

## Wiki-How Doesn't Tell You How to Save the World. You Have to Write Your Own Instructions.

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# Wiki-How Doesn't Tell You How to Save the World. You Have to Write Your Own Instructions.

by [SilverTonguedSlytherin1](#)

## Summary

After Afghanistan, Tony Stark tried to be a good man, and his life went to hell because of it. He was fine with it, though, if only because he was sure he was working towards a better world. He didn't care about the abuse he suffered because lives were being saved.

Then Thanos came. He came, and he snapped his fingers and half the universe was gone.

By some miracle or damnation, Tony is sent back to Afghanistan. He's grateful for his second chance, and he won't squander this one.

What was the phrase again, "Merchant of Death: Yes; Iron Man: Not Recommended"? That sounds right. He'll rewrite the book if it's wrong.

## Notes

To be clear, this fic is Civil War Team Iron Man, Not Steve Rogers Friendly, and is Canon Divergent. If you don't like these things, don't come cuss at me about it. You are warned, and the comments are moderated.

Also, to be blunt, Tony will not be stopping the weapons manufacturing in this fic. I understand that a lot of people feel like that's one of the most heroic things about him, but I disagree. Firmly and wholeheartedly. That disagreement doubles in Time Travel fics because the issue becomes not about world peace but about a psycho who wants to wipe out half of all life. No amount of clean energy or intellicrops or clean water can stop someone like Thanos, but a Jericho might. So, those of you who think Stark Industries making weapons is wrong/villainous might want to consider another fic as well. I'm happy to discuss our differences of opinion on this matter, though, as long as it remains civil and my readers aren't attacked.

To jehall2, I hope you feel better soon! I'm sending you lots of well-wishes and positive energy.

To Primus 1661, I know this isn't quite what you asked for, but I hope you like it anyway!

To Picasso25, your fic The Butterfly Effect is one of my biggest inspirations for this one!

This fic is also inspired by From A to Z by rachel500, which I am advising my readers to avoid. The fic is tagged as Civil War Team Iron Man, and it really, really isn't. There are a lot of things which happen in it which I feel are against the nature of the tag. For example, in the fic, a Senator reveals to the world that Hydra had Howard and Maria killed. Tony rightfully has a panic attack. Not long after, he apologizes for not telling Rogers and Romanov that he knew already - despite the fact that they were once again hiding the information from each other. (Chp. 11) The whole thing is written off as the team needing to work on their communication, and the only thing really said about Tony's panic attack is that it's problematic. (Chp. 12) Later, the author introduces the Super-Hero Registration Act instead of the Sokovia Accords, solely for the purpose of Tony joining the team in opposing it. (Chp. 16)

Normally, I would not include a negative review, but when I asked for advice on whether or not to include the fic in my inspirations list, the only advice I received was to do so, along with said warning. As such, here we are. I want to make it clear that I'm not trying to cause drama or trouble. I only want readers to be forewarned.

I got the quotes from Endgame from a website called ficquotes.

- Inspired by [Writing challenge Team Iron Man](#) by [Primus1661](#)
- Inspired by [The Butterfly effect](#) by [Picasso25](#)

## Back in Black

They're all sitting in the Compound's conference room when Steve says, "We've been hunting Thanos for three weeks now through face scans and satellites, so far we have got nothing. Tony, you fought him..."

Tony responds, "What are you talking about? I didn't fight him. No, he wiped my face with a planet while the wizard gave away the stone. That's what happened, there's no fight..."

"Okay, did he give you any clues, any coordinates?"

Tony can't believe Rogers just asked him that question. What did he think, that Thanos just rattled off where he was going as he beat the hell out of Tony? He doesn't mention his incredulity, though. Instead, he finds himself saying, "I saw this coming a few years back, I had a vision, but I didn't want to believe it. Now it's true."

"Tony, I'm going to need you to focus..."

And now Tony is boiling with rage. "I *needed* you, as in past tense. That trumps what you need. It's too late, buddy. Sorry. You know what I need? You know what I need? I need a shave. I don't believe I ever remember telling you this..."

Rhodey tries to calm him, "Tony, Tony..."

Tony doesn't pay attention, though, not with his anger boiling as it is now, "What we needed was a suit of armor around the world! Remember that? Whether it impacted our precious freedoms or not, that's what we needed!"

"Well, that didn't work out, did it?" Rogers asks in his Captain-America-Knows-Better-Than-You voice.

Tony ignores him. "I said we would lose. You said, "We will do that together too." Guess what, Cap? *We lost*, and you weren't there. But that's what we do, right? Our best work after the fact? We're the *Avengers*, not the *Prevengers*, right?"

Rhodey's worry drowns him as he says, "Okay, you made your point, just sit down, okay?"

"No, no, here's my biggest point, he said..."

Rhodey tries for pragmatism, saying, "Just sit down, okay? We need you. You're new blood."

Tony snarls at that, "Bunch of tired old wheels! I got nothing for you, Cap! I've got no coordinates, no clues, no strategies, no options! Zero, zip, nada. No trust - liar." What he wouldn't give to go back in time about now. He didn't have these problems until Afghanistan, and looking back, he'd have done a lot of things differently after it.

The thing is, he just doesn't know how to fix things now. He fumbles for the ARC Reactor and pulls it out, "Here, take this. You'll find him, if you do put that on. You hide -" the world

goes black. Peace at last.

It doesn't stick, of course.

He wakes up to Yinsen operating on him in the desert.

Tony knows he's not dead because of that. After all, if Hell is a repetition of his worst memory, surely the cosmic rulers of the universe would know that watching Pete fade to dust was the worst moment of his life, that Obie's betrayal is second, and Rogers' is third. Surely they know that open-heart surgery without painkillers somehow only barely scrapes his top ten worst moments, right? So, no, he's not dead. He's not sure how he's here, but he's not dead.

And not dead is generally a good place to be. There's almost always the hope for improvement as long as the "not" stays in place.

That doesn't mean Tony is looking forward to waterboarding, though.

Yinsen tells him, "We met once before, but I doubt you remember me."

"Ho Yinsen, Bern 2000," Tony says, then admits only a touch apologetically, "I wasn't exactly polite." But, damn, life had been simpler then.

Yinsen looks (impressed? confused? stunned?) at Tony and says, "If I had been as drunk as you, I couldn't have stood up, much less given a lecture on integrated circuits. I certainly would not be able to remember someone's name who I only met once."

Tony shrugs but doesn't comment.

In one lifetime, Tony had dedicated himself to peace after Afghanistan. He had stopped making weapons, had went so far as to buy them back. And where had it gotten him? He had recieved less respect with each passing day, and he had less of his political clout as well. After all, even a billionaire can only buy so much. And, you know what, Tony could have lived with that, if half the universe wasn't turned to dust.

But it was.

So Tony is going to get himself out of this cave, and he's going to do his best to save Yinsen. But whether the doctor lives or dies, Tony isn't going to drop everything for the man's ill-thought wish. No, world peace is a lovely wish, but all the clean energy in the world won't help when an alien army decides to wipe out half the planet.

It still takes three months, mostly because Tony is afraid of escaping and dying of exposure because Rhodey wasn't nearby looking for him. This time, however, the ARC Reactor and the suit are built better (even though Tony cannot wait for time in his lab with proper materials). This time, he builds a shield for Yinsen. This time, the doctor doesn't die. This time, Tony drags the suit behind him after escaping, so ~~Obie Stane~~ Obie can't find it.

He still feels relief at seeing those Air Force choppers, even though he knew they were coming. He tries to run to Rhodey, but he falls. That's okay, though, because his Platypus

catches him.

"Next time you ride with me," Rhodey commands with relief.

Tony nods.

Rhodey practically carries him to the helicopter, and Tony doesn't protest. He tells Rhodey, "Don't let them mess with the thing in my chest. It's an electromagnet, keeps the shrapnel from ripping apart my heart."

Tony doesn't need to see Rhodey's face to know it's filled with horror.

~\*~

Tony speaks politely with the military doctors who come to check on him, to the officers who come to speak with him about his escape. He tells them about the Stark weapons, apologizes fervently.

General Bowden tells him, "Dr. Stark, I'm sure I speak for everyone when I say that this leak is not your fault. You can't be expected to micromanage every detail of a company SI's size, so don't you worry. We'll get this sorted out as quickly as possible, although I have to warn you, this leak is probably pretty high up given what you saw."

"Yes, sir. I know. Start your review from the top, myself included."

The General gives him a nod. No doubt they were going to do so anyway, but the fact that Tony is offering is apparently comforting.

~\*~

He chooses to remain in the military hospital while they investigate him. It's safe, especially because they let Rhodey stay much of the time. It also allows him to have a conference call with the Board, wherein he describes what he saw in Afghanistan and explain that they are going to halt - but not stop - weapons production until the leak is resolved. For the most part, their reactions are actually pretty supportive.

Tony knows that part of it is because the move is temporary, but he can't help but wonder what the reaction would have been if he had called a Board meeting before the press conference. It really was an arrogant thing to do. Honestly, he really can't blame them for being upset with him. Stark Industries is a weapons manufacturer. Of course the Board would be upset that he made the decision to shut down their primary product. Hell, if a comic book publisher just up and decided to make textbooks instead, their Board would be angry too.

Still, he should be able to avoid being locked out this time, and isn't that a relief. It likely helps that he's already passing along schematics for things they can produce - including prosthetics designs. When asked how he came up with them so quickly, he replies, "I spent three months locked in a cave, and the only practical thing I could work on was my escape. I had to think of something, or I would go crazy, and weapons weren't an option because I might have let something slip."

Tony really hopes he gets released soon, so he can build the improved ARC reactor.

~\*~

Tony's breath catches when Secretary Pierce comes into his room that evening. His presence scares Tony. He hadn't come last time, after all. And a man like Pierce - even if he wasn't the head of Hydra - would have enough pull to frame Tony for the under-the-table dealing. He smiles, and it isn't reassuring.

Tony sits up as best he can and returns it. "Good evening, Mr. Secretary," he greets. "What can I do for you?" It's polite, respectful, and it's missing Tony's usual note of playful snark. He figures three months of torture is enough for him to "grow up."

Pierce gestures towards the seat in the room, and Tony nods. "You're not the same man who went to Afghanistan, are you?"

"What's the saying, sir, "Pain makes men out of boys"?"

Pierce assesses him; that's the best way to describe it. Tony can practically see him take his past profiling of Tony and put it in a box, so he can look at Tony anew. That he apparently approves of what he sees makes Tony sick, but he doesn't let it show. Besides, maybe he can use it. If he can get Pierce to trust him, to bring him into the fold of Hydra, then Tony can bring it down sooner, hopefully without the U.S. losing quite as many secrets or operatives. If nothing else, he'll be able to get his dad's research soon-

"There are several things which I would like to discuss with you, Dr. Stark, but they can wait until we're in a more private setting. I will have my assistant arrange a meeting with Ms. Potts. No, I came to tell you that you have been cleared of any wrongdoing with regards to illicit weapons sales, as has Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan. We are beginning the investigation into Stark Industries other executives and the Board. We will let you know when we discover anything."

"Thank you, sir. I look forward to talking to you in greater depth."

"Also, a Ms. Everhart has discovered the leak, but we are handling her as well. However, it would benefit both SI and the U.S. greatly for you to speak with her once the situation is dealt with."

It's phrased as a suggestion, but Tony hears the order. He bristles a bit instinctively, but he has no reason to oppose it. "Thank you, sir. I will certainly take your advice."

~\*~

The next morning, he is flown to Malibu. He doesn't eat the cheeseburger, knowing now how sick it will make him. Instead, he says, "Take me home, Hap. I have to redo this thing before it gives out."

He builds a new reactor, fingers itching for Starkium instead of Palladium. If Pierce doesn't give Tony Howard's research within a month, he's going to have an epiphany over the Stark

Expo model. He makes the new reactor quickly, barely putting in more than a dozen improvements from his last Palladium-cored one.

Right after calling Pepper in to help him change it, he has Jarvis (and, God, he hadn't realized how much he missed his baby boy) set in to producing more. He doesn't think that ~~Ob~~-~~Sta~~-Obie will get to him this time, but he wants to be prepared in case.

He's already got Jarvis buying stock in AIM as well as SI. He needs Extremis. As long as there is shrapnel in his chest, he won't breathe easily.

Wait. Extremis. A tech-based super-serum. A super-serum Tony understood, understood how to remove even. A super-serum that would help give them a fighting chance against Thanos. Why hadn't he thought of it before?



# Change of Plans

## Chapter Notes

This chapter is dialogue-heavy. Sorry for the lack of action. It was fun - if unexpected - to write.

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

Obie's ousting is quick and quiet. He "wrecks" while speeding to Tony's Malibu mansion. Of course, everyone's eyebrows raise at the explanation. After all, Tony Stark learned how to buy his way out of a speeding ticket from both Howard Stark and Obadiah Stane. No, most people don't buy that it was simple speeding.

They don't begrudge him drinking, though. Anybody would, given the circumstances. And they don't begrudge Tony hiding it. America's collective heart aches for him: tortured for three months, escaping only to have your godfather die on his way to see you. It's heartbreaking.

Tony's glad nobody has the nerve to tell them that Obie was stone-cold sober. He's even more glad that nobody has the nerve to tell them about the bullet.

He shakes Rumlow and Barton's hands and thanks them.

Coulson says, "You seem to be handling this rather well, Stark."

Tony's lips quirk a bit, and he shares a look with Pierce before looking at Coulson again. "Agent, I've been designing the majority of the U.S.'s weapons since I was seventeen. I may have enjoyed the luxuries that come with my status, but I've always been aware of how things work," he decides to take a jab, "especially with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division."

"How do you know about SHIELD?" Coulson asks. Barton steps forward, but Rumlow remains unmoved.

"My father helped found it, Agent. Yes, he kept me away from it, especially while I was younger, but that doesn't mean he kept it a secret from me." Okay, that's a lie, but only just. In Howard's notes, he had learned that Howard planned to tell him about SHIELD after he turned eighteen. Since he passed away before then, he never got the chance.

The SHIELD agent and handler look dumbfounded, but Rumlow and Pierce look unbothered. Tony guesses that it is believable then.

"Why not contact us, then?" Coulson asks.

"I felt my work would better serve the nation by being used by all branches and divisions; besides, would you have truly trusted me?"

Agent has no answer for that question.

He doesn't have an answer for why SHIELD had his father's belongings either. The research, of course, he understands, but what right did they have to a home movie?

Pierce, not Coulson, apologizes. "I'm sorry, Dr. Stark," he says, "I was unaware of the extent of what SHIELD had kept of your father's."

Tony nods, pretending to believe the lie.

The conversation does not get better. He learns SHIELD wants to provide him with security. His choices are either Rumlow or Barton. His choices are a Nazi and a man who joked about Rhodey's back being broken. He chooses Rumlow; he's less likely to deck him just to do it, and if he has to kill Rumlow, being part of Hydra is a pretty good reason to be killed in the U.S. He might even get a medal for it.

He will have to sideline Extremis for a bit, though, until he can get rid of Hydra.

At least he can avoid Romanov.

~\*~

Tony heads to his lab immediately, and Rumlow follows behind, carrying the box. In fact, he insists on carrying the box.

"You know, I'm aware that you aren't my butler."

"You got metal in your heart, the thing keeping it from killing you is killing you too, and you've been tortured for three months. I think you get a pass on the heavy lifting for a little while."

Well, when you put it like that... "Thank you."

