Senseless
by Scavenge4Dreams

Summary

Blinded, deafened, exhausted, injured and afraid, Tony raised himself up into a defensive position, the knife coming up just like Nat had taught him.

“That had better fucking be you, Steve Rogers- it had better be you. Fucking disarm me. If you let me kill you, I swear I will be very, very pissed.” Tony snarled, sure it was Steve approaching. Had to be. Had. To. Be.

What if it wasn’t?

Notes

For Alicia - Who correctly guessed the challenge piece. This doesn't match your prompt exactly (the bunny mutated and then got away) - Hope you're still out there and that you enjoy :)

See the end of the work for more notes.
He rocked back and forth in place, the gentle motion bringing him into reassuring contact with the solid barrier behind him, where two walls met to form a weakly defined corner. Semi-roughness, sandstone perhaps, scraped against bare skin, but the resulting burn of flesh rubbed raw and bloody was ignored.

His eyes were tightly closed. It was better that way.

He hummed softly, the vibrations in his throat almost audible. He’d rather be talking (to himself), but couldn’t stand it.

It had been a week, perhaps.

No more, for all that it felt like months. Years.

Someone would come for him soon.

Either a rescue or…

Although to be fair, he was sure that what was going on now was already classified as torture.

What was the technical term again?

He couldn’t remember.

Or at least, he couldn’t risk thinking clearly long enough to let reality sink back in. Better to float in a haze of daydreams and half-sleep.

Only to shake himself awake, deliberately radiating pain throughout his battered, tired body, because actual sleep led to screaming himself awake, which in turn led to panic attacks.

Because he couldn’t hear himself screaming.

Couldn’t hear anything.

Not the sound of his breath whistling into his closing throat, the thump of his heart too loud in his ears, the thud of his fists against the wall- nothing. Complete all-consuming silence.

And then there was the darkness.

And he blamed it on the room? Cell? Box?

Soundproofing. Light Proofing. His science mind tried to explain it away.

But nothing could account for the fact that even sound inside the room was absent, his voice-

And the darkness should have been lit by soft blue.

Better to keep his eyes shut and his mouth closed.

He’d been right; someone had come for him.
The shuddering vibrations as his cell opened traveled across the floor and up the walls, jolting through his shoulders, and Tony scrambled to his knees, ignoring the wave of lightheadedness that threatened to send him straight back down. He instinctively turned toward the stream of crisp, fresh air that broke over him.

His breath caught in his throat, his every sense screaming that he should be able to see now, to hear. Everything remained dark, remained silent, and his last scrap of illogical hope was brutally snuffed.

It wasn’t that dissimilar a feeling to having the reactor ripped from his chest.

Before the tightness could burst into panicked gulping *silent* breaths, Tony felt a minute vibration of the surface beneath his knees. It continued, carrying up into his thighs and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle with an extrasensory awareness of *being observed*.

He wasn’t alone in his cell anymore.

His breathing quickened on an unsteady gasp, an involuntary reaction to the spike of fear that drove itself between his ribs, sharp and agonizing.

He revisited his previous thought of *anything had to be better than this.*

What was it they say? Better the devil you know than the one you don’t?

He didn’t even want to consider what the next step to this nightmare might be.

A slight wash of warmth swept across him, and Tony stiffened.

He was feeling someone’s *body heat.*

Someone was standing (crouching?) right in front of him.

Ignoring the terrified little voice screaming in the back of his head, (what the hell had they done to him?!) Tony pulled back sharply, baring his teeth as he curled further into his corner, as far from the door as was possible.

He readied himself.

Out of nowhere and with no warning, something hot touched his shoulder, and Tony started violently, rearing away. His world bloomed into a dark kaleidoscope of fear and anxiety - *he couldn’t see them coming.*

Again, the touch returned, landing upon his shoulder, lighting up his senses like a burning brand from the darkness, glowing and dangerous, made more so by the fact that he couldn’t see it. He froze, face turned towards the heat signature, focus zeroed in on the burning contact. It tightened slightly, and then *tugged-* and Tony felt each individual finger.

He wasn’t going to wait to be dragged out-

He threw himself forward into the ever-stretching darkness, shouting something without any actual thought of it- unable to hear whatever visceral message his brain was determined to depart, he hoped it was appropriately ferocious and resolute.

He hit in blind tackle.

The bulk of his attacker’s weight lifted from the floor as he rammed his shoulder somewhere he
hoped was near center mass.

He could feel the unexpected shock his sudden movement caused, in the wildly flailing arms of his would-be torturer, before one hand latched onto his shoulder firmly, the other disappearing from Tony’s awareness, probably seeking purchase and a way to halt their backward momentum.

It wasn’t enough to stop them both from being propelled across the cell though; he felt something sharp and hard gouge into his flank as he raked against the open-door frame, his mind bursting with the white-hot flash of pain- out and onto a hard surface.

Stone, he realized as they rolled in an uncontrolled scraping, jolting tangled mess. His chin caught on a shoulder, forcing his teeth shut with a sharp silent clack, audible only from memory. Pain radiated from his jaw down his throat. Something- a knee perhaps, planted itself in his stomach and his breath thumped out of him, leaving his chest feeling like a hollow drum with the skin stretch too tight, aching and jarring.

His new surroundings were glimpsed only in the stinging scrape of flesh against rock, the roll, thud, roll of their bodies across an expanse of floor, the bruising grip of a hand yanking on the hair at the back of his head. Hundreds of tiny points of contact painting an incomplete, unclear, frankly terrifying picture.

And then they skidded a final foot to a jarring, shaking stop.

Tony was on top, he coul-

His arms gave like over-cooked noodles, pitching him forward, downward-

He barely had time to draw breath before he was flipped onto his back, the weight of his attacker bearing down on him from directly above.

Helplessness and powerlessness burnt through him as hot as the branding heat of the hands at his shoulders, pinning him to the floor- surrender seemed inevitable.

*Box of scraps in a damn cave. He wasn’t going out like this.*

Adrenaline swelled anew, threading through his veins alongside white-hot rage.

He didn’t breathe deeply in preparation, didn’t tense; he gave no warning before surging upward, attempting to throw his foe off with a mixture of surprise and strength; his assailant simply rolled with the action.

He wasn’t getting out of this.

Desperation bleeding into every move, Tony lost himself to panic; writhing, kicking, bucking and struggling to get free, to get even a limb free, to allow for a decent punch-

He felt an arm go across his upper chest, could feel heat on his face; breath, his attacker’s breath.

The arm at his throat tightened, and his eyes darted around, rolling in his head as he tried to force himself to see. He could picture them leaning over him -shouting at him-

He headbutted upward viciously and was rewarded with an odd crunching feeling as his forehead struck something.

The weight holding him down redistributed, but didn’t leave. His head was ringing; he didn’t want to
know what it had felt like on the receiving end.

But he hoped it hurt like a motherfucker.

A second set of hands suddenly grabbed his wrists, pinning his arms to the floor, and Tony felt his half-realized sense of accomplishment leech out of him.

There was at least two of them. He couldn’t see them, couldn’t hear them-

He pulled and struggled, the blackness choking him, detached terror building in his chest as he realized he was beaten.

They were forcing one of his hands open, palm up, fingers flat, and Tony suddenly had vivid imaginings of torturous forms of punishment for his audacity. *His fingers snapping, one at a time, his hand crushed under the heel of a boot* - something hard was being forced into his unwilling grasp, the unmistakable familiar bite of cold metal; *a blade slicing a finger off, stabbing through his palm, slitting his-*

Tony stilled.

He knew what this was.

Curved bumps, bracketed hinges, a hidden clasp….

He’d designed this.

He opened his mouth, about to ask-

He wouldn’t be able to hear the reply.

He needed to know.

A gentle tug of his unoccupied hand had it cautiously freed from its imprisonment. He could feel the hesitance in the reluctant release of the fingers around his wrist, the readiness to re-secure in the weight still holding him down, for all that he wasn’t fighting.

He could feel the tremble in his own hands and knew it had to be visible, as visible as the shakiness of his breath as he started to calm down, already subconsciously aware that the danger was not immediate.

His outstretched hand glanced on material, and he splayed his palm flat against a hard surface, only slightly malleable beneath the leather at his fingertips. His hand traced upwards, cataloging seams and stitching and muscle definition until he reached bare skin, a clean-shaven jaw and short hair with just enough spike to be obnoxious.

Clint.

**Clint.**

They’d come for him.

They were tugging him upright; Clint- and a pair of hands that were too small and too sure to belong to anyone other than Natasha. Tugging him upright, and Tony shook his head, tried to speak, but the
words fell silent from heavy lips- he, *he needed a moment*, he needed-

He couldn’t get enough air, and he couldn’t-

He needed-

Heat trailed down his arm, liberating the Widows Bite from his grasp, Tony followed, needing to-
He felt the gadgetry as it was clasped back around its owners’ wrist, Natasha’s fingers squeezing for just a moment, before dropping-

No!

His world was reduced to black nothingness again, silence echoing about him with terrifying emptiness- Tony *reached* - he couldn’t, he needed-

Sudden dizziness struck him, and he stumbled forward, one step, two, his legs giving way beneath him, sending him to his knees, doubled over-

His chest tightened, *aching, searing pain*, his head began to spin, his eyes rolling sightlessly back-

Twin points of contact thudded firmly onto his bare shoulders, the sudden heat drawing his immediate and total focus-

One of the hands trailed down over his collarbone, resting flat on his chest for a second before the fingers began to rise and fall rapidly, beating a gentle rhythm onto his skin-

*Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump*-

A fast, endless beat-

*Too fast*, Tony realized, his heartbeat matching the staccato fluttering of his friend’s fingers. *Too fast* and out of control; his heart was going a mile a minute, racing in his chest, and his breathing-

His breathing was an absolute mess. Silent gasping heaves and short, shallow panting breaths, his tongue dry and swollen against the back of his teeth. He swallowed thickly, painfully, drawing in a strained ragged breath and holding it with some difficulty-

Panic attacks were something he was familiar with, something he *could* deal with. Slow breath in-

It would be easier with Steve’s gentle coaching.

But he *could* do this.

- *slow breath out, count to three, slow breath in-*

The beat on his chest was slowing down.

