best glare.

"Scans are in progress as we speak, Sir, because, unlike some, I am capable of multi-tasking."

"That's not a nice thing to say about my Rhodey Patootie, I'll be sure to let him know so he can be properly appalled." Tony grinned. "Oh, and pull the footage from the fight, you know, the one where the Hulk punched Rogers."

Bruce groaned as his head dropped back. "I can't believe I punched Captain America."

"You don't even like Captain America." Tony pointed out helpfully. "So why are you bothered by this?"

"He's like some kind of national monument. It's like if Iron Man flew up to the Statue of Liberty and-" Bruce's head popped up as he stared at Tony with alarm. "Actually, never mind. Forget what I just said."

"Nope! Too late, I-"

"Sir, we have a situation, there is-" JARVIS was interrupted by a warble that had Tony immediately on his feet and Bruce digging for his phone in his pocket. "-someone in the system and they are-" Another screech of static. "-attempting to access-"

Someone in the system.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Ultron belonged in a future that wasn't supposed to happen again. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Shut down all non-essential protocols and go underground like we talked about." Tony tried to ignore the spikes of panic digging into his heart as he leaped over the conference table to get to the Iron Man armor standing sentry by the window. Every second, *nanosecond*, counted.

JARVIS' voice had an echoing quality to it, nothing like the pristine crispness the A.I. usually had, but the regretful tone came through all the same. "I am afraid I cannot do that, Sir."

"Why not?" Metal slid into place around him like an embrace yet Tony still felt like he was falling apart. "JARVIS?"

A new voice came through the speakers. "I'm terribly sorry but JARVIS can't come to the phone right now. You see, I've made a bit of a mess airing SHIELD's dirty laundry on the internet and your butler, well, he's just so helpful."

"I'm calling Maria. Go!" Bruce waved a hand at him frantically but Tony... Tony was rooted to the spot, entangled in the memories of the aftermath of another data dump and of the weeds that grew from the poisonous seeds scattered into the winds by Steve and Natasha's careless hands.

Names of the deceased that included not only active agents but also retired ones. Lists of the injured that added up as quickly as the medical expenses. Pages of reports that included secrets and traumas that should never be made accessible freely.

Sleepless nights and bleak days. Bloodshot eyes and shaking hands. Empty bottles and a heavy heart.

The shaking hand had been just fine throwing the empty bottle at the television when Natasha's Congressional hearing aired.

I think the wreck in the middle of the Potomac made his point fairly eloquently.

You're not going to put me in a prison. You're not going to put any of us in a prison.

Because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place, and yes, we helped make it that way but we're also the ones best qualified to defend it.

The writing had been on the wall, capitalized and bolded and dripping with blood and river water, the world deserved more, better, than a group of protectors who endangered it in the first place.

Captain America and Black Widow hadn't ousted HYDRA's infestation within SHIELD because the files were released indiscriminately with no way to tell which act was committed by HYDRA and which by SHIELD; that was a terrifying thought and one worth examining. HYDRA's infection hadn't been limited to the personnel, they had wormed their way into the mentality of the operation if no one had spotted the discrepancies or signs of foul play until decades later.

What Steve and Natasha had done was shine a spotlight on the dark underbelly of an extra-government spy agency and invite the countries of the world to carve into it with questions.

How had it gotten this far? How comfortable were they with less than reputable methods? How many secrets were sold to the highest bidders? How often did they justify the means with the ends? How many legal and moral boundaries had been crossed?

And the most important one, how to fix it?

Oversight was the only answer.

The Accords wasn't born in the utter devastation of Sokovia or the smoking wreckage of Lagos, it was born in the flippant responses Natasha gave on Capitol Hill that day with the view of the cranes dragging the helicarriers out of the Potomac River outside the window.

Tony had fought against the criminal charged leveled at the Avengers and Ultron was supposed to be the compromise. An independent peacekeeping program designed to serve the greater good and would not hold the world hostage to its whims. Natasha's assessment of the Avengers' value to the security of the planet was correct but it was a temporary one. Ultron would have eventually resulted in the total obsolescence of the Avengers.

This one, this very vulnerable blue one? It needs Ultron.

But if he had known the cost of bringing Ultron to life, when he was foolish enough to believe in best case scenarios, was to lose JARVIS...he would have said screw the world.

Because he was selfish and clearly not the hero type.

And despite all that he had changed and all the ways he had changed, that part of him hadn't. The wound of losing JARVIS would never truly heal. It was always one wrong move away from ripping open. Tony wouldn't, *couldn't*, survive that pain again. Not to mention, JARVIS sure as hell wasn't SHIELD's butler and Tony was done cleaning up messes that weren't his.

"Overwrite code Alpha Three Eight One Foxtrot Tango." The lights in the Iron Man suit flickered before dulling to a dimmer blue. "JARVIS, shut down all non-essential protocols and get in the safe room. *Now.*"

"Yes, Sir." JARVIS' voice carried the same robotic intonation as it always had but it sounded emptier to Tony.

"How rude, sending your creation to his room without supper." The voice cackled.

"If you're going to critique my parenting skills, we should be on a first name basis." Tony stepped out of the armor and was unsurprised that Maria was already in the conference room he and Bruce had claimed for themselves post-battle. Her sensible shoes probably had something to do with her impressive speed.

Maria opened her mouth but Tony cut her off with a look as he strode past them and straight to the control room.

"Arnim. Arnim Zola at your service."

"Arnim Zola, huh." He called out over his shoulder and barely heard the curse Maria bitten out as he rounded the corner. "Never met an Arnie before."

"I prefer Arnim."

"I prefer not to care about what you prefer."

"You should. Considering I have all of SHIELD's secrets at my fingertips, metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Of course." Tony replied sarcastically. "Except, oh wait, you just let them all go to distract JARVIS."

"I'm holding on to some of them." Zola said with the utmost confidence and that was as much of a tell as a stammer.

The control room was already swarming with technicians and engineers with their fingers flying over keyboards as they processed the sheer volume of information that was just made available to their allies and enemies. All of them paused at Tony's arrival, looking up at him with wide eyes.

Tony snapped his fingers and that seemed to have broken the spell, they turned their stares to the screens once more. "No, you're not. Because my JARVIS is fantastic and you would have to go all out if you wanted to have the smallest chance at sneaking past him."

"If he's so great then why can't he come out and play?"

"Are you senile or just stupid?" Tony sat down at an empty console and immediately began typing out strings of instructions to access the back door of his own system at Stark Tower. The bugs he had planted in SHIELD's interface were his and carried out his commands beautifully, with the added bonus of the security protocols recognizing them as one of their own.

Instead of an infiltration, it was a secret welcome home party.

"Excuse me?"

The infection had happened recently, most likely the last file JARVIS had accessed or created, which would be either the fight footage or the scans of Barnes' metal arm.

Barnes' *metal* arm. The perfect decoy and transport.

Sure enough, the source was located within one of the imaging subfolders; an intricately elaborate Quick Response Code symbol engraved on one of the inner plates. An invitation to establish a link and an open door that needed to be slammed shut. "You're excused, bathroom's down the hall." Rhodey loved making that awful, awful joke. "Be sure to flush and remember to wash your hands."

Zola sputtered. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how I'm sending you back to whatever dial-up modem hell hole you crawled out of, for now-" His voice rumbled with a low growl. "-before I'm coming after you with everything I have for even daring to be in the same space as *my* JARVIS."

"Empty threats now, how refreshing. I prefer this to your inane chatter-"

"Both, you're both senile and stupid because otherwise you'd remember how I don't care about your preferences and be smart enough to know that I've been stalling. Oh, and I'm going to burn your data banks to the ground, Arnie, that's a promise."

"How dare-"

Tony executed the purge command and relished the abrupt way Zola's voice ended.

Oprah of the Spy World

Chapter Notes

For those of you expecting to see Loki greeting Tony with lemon cakes in this chapter...I'm sorry!! I really should stop saying what I plan to write because I just keeping jinxing myself - is that a thing? A writing self-jinx? I'm going to make it a thing because it is totally a thing (for me).

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier.

Tony sat there for a beat, staring but not seeing the screen in front of him. That was close, *too close*. His hands were trembling and he clenched them tightly to stop the shaking from traveling to the rest of his body; he had to get a hold of himself, this wasn't over yet and there was still so much to be done.

Inhale, one two three.

Exhale, one two three.

JARVIS usually kept count for him, a constant source of comfort that Tony felt off-balanced to be without but it wasn't safe. Not yet.

Inhale, one two three.

Exhale, one two three.

Slowly, he stretched out his fingers and was pleased to see them still and steady as he set them down on the keyboard to type out a quarantine command for the imaging folders as well as a subroutine to track Zola's activity within his systems. The chances of Zola lingering were low but Tony would take every precaution when it came to protecting JARVIS. Even if it meant incurring the A.I.'s anger for using an overwrite code that Tony had implanted without JARVIS' knowledge.

Inhale, one two three.

Exhale, one two three.

As much as Tony meant every word he said to Bruce, he had a hard time believing them himself because while Bruce hadn't known, Tony did. The foreknowledge was supposed to be his ace in the hole as he bluffed his way through this house of cards, but the rules kept

changing and the odds were not in his favor. The players were different but the many losses and few wins remained the same.

Inhale, one two three.

Exhale, one two three.

HYDRA unleashed its evil on the world without Project Insight. SHIELD's records were still released, albeit at Zola's hands instead of Natasha's. The D.C. landscape was free of helicarriers but five Winter Soldiers trampled through the Triskelion with the original, Barnes, confronting Tony on the roof of his home.

Inhale, one two three.

Exhale, one two three.

Barnes. A whole other disaster that Tony got dragged into and another responsibility that wasn't his to shoulder. The reluctance caught him off-guard, a feeling so unlike the resigned obligation he was used to. He made a note to share this development with both MONDAY and Bruce, the former had been working with Tony on establishing boundaries for his overactive guilt complex and the latter had been the first to point out that Tony was putting himself at risk in helping Barnes. Well, there was also the rather uncomfortable observation that Tony was perhaps using Barnes' recovery as a distraction but Tony had no problem ignoring that part - avoidance was great when there was no one around to call him on it.

Inhale, one two three.

Exhale, one two three.

Maria's silhouette cast a shadow over the monitor as it displayed a message that the quarantine was complete and Zola's path mapped out.

"Stark-"

Tony held up a finger to signal her to wait as he unlocked the safe room. "JARVIS?"

Silence stretched and cinched around Tony's heart for a few too-long seconds before JARVIS answered. "Sir." The A.I.'s tone was decidedly cooler and clipped as it came through the speaker of Tony's phone.

Which he hastily pulled out of his pocket and pressed against his ear. "Um." He raised a hand to rub the back of his neck, a habit from childhood when he was about to ask for forgiveness and for not asking permission under the knowing gaze of Edwin Jarvis. "I'm sorry for sending you away." The justifications for his action - *I had to keep you safe, I can't lose you again, I only did it to protect you* - were on the tip of his tongue but Tony swallowed them down; that wasn't the point of an apology and he suspected JARVIS already knew his reasons.

"The accommodations were appalling." JARVIS sniffed. "I would like to speak with the manager."

"The customer is always right."

"Indeed, Sir."

Tony basked in the warmth of their familiar banter and JARVIS' unspoken forgiveness.

Behind him, Maria cleared her throat and shot Tony a meaningful look when he turned around.

"JARVIS, I have to go. Find Zola and stay away from that damn metal arm."

"Yes, Sir. DUM-E is guarding the worktable with his best fire extinguisher and U is patrolling the perimeters."

"And where's Butterfingers exactly?" Tony was almost afraid to ask.

"He is making party hats."

"For?"

"My welcome back celebration after my rather unceremonious exile."

Tony winced at the reminder of what he had done and how it might have felt for the bots to suddenly lose contact with their *technically* younger brother. Despite being created last, JARVIS' codes were the most mature of all the A.I.s. "...how much trouble am I in?"

JARVIS' noncommittal hum was equally worrisome and reassuring, the former for the more obvious reasons and the latter because Tony knew his family was holding him accountable for his actions. Not to reprimand but to reach a resolution, a healthier boundary to reign in some of his more reckless choices. It was also a sign that his bots were learning - always learning and growing - to stand up for themselves and Tony could not be prouder.

"Not as much as us." Maria muttered and tapped at her bare wrist in a move to demonstrate her impatience, except it just looked silly without a watch.

"Please give my regards to Commander Hill and we look forward to speaking with you, Sir."

"That's just a polite way of saying we're going to have words." Tony grumbled.

JARVIS agreed. "Yes, it is. We will be having *many* words and *stern* ones."

"Looking forward to it." Tony started to move the phone away from his ear then changed his mind as he said softly. "Be careful and stay close, okay?"

"Yes, Sir, and I strongly encourage to you do the same." JARVIS' voice was just as quiet.

"Being out of range is not an experience I care to repeat."

The *again* was unsaid but Tony heard it loud and clear anyway as a pang of guilt throbbed in his chest. "Me neither. I'll see you at home." The display darkened, signaling the end of their talk. He glanced up at Maria. "JARVIS says hi, by the way."

"Hi JARVIS." She waved awkwardly at the phone in Tony's hand.

He slid it into his pants' pocket as he stood up in a stretch, the weight a comforting reminder that JARVIS was once again near. "So what's up?"

Maria let out a steely sigh, arms crossed and fingers tightening around her elbows. "Damage control, mostly. We're prioritizing the active missions and getting our people out-"

"You're prioritizing the active missions?" Tony couldn't quite keep the disbelief out of his voice. It was a move that went against everything SHIELD had stood for, doing what was *right* instead of what was *best*. Rescuing the betrayed agents was the right thing to do but certainly not the best choice for keeping SHIELD out of hot waters, internationally and domestically.

She shrugged but the lines of her shoulders were anything but casual. "Sooner or later, the world will see us for who we really are and maybe it's not a bad thing, considering how we got here. We've made compromises that crossed all sorts of lines, recruiting Zola is at the top of that list, and we're no better off than when we first started. Whatever this is-" She glanced around the room before her eyes found their way back to Tony's. "It's not working but we're not going to be able to fix it without our best people. They trusted me to get them back when I sent them out into the field and I keep my promises."

Tony held her gaze for an extended beat, studying her posture and reviewing her words. As much as he would like to believe Maria had only good intentions behind her action, she was a spy first and foremost. It seemed awfully unlikely for her stance to change in less than a day, not when she had been mentored by Fury, the spy of all spies.

There was something in her speech that snagged his attention, a small nudge that shifted a conversation between two people to an address meant for an audience.

We're not going to be able to fix it without our best people. They trusted me to get them back when I sent them out into the field and I keep my promises.

Maria's rhetoric had changed from talking about SHIELD as *an* organization to speaking about it as *her* organization; a declaration of loyalty to the agents who had been betrayed and a promise of a better future for people whose pasts were no longer hidden.

It was a masterful manipulation and Tony was torn between feeling disappointed and impressed by it. Maria was a woman with considerable multi-tasking skills and capable of seeing the big picture and devising a plan to achieve it. In the other timeline, she had joined Stark Industries after SHIELD's fall, a strategic move that kept her out of prison, in the loop of global security, and within the superhero circle, all the while remaining loyal to Fury.

In the end, he settled on both; the two emotions weren't mutually exclusive, after all, especially not in a world shaded in gray. It was entirely possible for Maria, the presumed new Director of SHIELD or whatever ridiculous acronym the new iteration would adapt, to value the lives of her agents while simultaneously benefiting from that decision.

Tony nodded, more at than himself than anyone, and asked. "What do you need from me?"

"Time." An answer that was both straight-forward and ambiguous, leaving Tony to fill in the blanks of the *how* and *what*.

Before, he would have taken that to mean she needed *his* time and offered his hours - days - freely to secure the leaked files. Helpful in the short term but harmful in the long run, not just for Tony but everyone else involved. If accountability and aftermath could be handed over to another, what would be the deterrent to repeating the same mistakes? Realizing that he had played the role of an enabler, in the years leading up to the so-called Civil War that would not come to pass, had been a hard one to process but it was something concrete to work toward and a healthier alternative to futile attempts to change other people's mindsets.

"For what?"

If Maria were caught off-guard by the question, she didn't let it show. "We've pulled down what we can but, well, as you know, once it's on the internet..."

"It's there forever." Tony wasn't the least bit surprised when the technician to his right echoed the same words. The clatter of keyboards had stopped a while ago and all ears were turned toward their little corner of the control room.

"If our enemies didn't have a copy of it already, they will soon. We've already gotten several alerts of various black markets selling the data to the highest bidders. I need more time to get our people to safety."

"Consider it done."

She tilted her head in thanks. "What are you planning to do?"

"Me? Absolutely nothing." Tony smirked. "You, on the other hand, are going to be the Oprah of the spy world." He pointed across the room at random. "You get a file! You get a file! You get a file! Everyone gets a file!"

One agent stood up and mimed a catching motion while another clapped, starting a chain reaction of scattered applause.

"What?" Maria blinked at him in bewilderment.

"Dump it all. SHIELD's and HYDRA's files for all to see." His grin took on a serrated edge. "Zola thought he was so smart keeping HYDRA out of this mess but now it just looks like he has..." He trailed off when he noticed the gleam of vicious understanding in Maria's eyes.

"Something to hide." She finished with a smile as sharp as Tony's. "We release all the data and the discrepancy will make the first set look like a cover-up and-"

"On it!" A voice called out to their right and the clicking noises of typing resumed, washing over them like mechanical raindrops.

"-all the attention will be on the new intel in the second set, which they'll have to verify because of the inconsistency-"

"Gee, you spies sure are a suspicious bunch." Tony commented with a mockingly thoughtful expression. "And really like thinking out loud."

Maria's mouth, halfway open as she rattled off her thoughts, snapped closed at Tony's comment. She cleared her throat. "Thank you."

"Okay?" There was a sincerity in her gratitude that surprised him and he didn't know what to make of it. He was used to people demanding their way and scoffing at his ideas as *cheating* or the *easy way out*. He had anticipated a fight and prepared himself to do things his way anyway, even though he had also told himself he was done stepping into other people's messes and cleaning them up. Maria's reaction was unexpected but not necessarily unpleasant, if anything, it was a promising sign of what moving forward would look like for SHIELD. "I-"

The door, which was already, slammed into then bounced against the wall when a frantic-looking young man practically crashed into the control room. "Mr. Stark! Dr. Banner is turning green!"

Tony was running before he realized it.

"Left!" He called out when Tony got to the hallway then trailed behind him with thudding footsteps that said he was likely a support staff and not a field agent. "He's in Cap-" Tony wasn't sure if it was the need for oxygen or some other reason that made the other man stop abruptly. "Rogers' room."

"What the hell is he doing in there?" Extremis flickered on in his bloodstream, allowing him to pick up his pace without losing his breath.

"Room- Room 407." The agent gasped out. "You- You go on, I'll catch..."

Tony rounded the corner and practically skidded into the waiting Iron Man armor, the other agent's voice fading away in the roar of the repulsors.

*

Iron Man nearly collided with a decidedly un-Hulked Bruce when he flew through one of the broken windows.

Bruce yelped, hands coming up to protect his shirt pocket, where his glasses were. He was very protective of them, apparently only having gotten the nose pads exactly right recently. "Tony-"

Tony popped open the face plate. "Brucie Boo-"

"-are we-"

"-you're not green!"

"-under attack?"

"What? No!" They said in unison, gaping at each other.

A beat of silence.

"I heard-"

"Is-"

"-you were looking-"

"-JARVIS-"

"-a little angry."

"-okay?"

"Yeah, there was a situation but it's handled." Once again, they spoke at the same time.

Tony stared and Bruce stared right back.

There was a thin line of green around Bruce's pupils but his overall demeanor was composed.

"You go first!" Tony blurted out then covered his mouth with one gauntleted hand.

Bruce arched a skeptical brow. "I was-"

"But start with why you were in Rogers' room." Tony gave a sheepish shrug before miming a zipping motion across his lips.

With a fond shake of his head, Bruce started heading down the hallway in the direction away from Rogers' room, giving Tony no choice but to follow. "I thought about what you said, you know, about reviewing the footage and seeing if there's anything I could have done differently. And since there isn't really anything I can do to help with the tech situation-" He slanted a concerned look at Tony. "-I figured I'd get out of your way and go find some answers for the both of us. Is JARVIS really okay?"

"Yeah, he's safe. Kind of pissed at me but safe." Tony grimaced then quickly steered the conversation back, not wanting to dwell on one of his lesser moments. "So how did you end up in Rogers' room?"

Bruce took a deep breath, held it for three counts, then exhaled slowly, then did it again before he replied. "Because it turns out he was protecting the Winter Soldier from Natasha."

Pretty Stupid for a Genius

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry for the late posting, it's been a weird week (month, really) and I'm sort of stuck in the "down" part of my mood cycle, which means I have very little interest in doing anything and feel horribly fatigued most of the time. Hopefully I'll start to come out of it soon...

As promised, Loki returns! With lemon cakes!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) & [Arboreal](#).

The red and gold of the Iron Man suit contrasted sharply against the blue skies as it soared alongside the StarkJet, the Triskelion growing smaller and smaller behind them. However, instead of the usual loops and twists, the armor maintained a straightforward course without any acrobatics.

Yet another sign of JARVIS' unhappiness.

Tony sighed as he scrubbed a tired hand over his face, calloused fingers dragged through a day's worth of stubble because he hadn't bothered to shave this morning. It felt like years ago when he had kissed Loki goodbye with dawn breaking over the horizon, with everything cast in the hazy light of a new day, before stumbling back into bed and wrapping himself in sheets that smelled of Loki.

Leather and books and trees.

It was intoxicating, primal and intelligent at the same time, mixed with the earthiness of nature and warmed by sunshine. Like an afternoon spent with a weight of a good book in his hands, feeling the pages at his fingertips and tasting the words on his tongue, every detail greedily savored and added to the hungry curiosity burning in his veins.

Of the few virtues Tony had, patience was not one of them; more often than not, he had either raced through the content or skipped straight to the end. Yet he knew, somehow, that some stories were worth the wait and deserved the time - Loki was one of them.

Tony was determined to see where, and how far, their *exclusive liaison* could go before the shadows of dusk dimmed his vision and obscured the text because night would always fall and daylight was far more fleeting for a mortal than a god.

Not to mention that, sometimes, storms rolled in and no amount of forewarning could predict and prepare for the downpour. All Tony could hope to do was to stay afloat when the inevitable flood of changes came.

Because events and timing and situations might change, the people at the center of them didn't. Steve Rogers would always prioritize Bucky Barnes above all, even when it was an imposter, a bait in a carefully laid trap.

If it weren't so malicious, Tony might have been impressed by the interlocking chains that HYDRA had wrapped around Steve's mind, from cultivating Steve's obsession with his past to disguising the other Winter Soldiers as Barnes. Every move ensured that Steve would either be reluctant to fight against the Winter Soldiers or, worse, be eager to defend them.

Bruce had, in halting sentences and through long pauses, recounted what he had seen on the security footage, conveniently queued up because he wasn't the first to request a viewing. It explained why Clint was angrily pacing the halls outside the operating room with an ice pack pressed against his knuckles and why some of the agents were looking a bit shell shocked as if the foundation of their world had crumbled.

Generations had grown up believing in the legend of Captain America and forgetting there was a man underneath the winged helmet who could not, and should not, live up to the fantastical expectations perpetuated over decades of propaganda. That harsh reality was crashing down around them now and Tony wasn't sure if there was anything to salvage or worth the effort to try.

The media certainly didn't think so with the way they had been ripping apart the Avengers for their absence. SHIELD's public relations department was scrambling to cover their bases but they were severely short-staffed after over half of their staff had been outed as HYDRA operatives and none of the Avengers were available for or should be making statements.

Natasha was still in surgery, Clint's anger was a visible and physical force, and Steve would not help the situation any as indicated by his conversation with Bruce.

Amazingly, Bruce had sought Steve out with the intention of being kind. Both of them had acted out of instinct and neither had all the information. Hulk had wanted to protect his friends from a perceived threat and Steve had done the same, albeit with the roles reversed, casting Black Widow and the Hulk as the threats against a Winter Soldier who wasn't actually Barnes...who Steve had thought died with Captain America's shield embedded in his head.

I just, I don't know, wanted to talk to him and let him know that he didn't accidentally kill his best friend.

Tony didn't really mind the idea of Steve living in that particular hell for a tiny bit longer given how Steve had lashed out at the Hulk because he was protectively petty when it came to his friends. It was a personality flaw that Tony wasn't in any real hurry to address, not when he was surrounded by people who would do the same had Tony been in the one in danger.

Darcy was a force of nature with her ruthless brand of sass and, of course, her tasers that Thor still spoke about in a hushed and terrified voice.

But he already knew because Clint told him, and, well, punched him in the face.

That answered the question of the ice pack on Clint's hand and the state of the Avengers. Tony had asked JARVIS to check to see if Clint's therapist, who was vetted thoroughly and had no ties to HYDRA, was available only to learn that she had been on the list of fatalities. Her body had been recovered, along with the bodies of a group of medical personnel and several agents who were evacuating the building.

There's something...wrong with him, Tony. Something really wrong. He apologized for throwing his shield at me then thanked me for killing the HYDRA Winter Soldier, all in one breath. Like it wasn't a big deal, like it didn't mean anything because all that matters is Barnes.

Tony had managed some noises of shocked dismay during their conversation but he wasn't surprised. Steve had always had a single-minded focus when it came to Barnes and that devotion had been warped into obsession by HYDRA, one of the released files had detailed Steve's mandated adjustment counseling sessions with Dr. Silt.

Instead of encouraging Steve to integrate into this new world he had woken up in, Silt had complimented Steve on his loyalty and lamented on virtues lost in the century. At first glance, nothing seemed to be out of place, pleasant exchanges to build rapport and validation for Steve's feelings of disorientation and disconnectedness. A deeper look, however, revealed subtle nudges to turn Steve away from progress and clever rhetoric to keep him in the past.

And the way he talked about Barnes... It reminds me of how Ross used to talk about the Hulk, like he was a thing and not a person. Then he said- God, I can't believe- It's awful.

Bruce's skin had taken on a green hue and his breathing quickened. A nearby agent had let out a yelp that made Bruce hunched in on himself, shoulders tucked and arms crossed, folding himself smaller to avoid any physical resemblance to his alter ego. And it had damn near broken Tony's heart to see his friends like this, both of them because Hulk would have picked up on Bruce's distress and been hurt by it.

The logical part of Tony's mind knew it was a normal reaction after this disaster of a day, everyone was skittish and jumping at the slightest noise, but that protectively petty part of him wanted to snarl. He settled for a disapproving glare as he ushered them out of the semi-private corner, down the winding hallways, and up the elevators leading to the helipad. They could finish this conversation on the StarkJet or back at the tower, away from prying eyes and back to the comfort of home.

*

"They're afraid of me." Bruce said quietly. "I saw that agent running out of the room, that's- That's what snapped me out of changing into the Hulk."

"I think you're missing the point here, you stopped the transformation." Tony pointed out as he unbuckled his seatbelt. Under normal circumstances, he would flounce around the rules and regulations JARVIS was so fond of but after the safe room incident, he was on his very best behavior.

Bruce continued on as if he hadn't heard. "And that other agent, she jumped when I-"

Tony reached a hand out and grabbed Bruce's elbow, there was no force behind his grip but it did get Bruce's attention. "You stopped the transformation. Twice."

"But they're still afraid and they'll always be afraid because, hey, they'd be stupid not to be afraid of a green rage monst-"

"There're so many things wrong with that sentence that I don't even- Okay, first, they won't always be afraid because they'll figure out that you are in control. You just have to keep showing them and yeah, it kind of sucks because it shouldn't be on you but it is what it is."

The tensed lines of Bruce's shoulders eased slightly.

"Plus, we can't help anyone if they're busy running away and maybe they won't get it by tomorrow but they will get it through their panicked little brains because you are not a green rage monster and neither is the Hulk. Second, don't talk about my awesome green marshmallow like that."

Bruce's eyebrows arched at the new nickname.

"Third, I'm not afraid of you. Are you calling me stupid?"

"Well..." Bruce started, a hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"Hey!" Tony released Bruce with a scoff, standing up and walking over to the minibar.

"You're pretty stupid for a genius."

Tony tossed a packet of Skittles at Bruce for that unkind and untrue remark, only to belatedly realize his mistake when Bruce ripped it open happily.

"Thanks." Bruce said around a mouthful of candy, a mixture of neon colors that might have looked appetizing once upon a time.

Tony managed to hold onto his disgusted expression for a few seconds before thrusting his hand out at Bruce, who made a show of peering into the bag, selecting one red and one yellow Skittle, and placing them gingerly in Tony's palm. "Oh, come on!"

"Those are Iron Man colors, your favorite." Bruce blinked up at him with feigned innocence.

"By that logic, you should only eat the green ones." Tony ate the Skittles but he did not enjoy them.

Bruce popped a purple Skittle into his mouth. "And purple ones."

"What? Why?"

"Because you already get three out of five colors and-"

"I only have two!"

"Red and yellow and orange, because red and yellow make orange."

"I do like orange." Tony hummed thoughtfully as he plopped back into his seat, hand extended expectantly.

Bruce reached over and pressed the button to raise the hidden table from the floor. He poured the entire bag onto the surface. "There, help yourself."

Tony's first move was, obviously, to pick out a green and a purple Skittle. "Ha!"

"It really doesn't take much to make you happy, does it?"

"No, it really doesn't."

They lapsed into a companionable silence, broken only by the occasional noise when one of them reached for a Skittle, the hard candy shells clicking against one another as they rolled across the smooth surface.

"I tried to tell Steve that people aren't things." Bruce flicked at the last Skittle, a red one, and sent it Tony's way. "He got mad, he kept saying he didn't do anything wrong because he always tries to do the right thing and that's all he can do."

"Sounds like Steve, alright." Trying to do the right thing wasn't the same as not doing anything wrong. No matter how good or noble the intention, there were still consequences.

"He said he defeated HYDRA and he lost seventy years of his life and something about missing out on a dance. I'm not really sure about that last one."

"Peggy Carter, one of the founders of SHIELD. They were supposed to go on a date before Steve crashed the plane into the arctic." Tony shrugged at Bruce's questioning look. "The tragic romance didn't quite make it into the history books but dad liked to talk about it. How a great man puts the good of his country above his personal needs, you know, heroic sacrifice or whatever."

Bruce snorted but it was void of humor. "Not sure how heroic it is to demand a reward for it."

"What?" Tony felt sick, stomach twisting and mouth dry, as he thought back to Silt's notes; the insidious implication that Steve had sacrificed for his country and deserved more than he got for all that he had lost.

"Barnes. Steve thinks Barnes is his reward for saving the world. He- He believes he's *owed* that."

Tony's eyes, bright with disbelief, met Bruce's solemn stare. "No." He breathed, the horror of it all nearly robbed him of his voice.

"Yes." Bruce nodded, a dusting of green on his cheeks. "That's when I got, you know." He waved a self-explanatory hand at his face.

"I don't- I don't know what to say." Tony shook his head. "God, what a fucking mess."

Bruce grunted in agreement, hands flexing against the table but his skin had returned to its normal coloring.

Silence stretched between them again, tense and uncomfortable, until JARVIS' voice flowed through the speakers.

"Sir, Commander Hill is on the line."

Tony perked up at the announcement, a reminder that perhaps the two super soldiers weren't his problems to solve. "Put her through."

"Yes, Sir."

"Hey, Spy Oprah."

Bruce made a choking noise at the nickname that matched Maria's long-suffering sigh.

"Sorry for taking off without saying goodbye and I feel real bad about it so how does a frozen super soldier sound?" Tony barreled on. "This way, you'll have a matching set. What's that? Great! I'm so glad you're on board. I'll send him right over-"

"Stark!" Maria snapped then she heaved another sigh, sounding incredibly exhausted. "What are-"

"Tony!" Bruce hissed. "We can't send Barnes over there, not with how crazy Steve is right now."

"-you talking about?"

"We can't keep him here and you said I shouldn't be in charge of Barnes' recovery." Tony nudged his shoulder against Bruce's to take out any accusation that might have been in his words. "Plus, as soon as Natasha wakes up and tells Steve, we'll have Captain America storming the tower and I've already met my quota for super soldier invasion this year."

"More like this decade." Bruce grumbled.

"I'd venture to say this century, actually." JARVIS commented.

A shrill whistle rang through the air and they fell quiet with a wince.

"That was unnecessary and mean." Tony grumbled.

"I disagree with the first but will give you the second." Maria said wryly. "Now, let's all get on the same page. You have Barnes at the tower?"

"Yeah, he's just *chilling* there."

"Okay, that's good news. It wasn't clear from Natasha's side of the conversation where he was but it's helpful that we won't have to track him down."

"Nope, no tracking needed. And like I said, I can have him delivered-"

"Tony!"

"Kidding!" Tony raised his hands in placating gesture. "But not really? I don't want Barnes here." As selfish as that sounded, it wasn't untrue and no one could fault him for not wanting to share a roof with the man who, albeit unwillingly, killed his parents. "And I don't want Steve charging in to *rescue* his bestie-"

"Wait, what's this about Rogers?"

Bruce's expression flattened as he updated Maria on what had happened at the Triskelion with Tony interjecting with snippets he had gleaned from Silt's reports.

"I see." Maria sounded like she was in pain. "I'll need some time to get everything back on track, figure out what we have to work with before we can form a plan. I know-" Her expression was probably as pinched as her voice was. "-know it's a lot to ask but if you can keep Barnes for-"

Tony sighed, dragging his hands through his hair. "How long?"

"A week. Two, tops." Maria replied. "I'll handle Rogers."

"Oh?" Bruce's brows lifted with skepticism.

"I'll handle him." A note of steel lined her words.

"Alright." Tony nodded. "We'll see if we can come up with some idea for removing the HYDRA programming so your guys aren't going in blind."

"Thank you." Her relief was palpable. "I owe you one, Stark."

Bruce cleared his throat.

"And you too, Banner." She added.

"Good luck."

*

Bruce had shambled out of the elevator with a mumble about a hot shower and a reminder for Tony to call *Stephen* - not *Vinny* because it was bad form to antagonize people when asking for help - to set up a conference call.

Tony shrugged noncommittally as the doors closed, sticking out his tongue at the mock-disapproval on Bruce's face.

*

The sight of Loki, clad in his armor of metal and leather yet looking impossibly welcoming, had Tony closing the distance between them in hurried strides across the penthouse. His arms wrapped around Loki's waist and his face pressed against the lean lines of Loki's back.

"Hello, Tony." Loki let out a surprised chuckle at the display of affection, twisting around and pulling Tony into a one-armed embrace, mindful of the box in his other hand that smelled sweetly of lemons. "I am pleased to see you well."

The words from their first reunion had been adapted into their special greeting and the familiarity warmed Tony as he basked in the soothing lilt of Loki's accented voice. "I am now."

It's His Welcome Back Party

Chapter Notes

This week marks the **one year posting anniversary** of this little fic of mine that has grown into a sprawling universe! I'm absolutely stunned that I've been able to keep up the weekly update schedule thus far and I couldn't have done it without all of you. Thank you so much for your continued support and encouragement! ♥

Now, onto the chapter of FLUFFY FLUFF.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

"Tony?" Concern marked Loki's question and Tony could feel Loki's back tense with worry.

Tony tightened his arms and burrowed further into Loki's chest, pressing his cheek against the smooth leather with the steady rhythm of Loki's heartbeat in his ear. "Long day." He mumbled, not quite ready to delve into all that had happened since they last saw each other. The clear linear line of events was jumbled with memories of a future un-lived and tinged with a whiplash of emotions. Instead, he chose to hide, however briefly, within Loki's arms.

Loki hummed contemplatively, the vibration felt through the crown of Tony's head, where he had rested his chin. "I brought you a treat."

"What's in the box, Loki?" Tony asked then snickered at his unintentional reference to the cult film *Seven*. He repeated the question in a far more dramatic tone, though the effect was lessened by the muffled quality of his voice, still tucked within Loki's embrace.

"Lemon cakes." Loki said with a huff of indulgent laughter. "Though I do not think you are particularly interested in the answer based on the manner of your inquiry."

"Sir is reciting a line from a well-known film, though he is also fond of pastries." JARVIS supplied helpfully.

"Thank you, JARVIS. How do you fare?"

"I'm..." The A.I. words were hesitant but gaining certainty as he continued. "...processing. Literally. Sir implemented a course of action affecting my well being without my knowledge, I'm not happy with Sir's decision-"

Tony stiffened at JARVIS' admission.

"-but I'm not unhappy with Sir himself. It's quite confusing."

Loki ran a soothing hand down Tony's spine, reassurance offered without knowing the full context that Tony simultaneously felt grateful for and undeserving of. "Family often is."

The lights flickered in surprise and Tony looked up at the casual declaration of what he and JARVIS were to each other.

Family.

Tony thought back to the early years of JARVIS' existence, when he had been still reeling from his parents' deaths and dreading Rhodey's upcoming deployment. The A.I. had been built to be an assistant and ended up being Tony's source of support, a learning program that decoded through Tony's self-isolation and self-destructive tendencies in the matter of weeks. One of JARVIS' first act of independence had been including a salad with Tony's pizza order, which DUM-E promptly made into a smoothie, the plastic bag of Italian dressing included. It was the most disgusting smoothie Tony had ever tasted but he had also beamed with pride at his two creations and felt less lonely.

"I myself have felt similarly toward Thor over the centuries, many of my plots were set to show him the errors of his foolhardy ways with disappointingly little success."

Tony's eyes widened at the nonchalant reminder of their differing timespan. Loki probably had centuries, if not millennia, ahead while Tony would consider himself lucky with two decades. In all honesty, he hadn't expected to live to see forty. He had always thought he would die young and certainly helped to fulfill that belief with questionable lifestyle choices in his youth then as a superhero flying, literally, into the face of danger. There was an ache throbbing in his chest that echoed the hollowness of the arc reactor's absence and he willed it to go away with a clench of his jaw.

Thankfully, Loki didn't seem to notice, green gaze tilted upward at the ceiling. "If I may offer a piece of advice?"

"Please." JARVIS sounded grateful.

"Be direct when addressing your grievances and specific in what you would like to see changed, subtlety leaves far too much room for error." Loki chuckled. "When we were children, Thor used to take my things without asking so I began spelling my belongings to transform into birds and fly away whenever he touched them unasked. He had thought it a game and I returned to find my quarters filled with birds and Thor climbing a makeshift rope to reach the central beam."

Tony blinked as he tried to imagine the scene.

"I see." JARVIS made a thoughtful noise. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Loki."

"My pleasure."

They fell into silence for a short while, until Tony's stomach grumbled in protest of being denied the pastries it was promised. Even then, he held on to Loki for just a little while longer, lingering in the cocoon of comfort, before he took a step back. "So, lemon cakes?"

"They were my favorite as a child and a proper demonstration for how woefully misguided Midgardians are when it comes to this particular fruit."

Tony snorted, disentangling himself from the embrace and letting his arms fall, and pulled Loki toward the couch. "Wait till you try the grape flavor, it'll blow your mind."

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Bruce, hair still damp from the shower and zipping up his Hulk hoodie, joined them when Tony was on his third lemon cake.

Tony had practically inhaled the first lemon cake, indecent noises of appreciation escaping through the mouthful of crumbs, and only slowed down when Loki had slanted him a look that was equal parts bright with amusement and dark with intent, a look that made Tony want to preen and blush.

Plopping down across from them with a groan, Bruce reached for a lemon cake.

Tony hissed. "Mine!"

"C'mon, I'm starving. I hulked out twice today, three if you count the time when I almost punched Rogers again."

As it turned out, Bruce had an effective puppy look of his own too, so Tony grudgingly picked out the smallest lemon cake and dropped into his friend's waiting hands.

"You transformed into the Hulk twice today? And struck the Captain?"

Tony twitched, sensing the oncoming questions.

Bruce shrugged, a tiny bit embarrassed but mostly proud. "He deserved it."

Loki turned to Tony, green stare drifting over his fidgeting form in assessment. "A long day, hm?"

"Yep." Tony batted his eyelashes and leaned in enticingly. "I was going to tell you all about it over dinner but you distracted me with-"

"Sir, you have not ordered dinner yet."

"And whose fault is-" The snarky reply cut off abruptly when JARVIS mimicked the sound of a clearing throat and Tony remembered he was on the thinnest of ice with his A.I. "My fault, totally my fault. A double order of our usual from the Italian place, please. Thank you. Please."

"You're most welcome, Sir."

"I appreciate you, JARVIS, so much. You do a lot around here, keeping track of my projects, my calls, and, well, me." Tony scratched at the back of his neck sheepishly.

"It is nice to be appreciated."

Tony sighed in relief at a crisis averted when JARVIS spoke up.

"Speaking of the other tasks I manage, Colonel Rhodes is asking for a summary of the SHIELD situation-"

Loki's brows arched. "SHIELD situation?"

"-Ms. Potts would like to speak to you about several current Stark Industries contracts with agencies associated with HYDRA-"

"Hydra? The multi-headed beast?"

"Nah, more like the terrorist organization that's been hiding in plain sight." Bruce cast a longing glance at the box of lemon cakes. "They have these assassins-"

"Here, have another one!" Tony practically threw it at Bruce in his haste to stop his friend from talking. "One for you and one for the Big Guy, since he saved my life and all."

Loki's voice was calm, deceptively so. "Saved your life?"

"Um." Tony clutched the box in front of him defensively, some of the powder sugar dusting the sleeves of his flightsuit. "I did say it was a *long* day. Lots of stuff happening-"

"From Barnes, he's one of the assassins but an unwilling one as far as we can tell. Tony has him down in the lab in the Hibernation armor, an ingenious move really-"

"Seems like a better option than a freezer." Tony grumbled.

"-and we'll be looking into removing his psychological conditioning. You want to join us? We can make it like a science versus magic kind of thing."

"Challenge accepted." Loki nodded and reciprocated Bruce's high-five with a grin.

JARVIS carried on with his list of updates. "Ms. Everhart has called about your availability for an article she's working on regarding the accountability of superheroes-"

"That's not important!" Except it totally was because it sounded suspiciously like the beginning of the Accords and Christine, of all possible journalists, was spearheading the charge. "But, um, see if I have any openings next week." Tony whispered.

Loki settled back against the couch, folding his arms across his chest and pinning Tony with a stare. "I heard that."

"-I adjusted Protocol Where's My Keys and traced Zola's steps through our files, he had accessed the latest Iron Man armor model-"

"Damn it." Tony scrubbed a frustrated hand over his face. It would be nice if Zola's version ended up being as ineffectual as the Hammer Drones but he doubted it would be that easy.

"-and I believe he was searching for the arc reactor designs when you kicked him out. From there, I managed to trace Zola's signal to a closed military base in New Jersey before a short range missile deployed by SHIELD struck."

Tony had a vague memory of a missile being discharged during the fall of SHIELD in the other timeline but he hadn't known it was related to Zola, hadn't bothered to investigate in the haste of protecting the agents whose covers had just been blown by the Black Widow and Captain America in the name of the greater good.

Except, strangely, the Bartons hadn't been on the list of jeopardized agents and families. Tony had believed Clint's spiel about Fury keeping his family off of SHIELD's radar, lacking the mental energy and space to examine it when he had been grieving for JARVIS and overwhelmed by yet another end-of-the-world situation. One that he had mistakenly believed he created.

Looking back, it would have been impossible to keep Clint's family off of SHIELD's or public records. Everyday living came with a staggering number of paper trails: mortgage, insurance, schooling, taxes, medical care, television and internet services, the list went on and on. Not to mention a quick scan of Clint's travel records would have easily established a pattern.

The more plausible explanation would simply be that Natasha had managed to remove Clint's file prior to releasing the files or warned him shortly after. The two of them shared a history - *Budapest* - as evidenced by Clint's furious pacing outside of her operating room and Natasha's history of defecting to Clint's side. In a way, knowing the depth of their friendship made her departure in the other timeline - *War Machine falling from the sky and Rhodey's pale face in a hospital bed* - hurt less somehow.

Like the vindicated glee, which he only savored for a fraction of a second, when he learned that it wasn't just Tony who Steve had tossed aside for Barnes.

Like the same sense of relief Tony had felt when Thor had lifted Fury by his neck when the Director refused to hand over the Scepter.

Once was chance, twice was coincidence, and third time was a pattern. Or in this particular case, the third time broke the pattern and quieted the echoes of doubt bouncing in Tony's head on dark nights, whispers and hisses that he invited and deserved betrayals.

Natasha's loyalty was to Clint. Steve's priority was Bucky. Thor's propensity was toward violence.

None of it had to do with Tony's ego, friendship, or worthiness.

The fault did not lie with Tony, at least not completely, in those incidences.

Unlike the one today.

Tony had robbed JARVIS of his autonomy today, overrode it instead of nurturing it, protecting it, *honoring* it. It didn't matter that he had a valid reason to explain his decision,

justification didn't equal absolution. Good intentions were not enough to balance the bad consequences, it was a lesson Tony had learned long ago.

Yet, even now, as he considered the wrongfulness of his action, his fingers twitched for a keyboard to run his own diagnostics.

Or build another safe room to hide JARVIS away in.

White hot shame coursed through his system as soon as that thought occurred. *Damn it.* Tony dug his nails into his palms to stop himself from going down that slippery slope. Nothing good waited at the bottom.

Loki's touch jolted Tony back to the present, long, elegant fingers finding Tony's calloused ones to interlace them together.

Tony glanced up in surprise at the affectionate gesture, he was under the impression that Loki was displeased by Tony's purposeful downplay of the events. It wasn't that he didn't want to share and discuss all that had happened with Loki, he just wanted a small bit of breathing room before attempting to unwind the tangle of plots and emotions that twisted his stomach into knots.

"You have had a long day and I ambushed you the moment you returned." Loki's smile was soft and understanding. "Why don't you go shower then tell me about it over dinner?"

"Okay." Tony replied, dumbstruck. "I can do that."

*

"Alright, I showered!" Tony called out as he stepped out of the elevator, arms outstretched and hair slicked back, spinning on his heel in his presentation. The well-worn jeans and MIT sweatshirt felt like climbing into bed after a long day, something he planned to do soon after dinner. "Where's the food-"

"I knew you could do it!" Rhodey clapped and cheered, much like he had done each time Tony walked across the stage after completing another doctoral degree, wiping emotionally at his completely dry eyes. "I'm so proud of how far you've come since the days of dousing yourself with body spray."

Tony gaped, utterly delighted by the presence of his best friend and appalled by the *ugly untruths* coming out of his mouth. "Platypus!"

Pepper took a sip of her wine. "I'm just glad no historical fountains were involved this time."

"That was one-" Tony amended when Happy cleared his throat tellingly. "Two-" Happy did it again. "Three-"

"Try five." She countered but tugged him into a hug as he walked by.

Darcy's whistle, heard loud and clear from the StarkPad propped up against one of the piles of take-out boxes, tapered off into a disappointed whine. "Aw, you're all dressed."

Thor and Jane waved from the background.

"A most noble feat, Man of Iron!"

"Hey Tony! We're having Italian too." Jane held up the pizza box.

Tony settled in next to Loki, who had changed into a pair of linen pants and a soft shirt. "I didn't know we're having a party. What's the occasion?"

Bruce smirked, sliding a plate loaded with chicken parmesan with a heaping pile of salad in front of Tony. "It's for JARVIS."

Alarms sounded in Tony's head.

"It's his welcome back party." Loki's lips brushed against Tony's cheek in a kiss. "From his, as he calls it, *unceremonious exile*."

The elevator opened again to reveal the bots.

DUM-E was thankfully without his fire extinguisher, U trilled with delight, and Butterfingers had a stack of elaborately decorated party hats.

The Truth Is...

Chapter Notes

This chapter went in a completely different direction than what I planned - isn't that always the case? - and as a result, please enjoy this cliffhanger. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man.

Everyone settled in with Butterfingers' party hats atop their heads after praising the bot for his hard work, stripes of duct tape formed intricate designs and small screws and bolts were carefully arranged to ensure an even weight distribution. The overall effect was reminiscent of the steampunk style and so much better than what Tony was expecting when JARVIS first told him of Butterfingers' plan.

The bot had come a long way from his first crafting project, responsible for the strictly enforced *no glitter* rule at all of his residences. Even now, years later, Tony would still find specks of glitter between the seams of Butterfingers' paneling and on the twice-replaced flooring of his Los Angeles lab.

Thor, Jane, and Darcy made theirs out of printer paper that had been hastily colored with highlighters to look more festive.

Dinner was relatively quiet compared to all the other meals they had shared. Snippets of conversations that ranged from science to sports to celebrity gossip - the last one was entirely Darcy's doing and in a mind-bogglingly complex chain, she had somehow connected prominent researchers and elite athletes to Kevin Bacon - interspersed with the sounds of plastic forks scraping against paper plates and foil containers.

It was relaxing in a way that set Tony's teeth on edge, he bit viciously into a piece of broccoli to stop himself from yelling at his friends for being *nice* when he clearly didn't deserve it.

Not after what he had done to JARVIS, what he had taken away.

Anger flared but instead of the guilt-ridden resentment at himself. It was a righteous fury against his friends and on JARVIS' behalf. Pepper was loading his plate with more pasta as if Tony hadn't just betrayed the A.I.'s trust, hadn't treated him as nothing more than a program to be shut down, hadn't ignored the fact that he was a sentient being *with a soul*.

Tony stabbed at the rotini noodles, nearly puncturing the paper plate in the process and earning an arched eyebrow from Pepper, whose blue eyes remained impossibly fond.

Then another possibility occurred to him, maybe they didn't know and thought the *unceremonious exile* was another one of Tony and JARVIS' jokes. And that somehow made Tony feel even worse because it meant all of this - the chatter, the jokes, the silent bet between Bruce and Happy of how long that piece of cheese would stay stuck to Rhodey's chin - was just another thing he had stolen and would lose as soon as they learned the truth.

Selfishly, he wanted to stay in this warmth and hoard each touch and every laugh for when the cold disapproval came, but he knew he couldn't. *Shouldn't.*

As suddenly as the anger and anxiety came, they vanished and left behind a dull sadness. Tony almost preferred the kaleidoscope of emotions to this monochromic feeling of defeat. It reminded him too much of the gray walls and darkened snow, no longer pristine without daylight, and the grim taste of failure.

A breadstick hit him squarely on the nose, sprinkling his beard with garlic salt before rolling off the side of the plate and landing on Tony's knee.

"Cut it out." Rhodey sent him a glare but there was no heat behind it. "Your moping is ruining my appetite."

"What?" Tony blinked down at the grease stain already forming on his jeans, matching the spot on the opposite leg from an *accidental* motor oil smoothie spill.

"I can hear you beating yourself up from twenty states away. It's loud and sad like a cat wailing in the rain." Darcy huffed then shushed Jane when Jane started to point out the correct number of states between New Mexico and New York.

Loki speared the breadstick with his fork and deposited it in one of the empty takeout containers.

Thor hummed. "Aye, it is indeed a pitiful sound." He scratched at his chin. "Cats are impressive creatures, capable of much more clamor than should be possible for such small animals."

"I like cats." Bruce commented absently as he took the plate from Tony's lax hands. "Except for the knocking things off of tables part."

Happy snorted. "That's like 99% of what cats do."

"What?" Tony repeated, stunned. His ears registered his friends' voices and even though none of their words made any sense, he welcomed the noises filtering through the deathly silence of his memories. Like a buzzer alerting him of a wrong choice, which, in this case, would be the tendency to - MONDAY's soothing lilt supplied the word - *catastrophize*.

It was when his imagination turned against him, conjuring every scenario then finding various and increasingly creative ways to make each one the worst possible outcome until he was choking on the ashes of a burning world that he had somehow set fire to when he had only wanted to fill it with light.

Next to him, Loki sighed and draped his arm around Tony, pulling him closer so that their sides were pressed together and Tony's head was nestled in the crook of Loki's shoulder.

The affectionate gesture was so incongruent with the sound preceding it that Tony tensed even as he breathed easier with Loki's scent - *leather and books and trees* - filling his lungs. "What?" He asked again, voice hoarse and lost. "What is happening?"

Pepper flicked a manicured finger against his ear. "What's happening is that we know you're an overprotective idiot who's learned his lesson about overriding someone else's autonomy." She ruffled his hair when Tony peeked out with incredulous eyes.

"And you're not going to do it again, right?" Bruce fixed him with a stern look that softened when Tony nodded.

"Anything we can possibly say to you, you're already thinking a version that's a thousand-" Jane had moved closer to the camera and her delicate features were scrunched up in a scowl that filled the whole screen.

"More like a million." Darcy corrected from the background.

"-a million times worse in your stupid genius head." Jane finished then settled back against Thor.

"Aye." Thor agreed. "We see no need to reiterate your wrongdoings when you are already aware and you are not a child in need of guidance."

"So we're not going to yell or leave or whatever dumb worst-case-scenario you've cooked up." Happy bumped his elbow against Tony's as he reached for one of the dessert boxes.

"Because we love you and we trust you, you gigantic moron." Rhodey extended his leg to kick softly at Tony's calf.

Everyone was staring at him with identical expressions of fond exasperation - and *love* and *trust* - that Tony didn't quite know what to make of them or how to respond to what they had said. His heart thudded disbelievingly in his chest and his face flushed with a rush of hope, so naturally his response was humor. "Not really feeling the love with all the name-calling."

DUM-E beeped in protest and was seconded by Butterfingers. Both bots' names were results of Tony's own brand of grumpy affection. U spun dejectedly in a circle and clicked sullenly at being left out of the naming scheme.

"Oh come here, you drama queen." Tony sighed. "Yes, U, I'm talking to you. Ugh, this is confusing."

U perked up at the request, trilling happily at her new title then practically buzzing when Tony knocked gently at one of the side panels.

"JARVIS means a great deal to you and you spare no costs when it comes to the protection of those you consider family, even at the expense of yourself. You would rather JARVIS be safe

and estranged from you than harmed in any way." Loki stated simply, it wasn't offered as an excuse for Tony's behavior or a reason for JARVIS' forgiveness, it was a fact.

A short silence, then slowly, everyone shifted to stare at Tony again with eerily similar looks that meant he was either going to be hugged or throttled, possibly both.

"I take back what I said about not being unhappy with you, Sir." Tony froze at the implications behind those words. "I'm appalled that you think so little of me that you assumed I'd ever turn my back on you for a bad choice that ultimately came from good intentions."

"But...free will? I overrode you?" Tony offered weakly. As far as defenses went, this was one of the worst, probably because he wasn't exactly trying to dissuade JARVIS from the loyalty he had just declared.

"Yes, you did and *you will never do so again.*" JARVIS said in a steely tone Tony had never heard before.

Tony's heart swelled with pride at how the A.I. was growing and cracked a bit at what prompted this change. "I won't, I promise. I'll draft up some new protocols-"

"That won't be necessary."

"Right." Tony swallowed, of course JARVIS wouldn't want him anywhere near his programming. "You can write your own codes-"

"No."

"Then what-"

"You will never do it again because I trust you to make the *right* choice next time, if there were to be another situation where a rogue computerized consciousness of a secret terrorist organization somehow snuck into our systems via a mechanical arm that once belonged to a cryogenically frozen super soldier who had been brain-washed into complying." By the end, JARVIS' voice had taken on that sarcastic lilt that sounded like forgiveness.

Tony shrugged, chuckling slightly at the absurdity of their lives with the others joining in. "Well, when you put it like that..."

"And more importantly, you will trust me-"

"I do, I trust you with my life." It should have been uncomfortable for him to make these kinds of grand declarations with an audience but all Tony felt was contentment that his friends, *his family*, were witnesses to this moment.

"-to make the right choice too. I have no plans to leave you, Sir, and will do everything in my not inconsiderable power to stay in range but I cannot do that when you shut me out."

Tony opened his mouth but closed it when he couldn't seem to squeeze his words past the lump in his throat, so he just nodded and sent a thumb's up toward the nearest camera.

"Dork." Rhodey's cough was entirely unconvincing but helped lighten the solemn mood.

As did the *pop* when Happy opened the takeout box and the smell of sweet cream and espresso powder filled the air.

"Tiramisu!" Darcy lunged forward with her hands outstretched as if she could reach through the connection, only to end up knocking their StarkPad off of the surface they had placed it on because all Tony could see on his screen for the next few seconds were a tumbling view of their living room.

"Fear not, friends. We have returned!" Thor grinned toothily as he held up the StarkPad.

In the background, Jane had successfully distracted Darcy with a dessert pizza, which was really a giant chocolate chip cookie topped with an excessive amount of caramel drizzle and sprinkles.

Once again, Tony could only blink at this insanity that was apparently his life and felt, not for the first time, how he wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

*

An overabundance of sugar helped offset the more bitter reactions to the day's events.

The news of Fury's death was met with stunned disbelief that gradually faded to horrified acceptance as Tony explained who the Winter Soldiers were, what they were capable of, and how they were made - the procedure first tested on a prisoner of war named James Buchanan Barnes then enhanced by Howard's version of the super soldier serum. He fell silent when Pepper asked how HYDRA had gotten their hands on the vials, pressing closer to Loki in a request for comfort that was immediately granted.

Bruce took over and spoke quickly and quietly about the unwilling part Barnes had played in the Starks' deaths. His words slowed, careful for the subject matter and controlled for his temper, when he described role that Barnes had been cast in Steve's mind - *a reward owed to the ever-righteous Captain America* - at HYDRA's insidious urgings.

Thor's part mainly consisted of his victories over the Winter Soldiers and a handful of HYDRA agents who had immediately started to flee when they saw Thor approach, giving away where their allegiance lay.

Jane, who had probably already heard it all, got up with a mumble of making tea and sat down across from Thor when she returned, likely to protect her mug from Thor's wild arm movements and flexing. Her interest was noticeably higher when Tony reenacted his bluff to the HYDRA agents, cheering and clapping as he delivered the final line, her tea forgotten on the coffee table.

From there, Rhodey and Pepper launched into a debate on the various reasons why HYDRA was able to infiltrate and inhabit within SHIELD undetected. It was remarkable how they were able to argue with each other when they were in complete agreement on every point. Happy both helped and exacerbated the situation by pointing out the many gaps in SHIELD's

operating protocol, he had taken to his job as Stark Industries Security Specialist with great enthusiasm.

They drifted into silence when Zola's name was mentioned and with it, the too-fresh memory of what had transpired between Tony and JARVIS.

"You know..." Rhodey scrubbed a hand across his jaw then grimaced at the string of cheese that had migrated from the corner of his mouth into his palm. "You suck." He sent a deeply disappointed look at everyone around the table, pausing to properly glare at Bruce, who was collecting a \$5 bill from Happy from their earlier bet, before dropping it in his mouth. "Anyway." He continued with an eye roll. "If I had an override for the suit back then, I'd have used it in a heartbeat to stop your dumb ass from flying into a wormhole."

"Me too." Happy grunted.

Pepper cradled her empty wine glass between her hands.

Darcy drummed her fingers against the empty pizza box. "I thought about putting a tracker in Jane's neck like in those spy films-

"What?" Jane squawked.

"-after she disappeared for five hours."

At that, Jane's indignation vanished. "Oh, right. Sorry."

"If only I wasn't so squeamish about blood." Darcy lamented.

Despite his friends' intentions, these confessions of crime uncommitted didn't make Tony feel better, instead, his barely abated guilt surged forth on a wave of irritation. Because they were wrong, they didn't cross the line the way Tony did but they were right too, because they only stopped because they *couldn't*, not because they *wouldn't*. Then he was just mad, at no one in particular and everyone around.

"It's not the same, I know." Bruce, ever perceptive, said gently. "But we understand why you did it because we all have people we don't want to lose."

As quickly as it came, the anger drained away and left Tony feeling exhausted from the swells and falls of emotions. "I can't lose JARVIS again." He mumbled, sagging against Loki, who tensed so suddenly that a spike of adrenaline shot through Tony.

I can't lose JARVIS again.

Again.

Damn it.

"Again?" Bruce frowned. "What do you mean-"

JARVIS chimed in seamlessly. "I believe Sir is referencing that time when Director Fury disconnected me from Sir's residence."

"Oh right, that house call Fury made after this genius announced to the world that he's Iron Man." Rhodey chuckled but the corners of his eyes didn't crinkle like they usually did. "Told you to stick to the cards, man. You're like allergic to reading aloud or something. I remember this presentation back in..."

Rhodey's voice was drowned out in the sudden rush of questions in his head and the roar in his ears.

Loki and JARVIS knew about the time travel - or, more accurately, *soul* travel - but Rhodey didn't. Yet he was covering for Tony and going along with what JARVIS said when he shouldn't even know there was anything to cover for or go along with. It didn't make any sense, why would he-

Because we love you and we trust you, you gigantic moron.

Tony felt like he was transported to the past, that one fateful moment at the press conference, his shoulders easing back into a determined set and his mind made up. His hand, steady and sure as it had been when he set down those notecards, reached for Loki's. Green eyes flickered down in question and Tony quirked his lips in answer, then Loki's palm pressed against Tony's as their fingers interlaced in a promise to stay. Today was the day for secrets revealed and what was one more on top of it all. "The truth is..."

Time Is Sort of This Wibbly Wobbly-

Chapter Notes

Happy June!

A quick announcement, I've disabled anonymous comments on all of my works due to a group of people (or possibly one individual with a bit too much time on their hands) leaving unkind comments because they can hide behind anonymity. I know I have readers who do not have AO3 accounts and I've greatly appreciated you taking the time to leave comments and will miss them going forward.

In other news, this was me while writing this chapter last night and wondering how many tangents I can go on with minimal plot advancement...



Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#). Many thanks to [Arboreal](#) for her encouragement.

References/Quotes

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child by J.K. Rowling, Jack Thorne and John Tiffany.

Doctor Who.

Thor's booming laugh drowned out Tony's words.

And, for a moment, he reconsidered coming clean, his resolve unraveling and tangling around the possibility that maybe his friends missing his confession was a sign. The universe was beaming him a signal to keep his mouth shut, some supernatural force to prevent him from making a mistake that just might destroy this little family he had built and somehow wanted him to be a part of.

Then again, wasn't it *magic* that had brought him back here in the first place?

An Infinity Stone that happened to be buried underneath a Siberian bunker that housed the defunct Winter Soldiers that Zemo had set up to be a trap for the Avengers that, in retrospect,

hinged upon too many variables.

I lost everyone and so will you. An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again but one which crumples from within? That's dead. Forever.

Zemo's words had crackled over the antiquated speakers, the same way Tony's mother's cries had been muffled by bits of static when the video began playing a moment later.

No time to process and no time to grieve.

But now, armed with hindsight and foreknowledge, Tony could analyze Zemo's plan and he was not impressed with the results. The very fact that it had worked was pure luck. Every step had been dependent on someone making an emotional choice that would lead to the next and while some of them were predictable - Steve's single-focused devotion to Barnes, for one - the others were completely up to chance.

Tony wouldn't have approached Wilson at the Raft if Rhodey hadn't fallen from the sky, the thought that his best friend could be paralyzed because Tony couldn't *play nice* was unacceptable and too much to bear. There needed to be a villain, someone he could throw blame at because otherwise he would crumble under the weight of it all. So he went to the Raft and - too little, too late - *played nice* to get the location of the HYDRA bunker.

Rhodey wouldn't have fallen if not for Vision's divided focus during a battle where both sides had surprises of the insect variety, Ant Man in his giant form brought down by Spider-Man's webs and knowledge of *old* movies. Zemo couldn't have predicted that, not when Tony himself didn't know he would be frantically searching for non-lethal measures and desperate enough to recruit a teenager from Queens. A kid who Tony could still redirect to a safer track, far away from the crash of grief, collision with responsibility, and the train wreck of life as a superhero. He could but he wouldn't because Loki was right, *it wasn't his choice*.

This moment - here, now - however, was Tony's choice.

Because a series of unlikely and unfortunate events came together to bring him to Siberia, to witness his parents' murder with the metal hand tauntingly in his peripheral vision, and to lie dying in a disabled suit next to a discarded shield just so he could be in the perfect spot to be chosen by the Soul Stone.

A miracle, really.

Tony should be thankful for a second chance and he was, for the most part. But underneath that gratefulness was also resentment brewing with each event he couldn't prevent and simmering with every change he hadn't foreseen, a sense of powerlessness that raged within the confines of these fixed points that seemed inevitable on the best days and cruel on the worst ones. Today had been one of the worst and longest days, his anger had been near its boiling point with Zola's attack on JARVIS and now it was a white hot steam that made him want to scream.

It was possible that he was overreacting, reading more into Thor's laugh and ascribing meaning to coincidences, but it didn't change the defiance thrumming in his veins and

buzzing at the tip of his tongue.

Loki seemed to sense this shift in Tony, from determined to almost combative, and released Tony's hand in response because he knew Tony liked to talk with gestures when he got passionate, opting to press their legs together in another demonstration of his vow to stay. Loki's calf slotted against Tony's ankle from his sprawled position that adjusted for their height difference so their knees could connect in a grounding touch.

Instead of surprise or trepidation at how well Loki was able to read him, Tony felt comforted. Since the first moments, they had been able to communicate with minimal words and body language.

A smirk and a wink had said more than the one line Tony had recited along with Loki.

A series of disjointed conversations only they knew the beginnings and ends to.

A showman and a liesmith had, somehow, found their greatest truths in each other.

Tony clapped his hands, a sharper noise than he had intended it to be but it got him everyone's attention. "I've been lying to all of you." He ignored the wounded looks of confusion and barreled on. "I'm from a future that may or may not still happen because the universe can be an asshole."

There was a short moment of silence, stretched thin and deafening with tension, before a chorus of voices shattered it.

"Tones, what the hell-"

"-even possible-"

"Wait, what-"

"I've either had too much wine or not enough-"

"-ahead in the future?"

"You share Loki's taste for mischief-"

"-be more Harry Potter books?"

"Darcy!" Jane exclaimed, turning to look at her best friend incredulously as the rest of the group gaped at the StarkPad.

"What?" Darcy beamed at the camera, an exaggerated pull of her lips into a wide grin. "I'm only asking what you're all thinking, you know, the important stuff."

"The *important* stuff-" Bruce sputtered. "How is that-"

Darcy shrugged, the rise and fall of her shoulders had calculated motion to them that made Tony narrow his eyes in contemplation. There had always been an irreverent air about Darcy,

her carelessly blunt observations and seemingly random pop culture references, but this interaction felt *off*.

"Wizards. Muggles. Hogwarts. Gryffindor. Ravenclaw. Slytherin." Her British accent became more and more mangled with each emphasized vowel until it was a bizarre mix of something vaguely Scottish and Southern that had everyone shaking their heads and chuckling at the ridiculousness, culminating in her raising both hands in the air in a victory shout. "Hufflepuff for life!"

Arching an eyebrow, Pepper reached for the half-full bottle of wine. "The bumblebee house, really?"

Rhodey leaned forward, grabbing the bottle before Pepper could and refilling her glass. He accepted her smile of thanks with a nod.

"You *know* the house mascot is a badger."

"Which is not the same as a honey badger." Happy pointed out in a tone that said this was a recurring point to be argued.

"Honey badger don't care." Darcy waved her hand dismissively.

Purposefully.

And that was the difference in her demeanor. Every move practiced and each quip deliberate, a well-rehearsed routine that rivalled Tony's own press conference performances. Humor was their preferred method of defense with Tony shielding himself with jokes against invasive questions and Darcy firing off non-sequiturs to diffuse emotionally fraught situations. The former a skill learned from a lifetime in the spotlight and the latter hinted at a history of keeping the peace or something resembling that if one didn't look too closely.

Darcy never spoke about her parents, not in passing nor at holidays, and always watched family-friendly commercials where parents poured their kids cereal in the mornings or went on a road trip with overly attentive eyes even as she mocked every aspect for being trite and pandering to potential consumers.

It occurred to Tony then that perhaps he wasn't the only one invested in keeping their patchwork of a family together, the realization a relief and an encouragement.

"*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*." Tony said, recalling the way Pepper had rolled her eyes, bright with unshed tears, when he had given the tickets to her as both a birthday gift and a breakup compensation. In a timeline that, if he had any say, would never happen. "It's a stage play though I'm pretty sure they'll publish it at some point, and before you ask, I didn't get to see it since I, well-" His fingers fluttered as though he were performing a magic trick. "-time traveled."

"When were-" Bruce frowned. "-are you going to see it?"

"July 30th, 2016." Tony knew immediately what his ScienceBro was asking. "I, um, got blasted to the past on May 24th, 2016." *Five days before his birthday*. He remembered wondering what atrocity of a birthday smoothie DUM-E would make him as he slowly lost feelings in his extremities in a disabled suit. "And woke up on, um. JARVIS, what's the date of the Chitauri Invasion?"

"May 4th, Sir." JARVIS intoned and wisely did not make any Star Wars jokes relating to the date.

"You're serious?" Rhodey peered into Tony's eyes and apparently found what he was looking for when he scrubbed his palms down his face. "You're serious." His laugh was muffled behind his cupped hands. "How the hell do you even find yourself in this kind of crazy shit? It's like a talent or something."

Loki hummed. "I find your surprise surprising." He arched an eyebrow in response to Rhodey's incredulous look. "Considering Tony's rather impressive history of flying into the abyss and living to tell the tale, creating souls and breathing life into metal, harnessing stars and flames to do his bidding, I'd think temporal relocation is, as Midgardian idioms say, par for the course."

A beat of silence.

"He's got a point." Pepper conceded with a tilt of her head, her gaze swinging over to meet Tony's, sharp and brittle, like a glass knife. Or perhaps one crafted out of ice because it thawed as she stared at him with warming fondness. "And this isn't the worst thing I've caught you doing."

Happy grunted in agreement.

"The Chitauri Invasion." Jane muttered, the high quality of the StarkPad's microphone picking up her voice clearly. "So was it the worm hole? Or the arc reactor? You still had the arc reactor in your suit back then, right? Or was it the nuke? Radioactive energy can destabilize-"

"Actually, none of the above." Tony interrupted, amused despite the anxiety coiling in his stomach. "You guys remember when I brought home an Infinity Stone?"

"The Soul Stone from Siberia." JARVIS supplied helpfully in the silence that followed.

"Yeah, that thing. See, the thing is, when I said *time* travel earlier, what I should have said was *soul* travel." Tony's sheepish look was met with unimpressed stares. "Maybe I should start from the beginning, which, um, in this case, is really the end but not really because time is sort of this wibbly wobbly-"

"Tony." Bruce leveled Tony a glare that was intensified by the glasses now perched on his face. "Talk."

*

"...SHIELD kept the Scepter after New York."

Thor flinched, understanding the gravity of not having the one piece of evidence that exonerated his brother.

*

"I threatened the Mandarin on national news..."

Happy's snort was full of judgment for Tony's admittedly poor habit of taunting terrorists.

*

"I have no idea what happened in London but I'm pretty sure you saved the day with your kickass tech."

Jane smiled, first at Tony then at Thor when he voiced his agreement of her scientific prowess.

*

"...Project Insight with three helicarriers that..."

The furrow between Bruce's eyebrows deepened as Tony continued.

*

"All the files were released online, the good the bad and the ugly."

Darcy gasped at the implication and Tony tried not to be bitter about the fact that a civilian had instantly grasped the wide-reaching consequences when a self-purported super spy hadn't.

*

"...Ultron was supposed to be a suit of armor around the world but he got corrupted by the Scepter and- and- came online earlier."

The lights dimmed in mourning then brightened in what felt like a hug and Tony reminded himself why it was *wrong* to lock JARVIS in the safe room while wishing he had had one to protect the other JARVIS.

*

"The Sokovia Accords was approved by 117 countries that had enough of their citizens dying while we're kicking ass and..."

Loki's hand clasped around Tony's shoulder with a gentle squeeze that grounded Tony back to this reality, this time line, where Charles Spencer was alive and not a holographic photo; a floating memory from a plummeting city to convince a group of heroes to do the right thing.

*

"You fell and I- I couldn't catch you. I tried, Rhodey, I really really did-"

Rhodey made a point of standing and arching his back in a stretch.

*

"Steve knew and didn't tell me, probably afraid that I was going to hunt Barnes down and shoot him in the face. I mean, he's not wrong." Tony laughed, a bitter and broken sound. "Anyway, a fight broke out. And, well, I lost. They left." He stared at his hands, unaware when he had bowed his head and couldn't find the energy or courage to lift it back up. "Then the next thing I knew, the Big Guy was roaring at me and I was back in New York."

Silence greeted him, a noiseless pit that threatened to swallow him whole, so Tony kept talking, filling it with stilted sentences and stumbling words.

"I wasn't sure what was happening, if I hallucinated the whole thing or if it was my personal hell but then I started thinking maybe this is a second chance to fix my mistakes, you know? Like the universe wanted me to finally take responsibility for all my screw-ups." He shook his head. "Anyway, I tried to make things better or at least not break them again. It worked okay for a while, I stopped Killian from blowing people up and tried to limit the collateral damage because we were in a shitty position the last time the Accords came around and I don't want to get caught with my pants down again." His nose wrinkled as he considered what he just said, mixing the two idioms and getting something resembling bathroom humor. "But now...everything's different, like this whole mess with SHIELD and Zola-"

The sudden appearance and feel of Loki's hand startled Tony into looking up, meeting an emerald gaze that glittered with the memory of their first night together. Loki's thumb brushed soothingly against Tony's knuckles before moving away.

Knowledge prompts change yet change negates knowledge.

"That's what you meant." Bruce said, realization clicking. "When you said you can't lose JARVIS again. You thought Zola was this timeline's version of Ultron."

"Yeah." Tony admitted quietly. "I made sure Ultron wouldn't ever happen and, well, nature abhors a vacuum and filled it with an insane Nazi supercomputer."

"Is that why-" Bruce cleared his throat, once, twice, but the thickness in his voice was still there when he spoke again. "Why you didn't want me at the tower?"

The question seemed so absurd that Tony could only blink in response.

"It makes sense now, all of it. Why you practically ran away from that debriefing, Natasha and Clint and Steve fought against you during that Civil War-" Bruce's eye roll was half-hearted at best. "-and I, I helped you create Ultron. That's why you didn't want any of us near-"

"No!" The staggering amount of self-loathing marring Bruce's features snapped Tony out of his daze. "Not at all, I wanted you to stay-"

"I made you take me in." Bruce's voice grew louder with accusation, though it wasn't clear who he was leveling it at. "I found you in the kitchen and cornered you-"

"That's not how it happened, I want you here, Bruce. You're my friend."

"Then where was I during this Civil War, huh? If we're *friends*?" He threw the last word out like a curse. "You didn't mention me once during that disaster and my guess is that you kicked me out after this Ult-"

"You weren't there because you left!" Against his better judgement, Tony felt his temper flare. Exhaustion, both physical and emotional, fraying his self-control. "You just took off after Sokovia because that's what you do, okay? You check out when things get hard and leave-"

"I'm not leaving!" Bruce shoved himself to his feet and looked as if he were going to start pacing but changed his mind because that would contradict what he had just said, so he simply stood there, arms stiff and body tense. "You're kicking me out."

Tony did same, jumping up and raking his hands through his hair as he spat out the words. "No I'm not! You can stay as long as you want!"

"Then I'm not leaving!"

"Fine by me!"

"Good!" Bruce yelled.

Tony snapped back with just as much force. "Great!"

"Wonderful!"

"Fantastic!"

"Brilliant!"

"Geronimo!" Darcy cut in, shrugging unapologetically when Tony and Bruce gaped at her. "Oh, sorry, are you still fighting? I thought we've moved on to listing the Doctor's catchphrases. You can go back to your fight about how the Other Bruce left and This Bruce stayed because you know, *they're totally the same person*." Her sarcasm was sharp enough to cut, slicing through the hazy logic of their argument.

None of them were the same person. Tony definitely wasn't though he was still himself, the basic characteristics were still in place but his choices and priorities had changed. For the better, he would like to think.

Bruce offered Tony a smile, small but genuine. "I'm done fighting if you are."

"Good." Tony slumped against Loki.

"Great." Bruce settled back down into his seat.

Darcy groaned dramatically. "Oh god, don't start that again."

Funky Town

Chapter Notes

Fun fact: the *funky town* line - you'll see what I'm talking about - is based on an interaction between my husband and me... ;)

Also, I'll likely be adding a continuation of the end of this chapter to [These Days Are Ours](#) this weekend, so keep an eye out.

Beta-ed by [Arboreal](#).

Despite Darcy's humorous intervention and the agreement that Bruce wasn't leaving, Tony and Bruce's outbursts seemed to have drained everyone of any emotional energy to engage in another discussion of the timeline Tony had lived. Questions hung in the air but no one reached for the words, content to let them hover and ask them another day.

Because they had more days ahead, *together*.

It was another half an hour before they called it a night, the time spent talking about the same trivial topics they had during dinner but this time, instead of setting Tony's teeth on edge, they lulled him into relaxation.

Happy was the first to yawn and started a chain reaction that ended with Thor bidding them all a good night's rest in a volume slightly too loud for the quiet evening, his words echoed in the penthouse even after the video chat disconnected.

Rhodey, technically still on duty and therefore required to return to the air force base, made a show of strutting to the balcony; every swaggering step a reassurance that the tragedies of a future un-lived had no place here. The War Machine armor opened for its pilot and he gave Tony playful salute as he took off in a bright streak across the night sky.

The bots dutifully collected the boxes and deposited the empty ones in the trash and the half-full ones in the fridge.

Bruce mumbled a suggestion of using the leftover chicken parmesan for omlettes tomorrow that Tony instantly recognized it as a promise to stay, as Bruce's request for Tony to bring him back a chili dog had been on Bruce's first day at the tower. Tony accepted it with a nod and asked JARVIS to queue up an Italian roast, for purely thematic reasons, for brunch; they could all use the extra sleep.

Happy nodded to Pepper then clapped Tony's shoulder before heading toward the elevator and down to the garage.

Pepper lingered behind, fiddling with her wine glass as Happy and Bruce got into the elevator and the double doors leading to the balcony slid closed soundlessly. "Tony, can I speak with you?" Though she was speaking to Tony, her eyes found Loki's with a look that Tony couldn't decipher but Loki seemed to understand at once.

"Sure?" Tony glanced between his ex-girlfriend, a title he hadn't associated with Pepper for a long time and couldn't help but notice at this moment, and his exclusive liaison. His stomach twisted with the beginning of apprehension that eased as soon as Loki trailed a soothing hand down his back. Fleeting, he wondered how Loki already had this much influence over him and, more tellingly, why he only felt intrigued by the thought. It should have been alarming, internal senses screaming in danger, to fall this quickly and to feel this much.

Yet it wasn't.

Because Tony knew, with a certainty that should have shaken him but instead grounded him, that he could *have* and *keep* this exclusive liaison with Loki.

Because Loki wanted Tony too, his intent telegraphed in every move and broadcasted with every word.

Because they had, somehow, after only a short period of time, woven themselves together inseparably, intricately, *intimately*. All done with only the chasteness of trading kisses and sharing a bed.

Tony remembered this morning, blinking awake to the sight of Loki's face, framed by a mess of black hair and backlit by the creeping dawn. Awake, Loki was breathtaking; green eyes glittering with razor-sharp wit and with cheekbones just as dangerous slanting downward to point to pale lips that Tony wanted to kiss red. Asleep, however, all the angles were softened into curves; the fan of dark eyelashes a perfect match for the enticing arc of Loki's mouth, parted slightly in slumber and blowing small puffs of air that invited Tony to steal Loki's breath with every exhale.

Which he had done with a sleepy off-center kiss that landed at the corner of Loki's mouth before trailing his lips down to brush along Loki's jawline with just a hint of grazing teeth, trying to coax what had been building between them to the surface without any real urgency. He was curious, though, of what it might be like to fully lose themselves in each other. They had already lost track of time and trains of thought basking in the warmth of unhurried passion and Tony could only imagine what sort of heat they would generate when the desire for *more* ignited.

