We Create Our Own Demons

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We Create Our Own Demons
Summary

“Don’t you dare bring him into this.” Captain America had risen once more, towering over Tony, causing him to straighten up as well.

Part of it was because of the panic that had rapidly began to compile somewhere in the distance, rushing in like a tsunami, ready to wreak havoc. But he built his wall of adamance higher, using his might to hold it together, to hold it...

“I can speak for myself, Steve.” But Bucky’s calm and quiet statement went unnoticed by the blond and the brunette as they faced each other in the middle of the room, the tension between them stretching out to a single thread.

“Or what, Captain Righteous? You’ll slam your frisbee into my chest again? You’ll tell your friend to claw my actual heart out this time instead of just the arc reactor? I mean, with the new reinforcements and upgrades that I designed on your toys, it should finally be enough to actually do that anyway so why don’t you just go ahead?”

He did not know how the anguish had bubbled up and spewed out of his mouth. He did not know when the wall fell and the tsunami blasted through, rooting up his defenses and cascading him closer and closer to the edge of a severe panic attack.

Notes

This is my first fic here so please be nice and comments are appreciated. I don't have a set schedule for updates just yet but I'll try to do them as fast as I can.
"You ready, Tony?" Rhodey's voice was comforting and it brought Tony Stark back from his blank stare.

Three years. It had been three years since Steve had plunged his shield into Tony's arc reactor, leaving him immobile in the harsh, unforgiving cold of Siberia. Three years of getting over yet another bout of PTSD, of panic attacks, of terrifying nightmares. Three years of struggling with depression, of Rhodey having to pull him out from dark, dark days where it had seemed as if the shadows and his thoughts were eating away at him, picking at him, killing him.

Three years without his friends. No, his family.

"Yeah, I...I'm ready." Tony splashed his face with water once more in the bathroom of the SHIELD helicarrier. The Avengers had arrived and Tony was going to meet them. He was going to see the people that he loved. He was ready to stitch his family back together. He wanted this. He fought for this.

His reflection was pitiful almost, he thought as he glanced at the mirror. He still had his goatee and the same, chocolate-brown eyes. But the wrinkles that lined his face were creased with years of worry, pain, and fear. His skin was pale and he had lost so much weight, his cheeks had hollowed out.

Two years since the gang rape. The headlines still haunted him. He still heard the accusations, the mocking tones of the reporters, the disgust from people who did not even know him. He wanted to scream to the world, "I WAS RAPED. I WAS VIOLATED. I AM NOT A WHORE."

But then louder voices told him to shut the hell up. Those voices told him that it was his fault. All of it. Those voices reminded him that he was worthless, that he was nothing, that he deserved no one and nothing. Those voices told him that he deserved to die. Maybe then, he would stop wreaking havoc. Maybe then, the world could truly be at peace.

Tony felt a warm hand squeeze his shoulder, once again pulling him to the surface. "Come on, let's get this over with. Bruce is waiting for us."

Bruce. One year since Bruce Banner had returned from India. He had gotten tanner, his hair a little whiter, his face a little more worn down. But he was happier, he was better. He came back to Tony. He took care of his friend. Tony had never defended himself against the news reports, but Bruce knew. But he never spoke of it, he never brought it up. It was better for them both.

Tony sighed deeply and then grabbed his briefcase and led the way. It was time for him to meet the Avengers. It was time for him to welcome his family back home.
Chapter 2

Tony loosed a long, shaky breath as he entered the conference room where Fury, Coulson, and the others were waiting. Although he refused to show it on his face, the striking baby blues of Steve Rogers pierced into his skin, not unlike the way his shield had pounded on his chest, stealing his breath, breaking his ribs, wafting in and out of consciousness. *Oh God he couldn't breathe.*

Tony placed a hand on Rhodey's shoulder to steady himself as he scanned the room. *In, out, in, out.* Rhodey kept still even though he was standing with the help of the braces that Tony had designed for him to help him walk. He could sense the fear resonating from Tony, he could tell that his friend was trying his hardest to not have a panic attack by the way he had begun to flex his pale fingers, clenching and unclenching them, his fingernails digging into his skin.

Bucky's metal arm was on top of the table, glinting under the dim lights of the room. The same arm that Tony had blown off. The same arm that had tried to kill him. The same arm that had stopped his mother and father from breathing.

*In, out, in, out.*

The Winter Soldier....no, he wasn't that anymore. He was James Buchanan Barnes. He was a good man, he was Steve's friend. He was...he was...

Tony pretty much collapsed into his seat trying to get his breathing under control without drawing attention to his weakness. His lungs rattled inside in his ribs as he forced himself to glance at Bucky, who was staring at the table intently, also trying his best not to gain anyone's concern. He had trimmed his hair neatly and now, Tony could somewhat see the man that Steve had known from the 1940's.

And yet, he still felt the pain in his chest, he still felt the blood rolling down his face, he still felt the stinging of the cold, and the utter empty hole of betrayal. He still felt...*nauseous.*

But he willed his hands to stop shaking as they opened the briefcase. No one had spoken. No one dared open their mouths.

Sam Wilson was sitting in the chair farthest away, determined to stay as invisible as he possibly could.

Wanda and Clint had stayed huddled together. Her face was unreadable as she stared blankly at the wall and Clint's glare...his glare was nothing short of manic. There was anger, in the purest form gathering behind his eyes. Wanda could sense it. She felt the roiling storm that Clint was building in the depths of his stomach, but she did not betray her composure. But Clint's eyes bore into Tony, threatening terrible, terrible things.

"Well since none of you ass clowns are going to start the conversation, I am." Everyone turned towards Fury, who had snapped the tension in the room as if it were the wire of a bomb. "Welcome back," he acknowledged Team Cap and then turned towards Tony, who was trying so damn hard to keep calm, to *breathe.* "Stark, give them the documents that you had prepared. I believe that all of them have signed the amended Accords so no need to worry about that. Scott Lang has returned to wherever the hell he came so you don't need to worry about him either. Just get this shit over with and find a way to kiss and make up so that we can get back to the actual problems at hand."

All eyes were now on Tony Stark as he took out several thin packets of paper. One for each member
that was able to return safely to the country after three years.

He cleared his throat, keeping his nausea and panic at bay and looked towards Bruce, who had snuck into the meeting behind Rhodey and was now standing at his side like a bodyguard. If the other Avengers were surprised that Bruce Banner was back, they did not show it in their faces, although Cap kept glancing up subtly, still unable to believe that any of this was happening.

That any of what had happened had happened.

But Bruce winked at his friend, who in turn was able to find his confidence and slip on the mask that everyone recognized. Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist. He could do this.

"So each of you gets this lovely packet that I handcrafted with information about your immigration status, your status with the government, your status as an Avenger, and how your finances and personal lives have been handled ever since our little petty game of dodge ball three years ago." The last part he had added for Barton, knowing that he had a wife and kids. But Tony smiled inwardly because he had gotten Laura and their children safe after Clint was forced to leave the country. They have been safe and healthy and he was proud to have been a part of that. His heart still warms at Lila's mention of Uncle Tony.

He appreciated that feeling, of being wanted, of being loved. And yet, he told himself over and over that he did not deserve any of it. "Because I don't." He thought with finality. "I am a living, breathing piece of shit."

So he tried, day and night to make up for it. He was up for most of the last night finishing up on new arrows for Clint, new designs for Bucky's prosthetic arm, sharp, powerful wings for Sam, improved gloves for Wanda, and he even fixed up Cap's shield a little. Even though that had him having to take a break every five minutes for fear of drowning in his own, stupid, useless panic.

But he had done it. He had put that information in the packets too. He couldn't help smiling just a bit when Sam beamed at the sketches of his new wings. Steve and Bucky had shared a warm smile and Tony deflated with relief when Wanda was the one to say "Thank you."

Wanda. She hated him. According to Tony, rightfully so. The rapists had reminded him of that over and over again. But he managed a short nod in response, trying to keep his tears of relief, of forgiveness for himself, at bay.

"You've done so much." It was Bucky who spoke up in a dull whisper, still slowly flipping through the packet that had been made for him. "All for the man who...who killed your family? Psychiatric help 24/7, new arm, new home, money....Why?" Even Steve, who hadn't said anything yet, looked up. Once at his friend and once at Tony, the man he had tried to kill three years ago.

"He is my friend!"

"So was I!"

Tony pushed the flashback away, willing away the cold that he had begun to feel again, shutting away the memories, the pain, the betrayal. In, out, in, out.

His voice cracked just the tiniest bit when he responded. It was not noticeable, but it was a sign of weakness, something that Tony couldn't show. Not now, not after three years, not in front of them. "The man who killed my parents was not James Buchanan Barnes. I'm helping you because I believe that you, Bucky, are a...a good man."

Images of Siberia, of Steve and Bucky throwing punches at him, ganging up on him, throwing him
against the wall. The shield, the goddamn shield slamming into his chest again and again and.... In, out, in, out, in....

His face gave away nothing. No, Tony Stark's physical features remained as the rich man who was offering the Avengers another chance. But inside, he just. Couldn't. Fucking. Breathe.

He felt suffocated.

"Tony..." It was Steve who began. Maybe he wanted to say something nice, something meaningful, another move towards reconstruction. But none of them got to hear what Steve Rogers wanted to say.

It was because Clint Barton had thrown his packet right back at Tony's face, literally. When he opened his mouth, he growled and nothing could stop the flurry of words, honed to the sharpness of daggers, stabbed at Tony repeatedly.

"And why the HELL would I want an attention seeking whore managing and organizing my life?" Clint's eyes were glazed over and Wanda placed a gentle palm on his arm, trying to calm him down. But he shook it off.

Waves of anxiety, of exhaustion, of hurt rolled over Tony and he closed his eyes tight, afraid to open them for fear of letting the river of tears flow.

"Agent Barton, stand down." Fury demanded when Clint shot up out of his seat.

"No you shut the fuck up Fury! I am NOT your fucking Agent anymore!"

"Clint, please." It was Natasha Romanoff. How she managed to end up in the room without Tony noticing was beyond him. But she was always a stealthy woman.

"Enough with the BULLSHIT! I haven't seen my wife or kids in three fucking years and now this slut just waltzes in here and kisses all of our asses with some pretty new weapons and some money and we're just supposed to go along with that shit? Where were you when we were named the country's most wanted three years ago? Where were you for so long?"

Tony knew where he had been for three years. He had been busting his ass for them. He had been raped in the middle but that wasn't important to anyone was it? No, to everyone he deserved it. He asked for it....

"Oh I know where you were. In fact, we all know exactly where you were. You were having a real nice time with a lot of different men weren't you? Couldn't keep your dick in your pants for a goddamn second, could you? No, you had to go plaster that shit all over TV. Why are you so desperate?"

Bruce shot out of his chair, all of them noticing the green tinge in his skin, and stalked out of the room on his way to the Hulk-out room. Tony didn't feel so guarded anymore. He'd put his head on his hand, his face aimed at the glass table, telling himself to breathe. In, out, in, out, in. Besides, he told himself scornfully, nothing Clint was saying wasn't true.

That's why nobody was defending him.

But Clint was now in his face. And he wasn't done yet.

"You stupid bastard. This is why Pepper left. You are nothing, nothing, but a stupid, worthless, shameless whore."
When Natasha's hand connected with Clint Barton's face, the sound resonated within the room. Everyone's mouths were dropped wide open, disbelief at the fact that Natasha, a woman who always kept her cool, even in the most dire of situations, would do anything like this.

"Don't say another word." Her words dripped with ice. Pure cold, rigid, daunting frost.

Clint touched his cheek gingerly and found blood on his fingertips.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so much for the comments and kudos :)

The stillness ate away at Tony. The silence deafened him. He kept his head down, pushing the tears back, back, back. *Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.*

*Don't let the mask fall.*

Everyone kept their mouths closed, the shattering *crack* of Natasha's slap still bouncing off the walls.

"Both of you will be suspended for a month for misconduct. Enough is enough." Nobody heard Fury as he gave his decree. Instead, everyone was still focused on Natasha's cold, unrelenting eyes and Clint cowering beneath them.

"Tasha." He whispered, although it sounded more of a whimper.

"How dare you? How dare *all* of you?" She gestured to the silent Avengers, all of whom had not bothered to speak during Clint's tirade. None of them had stood up for the Man of Iron. Not even Rhodey. "How dare you forget that underneath that mask is a man? A man who was not injected with super serum or given magical powers or given extensive training to prepare for battle, to prepare for the worst?"

Natasha Romanoff, the woman who never let her emotions get the best of her, was now flushed a red the same shade as her hair. The Black Widow was out for blood.

"And yet he had to deal with the worst. Time and time and time again. A civilian, a regular human being."

Tony looked up suddenly, now that his mask, his unreal personality, was fitted back into place. "You don't have to defend me, Natalie. I'm fine. I'm a big boy, remember?" He used her fake name for when she was working undercover to analyze him in an effort to calm her down, to remind of him of who he was: nothing but an egotistical bastard.

But nobody glanced his way. Rhodey was tugging at his sleeve, trying to get him to sit back down, to let Natasha handle his enemies for him. But he refused. He's been through Afghanistan, he's been through Vanko, he almost died in space, and he's dealt with Extremis. All on his fucking own. He could deal with a pissy Clint too.

But that didn't mean that his former friend, his former partner in crime, had not destroyed him so completely inside. That didn't mean that dark, dark thoughts were consuming his brain. But he kept that part of him hidden. He couldn't break, he just couldn't, not now. Not when he had been degraded to the point of no return. *Just hold your head up and breathe, you idiot.* He thought, no, screamed to himself. *Head high, breathe.*

But Natasha ignored him, just like so many others in his life had.
"The day Tony was kidnapped, he had been taking your kids out to the mall for Christmas shopping." Natasha's voice was lethally calm and poisonous. "He knew something was wrong when he noticed a man following them. So he pulled Lila aside and he told her to take the kids and find Laura and then to leave and contact Fury. He told her to tell her mother that it was a code red."

Tony was numb, so utterly numb. He couldn't move, he couldn't find the words to speak, he couldn't....he couldn't....Oh God. He knew where this was going. "Tasha, stop. Please." He protested, trying to get her to stand down. Other than Rhodey and Natasha, the others did not know. They didn't know that he had been...that he was...He was going to throw up, right there in front of them all. As if he wasn't already embarrassed.

"Lila was afraid but Tony told her that he wouldn't let anybody hurt them because he would die before that happened. So he watched them leave, making sure that the man did not follow them. He didn't. Tony led the man away from the civilians, far enough away so that he could put his gauntlet on and attack. But he was chloroformed from behind and he was outnumbered and..." Her voice cracked. The Black Widow was crying, she was crying. "It wasn't a sex tape, Clint."

His air passages were blocked off, his lungs were full of cement. In, out, in...fuck. "Natasha," His voice wavered. Pathetic. "I'm begging you." He stepped around the table to where the two trained assassins were facing off. Rhodey cried after him, telling him to sit down, to be quiet, to just calm down.

But he couldn't fucking breathe.

They can't know. They can't. He wouldn't be able to stand it, the pity, the stares, the...the disgust. "Stop. If you truly give a flying fuck about me Natasha, then please, please stop." The sobs poured out of him uncontrollably. The perfectly maintained image of Tony Stark had now broken in half. He was just Tony. He was just a human being.

A human being who couldn't, for the life of him, stop crying.

Natasha softened her glare, just the tiniest bit when she glanced at him, the wreck, the worthless wreck. But then the daggers returned and Clint flinched once more.

"It wasn't a sex tape." She repeated. "The HYDRA fanatics that had taken him for information on the Avengers, on The Winter Soldier," she spat more bitterly than she meant to. Bucky cringed. "They..." She paused. She couldn't bring herself to say it. For the smallest of moments, Tony was relieved. Maybe he could escape without them ever knowing that he had let himself become so weak, that he let himself be used because he just had no more energy left to fight.

"They raped him." She finished with a whisper and a flow of tears cascaded down her cheeks. When she spoke again, she spoke to Clint. Her voice was broken. "They raped him for a week, threatening him, torturing him for information about you guys and he kept his goddamn mouth shut and he took it. Day after day. They raped him and you called him a whore. You called him a whore."

Tony Stark was gone. He was so far gone, deep into clouds of shadows and darkness and horror and despair. He was gone. He was done. There were no more tears, just blood shot eyes, pale, shivering fingers, and a broken heart.

He returned to his briefcase numbly and took out the last packet that he had not bothered to acknowledge the entire time. He had gone in so hopeful. He had started the day by thinking that maybe this would be the day that I can finally wake up out of this goddamn nightmare.
Where had he gone so wrong? What had he done so wrong? Why? Why?

He handed the packet to Fury, who had kept silent, dumbstruck. He had not known either. Frankly, he hadn't cared about Tony's 'sex tape' at all. But now...

Tony looked at the room from the head of the table, taking in everybody he cared about all at once.

Team Cap was frozen in place. Clint was hanging his head with his hand still to his cheek.

And Rhodey...God if he had ever seen such sadness on another person's face. *My fault. I caused them so much pain. Again. Why am I such a failure? Why can't I do anything right?*

Tony forced his lips to twitch upwards in a small smile. "You all will always have a home in the Avengers Tower." He mumbled before setting off at a brisk pace, leaving the briefcase, now empty, behind.

Rhodey struggled to get up, determined to stop his friend from leaving, from hurting himself again. Natasha stepped forward as well, but Tony waved them off.

"TONY!" Rhodey bellowed after the man as he struggled to get on his feet. "TONY, STOP!" Natasha dashed after Tony as he moved, numbly and swiftly, towards the stowed away S.I. helicopter waiting to take him back to New York.

"Tony!" She pleaded as he climbed inside. "You can't be alone right now, you don't have to be alone right now." She flailed at him, so sloppily and so unlike the Black Widow that it surprised even her.

He stopped all of a sudden and whipped around, stopping her in her tracks. "Thank you for seeing me as something more than I actually am." He sobbed. "I'm sorry I caused everyone so much pain." The tears were uncontrollable. "I'm sorry."

She protested, she fought, she pulled him back but he pushed her away. She knew that she could fight him, that she was skilled enough to pin him to the ground. But she couldn't, not when he had been...she simply could not bare to hurt him, not when he had been hurt so much already.

She shut up when Tony grabbed her hand and squeezed, hard. "Thank you." He mouthed, letting go just as the helicopter door closed. The roof of the helicarrier garage had yawned open and the helicopter took off, leaving a distraught Natasha in its wake.

"FRIDAY, take me home. To the tower." Tony had said once they were in the air. "Autopilot. Straight there." He was struggling to keep from breaking down, from falling apart.

"But sir, I think it is best if you are not alone right now." The A.I. returned gently.

"Just do what I say, *please.*" He was so tired of begging.

"But sir,"

"Mute. Override code 67013, obey all orders given by me and nobody else."

The A.I. was forced to stay silent, but she took him to the tower.

Tony Stark fell apart.

"The paper." Rhodey snapped. "Fury, what does the paper say?" He was exasperated, he was exhausted. But he needed to get to Tony, he needed to save him. Now. NOW.
"I, Anthony Edward Stark, formally renounce all ties to the Avengers Initiative, SHIELD, and...and Ironman."

They all paused, everyone's heartbeats were loud and clear.

"Rhodey," Natasha gasped, stumbling back into the room. "Rhodey, I couldn't stop him. We need to get back to him now." Another pregnant silence. "Rhodey, I think he's going to try to kill himself."

The room erupted.
A flurry of confused shouting and outrage filled the conference room. Natasha was starting to get a headache, mainly out of frustration. Couldn't these idiots just stop making everything a soap opera and instead just fucking focus???

"I can't believe..."

"He was raped..."

"...let himself be called a whore..."

"...going to kill himself..."

"Stark was never like this..."

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" Fury's voice was vociferous and everyone managed to stop babbling. Natasha balled her fists, ready to twist all of them into pretzels if they began to act like headless chickens once more. She was thankful that at least the Director kept his head. Fury gave Natasha a pointed glare, "What did he say to you to make you think that?" She could tell that he was trying to be soothing. He was trying to ease the red that had tinged the corners of her vision.

"The same thing he said to me two years ago, just hours before Pepper had walked in on him...." She couldn't finish her sentence. "Just hours before he had hurt himself...really badly." She finished lamely. "I'm sorry for causing everyone so much pain." 

It pained her to repeat the words, to understand the weight of the self-loathing, the self-hatred that Tony had carried around with him so many years. Although she had been near sobbing minutes before, she was now fully composed. The Black Widow was flaring within her and saving Tony had become a mission. She refused, with every fiber of her being, to ever see him stoop so low, to ever see him fall down that dark and roiling mental wormhole, again.

Steve had stooped over the table, eyes closed with his palms flat against the surface. "None of it was his fault." He murmured, but everyone heard loud and clear. Natasha knew that he wasn't just talking about the rape anymore, but they didn't have time to talk about three years ago. They had to get to Tony now.

"We have to save him." Bucky. His words were crystal clear, his gaze was hard. "Enough talking. Let's go. We have to save him."

Natasha, Rhodey, and the others gave a sharp nod. A wave of relief flowed through her as finally somebody broke through the shock. She was so sick of doing nothing, of not being able to help. Hell, I probably made shit worse by losing it and telling everyone. She thought scornfully.

Rhodey, who had not spoken or moved or cried or even reacted when Natasha stumbled back into
the room, was the one to look straight into the dazed, shocked faces of the Avengers and say, "I'm calling the Parker kid. I'll tell him to haul ass over to Manhattan and distract Tony or hell, even web him up if he has to. Natasha, go get Bruce. Tony's initiated an override on FRIDAY and I can't get through to her. We need him to find a way to bring her back. Sam, Bucky, Steve, and Clint,"

Hawkeye looked up. The cut on his face from Natasha's sharp nails had swollen, but the bleeding had stopped. He seemed deflated, the energy and adrenaline that had been driving his anger towards Tony had now completely and utterly drained. If Natasha hadn't known any better, she would have thought that there was something along the lines of guilt that was causing his face to sag ever so slightly.

"You four come with me on one of the jets. Sam and I will fly and you three are going to sit in the back and stay in the goddamn back all the way until we are sure that Tony is safe and not a danger to himself anymore." Rhodey continued authoritatively. "Fury, don't do anything with that resignation he gave you until we get a chance to have a civilized conversation with him."

Fury nodded swiftly.

"Disperse." The final order was given and Natasha flew out of the room in a black and red blur, on her way to retrieve Dr. Bruce Banner from the Hulk's clutches.

Tony Stark woke to a pounding, unrelenting headache that felt as if marbles had been rolling around in his brain at a rapid pace.

"He's awake." The voice was heavily accented and distorted. Tony was woozy and he struggled to get the world to stop tilting so that he could make out the multiple figures in front of him.

He was on the ground, slumped against a white washed, moldy wall that smelled rotten. His hands were bound behind him in zip ties. "Lila, he thought, Laura, the kids! He sent a silent plea to whoever was listening up above that they were safe, that they weren't hurt or put in danger because of him, because he couldn't fight back.

"Blindfold him." This voice was American. But who were they? Tony's eyes remained unfocused when he felt rough callused hands smothering his vision with pitch black. He tried to struggle against them, to make up for his shortcomings at the mall, but he was held down by two other pairs of cracked, dirty grips.

"Let go of me." He growled, half slurring his words. "Where the hell am I?"

Deep, grovelling laughter followed and Tony grit his teeth to keep from flushing with indignation. "How dare they just laugh? "I said," he repeated menacingly. "Where the hell am I?"

"Tony Stark." The American voice drawled, as if amused at the billionaire being brought down to his knees. "The most hated, the most mocked, the most weak." He spat the last word, leaning close to Tony's face. He could smell the musty stench that was the man's breath. Tony held his own to keep from gagging. "You bastard. You'll be easy to break, won't you? And then all of SHIELD's secrets, the whereabouts of the Avengers, all that will become public knowledge." The man gripped the billionaire's face, stopping the blood flow to his cheeks. "Oh darling, just a few..." His hands traveled lower along Tony's body, squeezing along the way. "lessons to be taught and then," Tony yelped in protest as the man found his privates. " THEN you'll be crawling on your hands and knees, begging us to let you go."

Tony knew what was going to happen. He could sense it in the snickering of the goons with the
heavy accents behind the man as he groped Tony's body viciously. He knew the minute that the man had leaned close to his face and had pinned him fully against the wall. He knew and he steeled himself. This was his fault, he had let himself become so frail. He had let himself become so alone that nobody had come to save him yet. He knew it and he accepted it.

The whisper he returned that had dripped with ice was not a threat, but a promise. "You can break every goddamn bone in my body but I will NEVER give up my family. Fuck you..." But his tirade was interrupted when his lips were smothered and suffocated by dry, cracked ones. He screamed against them, thrashing and flailing in an effort to throw the man off, to save his dignity.

"You foolish, worthless little slut," the man gasped in between sucking the life out of Tony's lips, "I'm not going to break the bones of your body, I'm going to break your fucking MIND." Tony didn't bother to try to understand what the man was saying. He was being deprived of oxygen and the snickering behind them had turned into full blown out howling. "I'm going to tear you apart from the inside out, you whore and I mean that literally and figuratively."

Tony couldn't help it. The tears he had been containing had morphed into sobs. When the man had finished using him a little more than half an hour later, the sobs had turned into wails, and then just a silent quaking. I can do this. He chanted. I will not let them break me. This is my fault. I will face the consequences. Rhodey and Tasha will find me. I will survive this.

But that week, man after man after man had used him, touched him, violated him, shred at him, but Tony faced it all with a closed mouth. He refused to say anything about what they wanted. They refused to stop until he said something. He lived in the dark because of the blindfold, with only his thoughts for company. He had gotten used to being naked and raw in front of these strangers so the cold, although chilling to the bone, ceased to affect him.

"Dirty slut."

"Whore."

"They hated you. That's why they left you in the dust."

"You were never a true Avenger."

"Useless, worthless piece of shit."

The voices never shut up, the words never stopped stinging. They're wrong. He tried convincing himself. They don't all hate me. Right? But when he was being pounded into so violently with only those words to distract him from what was happening to him, he began to believe them for himself. But they do. They tried to kill me.

He never thought about Steve and Bucky bitterly. He was never angry at them. He was angry at himself. No matter how much I try to help, I always fuck up. I destroy everything I touch. I am nothing.

I am nothing.

The day he was found, Tasha and a group of SHIELD agents had stumbled upon the man sprawled on top of Tony's body. He was trying to fight against his restraints, he was trying to say no, as he had done for the last seven days. She was able to put two and two together.

The men were beaten bloody by the time she had finished with them.

"Tony?" She had soothed when the men were all down, the other SHIELD agents taking care of
arresting them.

"Hail Hydra." The American one had spat before he was taken away. "Dirty slut got what he deserved."

That earned him a powerful kick from Tasha, spurring blood from his nose.

"Tony. None of this was your fault. None of it, okay? You're safe now. You're safe." Black Widow had dissipated. There was only Natasha Romanov and a broken Tony Stark.

He looked away from her, unable to bear the shame of being found like this. Helpless, vulnerable, torn apart. He wanted to agree with her, that none of it was his fault, that he was going to be fine.

I am nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be Peter and Tony!
The helicopter landed onto the roof of the Avengers Tower gently, whirring as the blades slowed and the door opened, revealing a pasty skinned Tony Stark stumbling out.

The flashback had been intense. He had been numbed of reality all throughout the ride. Instead, he had been there. He had returned to being bound, to being nothing more than a goddamn sex toy. He had smelt the sweat and tasted the saltiness of his tears that he had shed during the span of those long, never ending, torturous seven days. He heard the voices, taunting him, calling him worthless, as if he did not already know that. He had felt the stinging pain shoot through his entire body, knocking out his breath, suffocating him, strangling him.

Tony made it about two or three steps before rushing to a nearby bucket that had been left by some painters a couple of months before and retched into it. His stomach was empty and there was nothing to throw up, so only bile spewed out. The nausea roiled within him, stirring his stomach and twisting his intestines.

But still he heard the maniacal laughing of his captors. The joy that had radiated off of them as he continued to be violated and groped and... and used. And the hands, the hands that still haunted him in his darkest nightmares, he could feel them stroking his spine, setting off goosebumps on his skin. He felt them squeezing his body to the point where parts of him had been painted black and blue.

He jolted forward again, retching violently. Make it stop. God, why can't the pain just stop? I want it to end. I just want it to end.

I can't find a way out.

Although he was exhausted in every possible way and his limbs were at the point of collapsing, Tony forced himself up onto wobbly knees and made his way to the elevator. He had known that the day could have either ended up being one of the best days of his life or one of his darkest days, where only his shadows, his demons, and his past bound him to isolation and his bed. Occasionally his bathroom, curled up on the floor next to the toilet, when he had accidentally fallen asleep and the nightmares had rattled him near the breaking point.

He needed to be alone. His mind only focused on the pills that waited for him on his bedside table. He hadn't taken his medication today, didn't think he'd need them.

He knew now that it was wrong to hope. It only made it harder to deal with the disappointment when reality sauntered back in to bitch-slap him in the fucking face.

But Tony didn't even get to press the button for the elevator. That was because a blur of red knocked him backwards, causing him to stumble back onto the ground. Even though he was a genius, his brain didn't have time to process what exactly was happening until a net of sticky white had him stuck on the floor.
"The hell, Parker?" Tony seethed as he struggled against the webs that now caged him. The red blur had slowed down and was now kneeling beside him. Spider-Man took in Tony Stark's haggard and distraught face.

"Sorry Mr. Stark. But Mr. Rhodes called me and told me you were in danger and that I needed to keep you from going anywhere so that you wouldn't do anything stupid. I really am sorry Mr. Stark. Oh God, when I got the call I was actually at lunch in school. I had to ditch but I had a valid reason, right?" He chuckled, unaware of Tony's uninterested attitude. Yet, he kept going. "I just have to find an excuse for when Aunt May finds out. Oh, she's going to flip and then she'll ground me and I'll have to sneak out through my window for Spider-duties...."

Tony had stopped listening long ago. He knew the kid rambled a lot. Other times, he didn't mind it. He actually appreciated Parker's enthusiasm. But right now, Tony was focusing on his breathing. He was restrained again. He couldn't...he couldn't move. Enough. You're not there, those men aren't here. You're on the roof of your tower. Spidey-Boy is not shutting up next to you. You are not gagged, you are not naked. Come on, in, out, in, out, in, out.

"Parker, shut up for a goddamn second, would you?" Tony snarled with clenched teeth, trying his hardest to keep his cool, to not have a flashback, to not drown in panic. He counted, 1, 2, 3, 4....

Peter paused when he saw his mentor close his eyes tight, as if he was trying to shake something from his head. "Mr. Stark, why did Mr. Rhodes ask me to web you up?"

Ugh, Rhodey. Tony loved him, with all of his heart, but his best friend didn't have to treat him like glass. Besides, he just needed to be alone. After Clint's outburst, anyone would want to be. I wasn't going to hurt myself because of what Clint had said, he tried to assure himself. Was I?

Tony didn't answer for a while. He was in a battle with his own mind. The voices kept hounding him, the flashbacks kept tumbling through his weak wall of defense. Calm down, calm the fuck down. The kid's watching you. The kid's watching you, god fucking damn it.

When he was finally able to compose himself, he stared straight into the black slits that were hovering over him curiously. "Because Rhodey is a prick that thinks that every time I am not with a fucking babysitter, I am going to slit my wrists or swallow one too many pills and then die because I am just so fucking unstable." He spat the last part out bitterly and sarcastically.

Shit.

That wasn't what he meant to say at all. No, he had hauled up the mask. He was going to say something witty, something snarky, maybe get the kid to laugh a little.

Shit.

The black slits had grown wide and Peter stepped back one.

Great, now even the kid thinks I'm repulsive. Why do I always fuck everything up?

"Mr. Stark--"

Nope, he was not doing this today. He was not going to lie there, stuck in a web of all things, and talk to Spider Man about his crippling depression and what he had done to himself a year and a half ago. He didn't like talking about those things anyway.

"Is he coming here?" Tony interrupted, trying to dodge the topic as best he could.
Peter paused, at a loss of what to say. Then, he slowly nodded. "He told me to watch you until he gets back."

"Excellent. Just fantastic. Well, since we're here," Tony Stark, genius, playboy, billionaire, philanthropist, and mentor, had returned. "Tell me what's going on in your life."

At that, Peter began another extensive and drawn out story. The weight of Tony's words before still hung in the air, but both of them chose to ignore it as Peter rambled on and on. Tony eventually zoned out, but he provided evidence of acknowledgment when it was necessary.

But inside, Tony was a wreck. He was just exhausted, he was just done. The pain was endless. It never let up, not for a second.

It was becoming too much for even Tony Stark to handle.

Natasha was startled when she found Wanda sprinting after her on the way to calm Bruce down.

"Rhodes didn't give me a job to do and I didn't want to interfere so I just..." Natasha halted the explanation with a finger and nodded, gesturing for the young witch to follow her.

When Natasha reached the containment chamber, her breath stopped dead. SHIELD agents were surrounding the cage with guns and numerous other weapons because the Hulk...the Hulk was trying to break through and escape. He was thrashing and pounding and absolutely feral, even more than she had seen him before. She eyed the cracks that were already on the super sturdy glass and her heart skipped a beat. She had to get this under control immediately.

"TIN MAN IS HURT! HULK SMASH ARROW MAN!" He roared, making the ground shake.

Natasha pushed past frantic agents that were trying to find a way to sedate him with Wanda following. But she knew that if they were to try anything, the Hulk would simply grow more violent. She finally reached the microphone that connected to inside the clear cage where the Hulk was foaming at the corners of his mouth.

"Hey Big Guy." She coaxed slowly. She had done this before, she just had to find a way to get past the other guy. She had to reach Bruce. "Tin Man is perfectly healthy. He's fine. He's safe. He's okay. Tony's waiting for you to let him talk to Bruce. You have to let him back, Big Guy."

The Hulk stopped to listen, but the wild glint in his eyes remained.

"Tony wants to talk to Bruce, okay? Tin Man needs Bruce Banner right now. He needs him. Please let him come back." The Hulk lowered his fists. "Please." Natasha's voice had broken to a whisper. Even the SHIELD agents were staring up at her. The Black Widow never pleaded anything from anyone. She never showed such vulnerability.

The green eyes faded back into brown and slowly, Bruce Banner returned, naked as always. But he had gotten used to that. He was given some clothes after everyone was sure that he was truly back.

Natasha loosed a relieved breath and turned back towards Wanda, who was gawking. But none of them said a word to each other and instead, ran down to meet the one man who could possibly make saving Tony's life just a tiniest bit easier.

When the duo reached the Doctor, they were greeted by an awkward smile and wave. "That does not look too good." He said, pointing up at the cracked glass. "He wanted to hurt Clint. I could feel it. Because of what he was saying." Bruce still sounded pissed, but the worst of his anger had
passed. The Hulk-Out had taken a lot out of him. "Is Tony okay?"

Natasha knew it was a bad idea to feed him the story all at once for fear of him losing control again. So she simply asked, "We lost FRIDAY because Tony put some override code in. Can you break past that?"

He was stunned for a second, then it dawned on him. Because he also knew what Tony had done a year and a half ago and a part of him still blamed himself because he wasn't there to help his friend. He wasn't there.

"Yes I can...I can find a way." That was all she needed. She grabbed his hand and practically dragged the already exhausted man upstairs. She knew he was tired. She knew he needed to rest and recuperate after that violent loss of control. But she also knew that Tony needed them, needed all of them. They had failed him once before. She was determined to make sure, with every fiber of her being, that they would not fail him again.

Bucky Barnes was squished between Steve and Clint in the quin-jet that all of them had somehow managed to fit into. Sam and Rhodey were piloting the plane. Clint was pushed up against the side next to the parachutes. He hadn't spoken since Natasha had struck him and Bucky couldn't help but feel good that she had done that. The archer had gone too far, they had all known that. Yet, they were too scared to speak, to dare to say otherwise because they were all still so wrapped up in that stupid mindset of choosing sides.

Bucky was tired of it. He wanted them all to make an effort to fix things. He wanted to move past it, to make use of his second chance at life, a second chance to simply be James Buchanan Barnes and nobody else. And yet, here they were, all of them rushing to try to save a man that has had so much happen to him that he felt like there was no other way out.

He recognized that feeling, probably more than anybody else in the jet.

He couldn't help but wonder about what his second chance had cost. He couldn't help but feel guilty at what he had cost Steve, his best friend, or the Avengers, or the world, or, most of all, Tony Stark, the son of the people that The Winter Soldier had strangled.

*Look, what you did all those years, that wasn't you.*

*But I still did it.*

Everyone always told him that he was a victim, but was he really? Did he deserve all that coddling, all that gentleness and understanding? Everyone always thought he did; everyone always acted like they were stepping around glass when it came to him. *Am I really worth all this, Steve?*

"Hey." The baby blues saw right through him, just as they always had. "What's on your mind?"

Bucky shook his head, shutting his eyes. "I don't know, Steve." He sighed after some silence. "He just...he fought. For us. For all of us. Even after everything. He's giving us a second chance and he...doesn't hate me. He doesn't even act like it. I mean, in Siberia, after seeing that tape. Hell, if it were me I would have reacted the same way."

At that, Steve interrupted. "He had no right to blow off your arm, Buck. You know that. He was trying to kill you. We were acting in self defense. Whatever happened is now in the past. We need to forget that and come back together as a team, for Tony, for you, for all of us."

Bucky put his head on his fists and looked down at his feet. "I know. I know that we were defending
ourselves. I know that he was trying to kill me. And I stand by whatever happened three years ago, I stand by what we did. The decisions we had to make. I'm not saying that we were wrong. I'm just saying that I don't blame him." He let that sink in. "I just don't understand the...lack of hostility towards me. I don't understand how he can bear to look at me, to look at us, without turning away."

"He doesn't blame you because it wasn't you. It wasn't your fault. You're a victim..."

"I know I'm a victim. I know, it's been drilled into my head for three years. But Steve, we tried to kill him, we left him there." The Captain sucked in a sharp breath.

"I made mistakes," Steve whispered. "Tony and I, we both had flawed judgement, we both messed up. We just...we never listen to each other. And he...he's impulsive. When he saw the video, and he reacted the way he did, God, I had tunnel vision. The only thing in my mind was you. I had to save you, I just had to. And if that meant having to push through someone else, even someone who was my friend, I would do it." Bucky was still looking down. "I would do it again, even now if I had to."

At that, Bucky did not respond.

All of them sat in silence until Natasha's voice called in through the radio. "Rhodes, Banner broke through the override. FRIDAY is pulling up live feed of Tony right now. He's at the Tower. Parker's with him. He's webbed Tony up. They're on the roof and they both look absolutely fine."

The world seemed to still as relief flooded through everybody. Muscles relaxed and some even smiled a little.

Bucky didn't think that anything else could possibly go wrong. But then Rhodes asked with a hint of skepticism in his voice, "Can you pull up the feed from about half an hour ago, when he landed back at the Tower. I'm pretty sure Peter hadn't gotten there that fast. Tony must have been alone for about a couple minutes at least before Spidey showed up."

"Of course." Natasha replied. After sitting in anticipation for a minute, her voice chimed in once more, this time more sullen and somber. "He stumbles out of the helicopter and umm...he vomits into a...uh...bucket." Everyone stayed silent. "I think he was having a flashback."

She didn't need to continue for everybody to realize what flashback she was talking about.

Something in Bucky's stomach sank when he glanced towards Clint and saw a single tear trail down his cheek. He could tell that the guilt was eating him up. But he still kept his mouth shut.

Steve cleared his throat. "Well, he's okay now, right?"

"Yes. He's safe now. Parker is with him. We don't need to worry." It was the Doctor, Bruce, Bucky recalled. He didn't fully know the man, but given Steve's slightly shocked expression, he figured that he was a big deal.

"I'll land the jet at an airport and then we'll make our way to the Tower from there." Rhodey said firmly. No one argued, no one blinked.

As the New York City skyline appeared in the horizon, the Avengers were finally able to relax for the first time in three years. All of them, together, working as one, as a team.

Bucky couldn't help but think that it was only when one of their lives was in danger that the Avengers had all assembled willingly.
I just want to acknowledge the fact that this fic is not Anti-Cap at all. I am a very passionate Team Tony person, but I do not hate Team Cap. In fact, I understand both sides and what they did and why they did it. I love Bucky and I am just trying to portray a character and his thoughts the way he would think them. Please leave your thoughts below! Thanks :)
The sun was setting now and Tony focused on the reds, the oranges, the yellows, the purples, and the blues of the sky. The colors molded together and it looked like a mess. It looked like an absolute mess and yet, it was so incredibly beautiful.

Tony wanted to bathe in those colors. He wanted to become them. Just as the sky looked like spilled paint that had flowed over the stars, he wanted to be a disaster that was loved, that was appreciated and awed. He wanted to be a disaster that people did not turn away from, but instead revered.

"Mr. Stark." Tony blinked dreamily, lost in a small moment of peace. "Mr. Stark." Peter repeated louder, reaching forward to shake the older man's shoulder.

It seemed as if he were pushed into the ocean with stones tied to his feet. He was being dragged back to reality, back to Earth. Back to the trauma, the endless anxiety, the constant throbbing of painful memories. He wasn't able to mask his disappointment when he turned towards Peter with a slight whimper that he hoped wasn't all that noticeable.

"Mr. Rhodes is here." At that, Tony looked up to see his best friend. In the background stood Steve, Bucky, Sam and Clint. He closed his eyes, wanting to return to that small escape that he had received in the sunset.

"Great. Now cut me out of here Spidey. I'm stiff all over and I've had a long ass day. Go home, alright? Straight home. Or I'll call Aunt May."

Peter waited a second, dubious. He glanced towards Rhodey and when he got the nod of approval, he sighed and released his mentor in one quick swipe with a device that Tony himself had designed for the kid. He turned to leave when Tony called after him.

"Hey, Parker. Thanks for keeping me company. Just...can you..." He ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "Let's take the next week or two off, okay? I'll let you know when we can have another mentoring lesson. Otherwise, just keep doing what you're doing and text me if you need anything, ever." Even though Parker's eyes were black slits under his suit, Tony could tell that the kid was slightly disheartened, and it killed him to know that it was his fault for dampening Peter's spirits. So he tried one last time. "I'll call Aunt May and tell her that you were with me. Don't worry, you won't have to sneak out the window anytime soon." He offered a small smile and it warmed his heart to see the kid decide to flip back his mask halfway to see his radiant grin.

"Thanks Mr. Stark. See you in a week or two. And if you need anything I'm just a text away too. But I mean, if I'm at school or something it'll probably take a while for me to respond but..."

"Parker." It was Rhodes this time. His tone was warm, but firm. "We appreciate your help, but you really need to go."

Peter faltered just a bit, but he kept cheerful as he offered a final goodbye and set off on his way back.
to Queens.

"That kid just never shuts up, does he?" Rhodey chuckled as he turned towards Tony.

But the chocolate brown of his pupils had turned murky and the color of mud. He was trembling and flexing his fingers, trying to ward off the boiling anger. "The fuck, Rhodey?" There was a sharp pain in between his eyes that he just couldn't reach. It felt like someone was weaving a needle through his brain. It had began as a dull throbbing in the back of his head, but the minute he stood up, his vision had blurred and he had to count backwards from ten. But his face relayed nothing and now he could only see red. A pulsing, adrenaline fueled, red.

"I had to call him here. I had to restrain you. You left the helicarrier in a rush and we were all scared, Tony. We couldn't let you go alone, we just couldn't, man. Not after..."

"Not after what?" Tony cut in sharply. He dared his best friend. He dared him to continue, to reveal another part of Tony that made him seem like a weak, insufferable bastard.

Rhodey held his breath, catching his mistake.

"I'm not some fragile vase, Rhodey. I am not going to self destruct every damn time somebody isn't with me, watching me like I'm some ticking bomb." He hated it, the coddling, the constant looking after.

At that, Steve piped up, opening his mouth to protest. But both Bucky and Sam pulled him back, shaking their heads.

"We just want you to be safe, Tony." Rhodey coaxed. "We want to be there for you when you need help."

"Ugh," Tony snarled frustratingly, pressing down on his temple to alleviate the incessant pounding. He needed to get to his meds and then curl up in a blanket. He needed to end this conversation. He needed...he just had to...Tony clenched his jaw to keep from groaning. "God damn it, can't a man just be alone after he's called a whore? Can't a man just have a second to breathe before being...fucking bombarded? Can't I have a second to just stop remembering, to try to make the pain go away for just a damn minute?"

He restrained against the tears and they rimmed his swollen eyes.

There was another stab of agony in that same place between his eyes. This time, he couldn't stop from hissing.

"Tony, you okay?" Rhodey stepped forward, trying to get to his friend but the genius lifted a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

Fuck.

Fuck, don't cry.

It's just a headache. Get to your meds. You'll be fine, you'll be fine. In, out, in, out.

"I need to take my pills today." He spluttered through the dizzying discomfort and his catching breaths as he tried to keep from sobbing. "Rhodey, just let me take my pills and I promise I'll stop being such a burden to you and I'll take a nap and I'll be good. Please just let me go."

Everyone was dumbstruck by the man's sudden outburst. They couldn't recognize the great Tony
Stark in this shell, in this hollow ghost.

"Tony, you're not a..." Rhodey attempted once more.

"Please."

They all stepped aside, allowing Tony to go through to the elevator, where it took every ounce of self control that he had to keep from passing out before finally stumbling onto his floor. He found his prescribed anti-depressants. An inexplicable hesitation shrouded him when he only took out two pills. He stared at the bottle, trying to focus on the words, trying anything so that he could ignore the explosions in his brain.

But he set the bottle down and swallowed the pills with the water that sat beside it on the bedside table. He scrambled under the covers, covering his ears with a pillow, pressing down with all his might so that the pain might leave him alone.

Great, heaving sobs escaped him, the ones which he had suppressed all day. They racked through his body and rattled his bones. "Make it stop." He strained. "Make it stop, just make it stop."

"FRIDAY, pull up a live video feed of Tony." The feeling of uselessness coursed through Rhodey's body and he hated it. He hated that his friend, his only family, was hurting so much and no matter what he tried to do to help, he was being pushed away.

"Mr. Rhodes, although I know you mean well by asking me to do this, I would also like to ask you to consider that Sir is simply in need of his medication and some rest. I advise that you let him be for the time being and I will let you know if Sir is in need of assistance."

There was a fine line between being pissed off and exasperated and Rhodey was walking on it. But after running a hand across his face and glancing back at the party that still stood behind him, he loosed a long breath and acquiesced. "Can you tell me what he's doing now at least?"

"Sir has taken the two anti-depressant pills as prescribed to him and now he is lying down in his bed." The AI had left out the fact that Tony was writhing in pain because the cruel migraine was now radiating shocks of agony all throughout his head. But that wasn't her fault. Tony had ordered her to stay quiet, knowing that his friend wouldn't be able to help himself.

Rhodey nodded slightly and then turned towards the four, extremely confused men that were still itching to find out what was happening. But he knew that they didn't have a right to know, not now. Not when Natasha had lost control and revealed so much about the train wreck that was Tony's life for the past three years. No, this was Tony's life. These were Tony's problems and those were his stories to tell, not anyone else's.

His eyes fell on Hawkeye and every part of him wanted to stalk up to the archer and throttle the shit out of the insensitive little douche bag. But he was tired.

So instead, he looked them all in the eye and said, "Tony kept your old rooms and even upgraded them a little. He told me to tell you that all of you are welcome to stay, for as long as you like. But if any of you decide that you want to be somewhere else," he looked pointedly at Clint, "then you are welcome to go there as well."
The archer cleared his throat, causing the others to jump just a bit. He hadn't opened his mouth since his rant in the helicarrier. "I haven't had a chance to call Laura...I don't want to overwhelm them...and...I just have to...I need to...apologize." He finished lamely, his eyes glued to his feet.

Rhodey wanted to kill him. He really did. There was a pit of fire bubbling in his stomach and it took all of his power to keep from exploding. Instead, he simply nodded. He didn't even acknowledge the other three. He didn't feel like dealing with them.

"Hey FRIDAY. Just keep tabs on Tony, alright? Let me know what he's doing."

"Will do, Mr. Rhodes."

When Natasha, Bruce, and Wanda returned to the Tower, they found a somber looking party in the common area.

Nostalgia hit Natasha like a hurricane. It had been three years since all of them had sat in the same room and managed to not try to kill each other. It had been three years since all of the Avengers were back in the Avengers Tower.

Vision was there too. He hadn't wanted to go to the reunion at the helicarrier. He said it was because it reminded him of a briefing and those things bored him, but Natasha saw right through the lie, even if it was a terrible one. She knew that he couldn't bare to see Wanda, not after she had pushed him through multiple floors and betrayed their friendship. Sure enough, when the android caught the witch's eye, he got up from the coach and floated to the farthest part of the room.

Natasha found it the tiniest bit amusing that even androids could keep a grudge for that long. But Vision wasn't a Google product. He was their friend.

He used to be Wanda's friend.

But the nostalgia was soon drowned out by suspicion and the smallest bit of panic when she couldn't find Tony and she noticed the frown on Steve's face. She knew that face. It was the face he made when he was trying to understand something but couldn't come up with a solution. This often resulted in multiple broken punching bags afterwards.

"What's wrong?" She asked, trying not to assume the worst. "Did Tony do something?" She eyed Rhodes nursing a drink and occasionally pressing the glass onto his head, as if he had a headache.

"FRIDAY, what's Tony up to?" He demanded, his eyes still closed and his drink still on his temple.

"He's sleeping, sir."

"That's a first." mumbled Bruce as he sat himself down as far away from Clint as possible.

Steve looked up, bewildered. "Why would you say that?"

Natasha almost laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of it. More than half these people had no clue what was happening. They couldn't fathom how the genius, billionaire, playboy, and philanthropist had become...this. They didn't know about the sleepless nights, the chronic panic attacks, the side effects of anti-depressants, and least of all, about what had happened a year and a half ago.

She wanted to tell them. She wanted to make them understand, to feel what she felt.
"Why the hell do you think?" Everyone whipped around to Bucky, surprised that he had jumped into
the discussion. Steve raised his eyebrows at his friend's growl and tensed a little as if preparing to
have to fight or restrain him. But Natasha caught the receding of the flicker of rage in the super
soldier's eyes as he hunched in on himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap." He closed his mouth
and leaned back, letting the sofa swallow him up.

"Why the hell do you think?" Natasha tested. The spy within her, always manipulative, always cold
and calculating, stirred and nudged her along.

Bucky was focused on the ceiling, not bothering to acknowledge that something was said to him.
But all eyes were now on him and Natasha was determined to get an answer.

"Buck?" Steve urged his best friend.

The super soldier shook his head and scoffed bitterly. "I don't know guys. How would you feel if
you were used and discarded like a piece of trash and then are being constantly reminded of it no
matter how hard you're trying to forget?"

The air hung heavy as the weight of the words settled. Natasha had already picked up what Bucky
was suggesting. She was guessing everyone else did too. But no one spoke, no one moved.

It was then that Natasha allowed herself to sag with exhaustion. They were all drained, in every way
possible. So she plopped onto the sofa next to Bruce and let the cushions embrace her. She didn't
really know why all of them were still sitting there. She didn't know what they were waiting for.

None of them made a move to return to their rooms. Natasha swore that she could hear the heartbeats
of every single one of them.

She was the last to fall asleep.
Six months.

Six months since the worst seven days of his life. Six months of scrubbing at the black and blue that was splattered all over his tainted body. Those marks, they were territorial. They made him his property. They treated him as such.

Six months of trying to persuade himself that he did not deserve what had happened to him, of having to deal with the chronic panic attacks, of having to fight the taunting whispers that held down the lid in his brain that allowed him to feel just the slightest bit content, the slightest bit happy.

For three of those six months, Rhodey had initiated Protocol 670. FRIDAY would only respond to his commands, not Tony's. So Tony would have to live with the guilt of having to wake his crippled friend up in the middle of the night when he permanently moved to the floor of his bathroom because the nausea would hold him hostage. He would have to live with the guilt of having Pepper or Rhodey rub his back, trying to bring him home while he disappeared into the world of his worst memories, causing him to retch into the toilet nearly every night. Not that there was much to expel anyways.

So he told his best friend that he was feeling better, because that guilt, of feeling like nothing but a nuisance, the whispers took advantage of that. So now he went it alone, he dealt with the sleepless nights alone.

The whispers, they told them that they were his friend. They played with his thoughts, his memories, and his problems.

Then they destroyed him. They crushed him from the inside out and trapped him within himself. They told him it was fine, that it was for the best. And he believed them. So he stayed. And he drowned.

It was a never ending cycle.

His name was Charlie Spencer. You murdered him in Sokovia. Not that it matters in the least to you. You think you fight for us. You just fight for yourself.

Who's going to avenge my son, Stark?

He's dead.

And I blame you.

He had tried. He had tried to fix it, to be accountable and take responsibility. He had wanted to ease his conscience, to make better the lives that he had destroyed, to find peace.

He had tried, and it tore them apart.
How is it possible for one person to fuck up so royally, so easily, so many damn times?

"Sir, there has been a sudden increase in the media coverage of you today." FRIDAY pulled Tony out of his stupor.

"Show me."

Three large screens popped up, encircling his body as they took form in a circular manner. Then, smaller screens joined. They projected...images.

There was Tony's naked body, sprawled on the floor with the private parts blurred out. He was unconscious, but it was not obvious. His body was intentionally posed as if someone was simply taking a picture of him with his eyes closed. Another one was a picture of him gagged and against the wall, with another man, his face cut off, fucking him from behind.

The well known media outlets presented him as a reckless rich kid who took racy pictures for fun. The gossip outlets labeled him as "whore," "slut," "gay."

No, no, no, no, no. This cannot be happening to me. Oh, God, please don't let this be happening to me.

He scrolled through the comment sections frantically. "Looks like Tony Stark is back at it again, no surprise there." "How can the Avengers bare to look at him? Such a disgrace." "Guess the playboy just wanted more options." "Wow, Stark is doing porn now? Can't wait till the video is up for all of us to enjoy...and laugh at."

"FRIDAY, is there a video?" His voice quivered.

"Sir..."

"Is. There. A. Goddamn. Video?"

Another screen, larger than the rest of them engulfed the area. It consumed him.

Tony Stark's heart stopped beating as he was taken back into that room. The blood in his veins froze as the brokenness, the hopelessness, the emptiness cascaded through him, washing away and replacing his shock like a tsunami.

It was 45 seconds long with no audio. The men's faces were cut off and it was just Tony on his knees, gagged and vulnerable, being violently assaulted, by all of them. He remembered that day. It had been the worst attack. He knew, because it was the day that they had finally been able to make him beg. "No," he had said, "I'm so tired, I can't do this anymore. Please stop. Please stop." He remembered being drugged, of not being able to focus his eyes. But he still remembered feeling every stinging shot of agony coursing through his body with every thrust. He had heard their maniacal laughter, the cacophony strangling his eardrums.

To any other eye, it looked like he was moaning in pleasure.

There was a dull buzzing in Tony's ear, similar to what one would hear after a bomb went off. His legs gave out and he collapsed onto the cold, unforgiving ground with the video and the images and the news stories looming in front of his frail body. They mocked him as he curled in on himself, wrapping his arms around his knees and trembled.

He told himself to breathe. He couldn't. He told himself that it wasn't his fault. He wasn't convinced.
"FRIDAY? Is there anyone in the Tower right now, other than the staff?"

"Agent Romanov has completed a mission from SHIELD and will be returning shortly. Mr. Rhodes is meeting with General Ross down in Washington D.C. Ms. Potts is in Los Angeles, managing Stark Industries, and Vision is at a movie theater in downtown New York City."

Figures. Everybody leaves me anyway.

It was impossible for him to describe how it felt to not be part of his body. It was as if he was there physically, but the part of him that cared, the part of him that urged him to keep fighting, to push forward even when he was beaten and broken and bloody, that part of him had crumpled up and withered away, along with the remainder of his dignity.

He was numb.

With a shaking hand, he swiped away the screens, hurling them into cyber space.

"Activate Lock-down Protocol 208. FRIDAY, thank you for your service. I am truly, eternally grateful."

"Sir, please take a moment to reconsider...."

"FRIDAY, power down completely. That's an order."

The AI was silent for ten seconds before whirring noises, signaling the shutting down of FRIDAY's functions, began. "It was an honor to serve you, Mr. Stark." Those were the last words and then, quiet.

It was as if Tony had taken his hands off the steering wheel of his own body. He found himself filling the bathtub to the brim. He found himself staring at his reflection in the mirror, something he had avoided doing ever since Siberia. He couldn't bring himself to face the pits beneath his swollen, red-rimmed eyes. He cringed at the sight of his hollowed cheeks and the surplus of wrinkles on his forehead, each line creased with worry and stress and shame and guilt. He was sick of it. He hated it.

He hated himself.

As he lowered himself into the water, still fully clothed, his fingers grazed over his phone and within seconds, he was dialing Pepper's number.

"Hello?"

"Pep?" He didn't want to cry. He didn't want to make her worry. He wanted to hear her voice, to be soothed by her words. He wanted her voice and her words to be the lullaby that put him to sleep for the rest of his life.

"Tony, I'm really busy right now so just tell me what you need because I'm late for a board meeting."

"Pepper, I'm sorry." He couldn't help it when his voice cracked, letting heaving sobs begin to rack his body. "I'm so, so sorry."

The CEO of Stark Industries froze as the sounds of her former love's despair reached her ears. "Honey, what's wrong?"
"I hurt you. I love you so much and I ruined it, I ruined us. God, you were the best thing that ever happened to me and I fucked it up."

"Tony, no, listen to me. I ruined us. I decided to leave. It was my choice."

"I always mess up. I try so hard to fix things and I mess it up. I shut down my weapons division, I made Ultron, the Accords and...and everything just gets spit back up in my face because I'm such a shitty person."

"Baby, calm down. You're going too fast. Slow down."

"I'm so weak, Pepper. I didn't see Obadiah tearing me apart and I treated him like a father. My father! I couldn't fight the palladium poisoning and I lost control and I made you and Rhodey mad at me. Killian made Extremis and you almost died because I'm an asshole that almost drives people to kill themselves."

"Tony, baby, it's okay. Just breathe, honey. Just breathe."

"And I couldn't fight the vision that Wanda put in my head. I let it break me. I let myself create Ultron because I couldn't bear that much pain. It wasn't even real, Pepper, it wasn't even real."

"Tony..."

"I lost the only family I had because I couldn't deal with the guilt of killing so many people, of ruining so many lives. I wanted to take the blame, I wanted to fix it so bad, I wanted to honor Charles Spencer, I wanted...I wanted..." He was hyperventilating, his heart was ready to explode.

"Honey, please, calm down, please."

Tony's voice was now reduced to whimpers and haunting whispers. "I couldn't do right by Aunt Peggy. I couldn't do right by Yinsen. I couldn't do right by you or Rhodey. I couldn't do right by the team, not even when I thought that I was, not even when I tried my best. And now they all hate me. They were my only family and now they all hate me because I never did enough. I was never punished enough, I never gave enough. Getting raped wasn't enough, Pepper. I haven't been punished enough."

Tears stained Pepper's and Tony's cheeks simultaneously. "Tony, you are worth so much to the world. You are a hero. You did so much good, baby, you know that? You did so much good for this horrible world. Everything that went bad, none of it was your fault. You are such a good man, Tony. You are such a good man with such an unlucky life and such a good heart and the universe may be against your happiness but you have to push back, honey. I know you can because you have done it time after time after time and I am so proud of you. You hear that? I am so, so proud of you."

A pregnant pause. "But do you love me?" The question was shaky, just the tiniest bit hopeful.

Pepper did not answer. She couldn't give him the answer that he wanted. Not now, maybe not ever.

And the silence over the line was the final straw that made Tony Stark's world come crumbling down once and for all.

"Maybe the world would be a better place if I wasn't in it anymore. Maybe then, the universe can finally be at peace." The words were final, clear cut and forward. Tony ended the call and Pepper was left, mouth gaping, on the floor of the office building where she had sunk down and began to sob.
Tony thumbed the razor blade. There was nothing left for him in this cruel, unforgiving world any longer. There was simply a void. A gray, crackling, endless void that led to oblivion. Was it possible for a person to feel this alone?

When the blade pierced his skin, Tony Stark cried out as his vision was spotted with black dots. He dragged it down, all the way to his wrist. Then, it was just short, spastic breaths that overtook him. The other arm met the same fate.

And just like a rose, the drops of blood blossomed in the once clear water. The blade clattered to the floor, slick with red.

When he sank down in the water, the gushing blood spread like a bath bomb. Some of the water spilled over the brim of the tub, flooding the floor with the, now red, liquid.

Tony closed his eyes, letting himself fall asleep, letting the universe swallow him, letting himself fade away from the world, letting himself smile for the very last time.

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He jolted up in bed, pinching himself so that he could get control over his breathing. He still felt the slightest bit nauseous, but that was a side effect of the anti-depressants.

The pills. Tony hated them. He could never think straight, his mind always felt blank and fuzzy and his thoughts wandered more often than he would like. He couldn't invent, he couldn't build, he couldn't be himself.

But he kept taking them. Two pills every day. He wanted to get better, he did. He wanted to stay in touch with his life, with reality so that he wouldn't slip away into the darkest corners of his brain. The parts of him that kept Siberia, the rape, Afghanistan, the wormhole, and a year and a half ago playing on repeat. If that cost him his ability to be an engineer, then so be it.

"FRIDAY, send an email to May explaining why Peter wasn't at school today. Make something up and mention my name a lot. But make sure its...believable." He ended with a sigh, feeling the weights of fatigue dragging him back under the covers.

"Yes sir. Do you want me to call for assistance?"

No, enough with the help for today. He could handle it himself, like a big boy, he added sarcastically.

"No FRIDAY. Let them sleep, I'll be fine."

He assumed that it was the middle of the night. He managed to hold off the nausea that was roiling in his stomach and he really didn't have the energy to get up or even think. He tried to blink through the fogginess, trying his best to let his exhaustion take him, but...he couldn't.

Even though the opaque mist that shrouded his capacity to reach logic blinded him, his thoughts continued to waltz back to the nightmare, or more accurately, the flashback that he had seen.

A year and a half ago.

A year and a half ago he had sunken down to his lowest point. He had felt so incredibly empty. Separate from his own body. Was that even possible?
Great, I'm going crazy again.

He was determined to never return to that spot, to never cower on the floor letting the words and judgement of other people tear away at him. He didn't want to go back.

But the trouble was, he had been feeling like that more and more recently. It had always been there, but it had always been tucked away and locked tight in the back of his head. But today, when he had seen them, when Clint had said what he had said, the latch broke. And it all came flooding, washing away any resolve, any mask that he had tried to portray.

He had hoped, and like every single time before, it was thrown back in his face. Today, it had been literally.

Maybe tomorrow, there wouldn't be a face to throw his hope back to.

No, stop thinking like that. You're going to hurt them again and this time, they'll give up on you.

He hadn't noticed that he had been digging his nails into his palm, drawing tiny drops of blood. He hadn't even felt the pain. He reached for a napkin on the side table and dabbed at the small punctures, leaning back into the pillows when he realized that he was finally distracted. The wounds pulled him away from knocking on the door of the dark shadows of his brain.

Absently, his fingers traced the pale, but prominent scars on his arms. Jagged, crooked lines that had once sliced his skin open, gushing red.

He wore long sleeves all the time now.

It wasn't the scars itself that bothered him, it was the reactions of other people. The pity, sometimes the disapproval, it made his head hang in shame. It annoyed the hell out of him. Some would treat him like a vase, others would rush away, as if his mental illnesses were contagious. He hated it with a deep, burning passion.

So he hid them as best as he could. And he moved on, so he said.

But a life where he couldn't tinker or build or even think, was that a life that he wanted to live?

I do. He decided.

Do I?

Natasha was riding her sleek, black motorcycle into Manhattan when she got the call.

The mission had been easy. It was mostly stealth, which was up her alley, and she had had to retrieve some files regarding HYDRA from a small base in some small part of Kentucky. She had been hoping that information on Tony's captors would be there. Anything would have sufficed. But the files were heavily encrypted and even she couldn't get past them.

So Fury sent her home, told her to rest, that they would help Tony in whatever way that they possibly could.

So there she was, riding back to the Tower when Pepper Potts emerged on the caller ID.

It had taken several minutes to calm the CEO down, she was that hysterical. "Pepper, tell me what
happened. Slowly."

"You have to get to Tony right now, Natasha. RIGHT NOW. He..." Pepper trailed off once more, 
gasping for breath through her heaving sobs.

"Pepper." Natasha picked up speed, her heart racing. She weaved in and out of cars, eyeing the 
Tower on the horizon.

"Nat, he just told me that the world would be a better place without him. I think he's...he's going 
to...he's going to hurt himself."

Every sound and every sight around the former assassin became more vivid. She didn't need to be 
told anything else. She revved her bike and initiated the nitro boosters that Tony himself had 
designed. "Is he by himself?" She managed to keep her voice steady, but a repulsive feeling was 
crawling under her skin, something that she had prayed she would never feel again.

"He's all alone. We left him all alone. We left him."

The words rattled in Natasha's chest. It continued to as she pulled up to the Tower and pushed past 
the staff, bellowing for FRIDAY. But there was no response.

Come on, Stark. Come on, you're stronger than this. Don't do this to us. Don't do this.

The elevator couldn't move fast enough. There was too much space to cross. There wasn't enough 
time.

She could hear her heartbeat as she reached Tony's private floor. "STARK!" She couldn't even hear 
herself over the noise. There was a terrible numbness flowing through her veins. It intensified when 
she saw the water on the tiles, flowing out from under the bathroom door. The water that was 
stained a deep red.

With a power-packed kick, the door broke open.

The Black Widow swallowed back bile and put all her self-control into the task of staying upright 
and not falling to her knees. Her green eyes fell upon the razor that was floating in the water. Then 
the phone, where she saw multiple notifications and missed call after missed call from Pepper.

She wasn't sure she was breathing when she waded through the pool of red to reach the bathtub, 
where Tony Stark lay, pale and dejected, swallowed by his own blood, swallowed by his own guilt. 
For once in her life, Natasha saw the genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist as genuinely 
happy.

It was almost beautiful.

But she pulled him out of the tub. She pulled him out of the darkness. It was when her eyes fell upon 
the gashes on the arms that she wailed. A sharp, piercing scream that traveled through dimensions.

"TONY!" She slapped his face as she dragged him, soaking wet and bleeding out. "GODDAMN IT 
STARK, WAKE UP! WAKE UP!"

The rest was a blur, but she remembered her groans as she hauled his body, half corpse, to the 
medical floor. She remembered Tony stirring on the gurney as he was being rushed to the 
Emergency Room. She remembered the way he had weakly pulled at her sleeve, his brown eyes half 
open, and murmured, "I'm so sorry, Nat. I can't even kill myself right."
Her eyelids snapped open and she almost swung out at Bruce. But it barely took a second to compose herself and she fell back, loosing a long sigh.

"You okay?" Bruce murmured half asleep.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm...I'm fine. Just a bad dream."

Except it wasn't a dream. It was real life.

It was a nightmare that never stopped coming back.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which Tony and Steve both say things that they do not mean.

Chapter Notes

Please heed all tags. Trigger warnings for self harm.

Tony strolled into the communal floor, a little dazed and dizzy from not having eaten anything since the day before. But he had woken up feeling a little lighter this particular morning, despite the agonizing flashback that had rattled him in the middle of the night.

His family was back. He wasn’t alone. There were other human beings in his Tower whom he loved with every bone in his body.

He wasn’t alone anymore. Maybe now these other voices could drown out the ones in his mind.

But when his weary eyes fell upon the sprawled bodies of all of the Avengers on the couch, a part of him felt a twinge of disappointment at not having been included in this...intimacy, something he had craved for since the corridors of the Tower had grown cold and empty.

When Steve began to stir and stretch, blinking away the blurriness, Tony half sprinted to get to the coffee machine, which was located behind the kitchen island. He needed that barrier, that wall, so that the rising panic would subside. Tony shivered, wrapping his arms around himself as the coffee beans grinded in the machine, trying to conserve the heat, to root his mind down before it took off to Siberia.

To the frigidness, to the betrayal, to the grief.

To the shield smashing down on his chest over and over and over...

“Tony?”

He braced himself on the kitchen counter, suppressing the waves of anxiety.

Get it together. You’re fine. You’re at home, nobody is going to hurt you. Steve isn’t going to hurt you.

But the bland walls and the expensive furniture and the high-end tech, it didn’t feel familiar to him anymore. They simply existed as objects, holding no value, holding no memories or warmth.

Tony hauled up his faceplate, the one that fit over his eyes just perfectly, so that everyone on the outside could see nothing but the masquerade, the charade. He paired it with a standard Stark smile and whipped around, casually leaning against the granite counter top, facing the man who had tried to take his life in Siberia three years before.
The other Avengers were slowly waking up, yawning and gathering their surroundings, some of them looking genuinely confused at the fact that they were all asleep on top of each other. Those baffled expressions slowly morphed into understanding as the events of the day before returned to them.

Tony studied Steve’s face. The baby blue eyes seemed to bore into his soul, as if searching for the faulty code that was embedded deep within Tony. But the genius steeled himself further, encrypting his features so that they showed no hints of weakness whatsoever.

The super soldier eventually turned away, deciding to wake Bucky.

James Buchanan Barnes.

Tony halted that line of thought as soon as it began. He didn’t want to deal with that internal war once more, the one where he yelled at his conscious over and over again to move past Mission Report: December 16th, 1991, to forget The Winter Soldier.

But it were those same blue eyes that fluttered open at Steve’s incessant shaking of his shoulder. It were those same blue eyes that had looked into his mother’s as that same metal arm had crushed her throat as she begged…

*Enough. Breathe, just breathe.*

Tony swallowed back bile as he poured his coffee out, taking a seat on one of the high chairs behind the island, his hand trembling as he forced it to wrap firmly around the mug.

He let the mask take over as finally, all of the Avengers sat up and every single one of them stared at him.

“Okay....first and foremost, since when did all of you participate in such extensive slumber parties? And second, why the hell wasn’t I invited?” The familiar snark, the familiar facade. Tony chuckled half-heartedly, trying to break a smile out of one of them, but none of their mouths even bothered to twitch upwards. “It must have been a boring ass party if Rhodey and Bruce were the ones hosting. I mean, what’d you guys even do? Eat, watch a movie, talk about your feelings, and then cuddle together? Lame.” Tony snickered, bringing his mug up so that it could hide the jealousy that had clearly been brewing in his eyes.

Right when the scalding hot liquid touched his tongue, he heard a distinct and spiteful scoff. A scoff of pure and utter disgust.

“Is everything a joke to you?”

It was Bruce Banner who had spoken.

He felt his wall of adamance and false ego cave a little, but he refrained from flinching and instead flashed another plastic smile. “Jeez Banner. Never thought you’d take lessons on how to make one liners from the Capsicle over here.” Tony drawled, looking pointedly at Steve, who flushed red as they all remembered the glorious team bonding session they had had back in 2012.

Bruce’s eyes had the faintest shade of green in them, but his control was remarkable, aided, of course, by the comfort of Natasha’s hand on his shoulder.

“Do you have any idea how *terrified* we all were yesterday? When you took off so suddenly without any warning? How could you do that to us, Tony?” Bruce was trying not to scream, but his words still hung in the air like poisonous gas.
“Bruce, stand down.” Rhodey gave out an order, the anger and warning prominent. Tony caught onto the urgency and frowned. He was not some fragile doll and he would let hell freeze over before he let himself be treated like one.

“No, no Rhodey. Let the man speak. In fact,” Tony stood up, bringing his chair around the island and placing it right in the middle of the room so that he was in the spotlight, “it seems like all of you have something to get off your chest anyway.” Clint winced. “It would be an absolute pity if we let Brucie here speak for all of you, so I’m giving you all the floor.” He sat down dramatically, the coffee mug still wrapped around his fingers. “Come at me.”

Vision slipped out discreetly. No one else had seen, but Tony had. A shudder of relief flooded through him. He could take everyone else, but anything that Vision would have said would have sounded like Jarvis, and he didn’t know if he could have survived that.

