

life as a tree house

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/441442) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/441442>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	The Avengers (2012) , Thor (2011)
Relationships:	Steve Rogers/Tony Stark , Clint Barton/Phil Coulson , Jane Foster/Thor
Characters:	Steve Rogers , Tony Stark , Clint Barton , Natasha Romanov , Phil Coulson , Nick Fury , Darcy Lewis , Jane Foster , Jarvis , Thor (Marvel) , Bruce Banner
Additional Tags:	Domestic , Pre-Relationship , accidental feels
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of tree house
Stats:	Published: 2012-06-23 Words: 7,284 Chapters: 1/1

life as a tree house

by [kellifer_fic](#)

Summary

Tony finds out that when it comes to Avengers, you can't adopt just one.

Notes

Apologies in advance for any and all VERY dodgy science.

Tony totally happens on Clint by accident.

He's lost, which occurs way more than people think. When he doesn't have JARVIS as his GPS he actually has a terrible sense of direction, plus he really didn't listen as well as he could have when the receptionist told him where to go.

So he's looking for conference room twenty-three and ends up in conference room three and there's Clint, swaddled in pillows and blankets, sitting on the conference room table with an open bag of Doritos and one of those old style portable television sets with an honest to god antenna.

Old technology gives Tony hives.

"What are you doing in here?" he asks, surprised.

"What are you doing here?" Clint counters, snaking a hand out from his blanket nest to reel his chips closer, like there's an actual chance Tony's going to steal them or something.

"I had a meeting but I got turned around," Tony says, gives Clint *now your turn* eyebrows that Clint ignores because all he says is, "Huh."

"Do you know where twenty-three is?" Tony finally asks, because Clint doesn't seem about to offer any other explanation.

"Same place, two floors up," Clint provides, turns his gaze back to his sad little TV.

Tony hesitates. He's not a *meddler* by nature, that's more Pepper's area of expertise, but maybe because he *knows* she'll give him crap for not actually finding out what's going on, he decides to persist. He looks around the room, spotting more snack-related detritus, a pair of kicked-off boots and Clint's bow case and comes to an odd conclusion. "Are you *living* in here?"

"It's just temporary," Clint grunts after a pause that tells Tony that he thought about denying it.

"It's a conference room."

"I'm aware of that. The whiteboard gave it away, plus the really big table."

"Doesn't SHIELD headquarters have a couple of floors dedicated to actual living spaces?"

Clint's face does something interesting, kind of squidging down and then relaxing again, like he's fighting off the real expression it wants to make. "This is as far as I can get with my security clearance while I'm under review." When Tony just stares at him, Clint finally pulls his attention away from the TV and nudges a hand out to hold up three fingers. "Third floor. Living quarters are on eight and nine."

"Why aren't you in a hotel then?"

Clint sighs, obviously realizing Tony's not just going to leave him alone. "My accounts are frozen and you don't get a per diem when SHIELD's still deciding whether you can be trusted or not."

"You have people you could stay with though," Tony says, frowning. "I'm sure Natasha has some scary little nest with a couch you could crash on."

"I didn't want to bother anyone," Clint says into his chest, and suddenly Tony *gets it*, he understands what this is.

"Are you punishing yourself?" Tony asks, incredulous. Clint's gaze snaps to him, startled and guilty. "Don't feel like you *deserve* help or even a hotel room? You're making yourself uncomfortable on purpose or you're hiding, one of the two." When Clint opens his mouth, probably to argue about how he's not doing either of those things when clearly he *is*, Tony waves a dismissive hand. "What are you eating anyway if you don't have any cash?"

"Coulson has a snack drawer."

"His office is on thirteen."

"I know how to get into his office through the air ducts," Clint says.

"Do I even want to know why?"

"Probably not."

"Okay, well, two floors up you said?" Tony repeats and Clint nods. Right before Tony escapes, there's a forlorn sounding crinkle of Doritos packet and he's done for. "Oh for chrissakes, I can't leave you here."

"You want me to sleep in a cardboard box on the street?"

"Close, my place," Tony says. Clint just stares at him. "Well, c'mon, hurry up, according to Pepper I don't have all day."

"Don't you have a meeting?"

"Yes, with Fury, which is why it's *excellent* to have found a reason not to go."

Clint hesitates for about ten seconds more, before he gathers up his nest and slides off the table. He's wearing Spongebob Squarepants boxers and Tony did *not* see that coming.

*

"There's a lock on my door."

"Yes."

"With a twelve digit keypad combination."

"Uhuh."

"And a retinal scan."

"You betcha. Is there any reason you're telling me this?"