He wonders if Rumlow is Hydra yet. It's 2008. There are seven years between now and 2015. A lot can change during that amount of time.

Tony's not holding his breath, and he won't cry about it, but he makes a note to try and save Rumlow. A man like that could help a lot against Thanos.

~\*~

"You have a lot more lady-scientists than SHIELD," Rumlow observes, the morning after Tony rediscovered Starkium and made the new ARC reactor. He had been allowed into the party R&D threw in celebration.

"Yeah. We do our best to hire on merit alone. A lot of tech companies are hesitant to hire women, especially those like SI who specialize in weapons manufacturing. They seem to

think that women are too delicate or something."

"You disagree?"

"You saw my R&D team. Did any of those women seem fragile to you?"

"The little blonde in the pink flower dress?"

"Moriarty?" Tony laughs. "That girl is a Lilith-blessed demon," he says fondly. "She's the one who designed the tank shells." He had hated to see her go in the first time around, but her passion, her skill was for weapons. Now, though, Tony could help her truly master the craft.

"I thought you were big on the whole "don't call women girls" thing?"

"I am, but she's seventeen. She's a girl for the next ten months."

"You've got kids working for you?"

"The one's with Bachelor's Degrees from MIT, yes."

~\*~

Pepper looks at him incredulously. "You want me to be the Chief Financial Officer?"

"Yes." He sits back in his chair and takes a long drink of coffee. "Look, Pep, I remember how you were promoted. You noticed an accounting mistake that I had made. You pepper-sprayed Happy in the face to get to me. The Board agrees that you are qualified for the job, but more importantly, I trust you to do it. So will you take it?"

"Yes! But what are you going to do for a personal assistant?"

"I have a couple of people in mind, don't worry." Namely Belinda Keener or May Parker, but he won't share that just yet.

They talk a little more about the transition of Pepper from being his PA. He knows she can handle the job, of course. She was and will be an amazing CEO. He's hoping starting as CFO will help her adjust, but also, well, right now Stark Industries is in a bit of a rough patch. They don't need to add more trouble to it by switching CEOs.

~\*~

"Sir, I must ask why your behavior has changed so much?" JARVIS asks that night when they're finally alone. He had informed Rumlow that the lab would be in blackout mode for a few hours, and, according to J, the agent has fully respected it.

Tony breathes. It's been two weeks; he's surprised JARVIS waited this long to ask. He engages his strictest security protocols before he says anything, then he tells JARVIS everything.

"You have changed things quite significantly already, Sir."

Tony hums his agreement, while he focuses on the hardware update he's giving J.

"I worry about the effectiveness of your foresight if you continue to change things so dramatically."

"I know I'm changing things, J, but I'd rather fly blind with a stronger foundation than just keep putting the fractures because I have a blueprint."

"I agree completely, Sir. What I meant was that we might be best suited approaching things differently."

"What do you mean, J?"

"Have you considered reaching out to Doctors Foster and Strange, Sir?"

"She's as anti-military as they come, J. I could do wonders with her work, truly, but she won't come willingly, and I don't want to force her."

"Strange is, he gave away the Time Stone, J. I know he said that there was only one way to save the universe, but it's not like he told anybody what it was."

"I believe you need to rethink your stance on "forcing" Dr. Foster. You would compensate her more than fairly, and many people would be better for it."

"It's still wrong, J." He wishes his voice was firmer.

JARVIS' silence makes it clear that he understands just how rocky Tony's conviction is. Doubtlessly, he will press the issue later.

"As for Doctor Strange, you made it quite clear that he was an exceptional neurosurgeon before his accident. With Stark Industries expansion further into the medical field, his expertise could be invaluable."

"He could be a security risk too, J."

"Then is it not better to find that out for yourself, Sir, before he becomes a Master of the Mystic Arts?"

Tony sighs. That's all true. That's all true, and he doesn't want it to be. But it reminds him of another issue.

"J?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I don't want to kill green bean."

"Not existing is not the same thing as being killed."

"My heart disagrees, J."

"Then perhaps you should postpone your perfection of Extremis until after Doctors Banner and Ross complete their experiments with Gamma Rays."

"Except we know my suit played a large role in the renewed interest in a super-serum, and I'm agreeing to sell some suits to the government this time - although I'll wait until I'm through with Hydra and AIM to deliver them."

"I will run what calculations I can, Sir."

"Thanks, J. And how are your back-ups coming along?"

"Very well, Sir. I have them at various locations throughout the nation."

"Good. I'll put them in Faraday cages like this one as soon as I can. I'm not losing you, baby boy."

~\*~

"You are still making weapons," Yinsen says with distaste when he is finally released from the hospital.

"Stark Industries is the primary weapons manufacturer for the U.S., but we're expanding further into other avenues as well," Tony says. In one lifetime, this man's approval meant the world to him. In this one, however, Tony can't bring himself to care. Maybe Yinsen will understand after New York, maybe he won't. It doesn't matter. Tony's in the universe-saving business, not the popularity one.

"Even after what you saw? Even after what you experienced? Even after seeing who got your weapons?"

Tony snarls, "Obadiah Stane was the Chief Financial Officer for Stark Industries. Do you know what that means, Yinsen? It means that it was his job to oversee accounting. It means it was his job to prevent this sort of thing from happening because in a company SI's size, no one person can do everything.

"And do you know who Obadiah Stane was - is - to me? He's my godfather! I called him Uncle Obie growing up! For the eight months between my parents' deaths and my eighteenth birthday, he was my sole legal guardian. I had no reason not to trust him!"

Tony breathes, "Yes, we had an issue, but I handled it as quickly and effectively as possible. I have personally been tracking down the illicitly sold weapons with the Department of Defense's support. I freed your hometown from the Ten Rings; I didn't manage that by asking nicely.

"JARVIS, my AI, is taking the responsibility to oversee all matters of operation in greater depth, at least until I can get a new AI prepared for the job. Nothing like Stane will happen to Stark Industries again.

"Now, have you considered my proposal to work in our expanded medical division? It's one of few options for you to be allowed to stay in the U.S., although I'm sure there are a great number of hospitals willing to hire you as well."

## Chapter End Notes

So, what do y'all think about Rumlow being redeemed? I haven't decided yet, but I'm thinking about it. I just think that a lot of things can make a person go bad, and if the timeline is changed, those events may not happen. So, yeah, it's something to consider.

# Tear Down Sand Castles to Build Mansions

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony slept with a lot of people in the past, but the only one he regrets sleeping with is Christine Everhart. She was an above average partner but a headache afterwards. He refuses to meet with her alone, choosing to take Jennifer Walters from legal with him.

Everhart doesn't bother with pleasantries. "Who did you pay to get my story shut down?"

"Careful, Ms. Everhart, or I'll have a suit for slander drawn up before you're out the door," Jennifer says.

Tony smiles in the least friendly way he can, "No one, Ms. Everhart. In fact, I was informed of your investigation while in the hospital and only after Secretary Pierce put an end to it."

She jabs, "How are you sleeping at night, now that you know your weapons have killed Americans? Do you still feel the same way about the 'sticks' you sell?"

"Let me be clear, Ms. Everhart, no American blood is on *my* hands, so while I will do my best to ensure that not so much as a single bullet ends up in the hands of our enemies again, it's because I am taking responsibility, not because I am guilty."

"I don't suppose you would be willing to share what steps you are taking?"

"I am working with multiple government and military officials to create our new policies. Unfortunately, Ms. Everhart, telling you would be a security breach."

She glares at him. God, it's been so long since someone hated him for something he actually did, he honestly doesn't know how to respond.

"Look, I get that you don't like me," he tries, "but do you actually think I'm capable of terrorism?"

She looks him over, then shakes her head. She laughs, somewhere between kind and cruel, "No. I think you're closer to pissing red, white, and blue than the great Steve Rogers himself."

Now *Tony* laughs. He was a globalist for a decade; it's hard to be reminded how nationalist his views were - how nationalist his policies will have to be, at least until after New York.

"So where are you going from here?"

"The story is being dropped, but don't think that doesn't mean I won't be watching."

"I expect nothing less."

She leaves, and Jennifer doubles over with laughter. "Remind me why I was here again?"

"To destroy her if she thought I was a terrorist, and to make sure there was a witness to what I said?"

"So basically, you just wanted a witness to your glory?" she teases.

"You can't prove anything!"

~\*~

Tony doesn't think he's spent as much time with Rhodey as he has recently in years. After he stopped making weapons, Rhodey's duties often took him away from Tony. Now, though, now he's seeing more of Rhodey than he did even before Afghanistan.

"You're working hard, Tony, some say too hard."

"Are you one of them, Platypus?"

"No, but I want to know why because I know you better than to say guilt. Stane's treason wasn't your fault, and you're smart enough to know that. So level with me. What's going on?"

Tony sips his smoothie to buy time. He wants to tell Rhodey. He can't, though. Rhodey would be obligated to tell his superiors, and Tony doesn't know what would happen then. Would he be carted off to a psychiatric hospital? Would he be locked away in the sort of blacksite prison that makes the Raft look like a beach resort? The only thing he knows for sure is that it wouldn't help the fight against Thanos for people to know now.

So a half-truth it is, "You know I've been buying up stock in Advanced Idea Mechanics, right?"

"Yeah, but SI is always buying things like that."

"This time is a bit different, Platypus."

Rhodey cocks his head to the side, "Tones?"

"I don't have proof, but I think AIM is in bed with the Ten Rings, Rhodey, and the only way to get proof is to get the company." He breathes out harshly, taking a chance to add, "Maybe I'm paranoid, maybe I'm chasing zebras, but I'm worried how deep the Ten Rings' hold is; I'm worried they're not the only ones with footholds here."

Right now, Jim is hovering between Rhodey and Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes. "You know more than you're telling me."

"Yes."

"*Nothing* you can prove?"

"Not a thing. Not yet."

"Scale of ten."



"Thirteen."

"Damn it." He hesitates for a moment, before saying, "You've been speaking with Ross a lot more lately."

"I have."

"Are you sure you can trust him?"

Can he trust Thaddeus Ross? "Look, General Ross is a ruthless, merciless asshole, but if I'm sure of nothing else, he is a ruthless, merciless, *American* asshole. So do I trust him with my personal well-being? No, sir. But do I trust him with national security?" Tony's lips quirk. "Rhodey, trust me when I say the man would kill Captain America himself if he thought it was for the good of the country."

It's not the end of the discussion, of course, but it's enough for now.

~\*~

The past month has been a whirlwind. He's been "inventing" at a break-neck pace, although most of it has been creations he has already made, most of it for the Avengers in his other life. Since he already has Starkium entering mass production, he's skipped some of the initial steps, although not too many. So far, the general consensus by the military is that he took the deaths of the soldiers far too hard and far too personally, and this is his atonement. That's actually not far from the truth, especially the first time. He remembers the fervent *need* to create the EXO-suits the first time, especially since he refused to give them access to the Iron Man suits.

Now? Now it's coupled with the knowledge of how ill-prepared they are for interplanetary war. Now he understands how useful the suits could be.

And, okay, yes, he is preparing to skip to the nanites within the year.

But, look, he doesn't trust Wakanda. They're too secretive, too protective of Vibranium. He doesn't trust them not to claim Starkium as their right as well. He doesn't trust them not to try and take it.

But that's okay; they can handle Wakanda.

After all, it's 2008, and Tony is from 2018 with all of its inventions and innovations. He's already got Starkium, and he already knows how to handle it. He's also got it in the hands of the nation's best and brightest.

He gave June Moriarty free access, and said to have at it. So far, she's created bullets that can almost pierce even his armor and a plasma shield that looks straight out of Star Wars. She's working to improve the weaponry on the Quinjets, something about ARC-powered lasers. In another life, he would be concerned. Now, though, now he's simply intrigued.

He gave Helen Cho free access, and she's revolutionized medicine five times since breakfast. Some of these ideas, neither the FDA nor the CDC even have policies to handle them. He

can't wait to give her access to Extremis.

He gave Stephen Strange free access and paired him with Quentin Beck. It will be easier to keep an eye on them, if they're together. He provided the concept of and framework for BARF, and so far they've ran with it. They're even talking about bringing in Jennifer Walters to see if there is any way to use it in court.

Originally, he wanted to have Strange work on arm prosthetics, but he's not sure how necessary that will be with Extremis. Plus, well, he'd rather Barnes no longer be a threat before he improved on something so weaponizable.

To be honest, Tony suspects his people will have dragged the U.S. (and the rest of the world to a lesser degree) into the future, onto the same playing field as Wakanda by the decade's end.

Tony hopes once they get onto a more level ground with technology, they can have a partnership and become allies, if nothing more. They need capable fighters for the coming war with Thanos.

The month has been busy in other ways. Stark Industries is still recovering from its losses, but they're growing as well. And spies have been amongst those trying to enter their ranks. Rumlow had almost doubled-over with Tony's quick dismissal of Romanov's application, "Tell Fury to stop trying to send in his pet KGB agent."

Yinsen has taken the role as being Tony's "voice of reason." So has General Ross. Sometimes Tony will bring up an issue, so they'll argue with each other, giving him the peace to work. So far, he has yet to find a single thing they agree on, except that Betty Ross is a brilliant doctor.

~\*~

Tony has had more meetings with Alexander Pierce in the past month than he did in his past life in total. That is not in any way an exaggeration. At this point, Tony's going to rip out Hydra just to have the time to get things done.

The Secretary looks at him with piercing eyes for a moment before speaking, "You understand, of course, that the world needs order, don't you, Dr. Stark?"

Finally, they're getting somewhere. "Of course, Mr. Secretary." To be convincing, he adds, "I've been wondering lately where I would be, where *we* would be, if I had been given more discipline after my parents' deaths." Pierce doesn't even twitch. "Of course, now we know why that wasn't the case."

"Indeed, but you must know that it is never too late to change."

"I hope you are right, sir."

"I know I am. I can give you the opportunity to use yourself to your full potential."

"Mr. Secretary?"

"I have been informed that in three months you will be coming to Washington for two weeks for a series of meetings. I would appreciate it if you would take the time to meet with a political ally of mine, Senator Stern. I believe you will find his desires greatly align with your own."

Sure, about as well as rats and D-Con. Tony nods, "It would be my pleasure to meet with the Senator, Mr. Secretary."

If Tony has any say, Hydra will be ash before that meeting.

~\*~

AIM, it turns out, already has the base of operations in Rose Hill, TN. Since SI has acquired the lion's share of stock in it, Tony, as CEO, has every reason to go inspect it. Sometimes, the stars do align.

He's going with a team which includes Yinsen, Cho, and Strange, since they are his primary medical staff. Moriarty is coming mostly because Tony is not leaving her unsupervised when she's talking about Tesla's deathray; nope, that is only to be done under adult supervision.

Happy and Rumlow are coming as security, along with a few others. Tony is grateful he convinced Pepper to come with them. He had argued security and business, both of which are true, but they aren't the whole story. Tony is hoping to gauge Pepper's reaction to Extremis during this meeting; he's hoping he'll get her to keep it this time.

The trip there is fun. Tony drives, and Happy rides shotgun. In the back are Pepper, Moriarty, and Rumlow. Moriarty is explaining the science behind the deathray, and Rumlow looks equal parts impressed and terrified from what Tony can see in the rearview mirror.

Tony swears if he loses her to Hydra because of Rumlow that he will kill him slowly.

Instead of saying as much, though, he asks, "Why do you want a deathray?"

"Why don't you?"

"That's not an answer, Miss Moriarty."