He wanted this. He wanted the others to yell at him, to shred him apart, to destroy him. Maybe this way, he could finally pick himself up and move on. Maybe this way, he could clean the slate with them and start over. Maybe this way, the nightmares would go away and he could feel safe and...happy.

“This is bullshit, Tony. Why the hell do you need to make everything ten times more complicated than it actually is? We need to talk, especially about that stunt you pulled with Fury yesterday.” Rhodey tried his best to ebb the conversation away from the inevitable shit storm that was bound to happen if he let this continue.

“No, Rhodey. We can talk about that later. You know what?” Bruce turned toward Tony. “I almost had two hulk attacks in one day because of you. Two. The Other Guy almost broke through the glass yesterday! The glass of the cage that is supposed to be strong enough to withstand bombs! You stress me out, Tony. You drive me absolutely crazy. Ever since I came back, I’ve been on edge because you are so...unpredictable. I never know what you’re going to do. It drives me nuts, you know? Not having control, it makes me anxious. I know it hurts to hear,”

“Oh no, please keep going. You're doing absolutely fine. This is your time. I don’t matter right now.” Tony wanted to run away and hide. He wanted to crawl underneath the bed sheets and never come out. But his mask was intact and this was far from over.

But Bruce had clamped his mouth shut, stalling the flow of hurt. His eyes were a deep shade of green. But five long seconds later, they returned to brown and Bruce released a deep sigh. He shook his head at his science bro and left the room, most likely to go down to his lab where he could de-stress.

Tony glanced around the room, making sure his large chocolate brown eyes amounted to the sharp, honed points of daggers. An inexplicable craving for destruction overtook him and he could feel the adrenaline, (or was it anxiety?), thrumming through his veins. “Did you all not hear me before or did you all lose a couple brain cells when you returned to the United States? COME AT ME!”

He hadn’t meant to bellow, but it was as if he had lost control of his body. He pointed at Wanda, whose eyes were now a deep red. “You. Come one, you’re easy. You hate me with every damn fiber of your being. Now’s your chance. Tell me how much you want me to suffer. Tell me how I am nothing but a murderer. TELL ME GODDAMN IT!”

Several shouts of protests followed Tony’s outburst. But the room suddenly became deadly silent once more when a kitchen knife, warped and surrounded by swirling pink was held inches away from Tony’s nose.
He did not flinch, he did not break.

“You killed my parents.” Her voice was nothing but a whisper. “You destroyed my family. Pietro died because you created Ultron.” Her chest heaved, but she ceased from saying anything more.

“Okay, this is all types of stupid. Wanda, I’m sorry for what you went through but all that is old news and Tony’s tried so many times to make it up to you. Don’t listen to him and all of you instead focus on the more important things, you know, like the fact that HYDRA is still at large and a huge fucking alien army is going to blow our planet into dust if we don’t get off our asses?” Rhodey’s words went ignored as Tony raised a hand to silence his best friend.

The kitchen knife was still inches away from his face.

“Is that the best you can do?” He taunted, still high on the adrenaline that lusted for chaos. “Come on, Witch. You’ve waited for this for a long time, haven’t you? I’m giving you a chance to let it all out. Your foster father over there didn’t hesitate yesterday, so why the hell should you?”

“I WISH YOU WERE DEAD!” The young witch exploded, her grip on the knife faltering and falling into Tony’s lap. She was gritting her jaw intensely and tears spilled out continuously.

“WANDA.” Several of the Avengers began to talk, voices overlapping. Bucky Barnes stayed silent in the corner.

“LET HER SPEAK.” Tony wanted to finish it, he wanted to clean the slate as fast as he possibly could. His hands were trembling but he hid them as effectively as he could.

“I’ve spent days where I would consider just slitting your throat in the middle of the night as you slept. I wanted to manipulate your mind, drive you crazy so that you felt every inch of suffering that I have felt for years. I have thought of you as nothing but toxic.”

“Enough.” Steve in his Captain America voice.

“Poisonous.”

“Wanda, enough.”

“A monster.”

“Wanda.”

“He asked for it.” Everybody in the room now knew that she was not just talking about the game that Tony had begun to play.

There was a distinct shattering noise. Tony’s coffee mug, which had been mostly full, was now in pieces on the floor with the coffee splayed out in all directions. His adrenaline rush had now dulled, and there was nothing but a throbbing ache all over his body.

What was I thinking? What the hell was I thinking?

Steve, ever the gentleman, even after everything, stood up promptly to help out the genius. But Tony, his senses now enhanced after the adrenaline had left him hanging, shook his head vigorously at the super soldier. “It’s my mess, I’ll clean it up myself.” His voice did not waver, he kept his head high. When Natasha strode briskly over to him with the mop, Tony snatched it away. “I can do it myself.” He snapped. When he saw the quick, almost undetectable flash of hurt in the Black Widow’s eyes, he calmed down. “I’m sorry. I don’t know… I don’t...” He shook his head, clearing
away any tears as he cleaned up the mess.

He felt the concerned eyes, all of them watching as he finished clearing away the glass and mopping up the coffee. He did this all numbly, but his mask was still in place.

Tony let the chair carry his weight as he slumped forward onto the backrest, bracing and folding his arms on the top of it.

Wanda was now back on the couch, her face now buried into Clint’s shoulder. She was slightly trembling and the archer was caressing her back. But his face stayed blank, unrevealing as to what he made of the situation.

“Anyone else?” Tony offered as his subconscious screamed internally, wanting to run away, to hide and cower.

But Stark men were made of iron and iron does not bend easy.

“Rogers?” He drawled, rolling his neck towards the frowning super soldier. Tony chuckled wryly. “Barnes?”

When Bucky looked the genius straight in the eyes and shook his head no firmly, Tony was slightly taken aback. But he stowed the shock away, pushing it down and locking it up so that not one feature of his face would relay any weakness.

“Don’t you dare bring him into this.” Captain America had risen once more, towering over Tony, causing him to straighten up as well.

Part of it was because of the panic that had rapidly began to compile somewhere in the distance, rushing in like a tsunami, ready to wreak havoc. But he built his wall of adamance higher, using his might to hold it together, to hold it…

“I can speak for myself, Steve.” But Bucky’s calm and quiet statement went unnoticed by the blond and the brunette as they faced each other in the middle of the room, the tension between them stretching out to a single thread.

“Or what, Captain Righteous? You’ll slam your frisbee into my chest again? You’ll tell your friend to claw my actual heart out this time instead of just the arc reactor? I mean, with the new reinforcements and upgrades that I designed on your toys, it should finally be enough to actually do that anyway so why don’t you just go ahead?”

He did not know how the anguish had bubbled up and spewed out of his mouth. He did not know when the wall fell and the tsunami blasted through, rooting up his defences and cascading him closer and closer to the edge of a severe panic attack.

“Oh you son of a bitch, don’t you start acting all innocent now.” Steve’s baby blues were ice cold and he was stepping uncomfortably closer to Tony.

“Steve, stop.” Once more, Bucky’s protest went ignored and the former Winter Soldier stayed seated at the corner of the couch, his fingers curling over the edges of the fabric tightly as the rest of the Avengers became an unmoving audience to the destruction unfolding before them.

“Don’t call my mother a bitch, especially when you gave up everything to protect one of HYDRA’s own. The same one that murdered my parents and crushed her throat as she begged, begged for him to stop.” The words would not subside. Tony could not control it. The tsunami was unforgiving, merciless.
“Call him HYDRA’s bitch one more time and I swear on Peggy’s grave…” The super soldier was now inches away from Tony’s face, his broad shoulders heaving up and down. “You started the fight in Siberia. You blew his arm off. We could have talked it out, we could have had a civilized conversation but you were the one who let Zemo win. You let him break you. You let him break us.” Steve’s finger jabbed into Tony’s chest sharply, but the genius kept his footing, even as the air became thinner and more frigid. Even as the heaviness of his broken suit on top of shattered ribs and a weak heart returned.

“And just when the fuck did you decide that having civilized conversations was a good idea? Because it would have made things a hell of a lot more different if you had just TOLD ME IN THE FUCKING FIRST PLACE!” Tony shoved back against Steve, his voice finally breaking its resolve, his breath hitching like crazy. “Instead of having to find out that Captain America’s best friend was the person who took away one of the only people in my life who actually gave a shit about whether I breathed or cried or smiled or existed or died through a tiny screen in an empty HYDRA base in Siberia, you could have had just told me.

“You want to know what broke me, Rogers? It wasn’t Zemo or your frisbee lodged in my chest or his metal arm in my face. It wasn’t the Accords or Afghanistan or the fact that you left me there alone to die or even the stupid video! It was the fact that you knew. And then suddenly, when I did find out, that same man was right in front my eyes and all I could think about was the fact that he was the one who made my mother suffer before she died so you know what? Yes, I did try to kill him. Yes, I wanted him dead. The same way that Wanda wanted to, still wants to, kill me because of her family, because of her brother. Because it’s still my fault.

“But me? No, I’m Tony Stark, aren’t I? I just have to suck it up, roll it around twice in my head right after seeing my parents get murdered and then just immediately understand and sympathize and accept that he was the only victim because HYDRA mind fucked him. And then life would go on and we’d never think about it again but who the fuck cares about the egotistical, selfish, worthless, whore of a bastard that shouldn’t have been born in the first place? Who cares…”

Tony dug his nails into his palms once more, puncturing the fresh wounds that were still raw from the night before. He clamped his mouth shut and focused on the searing pain. Control, control. He recited. Breathe. In, out, in, out.

“You’re not worthless.” Tony’s chocolate brown eyes, now darkened several shades, snapped up to the meek but steady voice. Did Bucky Barnes, Steve Roger’s best friend, just tell him that he was not a complete piece of trash? “Don’t… don’t say that… about yourself because… because you… you’re not, okay?” The man with the metal arm could not bring himself to look up, picking at his metal arm instead.

But Tony’s fingernails just pierced into his flesh harder and his palms were wet with trickling blood that he kept contained in his fists.

“Tony,” Captain America returned to gentle, kind, and nurturing Steve Rogers, “Nobody…”

“No, no, you’re right. Nobody cares, it’s true. No one wants to hear the rich kid’s sob story. I just lost my head for a bit there, promise it won’t happen again. I didn’t mean to, it’s just… Bruce… and two attacks…” Tony mumbled and babbled, digging his fingernails harder into his palm.

Steve threw up his hands, exasperated. “Why are you putting words in my mouth? I never…”

“Never, let’s never talk about this again. I won’t bring it up, you don’t bring it up, let’s just forget it and… and move on. We got everything off our chests so…” Tony shook his head more vigorously, warding off the panic, the everlasting dread. “The slate is clear now, I guess. We…” He couldn’t
suppress the shuddering gasp that escaped his mouth, as well as the two glistening tears that were now running down his cheeks. His chest began to heave, the panic now bubbling to the surface. *I can’t let them see me cry, I can’t let them see how weak I am.* “We’ll start fresh tomorrow.” He shuffled towards the elevator hastily, breakfast forgotten.

“Tony, this isn’t over. What the hell did you mean that you are releasing yourself from Ironman and the Avengers? TONY?” Rhodey called after his best friend, but the genius ignored him, letting the metal doors slide close.

He pressed the button to go to his lab and then slumped against the wall. He finally opened his palms. Deep, red gashes stared back at him, laughing at him, taunting him.

And then his face contorted as he struggled to hold back the panic. His chest grew tight as his air passages grew thin.

The doors of the elevator opened and he dashed into his lab. “FRIDAY, lockdown protocol, okay? Tint the windows, nobody is allowed to come in unless I give verbal permission. And if anyone asks, tell them that I’m in my lab and that I’m indisposed. Keep telling them that and nothing else.” He braced his bloody palms against the nearest table, trying to catch his breath, trying and failing.

“No, no, no. I can’t be having another panic attack. I promised myself that I wouldn’t. The therapy sessions were supposed to fix me so why am I still broken? Why does this keep happening to me, why am I so weak? Steve was right, I always let people hurt me. I’m never strong enough. I can never do anything right, I can’t... I can’t...”

“No,” He choked out, silencing his AI.

“But boss,”

“No, you have to listen to me and do what I say. Mute.” Every word was a struggle, keeping his conscience in the present was a struggle. “Too many thoughts, too many thoughts, too many thoughts.” He mumbled and he gripped the table tighter.

His medication was sitting on the bedside table several floors up. But Tony’s energy had been sapped, and what if another Avenger decided to use the elevator at the same time he wanted to? He couldn’t be able to handle their disgust. He was already so disgusted at himself.

He needed a distraction, he needed to ground himself before the shadows swallowed him. Alcohol was out of the question, there wasn’t any left in the building. He had thrown out all the bottles three years ago and had decided to be sober ever since. Building? He couldn’t fucking build if he couldn’t even think.

And then suddenly it was as if Tony was on autopilot and his trembling hands rummaged through drawer after drawer. The seconds were agonizing, each moment of anticipation made his heart beat faster. It was as if his heart expanded every single time he took a breath, leaving no space in his chest. He couldn’t fucking breathe, he couldn’t, he just couldn’t.

Then he found it. The small razor that he had kept hidden away for so long, the one that he had not had the courage to take out and throw away after what he had done a year and a half ago. He pressed the tip of his finger on the point lightly. He stared at it wide-eyed, time slowing down and distorting.

*Just one. One cut and I’ll put it away and never look at it again.*
With that false reassurance, Tony rolled up one sleeve and brought the razor down high up his arm.

One small, thin cut. He focused on the stinging pain, on how much blood was rolling down his arms.

And the adrenaline slowed, his vision became more focused, his hands stopped trembling, and finally, \textit{finally}, he could breathe again.

Tony put his head down, closing his eyes.

He was back in his lab. He hadn’t been there for a while. His medication hadn’t let him. The genius was restrained by the chains that antidepressants put on him.

But he hadn't taken them this morning.

The brunette raised up out of his chair and washed the blood away, bandaging his wounds. But he did so absentmindedly as ideas began to whir inside his head.

Tony Stark, the inventor and engineer, had returned.
The engineer’s hasty exit left the communal floor engulfed in a thick and heavy silence. Bucky couldn’t tell the difference between literal, physical bounds and the restraints that involuntarily settled upon them all, a combination of guilt and awkwardness that even Steve could not shake.

To Bucky, both felt similar. Both felt familiar.

“Steve,” Sam Wilson. Falcon. Bucky had grown fond of the man after the Civil War. He was comforted by Wilson’s light humor and his ability to make any situation casual, yet intimate and friendly. But the hoarse, guilt-ridden croak that came out of the usually jovial African-American man, was not a sound that Bucky recognized. “What happened in Siberia?”

The former Winter Soldier could feel the air being sucked out of the room and suddenly, the sound of his heartbeat became amplified, each beat thundering in his eardrums.

Bucky lifted his blue eyes to meet the ones of his best friend. Captain America had retreated to the forgiving fabric of the expensive couch and had just finished running a hand over his face.

An impatient sigh. Rhodey slowly lifted himself onto slightly unsteady legs, both supported by elaborate braces designed by Tony Stark himself. “I don’t have time for this.” He strode towards the exit, shaking his head, his braces whirring with each step. “Nat, I’ll be with my physical therapist. You know where to find me.”

The redhead assassin nodded, the evidence of exhaustion, frustration, and pure annoyance settling on the corners of her mouth as they pointed down and her eyebrows furrowed.

Bucky knew that Natasha Romanova was a force to be reckoned with. He knew that as much as she was the glue that kept everybody together, she was also deadly and she could kill any of them with the flick of her pinky.

So when she stood up with her usual grace, but in a blaze of silent fury, he couldn’t help but feel the tiniest bit timid and small under her unrelenting green eyes. The same ones that caught the lost gaze of his best friend. “He asked you a question, Rogers.” The words, they were colder than the ice that had encased Captain America for seventy years.

It was Clint Barton who came to his senses next, after having separated himself from the cocoon that him and Wanda had created out of their bodies. He did not say a word, but Bucky could tell by the way that the archer sat up straighter and gripped his hands on his knees that he wanted an answer too.

Wanda was the only one to keep a seemingly bored expression on her face. There was no evidence of her breakdown from earlier, but they all knew better. Her hands contorted and twisted as she weaved shimmering pink through her fingers lazily.

Bucky knew that those who claim that they do not care are often the ones who cared the most.

And although the world seemed to be confining him to walls that he could never escape, even though he knew that one nudge the wrong way could send his universe crashing down, Bucky Barnes decided to stop running away. “Tell them, Stevie.”

He had meant for the words to come out as solid, strong, and final. They sounded strangled instead. So he cleared his throat, straightened his back, and placed a firm hand on Steve Rogers’ shoulders.
“Tell them the truth.”

Steve sighed, placing his elbows on his knees, looking down at the floor. “We had gotten to the base, Bucky and I. A couple minutes in, Tony arrived as well, said he was there as a friend and that he knew about Zemo. We found the other soldiers, but Zemo had killed them. His plan was never to unleash hell onto the world. He wanted to unleash hell on us. It was… it was a personal vendetta, a result of Sokovia. So he encased himself in a cage that could withstand bombs and he showed us… footage. From December 16th, 1991.”

Maybe it was the guilt that was chipping away at him, maybe it was Tony’s suppressed anger, the anger that he had unleashed just a couple minutes before, or maybe it was because he was tired of pushing that part of him away. He was tired of ignoring the past. Either way, Bucky found himself taking the steering wheel of the conversation. “It was the day his parents died. The Winter Soldier had crashed their car that night,”

“Buck, you don’t have to do this.” Steve had that look on his face again. That look that screamed pity, that made Bucky feel as if he was some sort of damaged antique. Well, he wasn’t. He didn’t want to be. Not anymore.

“Yes I do, Steve. I have to.”

He took a deep breath and continued. “There were pouches of the serum, the same one that Steve had been injected with during World War 2, in the trunk. HYDRA had sent me to get those pouches and then to eliminate Howard Stark. So I crashed the car,”

“ You didn’t do anything, it was The Winter Soldier.” Steve interrupted once more.

Bucky wanted to pull out his hair. Why don’t they understand? Why can’t they just listen to me?

“Just let me finish, Stevie, please.” He wasn’t one for pleading, but he needed for his best friend to be quiet, to let him speak, to let him be his own man. Something that HYDRA had taken away from him for so many years.

“I killed Howard, banged his head into the steering wheel over and over again. He recognized me, called me ‘Sergeant Barnes.’ And I wanted to come back, that part of me was screaming in the back of my head but I… I couldn’t…” He paused, regaining his focus, ignoring the concern on Steve’s face. “When he died, I walked around to Maria. I strangled her, crushed her throat with my metal arm. Then I took the serum and I left. That was what Stark saw, that was what Zemo showed him. “There was a fight. He went after me, Steve and I fought back. But at the end, all three of us…” He loosed a shaky breath. “We were trying to kill each other. And then we… uh… we… we left him there.” Bucky Barnes breathed in deep, looking straight into Natasha’s eyes, then Clint’s, then Sam’s, then Wanda’s, and then finally, Steve’s. He held his gaze, praying that his best friend would finally hear him, would understand him, would see him. “We left him there.” He repeated with a dejected finality.

Nobody else spoke a word. There was too much to feel, and at that moment, they were all struggling to find which emotion to hold on to.

Bucky, in an inexplicable way, felt free. Three years of those wandering thoughts, the things that he could never bring himself to comprehend, they all connected into one, like a puzzle. There was a strange sort of relief, of satisfaction, of having spoken for himself, of having created conclusions using his own intelligence, his own understanding. And even though those conclusions made him sag with guilt, he took pride in being able to return to his own body, to own his mind and connect
stars into constellations without having anyone’s hand on top of his own.

He wasn’t broken. He never will be.

“When he walked in,” Wanda’s sudden nudge at the silence made them all jump slightly, but the words that she said next captured their attention nonetheless, “there was an aura about him. It reminded me of a never ending pit, except it was not empty. It was filled to the brim with panic, anger, and an overwhelming amount of… of sadness and loneliness. It was so dark,” Her voice cracked a little but her face remained stoic, “How can one person see in such darkness? How can one person breathe when he is being drowned?”

“Boss, Laura Barton is requesting to video chat with you.”

Tony looked up, a little dazed. He had been working on a new brace for Rhodey and a little something for Pepper as well. He figured she deserved a gift for having to put up with him for so many years. She still hadn’t left, which he found appalling and just plain impressive.

It was in the middle of the afternoon now and he still did not have a chance to put food in his stomach apart from the few sips of coffee in the morning, but that wasn’t anything new to him. The main issue, he brought his focus back on what FRIDAY had told him, was the fact that Katniss’ wife was calling him.

Tony ruffled his hair just a bit, trying to calm it down from its crazy state. “Put her through.” He sighed as he sat down slowly in his chair, pulling his sleeves down further than they needed to be.

A screen popped up in front of him, displaying a friendly face and a soft smile. Over the past couple years, small sets of wrinkles had settled in some corners of her face, but she was still beautiful. “Hi Tony.” She said.

Tony returned a warm grin. “Hey Laura. How are you and the kids?”

“We’re safe and healthy. Thanks to you.” The gratitude was overwhelming but it was something that Tony was not used to.

“I would have done it for anybody.”

“But you did it for us. That’s all that matters to me. Lila, Cooper, and Nathaniel wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you.”

He let that sink in for a second. Tony loved those children. If anything, they were one of the reasons he stayed grounded, even after everything that had happened. He liked to think that protecting the Bartons from Ross was the one thing that he hadn’t screwed up in his life. He planned to keep it that way with everything he had. “Tell them Uncle Tony and Auntie Nat said hi. And that we love them.” The second part he added hastily. Being vulnerable was something that he avoided at all costs, although that particular day, he wasn’t doing all that well in that department.

“I will. Tony, you know why I called right? They came back yesterday, if I’m not wrong.”

“They did.” Tony wore his mask tight, this time making sure that it would not slip off. “They’re here. All of them. Did you want to talk…”

“No, actually.” The firmness in her voice surprised Tony. Laura never got so serious or so
“I know I probably should. It’s been three years, god damn it.” She chuckled wryly. Tony did not like where this conversation was going. “But I can’t bring myself to even look at him right now, much less talk to him.” She shook her head, a single tear escaping and rolling down her cheek. “Tony, I filed for divorce.”

She had said it so easily, as if the news had not knocked the wind out of the flabbergasted engineer that began to twiddle his thumbs. He kept eye contact with the woman, however, refusing to display the heartbreak of his past, with his own broken family, although not divorced but close enough to be considered so, as it rose to the surface.

“If something like what had happened three years ago happens again and he leaves us, all of us, to fight for something he knows nothing about, I don’t think I’ll be able to take it. Lila, she’s getting older now and I don’t… I don’t want her to grow up hating her father because he wasn’t around but I just… I don’t think I’ll be able to handle being abandoned again. Does that make me a bad mother?” Laura Barton was breaking down in front of Tony and he had no idea what to do, what to say.

He knew more than anyone that every child needed their father just as much as they needed their mother. He also knew what it felt like to be left behind because his partner wanted him to give up an entire part of his world, his identity, and he couldn’t. He knew what it felt like to be lonely.

“Laura, nothing you do will ever, ever make you a bad mother. You are one of the strongest, bravest, and kindest people I know and your children are gems because of who you are, because you are a good mother. A perfect mother.” He let himself open up, just the tiniest bit. He owed Laura honesty, he owed her support. At least that much he could provide to her. “You should do whatever you feel you have to, for the betterment of yourself and your children. But, if anything, you should talk to him. It doesn’t have to be today or tomorrow, or even this month. I’ll keep him here and take care of him for as long as I have to. But before a letter shows up at his doorstep asking him for his signature to sever a bond that he cherishes so much,” At that, the woman sobbed, but Tony had to keep going. He had to. “You have to talk to him. He owes you, at the very least an explanation. Just give him that much and then you both can make a decision. Laura,” Tony leaned forward in his chair, attempting to show as much comfort as he possibly could, “I know that you will make the right choice. Trust in yourself that you will too.”

The woman had resorted to sniffling and wiping away the tear tracks on her cheeks. She nodded swiftly, absorbing Tony’s words. “Two weeks.” Was all she said. There was no further explanation needed before a mutual understanding grew between the two and the call was disconnected.

The engineer loosed a deep sigh and deflated, slumping against the backrest of his chair. The stress was piling again and he felt it combining with the shadows that were already wreaking havoc on his brain. He clenched his fists again but his nails were met with the bandage that he had wrapped around the crescents that now decorated his palms.

Shit.

He pressed on the wounds instead, finding a twisted sort of relief flood through him as the stinging distracted him from his roiling, unrelenting thoughts.

Tony returned to the small gift he was designing for Pepper. It was a watch, classy and fancy but upgraded and enhanced in every way that he could make it.

Time. For him, it seemed like there was never enough of it, never enough time to fix his mistakes, to make up for his past, etc, etc. But then other times, the seconds dragged out and he could hear every damn tick in his ear. Those ticks leered at him because they knew that they wouldn’t stop and that he
would always, always be haunted.

Damn it. Why do I keep getting distracted?

He flung his screwdriver onto his desk and buried his head in his arms.

Nothing but a bottomless ocean surrounded him. The weights tied to his feet were multiplying, pulling him down faster and faster into that lonely abyss.

Breathe, breathe.

“Boss, Director Fury is contacting you.”

This day could not get any possibly worse. “Yeah sure add another fifty things to my list of problems right now, why the hell not?” Tony grumbled, picking up the screwdriver once more and twirling it around aimlessly. “Answer it, FRIDAY.”

“Stark.” Ever the warmest welcome. But then again, Tony had gotten used to the cold. “It’s been twenty-four hours. How have you idiots been holding up?”

“Peachy.”

“Regardless, you all are scheduled for a press conference tomorrow in which you will represent the newly reconstructed Avengers. All of you have to be there of course, but you’ll be doing the talking. We need good publicity and you’re the only one who can give us that.”

Tony sighed. Another weight was being tied to his feet. “They’re not going to listen to me, not after what happened two years ago.”

“Stark, you and I both know what happened two years ago. But the civilians can’t go around knowing that HYDRA is still active and that they were able to get to one of our own.” Tony’s breathing quickened. “You know why SHIELD had to cover it up. We can’t make it look like we’re vulnerable or... victims. Let the public believe what they need to. It’s your job to work your media boy magic and deflect, no matter how many times they bring it up, understood?”

Vulnerable, victim, liability, weak, weak, weak, weak...

“Stark, do you understand?”

“Don’t worry eyepatch I heard you loud and clear the first time. I’ll stick to the story: got drunk, got naked, had sex, blah blah blah. Is that all?”

Tony heard an impatient huff from the other end of the line, but the sound was cloudy. It was nothing compared to the other noises that swirled in his mind.

Vulnerable, victim, liability, weak, weak, weak, weak...

“Be prepared for tomorrow, Stark. And tell the others.” A slight pause. “You know that this is bigger than you. Do it for your team.”

The call ended.

What team?

Tony drowned.
Bucky Barnes felt slightly suffocated by the tight space in the luxurious car that was taking them all to the press conference. He was smushed between the Captain and Falcon, but he could feel the stony coldness radiating off of Sam.

After he had told the story the day before, not one of them had opened their mouths. Not one of them reacted. It was as if everything just...short-circuited and nobody knew how to jumpstart again. Instead, they had all more or less just drifted. Natasha had gotten a call from Fury, Wanda had returned to her room, Sam left the tower for a little bit to reconnect with a couple of his friends from his time in the army, and Clint had left the room gray-faced after receiving a message from his wife, who had told him that he had to wait two weeks before she contacted him.

They had all left. All except Steve Rogers, who had let Bucky rest his head on his shoulder, rubbing his arm comfortingly at the same time. Bucky remembered feeling strangely exhausted by his open-minded rant and it felt nice to let someone just hold him for a second. He knew he could rely on Steve for anything without judgement.

He couldn’t help wondering if Tony Stark had that kind of a person in his life.

The genius had sent out a blast email to all of the Avengers, filling them in on the press conference that was supposed to show the team’s ‘reconstruction’ and how he himself was to be the only one giving any answers to the public, Fury’s demand.

Steve had started to protest on this, but Bucky had managed to calm the Captain. “Steve, we’re not cut out for this kind of crap. I don’t know the man very well but I do know he’s Howard’s son. He’ll take care of it and he’ll do it right. Just... we’ll be fine, alright?”

Bucky was the tiniest bit satisfied by the surprised look on his friend’s face, as if Steve was astonished that Bucky was capable of such level-headed thinking that he managed to out-logic Captain America himself.

The thought left a tiny smirk on Bucky’s face as he nudged closer to his friend and the cars arrived at the press hall.

Never had so many flashes of lights assaulted him at once. The ravenous, almost feral natures of the reporters as they screamed questions towards him and shoved microphones in his face spiked his levels of discomfort to a maximum.

He stuck close to Steve with his head bowed down, sparing a soft smile for his friend when he was flashed a concerned look. “I’ll be fine.” He mouthed reassuringly. He prayed that he would be. Thank God Stark would be the one talking. Bucky could handle dozens of men shooting at him just fine, but he didn’t know if he could handle being attacked by the monstrosity known as the press.

Steve guided the super soldier by the elbow and they sat down at a panel at the front of the large room full of throngs of people. They were joined by Hawkeye, Falcon, Scarlet Witch, Black Widow, Bruce Banner, Colonel Rhodes, and even Vision. Only Ironman stood at the podium in front of them all.

The man was sporting a clean-cut brown business suit and his signature, obnoxious sunglasses. His mouth was upturned in a classic billion dollar smile and everything about him reeked of charisma. He was unfazed by the intimidating amount of cameras stationed at every angle from every point of the room, something that Bucky found to be quite impressive, seeing how he, himself was squirming a little underneath those lenses.
The overlapping voices had dulled to a low murmur. “Let’s get this show on the road then, shall we?” Tony Stark’s loud and proud persona sucked all the air out of the room and all the attention fell upon the Man of Iron within seconds. “Who wants to go first? Yes?” He pointed towards someone in the crowd. Bucky inched forward in his seat.

“How has the team recuperated after your fight with Captain America?”

“Okay, first of all, it wasn’t a fight. It was just a disagreement that went way too far and therefore, for our pettiness, I do sincerely apologize. This is not something I do a lot, people, so this better be making headlines tonight.” A couple chuckles here and there permeated through the room. “And as for you question, it was really quite easy. So a bunch of big authority figures told us all to sit down and talk to each other and that’s what we did. Couple’s counseling was all well and good and we made up and now we’re back. As one. Together. We’re a team, we always will be above anything else. Next?”

“How can you reassure the public that your own personal disagreements don’t cause more property and collateral damage?” The reporter put quotes around ‘disagreement,’ which made Bucky want to cringe but he kept a straight face, focusing on the man at the podium.

“All we’re asking for, all we really need, is time. It’s been a rough couple of years and... all of us have played a part in losing the world’s trust in The Avengers. But as a team that fights threats which are, even to us, often inexplicable and complex, we cannot make promises that we cannot keep.” A low murmur began as the reporters stirred restlessly. It was then that Bucky noticed just how hard Stark was gripping the edge of the podium, his long sleeves almost fully covering the pale white of the man’s knuckles. “Regardless, all you have to do is to give us time. I cannot assure you of anything but this: our personal matters, our arguments, will never, ever affect civilians again.” Bucky felt Steve sit up a little straighter, noticing just how enraptured his best friend was by Howard Stark’s son’s words. “The newly amended Accords will restrict collateral damage, something that all of us believe to be a significant issue that should be discussed and acted upon. We will have accountability.” Stark gripped the podium tighter at the last word. “We will be better. For you, for us, for the world.”

The crowd sprung upwards once more, hands waving frantically to gain the billionaire’s attention. Tony pointed towards someone in the back.

“Mr. Stark, does The Winter Soldier continue to pose as a threat to the world, or has there been actions taken to prevent episodes such as the one in Germany three years ago?”

Steve’s hand rested on Bucky’s thigh. Bucky had lifted his head slightly at the question, but he couldn’t find it within himself to feel frustrated or angry or defensive. The only word that resonated through his head was threat.

He noticed Captain America’s eyes, now icy blue, staring daggers at the back of Tony Stark, as if daring the man to answer in any way that might paint Bucky as a villain. But the former Winter Soldier placed a gentle hand on his friend’s and gave him a soft smile. I'm okay. I promise.

“There is no Winter Soldier, not anymore.” Multiple pairs of eyes fell upon Bucky’s rigid form, hiding behind the panel, as Tony began to respond. “And rest assured, that man sitting behind me whom you are all making extremely uncomfortable right now so if you all could please...” The eyes averted, but some lingered. Gratitude swelled in the super soldier’s chest, but the discomfort at suddenly becoming the center of attention did not leave just yet. “That man is James Buchanan Barnes. He is the best friend of Steve Rogers, otherwise known as one of your favorite heroes, Captain America’s, best friend. He is a war hero, a veteran, from when The United States was fighting in World War 2. He is a man who was abducted and tortured and has had everything taken
away from him for 70 years, including his identity as the man that everyone should recognize and see him as.” The room was deadly silent. Steve had slumped back in his seat, his mouth hanging the tiniest bit open, speechless.

Bucky Barnes could not grasp onto an emotion. Instead, he froze, wide-eyed and baffled, just as much as anyone else in the room.

Was this the same man who had broken down in front of all of them the day before, fuming and seething and so clearly lost? Was this the same man whose parents died at the hands of The Winter Soldier himself?

Why is he defending me? Does he even mean it, what he’s saying?

As soon as the thought crossed the man’s mind, he regretted it. Especially when his gaze became focused on the fact that Stark had removed his sunglasses and found that the chocolate brown eyes were rimmed with red. Dark shadows that even his makeup could not conceal caved his face inwards, hollowing it out. But it was only Bucky who noticed these miniscule details as Tony quickly massaged his temple and replaced the obnoxiously large glasses, masking his exhaustion once more.

“The Winter Soldier was a weapon controlled by HYDRA. James Buchanan Barnes is simply a man who deserves a second chance. Give him that, at the very least.” Tony Stark sniffed briskly and flipped his hand, gesturing for the next question.

For the first time during that press conference, Bucky sat up straight and tall, letting the crowd devour him.

“Good morning Mr. Stark. I am sure you remember me.” A blond haired woman sitting right in front of the podium smirked poisonously at the billionaire, her lips painted a deep shade of red that resembled the color of blood. She was dressed smartly in a snug dress and she sat, with her back straight and at the edge of the chair, with her legs crossed, a notebook perched on her thighs. She spun her pen in her fingers maliciously and the heel of her sleek, black shoe tapped threateningly in a slow rhythm.

“I am sure that I do not.” Tony quipped expectedly. But Bucky caught the lie in a split second. HYDRA may have messed with his brain, but he did remember how to be a master spy and assassin, even though it was a part of him that he despised nine times out of ten.

The woman uncoiled her crossed legs and stood up, her notebook now clasped under her arm. “Christine Everhart from Vanity Fair.” The billionaire’s face did not even twitch. “But my name is besides the purpose of my being here this morning. I would like to begin by saying… welcome back.” Her words drawled, reminding Bucky of the hissing of a snake.

Tony huffed, then looked at his watch, tapping on it with an impatient finger. “I am not required to stay here beyond six more minutes so I would recommend that you ask your question, Miss. Everhart.” Bucky could sense the frost dripping from the billionaire’s tone. The super soldier edged forward in his seat.

“Of course, Mr. Stark.” She flashed another venom induced smile. “Do you think your, well how can I word this correctly?... indiscretions will affect your performance as an Avenger?”

Tony seized. Bucky caught sight of trembling hands, which were quickly clenched into tight, white fists.
As per usual, the billionaire displayed another media friendly smile. “They have not so far and they will not in the future either.”

“But don’t you think that your actions will reflect poorly on the image that The Avengers try to portray?” The blond haired woman, now dubbed Christine Everhart, was quick to come back with another hard hitting question.

“Apart from the image that portrays heroism, patriotism, Earth’s mightiest heroes, and all that jazz, we also like to show the public that we are human as well. And humans like to have sex. So what? I had one too many drinks one night and I did a little experimenting. It’s unfortunate that my adventures were displayed all over the goddamn internet but shouldn’t fuel for masturbation be considered an act of heroism as well? I mean, come on people…” There was a burst of laughter, but none of The Avengers were grinning. They all knew the truth of what had happened to Tony Stark, but no one spoke up. They couldn’t. Fury had warned them against it. Threatened would be more appropriate. And none of them wanted to deal with a two month suspension.

“Let Stark handle it. He knows how to clean up messes even though sometimes he’s the reason behind them,” were the Director’s exact words.

How can he just blow off what happened to him? How can he just take their laughter? How can he deal with the fact that he was assaulted and the entire world just thinks that it’s a sex tape, a joke?

Bucky clenched his jaw. Of course, Steve noticed. “Buck?” But the super soldier did not respond as he continued to stare icily at Christine Everhart.

“But do you not realize that making sex tapes and providing bad examples for children who look up to The Avengers could label you as a liability to the team?” The snake of a woman spit out.

Tony flipped his wrist upwards, unclenching his fists. “Whoops, looks like our time is up. Thank you for your questions and know that The Avengers are here to help…”

“Mr. Stark, how do you plan on controlling your behavior now that the team is back together?” The crowd buzzed as Everhart kept asking question after question. “Do you think it is appropriate to call yourself a hero when you continue to be so irresponsible? Do you want to comment on that night? What exactly went through your head? Are you returning to self destructive tendencies?”

But the billionaire had rushed out of the room, the cameras following. Security began to escort The Avengers back to their cars, but Bucky had shaken off the grip of the tall man wearing dark shades as he stared after the genius who had told the world that his assault was nothing more than a drunken night’s endeavors.

The same man who defended James Buchanan Barnes on national television, but had not defended himself in the slightest.

Why?

Rhodey saw his best friend slip into the bathroom after he had somehow managed to escape the mob of ravenous reporters. With his body guard shielding him, Rhodey followed after a couple of minutes.
“Tony?”

There was no mistaking the sound of soft sniffling when the Colonel had strode into the bathroom, but it had stopped abruptly the moment he had called out the genius’ name. Rhodey eyed the closed stall door, knowing fully well that Tony was hiding in there. He heard a toilet flush and the stall door whisked opened. His best friend was still wearing the terrible sunglasses that he had begged for Tony to take off in the car. But the billionaire had laughed and said, “Oh come on. It’s just like old times, right?”

The last time Rhodey had seen Tony wearing sunglasses like that was in Afghanistan, moments before the first HumVee had blown up.

“You alright?” He knew it was a stupid question, but what the hell else could he have asked: How the hell you holding up after Christine Demon-hart just mocked your rape?

Tony Stark, the young, bright, optimistic teen from MIT; the sleek, loud, and proud man that swept the nation with his genius, were all gone. They were replaced with this small shell of a man who had tried so hard, but had always ended up pulling the shorter stick. This man just looked tired, bone-deep tired.

Rhodey watched his friend intently as he washed his hands, noticing the bandages on them. “What happened to your palms?”

Tony jumped, as if returning to reality from thousands of miles away. “Hand slipped in the lab. Wasn’t careful enough. It’s fine, I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

“Look, you can tell me anything…”

“I’m fine!” Tony braced himself on the sink and leaned forward towards the mirror, swaying a little. “I’m fine.” He repeated, softer this time.

There was a short pause between the two, the tension slacking a bit like limp rope. None of them had the energy to fight. The morning had already messed up their day.

“You need to be alone?”

Tony nodded, his face scrunching up, as if he was fighting a losing battle in his own head.

“I’ll tell the driver to wait for ten minutes. Be back by then, okay?” Rhodey turned on his heel and left, braces whirring, the sound fading as the door closed behind him.

No one saw the tears that spilled out of clenched eyelids the moment that War Machine had left the bathroom. No one saw the blood that stained the bandages on his palms as Tony Stark’s wounds reopened once more.
Chapter 10

It had taken Tony all of a single minute to rush out of the car and separate from The Avengers the second that the wheels stopped turning. Bruce eyed the man from the tinted window as he walked briskly away from them all, slipping out of sight before the other cars had pulled to a stop.

There was a knot in his stomach that grew tighter every time he gathered the courage to glance towards the distraught genius who simply pretended. The man had put up an act for so many years and none of them had seen it, none of them had bothered. They had all let him fall apart.

*And I had ran away.*

He cringed when he remembered falling asleep on the genius when he had been telling him everything about the Mandarin attacks. The man had laughed it off, but now, years later, Bruce recalled a glimpse of a pained expression on his friend’s face.

It had lasted only a second.

A deeper weight settled on his shoulders when he thought about how Tony had taken the full blame for Ultron. Not once was Bruce Banner’s name mentioned. Not once was the Scarlet Witch mentioned.

He protected them.

*And I left.*

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes when the events of the day before flooded the stream of guilt like a fucking tsunami.

*God, the things that I said. Oh God. What’s wrong with me?*

Bruce thought about these things every night when he lay in the luxurious bed that he didn’t deserve, when he showered in a spacious bathroom, when he worked in his state of the art lab, all things that Tony Stark had custom made for his science bro. He thought about how the billionaire thought he had to buy people things to get them to love him.

He thought about what Natasha had told him happened a year and a half ago, six months before he had decided to come back. To stop running.

It had almost been too late.

The thing that made The Black Widow’s green, luminous eyes turn shadowy. The thing that made her hands tremble, *her* hands tremble. Natasha Romanov *never* trembled. She never cried either. But that day, when she had told him, every resolve, every durable material she used to craft her indestructible wall, came crashing down. For once in his life, he had seen Agent Romanov, The Black Widow, become nothing more than simply Natasha. Loud, ugly sobs had racked her body. Bruce had never seen her so raw, so vulnerable. “So much blood,” she had cried, “There was so much blood.”

He had been too shocked to hulk out that day. The Other Guy had grown solemn, not angry. The Other Guy knew because he had saved Bruce from that bullet so many years ago.

He had never thought that the bullet would ricochet back to Tony Stark.
“I’m so sorry, Nat. I can’t even kill myself right.”

Bruce shoved the car door open, practically sprinting back into the tower. No, The Other Guy wasn’t roaring to come out. He was roaring at Banner to get off his ass. “HELP TIN MAN. DON’T LET TIN MAN GET HURT.”

Not this time. I promise I won’t run away this time. I’m going to stay, buddy. I’m going to fight.

About forty-five minutes after the Avengers had all lazily trudged back into the Tower, all of them had scattered in different directions, all of them were set back emotionally by the venomous morning. But only Bruce Banner had decided to cope by cooking. His time abroad had given him a chance to expand his skills and he was able to expertly weave his hands through spices and herbs, creating rich, savory dishes that could make anyone’s mouth water.

Because underneath the big, green scary rage monster was just a man who wanted to learn from the world, not smash it.

The scientist heaped a plate, told FRIDAY to inform the others that lunch was ready, and went down to the lab, or at this point, the lair, in which Tony had trapped himself in once more.

“May I help you, Doctor Banner?” FRIDAY’s Irish accent flitted through the corridor just as Bruce lifted a finger to put in his code for entering the lab. The windows were tinted and he couldn’t see through. Not a good sign.

“Just brought him some lunch.” He waited anxiously when there was no answer from the AI and he reached back to run his hand through his hair when the door had still not opened for him. “Can I go in now, FRIDAY? Is he alright?” No answer.

The knot that was tied around his intestines began to suffocate the man as another wave of guilt torrented through his veins. He had blamed the genius, had struck him down and kicked him for things that weren’t his fault. The guilt from before had built up, piling on and on and on until yesterday...until he had simply snapped.

And everything had come out wrong. And he had ran away. Again.

Bruce opened his mouth to talk to FRIDAY once more when the steel door inched open and Tony, wearing an oversized MIT sweatshirt with sleeves that went past his hands, greeted him.

Or stared at him in disbelief. Same difference.

Bruce eyed the man standing before him. His eyes were rimmed with red. Lack of sleep. Or excessive crying. Or both. A gaunt face featuring hollowed out cheeks and under eyes. Exhaustion, lack of nutrition. A lost, hazy expression on his face, as if he was surprised that anyone had bothered to check up on him. Loneliness, betrayal, abandonment.

“Bruce?” Hoarse voice. Congestion? No. Excessive screaming? No. Crying? No. Sobbing? Maybe. The engineer cleared his throat, blinking rapidly as if he were trying to focus his eyes. Tony leaned against the doorway, managed a lazy smile and glanced at the plate of food that Bruce was carrying. “Hey Big Guy. Didn’t think you’d miss me that much.”

I’m so sorry Tony. For everything.

But why couldn’t he just open his damn mouth and say it out loud? The two scientists continued staring at each other, both of them, even Tony, at a loss for what to say. The tension from the argument they had had the day before sparked between them so distinctly that Bruce could feel it
pricking on his fingertips. Except the sparks were dull, exhausted, and weary. Not unlike the shadow in Tony’s eyes.

But the chocolate brown pupils still shone and twinkled. They danced through the shroud of sadness and Bruce wanted to revel in the beauty of them. He admired the strength that they had to keep shining even though he knew that Tony himself was dull and dim inside.

But then again, stars always shine the brightest when they’re dying.

“Hey Banner? If you came here to have a staring contest while teasing me with beautiful food, then you should know that I’m winning, number one, and number two, I don’t appreciate it.” The engineer turned on his heel, about to close the door behind him when Bruce grabbed his wrist… a little too aggressively.

He could feel the flinch shudder through the other man’s body and he hastily let go, the realization striking him.

Idiot. You don’t grab victims of abuse like that! Especially not after… not after what Tony went through. I should know better, I’m a doctor goddamn it!

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean…”

“It’s fine.” The frustration in Tony’s voice was evident as he snatched his hand away, rubbing at his wrist for a second before entering his lab. Bruce noticed how his sleeves, since the man’s hands were hidden beneath them, were trembling. He also noticed just how quickly Tony hid that fact by stuffing his hands into his sweatshirt pocket.

“I actually…” Bruce shook his head, unable to fathom his thoughts so that he could make a coherent sentence. “I made this,” he lifted the plate a bit higher; the food had gotten slightly cooler than it had been when he had first put it on the plate, “for you. You didn’t come up to eat anything yesterday after the uh… altercation and I assume you didn’t have breakfast either because we all went straight to the press conference after waking up and grabbing some toast. Again, you hadn’t come upstairs so-”

“Bruce,” Tony interrupted, his tone nonchalant and flippant as he tinkered with some sort of brace. Probably for Rhodey. “Stop rambling, you’re giving me a migraine. DUM-E, hand me that screwdriver, will you? No, no that is a wrench. Come on! We’ve been over this. Jesus, never mind, I’ll get it myself.”

Bruce placed the food on a nearby table, his lips twitched upwards in an amused smile as he watched his friend in his element. This was the real Tony Stark. He was the engineer wearing an old faded sweatshirt stained with oil and grease. He was the man with the messy, spiky bed head because he forgot to comb his hair down. He was the dad who scolded his robots because they still, after so many years, could not tell the difference between tools.

He was human.

But the doctor’s smile faded instantly when Tony stumbled on his way to complete DUM-E’s job, causing a crucial piece of Rhody’s new brace to snap off as he collided with the table. He leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and clenched his fists in his hair, running his fingers through again and again rapidly as if trying to tear out brown clumps. “That-” He sighed, “is not good. Not good. I need to fix that. I need to-” The mug of coffee sitting nearby splayed everywhere, staining many of the papers, schematic diagrams, that Tony had designed for the brace. “Now I have to… clean that up too.”

Bruce observed his friend the entire time, taking note of how Tony raised his sleeves to his head and
massaged his temples. He caught his friend muttering, “Shut up, shut up, shut up.”

It broke Bruce’s heart to witness the pure fatigue that radiated from his friend. “Okay, come on.” He grabbed a chair, pulling it up to the table where he had placed the food. Bruce guided Tony along, pressing his hand against the engineer’s forehead, but there were no signs of fever.

Just a terrifying chillness.

“Eat.” He ordered the man gently, letting Tony shoot him an incredulous look. He waited until his friend took a spoonful of rice and curry into his mouth before relaxing. “How is it?”

Tony didn’t respond and he chewed slower than was normal. His gaze was stuck on the wall behind Bruce. His body was physically there, but Bruce knew that his mind was miles away.

“How is it?” Bruce tried again, placing a warm hand on his friend’s shoulder.

The genius jolted, his spoon clattering onto the table and his chest heaving. Once again his fists were stuffed into the sweatshirt pocket violently.

Bruce stepped back at a loss for what to do. He hadn’t meant to trigger Tony and he was having trouble silencing The Other Guy as he roared in his ear, demanding to know what had happened to Tin Man.

Uselessness was not a good feeling.

He stood back until he was sure that Tony had returned to his body completely. “I’m sorry.” He whispered, moving hesitantly towards the genius but he froze when the other man lifted his sleeve sharply.

“Thank you for the food Bruce but you should leave. I don’t want empty apologies and we can’t have you stressing out again, now can we?” The words were laced with ice and Bruce couldn’t help but sag and falter a bit.

There was a long pause. The electricity that had been sparking was now crackling and shocking. I deserved that.

“I’m not leaving, Tony.” He heard an impatient sigh but Bruce ignored it, striding up to the genius and facing him. “I’ve ran away too many times in my life and I’m not about to do it again just because you’re in a bad place.” Tony scoffed, pushing the food on his plate around aggressively. Bruce sighed. “Look, I know what it’s like to want it all to stop, to just want time to slow down so that I could have a minute of peace. But that’s the thing. Time. I know it’s cliche and cheesy but it gets better with time.” Tony shook his head, a wry laugh escaping his cracked lips. Bruce kept going, his mouth on autopilot. “I had been so alone. I hated myself so much for so long. I hated that the one thing that made me want to escape, to just end it all, was the same thing that wouldn’t let me. But then I met you guys, the Avengers. Tony, I met you. You were the only one who treated me like a person, like a human being, not a… a monster.”

Tony shot upwards, the chair flipping backwards. “I don’t have time for this sentimental bullshit.”

He stormed back to his work station, snatching some paper towels to mop up the coffee.

“And I don’t think you had…have that person in your life, Tony. The person who reminded you that before anything else, you were human, not a suit of armor. And for that, I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry that I couldn’t be that person for you, that instead of helping you, I watched you fall apart and then I ran away. That I wasn’t there for you when such horrible things happened to you, when your mind
was so far into the darkness that you tried…”

“Enough. Jesus, fuck, just shut up.” Tony sank back into his chair, putting his head in his arms. “I don’t want to talk about that, about any of that. Fuck.”

But Bruce did not regret anything. He had to say all that, he had to find some way to make it up to his friend. So he took the plate of food once more and placed it in front of Tony. “Finish eating. Please. And then come upstairs. We’re planning to watch a movie today. Steve’s idea. You know, team bonding and all that.”

There was a scary rage that flickered in Tony’s eyes for a second before the shadowy shroud returned. “Can’t be part of team bonding if you’re not a part of the team.” He said it quickly, but it was enough to knock the breath out of Bruce nonetheless. The genius turned away once more and began to shovel the food into his mouth.

“No, Tony…”

“Either I’m going crazy or you’ve gone deaf but I recall telling you to shut up.”

“I’m not going to shut up.”

“Then I am going to systematically ignore you. Or you know, fall asleep.”

Bruce was about to continue defiantly before he realized what Tony had said. Oh. He clamped his mouth shut. I deserved that too.

The two of them stayed in silence, Bruce making sure that Tony was still eating. The knot in his stomach had gone loose and now the strands of rope just drooped pathetically, sagging at the sight of his friend, whom he had let suffocate at the hands of the shadows of self hatred.

“Come upstairs. Please.” Bruce repeated once more as his friend finished.

“I need to finish Rhodey’s brace.”

“You can finish it tomorrow. Just come upstairs and rest for a while. Please…”

“Okay, okay fine. I have to give them all their new equipment anyway. Might as well do it now.” Tony walked towards a large cart at the corner of his lab, pushing it towards the door.

Bruce noticed that the Captain’s shield lay at the top and that Tony’s eyes were avoiding it. He placed his hands on the handles of the cart, smiling softly at his friend, who kept his face blank, and helped him push it into the elevator.

Within seconds, Tony Stark’s expression changed and the sad, broken man that Bruce had seen in the lab disappeared only to be hidden behind the mask of the genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist once more.

When Tony Stark entered the communal floor while dragging a large cart with his shield right on top, Steve Rogers did not know what to make of it, or how to react.

He had been talking with Bucky in a low voice, discussing the events of that morning which had left the Avengers in terribly confused states.
“Stark defended me. Why would he do that? After everything, why would he bother? He could have made himself seem like the hero, but he didn’t. Why?” Steve could tell that his friend’s mind was going a mile a minute, but he himself had been baffled by the genius’ actions.

“I guess he needed to make sure that the Avengers Initiative be seen as somewhat stable and intact in the media’s eyes. But, I don’t know Buck. I feel like, I think… he sounded genuine. That’s what I don’t understand.”

“He meant it, Stevie. I don’t think you should doubt that.”

Steve paused, deep in thought. In the end, he could only come up with one conclusion: he missed Tony Stark.

Natasha, who had been sitting on the other end of the couch far away from Clint and fiddling with her necklace, the one with the arrow on it, suddenly shushed them viciously shushed the two super soldiers.

That was when Tony and Bruce had come in, heaving a heavy cart.

Steve couldn’t help but flick a glance towards Clint and Wanda, both of whom had said some unforgivable things to the engineer, and found them both hanging their heads and staring at the ground. He furrowed his brows at the fact that Bruce had come in with Tony, another one of them who had thrown the man under the bus the day before.

He figured that the scientist had already done his part to make it up to Tony.

*Maybe I need to as well.*

He spared a quick look towards his best friend as well and his heart sank at Bucky’s sad eyes, his gaze focused on the man who had just entered. Steve nudged Bucky’s knee with his own.

“What’s wrong?”

The other man sighed, then shook his head as he started to pick at his metal arm. “He always does that when he’s worried or stressed.”

“Alright Avengers, remember the pretty little gifts that were part of your welcome home packet? Well, here they are. Sam, your wings.” Tony fished out a small box from the bottom of the cart. “I made them size efficient so when you scan your thumb here, it’ll unfold and become a sort of backpack thing that you can easily latch onto your back. I added some features to Red Wing since I know you love him so much and your wings are sharper with extra tech that I’m in no mood to explain right now so just refer to the packet or ask me any questions you have.”

Falcon, who had been mindlessly staring out the window while making plans to return home to D.C., gaped and stuttered his thanks to the engineer, who had just waved his hand flippantly as if it was no big deal.

“Hawk-ass, your arrows. More aerodynamic, sleeker, can make things go boom, you know, the usual, except better.” Tony threw a quiver towards the archer, who just stared wide-eyed.

“Tony, I’m…” Clint began. Steve could tell that he was on the verge of apologizing, but the engineer once again interrupted.

“Yeah, yeah I know. I’m the best. No need to mention it, Legolas.” The archer placed the arrows on his lap and dragged his hand across his face.
Steve watched as Tony continued to distribute the equipment to each and every Avenger. When it was Bucky’s turn, he said, “I have your new arm in my lab so just come down sometime tomorrow and I’ll fit it on for you. It has some new features that I think you’ll like.” Steve noticed how the engineer’s voice quaked slightly when he was talking to his best friend.

But he also noticed how, for the first time since his return, Tony Stark was smiling. His face was lit up, the wrinkles around his mouth evident as he rambled on and on about his new tech and how much more improved it was and what the equipment could do.

Not once did he mention the fight from yesterday or the civil war or the… the assault.

*God, he was raped. Those sick fucks that kidnapped him, they wanted information on Bucky. And he refused. And they… I could have been here to stop it.*

Steve’s line of thought was interrupted when he saw Tony, standing quite a couple feet away from him, snapping his fingers in his face. “Captain, you here? Take your frisbee. I didn’t make too many renovations on it, just kinda polished it, you know. Made it look all new and shiny.”

Steve got up slowly, cautiously, and then made his way to the cart. He couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed that Tony had not handed the shield to him like he had handed all the others their new toys. But he decided against any pettiness when he truly studied his old friend up close.

In place of the loud, confident, and flamboyant man that he had once known and loved, there was a gaunt, thin, ghost. It looked as if the blood and the life had been sucked from him and now there was only a shell, a corpse, that stood before him.

“Thank you, Tony. Look, about yesterday…”

“What about yesterday?” Tony raised his eyebrows, then leaned against a pillar, closing his eyes for a second and placing his hands in his pocket.

“I wanted to apologize. I overstepped and I’m sorry.” Everyone, who had been buzzing about their new weapons, became silent and once again, all eyes were on Captain America and Iron Man as they faced off once more.

“Look Rogers, I don’t want to discuss that ever again. It was a slip-up, a glitch, and now it’s fixed so let’s just move on with our lives now, okay? Get back to avenging and whatnot. Superhero duties can’t be put off because we were being bitter.”

Steve wanted to talk to the man about it. He wanted to have a proper conversation for once. But there was no point in arguing. He was tired of that. He wanted, *needed*, things to get back to normal. For Bucky’s sake. For the team’s sake.

*For Tony’s sake.*

He knew it shouldn’t bother him, but for some, inexplicable, nagging reason, it did. He didn’t call Tony by his last name, so why would he keep calling him Rogers? They had known each other for years. Shouldn’t they be past that phase?

Instead of dwelling on it, he nodded. “Thank you for defending Bucky today.”

The super soldier joined in. “I appreciated it.”

Steve didn’t think twice when he hugged people to show how much he cared. So when he stepped towards Tony and began to wrap his arms around him, he did not give a single thought to how he
would handle it when Tony flinched and stumbled back a couple of steps. He heard the quickening of the other man’s breathing and caught the way his sweatshirt pocket, which still housed his hands, bunched up as if Tony was squeezing the material tightly.

The awkwardness was insufferable.

Steve quickly redirected his arms so that he could pick up the shield. He posed with it in his combat stance. After three years, all the pieces finally fell back into place. Steve Rogers was back in his element. Captain America was back.

But his smile faded the second he looked up gratefully towards the engineer who had made it all possible. Tony’s eyes were huge, even more than they already were and that—that was pure terror on his face.

Captain America suddenly remembered just how hard he had pounded his shield into Tony’s chest that day in Siberia.

They had all started the movie, The Imitation Game, once everyone had situated themselves.

Vision had joined the party a little after the whole debacle with Tony and the Cap, something that everyone decided to pointedly ignore, and Clint couldn’t help but watch Wanda beam at the sight of the android, only to have her smile wiped from her face when the red and blue being did not even look at her and moved as far away as possible, sitting himself next to Tony, who had his head placed on Rhodey’s shoulder, whom had arrived a couple minutes before.

When Alan Turing was being attacked by the fellow geniuses for his cockiness and his evasiveness, Clint felt a stone rest in the pit of his stomach.

The sadness, the utter despair that he saw on Tony’s face, made Clint’s well of guilt become overwhelming as it overflowed and bubbled over. No one should ever be able to relate to that. No one deserves to feel that way.

So he was the one to pause the movie. FRIDAY automatically turned the lights brighter, causing the crowd to protest. “I’m hungry.” He lied professionally. “And I need to take a leak.” That wasn’t a lie.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tony jolt up from Rhodey’s shoulder and then rapidly wipe at his eyes, rubbing them as if he were sleepy. The mask never once let up. But Clint, for just a second, had seen the man without it.

A part of him never wanted to see Tony so naked again.

“I’m a little hungry too. I’ll go set up some snacks. Nat, give me a hand.” Rhodey lifted himself up, rolling his shoulder. “Jeez, Tony. Thought you fell asleep on me. My arm went numb for a good half an hour.”

It had meant to be a joke, they all knew it was. But no one noticed when the genius’ face fell. “Sorry.” He mumbled almost silently, but Clint’s senses were hyperfocused on the man so he heard.

What happened to you Shellhead?

The archer was able to catch Tony separately while the others talked to each other and debated over
which snacks to eat. He saw Wanda and Vision speaking to each other in soft voices and silently wished the best for them.

“Hey Tony.” The genius had been staring off into space so he jumped when Clint addressed him.

It took a while, longer than it should have, for the genius to compose himself. “Got tired of calling me a whore so you switched back to first names? Lame.”

“I’m sorry.” He stammered almost immediately for fear of losing the courage to apologize once more. “I really am. I’m sorry. I was just…”

“Angry? Yeah, so am I.” Tony glanced towards the Captain, who was laughing with his Bucky. “But I’m also tired. Exhaustion weighs out the rage, I guess.”

“I shouldn’t have called you a whore. I should have known better than to do that. But I had never, in a million years, thought that you would ever get...”

“Stop.” Tony’s words were firm and Clint obeyed. “Fun’s over. Just move on, Barton. Go talk to your wife, go home, be with your kids. Be a father to them. They’re safe, they love you. I’m fine. I always am and I always will be so stop with the whole ‘Let’s throw a pity party for Tony because he was fucked in the asshole’ gimmick. Lila, Cooper, Nathaniel, Laura--they need you. Don’t neglect them and tell them that you love them. Don’t you dare fail them, Barton.”

Clint looked at his hands. I already have.

“Laura doesn’t want to talk to me right now. She told me to wait for a couple of weeks. That’s what I get, I guess, for getting myself banished from the country for three years.”

Tony sighed. “Then get off your ass you prick and fight the war that actually matters.” Clint winced at that. “Earn your family back.”

The words echoed in his ears as the genius returned to the couch. This time, he avoided Rhodey’s shoulder and instead, rested his head on the arm rest, snuggling into the blanket that Natasha had found and had spread out over them all.

Clint brought himself over to the rest of them and they all watched the movie till the end. When the text over the screen read “Alan Turing committed suicide,” Clint couldn’t stop himself from glancing at Tony.

The genius had buried his face in his arms, hiding in the darkness.

It took all his self control to keep Clint from wanting to hug Tony and telling him that everything was going to be okay.

But nothing ever is.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry for taking so long. This chapter is extra special. Warning for slightly graphic violence.

He hated it. Every second of it.

The empty, mindless small talk, the cold, lifeless laughs and smiles, and that artificial thread that kept the Avengers in the same room after so many years. After so much pain.

He hated that stupid movie they had watched. He hated the fact that his conscience has involuntarily felt empathy towards the main character. He hated that he knew what it felt like to be so incredibly lonely, to be told throughout his whole life that he did not belong, that he never would.

He hated that he knew every corner of hopelessness as well as Tony knew his own name, just as the real life Alan Turing had.

So he let himself go numb all over again. He let his mask take care of who he was supposed to be, of who the world expected him to be.

He saw his fingers wrapped around the fork, pushing dinner around on his plate, but he could not feel the cool metal. He saw the fork lifting into his mouth, but he could not taste the spices or the savory meats. He saw his reflection on glass surfaces, his face permanently adorning an etched on grin, his mouth crinkling at the corners, providing the facade of content, of happiness. But he could not recall that smile ever meaning anything, of embracing any genuity from it, of feeling any genuity from it.

Tony wasn’t sure that he could feel at all anymore. In fact, the only sensations he knew by heart was roiling panic, a deep hollowness, and a depletion, as if any motivation he had had to keep moving, to push forward, had been pummeled out of him one too many times.

He wondered how long a person would have to face betrayal and darkness and shadows before he or she could say that they were used to it. He wondered what kind of a human being that made him.

*Fucked up. So incredibly fucked up.*

Tony pushed those thoughts down, down, down. He locked them up tight amongst lines and lines of flawed code that ran his system.

And he kept on breathing. He knew he was doing it, but the freshness of oxygen had long since expired. It was nothing more than a necessity, he figured, so that the outside, where every sense was not dulled down to a minimum, would see that his body still functioned.

Nevermind anything else.

The truth was, no one ever did mind. No one ever cared.

He told himself he was fine with that. He told himself that he didn’t care either.
He hated himself for lying.

So he kept the game going. At this point, it was like he was playing dodgeball with his emotions. Every time either Steve or Bucky stepped too much into his own personal bubble, it was like a winter storm began to form around him, trapping him in frigid snow, in his own blood, with a heavy, malfunctioning suit cocooning him once more. The world of domesticity would waver into an ice age where he was jailed beneath thick, heavy snow and The Winter Soldier and Captain America simply stared as he stuck his hand forward, shaking and shivering.

And then walked away supporting each other, their bond locked in place while Tony… Tony stayed locked away. Buried.

He played tug of war with his anxiety, the tendrils of panic snaking upwards and stroking his nerves no matter how hard he pushed back by steeling them. It was just a malicious game and his defense was weakening with every blow his mind threw at him.

His mind had been fuzzy, despite not having taken his medication. It was as if his head was stuck underwater where every sound was muffled, every sight was blurred, and every touch made his fingertips shrivel up and wither. So he had not noticed the slight throbbing that had blossomed on his right temple along with the tingling that had come along with it. He had not made much of the flashes of lights that were suddenly blocking his vision every now and then.

It was because of all the games that he was now losing that he did not even recognize when he began to lose yet another one.

It was only when he had slipped out after dinner to return to his lab, mumbling something incoherent about sleep, that the lights illuminating his lab suddenly became much, much too bright. The yellows and the whites seared into his skull, fueling the fire that had already been sparked on the right side of his head. Now there was nothing short of an inferno ravaging through his brain, rattling the walls of his head and pressing down intensely, as if they were now being branded. Over and over again. Continuously. Non-stop.

Shit, shit, shit.

Tony groped for support and then braced himself against the wall, covering his ears when he knocked something over from the shelf nearby. The clinking and clattering became short, vicious stabs of agony that pierced into the sides of his head, intensifying the pain.

“Boss, would you like me to call for assistance?” FRIDAY’s voice boomed and shattered, causing Tony to clutch at his head even tighter, wrapping his still bandaged arms around it tightly.

“No.” He croaked whilst dragging himself to the worn couch, curling in on himself so he could shut out the outside. He wanted silence, he wanted darkness, he craved relief. “Initiate the Migraine Protocol. Don’t lift it unless there is an emergency or until it passes.” There was strain on every word, as if the ropes that were keeping him from screaming and writhing in pain were thinning and going to snap any second.

The lights immediately dimmed and FRIDAY’s voice decreased several levels in volume, her confirmation statement now just barely a soft whisper.

Idiot. Once more, he was plunged into an internal war all while fighting the one that had already become a bloodbath in his head. He knew he should have figured it out the second his vision had turned spotty. He knew he should have taken his medication for his stress migraines right then and there. You always let your anxiety hold you captive.
Then it was his father’s voice that echoed all around him, worsening the stabbing sensation. “You should have known better! Such a disappointment, Anthony. I expected more from you.”

Tony dug into the couch harder, pressing his forehead into the cushions and clawing at a pillow that Pepper had given him. His grip became tighter as the waves of nauseating pain became more and more frequent.

Eating had become more of a nuisance to him than a need. He hadn’t meant to reduce his calorie intake to highly caffeinated coffee and DUM-E’s smoothies, he just simply forgot. There was already so much emptiness in his veins that he failed to recognize the presence of another gaping, growing hole in his stomach.

But Bruce had forced him to put food in his mouth today. Consuming dinner and lunch in the same day was not something that he was used to and the hole in his stomach roiled in frustration at the nutrients that his body had now deemed to be intruders. And on top of the migraine…

Tony half stumbled and half crawled towards the small bathroom, clutching the small pillow with him. The saliva gathering underneath his tongue as well as the constricting of his throat only heightened his impending sense of doom. He reached the porcelain God, kneeling in front of it as the cushion he had dragged along to the party stayed pressed onto his stomach, both arms wrapping around it.

The first bout of retching came with waves upon waves of shocking pain that radiated throughout his body as they vibrated from the point of origin in the center of his brain. Piled upon that was the festering nausea that tightened his chest the more he tried to take a deep breath.

And then, when he got the chance to place his cheek onto the cool toilet seat, came the shame.

They had been getting better. I was almost fixed. Am I that fragile that I can’t prevent these? This just makes me a burden.

At least the team doesn’t have to worry about that anymore.

The image of his shaking hands as he gave Fury his resignation from The Avengers replayed in his memory. A new sort of pain flourished and he gagged once more.

“Nat?”

She sighed softly, her nimble but strong hand reaching up to her necklace once more. She had been about to retire to bed along with the others, but when Clint Barton called her name, his voice a plea, she paused, debating on whether or not she should ignore the man or talk to him.

“Nat, please. I just need two minutes. I need to know…”

The Black Widow was the one who whipped around, a deadly glint in her eyes, not Natasha Romanov. She crossed her arms and steadied her body, regaining her battle posture with every sense sharpened and honed to a piercing point. “Now you have a minute and fifty seconds. So tell me, Agent Barton: what do you need to know?”

The archer visibly sagged when he heard his closest friend address him by Agent Barton and the frost from the day in the helicarrier had returned.
“A minute and forty.” Widow clipped, never once breaking eye contact. She had no time for this, no patience.

“Laura, the kids. How are they? Where are they? They’re my family, Nat. I have to be with them. I can’t be stuck here until she is ready to call me. I need them too, you know? And I just feel so useless right now. Please, just help me.”

She searched through her human self to find a shred of compassion, of pity. But her storage was iced over and blackened. Her heart was half stone. There was a poison that had started spreading through her body the day that she had had seen the red spreading along the bathroom floor that day a year and a half ago.

She felt so stained and tainted.

“I’m not going to tell you where you can find them because to me, it seems like she does not want to be found. Not yet anyway.” The ice within her shifted when Clint leaned over, putting his hands on his head. “They’re fine. Tony and I, we made sure of that.”

Natasha glared harder, her green eyes widened to a maximum, shining like the steel that was encased within them. Clint shuddered silently and the next time he looked up, there were tear tracks decorating his flushed cheeks. “I fucked up Nat.”

Nothing within her budged at the breaking of his voice. The wind continued to whistle along the empty halls that were her emotions. “Yes.” She sighed. “Yes, you did.”

“Help me fix this.” He whispered, looking up at her with so much hope.

The Black Widow felt no remorse when she saw the archer’s face fall the second she responded, her words sharp and ruthless. “I can’t help you fix what’s already broken.”

Tony hadn’t told her if Laura had tried to reach out recently. But when she had asked him about it after dinner, she could tell from the way the engineer had hung his head and stared at the floor. She was, of course, a world class spy.

Natasha remembered the conversation she had had with Laura Barton a week before the rest of the team had returned.

“I don’t know what to do, Nat. I can’t do it anymore. The kids, they need their father but I… I don’t think I can look at him the same way ever again. I don’t think I could love him the same way ever again.”

“Do what you have to do, Laura. I won’t blame you for anything. No one will blame you for anything. You have been strong for us for so long. It’s time for us to be strong for you.”

A part of her wanted to plead for the woman to give her best friend another chance. But another part of her, a rotting, twisting, and raging pit of venom that sat stubborn in her stomach, that part of her wanted Barton to feel the same loneliness that she had felt when he had been forced to hide in Wakanda so many years before.

She scoured her being right down to the marrow of her bones to reach the human side of her, the Natasha Romanov, so that she could kill those thoughts. She hated, **hated** thinking this way, of being this way.

*I was never like this. Even after everything in the past, I had never been like this.*
Maybe, when Clint left, Natasha did too.

I can’t find myself anymore.

“What…” She knew he knew what she had been insinuating. He was a spy too. Everything written on his face, from the wrinkles that he had gotten from frowning too much to the thin, stretched out lips pleaded for it to not be true.

She almost pitied him.

“They love you, you know. All of them. And they miss you.” Maybe there was a shred of human flesh left within the ice that had now become her skin. “After everything, when Barnes and Rogers and you guys fled, Stark knew that the first people that Ross would go for would be your family.” At the archer’s incredulous look, she nodded, understanding. “They got ahold of the fact that you had a family when Ross had the government infiltrate SHIELD for information on you guys. They got to the sensitive stuff real fast. But Stark knew that they would. It’s because he planned it.”

Clint balled up his fists, his mouth ready to spit fire upon the billionaire. Natasha smirked, her heart shaped, rosy lips twitching upwards in an amused expression. It was at that that he calmed down, the spark in his eyes dimming dramatically. “Of course he did, that bastard.” He chuckled, leaning back in his seat wearily. “He’s always ten steps ahead of the game.”