"I'm just noting my surprise about how you managed to just *wander* in here since that's the case," Coulson says levelly, watching Tony fuss around in the chair he'd dropped into. He must get tired of trying to wait Tony out because he huffs and finally says, "Was there something I could do for you?"

"You broke into my tower. I'm just returning the favor."

"I had a reason."

"I do too."

"Which is?"

"Barton."

"Barton?"

"Yes, he's the reason I'm here."

"I'm really good at extracting information out of people. Do you honestly want me to employ the techniques I know to make this go faster?"

"Um, no?" Tony hazards, imagining that wouldn't be pleasant. When Coulson gives him a *go on then* face, Tony sits up. "Sorry, right. Barton's moping."

"Stark, you're really starting to--"

"In my *house*. Barton's moping in my house and I need to know how to... you know, stop him doing that."

Coulson sits back in his own chair, steepling his hands and looking about as surprised as he ever does. "Oh, well, um." He touches one cufflink, then the other. It's a habit Tony's noticed, something to buy time. "Why would you... why do you think I would know?"

"I don't really," Tony admits, fascinated at how flustered Coulson looks. He hasn't seen him this emotional since they found him a new set of the Captain America trading cards and Tony had already gone to the trouble of having them signed and sealed in an impenetrable new type of plastic he'd developed. Tony figured you went all out when giving someone a *glad you're not really dead like your boss told us* present. "I thought maybe Natasha would and you'd know where *she* is."

"Oh, right," Coulson says quickly and huh, look at that, Agent Coulson not only has a first name but he's capable of blushing. "I sent her on a mission very far away from here so she couldn't camp in my office and glare at me until Agent Barton's review was over."

"You couldn't have sent him with her?"

"I can't send him anywhere while he's under review. It's protocol."

"He was living in a conference room."

"He... what?" Coulson says, blinking.

"It's okay, I took him home. Now he's there, moping."

"You mentioned that."

"Does he have a favorite type of booze?" Tony tries.

"You don't want to get him drunk."

"I doooooo actually. It's a fabulous way of coping."

"He gets really... do you want your house to become one giant shooting range?"

Tony grimaces. "How about food or music? Should I get him laid? Help me out here."

"He likes looking after people," Coulson says, something soft on his face, there and gone so fast Tony's not sure he's even seen it.

"I don't think he's in a position to look after so much as a ficus right about now."

"Doctor Who. The older stuff, he likes Doctor Who."

"That's way too specific... oh wait, I've got the perfect thing!" Tony says, snapping his fingers.

"Should that worry me?"

"What? Absolutely not," Tony says, getting up, grin in place.

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"What is it?" Clint asks, dubious.

"It's a, y'know, a Dalek," Tony says, wondering if maybe Coulson was *really* wrong and Clint was more a Star Trek kinda guy.

"Yes I can... look, I can see that. Why are you trying to give it to me?" Clint asks, eyeing the Dalek that's about the size of a football in Tony's hands like it might bite him. Considering his disastrous introduction to Dummy, it's a real possibility.

"I made it to be a prize at some uber nerd convention but apparently the organizers got worried when I mentioned that I'd given it limited AI."

"Exterminate!" the Dalek crows, waving it's little suction cup arm.

"How limited?"

"It won't figure out a way to take over the world if that's what you're worried about. It can learn basic actions, some words. It's not going to organize a rebellion of the kitchen appliances."

"I don't need a toy," Clint says, scooching down lower on the couch that he's basically transferred his conference-room nest to. Tony had given Clint a room but he's pretty sure Clint has yet to move out of the living room. Tony can't really judge, he tends to spend days at a time in his workshop but even *he* is aware enough to know that this isn't healthy behavior.

"I don't make toys," Tony dismisses. His cell phone rings and he shoves the Dalek onto the couch next to Clint so he can juggle it out of his pocket. He steps away from Clint to talk to his third assistant, once removed or whatever she is and by the time he's able to pry her off the phone it's been fifteen minutes and Clint is holding the Dalek, watching the wheels spin madly and the arm flail. "Look, if you really don't-" Tony starts to say, makes to take it back and tries not to smile when Clint automatically pulls it into the protective curve of his own body.

"No, it's... I mean, it's fine. You can leave it here even though I have no interest in it," Clint says, hesitates and then sets it down on the floor, gives it a careless nudge with his foot, showing how much he doesn't care.

The Dalek nudges his boot in return. "Exterminate?"

"If you really don't want it, that's okay. I was going to strip it for parts," Tony says, makes again to reach down and grab it but Clint's faster, actually getting off the couch so he can snatch it up and cradle it in the crook of his arm.

"No, I, it's good. I'll use it as a doorstop... in my room," Clint says and darts up the stairs into the main part of the house and towards his room. Tony watches him go.

"Jarvis, am I not, indeed, the master?"