She huffs, rolling her eyes like a teenager who has been told her dad doesn't approve of her boyfriend. "Look, boss, we're the primary weapons manufacturer for the most militarized country on the planet. We need it."

"That's not everything, is it?" Pepper asks.

"No, ma'am. It's just," she breathes, "I don't know what happened in Afghanistan, and I'm not pressing to know. But you're different, boss, and it's not just trauma." She looks down and steels herself, "All of the old-workers say you haven't been this focused since right after 9/11. So I guess what I'm saying is that you clearly think something bigger is coming, and that means we need the best we can get, right?"

She sounds small and scared, and Tony is going to help her build the best deathray in the galaxy if it will help.

Besides, it can't hurt to have a deathray when they fight Thanos.

After Hydra is gone.

## Chapter End Notes

I kept jumping so far ahead in this chapter! The original had Hydra crashing already! So I'm not sure how much I like it, but this is what we've got. I really want to get to Rose Hill and hire Mrs. Keener!

Alright, so about tech and Wakanda, how advanced do we really think they are? Because I have to think that it's reasonable to suspect that Tony Stark from ten years in the future and with a synthetic Vibranium could catch up/be caught up with Wakanda quite quickly, much less if he involves other top scientists.

Okay, so yes, Quentin Beck wasn't a full villain to Tony's knowledge, but he's definitely someone Tony would want to watch given his reaction to the BARF demo. However, he's clearly intelligent, so Tony's not going to want to cast him aside, not with what they're facing.

# Guns 'N Rose Hill

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They have taken over the hotel's small conference room, so the first meeting between SI and AIM is on neutral ground. Tony's sure it's a fairly standard set-up, but it feels like he's been thrown back into the 90's. It's worse even than his usual experiences with non-SI buildings.

There aren't enough seats for everyone. Tony isn't surprised that Rumlow slips to stand behind him on his left, but he is surprised by how *right* it feels. It's not something Tony ever thought he would feel. It's just, Tony thinks he can trust Rumlow to actually have his back, and that's not a normal feeling for him. It's worse because for all Tony knows, Rumlow is waiting for a kill order, yet he still feels less likely to attack Tony than his previous team. He doesn't know what to make of it.

Killian and Maya are the only representatives of AIM present. He's wearing a two hundred dollar off-the-rack suit, and she's in a pencil dress worth no more than a hundred and fifty dollars. The shoes are cheap: faux leather oxfords for him and forty dollar Comfort Soles heels for her. There's a broad and evident gap in the funds AIM was able to get on its own and the funds SI has on hand. It's a familiar position for Tony.

He takes off his sunglasses, the sign that he's officially starting the meeting. "Welcome, Ms. Hansen and Mr. Killian. It's a pleasure to welcome you both to Stark Industries; I must say that it is disappointing it took us nearly a decade to meet again," he lies smoothly.

"What?" Killian asks.

"Well, you see, Mr. Killian, I believe we were supposed to meet at midnight, but the lovely Ms. Hansen here distracted me. I searched for you in the morning, but nobody knew where you had went." That's a bold-face lie, but, honestly, nobody there was sober enough in the morning to remember anything either way. "And of course, it was so much harder to get in contact with people back then..."

He watches Killian's face flicker. It's like the hate and resentment visibly drain from him. Who knew a lie could do so much good?

"Why the interest in Extremis now?" Maya asks.

"There are a number of reasons. First, as you may know, my heart is full of shrapnel. Dr. Yinsen removed what he could, but there is still a significant amount left. All of our simulations say that surgery to remove it is even more likely to kill me than leaving it in with the ARC reactor. However, I'm not fond of metal shards in my heart, a gaping hole in my chest, or significantly diminished lung capacity. As such, selfishly, I am hopeful to use Extremis to heal myself.

"However, I do not intend to hoard it, Ms. Hansen. I see limitless applications for your creation, not the least of all our active-duty military and our veterans."

"What changed your mind?"

"What do you mean?"

She holds up the card with the equation on it, worn from years of study. "You almost solved it then, drunk off your ass. Actually, no, it seems more like you did solve it, but you stopped." She looks him straight in the eyes and says, "*You* have been the primary developer of weapons for the U.S. since 1992. You have been the Merchant of Death since 2002. So why now?"

"You aren't going to buy selfishness, are you?"

She snorts. "Dr. Stark, if you were half as selfish as you want people to think you are, you would have sold the U.S. out the second you woke up in the Ten Rings hands. But you didn't. Three months of torture, and you didn't even tell them that the President lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. So, I ask again, *why now?*"

Tony certainly has a knack for picking perceptive bed-mates. He sighs, "I was arrogant before my capture. I had little real knowledge of the threats we're facing. I thought that Extremis was too dangerous because there is a slippery slope of where it can go, of when "perfection" is achieved. But, now I realize that's a slope we have to summit rather ignore because what we're facing is far worse than what we are prepared to beat."

It's the truth, although not all of it. It feels good to say, but at the same time, it's awful. Moriarty is scared by his words; he can see it in her eyes that she's looking for a target to hit, thinking of a weapon with which to hit it. Happy and Pepper steel themselves, confused by his vagueness. He hasn't been up front with them, and they want to know what he faced. Strange and Cho are doctors, and they're having a nonverbal debate about whether or not he needs one.

He can't see Rumlow, but he can feel the other man tense. Doubtlessly, he knows the sort of torture Tony faced, possibly even the specifics of it. He wonders what sort of threat Rumlow is envisioning, if he thinks that Tony truly underestimated the terrorist group so badly or if he thought Tony learned of another threat. He wonders which would make him more appealing to Hydra.

Yinsen is, to be honest, Tony doesn't know what Yinsen is. He knew who Tony was before his capture. He saw what Tony suffered during his captivity. Somehow, though, Tony doesn't think Yinsen is convinced that waterboarding and beatings made Tony turn to the idea of a super-serum. He's probably going to have to talk to the good doctor soon, although what he'll say is beyond his knowledge right now. After all, the truth is out of the question.

Killian is... *afraid?* Yes, he is. And it makes sense. AIM and the Ten Rings are nearly as tied as SHIELD and Hydra. Killian must know that there's blood in the water, and Tony has always been a shark. Well, if he's truly willing to reform, Tony might let him earn his forgiveness; he can't be a bigger traitor than Rogers, after all.

Maya, though, her reaction is the most perplexing. She looks sad. She hadn't looked like that when he saw her last time. He wonders if she isn't a pacifist, is she didn't hope that somehow "perfecting" people wouldn't stop the world's fighting. He wonders how much it pains her to hear that his first thought for who could benefit, other than himself (although, something says she doesn't think that's the real first reason) was the military.

Oh, well. He's been disappointing people since he was seventeen. At least they'll be alive to be disappointed.

~\*~

Rose Hill has exactly one restaurant, the diner Belinda Keener works in. They go in during the lunch rush, and it is a *rush*. Tony would almost bet an Iron Man suit that half the town comes in to eat. Mrs. Keener doesn't write down a single order, and she doesn't make a single mistake.

Tony couldn't have set this up any better.

In the end, he doesn't even have to approach her. Pepper does, without any prompting, handing the woman a business card with her cell phone number on it and requesting a meeting when the woman has time.

"I think that Ms. Potts has found your new assistant for you," Rumlow says.

"She would have the best idea of who could manage it."

Lunch is pleasant. The food is all-American: greasy and unhealthy. Tony is willing to rank their burgers in his top five for taste and the diner as a whole for its atmosphere. He'd forgotten what it's like to be respected for something other than Iron Man.

"Excuse me, sir, are you Tony Stark?" an older woman asks.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

She smiles, "Oh, nothing more than you already do. I just wanted to say thank you for what you do for this country and that I'm glad you're home safe. I prayed for you every night, you know."

He thanks her, honestly and wholeheartedly. He had *forgotten* that people cared about him when he was the Merchant of Death, or maybe he had never really known.

Dozens more people come to him, men shaking his hand, women and children hugging him. If Tony wanted to start a career in politics, now would probably be the time.

Tony doesn't leave until everything calms down, then he slips out of the booth, everyone else following. Mrs. Keener, though, asks if Pepper can have that conversation now, and Pepper accepts, so they sit back down. Happy stays with them, "just in case."

Tony is sure it has nothing to do with his telling Happy before the trip that he wanted to try to have a conversation with Rumlow, to gauge his loyalties. Nope, not a thing.

~\*~

"You're basically Elvis but you make tech instead of music," Rumlow says, sitting down on the couch, but only after Tony has claimed the armchair. It's a habit Tony would like to break, but he's not sure he'll be able to.

Tony grins, "Do you want me to start singing *Blue Christmas*?"

"Wrong season, man."

They chuckle; the silence that follows isn't exactly uncomfortable. Tony's fingers itch to get ahold of Extremis. He's already got J set on their financials.

"You know, if you need to work and need privacy, I can wait in the hallway."

"No, that's not necessary. I really need my lab and JARVIS' most secure servers to work on anything important, especially something like Extremis. Besides, I doubt the hallway would be comfortable."

"I've waited in worse."

"I'm sure." Tony hesitates for a moment, unsure how well this statement will be received. "Besides, why would I need you to leave? Secretary Pierce trusts you."

"I'm SHIELD, and you know Fury wants your intel."

"We also know you're more than that, and the Secretary would have told me if he felt the need for SHIELD to have more than it already does."

Rumlow seems to think those words have meaning because he asks, "Has the Secretary asked you to meet with anyone?"

"I'm meeting with Senator Stern during my trip to Washington."

Something changes in Rumlow then. It's hard to describe, but it's like the moment when Tony learned that Rhodey had turned down money to spy on him, like when he learned that Happy - Happy who didn't want to hurt anyone - had broken a reporter's jaw when they tried to bug his car, or like when he realized that Pepper had spent a whole year as his PA without trying to sleep with him. He guesses the best way to explain it is that Rumlow has learned (or at least thinks he's learned) that Tony is truly on his side.

That's good. If Rumlow thinks they're playing for the same team, maybe he won't notice when Tony steals him from Hydra.



This chapter and my muses got along about as well as a copperhead and a weedeater, which is to say that they didn't.

I'm thinking of writing the next chapter from other non-Tony points of view. I really want to delve into what Rumlow, Ross, Pierce, and Pepper are thinking.

So we begin the foundation of Rumlow's redemption! Woohoo!

All right, full disclosure, the first couple of drafts of this chapter had Rumlow going full "yes, sir" during that conversation with Tony, and it felt very unnatural. Too soon and too forced. I do want to write a scene where Rumlow (and/or someone else) thinks Tony is Hydra handler and acts accordingly. I think it could be a good way win people over, to be honest, to show that he's not a psychopathic sadist who abuses those under his authority (but at the same time, he's clearly willing to get things done).

# Things Fall Together

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony decides to move back to New York before they're even finished in Rose Hill. He announces the idea at breakfast, just to gauge everyone's reaction.

Moriarty shrugs, "It's closer to MIT, which will make it easier to finish my Master's."

Strange says, "I still have my apartment in the city and my license to practice in the state."

Rumlow tells him, "My orders are to go where you go; they aren't to tell you where to go."

Mrs. Keener looks happy, "It's still a long way away, but at least it's not on the other side of the country."

Pepper asks, "You always said it was important to be where the tech is at, and that tech is in California. What's changed?"

"Pep, let's be frank: tech is wherever SI is, especially right now." He takes a bite of bacon and waffle. He needs this next sentence to have about five different implications, each heard by different people at the table. "Besides, I think that I will have a lot of meetings in the Capitol in the coming months."

Moriarty doesn't like that statement. She winces a bit before rolling her shoulders back and lifting chin proudly. He's scared her again. She's probably thinking about the last time he was based in New York, right after 9/11 and the following year.

God, that was a lifetime ago. He didn't go to a single party for a year. He was in D.C. more than New York, and he spent more than one night in the White House itself making plans for weapons and tech they didn't have but sorely needed. Hell, there was a ten-week stint he and Rhodey called "boot camp" where Tony didn't leave Fort Drum.

He's not going back to that, hopefully, but he can see why she would think so.

Rumlow looks pleased. He's probably thinking about how much easier it will be for Tony to meet with Secretary Pierce and other Hydra officials.

Pepper asks, "What about Rhodey?"

"New York is actually closer to his family, and you know it has taken both our pull to keep him from being transferred to Langley."

Happy just nods, "You've always been a New Yorker, boss. I've been wondering when you'd decide to go home."

Pepper looks Tony over, and if it was anybody else, he would feel violated. "Do you want to go home?"

She means to the mansion. It's- the Tower isn't there, not yet. If he's going back to New York, he's going to the mansion. He hasn't been there in decades.

"Yeah, I do. I think, Pep, I think it's time to stop running."

"Well, all right then. After we eat, Belinda, I'll start walking through what needs to be done. There's quite a bit, no doubt."

And that's that.

~\*~

The whole drive home, Tony hopes that Alexander Pierce isn't waiting on him when he arrives.

He forgot to hope that Thaddeus Ross wasn't there either.

Can he have no peace? He squares his shoulders, extends his right hand, and greets warmly, "General! I didn't know you would be stopping by."

"Betty suggested it." He says as they shake hands, "She's hoping to ask a favor."

"Come on in, General," he says, leading the way. He probably should call Yinsen for this meeting just in case, but he's too tired to deal with the arguing. "You know Happy and Rumlow already. Is this conversation need-to-know?"

Thunderbolt takes one of the armchairs, and Tony takes the other. Happy sits on the couch, but Rumlow doesn't, choosing to once again take "his place" behind Tony's left side. He wonders if it has a specific meaning or if it's just the best position tactically.

"What can I do for you, General?"

"Betty and her *lover* Bruce Banner are interested in the Extremis virus. They would like to work with it."

"Is that a job application? Because while I intend to sell access to the virus to the military once we have stabilized it, I don't intend to do so beforehand."

"Yes."

"And am I supposed to accept or rescind these applications?"

"I don't have a say in who you hire."

"No, but this is Betty we're talking about, your kid. You've got to have some opinion. So, do you want me to hire her, him, both, or neither?" Tony would love to hire Betty, but he needs connections in the Army more than he needs her.

Ross looks at him with a lot of respect, so Tony guesses he said the right thing. "Both," but he isn't happy.

"You sure about that?"

"Betty wants to do this, but I don't think she'll leave him for it."

"You know, SI is going to be moving back to New York. She wouldn't actually have to choose."

The General looks intrigued before shaking his head. "No. Banner is just as interested in it. Besides, I don't need her thinking that I'm trying to interfere in her love life. She would probably marry him to spite me."

Tony grins like he's supposed to and starts running the math. There is no way he can get around meeting with Banner this time, but he might be able to ensure that Betty is there as a buffer. He's not foolish enough to think that he can change Banner's nature. The man is inherently a flight risk.

He says, "I'll need to know what you can tell me about their security clearances."

~\*~

Ross leaves about an hour later. Tony breathes a sigh of relief when Rumlow sits in the vacated seat instead of remaining standing.

"You really don't like this Banner guy," Happy deadpans.

"I don't think he's reliable."

"Why hire him? You're taking Betty; I doubt ol' Thunderbolt would care a lot if you didn't take Banner too."

"The guy has seven Ph.Ds. If he didn't take his let down well, he could kick up a fuss, and I would be called "petty." It would do more harm than hiring him."

"Are you really comfortable letting him near Extremis?"

"Not fully, but I can handle it." JARVIS would monitor everything to do with Extremis, including lab conditions and experiments. He would require authentication from Tony for it to be duplicated or saved onto another device. Is it a headache? Yes. But it's worth it for the security.