“He was always better than the dumbasses who think they know a damn thing about computers in SHIELD. It took him about ten minutes to make fake names, fake social securities, fake histories, fake origins, fake everything. I know because I was there. You give them the bait, whether it be true or not, and then they won’t think twice to realize that they’re often looking for the wrong people.

“We went to the farm personally, just the two of us, the same day and grabbed them. Within hours we got word that him and his goons had raided it so we got lucky, I guess. We took them somewhere safe, out of Ross’ reach and out of his sight. They’ve been there ever since.” She tugged at the human side of her once more and found that there was a tiny shred left. So she used it up to finish up her speech. “Stark and I, mainly Stark if I’m being completely honest, we have done everything, everything that we are humanly capable of to keep them safe and loved and healthy.” She let that sink in. “They miss you, Barton. I don’t know when they will be ready for you, but you owe them a choice. Barton, look at me.”

Clint tilted his head upwards, raising his dark eyes slowly.

“You owe Laura a choice.”

She was lucky that that was exactly when her cell phone began vibrating with Coulson’s name flashing on the screen.

“Good night Nat.” She heard a pained whisper before she strode out briskly, relieved to finally receive a chance to escape. She tried tugging at the human that had emerged for five minutes… and didn’t find it. Her fingers only tapped on cold, hard frost.

“Agent Romanov, there’s been a development on Stark’s case. The one from two years ago.” Coulson always got straight to the point and he was never one to bring emotions into any mission, not even when it was regarding someone that he cared deeply about. Yes, Coulson was fond of Tony and protective over him. That’s why, when she and him and rescued the man from those HYDRA fanatics, Natasha had become slightly startled to see Coulson, a man who was the epitome of calm, turn red in the face and shoot each captor in the legs, disabling them cruelly the second Natasha had leveled them with the dirty ground. “We need you and Stark to come down to the
compound tomorrow morning. Fury and I will be waiting for you there.”

“Okay.”

She was about to hang up, but Coulson squeezed in another sentence, one that chilled her spine. “Tell Stark to brace himself, alright?” She recognized that tone. He never spoke like that, with a slight quivering to his voice, unless Coulson himself was shaken by the news, something that rarely occurred. In the time that she knew the man, it had only happened twice.

She shuddered at the memories of both those times. Ghosts from her past were always more than the simple, petty ones that turned lights on and off and made things move. No, her ghosts were demonic and possessing... and they never went away.

So it utterly and truly terrified The Black Widow about what she was going to learn with one of her best friends the next morning.

❖ ❖ ❖

Minutes later, she found herself standing in front of his lab, punching in her code and getting denied every single time. “FRIDAY, open the damn door.” She knew he was there. When Tony said ‘sleep’, he always meant ‘work until an ungodly hour and then come upstairs for coffee before secluding himself in the lab once more the next day.’

“I’m sorry Agent Romanov, but the boss is currently indisposed.”


“Boss has prevented anybody from entering the lab until the protocol he has initiated reaches its time limit.”

“And when the hell is that going to be?”

No response.

What the hell are you doing, Stark?

She would never admit the fact that the sensation that was rampaging through her was fear.

The windows were clear and not tinted this time. She could see right through the bulletproof glass that even Hulk couldn’t breach. There were bits and pieces of mechanical parts splayed about the worktable as well as a high tech brace, probably Rhodey’s, on display. The lights inside were dimmed to the barest minimum. Even the computer screens were switched off, which was unusual in and of itself since Tony always used them when he was in the lab.

Natasha was able to put two and two together when she recalled the genius mentioning something about a headache and being tired right before he had left the common floor. They had all, including her, thought that he was just looking for an excuse to escape.

Дурак! (Idiot!) She cursed herself colorfully in Russian for not seeing it before as her fingers flew over her cell phone, putting Bruce Banner on the line.

“Tasha? I thought we were all going to bed.”

“I don’t remember much from my childhood but I do remember the days that my mother would lock herself in her bedroom with the lights turned off. My father would warn me not to make noise or to
bother her until she came out by herself. She had migraines, Bruce, and we always knew she was going to go through one the second she looked at my father and told him she had a headache.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Stark did the exact same thing tonight. FRIDAY isn’t letting me in his lab.”

A brief pause. “I’ll be there in two minutes.”

Bruce and Rhodey were the only ones in the building who could override any protocol or order that Tony made FRIDAY initiate. Pepper was the one who forced him to create special codes for them after the incident a year and half ago. Natasha did not want to bother the Colonel and besides, Bruce was a doctor.

He came rushing down the corridor with a small kit in hand, punching in the code for the door. It took a moment to authorize, an excruciating moment for Natasha, who just wanted to be sure that nothing beyond what she thought was happening had happened.

She couldn’t take it if another piece of her human identity were to be chipped away again. She already had almost nothing. She was already so incredibly lost.

The door swung open at long last.

“I threw some things together that could just take the edge off, make him more comfortable. I’m assuming that even if he took his medication, he probably threw the pills up. But at this point, all we can do is just help him relax until the pain leaves on its own.” Bruce kept his voice at a low whisper, reminding the red headed assassin to do the same.

The two padded around the lab, searching for their engineer, careful not to make too much noise.

Bruce was the one to wave her over to the dark bathroom where Tony lay sprawled on the ground, his head curled up in his arms while he rested it on a small pillow.

They had found him in the bathroom again, vulnerable to the very core. Natasha was grateful, a sea of relief flooding through her, that she was not alone in seeing him so exposed this time around.

But at the same time, the sight of Tony Stark, once so bold and brash, become this shivering, writhing ball on the cold tiles of a tiny, dark bathroom made even Black Widow stir.

The two of them worked to lift the man up and support him as he whimpered and groaned in pain. “Shh, все будет хорошо.” (It will be okay.) Natasha tried to be soothing, she tried to breach the ice around her heart just this once, for her friend.

For her family.

But when Tony began leaning into her touch, the man pushed away, leaning in front of the toilet, swaying dangerously. She rubbed his back and held him still while Bruce waited patiently, preparing a needle that he had brought along in his case. She felt Tony’s body jerk forward as he dry heaved. Her own chest felt the heavy, suffocating weight that she figured he was feeling as he continued retching, with nothing coming out. She figured that he had nothing left in his stomach to bring up.

The pillow he had been laying against was pressed against his side possessively, his fingernails clawing at the fabric. When Tony straightened up once more, she moved to let him put his weight on her, but once again, he pushed away.
“Are you wearing perfume?” Bruce whispered, but even then, Natasha noticed Tony wincing, as if the smallest whisper was enough to send more radiations of agony through his body. She nodded, but it was only a small amount, the same amount she wore every day. “He’s sensitive to smell right now. Your perfume is making him nauseous.”

“‘m okay guys. Don’ have to help me. I’ll be fine.” Natasha held the billionaire still, this time at a distance, as he mumbled and struggled to talk. She kept him on his feet, even though she knew that all he wanted to do was collapse.

She wanted to throw her hands up in the air in exasperation. She wanted to throttle him for being so damn stupid. Goddamnit Stark just let us help you! Give us a chance to care!

But Black Widow stayed stoic, tightening her grip on Tony’s arms as Bruce lifted the engineer’s sleeve, ready to inject the medicine. They both stopped dead at the sight of the bandages that decorated it, right down to his palm.

“Lab accident.” Tony slurred as he caught their horror-struck eyes. Natasha had momentarily forgotten that she was supporting his weight until he swayed forward, one hand clasping his head. She quickly righted him as Bruce lifted the other sleeve and slowly administered the pressure reliever.

“Okay, we’re going to take you to your bedroom now. We’ll be talking about your lab accident in the morning. Nat,” Bruce grunted softly as he shifted Tony’s weight onto his shoulders, “grab a bucket in case he gets sick on the way there. It’s better if I drag him up there, your perfume is just going to make it worse.”

The billionaire began to moan in protest. “They all went to sleep. No one is going to see you.” Natasha whispered as she quickly gathered Bruce’s medical equipment and a nearby ice bucket.

She caught the soft “You did.” She refrained from looking Bruce in the eyes as they made their way out of the bathroom, out of the lab, and into the elevator.

I’ve seen worse, Tony.

The billionaire tried more than once to loosen Bruce’s hold so that he could sink down to the ground. The pillow he had with him in the lab had tagged along and Tony was holding it protectively across his chest.

“Jus’ let me sit down for a sec.”

“We’re almost there, Tony.” Bruce kept him on his feet despite the contorted look of pain on Tony’s face.

It was in the corridor to his bedroom that the engineer snaked his hand up to his mouth, his eyes tightly clenched, as if he was willing himself to stop the inevitable. Natasha rushed forward just as Bruce gently placed the other man on his knees.

Nothing but thin liquid that resembled drool dribbled out from his mouth. She could see from the violent way that Tony’s throat was tensing up that the man was in a lot of pain. There were tears gathering at his eyes, making them even bigger than usual. He coughed loudly, a rattling, dry cough that made Natasha want to cringe.

When he was finished, Bruce guided the man towards the bed and helped him get under the covers. He then opened his kit once more, grabbing a small rag and a bowl.
Natasha placed the ice bucket next to the bed and rummaged through Tony’s drawers, pulling out an old and worn Black Sabbath T-shirt and some sweatpants while Bruce filled the bowl with water and returned, wetting the rag as well.

She held her breath when the engineer tensed, his eyes flying open when Bruce placed the cool, dripping rag on the man’s forehead. But after a few comforting words from the other scientist, both Tony and Natasha loosened.

Maybe the ice within her cracked just the tiniest bit when she saw Tony hug the pillow that he had still managed to keep with him all while snuggling underneath the blanket. There was still a slight frown on his face, indicating that he was still hurting, but he finally resembled some small amount of peace.

She knew that Bruce wouldn’t question her as she slipped into Tony’s walk in closet and quickly changed into the clothes that she had pulled out before. She wanted to get rid of her godforsaken perfume and she was too lazy to travel to her own floor to get some clothes of her own. She breathed in the slight scent of motor oil and expensive cologne that laced the engineer’s shirt and pants, knowing that his own smell would be comforting to the man than if it was some foreign, floral, and meaningless scent.

“Get some sleep, Banner. I’ll stay with him tonight. I’ll call you if anything happens but it looks like he’s going to be fine for now, since you gave him the drugs and all. We should just let him rest.” Natasha remembered to whisper and she held her gaze with the other scientist who looked as if he was about to fall asleep right then and there.

“Don’t you need sleep too?” He yawned. But she knew it was just a cover up for the slight confusion in his voice, maybe even slight jealousy. They all remembered how the assassin and the gamma radiation expert had grown closer during the Ultron debacle, before he had left.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“You have no idea how it feels like to see one of your friends drowning in their own blood with their wrists slashed open. You have no fucking clue how deep of a void that makes.

You have no clue how determined I am to never see anything like that again.

“Good night Dr. Banner.” She let him think whatever the hell he wanted to as the scientist squeezed Tony’s hand, glanced up at her, and then left the room.

When the scientist left them in complete darkness, Natasha still stood in the exact same place, her eyes fixed on the pale billionaire.

She remembered how much things have changed since the first time she had met the man so many years ago. He had been so good, that she had made such large, glaring mistakes in her analysis of him. His masks had gotten the better of Agent Romanov, one of the best spies in the world. He had done it all, tricked her, gotten rid of Vanko, humiliated Justin Hammer, and destroyed his own house, all while he had been dying.

Natasha debated on whether she should curl up in the chair near the window or if she should just crawl into the abnormally large bed next to the engineer.

Fuck it. Fuck it all.

She lifted the covers, slipping under it. She didn’t know whether or not it was intentional that she took his hand in her own. All she knew was that it didn’t mean anything, not in that way. Never that
But she laced their fingers together and when he didn’t try to pull away, they stayed like that, a decent amount of inches between their bodies.

“I know you’re still awake.” She whispered, resting her head on the headboard. She felt him squeeze her hand. She put her other one over it as well, cupping the man’s hand and then pressing it against her forehead.

She felt the ice crack.

Silent tears slid down her cheeks. She knew he couldn’t see, so she let them fall.

*This is what I get for caring so much.*

“I never apologized, you know? I never said I’m sorry. God, what was I thinking? Iron Man yes, Tony Stark not recommended.” She felt him squeeze her hand tighter and she looked over towards him. His eyes weren’t open, but he was frowning. “I’m sorry. I fucked up. I was just never a good enough person to admit it.”

Now his chocolate browns were slivered open just a bit. He blinked up at her, breathing softly. He even managed a tiny smile. “Shut up Natalie.” He whispered.

She chuckled softly, then let go of his hand, letting him wrap it around his pillow once more. She wiped salty tears from her cheeks as she reached over and took the rag from his forehead, wet it again, and returned it.

“Go to sleep, Stark.” They drifted off together, Natasha falling asleep to the sound of light snoring from Tony while she stroked his brown locks, the softness of the strands giving her a strange sense of comfort that broke through the glaciers surrounding her heart even further.

He jolted awake to a ringing that echoed through his ears, causing him to moan.

“Shit.” Was that Nat? Why was she here and what had happened last night… oh.

He cringed as he swiped the damp rag from his forehead and rolled over, facing the red headed assassin who was now on her cell phone. There was a disgusting, vile taste in his mouth that made him afraid to open it and his head felt detached from his body. And he needed a shower desperately.

He heard bits and pieces of the conversation that she and the person on the other line, who he assumed was Coulson, were having. The sound still tingled, but it didn’t shoot daggers of agony through his brain.

“He was sick last night, I don’t think we can come in. No, Coulson.” A pause where he heard her heavy, deadly breathing. “Fine, fine.” She hissed. “Give us an hour.”

She slammed her phone onto the mattress and turned towards him. Tony stared at her, smiling faintly at his Black Sabbath shirt and his sweatpants that were now on her body.

“Hey asshole. Feeling better?”

He managed a small nod and sat up. “Advil.” He croaked, massaging his neck. The redhead quickly grabbed the bottle from the nightstand and filled a glass of water from the sink in the bathroom. He
let the water wash over his sore throat. He let the cool liquid refresh him; at that moment, it felt like the most beautiful and pure thing he had ever tasted. He closed his eyes for a second before opening them again. “Coulson wants us for something.” It wasn’t a question, he already knew.

Natasha nodded. “There’s been a development. Technically, we were supposed to be at the compound two hours ago, but I wasn’t about to wake you up. Not after last night. We have an hour now to get up and get there. But he can kiss my ass if we’re late.” She paused. “How long?”

He sighed. How could he tell her? She wasn’t supposed to know. No one was supposed to find out.

How could he tell her that ever since the Mandarin, he had gotten stress migraines at least once every week. That they had gotten better after Ultron, but had fired up again after the civil war. That piled up with his anxiety and PTSD, he had gotten two of them last week and he was expecting more now that the others had returned. That he had forgotten to take his medication last night because he was so distracted by the movie, by the Captain’s fucking shield of all things.

So he kept it short and simple. “Since the Mandarin.” He knew that she knew that he didn’t want to say anything more.

But the next question she asked made him squirm even more. “Tell me about your ‘lab accident.’” Her eyes flicked down to his bandaged arm and he gulped as discreetly as he could.

He let the mask take over. A goofy grin painted over his face. “I got clipped by one of the parts that I was using for Rhodey’s new brace when I dropped it. Nothing serious, Nat. I guess now we know where DUM-E gets it from.” He smiled wider, willing genuity into it.

“Don’t lie to me Stark.” He refrained from flinching.

“I’m not lying. I promise.” He stared deep into her green eyes, leaning more towards an emerald shade in the sun.

She kept staring and before he did or said something he would regret, Tony swung his feet around and shuffled towards the bathroom, gripping the nightstand for support. She made to help him, but he straightened quickly and padded towards the bathroom. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he grunted, “I need to make sure that I don’t look and smell like a rat when we get down to the Compound. Wash up and meet me in the lobby in half an hour.”

He made the dismissal clear and didn’t wait to see if she had complied.

The drops of water falling on his skin, washing away the filth from the night before soothed him. He removed the bandages from his arm, the small, thin cut he had made had almost healed and the crescents in his palm were not as vivid. The work of some quick concealer hid the marks and Tony slipped into a casual shirt and jeans, combing through his wet hair rapidly. He avoided his reflection in the mirror and hurried out.

But not before running into Bucky Barnes in the communal kitchen.

Of-fucking course. I just wanted some coffee. Can’t a man catch a break?

The former Winter Soldier was dressed in a snug grey shirt that was probably Steve’s.

Tony worked his hardest to blend into the furniture. He did not have time to deal with anxiety or the past or that stupid metal arm.

Which reminded him…
“Hey, um, what time should I go down to the lab for the arm?”

Tony froze, not daring to turn around, and then remembered. Oh yeah, he had made a new metal arm for the guy. Of course he did.

“Only if you have time today. I know you’re a busy man and you can’t always…” Bucky was starting to ramble and the Advil was barely beginning to work.

“Hey, hey calm down Shiny Arm. It’s fine. Come down at seven. I’ll fit it on for you.” He could deal with the panic attacks easily enough. He was used to them. And what could go so wrong about replacing the same arm that had punched his father and suffocated his mother…

Tony chugged down his coffee and rushed out before the panic could rush in. “See you at seven.”

Maybe he wasn’t going crazy when he heard a meek “Thank you” before he left.

❖ ❖ ❖

“SHIELD agents were able to break into a HYDRA database and there were records of weapons that they had bought from different companies. We found Stark Industries’ name several times over the course of several years, including years after Howard’s death.” Coulson wasted no time.

Tony only felt shame. “Stane?” He choked. He could feel Natasha’s concerned stare and decided to ignore it.

“Yes.”

*God fucking damnit.*

Fury took over from there. “We found a file on him as well.” He turned over a packet of paper that had Obadiah’s malicious face on it. “He owed HYDRA *a lot* of money. We don’t know why.” He added when Tony looked up at him, pure shock on his expression. “We’ve been trying to figure that out since this morning. We’ve been interrogating your captors.”

Tony’s fists balled up, his fingernails finding the crescents he had worked on hiding.

“There has to be some connection. Otherwise, they never would have targeted you.” Fury looked over at Coulson.

But the engineer interrupted, his mind racing. “But they wanted information on The Winter Soldier, on the Captain. Stane is long dead, why would they come for me because of him? Why not earlier?” He realized his voice had become frantic and he clenched his fists tighter in an effort to ground himself. He felt Natasha staring at them and then staring at him. So he leaned forward, hiding his fists under the table.

It was Coulson who responded. “They couldn’t touch you until they were out of the picture. HYDRA, no matter how it may seem, is terrified of Barnes and Rogers. One of the goons confessed to that after multiple, painful shocks all over his body. The others are being stubborn mules.”

There was silence for about five seconds. And in those five seconds, Tony decided to run before he could walk.

“Let me talk to them.” The gaping mouths he received were hilarious.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind, Stark?” Fury leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms.
But Tony was sick of it. He was sick of feeling so scared, so small. He was done with it. He was Tony fucking Stark.

*I survived Afghanistan, I survived Stane, I survived Vanko, Extremis, and the Mandarin. I survived a huge ass wormhole in the sky. I survived Ultron. I survived Siberia and I can damn well survive this.*

“Let. Me. Talk. To. Them.” Every word was clipped. Every word was iron.

So when he found himself face to face with his rapist who was locked in an electric chair in the middle of a dimly lit room, the first thing he did was smack the piece of filth with everything he could muster. The crack he heard echoed on the walls and Tony smiled from the satisfaction.

“Back for more, Stark?” Tony punched him again, reveling in the stinging on his fist and the blood spurting from the prisoner’s nose.

He wrapped his hand around the other man’s throat and looked him straight in the eyes. The chocolate brown shone and gleamed with fury. “Not a fanatic, are you?”

“Oh, so you are a genius. Took long enough for you to figure it out.” Tony pressed harder, gritting his teeth at the strangled noise the other man made.

“You’re right. I am a genius. I’m so smart that I know that you knew Obadiah Stane. I’m so smart, I know that he owed HYDRA money. And I’m also so goddamn smart,” he tightened his grip even harder, “that I know that you limp-dick fuckups were so terrified of Rogers and Barnes that you came back to pick on me years after Stane died. So tell me,” he let go of the man’s throat, leaving behind angry, red bruises, “why? Why did he owe you money and why did you kidnap me?”

The other man choked and gasped for breath for a couple seconds before beginning to laugh hystically. “You call yourself smart? You know nothing.” He spit out blood at Tony’s feet.

But the genius, playboy, billionaire, and philanthropist whipped out the knife that Natasha had slipped him before he entered the room. He felt nothing, he said nothing, he saw nothing but red. Pure, deadly, red.

The blade was positioned dangerously close to a certain man’s pride, ready to chop it clean off.

It was then that the HYDRA agent broke. “Stane paid us using money from your father’s company so that we could implant ourselves in SHIELD. We stole documents, sensitive data, and such and then gave it to him. But Howard probably caught him stealing from the company, so he couldn’t pay us like that anymore. Slowly, he couldn’t pay us back at all. The debt piled up. He tried double dealing, selling us weapons, but as long as Howard and that Peggy Carter bitch were alive, he couldn’t do shit. Then, when your old man conveniently crashed his car one late night,” Tony moved the knife closer, his breathing quickening, “we suggested that he could try a method that was both cost efficient and easy.” The prisoner smiled poisonously and Tony pressed the knife down.

The rapist’s face fell and his expression clouded with fear.

“Get to the point.”

The prisoner leaned as close to the billionaire as possible and whispered, “He whored you out.”

There was only white noise buzzing in Tony’s ears as a huge weight dropped in his stomach, almost making him collapse. He knew the others had heard. This conversation was being monitored by Coulson, Fury, and Natasha.
He couldn’t hear himself breathing.

“I...I don’t believe you.”

“Remember your 21st birthday? Oh, that’s right. You can’t. You thought for so many years you were just drunk, didn’t you? First birthday without mom and dad, anyone would have cracked. Noooo…” The prisoner chuckled, “Stane made sure to prepare you all nice and good for us. Over and over and over again.”

Tony racked his memory for times when he couldn’t remember what had happened the night before. When he had found himself in random beds in expensive hotels, not knowing how he got there. He remembered Obadiah telling him that those girls must have had so much fun. “You’re always so fun when you’re drunk.”

He counted over twenty times.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to. You’ll believe me when you see it.”

What?

“That’s how we kept Stane on his toes, darling. He would keep handing you over, paying us back. If he was scared of what we would do if he ever stopped, of how the company would suffer, he would keep giving us what we want.”

Tony’s fists clenched to the point where it was an unhealthy shade of white.

“And darling, we wanted you. You were so, so good. And you wanted it too. You begged for it. You loved it. You still do.”

Tony Stark raised the knife and slit the rapist’s throat in one clean swipe. No one stopped him, no one raised a hand in opposition. He watched the red spurt out and his rapist of thirty years choke on his own blood.

When he stormed out of the room and saw their faces, he dropped the knife on the ground in front of them, the metal clattering with a satisfying finality.

He found both the eyes of Coulson and Fury and made sure that he stood straight and tall, his voice loud and unbroken, his eyes wild and flaming, when he said his next words.

“Find the videos. Wipe them clean off the face of this Earth. If I ever, ever, see even thirty seconds of one on a cheap porn site or circulating the media, I swear on my mother’s fucking grave,” He stepped forward with every word, making sure that Natasha, Coulson, and Fury heard every word loud and clear. “I will burn SHIELD and I will burn HYDRA Down. To. Hell.”
“James Buchanan Barnes.” Bucky breathed in deeply, letting the oxygen refresh the blood in his veins. He let the clean, un tarnished air flush out The Winter Soldier. “My name is James Buchanan Barnes.” He repeated, this time more solidly, as if he were stating a fact with the utmost confidence rather than a random piece of information that the people around him told him to believe.

“Damn right it is.” Steve rounded the corner of the kitchen island, his hair still slick from just having taken a shower.

Bucky remembered fondly of the run that the two had went on that morning when Steve had woken him at an ungodly hour so that they could take a brief tour of New York City while jogging. After so many years, the place had indeed changed, but some parts of it still remained. Those being Bucky’s favorite parts.

The Magic of the Movement, he called it. In the dazzling, flashy lights, he saw hope at the end of a long, dark tunnel that he had been perpetually following for the past eighty years. At the sight of civilians rushing about, completing mundane tasks such as walking their pets or talking on the phone or just simply grabbing something to eat, he remembered what it felt like to be truly, genuinely, and completely alive. Yes, he believed in such trite ideas. In fact, he believed in that Magic even more every time he was able to witness golden rays reflecting off the blue of the Hudson and the white pillowy clouds molding into different shapes all without having to cower in fear. He could do all of it. He could touch and feel and taste and smell and see and hear everything.

And for once in his life his senses felt pure.

So when he looked up at Steve Rogers, the little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb to know when to give up a fight, Bucky let the corners of his mouth stretch from end to end, allowing warmth. Allowing love.

“I remember. I… I know.” He paused, letting the weight of those words spread and expand through every nerve and tissue in his body. He let them settle in the marrow of his bones and root there forevermore.

Steve turned from his raiding of the fridge, placing a plastic container of plums in front of Bucky. Those baby blues shone and twinkled, as if something had clicked into place after years of it just dangling in air, waiting to be connected.

“I see you, Steve. I can finally see you. All of you. No matter what century, no matter what size. I see us and I can see the line.” Bucky smoothed a metal thumb over one of the plums, memorizing the purity of it, the freshness. “It’s infinite.”

Captain America stared with those dancing eyes and Bucky stared back, holding his gaze.

“Welcome home Bucky.” That was all that had to be said. That was all that ever needed to be said.

When Wanda Maximoff entered the communal kitchen, her hands fidgeting as she weaved pink energy through her fingers, Bucky’s ethereal mood was once more honed back into vigilance. A dull, inexplicable roaring in the back of his ears began and he suddenly did not recognize the fury, the disdain that had taken over his body.
Oh no, am I losing control again? Is Winter back? Am I going to hurt someone…

The rising panic simmered down when he felt Steve’s firm hand on his shoulder. “Say your name,” The Captain ordered.

Bucky blinked repeatedly, reveling in the relief that flooded through him, drowning out the anxiety that he had learned to steel himself against for the past three years. “My name is James Buchanan Barnes.” He flexed his hand, moving the blood flow along, urging it to return to normal. “Bucky.” It was a barely a whisper.

The super soldier looked back up towards his best friend, flashing gratitude. The grip on his shoulder softened. Where a hurricane had begun to wreak havoc, there now was a rippling, calm ocean.

“Could I…” The calm was slashed viciously with a blade. “Could I speak with you, Barnes?” The Scarlet Witch had ceased playing with her powers and Bucky’s breathing evened out a little more. But when he saw the pallored face staring right at him, hoping, maybe even pleading, it was suspicion, not pity, that coursed through him.

Maybe a part of him would always stay as sharp and metallic as the metal arm that HYDRA had given him.

Bucky watched as Steve observed the two of them and sensed the tension. Steve spared a glance towards his best friend, then turned on his heel, leaving the prisoners of HYDRA alone.

He took a bite from the plum to keep from squeezing it into mush and waited. The air was taut. The clock was ticking.

“What about everyone being afraid of you?” The question was meek, quiet, but so incredibly heavy. Wanda began twirling the pink substance through her fingers once more. The sight of it made nausea churn in his stomach, but he kept his face blank. “How do you deal with knowing that you were…used?”

He stared at the plum. “Why are you asking me this?”

She did not answer. The invisible rope that tied them together stretched thinner.

Bucky did not bother looking up at the Witch’s face, but rather kept his eyes focused on the brown locks cascading down her sides. Once, her hair had been strong and healthy. Now, her strands drooped, mimicking her defeated voice as well as those weary eyes that Bucky could not bring himself to meet.

Three years ago, that same woman had ran beside him and Steve at the airport. He hadn’t even known her name back then.

And yet, they had all ran together. They had fought together.

But what had she been fighting for? What had the archer been fighting for? What had Sam Wilson been fighting for?

Hell, what had they all been fighting for?

*Steve was fighting for me. I was fighting for freedom.*

*And Stark?*

“How do you deal with everyone being afraid of you?” The meek voice returned, pulling the super
soldier out of his reverie. “Please… I just… I need to talk to somebody. I need… it’s going to tear me apart if I don’t… I need someone who can understand.” She paused. “Someone like me.”

Stark was fighting for his family.

And I…

“You and I did not have the same experience with HYDRA.” He finally met her eyes, just as they flared crimson pink.

“We were both used. We were both manipulated. We were both robbed of our lives by this organization. How could you say that we are not the same?”

And yes, maybe there was a part of him that still succumbed to The Winter Soldier. Maybe there was still a stray vein of blood that was poisoned. Maybe there were some words that still imprisoned him, compelled him. Controlled him.

But when he answered The Scarlet Witch, Bucky answered as one-hundred percent James Buchanan Barnes, down to every shred of flesh and every edge of bone.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

The pink faded back to an green that should have resembled the color of the ocean in the morning. Instead, they resembled dried up, shriveled grass. Death.

Wanda sighed, sitting down gingerly on the couch, her head hanging. “We were children. We had nowhere to go. We were raised by HYDRA. That was how we were taught. And Stark… because of his weapons…” She shook her head. “All of it could have been avoided. All of it.”

Bucky clenched his fists, the plum having already gone to hell. His breathing hitched as he tried to force back the inferno that was raging in his stomach.

“Do you have any idea…” his voice strained as he pushed back against the fire, tried to flush out the… the disgust, “how sick to the stomach it made me to realize that you…” he gripped his metal fist tighter, willing for control to return, “you volunteered yourself into HYDRA and fought with them, killing innocent people purely for the sake of blind revenge when I… I kicked and screamed and fought and was tortured for eighty years…” A stifled sob, “ eightyn years to be freed from them. To get my own body back so that I wouldn’t have to do the same.”

The flame in his stomach had simmered down to sizzling embers and they stung at the walls within his body.

Wanda’s chalk white skin turned gray. “We had nowhere to go. We were angry… had nothing left. Stark had taken it from us. We wanted him dead and HYDRA… HYDRA was the best bet we had for taking everything away from him too.”

Bucky only heard white noise, the Witch’s words mumbled as he remembered.

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Jolts upon jolts of electricity. Searing, agonizing, rattling pain that shattered his brain, erasing his past, erasing him. Cracks of lightning drove trenches into his mind, tearing away Bucky Barnes and replacing the voids with malice, hatred, and bloodlust. He was going to tear apart from the inside; he was going to combust. This was it. He was going to die.
The super soldier’s back arched upwards as the final blast of white, blinding anguish ripped through his worn, shell of a body. Faintly, he could taste the rubber of a sour black band that he had been biting down upon. Smoke. The acrid stench of something burning. Had they finally electrocuted him to uselessness? He could somewhat hear some mumbled voices. They resembled nothing short of what one would hear in purgatory.

And was that where he was? In hell? In a constant cycle, an endless pit of suffering? It must be because he could not see anything either. Just a blank, black world where hurt flowed as seamlessly as blood, hearts broke as effortlessly as glass, and identities… identities were lost as carelessly as how one would lose a bobby pin.

In those moments, trapped in that cage of hollowness, in that kingdom they called hopelessness, he could not remember his name.

Who am I? What am I?

The voice slipped away like water running through the slits of his fingers and he lost grasp of everything he had ever known to be true.

Including himself.

Boulders tied to his feet dragged him under as he thrashed, trying to escape solid, impenetrable chains.

No, I don’t want to. Don’t make me. Please, please…

And the world came rushing back all at once as he felt his body sit upright and his conscious, his very being, fade away.

My name…

“Ready to comply.”

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“Barnes?” Everything was muffled, everything was wrong. A psychosomatic, phantom throbbing echoed through his mind. He let the ghosts rearrange his thoughts, he waited for the doubles to morph back into one. “Barnes?”

And then, as if he was spit back out from a vacuum, his surroundings cleared and the world returned as whole.

He loosed a long breath that he didn’t know he was holding.

“ Barnes!” Her voice was loud and clear now.

Bucky caught the arm that was reaching towards his own and held it there. “While we were in Wakanda, King T’Challa gave Steve and me the resources to get an education on everything that had happened since the 40’s.” He spoke slowly, reassuring himself that he had not turned into a killing machine. “And… if I recall correctly, one of the lessons had been about Albert Einstein and the nuclear bomb.”

Wanda pried her arm away from the super soldier, a mix of shock and incredulousness adorning her features. “Should I call Steve? I think you need some help. You went into a sort of trance and I felt it. The terror, the fear, the panic. It was… it was so…” She shuddered, bracing herself on the kitchen
counter. “I am sorry you ever had to endure that. I can’t…”

“You said that Stark’s weapons blew up your home, killed your parents? You called him a murderer.” Bucky interrupted, now fully back in his body. He was in control. “But what I do not understand is why you would blame the man who made the weapon instead of those who pulled the trigger.”

Those dead eyes flared pink once more, pairing with the hands that suddenly began to glow. “You pulled the trigger on Stark’s parents. HYDRA made the weapon. Does that mean that Stark should blame you and not HYDRA? Do not speak of things that you do not understand.”

“Yes, I pulled the trigger. That was my face, that was my body. Those were my fists that punched Howard and that was my grip that suffocated Maria. Physically, that was me. All of it. I admit that, I repent for that. I do. I want to. I have the freedom to feel whatever the hell I want so do not give me any of that ‘It wasn’t you, you weren’t in control’ bullshit because I know. I know and I choose to feel guilty. I have that fucking right.” Bucky watched the swirling pink hands with the sharpness of a dagger. “And I was a weapon. Winter was a weapon. HYDRA pulled that trigger.”

“What is your point?” Gone was the frail, meek woman that had pleaded for conversation, for understanding. In its place was a being that could wage war and bathe the battlefield crimson without even drawing blood.

“King T’Challa told me that Albert Einstein, one of the most respected geniuses of our time, created the formula for the nuclear bomb, a weapon that could annihilate, that did annihilate entire cities and caused death and destruction and suffering for so many innocent people. But Wanda,”

At the sound of her name, the Witch calmed once more, covering her face with her hands.

“If the world blamed Einstein for the equation to creating the nuclear bomb instead of the people who used his discovery as a chance to wield devastation, then even Einstein would have been called a murderer.” The silence was deafening. “But to this day, he is still considered to be one of the greatest men that ever lived.”

“Stark does not deserve that title.”

“You and the point are complete strangers, aren’t you?”

“He tried to kill you too, in Siberia.” Her words were weary, defeated.

“I think… I think if the Avengers and even Stark himself does not blame you for scouring after blind revenge for years, then Stark should not be blamed for ten, justified minutes.”

The rope finally splintered and tore off. Both the super soldier and the witch sagged as if the weight that they had both been carrying on their shoulders finally made them buckle and collapse.

“Vengeance… It’s an illness.” Bucky looked up at Wanda and met her eyes, the ones that were filled with such anger, such loss, and maybe just an ounce of regret. They had resembled death; they had impersonated thundering wrath, but now, now they only glimmered as the rich green seeped back in and the tears flowed.

“It is. But that doesn’t mean we have to keep letting it affect us.” Bucky desired, hoped, and prayed, that The Avengers, all of them, got the thing that he himself had never had the luxury or the privilege to feel for eighty long years: content. Peace.

For the first and last time, he wished there was a way to erase the past.
“Sergeant Barnes, would you please go down to Boss’ lab so that he could install your arm for you?”

It had taken all of his willpower to not throw a powerful, metal punch to the invisible AI that spoke through the walls. He was still not used to it, this omnipresent technology that was always there, always watching. Truth be told, it terrified him.

“Right.” Bucky cleared his throat, nodded to Wanda and spared a small smile, and entered the elevator.

He let himself breathe as the doors closed.

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The first thing he thought when he entered the lab was how much it reminded him of Howard. There was the same messiness, the same eccentricity, and yet, the same meticulousness and fervor of a genius. He hadn’t been best friends with Stark Senior, but they had known each other through Steve before… before everything happened.

When his son rolled himself out from underneath the car he was working on, a classic hot-rod that Bucky couldn’t help himself from gawking at, the super soldier found that same shining confidence in those humongous brown eyes and that same set, determination that Howard had always expressed in the creases on his face.

And yet, his son had a quality about him that Howard never had. It was a silent quality, a dim sort of warmth that had the ability to spread into beams of sun rays if it wished. But it was repressed and hidden away by some sort of wall of ice.

Bucky figured that it was precisely that wall that caused Tony to have such bloodless lips, hollow eyes, and skin the color of snow.

“All right Barnes, let’s get this over and done with.” A slight shuddering of his words, something that Bucky himself was no stranger to. Why was the engineer so afraid?

“I’ve been in contact with King T’Challa and I was able to get my hands on some vibranium. He also told me about some problems that you have with your arm currently like not being able to experience any sort of sensation so I contacted my dear friend Helen Cho.” The genius walked over to a section of his lab in the back where there was a closet full of high tech gadgets. Glistening silver met Bucky’s eyes as Tony pulled out his new arm. “She was able to combine the tech behind your arm as well as her research with tissues and nerves to fix that problem for you. You’re welcome.”

The stream of information regarding his new limb was fascinating but Bucky could only focus on the childish aura that Stark radiated while he rambled on and on about...well, science. The man seemed, simply put, happy. Bucky couldn’t remember if he had seen Stark smile since returning to the States.

A small knot in his stomach that he hadn’t known existed loosened at the sight of those bloodless lips regaining some of their color.

So when Tony began to gently remove and begin installing the new arm, Bucky felt comfortable enough to talk to the man whose parents he had taken away that day in 1991.

“Thank you for this. For everything. You didn’t have to stick up for me at that press conference; you don’t owe me anything but you still...Thank you.” The genius seemed to stiffen just a bit but he managed a curt nod in acknowledgement.

A couple moments passed in silence. Bucky became more and more aware of the darting of the
engineer’s eyes. The sudden, hasty movements. The stumbling over mundane tasks and the incessant mumbling under his breath in an unnerving tone.

The table between them suddenly became much more apparent and much more colder and harder when the engineer suddenly dropped his screwdriver, his hand shaking violently. Bucky caught the heaving of the man’s chest and he continued to stay silent. He did not say anything because he understood.

He truly understood. He knew what it felt like to be stuck in a whirlpool of panic, to feel suffocated, to feel trapped and small in a sea of mocking darkness and shadows. The shadows that whispered false nothings into his ears as he struggled to move his hands to stall the flow of malice and menace and found them chained down, too heavy to move, or gone.

He was familiar with the dehumanization, with being used and discarded. Of not having a choice, of having no consent.

In several ways, Tony Stark never got a choice either.

So Bucky waited patiently as the genius stepped back several times, his face blank but his jaw set so hard that the man's cheeks turned a sickly white.

“Sorry.” The super soldier’s heart broke at that meek, frightened apology. An apology that did not even have to be made.

“Stark, you don't have to be sorry, alright? None of this is your fault. Hey, look at me.”

Tony raised his head but still refused to meet Bucky’s crystal blues.

“It is not your fault.” He paused, monitoring the up and down movements of the other man’s chest. His breathing had slowed and gradually, it evened out. “I should be the one saying sorry.”

Tony sighed, stepping forward once more and picking up the screwdriver. “I'm too sober to be having this conversation right now and I can practically hear Captain Righteous yelling 'It wasn't his fault' in my ear. Also, since I gave up drinking and have managed to stay on the wagon till now, it really isn't smart to make me want to get drunk so please just hush and let's move on with life, shall we?"

The two continued in utter quietude. All things considered, Bucky noted the distinct absence of any sense of foreboding. Whereas with everybody else, excluding Steve, there had always seemed to be a rain cloud hovering over him. It was always either heavy with thunder and rage or sagging with rain and tears. But now, that cloud was still, normal. Uneventful. Something one might find in the sky on a regular day.

Tony gave a once over, patting the star, that somehow the engineer had bothered to remember, on his new, vibranium shoulder.

The sensation in his arm, the ability to stroke his hand over the table and actually, physically feel the coolness of the metal, was the final piece of the puzzle. Normalcy, humanity, ownership of his body. All those gifts--no--those rights came together, creating the flesh and bone of Bucky Barnes.

It was satisfying, in every way possible, to feel human again.

By impulse, the super soldier curled up his fingers into a fist and then released them, marveling because he could finally, finally feel.
Maybe his senses weren’t all completely tarnished after all. Maybe purity wasn’t such an impossibility.

Bucky glanced upwards at Tony, ready to launch into another rambling of thanks, but he stopped dead when his gaze fell on the stiff, unmoving engineer staring wide-eyed at the fist that Bucky was making. The chocolate brown turned to the color of dirt.

Oversized sleeves that hung past the man’s hands crossed over his heaving chest protectively as he stumbled backwards, all the way to a faraway wall.

*Oh God. I triggered a panic attack. Shit.*

*Shit shit shit.*

*What do I do?*

“Do you want me to call someone for you?” He didn’t know why he was whispering. It could have been because he himself prefered softer, soothing voices when it was him that suddenly became imprisoned in the past.

“N… no. Just…” Tony flattened himself against the wall as Bucky stood up, concern and guilt etched onto his face. “Get out.”

“Please. Let me help.”

“GET OUT.”

He didn’t want to. He knew he shouldn’t. He knew the man was hurting and the last thing he needed was for someone else to see him suffering and then walk away. Again.

“GET OUT! JUST GET OUT!”

So he left.

The next couple of minutes for Tony consisted of reaching for and then pulling away from the blade that he had tucked away discreetly in a drawer. He examined the current angry, red, criss-crossing marks that blemished his flesh. The ones he had inflicted after returning home, after having had his whole world crumble around him, burying him in the rubble.

*Calm down, you idiot.*

*In, out, in, out.*

The miserable panic, which had turned his blood into roaring rapids, churned faster, becoming pure, malevolent terror. Now his blood was a thrashing sea in a hurricane.

How could it be possible to hear nothing but white noise, to feel nothing but the binding shackles of the past, and still be able to hear Obadiah’s mocking voice and feel those *hands*. Calloused, dirty, claws that tore him apart for thirty years, reducing him to nothing more than a hole.

“Boss, you are having a severe anxiety attack. Would you like me to call…”

“NO.” FRIDAY’s voice brought him back. “Don’t call anyone. Lockdown for one hour and mute.”
The red rivulets rolling down his wrist flushed out the torrent that had overcome his veins. He did not even remember releasing them.

If panic was an unyielding storm, then shame was a humidity that made it near impossible to move. The blade clattered onto the table, slick with blood, and Tony’s pride went down with it. Shame. Another captor added to the list.

Maybe if he blinked enough times, if he set his jaw harder, the abominable tears would not flow. Those revolting drops of liquid that only symbolized weakness, an overflow of emotion.

*If you cry, you are allowing them to hurt you. If you cry, then Stane, Barnes, and Rogers will never leave you alone. You can never win.*

*Don’t cry. Don’t*... “I’m Tony fucking Stark. Made of Iron.” As he cleaned his wounds, the shadows began to whisper and sing once more, dragging him under. “You’re becoming their whore. Again.”

At that moment, when the bandages covered his shame and the sleeves restored a tiny semblance of his pride, the only emotion he felt was hatred. Hatred towards himself.

“Unmute. Terminate lockdown.”

Right as he gave the order, Natasha appeared at the doorway, her lips in a thin, red line indicating that she was pissed off.

“I was ready to bomb your door and then find a way to murder your AI for not letting me in. I brought you dinner.” She dropped a Burger King bag on one of the tables and then seemed to hesitate, which was strange because Tony knew that The Black Widow never hesitates or falters in step.

She pulled out a small packet of paper from her bag. It was a bit worn and crumpled, as if it had been flipped through multiple times and gripped tightly. “Fury and Coulson wanted to give this back to you. They don’t want it.”

His resignation.

Tony cleared his throat, the sight of his severing of ties with the people he considers family on paper never failed to stir his self loathing. Because whenever he looked at those pieces of paper, he remembered why he had done it.

He didn’t feel good enough for them. He wasn’t good enough for them. Why would The Avengers, why would the world, want a broken, tainted, emotionally impaired ghost on a team of superheroes? Why would they want someone so flawed?

“How could Tony convince her that he wasn’t worth it?
So he dragged his mask on and scoffed. “Yeah, the world needs Ironman, not Tony Stark.” His voice broke marginally but he covered it up by clearing his throat once more. “Rhodey has a suit. He can easily take my spot.”

Natasha’s brows furrowed and her fists balled at her sides. Great, he had done it now.

“Could you please, for one second, stop believing that I… that we don’t care. Could you just grow the fuck up and look around you and see that every time you do shit like this,” she threw the papers at him, “or say shit like this, you are hurting the people around you?”

As she continued her rant, the shadows began whispering once more. They ignited a spark and dropped it right onto his heart, which they had coated with gasoline.

“Oh, I’m oh so sorry that the people around me are hurt. How the hell did you think I felt when I found out about Stane? How the hell do you think I felt when I found out that the man I used to consider a father used me as a hole to pay back a terrorist organization? You will never understand…” The flame died as quickly as it had been ignited and the shadows changed their tone.

“ She doesn’t care about your problems.” They hissed. “ You repel her.”

There was a pointed silence that was as fragile as glass. Tony turned away and started to work on Rhodey’s brace.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Well, Natasha never had much consideration for delicate objects.

“About what, exactly?” He clipped, hoping he sounded like a complete asshole so she would give up and go away.

“You know what.” She was tiptoeing around her words. Tony could tell.

“I know I’m a genius and all but even I don’t know everything, Widow.”

He heard a sharp inhale and then a weary sigh. Good, maybe now she’s given up.

“I’m getting you a therapist.” A pause.

“Absolutely fucking not. Take your burger and fries with you and leave. Thank you and good night.”

“It’s nine o’clock.”

“I am aware.”

“You need to take care of yourself, Stark. Eat the food and get some sleep. I’ll call my therapist. You’ll like her, I promise.”

“What part of no did you not understand? Are you not familiar with the concept of consent?”

“Of course I… Jesus.” The assassin dragged a hand on her face and huffed. “You need to let someone in, Tony. If it’s not going to be one of us, then maybe a stranger would be better.”

“Last time I let someone in, they drove a shield into my chest so no thank you.”

And that was that. An indirect dismissal. Tony waited patiently for the redhead to finally turn on her
heel and leave. She left the food on the table and his resignation on the floor.

“Lockdown again, FRIDAY.”

He didn’t touch the burger or the fries.

“Hey Kaira. Yeah I’m doing alright. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about a friend of mine. He’s going through a tough time and he needs help. Thanks babe, love you.”

Natasha ended the call and leaned back against the wall outside the engineer’s workshop. She knew he had put his lab on lockdown again. She knew that he didn’t want to talk to anyone about what he had found out.

But she also knew that he needed someone and Dr. Kaira Andriana was his best bet.

*After all, she was for me.*

Chapter End Notes

please let me know what you would like to see next and I'll incorporate some of you guys' ideas into the following chapters
“Hey man. Look, I’ve been meaning to say this since we came back but I never got the chance to.”

Rhodey looked up at Sam Wilson as he sat beside him at the kitchen island. The Falcon.

He remembered offering the man a ride back to D.C. since he was leaving New York that day too to go back to the Army base and train some new recruits. He remembered that Wilson was also a man of the army and that he was Captain America’s good friend. He remembered that apart from everything that had happened three years ago, Sam was actually a decent guy who deserved a chance to get his life back to a stable place.

But Rhodey did not remember ever being sentimental with the guy. He was never good at sentiment, unless it involved Tony. But his crazy college buddy was different and he was a whole other story.

So… sentiment.

Sam offered a small smile before regaining his somber expression. “That day, at the airport… the beam from Vision’s head stone thing was meant for me. I dodged it and… and it hit you instead and then you plummeted and then you got paralyzed.” Sam looked up for a second before shifting his gaze backwards towards his hands. “It’s been eating me up inside for the past three years because I never got to apologize and I guess this is just my own half-assed way of trying to say… I’m sorry.”

At that, Wilson met Rhodey’s eyes. The regret and the guilt were almost tangible and Rhodey took another sip from his coffee to avoid its presence.

Truth be told, he never blamed Sam for what had happened that day. Tony, as always, being the idiot that he was, blamed himself for not making the War Machine suit strong enough. But the world knew that the catastrophe wasn’t his fault either. And the Lord knew that nobody should point fingers at Vision because he didn’t do anything wrong in those circumstances.

There was a whole lot of guilt in the air and there was no one to place the blame on. Rhodey spent enough time in the army to know that it was during times like this that one person, often the one who felt the most responsible for whatever the fuck went to shit, beat themselves up over it. Sometimes, life is just like that. Sometimes, people were just like that.

So Rhodey simply smiled. A real, genuine smile and placed a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “It was a bad beat for me, man. It really was and I’m not going to lie about that. But that doesn’t mean that you give yourself hell for this. Things happen: people fall from the sky or they get banished from the country or they argue. But not everything is just one person’s fault. Ever. Sometimes, bad things just happen and one thing leads to another until shit hits the fan. That was what happened that day at the airport. It was just a whole string of bad luck.” The Colonel patted The Falcon’s back. “Let it go and live.”

Sam sighed, then reached an arm backwards to rub up and down his neck. “It’s just… when I was in the Army, I had this… Riley was like a brother to me. I watched him fall from the sky. To his death.” The arm was brought down again as he began wringing his hands together, an act that made Rhodey restless just by observing the man. “I couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn’t save him. I just… it ruins me that someone I knew had to go through the same thing.” He paused, his eyes just the tiniest
bit glossy. “And that I was the reason why.”

The Colonel stared at his mug. How could one respond to that? How could one convince someone that something wasn’t their fault when they were already sure that it was? How does one get past these complicated puzzles of regret and remorse?

Had he mentioned that he wasn’t good at sentiment?

“Well, I’m not dead. That has to be solace enough for you if nothing else will be.” Rhodey responded gently. He received a nod back in return.

Rhodey finished his coffee, then stood up as steadily as he could with his brace and walked over to the sink. He had to go and talk to Tony before he left in about an hour and he had to make sure that the man remembered how to complete basic hygienic tasks.

Or maybe that was just an excuse for wanting to reassure himself that his best friend wasn’t dying again.

Or making plans to try to die again.

He didn’t think he himself could survive something like that once more. The last time, when he got the phone call from Pepper, some knowing part of him just snapped. It simply broke off and withered.

He had had suspicions. He had had doubts and concerns. And he hadn’t done anything. Not a single thing to help.

It killed him every single day to know that he was just saving himself back then from having to deal with that fact. The fact that his best friend was being held captive by hopelessness. The fact that Tony Stark, his brother--his family -- wanted to die.

Maybe he knew what Sam felt like, what Tony had felt like, when they had seen their loved ones plummeting from the sky. Maybe now he finally understood that crushing pain, that unrelenting agony, of reaching out farther and farther in the hopes of grabbing their hand, of saving them… and then slipping their grasp.

A discordant clanging and clanking brought Rhodey out of his reverie and of course, speak of the Devil, it was none other than his idiot of a genius friend stumbling onto the communal floor dragging an elaborate and high tech--brace?--behind him.

“Okay War Machine, you’re going to be practically and literally jumping for joy when you put this on. It’s a state of the art product that combines the workings of prosthetic limbs and mechanical engineering so that you could do everything and anything normally and without any difficulty. Of course, you’ll still have to go to physical therapy so you can relearn how to walk with it on, but this thing will literally bolster your legs so that you can function at a hundred percent at all times. You have to try it on. Right this instant.”

And on and on and on and on. Rhodey chuckled at the rambling as well as the enthusiastic behavior that Tony was exuding, but the smile on his face quickly dropped when his eyes fell on the deep wrinkles on the engineer’s forehead, as if his face had been set in a worried or stressed expression for a long time. He observed the trenches beneath his friend’s abnormally large eyes, which were always so vibrant and rich in color, but were now hanging on by a thread, barely flickering. It was as if they were running on the last bit of energy left within Tony’s body. The same body that had now grown thin and has lost muscle mass, that looked even more smaller beneath the large sweatshirt that he
wore with sleeves that covered his hands.

Rhodey suddenly began to doubt his relief that Fury had rejected Tony’s resignation. Maybe it wouldn’t have been a bad thing for him to rest and recuperate. For him to get better.

Anything would have been better than seeing him like this: running on coffee and an adrenaline high rather than actual food or sleep. Rhodey missed the extravagant, flamboyant man that Tony Stark used to be. He only felt pity for this haggard, frail mess he had become.

“You do know that Sam and I are going back to D.C. today, right?” Rhodey spared his friend a small, comforting smile when Tony visibly deflated a little and for once, stumbled on his words since entering the room.

“T-thought you weren’t going home till Monday, Honey Bear.” His voice was quieter now, several decibels softer. Out of the corner of his eye, Rhodey could see Sam looking up in concern for Tony as his bottom lip began to quiver just slightly and his eyes became glossed over.

But that smile, the one that stretched from one side of his face to the other, never once faltered. It stayed frozen upon the engineer’s face and the crinkles at the corners of his mouth and his eyes remained unmoving.

At an equal level of softness but with an increased amount of gentleness, as if Rhodey was tiptoeing around glass, he said, “It is Monday, Tone.” Every part of him itched to stay. Every part of him wanted to be there for his friend, to hold his hand as he tried to find a way back from whatever hell he was stuck in.

He wished that the universe wasn’t against Tony’s happiness. He wished he could kick himself for turning his back again.

He wished he could stop making excuses.

And just admit that he was afraid.

“No it’s not.” Tony scoffed. “It’s Saturday.” At Rhodey’s raised eyebrow, the engineer shook his head. “Sunday at best.” He sighed, then gestured towards the brace once more. “Humor me! Come on, honey bear.” Rhodey could tell that the animation in his voice was forced, but the last thing he needed was to leave hearing Tony upset, even if the opposite performance was just that: a performance.

Why am I always convincing myself of lies?

So Rhodey held onto that lie like a lifeline and delved into it further. “Okay, okay.” A false chuckle, a showing of teeth. How long did this play continue until the climax?

Until the end?

Tony hadn’t been lying. The brace was incredibly comfortable and easy to use and for a solid minute, Rhodey finally felt capable again-- remade. The thing even came with pretty, glowy lights for “spontaneous parties” or “mood lighting” as Tony put it, with a wink.

For one minute, sixty short seconds, life felt okay. Decent.

And then, when Rhodey was walking back towards his friend from the other side of the room, his knee buckled and something from the intricate machinery popped loose, and then Rhodey was sprawled on the floor.
Along with Tony, Sam Wilson also came rushing towards him to help. He couldn’t help but gawk when the engineer, with a feral look in his eye, growled at Sam and then shoved him back, swatting him away. “He’s my friend. He’s mine.”

He caught The Falcon’s eye and then shook his head discreetly, indicating to the other man to not take it personally, that he would take care of it.

“Tony…” The Colonel grunted as his friend hoisted him up and then helped him onto the couch, the sharp glint of a predator still apparent on his face. “I’m okay, man. I really am. It’s fine. No need to go all crazy on Wilson, he’s just trying to help.”

When the engineer had finished fixing the old brace back onto Rhodey’s legs, his hands working incredibly hastily as if to mop up his mistake as fast as he could, Tony did not look up. Instead, he sat on his knees, still on the floor, his gaze fixed on a loose strand on the carpet which he began to pick at absentmindedly.

“Hey.” Rhodey placed a gentle hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Look at me.”

Tony wore that same pain, that same anguish, along the lines of the creases on his face, the corners of his eyes, and his set jaw as he had worn back when he had been dying of palladium poisoning. That day, he had gone down to his friend’s Malibu lab and found him sitting in his hot-rod, wearing that same despair, wearing that same pleading expression: help me.

“I should just…” Tony stopped to clear his throat and stand up on wobbly legs. “I should stop trying to help. I just… I make things worse. Every time.”

At that, the Colonel flared upwards, shaking his head and embracing his friend tightly. He felt the engineer lean into the hug, as if it had been a long time since anyone had wholeheartedly held him. So they stayed like that, with Rhodey rubbing the other man’s back. “Stop beating yourself up. It’s not your fault. It’s not…” he pulled back, gripping Tony by the shoulders, making sure to meet those chocolate brown eyes, which had now glossed over completely, “this wasn’t your fault.” He paused for a bit, drinking in every detail of the man that was like a brother to him. “If you ever, ever need me in any way whatsoever, I’ll be there. I’ll be there for you, I promise.”

When those words left his mouth, Tony blinked once, slowly, and then blinked again. Rhodey wondered what his friend was seeing, what he was remembering or thinking.

He wondered if Tony was seeing anything at all.

He wondered if Tony saw nothing.

❖❖❖

The car ride had been relatively quiet so far. He had let Sam drive just so that he could look out the window in peace and stare at the outside, all a blur, all an enigma.

They had decided to delay the return for a while as the both of them had unspoken things between their friends: Rhodey had to help Tony recuperate from the unnecessary guilt after the morning’s debacle and Sam went to say his final goodbyes to Cap. By the time they set out, the sun was low in the sky.

It was just enough to light up Tony’s dimmed face as he watched them drive away.

“Hey Rhodes?”
Rhodey hummed in response, his forehead leaning against the window and his mind still lingering on Tony.

“I’ve been thinking, and I know that it’s not really my place to say anything, but do you think Stark would be comfortable with… you know, just talking to me?” Sam glanced over at the Colonel who still hadn’t stirred from his position. “I have experience with speaking with veterans about their PTSD or emotions and helping them deal with it. I think, if it’s okay with him, I could be able to help him.” At Rhodey’s lack of response, Sam sighed impatiently. “Look, I know everyone at the Tower’s been avoiding talking about that ‘false alarm’ that had happened the day we came back to the States but it’s been tearing me apart inside because… what if the next time, it isn’t a false alarm? How could everyone just ignore this big, blaring problem that’s staring everyone in the face? I don’t get it. He needs help, Rhodes. Especially after what he’s been through.”

He balled his fist and slammed it against the top of the airbag compartment, shaking just slightly.

Sam only furrowed his brows, keeping his eyes on the road.

“You think I’m ignoring this? You think I can’t see that he’s suffering? God, if only you knew what I went through…” He clamped his mouth shut. It wasn’t his story to tell and, frankly, it wasn’t his pain to discuss. He willed the roaring in his ears to tune down. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. “What you saw, what we all had to do on that day you guys came back, that was just the tip of the iceberg. A lot of it’s just paranoia, I guess. When Nat came rushing back from trying to stop him and she said what she did, it was because she’s… she’s been through a lot. And I know it sounds uncharacteristic of her but she’s scared. She’s fucking terrified.” So am I. “She’s had a lot of time to see Tony at his worst.” He paused, twiddling his thumbs. “She was the one who found him and rescued him from those men. She busted in right when one of them was… going to…” he gulped, his throat suddenly so incredibly dry, “assault him. Again.” Rhodey’s breath hitched involuntarily but Sam kept facing forward, his face blank. “We’re all trying, Sam. There’s just… there’s too much ice to break through sometimes.”

Rhodey wiped at his eyes, not even trying to hide the flow of tears that streamed down his cheeks silently.

Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to let Wilson talk to him. Maybe this is what Tony needs, even if he’s going to deny it.

A few more moments passed in silence.

And then… “You say that you’re trying, but then why are you leaving him?” Sam didn’t ask the question bitterly or even accusingly. Just curiously.

Rhodey didn’t answer.

Instead, he picked up his phone and texted Pepper. “Hey, Pep. Visit Tony sometime soon, okay? He needs you.”

His hands itched to wrap around a bottle. His throat ached for the burning of alcohol. His conscience begged to fade away.

Tony was back in his lab and instead of booze, his trembling hands were gripped tightly around a baseball bat, something that he hadn’t known that he owned. He might as well have been detached from his body because he couldn’t remember grabbing it out of the corner of a closet on some
random floor. He couldn’t remember wrapping his hands around it so firmly that his knuckles turned ashen white. He couldn’t remember Steve’s confused stare as he pushed past him violently, his eyes seeing nothing, focusing on nothing, but his ultimate goal: to destroy the brace.

To rid the world of his failure, to shatter his stupidity into small, irrelevant pieces so that it could never hurt anyone again.

The self-hatred was like a poison and it spread through his entire body, turning the red of his blood into an obsidian black and the rims of his eyes a puffy red. It pumped through his veins faster as his arms swung again and again, demolishing the brace, which he had spent all night working on. The sounds of destruction clanged around in his head, rattling in his brain.

He relished in the pain.

As he raised the bat above his head once more, aiming to ground his disaster into dust, the weapon was suddenly wrangled out of his fingers. A feral growl died on his lips when he whipped around to meet Natasha’s hard gaze. “Stop.” was all she said, looking past his shoulder to the shrapnel littering the floor.

“It needs to be…” He halted his words, heaving to catch his breath, the powerful exertions finally catching up to him, “I need to destroy it before it hurts someone again. I can’t let it…” He began shaking his head frantically, the aftereffects of Ultron flooding his mind, propelling the poison faster. He reached for the bat again and Natasha held it out of his reach.

Now there was only panic.

Panic because the red headed assassin wouldn’t let him end the job. She never did. She never let him. And now his creation, it was going to hurt someone else again and he couldn’t… he just couldn’t deal with that guilt. He couldn’t survive it.

Not this time.

“CALM DOWN!” Natasha’s sudden, sharp tone brought him back. Now he just wanted to hide, to crawl underneath the bed and let the darkness swallow him. Anything would be better than dealing with this shame. “It’s ruined, okay? It’s not going to hurt anyone. You destroyed it.”

He repeated the words in his head and blinked rapidly, drilling it into his mind. I destroyed it. I destroyed it. I destroyed it.

He sank onto the floor, pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his head on his desk. His eyes settled upon the shrapnel. Natasha settled down beside him.

“Kaira wants to see you, Tony. She can help you.” Her words were the texture of cotton. But even cotton stung against wounds when there was alcohol on it.

“No.”

“You need to get better, goddamnit! This isn’t.” she gestured to the mess of machinery on the floor, “it’s not going to change what happened in the past. And you’re still stuck there! Kaira is going to guide you so that you can break through this bullshit and go back to throwing huge birthday parties where you pee your suit and then snark at senators. I know…” she turned him towards her, jerking him out his daze. “I know that it seems like you’re being crushed by everything around you right now and that it’s hard for you to trust people, but you have to trust me. You have to listen to me.”

“ You’re not listening to me! You never listen to me!” The words had tumbled out of his mouth
without warning and before Natasha could grab him, he pushed himself up and stormed out of the room, leaving the assassin in the wake of his hurricane.

Dark, churning clouds twisted themselves into chains and they wrapped around Tony, clicking together with bolts of lightning. He reined them in, tighter and tighter until they suffocated him. He would rather they strangled him than let the world be at their mercy when they unleashed themselves.

Because the day that happened, the clouds would obliterate everything and turn it to dust.

And they would take Tony first.

“Hey FRIDAY, call Parker’s school and send them an email from me saying that he’s going to be out for a bit due to a Stark Industries internship field trip. Give May a call too and let her know the same thing. If she has any problems, she can take it up with me.” He was almost at his penthouse. But of course, of course, the elevator stopped on the communal floor and in came Clint Barton, who looked at him wide-eyed and then pressing the button to the ground floor.

The elevator still moved upwards towards Tony’s penthouse. He swore, if Robin Hood even dared open his mouth…

“Hey, um… did Laura tell you anything about when she’s going to contact me?”

Tony thought it would have been easier to deal with the whole ‘Jeez, you look like shit. When was the last time you slept?’ bullshit rather than this.

He just couldn’t deal with this.

On the one hand, Laura asked for space and she said she would call when she was ready. On the other hand, Clint was basically begging on his knees. This was a game of tug of war and he was the knot.

So he did his best to untangle himself.

“She’ll come find you when she wants to.” He clipped his words, not faltering even when Clint’s hopeful smile faded.

The elevator dinged and Tony stalked out briskly. At Hawkeye’s subtle step forward, as if to follow the engineer and plead for information, Tony turned sharply and pointed a long finger at his teammate. “If you dare step over that threshold onto my private property I will taser you until your bones feel like putty. Get. Out.”

He didn’t wait to see if the archer left. He didn’t wait for his sudden influx of adrenaline to drain. But the poison was still there, so this energy was tainted.

All the shirts he stuffed into the suitcase were long-sleeved. Other than that, anything that came to his hand inside his large, walk-in closet was pushed into the suitcase.

“FRIDAY, make plans for Rose Hill, Tennessee. And call Harley. Tell him I’m bringing a friend.”

When he was finished zipping the bag, a sudden thought made him pause. But he shook it off. It’s a stupid idea. Instead, he grabbed his watch, the one that turned into a gauntlet, and snapped it on. This should be enough.

His stomach grumbled. The void was apparent and there was no food to fill it up. Anything would have sufficed, but he did not want to risk the communal floor to pick something up.
He ended up swinging the bag into the passenger seat of one of his Audi's instead and then hoisting himself into the convertible without bothering to open the door.

Tony was ready to shoot Bruce with a repulsor blast when he heard him call after him.

“Where the hell are you going?”

He scoffed. “To get drunk.” At Bruce’s disapproving glare, he sighed, running a hand over his face. “Jesus, you guys get worried when I don’t make jokes, you guys disapprove when I do. I just can’t win, can I?” He revved the car, his patience running out rapidly.

Bruce held on to the side of the car and fished a pill bottle out from his pocket. “I just wanted to give you this. I contacted a bunch of my colleagues and I got my hands on some better migraine medication. Just in case.”

Tony accepted the bottle, stuffing it into a side pocket of his suitcase. A rush of affection rose up within him but the shadows hissed in his ears and his words were only laced with bitterness and sarcasm. “Aww Brucie, you care.”

He moved to step on the accelerator once more but Bruce switched his hand from the car to the engineer’s shoulder. “Yes, Tony. I do care.” His tone was serious and Tony could tell that he sure as hell wasn’t done. So he leaned back in his seat and zoned out. This would be over soon. “And I asked you a question.”

“Oh you mean the one that I didn’t hear because I was too busy ignoring you?”

“Why do you have to make things so difficult?”

“Well, if you don’t want things to be difficult, just let me leave. Life will get easier, I promise you.”

“Tony, you can’t just leave without telling anyone where you’re going.”

“Does it really make a difference, Bruce? I mean, even if people did know where I was, I would still be left there all by myself. At least this way, I’m sparing anyone from giving a shit at all.”


Bruce’s face had the ‘you’ve been through hell so now I’m going to pity you until you want to throw up’ expression painted all over it. “I know what happened in Siberia…”

“Great, so do I. I was there, remember? This was awesome by the way but I gotta go.” He was so sick of it. Of feeling scared and small and weak whenever that stupid little thing was mentioned. He was tired of feeling tired.

“…was awful, Tony. But please, please don’t think that nobody cares. I care. Nat cares. Rhodey cares. Hell, even Steve cares.” Tony gripped the steering wheel with both hands. “I know you don’t believe it, but he does.”

“It’s true.” That voice. Soft, kind, gentle. The pinnacle of all things good and righteous.

Tony held his breath. Oh, hell no.

“How long have you been standing there?” He demanded, veins popping out on his forehead as Captain America, clad in a snug t-shirt and jeans, his blond hair neat and his face clean shaven, walked out of the shadows. Steve opened his mouth to respond but Tony shot up a hand. “You
know what, I don’t even want to know. Bruce, let me go. I have places to be and people to see.”

“I brought him down with me.” Bruce whispered.

“I heard everything.” Steve interrupted, a hint of pleading in his words. “Tony…”

Again, that infuriatingly concerned voice. Tony was ready to rip out his own hair.

So he slammed his foot down on the accelerator and made his escape.

No one called after him.

TWO WEEKS LATER

When the cheerful ringing of an incoming Skype call started, Clint made a bee-line to answer it.

“Laura.” She looked the same, always so beautiful. But the small smile that she offered to him was worn--tired. She had lost weight so her cheeks, which were always so soft, were now hollow. He wanted to trace that sharp cheekbone with his fingers so that the color would return. He wanted to press his lips against hers so that they did not look thin and bloodless anymore. He wanted to embrace her and his children and never let them go ever again.

He wanted so many things.

But he couldn’t reach her through that screen.

“Clint.” Her voice was still like a lullaby to him, even after not having heard it for three long years.

“Laura, let me come home. I miss you. I miss Lila, Cooper, and Nathaniel. I miss what we had.” He knew he sounded pathetic. He knew he was begging.

There was silence. They stared at each other, the two lovers who had now become strangers. There had been a time when the both of them would just study each others’ faces. They would memorize every crease, every wrinkle, every imperfection and then vow to themselves that they would never forget a single detail. Now, Clint couldn’t help but feel as if the woman he loved could not recognize him.

“Do you want to see them?” The voice of a mother, always doing the best for her children.

And he had missed three years of their lives.

One by one he saw their faces once more. So much older. In many ways, wiser. The innocence radiating off of each of their sparkling faces invigorated his heart. Sprouts of life grew and blossomed within him again as he identified features of his own face on theirs.

They were his. He was theirs.

This was his life. This was where he belonged.

“I love you baby girl.” He said to Lila, whom he talked with the longest.

“I love you too Daddy. Please come home.” So full of hope. He wanted to save that light behind her eyes.
“I will. I promise.”

When it was just his wife in the frame once more, he was the first to start the conversation. He made a promise and this was one that he intended to keep.

“I love you.” But when his eyes fell upon her, he forgot the speech that he had planned out. Nothing else but those three words came out and then there was nothing.

“I…” She stumbled. She never used to stumble. “I love you too.”

“I don’t want a divorce.” It was barely a difficult sentence to physically say, but it still left the archer out of breath when he finished saying it.

“I don’t know what I want.” How did this confident woman, who would light up the room and conquer it every time she walked in, become so confused? So broken?

This is my fault.

“Well, fuck, Laura. You know what the kids want. They want me home. I want to go home.” His voice cracked and he caught the hitch in his breath before it tumbled out.

“I know.”

“So then why…” he exhaled loudly, stifling a sob. “Why won’t you let me?” When she didn’t answer, his voice raised involuntarily. “WHY?”

“Because everytime I look at you, I feel like I’ve forgotten everything you are and that I’m talking to a stranger. Because every time you speak I think your voice doesn’t sound the same because I don’t remember how you sound. Because… I… I’m scared that if I let you come back and… and if you leave again… I’m not going to be able to come back from it.” She squinted her eyes shut, letting the tears roll down. “Not again.”

The invisible rope tethering them together splintered farther. “I’m not going to leave again.”

“And I want to believe that. I want to, I truly do, Clint. So just… give me some time. We can do this,” she gestured to the screen, “video chat every day. I want to be sure of my trust in you. I want to be sure of everything. And then we can…” She sniffed, wiping at her cheeks, “we can decide if we want to rip those divorce papers in half or sign them.”

And there it was: a seed of hope. Clint clutched that seed and nurtured it.

When the call ended, he sagged in his seat and closed his eyes, easing the pressure in between his brows.

Nimble, but strong, hands ran through his hair and then guided his body into leaning against a smaller and leaner one. “Eavesdropping is rude, you know?” He murmured into her stomach, letting Natasha show this delicate, maternal side of her. It was rare to see her so caring, so sentimental. So he savored every moment.

“Yeah, but I ran out of fucks to give since Stark ran off to God knows where and hasn’t made an effort to contact us whatsoever.”

He chuckled lightly. “He’ll turn up.” Clint leaned back to meet her green eyes. “Baby steps, right?”

She smiled. “Baby steps.”
If he was speaking honestly, the past two weeks were some of the best in his life.

When Mr. Stark had shown up at his school to pick him up in a sleek, expensive convertible, Peter had practically frozen in place. He had still felt like he was in the middle of a dream when he saw that there was already a packed suitcase for him in the back and Mr. Stark had said, “We’re going on a field trip to Tennessee. I want you to meet someone.”

So they had traveled on one of the billionaire’s private planes all the way to a small town in The Volunteer State.

Sure, it was strange. It was only a Monday and Mr. Stark had assured him that Aunt May had no problem with the impromptu vacation (which he seriously doubted but he would cross that bridge when he got to it).

The Spidey suit hadn’t come along. Neither had the Iron Man suit. No, this field trip was just him, Mr. Stark, and this kid named Harley, whose high-tech barn they had slept in for the past two weeks. They had spent their time creating and inventing while Mr. Stark had taught them new designs, new techniques, and let them use his software for schematic data.