He could do this. It was going to be okay. Rescue was here; the wonder twins had him, it was going to be okay. He wasn’t alone. They would get him out. He was-

He was going to be okay.

But they had to get out of here first.

With the panic subsiding, Tony became even more acutely aware of the heat resting against his skin-
and more importantly, the reserved stiffness in the fingers grasping his shoulder. Clint was tense, worried.

They were not safe here.

One final shaky breath and Tony wrapped his hand around the one on his chest, stilling it. Licking his lips, he spoke.

“I’m okay. I’m fine.” The silence of the action was almost sickening in its wrongness, and Tony carefully over-enunciated each word, sure he wasn’t speaking clearly enough, or loudly enough.

Clint’s withdrawal was slow, reluctant and unsure. His hand lingered on Tony’s shoulder as he drew back, trailing down his arm before grasping his hand-

Tapping, again – but with two fingers, disjointed and messy- purposeful.

\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]

Morse Code.
That was Morse code. Had to be.

Only-

“I don’t know Morse.” Tony was actually kind of glad he didn’t have to see or hear what he was sure was an impressive tirade on Clint and Nat’s behalf. They were right though; he was a genius, why the hell didn’t he know Morse code?

He’d just...never learned.

Clint’s hand lingered for a moment, and Tony wondered if he should tap back the only Morse he did know. Three short, three long, three short. That should get the point accords quite splendidly he thought.

Before he had the chance to decide if it was worth his life to tease Clint in this situation, the choice was taken from him when his hand dropped, and Tony remembered; they needed to move, he had to get his head in the game.

Unsteadily, he clambered to his feet, straightening- pain.

The sharp bite of grazed skin, a jarred shoulder, bruises and something wet and sticky trailing warmth down his left flank.

He ignored it the best he could.

If there were time, if it were safe, Clint and Natasha would have already tried to check him over. They hadn’t, so there wasn’t. He was clearly at least semi-mobile and not bleeding out, and that was obviously enough.

Clint’s hands dropped away, and Tony bit his lip, taking a steadying breath. They were still right there. He knew it. Could even sort of feel Clint’s body heat. But his immediate world was just vast silent darkness.

But they were there. He knew they were there. He knew. He told himself, repeating it as he took the first few steps toward-

Toward what? The door, the wall? Back into his cell?!
His breath hitched again, and he turned instinctively-

A slender hand slipped into his, warm heat a sudden anchor in the darkness.

She tugged gently. He followed.

They didn’t run. Couldn’t.

Not with Tony, blind and injured holding them back, holding himself back.

But that didn’t stop them trying, their speed increasing and flagging in turns, impeded by Tony’s blind stumbling steps, his inability to see corners, to avoid raised steps. Natasha’s hand in his was firm though, his only saving grace; never wavering as they rounded corner after corner, and raced down straight paths with narrowed walls, low ceilings and gnarled uneven stone beneath their feet.

He didn’t think about his helplessness. Couldn’t stand to. The complete and utter powerlessness was debilitating in its terror.

He didn’t focus on his total reliance on Natasha, didn’t think about how much, how fucking much he wanted to be able to rip his hand out of hers and just – run. How if he faltered on his own recourse it was his fault alone; but putting his life in someone else’s hands?

He didn’t want to think about how he didn’t know if he trusted them that much.

If he could trust anyone that much.

Because that hurt worse.

It was out of his control, better not to think about it.

Pain radiated up his side, across the tightly stretched skin of his lower back, his head pounding in time with his heartbeat and his feet, a thrice toned thud he couldn’t hear, could only feel as it resonated.

Tony was sure his breath was the wheezing, panting huffs of an asthmatic in a timber mill. It caught painfully in his throat, his ribs aching with every jarring gasp. He stumbled again, worse; completely losing his footing. Feeling his centre of gravity spiral as he windmilled uncontrollably, he wrenched his grasp from Natasha’s as he felt his weight start to drag her backward as well-

He fell into the endless darkness, down, down, down- and then pain, radiating from his tailbone and lower back as he landed with a graceless thud, roughhewn stone scraping against already raw skin as he skidded forward. His uncooperative limbs flailed, too disoriented to get a hand between his head and the approaching rock. His upper body jack-knifed downward with force-

Only to be brought up short by the sharp angle of an elbow at the back of his skull, the firm smoothness of skin warmed leather brushing against his cheek and stretching down across his shoulder. His own harsh panting breaths were matched inhale for exhale with the rapid rise and fall of the hard, ungiving surface beneath him, the shuddering breath he drew through his nose scented of leather and sweat-

The ground seemed to shift beneath him, a disjointed rolling motion and he slumped gently to the cold floor, sinking flat against the rough stone- unsure if the ground was still moving or if it was his
own shuddering.

He blinked up into the darkness, mouth open as he drew in wet shuddering breaths that sent tendrils of pain snaking across his chest. His head pounded mercilessly as he tried to piece together what had just happened. He was falling? He remembered hitting the ground; his back was still on fire, his lower body just a numb bruising ache. But then-

A sudden warmth landed gently against his cheek, a repeated tapping that drew his focus-

And then disappeared just as abruptly, to be immediately replaced with hands dragging him upright, urgently – his arm being pulled over shoulders and held tightly on the far side by an iron brand at his wrist, another stretched across his back, barely having secured a grip before they were moving-

Rushing, running, all but sprinting-

Like they were being perused.

Clint, and it was Clint; shoulders too broad to be Natasha, was half dragging him as he stumbled and faltered along. His feet caught painfully on the slightly raised, jagged floor, as he concentrated on just putting one foot in front of the other, not thinking about what was happening, what (who) they were running from.

Where Natasha might be.

Just running one foot in front of the other.

One hand was clasped tightly in Clint’s grasp, the other trailing along the nearest wall, marking his position, orientating himself to the – hallway? Or a tunnel, perhaps?

The same rough surfaced material as his cell. Sedimentary. Natural.

Cave.

Yet not.

There was no ‘cavernous’ feel of empty echoing space. If anything, the walls felt claustrophobically enclosing. Once, Clint had even pushed his head down, guiding him under some low set barrier.

Bends and turns and corners, a maze of tunnels that seemed to never end; Clint dragging him onward through the darkness, an almost desperation in his every grasp and tug.

And then, they stopped. Suddenly- and Tony felt himself shoved up against the nearest wall; Clint’s hand splayed flat over his chest, pressing, holding. Clint’s body heat hovered close, tense and edgy, antsy even.

And then he seemed to relax, his head thudding gently against Tony’s shoulder as his hand found Tony’s wrist and tugged, leading him around one last corner, and pressed him forward into-

Heat. An uncomfortable, burning intensity of warmth swathed him, but Tony could barely register the pain through the unimaginable relief that swept through him with a dizzying strength.

Arms enveloped him, drawing him into an embrace that he didn’t need eyes to recognize. He let his head fall forward to rest against a chest that rose and fell with such familiarity that he didn’t care that
he couldn’t hear the accompanying breaths.

Steve.

Steve was here. Thank flying fuck.

Not to misunderstand, because Clint and Natasha were awesome in their own right. As was Brucey-Bear and, well – Thor was his favorite. But Steve? Steve was Steve.

And there were probably things he should have been thinking about. Definitely things he should have been doing to get them out of here. Things to work out, to fix.

He probably should have been afraid, freaking out about his hearing and his sight, or complete lack thereof. He should have been worried about Nat, should have wanted to demand answers…but it had been one long, crazy, fucked up week, and he was in Steve’s arms. Tony didn’t care; he was so fucking done.

Someone else could do the fixing. The worrying. The being afraid and working shit out.

For at least the next five minutes, Tony was just fucking out.

The overwhelming relief slowly receding until he was back with it enough to realize that Steve’s hands were trailing carefully across raw skin, edging around cuts and bruises, one hand sinking into his hair, fingers no doubt feeling for tell-tale stickiness or raised areas-

His chest was rumbling beneath Tony’s ear, vibrating softly- as Steve talked to, well, Clint still, Tony supposed. They weren’t running; he wasn’t being dragged through this rabbit's warren of tunnels and holes, so he was deducing that the immediate urgency was gone, at least for now.

He felt Steve nod above his head, the brush of his chin against Tony’s hair enough for him to follow the gesture. A hand landed on his shoulder, and Tony barely stifled the startled yelp, or at least, he hoped he had. The hand, Clint’s, Tony reasoned, what with both of Steve’s settled at his hips, squeezed gently (in reassurance? Comfort? Farewell? ) before tugging him backward slightly.

Something with a warm solid weight was slipped over his right hand and pulled up his arm, before repeating on his left. Slightly damp, and smelling of leather, Tony frowned at the sudden slither of warmed metal sliding against the bare skin of his stomach. It was a bizarre feeling, and it took a second for Tony to recognize it as the drag of a zipper. Some sort of- Clint’s vest?

Steve’s fingers squeezed gently before sliding up to take control of the zip, sliding it up over the arc-

The arc reactor!?

Tony’s breath hitched with sudden panic; Steve’s hands stilled immediately, starting to pull away, and Tony lunged for them, “The arc! Is it still-?! The light?”

He couldn’t hear the reply.

But Steve’s fingers were squeezing his, calmly, reassuringly, and Tony allowed himself to accept what he had already known. The arc reactor was working fine. He’d know of course, that if it weren't, he’d have already been dead. Or at least feeling some pretty severe consequences (beyond the general state of ‘shitty’ he was currently experiencing)
But, not being able to see that constant reassuring blue glow-

With shaky fingers he finished tugging the zip up and over the arc reactor, and for the first time realized how comforting simply being less exposed was. He supposed he should be grateful they’d let him keep his boxers. He wished they’d let him keep his socks. They had a nylon lock pick sewn into the band. (Kidnappers were getting less careless recently. Not a trend Tony was a fan of).

Clint’s hand found his shoulder again, and Tony turned to look, well, face in his general direction, eyebrow raised enquiringly. A second squeeze and he was gone.

Tony didn’t feel him pass by, so, back the way they’d come. Back to get Nat? To find Nat? To help Nat? To save Nat?

Tony worried his bottom lip.

Steve’s hands were suddenly framing his face, drawing his eyes upward. He could almost picture Steve staring down at him, his face an open book of question and concern, his eyes scanning for any hint of need or want. Tony blinked back, unseeing.