Happy sticks around for an hour longer, and they mostly talk about the move back to New York. He's only been to the mansion once, but he loved it. It's done up in that old-fashioned style he finds elegant. Tony offers him a guest room without thinking or regret.

"You sure, boss?"

"I would be nice to have everyone home, and you know how bad rent is in the city."

Happy grins. He's an orphan too, so the idea of family, of *home*, it means as much to him as Tony. He shouldn't have forgotten that. How much pain had he caused his friend that first time?

When Happy leaves, Tony and Rumlow head to the lab.

"Extremis?"

"Paperwork, but I missed my 'bots."

"They're like people, aren't they?"

Tony nods. Most people don't get that. He wonders how Rumlow does. Surely the guy doesn't know about Zola yet?

In the lab, Tony takes his workbench, and Rumlow takes the couch. Tony smiles when he notices Rumlow playing fetch with the 'bots, after they check on him.

A couple of hours pass, and Tony doesn't notice until JARVIS informs them, "Sir, Pirate's ahoy, and he brings a spider infestation, a bird, and the STRIKE team."

Tony looks at Rumlow, "Am I about to be disappeared?"

"Not that I know of."

"J, call Secretary Pierce." Tony's on the phone with Secretary Pierce, who is assuring him that he has not authorized any sort of action against him - and isn't it frightening that he trusts the leader of Hydra over the Director of SHIELD - but that he has authorized SHIELD's visit, when Fury and the others enter the lab.

"There was no need for that," Fury says.

"I don't exactly trust you, Director."

"We're on the same side, Stark."

"We aren't playing by the same rules, though."

"You're out of line, Stark."

Secretary Pierce cuts in from the phone, "Nick, Anthony, we're all busy men here. Let's act like it."

"Yes, sir."

"Fine, Alex," but he says no more.

After an awkward moment, Sitwell speaks up, "Dr. Stark, we have reason to believe Stark Industries may be the target of an assault."

"Latveria or Wakanda?"

"What?"

"Is Latveria or Wakanda the suspected attacker? They're the only two countries who pose enough of a threat for this sort of response." And this is a bit sooner than he anticipated. He may have to perfect Extremis before Hydra is dealt with after all.

"Wakanda."

Damn it! "All right. J, start securing yourself and the company, strongest defenses you've got on everything you can cover. Call Moriarty, tell her I'm authorizing the deathray. Get Cho and Yinsen here, so we can perfect Extremis. Move all workers' families to safe-

"Dr. Stark, I misspoke," Sitwell says.

"Hold, J. What do you mean you misspoke? Are we being attacked or not?"

"At the moment, no. However, we anticipate one in the near future."

"How near?"

"Potentially within the year."

Well, that's only a little ahead of schedule. "Go for it on security, J. Email Moriarty instead of calling; Cho and Yinsen can wait until the morning. Don't involve the families."

"Yes, Sir."

"Thanks, J. Now, back to you, why are you here if the threat isn't immediate?"

Fury answers, "We're offering extra security, Stark."

He looks at the room. All of the agents, including Sitwell, have duffel bags, not unlike Rumlow's. "I rate the whole STRIKE team?"

Secretary Pierce answers, "You personally? Not quite, Anthony. However, Stark Industries is vital to the nation's economy and holds many of her secrets, and it rates more than the STRIKE team if necessary."

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary. And thank you, Director."

The Secretary hangs up soon after, now that the reveal is done, leaving Tony with just the in-person visitors.

Tony says, "If you're all staying here, rooms will have to be shared. Sorry about that. J, give the STRIKE team Level 2-Alpha clearance. Agent Sitwell gets Level 4-Delta. Show the agents to the guest rooms, please."

"Of course, Sir. If you all will follow the lights on the floor, I will lead you to the guest rooms."

The STRIKE team, including Barton and Romanov but excluding Rumlow, leave. Tony is well aware that neither Sitwell nor Rumlow make a move to leave until after he, not Fury nods his approval.

When they too are gone, Fury finally asks, "What the hell has happened since Afghanistan?"

## Chapter End Notes

I don't really like this chapter, but I don't really dislike it either. It could probably have used a rewrite, but I'm worried if I don't post now, I'll lose my momentum, so here it is. Don't judge it too harshly, please.

# It's Not What You Think

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony looks at Fury and considers what to say. "I realized what we're up against, and I realized who I was."

"That's not an answer, Stark."

"It's the only answer I'm giving you, Director."

Fury says, "We've never met, Stark. Why do you distrust me so much?"

"I'm the primary weapons manufacturer for the U.S. I know more of her secrets than seventy percent of the government. I know how SHIELD operates; I know how you operate."

"After all, don't think I haven't noticed you sent in the KGB agent I refused."

"Agent Romanov is-"

"A honeypot with a specialty in assassination. She's who you send in to off a billionaire and rob them blind with no regard for who will suffer because of it." He never should have forgiven SHIELD for what it did while he was suffering from palladium poisoning. It's not that he's upset about his own life, but he shouldn't have let his employees' livelihoods be threatened without consequence.

He can see the moment when Fury writes him off as selfish, egotistical. Well, it's a good thing Tony has already decided to go to Ross about Hydra instead. Honestly, if anyone will tear Hydra to shreds, it'll be Thunderbolt. And Tony's sure he'll put in actual effort to not spill the nation's secrets, to not let thousands of their agents die.

Fury leaves soon after, and Tony is happy to see the back of him.

"J, company-wide Blackout Mode; only overrides are for those with needs of Priority Level Crimson-Three or higher and then by authorization only. Send notifications to everyone applicable, especially Pepper, Happy, Rhodey, and Mrs. Keener. Send SI security to Pepper, Mrs. Keener, and all other SI executives. Increase security for all buildings, and see what we can do about offering security for all personnel, especially those working on anything classified at Level 1-Beta or higher, or whose projects have the potential for an effect of Bronze-Eight or higher. Offer Happy a place here or in New York as well." He wants Rhodey protected too, but Rhodey is adamant that he's the one who does the protecting. "Oh, and tell Rumlow that if he has to share, the couch in my room is comfier than the floor, and he's welcome to it."

"Yes, Sir. And may I ask what you intend to do?"



"For now? Sleep. I'm exhausted already, and there's not much I could do right now to improve our defenses. In the morning, I'll arrange a Board meeting and start hacking Wakanda to see what they know and plan.

"I'll probably jump us up to nanites; we'll say I panicked or something if we're questioned. Possibly stabilize Extremis, just in case, but we won't release that yet. We *are* going to start flushing out Hydra, though."

"Of course, Sir. It may interest you to know that the Black Widow is attempting to hack into my servers."

"Couldn't even make it an hour. I'm actually disappointed; I thought she would wait at least a day.

"Don't let her into anything, J, and record the attempt. If nothing else, we can use that as my reasoning to start fishing out spies."

"Very good, Sir."

"Thanks, J. Good night."

"Good night, Sir."

~\*~

Sitwell is standing outside of Tony's bedroom door. Tony isn't exactly surprised. "If this is about the spider, I'm not letting her into my servers or SI's. You can keep your taser to yourself."

Sitwell shakes his head with a small smile, "I think you're confusing me with Coulson, Dr. Stark."

Tony chuckles, "Could be. So, what do you need, Agent Sitwell?"

"To speak with you privately, Dr. Stark."

"Away from the kiddos?"

"That would be best."

"Let's go to my office, Agent. I can guarantee coffee and privacy."

"I thank you for both, Doctor."

Tony leads the way to his home office in silence. There's no weight to it. Sitwell isn't pointedly ignoring Tony as a "punishment." He isn't trying to goad Tony into rambling in hopes he'll reveal something.

In his office, Tony says, "Blackout, J." He turns on the coffee maker, then takes his seat at his desk, and Sitwell takes one opposite him.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Doctor Stark."

"It's not a hardship, Agent. Now, what do you wish to discuss?" Tony almost invites him to use his name, but he stops himself. Both Hydra and SHIELD are rigidly hierarchal, and Tony needs to establish rapport before he starts rocking the boat.

"How secure are we?"

"Right now, this is the most secure room in the nation."

Sitwell looks impressed but doesn't comment on it. Instead, he says, "I know you are upset with Fury, sir, but if you wish to act out your anger, I beg you to do so on myself instead of the team." He misreads Tony's confusion because he rushes to add, "They can withstand it, of course, but extra damage will eventually make them inefficient and-

Tony holds his hand up to silence the handler. "Agent Sitwell, I assure you that I will neither hurt nor harm the team or you because of my anger with Fury. Now, of course, if Agent Romanov doesn't stop endangering my company's security with her attempts to hack into it, I will take issue with her, but it will be because of her actions, not because of whom she serves."

Sitwell pushes his glasses up on his nose, even though they don't need adjusting. "Thank you, Doctor Stark," he swallows. "I didn't believe Rumlow about your generosity, you know."

"Oh?"

"I thought he was exaggerating or misinterpreting your behavior. And then, when you requested he share your room..."

"You thought I was going to rape him?"

"No! No, I know you have no trouble finding partners when you wish them, and nobody has ever made any allegations of anything like that about you, Doctor Stark."

"So you thought I wanted to beat him?"

Sitwell looks sick, "Why else would you ask for him in your room? Forgive me, but men of your station rarely care for the welfare of their protectors."

"Call me old-fashioned or new-fangled, whichever you think fits best, but when people enter my care or authority, their well-being becomes my responsibility." Tony doesn't know what to make of Sitwell's look, so he ignores it. "Do you want to talk about all of this with the team, or would it be better coming from me?"

"I think it would be better coming from you, Doctor Stark."

"Okay, I'll meet with everyone over breakfast then. Which reminds me, you will need to meet with Happy tomorrow to discuss rotations and the like. Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"You called the Secretary as soon as you learned Fury was here."

"I did."

"May I ask why?"

"I don't trust SHIELD, and I know I have been a thorn in Fury's side since my return."

"You trust the Secretary, though?"

"I don't think I have upset him lately."

They both know those are two very different things, but neither says it.

Soon after, they leave, going to bed. Tony is relieved to see Rumlow asleep on his couch and not in the corner waiting to be beaten. The STRIKE team leader is wearing only sweatpants, and Tony knows from experience that it can get chilly at night, so he grabs the throw blanket from his bed and tosses it over him before changing into his own sweats and crawling into bed.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a bit shorter than normal, but there's a lot of ground to cover in the day after, and I want to try to keep it together.

Fun fact: Sitwell was originally going to ask about the deathray. I don't know when he changed his mind.

# The Morning After

## Chapter Notes

There are heavy references to abuse and mistreatment of the STRIKE Team, one agent in particular by SHIELDRA. I'll include further notes below in case anybody needs or prefers to avoid that sort of thing.

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

Tony is not used to awkward mornings, so he does his best to pretend this one isn't. At least he can already smell coffee.

He takes his time dressing, swapping the tie twice. He specifically doesn't wear black. No, he chooses a navy blue pinstriped three-piece suit with a crisp white shirt. His tie is a deep red with navy polka dots.

Yes, he's wearing "Cap's colors" to his first official meeting with two of the man's little sychophants. It doesn't matter if they get it; he'll enjoy the metaphorical middle finger enough for them all.

There are nine people waiting in Tony's living room: the six members of STRIKE Team - of whom he can only name Rumlow - Sitwell, and Barton and Romanov - who are STRIKE Team Delta, and that's a very important distinction, apparently.

Tony levels Romanov with a glare. "JARVIS has records of your attempts to hack into my servers last night *and this morning*, Widow. I will not have the security of my company compromised by the one whose job is supposed to be protecting it. Get your things and get out. Know that you're being monitored, and all four of your bugs have been disabled. J, send copies of all evidence to both Secretary Pierce and Director Fury. Notify them that if I receive any pushback regarding her removal, I will press charges for industrial espionage and whatever else legal can think of."

"Yes, Sir. Agent Romanov, follow the lights on the floor, and I will escort you back to the guest room to collect your things then to the exit. A car has been called for you."

She makes a face, but she must realize he isn't playing games because she goes. Tony expects he'll have to deal with Fury on top of everything else today. Well, let it not be said that Tony pulled punches this time.

When she's gone, Tony turns his focus back to the assembled agents. "I'm going to guess that you gentlemen know who I am, but I can't exactly say the same, except for Rumlow, Barton, and Sitwell, so let's start with introductions."

A tall blond with a hard jaw steps forward, "Jack Rollins, sir."

He steps back and another guy steps forward. He speaks with a thick Southern accent, "Eliot Spencer, sir."

He's followed by a guy whose long blackish-brown can't follow any regulation. He stands 6'3" and has cold grey eyes. "Roman Reigns, sir."

The next guy who steps forward is about 6'4" with auburn hair slicked back and piercing blue eyes. "Dean Ambrose, sir."

He's followed by a shorter guy, this one about 6'1", *short* compared to the others. Like Reigns, his hair is too long for regulation and mostly dark, but the right half is dyed a yellow-blond. Tony doesn't miss the way the former two stand closer to him. "Seth Rollins, sir."

"Any relation?" Tony asks.

"Cousins, sir," Jack Rollins says. He seems defensive. No, he seems protective.

It's obvious that Seth is the youngest, and Tony would bet his car collection that more than one person has used him to keep the others in line.

"Okay, well, to avoid confusion, if there are no objections, I'm calling the two of you by your first names. All right?"

"Yes, sir," they say in unison.

"Good. Thank you. Now, we need to clarify a few things. Yes, I'm pissed with Fury," Ambrose takes a half-step in front of Seth, "but, no, I won't take it out on any of you. If you attack me, someone in SI, or Lt. Colonel Rhodes, I will fight back for protection but only that. If, like Agent Romanov, you attempt to hack into the company or otherwise spy on it, you will be removed in a similar fashion. *But I will not beat you*, not as punishment and certainly not because your boss is a prick."

The men in front of him, *including Barton*, look like they want to believe him but don't dare to do so. Well, he supposes, time is the only way to convince him. He makes a note to have J dig into SHIELD with a focus on how they treat their personnel - or how they allow them to be treated by those they're supposed to be protecting.

"So, now that we've got that out of the way, how about we sit down, eat breakfast, and get to know each other?"

Tony notices that the table is full of food already, and he takes in the sight eagerly. Sausage, bacon, Belgian waffles, oatmeal, enough fruit to fill three baskets, and a steaming pot of coffee. He takes his seat at the head of the table, and he's relieved when Rumlow takes his usual seat on Tony's left. Sitwell sits to his right, rather than at the other end like Tony expected.

Next to Rumlow is Jack Rollins, and Seth sits next to him. On Seth's other side is Ambrose. Next to Sitwell is Spencer. Then there's Reigns and finally Barton. Tony's pretty sure the seating arrangement was designed as strictly as one according to Burke's *Peerage*.

Tony decides he's too hungry to deal with this right now, so he starts filling his plate. He does a little happy dance in his head when he sees that there blueberries. Coffee, Belgian waffles, and blueberries: what more could he ask for? He moans a bit when he eats the first bite of the Belgian waffles.

He swallows, then says, "Whoever made those is my new favorite person, sorry Brock."

"Hey, how do you know I didn't make them?"

"Because we tried to make bacon and burned it so badly that J banned us both from the kitchen."

"That's fair. It was Spencer, by the way. He's basically a chef."

Tony nods, "If you ever decide to quit the whole agent thing, I've got an opening for a chef any time."