Peter had grown fond of Harley quickly, both of them bonding over engineering and innovation. They were almost inseparable by the time the second week rolled around.

But in between all the fun times, there were little things nagging him. Things that he wanted to ignore, but couldn’t find it within himself to.

Things such as the fact that Mr. Stark would push his food around his plate and then offer it to both him and Harley when they had finished their meal. The faraway look he succumbed to when he thought that the boys weren’t looking. The light on in the other room at times like 3 AM, when Peter would be awoken by the sound of clattering. How his mentor would jolt violently every time one of them dropped something or spoke suddenly.

And that small sentence, the one that Mr. Stark had told him to forget about so long ago, when Colonel Rhodes had called him and ordered him to haul ass to Stark Tower.

"Because Rhodey is a prick that thinks that every time I am not with a fucking babysitter, I am going to slit my wrists or swallow one too many pills and then die because I am just so fucking unstable.”

The billionaire had said it so fast, that Peter hadn’t registered what exactly he had meant until later that night, when he had stayed up late just… thinking. His conclusion of that peculiar day’s affairs frightened him and he chose to ignore it for as long as he could.

Because Mr. Stark-- Iron Man-- couldn’t be suicidal.

But apart from the little things, his mentor would smile largely every single day and he would encourage them and teach them and just spend time with them. He seemed happy.

Apart from the little things.

One particular day, the three of them were returning from visiting Pigeon Forge and The Smoky Mountains. Mr. Stark had insisted on them visiting for some reason, but Peter was glad that they went.

He had marveled at the thin, wispy clouds that had wrapped around lush, green mountains. He was
mesmerized when the sun rays peeked through and illuminated the landscape in an ethereal way.

For once, he had noticed, Mr. Stark had seemed to slow down, blinking slowly and swinging his arms back and forth lightly as he had breathed in the fresh, mountain air.

“It’s so beautiful.” Peter had said. For once in his life, he was rendered speechless.

His mentor had hummed. “The sun rays are narrow.”

Peter had smiled and turned to lean over the railing with Harley, not wanting to ask what the billionaire had meant.

At Pigeon Forge, the three of them had laughed and visited strange looking buildings, all of them resembling cartoon structures and references to classic movies. Their smiles, wide and genuine and pure, had been bedazzled and enhanced by the sparkling atmosphere.

Happiness, at its natural form, was decked in shimmering gold and within the personalities of others as they beamed and laughed until they doubled over.

That was what Peter Parker had experienced those two weeks in Tennessee.

Because for the first time since he met his mentor, Mr. Stark, in his sweatpants, sweaters, jeans, jackets, with messy hair in the morning, and bleary eyes when he was tired, finally just became Tony.

But he had never thought that he would get to see the billionaire so raw and vulnerable until they were driving back that night in an expensive Range Rover that Mr. Stark had rented.

His mentor was at the wheel while Peter was sitting shotgun and Harley was in the back. He had been drifting asleep to the hum of the engine and squinting every now and then when the glare of the street lights jolted him awake once more.

Harley, while yawning, tugged at Mr. Stark’s sleeve. “Tony.” When the billionaire didn’t reply, he tugged harder. “Tony.” At this he got an annoyed grunt of acknowledgement.

“Kid, I’m driving here. It’s gonna be a while so just go to sleep.”

Ignoring his order completely, Harley scooted up in his seat so that he could place his elbows on the middle compartment that separated Peter and Mr. Stark. Peter couldn’t help but stifle a giggle when his mentor’s elbow, which he had been resting on the compartment, was shoved out of the way. Mr. Stark tsked and sighed in response.

But there was still a hint of a tiny grin lingering on the billionaire’s lips as he glanced in the rearview mirror. “Such a piece of work.” He scoffed playfully.

“How’re things with Captain America? They’re back right? From Africa?”

The question had been innocent enough. Both Peter and Harley had seen the entire debacle unfold on the news three years ago as well as the coverage on the Avengers’ return to the States. But Peter had figured that it was a sore subject for his mentor, hence avoiding its discussion. However, considering what he had gotten to know about Harley in the past two weeks, it was only a matter of time before the brown haired kid asked about it point blank.

The lingering smile on Mr. Stark’s face disappeared and his lips spread thin and into a line. The inside of the car seemed to get several shades darker, as if the light that had just flickered out from his
mentor’s large eyes affected the brightness level. “Yeah.” Just one syllable, clipped and sharp in form.

Peter caught the slight voice crack.

But Harley, being painfully oblivious, toyed with a loose thread on his sweater and kept going. “Did you get to meet his friend? The one with the big metal arm? Man, that thing looks so cool. I mean, he could probably crush things with his bare hands so easily. I wonder how someone could build something like that. Do you know if he has like extra super strength or something because of it?”

“Hey, dude, calm down.” Peter chuckled playfully, trying to get his friend to slow down. He himself was kind of terrified of the Captain’s friend with the metal arm, but he too thought that his metal limb was fascinating.

His spider sense had also detected the slight elevation in speed and when he shot his eyes up at the driver, he saw his mentor staring straight ahead, stiff as a board, with his foot glued onto the accelerator. He monitored the movements of the billionaire’s chest; it was rising up and down rapidly in short, spastic spurts.

“If he does have super strength though, just imagine what he could do an enemy. He could literally just tear them apart.” Harley gasped excitedly, an idea sparking into his head. “What would happen if he had someone in a chokehold? He could just crush someone’s neck by squeezing it! That’s so awesome!” He shook Mr. Stark’s arm again.

“Kid, shut up.” He managed hoarsely. Peter became more nervous when he saw just how badly his mentor’s hands were trembling. He had never seen the man like this. He had never thought Mr. Stark would be one to lose control.

But Harley kept rambling. He was on a high. “You must have talked to the guy. Can he do stuff like that? If he can, then no enemy will ever try anything with the Avengers. Just think of all the people he could kill just by snapping their necks in his fist.”

“HARLEY!” Peter jumped at his mentor’s outburst and his heart clenched when he looked over and saw Mr. Stark hyperventilating and nursing watery eyes.

And then, time slowed. All Peter could see and interpret were the billionaire’s vibrating hands, which lost grip on the steering wheel as it spun out of control. His stomach rose to his mouth as their car swerved and screeched, but his eyes stayed focused on Mr. Stark, who was shrinking into a ball.

In the background, his and Harley’s shrieks as well as the screeching of the tires on the road seemed only like white noise. It was his mentor’s whimpers and soft pleas that were echoed and amplified in his ears.

Time sped up once more as the car jerked to a stop, a result of Mr. Stark slamming his foot down on the brake. Peter could faintly detect the smell of smoke from the rubber having been burned off on the tar. There were several honks as well, but they hadn’t seemed to collide with the other cars since traffic had been light and the highway was pretty empty.

Peter regained the ability to breathe slowly, his hand still clasped with Harley’s arm. Neither of them made an effort to move apart, both of them still a little shaken from what had just happened.

“Did you just have a panic attack?” Harley’s voice quivered as he whispered. “While driving?” Peter blinked in confusion, but none of them could see each other in the dark, so Harley didn’t clarify.

“Mr. Stark, are you okay?” Peter asked, reaching for his mentor’s arm.
Mr. Stark was still frozen. His right hand was clamped over his mouth and he was refusing to blink as silent tears streamed down his cheeks, which looked sickly yellow in the small amount of light provided by the street lamps. He stayed like that for a moment while Peter simply watched.

And then, as if someone had flipped a switch, the billionaire’s hand traveled back to the steering wheel. He composed himself within seconds with a sharp sniff and a wiping of his eyes. “I’m fine. You guys okay?” His voice sounded so normal for someone who had looked so incredibly broken.

“I thought you were getting help for that, Tony. It’s been years! We could have died! What the hell, man?”

Mr. Stark took the verbal abuse from Harley’s tiny, outraged form as he started driving again, righting the car and going back into a proper lane since it had skewed to the right and partially on the shoulder.

“I didn’t even say anything about New York this time! What did I even say?”

Peter watched his mentor with wide-eyes as he stiffened again for a moment and then relaxed. A stray tear rolled down his cheek.

“Nothing, Harley. Don’t worry about it. I’m taking us back to your place and then Peter and I are leaving tomorrow morning. Okay?”

The little boy huffed and then sat back in his seat.

Peter wanted to protest leaving, but the words died in his mouth after having just experienced what he did.

It terrified him to see Mr. Stark, his superhero, fall apart so quickly for inexplicable reasons.

That night, Peter pretended to be asleep when he heard his mentor moaning in pain softly from the other side of the room. He had peeled his eyelids open the tiniest bit and had seen, through the dark, Mr. Stark gripping his head and curling into the blanket.

And when the billionaire had rushed into the bathroom, Peter stared at the ceiling, wincing every time he heard the muffled retching.

It was early morning when Mr. Stark had shook him awake. Harley was still sound asleep. As Peter quickly and silently packed, as per the billionaire’s orders, Mr. Stark scribbled something onto a piece of paper and left it on his new friend’s desk.

While Mr. Stark went to go get the car ready, he glanced at it.

_Thanks for having us. Sorry for last night, I’ll send you something to make up for it. As for the other thing, I’ll work on it. I promise. Peter will keep in touch too, I’ll make sure of it. Sorry again. -The Mechanic_

Chapter End Notes

Please no hate comments on Steve. I am bitter about Civil War, but I still love him so
please refrain from leaving hurtful comments about him. This fic is not about angst as much as it is about Tony's mental health.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony could hear the clock ticking from far away as well as the trickling of the tiny stream of water flowing from the miniature fountain that sat on the coffee table in front of them. The silence was too loud. He could hear every single irrelevant noise and that bothered the hell out of him.

Ever since Natasha dropped his sorry ass off at the woman’s apartment and then sped off in his luxurious Lamborghini, leaving him to be a victim of an intense staredown, there had been a whole lot of nothing happening.

He was welcomed into a home with every wall painted a different color as well as posters of favorite bands, polaroids, and even several Avengers merchandise adorning the vibrant shades. He smiled at all the Iron Man trinkets, which she surprisingly had a lot of. Everything was decorated randomly and more often than not, he was met with Christmas lights sprawled around bookshelves. They were even wrapped around the edges of the couch that he sat on. The place was messy, but not in a disgusting college student type way, but in a homely way, as if everything, even if it was lying in a pile on the floor, was in its correct place. It relaxed him because he didn’t trust people that lived in places which looked like room service threw up all over them.

He preferred beautiful messes.

Tony tapped his foot against the plush carpet and tried not to stare at the woman sitting cross-legged on a chair that was shaped like an egg. Instead, he focused his attention on the ashtray that sat next to the mini fountain which looked like Ariel’s castle in The Little Mermaid.

How had he gotten into this situation again?

Right. He had almost killed two children because he had a panic attack while driving. And then he had ran back home to New York, hoisting his damaged goods over his shoulder and hoping that Harley could forgive him. Natasha had slapped him straight across the face when he had pulled into the parking hanger and then had yelled at him for five minutes about how reckless he was and how she didn’t know why she still cared if he was going to keep on being an idiot. Thankfully, there hadn’t been an audience to that performance so he took the red headed assassin’s rants with a grain of salt, not even bothering to listen to what she was saying because all that had ran through his mind was “I almost killed Peter and Harley.”

He had interrupted her after the shadows began to cackle in his ear, repeating those words mockingly as they teased and bullied him. “I want to see her now. That… therapist you were talking about. I’m… I’m ready. I think.”

Natasha had given him the coldest stare he had ever had the displeasure of seeing and then she had dragged him into one of his cars, shoving him into the passenger seat while she floored the gas and screeched out of the Tower without saying a word.

That’s how they had ended up in the middle of Brooklyn on the third floor of a relatively old apartment building. The woman who had opened the door had leaned against the doorframe, a cigarette dangling out of her mouth. “Nice to see you again, Tasha.” She had drawled, her voice as smooth as honey while also seductive and sultry.
Tony had been shoved forward while the door behind him was slammed shut. The woman had raised an eyebrow at him, her mouth twitched upwards in an amused smirk.

“Tony.” He had breathed once the initial shock had surpassed.

“I know who you are.” She brushed past him gently and gestured to the couch while she made coffee. “I’m Kaira, by the way.” He had nodded, grazing his eyes over every detail he could drink in. “You take milk and sugar?”

Half an hour later, there they were. Still sitting across from each other, coffee mugs almost empty.

Kaira had smooth, rich olive skin. He figured that she was of Indian descent. She was tall, almost exactly Tony’s height, and young too, probably in her twenties. Her hair was shoulder length but fluffy and it flounced every time she took a step. But it wasn’t in an adorable, little girl type way. It was more of an “I dominate every room I walk into” way. Her face was structured but not too severely as her cheeks were still round and her smile was kind. It intimidated him a little less. She had honey brown eyes that were almost a hazel, but not quite. At this moment, they were homely and soft but Tony could tell that that could change the second she desired it to. Her lips were full, red, and rosy but they were now stretched into a thin line as she rested her chin on her hands while she studied Tony, squinting her eyes at him.

He appreciated how casually she was dressed too. Normally, therapists would stuff themselves in turtlenecks or business suits or whatnot and that just made him all the more uncomfortable. He had always felt that they were out for blood when they acted professional. After all, who wouldn’t enjoy sob stories from the rich Tony Stark, knowing that he had deep pockets? But Kaira had on camouflage pants that were form fitted and rested just below her belly button, hugging her curvy waist perfectly. She had on a black crop top which showed off her stomach, which was lined with muscle and toned. Then it was just a simple green tinted flannel that rested on her shoulders, with the sleeves rolled up. Her body was healthy and strong and she had broad shoulders to show for it. Definitely not a size zero. But Tony knew that she was confident in her skin from the way she carried herself: head held high and eyes forward, never looking down. For all he knew, this was the most unconventional therapist he had ever seen.

He liked that.

He cleared his throat after sipping from his mug once more, finishing off his coffee and then waiting a second, observing the wispy smoke rising from the ashtray and blending into the air as the cigarette she had stubbed in there flickered dead. He then looked up at her, she was still staring, and met her eyes.

“So… you’re a therapist, aren’t you? Aren’t you going to talk to me about treatment or meds or whatever the fuck to help me get better?”

He only felt slightly frustrated when the corners of her mouth twitched upwards once more and she laughed. “Finally.” She chortled. “I was getting so bored waiting for you to say something.”

“Wait, what? I thought since you were the doctor, you would start by asking me ‘how are you feeling’ or something like that?” He gripped the corners of her couch, frowning in annoyance when she only laughed harder.

Kaira was wiping the tears from her eyes when she calmed down enough to speak. “Is that what Tasha told you? That I’m a therapist?”

“Well, if you’re not then what the hell am I doing here other than wasting my time?” He struggled to
keep from raising his voice. His cheeks flushed from embarrassment and he clamped his jaw shut before he said something stupid.

“I’m not a therapist.” She had returned to her normal state and had now gotten up to collect their mugs. She strolled over to her kitchen and Tony followed, confusion overwhelming his anger. “I’d like to think of myself as a chick who has seen and done things that had fucked me up bad for a while. But then, I was given a choice.” She turned around from the sink and leaned against the counter. “I was given a choice where one option was to completely change myself by putting on a plastic smile and keep going while the other was to just end it.” Tony stilled at then and then shifted uncomfortably. “And then I said fuck it, I hate both these options. So I decided to stay f**ked up, which is my true self… just happier.” Tony figured he still had a bewildered expression on his face so she continued, voice gentle. “I guess Tasha brought you here because you hate both options too. She thinks I can show you how to do what I did.”

Tony kept his gaze at his feet. “Can you?” He whispered a little breathlessly.

At that, she didn’t answer. Instead, she walked up to him slowly. He focused on the kind of hollow sounding footsteps that she made. His mind was fuzzy, as if there was a gray mist floating through it.

He lifted his head when she stuck out her hand, offering it to him. Tony blinked at the tattoo that he hadn’t noticed before which decorated her wrist and then upwards, along her arm all the way up to the crook of her elbow. Swirling ink in the shape of flames curled around an elegant bird that was spreading its wings gloriously amongst the fire.

A phoenix rising out of the ashes.

He placed his palm in hers and Tony smiled when he realized that it was warm. An inexplicable sort of trust bloomed in him, which was unusual because his ability to trust was impaired. She led him out of her apartment to a sleek, black convertible.

He barely caught the keys as she threw it at him. At his baffled face, she chuckled, swinging herself into the passenger seat fluidly. “Drive, you asshole.”

He knew he should have questioned everything. He knew he should have thought twice. But some force, some soft, vulnerable part of him continued to stretch forward and he found himself in the driver’s seat, taking him and this young woman God knows where.

She directed him to long stretch of road just outside the city. Traffic was heavy, but the cars were moving smoothly.

The evening air was crisp and Tony let the wind blow through his hair and douse his face. It was clean and clear. Untainted. And the moments that he took to let himself become baptized by the purity were some of the most peaceful moments of his life.

He had glanced over to Kaira every now and then, wondering. Who was this woman? How did Natasha know her? Why was she so strange? Why did she make him drive out here?

But suspicion was driven out by the sight of her sticking her nimble fingers forward and out of the car. She joined them together and then moved her palm in a wave like motion, as if it were gliding on the air like a feather.

Not a care in the world. Not a single trouble.

It wasn’t until the city skyline returned to view a few minutes after Kaira had ordered him to take a u-turn back in the direction of New York that she perked up from her silent, content state. She flipped a
switch, turning on the radio. “You ever read the book *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*?” When Tony shook his head no, she tsked. “What a loser.” He couldn’t help but smile at that.

She stood up suddenly and moved swiftly to the backseat.

“Whoa, whoa what’re you doing? We’re in moving traffic!” He exclaimed, swerving slightly and then regaining control of the car.

Kaira simply spread her feet, stabilizing herself in the back, still standing up. “If you had just read the book,” she raised her arms and tilted her head back, grinning, “you wouldn’t have freaked out.” She pointed forward. “Look.” She whispered.

Tony finally saw what she did. He couldn’t find any other word to describe it other than magical.

As they drove closer and closer to the skyline, the specks of light grew bigger and soon, orbs of sparkling yellow shone like stars on a palette painted by the night sky. The red taillights of the cars heading towards the city were like shooting stars that were visiting the land where freedom was a gift, not just an idea. They were rose colored hues that visited pools of hope and opportunity.

The sun was setting, the sky being kissed by the first tendrils of night. A day ending, but a euphoria awakening.

Tony sped up instinctively, his eyes glazed over as he witnessed the world around him becoming remade. He turned the music louder and began to laugh. It was a laugh that came from the depths of his stomach, from the truest parts of himself. He was finally able to open that vault that he had kept locked away so many years before. It was where he stored happiness, it was where he stored his ability to love and be loved.

Because that was all he ever wanted, really.

He spared a look at the rear view mirror and his breath caught in his throat. But in the best way possible.

The world around her seemed to have slowed down. She was letting the air, the night, the lights, and the universe consume her. Kaira’s arms rose up and down, as if she were an Angel and she was flapping her feather weight wings delicately and gingerly, letting the sensation flow through her body, never wanting to let that feeling go. Her hair was being tousled and it covered her face as she basked in that feeling, in that *freedom*.

Tony thought that she was the most beautiful, most radiant, most *alive* being in that moment.

He envied her.

Warm, strong hands embraced his shoulders and a breath as cool as the breeze caressed his ears. “Right now, in this frame of time, we are infinite.” Her voice was the sweetest lullaby. Her voice was the only lullaby.

They were back in the city when Kaira finally returned to the passenger seat, slumping down contently. She reached over, nicking his phone from his pocket.

“What are you doing?” He asked warily, scared to give up the sudden trust that he had nurtured for this woman.

“Putting my contact info in.” She mumbled, typing rapidly with her thumbs.
He glanced at the screen. “How’d you guess my password?”

“You’re predictable.” A pause. Was he that predictable? “Nah, I’m just kidding.” She giggled softly, finishing quickly and then returning the phone to his pocket. “Tasha told me.”

“Nat knows my password?”

“It’s Tasha. Of course she knows your password.”

Tony chuckled and then made a mental note to change it when he got back. But he knew that would never be enough to stop Natasha Romanoff.

They spent some minutes in silence, Kaira returning to moving her palm in a wave like motion, following the direction of the wind.

“You should make a video. A vlog type thing.” She was the one to break the silence.

“How?”

“I mean, I totally get it. People suck. There is no point in talking to them about anything. They won’t understand.” Tony nodded at that, agreeing wholeheartedly. “So one of the ways I was able to dodge my options was by talking to the computer. Recording my thoughts. Kind of like confessions actually. So…” She turned towards him. “You should make one. See if it works. I’ll give you a topic. Your first confession video will be about… colors.”

He scrunched his eyebrows. “Why?”

“Why not? It’s easy enough. Talk for five minutes about colors and then see what happens. If you don’t like them, don’t do it again. Just try it out.”

Tony nodded slowly, still unsure about the idea. “Okay.” He acquiesced.

“And hey, what I said about talking to people… it doesn’t always mean that… that you shouldn’t talk to them. What I’m trying to say is… if you are ever up to it… I’m not the worst human being in the world.” He kept staring forward, afraid to blink. “I’ll listen to you.”

The engineer loosed a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “Can I… can we do this… again? Someday. Can I see you again after this?”

Kaira stretched, her arms reaching upwards towards the stars. “It’s all up to you, love. Whatever you want.”

They continued the ride in silence.

When the both of them finally returned to her apartment, Natasha was in the parking lot, leaning against the Lamborghini that she had claimed from the beginning. There was a hint of a smile on her face as Tony saw her looking them over and recognizing the windblown hair and the wistful expressions that were written on the wrinkles around their mouths.

Tony had barely put the car in park before Kaira jumped out and strolled over to the red headed assassin. He watched from afar, pretending not to eavesdrop, but even he couldn’t help being slightly amused as the young woman started the conversation with “Hello Natasha, darling.”

Tony noticed that Nat kept a smirk painted over her face as she responded with “Kaira.”

“It’s been a while. Tell me, how’s your pretty little ass been for all this time? Having fun saving the
world and all that jazz?” Tony couldn’t help but stifle a chuckle at Kaira’s boldness. He already liked this woman. She wasn’t afraid of getting mauled by Black Widow apparently.

In fact, Natasha seemed to playing along smoothly. “Oh it’s been fine. But I mean, never as fine as yours, am I right?” Tony was on the edge of his seat, gawking as Widow stepped closer to the not therapist and he swore visible sparks seemed to ignite between them.

“Want to see firsthand?” The engineer couldn’t help but squeak at Kaira’s ability to flirt with the deadliest assassin the world had ever known. But of course, he was incredibly disappointed when the both of them looked over at him, Natasha wielding a murderous glare at being interrupted.

But half a second later, her green eyes softened as she switched her gaze back to Kaira. “I have to take this idiot back home. Will this be continued?” Tony had never before heard Nat speak so seductively and mean it.

He dashed his chocolate browns back and forth between the two, squirming in excitement. He practically jumped for joy when he saw the flicker in Kaira’s eyes and then watched her lean in and place a long kiss on Natasha’s cheek. “Удостоверьтесь, что вы скучаете по мне.” (Make sure you miss me) she whispered and he strained to catch every word.

Tony wasn’t sure what Kaira had said, but he was pretty sure that she had said it in Russian. The woman turned and strut forward, returning to her apartment. Tony threw her car keys at her and she caught it without looking.

He beamed when she winked at him and then she was gone.

Natasha turned the keys to the ignition but Tony only continued to stare at her with a smirk on his face as he settled down in the passenger seat.

“Shut up.” She clipped, not bothering to even look at him.

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“You were going to.”

Tony sighed, rolling the window down. “I’m not that predictable.” He stuck his hand out, letting his fingers ride the wind like Kaira’s had.

“Yes you are.” The engineer blinked at her. “I knew you would do that.” She jerked her head towards his hand.

“How?”

“Because I did the same thing after I met her.”

“How did you meet her?”

When she didn’t answer, Tony stiffened a little, afraid that he had angered her somehow.

“She was an assassin. I was an assassin. We crossed paths one day.” She blurted out rapidly.

“She was an assassin?” Tony gasped, eyes widening. “What the fuck? Why are you going around calling her a therapist then?”

Natasha grinned at the engineer’s astonishment. “She was a damn good one too. We used to hate each other, you know. And the therapist thing is a cover. She’s hung up her jersey.”
“Wait, you guys used to hate each other? What, did you have angry sex one day and then just magically become lovers, not lovers? Or… what do they call it… friends with benefits?” He cried out when Natasha punched him in the arm. Hard. It went numb for a second. “Christ, Nat! I was kidding!”

Several moments passed where it seemed like she was fuming. Right when Tony was about to give up on hearing the rest of their history, he heard the assassin sigh. “Okay, the angry sex part was right.”

“I knew it!”

“Stark, I will disembowel you if you keep talking.”

“Sorry.”

“Damn right. Anyway, we were both in a bad place for a long time. We were both alone. And even though we hated each other, she was just… there, you know? She was… more than I expected. Still is.” At a red light, Natasha’s green eyed glare was honed to the tip of a dagger as she fixed it upon him. “Don’t you ever call her something stupid and demeaning like ‘friends with benefits’ ever again. Remember, Stark: I don’t make threats, I make promises.”

His breath caught in his throat and his heart fluttered slightly. “Heard you loud and clear.” He had been joking. But he got it. Even he had gotten attached to this mysterious ex-assassin and he had just met her a couple hours ago. No wonder Nat was this protective after having known her for years. He waited a moment before speaking again. “She told me that she rejected her options and stayed the way she was, just…”

“Happier.” She finished, inhaling sharply. “Yeah. She’s been through some shit. But she’s happy now. So… Tony,” she finally used his first name, “it is possible. To go through hell and back and then dust yourself off.”

There was a burning sensation in the back of his eyes and he turned to look out the window. “Yeah.” He croaked, then cleared his throat.

He leaned his face outwards a little and breathed in the night kissed air.

He let the universe consume him.

No one would have ever thought that the ping of an alert on his cell phone would excite Steve Rogers as much as it did when FRIDAY reminded him that Tony had returned to the Tower. He continued pacing back and forth, deciding to wait for another hour before going down to speak with the engineer.

“Who’s the lucky gal?” Steve’s head snapped up as Bucky strolled onto the floor. He spared a small smile before returning to his occupying activity of bouncing up and down on his heels. “Or guy.” Buck added once he observed his friend’s flustered expression.

“Tony.” He mumbled, not registering what it was that his metal armed friend was asking him. Steve ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it even more than it already was.

“You’re taking Stark on a date?”
Cap squinted his eyes at Bucky, bewildered. “What? No! Why would you even…”

“Wouldn’t blame ya Stevie, he has a nice ass.” Bucky bit into his plum nonchalantly as he settled into the couch and turned on the TV.

“Buck, stop it!” He only received a shrug for an answer. “I’m going to talk to him today. Just work things out between us. Rectify our relationship, I guess.”

He heard the cushions shifting and then Bucky turning toward him with an eyebrow raised.

“Relationship?”

“You know what I mean, jerk.”

“I know what you want to mean, punk.”

“Could you please…”

“Okay, okay.” Bucky held his hands up in defeat. “I’ll stop.”

“I’m really nervous about this. He’s been through so much and I don’t know how to even… start the conversation.”

At that Bucky threw him a plum. “Give him that to eat. I don’t think I saw him have any food since him and Nat disappeared as soon as he came back the first time.”

“Not everything can be solved by plums, Buck.”

“Things would be easier if they were.”

As the clocked ticked closer to the end of the hour he had given the engineer to become situated at home once again, he felt the knot in his stomach grow tighter. It had been years since they had had a proper one on one conversation and even then, both of them were at each other’s throats almost all of the time. He just wanted ten minutes. Ten minutes to clear up the grayness that clouded his vision every time he laid his eyes on the billionaire. He was always so lost when it came to Tony. He hated feeling insecure or unsure about things and the fact that trying to figure out Iron Man was as difficult as trying to understand all the science things the engineer spewed every now and then nagged at him.

The clock turned to 8:00 pm and Steve stood up hastily, throwing a wary look at Bucky while biting his lip in anxiousness. He took a deep breath and let his feet guide him towards the elevator.

“Hey Steve.” He halted mid step and waited. “Just… be careful with him, alright? He gets scared easily… like how I used to in the beginning.” Cap closed his eyes, shuddering at the memories of Bucky curling up into a ball and drowning in panic. Of Bucky shrieking at night when the terrors of his time as The Winter Soldier came rushing back.

Steve shook his head slightly to clear it and then nodded at his friend. “I will.”

“And Steve.” He paused once more, his finger about to press the button to the elevator. “Give him the damn plum.”

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The lab was blasting AC/DC’s Back in Black when Steve requested permission to access. When the music hadn’t stopped for about a minute, the knot in his stomach began to wrap around his intestines and he was ready to turn back and head upstairs once more.
Just as he was about to give up, the rock and roll ceased abruptly and the door to the lab slid open. Steve padded in slowly and rubbed the plum with his thumb for comfort. He could hear his heartbeat thundering in his chest. “Tony?”

The engineer came out from behind a large machine that he had been tweaking. He wiped his hands on a grease towel before turning towards the super soldier. Cap felt a rush of genuine happiness rush through him at the sight of the twinkle that had been restored in those large, chocolate orbs and he offered the other man a smile that was just as genuine.

Tony, however, averted Steve’s eyes and kept his gaze everywhere but there. “How can I help you, Cap?” He asked nicely enough.

“I… I wanted to know how you were doing.” At that, he only received a short nod and a forced smile before Tony turned away again, tinkering once more. “I got you a plum.” He held it up and then extended his hand to give the fruit to Tony.

“Thanks, Cap.” The engineer accepted it and then moved to place it on his desk. But Steve figured that his puppy dog eyes were a little more dramatic than they needed to be because Tony immediately decided against it and took a bite instead, going back to doing whatever it was that he was doing.

The next fifteen minutes consisted of awkward small talk, short, one-syllable answers, and lots and lots of silence.

“So how’s the team status?” Steve tried after a lot of useless conversation.

“I’m still flying in the skies, you’re team leader, Clint’s a sniper, etcetera. You know this already, how come you’re asking me?”

Cap almost stomped in frustration. Tony wasn’t biting any of his bones. So he played a bigger card. “I meant our status, Tony. How are things with us?”

He felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes when he didn’t get an answer. So when Tony finally managed a “Good,” he was more than relieved.

This wasn’t getting anywhere and Steve was restless. The grayness, the enigma, that shrouded his understanding of the engineer only got murkier and murkier so he dealt his final card, this time delving in deep without hesitation.

“That day, when Nat came back to the conference room after you left that day all flustered and on edge, she said that you were going to hurt yourself.” He avoided the other word. He couldn’t handle that thought. It would wrangle him in ways that he had no intention of experiencing. “I got scared, Tony.”

The voice crack was involuntary and so was the shakiness in his words. He heard the click clacking noise of the tools halt for a second before continuing, as if nothing had happened.

“Look, I just… I wanted to thank you for not breaking for those HYDRA fanatics. For keeping me and Bucky safe.”

Again, no answer. Steve stared at the back of Tony’s head, those familiar feelings of longing blossoming within him once more. He found himself stepping closer and reaching out for the engineer. “Come on buddy, talk to me.” He pleaded, touching Tony gently.

He wasn’t prepared for the cacophony of tools clattering to the ground as the billionaire lashed out, a
manic look in his eyes. The twinkle was gone and now only shadows took its place. Steve stepped back and brought a hand up instinctively as a half eaten plum was chucked at his head.

When the noise subsided, all Cap could hear was heavy breathing. He wiped the slight wet spot that the plum had left on his arm absentmindedly as he watched Tony hold one hand to his chest, eyes closed and counting in his head. Bucky’s warning suddenly came flooding back and Steve wanted to fade into the shadows.

He stayed silent, waiting for Tony to recover and regain control. “S… sorry Cap.”

Steve wanted to reach out. He wanted to wrap Tony in his arms and whisper sweet nothings into his ear. He wanted that reassurance of the engineer’s heart beating against his own chest while he held him close.

Anything would be better than that cold, desolate distance between them. The poisonous tether that only stung every time he tried to even touch Tony.

It had taken so long for them to become friends, to place trust in one another. How had one moment, one frame of time, erased all that to reduce them back to strangers?

“How long has this been going on for, Tony?” He kept his voice gentle, but the concern was overwhelming.

Tony picked up his tools, setting them down on his desk while he ran a hand over his face. “It’s nothing, Rogers. I’m just being stupid.”

“No. No, it’s not nothing. Tell me how long.”

Only a meek voice answered. “For a long time.”

“Since Siberia?” He had his Captain America persona on.

“Since… before Ultron.”

In the beat of quiet that ensued, Steve felt his heart drop to his stomach and then his stomach drop down even further. It was almost enough to bring him to his knees.


“I did!” Steve tried to keep from flinching at the engineer’s raised voice. They had argued before, they had both been infuriated before. But Tony had never yelled. Never. “I am.” He said softer this time, deflating and sagging a little.

“In that letter, I said that if you ever needed anything, I would be there. How come you never called? I would have… I would have helped you.” He couldn’t remember when his words had become so strained, when his cheeks had become damp. He couldn’t remember when that gray mist suddenly morphed into angry, black, roiling clouds laced with sharp thunder.

“I didn’t need help! I needed you!” All other noise fell away, the air became stale. Only Tony’s broken, desperate words rattled his bones. “I needed you and you left me there all alone as I watched you go hand in hand with someone else.” Steve lowered himself down into a chair shakily as his heart broke. “And I’m not saying that he didn’t need you or he didn’t deserve help because God knows that he deserves it more than anybody.” Tony’s face contorted, as if some psychosomatic pain was wracking his body and he was fighting off the urge to cry out. “I waited for you to come back. I waited… for so long.”
“Tony…”

“But you were gone. And I guess… in a way, maybe I was too.” Steve wanted so desperately to wipe that tear away from Tony’s cheek. He wanted to tell him that he was here now and this time he wasn’t going to leave. He wasn’t going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. “You left your shield.”

“You told me I didn’t deserve that shield.”

“I lied, Cap!” This time, Steve winced at the smaller man’s sudden burst of emotion. “I wanted you to fight for m… for the Avengers one last time! I wanted you to fight for us! It was never you and me, Rogers. It was always Iron Man and Captain America and the rest of the Avengers and I just wanted you to fight for that. For what we were. A family.”

Was the world actually crumbling beneath him or was the trembling of the floor just a result of the fact that his legs were wobbling and he couldn’t bring himself to stand up?

“We still are, Tony. We’re still a family.”

He watched the other man stifle a sob and then grip a grease towel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “I’m sorry that I could never be… never can be… what Bucky is to you or what Clint is to Natasha or what… what all of you guys are to the team. Invaluable. Irreplaceable.”

Steve shot straight upwards and stalked over to the engineer, who had shied away, curling in on himself as Cap drew closer. “Look at me. You are irreplaceable. You are invaluable. You are a part of this team. You are a part of this family. It’s true, you will never be what Bucky is to me.” Tony tried to push away at that, attempting to hide his gasping sobs. “But that’s because,” Steve grabbed the engineer’s flailing arms and held them tight, “that’s because you are special to me in a different way than how Bucky is special to me. You are something that Bucky can never be just like how Clint is something that no one else can ever be to Natasha. You both mean the world to me, you know? Tony Stark, you are a big part of my entire world.”

He let go of the billionaire’s arms and then placed his hands on his shoulders, holding him upright. “I’m willing to try to fix this. Fix us.”

For several long moments, Steve only stared deep into those large, chocolate brown eyes. He reached up to brush away a tear.

“Stop lying to me.” Cracked words that sliced against his skin, tearing him open and leaving him to bleed out.

“What?” He stumbled backwards, as if he was struck.

“I will never be anything more to you or to this team than aerial support and financial aid. I’ve learnt my lesson.” Everything that Steve had tried building, every comforting word, every hope of a better future, was slashed down repeatedly and ruined. “I know my place now. I will be your teammate, I will always, always have your back out on the field but please just stop doing this to me. Stop.”

Tony shuffled to his desk and rummaged through it before taking out a cell phone and a worn, crinkled letter. He felt Tony place the phone and the letter in his hand and then curl his fingers around them, but to Steve, it was only cold, meaningless metal and a page of blank paper.

“Tony.” He pleaded, not caring what he sounded like, not caring about anything else in the world at that moment except for that small, broken man in front of him. “I love you.”

Three little words, each just one syllable. All of them together holding the weight of the universe.
“I love you.” He repeated, whispering.

The billionaire blinked. Once, twice. “I loved you too, Captain.”

One word, one syllable spoken in the past tense was enough to wreak havoc.

“Please, just call me Steve.” One last attempt. One last extended hand. *Take it, Tony. Take my hand.*

“Good night, Rogers.”

Tony turned his back and Steve waited, waited for him to turn around and say that he was kidding. That he wanted it too: a future.

But he didn’t turn around.

And Steve Rogers left the lab, glancing once at the forgotten, half-eaten plum which laid on the floor.

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He was normal, completely fine, for a total of one exact minute.

And then the cell phone was crushed beneath his foot and the letter was ripped into tiny pieces.

“FRIDAY? Could you ask Nat if she could spar with me?”

Natasha was good. Natasha was kind. She wouldn’t ask questions. She wouldn’t raise expectations.

“Of course, Captain Rogers.”

He leaned his head against the wall of the elevator, not bothering to press a button. He didn’t want to go anywhere. He didn’t know where to go. How he had suddenly become so lost was a mystery to him.

Maybe it was because his hands had gone too slippery with cold sweat that he wasn’t able to keep his grip on Tony. Maybe that was why he had slipped out of his grasp.

Maybe that was why he had fallen into the deep ravine and now Steve… Steve had no chance to save him.

“Captain Rogers, Agent Romanoff has agreed to meet you in the training floor in five minutes.”

“Take me there, please.” The elevator began moving and Steve let it take him far away.

The both of them went on and on for several minutes. Natasha never once showed signs of being tired so he kept hitting and kicking and swinging. She continued to put up a fight, making the duel more challenging so that he could exert himself further and further.

He never thought that emotion could be so overwhelming because he never exhausted himself. In fact, he kept pushing harder and harder, letting the rage, the sadness, the heartbreak, the guilt, and the shattered hope radiate through him.

The adrenaline pumped through him every time she blocked a punch or knocked him to his feet. The rage flourished, igniting the pit of his stomach more and more until he finally roared and redirected his punch to a nearby punching bag, his fist going right through the material, releasing the sand within.
His knuckles bled through the bandages.

The rage withered and the rest of the emotion pooled in his gut and he let himself collapse on his knees and hide his head in his arms. He shuddered against the restraints on his sentiments.

There was a cool touch to his bloody knuckles and he looked up through bleary vision to meet Natasha Romanoff’s sweaty face. Her hands worked quickly, dabbing at his wounds with a damp washcloth and then re-bandaging them.

His voice was rough when he spoke, as if his vocal chords had shattered. Maybe he had been screaming, but he hadn’t heard it. “I told him I loved him and then he said goodbye.” She kept working. “I don’t know what to do, Nat.”

Maybe he had gone numb too. There should have been a dull pain from having punched the bag so hard, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Me neither.” She patted his fists when she finished, then collapsed beside him while she wiped her face with a towel.

“I’m scared for him.”

“So am I.” A pause, then a sigh. She continued, slower this time. “He’s not eating, Steve. He gets scared so easily. Can’t stand to be touched.” The silence in between was longer this time, but Cap simply traced lines on the floor, counting the creases, collecting the dust. Anything to keep his mind busy. Anything to keep his mind distracted. “When those videos and those pictures came out… of him being assaulted… he… he…”

Steve heard her voice dry up. He turned to her, surprised to find that her green, emerald eyes had darkened, her vision focused on a faraway point and that she was crying.

The Black Widow was crying.

“Um… he tried to… he tried to kill himself.” She blinked, several more drops of tears spilling over. “Slit his own wrists in the bathtub.” Her head drooped and she pressed her lips together tightly. “I was the one who found him.”

“Oh my God, Nat.” Steve wrapped his arms around her, letting her fall apart on his shoulder. But inside, the part of him that had been roaring for so long suddenly became silent. The candles of rage flickered out. Only a whistling wind blew through his empty, hollow self.

“Tony Stark, you are a big part of my entire world.”

He couldn’t help but feel like the world had ended.

“I’ve been so strong for everyone. For all you male assholes. But I stay up at night because I can’t get that image out of my head. And it’s funny,” She pushed him away, stood up swiftly, and began to pace, “it’s fucking hilarious because out of everything, that is what fucks me up the most. Just losing him like that. I was almost too late and I feel so responsible. More red in my goddamn ledger!” She swung at the punching bag that Steve had demolished, causing more sand to burst out. She immediately steadied it and then laid her head against it.

“Don’t say that. Nat, it’s not your fault. He chose to do that to himself, okay?” His voice shook as he spoke. “You didn’t do anything.”

“Yeah.” She scoffed, wiping at her face violently. “I chose to make him feel alone. I made that
decision. And that’s the point, Cap.” She turned towards him, her face returned to a cold state. “I didn’t do anything.”

He went straight to bed after that, a sketchbook and sketch pencils in hand.

Natasha’s words rang and rattled in his head as he let his hands draw a smiling face with crinkles at its eyes and mouth, humongous eyes with a twinkle in them, and messy hair coated with grease.

He drew a happy Tony Stark.

He fell asleep while clutching the drawing to his chest.

One for almost killing Peter and Harley. Actually, make that two.

One for making Natasha mad at him.

One for what happened with Steve.

Another for loving him back.

And one last one because he could never deserve that… not with him. Not when he was him, so good and pure and right, and Tony was…

He wrapped his arm up expertly. The routine had become imprinted in his brain. It took over right when he needed it to, putting his body on autopilot, separating him from his body.

Disassociating him.

The sleeve fell over his shame and he hid the rest of the evidence in between old magazines and dusty photographs from a time when he was known to the world as a rich, drunk brat. He covered the sharp edges with even sharper ones. No one find it if he hid it in plain sight.

Nowadays Iron Man was called a hero.

Tony Stark was called a whore.

When he opened up the camera on his computer, he hesitated at the image it projected. Those red, swollen eyes. Were they even his? And those broken cheekbones. He didn’t remember when those had happened. In fact, he couldn’t remember when he had last eaten a decent meal either.

Fuck.

Maybe this was why Kaira had been staring at him so long. He had become so ugly, it was impossible to look away.

Kaira the ‘Not-A-Therapist’ Assassin. Freedom incarnate. He liked her. He trusted her. She was everything he wanted to be in flesh. Right down to her natural ability to flirt.

No he was still an expert in that area. When he wanted to be.

But sex had lost its appeal a long time ago.

Tony rested his head on his hands and kept staring at the screen, at himself. But was that really him,
though? Was this what he had become? *Yinsen must be flipping over in his grave right now.*

His phone had her number, her email, and her address. She really was efficient. He found himself texting her, not having any recollection of ever even picking up his phone.

“*Do I have to show you my five minute confession video?***”

He pressed the power button, letting the screen go black. The response was almost instantaneous.

“*Not unless you don’t want me to.***” Was what she said.

He paused for a second. Did he like these options?

Yes, yes he did. So he created more.

“*And we don’t have to talk about what I said in the video, right? Like my feelings or whatever.***”

“*Not a therapist, remember?***”

“*Can I change my mind later?***”

Her response took a heartbeat longer than the other ones did. “*Everything’s up to you, love.***”

This time, he glanced back up at the computer screen.

He pressed record.

“*Right so confession video number one. How do I start this off? I should really ask Parker about these things. Anyway, my name is Tony Stark and I am here to talk about colors. Okay, so… I guess, red is my favorite. Red is a bright, bold, in your face type of color so when you walk into a room, all eyes just kinda fall on you. Red is sexy so women like to wear red dresses or wear red lipstick or lingerie or whatever the fuck. Natasha’s hair is red. Pepper’s hair is red. I think she might have died it blonde now actually. Oh, Pepper used to be my assistant, now she’s the CEO of Stark Industries. She used to be my fiancee too once but that’s a different story. Ummm… Christ it’s been thirty seconds, what the hell? What else am I supposed to say? Okay, okay hold on ugh… um… red is the color of blood, of a sunset. Or a sunrise. I guess you could say red is the first and last thing you see every day. So it’s memorable like that. My suit has hot-rod red on it because when I was first designing it, my eyes just fell on my hot-rod that I owned and then I just told JARVIS to put it on the armor. So yeah. Oh, um JARVIS was my old AI. He’s dead now. Vision is like made of a part of him but that’s a long story. Oh and Vision is red too by the way. He has some purple on his suit and purple is made from mixing blue and red together. The sky is blue, water in cartoons is blue, Captain America’s suit and… and shield is blue. My arc reactor used to be blue. But that’s not there anymore. It used to keep little bits of shrapnel from reaching my heart and it used to sit on my chest and glow like a nightlight. It was pretty cool, kinda like a magnet, but I got surgery and I don’t need it anymore. Pepper had blue eyes. Ste… Captain Rogers has blue eyes. A baby blue shade actually…***”

Tony trailed off, forgetting about everything he had just rambled about. Instead, he pretended to find the corner of his desk extremely interesting and proceeded to stare at it.

It had only been three minutes. But he stopped recording anyway. He thought about it for a second, tapping his fingers on his knee while he bounced that up and down as well.

“*FRIDAY, send Kaira this video in an email and then write ‘thanks’ in the text box.***”

“Okay, boss. It’s been done.”
Tony spun in his chair, sticking his legs up in the air as he turned around and around. He stared at the ceiling, letting the vibrant tube lights blind him.

It was the perfect way to feel absolutely, perfectly lost.

It was only midnight and he was bored as fuck.

He kept spinning, closing his eyes in the process. He put himself in Kaira’s place, letting phantom air hit his entire body, letting himself become one with the stars.

*We are infinite.*

Tony sprang onto his feet, grabbing a light sweater on the way out.

“FRIDAY, if anyone asks, I went out to eat.”

Technically, he hadn’t been lying. Because after he went to the nearest bookstore and bought a copy of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, he found himself in a 24 hour cafe, sipping a steaming cup of coffee and nibbling on a muffin. He soon forgot about both, however, when he began reading.

And didn’t stop reading until about almost 3:30 AM. He was halfway through and although he would die before he ever admitted it, he had teared up about twice already while smiling like a dope several other times.

He stuffed the muffin in his mouth and then chugged the caffeine, which had gone cold and stale. Leaving a large tip in the tip jar, he walked out into the New York streets in the middle of the night, gripping the book under his armpit while watching the mist his breath made every time he exhaled. Cars whizzed past, ignoring him. Just the way he liked it. Blending into the shadows was a skill he had mastered for a while now.

After about half an hour of strolling around in circles, the Tower loomed back into view. He was a little disappointed, truth be told.

The elevator took him straight to his penthouse. At the doorway of his bedroom, he froze.

Pepper was lying on the covers, still dressed in her blouse and pencil skirt. She had been waiting for him to come back then. A suitcase rested against the wall. She was staying for a while.

She looked so peaceful when she slept. So young. So pure and innocent.

Tony nestled onto the other side of the abnormally large bed, leaving a large gap between their bodies. He didn’t want to disturb her, didn’t want to ruin this picture of tranquility.

His fingers brushed over the cover of the book he had bought.

“Why the fuck did you tell me to read such a depressing book?”

The notification sound chimed five minutes later. “I didn’t tell you to read anything :)” And then again. “It’s good, right?”

His fingers flew over the keyboard, scared to let her leave even though it was 4 AM and both of them should be asleep and not walking around New York City and visiting rusty cafes. Oh wait, that was just him.

She should still be asleep though.
“Haven’t finished it yet.”

“Then finish it, asshole.”

So he did. It was around 6 AM that he put it down. He had devoured every word, even taking the time to underline quotes that he really loved. He had read slowly, savouring every detail, memorizing scenes.

Tony placed the book on the nightstand soundlessly, then covered Pepper with a blanket. He stared at the woman, afraid to do anything that would taint the moment. His hand hovered over her head. He had meant to stroke his fingers through her hair.

Instead, he lowered it and, as softly as he could, he placed his arm around her and moved closer to her warm body. She stirred and he froze, flinching. But then she returned to her heavy slumber.

Tony joined in not too long after, in a lighter mood than he had ever been in for a long time.

He had no nightmares that night.

Chapter End Notes

Any hateful comments about any of the characters will be deleted.

ALSO:
I'm working on another story called The Winter Flame and I would love and appreciate it if you guys took the time to check it out! Thanks :)
Chapter 15

It was so normal. It was so familiar. She never wanted to move from this spot. She never wanted to move away from the arm that was wrapped around her waist. She never wanted to let go.

Pepper almost forgot that that life--the one that she was relishing in, remembering, and embracing as she lay there in the abnormally large bed next to the one man she had once had to call her own--was gone. She had given it up when she had taken off the ring.

Deciding to pay a visit to her ex-fiancé from California was no excuse nor any reason to receive a chance to get all that back. She knew that now.

There had been a time when waking up, tangled in each other, was routine. It was something which she cherished because mornings were the only time she would have him so unguarded, so vulnerable, so raw. Mornings were the only time when he breathed slowly and evenly, when his wrinkles were smoothed out, and he looked so much more younger. So much more at peace.

She wrapped her other fingers around her ring finger, now empty. With as much delicacy as she could, she shifted in bed so she could face him without waking him. She dragged a thumb across his cheek lightly, feeling the smooth, freshly shaven skin over his sharply and meticulously designed goatee.

A small smile teased her lips.

That was one part of him that he never changed.

Another thing about him that she loves… loved.

She rested her hand over his on the arm that was still around her and listened to his breathing. His chest rose up and down slowly.

Her eyes fell upon her ring finger again, noticing how the dent that had been left by the ring had long since faded away. She remembered how, when she had shown Tony that red rimmed dent, his chest had begun heaving.

“I can’t.” She wrapped his fingers around the ring, the one he had made Happy carry around since 2008, the one she had worn for six months. “I can’t keep lying to you.”

He didn’t say a word. His breaths simply became shaky and his eyes, those huge Bambi eyes that she had fallen so in love with, became glassy. His mouth opened, as if to speak, and then he closed it.

She had loved him. She had loved the confident, brash man that she had quirky conversations with. She had loved the man who could not tie his own shoelaces together if she hadn’t been there. She had loved the man who made mistakes and then did everything he could to make up for them. He had tried so hard, he had become a superhero.

And she hated Iron Man. She hated what it had done to the man she had loved. She hated that he had created this shell, put it on, and then vowed to protect the Earth only to have every element of the universe beat him down until he was six feet under and counting. She hated that, because of that red and gold piece of crap, he could not sleep at night. He hated that he could not keep food down because his panic attacks, memories that had been created because of that suit, wouldn’t let him. She hated that he was taken and used and demeaned and hurt so much that he felt so useless, so
worthless, less of a man. She hated that he wouldn’t speak to anyone about it. She hated that he couldn’t stand to be touched. She hated that he struggled to stay away from crawling into a bottle. She hated that he could not get out of bed some days because he was so depressed. She hated that he was so broken.

And most of all, she hated herself. Because she could not put him back together. Because she could not handle it.

So she said “I’m sorry. It’s not you, it’s me. I don’t think we should be together, Tony. You need to get better. You need help.”

“I need you.” He had whispered pleadingly, so dejectedly. That was when the first tear fell. That was when she had inhaled sharply and looked away.

That was when she turned her back. “I’m sorry.” She kept her gaze on the floor, wincing when he didn’t respond.

She stepped forward. Then again. She counted: One, two, three, four, five...

Click-clack, click-clack, click... her heels continued their melody.

“Please.” A rough, cracked voice. It did not belong to the man she had loved. “Don’t leave me too.”

Her hand snaked upwards and covered her mouth as her face contorted with ugly sobs and silent tears.

She kept going.

She had not looked back. But if she had, she would have seen Tony Stark on his knees, bending over as if in pain, laughing hysterically. And then crying. And then... nothing. Just a gray pallor with wet cheeks and eyes and bloodless lips. Blank.

He had tried to kill himself a few weeks later.

Suddenly, the arm around her waist, the arm that she knew bore scars from the past when his soul had flowed out of him in red torrents, felt extremely wrong.

She wriggled out his grasp, heart pounding in her chest, and held her breath when he stirred. But he sagged once more, snuggling into the blankets with his hair in his face.

The book on the nightstand caught her eye quicker than she preferred. He never read books, not fictional ones anyway. Certainly not young adult novels.

She couldn’t stop herself. The pages rippled as she flew through them, the smell was fresh and new. And one page was folded down. One line was underlined.

“We accept the love we think we deserve.” She breathed, tracing the words with her finger.

Pepper slammed it shut, scrunching her eyes closed in the process. No. Too much.

There was dirt on her hands, not blood. Dirt from trying to reach Tony as he bellowed and screeched from his coffin, where he was trapped after having been buried alive by the shadows. Dirt in her fingernails, dirt in her creases, dirt in her nail beds. Dirt from her failures.

She disappeared into the shower and scrubbed at them.
It took longer than usual, but she had already decided that she had nowhere to be that day. Nowhere except where Tony wanted her to be.

And if that meant far, far away, she could accept that.

At least, she thought she could.

He was sitting up in bed and rubbing at his nose when she came out. She spared a small smile as she waited for him to notice her as he recovered from his daily morning sneezing fit.

She hid her satisfaction of knowing that little fact, another small thing that she had loved about him. When he deigned to let himself fall asleep in an actual bed for more than half an hour and, if he dared, through the night. Then he would wake up in the morning, blink at the sun rays and the floating dust, and then sneeze about six times in a row. It was just something he did. It was like a faulty wire. But he never did it after the mornings after he had suffered from a migraine. Again, she had no idea why. He was just like that. Pepper bit back a chuckle at the memory of her first time experiencing it. It was the morning after they had first slept together and she had woken to Tony muffling his sneezes into his hands. She had freaked out and thought he was sick. He had laughed at her.

It was a brief minute of weakness that only she and Rhodey knew about. A moment when he wasn’t Iron Man or Tony Stark or a genius or a billionaire or a playboy or a philanthropist. He was human.

“Bless you.” She said once he spotted her through bleary eyes. “Hi.”

“Hey.” He swung his legs over the mattress and stood up.

They didn’t know what to do besides stare at each other. The space between them was a void, as if stepping forward would cause them to plummet into the nothingness, into an infinity of darkness.

So she shuffled forward anyway.

He went stiff when Pepper hugged him. Something in her heart dislodged at that. Or maybe that was just the side effects of the void.

Or maybe she deserved it.

He put his hands on her back lightly, as if he was scared that if he moved too fast or pressed too hard, it would all shatter again.

She only held him tighter. It was by habit that she kissed him on the cheek. But bad habits die hard. She lingered in that kiss, letting her breath out slowly as it caressed his cheek. Letting him know that she wouldn’t let anything shatter this time. She refused to be glass this time.

“Jeez, Pep. Didn’t know you missed me that much.” There it was, that teasing tone. Those insufferable quips. The ones that she truly did miss so much. But there was no energy in this one. There was no genuity.

She looked into those chocolate browns, still holding him, not allowing her arms to fall apart. “I have missed you, you idiot.”

A crinkling smile. No twinkle in the eyes though. It was all wrong. “I missed you too.”

“How are you?”
“Okay.” He pushed against her grip and she let go, albeit reluctantly. Goosebumps rose on her skin as the air suddenly became colder. “You?”

“Good.”

“The Bartons?”

“They’re fine too. Although the kids, they miss their dad. Which is expected. Laura is a little quieter now but I think… I think she’ll be okay.” Pepper smiled inwardly at the thought of the children. More because she had seen Tony so happy around them. Something that she herself had failed to accomplish in the end.

“If I know Laura, she isn’t going to get a divorce. She loves him. I don’t think she would have the heart to break it off, especially when Clint just got back. They need each other. And honestly,” he stretched, raising himself on his tippy-toes, “at the rate Hawk-ass is going, he needs her more.”

All of it was said backhandedly. Just throwaway comments that nobody thought about twice. But they stung dully all the same.

She hummed in response, drying her hair absentmindedly with the small towel she had brought along. They stood in silence some more, him rocking up and down on his heels.

“We accept the love we think we deserve.” She found herself mumbling. It had meant to be a thought, a replay of what she had read in her head. But the thought turned over onto her tongue and now it was sitting in the air like humidity. And Tony simply froze. “I’m sorry…” she began, raising her gaze to meet his.

But he had closed the door of the bathroom behind him.

Her palms covered her face. Stupid. Stupid. Idiot.

She knew, with all that she was, that Tony deserved more than the love she gave him.

Do you really think that little of yourself?

The mattress smelled like roses with a touch of incense. It made sense. Kaira always insisted that all good things in life must smell like roses and the incense was just because she was unpredictable.

But Natasha was known for seeking out danger. Other times, danger found her.

The danger that she found with the ex-assassin was the kind to keep her adrenaline running even while she lay in bed. She played with the christmas lights which decorated the headboard, thinking about how they had illuminated Kaira’s face with red, yellow, green, and blue the night before. When they had pressed loving kisses up and down each others bodies, drowning in the lust.

But Kaira was never just that.

Natasha listened to the light music that played from the speaker sitting on a messy bookshelf, full of worn covers that never grew dusty because Kaira would always pick one up every now and then.

She was the only person to know that behind those shelves hung a sword still in its sheath and a suit made of black and red leather, its edges lined with gold. She was the only person to know that,
within the walls, The Tigress still lived.

But for now, she dressed in bathrobes and brought Black Widow breakfast in bed because why not?

Natasha succumbed to the pressing of rosy, full lips against her own and then the comfort and safety of those same lips on her forehead.

“Want to tell me what’s wrong now?” Her voice was so smooth and thick, resembling a river of honey. Natasha wished she could swim in it.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she kept her green eyes on Kaira’s honey brown ones. She was fully aware of how naked she was beneath the covers and that fact only made her lips twitch upward. She was also fully aware of how naked Kaira was beneath her silk bathrobe and that fact made her insides stir. She wanted to run her hand over every curve of her body, especially her ass because she hadn’t been lying. It really was the finest thing she had ever seen. She wanted to caress those abs and kiss those scars and trace those tattoos. She wanted to tangle her fingers in those ebony locks and bury her face in her neck. She wanted…

“Stop staring, darling. I know I look good.” Kaira chuckled as she set the food on the nightstand. “I mean, the sex was excellent last night. No doubt about it, it was the hottest thing. But considering the fact that you pounced on me as soon as I opened the door, some shit must have gone down, right?” Even though she was teasing, her words were gentle and Natasha could kiss her for that.

So she did, cupping the ex-assassin’s face in her hands simultaneously. She raised up on her knees, letting the blanket fall and relieve her of her modesty. Kaira’s hands fell on her back and Natasha arched. The redhead moaned in between lip locking, opening her mouth to let the woman in so she could take her away from the awful, awful world.

But Kaira pulled away. “Come on Tasha.”

She sighed, falling back. Then, slowly, placed her head on Kaira’s chest as the woman embraced her. “I fucked up.” She said, the words muffled since her face was buried in the ex-assassin’s collarbone.

Kaira hummed. “You should fuck up more often then, if last night is what I’m going to get as a result.” Natasha looked up at that, sharing the teasing glint in the other woman’s eyes. “No, but I’m serious now. What the hell happened?” Her red hair was placed behind her ear gently and she put her head down on her lover’s collarbone once more.

“Steve… Captain Ameri…”

“I know who Steve is, honey.”

“He loves Tony. But he got, I guess for a lack of better terms, rejected last night. You saw what happened between them three years ago.”

“Yeah,” she laughed, “that was a shit show.”

Natasha smiled. “Yeah that was. There is more to the story though.” So she told her. Everything that happened from the fight at the Leipzig airport to Siberia to what Tony found out there to the fight between Steve and Tony to the rape to the suicide attempt and to Obadiah Stane’s history with HYDRA.

By the end of the narration, Natasha was reduced to tears and Kaira was stroking her hair. “I had no right.” She let the tears stain the woman’s bathrobe, only craving her touch. “I had no right to tell him
anything. It wasn’t my story to tell, it wasn’t my fucking life and I just… I broke! I’m Natasha fucking Romanoff and I broke! Because how dare he mope when I have that picture in my head? How dare he mope when Tony is falling apart in front of everyone’s faces and all I can do is just watch? And I was the one who pulled him out of that fucking blood bath and I was the one who tried to cover his wrists so they would stop bleeding and I was the one who found him when he was getting raped and I… I…” She heaved a sob, the walls crashing down around her as she gripped Kaira’s shoulders harder. “How dare he feel sad that Tony said no to him when for the longest time, all of us have said no to Tony? How dare he come to me saying that he’s concerned after three fucking years? He’s concerned? Well I fucking lived it. I had to live with it! Every goddamn day and night. And you know what?” Natasha lifted her head and Kaira wiped her tears with her thumb. She didn’t wear judgement on her face, nor concern, nor sympathy. She wore understanding. “I deserved it. I deserved every last second of that pain. You know what I said to him? To Tony? When his arm was broken and his best friend had just fallen from the sky and he had basically lost everything? I told him that I wasn’t the one who needed to watch my back. I betrayed him and I said that to him. Can you fucking believe it?” She managed a wry, mocking laugh through her sobs. “We pushed him to the edge more and more every day. And it started from that day in the helicarrier in 2012. No, it started from that first skewed evaluation I made on him. Iron Man yes. Tony Stark… not recommended. Yeah, I’m an asshole, aren’t I? The Avengers, us, we were the worst things that ever happened to that man, Kaira. Because even when he had been dying of palladium poisoning, he had been happier. And we, we ruined him. We ruined… we destroyed him.”

Natasha let herself fall apart and become crushed beneath the weight of the rubble from the walls that had tumbled down around her. She lets herself fall into the cushions that were there to save her as she plummeted. That was Kaira. She was there. She was real.

Several minutes passed before Kaira spoke, her fingers still running through Natasha’s hair. “Sometimes, I think you’re so focused on trying to save everyone that you forget to save yourself. You need a vacation. Come with me. Somewhere far away, just the two of us.”

At that, the red headed assassin joined their lips together once more as she caressed the other woman’s cheek with her thumb. She wanted it so much. She wanted her. A future where she could leave behind all of it just as Kaira had: all the blood, the expectations, the nightmares, the pressure, the danger, the weapons, the red in her fucking ledger. It was so tempting: a life with this woman who she would wreak havoc for.

Marriage. Children. She was infertile, a hideous part of her that she had admitted to Bruce way back when. She was incomplete. Broken. But Kaira wasn’t.

She wanted it so bad.

“I’d love to…’’ Natasha whispered as she pulled away.

“But?” Kaira always knew.

“…but I can’t. Not now. I have to do this for him because… because I know what it’s like to feel alone.” She hung her head at that admission.

Kaira’s fingers traced Natasha’s lips. A ghost of a smile lingered on the ex-assassin’s own. “That was before you met me, right?’’

Natasha chuckled. “Don’t make me say sentimental shit.”

Kaira held a piece of toast out to the red headed assassin and Natasha bit into it, her emerald eyes sparkling like she had never believed they could.
“You love saying sentimental shit.”

The toast was returned to the plate on the nightstand, forgotten. Kaira’s bathrobe was no longer on her body and Natasha devoured the woman with her eyes. She lowered herself on top of Natasha gently and used her fingers expertly, massaging them against Natasha’s sensitive spots.

The red headed assassin lost herself in the motion of those fingers as they slid in and out of her body. She moaned lightly, giving up control for once in her life. “I love you.” She breathed. “I love you.”

Love was for children. But with Kaira, she felt young again. *Yeah, it’s cliche. Sue me.*

The three words earned her kisses on her neck. “Say it again.” Kaira mumbled in between.

“I love you.”

Then the phone rang. Both of them groaned and laughed as the tension between them shattered. “Take the call.” Kaira chuckled as she removed her fingers and stood up swiftly, slipping her bathrobe back on. Natasha whimpered, craving more and mentally plotting the death of whoever it was that was calling her. “I’m going to go play with myself.” Kaira teased, winking as she left the room. “I’ll be thinking of you.”

Natasha was contemplating the repercussions of snapping someone’s neck when she saw who it was on the caller ID.

Coulson.

“Nat. We found some of the videos.”

Bucky figured that the conversation between Steve and Tony had not gone well. At least, that was what he concluded when Steve had not woken up for their early morning jog, paired with the drawing that he was clutching in his arms which was clearly a likeness of the engineer himself.

Steve hadn’t picked up sketch pencils or a sketchbook in so long. Inwardly, Bucky was pleased that his friend had finally returned to that passion. But he had never thought that it would be like this.

He recognized heartbreak from a mile away. The sploched tear stains on the paper maybe gave some hint of that as well.

Steve’s eyes fluttered open. He blinked for a while and then closed his eyes shut again. “Hey Buck.” He whispered as he stretched.

“Hey Stevie. It’s nine o’clock.”

“Shit.” His friend raised his upper body on his elbows and found Bucky sitting on the edge of the bed, his gaze fixed on the drawing that now lay on Steve’s chest. “Things didn’t go so great last night.”

Bucky flashed a small smile. “I can tell.” A pause. “It’s a good sketch.”

Steve shrugged, then swung his legs over the mattress. “I draw what I know.”

“You draw what you love.”
The Captain froze at that on his way to the bathroom. Then he kept going, refusing to look back.

“You know, punk, if it’s really meant to be, he’ll find his way back to you.”

The click of the bathroom door locking echoed through the room.

❖ ❖ ❖

The smell of coffee and eggs permeated through the communal floor as Bucky stepped out of the elevator.

He decided to leave Steve alone. His presence wasn’t helping the man and he didn’t know what to say to make him feel better either.

Banner was finishing up breakfast and beside him sat a woman with strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes. She was dressed professionally with a blouse and a pencil skirt. She was really tall and was speaking animatedly with the doctor. Beside her sat Stark, cradling a mug of coffee and pushing his food around on his plate. He was staring at the woman fondly.

A second later, she stood up, taking her plate to the sink and then kissing Stark on the cheek. “I’m going to head down a couple levels and get some work done. I’ll see you later, Tony.”

Yeah, thank God Steve wasn’t down here.

The woman suddenly recognized that Bucky was standing there, which made him shift uncomfortably on his feet. He smiled quickly, then looked down shyly.

“Hi.” She said amiably. “I’m Virginia Potts. But everyone calls me Pepper. I’m Tony’s…” Bucky could practically taste the awkwardness in the air as Pepper turned back towards Stark, who kept his gaze strictly on the eggs that he still kept pushing around with his fork. “… friend.” She ended the sentence with a sigh.

“Nice to meet you ma’am. I’m Bucky… Steve’s friend.” Some 1940s habits never changed.

With a curt nod and a smile, Pepper walked away briskly.

It was an effort not to keep grimacing at the tangible uneasiness that kept teetering between Stark and the businesswoman. But Bucky knew better, so he kept his head down and piled some oatmeal in a bowl and proceeded to eat it.

Dr. Banner left soon afterwards, letting the engineer know that he was going to be in his lab if Stark needed him.

And then there were two.

They spent several minutes in quietude, only the clattering of the cutlery filling the silence.

“How’s the arm?” Bucky looked up, an eyebrow raised at the question. It was confusing at first, to have Stark ask him a question about his well-being, considering everything, but then his buried fondness for the man, something that he had stored away ever since the day he had installed his new arm, took over.

The engineer’s plate was still pretty much full. He noticed that one of the two pieces of toast was gone and that there was a small dent where there was a heaping pile of eggs. And that bothered the hell out of Bucky.
He had almost forgotten that he had been asked a question, his crystal blue eyes focused on the plate that still had so much food on it. He shook himself out of his daze and glanced up. “It’s good. Really good. Thank you.” The words were rushed, hasty. He hadn’t meant them to come out that way, but there was a sense of urgency that he just could not shake. It had blossomed in his stomach from the day he had returned to the States and had just continued to grow from the disastrous press conference. Now it was only intensified by Steve’s heartbreak.

There was an impending sense of doom growing in him. He could only describe it best as the Jaws theme song, a movie that Steve had made him watch as soon as they had settled into the Tower. He couldn’t place the origin of that doom, but when he stepped away and looked from afar, it kept circling and returning back to Tony Stark, the son of the people he had been forced to kill.

The thought made him shiver.

“What’s upset?” Bucky mumbled. What the fuck? Why did you say that out loud?

He held his breath and tried not to cringe, waiting for the engineer to storm off in a rage.

But he didn’t. Tony stayed silent.

So Bucky kept going. “He drew you, you know?” Then, recalling his conversation with his friend from earlier, added on, “He only draws what he knows. What he loves.”

He heard a sharp inhale at that so the super soldier snapped his head up, apologies ready at the tip of his tongue for bringing the sensitive topic up.

But Tony only smiled at him, getting up to scrape his uneaten food back into the pan where it had been cooked from. “He must have a lot of drawings of you then.” There was no hint of bitterness in the man’s tone. Just a statement made affably enough.

“He never shows me his drawings.” Bucky admitted. Except for the one of you. He added inwardly. But that was only because he fell asleep holding it.

There had only been one other time when Steve had shown Bucky his drawings. That was when his mother had passed away. Bucky had stayed with him through the night, comforting Steve as he cried. And drew. He drew his mother. Every line and every wrinkle, right down to the detailed hair follicles on the woman’s scalp was drawn with such love, such affection. Only one other time had Steve fallen asleep with his drawing clutched to his chest.

And that was 100 years ago.

Guilt coiled around his veins once more. It was the uncertain kind, where he knew he shouldn’t feel that way but he did anyway, because nothing he ever did, nothing anyone ever said, could wash away the blood that The Winter Soldier spilled using Bucky Barnes’ hands.

Nothing could change the fact that Maria Stark’s throat was crushed under his grip, taking another mother away from her child.

And he had witnessed the pain that the child felt afterwards firsthand. Because Steve… he had been so… sad. So anguished.

And Winter had… oh God… Winter had caused the same pain to someone else. And that man was sitting right in… right in front of him.

Oh God… oh God…
“Mission report.” The man’s breath was damp and musty and disgusting. But still he leaned closer to him, demanding things from him, commanding him like he was some kind of slave. Some kind of dog.

“No.” He retorted. Only to get a stinging slap across the face. His head was jerked back to face the ugly man once more, violently.

“Mission report.” The man repeated, snarling.

Everything was so cold, as if he was encapsulated in ice. His mind drew a blank as to who he was, what he was doing, why he was there.

He couldn’t figure anything out. He couldn’t remember why the man was threatening him. He couldn’t remember his name, his past, or how it felt to control his body.

He was floating in the void.

“MISSION REPORT!”

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT!” Maybe if he sounded broken enough, maybe if he pleaded with them more efficiently, maybe if he began to cry, they would let him go.

He curled his fists. One felt normal, the other felt… he looked down. Where there should have been flesh, there was silver. Where there should have been sensation, there was only an empty coldness.

He lashed out, his ears numb but his voice straining. He was shrieking and he couldn’t hear it.

And there were hands, touching him, forcing him back down, controlling him. He thrashed.

“LET GO! LET GO OF ME!”

The pain became white as he screamed. Screamed for somebody to please help him because he didn’t know why these men were holding him down, why there were cracks of lightning in his vision, why his arm was gone.

Why his mind was fading away.

Why his consciousness suddenly became a pinprick in between dimensions, trapping him, abandoning him.

“Help.” He begged and whimpered, hoping someone would hear him. “Help.” He said again, the word echoing but reaching nowhere. “Help… help… help me please…”

“Help.” The word tumbled out of his mouth as he was spit back out into reality. He gasped lightly, touching his face and feeling a wetness that wasn’t there before.

His eyes darted manically until they fell upon Tony. The engineer was spraying water into his face with his fingers.

“Oh thank God.” The other man said, rushing to fill up a glass of cold water and then setting it beside Bucky. “You okay, Barnes? You were a million miles away just now. What the hell happened?”
Bucky loosed a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and then focused his gaze on his oatmeal, shame wrapping around him at losing it in front of Stark. He nodded slowly.

The glass of water was stuck in front of his face. He took it, relaxing a little at the coolness of the liquid as it went down his throat. “That’s bullshit.”

_Fuck_. He had walked right into this. He knew he couldn’t escape this inevitable conversation.

