Winter's End

by ali_aliska

Summary

One year after the Civil War, Bucky Barnes is pardoned, thanks in large part to Tony Stark, and given a chance to return in order to remove the triggers in his head, courtesy of the upgraded BARF tech. Bucky is ready to heal and make amends, but can he atone for all the damage done?

The path forward seems daunting and there are challenges ahead, but may be both he and Tony can find hope in the most unexpected place - each other.

Because no matter how cold a winter, spring always follows.

~~ON HIATUS~~
Post Civil War, Tony/Bucky getting together fic. I'm basically stealing Bucky away and claiming him in the name of Team Iron Man, so heed the tags. Not Team Cap friendly, obviously.

Other than that, this is a slow, sloooow burn fic that focuses on Tony and Bucky coming together, healing, and eventually falling in love. Other characters get their time in the spotlight too and it's a fic about family as much as it is about romance. And because everyone has way too many feelings, it takes time to resolve them all (just look at the word count!). It's a slow ride down the scenic route to Winteriron, so I hope you enjoy!

A/N: Fic is currently on hiatus as indicated in the summary, but it is not abandoned. I don't currently have a return date for updates, but the fic will be finished, hopefully in 2019.
“Friday, can we run that scenario one more time? I want to see how the additional shock absorption units interact with the current structure of the braces.”

“Will do, Boss. Would you like me to determine the delta in the overall integrity of the model?”

Tony tapped his fingers against the cup of coffee cradled in his hands. “Yes, let’s run simulations on every stress factor, I wanna see how much damage these puppies can take.”

The previously paused classic rock music resumed after Friday’s affirmative chirp and Tony’s attention shifted back to the holographic simulation. He swiped away the projected outline of leg brace schematics and scrolled through the rest of the project files.

No rest for the wicked, right, Tony?

He spared one brief thought to each project as he skipped over it—reviewing the latest batch of Accords edits, troubleshooting the new reactor models introduced in Japan last month, some necessary tweaks to the defensive protocols of the Avengers Compound, and a Starkphone update he was supposed to have finished for Pepper a week ago—and kept flipping until he found the file he wanted.

The schematics of the latest Iron Man suit expanded and bathed the lab in familiar blues. After zooming in on the chest plate, Tony began to take the hologram apart piece by piece, effortlessly deconstructing the virtual suit. This particular upgrade wasn’t a priority, not by a long shot, but Tony’s own chest had begun hurting hours ago, the gnawing pain crawling up and down the mostly-healed flesh. Tony’s recovery was a lengthy one, but he knew it was mostly phantom pain by now, distant echoes reverberating through his chest, metal clashing against metal. The only thing that dulled this particular ache was this - updating the suit designs, adding more protections, finding every potential weak spot and compensating for it. Structural reinforcements, back-up arc reactors, parachutes, insulators—

A chill ran down his spine and the icy pins and needles forced a tremble into his left hand as a memory of frost-covered floors forced its way into his head. Tony hurried to put the coffee mug down and clenched both of his fists on the table before squeezing his eyes shut.

Don’t think about the pain, don’t think about the damn cold, just focus on the suit.

The logical part of his brain knew this was his feeble attempt to cope with Siberia. The betrayal, the fight, the subsequent hours spent in a freezing bunker before rescue arrived, all of it left a mark—physical and otherwise—and just like after New York, Tony was using the suits to deal with the trauma, driven by some irrational need to make the suits invulnerable. To make himself invulnerable too.

A childish thought, he was well aware, but at the end of the day, working on the suits did chase away both the chill and the pain and it was far better than his earlier coping mechanisms. Everyone preferred Tony’s diligent tinkering to him drowning himself in alcohol.

With renewed determination, Tony focused on the schematics again and got to work.

It was Friday’s tentative “Boss?” that brought him back to reality and glancing at the clock at the corner of the holographic screen, Tony realized he spent over two uninterrupted hours on the suit. They felt like minutes to him.
“What’s up, my girl?”

“Colonel Rhodes is requesting permission to enter the lab.”

Tony scoffed. “You can tell Honey Bear he doesn’t need permission to do anything.”

“I will certainly let him know.”

“Thanks, Fri.” He watched the doors open and raised his voice to be heard across the lab, “I mean, he is the boss, after all!”

Tony heard Rhodey’s answering snort and continued to watch, this time with a familiar pang of guilt, as Rhodey skillfully maneuvered his wheelchair through the controlled chaos of Tony’s lab.

Getting to call Rhodey ‘the boss’ brought a certain amount of satisfaction at least. It was the truth too, a well-deserved change in the hierarchy. Years of military and leadership experience on and off the field, pragmatism, the ability to deal with anyone and everyone, from a scared civilian to some rambling villain to the slimiest politician in Washington, and years of dealing with the worst of Tony’s crap made Rhodey more than qualified to lead the Avengers.

“Damn right I’m the boss,” Rhodey said when he reached Tony, “but last time I entered without notifying Friday, I almost got a face full of fire extinguisher foam for my troubles, courtesy of your demented robotic children.”

“Aw, you love Dum-E and you know it. You’ll appreciate his extinguisher skills the next time you’re on fire.”

“Unfortunately, that happens far too often when I hang out with you, Tones.”

The words were meant to be teasing, but Tony’s heart clenched nonetheless, especially now that the wheelchair was in full view and Tony could no longer ignore it. It served as his constant reminder that people around Tony did get hurt far too often. Five months had passed since the ‘Superhero Civil War’ (Tony hated the name, but that was the trending hashtag at the time and it stuck), but Rhodey’s recovery was still moving at a snail’s pace, even slower than Tony’s. Tony knew he needed to accept the time Rhodey’s body needed to heal, but having patience was nearly impossible when all Tony could see was this brave, incredible man who sacrificed so much—too much—now confined to that wheelchair.

There was a reason why Rhodey’s braces were always number one priority on Tony’s to-do list; he was almost ready to build a working model and then it’d only be a matter of a few more months before Rhodey was back up on his feet. Everything else be damned, Tony would get his best friend walking again.

Thankfully, Rhodey seemed to be handling his injuries far better than Tony, but that was because, in addition to his other amazing qualities, Rhodey also had the patience of a damn saint.

“So, what brings you to my humble abode, Honey Buns?” Tony asked before glancing at the clock again. “I didn’t miss our dinner date again, did I?”

“No, no, I just wanted to talk, that’s all. You know that spending so much time down here by yourself isn’t good for you. You need to go outside, see the sunshine.”

“Hey, I spend time outside!”

“Right, right, and when is that? On your way between the Accords Council sessions and SI Board
meetings?” The disapproval in Rhodey’s voice was as thick as molasses. “You need to lighten your load, Tones. Not everything is your responsibility and there are people here who can help you. Your life doesn’t have to revolve around work.”

“I swear to god, Rhodey, if you tell me I need a hobby, I’ll scream.”

“Nah, you have plenty of hobbies. What you need is rest and—oh, I dunno, I’m just spitting here, maybe have some fun once in a while?”

Tony tried not to scrunch up his face in displeasure. It wasn’t so easy to rest and ‘have fun’ when the Council and the media were constantly breathing down their necks, foreign governments demanded reparations, SI stock fluctuated with every gust of wind, and you found your entire worldview in shambles—after spending several years in denial despite all the signs. Oh, there were so many signs, but Tony had always been good at denying the obvious.

He said none of that to Rhodey. Instead, Tony pulled out the best set of puppy dog eyes he could manage in the attempt to end this conversation. “I just have a lot of projects, that’s all. We’re still dealing with the aftermath of everything that happened with Ross and the trial. Once we pick up the pieces, I’m sure things will lighten up.”

“I’m sure they will. I just worry about you, that’s all.”

“You’re such a mother hen, Rhodes, it’s embarrassing.”

Rhodey’s lips twitched. “It’s cute how you think you’re not the biggest mother hen in this entire building, Tones. I get it though, really, I do. There is a lot on our plates, which is why I’m wondering why you’d add something else to yours.”

Uh oh, that was Rhodey’s ‘we need to talk’ face and it never meant good things for Tony; that face was the inevitable precursor to a stern lecture and plenty of ‘What were you thinking?’ and ‘Oh god, Tony, not again’.

“I had a—let’s call it an interesting conversation with one of the Council aides earlier today,” Rhodey continued. “Lorraine is her name, I think? Sweet kid, she’s gonna go far, although I hope she gets herself out of politics.” Rhodey had been drumming his fingers against his thigh, but he stopped when he pinned Tony with a steely glare. “And while she was telling me about her masters thesis at Yale, she happened to mention last Monday you had an informal discussion with the Council members regarding a—oh, shoot, what was it she said again? Oh, right. A pardon.”

The way Rhodey spat that word out said all that needed to be said about his opinion on the idea.

“The disapproving furrow between Rhodey’s brows didn’t budge. “That doesn’t make it better. You should’ve told the Council you won’t have any part in this. Sure, maybe we can’t stop them from
going through with it and maybe we’ll have to provide your Retro Framing tech for the
deprogramming, but you sure as hell don’t have to be personally involved.”

Tony slumped onto his forearms, letting his gaze settle on the tabletop first, eyes absently skating
across the bits and pieces of his projects, before he looked at Rhodey again. “That’s the thing though.
I think I do want to be involved.”

“…Excuse me?”

Ton could hear both the incredulous tone and the beginnings of righteous anger, so before Rhodey
could start in on him, Tony hurried to explain.

“The Council brought it up first, yeah, but it’s something that’s been on my mind for a while now—
you know, once I actually had the chance to breathe and to think. I know we’ve all had our, uh,
disagreements a few months ago—”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling it now? Because I’ve been calling it destruction of property and
attempted murder.”

“—but isn’t it in everyone’s best interest to get rid of any and all traces of Hydra? The tech I have, it
may be the only thing that can help with the deprogramming and I’m the one who knows the tech
best.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to help at all.”

Tony scrubbed a weary hand over his cheek; his laugh was tinged with bitterness. “You wouldn’t
believe how much easier it is to keep a clearer head when you haven’t just witnessed your parents’
gruesome murder with the killer and his bestest best friend standing a foot away from you.”

“See, that’s exactly why I think this is a bad idea. How can you even think about a pardon after what
happened?”

“We both know what Hydra did to him though. God, Rhodey, we saw the files. Hydra was a lot of
things, all of them fucking awful, but oh boy, did they take their torture documentation seriously.
Those fuckers didn’t spare a single details, so it wasn’t—” Tony swallowed and forced the phantom
images of scribbled words and ghastly images out of his mind. “It wasn’t his fault.”

Rhodey’s expression softened. He was obviously conflicted, but it didn’t take long for hurt to
overtake mercy.

“I get that, I do, but what happened in that bunker, that wasn’t mind control, okay? Fuck, Tony.” The
name was a plea to listen. “You don’t know what it was like. I was the one who had to sit by your
bed while you struggled with every breath because your damn chest was caved in. I had to listen to
those doctors list every fuckin’ thing those assholes did to you. Every bruise, every cut, every break.
Do you know how much internal bleeding you had?”

Tony hated hearing the worry in Rhodey’s voice, the hurt he knew intimately from spending his own
hours at Rhodey’s bedside, begging him to wake up. “I can probably guess. I was there too, you
know.”

“Yeah? Then why the hell would you want to be involved again?”

Looking away from the indignation in Rhodey’s eyes—on Tony’s behalf and it still took Tony by
surprise sometimes to see the proof of his friend’s love so clearly—Tony took a moment to
contemplate the question.
Why would he want to help? After all, there were still plenty of nights he spent waking up in cold sweat as the images of his mother’s dying breath—his father’s name on her lips—lingered in his mind for hours. Other nights were filled with cold, blue eyes and the shield coming down, over and over and over, in an infinite loop, until his mind forced itself to wake up, but Tony supposed those dreams weren’t relevant here.

He didn’t want to pretend his pain and the betrayal he suffered weren’t real, but in the bright light of day, away from the nightmares and the bad memories and the bone-chilling cold, it was easier to think beyond his own pain. Allowing that pain to drive his decisions was no better than letting Hydra win—Hydra, the same monsters who tortured an innocent man and who killed Tony’s parents. Howard and Maria were not the only victims that December night and Tony wouldn’t—couldn’t—pretend otherwise. He would do what was needed to be done, on spite alone if he had to, even if he knew he might lose a part of himself in the process.

Tony’s voice was quiet, but determined when he said, “I want to be involved because it’s the right thing to do. He deserves a second chance.”

This time, when Rhodey’s gaze softened, it was full of an affection Tony didn’t have the words to name.

“They never deserved you, you know.” Rhodey shook his head when Tony scoffed, but didn’t press on. “Are you sure about this then? I know the pardon itself will probably take months to push through, but once it’s done and once he’s here, it will mean having to see him every day, guiding him through the deprogramming, dealing with all this… baggage. Are you sure you can handle that?”

“I’m sure, Rhodey.”

Tony wasn’t sure, not at all, but no one could ever accuse him of backing down from a challenge—or having working self-preservation skills. “And if I can’t handle it, I’m sure you’ll be here to provide valuable guidance and snarky commentary, right?”

Despite Rhodey’s best efforts to maintain his serious visage, the comment had the intended effect of drawing out a smile. “Do I even have a choice in the matter? I mean, you’d be dead without me, Tones.” Rhodey laughed at Tony’s enthusiastic nod to confirm that claim. “It is just one pardon, right? None of the other assholes are coming back?”

“God, no. My guilt only extends so far and none of them have the excuse of Hydra screwing with them for decades. However,” Tony had to caveat, “now that Ross is out of the picture, others have been shifting towards more sympathetic stances on a whole slew of issues and while I am perfectly happy with Ross rotting away in some dark hole for all eternity, a more humane Council does mean someone somewhere might end up getting the rest of them pardons too, especially if some big scary villain shows up. I won’t be there to encourage them along though.”

“Oh good. At least you’re not completely crazy.”

“Nope. Only a little bit,” Tony quipped and flashed his patented grin. Neither mentioned that there was little feeling behind Tony’s smiles these days.

Rhodey looked up to the heavens with a sigh, probably contemplating how much of a mess this was going to be and asking whatever heavenly deities were listening to give him strength, but when he looked back at Tony, Rhodey was a man who accepted his fate. “Alright, I’ll settle for a little bit of crazy. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but lets get Bucky Barnes a goddamn pardon.”
Murmurs.

Echoes of mechanical beeping.

The shuffle of footsteps against linoleum floors.

Sound filtered through the darkness surrounding him, drip by drip. The darkness permeated every part of him, a thick and unyielding presence; it held him down and didn’t let him breathe, but he knew the darkness was safe. The sounds, however, those he knew to fear because the searing, bright lights and the cold always followed.

And where there was light and where there was cold, there was also pain.

*I don’t want to wake up.*

*Please, no more pain.*

Sometimes, the pain was a fire burning him from the inside out. Sometimes, it split him open, tore him apart into pieces. He wanted to scream, but the darkness still filled his lungs to the brim.

*I can’t do this again.*

*Please, no more.*

As the noises drew closer, every part of him steeled itself against the cold and the pain, but the chill never came. When the darkness receded and when he drew his first breath, the air was warm, something spicy and sweet, like an inhale of steam from a hot mug of tea.

*Didn’t my mother drink tea? Why can’t I remember her?*

The next breath was easier and the outside world, miraculously warm and quiet, coalesced around him; his slugging brains still struggled to make sense of it all.

There was a voice now, somewhere above him.

“Mr. Barnes?”

This voice was different too, nothing like the ones from before.

“Mr. Barnes, are you with us? You are safe. You are in Wakanda.”

There were no barking, harsh tones of German, no rolling r’s and cumbersome consonants of Russian. The accent was soft and comforting, like a lullaby.

*Did my mother sing lullabies too?*

Sweet air filled his lungs again and his mind finally registered the name—Barnes—but before he could draw his next breath, a sudden, raging wave of memories swept over him.

*Falling. Falling until there’s nothing but pain. It’s cold, it’s so cold, and he’s in pieces. They’re everywhere. They’re inside his head. Please, just let me die. Soldat? Ya gotov otevchat’. Explosions, destruction, and fire. There’s so much blood on his hands. Darkness and death, one after the other,*
over and over. The man on the bridge—Captain America—no, not a mission—Steve. Flying machines falling from the sky, engulfed in flames, sinking into the water. Running, away from the darkness and death, but it always follows.

He whimpered, drowning in these memories.

December 16, 1991. Ya gotov otevchat’. There’s snow and ice on the roads. It’s still so damn cold. The other soldiers are dead. Stark. Howard—no, not a mission—Tony. Tony Stark. Howard’s dead. There’s so much blood on his hands again. There’s so much guilt and shame, but pain and instinct take over. The Soldier takes over. Fighting in step with Steve, just like old times, but it doesn’t feel the same, doesn’t feel right. The world is sudden agony, but it feels lighter. He feels lighter. They run again, they always run, but even the warmth of this place doesn’t reach far enough inside.

“Mr. Barnes?”

With the darkness gone and the memories slotted back into place, Bucky slowly opened his eyes.

Without a conscious command, his mind began to catalog the details of his surroundings, a habit so ingrained into the Soldier within him, it was as natural as breathing. The soft sheets of cotton beneath him. The daylight filtering through the open window and the soft breeze that carried an unfamiliar birdsong. The room was small, but neatly organized. Everything had its proper place. Medical machines surrounded his bed and the empty cryostasis tank took up most of the space at the opposite wall. There were cameras well-hidden in several corners of the ceiling.

Two doctors, civilian man and woman, stood with King T’Challa on the other side of the bed. No visible weapons. The King appeared calm and composed, hands resting comfortably behind his back, but his eyes gave away the hints of worry hidden beneath the cool exterior.

Bucky took stock of his own body next, surprised to find there was no pain. A novel and disorienting experience, but a welcome one nonetheless. His every limb and muscle ached though and he assumed it was the side effect of cryostasis. He never had the chance to experience these aches before. The pain was usually swift and always overwhelming.

King T’Challa approached him cautiously and smiled.

“Mr. Barnes, my name is T’Challa. We’ve met before, I hope you remember. You’ve been in cryostasis for a while, so you may feel some joint and muscle weakness, but there should be no lasting effects.”

“How long?” The words felt like shards of glass in his throat. Bucky coughed several times and sat up at a gingerly pace when the glass of water appeared before him. The male doctor smiled kindly when Bucky accepted it, but immediately backed away to a safer distance.

Bucky ignored him in favor of his own thirst, drinking greedily. Even the water tasted sweet here.

“How long?” he repeated when he was done, pleased that his voice sounded stronger.

“It has been approximately ten months,” T’Challa said and gave the exact time and date, as well as their location; Bucky appreciated the details. Cryostasis had always messed with his perception of time and space, although he supposed the torture sessions had something to do with that too.

There was no cold, probing hands here though. No screams, no begging, no stench of blood and antiseptic.

Bucky looked back to the open window. It was the beginning of summer back home—home, what a
strange, foreign concept for a man like him who had no home—but here, in this tiny, wondrous land hidden away from the rest of the world, the sun always shone its brightest and its comforting warmth still clung to his skin.

It was also encouraging to know he didn’t miss another decade or two of his life.

Bucky swung his aching legs over the side of bed, feeling more human, more like himself with each passing second. To be fair, he didn’t quite know what ‘himself’ really meant these days, but he could leave that existential crisis for another day.

He glanced at T’Challa and the two doctors again. They were all standing just far enough away to give Bucky some much needed space, for which he was grateful. King T’Challa was formal as always, posture perfect, every inch of him exuding the air of royal authority. From what Bucky remembered of his first month here—the only month he spent out of cryo—T’Challa was always clad in a dark, well-fitted suit that probably cost a small fortune. Today was no different and privately, Bucky thought it was a good look on him. Another novel, strange thought and Bucky couldn’t remember the last time there was enough room in his head to contemplate something as frivolous as simple attraction.

Despite the King’s best efforts to mask it, Bucky could also see the exhaustion pulling at T’Challa’s features.

“Mr. Barnes, my doctors would like to perform some scans to ensure you are recovering as expected. They will need to place several sensors on you, but nothing more invasive than that. Would it be alright for them to approach you?”

Bucky nodded and the two doctors wasted no time. They attached the tiny nodes of Vibranium to his temples, measured his vitals and whatever else the portable scanners in their hands deemed necessary to examine, trading a few murmured words of Xhosa Bucky didn’t recognize.

The Soldier deemed both of them harmless. Bucky always tried to ignore this steadfast shadow buried deep within his mind, but he knew the Soldier was right, so he let the two doctors do their work and paid them no mind. Instead, he wondered why no one else was here. He remembered how frustrated Steve was with Bucky’s decision to go into cryostasis and it seemed out of character for Steve to be missing now.

His wary gaze fell back on the King of Wakanda.

“Why did you wake me up? Did something happen? Is everyone alright?”

“Please do not worry, everyone is doing as well as can be expected and all of your teammates still reside at the villa. When you are ready, we can take you to them. However, there has been a rather unexpected development concerning you and I thought it best to wake you.” T’Challa hesitated before adding, “I understand the presence of your friends would have made your transition out of cryostasis less distressing, but I felt it would be best to speak to you in private first.”

Several warning bells went off in Bucky’s head, but he tried to quell the suspicions until he heard what the King had to say. In all honesty, he appreciated the privacy. He barely knew any of the others and Steve’s presence would’ve been… Well, it would’ve be complicated, at best. Their whole relationship had grown complicated, every sharp edge sharpened further the more time they spent together.

At times, fueled by memories of a distant life lived, Bucky would remember the affection he held for that tiny, brave kid with newspaper in his shoes, always sporting a black eye and a look of righteous
determination. The memories were faded, but the echoes of them remained. However, there were other times too, where Bucky would look at *this* Steve and see a complete stranger.

He wondered if Steve felt that like too sometimes, but he doubted it. Steve actively tried to ignore the reality of the last seven decades and all the ways Bucky had changed.

The two doctors stepped back as soon as they completed their scans and Bucky let out a mental sigh of relief. He was able to tolerate their presence, sure, but the proximity of anyone, even those he deemed safe, made him uncomfortable. The touching in particular made him want to bolt.

Thankfully, Bucky’s personal space had been restored and when the female doctor informed T’Challa that everything was ‘within acceptable parameters’, the King thanked them both before asking them to leave.

When they did, T’Challa gave Bucky a more genuine smile.

“I am sorry for being so cryptic. I wanted to give you some sense of privacy and now that we are alone, I can speak more frankly.” T’Challa cleared his throat. “While the world had been blessedly peaceful in the year you spent in cryostasis, the Accords had seen significant improvements; the relationship between superpowered humans and the rest of the world is changing. The Sokovia Accords have now been accepted by 124 countries and many of these countries, your United States included, have drafted and passed their own legislation, formed their own governing bodies to oversee the implementation and the ongoing improvement of their laws.”

T’Challa offered more details, but Bucky’s mind drifted as echoes of memories began to fill up his head. He never got the chance to read the original Accords that set off the fight between Steve and Stark, but in the month that followed, the fugitive Avengers made it clear the Accords (and Stark himself) were nothing but bad news.

“It all comes down to politicians who want to control us, Bucky. They want to force us to do their bidding, to keep us from helping those who need it most. Peggy would’ve never agreed to this, she would’ve seen it for the lie that it is. She knew whose hands were safest.”

“The Accords landed us in the Raft, enough said. That prison is meant for the worst of humanity, but who do they put in there instead? Superheroes. And then Stark has the balls to show up, pretend like he was there to help. I should’ve known the bastard was lying, I should’ve never told him about you and Steve.”

“The Accords were always flawed, but Tony could never see past his ego. I said I supported them, but I was only trying to keep control of the situation. At the airport, when we fought, I knew I was failing. Tony and the others were too far gone and I had to make the decision to let you and Steve go. Ross would’ve killed you otherwise.”

“I lost my family because Stark decided to break up the Avengers over those Accords. I haven’t seen my wife and babies in months. I guess I should’ve seen it coming after Stark created Ultron and nearly got us all killed.”

“The Accords were made to keep people like me on a leash. That’s why they locked us away. We are powerful and people fear power. Fear can drive people to do terrible things, makes them weak and easier to manipulate. Stark was afraid too. I remember his fear and if I ever see him again, I’ll make sure he remembers it too.”

The voices mingled together, growing louder, expanding, pressing against his skull, and it was so much—*too much*—
The Soldier’s deep, visceral growl forced Bucky’s mind back into order. He let out a shaky exhale. The Soldier hated the voices. He hated being told what to do, what to think, who to hate, who to kill. Bucky hated it too, even more than he hated having anything in common with the remnants of the murderer Hydra forced him to be.

“Mr. Barnes?”

_Oh god._ Bucky’s face flushed with embarrassment. T’Challa had been calling his name, hadn’t he?

He clenched his fist several times, an involuntary gesture as he tried to push the Soldier back to some dark corner of his mind.

“Sorry, I just—It just feels like I always have too much noise crammed into my head. Drowned out everything else for a minute. But I’m here, sorry—”

“No apologies necessary. It is very likely you are still feeling the aftereffects of the cryostasis. Do you feel alright now?”

Bucky’s firm nod prompted T’Challa to continue. “To conclude on my earlier point, the political climate in the US has shifted. It is more sympathetic, more _humane_, in large part thanks to the efforts of Colonel Rhodes and Mr. Stark. There have been great strides in balancing both the oversight and the protection of superheroes. Of course, no solution is perfect, but I truly believe we are on the path my father would have been proud to see.”

The fondness in T’Challa’s voice and the soft look in his eyes were contagious and Bucky’s own lips twitched, working to remember how to form a proper smile.

He looked down to see his own hand absently brushing over the soft cotton of the sheets now. Another one of his nervous habits—the Soldier had no tells, but Bucky had plenty—but feeling the different textures beneath his fingers grounded him, made the world around him _real._

“I’m glad things are going well with the Accords, but what does that have to do with me?”

“The international Accords Council gathered for a formal meeting yesterday. The US delegates proposed a motion, one which was already approved by the US agency, and it passed with the full approval of the Council. I must say, I was surprised to see this particular development, but I cannot say I am not also pleased.”

T’Challa noticed Bucky’s obvious confusion; he met it with a tilt of his head and a smile. “As of yesterday, you, James Buchanan Barnes, have been pardoned of any and all crimes committed against the United States of America, and have received permission to return home to obtain specialized help to relieve you of the Hydra brainwashing. If the treatment is successful, you will be reintegrated back into society with all the rights and responsibilities afforded to its citizens.”

Bucky knew he must’ve looked like a deer caught in headlights, an expression unbecoming of the Winter Soldier, but he couldn’t help his surprise.

“I don’t understand. A pardon? They would let me go back, just like that?”

“There are some conditions, of course, but they are meant to protect both you and the people around you, and I believe they are fair, given your, uh—” T’Challa cleared his throat again. “Your potential to be a threat. You will be restricted to the Avengers Compound until such time you are deemed free from the Hydra triggers.”

Bucky couldn’t argue it wasn’t a fair restriction. “But how are they going to get rid of the triggers? I
remember what happened before cryo. No offense, Your Highness, but none of your doctors knew what to do with my head. I got triggered and attacked one of them, it’s the reason I went into cryo in the first place.”

“Yes, I regret we were unable to help you,” T’Challa admitted. It was obvious he saw any sort of failure as a direct reflection on him as a leader. “But there is other technology available now, promising technology, created and modified specifically for you by Tony Stark himself, and it has a realistic chance of helping you. The conditions of the pardon stipulate Mr. Stark will be personally involved to ensure the technology is utilized to its full potential.”

“Wait—Tony Stark? As in—‘Howard Stark’s son’ Tony Stark?”

No, that made no sense. Howard’s son had no reason to help him.

The bitter taste of guilt slid down Bucky’s throat as the images resurfaced, the look on Stark’s face—the look of a man betrayed and forced to relive his grief—still fresh on Bucky’s mind.

At the time, the fight that followed was driven by adrenaline and instinct. When Stark attacked, the Soldier took over, running on pure self-preservation. It was also easy—to fall back into place at Steve’s side, fighting together as one. That was instinct too.

Later, when he had time to think and catch his breath, he wished Stark would’ve blasted off more than that wretched arm. He did kill Stark’s parents. How could there ever be forgiveness for that?

By the patient look on T’Challa’s face, Bucky assumed he drifted off again.

“Sorry—I just—I don’t understand why Stark would be involved. How can that be a good idea?”

“I understand your reluctance, Mr. Barnes, given your confrontation with Mr. Stark in Siberia. Frankly, I still don’t understand what possessed him to attack you in the manner he did, but I suppose none of us were in the right state of mind that day. However, I assure you, Tony Stark has been one of the biggest supporters of the amended Accords and the efforts to protect superpowered beings. He has also spent a considerable amount of time and resources to augment his technology specifically so it could be used by you.”

All Bucky could do was blink in confusion, brain scrambling to line up T’Challa’s words against his own thoughts. T’Challa thought Bucky was afraid of being sent back to Stark?

There might’ve been apprehension, sure, a healthy fear of the unknown, but his real reluctance stemmed from the fact that he was the last person to deserve any help from Tony Stark.

The reality dawned on him a moment later.

T’Challa doesn’t know…

He didn’t know Stark attacked because he was forced to watch the murder of his parents just before realizing the man he considered a friend had kept that information from him for years. Any man would’ve snapped under the circumstances and frankly, Stark used a considerable amount of restraint. The capabilities of the Iron Man suit were obvious, both from their short interaction and from the constant whispers among Hydra’s ranks, covetous and fixated on the tech’s destructive powers. Stark could have killed him with one shot, but Bucky also remembered Berlin and wondered if Stark would’ve even needed the suit to get the job done.

The memories were filtered through the monochrome grays of the triggers, but he still remembered this vulnerable, baseline human going up against a rabid super soldier, wholly fearless and quick on
his feet, clever and graceful.

The Soldier rumbled his approval at the memories, fascinated and impressed; Bucky kept ignoring him. He dragged his attention back to T’Challa, who continued, incorrectly interpreting Bucky’s stunned silence as confirmation of fear.

“I have spent a lot of time working with Mr. Stark over the past year and I will personally vouch for the integrity of his character. He wants to help. He knows what Hydra did to you and he understands it is in the best interest of everyone to ensure no one else can take control of you again.”

Bucky couldn’t disagree with that either, but this whole thing, this idea of simply getting to go back without repercussions, to be promised a safe passage home all so Tony Stark could help him get his mind back was too much to process. Did he wake up in some strange, alternate universe?

“What about the others? Are they getting pardons too?”

“Unfortunately, no.” T’Challa appeared apologetic, but Bucky could read between the lines. While the King was downright protective of Bucky, his opinion of the others had always been far less lenient. “The choices they made were their own and the sympathies of the US government have their limits.”

“So if I take the pardon and leave—”

“There is a chance you may not see your friends again, yes.” T’Challa gave a noncommittal shrug and looked through the open window, observing the beautiful greenery outside. “It is, however, possible they will be able to return someday as well. As we face bigger and more frightening threats, desperation may overshadow the need for justice.”

“And what if I don’t take the pardon?”

“Then you are welcome to remain here with the others. When you first arrived, Mr. Barnes, I said I wanted to help you find peace. That promise still stands,” T’Challa said and turned back to face him. The King’s gaze was honest and kind, the way it had always been since their arrival in Wakanda. Bucky had never stopped being grateful for that. T’Challa’s goodwill warmed some small part of his heart, even if the rest of him didn’t feel worthy.

“However,” T’Challa continued, “I truly believe going back to the US and using Mr. Stark’s technology is the best option you have right now. It is your best chance to finally find the peace and freedom you deserve.”

All Bucky could do was give an absent nod. It wasn’t agreement, per se; he still needed time to think this through.

“Do any of the others know?” he asked.

“No, not yet. I wanted to give you the opportunity to absorb the information first and form your own opinion before taking any action. You may discuss this with the others at your discretion. I’m certain they will find out eventually.” Here, T’Challa rubbed his temple. “May I be honest with you, Mr. Barnes?”

“Please.”

“I worry the reactions of your friends will not be driven by what is best for you. Their opinions of the Accords and Mr. Stark are hardly objective—and while some of it maybe justified, I cannot claim knowledge of the Avengers’ interpersonal relationships—their gut reactions will be to stop you.
You’ve been asleep for the past ten months. They have not and their time here, their isolation, has not tempered their ire. On the contrary, their tongues are sharper than ever and to add to that Mr. Rogers—allow me to call it possessiveness, as well the potential for simple envy of your situation, I do not foresee them thinking this pardon is anything but a bad idea.”

Bucky let out a sigh. So things haven’t changed much, have they? He shoved aside the desire to crawl back into cryo, no matter how tempting the lure of non-existence tended to be. This chance at freedom was tempting too. Things like this didn’t just fall into his lap every day, so it would be foolish to reject it outright, and while he dreaded the discussion with Steve and the others, he wouldn’t run from it either. He just needed to make up his own mind first, before everyone else’s voices filled his head.

“Thank you for everything, King T’Challa.” Allowing him this privacy may have been a small gesture to anyone else, but to Bucky, it meant the world. “I have a lot to think about, but whatever happens, I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

The King’s answering smile was warm, just like the air of his homeland, and another shard of ice in Bucky’s chest gave way to warmth.

T’Challa carefully closed the door behind him, silencing the chatter of the voices in the other room. The rogue Avengers were at first surprised to see Mr. Barnes up and about; that surprise quickly turned into demands to know why they were not informed earlier. When prompted about Mr. Barnes’ return, T’Challa gave them a vague answer about the limitations of cryostasis and the need for periodic awakenings; it was a poorly constructed lie, but no one cared enough to pay it any mind. Ms. Romanoff, of course, lived to be suspicious, but for now, she was of no concern.

Having decided to let Mr. Barnes tell the others about the pardon, T’Challa headed back to his temporary office at the villa. Selfishly, he wanted nothing to do with that conversation, but even if that were not the case, he was still a king with a country to run. His presence here was a courtesy to Mr. Barnes, but even that kindness had its limits.

However, as he sat at his desk, the surface of it covered so entirely with paperwork and tech T’Challa was hard-pressed to name the color of the wood, he struggled to find his focus. His mind kept drifting back to the phone call from a few days ago.

With a tap, the hologram projector popped up in front of him, displaying Stark’s face; Stark gave T’Challa a friendly wave when the connection was established.

“Mr. Stark, I must admit, I was not expecting a call, but it is good to see you nevertheless.”

“Same to you, your Highness,” Stark replied with this patented smile, “how are things in beautiful Wakanda today?”

The relationship he and Stark developed over the last year was professional, but amicable, and T’Challa grew to respect the amount of work, dedication, and genuine care Stark had shown in dealing with the aftermath of the Superhero Civil War. Stark was nothing like the media-created image of him and it had been a surprising, but pleasant experience to see his true nature reveal itself.

They exchanged pleasantries, but eventually Stark’s smile morphed into a more serious expression. “So I, uh—I got some interesting news for you, Your Highness. During the last six months, we’ve been doing some negotiating here on the US side of things, about someone who was involved in our little fight a year ago. We put together a proposal that’ll be put to the full council in the next official
meeting and because I’m certain it’ll pass, I wanted to get the ball rolling.”

To T’Challa’s eyes, it appeared Stark was steeling himself for something.

“Here’s the thing.” Stark paused again and tapped his two pointer fingers against his lips. “Friday, this line’s been fully secured, right?”

The Irish lilt of Stark’s AI replied in the affirmative and T’Challa could no longer ignore the growing suspicion he was not going to like this conversation.

“A secure line, Mr. Stark? I think it is time you tell me the exact reason for this call,” T’Challa said, trying to impart an appropriate level of authority. He was a king after all.

“Right, right, need to cut to the chase,” Stark mumbled, almost to himself, but the moment of indecision ended quickly when Stark squared his shoulders and looked back at T’Challa, his gaze resolute. “The US is planning to grant a full pardon to James Barnes and with my help, deprogram the Hydra triggers and hopefully get him back into society once he recovers.”

T’Challa’s eyes widened slightly, but he tried not to let his surprise show. He didn’t realize the US government was at all sympathetic to Barnes and he certainly didn’t expect Stark to be sympathetic.

That train of thought was quickly discarded. The more pressing issue was Stark contacting him regarding Barnes. What exactly did Stark know?

Feigning confusion, T’Challa replied, “This is a surprising turn of events, but I am happy to hear it. However, I do not understand my involvement in this. If you are worried I will vote against it, I can promise you my vote will be a resounding ‘yes’.”

There, that sounded sufficiently convincing, T’Challa thought, right until Stark looked heavenward, took a deep breath, and gave him a thoroughly unimpressed look.

“Listen, T’Challa, I respect you an’ all, you’re a great guy, but let’s cut the crap. I know you’re housing the rogue Avengers. They’ve been in Wakanda this entire time.”

“That is a bold accusation to make, Mr. Stark.”

Stark had the audacity to roll his eyes. “Come on. Really? It took Friday less than two days to track them down once I actually decided to look. You may be sneaky enough, Your Highness, but aside from the assassin-spies, the rest of those guys are about as subtle as a train wreck.” He shrugged as if to say ‘What can you do?’ “Rogers literally sent me a package. Through the mail. Honestly, I’m surprised I’m the only one who tracked them down so far.”

T’Challa maintained his neutral facade for one more moment, his mind running through all the potential consequences of admission, but at this point, it was obvious he had no other choice. He sighed and dropped his head in his hands.

“Very well. Yes, they are here.” He looked back up. “What exactly do you plan to do with this information? You know Wakanda will suffer the consequences if it is revealed I provided refuge to known criminals.”

“Yeah, not to be rude, but you should’ve thought of that before you let them chill at your place.” Stark’s voice had adopted an icier tone with that statement, but it softened again on his next words. “Listen, I honestly don’t care where they are and what they’re doing. We have enough shit to deal with right now without needing to track them down. The US Council doesn’t care about them at the moment and frankly, neither do I. So, unless I think it’s absolutely necessary to avoid some disaster, I’m not going to spills the beans.”
The knot in T’Challa’s stomach unfurled, but the worry didn’t dissipate fully.

“How many others know?”

“Just me and Friday.”

“Good. I—Thank you for not revealing the truth. When I offered them a safe haven, I simply did what I thought was right. Honestly, I think my decision was driven by guilt more than anything else, after having falsely accused Barnes of my father’s murder.”

Stark’s face took on a look of understanding. “No, yeah, I get that. I think we’re all just doing what we think is right and honestly, it’s better that they’re in Wakanda under your watch anyways. The last thing we need is all of them gallivanting across the continents and causing more trouble.”

T’Challa couldn’t help but agree, given what he had seen from the rogue Avengers in the past year. Some of them were certainly more volatile than others. Unpleasant company too.

“Very well. I will relay the information to Barnes. Of course, he may decline and choose to remain here with his team, in which case, I cannot force his hand.”

Stark nodded. “It’s completely up to him. After being Hydra’s puppet for so many years, he deserves that much. Now, because we gotta keep your secret hush-hush, I don’t want you involved any more than that. Given his Winter Soldier skills, it’s reasonable to say Barnes would just hear about the pardon through the grapevine, so if he’s game, tell him to get himself to a US embassy far away from Wakanda. Somewhere that’s not Germany or Russia because they’re still pretty sore about the damages we left behind, but anywhere in Scandinavia is a good pick. You think he can make his way up north without making a mess?”