Warm lips pressed gently against his, Steve’s thumbs sweeping smooth paths beneath his fluttering eyelids.

One of Steve’s hands dropped back to Tony’s chest, fingertips warm against his bare skin where they slipped beneath the open vee of the zip, and then-

Tapping.

Tony dropped his head forward to thud against Steve’s chest with a sigh.

The tunnels and low ceilings had disappeared almost immediately after he and Steve had started moving, the claustrophobia-inducing closeness replaced with a hollow, cavernous feel that Tony feared much more intimately. Yet, despite not being able to see, he still doubted it was a cave. The ground remained cold and hard beneath his feet, but the rock was gone; the surface smooth and even against the soles of his feet, like polished concrete.

It felt, to his jacked up remaining senses, like a huge, empty warehouse.

The way Steve kept him crouched low as they edged their way around the barrier, slow and careful, seemed to support this theory.

Tucked up against Steve’s back, half under his arm, a fistful of Steve’s shirt clenched in his fist (No uniform? Clandestine? Hurried?) Tony had no choice but to rely on Steve to get them out.

They stopped, suddenly, and Tony’s heart jumped into his throat, gasping in a startled breath as he tensed. Steve’s hand moved to splay across his stomach, firm and warm, even through the leather; Tony relaxed a little, slumping forward to rest his aching head against Steve’s shoulder blade, still uncertain of what was happening but unable to do anything but rely on Steve. The hand on his stomach dragged a warm path up to squeeze the back of his neck gently.
Tony could feel Steve’s concern. His relief. The worry and happiness. The bridled anger. The lingering fear. He felt it in every glancing touch, every curl of a hand around his elbow, every sweep of a hand down his back, the press of Steve’s fingers against the pulse at his wrist. The flutter of eyelashes against his cheek when Steve stilled and drew him close.

He was certain Steve would have insisted on carrying him from this hellhole if it wasn’t for the need to keep both hands relatively free. Tony might just have let him.

If only because his feet were absolutely killing him. And the light-headedness. Shortness of breath. Burning tightness of his skin, watering stinging eyes and Sahara dry mouth. The pounding of his skull and the aching of his chest. The stabbing pain in his left side.

They kept moving. Slower though, agonizingly slow, and Steve grew steadily more – prepared. Tony couldn’t help the skitters of apprehension and uneasiness that raked fingers up his spine and set the hair at the back of his neck arise.

Something was about to go down. Tony wondered how many there were.

“Give me a gun” he whispered it, almost inaudible under his breath (god he hoped), knowing that Steve would hear anyway. Nothing. No response, just slow, slinking steps-

“Steve-” The hand around his bicep squeezed gently. Tony wasn’t sure if it was meant to be an acknowledgement, warning, reassurance or refusal, but all that mattered was Steve wasn’t giving him a gun.

He stopped moving, knowing Steve would be forced to stop as well. “I’m- I need to- I can help, just- I can’t- ...please, don’t leave me. Please-” He’d meant to be reasonable, logical, demanding and stubborn even- he hadn’t intended to all but dissolve into shuddery tears.

Steve’s arms came around him, tight and all-encompassing. Tony pressed closer still. He got it. He was a blind, deaf, shaking, shuddering mess, jumping at every unexpected movement and glancing touch. He’d been held captive, was injured, weak and exhausted. There was no way Steve would give him a gun. Tony wouldn’t even give himself a gun. He got it. Steve was going to leave to fight who knew how many, and Tony was going to have to crouch here, in the dark and silence, completely helpless, unaware, vulnerable.

He had to believe in Steve. Had to trust Steve. He had no choice. Whether he truly did or not, no matter what he may have told himself, he simply had to. Even if he didn’t. Even if he couldn’t. Somehow he had to.

“Go do it. I’ll be okay. I know you’ll be okay. You’ll come back. Just- Come back. Please- God- please…” he whispered the words against Steve’s throat, soft and fearfull, not at all sure, not at all ringing true-

Steve pressed his face into Tony’s hair, his embrace almost uncomfortably tight.

They parted seconds later, Steve pushing him away, down and backward- and then, Tony was forced to just crouch there in the dark while Steve disappeared.

Dry-eyed, he held the dagger between trembling fingers.
Tony felt like he was on fire, jittery and tense, alternating between uncontrollable trembling and rigid stillness. He was back up against the wall, curled low and tight, hopefully out of sight. Were there shadows? Did they have internal lighting that illuminated every hiding place? His breath skipped, and he deliberately drew in a huge mouthful and held it, trying desperately to hear anything. Light-headedness forced him to huff the breath loose, and he swayed unsteadily, blinking against nonexistent white spots.

Steve had been gone for ages. Or mere moments. Tony couldn’t tell. He hadn’t heard (ha!) a thing. The dagger point hit the ground, and the feel of metal skittering across smooth concrete resonated up into his arm. Tony snapped it back up in front of him from where it had listed downward. He had to be ready.

He absently wondered if Clint had found Nat yet.

Clint would be outstanding to have by his side right now. Or Nat. And Nat.

Bruce. Hulk loved him. No one got through the Hulk.

Thor would have been standing in front of him, legs akimbo, arms crossed, Mjolnir swinging back and forth from one hand.

Tony wanted Steve to come back.

The knife skittered again.

Tony desperately dragged it back up in front of himself, but the vibrations from the floor didn’t stop.

Footsteps.

Blinded, deafened, exhausted, injured and afraid, Tony raised himself up into a defensive position, the knife coming up just like Nat had taught him.

“That had better fucking be you Steve Rogers- it had better be you. Fucking disarm me. If you let me kill you, I swear I will be so very incredibly pissed.” Tony snarled, sure it was Steve approaching. Had to be. Had. To. Be.

What if it wasn’t?

They were slow to approach. Cautious because it was a worried Steve? Or cautious because Tony was a deranged escaped captive with a knife?

He wasn’t taking the chance. Couldn’t. *He couldn’t go back in the box. Couldn’t be alone anymore.*

Tony waited until their body heat said they were close enough, trying his damnedest to draw on everything Nat and Clint and Steve had taught him, everything Happy had ever shown him. Hell, there was even a flickering memory of Rhodey shoving 15-year-old Tony around a dojo.

Steve would disarm him.

Anyone else, Tony was going to try his very best (and his best was well beyond average) to kill them very, very dead.

He lunged.

A hand caught his wrist tightly, using his own momentum to spin him away, before he was immediately dragged backward, off balance. His back thumped against a solid surface, his feet an
inch off the ground, kicking helplessly. His arms were crossed over his chest, completely immobilized, the knife useless where it hung out to his left.

His chest heaved with overexertion, his head buzzing with a dangerous low hum, but it didn’t matter. Even as his eyes rolled back and he let go.

Steve had shown him that move a week ago.

He slipped embraced the current darkness, with Steve’s lips pressed against his temple.

Epilogue:

He hovered somewhere between asleep and awake, leaning more toward the former with each passing second.

If he thought hard enough, Tony could vaguely remember Bruce poking at him, drawing blood (not exactly pleasant when he couldn’t even anticipate it) and his various hurts being bandaged and tended to.

But it hurt to think hard, so Tony didn’t.

His Steve-mattress rumbled gently beneath him, heavy and wonderful against his chest, reverberating into his body in a way that grounded him. Drowsy and limp, eyes closed as Steve’s hands drew trails across his overly-heated skin, Tony almost didn’t even have the energy to worry or think or even care about what would happen if his sight and hearing didn’t return.

And then Steve stopped talking for a moment.

Trying for an illusion of calm, Tony licked dry lips before shifting slightly, poking a finger into Steve’s ribs, mumbling almost incoherently, “-talk s’more-”

He felt the rumble as it built in Steve’s chest, recognizing the indulgent chuckle that began the continuing vibration as Steve obeyed. Tony started to relax again, wanting to just- ignore reality. Just for a little while. Just until he was ready.

Then the vibrating stopped again, almost as soon as it started, and through the sudden onslaught of silent, dark, alone, Tony realized that it must have been a question or a statement, and really, only one question made sense in this situation. “No-. Still gone- Just- It helps- the vibrations. Please?” He implored quietly.

The rumbling resumed immediately, slightly- more. Louder?

Tony kept his eyes closed because that was better.

It was still better to pretend.
Sensation

Chapter Summary

Senseless, but from everyone else's point of view. Also, have an ending.

Chapter Notes

So I did a thing. It took me awhile, but you may have the thing now. Uh - you might need to reread the first segment if you don't really remember it. Technically they can stand alone, but they're meant to compliment each other. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He'd been draped over Steve, arguing with Bruce about "science" and abusing Clint with a spoon at breakfast, and then by lunch... just, gone.

And for over a week, they'd waited. Searched. Asked questions and prodded various wasp's nests. Had figurative ears pressed to all sorts of keyholes and walls, just hoping for a hint.

A clue.
Something to displace the cloying helplessness. The inability to do something, anything.

But nothing. Not even a whisper of a possibility of a perhaps.

Someone somewhere had the power and connections to disappear a public figure as influential and protected as Tony Stark with minimal fuss and no evidence left behind.

No one could avoid thinking about what else they may be capable of.

The most plausible scenario was that they'd taken him from the back entrance to the restrooms of a small diner he'd organized to meet Steve at (seriously babe; the best burgers in New York. Gonna blow your mind.)

Steve had waited in the small booth, with its checkered tablecloth and plastic covered seats for almost an hour and then assumed that Tony Stark, genius, billionaire ex-playboy (with lingering tendencies), philanthropist had probably been held up with SI Business. Or else was in an engineering induced fugue and would no doubt need collecting if Steve wanted his burger-date.

Except, calls to Tony's phone went unanswered, and his call to Pepper was unfruitful, except to disprove the first half of the theory; Tony wasn't at SI. Nor was he at the Tower. According to JARVIS, "Sir left approximately two hours ago."

JARVIS had proceeded to track down the chauffeur who had dropped Tony at the rear entrance of
the diner nearly an hour and twenty minutes previous.

Tony had entered the building. The driver had left.

There had been no witnesses, and the rear of the diner had no security cameras, so they'd been forced to piece it together with speculation and educated guesses.