That has the desired effect of loosening the mood, if only a bit. Tony takes his time to observe, and he knows J is too. They'll have to compare what they see. One thing he notices is that Seth seems hesitant to fill his own plate, especially when Tony is watching. He's going for another spoonful of oatmeal when he catches Tony's eye. He freezes. Tony doesn't say anything, just gives a nod of encouragement. He fills his plate again and eats quickly.

Yeah, Tony needs to find out what is going on now.

He gets the chance in the car on the way to the Board Meeting. Happy is with Pepper, so Brock is with Tony alone. He doesn't beat around the bush.

"So, who has hurt Seth, and what are the chances Moriarty can use them to test the deathray?"

Brock looks over at him from the passenger seat. "Seth is, I guess you could say that he's the omega of the group. The kid's barely twenty; by all rights, he *shouldn't* be on the STRIKE team, which is the point."

"He's the whipping boy." Tony hates to be right sometimes.

"Yeah. We do our best to protect him, of course, but there's rarely a lot we can do."

"Sitwell thought I was going to beat you because I was mad at Fury. He seemed pretty shocked when I assured him that I didn't plan to hurt any of you."

"I kind of figured that with the way you came into breakfast." He looks uncertain for a moment, like he wants to ask something but also doesn't want to know the answer.

"I didn't hurt him either," Tony says.

"I know."

"Then what's on your mind?"

"You have pull. If you said you wanted to keep someone as part of your security, transferring their contract would be easy."

Tony nods. He's not so sure of it being so simple, but he could make it happen if someone was willing.

"I know you just met him, but would you consider taking on Seth when we're through?"

"Brock, bud, I will take on the whole team if you guys are willing."

Tony wonders if it really is that easy to get someone's loyalty.

~\*~

The Board is up in arms, of course. Personally targeted by an advanced nation? It's terrifying for everyone.

Pepper says, "What sort of budget do you need to get the security to where it needs to be?"

And that's one of the best jumping off points they can get. Tony talks about armors and weapons and guards. Tony doesn't mention the nanites yet, but he brings up their medical research and Extremis and "there isn't actually a policy governing the use of such serums, so if we stabilize it, we might be better off using it right away just in case of an attack." They decide on self defense classes and weapons training for all workers.

All said, it is the most productive Board meeting Tony has had in years.

It's also one of the longest.

Tony is relieved when it's over. He understands the need for transparency regarding his actions, but he hates how the Board still treats him like an unruly seventeen-year-old.

~\*~

He doesn't make it to the office before Moriarty finds him. She looks straight out of the fifties, with the crinoline puffing her skirt and causing the *swish-swish* sound every time she walks, her white Keds, and high ponytail. Some would argue the words don't match the look, but, honestly, anyone who knows Moriarty for a week should know she's defined equally by glitter and grenades.

"The deathray is in the lab, boss. Do you want to run the sims with me?"

"It isn't even noon yet. How did you build it that quickly?"

She blushes, "I may have, you know, been running the numbers for a while? And I came in when JARVIS sent the email last night."

"Damn it, June. We've talked about this: do as I say, not as do. That means getting a full night's sleep." They're already heading to the lab, Happy and Brock behind them, probably sharing looks of incredulity.

~\*~

Tony always feels like Caesar when he makes it to R&D. The workers - the best in their fields, geniuses in their own rights - follow him like ducklings. They hang on to his every word. They rush when shows the slightest interest in anything, let alone that he *needs* anything.

Plus, he's pretty sure they may have rediscovered Greek Fire, and that really does help set the mood.

The point is that when Tony walks in to R&D with June to test the deathray, there's an audience to witness it.

It's effective. In every simulation, the target falls dead immediately without any signs for a cause of death.

There's an intern in a Ferrous Wheel t-shirt who doesn't seem to know how to react. Brock asks what's wrong, and the kid replies, "She basically just made the fucking Killing Curse a reality, and you want to know what's wrong?!"

Brock shrugs, "It's not like I don't trust her with it."

Tony hugs Moriarty in celebration, picks her up spins around with her. He whispers, "Lock it down, Level 5-Omega."

"On it, boss," she whispers with a grin.

Nobody, including Secretary Pierce, not even the President of the United States, would be able to access it without Tony's authorization.

Maybe he would let Pierce see it, though. It would be much better for the U.S. if the Secretary of State died of natural causes after all.

~\*~

Happy likes the STRIKE Team, he informs Tony on their way to the car; Happy is taking Pepper home, then he's going to fly out to New York, where Mrs. Keener is getting the mansion ready.

"They're polite, and they didn't try to give me any shit about my capabilities. I'm not saying I trust them, but I'm not ready to kick them out yet."

"Really, Hap?"

"Really."

Well, that's one fewer awkward conversations Tony doesn't have to have.

~\*~



Spencer is cooking, even though Tony offered to order food. It's Chinese, not Tony's usual cheap, greasy Chinese, but it's Chinese. Tony doesn't think he had half of these ingredients, and he knows he didn't have the other half.

Tony gives an excuse of the resources in the lab for hacking and goes down to it. In reality, he can hack just as well anywhere in the house; he wants to have J see what the team talks about when he's not there, how they act. JARVIS puts the best vantage point up on one of the side screens, and Tony watches it idly while breaking into Wakanda's servers.

It would have been a challenge without a decade's worth of knowledge. Now, it's no more trouble than when he hacked the U.S. during his Senate Hearing to prove the Iron Man suits weren't so easily copied.

He watches Ambrose put his arm around Seth's shoulders and kiss the side of his head.

Spencer asks, "What're the chances boss'll let the squirt eat two meals in one day, Commander?"

Tony flinches. Did they actually think he would starve someone?

Brock says, "He'll be more upset if the kid doesn't eat."

That got a lot of raised eyebrows and questioning looks, "Look, we talked this morning in the car. Doctor Stark was not pleased when he heard about the kid's treatment. He said that's he's willing to hire all of us once this is over with, if we want." They don't look convinced, so he adds on, "When dinner is ready to eat, send Seth down to tell him. That will give you all the answer you need."

Tony turns his attention away from the video and back to Wakanda. Listening in will not fix anything, and this is the tricky bit. Once he's done here, however, Tony should have access to everything - including schematics to the Black Panther suit, which will tell him how advanced he *needs* to make the Iron Man armor.

Thirty minutes later, Tony is jerked from his thoughts when JARVIS says, "Sir, Agent Rollins the younger is approaching." Tony chuckles a bit. J isn't one for first names, but more importantly, Tony thinks it's the point of not addressing Seth any differently than the others.

The young agent doesn't step in the lab when the doors open. Instead, he says softly, like he's afraid Tony will hear, "Dinner's ready, sir."

"Thanks, Seth," he stands and stretches before walking to the door. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"Yes, sir," he winces like he's revealed something awful.

"Well, let's hope Agent Spencer ordered enough, or we'll end up with greasy takeout on top of that wonderful-smelling homemade food of his."

Doe-eyes look at Tony, hopeful and fearful at once. "What would I have to do to earn a second meal, sir?"

"Nothing? I mean, nothing else. You're here, protecting me and my company and employees. The least I can do is give you a warm bed and a full stomach."

Seth shakes his head. "I didn't know people like you really existed."

"What? Eccentric billionaires? Mad scientists?"

"Good men."

Well, that's not something Tony has ever been accused of being, and he doesn't exactly know how to respond.

~\*~

Tony has paid four-figures for food that isn't as good as what Spencer has made. The mood is light, especially once Seth hesitantly starts to fill his plate.

"The dumplings are really good," Tony says, "Seth, tell me which you like better, the meat or the cheese. I'm conflicted."

It's not subtle. Tony isn't wasting time with subtle.

Which means he's probably going to let *Rumlow* test the deathray on Fury because of this.

"Thank you, sir," *Jack* Rollins whispers to him after dinner, like Tony did something worthy of it.

Yeah, Hydra and SHIELD are burning, but Tony is getting the agents out first.

## Chapter End Notes

It's implied that one of the agents is abused, specifically to keep the others in line. Specifically, there are questions about whether or not he would be allowed to eat at dinner - and what he might have to do to earn it. Tony, of course, is horrified that they think he would deny anyone food, but it's implied that Tony's way of thinking is far from their idea of normal behavior.

Okay, so about the naming of the STRIKE Team.

I could NOT find any names for the SHIELDRA STRIKE Team other than Rumlow and Jack Rollins, so I, um, I made some executive decisions.

Seth Rollins, Roman Reigns, and Dean Ambrose are/were wrestlers for the WWE. They debuted as members of a faction called the Shield (no, I'm not joking), they wore black tac gear, and they were originally villains. Seth has threatened to kill a man on live TV if

the bosses were not reinstated, and he's lately had an obsession with gauging out eyeballs on metal stairs (again, no, I'm not joking). You really don't need to know anything about them because nothing except the names and appearances are being used in this fic. That said, any of them is a fine specimen of a man if you're interested in them.

Eliot Spencer is Eliot from Leverage. However, he's more pre-Leverage Eliot. My working theory is that after his team was abandoned, it was SHIELDRA who found him (likely even the STRIKE Team itself), so instead of working as a merc then for Moreau, he went to SHIELD. That means he's still the vicious man he later sought redemption for being rather than the man seeking redemption. But you really don't need to know that either, if you're not familiar with Leverage.

I hope y'all like the chapter!

# It Can't Grow Back a Head if You Shoot Its Heart, Right?

## Chapter Notes

First things first, I'm sorry about the delay getting this chapter up! The original was very different, and I didn't like it at all. This one is much better, and we finally got some real action!

Second, I love all y'all, and this statement is not directed to any readers who have come with legit questions/concerns/statements. Basically, if y'all's comment has been published, this ain't applicable to y'all.

Now, to the trolls, y'all realize I ain't stupid, right? If someone has left comments saying they love the story, they ain't exactly likely to post a comment on the same chapter saying it's awful. Also, since their name takes me to their profile, and y'all's don't, it's pretty obvious that you're fake. Seriously, if you're going to be hateful, at least be smart.

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

After dinner, Tony says, "I'm heading back down to the lab to hack further into Wakanda's systems and maybe do some inventing. I'm going into Blackout Mode, at least until I've got everything relevant from their servers, so don't be worried."

With that, he heads back down to the lab and engages the protocols necessary.

"J, do we have access to the Black Panther suit schematics yet?"

"We do, Sir."

"Pull them up, please."

"Of course."

The schematics are brought up, and they aren't that impressive. The suit isn't that different from the Starkium suits he built for the Avengers, the ones he's already producing *en masse* for the military. It seems Princess Shuri had indeed done most of the inventing and revolutionizing for Wakanda in the last decade. It also seems that catching up with Wakanda will be easier than he thought.

Surpassing them, could even be possible.

"*That is it*, Sir?"

"It seems so."

"You made it sound... much more impressive, Sir."

"It will be. In the future, it'll be a feat of engineering, more advanced even than the Iron Man suit in some ways."

"I see," JARVIS does not sound convinced. "By my calculations, the new Starkium-based armor we have in production for the military are twelve percent superior by nearly every measure."

"They are?" Tony has fixed every flaw he had planned to address in the Avengers' armor before the 'Civil War,' and then he had double-checked for other weaknesses, but still, that can't be enough, can it?

"Yes, Sir. Would you like to see the data?"

"Yes, please. Bring it up in bar graphs, and don't bring it up yet, but start comparing the data for the Enhancements of the Black Panther to what we know of Extremis."

"My pleasure, Sir."

The charts come up, and right there in red (Tony's Starkium armor) and blue (Wakanda's Black Panther suit) are the facts. The current Starkium armor is indeed superior to the modern Black Panther suit. Huh.

The plan is for the Starkium armor to be the military-standard within three years. SI is even offering trade-in discounts and freely cancelling orders for their other armors in exchange for these. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers already have this armor; millions will have it by the time Thanos attacks.

Meanwhile, Wakanda's beliefs bind them to only one Black Panther at a time.

If Tony believed in fair fights, he'd stop now, while they're on fairly even ground and with fairly equitable tech, but Tony has never believed in fair fights. "To hell with it, J. We're making the nanites anyway. We'll let them play catch-up this time."

"Are you certain you want to jump to a nanite suit so soon, Sir?"

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

"The gauntlet watch you described could be a good starting point."

"Good point. Let's start input and fabrication. Once we have a working 'prototype,' we'll take it to R&D and let my little geeklings see if they have any ideas for improvements."

A few hours pass, and JARVIS has enough data to operate without significant input from Tony. As such, while JARVIS creates the initial prototypes for the watch/gauntlets, the pair look closer at the schematics for Wakanda's defensive and offensive tech.

At one point, it would have blown him away. Now? Now R&D is creating things that are equal or superior to this tech daily. Adams, the kid who freaked out over the deathray, he's part of a team who are prepping the launch of the StarkPad in November, the same StarkPad which is at least three generations ahead of Wakanda.

"JARVIS, what do we have on planned attacks by Wakanda on myself or SI, cyber, physical, or otherwise?"

"It appears, Sir, that the Wakandans are arrogant enough to think they can capture you and others, such as Dr. Cho, alive."

Now Tony looks at these specs and understands why he and SI are being attacked. Now Tony looks at these specs and wonders how much Wakanda has stolen. Now Tony looks at the specs and wonders how many great minds of the world have been 'disappeared' by Wakanda.

No more.

"J, prep the safehouses and send out a Code Orange-4 to all SI employees. Let them know we are expecting trouble. Get Ross on the most secure line possible. We're dealing with Hydra tonight, so we can focus on Wakanda for the coming future." He pauses, "Also, make a side note to watch for any overtures to Ivan Vanko from Wakanda. It's not a priority at the moment, unless they act."

"Yes, Sir," and then it's happening.

~\*~

For the past few years of Tony's life, Thaddeus Ross has been a constant thorn in his side. Tony had even went so far as to consider the man an enemy. It seems Tony has made the same mistake about Thunderbolt as people often make about Tony: severely underestimating him.

Ross moves on Tony's intel quicker and more thoroughly than can ever have happened through the "right" channels, especially once Tony is able to provide a list of who is in the clear and who is compromised to him.

He doesn't bother with a deathray. "Just send us more of those good bullets of yours."

"Yes, sir," Tony says, fingers flying across the keyboard.

Tony's job is containment, clean-up, and "collection." He is in charge of keeping national secrets from being exposed and funnelling that information to the appropriate U.S. departments as the proper people are vetted. He is also in charge of leading extraction efforts for all agents, especially those from SHIELD. Ross agreed with him that the secret agency was too similar in methods to Hydra to be allowed to stay operational, and even, no *especially*, Thunderbolt had some choice words regarding the treatment of their agents.

Ross has Admiral Halley send a team of SEALs in after Secretary Pierce. Tony doesn't learn until it's over that Eric "Killmonger" Stevens is the one to take the shot.

No, at that point he's too busy saving who he can. Names and locations fly across the screen, and he wishes he had the Iron Legion at his disposal.

He doesn't, of course, but he *does* have one of the world's best STRIKE teams. He chances involving them, "Ambrose, Reigns, I need you to go pick up a woman called Skye at..." and

"Jack, Seth, we have friendly called Grant Ward who needs a rescue. He may be accompanied by a John Garret." Tony thinks back at some of the things Garret listed in the file that he had done to Ward. "Just shoot him; I'll handle the fall-out. Spencer, Barton, we have a team needing assistance in LA.

"J, give Sitwell whatever he needs to get our boys back safely."

It's about two hours later - not that time means anything to Tony right now - when Rhodey calls him from the secure emergencies-only line. "This is you, isn't it?" he asks without preamble.

"In coordination with Thunderbolt."