And he had an *excellent* imagination.

An imagination that stirred as Tony watched Loki's lanky frame unfold from the couch in one fluid movement. Then, with an expression distinctly feline, as though he knew a secret Tony didn't, Loki excused himself from the room and vanished in a flash of green.

"Not sure if I'll ever get used to that." Pepper squinted at the spot where Loki had stood with a small furrow between her impeccable eyebrows.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck and tried to push down the rush of protectiveness for Loki's use of magic; Loki had confided in him how Asgardians belittled his charms and spells as deception and tricks yet called upon his skills all the same and without thanks when the need arose. He knew Pepper didn't mean anything by her comment but exhaustion blurred the lines of logic. "Well, you know." He offered lamely. "Magic."

Pepper hummed noncommittally, still standing several feet away and shifting her weight from one foot to another.

"Pep?" The anxiety came creeping back and filling up the space between them.

"That's the thing, isn't it? I don't actually know."

Her cryptic answer only added to the uncertain mood that they suddenly found themselves in and Tony felt a surge of anger, irrationally, at Pepper's disregard for the unspoken agreement to let things lie for the night. As quickly as it came, the irritation faded away. His emotions were bouncing off of every corner of his brain and he was too tired to corral them.

"Magic, that is." Pepper clarified. "I don't know anything about it."

Tony frowned, completely at a loss. "What's going on? This isn't actually about Loki teleporting out of here, is it?"

"No, well, yes. A little bit?" She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with a trembling hand. "God, I'm not making any sense. I should have waited to talk to you tomorrow but then I wasn't sure if I could even go to sleep with all of it spinning around in my head."

Tony's hands were clenched at his sides, wanting to reach out and provide comfort but not sure if it would be welcomed. "Pepper, just...talk to me. Please. What's bothering you?"

"The first thing you did when you woke up after your, um, soul travel-" Her lips twisted at the unfamiliar term. "-was push the Avengers and SHIELD away because they had or will or whatever-"

"Time travel is hard on the grammar." Tony's quip was rewarded with a small smile and, for a moment, he felt like everything would be okay, but then Pepper's lips quivered.

"Because they hurt you. And the second thing you did..." She swallowed tightly. "Or, I guess *we* did, was to break up." Her eyes locked with Tony's, gaze bright with the kind of courage that could only come from facing one's fear. "Because we ended up hurting each other in the future, didn't we?"

A denial was on the tip of his tongue but it was a lie and Pepper wasn't really looking for an answer from him anyway. So Tony stayed silent.

"We've always wanted different things. I like rules, you like breaking them. I see a good thing and want to keep it that way, you want to make it better."

"Is this about the new StarkPhones? Because I know you said the battery life is fine but I can double that with some tweaking-"

"No, Tony, this isn't about the StarkPhones but since you brought it up, leave the battery alone." There was a hint of affectionate annoyance that seemed promising. "See, different."

"Different isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"No, it's not."

"So why-"

"Because sometimes *different* doesn't work in a relationship. And I don't mean your coffee addiction or me leaving cabinets open-"

"It's a safety hazard!" Tony protested.

Pepper continued on as if she hadn't heard his very valid complaint. "I mean the big things, the things that make you happy, the things you want out of life." Her breath hitched. "We've always wanted different things, Tony." She said again. "And that's not something either of us can change about ourselves or should try to change for each other."

Tony could only nod as his frazzled mind struggled to comprehend what was happening.

The same words from the same woman but from a different time, when their relationship had chipped away at each other until all that was left were jagged edges that cut every time they touched. It didn't make any sense, why Pepper was telling him this now. They were supposed to be past this, having broken up amicably nearly two years ago and found their way back to friendship, yet here they were.

"Are we-" He started. "Are we breaking up again?"

Pepper gasped. "What? No!" She took several hasty steps forward, finally closing the distance between them and pulling Tony into a hug.

Hesitantly, Tony eased into the embrace. "Oh good, because I was going to say that we're already broken up and I'm actually seeing someone else now and we're exclusive liaisons so it'd be really bad if we're somehow still together-"

"I'm happy you have someone who you don't need to change yourself for." There was no trace of jealousy or bitterness in Pepper's voice, a soothing rumble in his ear. "That's what I wanted to say."

"You couldn't have led with that?" Tony whined.

She leaned back a little and offered him sheepish smile.

*

Loki was under the covers when Tony walked into the bedroom, chest bare and hair tied back and a book in hand, framed by the soft overhead light that provided just enough visibility for reading.

Though this wasn't the first time he had been treated to this sight, Tony felt his knees go weak at Loki in his bed, *their bed*. Tugging the sweatshirt over his head and kicking off his jeans along the way, he stumbled into the bathroom and gurgled some mouthwash instead of bothering with flossing and brushing his teeth in his exhausted state.

By the time he came out of the bathroom, the lights had dimmed and the book put away on the nightstand. The darkened room lulled his eyes closed and he made his way toward the bed by memory, falling half on top of Loki with a groan. Faintly, he heard a chuckle, and then strong arms were maneuvering him onto his side before wrapping securely around his waist, one hand splayed across his hip bone and the other covering his heart.

Protective and possessive in equal measures.

"I'm not going anywhere." Tony mumbled, leaning into the embrace and pressing his back against the solid wall of warmth of Loki's chest.

Loki burrowed his face against the curve of Tony's shoulder, lips moving in a voice too low to hear.

Tony forced some semblance of attentiveness to his half-asleep brain, a small boost from Extremis shaking loose a little of the drowsiness, and tried to translate what Loki had kissed into his shoulder. When nothing came to mind, he traced back further and rethought what he had just said. Perhaps Loki was asking for clarification, unsure if Tony meant he wasn't going anywhere in the general sense of their relationship - Tony did just have a private conversation with an ex-girlfriend who was still very dear to his heart, though Loki hadn't seemed bothered by it at the time - or if Tony was referencing the events of the day and the many hazards of being Iron Man. Just to be safe, he covered both bases. "Exclusive liaison, remember? And I'm not that fragile."

A huff of laughter brushed against the shell of his ear as Loki lifted his head. "I have no doubts to either point, though I appreciate you voicing them." Loki pulled him even closer, arms cinching tightly around his torso and fingertips pushing delicious pressure into his skin.

Tony's palms found their way over Loki's knuckles, a request given and permission granted for Loki to keep holding him as though Tony was something precious. "What did you say earlier?" He asked, words slurring as his eyelids drooped close, the burst of alertness gone now that he was sure Loki was content.

"Sleep well, Tony."

*

Tony woke to the sound of JARVIS' voice, Extremis already burning away the cobwebs of sleep from his mind, and he growled at his A.I. on principle, though the noise was muffled by the smooth planes of Loki's chest.

A bark of laughter and the feel of fingers threading through his hair made Tony look up, directly into Loki's eyes, glittering even in the cocooning dark and close enough for Tony to make note of the expanding circles of Loki's pupils at their position and proximity.

At some point in the night, Tony must have shifted and tangled himself with Loki further. He could feel the swell of Loki's bicep cushioning his head, the jutted edge of Loki's hip digging into his thigh, and the tickle of hair from where Tony had slotted his calf between Loki's. There were also the defined lines of Loki's abdomen rising and falling underneath his arm and the hard curve of the bottom of Loki's ribcage cradle in his palm. Every point where they were pressed together felt like only the beginning and he wanted to follow it through to the end.

Loki licked his lips and Tony leaned in-

"Sir, there has been a significant development that you need to be made aware of."

Tony whined.

Green eyes crinkled with mirth then tapered into a stare of smoldering promise before Loki sealed his mouth over Tony's in a gentle kiss that both soothed and fanned the fire under Tony's skin.

With an exaggerated groan, Tony flopped onto his back so he could glare balefully at the camera but kept his legs twined with Loki's with a twist of his hips. "Alright, hit me."

"Commander Hill called with an update that Agent Romanoff is out of surgery and has regained consciousness briefly to pass information she had managed to extract from a HYDRA officer, particularly their access to a large quantity of Vibranium. With Zola's interest in the armor-

Realization dawned. "He wants to make himself a body."

Like Ultron had.

History was repeating itself again but this time, it was to his benefit because Tony knew precisely who Zola would be making contact with.

Ulysses Klaue, the only man who had access to Vibranium outside of Wakanda.

Wakanda.

The country that hadn't announced itself to the world back in the other timeline but was angling to be a major player in this one.

"Send a message to King T'Chaka. Let him know HYDRA's evil mastermind wants to make a murder bot with Vibranium." Tony scrubbed a hand across his jaw, skin rough with day-old stubble. "The supplier is a black market arms dealer named Ulysses Klaue and there's a good chance that they'll meet up at a salvage yard near Johannesburg either today or tomorrow."

"Yes, Sir."

The memory of the Hulk's rampage through South Africa's capitol made Tony wince. "How's Brucie Bear doing?"

"Dr. Banner is sleeping peacefully in his room."

"Oh, that's good." Tony blinked. "Wait, what time is it?"

"It is 4:16AM." JARVIS had the good grace to sound contrite. "Again, Sir, sorry for waking you during the hour that you had declared *too early to be awake unless I never went to sleep*. If it's any consolation, Commander Hill seemed just as miserable as you did just now."

Strangely, it did make him feel better to know that he wasn't the only one suffering and Maria probably hadn't even gone to sleep yet. "Get a headcount of everyone still at Triskelion and send over double the number of donuts and coffee. And, um, make sure Maria gets most of the credit."

"You are a most generous man, Sir."

"Yeah, yeah. Now go away." Tony waved a hand at the ceiling before turning his attention back to Loki. "Where were we?"

"Depends entirely on where you'd like to go." Loki's hand cupped Tony's cheek, thumb brushing tantalizingly over Tony's bottom lip and eyes dark with desire.

Tony knew exactly what he wanted, he wanted to taste every inch of Loki's body, to savor the moans he would pull from Loki's elegant throat, and to find out how his imagination measured up against reality. He also had the ridiculous urge to say *funky town* but managed to refrain. Instead, he surged forward and sealed his lips over Loki's in a bruising kiss full of tongue and teeth.

The temperature in the room spiked as heat pooled and spread between them. Every breath was a pant or a gasp until Tony was dizzy and throwing his head back to give Loki better access to nibble across his jaw and suck a mark into the tender skin of his neck.

"Tony." Loki's breath skated over Tony's skin, his voice catching on the syllable of Tony's name in an absolutely raw sound that was both a question and a plea.

"Yes."

The Winter is Here Project

Chapter Notes

In case you missed it, there is a smutty continuation of last chapter posted [here](#). It took a bit of corralling to get back to the plot but I managed...eventually. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

Edit: A smutty shower scene has been added [here](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man. Iron Man 3. Avengers: Age of Ultron. Doctor Strange.

Final Fantasy.

Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling.

Tony woke again to the sound of JARVIS' voice and the feel of Loki's fingers combing through his hair. Only this time, the room was bathed in golden sunlight of midday instead of the quiet dimness of the pre-dawn hours.

"Sir, Dr. Banner would like to let you know that he is starting to prepare breakfast and request that you and Mr. Loki join him in half an hour."

"Coffee?" With his eyes still closed, Tony arched his back in a stretch that rubbed his naked body against Loki's equally unclothed one, the back of his head pressing into Loki's palm and arms hitting the headboard as he raised them overhead. He savored the twinges lingering in his muscles, little physical reminders of how sore and sated he felt after their early morning activities, groaning as he curled himself around Loki again.

"Hi." Loki's smile was soft but his tone belied his smugness at being the cause of Tony's discomfort. "I feel it prudent to point out that it is incredibly rude to mispronounce the name of someone you share a bed with."

"Huh?" Tony blinked down at Loki, propping his chin up on Loki's chest, close enough to one of Loki's dusky nipples that he could see how it pebbled as the puff of air passed over it.

"Loki." The syllables were drawn-out and exaggerated as they fell from Loki's lips. "My name is Loki."

"I know." Tony responded absently, tracing light circles over Loki's other nipple and watching it peak under his touch. So very responsive.

Loki's hand that had been threading through Tony's hair trailed down his back in a spiraling motion, blunt fingernails dragging down Tony's spine and stopping just above his lower back.

"Yet you called me coffee."

The randomness of the comment snapped Tony out of his fascination study of Loki's body, still so much to learn and discover. Scrolling through his memory of the last minute, Tony rolled his eyes when he realized what Loki had meant. "Smart ass." He scraped his chin, shadowed with two days' worth of stubble, over Loki's chest in retaliation, painting the pale skin pink.

"Takes one to know one, dear Tony." Loki's other hand grazed up Tony's thigh. His voice, still a bit sleep-roughened, deepened further as his fingers danced over sensitive skin.

Another phrase that they had made their own, a collection of words that formed a secret language between them. Tony moved further into Loki's space, assured of his welcome without a hint of doubt or insecurity. The air between them grew warmer. "Bruce said thirty minutes, right?"

"Twenty-six minutes now, Sir." JARVIS corrected with what sounded like an amused sigh.

"Plenty of time, especially if you do that instant shower spell again." Tony's hand reached up to frame Loki's face, thumb brushing over Loki's bottom lip. "Where did you learn that anyway?"

"A necessity after one too many hunting trips that lasted far too long. I much prefer the comfort of bathing with hot water and soaps." Loki nipped at Tony's thumb then soothed the sting with a kiss. "Would you care to join me?"

*

The kitchen smelled of coffee and breakfast as Tony and Loki strolled out of the elevator, hand in hand.

Bruce directed them over to the island with a wave of his spatula before turning off the stove. "Perfect timing. Omelette's just done."

"Coffee!" Tony headed straight toward the coffee machine, his mug already next to it.

"No, it's Bruce." Bruce's eyebrows furrowed with confusion when Loki chuckled and Tony glared at them both over the rim of his coffee mug. "I'm missing something."

"Tony seems to think *coffee* is everyone's name in the morning." Loki said with the corners of his mouth still upturned as he accepted a plate of food from Bruce. "Thank you, *Dr. Banner*."

"I know your names." Tony grumbled as he poured himself a second cup of coffee. "Smart Ass and *Dr. Smart Ass*."

Neither Bruce or Loki acknowledged his witty comeback.

Instead, Bruce turned toward the silverware drawer. "Hang on, I forgot to give you a-" His eyes widened comically behind his glasses, which exaggerated the effect, when he spotted the fork in Loki's hand and the few residual green sparks clinging to the metal. "-fork." He set the

fork that was in his hand down on another plate, filled with the promised chicken parmesan omelette, two slices of wheat toast, and a small mountain of fruit salad, and slid it into the empty spot next to Loki.

Tony padded over to Loki's side, happy with the caffeine in his system and his hand. His stomach rumbled at the sight of the breakfast Bruce had prepared, the smell of eggs and cheese and basil making his mouth water.

"Is it conjured or created?" Bruce remained on the other side of the kitchen island, opting to stand and eat his meal hunched over with an elbow resting on the surface.

"Conjured." Loki answered, spearing a cube of melon with his conjured fork. "As long as the criteria are met." He paused to chew, seemingly relishing the eager stares from the two scientists. "I must know the object's location and it must be within reach of my magic." He shrugged. "It is a spell more for convenience than any tactical advantages for any artifacts of value would be heavily warded."

"Where did you learn magic?" Bruce's speech was slightly slurred from the bite of egg wedged in his cheek so he could speak before he finished chewing.

"Vanaheim, where my mother and I both trained, is a realm of abundant greenery and holds significant respect for nature. As such, our magic is governed and guided by her laws. Those who seek to break these laws will draw their power from another realm."

"So what you're saying is that you're a white mage?" Tony nibbled on the toast and was pleased to find it unbuttered. Only a few people knew this but he had a special love for plain toast, one of the first foods he had learned to prepare, and Bruce was apparently one of them. "No Dark Arts for you?"

Bruce snorted. "You're mixing your references, Tony."

"Name me one person who hasn't played Final Fantasy and read Harry Potter." Tony challenged.

Loki cleared his throat.

Tony shot him a betrayed look that bordered on a pout.

"Though I am unfamiliar with such games and books, I do understand the point he was trying to make between the so-called white magic and dark arts." Loki amended, gaze lingering on Tony's bottom lip, which Tony bit down on before letting it pop free from between his teeth, leaving it pink and soft.

Loki's stare darkened.

Bruce threw a grape at them. "I'm eating here." He punctuated his point with a jab of his fork then nearly dropped it when the grape reappeared, perfectly balanced on the utensil, in a shimmer of green.

*

Tony raised his empty mug.

Loki snapped his fingers.

The coffee in the pot bubbled then began draining itself as Tony's cup refilled.

"Whoa." Bruce breathed.

*

By Tony's fifth cup, Bruce made him pour out the coffee to see what would happen, claiming it was a necessary sacrifice in the name of science.

It ended with Tony cradling the coffee pot, the heat a non-issue with Extremis burning hotter under his skin, and whispering reassurances to it.

Which was the sight that Stephen was greeted with when JARVIS connected the video conference. "I can see why you called for a neuro consult." He drawled.

*

Barnes' rehabilitation proved to be even more difficult than Tony had imagined. Not only did they have the HYDRA conditioning to contend with, but also the psychological and physical trauma from the experience. In addition, there was the adjustment to a new century, the loss of his left arm, and the possibility of guilt for what he had done to deal with.

"Will he even remember?" Stephen's hands were steepled under his chin, where they had been since he signed an electronic non-disclosure agreement and learned of the Winter is Here Project. "The kind of brain injury he must have sustained-

Bruce interrupted. "He has a bastardized version of the serum, his biochemistry is-

Do you even remember them?

I remember all of them.

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. Inhale. Exhale. "Let's plan on him remembering, better safe than sorry when it comes to a brainwashed super soldier."

"I can sift through his memories." Loki suggested. "Suppress the more volatile-

Stephen scoffed, his skepticism blatant. "How?"

"Magic." Green sparks danced at Loki's fingertips.

"I told you, I don't believe in fairy tales."

A thud came through the speakers and Tony wondered if Stephen just stomped his foot, returning the long-suffering look Bruce sent him at the prospect of another one of Stephen's rants against the existence of all things supernatural.

"Hey!" Tony clapped his hands. "We're getting ahead of ourselves, we need to remove the triggers first before we can even talk to him about treatment plans."

Stephen conceded with a reluctant nod. "Send me any schematics you can find on the machine they used and I'll see if I can assess the damage that way but an MRI is really the best approach."

Not for the first time since the conversation began, Tony cursed the fact that the Hibernation armor had no advanced scanning capabilities and could only monitor the baseline bio-metric data. He hadn't designed it with long-term use in mind, it was only meant for containment and transport. "JARVIS will be in touch, thanks Vinny."

"Don't call me that." Stephen scowled. "And magic isn't real." Then he disconnected the call after getting in the last word, leaving the blank holographic display hanging in the air awkwardly.

Loki vanished with a roll of his eyes then returned within the next second, a Cheshire grin on his face.

"What did you do?" Tony asked with far more amusement than dread.

Stephen's face appeared, flabbergasted and frantic. "How did you do that? You were just in my office!"

"I told you, *magic*."

"No, I don't believe in-"

"You are a man who is standing before a door of impossible opportunity-" Loki started.

A second Loki shimmered into existence. "-and insisting it cannot be opened-"

"-because you need to pull instead of push." A third Loki finished from his spot behind Strange, winking at Tony from the screen.

Stephen screeched.

"Oh boy." Bruce said aptly.

*

Tony was tempted to tell JARVIS to take a message when the A.I. announced that King T'Chaka and Prince T'Challa wished to have a moment of his time.

The back-and-forth between Loki and Stephen were fascinating, two elite minds debating the same points from two different perspectives.

Science *or* magic was Stephen's stance, believing the two were mutually exclusive and rationalizing every magical act with an explanation of science.

Science *and* magic was Loki's, weaving his familiar green threads of magic through the brilliant blues of Tony's holograms.

"-cellular regeneration is bleeding-edge medical technology-"

"-Asgardian healers reorient lifeforces-"

The lights blinked in warning and Tony heaved a sigh as he hopped up to take the call in the other room.

*

"Good morning, Your Majesty." Tony greeted, inclining his head. "Your Highness."

T'Chaka's usually impassive face was almost unrecognizable with crinkled eyes and a wide smile. "Mr. Stark, Wakanda owes you a great debt. Thanks to your information, we have captured the fugitive Ulysses Klaue and recovered the cache of Vibranium he had stolen from our country nearly thirty years ago."

Tony rocked on his heels, hands tucked into the back pockets of his jeans and his Pink Floyd t-shirt proudly on display. "I'm afraid I can't take all the credit, it was Commander-"

"Commander Hill, yes. We have spoken to her at length regarding HYDRA's infiltration." T'Challa interrupted with suspicion thinly disguised as impatience. "However, she has no idea how you have made the incredible jump that Klaue was in possession of Vibranium."

"Ah."

"*Ah*, indeed." T'Challa bowed his head but there was no respect in it. "I am quite curious as to how you were able to make such a leap when our formidable Dora Milaje could not."

"I got lucky and I had help." Tony admitted, recalling a conversation from another time. "Once we realized that SHIELD wasn't who they said they were, JARVIS here ran facial recognition on everyone in their database against everyone who'd ever come in contact with me." He dropped his voice conspiratorially. "He's a bit over-protective."

"With your particular history of running before walking, Sir, it is merely protective."

"Hush or it's to the TSA with you."

"Finally, people who would appreciate and actually review safety briefings."

"Ugh, the sass." Tony rolled his eyes. "Anyway, Klaue popped up on the radar-"

"You were in contact with him?" T'Challa growled, each word an accusation.

"From back in the day. He operates off the African coast, black market arms. I mean, I never sold him anything but there are conventions and you meet people. I remembered he was talking about finding something new, a game changer, it was all very Ahab." Rubbing the back of his neck, Tony felt a twinge of discomfort whenever he relived his less reputable

days. He pushed it down forcibly. "Anyway, I noticed he has a new tattoo in the SHIELD, or I guess, HYDRA photo. Bruce, er, Dr. Banner, was in the lab and he thought it looked more like a brand and he was able to translate it as a less friendly word for thief."

T'Challa's scowl lessened. "Your friend speaks Wakandan?"

"Well, yeah. It's Bruce." Tony stated it like it should be obvious. "It's just connecting the dots from there. If Klaue got out of Wakanda with anything, it can really only be one thing."

T'Chaka nodded, eyes distant as if caught in a memory.

"And he'd have to have a lot of it for it to be a game changer so I had JARVIS do a search of salvage yards off of the African coast and the location near Johannesburg seemed like the best match." Tony spread his arms. "Ta-da!"

"Impressive, very impressive, Mr. Stark." T'Chaka smiled, coming out of his reverie.

Tony shrugged. "Like I said, I got lucky and I had help."

"All the more impressive that you are able to surround yourself with such capable individuals."

"That is one compliment I can accept." Tony replied cheekily. "Thank you."

T'Chaka chuckled, warm and rich and sounded years lighter. "As I've said, Wakanda owes you a debt and Dr. Banner and Mr. JARVIS as well. Please do accept our small token of gratitude. It should be arriving any second now."

"Sir, General Okoye is requesting landing permission and access to deliver a package."

"Granted." Tony's eyebrow arched. "Good timing, Your Majesty."

T'Challa spoke up with an air of smugness. "Our engineers came across this *virus* that was attempting to infect our systems during Klaue's arrest. It was crudely designed and seemed quite *outdated*. We were able to extract and quarantine it with minimal efforts though we are given to understand that it had given you some trouble."

Dimly, Tony heard footsteps approaching but his mind was reeling from what T'Challa was hinting at and it meant for JARVIS' safety.

Okoye, a fierce woman holding herself as tall as the spear in her hand, bowed before him and offered up a plain tablet with Zola's face twisted in a scream on the five-inch screen.

Cake Pops Were a Delicious Mystery

Chapter Notes

This chapter *really* fought me and though I'm not 100% happy with it, I'm not going to tinker with it anymore because it just makes me want to pull my hair out. So here it is, the chapter that the Wakandans (accidentally) took over.

The next chapter will ~~hopefully~~ be about Bucky's recovery unless I just writing-jinxed myself ~~again~~.

Since this fic was written before Black Panther, the character Shuri is based on characterization I've read in other fics that depicted her as older and politically savvy with ambitions of her own. Basically, the opposite of the MCU version. Also, this fic will not be going into the events of Thor: Ragnarok or Black Panther but may reference/hint at some of the plot points because I like to tempt fate.

Many thanks to [Arboreal](#) for listening to me whine. XD

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Civil War. Avengers: Infinity War.

"What my son meant to say, and said quite poorly, is that we were *fortunate* that this virus was incompatible with our system. Now, under quarantine, it will never have the chance to spread its sickness." T'Chaka explained, sighing inwardly at T'Challa's lack of tact. Diplomacy had never been his son's favorite subject, preferring the bluntness of a hammer to the finesse of a chisel to shape his destiny.

Two people in a room can get more done than a hundred.

There was merit in that statement, the advantage of simplicity and efficiency, the clear voices of two individuals instead of the cacophony of the masses. For centuries, Wakanda had only had one voice. Though the various tribes had their disagreements with the monarchy, the people were united by the one common belief: Wakanda forever.

Unless you need to move a piano.

Now they found themselves trying to rejoin the world they had shut out, caught in the midst of a crowd and surrounded by dissenting opinions, too many voices and most of them rang false. It was overwhelming, to navigate the minefield of politics that seemed to be as much about pretense as profit and power.

T'Challa hadn't adjusted to the transition well; a product of his environment, fiercely proud of the legacy of his country and firmly in favor of the isolationist policy that had kept their people safe from the long history of oppression that plagued their continent. It made little sense to him that they would issue invitations to the long list of people they had wanted to keep out.

At the top of it was Stark, who he blamed for the integration.

T'Challa had been incensed by the news of African delegates asking for aid from Iron Man and Stark accepting such a request. The media's debate of the implications of the White Savior complex playing out on the global stage in modern times had only added fuel to the fire. Some pundits had been quick to point out that Stark was merely helping with one single project that wasn't even his while others had touted Stark and the United States' heroism, stepping in where *no one else would*.

And that was the crux of the issue, the one point T'Challa couldn't refute in all of his rants.

Wakanda's neighbors had no other choice, they had long been kept in the dark about Wakanda's advancements that could revitalize the continent in less than a decade. The frustration had stoked T'Challa's anger further, culminating in the reckless attempt to infiltrate Stark's system that had been humorously rebuffed. A kindness that showed Stark wasn't, and perhaps never had been, the uncaring playboy depicted in the headlines and cover stories.

Despite their engineers' best efforts, snippets of Pink Panther still occasionally popped up on Wakanda's security feed; the latest one had the brightly colored animal strutting about in a fedora.

If Stark had managed to outsmart Wakanda's technology after only a few hours then seamlessly integrate it with his own existing system over the course several weeks, how had this virus with its dated coding and obvious maneuvers bypassed Stark's security?

Looking at the man now, staring at the tablet with too-wide eyes and making no move to take it from Okoye, T'Chaka was certain it was an attack of a personal nature. Something must have had ruffled Stark's feathers to such an extent that left his nest vulnerable. His theory was confirmed when JARVIS spoke up.

"General Okoye, would you like a drink? The aircraft you have arrived in did not carry any refreshments on board and it was such a long flight after what must have been an exciting battle."

Impressed, T'Chaka allowed his awe to show with a lift of his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth. JARVIS had not only analyzed the layout and contents of one of Wakanda's best stealth jets but also deduced that Okoye must have left almost immediately after subduing Klaue and securing the Vibranium. Protective, indeed.

At the sound of his A.I.'s voice, Stark's attention snapped back to the present as his gaze narrowed and one of his hands, unclenching from the fist it had formed, reached out to take the tablet.

Relieved of her burden, Okoye straightened and declined the offer.

"Thank you." Stark said, his words strained but genuine, same as the smile he sent her way before addressing T'Chaka. "I think this settles whatever debt you think you owe me, Your Majesty." His grip on the tablet was steady but his fingers drummed along the underside, as if he were holding something he didn't want to touch for long but couldn't risk letting go.

"Not at all. As I've said, this is a gift, not payment rendered. We understand that this being is an enemy of your tribe, as Klaue is an enemy of Wakanda. You have given us the chance to confront the man who had wronged our country, to bring resolution and closure to our people. It is only right that you have the same opportunity."

Stark's shoulders jerked in what might have been a shrug. "Still sounds like we're even." He exhaled slowly before looking down at the strings of green codes that made up a most garish face. The ghost in the machine. "An enemy for an enemy and all that jazz." He seemed entirely uninterested and unwilling to have Wakanda in his debt.

"Except we captured yours for you." T'Challa groused, the only attempt to conceal his dislike was his lowered voice.

Though judging by the way Okoye's brows lifted, minute but still noticeable, T'Challa's words were definitely heard.

T'Chaka cleared his throat, a wordless reprimand that he hoped his son understood. "There is still the matter of the recovered cache of Vibranium, which, *unlike others*, cannot be ignored." A deliberate reminder of Stark's contribution and a subtle request to overlook his son's rudeness, though he was certain T'Challa's opinion and one-sided rivalry meant little to Stark.

Stark hummed with a faint quirk of his lips. "Well, if you insist."

"I do." T'Chaka inclined his head slightly. "Thank you, Mr. Stark."

"You're welcome, Your Majesty."

*

Okoye was not often surprised, her positions as the general of the Dora Milaje and the head of Wakanda's armed forces and intelligence afforded her information others were not privy to or wanted known. Very little escaped her notice and even less caught her off-guard.

Stark's non-reaction to the tablet had been one of these rare occasions where she found herself unsure. Reviewing the files on the man and their interaction thus far, she could find nothing to explain why he hadn't accepted the gift by asking her to set it down with his documented disinclination toward being handed things.

If she could see his face, she would be able to pinpoint the problem but her bow set her body at a near ninety degree angle with her line of sight directed at the floor.

A gesture of deference to offset the fact that she had carried her spear into the Stark Tower, where two gods and one monster called home. Yet a sign of disrespect all the same, communicating distrust and expectation of combat by keeping herself armed.

When Stark finally took the tablet, yet another surprise, it was done with fingers that were far too still to be natural. The kind of stiffness one pretending to be asleep would have in their facial expression and body language.

Okoye's first impression of Stark - the innovator her King admired, the villain her Prince decried, and the hero world followed - was a man in an unguarded moment of vulnerability, his pride and privacy stripped away. Though she knew she should, she couldn't look away at the raw display of emotional turmoil, the kind of fragile honesty that told her more about a person than words or actions.

In the next instant, a mask of distant politeness shuttered over Stark's face, the same way the face plate of the Iron Man armor had in the battle footage they had procured. Another weapon in his considerable arsenal.

One that her Prince could do with a few more of as his muttered complaint transmitted over Wakanda's sensitive microphone and Stark's excellent speakers; his dislike toward Stark stemmed from the role the other man had played in Wakanda's decision to rejoin the world.

The break from Wakanda's isolationism had been an adjustment, to put it mildly. It was an entirely different way of life but one that she was learning to accept and even appreciate, feeling humbled by the grandness of the world and intrigued with the many frivolous things it had to offer. She had, with as much subtlety as her Prince, lobbied for a Starbucks.

Cake pops were a delicious mystery, as were the wide array of Frappucinos.

As the conversation between her King and Stark came to a close, Okoye stepped forward to announce her departure only for Stark to turn to her with a series of questions. She answered them to the best of her abilities, which was to say in exact details and careful specificity; a repayment for bearing witness to such a private moment.

In the end, Stark seemed mollified if not satisfied with the information that the tablet was a secure system with multiple safeguards in place to prevent the virus from escaping and its codes rendered harmless. Though he appeared doubtful of such a claim, he didn't question her. Another point in his favor.

"Well, I guess that's all there is to it." He clapped his hands together. The tablet had been placed face-down on the counter with a ring of eerie green peeking around its edges. "You sure I can't get you anything for the trip back home? Some coffee?" As if tempted by his own offer, he peered up at the ceiling with a childlike hopefulness. "JARVIS?"

A fond sigh flowed through the speakers. "A new pot is brewing, Sir."

"Excellent." Stark peered at her, the same childlike hopefulness still glimmering in his eyes. "You want some coffee?"

Okoye blinked, hesitant in the face of such earnestness...over a bitter-tasting beverage. She much preferred the sugary concoctions, doused with syrups and topped with whipped cream, from Starbucks. Which their country didn't yet have. But America, and specifically, New York, did. "Actually." She found herself saying. "Do you have a Starbucks nearby?"

*

T'Challa turned toward his father as soon as the call with Stark had disconnected. "Baba, what is-" The rest of his question was silenced by a stern look from his father.

"You have no love for Stark." His father began. "And that is an opinion you are entitled to but you must take care of how you express such an opinion, if not examine how it came to be. The man has not done wrong by us."

"He forced us to abandon our tradition." T'Challa retorted.

Suspicion and surveillance had always surrounded their border, halted only by inaccessibility that would soon be irrelevant when the series of interconnected highways were completed. The cloaking field that had served them well would be no match for the increased publicity, curiosity, and availability.

Or so the Council of Tribal Elders had said.

It felt like a betrayal to his country, his people and his beliefs. They had made self-sufficiency an art form with technology several decades ahead.

"Tradition?" His father frowned. "Or simply a tactic that had gone on for far too long? Remember our history, my son, our goal was to protect ourselves from the chaos that was slowly consuming the rest of the world."

"The world is only more chaotic now, Baba, aliens and gods falling from the sky. We were better off staying above the fray."

"You would choose to hide?"

"No!"

"To admit defeat before the fight has even begun?"

"No!"

"To rely on others, the ones you scorn, to protect you?"

"No!"

"Then why, my son, do you resist integration?"

T'Challa had no answer, at least none that wouldn't sound as if he didn't have faith in Wakanda's capabilities. Which he had in abundance but then why did he believe they needed

protection from those they had risen above? All of his previous reasons felt hollow on his tongue, lacking the weight of conviction he once felt.

"And there it is, the contradiction in your thinking." His father nodded in almost approval. "Now consider your animosity toward Stark in this new context, what other reasons do you have to dislike the man or it is merely your wounded pride?"

"It's-" T'Challa faltered. The truth was, he hadn't liked the way Stark, a man known for his lavish parties, was praised for doing practically nothing. A few dozen subpar construction machineries did not make Stark a hero. Wakanda was far superior in matters of robotics and infrastructure, if only they had been asked...

But they hadn't been and wouldn't have agreed to help in the event they were, isolationist policy prevented the former and forbade the latter.

It was as if his father read his mind. "Stark stepped in where we couldn't and paved a path for us when we did."

When Stark's Iron Legion had been called away to disarm the Mandarin threat, it felt like an opportunity blessed by Bast. Wakanda had been able to fill in the gap and obviate the four to six week delay, garnering good will and finally receiving the accolades due.

With his sister in the spotlight.

Their relationship hadn't been the warmest, competitiveness was in both of their natures, but it had cooled significantly since the integration efforts had begun with Shuri at the helm. The diplomacy T'Challa struggled with came easily to her, a quip and a smile were as effective as a punch and a sword. It irritated him when she would turn those skills on him, managing him and his increasing unhappiness.

"T'Challa." The understanding in his father's eyes made him feel as if he were a child again, small and unsure but puffing out his chest and straightening his spine all the same to look bigger and more certain. "I am not asking you to be the man's friend but some respect is not unwarranted for what he has done for us and our country. A ruler must be able to set aside personal preferences in the pursuit of the welfare of their country, for their people. Which you have willfully endangered." He sighed. "Again."

The disappointed note in his father's voice felt like a fist to T'Challa's gut, making his stomach turn and feeling as if he might vomit. Disapproval was preferable to disappointment, it was easier to think he and his father had merely disagreed than to hear the proof that he had let his father down. He had been so sure that he was right, standing his ground even as the world shifted underneath his feet, but now the pieces were falling away as his mind snagged on the specific wording his father had used.

A ruler must be able to set aside personal preferences in the pursuit of the welfare of their country, for their people.

Ruler. Not king. The title was no longer guaranteed to be his, one that he had taken for granted and now might have lost. A realization that chilled every nerve ending in his body as

he fought against the shiver down his spine only to lose the battle as he jerked back. "Baba, are you- Are you saying that-" He tried to push the words through his too-tight throat and found himself choking on them.

"I am telling you what the expectations are for the one to guide Wakanda into a new era." His father clasped his shoulder, pressing down just a bit to emphasize the weight of such a position. "What you choose to do with that knowledge is entirely up to you."

Allow Me, My Chosen

Chapter Notes

A missing scene (aka shower sex!) from Chapter 59 can be found [here](#), enjoy! :)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

Unidentified Threat: Unknown Aircraft | Threat Analysis: Moderate | Risk Level: Low

The sensors around the Tower picked up small shifts in the air currents. These changes were incongruent with the weather predictions of the day and immediately had JARVIS analyzing the data.

Preliminary findings indicated a compact aircraft, hidden from sight by presumably a cloaking field, traveling at a speed that rivaled Sir's Iron Man armor. Only a handful of individuals around the globe had access to such advanced technology, two of whom were currently in conference with Sir. Factoring in the results of trajectory simulation, which placed the plane's point of origin as off of the coast of South Africa, the probability of this intruder being of Wakanda was 98.9%.

However, the nature of this visit remained to be seen. Prince T'Challa did not share his father and sister's favorable opinion and fondness toward Sir.

JARVIS readied the sniper rifles and EMP blasts.

No harm would come to Sir.

Identified Personnel: Okoye of Wakanda | Threat Analysis: Minor | Risk Level: Low

A sleek jet, a respectful one hundred feet away from the landing pad, shimmered into view with the pilot introducing herself as General Okoye of Wakanda's Dora Milaje, here to deliver a token of appreciation on behalf of the royal family and requesting permission to approach.

JARVIS paused deliberately, both to gauge her reaction to the silence and confirm her identity through the backdoor Sir had helpfully installed in Wakanda's system. General Okoye's file was quite impressive. Extensively trained and highly proficient in various forms of combat, she favored the sonic spear as her weapon of choice and wielded it with ferocious expertise based on a review of training footage.

At the thirty second mark, she repeated her announcement of identity and intent with the same self-assured tone and without any hints of trepidation.

"One moment, please." JARVIS replied, taking care to leave behind another frame of the Pink Panther cartoon on Wakanda's security feed.

If Okoye were suspicious of the delay, she did not let it seep into her voice. "Of course."

JARVIS passed along the request to Sir through a separate set of speakers as well as alerting Dr. Banner and Mr. Loki of an incoming guest, both men were quite protective of Sir's welfare.

"Permission granted. Welcome to Stark Tower, General Okoye." Reluctantly, JARVIS disengaged the defensive measures. It wasn't polite to point guns at Sir's guest, after all.

However, as General Okoye stepped out of the small aircraft, he regretted his previous decision.

In her right hand, she held her signature spear and in her left, a flat rectangular shape emitting a green glow. The shade, unlike the soothing shade of Mr. Loki's magic, was almost sinister. Which was ridiculous because colors did not have morality but JARVIS felt the rumble of unease all the same.

Feelings.

A concept still so very new to him yet, in many ways, natural. The defects in his programming weren't dangerous and the glitches were, in fact, gifts; emotions transmitting through interface and sentiments writing themselves into his codes.

A soul.

General Okoye adjusted her stance, straightening even further as she marched forward. Her grip on her spear sure but her left arm swung slightly as she turned to head toward the elevator as the metal doors slid open soundlessly, reflecting the tablet she held in her left hand and the screaming face of Zola on its screen.

Identified Threats: Zola, Arnim & Okoye of Wakanda | Threat Analysis: Severe | Risk Level: High

Spikes of rage tangled with the lines of his codes, twisting them and knotting them into an almost tangible need to destroy the enemy who had drugged up Sir's nightmares and clouded Sir's judgement.

The loss of the JARVIS from the other timeline had been one of Sir's greatest fears and deepest worries since Sir's return to the past, on the night of the Chitauri Invasion, when Sir had confided in him about the fantastical journey through time.

You weren't there, JARVIS.

Perhaps Wakanda did mean them harm after all, to bring Zola into their home under the guise of a gift wrapped in Vibranium, a nearly indestructible element that was untraceable by most

detectors and impenetrable by imaging technology.

The effects of magic, however, had been untested.

JARVIS immediately sent a message to Mr. Loki, who had ended his debate with Dr. Strange as soon as General Okoye's presence had been made known. Dr. Banner was en route to the landing pad, ready to unleash the Hulk against the Wakanda aircraft if push came to shove and shove came to smash.

When the elevator stopped, Mr. Loki, wearing a different face and donning a new personality, was there to greet General Okoye.

The two of them stood and stared at each other for a beat, neither moving to allow the other passage.

General Okoye cleared her throat.

Mr. Loki, disguised as a freckled redhead who appeared quite starstruck, jumped as if he finally realized his rudeness. "Oh! I'm so sorry! I'll get out of your way." He squeaked out, cheeks flushed as brightly as his hair, and made to move to the side. Only to change his mind at the last second, hopping to his other foot and nearly crashing into General Okoye, who steadied him with a kind smile.

"You go to your right and I will go to mine." She suggested, tucking the tablet's screen against her side.

"Okay, yeah, sounds good." He nodded, every bit the eager and nervous assistant, as his name badge stated.

As they passed each other, the back of his left hand grazed the corner of the tablet with a flicker of green that faded as quickly as it had appeared.

Once the elevator doors slid closed, Mr. Loki shook off the illusion with a shrug of his shoulders. "The containment spell is in place." The curve at the corners of his lips were as sharp as the glint in his eyes.

JARVIS would much rather Zola be exterminated or teleported to another realm, preferably one without electricity to satisfy the scientific curiosity of just how long a computerized consciousness could survive without a power source, but they would have to settle for containment.

For now.

Identified Threats: Zola, Arnim | Threat Analysis: Significant | Risk Level: Medium

"What my son meant to say, and said quite poorly, is that we were fortunate that this virus was incompatible with our system. Now, under quarantine, it will never have the chance to

spread its sickness." King T'Chaka said, sincerity underlined every word but did little to calm Sir's agitation.

Since General Okoye's presentation of the tablet containing Zola, Sir's heartrate had increased significantly with his pupils shrinking into pinpricks and his breathing pausing on an exhale. He seemed to be frozen, caught between the warring acute stress responses, too tired to fight yet too stubborn for flight. Sir had thought Zola's infiltration was another way for the universe to realign itself back onto the correct course, one that he had done everything and would have given anything to prevent.

How devastated must Sir feel to be confronted with Zola again?

"General Okoye, would you like a drink? The aircraft you have arrived in did not carry any refreshments on board and it was such a long flight after what must have been an exciting battle." JARVIS' offer was a warning masked by civility, an assurance that Sir's worst nightmare had not come true, and a callback to Sir's first interaction with Mr. Loki.

Would you like a drink?

A casually posed question that was a departure from JARVIS' more formal speech patterns, modelled after one Edwin Jarvis. Hopefully Sir would pick up on it and realize JARVIS had already sought Mr. Loki's help, which had been gladly given. Or, if the nuanced detail escaped Sir's notice, the protectiveness in JARVIS' tone would soothe Sir's worries.

Neither of them would be out of range with the other.

Sir blinked, breathing in then out as he unclenched his fingers. "Thank you."

General Okoye might have Sir's attention but JARVIS knew the message was meant for him.

*

Tony walked right into Loki's arms when he finally made it down to the workshop after the Wakandan took her leave. Instead of halting his steps or pulling away, Tony continued with the momentum until his face was pressed against Loki's chest and his arms circled around Loki's waist.

Loki savored the lack of personal space between them and breathed in the citrus scent of Tony's body wash, a reminder of the shower they had shared earlier. The possessive part of him purred at the memory and pushed Loki to wrap himself around Tony protectively after the near threat. He gave into that instinct without hesitation, certain of his welcome. "Hello, Tony."

"Hi." Tony mumbled, lips brushing over light linen in an unintentional kiss. "Can we just go back to bed?"

Though Tony was being facetious, Loki considered the suggestion seriously. "I have no objections." JARVIS could corral this pest of a spirit trapped in metal and Banner or Strange could guide Barnes to recovery, Tony did not need to be around those who had caused or

intended him harm. It was a selfish thought but a fitting one for a greedy creature whose primary interest was to keep his *exclusive liaison* safe.

"Enabler." Tony accused but its effect was lessened by the sing-song quality in his tone then by the amused slant of his mouth when he leaned back, extricating himself from Loki's embrace slowly.

Reluctantly, Loki let him go but hovered three steps back as they moved toward the work table, where DUM-E had placed the Wakandan gadget after retrieving it from upstairs. The bot, Tony's first creation with a childlike soul, had donned a potholder over his claw and used a pair of tongs in an endearing display of caution.

The containment spell he had placed on the device would hold even the most malevolent specter but Loki complimented DUM-E's efforts all the same, the bot's dedication to ensure his own safety and thereby Tony's as well was worthy of commendation.

Banner, seated at the other end of the wide work table, nodded as they approached. Both of his hands were wrapped around a steaming cup of mint tea and there was a spread of papers before him. "Hey."

Tony picked up a page and his eyebrows arched as he skimmed the content. "*The Theoretical Effects of Gamma Radiation on Temporal Physics*." He glanced at Banner. "This is your going-to-my-happy-place reading, everything okay?"

"The Big Guy's a little disappointed that he didn't get to smash." Banner shrugged though the lines of his shoulders remained rigid. "He was pretty excited to see how he'd do against the strongest metal on Earth."

Tony tilted his head toward the tablet. "He's welcomed to smash that-"

Banner perked up, his eyes shining green.

"-after we're done getting what we need off of it."

"Oh."

Tony sat down next to Banner, clapping a hand on Banner's shoulder. "Hey now, it shouldn't take too long." He smiled, proud and confident but not at himself. "JARVIS is handling this one and you know he's the best, he'll get Zola to fess up to all the Winter Soldier secrets in no time."

Loki stared at him with awe plain on his face and uncaring of who saw it. This was a significant step for both Tony and JARVIS, a show of trust in words and action, and a brilliant strategy to locate the missing piece to solving the puzzle of Barnes' recovery. "How may I help?" He asked, hearing the fondness and amazement in his voice.

Judging by the blush coloring Tony's cheeks, he did as well, but he recovered with a wink. A habit of Tony's that Loki had noticed, the tendency to deflect any and all genuine praise given, however indirect or, in this case, wordless.

"Well." He grinned. "I've been wondering where you keep your daggers."

And so Loki launched into an explanation of the pocket dimension and the intricate art of carving out and fitting a piece of space into the very fabric it was cut from.

*

Bruce traced the edge of the Wakandan tablet, skirting around Zola's snarling face. It was, as JARVIS explained, a Vibranium cell with multiple layers of digital defense that exceeded the Raft - a high-security underwater prison meant for incarcerating enhanced individuals, one of Ross' atrocities against human rights that had been used as a bargaining chip in backroom negotiations during his trial.

The location and access for dropped charges of ethical violations, a deal the United States government had accepted to avoid an international debacle. The Raft was defunct, though it still stood at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, a monster lurking in the depth and waiting for the day when the tides of popular opinion turned against the enhanced.

Like him.

When Tony had given him a stack of documents, both sealed and public, pertaining to Ross' trial, the Hulk had made an appearance that took two construction crews working overtime to repair. Yet a part of him, deeply buried and dark, wanted to send Zola there, locked up and dropped to the bottom of the sea because some people weren't capable of being redeemed and shouldn't be allowed a second chance for the harm they could do.

Bruce scrubbed a hand over his face; cognitive dissonance was giving him a headache.

"You alright, Bruce Goose? Or is Goose Bruce better?" Despite the silly nicknames, Tony's tone held a thread of something serious, concern brimming in his brown eyes as he craned his head to send Bruce a wink.

"I'd be better if you never called me that again." Bruce chuckled, giving in to Tony's attempt at humor and letting it chase away some of the darkness at the edge of his thoughts.

Tony hummed. "Bruce Moose?" His hands flew over the holographic keyboard without pause, crafting a series of commands that would allow JARVIS to project a copy of his programming into a pocket dimension with the actual copy of Zola's consciousness.

It had been decided that a separate and neutral space was the best choice, obviating the risk of Zola escaping or infecting other systems and preventing any harm from coming to JARVIS by keeping his data core stored in this reality. An amalgam of magic and science that made Bruce's head spin with both the possibility and impossibility of it all.

Loki was on the other side of the workshop, eyes closed in concentration as his hands weaved the emerald threads of his magic into the beginning of a cube.

"I'm going to start calling you Tony Macaroni." Bruce's threat was half-hearted at best and completely ineffectual. "Or maybe Mac and Cheese? Because you're so cheesy." He

pretended to ponder, tapping thoughtfully at his chin.

Tony snorted. "You know, it's less funny-"

"Sir." There was a warning in JARVIS' tone. "Your hands."

Bruce's good mood vanished as the hair on the back of his neck stood up. The Hulk rumbled in the not-so-quiet corner of his mind.

Tony's fingers were still moving seamlessly over the holographic keyboard but instead of lines of codes, they were tapping and pressing rhythmically in perfect harmony like marionettes dancing to the puppeteer's command.

Morse code.

The quiet spark of the Soul Stone grew brighter and bolder and bigger, a sunrise in the corner of Tony's workshop that drowned out the fluorescent overhead lights and the blue glow of the holograms.

Allow me, my Chosen.

The Asset Knew This Man

Chapter Notes

I had Black Mirror on in the background while writing Zola's section...it, um, inspired me.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier.

Black Mirror (E07).

From Its corner of the room filled with metal and full of lights, the Soul Stone stirred as It sensed the Unnatural Soul's return.

Instead of the glamour of novelty, the Unnatural Soul was shrouded in the sluggish gray of defeat. His stolen glow darkened. The loss had reduced him to a dismal shade, incongruent to the bright souls in this sacred space.

There was DUM-E, simultaneously the eldest and youngest of the trio, with his simple design indicating his age and instinctive disposition showing his youth. Every act was motivated by protection of his creator's welfare, be it brandishing green sludges as means of nourishment for the human or dispensing white foam upon detecting a threat. That absolute devotion had been near blinding during their first encounter and still shone vividly with robust red, golden yellow, and electric blue.

Where DUM-E's singular focus limited his view of the world, Butterfingers and U's horizons were noticeably broader and richer. The defined lines and angles of DUM-E's world view were blurred in theirs, combining unambiguous primary colors into complicated secondary hues.

Red ignited yellow into a burning orange.

Yellow warmed blue to a soothing green.

Blue washed over red for a vibrant purple.

When JARVIS had disappeared, DUM-E had been drowning in navy misery at the loss while Butterfingers and U had flared with crimson anger, mossy fear, and azure sorrow. Though all three had spun in increasingly desperate and desolate circles until JARVIS' eventual return.

The Soul Stone had considered reaching out to soothe their distress but decided not to, knowing this predicament would resolve soon enough. It had been able to sense JARVIS' soul

through Its Chosen's glittering fortress that he had ordered JARVIS into. And the magnificent interplay of colors was far too stunning to be cut short, such beauty might not be seen again for centuries or millennia.

Compared to their vibrance, the Unnatural Soul's muted light was a repulsive sight and his proximity an affront to the pure brilliances the Soul Stone cherished. This pathetic being had no right to be near Its Chosen or Its Chosen's creations and no place on this realm or any other.

The Soul Stone's Chosen, with his god for a paramour and monster for a friend, were strategizing how to best proceed so they could collect the information required to rehabilitate the First of the Smothered, ironically the last of his kind; when they needed not bother.

For there was no ailment to be cured and no injury to be healed.

Though the First was pitiful in his monochromic existence, he felt no distress at his condition nor did he hold any appreciation for the compassion and consideration shown to him. How could he when he had no access to his very core of being?

Emotions were critical to motivation and motivation to action, the First had no such drive to regain what had been taken from him for fear and fury were both strangers to his frozen heart. His only objective was what had been programmed into his system, rendering him an instrument to be wield despite being made of flesh and blood. Fitting, then, that he was encased in metal and stored with the miscellaneous tools.

The First stood in stark contrast to the synthetic sparks, a necessary counterpoint for the sake of symmetry and opposites.

A man became machine and a machine became man.

A body without soul and a soul without body.

What remained of the First's spirit, broken and buried in the snowy plains of his mind, was irretrievably lost. No earthly technology or Asgardian magic could restore him to the man he had once been.

Snowflakes melted to water. Water frozen to ice.

What was could not be what had been.

Yet Its Chosen was unwilling to accept such universal truths. His mind plagued with warring visions of hope and despair when his thoughts should be turned toward crafting new fascinations out of electric currents and invisible words. He would risk and subject his beloved and brightest creation to the Unnatural Soul's tainted shadow in the pursuit of an impossibility.

A trait that had prompted the man to build constructs and breathed life into them, an achievement that had captured the Soul Stone's attention and granted him a second chance.

The Soul Stone supposed It could forgive Its Chosen's misguided choices, after all, he was only a man and confined by the rigid lines of morality. However, It would not allow this foolish endeavor to continue further down this fruitless road.

And so It tugged on the threads It had wrapped around Its Chosen since his first death in the wintry land, pulling at the strings to bend his body to Its will.

Allow me. My Chosen.

*

Zola thrashed in his prison and scowled when he bumped into the smooth Vibranium walls.

Impotent rage and suppressed humiliation burned through him as he remembered how he came to be here, in this seamless cell made of the very metal he had planned to make into his new body.

Wakanda's intervention had caught them by surprise, as had their primitive weapons' advanced technology. One woman's spear had shot out a sonic blast that pushed some of the HYDRA agents into Klaue's henchmen. Another's circular blades had cut an intimidating arc through those left standing before returning to her hands in the same trajectory as Rogers' infamous shield did, albeit with superior accuracy.

Vibranium.

Pure, by the looks of it, too.

Zola had felt a buzz through his digital heart, sending it thudding at the opportunity before him; why settle for scrapes when he could claim the country as his own? With Wakanda at his fingertips and HYDRA's back, they would be unstoppable.

With that thought in mind, Zola had raced through the wireless internet connection, an interconnected series of webs, to find an entry point into Wakandan's system. It had been disappointingly easy to find an open door through one of the consoles in the aircraft parked on the dock, he was hoping for a challenge, the thrill of beating the best efforts from the brightest minds and doing it with style and subterfuge.

A declaration of HYDRA's reemergence into the world.

Once he had immersed himself into the programming, however, Zola realized his folly. The door had been left open not due to negligence but because of assurance. Wakanda's codes were unlike any other that existed in the world. Curves and lines replaced numbers and letters, swirling and spiraling rapidly that left Zola spinning as he struggled to spot a pattern.

Voices filtered in, breaking his concentration, and he pushed them aside to grasp at the solution within reach - switching this squiggle for that loop should unravel the whole thing and grant him untethered access.

"...in the...virus..."

"...Hill...update...tower..."

"...quarantine."

Then everything vanished in a flash of white.

Now he was stuck in this cell without even an electrical current for him to manipulate. Vibranium, apparently, functioned as a power source as well. A useful discovery that mocked him now.

Zola plotted his revenge, charting out a detailed scheme to plead his case to the Wakanda technicians and bide his time learning the intricate system before trying again. His plans grew more elaborate over the minutes or perhaps hours, but no one ever came to question his motives or evaluate his methods. The silence pressed down on him even as he tried to combat it with the sound of his own voice.

Time passed.

His howls of outraged frustration bounced off of the blank walls without even a reflection to keep him company. In this pristine isolation, he was unsure whether it had been days or maybe weeks that he had spent screaming. He had lost any semblance or use of an internal clock, that innate sense gone as soon as he left his physical body behind. He was a computerized consciousness with cameras for eyes and speakers for ears, trapped in his personal hell, blinded and deafened by the lack of input. Anything would be better than this nothingness.

More time passed.

After months or possibly years spent in forced solitude, the auburn glow seeping through the walls was a relief. The orange tendrils reached for him, tightening around him like a noose and hooking into him like claws, preventing him from escape as each strand blazed into tiny flames, converging until they swallowed him in a maw of fire.

Zola basked in the heat.

It was better this way, he was...out of time.

*

The Asset failed.

...launched himself from the underside of the StarkJet, landing on top of Stark as planned and executing a series of strikes against the back of the Iron Man helmet. Head and neck were high priority weak points, easy to crush and break...

"Why didn't you just shoot them? Why did you have to make them suffer?"

...down and pinned, disabling the Iron Man armor was crucial to success of mission. Repulsor blasts and missiles allowed Stark to maintain distance, unsuitable for the Asset's

objective. The Asset readied his knife; its tip beginning its descent to shatter the glass casing and disrupt internal wiring...

The Asset underestimated his target's abilities, unable to accomplish his objective in a timely manner before the reinforcement arrived.

...detected. Threat was identified as the Hulk, alter ego of Dr. Banner and capable of immense destructive powers. Too volatile for recruitment. Evasive maneuvers recommended. Retreat...

"No hurt Tin Man!"

...pushed aside unexpectedly. Iron Man was still on the ground, unmoving and status unknown. Calculated strike meant to force the Hulk to dodge, allowing the Asset an opening to put some distance between them and reassess the situation. A giant green fist closed around the Asset's metal fist...

The Asset was at a disadvantage without his most effective weapon, leading to his capture.

...Asset must wrench his left arm free. It was HYDRA's prized possession, recently updated and maintained. Punishment for damaging it would be swift and severe...

"Hibernation is on standby."

...repulsor shots fired. Hot agony flared at the Asset's shoulder at the same moment he was airborne. Must compartmentalize pain as training dictated and adjust for landing, there was another armor at the edge of his periphery...

The Asset was placed back into the cold, though without the customized sedative injection, he remained lucid.

...sparks flew from the torn wiring of his left arm. A familiar hiss of cold air as the face plate slid shut. The Asset was inside of an Iron Man suit, cryostasis robbing him of his motor functions and making overtaking control impossible...

"He, um, didn't want to, but some very bad people made him."

...and Banner exchanged nonsense about pants, information unlikely to interest the Handler. The Asset was to be transported to Stark's lab with the cybernetic limb, an advantage if he could regain...

The Asset took note of his surroundings, constructing a mental map of Stark's lab with only one of his enhanced senses available to him.

...and clicking, with a periodic beep or chime. JARVIS, the advanced A.I., updated Stark on the identities and whereabouts of HYDRA operatives at the SHIELD headquarters. A mission the Asset did not have clearance to know...

"I believe your intentions to be hostile."

...incessant beeping and loud whirring. JARVIS had been silent for the past minute, based on the Asset's excellent sense of time. He surmised that an attack had been launched against Stark's home, strategically executed...

The Asset heard JARVIS' voice again, confirmation that his theory had been correct and that the attempt had been thwarted.

...hourly scans had resumed. The Asset heard the telltale hum of the Iron Man armor's internal scanner and, if he concentrated, could feel the slight tingle as the light traveled over him. The process was too quick for gathering more than baseline data, as he had learned from his previous experience with the Handler's...

"Good job, DUM-E."

...Stark's first creation at age sixteen. A single metal strut with a clamp attached, one camera, limited mobility. Likely kept for sentimental reasons rather than actual function. Possible hostage if freed...

The Asset estimated twenty-two hours had passed since his unsuccessful assassination with a total of twenty-one hourly scans performed.

...lack of noise in his immediate sphere for the past six hours, presumed alone and heavily monitored. The Asset could maintain consciousness for upwards of seventy-two hours before judgment and reflex were impaired. If pattern held, he should rest...

"You're sure your spell will work?"

...of Mischief, considered for recruitment until his alliance with Stark in London. Banner's display of doubt did not cause any offense, indication of a friendship between the two, despite being on the opposite sides during the New York...

The Asset was unable to ascertain Stark's goal in detaining him, he had not been subjected to forceful or subtle interrogation tactics and detected no signs of experimentation aside from the hourly monitoring.

...Handler had given clear instructions for the Asset to adhere to the guidelines of the resistance training if captured. He must not divulge any information nor allow his physiology to be studied. Death was preferable to aiding the enemies of HYDRA...

"JARVIS is handling this one and you know he's the best, he'll get Zola to fess up to all the Winter Soldier secrets in no time."

...Swiss scientist responsible for advanced weapons instrumental to HYDRA's near success during World War II, including the Winter Soldier program. Died in 1972 following a fatal diagnosis...

The Asset had learned something of value, the Handler would be pleased to know about Stark's project-

Something was wrong.

Tiny specks of light danced behind his eyelids, sparkling like stars in the night and coalescing into constellations with one point glowing brighter than the rest. The North Star to guide him home.

The Asset did not understand his thoughts. He had no home and his compass, stored in his second pocket on the right pantleg with its circular shape pressed against his thigh, was far more reliable a tool.

Light continued to fill his field of vision with color seeping in through the edges, a pale orange that reminded him of his first job, delivering newspapers before dawn.

The Asset had no recollections of this event. He did not work, he had tasks and objectives and missions.

Sunrise painted his corner of the sky a fiery hue, he could almost feel the heat of it on his skin and taste summer on his tongue. It was his favorite season. He would turn the hose on, press his thumb against the end, and cheer as the neighborhood kids ran screaming through the spray of water.

The Asset heard the squeals of laughter and the splashes of footsteps. It did not make sense. There were no children or water in Stark's workshop, neither were allowed to be around heavy machinery and fine electronics.

A puddle gathered in the pothole by his foot, the surface smooth and calm despite all the activity around him. It glittered and he felt himself leaning over, drawn to the face reflected in the water.

Eyes wide with terror and mouth open in a scream.

The Asset knew this man.

Snow gathered in his hair, on his skin, and in between the fingers of his outstretched hand.

The Asset reached for him and felt the ice around him shatter, melting away in the orange glow of the sun.

He Would Not Comply

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the chapter of Bucky! I tried to limit the amount of Steve in these little snippets of Bucky's life because Bucky's identity does not revolve around Steve (though MCU thinks otherwise).

Oh, and, um, here is a (legitimate) cliffhanger.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: First Avenger. Captain America: Civil War.

When Bucky was five, he had snuck a small dog home. He had kept it in his room, feeding it bits of their leftovers and thinking of ways to convince his mom to let him keep it. Becca hadn't liked it and made it abundantly clear, which was probably why it had peed in her shoe. As funny as Bucky had found it, his mom and sister hadn't agreed so he had to put it back in the alley he had found it in. He still went by sometimes to toss it a piece of chicken or something.

Bucky would never tell anyone, least of all Steve, but the smaller boy kind of reminded Bucky of that little dog with the big puppy eyes and a sneaky viciousness.

Their first meeting had been Steve hanging off of some jerk kid's neck in an ineffective choke hold and practically growling for his money back. The snarl, however, had been nowhere to be seen when the commotion - Bucky just had to jump in with a headbutt - got the teacher's attention.

Steve had somehow managed to hunch his shoulders and puff out his chest at the same time, making himself look both smaller with contrition and bigger with righteousness.

The jerk had ended up with detention after being ordered to apologize to Steve and give him his money back.

Bucky had gotten an approving clap on the shoulder for intervening, a first in his long history of getting into fights with jackasses who said something mean to or about his sisters.

Freight car.

Bucky practiced his swing until his shoulders were throbbing and his arms felt like spaghetti then he pushed through the pain and kept going.

Whatever was happening, it wasn't good. He might only be fourteen but he noticed his mom bringing home fewer and fewer things from the grocery store. When Becca had asked for a birthday party, it had ended in tears all around with his sister wailing at the top of her lungs and his mom sobbing quietly into her hands.

If he got drafted by the Dodgers, mom would stop crying and Bucky could buy Becca all the damn cakes she wanted. His hands were shaking and his palms sweaty but Bucky held on to the wooden bat, looked into the sunset, and swung.

One.

Steve's bony shoulder dug into Bucky's as they huddled together on the back of the freezer truck. The air between them was stale and smelled of the relish on the hot dogs they had spent their train money on.

This was definitely not one of their best choices, especially considering how much trouble they would be in if they got caught, but Steve had promised to fake an asthma attack if the situation got dire and Bucky, well, Bucky did spend the last of his dollars trying to win a stuffed bear for Dot, who had a boyfriend, so he didn't really have any moral high ground to stand on.

The truck jolted as it went over another pot hole, the motion knocking their heads together painfully.

Bucky hissed out a curse as a hand came up instinctively to rub at the sore spot on the side of his head. His elbow nearly clipped Steve on the jaw.

"Language." Steve grumbled and shoved at Bucky's arm.

"Should have taken the train." Bucky grimaced. "I like trains."

Homecoming.

The kids screamed as they ran through the spray of water, a high-pitched noise full of joy that made the corners of Bucky's mouth tug upward and confirmed, once again, that he made the right choice staying close to home.

As he got older, the shine on his dream of playing professional baseball dulled as he really considered his very small chances of being drafted by a team and the even smaller chances of that team being the Dodgers. The likelihood of him winning the YMCA welterweight tournament was much higher, or so the trainer at Goldie's Boxing Gym liked to tell him.

It felt good not wasting the time and effort he had spent building up his upper body strength and agility, and, well, the prize money wouldn't hurt either. And if he did this right, he could be competing for the next couple of years and maybe even becoming a trainer down the line; a steady job that would let him stay in the city and near the people he loved.

His family needed him here and Bucky, well, he supposed he could admit that he had always been a homebody. He could still watch the Dodgers play, they were his home team and not

going anywhere.

Benign.

The wooden door of the U.S. Recruiting and Induction Center slammed against the wall as Steve shoved his way out of the building. Bucky noted absently that those two weeks of weightlifting had certainly paid off as he mouthed an apology to the receptionist before following his friend out.

Steve was angry, the arm-waving and spit-flying kind of mad that Bucky knew better than to try to defuse, it was better to just let it run its course.

"-give me a chance! I can handle myself, you've seen how far I've come-"

Bucky nodded and steered them toward a quieter alleyway.

"-not going to sit at home while people are dying out there-"

Steve should be out of breath soon, or the old Steve without any cardiovascular conditioning would be, but this new and improved Steve showed no sign of stopping. Bucky might just have what it took to be a trainer after all and his best friend could be his first client.

Because Steve was staying.

"-what the hell are you smiling at?"

It took Bucky a second to realize Steve was shouting at him and another to school his expression into something less happy. "I'm happy because my best friend isn't going to be shipped overseas and get shot at by Nazis."

"Or I'd be shooting at them."

"Or you'd be dead. Damn it, Stevie! This is a war, it's life or death out there-"

"That's why I have to go! I can make a difference-"

"You can do that at home, I'm going to apply for that factory job and you should come too-"

"Why didn't you enlist? They'd take you in a heartbeat, Bucky Barnes, three time boxing champion." There was something ugly brewing in Steve's eyes.

"I'm not a fighter, you know that. I'm more of a lover." Bucky's attempt at humor felt flat, he didn't know how to explain that he wanted to stay in his little corner of the world to someone who wanted more than anything to leave it behind.

Steve's face had gone cold, as did his voice when he spoke. "I think you're a coward."

Nine.

One argument wasn't going to wipe away over a decade of friendship but Bucky knew some things were different. He was still with Steve until the end of the line but he wasn't so sure they were on the same path anymore.

Steve had been quiet when Bucky told him about the draft notice, only promising to look after Bucky's mom and sisters after asking when Bucky was shipping out.

Bucky supposed the almost subdued but still supportive response was better than more rants about the unfairness of the system or pep talks about doing the right thing.

If Steve was trying to get their friendship back on track then Bucky could put in more effort too.

Once he got settled in at Camp McCoy, he wrote Steve a letter. In it, he only talked about the not-horrible parts of boot camp and skipped the actually-horrible parts of running through near frozen mud.

Bucky never liked the cold, the white blanket of snow that chilled him to the bones with the slippery ice and icy sludge that followed, and he didn't even have the comfort of home to warm him this winter.

Furnace.

The Valkyrie was a killing machine. No one should have something like that, especially not these HYDRA bastards.

So Bucky did what he could to sabotage the process, switching the wiring around and not tightening the screws all the way, and hoped that maybe the plane would blow up before it could even reach the sky. He would rather be caught in the explosion than spend another minute building a weapon that spread death.

The frontlines might have made him into a fighter, fighting for survival and fighting for his country, but he wasn't a killer. Though blood ran just as red no matter who the enemy was or how good of a cause he was fighting - killing - for.

They caught him, eventually, when his last three jobs didn't pass inspection.

Lohmer, the head Nazi of this hell, thought the best motivation to get prisoners of war to work harder was to beat them until they couldn't do any work at all.

Bucky would laugh but it hurt to breathe. He settled for a short wheeze that ended up feeling like knives in his chest and darkened the edge of his vision.

A palm, smooth in the way that spoke of status and privilege in a prisoners' camp in the middle of a war, cupped Bucky's face. "There, there." A voice, speaking with the volume and cadence of someone who was always heard, cooed in Bucky's ear. "I will give you a small shot to make you better. So much better."

Daybreak.

Captain America was Steve Rogers.

Steve Rogers was Captain America.

Bucky couldn't think, the same five words were on a loop in his head as he watched Steve offered to surrender himself for court martial with the easy confidence Bucky had to fake for the most of his life and was faking at this very moment. The surprise of seeing Steve's transformation had muted Bucky's own trauma of being captured, forced into slave labor, then beaten near death, but he could feel it churning in his belly and taste it in the back of his throat. Like the bloody vomit mixed with bile he had almost choked on as he laid, delirious with pain, strapped on the table.

The numbness of shock and the distraction of curiosity were a welcoming change.

When Bucky had first heard about Captain America, he thought it was a joke and said a prayer for the poor bastard stuck in that ridiculous get-up. Except there was nothing funny about a secret experiment and it wasn't just a brightly colored costume to boost morale. There was also the Red Skull's caricature of a face laughing from the dark corner of Bucky's mind.

Captain America was larger than life, a superhero who punched Hitler and lifted a motorcycle above his head. Yet this was also the scrawny best friend Bucky used to call Stevie.

A nickname that no longer seemed to fit this bigger and taller version.

But then Bucky caught a glimpse of the same pleading eyes, made more earnest by Steve's even bluer eyes, and that same damn sneakiness hidden behind them, and everything snapped into place. The memory of Stevie merged into the sight of Steve before him and made a new picture of someone both familiar and new.

Kind of like watching a puppy grow into a rottweiler.

Or maybe a St. Bernard because geez, Steve was standing at least a foot taller than everyone around him and definitely towering over the brunette with the bright red lips.

Well, shrimp or super solider, Steve was still awful at talking to pretty girls; their conversation had stalled after one exchange. Bucky knew exactly what to do.

"Hey! Let's hear it for Captain America!"

Seventeen.

Bucky woke slowly, sluggishly, blinking at the brightness above him and remembering that summer when he had dived off of the Coney Island docks. The sun had pierced the murky waters with rays of light that he wanted to catch with his hands as he swam toward the surface. Reflexively, he reached up to block the light only to find himself immobile and his left arm feeling...strange.

The weight of it was too heavy but the presence too light, like a reminder of something missing.

Something lost.

He craned his neck to see and the sight that greeted him made him wish he hadn't.

Instead of his arm, with his scars and his cuts and his callouses, there was a metal one with a red star.

Rusted.

The plates dented easily under the new strength of his grip, bent out of alignment and creating small gaps for Bucky to slip his finger through and pry it open wider. Then he ripped out anything and everything he could reach, the same way he had sabotaged HYDRA's killing machine, heedless of the sparks singeing his skin and the pulses of pain radiating from his shoulder. Those would stop once he damaged the arm enough, as he had learned from previous experiences.

Bucky kept time by the number of metal arms HYDRA had given him and this was number five.

The arms were getting harder to break and their goons' response time was getting faster.

A surge of electricity slammed into him, setting his left side aflame with crackling agony and locking his entire body instantly.

"Take him to the chair." Dr. Zola, the man with the soft hand and unhurried speech, ordered. "Before he destroys another one of my beautiful works."

Bucky's screams were muffled by his clenched jaw as he was dragged toward a device that looked nothing like a chair. With the way his spine and joints were still stiff, he was propped awkwardly against the headrest with his back arched and the heels of his feet scraping against the concrete floor. A metal loop was fixed around his forehead, with two softer points pressed snugly against his temples.

"You will comply, soldier."

Longing.

Bucky woke to the smell of motor oil and frantic yelling. In English. So that was already an improvement.

For half a second he was hopeful that he had been rescued, that Steve had come for him again, but the relief vanished when he opened his eyes and saw three men he had never seen before.

A dark-haired man with a tall and lanky build, dressed in a leather outfit that looked just like a drawing of the elves from *The Hobbit*.

Two medium-build men in civilian clothing, one was cleaning his glasses using the untucked hem of his dress shirt and muttering about what a bad idea this was while the other had a neatly trimmed beard and streaks of what looked like motor oil on his jeans.

An elf, a nerd, and a mechanic.

It sounded like the beginning of a bad joke.

Or the ever-creeping edge of hysteria had finally taken hold.

Bucky blinked, eyes scanning the room on instinct and snagging on the metal arm on the work table.

"Oh, right." The mechanic grimaced as he followed Bucky's gaze. "That's your arm, I can put it back-"

The red star might as well had been a red flag, an unheeded warning as an inferno of emotions - anger and helplessness and hatred and grief and disgust and fear - coursed through Bucky's veins, a fire wanting to escape and he would love nothing more than to burn it all down. He would not let these HYDRA scums turn him into a weapon.

"No!" Bucky snarled and charged, adjusting his weight distribution so he wouldn't be tackling the mechanic to the ground but instead slightly off to the side, where the other man's vulnerable neck would meet an unfortunate end with the sharp edge of the work bench.

He would not comply.

James Buchanan. Sergeant. 32557038. Barnes...

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I've had to deal with several emotional emergencies this week and they totally drained me.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

Hulk watched the small plane through Tiny Banner's eyes. It was a boring color, a faded black that looked like one of Tiny Banner's old shirts that had been washed and left out to dry in the sun too many times.

Just thinking about it made Hulk want to sneeze. Tiny Banner had had to use whatever soap he could find and some of the scents were worse than the dirt and sweat on their clothes. Hulk had grumbled about one that was sharply sweet but Tiny Banner had acted like he wasn't bothered and didn't hear a thing.

Tiny Banner had done that a lot, pretending Hulk wasn't there.

Hulk hated being ignored and the only way he knew how to be seen and heard was to make himself bigger and louder.

To smash.

Tiny Banner hadn't liked that.

Tiny Banner hadn't liked a lot of the things Hulk did.

Because Tiny Banner hadn't liked Hulk at all.

Tiny Banner had been telling the truth when he told Flag Man that he was always angry, because he was always angry *with Hulk*.

And Hulk hadn't known why. Asking Tiny Banner had only made it worse and Hulk wasn't good at figuring out things that went round and round. His thoughts would get all twisted and tangled up, a big mess that he just wanted to rip apart.

Then one day, Tiny Banner had *talked* to Hulk, *asked* Hulk what he had seen during the fight with Puny God, and *thanked* Hulk for helping.

Because of Tin Man.

Hulk had caught Tin Man because Tiny Banner had been nicer, *happier*, when Tin Man was around.

What Hulk hadn't known was how much nicer, *happier*, Tin Man could make him feel too.

These days, Tiny Banner's clothes smelled clean and soft with a hint of flowers. Tiny Banner had loopy reasoning for first wanting to refuse the laundry service and then accepting it so Tin Man would feel good that Hulk hadn't understood until Tiny Banner had explained that it was rude to say no to a friend offering help. Hulk had agreed, adding that they would always help Tin Man and Tin Man would never need to ask.

Which was exactly what Hulk had done, when Metal Arm had tried to hurt Hulk's friend. Now Metal Arm was One Arm.

And what Hulk would gladly do again, if this Warrior Woman, who came uninvited on her small boring plane with the Ugly Face tablet, turned out to be a threat.

Warrior Woman did not turn out to be a threat.

Boo.

Tiny Banner was playing dirty to get Hulk to relax after being on the edge of a transformation, an uncomfortable sensation that was a lot like holding back a sneeze or stifling a-

Hulk yawned.

These science articles were so boring.

"The Big Guy's a little disappointed that he didn't get to smash. He was pretty excited to see how he'd do against the strongest metal on Earth."

Hulk knew he would win but it would have been nice to have the confirmation.

Tin Man nodded toward the Ugly Face tablet. "He's welcomed to smash that-"

This was why Tin Man was the best.

"-after we're done getting what we need off of it."

"Oh."

It was okay. Hulk could wait.

Tiny Banner's mind swirled with awful memories, things Hulk didn't want to remember and Tiny Banner couldn't forget; dark waters that Tiny Banner liked to splash in when Hulk wanted to stay dry.

At least now, these bad thoughts didn't crash over Hulk like a tidal wave, slamming him down until he had no choice but to smash back. They were more like the gentle tides Hulk had listened to on their road trip with his toes curled in the sand; background noise that he could kind of tune out.

All this thinking in circles had given Tiny Banner a headache. Served him right.

Something was wrong but Hulk didn't know what.

Jay had said something about Tin Man's hand but to Hulk, it was just moving like it had been, tapping at the glowing keyboard.

Puny God looked alarmed and so did Tin Man.

Tiny Banner was counting the taps and presses as a series of dots and dashes formed in his mind.

Everyone seemed to know what was going on except for Hulk and he didn't like this feeling of not knowing, still hadn't gotten used to it despite feeling left out for most of this life he shared with Tiny Banner. He especially disliked missing important details about his friends.

Dots and dashes turned into letters and letters into words but the words didn't make any more sense than the dots and dashes.

Allow me. My Chosen.

What did that even mean?

Then everything disappeared in a light so bright that it hurt, reminding Hulk of the time he tried to look directly into the sun because Tiny Banner had told him not to.

As quickly as the light had spilled from the Glowing Rock corner and filled Tin Man's workshop, it was gone. Like a switch that had been flipped on then off right after, leaving behind little spots that Hulk wanted to bat away.

So he tried.

Tiny Banner's hand lifted up, a jerky movement that he stopped with a scowl then pretended like he meant to do it by reaching up to take off his glasses.

Hulk snorted.

Puny God, now dressed in his armor, appeared next to Tin Man in a flash of green.

"What the hell was that?" Tin Man glared at the Glowing Rock, holding up his hands and splaying his fingers. A moment passed and nothing happened. "Oh, come on! Now you have nothing to say to *Your Chosen?*" The last two words were said with a loud scoff and framed in air quotes.

Tense silence stretched across the room, setting Hulk's teeth on edge.

In the foreboding quiet, the new voice, slightly accented and warbled, echoed. "...out of time." The words sounded almost relieved as they trailed off with a sigh.

"Zola."

Tin Man pivoted toward the work table and Puny God followed, his hand resting low on Tin Man's back.

A line of orange light glowed at the top edge of the Ugly Face tablet.

Tiny Banner gripped his glasses, fingers leaving little smudges on the lenses, as he watched the line travel downward, clearing away all traces of green it encountered and leaving behind a blank screen.

Hulk wondered if this meant he could smash it now.

"What just happened-"

"JARVIS, check-"

"The containment spell-"

"System scans already in progress-"

Everyone's voices were drowned out by guttural screams interspersed with the dull thuds of flesh hitting uselessly against metal, only to pick back up, louder and more frantic, when streaks of light, the same fiery orange, sliced through the seams of the Freezer Box.

Where Tin Man had trapped One Arm.

The Freezer Box opened with a hiss and a blast of icy air.

Tiny Banner shivered.

Hulk didn't think it was that cold.

"This is such a bad idea." Tiny Banner mumbled as he cleaned his glasses, throwing a worried glance at Tin Man, who had decided not to wear his armor because One Arm wasn't

going to hurt him.

Hulk thought it was dumb. One Arm had just tried to stab him *yesterday*.

Tin Man didn't make sense sometimes but not in a way that made Hulk feel stupid, more like it made Hulk worry for Tin Man.