Even while he'd been busy calling the others, and altering SHIELD (Tony Stark in the wrong hands was an incredibly terrifying prospect for more than one reason), Steve had still been half expecting The Call. The one that went: "Sorry babe, I saw an 'insert shiny/scary/intriguing/silly item or experience here" and had to go' find trouble/cause trouble' - Forgive me?"

Then Steve had glimpsed shiny chromed metal lying discarded against the pocked concrete gutter. A cufflink, heavy in his palm, set with a tiny image of his shield.

A gag gift from Clint last Christmas. Cap Cufflinks. They were Steve's, but Tony had commandeered them on more than one occasion.

The scrap of tattered dark grey fabric caught at the base cemented his concern; it indicated some level of force involved with the removal.

Suppressed worry blossomed into actual fear.

That had been a week ago.

Since then, there hadn't been so much as a ripple on the surface of the pool of 'where the hell is Tony Stark.'

Until 2 am that morning.

Someone, somewhere, had seen something they shouldn’t have, put two and two together and had done exactly what they were supposed to do.

They'd contacted the authorities.

The Avengers had been airborne less than 40mins later.

Clint was starting to wonder on the probability of accidentally stumbling on a wholly unconnected Hydra base while searching for their missing team member.

Because so far, absolutely nothing indicated the presence of a prisoner. And certainly no evidence of a prisoner of Tony Stark caliber (No increased security, no weaponry to modify, blueprints to construct. No scorch marks, or disassembly of seemingly inconsequential electronics. No chaos.)

And Hydra.

Because of course, it was Hydra. It was always fucking Hydra.

(Seriously, why hadn't SHIELD learned to stop cutting off heads yet? They needed to start disemboweling instead.)

It felt like they’d been rushing through the claustrophobic winding tunnels for far too long. Only the fact that they were still steadily sloping downwards and Clint's trust in Nat's incredible sense of direction allowed him to believe that they weren't running around in intersecting circles.
They were under an enormous derelict airplane hanger in the middle of godforsaken nowhere. *Yeah, under.* Miles of winding tunnels and catacombs roughly hewn from the natural bedrock, two men shoulder to shoulder at their widest, and Clint had to stoop occasionally to avoid lowered areas of the ceiling.

It was also dark. Very dark. There was no extra lighting only the soft glow of the muted flashlight in Natasha's hand, just enough illumination for their darkness-adjusted eyes to make out the winding tunnel. Hopefully not enough to be seen as they approached corners and bends.

Not that that had proved to be an actual concern as of yet.

Foot soldiers, or 'grunts' as Clint had deemed them, with their all-black uniform and octopus-looking hydra emblem emblazoned on each shoulder, had poured out of the hanger bay like ants from a disturbed nest when Hulk had landed on their helipad and roared.

But Clint and Natasha had yet to stumble across anyone since they'd located and slunk into the underground entrance. No more grunts, no scientists. And more worryingly – no Tony.

Clint wasn't sure how the fight was going above ground, and couldn't let anyone know of their complete lack of progress down here; comms were down, it seemed likely that they were too far underground.

They'd used percussive force on several possible doors, revealing large chambers beyond. Most were abandoned, in various states of decay, but some were obviously still active laboratories with equipment that Clint couldn't even begin identifying. He'd snapped quick photos though because Bruce or Tony would know. Maybe it would turn out to be important (and he planned to blow this place to hell and back when they finally found Tony. Actually, probably shortly after they found him would be better.)

Clint rounded another corner, and at first, he thought he'd come to a dead end, the first they'd encountered. Lit only by the reduced beam of the torch in Natasha’s hands, the end of the path looked slightly rounded, curved inward, as if tunneling had simply stopped.

And then Clint noticed the dull sheen of rusted metal.

Hinges. Handle.

A door.

“Do you think?” He whispered, quiet in the echoing atmosphere.

Nat nodded, pointing up.

Written across the top of the solid wooden door, in messily scrawled sharpie was the word “Engineer.”

*Like someone might write the name of a beloved family pet above a kennel door.*

“What the fuck? They-?!” Clint hissed, something twisting in the pit of his stomach. Something was very off about this whole situation.

“Tony?” Clint called, trying to direct his voice through the infinitesimal gap of the doorframe, it was incredibly tight-set, barely a millimeter gap at any of the four sides.

“Tony?” He called again. Nothing. Was it empty? Was Tony unable to answer? Clint wasn’t sure
which would be worse.

It seemed the only security measure on the door was an old rusted padlock.

His stomach hollowed.

Who wouldn't think they needed much security to hold Tony Stark captive; and why?

He glanced at Natasha, nodding when she crouched against the far wall, alert.

Clint pulled his lock kit from his vest pocket and set to work.

The door was solid. Heavy timber set on rusted hinges that desperately needed oiling. The walls of the cave seemed to shudder violently, the floor vibrating beneath Clint's feet as he forced the door open against its will.

He had to step back at the overwhelming stench.

Sweat, feces, fear, mold, vomit, tears, terror-

The room-

Tony had scrunched himself into the corner of the cell, and even by artificial torchlight, Clint could see the harsh red abrasions that covered much of his bare skin, raw and painful looking. And the bruises; black, blue and shiny purple across hunched shoulders and updrawn thighs.

Clint took two stumbling steps forward before he could stop himself, murmuring “God- Tony- What the hell have they-”

“Clint.” Natasha’s quiet voice was cautionary, and Clint allowed it to steady him, slow him.

He looked more closely.

Tony had stiffened at his approach, flinching further away, back pressed flush against the curve of the room corner. Everything about his posture screamed, “Stay away.”

“Tony? Tony- It’s Clint. We’re here-” Clint tried to reassure, but Tony didn’t even acknowledge him, didn’t lift his gaze from where it was darting wildly across the floor at his feet.

Something beyond physical injury was wrong here. Clint wished he was Bruce. Or Steve. Both would be better at this than him.

But he was just him, just Clint, and the others were relying on him.
Tony was relying on him.

Stooping lower, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible, Clint inched closer, his voice soft as he spoke, “How ya' doing their Ironass? Ready to blow this joint?” Tony didn’t respond, but it was evident that he was aware that Clint was there.

Painfully so.

Clint reached out a hand slowly and tentatively rested it on Tony’s shoulder.

He barely managed to grab Tony to stop him from thumping into the wall behind when he reared back violently.

And then Tony froze, wary and tense, but still. Clint breathed a sigh of relief when Tony’s face lifted toward his-

And then Tony reacted. Violently.

The wordless snarling screech was the only warning Clint got, and not nearly enough. Tony’s shoulder caught him in the stomach, a solid hit that thumped the breath right out of him and lifted him from the floor. He was glad Tony was crouched, and he’d been bent double. Otherwise, Clint was sure he’d have left brain matter on the ceiling.

As it was, they were both propelled backward at speed, and it was all he could do to grasp Tony’s shoulder to keep them together and attempt to use his other hand to shove away from the approaching wall.

Somewhere at the back of his mind he registered the return of the shuddering vibration and thanked whatever heavens for Natasha’s quick thinking as she forced the ajar door the rest of the way open. As it was, they barely cleared the doorframe.

Clint felt his center of gravity tilt enough to know that there was no way they were going to avoid a smash landing against the solid floor. He twisted an arm around Tony’s waist, determined to keep him on top; the jagged-edged stone would tear bare skin to shreds, Clint had his leathers. The other hand grabbed a handful of hair at the back of Tony’s head, knowing that while a broken hand for an archer was seriously bad business, a crushed brain for a genius was an endgame move.

Despite having braced for it, their landing was an ungraceful tangle of snarled limbs and flesh scraping and bruising against stone. Clint felt the serrated edge of a jutting rock scrape fire down his left arm, and one knee twisted awkwardly beneath their rolling bodies until they skidded to a jarring, sickening halt.

Tony stared down at him from above.

With absolutely no recognition.

Then he pitched forward as if to continue the attack and Clint-

He tumbled to the left, swiftly flipping them in a well-practiced move, smooth and careful.

Beneath him, Tony sank limply against the ground, fight seeming to drain out of him, leaving his chest heaving as panting breaths, laced with panic and fear puffed from between lips bitten raw. Dark brown eyes darted around the room, sweeping and skittering around the hallway, never snared by Clint's seeking gaze.
And then-

Clint knew that look.

It was the same look Tony had sported on his one-way trip through the portal. The same steely
determination he'd stood against villains with, unsuited and unprotected. Clint wagered it was the
same look Tony worn blasting out of that cave in Afghanistan.

So it was mildly disconcerting to have it directed at himself.

There was no other warning. No tensing, no breath of preparation. No, tell. If Clint hadn't recognized
that indomitable tenacity, Tony possibly would have succeeded in throwing him off. As it was Clint
was expecting the move, and rolled with it.

Tony went ballistic. Feral. Completely and utterly blinded by rage and desperation, he threw a messy
fist at Clint's face that the archer only just managed to duck. Leaning forward, he pinned Tony's
upper body with an arm across his chest, leaning in close to try and break through the panic and
hysteria.

"Tony! It's me!- It's Clint! Calm down! You're okay- Com-oomph-Fuck! Fucker! -"

Clint felt for blood as Tony flopped backward with a strangely smug half smirk after his particularly
vicious headbutt.

His head throbbing, but finding no blood, Clint shifted uncomfortably, looking up with aching eyes
to pin a more than mildly impressed (bitch!) Natasha with a sharp gaze, "A little help maybe? He's a
fucking wildcat."

Natasha dropped gracefully to her knees, quickly pinning Tony's arms to the floor above his head,
grip gently restraining but non-negotiable.

"Stark?- Tony?" Natasha tried when Tony immediately and violently struggled against her grip,
squirming uselessly, snarling wordlessly, gaze unfocused and -

"Shit-" Clint breathed, realization dawning, "Tony- I think- Nat, he's blind. Fuck! Okay-Tony?
Listen to me- Calm down- Listen!"

Frowning, Natasha interrupted him, "Clint- I don't think he can hear us. Tony? Hey- "

Clint whistled, the sound piercing in the small hallway, echoing painfully enough to cause Clint to
wince. Tony didn't even flinch.

"Shit. Fuck. - How- " Clint was speechless. Dead and Blind? Deaf and Blind. How the hell were
they meant to-

Tony had no idea who was manhandling him. Friend or foe. In this place, considering the state they
had kept him in, Clint was sure Tony was assuming foe. He knew he fucking would be.