T’Challa inclined his head in a nod. “I have no doubt he can arrive in one piece. He did spend quite a bit of time in Romania completely undetected.”

“A valid point.” Stark huffed, the noise turning into a humorless laugh when he shook his head. “Not gonna lie, I still can’t believe we’re releasing the Winter Soldier into the wild just like that. I mean, I get what the Council is trying to do and I’ve been on board since the beginning—I had to be, to get the tech ready—but I really hope this isn’t going to backfire.” He ran his hand through his short hair and cleared his throat. “That’s for me to worry about though. Sorry about dropping this bomb on you like this, but I’ve never been known for my subtlety.” There was that media smile again, or at least an attempt at one, because Stark’s expression quickly turned somber. “I was serious about keeping this a secret, T’Challa. I wouldn’t put your people at risk intentionally.”

Thinking back on that phone call, as well as his other interactions with Tony Stark, T’Challa firmly believed it was in Barnes’ best interest to take the help Stark had offered, but T’Challa also knew none of the other fugitive Avengers would see it that way. He could only hope whatever decision Barnes made would truly be his own. Stark was right, he deserved that much.

Bucky spent the last two days watching his claustrophobia build and build as the others refused to leave his side, spending the time informing him of their lives in the months he had missed.

Apparently, he didn’t miss much. Everyone still hated everything to do with Stark and the Accords and none of them seemed to have made any attempts to change their situations, although they missed no opportunities to complain about it. T’Challa was right, the isolation had done them no favors and Bucky wondered if staying here, in beautiful Wakanda on T’Challa’s dime, had also made them complacent.
Steve in particular made sure to stay close—uncomfortably close. He was always around, in Bucky’s space, always *touching* - a friendly arm around him here, a hand on his knee there, with pleading, soulful eyes following Bucky wherever he went.

It set Bucky’s teeth on edge. Part of him felt guilty for the reaction; after all, Steve was his friend —*best friend*, supposedly, in some former life Bucky struggled to remember—but the Soldier had no such qualms and Bucky had to consciously keep himself from breaking Steve’s hand whenever it touched him. The Soldier’s need for violence was not an approach Bucky appreciated, but he wanted the space to breathe just as badly.

When he couldn’t take any more of the chatter and the complaining and the awkward declarations of how badly they all missed him—hard to believe when it came from people who barely knew him—Bucky decided he put off the pardon issue long enough.

After asking Steve to speak with him in private, they ended up in an unused room at the villa. They settled around a table, Steve beaming at him, obviously eager to spend the time together, chattering away again about this and that. Bucky took a deep breath and tried to force his mouth to smile too, but the effort was mostly fruitless.

“Listen, Steve, there’s—there’s something I need to talk to you about.”
Steve gets a chapter all to himself! I'm sure he'll handle the whole pardon thing like a reasonable adult. You know, just like he handled the Accords and Tony's parents. This guy is stellar at conflict resolution, you guys.

Steve couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. After everything they went through, after everything they sacrificed…

The edge of the table groaned beneath his hands when he leaned over and he had to let go, forcing himself to remain calm.

“Bucky, this whole pardon, it’s obviously a trap. It’s a set-up. I don’t understand how you can’t see that. Don’t you remember what happened? How we ended up stuck in Wakanda in the first place?”

Steve knew his tone was jumping back and forth between pleading and frustrated, but it didn’t seem to matter. Neither was effective in convincing Bucky of a damn thing. He still sat there, stiff as a board, nervously running his hand across the marbled surface of the table, refusing to look up at Steve. It still baffled Steve, this whole argument over a ridiculous farce of a pardon.

This day started off on such a high note too. Steve was greeted by the Wakandan sunshine on his morning run with Sam, his heart was full of hope again because Bucky was awake and with him, but now, out of nowhere, his best friend wanted to leave them all behind?

Steve was sympathetic, really, he was. “I understand you want to get rid of Hydra’s brainwashing. I do too, Buck, but this isn’t the answer. T’Challa, he’s—I’m sure it’s just a matter of time before he finds something and if he doesn’t, we’ll go looking for something ourselves.”

“We both know that’s not gonna work.” Bucky’s murmur was directed at the table. He still refused to look up. “T’Challa’s people tried everything they could find and they failed. We’re fugitives, we can’t run around the world looking for answers. Stark’s tech is my best chance and T’Challa doesn’t think it’s a trap. He said Stark really wants to help.”

Steve barely held back a disbelieving scoff. Of course T’Challa would fall victim to Tony’s charm too, it was only a matter of time. Steve was surprised the King hadn’t already given up all of them just to get into Tony’s good graces.

“Tony is really good at sweet-talking people and getting them to believe what he wants,” Steve said, trying to make Bucky see the truth, but all he got in response was the narrowing of Bucky’s eyes.

“He can’t be that good at it. He didn’t convince you on the whole Accords business.”

“The others and I spent years with Tony; it’s easier to see through his charm once you know where to look.” Steve released an exasperated breath. “Look, I’m not saying Tony is a horrible man, but even when he does have good intentions, his ego gets in the way and people end up getting hurt. T’Challa doesn’t have the advantage of experience, he doesn’t know Tony like I do and he hasn’t seen all the damage Tony has done. How could he possibly know what he’s talking about?”
Now Bucky looked up at him, but instead of understanding, Steve saw something a lot closer to annoyance.

“T’Challa is not an idiot. He’s not that easily manipulated.”

“He believed you were a murderer easily enough.”

“I am a murderer, Steve!” Bucky’s eyes flashed with outright fury. “And even if I didn’t kill King T’Chaka, every piece of evidence still pointed to me. T’Challa had every right to go after me, but as soon as he knew the truth, he helped me. So don’t go saying all these things about him, he did more for us than we deserve.”

“I’m sorry, Bucky, you’re right,” Steve said, going back to the pleading, apologetic tone. Bucky seemed more receptive to that. “I never meant to imply T’Challa wasn’t on our side. He’s a good man and I will always be grateful to him, but none of that means he’s right about Tony.” Steve sat down in an attempt to put himself on the same level as Bucky. “Look, it might be true. Maybe Tony really did have a change of heart, but that doesn’t mean he’ll protect you from others. As soon as you get there, they’ll put you in cuffs, lock you in a cell, and throw away the key—or worse. I can’t let that happen, I can’t lose you again. It’s you and me, remember? To the end of the line?”

Steve smiled, every inch of his expression nostalgic and fond; it worked in softening the icy steel behind Bucky’s gaze and in moments like these, he almost looked like the man Steve remembered—his Bucky, who smiled and joked, full of energy and self-confidence, standing proudly by Steve’s side as they faced the world. This Bucky was rarely like that; more often than not, he was made of rough edges and fewer words, quiet and distant, a stranger in Bucky’s body, but then Steve would get these glimpses and he knew it was only a matter of time. Despite everything that had happened, they could still go back to how things used to be.

Wanting to take advantage of the tentative lowering of Bucky’s ever-present walls, Steve scooted his chair closer, leaned in, and took Bucky’s hand into his own. The immediate tension that ran through Bucky’s frame broke Steve’s heart, but he didn’t let go. Between waking up from cryo alone and this pardon, was it any wonder Bucky was stressed?

Steve gave Bucky’s hand a comforting squeeze.

“We’ll figure something out, we always do. You’re out of cryo now and the best thing we can do is stay together. You, me, the rest of the team. We’re a family and we don’t ever leave family behind.”

Bucky didn’t pull away from him, but the strain in his body remained and now there was a strange, disbelieving look in his eyes too.

“Why didn’t you tell T’Challa about what happened at the bunker?”

The change of topic stopped Steve short. “What do you mean?”

“T’Challa—he doesn’t know the real reason Stark attacked us. He thinks Stark just snapped and went after us—”

“But Tony did snap—”

“Steve, I killed his parents!” Bucky hissed and Steve felt him trying to pull away.

“No, Bucky, you didn’t, it wasn’t you, it was the Winter Soldier—”

These reassurances fell on deaf ears. Bucky ripped his hand out of Steve’s grasp, jumped out of his
seat and took several steps back. He turned his back to Steve, hiding his face, but his shoulders remained hunched and his hand did the clench-and-release motion over and over, a nervous gesture Steve didn’t remember his Bucky ever having.

“I am the Winter Soldier,” Bucky declared, in a tone so fatalistic, Steve didn’t recognize it either. “I murdered hundreds of people and that includes Howard and Maria Stark. I can remember every detail of that night. The unnatural quiet, the crunch of snow under my boots. I can still remember the crack of Howard’s bones under my fists, the look in Maria’s eyes as I strangled her. Do you remember that, from that damn video?”

Bucky turned to look at Steve and the guilt in those eyes was overwhelming. More than anything, Steve wanted to comfort Bucky, but when he took a step forward, Bucky took an equal step back.

“None of that matters, Bucky, it wasn’t you.” Steve couldn’t understand why this was so hard to accept. “This is exactly why I didn’t tell T’Challa. I didn’t tell anyone because it’s none of their business and I didn’t want them judging you for something that wasn’t your fault—”

“Wait, you didn’t tell anyone? Not even the other Avengers?”

“No. I didn’t see any reason to.”

“So what? They all think Stark went crazy and tried to kill us for no reason?”

Steve scrubbed a hand over his face and tried not to groan. They were going around in circles. Why couldn’t Bucky see Steve was only trying to protect him?

“They all know Tony pretty well, Buck, they know what he’s capable of. Nothing I say—or don’t say—would change their opinion of him.”

“Has Lang even met the guy before?”

“You know what I mean,” Steve snapped and regretted it instantly. It wasn’t Bucky’s fault. He didn’t understand the team dynamics, he wasn’t aware of all the awful things, all the mistakes that took place before the final confrontation with Tony. Bucky didn’t have the context to understand why the rest of the Avengers were so angry and mistrustful, even a year later. Tony broke apart up the Avengers and betrayed everything they stood for by siding with corrupt politicians like Ross.

Now, to add insult to injury, Tony was trying to take Bucky away too, but Steve would not—could not—let that happen.

Bucky let out a frustrated sigh and ran his hand through his hair. “This arguing isn’t helping anything. We’re going around in circles.”

Yes, yes, exactly, we’re finally on the same page.

“You’re my friend, Steve, and I—I know we were real close, before, and you sacrificed a lot for me, more than I would ever ask of anyone. So I wanted to be honest about this, make sure we got a chance to talk.”

Steve’s smile rose unbidden. This was a welcome change. He took a step forward, wanting to embrace Bucky and forget this whole, stupid argument, but he stopped in his tracks when Bucky continued.

“I still want to go back. I want a chance to be free, to figure out who I am without Hydra slithering around in my head, so I need to go back and take the help Stark is offering.”
Steve felt his whole world shift at a nauseating tilt. “Bucky, what are you talking about? You already know who you are. You’re my best friend, my partner, and—and you just need some time to remember that! Going away is not going to solve anything!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t stay and risk losing it again. I will not risk hurting someone just because I wasted this second chance.”

“And I can’t risk them hurting you,” Steve countered. With a determined stride, he closed the distance between them. He hated this distance, hated it with a burning passion that made his heart ache, but like this, with Bucky right here, pressed against the dresser and safe in the circle of Steve’s arms, the pain and longing grew quiet.

Steve’s hands were gentle when they settled on Bucky’s shoulders to rub soothing circles, trying to get rid of the rigidity in Bucky’s muscles. God, he was so tense, like a frightened animal and for a moment, Steve hated Tony for putting them in this situation.

“I’m just trying to stop you from making a mistake,” Steve said, “I don’t know what they’re going to do to you, but I know it’s going to be awful. They’ll just use you, like they tried to use all of us. I can’t—I won’t let you leave.”

When Bucky looked at him, it was with the eyes of a stranger; it made the defiant look on his face both achingly familiar and disturbingly foreign. A shiver ran down Steve’s back.

“You won’t let me?” Bucky repeated, tone low and flat, and something in Steve told him to back away, but he had never been one to listen to that instinct.

“You’re just confused, that’s all. I mean, you’ve been in cryo for ten months, of course you’re not thinking straight, but that just means it’s my turn to watch out for you. Do you remember, the way you always used to watch out for me? I know what’s best for both of us now, I promise.”

Steve felt a tentative brush of fingers over his left wrist and wanted to sigh in relief. Bucky understood, Bucky was reaching out for him—

A sharp cry accompanied the sharp-shooing pain and the audible creak of bones when Bucky’s hand closed around Steve’s wrist and crushed, yanking the hand away and pushing Steve aside in a single move.

“What the hell was that for?” Steve couldn’t help his indignant outburst, cradling his injured wrist to his chest. Thankfully, Bucky released that death grip before something actually snapped; the bruise would heal quickly, but it still hurt like hell.

Steve never expected Bucky to react violently, but admittedly, he may have also forgotten about Bucky’s considerable strength. The missing metal arm and Bucky’s tendency to hunch in on himself and take up as little space as possible had the unintended effect of lulling people into a false sense of security.

“I spent the last seventy years having others do the thinking for me.” Bucky regarded him with cold eyes and that disregard—that mistrust—hurt Steve even more. “I’m not letting it happen again. Not even when it’s you.”

“This is completely different! I’m not Hydra, I’m not trying to brainwash you! I’m just trying to do what’s best for you!”

“Then let me decide what’s best for me! I deserve that much! I just—I just want to—” Bucky didn’t finish. He clenched his eyes shut, like he was holding back tears, and Steve watched him take a
shuddering breath.

“Bucky, please—”

“No, don’t. Goddamn it, I can’t do this,” Bucky added under his breath, his hand doing that clench-and-release thing again. A second later, he headed for the door, putting distance between them.

The aching wrist made Steve think twice about following.

Their eyes met when Bucky turned around. “Steve, I’m going. I’m leaving tomorrow night and I’m turning myself in. It’s my decision and even if it’s a mistake, it’s my mistake to make.”

He walked out, leaving Steve stunned and unable to process any of what just happened.

There was one thing he didn’t doubt though. Bucky’s behavior, his inability to see reason were proof of his vulnerable state. Tony and the others, they would take advantage of that, they would manipulate and hurt and break him.

Steve began to formulate a new plan. Maybe if he spoke with the others, they could present a united front and convince Bucky to stay. Yes, he should’ve done that from the beginning; he should’ve remembered they were stronger together.

With a determined heart, he left the room to find the others.

As Steve looked around, the reactions of his teammates ranged from disbelief to outright anger—to no one’s surprise. He felt the same way.

“Okay, so here’s what I don’t get - why is he the only one getting a pardon?” Scott asked, hints of his resentment coming through. “I mean, I have my little girl waiting for me at home too. Why don’t I get a pardon?”

“Lang, just shut up, okay?” Clint barked. His resentment was harder to miss. “I have three kids and a wife I haven’t seen in a year, and at least when you finally got to call your ex, she didn’t tell you to, and I quote, ‘Go to fucking hell, Clint, we’re getting a divorce’. I mean, shit, I finally find a way to call Laura after all those months and she drops that fucking bomb on me!”

Clint jumped out of his seat, a violent motion that sent the chair toppling over to the floor with a loud clatter. He started pacing back and forth, trying to work off the angry, seething energy. The others barely reacted. These outbursts weren’t exactly new.

“Then, the goddamn cherry on top of that cake! She tells me Stark has been helping her with the farm! Stark! It’s just like that son of a bitch too, throwing his money around and buying his way out of every problem.”

Steve understood the need to vent, but they were wasting valuable time. Before Clint could start in on another tangent, Steve stepped around the overturned chair and grasped Clint’s shoulder in a sign of solidarity.

“I know this is hard, Clint. You’re right, you should be with your family right now. All of us should be home right now instead of hiding. We will be, soon. We know what will happen when a bigger threat comes knocking on their door. They will need us and we will answer the call.”

Steve thought back to the telephone he sent off months ago. He spent so long agonizing over every word in that letter, trying to explain himself to Tony, trying to apologize.
The phone never rang, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

Clint deflated with a grimace. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry. I just hate everything about this.”

“Trust me, I know. That’s why we need to stop Bucky from leaving. We all know this pardon is a lie. They’re just trying to lure him back, to finish what they started. If he leaves, we might never get him back.”

Ignoring his overturned chair, Clint walked around Steve to flop onto the couch next to Sam. “Hell, if they get their hands on Barnes, they’ll probably stick him in the Raft, like they did with us.”

Scott raised his hand to get their attention again. “But didn’t we see on the news, like months and months ago, that Ross went to jail partly because he put all of us in the Raft?” He stopped and lowered his hand gingerly when everyone’s unimpressed glares zeroed in on him. His laugh was nervous when he added, “That’s what the news said, didn’t it? Something about it being a violation of the actual Accords and a whole bunch of other laws or whatever?”

“You can’t believe everything they say on the news,” Sam replied, calmer than Clint would have been. Steve was grateful to have Sam here with him. “Politicians like Ross, guys like Stark, they have too much money and influence to be put away for real. I bet Ross is on some tropical island, sipping martinis all day, laughing with all his other rich guy buddies about how gullible the rest of us are.”

Steve didn’t disagree, but they kept getting off topic. “Exactly, men like Ross would love to get their hands on Bucky. That’s why I need all of you to come with me. We need to make him see what a mistake it would be to go back.”

“Is it really a good idea for us to ambush him?” Natasha spoke up. She’d been silent until now, perched on the arm of the couch, listening and observing. “Six against one, that’s not really a fair fight.”

“We need to present a united front. Show him we’re a team, a family, and that we all need to stick together.”

“Steve’s right,” Wanda chimed in. “We look out for our own, especially when it means protecting them against people like Stark.”

Steve gave Wanda a grateful smile for the support. Natasha didn’t appear convinced, but she didn’t argue her point further, which was just fine. Steve didn’t want to waste any more time.

With Sam joining him at the front, they all headed to Bucky’s room. Steve assumed Bucky locked himself away, probably brooding, feeling guilty again. Bucky had nothing to feel guilty about though. He was just confused when he lashed out; Steve understood and there was nothing to forgive.

The door was predictably locked and a tentative knock prompted no response, so Steve didn’t waste time on any more niceties and used his strength to tear the lock out of the ornate, wooden door.

“Um… Wasn’t Barnes supposed to be in here?” Sam asked when they went in and found the room empty.

“Maybe he’s outside in the gardens. Probably just needed some fresh air,” Steve said, already heading out of the room, but a pointed cough from Natasha stopped him. She held out a piece of paper.
Steve took it hesitantly and his heart clenched when he unfolded it to see Bucky’s name.

_Everyone_,

*I’m sorry I had to leave without saying goodbye, but nothing I can say will convince you to let me go. I don’t want to fight any of you. Thank you for everything you’ve done to help me.*

*Steve - don’t do anything stupid. You know leaving Wakanda is a bad idea, so take care of the others. I’ll try to call when I get the chance, to let you know I’m fine.*

- *J. Barnes*

So the ‘tomorrow night’ part was a lie.

Steve vaguely registered Clint catching the note as it dropped from Steve’s lifeless hand; Clint began reading the message to others, but all Steve could think about was the fact that Bucky was gone.

*This can’t be happening.*

“Well, that sucks.” Sam rubbed the back of his head and scoffed. “What the hell was he thinking?”

“Damn, how does Stark even have Barnes under his spell?” Clint added with a sneer. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter, we’ll just go and bring him back and—”

“You will do no such thing.”

Everyone turned to face T’Challa, who stood in the doorway, framed by the rays of the setting sun, head held high and his gaze resolute; in that moment, even Steve could admit he was looking at a true king.

“If you decide to go after Mr. Barnes, any and all hospitality on the part of Wakanda will be revoked. You will deal with any retaliation you face on your own.” T’Challa’s already serious expression turned more severe when his eyes narrowed. “And may I remind you, you are wanted criminals in several very powerful countries.”

Steve, however, wasn’t so easily cowed. “How could you let Bucky do this?”

“I did not let Mr. Barnes do anything. This was his decision to make.”

“You told him it was going to be safe! You told him Tony wanted to help him!”

“I told him nothing I did not believe to be true,” T’Challa replied, ignoring Clint’s muttered expletive in the back. “In the end, it does not matter. Mr. Barnes is gone and within days, he will be back on American soil. All I can do is advise you to remain here and not interfere. As soon as I have news, I will let you know how he is doing.”

“You still should’ve discussed this with me.”

“I discussed the matter with the relevant party. I will discuss it no longer.” T’Challa paused and let his gaze slowly drift to the pieces of the broken door scattered conspicuously on the floor. “In the future, refrain from damaging any more of my property, regardless of how… distraught you may be, Mr. Rogers,” he reprimanded, speaking as if they were children.

T’Challa didn’t bother meeting Steve’s eyes again and with a turn of his heel, he left, but Steve swore he picked up a frustrated “I need a bloody drink,” when T’Challa was out of earshot of everyone else.
If this were any other day, Steve would’ve been mortified by the damage his impulsive actions had caused, but today he didn’t care, neither about T’Challa’s threats nor his damn door. Bucky was out there, alone, walking right into a trap.

A sense of impending doom settled over Steve, running its bony, frigid hand down his spine. Was this it? Did he fail? Did he lose Bucky again?

The King’s promise of information did nothing to help his unease.

The others began talking all at once, explanations, ideas, plans to get Bucky back, but before Steve could react to any of it, Natasha silenced the room with a forceful “That’s enough!”

When she had everyone’s attention, she continued in a more measured tone. “None of this will work. You can’t forget who you’re dealing with. If the Winter Soldier wants to disappear, he will and we will never find a trace.” She turned to give Steve a sympathetic grimace. “I’m sorry, Steve, but there’s no way we can get him back now. All we’ll be doing is risking our location and our safety and it will be for nothing. We will not get him back, not like this, but you have to remember, Bucky is smart. He can take care of himself.”

“I know that,” Steve said, but the words held little conviction.

Natasha didn’t bother pointing that out. “All we can do is wait and hope that Bucky can take care of himself if things go bad.”

She ushered everyone else out of the room, but Steve stayed behind. Every part of him wanted to protest, to run out the door and find his best friend, but he fought the instinct to fight. Natasha had been his voice of reason since the beginning, since the days of Hydra and Project Insight, maybe even before. She was right. He had no choice but to let this happen.

*I hope you’re alright, Buck. I hope you don’t regret this, but if you do, if these empty promises—from T’Challa, from Tony—if they come crashing down, remember you’re never alone. When trusting Tony turns out to be your biggest mistake too, I’ll be here, to the end of the line.*
This particular plot bunny just wouldn't go away, plus I needed to get some exposition out of the way, and I thought it would work best through an outsider. So, this is from an original character POV. Hopefully I did it justice.

The universe was conspiring against her. It was the only explanation.

A sleepless night spent tossing and turning. Her morning cup of coffee, spilt all over her favorite blouse (ruining both her outfit and leaving her decaffeinated). The rest of the morning was spent putting out metaphorical fires because the supply shipment was late, everyone was behind on their foreign relations training, and no, she didn’t know why the training room was a balmy fifty degrees (although if she were a betting girl, she’d say one of the newbies finally got on Friday’s last nerve).

Of course, the new personnel paperwork still hadn’t been signed by the Regional Office—no surprise there, even if it was their job to keep track of these things—and because lagging paperwork had the power to stop the entire planet from spinning, she spent the rest of the day alternating between pointless phone calls and wanting to bang her head against her desk.

Who knew working with superheroes involved this much paperwork?

Now, to add insult to injury, she was stuck in traffic and she was going to be late and damn it, she should’ve stopped for coffee.

Alice Blackwood, former SHIELD agent and current Managing Director of the US Avengers Compound, looked at the never-ending line of cars in front of her, sighed, and dropped her head to the steering wheel.

Most days, her current job had some great perks. Today was not one of those days.

She glanced back up. Nope, not even a foot of progress. Her eyes drifted to her hands—and damn, she didn’t realize she was shaking.

Okay, so maybe it wasn’t a vengeful universe that made this particular day such a mess. It wasn’t the paperwork nor the whiny trainees nor Friday’s latest prank.

The real reason was this little excursion. She was on her way to the airport to pick up the newly pardoned Bucky Barnes and just thinking about that man made her want to scream in a futile attempt to quell the anxiety and the anger that dwelled just beneath her breastbone.

She had spent more than two decades working for the government—first in the Air Force, then with US Intelligence, and finally with SHIELD—so challenging situations were par for the course. From arrogant douchebags thinking they owned the world to life-and-death firefights, she had dealt with it all, and handling the current, new, and potential superheroes, as well as the regular, run-of-the-mill humans manning the day-to-day operations of the Compound? That was a walk in the park.

So the fact that a mere thought of dealing with Bucky Barnes sent her blood pressure sky-rocketing only made the anxiety worse. She was disappointed in herself, but maybe she’d just gone soft. After
all, she hadn’t been a real agent since SHIELD fell, since her whole life crumbled, and now this
pardon was spitting in the face of all that damage, all that death…

She knew it wasn’t healthy to let her anger take so much control; Barnes wasn’t meant to take the
brunt of that anger either. He was a victim of Hydra and it wasn’t fair to hold the crimes of others
against him, but there was also no way she could separate Barnes from Rogers. Every time she tried
to close her eyes last night and sleep, she thought of Barnes, who was mere hours away from being
in their home. Barnes would quickly morph into Rogers and then it was Rogers coming back too—
and oh god, Romanov would come back too and they didn’t deserve it, there was too much blood on
their hands. Would they look her in the eye and tell her the deaths were justified? That they couldn’t
always save everyone?

Alice knew damn well about sacrifices and pragmatism, but she also knew about grief and she swore
the first person to preach to her about the greater good was getting clocked in the face.

With those thoughts swirling around in her head, there was no hope for sleep.

Barnes wasn’t the true source of her anger, but he wasn’t completely innocent either, Alice reminded
herself. She thought back to the way Mr. Stark was in constant pain for months after he came back
from Siberia. He never talked about, always avoided Alice’s inquiries, but the long recovery pointed
to some severe injuries—injuries he shouldn’t have received on a secret rendezvous with two allies.

Stumbling onto rescue mission logs (Alice was convinced it was Friday’s doing) made it painfully
clear Mr. Stark didn’t fly himself home either. He couldn’t and he spent hours in the Siberian cold,
waiting for help.

Alice didn’t know the details of what happened, but something did happen, and Barnes wasn’t
brainwashed then. He and Rogers didn’t hesitate to leave Mr. Stark to die.

As she forced her hands to stay still, Alice noted wryly the reason she spilt her coffee this morning
was because her hands had been shaking all day.

You’re a professional, dammit, so act like it. Mr. Stark personally asked you to do this, to make sure
it’s done right, because it’s your job. Yeah, it’s not fair, but newsflash, life isn’t fair and—

The loud and persistent honking of the car behind her snapped Alice out of the self-administrated
lecture and prompted her to drive forward. The traffic was finally moving.

“Alice Blackwood, Managing Director of the Avengers Compound, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”
Alice extended her hand to the man she assumed was the US Embassy representative delivering
Barnes from Sweden and into the hands of the US government—her hands, as it were.

The man smiled politely and shook her hand, running through brief introductions. The group
consisted of several more men, all US military. There were no visible weapons, but Alice didn’t
doubt there were several concealed beneath their uniforms.

Alice exchanged the expected pleasantries and apologized for her tardiness, but most of her attention
quickly pivoted to the man standing in the circle of military muscle.

Objectively, Bucky Barnes was a physically imposing figure, tall and muscular, but seeing him here
for the first time, standing hunched in on himself, wearing a ratty pair of jeans and an old sweatshirt,
Alice’s first thought was that he look painfully young.

After years of hearing the stories about the Winter Soldier from other SHIELD agents, the image of
Barnes in her head had built up to something far more grandiose, but this was a clear reminder he was only a man, and more than ten years her junior (if one didn’t count his decades spent as a brainwashed Hydra agent).

Barnes’ eyes were scanning the surrounding area, likely on constant alert for any threat, before they finally landed on her. Alice held his gaze and with all the will she could muster, gave him the same dazzling, ‘I’m so happy to be here’ smile she gave the rest of the group. His wary look remained however and Alice had to hold back a bitter laugh. Young or not, he was still the Winter Soldier and she was certain he could see right through her.

Ah well, in for a penny.

She tilted her head when she addressed him. “Mr. Barnes, I’d like to extend your first official welcome to the United States.” Despite the amicable tone, she made no attempt to shake his hand, but that was for his benefit as well as hers. Barnes had about two feet of personal space around him that screamed ‘Do not touch!’ and Alice had no desire to breach it.

He inclined his head in a nod of his own and gave a polite “Thank you, ma’am, I’m glad to be home.”

Alice never imagined the Winter Soldier to speak so softly either. The contradictions did nothing to soothe her anxiety.

Not wanting to drag this out any longer, she confirmed the relevant details of the transfer with the Embassy delegate to ensure everything was in order. Thankfully, the mountain of paperwork that came with this particular newcomer was already on her Starkpad, no paper needed, so she walked away from the group empty-handed, save for the super soldier obediently following her to the car. It made a chill run down her spine to have him at her back, but with another deep breath, she was back in control of her emotions.

“We’ll be taking my car back, Mr. Barnes, and I will give the relevant details of your stay once we arrive at the Compound. If you have any safety concerns, let me know, but I used to be a trained SHIELD agent and this car is one of the most secure in our fleet. We wanted to make as little fanfare as possible about your arrival and having a whole welcoming committee to greet you would’ve drawn a lot of unnecessary attention, media and otherwise.”

Damn, she was rambling to cover her stress. A turn of her heel when she reached the car put her face-to-face with Barnes who stopped when she stopped. She added with a strained smile, “I’m sure this is all a bit overwhelming, but I hope to make your transition here as painless as possible.”

The contemplative look in Barnes’ eyes, one that said he was constantly evaluating her every move, still lingered, but he did manage a small smile; his smile looked about as relaxed as hers did. “I appreciate all of your help.” He gave the bustling airport and the shimmering skyline in the background a once-over before looking back at her. “I’m very lucky to be back.”

Far luckier than you deserve.

With a nod towards the car, Alice took the driver’s seat, with Barnes next to her in the front, and they were back on the highway in minutes.

“And here are your living quarters, Mr. Barnes. Now, usually, our new members, guests, and trainees stay in the West Wing, but for the time being, you will be staying here in the East Wing, which houses the Avengers and the senior staff who live here permanently, myself included. It isn’t
our standard procedure, but given your, uh—” Alice wrecked her brain for the polite way to say ‘You’re a trained killer who can literally lose his mind with a well-placed word or ten’, but there wasn’t one, so she settled on, “Given your current situation, this is the best fit, with team members at hand who can best handle any challenges that may arise.”

She paused to allow Barnes a moment to survey the rooms. “Now, as bad luck would have it, all of our illustrious superheroes are out for the day, probably saving the world—or stuck in countless meetings, sometimes you can’t tell, but there is someone you get to meet right now. Her name is Friday and she is responsible for keeping all of us safe and making sure everything in this place runs smoothly. Say hello, Friday.”

“Hello, Mr. Barnes, and welcome the Avengers Compound. If there’s anything I can help you with, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

As expected, Barnes looked up at the sound of the voice. Alice herself couldn’t get rid of that habit, even after a year of working here. “Friday is an artificial intelligence, or AI for short, created by Mr. Stark. By far the most advanced in the world, on the bleeding edge of AI technology.”

“You flatter me, Ms. Blackwood,” Friday replied, “I am really just a rather complex computer system. I was initially designed to be the main user interface for Boss’ Iron Man armor, but have now been integrated into the entirety of the Avengers Compound.”

Barnes appeared confused, but curious, so Alice tried to explain further. “The way Mr. Stark explained it to me is that she’s a learning machine. The more you interact with her and the more situations and issues she deals with, the more autonomous she becomes.”

“So she learns from experience, like we do?”

“Essentially, yes. It’s really amazing, to be honest. If I didn’t already know, I don’t think I’d be able to tell she’s artificial.” Friday always fascinated her, a lot of Mr. Stark’s work did, and Alice was about to indulge in that enthusiasm, but she caught herself in time. This was neither the time nor the appropriate company.

“If you have any questions or need help, Friday is your best option. She’s always online, so all you have to do is call her name. As a side note, that does also mean she monitors the Compound 24/7. Definite lack of privacy,” Alice said as she shrugged, “but I guess that’s the price you pay for living in a superhero facility. Personnel quarters do operate in a default privacy mode where Friday monitors threats less intrusively, but given your, uh, situation—”

“I understand. It’s fine.”

Barnes’ weary resignation was unsettling too. “I’m certain that will change once you’ve fulfilled the requirements under the pardon,” Alice added, not knowing why she was trying to make Barnes feel better. “And honestly, you get used to having Friday watching over you. I promise she doesn’t judge.”

“I certainly do not. My judgement is only reserved for those who keep setting the training room on fire.” Friday’s voice took on a distinctly put-upon tone, which probably explained the recent temperature drop the trainees were complaining about.

Alice shook her head, taking a moment to marvel at an AI system that could hold a genuine grudge. “Moving on to the next point. Has anyone gone over the terms of your pardon with you?”

Barnes nodded. “Yes, once the, uh, the excitement of my arrival at the embassy died down, one of
the delegates sat me down and explained how the pardon is supposed to work.”

“Good, that means less work for us now, but to reiterate some important points - until further notice, we ask that you remain on the Compound grounds and not leave them without a designated escort, which would likely be one of the senior team members.”

Alice crossed the room and picked up a small circular magnetic pin from the night stand. “This is your access badge. It will get you around the Compound. There are sensors at every entrance and if the light’s green, you’re good to go.”

She dropped it into Barnes’ outstretched hand, squashing the automatic compulsion to offer help to pin it to his collar.

“The other key element of your pardon is your treatment using Mr. Stark’s Retro Framing technology. He will be the one to personally oversee the sessions, but he is currently out of the country and won’t be back until tomorrow night, so nothing will begin until next Monday at the earliest. It’ll give both of you time to prepare and I’m sure you’d like some time to get your bearings straight.”

The response was once again a nod and a quiet “Thank you, ma’am,” and this polite and respectful routine went against Alice’s every expectation; it unsettled her and it aggravated her somehow, bringing that simmering anger she’d been ignoring right back to the surface. Arrogance and righteousness she could handle, but this solemn, deferent act was almost insulting. She didn’t need him to be grateful for every little thing!

Alice grit her teeth. Damn it, she was being irrational. Maybe she wanted to be angry—or maybe she even didn’t know what she wanted anymore.

It didn’t matter. She was almost done and once this little tour was over, she could escape to her office, turn on her favorite TV show, and drown herself in the biggest glass of wine she could find.

“I know this is a lot to take in, but I do live on-site and I am available if you have any questions that come up later. For the time being though, is there anything else I can answer for you?”

Barnes watched her carefully, running through god knows what kinds of scenarios in that super soldier head of his, before asking, “You said you were a SHIELD agent?”

Alice refused to let herself flinch.

“Yes, I was. I suppose I never really gave a good introduction of myself, did I? I worked with SHIELD for a number of years. Air Force and US Intelligence before that. I’ve been here with the Avengers for only a year, but not to worry. Unless we’re getting attacked by aliens, any issue that comes up is nothing I haven’t seen in my twenty years of experience.”

Barnes nodded and let out a quiet hum; walking over, he sat on the edge of the bed, running both his hand and his eyes over the decorative pillow that sat atop the comforter. Alice wasn’t sure what else he expected from her, but then it dawned on her that his only real interaction with SHIELD was during the Project Insight fiasco.

“I know me saying this is not evidence enough, but I am not nor have I ever been a Hydra agent. I know SHIELD was infiltrated, trust me, I spend countless nights agonizing over it, but the agency wasn’t just Hydra agents. Most of us were decent people who were working to protect our country.”

That came off more defensive than she intended, but Barnes nodded with more confidence when he looked up at her.
“Don’t worry, I believe you. I know Hydra agents and you’re not one of them.”

“I appreciate the accurate character assessment, but may I ask why?”

Alice expected general platitudes, but Barnes’ smile turned weary and for a moment, to contrast that earlier image of youth, he looked so tired and ancient. “No Hydra agent I’ve ever known carried that much grief inside them.”

Alice’s whole body ran cold. The stillness of her heart didn’t last however, the cold replaced by rage, erupting and spreading through her, from her heart to her fingertips. She felt her cheeks flush, but with all the willpower within her, she managed to raise an eyebrows in feigned surprise.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to, Mr. Barnes.”

“I don’t need to have super soldier senses to see how much you’re hurting—or to see how much you hate me.” She watched him swallow uncomfortably, but he held her gaze. “May I ask what it was that I did?”

God, the way he asked that—earnestly, with no trace of arrogance or defensiveness, as if he was resigned to the fact that her hate must have been justified.

Alice was the one to look away first, even if she knew it’d break the facade she was trying to maintain. Her hands were shaking again and she could feel the anger choking her. She wanted to scream, but there was still some logical part of her pointing out that the man sitting here was not the true source for her anger. A victim of horrible circumstances. A case of misguided loyalty, at worst. No, the true targets of her anger were hiding away somewhere, running away like cowards and never facing up to the consequences of their actions.

Her training and her logic dictated she should politely excuse herself and walk away until her emotions were under control, but she just couldn’t breathe. The anger looked for an outlet and if it didn’t find one, she knew she’d drown.

Alice laughed, the sound so humorless it startled even her. “The real problem here, Mr. Barnes, is that it wasn’t even you. Somehow, that’s even more frustrating. I hate myself for it, but I can’t help it. Every time I look at you, I think of them.”

“Them?”

“Your goddamn teammates, who leave nothing but destruction and death in their wake without ever facing justice.”

It was almost comforting to see a normal human reaction out of Barnes. His eyes widened. “You’re angry with—with Steve?”

“No.” She snapped, caution be damned. With the anger-fueled adrenaline pumping through her veins, she could take on the damn Winter Soldier himself. “Don’t say his name. Don’t mention him or that redheaded harpy or any of the others for that matter!”

It was obvious Barnes was genuinely taken aback by her outburst. A small, barely there voice of reason whispered to her that she was losing her mind; Barnes probably thought out of the two of them, she was the crazy one now.

Alice tried to take a deep breath, but she knew she wasn’t done. There was no way to stop the words now. “Do you want to know who your teammates truly are? Because let me tell you, you’re not the only one with blood on his hands. At least you don’t strut around, proud of it, flaunting your actions
like a god-given gift to humanity.”

She took Barnes’ stunned silence as her cue to continue. “Do you remember the time you showed up on the scene? When the whole Hydra infiltration came to light? Brave Captain America and the courageous Black Widow taking on the entire shadowy organization on their own, saving the world one righteous punch at a time. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m glad Hydra got exposed. I will never forgive myself for not realizing it sooner.”

Maybe at the end of the day, she was mostly angry with herself.

“And the Widow, she did what she had to do, right? Every dirty, little secret SHIELD ever had, every piece of intel, all of it dumped on the internet. Finally, Hydra was exposed!” She paused, tired of her own sarcasm. “But do you know what else happened, Mr. Barnes?”

His look of realization told her the implications of what the Widow had done were not lost on him.