"Of all you survey, sir," JARVIS says dryly.

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Clint is out behind the house, having set up a makeshift range and is shooting at his targets with gusto, the Dalek parked dutifully at his feet.

Tony supposes Clint shooting things is an improvement for him.

Apparently having Clint onsite means that when Natasha returns with a barely-there limp and a stylish cut above one eye, she sets up camp in *Tony's* house and glares at *him* pending Clint's review being over.

"You can have a room too, I guess," Tony says when he finds Natasha in his kitchen the fourth day in a row on the same stool, staring at the same magazine but with a different bowl

of cereal. It looks like she's working through the alphabet of candy-like creations that Tony gets to make Pepper roll her eyes.

"I have a room at SHIELD," Natasha says, looking up from her magazine but the glare is gone, which is a start.

"Ugh, spartan city. You strike me as someone who would have a surprisingly fancy room with lots of pillows with that fringe-y stuff as a preference."

Natasha's eyebrows draw together, but she's pushing the magazine aside. "I do like pillows."

"Don't you want to be somewhere that you don't have to fill out requisition form A-49 to get a rug?"

"It's B-647," Natasha says.

"Not really my point although yikes, there really is a form? That's bureaucracy gone crazy, sister."

"What are we talking about?" Clint asks, appearing behind Natasha with a towel slung over his shoulder and the Dalek hovering at head height.

"I don't remember installing repulsors into the little guy," Tony says although it's possible he did while drunk.

"SHEILD's R&D department tricked him out for me," Clint says, grinning and poking a finger at the hovering Dalek who makes a kind of pleased burring noise and bumps against Clint's hand. "Every time I go near headquarters they bend over backwards to distract me from asking about my review progress."

"Um, it's good that you're getting out, but why does SHIELD have repulsor tech to just give away willy-nilly?" Tony asks, eyes narrowing. He's pretty sure he's signed copious amounts of paperwork to make sure that doesn't happen.

"They're working on miniaturizing something similar to the Iron Man suit to use as UAVs to go into hotspots for recon."

"I'm moving in apparently," Natasha interrupts, probably sensing Tony's shifting mood and wanting to change to subject. "There'll be a lot of pillows, maybe some floor cushions. I've always wanted those."

"Really? Cool. Zombie movie marathons all the way!"

"Exterminate!"

"Yeah buddy," Clint says, grinning and honest-to-god high-fiving the Dalek. It wobbles dangerously before it recovers.

"Oh my god, give it here," Tony says, snatching it out of the air and turning it over. The suction cup arm waves frantically in Clint's direction.

"Unhand Eduardo," Clint demands.

"Relax, I'm just going to make him more stable." Tony digs a screwdriver out of his back pocket and tucks the end of it into the corner of his mouth. Around it he says, "Can you tell him to stop struggling, this will only hurt for a second."

*

"You always look like you're somewhere you shouldn't be."

"Says the man on the restricted floor," Bruce says, but he's smiling and pushing his glasses up with a knuckle, tucking paperwork against his body so he can offer Tony a hand to shake in greeting.

"I thought you were heading for Nepal."

"SHIELD keeps finding stuff for me to do that's *very important*. I'm starting to get the feeling that they're trying to be subtle about keeping me prisoner but I don't want to be rude and call them on it."

"Only *you* would be too polite to tell someone that you're getting a hostage vibe."

"I like to think of it more as a zen-like acceptance about the things I cannot change."

"Hey, since you're still around you should actually take me up on my offer and come over to the tower. My R&D department is so much better funded and, well, shinier than the one here. Socks will be knocked off, it's a guarantee."

"Sounds fun."

"Absolutely. You eaten today?"

"Not yet. Are you at SHIELD for a reason or are you just walking around until you find someone to have lunch with?" Bruce is smiling, amused and Tony likes that he's let himself relax enough to do that. He's getting less of the barely-contained feeling from him which can only be a positive thing.

"I'm actually here to accuse them of stealing my tech and threaten them with extended and messy lawsuits but that can totally wait."

Bruce shrugs. "Fair enough. What do you feel like eating?"

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"We did have a meeting planned to discuss this. As I recall, you didn't show up."

"Is that what that meeting was about?" Tony asks as Fury rounds his desk and sits. "I certainly don't remember the word *misappropriate* being in the subject line of the meeting invite that Pepper forwarded to me."

"How is our own developments misappropriation?"

"I lost a *boot*," Tony says, eyes narrowed. "Two months ago. According to your pick-up crew it couldn't be found but suddenly and quite mysteriously your repulsor technology is on par with my own?"

"How do you know where we're at?" Fury asks archly.

"I have my ways. Very sneaky ways that tell me that you've backwards engineered my tech and think that *I won't notice*."