Mind already racing through the myriad of possible ways to make their identities known to a blind,
deaf, terrified, hysterical, defensive genius, probably still capable of using his own boxers and one of
Nat's hairpins to build a device capable of killing-

Nat.
Build.
A device capable of killing them.
"Nat, give me one of your bites-" he asked, sitting up slightly, redistributing his hold to allow an unquestioning Natasha to slip the weaponry of her right wrist and hand it over.

"Get his hand open-" the archer added, pressing the metal against Tony's palm once Natasha managed to flatten his hand open with much difficulty.

It took .002 of a second for Tony to go still beneath him, his fingers curling over the widow's bite, tracing the edges and hinges knowingly.

His empty hand tugged carefully, and Clint nodded when Nat looked at him questioningly. She warily released her grasp, and Tony raised his hand, reaching with shaking bloodstained fingers toward Clint, pressing his hand flat when he reached the leather of Clint's tack vest.

"That's it. You designed that too. It's Clint. Come on-" Clint encouraged, not registering the futility of such an action, nor caring when he did.

Tony traced his hand, still shaking, although that could have been telegraphed from the vibrations of his panting breaths, upward and over seams and joins, trailing along the zipper until he reached bare skin at Clint's throat.

Clint tipped his head back slightly, ignoring Natasha's hiss when the move allowed unrestricted access to one of his most vulnerable areas. Tony's hand slid up the side of his neck and caressed across his jaw in a movement much more intimate than they usually exhibited, but somehow seemed fitting with Tony's audibly bated breath the only sound in the darkened stone-walled tunnel.

The hand sunk into his hair, and tugged, somewhat gently, on the short strands-

Tony slumped bonelessly, the hand slipping free to thump down against his chest, an almost hollow sob of sheer utter relief escaping.

"Yeah, buddy- I feel you" Clint muttered, his breath a little uneven, aches and pains from their tumbled-weed impression across the stone floor and subsequent scuffle making themselves known as the atmosphere calmed somewhat (as much as was possible in an underground Hydra lair).

Speaking of, "Come on- we've got to move. He needs Bruce, and I don't want to be caught down here if the octopussy troops sound the retreat," Clint said, rolling to his feet and starting to assist Tony upward as well, grateful for Natasha's help- Tony was as shaky as a newborn colt, and completely insulated to what was going on around him.

Tony gasped at the sudden movement as Natasha tugged the widows bite out of his grasp, but Clint saw the gentle squeeze her fingers gave and trusted that she-

The gasp turned into two, three-

Clint spun back as Tony sucked in another reedy swallow of air through lips that opened and shut against nothing, and the word-"-Wait!" too loud and laced with something akin to renewed panic slipped free. It seemed to open the floodgates, and a jumbled flow of whimpered pleading and gasping, choking breathes broke free as he reached for something, hands grasping desperately, stumbling forwards and swaying as his knees buckled beneath him-

Panic Attack.

Too much, too fast; injured, deaf, blind and who knew what other hells he'd experienced in the past week-
It had to be an experience firmly straddling both the 'unsettling as fuck' and 'terrifying as hell' state lines.

Clint threw himself to his knees in front of Tony, vaguely aware of Natasha backing up slightly and assuming a sentry position a few feet away; anything trying to get to them in the next few minutes would have to go through the Black Widow.

They had time. Clint had time to offer what little reassurance and comfort he could.

He dropped his hands onto Tony's bare quivering shoulders, grip tight and unbreakable, just short of shaking him, unable to be ignored or dismissed.

Tony's head jerked up, his eyes wide and unfocused, but Clint could tell he had the engineer's complete attention.

He just needed to hold it long enough to-

Clint dragged his hands down over collarbone and clammy heated skin, settling flush over each side of Tony's chest. He stopped for a second, listening, feeling- and then began to drum his fingers gently, beating in a matching rhythm against bare skin.

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump-
A fast, endless beat-

Matching Tony's racing heartbeat, bringing it to his attention, dragging his focus inward, away from what he couldn't see or hear, couldn't control, to what he could. Himself.

Clint was trying to work out how to breath-coach someone who couldn't see or hear to match him, when Tony did it himself; drawing in a particularly ragged breath and holding in for a three count before releasing in thin raspy exhale.

_Rinse, wring, repeat._

And slowly the beat beneath his fingers slowed, Clint matching the pace as it dropped off to a more reasonable rate.

"That's it. Good. Just- fuck, how the hell am I supposed-" Clint shook his head in frustration; so much for comforting, he couldn't even communicate-

Tony brought one hand up to wrap cut and bruised fingers around the wrist attached to the hand at his chest, grip surprisingly strong as he squeezed in a blatant attempt to make sure he had Clint's attention.

He licked his lips before he spoke, voice halting and hesitant, some syllables too loud and disjointed, other soft and rushed as he misguided his silent voice- but undoubtedly understandable as, "‘I’m okay. I’m fine.'"

And that was their Tony Stark, idiot extraordinaire, trying to comfort him in this situation.

"Oh my god. You’re such a fucking liar! You- You’re fucking unbelievable-" Clint said it with a disbelieving laugh as he pulled away slightly, turning his hand in Tony's to squeeze gently, once, twice- 

Wait.
He turned Tony;'s hand within his grasp, tapping again, but with only two fingers, disjointed and messy; purposeful.

Morse code. He was a fucking genius.

Okay, so calling Tony a liar as his first choice of communication wasn't exactly comforting, but at least it was honest.

And then Tony had muttered, “I don’t know Morse,” with a shamed biting of his bottom lip, worrying at the cuff of Clint's wrist guard as he admitted the terrible shortcoming, apparently realizing how incredibly ridiculous it was-

"You're a genius, Stark! What kind of genius doesn't know Morse code!?” Clint howled, dropping Tony's hand to throw his own into the air, continuing, "You and me?! We're having words when this is all over! And Rhodes! What sort of self-respecting Military Enlisted best friend doesn't ensure his genius knows the requisite life knowledge! And Steve! Captain America! Captain! Some boyfriend he is! "

"Clint. Stop berating your blind and deaf best friend. We need to move." Natasha's voice was calm and collected, but Clint could hear the antsy wariness- they'd been in the same place too long.

"You're my best friend, Nat." He corrected, pulling out his torch as he moved to take the point position, throwing a glance back over his shoulder at Tony's sudden hitched breath. He watched as the look of panic faded away as Natasha slipped a hand into the engineer's, giving a gentle tug to get them started in the right direction.


Clint grinned a smug grin into the darkness. She wasn't fooling anyone.

Clint led them back the way they'd come, trusting his memory and the fact that Natasha would steer him straight if he made a wrong turn somewhere.

Like the journey down, they encountered no one, and as much as Clint was feeling the urge to punch some of these fuckers lights out (Tony was covered in cuts and bruises), he was also glad. Tony was stumbling onward valiantly in his wake, drawn along by Natasha's firm unrelenting grasp, but his whimpers were pained and his breathing harsh.

Clint tried to set a steady loping pace, something not too strenuous for Tony's sake, but he suspected that even hobbling was painful for the other man. Their speed increased and flagged in turns, impeded by Tony’s blind stumbling steps, his inability to see corners, to avoid raised steps.

If they could just get back to the hanger foyer, they'd be-

"Clint!" Natasha's startled worried voice.

Clint spun in time to see a wildly windmilling Tony yank his hand from where Natasha was unsuccessfully trying to stabilize him, and without the counterbalance, he plummeted toward the hard stone floor.
Clint lunged, using momentum to slide his own body beneath Tony's, bracing for the falling weight of his friend, getting an arm beneath Tony's head, to prevent it cracking like an egg against the rock.

Crisis averted, they lay still for a moment, each drawing in harsh breaths, part exertion, part fright, of varying degrees on both parties behalf.

A moment to catch his breath and Clint gently rolled Tony away, slipping out from beneath, moving to check for further injury and to try and reassure as best he could in whatever tactile manner he could think of-

"Heil Hydra!!"

Well damn.

Shit and shit again.

Clint rolled to his feet, dragging Tomy's arm over his shoulder and pulling him in close with an arm like a band across his waist. Already moving, he threw a glance over his shoulder at Nat, 'you got this?'

Nat stretched, cracking her knuckles as she turned to face the oncomming flood of hydra-foot soldiers.

"Now this? This is a party", she quipped, drawing a dagger from someplace Clint probably didn't want to think about being a hiding place for sharp pointy objects.

Clint ran.

He knew Natasha would keep the Hydra minion off them as best she could, which was pretty damned efficiently, but it was a narrow corridor, and there had been a lot of soldiers. It would only take one or two getting past, and they'd be in trouble.

So they ran, for all that Tony wasn't in any fit state to be upright let alone being half dragged through an underground Hydra-lair at break-neck pace, blinded and deafened and carrying who knew what other injuries.

They ran, Clint splitting his attention behind them and in front, hyper-aware of every echoing shout, every reverberating footfall falling distant behind them. Trying to keep the torch steady so as not to lose the light at an inopportune moment. Trying desperately to remember to pull Tony down when they encountered low-hanging ceilings, to keep tugging him closer when he tried to list toward the wall for security and purchase.

He registered the harsh panting breaths of gasping pain, noticed the way Tony held himself rigid, one arm tucked against the ribs on his right side. Clint could feel the prominent limp as it telegraphed into his own body, making their half-blind gait even more irregular.

Registered and ignored, because there was just no time. And while Tony was still upright (by whatever definition of the word) and stumbling along beside him, Clint had to keep them moving.

Because he didn't know how much further. Didn't know what was pursuing them from below, or what awaited them above.

Clint had to be ready to act and react fast enough for two because Tony wouldn't see or hear
anything coming. Clint was the first line of defense. Tony's only line of defense.

They rounded yet another corner and glimpsed light at the far end of the tunnel. Clint slowed abruptly, shoving Tony into the nearest shadowy alcove, and following himself. He'd know they had to be approaching the surface, but he hadn't been expecting it to appear quite so suddenly.

More concerning was the shadowy figure haloed by the light at the entrance to the tunnel. Sentry, standing guard. Obviously well trained, lean, yet built like a brick shit house.