“That’s right. Every piece of intelligence was out in the open, up for grabs by anyone with a basic set of computer skills. It wasn’t just Hydra agents who got exposed, it was every single intelligence agent, past or present, good or bad. Most of them were the good guys. They were people who dedicated their life to the service. People who were undercover in some of the most dangerous places on Earth. People whose entire lives depended on the security of that information. They were my colleagues, my friends and—and some of them—they never even got the chance to find out why before someone put a bullet through their heads!”

There were tears in her eyes, even though it took her a second to realize it. In the time since the fall of SHIELD, she never really had the chance to say any of this. Not this way. No one ever gave her a chance to scream and rage and cry. When all of this was over, she knew she would pity Barnes for ending up the recipient of her bottled-up grief.

Maybe she should’ve taken her mandatory therapy sessions more seriously after all.

There was understanding in Barnes’ eyes though; it sparked even more contradictions when she found herself both hating and craving it.

He didn’t say anything though, so she wiped away the stray tear and continued more calmly. “I was on assignment too. Almost four months spent inside a Russian drug cartel. The place, the people, everything was as bad as you’d expect. Illegal weapons, drugs, prostitution, the usual deal. I wasn’t the only one out on assignment like that, but when SHIELD fell, I was one of the lucky ones.”

She had to wrap her arms around torso when the memories forced a chill through the heat of her anger. “Mr. Stark—as soon as he found out about the data dump, he used every resource he had to encrypt the data. There was no time to pick and choose which data to protect, so he went after all of it, but he did use his tech to pinpoint the information relevant to active agents. If any intel fell into the wrong hands, it was basically a death sentence. At the time, all I got was a short message saying my cover was compromised, but later, Mr. Stark told me of the effort he went through trying to contact each and every agent and get them to the closest safehouse available. He contacted every expert he knew, called in every favor he had, put in sleepless nights to get so many of us out of harm’s way and protect as much information as possible.”

Her voice was hoarse and she had to stop. It was grief now, rather than anger, threatening to choke her.

“Mr. Stark saved my life. I spent days at the safehouse, mourning one friend after another as the news of their death rolled in. Dozens dead within hours. More and more deaths trickled in as the
days went by. Lives and years of undercover work completely ruined, innocent families now placed on hit lists. It was a nightmare and those of us who lived had to cope with it while the reality of the rest sunk in too. We were all compromised, infiltrated by Nazis, and we didn’t know. We failed in our basic mission to protect the world from harm. Then, because all of that wasn’t enough, I had to see their faces on TV weeks later, flaunting their actions as something heroic. The Widow was proud of what she did, so damn arrogant in her conviction. Out of everyone, I thought she’d understand. I know you have to make hard decisions sometimes. You make sacrifices for the greater good, but you never act like those sacrifices never happened! Actions have consequences and you face up to them, no matter your intentions!”

Alice sighed, feeling unbearably drained. “That’s what Mr. Stark was trying to do with the Accords, you know. Yes, he was trying to protect his team by taking control of the inevitable government intrusion, but he also believed all of us were responsible for what we do, good or bad. We all have to answer for our actions. Some of us never do. Some of us get to spit in the face of those efforts, spit in the faces of all those countries, every scared civilian, every community leader just trying to find a solution to the chaos. All for one man.”

She didn’t mean to bring it back to Barnes, but here he was, the catalyst of so much damage. “And then Siberia? I know I don’t have all the details, but I do know you left Mr. Stark to die. His suit was disabled - if Vision and the rescue squad hadn’t gotten there in time, he would’ve been dead within a day.”

Alice didn’t expect to see shock in Barnes’ eyes. He didn’t bother hiding it and she couldn’t know if it was genuine. She had to wonder if it was possible he didn’t know.

Figures. Even then, Rogers is the one leaving a teammate behind to die. I should’ve expected it.

Her gaze dropped to the floor and all she felt now was bone-deep exhaustion. The ensuing silence was short, but it felt like an eternity and Alice didn’t expect Barnes’ whispered “I’m sorry,” to be the thing to break it.

He began to stand up and Alice took a step back. She was too emotionally compromised to maintain any sort of composure and she was thankful he made no move to get closer when he stood up.

“My apology won’t mean much—too little, too late, I know—but I am so sorry. There’s nothing I can do or say to bring back the people you lost, and the bunker—I didn’t know Stark’s suit was disabled, that he wouldn’t have been able to leave. That—that’s no excuse though. That whole fight should’ve never happened.”

The sincere remorse in Barnes’ voice quieted something inside her, something that used to be sharp and raw and bleeding. “Thank you. Someone has to be sorry, I guess, but seems like the ones apologizing are always the people who have the least to be sorry for.”

How many times had Mr. Stark told her ‘I’m sorry’?

Barnes scoffed. “I have so many things to apologize for.”

“Maybe, but you’re not to blame for my personal grief.” It was easier to accept it now that the anger was out in the open and no longer eating away at her. “It’s not my place to be your judge and I—I shouldn’t have—Oh god—” Reality finally caught up with her. “This—this shouldn’t have happened. This conversation should have never taken place. I—” She swallowed and bit back tears again. “I’m sorry, Mr. Barnes. No matter my feelings, you are safe here and I—I’m going to leave this room now, if you may excuse me. I’m going to go drown myself in a bottle of wine and if I’m not fired by tomorrow morning, I’ll come back as the Director I’m supposed to be and we can try this
whole thing again.”

She knew she was leaving Barnes under Friday’s watchful gaze, so she gave Barnes one last look and walked out of the room without another word. Running away had never been her nature, but today the universe was conspiring against her and it was okay to run just this once.
“Miss Friday, could you please help me save the latest copy of the Accords to the, uh, the Stark tablet? And any newspaper articles you think would be useful?”

“Of course, Mr. Barnes. The entirety of the Accords have been saved to your device, including detailed notes on the amendments made in the last six months. Additionally, I have gathered 36 articles that discuss the Accords from a variety of news sources. I hope you find my selection to be both fair and representative of the different viewpoints.”

Bucky tapped the newspaper icon on the electronic device in his lap and the aforementioned articles came up on display. He smiled despite himself. Modern technology still amazed him.

“Thank you, ma’am, this is perfect.”

“I am happy to be of assistance, Mr. Barnes.”

Bucky’s response was a distracted nod. He was already scanning through the articles, trying to decide which ones he wanted read first; while the amount of information was overwhelming, he had some free time on his hands and he wanted to do something productive with it. There was a part of him, one he recognized as a trait of his former self from before, that was itching to learn about the more fascinating aspects of the future—the new technology, the cutting edge developments in science, medicine, transportation, you name it, all those things that used to fascinate him—but he knew it was more important to understand the context of his situation. Stark and Steve went to war with each other over these Sokovia Accords—and over Bucky, of course, but that part was a lot more personal and a lot less complicated.

The least Bucky could do was get all the facts straight and see where he stood on the issues.

After a few hours, the words began to blend into nonsense however and Bucky knew it was time to take a break. He let himself fall back on the bed, his hand behind his head as he closed his eyes and let them rest; as his mind drifted, he thought back on his first day here.

After Ms. Blackwood’s hasty departure, he remained in the rooms provided, not wanting to cause any more trouble by being somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be. With their sleek and modern design however, the living quarters offered plenty of space, their tasteful furnishings adding a touch of comfort he appreciated, and staying put was hardly a burden.

The quarters consisted of a bedroom that came equipped with a massive bed, dressers, and an oversize reading chair, a walk-in closet currently sporting a few stacks of generic essentials, a small office space to the left with a desk and two bookshelves already half-full, and a spacious, sparkling bathroom to round everything out. It took a bit of effort to figure out the high-tech shower, but with its multiple shower streams coming out of the ceiling and walls and the perfect temperature control, Bucky decided to add the shower right to the top of his ‘Favorite Things about the Future’ list. He wasn’t ashamed to admit he took longer than necessary in there, letting the hot water run over his body, letting it work the tension out of his muscles, soothing the aches and pains. He’d been on high alert ever since he left Wakanda and the chance to relax and unwind was precious.

It was the same reason he was thankful to have the rest of the night to himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he was both alone and relatively safe. Before Steve found him, he was in constant combat mode, always scanning for threats and evaluating whether he needed to run again. When he was in Wakanda, he never got a moment to himself.
Thinking back to his last conversation with Steve left a bitter taste in his mouth and although it was selfish, Bucky knew he was going to put off that promised phone call for as long as he could. King T’challa knew he’d arrived safely and he would keep Steve and the others from rushing across the ocean to ‘rescue’ him.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel guilty. He lied to Steve, took off without so much as a goodbye, but he just wanted to get better so desperately; he thought Steve would understand, but somewhere down the line, they stopped seeing eye-to-eye and Bucky had no choice but to run from that disastrous conversation. Hell, he spent half of it trying to hold back an irate Soldier who bristled at each possessive note in Steve’s voice, flooding Bucky with the need for violence with each unwanted touch; another minute spent in that room and Bucky was worried he’d do more than just bruise Steve’s wrist.

There was no turning back now. Maybe this was the end of the line for them, but Bucky hoped Steve would someday forgive him and understand why he did what he did.

He planned to spend the rest of that first night enjoying the comfortable bed, but a tentative knock at his door changed that plan. What he found outside was a quickly retreating back (whoever knocked clearly didn’t want a friendly chat), a large meal tray, and a box that said ‘Stark Tablet’ in big, bold letters. A hastily scribbled note from Ms. Blackwood included several apologies as well as a ‘Please eat and get Friday to show you how to work all the tech in your room. The Stark tablet is an ‘I’m sorry I was a basket chase’ apology gift’.

The food was delicious and he hadn’t enjoyed a simple meal of steak and potatoes this thoroughly since—well, since forever, really. He spent the rest of the night getting to know Friday, both of them conversing quietly as she walked him through setting up the tablet while giving him an AI’s insider view into the world wide web.

As promised, Ms. Blackwood was at his door the next morning at seven sharp and after another round of apologies, they ended up sharing a quick breakfast in the kitchen. This wing of the Compound was still quiet, no one else crossing their paths, but everywhere he looked, Bucky could see the hints of its residents. The space felt lived-in and seeing these small signs of life—textbooks and notes strewn in one corner, a note on the refrigerator with a blunt ‘Eat my blueberries and suffer!’ scribbled right next to a much sweeter ‘In this house we love James Rhodes’, the fresh fruit piled up in a bowl adorned with tiny Hulks, a colorful blanket peeking out from the back of the couch where they passed it in the living room—it held a strange warmth Bucky wasn’t sure he had the right to enjoy.

Ms. Blackwood was more composed, all professional smiles and small talk again, and made a point to reiterate that her anger was both misplaced and unfair, especially given Bucky’s situation and the reason for being here.

Bucky appreciated the gesture for what it was, even though he found the apologies unnecessary. He could also see Ms. Blackwood was still uncomfortable around him. She hid her grief well, but not well enough to escape Bucky’s notice, and he knew this was the type of grief she would carry for the rest of her life.

However, the anger he saw yesterday was muted now, just a shadow of the boiling fury she tried—and failed—to hold back and he was glad his presence gave her a chance to find some peace. Besides, their conversation left him with several new issues to mull over—Steve and Natalia, the other Avengers, and Stark. With only the opinions of others to build up the image, Stark existed as a maze of contradictions in Bucky’s head right now; it was such a glaring contrast, to remember how the others spoke of him and then to hear Ms. Blackwood, whose voice was colored by admiration,
respect, and protectiveness each time she spoke about Stark.

As much as the inevitable meeting with Stark terrified him—guilt was a terror far greater than most—Bucky was eager to put these contradictions to rest. Whatever it was, he wanted to know the true nature of Tony Stark for himself.

He and Ms. Blackwood parted ways soon after breakfast and although she made it clear he wasn’t confined to his quarters and was welcome to use any of the facilities in the East Wing (which apparently included a full training room and a pool, a library, and a common room sporting an impressively large television screen), his room sounded like a comfortable enough place to settle in. With Friday keeping him company, Bucky spent the rest of the day trying to wrap his head around the current political situation.

Now though, the comforting warmth of the room and the softness of the bed kept trying to lull him into a light sleep, a temptation he didn’t bother fighting, but before he could fully indulge in his afternoon nap, there was another knock on his door.

He expected Ms. Blackwood, but when he opened the door, the woman’s tall frame was nowhere in sight. Instead, there was a younger boy, probably in his early teens, with a mop of light brown hair, and then there was—

Huh. It was the kid he fought a year ago, still clad in that bright red-and-blue costume.

Bucky blinked, unsure of what to say, before he managed a tentative “Hello?”

“Hi, Mr. Barnes! I hope you remember me, we fought in Germany that one time! Coolest fight ever, am I right?”

Yeah, Bucky definitely remembered that enthusiasm. He also remembered his own confusion, although whether it was the boy’s over-the-top energy, the bizarre web-slinging powers, or the fact this was just a kid, that kept Bucky off-kilter he couldn’t say.

The other boy scanned him over once, top to bottom, and gave Bucky the most unimpressed look he’d ever seen on a face that young.

“You know, he sounded way cooler when you described him,” he addressed the Spider-kid, but his narrowed eyes were still studying Bucky. “I thought you said he’s supposed to have this awesome, cybernetic arm.”

Between the boy’s expression and that unapologetic disappointment, Bucky had to hold back an amused snort. Who was this kid?

“Sorry about him,” Spider-kid said as he shoved a splayed hand into the other boy’s face, who sputtered and protested. “Apparently Harley here was raised in a barn. Please ignore him, he has no manners. We keep him around out of pity.”

“Remind me why we keep you around. You wouldn’t know manners if they punched you in the face.”

“I would too! See?” Spider-kid thrust his hand out for Bucky to shake. “I’m Spiderman! It’s very nice to formally meet you, Mr. Barnes.”

“Bucky, please.” He shook the kid’s hand, marveling how small and skinny it felt in his own, remembering how it caught and stopped a full-on punch from his metal arm.
Guilt quickly followed, as it always did, but at least Bucky was lucky enough to have assurance the kid came out of that battle just fine.

“Yo, I’m Harley.” Another hand for Bucky to shake pulled him out of his darker thoughts. This kid’s grip was strong and sure too, but Bucky had no way of knowing if he was superpowered as well. “I was not raised in a barn. I don’t have any weird powers—or lame superhero names—and yes, in case you were wondering, I am cooler than everyone here by a factor of one thousand.”

Well, that answered one question and raised twenty more. Bucky decided he liked both of the boys already though. “Confident too, I see,” he said to Harley, lips twitching as he tried not to grin.

Harley crossed his arms and smirked. “Damn straight I am. I was the one who helped Tony fight off AIM.”

“Pff. Old news, Keener. I was the one who helped Mr. Stark fight Captain America and Falcon and that one weird Ant guy and—well, um, him, technically,” Spiderman pointed at Bucky and rubbed the back of his head. Bucky couldn’t see the expression behind the mask, but he could guess there was a sheepish smile there. “No hard feelings, right, Mr. Barnes?”

“None at all.” God, if only it were that easy, but Bucky would still take the freely offered forgiveness of a kind-hearted child.

Harley rolled his eyes. “Ooh, fighting Captain Asshole, what an accomplishment.”

“Hey, you know what, I had a whole airport dropped on me, okay? Things got real! And I had to—no, no, never mind all that.” He waved his hands, huffed, and turned to Bucky. “Sorry, totally getting off track here. We, uh, we knew the East Wing was going to be pretty empty today, so we wanted to come by and say ‘hello’. You know, welcome you to the Avengers Compound!”

Harley pouted as he muttered under his breath, “I just wanted to see the cool arm, but life is full of disappointments,” and this time Bucky couldn’t help but smile. These kids were not afraid of him in the slightest and in their eyes, he was neither Bucky Barnes, Captain America’s Best Friend nor the Winter Soldier, Fist of Hydra. He wasn’t sure who they saw when they looked at him or what he should make of this whole conversation, but it was the first bit of levity he had in years. It left him lightheaded.

Leaning his right shoulder against the door frame, he looked the two boys over and cocked his head to the side.

“Are the two of you even supposed to be here?”

Harley kept up the cocky routine when he shrugged. “You see, this place is kinda our playground. We can be wherever we want.”

“Factually inaccurate,” Friday piped up from the ceiling.

Spiderman snickered. “She isn’t wrong. We do live here though. In the East Wing, I mean.”

“During the school holidays, sometimes on the weekends.”

“And Friday does like us, so she usually lets us get away with a lot as long as we’re not getting into too much trouble.”

“See, now that is factually accurate.” Friday sounded like she wanted to sigh.
“Don’t worry, we’re definitely not getting into any trouble though,” Spiderman declared, convincing absolutely no one. “Ooh, I wonder though, will they let you come train with us soon? That’d be so awesome, we have to show you these things we have in our training room, they’re so cool and—”

Someone pointedly cleared their throat. The boys pivoted at the sound and when Bucky looked up to follow their line of sight, he got his first full glimpse of Tony Stark since their disastrous fight in Siberia.

Bucky didn’t know what he expected, but Stark looked… good.

Bucky had to admit he had no accurate baseline to compare against, but the Stark he remembered was exhausted and pale, sporting that livid black eye. This Tony Stark had color back in his face, footsteps light and sure as he walked over to the boys, taking off his orange sunglasses in one smooth, practiced move. It seemed like he was coming back from some important meeting because he was clad in a tailored, black suit, accented by a bold, red tie.

The sleek, expensive material of the suit clung to every line and curve, leaving no choice for Bucky’s eyes but to follow them, and he tried to remember if Stark had looked this gorgeous before.

The thought rose unbidden and when it hit Bucky he was all but ogling Stark, he was grateful for the mental discipline that kept him from blushing. That was not the type of thoughts he was allowed to have right now—or ever, for that matter. Sure, Stark was a handsome man, objectively, but Bucky had neither the right nor the courage to think about it.

He shoved the unruly thought back, some place right next to the Soldier, who’d been uncharacteristically quiet since Bucky arrived at the Compound. Probably getting bored without anyone to act as the conduit for his anger, Bucky thought uncharitably. There, let him deal with this.

Stark gave Bucky a brief glance, expression not giving away anything, before his gaze settled on the two chagrined boys. Stark’s brows pulled together in what was supposed to be a severe expression, but the mirth behind his eyes gave him away.

“Troublemaker uno.” He pointed at Harley. “You are supposed to be in the lab working on your project right now. I distinctly remember that was the only reason your mom let you stay here for the summer, am I correct?”

Harley gave Stark an admittedly endearing, faux-innocent smile. “Yes, Tony. You are correct.”

Stark snorted, shook his head, and swung his attention to the other boy. “And you, Spiderboy, Troublemaker dos, you’re definitely supposed to be in training right now.”

“Mr. Stark, we’ve been over this, you know that it’s Spiderman!”

“Oh, is that so?” Stark raised one unimpressed eyebrow, a move Bucky was certain took years to perfect. “Last I checked, men didn’t skip out on their lab work and training just so they could come in here and harass our new resident ex-assassin.”

“We weren’t harassing him, Mr. Stark! We just wanted to say ‘hello’ and keep him company!”

“Well, I’m sure he appreciated the effort, but now, it’s time to say goodbye, so both of you, shoo, skedaddle. Don’t make me get Alice down here.”

Stark earned himself two disappointed groans, but both of the kids were already walking away.
“It was nice to see you again, Mr. Barnes!” Spiderman threw over his shoulder. “Let’s hang out soon!”

“See ya around, Bucky! I guess you’re alright, even without the cool arm!”

“That’s right, keep walking, you troublemakers!” Again, Stark’s strict tone was betrayed by the fond expression he seemed unable to keep off his face. “Sorry about that. Those two are too curious for their own good.”

“I didn’t mind. They seem like good kids.”

“They are.” Stark’s eyes lingered on the boys’ retreating backs. “Sometimes it feels like we’re running a daycare center instead of an elite superhero training facility though. Anyways…” He tilted his head and their eyes met again. “I guess we should talk?”

Bucky gathered every bit of his mental strength, tried to remember to breathe, and gave Stark what he hoped was a friendly smile. “I’m ready when you are.”

Their conversation turned into a tour of the Compound as Stark set the leisurely pace down the hall and took Bucky around the East Wing. Stark did most of the talking, filling in the silence with details behind the various tech they came across, pointing out who else lived at the Compound and when Bucky should expect to run into them. Stark also asked questions, mostly about Bucky’s trek across Europe and the reception he received at the Swedish embassy.

The conversation was pleasant, polite, and completely devoid of authenticity.

Every interaction was forcibly casual, every word carefully chosen, and Bucky could sense Stark’s caution, in the tense lines of his body, in the deliberate physical distance between them, in the way Stark’s eyes had avoided Bucky’s since they began walking.

Bucky hoped it was only caution, a healthy mistrust he would never begrudge Stark given their limited—and violent—encounters thus far.

He just hoped it wasn’t fear.

It was also painfully clear Stark was in no hurry to address any of part of their unsavory, shared past and Bucky decided he was alright with that. This casual conversation, an exchange of pleasantries amounting to nothing meaningful, was more than he expected. A part of him did want to offer some sort of apology right off the bat, but the words sat sour and trapped in his throat. What would an apology accomplish? Words would never bring back the people he killed, they would never reverse time and give him a chance to make a different choice.

No, this easygoing atmosphere wasn’t genuine, but Bucky was willing to keep up the charade, for both of their sakes.

When they made a full loop through the East Wing and came back to the kitchen, Stark gestured for Bucky to sit down at one of the bar stools around the breakfast nook; Bucky dutifully obeyed and watched Stark beeline for the counter to turn on what appeared to be a coffee-making machine.

Before Stark could say anything else, a tremor ran through the entire Compound, something akin to an earthquake. Both Bucky and the Soldier were on immediate alert and scanning for threats as soon as the ground beneath them began to move, but Stark didn’t appear perturbed in the slightest.

“Friday, we’re not under attack, are we?” he asked and kept poking buttons on his coffee machine.
“No, Boss, the kids are still using modified sonic waves in their training today. Expect more tremors, but I reran all the calculations and there should still be no damage to any of the integral internal structures.”

“See, nothing to worry about.” Stark addressed Bucky this time. “If there’s an actual threat, Friday would’ve notified us immediately.” Satisfied the machine was ready to perform whatever coffee miracles it was built to produce, Stark turned around. He gave Bucky one long, scrutinizing look and leaned back against the granite counter, arms loosely crossed over his chest. “So, how’s your stay here so far? Alice get you situated alright? She hasn’t scared you into leaving yet, has she? I know she’s tall and buff and can totally kick your ass, but I swear she’s one of the nicest people here.”

In any other situation, Bucky would’ve considered Stark’s general tone downright teasing.

“It’s been an interesting day,” he replied, but didn’t elaborate further. What happened between him and Ms. Blackwood was her story to tell, not his. “It’s a lot to take in, I’m not gonna lie, but Ms. Friday has been helping me out a lot. She really is something spectacular,” he added, both in an attempt to say something nice to Stark and because Friday was amazing.

The compliment drew a smile out of Stark, so Bucky called that a win.

“Don’t fall for her charm, Barnes, she’s a heartbreaker. Isn’t that right, my girl?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re referring to, Boss,” Friday replied. There was a teasing note to her words too and once again Bucky was amazed she wasn’t a breathing, made-of-flesh person.

“I think she’s my favorite thing about the future so far,” he admitted with a shrug.

“Oh, Boss, he is very sweet. And he calls me ‘ma’am’ too. Can we keep him?”

Stark’s bark of laughter was the most genuine reaction Bucky had seen thus far; it was contagious because Bucky found himself smiling too.

“Friday, stop flirting with the ex-assassin, this is getting ridiculous,” Stark said, the smile evident even in his indulgent tone. His eyes were on Bucky again. “Alright, Robocop, what else do you like about the 21st century?”

“Well, the internet’s very handy. Oh, and antibiotics too, those came a long way.”

Stark let out an exaggerated hiss. “Ooh, yeah, not gonna lie, we screwed up both of those things. Sorry.”

“How so?”

“Well, see, only five percent of the internet is actually useful these days. A good quarter of it is just people yelling and being angry at each other.”

“And the other seventy percent?”

“Mostly porn.”

Bucky’s own laughter was unexpected, but he didn’t bother trying to smother it. “Wow. Okay, I see. And the antibiotics?”

“Okay, so, those were great for a while, but then we went a little overboard—as we tend to do—and
now we have a bunch of new superbugs that can’t be killed with anything.”

“Huh. So it sounds like technology and science have improved, but people haven’t really changed a bit?”

“Pretty much.”

“Not sure if I find that disappointing or comforting.” Bucky joked. He sneaked a glance at Stark and rejoiced when he found Stark visibly more comfortable; both of their smiles felt less plastic.

This was good. Maybe they could keep up with this levity and avoid the darker topics. The last thing Bucky wanted was to break this tentative truce.

Another tremor ran through the building and Stark rolled his eyes. “I swear, they’ve been doing this all week. If they break my Compound, I will—Well, I don’t know what I will do, but it will be painful and humiliating and—”

The loud ding of the coffee machine cut Stark short and prompted a satisfied, “Finally, my coffee,” instead. He pivoted and opened the dark redwood cupboards, searching for something. He stopped to let out a frustrated hum as he studied the contents and Bucky quickly caught on as to why.

The cabinets were tall to match the arches of the doorways and the high ceilings; the lower shelf was all but empty and the coffee mugs Bucky assumed were once there were now crowded together on the highest shelf, a lot of them precariously placed on top of each other, some right on the edge and barely fitting onto the shelf.

They were also just out of reach for Stark, even if he stood on his tip-toes.

Bucky couldn’t help himself. “You, uh, you need some help reaching those?”

Stark turned to glare, not dissimilar to the way he had glared at Harley earlier. The glare quickly turn to annoyance which turned into an indignant huff.

“First of all, I’m not even that short,” Stark declared with petulant flare; his gaze swung back to the cupboard. “I am above the worldwide average, thank you very much, and second of all—”

Bucky got to watch as Stark, fancy suit and all, hopped up to sit on the counter, stretched up, and grabbed the closest coffee cup he could reach.

“This is Rhodey’s doing, the menace,” Stark grumbled as he jumped back down. “Those mugs were on the bottom shelf last week, where they’re supposed to be.” He glanced over at Bucky and then back down to the coffee cup. “You’re gonna have to get your own if you want some, I’m not climbing back up there again. My dignity can only handle so much.”

Bucky’s lips twitched, but he tried not to think about the way Stark’s antics kept making him smile, tried not to dwell on the ease of this conversation. He couldn’t forget what they were to each other, but god, did he want to right now.

Stark filled his mug to the brim and went back to the same spot in front of the still-opened cupboard. He took a sip and let out a pleased moan, so satisfied it made Bucky realize a cup of coffee sounded fantastic.

He got out of his seat to grab a mug of his own, but another tremor, this one stronger and longer, drew their attention. Bucky held onto the counter to steady himself while Stark held his coffee away from him with a dissatisfied grimace, trying to keep it from spilling. The glass cups in the cupboard
made a cacophony of clinking noises as they danced in time with the vibrations. One of the cups caught Bucky’s eye as it moved dangerously close to the edge.

His next move was automatic - an ingrained response of any person when they saw something about to fall. He lurched forward, putting himself right next to Stark, and reached up and over Stark’s shoulder to catch the large, red cup before it hit the counter.

The loud crash of shattering glass still echoed and for a moment, Bucky’s brain struggled to reconcile the sound with the intact mug in his hand. When he looked back down at Stark though, Bucky realized his mistake.

Stark was ashen. The blood drained from his face, his breathing turned shallow, his hands shook, and his eyes, which just moments ago danced with amusement, were looking through Bucky, at something unseen.

Stark looked absolutely terrified.

No, no, no.

Bucky’s own heart rate jumped and he stumbled back a step. “Stark?” he called out, about to reach for him.

“Mr. Barnes, step away from Boss immediately. Give him space.”

“What? I don’t—” Bucky looked around, confused and panicked, but Friday’s harsh, “Now, Mr. Barnes!” kicked his brain back into gear and he quickly backed away to give Stark breathing room. He didn’t take his eyes off Stark though, even as all the guilt rushed right back.

God, how could he do that? He should have known better. Hell, if someone jumped out at him like that, he wasn’t sure they’d come out of the altercation in one piece, good intentions be damned.

As he watched Stark struggle to breathe, Bucky got to see exactly the impact he had on others. This was what the Winter Soldier did, this was the damage he left behind, and Bucky wasn’t sure he could ever escape that legacy.

He couldn’t breathe.

Oh god, he was being attacked. The Winter Soldier was here, lunging at him, coming for him, and he was going to kill him, just like his parents, he was going to choke the life out of him—that was why he couldn’t breathe, why he was feeling dizzy and clammy and—oh god, he was going to die.

Tony’s vision blurred and darkened before a sea of white replaced his whole world.

No, no, no, he couldn’t be in Siberia, not again—he was wrong. It was Steve who would kill him. He was going to bash Tony’s head in, sever it at the neck and leave him to bleed. Maybe he’d go for the reactor? Was that why Tony couldn’t breathe? Did Steve break the reactor? Oh god, no, not again, Tony couldn’t die like that.

He ran his numb hand over his chest, again and again, trying to find the hard, cold casing of the reactor, but there was nothing there.

The reactor was gone. It was gone and his heart was fine—no, no, his heart wasn’t fine, because it was still racing, his body wrecked with chills, and goddamn it, why couldn’t he breathe?
Friday’s voice made its way through the fog and Tony nearly cried from relief. He wasn’t alone. Friday was here and he wouldn’t have to die alone in this godforsaken, frozen tomb of a bunker.

Her words were an incomprehensible mumble against the roaring in his ears, but finally he could make something out.

“Boss? Boss, you’re having a panic attack. You need to breathe with me, please, Boss. Come on, inhale with me for one, two, three…”

Panic attack? Was that what this was?

“You are safe at the Avengers Compound. Exhale now—”

Tony didn’t remember the Compound ever being so cold, but Friday kept counting and he trusted her, so he tried to draw in a breath in time with her voice.

*One, two, three…*

“Four, five, and hold for, one, two. Exhale now, six, seven…”

*Eight, nine, ten.*

The next breath was easier and Tony realized his hands had stopped tingling and the tremors lessened as well. The pain in his chest was dissipating.

“Good, Boss, please keep breathing. Your heart rate will stabilize in a minute.”

His vision began to clear slowly, the freezing white disappearing to put Tony back at the Compound, safe in the kitchen. He had spent countless hours here. This was his home.

Tony thought he could make out Barnes standing a good distance away, but the details were still blurry and the roaring in his ears hadn’t let up.

Was Barnes saying something? His voice was nonsense in Tony’s head and Friday spoke up to stop it, her severe tone causing Barnes to go perfectly still.

For some reason, Tony’s brain decided Barnes’ face was the only thing deserving of HD resolution, despite the rest of the world still swimming in a blurry haze, and the first thought that swam through Tony’s head, right alongside the count he kept up in his head, was that Barnes looked so heartbreakingly sad.

It was an odd thought, Tony acknowledged absently, but it was no more odd than his next one because between the guilt and the shame in his eyes, Barnes looked like a lost puppy that just found out it was being taken back to the pound. Tony blamed both the bizarre comparison and the unyielding compulsion to help on his oxygen-deprived brain.

With another breath, the roaring stopped and while Tony’s heart still hammered against his ribcage, it no longer felt like it was going to explode right out of his chest.

“Boss, are you alright? Are you with me? Your heart rate is decreasing now and your hormone levels are stabilizing.”

He nodded and with his brain fully online again, Tony took a second to survey the scene around him. His mug was now in pieces and the coffee a brown, offensive stain against the otherwise pristine tile. Barnes was standing a few yards away, still as a statue, that same, kicked-puppy
expression still on his face. In his hand was a red mug.

*Oh, god.*

The mug must have fallen from the cupboard during the tremor and Barnes just reached out to catch it.

Tony felt the heat of embarrassment scorch his cheeks, pushing out the cold tendrils of imagined fear. He just had a panic attack. In front of Barnes. *Over a coffee mug.*

*Oh, goddamn it.*

This was *not* how this conversation was supposed to go. Hell, the conversation *was* going just fine! They were civil, they were laughing and joking, and by some unspoken agreement, they both decided to avoid any and all mentions of the proverbial elephant in the room.

It was all *fine*, but of course Tony had to go and have this little breakdown right here in the middle of the kitchen.

So much for first impressions.

Before he could say or do anything to make this situation *worse*, Tony mumbled out a barely coherent, “I have to go,” and bolted out of the kitchen, heading straight for his lab.

Bucky watched Stark disappear down the hall as he all but sprinted out of the kitchen. A part of him wanted to follow, to apologize, but he knew it would only make things worse.

He let out a despondent sigh and realized he was still holding the damn mug. He placed it carefully on the counter by the coffee machine.

An Iron Man mug, of all things, adorned with an ‘I ‘Heart’ Iron Man’ in bold, golden letters, the heart painted on with matching gold glitter. It was *cute* and Bucky could see himself teasing Stark over it had their conversation continued on as it had.

Things were never that simple though and Bucky was lulled into a false sense of security by the ease of their first interaction. For a moment, he let himself forget all the damage he’d done, all the pain following him like a shadow. Stark was terrified of him and Bucky couldn’t bring himself to feel like he deserved anything less.

With another sigh, he eyed the mess on the kitchen floor and without much fanfare, took a handful of paper towels and began to clean up the spilled coffee, picking up the pieces of glass littering the floor as he went along.

“Mr. Barnes, I can have the cleaning staff up here to clean that up,” Friday’s voice implored, but he shook his head.

“No, it’s alright, Ms. Friday. It’s my mess to clean up.”

This whole mess was his to clean up.

Bucky almost talked himself out of asking the question, but in the end, he decided he needed to know. “Will Stark be alright?”

“Boss will be fine, yes. Panic attacks are usually not dangerous in and of themselves.” Friday still
sounded worried though, but maybe that was only Bucky projecting his own feelings.

“That’s good. Can you—just—please tell him I’m sorry.” Bucky wasn’t sure it would mean much, but he needed Stark to know.

Hidden away from the world on his couch, surrounded by the hum of his lab and the soft, blue light of his many projects, Tony felt like a whole man again.

His mind couldn’t stop replaying what had happened though, but he wasn’t even mad at Barnes. No, more than anything, he was just embarrassed.

Tony groaned and tossed his arm over his eyes in the hopes he could block this whole experience out, but the darkness wasn’t helping as much as he thought it would.

“Friday, under no circumstances are you to tell Rhodey about this.”

“Uh, Boss…” She sounded suspiciously guilty.

“Oh no, please don’t tell me—”

“I may have contacted him as soon as the panic attack began.”

Tony let out another exaggerated groan. Oh, he was never going to hear the end of this.

“Did you at least tell him I’m fine? I don’t want him going all War Machine on poor Barnes like I’m some damsel in distress.” He could see it now, Rhodey suiting up right in the middle of his meeting with the Washington Hill suits, bursting into the Compound, swearing his vengeance, ready to rescue Tony from the evil Winter Soldier.

Rhodey would probably enjoy that too, the overprotective menace, given how vocal he’d been about his mistrust of Barnes.

“I did inform him you recovered quickly. He said he won’t leave D.C. early, unless you need him, but he indicated that he did want to talk.” Tony whined pathetically and Friday’s voice turned contrite. “Sorry, Boss. I just never saw you have a panic attack like that before and my protocols are to contact Colonel Rhodes when you are in danger. So I just—I guess panicked too.”

“Boy, we make quite a pair, don’t we, Fri?” Tony couldn’t help his chuckle. He was hopeless and this whole thing was hopeless, but dammit, he was not giving up this easily. He promised to help Barnes and he was keeping that promise come hell or high water. He just had to figure out how to fix this particular mess before getting started on the rest of it.

Of course the first thing on his list was finding that stupid red mug, shattering it into a thousand pieces, and blasting the whole thing to smithereens with a repulsor blast or five.
Quick note: since the MCU canon gives us, like, two sentences worth of information on BARF, I'm just going to take some artistic liberties with it. The focus of the story is ultimately less tech and more Tony/Bucky, but I do hope to make it at least somewhat believable.

The hot tea was finally doing its job, soothing the cold in Tony’s chest as he took another fortifying sip. He placed the mug down gently, not wanting the loud clank of glass against glass to displace the quiet solitude of the kitchen.

Nightmares were familiar friends of course, for enough years now that Tony had stopped counting long ago, and the kitchen here had become a respite of sorts after each tangle with old memories and trauma, serving as an escape from the cold and the darkness.

Strangely, tonight’s nightmares weren’t what Tony had expected. After the panic attack caused inadvertently by their resident super soldier, Tony expected his usual laundry list of bad dreams - the murder of his parents, the look on Rogers’ face when he admitted he knew, the ensuing fight. Metal hitting metal, over and over, until there was nothing left of Tony. The cold that crept into his dead suit and throughout his whole body while he desperately pleaded with some higher power not to let him die alone.

Any one of those ghosts would’ve been expected tonight. However, Tony’s mind decided to bring back an old classic and so Tony spent the night choking on water while hateful voices above him spat violent words as he tried—and failed—to tell them he wouldn’t make those weapons, he wouldn’t, he couldn’t, please, no more.

The specter of the arc reactor sat cold and heavy in his chest until its light flickered and faded to black, the shrapnel tearing his heart to pieces.

Tony took another sip of the tea, chasing away the shadows. It never did him any good to dwell.

Friday’s quiet chirp in his earpiece informed him Barnes was on his way to the kitchen and for a brief moment, Tony debated whether he wanted to face Barnes so soon after what happened.

It would’ve been easy to get up and leave, to disappear and save himself the awkwardness, but the kitchen was peaceful and warm, with its softly dimmed lights and the low hum of the appliances, his mug of tea was half-full, it was four in the morning, the world was quiet, and Tony decided he didn’t want to abandon his personal safe haven just yet.

As expected, as soon as Barnes turned the corner and spotted Tony, he froze in a convincing imitation of a spooked deer and immediately began to back away.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize someone would be here. I’ll just—I’ll leave.”

Tony took pity on him. “Don’t worry about it. The kitchen’s a common space, you have as much right to be here as I do.” Barnes stopped his retreat, but didn’t move any closer, so Tony tried to
infuse some humor into his voice when he asked, “Looking for a late-night snack, Terminator?”

It fell flat and Barnes kept looking away, examining something particularly interesting on the tiled floor. Eventually though, he sighed and offered a quiet, “Just had trouble sleeping.”

The loaded meaning behind the words was not lost on Tony. Apparently he wasn’t the only one plagued by bad memories tonight.

He contemplated his next words, wondered briefly why his brain decided to fixate on how dejected Barnes’ little sigh was, and with his mind made up, Tony gestured at the mug in front of him. “You want some tea?”

Barnes wasn’t expecting the invitation, if the way his eyes widened was any indication, but after a pause, his tentative nod was accompanied with an almost shy, “Yes, please. Tea sounds great.”

He moved closer and Tony kept watching, using this as an opportunity to study a man he barely knew, trying to paint a picture—a better one—out of scattered details and first impressions.

Bare feet pitter-pattered over the tiled floor as Barnes made his way over to settle into the chair on the opposite side of the small table. He wore a sleeveless black shirt and loose sleeping pants, both of which looked new and comfortable. Tony wondered where Barnes was getting the clothes and realized Alice and Friday must have taken care of this too.