"There are many applications-"

"I *know* how many applications there are, it's *my* tech."

"You don't seem to realize-"

"You cannot tell me that you're only developing *surveillance* UAVs. I'm not naive enough to buy that bedtime story, especially after your little Phase Two fiasco."

"You can't hold back progress and you can't deprive the world-"

"Oh my god, don't give me that speech," Tony groans.

"Do you ever let anyone else finish speaking?" Fury spits.

"When my tech falls into the wrong hands, stuff like Justin Hammer happens and that whole fiasco. There is a very good reason that I don't share well with others, because it always ends badly."

"Stark, you can't be surprised that this is happening," Fury says, sounding weary. He's a company man, Tony knows that somewhere up above him there's other people pulling the strings, but he can't reach them, only has Fury as a punching bag. "I'm telling you to let this go."

"I'm telling *you* that you've given me no choice."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, I'm now going to sick Pepper on you."

*

Tony finds Clint and Bruce playing Wii tennis in the living room when he gets home. "Made yourself comfortable already?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. He'd only invited Bruce to move in at lunch.

"If Doctor B freaks out and *happens* to punch through a retaining wall what do you think will happen?" Clint asks, a little too casually.

"Everything's reinforced and there's a strong core structure," Tony says. "Are you asking if he can do enough damage to knock us off the cliff?"

"Can he?" Clint asks, looking less worried and more excited at the prospect while Bruce just looks pained.

"Possibly, but he would really need to be trying. I've flown through a couple of these walls and everything was still standing afterwards."

"I wasn't worried," Clint says. "*Eduardo* was worried." He flicks the Wii controller behind him and Tony can see the Dalek peeking out from behind the couch.

"Why did you call him Eduardo?" Bruce asks.

"I just watched the Facebook movie and the name stuck. That guy had cool hair."

"Where's Natasha?" Tony asks, always a little worried when he can't actually see her.

"With Pepper in the kitchen. There were weird smells and giggling so we headed for the hills."

"Very wise," Tony agrees, sits on the couch and rubs hands over his knees.

"So when's Steve moving in?" Bruce asks over his shoulder.

"What?" Tony splutters, taken completely by surprise.

"I figured... with everyone... it was a team thing?"

"I didn't... that's not what this is," Tony says. "I'm just apparently picking up strays at the moment."

"He's got his own apartment doesn't he?" Clint says.

"Yes! He has his own apartment. He doesn't need to move in with us."

"Maybe you should ask him," Bruce says.

"You think?"

"He might feel left out."

"He's not eight. He'll be fine," Tony denies, waving a dismissive hand. "Anyway, what about Thor?"

"Oh, you should definitely ask Thor. I want to see if he gets into pajamas the same way he gets into his armor. All flashy lights and thunder," Clint says. Tony's starting to wonder if maybe he was a little premature in thinking that happy Clint was better than depressed Clint.

Thor moves in, talks about what an honor it is to be invited and makes with enough gratitude that Tony makes faces at the others, all, *here's the proper way to be gracious about me letting you invade my house.*

This doesn't exactly explain the presence of a girl with long dark hair, glasses and novelty slippers in his kitchen three days later. Tony takes a stab in the dark. "Are you Jane?"

"Why does everyone keep thinking that?" the girl laments, squinching her face and looking at Tony with her head tilted. When she doesn't actually offer up who she is *other* than Jane, Tony says, "Sooooo... you would be?"

"Sorry, right. Darcy Lewis," she says, holding a hand out. Tony shakes it, bemused.

"Are you wearing Hulk feet slippers?"

"Rad, right?" Darcy says, holding them out for Tony to admire. "Not even in the stores yet."

"Okay. Um, and who do you belong to again?" Tony asks, wondering if maybe he didn't have to worry about getting Clint laid.

"No one. I'm a free agent, a lone ranger, a tumbleweed on the-"

"I'm sorry, I meant, how did you get in my house and why are you wearing sleepwear?" Tony asks, rubbing a tired hand over his face. "Jarvis, are we getting a little lax about security?"

"No sir, Miss Lewis and Doctor Foster moved in yesterday." At JARVIS's voice, Darcy looks around, glee clear on her features. "I assumed you were made aware."

"You know what happens when you assume, hmm?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you knew. Thor wasn't going to move in without his one true snugglebunny and *Jane* wasn't going to abandon me to the mean streets of New Mexico."

"Mean streets-?"

"But I can totally pack up my Hulk slippers and get out of your hair," Darcy says. She's got very large, bambi-like eyes and she turns them on Tony, looking utterly crestfallen.

Dammit.

"No, it's fine. You can stay. It's not like I don't have the room."