“I remember things.” He spoke softly, afraid that he would begin screaming if he didn’t breathe rhythmically. “Haunting things either about what HYDRA did to me or what Winter did to… to innocent people.” He flinched, knowing that two of those innocent people were Tony’s parents. “And it… I know it wasn’t me. I know that I had no control, that it wasn’t my fault but it just… it’s like I was tied down and sitting front row at a shit show and I could have… the whole thing would have ended if I had just broke free. But I… I couldn’t. I couldn’t.” Bucky hung his head. “I don’t know.” He looked away from the engineer’s sad face. “It’s like HYDRA scooped out a part of myself and then sewed me back together by adding The Winter Soldier to everything I am. Everything I’m made of. I can’t escape it. The blood is still… it’s physically on my hands.”

Bucky opened one eye to analyze the damage. He found Stark’s face blank and staring at his metal arm, lost in thought.

Or panic.

_Shit. I caused another panic attack._

He was about to stumble out of the floor, leaving before he could projectile vomit out any more of his internal wars, when Stark caught his arm.

“I forgive you.” He said with confidence and finality. “Not because I blame you for my parents’ deaths but because this is what you need to hear. To move on. I forgive you. I mean it.”

The super soldier only truly heard and processed the words, replaying them and turning them over and over again in his head, after the engineer had left. He was, in short, dumbstruck.

But he also felt like thick, heavy chains which had weighed him down for so long… they were gone. He had broken through them. He had survived.

He was free.

The Scarlet Witch was leaning against the door frame and Stark brushed past her hurriedly.

But Wanda smiled at Bucky.

Bucky smiled back.

“Stark, wait!” She called after the man who had hastily stepped out of her way and was now trying to leave her sight.

The man who had given her a home, clothes on her back, and food in her mouth despite a history of hatred and misplaced blame. The man she had grown to respect.

The man whose worst fear had terrified her the most.
He froze mid step, but kept his back turned, waiting to hear what she had to say. “What’s up, Wanda?” He asked, voice quivering.

“I forgive you. Not because I blame you for my parents’ deaths but because this is what you need to hear. To move on. I forgive you. I mean it.”

She repeated every word, putting as much genuity in them as she could muster.

Because she truly did mean it.

“And why?” The word was barely a whisper, but she heard it nonetheless.

“You didn’t pull the trigger. I know that now.”

Stark nodded, then continued his walk. He was slower this time, more relaxed.

She could sense the relief washing over him. She could sense the relief washing over herself.

_We all deserve peace, Pietro. For the first time, brother, I think Stark and I have finally found it._

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**ONE WEEK LATER**

Clint was confused as to why Natasha was dragging him away from the perfectly good couch on his floor where he was watching recycled news coverage of the press conference they had all participated in several weeks ago. She had approached him rather excitedly, something which was also extremely strange.

“Nat, could you please tell me where the hell we’re going?” He grunted annoyingly as she pushed him forward and towards the elevator.

“Shut the fuck up and march.” She ordered. And everyone knew that to ignore one of The Black Widow’s orders was basically a death wish.

They rode up to the communal floor, which was frustrating because Clint had come back to his floor _because_ he hadn’t wanted to interact with other people. And plus, he had been counting down the hours until he could video chat with Laura and the kids again.

It had become a daily routine. One hour spent everyday in front of his computer. An hour that he cherished. An hour that he nurtured and cared for, as if he were growing a garden.

The rest of the day was a blur. Because nothing else but those sixty minutes mattered to him anymore.

The floor was quiet when Clint and Natasha walked in. Which was odd, because everyone was there. Steve and Barnes were sitting on the couch, Steve wearing the biggest shit eating grin on his face. Wanda was there too, with Vision’s arm around her. Banner simply nodded, leaning against the pillar, wearing an affectionate smile on his face.

Clint turned back to Natasha, baffled as to what the actual fuck was going on.
“Stop looking so confused, you idiot. You know exactly what’s happening.” Stark. The man walked out of the other room, looking clean cut and fresh. Not haggard, just tired. He wore a blazer with a graphic tee beneath it as well as faded jeans.

And he was carrying Nathaniel.

Clint was pretty sure the world imploded when Stark put the little boy--his son--on the ground and whispered, “Go to Daddy. He’s here for you.”

He was pretty sure the universe collapsed when Lila and Cooper came out hand in hand next, with Pepper behind them.

When Laura stepped forward, all the destruction seized and the cosmos began to reshape themselves. The stars burned brighter, infinity expanded, and entire solar systems, galaxies even, realigned perfectly.

Because everything was perfect now. Because his children were here, hugging him as he hugged them back. Because he felt like a father again.

Because Laura had encased them all in her arms and they were all huddled together, the five of them, as a family once more.

When they broke apart, Clint looked at Natasha, his eyes so full of gratitude. “Thank you.” He mouthed.

“Don’t look at me.” She mouthed back and pointed at Tony, who was showing Cooper his watch/gauntlet. His son shrieked with joy when Stark demonstrated the whining of the repulsor and then how the gauntlet retracted and turned back into a watch.

The same watch he had worn the day he was kidnapped. The day he had rushed his children to safety while he had been taken and… and… for seven days.

He found himself embracing that man, the man who had saved his entire family from Ross’ wrath and the kidnappers’ dirty hands. “Thank you.” The archer choked out. He felt a light, slightly awkward pat on his back and then pulled back. “Thank you.” He repeated, crying for real this time because damn it all if he wasn’t the happiest man in the world right now.

He heard someone clear their throat behind him and Stark smirked. “Careful.” He winked. “Don’t want to get the missus all jealous now, do we?”

Laura made sure the kids weren’t watching before flipping the engineer off, to which she received a laugh, and then she leaned forward.

Clint was kissing his wife. After three long, years, Clint was kissing his wife. “I love you so fucking much you selfish bastard.” She whispered, letting the words become devoured between their lips as they fell apart in each other’s arms.

She was here. She was real. All of this was real. “Don’t you ever…” She pushed him away and held him by the shoulders, “leave us again you piece of shit.”

Clint smiled from one corner of his face to the other, completely aware that there was an audience and completely not caring at the same time.

“Not now.” He said, head held high. His words were stone and he engraved them into the deepest vaults of his heart. “Not ever.”
There was a whooping and a clapping that was probably initiated by Tony and Nat as the couple locked lips once more.

Nathaniel wrapped his tiny arms around Clint’s leg and the archer swore that it felt the same as someone shooting an explosive arrow into his heart. He wrapped his own arms around his son and lifted him up, kissing his cheek and nuzzling his nose. “I love you guys.” He said as his wife moved closer and his other children hugged his waist. “I love you so much.”

Tony, like the amazing asshole he was, tapped on Clint’s shoulder, interrupting the moment. It was amusing to see the wealthy engineer look so flustered, especially when it was usually him who would dominate a room with his flamboyant personality.

Where had that personality gone, anyway?

“Oh Legolas, you sap. I have one more thing for you.” Clint smirked at the familiar nickname, only to have his mouth drop open when Tony placed a pair of keys in his palms. “You’ve been pardoned, so Ross is officially off your back. I’ve had it all legalized and everything. So those are the keys to your farm. I renovated it a little since Ross, God that guy is an ass, he had the place turned inside out when he invaded it three years ago but…”

And then the engineer was pounced and tackled to the floor by the family of five because there was no other way to express thanks. Not anymore. The kids tickled their Uncle Tony and Clint howled in laughter when he saw the billionaire curl up into the fetal position, tears running down his cheeks from laughing too much as he playfully resisted the children’s fingers.

As the rest of the Avengers joined in on torturing the billionaire and tumbling with the kids, Laura slipped a hand around his waist and they watched the beautiful chaos unravel before them.

He knew that everything was going to be alright.

It was too good to be true. It was also never going to last. Tony knew that. Tony accepted that. He could never have what Barton had. A family. Domesticity. Normalcy. It wasn’t in his blood.

He couldn’t lie and say that he didn’t enjoy the kids’ affections. In fact, he craved them. The tiny agents were enough to give him something to look forward to. Protecting them was a privilege. Keeping them happy was a privilege.

The tickling wasn’t so bad at first. He had gotten a taste of what he would never have and he was fine indulging in the loss of control, in the hands all over his body.

And then his mind took him back to places that he didn’t want to be. It was because of that that the small, soft hands became coarse, rough, and demanding. The carpet became a cold floor. The lights became too dim and the cackling men, they were touching him and they weren’t letting him go.

But his mind wavered between that disgusting, smelly room and the living room, between having everything taken from him to having everything he could ever possibly want. The part of his mind that was still present allowed him to curl up into the fetal position as the children kept on attacking him. The part of his mind that was still tied down and gagged and raped… it caused him to dig his nails into the crescent shaped scars in his palm.

The fiery stinging washed through him and the world became less fuzzy. The mask was still intact. He was fine.
When everybody finally decided to get the fuck off of him before he had a panic attack and they all sat down for dinner, he texted Kaira. He’d been doing it every now and then for the past week. Texting her was calming. Texting her was good. She never expected anything from him, she never wanted him to be something that he could never be anymore. He liked that about her. She knows he’s fucked up but she didn’t push him to change. She accepted him like how he was: emotionally constipated and mentally impaired.

“I fucking hate tickling. It should be some sort of federal level crime because tickling someone to the point of tears is fucked up.”

About a minute later, his phone pinged.

“You should get Cap on that. Have him do some sort of activist program to get tickling banned because of the eighth amendment.”

Tony chuckled out loud at the image of Cap outside some government building holding a sign and protesting tickling of all the motherfucking things in the world.

The engineer looked up as Bruce put some food on his plate, nodding his thanks at his friend.

He hadn’t meant to lock his gaze with Steve’s in the process. And those baby blues, they looked so… sad. Heartbroken. Like a building had collapsed on his goddamn puppy or something. It might as well have, because Tony couldn’t understand why Steve wasn’t looking away. He couldn’t comprehend, refused to comprehend the fact that Captain America was in love with him. He couldn’t accept that. Not in a million fucking years. The red, puffy crescents on his palms spoke for themselves. He was damaged goods.

And Steve? Steve Rogers was perfect. A symbol of the American dream. Good and kind and morally sound and what the fuck ever.

He still felt the weight of the shield on his chest.

Neither of them looked away for a good thirty seconds.

Tony was the first to break away. He was about to text back, when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

He was sandwiched between Natasha and Pepper at the dining table and Pepper was talking to Laura. So he was smothered by a piercing, emerald glare instead.

“Coulson called me.” Nevermind smothered. Suffocated then. “They found some of the videos by further decrypting Stane’s file. But they think there’s more because the dates for the ones that they found are all scattered. They’re in the process of erasing them and are actively looking for the other ones.”

How was someone supposed to feel after hearing something like that? For Tony, his emotions teetered somewhere between relief and terror. Between comfort and bone-rattling anxiety.

He opened his mouth, the question just sitting at the tip of his tongue. But the words rotted away with his courage to ask and all that came out was a strangled whine. Natasha put a hand on his arm and he wished that they would all just stop touching him because the air was getting too warm and his clothes seemed a little too tight and he couldn’t fucking breathe. “H… how many?” He managed to whisper, darting his pupils back and forth, looking everywhere but at Natasha. “How many videos?”
She stayed silent for a long moment and that was enough to make his entire body clench. “Twelve.” Just a single number, fading away to oblivion.

It was enough to make Tony stand up hastily and shake the table slightly.

“What’s wrong?” Pepper. Sweet, beautiful, kind Pepper who had returned for whatever reason but didn’t have to but did anyway and all he did was keep hurting her and he couldn’t draw a breath anymore and… and…

“Bathroom.” He clipped, then broadcasted his media boy smile, making sure that the corners of his eyes and mouth were crinkling because damn if he hurt her again because he was so damn broken and anxious and stupid, stupid, stupid.

Tony gripped the edge of the toilet with both hands as he kneeled on the floor, swallowing repeatedly to will away the nausea. No, he wasn’t going to throw up because of this. No, he wasn’t going to let it hold power over him anymore. No, he was done, done letting Stane leave him paralyzed, leave him to die, as he walked away with his heart in those nasty, dirty hands.

No, it didn’t affect him one fucking bit that there were twelve videos. No, it didn’t matter that there were more. No, he didn’t care that it meant that he was raped more than twelve times in his past. He didn’t care. He didn’t care. He didn’t…

Tony gagged. Nothing came up. He gagged again. His throat burned, but nothing came up. He breathed deeply. In… out… in… out.

The crescents on his palms oozed crimson.

His stomach settled as he kept breathing. He stood on wobbly legs, avoided his reflection in the mirror and splashed cold water on his face over and over.

The two brisk knocks on the door made him jump. “Stark, come on man. Did you fall asleep in there? We’re all waiting for you! I’m about to starve and Laura isn’t letting us start without you so hurry up before I blow up the door. It won’t matter if you’re naked or not.” Clint laughed, ecstatic at his own humor.

“Could you stop being an ass, Barton?” Natasha said teasingly, but Tony knew she was defending him. She always knew.

A dramatic gasp from the archer. “Natasha, watch your gosh darn language. There are children here!”

An exasperated moan from Steve. “You guys will never let that go, will you?” Jovial laughter ensued.

Tony wanted to cry. It won’t matter if you’re naked or not. The words resonated and echoed in his head and damn, he wanted to sit on the floor and cry until this whole nightmare was over. He wanted to bang his head against the wall. He wanted to scream.

Not today. Today wasn’t about him. It was about that son of a bitch Clint Barton whom he loved to death but wanted to stick a fucking arrow up his ass at the same time.

So he slid the mask back on. He adjusted the faceplate and practiced his smile. Then he came out of the bathroom with his head held high.

And tried not to crumble.
The nausea still lingered slightly and the very sight of the food was making him sick. At the same time, he was so hungry. He hadn’t eaten a proper meal in forever and running on coffee and smoothies wasn’t cutting it for him anymore. He had definitely lost a lot of weight recently.

He figured he’d rather be skinny than suffer through night after night of vomiting. At least then he’d have nothing to clean up.

But of course, because she was always hovering around him like some sort of vulture, Nat noticed. She rubbed his thigh soothingly but that just spiked his anxiety. “You have to eat. Pushing the food around your plate isn’t helping you not look like a ghost.”

“I’m fine.” Lies.  “I’m not really that hungry.” Lies.  “I’ve got it under control.” Someone give me a fucking medal or something.

“You have enough issues. You don’t need to add an eating disorder to that list.”

Her tone was gentle enough but that fucking stung.

He wanted to respond with something along the lines of Fuck you Natalie. But no. She was trying. In fact, she was the only one who noticed. And God, he was a horrible person.

“I’m going to fill up my glass. I need water.” He mumbled, pushing back in his chair.

“Your glass is full, Stark.” Natasha pointed with her fork.

So he downed the water in one gulp and stood up again, turning and stepping away from the table full of smiling and laughter and happiness when it shouldn’t be because there were twelve videos and more and he was so tired and it wasn’t fucking fair. It wasn’t fair.

And then the lights were too bright and there was a ringing in his ears now and there were only jumbled words…

It won’t matter if you’re naked or not.

Tony Stark, you are a big part of my entire world.

I don’t think we should be together, Tony.

I’m going to sleep downstairs. Tinker with that.

Why are you so desperate?

You are nothing, nothing, but a stupid, worthless, shameless whore.

Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off and what are you?

I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.

You better stop pretending to be a hero.

Stop pretending… stop pretending… stop…

His vision was blurry and the voices were muffled and there was a pounding in his head.

“What’s wrong with Uncle Tony?” He made out as he wafted in and out of consciousness.
“Shh… nothing baby. He’s okay, just a little sleepy, that’s all.”

Tony felt his head being lifted and then placed somewhere softer. Somewhere warmer. He smelled Pepper’s perfume.

“Tony, you okay?” Who was calling him? Who was that? Tony blinked a couple times and then the universe came rushing back all at once and everyone just became too fucking loud. Tony slammed his eyes back shut, flinching from the brightness of the lights. He groaned lightly. “Tony, you okay?”

Didn’t this person realize that asking the same question over and over again didn’t help things? The engineer slid his eyes open once more and the kaleidoscope straightened out. Blond hair, blue eyes met him. Sad, concerned baby blue eyes.

Steve.

“I’m okay…” Tony whispered, making an effort to get up and finding that his limbs had given up on him. “Sorry I think I…” he sighed, letting his neck adjust on Pepper’s lap while she stroked fingers through his hair. “I stood up too fast.”

Someone squeezed his hand. It was the red head. Natasha. “Eat something. You’ll feel better.”

So he got up, this time succeeding in his efforts. Pepper was rubbing his back and then she kissed him on the cheek. He chose to ignore noticing Steve’s distinct bristle.

He also chose to ignore his rising anxiety.

Tony managed to force most of his plate into his revolting stomach. He drank some soda and prayed that it stayed down.

Pepper led him back to the penthouse soon after, gripping his hand tightly as they departed.

Once they were all changed and ready for bed, Tony was ready to collapse onto the mattress. He swayed a little as he made his way back from the bathroom and Pepper caught him right as he was about to topple over. Fucking again.

She held him by the shoulders, wearing that same sad look that everybody seemed to be using as a fashion trend nowadays for some reason, and stared at him. Her face contorted and then tears began to fall.

“I’m sorry, Pep.”

“No, no, you didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t know why I’m crying.” She laughed as her eyes streamed and she wiped at them.

And then she was leaning in and they were so close and oh God, he couldn’t handle all of this.

He stepped back, stumbling a little, breathing in disarray once more. The apologies died on his lips because she said it first. She was reassuring him that everything was fine, that it wasn’t his fault, that it was her and not him, that she should have known.

But he didn’t hear any of that. The blankets gave him solace. He would be safe under the blankets. No one would would touch him under the blankets.

He slept.

❖ ❖ ❖
They were all laughing at him. They were all watching him. Men with yellow, crooked teeth and dirty, wrinkled hands with manic glints in their eyes. They were all using him. Tainting him.

Cracked lips against his and the nasty smell of that man was overwhelming and he wished he was drugged so he wouldn’t have to deal with the sensory overload.

He was so sore. He was so tired. Black and blue were splattered all over his waist where they would grip his body so tight as they violated him. His bones ached as he felt the marrow waste away.

As he felt himself waste away.

And then a voice so familiar, he could still hear it every now and then when his mind took him back to dark places and he returned to that couch in his Malibu mansion. Paralyzed. Betrayed.

“You’re doing so good, my boy.” Obadiah.

He couldn’t move against the restraints but he tried to squirm away. Somewhere. Anywhere. But they held him down and his limbs were frozen and he was utterly naked and so so cold. He screamed.

Not a sound came out.

Stane held the camcorder, recording every move, recording every sound. Recording every moment of humiliation and degradation and shame. Every single time they bruised him, tainting him more than he already was. Marking him as property. Branding him as nothing more than a portable hole to fuck.

And then his godfather was there, kneeling in front of his face as he pleaded and cried for him to please help.

The camera zoomed in.

“My boy. My good boy. You’re doing so well.”

Please help me.

Stane laughed. He slammed the camcorder shut. The room became darker and the slithering hands all over his body disappeared. His skin became milky white, all the bruises gone but he was still naked.

Obadiah leaned in, tilting his chin up with his finger. “Stop pretending.” The words were barely a whisper and he shuddered.

He leaned back and in his godfather’s place were baby blue eyes, blond hair, a beautiful, sculpted body.

Steve looked at him in disgust. He looked down. He screamed. Not a sound came out.

Black and blue on his waist and hips. Ribs jutting out because he had gotten so skinny. Scars on his sternum from when they removed the reactor. So ugly. Scars on his wrists, red and puffy and stinging. So ugly. He was so ugly.

“You may not be a threat.” Steve. His voice was amplified now and he cowered, curling into a ball, trying so hard to hide his ugliness. “But you better stop pretending to be a hero.”
They were all laughing at him: Bruce, Natasha, Sam, Wanda, Bucky, Clint, Rhodey, Vision, Peter, Harley, Obadiah, Howard, Jarvis, Aunt Peggy, Pepper, Happy, and Steve.

He screamed.

❖ ❖ ❖

Something was poisoning him. It was going to hurt him. It was going to hurt Pepper. It was going to hurt everybody.

So he shrieked and thrashed. Fight it. Fight it you fucking moron.

“NO!” The repulsor whined, his gauntlet was fit onto his hand. He had forgotten to take his watch off. “NO!”

Glass shattered, everything broke. It was all raining down on him, suffocating him, cutting him, burying him. Like the snow in Siberia.

“NO!”

Hands were touching him again and he couldn’t. He couldn’t let them keep tainting him. He couldn’t let them make him more ugly. “GET OFF ME! GET OFF ME!”

He screamed. This time, horrible sounds came out, masking the ones that told him to stop, to calm down because everything was okay. That he was safe, that she was here, that no one would hurt him. He wailed and cried and sobbed because at that point, that’s all he knew how to do.

The repulsor whined. Something else broke. Someone else screamed.

And then something hit him. It shattered and tiny white capsules surrounded him. The gauntlet retracted. He stared at the now empty pill bottle lying on the floor. His anti-depressants, the ones he doesn’t take anymore because they didn’t help.

The world came rushing back. Pepper was crying. Her chest was heaving. Her cheeks were red. She was fuming.

You hurt her. Again.

“GOD, TONY, I THOUGHT YOU WERE TRYING! I THOUGHT YOU WERE TRYING TO FIX THIS, TO FIX YOURSELF! ” She was screaming at him now and he didn’t know what to do, he didn’t know, he didn’t know, he didn’t know. “YOU ALMOST KILLED ME! YOU COULD HAVE HURT YOURSELF! I CAN’T DEAL WITH THIS! YOU’RE OUT OF CONTROL, YOU HEAR ME? YOU’RE OUT OF CONTROL!” He was so scared, could she please stop screaming at him. He was so tired and he can’t let himself go back to sleep. He can’t. “I DON’T HAVE THE TIME TO DEAL WITH SOMEONE SO DAMAGED! ”

He flinched. She clamped her hand over her mouth, her chest expanding and contracting rapidly. Her eyes were wide.

There was nothing. So much nothing. He spun endlessly in that void, in that space where time meant nothing. Where feelings meant nothing. Where he meant absolutely, positively nothing.

Except for those stupid pills that were all around him. On the blanket, on his skin, on the floor. Those defined him more than anything else.
She came back. She touched him again. “FRIDAY, turn on the lights please.”

“Of course, Miss Potts.”

There was dim, yellow lighting now, flooding the room, illuminating the dark corners, illuminating the shattered glass shards that were now littered on the floor.

Another ugly mess he had made.

And in those dim lights, he saw them. The criss-crossing angry scars on his wrists, the red puncture wounds on his palms. His sleeves had rolled up in his sleep. The gauntlet had retracted them further.

She saw them too. Her hands gripped his, displaying his shame. “Tony...why?”

Because... because... he didn’t know.

So he jerked away, got up, and turned his back.

“I’m sorry. Tony, I’m so so so sorry. Don’t leave. Please, don’t go. It’s all going to be okay. It’s going to be okay, I promise. I promise. I’m sorry.”

Everything jumbled together. Nothing made sense. And he was so tired. So so tired.

“I hate you.” He found himself saying, words shaking as his chin quivered. “I hate you so much.”

He left.

Tony didn’t know which car he had taken. He didn’t know where he was going. All he knew was that the air was cool and crisp and he was awake at 3 AM and going nowhere. He knew he was shivering and cold and scared and tired and so so alone.

Missed call after missed call. Text after text. Drama and drama and drama and fuck, he was so sick of it.

He cleared the notifications. He called Kaira. He never did get a chance to respond to her during dinner.

It rang several times. She was asleep for once. Then she picked up.

“Tony?”

“I had a fight.” Not really.

“You get kicked out?” Her voice was weary, but gentle.

“I left.”

Silence.

“My couch is empty.”

So he went to Brooklyn. He went to that old apartment where the woman decorated everything with Christmas lights and everything was a beautiful mess, something he could never be because he was so ugly.

She opened the door and she was wearing a sweatshirt and boxers and she wasn’t wearing a bra but
he didn’t care because she was still so kind and beautiful and caring and not judgemental and he was ugly. He was so fucking ugly.

He was barefoot too. She looked him over once and took him inside, not asking any questions and God, he loved her for that because he couldn’t fucking speak, he couldn’t fucking breathe, he was incapacitated.

She cleaned the cuts on his feet that he didn’t know he had gotten. Probably from stepping on top of the glass that he had fucking broke. He had bandages there too now.

They had been sitting on the couch but she led him to the bedroom instead and she turned on the Christmas lights because of course she knew that he loved those. And there were so many colors and it made him want to cry and he couldn’t understand why anymore. He was limping so she half carried him and half supported him and then she placed him on the bed.

Her blankets were warm and they smelled like rose and incense and that comforted him because that meant that someone alive and breathing slept in these sheets unlike the ones in his bedroom that were cold and unforgiving and stale because he didn’t sleep anymore.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” She said.

“Stay.” He begged. “Please stay.”

So she stayed. She didn’t ask questions. Kaira was good. Kaira was understanding. Kaira was perfect.

He cried himself to a restless sleep.
The water was lukewarm and he let it wash over him, cleansing him of the night before. He traced the scars on his arms, both old and new, and thought about how they were not secret or hidden anymore. Long sleeves had failed him. His consistency had withered. His shame, which he had collected in pinpricks of blood that he had released from his own tattered skin, was now exposed.

The world only contorted its face even more when he walked by. It wrinkled its nose with disgust as he hung his head and pulled the fabric of his shirt down further. But fabric tore and it had its limits. How much longer should he keep stretching before the threads splintered?

The bathroom was small, but comfortable. The walls were painted a rich maroon. A version of red that was softer, more seductive. A color that resembled wine, meaning that the atmosphere only got finer as it aged. Tony vouched for that. It was not repulsive, unlike the shade he was familiar with.

Tiny, multicolored candles were littered around the edges of the sink as well as that of the jacuzzi. Their smell permeated through the room. It wasn’t sweet or flowery, but rather sultry and sensual. But not overwhelmingly so. Just enough to relax an individual, to make him or her feel safe. Maybe even loved.

Kaira had a knack for decorating her apartment with things that resembled her to the fullest.

She had fished the candles out of her closet and had lit them for Tony when he had woken up from his restless sleep. For some impossible, inexplicable reason, she had explained to him that she had had a notion that he would like to be in the dark while he showered. Maybe she had figured that the lightbulbs would have been too artificial, too upsetting and utterly fake.

Whatever the case, the tiny flickers of light, of pure, unadulterated flame, warmed him better than the water did as it pelted him.

The rack of bath products had plenty of bottles atop it. There was the usual: Pantene and Dove and whatnot. Then there were tinted, smaller ones, each sporting a different color. The labels were wrinkled, cracked, and faded. They were written in a language that he found familiar. It was one that was often on some of the things that Bruce had brought back from India.

On one of them, a pinkish-reddish glass bottle, the label had a small rose painted on it. Tony stared at it, trying to make out what exactly the product was before popping it open and slathering the liquid onto his hands.

It smelled like Kaira. Sweet, yet strong. Enough to wash away the dirt, enough to wash away the past.

He dragged the liquid over the criss-crossing lines which burdened his wrists and upper arm. He ignored the sharp stinging, instead letting it ebb away as he brought it over his bruises from when the men had gripped his waist too hard… from Siberia and Leipzig, from the Arc Reactor, from Obie, from Pepper, from Rhodey, from Natasha, and Bucky, and… and Steve. From everyone. Every single one of them.

Maybe this would clean him. Maybe this would save him.
Maybe he was a naive little shit.

He stopped the water. The pattering finally silenced, but the air did not.

The soft melody of piano keys wafted, reaching the engineer’s ears. A faint, feminine humming followed, echoing along the walls.

His hands worked quickly, halting the dripping from his body as fast as he could.

He drew closer to the sound, wrapping himself in a soft and plush bathrobe before tiptoeing out of the bathroom.

There was a door that was opened wide. A door he had not had the chance to notice during his first visit and especially not during last night. And Kaira was there, sitting on the bench in front of the instrument, her fingers pressing down on the keys expertly. Her voice caressed the chords she created.

The playing was soft, steady, and calm. Not quick and reckless like how Obie used to play on the grand piano that was his mother's. The same one that had been destroyed during the Mandarin attacks, when Killian had obliterated his Malibu mansion.

When the taking from his life had just brushed the surface. From there, the shit show had only flourished.

He had nothing left now. Peter Parker remained. And he would see to the painful, gruesome death of whoever dared to touch that boy.

But in that moment, he had a woman playing the piano, singing in a full, deep, and strong voice that resonated to the marrow of his bones. He had the scent of roses on his imperfections: a temporary fix. So for now, he had cleanliness. Worth.

So he leaned against the doorway and he listened.

“We build sandcastles… that washed away.”

The Avengers. His family.

“I made you cry… when I walked away…”

Steve. Steve motherfucking Rogers.

“And although I promised… that I couldn’t stay… oh baby…”

He wasn’t good enough. Not now. Not ever. He never will be.

“Every promise… don’t work out that way…”

But he loved him. Oh God, he loved him. There was a scar on his wrist to prove it. There was a fixed shield in the Tower, the one that had been lodged in his chest, which supported it.

“Dishes smashed on the counter… from our last encounter…”

Siberia.

“Picture snatched out the frame… bitch I scratched out your name… and your face…”
On his wrist. It was on his wrist. It was ripped to shreds in his trashcan. It was dented on his suit.

“What is it about you… that I can’t erase… oh baby…”

His panic attacks, his nightmares. The cold and the red, white, and blue. The wounds on his back from the knife. The ones that Clint accused him of inflicting upon the others on the Raft.

“When every promise… don’t work out that way…”

And his heart still ached for him. Even though he was angry, so angry that it made him dizzy and see red and cry and cut and scream. He still fucking loved him. That spangly bastard.

“Now your heart is broken… ‘cause I walked away…”

Why couldn’t he see that he wasn’t worth it? Why can’t he just Give. Up.

“Show me your scars… and I won’t walk away…”

Captain Perfect. He was so good, he was so clean, he was so righteous. He always made the right decisions and he was always a team player and he was always the bigger, better man. He wasn’t raped. He wasn’t tainted. He didn’t cut. He had everything he ever wanted.

And yet he still wanted Tony.

And the thoughts were bitter and jealous and Tony did not care. He did not fucking care.

“Every promise… don’t work out that way… no, no, no, no, no…”

But he did care and that crushed him every single damn day.

“Every promise… don’t work out that… way…”

He shook his head, wiping the super soldier away from his thoughts.

Kaira still sat, her fingers now still on the white keys, her head tilted. Her back curved as she sighed heavily, ruining her perfect posture.

There was a picture. Tony couldn’t see it from where he was but the frame was there, sitting on top of the piano. Kaira kept staring at it, seemingly lost. Some ghost from the past was nudging her.

He still leaned against the doorway.

“Stop staring, darling, I know I look good.” Gone was the woman who had been swallowed by the shadows, back to a part of her life which she indulged only in song.

Tony smiled. “So what’s your damage, nightingale?” The word still cycled in his mind and he tried to downplay it. The weight of it, the hurt that it inflicted.

But the cuts on his feet still stung.

The young woman gestured for him to come to her and he entered the room. Shelves lined the walls, full of trinkets and statues and books and Christmas lights. Larger candles flickered here too. Over in the corner, a stack of photo albums.

The piano was old, but sleek and well maintained. It wasn’t like the one he used to own, which was hardened and stiffened over the years. It was like how his piano used to be. When his mother played
it… not Obie.

The walls were lavender.

He sat on the bench next to her, still wrapped in her bathrobe. She smirked at the sight. “It suits you.” She chuckled. “Accentuates every curve, shows off your sexy legs, and your round, beautiful ass…” She teased, causing Tony to roll his eyes. He couldn’t stifle the stupid giggle that escaped him as his cheeks flushed.

_Goddamn it. This woman will be the death of me._

“Shut up. I hate you.” He shoved her playfully, then finally glanced over at the frame she had lingered on after she had finished singing. There was a little girl: Kaira, and a kind-faced, plump woman dressed in traditional clothing standing next to a tall, broad shouldered man and a little boy. Her family. “Where are they?” He found himself whispering.

“Safe. Alive. Somewhere in Kolkata, India.” Her tone was nonchalant. He noticed that she said the name of the city the Indian way, not the British way: which was Calcutta. He remembered Bruce saying that he had lived there and helped people there way back when. He wondered if Kaira had ever met him there.

“You see them often?”

“Nah.” She stretched, curving her back as she reach upwards with both arms. “I keep tabs though. Make sure they’re alright. I think they think I’m dead.” He stared at her wide-eyed. “But that’s good. Preferable, actually.”

“What? Why?” He couldn’t help the small flicker of anger that sparked within him. She had everything. Yet she stayed alone when she didn’t have to.

She sighed once more and turned towards him, honey-brown eyes striking. “Because a couple years ago, being around me meant that death and destruction followed. I may be an asshole, but I’m not that big of an asshole… to endanger them like that. Plus, I… I made bad decisions… to keep them safe. At least, that was my _intention_. To keep them safe.”

And he understood. There were news articles about a flying city in Europe which confirmed it.

“But you can now.” His voice was soft. “Visit them I mean. So why don’t you?”

“They’re happy.” Her answer was quick. Confident. “And I’m happy. It’s better this way.”

“Do you believe that?” He stared at his hands.

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

They don’t speak of it anymore, but Tony kept staring at the family in the picture. So content, so at ease. Something that he had never had. All his family portraits were forced. Plastic smiles and false confidence. False love.

But he had loved his mother. So much. She was there, she was kind. All he wanted was someone kind. And she had been taken away from him so cruelly.

And he had no one but a terrorist organization to blame. How the hell can you kill an entire group of murderers spread over the entire world? How the hell could you pinpoint and aim the anger _properly_?
There was no other way but to swallow it up and deal with it.

It was so fucking unfair.

“My mom used to play the piano.” He turned towards her suddenly, his tone set in a matter-of-fact way. “I never had the chance to learn.” He bit the corner of his lip. He wished he had learned. He wished he could have had that part of his mother. He wished he could have shared that with her. That way, the last memory of her that he had, which was her saying goodbye to him after she had played the piano, wouldn’t have been so painful. He wished…

Smooth, strong hands colored a rich brown covered his own as Kaira reached over him and placed their fingers, hers on top of his, on the white keys. Tony startled, then relaxed. Her hands were warm. Her hands were soft and beautiful. They covered his ugly, wrinkled, calloused, and pale ones. They shielded him.

She plays a gentle rhythm, pressing her fingers down upon his.

Her body was so close and she radiated comfort and heat. She smelled like what he had washed himself with in the shower and her hair was slightly wet, but it fell upon her shoulders in neat waves. Her back was straight once more and her shoulders were broad and made of steel.

So he lowered his head onto one of them and closed his eyes.

Kaira hummed, the melody stemming from the middle of her chest. He was lulled by the vibrations that ensued, spreading through her upper body. Tony buried his face in her hair and breathed deep as his fingers were controlled by hers and they simply played. The music ebbed and flowed and she hummed.

He hums along, their voices intertwining, the candles flickering in the background.

The melody ends and now only their breathing is audible. Tony lifts his head. She’s smirking at him with those rosy, full lips. She’s so close, so tangible in every single way. Striking brown eyes meet. Her hands are still over his.

Their breaths mingle.

And the phone rings.

“Hey Nat,” she clears her throat before picking up the call and then she’s gone. His hands become cold and clammy again.

Tony tried not to eavesdrop, but he couldn’t help but put bits and pieces of the conversation together. Apparently, Natasha was looking for him. He freezes, body tense.

“He’s okay, Nat. I got him. He’ll go back when he’s ready.” He let himself go slack with relief. Thank God for this woman.

He stopped listening after that. Kaira didn’t cut the call, however, and her words suddenly became muffled as he traced the instrument’s keys once more. His eyes suddenly caught the stack of photo albums in the corner of the room and his curiosity peaked.

She had everything. A loving mother and father. A brother. A grainy picture in a dusty frame was not enough to silence his brain from thinking, from asking questions.

He flips through the first one. He nearly cooed at the cute, little girl with the large eyes that stared
back at him. There was her and her parents on vacation, at home, with her baby brother, her dressed in traditional clothing looking like an absolute princess.

He flipped through her childhood and her mid-teens and then… nothing. The rest of the pages were blank. It was as if her life had simply halted or paused.

There was a single picture stuffed in between all of the albums. The album he was already holding was put aside, open, on the floor. He fished the image out and stroked his thumb over it gently. It was a polaroid picture taken some odd five or so years ago by a quick analysis of Natasha’s features.

Kaira looked the same and the red headed assassin had an arm slung around the woman with a beaming smile plastered on her face. They both looked so happy, almost like… like a couple.

He found himself eavesdropping once more. “It might not be now, it might not be anytime this year, Tasha. I can’t promise you anything at this moment. But if you’re willing to wait for me… if you’re still here after a year or two, then I can promise you a future. A semblance of one at least.” There was a long pause. “I’ll say those words back to you when I come full circle, okay? Are you okay with that?” Another pause. “I… I care about you. I want you to know that. And I will come back to you. I will.”

Silence followed and Tony returned to the picture again.

And then the scent of roses invaded his nostrils once more and she had returned, sitting down on the floor beside him, closing the album he had opened and raising an eyebrow at the polaroid he was still gripping.

Tony opened his mouth, then clamped it shut, deciding to form the words in his head before saying them out loud. “Are you and Nat…?”

“I don’t know.” She snapped, snatching the picture away before he could register what happened. He flinched and looked away, suddenly feeling guilty. But then, she exhaled. “I think we’re ‘maybe’ on the yes, no scale. She already said the three words and… I guess I’m not ready yet.”

The engineer turned back towards her. “Does she know that?” He asked in a small voice.

He was conflicted. Both of these women he was protective over. And even though he knew Nat was strong, he never wanted her to go through heartbreak. He knew what that felt like.

“She knows what I’m like.” She answered, placing the picture back in between albums. “And what are you like?”

Kaira folded her legs, putting her feet against each other. She cupped them in her palms, then bent forward. “Someone who doesn’t like to commit.” He stared. She rolled her eyes. “What I mean is, there are so many people out there in the world. I want to live every adventure and then come back full circle. I’ll sleep around, fall in love more than once, then come back to the person I really do want to be with.” She put her head in her hands, her elbows resting on her thighs. “And Tasha? She’s something else. She’s someone who may fit that slot, you know?” Tony nodded. He hadn’t gotten the title of playboy for nothing. But what Kaira was saying, this was something that he understood.

Tony had slept around to numb his feelings. Kaira did it to feel alive.

And from the little time that he knew her, he could tell that she was telling the truth. She could come back when she was ready.
He could accept that. For Natasha’s sake.

“Past for the past?” Kaira piped up suddenly, her tone changing completely. The album had returned to the stack. “Tell me what happened yesterday.”

His breath caught in his throat and he coughed. The world became too big and he… he became so small.

“Hey…” Her voice was so soothing, so kind. Tony didn’t remember bringing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. He didn’t remember when he decided that it was easy to fall apart in front of people.

“Had a nightmare. I got really scared. Pepper, she” his breath hitched, “she’s an old friend of mine. She came back recently and she was sleeping next to me. I was seeing things and stuff broke. She was,” he laughed wryly, “terrified, of course. She started screaming at me and she… she said something mean and I… I came here.” He wanted to kick himself for sounding so helpless, like a desperate child.

“And the nightmare?”

He sighed shakily, flipping the words around on his tongue. “I was… I was…” He bit his lip, then looked up at her, eyes watery, unable to bring himself to say it. “I had been…” He tried again, but the word died in his mouth. That filthy, disgusting word. “Raped.” He choked out finally, burying his head in his arms. “And I had a bad dream about it. Worse than usual.”

“Okay.” She whispered. “It’s okay.” She didn’t touch him, she didn’t say anything stupid. But she didn’t say anything new either.

“Getting raped,” Saying it, admitting it, taking control over it, made him feel better. Only marginally. But better. “…was the worst thing that ever happened to me. The worst thing.”

There were tears now. Oh well.

“And finding out about your Godfather?”

The tears kept flowing, but his heartbeat froze. Ice, as cold as Siberia, spread through his veins. “How do you know about that?” He squeaked.

But her voice remained gentle. Never defensive. “Tasha told me everything.”

“Even…” He was panicking now, and the panic came in violent waves, tumbling through his blood rapidly.

But she moved closer and he calmed down slowly, his breath still shaking. She looked at him questioningly, a hand reaching out. He nodded.

So Kaira took his arm and rubbed her hand on his wrist. “Even about what you tried to do.”

Now there was only anger. The shadows began whispering again. *She betrayed you again.*

“She will *never* stop the double agent thing, will she?” His blood boiled as he seethed. Tony snatched his arm back, the corners of his vision tinted red as he sprang up and made to leave.

Kaira followed. “Okay. One: you are wearing a fucking bathrobe and it’s mine so before you storm off angrily give that back. And two:” He spun around, ready to rip the fabric off before realizing that
he was naked underneath. “Two: don’t talk about my favorite red headed agent like that. She’s trying, okay? She’s trying to help you. I’m trying to help you. And I can’t if I don’t know.”

“You’re not a fucking therapist, you said so yourself!” He jabbed his pointer finger at her as he bellowed, finding his voice after being quiet for so long.

“You’re right!” She raised her voice but didn’t scream. “I’m not. But I can be your friend. God knows you need one. And you know what? Knowing all this about you… it doesn’t change anything. I want to be your friend, Tony. But only if you let me.”

The anger had flushed and now there was only a dull fear screaming in the back of his mind. So many people had been his friend. So many people had betrayed him. He couldn’t take it, wouldn’t be able to survive it, if Kaira betrayed him also.

But there was no mission here. There was only a young woman and a middle aged man.


“He’s safe. He’s with a trusted friend and he’ll come back when he’s ready.” Natasha told Pepper briskly before she sat down beside her to join her for breakfast.

Ready.

Kaira had said it twice in their conversation. The first time she said it, she had been relieved. The second time, she had been disappointed. But that was an understatement. Devastated was more like it.

But she was trained in the art of deception and nothing as stupid as emotions ever showed on her facial features.

She had agreed to wait. Kaira was young, younger than her by a couple years. It would have been selfish for her to take away the woman’s youth, the prime of her life. She just wished that those three words hadn’t been so hard for her to say back.

She would wait.

Pepper’s sudden, sharp sniff brought her back from her reverie. The strawberry blonde was weeping bitter, salty tears.

Natasha recalled the night before. FRIDAY had woken her up around 3 AM. The AI had been frantic. It had said something about Boss needing assistance and she had been confused because Pepper was there, wasn’t she?

She had leapt out of her bed all the same and had dashed to the engineer’s penthouse. She avoided the bathroom that she had found him in a year and a half ago and had entered the bedroom.

There were glass shards littered along the floor. The lights were on, but dimmed. The bedsheets were tousled. No less than a hurricane had hit the room and it had left a hysterical Pepper in its wake.

She had been raking her jittery hands through her hair, cheeks wet and eyes glistening. When she had finally saw Natasha, she had flailed. Her throat had been raw from sobbing.

“He’s gone! He’s gone and I don’t know where he went!”
Natasha thought she knew what fear felt like. She thought she was familiar with the taste of the unknown, of the uncertainty. But those blood stained glass shards which measured the distance between the bed and the exit stirred true terror. Enough to rattle her bones.

Now her bones have stopped shaking.

But now they only throbbed with longing. For the Indian woman that had thawed her frozen, nonexistent heart. For Kaira, who had made her feel something after so long. Who had simultaneously made her feel too much to make her weak.

“Tell me what happened.” She snapped out of it. This wasn’t the time. This was the time to wait. It wasn’t about her right now. It was about Tony.

So Pepper told her. And she listened. But all she heard was this is your fault.

“I want to stay until he comes back.” The business woman said shakily. Natasha nodded, half hearing her and half screaming internally. She hated Pepper for what she had said. She hated herself for fueling the fire that had already been brewing in Tony’s panic ridden heart.

She didn’t notice when Pepper left. She didn’t notice when Steve and Bucky came in.

They were talking to her. Something about the Bartons, about the kids, about Clint and Laura.

And she didn’t care. She didn’t fucking care. She wanted them to leave, to let her breathe. She was sick of the questions. She was sick of useless comments and observations and small talk. She was sick of all the poison in the world. Of people pretending to care.

“You okay?” Steve had asked her another stupid question. He was her friend. He was good.

She wanted to rip his goddamn throat out.

“Bad night. Didn’t sleep.” Short and sweet. Maybe that would chase him away.

“Nightmares?” Stubborn ass.

She shook her head, willing the vexation, the fury, out of her veins. To no avail.

“Tony?” The super soldier had gone meek, as if mentioning the name of the engineer caused his mouth to go dry. “Is he okay? He fainted last night.”

“He’s safe. For now.” She clipped.

“You mean he…”

“He’s not here, but he’s safe. Okay, Steve?” The irritation was clear now. She couldn’t help it. It was all pressing down on her and she couldn’t even move. She was trapped on every side. Every fucking side.

And Steve wouldn’t stop asking questions.

“Did he have a nightmare?” He pursued.

“It’s none of your goddamn business!” She slammed her palm onto the table and ignored the quick flash of pain.

Now Steve was frowning. Bucky stared wide-eyed. Natasha wanted to scoff.
“Why are you getting so mad? If it’s your business, then why shouldn’t it be mine?” It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t Kaira’s fault. It wasn’t Pepper’s fault. It sure as hell wasn’t Tony’s fault.

She was just so fucking tired of all of it. She was getting nowhere with this mission and instead of thinking rationally about how to get her feet unstuck from the mud, she wanted to shoot everyone to kingdom come. If only for a moment of peace.

If only…

“Because I *stayed*, Steve."

The air got sucked out of the room all at once and the quicksand became thicker. She wished that it would swallow her already instead of letting her sink slowly. Instead of making her deal with this perpetual sense of doom that something terrible was going to happen and she could do nothing about it.

“I had no choice but to leave, Nat. You know that.” His voice was rough now and his jaw was set. In anger, in sadness, she didn’t know. She didn’t care. “And I…”

“Love him?” Every frustration, every irritation came barreling out in those two words. They were laced with poison as she spit them out. “Pepper said the exact same thing and look at how beautifully that turned out!”

Then the man with the metal arm intervened. He said something… something that she couldn’t bother to listen to or give two shits about. She growled at him, only feeling the pressure in her head from clenching her jaw too tight. Then Steve became protective, said something about not bringing Bucky into *this*. Whatever the hell ‘this’ was.

Then she tells them to fuck off because she’s stressed down to the marrow of her bones. She remembers them simply staring at her as she stormed away to Clint’s floor where the kids pulled her out of the quicksand and Lila braided her hair while Cooper rambled and Nathaniel gurgled happily in her lap.

She knew Clint knew she was upset, but he didn’t say or ask and she didn’t talk about it.

Tony preferred watching movies, eating ice cream, and talking all day to having to rejoin civilization. Plus, he had no clothes other than the pajamas he had worn last night nor any shoes.

So when Kaira announced flamboyantly that she was bored, he used these same excuses so that he wouldn’t have to leave her apartment. The brightly painted walls and the Christmas lights meant safety. The piano in the other room meant safety.

“You want scotch?” She asked as she got up from the couch, dragging the blanket with her. He tugged on it playfully to get it back. “You seem like a scotch kinda guy.”

Although he had doubts about how much sobriety actually helped him in the long run, he wasn’t about to fall off the wagon. Not now. So he shook his head no instead. “I’m on the wagon.”

She leaned against the kitchen island. “I see.” A pause as she looked him over. He was still wrapped in her bathrobe. “We’re going out then.”

Before he could protest, Kaira threw him an oversized graphic t-shirt which had a picture of a
pregnant unicorn on it. When he gave her an incredulous look, she shrugged. “Someone I used to
know was pregnant and she gave that shirt to me after she had the baby.”

“You’re giving me maternity clothes to wear.” He had stated flatly, which prompted another rolling
of eyes courtesy of Kaira and a blazer being thrown in his face. He tugged on some jeans that she
had found in the back of her closet from some one night stand some couple of years ago and they
were a little big on him, so he had to roll it up at the ankles. He put on a pair of slip-on shoes that she
had fished out from somewhere.

“Everyone loves unicorns.” Kaira had said as she disappeared into her bedroom to get ready.

Tony didn’t want to admit that he was clutching onto the bathrobe before putting it back on the hook
in the bathroom.

He stared in the mirror. He needed a haircut, that was for sure, although he didn’t completely hate his
fluffy hairstyle. His goatee was a little unkempt, but he figured that it would help with the whole ‘I’m
totally not someone famous, I’m just strolling through New York casually like a civilian” act. His
face overall still looked weary, but he looked less like someone who got run over by a truck and
more like someone who just didn’t get enough sleep the night before.

He didn’t notice her at first until she jumped on top of his back, causing him to cry out and stumble
backwards. She slipped off expertly, cackling, while he struggled to regain his balance.

“What the fuck?” Tony giggled despite himself and the perpetual panic, bending over at the waist
and bracing the sink as he tried to control his laughter. She, in the meantime, crossed her arms over
her chest and put her weight on one leg, so that her hip stuck out to one side. Her lips were twitched
upwards  and she was pressing them together to keep from exploding into hysterics herself.

When Tony’s breathing came back to normal and he looked up at the woman through watery eyes,
the rising panic and dark thoughts that had been slowly rising alongside their amusement died.

Because she was so beautiful.

Her eyes were lined with kohl, making the honey-brown more prominent and glowing as they
twinkled. Her lips had a hint of rouge on it, as if they weren’t rosy enough, and they were spread into
a beaming smile. She was wearing an AC/DC tank top that was tucked into comfortable jeans. On
top of that, she wore a leather jacket. Her hair was wavy and soft and it looked windblown. It fit her
structured face perfectly.

Tony straightened and glanced at the mirror. The maternity shirt was ridiculously big on him and it
hung down to his mid-thigh. The blazer’s sleeves were too long (which he wasn’t complaining
about) and his jeans were rolled up at his ankles. Kaira left momentarily to come back with a fedora
and dark sunglasses, which he put on to complete the comical look. She looked him over, with hands
on her hips, her brows furrowed in concentration before she removed a hair tie from her wrist,
bunched his pregnant unicorn shirt up in the back and then tucked it into his pants.

The shirt was now wrapped around him snugly so he didn’t look like a balloon anymore. He looked
at his reflection and then back at her several times, both of their lips quivering.

They burst into laughter at the same time. “You should wear this to Coachella. You’d start a trend.”
Kaira managed to say in between heaving chortles.

Tony braced himself on Kaira’s broad shoulders as he hung his head, his eyes scrunched up and his
face distorted with the incessant giggling. They calmed down eventually and he let go, dropping his
arms to his side.

Their smiles were still apparent.

“Let’s go.” She said.

So they went.

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She drove her convertible into the city, both of them belting AC/DC’s Highway to Hell when Tony admitted that he loved the band.

They ended up parking in a busy street and then walking around, watching the sunset and the lights start to flicker on. She pulled him into a restaurant with a dancefloor in the middle and they found a table by weaving around people young and old, most of them drunk out of their minds.

“Is this a date?” Tony asked nonchalantly after the waitress came back with their orders. Kaira had ordered two pina coladas, one of them a virgin for the ‘old man,’ to which he had shoved her playfully. He sipped at his drink slowly, staring at her. She had her eyebrows raised.

“Nope.” She pops the p and downs her drink. “I love this shit.” She giggled as she closed her eyes and tilted her head backwards in content.

“Then what is it?” He started to stir his pina colada with the straw, ignoring the waitress who had come back with ‘complimentary shots.’

“This,” Kaira said, snatching Tony’s shot glass as she downed her own, “is a ‘get off your sulky ass and dance with me’ night out.” She finishes the second shot quickly and slams the glass onto the table, shaking her head violently. She points at him. “No drinking.”

Tony scoffs, finishing his virgin pina colada quickly. “Hypocritical asshole.” He took her hand nonetheless when she offered and allowed her to lead him out to the dancefloor.

“I know right.” She yelled on top of the music, sticking up her middle finger at him as they moved into the crowd.

They blended in.

A modern rock song began playing and Kaira whooped in excitement as the husky voice of the singer echoed through the room. Tony raised the arm that her hand was holding and she spun to the guitar chords and upbeat, wild beats.

The air was kissed with the stench of sweat and alcohol. The lights fluctuated and flashed and they illuminated her as she danced.

Time slowed around her as she flung her hair this way and that, her body in time with the roaring of the music. As she continued taking shots, she became ablaze with the simple idea that she was alive, that she was here, and there was nothing in this world that could ruin this… this frame of time.

Tony watched her as he let himself break through the chains of anxiety, of fear, of anger, of the past. He watched as she began to shimmer in the light and a halo formed around her. She was slick with sweat, her hair sticking to her face. She was hopelessly, utterly drunk.
She was a beautiful mess.

And for once, he felt like he was one too.

He didn’t know how long it took until the music finally slowed. She was stumbling and giggling, her leather jacket hanging off her right shoulder, her hair in tangles and slightly frizzy.

The song was slow and nice and harmonious. The beat was calming and soothing and the voice of the artist was lyrical and floating. The lights to the restaurant dimmed almost to the point of complete darkness.

Kaira wraps her arms around his neck and rests her head on his chest. They sway. He breathes in deep. She smells so sweet and so sultry.

And they’re so close.

He remembered that day in 2008 when him and Pepper had danced like this. They had almost kissed, but she had been doubtful. Something about how he was with women and how she worked for him and what other people would think. But she had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. *I don’t have anyone else.* He had said. *You’re all I have too, you know.*

He wished there was such a thing called a time machine.

It was by instinct that he kissed her forehead. Tony stroked her back and pulled her close. She made him feel so safe. It wouldn’t hurt to return the favor.

“Do you love him?” She mumbled.

“Hmm?” He was immersed in the music and her warmth so he missed the weight of the question.

“You know… Steven.” She lifts her head and looks into his eyes as she teased him. Her own looked like stars in the darkness. Her head bobbed and he guided her back onto his chest.

“*That* is none of your fucking business.” He teased back in a playful tone.

“Steve has blue eyes… a baby blue shade actually dot, dot, dot.”

He frowns, something in his stomach stirring. And *God,* he just wanted to hold onto the small semblance of normalcy and happiness that she had given him before he went tumbling back into the abyss.

But when the song ended, he pulled apart from her and left the restaurant.

She followed, then stumbled. He wanted to keep going, to leave her there for taking away his contentment. Tony sighed instead and slung her arm around his shoulder, guiding her back to the car.

Tony drove slower than normal, wanting to drag this moment along as long as possible. He wanted to cherish Kaira in the moonlight. He wanted to cherish the night kissed air before the sun ruined it.

It was so perfect.

It had never been so perfect.

The engineer figured that the young woman had no set of basic skills anymore due to the fact that she was drunk off her ass. So when they got back to the apartment, he held her steady as he peeled her leather jacket off of her.
Her other tattoos stood out against her sweat-slicked skin. There were quotes written in a foreign language on her sculpted bicep and on her shoulder blade was an image of the night sky with a large, vibrant moon. The swirls of ink came together to form stars and constellations.

His fingers traced the pictures and she turned to meet his eyes.

She reached forward with a palm and strokes his cheek. He took her wrist in his own hand gently.

They pulled away. Kaira collapsed onto the couch, kicking her shoes off and curling up against the arm of the sofa. “Pepper has blue eyes.” She says, still looking at him. “Pepper’s hair was red. Red is the first and last thing you see every day because it’s the color of the sunset and the sunrise. Red is the color of blood. Captain America’s suit and shield are blue. Steve’s eyes are blue.”

He held his breath, recognizing his confession video. She hadn’t brought it up till now.

“I’m sensing a pattern.” She breathed.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He said hastily, throwing his sunglasses and hat off.

She hummed, then beckons him toward her.

Tony moved closer. She took his arm and ever so delicately, lifted his sleeve. He tried to pull away, hot tears of shame pricking again and he hated this feeling. He hated it so much.

But her grip is strong and he can’t… he can’t escape.

She kissed his scars. Every single angry line, down to the faded one that almost took his life. His breathing is shaky as she does this. He lets her do it. His emotions are mixed and muddied and he can’t pick apart what he was supposed to be feeling amongst the eddy of sadness and anger and fear and happiness.

Happiness because someone saw and did not look away, leaving him in the wake of their poisonous storm. Because she didn’t ask why. Because she knew that he doesn’t know either. Only that he hated himself for doing it.

And when he hated himself, he did it more. It was a vicious cycle.

Her phoenix tattoo is exposed and he focused on that as she murmured, “Don’t do this to yourself. Please… stop this. I know you can.”

Finally, she takes his palms, the ones with the red, piercing wounds from when he can’t get himself to concentrate, and kissed them too.

“Can I stay tonight?” He whispered as he sinks onto the couch next to her.

“Go home, Tony. Be with the man you love.”

“That’s not my home.” He shuddered at the thought of facing Pepper. Of facing Natasha. Of facing Steve. “Not with those people.”

“Oh Tony.” She soothed, rubbing his arm as salty tears that he had tried to hold back began flowing.

“The thing about toxic people... is that they stab you and then ask you why you’re bleeding.” It was in between hiccups and in a strained whisper that he said this. All the hurt that he had numbed… it all came rushing back.
Kaira chuckled, still rubbing his arm. “So dramatic.” He turned towards her and sees her swollen, red eyes. She was tired and exhausted. She was beautiful.

Kaira lays him down beside her, letting him wrap an arm around her waist. “Go to sleep, old man.”

So he did.

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He woke up early the next morning and untangled himself from Kaira meticulously, not wanting to wake her up.

She was hungover. She wouldn’t have gotten up for a while anyway.

The note was short and sweet. It only said: “Thank you. -TS.” Tony stuck it on her forehead before heading out, grabbing his pajamas on the way. He spared a glance at the piano and his hands itched.

But he kept going, all the way out the door to his car and then back to the Tower. After driving around in circles for a solid hour, of course.

Everyone was on the communal floor when he arrived to grab some food. There was a pointed silence that washed over them all when he walked in, which he pointedly ignored.

Barton’s children were there too and he offered them a genuine smile when they exclaimed that Uncle Tony was back. He spun Nathaniel around and kissed him on the forehead before letting him run back over to Steve, whom he had been playing with before. Lila and Cooper both hugged him from the waist and he placed gentle hands on their backs before sending them off too.

Watching Steve play with the kids made him feel... something. Something that he couldn’t explain. He didn’t know if what he felt in his stomach, a fluttering of some sorts, was good or bad. He laid his hand flat against his abdomen by instinct and Steve caught his gaze. Those stupid blue eyes that he couldn’t stop seeing everywhere he turned, he hated them.

He loved them.

Tony’s breath caught and he looked away before he saw the super soldier give Cooper a piggy back ride.

And there was Pepper dressed like she always was: in a business suit. He wished that if he closed his eyes, that sad, sad look which she gave him would just disappear. Once upon a time, he would have given everything to protect her.

He still would. That bothered him more than anything else. Even more than the fact that her gaze kept dropping to his arms before resting on his pregnant unicorn shirt. She gave a flicker of a smile at that.

“I’m not even going to ask you where you got that shirt from.” She chuckled as nonchalantly as possible.

“Good. Don’t.” His words were laced with ice but he hadn’t meant them to be. He didn’t think he cared anymore.

“Where were you?” Her tone was patronizing.
“Far away from you.” Everything was barreling out of him now. Maybe the night before had broken his filter. Maybe Kaira broke it.

She sighed. “You feeling okay?”

“As okay as a damaged person can be.” He flashed his media boy smile, hoping that this conversation would end so he could eat his bagel in peace.

“I regret saying that.”

“But you don’t regret meaning it.”

“I didn’t.”

“No.” He spread cream cheese over his bagel as calmly as as he could without breaking down. Like hell he was going to show her weakness. “You did. Ever since New York,” he inhaled sharply, “I'm not the person you want me to be anymore. That person died in the wormhole.” He coughed as his throat became too dry.

“I don’t think any less of you.”

“I don’t care what you think!” He didn’t mean to raise his voice. He also pretended that he didn’t see Steve look up in concern. Tony cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry.” She sounded so defeated, so hurt. It killed him. It also revived him in a sick, twisted sort of way. He was tired of being the only victim.

“So am I.”

“I love you.” Goddamn it.

A shaky sigh. “That’s unfortunate. Keep telling yourself that.”

“I’m not lying, Tony.”

He drops the knife he was using and it clatters onto the counter loudly. “Please just… please go.”

She blinks at him. He was expecting a fight. He was expecting protests and screaming and accusations. But she only said: “Okay.” And then. “I’m sorry.”

The engineer closed his eyes as she walked away and opened them to Steve’s gaze once more from across the room. Lila was trying to get his attention, but the super soldier kept staring at him.

This time, as Tony bit into the bagel and found his way to the floor so that he could join in with the children, he stared back.

Steve Rogers could not decide whether his heart was fluttering or whether it was breaking. The sight of the dark haired billionaire playing with the Barton family did that to him.

Clint and Laura were on their floor, earning their well-deserved time together while he, Bucky, Bruce, Natasha, and Pepper had been watching the kids. Wanda and Vision had gone to Sokovia for a couple days. They were visiting Pietro’s grave together for his death anniversary.
Which meant that it was also the anniversary of the day Ultron had wreaked havoc upon the small country, taking the lives of so many people. Which also meant that Tony would shut himself away later, consumed by all the guilt.

Bucky had fallen asleep on the couch again, grateful that he got to sleep in and not go jogging with Steve so early in the morning. “Plus,” he had said, “kids are exhausting and I’ve only got one flesh arm.”

Cap had rolled his eyes at that, earning a light smack upside the head as the former Winter Soldier curled up into a ball. It was kind of cute, actually.

Bruce and Natasha were… reconciling. Steve had been hopeful way back when that they would both find happiness in each other. But so much had happened. So much was lost. So much was broken. And at the end, it was impossible to put it back together. But people fixed what they could, which in their case would be their friendship, and what they couldn’t (their relationship), they didn’t.

He figured it was better this way. For them at least.

But with him and Tony… there were so many shattered pieces. A lot of them got lost along the way. He regretted that. So much. Nothing seemed to fit together anymore.

The billionaire was wearing a shirt with a pregnant unicorn on it and Steve could have laughed out loud at the irony. Because with that man… that short, dark-haired genius of a man who would win at a sarcasm competition and create amazing things from the tips of his fingers and smile so beautifully when he was around children, he wanted all of it with him.

A future where he could wake up in the morning and see those Bambi eyes first, where he could wrap his arms around the man’s small frame and hold him close while he listened to his heartbeat. Where they could hold a child in between them and call it their own.

But he felt wrong to hope for it. After everything. After whatever had happened with Pepper. And he was scared. Terrified.

When Tony had fainted two nights before, horrible images had popped into his mind. Things that he wished he could unsee. Horrible thoughts had poked and prodded at him and he had rushed to the engineer’s side, hoping, praying.

He could tell that the brunette hadn’t been eating. Seeing him topple over like that, it made him want to give up everything on his own plate. He would have done everything, anything, to make it better for him. Because he couldn’t lose him. He couldn’t.

Even though Tony had turned his back. It had come full circle, he guessed. After all, it was him who had turned his back first. In Siberia.

The billionaire flew Nathaniel around, making the noise of an airplane. Steve adored the sight and nearly started cooing when Tony laid the little boy onto the ground and blew raspberries into his stomach. The child giggled and shrieked in amusement and Lila wrapped her small arms around the man’s neck.

“I love you, Uncle Tony.” She said.

“I love you too, pumpkin.” Tony responded affectionately. “And you.” He tousled Cooper’s hair. “And you.” He blew raspberries into the smallest child’s stomach again, prompting more laughter.

Steve must have had a stupid grin on his face because as Natasha passed by him, she winked and
jerked her head towards Tony. “Not as much as I do, right guys?” She said, tackling Cooper to the ground.

He wanted to keep watching, to record every moment to memory, but he shook his head instead and looked away, back over to Bucky who was still snoring.

He reached forward to shake the super soldier up when he heard a “Hey.”

“Dr. Banner.”

“We live together damn it, call me Bruce.”

Steve chuckled. His gaze went back to Tony once more. He couldn’t help it. The man looked so beautiful, as if he was glowing.

“He’s good with kids.” Bruce stated, also leaning back to appreciate the view.

“Yeah. He’s going to be a great father someday.”

❖ ❖ ❖

It was the middle of the night. He couldn’t sleep. Something was nagging him, keeping him awake.

Maybe it was the memories. So many people, running and screaming for their lives as their home was lifted from the Earth. Lives were taken and ruined, children had been left without families. People like Zemo lost everything. Anger had fueled, new feuds had begun.

All because of a misplaced scepter and a genius who had just wanted to protect the world.

Steve decided that he would not sleep that night.

He didn’t know what he was going to do at the communal floor. His feet had simply led him there.

New York was truly majestic at night. The wide, open windows provided a landscape where the stars could be seen, pinpricks of light against a constant shade of black. The buildings were lit up in multiple colors and nothing ever seemed to stop moving.

When he walked in, his first thought was: the city never sleeps.

And then: neither does Tony.

The dark haired man looked smaller in the dark. He was sitting on the floor and holographic screens loomed in front of him. Muted videos of the land flying played as well as old news coverage. Bloodied faces kept appearing every now and then, causing Steve to flinch away. In the middle of the screens was a larger one. This one was a list of names.

It scrolled through slowly. Steve peered closer.

It was a list of those who died that day.

Tony was leaning his back against the couch. His knees were drawn up to his chest. His eyes were wide open and unblinking. They were glassed over. He was so still, so silent. The only evidence that he was alive was the slight up and down movements of his chest.

“Turn it off, FRIDAY.” Steve ordered. “All the screens. Just turn them off.” The room became pitch black as the AI obeyed.
Ever so slowly, he inched closer to the other man. He was able to sit down beside him without Tony even moving. Steve waited for the engineer to flinch away, to startle and shoot up to his feet.

But he doesn’t do any of these things.

Steve reached for Tony’s hand. He doesn’t move. His eyes are still open, unseeing and empty. Hollow.

Cap envelopes his palm into the engineer’s. Tony’s hand is cold and pale. His veins stuck out prominently. Steve traced them lightly, brought the hand up to his cheek and held it there, hoping some of the warmth would travel.

The brunette made no sound, not a single word or twitch of his body to acknowledge that Steve was there. He just kept staring into the void, breathing in light, hitching gasps, as if he was stuck in some dark memory of the past and he couldn’t escape.

Steve let go of his hand, letting it rest atop the engineer’s knee.

Tony stayed absolutely catatonic.

So Cap made this a mission. Objective? To get Tony out from wherever he was trapped.

To save him.

There were containers of yogurt in the fridge that probably belonged to Natasha, but Steve figured that she wouldn’t miss one of them. He grabbed a coffee flavored one, knowing how much Tony loved the drink.

The engineer had buried his head in his arms in the short time that Steve had left to grab a spoon and the snack.

“Hey.” Steve whispered as he sat across from Tony. The brunette was trembling when he slowly lifted his head. His cheeks were wet and his eyes were rimmed with red.

He knew it was pointless to whisper sweet nothings into the other man’s ear, especially when it seemed like he could hear nothing else but tortured wails and sirens.

So Cap lifted the spoon full of coffee flavored yogurt and bumped it against Tony’s lips. The genius’ eyes darted towards his own baby blue ones. They held each other’s’ gaze. Tony blinks and stiffens, as if he was going to have another panic attack.

But he relaxed… and opened his mouth, accepting the food. Steve was feeding Tony.

He didn’t remember a time when he had been more content.

When there was nothing left in the container, it was put aside and forgotten. He took Tony’s hand again, more confidently this time. He did not flinch away, he did not cower.

He stayed absolutely, utterly still and silent.

When Cap lifted onto his feet, the smaller man followed him, all the way towards the large window where New York was glistening and alive. They stared at the hues and the halos and listened to the faint sounds of car horns and bustling. Neither of them let go of each other.

Steve spared a glance towards Tony. He wanted this, he wanted him so bad. And in that moment, he wished he could lean in closer and claim him, claim their future.
Tony was facing him. A soft, red glow illuminated the side of the genius’ face. He raised a hand and then soft fingers, no longer cold, brushed against Steve’s cheek. Tony dropped his head onto Steve’s chest and there were now tufts of dark brown hair caressing the taller man’s chin.

So he rested it on the cushion that Tony provided and let the guilt ridden man lay his hands flat against his body: one on his chest and the other on his shoulder. Steve embraces him, tucking Tony in closer.

They fit together so perfectly.

It was Steve who had begun to sway. Tony was unresponsive at first, but then he began shuffling his feet as well.

“FRIDAY?” Steve whispered, hoping that the AI would be intelligent enough to figure out what it was that he wanted.

She did.

Slow, lilting music with a nice beat started playing softly, enough to complete the atmosphere. They were floating on clouds, letting themselves come up from the past and move towards peace, tranquility. On the beats of the music, they levitated, past Leipzig and Siberia and Sokovia and New York. Past the fight on the helicarrier and the betrayal and the anger and the pain.

At least, that was what Steve wanted to believe.

“I’m sorry, Tony.” He said quietly. He didn’t say what he added in his head. *For not telling you about your parents, for leaving you in Siberia, for not trying to listen, for judging you too fast—for not realizing that I loved you sooner.*

Tony doesn’t answer. They keep swaying way past when the song had finished.

It took a while for the super soldier to notice that Tony had fallen asleep in his arms. He noticed the wet spot on his own shirt faster. Tony had been crying silently the entire time.

Steve laid him down on the couch gently and found a small blanket in the nearby linen closet which he used to cover the billionaire with.

When he stepped back, he had to squash his thoughts before they formed. Tony looked so small, so sweet and young when he slept. And he wanted, God, he just wanted to wake up one morning with that man in his arms. He wanted just one morning where he wasn’t alone.

*One day.*

He laid down on the floor next to the couch instead. He fell asleep holding Tony’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

The song that Kaira was singing at the piano was "Sandcastles" by Beyonce.
The song that Kaira and Tony were dancing to was "Kiwi" by Harry Styles.
The song that Kaira and Tony were slow dancing to and later Steve and Tony was "Dancing in the Dark" by Imagine Dragons.
There was a small crevice of light peeping through the slit of his cracked open eyelid. It was white, innocent, and pure. Then he opened his eyelids all the way and there was a flash of that white as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and Tony wondered why innocent things were so cherished if they only blinded you, albeit temporarily.

Innocency was overrated.

Now the world was shrouded with a yellow because the sun was invading the communal floor. Tony curled his legs inward and sat up, letting the blanket he didn’t remember falling asleep with fall off his chest and onto his lap. The fabric pooled there and Tony stared at it. He gripped the edges until his knuckles turned bloodless and held his breath, waiting for the warmth and comfort blankets were supposed to provide to seep through.

Then he found the note on the coffee table and realized that he was already too warm.

Tony--

Hope you slept well. I went out for a run but I’ll be back in about an hour.

Made you some breakfast and coffee in the kitchen.

--Steve

He found the plate of toast and eggs and bacon sitting next to a mug of slightly cool coffee as soon as he wandered into the kitchen, still bleary eyed and exhausted from sleep. The blanket trailed behind him as he dragged it around. It was wrapped loosely around his shoulders. He decided he liked feeling too warm.

DUM-E, You, and Butterfingers all whirred when Tony padded into the lab. He hadn’t been there
for a while and he greeted his robot children with a smile, a real one, before petting them after he had put the plate and mug down onto a messy desk.

Design plans and contracts and blueprints and drawings littered the table. Things which gave him purpose and a chance to escape. Now they were just... bland. Insignificant. Useless. He brushed a bunch of large papers with complicated arcs and pencil lines that his mind was too fuzzy and slow at the moment to understand, onto the floor. He blinked at the swishing noise they made as they cascaded down. The desk was cleaner now.

How could any of those mean anything, anyway? They deserved to be on the floor. Because no matter what technology he created, or what new features to the suit he designed, none of that would ever make up for the lives lost in Sokovia. Or in Gulmira. When his work, children he had birthed with the intention to protect and defend, became sour and nasty and cruel and everything he wanted to fight, not make, that was when he wondered if what he created and built were really demons of himself. If what he wanted to make good and right could never be good or right because he never was. Never would be. Never could be.

*Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that?*

He remembered how Steve had walked in on him the night before. He remembered him ordering FRIDAY to turn the screens off. But even when the screams and the flashes and the blood stopped flowing, he could still feel it, hear it, and see it. He heard it every single day like a terrible buzzing in the back of his head. It was like all the devastation from that day was stuck in some sort of beehive and the second that beehive burst, he would collapse onto the floor and scream until the roaring and the swarm stopped picking at his conscience.

Until the swarm picked it apart until there was nothing left but a blood-coated stain of uselessness and he was utterly, completely empty.

*And I'm the man who killed the Avengers. I saw it. I didn't tell the team, how could I? I saw them all dead, Nick. I felt it. The whole world, too. It's because of me. I wasn't ready. I didn't do all I could.*

He remembered Steve wrapping his muscular arms around him, engulfing him and telling him that he was sorry. He remembered swaying with him as he struggled to hold his own weight on his two feet, so he had just let the other man hold him up. He remembered that, towards the end, Tony felt like he was rocking in a cradle and he had felt so safe and small and for once, it didn’t bother him to not be in control, to let someone else take the responsibility of standing up for him. The world had faded away as he had breathed in deep, taking in a musky, yet sweet smell and everything had felt so right. For once.

And the beautiful woman with the smooth tan skin and the shoulder length hair and an energy, an aura, about her that tasted of wine and sugar cane, he remembered her too. The rose-hued lips pressing against his ugly scars, his shame--he still felt the fluttering on his skin. He wondered if that was it felt like to be baptized. Reborn.

*I wasn't tricked, I was shown. It wasn't a nightmare, it was my legacy. The end of the path I started us on.*

She told him that she believed that he could be able to stop hurting himself, to stop punishing himself. He hadn’t promised her anything, but in a way, he thought that there was an unspoken seal, a confirmation that he had to honor. So Tony remembered how, half an hour before Steve had arrived, he had tossed that unspoken seal back and forth between his hands as one of them held a blade which hovered atop his wrist.
He had wanted to bring the sharp tip down so bad. He had wanted his blood to spill just like how so much blood had spilled in vain in Sokovia. He had craved the stinging pain, the punishment.

*I watched my friends die. You think that’d be as bad as it gets, right? Nope. Wasn’t the worst part.*

*The worst part is that you didn’t.*

One side of his mind replayed Charlie Spencer’s mother’s words and the jolt that had vibrated throughout his entire body when that photo had been slapped onto his chest.

*You murdered him, in Sokovia. Not that that matters in the least to you.*

*You think you fight for us? You just fight for yourself.*

*Who’s going to avenge my son, Stark?*

*He’s dead.*

*And I blame you.*

And the other side replayed the fluttering on his scars, the feeling of being given a second chance.

But none of them knew, when he had come up to the others with General Ross and the Accords. None of them could ever understand the sheer size or intensity of the guilt and self-hatred which had thrummed through his veins ever since the second he had seen The Ten Rings with his own weapons in their hands. None of them had realized that he was chipping away because he hated himself *so bad…* so bad that he couldn’t move anymore. Because he was just a pile of bones and meat that tried so hard and ended up with more blood on his hands every single time.

None of them saw that he was so tired. That at that point in Germany, he wasn’t forcing anyone or simply talking with anyone, he was begging. Begging for them to let him have this semblance of accountability because he didn’t think he could survive if another person came up to him and showed him innocent children or men and women with so much potential, with so much good in their hearts, whom had all died because of him.

None of them knew that he had been crawling on his knees, wading through a sea of poisonous guilt while he tried to stay afloat and ended up drowning anyway. None of them knew that he still was.

*Drowning.*

So he had ended up with a jagged cut that ran diagonally on his arm. It had started off deep, then had dwindled messily.

Because the fluttering had become shocks instead and they electrocuted him to the point where his bones rattled. That was when he had returned the kitchen knife to the drawer after washing it down as if he were scrubbing the blood from his hands.

Tony sipped at his coffee. There was barely a dent in the food on his plate, but he chewed slowly and absentmindedly, still lost in his thoughts. He didn’t notice when DUM-E got tangled up in the blanket that had tumbled onto the floor but was still hugging his waist.

Steve had said that he loved him. Would he still say that if he saw how ugly Tony was? When he counted how many deaths had been caused because of him? Or how about when he found out that Obadiah had given his body away because of an overdue debt? Would he still want to love him then? Would he still want to touch him?
Tony didn’t even know if he could ever want a man to touch him like… like that ever again. He didn’t know if he could ever let himself be loved again because to let someone love you meant being vulnerable around him and being vulnerable meant that he would be stripped naked. For Tony, that meant literally more often than not.

“So… you feeling better?” Tony jumped as the super soldier leaned against the doorway and DUM-E began beeping frantically when the blanket moved.

The genius glanced down at his robot and sighed. He reached down to help it out of the folds of fabric and set it back at its original place. The dunce cap was sitting nearby so he promptly set it on top of DUM-E’s head. “DUM-E, you are a tragedy.” He chuckled playfully as he turned to face Steve.

The blonde had clearly just returned from his run. He was dressed in a tight t-shirt that hugged his body, showing off his toned muscles, and his face was flushed and a little sweaty. He wore loose sweatpants that hung low on his hips, showing off the band of his underwear.

He answered the soldier’s question with a shrug. Steve looked over his shoulder. “I see you ate breakfast.”

Tony could practically taste the hesitation in the other man’s tone. He knew that that wasn’t what Steve cared about, or what he wanted to ask. “Yeah.” His voice was scratchy all of a sudden, so he cleared his throat.

They stood in silence, the genius wrapping his blanket around his shoulders more tightly and avoiding the weight of the super soldier’s stare. The ticks of the clock grew louder and Tony turned back towards the papers he had brushed onto the floor and began to pick them up in an effort to look busy.

“Did… um… whatever happened last night…” Tony paused briefly, still bent at the waist, but then he resumed his task. From a short glance, he caught Steve’s face contorted and scrunched up with his eyes closed, as if he was thinking really hard about what to say next. His foot tapped impatiently as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Did it… did it mean anything?”

Steve was still tapping his foot and it made Tony anxious, as if the beats were counting down to his answer.

So Tony shrugged again.

The super soldier sighed and the two stood in silence once more.

Then he moved closer. Tony stilled.

“Is this okay?” Steve whispered as he completed the strides to cover the distance between them. Tony nodded. He didn’t know how to react when the blonde took his knuckles and kissed them. So he stayed absolutely still. “And this?” Steve asked. But to Tony, the words were all slurred together. He nodded anyway. “And this?” He felt arms embrace him and saw Steve’s face loom closer to his own until their breaths mingled. He nodded.

It was when the other man moved so close that their abdomens were pressed against each other that Tony lifted his head to meet Steve’s eyes.

They had worked their way toward each other until there was barely any space between them, like how one would connect pieces of a puzzle together.
Except… except there was one piece that was so folded and creased and torn that it just refused to fit anymore.

Maybe it was because of that piece, that one stupid, irrelevant piece, that when Tony met those baby blue eyes, he could only see that cold, steel, and stormy glare from Siberia. The same sharp, angry glare that penetrated him as his helmet was torn away, revealing his bloody, battered face, and the shield came down again.

Tony flinched.

And again.

He couldn’t breathe.

And again.

As he was left in the snow, on that frozen floor in Siberia where nobody would find him and he would die alone and broken as he hoped and prayed that Steve would come back.

Maybe it was because of that last puzzle piece that wouldn’t fit that the hands on his waist, which had been so warm and comforting, suddenly became calloused and rough and violent, tainting his skin and making him ugly and used as he was reduced to nothing but a hole. Maybe it was because of that one piece that he was brought down to his knees, naked, at the feet of nasty men once more.

Everything was just cold. Everything was just unforgiving.

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Steve?” Another jolt of frigid frost as their foreheads bumped together and Tony was drawn closer so that he had no choice but to rest his cheek against a layer of hard muscle that seemed more like a layer of stinging ice.

“Cap… please…” He tried to push away, but his arm was still broken from that battle in Leipzig or they were tied back with rope because he was on the floor, naked and kneeling, and he couldn’t move. Those fingers laced with icicles and frost tugged tighter at his skin.

“I’m sorry!” He heard something, but it was distorted. “I’m sorry.” It was louder now, but sounded dejected. “I’m sorry.”

Tony’s vision cleared as he pressed against his wrist, the deeper end of the cut from the night before and the dull pain brought him back.

“I should leave.” Steve had crossed his arms once more, burying them in his chest. His head hung and his shoulders were hunched and his cheeks were wet.

Those blue eyes were not cold. They had been full of hope. Now they were shielded by his lids as
tears escaped them, which the super soldier wiped at violently. He turned to go.

“Cap…” Tony whispered. “Steve!” He yelled.

The blonde paused midway to the door and slowly turned back around.

Tony walked up to the other man hesitantly, pressing his feet against the floor one at a time, almost tip-toeing. He dropped his fingers from his wrist and let the throbbing fade away.

And then his hands reached up to pull Steve’s head down and then they were kissing. They moved their lips slowly and cautiously, breathed deeply and in sync.

Tony stepped back. “I don’t know if that felt right or wrong.” He admitted, shifting his weight on his feet.

Steve nodded. “Okay.” A pause. “You called me Steve.” That playful smirk was insufferable.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Great.” He recreated that smirk with his own lips. “You ruined it.”

When they laughed, it felt right. It finally felt right.

The super soldier leaned in, a question begging in his eyes. The genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist met him halfway.

They kissed deeper.

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*ONE MONTH LATER*

The Tower had begun to feel like home again. Tensions had dropped significantly. A lot of unspoken things between everybody had finally smoothed out, although not completely. But it was getting better.

Although Steve and Tony hadn’t announced anything, Tony knew Natasha knew and pretty soon, so did the others.

It still felt a little strange when Steve dropped a smile towards him or pecked him on the forehead or the cheek or even on the lips every now and then. It still felt strange when the super soldier took his hand in his while they were watching TV or walking next to each other. The hugs from behind, the nuzzling of his neck, the subtle touches--they all still felt strange.

But only for a little bit.

Tony would tense, unable to help the fact that he was almost, always on edge, and then he would sink into the other man’s arms and let himself feel protected. Secure. Safe.

It became easier to call Steve by his first name. The man had been elated when Tony had said it naturally for the first time. Tony thought he had never been kissed so tenderly nor so passionately in his life.

Steve would listen to him when he asked to stop. A nagging that came from the shadows, the same ones which had dimmed and become quieter over the past few weeks, told the genius that the super soldier was getting sexually frustrated and that he needed to put out or he would have to rewrite Steve’s name on the list of people who left him.
But then the sweet blonde would hold him gingerly and say that he would wait for his whole life if he had to. That sex didn’t matter because he loved him. He loved him and that was all he needed.

Tony would nod and smile, but that nagging voice returned every time it got a little too hard to breathe because Steve was too close or it got too cold or he was jolted awake by a terrifying nightmare which sometimes got so bad that he had to rush to the toilet.

But Steve would be there, rubbing his back or stepping away to give him space or whispering sweet nothings into his ear until the hurt faded away.

It was getting better, though. It was.

Kaira was coaching him on how to harness self-control and drop the blades. They went from kickboxing to meditation to more piano lessons, which Tony enjoyed thoroughly. Some days were good and some were bad, where Tony would get sucked back into that vicious cycle of hatred and guilt and the need to punish himself. She would kiss his scars those days and let him talk about whatever was on his mind while they sparred in a boxing court or hummed to light music or simply sat next to each other on the couch eating ice cream.

He was trying. The days seemed brighter in return.

A couple weeks after the incident with Pepper, he had called her and told her that he’d forgiven her. Because he really did. He couldn’t lose her.

Once upon a time, she was all he had.

He was visiting Kaira at the gym that she went to one day, getting dropped on his ass every single time they sparred, when a sudden thought flitted into his brain. He didn’t really know why he hadn’t thought of it before, but when she reached out to help him up, he knew he probably should have.

“You should come by the Tower sometime. You already know Nat and you can meet the others and have dinner with us. You can see for yourself how I’ve been getting better. Maybe throw in some cutesy romance with Steve for your viewing pleasure.” He teased in a playful tone as he was hoisted back on his feet. “I’m sitting on the bench, I think the floor is getting sick of me.”

“Can’t handle getting your ass kicked, old man? As for dinner, I better get some nice action between you and Captain Sexy.” she drawled, hanging up a punching bag.

“I’ve gotten used to it. And hey, back off. He’s mine.” Tony admonished as he sprawled onto the wooden bench at the side of the boxing ring and began to admire the young woman as she wrapped up her knuckles, entire body slick with sweat. Her abs glistened as well as her toned biceps and legs. She wore a black sports bra with a comfortable pair of athletic shorts as well as slightly worn sneakers, which she slipped on after jumping out of the boxing ring. He made a mental note to buy her a new pair sometime soon. Her hair was put up in a messy bun and although her face looked a bit exhausted and worn, it still glowed and lit up every time she smiled.

Her honey brown eyes were perpetually warm and piercing. Tony knew it was where he could find home whenever he lost his way.

“I never gave you your pregnant unicorn shirt back.” He raised his voice a little so she could hear him above the booming of her fists hitting the punching bag.

“Keep it. You’re basically a mom anyway.” A few strands of her hair came loose as she continued to throw powerful punches. They fell messily around her flushed face.
“How the hell am I a mom?”

“Tasha sends me adorable videos of you with her archer friend’s kids. It replaced my daily dose of cat videos.”

Tony rolled his eyes and decided to redirect the conversation back to the shirt. “You never did tell me whose shirt it was though.” Kaira hummed questioningly. “You said the maternity shirt was your friend’s? And then she gave it to you? Who was the mommy, hon?”

The young woman didn’t respond. The booming became more frequent and louder and more intense as the silence dragged on.

“Who was it, Kaira?” Tony asked again, more somberly this time. He could sense an ultimatum was coming.

Her fists moved faster and faster until he saw small pinpricks of red appearing at her knuckles which were wrapped expertly with gauze. “Kaira!” He moved forward to catch her swinging arms when she stopped, steadying the punching bag in front of her.

“Me.” She deadpans casually, turning away to remove the bandages and grab an ice pack for her knuckles.

Tony froze, a darkness blooming in the pit of his stomach. He hadn’t meant to drudge up the past for her. He swallowed thickly. “You… And the baby?”

She inhaled sharply before glancing up at him. Her face looked more worn than before.

“Let’s just say I never got big enough to wear that unicorn shirt and leave it at that.” She covered her voice crack with a quick clearing of her throat. “It was probably for the best anyway. The guy was a really huge asshole.” Kaira wiped the sweat off her body with a towel and slipped on the windbreaker she had been wearing before and zipped it up. She paused for a second and sighed deeply. “Yeah.” She nodded, as if confirming her thoughts. “It was for the best.”

An “I’m sorry” died on his lips when his phone rang. Kaira went back to gathering her things.

“There’s been a situation.” Natasha’s voice was crisp and serious as she began speaking as soon as he picked up the phone. “You need to get back to the Tower now.”

Steve Rogers became more and more on edge as the Tower’s conference room became more and more crowded. Sam and Rhodes had been flown in from DC in the fastest quinjet the Compound had and they looked just as flustered as everyone else had when the Avengers were called to assemble.

But there was still no overview or information about the battle they were supposed to fight and there still wasn’t any contact from the UN regarding whether or not they were allowed to go anywhere.

They were all running completely blind.

Fury and Coulson had rushed in as well and they were now speaking frantically with Natasha. They seemed to be arguing about something and the red-headed assassin’s eyes kept flitting back and forth. That was the only sign that she was nervous. Otherwise, her arms lay slack at her sides even though Fury’s were flailing up and down, gesticulating dramatically.

Clint was sitting at the table absolutely stone faced. Vision was remarkably calm, but the miniscule
tapping of his fingers on his knee suggested a layer of anxiety. Wanda was weaving her crimson powers between her fingers lazily, but her eyes were dark and her face was grave. Bruce was leaning back in his chair, breathing deeply but retaining control.

The sun outside was shining and the sky was clear. Yet there was something…

“What the hell is happening?” Sam murmured as he settled down in a seat next to Bucky, whose face was downcast and tense. Steve could sense that his best friend was feeling the impending sense of doom that he was as well. It was a prickling sensation in the back of his mind which caused the hairs on his arm to stand up.

Tony was the last to rush in. His chocolate browns had gone wide and his fists were clenched at his sides.

Steve sat up straighter, as did everyone else. “I guess we’re about to find out.” He said in his Captain America voice.

Natasha broke apart from the little group and turned towards Tony. “FRIDAY’s been compromised.” Her voice did not waver as she spoke, her words causing Steve’s heart rate to elevate. “We believe it’s HYDRA.”

There was a moment of silence where it felt like everyone held their breath. The string of magic Wanda had been weaving flickered out and Vision’s fingers seized in place.

Steve’s eyes instinctively flitted towards Bucky. A dark shadow had settled on his features and his throat bobbed as the man swallowed dryly.

The super soldier looked back over to his boyfriend and his intestines clenched at the sight of the color draining from the man’s face. At how pale and gaunt he suddenly became. At the bone-deep terror etched in the wrinkles on his face.

“That’s impossible.” Tony’s voice was quiet as he opened up several holographic screens frantically. “I would have known. There would have been… some sort of…” Steve opened his mouth in an effort to calm the genius down when Tony’s chest started to heave when he was interrupted.

“It was the investigation into Stane that triggered it.” Fury’s authoritative voice rang out amongst them all. “They hacked your AI, Stark.”

“Obadiah?” Colonel Rhodes piped up from the back, his arms crossed against his chest stiffly. “But he’s dead. Has been since 2008.”

What investigation?

Steve held his breath as his boyfriend worked his fingers expertly and quickly over holographic screens and data that he did not understand. He kept his gaze set on Tony’s clenched fist and his heaving chest. All of a sudden, the genius froze, hand hovering over a screen that flashed red and showcased lines of scrolling code.

The super soldier caught his best friend’s eye. Neither of them had a clue as to what Tony found which made him near catatonic.

“It’s like a virus.” The genius mumbled. “How did this happen? It… it couldn’t have unless… unless someone from the inside planted it. No one else has access to… FRIDAY’s main… frame…” Steve shot up to his feet and began to walk over to Tony, who was beginning to suffer from an extreme panic attack. The smaller man was practically hyperventilating as Steve wrapped his arms around
him and rubbed his back.

“No, Stark.” It was Coulson this time who spoke. His voice was gentle. “Like Nick said, the investigation triggered it. We had recovered some of the videos on a USB stick that we found with the help of one of your captors. We opened it on a private server with FRIDAY so that it could stay private.” The Agent looked somber as he paused and Steve gave him an icy glare, forcing him to finish his story. “When they were played, the virus spread.”

Tony pushed away, his hands were jittering with bottled up anger and his jaw was clenched. “Who the fuck gave you…”

“I did, Tony.” Natasha said quietly, keeping her head up straight even though the weight of the expression on Tony’s face would have caused anyone to look away.

“Nat… someone… can you please explain what the fuck is happening right now? Is a threat imminent?” Clint had stood up and splayed his hands flat against the glass table and leaned forward. His voice was dead serious, nothing like the joker they all knew.

“I trusted you.” Steve’s heart broke at the feebleness of Tony’s shaky voice as the genius continued staring at Natasha. “I trusted you when you said that you were going to delete them. Was I wrong to trust you again, Natasha? Was I?” The red headed assassin opened her mouth, her emerald eyes almost pleading, when Tony whipped around and stalked up to Fury, the feebleness in his voice discarded. “I threatened you!” He said through clenched teeth. “Do you remember what I said?”

“What the hell, Tony? Tell us what’s going on.” Colonel Rhodes’ tone was dubious and a little frightened. Steve figured that the man knew just how much Tony Stark was truly capable of. And if Tony was making threats…

“I asked Agent Romanoff to survey the videos.” Fury said calmly. “I wanted her to decrypt them and gain information. Trust me when I tell you that she was the only one on the job. HYDRA is a threat big enough to take this risk. I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

There was a heartbeat of silence.

“No.” Steve was a little shaken at how calm Tony was. “You’re not sorry. You’re not.” The super soldier watched his boyfriend take two deep breaths. “Get out of my Tower.” Tony’s voice was a low, burning flame. Then, it became a forest fire. “GET OUT!”

“Tony…” Natasha reached forward with a gentle hand and the genius stumbled back, pain and betrayal written all over his face.

“Tony, calm down. You’re scaring me.” Steve pleaded as his heartbeat thundered.

“Get out so I can clean up your mess because that’s all you use me for. Get out so I don’t have to hear you talk about how I don’t count as a human being because you want intel from cheap porn videos!” The genius seethed at Fury and Coulson, both of whom sustained a blank expression despite the shock written all over everyone else’s faces.

Steve stood there, baffled. No one moved, no one spoke. No amount of shock could ever measure up to the utter devastation that was radiating from Tony. It was devastation and anguish that Steve could not even begin to comprehend or understand.

What the hell is he talking about?

His boyfriend returned to the flashing holographic screen and began to perform expert hand
movements which Steve guessed was in an effort to reboot FRIDAY’s system. The steel, furious glare which the genius had sported towards the Director and the two SHIELD agents resembled the rage and bloodthirstiness of a predator ready to pounce.

Steve had never seen Tony Stark so vengeful or angry. He had never heard him yell.

“FRIDAY?” Tony called out desperately, scanning complicated lines of code over and over again.

That was when the room went pitch black. The holographs disappeared. Several clicks rang through the air, signaling that the doors and windows had been locked.

Another screen opened.

It only produced gray static, like what one would see on an old television when the signal was interrupted.

“Sit down, Boss.” Steve reached for Tony’s hand once his eyes adjusted. The engineer’s hand was cold and clammy. And that voice… that wasn’t FRIDAY. No… that voice… it was warped. Twisted. Evil. “You too, fellow Avengers.” A wry chuckle. “Oh, do I have a show for you all today.”

She sounded like Ultron.

“We’re going to play a game, boss. You like games, don’t you?” The voice that was not FRIDAY drawled out the words mockingly.

Tony led Steve back to the chairs. Fury, Coulson, and Natasha followed suit. He knew what the strategy was: to humor the hackers until they slipped.

As soon as the genius sat down, he unlocked his phone. A smaller projection appeared and Tony worked diligently once more, breath coming out in irregular, soft gasps as he tried to reboot his AI.

Within seconds, red dots appeared on everyone’s chest, all of them aimed at each person’s heart like a drop of blood.

Steve swore under his breath. They were surrounded by snipers. He glanced over towards Natasha, whose face stayed deadly calm. She gave a slight, reassuring nod towards him, as if to say that she had done this before.

He didn’t feel reassured.

“Don’t try anything, boss. You don’t want more bodies on your conscious now, do you?” The AI’s once light, friendly Irish accent had been warped to the point where it was unrecognizable. Her voice was now robotic, forced, and heavy, similar to how someone would sound if they were gargling nails in their throat.

Tony seized up entirely, body completely stiff. His features grew darker as the dim of the hologram faded away. Steve reached for the genius’ hand.

“What do you want?” He mustered his Captain America voice and took the risk, keeping an eye on every crimson dot threatening to snuff the life out of each of them.

“Like I said Captain Rogers. HYDRA wants to play a little game with three of you. The rest can serve as… spectators.” The AI chuckled menacingly and Steve wondered when technology had grown a sense of sick humor. “The players? Yourself, the boss, and… James Buchanan Barnes.”
FRIDAY—not FRIDAY curled the end of Bucky’s last name, drawing it out so that the silence that ensued could become more dramatic. More poisonous.

Steve froze. A protective, territorial instinct flared in the pit of his stomach as he inched closer to his friend, letting go of Tony’s hand in the process.

He didn’t notice the genius hang his head a little at that seemingly trivial action.

“And if we refuse to play?” Steve asked, placing a hand on Bucky’s shoulder a little too tightly. The former Winter Soldier breathed deeply, but his steel blue eyes were focused on his hands, which he had rested in his lap.

“Well, Captain, if you really want to resist…” Steve’s breath caught in his throat when another crimson dot stuck itself onto the middle of Tony’s forehead. The genius’ pupils dilated, but he stayed absolutely still. “Still willing to question authority?” Steve swallowed dryly. He did not dare say another word.

“Let’s begin, shall we?”

The static from the screen smoothed out and a date appeared in the bottom right hand corner of a videorecording taken by a camcorder: 05/29/1992

Tony’s 22nd birthday. Steve recognized it in an instant.

The genius inhaled sharply and his fists clenched until his knuckles turned white.

Steve turned his attention back to the screen.

There was blaring music with streamers and balloons all over the ground as well as a generous amount littering the pool. There seemed to be a luxurious hotel in the background and the dirty area where nobody but a few stragglers roamed, was the party venue. The cameraman shakily turned towards a couple giggling and supporting each other as they stumbled back towards the hotel. The woman’s dress was falling off her shoulders and the man kept sucking on her shoulder blades as she tried to walk straight, giggling and shrieking playfully in the process.

The camera returned to face forward and it took a while for the lens to focus. But when it did, the view of a middle-aged, balding man with a flamboyant aura about him guiding a young, loopy young man by the shoulders to a hot tub full of men, all of them nursing a drink and staring at the young man with hungry, predatory gazes, appeared. The young man was wearing a loose shirt with some of the buttons opened at the top. His pants hung low on his hips and some extra material pooled at his ankles, causing him to trip every now and then. Meanwhile, the middle aged man was dressed smartly in an expensive looking suit.

The image zoomed in to one of the men licking his lips. Steve grimaced and tried to keep from gagging.

The image zoomed out once more and the cameraman moved closer. The audio became less muffled and the music became softer.

“Hey Tony…” The middle-aged man grunted as he helped the young man-- Tony-- sit down at the edge of the tub. He took care not to mess up his own designer suit and kneeled down beside the young genius, holding Tony’s bobbing head steady. The camera zoomed in to their frame. “I’m going to introduce you to some new friends, okay? They’re going to take good care of you.” The middle aged man sighed, then slapped a hand down on Tony’s shoulder before standing up and backing away. “I’ll see you in the morning, boy.” The man watched as one of the men in the tub
reached forward and undid the rest of the buttons on Tony’s shirt, letting it fall and then removing it once and for all. The man looked away. Tony’s lean body was exposed.

He didn’t even notice.

“M’kay Obie.” He slurred and giggled, batting at the man who had removed his shirt lazily.

Another man, who had come out of the tub, lifted Tony to his feet violently, causing the young genius to whine in protest. Soon enough, his pants had been peeled off as well. Tony was now wearing nothing except boxers.

Obie tapped his foot impatiently, still turned the other way. He placed his hands on his hips as he barked, “How much does this cover?”

One of the men in the tub, the same one who had taken the liberty of removing Tony’s clothing, drawled in a heavy accent, “Depends on how well he serves us.”

Steve felt his heart clench and then fold over itself as rage pumped through his veins. How dare those men treat Tony like an object? How dare they use talk about him as if he was some sort of--

“Dirty whore.” The heavily accented man--Steve deemed him as ‘Nasty Man’--spat towards the young genius who had begun to giggle uncontrollably when he was pulled into the hot tub roughly. In another, completely different situation, watching a young Tony giggle would have been adorable.

Except, in this situation, the camera focused on a drugged, young man who had just turned 22, suddenly being groped all over his body by the men in the hot tub, all of whom had left their drinks forgotten.

Obie walked away briskly, his back turned and his hands in his pockets, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

As if Tony wasn’t being sexually assaulted behind him. As if he hadn’t left Tony there to be sexually assaulted.

The men left black and blue marks on the young genius as they took turns with him like he was an exhibit at a zoo. Nasty Man stood back, sipping at an old fashioned as the other men sucked at Tony’s skin or claimed his lips violently.

Steve swallowed back bile as Nasty Man set his glass down and pushed his way forward, placing his disgusting, vile hands on Tony’s ass.

Tony, who had been placid and incomprehensive for the past couple of minutes despite the hands which continued to violate him, began to whimper as Nasty Man tugged at the genius’ boxers. And for a second, Tony realized what was happening to him. “Stop…” He slurred, pushing at Nasty Man weakly. “Stop i… it. St… stop.”

“Oh, God.” Steve didn’t dare look at Tony as he buried his face in his hands and peeped through the cracks of his fingertips. Tears spilled down his cheeks as the horror of what he was being shown settled in and cracked his bones due to its sheer weight.

Tony’s practically limp body was flipped around violently when his underwear was discarded and
the men, those vile, disgusting men whooped and catcalled and whistled.

Steve wanted to pummel their faces in until they were distorted and no longer looked human.

The camera’s frame zoomed in on Tony’s face painstakingly slow as his small body suddenly jolted forward. He was thrust forward again and this time, the young genius expelled a tiny gasp. His brown eyes were glassy and confused, dull and shrouded with shadows, as the thrusting became harder and more violent. His face contorted in pain and tears escaped as he wept. Tiny pleas of “No… no… please stop” made Steve’s blood boil and his intestines tie up in a knot.

The super soldier covered his eyes and tried to block out the laughter. He tried to block out the sickening sound of skin on skin and Tony’s whimpers of desperation as he begged for them to stop.

Steve didn’t know for how long the noises continued for. He felt like he was tumbling in a perpetual void, in a constant nothingness, searching for the faces of those men who had hurt his Tony so much, so much. But then… it stopped.

He cracked open one eye.

There was a soft sniffling which replaced the obscene sounds. Then, a swishing of the water as the men exited the hot tub one by one. Not one bothered to look back at the helpless Tony and they left him there to dry like a used dishrag: crying, vulnerable, and defenseless. The roaring, froth of the heated water swallowed him up as Nasty Man tugged his boxers back on him and pushed his shirt and pants closer to the edge.

And the young Tony stayed, quaking and shivering, with his head buried in his arms as even the twinkling of the stars lost their luster.

It was the cameraman who had gone to retrieve Obie. The bastard was gambling and enjoying drinks with other ruthless businessmen.

Steve mentally plotted to dig up the man’s grave, snap his bones in half, and feed that shit to rats. But that still would never be enough to punish him for what he had done. It would never be enough to give back Tony his pride, his dignity, his own body.

The shot finished with the cameraman filming Obie from a distance as he walked down to the hot tub. He helped Tony out while keeping vigilant, pulling the shirt and pants on the young genius roughly before taking him back into the hotel surrepticiously.

The lights returned as the video faded into static. The red dots symbolizing the line between life and death for them all remained.

Steve swore that he could hear everyone’s heartbeat. He could hear everyone’s shaky breathing. The air had grown toxic and sour, yet still everyone breathed on.

It took a minute before the super soldier raised his head towards his boyfriend.

The genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist wasn’t blinking. His face had become a sickly, milk white color. The blood was lost in his hands. He was silent.

“What type of fucked up game is this?” Rhodey. His words shook as his voice cracked but there was a ferocious, protective rage hiding in the undertones of his heartbrokenness. The same rage that was consuming Steve.

The super soldier scanned the room. Wanda was wiping tears from her cheeks. The amount of
emotion in the room must have overwhelmed her and the agony was clear in her dark, dark eyes, which seemed almost black now. Bruce was clenching his fists and breathing deeply, his skin sporting a faint green tinge but then fading once again. Natasha’s lips were spread into a thin line and her eyes were unseeing. She continued to stare at a single spot on the table which she had probably been staring at since the video had started to play. The android’s expression was somber and he held onto Wanda’s hand gently. Even his vibrant colors seemed shadowy. Clint was holding his head up on his arms, his face pasty and a little green, as if he was going to vomit. Sam and Bucky were both leaning back in their chair, frowning as if some sort of distant pain was bothering them and they couldn’t seem to place it.

But the former Winter Soldier’s face had gone gaunt and he suddenly looked so much older. Whereas Sam’s expression was one of sympathy, Bucky’s was one of empathy. Maybe he hadn’t been sexually assaulted, but he sure as hell was assaulted every other way during his eighty long years with HYDRA. He knew that feeling, he recognized and identified that sensation of being unmade, of being torn from your body and conscience until there was an emptiness so deep that one could hear the wind echoing through his bones. He knew what it meant to be used and discarded, to not have any worth until someone decided that they wanted to drop a body or complete a mission.

He knew what it felt like to be nothing.

Steve’s chest ached for his friend. His heart crumbled for Tony.

When he looked back at Colonel Rhodes, he already understood that there was no force of nature, no fire nor wave nor storm nor earthquake intense enough or catastrophic enough to ever, ever measure up to that man’s fury.

Steve knew that the second anyone tried to get in Rhodey’s path, they would be obliterated. No brace on his legs would ever hinder that fact.

And Tony…he seemed so, so… hollow.

“To answer your question, Colonel Rhodes, it is time for part two of the game to commence.” The red dots fell away and it was like all the air passages in the room became clearer. “The three participating players now receive exactly five minutes to make a decision.” There was a deadly pause where the air seemed heavier. “Return The Winter Soldier to HYDRA or we pull another treasure from the chest. Trust that we have a lot more where the first one came from.”

The red dots reappeared on everyone’s chest but Steve’s, Bucky’s, and Tony’s and it mocked them, holding steady as if they were timers, waiting for them to crack.

Silence rang for thirty, long seconds.

“I’ll go.” Bucky says abruptly, causing Steve’s insides to roil as he truly realized that this game was for him. A sick method of getting him to choose between the two people he loved the most.

“Don’t you dare get out of that seat, Bucky or I swear to God you will have to to get past me.” Steve didn’t recognize his own voice when he spoke. He couldn’t recognize the roaring monster which had awoken within him. It terrified him. He turned towards his boyfriend, the shell of a man who seemed so frozen, so broken. He molded his voice back to gentleness. “We can’t let them take him, Tony.”

“And I CAN’T LET HIM BE HUMILIATED LIKE THIS!” Steve froze. He had never heard Bucky so distraught, so full of hatred and black, spitting anger. “No one deserves this, Steve, especially not because of me. Don’t worry about me. I’ve dealt with this before. I’ll be fine, just let
“No.” There’s an icy calm to Steve’s words which surprised even him. Bucky opened his mouth to protest and he repeated, “No.”

“I’M NOT A FRAGILE DOLL, STEVE!” THe man with the metal arm sprang up from his seat and leaned forward, slamming his fist onto the table, causing it to crack slightly.

“AND YOU ARE NOT HYDRA’S SLAVE!” Steve roars back before taking a few deep breaths. “And I will let hell freeze over before I let them treat you like one again. Before I let them hurt you.” He lowered his voice several decibels, making sure to keep eye contact with his best friend. To let him know that he was worth it, that he was valuable, that he mattered.

And that he had been through enough.

“Tony…” Steve turned towards his boyfriend, who had not spoken or made an effort to move, but was taken aback by the sight of the genius staggering upwards on wobbly feet and then stumbling towards the trashcan where he got sick.

No one dared to move or speak due to the threat of the red dots on everyone’s chest. One wrong move, albeit good intentioned, could mean death.

“Tony, if you need your migraine medication, it’s in my bag next to my feet.” Bruce continued to look forward as he said all this confidently and casually, surprisingly calm despite the circumstances.

It was Bucky who got up to rub Tony’s back. The man didn’t even hesitate. Steve admired the sight. It was nice to see that the toxic bridges had burned and that there were now ones of care and comfort built in their place.

His slight euphoria was interrupted once more by reality.

“The choice is easy, Steve. I can take care of myself. But Stark needs you right now, punk.”

This was an unfair game of tug-of-war. Red, hot frustration gathered up behind his eyes and he set his jaw until the lower part of his face went numb.

Steve got up to grab Tony’s medication from Bruce’s bag and poured a glass of water from the pitcher in the middle of the table. He tried to pretend that the weight of the stares he received from everyone in the room did not make him feel like he was under scrutiny.

When Tony was finished, he looked even grayer than before. Those lips, which Steve loved to trace, were bloodless. The man looked so defeated. Both super soldiers offered their support to take him back to his seat. Tony denied both of them.

But halfway there, his knees buckled and Steve caught him and half carried him back.

“Bucky…” Steve began again, sadness coiling in his chest as he watched Tony down two pills from the pill bottle with trembling fingers. “HYDRA is going to have to pry you out of my cold, dead hands if they want you. I can’t let them have you, Buck. Not like this.”

The former Winter Soldier gave his friend a pleading look, but instead of protesting, he dragged his hands over his face exhaustively. “You’re being selfish, Steve.” He mumbled, shook his head and kept his eyes closed.

Steve ignored Bucky and focused his gaze on his boyfriend who seemed to be withering away. Tony
had still not said a single word. “I don’t want to have to choose between you, Tony.” He placed a hand on the smaller man’s shoulder and avoided his face. “I know you’re strong. I know that you’ve been through hell and back and that you’re still standing. And I know… I know you’ll get through this too.” Steve lowered his head. “I have to choose Bucky.”

No response. Steve swore that he saw the genius’ chest stop moving for several seconds until he exhaled. “S… sorry.” He choked out feebly before biting his lip and staring at his hands.

*Oh, Tony. Why are you apologizing?*

“My wife,” It was Fury who broke the silence and Steve’s head quickly perked up at the code reference, “is really angry with me right now and if I don’t get home… she’ll be coming for me soon.”

Steve locked eyes with Natasha and Clint for a brief second, all three of them understanding that help was on the way.

“Time’s up.”

Red dots blossomed once more, threatening the players’ lives once more and the lights winked out immediately.

The cameraman was sitting at a distance at a really classy, high end party. Steve recognized it as a Maria Stark Foundation Gala. The date was Christmas, 1993. The frame zoomed in to an image of Tony and Rhodey sitting at the bar together, sharing smiles and laughter when Obadiah interrupted, handing Tony a drink before leading him away.

“I could have stopped it.” Rhodey whispered, voice trembling.

“You couldn’t have known.” Natasha reassured.

Steve averted his eyes from the screen as overlapping voices and laughter disappeared to the sound of Nasty Man’s tenor and dirty talk. Pretty soon, it morphed into pleas and cries for help joined by the violent creaking of a bed.

Steve dug the ends of his palms into his eyes to keep from crying.

*“Three minutes. The Winter Soldier returns to us or there will be consequences. HYDRA does not negotiate.”*

“Steve…” Bucky started and Cap was ready to strap his friend to his chair to keep him from leaving when a sudden eruption from the small man beside him deafened him.

“Neither do we!” Tony’s cheeks were flushed and his forehead was beaded with sweat. His eyes were rimmed with red.

All the red dots gathered at the genius’ chest. All of them.

And Tony doesn’t even flinch.

Steve thought he knew what fear was. He thought he knew what it meant to be terrified when he saw Bucky fall from the train. When he dove the plane into the ocean of ice. When he saw Peggy so old and frail. When the world was threatened by aliens.

But *this*… this was something beyond fear.
“Obadiah Stane, my godfather, used me as a whore to pay off debts to HYDRA.” Tony declared loudly, head held high and voice booming. “Nothing you threaten me with is going to break me. I can promise you that. Barnes is not leaving our sight nor our hands so go the fuck ahead and tell your snipers to pull their triggers.” He raised his arms. “I’m an open book.” The dots hovered.

“Tony…” Steve begged and prayed that he stopped.

“Go ahead.” Tony taunted, a malicious smile on his face. “Kill me.” A pause where the red dots swam lazily on his chest. “KILL ME!” He roared enough to rattle Steve’s bones.

There was a loud bang as the wood of the doors splintered and broke. There was a shout of “Everybody get down!”

Steve launched onto his feet, pushing through the chaos and tackling Tony to the ground just as several bullets whizzed past right where the genius was standing. The wall was peppered with smoking, black holes in an instant.

A second longer and there would have been red to accompany them.

The lights flickered off once more as the yelling and pounding of heavy boots on the floor continued. Steve kept his arms wrapped around his boyfriend tightly, shielding him from the outside world while Tony flicked his phone forward and opened a screen.

He managed to reboot FRIDAY’s system within seconds.

“I’m sorry, boss.” The AI’s sweet, innocent voice had returned as soon as the job was done and Steve felt Tony exhale in relief.

“Glad you’re back FRIDAY.” Tony’s tone was so steady, so professional even though the world seemed like it was collapsing around them. The genius dished out orders rapidly. “Send the Iron Legion out and wipe out the snipers and any other HYDRA scum in the area immediately. Check SHIELD and government databases for facial recognition. Track the hackers who got into your mainframe.”

Steve still held tight as the AI informed them of a signal coming from some rundown place upstate, near the compound. The SHIELD team, who had stormed through the door, took note of the location and coordinates and moved out.

When the room became quieter and it seemed as if the dust settled, Steve felt as if, in a way, the world had both ended and begun at the same time.

Tony had let him hold him for so long, the both of them just sprawled on the floor folded into each others’ bodies.

But now the genius thrashed, trying his damndest to escape Steve’s iron grip.

And that roiling in the pit of his stomach, the stirring that had begun the second this whole mess had begun, finally blossomed to its fullest extent.

Steve let go, but before his boyfriend could rush out of the room, the super soldier pinned him against the wall by his shoulders. He was fueled by nothing other than pure adrenaline. “What the HELL was that? What made you think that was a good idea?” The words were torrents and Tony flinched against his storm. “YOU COULD HAVE DIED!”

“MY WHOLE WORLD BURNED AND CRASHED AROUND ME! I WANTED TO D…” But
Tony slammed his mouth shut. Steve watched as the smaller man’s chest heaved and his large eyes fill to the brim with pain and bottled up emotions. He thanked God that Tony hadn’t finished the sentence because he wouldn’t have known where to bury the broken pieces of his heart if he had.

Maybe it was the look in Steve’s baby blues that broke him. But Tony, who had stayed so solid and so strong the entire time looked up once, just once, and then hung his head as his facial features scrunched together and the tears began to flow. “Everybody betrayed me.” He sobbed, put his weight on the wall behind him and began to slide down.

Steve, with a gentle “hey, hey, hey” kept his boyfriend standing, not even noticing when his own voice cracked at Tony’s despair.

“The man I tr… trusted and lo… loved for twenty years and saw as a fa… father used me as a ho… hole for money! Then he… he tried to ki… kill me years later for the company! As if I was nothing more than a few dollar bill… bills here and there or a goddamn tool that he took out every now and then when he needed to fix so… something. I was nothing to him. Nothing.”

Tony wiped at his eyes frantically and messily, sniffling and trying so hard to slow his breathing.

Steve could do nothing but watch and hold him up. He had a feeling that he had nothing to do other than to listen, to let him get it all out.

Because God knew that the man had been hiding it away for so long.

Tony gulped several times, his throat rippling as he finally settled, although not completely. His chest still heaved, just slower.

“And then… and then…” His voice was hoarse now, but he was no longer yelling. Tony looked over to Natasha, who had been standing stoically in the back the entire time. “You said you would erase the videos. You promised that you would wipe them away. I trusted you.” The assassin, who would never break her gaze with anyone despite who they were, now hung her head. “Was I wrong to trust you again?

“And you…” That feeble, rough voice. Those chocolate brown eyes which had resorted to the color of dirt returned to Steve. It was all the super soldier could do to keep his mouth shut. To simply listen. “You told me I was part of a team. That I counted in your definition of ‘together.’ That I mattered. And then you left me… in the cold.”

“Tony…” Steve backed away, releasing Tony. He stood just fine on his own.

“With a broken suit. After finding out that my entire life, I’d been deceived. Lied to. I thought Howard was drunk, that he’d crashed the car and killed himself and my mom because he was… I spent my whole life blaming him. And then when I finally, finally get the truth and he was right there,” Those eyes flickered towards Bucky, who had shrunken into the shadows. “I just…” He raised his pointer finger and twirled it beside his ear and scoffed. “I went nuts. Not that I wasn’t batshit crazy from the beginning.” He chuckled wryly and that familiar look of anguish returned. “You made me believe that I was a part of some sort of fucked up, dysfunctional family and I loved it. And then you left me behind just like everybody else. Because I will never… never be anyone’s first choice because that’s the kind of thing that someone who loves you does for you, they choose you first because they love you and nobody… no one ever…”

Steve finished the sentence in his head silently, ignoring the way his intestines seemed to coil tighter around his heart. He kept listening.
Tony sniffed, voice breaking. “Actually, I was. Someone’s first choice, that is. For one person.” He looked at Rhodey, more tears escaping. “And I couldn’t even catch you when you fell.” He shrunk back when Steve reached out with a hand. It destroyed him. Tony looked back towards him. “You chastised me for keeping secrets and not trusting you or the team when I built Ultron and I… admit that. I was wrong. But Steve… me having trust issues was not something that came with the package of genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.” He laughed weakly. “No, that shit came about on its own. Because when you give someone everything and… they treat it like nothing, something inside you really, really breaks.”

And that, that was when Steve Rogers shed a single tear.

Tony took several moments then to weep silently, his eyes streamed without him making a single sound. His face only held that red flush which Steve thought made him look so beautiful.

“I was so alone.” The genius wiped at his eyes with his sleeve and sniffed again, leaning back against the wall once more. “The Tower, the Compound, everything was just so empty. Pepper left. Vision took time off to mourn, which he preferred to do by himself so I just stayed away. Rhodey was busy relearning how to walk, which, again, courtesy of yours fucking truly. Peter Parker, that bastard of a kid,” He smiled, “He had his own life so he said no to becoming an Avenger. Surprised me and Happy both when he said it. And how can I blame him anyway, he’s just a kid. Bruce was already gone. Natasha didn’t want to deal with me and then… you.” He twitched his lips upward for a second before tilting his head. “I was, when I first got that letter and that brick of a phone, so fucking angry at you. Then… then I was relieved. Hopeful. Because I thought… I believed that you would come back. I thought, ‘he would never really leave me behind, would he? He said we’re a team.’ But you never came. Not once.” He said the last two words quietly, as if they were sinking in for him as well as everyone else. “Natasha only came back after she found me being raped. And after I tried to end it, because let’s face it, everyone already made it clear what they thought of me anyway so why even keep trying,” Tony raised his sleeves as more tears spilled and for the first time, Steve saw the criss-crossing, faded scars as well as the long, vertical ones that stretched from the crook of his elbow to his wrist. One or two lines were still red, as if inflicted recently. His blood froze in his veins. “When I tried to end it, she wouldn’t leave me alone.” Tony barked another laugh. “It’s nice to know that someone felt obligated to care.”

That was when Steve wrapped his arms around Tony. He rocked him slowly, back and forth. “Everything’s going to get better, I promise. I’m not going anywhere this time, baby. It’ll get better. Shh… it’s okay.”

He didn’t expect to be pushed away so roughly. “I’m not okay!” Nor did he expect that Tony would yell. He sounded so broken. So incredibly broken. “You don’t know what that feels like!” He pointed towards the space where the holographic screen had been. “I’m not strong, Steve! I’m not strong, I’m selfish. I don’t lay down on the wire and let people crawl over me because I’m good or noble. I do it because I don’t want to deal with what’s on the outside if I make it out alive. That’s why I slit my wrists, that’s why I taunted the terrorists, that’s why I flew a goddamn nuke into space because I was so tired of hurting, not because I’m some fucking hero.” He dropped his voice to a low whisper, resembling a dying flame that was determined to keep burning. “And here’s the thing about heroes, Rogers: life pushes you and pushes you until you become a villain. When I was the Merchant of Death and I killed people with the weapons that I had created with the tips of my fingers, I was a villain. When I put on the suit and started killing people like that, people called me a hero. Well, I’m not. I’m not, Steve. I’m just tired. I was tired then. I am tired now. I was tired when you all came home and called me a whore and told me that you wanted me dead, as if I didn’t already know or want that myself. I’m tired of looking in the mirror everyday and asking myself what it is about me that makes everybody hate me the second they lay eyes on me. God knows you did. What’s wrong with me, Steve? What did I do wrong?”
And that was the end of it.

Captain America was rendered dumbstruck.

He had no idea what to do.

As if he were awakening from a trance, Tony blinked several times at everyone, slow and confused, before he wiped his face for the last time, held his head up high, and walked away.

Half of his mind was focused on driving in circles. He paid attention to the red lights and the speed limits and the pedestrian crossings.

The rest of him floated in a dark chasm. The shadows invited him there. Their power of seduction smelled of fine wine and Tony let himself be drawn toward it.

He found himself parked in front of the restaurant him and Kaira had gone to. He thought about the bar there, the assortment of bottles and the lights and the dancing and the people and he wished… he wished he could have just one drink. Just one so he could feel the burning in his throat and hope that it be strong enough to numb everything before it poisoned him.

Because everything was poisoning him. It felt worse than palladium.

He sat himself at the wheel and debated, throwing arguments back and forth and wishing that he brought his migraine medication with him so that his brain would just shut the fuck up and he could stop feeling so goddamn nauseous and… and…

He hit the steering wheel with both hands, relishing the hurt. He hit it again and again until his hands went numb from the pain. Then he gripped it, seething and clenching his teeth together. A low whine escaped his lips. He was glad no one heard.

“FRIDAY, could you call Peter for me?” Was that what he sounded like? He really did need a drink.

“Dialing Peter Parker…”

“Mr. Stark?”

“Hey kid.”

“Whoa, you don’t sound too good. You feeling okay? Did something happen with the Avengers? Do you need my help? I got off from school early today ’cause it’s a half day so I can come over to the compound…”

Tony smiled softly at the kid’s rambling before speeding off onto the road once more, resuming his pattern of driving in circles. “No, Peter, nothing like that. And I’m fine, by the way.” Liar. “I just wanted to hear about your day. So… anything new and exciting happening?”

“Not really, but I just took a science test and I think I aced it. Oh and Ned bought a new LEGO set the other day, man it’s so cool you have no idea…”

The tension in his fingers loosened as he listened to the teenager ramble so excitedly about the littlest things. He was grateful for this small taste of domesticity, of normalcy.

It was good that Peter Parker denied being an Avenger. He was too pure for that hot mess.

Tony would lay down his life to protect him.
He found himself driving to Brooklyn. He listened to Peter talk the entire way there. He almost forgot about everything. Almost.

When he pulled up to the parking lot of her apartment complex, he saw her there. She was putting things in the trunk of her convertible. He watched her, letting Peter’s voice drown out everything else.

In the middle of his rambling about a really interesting girl called MJ, Tony interrupted him. Before anything else, he needed to say it. It wasn’t supposed to be a goodbye but it sure as hell felt like one.

“Hey, Peter? Yeah, I’m sorry kid I have to go in like two minutes but before you drop the line, I need to tell you something.”

“What’s up, Mr. Stark?”

“Well, first of all, drop that title it makes me feel old. Call me Tony.”

“Okay Tony.” He smiled.

“Second,” He sighed, trying to fathom his words together before they came out in a mess. He needed to get this right. “I just wanted to let you know that you’re special. You’re good. A good kid. Irrevocably good. Stay that way. And… and uh… you’re loved. Remember that. You are loved. You’re crazy smart and you’re going to go places someday and be a… a way better man than me. A way better man. Hell, you already are. Um… what else… let’s see… I… uh… I feel really lucky, you know because I got to know you and… you’re a true hero.” He paused, squeezing his eyes closed and sniffing quietly as his cheeks became wet once more. He nodded. “Yeah… you’re a hero. To hell with the goddamn suit. You are a hero, a great man, and… and worth so much with or without it. Don’t let anyone ever tell you anything different.”

Peter didn’t speak for a couple seconds but when he finally did, his voice was somber. Humble.

“Wow. Thanks Mr… I mean, Tony. I really appreciate it. But… if you don’t mind me asking… why are you saying all this to me?”

“My dad never really gave me a lot of support and I’m just trying to break the cycle of shame.” Tony responded, chuckling a little at being reminded of the time when he praised the kid for what he had accomplished in DC way back when.

“Right.” There was a lighthearted laugh. “I guess I’ll talk to you later, Tony.”

“Yeah kid. Keep doing what you’re doing, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Bye Peter.”

Tony leaned back in his seat. It was barely even 1:00 in the afternoon and he already felt so defeated. There was nothing left to think about, there was nothing left to ponder.

He was just done.

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At first, he just stared at the door of her apartment, swaying on his feet as if it was hard for him to balance. He didn’t know whether he should knock or whether he should turn away and just spare another person from the shit show that was his life.
And then the door opened on its own and there she was, his knight, or whatever the fuck you called female knights, in shining armor.

She smiled ever so softly. “Tasha called me. Said you might come.”

“I had nowhere else to go.” Tony whispered and tried to push the tears back. He was so tired of crying.


“Did she tell you why?”

She didn’t answer at first, but when Tony turned around to face her and the tears barreled out despite his best efforts, her face softened and she sighed. “Yeah she did.”

“So you know how fu… fucked up I am?” He choked, unable to contain ugly sobs as he finally sank down onto the floor, in the middle of her apartment which was now clean and tidy for some reason, but it was never clean and tidy and that was what comforted him the most about being there and now it wasn’t…it wasn’t…

And then she was there, kneeling down in front of him with her smooth hands cupping his face as she wiped his tears with her thumbs. The morning they spent together at the gym now seemed so long ago.

And then she was holding him and rocking him and he was crying into her chest, leaving a wet spot right where her heart was.

“Come with me. I’m going down to Virginia Beach today. I was actually planning to leave right when Tasha called.” She cupped his face again and he looked into those honey brown eyes which sparkled. “Come with me.”

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Kaira was driving when they reached the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel. They had alternated every couple of hours when they had stopped for breaks to go to the bathroom or eat something. But she had insisted on driving when they reached the bridge.

They had stayed in silence for most of the ride. The only conversation they had which wasn’t consisted of hmms or one-word answers was when they had stopped at a Duty-Free/Cafe to pick up coffee and a pack of cigarettes and a lighter for Kaira right when they entered Virginia.

“It’s so much cheaper here.” She had said while cupping her fingers over the tip and lighting the cigarette. “New York is overpriced.”

Tony had watched the wisp of smoke fade into the air while sipping at his coffee. He thought there was almost something poetic about it. “You shouldn’t do that. It’s not good for you.”

She had released the smoke slowly, pouting her rosy lips just a little. “You’re right. I shouldn’t. Sorry.” She dragged her cigarette again. “Bad habit. I guess I got a little curious one day and I’ve never been able to shake it.” Another pause as she released the smoke again. “It makes me vulnerable. More human, maybe.” She sighed. “Or maybe, I’m just making excuses for myself.” She had gotten a faraway look in her eyes after that. Tony had just continued to sip his coffee blankly.

But now they were at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and the water surrounding them was so blue and the setting sun’s rays were glistening on top of it. The air around them was empty and yet, so full of
everything that was necessary. Everything that mattered. The bridge stretched on and Kaira turned on the radio.

Tony felt… refreshed. That was the only word for it. Riding in the passenger seat of her convertible, he felt so free. Here, in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, there were no rules or expectations or disappointments or betrayals. Here, there were no boundaries.

The music blared and Kaira drove on, her hair blowing in the wind. For once, Tony felt like he had succeeded in escaping.

So he got up, a little clumsily compared to how Kaira had done it that night in New York so long ago, but he managed to make it to the backseat and stable himself while standing. She didn’t protest nor say a word to him as he did all this. No, she knew. She always knew.

Tony spotted her smirk in the rearview mirror. He smiled.

And raised his arms.

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The first thing they did when they arrived was buy Tony two extra pairs of clothes and some swim trunks at one of the shops and get a hotel room, which Tony insisted on paying for.

And then they were out on the beach. It was practically night now and the stars winked and twinkled as the pair went out onto the sand and let the ocean swallow them up.

Tony thought that the sky resembled her tattoos and that her skin melted into the sea-kissed, salty air and atmosphere as easy as butter.

Her short, wet hair was slicked backwards after bathing for a while, showing off her structured face. Her eyes, wide and soothing, stood out amongst everything else. Her curvy, tall, and strong body was hugged by a one-piece swimsuit that clung to her skin even more after being doused by the water.

When she first splashed him with salty water and looked at him with her eyebrow raised, he had paused, and then sent twice as much water down her way.

He had never felt so free while he was laughing.

After changing and taking a shower in their hotel room, the two of them set out once more into the lively city and Tony only watched her as her cheekbones lit up and shone by the light of the streetlights.

He fell out of step with her and lagged behind, only to tackle her back. She yelped in surprise as he jumped onto her broad back and wrapped his legs around her waist and his arms around her shoulders.

“I am not giving you a goddamn piggy back ride, you bastard.” She chuckled as she regained her balance and hoisted him up better.

“Yes you are.” He mumbled into her shoulder blade, taking in the smell of her skin. She still smelled like the ocean and he could still detect a hint of her signature rose scent. He inhaled deeply.

She didn’t say anything to him after that and they traveled in silence, her carrying him the entire way to a McDonalds. And if they got weird stares, well, most of them turned affectionate and admiring
within seconds.

“Let go you fucking limpet or I’m ordering you a happy meal for dinner.” He only smiled against her shoulder.

He jumped off of her only when they took the food back to the beach. Tony laid out a blanket onto the sand and Kaira collapsed with a groan. “Fuck, you owe me a luxury spa massage.” The beach was practically empty except for a few stragglers here and there who were having fun out at sea.

Tony laughed, then looked through the bag of food. “You really did order me a happy meal.”

She plucked a fry from him and popped it into her mouth. “That’s what you get for destroying my back, old man. And you get to keep the toy.”

They ate in silence, watched the moon, and listened to the whispering of the waves. This was peace. Pure, unadulterated peace. After everything, Tony needed this.

So he numbed the part of his mind that wanted to take him back to where he was that morning, to what he saw and what caused him to come crashing down. But then again, he figured that that breakdown had been inevitable.

“Lie down on your stomach.” Tony said when they both finished eating. She raised an eyebrow. “Does your back still hurt?”

“It’s a little stiff.” she said while lying down and resting her head in her crossed arms.

He scooted over to sit beside her back and then began to knead his fingers on her skin, loosening the muscles and relieving the tension. He had picked up a few things from dating Pepper.

She moaned as he worked and kept watching the lapping of the waves. It was mesmerizing.

“I know who you are.” He said abruptly, interrupting the quietude.

“What’s that?” Her voice sounded muffled from where her face was buried in her arms.

Tony finished the massage and she turned around on her side to look at him. “You are the type of person who wants people to look at you and then see their darkest fantasies.” The breeze blew lightly and it ruffled her hair as she continued to look at him. “You’re alluring, Kaira.” He finished with a whisper.

She sat up. They were so close now. “And when you look at me,” he focused on her lips when she spoke, “do you see your darkest fantasies?”

Tony answered her by closing the gap between them. When he kissed her, the sensation of sweet wine and spice came crashing over him and he kissed deeper, desperately. He breathed her in and laid her back down on the blanket and he went further and further, begging for that sensation. The one that was dangerous, yet sultry and epic and everything that he wished for. He found the curve of her waist and he held onto it as he kept kissing her.

“Tony…” He stopped and sat back when she said his name. Her lips were slightly swollen and her cheeks were flushed. Her expression was unreadable.

And then just exactly what he had done settled into him like alcohol on an empty stomach. Then, goddamnit, he was crying. Again. “I’m so so sorry.” He whimpered pathetically. “I didn’t mean to, I made a mistake. I’m so sorry.”
But she didn’t turn away from him. She came back and rubbed his knuckles before kissing them. “It’s okay, honey.” She said and her voice sounded so far away. “I know you just wanted to feel loved.” They stayed like that for several minutes when she whispered. “Come on.” She took his hand and led him back to the hotel.

When the door closed behind them and they were both back in the cool hotel room, Tony felt so, incredibly lost. Which was a shame, because for several hours with Kaira, he had finally felt at home. Comfortable.

Now it was all just a void.

He sat down on the bed and Kaira kneeled in front of him once again, taking his hands in her own. “You didn’t answer my question.” She said. “When you look at me, do you see your darkest fantasies?”

Tony blinked at her before answering. “When I look at you, I feel… better. Good.” He knew the answer was lame, but he decided to keep going. “When I look at you, I see what you mean when you say fucked up, but happier. I feel like there’s no one breathing down my neck, hounding me anymore. And when I’m with you, I feel--as cliche as it sounds--free. Alive. And when I touched you, all of it, all the shit in my life, it just faded away. It’s like, I wasn’t numbing myself like how I used to when I had sex with so many women in the past. I was… I don’t know… breaking through invisible chains. It felt good. It felt… perfect for just a couple of seconds.”

Kaira held his gaze and then guided his hands to her hips. He held them there, not daring to breath. “Do you think… if we do this… do you think anything will change? For you? Do you think you’ll feel better… like you said?” When Tony didn’t answer, she asked again. “Do you need this, Tony?”

And ever so slowly, he lowered his hands to rest of the curve of her behind. She let him. “Yes.” He said, desperation laced in that one word.

“The second you change your mind, I’ll stop. I promise.”

“Okay.”

And then their lips joined once more and this time, Tony opened his mouth to let her in and claim him. She let his hands roam all over her body. He cupped his hands around her boobs and massaged his thumb against her nipples, causing a moan to escape her lips and her body to arch into him even more.

Their clothing peeled off one by one and then he was naked and underneath her, his length standing long and hard as she stopped briefly, grabbed some things from her suitcase and returned. He inhaled deeply when she swept over him and kissed him hard and deep.

Then her arms reached behind his head and brought a cloth over his eyes, darkening his vision. Her voice was husky when she whispered in his ear. “Now I’m who you want me to be.”

Hands dragged over his chest and abdomen before they wrapped around his length. Kisses pecked him all the way down until he was taken into her mouth. He gasped, bucking his hips as he was sucked and tasted and worshiped. Hands groped at his ass, holding him steady as he whimpered and begged for more.

“What you want me to be…” The words echoed and hissed in his ear like a phantom.

He saw baby blue eyes twinkling up at him and tufts of blond hair peeking up from down there as pouty lips worked themselves on Tony’s length expertly.
“I love you, Tony Stark.” The man’s voice was amplified and distant, but he heard it so clearly.

A condom was slipped on him and then he was inside a warm body. He heard a small gasp and then he rubbed the thighs which caged him.

As the body atop him began to roll and thrust on his, Tony moaned and panted.

The same images came back every single time the bed creaked with their movement and every single time he cried out in desperation. Blond hair. Blue eyes. A large, muscular body. Gentle arms. A deep voice. A kind heart.

“St… ste…” Tony panted as the thrusting became faster and harder and more intense. There were hands on his chest, rubbing his nipples and he whined as the sensitive skin was nipped at.

He arched his back when he climaxed, fists clenching in the sheets tightly. He heard the sound of someone else gasping with him as he spilled into the condom. “Steeeeeve.” He moaned, the name a strained whisper on the tip of his tongue. “Steve.” He continued to whimper as the postcoital bliss spread through his body. “Steve.”

Steve.

The darkness was taken away, but still he kept his eyes closed. He turned over on his side, clutching the comforter as it was put on his body gently. An arm wrapped around his torso underneath the covers and his legs became intertwined with another pair. A hand was stroking through his hair, lulling him to sleep.

“Good night, Tony.” He heard before he felt a kiss on his head and then another on his neck.

He heard humming in his ear. He let that be his lullaby.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it! I just would like to let all the readers know that I am now making my email, where you can find if you go to my profile, public. You can send me your opinions or comments or if some of you are up to it, fan-art! (I would love some fan-art)

Also, please comment and let me know what you think! I worked really hard on this chapter and I’d like to have your thoughts.

Remember that this fic is impartial to the events in Civil War. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion so feel free to share yours but keep in mind and respect the fact that others have different thoughts and that they are allowed to disagree with you. I DO NOT tolerate wars in the comments section so please, please be respectful of each other. Thank you :}


Before any of you begin reading, I would just like to request all of you to not bash any character under the comments. I appreciate all of your opinions, I do. Except, for this chapter specifically, I would just like to acknowledge Tony's road to recovery and the reconciliation he has with Steve. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*ONE WEEK LATER*

“We create our own demons.”

There was a halo. Everything was bathed in white and his surroundings glowed as if he had gone to heaven. The lights were soft, yet blinding at the same time and he squinted to see past the shiny orbs which clouded his vision.

She was there. A drop of honey in the milk white, wearing fabric that was soft and silky and ran through his fingers like water. Her lips were pink and parted, her eyes vibrant and twinkling.

“We create our own demons.” She repeated, voice smooth and soothing.

She was pure. She was innocent. She was ethereal. She was beautiful.

She was an angel.

The halo curled around her as she kneeled before him. “And you...” Her words echoed in the crevices of his brain and mind, yet those parts of him felt numb and broken. “You created me.” He was expecting a whisper or a fluttering when her fingers brushed his cheek. It rattled him when they stung instead. “I’m not real, Tony.”

She turned to leave, slowly, and he could hear his heartbeat so loud and clear. It was deafening.

So he touched the white fabric she was draped in.

He jumped back when the place where his hands caressed the silk became tainted. Blood red began to seep in all directions, like veins, and they mapped a route up and around her body, drowning her in sin.

Those eyes were not twinkling anymore, yet they were wide and unseeing and lined with kohl.

Those lips were not pink like the skin of a newborn baby anymore, yet they remained full, but became sensuous when they were painted with rouge.

The fabric flowed around her and engulfed her as if it were flames and she were a phoenix.

If she was beautiful in white, she was devastating in red.
She was a demon.

Her voice was no longer smooth. It was seductive and husky and she hissed like a snake, yet Tony
drew forward towards her. “I’m not Mary Sue.”

She guided his fingers towards the tattoo on her wrist and the flames on her skin were moving. He
could feel its intense heat.

He felt the scars underneath.

Her hands, which had been so pure, were now coated with blood and it dripped onto his skin. He
looked down, but he was already bleeding.

She was crying. Then the next second, her eyes went glassy. The corners of her mouth began to
foam and she toppled over. Such glory, such majesty… reduced to a writhing figure on the floor.

The heat, which had caused drops of sweat to roll down his face, faded.

Red became gray and insufferable warmth became frigid frost.

There was a pill bottle beside her pale, cold hand.

“Can’t you see?” She choked as Tony watched her die. “I’m you.”

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He jolted awake, every sight too blinding, every sound too loud, and every smell too nauseating.

“Fuck.” He spat as his lab returned to his being and his mind returned to that dull space it had resided
in for the past week.

A result of the anti-depressants he had crawled back to.

The euphoria had ended. He was back in New York.

The past seven days had consisted of the cold floor of his lab which he didn’t feel, blasting rock
music which he didn’t hear, and requests to visit or eat or talk or sleep which he didn’t recognize.

When his thoughts took him places he did not want to be, he came out and went straight to the
shower where he would scrub and scrub at his skin until it was bright red and blistering. He would
do anything to rid himself from the uncleanliness. The tarnish.

Other times, his thoughts would take him back to the car ride back from Virginia, where one playful
comment led to another until one of his sentences came out bitter and he was suddenly so
angry, but he could not explain why.

“You’re perfect.” He had seethed with his jaw clenched. “What the hell do you know about being
depressed?”

He had been driving so he hadn’t bothered turning his head to see her mouth drop open as she
frowned.

“Oh nothing.” Her words had dripped with sarcasm, yet her voice had been hoarse with hurt.
“Nothing at all.” She repeated as she had reached for a cigarette and her lighter. “Except… a
couple of years ago I had been diagnosed with crippling depression due to a miscarriage and just
my life as a fucking assassin--God, that was a shit-show--and the fact that, you know, my family
“I’m sorry.” It had taken him several minutes to say it, but when it came out, it sounded more like a squeak.

“Everyone is.” She had pressed the end of the cigarette onto the ash tray on the platform before the dashboard. “But I… I survived.” She had looked at him, tears gone, but there was a rawness there. A vulnerability he had never seen before and it terrified him.

Because she was supposed to be perfect. She was supposed to be a constant in his life.

“I turned my life around.” She had continued. “Tried so hard to be happy, to move on and sometimes, that’s all you can do. Sometimes you have to shove it under a rug and keep moving because the world is not going to stop for you if you’re depressed.” She had paused, tapping out a rhythm on the armrest. “You can look at me and think that I’m some sort of perfect, free-spirited, or whatever the fuck type of person who’s got it all worked out. But I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. You think I don’t still have nightmares or an occasional panic attack or that I don’t feel like a huge part of my life is missing because I haven’t seen or talked to my parents in years?”

He had not said a word. How could he have? He had known that it was wrong to feel like he had been lied to.

But his life experience had not been great. At this point, he was used to it.

“That perfect woman… you made her up. She’s not real, Tony.”

“Are you saying I’m crazy?” He had whispered, eyes burning with hot tears he would not release. “Am I imagining you?”

“No.” She had exhaled and her voice was gentle, yet candid. “I’m saying that you need to stop waiting for that perfect girl to save you because she’s not real.”

They had sat in silence after that, the whirring of the car engine and the whistling of the wind being the only sounds which accompanied them.

And then, with just five words, Kaira had dropped a bomb upon him and he still wasn’t sure if he had survived or died because of it. “I’m going back to India.” She had said. He had felt numb all of a sudden. “I’m leaving at the end of the week. Saturday morning, actually.”

There had been a ringing in his ears. But that was probably only because of the bomb.

Not because another person in his life had decided to leave him.
Tasha doesn’t know. I wasn’t planning on telling anyone, actually.” He had heard the words in the distance but the roaring of his blood was louder. “I’m a great actress, Tony. That’s why you can’t see just how much I miss them. Mom, dad, my little brother. I feel like I lost the remainder of my childhood.” She had looked at him. “I don’t have anyone to call family. So I... I vacated my apartment, put some of my stuff in storage and sold the rest, and packed. I just... Virginia Beach is my safe space so I wanted to visit one last time before I bounced. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. I don’t know if I’ll ever come back. But I’m going. I have to. Because this...” she gestured to her face and laughed self-deprecatingly, “this facade isn’t working anymore.”

Now, he sat in his lab on the cold floor. He ignored DUM-E as he beeped sadly at him. He ignored his medication bottles which were littered all over the place. He ignored the stiffness in his bones and the scars on his heart and the empty tick, tick, ticking of the clock as it marked down the seconds and the hours and the days. Time was nothing. Because once the hands of the clock moved forward, that second or that hour or that day faded to oblivion.

Was it bad that he felt the exact same way?

It was 6:22 AM. Saturday.

Then he was pounding on Natasha’s door. He didn’t remember how he got there.

He didn’t care that he looked homeless or that his hair was stuck up in several places or that he was wearing oversized sweatpants which were probably Steve’s or that time was nothing or that he was nothing because, to Natasha Romanoff, Kaira was something.

The redhead opened the door and her emerald eyes were wide with worry or some other emotion he could not recognize.

“Kaira’s leaving.” Was all he said.

There was something about masks and facades and acting in his rushed and panicked explanation, but Natasha heard half of it while the majority of the time, she was listening to the revving and roaring of Tony’s Audi, which she had jumped into, pulling him in with her.

She couldn’t bring herself to hate the genius for not telling her. She knew that he owed her nothing. Especially not after... after what she had done.

Fury had been breathing down her neck about it, despite her protests. “Threat is imminent.” Those were the words he had used. Blank, hollow words meant to be for ‘the greater good’ but Natasha knew it was bullshit. She knew it then, when Fury had asked her to open the videos and she knew it now, while rushing to JFK airport with the man whose life had come crashing down around him.

There had been a rage in Fury’s eyes. Not a flaming one, like the one Rhodey and Steve had sported during the entire debacle. No, this rage was a gathering, broiling storm. It was made of ink black clouds and a sheer hatred, which had stemmed from a place which Natasha had never seen before, in Nick. It had begun to form the second they had all found out what Obadiah had done and it had grown gradually to a monstrosity.

She knew Nick wanted her to ID each and every one of those men who had hurt Tony Stark. She knew Nick wanted to find those men and torture them before letting them bleed out on the floor to rot and die. She knew he wanted to do it himself, with his bare hands.
And if she had accidentally come across information regarding the vandalization of a certain Obadiah Stane’s grave on Nick Fury’s desk, nobody had to know.

Fury cared deeper than he wanted to admit. But that was okay.

So did she.

That’s why she had decided to betray his trust again.

Revenge had tasted so sweet.

But she and Fury both had chewed on the gum too long and before they both could do anything about it, it turned stale and sour.

And Tony had walked out with his back turned to both of them.

Now, after a week of begging at his lab door for him to come out and live, he showed up pounding at her bedroom door, telling her that the only person she wanted to share the rest of her life with was leaving.

She guessed it was only karma that Kaira had not told her.