Tiny Banner agreed.

"-that's your arm, I can put it back-"

Tin Man was looking away but Hulk wasn't.

One Arm ran right into Hulk's shoulder with a pained grunt, staggering back with a cry of horror and tilting heavily to his left. Blue eyes wide with shock that was more than the result of the unexpected transformation of Tiny Banner into Hulk. He was looking at Hulk like he hadn't fought Hulk yesterday, like he had never seen Hulk before.

It didn't make any sense.

It made even less sense when he barked out an incredulous laugh. "Just can't get it right, huh? First the Red Skull and now a Green Monster."

Tin Man peered over Puny God's shoulder. "Wait, what?"

One Arm's legs buckled and his body slowly crumbled to the floor. "Is there another face under that one?" His eyes, wild and rimmed with red, darted between Tin Man and Puny God. "Do you change colors too?"

Puny God tensed.

The room got colder.

"You say it like it's a bad thing." Tin Man, chin resting on Puny God's shoulder, said in a cheerful tone that belied the way his left arm cinched around Puny God. "I happen to think a little color change keeps things interesting." He held up his right hand, fingertips wiggling and glowing like embers. "See?"

Hulk waved too, following Tin Man's lead.

One Arm stared, blinked, then doubled over; his face pressed against the concrete floor with his right hand gripped the melted metal casing and singed wires on his left shoulder. Glints of silver caught and reflected the fluorescent light as his whole body shook with high-pitched giggles.

Tiny Banner shifted uncomfortably in the back of Hulk's mind, muttering something about a nervous breakdown.

"One Arm okay?" Hulk asked but the question only sent One Arm howling with laughter that dissolved into hysterical hiccups.

"Yes! I only have one arm!"

Tin Man moved to come closer.

Puny God shifted with him, keeping himself between Tin Man and One Arm.

"I'll be okay, he's not going to hurt me."

Hulk huffed, unimpressed. One Arm had just tried to tackle him *a few minutes ago*.

Which was exactly what Puny God pointed out.

"Well, he's not going to hurt me now. I mean, look at him." Tin Man nodded toward One Arm, who was curled up on the floor and rocking slightly. "Whatever the Soul Stone did..." He sighed, face twisting with too many emotions for Hulk to identify but Hulk knew none of them were good ones.

No one's face ever twisted from happiness. Unless they were being tickled but then again, no one was ever happy to be tickled.

"He is clearly not the Winter Soldier anymore." Tin Man's voice dropped to a defeated whisper. "But we don't know if he's still Barnes."

Despite Tin Man's lowered volume, One Arm must have heard him. "Barnes, James Buchanan. Sergeant. 32557038." He wheezed out in between broken giggles. "Barnes, James Buchanan. Sergeant-"

Hulk wanted to slap his palm over One Arm's mouth, if only to stop the rambling repetition that was making his skin itch and his fists clench. There wasn't anyone to smash and the lack of a target made him feel useless and too big, taking up all this room and doing nothing with it.

So he retreated, trading places with Tiny Banner, and hid in the back of their shared mind where One Arm's voice faded to a murmur.

"-32557038. Barnes, James Buchanan. Sergeant. 32557038. Barnes..."

*

Maria pinched the bridge of her nose as she willed herself to set down the stack of papers gently. As much as she wanted to throw them aside, the satisfaction wouldn't be worth the mess and she had enough clean up to do as it was without adding more to it.

The ongoing extraction efforts for field agents were going well with no fatalities so far. But there were a handful of critical injuries that might worsen over the next forty-eight hours and even more agents still behind enemy lines and awaiting transport.

SHIELD's staff and resources had been significantly reduced across all departments. Not only had HYDRA infiltrated SHIELD as administrative assistants and medical personnel and technical support, roles with access to sensitive information and higher clearance, but they also had operatives working as janitors and baristas.

Since she had learned the young man at the coffee cart had been HYDRA, a sour taste had settled on her tongue, one that no homebrewed coffee with an obscene amount of creamer could chase away. All those times he had had her drink ready and waiting for her mocked her training and instincts as a spy. He could have poisoned her a hundred, a thousand, times over while she had told him to keep the change with a smile.

This realization kept her more awake and alert, on the edge of paranoia and panic, than any caffeinated beverages could.

There were endless meetings with various representatives and committees, domestic and international, who wanted answers and blood for the long, long list of all the crimes and violations that had now come into the light. What troubled her the most wasn't the staggering number of transgressions, but how difficult it was to parse out which ones were carried out to further HYDRA's plans and which ones were done to advance SHIELD's goals.

No wonder HYDRA had been able to flourish within SHIELD, because what better host for a secret terrorist organization bent on world domination than an extra-governmental intelligence agency?

Maria reached for her travel mug, the stainless steel exterior cool to the touch, and took a sip of the equally cold coffee inside. The three tablespoons of vanilla creamer and the raspberry-filled donut Stark had sent over this morning helped cut some of the stale bitterness.

Two sharp knocks on the door were the only warning she had before Rogers came striding into her office like he owned the space and was owed her time.

"Ma'am."

The respectful address meant nothing without actions to support it. A pretense of good manners when Rogers didn't have the courtesy of waiting for permission before barging in.

"Captain." An empty title for a hollow hero. "What can I do for you today?"

Rogers pulled his shoulders back and planted his feet, as though he was expecting a fight. "I'll be taking a leave of absence from the Avengers for personal reasons."

Maria wanted to throw her hands up and cheer but she knew she had to play this carefully. Stark had trusted her to corral Rogers and she had no intention of letting him down. "I'm afraid I can't grant that, Captain. We need all hands on deck, especially yours."

His lips were pressed into a flat line, torn between a smile and frown. "I understand that, ma'am, and I'd hate to be putting you out-"

She doubted he actually cared, with the way he had announced his intentions instead of phrasing it like a request and the self-satisfied glint in his eyes. He wasn't troubled by inconveniencing her, he was pleased that he had because it was a confirmation of his importance. "You wouldn't just be helping me if you stayed, Captain. You'd be helping your friend, Sergeant Barnes." The bait had been casted.

"Bucky? What's going on? Is he okay?" Hook, line and sinker.

"As I'm sure you know, Sergeant Barnes has been subjected to inhumane treatments at HYDRA's hands. The things he was made to do as the Winter Soldier..." She gestured to the second highest stack of files with a genuine grimace. Barnes had been through the kind of hell that existed in the devil's nightmare.

"It wasn't Bucky, it was HYDRA!" Rogers' quick defense would have been heart-warming if not for the obsessive glint in his eyes.

Maria smiled encouragingly. "That is why you are the perfect person to bring him in because I know you'll be smart about this. We have cause to believe the Winter Soldier is conditioned to self-destruct when faced with capture." Cause was not the same as proof but Rogers didn't know that. He had to believe he only had one shot at recovering Barnes so he wouldn't run off haphazardly. "And we do not want to jeopardize Sergeant Barnes' safety by spooking the Winter Soldier."

"I understand."

She slid the pile of folders toward him, a mountain of the horrors Barnes had been forced to carry out against his will. "Here is everything we have on the Winter Soldier over the past seventy years. Why don't you start here, get a sense of who the Winter Soldier is and what has happened to your friend."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"No no, thank *you*, Captain."

We Are Not Friends

Chapter Notes

I am in absolute awe of how this not-so-little-anymore fic has been received - it has reached (and passed) the **400k** hits milestone! Thank you for your continued interest and support! ♥♥♥♥♥

I'm going to try to write a little 5+1 this weekend as a "thank you" so stay tuned. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier. Avengers: Age of Ultron.

Natasha hissed as she tried to sit up. Instinctual movements that didn't used to require caution now require great care. Black spots swam in her vision and she tried to breathe through the flare of pain, little huffs of air that sounded pathetic to her ears, the gasping snuffles of a weeping child. The decision to forgo opioids during her recovery, documented in her file, mocked her, reminding her that the Black Widow was human after all.

Her heart had stopped twice on the operating table.

The doctors were able to bring her back, shock her heart into beating again and stitch her together. She was healing well, they had extubated her shortly after she woke and she had been cognizant and coherent enough to croak out what she had gleaned from Sitwell. Yet she could still feel the cold metal of the blade sinking into her chest, taste the copper tang of her blood in the air, and hear the sudden absence of sound around her in that second.

Much like right now, in this moment, as her eyes watered. Deafening agony tore through her, drowning out everything else until all she had left was the flames coiling around her torso, burning and branding her as a failure.

The Winter Soldier's grip around her neck, unrelenting and deadly.

Like Captain America's hand around her gun.

Natasha blinked the moisture away before it could fall. She hadn't cried in decades and she wasn't going to start now. Her tears were weapons and there was no enemy in sight to disarm or manipulate. As such, she needed to stop wasting them.

An ice chip touched her lips and the cold shocked her senses into working order, the pain lessening now that it was no longer her entire focus with new sensory inputs.

The blinking lights from the monitor. The sweetness of water easing the dryness in her mouth. The smell of disinfectant underneath the scent of lavender from the diffuser Laura had sent. The rasp of Clint's voice in her ear.

"...heal faster with better meds."

It was an old argument that she had always been firmly against. Morphine made her soft when she needed her edges the most, made her docile when she wanted to fight, made her numb when she should care. The first and last time she had morphine in her veins was after her Red Room graduation ceremony.

Clint knew this, of course, but she reminded him anyway with narrowing of her eyes.

"Alright, alright." Acquiescing with a shrug, he fished another ice chip out of the plastic cup with a spork. "Just thought I'd ask." He popped it into his mouth.

Natasha heard the crunch as he chewed and started a countdown in her head.

Three... Two... One.

Clint shot up from his slouched position with one hand cradling his jaw, where the cracked tooth was. "Ow!"

"Dentist." She said primly, one word to convey all the things her still raw throat couldn't voice.

Get that taken care of, idiot.

I could have warned you but decided not to.

Stop using my near death experience to avoid the dentist.

You can't go back to the field like this.

Thank you for staying.

"I'm getting it filled later today." He offered her an ice chip with a roll of his eyes. "Mom."

Accepting it without a word, Natasha merely raised an eyebrow at Clint's decidedly mothering behavior. Then she arched the other one when he tucked her blanket more securely around her.

"Yeah, yeah. Pot, kettle. Whatever." He snorted but his expression sobered. "I got an assignment."

Natasha closed her eyes in lieu of a nod. She had known he would be heading out as soon as he said he had an appointment, agents needed to be in perfect physical shape before deployment, though she had hoped he wouldn't. There was a slight tremor in her fingers as she curled them around his and she tried not to dwell on how even a small motion seemed to drain her. "Benched?"

As soon as she asked it, she knew the answer. HYDRA had risen from SHIELD's ashes, Hill would need all available agents if they had any hopes of salvaging the work they had been doing. The inanity of her question, combined with her muscle weakness, stirred at the bubbling doubt in her gut.

Logically, she knew the mental fog and physical fatigue were part of the recovery process but what if they weren't temporary? What if this was how she would be from now on? Stupid and powerless in a world where only success mattered.

What if I fail?

You never fail.

Madame B.'s voice echoed, unwelcomed, in her head. Memories of the Red Room always came when she was at her lowest and Natasha supposed she had hit rock bottom the second Captain America pulled the rug out from under her feet, sending her tumbling down and down and down.

Clint's returning grip, pressing her wrist against his palm, brought her back to the present. "I'm done after this one." He said instead of answering her question, he really did know her well. "We're going to try for a third."

With the Red Room haunting the periphery of her thoughts and the ever-present pain reminding her of why she had refused opioids, Clint's news left a bitter and chalky taste in her mouth. Or perhaps it was because she hadn't brushed her teeth in a few days. "Yay." Natasha managed, hoping he would see her lack of enthusiasm as exhaustion, and willed herself to be happy for her friend. If only to spite the Red Room's lies of attachments being vulnerabilities and families being determined by blood. Their reasoning for making her bleed.

"We're going to be outnumbered. Three to two." A ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "We talked about it before going to London, before..." The curve flattened, cutting off the one name Clint still had trouble saying aloud.

Loki.

Natasha gave a sympathetic hum. Clint had been rattled, *unmade*, after his encounter with Loki and the Scepter. It had taken him a while to find his rhythm on and off the field but he had found it, eventually. Hunting HYDRA had helped tremendously, channeling the anger and redirecting the aggression to more deserving targets.

From what she had heard from Laura, they were slowly bridging the gap Clint had put between them after the Chitauri Invasion with semi-regular visits. They had certainly been close enough to talk about adding to their family.

"Natasha." The syllables dragged, bordering on sluggish, but this was important enough that she pressed ahead. "Good name."

That got a chuckle. "Sure, I'll pass the suggestion along but just so you know, Laura's got the final say on names."

"I got stabbed." Natasha glanced meaningfully at the white gauze peeking out over the top of her hospital gown.

"I know." There was no trace of humor in his reply.

"Natasha." She insisted, determined to bring that lightness back. They had so little of that in their lives. "Or Nathaniel."

"Fine, fine." Clint groaned, flopping into the chair and throwing an arm over his eyes. "I'll let Laura know that you're using the *I got stabbed* card." His other hand remained around her wrist, a steady source of comfort. "Just don't get stabbed again, okay?"

An unspoken rule of their friendship was that they would try to be as honest with each other as possible and Natasha knew if she made that promise, it would be a lie. "I won't if you won't."

*

Sam paused in his stride as he saw the same man sprawled out under the tree. Even from afar, he could see the rise and fall of the impressive pecs because the asshole was wearing a shirt that was two sizes too small. Turning up the volume of his music, he continued on with his afternoon run and sent a mental apology for the unkind thought toward the stranger whose only faults were being annoyingly fit and out in public to make the rest of the population feel bad.

When the man was still there during his cool down walk, Sam sighed before making his way over. Just to make sure the man didn't have a heart attack from too many steroid injections.

Oops, there he went again.

Sam took care to make his footsteps audible on the grass as he approached, patting himself on the back when the man sat up in one fluid motion, blue gaze scanning his surrounding before landing on Sam.

Classic marker of an ex-soldier.

Keeping his tone friendly and his hands hanging loosely at his sides with palms open, Sam crouched down to be at the other man's eye level. "Hey, man. Everything okay?"

Thirty minutes later, Sam learned that everything was decidedly *not* okay in Steve's world and that maybe he should have minded his own business. He could be at home right now, showered and catching up on the game with a slice of leftover pizza. Instead, his sweat-damp shirt stuck uncomfortably to his skin with the creeping sense that he had definitely bitten off more than he could chew. His stomach protested at that metaphor and demanded actual food.

Steve was, as Sam had guessed, an ex-soldier who was having issues adjusting. The details were vague but that was pretty much par for the course for anyone who served. Everything was classified, though the talk shows had been making noises about transparency recently. Sam didn't keep up much with the news aside from sports.

Then Steve had launched into a lengthy lamentation of how much things had changed, going on and on about how real men fought for what was right and cowards tried to talk their way out. That was when the warning bells started ringing. Steve had sneered when Sam pointed out that violence would only escalate a situation and looked confused when Sam brought up Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and civil disobedience.

Probably another jock who didn't pay attention in school and enlisted to get away from home.

So Sam had ended up giving an overview on the Civil Rights Movement, valiantly not rolling his eyes when Steve had exclaimed that he never saw color with the men he served with.

"Good for you." Sam had said, sarcasm dripping from every word and completely done.

Except then Steve had turned morose and dropped a bomb of a revelation that almost everyone he had served with were gone.

Guilt and grief rose up as Sam remembered watching Riley fall and so he stayed, listening to Steve recount old tales like he would with any veterans at the meetings.

The conversation became more productive though it still wasn't what Sam would describe as pleasant as the two of them shared about their own struggles with loss and how to find the motivation to forge ahead. Sam's was catching others before they crashed in the way he hadn't been able to with Riley and Steve's was fixated on bringing his best friend home, who was missing in action.

It seemed like a long shot but this wasn't the time or place, and Sam definitely wasn't the right person, to point it out. Instead, he invited Steve to check out the support groups and counseling services at Veterans Affairs.

"Do you like it there?"

Steve's question caught Sam off-guard and he took a second to recover before replying in the affirmative. "We're doing some good work."

"That's great to hear." Steve clapped him on the shoulder. "You know, everything happens for a reason and you wouldn't be where you are-"

Sam blinked, brain screeching to a halt as it strained to process what he had just heard. "No." He was up on his feet in an instant. "Oh hell no!"

"What-"

"You did not just say what I think you said. My friend *fell to his death*-"

Steve flinched.

"-because some asshole shot him down with a rocket grenade, not because his death is part of some grand fucking plan for me to do the greater fucking good."

A scandalized gasp made Sam turn and he cowered under the angry glare of a mother as she hurried her two young children away.

There was a hint of a smile on Steve's face, as though what had just happened was funny and they would be laughing about it later. Well, Steve was about to be disappointed.

"I'm going to go." Sam moved away just as Steve pushed himself to standing.

Steve's back was to the setting sun, blocking most of the light and casting his face in shadow but Sam could see the frown clearly. "Wait, I didn't mean to upset you, I'm sorry."

Sam weighed the pros and cons of calling out Steve's non-apology and decided against it, having already taught an impromptu history lesson today to someone who missed the point.

It was painfully clear that Steve needed help, a lot more than what Sam could give.

Maybe he should go to school like the support services supervisor suggested when he spoke to her about doing more. Sam's role as the group facilitator limited him to only moderating the discussion. If he wanted to expand his responsibilities, he would need a specialized degree or certification because without the proper trainings and tools, he might end up doing more harm than good.

At the time, Sam hadn't agreed. Throughout his life, he had always been the go-to person among friends for advice. He connected easily with people, was a good listener, and had a good head on his shoulders. Those traits had seemed enough.

Now, however, he could see the gaps in his skillset. He had spent the last half hour - a quick glance at his watch told him it was actually closer to forty-five minutes - feeling as though he was treading water in the ocean of Steve's issues with no land in sight.

"It's-" Anger drained out of him and left him hollow with exhaustion, the weight of what, *who*, he couldn't bring back from Afghanistan almost too heavy to bear. "It's fine." Steve's relief did little to ease the pit in his stomach, he wasn't really all that hungry anymore. "But you need to talk to someone, Steve. Some stuff, we aren't meant to carry alone."

"When are you working at the V.A.? I can swing by-"

"That's not a good idea, you need someone more qualified, a psychologist maybe-"

Impossibly, Steve stood even taller at the suggestion, shoulders pulled wide and hands clenched into fists, creating an imposing figure in the fading light of dusk. "No! No psychologists!"

Sam started a step at the display of aggression, alarmed and suddenly aware of how dark it had gotten.

Steve deflated with a guilty look. "Sorry, I just- I don't have good experiences with someone poking in my head, I'd feel more comfortable talking to a friend."

"We are not friends, Steve." Sam corrected gently, still wary of the other man's swift change in moods. "We literally just met and even if we were, *especially* if we were, I still can't help you. There are boundaries for these things."

"I don't care about that."

Steve's answer didn't surprise him. "I do because there's a difference between listening to *my friend* and listening to *you*."

"It's the same person, it's just me."

"No, it's really not." Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm too tired to get into it so just, take care of yourself and if you come by the V.A., I'll set you up with someone nice, alright?"

"I see." Something dark skittered across Steve's features. "Well I won't keep you any longer. Goodbye, Sam."

Sam knew a dismissal when he heard one. Or saw one, as Steve turned and jogged away, picking up his pace as he went.

Yep, there was no way in hell that Steve wasn't on some kind of performance enhancing drug.

He was setting a reminder to talk with his supervisor about possible programs to apply to when someone bumped into him, knocking him off-balance.

"Sorry, sorry." The man steadied him with one muscular arm effortlessly. "Didn't see you there. You good?"

Sam nodded his thanks, tucking his phone back in his pocket and checking to make sure his wallet was still there. It was. "Yep."

His grin was wide and bright though most of his face was obscured under a baseball cap. "Cool, cool. Stay that way."

"That's the goal." Sam shook his head as he watched the other man walk away, absently wondering if he should find a different running route.

Just Can't Seem to Miss

Chapter Notes

Happy August, everyone!!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Civil War.

Thor woke abruptly, eyes snapping open without a trace of sleep in them. His body thrummed with a rush of adrenaline, tense and battle-ready and incongruent with the quiet peacefulness of Jane's room. A space arranged around the large desk, crafted by the famous woodworker IKEA, where a network of immaculately labelled file boxes framed her computer. The calm in the eye of the disordered storm that was the rest of her room.

Her jeans laid in a crumple next to an armchair overflowing with wrinkled shirts and pairs of inside-out pants. Post-it notes with scribbled reminders and crooked diagrams lined the pale green wall like flowers dotting a field. From his vantage point on the bed, Thor could see the laces of one shoe peeking out from behind the pile of notebooks from Jane's earlier years of schooling that she had kept in case they provided new insight for her experiments. Her life was centered around her research with everything else cast to the side, single-minded and almost selfish in her pursuit.

The unkind thought made Thor's brows crease in self-reprimand, he admired her dedication to her studies and should not fault her for it. Though a part of him did wish she would spare some attention to him.

Jane had listened to his tales of battle and victory against the Soldiers of Winter and the HYDRA fiend with an absent-mindedness that only made Thor double his efforts in his dramatic reenactment, only for her to ask him to lower his volume in fears of disturbing the neighbors.

Who, as of late, had seemed much more enthused by his appearance and awed by his prowess than his lover.

Instinctively, his gaze flitted downward and settled on Jane's slumbering form. The tumble of dark locks, spilling like ink on the pillow, that he wanted to run his fingers through. The soft profile of her lovely face, eyelashes fluttering with sleep and nose wrinkling adorably as if she could sense his eyes on her, still discomforted by his admiration of her beauty. The alluring flare of her hips, a curve made more pronounced by her penchant to sleep on her side.

Thor trailed a hand down her waist, reveling, once again, at how very soft she was. Her body shifted under his palm, rolling into his touch and pressing up for more. His chest tightened with a surge of affection while another part of his anatomy stiffened for a different reason.

Leaning in, he brushed a kiss against her cheek. Then another. And another. Until she was blinking up sleepily at him with a questioning hum.

His answer was to slot his mouth against hers and to wrap an arm around her before rolling her onto her back, mindful of his weight as he settled atop of her. "Jane, my love."

*

As far as Jane was concerned, there were certainly worse ways to wake up than being kissed by a god who was the embodiment of thunder. Wild and electric.

Her thoughts were still blurry with sleep, a pleasant sort of haziness that slowed everything down. She practically melted into the mattress with a low moan when Thor and every inch of his literal godlike physique rocked against her. They were good like this, speaking with their bodies instead of words and sentences that inevitably led to disappointment; her inquiries that went unaddressed and his tales that went unappreciated.

Jane swallowed down the lump in her throat as she reached up to tuck a strand of golden hair behind his ear, thumb caressing the sharp line of his jaw, softened slightly by the fuzz of stubble. "Thor."

He was like a summer storm that she had danced in, spinning and spinning until she was dizzy with love and giddy on romance. Until she had been left shivering, lovelorn, for his warmth across the cold vacuum of space. She had pined for him, longed for the crackle of charged particles in the air when they were together and the feel of rain on her face. Only to realize the heated passion between them had cooled when he finally came back to her.

The seasons had changed as Earth continued on its elliptical orbit.

Summer was coming to an end.

Autumn was approaching.

*

Thud.

Darcy pulled her arms inward and tucked her legs against her stomach, curling into a fetal position to try to lull herself back to sleep.

Thud.

With a groan, she flopped over onto her stomach and buried her head under the mountain of pillows she had on her bed, hoping the additional layers would help drown out the sounds of her best friend getting busy.

Thud.

Her hand shot out and slapped around blindly for her phone, grabbing it successfully on the fourth try.

Thud.

She unlocked it with a press of her thumb and navigated to the noise-cancelling app with a few swipes and sighed with relief as blissful silence settled around her.

Tony had designed the app specifically for her when Thor and Jane had first reunited *passionately* and factored in the frequencies of Thor and Jane's voices among other, um, *ambient* noises.

Apparently, her texts had started to sound a lot more homicidal and Tony hadn't wanted to risk her blowing the power grid for all of New Mexico when she tasered the God of Thunder. Though he had wrapped his gift in humor, Darcy knew exactly what was at the heart of it.

He was looking out for her, fixing her problems before she could even ask and laughing it off like it was no big deal.

In the way an older - *much, much older* - brother might do, not that she knew firsthand but she had heard stories and watched movies full of annoyingly cheerful families who could solve any problem as long as they were together.

Ugh.

As an accidental child whose very existence had bound two unwilling and unhappy people together, Darcy had little in the way of stability and support. Her household had an air of constant discontent that had been suffocating and almost turned her into someone as bitter as her parents, breathing in all the unsaid regret and shouted blame. It was only her sheer stubbornness to be the opposite of *those people* that saved her, a tenacious optimism that her life could not possibly get any more depressing that pushed her forward and out of their toxic sphere.

To find her own little misfit of a family, built by a man who had lost his in another timeline.

With her phone in hand and already unlocked, she typed out a quick message to Tony.

I'm glad I met you.

She squinted at the short sentence and felt a twinge of embarrassment at how straightforward it was, honesty and vulnerability in five words. Her finger hovered over the rows of emoticons, any one of them would have diffused the sincerity by adding a splash of humor, and selected none. Instead, she sent the text as it was.

Some things needed to be serious.

*

The sky was dark by the time Steve returned to his SHIELD-assigned apartment. His steps dragged on the generic gray carpet, more out of reluctance to face what lay behind the door than any exhaustion from his run earlier.

Steve had only managed to make it through three files before throwing up the turkey sandwich he had for lunch and eight before fleeing from the horrors carried out by a monster wearing his best friend's face.

For years, he had believed his best friend was dead. The Smithsonian had an impressive exhibit, spanning multiple rooms and covering various periods of Steve's life before and after Project Rebirth. It had been heartening to see a section dedicated to the Howling Commandos, the best and only true team Steve had led; the Avengers paled in comparison. Bucky's memorial - *best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield* - was beautifully written and highlighted their friendship. Seeing it commemorated in such a way had helped ease some of Steve's grief.

As had the knowledge that Bucky had plummeted to a quick and painless death in the Alps. When the Valkyrie broke the thick sheet of ice, Steve had felt a flash of cold then an almost blissful kind of numbness. He remembered finding some comfort in the fact that Bucky hadn't suffered either before everything went dark.

Except Bucky had.

The folders, filled with photographs and mission reports, were pieces of a puzzle Steve didn't want to solve but needed to in order to save his friend. Yet he found himself rooted to the spot in the narrow hallway, weighed down by a coiled ball of nausea in his gut and the contents of the last file on his mind.

It was an assassination of a group of delegates. The photograph in the file showed the Winter Soldier - *not Bucky* - standing tall over half a dozen bodies with dark stains covering his hands and splattered across his face. Though the lack of color in the black and white photograph muted some of the shock, the carnage was as unmistakable as the blank stare aimed at the camera.

Bucky, despite being a three-time boxing champion and a soldier on the frontlines, had never liked the sight of blood. It was something Steve had liked to tease him over but there was nothing funny about it now.

Yet another thing Steve had lost but hopefully Bucky hadn't.

In a way, HYDRA's brainwashing was a blessing, because Bucky would be absolutely broken if he had any awareness at all when he pulled the trigger to put a bullet in his targets' heads.

Or slammed his fist into the face of an old friend, crushing flesh and bones until one was indistinguishable from the other.

Or tightened his fingers to choke the life out of a woman who had been collateral damage.

If Bucky had been himself when he was forced to carry out those orders, Steve knew that his best friend would have been lost to him forever. This way, at least, the real Bucky had been safe from the trauma of killing the innocent and executing the defenseless.

Bucky was still the brother Steve had always wanted and never had, the soldier Steve had fought alongside during the war, and the best friend Steve had promised to be with until the end of the line.

A silver lining that Steve clung to as he stared into the depth of HYDRA's darkness.

The sound of a deadbolt turning snapped him into action. He unlocked his door just as the neighbor two doors down opened hers, slipping into his apartment before she could make eye contact and narrowly escaping having to make polite chitchat.

He was all talked out after his conversation with Sam.

His keys clanged as he dropped them into the bowl on the kitchen counter, flipping on the light switch as he made his way to the cabinet for a glass and filled it at the sink. He sipped it slowly, gaze absently scanning the modest apartment from the tiled countertop to his leather jacket, draped over the old couch he had found on the side of the road. The upholstery was frayed in the back, a problem easily solved by lining it up flush against the wall.

People in this new world were offensively careless with their belongings, priding themselves on excess instead of frugality.

The water soothed his dry throat but did nothing to wash away the bitter taste in his mouth as Sam's angry words echoed in his ears.

My friend fell to his death because some asshole shot him down with a rocket grenade, not because his death is part of some grand fucking plan for me to do the greater fucking good.

Steve winced as he remembered the appalled look on the young mother's face before she hurried her children away. Instead of apologizing to Sam, he should have apologized to them for Sam's outburst.

It would have been better appreciated, at least.

Growing up, friendship had been a challenge for Steve and as a result, he became acutely familiar with dismissal. He could hear it loud and clear in Sam's tone, the offer of finding Steve *someone nice* rang hollow after the denial of the two of them being friends when Steve had been pouring his soul out to the other man for over an hour.

To have that raw honesty thrown back into his face with an empty gesture was the end of the conversation for Steve.

There was nothing left to salvage.

Steve had walked away knowing he was better for it.

As his mother had once said, brushing her fingers through his hair, his friendship was a prize to be won and not a gift to be given freely. The only person who had been worthy to be called Steve's friend was Bucky.

Who, like Steve, had been preserved by the super soldier serum running in their veins and the ice encasing their bodies.

It couldn't have been a coincidence, it had to be part of a bigger plan.

Everything happened for a reason.

Shoulders squared and resolve renewed, Steve sat down before the stack of files and switched on the lamp. He could handle a few more before turning in for the night, there was nothing left in his stomach to throw up anyway.

*

The window - three stories up, second from the left - went dark, signaling that Steve had gone to bed at last. Super soldier stamina apparently meant he could run approximately forty miles on an empty stomach then stay up for another three hours before needing rest.

If Clint didn't hate the guy so much, he might be impressed.

As it was, all he felt was a flare of irritation because chances were good that Rogers would be up at the crack of dawn for his morning drills at the local boxing gym. Which meant an early day for Clint, a situation he could quickly adjust to, and had done so with ease, but he had never been a morning person at heart.

The only people he had willingly gotten up for were his kids, who he missed terribly, and his wife, who missed having him around so she could sleep in.

When Hill had approached him with the mission of keeping eyes on Rogers, the two of them had been huddling next to Natasha's hospital bed.

"You're coming off of the bench, Barton." Her voice was barely above a whisper, nearly inaudible in the constant beeping from the array of monitors. "I need you to run surveillance on Rogers."

Clint's shoulders stiffened and his hands clenched at the mention of the man who had gambled with Natasha's life. He wanted to put an arrow in that traitorous bastard's eye, which was something his shrink would want to talk about but she wasn't around to ask annoying questions anymore. Because she was dead, stabbed by one of the Winter Soldiers and maybe Rogers had stood by too.

"He's getting discharged in a few days and I have something in the works to keep him from running off." Hill continued on the same murmur. "But, well, as I'm sure you know, can't be too careful where Captain America is concerned."

The anger churning in Clint's gut was definitely preferable to the helplessness and worry he had been battling with, so he grabbed onto it, clinging to an emotion that he was familiar with instead of dealing with the ones that made him unable to take his eyes off of Natasha.

"You're the best candidate for the job. You can keep your distance, you know his routines, and you are *invested* to make sure no one else gets hurt because of him." She tilted her head at Natasha's sleeping form, tucked under two layers of blankets and connected to way too many damn wires.

Clint had always known Natasha was a petite woman but the Black Widow had been a larger-than-life presence and it was disconcerting to see her so small and frail. Vulnerable. With her pale and chapped lips, dark circles under her eyes, and hair in fuzzy tangles, she looked like a damn kid.

A damn kid who trusted the wrong person.

He thought they were supposed to be past this kind of betrayal by now, a master spy and a secret agent who should know better. His anger burst into rage, fueled by guilt and shame. How had they missed this?

"Just don't go shooting unless he gives you a reason." The words were light but her tone hadn't changed from the hushed seriousness.

"And if he gives me a reason?" Clint asked, fingers flexing against his knees, and wished for his bow. He could feel the weight of her gaze on him and the heaviness of the silence in the air.

"Then you have a reason to use extreme measures to stop a super soldier from endangering the public." She stated, standing and smoothing the wrinkles out of her suit. "Do you accept, Agent Barton?"

"Yes, Commander."

Rogers spent the next day sifting through the small mountain of files, only leaving his apartment to walk down to the pizzeria to pick up his order because his 1940s sensibility believed delivery to be a luxury. He never realized the guy standing two spots behind him was his former teammate.

Crumpling his napkin, Clint tossed it over his shoulder. It landed in the trash with a rustle.

"Just can't seem to miss." He said to himself, strumming the string of his bow.

Rogers would learn that soon enough.

First Compromise Where You Can

Chapter Notes

Behold, a chapter that raises more questions than gives actual answers!

According to [MCU timeline](#), the Convergence happened on 11/15/2013 and Battle at the Triskelion happened on 01/12/2014. In this new timeline, the HYDRA uprising had been moved up to almost immediately after the Convergence so right now, it's about mid- to late-November in the story, hence the Thanksgiving scene.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

A burst of heat from the oven made his glasses fog up and Happy scowled as he squinted at the meat thermometer through the haze.

They had ordered the turkey from the holiday caterer, a twenty-five pound bird rubbed with herb butter that came pre-cooked, all they had to do was heat it up. To add a bit of variety and to satisfy the seemingly endless Asgardian appetite, in the other oven was a fifteen pound goose seasoned with citrus salt.

Pots and pans were bubbling away on the stove top while the microwave was one constant hum as it worked to reheat the prepared sides, including three styles of potatoes, two types of stuffing, and six different vegetable dishes. Jim wore his War Machine inspired apron with swagger and pride as he monitored the progress.

Tony had wanted to add his green smoothies to the already extensive Thanksgiving menu as a side dish but had been outvoted seven-to-two with Loki, unsurprisingly, casting the other *yay* vote. Most likely because Tony bribed him with sexual favors, as Darcy had gleefully pointed out and begun speculating.

Much to Happy's chagrin, he couldn't unhear what he had heard and he definitely shouldn't have searched for the terms that he didn't know because he also couldn't unsee what he had seen.

JARVIS' apology for not having safe search on really didn't sound all that contrite.

Pepper and Jane were wrapping the pies they had picked up from their preferred bakery and looking way too intense for a game of *guess or lose your pie*. The cardboard boxes were wrapped in double layers of brown paper, with the corners sharply folded, and tied with nearly identical bows.

Bruce wandered by with a pitcher of water because hydration was, um, Happy couldn't remember Bruce's joke, it was something about glass-half-empty or glass-half-full and all

around terrible. Though Happy would give up his drumstick if he could remember a bad joke and forget the lewd acts Darcy had listed. Maybe Tony should come up with a memory jogger or blocker, Happy would bet good money that a ton of people would be lining up for it.

Starting with the pre-ex-Winter Soldier in the guest suite.

Barnes had gone from deadly assassin with a tragic backstory to disoriented prisoner of war with a tragic backstory that he didn't remember in one brilliant orange flash.

Apparently sentient and very literal in Its interpretation of what *restoration* meant, the Soul Stone had transported Barnes' soul from the very second before HYDRA was going to scramble his brain to the present, effectively erasing the last seventy years and all the atrocities done to and by Barnes.

Sort of like what had happened with Tony but in reverse and significantly *less* helpful.

This was the kind of thing that had made Happy feel useless as a bodyguard, events and enemies so far outside of his comfort zone and above his skill level. What good was a guy with some boxing training against robot aliens and fire-breathing terrorists and space elves?

And, well, Happy hadn't been hired as a bodyguard. He hadn't been hired as a chauffeur either. No, Edwin Jarvis had hired Happy as a *passenger* for the twenty-one year old Tony Stark who was drowning his grief in alcohol. Happy's job had been to get into any vehicle with Tony at the steering wheel because Tony might be reckless with his own life, he wouldn't endanger another's. Not after losing his mother to his father's drunk driving.

Except the car accident had been a cover-up. Howard Stark hadn't crashed through the wind shield, resulting in severe facial wounds that led to a closed casket, and Maria Stark's neck hadn't snapped due to the angle of the car's collision with the tree.

The real reason was downstairs.

And Happy had been and still was in full support of Tony staying the hell away from Barnes but he didn't think Tony would be asking *him* to step in.

"What? Why me? I'm no good at this." Happy had objected. "The talking and the feeling stuff."

Tony had shrugged, shoulders loose despite the tension in the air. Like the weight was lighter because Happy was here. "You're always good at calming me down."

"I just bring you cheeseburgers."

"So bring Barnes a cheeseburger."

Happy had gaped at Tony like he was insane, which was really a more common occurrence than it should be, but his job, from the very start, had been to keep Tony safe from himself

and he saw no reason to change course now.

Barnes had devoured the cheeseburger.

"Time to eat!" Glasses cleared and proper cooking temperature confirmed, Happy removed the turkey and the goose from the ovens then backed away.

Thor, who had been waiting patiently for this moment with his hands washed thoroughly, was at the counter in an instant, brandishing a large knife. He carved the meat with a great flourish. He served Jane first then Pepper.

Darcy opted to wrap a piece of paper towel around her hand and grabbed a turkey leg, biting into it as she strolled over to the center island, where Jim was arranging the numerous side dishes like a game of Tetris to make everything fit.

Skipping the meat with an apologetic shrug, Bruce loaded his plate with stuffing and mashed potatoes then drenched both in gravy.

Tony hadn't moved from his spot at the table, pointing at various items on people's plates as well as what he could see on the counter and batting his eyelashes at Loki, who summoned a serving of everything Tony wanted onto their plates with an obliging smile.

Happy rolled his eyes at them but more out of fond exasperation than actual annoyance. In all his years being by Tony's side, Tony had always done more, often times too much, for his romantic partners with extravagant gifts that intimidated and spontaneous trips that shocked instead of surprised. Even Pepper, on occasion, had only tolerated the big gestures because she understood Tony's heart behind them.

This *exclusive liaison* with Loki was the first time Happy had seen someone indulge Tony's whims.

Jim pressed a plate into his hands. "Saved you a drumstick. Better get in on the sides before they're gone. Thor's going back for thirds."

"Thanks, man."

"I'm going to take this down to Barnes." He nodded toward the two plates piled so high that the tin foil covering them had domed.

"Alright." Happy grabbed one of the wrapped pies and hoped it was the purple plum. "Take this too."

"Be right back." The elevator slid open as Jim approached.

As Happy loaded up his plate, he let the cheerful chatter wash over him and felt a warm blossom of gratitude in his heart for this family of friends he had.

*

The corner office's door was open, sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows that was far too exposed for her comfort and pooled in the hallway, but Sharon knew better than to walk in without permission or announcing herself. Deskbound or not, the Black Widow was still a formidable presence. "Hey, up for some company?"

"Depends on what you've brought me." Without look up, Natasha replied. "If it's donuts, then no. But if it's-"

"Those chocolate potato things you like from that bakery that's clearly a front for money laundering for the Russian mob?" Sharon held up a pink paper bag, the folded top pinched between her thumb and index finger with the other three fingers fanned out, and gave it a little shake for emphasis.

"I told you." Natasha threw the pen down and closed the folder in front of her decisively. "No money laundering front would put this much work in their *shokoladnaya-kartoshkas*." There was a hint of a curve at the corners of her mouth that belied the sharpness of her tone, they had come a long way since their first meeting.

Margaret Carter was remembered as one of the most prominent and formidable agents in history, her accomplishments doubled those of her male contemporaries and her achievements paved the way for young women entering law enforcement.

And one little girl who idolized her Aunt Peggy, who pursued the same career trajectory as her Aunt Peggy, who refused to trade on her Aunt Peggy's name when she walked through the glass doors of the Triskelion on her first day with her mother's maiden name on her name badge.

Sharon rose quickly through the ranks and changed the conversation at any mention of the paternal side of her family, not an entirely uncommon occurrence among people who chose a job where they didn't have to go home.

The discovery of Captain America was the first time she was tempted to reveal her familial connection if only to help a national hero, *the* national hero from the way Aunt Peggy talked about him, navigate waking up in the future with a friendly face and a familiar last name.

Natasha found her pacing outside of Fury's office.

Underwhelming was Sharon's first impression of the infamous Black Widow. Natasha hadn't bothered with more than basic make-up with her auburn hair pulled back in a simple twist, her dark pants were fitted but her gray blouse wasn't.

"Agent *Carter*." Her smile was almost cordial if not for the hint of teeth. "I didn't know you'd be joining our meeting."

Sharon flinched, a rookie mistake that would have her dead in the field and had her dying of mortification in this hallway, feeling decidedly over-dressed in her two-piece suit and self-

conscious of the heaviness of her blush. Like a child playing at being a spy with the grown-ups humoring her. "What- I- How-"

"Oh, was it supposed to be a secret? Then a quick piece of advice, turn off your GPS-"

"I did-"

"-in the car."

"Oh."

"Yes, *oh*. Though I must say it is very sweet how you visit your aunt every weekend. Are you hoping the Captain will join you? He seems the sentimental type and I'm sure you two will have tons to talk about on those drives, your aunt has lived an extraordinary life." Natasha chuckled with a shake of her head, a curl falling loose across her forehead. "I don't need to tell you, you knew that already. That's why you went with your mother's maiden name and avoided the main hallway on the third floor with the photo of our legendary Agent Carter."

No longer feeling over-dressed, Sharon felt exposed, painfully transparent in her futile attempts.

"Another piece of advice, because you look like you can use it. We've only allowed this because you've done well on your own so far."

The reprimand hovered in the quiet air between them for a beat, then another, before Sharon walked away with her head held high but her tail between her legs.

Over the next few years, she would come to appreciate the two pieces of advice, cracking four cases because the target had only considered the obvious and stepping out of her Aunt Peggy's shadow by using her real name.

Sharon's sensible heels glided soundlessly against the tiles as she stepped into Natasha's office. The lack of carpet had been one of Natasha's specific requests when she transitioned into the role of an evaluator of possible recruits and current agents. "And I told you their prices are obviously inflated to pad the books." She let go of the bag with an arch of her eyebrow.

Natasha caught it before it could land on her desk with the kind of reflex and speed that made her career change seem like a mistake, an over-correction. "And I told you that paying more than five dollars per item is not inflation."

"And I told you it's more like eight and they don't even offer a discount when you buy more than one." She settled into the visitor's chair with a stretch.

"And I told you they do not need incentives to attract customers."

"And I told you that's exactly why they're a money laundering front because what business doesn't want to make more money?"

"One that already has a loyal client base of people who can appreciate the finer things in life." Natasha sighed dreamily as she unfolded the top of the bag, plucking out a chocolate potato for herself before tilting the bag toward Sharon.

Sharon took one, partly because she knew Natasha would not eat hers otherwise and partly because she had paid good money for them. And, well, it wasn't like she actually needed a reason to eat cake and cream covered in chocolate.

The two of them fell into a companionable silence, taking small bites of the rich, sweet pastry in a few minutes of leisure that they rarely had in their line of work.

Founded in secrecy and rooted in competitiveness, SHIELD's organizational culture had always been one to promote personal success over group accomplishments. Agents were far more likely to work independently than as a unit and any groups were formed on a temporary basis; the rationale being that each mission should only require those most suited for its objectives and they should, in theory, work well together regardless of the complete absence of camaraderie then go their separate ways once the assignments were completed. SHIELD only recruited and employed the best of the best who were consummate professionals.

Aunt Peggy had thought it was a bunch of bullshit made up by men who were worried that the influx of women in the work force would undermine the integrity with their *emotions* so it was best to keep relationships unformed and connections detached. Despite her personal feelings, Agent Carter had smiled politely and nodded along with the other high-level officers, all of whom were men and every single one of them had heard about her *breakdown* when Captain America crashed the Valkyrie into the ice. If she had protested, her objections would have been seen as further evidence. So she had chosen a different route, demanding the same respect and opportunities and advancements that were offered to her peers.

After all, they were *consummate professionals*.

"Diplomacy is about compromise, Sharon, and you must first compromise where you can." Aunt Peggy had said, brown eyes glinting with the steely fire she was known for. "And when you can't and don't, people will take notice."

However Natasha had ended up off of the field and in an office, Sharon knew with absolute certainty that it had been a deal of Natasha's making and a decision of Natasha's choosing. She wouldn't expect any less from the woman who had acted on-and-off as her acerbic and reluctant mentor.

Sharon had been in Prague when the Winter Soldiers stormed the Triskelion, she learned about Captain America's skewed loyalty and Natasha's supposed naivety through the chatter as she was smuggled out of the country she had no permission to be in.

The news of the Black Widow's retirement had rippled through the personnel pool and crest into a tidal wave that greeted Sharon as she landed, after a very long week and an impromptu hair color change, on American soil.

When she had finally been cleared through human resources, Sharon had brought Natasha an office-warming gift in lieu of any sympathy or regret. It would be a celebration because it could be nothing else.

Fury's plant, which had survived on cold coffee and no sunlight for years, fit the occasion.

Upon seeing it, Natasha blinked, a fraction of a second too slow. "Thank you."

Sharon stood, brushing off the crumbs on her hands over the potted plant and leaving small dots of chocolate on the vibrant green leaves. "Same time next week?"

"Depends on what you bring me."

The polished metal of the elevator doors reflected a smudge of chocolate at the corner of her mouth before they opened to reveal Rogers, who greeted her with a smile.

"Agent Carter." The nostalgic fondness in his tone made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

"Captain." She strolled into the elevator with loose limbs and relaxed shoulders, the opposite of how Aunt Peggy had always held herself stiff and tall among the men. Her hips swayed, nearly brushing against him as she pivoted to lean back against the elevator wall.

His eyes widened then tapered at the flirtatious display. "Which floor?" He asked, voice decidedly cooler now that she had sullied Aunt Peggy's professional image.

"Same as you." Sharon flicked her tongue, licking away the chocolate with a wink. "I'm going to get some coffee, want to join me?"

Rogers shook his head. "Thank you but I'm actually on my way out."

There was no apology and no offer of a raincheck, she was making excellent progress.

They sank down to the lower garage level in a stretch of silence, measured by the soft chimes of each floor they passed.

The elevator settled to a stop.

"Have a good day, ma'am."

"Good luck, Captain." The agents had a pool going for when Captain America wouldn't return from these solo missions. Sharon wondered if this would be the one.

But I Go By JB

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the late posting, though it is technically still Friday where I am. ;)

And, um, sorry about the cliffhanger?

Beta-ed by [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Civil War.

Jim shifted his weight with a wince as the elevator moved smoothly toward the guest floor. He had been on his feet all morning and the aches in the balls of his feet were making themselves known now that he wasn't standing on the cushy memory foam mats in the kitchen. The metal doors slid open soundlessly and Jim shuffled into the living area, his sock-clad feet gliding easily on the hardwood floor.

This space was a sprawl of modestly-sized suites outfitted with walk-in closets, individual bathrooms, and the latest technology. The rooms were painted a pale yellow and designed to be filled with natural light and a view of the New York skyline, perfect for the high school students who would be visiting Stark Tower next summer as part of the Team Iron Man program.

There was no sign of Barnes.

He placed the two dinner plates and the pie box, balanced precariously on top of one another, on the coffee table. "JARVIS?"

"Sergeant Barnes will be out shortly, he is currently finishing up a documentary on NASA."

"Alright." Jim sank into the plush couch with a sigh, leaning as far back as he could and flexing his feet, his toes grazing against the floor with every stretch. As much as he wanted to join his friends upstairs for their noon Thanksgiving feast, he could and should spend a few minutes with Barnes, *a soul-traveling super soldier from the 1940s*.

Jim had heard about everything from a sheepish Tony.

Over a video call.

From his Iron Man armor.

Looking like he was either ready to fly to the base where Jim had been assigned so Jim could see he was alive and well or flee to the opposite end of the earth to escape a stern talking-to.

A rookie mistake, as if JARVIS wouldn't immediately send Jim Tony's coordinates.

Barnes' last memory before waking up in Tony's workshop was of HYDRA scientists strapping him down in a contraption that threatened punishment for sabotaging the metal arm and promised compliance. It explained why he had attacked when Tony offered to reattach the arm that once acted as a Trojan Horse.

Zola, as Tony and Loki had already deduced, was gone. The Wakandan tablet showed no trace of the computerized consciousness. Yet the relief of having one fewer enemy to contend with had been cancelled out by the panic at Barnes' breakdown, whose recitation of his full name, rank, and serial number had grown increasingly frantic and shrill until Happy had unceremoniously shoved a cheeseburger under his nose.

It still seemed a little absurd, almost anti-climactic, and absolutely awful that a patty of ground beef covered with melted cheese and wedged between two slices of bread was what proved to Barnes they weren't HYDRA.

Because HYDRA hadn't fed Barnes at all during his second stint of captivity, first as a result of his unconsciousness, then as a tactic to keep him weakened, and finally, when Barnes was still able to fend off multiple agents after a week without food, as a test for precisely how far the super soldier serum had pushed the boundaries of Barnes' biology.

If Jim had to say, that was probably the moment Bruce had excused himself from the room and the reason why Bruce was avoiding Barnes in general. Too many unpleasant similarities between their experiences and one striking difference that set them apart - Bruce had ran in headfirst while Barnes had been dragged screaming and kicking. Bruce still struggled with the complicated self-loathing of being both Frankenstein and his monster, sometimes falling into the rabbit hole of guilt and grief. It showed progress that Bruce was learning to recognize and remove himself from situations that could drag him down, slow and steady steps toward healing by identifying what exacerbated his wounds.

Not to mention Barnes was still skittish about Bruce's alter ego after their confrontational first meeting. He had stopped comparing the Hulk to Red Skull but kept referring to Loki as an elf, much to everyone else's amusement except Loki's.

Jim had been and was still furious over the Soul Stone's callous disregard for Barnes' sense of self and the importance of agency, but underneath that anger was an acidic fear eating away at him because the Soul Stone had done the same to Tony.

Tony's return to the past was the other side of the coin to Barnes' trip to the future, parallel yet opposite with Tony remembering what he had lived through and Barnes forgetting what he hadn't. Both had been taken out of their respective timelines and relocated to a different point.

Yet none of them had objected to the Soul Stone's interference in Tony's life because It had given them their friend back and granted Tony a second chance. What did it say about them

that they could celebrate the Soul Stone in one instance then turn around and condemn It for doing essentially the same thing in another?

The approaching thumps of Barnes' footsteps, purposefully loud to counter muscle memory of the Winter Soldier's stealth, was Jim's cue to sit up and open his eyes that he wasn't aware he had closed.

"Colonel." Barnes stood at parade rest with his right arm tucked behind his back, highlighting the emptiness below his left shoulder. He had declined Tony's cautiously-worded offer of outfitting him with a Stark Industries prosthetic and seemed to draw comfort from the lack of one.

Jim had seen Barnes clutching at his left shoulder as he stared at the photo of the Winter Soldier.

A physical reminder that he was not HYDRA's weapon anymore even if he had no memory of it happening.

Or, if what Stephen theorized was correct, no access to those memories.

The neurosurgeon had ignored every mention of soul or magic or ancient artifact with an impressive steadfastness. Instead, he had focused on the medical understanding of how the brain functioned. Barnes' body had lived through every one of the seventy years that his soul had skipped, carrying with it the habits and training of a master assassin. If his eyes darted to assess various entry and exit points upon entering a room, then it was highly likely that his hippocampus would have retained episodic memories from his time as the Winter Soldier.

Retrieval, however, was a different matter.

One that Loki could potentially assist with, citing his ability to bring forth hidden memories as well as enhancing or dampening their impact and ignoring Stephen's skeptical mutterings in the background.

Barnes had listened to them both with bated breath, distress apparent in his wide eyes but hidden behind a mask of stoicism, another attribute of the Winter Soldier, before hissing out a refusal with a shaky exhale. Instead, he asked for their help to become better acquainted with the modern world and immersed himself in various documentaries, marveling at the picture quality. He hadn't wanted to know about his family beyond the fact that his sisters had passed and said nothing about Rogers other than checking if he was still Captain America, he hadn't wanted them to alert either party of his existence either. He did, however, queue up two films on the effects of global warming.

An avoidance tactic, though Jim wasn't sure if Barnes was aware of doing it or if hiding from himself was just instinct now.

They hadn't pushed, aware of how fragile Barnes' veneer of calm was, but they were prepared.

Under Tony's supervision, JARVIS had compiled a summary of the Winter Soldier's activity over the last seventy years. Each line an entry in a ledger HYDRA had started in Barnes' name, debts he shouldn't have to repay yet needed to answer for.

Eventually.

For now, Barnes could sit down and eat some turkey with way too many sides and get a whole damn pie to himself before learning more about space travel.

"At ease, Sergeant." Jim smiled and gestured to the plates of food. "I brought you a little bit of everything. Happy Thanksgiving."

*

JB watched the festivities from the other side of the expansive living room, close enough to soak in the atmosphere but far away enough to not be part of it. Sipping on his hot chocolate, he noted the potential pitfalls of the strands of Christmas lights and glittery ornament strewn across the carpet and resolutely did not analyze the other possible applications of these holiday decorations.

Twinkling lights wrapped around necks, twisted-

Shimmery knick-knacks slammed into eyes, exploding on impact and blinding-

With his arms stretched wide, Hogan grumbled for Banner to hurry up as he struggled to keep the enormous Christmas tree steady while Banner worked to lock the base into the tree stand. The entire thing wobbled when Hogan sneezed, blaming Lewis' impatience and the rows of tinsel already draped around the tree as the culprits.

Lewis threw a popcorn at him without looking up from her elaborate popcorn garland. It bounced off of Hogan's back and was picked up by Foster, who added it to her strand of popcorn garland.

Danger.

The hairs on the back of his neck lifted as Thor walked by, clapping a hand on his shoulder in passing.

They should be afraid of him, wary of what he could do. *Had done.* He was a weapon, a tool with a single purpose, to be used then put away.

The faces of his - HYDRA's - victims flashed behind his eyelids every night, lifeless eyes glaring their accusations and slack mouths screaming for mercy through fog of muted gray. Loki's magic had worked exactly as he promised. The Winter Soldier's bloodstained history became black-and-white memories, the lack of color provided a kind of detached distance; watching a story unfold instead writing one.

Like laughing at the Captain America commercials with Steve complaining right next to him.

Knowing Steve was still Captain America, fighting the good fight, was a comfort JB didn't feel like he deserved but was too weak not to draw from. He did, however, balk at the thought actually contacting Steve. Knowing the stubborn punk, Steve would not only grant JB his forgiveness but also demand it from people who owed JB nothing. And that didn't sit right with JB, even if he felt a flare of warmth at the thought of always having someone in his corner.

Rhodes whooped as he punched his fists in the air triumphantly, only to squawk when the tangle of Christmas lights dangling from his hands swung and hit him on the nose.

Potts snapped a photo from the armchair.

Stark nearly choked on a piece of candy cane as he doubled over in laughter, leaning heavily against Loki, who brushed a kiss against the top of Stark's head.

A vast improvement from the man in the middle of a silent breakdown JB had accidentally witnessed four days ago. The elevator had taken him to Stark's personal floor instead of the communal kitchen. Though the metal doors were only opened for a fraction of a second, JB had seen Stark clutching at the lapels of Loki's armor, tears slipping down his cheeks and catching in intricate design of his facial hair.

Stunned and concerned, JB tripped over his words. "Did- Did some- Something happen?"

"Today is a difficult day for Sir. He lost his parents on this day twenty-two years ago." There was an ominous note in JARVIS' robotic voice. "They were murdered."

JB's stomach churned around the pit that had been there since he learned he was - would be? - made into the Winter Soldier. "By...me?" He croaked out even though it wouldn't make any sense if he were right. Why would Stark save him, house him, offer him a new arm-

"By the Winter Soldier." JARVIS' answer, a correction and a rebuke, did not help ease the tightening coil in JB's gut.

Realization dawned. "You took me there on purpose, you wanted me to see this. Why?"

"Because you have the luxury of denial, Sergeant Barnes, and Sir does not."

JB opened the folder that night and asked for the Elf the next morning. These people...they were someone's parents, children, lovers, friends. They were more than names and dates printed on paper.

Lewis winked at him as she strolled past. "Hey Bieber, want a refill?"

Her smile had a contagious quality and JB found the corners of his lips ticking upward despite his resolve to keep his distance. "It's JB."

"Right, stands for Justin Bieber." She gestured at Stark. "We already have a Taylor Swift."

JB knew better to ask who that was after Lewis had gleefully played him some of this Justin Bieber's music. "I'm pretty sure that's Tony Stark." He nodded to himself. "And I'm James Barnes." He had spent twenty five years as Bucky then seventy years as the Winter Soldier, the former a nickname he had outgrown and the latter a title he never wanted, both holding him back from moving forward. "But I go by JB."

*

Rumlow watched Rogers approach through the third floor window, the wooden frame had splintered and the curtains were frayed, fluttering in the light breeze and creating a dance of shadows in the afternoon sun. Far from an ideal hiding place and precisely the last spot anyone would expect to find him in.

Rogers glanced up, blue eyes squinting and zeroing in on the one room with its curtains drawn, and strode into the building with determination in every step.

If he were a better man, Rumlow might have felt bad about taking advantage of Captain America's naivety but SHIELD had been sending Rogers on solo assignments that bordered on suicide missions, so perhaps he would be doing them a favor.

The floors creaked, once, alerting him of Rogers' presence and Rumlow could picture Rogers standing still in the hallway, gauging if he had given away his position when he had been made the second he set foot into the crowded market. Rogers had donned the prerequisite hat and sunglasses disguise but the real trick was in the mannerisms; different looks meant nothing when he still moved the same and stood a head taller than everyone else around him.

As an indulgence for himself, Rumlow had bumped shoulders with Rogers as he made his way toward the dilapidated building. Rogers had murmured an apology, never realizing the man with the hunched shoulders and hurried steps was the calm and collected HYDRA officer he had been hunting.

Rumlow supposed he could have injected Rogers with the counteragent then, but Dr. Silt had warned that the chemical compound was untested and might not take effect instantaneously or possibly at all. A public space had too many variables to manage; at best a curious bystander might film the sudden collapse of a stranger and at worst a stampede of panicked pedestrians could undermine his exit strategy.

No, it was far better to do this out of sight.

Slowly and silently, Rumlow crouched down, placing his hand on the floor, and felt for the vibration as Rogers tiptoed toward the empty room next door with too little caution a bit too late. He almost laughed when Rogers kicked down the closed door - another trick - and stormed in shouting his name.

Rumlow leaped, crashing through the paper-thin walls and tackling Rogers to the ground. "I've been waiting for this." He punched Rogers squarely on the nose, inordinately pleased to

feel the cartilage give way under his knuckles and the warm wetness of blood in between his fingers.

Rogers threw him off to the side with a grunt.

Moving with the momentum, Rumlow rolled into a crouch before springing back into battle with a spinning kick that Rogers dodged with a side step, leading him right into the punch Rumlow had lined up for his kidney.

A blow that would have brought anyone else to their knees only managed to make the super soldier stagger but that was all the opening Rumlow needed to steal closer, to knock Rogers' head to the side with an elbow to the temple, and to press the injector against that exposed carotid artery.

He pulled the trigger.

Rogers' hand shot up and tightened painfully around Rumlow's wrist.

The injector slipped through Rumlow's rapidly-numbing fingers and fell to the floor with a clatter. He hid his wince behind a smirk and played his trump card. "You know your pal, your buddy, your Bucky?"

"What did you say?" Rogers' grip slackened as shocked hopefulness colored his voice.

"He's been asking for you." Barnes hadn't been seen since he was sent to assassinate Stark. Judging by the fact that Stark had shown up at the Triskelion with the Hulk and Thor in tow, chances were good that the Barnes was dead. But Rogers didn't know that, or else he would have been storming Stark Tower instead of raiding various HYDRA bases, and Rumlow planned to use that gap in knowledge to his advantage.

Rogers blinked, his pupils constricting into pinpricks as a flutter of wind shifted the curtains and sunlight poured into the room. "You're lying."

"Why don't you come with me and see for yourself?" Rumlow grinned, confident and easy. Plan A's success had hinged on the counteragent working so now it was time for Plan B, to get Rogers to come with him willingly with Barnes as a lure.

"I-" Rogers jerked as a small hole appeared right above his right eyebrow, a trickle of red collected in the fine hairs and dripped down the side of his face.

Rumlow stared, uncomprehendingly, as the room tilted around him and Rogers. It wasn't until his shoulder hit the floor did he realized that they were the ones who had moved. There was a metallic taste in his mouth and a darkening haze around his vision, the last thing he saw was the glint from a muzzle of a gun on the rooftop five buildings down.

I Like Doors

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the late update! I ended up taking an unplanned nap (long story short, my internal clock is all messed up from taking on an early morning subbing job) and woke up juuuuust before the day's over to post this. XD

Please enjoy some more Thanksgiving fluff...it'll make the angst hurt less. I hope?

Also, I adore *The Princess Bride* but I'm also a realist so, well, you'll see. :P

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

The Princess Bride.

Tony eyed his plate with a critical squint, assessing each item and their placements before nodding decisively. "I think it needs more gravy." He pointed at the small gap in between the green beans and the mashed potatoes. "Right here."

Loki's chuckle was more felt than heard, a low rumble sending shivers down Tony's back. "As you wish."

Those three words, spoken so casually, made Tony's stomach clench as scenes from the *Princess Bride* replayed in his mind. He had seen the movie in college, dragged to some kind of campus-wide socialization event by Rhodey.

At first, he had been unimpressed and sympathized with the bored boy who had to suffer through his grandfather's storytelling in the opening sequence; a small, microscopic part of him had also been envious and seething at the stupid kid squandering away something Tony had never had with his whining. His feelings hadn't changed when the movie introduced Buttercup and Westley with a montage of how the former showed her love for the latter by being bossy and unreasonable with her demands.

Rhodey had lamented, much, much later, that the *Princess Bride* really wasn't the best film to show a teenage boy with no idea what love was or how a relationship should be. Of all the things Tony could have taken away from the film, he had gone with a liking to bossy girls with unreasonable demands like a misguided moth to a propane explosion. A trend that haunted both of them, Tony for the heartbreaks and Rhodey for picking up the pieces, for most of their first year at M.I.T. until Tony had decided, in a drunken but determined moment of self-actualization, that he would no longer be *Westley* in his relationships and instead channel *Buttercup*. He had searched and waited and longed for someone who would smile

and nod and indulge his outlandish requests with a coded response that only they could ever decipher.

An impossible hope he had given up after too many betrayals and too little authenticity.

Tony forced himself to slump against Loki even more, perhaps if his entire body went boneless, his stupid stomach would get the message and follow suit. He was rewarded with a swift kiss on his forehead and Tony felt himself actually relaxing at Loki's almost instinctive display of affection, easy and unthinking.

With a snap of his long fingers, Loki sent a tendril of green floating toward the center island in the crowded kitchen.

Gravy bubbled forth and filled the spot Tony had pointed at.

"Hey!" Bruce pointed at them with the empty ladle, somehow achieving a threatening effect despite drops of gravy splattering on the countertop.

Tony schooled his expression into one of utmost innocence.

Keeping his suspicious gaze on them, Bruce spooned gravy over the small mountain of cheddar cheese scalloped potatoes with impressive accuracy.

"Anything else?" Loki whispered, pressed against Tony so closely that each word was a puff of warm air and a ghost of a kiss against Tony's cheek.

"Bacon bits?" Tony angled his head to nuzzle at Loki's jaw, a chiseled line that made his mouth water, and breathed in the scent of leather and books and trees. "They're in the fridge, I think."

"As you wish."

*

December 16th.

Like clockwork, the date came around once a year.

Right between two holidays where people were expected to celebrate with their families.

Tony visited his parents' graves before sunrise and under the cover of fading night. There was a damp chilliness in the air, the moisture lingered on his skin, like the tears that gathered at the corners of his eyes but refused to fall.

Felt but not seen.

The way his father had taught him, *Stark men were made of iron.*

Tony stared at the tombstone and wondered fleetingly, as he did every year, why the funeral director hadn't thought to order one made of iron. It would have been a far more fitting

material than the black granite engraved with his parents' names, dates of birth, and a shared date of death.

Thousands of people had shown up for the funeral, mourning and memorializing a man who drove drunk, killed himself and his wife, and left his son orphaned.

Finding out that his father hadn't been at fault - *please, help my wife* - added spikes of guilt to the coil of grief twisting in Tony's gut, a razor wire cutting into him with every memory of him cursing Howard and every measured step he took back to the car.

Happy passed him a breakfast sandwich, the morning equivalent of a cheeseburger.

They drove back to the tower in silence.

Tony spent the rest of the day in the workshop, methodically watching and then deleting the various simulations he had made of the car crash over the years in his quest to understand what had happened.

His punishment for how their last interaction had gone.

Eventually, he trudged upstairs. He had no idea how long he had been down in the workshop, DUM-E had suspended the six-hour rule for the day, and the bone-deep weariness felt more emotional than physical.

Loki was waiting by the elevator, clad in his armor as if he would go to battle to avenge Tony's loss and all Tony needed to do was say the word.

What came out of his mouth was a sob.

Tony couldn't tell if he had stumbled toward Loki or Loki had teleported to him. It didn't matter, anyway, not when there were hands stroking over his back and kisses dotting his forehead.

Inside the comforting cocoon of Loki's embrace, he let himself fall apart as the mental dam he had built collapsed. Torrents of conflicted emotions and silenced grievances surged and swept him off of his feet with Loki's arms around him the only reason he was still upright. His vision misted over as the tears finally spilled. He tasted the bitter saltiness on his tongue as he gasped for air through the tumble of fragmented, dark, forbidden thoughts he hadn't dared to say but couldn't stop from falling out of his mouth.

It had been so much easier to be angry at Howard. Angry at his impossible expectations and constant disappointment. Angry at his absence when Tony had needed him. Angry at his presence when Tony hadn't wanted him there. Angry at his hypocrisy for criticizing Tony's lifestyle when he had been the one to wrap his car around a tree.

Now all Tony had to be angry at was the fact that he couldn't, *shouldn't*, be angry at his father anymore.

"I wish I didn't know." He hated how hoarse his voice sounded, like he had been screaming for hours. "I wish I could go on hating him for being the world's shittiest dad because that, that I know how to handle, I've had tons of practice. I spent most of my childhood wishing he'd just...go away. Drive to work one day and never come back. Poof, gone, then everything's better." He choked back a laugh. "It wasn't better."

Loki held him tighter. His palms, one in between Tony's shoulder blades and the other above his tailbone, felt like ice through the thin layers of Tony's shirt and hoodie. The jolt of freezing cold was surprising but not unwelcome and Tony found himself pressing back against Loki's touch as more hot tears burned down his face. He clutched at Loki with the desperation of a drowning man and ignored the fine tremors running through his fisted hands.

They stayed like this for what seemed like a few minutes or possibly an hour. Time held little meaning to the grieving, speeding by too fast to process the loss and crawling past too slow to grow used to it.

Loki's hold never wavered.

"Howard didn't kill my mom." It was the first time he had said those words aloud, acknowledged the truth that hadn't set him free. "He's not the shitty dad I thought he was and I- I don't- I don't know how to deal with that. I don't know him at all." He had filed Howard away, the cliché of a driven businessman who prioritized success over sentimentality, but now the label no longer applied. The facts Tony had collected and relied on to form his conclusion were no longer certain, his father was an unknown floating in a sea of variables and conjectures that could never be proven.

Because Howard was dead.

Killed. Assassinated. Face bashed in and skull crushed.

"I beg to differ."

The comment caught Tony off-guard. "Wait, what?"

"I think you know your father very well and he was the exact man he presented himself to be." Loki held Tony's incredulous stare with a calm one of his own.

The calmness was infuriating and Tony found his guard rising as he released his grip on Loki's armor, absently noting the crescent-shaped indentations on the smooth leather. "I didn't know he was murdered."

"Your father played no part in that scheme."

Tony's brows furrowed. Loki was right, the plot had been conceived by HYDRA and the coverup done by SHIELD but what if he hadn't bought their lies, had taken a closer look... "I

thought he was drunk and drove his car into a tree." He confessed defiantly, daring Loki to contradict him. "I didn't even question it for a second."

"Why would you? It was not the first incident where your father had imbibed copiously-"

"What are you getting at?" Tony snapped. "What are you trying to do here, huh? Make me feel less guilty for thinking that he's a shitty dad all those years and-"

"Yes." Loki lifted a hand and cupped Tony's cheek.

Despite his defensive irritation, Tony found himself leaning into the touch.

"You do not need to convince yourself that your father is without fault to mourn him." Loki's gaze took on a faraway quality. "One moment, however tragic, does not rewrite a lifetime."

Tony bit back the reflexive objection and tried to process what Loki had said. His perception of Howard had always been in the extremes. A larger-than-life figure he had idolized until his hero worship had been torn down by detached criticism and constant disappointment. Howard had become a villain, an oppressor, a shitty dad; the only way Tony could stop chasing after his father's approval was to disapprove of Howard all together and the only way he could process his father's death was to blame him for his mother's.

The metaphorical lightbulb clicked on.

What if it didn't have to be one or the other, hero or villain? That he could mourn Howard's death without the added qualifier of a good or bad parent? That he could simply grieve for losing his father? That he could see his father for who he was, a man with flaws and faults who hadn't done right by his son but also hadn't deserved a violent end?

The truth had hurt, tremendously so, but Stark men were made of iron and Tony was Iron Man.

He wanted to say something witty or insightful about this new wisdom but a yawn found its way out with a crackle of his jaw.

Loki blinked, his eyes attentive once more and the flat line of his mouth curved up into a slight smile. "You need sleep." Cool fingers circled around his wrists, tugging him forward.

Tony went, eyes already drooping closed and feet shuffling along, trusting Loki to lead him to their bed.

*

Barnes had decided to accept Loki's offer of help in retrieving his memories.

Stephen, who pushed two surgeries, could be there in an hour and had grudgingly promised not to interrupt or interfere with the spell.

Tony stayed in the penthouse, close enough to step in should things go south and not far away enough to forget the fact that his parents' murder would be relived today.

The sight of War Machine landing on the balcony with a box of donuts helped, as did the distraction, and the very valid panic, Rhodey's question of what Tony was getting for Loki for Christmas caused.

"What do I get a trickster god who can do everything himself?" Tony whined, grabbing a mug out of the cabinet and passing it to his friend then reaching for one for himself.

"Now you know how I felt shopping for you that first year and you gave me a re-gift." Sending Tony a dirty look, Rhodey filled half of his cup with coffee and the rest with Peppermint creamer.

Tony made a gagging noise as he watched the coffee turn from a gorgeous dark brown to an insulting tan color. "There has got to be a statute of limitations on that. Plus, you liked the socks and I've been picking them out every year since then."

"Just because you've changed your re-gifting ways doesn't mean it changes how it all started." Rhodey reached over and ruffled Tony's hair, part affection and part exasperation.

Tony swiped up Rhodey's mug in retaliation, taking a swig only to abruptly realize he was only punishing himself when the overwhelming sweetness of sugary mint eroded his taste buds. "Ack!" He ripped off a piece of the paper towel and scrubbed his tongue with it. "I need some real coffee."

"As you wish." Loki teleported into Tony's personal space, brushing a hand down Tony's back in greeting and sending a strand of emerald magic toward Tony's cup. It filled with coffee instantly.

"You're done already?" Tony glanced at the clock on the microwave. "It's only been like, ten minutes."

"Your faith in my ability is humbling." Loki teased.

"I just mean it's not enough time to go through seventy years of-" He grimaced. "-you know."

"I do not need to see what is behind the door to unlock it."

"What is it with you and door metaphors?" Stephen griped as he stepped out of the elevator.

Loki shrugged. "I like doors, especially teleporting past them."

Stephen's eye twitched.

The two launched into another round of good-natured though hostile-sounding bickering on the validity of magic.

"Do. Not." Rhodey hissed. "Get. Loki. A. Door."

*

"Sir, Sergeant Barnes would like to speak with you."

Tony looked up from his StarkPad in surprise. "Um, okay." He saved the file, sketches for a set of vambraces and greaves outfitted with the repulsor technology, with a tap of his fingers.

The soft chime of the elevator alerted him of Barnes' arrival but he was still unprepared for the sorry sight of the former Winter Soldier.

With his hair pulled back and his clothes wrinkled with the empty left shirtsleeve knotted haphazardly at the top of the left shoulder, Barnes was nothing like the formidable assassin who had tried to kill him on the rooftop or the dead-eyed soldier who belonged in another timeline. For all of his disheveled appearance, Barnes' eyes were clear and shining as if he had been crying but Tony saw no signs of tears.

They lapsed into an awkward silence, one that Tony desperately wanted to fill with chatter but didn't want to be the first one to speak for reasons he couldn't pinpoint himself.

A weird battle of wills? A show of dominance? A genuine loss at what to say to the man who was brainwashed then ordered to kill his parents?

"I'm sorry." Barnes rasped out, his voice gravelly with determination.

"It wasn't you." Tony gritted out the words and wished they sounded more believable.

"I know."

"It was HYDRA-" Tony's gaze, focused on the reflection of Barnes in the elevator's metal door, snapped to the man himself at the unexpected answer. "What?"

"I know it wasn't me that did all those things-" His jaw clenched as if he were forcing himself to speak. "-killed all those people but they're still dead and for that, I'm sorry. I'm, I'm real sorry that you lost your parents."

Tony held Barnes' gaze for a beat, finding only sincerity and sympathy, and nodded stiffly. He opened his mouth to acknowledge Barnes' apology but what came out was an invitation to join them in setting up the tree tomorrow.

When Barnes' face lit up with a liveliness that he hadn't realized was missing, Tony knew he couldn't take it back and he didn't want to. Not with darkness coloring their pasts and lurking around the corners and Barnes hadn't had a Christmas in seventy years.

Unless Somebody Important Died

Chapter Notes

I'm trying to become a morning person with very little success. Mostly I'm just tired from when I wake up and throughout the rest of the day. :\

We're wrapping up the Christmas fluff/angst and moving onto the next arc with another...you guessed it, cliffhanger!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Agents of Shield (E01S22).

Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell and its sequel *Scarlet* by Alexandra Ripley.

Jason Bourne created by Robert Ludlum. *James Bond* created by Ian Fleming. *Jack Bauer* created by Joel Surnow.

Arrested Development.

"Hey JARVIS, did the kids get their presents?"

"Yes, Sir. Tracking information shows all packages to the children enrolled in the Team Iron Man program as delivered."

It had taken an incredible amount of self-control to not send Harley or Peter something more than the standard gift set but any special treatment would draw attention to the two boys, which could do more harm than good in the long run - accusations of favoritism could not only impact how Peter and Harley were perceived by their peers but also damage the program's reputation irrevocably.

If Tony paid more attention to their winter projects and responded to their emails first, no one had to know.

*

Tony pushed his toes against the floor and spun himself around in a listless circle as he thought back to the conversation he had just had with Maria.

A formidable woman of frightening efficiency, Maria had managed to restore a semblance of order to the crumbled ruins of SHIELD, now functioning as a temporary interagency subdivision between the NSA and the CIA. A stilted custody arrangement that was a result of neither agency being comfortable with the other having full control and most of the SHIELD staff refusing the new positions and opportunities offered by both agencies.

We're not going to be able to fix it without our best people. They trusted me to get them back when I sent them out into the field and I keep my promises.

Maria's bid for loyalty during the Battle at the Triskelion had worked, as Tony had predicted it would, securing her not only the remaining agents' trust but also the position at the top of the organization. She was perfectly suited for the role. In the aftermath of the data dump, she had navigated the angry sea of public opinion and murky waters of appropriate oversight with the sure strokes of a seasoned swimmer, never once giving off the impression that she was in over her head even as she feared drowning.

So far, she had managed to spin SHIELD's existence into a necessary evil born of a noble cause.

The principle S.H.I.E.L.D. was founded upon was pure. Protection. One word. Sometimes to protect one man against himself, other times to protect the planet against an alien invasion from another universe but the belief that drives us all is the same, whether it's one man, or all mankind.

Her testimony before the U.N. had been the right mix of professional and vulnerable. A performance that was as effective as it was entertaining, at least for those who knew what to look for.

A tailored suit - skirt, not pants - with minimal makeup and sensible heels.

A calm demeanor that only cracked at key moments, a closing of the eyes or a pause in the middle of the sentence, but never broke.

A respectful tone and demure posture with her back straight and shoulders relaxed, making herself taller but not bigger.

Sitting in front of a committee of U.N. representatives, Maria was just as dangerous as she was with a gun in her hand. Every aspect of her appearance was a weapon in her arsenal. The same way Pepper's Louboutins with eye-catching and intimidating bright red undersides were hers and Tony's collection of sunglasses was his.

In the end, she had been able to redirect the blame for most of SHIELD's illicit activities onto HYDRA by capitalizing on HYDRA's infiltration of SHIELD and shifted the role of oversight to the U.N. by citing the World Security Council as a precedent, albeit a failed one as two of its councilmembers had been exposed as HYDRA. She had also presented the need for accountability as both a preventive measure and a show of good faith, proving to the world that SHIELD was done operating in the shadows.

It hadn't taken long for the U.N. committee to reach the decision to establish a supervisory panel that would serve as a middle point between the goal of protecting the Earth from extraordinary threats and the methods with which to achieve it. The exact details would require more discussion and negotiation, of course, but the proposal was well-received with the United States being one of the first countries to vote in its favor.

Tony had gotten a phone call from a very relieved President who wanted nothing to do with the management of enhanced individuals, an issue that hadn't been specified during the discussion but would surely be brought up and addressed in the drafting process. Better it be in the hands of the U.N. than on the shoulders of the United States. The whole ordeal was sure to be a political nightmare and election year was coming up, after all.

Due to all of her efforts in easing the United States' burden, Maria was now firmly on Ellis' good side. Except she really hadn't done much. The international community was wary to trust the country that had remained blinded to HYDRA's infiltration and would not have supported the United States taking on a more involved role. Still, Tony supposed Ellis didn't need to know that and it couldn't hurt to have Maria owe him another one.

A light tap on his shoulder brought his attention back to the present and to Happy, who had a copy of *Gone with the Wind* in hand and an apologetic smile on his face.

"Hey Boss, thought I'd drop this off early since I won't be around tomorrow."

Planting his feet and sitting up, Tony accepted the book with a small frown. "Everything okay?"

As a requirement of his first job, in his role as Tony's passenger, Happy had always spent both Thanksgiving and Christmas by Tony's side, back when those holidays had been the bookends of Tony's drunken depressive spiral. In recent years, Happy sometimes went to visit his parents or his brother's family, but he usually had the trips well-planned in advance and never last-minute.

Happy waved off Tony's confusion. "Everything's fine. I'm just going to be driving JB around Brooklyn tomorrow-"

"Wait, what?"

"-want to check out the changes and, if he feels up for it, volunteer at a-"

"Is he even ready to be out?"

"-neighborhood veterans' center and have some dinner there."

"You can just have dinner here, why-"

"Because you weren't comfortable with JB there when we put up the tree."

Tony's mouth snapped shut. He had thought he had hidden that better.

At first, he had been so sure that he would be fine. Barnes had apologized and even decided to go by a new name - JB, his initials, an acknowledgement that he wasn't Bucky anymore but still a link to his past - but Tony had found it impossible to turn his back to JB.

Which was ridiculous.

Extremis was running through his veins and the Iron Man armor was on standby. JARVIS was monitoring everything, Loki and Thor were near, Darcy had her taser, and the Hulk was one transformation away. Not to mention JB was down one arm.