...with a very familiar shoulder to waist ration now that Clint was paying attention.

Steve. Thank Flying Fuck.

Clint relaxed, his head thudding forward to rest against Tony's shoulder, which prompted a questioning whine from the other.

"Yeah, we're good. Someone's waiting for you. Come on" The Archer explained, again uselessly, but whatever. It had been a long day.

He tugged Tony out of the alcove and into the tunnel corridor, slowly making their way toward the light.

"Heya Lova-boy, I got something for you," he called, more to announce his presence and avoid any nasty surprises (like being taken to the mat by Captain America). Although with that enhanced vision of his and the way he was already making long strides up the tunnel, Clint figured Steve could see well enough who he had curled under his arm.

"Tony!?-" Steve called as soon as he was in some semblance of hearing range. For Clint anyway.

The archer slowed his stride slightly, letting Steve close the last few yards between them before gently propelling Tony forward.

Steve's arms came up, encircling Tony in an embrace that did nothing to hide the way Tony just melted into the hold, recognition instant and total. And just- relaxed. Tony let go; his trust in Steve absolute and all-encompassing.

Clint would be envious, but well, it wasn't like he didn't have his own Steve.

Steve felt as if a week old layer of fear and unspeakable 'what if's' were being peeled from his soul as Tony melted into his arms, dismissed as unfounded, finally.

"Tony? Sweetheart? - Are you-" he asked, hands moving to skim down over bare shoulders gently, despite the wave of anger he could feel boiling within his blood.

Hating on things that hurt your loved ones was the worst, especially when there was no one suitable to punish. Although he'd found a pretty good start on the Hydra soldiers in the hanger.

Clint was speaking, and Steve forced himself to drag his focus from Tony, just for a moment.

"-God- Steve- Just, god. I don't know what they did, but he can't see or hear anything. We need to get him up to Bruce. " Clint explained, worried eyes sweeping over Tony's back.

Steve felt his stomach bottom out, snapping his attention fully to Clint, disbelieving, "What? They-
he- Tony?" his gaze dropped back down to the dark head pressed against his chest, but Tony gave no indication of hearing.

Deaf? Blind? How- what the hell had they done to him? Was Tony injured? Badly? Beyond the scapes and bruises, Steve could clearly see? Was it permanent?

No.

No. It couldn't be.

Steve’s hands trailed carefully across flushed skin, edging around cuts and bruises, carding one into Tony's hair, searching for tell-tale stickiness or raised areas.

Something that might explain...

Clint was still talking, and Steve tuned back in at the sound of his name-, "Steve, I need to go back for Natasha. Get him up to Bruce. If we're not out in 15 minutes, get out of here. No, I'm serious, every wasted second might be closer to this being a permanent state of affairs. You need to get him help. Nat and I'll take care of the stragglers, gather whatever intel we can and blow this joint- and I mean that quite literally. Don't worry; we'll find a ride home."

Steve was reluctant. The base had been occupied by masses more foot soldiers than they had been expecting, although no one of any prominent ranking had made themselves known.

Steve wasn't comfortable leaving any one of his team behind under any circumstances- but Tony? Tony needed help now. "Okay, but Thor's staying above ground to make sure you don't get boxed in. And he's your ride home. " He compromised, pulling his best 'I'm the cap and I said so voice' out for extra points.

Clint nodded, not bothering to argue with a good suggestion, and reaching out he dropped a hand to Tony's shoulder and then winced apologetically when Tony bit back a startled yelp, apologizing, "Sorry Ironass, was just saying goodbye...which again, pointless. Anyone ever tell you that you're a great listener?"

Steve rolled his eyes skyward, sniggering, unable to resist finding the humor in the situation, mostly because he knew Tony would have as well, had he been able to hear. He would later.

Clint nodded, not bothering to argue with a good suggestion, and reaching out he dropped a hand to Tony's shoulder and then winced apologetically when Tony bit back a startled yelp, apologizing, "Sorry Ironass, was just saying goodbye...which again, pointless. Anyone ever tell you that you're a great listener?"

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Clint rolled his eyes, defending himself with a weak ass reply, even by Steve's standards, "Oh shut up. I guarantee you'll be talking to him too."

Shrugging, Steve nodded, "Probably. I talk to him when he's asleep, so I don't see why not." Why deny what was no doubt the honest truth.

"Mhmm. You lovebirds are disgusting. You know that, right?" Clint replied, then frowned when a violent shiver raised goose-bumps on Tony's shoulders and neck, continuing, "Shit. He's probably freezing. Hang on-"

He'd stripped out of his tac-vest and was tugging one of Tony's arms through the shoulder hole before Steve could say anything.

Clint caught the softening indulgent look Steve was practically throwing at him, and Steve grinned at the telltale flush that skittered across his collarbones, laughing outright when Clint sassed, "What- I rock the topless look. Have you seen these babies?" He pulled away to flex his pecs and Steve snorted again, amused as he reached down to take over the zipping.
“You're fooling exactly no one, Clint.” Steve teased, but his full attention was immediately dragged back to Tony when the genius suddenly stiffened beneath his hands, a panicked gasp escaping his lips.

Steve, thinking he'd inadvertently touched on an injury when he'd been slightly less observant while distracted by Clint, immediately started to pull away, only stopped when Tony's hands shot out to wrap around his wrists, tugging. Words, clear and crisp, yet hurried and halted with fear infused panic fell from the engineer's lips, "The arc! Is it still-?! The light?"

"No! It's fine baby; it's okay. The arc reactor is fine! You're fine-" Steve was quick to reassure, and even though he belatedly realized that Tony couldn't hear him, it seemed that body language was still something Tony could read, even without vision or hearing.

Under Steve's carefully soothing hands, Tony calmed, shaky acknowledgment of the reassurance communicated when he slowly pulled the zipper up over the arc reactor housing himself.

Clint reached out to squeeze Tony's shoulder again, and Tony barely jumped, just turning slightly in the archer's direction with a raised eyebrow.

Steve huffed a breath of relieved laughter.

Cheeky. Good.

A second squeeze and Clint disappeared back into the darkness of the tunnel like a ghost.

Tony stared after the archer for a second, before swiveling back toward his partner's unseen form.

He was worrying his bottom lip.

It was something Steve only ever saw Tony do subconsciously, and only when he was was ridiculously close to tears. Steve could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen that bottom lip bitten red.

Desperate to offer whatever comfort he could, Steve wrapped an arm around Tony's waist, dragging him closer, before both hands came up to frame his pale face. Drawing his wide fathomless eyes upward, not trying to avoid the tingle of unease that crept down his spine as the sightless gaze darted around the room, Steve searched for whatever Tony needed.

Tony's hands fist tightly in his uniform top, the material not giving against its rigid structure, but flexible enough for fingers to find slight purchase.

Huh.

Steve dropped his head down, pressing his lips to Tony's slightly parted mouth, tongue flicking gently against chapped, bitten skin, his thumbs sweeping softly across the delicate skin of dark undereye circles.

If all Tony wanted most was Steve's reassurance, well, he didn't even have to ask.

Steve's fingertips crept beneath the open vee of the tac-vest, finding warm bare skin, and tapped gently.

He frowned slightly when Tony dropped his head forward to thud against his chest with a defeated
sigh.

He supposed 'You're Okay' wasn't that reassuring, but well- it would have taken a long time to spell out 'Yes, you're blind and deaf at the moment, but Bruce is going to fix you and then you'll be okay. I love you'.

________________________________________

Steve propelled them the last few feet of the tunnel, the slow incline giving way to flat ground as they neared the mouth into the hanger. He slowed their approach, dropping into a crouch, gently pulling Tony down beside him as he peered out into the shadow darkened warehouse-like space.

Not empty. Well, damn.

There were six, all hydra foot soldiers as had been typical for this mission so far. They'd gathered in a small group behind a precariously leaning pile of crates and wooden shipping boxes, no doubt believing they were concealed.

And they were; from the entrance. Steve and Tony would be approaching from behind.

Steve kept them low as they edged their way around the wall, slowly and carefully, not wanting to give away their position. He was supporting most of Tony's weight; the smaller man half draped over his back as they sidled forward, the crouched position no doubt making every injury scream at the abuse.

He hadn't made a sound.

Steve was- as he always was. Incredible impressed and impossibly proud.

One of the Hydra-operatives suddenly turned in their direction, and Steve froze. He could take them, but he didn't want to have to do it anywhere near Tony.

At the sudden stop, Tony startled slightly, a barely audible breath of surprised fear ghosting between his lips, and Steve immediately reached out to calm him, splaying a hand across his stomach to still and ground him.

Tony relaxed a little, slumping forward to rest his aching head against Steve's back, the captain dragging his hand up and around to soothingly squeeze the tense muscles at the base of Tony's neck in response.

The hydra-soldier turned back to the others, dismissing the niggling feeling he really should have trusted, and Steve crept them a little further forward, stilling in the concealment provided by a large overturned packing crate.

“Give me a gun.”

Steve almost missed the quietly whispered demand, and his head whipped back towards Tony. Could he see? Was he-

Unseeing eyes didn't notice his suddenly hopeful gaze, and Steve dismissed the surge of premature relief.

“Steve—”

He squeezed Tony's bicep gently, in acknowledgment and reassurance; but there was no way he was giving his blind lover a ballistic weapon. No way.
Tony stopped dead, the stubborn look on his face so familiar that Steve wanted to both scream and laugh. He didn't have time to deal with mulish, stroppy, demanding Tony, but thanked God he was still in there.

Tony opened his mouth and wet his lips. Steve grimaced, stealing himself for half-logical, half-insane arguments, and stubborn refusal to take no for an answer.

“I'm- I need to- I can help, just- I can’t- ...please, don’t leave me. Please-” Tony's thready quiet voice faded away as he all but dissolve into shuddery tears.

Steve’s instantly wrapped him up in a tight embrace, frowning worriedly when he felt Tony press closer still.

Tony was nodding, pressing gently against Steve's shoulders as he spoke quietly, “Go do it. I'll be okay. I know you’ll be okay. You’ll come back. Just- Come back. Please- God-please…” he whispered the words against Steve’s throat, soft and fearful, not sounding at all sure, not at all ringing true.