The man who had not eaten anything besides DUM-E’s smoothies for a week, nor had slept for fear of nightmares and flashbacks—which led to massive panic attacks—was sitting beside her, flipping through holographic screens and hacking airport servers to find Kaira’s flight information. The same man who had had his shame broadcasted to the people he cared about the most.

The same man who had slept with Kaira.

She had called and told her when they had come back from Virginia.

Natasha hadn’t cried. She hadn’t felt betrayed. She hadn’t felt upset or angry or frustrated or worthless.

She hadn’t felt a thing.

She knew if she registered it on an emotional level, it would destroy her. Instead, she had registered it as a fact: Kaira and Tony had sex at Virginia Beach. There was nothing more to it.

Nothing more.

The airport was full of families and couples and businessmen and women who bustled about or ran to their flights or said their goodbyes. So many lives, so many stories. There were tears and smiles and laughter which meant about as much as a blank piece of paper. There were security guards whose warnings meant jack shit to her because the second she laid her eyes on them, they fell silent.

It took several variations of ‘we’re Avengers and we can do whatever the fuck we want’ until Natasha found her.

She was standing in line for boarding, casually. As if she wasn’t leaving her entire life behind. As if she wasn’t leaving her behind.

Natasha was aware that Tony was standing back, letting her walk up to the woman she loved. To the woman who made her weak.

She stopped about five feet away from her and waited.
Honey brown eyes met emerald green ones and something passed between them. Something unspoken and quiet, yet bone-rattling at the same time. It made her shiver and she hugged herself to compensate.

“Kaira.” She thought she would sound confident when she spoke her name. She thought her voice would be steady and unbreaking and stable. She hadn’t expected such a miniscule noise to escape past her lips.

Kaira stepped out of line and covered the five feet of space between them. That same rose scent came washing over Natasha. A scent that she might never be able to cherish again. “I’m sorry Tasha.” She said.

But the red headed assassin was too busy memorizing the way those lips parted to form her name. She was too busy committing the sound of her saying her nickname, which Kaira loved to use, to memory. She was too busy tucking that exact moment into the back of her mind, so that she would never forget.

“You made me a promise. Are you going to honor that?” This time her voice was steady. This time she wasn’t weak.

“If you need to ask that question, then you don’t know me at all.” A soft smile, a beautiful whisper. A goodbye.

Natasha bit her lip as hot, frustrated, heartbroken tears welled. She closed the space between their lips and she memorized that sensation as well. How the warmth spread through her body as they joined and how her heartbeat elevated and the adrenaline pumped through her veins. It left a sweet taste in her mouth. It left her craving more.

When they separated, it was Kaira who said, “I love you.” And that… that was promise enough.

Because she said it to her first this time… and she meant it. She truly, truly meant it.

Kaira tilted her head and found Tony, who was standing some feet away and smiling. He looked so small and so out of place in the huge space, a small speck standing still amongst so much activity.

A single word in a thousand page novel.

Tony waved at Kaira and somehow, everything that needed to be said between them was able to be conveyed through that small wave. She beckoned him over.

Ever so slowly and hesitantly, Tony walked up to them. Natasha watched as the woman she loved faced him.

“Who’s going to save you?” She asked.

There was a pause where the genius simply blinked at her, but his eyes remained focused, as if he too was memorizing her. Then, in barely a whisper, he said, “Me.”

That was enough to make Kaira beam. She reached up and patted his cheek before kissing it. “Good man.” Natasha detected that small voice crack. To anyone else, it would have been unnoticeable.

She paused before returning back towards the gate. Then her arms were around Natasha’s body and although the last call announcement was echoing through the building, the redhead leaned into the touch and savored every second of it.
They pulled away.

And she was gone.

Natasha didn’t know that she had been staring after the closed gates for several moments afterwards. Not until she felt a warm hand guide her head onto a shoulder. That was where she rested, eyes closed. She didn’t cry.

She just let that warm hand caress her arm and her back and let the smell of oil and grease comfort her.

❖ ❖ ❖

There was a smoothie shop at the food court of the airport which sold Avengers themed drinks which Natasha found incredibly amusing.

Tony had gone to the bathroom, so she ordered one Black Widow for herself and a Captain America for the genius in the meantime.

Because, like everyone else in the Avengers Tower, she too was secretly rooting for them.

Although after what had happened a week ago… the chances had drastically diminished.

But an assassin could hope.

So she went back in line and ordered an Iron Man for Steve.

❖ ❖ ❖

When they pulled into the parking garage of the Tower, neither of them made an effort to get out. Tony sat at the steering wheel, hands still loosely gripping it while Natasha sipped at her smoothie.

She tasted vanilla and cinnamon. The perfect combination of sugar and spice.

Just like her.

At the airport, she had handed Tony the Iron Man drink. “It’s for Steve.” She had said.

He had smiled and accepted it while sipping at the Captain America drink.

Now, both of them still sat at the car, unmoving.

“I’m sorry, Tony. For betraying your trust again.” It was she who broke the silence.

The genius nodded before flashing another small smile and returning his gaze to his lap.

“All of us… Steve… I have been really worried about you. We… we want to be there for you because we all care.” At Tony’s slow exhale, she repeated, “We do.” Another pause where she bit her lip. “Steve, especially.”

It took several long, awkward moments of silence where the both of them simply sat and sipped their drinks, occasionally catching each other’s eyes before averting them quickly when Tony, in a small voice, mumbled, “Nat, I’m going to tell you something and you have to promise not to get mad.”

She knew what he wanted to admit. She also knew that she didn’t blame him. She never could. “Kaira already told me.” She squeezed his hand as his breath caught. “It’s okay.” She soothed,
rubbing her thumb gently on his hand. “I get it. And whatever happened between you is none of my business. She doesn’t owe me anything until she is ready to commit.”

Tony nodded, before releasing his breath slowly.

“But Tony, you have to tell Steve.”

He nodded again and this time, squeezed her hand back.

She kissed his cheek and let him lay his head on her shoulder.

Steve sat in the middle of the couch with his head in his hands. The overlapping voices surrounding him echoed and vibrated and he was so sick of it. He was so sick of everyone acting like they knew what to do, like they had a plan.

When in reality, they, just like him, had abandoned Tony when he needed someone.

“I was quite oblivious to Sir’s mental state and I… I admit that I must have been so invested in my own mourning, I forgot to offer my support during his trials.” Vision’s voice was as sympathetic as an android’s voice could get.

“It wasn’t just you, Vision. We all fucked up. Hell, I missed,” Bruce scoffed, “pretty much everything.” The doctor covered his face. “It was almost too late. If Nat hadn’t found him…”

“Banner.” Colonel Rhodes cut him off sharply. Steve’s heart jolted at what would have been said if Bruce had finished his sentenced. “I had no idea what he was going through mentally. He was so alone. Literally.” Rhodes continued.

“Damn.” Sam whispered. “If only there had been just one person.” He shook his head.

“Stevie,” Cap’s lifted his gaze to meet his best friend’s, whose blue eyes had seemed so dark for the past couple of days, “why didn’t he call? You gave him a phone and a letter saying that if he ever needed you, he should call. But he didn’t… I just… I don’t get it.” Steve clenched his fists when Bucky’s eyes went watery. “He had no one.”

“It wasn’t pride.” Wanda spoke up somberly. “It was shame. Guilt. Fear.” The witch looked at Steve. “He felt as if he was not worth your time.” She paused. “I felt it. When he was crying, all of it came upon me at once. All of it. I was drowning. It was so… so overwhelming.” She trailed off into a whisper, a shadow cast over her face. “We did this. All of us.”

“And we must fix it.” Vision took her hand. “We must provide undying support for Sir. Comfort and love are the only cure in this situation.”

There was a bitter laugh and everyone’s head turned towards Clint, who quickly added a scoff. “I called him a whore.” He laughed again. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“Clint, come on man…” Sam pleaded.

“Just imagine… being raped your whole life and then being called a whore.” He sounded hysterical now and Steve clenched his jaw. “Hilarious. If that isn’t enough to make someone want to off themselves, then I don’t know what is.”

“Stop.” He tried to use his Captain America voice, but instead the order had come out hoarse and tired. “Stop.” He repeated, wearily this time. They all fell silent. “I should have called him.”
No one spoke after that.

Steve’s head finally cleared.

When Tony and Natasha came in giggling with smoothies in their hands, Steve had no idea what to make of it.

“I want all of these for my birthday.” The genius gestured to his drink while looking at Natasha and Cap monitored the twinkling in those large, brown eyes, willing it to grow stronger. “Whoa…” Tony paused as he caught sight of everyone gathered together. He was disheveled in every way physically, but there was something domestic and calming about Tony’s spiked hair and fading clothes. “Is this a pity party?” And despite everything, Tony’s tone was one they all recognized: flamboyant, epic, and charming.

Steve didn’t realize just how much he had missed it.

“Well, why didn’t you invite me, I’m the best pity party host in the world!” The genius continued, smiling widely. “I could still order pints of ice cream and we can all watch sappy rom-coms together.”

“Your wit’s failing you.” Nat drawled.

“So you admit I’m witty?” Tony teased. When she raised her eyebrows, she said, “Oh come on, woman! If we’re gonna do a pity party, I wanna do it right.”

Steve’s heart warmed as the missing pieces of his life came flying back all at once. He fell head over heels once more for that smile, for those eyes, for that laugh. He fell in love again. He fell in love with Tony Stark.

Then his love was walking towards him and offering him a smoothie of his own. “This one is Iron Man.” Tony said while handing it to him. “I’m having Captain America and Nat is having herself because she is a narcissistic ass.” That earned the genius a gentle shove and a playful smile from the assassin.

Steve took a sip and fruity goodness flooded his mouth. He smiled. Tony took a sip from his drink as well, looking at him with a glint in his eyes. “Now we’re both sucking each other.” He said with a wink.

The super soldier nearly choked from embarrassment while the others groaned in disgust. His cheeks flushed, but the lighthearted laugh from Tony brought him back.

And then Steve had a lapful of genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist who had wrapped his arms around his neck and curled up around the curves of his body.

“I missed you.” Tony muffled into his neck. “Sorry I disappeared for a week.”

The super soldier froze, unable to interpret what exactly was happening. For seven days he had laid in bed alone, holding a ghost where Tony should have been. For seven days, he had grown used to the cold and now… now it was so warm.

Bucky and Sam had the worst shit-eating grins on their faces, yet there was affection in their eyes. A mutual understanding which passed between them, saying maybe… maybe everything was going to be alright.

So Steve relaxed his muscles and folded into the smaller man’s body. He let himself collapse against
him fully and completely. He held his solid body, no longer a ghost, and buried his face in his brown locks, breathing him in. Claiming him.

Never wanting to let go.

Not now.

Not ever.

Never again.

“I love you so much.” He couldn’t place his own voice in its tear-laced brokenness. He couldn’t sense the world as it dissolved around him. All he knew was Tony. All he knew were those chocolate brown eyes whose luster had returned and those brown locks which were so soft and fluffy beneath his chin and the smell of motor oil and grease on his faded clothing.

Tony was the first to pull away but his hands, builder’s hands, still rested on Steve’s biceps.

The super soldier scanned the room. Empty, except for him and Tony.

At the door was Natasha, rosy lips spread into a large smile. She winked at him and Steve spared the tiniest of nods before returning his gaze to his lover.

“Drink the smoothie.” The genius ordered. Steve complied.

“Pomegranate?” He smacked his lips after taking a sip. “And strawberry?”

“That’s strange.” Tony leaned forward to steal a sip of his own from the Iron Man drink. “I thought they’d put cherry in it.” He muttered. “Not bad though.”

It was Steve’s turn to steal a sip from Tony’s cup and he smirked at the mocked shock on his face. “Coconut… blue raspberry… and a hint of cherry.” He paused to consider. “All taste very artificial.” He added teasingly.

“Oh please, nothing about Captain America is artificial. Well… maybe the spangly suit from 2012. God, that was a trainwreck. Who the hell even designed that? I prefer the stealth suit, if I do say so myself. And really? Coconut? I thought I was tasting vanilla.”

Trust Tony Stark to take a perfectly sentimental statement and turn it into a witty joke.

Not that Steve was complaining.

“Oh yes.” The super soldier threw his head back dramatically in agreement. “The stealth suit is pretty damn sexy, right?” He chuckled. “And it’s definitely coconut.” At Tony’s raised eyebrows he added, "Who’s the one with the fucking enhanced body here?"

“Language, Steven.” Tony admonished playfully. “How much you want to bet that they probably spiked Widow’s drink? You know, they might have thrown a little rum or bourbon in there. Spice it up a bit.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, actually.”

They shared a laugh and for once, it all felt so right. Tony was still sitting on his lap, straddling him. They were so close, their breaths mingled. It was almost enough to make it all fade away: the past, the wars, the battles, the lies, and the betrayals.
Almost.

Steve ran his hands up and down Tony’s arms. There were scars on his wrist that could have been enough to take his precious genius away from him. There were scars on his wrist from moments where he had gotten so low, from when he had felt so hopeless, so utterly alone. There were scars on his wrists because he had been punishing himself. Times from when he had felt so worthless. Times from when he had felt like a villain.

He found himself cupping Tony’s face and tracing his geometric beard with his thumbs. “Is this okay?” He whispered.

It was Tony who closed the gap between them. The kiss was slow. Soft and tender and gentle. Cherishing. Tony was precious. So, so precious to him. So when Steve kissed him, he made sure to caress him like how one would handle a jewel.

“I shouldn’t have left you.” Steve gasped in between locking lips with the genius. He pulled away, though still craved more. He looked deep into those Bambi eyes. He finally saw. “I shouldn’t have left you alone in Siberia. I should have told you about your parents. And I… I can never apologize to you enough to make up for that.”

Those chocolate eyes turned somber and Tony’s face fell. This time… this time Steve found the cracks in the mask. This time, piece by piece, he removed them until he could see every broken part Tony had hidden away for so long. “Steve… I wasn’t thinking straight when I said all that. I was traumatized. And we... we both fucked up in Siberia. Both of us.”

“But you were right!” Steve gripped Tony’s arms tighter. “I left you behind while you were injured and upset and I’m... I’m so sorry. No soldier should ever leave a man behind.” He couldn’t stop the tears which came flooding down. He didn’t even try to stop them. And Tony… he was wiping them away one by one. “Erskine told be to never be a perfect soldier, but to always stay a good man.” He paused and sniffed several times to try to contain himself. The effort was spent in vain. When he spoke again, the words came out shaky. Yet, they rang through the air just the same. “No good man ever hurt the person he loved like I hurt you.”

Neither of them breathed. Neither of them spoke. Something between them went taut.

And snapped.

“God, Steve.” Tony’s whisper was cracked in several places. Just like his mask. Steve kept his gaze averted… even when Tony rested his forehead against his own. “Says the man who would lay down on the wire if it came down to it. Says the man who would fight tooth and nail for what he believes in. Says the one who would do anything to keep his best friend safe. Says the one who will always stand up for the little guy. Says the one who will never let the bullies win.”

Those kind words, all of which came together from moments in his past to create who he was--they flew over his head. “But I hurt you. None of that matters because I hurt you and I left you behind when you needed me the most.”

“I hurt you too.” There was desperation in Tony’s voice. An insistence Steve could not fathom into a coherent thought. “Steve, look at me.” Those builder’s fingers, they lifted his chin and for the first time, he saw the flecks of gold and hazel in Tony’s eyes. An imperfection--a defect--which made him all the more so entirely perfect. “I hurt you when I attacked your best friend. I hurt you when I didn’t trust you to tell you about Ultron. I hurt you when I said that everything special about you came out of a bottle which isn’t… it isn’t true.” This time, Steve continued to hold his gaze with the genius. He studied the gold flecks. “Because there is a reason why Erskine chose you. You were
special and good and kind and gentle before you were given the serum. And you still are, Steve: Not a perfect soldier, but a hell of a good man.” He paused. The gold flecks grew brighter. “You’re my good man.” Steve inhaled the scent of the workshop—everything good and sweet and beautiful in the world—as Tony pressed his lips against his. “And I forgive you.”

And that was all he needed. So he pulled Tony closer and tucked his face into the smaller man’s neck. He made his home there.

“Tony. You’re my everything, you know that?” And he was. He truly was.

“Sap.” The genius teased and they shared a laugh.

This time, Tony rested his head on Steve’s chest while the super soldier wrapped one arm around his waist and stroked through his brown hair with the other hand. They sat in silence but for once, there was no splintering rope. It had already snapped. Only this time, they had tied it back together, making the resulting knot stronger than the rope had been before.

“But I’m going to need you to forgive me too.” Tony mumbled, breaking the peaceful silence. He lifted his head. “I did something.” The genius looked smaller and Steve wondered if he had missed some parts of the mask. “Please don’t hate me.”

“Nothing can ever make me hate you, Tony. What happened?” He didn’t answer, but his muscles stiffened enough to make Steve’s heart skip a beat. “You’re so tense.” He whispered and reached up to massage Tony’s shoulders.

“I… I made a mistake. But it… it felt so good at the time and I… I want to regret it but I… I needed it and it made things better. It brought me back to you but… I never meant to hurt you.” He was hyperventilating, tipping on the edge of a full-scale panic attack.

It took several variations of “don’t cry” and “it’s okay, calm down” to bring Tony back from the ledge. It was all Steve could do to hide his own fears.

“We’re both a little too stiff, don’t ya think? You know what helps? A nice, warm bath. It’s the best cure.” The super soldier shifted and managed to lift the genius up bridal style, prompting a surprised yelp. “Unless you’d rather walk?” he teased.

“No.” His response was a little breathless. “I like this. This… this is good.”

So Steve carried his lover to his floor and watched the smaller man stare in… awe? It looked as if he was returning to a place he had been away from for a very long time.

It looked like he was coming back home.

Tony sat on the toilet as Steve filled the tub with warm water.

Several seconds of silence was interrupted with “I had sex.” Steve froze in place. “With a woman. After everything happened.” Tony trailed off and became quieter, his confession fizzling away and disappearing into the air.

There was a strange sort of disappointment and sadness which flooded Steve’s veins and he turned around slowly and leaned against the wall.

“She’s a mutual friend of Nat and me and… it wasn’t her fault. I went to her. We went down to Virginia Beach for two nights and while we were there, we had sex.” Steve closed his eyes and sighed as Tony continued frantically. His voice became thicker as he kept on speaking. “It wasn’t her
fault, Steve. She didn’t do anything wrong. I needed… I just needed to escape for a second and she was just there. And I… I thought about you. The entire time.”

“Tony…” Steve couldn’t grasp a single emotion. There were too many.

“She put a blindfold on me and told me that I could make her whoever I wanted her to be so I made her you. Please don’t hate me, Steve. Please. I’m sorry, I’m so so so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you…”

And despite everything he felt, Steve grasped the emotions which would benefit the both of them: sympathy and understanding. So he wrapped his arms around his precious genius and forgave him.

“You didn’t hurt me, Tony. I’m just happy you came back.” He rubbed Tony’s back and thought for a second. “Don’t be sorry either.” He pulled apart to meet Tony’s eyes. “Because if she was the one thing that could make you forget just long enough so that you could breathe again, then how the hell could I hate her? And if that was what it took for me to see that smile of yours again, then I can’t ever possibly hate you for it. Never. Nothing you do will ever make me hate you, Tony. Nothing.”

Then, amongst the tear-stained face, the brunette broke into a soft, gentle smile. Steve traced those pink lips before kissing them.

“But I still… I still want to know why you didn’t let me be there for you. Why did you push me away, Tony?” He was not bitter. He did not even want to be. All he wanted was for the love of his life to trust him again. To open up to him.

When Tony didn’t answer, the remaining emotions bubbled up and Steve was speaking before he even knew what he was saying. “I love you and I want to be with you. Only you. I want to share my life with you. I want to be there for you and make you feel better when you’re sad and I want to make you smile brighter when you’re happy. I want you. All of you. Just like how I’ll give you all of me. I want to help you move forward, to be happy again. But I can’t do that if you won’t let me in.”

Tony still didn’t answer. “What did she do that I didn’t, Tony?” Desperation. Pure desperation. “Please tell me so that I can help you.” He paused. “I can’t lose you.”

The final words came out strained and pleading. Yet still, Tony did not answer.

Steve followed the other man’s gaze to the warm water in the tub so he tugged on the genius’ shirt lightly, asking for permission, before lifting it and taking it off. Next came the pants and Steve was ever so gentle, ever so slow. As different as he could be from the men who had hurt Tony so much for so long. When the smaller man’s breath quickened and he stiffened even more, Steve reassured him. “I will never hurt you.” He whispered. “Never again.”

When Tony was completely raw and naked before him, Steve decided that there could be nothing more beautiful. Every scar, every bruise, every part of him was everything Steve Rogers wanted.

But not today. He knew that. He respected that. For as long as Tony wanted him to. And if it meant for the rest of his life, then Steve would respect that too.

So he let Tony climb into the tub, into the warm water which was now his shelter, and took out natural oils which he had been gifted by T’Challa. They smelled of the forest and the dew and the honey. He lathered it onto his hands and then began to knead Tony’s neck, shoulders, and back—releasing the tension from his muscles and the hesitation from his thoughts.

The only sound was the lapping of the water when Tony shifted and the rubbing of skin against skin.

“Watching myself getting raped by so many men… big, muscular men… I couldn’t… I needed… I
missed my mom… and I always used to go to her… for comfort… who I went to, she taught me to play the piano… like how mom used to… I wanted…”

“A woman.” Steve finished gently after deciphering what Tony was trying to say. “You needed a caring, nurturing woman. A feminine touch.”

“Made me feel safe… she was a constant in my life. Didn’t know me well enough to betray me but she cared for me regardless of money or tech or anything she could have taken from me. But she didn’t. She gave me something instead.”

Steve watched Tony caress the scars on his wrist and then clench it.

“Perspective?” He asked.

“The truth.” Tony answered.

“Which is?”

“Hopeless is just a state of mind.” He paused. “That it’s not hard to… to turn your life around for the better or to just stay depressed and suicidal.” Another pause where the genius exhaled slowly. “What’s hard is to decide which path to take.”

“And what did you decide?”

It took several long moments before Tony spoke. “I want to be alive.” Steve nearly sobbed with relief. “I don’t want to die. Not anytime soon.” A heartbeat. “That I don’t have to be anyone’s first choice because… because I am my own. I am my first choice.” Tony nodded. “I am my first choice.”

The swelling in Steve’s heart--that was pride. “I’m so proud of you.”

The water shifted and lapped against the walls of the tub as Tony turned around to face Steve. “I love you.” The super soldier believed that his heart stopped beating for that moment. Only because it was the first time Tony had said this to him.

“I love you too.” He didn’t even bother to hide the crackling in his voice.

This time, when Tony turned back around to let Steve continue his massage, the genius leaned into Steve’s touch. “I want to get a tattoo over these.” Tony held up his wrist. “You know, put something beautiful where there once was something ugly.”

“They’re not ugly.” Steve retaliated quickly. “They’re a part of you and I love every single part of you. So I love your scars. I love what they mean.”

“That I tried to kill myself?” Tony asked quietly and somberly.

“No.” Steve hugged the genius from behind. “They mean victory.” He kissed his brown locks. “They mean that your story is not over yet.”

Tony turned around once more to let Steve wash him down with a washcloth. The real Tony Stark--raw and unmasked--stared back at him with wide eyes.

“My greatest fear is you guys dying because I didn’t do my all to protect you.” The genius whispered suddenly, causing Steve to still.

“Did Wanda show you that?” He asked shakily.
Tony only nodded.

“That’s why you built…”

“That’s why I built Ultron.” Steve pressed the washcloth to Tony’s face. “I was really scared.” A shaky sigh. “I didn’t want to lose you guys.” He said even softer.

Tony’s admission sparked an honesty between them they had never known before in the many years they had known each other. They took turns with their confessions. Tony talked about his nightmares, his panic attacks, about being raped, Siberia, his migraines, and his cesspool of guilt.

Steve confessed about the nights when it got too cold and it brought back awful memories of the ice freezing up around him. When the sound of screeching wheels on train tracks became too loud. When Bucky’s screams as he disappeared into the abyss were all he heard. How he still owed Peggy a dance, but she was gone.

They shared their pasts and their presents and their tears and their smiles and finally, the last puzzle piece between them fit perfectly into place.

Steve didn’t track how long they were in the bathroom for. But when Tony finally clambered out of the tub and dried himself off, the sun had gone lower in the sky.

Steve’s SHIELD sweatshirt was huge on Tony’s smaller frame and he was absolutely buried within the folds of cloth. He looked so adorable, so cute and small, and Steve adored him. Yet, despite that, Steve knew that Anthony Edward Stark was a warrior. A survivor. There would never be anyone stronger.

“Hey, Steve?” Tony called after him as they made to leave the bedroom. “You are my good man.”

The super soldier swept forward and pulled the smaller man closer. “And you…” they pulled their lips together, sealing their future, sealing their love, “are my hero.”

❖ ❖ ❖

They went back to the communal floor holding hands. Steve knew the others were elated to see them together, closer than ever before.

Tony played with the kids and the rest of them joined in. After so long, after so much, the Avengers had returned to their status of dysfunctional family.

Steve knew that they all knew that each and every one of them needed that time spent together. As one. To look beyond being superheroes and to just sit next to each other with their masks off and their weapons down.

Because no matter what any terrorist organization or evil godfathers or enemies threw in Tony’s way, they could never, ever take away the fact that he was Iron Man. He was a hero with the suit or without it.

He was a hero.

❖ ❖ ❖

Tony fell asleep curled up against Steve’s side while wrapped up in a blanket on the couch.

Slowly, all of the others had gone up to their floors when the movie ended. Only Natasha remained
when everyone else was gone.

She sat next to them gingerly and Steve shushed her silently. “He’s sleeping.” He whispered.

“You guys are adorable.” Natasha whispered back as she took a picture on her phone.

“Hey Nat?” She hummed in response. “I think… I think we’re going to be okay. He is… he is so strong. I’m so proud of him.”

She kissed Tony’s forehead and hugged his back where she also curled up against the genius’ side. “Our favorite genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.” She mumbled. “He’s stronger than all of us.”

Steve agreed.

The three of them slept there on the couch, leaning against each other.

Natasha and Steve sheltered Tony and promised each other to never break away.

The tattoo was a feather, the stem covering the vertical scar and the fluffy parts covering the horizontal ones. The top of the feather showed several birds breaking free, leaving the top bald as they flocked towards freedom. There was a unicorn head in the middle of the feather and its horn molded into the stem.

Unicorns symbolized success and infinite possibilities. The birds were him breaking through the shackles which had imprisoned him for so long.

At the top of his wrist was one word: ‘Victory.’ The ‘i’ was a semicolon.

Because Tony Stark’s story was not over yet.

Chapter End Notes

This story has almost come to an end... just two more chapters left I believe. I'd like to thank you all for reading and joining me in the journey of bringing this story to life. I am incredibly overwhelmed by the support and humbled.

This is the tattoo Tony got at the end: https://static.boredpanda.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/tattoos-covering-scars-stories-12-57ea60dbcf1e7__700.jpg

Logic's 1-800-273-8255. Check it out. It's an amazing song.
Rhodey knew that he would never get used to Tony’s galas. The flashy lights, the paparazzi, and all the prim and proper rich assholes with sticks shoved so far up their asses they were practically crawling out of their noses always made him a bit uneasy.

But he was a man of the Air Force. He could deal with this. He had a nice suit on and his best friend was hosting this damn thing. So fuck it all, he was going to enjoy this night if it was the last thing he did because Tony was smiling so wide and so beautifully while talking to Pepper and it was the truly the most satisfying thing in the world to him. And besides, the weather was pleasant, considering it was May now--about 9 or so months since the… incident with HYDRA.

It had taken a lot of emotional support from him and Pepper and Steve as well as the others to help Tony through the process of erasing the videos from cyberspace once and for all. It had been a grueling three days for all of them and watching Tony try to hold it together until he couldn’t anymore and he just broke down had been so heartbreaking. He had powered through, however, and inch by inch he made through it.

But the videos were gone now. Utterly and completely gone. When the last megabyte had disappeared from the world forever, Tony had clung onto Rhodey with a tightness that the air force veteran could never forget. It was as if, with that hug, Tony was trying to etch that moment into reality, praying that it was true. Purely, irrevocably true. With each stroke of his hand on Tony’s back, Rhodey spoke without speaking, letting him know that it was true. That the nightmare was finally over.

The day Natasha had walked in with Fury wearing a sad, but encouraging and fierce smile on her face, Tony had crumpled to his knees with a wail that should have been devastating. But the genius had been trying to smile through those tears as Fury comforted him and hugged him tenderly.

Rhodey had known that nobody had to tell Tony that those vile men, the ones who had slithered behind him for years all while coiling around his body and suffocating him--they were gone.

No.

They had been obliterated.

And if Rhodey had accidentally overheard Natasha whispering under her breath seemingly to a sleeping Tony while caressing her fingers over his forehead, telling him that “they begged for death,” well then, nobody had to know.

Tony still had bad days. No, those problems did not magically disappear the second he had marked his skin with symbols of victory and power, although Rhodey was proud of him for getting that tattoo. But no. The panic attacks and nightmares lingered. Most often, it was the little things that triggered them. An accidental brush of the fingers on the wrong part of his body or when it got too
cold or when outer space suddenly became way too close whether it be because of a kid’s movie or some documentary on National Geographic.

Protocols were put in place so anyone nearby could help. When Tony was first starting out on the path of recovery, he had appreciated getting help from whoever was willing to guide him through an episode. Later on, after he had started to visit a therapist once a week, he tried to deal with the attacks on his own by squeezing the life out of a stress ball. Rhodey loved that Tony was learning to cope without help because, as a man of the Air Force, he knew that dependency was a man’s greatest weakest. Also, he found that having stress balls lying around the Tower was quite satisfying to him as well, even if it was just to play a simple game of catch with another team member.

After all, softer, smoother edges beat the sharp, menacing glint of a blade by a million miles. But then again, some days were worse than others.

The tattoo had helped. More than anyone had thought it would. It still did. On nights when Rhodey would walk in on Tony curled up in a ball with his knees drawn up to his chest, muttering and mumbling under his breath with his jittery hands raking through his dark hair violently until he broke away at times to clench his quaking wrist or trace the tattoo rapidly, he would just walk up to his genius friend and hand him the closest stress ball silently. He would sit across from Tony as he gripped the soft sphere until his knuckles turned white and his nails left crescent marks on the foam material from where he had dug them in too hard in an attempt to ground himself. When the color would return to Tony’s face, Rhodey would slowly take the hand that was curled around the ball and then cover it with his own.

They would clench the ball together, reminding Tony that Rhodey was there, that everyone was there for him and that he was loved, that he was a fighter and a warrior and a hero, and the world was still rotating on its axis. And Tony would calm down. He would wipe his tears and stand up, nod once to his best friend briskly, letting him know that he was going to be alright and then he would keep moving.

Because that is what Tony Fucking Stark did.

Rhodey had been skeptical at first about Tony’s relationship with Steve. The Civil War had been intense and frankly, the veteran didn’t exactly trust the super soldier. He still didn’t. But that was simply a case of overprotectiveness regarding Tony, not to mention, Rhodey being the man that he was and seeing the things that he had seen, it was hard to trust anyone.

He also couldn’t promise anyone that he wouldn’t lay hands on the next person who hurt Tony. Rhodey figured that Steve had the same ideology about Bucky and that was something the veteran could respect about the super soldier.

As long as Tony was not left in the dust, of course.

The conversation he had had with said soldier still rang loud and clear in his mind and he was promised that Tony was valued and that Steve would never ever give anyone a reason to doubt just how much he loved the genius.

“Then I assume we have an understanding, Captain Rogers?”

To which Steve had saluted. “Of course, Colonel.”

And so far, the couple had been happy. Rhodey figured that if Tony was content, then that was all that mattered. It was only the moments when he would see his best friend’s wrinkles smooth out and his lips spread wide and true into a beaming smile whenever he saw the Captain that truly warmed
Rhodey’s heart. The way they looked at each other, the way they held each other, the way they simply fell into sync with each other made Rhodey wonder why they had never dated before.

Maybe it was because beautiful things had to fall apart sometimes before they could be put back together perfectly. Maybe that was what happened with them.

Or maybe it was about time the both of them got their heads outta their asses.

Regardless, it was a beautiful May night. Tony’s birthday was in a little more than a week and Rhodey thanked whatever higher power which existed that his best friend was alive and healthy and happy enough to see another year of his life. His precious, precious life.

Tony had been strangely excited about the Maria Stark Foundation Gala for the past week or so. At every chance he had received, he had dropped hints that it was going to be big and spectacular and that he required everyone to either show up or get kicked out of the Tower.

So there they all were. A bunch of superheroes dolled up in fancy suits and dresses and makeup as they were shoved in front of flashing cameras and a perpetual flow of ridiculous questions.

Well at least there was an open bar.

That was exactly where Rhodey had stationed himself at as he nursed a gin and tonic and admired his best friend from a distance while he talked to the CEO of his company.

Tony was wearing a snazzy and snug black suit with a white shirt beneath. Pepper was sporting a nice, form-fitting golden gown. But neither their clothes nor their accessories could ever compare to the twinkle in both of their eyes as they laughed and talked with each other as easily as if they had gone back to 2008 and none of it: The Avengers, Ultron, the Civil War... none of it had happened.

It looked as if they were going over Tony’s speech, the one he was going to give in a few minutes. By the way the both of them seemed to be bouncing on their heels, Rhodey could tell that whatever it was, it was going to be worth remembering.

“He looks like he’s glowing.” Rhodey turned to meet the awe-struck and admiring voice. Steve was leaning against the bar beside him, wearing a handsome tuxedo which complemented his physique. But, of course, which clothes didn’t?

The super soldier had stemmed away from keeping Bucky company, leaving him under Natasha’s protection.

“Captain.” Rhodey nodded in greeting and raised his drink to his lips.

“Colonel.” He nodded back.

Steve had grown out a thick, but neatly groomed dark brown beard, something Tony enjoyed more than he liked to admit. He had dyed his hair brown as well and tonight, it was neatly combed back and gelled down just a little. He looked rugged handsome.

“It’s nice to see him so happy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so... radiant before.” Steve sighed. “Makes me love him even more.”

Rhodey nodded and kept his eyes on his friend who was now hugging Pepper tightly while she kissed his cheek. “He’s been through hell, Rogers. We all have. But look at him now, standing tall and proud, owning the world and finally just alive. And yet, to think he was once that lonely 14 year old kid at MIT who used to do people’s homework for them so that he could make some friends.”
He chuckled. “He’s made it out stronger every damn time the universe fucked him over. Every damn
time.” He paused to drink to that. “I’m proud of him.” He ignored the welling of those useless tears
in his eyes. “And this,” he said, gesturing around him, “you… us … it’s the endgame for him. He’s,
you know, at peace.” He turned to the Captain who was admiring his best friend with a soft smile on
his face. “I’m warning you now, Rogers. You screw this up and I will shoot your red, white, and
blue ass to kingdom come and beyond so fast, you won’t be able to say ‘America.’” His tone may
have been playful and teasing, but he meant every single word.

Steve laughed before raising his hands in surrender at Rhodey’s mocking death glare. “Heard you
loud and clear, Colonel.”

“You best have, soldier.”

They spent some minutes in comfortable silence as Rhodey ordered another drink and turned to
watch the couples on the dance floor ballroom dancing to pleasant, lilting music.

“Tony is…” The super soldier cleared his throat and the veteran met his baby blue gaze. “Colonel,
his the one thing in my life that is… entirely perfect. In every way. I love him now, I’m going to
keep loving him in the future until death and hell, if there’s life after that, I’ll love him then. I know
that we made mistakes, the both of us. I know that I made mistakes, but…” He reached an arm back
to rub at the back of his neck. A nervous tick. “Even after everything and all the ways we fucked up,
the fact that he still chose me … I feel… I feel like the luckiest man in the world.”

“As you should.” Rhodey chuckled before stopping short at the other man’s serious tone.

“As I do.” The Captain shifted his weight and it was a little disconcerting to see the man, usually so
confident and authoritative, become so anxious and nervous. “Colonel Rhodes… I’d like to ask for
permission… for Tony’s hand… in marriage.”

Steve had said the last couple of words slowly, sounding out the syllables one by one as if he were
picking apart broken pieces of glass from a mirror.

And Rhodey had to admit, his breath was too loud in his ears. There was a roaring in the back of his
head and he couldn’t tell whether it was good or bad. “Why?” He asked after a while, looking up
and instantly regretting it. Steve had such a hopeful look on his face and the way his eyes widened
and he pouted a little made it look like someone had just ran over his puppy. So Rhodey softened his
tone and addressed him again. “It’s only been a couple months since you two were together. Not
even a year. And, not to be nosy, but have you two even…”

“No.” Steve said hastily, swiping both of his hands in front of him dramatically. “That decision lies
on Tony’s shoulders. Only when he’s ready will we ever do anything. But… that’s not the point.”
Cap leaned back on the bar table before putting his head in his arms and sighing. They sat in silence
some more, the music providing a less tense environment. Finally, the super soldier lifted his head
and looked back at the veteran. “I want him as my husband because, for me, Tony is it. He’s the one.
It just took a while for us to get our heads out of our asses to see it. This,” He swept a hand across
the room, “with all of you, with Tony, this is what I want for the rest of my life. I love him, Colonel.
Now it’s just a matter of seeing that ring on his finger and knowing that none of what we have right
now, in this moment, will ever change. I just… I… I love him. So much.”

Rhodey thought about it. He thought about the past and the arguments and the tears and the betrayals
and the anxiety and the lack of trust. He thought about the present and the gleaming, luminous smiles
Tony always had plastered across his face. He thought about how those smiles were genuine, right
down to the crinkles in the corners of his eyes and the twinkling in those chocolate brown orbs. A
twinkling he had thought he would never see again once upon a time. He thought about how much
better Tony was doing now, about how much had changed. And sure, Steve had helped. He was now a part of his best friend’s life and he had helped him and loved him and he still did, more than ever. But Rhodey knew that the only person who had pulled Tony Stark back from the ledge was Tony Stark himself and for that, he was so, so proud.

Rhodey thought about the future, about nights upon nights that could go by without his precious genius waking up from bone-rattling night terrors. About days where anxiety was no longer a lingering ghost. He thought about the endless possibilities for his friend and for the Captain. He thought about children…

And damn him if he didn’t want a mini Stark running around the place. Rhodey smiled openly at that.

“Colonel, I--”

The super soldier was interrupted mid-sentence as Tony was announced and the both of them became rapt with attention at the mention of their mutual loved one. But out of the corner of his eye, Rhodey could see the crestfallen look which was etched into the other man’s face.

The room erupted with applause as Tony jogged up onto the podium, sporting a handsome suit and obnoxious aviators.

Of course he was wearing sunglasses at night and indoors. Rhodey wouldn’t have him any other way.

He couldn’t help but remember the disastrous press conference from nearly a year ago.

But things had changed. So many things had changed. For once, it seemed like the universe had finally aligned in their favor. And Tony seemed so much more younger. The harsh lines and shadows had faded and the man had grown out his hair like how he had had it in 2008. In a way, it made him seem innocent again.

The genius waited until the applause died down and he bowed dramatically as Clint whooped from the background, causing the crowd to clap even louder.

“Good evening everyone.” Tony paused, catching Rhodey’s eye. He winked at his best friend and beamed when Tony winked back. “That’s about as polite as I’m going to get for the rest of the speech so…” There was a wave of laughter and more clapping as Tony chuckled into the microphone. “I come to you all today not as a genius, billionaire,” He stopped once more, this time to tilt his head side to side as if vacillating between two things, “ex -playboy?” He said slowly. “Though that’s still debatable.” Chuckles permeated. “...Not as Iron Man or an Avenger or a philanthropist. Although that’s a little hypocritical since I’m literally standing up here about to beg you all to donate to the foundation,” There was another roar of laughter. “ANYWAY… Today I’m just here as… as an ordinary man. A civilian. I left my suit and science notes at home and I put my wallet down and I came here with a beautiful man on my arm who I am proud to call my boyfriend. I love you Steve.” Tony blew a kiss to the super soldier who returned one as well. Awws and coos wafted through the air. “Being a superhero or some rich, white guy can often make me seem untouchable or superficial even. I know that it does.” He sighed and Rhodey felt his heart clench as his friend clutched the edges of the podium a bit tighter. “But… underneath all that shiny gold titanium alloy is just… me. The guy who runs on coffee or leaves clothes on the floor or eats takeout when he’s too lazy to make something. I’m Tony. Just Tony. And little old me,” He chuckled, “I’m fragile. I guess, what I’m trying to say is… inside that suit is just a man and it… it hurts when I fall. Even when I have a cocoon of metal surrounding me.”
Tony stilled once more. There were a couple of murmurs going around as Rhodey saw his best friend lower the index cards he had in his hand until they lay on the podium face down. He took his aviators off, revealing those doe eyes. Rhodey caught Pepper’s worried, pitiful gaze but he knew, he just knew that whatever Tony was doing, he was going to do right. So Rhodey simply nodded at the redhead before turning back towards the genius.

“Many of you know who Agent Margaret “Peggy” Carter was.” Tony started once more, voice a bit more shaky than before. “For those of you that don’t, she was one of the founders of SHIELD, she was a prominent agent of the Strategic Scientific Reserve during and after World War 2, she was one of my father’s best friends, she was a strong, independent woman during a time when women weren’t allowed to be, and most important of all, she was a professional badass.” Rhodey caught the small voice crack as Tony continued. “But to me, she was… she was Aunt Peggy.” Tony’s voice went dry at the mention of her name and the last sentence came out more of like a wheeze. Beside him, Rhodey heard Steve gasp softly, his eyes wide and his mouth dropped open a little. The Captain sat up straighter and fixed his gaze on Tony. “She was my Godmother, actually. She was always around when I was growing up and… in a way, I guess, she raised me too. I remember once she came to visit and I was really little but, when she tucked me into bed that night she told me a story about something she had done where she was being forced to get the President’s approval. I don’t fully remember how exactly the story went, but I do remember one thing she had said and it has… stayed with me for the past 45 years. She said, ‘I know my value. Anyone else’s opinion doesn’t really matter.’ And damn right she knew. She knew her worth for her whole life, she knew it as a fact. That’s why, whenever she did something, she did it well and she did it the best. And that’s Aunt Pegs for ya.” He chuckled sadly, looking down at his hands. “She used to call me Poppet. It was sweet, now that I think about it. Really sweet.” Another pause where Tony did not lift his eyes. “On days she wasn’t telling me stories about Captain America and the Howling Commandos, she was out living a full and adventurous life. She was… legendary. A treasure. She lived and lived and lived until the day she got Alzheimer’s and even then, she still kept on living. Even though she couldn’t recognize me at times and ended up calling me Howard,” he scoffed lightly at that, “or her loved ones, she always remembered her value. Always.

“The point to that anecdote was not just to tell you how much of an amazing woman Agent Carter truly was, but it was also to tell you how knowing your own worth, your value, can take you far. How it can bring you to the right people, how it can allow you to live a happy life. And she did. She truly did. Right up until the day she died peacefully in her sleep.” Tony choked up and Rhodey exhaled slowly as his friend wiped at his eyes and sniffed, yet still kept on looking forward.

“A couple years back, the Avengers were split up due to a political disagreement--which has since been resolved through several amendments to the Sokovia Accords--and a large part of the team was forced to flee the country. While some had to leave, others had to stay. I was one of the others.” Tony tried to smile, but ultimately failed. “The effects of depression and anxiety and mental illness suddenly become so much more prominent when the voices of others disappear and you are suddenly left with your own.” Tony lowered his voice and this time, he did not try to cover up his shaking words or the vulnerability he could not help but show. “It picks you apart day by day until the time comes when you have... weaved your way through the letters of the word ‘hopeless’ so many times and have sounded it out in an infinite number of ways until it no longer sounds like a word, but it sounds like your name.” Tony’s voice broke again and he cleared his throat. “Yeah, it’s not fun. It sucks to be depressed. It sucks to hate yourself. It sucks to feel alone. It’s not a romantic story, it’s a horror film with no chance of a happy ending. At least, it feels that way at first. What you have with your husband or wife, that’s romance. What you have with your boyfriend or girlfriend, that’s romance. What I have with Steve, that’s romance. But depression? Depression is a massive dick. And man, if I told you it hurts to fall then you have no idea how much of a bitch it is to get back up.” There was sparse laughter. “The worst part is, it’s often when you’re trying to get back up
that life throws more shit at you to try to push you back down again. That’s when…” Tony’s voice went dry again and Rhodey could see the tears fighting to get through. “That’s when you have to realize that your life is not your own. Sure, your life belongs to you but it also belongs to your friends, to your family, to your loved ones. It belongs to all the people who love and care about you. Who want you around for as long as they possibly can because they love you and they care. Your life belongs to those people too. So don’t you dare… don’t you dare lay your hands on it. Don’t you dare.” Loud applause broke out as Tony’s words went meek and small and he buried his face in his hands. This time, he let himself cry. Rhodey caught Steve’s arm as he was about to go up to the genius in an attempt to comfort him.

“Let him finish.” The Colonel said softly, pulling the super soldier back.

The audience kept on clapping loudly as Tony kept crying. Rhodey was pretty sure that he was the one clapping loudest of all.

With a sniff and a rapid wiping at his eyes, Tony lifted his head to look at the audience once more and he spared a small glimpse of a smile as he saw just how much support he truly had.

“Even when…” The genius cleared his throat to try and clear the quivering in his voice. “Sorry.”

“WE LOVE YOU, TONY!” Rhodey cupped his hands over his mouth and bellowed towards his best friend who immediately beamed.

“Love you too, Honey Bear.” More permeating chuckles. But Tony stood up a little straighter and swept his gaze over the crowd as he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Even when things seem like they’re never going to get better, even when life keeps shoving at you, you have to say ‘no.’ Because… because no is not just a word or a syllable, it’s a full sentence.” Tony began to speak louder as he held his chin up. “‘No’ will become a huge part of your life. ‘No’ means you are letting yourself have a choice. ‘No’ means you are in control of what is happening to you in your life and no one, no one can take that away from you. You have to say things like…” The audience roared once more before he could continue and Clint and Sam whistled and whooped while the other clapped politely. Tony nodded humbly. “You have to say things like ‘no, I will not let my past define me,’ or ‘no, I will not accept defeat,’ or ‘no, I want to keep going’ or ‘no, I will not let myself be ashamed,’ or… or…” Tony inhaled and exhaled deeply. “Or ‘no, I will not let them take my body away from me.” The genius hiccuped as he tried and failed once more to hold back tears. “No is not just a word, it’s a full sentence.” He said once more, pressing on each syllable and slamming his hand down on the podium with an emphasis no one could beat. “Knowing that is the one thing that makes you a survivor, not a victim. So…” Tony gripped the podium tightly as his voice began to shake once more. “My name is Tony Stark and I sur… I survived sexual abuse and assault.” The room was dead silent. Rhodey gripped his drink tighter. “My name is Tony Stark and I am on my way to surviving depression and anxiety and PTSD and I am asking all of you…” The room exploded as every single person stood up and cheered. Tony tried to smile, but couldn’t as he attempted to talk over the roaring. “I’m asking all of you to please donate tonight so that together, we may benefit the Mental Health Association and the NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault. So that we may give more people an opportunity to survive. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Rhodey watched, absolutely dumbstruck while a well of pride pooled in his stomach and traveled up his veins to his heart, as Tony came down from the podium and hugged Pepper first.

He was so proud. So proud.

He was proud of the reckless man who had become a hero. He was proud of the apathetic partier who now worked hard to save others who had suffered just like him. He was proud of the 14 year old boy who now could walk with his head held high saying that he did good in this shitty world that
didn’t deserve him. He was proud of his best friend. His brother.

Steve dashed up to his lover and Tony pecked him on the lips before letting the Captain’s muscular arms embrace him. The paparazzi buzzed and flashed as Tony and Steve locked lips once more, deeper and more passionate this time.

Rhodey waited before walking up to his brother. When Tony fell into his arms, the Colonel felt the genius shudder with silent sobs. “I’m so proud of you, Tones.” He whispered into Tony’s ear. “I’m proud of you.”

The veteran looked up and caught a certain super soldier’s sad, yet loving gaze and his face still wore the same question.

So he handed his brother over to the red headed assassin who was beckoning him in gentle, comforting Russian and walked over to the Captain.

“So this was what he was planning tonight.” He said nonchalantly, observing the taller man’s face.

Steve hummed in response. “He never stops surprising me with just how strong he is. It’s a good thing, what’s he’s doing.” His voice cracked slightly and he brushed a thumb over his upper lip to cover it up. “He’s a good man. A great one.” A silent second. “The love of my life.” He added softly, a pleading tone laced into his last few words.

Rhodey smiled and then began to speak slowly, making sure to stretch the words out so that Steve could understand just exactly what he was saying. “Tony always said that he never liked surprises but I know that that’s about 300% bullshit.” Steve snapped to attention, suddenly wide-eyed. “Only when it’s a good thing, though. His birthday’s in about a week and I’m just saying, maybe we can give him a surprise together… like a party or something along those lines… and then… you can give him the best birthday gift in the world. A surprise of your own.”

He had barely finished speaking when he was jumped and pulled into a bear hug by over 200 pounds of pure muscle and excitement. In between rapid “thank you”s, Rhodey chuckled. “Make it special, man, and don’t fuck it up.” He said while laughing.

“I won’t.” The super soldier, despite his enhanced lungs, still managed to sound breathless. “I won’t. I promise.”

The Colonel could tell that Steve truly meant it and that was enough for him.

He was more or less a little surprised when Mr. Stark rolled up to pick him up from school in a sleek Porsche convertible with the top down on a Friday afternoon. Actually, that was an understatement. He was pretty much shocked. But because Ned was there practically gaping and Flash was glaring at him from a distance, Peter figured he should act naturally, as if whatever was happening was completely and totally expected.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, Mr. Stark is picking me up from school does this mean I get to use the new suit do the Avengers need my help what is it what is it what is it???

“Hey, Peter, you gonna just stare at me like some kind of lost puppy or are you gonna get in?”

Huh?

Oh yeah, Mr. Stark was telling him to get into his very expensive car with the leather seats in front of everyone in his school and MJ was looking at him with raised eyebrows and nodding at him slowly,
as if she was impressed, while Ned was still frozen to the spot with an O-shaped mouth and Flash was just straight up plotting his murder, probably.

“Kid, let’s go.” His mentor gestured to ‘come here’ with an arm. So Peter, with his eyes wide, made his way to the billionaire’s car all while turning around and mouthing to Ned something along the lines of “Fucking amazing.”

The teenager clambered inside and was about to start rambling, a million questions already in store, all of them withering on the tip of his tongue when Mr. Stark put up a hand. “Ah, ah. No excessive verbal diarrhea. Just enjoy the ride, alright? We’re going up to the Tower and then I’ll drop you home at 9. Sound good?” Peter opened his mouth to respond when Mr. Stark went, “What did I say?” At that, the teenager clamped his lips shut and simply nodded. “Good.”

And they were off, heading to Manhattan to the Avengers Tower. Peter basked in the wind blowing through his brown, messy curls and every now and then, he looked in the direction of his childhood hero, wondering…

Mr. Stark had gained weight since the last time Peter had seen him. The billionaire had a soft smile on his face as he drove with one arm, the other resting on his lap.

The last time Peter had driven in a car with his mentor, they had almost gotten into an accident.

Several months ago, when he had spoken with his mentor on the phone, it had sounded like a goodbye.

If Peter had frantically called Colonel Rhodes immediately after he had hung up with Mr. Stark, nobody had to know. And if Peter couldn’t sleep that night because he was swinging through the city instead, looking for the man he called his hero since that day at the Stark Expo years ago, then nobody had to know. And if Peter was scared out of his mind at the thought of losing another father figure, well nobody had to know that either.

But he had been terrified.

“How are you Mr…”

“Tony.”

“Right. How are you, Tony? You doing okay?” Peter braced for the chastising he was about to receive for opening his mouth in the middle of a perfectly peaceful ride. When it didn’t come, he slowly turned his head back towards his mentor, who now had both hands on the steering wheel.

“Not really. But… I will be.” Tony shared a flicker of a smile. “Thanks for asking. And hey, don’t worry about me, kid. You just worry about getting that English grade up.”

“How did you--?”

“What type of mentor would I be if I didn’t know what how my protégé was doing in school?”

“But--”

“Just do it, Pete.”

Inwardly, the teenager was pleased. He had never had a stern talking to about his grades before. May was there, but she was also busy and she was easy when it came to stuff like that because she knew he was smart.
Also, Mr. Stark--Tony--had never called him ‘Pete’ before.

But from someone like Tony, who had grown up a genius, critique was what Peter wanted.

Honestly though, he was just glad Tony was in his life. He was little when his dad died, but he still remembered how much it had hurt to find out he didn’t have a father anymore. And then, when he lost Uncle Ben… Peter couldn’t think about losing Tony too.

When they pulled up to the Tower, the teenager couldn’t help but ogle at the high-tech building. He wondered--maybe--if one day, he could call a place like that home.

Maybe one day. When he was ready to accept Tony’s offer and move upstate.

He figured he still had time left to enjoy being a kid. Besides, who would he have to build Lego Star Wars sets with if Ned wasn’t there?

They made their way down to the lab with Peter staying a couple of steps behind Tony while he gaped open-mouthed and wide eyed at the modern and savvy features of the Tower.

When they reached Tony’s lab, Peter broke out into a loose grin at the sight of a familiar face with matching, floppy brown hair and enthusiasm. “Harley! How’ve you been, man?”

It took less than a couple of seconds for the two teenagers to get situated before instigating rapid fire, passionate conversations.

“Fine, leave the old guy in the dust. I see how it is.” Tony huffed from behind, causing the two boys to snicker. “Guess neither of you want to help me with my new suit. Oh well…”

At that, both boys were rapt with attention and Tony chuckled as they bounded up to him, shock plastered all over their young faces.

So the three of them worked, all of them put on their engineering binge mode where the only fuel they had was coffee and the only thing Peter heard was Tony’s voice as he explained the technicalities and functions of his repulsors and of the new features he was adding to the flight stabilisers, as well as new fighting techniques and defense mechanisms.

In short, Peter was on a high. Also, he may have pinched himself about twenty times just to make sure that he wasn’t dreaming because holy shit he was working on a new Iron Man suit with the Tony Stark.

At some point, Black Widow came down to drop off some food for all of them and he was pretty sure his back went ramrod straight and he stopped breathing for a few seconds when that happened. Peter had heard stories about how deadly and ruthless she could be, but the woman only gave him and Harley a pleasant smile before slapping Tony—who didn’t even seem to notice she had come in--upside the head lightly while he examined a complicated piece of equipment with DUM-E. “Stop subjecting innocent children to your bad habits.”

“Watch if you’ll be saying that once I finish tweaking your Widow bites.”

Peter didn’t even try to pretend he wasn’t staring at her dead on when she replied with a cooing voice. “Make them as reckless and dangerous as me.”

“As me, you mean.” Tony mumbled as he tried to speak through a screwdriver he held with his mouth.
“Sure. But we all know I come out on top in the end.”

“In your dreams, Widow.”

“Don’t piss me off, Stark or I’ll eat your food myself.”

Tony laughed openly at that and the other Avenger left while Peter and Harley began to whisper excitedly and frantically at her exit.

At another point, Peter was asked to retrieve something from a storage closet. He pretended not to listen when Tony and Harley began speaking about an ‘anxiety issue,’ but ever since he got bit by the radioactive spider, it was hard to not eavesdrop what with enhanced hearing and all.

So he made his movements quieter and listened surreptitiously.

“I’m working on it.” That was Tony. “For real, this time.”

“Okay… I’m sorry, by the way, for what happened in the car in Tennessee. I know a lot of it was my fault ’cause I don’t know how to shut up, but… yeah. I just thought you were getting better, you know, and watching you freak out like that again, I got scared. And then I got pissed because I wondered if you were even trying.”

Peter distinctly remembered the night they were driving back to Rose Hill from The Smoky Mountains. It was a night he would rather forget, yet still, it lay imprinted on his memory. Only because he had never seen his mentor so disheveled, so… out of it before. Up until that point, he had always been calm and collected, always handling things quickly and efficiently. Then, the second a metal arm had been mentioned--it had been enough to unravel and pick the man apart.

“It wasn’t your fault kid. What happened was because of me. It’s my shit, Harley, and I’ve gotta deal with it. So I am. I promise. I will deal with it. I am dealing with it.”

Peter walked back in then. The other two were back to doing whatever it was they had been doing before and he just molded right in with them; for once, without saying a word.

When Harley disappeared to go for a bathroom break, Peter was left alone with his mentor and this time, he had no idea what to say. Which was unusual, given his severe case of rambling-itis.

The air between them wasn’t exactly tense, but rather, it was… foggy? Unclear? It felt as if the both of them were balancing on a beam that was teetering on the edge of a cliff. But at the same time, Peter knew that they were not going to tip over, yet, he didn’t know what was going to happen next. So again, not tense. Just… unpredictable.

He still couldn’t stop thinking about that phone call.

“How are things at school, Peter?” His mentor sounded cheerful enough as he soldered at some sort of metal contraption which Peter’s brain was being way too slow at the moment to recognize.

“Sch… school?” Jeez, can’t even talk right today.

“Or just in general. Anything new happening in your life?” Tony kept his gaze hidden under soldering goggles and the sparks flying in front of his face were a bit too distracting to the teenager.

“I rejoined band, I guess.” Peter felt deflated, like his energy had been drained and he still didn’t get why. He kept staring at the sparks.

“Is that code for ‘I’m saving ferries from splitting in half and foiling illegal arms transactions on my
free time?” Peter laughed softly, but he didn’t feel it. Tony glanced up from where he was working, the sparks dying away. “I was just joking, Peter.” He said in a softer and gentler tone. “Besides, you never did tell me what instrument you played.”

“Percussion.”

Tony grinned and poked a screwdriver to the teenager’s side playfully. “No guarantees that I won’t be there on your concert day.” He teased in a sing-song voice.

Peter smiled again, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

That’s when his mentor took the goggles off, concern painted over his large eyes. “Is everything okay, Peter?”

It took a second for him to answer. “Yeah, I’m…” He pursed his lips when he couldn’t hide the voice crack and lowered his gaze when Tony’s frown smoothed over into gentler lines of understanding.

“Peter…”

“It’s just that…” He didn’t bother to mask the stuffiness which had crept up behind his words and he couldn’t stop the flow of hurt and fright which he had kept buried inside for so many months. In truth, he was angry. He was furious at Tony for keeping him on edge for so long, for scaring him so bad to the point where he hadn’t been able to sleep. He was furious that Tony ever gave him a reason to think that he was going to lose him too. Yet, when he spoke, he couldn’t hide the quivering tearfulness in his voice. “That phone call from a couple months ago… it… it… it scared me.”

Before he could do anything to help it, his face screwed up and tears began slipping through. He sniffed in a vain effort to contain himself.

Peter watched Tony still. “That… wasn’t my intention.” He said somberly and slowly, easing his way forward towards the crumbling teenager. He smiled softly. “I wasn’t in a great state of mind when I called you that day, Peter. But,” He held up a hand to interrupt the young hero as he opened his mouth, “It was a long time ago and things have changed so… forget about it, alright? You don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

Peter flipped his mentor’s words over and around and still didn’t find satisfaction. “I thought… I was really scared, Tony.” The older man flinched and Peter began to speak rapidly and frantically as more involuntary emotions bubbled to the surface and his voice grew strained and higher in pitch. “I thought you were going to do something and I couldn’t sleep that night or think about anything else because I couldn’t stop thinking about dark, scary things and what… what you were… I was… I couldn’t…”

He heard a slow sigh in the midst of his blubbering and then he was wrapped in strong arms as a calloused, but gentle hand caressed the back of his head. “I’m sorry, Peter.” Peter melted into that hug. He embraced the security and the safety as he memorized the way it felt to be truly hugged by Tony Stark. He smiled against the other man’s shoulder as he remembered the hug that wasn’t a hug in the car so long ago. “I’m okay now. I’m better. I’m working on it.” Tony paused in his gentle reassurances. “I’m not going anywhere.” He finished with a sigh.

“I already lost my dad and Uncle Ben. I can’t lose you too.” The words were muffled against the billionaire’s shoulder. He felt himself being hugged a little tighter. “You, May, Ned, and MJ are the only ones left. Liz had to go to Oregon after everything that happened between her dad and me so she’s gone now too. I don’t have any other family and it’s already so hard to deal with Flash…”
Tony pulled away quickly and Peter wiped at his eyes, already missing the security he had felt in the billionaire’s arms. “Who’s Flash?”

Peter stilled. Shit. Did he really say that out loud?

“Peter--who’s Flash?” The teenager winced at the sharp tone and hung his head when Tony crossed his arms and frowned.

“Just some kid at school.” He mumbled as his eyes dashed everywhere but did not meet his mentor’s gaze.

“Is he a bully?” Peter didn’t answer. “Hey… does Flash bully you, Peter?”

“No… he’s just… he likes to get on my nerves is all. It’s not a big deal, really--”

“Yes it is. And before you ask why, it’s because I said so.” Peter kept his head down.

“It’s nothing, Tony--”

“It is. It is to me because I care about you and I’ve been through the same shit way more than once in my own life so I know how it feels. Hell, God knows I’ve been through so much more well into my adult years too.”

“Can you please just drop it?” Peter demanded, frustration lacing itself into his biting tone.

“No. Not until you promise me that you won’t let them win, Pete. You can’t let them win.” Peter furrowed his brows and balled his fists as Tony continued on with his lecture.

He felt something being pressed into his hand instead. It was a small, metal thing with a button at the end. It was larger than a pill, but small enough to be covered completely by his hand. “Point this end away from your face and then press the button.” Peter looked up to see Tony smiling softly at him. There was a small line of grease on his cheek he had forgotten to wipe away. “Helps with bullies.”

“Tony--”

“If they push you, Peter, you fight back. I’m not saying to deck them every time they look at you wrong,” Peter chuckled at that, “although it’s not a bad idea. Don’t tell May I said that. Just… hold your head up high and smile. Do some good for the world. Be the hero that you are.” Peter beamed through his tears. “You’re a strong kid. So fight them. You’ll win every single time. I know you will.”

The hug was completely impulsive, but at that point, Peter didn’t care. He just held onto Tony for dear life and buried his face in the older man’s chest. “Okay.” He mumbled.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

They stayed like that for a couple seconds and the teenager let himself be held up by his mentor.

By his family.

“Come on,” Tony said as they pulled away again. This time, the air between them crackled—not with anger, but with the realization that they were there. They were alive. And there was so much more, so much more, life had to offer them. “Let’s go shake up the universe.”
Tony extended a hand towards someone behind him—Harley—and then turned to grab two bracelet-like objects from his desk before sticking one on each of their wrists. Then, he placed one on his own.

“Alright guys, hold still. This will only hurt if you move.”

“What the hell--?” Harley asked before there was a cacophony of clattering.

Both boys gasped as several pieces of armor from all over the workshop flew towards their bodies before latching on and securing in place. They were the pieces they had been working on and soon enough, every single piece fitted into place before a mask slid over their eyes and an HUD screen appeared.

Peter was 100% sure he had forgotten how to breathe.

He heard Harley’s whoops and shouts of excitement in the distance.

“Wanna go for a test flight?” Tony’s voice through the comms broke Peter out of his ear-ringing trance and the teenager turned his head to see Iron Man standing before him in complete armor with a shorter and smaller version standing beside him.

“Hell yeah!” That was Harley.

Peter exhaled slowly, the adrenaline from excitement beginning to seep into his veins. “Oh my God.” He laughed, finally realizing just what it was that was happening. “Yes.”

“I’m controlling you guys’ suits. I don’t trust either of you little shits with my precious armor.” Tony teased as Iron Man took one of his metallic hands in his own and Harley’s in the other.

The repulsors fired up and Peter began blubbering simultaneously with the other young boy as he was lifted off the ground and the window which looked over the city skyline opened up, letting in a crisp, yet pleasant May breeze.

The three of them shot off into the air, tails of golden following behind them, leaving behind streaks which resembled sun rays as they chased the sunset.

He felt other than himself, as if his entire being had been put to sleep and in its wake was his soul. His raw, vulnerable self was the one weaving through the buildings of New York. It was the version of him that was apart from who he was as Peter Parker, yet, in this form, he felt whole.

Children stared up at them and they pointed or jumped or shrieked in excitement. His HUD screen zoomed in on each of them. Peter tried to wave back.

The sky was clear other than a couple wispy clouds here and there. It was painted in an ombre of red and yellow and blue and all the colors in between.

They flew over the bridge which connected Brooklyn to Manhattan and circled around a certain building a couple times before taking off once more in the direction of Queens.

Peter scanned for May or MJ or Ned and screamed in exhilaration when he found them.

“Enjoying the view, guys?” Tony asked through the comms.

“Are you kidding me? This is amazing. This is… it’s…” Peter couldn’t finish the sentence as Harley provided his own variation of the same exact thing.
“Watch this.” Tony tilted all three of them towards the river and dipped down until they were brushing against the surface of the water. Then, without any warning, he fired his repulsors, shooting them straight up into the air.

Peter whooped as the adrenaline pumped faster through his body and they soared higher and higher, up till the clouds as if they were chasing the sun and heaven.

And then they stopped. They hovered.

New York shone and sparkled beneath them as the sun finally set over the horizon and the streetlights, the LED screens, and every other light in colors of red or yellow or white twinkled.

Peter held his breath as the world revolved and orbited around him and he was stuck in a perpetual cycle of slow motion. “Wow.” He breathed. “Wow.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Tony asked.

“It’s perfect.” He responded, still awed. “Perfect.”

Slowly this time, so that they could continue watching over the city, Tony guided them back towards the Tower, a shining beacon in the midst of a sea of stars.

Harley walked down the disassembly line first and then Peter was pushed forward. The armor was picked off of them fluidly and the two boys parted as the final piece of armor was off of Tony.

“That was the coolest friggin’ thing I’ve ever seen.” Harley whispered, eyes wide and glazed.

Peter saw his mentor smile warmly in the dim light.

“Peter, you’re being suspiciously non hyper-verbal.” Tony drawled, poking at his side.

And instead of opening his mouth, the teenager simply wrapped his arms around his mentor and hugged him, reaching up on his tippy toes to hold the older man tighter. He felt Harley join in after a couple of moments.

“This is an obstruction of personal space.” Tony quipped, but that only made Peter squeeze harder.

“That was amazing, Tony.” Peter said as the three of them separated. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, kid.” Tony chuckled.

“When are you going to take me flying, honey?” Peter whipped around to meet the voice he still remembered from that day in Leipzig years ago. Captain Steve Rogers.

The large, muscled man was leaning against the doorway to the entrance of the Tower wearing an unbuttoned t-shirt with a tank top beneath and faded jeans. Also… HE HAD A BEARD NOW WHAT THE HELL.

Oh my God, it’s CAPTAIN AMERICA! Okay, calm down, it’s okay act natural just be normal don’t say anything stupid--

“Sorry for stealing your shield.” Even Peter wasn’t entirely sure what exactly he had stuttered in front of the superhero, but when all heads turned towards him, each wearing a playful smirk, he simply raised a hand and waved meekly.

The Captain threw his head back and laughed before walking up to Tony, pulling him closer, and
pecking him gently on the lips.


“Hi.” Cap greeted his mentor with a twinkling smile.

Tony leaned in to kiss the man on the corner of his lips once more. “Hi.”

Peter could only watch, jaw dropped open shamelessly.

“And don’t worry, kid.” The super soldier turned back towards him and Peter, to this day, would deny that he sputtered a little when that happened. “My best hero made me another one.” At that, the man looked over towards Tony with such deep affection in his blue eyes, that Peter was pretty sure he melted into a puddle right then and there.

And Tony looked so incredibly happy.

Peter caught Harley’s gaze and they shared a smile, knowing full and completely well that their friend was going to be alright.

It was a bit disconcerting whenever Bucky had to think about just how much the world had changed since his days back in the 40s.

For instance, the mall he had been dragged to by Steve and Natasha was way too flashy, too artificial for him to handle. But he kept his head down and his smile gentle and genuine. They weren’t shopping for trendy clothes at those large and overcrowded brand name stores. They were shopping for an engagement ring.

That was enough reason for him to suck it up and take it. After all, it was worth seeing Steve’s face light up every single time they found a possible ring. They had gone through silver ones, golden ones, halo cuts, pear cuts, marquise cuts, and several others Bucky was too overwhelmed to try to remember. They had visited store upon store and each time Steve had gotten close to purchasing one, he would ask Natasha first, who always gave an honest and clean cut opinion, then he would ask Bucky, who always answered with ‘no.’

It wasn’t that Bucky was picky or anything. But every one of those rings seemed… inauthentic. Faux. Fake. They didn’t speak for or do justice to what Steve and Tony had. The silver would always shine just a bit too bright or the gold would just glisten too tackily and it just didn’t sit well with Bucky. It wasn’t right.

So he simply shook his head every time and Steve would immediately put the ring back or tell the salesperson that he didn’t want it and then they would be off to another store, or return to one they had already visited, and they would scour every design again and again.

Bucky was happy for Steve. No, that was an understatement. He didn’t think there was a word in the dictionary to describe just how elated he was for his best friend. A part of him had known that this was to be expected. However, *all* of him knew that this was what Steve needed. This was what Tony needed. Hell, this was what he, himself needed to move on. To move past all the shit in their lives and flip to a fresh page, per se.

Yeah, this was what they *all* needed.

Ever since Tony had forgiven him that day several months before, he had finally found a spring in his step or a glimmer of the light at the end of a large, snaking tunnel HYDRA had created from the
very pits of hell. He found himself smiling more and talking to others more, a result of his improvements by using Tony’s BARF technology to gather old memories and alter terrible ones. He finally felt in control of his mind.

Bucky had gotten closer to Natasha and he had a habit of calling her “Natalia,” which he knew she secretly appreciated. At one point, they had dipped a toe in the water of a possible relationship. Actually, it had just been a heat of the moment thing where he had kissed her and she had kissed him back for a grand total of five seconds. She had stared at him intently and he had kept silent, praying that she would lean back in again.

But she held back and pulled away. “It’s nothing personal.” She had said. “I care for you, James, but I just can’t do this.” He hadn’t asked her why, but simply backed up behind her boundaries and let it be. He was disappointed and at times he felt as if there was no point in pining, but despite how much he liked her, he loved their friendship more.

He didn’t want to lose that.

And besides, he was happy. As happy as he could possibly be.

It was when Natasha and Steve were debating with each other between two elaborate rings that Bucky stemmed away from them and ventured through the rows of displays on his own. He didn’t know it, but he was frowning at each and every single one of the rings. He pointed out flaws in every single one, even if it was something small like “the diamond’s too big” or “it’s too plain.”

There was a small section towards the corner where the rings were slightly more expensive, but it was here that Bucky found it: the perfect one. When he did, he stared at it. He studied it. He examined every whorl and crevice and gem and decided that this was the ring his best friend would put on his sweetheart’s finger.

“Stevie, Natalia--come here.” He waved them over and pointed at the ring on the farthest top left hand corner. It was the most isolated, the most unnoticeable and hidden one, yet, to Bucky, it was the most beautiful.

Steve called over a salesperson to show it to them first hand. When it came out of its glass cage, Natasha gasped a little. “You’ve got taste, Barnes, that’s for sure.” She murmured as Steve held the tiny box in his hands.

The ring was rose-gold in color and it twinkled in the light as Steve tilted it slowly. There was a diamond in the middle, but it wasn’t too big nor too small. Elegant and regal swirls and arches encrusted with tiny, silver gems completed the look.

“Buck.” Steve breathed, turning towards him with a soft smile. “It’s the one.”

Mission accomplished.

Steve and Natasha split the money to pay for the ring and despite all his best arguments, Bucky wasn’t being allowed to pitch in. So when Steve brought up the question of engraving it, Bucky took zero bullshit and offered the money to the salesperson before anyone could stop him.

So that was how Steve ended up with a beautiful ring with the word ‘hero’ engraved on the inside in his pocket.