Barnes blinked sleepily and yawned, a second too late to cover it up with the back of his hand and the sight was so unlike any of Tony’s memories—an imposing, towering figure clad in combat gear, a deadly weapon in his own right, carrying more deadly weapons—that his internal alarms remained quiet, even with Barnes only a table-length away.

This wasn’t the Winter Soldier. No, here, in the quiet solitude of the late night, there was a humanity to Barnes, one Tony hadn’t afforded him before, as well as a disorienting, but not unwelcome vulnerability. Tony could see it in the heaviness of Barnes’ lids, the creases streaked across his cheek, the way he began to run his fingers against the glossy finish of the tabletop in a nervous back-and-forth.

Tony realized he was waxing poetic and staring at Barnes for way longer than what was socially acceptable, so he cleared his throat and got up to grab another mug.

He examined their kitchen wear with a critical eye. “Do you, uh, do you want the ‘War Machine is my Co-pilot’ mug or the ‘HULK SMASH’ mug? Because apparently we don’t own normal ones. Seriously, who keeps buying these? Ugh, maybe we are running a daycare.”

When he turned, Barnes’ chin was propped on his hand as he watched Tony.

“I’m partial to that red cup over there,” he replied with a tilt of his head, some measure of amusement coloring his voice, and Tony looked in the direction of the coffee maker. The cup—Tony’s newest arch nemesis—sat innocently on the counter in all its sparkling red and gold glory, mocking him. Tony glared, hoping the mug would spontaneously combust, but when no fireball consumed it, he let out a dramatic sigh and went to grab the damn thing. He filled it to the brim with hot water, dropped in a tea bag, and handed it off to Barnes before settling back in his own seat.

Barnes wrapped a hand around the mug and brought it closer. “Thank you.”
“You’re welcome. Enjoy that cup while you can though because I’m blowing it up for my next science experiment. Its days in the sun are numbered.”

Barnes didn’t comment on that bit of petulant grumbling, but Tony saw his lips twitch, which he counted close enough to a smile.

Silence fell over them as Barnes observed the tea, letting it brew for a minute, and needing to fill the space with something before things got awkward, Tony gestured at the bandaged stump of Barnes’ missing left arm.

“Does that hurt at all? We have a full team of doctors and nurses on-site, all well-versed in superhero bumps and bruises, so they can take a look if it’s bothering you.”

“No, it’s fine. Just aches sometimes,” Barnes admitted, his voice and his shrug both resigned. Familiar too, given Tony’s old proclivities for treating chronic reactor pain as par for the course, but Tony didn’t think Barnes would appreciate a spiel about accepting help and deserving a pain-free life, at least not tonight and not from Tony. A dilemma for another day, perhaps.

“Well, feel free to go to Medical if anything feels off or starts to bother you.” Another niggling thought rose up, something Tony had been willfully ignoring and something more awkward than any silence could ever be, but before he could remember the reason why people had brain-to-mouth filters in the first place, Tony blurted out, “So, uh, speaking of arms. I still have your old one.”

Barnes’ bewildered look was a fair reaction, he supposed. Tony quickly elaborated. “When Viz came to pick me up at the bunker, he picked up the arm too. You know, to make sure Hydra tech wasn’t lying around for anyone to find, that sort of thing. It’s been sitting in our storage ever since.”

“Oh.” Barnes sounded perplexed at first, but it only took a moment for his expression to darken. Hints of Winter Soldier bled through and Tony did remember the hard set of that jaw. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not have it back.”

“No?”

“No. I don’t care if I’m stuck with one arm for the rest of my life, I don’t want that thing anywhere near me.”

The revulsion coloring Barnes’ voice was familiar too.

Depressingly so, and Tony hated drawing the parallels, but he recognized that disgust, those echoes of violation and loss. He knew what it was like to wake up from near-death, surrounded by enemies, to have your body augmented and mutilated, forced to coexist with a foreign, wretched sense of other.

He could still remember the sickening sensation of poor Yinsen’s hands moving around in Tony’s chest cavity during the operation.

*Stop dwelling, Tony.*

Memories fled when Tony took another sip of his tea and focused on Barnes. “Well, that works for me. Don’t like shoddy pieces of machinery lying around my house anyways. I’ve got a reputation to maintain, you know, so I’ll make sure Friday tosses it with the rest of the trash. Probably in some incinerated form or another.”

That earned him a grateful look and Tony almost felt bad, given that his promise was a bit of a white lie. He was definitely getting rid of the arm, but not just yet. He’d been avoiding the thing for a year,
but maybe it was finally time to crack it open and see what qualified as a ‘technological marvel’ by Hydra standards. Already some part of his mind was running calculations and listing possible areas of improvement and he expected an hours-long marathon of science-y, engineering goodness in the near future, but those were all thoughts for later.

He took another sip to quiet his mind, which prompted Barnes to take a slow sip of his own.

“It’s good,” he said and tried to give Tony another grateful smile. “What’s in it?”

“Ginger and peach. Peppermint too, I think.”

“I take it you like tea?”

“Ugh, no. I hate tea.”

Barnes blinked. “Then this is a weird choice for a late-night drink.”

Tony huffed a self-deprecating laugh and debated whether he wanted to elaborate further. “Like any decent person, I would much rather have a nice cup of coffee, but there’s—there’s this woman, she’s, uh, she’s amazing. One of the strongest, most capable people I know. She used to be a close friend of mine and she always used to drink this same tea whenever she was having a bad day. I must’ve picked up the habit from her, but I find myself craving it whenever my day isn’t going so well.”

A part of Tony’s heart always ached, knowing Pepper drank that damn tea mostly when he was around.

They weren’t close anymore, not after the break-up and the superhero airport brawls and the stint at the hospital and the self-inflicted second stint at the hospital and—well, not after everything. They were more business partners than friends now and Tony wished he could fix that, wished he could get some of their old friendship back, that affectionate easy-going camaraderie they used to share, but that was a selfish wish. Pepper was doing so well now. She didn’t need him butting into her life again and Tony still saw her at SI functions, still had those fleeting moments where he could drink in the sight of his beautiful, capable, sweet Pepper. That was enough.

Barnes didn’t remark on Tony’s confession, just took another sip before softly placing the mug back on the table.

“My mother… She used to brew all sorts of tea too,” he murmured, watching the mug as he slowly twirled it back and forth. “I—I don’t really remember her.” He glanced up at Tony and looked away again, almost shy. “I mean, I remember information. Her name, where she lived, where she worked, but whenever I try to remember her, there’s nothing there, no matter how deep I dig. I don’t remember what her voice sounded like or what she looked like when she laughed or how it felt when she hugged me…”

There was no way Tony could have stopped those words from resonating with the tender ache in his chest. Sometimes, he wasn’t sure he remembered what Maria’s laughter sounded like either. More parallels he best not dwell on.

“Memories are a tricky thing, Barnes,” Tony replied, trying to push away the wave of familiar grief. “Given what you went through, your memory loss is expected, but even healthy people lose their memories over time. Things fade and our brains actually alter what we remember. Every time we recall something, our brains tweak it, so half the time, we don’t even remember the right thing anyways. Trust me, it was one of the most frustrating things I had to deal with when I was building
out my BARF system—"

"Your what system?" Barnes gave him the second bewildered look of the night and Tony gave himself a mental pat on the back. That acronym was a gift that kept on giving.

"Binarily Augmented Retro Framing system."

"Oh. I thought everyone just called it Retro Framing?"

"Yeah, well, that’s because everyone’s a big party pooper." Tony gave an exaggerated grumble. "I worked very hard on that acronym, thank you very much, but as you’ll soon learn, my genius often goes unappreciated around here."

"Obviously." Barnes shook his head. He was trying to fight off a smile again and Tony wished Barnes would stop holding back. His laugh from earlier, that was something Tony wouldn’t mind hearing again.

Tony never thought he’d find the Winter Soldier’s laughter endearing, but he didn’t expect to find himself sharing a late-night cup of tea with him either.

"So, this, uh, this BARF system," Barnes emphasized and drew a chuckle out of Tony. "Would it bring my old memories back?"

Tony didn’t miss the tentative hope and hated to be the one to shoot it down. "It’s unlikely. BARF is designed to deal with specific traumatic memories. It doesn’t have the capability to restore old ones. The way it worked, at least the initial model, was by helping you work through trauma by reliving the bad memory in some altered form. The altered memory is projected around you and the visual is meant to let your brain overcome whatever negative associations connect with the memory. When your pardon came up, I began modifying the system to make it work for your specific situation. The triggers in your head, they’re memories in a sense, a conditioned response installed into your brain by Hydra using their favorite tried-and-true method."

Even now, Tony could feel the nausea rise up as he remembered reading through the decrypted Hydra files. ‘Horrific’ didn’t begin to describe it - the torture sessions, the Winter Soldier training, the subsequent scrubbing of Barnes’ mind. Rinse and repeat, over and over, for decades on end; frankly, it was a miracle and a testament to his tenacity—or his stubbornness—that Barnes was still in his right mind and determined to get better.

The reminder of what Hydra did soured Tony’s mood considerably and he tried to push the thoughts away, not wanting them to poison the otherwise comforting atmosphere.

"Sorry. Didn’t mean to bring up the bad memories," Tony muttered as an apology.

Barnes just shrugged. "So your system - it would help change my responses to the trigger words then? Make it so they don’t have any power over me?"

"Essentially, yes. It’s a lot like what happens to our own normal memories over time. ‘Time heals all wounds’ and all that. Even painful memories fade and at some point, we may remember the facts of the event, but the pain associated with it loses its sting. That’s what the modified system is meant to do. The words somehow trigger a physical response in your brain—chemicals and hormones and electrical impulses—the same way a particularly powerful memory would. Our goal is to disassociate the words from those physical responses. Alter the memories, let you relive them in a different form, until those words trigger as much of a response as ‘potato’ or ‘coffee cup’ or—okay, so maybe not ‘coffee cup.’" Tony gave the Iron Man mug a mock glare. "I think we both have had enough
traumatic cup experiences.”

Barnes smiled a weary smile and pointedly raised said mug in a salute before bringing it to his lips and taking a drink. Tony’s exhausted brain decided to focus in on those lips and point out how full and soft and really, unfairly attractive they were and was this the first time Tony was noticing them?

Tony grabbed his own mug and took a drink in an attempt to distract himself from that.

*Jesus Christ, Rhodey was right, I do need to get laid.*

His renegade brain remained uncooperative however, happily cataloging the rest of Barnes too, making a note of the sculpted muscles, the stupid, floppy hair falling into his face, those brooding, blue eyes—okay, yeah, the guy was definitely Tony’s type and Tony had to look away completely before Barnes caught him staring.

*For the love of god, Stark, you’re not Friday. Stop ogling the ex-assassin.*

He gave all these thoughts a mental shove, but all they did was mix with his already conflicting emotions. It was confusing, to feel it all at once—resentment, compassion, a shared sense of pain, *and* a physical attraction—all for one man.

Barnes didn’t seem to notice any outward signs of Tony’s existential crisis at least. They settled into a comfortable silence and the quiet was peaceful as they slowly finished their drinks.

After a few minutes, Barnes looked up at him, his expression still full of that achingly soft vulnerability. “I’m so sorry, for everything.”

A few simple words, yet they carried so much history behind them, so much pain, and this apology, this delicate, hesitant thing, resonated like thunder in Tony’s ears. The old hurts flared, hurts that had little to do with Barnes himself and Tony could admit that, he could admit that so much of this was about Steve and the team, about his own failings and insecurities, but he didn’t want to talk about this, he didn’t want to bring up all those raw, aching memories again and put them on display for the world to dissect. He couldn’t, not today.

He raised his hand to keep Barnes from saying anything else.

“I know you are, I do, but I can’t—I’m sorry, I just—Not here. Not yet.”

Barnes nodded and let out a soft sigh. “Can I at least apologize for the broken mug?”

Tony couldn’t help his tired huff. “Yeah, that one is definitely coming out of your paycheck.”

“Hold on, I’m getting paid for this?”

Tony’s snort was decidedly unattractive. “Oh hell, I don’t think either one of us are.”

They smiled at each other in some simple, shared understanding and Tony was grateful to have this sense of ease return to them. Nothing was really fixed, not yet, and shitty histories aside, the therapy and the Retro Framing and all those Winter Soldier memories were going to be hell for everyone involved, so these moments of peace might be the one thing to get them through the inevitable, painful hurdles ahead.

It was odd though, Tony had to admit. Here he was, feet away from the Winter Soldier, but the caution, the grief, the resentment, it all faded back into the stillness of the late night. There was no room for it here, in this one quiet, strange moment in time where all Tony felt was some new,
inexplicable warmth in his chest, one he couldn’t help but enjoy, already craving more.
Rhodey threw his tie onto the recliner with little ceremony or care and after a moment’s deliberation, followed it himself, sinking into the soft, well-worn material of the recliner with a groan.

Being the leader of the Avengers wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

He was convinced he’d be a lot better at this during an actual crisis. Give him a firefight any day and he’d come out on top, but strangely—and suspiciously—the past year had been quiet. No villains pouring down from space, no fire-breathing assholes popping up to ruin their day, no wayward Captains ready to start another brawl. Even their run-of-the-mill villains and criminal masterminds were sub-par these days and didn’t require much more effort than some coordinated tag-teaming between himself, Vision, Hope, and occasionally Peter or Strange.

These days, Avengers spent more time negotiating with world governments, mugging for the cameras, and running miles than they did fighting the good fight.

Contrary to what Tony believed though, Rhodey had never been a good diplomat. Sure, he could talk the talk and walk the walk, but he didn’t enjoy it. He was a man meant for combat, not for a suit and tie and fancy dinners with stuffy politicians and military brass. Taking on more of these responsibilities in the past few months to lessen the burden on Tony didn’t do much for Rhodey’s blood pressure, but if it meant the bags under Tony’s eyes weren’t quite so pronounced and the smile on his face was a touch brighter, well, Rhodey was ready to schmooze the shit out of the entire US government for a good cause.

It wasn’t so bad, he supposed. His team was safe, the Washington suits were mollified for the time being, and now he could enjoy the best part of these Avengers-related travels, which was finally getting to come home.

Nowadays, home meant hearing Peter and Harley bicker over the results of their latest science experiment in the common room. It was Alice stopping by his office with a glass of scotch and listening to him vent for a moment. It was the bowl of apples in the kitchen and a plate of freshly baked pastries, their combined scents reminding him of his childhood. The treats appeared mysteriously every time he came back from a trip and he guessed it was a coordinated effort between Vision and Friday.

And of course, even before the Avengers Compound, even before all this superhero business, for many, many years, home had also meant Tony.

At the thought of his best friend, his idiot little brother in all but blood, Rhodey opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, heaving an exasperated sigh. Unfortunately, this time around their home had acquired a new guest who had been here barely a week and already Tony was worse off for it.

Rhodey received the panicked message from Friday in the middle of a meeting with several US senators.

Boss is having a panic attack, I think it was inadvertently caused by Mr. Barnes.

The words scrolled across the screen of his phone and he wanted nothing more than to walk straight out of that meeting and fly home, diplomacy be damned. However, he waited several agonizing minutes, first reminding himself Tony was a grown adult who didn’t need rescuing, then remembering Tony was occasionally a self-sacrificing idiot who did need rescuing, then trying to
think of the best way to excuse himself without offending the people who could make their lives difficult.

He was eternally grateful when the next message popped up on the screen.

*Boss is OK and has retreated to his lab. Will continue to monitor his condition.*

Rhodey responded with a simple, *Tell Tony we NEED TO TALK.*

Afterwards, when Rhodey was finally free to give Tony a call, Tony tried to convince him that everything was *perfectly fine*—*really, Rhodey Bear, stop being such a mother hen, I am in one piece and no worse for the wear*—and eventually Rhodey did agree not to cut his trip short, but he wasn’t convinced, not for a second, that Tony had this under control. Rhodey knew from the beginning Barnes would be trouble and so far, he wasn’t wrong.

A jolt of pain shot down his right leg, sharper than usual, and he tried to ignore it with his typical willfulness as he worked to find a more comfortable position. Tony’s custom-made braces gave him the ability to walk again—and so much more—but he still tired quickly, especially after trips like this, and the dull ache never really went away.

Unfortunately, there was little time to rest. Rhodey knew he’d have to deal with their new interloper sooner or later.

“Friday, can you tell me what Tony and Barnes are up to?”

“Mr. Barnes is in his quarters reading and Boss is in the West Wing Training Room 5, preparing for the first BARF session with Mr. Barnes.”

Rhodey sat up. “Wait, the first session is today?”

“Yes, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Dammit, I told that stubborn idiot not to start without me.”

“To be fair, Boss hasn’t actually *started* yet.”

Rhodey didn’t dignify Friday’s sass with a response—little wonder all of Tony’s creations inevitably ended up as sassy, sarcastic little shits—and with all the willpower left in him, he abandoned the safe haven of his recliner and headed for the training rooms.

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The viewing area above the training room, separated by glass and meant for observation by both coaches and trainees, reminded Rhodey of a surgical theater. Usually, the room below was filled with floor mats, training dummies, weapons, and other training equipment, but it looked like Tony had appropriated the entire thing for his latest science experiment. There were several holographic projectors placed all around the room and a holo-table situated next to Tony, already projecting multiple screens of data and images. Tony adjusted something on one screen and pivoted to examine a tray of tools nearby; on the other side of him was a simple, wooden chair, out of place and clashing with the rest of Tony’s whole sci-fi vibe. Rhodey’s eyes narrowed. It looked suspiciously like one of the chairs from their kitchen upstairs.

Tony was in full science mode and didn’t notice Rhodey at all, which gave Rhodey a chance to observe him without Tony trying to be *cute* about all of this and distracting him from the issue at hand.
Tony didn’t look stressed at least, moving around with his normal, slightly manic ‘mad scientist’ energy; his lips were moving and Rhodey couldn’t tell if he was speaking to Friday or muttering to himself.

It was a familiar and welcome sight, but Rhodey also knew Tony was very good at putting on an act. Still, it was better to come back to a ‘mad scientist’ Tony instead of a ‘drown my sorrows in liquor’ Tony.

There were a lot of things to hate about the past year, but a lot more things to be grateful for and Rhodey had never stopped being grateful for Tony pulling himself out of that dark hole and spending most of this year sober.

He sighed internally. At this point, they wouldn’t get the chance to have a real conversation until this whole Retro Framing session was over.

Rhodey turned on the audio connection to the training room. “You know,” he said and Tony looked up at the sound of his voice, a smile spreading across his face, “I’ve been back for hours and I don’t even get a simple ‘Welcome back, oh, fearless leader’? I’m wounded, Tones, really. Wounded and unappreciated.”

“Welcome back, oh, fearless leader! Oh Rhodey, my Rhodey, the moon to my stars!” Tony sangsonged and gave him a self-satisfied smirk. “Been a little busy here, as you can see.” He released a strained huff, hefting a particularly heavy-looking piece of scanning equipment into his arms.

“Apparently. Now put that thing down before you break your back, old man.”

Tony complied, but not before muttering a petulant, “You’re an old man.” He adjusted a few more dials on the holo-screens and turned to look up at Rhodey when he was done. “So, how was the trip? Did you play nice with the politicians, Honey Bear? I want to hear all about it.”

“Well, no one’s trying to sue us this week, so that’s a plus. We can talk about that later though. What I want to know is why I had to hear it from Friday that you’re over here setting up for the first session with Barnes.”

He pointedly raised an eyebrow and Tony grinned sheepishly.

“Just trying to move things along. No time like the present and all that. You don’t have to supervise, you know. It’ll be fine. Plus, we’re just doing baseline testing today.”

Leaving Tony unsupervised usually came back to bite Rhodey in the ass. “Yeah, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Just like Barnes driving you into a full-blown panic attack was fine, right?”

“Come on, I told you, it was an accident. He didn’t do it on purpose, okay? It wasn’t even —actually—” Tony whirled around to point an accusatory finger up at Rhodey. “You! You’re the menace responsible! Rearrange any coffee mugs lately, Colonel? You know, maybe to mock your perfectly average-sized best friends?”

This was exactly what Rhodey had meant about Tony trying to be cute to wiggle his way out of trouble. The conversation was supposed to be serious, but it was hard not to grin at Tony’s indignant face and Rhodey had to take a moment before responding lest he burst out laughing.

“Ok, in my defense, it was mostly Harley. I just supervised,” he admitted and it was worth it just to see the priceless, put-out look on Tony’s face. “What does that have to do with anything though?”

“Well, there was this damn mug that fell and Barnes startled me when he tried to catch it and—okay,
actually, a legitimate concern here, but why does our kitchen have more Avengers merchandise than our licensed stores? Who keeps buying these Iron Man mugs? Why can’t we have a normal set of plates?”

“Asks the man who owns five pairs of Hulk socks.”

“They were fluffy, okay? I’m a sucker for fluffy things and—no, you know what, not relevant. Barnes and I are just fine, alright? It was an accident and he was trying to keep a damn mug from landing on my head—I mean, this thing was huge, a concussion just waiting to happen. Barnes is practically a hero. Plus, it’s been a week already, neither one of us tried to kill each other, we even had lunch the other day. We’re basically best friends now.”

Tony was a master of deflection, but Rhodey could be stubborn too. “Fine, fine. We can table this discussion for later, but I’m still overseeing this session, just to be safe.”

Tony scoffed as he began to fiddle with one of the screens again. “Only if Barnes says he’s fine with you being here.”

“Since when did Barnes get promoted to being the boss of this place?”

“Since it’s his brain I’m gonna be rooting around in today.”

That little bite in Tony’s voice sounded genuine and Rhodey sent a mental prayer up to the heavens. He did not have the patience to deal with this today, but he should’ve expected the overprotectiveness. He remembered how stubborn Tony was on some issues when they first began hashing out the details of the pardon and one of his sticking points was preserving as much of Barnes’ privacy as possible during these Retro Framing sessions.

Had the Washington suits gotten their way, this place would’ve been crawling with every curious doctor, reporter, and scientist who wanted to gawk at the messed-up super soldier brain.

Rhodey understood the sentiment, he really did. He even sympathized with Barnes on a logical, objective level. The man was a victim, one who survived extraordinary and horrific circumstances. He was here to get help.

Rhodey got that, but logic meant little in the face of one simple fact. Tony was family and Barnes was a stranger—hopefully just a stranger and not a legitimate threat.

However, Rhodey could also acknowledge this was the right thing to do and it was also important to Tony; in the end, his best friend always did what he wanted, so it was better if he wasn’t forced to go behind Rhodey’s back to do so.

“If he’s uncomfortable with me being here, I’ll leave,” Rhodey reluctantly agreed.

“Thank you, Gumdrop.” Tony’s tone softened and the fond look that followed was worth it. “Speaking of the resident super soldier… Friday, could you call him over? We might as well get this over with.”

While they waited for Barnes, Tony coaxed Rhodey into recounting meeting with the Secretary of Defense, but before long, the man of the hour showed up at the doorstep.

The last time Rhodey had seen James ‘Bucky’ Barnes had been at the German airport and it was uncanny to see the differences between the man standing here and the man Rhodey saw on the battlefield. This Barnes moved with deliberate caution, hesitant and unsure; he didn’t take full advantage of his considerable stature and clothed in a plain black shirt, a pair of jeans, pattering over
in sock-clad feet, there was nothing about his appearance that screamed ‘trained killer’. Rhodey supposed that was probably the whole point though. There was a reason the Winter Soldier remained was one of Hydra’s greatest assets for seven decades.

Tony’s voice broke him out of his observations. “Barnes, I’d like to introduce you to our esteemed leader and current Avengers bossman.” Tony pointed to him, prompting Barnes to look up. “Colonel James Rhodes, although most of us call him Rhodey. Or Honey Bear, if that’s what you’re into.”

Rhodey’s first instinct was to roll his eyes and match Tony sass for sass, but he ignored the compulsion and gave Barnes his best stare-down instead. Barnes didn’t seem cowed though, which was frustrating, but at least he responded with a head tilt and a polite, “It’s an honor to officially meet you, Colonel.”

“I’m glad you made it here safe, Barnes.”

Rhodey’s attempt to intimidate Barnes didn’t go unnoticed however as Tony shook his head with exasperated disapproval and did roll his eyes.

“All right, so here’s the deal. Today we’re going to work on establishing a baseline. We’ll have to pull up some memories and they will be visible to everyone involved, but we’ll only focus on the good ones today. Now, Rhodey here wants to stay and observe our first session, just to make sure I behave myself. We all know I’m trouble when left unsupervised.” Tony’s expression turned serious and his words softened, losing the teasing tone. “It’s up to you though. If you don’t want him here, Rhodey will just have to come visit us later.”

Barnes gave Rhodey a wary glance and it was obvious he knew it wasn’t Tony’s behavior Rhodey was monitoring, but thankfully, after a moment of scrutinizing them both, Barnes did the smart thing and nodded his assent.

Satisfied, Tony turned back to his equipment, tapped this and that and once he deemed everything ready to go, he pivoted the empty chair so that it faced him instead of Rhodey. He asked Barnes to sit and Barnes complied with the same hesitance, his eyes scanning the equipment and tools with noticeable suspicion; it wasn’t hard to understand why this whole process was difficult for Barnes, given his history.

Tony adjusted a few more holographic levers, ordered Friday to prepare the scanning equipment and turned to Barnes, mouth opened to give out the next set of instructions, but he stopped in his tracks, clicking his teeth and narrowing his eyes at Barnes, who sat so stiffly in that chair, one would think he was awaiting his last rites.

“Okay, wait, real talk here, but what exactly happened to your hair today?” Tony asked out of nowhere, gesturing to the admittedly tangled mess on Barnes’ head that looked like a failed attempt at a pony tail.

“It was getting in my face, so I tried to tie it back,” Barnes mumbled and Tony rolled his eyes.

“You look like a street urchin.”

“Ouch. No need to be hurtful, Stark,” Barnes responded, less sullen than before—and was that humor in his voice?

Tony twirled a finger in the general direction of Barnes’ head. “I call ’em how I see ’em. This is a mess and if you haven’t noticed, we have standards around here.”

“And if you haven’t noticed, I only have one arm,” Barnes retorted and now there was a ghost of a
smile on his face.

“You know, you can only use that as an excuse for so long.”

To anyone else, this whole conversation would’ve looked like a lesson in insensitivity, but these two were enjoying the back-and-forth. Barnes was already visibly less tense, the hard line of his shoulders drooping into a more relaxed stance and his expression losing some of that haunted look.

_Huh._

Most people didn’t bother understanding the reasons behind Tony’s jokes, inappropriate remarks, and the occasional exaggerated flirting. Usually, Tony used them as a defense mechanism, but he also used them as a way to test people, to see how far he could push them before they got fed up with him. Most people got fed up _quickly_—and here, Rogers’ annoyed face materialized in Rhodey’s mind—but those who could tolerate it earned themselves the chance to see beyond Tony’s many masks.

Despite what some people believed, Rhodey didn’t just _tolerate_ Tony’s antics, he downright enjoyed them. They wouldn’t have been friends for three decades otherwise and really, he and Tony weren’t all that different. He was just a lot more subtle about being a little shit. Plus, someone had to be the responsible one and draw the line at Tony needlessly putting himself in danger.

Based on what Rhodey just saw though, apparently he wasn’t alone. Barnes here also appreciated Tony’s smart-ass comments and Rhodey couldn’t help his internal groan. He did always appreciate people who _got_ Tony’s charm, but why did it have to be this particular super soldier to get it this time?

Tony paid Rhodey and his silent lamenting no mind, all of his attention still tuned to Barnes when he let out an exaggerated sigh, clicked his tongue, and gestured at Barnes’ head again.

“I can’t look at this anymore, Terminator. May I?”

Tony made no move to get closer until Barnes nodded. He walked around to the back of the chair, pulled the hair tie out of the tangles and began combing through Barnes’ hair with his hands before carefully gathering it all in the back and tying it back up.

An innocuous gesture, sure, with anyone _else_, and Rhodey watched the whole thing unfold with a morbid sense of fascination. Tony’s touch was—dare he say—_gentle_ as his fingers ran through Barnes’ hair to get a few of the tangles out, brushing some of the strands out of Barnes’ face. For his part, Barnes looked completely unbothered by the whole thing and since when were they this comfortable around each other?

_Sweet baby Jesus, what did I miss? I was only gone a week!_

Tony stood back to observe his handiwork. “There, now you look like a presentable adult.”

“At least one of us should, I suppose,” Barnes replied without missing a beat.

“Hey, you watch it.” Tony wagged his finger, but he was failing to keep the amusement off his face. “I make this look good, okay?” He gestured vaguely in his own direction and Barnes let out an undignified snort.

Oh god.

Were these two idiots _flirting_? Rhodey was about to pinch himself, to see if he was stuck in some
terrible nightmare, but he kept watching the scene like a train wreck.

Tony just went back to toying with his screens though, Barnes sat back and resumed his assassin-eyed examination of the room, no one was making any more google eyes—and oh no, this wasn’t flirting, this was worse. This wasn’t some intentional effort to express interest because they were two good-looking guys who wanted to get into each other’s pants. No, this had to be a natural manifestation of their personalities when put together in the same room and the two were all but oblivious to it.

Their personalities clearly clicked and it must have helped build this rapport Rhodey was seeing. Knowing this wasn’t an act was worse, but Rhodey couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

All he could do was continue to watch. Tony explained the next steps to Barnes, something about brain and body chemistry and blood samples. Rhodey tuned out most of the technical details to focus on the interaction between the two.

Tony picked up the intricate sensors meant to go onto Barnes’ temples and around his forehead. Since Tony was discussing the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex, Rhodey assumed the sensors provided the necessary brain activity readings that Tony and Friday would analyze later.

Again, Tony didn’t budge until Barnes gave him another affirmative nod; then and only then did Tony approach and carefully—gently—placed the sensors around Barnes’ head. Barnes was attentively watching Tony’s every move, but Rhodey had a hard time interpreting the expression on his face. Was it anxiety? Resignation? Or god forbid, were those the first inklings of trust?

Tony plopped into his own chair on Barnes’ right, ready to insert the needle for the blood draw and although Tony’s next words were quiet—and clearly meant only for Barnes—Rhodey was still able to pick up the reassuring, “If at any point this gets to be too much, just let me know, okay?”

Too busy with the medical equipment, Tony didn’t see how Barnes’ expression softened when Tony let out a sympathetic hiss as the needle went in, even though Barnes himself gave zero indication it had hurt at all.

Yeah, that was definitely trust Rhodey had seen earlier; between this whole scene and the fact that yes, Rhodey was well aware Barnes was exactly Tony’s type, he had a bad feeling at the pit of his stomach.

The thing was, Tony had a tendency to pick up strays. Whenever he stumbled onto someone broken and in need of help, Tony developed the most fierce need to fix everything, immediately, and without reservations, and even though he denied it, Tony’s track record spoke for itself. He basically adopted Peter and Harley (two boys without father figures, and it was still both hilarious and heartwarming to watch Tony, a man who never expected children of his own, parenting two teenage boys). It even happened with Banner and Alice. Dr. Banner was an outcast who didn’t believe anyone would ever accept both him and the Hulk (Tony proved him wrong), and before Tony offered her the job at the Compound, Alice spent the time after the destruction of SHIELD in a dead-end job, spiraling into deeper and darker depression and failing to cope with what was likely severe survivor’s guilt.

And Barnes here? Oh, he was the perfect candidate to satisfy Tony’s need to rescue people, even given their complicated history. Take one tragic backstory, a well-placed ‘thank you’ or two, a pair of sorrowful eyes and a quick tongue, add a pretty face and voila. Barnes could have Tony wrapped around his little finger in under a month.

Above all things though, Rhodey was a realist and he knew that this thing—this compatible-
personalities, flirty-banter, trusting-looks thing—if it ever developed into anything at all, it would most likely blow up in their face. He had no evidence, no knowledge, nothing that said he could trust Barnes, but what he did have was prior experience. It wouldn’t be the first time Tony had his heart broken and it wouldn’t be the first time Rhodey was left to pick the pieces.

With an aching heart of his own, he watched Tony let out a satisfied hum when Friday informed him all equipment was operational and ready to go.

Tony turned to Barnes. “Alright, I need you to think of a neutral memory, the clearest one you can find. Something mundane, something that doesn’t bring any strong emotional responses, good or bad. Oh, and don’t startle when images start popping up around you. It’s just the most technologically advanced virtual reality hologram system in the world, no big deal.”

True to Tony’s word, it only took moments for the room to transform into a busy street filled with rushing people and old cars. Obviously one of Barnes’ memories from the thirties.

Tony’s hands flew over the holographic keyboard, eyes darting between the various outputs on the screens.

“How can you tell me what this memory is?”

“It’s—it’s the street I used to play on when I was a kid,” Barnes replied as he sat up straighter and gaped at the images. “This is—my god, this is incredible. It looks real.” He scanned the entire scene again before looking at Tony, who shrugged with a not-so-humble smirk.

“Let’s just say I’m pretty good at what I do.”

Barnes didn’t argue the point and went back to observing his own memory. For a few minutes, all three of them listened to the sound of the bustling virtual street until Friday informed them she completed the initial round of scans.

“How like I like to hear.” Tony rubbed his chin as he examined some part of the readings. He turned back to Barnes. “Alright, let’s focus on a good memory now. Something that made you happy, excited, satisfied—you get the picture. Find whatever’s clearest in your mind—and let’s keep it G-rated, please. For the Colonel’s sake.”

Barnes dutifully closed his eyes and Rhodey watched in impressed fascination—Tony had an annoying habit of always impressing him, in good ways and bad—as the holographic scene shifted and transformed again.

This scene was painted with brighter colors and awash in electric lights and there was another crowd of people filling the room with excited chatter. There were fireworks in the night sky and a large neon sign that read ‘…of the Future’ in bold, black letters. The first word was blurry, just like each face in the crowd, an indication that Tony’s system didn’t bother reconstructing those parts of the memory.

A younger version of Barnes, clad in his Army uniform, hands resting in his pockets, was laughing as he walked through the crowd and down a flight of stairs. Tagging reluctantly alongside him was —

Ah, shit. I hate it when I’m right.

Rhodey saw him at the same time Tony did, if Tony’s suddenly stiff posture were any indication. A projection of pre-serumed Steve Rogers, wearing an ill-fitted suit over his skinny, hunched shoulder and sporting a sullen look on his face, followed the younger Barnes. Rogers rolled his eyes when
Barnes gave him a friendly shove.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” younger Barnes spoke and their Barnes opened his eyes at the sound of his own voice; he watched the memory, not bothering to hide his awe and too distracted by it to take notice of the effect the memory was having on Tony.

Typical.

“You’re about to be the last eligible man in New York. You know there’s three and a half million women here?”

“Well, I’d settle for just one,” mini-Rogers responded with a sideway glance at Barnes.

The holographic Barnes was oblivious to the look Rogers gave him, smirking as he gave a wave to two beautiful young women standing by a stone monument. “Good thing I took care of that.”

For a moment, Rhodey’s mind couldn’t settle on any one particular thought. He was amazed by yet another piece of Tony’s incredible tech, fascinated by the bizarre dichotomy between the pre-serum Steve Rogers and the version Rhodey was more familiar with (the same was also true for the two versions of Barnes and the contrast was jarring). There was also that strained look on Tony’s face that had Rhodey worried.

A tinny voice echoed through the room, “A greater world. A better world!” The scene shifted in blurring colors as Barnes and the two women ran excitedly toward a stage. Rogers followed them at a more sedate pace, looking annoyed.

All three of them—Barnes, Tony, and Rhodey—simultaneously drew in a sharp breath at the cheery announcement that rolled through the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Howard Stark!”

What the hell? Is Barnes deliberately screwing with Tony?

But no, apparently not, because their Barnes finally realized his mistake and quickly stammered out a guilty, “We can turn this off, I didn’t meant to bring up Howard—”

“No, it’s fine,” Tony cut him off, all previous good humor gone. Just like that, whatever fleeting camaraderie Barnes and Tony had developed fell victim to the reality of their situation. “This is a happy memory, right? Let’s not screw up the readings.”

In the face of Tony’s cold, flat monotone, all Barnes could do was sit back in the chair, stiff and contrite, and they all watched Howard Stark’s performance on stage, all the way through to the end where the floating car collapsed in a sea of sparks and prompted a carefree laugh from the younger Barnes.

Rhodey had known Tony for several years before his parents’ deaths, but he had only met Howard a few times and Tony purposefully never talked about his parents more than strictly necessary even when they were alive, so watching this younger version of Howard was surreal and it made painfully obvious how much father and son had in common. The flair for theaetrics, the drive to be the first and the best, the unashamed flirting and the knowing, self-assured glint in their eyes. There were so many parallels.

Rhodey could only imagine what Tony was feeling, watching this young, carefree version of his father smile and banter with the crowd while they both stood feet away from the man who killed him.
Rhodey had to swallow back the desperate urge to shut this whole thing down, drag Tony away, and hide him somewhere safe—from Howard’s ghost, from Rogers and Barnes, from the whole goddammn world—but Friday’s chirp to announce she had the necessary data saved Rhodey from following through on those ill-advised, overprotective instincts.

He let out a sigh when all the images faded, hoping to god they were done.

Tony didn’t speak a word and didn’t look away from his screens. Barnes still sat hunched in on himself, running his hand nervously against his jean-clad thigh.

“Well, I think we all had a fantastic time, so how about we call it a day?” Tony delivered that cutting, sarcastic remark in the direction of the holo-screens too.

“I’m sorry,” Barnes mumbled, “I didn’t mean to bring that memory up, I didn’t think—it was the clearest thing that came up—”

“Don’t.” Tony halted Barnes’ jumbled apology with a shake of his head. “Whatever it is you want to say, just—don’t.”

“I just want to make things better,” Barnes added, clearly miserable, and this time he did get Tony’s attention, but it was not the reaction he wanted.

Tony was furious.

“Better? My parents are dead, Barnes. They’re dead, because of you, and now you pull this? What, did you think it’d be fun to watch me meet the ghost of my murdered father in vivid, technicolor glory—oh, plus, bonus, there’s you and your best buddy Steve fucking Rogers laughing it up too! Just like you guys did in Siberia, right? Stupid, pathetic Tony, he’s always such a joke, always such a trusting idiot. Was Siberia a fun memory too? Maybe we should bring that up next!”

“No, that’s not it at all—”

Tony didn’t let him finish; he headed straight for the door, throwing out a careless, “I need time to look at the goddamn data,” over his shoulder.

Rhodey watched Barnes curl in on himself and grip his hair in frustration with his one good hand, undoing all of Tony’s earlier work.

Rhodey waited until Tony was out of earshot.

“Funny, isn’t it, Barnes?” He threw the words out casually and given his startled flinch, Barnes must have forgotten he was still up here. So much for assassin instincts. “Funny how seeing your own dead father conjured up by the man who murdered him might change a man’s mood, hmm?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Barnes whispered.

Rhodey scoffed and shook his head. “Yeah, see, no one ever means to hurt Tony. At least, that’s what everyone keeps telling me. I’m sure Saint Rogers didn’t mean to keep the truth from Tony for years, I’m sure he didn’t mean to beat the shit out of him—well, maybe he did. After all, he was just protecting his one true love, right?”