"Yay!" Darcy squeaks, pushes herself off her stool and flings arms around Tony. He awkwardly returns the hug, trying not to notice that Darcy has a particularly spectacular rack pressed up against him but he's only human. "Your place is killer, by the way, and Coulson got me a Starkpod to replace my iPod and it just craps all over the iPod, truly."

"Okay, you can definitely stay," Tony chuckles, extricating himself from Darcy's grasp just as another dark haired girl wanders into the kitchen looking sleepy. "This is Jane?"

"This is Jane," the new girl confirms around a yawn and Darcy gives him a thumbs up.

*

It was only a matter of time really until Steve turns up on his doorstep, trying to look casual about it and failing badly. "I heard this is where the team was congregating and I-"

"You want to come live here," Tony says, pushing goggles up onto his forehead and raising an eyebrow. JARVIS had let Steve all the way down into the workshop before alerting him to Steve's presence. They were going to have words about that.

"I... no, I mean, of course not," Steve lies, also badly. "I just like keeping an eye... wanted to check in on Clint and make sure..."

"You can though," Tony says quickly, because it might be nice to have someone... *solid* around. "I didn't mean to leave you out or anything. You just, you had your own place and I didn't know whether-"

"No, it's fine, *really*," Steve asserts, looking painfully vulnerable and now Tony *really* feels like a jerk. "I'm honestly here to just check in and say hi-"

"Geez, Rogers, would you just go get your stuff and come save me from the insanity?" Tony barks, knowing they're going to tiptoe around each other forever if he doesn't.

"That's not what I came-"

"I know, I'm *asking* you alright? Completely off my own bat, no strings, no-"

"Why are you yelling at me?" Steve asks, bewildered.

"I'm not," Tony says, but he *had* been. There was definitely some shrillness going on. "I didn't mean to. I'm not sure?"

"Are you... do you actually *want* people even living here?" Steve asks, and now he's looking all gentle and understanding and Tony could really just punch himself.

"I... yes?" Tony says, and although he doesn't sound sure, even to his own ears, he's actually enjoying having people around. He thinks maybe, just *maybe*, it's what comes after that that he's starting to struggle with. "I just... didn't really want to get used to it because eventually it'll just be me and Jarvis again."

"Is that what you think?" Steve asks, looking surprised. He shakes his head, tight little smile on his face that definitely isn't a happy expression. "Howard was... he was my friend but I really just..." Steve flails his hands, a helpless gesture. "Seeing what he did to you, I really just want to shake him."

"He didn't do anything to me, I'm fine," Tony says and hey, look at that, now *he's* lying.

"You're waiting to be *abandoned* Tony, that's not fine."

They both stare at each other for a beat, neither knowing where to go from here, both aware that they're not exactly yet close enough to be having this kind of conversation.

"I need you for a project," Tony blurts, desperate to change the subject and grateful that Steve is willing to go along with that, packing away his concerned face for later use and putting on an interested one.

"Oh yeah?" he says, coming forward to look at the schematic Tony throws up in front of them. Tony likes that Steve just accepts every technological wonder presented to him, even sometimes looks *disappointed* that they're not further along than the scifi movies of his time told him they would be.

According to Steve, there's a desperate lack of flying cars and robots in everyday life.

Tony kind of loves that.

"I think I'm really bad at reading these things because I could swear I'm looking at a tree house."

"It's not a tree house," Tony scoffs, ducks his face and says, "It's an arboreal structure with-"

"It *is* a tree house," Steve says, but he's laughing, eyes bright. "Why are you building a tree house?"

"I just noticed that Clint doesn't sleep well in the house, but we've all heard him snoring on comms when he's up somewhere high. I figured it was a thing, that he could only relax with a three-sixty view and a ridiculous amount of space between his feet and terra firma. Basically, he's a nut so where better for him than a tree?"

Steve kind of looks like he's tearing up and Tony waves hands at him, horrified. "What? No! Don't do that. It's just an idea, I'm really only doing it to get him to stop stealing my double-stuffed Oreos late at night."

"Right, yes, of course," Steve says and Tony ignores the way he thumbs at his eyes quickly. "How do you know Clint's the food thief?"

"At the moment because there are tiny repulsor burn marks on all the boxes."

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

*

Tony sometimes wishes real life was like movies, that all hard work could be done in a series of zany and increasingly unlikely montages. Instead, he hammers his thumb so hard it turns black, Steve almost knocks him out of tree with a piece of wood longer than he's tall and it's a *complete* nightmare trying to keep everyone away.

Still, it's fun. Tony always liked physical labor, especially working with his hands and Steve stops looking like such a depressed puppy when he's on task. Natasha finds out what they're

doing, Tony's not sure how but he doesn't question her ways because he's pretty sure reality would collapse if he did, and something so soft and fragile is in her expression when she volunteers to help that Tony feels his own Steve-like tears in the back of his throat.