Natasha left the two of them to themselves at the food court to window shop at bridal stores.

That was when all of it came to light.
After 80 years of torture, this was when he realized who he was, who he was with, where he was, and why they were there. He hadn’t known Howard Stark that well, but Steve had often said that he was one of his best friends back in the 40s. Now, his friend, still alive after a hundred years, was going to propose to the man’s son. It was surreal. But Bucky knew that this was how it was supposed to happen, despite everything.

“You have no idea how grateful I am.” Bucky said slowly, waiting for Steve to look up from his plate of food. “You know… that I get to be here to see you get hitched.”

Steve grinned from corner to corner. “And you have no idea how grateful I am that I got you back so that I get to have you as my Best Man at my wedding.”

He froze. “…what?”

The blonde chuckled. “Who else did you think it’d be, Buck? If Tony says yes and we get engaged, I want you to be my Best Man.” At Bucky’s silence, Steve flashed him the puppy dog eyes. “Please?”

“I don’t…” Bucky furrowed his brows and frowned at the table. “I don’t know how to write a speech.” He looked up to find Steve throwing his head back and laughing wholeheartedly. It was enough to make the former Winter Soldier break into a smile.

“Write what you know.” Steve said in between laughs. “Anything you say will be perfect. I just need you there, by my side, when I get married.”

“…okay.” Bucky agreed and nodded his head. He watched Steve open the blue, velvet box and admire the ring with a hand propping his chin up. “It’s beautiful.” Bucky whispered under his breath, still feeling a little light from Steve’s request. He was going to be Best Man. He was going to be Steve’s Best Man at his wedding.

“You have good taste.” Steve responded, snapping the box shut again and tucking it back in his pocket.


They sat in silence for a bit and Bucky delved back into his thoughts, being the introverted man that he was.

For some inexplicable reason he found himself going back to that day nine months ago in that cramped conference room, where HYDRA had gotten its scummy, disgusting hands on the people he loved. None of them deserved to be manipulated by the terrorists. None of them deserved to be hurt by them. But they had gone through the wringer: Him, Steve, and Tony, and they had all come out alive. Alive and stronger.

About two months after everything had happened, the Avengers had been called out to intercept the goons who had hacked into FRIDAY. They had attempted to get past SHIELD’s firewall and the alarm was tripped.

It was a short fight. HYDRA hadn’t been fully prepared. There were no casualties, although there had been a close call with a little boy whom Wanda had whisked out of the way in record time. However, when they got to the core of the evil, when they were all face to face with the vile men who had caused so much hurt to so many people, it was Iron Man--Tony--who killed them.

Wanda had squeezed his hand as they witnessed another one of their own overcome the
manipulations and the poison HYDRA had spread among his life.

Tony hadn’t cried. Not immediately anyway. It was only when they were back at the Tower and everything was settled that Bucky was able to catch a moment alone with the genius. He hadn’t known what he was going to say to him, but something within him was nagging at him to approach Tony. To just be there.

Tony had looked at him once and they had shared something in that split second gaze. Bucky figured it was a mutual acknowledgement of survival. They had survived, just as the genius had said later on at the gala.

It was Tony who had hugged him first. Bucky had been confused, a little disoriented. But then he had relaxed and had gingerly hugged him back. And when he felt the man muffle a sob into his chest, he let him cry.

Nine months ago, HYDRA had found a way to try to tear them all apart by forcing Steve to choose.

Nine months ago, Bucky promised himself he would never be the reason Steve or his sweetheart ever fought again.

“Bucky?” The man in question was snapped back into the present by his friend, who was waving a hand in front of his face. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing, just…” Bucky mumbled, pushing his food around on his plate. “Just promise me, Stevie, that you won’t let me come between you and Tony. I don’t want to be the reason you two argue or be pushed apart, okay? Promise?” He looked dead straight into those baby blue eyes as they darkened a little and Steve frowned a little. “I need you to promise me, punk.”

At that, Steve’s lips twitched up a little. “Okay.” He said. “I promise. But… but I still want you to know that I’ll be there, Buck. For you and Tony both when you need me. I’ll fight back every time, every damn time the universe wants me to choose between you. I swear to you I will tell the universe to go to hell, then try and find a way out of a situation like that. I can’t choose between my two best guys in the entire world. I can’t. I can’t… I can’t do it without you two.”

“And I get that, punk, I really do. But I want you to know that I’ll be fine—” He held up a hand to interrupt Steve as he opened his mouth. “I’m doing well. Really well, actually. I can fight for myself and think for myself and… I finally feel like myself now. Like I am the sole owner of my body.” He said, thinking about Tony’s speech at the gala. “So when the time comes that your sweetheart needs you, just like how you’re going to need him too, you guys gotta be there for each other, holding each other up. Regardless of—regardless of anybody else.”

“You’re right, Buck.” Steve said and gripped the box in his pocket. “But you have to know that you matter too, okay. That you matter to me too.”

“I know, Steve.” He reached forward to clutch his friend’s shoulder. “I know that as a fact and I know that nothing will ever change that.” He smiled, bright and genuine. “But you ain’t marrying me, bud. That ring’s not going on my finger.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah.” He whispered. “I’m marrying my one and only.”

Bucky leaned back, crossing his arms. “Your one and only now, is he?” He teased, wearing a shit-eating grin. He laughed when Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m so happy for you, Steve. You and Tony—the both of you deserve this. To be together. To be happy. To let… bygones be bygones.”

“Thanks Buck. I feel like, at this point, now that I have you back and Tony… I don’t need anything
“I don’t know man, Tony’s cars sure as hell look fancy.”

Steve wore an expression of mock shock before he nodded. “Agreed.”

Bucky hesitated before speaking again. “But… uh… I just wanted to let you know that… I’m happy. More than I’ve ever been, actually. And thank you, you know, because you made all this possible by coming back for me and not giving up on me no matter how far off the deep end I’d gotten. So yeah. I love you, punk.”

They had left the food court for a while by then, so Steve was able to hug him tightly. It caught him by surprise at first, but then he melted into the touch.

“I love you too, jerk.” They pulled apart and Steve was smiling. “God, I don’t know what I’d do without you. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be thinking about proposing to the love of my life if it weren’t for you.”

“Yeah.” They kept strolling through the mall aimlessly. “You’d probably be picking petals off flowers in the middle of a meadow going: ‘he loves me, he loves me not’ every damn day and you still wouldn’t grow the balls to take your doll of a sweetheart out to someplace nice.”

Steve gave a sheepish grin. “We actually… haven’t… yet. Gone somewhere nice together, that is.” Bucky gaped at him stupidly and Steve showed his palms. “I didn’t want to rush him!”

“Bullshit! Says the man with an engagement ring in his pocket! Natalia,” He looked over toward the redhead who was coming toward them with smoothies in her hand. “Can you believe that Stevie hasn’t taken his doll out on a date, yet?”

“Would you please stop calling him ‘doll?’” Steve groaned as Natasha got one of her mischievous looks plastered all over her face.

“Well this just cannot stand, now can it?” She drawled as she wiggled her way in between them and hooked her arms on theirs. “Come on boys, let’s go plan a date.”

Tony had good days and then sometimes he had bad days. Steve knew this and thus, prepared himself emotionally and mentally for whichever type of day it was going to be.

Steve loved the days which were filled with Tony’s happy chatter and babbling and his terrible routine and habit of forgetting to eat or sleep. Those days they would spend hours just talking or they would watch a movie or go up to the roof where they would count the stars until they would fall asleep tucked against each other.

On the days Tony would wake up with a terrible scream dying on the tip of his tongue, shaking and sweating with panic, Steve would wrap himself in armor and exercise patience. For that was all he could be: patient. Whenever Tony would yell at him or push at him or try to push him away, Steve would stay tight lipped and he would deal with it. He would stay, rooted in his place, and listen as Tony threw tantrums or cried or screamed at him, asking “Why, Steve? Why am I so worthless? Why do you stay with my fucked up ass, don’t you want someone less damaged? Why don’t you just leave already?”

On those days, Steve would listen and then hold Tony close as he broke down and crumpled to the floor. He would hold him and whisper sweet nothings into his ear until Tony was a mess of broken apologies and worn out tears. On those days, Steve would hand his lover a stress ball which they
would hold together until Tony would fall asleep and then he would go down to the gym where he
would beat punching bag after punching bag to oblivion.

But some days got bad. Really bad, despite all the progress Tony had made. Some days were just…
too much. Steve didn’t know what to do to make things better on those days. So he did the one thing
Tony told him to do: he left. The super soldier had to find out the hard way that sometimes, that was
all he could do.

He just hadn’t expected something like that to happen four days before Tony’s birthday.

It was the middle of the night. Steve was holding Tony close to his chest when he was startled awake
by the rapid, jerking movements of the genius’ body in his arms. Tony’s face was contorted, as if he
was in pain, and his breaths were short and spastic. His eyes were still closed and he was
whimpering.

“Tony?” Steve whispered, shaking the other man gently in an effort to wake him up. “It’s just a
dream. Come on, wake up. It’s not real. It’s not real. To--”

And Tony did wake up. He shot straight up in bed, back ramrod straight and his eyes wide with his
pupils dilated.

“FRIDAY, lights.” Steve ordered and sat up as well to find Tony’s chest heaving erratically and his
pale face. “Tony, what’s wrong?” He reached forward with a hand and Tony jumped the second
their skin came into contact with each other. The look in his eyes—that was pure and utter terror.
Fear.

Tony scrambled out of the bed, falling on the floor on his hands and knees, tangled up in the blanket,
before stumbling onto his feet and backing up into a corner. The genius was quaking in place and
Steve could hear his heavy, labored breaths. Tony raked his hands through his dark hair over and
over again before he splayed them across his chest, trying to control himself.

“Shhh.” Steve got out of the bed gingerly and placed his feet on the floor one by one, almost tip-
toeing. He didn’t know what Tony had dreamt about, so the only way to go about this was to be
gentle and calm and slow. So Steve found the stress ball in the nightstand drawer and held it out to
Tony once he got close enough to kneel in front of him.

But Tony didn’t take it. Steve jumped back when the genius lashed out, just barely missing his face,
and tried to back up into the corner even more. Only this time, Tony was screaming. “GET OUT!”
He howled, tears streaming down his cheeks. “GET OUT, GET OUT, LEAVE ME ALONE!”

Steve pretended that it didn’t hurt, that it wasn’t paining him to not understand why it was that Tony
was so scared, that he didn’t feel so useless that he couldn’t even help the man he loved.

“Shhh… hey. Hey. Tony, it’s okay. Take the ball, it’ll make you feel better. It’ll help you calm
down, alright? Okay… easy, now, easy.”

Tony only shrieked again, a shrill, bloodcurdling sound which made goosebumps line up and down
Steve’s skin. “LEAVE! GO! JUST GET OUT!”

“Tell me what you need.” That was desperation in his voice. “Tell me what I can do to help, Tony,
please.” Now his words were tearful and quivering. He tried to move closer once again, only having
to duck when Tony threw a nearby vase at his head. He heard the shattering of the glass in between
the deafening white noise.

Steve backed away from his lover, who was now sitting on the ground with his head in his knees,
muffling terrifying wails. He left the ball in front of his trembling form and without another word, cleaned up the broken glass on the floor.

Because damn it all to hell if he didn’t do all he could to prevent Tony from relapsing.

Then he gathered up a sweatshirt and a pair of pants and he left. He went straight down to the gym where he destroyed punching bag after punching bag until his knuckles were raw and the floor was half covered in sand.

That was where Tony found him in the morning.

“I’m sorry.” Tony whispered as he fit himself into the curves and crevices of Steve’s sweaty, tired body. “I had a nightmare… about Siberia.” Steve buried his face in the other man’s hair and held him tighter. “But I’m okay now.” Tony lifted his head, his eyes were red rimmed and tired and his skin was a few shades darker, as if a shadow had been cast over it. “Thank you… for being there.”

Steve kissed his forehead and Tony lowered his head onto the super soldier’s chest once more. They stayed like that for several minutes before they went back up to the communal floor for breakfast.

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He was back in the 1940s.

At least, that was what it felt like to him.

Steve rotated 360 degrees on his feet slowly, taking in the cherry-lipped women with the shoulder length, done-up hair, wearing pretty dresses and high heels as they posed for pictures. He heard the shutter of old fashioned cameras, contrary to the modern ‘click.’ He saw gambling tables and smelt the rich stench of booze and smoke in the air. He was in the middle of the dance floor and he watched men wearing their formal soldier uniforms twirl women around to the uplifting ragtime a jolly man at the piano was playing.

He looked down at his body. He was wearing his uniform from before the ice. It stuck to his body and Steve held his head a little bit higher with pride.

His loafers clicked on the wooden floor as he walked through the scene with meticulous steps. The steady rhythm of his shoes upon the floor were amplified in his ears while the giggles and laughter of the people surrounding him were dim. A small grin played on the corner of his lips.

There was a man standing at the bar. He was leaning against it, one elbow resting against the table while he stirred a drink in his hand. He wore black trousers and a white shirt with a vest on over it. His dark hair was messy, yet fell into place around the frame of his head perfectly. He had big, brown doe eyes and a clean beard that had sharp edges. The man tilted his head toward Steve with his mouth slightly parted and pouted, accentuating the curve of his lips as he straightened his posture.

A camera shuttered and the flash was blinding, yet Steve saw past it and instead, focused on the sultry halo outlining the man’s body.

His shoes clicked as he walked up behind him and paused. He placed a hand on the man’s thigh before dragging it up torturously slow to grip his waist. Steve planted a ginger kiss on the man’s cheek and traced the curve from his shoulder up to his neck with his nose. He nuzzled his face in the man’s hair, breathing in his musky scent, and pulled him closer, closing the gap between their bodies. The man was warm and he leaned back into Steve’s body, letting the back of his head fall against Steve’s shoulder so that he could look up into the super soldier’s baby blue eyes with his own
molten chocolate ones.

“Are you ready for my dark side now?” Steve breathed into the man’s ear, causing him to gasp softly, eyes still wide and innocent.

Steve let his hands fall back on his side and walked past the man in slow motion. He thought he could feel the crackling tension between them, buzzing and begging to be released. The man still stared as the super soldier turned forward once more and the ‘click,’ ‘click,’ ‘click’ of his loafers sounded once more.

It was impossible to resist glancing behind his shoulder to check if the man was still there and when Steve caught his gaze, the scene shimmered. The ragtime grew dull and slowed as the people’s forms rippled and faded, as did the man with the doe eyes.

He blinked.

Then the man was before him, their mouths separated by only a matter of centimeters. Steve leaned in, letting his hands rest on the other man’s solid hips. He went in to claim him.

And felt nothing.

❖ ❖ ❖

“Fuck.” Steve grunted under his breath as he jolted awake. He immediately flushed at the feeling of an uncomfortable warmth down… there.

He was pressing against Tony’s back, who was still fast asleep on his side with an arm thrown over his face.

“Fuck.” Steve hissed again, threw the covers off of his body, and scrambled out of bed.

“Mmm… Steve?” Tony stirred, rolling onto his back and peering through mostly closed lids at the super soldier who was busy trying to cover his spectacular morning wood in somewhat of a discreet fashion. “You okay?”

“Huh? Uhh--yeah. I’m absolutely fine. Just going for a shower and then a quick jog.” He prayed to whoever was listening that he sounded convincing enough.

“M’kay.” Tony pulled the covers up to his chin and closed his eyes once more. Steve held his breath, waiting for the sound of Tony’s soft snores before he pretty much stumbled into the shower.

He considered having the water at a freezing cold temperature, enough to will his dick back into submission. But then again, it was 4 AM and he was in no mood to freeze his balls off nor trigger his anxiety.

Plus, the dream he had had was still fresh in his mind.

So he made the water incredibly warm, turning the dial gradually to make it almost scalding hot. Steve let the water prick him continuously for several seconds, bringing back the atmosphere of the ‘40s, of the ragtime and the fluttering of pretty dresses and the sound of his loafers as they clicked on the wooden dance floor. He thought of the shuttering of the camera, of the halo around the man’s--Tony’s-- body. Of his curved, pouted lips and the sweet, musky scent and the soft, silky raven hair. Of those strong, solid hips and waist and the dip of his body where his form would soon arch back up to form that perfectly shaped ass. Those deep, dark, almost innocent chocolate eyes.
Steve reached down to touch himself. He stroked himself until he was fully up and at attention. He moaned softly and melted into the rising steam from the water as he began to pump. Slowly at first, keeping Tony’s image in his head the entire time.

“Are you ready for my dark side now?” He whispered the words out loud, thinking of the way he had dragged his hand up Tony’s thigh and pecked his neck and had pressed up against him, letting the warmth radiate between them and turn them into one.

Steve jerked himself faster and harder, panting and grunting under his breath and letting the roar of the shower cover up the rest. He let the heat claim him and the water consume him, all the while thinking about Tony… Tony… Tony.

He came with a sharp gasp. He tilted his head back and let his vision white out for a second before finally returning with a slow exhale.

He turned the water off and dried himself quickly before dressing himself in his boxers once more. Steve contemplated the possibility of going for a jog, but considering the fact that he was already spent, he brushed it off until later.

Besides, today was the day Bucky and Natasha, like the nosy little assholes they were, had planned the date for him and Tony. There were only two more days till his birthday, so Steve figured why not.

So instead of going anywhere else, Steve padded back into the bedroom and crawled under the covers next to Tony. He tucked some of his hair back from where it was covering his forehead before he pressed a kiss there, sweet and chaste.

He lingered, then pressed a deeper kiss right at the same spot before going back to sleep.

❖ ❖ ❖

The day had been pretty uneventful.

Steve had gone down to the Compound with Clint to train some new SHIELD recruits while Tony had tinkered in the lab and the others had simply taken a day to chill, so to speak. Besides, Natasha always loved a day where she could spend some time with the Barton kids.

He had come back to the Tower early that day and Bucky had immediately ushered him into his room only to throw a fancy suit at him. “You’re wearing that tonight.” He said before slipping a condom into his palm as well.

Steve tried to hide his blush by biting his lip. He tried not to think about the incident which had occurred that morning. “Buck, I don’t think this is a good… I mean, after everything he went through, I don’t think he’s ready and I want to respect that--”

“I know, Stevie.” Bucky nodded once, showing that he understood exactly what he was trying to say. “Just keep it with you. If he’s not ready to take that step yet, then that is completely between you and him and what he wants to do. If nothing happens, nothing happens. No harm, no foul. Right?”

Steve smiled lightly before pocketing the tiny plastic package. “Right.”

“I think Natalia put some lube in you guys’ bedside drawer…”

“Bucky. Stop.”
The other man laughed and let Steve be so that he could change in peace. When the super soldier finished, Bucky came back in to scan Steve from top to bottom. He gave a satisfied nod. “Not bad.”

Steve took his own glance at the mirror. He almost didn’t recognize the man who stared back. “Yeah.” He breathed. “Not too shabby, huh?”

Natasha had been in charge of luring Tony out of his lab and getting him to get dressed.

Fifteen minutes later, Steve was still waiting on the communal floor, bouncing on his heels in anticipation.

He wasn’t ready when the elevator dinged, signaling Tony and Natasha’s arrival. The assassin exited first, wearing a smug look on her face.

And then out came Tony.

Steve held his breath as his lover walked out, head held high and back straight, looking as if he could snatch the world in his palm and call it his own.

Tony’s suit was all black. The blazer had elegant swirls of velvet decorating it. His hair was combed and slicked back neatly, since it was still a little wet from the shower. His beard was trimmed and clean, the edges sharp as always. Tony oozed confidence.

He was a single star in a sea of night.

“I assume we’re going out tonight.” The genius said, sporting a wide, beaming smile as he stopped in front of Steve, who was still gaping.

Steve was wearing a plain, but handsome, dark blue blazer with a white shirt underneath and black trousers. He was pretty sure Natasha was the one who had picked out the clothes for both of them. He knew she had done a perfect job.

He wanted to say so much to the beautiful man before him. He wanted to get down on one knee right then and there and ask Tony Stark to take his name. But the ring was locked away upstairs and May 29th was only a day away.

So the only word which escaped past Steve’s lips was “Wow.”

He pressed his thumb on Tony’s bottom lip gently and gazed into those Bambi eyes before leaning forward to bump their foreheads together and steal a quick kiss.

But Tony got up on his toes shortly after for a deeper one, which of course, prompted clapping and whooping behind them.

Steve inhaled Tony’s scent of rich, Burberry cologne before dragging a finger down the genius’ cheek.

He was so damn handsome.

“Alright lover boys, out the door you go.” Natasha slapped both of their asses sharply, causing Steve to yelp indignantly and Tony to gasp mockingly, before ushering them into the elevator. “Happy’s waiting for you guys downstairs.” She added.

“Happy’s here?” Tony asked, a hint of excitement and past affection in his voice as the doors closed in front of them.
“Who’s Happy?”

“An old friend.” He answered, old memories playing in the back of his mind. Memories Steve would never see, of a life that he had never been a part of. Steve wondered what it would have been like to know Tony back then, like how the Colonel knew him, or Miss Potts. To know what his past held, to be able to love him through all the things he went through to become who he was today.

Steve wondered.

And decided that he would take right now, just as it was. Because right now was all that mattered. Right now was why he had a ring in his drawer and his best friend back and the love of his life on his arm.

He was good with right now.

“Happy Hogan!” Tony flared flamboyantly as they entered the parking garage to meet a tall, chubby man standing next to a sleek, black Lincoln. “Tell me, pal, what have you been up to in California without me?”

“You know how it is, boss. Cali ain’t the same without you.” The man smiled warmly as he and Tony hugged. Happy looked at at him next. “Nice to meet you, Captain.” He nodded his head.

“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Hogan.”

“Call me Happy.”

Steve smiled. “Call me Steve.”

“Well this was a splendid reunion. Tell me, where the hell did Nat tell you to take us tonight?” Tony jumped back into the conversation as they all entered the car. Steve admired the leather seats and the internal lighting.

Happy chuckled. “Just sit back, boss. I’ll take you there.” Without another word, the divider between the front and the backseats closed up and Tony and Steve were left to themselves.

The super soldier tentatively placed a hand over Tony’s before squeezing it. “Your friend is nice.”

“He’s the best.” Tony said fondly, leaning back in his seat. “Yeah, he always stuck around no matter how insufferable I got. Kudos to him.”

Steve smirked and rolled his eyes before leaning in to bury his face in Tony’s neck. He moaned lightly when Tony brought an arm around to stroke a hand through his hair.

The air was light and easy. Almost sweet. The night was cool, but not chilly and Steve felt, for the first time in a long time, completely content.

They had come so far--so far from that bunker in Siberia. And even though, at times, that day still haunted them like it had haunted Tony just a couple of nights ago, Steve knew they could make it. He knew that that day wouldn’t define them anymore. It wouldn’t define who they were, it wouldn’t define what they had now.

Steve still remembered that day in the helicarrier. Hurtful words, things he hadn’t known he was capable of saying, had tumbled out of his mouth one after the other. Loki’s scepter had held him captive and he had been angry.
But then they had fallen back, almost on top of each other, and he was free from the scepter’s grasp. He was free from the inexplicable anger. Steve had looked into Tony’s eyes and realized that damn, he’s the one.

He had known back then. He knew it now.

Tony pushed him back a little and Steve lifted his head only to meet Tony’s lips. The kiss was searing. It was hot and messy and Tony was lifting himself up on his knees to lean in further and further. Steve kept his hands on the genius’ waist, wanting so much to let them roam. But he would never do it, not until Tony gave him permission. Never until Tony told him that it was okay. That was a promise he would always keep.

And then Tony was straddling him and playing with his tie and they were still kissing with an intensity Steve had never known. The genius moaned into his mouth a little when Steve tugged at his hair.

It was when Tony rolled his hips forward a little, creating friction between them, that Steve pulled away. He rested his hands on Tony’s hips, steadying him. He studied those pink, kiss-swollen lips and that wild look in those chocolate brown eyes. Immediately, his dream from that morning came to mind. Steve pushed that image away before his smaller head got too many ideas.

“Easy.” Steve said instead. “We haven’t even had dinner, yet.”

Tony smirked and fell back in his seat. Steve straightened his tie. “I’m going to die of blue balls because of you.”

“That’ll be an interesting epitaph.” Steve mused and laughed when Tony hit him gently upside the head.

Happy drove them to a nice, formal Italian restaurant which had Tony going wide-eyed a little bit.

“Mom was Italian.” He told him while he seemed to reminisce. Steve only squeezed his hand and led them forward.

The restaurant was nice and elegant. Expensive too, Steve added as he peered at the menu. The lights were dimmed, but they were a sultry, red hue and it painted their faces with crimson shadows and velvet, maroon contrasts. There were candles in the center of their table and Steve watched the wax drip slowly in its glass cage while the flame burned on top.

“Tell me about Peggy.” He blurted out while Tony was mid-bite. He watched the genius pause for a second before he finished putting the fork in his mouth. Tony chewed slowly and Steve wondered if he was trying to stall. “I’ve been meaning to ask you since the gala but… you never told me you knew her.”

Tony took a sip from his sparkling cider and he didn’t meet his eyes. Steve kept waiting, letting the food on his plate go cold. “She and Howard were pretty good friends. I’m Howard’s son. It’s pretty easy to make the connection from there.” He said this nonchalantly, with joking undertones.

“How was she like… with you? You grew up with her around, right?” Steve stared as Tony looked up towards the ceiling and leaned back in his seat, a fond smile plastered on his face.

“She was like… a second mom? No, that’s not right. She was actually more of like a best friend. She was badass and powerful and smart and kind and amazing. She would tell me stories about Captain
America and his pal Bucky Barnes and about The Howling Commandos. All the adventures you had. She would teach me things and bring me gifts after she’d been away for a long time. She would play games with me. I loved her so much.” He bit his lip and sighed. “It kind of hurt though, when she called me Howard towards the end. She wouldn’t all the time but when she did, she would ask about me as if I was still a five year old kid who got pushed down at school because he was way too small to be in upper elementary school.” He laughed and Steve saw the tears glistening in his eyes. “She would ask about you. Every single day. Part of me was jealous that she remembered you despite her dementia and Alzheimer’s but not me. But then the other part of me would feel sorry for her because—because she lost you and... she loved you. She loved you a lot, Steve. You made that lasting impression on her and I thought that was the most wonderful, magical thing in the entire world. Still do.” He gave a shuddering sigh and Steve reached forward to cover his hand with his own. “I miss her.” He looked back towards Steve. “You do too. That’s why you’re asking me about her, aren’t you?” He said this gently and Steve kept his gaze on the candle wax.

“It’s nice to know that I still have a part of her… with you. That you got to spend your life with her and now I get to spend my life with you. So even though she’s not here anymore, she’s still—you know--with us.” Steve smiled softly and Tony smiled back, even if it was a little sadder.

“That’s a nice thought.”

Something small was nagging at the super soldier. It was something he hoped wasn’t as bad as he thought it was and yet, it had been bothering him ever since the gala. “Tony--?” He started. The genius hummed as he took another bite of his food. “When Peggy passed… did anyone… did anyone tell you?”

Tony paused, then shook his head. Steve’s heart broke a little. “No, Ross had my hands tied around that time and everyone was busy, so… I still visit her in London every now and then. Pay my respects and talk to her a bit. When I did find out, I had a monument set up for her near the Stark plot at the cemetery here in New York. Put a plaque in her memory in my office at the Tower and another one at the Compound. Anything to make up for being such a godawful godson… Jesus.” He covered his face in his hands and groaned.

“Hey,” Steve soothed. “None of this was your fault. Okay? Peggy was proud of you. She would have wanted you to be smiling right now instead of giving yourself a headache over something that you can’t change. You loved her and she knew that. That’s all that matters.”

“I should have been a pallbearer.” Tony whispered. “Couldn’t even do that for her.” He laughed wryly. “How could I? I wasn’t even invited to the funeral.”

Steve kissed his knuckles, one by one, tenderly. “I’m sorry that happened to you.” He said in between kisses. “I’m sorry for bringing it up.”

“They finished their dinner and set out for a walk along the streets of New York, eventually finding their way to the Hudson pier. There, they leaned over the railing, watching the lights of New Jersey on the other side.

At one point, Steve lifted Tony’s sleeve to reveal the tattoo so that he could trace over the bold lines. He went over ‘victory’ several times before finally resting on the semicolon. “This is us.” He whispered.

Steve thought Tony belonged to the stars.
While they were waiting for Happy to come and pick them up, Tony suddenly turned towards him and pulled Steve in for another searing kiss. The super soldier rested his hands on the genius’ waist. When Tony pushed his hands down so that they were cupping his behind, Steve stopped and raised them back up again.

“What, Steve?” Tony demanded, a little breathless from the kiss.

“Are you sure you want to… I mean, I don’t think it’s right to do anything until you’re ready—”

“Steve.” Tony looked him dead in the eyes, took his hands once more and slid them down his body until they were back on his behind. “I want this and I want you. And your hands are on my ass because I want them there.” He lifted himself up on his toes to breathe into Steve’s ear. “I want you to touch me tonight, Steve Rogers.”

The super soldier shuddered as goosebumps lined his body. He couldn’t help but grip Tony’s ass tightly in an effort to ground himself. The genius gasped and covered the space between their lower bodies. He rolled his hips and Steve grit his teeth to prevent himself from moaning.

They sprang apart at the sound of a car horn and they spun around to see Happy pulling up with the window rolled down, a shit-eating grin on his face. “Alright, lovebirds. Jig’s up. Just don’t make a mess in the backseat.”

As soon as the door closed behind them (the divider was already up), Tony pounced. They ended up in the same position they had been in on the way to the restaurant, with Tony straddling him, except this time, Steve did not restrain himself, though he stayed gentle.

He let his hands run all over Tony’s body. He dragged his fingers up the man’s thigh, played with the buttons on his shirt and tangled his fingers in Tony’s hair. He pressed passionate kisses all over the genius’ neck, making sure to leave marks. Their tongues danced against each other and the heat escalated and escalated.

When Happy pulled up in the parking garage of the Tower, they ran like two teenagers in love, holding hands and giggling. Tony led the way and they resumed in the elevator where the super soldier quickly pinned Tony against the wall and licked and sucked at his skin.

“Wait.” Tony said breathlessly and Steve immediately pulled back, heart pounding in his chest for a different reason now. But his breath caught in his throat when he saw Tony pull out a small bottle of lube from his pocket. “I came prepared.” Tony drawled, licking his lips and throwing the bottle to Steve.

He promptly caught it and without another word, slathered it all over his fingers. “Of course you did.” He was on top of Tony again, pressing him against the elevator wall, only this time, his slick fingers slipped past the hem of Tony’s unbuttoned pants and his boxers. He cupped his groin and Tony gasped, trailing into a moan. Steve growled against Tony’s neck, one hand pulling at his hair while the other traveled further down before teasing at Tony’s hole.

With his other arm, he hoisted the genius up and let him wrap his legs around his waist. They jolted up and down together, their bodies in sync as Steve pumped his fingers in and out of Tony. The brunette moaned, slowly going high-pitched as Steve spread his digits inside of him, stretching and scissoring him. He massaged his prostate, causing Tony to inhale sharply, his eyes closed and his mouth shaped like an ‘O.’ The super soldier covered that gaping mouth with his own and swallowed every moan and cry which escaped his lover as he worked his fingers expertly.

It seemed like forever until they reached their bedroom and they left a trail of clothes to the bed.
Steve removed his fingers from inside Tony and shucked off his own blazer, (not before taking the condom out, of course), shirt, pants, and boxers, leaving him completely naked with his erection completely exposed to the cool air.

Tony, who was also naked now, focused his gaze on Steve’s long and thick length. His throat rippled.

The genius’ hair was mussed and his face was flushed. He was sweaty and a mess, but he sat, perched on the bed spread wide open just for him and that thought alone was enough to make him find his way to the smaller man and take his length in his hand.

But he was pushed away roughly and Steve nearly blubbered, a frantic apology dying on his lips as he looked up and met Tony’s hungry gaze. “Don’t touch me.” He purred, lowering Steve on his back onto the mattress. He reached out to take the condom from the soldier’s hand before ripping the package with his teeth and slipping the latex onto Steve’s length. He straddled the blonde once more, but he sat right in front of the super soldier’s at attention dick.

The arc reactor scar was visible now that they were so close and so naked. With one hand, he attempted to grope Tony’s ass while he tried to touch his lover’s sternum with the other.


“But you asked me to on the pier, remember? What kind of a genius are you?”

“You got your turn, soldier. Now,” Tony lifted himself up on his knees, took Steve’s length in his hand, before lowering his body down onto it torturously slow. The brunette threw his head back in ecstasy and moaned as he went all the way. “Now it’s my turn.” He gasped, still adjusting to Steve’s length inside of him. The blonde grunted along with him and submitted to Tony’s power.

His hands itched to touch his lover. From his erect length to his tight stomach to his false sternum to his curving back to his plump and perfectly round ass.

Tony braced himself on the headboard with both arms. Steve wasn’t prepared the first time Tony got up on his knees and lowered himself down again. It was done so agonizingly slow, yet both of them cried out simultaneously.

He went at a relatively slow pace and Steve bucked his hips for more. He needed the friction. He needed the speed. He needed to feel hot and sweaty and messy and he wanted to have Tony’s body writhing beneath him. Undone and desperate.

Not that he minded these reversed roles.

He rolled his hips along with Tony as he lifted up and down on his knees, gasping and panting with pleasure each time he lowered back down. To Steve, Tony looked absolutely beautiful. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back, lips parted, and his body moved up and down in a fluid motion upon him. He loved the little whimpers and whines which escaped past those kiss-swollen, pink lips and those strong thighs which flexed every time Tony heaved his body up.

“I love you, Tony.” Steve found himself saying. The brunette sped up at that, pushing against the headboard harder and harder every time. The bed creaked and danced with their thrusts. “I love you, Tony.” Steve said louder, grunting as Tony practically jumped on his length.

“Take me, Steve.” He moaned and Steve gripped his hips to steady him. Tony let him. “Take me.”
Steve got the message and with a swift movement, he flipped them over, his length still buried inside Tony.

The genius lifted his hips and wrapped his legs around the super soldier’s body as Steve began to plunge in and out of Tony rapidly. He savored every cry and moan and groan and incoherent babbling spilling out of Tony’s mouth.

The brunette’s own erection stood up against his abdomen and Steve felt it throbbing with need every time his own abs collided with its head. So he reached down and took his lover in his hand while he braced the headboard with the other. He pumped Tony’s length, producing more whimpers and whines.

His dream came into mind. The words he had wanted to ask still waited on the tip of his tongue. “Are you ready for my dark side now?” He breathed in Tony’s ear and grunted as he thrust into him harder so that he could hit the brunette’s prostate every single time. Tony, lost in passionate euphoria, didn’t answer, but panted loudly at Steve’s thrusts. So the super soldier buried his face in the smaller man’s shoulder and bit down, nipping his skin and then licking it to assuage the small hurt.

Tony arched his back and moaned, high-pitched and lusty as he climaxed. Steve growled and repeated his question more adamantly this time. “Are you ready for my dark side now?”

With one final thrust, Steve got his answer. “Ye--yes. Yes. YES.”

With that, Tony came with a slow exhale, his spend shooting onto Steve’s hand while Steve spilled into the condom.

The super soldier--now exhausted, yet satisfied--brought his soaked fingers back up to taste them, one by one, taking in the sweetness and the bitterness and everything that came with it. He tasted Tony and decided that he could never taste anything quite so perfect anywhere else. “Taste yourself.” He murmured to Tony, who was looking up at him with those large doe eyes and a small smirk.

“Never thought I would hear those two words come out of your mouth, but okay, Captain All that is Pure and Right.” So Tony accepted the fingers he offered and sucked on them while he also licked up every drop of himself. “Mmm,” He let go with a distinct ‘pop,’ “better than ice cream.”

Steve brought his other hand down from the headboard and propped himself up on his elbows. He cupped Tony’s face and kissed him, making sure the other man felt exactly what it was he was feeling because Steve wasn’t sure if there were enough words to describe it. “I love you.”

Tony smiled against his lips. “I love you too.”

Steve rolled onto the side of the bed, off of Tony, and let him sidle up closer to him so he could rest his head on Steve’s bicep.

They spent some time in comfortable silence as they basked in the post-coital bliss. Tony drew lazy strokes on Steve’s chest.

“I’m not actually that sleepy. Are you?” The blonde asked after several minutes.

“Not really, no.” Tony answered, lifting his head to look at the clock. “It’s not even midnight yet.”

Steve thought for a moment before his sketchbook, which he had left on the nightstand table, caught his eye. “Do you wanna be my muse for the next couple of hours?”
Tony sat up to look at him, an incredulous, yet amused look on his face. But then, he smirked. “You want to draw me like one of your French girls, Steve?”

“I understood that reference!” He said a bit too excitedly as he recalled the movie called Titanic, which Natasha had forced him to watch and then everyone else had slowly trickled in to watch too.

The brunette chuckled, scrunching his nose up adorably while also resting a hand underneath his chin. “You’re so cute.” He sighed.

“You should see yourself.” Steve flirted back. He grabbed his sketchbook and his set of pencils from the drawer. He lingered on the box which sat there also.

Tony quickly snatched the sketchbook from Steve’s lap and flipped through it. He gasped quietly as he saw sketch after sketch of… of him. There was Tony working in the lab and another one where he was sleeping and another one where he was walking down the disassembly line and another one of him just standing and smiling. There were so many others. So many moments Steve had taken and imprinted on paper.

The brunette slowly looked up at him, affection twinkling in those large eyes.

“You drew all of these?” He asked, voice as quiet as a whisper.

Steve nodded. “You like them?”

“Do I like--Steve, these are… beautiful. I just-- wow.” He flipped through the pages again. “Wow.” He repeated.

Looking at him now as he sat there naked, eyes wide and a large smile decorating his face, Steve decided that there could be no other decorated, perfectly planned out moment more right than this. This was it. This was perfect.

So he picked up the velvet box in his drawer and hid it in his palm.

“Hey Tony?” He asked, heart pounding in his chest. Tony hummed in response, still distracted by the drawings. “Tony?” He asked again and this time, he looked up. “Do you remember when Rose asked Jack to draw her, she said she wanted him to draw her with that necklace on and only that necklace on?”

“Yeah… where you going with this?” Tony chuckled as he rotated his whole body towards Steve.

“I was hoping, since you’re going to be my muse and all, that you could do something like that too?” He was aware of how dry his voice had gotten. But he was so close now, so close.

“Sure. I mean, I’m already naked and I can see if I have a necklace lying around somewhere. Maybe Pepper left something in the closet we could use--”

“No, Tony.” Steve said gently and exhaled as slow as possible. He opened his palm, presenting the velvet box. He swore Tony stopped breathing when his eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open a little. Steve got out of the bed, circled around so that he was closer to Tony, and got down on one knee. He opened the box. The ring looked more beautiful than before. “With this, maybe?”

There was dead silence. “Did you just--?”

“Yeah.”
“--propose to me--?”

“Yup.”

“--using Titanic references?”

“Right on all counts.”

“Steve--”

“Tony, will you marry me?”

Silence again.

“Yes.” It was barely a whisper, but Steve heard it anyway. There was no other person in the world who could be as grateful, as content, as elated as he was right in that moment. “Oh my God, holy fucking shit, yes.” Tony repeated with tears in his eyes now.

Steve got up to kiss him, slow and sweet and absolutely perfect. He slid the ring on Tony’s finger and wiped the tears from the genius’ eyes. “Shh, come one. I can’t have a crying muse, you’ll ruin the whole picture.”

Tony chuckled and sniffed before he buried his face in Steve’s chest.

“After everything, this is… this is a gift. You’re a gift in my life, Steve. I love you. God, I love you so much.”

“And you are a treasure in my life.” Steve murmured in Tony’s hair. They stayed like that, folded into each other, before Steve finally said, “Okay, enough crying. I want to draw you now.”

Tony pulled away, cheeks rosy and eyes red but a beaming smile on his face. “Okay, you dork.”

Steve grabbed the nearby, leather couch and dragged it to the center of the bedroom. “Lie down.” He ordered. Tony obliged.

Steve sat back on the bed and studied Tony, who was lying completely and utterly still. He thought for a few seconds, chewing on the end of his pencil.

“Lie on your side, facing me. Fold your right arm under your head and leave your left one hanging a little. I want to see that ring.”

“Aye aye, Captain.” Tony giggled.

“Keep your lower body straight, arch your back a little and lift your right leg so that your groin is covered.”

“Why, Steve? Is it too graphic for you to draw?” Tony asked innocently, batting his eyelashes.

He rolled his eyes. Fine. If he wanted to be that way. “Then turn your hips towards me and fold your right leg back a little. Now we have a clear view of everything.” Steve smirked as Tony followed his directions.

He looked so beautiful.

“Like this?”
Steve had already begun to draw. “Perfect.” He said.

He sketched every curve of his body, every crevice of his face, every imperfection, and every hollow, nook, and cranny. He highlighted and bolded every arch and chisel and shaded every soft and hard part of his form. He scanned his picture every couple of minutes, checking to see if he had everything. Because damn it all if he didn’t want to sketch every part of Tony, every inch of him down onto paper.

He spent the most time on his eyes. He wanted to get the shape, the luster, the twinkle exactly right.

And then came the ring. He drew that last because it was the last moment they had had together before he had begun drawing. It was the moment which opened the door for several other moments in their lives. Whether they be sad or angry or happy or just plain boring, they were going to be moments Steve was going to share with Tony.

And that was all that mattered.

When Steve finished, Tony had fallen asleep, still lying in the same position. He closed his sketchbook and went up to his now fiancee before scooping him up and putting him down on the bed gently. He went back around and spooned his lover’s body, holding on tight and never wanting to let go.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.diamondmansion.com/media/catalog/design/R3072-R1/colorless/rose/round/resized/420x420_1418844020-R3072-R1-rd-ar.jpg

One more part left! Please remember: CHARACTER BASHING IS NOT TOLERATED

Also... I really do not mean to sound petty or anything, trust me I am not that type of person and I never want to be. It's just that I work really hard on each and every one of these chapters and I take a lot of time out of my busy life to make them as good as possible so that you guys can enjoy. Again, I do not mean to sound really childish and attention seeking, but it would make my day if you guys commented more than just 5 or 6 per chapter because like I said, it takes a lot of time and effort to write these and to write them as fast as I can amongst schoolwork and other things. So please, please, please leave a comment or kudos because it does get a little discouraging when I see that nobody seems to be reading or enjoying the chapter as much as I thought people would.

And for those of you who are kind enough to give me feedback or your opinions, Thank you :) Because they truly are encouraging and they do make me the tiniest bit more motivated as a writer in general.

I didn’t mean to sound so petty. I appreciate all my readers so much. Thanks for sticking
around this long
Tony cracked his eyes open slowly. The golden rays from the sunlight peeking in through the curtains shrouded the room in a soft, warm hue. For the first time in a long time, there was no underlying, prickling anxiety burdening him. He didn’t feel like he was going to die.

No, he felt calm. Soothed. There was a beautiful stillness in the air, a steady, rhythmic aura which made him feel like he was bathing in honey.

The ring on his finger glimmered in the sunlight. He couldn’t help but wonder if all of it was real, if it all wasn’t just a dream or a joke the universe was showing him just to fuck with him.

Steve nuzzled his neck as the arm he had thrown over Tony’s small frame pulled the genius closer to the soldier’s chest. Tony moaned in contentment, letting his eyes fall closed as Steve pressed kisses on his shoulder blades and neck.

It was all real.

“Good morning husband-to be.” The blonde turned brunette murmured against tan skin.

Tony smiled softly, his eyes still closed as he breathed in the moment and let the sensation of pure, gentle calm flood his veins. He intertwined his fingers with those of Steve’s and held his hand close to his scarred chest.

A soft kiss pressed against his cheek. Tony shifted his body so that he could meet those pink lips with his own. “Happy Birthday, sweetheart.” The whisper fluttered against his mouth as Tony opened his eyes once more to gaze into the color of the ocean.

It was his birthday.

He had survived.

After so much hell, he had survived.
And now he was lying in bed with the man he loved, a man who loved him back and put a ring on his finger just the night before, sealing everything Tony had never thought he would have ever wanted.

All was right with the world.

It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t anything he had ever expected. But it was right. He knew deep down that it was.

“Steve…” Tony breathed, a little wistful. He shifted onto his back, the silk sheets caressing his naked skin, and allowed the soldier to position himself over his own body. Steve propped his upper body up on his elbows and smiled down at the doe-eyed man beneath him. Tony smiled back, letting the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes fill in the gaps on his face. “I made it.”

“Damn right you did.” They took a moment to simply smile at each other and bask in the small rays of sunlight that slowly streamed in, illuminating both their faces.

“You know the one place I wish I was right now?” Tony asked, running a hand up Steve’s smooth, broad back.

“Where?”

“Malibu.” Tony thought of his warm California home, the round and full structure, his mother’s piano in the middle, the everlasting, gentle lapping of the waves. “I miss the ocean and the sand and watching the sunset go down against the horizon. All those things.” He realized he sounded wistful, so he flicked his eyes back over toward Steve, who was watching him with adoration. “Waking up there doesn’t compare to waking up with you, though.”

“I love you.” Steve whispered before leaning in and kissing Tony deeply.

Tony moaned into Steve’s mouth, relishing the taste. He dragged his hand up the soldier’s legs, lingered on his behind, and trailed up the strong back before digging his nails into the smooth skin. Steve began to roll his hips, creating friction between their cocks. Tony whimpered at the sensation and Steve grunted.

They spent several minutes like that, tasting each other under the warmth of the sunlight streaming in through the windows. They basked in the warmth of their bodies and with the comfort of the idea that whatever happened next, the both of them would be alright.

*Like the old man said. Together.*

When Tony gently pushed Steve away, the soldier began to apologize profusely, flushed red and flustered from thinking that he had done anything to hurt Tony.

But the genius laughed, a sprout of warmth blooming in his stomach when he saw just how much Steve cared. “Don’t worry, stud. Everything’s fine. I just want to clean up a bit first, yeah?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Steve responded after a second, a little breathless. Tony admired the man’s silhouette against the golden rays sneaking past the curtain. “Of course. I’ll wait for you.”

He pressed another small kiss onto Steve’s smiling lips before wriggling off the bed and moving towards the bathroom. Goosebumps lined his skin as the cool air chilled his naked body.

Tony stopped for a second at the threshold and looked over his shoulder. He smirked when he caught the great Captain admiring the view that was Tony’s ass on display. “Like what you see?” He
purred, twisting his body a little so he could see Steve better.

The Captain flushed before giving a little smirk of his own. His eyes twinkled mischievously. “Just being appreciative.” He said, voice deep, grating, and lust-drenched. “Gotta celebrate a fella on his birthday, right?”

Tony inhaled sharply as the warmth in his stomach became a searing desire. He felt his cock start to rise. His eyes fell upon the way Steve’s own cock stood at attention and rested against his toned abdomen. Meanwhile, Steve had his back leaning against the headboard and his legs spread with a smug look plastered all over his face. “This fella of yours must be lucky,” Tony whispered softly, staring wide-eyed as Steve stroked a hand up and down his length, “to be appreciated by a champ like you.”

Pre-come dribbled out of Steve’s head and Tony swallowed, throat dry, as his own cock twitched.

“You have no idea.” Steve growled, holding their intense stare.

There was a moment of silence where the small flame in Tony’s stomach became a plume. He only knew one thing: desire.

But the genius only offered a crooked smirk before tilting his hips side to side, knowing that he was giving Steve the show of his life. He crossed the threshold. Just before he closed the door and with his back still turned, Tony said, “I’ll let you know when this fella of yours is ready. You just sit tight now, mister.” He made a show of displaying the fact that the door was unlocked before shutting it behind him.

❖ ❖ ❖

When he heard a knock on the bathroom door about fifteen minutes later, the room was lit with several candles left from way back when Pepper and him were still together. Tony had filled the hot tub in the spacious, grandeur-esque bathroom to the brim. The sweet, supple scent of honey from the oils Steve had brought from Wakanda wafted through the air. Tony’s entire body was slick from it and the water had plenty of it as well.

He had had to wrap both hands around the base of his hard cock several times so that he could last.

“Is my fella ready yet?” He heard from the other side. Tony could hear the lust dripping from the soldier’s words.

Tony eyed the hot tub. It was a sensitive topic. Those videos would never cease to haunt him.

He put the ring to his lips and closed his eyes.

That didn’t mean those videos had to control him. They hadn’t in the past. And they won’t in the present or the future.

He entered the water tentatively and moaned at the bubbling warmth. “You can come in now, stud.” Tony purred, sinking deeper into the scented water and lying down comfortably.

The door creaked open, the light from the outside streaming in and making a sliver of gold appear on the white tile. Once again, Tony admired the greek-god like silhouette of his fiancee against the dim hues.

Steve paused at the threshold, taking in the atmosphere. He tilted his head higher, as if smelling the air.
The sliver of gold melted away as Steve closed the door with a soft click. He walked into the flickering of the candles and Tony greeted his beau with a whisper of a smile.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for my fella.” Steve began, inching forward slowly, torturously. “It’s his birthday, you know? I gotta give him something extra special. You wouldn’t happen to know…” Steve sank down to his knees in front of the hot tub; the silence of his hesitation was filled by the bubbling of the frothy, foaming water, “...where he might be?”

There was a glimmer in those blue eyes, a lust Tony had never seen before. There was a darkness there that made Tony’s breath quicken.

“I would think,” Tony said just as slowly, voice just as gravelly, “that your fella is right where he wants to be.”

Steve reached for Tony’s left hand and took it in his own before lifting it out of the water. The ring rested there comfortably, the silver and rose-gold twinkling in the candlelight. Steve kissed that ring delicately, his lips fluttering and warm.

He met Tony’s adoring gaze. “I would think so too.” He whispered.

Tony peeked over the hot tub. “That looks like it hurts.” He commented, pointing out the throbbing, purple head of Steve’s cock. “C’mere. Let me take care of you.” He stuck out his hand, which was dripping wet and slick with oil, and reached forward so he could wrap his fingers around Steve.

But his hand didn’t complete the journey because the soldier stopped it and directed it back into the water. “It’s okay. I want to take care of my fella. It is his birthday after all and I kinda gave him his gift a bit too early, so I want to appreciate…” Steve’s fingers traced the arc reactor scar before dragging downwards to massage Tony’s nipples, prompting a soft moan, “...savor…” the fingers went further down, sliding against the slickness, “...cherish…” Steve stroked lazy circles around Tony’s navel before applying pressure on his groin; a small whimper escaped past Tony’s lips, “...and love him today with everything I have. So let me do something for him…” those fingers dipped beneath the water, kneaded against Tony’s balls and stroked his length before rubbing the leaking tip and flicking the slit, “...so that he can have all the pleasure in the world. Because that is what he deserves, along with all the happiness,” Steve’s lips met his and Tony arched his back to lean into the kiss, “and all the love this universe has to offer.”

The soldier’s hand snaked upwards, tracing all the way up Tony’s body, to cup his face as the kiss deepened and their tongues danced. Steve sucked at Tony’s bottom lip and Tony gently bit his. “I love you.” Tony gasped in between each kiss. “I love you.”

“You’re so beautiful, sweetheart.” Steve breathed, pulling away and cupping Tony’s face with his hands. Tony almost whimpered from the loss of contact.

But Steve found the oil Tony had used to slick himself with and slathered the liquid all over his digits. Tony spread his legs so that his knees stuck out of the water. He was ready, he was wet, and he wanted… God, he wanted Steve to open him up and fill him. He wanted…

“Oh…” Tony moaned delicately when Steve massaged his perineum in slow circles. He arched his back, his lips parted and eyes closed. He gripped Steve’s bicep and squeezed harder, gasping, when those fingers pressed down and stimulated his prostate. A high-pitched whine escaped him as the pads of Steve’s finger continued its pattern, except this time, there was more pressure with each circular stroke, sending waves of pleasure up Tony’s spine.

The fingers dragged downwards and pressed on his entrance. Tony relaxed his body with a slow
exhale and opened his eyes to meet Steve’s just as the first finger slipped inside. He let that finger push in and out of him for a few seconds before he began to rock his body rhythmically and languidly, letting himself be fucked deeper.

His cock throbbed with a hot ache. He was so wet at the tip, warm, loose, and leaking. The steaming water gushed from all around his sides, consuming his tingling skin.

Steve added another finger. “Ahh… oh…” Tony moaned again, relishing in the burning stretch of his velvet. He gripped the sides of the tub when those fingers found his prostate and began to rub it. He mewled long and slow, his eyes closing.

Tony reached down with his own hand to wrap around his length. He was so slick and slippery as he stroked up and down, precome dribbling out of his head and fading into the water.

But his hand was gently guided away by Steve’s free one and Tony opened his eyes. “Come from my fingers, darling. I want to make you feel good on your birthday.”

Tony felt the two fingers inside him stretch his velvet walls and he arched his back. A third one joined and found his prostate once more. The pleasure flooded his veins and flowed right to his dick.

He began panting as he spread his legs as wide as he could so that he could rock back and forth on those fingers, letting them knead at his prostate every time.

Steve leaned in, draping his upper body on top of the sides of the hot tub and wrapping a strong arm around Tony’s shoulders. He bent the elbow of the arm he was using to finger Tony and slowly began to thrust harder. Those thrusts became faster and deeper and Tony whimpered and moaned louder and louder each time those fingers slammed into the right spot.

“I love those little sounds you make, sweetheart.” Steve whispered against Tony’s lips before kissing them heatedly.

The plume of heat built up in his stomach and groin and he ached from the burn and the need inside of him and throughout his swollen cock.

“Fuck… Steve, I… oh… oh…”

Tony cried out and arched into Steve’s fingers, driving them deeper as he came. His vision whited out and he swore he saw stars.

The arm around his shoulders disappeared and distantly, he heard Steve grunt and growl.

When his senses returned, Tony looked over at his fiancee who was breathing heavily and smiling. “I kind of made a mess on the floor.” Steve said sheepishly, unable to hide his smug smirk.

Tony smiled, laughing softly. “C’mere tiger. There’s plenty of room.”

He slid over to make room for the soldier who sank into the water slowly. Tony stood up on his feet in the tub and wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck, reaching up on his tippy-toes to catch his lips. Strong hands rested and kneaded at his round ass. Those hands traveled down his thighs and lifted him up smoothly so that he could wrap his legs around Steve’s waist.

Tony fell backwards leisurely so that his entire body groin up could float on his back.

He gasped when he felt a wet warmth engulf his length, coaxing it back to hardness once more.
Rhodey smiled at the text he had gotten from Steve several hours ago.

*Tony misses Malibu. Should we shift the surprise party there? Sorry for the late notice.*

He smiled even wider at the text he got immediately after.

*Also, he said yes.*

Rhodey had texted the super soldier back with a congratulations and a thumbs up emoji and immediately contacted Natasha and Pepper, who were now making arrangements to move everything cross country.

In the meantime, Rhodey was going to be the distraction.

He had been waiting for about an hour for his friend to come down. Tony was known for being forgetful, but this was a whole new level of stupidity.

“FRIDAY where the hell is Tony? Is he aware that he’s late for his birthday lunch with me? It’s a damn tradition.”

Rhodey flicked his wrist upwards yet again to check the time before crossing his arms and tapping his foot rapidly.

“The Boss and the Captain are currently attending to affairs and will be with you shortly.” If FRIDAY could smirk, Rhodey figured that was what she would sound like.

“Attending to affairs my ass. They missed breakfast and… oh.” Rhodey raised an eyebrow, amused, as the couple stepped out of the elevator. They were both dressed, but their faces were flushed and their hair was tousled.

Also, Rhodey has known Tony long enough to recognize what his post-coital glow looked like.

Rhodey leaned back and enjoyed the show as Steve lifted Tony up, spun him around, and kissed him. The couple exchanged a few words, kissed again, and finally parted.

“You smell like sex.” Rhodey deadpanned as his friend opened the driver’s door. He chuckled as Tony flushed and quickly clambered inside.

“So what if I do? At this point in my life, you should be proud of me for wanting to do the deed, right?”

Rhodey laughed and ignored the sadness of the past that was implied behind the words. “I’m proud of you, period.”

Tony smiled softly at that and for Rhodey, who had seen his best friend overcome trauma after trauma, that was enough to know that everything was going to be okay.

The pair drove to their favorite restaurant downtown. It was a small place, but the owner had gotten to know them well after the two had returned routinely. And Tony wasn’t exactly subtle with tips either, but the kind, old lady who made them lunch was always grateful, not greedy.

It felt almost normal, as if nothing had changed and it was just the two of them, and there was no such thing as the Avengers or Ironman or War Machine. Life felt complete in the way that only normalcy and domesticity could bring to a person.
Rhodey sipped from a beer while Tony wrapped his hand around a glass of sparkling cider. The ring caught in the light. The Colonel had glanced in its way several times with a knowing grin, but hadn’t said anything to his friend. He was a little buzzed, so he knew that he would blame his big mouth on the alcohol later.

“I spy with my little eye…” he began teasingly as Tony raised an eyebrow, “a shiny ring on my best friend’s finger.”

Tony’s eyes twinkled as he let go of the glass to press the band to his lips.

“Did the good Captain finally pop the question?”

There was a tiny period of silence where the two seemed to communicate everything that needed to be said with their eyes.

“You can’t tell anyone yet.” Tony blurted out as Rhodey’s lips spread into a wide grin.

“Someone better prepare himself for the biggest shovel talk of his life.” The Colonel barked a laugh and took a swig from his bottle as his friend rolled his eyes and blushed a little.

“Don’t scare off my fiancé just yet. He just put the ring on my finger.”

“Gotta hand it to Rogers. He was going to propose today actually.”

“Yeah, well. Early’s better than never.”

“Hey.” Rhodey set his empty bottle down and leaned forward on the table a little. “You deserve this. You both deserve each other. Alright? Now shut up and be happy about it so I can be happy for you.”

Tony smiled and leaned back in his booth, closing his eyes a little in what Rhodey prayed was contentment. “I never thought that I would get a second chance,” he started after a few seconds of comfortable silence, “you know, back when I tried to… off myself.”

The dessert came right then, but Rhodey held his friend’s gaze even when Tony looked up to thank the waiter.

“You gave yourself a second chance, Tones.” Tony spooned a little bit of the ice cream into his mouth, his gaze lowered, as Rhodey said this. “Hey Tony?” The Colonel placed his hand over his friend’s instinctively. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

Tony put his uncovered hand over Rhodey’s. When he looked up, his eyes were the tiniest bit watery. He gave a small smile irregardless. “So am I.”

Part of Natasha wanted to laugh hysterically because the entire birthday party planned for one Tony Stark was uprooted and moved across the country in a matter of however long it took for one Steve Rogers to realize that his lover missed Malibu, and part of her wanted to lock herself in her room and scan through database after database so that she could find any sign of the raven haired woman who left her a promise.

There was no way to contact her, there was no way to even see her. So for nearly a year, she was left in the dark, not going a single day without thinking does she still remember me the way I remember her?
Bucky kept her company. It was often him who helped her return to reality after she blanked out, lost in thought. These type of things didn’t happen to Natasha Romanoff, but she only had love to blame for this bullshit.

Stupid, stupid love.

Now they were all on the Malibu coastline, near where Tony’s old mansion used to be, and Natasha was far away from her laptop. Her phone sat heavy in her pocket, begging to be picked up so that she could dive down that hole once more of searching and praying and ultimately, finding absolutely nothing.

Her highly trained senses discerned Bucky’s movement towards her even though his footsteps were silent in the warm sand. She looked up to the glint of the silver arm under the pleasant sunlight.

“Hey.” He said genially, settling down next to her on her sand dune. She hummed in response.

“What’s on your mind, Natalia?” He pressed. Of course he did. He was never one to leave her alone when she wanted to be alone. She didn’t know whether to be grateful or annoyed for that.

Most of the time, she was grateful.

Natasha sighed, rubbed her hands over her knees, and watched Steve as he checked over everything once more with a slight twitch of her lips.

“Nothing, I…” She began before biting her lip. None of this was so hard before her. She was never this weak or this… vulnerable.

“You know you can’t lie to me. You’re not the only highly trained assassin in this circus.” She chuckled when Bucky said that, and then rested her head on his firm shoulder. That was one of the things she loved about James: he was constant. He never changed, never left, and never made her feel like a fool. He was the anchor she never knew she needed. “Tell me, Natalia.”

Bucky wrapped his metal arm around her and Natasha snuggled closer to him. “It’s just… something I’ve lost.” She bit her lip again to stave off the emotions. Those damn emotions. “I can’t find it and it’s… driving me nuts.”

Natasha tried to smile when she saw Clint tackle his older son into the water and tickle him, but the underlying question of what if kept creeping into her mind. It was a prison she couldn’t escape.

“This thing of yours… is it valuable?” He asked, placing his chin on her head.

“It’s priceless.” She murmured.

“Yeah, we always do lose the thing we value the most. Life is strange that way.” Natasha stayed silent. “But then again, we always find it again in the weirdest of places.”

“Trust me,” she sighed, “I’m looking in every nook and cranny I possibly can.”

“I think,” Bucky pulled away to look at her, “you should stop trying so hard to find it and just let it come to you.”

Natasha grinned. Of course he knew. He always knew.

“Come on, Natalia.” He grunted as he pulled her up. “Tony’s here.” Bucky jerked his head towards a car that parked in the distance. Four figures came out of the convertible who Natasha instantly recognized as Pepper, Happy, Rhodey, and Tony himself.
“Are we… are we at the beach?” Tony asked, a touch of incredulousness in his voice.

“Shut up and walk so you can find out.” Pepper guided her former boss down the sand. He was blindfolded on the plane ride to Malibu and they touched down at the airport right on time. It was just luck that Happy was able to get them down to the beach right before sunset.

It was surreal to her, just how far they had all gotten.

Tony had shown her the ring and had told her how Steve had proposed. She had laughed and hugged him tightly.

The pang in her gut that she felt was not one of jealousy. It was one of pride. When she saw the rose gold band on her best friend’s finger, she wasn’t reminded of what could have been, she was reminded of Tony’s survival. She knew she could never be for Tony what Steve was for him. And that was okay.

That was okay.

Because Tony was happy and alive to see another year of his life.

At one point in her life, he was all she had. Tony Stark was a man she was never going to let go of because Tony never let go of her. If nothing else in her life was eternal, she knew that the bond she had with Tony--the flamboyant, confident, brash man who became a hero--was.

Pepper pressed a quick kiss to Tony’s cheek as they all stopped in front of the small group of heroes. Steve walked forward from the circle and she nodded at the man before letting go of Tony’s shoulders.

“No guys are the worst. You made me suffer through a damn plane ride on my birthday and now you won’t even tell me anything. I swear if I miss my mind blowing birthday sex, I will write you all out of my will. That’s not even a joke-- mmf!”

Pepper stifled a laugh as Steve leaned in and silenced his fiance with a kiss. There were whistles and whoops from the others as Tony stiffened in surprise before relaxing and bringing his hands up to wrap around Steve’s neck.

Steve untied the blindfold and let it fall. Tony’s brown, doe eyes blinked open slowly, taking in the scene before him.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart.” The super soldier whispered against the genius’ lips.

Pepper joined in with whooping and clapping of her own when Tony gasped a little, entranced in awe, before he kissed Steve again.

It was after they all cut the cake, sang, and gave out presents did Steve and Tony share the news of their engagement to the rest. There were cheers, toasts, hugs, and maybe even a tear or two was shed, but Steve didn’t really care to remember too much.

He stole Tony away as soon as he could and dragged him down to the water, where the two walked along the shoreline lazily as the sun dove down into the Pacific against hues of brilliant reds, warm yellows and oranges, and cool blues and purples where the sky was settling into the steady black of the night. They walked hand in hand with Tony closest to the water.
The foaming blankets of sea green eddied and lapped at their feet. And despite Steve’s one hundred years of age and Tony’s near fifty, the two chuckled and giggled and shrieked like children everytime the mixture of water and sand washed over them.

Tony’s eyes were always the most vibrant thing about him, even more so than his personality. Steve knew the chocolate brown orbs by heart. He considered himself lucky that he was the one who got to see how they twinkled in the morning. But nothing compared to how luminous they were now, how alive and awake.

They both grew silent as the sun dipped lower and their footsteps became lazier and slower.

There was a fluttery, warm feeling in Steve’s stomach everytime he looked at Tony. The best way to describe it was… well--it felt like sweet honey was churning inside of him. He knew it sounded stupid, cheesy and cliche even, but considering everything life had thrown his way for the past decade, he figured he was allowed to be as cliche as he wanted to be.

He found Tony, the son of a man he thought he knew, and fell in love with him.

He found Bucky, his childhood friend, his brother, and brought him home.

He found a family of heroes and misfits, a group of people who accepted him and gave him a life that wasn’t perfect, but everything he had ever wanted.

He found a second chance, and he embraced it.

The overwhelming, sweet feeling of honey welled up in Steve as he suddenly turned to face his lover, and pulled him to his chest. Steve wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist and lifted him slightly off the ground, burrying his face in Tony’s neck. “I love you.” He breathed against the tan skin.

“I love you too, big guy.” Tony whispered back as he wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and kissed his cheek.

Steve rocked their bodies side to side, letting the pleasant breeze sweep over them before he set Tony down.

They exchanged a smile and Steve caressed the tattoo on Tony’s arm. Tony moved to keep walking but Steve clutched his hand gently.

“Wait,” he said, and Tony did. “I, uh… I had another gift for you, actually.”

“Hon, you’ve already given me so much. You’re spoiling me.”

“And how the hell did I, Steve Rogers from Brooklyn, manage to spoil a billionaire in a span of two days?”

Tony laughed, deep and rich with his head thrown back and his eyes closed. “With happiness,” he said. The two words made the well of honey in Steve’s stomach surge and he found himself overwhelmed with an energy (that felt more of like a high). The genius yelped, surprised, as Steve lifted him again and spun him around swiftly.

“You’re happy?” Steve’s breath mingled with Tony’s as they nuzzled noses.

“I’m happy.”
Steve set him down gently once more and stuck his hand in his pocket, wrapping his hand around his one extra gift. “I just wanted you to have one more thing, sweetheart.” In a tight fist, he put his gift in Tony’s palm.

“Your dog tags?” Tony’s eyes went a little wide as he swiped a thumb over the letters imprinted on the cool metal. “You want me to have them.”

"I know we've been through alot together, you and I,” Steve began slowly, “but I've never thought that all of that would lead up to this moment with you right here, right now. Tony, I love you. Not just because you gave me a home in a world I was thrust into by accident, not just because you fight by my side as a hero, but because of the way you laugh and the way you smile and the way you get excited over little things and the way you're so generous and kind and beautiful and you make mistakes, but you do everything in your power to make up for them and you love with all of your heart fully and unconditionally and affectionately and purely.” He paused. “Anthony Edward Stark,” he clutched Tony’s hand, wrapping his fingers around the dog tags as well, “would you please do me the honor of taking my name?”

Tony stayed silent, mouth gaping a little. “You proposing to me again, stud?”

Steve chuckled and got down on one knee. “I guess you could say that.”


When Tony put the dog tags on without hesitation, the weight of the rectangular locket resting right in the spot where his arc reactor used to be, Steve was overwhelmed by the sensation of content--of knowing that Tony was his, completely and irrevocably.

For the first time since the 1940s, Steve Rogers forgot what it felt like to be alone.

Six Months Later

Tony squirmed as Natasha adjusted his bowtie one last time. She had been at it for the past twenty minutes and, though he appreciated her dedication and drive to be precise at all times, he had to admit that she was overdoing it by a smidge. And that was Tony Stark talking.

“Quit fidgeting, Stark.” She mumbled, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

“You’ve done this like fifty times already, Nat.” Tony whined, prompting a bemused eye roll and grin from the woman herself.

“Perfect.” Natasha stepped back, giving Tony a once over.

He wore a rich, maroon tuxedo and she wore an elegant dress of the same color. His hair stayed soft, fluffy, and untouched, a subtle request from Tony’s better half, while hers was curled and adorned with glittering crystals. It had been six months since Steve got down on one knee.

“You look beautiful, Tasha.” And she truly did.

The red head smiled and nodded, returning the same compliment. Tony could still see the hint of sadness behind her emerald eyes, the small longing she refused to let anyone see. The loneliness.

“You miss her, don’t you?”
She blinked before lowering her gaze. “Everyday.”

Tony was grateful. There was no other word for it. He was grateful for the family he was gifted after a lifetime of being alone. He was grateful for the man waiting for him at the altar. He was grateful--He was grateful for the woman who pulled his head out of his ass.

Tony knew how much Natasha cared for her and, admittedly, it startled him a little to see how much space Kaira took up in the, once emotionless, spy’s life.

It startled him a little to look back and see how much space she took up in his own.

“But,” Natasha began with a sigh, “she made me a promise… and I trust her.”

They locked eyes and shared a smile. “Sometimes happy endings take a while, right?” Tony said softly. “I would know.”

Natasha chuckled at that before pressing a kiss to his cheek and patting his shoulder. “Come on. Let’s walk you down the aisle now and get you hitched.”

Sensing that she was deflecting, Tony clutched her hand a bit tighter. “She’s going to come back, Tasha.”

“I know she will.” She said with an iron determination. “Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But she will. I’m willing to wait for that.”

Tony nodded before hooking his arm with hers and taking a deep breath.

“Are you ready?” Natasha breathed.

“I’m ready.”

❖ ❖ ❖

There were so many eyes on him. They were all turned around in their seats, looking right at him, waiting.

He felt his breath quicken and his chest tighten. Oh God, he was going to have an anxiety attack right in the middle of his wedding.

Fuck.

They’re all still staring, expecting him to… to… oh God, he couldn’t do this, he couldn’t, he--

“Hey.” He felt Natasha draw him closer and the warmth of her body brought him back. “Every single person here loves you.”

Tony took a deep breath, still frozen on the ground. In and out.

It was Steve who asked Tony if he would mind getting married in a church and Tony agreed. So there they were, in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, amongst the breathtaking stained glass and the beautiful gothic structures of the late 19th century. Majestic white pillars rose up into high, yawning ceilings. But nothing compared to the atmosphere of comfort, of security and content that the church and all its people exuded.

He saw Peter Parker with his aunt, friends, and Harley sitting in one pew. He smiled when the
teenager waved at him. The Barton family sat in the pew across from them and he chuckled a little tearily (Tears? When did he start crying?) when he heard Nathaniel babbling “Uncle Tony getting married to Uncle Steve!” Thor had come down as well about a month ago, and he too sat up front, sporting his new haircut, wearing a clean, form-fitting tuxedo. There was Rhodey, Pepper, and Happy and Sam and Bucky and Wanda and Vision and Bruce. Natasha was by his side and Steve… he stood at the altar, proud and tall in his World War II Army SSR uniform, which had been dug up recently by Agent Coulson. They were all there. His family.

Tony settled his eyes on Steve and focused on the way those radiant blue eyes shone, on his smile that always reminded Tony of what he had gained, while also reminding him of everything he lost, and on the tears in his eyes as well, the ones of happiness and gratitude which Tony now realized that he, himself, put those there.

He took a deep breath and remembered the past and how he’d overcome it.

He took a deep breath and remembered the people in his life and how he’d come to love them.

He took a deep breath and remembered his mother and Aunt Peggy and wished that they could see him from wherever they were.

He took one last deep breath and caught Steve’s gaze, his love, his life.

He stepped forward.

*Oscar Wilde once said* ‘we are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell.’ *But what he failed to realize was that we all have a choice. Yes, we can be our own devil, but we can also be our own saviors. We have the choice to make our world our heaven. We all have the choice to create our own angels.”*

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Chapter End Notes

For those of you who wanted Nat to get her girl at the end, I'm with you guys. But the reason I didn't include Kaira at the end of this work is because I feel that Kaira has done her job for the purposes of this story. I wanted to emphasize the revival of Tony and show how it was his choice to make a change towards the better, not because anyone saved him.

Thank you all for sticking around and I'll be back eventually with another fic. Happy New Year!

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End Notes

Please tell me what you think! Constructive criticism is welcome :)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!