Barnes looked guiltier than sin and Rhodey almost felt sorry for him, but then the image of hospital beds and flashing monitors, Tony’s unmoving body and vivid bruises, surfaced in his mind’s eye and it was hard to remember why they invited Barnes here, into their home.
“Listen, Barnes, I’m gonna get right to it. I don’t like you.” Sometimes you had to throw subtlety out the window. “And I sure as hell don’t trust you. If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be here and the only reason you are here is because of Tony. Tony was right, he is a trusting idiot and he drives himself to ruin with his desire to help. More often than not, that’s all he’s trying to do. The Accords, trying to bring you morons in at the airport, taking his dumb ass to Siberia alone, all of that was him trying to help. Unfortunately, more often than not, helping blows up in his face.” Rhodey stopped and waited until Barnes looked up at him. “I get that you went through hell and back, I do, but you’re not in hell anymore, Barnes. You’re here, in Tony’s home, living on his dime, and you’re only here because Tony is a trusting idiot and a better person than either one of us deserves.”

Rhodey mulled over how best to phrase this last part and decided simpler was better. “I’ve been at Tony’s side for longer than you’ve been alive, and no, your assassin years don’t count. A year ago, I saw you and your pals come this close to taking him away from me. I almost lost him. I’m not letting it happen again.”

Making sure to channel every bit of his protective fury, Rhodey gave Barnes one last look. “So you better watch your step around him, because unlike Tony, I won’t give you a second chance.”

Why was it, Bucky questioned himself in bitter, resigned despair as he slowly made his way back to his room, that everything turned to hell whenever he was around? He had to be cursed. It didn’t matter where he ran to or what he ran from, he only made things worse in the long-run.

Or maybe this was justice, maybe this was him finally paying for all of his sins. Bucky wasn’t sure anymore, but when he collapsed onto his bed and curled in on himself, all he wanted was to disappear. The world would certainly be better off for it.

Guilt warred with the after-effects of that memory. When he thought back to the images of the Stark Expo, of him and Steve, young and whole, everything in him drowned in a powerful wave of nostalgia and longing. God, that memory felt so clear after that session, as if it had happened yesterday instead of seventy years ago. It must have been the result of Stark’s tech, because the emotions attached to that memory were no longer dulled. His excitement at seeing the Expo, the apprehension about the war and wanting to make the best of his last night, the well of affection he had for that smaller version of Steve…

He felt all of that so keenly now and he wished he could have all of that back so desperately he wanted to weep. In that moment, he would have given anything to go back, to turn back time and erase the last seven decades. He wanted to be that happy young man again who, even in the face of a deadly war, was able to laugh and enjoy life with his best friend.

He just wanted to go home.

With sudden clarity, Bucky realized what he needed to do. Stark gave him the go-ahead days ago, but he’d been putting this off since the beginning, finding excuse after excuse, but now, with the glow of the memory still fresh in his mind, it was finally the right time.

Without preamble, he found the Stark tablet and connected it to the larger television screen just as Friday had taught him. He activated the secure line set up by T’Challa and Stark and waited for it to go through.

When it did and when Bucky saw the surprised face on the screen, another wave of wistful, nostalgic affection threatened to overwhelm him.

“Hey, Steve.”
Bucky wished someone would have told him it took exactly ten and a half minutes for nostalgia to wear off and for reality to set back in.

He squashed down the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose as Steve’s image on the television screen continued laying out the plans for Bucky’s escape from the Compound and their subsequent rendezvous.

Apparently, they were all going to go on the run again.

"Fantastic."

"Steve," Bucky finally had to interrupt, "I’m not leaving the Compound and you’re not leaving Wakanda."

Steve’s digital image made a frustrated noise, something between a groan and growl. "Bucky, no, you can’t stay there. You’re the one who called me. You’re obviously upset and I’m not going to sit on my hands while they do god-knows-what to you."

"They’re not doing anything to me. Yes, I was upset—"

"Because Tony said or did something insensitive, like he always does. I told you, I said it was only a matter of time. He’s still blaming you for everything that happened, isn’t he?" Steve’s expression shifted from exasperation to sudden dread. "Oh god, Buck, is it worse? Are they keeping you locked up? Starving you? Has anyone hurt you or—"

"No! Jesus Christ, Steve, enough with the fantasies. M’not locked up and no one is hurting me. I just—had a bad day and I thought calling you might make me feel better."

It didn’t.

At first, when he saw Steve on the screen, Bucky’s heart swelled. Over the past several decades, he’d forgotten what home felt like and for one desperate moment still fueled by the warm echoes of the Stark Expo memory, he thought this could be the answer. Just him and Steve, like before, taking on the brave new world together. A quaint thought, certainly, but nothing more because that yearning for the past, all that wistfulness, was quickly smothered by the stark reality of their new lives.

Bucky should have remembered how their last conversation had gone, but apparently nostalgia came with some pretty impressive blinders.

The first part of the phone call consisted of Steve reprimanding him for leaving. Then, Steve peppered Bucky with questions - what happened, why didn’t Bucky call earlier, why was he upset,
what nefarious thing was Stark up to now?

Bucky tried to explain, but after a few failed attempts at getting a word in edgewise, he realized Steve didn’t actually care to hear Bucky’s answers and was instead content to fill in the gaps himself.

According to Steve’s answers, the Compound was nothing more than a prison, Bucky was being horribly mistreated, and leaving everything behind to run away together was their only option.

Bucky forgot how much he hated this, to have his words ignored, to be spoken over and treated like an ignorant child who didn’t know what was good for him.

His mental growl matched the Soldier’s, who had stirred back to life to channel annoyance and blood-soaked fantasies at Steve’s visage.

At least this phone call wasn’t a total loss. If nothing else, it put things back in perspective and forced Bucky to come out of his morose episode of self-pity.

He blew out a breath. “Steve, I’m serious. I don’t want to leave. Getting my head on straight is just turning out to be a lot of work—no surprise there—but my priorities haven’t changed. I want to get better. I just had a shitty day and all I wanted was to see a familiar face.”

Steve’s eyes softened. “Of course, Bucky, you know I’m always here for you, but we both know this isn’t enough. I should be there with you! You shouldn’t go through something like this alone.”

Maybe not, but Bucky honestly didn’t think Steve was the right person to help him through this particular challenge.

He couldn’t help but think of Stark and their interactions before that stupid memory ruined everything. He remembered those silly jokes Stark dished out with a charming ease, so casual and devil-may-care, but somehow timing each ridiculous comment perfectly to distract Bucky from his anxieties. Stark always asked before approaching him or touching him, keeping a respectable distance between them, and it took Bucky a few days to catch on, to realize Stark was keeping that distance for Bucky’s sake more than his own. He even asked about Bucky’s favorite foods when they had their lunch together a few days ago. Bucky thought little of it at the time, a mundane topic to fill a conversation, but everything Bucky had mentioned appeared in the kitchen the next day and when Bucky tried to thank Stark, he waved away every word of gratitude and steered the conversation into a different topic before Bucky realized what had happened.

Stark was nothing like Bucky had imagined and while Bucky was still putting together the smaller details to get a better understanding of this man, there was no denying the big picture. Despite everything, Stark took Bucky into his home, spent his own time, energy, and money to help him, and so far, Bucky hadn’t found any strings attached either.

Bucky didn’t realize how much he appreciated those gestures, both big and small, until it was all ripped away in a blink. He remembered Stark’s cold look, that fury infused with so much hurt. Stark’s last words rolled through his head like thunder and Bucky wondered whether those words were spoken in the heat of anger or whether they were the truth of how Stark truly felt about him.

“—Bucky? Buck, are you alright?”

Damn, Steve had been calling his name. It was odd, Bucky realized, that he hadn’t lost track of his thoughts like this in a while.

“I’m here, I’m here,” he hurried to reassure before Steve started planning another righteous rescue attempt. “I understand you want to be here to help me. I get it, but we both know that’s not possible.
So please, just listen. I’m okay and everyone here has been real nice to me. Much nicer than I deserve.”

“Don’t say it like that, Buck, like they’re doing you a favor. You have nothing to apologize for.”

Bucky knew Steve meant well, but telling him it wasn’t his fault never helped. By trying to separate him from the actions he did in fact commit—and remembered down to the last bloody detail—Steve was taking away another piece of Bucky’s hard-won autonomy.

It felt like they were back at square one—or maybe they never left square one.

Before Bucky could decide whether he wanted to continue this familiar argument or cut the call short, several faces appeared on the screen as the rest of the runaways decided to join Steve on the call.

Natalia stayed in the background and gave him a brief nod, then Barton, Lang, and Wilson stumbled into the view of the camera, overtaken by uncharacteristic fits of giggles. Bucky assumed they were all drunk and had to restrain himself from making a disgusted face—but then she appeared.

He couldn’t hear the greetings nor the giggling any longer, not with the Soldier’s roar filling his head and the immediate flood of rage and violence at the sight of that woman sidling up to Steve—Wanda Maximoff, threat level maximum, avoid or neutralize at the Asset’s discretion—made Bucky physically flinch. He had to use every bit of his willpower to push the Soldier back lest that need to kill made him punch the television screen—or worse.

He never understood why the Soldier reacted to Wanda like that, but it had been the same way ever since they arrived in Wakanda, once the adrenaline of battle had worn off and Bucky had a chance to spend more than a minute around her.

The Soldier treated the other Avengers as potential threats as well, ranging from higher threat levels—Natalia—to entities of little concern—Scott Lang—but his hackles refused to go down for even a moment whenever Wanda was around, no matter how much Bucky ignored him or how many breathing exercises Bucky had tried.

Unfortunately, actual information to support this reaction was minimal. Steve told him a vague story about her parents getting killed by Stark’s weapons and even though she initially fought the Avengers in her need for justice, she switched sides at a pivotal moment and helped them defeat the robotic intelligence they called Ultron. Bucky knew all about the need for second chances, so he didn’t hold Wanda’s past against her, but the Soldier’s reaction, the aversion, was so visceral, particularly when she used her magical powers, Bucky couldn’t help but trust the Soldier’s instincts, no matter his distaste for trusting the Soldier with anything. He eventually took to avoiding Wanda entirely.

Bucky swallowed hard, reminded himself to breathe, and gave a strained, “Hello, everyone.” Thankfully, Natalia was more perceptive than Steve and she quickly pulled Wanda away. Bucky could hear her off-screen asking Wanda to join her in the kitchen.

“Hey, is that Barnes?” Barton slurred as he stumbled his way over to Steve. “Did you convince him to get his ass back here yet?”

“No, Bucky is being a little stubborn. He’s always been like that though.”

That remark was probably meant to be fond—it didn’t feel fond—and Barton nodded sagely before looking into the camera and taking another swig from his bottle. “Yo, Barnes, come on, didn’t you
have enough of Stark’s shit yet? It’s been—what? Two weeks? I bet you’re wishing you never left, huh? Did they introduce you to the Raft yet?”

“I’m fine, actually, thanks for asking,” Bucky replied coolly, fueled both by the Soldier’s wrath and by his own dislike of this belligerent version of the man. Sober Barton was difficult enough, but drunk Barton made Bucky want to punch the man. Repeatedly.

“Ha, he’s fine. Steve, isn’t that cute?” Steve tried to usher Barton back and out of view, but it was obvious he didn’t want to use his super soldier strength on him yet. “What, happy to be there then? Is Stark being so good to you? Don’t you worry, just give it some time. He’ll charm the shit out of you, romance you, throw his money around, and then he’ll stab you in the back just like he did the rest of us.”

Bucky clenched his fist, feeling the need to defend Stark. “Stark has been nothing but kind to me.”

Barton let out a drunken cackle. “Ooh, I know what this is,” he singsonged, “I know! Did Stark turn you into his boy toy already? Wow, putting out on the first date, Barnes, are you really that easy?”

Steve’s indignant and embarrassed, “Clint!” echoed through the room at the same time Bucky’s whole body tensed.

Clint wasn’t done though, even with Steve’s hands on his shoulders, trying to push him off-screen.

“Yeah, it’s obvious why he doesn’t wanna come back, Steve! He’s too busy getting on his knees for Stark! Ha, I bet he just came back from having that bastard’s cock in his—waaah—”

Steve shoved Barton away with a loud crash and what must have been a rough off-screen landing. There were groans and shuffling sounds and at the corner of the screen, Bucky got a glimpse of Wilson and Lang dragging Barton out of the room, although Bucky still caught the poisonous, “Hey, is my Laura there too? Is he fucking her too?”

Steve was still on screen, hiding his embarrassment with a weary hand over his eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Buck. Clint—you know he’s been going through a rough time, what with Laura and the, uh, the talks of divorce. He shouldn’t have said any of those things about you though.”

“He shouldn’t have said any of those things about Stark either. Or his own wife, for that matter.”

Bucky tried to ignore the sour taste in his mouth. How the hell was he supposed to feel at this point? Shocked? Embarrassed? Resentful? Steve acted like the implications were offensive, but Bucky had more issue with Barton’s intent to smear a man’s name rather than the accusations themselves.

The Soldier, who had the worst sense of timing possible, took a pause from his typical rage to conjure up a very vivid image of Stark’s brown eyes and that ridiculously attractive smirk, all of which Bucky promptly shoved into the darkest corner of his mind before that memory could pan down and straight into forbidden waters.

“Bucky, Tony is a self-identified playboy. He will sleep with anything that moves and nothing anyone can say would tarnish his reputation any more than he had done himself.”

Steve’s flippant tone did Bucky’s work for him and narrowed his emotions down to one—anger. For once, he and the Soldier were on the same page and with that sweet burst of anger came clarity.

“You know,” he began, surprisingly casual, “I may not remember everything about our lives, but I do remember how much you hated bullies. Always getting into fights with guys bigger than you just
because some ass was talking shit about someone who couldn’t defend themselves.”

Steve gave him a confused nod. “Of course.”

Whether Bucky liked it or not, the past seven decades had left a permanent mark on all of them and nostalgia was for starry-eyed fools. “So when did you become the bully, Steve?”

Steve blinked, trying to process the question, and it took him a moment to respond. “I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“The way you talk about Stark, the way you let the others talk about him. This isn’t just criticism or differences of opinion. This is bullying, plain and simple.”

“Bucky, no, you don’t understand. Tony isn’t some victim, he’s—”

“What? Your friend, your teammate? Because that’s what he was when you were lying to him, when you left him for dead.”

“I did all of that to protect you!” Nostrils flaring, jaw clenching, Steve ran a frustrated hand through his hair and after a measured breathe, he added, “Everything I did was for you - because I love you.”

Such a seemingly sincere display and Bucky almost felt guilty because the only thing he felt in the face of this profound declaration was a strange sense of sadness.

“The man you love has been dead for seventy years.”

Because just like Bucky could never again see the Steve from his memories, Steve would never reunite with the old Bucky Barnes. They were basically strangers now and they would always end up here - arguing, fighting frustration, never seeing eye-to-eye because they saw two different paths forward and two different worlds.

Another memory rose unbidden. Bucky stood by Steve’s side at his mother’s funeral and he remembered telling Steve then, ‘to the end of the line’.

A tempting, wistful image, but Bucky couldn’t afford to dwell on the past anymore. It was gone and that younger, happier Bucky Barnes was dead. All that was left was the here and now.

Maybe this was the end of the line then.

“Come on, Bucky, don’t say that. You’re not dead, you’re right here. You’ll be your old self again, it’s just a matter of time and isn’t that the whole reason you left to get treatment in the first place? To get better?”

Bucky almost opened his mouth, to correct Steve, to explain it wasn’t possible to simply be ‘his old self’ again, but sheer exhaustion kept him from trying.

“I think this conversation is done,” he said instead, less forcefully than he would have liked to.

“Bucky, no, we need to talk this through!”

“Talk what through? We’ll just go around in circles, never hearing each other. I’m tired of fighting. I’m just—tired.”

Steve was about to say something else, but for once, it was Bucky who spoke over him.

“I’m sorry and I hope all of you will be okay. Take care of everyone and if I have anything to say,
I’ll—I’ll send the message through King T’Challa.”

“Bucky, no, wait, you can’t—”

Steve’s desperate plea was cut short with a simple press of the tablet’s red ‘End Call’ button and the room fell back into silence.

Bucky made his way over to the bed and slowly sat down, working to parse out the mess of emotions tumbling through his head. He didn’t feel as morose anymore, but he certainly didn’t feel any better either.

At least the anger finally made room for everything else—the resignation, the loneliness, the uncertainty about his future—and some part of him even mourned the life he had accepted was gone forever. The sense of guilt, having never left him in the first place, surrounded all of that in a bitterly tasting fog.

The Soldier was still restless at the back of his mind, but between the flashes of violence and anger, Bucky could almost hear the Soldier laughing, as if mocking Bucky for being this confused, pathetic mess of jumbled emotions.

Bucky spent the next day and a half keeping to himself and only leaving the room to get food from the kitchen, making sure not to run into anyone on his way there. His heart gave a strange lurch at the sight of the bowl of fresh plums sitting on the counter that wasn’t there just a few days ago.

To pass the time, he returned to a habit he picked up when he was on the run and trying to piece together his broken mind. He found paper and pen and spent hours in the study writing down everything he could remember. Good memories, bad memories, random details that were probably meaningless in the grand scheme of things. He tried to commit all of it to paper and it may not have been as flashy as Stark’s tech, but physically writing things down had its own unique effect of giving his memories tangible form.

Late afternoon the next day found him in the middle of a particularly straining writing session; through bile and sweat, he detailed a brutal and bloody Winter Soldier training that ended in him killing the other soldier—his first of many.

Friday’s voice interrupted the grueling exercise.

“Boss would like to see you for the next BARF session, Mr. Barnes. Training Room 5, if you would be so kind.”

Emotionally raw from the memory, Bucky didn’t think he was in the best mental state to relive some more, but he was also glad Stark was willing to see him at all. Letting that kind of generosity go to waste was foolish, so Bucky left the quiet of his rooms behind and headed back to the other side of the building.

When he entered the training room, Stark was facing away from him, focused on all of his screens just as before. Colonel Rhodes was nowhere in sight and Bucky had to admit he was grateful. He didn’t necessarily blame him for the things that were said, but Bucky felt too emotionally exhausted to handle another guilt trip so soon.

He cleared his throat to announce his presence and Stark turned around, gave him a brief glance, and with his own version of stiff awkwardness, gestured towards the chair.
“So, uh, just like last time. Take a seat, I’ll get you set up, and we’ll get started.”

Taking the offered seat, Bucky continued to watch Stark as he worked. The earlier fury seemed to have dissipated, but now in its place was this awkward attempt at professionalism and it reminded Bucky of Ms. Blackwood the morning after her emotional breakdown. She was better at faking that cheery, ‘Everything’s fine!’ attitude, though; Stark fidgeted in place, radiating discomfort, and refused to look Bucky in the eye.

With a hesitation that wasn’t there before, Stark asked if he could approach and when Bucky gave him a nod, Stark placed the same sensors around his head. The devices felt cold and sticky against his skin, giving off small currents of static when they connected, but there was no real pain or discomfort.

Stark inserted the needle for the blood draw with the same stiff movements and made a hasty retreat to his table. There was no sympathetic hiss, no quiet murmurs to reassure Bucky this was going to be alright, but despite that absence, Stark’s touch remained gentle, so much so it made something at the pit of Bucky’s stomach twist and ache.

After a brief examination of the images on the screens—from Bucky’s vantage point they looked like brain scans—Stark rubbed his hand over his eyes.

“Listen, Barnes, I’m not gonna lie, this next part, it’s, uh, it’s gonna suck, but we’ll have to do this—today, tomorrow, it doesn’t matter—we’ll have to start dealing with the Hydra memories, with what they did to you. I don’t know how to fix something if I don’t know what the problem is and I need at least one baseline to properly recalibrate the system.”

Bucky was inexplicably glad the cold in Stark’s voice still hadn’t returned; he sounded apologetic in fact and Bucky wanted to say something to show he appreciated the sentiment, but nothing sounded right in his head. There was too much tension running through him—from his writing exercise, from the earlier call with Steve, from what happened with Stark the other day.

Even the Soldier refused to stay down, stuck in his own mental version of pacing, like a dangerous animal stuck in its cage.

All of that, combined with the prospects of dealing with another horrible memory made Bucky vibrate with anxiety; if he were honest with himself, he would admit he was scared. Usually, whatever memories he had of Hydra—their ranks and bases, the Chair, the training—it was all locked up tight, deep within his mind, and he used a considerable amount of energy actively ignoring the memories’ existence.

At least, that was before he came here and now he just forced himself to relive one of these memories on paper before being asked to pull another one up and relive it in much more vivid detail. Bucky wasn’t an idiot, he knew this was coming, but that didn’t make any of this easier and as that ache in his belly grew stronger, he desperately wished Stark would make one of his jokes and remind Bucky he wasn’t alone in this.

Stark stood stiff and unsure next to him though, so all Bucky could do was take a deep breath and brace himself.

“What do I have to do?”

Finally, there was eye contact and Bucky wondered whether it was really sympathy he was seeing in Stark’s eyes.
“Just like before, find the clearest memory you have and focus in on it.” Stark’s voice wavered. “If you, uh, if you can, find something that relates to how they programmed the triggers because that’s where our focus needs to be.”

Bucky’s answering nod was shaky and anxious, but he didn’t bother hiding how he felt.

“Don’t stop the memory until you have the information you need, Stark, even if it’s—unpleasant for me. It’s only fair.”

Bucky wasn’t sure what emotion crossed Stark’s eyes this time, but the moment was over, Stark went back to his screens, and he murmured a soft, “Ready when you are.”

So Bucky clenched his fist, squeezed his eyes shut, and reached deep within himself. He dove into the revolting, suffocating darkness and pulled on the strongest sense memory he could find and as the memory filled his head, his veins, every part of him, he knew his hand was shaking and already sweat began to bead at his brow.

As the decades-old phantoms of his screams echoed through the room, he knew what he would see when he opened his eyes.

This was no longer the training room. There was only the Hydra base, awash in green, sickly shadows, and he was surrounded by the same four doctors who always handled this part of the programming. He could remember their faces with clarity, their ugly frowns and calculating eyes burned into his sclera, never a shred of sympathy or regret to be found.

He was restrained, strapped into the Chair as they laid him flat and forced the apparatus onto his head—it didn’t have a name, not one he knew, but it felt like red-hot iron when it latched onto him.

He kept screaming.

Every time they did this, he would struggle, try so hard to break free, but the men around him would only laugh and the restraints grew tighter. His hopeless, pathetic attempts to escape only served to amuse them.

His screams continued, desperate and terrified, like a wounded animal, until they were muffled to a helpless whimper when the doctors shoved a mouth guard between his teeth. One of them—balding, sallow-faced bastard—held a book in his hands as he walked over to stand in front of the Chair. His wrinkled face held no outward emotion, only a critical eye as he observed the scene before him. To them, he was nothing more than a mission for the glory of Hydra. He was nothing more than a science experiment, a lab rat to rip apart and put back together.

For a heartbeat, the world around them stopped, but before he had a chance catch his breath, bolts of electricity ran through his head, his body, down to his very fucking soul and all he could think about was agony.

“Zhelaniye.”

Another bolt of electricity. Everyone looked on and took notes as his body convulsed and tears streamed down his face.

“Rzhavyy.”

His head was on fire. His body was on fire, every part of him was alight in flames. He was fire, he was ashes, he was pain. His body arched as the electricity ran through it once more; he kept convulsing under the strain, screaming his throat raw. All he wanted was death, but all he could think
Needles—sharp, red-hot needles piercing every organ, every bit of him raw and bleeding, all of him being eaten away by the acid creeping through his veins. He strained against it, clenching his fists, kept screaming and choking on the gag, desperately clinging to the remnants of sanity as the rest of the world blurred behind the cascade of tears and began to slip away. He wouldn’t let them—

“Rassvet.”

Electricity rolled through him, over and over, relentless and unyielding, and then he was empty. There was nothing left, neither life nor death, only the Asset, a vessel ready to be filled and—

“—come back to me! James!”

Who the hell is James?

“James—Fuck, fuck, you have to snap out of this!”

He clung to that voice with all his might, hoping it could keep him from drowning as the next wave of electricity hit.

Someone touched his hand and touch had always meant pain, but this… This was gentle and sure and all of the sudden he was desperately clutching the hand that held his and when he moved, when he looked up, he saw a set of wide, terrified brown eyes—

“S-Stark?”

On the next heartbeat, everything flooded back, but Bucky didn’t get the chance to put the jagged pieces of himself back together before the Soldier roared to life, every dark instinct, every sharp edge, every ounce of agony flooding back into his veins. The Soldier pushed back against every mental defense, desperate to get out, and Bucky could suddenly taste that insatiable urge to silence all the voices around him, to destroy, to kill, to kill every last one of them.

He wrenched his hand out of Stark’s grasp, pressed back into the chair and clutched his head, whispers bleeding out between words.

“I can’t—turn it off, please! Please make them stop! I can’t—”

“Everything is off, I promise. I turned everything off five minutes ago. It’s just us here, just you and me. You’re safe, James, everything’s alright. Nothing you’re seeing is real.”

So the voices were just in his head then, his insides filled to the brim with echoes of old realities, whispering those poisonous words until there was nothing left of Bucky—of James.

Why did Stark call me James?

The most inconsequential of questions, but it helped ground him in reality—away from Hydra’s cruelty, away from the Soldier’s desperate need for vengeance—and Stark’s voice kept him here, all those strong, reassuring notes infused with concern holding him above water.

The old voices began to fade back, but the Soldier remained, still pushing against Bucky’s mental walls, relentless, threatened, and enraged, and Bucky felt like he was straining just to keep himself from blacking out.
“James, is there anything I can do?”

Bucky clung to those words; Stark’s voice was real and as long as Bucky wasn’t alone in his head with the Soldier, maybe he could come out of this in one piece.

“Just—please—please keep talking.”

He heard the humorless, “I don’t think I’ve ever had someone request that before,” but Stark listened, he heard the unspoken plea. He stayed and began to speak.

“Would you like to hear the story of how I met Harley? I’m sure you’ve been wondering why there are two teenage boys living in my house and eating all of my food, and while I may have to leave Spiderling’s story for another day, Harley wouldn’t mind if I shared his. You see, it all started with yours truly, making a less-than-graceful crash landing in the middle of frozen Tennessee…”

In that same soft, measured tone, Stark wove a story of his slow trek across the snow, the Iron Man suit dragged behind him; he spoke of the stolen poncho and the phone call, of his first interaction with Harley and being shot at with a potato gun. Stark’s description of Harley was fond; the kid was hard to impress, even then—unless you were the Iron Patriot, of course—and already he was clever and independent, kind-hearted and brave. One boy trying to help one lost man, to defeat the bad guys and to help the lost man remember who he was—a mechanic who could fix anything.

As the story drew to its close, Bucky hoped that maybe, someday, Stark could fix him too.

There was no way to tell how much time had passed, but eventually, with Stark’s voice soothing the raw ache within him, the Soldier’s raging chaos subsided and when Bucky no longer felt like there was violence and death running through his veins, he opened his eyes.

Stark was sitting on the floor in front of him, worry and exhaustion working to thin his lips into a pained grimace. When Stark noticed Bucky had opened his eyes, he let out a long, drawn-out sigh, as if he’d been holding his breath this entire time, and he sagged against the leg of the table behind him.

“Okay, that did not go as planned, at all.”

Bucky shrugged, still curled in on himself, and Stark continued with another exhale.

“You were lost—to me, to the world, whatever, even when I turned everything off. Shit, I don’t know what went wrong, the projection shouldn’t have affected you that badly. Hell, it should have actually prevented you from losing touch with reality, but I, uh—” Stark looked around, first at the equipment and then back at Bucky. “Apparently I have still have a lot of work to do.”

Bucky didn’t know what to say, so he gave Stark a shaky nod. Every part of him was aching, physically and emotionally, and all he wanted was to be left alone.

“Can I leave, please?” he croaked.

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” Stark stayed where he was on the floor, clearly suffering the same bone-deep exhaustion. “Listen, Barnes. The system—it just needs some tweaks so that we can counteract whatever is going on in your head. I promise I’m gonna figure this out, okay? I’m gonna fix this.”

Bucky nodded again and walked away, wondering if Stark had meant for those words to sound like an apology.
Chapter 9

The early morning fog was just beginning to dissipate as the sun slowly made its way up to illuminate the green below in the soft light of dawn. There was something refreshing about these quiet morning hours and whenever Tony needed to clear his mind, he would often find himself here, outside the Compound, taking a stroll along the path that wound its way through the expansive property. Of course, unlike most of the joggers enjoying the morning light, he wasn’t a bright-eyed early bird. More often than not, he would already have spent the entire night working and would collapse into bed as soon as his little stroll was over.

Today was no different. He spent the night going over the terabytes of data Friday pulled out of Barnes’ head, trying to figure out what went wrong and what the next step in the BARF therapy needed to be. Ever the perfectionist, he hated admitting he overestimated the readiness of his upgraded system—or rather, he underestimated the sheer chaos that resided in Barnes’ head.

At this point, Tony needed a way to modify Barnes’ memories so that viewing them would begin to neutralize the triggers, but the data collected was being uncooperative and every time Tony thought he was making a breakthrough, it led him to another missing variable instead.

Thinking back to that revolting memory of Hydra’s reprogramming brought back the same nausea and the acid swirling in the pit of his stomach and Tony caught himself grimacing at the sensation. He stopped and tried to take a deep breath, hoping the fresh air would dislodge the feeling, and it helped a little, so he resumed his walk.

More than anything else, that memory reminded him that Tony Stark, genius, billionaire, etcetera, etcetera, was also an insensitive ass.

He regretted what he said to Barnes almost as soon as he stormed out of that room and once the red fog of anger lifted, the unnecessary cruelty behind his words became glaringly obvious. He didn’t even mean what he said. It really wasn’t like that. After the revelation at the bunker, he had a whole year to come to terms with what happened to his parents and to accept that Barnes was as much of a victim as they were.

Still, when he saw his father juxtapositioned against the images of both younger and older Barnes, something inside him snapped again and in that moment, he just wanted to hurt Barnes in the same way he was hurting.

At least no one could ever accuse him of being well-adjusted.

He may have felt bad about his words before, but then he got to experience, in vivid detail, just a fraction of the hell Barnes went through and then he really felt like shit about the whole thing.

It was one thing to read about the reprogramming sessions in the Hydra files, but it was a completely different thing to watch them unfold and he swore Barnes’ desperate screams still echoed in his head hours later. He remembered the holographic image of Barnes convulsing from the electroshocks and he remembered their Barnes, lost to the world as his mind was lost to the memory, begging for the torture to stop.

Begging for someone to let him die.

Tony shut everything down as soon as he realized Barnes went under, but turning off the tech didn’t bring him back right away. Barnes was still lost, choking on his litany of pleas and his body began to
convulse here too. Desperate and terrified, all Tony could do was keep calling out to him.

_Damn it, Barnes, you need to shake this off, please! You need to come back to me! James!_

He didn’t realize he’d grabbed hold of Barnes’ hand, but the touch had done _something_ because in that moment, recognition finally flooded those terrified eyes.

The request to keep talking caught him off-guard and Tony felt woefully inadequate, unsure he could help Barnes in any meaningful way, but he wasn’t going to argue, so he infused every bit of calm he could find into his voice and he told a story of misadventures from years ago.

That last session served as a brutal reminder of what Barnes had suffered. Tony’s pain seemed less potent by comparison and he wanted to apologize for what he said, but for the life of him, he couldn’t find the right words. Plus, Barnes had been actively avoiding him for days now and Tony didn’t want to use Friday to invade his privacy.

Tony couldn’t quite believe it himself, but he really did want to get them back to that tentative truce, that easygoing _thing_ that began to develop before everything went to hell. It was a pleasant surprise, finding out Barnes didn’t have as much in common with Rogers as Tony had initially thought.

On the contrary, the differences were striking. Barnes was solemn and observant, he listened more than he talked, but when he did, he asked relevant questions, spoke honestly, and matched Tony snark for snark. He even laughed at the jokes Rogers would’ve found incredibly annoying.

_Why can’t you just grow up, Tony? No one here has time for any more of your wisecracks._

No, Barnes actually enjoyed their banter, didn’t find pleasure in criticizing Tony’s every move, and appeared genuine in his desire to use this second chance to rebuild his life. Tony nearly choked on his lunch when Barnes casually mentioned that he read through the latest iteration of the Accords and had some questions he was hoping Tony could answer.

Tony wasn’t sure _he’d_ read the entirety of the latest draft.

Already Tony could see glimpses of Barnes’ intelligence, his curiosity, and a budding fascination with the newest advancements in science and tech, which would’ve been enough to charm Tony properly, but Barnes also had to go and be _grateful_—thanking Tony for some damn plums and a few bars of chocolate. Really, the sheer _audacity_, but Barnes refused to take a page out of his former colleagues’ book, so in addition to being clever, he was apparently an all-around decent guy too. Plus, there was no denying Barnes was a damn pleasure to look at and Tony had made it a daily mantra to remind himself this particular super soldier was _absolutely off-limits_.

As he made his way around the loop of the path, Tony noticed someone in the distance, jogging towards him and—well, speak of the unfairly handsome devil.

Barnes slowed when he spotted Tony, the hesitation obvious, but he did keep walking, probably deciding it would’ve been way more awkward to turn around and run away.

Not that Tony would’ve blamed him for running away, but still, _awkward_.

Seeing him out here though, clad in jogging gear, brought back another sharp memory of Rogers who used to go on these same runs around the Compound, almost always around this time. The memory was bitter, tinged with the ever-present taste of betrayal, but Tony squashed it down. Barnes wasn’t Rogers and it was high time for Tony to stop equating the two.

“Good morning, Super Soldier,” he called out with a mock salute, trying to infuse some cheerfulness
into his voice. “Training hard, I see?”

Barnes was finally close enough that he didn’t need to shout his reply. “Just a run. Helps clear my head,” he said, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

Tony noticed Barnes looked better than the last time they saw each other. There was color back in his cheeks and the shadows beneath his eyes weren’t quite as pronounced. Tony’s brain, as unruly as ever, also promptly noted that Barnes was glistening in the light of the early dawn and that apparently it was all very attractive and something Tony should absolutely pay all of his attention to.

Tony didn’t necessarily disagree, but he was a responsible adult—mostly—so he tried to focus on the PG-rated aspects of the situation, especially since Barnes’ reply was still awkward and stiff and it was obvious he didn’t know how to behave around Tony. Which was bad, because Tony wasn’t sure how to behave around him either. God, they were both just walking disasters, weren’t they?

Tony had to try though. It was the least he could do.

“I’m making my way back to the Compound. You wanna keep me company the rest of the way there?”

Barnes watched him for a moment, but in the end he just nodded, falling in place at Tony’s side and matching his slower stride. Tony clung to the positive response with every ounce of his stubbornness.

“We’ll have to move at my old man pace, if you don’t mind. I’d absolutely jog with you, but ya know, I’m not a fancy super soldier.” He followed that up with an exaggerated groan. “Ugh, I mean, I’ve been out here for ten minutes and my feet are already killing me. Running is just the worst.”

“Well, I’d offer to carry you back to the Compound, but ya know, still only got the one arm.”

Tony swore he could’ve kissed Barnes just then. Barnes, who was snarking right back and who wasn’t rejecting Tony’s olive branch and who maybe wanted to fix this whole mess too.

“What did I tell you about using that as an excuse, hmm? Besides, you could just toss me over your shoulder and carry me back like a caveman,” Tony let out an undignified cackle. “Can you imagine Rhodey’s face if you just dragged me into the Compound like that?”

“I have a feeling he’d shoot me.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about him. Rhodey has a protective streak a mile wide, but I swear, once you get to know him, he’s basically a big, soft teddy bear.”

Barnes’ smile peaked out of the storm clouds and grew as he shook his head and replied, “I’m pretty sure that doesn’t apply to me.”

“You wait and see, I bet he’ll warm up to you.”

Barnes just shrugged. They kept walking and Tony watched their steps synchronize; he wanted to continue with this easy banter and forget everything else, but he knew there were things he needed to say.

“Listen, Barnes, I, uh—” he began, but the words got stuck in his throat and why was apologizing always so hard? Tony wished he could fight some aliens instead, but no wormhole in the sky opened up, so he had to continue down this path. “I shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t have said what I said to you. It was unfair and cruel and just a shitty thing to do.”
Tony stopped and turned around when he noticed Barnes had stopped walking. Tony wasn’t sure how to interpret Barnes’ expression, so he bit the bullet and let the rest of the words tumble out. “I don’t blame you for what happened to my parents. That’s—God, I blame Hydra, not you. Our last session made it abundantly clear who the enemy is and you’re not my enemy, Barnes, and I—I just meant that—Jesus, but I’m not good at this.”

Tony ran a frustrated hand through his hair and looked straight at Barnes, who was still giving him that same strange look. Finally, with a deep breath, Tony added, “I’m sorry for the hell you went through and I’m especially sorry I added to that hell in any way. I’m sorry I snapped and I’m sorry about the last memory session. I should’ve worked harder to make sure you wouldn’t get hurt.”

The moment crawled by, with Tony standing there, wrestling with the terror of leaving himself so exposed, so vulnerable. He never wanted to throw himself at Barnes’ mercy like this—but he supposed Barnes had thrown himself at Tony’s mercy by coming here and maybe it was only fair.

It all seemed worth it though when Barnes’ expression finally changed and Tony was certain he’d never seen Barnes look so unburdened. His smile was small and tentative, but it was also open and real and beautiful, a perfect match to the soft look in his eyes.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much that means to me and as far as everything else? We both knew this wouldn’t be easy and the last session wasn’t your fault. Things tend to go wrong around me and you weren’t trying to hurt me.” He stepped closer and shied away from Tony’s eyes now, looking down. “I’m sorry that I hurt you too. Before, obviously, but also with that stupid memory. That wasn’t my intention, I just didn’t think, but you were hurt—of course you were, I can’t even imagine how that would have felt, so I’m just—I’m sorry.”

Either Barnes was a fantastic actor or the remorse was genuine and Tony preferred to think it was the latter. Rhodey would say it was because Tony was easily swayed by a pretty face, Pepper would say Tony was too forgiving, and Tony thought it was because he saw some part of himself in Barnes. Trying to do the right thing, stumbling, falling, failing, hurting others despite every good intention. How many apologies had Tony issued on his own path to becoming a better man?

There was a lightness in his chest now, one he didn’t expect, one tangled up with a tentative promise of a new beginning, and he hoped he wouldn’t start grinning like a loon.

“Okay, good. I’m glad that—I’m glad we’re okay. I’d like for us to be okay.”

“I’d like that too.”

Tony smiled and beckoned Barnes to follow him. Barnes obediently fell into step beside him again.

“So, now that we have that awkward heart-to-heart out of the way—and let’s not do that again if we can help it—I have something much more interesting to talk about.” Tony had been thinking of a way to cheer up their resident broody ex-assassin and hoped this next part would do the trick. His smile turned mischievous. “How would you like to take a day trip with me?”

Bucky felt a distinct desire to fidget under Stark’s scrutinizing gaze.