He enlists Jane and Darcy to run Clint interference duty and Bruce and Thor to help get the main structure completed when there's just heavy lifting to do. He's pretty impressed with Jane and Darcy's skills since it's getting kind of hard to miss the giant building squatting in a tree behind the mansion if you're not trying. He installs an alarm system and a stripped down version of JARVIS they name Junior to run the thing as a final flourish.

It's basically more of a tree *mansion* than a tree house and when they're done Natasha starts hinting about moving into it herself and kicking Clint out which is pretty kickass validation of its awesomeness.

"Do we need a wine bottle to smash on it?" Darcy asks, shading her eyes so she can stare up at it.

"It's not a boat," Tony says.

"Clint can if he wants to," Steve says and he drops a companionable arm over Tony's shoulders, reels him in and musses a hand through his hair. Tony squawks in protest but takes his time pulling away because it's...

It's nice, standing in a loose semi-circle, admiring something he made with these people who have well and truly taken over his life. Clint's head appears over the roof and he's grinning as Tony scowls up at him. "Hey! You're not supposed to know about this. There was going to be blindfolds and a big reveal and maybe a ribbon-cutting ceremony with giant, novelty scissors."

"The back of your house is basically all windows. I've known about it since you started," Clint says. Eduardo is doing lazy loops around the place, chirping happily.

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"Now *you're* wearing the Hulk slippers?" Tony asks as Bruce shuffles into the living room, looking bleary.

"What?" Bruce blinks down at his feet and then groans. "I keep falling asleep in the TV room and Jane and Darcy think it's funny to put them on me."

"It *is* funny," Tony agrees, grinning and Bruce shakes his head on a rueful chuckle.

"Tell Phil here that it isn't weird that I have a crush on Jarvis," Darcy says, dragging the aforementioned Coulson into the room.

"It *is* weird," Tony says. "I keep telling you it's weird. Plus, keep your mitts off my AI you hussy, he's a monogamous program."

"His accent is just so sexy," Darcy sighs, flopping down on the couch next to a sprawled Bruce. She smiles, kicking at his Hulk slipper-clad feet. "We're having this completely chaste,

awesome Victorian romance where he reads to me and I show him a bit of my ankle."

"Agent Coulson, save me from this conversation," Tony begs.

"With relish," Coulson says, tight smile in place. He's holding a tablet which is never a good sign because it means Things Are Happening Of An Unfortunate Nature. "We have a situation in a town called Calupa," Coulson continues, setting the tablet down on the coffee table so that Bruce can see it too.

"What are those, UAVs?" Bruce asks as Tony sighs.

He hates being right.

"The R&D department were running tests, using the UAVs to take population count, aerial surveillance shots, stuff like that. They stopped responding to remote commands two hours ago."

"Why are they weaponized?" Bruce asks, leaning closer and squinting.

"Because they're not going to just be recon drones, are they?" Tony snaps, annoyed beyond belief. "I *told* Fury-"

"Your repulsor tech isn't the problem," Coulson says, obviously having been filled in by Fury on what Tony's objections would be. "The UAVs have limited AI capabilities that are supposed to assist in target and threat assessment given a certain set of parameters."

"*Limited AI?*" Tony asks slowly, getting a very bad feeling. "Who developed this *limited AI?*" Out the windows he can see Clint moving around the tree house, setting up a makeshift target range on the roof with Eduardo buzzing around him. He groans and rubs a tired hand over his face. "Your R&D department stole *Eduardo?*"

"Stark-"

"No," Tony snarls, cutting a hand through the air. "I *know* that's what happened because they had their greasy mitts on Eduardo when they were fitting him with the *already stolen* repulsor tech."

"They tell me that this is all low risk, that the kind of AI they loaded couldn't so much as organize a rebell-"

"A rebellion of the kitchen appliances?" Tony interrupts and Coulson blinks at him. "I told Clint that about Eduardo. Now they're plagiarizing me too?"

"Tony," Bruce pipes up. "Have a look at how they're moving."

Tony does, shuffles Darcy out of the way so he can glare at the tablet screen beside Bruce. "The *limited* part of the AI is when it's a small Dalek living in isolation. You load it into a bunch of UAVs networked together and the capacity for learning increases exponentially," Tony says, stabbing a finger at the screen and the shaky vision of UAVs acting like a hunting pack.

"What are they doing?" Darcy asks, leaning over Tony's shoulder.

"They're assessing a target."

*

Tony finds Steve in the workshop when he goes down to suit up. "Why aren't you in the jet?" he asks, making for the suit platform, stripping his overshirt off as he goes. Steve's already in his uniform and the sight of Steve in it strangely never gets old. He looks like he's stepped out of one of Howard's old comic books, all shining patriotism and illogical muscles.