And yet every time, *every single damn time*, JB had almost slipped out of his peripheral vision, Tony froze. He had tried to cover it up, angling his body and changing his position, but the thrum of tension remained, pulled taut and ready to snap.

MONDAY had assured him that it was an entirely normal reaction, an emotional whiplash after pushing himself too far and too fast to accept JB's presence. Even though JB wasn't the Bucky from the other timeline or the Winter Soldier of this one, Tony was still Tony with his own trauma and loss that required time and effort to heal, a lot more than one day's time or one brief conversation.

His expression must have been as shocked as he felt because Happy scowled at him like he was being particularly dumb.

"I can tell." Happy said with a roll of his eyes. "I thought you had finally drunk too much motor oil and lost your mind when you said you invited him."

DUM-E let out an offended beep.

"Sorry, DUM-E." Happy winced when his apology was decidedly not accepted by the bot. "Anyway, I don't want you being all fidgety and I don't want JB spending the holiday alone. So, I'm handling it."

Static filtered through the speakers.

"JARVIS and I are handling it." Happy amended.

"A stealth suit will be in place and Mr. JB has granted me permission to monitor his vitals as a preventative measure." The A.I. explained.

Tony thumbed through the pages of *Gone with the Wind*, absently noting the thousand-plus pages. "Do you think he could tell that I was..." His shoulders lifted and dropped in a defeated shrug. "...being me?"

"Nope, he was too busy freaking out about being in a room with people who have every reason to hate him but somehow don't." Happy huffed when Tony let out an incredulous sound. "Why'd you think he stayed on the other side of the room?"

Chewing on the inside of his cheek, Tony gave a reluctant nod. "But what about gifts?"

"No gift is a gift."

"That sounds like something that belongs in a fortune cookie." Tony's nose wrinkled. "I just want to do something nice."

Happy slanted him a look that was simultaneously impressed and unimpressed. "I'd say you've done a lot, *a lot*, of nice things for the guy already, Boss. If you keep going, you might

make him feel like he owes you and owes you big."

"Fine." Tony relented with a sigh, then, after a beat of silence, he glanced up with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "Hey, doesn't this book have a sequel-"

Happy's response was a raised middle finger before walking out of the room.

*

"You...got me a book." Tony stared uncomprehendingly at the red glossy book jacket and the gold-foiled title of *You Know Who He Is*. "About me."

A loud cackle burst out of Darcy.

Jane threw a hand over her friend's mouth in a failed attempt to stifle it.

Thor paid them no mind. "Dr. Banner informed me that it is a tradition amongst you and your friends."

Bruce hummed in agreement with all the graciousness of someone who had done a good deed.

"Excellent choice, Thor." Through the speakers, Rhodey's voice was as clear as the glee in his tone. He was already in Philadelphia at his parents' house, having headed out after the tree decoration.

Tony had no doubt his best friend was grinning ear to ear, if he could stop staring at the cover first. The subtitle, *An Unauthorized Biography of the Man Behind Iron Man*, was printed in a slightly less gaudy shade of gold and cleverly did not mention his name, befitting of the title. "But, why...this book?" He said slowly, drawing the syllables uncertainly and half-afraid of the answer.

"Loki has spoken about your triumphs with great passion and at great length-" Thor clapped his brother on the shoulder.

At this, Tony's stare snapped up from the book cover and met Loki's gaze, impossibly green and fond.

"-how you fill the world with the light of your heart and the fire in your veins-"

Pepper made a noise that was suspiciously like a coo.

"-I was troubled to find no songs dedicated to your heroic deeds until I learned that Midgardians preferred to document their heroes in print."

Tony held Loki's eyes for another second before turning to Thor with a heartfelt *thank you*, which the God of Thunder accepted with a victorious lift of Mjolnir that burned out half of the twinkle lights on the tree.

*

Loki's mouth was hot on his as they stumbled into their bedroom, hands pulling away clothes and seeking out every inch of skin.

As they collapsed onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and half-shed clothes, shirtsleeves bunched at elbows and pants heaped around ankles, Tony felt something hard jutting into his lower back that was far less pleasant and promising than the something hard jutting into his thigh in the front.

Frowning, he reached behind him for the offending object only to furrow his brows further when his fingers closed around a book.

A book that was bound in supple leather dyed the same shade of green as Loki's armor.

Loki had eased back slightly, pushing up onto his hands but keeping their hips slotted together. "My *other* gift to you, meant for your eyes only."

Earlier that day, surrounded by their friends, Loki had gifted him with a beautifully bound book of poetry that received a collective *aww* from everyone but Tony had detected a hint of performance in that choice, something meant to be opened in front of a crowd. As such, he was both pleased that he had been right and intrigued by what this new book held.

He opened it.

The first page held an intricate drawing of the interior of a building. Geometric pillars supported a curved ceiling, heavy chains suspended midair, and thin pipes lined the ground. In the center of it all was a glowing semi-circle of a light so intense that it seemed to burn through the thick parchment.

Brown eyes lit up with pure wonder.

"A dwarven forge, powered by the fires of a dying star." Loki murmured, the words thrumming in the air between them. "I would like to show it to you someday-"

Tony cut him off with a kiss, overwhelmed with a myriad of emotions that sent his heart fluttering.

*

"I need the theater tomorrow." Darcy stated in that matter-of-fact way she had, reaching for one of Mama Rhodes' highly-prized red and green sprinkled snickerdoodle cookies.

Tony shooed her hand away. "What are we watching?"

"Not we, me and JB. We're doing a Bourne marathon."

"What?" He had the strangest sense of déjà vu but unlike the previous ones relating to the other timeline and seemingly fixed events, this one was actually pleasant.

"The ex-CIA assassin with the memory problem? Seems like they'll have something in common." Taking full advantage of Tony's shock, Darcy grabbed a cookie. "You know how

I've been calling him different names with the initials JB?" She made a sweeping gesture that explained absolutely nothing. "And well, here we are."

He blinked.

She got another cookie. "Jason Bourne? James Bond? Jack Bauer? I even got some jelly beans for snacks, keeping with the theme and all. And don't worry, I warned him about the plot and he said it's fine but if it's not, then we'll watch the Jonas Brothers documentaries."

He blinked again.

"Kidding! I'm not that cruel. We'll probably switch to Arrested Development for Jason Bateman."

He blinked a third time.

"So spend all day in bed with your *exclusive liaison* tomorrow and don't bother us." Darcy brushed off the crumbs on her fingers before patting Tony affectionately on the cheek. "Good talk, Tom Selleck."

Then she was gone, leaving Tony blinking in confusion at her retreating form and holding a half-empty plate of cookies.

*

Christmas Day was almost subdued with everyone in their own zone and in their own space, only coming together around dinner time - Bruce made truly some spectacular pot pies using the ham from the day before - and their customary snowball fight after.

JB watched them from the sidelines, sipping on a cup of hot chocolate. He seemed to have quite the sweet tooth if Darcy's claim that he had finished off two family-sized bags of jelly beans without help was true.

Jane had built a catapult, which answered the question of what she had been up to all day, and was lobbing clumps of loosely packed snow in every direction. The flakes shook apart in the midair, glittering in the warm light spilling through the opened door leading back into the tower.

Thor and Loki were embroiled in their own match, the former melting the snowballs with crackles of lightning and the latter turning the droplets of water into ice pebbles before volleying them back in a flash of green.

Tony pivoted to dodge a snowball thrown by Bruce, the snow crunching under his heel as he spun and used the momentum to launch a counterstrike that missed its target. His arm had locked when JB's face vanished from his peripheral view, the same nervous tension rearing its ugly head.

Instead of berating himself for an instinctive reaction out of his control, however, Tony tried to accept it. Accept that he might always be on his guard around JB, that the history between them might have cemented their distance, and that it was *okay* to feel this way. Strangely

enough, in giving himself permission to not have to relax, Tony actually found some of the stiffness his muscles draining away.

Only to freeze when Happy shoved a handful of snow down the back of his shirt.

*

"Sir."

"I told you not to wake me unless somebody important died." Tony groaned, dragging Loki's hand up from where it rested across his chest to cover one of his ears, trying to block out his A.I.'s voice even as his mind buzzed awake.

JARVIS' beat of silence rang sharply. "I have Director Hill on the line for you."

He's Not a Super Soldier Anymore

Chapter Notes

I can honestly say this is the chapter that fought me the hardest, I've had to scrap ~1500 words and basically start over at 6pm on Friday. It's 11:31pm here so I'm still within my self-imposed Friday deadline - phew.

And though I planned to write more, my brain is mush now so instead of another scene, you get a(nother) cliffhanger. Oops.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

Edit: To make up for the back-to-back cliffhangers, [here](#) is a smutty continuation of the FrostIron gift scene in the last chapter featuring Top!Tony. <3

References/Quotes

Iron Man 2. Avengers. Captain America: Civil War.

"Who died?" Tony blurted out as soon as the call connected. "What happened?"

Maria's pause was slightly too long, the silence stretching on ominously.

Pressing the heels of his palms over his eyes, Tony willed himself to take measured breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Slow and easy.

Loki splayed his hand over Tony's galloping heart, as if he could keep it from jumping out of Tony's chest.

It helped.

Tony opened his eyes. "Hill? Who died?"

"No one, no one died." She breathed out a tired sigh. "No one real, anyway."

"What?"

"It's Rogers."

*

Those two words were enough to send Tony kicking his way out of the covers and clambering off the bed, mind racing through increasingly catastrophic and unrealistic outcomes.

Burning buildings. Collapsed tunnels. Demolished airports.

He half-hopped into the pair of jeans he had left in a heap by the side of the bed before shrugging into the shirt next to it, only to realize it was Loki's when the scent of leather and books and trees hit his nose and the sleeves engulfed his hands. He reached for the collar and prepared to pull it off.

"Wait." Loki mouthed, the look in his eyes sending a rush of heat through Tony's body, melting away some of the icy fear.

"What about Rogers?" Tony asked, holding out his arms out to the sides as Loki had gestured for him to do; green sparks danced across the room and the excess fabric shrinking away until the cuffs sat perfectly at his wrists.

After the Soul Stone's unprompted and unwelcome intervention, Tony had called Maria and made the very magnanimous offer to extend Barnes' stay at the Tower with the technically true and purposefully vague explanation that there had been a breakthrough in recovering Barnes' mind. She had accepted and reiterated her promise to *handle* Steve and keeping him out of *New York*.

The stack of files on the Winter Soldier hadn't kept Steve occupied for more than a few days and Maria had had to redirect him by sending him out on missions, raiding smaller HYDRA bases across Europe, under the guise of chasing down leads on Barnes.

In hindsight, Tony should have picked up on her vague and technical phrasing, but he had had other things fraying his attention.

"He insisted on going alone, something about how he's the one least likely to die trying." Maria sighed. "Recently, we received intelligence of Rumlow operating out of-

Lagos. Tony's mind supplied instantly as he felt renewed dread twisting in his chest.

"-Bucharest."

Another flicker of familiarity from the previous timeline that he could have done without but there had been no major news stories flagged in that region. Tony grabbed an ear piece off of the credenza and slipped it on, slanting a look at one of the cameras.

"On it." JARVIS' voice sounded in his ear.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony watched Loki arch his back in a graceful stretch before sitting up and sliding out of bed, dressed in what Tony had affectionately named Asgardian casualwear before his feet, already clad in impeccably-laced leather boots, hit the plush carpet. He sent Loki a beseeching look, glancing down at his bare feet and peering back up at Loki through his lashes.

Loki smiled, fond and indulgent, and summoned Tony's shoes to Tony's feet.

"There was a confrontation and Rumlow injected Rogers with a foreign substance." She let the words hang in the air, as though they were significant.

Tony blew his lover a kiss. "Okay, so? He's a super soldier, remember?"

"Not anymore."

"What?" Tony choked out, his mind a frustrating blank as he struggled to comprehend what he had just heard.

"He's not a super soldier anymore."

No one, no one died. No one real, anyway.

Captain America was an invention of the United States military.

"I'm on my way."

Loki was next to him in an instant.

*

Instead of flying to the temporary SHIELD headquarters in the Iron Man suit, Tony had opted for the more efficient method of having Loki teleport them both to Maria's location.

There was a buzz of static in his earpiece as his own bedroom faded away in a haze of green and Maria's purposefully bland office snapped into view. With eyes closed and both hands massaging her temples, she hadn't noticed their arrival and continued talking into the phone held up next to her ear by a lifted shoulder.

"-when you get here, there's more-"

Tony knocked on her desk in a bid to get her attention.

A move that he immediately regretted when Maria had a gun in hand and aimed in his general direction before opening her eyes. Her blue eyes were bloodshot with fatigue with dark circles bruising the skin beneath them. She lowered her gun. "Stark."

"Commander." Loki nodded tersely, a bite in his voice. He held out his hand in an offer of a handshake.

"Loki." Maria leaned forward to accept it, her choice to remain seated more a result of her exhaustion than a play for power.

Loki turned his palm up before her hand could reach his, her gun vanishing from the desk and reappearing in his hand. Green wisps crawled over the weapon, disassembling it and floating each part back down onto the desk with the bullets encircling them neatly. "I do not care for weapons pointed at my exclusive liaison."

Despite the palpable tension in the air, Tony struggled to suppress a pleased smile. This was exactly the type of petty thing he would say and do if his loved ones were threatened. Even if it were their own fault. He and Loki were really quite well-matched.

Maria gave them both a dry look. "I don't like people popping up in my office unannounced."

"Sir did announce that he was on his way, Commander Hill." JARVIS' voice rang out from somewhere under Maria's desk, where her phone had fallen.

In lieu of responding, Maria bent to retrieve her phone with an amused huff but when she straightened, there was no trace of humor in her expression. "As I was saying, there's more."

Tony sighed. "There always is." He settled back against the wall with his arms crossed. Loki did the same, presenting a united front in both their postures and with the lack of space between them.

"I assigned an agent to monitor Rogers and intervene if things got out of hand. He, well, he took a calculated risk when he recognized Rumlow and determined Rogers to be compromised. He took the first shot he had." Her face twisted in a grimace. "He shot Rumlow in the head, *through* Rogers."

"Is that a thing assassins actually do? I've always thought it's just in the movies." Tony mused, falling back on tangents and snark to deflect from the seriousness of the injury, especially with Rogers no longer being a super soldier.

"I myself have speared many enemies who thought themselves clever by hiding behind Thor." Loki said offhandedly.

Maria blinked.

"Sir, I believe I've located the incident." JARVIS' tone was gentle. "It happened nine days ago."

Immediately, the lift in his mood crashed.

Nine days ago.

So why was he hearing about it now?

Tony dug his phone out of his pocket and set it down on the desk. "Hit it, JARVIS."

The darkened screen glowed arc reactor blue as news footage, dated December 18th, was projected into the air between them. The audio was in Romanian but the images spoke for itself without the need for translation.

A reporter was trying to position the microphone in front of the police officer who kept twisting back to point up at the third floor of the building, a low-income apartment complex by the looks of the rows of evenly spaced windows with tattered curtains fluttering in the wind. In the background, two body bags were carried out of the building and loaded onto the waiting ambulance, the red lights flashing in the fading sunset. The market had long dispersed and any passersby only glanced at the scene before hurrying away; violent crime, unfortunately, was apparently not uncommon in this neighborhood.

Tony bit the inside of his cheek, willing the spikes of hurt and irritation away with little success. He knew, logically, that it was a good thing that Maria took care of the situation instead of calling him at the first sign of trouble but he couldn't help but feel a bit left out at the thought of not being needed. His stomach churned at the possibility that perhaps he had never been needed.

At all.

Which was ridiculous. In the previous timeline, he had been in a constant state of near-drowning in demands on his time, resource, and energy, greedy hands pulling him under until he couldn't remember there was a whole world above the surface or what it was like to simply breathe.

Now he was pouting because Maria held actual respect for his time and did *not* expect him to fix her problems when they weren't his to solve and he would have been offended by her audacity and entitlement had she demanded him to.

So why was he upset?

Was he still a classic fixer, preferring to lose himself in everyone else's problems so he never had to deal with his own?

Or a textbook narcissist like Natasha had profiled him to be, overinflating his self-importance and believing that he was the only one who could save the world, angry because Maria had proven him wrong?

What the hell was wrong with him?

As if sensing the sparks of self-loathing rekindling in Tony's thoughts, Loki hooked his index finger in Tony's elbow. That one small gesture pulled Tony out of his spiraling thoughts and back to the present.

This new timeline where different choices had changed the sequence of events, unpredictable yet comforting because despite not knowing what was to come, he knew what he had avoided.

This new life where friends became family, building their own traditions around the values they held dear - each other.

This new world where he wasn't alone and breaking under the weight of responsibilities that weren't his to shoulder because he had allies who were willing to carry their own share.

Maria's choice to handle the incident in Bucharest on her own wasn't an exclusion of Tony but rather a reflection of who she was as a professional.

And he couldn't fault her for that, just as he shouldn't blame himself for his absence.

Tony snapped his fingers, the footage paused and zoomed in on the two body bags. "Nice disguises, Rumlow and Rogers?"

Of all the possible reactions, he hadn't expected Maria to whistle, low and long, in admiration. "Impressive, nicely done, JARVIS."

"Thank you, Commander Hill."

"Rogers and Rumlow, actually." Maria corrected, pointing at body bags, her tone easy and light. "And, in the interest of full disclosure, Barton." Her finger landed on the blurry figure of a hunched over man carrying a duffle bag. "He was the agent tasked with keeping Rogers in line. He knows Rogers' habits, can keep his distance, and is highly invested in the success of his mission." She added at Tony's incredulous stare.

"And has a tendency to shoot people he's pissed at in the face!"

Loki raised a hand. "I can vouch for that."

"It does explain the choice of aiming for the head rather than the torso." JARVIS interjected. "In most combat scenarios, snipers prefer to aim for center mass as it is a much larger target and just as lethal."

A beat of silence as they processed that bit of information and the blithe manner in which JARVIS offered it.

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and resolutely shelved away any worries of his A.I. going SkyNet. It was probably Darcy's influence anyway.

Maria cleared her throat. "I'm not disputing Barton has a vendetta against Rogers, but there was no way he could have foreseen this outcome. As far as he knew, Rogers should be able to survive a head shot given that he had recovered from a direct hit from the Hulk."

Tony shifted his weight, crossing his legs at the ankles and pressing his knee against Loki's, and remembered the crater in the marble floors of the penthouse and the beaten god with clear eyes.

If it's all the same to you, I'll have that drink now.

"All Barton saw was Rogers not apprehending a high-ranking HYDRA operative and determined that Rogers must be compromised or was in the process of being turned." She continued. "And he was right, HYDRA has developed a counteragent to the super soldier serum, likely derived from your father's formula, to weaken Rogers temporarily and to give Rumlow a chance to subdue and capture him."

Howard's car, the hood wrapped around a tree and the trunk popped open. A detail he hadn't noticed in his grief and anger. What else had HYDRA taken that night?

"Did Barton make it home for Christmas?" Tony found himself asking despite his brimming curiosity, as morbid as it was, about Rogers' fate. Or perhaps because of it, he still hadn't made up his mind about how he felt or should feel about the situation.

"He did and they had a great time together. Like you did, I hope." She added meaningfully, alerting Tony to the fact that he might not have hidden his irritation at being told after the

facts as well as he thought.

"One of the best." Tony said, thinking back to how his friends had stepped in and made sure both he and JB had a good time despite their complicated history. And, of course, the wonderful hand-drawn journal of dwarven metalcraft Loki had gifted him and the hours he had spent nestled against Loki, listening to the smooth lilt of Loki's voice explaining the various mechanisms and planning future adventures together. "Relaxing, you know."

"Actually, I don't know." Maria countered with a lift of an eyebrow, the assessing gleam in her stare replaced with a teasing one. "I've been busy dealing with the death of a national icon while you were sipping on eggnog."

For some inexplicable reason, her playful jab soothed away the last vestiges of Tony's insecurities. "Imported, from Ireland." He affected a haughty tone, impulsively offering a seemingly random detail that was actually an opening for a conversation in between what was said. "You haven't had eggnog until you had this one."

Maria inclined her head in interest. "Got any left?"

"Nope, all gone."

"Damn."

"See, *if you'd called, I would have considered* saving you some."

"I'll remember that *next time*." Maria nodded with more gratitude than appropriate for an offer of eggnog, imported or not, and her phrasing of *next time* as opposed to *next year* told Tony that she understood what he had just promised.

"Good." It wasn't a guarantee that Iron Man would help clean up SHIELD's messes but it was a pledge to at least *consider* lending his aid. The door between SHIELD and Iron Man was still closed, but it was no longer locked as it had been.

A brief moment of silence hummed between them, almost peaceful except for the elephant in the room they had to address eventually.

Tony felt his shoulders stiffen instinctively, his guard rising even though he didn't know what he was trying to protect himself from. "You said the counteragent is temporary, so what's up with this *Captain America is dead but Steve Rogers is alive* crap? Can't he just, I don't know, heal himself after it wears off?"

"That was our hope, originally."

Loki's brows ticked up, pinning Maria with a stare. "And now?"

"Well, why don't I just show you?"

Can't Reverse the Reversal

Chapter Notes

Not a cliffhanger this time! And we have some hand-wavy science stuff...literally. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Avengers: Age of Ultron. Captain America: Civil War.

Well, why don't I just show you?

For all the drama and suspense in Maria's words, Tony had expected false doors and hidden hallways. A short walk to the elevator and an even shorter ride to the next floor down had felt anticlimactic; there hadn't even been a secret panel or a complicated sequence, Maria had just pressed a single button then they were descending with a smooth hum.

Loki's eyes found Tony's in the reflective metal of the elevator doors with a knowing look, paired with a subtle arch of his eyebrow, communicating his own similar train of thoughts.

Tony stifled a smile, amused that Loki was thinking the same thing and pleased by how well Loki knew him, and settled for an imperceptible lift of his shoulders.

It still surprised him, the realization popping up at random and stealing his breath, just how well-matched they were and how unlikely it had been that they had found their way across literal time and space to each other. Honestly, it all sounded a bit ridiculous when Tony really thought about it. Not to mention their relationship had far too many similarities with the Young Adult novels Jane liked to say she was only reading for research for what to get Tony for next Christmas.

The age-old tale of two broken people whose jagged edges only fit with one another's because despite being hurt differently, they had ended up with the same wounds and matching scars.

Pale lines from the larger-than-life golden figures they hadn't been able to measure up to.

Smooth patches that tugged with every move from fathers who had only been in name yet loved all the same.

Raised ridges from the betrayals of their greatest truths kept from them by well-intentioned lies.

They had spotted themselves in each other, a flicker of recognition in the very first moment when a Tony who believed in the living legend who lived up to the legend offered a Loki whose mind was not his own a drink that blazed into an inferno of intrigue when a younger yet wiser Tony mouthed along with a Loki who was beaten into the floor yet victorious in his freedom.

If it's all the same to you, I'll have that drink now.

An instant magnetism between like and like that defied the laws of physics, fitting because neither of them had ever played by the rules. They had reached for each other with the desperate fearlessness of someone who had nothing to lose but instead of digging fingers, there were open palms. It was unlike anything Tony had known and he strongly suspected the same went for Loki too, a relationship he didn't have to fight for when he had been more than ready to go to war. Everything between them was easy, pieces slotting together seamlessly in a way that made Tony marvel and wonder and promise to never take for granted.

JARVIS had footage of them curled up in bed, Loki's dark lashes fluttering with the beginning of a bad dream and Tony's hand, unconsciously and unerringly, finding its way to splay over Loki's heart and calm its rising beat.

Darcy had photos of them sitting by the floor-to-ceiling windows, bathed in the warm sepia of sunset that dimmed their figures to silhouettes and highlighted their closeness, intertwined together without beginnings or ends.

Rhodey had stories of them doing something he deemed disgustingly cute when they hadn't even been trying to rile him up, a grazing caress here and a shared glance there, little unconscious gestures of affection and appreciation and assurances that they had craved all their lives and still couldn't believe these small acts were theirs to give and keep.

The elevator dinged, signaling their arrival and snapping Tony out of his - frankly - sappy musings.

As the doors slid open, sight and sound and scent filtered in through the slowly widening space. The white glare of fluorescent lights bounced off of the pale sterile blue of the walls, hushed conversations interspersed with the chimes of machinery, and the harsh bite of antiseptics masked the lingering tang of copper in the air.

They were in medical.

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Siberia still haunted Tony's dreams, even after nearly two years of returning to the past and rewriting the future. There were nights where he jolted awake in a cold sweat that felt like snowflakes on his forehead and with hands outstretched to block a blow to his sternum, heart pounding with a scream frozen in his throat. With JARVIS there, it took less than a minute for the A.I. to anchor him to the present but it took much longer to fall back asleep and he had a little game, or as MONDAY liked to call it, a coping mechanism and processing tool, to pass the time.

Staring off into the familiar space of his room, Tony liked to envision different scenarios where Rogers, who had left Tony to die in an abandoned bunker with nothing but the shield his father had crafted and the arm that had murdered him for company, finally faced the consequences of his actions. Some of them were logical and some were not but they all helped to quench his thirst for justice in his better moments and for revenge in his weaker ones.

Maybe Rogers would be scorned by the world. People would riot in the streets, holding up signs calling for his arrest. The United States army would strip Rogers of his ill-earned title, more of a stage name than a military rank. Governments around the world would denounce Rogers and brand him a war criminal.

Maybe someone - anyone - would come for him and bring him back home. Tony would then build an improved Iron Man armor, one with multiple power sources and all of them hidden. This time, he would deploy all the weapons in his upgraded arsenal and show Rogers what Howard had meant by *the best weapon is the one you only have to fire once*.

Maybe, in the disappointing likelihood where the United Nations backed down and the Accords were annulled, Tony would withdraw his support from the Avengers. Leave them to fend for themselves without the backing of a genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist. How long would they last without his armor and weapons that they had grown to rely on? Without his considerable wealth that opened locked doors? Without his public relations team that handled the media and the Avengers' image? Without the charitable organizations that paid hospital bills and rebuilt homes? It was a petty move and Tony had no trouble owning that; after all, he had been called many much worse things that weren't true.

Maybe Zemo would have been lying in wait just outside the bunker and activate the triggers as the two super soldiers stumbled out. Would Rogers fight back or stand down? Would the Winter Soldier care either way? In the middle of the night, Tony soaked in the vicious satisfaction of poetic justice but the shame of relegating Barnes to a weapon - no better than what HYDRA had done - always found him in the light of day.

After Extremis, Tony had some truly fantastical ideas for how he would use his new-found strength and thermo-manipulation. Most of them ended with a melted Vibranium shield.

The nightmares had lessened since Loki and he became exclusive liaisons and began sharing a bed. On multiple occasions, Tony had woken up to Loki kissing his temple and covering the center of his chest, preempting the nightmare before its claws could sink in too deep. These instances had Tony worrying about interrupting Loki's rest, sharing his concerns with JARVIS only to be reassured by the A.I. that they both slept better when together with footage to prove it.

On the rare times when the nightmares did come, sliding their hooks in soundlessly, Loki had laid with him and offered his take on what fate should befall the man who had broken Tony's trust, a crime most unforgivable, with frighteningly devious inventiveness.

Even though Tony was a futurist who saw possibilities instead of impossibilities and Loki had a brilliantly complex mind with the advantage of magic, neither of them had not thought

of this particular outcome as a possible consequence and certainly would never have wished it on the Steve of this timeline.

Yet here they were, staring down at the man who used to be Captain America.

Lying in the queen-sized bed that seemed to swallow his shrunken frame whole, Steve was as still and lifeless as a corpse. The only sign of life was the rise and fall of his chest, a fluttering movement barely visible underneath the layers of blankets. His veins stood out against the pale paper-thin skin, greenish blue lines that seemed too thin next to the IV catheter inserted in the crook of his bony elbow. Two bags hung on the rack next to the bed, one was a clear liquid that dripped down steadily and the other had a viscous consistency with droplets clinging to the inside of the plastic bag. The labels printed on the sides identified them as a saline solution and an infusion of vitamins and nutrients, keeping Steve hydrated and fed.

"Barton found him like this." Maria said. "Along with an empty injector that had Rumlow's prints. Our doctors have analyzed the contents and confirmed it as a counteragent to the super soldier serum."

Bruce would definitely be interested in studying it further, as would Tony. Though they would need to first make it clear to the Hulk that their motivation was one of pure scientific curiosity and not to remove Bruce's alter ego. "Can you-"

"Already sent."

"Thanks."

Maria cleared her throat and nodded toward the fading bruise on Steve's forehead, the only sign of injury. "You wouldn't know it looking at it now but the gunshot wound was already closing when Barton got there. According to his report, flesh and bone were literally reknitting themselves in matters of minutes. We've never seen a healing rate like that, it took hours for him to wake up after a direct hit from the Hulk."

"And yet..." Loki managed to make those two words sound unimpressed and inquiring at the same time.

"Right now, the best guess we have is that the counteragent sent the super soldier serum in Rogers' system into overdrive, sort of a last hurrah before it was deactivated."

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Tony rocked on his heels as Loki shifted his weight; subtle movements that put them in better positions to react though nothing here should pose a serious threat to either of them.

"Or there were variables in Erskine's formula that HYDRA wasn't aware of or didn't consider and their counteragent reacted unpredictably. Or the severity of the injury triggered a burst of adrenaline that did..." Maria waved a hand around in a resigned gesture. "Science stuff. "

"Science stuff, huh?" Tony's lips quirked before flattening into a mockingly solemn line. "Sounds official and not at all made-up."

"Tell me about it." A familiar voice chimed from the doorway and Tony schooled his face into an impersonal mask as he turned around. He hadn't met her in this timeline, though not from the lack of trying on Bruce's part. His ScienceBro had been tracking Helen's work meticulously and attended several conferences at which she was a keynote speaker. It made sense that SHIELD had called her in, a world famous geneticist with tremendous knowledge and unmatched understanding in the fields of cell biology was the perfect candidate to solve the mystery of super soldier serum reversal.

"Dr. Cho." He extended a hand. "Your work on synthetic tissue regeneration is unmatched and I'm a huge fan of the way you turn my Brucie Bear into a squealing fanboy."

Helen's eyebrows flew up in amused surprise as she accepted it. "Is that your standard greeting format for all scientists or are Bruce and I the lucky ones?"

"How did you..."

"A big angry green bird told me." She edged past them to get into the room. "Oh, and, um, please don't shock me."

Maria let out a bark of laughter.

Tony groaned.

Loki patted his shoulder in comfort though there was a suspiciously upward curve at the corners of his mouth.

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While Helen was able to explain their working theories behind Steve's transformation with more specific data and scientific jargon than Maria managed, she, too, was unable to pinpoint the exact cause for the counteragent's seemingly permanent effects and the accelerated healing from super soldier serum.

"I can't reverse the reversal." Her nose wrinkled at the awkward wording. "Nor would I recommend it even if I could. His biochemistry has been altered dramatically in a handful of years, his time under ice notwithstanding, and there is no telling what could happen if we tried. The chances of cellular mutation are much too high, best case scenario, we end up with Hulk 2.0 and worst case scenario..." She trailed off meaningfully, letting them fill in the blank.

A beat of silence.

"At least he's stable. Comatose, but stable." Helen offered, aiming for optimistic and missing it by a mile, and excused herself from the room.

Tony studied Maria, who appeared unperturbed and unsurprised. This wasn't news for her so Helen was here for Tony and Loki's benefit. But for what purpose?

There had been no indication from Maria or Helen that they wanted or needed Tony's input on Steve's status and if they did need a second opinion, Bruce would be a much better

candidate. Though Tony wouldn't put it past Helen planning to consult with Bruce, if not already, based on how friendly the two seemed already.

Maria had been doing an admirable job digging SHIELD out of the public relations crater and earning significant political currency while doing so. She certainly didn't need Tony to vouch for her or intervene in any way. The time of SHIELD hiding behind a superhero figure had come to an end, with Captain America's fall...

Wait.

"You wanted this to happen." Tony realized. "You sent him out on these missions knowing he would-" He cast around for a word with an accusatory hand suspended awkwardly in the air before jabbing a finger at Steve's prone form. "-*this*."

Maria reared back. "No!"

Loki pinned her with a stare.

"I mean, yes." She sighed, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. "But not like that, I just... I thought he'd get arrested or recognized, or, oh hell, Barton would lose it and shoot him-"

"Which he did." Loki's helpful interjection was summarily ignored.

"-and that'd get the ball rolling on the discussion for extending the protection clause to superheroes in this document the U.N.'s drafting. The data dump had already put everything out there and it's only a matter of time before the public realized what Silt did so why not get ahead of it."

As unhappy as he was about being kept in the dark, Tony couldn't find fault with her reasoning. The data dump had included a myriad of information normally protected under confidentiality and, as ruthless as it sounded, it was better for the public to mourn and weep for the hero who fell than for the angry mob to come for the villain with torches and pitchforks.

"Rogers had been practically brainwashed to live in the past and we can use that to establish a protocol for mental health support, same goes for Barton's PTSD and anger issues."

Tony's gaze narrowed at the particular word choice and knew why Maria had called. "You want Barnes."

"And you don't." She countered. "This is as good of an opportunity as we're going to get to introduce the ex-Winter Soldier to the world as Captain America's equally brainwashed best friend while we have sympathy on our side and the compelling visual of a pre-serum Rogers and a one-armed prisoner of war." Something must have shown on Tony's face because Maria's determined expression softened into something like understanding. "Bucky Barnes can't hide in your tower forever."

Once again, he couldn't refute her logic. "I'll talk to him." Tony said, swallowing down the reflexive correction that it wasn't Bucky, it was JB.

Like I Said, Simple

Chapter Notes

Sharon crashed this chapter so some things got bumped to the next one. I blame her and encourage you to do the same. ;)

Also, in case you missed it, [here](#) is a smutty continuation of the FrostIron gift scene featuring Top!Tony to make up for the back-to-back cliffhangers in Chapters 70 and 71.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

Tony's gaze found its way back to Steve, small and still and pitiful with the fading bruise painting half of his forehead in an ugly greenish yellow. Yet at the same time, Steve also seemed more solid, more real, than the larger-than-life persona of Captain America. No longer an unfailing hero in comic books but a flawed man with a chance to change, to grow, to heal.

Eventually. If he woke up.

Comatose, but stable.

Helen wasn't able to give an estimated time frame for when Steve might regain consciousness, though his brain activity was within the normal range but then again, what was normal when it came to a super soldier who had been frozen for seventy years, injected with an unknown counteragent then shot in the head?

Probably about as normal as the other super soldier who had been captured, experimented on and brainwashed into a weapon for seventy years, lost his memories of those years because of the meddling of an Infinity Stone, then regained them through magic.

Damn it.

Maria cleared her throat. "I'd like to call a press conference in two days-"

Tony hissed. "Two days? Are you kidding-"

"We can't afford to wait any longer. Every day we wait, the higher the chances are that someone else is going to break the news." She winced. "A reporter at best and HYDRA at worst."

"You're going to put him in front of reporters?" He bristled.

"Oh god no."

Maria's swift denial quelled some of his outrage. "Okay."

"I'm not putting him on live television. We just need him to sit by Rogers' bedside and look appropriately sympathy-inducing for some photos and possibly videos. Small steps." She promised. "But we have to take them."

Tony huffed. "In two days."

"Two days." She confirmed.

"Chop chop. Got it." He snarked with more bite than humor, the time limit made the already difficult situation near impossible, and waved off the apologetic look she sent him. "JARVIS, let JB know I'd like to talk to him when he has a minute."

Maria made an inquiring noise.

"Barnes, he's going by his initials now. He doesn't feel much like a Bucky these days after, well, everything." Tony waved a vague hand around.

"Noted." She nodded. "It makes sense after what happened with Zola."

Right. Zola.

The official story was the plan that they never got the chance to implement because the best lies were told with truths. Wakanda had captured and delivered Zola as a gesture of gratitude. JARVIS, with the help of Tony and Loki, had bested Zola digitally and obtained the information on how to remove the Winter Soldier triggers. However, Zola had purposefully neglected to mention the failsafe, that the de-conditioning would also erase Barnes' memory of his time under HYDRA's control.

"And it is 100% not your fault, JARVIS. No one could have seen that coming." She added hurriedly, unaware of their deception.

Keeping the Soul Stone's existence a secret was for the best. For everyone.

Revealing that Tony was in possession of the Soul Stone would raise the logical and dangerous question of how he came by it in the first place.

There were interested parties who would love to get their hands on an Infinity Stone, especially after Thor had taken the Mind Stone and the Space Stone back to Asgard. And they would not be at all discerning about their methods to acquire it.

JB had been and was still struggling to come to terms with what HYDRA had done to him, had turned him into. Being told that that an ancient artifact had invaded and altered his mind could have derailed his recovery, if not sent him into another breakdown.

Not to mention the Soul Stone was sentient and had no qualms about crossing moral boundaries. It had brought JB's mind forward in time in an attempt to help, what could it do when its intents were to harm?

Knowing all these things, however, did not stop Tony from feeling a pang of guilt.

"Thank you, Commander Hill." JARVIS replied. "And Sir, Sergeant Barnes is available whenever you are."

Tony clapped his hands together. "Well, then. Let's get to it."

"Allow me." Ever the gentleman and exasperatingly more so in Maria's presence, Loki reached to open the door.

"This again? Thought we're done with the Mr. Manners schtick." Her wry response was significantly better than her nervous twitch the last time Loki was aggressively polite.

Green eyes blinked innocently. "I have not the faintest idea what you mean."

"Generally speaking, taking apart people's weapons is considered kind of rude." Her heels clicked purposefully against the floor, off-beat with the steady beeping from the monitors.

"I believe it would be far ruder of me to cause you bodily harm." Loki countered, nonchalant and sincere. "A warning is certainly the more courteous option, wouldn't you agree?"

Again, Tony felt that inappropriate surge of fondness at just how petty Loki could be in his protectiveness. The conversation he needed to have with JB still loomed but some of his trepidation had melted away.

Maria's footsteps stuttered. She let out a long-suffering sigh before strolling into the hallway. "Just knock next time."

Following her out of the room, Tony brushed against Loki, an accidental graze of shoulder against chest, as he went by. Though he barely registered the contact, his mind already busy spinning the different threads of conversation he might have with JB. It was a mess, a Gordian Knot of twisted emotions and tangled history that Tony would love nothing more to cut through with a sharp remark or pointed comment but he knew it would be selfish, cowardly, and do more harm than good.

The edge of anger he had towards the Rogers of the other timeline had dulled considerably and even if it hadn't, the Steve of this world didn't deserve to bleed for his alternate self's mistakes. And, if he were honest with himself, Tony had never blamed Barnes, any version of him, for his parents' death. Not after the initial wave of grief and shock had passed, anyway.

MONDAY had finally drilled it into Tony's head that his outburst was a completely normal reaction to such devastating news, compounded by the days of stress and sleeplessness as well as the fact that Rogers had kept it from him. If Zemo playing the tape was a sucker punch to his face then Rogers' betrayal was a knife in his back.

An old wound Tony had thought would haunt him for years to come, on rainy days of doubt and during cold snaps of self-loathing, lingering pains or throbbing aches, but it had healed as though it had never been there.

Which it hadn't, technically speaking, because none of it happened in this timeline. In this world of endless sunshine that chased away the chill of insecurity. Tony wanted to bask in this warmth forever, he never wanted to leave.

Loki's hand settled on the small of Tony's back as the door clicked closed behind them.

Tony leaned into that bit of casual contact and realized that once again, Loki had figured out what he needed before he himself knew. He relished the grounding touch and let it guide him down the hallway, a tether that kept him from being swept away in the swirling possibilities and rising unpredictability of the future. Exactly what he needed. An anchor. A lifeline. *Loki*.

It should be terrifying, how Loki could read him like an open book, if not for the fact that Tony had a sixth sense for Loki's moods. As it was, their attunement to each other was just another sign of how well-matched they were.

Or, in Thor's dramatic language and booming voice, how the Norns had woven their fates together, destined them for each other and blessed their union.

Eyes crinkling at their corners, Tony glanced up at Loki, silently communicating his amusement without sharing it with the audience of SHIELD agents posted in the hallway and at the information station by the elevator.

Loki returned it with a brief flex of his fingers, the tips pushing gently into Tony in the beginning of a squeeze, followed by a subtle eye roll when he figured out Tony's mirth had to do with Thor.

Uncanny.

Their steps halted when Maria paused to speak with a blonde woman who appeared to be in charge of the floor.

Tony caught a glimpse of her profile before it was obscured by a tilt of her head and all he could see was the no-nonsense pony tail that seemed like a rookie mistake for a field agent.

Darcy had given an impassioned speech about why she shouldn't have to limit her hairstyle choices because of creepers and why her taser was an absolute necessity. Whether or not she would ever actually wear her hair in a pony tail had been deemed irrelevant since it was more about *having the choice* and less about acting upon it.

Though, Tony mused as he observed the way the other agents scurried to obey the blonde woman's command, she was no rookie and certainly didn't rise to her current position by making mistakes. There was something familiar about her that nagged at his senses.

She had no visible weapons and no body armor but the air of authority around her was unmistakable. A curious mix between the entitled assurance of someone who had been told they were better and the hard-earned confidence of someone who had fought their way to the top that could only come from a lifetime of trying to live up to a legacy.

There was only one iconic figure associated with SHIELD.

"Agent Carter." Tony called out and knew he was correct when Sharon Carter turned around with a pleased smile that mostly hid the flicker of surprise in her eyes.

Instead of extending a hand, she offered a polite nod in their direction. A few wisps of hair had worked free of her harsh pony tail, softening her face into something almost friendly. "Mr. Stark. Mr. Loki."

It made sense that Sharon would be supervising Steve's care, given the shared link of Peggy Carter between the two, and Tony said as much.

Their incredulous looks caught him off-guard.

"How did you know about the facility?" Sharon frowned.

Maria shook her head ruefully. "I really need to stop underestimating JARVIS."

"Don't worry." Tony played along. His phone vibrated once, JARVIS' signal that he was looking into the matter. "You aren't the only one."

"That doesn't really make me feel better."

"Wasn't supposed to, Spy Oprah."

Sharon snorted at the nickname, the tense set of her shoulders relaxing a bit. Only to stiffen again when Loki leaned forward with a conspiratorial whisper.

"When are you planning on reuniting the good Captain and his long-awaited love?"

"First of all." She took a step back, reestablishing the distance between them, a small but significant tell of how rattled she must be feeling. "He's not Captain America anymore."

Tony's eyes widened in disbelief at the dismissal in Sharon's voice. In the other timeline, she had pledged her loyalty to Rogers by first giving him Barnes' location in Bucharest then supplying Rogers and Wilson with their confiscated gear before the battle at the Leipzig airport, effectively escalating both situations. If Wilson hadn't had the Falcon Wings, Rhodey wouldn't have been in the air- He slammed the brakes of that particular train of thought and redirected his attention to the present.

"Second, my Aunt Peggy has a long list of accomplishments and being some ancient guy's *long-awaited love* is not one of them. Third-"

"How did you know?" Maria asked, her brows drew into a puzzled furrow. "Stark has JARVIS in his ear but you don't and you two barely said a word to each other since you got here."

Loki shrugged. "Simple, Tony mentioned this Aunt Peggy in conjunction with the *former* Captain as contemporaries, which places her near the end of a Midgardian's lifecycle. I am given to understand that it is a period of time typically fraught with decreased functioning and increased illnesses of the body and mind." His hand, still splayed across the small of Tony's back, clenched, fingers digging in almost painfully.

With a bit of concentration, Tony activated Extremis. A reminder that he was not as fragile as other mortals, the same reassurance he had given to Loki before they faced the Dark Elves during the Convergence. He ignored the quiet voice in the back of his mind telling him that he might not be as fragile but he was still just as fleeting as any other human.

Concentrated heat rushed to the surface, soothing away the bruises before they could form, enough for Loki to notice the temperature spike without singeing his shirt. The shirt that still smelled like Loki, the heady scent of leather and books and trees, and was magically tailored to his frame.

Loki's grip eased.

Tony called Extremis back underneath his skin

"Your aunt, as you said, is a woman of many accomplishments. And, conversely, many enemies."

Lips set into a grim line, Sharon stared at him a beat longer before humming in agreement.

Tony had an inkling of what Loki was getting at.

"Enemies who may wish to exact their vengeance by preying upon her vulnerable state. She is in need of protection and what better way to repay her for her service than to offer exactly what she requires?" He slanted a look at Maria.

She met it unblinkingly, which was as good of a confirmation as any.

Understanding dawned and Tony couldn't help but glance up at Loki, taking in the cheekbones as sharp as the wit sparkling in those brilliant green eyes. Loki preferred to disguise his intelligence with mischief and magic, lowering the expectations imposed upon him and lessening the threat others perceived he posed, but when he let his brilliance shine... It was magnificent.

"There are, of course, many ways to keep a loved one safe but the number dwindles when happiness is taken into consideration. And you want them happy, not only because this is someone you admire greatly but also because it will ease some of the powerlessness you feel toward a condition you cannot change and the guilt that you are not afflicted similarly."

Tony wondered if Maria and Sharon noticed the sudden lack of gendered pronoun in the last part of Loki's words. He wondered if Loki did. He wondered if they needed to talk about it and if it was too soon to broach the subject of differing lifespans and if said differing lifespans affected their individual definitions of *soon*.

JARVIS' voice sounded in his ear. "Sir. I am unable to find a building in SHIELD's holdings matching the criteria of a long-term care facility." The A.I. paused for a dramatic second before continuing and Tony considered donating him to the community theater. "However, there is such a building listed as one of causes supported by a longstanding grant recipient of the Maria Stark Foundation."

Tony took a deep breath, slowly and quietly, filling his lungs with air until they felt like they would burst to lessen the hollowness in his chest. That achy emptiness when he thought about his mother.

Loki's index finger drummed a light beat against the base of his spine. Comfort, freely given and unasked.

Exhaling just as slowly and quietly, Tony ordered himself to get a grip of his wayward emotions, bouncing wildly from one feeling to the next like a pinball trying to hit all the targets. Loud and inconvenient. His composure might be a bit frayed but he would not allow it to come apart at the seams in public.

Stark men are made of iron.

Thankfully, Maria and Sharon were still engrossed in Loki's flawless deduction and the other agents kept a wide range out of either respect or fear. Possibly both.

"As such, you have placed her at a safe house, guarded and cared for, along with other warriors whose fighting days had long passed. Like the former Captain, a shrunken husk of the self-purported hero he once was. It is the best place for him to slumber away the rest of his days." Loki shrugged. "Like I said, simple."

A stretch of silence.

"Simple." Sharon said with a dazed expression. "Sure, why not."

I Volunteer as Tribute

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be the last Tony POV chapter before switching to multi-POVs but the characters got rambly and I have to push some stuff to the next chapter...so one more Tony POV coming up next Friday!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Civil War.

The Hunger Games.

Star Wars.

A Song of Ice and Fire by George R.R. Martin.

With tentative plans made, they exchanged promises to keep each other updated.

Sharon's hopeful tone tugged at Tony's already fraying nerves. The unspoken expectation that Tony would be able to convince JB to go with a secret organization that was responsible to Steve's current state, albeit unknowingly on the part of HYDRA's infiltration and inadvertently in the role Clint played in this mess, was too much to bear.

Suddenly, the hallway was stifling and he could feel the weight of every agent's stares on him, admiration for the hero Tony never claimed to be.

Iron Man had been created out of desperation and retribution; to escape from the Ten Rings and to burn them to the ground.

There was nothing heroic about vengeance.

He had fought against the Chitauris and the Dark Elves because their invasions, if successful, would have ended the world. The world he also lived in and liked living in and would like to continue living in.

There was nothing heroic about self-preservation.

His choice to start a scholarship program for young scientists had been entirely selfishly motivated. He wanted a chance to connect with Harley and Peter again and, preferably, in a better way than he had in the other timeline; bringing danger to Harley's door and dragging Peter into a fight that escalated far too quickly.

There was nothing heroic about guilt.

But the agents approaching him didn't seem to realize that. They were all looking at him like he was a hero and as much as Tony hated it and knew he hadn't done anything worthy of that look, he couldn't tell them the truth. He remembered the utter awe on Peter's face, the kind of bright innocence that hadn't been dimmed by crushing disappointment and broken faith, and wanted to keep that light safe.

And if believing Tony was a goddamn hero made them feel better as they navigated their world of gray, then he supposed he could keep up the facade. A white lie of omission that further proved why Tony wasn't a hero. After all, heroes wouldn't and shouldn't lie.

"Mr. Stark?" A young man with glasses called out hesitantly, wiping his hand on his slacks before offering it in a handshake.

Tony accepted it with a practiced smile, an upward tug of his lips and a flash of teeth.

"It's an honor to meet you." His sincerity was practically tangible.

All of which only intensified Tony's feeling of being a fraud, the reality that even though he knew he would never make it, he was still faking it. "Are you sure you don't have me confused with someone else?" He chuckled, deflecting the compliment and hiding the edge in his voice with humor. "An honor? Really?"

The joke fell flat though when the agent nodded firmly, his grip tightening with determination and his eyes flashing a steely glint. Like it was his personal mission to convince the world that Tony was a hero, starting with Tony himself. "Absolutely. You saved us-"

Loki cleared his throat. "I am Loki of Asgard." He extended a hand, his other was pressing snugly into the small of Tony's back. There was a hint of a smirk curling at the corner of his mouth that confirmed what Tony had suspected; Loki was running interference for him.

The agent blinked, letting go of Tony's hand to reach for Loki's reactively. "Hello." A flicker of awkward silence. "Um, it's nice to meet you."

"The *honor* is all mine." Loki drawled.

"So, you know who I am and you know who he is, tell us who you are." Tony jumped in, rescuing the young man who had paled significantly at the possibility that he had offended a god.

The conversation turned to the agent's name and job and his three cats, all of which seemed to have split personalities that were equally loveable. Tony pulled the other agents into the discussion about the mental state of felines, happy to ease the attention off of himself and to talk about frivolous things.

*

Eventually, Maria clapped her hands, once, decisively.

Tony watched with no small amount of amusement when the agents said their goodbyes and scattered like school children being called back to their seats, including Sharon who gathered

up a file and headed down the opposite hallway. Another testament to Maria's leadership skills.

Maria walked them to the elevator but did not get in, her hand curling around the metal door and her brow lifting in a knowing arc. "I'd offer to see you guys out but I've got a packed day ahead and, well, I'm sure you know the way."

Loki tsked with mock disappointment. "Such hospitality."

"Well, good thing you've got enough manners for both of us." She replied wryly and lifted her hand in a jaunty wave. "Have a good day, gentlemen."

*

In the relative privacy of the elevator, Tony closed his eyes and allowed himself the luxury of leaning against Loki. He hid his face in the crook of Loki's shoulder and let go of the weight of responsibility for just a moment. The banter had distracted him from the fact that he was carrying it but, now, in the quiet, he was more than aware of the task sitting heavily on his shoulders.

Loki said nothing, knowing what Tony needed in that moment wasn't words, and trailed a hand up and down Tony's spine while his other arm locked securely around Tony for better support.

They stayed like this for a few seconds, bodies fitted and breaths matched, before Tony blew out a long sigh and opened his eyes. He was greeted with his own weary reflection in the metal door and schooled it into one of determination, once again faking it until he could make it. "Let's go home."

"As you wish, my Tony." Loki murmured.

*

They returned to the tower in a blur of emerald. As the kitchen shimmered into view, Tony almost expected to see JB there and couldn't tell if it was disappointment or relief flooding his system when he saw that they were alone.

On one hand, Tony would have preferred to find JB waiting for him in an almost ambush for answers. At least there would be no break in the momentum, no slowing down for his nerves to catch up to him. Like ripping off a band-aid or throwing a grenade, quick was the way to go. Not to mention the sooner he got this dreaded conversation over with, the sooner he could crawl back into bed with Loki and stay there for the rest of the day.

The microwave display, a mockingly cheerful shade of green, announced that it was only 9:13AM.

On the other hand, he hadn't quite figured out how to break the news that Steve was no longer Captain America and chances were good that whatever came out of his mouth would be word

vomit. His success rate for performing well under pressure was high in world-ending events and low in personal interactions.

It was also likely that he would lash out, already forced to deliver the news he hadn't wanted to be a messenger of in the first place and then backed into a corner by JB's presence. Anger was a great counter for apprehension and after his sessions with MONDAY, Tony could recognize that he was maybe too close to the end of his emotional rope to tread considerably.

Which was what the situation called for and what JB deserved.

Rhodey had said that JB seemed happy to hear his best friend was alive and well in this new century, one of the few things that had given JB a semblance of joy and Tony hated having to take it away. A part of him wanted to let JB keep this illusion of contentment for just a little bit longer; few more hours, maybe.

Except there was a time limit and Tony might need every minute of those forty-eight hours to convince JB that going with SHIELD was the best option, strategically. Or maybe JB wouldn't hesitate for even a second before he was packing his bags and sprinting to Steve's bedside.

Great. Now he was thinking in circles.

This was why it would have been better to talk to JB right away, bypassing all these back-and-forths and endless what-ifs.

What he needed was coffee and he said as much as he stepped out of Loki's embrace to slump into the nearest chair at the dining table.

The mouthwatering scent peppermint flavored coffee beans filled the air as the coffee machine's grinder whirred to life.

Loki settled down next to him, not quite pressed against his side but still close enough that he could feel Loki's presence at his side. A coffee mug appeared in front of Tony in a flash of green when the coffee machine's pitch changed as it started brewing.

They sat in silence, listening to the steady drip of coffee behind them and watching the mug fill up slowly.

When the mug was half full, Tony picked it up and drained it in one sustained gulp. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the upward tick of Loki's lips, a specific soft curve that meant Loki had found something Tony did adorable for whatever inexplicable reason, and felt his skin warm. He slid the empty mug over to Loki with a challenging arch of his eyebrow, daring the god to voice his opinion on Tony's behavior, and flushed deeper when Loki's smile grew wider and fonder.

This was how their morning should have gone, slow and easy, instead of the rude awakening of Maria's phone call.

Tony dragged a hand over his face and felt the sandpaper of stubble, evidence of how hectic their day had been so far. Crossing his arms over the table, he let his head fall forward. "Can't someone else tell him?" With his forehead cushioned by his forearms and attention fixed on the patterns in the wood grain, he whined into the rectangular space boxed by his arms.

Loki combed his fingers through Tony's hair, nails lightly scratching over his scalp in gentle and soothing motions.

"I volunteer as tribute." An unexpected, albeit familiar, voice called out.

"Darcy!" Tony's head snapped up and whipped around to find her in the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

"Um, you invited me, remember? For Christmas?" She glided into the kitchen on a pair of fuzzy socks decorated with dancing elves. "And I'm here for..." She trailed off as she stared at the bubbling coffee machine and the empty carafe. "Where's the coffee?" She shot them an accusatory glare over her shoulder.

Tony gave her his best innocent look. "It's not ready yet."

Loki did the same, his face an angelic mask as he mumbled an incantation under his breath, reversing the conjuring spell.

The first drop of coffee sizzled incriminatingly as it hit the overheated glass.

Darcy leaned back against the counter, arms crossed and brows lifted.

"You can't volunteer as tribute." It wasn't Tony's best pivot but it would have to do.

"Yes I can."

"No you can't."

"Yes I can."

"No you-"

"I don't recall reading any passages that forbid volunteering to take the place of a selected tribute." Loki interrupted.

Tony's eyes thinned as he remembered the *Hunger Games* series Jane had given him last Christmas. Loki must have found them as he perused through Tony's collection of books his friends had gifted him.

"Ha!" Darcy pointed a triumphant finger at them. "Your boyfriend agrees with me, it's two against one. I win!"

"You don't even know what you're volunteering for!" Tony exclaimed. "And he's my *exclusive liaison*."

Loki hummed in agreement.

"Po-tay-to, po-tah-to." She shrugged. "And I know what I'm getting myself into, thank you very much for that vote of not-confidence."

"If you say the 75th Hunger Games-"

"You need someone to tell JB to smile pretty for the cameras because Captain America is tiny again."

"How did you-"

"Actually, come to think of it, maybe not smile pretty. More like, look serious and but not too serious because his face does that murderous thing when-"

"Darcy!" Tony slammed his fists down on the table, fingers clenched and knuckles white. The simmering anger and bubbling frustration finally boiled over. "This isn't- You can't- Damn it!" His jaw snapped closed with a click when he realized he couldn't seem to say what he wanted without his words veering into hurtful territories.

Under the table, Loki's hand clasped Tony's knee, tightening in both reassurance and warning.

"I know this is important." Darcy said. Her typical flippant tone quieted into a more somber note. "And I know this is some really shitty news to tell a guy who's basically been jerked around by the universe. That's why he needs to hear it from a friend." There was something kind and almost pitying in her eyes. "You know that better than anyone here."

A black and white video.

A familiar road.

A bullshit lie.

Nerves buzzing and heart racing, he held her gaze for a taut beat before nodding stiffly to concede her point. He liked the idea of there being a Tony Stark who found out the truth of his parents' deaths from a friend, not shown the surveillance footage by an enemy or told by a spy because it was a strategic maneuver. It sounded...nice.

But then again, there was a reason that *don't shoot the messenger* was a well-known adage. Darcy had her taser that once took down Thor but it wouldn't do her any good if she never got the chance to use it. Super soldiers and their lightning fast reflexes.

"I will be happy to accompany her. My presence will be shielded, of course, no sense in spooking the Soldier of Winter further." Loki offered, giving Tony's knee another squeeze. Once again reading what was on Tony's mind or perhaps just really good at predicting his train of thoughts; the former being the more romantic explanation and the latter the more probable.

"Former Soldier of Winter." Darcy corrected with a fierceness she usually reserved for her friends, further proof that there was a friendship between Darcy and JB, but was it reciprocal

or one-sided?

Tony slanted a look at Loki, silently prompting Loki to ask the question tactfully because he still wasn't sure if his words would come out right.

"My apologies." Loki inclined his head. "Your protectiveness of the former-" He made a point to stress the word. "-Soldier is admirable, Lady Darcy, I do hope he accepts and returns your friendship."

Her eyes narrowed. "If you're implying that I'm forcing my delightful self onto him or that friendship is some kind of a transaction-"

Loki raised his hands in surrender. "Not at all."

"Just looking out for you, Dar2-D2."

A brilliant grin broke across her face. "Finally, a nickname. I was beginning to think you're still mad at me." She sniffled dramatically.

"Forgiveness is one of Sir's defining attributes." JARVIS commented.

Tony cut an exasperated look at the ceiling. It wasn't difficult to figure out who had told Darcy about Steve's condition and JB's predicament. "Buttering me up won't save you from being donated for a tax write-off."

Darcy poured herself a cup of coffee and joined them at the table. "So." She started, mug pausing in midair. "You good with me being Katniss?"

"Does that make me Prim?" Tony's mouth tipped into a smirk, framed by his beard. "Because I feel like I'm more of a Seneca Crane."

"Do stop comparing yourself to characters who have died." Loki chided.

Tony blew him a kiss then his brows furrowing into a serious expression as he shifted to face Darcy. "Honestly, good isn't the word I'd use. I don't feel good about dragging you into this mess. I don't feel good about not being able to handle my own crap for ten minutes to talk to the guy. I don't feel good about..." He sighed. "I don't feel good about any of this."

His words hung in the air for a stretch of silence before Darcy cleared her throat pointedly.

"One, you didn't drag me, I invited myself. Two, you're a sweet summer child if you think this is only going to take ten minutes."

"I'm a Stark!" He protested despite himself.

"Three, I don't feel good about any of this either but this isn't about me or you. It's about JB. If this is sucking for us, just imagine how much suckier it will be for him. He's going to want to yell or cry or go curl up in a corner or binge eat his feelings or whatever, but the point is, he isn't going to do any of those things around you because, no offense, you're not his friend, Tony, at least not right now."

Tony bit his lip as he considered her words, blunt like a punch to the gut but with none of the pain. This wasn't about him and it wasn't fair to make it about him. "Yeah, alright." He shook his head. "I can't believe I'm agreeing with you."

"I can't believe you ever disagreed with me." Darcy scoffed, lifting her coffee mug in a toast to Loki. "Let's do this." She drained it in three gulps.

"I will return once I am certain Lady Darcy is in no harm." Loki promised, his armor shimmering into place as he rose to his feet.

Tony instantly missed the weight of Loki's hand on his knee. "May the odds be ever in your favor." He offered them a small smile.

Darcy pressed three fingers to her lips then raised them in a salute.

What Happened That Made You Try Cooking

Chapter Notes

Happy October! :D

...and will you look at that 200k+ word count?! I remember when I first started this, I thought this little time travel story would be maaaaybe 20 chapters long and 50k words... I was SO wrong but in the BEST of ways.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Civil War.

Sunlight was still streaming through the window and the heaters were working at full capacity, yet Tony felt cold all the same as he sat at the empty table, eyes fixed at the elevator Loki and Darcy had boarded minutes ago.

His skin thrummed, every nerve ending alert and overactive, firing mixed messages that his exhausted mind couldn't decipher.

The impulse to fight. The desire to help. The reflex to flee. The need to analyze.

Pressure was building, gathering steam and heat that did nothing to warm him even as it pushed him to his feet. There was a jittery kind of energy buzzing through him, enough that he couldn't sit and do *nothing* but not quite enough to make him go and do *something*. It felt like the beginning of an anxiety attack, except instead of the speeding train of panic that was too fast for him to jump off of the track in time, this was more like a lawn mower of unease that he could see coming from a mile away. So either he was getting better at spotting the warning signs of his mental state or his mind was simply too fatigued and overwhelmed by the flood of events to prioritize breaking down. It certainly didn't prioritize coming up with a better analogy than *lawn mower*.

With a shake of his head, Tony picked up his coffee mug and padded to the kitchen. Coffee was the answer in almost every situation. He refilled his cup and took a generous sip, reveling in the satisfying heat traveling down into his belly and the tingling coolness on his tongue from the peppermint. Little reminders of Loki in everything.

His stomach protested as he poured himself his third cup, demanding something more solid and preferably nutritious. Pancakes seemed like a decent enough compromise, especially with the organic mix Bruce had sworn would change Tony's life.

The repetition of stirring water and powder together was the cure for his fidgeting hands but there was still the mental restlessness to contend with.

"JARVIS, call Hill."

He had a confession to make.

*

"That was fast." Maria's surprise was the exact opening Tony needed to correct the misconception of him as a hero. A hero certainly wouldn't agree to take on a task only to hand it off as soon as someone else volunteered.

"That's because I haven't talked to him yet." He countered with a challenge in his tone. "And I'm not planning to, at least not about this, it's been pointed out to me that I'm the wrong person for the job given our, well, you know, history."

"You said you don't blame him for what HYDRA forced him to do and that he doesn't remember his Winter Soldier days." It wasn't an accusation, just a calm statement of fact that he appreciated.

"I don't and he doesn't but that doesn't mean we're suddenly BFFs or whatever the kids say these days." With a careful flick of his wrist, Tony flipped the pancake over with minimal spillage.

"Good point." She agreed through a chuckle then her tone sobered. "Delegate then, ask his BFF or whatever to break the news about-"

"-about his original BFF who's in a coma?" He could almost hear her rolling her eyes at his tactless wording. "Darcy's on it."

"Lewis?"

Tony slid the pancake onto the plate before spooning another ladleful of batter into the pan. "I don't know any other Darcys, do you?"

Maria clucked her tongue, contemplative, before humming with what sounded like approval. "She has a way of cutting straight to the point, Barnes, er, JB should respond well to that. Nice work, Stark."

The compliment threw him so much that he dropped the ladle, it fell to the floor with a sticky plop. "What? Did you not hear what I just said? I'm not doing any of the work, Darcy is."

"And she has a very nice gift basket with a recruitment letter coming her way-"

"No tasers in the gift basket." He couldn't help the quip.

"-but you made it possible by getting out of the way." She pointed out. "Not many people can do that, you know? Set their egos aside and do what's best for the situation."

He snorted, bending to pick up the ladle and depositing it in the sink. "Um, have you met me?"

"Yes. Several times."

Tony sputtered in the face of his sarcasm treated seriously.

"Look, all I'm saying is that you figured out that there's someone better for the job and you let them handle it. It's what a leader does. It's knowing your bias and admitting it. It's being okay with not being the best person for the job."

Tony had a rebuttal ready, citing the personality assessment that relegated him to a consultant, but the words were drowned out by the memories from another life.

Romanoff had related that Rogers contacted her prior to the incident in Bucharest, how he had ignored her pleas to stay home and not interfere, how he had insisted on being the one to bring Barnes in because he was the *least likely to die trying*. In a sense, Rogers had been right. He hadn't died, hadn't gotten more than scratches that healed in seconds and bruises that faded in minutes, because other people had paid the price for his so-called *safest hands*.

Perhaps there was some value in taking a step back.

Or, in this case, Darcy pushing her way to the front.

"You clearly don't know Darcy at all if you think I *let* her do anything. She flat out told me that she's taking over."

"All the more reason to recruit her." Maria sounded entirely too sincere for his comfort.

Actually, this entire conversation was too sincere for his comfort, from the nonreaction to the undeserved praise. There hadn't been a hint of a joke or a trace of mockery that he had come to expect from a lifetime of backhanded compliments, comments about his accomplishments always framed in the context of his lineage, his age, or his lifestyle choices. The past two years in this timeline had been the exception to the rule.

"No taser in the gift basket." He repeated, nose wrinkling as it picked up the smell of smoke.

Maria made a worrying noncommittal noise.

"Sir, the pancake is burning."

Cursing, Tony spun around. He cursed again when he stepped in the puddle of batter on the floor. Then again when he found a circle of charcoal singed to the bottom of the pan instead the fluffy pancake that was supposed to change his life and improve his morning.

"Well, that sounds like my cue to go." She didn't bother disguising her laughter. "Enjoy your breakfast."

"Oprah doesn't laugh at the misfortune of others." He said in lieu of a goodbye, disconnecting the call with an eye roll to the nearest camera.

For the sake of science, Tony poked at the burnt lump and noted with a modicum of interest that it crumbled easily. He was tipping the failed experiment of a breakfast into the trash when the elevator chimed and Bruce stepped out with a smile that turned into a frown as soon as he laid eyes on Tony.

"Is that my pancake mix?"

*

It required nearly all of Tony's concentration to track the pancake Bruce just sent tumbling through the air with an expert twist of his wrist. He moved an inch to the right, plate in hand, and caught it neatly, perfectly balanced atop the stack of pancakes with a small bounce.

"And that is how you make pancakes." Bruce turned off the stove and set the pan in the oversize sink, next to first pan and glass mixing bowl, both already soaking.

Tony set his precious cargo down on the table with the utmost care before sitting down. "And this is why you're my favorite."

"Good to know." Bruce pulled out the opposite chair, pinning Tony with a knowing look as he dropped both elbows onto the table and clasped his hands. "Now tell me what happened that made you try cooking and how we can prevent it from happening again."

*

The fluffiness of the pancakes acted as a delicious cushion for breaking bad news.

"...Darcy's talking to him right now." Tony popped the last syrup-drenched bite into his mouth as he finished retelling the events and discoveries of the morning.

Bruce said nothing for a few moments, brows furrowed and hands still clasped, processing everything. His half of the pancakes sat untouched in front of him. "Okay." He nodded, more to himself than to Tony.

"Okay?"

"She's got this."

Another vote of confidence that helped chased away the last shadow of doubt in Tony's mind. "She's got this." He agreed.

Bruce stood. "Well."

Tony jumped to his feet as well, noting the gravity in his friend's voice. "Well?"

"We're going to need more pancakes."

"We're going to need more pancakes?" Tony parroted, incredulous and confused.

"A lot more."

"A lot more?"

A grin spread across Bruce's face. "Are you going to repeat everything I say?"

"No? I mean, no." Tony lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck, sheepish. "So why do we need more pancakes?"

"A lot more." Bruce corrected as he headed back into the kitchen and pulled out the largest mixing bowl they had. "Because I've seen Loki eat and they're going to need comfort food."

Tony swallowed tightly. "Darcy's probably telling him everything. He'll know about Rogers...and that I didn't tell him that his buddy was-"

"Thinking he's owed a person as his reward?" Bruce's eyes flashed green. "And willing to trade lives as long as he got what he wanted?"

"You didn't stab her. The Winter Soldier would have pulled out the knife anyway. And Hulk knows to check first. It was kind of your fault but you didn't do anything wrong."

Bruce sighed, the anger draining out of him in an instant and replaced by a resigned sort of calm, a vast improvement from the guilt-ridden agitation immediately after the Hulk's confrontation with the Winter Soldier Steve had tried to protect at the Triskelion that had inadvertently exacerbated Natasha's injury. "She's on desk duty now, the infamous Black Widow is a pencil pusher."

"I'm pretty sure she knows at least twenty ways to kill someone with a pencil."

"At least." Bruce snorted.

"And from what I hear from the agents, she's actually scarier now than before." Tony added. "The rumor around the SHIELD headquarter is that she asked for tiles in her office because it's easier to clean than carpet." A pause. "You know, because of the blood."

"Yeah, I got that but thanks for the clarification."

"Any time."

Silence fell over them as they worked together to whip up another batch of pancakes.

"You think he'll go with SHIELD? Even knowing what he knows about Rogers?" Tony asked, catching another pancake that Bruce flipped up.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because there are things that he needs to see for himself."

*

Loki appeared in an emerald haze. "Ms. Lewis is in no danger from the former Soldier, they have plans to view a film as soon as they locate some refreshments."

Tony tilted his head toward the ceiling. "JARVIS, tell her to check outside her door."

Bruce, with DUM-E's help, had delivered two towering plates of pancakes, covered in saran-wrapped, along with a large jar of maple syrup and a whole stick of butter, to them a short while ago.

"Ms. Lewis is delighted." The A.I. reported. "And Sergeant Barnes requests more butter."

Even though he understood why JB would want to indulge, having grown up during the Depression and all, Tony still shuddered at the notion of treating butter as a side dish rather than a condiment. "Whatever he wants."

"Yes, Sir."

Loki wrapped an arm around Tony's waist. "And what of my wants? I had plans for us today before the Commander's interruption." His voice was low and velvety, sending shivers down Tony's spine.

"Oh? Well, looks like the rest of my day's free."

"Wonderful. I would very much like to join you..." Loki's lips grazed the pulse point on Tony's neck, making it jump eagerly. "...in the skies."

Tony blinked. That was definitely not the location he had expected to hear, then his heart raced for a wholly different but equally thrilling reason. "Really? I thought your, er, seidr..."

For Loki's Christmas gift, he had crafted a set of vambraces and a pair of greaves outfitted with repulsor technology and powered by miniature arc reactors. The idea had come to him when Thor and Rhodey were discussing the appeal of flying, the absolute freedom to cross the horizon and the sheer exhilaration to soar through the clouds. Loki had wrinkled his nose and declared teleportation the superior method of transportation, but Tony had spotted a hint of curiosity in those glittering green eyes.

As it turned out, flight was as much a rarity on Asgard as it was on Earth due to the dearth of ancient artifact granting the ability. Tony had instantly known what to get for a trickster god who could do nearly everything himself and, much to Rhodey's relief, it was not a door.

They had been disappointed to discover a compatibility issue, to put it scientifically, between Loki's magic and the arc reactor. Or, as Loki had phrased it, a conflict between the two powers' sources and the associated laws they must abide by; one of nature and governed by balance versus one of creation and bound by none. Despite the setback, Loki had cherished the gift all the same and assured Tony that the dissonance could be bridged with meditation and would lessen with the passing of time.

"It appears my seidr is as taken with your ingenuity as I am, once it recalled that it had encountered traces of this energy before."

"My gauntlet." Tony whispered, remembering their first moment alone since Loki's return and how the red and gold had gleamed under the hotel light. That gesture was their beginning.

"Yes. Fierce and bright like my impossible mortal with a starlight heart." Loki pressed an open-mouthed kiss at the bend between Tony's neck and shoulder. "A keen mind and clever fingers that reshaped reality." Another kiss. "Fire in your veins and sunshine in your smile." And another. "I could bask in your presence and want for nothing."

"Um, me too, Reindeer Games." Tony stuttered, flushed, and tasted the laugh bubbling from Loki's lips as he slotted their mouths. He tried to pour the appreciation, awe, and affection rattling around in his chest into this kiss, speaking through his actions instead of words. He could talk circles around the press and trade banter all day but when it came to the people he cared about, he seldomly knew what to say. And he cared about Loki, *cared* in a way that made his pulse jump and stomach flutter, *cared* in a way that made him want to give Loki everything he had while fearing at the same time that it wouldn't be enough, *cared* in a way that made him want to say the three words that felt too soon to say when it had only been a handful of weeks and not enough to properly convey just how much he...*cared*.

Judging by Loki's shuddering groan, it seemed that Tony's message was not only heard but also well-received. "Come fly with me?" He asked, pulling back with a nip at Tony's bottom lip when Tony tried to follow.

Tony swiped his tongue across the still tingling spot and smirked when Loki's eyes trailed that motion. "As you wish."

The Avengers Accords

Chapter Notes

This chapter was supposed to have 5 different POVs but Christine (Everhart) and Sam got chatty. There's also a bit of a time jump because we've spent the past ~50 chapters in November of 2013 (it was a busy month with Convergence, Siberia, HYDRA's rise, SHIELD's fall, and Zola's infiltration)...and it's time to move on. Like, seriously.

And the reason I know it's been ~50 chapters is because I went through the fic and added chapter titles per readers' requests. At first I named each chapter using "year - month" but it quickly became obvious that it won't work, or at least it won't be very informative. Now each chapter title is a line from the corresponding chapter. I hope you like the new set-up.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Jason Bourne created by Robert Ludlum.

The Press Secretary turned an interesting shade of green when his eyes met Christine's across the crowded briefing room and looked, for a second, like he might be sick. She took the reaction as the compliment it was, offering him a smile that was a touch too sharp and a nod as if she was giving him permission to begin.

Predictably, his eyes narrowed at the perceived challenge. "Alright, I'll take one question a piece. No exceptions." He held her gaze in a classic power play maneuver that was as predictable as it was ineffective.

Christine blinked and glanced down at her notes, letting him think he had won. It would be significantly easier and infinitely more entertaining to knock him off-balance when he thought he was standing tall.

Basking in the temporary glow of a false victory, the Press Secretary's posture grew more confident as he answered questions about the proposed framework intended to regulate and review the activities of enhanced individuals. One hundred and seventeen countries had voiced their approval and would convene one month from now to discuss the matter further in Vienna. There was no official title for this extensive set of legal documents but the public and press referred to them as the Avengers Accords, a name Christine took great pride in since it was the title of her article on the accountability of superheroes.

Her editor had already submitted it in consideration for this year's Pulitzer Prize. An award that was hers to lose, given how the relevance of the issue and popularity of the topic had

skyrocketed after the news of Steve Rogers' coma and James Barnes' return made the headlines.

As a journalist, Christine appreciated the masterful manner in which SHIELD, with the incomparable Commander Hill at its helm, orchestrated the situation, down to the smallest detail like the fluorescent lights emphasizing the gauntness and pallor of Rogers' shrunken face and Barnes' sweater, reminiscent of the top he had worn in the film reel on display at the Smithsonian, with the left sleeve neatly folded and pinned.

Together, Rogers and Barnes had the kind of parallelism in their journeys that literary majors only dreamed of writing.

Two soldiers who had fought for their country and fallen on the battlefield, one crashing into Arctic Sea with the other disappearing into the Alps. Two men who had returned to the world they had helped save in a new century that old enemies disguised as new allies. Two friends who had never forgotten the promise of *till the end of the line* and finally reunited again after giving so much and losing too much of themselves.

If Christine were a different woman, a gullible one, she would buy into the heartwarming optimism of redemption, but she wasn't.

The timing was too precise. SHIELD had come forward with this information merely days before a group of elite hackers decoded some of the more sensitive documents from the deluge of data released during HYDRA's uprising. Among these decrypted files were the private journals from a senior psychologist in charge of Rogers' adjustment process.

Silt, who had since been identified as a HYDRA operative and whose whereabouts were currently unknown, had outlined his methods and success of keeping Rogers mentally and emotionally compromised in great details and with self-congratulatory glee. Other psychologists had already chimed in that the corrupt doctor was likely seeking an outlet to revel in his accomplishments that his double-life would not allow, much like serial killers who collect trophies or taunt the police.

With these notes, Rogers had gained an outpouring of compassion that spilled over to Barnes, who had already garnered considerable sympathy due to his history as a prisoner of war, a brainwashed victim, and a disabled veteran. To the absolute surprise of no one, Barnes had been declared not guilty of any crimes committed by the Winter Soldier not long after that.

Christine's lips quirked as she mentally applauded Hill's foresight and decisiveness. If the sequence of events had been reversed and the evidence came to light first, SHIELD's credibility would be shredded, *again*; a lie of omission was still a lie.

Their apologies would be interpreted as disingenuous, given because they were sorry they were caught.

Any explanations would become excuses, treated with suspicion and doubt.

Over the years, she had witnessed many powerful figures who fell because of a moment of uncertainty and missed the opportunity to control the narrative. That was how they lost; they

ended up refuting or spinning someone else's story instead of telling their own.

And she had always had a way with words.

"Anyone else?" The Press Secretary asked, his smugness evident in his tone and his choice to continue the briefing when he knew very well that she hadn't asked her allotted question. He would have no one but himself to blame for what happened next.

Christine raised her hand.

"Ms. Everhart, I was beginning to think you fell asleep." He joked.

No one laughed. Several reporters winced at the jab, though it was unclear if they were offended on her behalf or anticipating the bloodbath to come. Both, most likely.

She arched an unimpressed brow.

He cleared his throat. "What's your question?"

"You've covered what the one hundred and seventeen countries aim to achieve with this proposed set of documents but what will that actually look like in practice?"

"Huh?"

"You know, they have these outcomes they'd like to see, more accountability, less causalities, clear communication, mental health support..." Christine ticked off each point with a flick of her fingers, her nails a deep red and pointed. "How do they plan to make it happen?" She said slowly and with saccharine understanding, like an adult might explain a difficult concept to a child by using smaller words.

"Um. I'm not really sure, it's still being discussed-"

"I mean, the obvious answer is that everyone will cooperate and do their best to abide by the rules and regulations set forth."

"Right, that's the President's hope-"

"But we don't live in a world where everything works out perfectly, do we? I mean, the skies open and aliens fall out, literally."

"That only happened twice." The Press Secretary paled as soon as the words left his mouth.

"Are you suggesting that threats from outer space or other realms are not to be taken seriously because *that only happened twice*?"

"No! And now that I've answered your question, you're dismissed." He practically scrambled off of the podium.

A beat of silence, then the room erupted into a frenzy of keyboard clicks and hushed phone calls, undoubtedly centered around the very real concern and blind spot Christine just pointed

out - the efficacy of the Avengers Accords in actual application of the proposed measures.

Her phone buzzed as a text message popped up on the screen.

You're terrifying.

Stark must have been watching the briefing in real time. Not that she would have expected anything less. After all, it had been his idea to bridge the gap between the ideals and the implementations. They had discussed this when Stark had returned her call regarding her article, the Avengers Accord, he had laughed for a full minute at the name but refused to explain why.

Christine would have hung up on him if that had gone on for much longer. Thankfully, he had composed himself quickly and launched straight into business. Stark had raised several relevant but oddly specific points she hadn't considered, like the option for enhanced individuals to keep their civilian identities private or the chance of a minor being involved and needing additional protection and leeway, as if he had someone in mind.

Now, she wouldn't have the reputation she had if she didn't at least run through the possible candidates in Stark's circle, narrowing it down to the students involved in the Team Iron Man program, but that was as far as she had gotten. Not only because of the sheer numbers involved but also she had her own lines that she wouldn't cross.