Steve couldn't imagine what Tony was going through right now. Being near helpless in an incredibly volatile and dangerous situation. Having had to accept that he was blind and deaf, with no way of knowing if it was temporary, or permanent. Relying on and trusting others were not things that Tony "Mr independent" Stark was known for accepting gracefully. And yet--here he was, being forced to endure exactly that.

Steve pressed his face into Tony's hair, his embrace almost uncomfortably tight.

They parted seconds later. Steve pushing Tony away, down and backward- and then, he turned slinking toward the front of the hanger silently, one final glance over his shoulder etching the picture of Tony, dry-eyed, crouched defensively, the 'pick-pocketed' dagger held between trembling fingers.

The fight, as far as they went, was trifling, and over within minutes. Steve had good motivation to not take chances or draw things out, and within minutes, the first two were down; one likely to wake up with a massive headache, the other missing his head (he'd been wearing Tony's watch).

After seeing the power of Captain America in somewhat of a rage, soldiers three through six had attempted to flee. The haphazard pile of crates and containers had crushed four and six like bugs, and Steve had made short work of five with a roundhouse kick. Three had managed to abscond out the hanger door.

Steve let him go. He knew what was waiting on the other side. Or rather, who.

He turned, and hurried back to Tony's side, not bothering to mask his approach this time.

Blinded, deafened, exhausted, injured and afraid, Tony still managed to look threatening as he raised himself up into a defensive position, the knife coming up between them, not a hint of waver about the blade.

When he spoke, it was with deadly calm, voice an octave above snarl with twice the steely determination, “That had better fucking be you, Steve Rogers- it had better be you. Fucking disarm me. If you let me kill you, I swear I will be so very incredibly pissed.”

Steve hummed reassuringly, answering despite knowing that Tony couldn't hear, (so who exactly
was he comforting?), answering quietly, surely "It's okay. I've got you, sweetheart. We're just going to get you to put down that dagger; then we're getting you out of here. We'll get you all fixed up. Come on. Come on. Closer. That's it, and-

Tony lunged.

Steve caught his wrist tightly, using the smaller man's feral momentum to spin him away, before immediately dragging backward, off balance. Tony's back thumped against Steve's chest, his feet dangling an inch off the ground, kicking helplessly. His arms were crossed over his chest, completely immobilized, the knife useless where it hung out to his left.

Steve felt him relax a bare instant before his eyes rolled back in his head and Tony went limp against him. Steve hoped it wasn't just natural relaxation of his body. He pressed his lips to Tony's sweaty hairline, hoping that Tony had at least realized he was safe before he fell into the darkness of unconsciousness.

Gathering Tony to his chest, limp like a ragdoll, and not much heavier, Steve left the warehouse, striding into the light with purpose.

In the brightness of the midday sun, Tony looked so much worse.

Hair oily and matted, with blood and who knew what other substances. Skin pale and grey, ashy in places and flushed unhealthily in others, bruised and cut and scraped raw.

He looked like a corpse in Steves' arms.

Thor's heartbroken roar from the heavens said he thought as much also.

When the Thunder God landed and rushed to approach them, his voice didn't boom with anger and loud lamentation, instead, he was heartbreakingly quiet as he confronted death, "-No, surely not. We cannot have- Not young Anthony-"

Steve suddenly realizing what Thor was seeing, was immediate with his reassurance, "No, he's not- Thor he's alive. Tony's alive. Just- we need Bruce."

Thor paled even more if possible at the revelation; relief and intense concern battling for the ground as he dragged his cape from his shoulders and engulfed Tony in the material, speaking "The good doctor awaits in the jet, yonder. Shall I-"

Steve shook his head, cradling Tony close with one arm, assisted by the stabilizing effect the cape-blanket had on his limbs, the other hand reaching out to squeeze Thor's arm. "Nat and Clint are still inside, rounding up the last of the enemy and trying to find evidence of exactly what did this. I need you to stay and back them up, then get them home."

Thor nodded, deserting his usual fanfare in the seriousness of the situation to simply nod, replying, "I shall see to it. I'd wish you good fortune, but as TonyStark believes that lady fortune went sour on him many a while ago, I shall leave his fate to the doctor."

Steve nodded his thanks to Thor's already retreating back and hurried towards the invisible Quinjet parked on the rise above the hanger.

Bruce would be waiting.
Epilogue:

He hovered somewhere between asleep and awake, leaning more toward the former with each passing second.

If he thought hard enough, Tony could vaguely remember Bruce poking at him, drawing blood (not exactly pleasant when he couldn’t even anticipate it) and his various hurts being bandaged and tended to.

But it hurt to think hard, so Tony didn’t.

His Steve-mattress rumbled gently beneath him, heavy and wonderful against his chest, reverberating into his body in a way that grounded him. Drowsy and limp, eyes closed as Steve’s hands drew trails across his overly-heated skin, Tony almost didn’t even have the energy to worry or think or even care about what would happen if his sight and hearing didn’t return.

And then Steve stopped talking for a moment.

Trying for an illusion of calm, Tony licked dry lips before shifting slightly, poking a finger into Steve’s ribs, mumbling almost incoherently, “-talk s’more-”

He felt the rumble as it built in Steve’s chest, recognizing the indulgent chuckle that began the continuing vibration as Steve obeyed. Tony started to relax again, wanting to just- ignore reality. Just for a little while. Just until he was ready.

Then the vibrating stopped again, almost as soon as it started, and through the sudden onslaught of silent, dark, alone, Tony realized that it must have been a question or a statement, and really, only one question made sense in this situation. “No-. Still gone- Just- It helps- the vibrations. Please?” He implored quietly.

The rumbling resumed immediately, slightly- more. Louder?

Tony kept his eyes closed because that was better.

*It was still better to pretend.*
F**k, he was crying.

"You don't know that. You don't know that! YOU DON'T KNOW"- He suddenly screamed, louder and louder and louder- because he knew what Steve would be saying. What empty promises he would be whispering in ears that couldn't hear them.

He wished he could hear them. If he could hear them, Steve might even be able to make him believe them.

He buried his face in Steve's stupid rumbly lying chest and sobbed.

He could feel the heat on his face. Too hot. It was making him sweat, beads of sticky moisture running down the back of his neck. He held his eyes open wide but could see nothing.

It was an industrial spotlight. He should be half blinded by now, eyes squinting involuntarily.

He huffed, shoving the lamp away, not knowing if it had fallen and smashed. Not knowing if it set the room on fire.

Not caring.

There are dots beneath his fingers, dots and indents. But it's not morse. It's braille.

So he can read braille. So-fucking-what.

Okay, so the printout telling him that Bruce is pretty sure that his loss of sight is a chemically induced affliction, and that once his body breaks down the injected chemical, his vision should return, is... interesting, if not comforting.

Thinks.
Should.

And no one said anything about his hearing.

Tony had managed to use the braille reader they 'd given him to hack his own medical reports and read that even the Hydra quasi-scientists weren't sure why his hearing had been affected. Naturally, no one had any idea if his sight coming back would also piggyback to his hearing as well.

After, they'd restricted him to trashy sci-fi novels and romantic thrillers. Hence, "Romanced by The Knave" that was currently dropped open over his face, sightless eyes hidden behind.

So he'd become slightly hysterical and tried to burn through his retinas in an attempt to see something, anything as a result. It was an entirely reasonable reaction by Tony Stark standards, really. Dying B'day party of '10 anyone?

Steve wasn't there when he woke up, and Tony was feeling petty.
Petty, because Steve had been there every other time, was almost always there, and had been, just in general, absolutely freaking amazing.

But he hadn't been there when Tony had woken up, and Tony was feeling petty.

So what if he'd rushed in 10 minutes later, still drying his hands.

"If you don't want to be here, you don't have to be."

"This time it was the bathroom. Next time it will be something to eat, or that Bruce needed a word, or that Clints stuck in a vent again...I'm just saying- you don't have to be here."

"You don't have to say you do want to be here either."

"You don't have to stay with me. Your useless blind fucking boyfriend."

"I didn't forget deaf. I was working up to it."

"Shut up; it's not funny."

"Steve, seriously, I know you're laughing. Shut up."

"Stop- no, don't hug me! Stop- St-

Ten minutes later, wrapped in Steve's arms, Tony muttered, "Sorry."

Steve's chest rumbled in all too familiar way.

"Just nod for yes and shake for no- got it?" Tony asked, leaning forward where he sat cross-legged on the bed, eyes closed as he reached up to frame Steve's face with his hands.

Steve shook his head.

Tony snarled, almost silently, and thwacked Steve's chest, hard. Then he did it again for good measure.

Steve was rumbling again. Tony could feel him from where he was seated two feet away. Bastard.

Tony bit out, "Go on, laugh at my misery yo-"

The rumbling stopped, and Tony tilted his head questioningly for a second.

And then hit him again.

"For god's sake, I was joking. This is- please, please laugh at this fucked up situation, or I'm going to end up crying again, and that really sucked last time. Please- I can cope if I've got you and you're smiling and laughing. Steve. Please. Don't make me smack you again."

The rumble returned.

"Good. Now nod for yes, and shake for no, okay?".

Tony had to stop him shaking again, forcing him into a nod that Steve gave into.
"Okay...so first. Do I look okay?" Tony asked.

It was Tony's turn to get slapped, albeit Steve's hand was a lot gentler on his thigh than Tony had bothered to be.

Tony huffed a laugh, "Nooo - I mean, yes, Okay, you're dating a total stud. But- I just...my eyes are still brown? "

Steve nodded vigorously and pressed a kiss to his lips for good measure.

"Oh. Good. That's good then. I'm still hot. Uh- everyone was okay after the rescue? I mean - I tried to beat the shit out of Clint."

Steve was rumbling again, but he was also nodding, so Tony counted it a win.

Tony leaned forward slightly, "This- Bruce thinks this will wear off eventually, right? He still thinks so?"

Nodding, sure and calm- precisely the answer Tony needed, even if Steve wasn't actually that sure.

"And the hearing?"

Steve didn't nod, but he didn't shake either, bringing a hand up to press a kiss to Tony's knuckles.

Tony heaved a shaky breath, "Non-committal. Okay. I can work with that."

He looked up at Steve with unseeing eyes, an eyebrow quirking playfully, "Wanna make-out with a deaf-blind guy?"