“Please tell me that’s not what you’re wearing.”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“It’s a ratty sweatshirt and jeans. Frankly, I’m worried we’re gonna get escorted out by security as soon as we step foot into Stark Tower.”
Okay, so maybe Bucky did feel underdressed, especially when standing next to Stark, whose clothes were always immaculately put together even when he was dressed for a casual day out. Even now Stark looked good, clad in his sneakers and jeans, a dark blazer thrown over a shirt emblazoned with the NASA logo.

The plan for today, according to Stark, was to stop by Stark Tower in Manhattan for a brief meeting with the SI CEO (the illustrious Pepper Potts, as Stark described her) and then spend the rest of the day enjoying the city.

The offer was tempting. With everything that happened in the past two weeks, Bucky was going stir-crazy and while a part of him was worried about being out in public again, the anxiety was drowned out by the excitement of doing something normal.

Well, as normal as a stroll through Manhattan with Iron Man at your side could ever be, he supposed.

In the face of Stark’s scrutiny, all Bucky could do was give a helpless shrug, which prompted Stark to roll his eyes and head straight into the walk-in closet attached to Bucky’s bedroom. Inside, there was almost an entire wardrobe now, building up through steady deliveries that kept appearing on his doorstep daily. Apparently Friday had gotten carried away in her enthusiasm now that she had his proper measurements and had purchased him half a department store.

Bucky appreciated the effort, really, but the sheer amount of everything was intimidating. What did he need so many shirts and shoes for?

Stark seemed right at home though, examining the different pieces and grabbing the items that caught his interest. Finally, he came back out, arms full, and began handing pieces off to Bucky one at a time.

“Alright, here, a decent dress shirt. Dark blue, to complement your eyes. Undershirt, always important. A nice, new pair of jeans. You get to pick between sneakers and dress shoes. Ooh, and these sunglasses to complete that fun assassin-spy look. That should be good for today and if I see you wearing that ratty sweatshirt outside of late-night brooding sessions again, we’re going to have words, Barnes, capiche?”

Having Stark fuss over his fashion choices wasn’t anything Bucky had expected when he came here, but he’d long ago learned to roll with the punches. With a nod, he disappeared into the bathroom and reappeared a few minutes later, wearing all of the pieces Stark gave him.

Of course, Friday’s purchases garnered no complaints. Everything fit perfectly and the button-down shirt had been tailored to have the left sleeve trimmed and discreetly pinned in place. Getting dressed with one arm still came with its own set of challenges though.

“Buttons are a bit of an issue for me, Stark,” Bucky said while Stark evaluated his handiwork with a hand on his chin.

Truth be told, this wasn’t one of those challenges. Bucky could have managed the row of buttons himself, but as he tried to do the first one, he remembered how surprisingly nice it was to have Stark offer to fix his hair, to feel those careful, clever fingers brushing through, so wondering if he could get Stark to fuss just a little bit more, Bucky took a chance and left the shirt unbuttoned.

The gamble paid off when Stark gestured at it and simply asked, “May I?”

Bucky nodded and when Stark stepped closer to begin fixing the row of buttons, Bucky had to pretend there wasn’t a pleasant heat spreading through him at the proximity. It was even harder to
pretend he wasn’t developing a positive association with those two simple words.

Standing closer than they’ve ever been gave Bucky the chance to let his senses wander and he noted the spicy, crisp smell of Stark’s aftershave first. His eyes slid over the small, numerous scars scattered across Stark’s face and found the laugh lines in the corners of his eyes. Stark bit his lip in concentration, trying to fix one of the more stubborn buttons, and the sight of his small concentrated frown was almost endearing.

Brown eyes looked up at Bucky, framed by long lashes and dancing with mirth, and Bucky flushed, realizing he was caught staring.

He took an awkward step back when Stark was done and coughed to clear his throat.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“So, how do I look? Not gonna scare away the civilians anymore?”

The glimmer in Stark’s eyes hadn’t subsided when he hummed as if contemplating his answer and Bucky was hit by how much he already missed this easy back-and-forth.

He missed Stark’s smile too and those teasing notes when Stark said, “You’ll do just fine, Super Soldier.”

The vivid treetops of Central Park were a welcome respite after their thirty-minute walk through the busy streets of Manhattan and Bucky found himself smiling at the familiar sight. At least the park hadn’t changed as much as everything else had.

The meeting at Stark Tower turned out to be surprisingly short, which made Bucky suspicious as to whether it was really the reason for their trip into the city. After Tony made a big production out of introducing Bucky to an exasperated, but very polite Ms. Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts, she and Stark stepped aside to discuss some inter-Atlantic contract, the details of which Bucky ignored in favor of observing the interaction between the two; it didn’t take long to realize Ms. Potts must have been the woman Stark mentioned over their first cup of tea.

The two were amicable enough, offering each other friendly smiles, talking business in a fluid back-and-forth that spoke of many years working together, but there was an undeniable tension between them, a sort of discomfort Bucky couldn’t identify without more information. His curiosity niggled him to ask questions, but he knew it would be neither polite nor appropriate.

After they left the Tower, Stark insisted Bucky needed to start trying new things and so Bucky followed an enthusiastic Stark to a tiny restaurant across the street that served ‘the best damn curry in the damn state’.

The restaurant owner greeted Stark like an old friend, lamenting she missed having him visit now that the Avengers no longer lived at the Tower. Tony asked about her kids, gushed about her restaurant, and assured her he would stop by more often.

The rest of lunch was spent over friendly conversation, with Stark indulging Bucky’s more generic question about the many things he had missed in the past seventy years. This conversation flowed easily too, as if they’d been friends for years, and Bucky wondered whether the ease came from compatible personalities or from both of them having dropped all expectations of each other.
Stark didn’t seem to want anything out of Bucky other than the obvious—not to cause any more trouble—and Bucky had long ago dropped his preconceived notions of Stark, determined to figure this man out for himself.

He liked this, he realized, the simple act of being without a set of expectations weighing him down, without sets of eyes watching him, waiting for hints of before, some that could manifest, but some that might never return.

Bucky hoped there would be more moments like this, that this wouldn’t be their last shared meal, especially since he also learned that he did, in fact, enjoy a bowl of spicy, hot curry.

Unfortunately, as soon as they left the restaurant, another business emergency reared its ugly head and because Stark was dead set on taking Bucky to Central Park, compromises had to be made and so Stark spend most of their walk on a conference call with Ms. Potts and the rest of his executives.

Bucky didn’t pay much attention to the details of Stark’s discussion; watching Stark’s face go through an impressive range of emotions as the call went on made for much better entertainment. There was annoyance at first, which manifested itself in exaggerated eye rolls and exasperated groans; then, a look of concentration and a furrow of Stark’s brows when he began to take the conversation seriously and worked to solve the problem. At some point, Bucky had to stifle a laugh when Stark turned to him and mouthed a pleading, “I hate these people, Barnes, help me.”

Bucky could do nothing to rescue him, so all he offered was a sympathetic shrug and Stark just shook his head as if to say, ‘Oh, you’re no use,’ and continued rattling off facts and figures.

When he wasn’t watching Stark, Bucky also used the time to study the city, to take in the sights, and to reflect on what happened earlier today because no matter how much he tried to let the fast-paced crowds and the neon signs distract him, he couldn’t ignore the warm, light feeling blossoming in his chest. It felt almost foreign in a way, something new—something forgotten—but he was quickly getting used to it and why shouldn’t he allow himself this new comfort?

Because after all that had happened, after everything, Stark had apologized—to him, sincerely and without qualifiers, over simple words spoken in anger.

Bucky didn’t expect an apology, certainly didn’t feel worthy of it. Had Stark demanded his pound of flesh, Bucky would’ve likely given it, preservation instincts be damned. His guilt was a constant and Stark had every right to stand behind his words, to punish Bucky for his past crimes, but he chose to take a different path. He was the one brave enough to take the first step down that path.

After that awful second session, all Bucky could do was run and hide. He spent hours in bed, unmoving, trying to put back all the jagged pieces of his mind. Eventually, once he felt like those broken fragments wouldn’t crumble when he stood upright, he let himself shower and eat. Both helped more than he expected, but he still didn’t think he could face Stark. He couldn’t even think of a way to start that conversation.

Stark found a way though and he found the words Bucky couldn’t.

His heart still full of that warmth, Bucky dutifully followed wherever Stark led, just a step behind, and after working their way through crowded streets and honking taxis, they finally entered the beautiful, tree-lined path leading them into the tiny pocket of nature nestled in the middle of the sprawling city. Just like the city streets though, the park was full, children and adults alike enjoying the summer weather.

Stark let out a relieved sigh as he placed his phone back in his pocket. “Jesus, glad that’s over. Word
of advice, Barnes, don’t ever run a multi-billion dollar company.”

“Hmm, being rich and powerful, that does sound pretty terrible.”

Stark deflated and groaned. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Old, rich white guy complaining about his money. I’ll shut up.”

“I thought Ms. Potts ran your company anyways?”

“She does and she’s amazing at it, which means usually I can just focus on the fun stuff. You know, making cool new gadgets, revolutionizing the clean energy business, that kinda thing. I still have a controlling interest in the company though, which means any big decisions have to go through me. Hence, the need for that unnecessarily long phone call with a bunch of other old, rich guys—and poor sweet Pepper, of course, bless her beautiful heart.”

Stark took a moment to stretch his arms as they continued to walk and the pause gave Bucky enough time to digest what Stark had said. Not only was he an Avenger who fought actual threats and dealt with the legal and political side of the superhero business, he was also involved with Stark Industries in at least several different capacities - design, production, management.

Bucky was certain there was more and faced with the breadth of Stark’s influence and responsibilities, he had to wonder where Stark was finding the time to recalibrate the BARF system, administer the memory sessions, and study whatever information his system was spitting out about Bucky’s messed up brain.

Worse yet, Bucky wasn’t even sure he’d ever thanked Stark for any of it. On top of Stark’s already extensive list of responsibilities, here was Bucky, a burden in most regards, brought back to appease a more sympathetic Council (that was trying to appease a more sympathetic voting public) and provided for by a man he nearly killed less than a year ago.

Maybe Rhodes was right. Maybe Stark was too kind for his own good.

Before Bucky could find the words to thank Stark—or worse, tell him he was too kind—Stark spotted something in the distance and his face brightened up.

“You know what we need right now?” Stark looked back and winked. “We need ice cream. They had that back in your day, didn’t they?”

“Of course we did. I’m from the forties, you know, not the Dark Ages.”

“Coulda fooled me, old man. Come on!” Stark motioned him over and into line for an ice cream truck and before long Bucky found himself with an actual bowl of ice cream since Stark insisted he try every flavor that sounded even remotely unfamiliar and Bucky could do nothing but watch his pile of ice cream scoops grow taller. Stark showed restraint with his own treat, limiting himself to a few generous scoops on a cone and because Bucky couldn’t actually eat his share while they walked, they found a bench overlooking the park grounds.

Between the ice cream, the beautiful view, and the many families around them enjoying the warm summer day, Bucky realized this was the most normal, the most fun thing he’d done since—well, since that night at the Stark Expo. The realization was bleak, but the bright world around him quickly extinguished the self-pity and it was a heady, addictive feeling, he realized, to feel this contented. It scared him because he knew these moments were fleeting and it meant going back into the shadows would be that much harder when the sunshine dimmed and the laughter subsided.

He fought back against the dark thoughts. The sun was still out, the children around them were
laughing, and Stark himself appeared comfortable and relaxed as he looked over the scenery and took great delight in enjoying his dessert. Bucky watched as Stark’s pink tongue darted out to catch some of the vanilla ice cream melting down his cone and he had to look away then, suddenly flushed again.

The Soldier stirred and Bucky shoved him back, ordering him to stay out of the way. There was definitely a pattern to these errant moments of impropriety and the Soldier’s curiosity did not help, but Bucky refused to give it any more thought. Instead, he focused on another anomaly that had him curious since the visit to the Tower.

“Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?”

Stark met his glance when Bucky looked over before going back to observing the people walking by.

“Nothing wrong with asking a question, but I reserve the right not to answer.”

“Fair enough. Were you and Ms. Potts ever, uh—” Words fled and suddenly he didn’t know how to phrase his perfectly generic question.

Thankfully, Stark took pity on him. “If you’re asking whether Pepper and I have ever been in a relationship - yes, we were together for a few years.” He deflated a bit. “Were we really that obvious in there? I thought we were being pretty civil with each other.”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” Bucky assured him. “It’s just the way you look at her. It’s obvious you love her, but there was also a tension between you, the kind you don’t have with someone who’s just a friend or a colleague.”

“Ugh, is this a super soldier thing?” Stark slumped even further and gave his ice cream a dejected lick. “Because that’s way too perceptive. Between you and Rhodey I’m never going to get away with anything.”

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “I’m not sure if it’s the serum or not. Maybe I’ve always been good at reading people. So the two of you—you’re not together anymore?”

Here, Stark’s voice dipped into a more wistful tone. “No, we’re not together. Haven’t been for a while, actually. Pep—she’s amazing. Strong and capable and kind. She’s an incredible woman who’s taking the world by storm—and me?” Stark shrugged. “I’m a human disaster in a tin can. She always deserved better.”

Bucky wasn’t sure he agreed with Stark’s assessment, but he kept that particular thought to himself. He also wondered whether Stark was aware Ms. Potts held the same wistful fondness in her eyes whenever she looked at him.

When Bucky didn’t say anything else, Stark decided it was his turn. “So, what about you? It seemed like you were quite the ladies man back in the good old days, at least based on the memory we saw. Did you have to leave a girl behind when you went off to war?” Stark cringed a second after he said that last part. “Sorry, that probably wasn’t the most sensitive way to phrase it.”

“No, that’s alright.” Bucky took a moment to contemplate whether he wanted to be honest with Stark. “I, uh, I was actually more sweet on the guys back then than I was on the girls,” he confessed and saw Stark sit up straight in his peripheral vision.

“Huh, is that so?”
“It wasn’t something we could even talk about.” Again, the memories were nothing more than sterile glimpses and facts scribbled onto faded paper. He couldn’t remember how it all felt, those secret meetings and stolen kisses in dark alleys. “It’s better now, isn’t it?”

Stark shrugged. “It’s definitely better than you remember, but eh, things are still a work in progress. I think humanity’s always a work in progress, for better or worse.” Suddenly, Stark’s eyes widened and he looked straight at Bucky. “Oh my god, wait.”

“What?”

“Did—did you and Rogers—were the two of you—” Stark sputtered, unable to finish and it took a second for the question to sink in and then it was Bucky struggling not to choke on his spoonful of ice cream.

“What? No, no, why would—he was like a little brother to me! Wait, since when is Steve even into men?”

“Well, since—” Stark began to count on his fingers. “Four—five years ago? At least that’s when he told the rest of us and the public reveal came a little later. We got him a great interviewer, made sure everything was in our favor. It went well, actually, considering everything else. Some of the conservatives gave him grief—no surprise there—but for the most part, the public was pretty accepting that he was into men now as much as women. More accepting that they were of any of my former male flames, but ya know, the public has had a love-hate relationship with me since I was five, so water off a duck an’ all that.”

Bucky blinked, processing the barrage of new information. Surprise after surprise and just as he was trying to decide how he felt about that last part, Bucky had another moment of realization.

*Oh god.* It would make sense too, given the way everything was so emotionally charged between Steve and Stark last year, and he couldn’t help his incredulous look. “Wait, hold on, were you and Steve together?”

Of course he said this just as Stark was about to take a bite and now it was Stark’s turn to cough and sputter. He gave Bucky an affronted look after he was finally able to breathe.

“Well, since—” Stark began to count on his fingers. “Four—five years ago? At least that’s when he told the rest of us and the public reveal came a little later. We got him a great interviewer, made sure everything was in our favor. It went well, actually, considering everything else. Some of the conservatives gave him grief—no surprise there—but for the most part, the public was pretty accepting that he was into men now as much as women. More accepting that they were of any of my former male flames, but ya know, the public has had a love-hate relationship with me since I was five, so water off a duck an’ all that.”

Of course he said this just as Stark was about to take a bite and now it was Stark’s turn to cough and sputter. He gave Bucky an affronted look after he was finally able to breathe.

“Well, with everything that happened last year—it was just—it was all so personal between you two.”

“Yeah, we were teammates for six years and then he decided to throw it all away. If anything was personal, it wasn’t because of me. It was personal because of you.”

Bucky winced, realizing he inadvertantly brought up what was possibly the second worst topic.

*Great job, Barnes, just great. Mention his dead parents too while you’re at it.*

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought this up, I just—” Bucky stopped his poor attempt at an apology when he saw Stark deflate and wave a dismissive hand.

“No, no, it’s my bad, I shouldn’t have gotten worked up about it either.” Stark let out a sigh as he watched himself twirl the small remaining piece of his cone between his fingers. “We’re two grown men. We should be able to talk about Steve without being at each other’s throats. Hell, we both have
a history with him, so we can’t avoid that forever. Now, don’t get me wrong,” Stark looked over and pointed the waffle cone piece at Bucky, “if I ever see him again, I’m probably gonna punch him in his stupid, perfect teeth, but he’s not here and I’m sure as hell not gonna let him ruin our good time.”

“That sounds like a good plan to me.”

Stark nodded decisively before doing a full-body shiver and scrunching up his face in exaggerated disgust. “Ugh, I think that was literally the most mature thing I’ve said all month. Rhodey would be so proud.” He squinted at Bucky and popped the rest of the ice cream in his mouth. “I hate being an adult,” he declared, crunching his way through the cone and Bucky couldn’t stop the helpless chuckle that escaped him. Somehow, this situation went from potentially disastrous to utterly ridiculous in a matter of seconds.

He took a moment to look over the horizon and noted the sun was slowly setting. There was still something he needed to say, so maybe now was his chance to be brave and find the right words.

“I, uh, I wanted to thank you,” he began and Stark gave him that familiar cocked eyebrow.

“For the ice cream? Well, uh, yeah, sure, you’re welcome. That was pretty good, wasn’t it? We should get the food truck to come out to the Compound for a day, treat everyone before the summer’s over.”

“No, not the—well, yes, the ice cream too of course, but I just meant—thank you, for everything.”

Bucky kept his eyes settled on the park, not brave enough to look at Stark as he said this. “For making the pardon happen, for allowing me as much autonomy as I have. You’re spending so much of your time trying to help me and I can’t help but think you’re the type of man who can spend that time doing something so much better. You can change the world, you save it for a living, and yet here I am, demanding that time for myself. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not selfless enough to tell you to stop. I really do want to get better, I want it so badly I was ready to come here without knowing what was waiting for me—and my expectations, my preconceived notions, I’m still learning to adjust them. So thank you for opening up your home to me and offering me this chance, even though you were the one person who had every right to tell me to go to hell. I just—I’m grateful and there isn’t much more I can do other than thank you.”

Heat settled in his cheeks as he finished. He didn’t expect to say so much—too much and the vulnerability of being so honest was frightening, but Bucky kept himself still. He was grateful and there was no shame in honesty.

It didn’t help that Stark hadn’t responded though, but when Bucky glanced over, he realized Stark almost looked flustered, as if he didn’t know what to do with Bucky’s gratitude.

Finally, Stark seemed to gather himself and nodded. “Yeah, I mean, I appreciate you saying that and uh, don’t worry about it, we’re—we’re fine. The pardon was going to happen one way or another and sure, there were some parties that wanted to use that to their advantage, you know, some wanted to get more information on the brainwashing, for science, others wanted to use you for their political platform, etcetera, etcetera. All I did was put my foot down and make sure the vultures didn’t get their hands on you. What else are genius billionaires for, you know? And obviously no one’s expecting you to pay anything back or whatever it is you’re thinking. Just—be a decent person. That’s all anyone’s asking for here.”

Stark proceeded to fidget with the cuff of his sleeve as he pretended to observe a family of four nearby.

The bar seemed to be set pitifully low, Bucky decided, and the reaction was an odd one too given
Stark’s usual confidence. Was this because Stark didn’t expect Bucky to thank him at all or was Stark not used to being thanked like this?

The sun was almost swallowed up by the horizon now and Stark stood up slowly, letting himself enjoy a long, luxurious stretch. After a yawn he hid behind his hand, he propped his hands on his hips and looked down at Bucky.

“Alright, Super Soldier, I think we need to head back. There’s a slight possibility I haven’t slept in the past day and a half—no big deal, this is normal—but if we don’t get moving, you will have to carry me back and granted, this is Manhattan, no one will blink an eye, but I’m old and fragile and I require careful handling.”

Bucky stood up too, taking his own opportunity to stretch.

“Handle with care, duly noted. Anything else I should keep in mind?”

“I am easily bribed with coffee and anything I say while sleep-deprived should not be held against me in a court of law.”

Bucky grinned, trying to picture messy hair, bleary eyes and a half-coherent, sleepy Tony Stark. He hoped to see it with his own two eyes someday.

“Just giving away all your trade secrets today, aren’t you? Suppose I better start learning how to make a mean cup of coffee.”

“Damn straight.”

They began to walk back, still side by side, with the last rays of the sun leading the way.

“Thank you for taking me with you, by the way. This was exactly what I needed.”

Bucky watched Stark’s reaction this time—and yes, there was that odd mix of flustered confusion again.

“No problem. I, uh, I needed someone to keep me company anyways. You’re just snarky enough to make do,” Stark said, deflecting yet again, and Bucky made a mental note to look into this further.

Right now though, to encourage this playful levity between them, he gave Stark his own version of a mischievous smile.

“Alright, so I’ve been reading a lot and I think I’m starting to get the hang of this whole 21st century deal, but here’s something that’s been bothering me and I was hoping you could help me.”

“I’m all ears, Barnes.”

“Could you please point out the geniuses who decided it was alright to demote a whole planet while I was out of commission? ‘Cause I’ve got a bone to pick with them on Pluto’s behalf.”

The rest of their walk back was spent with Stark giving an impassioned lecture on planetary classification and with Bucky pretending he didn’t ask that question just so he could enjoy listening to Stark’s voice.

Bucky could already smell the soothing herbal scent of the tea before he entered the kitchen and he took a deep breath to enjoy it.
Stark was at the table, a steaming mug of tea at his side, but his brows were pinched in frustration as he glared at his tablet. When he looked up at the sound of Bucky’s footsteps though, his features softened and he gestured for Bucky to sit next to him. A familiar red mug was already there waiting for him.

Bucky sat down and savored a sip of tea first, enjoying the heat as it went down and spread through him, mixing together with the pleasant warmth that hadn’t left him all day.

Stark’s disgruntled hum however drew Bucky’s attention away from the tea.

“You seem to be in a bad mood,” Bucky said and Stark’s defeated sigh was answer enough.

“Yeah, just a little bit. I’ve spent the past couple of days going through the data from our two sessions and it’s just—it’s useful and it’s what I expected, but it’s not enough.” Stark stopped and tried to give Bucky a smile, but it wasn’t very convincing. “Listen, don’t worry about it, let’s not ruin a good day with boring shop talk.”

“But if it relates to my treatment, I’d rather know now if there are problems. Is your system not working how it’s supposed to?”

Stark hesitated, looking back down at the tablet as his fingers drummed against the tabletop. After a moment’s deliberation, he said, “Well, it’s less about the system and more about the information. Our next step is to use the system to modify your memories in a way that disassociates them from the physical responses they cause, basically the exact opposite of what happened in our last session, but the way those damn triggers work—I just—I don’t have enough information.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face and through his hair, groaning as he pushed the tablet away. “Fucking Hydra. Damn those bastards to hell—please believe me, I hate saying anything nice about those sadistic SOBs, but they were pretty clever in the way they went about your programming. The way the triggers affect you, it’s unique and incredibly complex on a physical level—and each trigger is different—and I’m just not sure I can figure out the right configuration for BARF without knowing exactly what each individual trigger does to your brain and body.”

With each second, the implications behind Stark’s words became more clear and the earlier warmth dissipated as the numbing, cold tendrils of fear began to crawl up Bucky’s spine. He felt his blood drain, felt his hand beginning to tremble and it all must’ve been obvious because Stark’s expression turned sympathetic.

“Barnes, listen, we’re not even going to go there, okay? I’ll figure something out. Maybe I just haven’t spent enough time looking at what we have or maybe I just—I just have to find another way, try something else… There’s gotta be something else…”

He trailed off and Bucky knew there wasn’t anything else. If Stark hadn’t already found it, there was no other way.

Somehow, he found his voice somewhere beneath the icy chill of dread in his chest.

“You have to activate the triggers.”
“Damn it, I’m not gonna win with you, am I?”

Rhodey sounded resigned and Tony had to wonder whether he was getting better at convincing Rhodey to let him do things or whether Rhodey had just about enough of his shit over the years and had given up altogether.

Tony was leaning towards the latter.

They spent the last hour arguing over the next steps in advancing Barnes’ treatment and unsurprisingly, Rhodey wasn’t sweet on the idea of activating the triggers and unleashing the Winter Soldier onto an unsuspecting world.

Tony wasn’t sold on the idea either, but his distaste stemmed less from the potential threat and more from that terrified look on Barnes’ face from a few days ago.

Tony would’ve been terrified too, having to face the realization his only path forward was letting someone else take away his autonomy.

He tried to be optimistic. He told Barnes they should wait and try something—anything—else, but Barnes wasn’t convinced and truth be told, Tony wasn’t convinced either. Deep down, he knew this was their best chance to get the data they needed. It would be quick, effective, and so damn painful.

A part of Tony, one that surprised even him with the strength of its conviction, wanted to spare Barnes that pain. Maybe it had something to do with seeing Barnes relapse and relive that revolting Hydra memory. Maybe it was the exact opposite. Maybe this protectiveness came from seeing Barnes content and smiling on a bench in Central Park and realizing Barnes deserved to be happy too.

None of that mattered though, neither Tony’s sentimentality nor his futile optimism. He looked at the data up and down, forwards and backwards, every which way, and the data didn’t lie. They needed more and without understanding the triggers, they could spend months—hell, years—going around in circles without any progress.

Rhodey was still teetering on the edge of taking that risk though, partly because he was the resident responsible adult who had to consider the safety of anyone and everyone within the Compound, as well the safety of the world at large, and because he had little desire to see Tony put himself in the line of fire just to help out Barnes.

Tony respected the first part and certainly appreciated the second. The past year had lent itself to plenty of soul-searching and Tony had developed a keen appreciation for the love and support Rhodey had given him—not simply this year, but always—and he hated worrying his best friend yet again, but they were also out of options and Tony refused to give up.

“It’s going to be fine, Honey Bear.”

“You know, Tones, our esteemed elected lawmakers will not be very happy if they find out you’re trying to reactivate the Winter Soldier.”

Tony snorted as he got up—no matter Rhodey’s final decision, Tony didn’t see this discussion ending any time soon—and while he poured himself another cup of coffee, he said, “Happy or not, they can’t actually stop us. See, this is what happens when people get lazy. They all but gave me
carte blanche when it came to Barnes’ treatment, just so they could get out of doing the work while still getting all the glory for bringing back and rehabilitating a war hero. Serves them right for not reading the fine print carefully enough.”

“Not everyone has an army of lawyers like you do.”

“And isn’t that lucky for all of us?” Tony settled back in his seat and gave Rhodey a pointed look over the rim of his mug. “If it weren’t for my army of lawyers, we’d still be here licking Ross’ boots.” Tony took another sip, letting the scalding heat seep through him. “Putting that son of a bitch away is still one of the best things I’ve done for the world.”

“I hate Ross as much as the next guy, but don’t change the subject. Activating the Winter Soldier is dangerous. We both know what he’s capable of when he’s in that state.”

Tony was well aware. He still had the gauntlet with the bullet hole to prove it. “We’re going to take every precaution. The most secure room in the Compound, total lockdown, Friday will be on stand-by with so many tranqs, Barnes will sleep for a week if he so much as twitches wrong. There’s no way he’s getting out to cause trouble, okay?”

“Sure, okay, I’m glad Manhattan isn’t going to have a vengeful Hydra assassin on their hands, but it’s also going to be you sitting in that room with him.”

“Who else would it be? I don’t see a whole lot of people lining up for a chance to hang out with the Winter Soldier.”

“Let me do. Hell, let Vision or Strange or the damn Pope do it, I don’t care.”

“Nah, no way, I’m letting any of you hog the spotlight. This is cutting-edge science right here, breakthroughs about to happen! I’m gonna be famous!” Tony knew he was being flippant, the sarcasm unattractive in his tone, but he didn’t want to start this again. “Besides, this is my project, my system, and if I let any of you amateurs anywhere near my scanning equipment, it’ll probably end up on fire.”

Rhodey scoffed. “Are you serious right now? You’re acting like this is some fun science experiment for you.”

Sarcasm and the need for deflection bled away to make room for defensiveness.

“You know better than anyone I’m not just doing this for shits and giggles, Rhodes.” Tony really didn’t want to argue, but apparently here they were anyways. “You think this is easy for me? I’m going to have to go in there and stare into the eyes of the man who killed my parents—and I don’t mean Barnes, I mean the actual goddamn Winter Soldier!”

Tony would’ve said more, but the guilt that crossed Rhodey’s face had his anger dissipating as quickly as it came.

“I know that, Tones, and that’s exactly why I don’t want you doing this. Let’s find some other way, get someone else to step in. We both know there are others here who can handle the job—myself included, thank you very much. So why does it have to be you?”

The words were an echo of the same sentiment from months ago when they first began to discuss the pardon and just like last time, Tony took a moment to think it over. His reasoning wasn’t quite the same anymore though, not after meeting Barnes. It wasn’t just about second chances and doing the right thing.
“Because I want to help him get his life back. I promised I would fix this and I can’t—he’s trusting me to do this and I can’t go back on that.”

There was some sort of realization in Rhodey’s eyes Tony couldn’t quite interpret; it was gone when Rhodey let out a resigned sigh and dropped his head into his hands.

“I get that, I do, but I’m still not comfortable with you going in there by yourself, with no back-up.”

“You know I’m not going to be entirely powerless. There’s more than enough safety precautions. Barnes will be restrained, I’ll have my suit on stand-by, Friday will be my eyes and ears, and you’ll be just outside the door. I know you want twenty armed guards and a rocket launcher pointed at Barnes—and really, I get it, I’ve seen what the Winter Soldier can do first-hand—but I’m not letting anyone else into that room. This is going to be hard enough on Barnes, I’m not going to make a spectacle out of it.”

When Rhodey groaned, Tony knew he was wearing him down, so he pushed just a little further to play up the sympathies he knew Rhodey was trying to ignore. Objective leader, bad-ass military man, those were all accurate titles, but at the core, Rhodey was a good man and that mattered more than anything.

“We both know this isn’t easy for anyone, but imagine how Barnes must be feeling right now. He’s prepared to give up control, just like that, all of his autonomy, in a place where he feels he has no allies, to a guy he knows has incentive to hurt him. I could ruin him and who would even stop me?”

Now it was Tony pointedly ignoring the sheer power imbalance created here, the terror Barnes must be fighting against to place his literal body and mind into Tony’s hands. It was both heady and terrifying to think about. “Imagine how vulnerable he must feel. That poor guy must be thinking about all the ways I could take advantage of him. Maybe I’ll order him to go kill Rogers and the rest of his runaways buddies. Maybe I’ll kill him while he’s powerless or I’ll use my tech to keep him as the Winter Soldier forever. There’s no way he trusts me enough to be comfortable. Hell, maybe if Rogers were here, Barnes would at least feel safer, having someone he trusted saying the triggers.”

Still resting his chin in his hands, Rhodey looked up to give Tony another strange look. “Oh, believe me, no one here needs Rogers. Barnes trusts you just fine.”

Tony wasn’t sure what Rhodey was trying to imply with that, so he brushed it off. It wasn’t important. He just needed to convince Rhodey—hell, he needed to convince himself—this wasn’t going to turn into some great, big disaster.

“It’ll be fine, I promise. We just need to keep it simple and clean. Hell, I bet it’ll be over in five minutes.” Tony was about to take another sip of his coffee, but realized he probably didn’t need any more caffeine at this point; he put the mug down with an awkward clank. “We both watched the recovered surveillance from when Zemo activated the Asset in Berlin—and really, that asshole, thinking he was so smart with that e-bomb. Thank god I was paranoid enough to have Friday run constant back-up on the security system. My poor girl got her circuits fried too, but she managed to save enough in the end.”

Rhodey let out a tired huff. “Barnes should send her a gift basket. Those surveillance tapes were the main driver behind the pardon. I don’t think the Council would’ve come around quite as easily if they didn’t see what Zemo had done with their own eyes.”

“Yup, and we saw it too. We both saw how the triggers work. The Asset is passive in that state with no will of his own, at least until you give him orders. So while Friday gets all the readings she needs, all I have to do is keep my mouth shut.”
“I hope you realize you’re instilling zero confidence in me by saying that.” Rhodey let Tony shrug innocently before adding, “And what about after? How are we deactivating the Asset?”

Here Tony did have the good graces to look chagrined. “Er, Friday and I are working on it.”

All Rhodey could do was groan again and lean back in chair, arms crossed. He looked heavenward first, then back at Tony. “If you really feel that strongly about making Barnes comfortable, fine, you can go in with him alone, but Vision and I will still monitor the whole thing from outside. We’re on stand-by the entire time and if anything goes wrong—and I mean anything—we’re busting in there and doing whatever’s necessary to keep you safe—to keep both of you safe. Is that clear?”

Rhodey was in his full ‘bad-ass military man’ mode and his tone brokered no argument, but Tony knew a victory when he saw one.

“Square deal.”

Barnes opened the door a few seconds after Tony knocked and while Barnes was trying to hide his anxiety behind a welcoming smile, it still came off as a strained grimace.

Tony could sympathize, really.

It had been two days since Barnes put two and two together and they haven’t really spoken to each other since then. According to Friday, Barnes spent most of his time in his room, reading or writing, or outside on the Compound grounds during his morning runs. Tony let Barnes have his space, knowing this decision must have been hell for him.

“Hey there, Super Soldier. Can I come in for a sec?” Tony hoped his own smile didn’t fall quite as flat.

“Of course,” Barnes replied, his voice so soft Tony strained to catch the invitation; Barnes went back to sit on the edge of his bed and Tony took a moment to give Barnes’ quarters a once-over, noting that Barnes must’ve been sitting in here alone in near darkness. Suiting for a broody ex-assassin, he supposed, and Tony couldn’t exactly judge. He’d had a few of his own brooding sessions in the dark of his lab under his belt.

Without trying to overthink it, Tony took a seat next to Barnes. They weren’t close enough to touch, but Tony was close enough to see just how stiffly Barnes held himself, every line of his body like a coil stretched to its limits, ready to snap at the lightest touch, and it also didn’t escape Tony’s notice how Barnes kept running his hand against his jean-clad thigh, over and over. Tony had his own share of nervous gestures, but given this was a man with the self-control of a trained assassin spy, these outward signs must have pointed to Barnes being close to a full-blown anxiety attack.

Tony didn’t let himself overthink this part either and with a tired oof, he let himself collapse onto the bed before making a contemplative hum as he made a show of feeling the bed out with what had to be a ridiculous wiggle.

“Hmm, well, this is nice. Very nice, actually—and okay, wait, how is it that your bed is more comfortable than mine?” Tony pulled out his best pouting expression when Barnes turned to look down at him. “That’s just not fair. I mean, it’s my Compound! You know what this is? This is Friday’s favoritism at work. Mm-hmm. Still can’t believe it took you one day to charm my AI. Maybe I’ll just come sleep in here from now on, that’ll solve this problem.” He topped it off with an exaggerated wink and Barnes let out a huff of laughter, just as Tony expected. Barnes always seemed to find Tony’s more ridiculous behavior amusing and Tony was more than happy to oblige.
“You’re welcome to have it, Stark,” Barnes replied, but then his expression grew dark again as he shrugged. “Don’t have much use for it anyways. Haven’t been doing much sleeping lately.”

Damn, okay, so that only worked for one short moment.

Tony sat back up and let his elbows dig into his knees, mirroring Barnes’ position. “Yeah, I know how that goes. Thankfully, sleepless nights usually mean I actually get some work done. Honestly, Pepper and Rhodey don’t appreciate how much tech my sleepless nights have produced for them.”

This time Barnes’ response was an underwhelming hum; he sat looking straight ahead with that same lost expression and Tony had to acknowledge all of his jokes were falling flat. He let out a long sigh before gently knocking his knee against Barnes’.

“Hey,” he said when Barnes looked over. “We don’t have to do this, you know.”

Barnes’ brows drew together. “Do you think you’ll be able to find another way to continue my therapy?” Before Tony could answer, Barnes added, “Please be honest with me. Don’t give me platitudes. I know you mean well, but—I just need the truth.”

It was a fair request and Tony gave himself a few moments to think before answering. “No, I don’t think I’ll be able to find the right configuration for the system without the data, at least not for a very long time. None of the decrypted Hydra files had anything close to what we need, so we’d be doing this blind.”

Barnes looked away, staring again at the space in front of him. “Then we have to do this.”

“Yeah, I suppose we do.” Tony watched his own sneaker-clad foot tap against the soft carpet. “I guess what I really meant was that I wish you didn’t have to go through this. I know this must be hell. No, actually—” Tony grimaced. “I don’t know, I can’t even imagine.”

Their eyes met again and that vulnerable, overwhelmed look on Barnes’ face made Tony’s chest feel tight with sympathy and regret.

Barnes looked away first, to watch Tony’s still anxiously tapping foot.

“I just wish you didn’t have to be in there with me,” Barnes whispered and Tony’s stomach dropped. Oh.

He should have expected this. Hell, he did expect his, but knowing and hearing that Barnes didn’t trust him were two different things and already knowing didn’t make the sudden, sour discomfort any easier to handle.

Of course Barnes didn’t trust him though. He had no reason to trust Tony. Hell, Tony’s former teammates, people who spent years living and fighting alongside him, even they didn’t find him trustworthy enough, so why the hell would Barnes do so after a few short weeks and a half-assed apology in the form of ice cream?

All Tony could do was try to swallow around the lump in his throat. “I understand where you’re coming from. You’ve no reason to trust me, so if you want, I can get someone else in there, someone who can—”

“Wait? Someone else? No! No, that’s—that’s not what I meant at all, please.” Barnes turned to face Tony fully and continued, albeit with a touch less panic. “I do trust you. You’re probably the only person I can handle being in that room with me. Just the thought of letting someone say those words
and turn me—turn me into *him*, makes me want to run.” Barnes swallowed, his throat bobbling, and he shut his eyes for one long breath. “It makes me want to run so far away that no one would ever find me again, but I know I can’t run away from this forever. I can do this—I think—if you’re the one in there with me.”

Tony didn’t know how Barnes had gotten so proficient at throwing Tony off-kilter—speaking so honestly, so *openly* certainly didn’t help—but it kept happening and Tony wasn’t sure what exactly he’d done to deserve this kind of trust (and what exactly Rhodey saw that made him suspect it in the first place).

“I’m not going anywhere, I promise, but then why did you say you didn’t want me in there?”

Barnes just shrugged. “I just meant none of this is fair, to *you*. I hate asking this of you. You shouldn’t be the one to deal with this. I’ve caused you so much pain already—and I very clearly remember what happened the last time the triggers were activated.”