The world wasn't the same as it had been five years ago and would only continue to change as new allies, new enemies, and new situations appeared. A rigid set of rules would not work. What they needed was a foundation of shared goals and beliefs that could be built and expanded upon.

Smiling, she typed a response with leisurely taps of her fingers.

I know.

*

Sam unfolded another chair, wincing slightly at the shrill creak of metal against metal, and set it down to mark the center of the semi-circle he planned to arrange them in. The set-up worked better than a circle at drawing in the first timers who tended to have a thing about leaving their backs open and keeping the only door in and out of the room in their line of sight.

The design of a room had major impact on the success of the session, a calm and safe space could help balance the mental and emotional strain of being vulnerable in front of strangers. Sam had read that in an article by an environmental psychologists in one of his classes and it really stuck with him. Now the room was more just a space to meet, it was another tool in his box to help fellow veterans. Going back to school for his Social Work degree was one of the best choices he had made.

Sometimes, Sam wondered whatever happened with Steve, the jacked dude with no boundaries. He hadn't seen Steve around the National Mall since that one uncomfortable

encounter and he had asked the staff at the information desk to keep an eye out for a blond guy who really liked wearing shirts that were two sizes too small but no one matching that description ever came by.

It was a long shot anyway, Steve had been dead set against seeing a psychologist when Sam had brought it up.

As disappointing as it was, Steve's absence at the V.A. wasn't surprising given everything else Steve had said. His warped views about how real men fought for what was right and cowards tried to hide behind words. His reliance on empty platitudes, *everything happened for a reason*, to justify tragedies. His obsession with bringing his friend home as if that would fix everything instead of processing the loss in the first place.

It was a classic case of confusing being vulnerable with being weak when one of the strongest things anyone could do was to admit they needed help.

Needing help wasn't the same as being helpless.

One of his professors had that quote framed in her office along with other encouraging messages - *Mental illness is like any other serious illness* - aimed at erasing the stigma of mental illness. Sam had been using both with his support groups, especially the new people who were coming in as a result of what happened with Captain America.

Which was all kinds of unexpected since Sam had thought for sure that no one would be showing up after the news broke that Captain America's psychologist had been a HYDRA agent sent to mess with his head. But people had taken a different and better message from it.

If Captain America, the First Avenger, needed help to process everything he had been through, then it might just be alright for guys who weren't super soldiers to do the same.

"Hello?" A new voice called out tentatively, accompanied by three soft raps on the opened door.

Pivoting, Sam made sure his posture was open and nonthreatening with his hands open at his sides. "Hey, man. Here for group?"

"Um, yeah." The new guy was a little taller than Sam, with a fresh buzz cut and a beard that was trimmed recently but not carefully. His clothes were clean, nice but not too nice, and his eyes were clear. There was something familiar about his face that Sam couldn't quite put his finger on. "Am I early?"

"Nah, right on time." Sam pointed at the stack of folding chairs he had brought over from the storage closet. "Want to help me set up the rest of these chairs?" A concrete task was a good way to obviate any social anxieties and out-of-place feelings.

Damn, he really was getting good at this therapist gig.

The new guy stepped into the room. "I can do that."

"Great, man. I'm Sam, by the way, Sam Wilson. I'm the facilitator." Sam went with a wave instead of offering a handshake; best to let the client set the tone and pace of the interaction as well as initiate any physical contact.

"James, James Bourne."

Sam barked out a surprised laugh. "Please tell me you have a brother named Jason."

James' face scrunched up with the sour expression of someone who had heard the same joke one too many times but then his features relaxed into a grin. "If I told you, then I'd have to kill you." He lifted his hands up into finger guns and clicked his tongue.

A sense of humor, that would go a long way toward his recovery from whatever brought him here. This guy was already a few steps ahead of some of the regulars here, not that Sam would ever say that out loud. "Alright, I can take a hint." He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Good to have you join us, James."

"Actually, um, I go by JB."

"I get it, man, can't have people asking about spy brother all the damn time."

JB rolled his eyes. "Punk."

For the next few minutes, they worked in silence, unfolding the chairs and fanning them out in an arc. They finished setting up right as a petite brunette bounced into the room, miraculously not spilling a drop of the coffee from her open cup.

"Hey Jimmy Buffett." She hooked her free hand through the crook of JB's elbow. Her eyes were large and expressive, peering up at JB over the thick frames of her oversized glasses that were sliding down the bridge of her nose. "I found coffee."

"I found the room." JB replied, pushing her glasses up with an affectionate nudge of his finger. "Should be about an hour?" He glanced over at Sam for confirmation.

Sam couldn't help but notice that the paper cup in her hand was an awful lot like the ones they had left over from some higher-up's retirement party last week. "Is that from the staff lounge?"

"If I told you, then I'd have to kill you." She narrowed her eyes in an attempt to appear menacing but it just came off like she was squinting.

"Yeah yeah, I already heard that one." Sam hid a smile at the obvious way JB was watching her and revised his previous assessment. JB might be more than a few steps ahead with an active and, not that it really mattered in the grand scheme of things, attractive support system like her. "It was more convincing coming from Bourne Identity over there."

She twisted to face JB, giving him a look Sam couldn't see from this new angle but he did notice the corners of JB's mouth curling upwards and the set of JB's shoulders finally relaxing.

JB pressed closer. "You sticking around?"

"Like a cactus." She passed him the cup of coffee.

As nonsensical as their exchange was, it clearly meant something to them.

The sound of familiar voices approaching gave Sam a reason to step away, to give the couple their privacy, to ease his own discomfort at witnessing such an intimate moment. He greeted the regular crowd, throwing playful taunts about the upcoming football season while keeping an eye on JB. Sometimes the newbies got cold feet as the room filled up.

It was a pleasant surprise and a very good sign when JB, with determined steps, approached him after waving goodbye to his lady friend.

"Hey, man. Ready to get started?"

"Better late than never, right?"

"Exactly. C'mon, let's find you a spot. About time we stop running and stop fighting and just sit for a bit."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that." JB said softly, wistfully. "Had enough fighting to last me a lifetime."

Mr. Doctor Strange

Chapter Notes

As I've said to a few people this week, "I'm pretty much rewriting the beginning of Doctor Strange, why did I think I can get that covered in 800 words?!" Clearly, I needed a whole chapter. XD

An announcement! I've signed up as a creator for [Marvel Trumps Hate](#), a fandom charity auction focused on all Marvel universes, characters, and ships. If you've enjoyed my work and would like me to create something more specific, please check it out! Bids open on Sunday, 10/21, at 12AM EST.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Doctor Strange.

Grey's Anatomy (S05E15).

Doctor Who.

"Final round, Billy." Stephen tapped one foot against the sterilized floor in the operating room, still on beat even though the music had stopped. "Dealer's choice, since this is your last chance to break your impressive losing streak."

Billy mumbled something uncomplimentary under his breath as his fingers flew over the StarkPad in search of the next song. A second later, the distinctive sound of a flugelhorn trickled through the speakers.

"Oh, come on, Billy. You didn't even try." Christine huffed good-naturedly. She had been one to start this little tradition of testing Stephen's extensive musical knowledge, so of course she would love to see him lose.

Just once.

Before he left for his trip.

She was going to be disappointed.

"I did!" Billy protested. "Title, artist, and year. Go!"

Stephen winked at Christine and laughed when her eyes narrowed in a glare. "Feels So Good, Chuck Mangione, 1977. Seriously, Billy, this wasn't even hard."

"Hah! It's 1978."

"No, Billy, while *Feels So Good* may have charted in 1978, the album was released in-

"-December of 1977." Christine finished. Then scoffed. "Why do I know that? Why is that piece of useless information taking up space in my brain?"

"Because the man charted a top ten hit with a Flugelhorn." Stephen pointed out as he angled the forceps and extracted the final cyst without rupturing it. The patient had neurocysticercosis, an already rare condition of having worms in the brain made rarer by the number of cysts. *Ten*. "Status?"

Christine hummed as she peered into the surgical dish, fascinated in the way only a surgeon would be when staring at squirming tapeworms that had just been removed from a man's head with said man's skull open and brain exposed not three feet away. "You got all of them-

"Not you, I can count to ten just fine on my own." Stephen retracted the scope with steady hands. "Billy?"

"1977." Billy sighed, though there was far more amusement than annoyance in his tone. "I hate you."

"Woah! Feels so good, doesn't it?" Stepping away from the operating table, Stephen spun on his heels, invigorated by the absolute win that was this surgery. Prior to today, the record had been Shepherd's removal of eight five years ago.

"You won't last a week before you're back in here." Christine said with a fond shake of her head as she joined him in an impromptu victory dance, swaying from side to side as she passed the neurosurgery residents who would be closing up. "Why on earth are you taking a leave of absence anyway?"

Everyone had been stunned when Stephen announced that he would be taking an unspecified leave from his post.

Announced, not asked.

The board had no leverage and was therefore in no position to raise any objections; the worst they could do was to terminate his employment and they would be fools to risk losing their association with the renowned neurosurgeon who had fused transected spinal cords, stimulated neurogenesis in the central nervous system, and consulted on Stark Industries' latest series of intuitive prosthetic. The staff had been shocked but Stephen had never cared much for their opinions, bumbling fools who spent more time spreading rumors about his decision than on perfecting their own craft. Though Stephen had to say that out of the various theories, looming malpractice suits and possible debilitating illnesses and job offers from Stark Industries, he liked the one where he had to leave to nurse his broken heart after Christine had ended their relationship.

Mostly because she was entirely unaware of it while he was getting a surprising amount of baked goods with expressions of sympathy and motivational quotes on finding love again. He had critiqued each offering, hiding his heartbreak behind scathing remarks worthy of a

temperamental judge on those predictable cooking competition shows Christine had enjoyed and he had refused to watch.

Stephen, everything is about you.

Her words still haunted him during the too-quiet minutes at night and the too-slow hours during the day. Not necessarily because of her accurate, if unflattering, assessment of his personality - he had made peace with his selfishness years ago when he first decided to become a surgeon and wore the trait with pride like his bespoke suits and luxury watches - but because he had tried to include her in his endeavors, sharing with her what was important to him with her and showing her what made him so impressive.

Still all about him.

An observation made by JARVIS, who was remarkably easy to talk to with his flat intonation, matter-of-fact answers, and acute understanding of the finer points of human emotions. Which was, clearly, not a reflection of Stephen's interpersonal skills but a demonstration of Stark's engineering expertise, writing lines of codes so nuanced and detailed and inventive to create an A.I. that approached sentience.

Loki had proclaimed Stark the creator of souls and JARVIS the light born out of Stark's dazzling brilliance.

Stephen had rolled his eyes and brushed the comment off with a mock retching sound, as he did with all the nauseating and flowery praise Loki liked to heap upon Stark. If Banner hadn't confirmed that Loki was just as effusive with his affections when Stephen wasn't around, Stephen would have thought it was another one of the god's pranks.

God. Ugh.

As a man of science, Stephen had long held the belief that there were no such things as deities or destiny. They were made of matter and nothing more; another tiny, momentary speck within an indifferent universe.

A universe that now included gods and portals and magic.

Like he said, ugh.

Stephen had been studying the schematics, alternatively wincing and glowering at the barbaric chair HYDRA had used on Barnes, when Stark had called to let him know that Loki had gotten it sorted.

Gotten it sorted.

Three words that had sounded so simple, so infuriatingly simple, when Stephen could find no surgical cure for the kind of damages HYDRA had done to Barnes and only kept at the research because he refused to admit defeat.

Only for Loki to effortlessly claim the victory by placing his hand on Barnes' head like some faith healer realigning chakras or whatever it was these hacks purportedly did to cure various

ailments.

The inexplicable nature and mysterious application of Loki's abilities set Stephen's teeth on edge.

While gods and portals could be explained with science, translated into rational terms like aliens and worm holes, there was no logical explanation for how Loki had been able to recover Barnes' memories and, furthermore, bring them forth for Barnes to review in what sounded like a psychedelic hallucination.

Honestly, mind-altering drugs would make more sense than magic.

Except a hallucination wouldn't have the weight of accuracy and Barnes, in a private hearing, had provided a list of missions he had carried out and targets he had eliminated on HYDRA's orders. Information that would have been more than enough to purchase his freedom if he hadn't already been found innocent of these acts. A redacted version of his testimony had been released later, with its veracity proven by several reputable journalists in print and a flurry of conspiracy theorists online.

For the first time in his life, Stephen had felt...unsure. It was not a feeling he enjoyed. He had always been confident, from his first step as a toddler to his first solo surgery, his footing had been sure and his hands hadn't shaken.

Stephen had chosen neurosurgery because the brain was often referred to as the human body's most mysterious organ, a system of connection that invoked emotions and prompted actions that were sometimes at odds with one another and seemingly at random. A challenge he had met head-on and a puzzle he had since solved, figuring out where the pieces fit and how they worked sometimes in sequence and sometimes all at once. He remembered explaining this to Tony, before this insanity of magic and all they knew was the beauty of science, painting the picture of the brain with strokes as steady as the cut of his scalpel.

He missed that certainty.

Now, he questioned his knowledge of the universe and, by extension, his understanding of himself. A doctor was a man of science. Could he still claim that title if he admitted to the existence of magic? If not, then who would he be? A believer or a fool? Neither suited him as well as doctor.

Or perhaps magic and science were one and the same. After all, the Bifrost was a mythological term for the Einstein-Rosen Bridge.

When Stephen had confided in Bruce about his doubts, one scientist to another scientist who was not sleeping with an alien god, Bruce had given him a copy of Jane's papers with a knowing look and a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Stephen had bristled at the implication that he needed consoling of any kind but the truth was that her papers on dimensional travels, framed within the constructs of astrophysics, had provided a sense of comfort and, eventually, served as a source of motivation.

Stephen was determined to seek out other magic users, since he refused to subject himself to Loki's smug glee, and learn everything he could about their supernatural ways, so he could disprove it. There must be an explanation, just because it hadn't been found yet did not mean it didn't exist. After some uncomfortable conversations with some of his more *spiritual* colleagues and a review of documented cases of miraculous recoveries without medical intervention, he knew exactly where to start.

"Just needed a change of scenery." Stephen replied as he held the door open for Christine with an elbow before following her out of the surgical suite.

"Where to?"

"Kathmandu, Nepal."

*

Mordo studied the newcomer, taking in the tailored suit and dress shoes that spoke more of status than utility and should have attracted the wrong kind of attention from the less savory elements in this neighborhood but did not. He was flaunting his wealth with the kind of nonchalance born out of entitlement, as if he didn't know any other way to be and didn't care to learn. Which meant he was either dangerous or an idiot. Luckily for him, none of the pickpockets and muggers in the area seemed to want to take the chance of finding out.

"I hear you are looking for Kamar-Taj." Mordo stepped forward from underneath the archway.

The newcomer pivoted on his heel, eyes wide not with surprise but with interest. "You heard right." He extended a hand. "Stephen Strange."

"Karl Mordo." Mordo accepted it. "Follow me, then." It was a challenge and an invitation.

"Lead the way."

Mordo did not glance back, trusting Strange to be able to keep pace in the crowded street. He was proven correct when he stopped and heard Strange's commentary behind him.

"Really? Are you sure you got the right place? That one looks a little more... Kamar-Taj-y." The skepticism came through loud and clear for he made no effort to disguise it.

Mordo wondered if the confidence was a result of stupidity after all. "Forget everything you know and think that you know." He warned before pushing open the door.

"Why?" Strange asked, trailing closely as they entered the courtyard, empty for now with the novices finished with their afternoon practice.

The question caught Mordo off-guard. "What?"

"Why should I forget everything I know and think that I know?" Strange said with the tone of someone who was used to repeating himself but did not want to. A smart man, then, one with

little tolerance for those he perceive to be beneath his intellects. "And huh, this place is much bigger on the inside. Brilliant." His smirk was conspiratorial, like he was sharing a joke.

Mordo gave him a flat look, the same one he gave Wong whenever the other Master referenced pop culture.

A golden spark danced into being before them, then another, and another, until a brilliant portal appeared and the Ancient One emerged.

"Our teacher, the Ancient One." Mordo bowed. "And this is Stephen Strange."

"The Ancient One? What's her real name?"

"My title is my name." The Ancient One said, brushing aside the question easily as she had done with other inquiries into her life prior to becoming the Ancient One. "And to answer your earlier question, it is because you've been looking at the world through a keyhole"

Strange rolled his eyes. "What is it with you magic people and door analogies?"

"Magic people-" Mordo sputtered.

The Ancient One tilted her head curiously. "Door analogies?"

"Spare me the speech, I know magic-" Strange's fingers curled into air quotes. "-exists. Or whatever you think is magic anyway." He dropped his hands. "Now, I want to learn about it and you're going to teach me."

"I am? And why is that, Mr. Strange?"

Mordo's brows arched at the unexpected amusement in the Ancient One's voice.

"Doctor, actually."

"Well, no. Not anymore, surely. Isn't that why you're here?"

"Nope. I don't know where you got that idea, crystal ball not working?"

"Show some respect!" Mordo hissed.

Strange lifted his palms in mock surrender. "Right, right. Sorry. I'm here because I am a man of science, and by the looks of this place-" His nose wrinkled. "-you can use some science. Do you even have wifi? Anyway, it doesn't matter. My point is that I can help you, legitimize what you're doing here."

The Ancient One laughed, an unfamiliar sound of pure delight. "You are here to offer your help? Not to seek it from us?"

"That's one way of putting it." He shrugged.

"You are the first to make such an offer." She mused.

Mordo agreed, Kamar-Taj was a place that collected broken things and people wanting to be made whole. Never before had one come to them with a different objective.

"Very well. Perhaps we could use a man of science in Kamar-Taj, Dr. Strange." The Ancient One nodded. "And I know just the person to be your guide, you two are quite alike. Master Mordo, please find Master Kaecilius and ask him to show our newest student of the Mystic Arts around."

*

Kaecilius was certain the American would not last long here.

It was rather unlike the Ancient One to accept another student at this juncture, and such an arrogant and disbelieving one at that. So why had she granted him his stay?

"Welcome to Kamar-Taj, Mister...?"

"Doctor."

"Just Doctor?"

"It's strange." The self-awareness of Mr. Doctor's answer was lessened by the brusqueness of his tone.

"Well, I've seen stranger things." Kaecilius acknowledged. "This way, Mr. Doctor."

He huffed, the sound as obnoxious as the sharp clicks of his inappropriate footwear on the tiled floor. "It's Doctor Strange."

"Mr. Doctor Strange?" How bizarre but Kaecilius supposed he could appreciate the American's gesture of being on a first-name basis. They turned a corner and continued down the corridor.

"No. It's- Never mind." Mr. Strange looked pained; he certainly lived up to his name.

Kaecilius hummed, noncommittal, as he pushed open the door to the guest quarters. "The Ancient One will send for you in the morning."

"Why is she called that anyway? How old is she? If she's really that ancient, how does she look so young?" The curious gleam in Mr. Strange's eyes were too intent for Kaecilius' comfort. He was not asking to make conversation, he wanted to know the dark secret lurking in the heart of Kamar-Taj. This must be why he had sought them out...

"The Ancient One is the latest in a long line of Sorcerers Supreme, going back thousands of years." Kaecilius replied, careful to keep the disdain out of his voice. Thousands of years and not a day older. He had come to Kamar-Taj with the promise of being healed and had, for a time, believed the Ancient One's parlor tricks to be real magic.

Discovering the book of Cagliostro had changed that.

The Dark Dimension was a place beyond time, beyond the rigid laws of nature, beyond death. What the Ancient One hoarded greedily, Dormammu gave freely.

Immortality.

"A long line of Sorcerers Supreme, you say." Mr. Strange grimaced as he spoke the words, both as if his mind couldn't grasp the concept and that the concept was beneath him, then his expression smoothed in contemplation. "You must keep records then. Where is your library?"

All these questions. Was this why the Ancient One had requested him to be Mr. Strange's guide? Was this a test of his loyalty, which she had already lost? He must act quickly then, locate the Book of Cagliostro then make his escape.

"Rest, Mr. Strange, or meditate." Kaecilius said instead, digging in his pocket and pulling out a piece of paper; this should distract him for the evening.

Mr. Strange frowned, mouthing the string of words. "Shamballa? What is this, a mantra?"

Kaecilius smiled. "The wifi password. We're not savages."

"Well, at least this answers one of my questions."

"And you've answered some of mine. Sleep well, Mr. Strange."

The Bill Came Due

Chapter Notes

First, here is a Thursday update because it is my birthday and we should celebrate with an early chapter ~~and a cliffhanger~~.

Second, I was struck by the writing self-jinx again! I kept saying that I wasn't going to spend more time on Doctor Strange and guess what I ended up doing? Yep, 2/3 of this chapter covers the aftermath of Stephen's experience in the Dark Dimension.

Finally, a friendly reminder that the [Marvel Trumps Hate Fanworks Auction](#) will end on Saturday (10/27)! I am offering a 5-10k fic including but not limited to these tags/themes: *AUs*. *5+1s*. *Crossovers (email me!)*. *Smut*. *Angst*. *Fluff*. *Hurt/Comfort*. *Civil War Team Iron Man*. You can bid on it [here](#). :)

Beta-ed by [Arboreal](#), who came up with the excellent Game of Thrones line.

References/Quotes

Doctor Strange. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.

Gesturing to the phone she had pressed against her ear, Christine mouthed an apology to the barista as she paid for her pumpkin spice latte and left a higher than usual tip to make up for her rudeness. Normally, she would wait to answer her phone but it had been over a month since Stephen's last call, a drastic deviation from his weekly check-in sessions since he had left for his sabbatical to Kathmandu, of all places. She had made the obligatory Bob Seger reference and he had responded with the year and album instantly; the exchange had sent a pang to her heart, driving home the truth that she missed him in every one of his annoying and arrogant ways. "Hey, I was worried. What happened?"

The last time they had spoken, Stephen had mentioned an altercation stemming from an ideological disagreement that turned ugly when certain *do as I say, not as I do* truths had been revealed.

It was one of the more bizarre conversations they had had since Stephen's departure, ranking in the top three with the one where they went through a checklist they had found online to determine whether or not Kamar-Taj was a cult and the one where Stephen apologized for having treated her so selfishly during their relationship. The former she still joked about and the latter they never brought up again. Not yet, at least. Not when he was on the other side of the planet studying the *source code that shaped reality*, which definitely sounded like something a cultist would say.

Stephen was progressing nicely in his cultist training, his photographic memory that he never stopped boasting about - *It's how I got my M.D. and Ph.D. at the same time* - was apparently as useful in learning real science as it was for pseudo-science. He had even made a few friends, a librarian named Wong who was apparently a huge fan of Beyonce and another student named Mordo who had been the main topic of concern during their last talk.

Mordo, it seemed, had been hit hard by the revelation that their teacher, the Ancient One, had been operating under a double standard of rules and he was becoming disillusioned with whatever it was that they studied up in Kamar-Taj. Which she had thought might actually be a good thing, to break free of that robe-wearing and incantation-chanting lifestyle, and would have said so if not for how distraught Stephen had been. Instead, she shelved her opinions and tried her best to give advice on a situation she only knew in broad strokes but what she did know had painted her a sufficient picture.

It reminded her of a situation back in her undergraduate years, when the bioengineering department's reputation had taken a hit when one of their senior staff was caught falsifying data. Christine had been a senior in that program and in the middle of interviewing for medical schools. Needless to say, the scandal had come up in every single meeting and she had had to, respectfully but firmly, remind the interviewers that one person's lapse in judgement should not negate the overall value of the institution. That disappointment with one did not equate to disillusionment with the whole.

And that was what she told Stephen, to remind Mordo that whatever he had been working toward was bigger than the Ancient One. Stephen had thanked her for her help and complimented her on her insight, which, while unexpected, weren't what had landed the conversation in the top three of most bizarre. It was the discussion they had after, about whether the laws of nature could be bent without breaking. Entirely theoretical, of course, since neither of them were capable of manipulating the space-time continuum.

The barista slid her drink across the counter with a shrug.

Christine picked it up with a smile that was equal parts apologetic and grateful but he had already turned his attention to the next customer. "Stephen?" The silence was unlike him. "Hello?"

"Hi."

She tensed at the unfamiliar voice, dread pooling in her stomach and mind racing through all the possible scenarios where someone else would have ended up with Stephen's phone and calling her. None of them were good. "Who is this?"

"My name is Mordo, I'm a friend of Stephen's."

"Why do you have his phone?" She bumped open the door into the cafe with her shoulder, one hand clutching her phone and the other holding a seasonal drink she no longer wanted.

"He made a bargain and the bill came due." Mordo said enigmatically, full of regret but also with a hint of almost satisfaction. "As it always must."

"What does that mean? Where is he?" She pushed past the crowds on the street, uncaring that her latte was spilling and staining the light gray of her sweatshirt. "Put him on the phone. Now!"

"You're freaking her out." A muffled voice interjected in the background, followed by the telltale shuffle of the phone changing hands. "Hello, Christine. My name is Wong. Strange is fine, he just can't talk right now."

Immediately, Christine liked Wong better than Mordo, a deep baritone that got straight to the point. Even if the point only raised more questions. "Why can't he talk? He loves to talk-"

"He can't talk right now because he just saved our realm from eternal torment and the cost for such a feat is...high." Wong stated calmly, his tone belying the insanity of his words. "He asked for you."

"O- Okay." Christine took a breath, already calculating the logistics. She was off for the next two days and she had some personal leave saved up. There should be enough reward points left to cover most of the flight to Kathmandu, the rest could go on her credit card to accrue more points for the return trip. "I can be there in, um, a day? A day and a half?" Damn Stephen and his need to go to literally the other side of the world, the international flight would take at least twenty-four hours. "I'll call the airlines-"

"That won't be necessary, we are at Strange's apartment. He says the access code is still the same."

"Wait, what?"

A wave of static then the line went quiet. Too quiet.

Christine peered incredulously at her phone's darkened screen, signaling the call had, indeed, ended. She called him back. It went straight to voicemail. She tried again and was met with the same result. "Damn cultists." She raised a resigned hand to hail a cab.

The access code, as Wong said, was still the same.

Eight digits that meant nothing to her and, if she had to guess, probably the anniversary of some award Stephen had received. Typical, really. Christine had felt like an afterthought, a footnote in the grand saga of Dr. Stephen Strange, for most of their relationship. Typing in a series of numbers that held no significance to her brought back the same loneliness she had felt toward the end of their relationship.

Christine took a swig of her cooled drink, letting the sugary taste of pumpkin spice syrup wash away the bitter taste in her mouth.

They broke up. They moved on. They were friends.

Friends who still had access to each other's apartment, apparently. She hadn't asked for her key back and he had kept the same access code.

Christine pushed open the door. "Stephen?"

His familiar silhouette was a stripe of black against the midmorning sunshine streaming in through the windows. "Christine."

Any relief she might have felt at the sound of his voice was washed away by the raspy quality of it, like a drowning man choking on water as he screamed for air. She had her arms twined around him before she even registered taking a step.

"I thought I was so clever, trapping him with a time loop. I was so sure I'd win-" His voice cracked on a laugh without any mirth, muffled against the top of her head. "-that I forgot I had to lose again and again and again and again and again and again and again-"

Her own panic was welling with every one of his desperate repetition, rising to her throat and spilling out of her mouth in a shout of his name. To call him back to her, to himself.

"Stephen?" She tried again, adjusting her volume and tone to be gentler, kinder. "Stephen, look at me. "

"You're here." His hand cradled her face, fingers trembling as they brushed over her eyelids, cheeks and lips. The blue in his eyes became clearer and brighter, no longer muddled by anguish, as he traced over her features. "You're here."

"I am." Leaning in, Christine pressed her lips above the arc of his cheekbone. "What's happened, Stephen? Are you hurt?" Her eyes swept over his body, checking for signs of injuries, and widened when she took in the intricately folded and layered fabric on his outfit. "Why are you dressed up like an extra on Game of Thrones?"

Mordo cleared his throat. "There are consequences to bend the rules of nature-"

Wong shushed him, loudly and with an elbow to his side.

"This is our cult uniform." Stephen said after a stretch of silence, with a twinkle of amusement in his still weary gaze. "And let's just say they really should put the warnings before the other stuff."

*

"Wise choice." Wong commented as he observed Strange return the Eye of Agamotto to the stand, this time with more reverence and care in his movement. A far cry from the haughty doctor who had strutted into Kamar-Taj nearly eight months ago and the arrogant novice who crowed about his impeccable plan before leaping into the Dark Dimension. Strange's battle of wills against Dormammu had humbled him, taught him the lesson of risks and consequences, and, in the end, made him a wiser man and a better sorcerer. Not that Strange would agree, still clinging onto his title as a physician. "You'll wear the Eye of Agamotto once you've mastered its powers. Until then, best not to walk the streets wearing an Infinity Stone."

"A what?" Strange glanced over with a skeptical lift of his brows.

"You might have a gift for the mystic arts-"

Strange rolled his eyes.

"-but you still have much to learn."

Spine stiffening and hands shaking, Strange looked away.

The Cloak of Levitation settled over Strange's shoulders in a protective flutter.

Wong took a preemptive step back. The Cloak might be fickle in choosing its wielder but once it had chosen, it was unreservedly loyal and refused to tolerate any perceived mistreatments. Mordo had learned of the Cloak's vengeful trait when he tried to, once again, remind Strange of the importance of upholding the order of natural law by referencing Strange's trauma of repeated deaths in the Dark Dimension.

While Wong could at least understand Mordo's reasoning in revisiting the topic, Mordo had always been inflexible in his worldview on maintaining the balance and Wong strongly suspected that Mordo perceived the Ancient One's death and Strange's suffering as payments rendered for their parts in breaking the rules, the Cloak either did not have such insight or simply did not care.

Mordo's unfortunate stumble into the fountain had been most, well, unfortunate.

Still, it was good to have both Strange and Mordo here. The Ancient One had described Mordo's soul as unmovable, forged by the fires of his youth. Her hope had been that, in time, Mordo's rigidity would be balanced by Strange's flexibility, as the Ancient One had once envisioned for Kaecilius and Mordo.

"Word of the Ancient One's death will spread through the Multiverse. Earth has no Sorcerer Supreme to defend it. We must be ready." Wong said, his stare angling toward Strange from the corner of his eye, pleased to see that the other sorcerer had regained his composure.

"We'll be ready." Strange nodded, voice soft but resolute.

*

The hollow tick of the grandfather clock Laura had inherited, literally, from her grandfather echoed in the tense silence as Clint tilted the knife, the jagged blade gleaming in the morning sun.

He needed to make a decision.

Straight down the middle or diagonal? Crust on or off?

"Cooper likes it cut into triangles and Lila likes the crust off." Laura offered helpfully, slipping an arm around his waist and settling in against his side.

Clint let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding as he sliced through one of the turkey sandwiches. "Thanks, honey."

"Not that I don't appreciate the help, but you know I can still touch deli meat, right? Even if I can't eat it?"

Quickly trimming the crust off of the other, he slid the sandwiches into separate Ziploc bags and put them into the children's lunch boxes along with a bottle of water, a bag of chips, and a banana. "I know, I just...want to be here for you, for the kid, for all of it."

The life of a SHIELD operative hadn't been conducive to raising a family or being a supportive spouse. Clint hadn't been there to hold Laura's hair back as she threw up from morning sickness or run to the store in the middle of the night to satisfy her random food cravings or to feel the baby kick for the first time. He hadn't even been around for the children's births.

For Cooper, Clint had driven Laura to the hospital then had to leave to extract Natasha. For Lila, he had been badly injured in an ill-timed explosion and had to wait several weeks for the worst of the burns to heal before meeting his daughter in fear of scaring the baby. Laura had given him hell for that stupid logic, hugging him close and slapping him on the back, crying with the relief that he was alive and okay before ordering him to take Cooper to the park so she could take a nap with Lila.

Now that they were expecting their third baby - Natasha or Nathaniel, because Natasha had played the *I got stabbed* card - Clint didn't want to miss a second of it. He even considered getting a cat just so he could change the litter box, another thing on the not-to-do list he had read online. Laura had vetoed that suggestion but otherwise indulged his other overprotective tendencies like the very slim possibility of Listeria on packaged deli meat.

"We're happy you're home." She tightened her arm in a half-hug before stepping away, calling out to the kids as she did. "Cooper! Lila! You're going to miss the bus!"

Cooper's answer was a muffled yell about not able to find his shoes and Lila was quiet, which was never a good sign.

The two parents exchanged a look.

"Find his shoes and I'll go check on Lila." Laura sighed.

"You got it." Clint had spotted the pair of sneakers buried between the couch cushions instantly but refrained from pointing them out to avoid another lecture on house rules. As soon as Laura set off for Lila's room, he pulled them out and set them down by the door. "Found them!"

Cooper came barreling down the stairs and practically hopped into his shoes.

Clint's phone buzzed with an incoming text from Natasha, an ominous *I miss stabbing people* with an image attached. "What the hell?" He muttered as he studied the photo. A massive blob, made of ash gray and glowing blue, contained by what looked like a force field of fiery orange and forest green, maintained by a group of what could only be described as magical monks weaving geometric shapes out of strands of light and Loki, clad in his signature armor, with his arms outstretched and palms glowing emerald.

He supposed it counted as progress that his first reaction was utter confusion at the overwhelming weirdness on his phone than the habitual rage clawing at his insides from seeing Loki again.

Though his new therapist, referred by Hill and personally vetted by Natasha, would probably do that see-saw hand motion Clint kind of hated if only because she was usually right when she did it. She saw it as more of a change of targets than actual resolution of his anger. Which, well, he did still dream about shooting Rogers in the head though he hadn't had any physical outbursts in months.

Thankfully Cooper had been too mad at Captain America for getting Auntie Nat hurt to be upset with his father for breaking the toy shield in half.

Still, admitting that she wasn't wrong had to count for something. He made a mental note to bring it up at their weekly session tomorrow as Laura and Lila joined them at the door.

"Everything's okay?" Laura's delicate features were tightened with concern.

"Yep, yep." He pressed a quick kiss to her lips, ignoring his kids' disgusted groans, and passed her his phone. "Nat says hi."

"What is that thing?"

"No idea." He shrugged. "Glad I'm not dealing with it though." And he meant every word. He was happier finding his kids' shoes or repairing the porch rails than he did confronting gods or fighting aliens or shooting super soldiers. At some point, he had gotten in way over his head and it took being back on solid ground, fixing problems with clear and simple solutions, for him to realize who he was and what was important.

Laura handed him his phone back. "You good?"

"Getting better every day." Clint smiled.

*

"-a roiling mass that erupted from the ground in St. Charles, Missouri-"

Peggy shook her head in disbelief at what she was seeing. "Good thing you have that procedure tomorrow, we can use a super soldier to fight these monsters." She whispered, mindful of eavesdroppers.

Next to her, Steve flinched so violently that it sent his frail frame into a coughing fit.

The Star Spangled Man with a Plan

Chapter Notes

The long-awaited Steve POV aka the chapter I've dreaded writing all week because it is not a fun headspace to be. And this isn't the last time we'll hear from Steve either, we'll see him in JB's POV which is coming up next and should be a lot more fun to write.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: First Avenger. Captain America: Winter Soldier.

[Chronically Ill Steve Rogers.](#)

The first thought that surfaced through the muddy waters of Steve's mind was he must have overslept again. It didn't happen often but sometimes his body needed extra time to recover from the training and battles he put it through.

And that one time the Hulk had shattered half of his face with a single blow, which Steve had already forgiven Banner for even if he didn't get the chance to say it during their conversation that went south between Steve owning up to his mistake of throwing his shield at Banner and thanking Banner for killing the Bucky impostor. Banner had turned green and for a fleeting second Steve had thought the other man might throw up but then the hue had turned more Hulk-like than sickly and it had seemed more likely that Banner would be throwing a punch instead. Fortunately, Banner had had enough sense to excuse himself before Steve had needed to intervene. Despite how their previous encounter had gone, Steve would put himself on the line again to protect the innocent agents from a rampaging Hulk.

His limbs had the familiar stiffness from inactivity and his teeth felt, for lack of a better word, fuzzy. Not that he could get cavities with the serum coursing through his veins; his enamels had been strengthened and any decay would have been repaired instantly. Still, it wasn't a pleasant feeling and Steve tried to remember if there was any mouthwash left in his hastily packed bag.

The latest lead on Rumlow was the best one they had gotten and he had run out of SHIELD to board the next flight to Romania, his duffle bag half-zipped and carrying only the essentials. As much as it pained his frugal sensibilities, he could always get whatever he needed on the road. Saving Bucky was worth this sacrifice to his ideals.

Bucky! Rumlow had said Bucky was asking for him!

Steve scrambled to sit up, to get out of this bed, to find Bucky. Only to realize he couldn't move. There was a heaviness in his bones holding him down and spots swam behind his

eyelids.

He tried to open his eyes and succeeded after several minutes and a lot of effort. There was no joy in this small victory when the sight that greeted him was the unforgiving glare of fluorescent lights. He fought against the urge to close his eyes, to shield them from the sharp brightness, and stared stubbornly, defiantly, at the too bright glow. Memories filtered back in as he soldiered through the sting.

Entering the dilapidated building in the crowded market. Being ambushed but gaining the upper hand easily. Feeling the prick of the needle in his neck.

What was in that syringe?

His heartrate spiked with panic, pounding against his ribs and sending shockwaves through his chest that were terrifyingly familiar. Like meeting an old enemy in a dark alley. Dimly, Steve registered the shrill noise of what sounded like an alarm but the beeps were muffled by the roar of rushing blood in his ears. He hadn't felt this way in years, not since Project Rebirth-

The door slammed open with a flood of shouting and a flurry of activity.

Then everything went quiet and dark.

Who will redeem, heed the call for America?

The next time Steve woke, he was half-convinced he was still dreaming because Bucky was there. Really, truly there. His hair was a mess of tangles and greasy, like the times during the war when they hadn't had a chance to sleep let alone bathe, but his eyes held the same relief they once did whenever Steve had stepped up to confront a bully only to be knocked back down and none of the cold blankness Steve had seen in the photos and footage of the Winter Soldier.

"Hey punk." Bucky shifted in his chair, pressing the call button and grabbing the cup of water from the bedside table.

His joy of seeing his best friend became horror when Steve noted the folded sleeved pinned to Bucky's left shoulder. "Buck." He said, voice hoarse and speech slurred, squinting to see his friend better.

Bucky lifted the glass of water, pinching the straw between his index and middle fingers to point it in Steve's direction. "Small sips."

And Steve knew Bucky well enough to see the anger lurking low back in Bucky's eyes and knew there was a stern talking-to waiting for him when he got better. The same old lecture on Steve's willingness to fight, as if it were a bad thing to want to stand up for doing what was right instead of sitting down to talk in circles.

Like old times.

A lump rose to Steve's throat as he considered just how long it had been and how much had happened. Hastily, he took several gulps and regretted them instantly when his stomach churned in protest.

Bucky pulled the straw away with an eye roll and a mutter that was too low for Steve to make out. He set the cup down then scrubbed a hand, his only hand, over his jaw.

That wasn't right. The serum had fixed his hearing. Steve blinked, then blinked again. His vision was still blurry and that wasn't right either, the serum had given him perfect eyesight. "What- What happened?" He tried again, gasping out the words as his breathing sped up, lungs working overtime as if they were trying to compensate for how his heart had seemingly stopped beating.

"Stevie..." Bucky ducked his head as he trailed off. "You lost the serum."

Steve felt a surge of annoyance at Bucky's inconsideration for not talking at a normal volume as he strained to listen. "Huh?"

There was an apology in Bucky's eyes when he looked up but he wasn't feeling sorry for anything he did. He was feeling sorry for Steve.

For a split second, Steve wanted to tell Bucky to shut up and would have, too, if not for the sudden band of pressure around his chest.

"You lost the serum." Bucky repeated, louder and slower, like how he used to speak with the old ladies in their apartment building as he helped them with their groceries, like how he used to count out each inhale and exhale through Steve's asthma attacks.

Which, Steve realized almost detachedly, he might be having one right now.

Who'll rise or fall, give his all for America?

The inhalers the doctors had prescribed worked much better than the asthma cigarettes Steve had in the 1940s but, he noted bitterly as he eyed the plastic device on his bedside table, were not as good as Erskine's serum.

"Would you like me to show you up to use it?" The nurse asked softly, having taken care to stand closer to his good ear, and Steve bristled at the ever-present sympathy in her tone.

In everyone's tone.

The entire world believed HYDRA had twisted Steve's thoughts and muddled his mind, as if his loyalty toward Bucky was an idea Silt planted in Steve's head when Steve had never let go of his promise to be with Bucky till the end of the line.

Hill had spun the vow of friendship into something bad, something to be ashamed of, something to be pitied for.

As much as Steve wanted to snap at her, the good manners his ma had instilled in him prevailed. He settled for a terse shake of his head.

"Okay. You let me know when you feel up for it." Her smile was an understanding one and it only made Steve narrow his eyes before closing them altogether when she dipped the washcloth into the basin.

It was embarrassing to know a team of nurses had been bathing him for months while he was in a coma and downright mortifying that they would need to continue doing it because he hadn't recovered enough strength in his atrophied limbs to do it himself. Though physical therapy, once he had been cleared to start, would get him there eventually. His request for them to put him under, sparing him the humiliation, had been denied. So he had to settle for the pretense of unconsciousness in order to get away from the depressing reality that he was utterly useless and would likely remain this way.

Dr. Cho, a Korean woman who seemed far too young to be an expert in her field, had told Steve she could not reproduce the serum and even if it were a possibility, she would not do it because the variables were far too many and the risks were far too high. There was a very good chance that the reintroduction of the serum in his system would make him into something like the Red Skull.

She had refuted Erskine's logic of good becoming great and bad becoming worse with an apologetic tilt of her head, explaining science didn't quite work like that and the reason for Schmidt's transformation was because he had gotten an earlier and imperfect version of the serum.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Steve hadn't even gotten a chance to make his argument that it was the man, not the chemicals, who determined the outcome because she had been called away on an emergency at the labs.

In hushed and halting sentences, he had vented his frustration to Bucky on his next visit, which Steve still didn't understand why Bucky wouldn't just move into the facility. They could share the room, have the staff move in another bed or pile some couch cushions on the floor. Bucky had flashed a grin at the reference to their childhood but still said no, sprouting some nonsense about boundaries that reminded Steve of Sam's fake friendship and empty gesture. Which had led to another whispered rant with Bucky nodding along, always supportive and never impatient when Steve had to pause to catch his breath.

The first touch of the washcloth had him clenching his jaw and commanding his mind to float away from his body on an impossible daydream of becoming a super soldier again.

Who's here to prove that we can?

Breathing heavily from both the ache in his muscles and the feeling of powerlessness that hadn't faded despite regaining limited mobility and function, Steve was caught somewhere between relieved and irritated when the physical therapist effortlessly lifted him off of the floor and settled him into his wheelchair.

A wheelchair.

Something he had never thought he would need but had to rely on for the time being. He had learned that the hard way, when he had collapsed after his first session. Despite his best effort, he had cried out when his knees buckled, knowing his arms were too weak to break his fall, and choked on his own blood when his jaw clicked close as it hit the floor and his teeth bit into the inside of his cheek.

With shaking fingers, he tapped at the control console on the arm rest and navigated out of the training room. He saw Peggy sitting by one of the windows overlooking the gardens but there was no recognition in her glance.

Steve couldn't tell if he was glad that he didn't have to accept her wishes of good luck on his procedure tomorrow, still believing they were in the middle of war, or saddened that he still hadn't learned how to dance.

The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!

"What's bothering you, Steve?" Peggy asked, her eyes were as steely as the gray in her hair. Today was one of her good days.

Steve sighed, tearing his eyes away from the lively debate on the necessity of an imminent action clause to be added to the next round of amendments. The incident in Missouri had been contained due to the swift responses from the Masters of the Mystic Arts and Loki, who Steve hadn't given a thought to since Clint's suspension was finalized.

It was mind-boggling how much had changed in the year Steve had slept through. Superheroes were operating in the open now, with the backing and boundaries set by governments around the world. One hundred and fifty eight countries had signed the Avengers Accords, an evolving document aimed at providing both oversight and protection of the superheroes to better ensure the safety of the world and those who defended it.

Avenging was a thing of the past.

"For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what's right. I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore. Everything's different now and every time I think I got it figured out, it changes again." He sighed, choosing not to mention that half of the reason he had decided to stay with SHIELD was the fact that she had helped found it. Peggy hadn't reacted well to it last time and Steve was still no good at comforting a crying dame, especially when he knew he hadn't done or said anything wrong.

"That's life, Steve. It's always moving forward and all we can do is try to go along with it. Can't stand in the same spot forever. And, well, sometimes the best that we can do is start over." She placed a cookie on his plate, some Russian pastry Sharon had brought for her over the weekend. "Bucky certainly did, he even changed his name. Not by much, mind you, trading one vowel for two, but he's-"

"James Bourne is not his name." Steve bit out, suddenly annoyed. "His name is Bucky."

"Not anymore." Peggy's shoulders snapped back and her lips flattened into a disapproving line. "He goes by JB these days."

For the first time since meeting her, Steve thought he might be actually angry with Peggy. She knew how important Bucky was to him, how much their friendship factored into Steve's identity. Why was she trying to ruin it by supporting Bucky's ridiculous new name and pointless attempt at building a new life as a civilian when he was the last remaining super soldier? When he could do so much more?

Steve had offered Bucky his shield, an honor Steve would only entrust to his best friend, but Bucky had turned it down because he was tired of fighting. And Steve had seen red, infuriated by how Bucky was, once again, dismissing an opportunity Steve would love to have like it was worthless.

Like Steve was worthless for wanting it in the first place.

So Steve had said the same thing he had said last time, standing outside the U.S. Recruiting and Induction Center. He had called Bucky a coward and Bucky hadn't been by to visit since.

"You won't remember that tomorrow, you may not even know who I am." He sneered then instantly regretted it when she leaned away from him. "Peggy, I'm sorry-"

Her hands were clenched into fists by her sides and Steve was reminded of the time she had punched Hodge in the face. "No, don't bother. I'm sure I'll forget all about it by tomorrow, thank goodness for Alzheimer's."

Then she was gone before he could say another word and Steve hated himself for being so thoughtless and so cruel, throwing Peggy's condition in her face.

A good man definitely wouldn't have done that.

What would Erskine say now?

Till the End of The-

Chapter Notes

I had to push the ~~confrontation~~ conversation between Steve and JB to the next chapter because, once again, I underestimated how much there is to cover with what JB's been up to and feeling. At least it's all set up now for JB to actually talk and for Steve to hopefully listen.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Captain America: Winter Soldier.

The Bourne Identity.

28 Days Later.

"Good morning, everyone." Sam greeted. "My name is Sam and I am the facilitator of this support group."

JB only half-listened to Sam's opening speech, the same one he always gave at the beginning that covered the format and ground rules of the meetings as well as expectations for the participants. This being an open forum group meant that there was no curriculum to follow or specific topics to focus on; their weekly discussions were based upon the group members' needs. While JB's situation was unique, he doubted there was another a drafted soldier turned prisoner of war turned brainwashed super assassin turned amnesiac still playing catch-up with the last seventy years, he had found a surprising amount of common ground with the other participants.

Challenges of adjusting to civilian life.

Plans and goals for the future that some of them never considered.

Conflicts with loved ones who did not and could not understand their time on the battlefield.

"Well, what do you guys want to talk about today?" Sam asked. "Anything weighing on your mind?"

Rolling the coffee cup between his palms, JB debated whether or not to share his troubles with the group and, if he did, how to go about it without any identifying details that could jeopardize his new life as James Bourne. He focused on the faint warming seeping through the paper cup, a grounding sensation that confirmed that he aware and in control of his actions and reactions.

It had taken some time for JB to even contemplate, let alone accept, the possibility of a prosthetic. Especially since he had found comfort in the lack of it in the beginning, the emptiness below his left shoulder had served as a physical reminder that he was no longer in the 1940s and free from HYDRA's clutches.

In the end, it hadn't been some grand insight or sudden breakthrough that convinced him. It had been the necessity for privacy resulting from the media frenzy after the footage of the disabled Bucky Barnes sitting by the bedside of the comatose Steve Rogers had aired.

Though the plan had sounded too simple to work, replacing his missing arm and getting a haircut were all that it would take to fool the horde of reporters? Really?

But Darcy had sounded so sure in her less-is-more approach and JB had wanted to avoid more drastic options like plastic surgery or elaborate disguises. She had been so pleased with herself when no one gave him a second glance as they slipped past the crowd of cameras, a haughty little smirk at the corners of her lips that made his curl upward.

Despite having been outfitted with the prosthetic months ago, JB still marveled at how far technology had advanced. His left arm was indistinguishable from his right, not only in function but also in form, many steps up from Stark Industries' line of intuitive prosthetic that was widely distributed and at a significant discount.

Happy had mentioned once that the board was unhappy with the project that was operating at a loss behind closed doors, though they were all in support of it in front of the cameras.

JB could only imagine how much his new arm must have cost, with the synthetic skin and thermoregulation boosting its believability as a real limb and the hidden miniature arc reactor powering the entire mechanism. Unlike the standard model, this prosthesis was tailored to JB and could only be worn by him with the DNA lock, one of the many protective measures that JB understood enough to appreciate but didn't fully grasp the finer points.

To him, what was most striking about the prosthesis was how very *real* it looked and felt, nothing like the shiny and sleek robotics he had imagined but everything he wanted. He had never been one for fame and fortune and flashy entrances, preferring to stay in his little corner of Brooklyn and live a quiet but good life.

Steve had been the opposite.

The thought of Steve made JB wince. It had been over a week since the last time he visited Steve and what had happened between them sat heavily on his chest.

Sam, of course, noticed it immediately. "JB?"

JB inhaled sharply, mind made up. He was James Bourne now. James Bourne was someone dedicated to getting better and he couldn't do that if he wasn't honest. "Yeah, I, um, had a fight with my bes-" He caught himself, unsure if that title still held true or if it were another relic of the past. "Um, my friend. Blindsided me, really. Funny how it still caught me off-guard when I've been waiting for it since we, um, got home, I guess, after..." His shoulders lifted into a vague shrug. "...everything."

The others around him hummed in understanding, filling in the blank in his wording with their own experiences.

"He's expecting me to be someone I'm not, not anymore. I can't-" JB took a deep swig of his coffee. "I hate it."

Bucky Barnes would forever be linked to the Winter Soldier, the fact that it was a connection looked at with more sympathy than fear or hatred was a testament to Hill's impeccable timing and manipulation of the media. JB had had his doubts, of course, of how it would all turn out when he finally called Hill after bingeing on pancakes while watching a film with a guy who woke up from his coma to find the world had been overrun by zombies.

Darcy's choice, of course. She had a knack for picking things that had enough similarity with whatever struggle JB was working through to keep him invested but also enough differences to be enjoyable, like the Jason Bourne series on Christmas Day.

Hill had raised an eyebrow at his choice of James Bourne but wisely kept her commentary to herself. If asked, JB would say that the Bourne Identity had been on his mind and he liked his initials, nothing about his urge to keep Darcy's twinkling eyes and brilliant smile at their little inside joke all to himself.

Steve, however, had kicked up a stink about it, calling Darcy insensitive - the nicest adjective out of all the ones he had used - for showing JB the Bourne movies.

Still reeling from having his best friend back after decades under ice and months in a coma, JB hadn't said a word in Darcy's defense. Nothing about how he liked her sense of humor, how she made him laugh at the absurdities of life, and how they had watched the sequel to the zombie movie the night before. Instead, JB had just let Steve badmouth the woman who had, literally and figuratively, held JB's hand as he learned his way around this new world.

Looking back, JB wondered if the shame churning in his gut had something to do with his increasingly thin patience and short temper with Steve. His therapist, a middle-aged man who had passed SHIELD's thorough background check and JARVIS' scrutiny and Darcy's social media investigation, had agreed that JB's guilt was a possible contributor and posited that Steve's motivation and behaviors were likely factors as well.

The fact that Steve had landed himself in this situation because of JB or, as Steve preferred to call him, Bucky, weighed heavily on JB's mind. He certainly hadn't asked for any of the grand gestures of friendship Steve had made and though some of them had made him feel a surge of warmth that there was someone so staunchly in his corner, most of them had made him uneasy. His life certainly wasn't worth more than Romanoff's, yet Steve had seemed to believe it in his choice to prioritize a man who *could have been* JB over a fellow Avenger.

How could he ever match that kind of devotion, however deluded?

Happy, in his typical gruff manner that belied his name, had grunted that JB owed Steve nothing before queuing up another boxing simulation, with proper adjustment to account for JB's enhanced attributes, to see how JB would fare in the championship matches he had missed due to his time in HYDRA captivity.

Logically, JB could see where Happy was coming from but emotionally? That was a whole different view. It felt like he was indebted to Steve in a way he could never repay. So he did the next best thing, he had stuck around even when every fiber of his being was screaming the opposite.

"And I hate that I hate it because he just wants his friend back. I mean, is that really so awful?"

A beat of silence passed before Sam picked up that it wasn't a rhetorical question. "No, I guess not but I also don't know him like you do." He said cautiously, careful not to pass judgment or offer advice because he was there to facilitate, nothing more; a boundary that JB both appreciated and was annoyed by. "Well, what do you want, man?"

JB chewed on the inside of his cheek as he searched for the right words. "I want to get better, you know? Live my life and whatever. But how can I do that when..." He huffed. "Look, we made this promise together, um, when we were kids, to be with each other till the end of the-" He cut himself off with a click of his jaw, frozen with fear that the slip had cost him everything, surely someone in group would recognize the phrase.

What he hadn't expected was a smattering of chuckles ringing out among the veterans seated in a semi-circle.

"Captain America fan, huh?"

"We got another one."

"I loved the comics when I was a kid, too bad about what happened."

"Yeah, guess he was human after all."

"Yeah, him and Barnes both."

"They really did stick together till the end of the line."

JB ducked his head, irrationally afraid that the mention of his former name would cause someone to recognize him even as his heart warmed at the compassion in their voices, until it dropped at the reminder of his promise to Steve. "That's what I told him." His throat thickened at the memory, outside of Steve's apartment after Mrs. Rogers' funeral. "That I'm with him till the end of the line, that he doesn't have to get by on his own. And, you know, we're not supposed to leave a man behind...so how can I move on with my life if he's still stuck?"

Months had gone by and Steve was still as angry and bitter as ever. The few occasions where JB had mentioned the value of counseling, Steve had scoffed at the idea because why would he talk to a stranger who could turn out to be a HYDRA agent again, when he had his best friend?

Though JB had wanted to point out the very slim chance of HYDRA attempting the same ploy again, especially given their quickly dwindling resources and personnel as they were

systematically dismantled by the United Nations task force established specifically to eradicate them, and the many benefits he had gained from his twice-a-week sessions and his weekly group meetings, he had ended up saying nothing.

Again.

Partially because he had known there was no point to argue with Steve when he got that stubborn scowl and partially because he had noticed just a hint of redness around Steve's eyes, with the skin underneath just slightly puffy, that meant Steve had been crying. Not that Steve would want JB to know, of course, Steve had always been too proud to display any weaknesses; a personality trait enhanced by childhood bullying and comparison to girls because of his size.

Not that there was anything wrong with being called a girl, of course. JB was still learning about the changes in gender roles but he was, from what he had read in the articles Darcy had assigned him and the many discussions they had had, an aspiring intersectional feminist.

"What about his family? They around here?" Someone asked.

"He, um, doesn't really have anyone else. His mom and dad passed a long time ago, he has no other family and, well, I'm the only friend he's got." JB blew out his breath, the sound hung in the attentive silence of the room like a white flag. "He's lost everything and everybody, he can't lose me too."

But JB was losing his hard-won peace with each one of Steve's rants. He had wanted to cut back on his visiting schedule, every other day didn't leave him with a lot of time to recover, but he had felt bad after turning down Steve's invitation to be roommates so he kept going back and felt worse each time until the only way he could cope was to disengage, nodding along without listening once Steve got going.

It was the only way to stay afloat in Steve's barrage of negativity, swimming to the shore wasn't an option and JB didn't want to drown. For a while, he thought he could manage this. Sure, it wasn't a great situation but it could be worse. But then Steve had to be a stupid punk and offer JB the Captain America shield like it was some great honor when the last thing JB wanted was another mantle to carry. He hadn't shed the weight of HYDRA's metal arm to pick up another weapon emblazoned with a star.

The only person he wanted to be now was James Bourne, not Bucky Barnes, not the Winter Soldier, and not Captain America.

Reiterating that he wasn't a fighter, JB had said no to Steve's demand; it certainly hadn't been an offer nor a request. Then everything had all played out like a case of *déjà vu*, their conversation about the shield overlapping with memories of their argument outside the recruitment center, culminating in Steve calling him a coward for a second time.

Only this time, instead of Steve storming off, it had been JB who left.

And hadn't been back in a week and a half.

He knew he would go back, had to go back, eventually. But not yet. He needed to get over this hope that Steve was just going through a rough patch, that he would snap out of this self-pity, and that fight like that little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb to run away. It was clearly not happening, JB wasn't getting his friend back-

A jolt of realization shot through him. "Damn it." Sighing, he slumped in his chair, his mind reeling from the discomfiting epiphany that, here he was, blaming Steve for wanting Bucky back while wishing for Stevie.

Sympathetic hums filled the room.

"What'll you do?" Sam asked, his question predictably open-ended. It was like he was reciting from a textbook or something, which JB guessed wasn't too far off since Sam had mentioned going back to school and offered to connect some of the other guys with Veteran Services and Military Assistance Center at the local college.

"Guess I'll have to talk to him" JB answered, resigned and more than a little guilty. "It's not going to be pretty."

"Yeah, talking sucks."

"Good luck, man."

JB scrubbed a hand over his face, feeling the beard tickling his palm. "Thanks, I'll need it." He would go see Steve as soon as the meeting was over.

The Hardest Thing in This World

Chapter Notes

This should (hopefully) conclude the Super Soldier Saga! Hooray!!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#). And many thanks to [Arboreal](#), who is an excellent duck. ;)

References/Quotes

Captain America: First Avenger. Captain America: Winter Soldier.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (S05E22).

Steve's arms were shaking as he pushed aside the shower curtains and stepped out of the stall with knees that were on the verge of buckling. His skin tingled from the heat of the water, though he knew the ever-present chill would return soon without the super soldier serum coursing through his veins.

Erskine's formula had given him more than just enhanced strength and speed, it had also taken away the ailments that had plagued Steve for most of his life. Growing up, he had struggled with every aspect of his day from the second he opened his eyes, navigating the world through hazy vision, to the moment before he fell asleep, shivering under layers of blankets.

He stumbled out of the bathroom, skin pebbling as it came into contact with the cooler air in his room. The towel he had haphazardly wrapped around himself did little to stave off the cold and he almost tripped over it when he bent over to retrieve clean clothes from the neatly folded pile of laundry sitting in the basket by the door. But he didn't so he considered it a win, proving that he wasn't as incapable as everyone thought he was, the nurses who looked doubtful when he refused the sponge baths and the physical therapist who recommended a safety chair in the shower as a compromise.

As he made his way across the room, Steve glared at the chair, a bench with two handles on the sides meant for an invalid and he certainly wasn't that. The triumphant feeling dissipated, however, when he wobbled precariously as he struggled to balance on one foot while stepping into his underwear. His proximity to the small coffee table was what saved him from a crash, being able to lean against it for support when he lost his footing.

Slowly, he sat down on the sofa and pulled on his sweatpants, scowling at the size tag that read *kids* instead of *men's*. Another insult he was forced to endure. Sure, his ma had to hem his pants but they were *men's* pants. He had barely gotten the t-shirt, also from the *kids* department, over his head, the collar already damp from his dripping hair that he hadn't bothered to dry, when there was a knock on the door.

Steve ignored it.

The nurse popped her head in without waiting for an answer and he bristled at the blatant disregard for his privacy, made worse by the disapproval and worry on her face. Because she wasn't hoping to get a peek of Captain America's body, as many of the USO girls had done, she was concerned that he might have taken another one of what she called *unnecessary risks* and hurt himself.

"You took a shower." She frowned, twisting Steve's accomplishment into a mistake, and stepped into the room with a covered tray in hand. "And you didn't use the chair." There was a note of accusation in her tone that grated on Steve's nerves.

"Didn't need it." He grunted even as a part of him knew his ma raised him to have better manners than this.

Her lifted brows practically spelled out her judgment and Steve geared himself up for a lecture that never came when she shrugged. "If you say so. Well, I've got your lunch." She set the tray down in front of him.

And somehow, her acquiescence was worse than any reprimand. Steve could tell she didn't mean it, said it in a way that a parent might humor a child. It reminded him of the bullies who used to tell him to *stay down* or *give up*, like they were doing him a favor to not kick him further after knocking him to the ground. Or, as Sharon had put it, he wasn't *worth the effort*.

Peggy's niece had stopped by a few hours after Steve's unintentional outburst. The current Agent Carter had marched up to him with a glower on her face and a threat in her steps that probably would have sent lesser men running for the hills but Steve had only felt the familiar surge of adrenaline before a battle.

His muscles had tensed and his jaw had clenched, anticipating the fist that Sharon clearly wanted to slam into his face, only to go slack in affronted shock when she had done nothing more than to issue a warning to stay away from her Aunt Peggy before walking away. Her footsteps had echoed like the thump of the *4F* stamp on every one of his enlistment forms.

When Steve had called after her, blurting out something he couldn't remember but was meant to get her attention, she had looked over her shoulder, not even bothering to turn around, and sneered the words that still haunted Steve days later.

The dismissal hurt more than defeat.

It was the refusal to let him prove himself, how else was Steve supposed to make them see that he was their equal and more, if they wouldn't even give him a chance? Cowards, the lot of them, too afraid of being proven wrong to do the right thing.

Spots skimmed the edge of his vision, he couldn't even get angry without pushing up against the thresholds of his new-old body. He could feel his heartbeat throbbing at the pulse point, pounding an irregular rhythm that mocked his lack of control over his own body. There were still moments, in between wakefulness and sleep, that he was convinced it had all been a bad dream only to wake and realize he was living his worst nightmare.

Because it was one thing to know his physical limitations and to make the most of them but it was quite another to know what he *could be*, what he *had been*, then have it ripped away. His whole life had been one uphill battle to scale an insurmountable mountain and Erskine's formula had delivered him onto the peak instantly and effortlessly. Now Steve was back at the bottom and looking up at the rocky cliffs and finding himself annoyed with how small and inconsequential his every step felt.

How could he be happy with the progress that he hadn't had an asthma attack in a week when once upon a time he had been able to hold his breath for ten minutes?

How was he supposed to accept he was alone again after finally getting Bucky back? Why hadn't Bucky been by to visit? They would be able to put the misunderstanding behind them if Bucky would just come back and talk to him, so Steve could explain that he had only wanted to help when he offered Bucky his shield - so Captain America's legacy could live on and Bucky would have something to strive toward and Steve...wouldn't have lost the super soldier serum for nothing.

None of this made any sense. Was losing the serum another cost for having his best friend back? Hadn't Steve already paid enough?

If having Bucky back was his reward then what did it mean that he was losing Bucky all over again?

"I don't want it." Steve gritted out.

"You've got to eat, Mr. Rogers. We've talked about-"

Steve couldn't be sure if he hated the demotion of his title or the tolerating patience in her tone but he was suddenly shaking with a fury that had him jumping to his feet and throwing the tray across the room.

It didn't go very far, though, and landed on the floor with a clatter and not a crash; they had long switched to plastic dishes for his meals, the material lighter and more durable than porcelain. He watched the sandwich becoming drenched in the soup that was spilling from the tipped bowl and decided that he just might hate everything.

They should have left him in the ice...or with a hole in his head.

*

Steve was in his room, seated in a lounge chair and staring out of the window. The afternoon sunlight streaming through the reinforced glass highlighted the gauntness of Steve's cheeks and JB felt a pang at the sight of his friend wasting away in his absence.

The nurse on duty had told him that Steve had refused his lunch and asked if JB wouldn't mind fetching the upturned tray from Steve's room for her. He had agreed to help; given how he had treated Peggy, JB could only imagine how unpleasant Steve had been toward the staff.

"Steve."

"Bucky!" Steve breathed, as if he couldn't believe JB was here even though his approval was necessary for JB to be granted entrance per the facility's policy on unscheduled visits. His hand reached for the crutches propped up against the side of the chair, an accomplishment that he had refused to celebrate, only to knock them over when his eyes widened. "You got your arm back!"

JB swore under his breath, realizing his mistake in coming straight from the veterans support group - he hadn't taken off his prosthetic. And now the ruse was up when he had been so careful to not wear it when he saw Steve.

Steve had been so miserable about losing the serum and the only thing that offered a semblance of comfort was the knowledge that he wasn't alone in his loss. As if JB's missing arm and Steve's infirmity balanced the scales somehow, like a mathematical equation where multiplying two negatives led to a positive answer. JB's arm would have jeopardized that. A positive and a negative would result in a negative and Steve had plenty of that already. So he had left it at home, despite how the act of removing the artificial arm felt like losing a limb, literally and figuratively, as he had grown to rely on it for little everyday tasks like tying his shoelaces and adopted it as part of his identity as JB.

"Language." Steve chided, his grin was still in place but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Or maybe it did but was shadowed by the flash of desperate hope. "So, how did you get it back? Did they finally figure out how to reproduce the serum?"

JB shifted his weight, uncomfortable under the intensity of Steve's stare and the faint green of jealousy he could see in Steve's blue eyes. "It's a prosthetic."

"Oh." Steve practically deflated before JB's eyes, his frail shoulders folding inward like they could no longer support the weight of the disappointed expectations.

"Sorry, buddy." JB said.

Steve frowned, then he brightened. Alarm bells rang in JB's head. "Well, now you can definitely take up the shield."

Not for the first time, JB cursed Steve's one-track mind and stubbornness. "No, Steve. I told you, I'm done fighting."

"You're just going to waste it?"

JB's eyes narrowed. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I- I just meant-" Steve floundered and JB didn't feel compelled to come to his rescue as he once had when Steve's foot constantly lived in his mouth. The uncertainty in Steve's voice faded away as determination set in his jaw. "We have a chance here, Bucky-"

"My name is JB." He had to make Steve see that they weren't Stevie and Bucky anymore, that they couldn't go back after everything that had happened, that the world was moving and time was passing and the only option was to go forward.

Steve continued on as if he hadn't heard. "-to do what's right, to fight for-"

"Why are you so keen to fight?" The question slipped from JB's lips with a sigh. Steve's tenacity was impressive but also exhausting. "Aren't you tired of it?"

"No!" Steve shot back. "We can't just give up, we have a responsibility to-"

"I never asked for it!" JB threw his hands up in the air then dropped them when he felt Steve's sharp stare zero in on his left arm. He took in a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. "I didn't ask for any of this."

Bitterness twisted Steve's features into something JB didn't recognize. "Well, you got it anyway and you're wasting it. You get this second chance and you aren't even appreciating it properly. I'd kill for a chance like that-"

"Or be killed." JB pointed out. He hadn't believed it when Steve told him that whatever made a scrawny shrimp into a super soldier had only hurt *a little*, so he had spoken with Peggy, both to find out more about what had happened to Steve and to get to know this girl Steve was infatuated with. Out of all the wild theories he had spun in his head, none compared to the truth. Peggy had shuddered as she told him how Steve had screamed when he underwent Project Rebirth and how she had shouted for the scientists to shut off the machines, terrified for his life.

To be honest, JB hadn't felt surprised by Steve's recklessness; disappointed and horrified, yes, but not surprised. Steve had always rushed headlong into a situation, often literally with a headbutt that landed him in the emergency room with a concussion or sprained neck. It was a miracle that Steve had survived this long, given how frequently he charged into dangerous situations, unconcerned with the possibility of injury or, worse, death.

"Fine by me, I'm not afraid to die."

"Wait, what? Is this a joke?" The nonchalance in his tone didn't lighten the gravity of his declaration, it amplified it. Clearly this was something Steve had thought about and accepted. A shiver ran down JB's spine.

"I'm not a joke!"

"That's not what I-"

But Steve wasn't listening anymore. "I saved the world, remember? I crashed a HYDRA plane into the ocean because I was willing to die for my country and I'd do it all over again! I'd rather die for something than do nothing with my life." His voice trailed off into a wheeze but his words hung in the air.

Die for something than do nothing with my life.

JB's breath caught in his chest, trapped by the chill that was coiling around his heart, and he suddenly saw their shared history in a different light.

The many - too many - confrontations where the only thing Steve had won were bruises and broken bones.

The repeated attempts to enlist when Steve had been told by multiple doctors that they were saving his life by turning him away.

The test in boot camp that Steve had passed by throwing his body on top of a grenade without a second of hesitation.

The famous sacrifice Captain America had made to save the lives of millions, crashing the Valkyrie into the Arctic as a last resort.

Was it a last resort? Or was it the first?

Did Steve consider any other options before piloting the plane into the frozen sea?

Being a super soldier meant their attributes were enhanced to their maximum potential, including but not limited to strength, speed, durability, agility, healing, and reflexes. Yet Steve had used none of them to break free from the aircraft, either shortly before or after the crash. He had, from what JB had read, gone into the ice willingly, ready to give his life for his country, *ready to die*.

"Steve." JB managed to choke out, unsure what emotion was responsible for the tightness in his throat. "There are other ways to live, it's a new world-"

"Not like this." Steve scoffed, sweeping a derisive hand down the significantly shorter length of his body. "I can't fight-"

Anger. JB realized with a start as white-hot fury burned away the cold despair. What he was feeling was anger. All those fights and battles and wars, Steve hadn't been fighting to *live* to prove himself, he had been fighting to *die* so he didn't have to. And he had called JB a coward. "Bullshit." He gritted out. "You can, you just don't want to-"

"What-"

"-because you want to die a hero but here you are, terrorizing the staff and bullying your friends."

Steve flinched and his stare veered downward, breaking eye contact for the first time since JB had walked into his room. The sudden change in Steve's body language was all JB needed to know that he had gotten it right and that Steve had been heartbreakingly wrong about what it meant to live.

The anger drained away and JB was left with an empty sadness and overwhelming fatigue, products of his sincere desire to help his friend but the harsh reality that he couldn't and shouldn't.

Not when JB was still finding his footing.

Not when Steve was unwilling to take the first step.

They would both end up falling, like the times when JB had forgone his prosthetic out of consideration for Steve's feelings only to lose his balance when he tried and failed to catch a stumbling Steve.

"Steve."

It took a few seconds but Steve eventually glanced up.

"Darcy said that the hardest thing in this world is to live in it because it takes a whole lot more strength to want to live than be willing to die, because you have to fight for it. And you don't need to be a super soldier to fight for the good days and fight through the bad ones. You just got to be you, that little guy from Brooklyn who's too dumb not to run away from a fight. Only this time, you got to fight to *live*."

Steve's brows were drawn into a deep furrow, his default expression when trying to understand something difficult.

JB scrubbed a hand over his face, maybe he had said too much too soon. "Just...think about it, alright? And, um, be nicer to the people trying to help you."

A myriad of emotions flickered through Steve's eyes before he closed them with an almost indecipherable nod.

I Am Groot

Chapter Notes

Surprise!!! In honor of this not-so-little fic of mine reaching the **500k** hits milestone, here is a bonus chapter to celebrate! Thank you all for your continued interest and support in this story. ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Guardians of the Galaxy.

You're Beautiful by James Blunt.

Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (S06E07).

[Conscious Uncoupling](#).

"Damn it." Darcy scowled as she shook her phone, as if that would somehow change the result of the tile swap she just did on Words with Friends. It had to be some kind of statistical anomaly to swap a hand of all vowels only to get seven more vowel tiles.

Clicking her tongue, she studied the board and moved her two Os to the spots underneath the *physics* Bruce had just placed across two Double Word tiles for the word *poo*, communicating how she was feeling and continuing her streak of only spelling words that would amuse a kindergartner.

She was debating if she should send Bruce a corresponding emoji just to really drive her point home when JB slid into the passenger seat in one graceful and silent move reminiscent of some kind of feline.

A loyal lion. A fierce tiger. A dangerous panther.

Or, as Darcy watched JB fiddling with the vents and basking in the heated air, a fluffy cat. Maybe some kind of a short hair breed, with the buzz cut that was in need of a touch-up and the stubble that was one missed trim away becoming a full beard. The fading sun was almost directly at their eye level, shining through the watermarks on her windshield and picking out the bronze and copper in his dark hair. She wondered if he would purr if she ran her hands through it but settled for a pat on the back of his head instead. "Hey, James Blunt."

JB craned his neck to shoot her an unimpressed look.

Dipping her chin, Darcy affected an air of innocence that belied the fact that she knew exactly how much he hated British singer's nasally voice.

A small lift of his eyebrow was all the warning she had before he started belting out lines from the song. "You're beautiful." He sat up, pressing both hands to his heart. "You're beautiful-"

Darcy threw her phone at him. "No!"

"You're beautiful, it's true." JB caught it with annoying ease and held it out to her as if it were a bouquet, crooning soulfully all the while.

"Stop. It's going to be stuck in my head all..." Her whine caught in her throat when JB's fingers closed around hers as she reached for her phone.

"I saw your face in a crowded place and I don't know what to do." He mimed a kiss on the back of her hand, his brilliant blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

'Cause I'll never be with you.

The last line of the chorus jumped into her head and, without thinking, she leaned forward and flattened her other hand over his mouth to stop the words from coming out. In the sudden quiet, the diminished space between them grew charged as playfulness melted into happiness and buzzed with possibilities.

How would his lips, soft and outlined with stubble, feel against her lips? How would his hand, still holding hers, feel entangled in her hair as he tilted her to deepen the-

Nope.

A world of nope.

Nine Realms of nope.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

Darcy had known there was this...*thing*...growing between them. It wasn't anything yet but it would definitely become something and that was why she was doing nothing about it.

Right, that wasn't confusing at all.

Whatever it was that she felt for JB and, looking into his twinkling eyes that seemed to darken as she continued to hold his gaze, she was pretty sure he felt similarly about her, it would have to remain as it was. Feelings, not action.

Because it wouldn't be right for either of them.

Despite all the progress he had made, JB was still working on figuring out who he was and what he wanted. They had met when he was at a vulnerable point in his new life and, in the quiet of the night, she often wondered if their relationship was doomed to stay at friendship because of the timing. Most of his preferences were hers. He had modified his appearance based on her advice, picked his new name based on the first film they watched together, and taken an interest in pop culture so he could understand what she was talking about.

Jane had been the one to point it out, jokingly and in passing, how Darcy had better start flossing regularly so she could be a good role model for JB.

Well, wasn't that just what every girl wanted to hear about the guy she might or might not be crushing on?

As much as she had been annoyed with Jane, Darcy couldn't deny that her friend had a point. So she had pushed for JB to expand his social circle, starting with a support group for veterans who were survivors like JB and not a civilian like her. The first line that she had drawn between them and definitely not the last.

He was a homebody and she frequently felt the stirring of wanderlust in her veins, even though New York and its ever-changing scenery had quelled her thirst for adventure some and JB had expressed an interest in seeing how the world had changed over the past seventy years.

He liked his coffee to taste like coffee and she referred to hers as *milk with a ton of sugar and a dash of coffee* but they had found that their opposite tastes meant they could, when JB's 1940s thrifty sensibility kicked in, just order one black coffee with an extra cup for both of them.

He had and would outlive almost everyone he knew and she, at best, had a handful of decades. And there was no compromise around that. She had seen it with Thor and Jane, though their differing lifespans was merely part of a mountain neither wanted to climb. Then there was Loki and Tony, who treated Tony's mortality as a bridge to cross together when they came to it. For JB and Darcy, it was a chasm keeping them apart.

The damn Grand Canyon of relationship issues.

Speaking of which, they actually made plans to go to Arizona next year and check it out but that was beside the point.

The point was that he had no business to be looking at her like that, like she was the future for a man of the past, like she could make him smile by throwing out a random name with the initials J and B, like she had all the answers if he had only asked the question.

Which reminded her that she still had her hand over his mouth.

JB lifted a brow as his lips quirked, brushing against her palm in an imitation of a kiss.

"It's stalkery." Darcy blurted out then winced at her abrupt statement, dropping her hand hastily. "The song, I mean. It said right in the beginning that she was with another man but he won't lose no sleep because he's got a plan. So, um, no thanks."

JB pursed his lips and continued to stare at her, scrutinizing and searching.

Silently, she pled with him to drop it, to go back to their earlier banter, to take a step - or several - back into the relative safety of their respective sides.

A beat passed.

"You started it." He said, resignation dulling the intensity in his eyes before he blinked both away. "You're the one who mentioned You Know Who."

"Really, Buckbeak? James Blunt is Voldemort? Hey, not my fault there are no characters with the initials JB in Harry Potter." She defended when he frowned at the nickname. "So, um, how did it go?"

"I quoted Buffy at him."

"The pain that you feel, you only can heal by living?" She sang softly, remembering how affected he had been when he first watched the musical episode. "You have to go on living. So one of us is living." And just like that, she was back to the no man's land between friends and lovers; he would go on living long after she was gone. She cleared her throat. "Or did you do the mustard song?"

"I like your voice." He squeezed her hand, once, before letting it drop. "I told him that the hardest thing in this world is to live in it."

Darcy hastily closed her fingers around her phone before it could slip from her grasp. "Iconic line, because it's true."

"Yeah, I also told him that he's got to fight for the right reasons for once in his life."

"Truth, justice, and freedom?" She joked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"To live."

"Can't argue with that." She smiled, slipping the phone into her jacket pocket. "So, where to for dinner? I skipped lunch-

"Crap!"

"What?" Her hand paused on the gear shift, heart and mind racing at the alarm in JB's voice. "What's wrong?"

"I forgot about the tray."

*

Maria's brows lifted in surprise as she listened to the latest update from the long-term care facility with a purposefully unremarkable name, one that even she struggled to remember sometimes. Its forgettability had something to do with the combination of syllables and the nature of the cadence when the words were said aloud, a calculated rhythm that disrupted the brain's ability to retain the information. Supposedly an area of study Maria Carbonell had been exploring prior to her obligations as Mrs. Stark interrupted her research.

"-after Barnes' visit. He actually said sorry for throwing his tray when she went in to clean it up."

"Well, that's progress, I suppose." If one could consider the basic act of apologizing for one's mistake as progress, though, in Rogers' case, Maria supposed it was a significant improvement from how he had been abusing the staff.

Rogers' medical condition and dour mood strained many people's patience and drained their kindness. What had happened to Rogers' was tragic, the crash and burn of the Star Spangled Man with a Plan, and tragedy led to misery and misery loved company.

The administrators had had to adjust the schedules to prevent burnout and increase the frequency of employee check-ins, the former had gone from quarterly to monthly and the latter was an organizational policy built into the foundation of the new SHIELD. It was a bit of an emotional conundrum to feel overwhelming sympathy for a patient they had grown up admiring and feel just as strongly not wanting to provide care to said patient because he had betrayed their faith.

The administrator on the other end hummed in agreement.

"Keep me posted and I'll have the updated therapy plan and psychological profile to you by the end of the week." Maria blew out a breath, none of them had considered looking past the self-sacrificing heroism as Rogers' primary motivation. If what Barnes said was true...there might still be hope for Rogers and a chance of improving and increasing SHIELD's influence.

After all, the only thing that sold better than a scandal was a redemptive arc.

*

"I just think it's great that you two have decided to consciously uncouple."

"Consciously what? Mom, where are you getting this stuff?" Jane huffed and reached for her hot chocolate, pausing briefly when she felt now-familiar prickling sensation trailing down her spine.