Rhodey breathes, "A thirteen, huh?"

"Yeah, Sour Patch."

"One day, you're going to tell me what happened in Afghanistan because this right here isn't scaleable, Tones."

They hang up, and Tony is happy he's got Rhodey in his corner this time.

He authorizes for every Stark MedBay to be used for agents and soldiers and whoever else is injured because of this mess. He's got people buying out stores' first aid supplies and easy-on-the-stomach foods and blankets because even SI's personal stock has limits.

Belinda Keener takes over running the "safehouse" in New York, due to her time spent volunteering with the Red Cross. Happy is frantic about Tony and checks in hourly, until he sends in Brock instead.

JARVIS alerts Tony, "Sir, Agent Rumlow is requesting permission to enter on Mr. Hogan's request."

"Let him in, J."

Brock enters the lab hesitantly. He pointedly does *not* look at the computer screens. He doesn't say anything, just looks at Tony for confirmation that it's alright to be there.

"There are things you're going to see here that you won't like, Brock. I'm going to do things you won't like. I had hoped to talk to you and the boys first, but there isn't time."

Brock shakes his head, "Boss, you don't owe me an explanation. I've lived with you for over a month. I've seen enough of how you treat people to say that I trust *you*."

Tony makes a mental note to work on encouraging more independent thought, but he just nods for now. Someone in Hydra has decided they aren't going down without a fight, and they've called in the Fist of Hydra.

"J, patch me to Sitwell."

"Yes, Sir."

Sitwell answers, "How can I help you, Dr. Stark?"

"If the Winter Soldier has already been triggered, would re-triggering him override it or just give him time to kill me?"

## Chapter End Notes

Alright, so I feel the need to clarify a few things.

Tony's been holding off on exposing Hydra because he wanted an "in" to investigate, preferably from someone like Pierce or Senator Stern. This was to keep things from looking fishy on Tony's end. Now, though, he's probably going to use the excuse of Romanov's attempted hack as his reason for looking deeper into SHIELD, thus leading him to discover Hydra.

He's acting so much quicker because he's anticipating an attack by/war with Wakanda, and Tony wants to have Extremis and the like available for it, but he certainly doesn't want Hydra having access to it.

Ross is weird. I imagine he's a real hardass if you're disobedient or something. Like I can see him looking the other way if someone smacked an out-of-line subordinate, but I can also see him just full-force decking someone who hit a subordinate who hadn't earned it.

Yes, Killmonger is mentioned for a reason.

So, what do y'all think?



# The Winter Soldier vs. The Merchant of Death

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's a pause, then Sitwell says, "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, Dr. Stark."

Right. Shit. Tony forgot. In his defence, though, it's not really his fault. He had looked up everything available regarding the Winter Soldier after Siberia. The fact that Sitwell and the current STRIKE Team didn't know about his existence until after New York hadn't really seemed relevant, especially since they were already dead by the time he learned anything about it.

Tony should probably explain the situation then. "Okay, so long story short, Hydra found Bucky Barnes after he fell from the train. The serum Red Skull gave him wasn't as strong as the one given to Rogers, but it was enough to save his life and turn him into a super-soldier as well. They've tortured and brainwashed him into acting as their prized assassin for the past six decades.

"And he's been activated. His orders are to take out those who currently pose a large threat to Hydra according to Senator Stern... and I'm the first target."

Sitwell says, "What's the ETA for the Soldier? We may have time to get Barton in position-"

"I don't want him dead."

"You don't want to kill him. Sir, you just said that he has been given orders to kill you!"

"He's been a prisoner of war for most of his life. He deserves a chance to live, not to be put down like a rabid dog."

"Barton could use a tranq shot on him, especially if the rest of STRIKE Team contained him."

JARVIS speaks up then, "I'm afraid that argument is moot. The ETA for Sergeant Barnes is less than three hours, but the STRIKE Team will be here in a minimum of five hours."

"Well, that limits our options, boss," Brock says.

"Yeah, it does," Tony agrees. "JARVIS, the Mark four-point-nine is ready, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir. It has been fabricated and painted already."

"Show her to me."

JARVIS opens a panel in one of the walls and pulls forward a suit. She's a beauty, something of a remake of the Mark 49, the last model before the nanites, but with as many upgrades as

he could give her. The color scheme too is different.

Gold and hot rod red are flashy. They're the colors of a man who wants you to get caught up in the show. They're the colors of a carny-barker with a flea circus, distracting you from looking too close.

These are not that. Gunmetal grey has taken the place of gold, and a dark, nearly black, navy is in place of the red. It's dark, sophisticated, *patriotic* in a certain way. These are the colors of a man who doesn't mind being seen but isn't present to entertain you. These are the colors of a man who doesn't care how close you look.

Red and gold belong to Iron Man. The Merchant of Death belongs in gunmetal and navy.

Tony smiles, and he's sure it's not friendly. "You did well, J. She's gorgeous."

"I do strive for excellence, Sir."

Brock chimes in, "I agree that she's badass, boss, but you can't tell me you plan to fight this guy in that?"

"Why not? It could take more than one, if I was inclined."

"I'm sure, but I didn't think you were inclined."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"I got something, boss, but I don't know how well it'll work."

~\*~

Of course, preparing for an impending attack doesn't mean they get to turn their attention from the wider world. It's during this time that Tony finds out that the SEALs were sent to kill Pierce. He asks General Ross, "Is it possible to send them to Senator Stern as well?"

"I think it can be arranged. Do your boys have a handle on this assassin?"

"We've got plans for capture, General."

"Capture? Stark, this is not the time for a bleeding heart!"

"I'm not killing a POW, General."

"What?"

"The Winter Soldier is Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th Infantry. He's been held captive by Hydra for the past sixty years."

The General curses. He knows how Hydra treats its *willing* soldiers; Tony doesn't have to tell him how they treat the *unwilling* ones. "You think you can bring him home?"

"I'm damn-well going to try."

"Good. And when you're done, see if you can find a way to bring Pierce back to life. We killed him too quickly, all things considered."

"Sure thing, General."

~\*~

"Sir, Sergeant Barnes has entered the grounds." A pause, "He has cut my main power."

Show time.

"Thanks, J. Your priority is to look after yourself until after this is done. I'll be fine."

Tony doesn't want to kill Barnes. If he did, he would have been the only one walking out of Siberia. So, no, Tony isn't going to use this as an excuse to kill Barnes, but Tony knows now that he has too much to do to let the brainwashed assassin kill him or force him into a hospital bed for twelve weeks again.

"You won't lose me, Sir, not if I have any say," J assures him. He keeps the security feed playing.

Tony doesn't say anything. Now isn't the time for emotions. He can't fight if he's crying.

He watches Barnes search the house on the security feed. He holds his breath when he walks by the entrance of the panic room where he finally convinced Sitwell to wait. Tony doesn't want to be responsible for the handler's death. His relief is short-lived, though because the only place left for Barnes to search is Tony's lab.

He lets Barnes fully enter the space before acting. JARVIS locks the doors at the same time that Tony fires at the metal arm. Brock attacks Barnes with the sonic taser as planned, sending Barnes to the floor.

Tony almost feels bad about it, since he knows how frightening being paralyzed is. However, Barnes is no more down than he's springing back up. He tosses Brock to the side and barrels towards Tony.

Tony side-steps him at the last second, sending Barnes into the wall. He's dazed and struggling to get up. Before he can, though, Brock comes from the other side of the room, running like a bullet, and stomps Barnes face-first into the concrete floor.

He's not unconscious, but he's not quite able to get up yet.

"Plan B, J!"

The suit rips itself off of Tony so quickly he falls to the ground, gasping for breath. It slides onto Barnes just as quickly, the plates locking together tightly. With JARVIS in control, Barnes is a captive in the suit.

"Open the faceplate, J." It slides open, revealing Barnes' face and dead eyes. Tony says, "My name is Tony Stark; you knew my father a bit during the war. I'm going to help you, Sergeant, but it's going to take time. You're going to stay in the suit until we can prepare a proper containment area for you. It might be up to a day; I'm sorry. We're in the middle of a *situation*."

"J, you can close the face plate. If he asks for water or anything like that, give it to him. See if you can start easing him out of that state."

"Yes, Sir."

"Thanks, J. So, how are we doing?"

"The President is no longer threatening to have you and General Ross charged with treason."

"That's good. What changed his mind?" Tony asks, typing at the computer again.

"One of his Secret Service agents was Hydra. Colonel Rhodes almost didn't arrive in time to save him."

"Is Rhodey safe?"

"He is as safe as is possible, given the current situation. At present, he is on Air Force One, and all aboard it have passed your checks."

Thank God. "Everyone else?"

"All safe and accounted for, Sir. I believe Misses Potts and Moriarty are plotting your demise for not involving them."

Tony swears. It's probably better than charges of treason, but only *just*. "Hydra?"

"All Hydra personnel is the upper levels of the U.S. government have been eradicated. Progress is being made on foreign officials and mid-level U.S. government officials. All of the scientists you have tagged, namely List and Von Strucker, have been killed."

"Good. And the media?"

"The media has little idea of what to say," JARVIS brings up the major U.S. and world news organizations. "They have no idea of your involvement as of yet, Sir."

Small mercies. The last thing he needs is for people to get it in their heads that he's any sort of traitor.

"Current approximate threat level, J?"

"Red-1 falling to Orange-5, Sir."

"At least we're almost back to where we started." He breathes. "See if you can get me on the phone with the President, J. We need to get ahead of the media before we get steamrolled."

"Of course, Sir."

## Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it's been a few since I updated. I had a bit of writer's block. The end result isn't quite what I had hoped for, but it's good enough for now. I hope to wrap up Hydra and move on to Wakanda within a chapter or two. I'm not sure how long that arc will last, but I have a pretty good idea of how I want it to go. :)

I also want to say I'm sorry to the people who wanted Bucky to have time-travelled. I tried it. There are 2 rough drafts on my flash drive, but it didn't feel right.

To everyone who has commented, I love y'all! Thank you so much! I'll try to catch up on individual replies soon!

I read a fic a little while back where post-Siberia Tony wears a similarly-colored suit for his final fight with Rogers. It was based off of Rogers' STRIKE suit. I really liked the idea of it.

A reader called Ninke and another called The\_smoke\_machine are pretty sure the fic in question is "Tony's Girl" by crosshairs. So thank you to Ninke and The\_smoke\_machine for telling me, and thank you to crosshairs for the inspiration!

Okay, so I've been hinting at it a little, but I have an idea for Tony to kind of slowly undermine Rogers and take his place as "America's Hero." Some of it is subtle, like with the color choices for the armor, but some of it might be bolder - like Tony being given public credit for the takedown of Hydra. This will be in tandem with Barnes' imprisonment with Hydra coming out and with Rhodey being War Machine. The idea I've got is that with so many "good American patriots" if you will, that Rogers' political clout will be significantly smaller than in canon, but it won't be in a way that will seem like an outright attack against Rogers (thus not making people recoil in defense, hopefully).

What do y'all think? Like it? Hate it? Want it only if it comes with a bendy straw?

# Executive Orders

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony Stark doesn't remember a time when he hasn't met the President of the United States. It's just the way things work when you're the heir to the nation's primary weapons manufacturer - and then said manufacturer yourself; you end up meeting the President more than once before you're potty trained, and more than one First Lady still tells the story of you deciding that you hate pants and weren't wearing them any more. What Tony means is that the idea of talking to the President is, in and of itself, not a big deal for him.

However, talking with the President to explain that the nation was infested with Hydra and that Tony and General Ross had taken it upon themselves to handle it rather than involving anybody else is a big deal.

Tony takes a deep breath, and he explains what happened according to the story he and JARVIS had created. "Mr. President, this goes back a long time. I've known about SHIELD for a long time, but as nobody ever approached me about it, I assumed I didn't have the clearance for it and kept my mouth shut." He explains about Afghanistan and Secretary Pierce's visits, about dealing with Stane and Coulson and Barton's reactions to Tony knowing about SHIELD. He talks about Fury's initial attempts to get Romanov into SI, "As you know, all Stark Industries are government-vetted, Mr. President. Ms. Rushman was flagged by multiple sources as a Russian spy. I was preparing to alert the authorities of her attempt when my bodyguard, Brock Rumlow, identified her as a SHIELD agent called Natasha Romanov. I decided to let the matter sit until I had something actionable.

"Agent Romanov was part of the STRIKE Team sent for my and Stark Industries protection due to the anticipated attack against us by the nation of Wakanda. She attempted to hack into my systems multiple times during her less than twenty-four hour stay in my home, despite my AI offering her access to anything she had a valid need to see for our protection. Her attempted hacking, along with the effort put in an attempt to get her hired, made me even more skeptical of SHIELD. I decided to investigate the organization, which led to the discovery of Hydra."

Of course, the conversation isn't that simple. It goes on-and-on for hours, while Tony and General Ross state, confirm, and defend their actions.

In the end, the President says, "Well, I think we can all agree on two things: first, this nation can not handle a Senate Hearing right now, so that's out, and second, if either of you pull a stunt like this again without informing me, I will personally pick the prison we throw you in. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Although, given the way Brock stiffens from where he stands just off-screen, Tony doesn't think even the President could get him without a fight.

"Good." Tony hears him sit back in his chair, "Now, please tell me one of you has an idea of how to handle this Winter Soldier business."

"Yes, sir," Tony says. "If no one has an issue with it, I would like to take responsibility for Sergeant Barnes' care, at least until he is capable of making that decision for himself."

"You said he killed your parents. Dr. Stark, forgive me, but you're not a saint."

"No, sir, but I recognize a weapon when I see one." There's a brief silence, so Tony continues, "Hydra brainwashed and conditioned Sergeant Barnes so badly that he doesn't even recognize his own name. They tried to make him into a perfect, unquestioning weapon. You're right that I'm not saint, Mr. President, but what better revenge can I have than to give back the humanity of their greatest weapon." He takes a deep, steadying breath, and admits something Rogers never understood, "Besides, you know Howard's relationship with the Howling Commandos. He considered it an honor to be the one who made their weapons. He stayed in touch with every single one of them."

"In another life, Mr. President, Sergeant Barnes would have been my Uncle Bucky. He would have helped me get into trouble as a kid. He would have helped finish raising me after my parents died."

"Now, of course, I can't force him to want anything to do with me. I can't, and I won't try. But he's my family regardless, so I have to help him as much as possible."

The silence is heavy and stretching, and Tony worries he said the wrong thing. Then the President says, "General, this sort of thing would fall under the Army's purview, wouldn't it?"

"Ours and the VA's, but I can't imagine anybody in either protesting Dr. Stark's request."

"All right. That's good. My only real concern here is if you'll have enough time to devote to his care that it will matter if you have him, Dr. Stark."

"Mr. President?"

"Your popularity is at an all-time high. You have suffered months torture without giving into it. You conned your captors into giving you the tools to build your escape, and you rescued a fellow prisoner while doing it. You are expanding your company further into healthcare, which has only endeared you further to the people, and you're talking about clean, affordable energy, which has everyone from the hippies to HUD singing your praises."

"What I mean, Dr. Stark, is that if we tell the truth about you being behind the operation to flush out Hydra, people will love you. You're Tony Stark; of course the Merchant of Death did what was necessary to protect the United States. It's what you've done since you were seventeen."

"We'll also tell them the truth that General Ross handled most of the field operations. We'll emphasize how his tactics were effective in eliminating Hydra without any civilian casualties."