“Well, what happened is that you kinda kicked everyone’s ass. Not gonna lie, it was actually pretty bad-ass—”

“I *shot* you!” Barnes spoke over him, guilt warring with anger. “I shot you and if it weren’t for your tech, you’d be—” Barnes drew in a ragged breath and didn’t finish the thought. “I don’t want him to hurt you again.”

Without realizing he was doing so, Tony drew closer and put his hand on Barnes’ right shoulder. “Hey, hey, it’ll be fine, alright? We’re taking precautions. Nothing is going to go wrong.” He felt Barnes slump beneath his hand. “I’ll say the trigger words, we’ll activate the Asset—”

“The Soldier.” When Tony gave Barnes a puzzled look, he clarified with the same sulky mutter, “I call him the Soldier.”

“How are you planning to deactivate him?” Barnes asked and Tony rubbed his neck sheepishly. This was exactly what he meant about both Barnes and Rhodey being too perceptive—too *smart*—for Tony to get away with anything.

“Friday and I are working on it. How did you turn him off in Berlin?”

“Pretty sure I just got hit on the head real hard.”

Tony couldn’t help his snort. “Ah, yes, that’s the preferred way of shaking off mind control around here.” At Barnes’ confused look, Tony just waved him off. “Long story, never mind. Well, hopefully Friday and I can do a little better than give you another concussion. Honestly, I don’t think that head of yours can take any more damage.”

“Just do whatever is necessary, okay?” Barnes insisted, ignoring Tony’s quip. “Do whatever you have to do.”

Tony gave Barnes’ shoulder a comforting squeeze and tried to ignore how warm and solid and *real* he felt beneath Tony’s hand. This was neither the time nor the place for Tony’s stray thoughts.

Instead, Tony put every bit of confidence and reassurance into his voice as he said, “I promise I won’t let anything bad happen to you, okay?”
The look Barnes gave him was gratitude and desperation and fear all rolled into one and Tony’s heart ached.

When Barnes walked into the room Tony had set up for this session, he looked like a man walking to his own execution. Tony hated the fact that he was the executioner in this case, but he kept telling himself this would be over quickly. Nothing would go wrong and they would come out of this with the final variables needed to solve the equation and Barnes would be no worse for the wear.

“Friday said it was time?” Barnes asked as he neared, all coiled tension and anxiety, and Tony replied with a simple nod. Usually, he’d crack a joke at a point like this, but it was obvious from his earlier attempts it wasn’t the right approach. He didn’t think any amount of levity would lighten Barnes’ mood and Tony didn’t want to cheapen what Barnes was going through with a stupid comment.

Tony directed Barnes to sit in the chair in the middle of the room, next to a simple desk with Tony’s own seat placed on the other side. Barnes slowly lowered himself into the large, metal chair, probably already aware of the way it was bolted down to the floor, of the restraints built into it. Tony thought it resembled some caricature of a throne and he hated it. It reminded him of the restraints from Berlin—ones that admittedly failed to hold an enraged and desperate Winter Soldier; it also reminded him of that damn chair from the Hydra lab and that was much worse.

Tony swallowed against the rising tide of nausea and tried to steel his nerves. This wasn’t about him and his guilt.

Their room was a smaller venue this time. It was actually the first room at the Compound built to house the Hulk, before Tony decided it wasn’t spacious or luxurious enough for his Brucie Bear and he built a much better one in the basement. However, Barnes and him didn’t need the extra space nor the giant television screen nor the comfortable bed sinking under a mountain of pillows today—although by god, that sounded so much better that what they were about to do and Tony would’ve given away a sizable chunk of his fortune for the ability to skip this whole mess and find himself and Barnes in a bed, with a lapful of popcorn and an action flick on the screen.

It didn’t mean they couldn’t make that a reality later—someday, perhaps, in Tony’s sleep-deprived fantasies—but right now all they had—all they needed—was a place that would keep the rest of the world safe from the Winter Soldier, even though Tony kept reminding himself and everyone around him this was all unnecessary precautions.

“I, uh, I need to place the sensors on your head again.” Tony gestured with the device he picked up from a tray. “I was also able to borrow this piece of nifty equipment from a doctor friend of mine. She works in medicine, on the cutting edge of nanotechnology, and the device she gave me can give us blood, hormone readings, all that good stuff, without needing to poke more needles into you. I, uh, I thought you’d appreciate that, I’m sure you feel like a pin cushion at this point.” Tony knew his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Is it—is it okay if I start?”

Tony also couldn’t remember ever being this hesitant—this inarticulate—but he supposed it was because he was trying to be both careful and sensitive to the whole situation, two things he’d never been particularly good at.

Barnes just inclined his head in assent, still all rigid lines as he sat in that godforsaken metallic trap of a chair. Tony noted that his fist was clenched tight and there was a slight tremor running through Barnes’ whole body. God, he must have been on the verge of panic.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Tony approached, whispered a soft, “May I?” and when
Barnes nodded again, Tony smoothed the sensors over his temples and across his forehead. The blood analyzer came next and Tony rolled up the sleeve of Barnes’ shirt, trying to focus on keeping his movements gentle and ignoring the warmth of Barnes’ bare skin beneath his fingertips. It wasn’t hard to push aside that inconvenient reaction this time, not when Barnes trembled and tensed with each shallow breath.

With the same care, Tony wrapped the nano-strip around Barnes’ considerable bicep. The nano-strip was long and thin, roughly the width of a matchbox and a fourth of the thickness, a simple piece of flexible white plastic attached to the skin, if one didn’t know any better. However, the device housed some of the most impressive nanotechnology available today, meant to take and analyze minute samples of blood at pre-programmed intervals via a barely-felt penetration of the skin and muscle before sending the results directly to Friday.

Both useful and less intrusive, true, but Tony also hoped the device would help them with the deactivation of the Soldier. It was a bit of a Hail Mary, but he supposed they would cross that bridge when they came to it.

Next came the less savory part of this whole process and by the resigned look on Barnes’ already anxious face, Tony guessed he knew it was coming too.

“I’m sorry about the restraints. Unfortunately, I had a hard time getting this past Rhodey even with all these precautions.”

Barnes shook his head. “No, this—this is good. I want you to do whatever you need to keep me from hurting anyone.” He gave Tony a meaningful look. “From hurting you.”

Tony kneeled down at his side, leaning against the seat. “Hey, what did I tell you before? Nothing is going to go wrong, okay? All that’s going to happen is I say the trigger words, Friday records everything that happens with your body and brain, I say absolutely nothing else, and then we shut the whole thing down. Plus, everything’s going to be on tape. You’ll have proof that nothing went wrong.”

Barnes looked like he wanted to say something else, to protest some part of Tony’s explanation, but then he just closed his eyes, sat up straight against the chair, and placed his arm into the unlocked restraints. He gave Tony a shaky, but resolute nod.

“I’m ready,” he said and it was humbling, the amount of willpower Barnes must have needed to say that when every part of him screamed not to do it.

One by one, Tony locked the metal restraints in place. A set around Barnes’ forearm, one set across his torso and two over his shoulders. Tony felt bile rise up in his throat when the final restraint clicked around Barnes’ throat.

“I’m sorry, Barnes.”

Tony watched him swallow against the restraint and he heard the quiver in Barnes’ voice before the actual words. “Can I ask you something of you, Stark?”

“Of course.”

“Can you—can you call me James? Please?”

Prompted by the resurfaced memories, Tony cautiously placed his hand over Barnes’, who clutched it in his own immediately and the gratitude in his eyes made Tony feel like he finally did something right.
“Of course, but that does mean you’ll have to call me Tony. Seems only fair,” he replied with a barely-there smile; he watched Barnes try to reciprocate, but he looked to be on the verge of tears and Tony knew he shouldn’t bedragging this out any longer.

He gave Barnes’ hand—no, James’ hand—one tight squeeze before letting go.

Friday was on stand-by to fire up the scanning equipment and she knew to wait for Tony’s signal, but there was one more thing Tony needed her to do first.

He settled into his own chair and drew in a determined breath. “Friday, initiate lockdown Omega, Code Black. Authorization Sierra 5 0014 81.”

She hesitated. “Boss?”

“Please follow the command, Friday,” he ordered sternly, but at James’ questioning look, he explained with a softer tone, “The lockdown is just to make sure this room is secure from any and all threats.”

That was enough for Barnes, who probably thought the explanation implied the lockdown was to keep the Winter Soldier in if anything were to go wrong.

That was half true. This version of the lockdown also happened to keep everyone else out, including dear old Vision who could phase through those pesky walls at will and while Tony didn’t start working on anti-magical barriers just for Barnes, there was no reason he couldn’t run another field test on them today.

Tony was self-aware enough to admit that his desire, his need to create something that could defend against the magic of these so-called Infinity Stones was driven both by the looming threat coming from a distant corner of the universe and by the ever-present threat of the Scarlet Witch, so a few months back, Tony spent weeks trying to convince Strange to let him in on some of those mystic secrets that could help him counteract the Stones.

Like any scientist worth his salt, Tony hated magic—or rather, he hated that it came with hand-wavey explanations produced by people who got off on making everything as convoluted as possible, so if it meant turning to the mystic arts and figuring them out for himself in order to protect those he loved, then so be it. Despite Strange’s initial reluctance, Tony was nothing if not persistent; he wore Strange down—it helped that Strange couldn’t just forget about his own medical background and scientific curiosity either—and he convinced Strange to give him enough information to get started.

Unfortunately, progress was slow and so far, Tony could only get the anti-magical barriers to work on a larger scale (and even that was touch-and-go for longer than a day or two), but those were all worries for tomorrow. Today, they would do just fine to help keep the resident Stone-powered android from interrupting in a fit of overprotective worry.

Tony didn’t regret the decision to lock everyone out, but the sour taste of guilt still lingered when Friday informed him the lockdown was in place. Rhodey didn’t actually agree to this particular detail and Tony hated lying to his best friend—even by omission—but in his gut, Tony knew he only had one chance to do this right. James trusted him and Tony wasn’t going to let him down, which meant he had to control this whole process from start to finish to make sure they got the right data, to make sure nothing was disrupted—and to make sure James came out of this in one piece.

James. He liked that name.
Tony looked back and took in James’ strained posture, his anxious expression, every inch of him crying out against this vulnerability. Willing to be here or not, James still looked terrified beyond words, waiting to give up his free will.

And to Tony, of all people.

*This is exactly why I initiated the lockdown. He’s my responsibility, he’s putting his life in my hands, and I can’t take the risk of anyone hurting him.*

Tony knew the trigger words by heart, having memorized them as he rewatched the Zemo tapes. Tony’s own Russian consisted of not much more than the basic set of pleasantries as well a wide array of swear words, but he thought he managed the pronunciation of these well enough.

“I wish I could just rattle these off and get it over with, but Friday needs time to collect the data on each one. I’m sorry I have to drag this out.”

James’ nod was strained when he whispered, “It’s okay, I understand.”

Tony wanted to say something else, but the right words just wouldn’t come and he knew he’d only be stalling. He had to accept it was time.

“*Zhelaniye.*”

*Longing.* The first word felt foreign and cumbersome and Tony wanted to cough around the sudden dryness of his throat. He watched James swallow, his hand clenching over and over on the side of the chair. Friday was in silent mode now, only communicating with Tony through his earpiece, and Tony breathed a mental sigh of relief when she informed him they were getting readings. A lot of readings. Barnes’ whole physiology was lighting up like a Christmas tree. When she gave the go-ahead, Tony moved on to the next word.

“*Rzhavyy.*”

*Rusted.* Tony knew he stumbled over the consonants. He waited and wished Friday would hurry up.

“*Semnadtsat’.*”

*Seventeen.* James drew in a ragged breath and clenched his eyes shut.

“*Rassvet.*”

*Daybreak.* One single tear ran down James’ check and the gasp of air he drew in bordered on a sob. Tony refused to look away, no matter how much this was breaking his heart.

“*Pech’.*”

*Furnace.* Tony wished he could reach out to James, take his hand into his own again, find some way to communicate that he wasn’t alone, but James was locked in his restraints, too far away, and Tony had to continue.

“*Devyat’.*”

*Nine.* James opened his eyes, meeting Tony’s gaze as another tear made its way down.

“*Dobroserdechnyy.*”

*Benign.* Tony learned yesterday it translated literally to ‘good-hearted’ and he thought that was a
better fit. The man in front of him had never been benign, but his heart? Tony was ready to admit James’ heart must have been good.

“Возвращение на родину.”

Homecoming. Tony mouthed an ashamed, “I’m sorry, James,” and James whispered his own sorrowful, “I know.”

“Один.”

One. James shut his eyes again and another ragged, powerless sob wrecked his frame.

The last phrase. Freight car. Tony imagined James falling into the cold abyss from that train during the war and understood why Hydra used this as the last trigger. The beginning of the end for James Buchanan Barnes.

“Грузовой вагон.”

Tony waited one, two, three beats before uttering the final, “Солдат?”

Those scruffy cheeks were still marred by their tear tracks, but when the man before Tony opened his eyes, it was no longer James looking at him. It was the Winter Soldier.

“Я готов отвечать.”

Ready to comply.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Soldat?”

“Ya gotov otvechat’.”

[Ready to comply. Translated directly as: I am ready to answer/respond.]

Tony noted Friday’s translation that filtered through his ear piece as he sat unmoving, looking at the Winter Soldier in front of him.

As soon as he said that last phrase, the change in James was instantaneous. All the tension in his face slipped away and he looked straight ahead, right at Tony. Every emotion, all that panic and grief that Tony saw in James’ eyes just seconds ago, it was all gone. The tear tracks still visible on the man’s face made for an almost obscene contrast against that empty, neutral expression.

However, Tony noted that the Soldier wasn’t a lifeless zombie by any means. His gaze was deliberate as he watched Tony. There was intent, but it was neither friendly nor hostile.

[Boss, my scans continue to pick up readings from Mr. Barnes. His body and brain chemistry have shifted significantly and I am still cataloguing the changes. Should I continue?]

Tony and Friday developed a simple code to communicate in moments like this. One tap of his pointer and middle finger meant yes, two taps for no.

He tapped once on the table and observed as the Soldier looked down at the movement of his hand and then looked back up, his expression unchanged.

“Ya gotov otvechat’,” the Soldier repeated in that same monotone. It was strange, Tony absently noted, that the Soldier’s Russian lacked the heavy accent one would expect.

Another several excruciatingly long minutes passed by in silence as Tony waited for Friday’s update and it gave him more time than he wanted to examine the gambit of emotions that were running through him.

The man sitting in front of him… This was the man who killed his parents.

The cold, dark December road flashed before his mind’s eye and in crystal clear detail, he remembered the image of his father, beaten to death. The image of his mother, as the hand of the man before him curled mercilessly around her throat and crushed.

Tony could suddenly feel grief, anger, and fear all rolling through him in waves. He clenched his jaw to the point of grinding his teeth down in an attempt to center himself because he was not going to look away, goddamn it. He needed to face this. This was his chance to literally face his parents’ killer.

And as he looked over that lethargic, empty expression once again, he realized, with painful clarity, that this wasn’t James.

He also realized just how much of what James felt came through in his eyes, his expressions, his
body language, because now, Tony desperately wanted to see something—anything—

But there was nothing. Only simple, forced compliance and—

[Boss, I have all the data I need.]

Oh thank fucking god, Friday, not a moment too soon.

Tony let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. He was right after all - without a command, the Soldier was nothing more than a passive entity and everything went as he expected. He took just one more second, just one last chance to stare into the eyes of the weapon Hydra used to kill his parents, to burn this image into his head, so that the next time he saw James, he’d know where to look for the differences.

[Boss, should I initiate the shutdown protocol?]

Ah yes, his and Friday’s brain child for shutting down the Winter Soldier. While Tony had another backup plan, it was even less reliable than this idea, which was already a bit of a long-shot.

He tapped his fingers once against the table.

It was obvious when Friday activated the protocol because James went completely stiff, drew in a sharp pained breath, and then his eyes rolled to the back of his head and his entire body went slack.

The shutdown protocol that Friday and Tony came up with was all about chemistry - Tony jokingly called it the *Cognitive Recalibration Cocktail*. It was a precise blend of various drugs, created by Friday, synthesized and delivered by the nanotech device on James’ arm. The goal was to find just the right mixture of chemicals to perfectly counteract the physical changes that James underwent as a result of the triggers to become the Winter Soldier. The dose of course had to be several orders of magnitude larger than anything standard to counteract the resistance of the super soldier physiology. Since Friday was the only one currently in possession of all the data collected, Tony didn’t actually know the exact composition of the cocktail she used, but it seemed to have worked. God bless Friday and god bless nanotechnology.

At this point, James’ body should be able to filter out the chemicals with relative ease, avoiding any permanent damage, and his body chemistry should stabilize and settle into its normal pre-triggers state.

*Hopefully.* Tony had to admit to himself that all of this was *way* more art than science, but desperate measure and all. He supposed that if the Soldier woke back up with his now predictable *Ya gotov otvechat*, Tony would just have to hit him over the head once or twice, but he was keeping his fingers crossed.

Tony spent a few silent minutes observing the man before him, but eventually he couldn’t stand to look at those restraints any longer. That dam HYdra memory kept playing on repeat in his head and all he could think about was James tied to that chair, desperately struggling as he screamed. So mind made up, Tony was by the other man’s side in just a few short steps and he began undoing the restraints with a vicious satisfaction. He had to admit they did at least keep James from falling forward and cracking his head against the table when he lost consciousness, but there was no purpose to them any longer and Tony wanted them off the man now. He gave each metal restraint a hateful glare before releasing the locking mechanisms. Maybe he should incinerate this stupid chair once this was over. After all, he hadn’t blown anything up in a while. Yes, he decided, they were definitely blowing it up in the lab later as a way to celebrate.
Finally, James was free and Tony made one terribly unsuccessful attempt to carry the man over to the small cot in the corner (originally meant for Bruce). He gave up when he could barely even lift James out of the chair.

“Damn heavy super soldiers,” Tony muttered as he observed the unconscious man. He supposed he could put on his suit and carry him that way, but Tony decided it could wait a few minutes.

He gave James’ slumped form one last look, saying a brief mental thanks to whatever gods were listening (he hoped it wasn’t Loki) that things ended up going well, before proceeding over to the scanning equipment to begin shutting everything down. He was in the middle of powering down the holoscreens when a sudden, loud crash reverberated through the room and Tony had only enough time to turn around at the sound before he was slammed viciously into the nearby wall.

His vision exploded in a sea of stars as the pain at the back of his head momentarily overtook every one of his senses. He groaned and tried to move, but a heavy pressure on his throat stopped him in his tracks.

As the world around him finally came back into focus, he realized he was staring into the eyes of a very conscious Winter Soldier, who had him pinned to the wall with his forearm pressing down against his throat.

Shit, shit, shit.

Apparently, things did not end up going well. Tony could feel the cold tendrils of a panic attack begin to make their way through his body and the edges of his vision began to darken, but he pulled on his remaining willpower to push it all away. He couldn’t afford to go comatose now, he couldn’t.

As the panic miraculously began to recede, Tony noted humorlessly that while he apparently could control it in the heat of danger, he couldn’t do it in the middle of his own damn kitchen. Figures.

[Boss?? Boss, do I need to lift the lockdown? There are more readings now, new data, his physiology changed again, but— I'm not sure what’s happening. I’m scared, Boss. Do I lift the lockdown?]

Tony took just a moment to contemplate his current situation. He wasn’t dead yet, so that was obviously good news. The Soldier’s expression didn’t give much away, although his eyes were actually alert and alive now and the initial, potent rage that Tony first saw in his expression was replaced by a more calculating look as the Soldier’s eyes scanned and scrutinized Tony. The forearm across Tony’s throat wasn’t pressing down hard enough to significantly constrict his breathing either. Rather, it felt more like a reminder, a warning, that if he made the wrong move, all the Soldier had to do was push to crush Tony’s very fragile windpipe.

Tranquilizers and drugs obviously didn’t work. A spooked Soldier would probably kill him well before Tony’s suit had the chance to assemble. And if he lifted the lockdown and everyone stormed in here, trying to rescue him— well, hell, that wasn’t going to make things any better either. The Soldier might still end up killing him. On top of that, Rhodey would shoot first and ask questions later and Tony feared with a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach, that if Rhodey had the chance, he would go for the kill shot.

Tony realized he couldn’t let that happen.

There was still one more thing he could try to end this, but Tony noted that the Soldier didn’t bother ripping off any of the scanning equipment still attached to him and what if this was their only chance to get a better understanding of what was going on in James’ head? How could Tony afford not to
get every useful bit of information out of this?

And if he were honest with himself, there was also a part of him (the one that needed to take everything apart and see how it all worked) that was morbidly curious about what the hell was actually happening because none of them expected this going in.

Well, I never did have a good working relationship with my self-preservation instincts.

His arms were still at his sides (he didn’t even bother trying to pull the Soldier off himself), so he tapped his fingers twice very gently against his thigh so as not to draw the Soldier’s attention to the movement.

He knew Friday would obey and would also be perceptive enough to continue the scans and get all the data available until he told her otherwise.

Either way, I come out of this dead, Tony thought and he almost wanted to laugh. Either the Soldier kills me… or Rhodey does.

Well, it was time to push away any fear, any remaining grief, and just do what Tony Stark did best. Talk.

“Uh— Hi there, stranger. Come here often?”

The Soldier’s eyes narrowed at the sound of his voice and it was a strange dichotomy yet again - this wasn’t exactly the compliant Fist of Hydra who killed his parents on a simple command, but it wasn’t James either. The arm against Tony’s throat was a constant pressure, but thankfully the Soldier didn’t feel the need to push harder.

After the next scrutinizing look (Tony was really beginning to feel like some lab specimen being examined), the Soldier cocked his head to the side.

“Vi ne Geedra.”

[You are not Hydra], Friday’s translation came through his earpiece.

“Nope, not at all. Those guys are a bunch of dicks—” Tony stopped suddenly, belatedly realizing that maybe the Soldier expected him to be Hydra? Ah crap.

The Soldier examined him critically for one more moment, but then finally some form of recognition flittered across his eyes as he locked them with Tony’s.

“I do know you,” the Soldier said and then his face transformed as he gave Tony an actual smirk. This was nothing like James’ soft, shy smiles though - this was sharp, dangerous.

“Tony Stark,” the Soldier crooned, his eyes never leaving Tony’s. “You’re the one trying to save me. The man made of iron and light who wants to slay the Hydra in my head.”

Tony swallowed hard, feeling his Adam’s apple bob against the heavy, solid mass of the forearm pressed against him. “That’s, uh— that’s me. Although no one had ever stated that quite so— poetically…” Tony trailed off, unable to interpret the look the Soldier was giving him when his eyes narrowed in contemplation.

“I fought you. In Berlin.”

“You almost killed me.”
“Almost means I didn’t want you dead.” The Soldier trailed off for a moment, glancing down. Whether he was looking somewhere in the vicinity of Tony's lips or just at his arm over Tony's throat, he couldn't tell. But then the man glanced back up. “I had a mission to kill you, before… but it was terminated. They sent someone else,” the Winter Soldier declared, his tone almost casual. Tony couldn’t help the surprised deer-in-the-headlights look that he must have given the Soldier when he heard the words.

Because that was hell of a bomb to drop! Hydra wanted to kill him? When? Why? Why didn’t they?

All questions for later. He had more pressing matters at the moment.

“Well, I’m glad Hydra failed to kill me, big guy. Gotta tell you, love the whole ‘living to see another day’ thing.”

Then, before Tony even knew how to react, the Soldier leaned even closer, pressing his whole, larger body against Tony’s, his forearm never leaving Tony’s neck. His face moved closer as well and for one bizarre moment, Tony was convinced the Soldier was going to kiss him.

Instead though, the Soldier just leaned over his shoulder and with his lips right next to Tony’s ear, he whispered, “I’m glad they failed too.”

Still unable to get his bearings straight with the entire goddamn super soldier pressed up against him, Tony couldn’t manage a single word and the Soldier took that as his cue to continue.

“Ya huchoo jị́ toje.”

[I want to live too]

Okay, so they were back to the Russian apparently. Thank god Friday was in his ear. “That’s— uh, that’s great. Glad we could agree on that,” Tony stammered out. He was relieved that, at the very least, this entire situation was more bewildering than terrifying so far. Oh, he was sure he’d have the inevitable emotional breakdown once he was back in the safety of his lab or his room (or his new shiny coffin, if Rhodey had any say in it), but right now, he was holding himself together surprisingly well.

“Ya huchoo bit’ svobodnim.”

[I want to be free]

The way the Soldier whispered those words, that barely there caress of his breath against Tony’s ear, felt downright intimate, sensual, and even though this wasn’t James, it was still his body, and Tony couldn’t help the shiver that ran through his own. Tony tried to ignore it, but he couldn’t deny he was curious as to where exactly this was going. He did wish though that the Soldier would stop whispering his weird-ass, cryptic messages into his ear.

“I want to kill them all.”

Okay, shit, never fucking mind, cryptic was just fine. Tony stiffened and his body jerked involuntary when he heard the words, but the Soldier pressed down on his throat just hard enough to get Tony to stop moving. Still refusing to leave Tony’s personal space, he just shushed him and gave him a quiet, playful “Tiho, tiho, moyo solnishko.” Friday supplied that the Soldier just told him to be quiet, but frankly, Tony was more affronted by the fact that the Soldier also just called him his little sun.

Tony Stark had been called many things during his long, adventurous life, but that was a new one.
“Hard to be quiet, buddy, when you just told me you want to kill everyone.”

Finally, the Soldier pulled back, but only far enough to lock eyes with Tony as he delivered his reply with a smile that Tony could only describe as part devious and part vicious.

“Not everyone. Only those who reek of Hydra.”

Tony’s eyes widened in surprise for the second time. Apparently the Winter Soldier was just full of revelations.

“Sounds— sounds great to me,” Tony stumbled over his words and tried to give the Soldier a smile. “We’re all on the same page here. I hate Hydra, you, uh— you hate Hydra. Your pal James Barnes, he hates Hydra. And he wants to live and be free too, I bet.”

There was a knowing smirk on the man’s face and it gave Tony a strange sense that the Soldier was aware of things that Tony couldn’t even begin to guess at.

The Soldier drew closer again and gently ran the tip of his nose against Tony’s cheek, causing him to shiver again and okay, Tony was sure he was gonna get kissed this time, but the other man stopped short, leaving just enough space between their lips for him to speak.

“I am James Barnes.”

Tony felt like he stopped breathing. The only thing he knew for sure in that moment was that he was going to have so much shit to think about after this situation, he wasn’t going to get any sleep for days.

[Boss, I’ve gotten all the possible readings I can. There’s nothing else. Please, can we end this?]

Poor Friday sounded desperate. Tony briefly wondered if he should try to get any more earth-shattering secrets out of the Soldier, but this was getting too intense, even for him. Plus, the Soldier was still too close, their lips just a hair breadth apart, and the man was now giving him a look that Tony was not appreciating at all - part curiosity, part hunger, and yeah, Tony was pulling the plug on this. No goddamn Winter Soldier was kissing him today.

Well, time for the ace up my sleeve. God, I hope this works. Do Hydra files get peer-reviewed?

He swallowed hard and thought back to the trigger words that one of the Hydra files indicated should shut the man down (although apparently their success rate left much to be desired), but all he managed to get out was a “Toch—” before said Soldier suddenly lifted his arm away from his throat and clamped his hand over Tony’s mouth, pressing him back into the wall with his whole body. Tony’s hands flew to the hand on instinct, but he had no chance getting it off.

“Clever, clever Tony Stark,” the Soldier actually cooed with mirth in his eyes and then huffed out a laugh when Tony tried to jerk out of his grasp. He shushed him again, still close enough to let his forehead rest against Tony’s. ‘Tiho, solnishko. It’s okay. I won’t let anything happen to you. I won’t let Hydra touch either one of us. Not ever again.”

Before Tony could even process what that was supposed to mean, the Soldier leaned in again, lips right against Tony’s ear. “Because there is only one mission now. I will kill them all,” he whispered and this time, nothing about this felt even remotely intimate or playful because his voice lost those earlier teasing notes, turning vicious and vengeful. Tony had to clench his eyes shut, because the violence behind that tone made him terrified. Every sense he had zeroed in on that voice and even Friday’s translations were nothing more than static in his ear.
“Odin za odnim, they will all die at my hands, slowly, brutally. I will take them apart until they know nothing but pain, until they suffer how I suffered. Until they suffer how we suffered. Ves’ mir boodet v krovi etih svolochei. They will beg for mercy as they choke on their blood, but there will never be any mercy. Only death.”

He pulled back then to look at Tony, who finally opened his eyes. “They will all die. No ti i ya, my clever Tony Stark,” the Soldier smirked and pressed his forehead to Tony’s again, “we will live.”

For one terrifying, confusing second of silence that dragged out into eternity, all Tony could do was stare into those eyes - alive and uncontrolled, filled with both a vicious violence and a possessive, protective hunger that Tony couldn’t even begin to interpret.

Then, the Soldier closed his eyes and placed a barely there kiss on Tony’s forehead before whispering, “We will be free, moyo solnishko,” and finally letting go. He took several steps back and gave Tony a self-satisfied smile, as if daring him to use the trigger.

Tony didn’t hesitate.

“Tochka zamerzaniya.”

As soon as Tony said the words (and Hydra probably thought they were being so goddamn clever using freezing point as the shutdown trigger), the Soldier’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body collapsed to the floor, slack and motionless. Tony didn’t even attempt to catch him, frozen to his own spot by equal part fear and shock.

He watched the prone body for what he assumed was no more than a minute, not letting himself make a single move. But then, finally, the body stirred.

“…Tony?” a very groggy, disoriented James Barnes called out and then let out a pained moan, as he tried to lift himself off the floor.

Oh thank god.

Tony let out the breath he was holding and then felt his legs promptly give out from under him. He slid down the wall and collapsed in a heap of uncoordinated limbs on the floor.

“What happened?” James asked, looking around in confusion, probably still trying to get his bearings straight. His eyes landed on Tony.

“Just, uh— some complications,” Tony breathed out and oh boy, everything was turning dark and cold and there was that panic attack he’d been pushing away the entire time. “Friday, cancel the shutdown please,” he managed to croak out, before he had to go back to struggling through each breath.

It took no more than a second or two before the doors to the room were flung open and Colonel James Rhodes himself burst into the room, looking like an avenging angel. Tony realized that in this case, it was probably the angel of death.

“Tony, what the actual fuck?” Rhodey began shouting before he even got across the room. “What in the hell did you think you were doing?!” Each word was punctuated with a step, which finally brought Rhodsy right next to Tony.

“We, uh— has some— technical difficulties— no big deal,” Tony barely managed to get the words out.
“That is it, I am going to kill you,” Rhodey pointed to Tony and then swung his attention to James, “and then I’ll kill you,” he seethed and poor James just looked more dazed and confused. Rhodey was back to pointing at Tony again. “And then I’ll find a way to bring your sorry ass back from the dead just so I can kill you again, hoping that maybe it’ll sink in the second time, because you’re a goddamn idiot!”

“Rhodey, Honey Bear—” Tony had to catch his breath after every few words, “I will take all of that into consideration, but can we— can we not yell at the guy— about to have a massive panic attack?”

The message was thankfully received because all Tony heard next was a muttered expletive and then Rhodey was kneeling in front of him and taking his face into his hands. Despite the anger he could see in Rhodey’s eyes, the touch was gentle and it was already helping Tony feel more grounded.

“You goddamn idiot, do you realize how much you scared me?” Rhodey whispered and when Tony just shrugged, he pulled Tony into a crushing hug.

Tony’s face was squished into Rhodey’s shoulder, so he was only able to get out a muffled “You’re squashing me, Rhodes.” Rhodey’s response was to just hug him tighter, so Tony stopped squirming and let himself enjoy the embrace, which did actually help push the panic back. From the vantage point of Rhodey’s shoulder, he watched Vision first give him an uncharacteristically resentful look before holding out a polite hand to James, who used it to lift himself off the floor. The man was looking less dazed now, but the confusion was quickly being replaced by fear.

“I don’t remember anything. I— I need to know what happened! Did I— did I hurt Tony?” he looked stricken at that realization and Tony felt the immediate urge to reassure him. He burrowed himself out of the comfort of Rhodey’s shoulder so that he could at least speak clearly.

“No one was hurt, nothing happened, everything’s fine,” he insisted, but then he felt Rhodey push him away and hold him at arm’s length.

“Nothing happened? Are you kidding me right now?”

Apparently Tony’s attempt at an innocent smile was not working at all because Rhodey stood up and turned to James.

“You wanna know what this idiot did?” he pointed to Tony. “He locked all of us out, so that when you went all Winter Soldier on him and attacked, we were stuck outside watching the whole damn thing like some shitty movie!”

James went ashen white. “I did what?”

Okay, Tony needed to put a stop to this before it was their resident super soldier having the panic attack. He was fairly certain his legs could support his weight now, so using the wall as a crutch, he slowly made his way into a standing position. The world around him spun a few times, but all in all, not too bad. He had hangovers worse than this.

“I’m fine, James. Not a bruise on me.” His throbbing head promptly reminded him that wasn’t entirely true. “Well, I might end the day with a killer headache, but other than that, I’m fine.”

James wasn’t anywhere near convinced and he was on the verge of panic again. “Please tell me - what did I do?”

Tony tried to find the words to explain what the hell just happened, but realized he didn’t actually know himself what the hell just happened.
He sighed. “Alright, this might be easier with visuals. Friday has everything on video. Probably a lot better than whatever explanation I can come up with. Friday, be a dear and give us a projection with the recording. Start when the Soldier was activated the first time.”

For the next few minutes, they all watched in silence as the events Tony had just lived unfolded on the holographic screen before them. The footage itself was only a few minutes long, which surprised Tony because the ordeal felt like forever.

James watched the whole thing with increasingly terrified expression on his face and he physically flinched when the Soldier overturned the table and charged at Tony, slamming him into the nearby wall. When the video was over, Tony wasn’t sure what to do or say, so he tried for reassurance.

“See? It worked out fine. We got exactly the data we needed. More, actually! And hell, the Soldier was gentler with me than some of my former teammates! At least he didn’t lift me off the ground by the throat. Trust me, not pleasant—”

“You shouldn’t have done this,” James interrupted him, his voice suddenly furious. “You shouldn’t have taken off the restraints. You should have shut the Soldier down as soon as I attacked you. You should have let them stop me!”

“James, it’s fine—”

“I could have killed you!”

The devastated declaration echoed through the otherwise silent room like thunder and the look in James’ eyes — anger and guilt and fear — left Tony feeling off-balance.

James drew in a sharp, jagged breath and it looked like he wanted to say something else, but instead, he just turned on his heel and walked straight out the opened doors. Tony called out to him and tried to follow, but Rhodey grabbed him by the arm.

“Let him be. Besides,” the look on Rhodey’s face turned decidedly murderous, “we’re not done talking.”

Tony looked back toward the entrance and he realized he felt guilty. What the hell kinda day did they just have that he was the one feeling sorry for things? Didn’t he keep his promise though? He kept James safe! He kept all of them safe!

But all Tony’s mind could think about was a constant loop of James’ tears as Tony said the final trigger words and James’ devastated expression when he watched himself attack Tony. Over and over, two different expressions of terror and grief.

Fuck. Tony didn’t think that there was a cup of tea in the world big enough to fix this.

Chapter End Notes

So for those of us who were just as lost as Tony with that last part of the Soldier's little rant, here's the translation for those parts:

*Odin za odnim* - *One by one*

*Ves' mir boodet v krovi etih svolochey* - The whole world will be covered in these bastards' blood
No ti i ya - But you and I
Tiho - be quiet/calm down
Moyo solnishko - my little sun (my sunshine, there isn't a perfect English equivalent)
Chapter 12

Peter loved this particular spot on the roof of the Compound because it was always secluded and had the best view of both the grounds and the setting sun, which still had a ways to go before it disappeared below the horizon. He smiled, enjoying the warm sunshine on his face as he sat on the edge, his feet dangling over the side of the building, before reaching into the bag next to him. He rooted around for a moment and finally found what he was looking for with a satisfied “Aha!”

He unscrewed the lid of the jar he pulled out, stuck a spoon in it, and handed it over to the man sitting next to him.

“Try this one. That’s definitely the best one!”

The man accepted the jar and placed it carefully between his knees to keep it still and then proceeded to put the generous scoop on the spoon straight into his mouth. Peter couldn’t help his grin when a look of curiosity on the man’s face turned into one of delight.

“Oh wow, this is amazing,” Mr. Barnes said around the spoonful still in his mouth and Peter tried to hide his laughter. Giving the spoon one more quick lick, Mr. Barnes placed it down and picked up the jar. “Nutella,” he read the label, “I assume it has nuts of some sort?”

“Hazelnuts! Apparently it was invented because there was a shortage of cocoa after World War Two,” Peter replied and reached into the picnic bag again to grab his own jar of the chocolate spread.

Mr. Barnes just gave a curious hum and then busied himself with another spoonful, prompting Peter to do the same. For a moment, they enjoyed their dessert in silence, looking over the vibrant green of the Compound grounds. Peter wondered, absently bouncing his foot against the concrete wall, what the grounds would look like during fall or winter and he hoped Mr. Stark would let him visit during his school breaks. Or maybe even on the weekends.

Unfortunately, Peter would have to wait to discuss any of his future visits until everyone was in a better mood.

Things at the Compound had been... tense for the past week. Or at least they were with the East Wing residents. Life in the West Wing seemed to be going as smoothly as ever, with the hustle and bustle of people coming and going - some here for training, some on assignments with the government or even the UN. Most of them weren’t even aware that a big, rainy cloud settled over the East Wing.

Peter wasn’t entirely sure what happened a week ago - mostly because everyone still treated him like a kid and never bothered to tell him anything. But he accidentally stumbled onto Mr. Stark and Colonel Rhodes in the middle of a really intense conversation and the two men were so focused on their argument (well, one-sided argument, the Colonel was doing all the talking) that it took minutes for them to realize that Peter was even there. Before they became aware of his presence though, Peter got the gist of the situation - Mr. Stark did something dangerous and so goddamn stupid, Tony, honestly, I’m impressed you can still surprise me with how fucking reckless you can be (Colonel’s words, not Peter’s). Apparently whatever Mr. Stark did happened while he was trying to help Mr. Barnes (Peter only knew that Mr. Barnes was here to get help with the awful things Hydra did to him).

The Colonel seemed absolutely livid with Mr. Stark.
You could’ve died, Tony. Do you understand me? Can you take even a goddamn second to think about how I felt? I had to stand there and watch, helpless and terrified, thinking—is this—is this the moment he decides to snap your neck and kill you? Am I gonna have to carry my best friend out of that room in a body bag? And all because you decided you knew better than the rest of us. Is that it, Tony? You don’t trust us?

Mr. Stark just stood there, letting the Colonel yell at him. He looked contrite and guilty, and Peter wasn’t sure how to feel because he had never seen Mr. Stark like that.

It was at that point that the Colonel noticed him and in the sternest voice he had ever heard from the man, Peter was told to please leave, Peter, this is a private conversation. Usually Peter would put up a fight, ask to be included because he wasn’t just a kid anymore, thank you very much, but he obeyed without an argument for once. The tension between the two men was palpable and Peter knew this wasn’t the place for his usual comments and quips.