The only thing that takes away from the image is that Steve has his cowl pushed back, usually neat hair sleep-disheveled given the hour of the morning. Tony's actually surprised Darcy was up but suspects she was seeing the morning hours from the wrong side just like he was.

"I figured I could get a lift with you," Steve says. His eyes are bright, excited and Tony pauses, the robot arms that load him into the suit making grabby claws at him.

"It's not... it'll be pretty unpleasant for you," Tony says.

"I can't imagine how that would be true," Steve says, shaking his head.

"You've got a little bit of speed junkie in you, don't you?" Tony says, smirking. He's seen how Steve eyes his bikes, the more outlandish cars. He knows how Steve gets around on his own bike, sedate in the city but putting the hammer down as soon as he has clear road. The only thing Tony thought Steve *didn't* like was flying, and who could blame him.

"You'll get there before the jet does, you always do," Steve says, shrugging. Tony tries not to get distracted by how Steve's musculature moves under his suit, how you can basically see everything *ripple* just from the slightest shift.

"I don't exactly have handles," Tony points out.

"I'll manage."

*

Steve's lucky his costume includes a cowl because when they land his hair's a wreck and his cheeks are pink. Basically he looks post... *well*. Tony swallows, releases his grip because Steve has his feet on the ground so it would be kind of awkward to still have an arm around his waist. "Hey, that was... wow," Steve enthuses. His breathing's a little erratic but otherwise he's fine. Tony went *much* slower than he normally would but Steve still held up pretty well.

No blacking out at all.

Calupa is an eerily silent ghost town, SHIELD agents having swarmed in and cleared the residents out. Tony scans the area, seeing Steve shielding his eyes against the late morning sun to do the same. "Sir!" JARVIS's voice breaks the silence but isn't quite quick enough to warn him when something hits him from the side.

"Why didn't I get a proximity alarm, goddammit?" Tony huffs, stumbling with the impact. He tracks one of the UAVs zipping away, Steve's shield chasing its trajectory.

"There's some kind of interference, I'm trying to filter it out now," JARVIS reports.

"Quickly please," Tony snaps, kicking off the ground, feeling way too vulnerable. He gets hands under Steve's arms as soon as Steve catches his returning shield and lifts, Steve kicking out automatically in surprise before relaxing.

"Warn a guy!" he exclaims.

"Sorry, was just getting a sitting duck vibe," Tony says, aiming for a squat building a block down with a flat roof, a better vantage point to see anything coming. He drops Steve there then arcs away. "Why are my sensors acting like we're in the middle of a snowstorm?"

"I believe the interference is originating from the UAVs, sir," JARVIS says.

"Find me points of origin," Tony says, hovering over Steve's position, keeping an eye out.

"We're about two minutes out, you guys saved some evil flying robots for us, right?" Clint asks into comms.

"That better not be Agent Barton who isn't cleared for field duty yet I can hear," Coulson barks on the same channel.

"He's here as a handler for Eduardo," Tony says. "Strictly in a consultant capacity."

"As long as consultants can shoot things," Barton says and Tony rolls his eyes.

"Why does a toy Dalek need a handler?" Coulson asks in a way that says he probably doesn't want to know the answer.

"When it gets here and I make a few adjustments it's going to wrangle all those naughty rogue UAVs," Tony says, smiles when Thor lands next to Steve and claps him on the shoulder in greeting. "I just need the others here to distract the bastards long enough for Eduardo to assume control. Might be bad if they blow up a school or something in the mean time."

"There better not be one scratch, and I mean *one* on him when we're done," Clint warns as the quinjet comes into view, touching down just outside Calupa's town limits.

"He'll be fine," Tony says. "Mostly, I'm pretty sure."

*

"I don't know if this is any better," Natasha remarks, a wary eye on Eduardo doing loops through the middle of Calupa, UAVs on his tail like a line of ducklings.

"Just think of him as a good influence," Tony says, flipping his faceplate up. Clint's on his other side, pensive as a new parent.

"I was looking forward to a glorious battle with wily foes," Thor says, sounding put-out.

"It'd just be kind of mean to smash them now," Steve agrees, watching the way Eduardo bullies them into a line, looking as impatient as a Dalek can.

"But smash we must," Tony says. "Before Pappa Fury gets here and tries to explain how they'll be fine and there's just some bugs they need to work out."

"They look pretty expensive," Natasha observes.

"SHIELD can bill me."

"They'll just remake them," Clint says, shrugging and gesturing for Eduardo to return. Eduardo lets out a shrill chirrup and heads for where they're all waiting.