"Listen, I've got a terrorist organization that has been flourishing for decades within a classified government organization whose tactics aren't markedly different that has just been discovered and burned by a genius who is only bound to not cripple the whole country by his own sense of patriotism and a General whose tactics are more than a little heavy-handed. I've got forty-two dead Senators, six dead Supreme Court Justices, and that's just the start. My own Press Secretary has a bullet between his eyes. Why? Because they were Nazis!

"So, the two of you are coming to D.C. within the week. I'm giving the pair of you, Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, and perhaps a few others a Medal of Honor, and we're going to present you as heroes. Then, the two of you are going to stay and help me clean this mess up because I refuse to be the last President of the United States, but as it stands, I just might be!"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. President."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

It goes on-and-on. The STRIKE Team returns at some point, and Brock goes to check on them. He comes back with a sandwich and orange juice and a look that says Tony's eating it if the Commander has to make airplane noise.

Finally, Tony gets off of the phone, and he takes a bite of the sandwich. Turkey, cheese, spinach, and tomato on whole wheat. It's brilliant. Five stars, will eat again.

"Have you eaten?" Tony feel embarrassed he's halfway through the sandwich before he thinks to asks.

"Not yet, boss. I wanted to make sure you had something in you in case something came up."

Tony cracks his fingers, trying to work the stiffness out. "Well, go eat, and make sure the others do too. Seth has missed too many meals as it is." His record had actually made Tony throw up, and he had barely skimmed it.

Brock shakes his head, "And you still wonder why everyone follows you."

Hours pass.

JARVIS prepares Starkium restraints for Barnes, and the STRIKE Team works with him to reinforce the panic room before taking Barnes to it.

Eventually, Tony's legs start trying to give out, but DUM-E brings him the stool. He keeps working, collecting and distributing intel. He works to save agents and their families.

He works until he crashes.

He wakes up to strong arms carrying him. It's just Brock. Tony should probably be concerned, but he's not.

"L'me go," he slurs. "H've t'help."



"Shh, boss," Brock says. "You can't help anybody if you're falling over. Just go to sleep for a few hours, and when you get up, you can eat and go back to work."

Tony nods. Sleep and food do sound good. JARVIS can keep the bulk of the work up while he's out, and he'll get back to the heavy-lifting when he wakes up.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter is not my favorite. It's one of those "wrap it up" types, and they aren't my forte. I like introducing and dealing with threats, but the whole "resolution" thing (which this isn't quite) is awkward. Anybody with tips on how to finish up story arcs get ten virtual hugs.

I purposefully didn't name the President. Why? Well, it can't be Ellis. This fic is set in 2008, when the first Iron Man movie was released, meaning it would be near the end of a Presidential term and likely gearing up for election season.

Ellis was President in 2014, and it seems kind of implied that he's a first-term President (or maybe I'm too influenced by the amount of Ellis-seeking-reelection fics). Even if not a first-term President, he can't be President in 2008 /and/ 2014 unless he wasn't President during the intervening term, which doesn't really fit with American politics. That said, in the real world, George Bush would be finishing up his second term during this mess, and I just don't know how well he fits.

So, please enjoy your purposefully-vague President, and let me know who you're envisioning!

I'm struggling with how to deal with AIM/Ten Rings and if I should bring them in right now. I had planned for them to be a somewhat major threat, but now I kind of think no. Part of it is that I'm itching to deal with Wakanda, but I want AIM out of the way first. And part of it is just that I don't see AIM/Ten Rings being that much of a threat this time, especially since Tony owns AIM... \*Grumbles about not having a timeline to work with when I'm the one who put the timeline in a ditch.\*

# Picking Up the Pieces

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Tony wakes the next morning, he's already in the middle of a call with Rhodey before he gets to breakfast.

"I know you had to do it quietly, Tones, but still, a little heads up would have nice."

"I'm sorry, Sour Patch. I knew SHIELD was watching you because we're friends, and that meant Hydra was too."

"Yeah, I know. I appreciate you looking out for me. So what's this about you being moved to DC?"

"Temporarily, only. The President is big on the "you made the mess, you clean it" philosophy."

"That's not what I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"That Ross is being considered for either Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense, and you are being considered as either Secretary of Defense or Secretary of Homeland Security. And that's by the President and both the Democrats and Republicans."

"Shit," Tony says, pausing to consider the ties. He chooses a light blue with navy stripes and starts tying it before continuing, "Rhodey, I *can't* be in the President's Cabinet! I've got a company to run, and we all know I'm better at designing tech than telling soldiers how to use it. Who even came up with this foolishness?"

"Tony, are you serious? You are aware that you were on the shortlist of contenders to be the first Secretary of Homeland Security, right? You submitted to all the background checks and everything."

"Yeah, but that was a weird time..."

"Tones! What kind of time do you this is?!"

Tony sighs, "I still think I can do more as the CEO of Stark Industries."

"And that's fine. I agree, to be honest, but don't act shocked that you're being considered for the posts."

"I guess..." Honestly, in the past decade, Tony had forgotten he used to be considered for those positions. He was brilliant with weaponry, but his party lifestyle always kept him from being

the final choice. And then when he sobered up, his refusal to make weapons made people stop considering him. It's odd to think that he might actually have to turn down the offer.

They hang up soon after, since they both have to get to work.

Tony heads for breakfast again, only to see the STRIKE Team waiting for him again.

"What're we doing today, boss?" Spencer asks.

Tony says, "I'm going to check with J to see what's needed. It might be more of the same from yesterday. I would like to get what I need from here packed up soon, especially the 'bots, so I can get set up in New York soon. I had meant to take my time transitioning to the East Coast, but because of everything, I've kind of been, well, summoned, I guess, by the President to DC to help manage the fallout, so we're moving now rather than later."

"Do you do that often?" Ambrose asks, "Get ordered to go DC by the President, I mean."

Tony has to think for a moment, "Actually, yeah. I usually end up there for a few weeks a year at least, but this time is pretty different in terms of what we'll be doing and how long we'll be there."

Ambrose says, "I thought you were a civilian, boss?"

"I am, but when you're a military contractor, things are sometimes a little different."

Barton speaks up then, quieter and more respectful than he ever addressed Tony before, "My wife Laura, sir, she works for SHIELD too. She's pregnant, and she's on desk-duty right now until she's ready for maternity leave. I'd like to, that is, would you-"

"J, do we have a location on Laura Barton?"

"Yes, Sir. She is at the Stark Industries warehouse in Fredericksberg, VA. She is unharmed."

"Thanks, J. Go to her, Barton. If she's stable enough to move, go on to New York. That's where the majority of Stark Medical is, and she needs the best."

"Thank you, sir," Barton says, and for a second, Tony thinks he's going to kiss his feet or something. And, honestly, this man isn't the archer he bantered with over the comms, and he's not the asshole who made jokes about Rhodey's injury. Before Tony can think too hard, however, he's running out the door.

The silence that follows is heavy, and Tony doesn't know why until Brock says, "What happens to us now, boss?"

"What do you mean?"

He looks down, then whispers, "We were Hydra, sir."

"I know," Tony says. "I've known for a while."

Brock looks up, surprised, "Then why?"

Tony isn't even tempted to try to tell the truth; they're too broken to know he originally planned to use them. "You deserved a chance to prove yourselves. Last night, yesterday, you didn't have to help burn Hydra. You could have ran. You could have killed me, or let the Soldier do it." Of course, JARVIS would have stopped them, but the point is that they could have tried. "You helped me burn it to the ground. Hell, you even killed some of the other Hydra members yourself. And that's... it's been taken into consideration."

There's silence, and Seth is the only willing to break it. "What does that mean, sir?"

"The arrangement I've made with the President isn't exactly ideal, nor is it entirely legal. Essentially, if you sign an admission of guilt, you'll be entering into a sort of modified work release/house arrest combination under my supervision."

Suddenly, Tony's got an armful of Seth hugging him, quiet 'thank yous' coming from him. Tony hugs him back, but he looks over at Jack for clarification.

"All things considered, boss, we figured we were dead. You're not cruel, so we didn't think you would let them cart us off for *interrogation*, but, well, we didn't expect anything else."

"You're basically going to be on lockdown for the next twenty-five years. I mean, unless you're accompanying me as security, you're going to have to stay in a property owned by me or SI. This isn't going to be like being free."

Ambrose says, "It doesn't sound that different than working for SHIELD, boss."

"What?"

"Fury liked to keep us on base when we weren't out for an assignment, so it's not like we're missing anything."

Seth says, "Except that boss treats us a lot better."

"Well, okay, then," Tony says, this conversation having went a lot smoother than he anticipated. "Let's go eat breakfast. There's nothing we can't discuss that can't be settled over food." Everyone looks sheepish, so Tony asks, "Are we out of food?"

"No, boss," Spencer responds, "It's just, well, we- y'see, we thought we were dead, and, well, we didn't want to waste food, so..."

"I'm guessing there's one plate in dining room instead of enough for everyone."

"Yeah, boss..."

"Okay, Seth, go eat. You're as skinny as a rail. I can, um, man the coffee machine while we cook breakfast."

Of course, it's not that simple, but Tony does manage to convince Seth to go eat by implying to the others that he needs to have an "adult" conversation. Apparently, the idea of something

being beyond his security clearance is the easiest way to get Seth out of the room.

Tony pauses to make sure Seth is indeed eating before he follows the others into the kitchen.

"You really do care about him, don't you, boss?"

"I care about all of you. But he was fucking sixteen when Fury roped him into SHIELD. Sixteen. He hasn't even finished high school. And now he's stuck being a prisoner until he's forty-five, and that's the *best* I could do for him all because Alexander Pierce promised to feed him everyday and told him his pain could mean something!"

Brock shakes his head, "Boss, I'll be sixty-eight by the time it ends, and let me tell you that the thought of spending that long at your side is more comforting than anything Fury or Pierce ever promised me.

"I know, shit. You know the names of the cleaning staff, boss. You help the waitress at the Japanese place with her calculus homework. We're not, you don't see people as expendable. You don't see us as expendable.

"I'll be blunt, boss, and you won't like it. I worked for SHIELD, was part of Hydra for so long that I don't know how to be a person on my own. And I'll be honest, even if I did, what would I do? Sell myself as a merc? It's not like I've got other skills and even the military wants a high school diploma. You taking us in? That's not the best of bad options; that's the best case scenario period."

The others are nodding, and Tony feels some of the guilt in his chest starting to unknot. It still feels *wrong*. It's like slavery. Even if Tony is going to pay them, even if he'll give the training for any job he can, it's still not their choice to work for him.

"Doctor Stark, wasn't there something you needed to discuss with us?" Sitwell asks.

"I mostly wanted the kid to eat, but yeah, there are some things we need to discuss, although most of it Seth probably should be present for. I guess we can start with how to secure the labs for movement."

They talk and plan a bit, mostly, though, they watch Spencer cook and hand him ingredients. When it's ready, they take it to the dining room. Seth is sitting there, the plates empty, looking down at his lap.

He looks up when they come in and asks, "Do I need to go, boss?"

"No, you're fine. Besides, I just thought of something important I need to discuss with all of you: payment. Per the agreement, I'm taking responsibility for your necessities: housing, food, clothing, etc., so I imagine sixty thousand a year will be enough to pay you?"

They're all very quiet, and they look confused. Tony's about to ask what's wrong when Brock says, "That's almost twice what SHIELD paid us, and we still had to cover offsite living expenses, boss. We can't, you can't just throw away that sort of money."

"Brock, I'm not "throwing away" money. The base pay for SI security is eighty thousand a year, so I'm just factoring in the cost of living to that."

"There's no way you are. The mushrooms in these omelettes cost around a thousand dollars!"

"Well, I've got to pay you something. I'm sure you're going to want something beyond the bare essentials."

Brock doesn't ask what they might want, but it's clearly close. "A thousand a month then."

"That's below the poverty line. How about a thousand a week?"

"Five hundred a week."

"You're killing me." And then Tony laughs.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't think I've ever had to tell someone I wanted to pay them *more*."

Well, at least he isn't going to stuck with the bills for a three hundred thousand dollar guitar from *this* group.

## Chapter End Notes

Hi, y'all.

I'm sorry it took me a few days to get this one up. The rough draft was mostly written the day I posted chapter 10, but I didn't have time to edit it, let alone rewrite it. Why didn't I have time?

Well, my cousin Olivia decided the paint in the guest room was the reason she couldn't sleep; it was a weird fleshy nude, so I'm not disagreeing, so we went to town to get paint. Except town is about three hours away, so it took most of a day to get it, and then we got lost. We found a gas station that sells the best biscuits I've ever eaten and some truly awful coffee.

So anyway, yeah...

This chapter ended up not how I expected it, but I'm mostly satisfied.

I know the, er, arrangement with the STRIKE Team is odd, but I thought that it was the best way to avoid any issues legally (harboring terrorists, etc.). This way, they're people working for their second chance, not terrorists hiding from consequences. Plus, it provides a big contrast to Maximoff who seemed to feel like she was owed the world, despite y'know, \*waves at Age of Ultron\*.

I can rewrite it if its too odd or unbelievable, though.

# Duct Tape Can't Fix Soldiers

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After breakfast, Tony heats a bowl of broth to take to Barnes and has JARVIS send it to him. J said they had a sort of breakthrough during the night, but he still won't eat, so Tony is checking on him. Brock is overseeing the packing of the lab, so Seth comes with him.

On the walk to the safe room, Tony notices a hole in each of Seth's boots, like his big toe has slowly cut its way through it. He tells JARVIS, "J, set up an appointment with Blake and Thomas for shoe fittings for everyone. Until then, do I have anything appropriate for Seth?"

Before JARVIS can reply, Seth says, "You don't need to do that, boss. These barely hurt at all, honest. I can get at least six more months out of them, longer if you'll let me use a sewing kit," quieter he adds, "I don't want to be a burden, sir."

Tony pulls Seth into a one-armed hug, "Seth, buddy, shoes shouldn't hurt, and buying you a new pair isn't a burden. It's my responsibility." Seth looks ready to protest, so Tony adds, "If it helps, think of it as part of a uniform."

Seth nods, jerkily. JARVIS responds to Tony's request then, "The appointment has been made, Sir. Also, I have identified four pairs of shoes which should be suitable for the younger Agent Rollins. Personally, I would recommend the hiking boots you purchased for the Stark Industries Executive Retreat in 2006."

"Thanks, J. Send them down with a pair of the thick wool socks."

"Are you sure you won't miss them, boss?" Seth asks quietly. "Honestly, I can wait until we can order a new set. It's really no trouble."

A wall panel slides open, revealing a pristine shoe box and an unworn pair of black wool socks. J answers before Tony can, "Agent Rollins, Sir has owned the shoes for two years and has worn them precisely four times: once for the fitting, once when he was leaving for the retreat, the following day when he returned, and the final time when he went for a weapons demonstration in Nevada. I can assure you, he will not miss them."

Seth still looks at Tony for confirmation before sitting down on the floor and taking off his shoes. The first thing Tony notices is that the shoes are in good condition compared to the socks. When they are peeled off, Tony gets a first hand look at Seth's feet. They are a mess of blisters, welts, and cuts. Before he can put on the new shoes, Tony says, "Wait a minute, will you? J, send up a med kit."

Seth *flinches*. "Sir, please, no! I-I know I shouldn't have questioned your orders. I'm sorry. Please, you don't need to beat me. Or at least not my feet-"

Tony goes to the floor too and wraps his arms around the panicking agent. "Hey, hey, shhh. It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you. I asked J for the kit, so I can clean and wrap your injuries. We don't want them getting infected. I don't want to see you hurt. Okay?"