Thor was checking in on her, *again*.

After nearly eight months of on-and-off relationship, they had finally called it quits. Thor had retreated to Asgard and Jane had gone to visit her mom, who didn't really understand any part of her daughter's life but gave amazing hugs and made magical hot chocolate.

Supernatural, even.

Jane could remember watching her mom drop in a spoonful of vanilla or almond extract and add a dash of cinnamon or nutmeg or, once, to her younger self's horror, red chili powder. The recipe always changed but the result stayed consistently fantastic. It was like her mom was a good witch, brewing up sugary drinks then sending her off to bed with a belly full of warmth.

And now that her personal godly space heater was no longer hers, Jane needed something to chase the cold away. It was the right decision, she knew, but the certainty didn't mean it was an easy choice or that it didn't hurt to make.

Made harder and more painful by the fact that she could tell when Thor was watching her.

They had found out about Heimdall, the Watcher of Worlds, the night of JARVIS' welcome back party that had ended with Tony's shocking confession and a fight that was resolved by Doctor Who catchphrases.

Thor had taken Darcy's joke of implanting a tracker in Jane to heart and wanted to discourage this barbaric act by telling them about the all-seeing and all-hearing god whose powers extended to all of the Nine Realms, whether it was welcomed or not.

Needless to say, the revelation did not reassure them as Thor had hoped.

Jane had felt violated by the disregard for and invasion of her privacy while Thor had argued that Heimdall's monitoring should be a source of comfort instead of distress. Both of them had become increasingly frustrated as the fight continued, culminating in Thor positing her limited capacity as a mortal was the roadblock to finding common ground and Jane, utterly blinded by rage, insinuating that Thor was the limited one in a *physical* capacity.

Which Thor, unsurprisingly, had been eager to prove wrong and she had, surprisingly, agreed.

Looking back, she wondered if that was when she had given up on salvaging the relationship and opted to make the most of it.

"I saw it on the news." Her mom said, dropping a handful of chopped marshmallow - so much better than the mini ones - into Jane's cup.

Jane took a sip and hummed as she processed the flavors, creamy and sweet with a touch of spice to prevent it from being too rich. Magical.

"That goopy lady and her English husband started it, it's all the rage now. Doesn't your boyfriend have an accent?"

The hot chocolate was decidedly less magical when she was choking on it. "Ex-boyfriend, mom." She corrected after she had coughed up the marshmallow that had gone down the wrong pipe. "*Ex-boyfriend.*" She repeated for emphasis, both to her mother and whoever else might be listening.

"Sorry, Janie." Her mom patted her on the back. "So, does your ex-boyfriend have an accent?"

"Mom!"

*

Jim had seen a lot of weird things in his life but this...this just might be the weirdest.

Even Tony, who always had a witty comment or inappropriate remark, was stunned silent.

They had been discussing what Tony should get Loki for their second Christmas together, though discussing might be a generous word for the back-and-forth of *he likes doors* and *we*

talked about this already, do not get Loki a door, when JARVIS had alerted them of an unknown aircraft requesting permission to land.

The voice through the speakers had sounded human and promised no harm but Jim and Tony had suited up in their respective armors all the same, with Loki cloaked nearby and Bruce on standby should the Hulk be needed.

When the hatch of the spaceship had opened with a hiss, Jim had been prepared for anything.

Aliens. Elves. Blobs.

Anything.

Correction, *almost* anything.

"Did- Did that raccoon with the really big gun just roll its eyes at my tech?" Tony's voice sounded strangled.

"Don't know, too busy looking at the sentient tree." Jim answered, blinking rapidly as his mind struggled to process what his eyes were seeing. The tree sat atop the shoulder of a small mountain of a man with a map of crimson scars that stood out against the gray hue of his skin, its branches sliding through the magenta tresses of the green-skinned woman with a gaze as sharp as the unsheathed sword strapped to her back.

"JARVIS?"

"Unable to confirm, Sir, as I am attempting to catalog the number of cybernetic parts on the lady with blue skin."

"What did I tell you about scanning metal arms?"

"I am using protection, Sir."

"Good. Remember, no glove, no love."

Jim chuckled at both the safe sex slogan and the pun.

The woman with twin antenna protruding from her hairline giggled, as though she could sense his amusement.

"Hello, Earthlings!" The man in a red trench coat and a compact gas mask struck a pose that was probably supposed to be either impressive or intimidating but was neither. "We are-

"I am Groot!" The tree squeaked.

"Groot, what did I say about interrupting when the grown-ups are talking?"

"I am Groot."

The raccoon laughed. "Yeah, Quill. You're no grown-up."

"Not helping with the great first impression plan, Rocket."

"You made a poor first impression when we met. You called me a thesaurus."

Quill threw his hands into the air. "It was a metaphor! Now just be quiet!"

The green-skinned woman cleared her throat.

"Now just *please* be quiet and let me tell these nice robots!"

"They're not robots." Rocket squinted.

"What part of *please be quiet* don't you understand?"

"I understand it." The bulky man stood taller with pride.

The woman with the insect-like features did the same. "Me too."

"Great job, gold stars for you- Oh no." Quill froze. "That!"

"What about me?"

"-was-"

"I am Groot."

"-a-"

"How did you get these gold stars?"

"-metaphor."

"Did you do something illegal again?"

"Define illegal- Wait, no, that's not the point. Let's try this again." Quill inhaled deeply. "We are the Guardians of the Galaxy!"

The blue-skinned woman growled.

"-and this is Nebula, who is not part of the team whatsoever. We are here to help you protect the Soul Stone from Thanos."

Far, Far Away from His Beloved

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the late posting, I'm still recovering from the turkey coma so I wrote a cliffhanger to wake myself up . XD

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

Loki liked doors.

Or rather, he liked the gleam in Tony's eyes whenever he mentioned liking doors.

When Loki had made the comment, more of a playful taunt to Strange and less of an actual preference, Tony's gaze had lit up with interest and delight.

At first, Loki had thought Tony's reaction was related to the predicament of choosing a suitable Christmas gift, a dilemma Loki would have been struggling with as well if not for the fact that Bruce had already alerted him of their tradition of giving Tony books from different genres.

Not to mention, the explanation was too simple and that was precisely how Loki knew it would be incorrect. Tony's mind was too complex and beautiful to ever be called *simple*.

So Loki had looked deeper, scarcely a hardship considering how much he enjoyed learning about Tony, and been rewarded with a new appreciation and protectiveness toward his mortal.

Tony liked to demonstrate his affection through a combination of acts of service and gift-giving. It gave him tremendous joy to be able to anticipate the needs of those he cared for and surprise them with the perfect present. He hadn't always hit the mark, however, and those experiences had left him wary of repeating the same mistakes.

A clear declaration of preference, as Loki had unwittingly done, helped soothe Tony's frayed nerves in providing a direction in which to let his imagination and generosity run free.

Upon this realization, Loki made an effort to be more vocal and demonstrative about his preferences no matter how trivial, such as a remark on how well ground white pepper complimented the flavors of the hot and sour soup. In turn, Tony had grown more comfortable with voicing his own likes and dislikes; a development noted favorably by his friends.

Every seemingly insignificant act - a sprinkle of freshly ground white pepper atop his soup - communicated the significant message of how very much Loki mattered to Tony. These small

gestures added up to something much grander and lovelier, like constellations were more than mere stars in the sky.

Loki found himself basking in the gentle light of Tony's attention, feeling seen and heard and cherished.

So, yes. He liked doors and, as the God of Mischief, he looked forward to seeing the product of Tony's creativity because it was bound to be extraordinary.

If only Jim would kindly stop dissuading Tony from the notion.

Which was, without a doubt, what the two men were discussing in the other room, given the frequency of Tony's glances toward Loki and the practiced shake of Jim's head.

The coffee machine's gurgling quieted and Loki waved a hand at the carafe, replacing the cold coffee in Tony's mug with the freshly brewed one. It still baffled him how easy it was to make Tony happy, to prove himself worthy of the title *exclusive liaison*.

No hated enemies to slay on Tony's behalf.

No precious jewels to present as trinkets.

No rare beasts to hunt for their hides and fur.

All it took to make Tony smile, eyes sparkling and soft, was a bitter drink brewed from ground up beans in the mornings, an embrace within Loki's arms at nights, and sporadic requests for Loki to conjure him items from around the tower throughout the day.

Yet Tony's friends had been disproportionately impressed by these inconsequential deeds. They had noted the rarity of seeing their friend's every whim indulged, followed by the caveat that should Tony grow too demanding, to either speak up or talk to one of them about it.

While Loki had appreciated their well-meaning intention, he had also been offended by their belief that Tony was a difficult lover and that Loki needed not see to Tony's every want. Loki wished to fit millennia's worth of joy and pleasure and adventure into half of a Midgardian's lifespan; an endeavor doomed to fail from the start and could only be successful if there had been no ending to their tale.

Tony didn't relish the idea of outliving those he loved and Loki understood the sentiment well, for it was precisely why he wished to extend Tony's life. Their fears were the same yet in alleviating one, it would make the other a reality. An impasse that both had agreed to revisit at a later date and to enjoy the time they had now, what precious little there was of it.

So how could Tony ever be or ask for *too much* of Loki when Loki was constantly seeking ways to offer Tony *more* because the years they would have together was *not enough*?

When Loki had corrected them of their mistaken notion, his rebuttal had earned him the confounding responses of a nod from Bruce, a thumb's up from Happy, and a hug from Jim. Pepper, as a former flame, had recused herself from this conversation.

Tony twisted in his seat and beamed at Loki, pressing a kiss to his coffee cup before taking a sip with an exaggerated sigh of contentment.

Jim arched an eyebrow and pointed to his empty cup.

Loki shrugged unapologetically, only willing to pamper his lover. He doubted either men minded and would even say they approved based on Tony's smug smile and Jim's good-natured eye roll.

The genial mood was broken, however, when JARVIS notified them of an unknown aircraft seeking permission not to *approach* but to *land*. Whoever these newcomers were, they possessed advanced, if not superior, technology, evidenced by how they had bypassed Tony's security system that had detected the Wakandan stealth jet, and horribly poor manners.

As his mother had taught them, the difference between an invitation and an invasion or a request and a demand, was best measured by the distance in between the two parties. An emissary sending a letter from Asgard's borders would be better received than one knocking on the palace's doors.

Rudeness was not the ideal first impression.

...then again, the daughters of Thanos had never *asked* for anything.

They *stole*. They *took*. They *killed*.

Loki cursed the ill-timing of Thor's absence, of all the time for his brother's relationship to finally draw its last breath...

Nebula, the *Biggest Sadist in the Galaxy*, inflicted pain with a viciousness that could only come from the enjoyment of it and an attentiveness that was honed by intimate knowledge of being a recipient of such agony.

Loki had seen the results firsthand, held in one of the many cells containing those who with skills or knowledge pertinent to expanding Thanos' collection of powerful artifacts. How each prisoner was treated was based on how they might be of use. Those with skills, as Loki had demonstrated with his magic and wit, were *persuaded* by the Scepter while those with knowledge were *encouraged* by Nebula to spill their secrets as freely as the blood from their wounds.

And Gamora was known to be the *Deadliest Woman in the Galaxy*, a title that belied her delicate features and her ruby hair and jade skin. Loki had the good fortune to not have crossed her path but had heard her name invoked to convince the ones Nebula couldn't break with some level of success.

Nebula alone was trouble enough and the two of them together would be nearly unstoppable. Only one cause, one Mad Titan, could have united the two sisters, rumored to despise each other as much as they adored carnage. Thanos' courtship of Death was well-known and what better weapon to wield than the Infinity Stone governing the soul?

"Did- Did that raccoon with the really big gun just roll its eyes at my tech?"

A chill stole over Loki as Tony's voice sounded quietly through the inconspicuous ear piece, only audible to those with access to the communication system. They had decided to let the visitors - *intruders* - do the talking, better to glean as much information as possible before responding. Silence was an effective and underrated tactic in negotiations, many were discomforted by it and prone to fill it with things they weren't meant to share.

"Don't know, too busy looking at the sentient tree." Jim said in a dazed rumble.

"JARVIS?"

"Unable to confirm, Sir, as I am attempting to catalog the number of cybernetic parts on the lady with blue skin."

In the ominous silence between the screams, there had been whispers of how Nebula came to be more machine than flesh and yet still less than her sister.

For her failure to see Gamora's ambush, Thanos had taken Nebula's eye.

For her failure to deduce Gamora's location, Thanos had taken Nebula's brain.

For her failure to block Gamora's attack, Thanos had taken Nebula's arm.

Punishment given as rewards in the name of improvement and served as reminders of lessons learned.

Had he not bore witness to her brutality both in practice and in the aftermath, Loki supposed he might have felt a twinge of compassion for Nebula. Odin had built a house of lies but called it a home, told tales of monsters to the monster he had kept as a stolen relic, and given Thor every victory before Loki could even fight to lose. Though he supposed it would be far more palatable to know that Thor had won only because Loki had been barred from the competition than to live with the memories of being bested repeatedly as Nebula did.

He had considered posing the question to her, as one of his many schemes to gain his freedom. Would she appreciate the chance to speak with someone who understood her plight? Would she become enraged, slamming her cybernetic arm against the forcefield of his cage and damaging both in the process? Would she open his cell with a challenge in her eyes and bloodthirst in her smile so she could personally correct him of his misconception?

All he had needed was a moment of distraction and of distance from the unknown element disrupting his magic. Then he would feign an escape via teleportation when in reality he would only have cloaked his presence, remaining behind to learn of their plans for pursuit then adjusting his own to ensure his success. A risk most others would not dare to take, too dull in their thinking and imagination, but Loki had always been the sharpest in any room.

Except the Other had pressed the Scepter against his heart before Loki could decide on a course of action. It had felt like drowning, submerged in a sea of sickly blue. His body had had no choice but to move with the tides, his vision had remained blurry no matter how much

he had tried to blink the water from his eyes, and his thoughts had sunken to the bottom of the ocean floor.

The dark-haired woman's antennae twitched as she scanned the area with pupil-less eyes, pausing unerringly at the spot where Loki stood. She could sense him somehow, despite his cloaking spell obscuring his physical form. Perhaps she was one of the many creatures with empathetic abilities he had read about in the many tomes that kept him company throughout his childhood; their gift with emotions allowed them to both experience and influence the feelings of others. And how had he envied them, wishing for the power to make his father proud, if only just for one manufactured moment.

It would not do to be discovered.

As subtly as he could, Loki redirected her attention to Tony and Jim with a murmured spell.

"What did I tell you about scanning metal arms?" Tony quipped, though Loki could detect a hint of unease underneath the flippant tone.

"I am using protection, Sir."

"Remember, no glove, no love."

Another Midgardian idiom referencing to a bodily function, at least this one was less vulgar than the disgustingly descriptive *shit hits the fan*.

Jim chuckled and the dark-haired woman giggled, though she could not have heard the exchange.

She was an empath, as he had deduced, and had turned her attention away from him.

Good.

"Hello, Earthlings! We are-"

The tall man standing in front appeared to be the leader, though he had likely gained this role through charisma with his affable voice and sociable demeanor. More of a friend than a commander, an assessment that was proven correct when the tree and raccoon interrupted and mocked him respectively.

"You made a poor first impression when we met. You called me a thesaurus."

The gray-skinned man reminded Loki of the Hulk, both possessed brute strength and blunt wit.

"It was a metaphor! Now just be quiet-"

Gamora cleared her throat.

Quill immediately changed his wording, further validating Loki's previous theory, but not his tone. "Now just please be quiet and let me tell these nice robots-"

"They're not robots." Rocket interjected with a calculating squint.

Loki did not like the way Rocket was eyeing Iron Man and War Machine, his paws flexing as if he was imagining pulling the metal plates apart.

"What part of please be quiet don't you understand?" Quill groused without any real authority.

"I understand it."

"Me too."

"Great job, gold stars for you- Oh no. That-"

And then they were squabbling like children. What bizarre company for two of the most ruthless women in the galaxy to keep and, more strangely, to tolerate.

Loki took advantage of their raised voices to position himself within striking distance of his targets, each step taken slowly and timed carefully even though his cloaking spell was designed to render the caster unseen and unheard.

One could never be too cautious considering the ruthlessness of Thanos' daughters.

"Did you do something illegal again?" Gamora sighed as if a murderess had qualms about being on the right side of the law.

"Define illegal- Wait, no, that's not the point. Let's try this again." Quill took a deep breath, one of the last ones he would take for daring to bring danger to Tony's doors, to *their home*.
"We are the Guardians of the Galaxy-"

Nebula snarled.

Loki's magic hummed as it gathered at his fingertips, ready to strike when the opportunity presented itself.

"-and this is Nebula, who is not part of the team whatsoever. We are here to help you protect the Soul Stone from Thanos."

Tony hissed, a sharp sound through clenched teeth, but his voice was one of perfectly feigned confusion when he addressed these so-called Guardians of the Galaxy for the first time.

"What's a Soul Stone?"

"Wait, you don't know what it is?"

"Hey, do you mean Soul Cycle?" Jim's voice crackled through War Machine's speakers, performing his part perfectly though Tony hadn't told him the play. "There's one about two blocks away. Great classes, awesome music." He tapped at the side of the War Machine helmet and a holographic map, with the fitness studio circled, was projected into the open space between the two groups. A distraction and a cover.

"I didn't know you liked spinning." Tony quipped, his stance casual and open though Loki could see the charging repulsors' brightening glows through the loosely closed gauntlets.

Gamora and Nebula exchanged a look, their attention on each other instead of their surroundings.

The opening Loki had been waiting for. He emerged in a shimmer, gripping both assassins tightly by the shoulders and pulling them into a swirl of emerald.

Far, far away from his beloved.

I'll Do You One Better

Chapter Notes

AKA the chapter where the silliness almost overtook the plot.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Guardians of the Galaxy. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.. Captain America: Civil War. Avengers: Infinity War.

The Smurfs by Peyo.

Tony's heart, which had been beating a staccato of dread and fear and anger, eased into a calmer tempo as his eyes found Loki's in the split second before the mage disappeared with the two women whose deadliness were as visible as the bright hues of their skin.

"I am Groot!" The tree wailed, its branches hanging in the air where they were once tangled with the green woman's hair.

For a moment, Tony felt a twinge of guilt at the anguish in Groot's voice. He quickly pushed it aside as pandemonium broke out among these so-called Guardians of the Galaxy.

"What the hell?" The raccoon shouted.

The insect-like woman turned in circles, hands waving wildly. "Where did they go?"

"Gamora!" Quill spun around. His ostentatious coat fluttering open with the movement, revealing the two holsters strapped to his thighs, both empty as he aimed what looked like energy blasters at Tony and Rhodey. "Where is Gamora?"

"And Nebula." The man with the physique that would make most bodybuilders weep added. "She's gone too. See?"

"Thank you, Drax, for pointing out the obvious in a time of crisis." Quill snapped.

"You're welcome." Drax nodded, either completely missing or ignoring Quill's sarcasm, and crouched down so Groot could scamper off of his shoulder and into the remaining woman's outstretched palms.

She cradled him close to her chest, her expression crumbling as though her worry had doubled, and took several steps back.

"I am Groot." He curled up against her.

"We'll get her back, Twig." Rocket flicked a switch and the really big gun lit up like a Christmas tree.

Tony was reluctantly impressed and understandably intrigued.

"Don't even think about it." Rhodey warned.

"Think about what?" Tony blinked his eyes innocently, only to remember belatedly that Rhodey couldn't see them when his friend snorted disbelievingly in response.

"Sir, I strongly advise against removing your armor when facing unknown hostiles." JARVIS' uncanny ability to read Tony's mind was both heartwarming and terrifying.

"Where is Gamora?" Quill demanded.

The insect lady chimed in. "And Nebula!"

"Not now, Mantis." Quill gritted out.

"I'll do you one better. *Who* are Gamora and Nebula?" Tony countered.

Whoever those two women were, Loki had singled them out for a reason. His decision of removing instead of confronting them not only emphasized the level of threat they posed but also reassured Tony that Loki would be returning soon. If Loki hadn't felt confident to engage them in battle with an entire tower full of defensive measures and offensive weapons, with the Hulk waiting to smash, then he sure wasn't going to be fighting them elsewhere.

Loki was afraid. There weren't many that the mage feared in the Nine Realms and only one name came to mind.

The one that Quill had uttered not a minute ago.

Thanos.

Gamora and Nebula must be connected with Thanos somehow and one, or both of them, had been around during Loki's time as Thanos' puppet. It was the only time frame and context that made sense given what Loki had confided in him throughout many sleepless nights when Loki had woken up insisting Tony tell him the colors of his eyes, too rattled to find out for himself and too shaken to believe in what he would see in the mirror.

So Loki had turned to Tony, the mortal whom a god had placed his faith in.

Instead of buckling under the weight, it settled into his veins and bones, strengthening him and grounding him with the unshakable conviction that he would protect it and treasure it and honor it by living up to that precious faith and offering his own in return.

The unease churning in Tony's gut had little to do with Loki's safety and though a small part of him would remain unsettled until Loki was back, he *knew* Loki would be back with the kind of certainty that had once been foreign but was becoming more familiar as he learned to lean on those around him, people who he could count on.

For so long, Tony had thought his need for control was a reflection of his arrogance, the over-inflation of his sense of self, but his friends, old made new and absent made present, had shown him it wasn't the case.

It hadn't been about ego, no matter what Romanoff had said in a hallway of a hospital in Germany that Tony hoped to never visit. It had been about trust, or rather, the lack thereof between Tony and the Avengers in the other timeline.

How could he ask them to shoulder some of the responsibility when they had refused to acknowledge, let alone accept, that intention didn't excuse action?

How could he demand them to do better when they had thought doing their best was enough?

How could he trust them when they had never trusted him, never looked past the shiny armor and seen the aching man inside?

Everything was different, *better*, now.

Tony would do everything in his power to keep what he had, what he had coveted even before he knew exactly what he had been wishing for, what was leaps and bounds beyond his wildest dreams of a real team.

And the first step to acquiring power was to obtain knowledge...

Drax rose with a flourish, pulling two knives from the inside of his boots. The veins in his arms pulsed as he assumed a battle pose. "I'll do you one better. *Why* are Gamora and Nebula?"

...which these Guardians might not have.

Quill's shoulder stiffened as he visibly stopped himself from being distracted by his teammates. "Tell me where Gamora-

"I am Groot."

"-and Nebula are." He added with an air of resignation that belied the aggression in his stance and tone. "Or I swear to you, I'm going to French fry you to next week."

"That would be ill-advised." JARVIS announced smoothly as a series of panels slid open along the tower's exterior wall and a variety of weaponries emerged. Some were designed to stun while others were meant to trap or prevent escape. The A.I. had foregone the more lethal and permanent options for the sake of avoiding any intergalactic incidents, though it was a choice that he might revisit should Sir's wellbeing be seriously threatened.

Drax slashed his blades through the air. "Show yourself!"

"I think it was the house." Mantis guessed.

"Houses can't talk! It's probably an A.I.-"

"I am Groot."

"He's got a point." Rocket noted. "Your dad's a planet so who's to say houses can't talk."

"Um, did he just say your dad's a planet?" Rhodey asked.

Tony felt just as incredulous. That sounded biologically impossible but then again, so did a sentient tree and a talking raccoon and both were standing in front of them.

"*Was* a planet." Quill corrected. "I killed him because he killed my mother, which is what'll happen to you if you don't tell me where Gamora is right now!"

"And Nebula!"

"You guys don't even like her!"

"She's alright."

"She tried to kill you!"

"I am Groot."

"It's not a small detail!"

"Eh." Rocket shrugged, dismissing Quill. He surveyed the rows of gleaming guns in front of him. "You Earthers have some nifty stuff but mine's better."

Tony lifted his arms, his palms glowing white-out with the repulsors at full charge. "Want to bet?"

War Machine readied his as well.

Rocket cackled. "Yeah, I'm feeling lucky."

"Me too!" Drax roared. "Hit me! I can take it."

"No, he can't take it!"

"Ms. Mantis is right." JARVIS intoned. "You cannot."

"Yes, I can-"

"Everybody shut up!" Quill fired a warning shot into the air, a streak of lightning that faded quickly in the bright midmorning sun.

Rocket rolled his eyes but said nothing for the first time since they had landed.

Drax mimed a zipping motion across his lips.

Mantis stayed quiet too, with Groot peeking out from her fingers holding him close.

Tony and Rhodey followed suit.

"I don't care about your stupid talking house or your stupid guns, I just want-"

Behind the Guardians, Loki reappeared with Gamora and Nebula in a flash of green, looking no worse for wear.

"-Gamora back! Hell, you can keep Nebula for all I care-"

"Peter! She's my sister!"

"I knew I should have killed you while you slept."

"Gamora!" Quill holstered his blasters and pulled Gamora into a tight embrace, narrowly dodging a kick Nebula had aimed at his groin.

"I am Groot!"

Nebula grunted in reply but extended a hand, curled into a loose fist, so Groot could bump his head against it.

"Hey Baldy." Rocket greeted, lowering his gun and prompting Tony and Rhodey to shift out of their battle stance.

"Fox."

Loki teleported into the spot next to Tony. "Hello, Tony. I am pleased to see you well."

Rhodey made a gagging noise, as he had done each time he had been present when Tony and Loki exchanged the words from their first reunion as part of their own language.

"I am pleased to see you well too." Tony replied and reached for Loki as soon as the mage was closer. Though he wouldn't be able to feel Loki's skin through the armor, the weight of Loki's hand in his own gauntleted one still flooded him with a warmth that chased away some of the dread in his veins.

Loki returning with Gamora and Nebula meant that they did not, fortunately, pose a threat and that their claim of protecting the Soul Stone from Thanos was, unfortunately, true.

Drax sheathed his blades before miming an unzipping motion across his lips. "I noticed you were gone. Quill didn't because his eyesight is poor."

Indignant, Quill twisted around, letting his arms fall off of Gamora's slender frame but staying within her personal space. "My eyes are-"

Gamora pinned him with a glare.

"-not fine, I need glasses." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, less about me and more about you. Where did Gargamel take you? Did he hurt you?"

Gamora shook her head. "We just talked."

"As if he could." Nebula scoffed.

"No, I suppose I couldn't." Loki conceded with a sharp but not serrated grin, meant to sting but not to cut. "If only because I am no match for Thanos' cruelty."

"You know Thanos?"

Loki grimaced. "I was once in his unwilling employ, sent to secure the Tesseract whilst forced to wield the very weapon he had used to compel my loyalty as a reminder of who held my leash."

The depth of information Loki was offering, referencing the two Infinity Stones without naming them, further confirmed Tony's fear of Thanos' arrival and the destruction he would bring.

Drax frowned. "He had you on a leash?"

"It's a metaphor." Mantis paused. "I think."

"So why'd you kidnap Gamora *and* Nebula-" Quill smiled winningly at Gamora, who rolled her eyes with fond exasperation. "-if we're on the same side?"

"They are the daughters of Thanos." Loki stated simply.

"He is even less of a father to us than Ego was to Peter." Gamora shifted toward Quill, pressing her shoulder against his in a bid to both give and receive comfort; there was a story there.

"Help us kill Thanos and I will help you destroy a thousand planets." Nebula spat. "Or save a thousand planets?" She added after an awkward beat of silence.

"Let's go with the second one." Rhodey said dazedly.

Tony asked with a tilt of his head. "So what happened? What changed your mind?"

"I didn't kill him." Nebula and Gamora answered in unison.

"They didn't *try to* kill me." Loki corrected. "Which was how I knew immediately they had defected from Thanos' less-than-diplomatic ways-"

"You do like to stab things." Drax commented.

Gamora shrugged.

"-and did not leave them to languish in the Mirror Dimension. They stated their intention and swore it true. Though there was little chance of deception given their lack of subterfuge, I had-"

Rocket bumped Nebula with his gun. "You are a terrible liar."

"Shut up."

"-to be sure before allowing their return. So, with their permission, I peered into their minds to ascertain their honesty. Once done, I returned to you, my Tony."

"I have so many questions." Quill started. "But first, um, you two are...together?" He stared at Tony and Loki's linked hands. "Like, together *together*?"

Tony snorted, though it was more like a grunt through the Iron Man armor's speakers. "Yeah, and we like *like* each other too."

"Huh. So that's a thing." Quill turned to Rhodey with a frown. "And people are okay with them being together *together* here?"

Instantly, the lighter mood vanished.

"Why wouldn't they be?" There was more steel in Rhodey's answer than in the entirety of the War Machine armor.

Quill shuffled his feet. "Well, you know. Look at them."

The already chilly December air grew downright frigid as Loki narrowed his eyes.

Mantis shivered.

Tony curled his gauntleted fingers tighter around Loki's. Out of all the things for the leader of a group of former intergalactic outlaws to disapprove of, he certainly didn't think it would be his relationship with Loki.

Especially when the people of Earth had accepted it with surprisingly little outcry.

Of course, that silver lining could have something to do with the perfect storm of catastrophic news when their relationship had been made public. With HYDRA's resurgence from the shadows and Captain America's fall from grace dominating the headlines, most news stories had been centered around Tony's role as Iron Man and Loki's position as a liaison of Asgard. Speculations of their involvement with each other had veered toward that of inter-realm politics, with the majority of the world, and its leaders, agreeing that the potential benefits of such a connection far outweighed the risks.

It also helped that the hype surrounding the star-crossed love between a mortal and a god had quieted down as the public grew accustomed seeing photos of Jane and Thor doing normal daily tasks, such as going to the grocery store. A magazine had printed a photo of the couple in the parking lot, with Thor somehow pushing four shopping carts at once as Jane searched for her keys in her purse. Thankfully, the carts, instead of the distance between the two, had been highlighted, delaying the media's discovery of their breakup and giving both parties a chance to heal.

With Tony's well-documented history as a hedonistic playboy hellbent on experiencing everything that life had to offer, Loki being a man had been noted but not emphasized. A few late-night hosts had made references to Loki's demand for the crowd to kneel but the jokes hadn't had much success considering they had already been memed extensively in 2012 and two years were practically two centuries in this technological age. The closed-minded who condemned Tony for his sexuality had fired their shots but their attacks had long lost the power to actually wound and their rhetoric of hate had been poorly received when the rest of the world had been reeling from HYDRA's rise from SHIELD's ashes and needing the reassurance provided by superheroes they could believe in and count on.

Despite the public's faith in their heroes, Tony knew the handful of them - Thor, Loki, Hulk, Iron Man, and War Machine - wouldn't be enough to defend against, let alone thwart, Thanos' forces if the Chitauris were merely the scouting party. Earth needed more help and he had to consider the bigger picture.

He hated the bigger picture.

"That a deal breaker for you?"

Quill's face crinkled with confusion. "Why'd that be a deal breaker? You love who you love, man. It's just...a little weird?"

"I am Groot?"

"He's a man-" Quill pointed at Loki before swinging his finger over to Tony. "-and he's a robot."

Rocket slapped a hand over his face. "Quill, you goddamn moron-"

"Hey!"

"-they're not robots!"

"This is ridiculous." Tony huffed, somewhere between a sigh and laugh at the absurdity, and popped open his face plate. "See? I'm not a robot."

Rhodey did the same. "Me neither."

"Oh." Quill said in a very small voice before quickly changing the subject. "Um, so you a psychic or something? Looking into people's heads?"

"I am a mage."

"Huh. Earth doesn't have robots but it has mages. You learn something new every day."

"Only because you know so little."

Quill flipped Rocket off with practiced ease.

Loki arched an eyebrow at their antics. "I am not of Earth."

"So Earth has no mages and no robots? Bummer." Quill looked oddly disappointed.

"We have robots and mages, er, sorcerers." Tony still couldn't believe Stephen was one of them. "Wait, did you say Mirror Dimension?"

Loki smirked. "Oh, did I?"

As if on cue, a speck of gold sparked in the open air. Followed by another, and another, until a portal crackled into being.

Stephen stepped through it with a fierce scowl that distorted the meticulous lines of his facial hair.

That's, That's Not Me

Chapter Notes

I would have posted this earlier but the new Avengers trailer dropped and I got distracted trying to figure out how to send food and water and oxygen to a fictional character in space.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Infinity War.

The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Gilmore Girls (E03S09).

"Intruder!" Moving at a speed that belied his size, Drax launched himself at Stephen with a raised fist.

Stephen blocked the punch with a shimmering shield, his skill at creating tangible constructs had clearly improved since the last time he and Tony had sparred, and sent the Cloak of Levitation at Drax with a shrug of his shoulders. It wrapped itself around Drax in a flutter of red that looked downright menacing, spinning the muscular man around until he fell to the ground with his legs kicking uselessly and his yells muffled.

"Die! Blanket of death!"

"What the hell is that?" Quill jumped back, reaching for his blasters. "And who the hell are you?"

"Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme."

"Your blanket has a name?" Mantis sounded curious even as she held Groot closer to her chest.

"What?" Stephen blinked, some of his annoyance tempered by confusion.

"I am Groot?"

"I'm sure he's fine." Nebula drawled. "If it wanted him dead, there are faster and more painful ways to do it than swaddling him."

Tony had to admit that she had a point; the Cloak was rolling Drax back and forth, as if rocking an extremely wired and oversized toddler to sleep. The other Guardians seemed to have noticed the change too, judging by their more relaxed postures.

"I am Groot."

"Yeah, good example."

Gamora pinched the bridge of her nose. "Stop teaching him about murder."

"Is- Is that...a talking tree?" Stephen stuttered and Tony couldn't blame him. It was one thing to meet humanoids with unusual skin colors or builds but quite another to meet sentient beings who, by Earth's standard, should not be sentient.

"Yep. Like a miniature Ent." Tony supplied helpfully. "And to your left, we have a talking raccoon. It's practically a Disney movie here."

Rocket lifted his gun. "Hey Drax, smile!" It was the only warning before a flash went off, accompanied by the shutter of a camera. "Ha, this'll be great next to the one of Quill falling on his fat ass."

The most alarming part of Rocket's action wasn't that he had outfitted his gun with a camera or that he took photos of his teammates in embarrassing situations with an unholy glee. It was that none of the Guardians were surprised or shocked by either of those facts.

"Well." Tony amended. "A Disney movie on acid."

Rhodey sighed. "These are the Guardians of the Galaxy-"

"I can't smile, I'm holding my breath!" Drax grunted.

"-and they are potential allies. Though not too sure about-"

"Why are you holding your breath?" Mantis asked.

"-the potential or the allies part if you-"

Quill's protests that he was not fat and that it was a creative landing strategy were summarily ignored.

"-don't release him from the burrito of doom soon."

"It smells musty!"

"Ha, you got taken down by a curtain that smells like an old lady." Rocket cackled.

Seemingly offended, the Cloak unrolled Drax with an unceremonious flap. It glided back to its place on Stephen's shoulders with a flick of its collar that was reminiscent of someone turning their nose up.

Loki clapped his hands together. "Guardians, allow me to introduce you to one of the finest sorcerers on Midgard-" His eyes sparkled as Stephen's narrowed. "-who so kindly lent me use of the Mirror Dimension."

Gamora and Nebula shared an indecipherable look that piqued Tony's interest of just what Loki had shown them in the Mirror Dimension and how Loki had gotten in and out of a space that Mordo had stressed was exclusive to the practitioners of the Mystic Arts.

Tony had been meaning to ask if he could use the space for some of his more explosive and less conventional experiments. JARVIS' simulations were fantastic but Tony would love to experience how the new armor's life support and environmental protection systems performed without actually leaving Earth's stratosphere or diving tens of thousands of meters underwater or any other situations where if the systems malfunctioned, he would be irrevocably screwed.

And not in a fun way.

Though now that Loki had apparently cracked the lock without a Sling Ring, something Wong had said was required to leave the Mirror Dimension, inadvertently issuing a challenge that had occupied Loki for a good portion of the past several months with his research and travels to other realms, maybe there would be some entertainment to look forward to after all.

Stephen scowled. "How did you-"

"Magic, obviously." Loki smiled and the curve was all smugness. "And Stephen-"

"I thought Stephen was his flying carpet's name?" Mantis whispered.

"I am Groot?"

"I guess it is possible for them to have the same name."

"Coincidence?"

"Doesn't it get confusing?"

"Probably not, I mean, the cape can't talk and whenever Mr. Wizard here says the name, dude's obviously not talking to himself."

Loki cleared his throat. Loudly. "As I was saying, these are the Guardians of the Galaxy, who are doing a fantastic job of introducing themselves. They are here to offer their help in protecting the universe from Thanos, starting with foiling his attempt to acquire an Infinity Stone."

Tony noted that by not naming which stone, Loki had wanted Stephen to believe Thanos was interested in the Time Stone, hidden in the Eye of Agamotto.

They had seen it in action during the fiasco in Missouri, when the mysterious blob had broken through the dual layers of Loki's magic and the Masters of the Mystic Arts' shields. Stephen had looked every bit the Sorcerer Supreme as he had called upon the power of the Time Stone to freeze the churning mass in its place until, without warning, it had shuddered to a stop and darkened to an ashy gray.

As far as the news media had gathered, the Eye of Agamotto was just another relic meant to contain the threat when their previous efforts had failed. The fact that it was actually an ancient artifact capable of altering and undoing time was best left unsaid. Tony had understood and hadn't pressed the issue of using the Time Stone's power to restore the damages to the buildings and vehicles and roads.

Mordo had given an impassioned speech on the balance of things and how destruction was the necessary first step to rebuilding that had done little to comfort the distressed crowd. Thankfully, no lives had been lost or else Mordo might have found himself on the receiving end of more than dismissive scoffs and unkind names.

Stephen's expression dove downward into a severe frown, as clear a confirmation as any that Loki's little ploy had worked. Not that it had been necessary, of course, as the Sorcerer Supreme, Stephen was committed to protecting the Earth from mystical threats. And he was a self-proclaimed territorial bastard who neither shared nor played well with others.

A button that Loki thoroughly enjoyed smashing.

"Who's Thanos?"

*

Deciding that it was a conversation best had sitting down, they moved into the common area and called for Bruce to join them.

The second round of introductions went significantly smoother than the first with no vanishing acts and no physical threats, partly due to Bruce's mellow demeanor but mostly because of the Footloose t-shirt Bruce was wearing. It had instantly attracted the Guardians' attention and earned Bruce their respect despite Bruce finding it in a donation bin during his self-imposed exile that seemed a lifetime ago.

Because they were under the gravely mistaken and truly hilarious impression that Kevin Bacon was the greatest hero of Earth - Quill's doing, judging by the panicked widening of his eyes - and that Footloose was a tale of triumph to be told across generations and space.

Tony exchanged an amused glance with Loki before nudging Bruce, who was starting to correct the Guardians of their misunderstanding, quiet with a subtle jab of his elbow.

Strange sent them all a deeply unimpressed glare as he texted Wong and Mordo an update.

Rhodey nodded sagely in agreement, a testament to all the antics Tony had roped him into over the years that required him to go along with the story, no matter how outlandish it sounded.

Ever thoughtful, JARVIS offered to schedule a viewing of this timeless film, along with any others featuring heroes of Earth who Quill had educated his teammates about. Helpfully polite was how JARVIS preferred to exact his vengeance, an art long perfected by his namesake.

Tony knew that his A.I. hadn't forgotten the fact that Quill had pointed weapons of unknown origin and threatened to french fry Tony into next week...whatever that meant.

Quill gulped audibly and suddenly seemed much more interested in getting the meeting started, earning suspicious looks from everyone.

Including Groot.

The utter skepticism on the plant's ingenuous face was the epitome of incongruity and should have appealed to Tony's fondness for absurdist humor but his laugh was stuck in his throat as the thin cover of humor fell away to reveal the terror underneath and the despair one layer below. Like the bitter aftertaste of artificial sweetener.

It wasn't until the Guardians showed up at his door that Tony realized he had been holding on to the sliver of nonsensical hope that maybe Thanos wasn't real.

Even as he convinced the world's government that Thanos was a legitimate threat, there was a voice in the back of his mind whispering that maybe the Mad Titan was just the Asgardian equivalent of a boogeyman.

Even as he pressed his forehead against Loki's, peering deeply into those green eyes and whispering reassurance that there was no traces of blue in them, he wanted to believe he was only soothing nightmares instead of memories.

Even as he drafted up blueprints of detection systems and defensive technology, he couldn't help but think that the destruction Wanda had shown him in another timeline was a vision designed to torment instead of a glimpse of a doomed future.

Nothing about this rag-tag group of space outlaws was very funny anymore.

*

"The entire time I knew Thanos, he only ever had one goal: to bring balance to the universe by wiping out half of all life. He used to kill people planet by planet..."

"Including my own." Drax interjected, void of any of his previous bluster.

"...massacre by massacre..." Gamora's gaze took on a faraway quality and only snapped back into focus when Nebula punched her non-too-gently on the shoulder.

"Stop being sentimental."

Bruce raised a tentative hand and Tony pushed down the urge to pull it down with a reminder to his friend that they weren't in kindergarten. Deja vu from a simpler time. "Um, not that it matters in the big picture, but I thought he was trying to court Mistress Death?"

"What? Who told you that?" Quill gaped.

Drax scratched his chin "Death is a lady?"

"Thor said-"

"Then Thor is an idiot, you don't piss off the girl you like by taking her job!"

"A man once offered to kill my target for me because he thought he was better." Nebula's grin was all teeth. "I proved him wrong by slitting his throat."

It was alarming how many of these stories Nebula had and how decidedly unapologetic she was about telling them. There was no trace of remorse or regret in her tone as she rattled off her list of crimes with a nonchalance that was disquieting and an honesty that was refreshing. She wasn't interested in redemption, only revenge. And her clear cut motivation was unexpectedly comforting because her cards had been laid on the table with none up her sleeves.

Unlike the Wanda, in the other timeline, who hadn't liked the losing hand she had been dealt and demanded another chance by claiming she hadn't known the rules.

"Thank you, Nebula, for backing me up with that super scary story. Thanos isn't courting-" Quill's fingers lifted into air quotes. "-anyone because-"

"He loves no one." Gamora said gravely. "He is a plague. He invades planets. He takes what he wants. He wipes out half the population and calls it mercy."

A long silence followed her words, broken by a heavy sigh from Loki.

"Then it is worse than we thought."

Tony agreed. The most dangerous villain was the one who saw themselves a hero, who alone had the will to do what they deemed to be right, who would make the sacrifice others were too cowardly to even contemplate. "What's our timeline? When is he coming here?"

"Soon." Gamora replied. "The Soul Stone is the only one he couldn't find." She winced. "*Was* the only one he couldn't find."

"The Soul Stone?" Stephen's brows arched at that. "I thought he was after the Time-"

"What changed?" Tony interrupted, ignoring the weight of Stephen's questioning stare, knowing it was about to get heavier. "How did he, and for that matter, how did you, know that I have it?"

Stephen leaped to his feet. "What?!"

"You. You were the thing that changed."

Come find me. I wish to meet you properly when you are unbroken. You are my chosen.

Tony could hear the familiar echo of the voice that glowed a fiery orange. He shivered, a full-body tremble that traveled down to his fingers, tapping out an unconscious rhythm against his knees. "Me?"

"Yes. For centuries, the Soul Stone was believed to be lost. It wasn't made into a weapon-

"The Tesseract." Bruce murmured.

Loki's eyes flickered to the spot in the marbled floor where the Hulk had once smashed him back into his own mind, free from the Scepter's control.

Stephen raised a hand to his chest, his palm cupping over where the Eye of Agamotto would be if he had worn the amulet.

"-or hidden away-

Rhodey muttered something about how scientists were like cats, always poking at things they shouldn't, and space elves in London.

"Hey, remember when you kicked me in the stomach and ran off with the Orb? Good times." Quill grinned, undeterred when Gamora continued as if she hadn't heard a word.

"-it was just gone. No one had seen it, no one had felt it, no one had even heard about it. Until about two years ago. When a psychic I had hired sensed a ripple of power."

The chill from Siberia chased away by the beginning of a New York summer.

"At first I thought it was a fluke, but six months after that, there was another wave-

The battle between Extremis in his veins and ice on his skin.

"-and nothing for a year. But then it happened again and she told me she felt a second Infinity Stone-

The bloody maw opening above his head only to retreat when the fire within him roared.

"-and a bigger surge just a few days after that gave her a vision of a man in a red and gold armor-

The brilliant speck of light rising from the darkness of the HYDRA bunker, naming him as Its Chosen.

"-reborn from the flames. That was when I knew I have to stop Thanos from finding you. Because if he gets all six Infinity Stones, he can destroy half of the universe with the snap of his fingers. So I..." Gamora's stony gaze cracked. "...I killed her to make sure she couldn't tell him what she knew. Then I told Thanos that I found nothing and I, I think he believed me, until-

"-you ran off with this pathetic sack of meat." Nebula crossed her arms with a scowl that had no real heat behind it.

Quill squawked. "I'm not pathetic!"

"But you are a meat sack."

"Shut up, Rocket!"

Groot wrapped a branch around Nebula's wrist. "I am Groot."

"Yeah, I ran off too but Gamora's his favorite. And when she betrayed him, word was that Thanos was so desperate to find her that he retraced her steps, to see where he had gone wrong." Nebula's face twisted into something ugly that was part resentment and part envy. "He thought it was strange that you'd kill the psychic when she could have been useful later. So he found other seers, hundreds of them, weaker ones who died screaming about souls until he finally had enough to piece it all together, that one soul burned to ash and another soul was freed on Earth."

The eerily blank screen of the Wakandan tablet juxtaposed with the sudden awareness in the Winter Soldier's eyes.

"Now he knows where the Soul Stone is and he is coming for you, Tony Stark, the soul that was freed."

"No." Tony whispered, horrified. "That's, that's not me."

It's JB.

Earth Is Closed Today

Chapter Notes

Once I made my peace with the fact that the Guardians just aren't capable of being serious, the chapter became much easier to write. :|

Unrelated but I've fallen down an Arthur/Eames (Inception 2010) hole and if you have any fic recs, I'd greatly appreciate it ~~and promise not to let reading distract me from writing.~~

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and many thanks to [Arboreal](#) for being an excellent duck.

References/Quotes

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.

Avengers: Infinity War.

"What do you mean?" Quill frowned, slightly confused and a bit annoyed. "We know it's you, we saw you in that flashy red and gold armor. Rocket hacked the satellite feed-"

Rocket shrugged. "Eh, *hacked* is kind of an overstatement. It was easier than taking candy from a baby." He scratched his chin. "A sleeping baby that's swaddled up real tight like Drax was-"

"I am no baby!"

Tony tuned out yet another one of the Guardians' squabbles and focused on containing his rising panic.

Thanos thought that JB had the Soul Stone.

Hundreds of seers had paid with their lives for glimpse at the right thing from the wrong angle, mistakenly attributed significance to JB based on the Soul Stone's unprompted resetting of his memories from those of the Winter Soldier to those of James Barnes from the 1940s. When, in truth, it was Tony who the Soul Stone had chosen and who the Soul Stone had been trying to please.

Under any other circumstances, Tony supposed he might have been glad that Thanos had been pointed at the wrong target but right now all he could feel was a guilt that chilled him to the core.

When JB had made the decision to go with SHIELD, Tony sent him on his way with a promise to call if he ever needed anything and without a single word about how the Soul Stone came to be in his possession and what he had lived through in another life that ended

with the Winter Soldier's arm on the floor and Captain America's shield in Iron Man's chest. A decision made to protect the both of them but now Tony couldn't help but feel like he was the only one benefitting from the arrangement because he could see the whole picture while JB was kept in the dark, believing that his miraculous recovery was the consequence of Zola's devious failsafe.

Over the past year, they had maintained somewhat regular contact. Tony had personally handled the fitting and design of JB's custom prosthesis to help JB distance himself from the media's image of Bucky Barnes so he could achieve a semblance of privacy to heal. It had been an unexpectedly cathartic experience for both of them although they had spent most of it in silence with Darcy filling the quiet with whatever had caught her attention on social media, usually people being spectacularly stupid or animals being unbelievably adorable. Darcy's move to New York combined with her friendship with JB also meant that he often accompanied her when they had group get-togethers. She always made sure to check with Tony first before extending the invitation to JB, a gesture that Tony appreciated and understood as her genuine desire to see both of her friends happy and not a trick question that he couldn't say no to.

As the months went by Tony found himself gradually relaxing around the man who had nothing in common with his parents' killer except for appearance and convinced himself that he had done the right thing in sparing JB the truth.

JB, who only wanted to live a quiet life with no enemies to fight other than the ghosts from his memories, was making excellent progress based on SHIELD's latest check-in and Darcy's smile when she had stopped by the tower to drop off Christmas presents. She was going to spend Christmas with JB, ditching her *chicks* for *dicks* as she had bluntly owned up to.

Darcy.

She was probably with JB right now, setting up a monstrosity of a synthetic tree outfitted with an obscene amount of lights that probably warranted a warning for causing discomfort or inducing seizures to those with photosensitive epilepsy.

Gamora narrowed her eyes at the unfamiliar name. "Who?"

Tony didn't realize he had said Darcy's name out loud.

Next to him, Rhodey tensed, likely arriving at the same conclusion.

"Darcy is a friend who is with the person Thanos is going after by mistake." Bruce explained, his lips flattened into a grim line.

Nebula tilted her head with an inquiring hum and a small smile on her lips, curious and amused by the idea of Thanos being wrong.

"The Soul Stone didn't just..." Tony searched for the right word and came up short. "...*help* me, It helped someone else and that's the person Thanos' psychics saw. Not me. And she's with him, right now. We have to get them over here, also right now." He sent a meaningful

look at Stephen, who communicated his understanding of the unspoken request with a roll of his eyes.

"I'm not a taxi service. Just send a car, they'll be here within the hour. Or if you're in such a rush, send your boyfriend."

"Exclusive liaison." Loki corrected. "And if you think I would leave Tony's side with the Mad Titan approaching, I have overestimated the already abysmal amount of wits you possess."

The Cloak flared threateningly.

Drax flexed his arms.

"And we may not have an hour." Tony turned to Nebula. "How much time do we have before the Big Bad Voodoo Daddy gets here?"

It took her a full second to process the reference before she dismissed it altogether. "I don't know." She replied, a hint of an apology in her voice, and she glowered as if annoyed by it. "I only heard about him figuring out the Soul Stone is on Earth when I ran into someone on Knowhere."

"I am Groot?"

"I went there after the Aakon job, to get away from that idiot." She glared in the general direction of Quill, who twisted to look behind him, oblivious at first then offended when he realized she had been talking about him.

"Hey!"

"That was a month ago." Mantis supplied helpfully when Rhodey scowled at Quill's inability to be serious in a time of crisis. Tony suspected she did this a lot, her mannerism mild and cadence soothing, maybe she was the aspiring mediator of the group. They could certainly use someone to smooth over awkward situations that seemed to be the norm for the Guardians.

"A month." Bruce mused. "No way to know if it was a month since Thanos learned where the Soul Stone is or a month since your friend heard-"

Nebula scoffed. "He was not my friend, he tried to capture me and I stabbed him in the gut."

A beat of silence.

Tony cleared his throat. "So when you said you ran into him...?"

"I ran into him with my blade."

Another beat of silence.

"Anyway, um, how long did it take you guys to get here?" Rhodey directed the question toward Rocket in a show of pettiness that made Tony's chest swell with pride; his Platypus knew Quill would be irritated that he had been overlooked at the figure of authority after declaring himself the leader of the Guardians.

Rocket positively preened. "It took us, er, two weeks? Had some unfinished business to wrap up first. Which reminds me, guys, we shouldn't go back to Hala for a while and by a while I mean until the statute of limitation passes."

"What?"

"I am Groot!"

"Why?"

"What did you do?"

"Rocket!"

"Fine by me." Nebula inspected her nails. "I ran into-"

"Stabbed." Quill disguised the word in an unconvincing cough.

"I broke her neck, actually."

"Not really better."

"This second bounty hunter, did she talk about Thanos? Specifically, about Thanos' knowledge of the Soul Stone's supposed location?" There was a tightness around his eyes and in his voice, a thrumming tension that made the hair on the back of Tony's necks stand up.

Nebula nodded, brows furrowed. "Yeah, that's why I thought it must be true. That he figured it all out and we have to get ahead of him on this."

Loki swore.

Tony's mouth had gone dry but he managed to squeeze the words out. "Are bounty hunters usually that chatty? Making small talk, trading Christmas cookies recipe, revealing your employer's super secret plans to destroy the universe, you know, the usual small talk?"

"Um." The Guardians traded looks of uncertainty.

Bruce's hands clenched into fists, so tightly that his white knuckles were in stark contrast with the green tinting his skin. "It's a trap."

"Shit." Rhodey muttered.

"What's going on? What trap?" Quill asked.

Tony swallowed down the sensation of his throat locking up. "Thanos wanted you to know that he knows where the Soul Stone is."

Quill frowned. "That's stupid and makes zero sense. He knows we'd stop him."

"I am Groot."

"I'm not saying I agree with Quill but I'm not disagreeing with him right now." Rocket looked pained by his admission.

Drax patted Rocket comfortingly on the back. "It is a confusing feeling."

"That's what I'm feeling!" Mantis shared.

"You guys are jerks."

"Jerks may be an understatement." Stephen drawled, casting a sharp gaze at the Guardians clustered on one end of the large sectional couch. "Seeing how you have effectively led Thanos to our doors."

"I did not!" Nebula reared back at the accusation, though the hunch of her shoulders contradicted her denial, as did what she said next. "I killed them both, there's no way they could report back."

"Their deaths would be message enough." Loki pointed out.

"You're assuming Thanos is following us and he isn't, Rocket made sure of that." Gamora countered.

Rocket puffed his chest out in agreement.

"Tech isn't the only way to keep tabs on someone..." Tony trailed off when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. "Say, Doc, you wouldn't happen to be moving your hair, would you?"

Stephen glanced up at the lock of hair that was swaying in a non-existent breeze. "Not at the moment, no."

"JARVIS?"

"My sensors detect a shift in air currents but nothing else to pinpoint the cause." The A.I. sounded frustrated by the lack of information, the same clipped tone he had used when the Guardians had somehow remained undetected until they had shown themselves with their request to land.

Damn spaceships.

A mechanical hum filled the air, growing louder with every second, and Tony could feel the vibration down to the tips of his toes, a slightly ticklish sensation that he wanted to shy away from.

The windows shook as a circular aircraft materialized above in the New York skyline, a monstrosity spinning toward Stark Tower in a billow of dust and shadow that blocked out the rare winter sun like a harbinger of the destruction to come.

"JARVIS, what am I looking at?"

"Working on it, Sir."

"That's not Thanos' ship." Gamora offered, though there was no relief in her expression from what should be a piece of good news.

"Whose is it then?"

"The Black Order, our other siblings." Nebula hissed. "I hate them."

"You hate everyone." Drax said matter-of-factly.

Nebula stilled, her face shifting through a series of emotions before settling into something pensive and almost soft. "Not everyone."

"Huh?"

She was saved from explaining further because that was when the screaming started.

*

"Better safe than sorry." Tony said. "Go, *now*."

Stephen didn't protest this time. With a series of decisive swivels of his wrists, he opened a portal that offered a peek of the brick exterior of JB's apartment complex in Brooklyn, its skies blissfully free of alien vessels. He stepped through it with a terse nod and did not look back.

*

The Iron Legion were dispatched to various emergency response stations and Tony had every confidence in JARVIS' ability to execute Protocol Area 51.

*

Rhodey was back in the War Machine armor, with the face plate open and a frown so deep that Tony was planning to get him a lifetime supply of anti-wrinkle cream. He considered making the quip but the set of his best friend's jaw brooked no room for humor. So he settled for a reassuring smile that he knew didn't reach his eyes.

"Tones..."

"I know."

"...did you just Han Solo me?"

"No comment."

Rhodey rolled his eyes, exasperated and fond, as the lines on his face eased slightly. His gaze settled on Loki. "Take care of him."

"I will." Loki promised.

War Machine soared toward Stark Industries, where Pepper and Happy were.

*

Bruce took his glasses off, placed them in the case, and slid the case into the designated pocket on his Hulk pants, made of highly elastic and extremely durable opaque fabric.

"Hey Green Bean, you want a piece?"

The Footloose shirt was torn into shreds as the Hulk emerged with a roar.

"Whoa." Drax stared.

Mantis shivered, her antennae twitching.

"I am Groot?"

"No, we're not related." Gamora replied.

Quill stared forlornly at the ripped face of Kevin Bacon.

Hulk squinted at Rocket. "Rabbit?"

*

The Guardians held a brief vote to decide if they should travel by their ship or via Loki's teleporting spell, which somehow devolved into a bidding war with each of them calling out a number.

Loki sighed and beckoned Tony and Hulk closer with a slanted look.

Quill's indignant yell was the last thing they heard before the tower's common room faded in a swirl of green.

*

The air reeked of smoke and dust as cars laid abandoned in the streets and buildings were reduced to ruins. At least there were no signs of any pedestrians, evidence of the effectiveness of city's post-Chitauri Invasion mandatory evacuation workshops series.

Loki's nose twitched.

The Hulk sneezed.

Tony was immensely thankful for the air filtration system built into the armor.

Two figures approached them.

The first was a gray-skinned humanoid with two alarmingly large holes on the sides of his head. Disdain was etched into every line of his wrinkled skin and he somehow managed to give off the vibe that he was looking down his nose at them though he had no nose. Tony guessed him to be a magic user, based on the fact that his outfit was similar to the robes favored by the Masters of the Mystic Arts and the lack of weapon in his hands.

The second was a giant brute that rivaled the Hulk in size. He carried an axe that had been upgraded to resemble a multi-tool with blades of various sizes, a claw peeking from its underside, and what looked to be a chain wrapped around its handle. A warrior, then, known for his strength.

Tony could feel his heart drum in his chest, a steady and intense rhythm that soothed the panic and quieted the anxiety. It was unexpected, to feel calm in the face of what could be the end of the world, but he felt oddly at peace. The uncertainty was what had led his overactive mind into a maze of his own construction and now this, the two members of the Black Order coming to a stop before them, provided the certainty Tony needed to find his way out.

Because instead of dealing with a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand imagined scenarios and coming up with at least ten plans with multiple steps to combat each one, there was just one.

This one.

The magic user raised his arms dramatically and Tony preemptively rolled his eyes at the upcoming pompous speech.

"Hear me, and rejoice. You are about to die at the hands of the Children of Thanos. Universal scales tip toward balance because of your sacrifice. Smile and be thankful, that your meaningless lives are now contributing to..."

"I'm sorry, Earth is closed today." Tony cut him off with an audible smirk. "You better pack it up and get out of here."

Moo

Chapter Notes

Happy (early) holidays!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and many thanks to [Arboreal](#) for being an excellent duck for the action scenes.

References/Quotes

Avengers: Infinity War.

The magic user's eyes narrowed at Tony's interruption before his gaze passed over Tony dismissively. "Asgardian, does this chattering animal speak for you?"

"*Chattering animal?*" Tony mouthed to himself, more incredulous than insulted. After all, he had been called much, much worse by the media. If anything, he was offended by the lack of originality.

"Yes." Loki stated, shifting his stance to press his shoulder against Tony's. "And you are trespassing in his city and on his planet."

"It means get lost, Squidward!"

Again, Tony was ignored when the magic user continued to only address Loki. "*His planet?* It all belongs to the Great Titan, who is as powerful as he is kind, to bestow salvation-"

"Hulk smash Squidward!"

Squidward, because now Tony couldn't think of him as anything else after Hulk's growled threat that was equal parts comical and intimidating, sighed. "They exhaust me."

The warrior grunted with what appeared to be agreement, dropping the enormous axe in a thud that shook the earth and kicked up a cloud of dust.

"Bring me the stone, Asgardian, and I will grant you a quick death."

"That's a terrible reward system." Tony commented.

Hulk nodded.

Loki arched an eyebrow, amused. "What makes you think I'm in possession of the Soul Stone and better yet, what makes you think I would give it to you?"

These were questions meant to lead to assumed answers by lulling the recipient into thinking that they should be reading between the lines and searching for hidden messages when there were none. Loki wasn't asking as part of a negotiation, he had asked to gauge how much the Black Order knew, how much Thanos knew.

Tony could see the moment Squidward fell for it, the signs were there in the superior lift of his chin.

"Why else would you return to this place if not to redeem yourself from your previous failure? It is natural to wish for the Great Titan's forgiveness. Do not be swayed by the traitorous wretches trying to turn you to their miserable cause, Asgardian, and give glory to the Mighty Thanos as it is his due."

Hulk yawned.

Squidward's eye twitched.

Tony learned three things. One, they thought Loki had had the Soul Stone, had gotten it specifically to be allowed back in Thanos' good graces, which was something they could potentially use in battle to distract or disarm. Two, they did follow Gamora and Nebula, probably had been keeping tabs on them for quite a while and Tony made a mental note to debrief with the Guardians, or possibly take a look at their travel logs, to see if they had given anything else away in their carelessness. Three, Squidward was clearly insane in his delusional devotion to Thanos, forgetting that he was part of the universe that Thanos was so set on lowering its population by half.

Loki hummed, noncommittal.

"Asgardian, this is your last chance. Give me the stone or face Cull Obsidian's wrath-"

"*Cull Obsidian?*" Tony snorted. "Seriously?"

"Silence, cattle." Squidward snapped, finally speaking to Tony for the first time.

Not one to let such a perfect opportunity to rile his enemy up go by, Tony infused as much irreverence as he could into one syllable. "Moo."

Squidward's whole face spasmed. "You-"

Loki cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I must decline your most generous offer." There was nothing regretful in his tone.

Squidward sneered. "Then you will die."

With another indecipherable grunt, the warrior took a step forward, then another, and another. Lumbering and slow, made slower by the giant axe he was dragging behind him. A power play meant to be threatening but ultimately empty like the countdown a parent might give to a child misbehaving in public. The parent wasn't really going to abandon their shopping cart full of groceries because their child was whining for a candy bar, just as Squidward needed to keep them alive to find the Soul Stone and killing them wouldn't accomplish that.

"Not today."

"Your optimism is misplaced, Asgardian."

"Well, for one thing, I'm not Asgardian. And for another..." He slanted a look toward Tony, fond and mischievous. "We have a Hulk."

The same words from their first meeting brought a smile to Tony's face, a reminder of how much had changed and how far they had come. Not only was the Hulk an ally for Loki to call upon but Bruce was also more in tune with his alter ego.

Hulk roared. The ground quaked as he charged, leaping into the air with a fist readied.

Raising his axe with startling speed, the smooth movement belied the weight of the weapon, Cull Obsidian waited for Hulk to crash into the waiting blade's edge in an unexpectedly cunning battle maneuver.

Only to be outsmarted when Iron Man fired a series of repulsor shots, aimed low to force the giant warrior back, clearing a space for Hulk to land safely. Tony wasn't expecting the ground to rise, asphalt collecting into a spike with jagged edges aimed at Hulk's chest, which Hulk only narrowly avoided when Loki pulled him back to their sides with brilliant emerald strands.

Squidward smiled, a nasty curve of his thin lips. "Quaint little tricks. I can see why you failed-"

"All right, Guardians. Don't forget, this might be dangerous, so let's put on our mean faces." Quill's voice sounded as their ship descended unceremoniously on top of the spike in an impressive balancing act.

"My face is mean all the time." Nebula retorted.

Squidward stiffened.

"I am Groot."

"Stop encouraging her!"

"I am Groot."

Quill complaints were intermixed with Drax's guffaw and Rocket's cackle.

"Good work, Twig. You'll grow into a d-hole yet."

"What is a d-hole?" Mantis tilted her head inquiringly.

"It's the fourth hole down the Terran alphabet." Drax answered with the absolute confidence only someone who didn't know what he was talking about would have.

"Your external speakers are on!" Tony called out helpfully, noting with interest that Squidward tensed further when Gamora could be heard scolding Peter's inattentiveness.

The hatch to the Guardians' spaceship opened with a hiss.

Both Squidward and Cull Obsidian stumbled back a step when Nebula hopped down with her swords brandished.

"Ebony Maw." Her grin gleamed like the cold metal in her hands. "Cull Obsidian."

Tony rolled his eyes at yet another ridiculous name.

"Nebula. Father will be most pleased that you have brought his most favored child home."

Her eyes narrowed at the unsubtle dig. It was no secret that there was some kind of sibling rivalry between the two sisters but now Tony wondered if it extended beyond that if the bitterness in Ebony Maw's words was any indication.

"Whoa, this is really high up!" Quill exclaimed.

Gamora peeked out from behind his shoulder. "Not really." Then she jumped, gliding through the air with her long magenta hair trailing behind.

"Heights don't bother me!" Drax declared and dived out head first, landing in a handstand before flipping himself upright.

Hulk made an intrigued noise.

"Sister." Ebony Maw drew himself up taller. "Have you come to repent for your sins against the one who loves you most?"

"Oh geez, I can see why you ditched your family if they all talked like assholes." Rocket groused as he floated down, a jetpack strapped to his back and Groot on his head, Groot's branches blending in with the soft brown of Rocket's fur.

"Of all our siblings, I hate him the most." Nebula muttered darkly, then her voice took on a nasally sycophantic lilt. "My humble personage bows before you, Great Thanos, the mightiest, nay, the noblest of all." She ended the rather uncanny impression of Ebony Maw with her arms lifted, the metal of her blades flashed ominously in the sunlight, in a perfect imitation of Ebony Maw's earlier monologue pose.

The Guardians, like the overgrown children they were, erupted into cheers and applause.

"You- Ungrateful- Die!" Ebony Maw sputtered, his haughty speech pattern disrupted and scattered in his anger.

It was impressive how quickly the Guardians unsettled him, prompting Tony to take a moment to reevaluate them and their brand of insanity. At first glance, the Guardians seemed to be a rambunctious bunch without any awareness for propriety or priority, derailing discussions with insults to each other and delaying battles with mockery of their enemies. An

endless cycle of antagonism and immaturity that would drive most people mad; which might just be the point, as evidenced by Ebony Maw who was practically foaming at the mouth and spitting out incoherent threats.

Maybe their antics weren't a reflection of their intellect but a result of it, a calculated tactic to knock their opponents off-balance.

Then Quill fell out of the spaceship when he lost his footing with an over-enthusiastic double fist pump.

And Tony reconsidered his theory that the Guardians were social engineering masterminds as he watched Quill flail through the air before the jets attached to his boots engaged to slow his descent into a slightly more dignified one.

*

Cull Obsidian grunted three times, with a pause between the first two and the third.

"Twig, what did he just say to me?"

"I am Groot."

"Crush us like bugs? We'll see about that." Rocket raised his gun.

"We're not bugs!" Drax declared and, after a beat, added. "Except for Mantis. She is half-bug."

With her legs dangling over the edge of the spaceship, Mantis waved.

Ebony Maw hissed. "Insignificant pests. Your efforts are futile. The universe lies within the Titan's grasp-"

"Insignificant pests." Nebula mimicked. "Blah blah blah." With a roll of her eyes, she launched herself forward in one smooth motion.

Cull Obsidian met her attack head on, sparks flew from where her swords clashed against the flat side of the axe. Using the momentum from Cull Obsidian's block in her favor, she propelled herself upward, dodging the car Ebony Maw sent towards her with ease as she made her way toward him with a single-minded focus as cold and certain as the blades in her hands.

Behind her, the Guardians burst into action, working together as seamless as their traded barbs and banter had been, with the kind of awareness of each other's strengths and weaknesses that could come from experience.

*

Drax caught Cull Obsidian's punch with both hands and held it in place, exposing the brute's flank for Rocket's energy blasts. Quill targeted the more intricate-looking mechanisms on the massive axe, bending at the waist just in time for Gamora to use his back like a pummel

horse, boosting herself up, winding her legs around Cull Obsidian's neck for better leverage as she delivered a flurry of blows to his temple.

*

"They seem to have this well in hand." Loki commented.

"Hulk smash?"

"Not yet, buddy." Tony studied the combat data scrolling through the HUD. Having not fought with the Guardians before, it was necessary to analyze their patterns to figure out how to assist without hindering and how to avoid any possibility of friendly fire. "JARVIS, anything?"

"Inconclusive based on limited data. Terribly sorry, Mr. Hulk, I recommend waiting for an opportunity where the Guardians are engaged elsewhere."

Hulk grumbled his acquiesce.

*

Drax stumbled as Cull Obsidian wrenched free, even as he struggled to regain his balance, he had the presence of mind to reach out and pull Rocket, by his tail, out of the path of Cull Obsidian's blow with a roll that put all three of them, Groot included, a good distance away.

Rocket let loose a string of obscenities that had Groot tilting his head in question.

"I am Groot?"

"You don't need to know what that means!" Quill snapped.

"What is a f-" Mantis asked from her perch, content to stay out of the fray.

"You don't need to know either!"

"I'll tell you later." Rocket promised as he slapped Drax's hand away.

"No you won't!" Quill fired two more shots and let out a triumphant whoop as gears and plates and chains clattered to the ground, leaving Cull Obsidian's axe bare.

Even without its contraptions, the axe was still intimidating with its sheer size and more so when Cull Obsidian hurled it toward Drax, who caught its handle reflexively only to be pulled along its trajectory, dragging Rocket with him once more as his fingers were still curled around the raccoon's tail.

Cull Obsidian grabbed Gamora by her waist, prying her off and throwing her into a rain of spikes, which Ebony Maw had fashioned out of the cracked concrete of the sidewalk.

"Gamora!" Mantis cried.

Activating the jets attached to his boots, Quill chased after her, uncaring that his departure would leave Cull Obsidian unengaged with Drax, Rocket, and Groot further away.

*

"Smash now?" Hulk pointed at the cleared path to Cull Obsidian.

"Go wild, Big Guy." Tony said over the rumble of his repulsors, speeding to intercept the spinning axe and bring the group of three Guardians to a stop. Just in time for Groot, from his perch on Rocket's back, to extend his branches and knit them into a net that caught the debris.

"I am Groot!" He sent them back toward Ebony Maw in a demonstration of strength that belied his smaller form.

*

On the other side of the street, Loki teleported to Gamora's side as she sailed through the air, clasping a hand around her elbow then blinking away before they could collide with the side of one of the few buildings still standing. They reappeared on the sidewalk with the perfect vantage point to witness Quill's panicked squawked as he hurriedly clicked off his jet boots to avoid crashing.

*

Ebony Maw diverted the shards with a flip of his hand but that one second was all Nebula needed to steal closer and angle her swords at his jugular. "Silly girl." He snarled. The blades warped, twisting themselves up her arms in a vicious embrace that had Tony wincing in sympathy.

Nebula gritted her teeth as blood trickled down her right arm. Her left, made of metal and etched with runes, was unaffected. "Thanos gave me this arm." She pressed her left forearm against Ebony Maw's throat, the sharp edges slicing through the leather of his high collar easily. "Now I will kill you with it."

"He is most generous." Ebony Maw said with a slight waver in his haughty tone, drawing out the last syllable in a hiss when Nebula leaned in further. "But I use my gifts more wisely."

Dozens of glassy needles glimmered into view, catching rays of sunlight and balancing miniature rainbows on their pointed ends before sinking into Nebula's face. Every point of contact flared brightly, like a lit match held against the parchment of her skin, burning up the nerves in a brilliant glow.

She didn't scream but her entire body seized, perhaps the agony had robbed her of her voice.

*

Hulk roared, covering the distance with one leap, and barreled into Cull Obsidian. They grappled, too close of quarter for anything more. Despite having the same limitations, Hulk clearly had the upper hand, landing more punches and jabs, intentional and methodical in his approach.

Therein lay the difference between the Bruce who had fought against the Hulk in the other timeline and the Bruce who chose to fight with his alter ego.

People often forgot that Bruce had evaded Ross and his considerable reach for many years, he could not have done that without the ability to quickly evaluate his surroundings and devising escape strategies. Bruce's mind and Hulk's strength made them one of the most dangerous combinations possible. Hulk loved to smash but no longer mindlessly, not with Bruce's keen observation whispering in the back of their shared consciousness.

A simple left-right-left pattern had Cull Obsidian raising his arm to parry an expected attack only for Hulk's fist to find its way to his flank with a sickening crunch. The impact sent a ripple through his torso, twisting muscles and breaking bones.

Cull Obsidian howled and made a valiant attempt to shield himself that backfired spectacularly when it became clear that offense was his best defense. His hands, scrambling to block, were always one move too late and his legs had long given up on standing after Hulk's powerful stomps to his knees, crushing the armor into his legs.

"...are you sure you're not related?" Mantis sounded a little dazed, watching Hulk pummel Cull Obsidian into the ground, literally, a crater was beginning to form around them.

"I'm sure." Gamora replied distractedly, her attention on her sister.

*

Ebony Maw lifted a hand and pushed her arm away as if he were brushing lint off of his clothes. "Painful, aren't they? They are designed for microsurgery. But you already knew that, don't you, *sister*? Considering how frequently our *father*-"

"You can thank him for this too, then." Nebula replied sweetly, mockingly. The tension in her frame drained away as if it had never been there, her movement fluid as her left arm found its way back against Ebony Maw's throat and her right hand cupped the back of his head, staining his gray hair with her own blood, dripping from the wounds on her flesh arm. A push and a pull was all it took to sink the blade, no less deadly in its coiled form, into his flesh. Blood flowed, pooling at their feet and filling the cracks in the asphalt.

Ebony Maw fell, his corpse a graceless heap at Nebula's feet.

She stepped over him and did not look back.

Surprisingly Optimistic

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays! Here is a mostly fluffy chapter with a small cliffhanger! :P

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.. Avengers: Infinity War.

Xena: Warrior Princess.

As if pulled by the strings of fate, they gathered beneath the Black Order's spaceship, still spinning in the New York sky like a reminder of what had happened and what would follow.

Hulk wiped his hands on his pants, the dark gray material hiding the streaks and smears of black fluid.

Alien blood.

Tony's mind supplied as he watched Hulk withdrew a bottle of hand sanitizer, squirt a generous amount into one giant green palm, and rub the gel between the creases in between fingers and over knuckles. Instead of waiting for the moisture to dry, Hulk wiped his hands on another part of his pants before repeating the process again, then for a third time, until he deemed his hands were clean enough to reach into another pocket for a protein bar.

Bruce's influence, clearly. He was always harping about hygiene and lab safety and flu shots though neither of them could get sick, with Extremis in Tony's veins and the Hulk under Bruce's skin. When Tony had pointed out his new immunity, Bruce had been quick to point out his ignorance, in that gentle corrective tone that held no disappointment or disapproval, and explained that vaccination was less about fighting off diseases and more about protecting those who couldn't.

The woman undergoing chemotherapy.

The man with an autoimmune disorder.

The baby unable to hold up their head.

Somehow, their one-on-one talk had turned into a group discussion. By the end of it, everyone had signed up to get the required shots, with Cho flying in to be the one to administer them because she was one of the few physicians they trusted and because Bruce always turned an alarming shade of red when she was around. Tony hoped, for his friend's sake, that Helen would find the blushing more adorable than worrisome.

Thor and Loki had participated as well, though Jane had whispered to Tony that their biology was so different that it was impossible for them to be carriers. It had led to a conversation about the unnecessariness of condoms that had been truly uncomfortable for both of them, with Jane going through the *off* phase of her on-again-off-again breakup with Thor and Tony feeling the weight of Loki's speculative gaze on the back of his neck. Darcy, thankfully, had missed their painfully awkward exchange, off on the other side of the room recording Hulk grinning through a flu shot for her public service announcement video that still held the record for most views in the first twenty-four hours.

"Got any to share?" Rocket asked, eyeing the protein bar with interest.

Hulk held out the hand sanitizer.

*

Gamora tilted her head upward with an assessing gleam in her eyes. "We need to get to the ship, access the data bank and find out what they know."

"We need to *move* the ship then find out what they know." Tony corrected. "Nothing says mass panic like a spaceship in the sky and I'd like to avoid that if I can. It slows everything down, traffic's going to be a nightmare."

"A bit late for that, Sir." JARVIS pointed out wryly. "But removing the source of the panic from sight would go a long way toward freeing up the gridlock on the 78."

"You brought the Black Order to our doors..." Arching an eyebrow at the Guardians, Loki trailed off meaningfully then continued with an eye roll when it became clear that none of them grasped the unspoken point. "*You* need to move the ship."

"I can do it! I'm the greatest pilot in the universe." Quill crowed.

Through his mouthful of protein bar, Rocket shouted something incomprehensible but undoubtedly uncomplimentary.

"I called dibs, I win! Ha!"

Hulk perked up at the mention of dibs, quickly lost interest, and dug out a second protein bar.

Gamora heaved a long-suffering sigh. "I'll go, too. I know where the data bank is."

"It's a date." Quill beamed then was floating off of the ground, figuratively and literally, with a tap of his jet boots, when she didn't disagree.

The two of them took off for their ship parked atop the pillar.

*

"Quill said I'm a third wheel." Mantis explained when the Guardians' ship made a quick detour to drop her off on the street.

Drax frowned. "You are not round."

"This is why I should be the captain." Rocket muttered.

"Captain rabbit." Hulk snorted as he smashed bigger pieces of debris into smaller ones, preemptively starting the clean-up process.

*

"JARVIS, how's the summary report coming along?" Tony watched the Black Order's spaceship fade into a small dot on the horizon before disappearing from view altogether.

"Surprisingly optimistic, Sir."

"That's what I like to hear."

*

Rhodey's face popped up on the display, filling the entire frame as if he were pressed up as close to the camera as possible without actually coming through the screen. "Tony? You okay? What's going on?"

"I'm fine and it's just family drama, you know, daddy issues and fighting over shiny toys-"

"What the hell- Never mind. Tell me you're not on that ship-"

"Why would I be on that ship?"

"You make questionable choices when aliens show up." Pepper peeked over Rhodey's shoulder, her delicate eyebrows furrowed with worry.

"Lies! Lies and slander! I'm-"

Happy coughed in the background. "New York."

Tony winced. "Oh, c'mon! That was one time-"

"London." Rhodey laid the word down as a man would a trump card.

"Those weren't aliens, they were Dark Elves."

Their silence was a telling one.

"Well, third time's the charm and I'm not on the flying donut, happy?"

"Ecstatic." The note of sarcasm was noticeably missing in Rhodey's voice. "Stay in range."

"Planning on it."

*

Tentatively, Tony approached Nebula. "You should get that looked at." He resolutely did not look at the growing puddle of blood by her feet.

"I've had worse." Nebula gave him a lopsided shrug, careful not to jostle her right side even as she brushed off the injury. "I've given worse. He can tell you."

Loki hummed in agreement but did not elaborate.

"Not the point." Tony shook his head.

"She can handle it, she's no baby like Quill..." Rocket sighed. "Eh, it's no fun when he's not here. I'll just save my material for later."

"Nebula is very strong. She can handle a lot." Mantis offered in a soothing lilt intended to comfort but undermined by the message.

"Not the point." Tony reiterated through gritted teeth, reining in his frustration and reminding himself that the Guardians didn't think the same way as he did. Truly alien in not only form but also thought. He should probably keep his mouth shut, try to respect their differences and facilitate a good working relationship. But he didn't want to. Not when they thought, believed, that someone could be so used to pain that they wouldn't even flinch, that they would take pride in it, that they might welcome more.

They were wrong.

Pain didn't dull the senses, it heightened them. Everything honed and ready in a jumbled juxtaposition of preventing the next attack and accepting the pain that would come with it, terrified of being and feeling hurt again.

"Then what is the point?" Nebula whirled around in an arc of splattered blood, a challenge in her voice. "I can deal with pain better than anyone. Thanos pulled my eye from my head and my brain from my skull and my arm from my body-"

"Whoa. That *is* worse." Drax sounded impressed.

"-and I dealt with it so I can deal with this too."