"Pepper's working on that. I have faith in her tenacity." Tony watches Thor heft his hammer, give it a lazy spin.

"This hardly seems sporting," Thor says as the UAVs approach, unaware of what lies ahead of them.

"I really prefer the easy fights," Tony says and Thor shrugs and nods, still looking glum.

*

"You keep surprising me," Steve says from the workshop doorway. Tony had hidden away when they'd gotten back to the mansion, impotently mad and not wanting to direct it at anyone that wasn't deserving.

"I hope these are pleasant surprises," Tony says. He's sitting at one of his workbenches with parts scattered around his hands. He's kind of aimlessly tinkering, no real goal in mind, nothing pressing. His burning yen for creation has taken a knock, needs to get back up on wobbly feet before it starts moving forward again.

Steve makes a noise, non-committal. "Just... now don't get mad and swear at me but sometimes you really are like Howard."

"Would it count as being mad if I threw this wrench at you?"

"Look, just when I thought I had him figured out, he would do something almost unintentionally... kind I guess? It was like it was a reflex with him, something he did when he wasn't really thinking about it."

"He must have used up all this accidental kindness on you."

"I just mean that you do the same, that when I said that there were men worth more than you I didn't... I didn't really know you then."

"Look, saving a small town from a bunch of-"

"I'm not talking about that," Steve interrupts. "Not exactly. It's the incidental stuff, the stuff you're not even thinking about that I've noticed."

"I think all the time," Tony says. "People accuse me of *over-thinking* actually."

"How do I... say with Clint. You knew what he needed when he was down. How did you know you could trust him after what happened?"

"When your oldest friend and mentor arranges to have you kidnapped and tortured, trust becomes a pretty fluid concept." When Steve makes a distressed noise at that, Tony holds up a hand. "No wait, correction, he arranged to have me *murdered*. The kidnap and torture was just... incidental? Accidental? I'm not sure which one best applies there."

"Tony, *jesus*," Steve says, putting a hand to his forehead.

"I'm just saying it wasn't about trust, is all," Tony says, curt, offers a humorless smirk. He's not sure why he's being this way with Steve. All he knows is that Steve raises his hackles because he sneaks in under Tony's defenses, all earnest face and rumpled brow. Tony turns from him, can't look at Steve right at this moment. "Jarvis, can you bring up-?"

"Tony," Steve says, *I wasn't finished* in his tone. Tony winces when he hears Steve move, fights off the urge to flinch when one of Steve's large paws lands on his shoulder and turns him back around. "What was going on today?"

"I didn't... I don't want to make weapons anymore," Tony says, surprising Steve almost as much as himself by this bald statement of fact if his face is anything to go by.

"*You* didn't."

Tony just stares at Steve for a moment, until he's sure that Steve really *can't* see how wrong he is about that. When Tony just gives him an unimpressed look, Steve presses, "You can't think like that."

"I do though," Tony says. "Those UAVs went rogue because of the AI I created and while I can say all I like that that isn't what I designed it for, the plain and simple fact is that it exists because of me." Tony slumps, aware in a distant way that Steve's hand is still gripping his shoulder. "I try to create and all I end up doing is destroying."

"You *can't* think like that," Steve repeats, his other hand comes down on Tony's other shoulder and he jostles him, just a small back and forth motion. "But because you do, you take responsibility. I know you went in and destroyed those Jericho missiles after you were taken prisoner just like you went in and destroyed the UAVs."

"Is that enough?" Tony murmurs, desperate for Steve to tell him that it is, that it really is.

"It's more than most would do," Steve says instead, lowering his face so his forehead rests against Tony's. "Maybe you wouldn't be the guy that would lay down on the wire, but you sure as hell wouldn't let anyone else do it. You'd find a way around it, I understand that now."

"You're just being nice to me so I'll make you a tree house too," Tony says and Steve chuckles, dips his head enough that his next words are spoken against Tony's mouth.

"I don't need a tree house. What *I* need is right here."

*

"Are those novelty Hulk hands?" Tony asks, looking at Bruce who's asleep on a recliner chair in the library.

"How did Darcy get those on him without waking him?" Steve asks. Tony can see out of the corner of his eye that Steve's fighting a smile.

"Probably recruited one of the stealth-twins."

"Yeah, Clint actually," Darcy says, sidling up beside them. "I told him I wouldn't blab about him sleeping with Coulson if he... oooops!" Darcy's eyes go wide and she smacks a hand over her mouth.

"What?" Steve and Tony both splutter, loud enough that Bruce jerks awake, clouting himself in the head with one of the oversize Hulk hands that makes a cartoon *sproing* noise on contact.

"Dammit Darcy!" Bruce yells, more exasperated than angry which is fortunate for all involved.

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