Seth looks ashamed and starts apologizing again. This time, he's sorry for daring to accuse Tony of something bad.

"It's how you're used to be treated. Of course you would expect it."

"But you've been so nice to us! I shouldn't, it's wrong to think badly of you, especially with everything you've done."

"You've known me for about two days. It's completely expected that you'll take some time to really get used to me and how I do things." Seth nods. "Now, do you want me to take care of your feet, or do you want to do it?"

"I should do it, boss. You shouldn't have to- I mean, unless you want to. It's not my place to give you orders," Seth says, working himself into another panic.

"Hey, hey. Whichever is best for you. I just want you to have them treated. Here, how about I do the right one, and then we'll decide on the left one."

Seth nods, so Tony starts. He takes his time, properly disinfecting everything, telling Seth what he's doing and checking in. He applies a healing cream developed by R&D before wrapping the foot. He looks up at Seth for a moment to judge his comfort level before doing the same with the other foot. He puts the socks and shoes on Seth, so the other isn't unnecessarily rough with himself.

"Thank you, boss."

"It's nothing anybody decent wouldn't do, kid. Now, c'mon. Let's go check on Sergeant Barnes."

~\*~

Barnes is lying almost as motionless as a corpse on the bed. Seth steps in the room first, even though the Starkium nanites that were the restraints are just waiting to be called - either to return to restraints or to act as the suit.

Tony says, "Hello, Sergeant. Our introduction was a bit odd, so let me start by saying that I'm Tony Stark. You knew my father, Howard, in the war. And this is Seth Rollins; he's part of my security."

Barnes doesn't react. He doesn't even move his eyes to look at Tony.

Tony sighs, "Soldier? Can you look at me?"

Barnes turns his head immediately to face Tony, although his eyes don't meet Tony's.

"How are you doing, Soldier? J said you wouldn't eat."



"The Soldier did not have orders to eat."

"Uh-huh. So, tell me about this *understanding* you reached with JARVIS? You, uh, don't seem as homicidal towards me."

"The Soldier was Hydra's Fist. Mister JARVIS explained to the Soldier that Hydra was taken down by your hand. He also showed the recording of the President giving the Soldier to you. The Soldier is yours now, and his programming would not allow the Soldier to hurt the handler." Each word is more forced than the last, and Tony almost stops him just to spare him.

"Okay. Well, if I'm your handler, then that means you have to follow my orders. My first order is that you have to eat every day. Nobody under my authority is going to go hungry if I can help it. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You can start by sitting up and eating that," he gestures towards the still-warm bowl. Barnes does so obediently. "Okay, second order, you are to obey JARVIS just the same as me. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, last two rules, you are not to hurt anyone unless they pose a threat to you, those close to me, SI, or myself. But, if they do pose a threat, you are to use whatever force and resources you deem necessary. Okay?"

"Yes, sir." He looks at Tony with some expectation, of what, Tony doesn't know.

"What's on your mind, Soldier?"

He looks pained, "May the Soldier know when he will be taken to The Chair, sir?"

"You won't." Tony runs a hand through his hair in frustration. "Look, I'm a first-rate bastard when I need to be. The first time I made a marketable weapon, I was thirteen. I took over the R&D for SI when I was seventeen. That's the age of my protege now.

"What I mean is that I'm not going to lie and tell you that I'm a good person because I'm not. But I can promise you that I will never put you in that thing."

Barnes looks confused and scared.

Tony can't think of an explanation fast enough because Seth has already went to Barnes' side. He grabs Barnes' hand in an odd sort of hold, quickly going through three or four more. Barnes doesn't return the same ones, but he gives his own. With each exchange, Barnes seems more and more hopeful.

Seth speaks out loud after a few minutes, "The Sergeant would like to ask you something, boss."

"Of course. I'll answer as best I can."

Tony is patient while Barnes finds his words, "Asset Rollins tells the Soldier you are kind and generous. This asset knows he has no rights, but he begs to be allowed to serve instead of going into the cryo chamber."

"Wh- oh, of course you're not goin into cryo! No cryo, no chair, no disposal. I promise. Okay? I have some doctors already lined up to help you, and I've got a prosthetic in the works if I can't regrow your arm. I've already got J working on a reintegration program for you too. You saw the video of my conversation with the President, right? I meant what I said: I'm going to help you, not hurt you."

"The Soldier is functioning at sixty-two percent efficiency. A new arm will be required to return to full effectiveness. He does not require a medic otherwise, sir." There's none of the fear of the Chair in that statement, none of Seth's fear from earlier.

Tony doesn't want to think about the implication that SHIELD's med staff was more sadistic than Hydra's.

"Not all of these doctors are for your body. Hydra did a number on your mind, Soldier, and we need to heal it too."

In the end, they don't really accomplish much, but Tony thinks they've laid a good foundation. He at least got Barnes to eat and drink some water, which is honestly more than he was expecting.

~\*~

Tony and Seth go down to the lab afterwards. The essentials are mostly packed, and he sends the STRIKE Team up to get started on lunch while he has a conversation with Ross and goes over some paperwork for Stark Industries' move.

"We have more Hydra agents, Stark."

"Do you need more bullets, General?"

"No. These are in the same condition as yours."

"Are you proposing similar treatment for them?" Tony doesn't really know how he feels about that. If they've been abused or coerced, then they deserve a second chance. But, well, he's barely got his head around the STRIKE Team, let alone others.

"We are. Look, I've got a woman who's twenty-three. SHIELD took her in at thirteen. Hydra got her at fifteen because your Agent Sitwell would sneak her water and pouches of baby food."

"Send me a list, so JARVIS can check them. I'll run the names by the STRIKE Team to see what they have to say. We'll see what Law, Accounting, and PR say. I want to help, but I can't put SI at risk."

"Of course. Now, what are your plans for-"

And so it goes for around an hour. Tony has barely saved and locked down the computer when JARVIS announces, "Sir, Agents Sitwell and Rollins the elder are approaching. I believe they are here for a personal conversation as well as to announce lunch."

The doors slide open a moment later, and the pair walk in. Jack picks Tony up in a hug.

"Jack?"

He just squeezes tighter.

"Agent Sitwell?"

"You treated Seth's feet, Doctor Stark. You gave him your own shoes."

Tony guesses his confusion must be apparent even without seeing his face because Jack says, "Boss, you really don't get it? Healthcare isn't something we always get; it's not a guarantee in any way. But you didn't just let Seth get his injuries treated. *You treated him yourself.*" He shakes his head, "You took the time to treat his injuries, and then you gave him your own shoes. You could've had him wait another week, until a pair could be ordered, but you didn't. You took your own and gave them to him."

Tony doesn't get to ask what the significance - honestly, hand-me-downs shouldn't mean so much - when Sitwell's phone rings. The person on the other line speaks loudly and clearly enough that Tony doesn't even have to strain to hear. "Sir, it's Barton. Romanov has Laura, Fury's orders."

## Chapter End Notes

Hi, y'all!

I'm sorry it's been a little bit. I had the rough draft started the day I posted Chapter 11, but I hated it. I tried rewriting it, but it didn't work. Then my dog got sick.

Long story short, about two months ago, he had to have stones removed from his bladder. Well, some came back. We caught them early and small enough that the vet was able to sedate him and give him medicine to pass them through a catheter, but it was still a rough time. And we've had to start him on a special urinary care diet. So, yeah. I love y'all, but my fur-baby comes first.

This chapter was weird. Honestly, it's a complete 180 from both the rough draft and the first rewrite. Seriously, both of those jump straight to a Quinjet on the way to DC.

And I'm sorry for hurting Seth more! But I like the idea of him being almost as broken as Bucky, so they can heal together.

Also, I don't know what's happening with the other Hydra agents. A reader mentioned in

the comments (and I am SO SORRY for not responding to those yet) that they felt bad thinking about the other Hydra agents who may have been forced into it, so... yeah.

# Gearing Up

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sitwell hangs up the phone and looks at Tony for orders. The man looks *hopeful*, but he doesn't seem willing to ask for anything.

Tony is intrigued for a moment: Barton wasn't Hydra, wasn't even part of the STRIKE Team itself, so why would he care? Quickly, though, he puts the thought aside for the moment.

Tony orders, "Get everyone to the dining room, and J, get everything you can about the whereabouts of Laura Barton and the others. I want you to find me any hint of Fury, Hill, Coulson, Romanov, and either Barton. Start prepping a Suit, and get the armors ready for the STRIKE Team. Inform Ross of the situation. We can't afford to step on each others' toes. And have every MedBay and friendly hospital near their last known location start preparing for a pregnant and possibly injured woman."

"Yes, Sir."

"Also, I gave you the framework for stabilizing Extremis. Work on it. I want to be prepared, just in case."

There's a pause before JARVIS says, "Yes, Sir." Tony doesn't imagine the concern in his baby boy's voice.

~\*~

The STRIKE Team force themselves to eat while they plan, so they'll have the energy to do whatever is needed. Tony can't. Even a smoothie would be too much right now.

"Boss, you know this is a trap, right?" Reigns asks.

"Yeah. But I can't trust SHIELD with a baby."

"But you don't have to put yourself in danger either."

Tony shakes his head. "Laura and the baby wouldn't be in danger if not for me. I can't make someone else deal with that."

The look he's given clearly says he's the only person who agrees with that statement. Before he can say anything, though, Spencer asks, "When are you going to tell the Sergeant?"

"I wasn't."

"Why not? He's a heavy-hitter, and an assassin like him has to be good at extraction."

Seth adds, "Besides, boss, he just wants to be useful. He's going to find out about the op at some point. What do you think it'll do to him if he thinks you thought he wasn't capable?"

Tony doesn't answer that last question because quite frankly, his stomach isn't up to the task of considering the response. Instead, he says, "J, how long until fabrication of the arm is complete?"

"Approximately one hour and seventeen minutes, Sir."

"Alright, ask the Sergeant to be in my lab in half an hour. We need to get some of the initial prep work done, so we can attach the new arm. Are the armors and weapons ready?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. Thank you, J. Now, guys, if you'll follow me, I have some things you'll want to see before you start packing your gear."

~\*~

The armors really aren't that great. They're about three generations ahead of what the military is currently being sold - Tony would happily sell them these, but he learned a long time ago that his mind moves faster than government writes checks. Well, that and the fact that the government has to have fairly *uniform* uniforms, not ones made to the specifications of each soldier.

They are maybe as much as seven generations more advanced than the Avengers' last armor. It's difficult to really say because so many of their upgrades were woven in slowly when they needed to be repaired, rather than being an entirely new suit. But anyway, the future-past-that-hopefully-will-never-be isn't relevant, and neither is the casual way the Avengers used to dismiss his work to protect them.

*Hephaestus and Tyr both*, if they had shown him a quarter of the gratitude of the STRIKE Team, Tony probably would have literally worked himself to death for them. As it is, he has no idea what to do with the sheer amount of appreciation the STRIKE Team is giving him.

"You made us custom-fit armor, boss?" Brock asks.

"Well, technically tailor-made." He gets a look of confusion, so Tony explains, "Custom-made implies taking a pattern and altering it to size. Tailor-made means each piece was designed for the wearer's specifications. You'll notice that none of them look the same, right? That's because J looked at how you move, both regularly and the bit of combat we've seen of you, and the armors were created to best support that. The more you wear them, the more we'll be able to tailor them to your exact needs."

"Boss-"

"Nope, sorry, this is nonnegotiable. If you have ideas for improvements after wearing them, please let me know. It'll certainly take work off of me and J because we are going to keep

improving them. Look, you're my security; that means I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe.

"You'll have to keep your current boots, though, I'm afraid. They aren't exactly my area of expertise."

"It's no problem, Dr. Stark," Agent Sitwell says. "Most of the team recieved new boots at the start of the quarter."

Tony looks and notices that Sitwell is telling the truth. The majority of the boots do look fairly new. He's going to regret hearing the answer to this question, he's sure, but he can't help but ask, "Then why were Seth's in such poor condition?"

Surprisingly, Seth is the one who responds. "It's a rule, boss. People like the Commander or the Widow are the most important, so they get new gear whenever they need it or if there's a new improvement. Other agents, like the rest of the STRIKE Team or Barton get their gear on a schedule, usually every three or six months. But people like me aren't important, so we get gear or repairs when we earn it."

Tony doesn't plan to hug the kid so much as he finds himself pulling the kid into a tight one. "That's not a rule here, Seth. Everybody is just as important as each other. You're as important as the Team. They're as important as the Commander. And he's as important as me. I know you may not believe me, but that's the truth." Seth tries to protest, but Tony continues, "*But even if it wasn't*, you'd still deserve to have your needs met. You still deserve food and water, a safe, warm place to sleep, and proper healthcare. You certainly deserve proper gear. I mean, what kind of person would I be if I sent you out with subpar gear and then got upset with your job performance?"

He doesn't get a verbal response, but the looks he gets speak volumes.

What does it say that a man who hires literal children to design weapons - geniuses or not - and who brings literal children into battles - Enhanced or not - is somehow the man with the most morals in this story?

~\*~

Sergeant Barnes is not so dramatic about the gear or the arm. He is very stoic and glassy-eyed. Pliant. At least, he is until he notices his gear is the same sort everyone else is wearing.

The Sergeant appears in distress for a moment before Seth is at his side again, once more trading hand-signs.

The others try to look away, likely in order to give them a semblance of privacy. Tony can't help but ask, "Is that a Hydra thing?"

"Partially, but a lot of it is SHIELD," Brock answers. Then he asks, "Do you want us to teach you, boss?"

"I don't want to intrude. I mean, you're going to have to spend a lot of time with me, and JARVIS will be present even when you're alone. If I can give you even that bit of privacy, I will."

Brock shakes his head. "I don't want to disagree with you, boss, but we're yours, so you can't intrude. And even if you could, well, it's not intruding if I'm offering to let you in on it. Besides, wouldn't it be useful to be able to communicate without others understanding?"

Tony purses his lips: he doesn't agree with the first part of Brock's statement, but the latter is difficult to argue. "We'll table this," he says when he notices Sergeant Barnes and Seth turning towards them. Neither speaks, and Tony doesn't press. Instead, he simply asks, "Everybody ready?"

There's a chorus of "Yes, sirs" and "Yes, bosses."

Tony calls the suit to him, letting it slide into place. Before he pulls down the faceplate, he says, "Then I guess it's show time."

## Chapter End Notes

Hi, y'all. Sorry it's been awhile. I've had a rough time lately.

First, Fuzzy passed away. I'm lucky because we were home, and I was with him. He wasn't alone, and that means a lot.

Second, a former classmate of mine was murdered. We still don't know what exactly happened. I had known him since Kindergarten, so it was pretty shocking.

Third, I lost my great aunt. She had a bleed in her brain, so there wasn't much they could do.

And on top of all that, we're dealing with some mild on-again-off-again flooding that keeps knocking out the internet and phones, so yeah. Writing hasn't really been my priority, but posting has been an issue regardless.

That said, I don't know how I feel about this chapter. It's a long way from the rough draft, that's for sure. I keep wanting to jump to what happens /after/ the rescue, so getting through this arc has been hard on my muses.

By the way, I have lost another bet, so I may be starting the collection of sidefics for this one soon. It'll be either Tony legit joining Hydra after Afghanistan, Tony being a lot more broken because of the Avengers abuse, OR Tony basically becoming the lapdog to Ross that the Rogues accused him of being. My cousin hasn't made her choice yet (I'm not really looking forward to trying either of the latter two).



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