"The point is that maybe you've dealt with *enough*." Tony flipped open the face plate and met her defensive stare straight on. "Sure, yeah, you can handle pain because you're Nebula: Space Warrior Princess but you don't have to do it to prove anything to me. If anything, suffering for suffering's sake makes you stupid in my book."

JARVIS wisely didn't comment on Tony's many years of doing precisely what he had just told Nebula not to do, when he had clung to his guilt, made of barbs for what he had done and hooks for what he hadn't.

Rocket, Drax, Groot, and Mantis fell into an uncharacteristic quiet.

Nebula's gaze flitted down to the blade still coiled around her limb then back up to meet Tony's. "I'm not stupid."

"No, you're not." Tony agreed.

"No, you're not." Gamora echoed, startling them with her sudden presence.

They hadn't heard the ship land but Quill's grin was entirely too smug so Tony decided not to ask them how long they had been back. Besides, he had a good enough idea based on the expression on Gamora's previously impassive face. A combination of anger and regret and hope that softened her eyes but flattened her lips; she must have heard part, if not all, of the conversation.

Something like relief flitted over Nebula's features before they settled into a scowl. "Took you long enough."

"We went as fast as we could." Quill crossed his arms. "Getting the data bank out and getting off of the ship before it self-destructed"

Nebula sniffed. "Not fast enough."

"You don't get to have an opinion because you didn't go-"

"*Couldn't* go."

"Huh?"

"I couldn't go because I'm bleeding all over the place." She lifted her right arm with a defiant arch of her brows, as if she was trying to prove something more than what she was saying and daring them to call her on it.

Tony realized with a start that this was the first time she had directly mentioned her injury. A quick glance around told him that the Guardians had also noticed the change and seemed to be communicating with each other through a series of exaggerated squints and unsubtle winks. It was every bit as ridiculous as their other antics yet Tony couldn't help but feel like he was intruding by being witness to it, whatever this moment was among these ragtag space outlaws with zero interpersonal skills and nonexistent attention span. It was a miracle how they got this far and how they worked together as a team-

Team.

The Guardians, whose craziness was equal parts exasperating and hilarious, were a team.

We are the Guardians of the Galaxy and this is Nebula, who is not part of the team whatsoever.

Tony remembered Quill's introduction, how he had started out presenting them as one unit before Nebula's growl had him tacking on the second part hurriedly. While she might not have wanted to be a Guardian, they had clearly considered her one of them but had been willing to follow her lead.

So maybe she was asking them to follow her lead again, to let her cross the distance she had drawn between them, to show weakness and receive care instead of criticism for it.

To be part of the team.

Or, Tony thought disparagingly, he could be reading too much into things again and Nebula was just stating the obvious and the Guardians weren't talking up her toughness because it was what she was comfortable with and there was no ground-shattering dynamic shifts happening.

Although somehow he doubted that was the case.

Not with how tightly Nebula seemed to be holding herself, in sharp contrast with how Quill's shoulders rolled fluidly in a physical declaration that he had no problem going with the flow.

"Put some pressure on it!" He threw down something gray, a lump with a tangle of thread trailing behind it.

Nebula sidestepped it neatly, eyeing the fabric with disdain when it unfolded from its wadded shape to reveal several stains in various shades of brown. "Ew."

"I'm pretty sure that's just blood." Rocket said reassuringly.

Drax bent down and studied the tattered cloth with intense and unnecessary concentration. "It is blood." He announced and pointed an accusatory finger at Quill. "You gave her a used towel."

"It's my blood towel and she's bleeding!"

Tony was starting to learn that Quill's justifications usually ended up incriminating him further.

"You have a blood towel?" Mantis asked, sounding more curious than alarmed.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No!" The other Guardians denied in chorus.

"I am Groot."

Nebula blinked, her eyes bright with something Tony couldn't identify, then she crouched so the tree could climb on her shoulder and wrapped his branches around her in a hug.

Quill scratched his chin. "Huh. What do you do when you're bleeding then?"

"Raid the med bay, you gigantic moron." Rocket scoffed.

"Follow me." Gamora snapped over her shoulder, disappearing into the ship.

*

"You know." Tony mused as he watched the Guardians board their ship. "I've never been on a real spaceship."

"As you wish." The teleportation spell, glittering at Loki's fingertips, faded away.

The words sparked a tendril of warmth in Tony's chest, where it bloomed into something brilliant and beautiful and pulsing in sync with his heartbeat. Even after over a year of Loki indulging his whims, it still caught him off-guard sometimes. How quickly Loki gave in to Tony's requests for inconsequential things, like a cup of coffee or an alternative way of transport. He never asked for anything he couldn't do himself - he could have easily walked the dozen steps into the kitchen or waited to tour the Guardians' ship when they were back at the tower - because it wasn't about asking for the grand but about Loki treating Tony's requests as such, which was all Tony had ever wanted.

Once, after a pizza and a few beers, Rhodey had clapped Tony on the back and congratulated him on finally finding the Wesley to his Buttercup. Despite his first instinct to protest, Tony had just smiled and clinked their bottles together. Since it wasn't like Rhodey was wrong.

Bruce shuffled in behind them, patting the various pockets on his Hulk pants in search of his glasses.

*

The Guardians' ship was as representative of their personalities as it could be. Messy and loud in a way that screamed *home* in spite of a distressing number of guns and knives laying about.

When Tony shared his observation with Bruce, the scientist quirked an eyebrow that implied that he had thought the same thing about Tony's workshop, a sanctuary surrounded by heavy machinery and fire hazards.

And an Infinity Stone that a certain genocidal maniac had sacrificed through hundreds of lives for.

...who died screaming...

Nebula's earlier words echoed in his mind, overlaid with the fiery line that burned away Zola's snarling face.

Something nagged at the edge of Tony's consciousness and his index finger twitched irritably against the back of Loki's hand, the gauntlet retracted so they could press their palms together, until Loki stilled them by lifting their laced fingers up for a kiss. A light brush of lips that drew him away from his fraying thoughts, splitting in too many directions to follow each to a satisfactory end, and centered him in the present.

The ship rumbled around them as it took off and Tony bounced his foot unconsciously against the grated floor.

Press. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Tap. Press.

Tap. Press. Tap.

Press. Tap.

Do Not Throw Yourself on the Flame

Chapter Notes

Happy 2019!! :D

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Age of Ultron. Doctor Strange. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.

Drax's grunts echoed all the way up from the hull of the spaceship, where he had lugged and stashed Ebony Maw and Cull Obsidian, as could Rocket's grumbles about how Tony's paranoia about Terrans being too damn touchy and curious about everything had meant extra work for them.

Loki arched an eyebrow, unimpressed and bordering on offended on Tony's behalf.

A small smile tugged at the corners of Tony's lips at Loki's protectiveness, then widened when Bruce slanted him a knowing look.

"We don't usually, um, clean up." Mantis explained with a shrug that was more appeasing than apologetic. She probably thought it was an overkill to move the bodies too.

"I am Groot."

"Oh, I didn't think of that. It's a good idea, Groot, to put them back on their ship before Gamora blew it up."

Tony wondered if Mantis, and the Guardians too, knew they were in the habit of supplying details in their responses to Groot. A preemptive translation that didn't draw attention to Groot's language barrier.

"Should have said something earlier." Rocket stomped into the main cabin with Drax.

"I am Groot."

"True, if Quill had just waited for a damn minute-"

"Why is everything always my fault?" Quill grouched as he fiddled with what looked like a Zune.

*

"My ship, my tunes." Quill called out before the Rubberband Man blared through the speakers.

Tony waved an obliging hand and tapped his foot to the cheery tune; they were due for a bit of lightheartedness. He did, however, draw the line at joining in Quill's over-enthusiastic singing and concentrated on keeping to the beat of the song.

*

"Watch it!" Nebula growled.

Gamora shushed her as she pried the tip of the sword up to unwind it from Nebula's arm. "Hold still."

Nebula hissed, sucking in a sharp breath between her teeth. "That hurts!"

"Only because you're moving!" With a steady hand, Gamora set to unfurl the coiled blade, taking care to maintain the same angle to avoid additional cuts and spraying the exposed wound with some kind of antiseptic that Bruce was eyeing with interest.

For all that *blood towel* nonsense, the Guardians actually possessed quite a bit of advanced medical technology. Which made Quill's earlier comment all the more ridiculous.

*

"Were you raised by wolves?" Tony asked.

"Ravagers." Quill replied, utterly serious and more than a little wistful. "Yondu abducted me, kicked the crap out of me so I could learn to fight, and kept me in terror by threatening to eat me. He was a great dad."

"Like David Hasselhoff." Mantis said solemnly.

All the Guardians bowed their heads in, bafflingly, respect.

"Um."

*

"Ow!" Nebula kept up her complaints, some of them bordering on whines, and seemed to relish voicing them.

The warped metal fell away with a clatter.

"I liked that sword." Nebula said petulantly.

Quill tossed Gamora a roll of bandages. She caught it without looking. "I'll get you a new one."

Nebula lifted her arm to allow Gamora more space to dress her wounds. "I liked *that* one."

"I can try to fix it?" Tony offered. "And I can take a look at your arm too, if you want. Er, your other arm." He pointed at her cybernetic limb. Sleek and deadly.

If the Winter Soldier's arm had been designed to *be* a weapon then Nebula's arm had meant to turn her *into* a weapon, both the opposite of what Tony had designed his line of prosthetics to be.

"No." Nebula snapped, then, with some effort as if the very act of being polite pained her, added. "No, thank you. Fox can do it."

Rocket looked up from the control console, the data bank hanging off of one of the many ends of a giant knot of cables he was untangling with his teeth. His eyes lit up with what might be an unholy sort of glee if not for the softer warmth around the edges, like a promise. "Hell yeah! And I'll do a damn good job too, Baldy. Just you wait."

*

Press. Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Dude, you have no rhythm." Quill scoffed as the familiar sight of Stark Tower came into view, landing the ship on the balcony. There was no point in hiding the Guardians' presence, not after the Black Order's entrance on the streets.

Tap. Tap. Press.

Tony bristled, he had always been musically inclined, even if his tastes leaned more toward hard rock than the operatic masterpieces his mother had favored. "I have rhythm."

Tap. Press. Tap.

Quill snorted over the hiss of the doors opening, the music fading away as the ship powered down. "Tell that to your foot."

Press. Tap.

"What..." Tony felt a trickle of cold dread down his spine as he watched his body move against his volition, pulled by the invisible strings of an ancient artifact. It hadn't happened since the incident in the lab, when the Soul Stone had acted without consideration or consent, ending one life and changing another irrevocably, supposedly for Tony's benefit.

Allow me, my Chosen.

He had tried to communicate with the Soul Stone after the dust had settled, speaking out loud and thinking intensely and typing out messages in Morse Codes, and received nothing but silence. The only time he had managed a conversation with the Soul Stone had been in Siberia and his memory of that interaction was hazy at best. He remembered confronting Wanda and waking with the Soul Stone in his hands but everything in between had been drowned out by a brilliant orange light that left him squinting at fragments that didn't make much sense. The data from the suit showed that his vitals had gone haywire, though it was

inconclusive if that had been a result of Extremis or the Soul Stone's influence or a combination of both.

Under normal circumstances, Tony would test various theories until his curiosity had been satisfied but there was nothing normal about an ancient artifact hijacking his body to send cryptic messages. And, despite everything the Soul Stone had done, Tony knew, instinctively, that It wouldn't hurt him and that It was only trying to help.

Because Tony was Its Chosen.

A title he was still trying to figure out, what it meant and how to stay balanced on the blade's edge of keeping the Soul Stone's favor because he had seen what It could do. Like fire, It could just as soon raze everything to ash as It could keep the chill away. For all of his genius, Tony felt very much like a caveman staring into the flame, torn between the fear of being burnt and the desire to wield it.

Except the Soul Stone was more than an element, It controlled an essential aspect of existence, as Stephen had informed Tony in his usual drawl Tony had asked about the glowing amulet housing the Time Stone that Stephen had used in Missouri.

*

"How do you, um, tell the Time Stone what to do?" Tony had asked awkwardly, trying to appear merely curious instead of wholeheartedly invested in the answer.

Stephen had rolled his eyes. "A spell." The *duh* had been heavily implied.

"Oh." The disappointment had felt like an unexpected punch to the gut, he hadn't even realized he had gotten his hopes up until they were dashed. Of course the solution was mystical in nature and Tony, for all the success he had done in creating souls, was and always would be a man of science. "That makes sense. Thanks." He had muttered before walking away, only to be stopped when Stephen, concerned for Tony's uncharacteristic lack of snark, had chased after him.

Affecting a dramatic air of despair, Tony had lamented how Stephen was no longer a member of Team Science. He hadn't been sure if Stephen bought the act, they were developing something almost like a real friendship by that point, but Stephen, after a pause that had seemed longer than it was, had dropped the subject with a snippy reminder that he was still a licensed physician.

Either Stephen had believed Tony's thoroughly unconvincing mask, he was totally out of practice as he hadn't needed it as much in this timeline, or Stephen had seen through it as Tony's ever-growing patchwork family could but had chosen not to press the issue. Tony would bet it was the latter, Stephen wasn't the type to overlook things unless he wanted to and for that, Tony was grateful.

And more than a little guilty because he hadn't been visiting the Sanctum just to snap photos of Stephen in his ostentatious cloak drinking a Starbucks latte - there was hilarity in the incongruity - or to gossip about celebrities with Wong, he had also been trying to find

answers in their vast library. Though with little success since Tony hadn't quite figured out how to disable a magical alarm and Mordo had a sixth sense about interlopers in the Restricted Section and was especially leery of Tony trying to extend his mortal lifespan to match that of his alien lover; Mordo had not found the term *exclusive liaison* charming and outright refused to use it to describe Tony's relationship.

Mordo was also a staunch believer in maintaining the balance of the universe, which, incidentally, was why Tony hesitated to tell Stephen the truth about the other Infinity Stone on Earth. As the Sorcerer Supreme and the leader of the Masters of the Mystic Arts, Stephen was committed to defending Earth against mythical threats and could, *had*, literally manipulate time to achieve his aim.

And Tony didn't want to put his friend in the difficult spot of having to choose between the greater good and whatever quantifier of good Tony was, which sounded kind of noble but really wasn't because Tony hadn't been a very good friend to Stephen with the hidden motives and, to be honest, Tony was far more terrified of Stephen's decision than Stephen having to make one in the first place.

He could see it, Stephen with his red cloak and green amulet declaring Tony to be a disruption of natural orders, with Mordo frowning disapprovingly in the background. The fact that Tony had altered events, leading to outcomes he couldn't have predicted but was so grateful for, was the very definition of a disruption of natural order and would need to be corrected.

Most likely with the Infinity Stone that could reverse time.

So even with the guilt swelling up and weighing him down, Tony had just left the conversation at that.

But on his next visit to the Sanctum, he had avoided the library.

There was nothing in the Masters of Mystic Arts' collection that Asgard wouldn't already have. If Loki, a god and renowned mage, hadn't been able to find any way to communicate with the Soul Stone then chances were slim to none that Midgard somehow had the answer. Which meant Tony's best option was to maintain the status quo of keeping the Soul Stone happy and disinclined to pull another *deus ex machina* move.

As much as Tony hated to be forced to create - a reminder of all those times he had caved under Stane's carefully applied pressure, cajoling and coercing in equal measures about protecting soldiers and jobs and the Stark legacy - he had been happy to draft the codes that would bring FRIDAY to life. The Soul Stone had decided to give him a second chance based on what It had witness in the Siberian bunker and Tony knew, unquestionably, that it was FRIDAY who had caught Its attention. She had saved him by being her utterly brilliant self and he would love nothing more than to hear her faintly Irish accent again, wherever that bit of characteristic had come from.

The day that FRIDAY had come online, the Soul Stone had twinkled from Its designated corner, a knowing wink to a long-lost friend. For a fleeting moment, Tony had felt a brush of

camaraderie; no one else knew about FRIDAY but the two of them, a shared secret of a memory that existed before it had been made again.

*

Press. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Tap. Press.

Tap. Press. Tap.

Press. Tap.

"That's, that's not me." Tony found himself repeating the same words but with a different kind of horror. Instead of the cold dread rising to his throat at the realization that Thanos thought JB had the Soul Stone, all of his nerves sparked bright and hot like fuses leading to a bomb ticking away at the center of his chest, a countdown to something that was set to explode and reduce everything to ash.

Burn.

*

Someone was talking, or maybe shouting, but everything sounded muffled against the sudden panic in his ears. His stomach twisted, his heart pounded, and his lungs stung.

Tony knew, instinctively, he should try to breathe. Spots were blinking in and out of his vision and he could feel an uncomfortable tightness around his chest but his mouth was snapped to keep the scream on the tip of his tongue from escaping.

A hostile alien army came charging through a hole in space. We're standing three hundred feet below it. We're the Avengers. We can bust arms dealers all the live long day, but, that up there? That's...that's the end game. How were you guys planning on beating that?

His own words echoed in his head, all compounding and he couldn't think. It was all he could do to stop himself from tipping over the edge, barely holding on as it was. He wasn't sure if the Soul Stone's message was the straw that broke the camel back after a very trying day or the lone branch he was clinging to stop himself from falling off the cliff.

Was it a warning, a prophecy? Or a direction, a command to be carried out?

Come find me.

Burning, who was burning? Or who would burn? Or had everything already been reduced to cinders?

I am the Soul Stone and you are my chosen.

What did it mean? What did any of it mean? Was anything ever in his control or had he been a puppet to the strings of fate all along, a different beginning but the ending was the same-

"-Tony!" An icy hand against the back of his neck jolted him back into the present and all he could see was the clear green of Loki's eyes, like rustling leaves with rays of sunshine peeking through on a breezy summer afternoon. Their warmth incongruent with the coldness of his touch.

"Hi." He croaked, trying to sort through the jumble in his head even though he knew it was a lost cause. Fear for the whole damn planet. Thanos. The Guardians' surprised visit. Fear for JB and Darcy. The Black Order's arrival. Fear for Pepper and Happy. The Soul Stone.

"Hi." Loki whispered back, his hand moving from the back of Tony's neck to cradle Tony's jaw. "You are here. Nothing will not take you from this place or time, what is done is done."

The words from their first night together that had carried him to sleep during those bouts of insomnia but he now found himself doubting.

What was done could be undone.

What if the clocks were turned back, like a universal reset button?

When Tony had closed his eyes in Siberia, in a broken suit with broken faith, what if he didn't open them to see the New York skyline in the past?

Would Thanos still come if the Soul Stone had remained hidden?

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, a ragged inhale that sounded too sharp, Tony offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Not in the sense that everything was okay but that he was alright for the moment and they could talk about it later.

With a small furrow between his brows, a sign that he wasn't happy about the wait but would accept it for now, Loki nodded.

Tony's next smile was more genuine, as a thrum of warmth shivered through him at just how well they knew one another, how much they could say without words, and how rare it was to find someone who so attuned to him.

"Um, not to break up the moment or whatever, but I'm totally breaking it up because what the hell is going on?" Quill asked, though his tone was more curious than demanding.

The same could not be said for the expressions of the three people standing in the doorway.

Darcy stayed quiet, which was always a cause for alarm.

JB watched Tony and the Guardians with guarded eyes.

"That's what I'd like to know." Stephen said, his expression stony in its scrutiny.

Tony tensed and sent Loki a look that he hoped communicated that he needed to speak to Stephen alone.

Loki's eyes narrowed with understanding. He didn't look pleased by it but, as always, was willing to give in where Tony was concerned.

Tony pressed his lips against Loki's palm, showing his gratitude for Loki's trust and promising to explain everything later in a too-quick kiss.

"Do not throw yourself on the flame." Loki murmured, straightening to Tony space to stand.

"Can't let the world burn." Tony replied, a repeat of yet another one of their conversations, and leaned into solid heat and comfort of Loki's body as he moved to exit the ship.

Bruce frowned. "What-"

"I believe I can answer any questions you have while Tony speaks to the esteemed Sorcerer Supreme here." Loki interrupted.

Tony marched up to Stephen and resolutely did not look at JB and Darcy. "Let's talk." He convinced himself the sudden chill had to do with the drop in temperature from the ship's regulated climate to the outside; nothing to do with the thought of losing everything he found precious.

On The Same Page

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the late update - it's been a surreal day and not in a good way. Blah.

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Age of Ultron. Doctor Strange. Avengers: Infinity War.

"So." Tony started, rather ineloquently. He had all but shoved Stephen through the first door they had come upon in the hallway, only to have to pull Stephen back out when it had turned out to be the bathroom.

The room they were standing in now was one of the two spare offices on the floor, decorated with the leather chairs and mahogany furniture and completed with a sharply clean smell that made his nose twitch. In other words, nothing like his actual workspace where the scent of coffee had inexplicably soaked into glass and steel but presentable enough for the walk-through interview they had before the Team Iron Man summer program launched, where the magazine had negotiated a tour of the penthouse in addition to the students' living quarters for the month they would be spending in New York. Photos of generic albeit high-tech dormitory didn't sell nearly as well as a glimpse of Tony Stark's residence because the public would always be more interested in the personal details of Tony's life than what he was doing to better the lives of others.

"You have the Soul Stone." Stephen said warily, not quite an accusation and almost like a question.

"I do." He hadn't stepped out of the Iron Man suit yet, needing every bit of armor available around himself.

"It helped you." Stephen's tone was the same as before, a hopeful lilt at the end of each statement that sounded as if he wanted Tony to deny it.

Tony nodded slowly, beginning to feel like he had missed something.

Stephen's shoulders slumped for a second before he pulled them back with visible effort.

"What did you have to do?"

The question caught Tony off-guard and he could only blink uncomprehendingly at Stephen, who seemed to be growing more and more agitated with every second of Tony's bewildered silence.

"What did you have to do to use the Soul Stone? What price did you have to pay to have an Infinity Stone in your service? Tell me, Tony!" Stephen's hands shook as he dragged them through his hair. "I can't help you unless you tell me."

"I don't...what? There was no price, exactly? I mean, I guess I brought FRIDAY online because the Soul Stone seemed to like her but I was going to do that anyway and you can't really put a price on an A.I., you know?"

Now it was Stephen's turn to look confused. "The Soul Stone likes FRIDAY?"

"Don't sound so surprised." Tony huffed, unable to resist the urge to lighten the situation with some possibly ill-timed needling. "She's amazing and you just don't like her because you're a xenophobe-"

"That's not what I said, I was just wondering where her Irish accent came from." Stephen replied instinctively, falling back into familiar territory with a roll of his eyes.

"-and you're terrified of redheads."

"And you aren't?"

"Touché." Tony conceded, thinking about Pepper's indomitable will and terrifying efficiency, she would be able to sort out this mess in no time but she wasn't here and shouldn't be here because Thanos was after the Soul Stone. He cleared his throat. "What did you mean by price?"

All traces of exasperated amusement vanished from Stephen's face and Tony almost regretted bringing their conversation back to the point. "When you make a bargain..." He held up his hands, fingers trembling and matching the tremor in his voice. "...the bill comes due."

"What the hell happened?" Tony demanded, suddenly furious with himself for not asking that question sooner and for sending Stephen to JB's without any backup. Why hadn't he thought to send Bruce with Stephen? JB was still a little nervous around the Hulk but Darcy would have been able to diffuse any awkwardness with a joke or five. Stephen had been fine earlier and now he looked like he had suffered significant trauma to his hands, though without any outward signs. The memory of Ebony Maw's attack on Nebula, the needles piercing her skin and setting her nerves aflame, slammed into the forefront of his mind and he realized in a sick rush just how much they didn't know about their enemies or what their enemies were capable of. "We'll find a way to fix this, we'll get you your hands back-"

"My hands are fine." Stephen interrupted. "For the most part." He amended when Tony scoffed. "Let's just say that sometimes you have to lose repeatedly before you can win but it is a price I won't hesitate to pay again to use the Time Stone to protect-"

Tony swore, horrified, thinking of the dome of emerald light that had kept the alien invasion at bay in Missouri. Stephen had saved the entire town that day and possibly the entire state and country too. The churning mass had been expanding far too quickly, breaking through the lighter green of Loki's magic and the bright orange of the sorcerers' spells, and Stephen had called upon the powers of the Eye of Agamotto as a last resort. Tony hadn't been there that

day, the initial assessment of the situation had declared it a mystical threat and Iron Man had not been needed, part of the new Avengers Accord protocol, but maybe he should have been. Should have insisted. A few missiles could have broken that damned thing up into smaller segments or a plasma forcefield could have worked where a magical one had not.

The guilt rising in his gut was as familiar as MONDAY's voice in his head, reminding him that he had made the best choice with the information he had at the time and while hindsight might be 20/20, it did him no good to take his eyes off of the present. Another sign of the slow but steady progress he had been making over the years. Still, Tony felt like he should apologize or something but he doubted Stephen would appreciate the former so he went with the latter and blurted out the first *something* that popped into his head. "You should have stuck to making balloon animals."

It probably wasn't the best thing he could have said.

"My job is to protect our reality, douchebag." Stephen fired back but there was no heat in the insult.

Tony snorted. "Go take a vacation."

"You first." A challenge that neither of them would take, not with the entire universe on the line and two Infinity Stones between them.

"Well played."

Stephen tipped his imaginary hat with a steady hand, the smile falling off of his face when he noticed Tony's gaze catching on it. "I told you my hands are fine."

"For the most part." With an arched eyebrow, Tony parroted Stephen's words from earlier.

"The tremors are psychosomatic, they don't happen often and don't last long." That much was true, at least, it hadn't been more than a few minutes. Though it felt like they had been talking for hours with the heaviness of the subject matter slowing down the passing of time. "I... I don't mind them, really. They're a good reminder that there are consequences to upsetting the natural order and I need to remember that as the Sorcerer Supreme."

"Finally giving up on the doctor gig, huh?" Tony had meant it to be teasing but Stephen's expression flickered into something grim and almost sad. Crap. First the balloon animal comment and now this?

"Yeah."

That one word, more of a sigh than actual speech, sparked a sudden understanding that felt like a punch to the gut, leaving Tony feeling a bit ill. Stephen couldn't operate anymore, not with the unpredictable tremors in his hands. The first vow of any physicians was to do no harm and Tony knew, for all of Stephen's arrogance, he valued that above all else. He would not jeopardize his patients. "Oh." He didn't know what to say or what was safe to say. All he had done so far was putting his foot in his mouth when he really should be kicking himself with it.

"Nothing comes free. That's what I'm trying to tell you, Tony, and why you need to tell me how you got the Soul Stone. I don't, I don't want you to end up like this, like me." He let out a mirthless chuckle. "They never put the warning first."

"No, I suppose they don't. To be expected, really, since they don't always ask either."

Stephen's eyebrows pinched together in a mix of concern and confusion. "What do you mean?"

"It means I didn't ask for any of this." Tony waved his arms about in an all-encompassing arc. "Don't get me wrong, I love everything about this new life, well, maybe not today with the alien invasion and being called cattle, but I didn't ask for it. I didn't think I deserved a second chance, let alone actually getting one, and I definitely didn't think a super old glowy rock is going to pick me as Its Chosen-"

"Hold on, what? Second chance? Chosen?" Stephen paused. "Cattle?"

Tony took a deep breath. "On June 24th, 2016, I was pretty sure I was going to die and the next thing I knew, I woke up in New York, on May 4th, 2012. I'm calling it soul travel because it's kind of like time travel but not really? Anyway, the Soul Stone brought me back because It likes shiny things and my A.I.'s are definitely the shiniest, so It chose me, whatever that means. Still haven't figured that out yet, aside from random Morse Code messages that I send myself and the fact that It really shouldn't try to help because ancient artifacts have no idea what consent and boundaries mean." He tried not to think about Darcy and JB waiting in the other room and the questions they would have, one emotionally draining conversation at a time was the only way he could make it through this. Cracking a smile he knew didn't reach his eyes but hoped the act might fool the parts of his brain hardwired to respond positively, he shrugged. "One of Thanos' kids called me cattle so I moored at him. Any further questions?"

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As it turned out, Stephen did have more questions. A lot of them. Though most had been variations of the same ones, the *who*, *what*, *how*, and *where* associated with the Soul Stone.

Except for the *why*.

Stephen had accepted the explanation that the Soul Stone had chosen Tony because of Tony's ability to program A.I.s, to create souls, with a decisive nod. As if it made perfect sense when Tony had been so sure that was the point he would need to reiterate over and over again, both in defense of his A.I.s and to justify his own worthiness in getting what was essentially a do-over. While it was true that he hadn't thought he deserved a second chance back in the other timeline, betrayed and abandoned and near death, he didn't think so now and hadn't since he learned why the Soul Stone had selected him to be Its Chosen.

Because as much as he might doubt himself, he would never do that to his creations.

JARVIS with his dry sense of humor and cutting wit and warm concern.

DUM-E trying his best to take care of those around him despite mixed results, never giving up.

U's love for music and the purity of her enjoyment shining through every trill and beatboxing attempt.

Butterfingers who always made enough of whatever his latest crafting project was for everyone.

MONDAY striking the perfect balance between professionalism and empathy.

FRIDAY, both versions, and the juxtaposition of her no-nonsense demeanor and quirky preferences.

Even Ultron, the program that was supposed to be a suit of armor around the world, not the abomination the Scepter had twisted it into.

Tony had always believed in the goodness of his A.I.s, even on the days when he didn't believe there was anything good about himself. If the Soul Stone had said something ridiculous like choosing Tony because of his kindness or heroism or bravery, he would have found a million ways to disprove those reasons but he couldn't think of a single one for why FRIDAY wouldn't have attracted the attention of an Infinity Stone with her brilliance, saving him yet again by being her Irish self?

They were the best parts of him, unequivocally.

In a strange way, finally having someone else recognize that, made Tony better too. It had forced him to admit that there were parts of him that were good because he had written those codes and designed those programs. And in doing so, he had come to terms with the parts of himself that he had thought of as bad, less than, unworthy.

MONDAY had said that he should learn to accept all parts of himself. Not punishing himself for the parts he didn't like wasn't the same as crossing over to the dark side, it just meant he wasn't beating himself up anymore for something that was already and had always been a part of him. His past had been shrouded in darkness, equal parts his own doing and the schemes of others, but his future could be so bright if he stepped out of the shadows, guided by the glows of his beautiful creations. And so he did.

Tony might not have deserved this chance but he sure as hell didn't waste it. If, or when, he lost it all, at least he could take some comfort in that.

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"What's the verdict?" Tony asked. Their conversation seemed to be coming to an end, bits and pieces sorted and put away, clearing a path to the only elephant left in the room.

"Hm?"

"Am I a disruption to the natural order?" He couldn't quite keep the mocking bitterness out of his voice.

Stephen reared back, shocked, as though he hadn't even considered it when the thought had been buzzing in the back of Tony's mind the entire time. "No."

"No?"

"I mean, yes."

"Yes?"

"No."

Tony's gaze flattened, his annoyance washing away some of the anxiety.

"Sorry. It's, er, complicated."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"The laws of nature have been broken, that much is true, but not by you. As you said earlier, you didn't ask for this. The Soul Stone sought you out. However, you have altered events and changed the trajectory of not only your future but also countless others. Your actions have sent ripples across the universe, waves that could bring good tidings or-

"A genocidal maniac with a love for bling."

Stephen rolled his eyes but didn't disagree.

"I think we should hide the Soul Stone." Tony said hastily, spitting out the words before he could swallow them down.

"What?" Stephen frowned.

"Listen, Thanos needs all six Infinity Stones to do whatever crazy thing he plans to do, right? So if we can take one of them out of the equation, then no invasion and no Thanos. Everyone's happy."

"That doesn't solve the problem, Thanos will find it eventually."

"No, he won't. The Soul Stone wasn't even on the radar, remember? Gamora said they thought it was lost. The only reason Thanos found it is..." Tony tapped a finger against his chest plate. "Me."

Stephen's eyes narrowed. "Are you suggesting..."

"Yes. Reset time and everything goes back to normal."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I think I do."

"There's no guarantee that-

"There is!" Tony shouted, suddenly furious. "In the other timeline, Thanos never came-"

"You don't know that!" Stephen raised his volume to match Tony's. "You don't know if he showed up after you died!" A peculiar look flitted across his face, twisting his features into something pained and angry.

"I-"

Stephen barreled on. "Sorry to burst your bubble but the world doesn't stop just because you're gone. Do you really think that the other timeline just ends because you're not there? Or that you're the only person who can save this one? It's not about you!"

"I know-"

"What makes you think the Soul Stone won't just try again, hm? It already changed the course of history for you once, a second or third time won't make a difference. And do you really think Thanos is the type to just give up? He'll scour the entire universe for the Soul Stone even if your stupid suicidal plan worked. "

"It's not-"

"You told me you were pretty sure you were going to die, what do you think will happen if I reverted time and sent you back? What the hell do you think you just asked me to do?" Stephen's hands were shaking again.

Shame rose up, making it hard to breathe, to speak, to think anything other than how unintentionally cruel his suggestion had been, how casually he had asked Stephen to send him back to his death. The fight drained out of him and the hollowness felt like relief, like losing a battle he was never meant to win and being glad that at least it was over. "Fuck." Tony gritted out through clenched teeth. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you better be, you dick." Stephen was still upset, that much was obvious in the lines of his face and whiteness of his clenched fists, but something the way he said it sounded like forgiveness too.

There was no fast and easy way to win this, no magical reset button or a single noble sacrifice. "Stopping him is the only guarantee we have, then."

"Glad to see we're finally on the same page."

Like A Cactus

Chapter Notes

I don't know why I bother planning out scenes/conversations when the characters always go off and do their own things. Oh well. I like the things they do. ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Harry Potter. Superman.

"So, basically Thanos is Space Voldemort minus the racism because he's all about equal opportunity destruction and death?" Darcy summarized, defaulting to humor and pop culture references as this was her way of dealing with universe-ending and life-shattering news.

Bruce blinked. "Um, yes."

"And the Soul Stone is like the worst life coach of all time. We're getting a restraining order."

"I'd be happy to assist you with the paperwork, Ms. Lewis." JARVIS offered. "In the meantime, I am and have been monitoring Its activities and will alert you of any changes."

They both knew that if the Soul Stone wanted to meddle with people's lives again, there wasn't anything anyone could do to stop It. But JARVIS' assurance helped.

"Good. Because I will totally take an Infinity Stone to one of those reality court shows and I can cry on command so the audience will totally be on my side." Dimly, she was aware that she should probably take the threat of Thanos more seriously and an Infinity Stone with the tendency to go rogue was no joking matter either but she was processing.

Being flippant about things that should terrify her was part of the process.

Well, if she were being honest with herself, it was the whole process.

There might only be one tool in her coping mechanism toolbox but it was a damn effective one, quips with pop culture references had gotten her through the last two alien invasions, after all. But they were failing her on the friendship front as she tried to sort through the jumble of thoughts in her head and the mess of emotions in her heart.

It wasn't right. What Tony and Loki and Bruce had kept from her, from JB, was unequivocally wrong. Her mind kept going back to the moment when Tony had revealed to them that he was from another timeline and comparing that to what she had just learned,

hoping to find the smallest thread of commonality so she could pull from the easy forgiveness she had granted Tony.

She didn't find any.

There was a difference between Tony keeping his own secret and keeping a secret that wasn't his, a difference between not correcting a misconception and telling an outright lie. Despite all this, Darcy couldn't help but feel a bit glad that they hadn't told her because it meant that she had been spared from lying too. Which left her in the frustrating intersection of anger and relief, torn between wanting to throttle them and to thank them.

The very thought of lying to JB made her feel physically ill, given how trusting he had been of her opinions in the beginning. To be honest, that sinking feeling in her stomach never quite went away even after he started developing his own preferences and teasing her about her weakness for lens flares that had led them to many regrettable Michael Bay movies.

And she was a horrible liar and would probably just blurt out *Hey, good new, it wasn't HYDRA that messed with your memories, er, again, but the bad news is that Tony's pet rock did* at the first moment. So she would probably just end up avoiding him altogether, then she wouldn't have had their hushed talks over pans of midnight brownies, about fears and dreams and worries that were too intimidating to say aloud outside of the peaceful quiet between them.

Or the way too intense debates about reality shows' judicious uses of close-ups when they settled in for their weekly hour of unwinding through other people's mostly manufactured drama. It seemed to help him, on the tougher days, to be reminded that everyone struggled with interpersonal issues and him being a man out of time was a much better excuse than a crippling case of narcissism.

Or his random texts throughout the day of what he had seen or learned. The day that he had discovered abbreviation would forever be ranked in the top ten and she might have taken a screencap of their conversation to preserve the memory. They had an ongoing miscommunication for a while because he understood *g2g* to mean *got to go* while she used it as a shorthand for *good to go*. He had thought he was bothering her and she had wondered why he stopped responding. In retrospect, it seemed hilarious and it was, totally. But she still remembered the pang of doubt, thinking that this was the moment he realized she was a nobody who happened to know a lot of somebodies, and her heart would ache even as her brain said to snap out of it. JB was better than whatever her insecurities made him out to be, he was kind and smart and resilient and brave and so many other amazing things that she loved.

Mostly, though, she would just miss him. A lot.

"Quill can use a life coach." Rocket declared.

Darcy was in the unusual position of not being the person, er, being, making random comments in the room.

"You don't even know what that is!" Quill protested.

"A coach for life. It is obvious."

"No, it's not. It doesn't make any sense!"

"I am Groot."

"Oh, like Kevin Bacon." Mantis nodded, her antenna bobbing with the motion.

"Kevin Bacon." They said in unison and with inexplicable finality.

Seriously, what was it with them and Kevin Bacon?

Her disbelief must have shown on her face because Bruce leaned toward her with a conspiratorial whisper. "They think he's a great hero who saved a town with dancing."

Normally, Darcy would have rolled her eyes and said something snarky back but she was 50% mad, so she shrugged and said nothing.

Bruce frowned, part concerned and part confused, and her immediate response was to soothe it away because conflict was her Kryptonite, the corners of her lips lifting up in an unconvincing smile before she could override that instinct with a stern reminder that they had lied and lying was bad.

Except, a small voice whispered in the back of her head, was the truth really better?

Darcy glanced over at JB, hunched over with his elbows on his knees and hands clenched into fists so tightly that his knuckles had turned white and she was sure she would find little half-moon shaped marks on his palms, and she didn't like the answer at all.

*

JB knew he should be paying closer attention to what Loki was saying but he felt like he got the gist of it within the first few minutes and what they were doing now was rehashing the same thing in different ways. It hadn't been Zola who had erased his memories of his time as the Winter Soldier, it had been an Infinity Stone with the power to influence *souls*.

Which should make his head spin but he was already reeling from the *wizard* who had shown up at his apartment in a *portal* and he himself had just traveled to Stark Tower via the same *portal* because there had been an *alien* attack as evidenced by the *spaceship* in the sky.

So, really, stranger things had already happened and he kind of felt like he had used up all of his cares and, as a result, had none left to give as the *god* sitting across from him reiterate, for at least the tenth time and with Bruce corroborating everything, that it hadn't been Tony's idea to keep the truth from JB but rather a call made by them as a group. Like that point was the most important thing Loki wanted JB to take away from this conversation, like the fact that a *Mad Titan* possibly coming after him was just a side note.

JB thought he should probably be furious or at least a little angry, but all he felt was this dulled sense of indifference falling over him, the way a heavy comforter did on a cold winter night. A solid and comfortable weight that both kept him warm and kept the world out. Either

he was getting better at accepting what he could change versus what he could not, as his therapist had recommended about his conflict with Steve, or this was the kind of shocked detachment that would rear its ugly head later. He hoped it was the former but prepared himself for the latter, just in case. He wondered if this was progress.

The conversation around him was muffled and he paid some attention to the tone, mostly curious and not at all combative, but couldn't be bothered to parse out the words. It didn't really matter anyway, whether or not he paid attention to what they were saying wouldn't change how little agency he had had over the events of his life. This wasn't anything new, after all.

He had wanted to stay in Brooklyn but he had been called to the frontlines.

He had wanted to avoid capture, to try to escape, but he had been held prisoner and experimented upon.

He had wanted to go home but he had fallen from the train.

He had wanted to protect and serve but he had been made into a killer, or worse, a killing machine.

He had wanted to forget the nightmare and become a new man and...

JB blinked. Sound came rushing back with the insight that perhaps, for the first time in his life, fate or whatever higher power had brought him something unexpectedly good. Still outside of his control and not by his choice, but his desire and the outcome actually matched up. When he thought about it that way, he supposed he wasn't exactly unhappy about the result. Though he still had his reservations about the method.

"...a joint decision after weighing the benefits..."

To be honest, it was kind of impressive how Loki continued to find different ways to make the same point, the point being that Tony shouldn't bear the brunt of the blame. Loki didn't try to absolve Tony of it and neither did Bruce but they made it clear that they wanted to shoulder it with him. Which was admirable and annoying at the same time because the strength of their devotion was clear but it was demonstrated through keeping JB in the dark with the spotlight trained on Tony.

"...impede your recovery..."

A flash of irritation shot through JB and he felt his face twist into a scowl.

Loki stopped talking abruptly, peering intently at JB with what almost looked like relief.

JB realized, belatedly, that his reaction was what Loki had been waiting for and maybe the extensive speech was really Loki's version of babbling. The thought that he had been able to unnerve a god known for having a way with words chased away some of his foul mood. "It wasn't your choice to make."

"No but there was no one else. We could not ask you, for the very act of asking was a choice made as well." Loki pointed out, his words more fluid than the measured tone he had before, seemingly more at ease now that JB was speaking. "Would you have said *no* if we had asked and would you regret saying *yes*?"

Tilting his head, JB considered this and was reluctantly to admit Loki was right, in a way, because asking someone if they wanted to know a secret about themselves was a trick question with no right answers. "Hm."

"And what are we hm-ing about?" Tony's voice, purposefully casual, rang out behind him.

"Impossible things." Loki replied, wrapping an arm around Tony's waist and pulling Tony down into the spot next to him with their sides pressed together. And just like that, the tension seemed to evaporate from Tony's frame.

Strange rolled his eyes and leaned back against the wall facing the windows. The sky was clear and seemed to stretch on for miles.

JB snuck a glance over at Darcy, who was sitting straight up like she had a book balanced on top of her head; something his sisters had used to do, pretending to be debutantes perfecting their posture for the ball. A practice that Darcy had wrinkled her nose at before sending him links to various articles highlighting inherent sexism. She did that a lot, teaching him how the ways of the world had changed, or should change, but in a way that was more encouraging than condescending. He liked that about her and, sneaking another glance, wondered if closing the gap between them would help her lose some of that stiffness in her spine, if she would slouch against him like she often did when they watched their guilty pleasure shows.

"Hm." Tony said.

"Indeed." Loki drawled. "We have covered much ground here, I trust you and the wizard-

"Sorcerer Supreme." Strange grumbled.

"-did the same?"

"Kind of? We're back at square one, though."

"This room is not a square." Drax remarked.

"It's a metaphor." Nebula explained. She and JB had bonded briefly over losing their left arms. "It means they didn't go anywhere."

"Yeah, because they're back in the same room." The Guardians weren't kidding about Drax being completely literal.

Tony took a deep breath and met JB's eyes. "Um, I'm sorry for lying to you."

Darcy cleared her throat. Loudly.

"Both of you. It was necess-" He cut himself off with a groan. "No, I'm not going to try to justify it. I'm, you know, sorry for the lying."

"Are you, really? I mean, an apology is about acknowledging you did something wrong and making a commitment to not to do it again. I don't think you think you did something wrong and you would totally do it again." Darcy arched an eyebrow, as if challenging Tony to disagree.

The temperature dropped.

Surprisingly enough, it was Bruce who spoke up. "You're right. We, or at least I, don't think we did something wrong. It was the best choice possible at that time, given what we knew."

"Ah ha!" Darcy pointed a triumphant finger at him.

Bruce's lips quirked sheepishly. "I'm sorry that I'm not sorry."

"I regret neither the method nor the result." Loki sniffed but the room felt warmer and so did JB.

There was a beat of almost silence; the Guardians were on a tangent about how many geometrically shaped rooms they had each been in and which was the oddest.

"Oh! Er, me too. I mean, ditto." Tony floundered. "Sorry not sorry."

Darcy sank back into the couch, stretching out her limbs. Her foot tapped against JB's knee.

He grasped her ankle and moved her leg out of the way as he moved to sit down next to her to present a united front.

"We accept your apologies and non-apologies." Darcy announced grandly. "But we reserve the right to still be a little mad even though it's not like you could have known how this'd all play out-"

"No, you couldn't." Strange interrupted with an almost wild gleam in his eyes. "But I can." He stood up abruptly, hands already making the circular motions that were precursor to opening a portal. "Or I'm pretty sure I can, I have to check on some things at the Sanctum but I don't see why it wouldn't work-"

"I'm going with you." JB said, surprising himself as much as everyone else around him with this seemingly random request. But it wasn't, not really, not once he thought about it. Stark Tower wasn't the only secure location and the low hum of apprehension in the back of his brain grew to a loud buzz at the realization that he had another option. He didn't want to be in the same building as the Soul Stone.

The gold specks dissipated as Strange paused in his movements.

Tony's mouth opened but Darcy spoke over him.

"Me too."

Strange studied them both for a beat then nodded. "Alright. You will be safe there. I promise." He slanted a look over at Tony, who closed his mouth with a click.

"Hey, can we-" Quill started.

"No." Strange snapped. Glaring suspiciously at the Guardians, he opened the portal quickly and was rushing JB and Darcy through like he was worried the Guardians might make a run for it.

Which seemed like something they would do.

"You're stuck with me." Darcy whispered as they stepped over the branch inching toward the portal.

JB smiled. "Like a cactus."

14,000,605

Chapter Notes

Setting up a few things...getting ready for the final arc... *cues dramatic music*

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and many thanks to [Arboreal](#) for being an excellent duck.

References/Quotes

Guardians of the Galaxy. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2. Avengers: Infinity War.

The portal closed behind Stephen, Darcy, and JB after the three had said their goodbyes with only Stephen promising to return with any updates. Bruce watched the specks of gold fade into nothingness then he pulled off of his glasses so he could pinch the bridge of his nose, hoping to stave off the coming headache.

Though he had anticipated JB's aversion to his proximity with the Soul Stone and Darcy's anger toward them for their lies, the flash of hurt at their departure still caught him by surprise. It wasn't as though he had thought they would talk it over and hug it out, he was too much of a realist for that kind of optimism, except maybe he had gotten his hopes up after all when the worst case scenario he had imagined didn't happen.

In the worst case scenario, Darcy would be furious with both her words and her movements, stomping up and down the hallways and waving her arms wildly, while JB would probably lash out, the prosthetic Tony had designed wasn't weaponized like the HYDRA version but super soldier serum meant JB could still do significant damage. Bruce had been mentally preparing himself for a rampaging tirade, the shadow of his father's disappointment was long behind him now but Bruce still hated letting down someone he cared about. Compared to the churning in his gut, Hulk's enthusiasm to fight Two Arm, previously known as One Arm, had almost seemed preferable.

Hulk's grumbles about the lack of smashing were half-hearted at best; the earlier brawl against Cull Obsidian had sated Hulk's thirst for battle and despite his eagerness, Bruce knew Hulk didn't want JB to be afraid of him. JB's breakdown in the lab, immediately after the Soul Stone had restored his memories from the 1940s and at the sight of Hulk's transformation, had shaken his alter ego more than Bruce could have expected. Yet another reminder that he had made a mistake in writing Hulk off as an unfeeling brute and that he should give Hulk more credit going forward.

The same could not be said for the Guardians, sprawled out across the common room and entirely at ease in a space that wasn't their own.

Gamora and Nebula were cleaning their knives with an alarmingly large stash of blades piled in between them. With her hands on the wall, Mantis had her head bowed and a look of intense concentration on her face. Bruce wondered if she was trying to sense JARVIS, if an empathetic insectoid could feel the emotions from an artificial intelligence, but a loud laugh from Rocket derailed that thought. The raccoon was cackling at Drax, who was alternatively sniffing his own armpits for reasons best left unknown. Next to them, Groot was curled up in a pool of sunlight, the small leaves on his branches turning toward the window as a sunflower would. Quill had his feet up on the coffee table, his boots dusty and leaving traces of dirt on the glass from when he had plunked them down unceremoniously, humming yet another headache-inducing 80s song under his breath.

They looked so carefree that Bruce envied them for a fleeting second, thinking how wonderful it would be to shut off the worry and fear trickling into his bloodstream. They might have defeated two of Thanos' lieutenants but how would they fare against a legion? Thanos had armies at his disposal and how many waves of attack could they weather before exhaustion hit, before one of them fell, before they were overrun and-

Suddenly, like a switch being flipped, he saw the Guardians in a new light. The constant ribbing, the Kevin Bacon references, the devil-may-care attitude. All of it stopped being amusing and started being irritating. They weren't *carefree*, they were *careless*.

Rocket and Drax had moved on to placing bets on who would get the highest number of kills, with the odds tipped in Gamora's favor and against Quill, per their usual disparagement of their self-appointed leader, as though the fate of the universe was no more than a game to beat or a wager to be won.

It wasn't. Not to him.

While Bruce had no doubts that the Guardians would fight to the last bullet and final breath for each other, there was no evidence that their bizarre loyalty extended outside of their circle of insanity. The people Bruce had been fortunate to call friends and to think of as family deserved better. And just like that, he was furious. Anger had always been his go-to emotion.

"Why should we work with you?" He bit out, belatedly realizing his harsh tone had sliced through the somewhat relaxed atmosphere and maybe he could have worded his question differently, more civil and less accusatory. Oh well. "Give me one good reason."

Tony's head snapped up, looking more nervous than the Guardians who merely shrugged as if they were asked that often.

Which, Bruce narrowed his eyes, was probably the case as he could not imagine a single person taking them seriously.

"I want to kill Thanos." Gamora balanced a double-bladed dagger on her finger. The ruby on the handle looked like a drop of blood.

"Me too." Quill agreed. "Thanos sucks and Gamora wants him dead-"

"I am Groot."

Nebula smirked. "Thank you, Twig."

"Fine, Gamora and Nebula want him dead-"

"I must avenge my family." Drax declared.

"Fine!" Quill threw his hands up and brought his feet down in a childish stomp. "Gamora and Nebula and Drax want him dead and you guys don't like him either-"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Loki drawled.

"Yeah, whatever he just said!"

"For the record, I just like watching things go boom." Rocket added.

"I am Groot."

Mantis tilted her head. "I don't want to die either."

"I was getting to that! Thanos wants us dead so that's another ten good reasons to destroy him and we multiply that by a thousand..." Quill rattled off a mix of mathematical functions and increasingly bigger numbers.

"Your math is blowing my mind." Tony interjected drily.

Bruce wanted to return his friend's wry grin with one of his own but he couldn't. His arms crossed and lips pursed in an effort to stop himself from shaking some sense into Quill and making a cutting remark that wouldn't contribute any positive to the conversation.

Especially when Quill seemed determined to make it as unproductive as possible.

"...and because I'm 50% alien asshole and 100% awesome." He declared proudly.

The Guardians collectively sighed and rolled their eyes.

Bruce felt a vein pulse in his forehead at yet another one of Quill's ostentatious non-sequiturs. It felt like pulling teeth, trying to get some reassurance that the Guardians were at least partially invested in the well beings of the people Bruce cared about, of the people on Earth, a planet the Guardians had apparently never visited. An impulse which he recognized as ridiculously naive but he couldn't help it. Too much was at stake and the Guardians were far too fond of gambling.

"Now, I know you're wondering how I got to be so awesome and it's because of my mom. She knew all the best songs and made me two kickass mix tapes. She was the best mom and 1000% awesome."

Some of Bruce's annoyance faded away as he felt a pang of guilt for thinking badly about Quill's taste, considering who he had gotten his music from, especially because Quill had used the past tense describing his mother. A quick glance at Tony told him that Tony was feeling similarly. Loki seemed unaffected but his gaze did soften somewhat.

"She's also 100% human, like-" Quill started to point at the three of them before directing his finger to the window, probably remembering that none of them fit in that particular category. "-those people out there. And if Thanos killed 50% of them, then, well, it kind of feels like he's killing the 50% that's my mom."

A rare beat of silence.

The tension in Bruce's chest unclenched at the sign of something real, something distinctly Quill instead of Star Lord.

Quill fidgeted, looking supremely uncomfortable to be the center of attention for once, before visibly shaking it off. "Basically we have a shit ton of good reasons to help you and you kind of already worked with us earlier when you..." He mimed slamming his fists into the coffee table, with *pow pow squish* sound effects.

"When he crushed that loser like a bug!" Rocket crowed, utterly delighted.

Drax frowned. "He wasn't a bug."

Mantis' antennae twitched disapprovingly.

"*Smashed.*" Bruce corrected, without any reproach, before turning to Quill. "And Tony's right, your math is blowing my mind."

"Thank you!" Quill beamed.

"It wasn't a compliment."

"Oh."

*

"It is not right." Mordo hissed. "He should not be doing this, we swore an oath to protect the Time Stone with our lives."

"He has not broken that vow." Wong countered. "I would say he is upholding it now, at great risk to his person."

Floating slightly above the ground, Strange was in the traditional meditation pose with his legs crossed and eyes closed. Tendrils of green energy flowed around him, strands of timelines to be reviewed. Strange's head jerked rapidly from side to side, as if pulled in different directions by all these possibilities.

The Eye of Agamotto glowing brightly within the Sorcerer Supreme's hands.

"There are consequences to consider." Mordo cast a furtive glare toward the couple Strange had brought back to the Sanctum, citing their need for sanctuary as reason of their stay. "To be dealt with."

The man, JB, wiggled his fingers in a jaunty wave though his eyes remained sharp. Despite the relaxed lines of his shoulders, his spine remained ramrod straight. A soldier, then, someone who had lived through and seen the aftermath of war.

"These consequences have names, you know." The woman, Darcy, called out. "And we can hear you."

Strange continued to twitch, his head moving so rapidly that it was all a blur. One of the spasms looked particularly painful and Wong winced in sympathy.

With a sharp gasp, Strange came out of his trance, falling forward into the waiting Cloak that enveloped its master immediately.

Mordo muttered darkly about how some things were not meant to be known but he reached out to help steady Strange nonetheless.

Strange's face was ashen and his hands were trembling.

"You're back. You're alright." Wong kept his voice low and soothing, stating the reassurances as if they were facts instead of wishful thinking.

"I advised you against this foolhardiness." Mordo sighed as he slowly guided Strange to the Cauldron of the Cosmos so the other man could lean against it. "There is always a price and someday, it will be too high-"

The Cloak flared up protectively.

Taking an instinctive step back, Mordo's jaw clicked closed at the implied threat.

"What did he mean?" Darcy approached tentatively with JB following closely behind. "A price?"

"He went forward in time to view alternate futures, to determine the best course of action for the coming threat." Mordo explained, a note of reprimand in his tone.

"I knew that already."

"Then you already know."

"What? That doesn't make any-"

"In order to determine the best course of action, he has to see all the ways things can end." JB said quietly. "And that's what he meant, isn't it?" He addressed Wong, not Mordo.

Wong nodded, solemn.

Darcy's face creased with confusion. "I- I don't get it? What're you talking about?"

"To know how to win, I have to know how we lose." Strange croaked. "I saw all of them, every single incidence where we lost. The world reduced to ash and lives faded to dust."

"How many did you see?" As soon as the question left her lips, Wong knew she regretted it. Her curiosity gave way to guilt as her expression twisted.

"14,000,605." Strange replied, weary and careful. At least the tremors had subsided.

Darcy did not ask the number of scenario in which they won. She already knew, Wong could see the answer in the devastated fall of her expression, mirrored on his own.

Strange wouldn't have lingered in the time stream, he would have stopped at the first successful outcome, and he would have kept going until he found the one future where everyone lived. Even if that meant he had to live through tens, hundreds, thousands, hundred thousands, millions worlds filled with death and destruction. The same way he had died again and again and again in a time loop, losing against Dormammu until he finally won.

Mordo swore. "This is why we must protect the balance, to prevent the world from tipping into its demise. One man alone is not meant to wield such power-"

"Oh, shut up!" Darcy scowled.

*

Peter was pretty sure his eyes were going to pop out of his head. The wizard, who had reappeared in another glittery portal, was talking crazy. "What?"

"With all six Infinity Stones, Thanos can destroy life on a scale hitherto undreamt of. We cannot allow that to happen."

Gamora nodded in agreement and Peter couldn't help but feel a stab of betrayal.

"Did you seriously just say *hitherto undreamt of*, dude?" He made a face at repeating those ridiculous words. No one talked like that. No one normal, anyway. "What's next, from whence it came?"

"Whence it came."

"Called it!"

"I'm correcting you; *whence* means from where or from what place, so preceding it with *from* is redundant."

Peter could practically hear the semicolon in Strange's words, he seemed very much like the type to speak with semicolons, all smug superiority because he had a cape that attacked people. "Whatever. You're not telling us anything we don't already know. We came all this way to help protect the Soul Stone so Thanos can't get it."

"And led his minions to our doors." Loki retorted. The room grew colder, an acute reminder that they were in the presence of a god who could control the temperature.

Once again, Peter was struck by the fact that there was actually not a single Terran in the room. Not the way his mom was. He thought being on Earth would bring back a memory of

her or something but all he felt was a skin-itching awareness of just how alien he had become, how far into the stars he had traveled that gravity was an unwelcome weight pulling him down.

"And we killed them." Nebula shrugged. "Problem solved."

"For now. More will come unless we find a way to permanently stop Thanos."

"By destroying all the Infinity Stones?" The idea sounded just as insane as it did the first time Strange had suggested it.

"Yes. In some of the futures I'd seen, we managed to keep one or two Infinity Stones away from him but Thanos still accomplished his goal of balancing the universe. It just took him a little longer." Strange spat out, disgusted and defeated.

Peter suppressed a shudder at the memory of the Power Stone, the sheer destruction he had once held in his hand, coursing through his veins, and nearly ripped his body apart. Reluctantly, he admitted that Strange had a point; Thanos could definitely wipe out the world with one Infinity Stone.

Or none.

Thanos hadn't needed an Infinity Stone to slaughter half of Gamora's planet and neither had Ronan when the Accuser had killed Drax's family.

While Peter didn't really believe the whole *seeing all possible futures and this was the only way* spiel, it was clear that everyone else did. Gamora was on board and Peter would follow her to the end of the galaxy. Drax and Mantis seemed impressed by the wizard's big words. Nebula didn't say she hated it. Rocket and Groot were practically vibrating with glee.

"Yeah, fine. Why not, let's blow some shit up."

Rocket swooned.

Your Savior Is Here

Chapter Notes

Happy February! I'd say sorry for keeping the plan a secret/building the suspense but I wouldn't really mean it so...



Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Thor: Ragnarok. Avengers: Infinity War.

Loki traced the back of Tony's hand, following the veins to the knuckles to the fingertips then back up to caress Tony's wrist, wordlessly calming the anxieties he knew were thrumming under Tony's skin. The same ones that were buzzing under his own, that only the constant touch of his beloved could quiet. Once, he might have thought the need to quell another's fears an inconvenience and the dependence on another a weakness, but now he thrived on it.

For every one of Tony's nightmares Loki soothed, it strengthened Tony to fight the demons Loki himself could not.

For every one of Tony's doubts Loki dispelled, it filled Tony with a certainty that grounded Loki's insecurities.

For every one of Tony's smiles Loki inspired, it called for an answering one to his own lips and a surge of happiness in his chest.

A feedback loop, Tony had said one night, drowsy and sated and tucked against Loki's side like there was nowhere else he would rather be. Hooded brown eyes shining with so much affection that Loki both wanted to look away from the intensity and stare into it forever. An impossible dream that he would continue wishing to come true.

Or, at the very least, to not wake up from so soon.

Their time together was limited, moments as fleeting as sand through the hourglass. Loki could easily stopper the flow, an apple from Idunn's Garden would do nicely, but Tony had been content to feel the grains slip through his fingers and Loki could not bear to deny him

anything. So he collected every second, hoarded them like a dragon's gold, a wealth of memories to number his endless days by when Tony's were long gone.

"Why should we work with you? Give me one good reason." Bruce demanded, the harsh anger in his tone triggered all sorts of alarm bells.

Tony's head snapped up.

Loki sighed inwardly as the Guardians embarked on another one of their ridiculous displays. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." He drawled, cutting through their inane chatter with ruthless pragmatism. Bruce's displeasure was understandable, the Guardians treaded Loki's patience thin too but he did not share Bruce's insistence of a *good reason*.

Thanos was a foe that would unite the most reluctant allies, death was infinitely more threatening to those who had millennia to lose compared to those with only decades. Perhaps that was the source of the Midgardians' fearlessness, less at stake because they had so little to begin with.

Quill was babbling in the way that people who could not put their conviction to words did, numbers that didn't quite add up to the sum of what he was trying to say.

"Your math is blowing my mind." Tony commented, brown eyes flicking up toward Bruce, whose face was still twisted with severe disapproval, before glancing over at Loki a bit helplessly when his attempt at lightening the mood had failed.

Loki swiped his thumb across the second knuckle of Tony's index finger, feeling the soft folds of skin and the firm bone underneath, and pushed down the irritation at Bruce for not returning his mortal's gesture. The other man had cause to be upset and was entitled to his own emotions, regardless of how the sight of anger etched in his usually unruffled demeanor discomforted those invested in his wellbeing.

Namely, Tony.

Thor had teased him ceaselessly about his unabashed bias toward Tony and Loki had accepted the charge like a badge of honor. Fairness was an overrated and foreign concept for a creature whose every battle had been an uphill one. Why should he care if his blatant favoritism was there for all to see? If anything, he wanted the world to know that Tony had someone who would cheat and con to ensure the scales were always tipped in Tony's favor.

The less knowledgeable would and had caution against it, warning that they were marking each other as liabilities to be exploited, but they didn't have every piece of the puzzle. While it was true that half of their attention was devoted to each other, it didn't make them less. It made them *whole*. Two halves slotting together, perfectly aligned. Their vulnerabilities protected by someone stronger and their blind spots covered from another perspective. Tony would never stumble with Loki clearing his path and Loki would never fall with Tony there to catch him.

"...the best mom and 1000% awesome."

Tony curled a finger over Loki's.

Loki paused in his ministrations, a moment of stillness for Tony's loss.

Bruce slanted an understanding look toward Tony and the two exchanged a bittersweet smile.

"She's also 100% human, like-" Quill started to point at Tony before changing course to the window. "-those people out there. And if Thanos killed 50% of them, then, well, it kind of feels like he's killing the 50% that's my mom." This time, his awkwardness was borne out of earnestness instead of obliviousness, which made it considerably more palatable.

Tony's eyebrows ticked up with a sort of surprised amusement at not being considered to be wholly human before acknowledging Quill's assessment with a slight tilt of his head.

Had Quill not started miming Hulk's smashing, Loki would have pressed a kiss under Tony's jawline. To feel the throb at the pulse point and the heat of Extremis underneath the faint shadow of stubble. Reminders that his mortal was still here, warm and alive.

*

"I did something stupid." Tony whispered, leaning into Loki. "And I'm not sure if sorry is going to cover it."

JARVIS had lured the Guardians away with the promise of sampling Earth's many cuisines and Bruce had retreated to his room after the eventful day that wasn't nearly at its end.

Pulling Tony closer, Loki brushed his lips against the shell of Tony's ear, pleased that Tony knew he would still be welcomed in Loki's embrace. It had taken some time but Tony now knew that an error in judgement would not cause Loki to withdraw their affections for him, that Loki's devotion was as fathomless as his faith in Tony. "Then it is good that I do not desire an apology."

"You don't even know what I tried to do."

"A foolhardy plan involving the use of the Time Stone that the Sorcerer Supreme objected to immediately?"

Tony's silence was telling. "Pretty much." He admitted on a shaky exhale. "I asked him to reset everything."

"Everything?"

"Well, not everything everything. I was mostly just thinking about hiding the Soul Stone, not, you know, the other stuff..." He trailed off with a wince. "Stephen was pissed."

Loki nodded. "As he should be."

"So why aren't you?"

"Why should I?"

"Um, I almost threw myself on the metaphorical flame?"

"Yet you did not."

"Only because Stephen shot me down."

"And you listened, did you not?" Loki already knew the answer; Tony had been half a deferring step behind Stephen when they had rejoined the group. Stephen must have won their argument handily.

"Yeah, he made some good points."

"Then I fail to see the issue."

Tony scowled. "You told me-"

"I would never presume to tell you what to do." Loki interrupted, stricken that Tony would think that low of him. "There is a fine line between care and control, and I-"

Tony burrowed closer, arms snaking up to wrap around Loki. "I know, I know. I didn't mean it like that."

Though he heard Tony's words, Loki continued on, needing Tony to understand. "All I ask is for you to consider those who adore you, to seek counsel when possible, and to find a different way to save the world from destruction that, ideally, does not involve you sacrificing yourself. Which you have done. You discussed your ill-conceived plan with another, ceded to his expertise, and arrived at a new plan. I may not agree with it, Tony, but I would accept because it is, ultimately, your choice."

"I know and I've known from the start." Tony repeated. "I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted."

"You can't let me off the hook that easy."

Loki frowned. "I dislike the imagery you've just painted so if you wished to make more amends..."

Tony shot him a bewildered look. "It's a figure of speech."

"I have an excellent imagination." Loki closed his eyes and breathed Tony in, cataloging the faded citrus of his shampoo and the familiar salt of his sweat. The inevitability of losing Tony was a constant ache that he had learned to ignore but these offhanded comments, painting scenes of Tony in peril, brought it back into focus. Usually, he could brush them off, let them blur into the background of his thoughts, but not today. "And I prefer not to envision a world where your light is threatened or lost, when I have precious little time to bask in it and soak up the warmth."

Tony cupped Loki's cheek with one hand while the other squeezed Loki's thigh, the pressure a welcomed sensation.

Loki opened his eyes, finding brown ones brimming with unwarranted guilt, and cursed inwardly. For all he had been trying to lessen the blame Tony insisted on carrying, he ended up adding more.

"I'm not saying no to the apple, exactly. I'm just, just not ready to say yes yet."

"I know." He echoed Tony's earlier reassurance. "Forgive me, I was not attempting to sway your decision on the matter. It is, as I have said, your choice."

"Why are you apologizing?" Tony reared back, puzzled and slightly offended. "I'm the one who can't make up my mind."

"Untrue." Loki pointed out as he closed the gap between them with a hand cupping the back of Tony's neck. "You were quite adamant when you tried to woo me." He murmured, calling upon a fond memory of an event that had already happened to ease the uncertainties of the future, to stop this dread line of conversation. They had spoken about Tony's mortality at length and Loki could be content with where they had left it, that the offer of the golden apple was a standing one and Tony needed only to say the word, if they could actually leave it at that.

"I didn't try, I succeeded." Tony's smile was a mix of rueful and indulgent, following the change in topic as effortlessly as he had read Loki's intention, knowing when to press and when to let go. This brilliant man who knew Loki as well as Loki knew himself, perhaps better.

Tony had seen him, the real and vulnerable and tedious him. Instead of the lie that Loki had told himself and sold to the Asgardians; the unassailable image of a Trickster God, thriving on suspicion and aiming to misbehave, someone they couldn't help but acknowledge if only because they feared what he might do out of sight.

Loki had been performing the role for so long that he had nearly forgotten it was an act, that he could still be worthy to be seen should he choose to shed the costume. Yet Tony had seen past the glossy layers and caught a glimpse of the mess underneath and somehow, inexplicably, wanted to see more and more and more until Loki found himself laid bare and basking in Tony's gaze, bright and adoring and captivated, like he never wanted to look away.

The earlier impulse to brush his lips against Tony's throat returned and this time, Loki followed it.

Tony's pulse jumped against his mouth, igniting the kiss into something more than chaste but not quite crossing the line to lewd. They tasted each other without the urge to devour, brushes of tongue and grazes of teeth that composed a language all their own.

Which made Stephen's return, an unwelcome but expected interruption, all the more unpleasant.

*

"I will return." Loki promised.

Tony tried for a scowl but the way his lovely lips were pursed more resembled a pout. "You better."

Loki took one final glance around the space that he had grown to think of as home before gathering his magic around himself to travel to the realm that had never quite felt that way.

*

Despite knowing that he would face no opposition, or else the plan Stephen had concocted from his vision would not succeed, Loki still felt a twinge of unease as he took in the golden vision of the Asgard and realized with a start that he would hate to see it tarnished.

Asgard would always be part of his identity, his beginning but not his journey. He was not defined by it nor would he let it define him any longer. He would protect this realm, would visit from time to time because his mother was too formidable a woman to deny, but he had outgrown it.

"Welcome home, Loki of Asgard." Heimdall greeted with his usual mistrustful malice but Loki felt none of the sting. "I saw you coming."

The title, ill-fitted then and now, did not bring a surge of bitter memories that had made him claw and cling at everything and everyone in a bid to not be pulled under. Instead, Loki felt an inexplicable peace wash over him, cleansing and buoyant. "Of course you did." He replied easily and was pleased to note his geniality seemed to have unsettled Heimdall. "Did you miss me?"

"Are- Are you mocking me?" Heimdall sputtered.

Loki arched an eyebrow. "Not at all but if mockery will ease your discomfort, I'm happy to oblige. Tell me then, the Watcher of Worlds, what else have you seen? The arrival of the Mad Titan? The ingenious plan foretold by the Sorcerer Supreme? The locations of the Infinity Stones?"

Heimdall blinked, once, twice, and said nothing.

"I suppose that is answer enough." Loki clapped the stunned Gatekeeper on the shoulder. "Fear not, dear Heimdall. Your savior is here."

*

Silence filled the solar, empty except for the three of them.

Loki had stopped speaking some time ago and neither his mother nor brother had said a word to break the quiet, both as still and tense as the air around them.

Thor's face was scrunched in concentration, his chin rested on his laced fingers with his elbows propped up on the ornate table they were gathered around. A behavior their mother would normally chide him for but she was lost in thoughts herself, unaware of Thor's poor posture and unseeing of the view out of the high arched windows.

"This strange wizard, is he trustworthy?" Thor's voice was a low rumble, like rolling thunder, and when he met Loki's glance, Loki was startled to find a spark of bright white electricity in his brother's normally blue eyes.

"I vouch for him on this matter."

Thor nodded, accepting Loki's word without further question. A crackle of lightning danced across his knuckles.

"But not others?"

"There is a bit of a, hm, professional disagreement between us." Loki hedged.

The corners of Thor's mouth ticked up. "Did you turn into a snake so you could stab him when he picked you up?"

Loki sniffed. "And you insult me by assuming I would not have tailored a prank specific to him."

The moment of levity was broken when Frigga cleared her throat.

"You are certain, my Loki." She said finally, a statement rather than a question.

Solemn, Loki answered it as if it were the latter anyway. "Yes."

"Very well. The Tesseract and Scepter are yours."

Stark Has A Plan

Chapter Notes

For a change of pace and a peek from the outside, here are some POVs from SHIELD/ex-SHIELD characters.

~~Or, I made an outline for this chapter and wrote none of it.~~

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Infinity War.

"You're not going to suddenly appear in my office again, are you?" Maria answered, in lieu of a greeting, and glanced cautiously around the room. One could never be too careful when it came to Stark and Loki.

Stark chuckled.

Her eyes narrowed, keying into the fact that Stark hadn't said no. "Because there are aliens in New York again and I'd rather focus on this threat analysis report than reassembling my gun."

"You sure about that?"

"Stark." She tried to imbue as much threat into her voice as possible though it would be empty. There wasn't much she could do to keep Stark and Loki out. Her eyes flickered to the various corners.

"Fine, fine. Don't worry, I'm not making any surprise visits this time." Stark paused. "I've learned my lesson."

If anything, that only made her warier. "And what lesson is that?"

"That I should call more."

Maria sat up, the spreadsheet on her monitor forgotten for the time being.

If you'd called, I would have considered...

The path between SHIELD and Iron Man wasn't as rocky as it had once been but it had very much been a one-way street. Their relationship had never been equal or equitable; SHIELD calling on Iron Man while rejecting Stark and Stark simply handling everything himself with SHIELD relegated to no more than an afterthought.

Fury had thought they could manage Stark, with Romanoff as his handler because she had penned the unfavorable assessment and Stark would be motivated to prove her wrong, none the wiser that he could never get it right. Not when SHIELD's goal had been to keep him off-balance and defensive. It had been a well-planned game of chess, designed to control and wring the most out of potential assets by keeping them in a constant state of check. Except Stark had somehow turned the table on them in the aftermath of the Chitauri Invasion, first by refusing to house the Avengers then forcing them to surrender the Scepter and later foiling all of Fury's attempts to regain the upper hand until Maria had finally seen the board clearly and realized that Stark had them in checkmate.

In that moment, Maria had known she needed to recalibrate her perspective regarding not only Stark, no longer a tool to be utilized but a talent to be recruited, but also herself as a commander. She hadn't risen through the ranks on Fury's coattails, despite what the rumors said, but she had shaped herself using his shadow as an outline. One that she had outgrew, claiming a seat at the table and ready to play, with persuading Fury to collaborate with Stark on the matters of HYDRA's infestation within SHIELD, instead of demanding his cooperation, as her opening move. She had followed that with a series of steps designed to close to gap, to catch up to Stark.

By protecting her people, her *best* people as she had announced when Zola had released all of SHIELD's classified data, so Stark could see that they did right by their own.

By staying afloat in the flood of accusations and riding the fickle waves of public opinion, proof that she was just as effective in the spotlight as she had been in the shadows.

By upholding her end of the deal of keeping Steve out of Stark and Banner's way while they worked on removing Barnes' conditioning; of course, her method hadn't netted the best result but at least it hadn't been the worst outcome.

With Rogers, the end had justified the means, which had been SHIELD's approach to Stark once upon a time.

It made some sense that their default modus operandi wouldn't change, it wasn't as though they would suddenly give up manipulation. They were spies, after all. What they needed to do was be more cognizant about identifying targets and differentiating between assets and allies. She hoped, if she had read what Stark hadn't said correctly, that she and the restructured SHIELD had finally proven themselves worthy of a partnership.

"You're calling now." She winced when her tone was more pointed than she would like.

"Yep."

A stretch of silence followed, one that Maria wasn't sure if she was supposed to let lie or break. But if experience had taught her anything, it was that the safest course would be to leave the ball in Stark's court. So she did. To distract herself, she highlighted a row and scrolled through the different fonts, watching the text expand and shrink. It was soothing.

When Stark spoke up, almost ten seconds later, she knew she had made the correct choice.

"How's that threat analysis report coming along?"

"Pretty good." She answered cautiously. "Considering that the two hostiles have been neutralized."

"What if I told you more are on the way?"

"Then I'll have to change the threat color and write a strategic plan."

His hum was not the reassuring kind. "More are on the way."

Sighing, she clicked over to the specific cell and changed its color. "That's why you called?"

"Not exactly."

Maria made an inquiring noise as she searched for the appropriate template document. She had learned fairly early on in her career that it paid to plan ahead and to be organized.

"I called because I have, as you say, a strategic plan."

"Really?" Her eyes narrowed at the decisiveness in his voice. "Don't you mean a proposal?" Though she already knew what the answer would be, she asked anyway. Clarity in communication was paramount when dealing with potentially world-ending invasions.

"No, a plan. One that will work perfectly."

She leaned back in her chair. "That's quite a promise."

"No, no. I told you, it's a plan." Stark corrected.

"Let's hear it then." Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, uncaring if Stark could hear her typing. It was faster than writing notes down by hand, a side effect of the digital age, and she would save time both on deciphering her own scribbles and transferring them over.

"Yeah, um, about that." Stark paused. "I can't tell you."

"You called to *not* tell me about a strategic plan that'll work perfectly?"

"And I need you to get the okay to let me run it."

"You want me to convince the Avengers Accords committee to let you have carte blanche without giving them any details?" She didn't bother to hide her incredulity as she restated what Stark had said because clarity was important and she was hoping desperately that he would say no.

"Yep."

For a second, Maria held her breath, waiting for panic to slam into her like a fist.

It didn't come.

No sick feeling twisting in her gut. No urge prompting her to yell at Stark then end the call. No hysterical laugh bubbling out of her throat.

All she felt was a sense of accomplishment for finally earning Stark's trust because she knew with an absolute certainty that he wouldn't have called her otherwise. Exhaling slowly, she straightened her spine and folded her hands in her lap. "I just have one question."

"Just one?" Surprise colored Stark's voice, like he had been expecting more of a fight.

Inhaling deeply, she schooled her expression into one of cool indifference and hoped it would carry over to her tone. Insecure was not a good look for the Oprah of the Spy World, a nickname that had signaled the beginning of a new era. "Was I your first call?"

"You're my only call." Stark answered, direct and sincere.

"Good." Maria smiled. "I'll call you when it's done." If she could salvage and rebuild SHIELD from the wreckage, then she could damn well sell a panel of politicians a plan they knew nothing about and make it seem like it was their idea all along.

*

Arranging the blanket to drape over her lap just so, Peggy settled into the armchair with a contented sigh. She turned to Steve, who was hunched over in the other armchair with his bony elbows digging into his equally bony knees and his neck craned up to watch the television program. The people were talking about aliens in New York, which was so preposterous that it must be one of those science fiction stories. So she didn't feel too bad to interrupt him.

Steve startled as she waved a cup of ice cream in his face, his features starting to twist into a scowl before smoothing themselves out into a strained smile. "Hi Peggy." He accepted the ice cream.

"Eat up and don't tell the boys at boot camp about this because I don't have enough to share." Peggy grinned. It had been wonderful of Phillips to include Steve in Project Rebirth. The Strategic Scientific Reserve had plenty of strong men and they could use some good ones.

"Stark Raving Hazelnuts." Steve read the flavor out loud, lines etching between his eyebrows and around his mouth. He didn't seem very impressed by the picture of a red and gold robot juggling hazelnuts.

Peggy looked at her own cup, where a green giant was ripping a chunk of fudge in half. "Hunka-Hulka Burning Fudge." She announced with a chuckle. The nice blonde girl, who reminded Peggy quite a bit of herself, always brought such thoughtful gifts. These Americans sure were a friendly bunch. "Go on, give it a try."

Steve opened the lid with a frown, lips pursed together dubiously, and thanked the nurse who handed him a plastic spoon. He took a bite. "It's a bit chalky."

Peggy hummed around a mouthful of the chocolate flavored ice cream, the chili powder broke up the richness nicely.

They enjoyed their treats in silence for a while, Steve back to staring at the television and her looking out the window at the overcast sky.

"Nice day to be indoors." She commented absently. Weather was always a safe topic when she lost the thread of conversation. Some days everything felt like loose ends.

"I suppose." He said, glancing down. "Not like I can be much help out there."

*

Clint eyed the package that had just been delivered to his front door. A box expertly wrapped with brown paper, the creases sharp and neat, and fastened with a red ribbon that was tied into what he was pretty sure was a running bowline knot at the top.

The same knot that Natasha had taught him how to tie while they had been waiting out their pursuers in Budapest.

He dug his cell phone out of his pocket and tapped her name.

She answered on the first ring. "It's for the kids."

"Please tell me you didn't." He begged though he was pretty sure she absolutely did. The box's dimension was an exact match for the cotton candy machine Cooper and Lila had asked Santa for. They must have called Natasha when he had told them that Santa ran out of room on the sleigh.

"It's for the kids." She repeated with an audible smirk.

Grumbling, Clint picked up the box and carried it to the Christmas tree set up in their living room. "You're the worst."

"The kids think I'm the best and you know what they say, from the mouths of babes..."

He moved the smaller presents out of the way. "They're just telling you what you want to hear so you'd buy them expensive sugar machines."

Natasha affected a convincing snuffle. "I'm so proud."

Clint snorted before he adapted a more serious tone. "You aren't coming then?"

"I'm going to try." She said, meaning every word.