Steve was wise enough to nod.

Something startled Tony from sleep, and for once it was not a nightmare. The bed was moving slightly, in a way disturbingly reminiscent of much kinkier happenings, but also very telling.

Not his nightmare.

Tony couldn't see.

He couldn't hear.

He also couldn't touch.

He'd promised a tearfully pleading Steve, who'd been holding an ice pack over the blossoming bruise beneath Tony's eye, that he'd never try to touch him to wake him from a nightmare ever again.

So he scooted to the base of the bed, pulling his legs up and wrapping his arms around them, and just began to speak.

Nonsense mostly, stories of Dummy and University. Shenanigans with Rhodey. His favorite places, things, sights, attractions, and foods across the world. He sang a few lines of a couple of his favorite songs. Sang the entirety of Steve's.

The bed had long stopped moving, and he figured Steve was either awake, or asleep, but whatever
the case, the nightmare was over. He thought about crawling back up to the top of the bed and wrapping himself in Steve and sleep.

Instead, he said "When they grabbed me, the first thing I thought of was you. And the fact that you'd think I was late again. That I'd let you down again. I wasn't you know. I was early and everything."

Steve, if he was awake, remained silent, and Tony was thankful. He also more than half hoped Steve was asleep.

"It was very 90's B-grade kidnapping movie. Chloroform, Musclebound walking brick walls. Waking up in a moving vehicle, hog-tied with a black bag over my head..."

Tony fell silent for a moment. It was the first time he'd let himself truly remember any of this. Let alone say any of it aloud.

His voice was distant when he continued, "I wasn't afraid. They were so amateur that I laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed. And then again with the chloroform."

"I woke up in the damn hole. No clothes, no idea how long it had been, or what had happened. They didn't let me out again."

"It took me hours to realize that my hearing was fading. I was mostly quiet. Someone had punched me in the mouth, and it hurt to talk. There was no one there to listen anyway. And it was so dark."

"They didn't let me out again, and I didn't see anyone again. Not until Clint and Nat turned up."

There was an air of approaching finality to his voice, and Tony dropped his gaze, for all that it was unseeing, licking his lips before he admitted the last, "I did all of this to myself." He gestured vaguely at the slowly healing cuts and scrapes, skin still tight and sore, bruising just starting to mellow around the edges.

"It was- there was nothing. No noise. Just darkness. The pain- it was grounding I guess. I deliberately hurt myself so that I could feel something. I thought I was going insane. Steve? Was I going insane? Ste-"

Strong arms wrapped around him, hands dragging his own up to frame Steve's familiar square jaw. Steve was shaking his head adamantly, peppering soft kisses on Tony skin as he mouthed unknown words.

Tony could have been crying again. But maybe it was Steve.

"I'm re-designing your tac-vest. Having to wear that bulky walking prison gave me a whole new perspective on what needs streamlining. Like the zip. That thing is freezing. And no wonder you wax your chest. And it's only got like ten pockets, and none of them are waterproofed properly. Also, refrigeration pockets. And pockets to wirelessly charge small electrics. And gadgets and gizmos galore. Write me a list. Seriously, you dream it; I'll build it. SHIELD can fund it. Kidding! - I'm way too expensive. I'm thinking orange as well. Neon orange. With your call sign on the back in white block print. KATNISS. Well, it's either that or LEGOLAS. Sorry, Merida, I can never remember. Tell Nat to drop in her bites at some stage too. They're due an overhaul."

"Stop flipping me off. But- seriously. Thanks."
He’d had a headache since he woke up, and had subsequently refused to get out of bed. He was blaming it on Bruce. The vampire had stolen like 50 liters of blood the night before, and Tony was sure he was now suffering iron deficiency or sanguine dehydration or something.

All for nothing too. His blood work was clean, had been for three days now. The world was still a dark, silent abyss where he existed on everyone else’s peripheral.

So, he was experiencing like, half the stages of grief right now. So sue him.

And he needed to use the bathroom. Like, yesterday.

He was pretty sure the room was empty, but he didn't really care who saw his mini temper tantrum as he let loose with a screech that wouldn’t leave his soundproofed apartment and flailed his arms and legs about like a two-year-old.

He was entitled.

And he really, really needed to pee.

Tony sighed. He was a big blind boy. He'd been going potty by himself for nearly a week now. He could manage.

The walk to the adjoining ensuite was three short steps, carpet becoming tile beneath his feet as he padded to the porcelain throne. Not trusting his aim, (and not wanting to subject Steve to that particularly humiliating clean-up job), Tony de-boxered and sat.

How undignified.

He finished his business, and stood slowly, straightening his clothes as the toilet flushed itself. One of the benefits of being rich as fuck was that everything that could be possibly be upgraded to near sentience *winkwink* already was.

He dragged himself to the sink and shoved his hands under where he approximated the taps should be, and hallelujah, warm water jetted out.

His head throbbed in time with the water pressure adjusting. Nice. Very syncopated.

He gave his hands a quick scrub before ordering "Cool, J" and instantly felt the temperature decrease. That had been the compromise. He could use the bathroom alone, but Jarvis had to be reactivated to monitor.

Tony sighed and splashed his face.

Today officially sucked. In fact, this whole month had just sucked. And if he was going to be blind and deaf forever, this was going to be the Year. That. Sucked.

He straightened, reaching haphazardly toward the towel rack, grabbing the closest fuzzy that graced his fingertips. Probably Steve’s.

Holy fuck, he looked like shit.

The bags under his eyes were dark and heavy, almost shiny with their swollenness, made much worse by the red that rimmed and darted through the bloodshot whites of his eyes. His hair was a
birds nest of tangles and his goatee! His goatee was in complete disarray.

He needed to shave, now. And shower.

God, he looked like he was trying to recover from some hangover he'd had when he was 18, but now, at nigh on 40.

He reached for his trimmer, and leaned in close to the mirror, bracing one hand on the sink as he raised the other to-

Something moved in the background of the mirror, over his reflections shoulder, and Tony stared as Steve came into focus, mouth moving, hands waving frantically, but no sound coming out.

Oh.

Oh.

Steve was reclined back on the bed, propped up by several pillows, a pad and pencil clutched loosely in one hand, the other thumbing loosely at the bare patch of skin Tony's pajama top had ridden up to reveal.

The genius was sprawled languidly down Steve's front, legs straddling Steve's thighs, chin propped up on one hand as he stared intently at Steve's lips.

"Again. Okay- Ugh, something about meat? "

Steve was laughing at him, although, to be fair, the blond hadn't stopped laughing since they'd decided to try this little activity.

Apparently Tony sucked at lip reading. Who knew?

Steve shook his head, and Tony batted at him with his free hand, demanding, "Okay, I give up- let me see."

Steve flipped the notepad toward him, and Tony glanced at it, squawked indignantly and prodded at Steve with his feet, before tucking them under ridiculously muscled calves.

"I do not have cold feet! You're just a furnace."

Steve rolled his eyes. It was an old argument.

Tony huffed. "Gimme that. You're in for it now." He made grabby hands at the notebook, and Steve handed it over, smiling as he watched Tony focus intently on the paper as he scrawled what was no doubt some terrible insult to Steve's ancestry or something.

With his tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth in concentration as he battled the ungainly effort of writing on the same chest he was attempting to lie on, Tony was vibrant.

He was smiling. Smiling, eyes dancing as they focused and darted from one place to the next, seeing.

Steve was starting to believe that even if his hearing never came back, Tony would be okay They would be okay.
Tony wiggled to sit up a little and Steve huffed at the air was pushed from his lungs, catching the deliberate smirk Tony shot him.

Tony raised the note-book meaningfully, and Steve gestured with his best 'bring it on.'

" -eve Rogers is-

Steve reached out, and gently closed his hand over Tony's mouth, meaning pretty obvious, especially considering this had happened at least every other time that evening.

"I was taking again?! Oh man- " Tony let the notepad drop with a rueful grin, letting himself follow it, settling against Steve's chest like a landed fish as he squirmed to get comfortable, glancing up at Steve through his eyelashes, grinning.

*Just so happy to be able to see him.*

Steve wondered how much more it would be possible to love this one infuriating man.

Tony's eyes dipped closed as Steve threaded his fingers into soft, clean detangled curls, letting them tangle about his fingers, tugging gently occasionally.

Tony let out a sleepy sigh, and Steve pulled him closer, jostling the notebook free as he did so.

Staring up from the page were the words, *Steve Rogers is the love of my life.*

The shithead had definitely done that on purpose.

Steve ripped the page out and tucked it into his wallet.

---

It was Bruce who finally sat down and explained it to him.

They used Jarvis to dictate for Bruce, and Tony read straight from the holographic projector before him in real time. It was as close as they could get.

Bruce told him that it was Hydra.

That Nat and Clint had brought back data packs of the various experiments they'd performed previously. Brainwashing. Conditioning. Resetting and re-wiring. Recalibrating humans.

Bucky Barnes was the inspiration.

Tony was supposed to be their holy grail.

Their own subservient genius, malleable and moldable to their every whim and desire. Personality and individuality eviscerated.

Neurotoxin-induced blindness was the first step.

Sensory deprivation and isolation the second.

Physical castration the third.

They'd never made it to the third step.
Bruce honestly couldn't tell him if his hearing would ever return.

But he said he'd never give up, and Tony believed him.

They put the subtitles on for him at movie night.

Until one night, Clint says "Steal me some of Tony's popcorn," and Tony, staring avidly at the screen as spacecraft whiz by, replies, "Get your own, asshole."

And they don't need to anymore.
Hey all, I hope you enjoyed this second part of Senseless as we explore what went down from everyone else's point of view. There were aspects of this I really enjoyed, and a few others less so (things got a bit repetitive). I'd love to hear what you thought and if it was worth the wait - so drop me a line if you want!

Also - I give you an ending.

Um - no beta and proofed/uploaded at 2:30am, so flick me any glaring errors and I'll fix em :)

-Keep an eye out for the very last part of "As Easy As" soon.

And then, onto other things (Being Feline is begging to be written).

Happy Reading :)

End Notes

Sorry about the ridiculous wait on *everything* - Real life is kicking my ass currently. I promise- I'm never going to willingly leave anything unfinished.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!