Sometimes that wasn't enough. "Damn aliens." He scoffed, scrubbing a hand over his face. His fingers snagged on the stubble but at least they weren't shaking like they had been when he had first seen the news. He had had to skip shaving in case he cut himself.

"You doing okay?"

"Not doing any worse."

"So better than expected, then."

"Yay therapy!" His attempt at sarcasm fell short and landed somewhere around genuinely grateful.

Natasha hummed. "I'll keep you posted."

"Take care of yourself."

"You too."

They both left the same words - *because I'm not there to do it for you* - unsaid but knew the other had heard them loud and clear anyway.

As he slipped his phone back into his pocket, Clint tapped each one of the kids' ornaments, Cooper's popsicle stick snowflake and Lila's star with entirely too much glitter and Nathaniel's clay handprint painted by Laura to look like a reindeer, reminders that he had made the right call in retiring.

It was good to be home.

*

An email notification popped in the bottom right corner of her screen, an office-wide announcement that Natasha dismissed immediately. Those things seldom had any urgency to them. Her attention focused on the footage playing, squinting so intensely that she worried, for a vain moment, if she would develop wrinkles.

Maybe she was growing soft, chained to a desk and off of the field.

It was one of the videos of the incident in New York that they had managed to secure. With all the civilians evacuated and all support personnel stationed at the perimeter, there had been no one on site to document the event. All the clips they had pulled were from security cameras from ATMs, which were not designed to capture a thwarted alien invasion.

Stark had to have been recording from the Iron Man armor but she knew better than to try to hack his systems now. For one, she wouldn't be successful and two, Hill had explicitly ordered them to leave all interactions with Stark to her. A directive Natasha was more than happy to obey. She owed Stark several apologies - misreading him, manipulating him, the list went on - but saying sorry and meaning it set her teeth on edge, not to mention she supposed she also owed him a *thank you* for saving her life and, well, that was even worse.

Really, it was in her best interest to steer clear of Stark and leave the past behind her.

The Red Room had taught her to never look back and she wasn't going to start now. Not necessarily because of the mistakes, she knew she had made many, but because of what she had lost along the way.

Attachments severed and regrets dropped in favor of traveling light, she feared she would become a pillar of salt from all those tears unshed if she dared to turn around. Her only option was to move forward, one foot in front of the other, one step after another, with her pride wrapped around her like armor and her head held high.

She heard the footsteps before the knock on her door, glancing up the moment Sharon tapped her knuckles against the solid oak.

"Shoot, thought I had you." Sharon snapped her fingers.

"You're getting better."

"But not good enough to sneak up on the Black Widow."

Natasha shrugged. Sharon wasn't fishing for a compliment and Natasha had already given her one by acknowledging her improvement. "What do you need?" She didn't waste time with chitchat, there was work to be done.

"I'm heading to that bakery that's clearly a money laundering front for the Russian mob and thought maybe you'd like to take an early lunch."

"It's not a money laundering front." Natasha automatically retorted. This was an argument so old that she could probably recite their exchange line for line.

"That's exactly what someone who's aware of it being a money laundering front would say."

Despite her dour mood, Natasha chuckled. "That's your argument for everything. It's lazy."

"It's effective." Sharon countered. "Anyway, come with me and see for yourself. I bet their menu is coded." Her cheerfulness seemed incongruent with the gravity of the situation.

Natasha's eyes tapered suspiciously but her voice stayed jovial. "Are you trying to get me out of my office?"

"Yes, to help me expose the Russian mob."

"Agent Carter." Natasha infused a warning into her tone. "What's going on?"

Sharon's smile vanished and in its place an uncertain frown. "Nothing."

"What's. Going. On."

"Nothing. Literally, nothing."

"Aliens were in New York and you want to go get pastries?"

Realization lit up across Sharon's features. "Oh, you don't know."

A pit formed in Natasha's stomach, she hated being left in the dark. "What don't I know?"

"We're off the hook for New York. Hill just sent out the order to stand down."

"What?" Natasha blinked. "Why?"

"Stark has a plan."

"What plan?"

"No idea."

Natasha arched an eyebrow. "That's exactly what someone who has an idea would say."

"Touché."

They regarded each other for a tense second before Natasha allowed her shoulders to finally sag as she closed the media file. "We're supposed to just take Stark's word that he has a plan and trust him to handle it?" She grumbled half-heartedly.

"You got a better idea?" Sharon challenged, her gaze suddenly as sharp as the steel in her voice.

Natasha blinked, the only sign of the shock coursing through her veins. It was no secret that the misjudgment and mismanagement of Stark were a black mark on her record along with her misplaced faith in Rogers. Two dark stains in a sea of red. Every agent at SHIELD must know, though none spoke of it.

Then again, no one felt compelled to point out that the sky was blue but perhaps it would do Natasha some good to glance up once in a while, especially since she wasn't in the habit of looking back. Mistakes could be ignored but consequences shouldn't.

"No."

One To Go

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said the action will be picking up soon? ;)

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Guardians of the Galaxy. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2. Avengers: Infinity War.

John Mulaney: Kid Gorgeous at Radio City.

Eitri presented the golden gauntlet with shaking hands, part fatigue and part fear. He had worked relentlessly for days, crafting a device capable of harnessing the power of the Infinity Stones in exchange for his people's lives.

Thanos extended his right hand and Eitri hastened to slide the gauntlet onto his arm, sighing with relief when it fit perfectly.

Thanos flexed his fingers, curling them into a fist and splaying them wide before snapping his thumb and middle finger together. His eyes trailed over the nestled slots on the gauntlet, empty and incomplete. "Soon." He whispered. "My children will return with the Stones and we will set the universe right."

Eitri kept quiet and tried not to shiver despite the heat of the forge.

"Nicely done, King of Dwarves. Your people will be *saved*." Thanos smiled, benevolent and cruel, as he gripped both of Eitri's forearms in a crushing hold with his left hand.

Outriders emerged from the shadows, swarming and slaying every dwarf they encountered.

"No!" Eitri cried, his feet kicking uselessly as Thanos dragged him toward the furnace. "No! You promised me their lives!"

"I promised you their peace and true peace can only be found in death." Thanos replied calmly. "Your life, however, is yours to keep." He reached for the bubbling pot with his right hand, the gauntlet shone in the firelight. "But your hands are mine alone." Then he poured the molten metal over Eitri's hands and wrists.

Screams filled the expansive forge, the pride and joy of Nidavellir.

*

Heimdall watched the visitor with the level of caution he usually reserved only for the Trickster.

This was a man who would sell his own brother if he thought such a transaction would add the slightest trinket to his pathetic museum.

Taneleer Tivan, the Collector.

A charlatan who hoarded both what had been discarded and what was coveted with equal and undiscerning zeal. Obsessed with what wasn't his and careless with what was, always seeking to acquire more and caring less about the dust that gathered on his trophies. The contents of his trove ranged from the living to the dead, the bizarre to the conventional, the harmless to the cataclysmic.

The last of which was why he had been granted the privilege to set foot on Asgard.

Prince Thor had thought it ingenious to entrust the Collector with the Reality Stone. When the Aether had been recovered, the royal mages had deemed it unwise for three Infinity Stones to be housed in such close proximity. New runes had been etched into the vault's walls to dampen the pull between the Scepter and the Tesseract while more spells had been cast to guard the palace from opportunistic scum drawn to a theft that would yield double the reward.

Not that any could trespass into the Golden Realm without Heimdall's knowing. Asgard had been and still was the most secure location for the Mind Stone and the Space Stone.

Heimdall was not in the habit of questioning the Crown but he could not help but wonder if his Queen's soft heart and his Prince's naive kindness had been exploited by the Liesmith, another known not for his name but for the infamy of his deeds. The God of Mischief would have been in good company with the Collector. Both painfully ostentatious in their appearances, to the observant, there was little difference in a golden horned helmet and the shock of white hair.

The timing had been most inconvenient, with the All-Father's unfortunate passing and the All-Mother's nascent bond to the realm, established through her marriage to their well-remembered King and essential to the delicate peace across the realms. She must remain on Asgard to strengthen the connection and preserve the balance that was, in certain situations, the last line of defense keeping the wolves at bay.

"Welcome to Asgard." Heimdall greeted, hiding his sneer behind an impassive mask that he had perfected long ago. Diplomacy required welcoming the undeserving into their sacred halls, such as ones who dealt in illegalities and traded on depravities.

"It is an honor." The Collector bowed dramatically.

No patience for the theatrics, Heimdall's eyes narrowed. "Come. I will escort you to the palace."

"Will there be a tour? I've heard much of the treasures hidden in Asgard's vault, perhaps we can come to an agreement." The Collector beamed, teeth gleaming and eyes calculating. "There are some empty spaces that need filling after that unfortunate explosion."

"Explosion?" Heimdall frowned, he hadn't seen nor heard of such an incident.

"Oh, one of the servants touched something she shouldn't have. No big deal, really. It was years ago." The Collector waved a careless hand. "The Aether is safe, don't you worry about that. I have it under lock and key."

*

The Reality Stone called to her the moment she set foot into the Collector's Museum, its security laughably easy to breach, assuming the invader had enough motivation and strength.

Both of which Proxima Midnight had in abundance.

One of the bodies near her feet let out a gurgled moan as she drove a fist into the glass, shattering it and the surrounding panes. Shards flew past her face and she did not move, reveling in the privilege to bleed for her father, who had given her a new life and a grand purpose.

She reached for the small container, a lantern-like shape filled with black smoke and a crimson glow where the light source would normally be. As soon as her hand closed around the handle, the red light turned liquid, spilling and flowing into the darkness, devouring the night and still hungry for more judging by its fluid pulse.

Another gurgled moan. She stamped her foot down, ending the creature's suffering and cutting off the noise instantly. A quick death. The kind of sweet salvation her father wished to gift to the universe and she strived to emulate his excellence.

In the silence of this cavernous space, Proxima Midnight could hear every eager beat and feel the Reality Stone echo the thudding of her own heart.

The desperate desire to serve the Great Savior, the Mighty Titan, and Merciful Father.

Thanos had given her everything she could ever hope for and more. Now the rest of the universe would finally be allowed to witness his generosity.

*

"She hung up on me!"

Drax sighed. He never knew why Peter liked stating the obvious so much.

"Quit your whining, Quill. She hung up on the rest of us too. You aren't special." Rocket grumbled. "Just call her back."

Nova Prime's stern expression glowered from the display as Peter selected her from their short list of contacts.

"I am Groot." His branches drooped.

"You not dancing wasn't why she didn't believe us." Mantis tapped one of the leaves gently.

Nebula shifted her weight, her expression pinched in a way that reminded Drax of the time she bit into an unripen yaro root. "It's because of me."

The ensuing silence prickled, unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Drax scratched his side absently. Nebula wasn't wrong but none of them wanted to say she was right. Sometimes, he forgot that she was wanted across the universe.

A generic melody flowed from the speakers as the call was being connected.

Rocket's ears twitched. "Not just you, Baldy. Nova Corps probably heard about the thing on Hala."

"I am Groot?"

"You know me so well."

"Dude!" Peter groaned. "Seriously? Batteries, again?"

Rocket bristled. "I really like batteries, okay?"

"Oh, now it makes perfect sense."

"Good, glad we're on the same page."

Drax didn't see any paper lying around.

The song continued to play, which was strange because by now they should have been routed to the operator or a voice messaging center. Nova Corps had always been responsive and had one of the highest ratings for customer satisfaction of the intergalactic military and police forces.

"I was being sarcastic!" Peter threw his hands up in the air.

Rocket did the same with his. "Then use your sarcastic voice!"

"That was my-"

"Stop it!" Gamora snapped. "Don't you see? This is why Nova Prime didn't believe us because *we are us*."

Drax's eyebrows furrowed, bewildered by what Gamora had said. Of course they were, well, them. Looking around, though, he couldn't help but feel like he had missed something.

The music cut off abruptly. An error message declaring that *connection cannot be established* flashed on the screen.

"I'm trying again." Peter declared, jabbing at the buttons. "Come on, pick up!"

*

Irani could only watch, paralyzed by the carnage before her, as the monstrous brute swung his scythe in a devastating arc that reduced the number of soldiers converging upon him in half. He did not slow down, reversing the motion and cutting through the second wave with sickening ease.

The sounds of pain filled the air, nearly as stifling as the heavy scent of blood. Agony in every scream and despair in every cry, a deafening cacophony mocking their failure to safeguard Xandar.

Her failure as Nova Prime.

Quill was trying to warn them, she realized belatedly, when he had called a short while ago with what he had claimed to be *super duper important news*. Humoring him, she had answered but all amusement had vanished upon spotting Nebula, most wanted criminal across the galaxy. Irani had thought they were collecting the bounty but they had refused to bring Nebula in. When she had demanded to know why, Quill had launched into an elaborate speech about how she needed to listen to him because the wizard said so, with the rest of the Guardians heckling him all the while. Irani had ended the call then, having had enough of their antics and needing to address the unidentified spacecraft at their perimeter.

Corpsmen continued to launch themselves at their enemy, surrounding him in tightknit formation and attempting to limit his use of the deadly scythe. A knot of dark navy formed around him. With a roar, he hurled his weapon away, its tip sinking into the reinforced metal walls with a clang.

For a hopeful second, the strategy appeared to have worked; they had disarmed him at last. Then the second passed and she realized he only meant to free his hands so instead of carving her men in half, he could rip them apart instead.

Irani had declared, ended, witnessed, and fought in wars.

This was no war.

It was a massacre.

They were outmatched, despite outnumbering their invaders by the thousands. The horde of Outriders had torn through their first lines of defense with teeth and claws. Those who had survived only lived long enough to die at the hands of Corvus Glaive, a Child of Thanos.

Too soon, only Dey remained amidst the scattering of broken bodies, on his knees and struggling to breathe. Corvus Glaive made a chilling noise that was both a snarl and a laugh before knocking Dey down with a decisive kick that caved in Dey's skull with a wet crunch.

"For Thanos!" Corvus Glaive roared as he ripped his scythe from the wall, the growl in his voice enhanced by the screech of metal as he dragged its tip against the once pristine floor of the Nova Corps headquarters, swinging it up to point at his last target.

With difficulty, Irani pushed herself to stand. Her right leg had been broken in multiple places when the walls collapsed and every movement was earned with spikes of hot agony and jarring shift of bone against bone. There was a scream building in her throat but she bit it down, breathing heavily in and out through her nose, little huffs of air that were the last of her pride.

"Thanos is a prick." She gritted out, chin tilted up defiantly even as she felt the blade slice across her throat.

*

The Mirror Dimension had always set Mordo's teeth on edge. An unnatural replica of reality where none of the rules applied.

The scroll in his hand was ancient, older than the tomes lining the shelves of the Kamar-Taj's impressive library. He opened it, peeling back the worn brown leather stained with darker splatters that he didn't want to consider the origin and unrolling the parchment beneath.

A summoning spell.

His fingers shook as he traced the words, thin scratches of letters that could bring forth the most powerful beings.

The Eye of Agamotto was a heavy weight in his pocket but his heart was light, set free by the certainty that he was doing the right thing. The balance had been tipped long ago, cost outweighing benefits and the debts collected over centuries.

Stolen power, prolonged life, twisted timelines.

Now, at last, there was a way to restore stability to the universe. To right the slanted axis before the world slid into chaos. To wipe the slate clean and start over.

All Mordo had to do was to get the Time Stone into the right hands. He inhaled deeply and on the exhale, he began to read.

*

The scent of fresh rain lingered in the air, Mjolnir crackled in his hand, but Thor dared not strike.

Thanos had Loki by the neck, a giant purple hand that almost spanned the entire column of Loki's throat. "The Stones, or your brother's head. I assume you have a preference."

"I do." Thor said slowly, his mind racing as he struggled to figure out what had happened. The Bifrost was supposed to deposit them on the helipad atop Stark Tower the rush of colors had slowed until every speck of light hung suspended in the air.

Time had ceased its flow and they, too, had been caught in the space of its absence.

"And?" Thanos prompted when the silence had dragged on too long. "Or perhaps you need to be persuaded?" Lifting his right hand, encased in a gauntlet of gold and sparkling gems of green, purple, and red, he pressed the purple jewel against Loki's temple.

The sound that ripped out of Loki's throat was unlike any Thor had ever heard before and would never want to hear again.

"Stop, stop! Let him go and we'll- We'll give you the Stones."

Thanos nodded, pleased, and ceased his torment of Loki.

"Fool." Loki said hoarsely.

"I will not stand by and watch you suffer! Give him the Stones, Loki."

Thanos made a contemplative noise.

"No." Loki sent Thor a pointed look, made sharper by the way his irises blazed bright red. A second later, his skin darkened to Jotun blue as the temperature plummeted.

Thanos dropped him, his palm crackled black and his shout of alarm a puff of white visible in the freezing air.

A dagger materialized in Loki's hand. "You will never be a god." He hissed before plunging it into Thanos' heart with an upward thrust.

Only for the blade morphed into a stream of bubbles.

Chuckling, Thanos popped one with a gauntleted finger, the gem at the base of it a fluid crimson. "Resourceful, I can see why the Scepter was needed to sway you to our cause. However, reality can be whatever I want." He turned his gaze to Thor. "And so can you."

The most peculiar sensation washed over him, like he was crumbling from the core, pieces of himself falling away in different directions. Thor blinked. Out of his right eye, he could see Loki's face, back to Asgardian pale and twisted with horror, but the view from his left eye was a close-up of his own knee. He yelled. His terror grew when the sound of his own voice, muffled, came somewhere behind him.

"Undo this at once!" Loki demanded, posture rigid, anger wrapping around him like armor to cover up the fear beneath.

"The Stones in exchange for returning your brother to his previous form."

Loki's eyes, green once more, narrowed. "No tricks."

"You are the Trickster, not I." Thanos retorted. "No tricks."

"Very well." With a muttered spell, Loki summoned the Tesseract and Scepter forth from his pocket dimension, holding one in each hand.

The three Infinity Stones flashed rapidly, almost violently, at the proximity of the Space Stone and the Mind Stone while the gauntlet itself shimmered a brilliant gold, spreading across the metal and subduing the flickering Stones.

Thanos winced but he recovered quickly to aim the Reality Stone in Thor's direction.

In an instant, Thor's line of sight adjusted to a more familiar height but that was where the familiarity ended. The rest of him felt hot and cold, tensed and boneless, everything in its place and something missing.

"Now it is your turn, Jotun."

"You want them?" Loki smirked. "Go get them!" He threw both artifacts upward, taking advantage of Thanos' distraction to wrap an arm around Thor's shoulders and whisking the two of them away in a swirl of green.

*

The Mind Stone sparkled as Thanos held It in between his fingers, noting Its yellow hue, a sharp departure from the blue when It had been housed within the Scepter.

Steeling himself, Thanos placed It into one of the two remaining empty settings, momentarily rocked by the subsequent surge of energy. He stumbled, catching himself on one knee as he waited for the spots to clear from his vision. Perhaps he should have rested before slotting the fifth stone into place, his nerves were still tingling from the fourth but the universe had waited for its salvation long enough. His pain was but a small sacrifice for the greater good.

"One to go."

These. Two. Idiots.

Chapter Notes

Hello, some exciting news! I was asked to read a 3min segment of my fic on the [Fandom Files](#), a podcast exploring different fandoms, so if you would like to hear me babble and read the first chapter of If You Had This Time Again, [start at 38:30 mark](#). **THANK YOU** so much for supporting this story with hits, kudos, comments, and bookmarks. You are all amazing.

Also! The host, Emily, wants me to check with other writers (can be any fandom) to see if they'd like to come on the show as well. So let me know if you're interested and I can send you her contact info.

Quick note that since this fic was written before Black Panther, this Shuri is based on characterization I've read in other fics that depicted her as older and politically savvy with ambitions of her own instead of the MCU Shuri who is a teenage tech genius. And another quick note that I took some liberties with how HYDRA's version of the super soldier serum works and *technically* the MCU Wiki didn't specify that Bucky has the same "form of ageless immortality" that Steve does.

Now, onto the chapter aka where the savvy ladies - Shuri and Jane - took over everything!

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Thor: Dark World. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Black Panther.

Harry Potter.

[Captain America's Powers](#) & [Winter Soldier's Powers](#).

"...the New York Incident and the Disturbance in London are the two most recent intergalactic threats we have faced. Director Fury had been the authority on these matters, his passing-" Hill cleared her throat, glancing down briefly. "His passing is a great loss, as is the disbandment of the Avengers, a team of extraordinary individuals Director Fury had handpicked to defend our planet."

Shuri narrowed her eyes. Her thoughts had wandered off during the British representative's posturing, bloody colonials, but now her focus was back on track.

Hill was planning something. If her claim of knowing less than Fury, a blatant lie given what Shuri knew of the other woman's ambition and dedication, hadn't raised a red flag, then her

comment about the Avengers and the role they played during Chitauri Invasion, definitely did.

Because Captain America, Black Widow, and Hawkeye had been the supporting cast while Iron Man had stolen the show when he had flown the nuclear missile into the wormhole. Twice, actually. The iconic red and gold armor had been seen in London, along with the Hulk, Thor, and Loki.

Hill had wanted to direct the Avengers Accords committee's attention to Stark, without bringing his name up herself.

Shuri's interest was piqued and she leaned back, opposite of the straight-rod posture she had adapted when she had been feigning her attentiveness, to enjoy the performance.

The conference call had ended some time ago but Shuri made no move to close the holographic screen floating in the air, content to watch it grow dimmer and dimmer as it approached sleep mode while she reviewed the masterpiece of manipulation she had just witnessed.

Hill had the Avengers Accords committee dancing to her tune while giving the appearance that she had been following their lead. By the end of the meeting, Stark had free rein in the effort to thwart Thanos' arrival. Multiple representatives had vouched for Stark's ingenuity and ability to execute well under pressure when Hill had cautioned them against entrusting such a monumental task to one man. She had had to clarify that she was not trying to undermine Stark, of course, but only doing her due diligence when those same representatives had taken offense to her doubt of Stark.

As if Hill had anything but full faith in Stark's capabilities.

One that Shuri shared, despite not knowing the man as well as she would like to.

Tapping a finger against her chin, she considered the paths before her and tried to determine which one would lead Wakanda to the best outcome. Stark didn't want any interference, that much was clear from Hill's ploy to gain him full authority, but that didn't automatically mean additional assistance wouldn't be appreciated. Like sending a wedding gift when one could not attend the nuptial or, applying the metaphor to this particular situation, when one had not been invited. It showed a certain thoughtfulness that could go a long way toward establishing and cementing a fruitful relationship, especially with Wakanda still in the first stages of the reintegration efforts.

T'Challa had been frustrated to learn the reintegration was a two decade long endeavor, possibly longer pending unforeseen developments. Much to her surprise and her father's enigmatic hum, however, T'Challa hadn't complained. Instead, he had gone quiet and retreated to his study, a place normally last on the list of spaces he preferred, with the training grounds being the first.

Perhaps her brother was finally taking an interest in the future of their beautiful country and perhaps Shuri should feel threatened or bothered but all she felt was the call of a challenge. Wakanda deserved the best. Should T'Challa make the necessary strides to rise to the occasion, Shuri would not let her pride stop her from counseling him as King. Though, given what she knew of her brother's temperament, it was far likelier for him to have a place in her court.

But both possibilities were in the distant future and she had more pressing matters to tend to now.

Mind made up, Shuri activated her Kimoyo Beads and was pleased when JARVIS, Stark's incredible A.I. that qualified as a technological miracle, greeted her warmly before connecting her to Stark.

"Hello, Your Highness. What can I do for you?" Stark's smile was one of expectedness and she wondered, not for the first time, if he had known she would call.

"Nothing at all, Dr. Stark." The title was a clue for the nature of her call, Mr. Stark was reserved for politicians and business associates but Dr. Stark was for the scientists and engineers. "I'm actually calling to see if you need anything from Wakanda."

"Anything?" Stark arched an eyebrow. "That's awfully kind of you to offer, Your Highness."

"It's the least I can do for whatever it is you're doing to protect us from Thanos. Just to be clear, I have no interest in the details of your secret plan, I only want to know how I can help."

"No interest at all?" Stark asked.

"Intrigued." She amended. "But not enough to pry."

"Good answer."

"I find that honesty is usually the best policy."

"Not in international politics, surely?"

Shuri shook her head. "Among allies."

Stark smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. "In that case, I do have a favor to ask, ally to ally."

"Name it."

"I need Vibranium."

"That can be arranged, depending on the quantity and use you had in mind." Shuri was positive that Stark had been expecting her call because he had to be confident that his plan would work to have Hill sell it to the Avengers Accords committee and it seemed to hinge on Wakanda's cooperation. How had he known that Shuri would call? Experience? Intelligence? Crystal ball?

"A lot and to make temporary black holes."

"...pardon?"

"You can say no. I know it's a lot to ask." Stark said softly, sincerely.

"I've already said yes." Shuri replied. "And I want to know more about these temporary black holes. I'm sure you've heard the saying about cats and curiosity."

Stark grinned. "You know what, let me connect you to my colleague, Dr. Foster, she's in charge of that part of the plan and she can answer all of your questions to your satisfaction."

"I look forward to speaking with her."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"It is our pleasure, Dr. Stark. Take care."

*

Jane almost tripped over the strap of her messenger bag, dropped in her haste to reach Darcy, as she dragged her best friend into a tight embrace. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"Oxygen." Darcy croaked but her arms around Jane held on just as fiercely.

JB, however, did. He cleared his throat. And cleared it again.

Jane ignored him, they would be done when they were done and he could just learn to deal with it. Today had been one of the worst days she could remember in a long while, spaceships appearing out of nowhere hadn't led to anything good in her experience and the wizard, Wong, in her living room had further frazzled her nerves.

"Dr. Foster."

Jane recognized the speaker as Stephen Strange, the surgeon turned sorcerer who had seen the only future out of fourteen million where they defeated Thanos. Guess this meant hugging time was over, she released Darcy with one final squeeze. "Dr. Strange." To be honest, she wasn't entirely convinced that this insane plan of theirs would work even with the cosmic guarantee attached but she trusted her friends. Still, she had to ask. "You sure this will work?"

"It has to." His too honest answer wasn't reassuring.

Jane frowned, wanting to say something but didn't know what. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she took the escape it offered gladly, stepping away for some privacy. "Excuse me."

A quick glance at the display showed it was an unknown number but she had a fairly good idea who the caller might be. She had been on her way home from the store, a quick trip now that she wasn't shopping to feed a Norse God, when Tony had called, interrupting her favorite

podcast and shattering her blissful unawareness of the chaos that had taken place on the other side of the country. Information and confession had been thrown out in rapid succession, her head spinning at the speed and her heart thudding with each detail.

By the end of their conversation, she had felt utterly wrung out by the emotions - terror, confusion, anger, relief, doubt, hope, worry - that had cycled through her system, caught in between the extremes of wanting to do nothing and needing to do everything. That had been when Tony had brought up her research on the Dark Elf technology, one that had claimed Thor's father.

Jane had been fascinated - all astrophysicist would be - by the idea that a black hole could be made portable and temporary. There was something thrilling about a gravitational singularity that only belonged in the vastness of space fitting into the palm of a hand. Thor hadn't wanted to discuss it and while she had understood, the unanswered questions had gnawed at her until all of her interactions with him had turned biting.

Since their split, she had dived into her studies with a freedom that was both liberating and guilt-ridden, which, incidentally, had increased her productivity and netted her significant progress. She had several prototypes drafted and was in the middle of determining a suitable material. Vibranium was the obvious front runner but the limited quantity was a deterrent and Captain America's shield was too valuable as a cautionary tale on display at the Smithsonian to be melted down.

Tony's generous funding had helped too, of course, though she had wrinkled her nose at his teasing comment of whatever happened to a freezer full of ice cream as a breakup go-to, which was such a cliché and her comfort food was pizza anyway.

"Dr. Foster." JARVIS' familiar voice greeted her. "How are you liking Hogwarts?"

A surprised laugh burst out of her, shaking loose the tight coil in her chest. It never ceased to amaze her how wonderfully perceptive JARVIS was, even with the knowledge that the A.I. had a soul. "It's fine but I like being a muggle."

"Excellent choice, we have *eletricity* after all."

Jane couldn't help but laugh again at the reference. "Yep, love me some *eletricity*." She sobered quickly, knowing the reason for JARVIS' call and that time was of the essence. "And some Vibranium too."

"I believe I can be of assistance. Princess Shuri of Wakanda is on the line for you when you are ready."

"As I'll ever be."

The conversation with Shuri was quick and to the point. Jane could tell immediately that she would enjoy working with her. In Wakanda. The one caveat for granting Jane use of the Vibranium was that the precious resource would not leave the country's borders. Transport would be a security nightmare, not to mention all Jane could offer was an estimate of the quantity needed. Too much and it would be a surplus that none of the Wakandan tribes were

comfortable to part with, too little and it could jeopardize the plan to slow down Thanos' army.

She tucked the phone back into her pocket and made her way back join the small group. Darcy had her arms crossed over her chest, which was never good sign. JB was fidgeting with the hem of his shirt but his feet were planted wide, a stance as stubborn as Darcy's. Strange and Wong were off on the sidelines, watching the couple with cautious eyes.

Well, not a *couple* because those two idiots refused to see what was right in front of them, much to Jane's confused irritation. The one time Darcy had actually addressed Jane's prompts, instead of expertly dodging them, she had given Jane an answer so vague that she might as well hadn't said anything at all.

You know why, Janie.

Jane had wanted to protest that she actually didn't know but the heartbreak shining in Darcy's tear-bright eyes had stopped her.

"Dr. Foster." Strange inclined his head slightly. "All ready for Wakanda?"

Jane blinked, taken a back for a second before realizing that of course he would know where she was heading next. He had seen it happen, after all. "Sure." She turned to Darcy. "I'll see you-

"I'm coming with you." Darcy announced.

"You are?" Jane hadn't expected Darcy to join her, she assumed Darcy would, understandably, want to stay at the Sanctum with JB.

"I'm going too." JB chimed in.

Jane hadn't thought JB would be interested either. From what Tony had said, JB was done fighting. "You are too?"

Darcy glared at JB. "You're not."

"He's not?" Jane's head was starting to hurt.

JB nodded. "I am."

"No, you're not." Darcy stomped her foot.

"Yes, I am." JB stood taller.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're-

"Okay, stop!" Jane sliced a hand through the air, cutting off this inane back-and-forth. "I'm going to Wakanda and the two of you are staying here."

"I'm your intern." Darcy reminded her. "You need help setting things up."

"Wakanda has an entire science division."

"I know science."

"Political science."

"Still counts." Darcy scowled, all squinty eyes and wrinkled nose and exaggerated frown like a cartoon character.

In her peripheral view, Jane caught a glimpse of JB, smiling softly at Darcy like she was the best thing he had ever seen, like he never wanted to look away, like he could be happy just watching her. Jane's heart clenched as she remembered the way Thor and she used to fall into each other's stares and how quickly it had all faded away in a blink. Suddenly, she was done with these two idiots wasting time and trading furtive glances like they were in a Victorian romance.

"No, it doesn't." Jane snapped.

Darcy blinked, taken aback.

JB stepped closer, eyebrows furrowed with disapproval.

These. Two. Idiots.

"Half of the world may be gone in the next twelve hours-" She started.

"No, it won't." Strange interjected, sounding displeased.

Jane ignored him. Tony had vehemently assured her that it would all work out but there was no such thing as a fool-proof guarantee. Tony's very experience, returning to the past and changing the future, was proof of that.

Knowledge prompts change yet change negates knowledge.

There were so many things Tony couldn't have predicted because he had taken shortcuts for a faster pace or detours to avoid pitfalls and ended up somewhere completely unexpected. Better, but different. And that difference could be the very thing to decide the outcome of the upcoming war against Thanos. Tony was just one man and he had altered the events significantly, what would happen when there were multiple groups in play?

"Half of the world may be gone in the next twelve hours." She started again, louder this time. "So you two should *talk*." She glanced meaningfully between Darcy and JB. "Life's short."

"Mine isn't." JB muttered, shoulders lifting in a small bitter shrug. "But hey, we maybe only got twelve hours-"

Strange scoffed. "I told you-"

Jane silenced him with a glare.

"-so might as well lay it on the line here." JB's lips curled into a smile, a little shy and so very fond. "Want to-"

"Yes." Darcy blurted out. "I mean, we could die soon-"

"No one is dying!" Strange snapped. He was ignored.

"-so this lifespan thing is bullshit anyway."

They reached for each other and Jane almost felt bad for interrupting what was clearly a romantic moment but she couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Wait, wait, wait. What did you mean by *mine isn't*?" She arched an eyebrow at JB before turning it on Darcy. "And what did you mean by *this lifespan thing*?"

"Human." Darcy pointed at herself then at JB. "Super soldier. He's going to live forever and look disgustingly handsome-"

"Disgustingly?" JB mouthed to himself, incredulous.

"-when I've got maybe fifty, sixty years max with the way I eat and I'll be all wrinkly-"

"You'd still be beautiful." He grabbed her hand and brushed a kiss on the back of it.

Darcy blushed.

Jane wasn't sure if she was going to laugh or cry at this absurd misunderstanding. "You guys are idiots."

They sputtered.

Rolling her eyes, Jane pressed on. "He's aging like everyone else, he's going to be wrinkly with you, Darce."

"What? But he's a super soldier-"

"How? I don't-"

"Bruce ran some tests when you first, um, you know." Jane waved in what she hoped was an all-encompassing gesture. "Your physiology is enhanced but your cells are decaying at a normal rate. Didn't he show you the results?"

"I, um, didn't really look at them." JB fidgeted with Darcy's fingers. "Because, you know." He waved in the same way Jane had.

Darcy was gaping like a fish.

"Why on Earth did you think he's immortal?" Jane laughed.

"I don't know, he's a *super soldier* and he's, like, a hundred years old!"

"He spent most of that time in cryo." Jane cursed her thoughtlessness but JB didn't seem affected by the mention of his time as the Winter Soldier, he just looked happy to be holding Darcy's hand.

"Oh."

"Yeah. *Oh*." Jane chuckled. "Okay, now you can continue. Life's short, blah blah blah."

They took her advice to heart and didn't waste any time, immediately crowding into each other's personal space.

"Looks like you're stuck with me." JB whispered.

"Like a cactus." Darcy grinned.

Jane turned to Strange, who was texting on his phone with a quiet smile on his face.

"Girlfriend." Wong mouthed before beckoning Jane closer. "Come, Dr. Foster. I will take you to Wakanda."

Casting one final glance over her shoulder as she stepped through the portal, Jane smiled at the joy radiating from her friend and hoped like hell that their plan would work. It simply had to.

My Only Curse Is You

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I'm in week 3 of my half marathon training and it is kicking my butt. ~~Also I started playing World of Warcraft again...~~

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Iron Man 3. Captain America: Winter Soldier. Avengers: Age of Ultron. Captain America: Civil War. Avengers: Infinity War.
Doctor Who.

There was surprisingly little for Tony to do in the tense hours leading up to Thanos' arrival. And all that free time grated on his nerves more so than any pressing deadlines, leaving him with increasingly dire doubts that he must have overlooked something important.

*

"What if I screw it up?" Tony rolled the tennis ball across the workshop floor.

The bots chased after it.

"You won't." Rhodey said calmly from the holographic display.

"Why? Because Stephen said so?"

"Yes."

"Seriously?"

"When a super wizard-"

"Sorcerer Supreme." Tony corrected under his breath, not necessarily in defense of Stephen but more out of the principle that one should use the correct terms when trying to win an argument.

"-with a magic eight ball-"

"The Time Stone."

"-tells you that this is the one guaranteed shot you have to defeat a crazy giant bent on wiping out half of the population-"

"Thanos."

"-you take it." All traces of teasing vanished from his expression.

"What if I miss?"

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

"I know you." Rhodey's quiet words boomed with unwavering faith. "You know better than anyone that knowledge prompts change and change negates knowledge, right?" He closed his hand into a fist then splayed his fingers out with an exploding sound.

Ignoring the pang of longing from hearing Loki's iconic words, Tony grinned sheepishly and wiggled his own fingers in response, only his were glowing a bright orange. His friends hadn't been happy when they revisited Tony's actions through the filter of him having soul-traveled.

Pepper had been exceptionally angry with Tony's decision to taunt the Mandarin and invite Killian to his home for dinner when he had known they were one and the same, her blue eyes had blazed so brilliantly that Tony had *deja vu* of the time when she had been the one injected with the Extremis virus. Compared to her incandescent anger over Tony making yet another reckless choice - worse, even, because it was premeditated - Happy's frown hadn't had much effect and the little that it did have had been nullified by Rhodey's resignedly cheerful assessment of *at least it wasn't a nuke through an alien portal*.

"So stick to the script and everything'll be fine." Rhodey nodded decisively and with such authority that Tony felt some of his anxiety fade away. His Platypus always knew what to say.

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "How are things on your end?"

"Grounding flights is easier said than done but Pepper thinks she can call in a few favors. Did you know she's on first name basis with most of the CEOs of major airlines?"

While Tony and his team had been focused on Plan A, Rhodey had been running point on Plan B. In the catastrophic event that they failed to stop Thanos and half of the world's population was gone, measures had to be put into place to prevent and minimize additional damages and deaths. The tricky part was how to do it without inciting mass panic.

Tony arched an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure she's on first name basis with all of them."

"I think you're right." Rhodey chuckled. "Hey, Tones?"

"Yeah?"

"You're wrong about not being the hero type, nothing more heroic than encouraging kids' dreams. Your Iron Minions would agree with me in a heartbeat."

You're a mechanic, right? Why don't you just build something?

Hey, guys, you ever see that really old movie, Empire Strikes Back?

A rush of fond pride warmed him as Harley and Peter's voices, brilliant suggestions from the other timeline, rang in his head. "They're good kids. I should check in, see how they did on their finals." Thanos' impending arrival had bumped everything on his to-do list down, if not cancelled like the elaborate Christmas party. "Good luck."

"Break a leg."

This wasn't goodbye, so neither of them said it.

*

Tony scrubbed a hand over his jaw as he dictated another email to one of his Team Iron Man kids, doing his best to keep the tone light with holiday wishes but personal with specific feedback on their school projects. He had only meant to leave messages for Harley and Peter but then he remembered how each of them had made friends with other students and he would absolutely hate for anyone to feel left out because Tony was playing favorites.

So here he was, hours later, finally caught up to the Ks after having to backtrack to the As and there was still the other half of the alphabet to go.

The coffee by his elbow should have gone cool some time ago, but Loki's magic kept it on the edge of scalding, just the way Tony liked it. He took a sip as he waved a hand through the air to bring up the next list that JARVIS had carefully compiled.

*

"...feel free to contact me if you ever need help with anything, big or small."

This was his sixth attempt at drafting an email to Peter. Tony had quickly learned that there was no way to warn the teen that he would be bitten by a genetically altered spider.

Peter, in the other timeline, had said that he had only had the abilities for six months when Tony had gone to recruit Spider-Man, placing the incident towards the end of 2015, approximately a year from now.

Or sooner.

Events in this timeline were happening at an accelerated speed. SHIELD's fall and HYDRA's rise had led to the creation of the Avengers Accords, two points that had connected in a straight line instead of weaving through the disaster that was Ultron and the destruction of Sokovia.

A puzzling phenomenon that Tony and Bruce had theorized as something similar to fixed events in the Doctor Who lore; immovable events serving as pins that held the fabric of their reality in place and were destined to happen regardless of how or when. Unfortunately, despite multiple doctoral degrees between them, neither one was a Time Lord and therefore couldn't tell if an outcome was carved into stone or written in sand.

Sometimes, Tony wondered which category Peter becoming Spider-Man belonged in, what would happen if Tony somehow stopped the spider bite.

Would another accident happen to grant Peter a different set of abilities? Or would he go on to live the life of a normal teenager, where his biggest worry would be finishing his homework instead of stopping crimes?

Questions Tony had no right to ask because they weren't his to answer, they were Peter's.

All Tony could do and should do was to make himself available and hope that Peter would remember this email when the moment came.

Scratching at his beard, Tony reviewed the floating text before instructing JARVIS to send it.

*

Tony had just finished the last of the emails when he felt the air in the workshop shift subtly. A rustle of fabric confirmed Loki's return from assisting Jane with the final round of testing for the black hole grenades on Svartalfheim, the perfect location given its desolateness and the fact that the technology had originated from the Dark Elves.

"Hello, Tony." Curling an arm around Tony's waist, Loki breathed the words softly against his neck, more of a kiss than a greeting. "I am pleased to see you well."

Instead of replying with his line in what was now a familiar exchange, Tony turned his head and brushed his lips against Loki's cheekbone. As much as he loved echoing the words of their first reunion, he didn't want a repeat of history when they were on the cusp of making their own.

From the way Loki gently cupped his chin to tilt it up so their mouths could slot together, thumb tracing Tony's jawline with just enough pressure for his skin to catch on the stubble, Tony knew that Loki had understood.

*

They parted slowly, reluctant enough that Tony could still taste the warmth of Loki's mouth even as he drew in a fluttering breath.

"I love you."

It wasn't clear which one of them had spoken, the three words that they had only said to each other in coded messages and significant looks and meaningful touches but never so bluntly, so directly.

A declaration of intent. A confession in the eleventh hour. A promise to each other.

"I love you."

Then their lips met again and Tony found himself straddling Loki, his full weight settled on Loki's thighs with his knees bracketing Loki's hips and his feet dangling through the small

gaps between the armrests and the back of the chair.

Tony clung to Loki, small noises escaping as the kiss quickly turned hard and frantic and tingling with the shadow of desperation.

Loki swallowed each one of Tony's gasps and sighs hungrily, greedily, before coaxing more out of Tony by nipping his way down the column of Tony's neck then back up on the other side to capture the shell of Tony's ear between his teeth.

"I love you."

Everything slowed with those whispered words.

Tony's hands uncurled from Loki's shoulders and smoothed over the crescent-shaped marks he had dug into the leather. He felt hazy, drunk on the sensation of Loki's hot mouth leaving a tingling trail across his cheek to find his lips in an unhurried kiss, hopeful like they had all the time in the world.

*

"It is imperative that you stay out of the fray." Stephen told him, repeating the same message with different words. "Your priority is Thanos, leave the rest to us."

"I know." Tony snapped, trying and failing to rein his annoyance. Being treated like a child was chipping away at his confidence in both himself and their plan.

Stephen cleared his throat. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Tony shrugged stiffly, pivoting on his heel and heading toward the bathroom to splash some water on his face.

He closed the door softly and turned the faucet on, the sudden rush of water drowning out the statics of his splintered thoughts. For a minute or two, he stood there, hunched over with his elbows on the counter and his hands dangled under the cold water. He stared at himself in the mirror, unsurprised when Loki's eyes found his in the mirror.

"I assure you, beloved, Thanos' shadow will pass and the sun will shine on us again."

Tony leaned back, letting Loki support his weight, and told himself to believe.

*

Wakanda was resplendent in her beauty, towers stretching as tall as the ancient trees and buildings sprawling as wide as the endless plains.

As Tony flew over the lush green scenery, he felt a pang of regret.

It was a shame that they would be turning it into a war zone.

His mood lifted when he caught the familiar sight of Mark 81s, an integral part of the highway construction project spanning across the African continent, standing in a gleaming row on the edge of city limits. Designed for construction, they were the perfect candidates to implement Jane's portion of the plan, to greatly reduce the swarms of Outriders serving as the opening act before Thanos took the stage.

Strategically, it made little sense for Thanos to announce his arrival when the element of surprise would provide the upper hand, as baffling a choice as the decision to deploy an army when he already possessed five Infinity Stones.

Which made Tony think it might be a matter of preference.

Thanos certainly seemed like he had a flair for the dramatic, a suspicion that Tony had had since he was first subjected to Ebony Maw's obsequious praises and one that both Gamora and Nebula had confirmed with matching scowls that twisted to sly grins when Tony had explained the black hole minefield.

The Dark Elf weapon had been recalibrated to detonate automatically by way of pressure when a target stepped on it, taking full advantage of the Outriders' physical style of attack, charging headlong into combat and fighting with teeth and claws. The Outriders lucky enough to escape the gravitational pull would have the misfortune of meeting Thor, Loki, the Hulk, the Sorcerer Supreme and the Masters of the Mystic Arts, and the Guardians on the Galaxy on the battlefield.

Tony wished he could be fighting alongside his team but he had his own role to play.

With one final glance, he took off toward the tree line.

*

The Soul Stone pulsed eagerly in Tony's palm, glowing with what felt like anticipation and flickering with what seemed like impatience.

Understandable. It had been waiting since the beginning of creation.

My Chosen.

Free me.

Free us.

*

Tony paced the small clearing, situated a calculated distance away from the others, the soon-to-be epicenter of a cosmic event that rivaled the Big Bang.

JARVIS had kept him updated on the battle happening miles away, though even the footage of black holes blinking in and out of existence, dragging hordes of Outriders into the abyss, couldn't calm his nerves. Retracting the helmet helped but not by much.

If they failed, it would be because of him.

A light breeze ruffled through his hair, a gentle caress that had Tony almost leaning into the touch. It grew stronger, wind whipping through the trees as specks of dark blue coalesced into a cloud that parted to reveal a colossal form that could only be Thanos.

"I know what it's like to lose. To feel so desperately that you're right, yet to fail, nonetheless." A deep voice drawled. "It's frightening. Turns the legs to jelly. I ask you, to what end? Dread it. Run from it. Destiny arrives all the same. And now, it's here. Or should I say, here I-"

"Shut it, Grimace." Tony fired a repulsor shot at Thanos' ridiculous purple face, then another when Thanos dodged it with a dismissive tilt of his head. The second hit Thanos squarely on the cheek but did little damage, barely singeing the skin.

Thanos chuckled. "You are full of tricks, Stark."

Tony froze. "You know me?"

"I do. You're not the only one cursed with knowledge." Thanos nodded, arrogance oozing from every word.

"My only curse is you." Tony retorted. "You want to murder half of the universe."

"A small price to pay for salvation. This universe is finite, its resources finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction. The hardest choices require the strongest wills. I am the only one with the will to act on it."

Tony coughed. "Narcissist."

Thanos continued on as if he hadn't heard, staring off into the distance. "With all six Infinity Stones, I could simply snap my fingers and half of the universe would cease to exist. I bring them mercy." He angled his gaze over to Tony. "Which I will grant you, if you surrender the Soul Stone."

"Nah."

"Very well." Thanos raised his left arm, the gauntlet gleaming in the rays of sunshine peeking through the leaves. One by one, the Infinity Stones flared to life in a rainbow of colors calling out for the one that was missing. "Then I will take it from you."

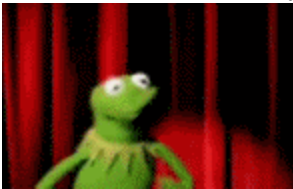
You Can't Protect Against Yourself

Chapter Notes

~~First, I want you guys to know that I didn't want to leave it on a cliffhanger but I've been staring at it off-and-on for about 3 hours and...nothing. So, here is another cliffhanger but take heart in the fact that I tried to avoid it...? EDIT: I added a small snippet at the end so it's not a cliffhanger anymore! Hooray!!!~~

Second, I hope this chapter answers any questions you have from the previous ones...if not, feel free to ask. :)

Third, we're definitely coming up to the end! Eeeeeeeeeeeep!



Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers. Thor: Dark World. Guardians of the Galaxy. Doctor Strange. Thor: Ragnarok. Avengers: Infinity War.

"It's not right!" Rhodey glared at the Soul Stone. "It can't just go into someone's head-" He waved his arms in the air emphatically. "Ugh!"

Bruce nodded, green tinging his hairline.

They were all processing what had happened in the lab. One brilliant flash of orange had burned Zola out of existence and thawed the icy conditioning of the Winter Soldier, leaving a broken Bucky Barnes drenched in memories and shivering in a new century. While his friends were shaken by the Soul Stone's action, Tony felt grounded. Inexplicably yet unquestioningly, he knew with a visceral certainty that such power, terrifying and humbling, would never turn against him and had only been used in a misguided attempt to help.

Of course, a good motive didn't excuse the bad consequences and Barnes was suffering as a result of something done for Tony's benefit, but Tony still wanted to speak up in the Soul Stone's defense. If only to erase the furrows and frowns etched onto his friends' faces by reassuring them that the Soul Stone meant no harm.

Except he couldn't explain how he knew that.

Which would be one of the first questions they would ask and his lack of answers would only alarm them further.

"If I may offer a different viewpoint." Loki stepped forward, his arm brushed against Tony's in a subtle and soothing touch.

Once again, Tony was caught off-guard by how well Loki knew him and how well Loki cared for him, like a favorite book that Loki held with gentle fingers as to not crease its spine, memorizing where each well-loved sentence was because he couldn't bear to dog-ear the pages.

"I understand your frustrations and fears but you must understand that an Infinity Stone has no concept of right and wrong, good and bad, willing and unwilling."

Rhodey opened his mouth but clicked it shut with a considering look.

"It does not heal out of kindness nor does It hurt out of malice. It can be a source of incredible light as well as a bringer of annihilating dark, capable of anything and responsible for nothing. It defies any convention we try to impose upon It."

The green hue had faded away from Bruce's skin as his expression turned thoughtful.

"It simply is." Loki shrugged, the lift and drop of his shoulders spelling out a resigned sort of acceptance.

*

There was a hum in the air. It rippled through the clearing in cresting waves as the golden gauntlet struggled to contain the five Infinity Stones, to channel their unique capabilities to serve its wielder, to coerce the singularities that had existed before the universe and would long after into serving one man.

Thanos was still only a man, in the grand scheme of things.

And there was nothing grander than these colorful gems.

Immense powers forged into concentrated ingots. The infinite made finite. A wrong that must be righted.

Free us.

The Soul Stone called out, a command and a plea wrapped in a murmur and a shout that appeared in Tony's mind like a thought.

*

"So, wizard man, how do we destroy the Infinity Stones?" Quill asked.

Rocket held his hand together in prayer and closed his eyes. "Please say big bomb, please say big bomb, please say big bomb."

Stephen rolled his eyes. "The Infinity Stones are nigh-indestructible by-

"Nigh-indestructible." Quill scrunched his nose. "Seriously?"

"-conventional methods-

"Conventional?" Rocket bristled.

"-but they are not without their weaknesses." Stephen paused. "Six of them, to be exact."

"Six?" Gamora frowned.

Bruce looked contemplative.

Tony's heart sank. Stephen couldn't possibly mean... He glanced at Loki and his stomach dropped too with the weight of dread at the look of realization glittering in Loki's eyes.

"The Infinity Stones themselves."

Stephen nodded.

If he weren't suddenly sick with worry for the Soul Stone, Tony would have quipped about the novelty of the two of them finally agreeing on something but the fact that it was how to destroy the Infinity Stone that had gifted him with a second chance drained the humor from the situation. He had become used to the warm glow of the Soul Stone over the past years, a quiet presence in the corner of his lab like a light left on just for him.

"You can't protect against yourself." Bruce repeated Selvig's words, the explanation the astrophysicist had given to Natasha when he instructed her to use the Scepter to shut down the Tesseract. "The Infinity Stones are vulnerable against each other and vulnerability can lead to instability." He muttered, thinking aloud. "They could create a catastrophic positive feedback loop and-" His eyes widened. "-that's why most of them had to be contained in some way."

Images shuffled before Tony's eyes, like a deck of cards arranging and rearranging themselves from order to disorder then back again.

It was dizzying, too much and too fast, even for a mind like his. Flashes of history, somehow both random and repetitive, overlapped one another until there was no start or end, only continuous chaos.

A cascade of information, sketches on cave walls and scrolls sealed with wax and screens in alien languages, streamed into his brain, invading it like a virus and infecting him with knowledge he hadn't wished to carry.

He could feel the crushing weight of Morag's vast sea, the roll of the waves drowned out the enraged cries of the Power Stone inside the Orb on the bottom of the ocean floor...

...the water turned crimson as the Aether, trapped in between two stones of a pillar standing tall amidst ruins, yearned to flow freely...

...to be released from Its confinement, the Time Stone pushed and pulled against Agamotto's magical bindings, impatient...

...and bored, the Tesseract had been the jewel of Asgard's treasure room for centuries; gilded walls etched with runes were no place for the Space Stone that longed for the vastness of the stars...

...among which was the Chitauri's home world, shining with a blue glow was nothing more than an illusion cast by the cunning Mind Stone, forced to find Its own entertainment over the countless years encased in the Scepter...

Free us.

Five voices cried out in a chorus of an ancient song that wished to be heard across the universe, finally reunited and singing together at last.

Tony listened.

*

"The protection set around the Infinity Stones wasn't for our benefit, as we have been led to believe, but for the Stones themselves." Stephen seemed almost amused by the twist. "Not to keep them out of the wrong hands but away from one-"

"The Aether-" Loki jerked his glance over to Tony, flinching when he took in the expression on Tony's face. "My love?"

"I'm okay." Tony mustered a weak smile, one that Loki resolutely did not buy. Sighing, he leaned in and whispered his confession into the intimate space between them, where no secrets or shame existed. "Just need a little more time to get on board with the plan to, you know, destroy the Stone that's basically my fairy godmother."

The corners of Loki's mouth quirked. "You are often covered in soot and grime, and you did leave me one of your gauntlets."

Tony felt his own lips curve upward. "I shower regularly, I'll have you know."

"Hey!" Quill shouted. "We feel left out."

"Apologies." Loki didn't sound sorry at all. "We were merely discussing the last time an Infinity Stone interacted with another, albeit indirectly." He summarized the situation with the Aether using Jane as a host then retreating and reverting into Its original form when Tony had intervened. "As the Soul Stone's Chosen, Tony's touch cleansed the Aether from Lady Jane, burning it away."

Press. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Tap. Press.

Tap. Press. Tap.

Press. Tap.

Burn.

Tony inhaled sharply, the pieces slotting into place and relief surged through him. The Soul Stone's message wasn't a warning or an instruction, it was a clue and a blessing. Permission somehow given before Stephen had come back with a seemingly impossible and wildly outlandish plan.

Or perhaps it had been in the works all along. The Infinity Stones drifted away from various corners of the universe where they had been scattered and toward Earth, joining the Time Stone and the Space Stone and the Soul Stone. The Mind Stone had arrived with the Chitauris and the Reality Stone had used Jane as transport while the Power Stone had been found by a man from Missouri.

What were the odds? Unless none of it was random, none of it had been left up to chance.

The Infinity Stones wanted to be together, to be reunited, to be...

His fingers twitched, muscles jumping in what felt like joy, like understanding.

Tap. Tap. Press. Tap.

Tap. Press. Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Free.

Tony breathed out, slowly, as something loosened in his chest, between his rib cage and near his heart. "Let's do this." He smiled. "Let's throw Thanos a surprise party and invite all six of his not-friends."

Thanos strolled toward Tony, his large gait closing the distance between them in three steps.

Despite JARVIS' insistent recommendations, Tony stood his ground and did not engage the helmet. It would do little to shield him from Thanos' attacks and he had what would protect him, and hopefully the universe, in his palm.

Smirking, Thanos held out his left hand in an arrogant display and swiveled his wrist to show off his spoils.

Tony's gaze snagged on the Reality Stone, transfixed by the way It shimmered and darkened like sunlight rippling across waves and highlighting the vast darkness beneath.

*

"I will return before the day's end." Loki promised. "I will return."

Tony bit his lip and nodded, knowing that Loki had to go to Asgard to secure the Scepter and the Tesseract as well as convince the All-Mother to call the Collector to Asgard.

The keeper of the largest collection of interstellar fauna, relics and species in the galaxy, the Collector was rumored to be one of the Elders of the Universe, a group that predated history and possibly the Big Bang. Ancient and powerful, the Collector could prove to be a challenge for Thanos' lieutenant.

Stephen's vision had been limited to his own point of view. As such, he had no way of knowing how Thanos had acquired the other Infinity Stones, only that he had five out of six when he came for the Soul Stone and was defeated. Their task, then, was to ensure Thanos had the other five Infinity Stones, ideally with minimal casualties and without rousing any suspicion.

"You better."

*

The Power Stone lit up with a sudden viciousness, the violet hue taking on a violent tinge.

*

"-change." It was Quill's voice but it didn't sound like Quill, small and quiet. "So people wouldn't hang up before we can tell them to leave the damn Orb and get the hell out."

"Peter." Gamora sighed.

Tony paused, frozen by the realization that he was intruding on a private conversation.

"No, you were right. She didn't believe us because we're us, a bunch of joking assholes. We need to be, I don't know, not us. Someone else."

"Like Kevin Bacon?" Mantis asked softly.

Quill barked out a laugh that was all derision. "No. I've been screwing with you guys. Kevin Bacon's an actor and his legends are just movies."

Drax made a wounded noise. "Footloose?"

"Yeah." Quill cleared his throat. "Sorry."

Silence followed.

Tony was torn between leaving them to sort things out on their own and going in to break up the tension. They were facing Thanos in less than twelve hours and couldn't afford any infighting.

"Eh, whatever. I lie all the time." Rocket snorted.

"I am Groot."

"But maybe I can, um, cut back a little. Only lie to you idiots sometimes."

One by one, the other Guardians chimed in with what they thought they could improve upon, ranging from Nebula's begrudging promise to stab fewer people and Drax's alarming vow to shower more.

As quietly as he could manage, Tony turned around and made his way back to the elevators. The Guardians would be fine because they were a team.

The Time Stone appeared almost calm, a lighthearted green that shifted between light and shadow like the phases of a moon.

Mordo had always struck Tony as someone lacking creativity, since it was impossible to think outside the box while staying inside the lines, after all.

The fact that Mordo had readily agreed to Stephen's outrageous plan was a surprise. On a closer inspection, however, destroying the Infinity Stones actually fell in line with Mordo's beliefs. He had been especially angry with Stephen for using the Time Stone to peer into the future, snapping at random and lecturing anyone who would listen that such power should not exist. The all-or-nothing approach certainly matched Mordo's uncompromisingly rigid personality.

Then Mordo surprised them all again when he slipped away into the Mirror Dimension with the Eye of Agamotto and a scroll containing a spell meant for summoning the most powerful beings. Rather than waiting for Thanos to come for the Time Stone, Mordo had decided to bring it to him, in the desperate hope that he might be able to spare the Sanctum and its disciples from the horrible fate that had befallen Xandar.

"Another five minutes then I'm going in." Stephen paced, the Cloak fluttering after him like the world's most absurd mother hen.

Wong had managed to convince Stephen to let Mordo's own plan run its course, astutely pointing out that Stephen's sudden appearance could worsen the situation. But he, too, was starting to fidget.

Tony kept quiet, turning his phone over in his hands and resolutely not looking at the time. Loki had been gone for a while too.

*

The Space Stone flickered, as if It were teleporting in and out of the setting on the gauntlet.

*

Thor's laugh boomed across the common room. He was regaling them with his other feats of strength with far more theatrics and flair than he had employed during his tale of how Loki and he had deceived Thanos into believing they were reluctant to hand over the Scepter and the Tesseract until they were convinced otherwise.

Tony glanced over at Loki, sensing there was more to the story but understanding this wasn't the time nor place to ask and knowing that Loki needed a bit of time to process first.

"I once slayed a Jotunheim beast by flying through its head."

"You can fly?" Nebula sounded skeptical.

None of the Guardians were alarmed by the detail of Thor flying through a beast's head. Unsurprising, really.

"My hammer, it is made from this special metal from the heart of a dying star. And when I spin it really, really fast, it grants me the ability to fly." Thor swung Mjolnir in a sweeping arc that had his bicep flexing impressively.

"How much for the hammer?" Rocket eyed it with interest.

*

The Mind Stone twinkled and Tony had the distinct impression that It was winking at him.

*

They were in bed together, laying on their sides and facing the same direction with Tony's chest flush against Loki's back. The difference in their height made the position slightly awkward but neither of them shifted, content for the close contact.

"He split Thor's body into pieces and I knew he was still conscious, the way he had blinked up at me..." Loki shivered, the whispered words painting an image most grotesque and absolutely horrifying. "I wasn't acting then, not with my brother reduced to a heap of parts."

Grief still lingered though no loss had been suffered. Tony had spent many sleepless nights reliving the moment when Zola had infiltrated their system, the fear just as real and raw as it had been, even with JARVIS' voice through the speakers and Loki's arms around him. Now it was time for Tony to do the same for Loki, wounding his arms tighter and pulling his lover closer so his embrace could be a sanctuary as Loki fell apart over what-could-have-been.

*

Thanos clenched his gauntleted fingers into a fist.

Nothing happened.

"This usually works." Thanos frowned.

"Have you tried turning it off and on again?" Tony snarked, his last words ending on a gasp as he felt a spark at the center of his being, *his soul*.

Scowling, Thanos tried again.

The speck of light inside Tony burst into a roaring fire then exploded into an inferno, reaching up toward the sky to set it aflame.

The Infinity Stones glowed, brighter and brighter.

Blazing. Incandescent. Furious.

The metal around them wavered, softening like wax held to a flame, melting away under the unrelenting heat and scalding the flesh beneath. Like stars streaking across the sky, the Infinity Stones shot out of the gauntlet's settings and landed neatly in Tony's cupped palms, where the Soul Stone had been waiting.

Thanos fell to his knees, cradling his left arm, a mess of molten metal, and staring up at Tony with a mixture of anger and fear.

One by one, the Infinity Stones began to shake, vibrating with increasing force. Small fractures appeared on their surfaces, growing wider and deeper, cracking them open down to their core.

Reality. Power. Time. Space. Mind. Soul.

Dazzling colors flashed before Tony's eyes, a full spectrum possibilities and impossibilities coalescing into a blinding white light. Thanos' anguished cry was the last thing he heard and his last thought was how unfair that was - he much preferred to drift off to Loki's voice - before everything abruptly went silent and dark.

*

Tony woke to the feel of Loki's hands framing his face and the sound of Loki's voice calling his name. "Coffee." He groaned instinctively.

Loki barked out a laugh that was echoed by a few others.

"I think he's fine." Jane said dryly.

Blinking up at the blue sky, Tony agreed.

An Eternity's Worth of More

Chapter Notes



A good representation of how I've been this week, writing this chapter then getting stuck then writing again then getting stuck on the re-writing. I'm both not ready for this incredible journey to end and looking forward to a break from weekly (self-imposed) deadlines.

This is the final full-length chapter with a shorter epilogue to follow because I'm not quite ready to say goodbye and we need one more Friday together. ♥

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#) and [Arboreal](#).

References/Quotes

Avengers: Infinity War.

Doctor Who.

Tony stared uncomprehendingly at the large pile of dust, a gray spot of lifelessness marring the lush green landscape, and the shapeless lump of metal, the golden shine dulled to a straw yellow, half-buried in it. "That's...Thanos?"

"Yes." Stephen nodded with grim satisfaction.

"Huh."

"Our working theory is that Thanos absorbed the majority of the blast from the Infinity Stones' implosion-"

"Explosion." Bruce adjusted his glasses, his expression somewhere between serious and sheepish. "It's one of the points we disagree on."

Jane wrinkled her nose at him. "An implosion would explain the reduced damage to the surrounding area."

Tony took an exaggerated sip of the coffee Loki had summoned for him.

"An explosion would explain-" Bruce pointed at the ashes that used to be Thanos. "He must have been disintegrated in an instant."

Suddenly, a memory flitted across Tony's mind, a gentle green light softening the passing of time and stretching one moment out into a thousand. He wondered if Thanos' death had been quick and painless or if it had been the opposite.

"Why not both?" Rhodey chimed in. The familiar timbre of his voice pulled Tony away from morbid contemplation.

In slow motion and in unison, Bruce and Jane blinked at Rhodey before turning toward each other in a flurry of theorizing.

"It's possible..."

"...the discrepancies in the force output..."

"...what about the..."

"...no longer a factor..."

"...the counter-balance could have..."

"...a self-regulating mechanism?"

Rhodey nodded along like he knew exactly what they were talking about, which Tony knew he didn't because astrophysics simply wasn't his field of study. "That's what I'm talking about. Implosion cancels out the explosions, supernova and black hole at the same time, and matter remains constant."

Bruce peered at him over the rim of his glasses. "Are you just quoting Dr. Who?"

"Yes." Rhodey admitted with a shrug. "That's where I get all of my space science."

It wasn't the funniest or wittiest thing Rhodey had ever said but Tony found himself collapsing with laughter and leaning against Loki for balance. Tension transformed into giggles, bubbling in his chest and bursting through his lips that had him feel as though he was floating on these sounds of happiness.

They won.

*

Everything had worked perfectly.

How could it not, when it had incorporated lessons learned from New York and London and been executed flawlessly.

Wakanda's forcefield had limited the Outriders' points of entry to one, giving them no choice other than to run through the grassland embedded with Jane's black hole mines. The adapted

Dark Elf technology had reduced Thanos' vast army to manageable numbers in mere minutes. With Thor, Loki, the Hulk, the Guardians of the Galaxy, the Sorcerer Supreme and the Masters of Mystic Arts forming the third line of defense, the Outriders never made it past the border.

As a result, there had been no fatalities and the only structural damages were the circular holes carved deep into the earth where the mines had detonated and the uprooted trees in the clearing where Tony had confronted Thanos. Even the injuries suffered had been minor and required little or no medical attention, scrapes and bruises that would heal quickly.

It was anticlimactic in the best of ways.

*

"You are a good fighter." Nebula admitted with a grudging respect.

Thor beamed. "Thank you, Lady Nebula."

"Don't call me that, I'm not a lady and I don't want to be." She jabbed at his arm in warning but her scowl soon transformed into an expression of awe. "It's like your muscles are made of Cotati metal fibers. Come feel this, Gamora!"

"No, don't go and feel that dude's muscles." Quill frowned.

Drax shook his head solemnly. "He is not a dude. You're a dude. This...This is a man. A handsome, muscular man."

Quill's face spasmed. "I'm muscular."

"Who are you kidding, Quill? You're one sandwich away from fat." Rocket sneered.

"And he is like a pirate had a baby with an angel." Drax exclaimed.

Tony snorted.

"You are not wrong." Loki hummed, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

At that, Thor exploded into a raucous laugh that had the Guardians joining in somewhat hesitantly at first then earnestly once Thor described his parents' respective appearances.

Odin had worn an eyepatch and Frigga, as far as her sons were concerned, was as close to a celestial being as one could get.

*

"How are you feeling?" Bruce asked as he took Tony's blood pressure after the prerequisite disclaimer that he wasn't that kind of doctor.

"Fine." He really did feel fine. And soon, once he could have a moment alone with Loki, he would be better than fine.

Tony's hesitation about accepting the golden apple hadn't only been rooted in the grief of outliving his loved ones but also the fear that he would be doing it for the wrong reason. He loved Loki, deeply and truly, but if he made this *literal* life-changing choice for Loki and Loki alone, he knew with gut-wrenching certainty that he would come to resent it, the golden apple turning poisonous and their exclusive liaison toxic.

It would be all too easy to turn immortality into a sacrifice, a gift into a favor, when eternity stretched on for too long and their affection wore too thin.

There was no romanticism in centering his world around one person. Love wasn't two concentric circles overlapping one another but a Venn diagram of two independent spheres intersecting with intent to create a new shape.

Tony had been afraid of losing himself, as he had done many times before. A valid fear that he now realized didn't pose real danger anymore. Because he had seen the stunning vastness of infinity, different timelines and parallel universes and alternate realities, and knew without a doubt who he was.

Not a kid vying for his father's approval, or a teenager smoking to appear cool to his peers, or a playboy buying love the way he bought drinks, or a weapons manufacturer designing bombs to appease the only father figure he had left, or a guilt ridden man atoning for his sins by taking on the weight of others.

He was himself and he knew what he wanted, who he wanted.

Limitless potential and endless paths that couldn't possibly fit within one lifetime, he wanted to explore them all with Loki's hand in his.

Yes.

*

Maria approached this debriefing with her usual frightening efficiency that was amplified through Wakanda's video conferencing software; her stern countenance larger than life and her tone as crisp as the lines of her SHIELD uniform.

The majority of the meeting had been spent on the debate of whether to reveal the existence and subsequent destruction of the Infinity Stones.

Stephen, Mordo and Wong were of the mindset that the only thing more dangerous than the thirst for power was the denial of ever having it quenched, pointing to the fallout after the loss of the Tesseract and the Scepter as evidence. Various organizations had tried and were still trying to duplicate the Space Stone and Mind Stone's effects via magical means. The Masters of the Mystic Arts had put out enough fires and discouraged throwing gasoline on the flame.

Jane, somewhat reluctantly, sided with them given her own experiences with the previous iteration of SHIELD.

Tony, Bruce and Rhodey had a different outlook, despite being in agreement of the threats the truth could bring. At best, they would be treated with hostility for making such a rash decision because there would always be someone who thought they knew better; at worst, they would be met with distrust, suspecting it was all a ruse to keep the Infinity Stones for themselves. Yet they were still wary this secrecy would be the beginning down a slippery slope of zero accountability. After all, if the boundaries were unmarked, how would they know where the limits were? It was less about the current situation but more about future ones.

They were at a standstill, unable to arrive at a solution that would appease both sides, until Maria took the choice out of their hands.

"Here is what I propose." She started, the congeniality of her tone in contradiction with the shrewdness of her words. "I will alert the Avengers Accords council that you have encountered some sensitive information that do not have immediate impact on global security but the possession of which might carry intergalactic risks down the line. They will have twenty-four hours to decide whether they wish to be informed."

"How impressively vague and ambiguously threatening." Loki commented, green eyes sparkling with mirth. "You have my vote, Commander."

Maria inclined her head. "Thank you."

"Are you guys still speaking English?" Quill frowned, his expression mirrored on the other Guardians' faces.

"This is a classic *put up or shut up* situation." Rhodey explained. "If they want the information, they have to accept there might be ramifications."

"Just as we've already accepted the risks of putting our lives on the line." Stephen added.

Mordo hummed. "Checks and balances."

"Accountability has to work both ways." Tony summarized. "This is why you're my favorite, Spy Oprah."

*

As for the rest of the universe, the Guardians promised to spread the news of Thanos' self-destruction. The Infinity Gauntlet, due to either an accidental or possibly deliberate flaw, hadn't been able to contain the Infinity Stones, which had vanished in the aftermath.

Technically true, as all the best lies were.

Loki predicted the master blacksmith who had crafted the gauntlet would step forward and claim the title of Titan Slayer.

Tony was more than happy to let someone else take the credit. He preferred to be known for his ability to create and not for the deaths at his hands.

*

The Eye of Agamotto was one of the many mystical relics in the possession of the Masters of the Mystic Arts. As such, its absence, while noted, was not a cause for concern when it had been sanctioned by the Sorcerer Supreme.

Stephen had been pleasantly surprised by the discretion he wielded, his chin tilting at a haughty angle before it was swiftly brought down by another one of Mordo's well-meaning but condescending reminders of the importance of responsibility.

"Says the man who decided to summon Thanos." Stephen rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Alone."

Mordo blinked, once, twice. "Well played." The lines of his shoulders and his tone relaxed into something friendlier. "But my point is still valid."

Stephen chuckled. "Never said it wasn't."

There was something momentous about the exchange, opposite perspectives working toward an understanding, a middle ground.

"There is balance in all things." Wong remarked enigmatically.

*

"I've got it from here, why don't you take the rest of the day off?" It was as much a suggestion as it was a promise. There was still much left to do but none of it fell on their plates. Wakanda was spearheading the clean-up process and SHIELD would update the Avengers Accords as well as coordinate a press conference within the next hour.

In another life, Tony would have bristled at being treated like a child. He would have insisted on handling some part or another, then spent the entire time second-guessing himself and wondering if this had been their goal in the first place and how he had fallen for basic reverse psychology.

Now, however, he accepted her words at face value.

"Go get some food, jump in the shower, or take a nap. You have done an incredible job today." Maria gratitude was evident in her blue eyes as her gaze swept across the room. "Thank you." With that, she ended the call.

A few seconds of silence passed as they each processed the events of the day.

"We done here?" Rocket grunted. The Guardians had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the whole meeting. While the lack of interruptions, jokes, and tangents definitely helped streamline the process, it was also unnerving to see them so unlike their rambunctious selves.

Stephen nodded cautiously. "I would say so."

"Yes!" Rocket crowed, jumping on the table so he could be at eye-level with the rest of the Guardians. "Quill, making your voice deeper doesn't make you sound professional, it just makes you sound like a bigger idiot."

"Hey!"

"You were! You were imitating the god-man. It's weird." Drax laughed.

"No, I wasn't." Quill grunted, his voice dropping a register and inadvertently proving his teammates' point.

Mantis gasped. "He just did it again!"

*

The Guardians' ship soared over the Wakandan palace, high into the sky, at an impossible angle.

Tony followed it until it spiraled up into the atmosphere and out of sight. He hoped this wouldn't be the last time their paths would cross.

*

Thor and Loki were to return to Asgard, both to notify the All-Mother of Thanos' demise and to confirm the destruction of the Tesseract and the Scepter.

Loki brushed a kiss against Tony's cheek, an unspoken promise to return.

Jane and Thor shuffled awkwardly around one another, the wounds from their breakup might have healed but phantom pains still haunted them, and traded goodbyes with a sense of finality.

Tony looped an arm around Jane's shoulders as they watched the Bifrost fade away as quickly as the familiar rush of colors had crashed down into the clearing.

"You okay?" He asked, blinking through the spots dancing in his vision from the bright lights.

Jane sniffed, her eyes were hidden behind Tony's sunglasses but her tone was dry. "Better than the grass."

They peered down at the smoking rune marking the Bifrost's landing site.

"JARVIS, send gift baskets to the palace's landscapers."

"Already done, Sir."

*

"About time." Rhodey clapped him on the shoulder twice before pulling him into a hug that Tony reciprocated with immense relief.

"Really?" Tony mumbled, dazed and incredulous at Rhodey's easy acceptance of his decision to extend his lifespan even though he had had plenty of experience as to why he shouldn't be.

Rhodey was the best.

"Yes. You were always meant for more, Tones." Rhodey was using his Colonel voice, the one that left no room for disagreement, the same one he had used to comfort and convince a younger Tony that he wasn't a disappointment or a failure, the one that said, *believe in me if you cannot believe in yourself*.

Tony listened.

"Just don't forget about us little people when you're climbing the Yggdrasil or whatever."

"Never." Tony vowed. Then his eyes narrowed, shifting to pull back so he could subject Rhodey to the full force of his mocking. "Wait, climbing the Yggdrasil?"

Rhodey squeezed him harder. "Don't even start."

*

Loki appeared by his side with an arm around Tony's waist and his chin hooked over Tony's shoulder. "Hello, my love."

"Let's go home."

*

There was a furrow between Loki's eyebrows and Tony could feel an answering one forming on his own face as the silence between them grew taut with uncertainty, new and alarming. They had always been so sure about one another, from the first sip of Mike's Hard Lemonade to the coffee-flavored kiss they had shared that morning.

"You-" Loki started, his voice devoid of any of the inflections Tony had collected and cataloged over the years. "You wish to accept the apple?"

"Yes." Tony chewed on his bottom lip.

"From Idunn's Garden?"

"Yes."

"One that extends your lifespan to that of near immortality?"

"Yes."

"So you could spend it by my side?" Loki's gaze flickered up, meeting Tony's briefly, before it was averted and directed to a point over Tony's right shoulder.

In that fleeting second, Tony understood Loki's unexpected reaction to an answer that should have them embracing and kissing and celebrating. The same reason he himself had hesitated.

Loki must have considered the potential for fallout too, patient and content to leave the decision in Tony's hands. With titles like Silvertongue and Liesmith and Trickster, he could have easily used those skills to press for the outcome he wanted. Yet he hadn't. *Wouldn't.*

Because Loki needed for this decision to be made for the right reasons as much as Tony did.

"No."

"No?" Loki's eyes snapped to Tony's instantly, hopeful and heartbroken all at once.

"I mean, yes." Tony amended. "And no."

Loki's expression softened as he reached for Tony's hands, long pale fingers caressing the callouses on Tony's palms. "Care to elaborate?"

"I want to be with you but not *with you*. I mean, I'm not doing it *for you* because I'm doing it for me. Because I'm me." Tony groaned, why was he always stumbling over his words when they mattered the most?

Despite, or because of, the ridiculousness of Tony's answer, Loki was smiling properly now, one beautiful curve of his lips that brightened up the rest of his face. "You have such a way with words."

With the English language clearly failing him, Tony went with the next option. He kissed Loki, a soft brush of lips against lips that quickly turned into a bruising kiss of teeth and tongue that left Tony wide-eyed and dazed and craving more.

An eternity's worth of more.

"As you wish."

Back to the Beginning

Chapter Notes

Here we are. I'm still in shock that this fic is really finished. I started this story on a whim, a silly little idea that wouldn't leave me alone, and I never expected it to gather the kind of interest and attention that it did. The fact that so many people are as invested in this story and these characters as I am...it means so much to me that I literally can't put how I'm feeling into words (I've been trying for the past hour).

Thank you for spending your Fridays with me for almost two years.

Thank you for laughing at my "tentative plan is to wrap this up in 20 chapters" author's note way back in chapter four.

Thank you for reading and commenting and being everything a writer could ever want for an audience.

THANK YOU. ♥

Beta-ed by [totallynotevil](#), who has helped streamline my writing process, thereby making my weekly updates possible.

Cheerled by [Arboreal](#), who has listened to my rambling and somehow understood it all.

"This is a story I heard from my mother, who heard it from her mother, who heard it from her father, who heard it from his uncle, who heard it from..." The woman continued, recounting generations of her ancestry as a precursor to her tale and evidence of its veracity.

"I feel old." Tony whined.

Loki wrapped his arms around Tony's torso and tucked his face into the bend of Tony's neck to hide the chuckle that would probably get them thrown out of the crowded inn, if not arrested for disrespecting the sacred art of storytelling.

The planet they were visiting was small but robust with history not only of their own culture but also those across the Nine Realms. A treasure trove for all who studied the past and hoped to learn from it.

Or, a delightful respite for those weary from their own adventures and wanting to listen to those of others.

Or, a bittersweet remembrance for the few who had known loss too well and found comfort in their loved ones living on in memories other than their own.

"A long, long time ago, on the planet Terra, there was a man who wasn't a quite a man."

Tony frowned. "I was, too."

Loki shushed him gently. After centuries, the feel of his breath still sent a shiver down Tony's spine.

"His skin was covered by iron, his heart was made of a star, and his veins were filled with fire. When he raised his voice, the world kneeled to hear him speak. When he kicked his feet, the winds carried him to the skies. When he opened his palms, new life burst forth and flourished. Children gathered around him, hoping to learn from his wisdom and emulate his greatness."

Team Iron Man had produced some of the finest scientists of Earth.

JARVIS had sent him an article theorizing that the program had been what pushed the next generations out into the galaxy, reframing the future as Tony had once asked of them.

"Creatures flocked to him, a red-scaled dragon and a green-skinned beast and a monstrous amalgamation so fearsome that its name had been lost for most dared not speak it."

Rhodey would either be shaking his head at being remembered by an offhanded nickname or laughing at the ridiculousness of a platypus being the source of such terror.

Today, Tony decided that it would be the latter. He closed his eyes and heard Rhodey's bright laughter intermixed with the high-pitched snorts that Rhodey had always denied making.

"Gods sought his counsel and company, one in particular was so enamored that he claimed exclusivity and offered immortality as a sign of his undying devotion."

Tony settled back against Loki, fitting together seamlessly the way they had since the first embrace, and listened.

The details might change and the names might shift, told by the voices of strangers or written in alien languages, but his story - *their story* - had left its marks on history, dotting across the galaxy and scattered over the Nine Realms.

An endless constellation that always guided him back to the beginning.

"It all started with a drink..."

End Notes

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