Ever since then, each time Peter visited the East Wing, it felt like everyone was just stressed and withdrawn, and no one wanted to engage Peter in conversation or hang out with him. He didn’t see Mr. Barnes or Mr. Stark at all. According to Friday, Mr. Stark had been locked away in his lab the entire time, and everyone’s visiting privileges were temporarily revoked. Mr. Barnes spent most of his time hiding away in his quarters.

At first, Peter let it go, telling himself it really wasn’t any of his business, but after a few days, it frankly felt like everyone was just moping about. If Peter were honest, adults could be pretty dumb sometimes. How did yelling at each other and then hiding away actually fix anything?

And really, Peter couldn’t think of a problem that couldn’t be helped (even if just a little bit) with some food and fresh air.

So Peter took matters into his own hands (he would’ve recruited Harley, but the other boy was with his mom and sister for the week), and because Peter couldn’t even reach Mr. Stark at the moment, he decided he would start with Mr. Barnes. So, he grabbed a big picnic bag, raided the large West Wing kitchens for any dessert that he thought Mr. Barnes might like (he had to consult with Friday several times on whether something was invented before or after 1944), and after he was satisfied with his haul, he headed over to the East Wing.

Thankfully, Mr. Barnes opened the door when Peter knocked. The man was momentarily confused and Peter had to stifle a laugh because, that’s right, Mr. Barnes had never seen him without his mask on before. But Peter decided that the man was totally cool enough now to know his real identity, so he introduced himself again, Hi, I’m Peter Parker! You may have seen my work as Spiderman! and Mr. Barnes’ face lit up in recognition as soon as he heard Peter’s voice.

At first, Mr. Barnes was reluctant to spend time together, telling Peter that he wouldn’t be very good company. It was obvious the man was tired and stressed, what with those dark shadows under his eyes. However, that only made Peter want to help more, so he put on his best puppy dog eyes and asked Mr. Barnes, could you hang out with me just for a bit? I mean, it’s been so lonely without Harley, and I could really use the company! Please, Mr. Barnes? I even brought us snacks!

The man finally acquiesced and followed Peter to his favorite spot on the roof. It may have taken a little bit of time (as well as a whole assortment of candy and chocolates), but just as Peter suspected, sunshine and sugar did their job. Bit by bit, Mr. Barnes relaxed and even began to engage in conversation with Peter (at first, Peter had to do most of the talking, but he didn’t mind).

They ended up spending over three hours here on the roof, just talking and taking in the view. Peter hadn’t brought up anything about Mr. Stark and instead stuck to safer topics. He told Mr. Barnes all
about his training here at the Compound and about the science experiment that had been put on hold because Harley was away. Mr. Barnes even listened to Peter talk about a girl that he really liked and hoped to see again once school started up in a few months.

Finally though, they were down to their last two jars of Nutella and Peter thought it was safe to bring up the thing that happened days ago.

“So, um— Mr. Barnes? Can I ask you something about Mr. Stark?” Peter tentatively began.

“Sure. But you do know you don’t have to call me Mr. Barnes, right? I’m fine with just Bucky,” the other man said and then cocked his head to the side. “And I may not have known Tony for very long, but he doesn’t seem to be the type to insists on formalities either.”

“Oh no, he definitely isn’t! He asked me to call him Tony several times now, but I, uh—” Here, Peter let out an awkward laugh. “I may have accidentally called him Dad in one of the meetings a little while back and— No, don’t laugh, Mr. Barnes!”

The other man was failing to hold back his mirth, despite Peter’s glare. “Sorry, Peter, I can’t help it. I’m just trying to picture how Tony reacted to that.”

“That’s the thing though, he didn’t even react!” At Mr. Barnes’ raised eyebrow, Peter elaborated. “So we’re in a meeting with everyone and he just says, ” Peter tried to mimic the man’s deeper voice, “Great job on that mission, Peter. I’m proud of you, and I just say— Oh man, I just accidentally say Thanks, Dad, and Mr. Stark just goes on to the next item on the agenda like nothing happened. But then we both realize everyone’s just sitting there, staring at us!”

“I wish I could’ve been there to see that.”

Peter let out a groan. “No, it was already bad enough! Miss Van Dyne just bursts out laughing, the Colonel is sitting there with the biggest grin on his face, and Mr. Vision— oh my god, he just says I didn’t know you formally adopted Peter, that’s great news, Tony. I think at that point, both Mr. Stark and I just wanted the ground to swallow us whole. And then of course they had to tell Harley and everyone else. So yeah,” Peter made a face, “I’m just sticking with Mr. Stark for now, to be safe.”

Mr. Barnes gave him a nod. “Yeah, I get that, and you can call me whatever you’re comfortable with, Peter, I don’t mind. I just wanted you to know you didn’t have to be so formal. Although, I suppose,” the man made a point of looking thoughtful, rubbing his hand against his chin, “I am technically one hundred years old, so I guess I am old enough for you to call me Dad too if that’s what you really—”

All Peter’s indignant “Mr. Barnes!” got him in return were pearls of laughter and even though Peter was only a little bit mortified, he could admit it was actually really nice to see the other man laugh so freely.

“I’m sorry, Peter, I shouldn’t be making fun of you for that,” Mr. Barnes shook his head, but he was still smiling. ”It’s really no big deal. I mean, my memory is crap, but even I remember calling some of my teachers mom once or twice. It happens to everyone.” He took a deep breath, trying to get his amusement under control. “You were trying to ask me something about Tony?”

Peter realized he did in fact get side-tracked from his initial question. “Yes, I was just wondering… A few days ago, something bad happened between you and Mr. Stark, didn’t it? Mr. Stark did something really irresponsible?”

Almost immediately, Peter saw Mr. Barnes’ earlier good mood drain away as the man deflated. “It’s
really nothing you should worry about, Peter. You’re just a kid and that whole situation—it just—"

Mr. Barnes stopped when he saw Peter shake his head vigorously. “Why does everyone keep telling me that? So what if I’m a kid? That doesn’t mean I don’t understand things!”

He stopped suddenly and flushed with embarrassment when he realized he just inadvertently yelled at Mr. Barnes, but thankfully, the other man didn’t seem to be mad. He just looked tired again, like there was some great, big weight on his shoulders.

“No, you’re right, I shouldn’t have brushed you off like that,” Mr. Barnes leaned forward to rest his elbow on his knee and Peter watched the man rub his eyes.

“The thing that happened with Tony—” he began and then let out frustrated sigh. “Tony did something he shouldn’t have and he put himself in a lot of danger.”

“He did it because he was trying to help you, right?”

“In a way, yes,” Mr. Barnes said and followed it with a disapproving grumble. “I do think Tony thought that he was helping. But it wasn’t worth it. None of it was worth him risking his life like that. He could’ve gotten really hurt. I just—I don’t understand why he did what he did.”

Peter contemplated Mr. Barnes’ words for a few moments, as he leaned back on his hands and took in the setting sun.

“Well, I haven’t known Mr. Stark for very long either,” he admitted, “but I do know that he spends a lot of his time doing things for other people. For example, did you know that he takes the time to spar with both me and Harley? And he even helps us with our summer homework, even though I’m sure that must be really boring for him.”

Peter looked over to see Mr. Barnes watching him in contemplation. He turned back to the sunset and took a moment to think back on all the other things he noticed living at the Compound.

“Somehow he always knows when the Colonel’s legs are hurting more than usual and he makes adjustments to the leg braces to make them more comfortable. And I’ve seen Mr. Stark spend hours trying to help Mr. Vision cook whenever the other man looks like he needs a little cheering up, and trust me, Mr. Stark is terrible at cooking. Oh, and of course he builds all of our stuff for combat!”

Here, Peter couldn’t help the excitement that seeped into his voice. “Like my suit, which is so great! I can’t even imagine how much time it must have taken Mr. Stark to program all the cool things it can do! He works on the War Machine suit too, of course! And did you know that he either made or improved all of the cool gadgets that the other Avengers used? Like the Widow Bites or Hawkeye’s ridiculously awesome exploding arrows? Or Redwing? You know that cool little flying guy that the Falcon used? Oh man, I bet Mr. Stark probably even built some crazy, cool secret features into the Captain America suit, like he did with mine and—”

Realizing that he was totally gushing like some crazy fanboy, Peter covered his face in embarrassment. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Barnes, I didn’t mean to get carried away like that. I’m just— Well, I’ve always been a big Avengers fan, even before I got my powers,” Peter admitted sheepishly and when he looked over at Mr. Barnes, the man was giving him an indulgent smile.

“It’s okay, Peter, I like hearing about all of this. I still have a lot to learn about everybody here.”

“Okay, that’s—that’s great then, I can definitely tell you all about everyone,” Peter nodded, but then paused and furrowed his eyebrows, “Um, where was I going with all that again?”

“Tony builds things for people?” Mr. Barnes supplied with a huff of laughter.
Peter was sure he was blushing, still a little embarrassed, but he continued. “Right, yes. I just think that the things Mr. Stark builds - it’s his way of showing people that he cares about them, you know?”

Or at least that was what Peter wanted to believe because it gave him a warm, fuzzy feeling in his chest to think that he could be part of that small group of people that Mr. Stark cared about and looked after.

For a moment, Peter had to stop because he wasn’t sure he had the right words for what he was trying to say next. But then he thought back to that image from so many years ago, the image he saw on TV when he was just a small kid - Iron Man carrying that nuclear missile on his back and flying it into the portal, away from New York and all the innocent people. The amateur video taken by some thrill seeker on the battle-ridden streets of New York and played on every news station didn’t capture what happened later, so all Peter remembered was being so scared when he saw Iron Man disappearing into the wormhole and never coming back.

“Mr. Stark tries to take care of everyone around him, even people he doesn’t know or might never meet. That’s what being Iron Man is about to him. But I think sometimes, he’s so focused on helping everyone else, that he forgets to take care of himself as well.”

Gosh, he probably really did sound like a stupid kid to Mr. Barnes, Peter thought suddenly, but when he looked back at the other man, his expression was softer and there was a look of understanding on his face. So maybe Peter was saying the right things after all?

“But I think that happens to all of us, you know? Sometimes we all forget to take care of ourselves. A few months ago, I— uh, I was on a mission. Not a big one,” he had to clarify, “since I’m not allowed to go on those yet. Just a small one. But I did— well, I did something really stupid. I didn’t listen to the Colonel’s command because I thought I saw a better opening and decided to do my own thing.” Here, Peter could feel his cheeks warm in embarrassment again.

“Let’s just say I didn’t save the day. The Colonel and Mr. Vision did get the bad guy, but I ended up doing a lot of property damage and giving myself a small concussion.” He turned to give Mr. Barnes a sheepish grin. “Now I can usually just shake off most bumps and bruises, kinda like you, I’m sure, but that one was bad enough that I was knocked unconscious and I had to spend a day in Medical. Mr. Stark was furious.”

Peter could still feel his ears burning in shame from the lecture Mr. Stark gave him that day.

“He told me how disappointed he was in me, that I didn’t listen. He told me that maybe all of them were just wasting their time training me since I was just going to ignore all of it anyways. And at first, I didn’t understand. I thought Mr. Stark was mad because of all that damage I did or maybe because I disrespected Colonel Rhodes. But then I realized—”

*You could’ve gotten yourself killed with that, Peter, what were you thinking? Can you imagine how we’d feel if something happened to you? If we lost you?*

“I realized that he was mad at me because I was careless and put myself in danger. He was scared because I got hurt. And I think I finally understood that when he gave me this tight hug and his voice — I remember it shaking when he said *Peter, don’t ever do that to me again*. So I think— I think it’s important to be reminded sometimes that what happens to us matters to other people. Maybe Mr. Stark just needs a reminder like that too…”

Suddenly at a loss for words and feeling self-conscious, Peter stopped talking and fidgeted with his empty jar of Nutella.
He heard Mr. Barnes let out a soft exhale. “I wish it were as easy as that, Peter… I wish I could just go find Tony, give him a great big hug, and tell him never to do it again because I care about him.”

Peter took only a moment to think that over. “Well, why can’t it be that easy?”

When Mr. Barnes just gave a tired huff of laughter, Peter deflated. “Yeah, I know, I’m just a dumb kid,” He let out a sigh of his own. “I guess I just want everyone to get along. But I’m sure I don’t know everything, so maybe it isn’t my place to give advice like that.”

Mr. Barnes shook his head then and gave him a fond look. “No, actually, I think you are right, Peter. Maybe us grownups do make everything more complicated sometimes. I think you’re smarter than all of us put together, kid,” he finished with a wink.

Peter preened under that warm praise and he matched the smile that Mr. Barnes gave him with his own.

The sun had almost set then and the hues of red and orange were turning into shades of purples and blues. There were still training drills Peter knew he had to finish before the end of the day, so he soon parted ways with Mr. Barnes, who didn’t let him leave until he thanked Peter for the food, the company and the advice. The man stayed on the roof, watching the sky darken and Peter hoped that his favorite spot could provide Mr. Barnes with some peace of mind. He still wasn’t sure if anything he said helped with the thing between Mr. Barnes and Mr. Stark, but he hoped that the softer, less overwhelmed expression on Mr. Barnes’ face was a sign that Peter’s efforts helped. Even if only a little bit.

Sometimes, adults just needed a push in the right direction. Well, that, and a jar of Nutella never hurt either.

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The sky was rapidly turning darker as Bucky took in the world around him and he noted with brief disappointment that there would still be too many lights on the Compound grounds to be able to see the stars with any clarity once night finally fell. A wisp of a memory fluttered through his mind - him as a child, fascinated with stars and space. Always looking up at the sky, wondering what was out there. Wondering what the stars up there were like, those bright distant suns.

_Moyo solnishko…_

Those words, _the Soldier’s words_, suddenly echoed through his head and at first, Bucky wanted to push them away because he refused to let the Soldier ruin this moment of peace, after days and days of struggling with him in his head. But the Soldier didn’t fight back or beat against his mental walls, just stayed quiet and let that term of endearment lead Bucky’s thoughts inevitably back to Tony.

The Soldier couldn’t have picked a better term for him, Bucky had to admit. How else could he describe that man but a bright, shining sun? Tony and his offer to help was the light cutting through the darkness of Bucky’s memories and his past; he was the source of warmth that Bucky felt when for the first time in _so long_, he finally let himself feel _content_. But get too close to Tony Stark and apparently you can burn yourself on the intensity of those flames.

Bucky stopped that train of thought with a mental eye roll at his own sudden bout of poeticism. Maybe the Soldier’s apparent penchant for dramatics was rubbing off on him. Taking a deep breath to steady his mind, he thought back to the last few days.

He wanted to say that they felt like hell, but Bucky had intimate knowledge of what _actual hell_ felt
like, and this didn’t quite make the cut. But the last few days were spent alone, away from everyone, as he struggled to deal with everything. It felt a lot like those initial few months after he rescued Steve and then ran - when he finally settled in Romania and desperately tried to figure out who he was. Back then, his head was filled with fragmented memories, bits and pieces that didn’t make much sense, and alongside those jagged pieces of himself, there were so many voices. Telling him what to do, how to feel, who to kill…

They were fragments of Hydra still festering in his head, but they slowly settled into a quiet hum at the back of his mind, and Bucky realized that it may have been the Soldier who pushed it all back. Because as Hydra’s voices receded, his presence made itself known.

Now, the only voices in his head were the Soldier’s and his own, but somehow it didn’t lessen the discord and the confusion because there was still so much conflict raging on in his head.

The first time he watched the video of what happened, still standing in that room with everyone else, most of the details frankly didn’t even register for him. All he could focus on was that loud crack as Tony’s head slammed into the wall. That moan of pain that followed. That abject fear on Tony’s face as the Soldier rattled off his death threats in his ear. The fact that all the Soldier would have had to do was push just a little bit harder and—

The first time he truly let himself picture what could’ve happened, he found himself on the bathroom floor, dry heaving over the toilet. His body didn’t care that there was nothing in his stomach but acid and bile. That image, it was too much, too overwhelming.

Waking up in that room, disoriented and groggy, with the first thought in his head to look for Tony and then seeing his body right next to him on the floor, lifeless and still. Neck at an obscene, unnatural angle because the Soldier snapped it in his rage and those dead eyes, staring at Bucky… That suffocating realization that there was nothing he could do, that it was too late, that Tony was dead and it was his hands that killed him. Tony, that bright shining sun, that just seconds ago looked at him with warmth and care in his eyes… Gone.

Bucky had to take another deep breath and he clenched his eyes shut. A second breath, a third, then a fourth. He eventually lost count of how many he needed before he finally felt centered enough to open his eyes again.

The sky was dark before him.

And now that his mind was focused on Tony, yet another roiling conflict of emotions presented itself. Because on one hand, he was so angry. He was infuriated with the man for what he did, for the risk that he took with his own life. Bucky wasn’t sure whether Tony’s actions were driven by a desire to help him or just by some strange destructive sense of curiosity, but it didn’t matter. God, how could he have been so selfish? Didn’t he realize it would have been Bucky (not to mention the rest of Tony’s friends) who would’ve been left to deal with the fallout? Bucky could admit to himself that Tony’s death would have possibly broken him for good. And the fact that all of this was yet another way in which his autonomy was ignored… Thinking about it all left him raw and hurting inside for days now.

But on the other hand, thinking about losing Tony also filled him with an overwhelming need to see the other man - to make sure with his own eyes that the man was still alive. That his heart still beat, that there was still breath in his body. Not being able to see Tony in the past five days actually physically hurt, but he just couldn’t face the other man, not with that anger still boiling in his chest. Instead, he would speak to Friday, whenever the need to see Tony became too great.

“Ms. Friday? Is Tony still in his lab?”
“Yes, Mr. Barnes.”

“Is he alright?”

“...I'm sorry, Mr. Barnes. My protocols currently forbid me from disclosing any other information regarding Boss.”

“But he’s alive?”

“...Yes, Mr. Barnes.”

Friday actually sounded remorseful every time she was unable to answer Bucky’s question and he didn’t hold it against her. On the contrary, he appreciated her patience and letting him ask those same questions over and over, just to give himself some semblance of peace.

In the meantime, as he waited for his anger to settle, he spent the days watching that video over and over in an attempt to understand what the hell actually happened in that room. After losing count of how many times he had seen the footage, he still wasn’t sure whether he had any answers.

Once he was able to push the Hydra memories away and put some parts of himself back into place, Bucky was made aware of that dark, violent presence in the back of his head. The Soldier. He always assumed it was the manifestation of whatever Hydra did to him over the past seventy years, whatever killer instincts they may have installed into him.

But over time, as Bucky slowly pieced his identity back together, it felt like the Soldier took on a life of his own and that fact was made perfectly clear five days ago when he became an autonomous force in Bucky's body, with his own desires and motivations. Seeing that only made things more confusing.

Bucky supposed that he should at least be grateful that Hydra was the real target of the Soldier’s wrath and his reaction to the memory weeks ago made more sense now. After Tony pulled him back to reality, Bucky was overwhelmed with the Soldier’s urge to kill, and at the time, he thought it was an indiscriminate desire, but looking back on it now, it was obviously focused on the men in those white coats who tortured him, who ripped his soul out of his body and replaced it with their own will.

It was hard to disagree with the Soldier on that point because Bucky hated them too. But it was the vicious, vengeful violence that came with the hate that terrified him, because Bucky didn’t want to kill anyone, he didn’t want to find vengeance. He just wanted to find peace. Didn’t he?

He wasn’t sure of anything anymore, but Bucky refused to believe something so dark could be a part of him.

He also couldn’t understand the Soldier’s reaction to Tony. Was it Tony's efforts to undo Hydra's damage that kept him alive? Or was it Bucky’s growing affection for the man (not to mention the physical attraction he always tried to ignore) bleeding through into the Soldier? Whatever it was, the Soldier seemed enamored with Tony. After the Soldier finally recognized him, his entire demeanor changed, turning into something more playful, intimate. God, the way he used his body to crowd Tony, to hold him down… He kissed Tony! And even if it weren’t a real kiss, it was still tender and private and every time Bucky saw that exchange, it made him even more irrationally angry, filling him with an unyielding desire to tear the Soldier away from Tony, to stand between them, to protect Tony… Of course, then the remnants of his logic would point out that there was no them. It was his
own body that held Tony down and his own lips that touched him in some twisted mockery of gentleness…

I am James Barnes.

No, the Soldier was wrong. He was lying. Bucky wouldn’t— couldn’t accept that the Soldier was in any way a real part of him. It was Hydra’s doing, some remains of the countless reprogramming sessions that coalesced into the Soldier in his head. He hoped with something that bordered on desperation that as he continued his therapy, the Soldier would fade and then disappear completely when the triggers no longer held power over him.

But for now, all Bucky could do was attempt to ignore the Soldier, even if it was becoming increasing harder to do so as they both seemed to bleed into each other more and more.

And on top of it all, now Bucky had to worry about Hydra possibly coming after Tony. He had no recollection of an order to kill him, but he supposed the Hydra scientists would have wiped his memory after the mission was aborted early. He also had no knowledge of who they may have sent in his place, not that it really mattered. Every time he even thought about some Hydra agent coming here to lay their filthy hands on Tony, it became impossible to tell apart the Soldier’s protective instincts and his own.

A cool gust of wind pulled Bucky from his dark thoughts and reminded him that it was getting late. Even though all these conflicting emotions were still weighting him down, at this moment he did actually feel better, at least when compared to the past five days. Peter was truly a godsend and Bucky made a note to spend more time with the kid and to thank him again later.

Just getting the chance to enjoy normal for a few hours, to feel the warmth of the sun on his face and the sweet taste of sugar on his tongue, to listen to Peter’s cheerful voice - all of it made the darkness in his head feel less oppressive. And what Peter said about Tony and the way he spoke about him (all that open affection with a touch of hero-worship, it was downright adorable), it also worked to soften the hurt and the anger that he felt when he thought back to what the man did.

Bucky realized his desire to see Tony was finally stronger than the anger and maybe if they finally had a chance to just talk, they could figure out where they stood. It helped last time, when Tony reached out and apologized. Tony’s courage helped put down the first building block for whatever it was that they had between them— friendship, trust, affection? Bucky wasn’t sure how to define it, but even the thought of losing it made his heart clench.

Maybe it was his turn to be brave and reach out.

Suddenly determined, Bucky jumped back down to the roof and made his way back into the Compound.

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“Ms. Friday? Is Tony still in his lab?”

“Yes, Mr. Barnes.”

“Is he alright?”

“…I’m sorry, Mr. Barnes. My protocols still currently forbid me from disclosing any other information regarding Boss. Unfortunately.”

“That’s okay… Actually, could you, uh— could you ask him if it would be alright for me to come
down to the lab to see him?"

“Yes, Mr. Barnes, I will ask Boss right away.”

Friday sounded almost hopeful, at least to Bucky’s ear. He spent the next few minutes in silence, sitting in the kitchen as he waited for Friday to respond back. After several more minutes, he felt himself deflate, realizing that there would be no chance that Tony would want to see him now. After what the Soldier did, Bucky hoped like hell that it wasn’t fear that was keeping Tony away.

Assuming that Friday was just too polite to tell him his request was rejected, he was about to head back to his quarters when her voice, genuinely cheerful this time, rang through the room.

“Boss would like me to tell you that you have permission to come see him. Would you like me to provide you with directions to the lab, Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky swallowed hard against the sudden dryness in his throat. It was time to be brave.

“Lead the way, ma'am.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I dunno how my chapters always turn out this long and I wish I could break this up into multiple updates, but luckily for you guys, I hate forcing a break when the story doesn't call for one, so you get 7K of just Bucky/Tony goodness. I can't think of a better way to start the week, tbh. ;)

Please enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Walking into Tony’s lab felt like walking into all of his childhood science fantasies rolled into one - or at least the ones Bucky could still remember.

There were holographic projections everywhere he looked - schematics, rows upon rows of data, images and words. Tables bursting with tools, unfinished parts, pieces of metal and machinery scattered on every available surface. And the walls - they were lined as far as Bucky could see with the Iron Man suits. Each one different from its brothers - some sleek and built for speed, others bulky and tough. Some were battle worn and some brand new. All shared the same red and gold flare and the familiar blue glow in their chests.

Bucky carefully made his way through the controlled chaos, making sure not to bump into or disturb anything. The slow pace also gave him the opportunity to take everything in. Knowing what he did of the man, Bucky already recognized that this lab must have been Tony’s safe haven, his sanctuary, and he didn’t want his presence to somehow violate that, regardless of any anger he may have felt at the moment. And he also couldn’t deny that being surrounded by this incredible display of science, of the future, put him in a state of awe. It was beautiful.

As he came around the corner of one of the tables housing unfinished pieces of an Iron Man suit, he finally saw Tony. The man was sitting on a bar stool, hunched over a large table, the surface of which was covered with glass that displayed rows and rows of holographic data. From his vantage point, there was no way for Bucky to see exactly what Tony was working on.

When Bucky neared him and tentatively called out his name, the other man finally turned around and the first thought that crossed Bucky’s mind was that Tony looked exhausted. There were dark, vicious circles under his eyes and the lines in his face looked more prominent against the pale skin. Tony’s usual perfectly styled hair was untamed and it was obvious that the man must have been running his hands through it constantly. A sea of coffee cups were scattered around Tony on the glass table as well as on every other surface surrounding the man.

“Hey there, Barnes. You, uh— Friday said you wanted to see me?”

“I did. I just— I wanted to see how you were doing.”

Tony gave an attempt at a carefree smile, but all it did was highlight the man’s exhaustion further. “I’m peachy keen. You know,” he cleared his throat uncomfortably and shrugged, “just trying to get some work done.”
Bucky swallowed against the lump in his throat. So they were back to the awkward attempts at neutrality then? That didn’t work particularly well for them last time. However, before he had a chance to even find the right words to address Tony, he saw movement in his peripheral vision and tensed up, instantly on high alert. But when he finally pinpointed the source of the movement, he realized it was a—

“Is that a robot?” he couldn’t help his surprised question as a machine of some sort rolled its way over to him while making a series of clicks and beeps in different pitches. Its long arm, which ended with a mechanical claw, tentatively reached out towards Bucky. At the same time, he saw Tony jump out of his seat and rush over to him.

“Dum-E, hey now, don’t just ambush people like that! Personal space, buddy, we talked about that! Remember how some people don’t like you bothering them?”

The robot lowered its arm dejectedly and it made another series of lower pitch beeps.

“Sorry about him, he likes visitors,” Tony said and than gave the robot a glare. “A little too much.”

Bucky glanced at Tony for a second and then shifted his gaze back to the sad-looking robot.

“Is it— is he alive?”

Tony gave a grunt. “Depends on one’s definition of alive. He’s an artificial intelligence, same as Friday. Just a lot more rudimentary. First one I ever built actually.”

Bucky took a second to observe the robot. “So then, he’s aware of what goes on around him? And he learns, just like Friday?”

“Yup, something like that. Although apparently he hasn’t learned that people don’t like him invading their personal space.” There was that glare again, but Bucky realized he’d seen it before. It was the same mock glare Tony gave Harley and Peter on that very first day of Bucky’s stay at the Compound. There was no real heat behind it. On the contrary, Tony’s eyes couldn’t hide his affection, just like they didn’t when he looked at the boys.

That warm fond look, hidden behind the seemingly stern words put everything in a different context all of the sudden. Because this little robot that Tony built with his own two hands and breathed life into? In so many ways, it was Tony’s child.

Everything else be damned, Bucky couldn’t help his smile in that moment. “It’s alright—if he wants to approach me, that is. I don’t mind.”

Tony let out a resigned sigh after beat, but then gestured in Bucky’s direction while addressing the robot. “Fine, have at him, Dum-E. But don’t come crying to me when he decides you’re being an annoying little brat and he wants to sell you for scraps.”

The robot seemed to have ignored that last part and instead beeped cheerfully at Bucky as the mechanical arm extended toward him again. The movement was slow and gentle though, so it didn’t put Bucky on edge, and he watched with open fascination as that arm moved closer to his face, and then carefully took a lock of his hair into its mechanical claw. The little robot didn’t pull on it, just proceeded to move his metal appendage through it, like someone running their hand through his hair. Then, he decided the hair no longer fascinated him and the arm seemed to have focused on Bucky’s missing left limb. It circled the stump of his arm one, twice, before letting out a string of tentative clicks and focusing on Bucky’s right arm (he realized that in the middle of the robot’s claw was a camera of sorts and he wondered if that was how the robot could observe him).
“Oh no, I think he’s bonding with you because you both have one arm,” he heard Tony’s exasperated moan and Bucky had to laugh.

“Finally, I don’t have to feel so alone anymore,” he joked back before asking, “Is it alright if I touch him?”

“Knock yourself out. See those clear strips along the arm?” Tony pointed out. “They’re touch sensitive, so he’ll be able to feel you.”

Not needing anymore prompting, Bucky reached out and carefully ran his fingers along the clear glass, which lit up under his touch in a rainbow of colors. The robot chirped happily in response.

“This is— this is so incredible,” Bucky knew there was awe in his voice and maybe this wasn’t the reason he came down here at all, but he couldn’t help himself. Tony’s creations never ceased to amaze him.

Tony watched the robot bump his metal claw against Bucky’s arm and rolled his eyes in mock frustration. “Why is it that all of my tech starts flirting with you, Barnes? First Friday, now Dum-E. Traitors, the lot of you!”

“Maybe it’s because I’m nice to them,” Bucky suggested, “I mean, you call this poor fella ‘dummy’. He doesn’t seem all that dumb to me.”

Bucky saw Tony fail to stifle a laugh. “No, that’s his actual name. D-U-M and E.” When he saw Bucky’s unimpressed face, the man looked indignant. “What? I was only nineteen, give me a break.”

“Wait, you made him when you were only nineteen?”

Tony just nodded and then came over to brush his hand carefully over Dum-E’s other touch sensitive panel. “Yup, this guy has been with me for a while now. You’re an old man just like me, huh, Dumbo?”

Dum-E just cooed and moved his mechanical arm away from Bucky and over to Tony so he could gently place his claw onto Tony’s shoulder in much the same way a dog would with his head.

“Alright, alright, I forgive you for liking Barnes more,” Tony gave him a quick pat. “Now scram, pal, mommy and daddy need to talk.”

Bucky watched Dum-E obey and roll between the many desks and piles of metal, chirping happily the whole way. When the robot was out of sight, Bucky looked back to see Tony slowly walk back over to the desk, completely ignore the bar stool, and promptly slide down onto the floor with an exhausted sigh, leaning against the nearby wall.

When he saw Bucky’s confused look, Tony just shrugged. “Floor’s more comfortable.”

Probably because the man looks like he’s about to pass out, Bucky thought. Tony really did look like he hadn’t slept in days. He was dressed in a simple well-worn white top streaked with oil, and old ripped up jeans. Without Tony’s usual flare, the perfect fancy clothes, and with that exhaustion marring his face, Bucky realized he had never seen Tony look quite so small and so vulnerable as he did in that moment. That realization carried with it a wave of affection threaded with a sense of protectiveness and Bucky hated that he couldn’t tell whether it all came from him or from the Soldier (or both). However, he couldn’t deny his need to be closer to the man any longer, so without preamble, he walked over and sat down on the floor as well, on the man’s left. Their shoulders were just a hair breadth away from touching.
Tony gave him a tired smile. “Told ya the floor’s more comfortable,” he said before closing his eyes and resting his head against the wall behind him.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky tried to decide on what he wanted to say. He settled on “I have a dilemma, Tony.”

When the other man looked back up at him, he continued. “I know that given our history and everything that’s happened, I probably don’t have any right to be angry with you.” Bucky paused and made sure he was looking back at Tony. “But I am angry with you.”

Tony blinked at him once, twice, before dropping his head and letting out a dejected sigh. “Nah, you’re totally allowed to be angry with me.” Bucky watched the man’s shoulders slump. “Hell, everyone else in the compound is angry with me, you’ll be in good company.”

After a beat, Tony continued while distractedly picking at one of the threads in his ripped jeans. “Rhodey just yelled at me for like five hours that day and I haven’t seen him since. Every time I walk into a room and see Vision, he just gives me this really disappointed, sad look and then just phases out of there. Even Friday’s been cold with me.”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to, Boss,” Friday’s voice echoed through the lab and it did sound decidedly cold. “I am simply here to follow your every order, even if it means having to watch you put yourself in grave danger and forcing me to experience a wide range of confusing and quite frankly unpleasant human emotions.”

Tony gave him a look and gestured vaguely at the ceiling as if trying to say See what I mean?

Bucky didn’t bother hiding his exasperation. “You realize, Tony, that it’s all because these people love you, right? They’re all angry with you because they were worried on the count of you coming this close to dying.”

The other man just shrugged and returned his gaze to the floor.

“Why, Tony? Why did you do it?”

There was a beat of silence before Tony answered. “Because I wanted to get every bit of information out of that miserable experience so you wouldn’t have to go through it again? Because I wanted to find out what the hell was actually going on?” Finally, he gave a sad chuckle and looked at Bucky. “Because I’m a reckless idiot?”

Tony looked genuinely remorseful and that sad expression on the man's face mixed with the stark exhaustion in his eyes softened something inside Bucky.

“I just— I promised you that I wouldn’t let anything bad happen to you,” Tony tried to explain, ”so I thought, the only way I can do that is to have everything under my control. And when the Soldier attacked me, I knew letting the others in would’ve just put you in harm’s way. You were my responsibility, Barnes.”

Bucky took a second to contemplate Tony’s words, but instead of commenting on them, he just decided to remind Tony. “It’s James, remember?”

Tony let out a puzzled hmm? and then followed it with a distracted, tired nod. “Yeah, no, I remember. Just thought I lost my first-name privileges, that’s all.”

The notes of insecurity behind that reply softened the anger in Bucky’s chest even further. God, why was it so hard to stay mad at this man? Still, he had to figure out a way to understand what happened.
“I appreciate that you were trying to protect me, although I don’t agree with it when it’s me who’s attacking you…” When he saw Tony about to argue with him, Bucky didn’t give him the chance. “But why didn’t you use the shutdown trigger right away? You had no way of knowing that the Soldier wouldn’t kill you at the first opportunity.”

Here, Tony looked up at the ceiling of his lab before taking in a long, deep breath and letting out a tired laugh. “I think there are some thing that you outta know about me, James. One,” he began counting on his fingers, “is that I have zero self-preservation skills. Ask anyone. Two—”

Tony paused to let out a big yawn and Bucky watched as Tony’s bent left knee first bumped against his own and then stayed resting against it. He realized that Tony was so out of it with exhaustion that he wasn’t even aware of this small physical connection between them.

“—Two is that all those places where my self-preservation instincts were supposed to be?” Tony finally continued, “That’s where I put the large, colorful collection of my self-destructive tendencies. And three,” Tony’s sleepy eyes focused on Bucky’s face, “whenever I see something or someone bigger and badder than me, I get the irresistible urge to poke them with a sharp, pointy stick. Sometimes literally.”

At Bucky’s disbelieving look, Tony just scoffed. “What, you don’t believe me? You think this Winter Soldier deal was some new thing for me?” He gave a tired laugh. “Did anyone ever tell you about how we got invaded by aliens a while back?”

Bucky hesitated. “I have a general idea of what happened.”

“Right, so this alien invasion was led by this Asgardian Norse god— yeah, those apparently exist, so get used to it. His name was Loki and he was batshit crazy, with daddy issues for miles. Unfortunately, also happened to be powerful enough to snap me in half with his pinky finger. So, this guy decides to strut right into the top suite of my Stark Tower. I fly over— let’s just say the Iron Man suit had seen better days— I take the suit off, and I walk right in there, completely unarmed. And guess what I do?”

“…I don’t want to answer that.”

“I offer the god a drink.”

Tony laughed at Bucky’s pained groan of frustration. “Hey, I was trying to stall him! I needed to reach these two bracelets that would activate my shiny new suit. So I talked to the god. We laughed, we cried, he tried to poke me with his Glowstick of Destiny, I may have told him he couldn’t get it up in the bedroom, he got very upset and tossed me out the window, and then finally I—”

“Wait, he did what?”

“…Tossed me out the window?”

“Of Stark Tower?”

“Yes.”

Bucky pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Continue.”

“See, that’s the best part though!” Tony’s chuckle was part amused, part sleepy. “There I am, falling faster and faster, just watching the ground get alarmingly close. The suit finally starts assembling around me, comes together literally yards away from the ground, I fly up, say a witty one-liner, and blast that bastard right in the face with a repulsor.”
There was actual pride in the man’s voice as he retold what would’ve been a terrifying experience for anyone else and Bucky wasn’t even sure what to say, but apparently there was more.

“The first test flight of my suit? I flew so high, the whole thing froze over and I plummeted to the ground. Almost died.” A pause. “A few years back, I gave my home address in Malibu to a bunch of terrorists.” Tony paused again for dramatic effect. “Let’s just say I no longer have a mansion in Malibu. Oh, oh!” Tony suddenly pointed his finger at Bucky. “You were there! Remember how I went up against the infamous Winter Soldier with nothing but a gauntlet and my Armani three-piece suit?”

All Bucky could do was groan in defeat. “Okay, okay, I get it. How are you even still alive?” he asked, shaking his head at Tony in disbelief, who just gave a careless shrug and had the audacity to wink at Bucky.

“Partly my charming personality and my dashing good looks. Also a shitton of luck, I think. And I have a few amazing people still around who pull my ass out of the fire now and then.”

What could Bucky possibly say in the face of all that? “You, Tony Stark… You are crazy. And that’s coming from a guy who has a Hydra assassin living in his head.”

“Yeah, not gonna lie, James, your alter ego is a bit of a drama queen,” Tony snorted and Bucky just made a disgusted noise.

“I don’t even want to think about the damn Soldier… At least after five days, he’s finally quiet now… But I guess he’s always been calmer whenever you were around,” Bucky acknowledged absently, almost to himself, but then gave Tony his full attention when he realized the other man was blinking at him in confusion.

“…What do you mean ‘finally quiet now’?”

“I mean he’s finally not beating against the inside of my skull, trying to convince me to go kill all of Hydra or whatever it is he wants to do.”

Tony frowned, still not understanding. “You mean, he’s always around? Not just when the triggers are activated?”

“Well, yeah. Ever since Romania. He’s like this dark thing at the back of my head.”

He watched Tony let out a frustrated, defeated groan and drop his head against the wall, although he pulled away immediately with a quiet, pained ow. He must’ve hit the same injured spot from when the Soldier slammed him against the wall, Bucky realized, and he let out his own sympathetic hiss, about to reach out to cradle’s Tony’s poor head in his hand. But he caught himself just in time and just let Tony rub his own hand against the sore spot.

“I’m sorry I— the Soldier— dammit it. I’m sorry we hurt you.” God, there were too many people living in his head.

“It’s okay, I fly around in a tin can, this isn’t my first concussion,” Tony brushed off the apology with a smile and then sighed. “I’m not sure if it would’ve made a difference, but I probably should’ve been aware that the Soldier was a constant presence in your head.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“Nah. It’s my bad, not yours.” This time, Tony rested his head gently against the wall. “Maybe this is why an engineer shouldn’t be dabbling in psychiatry. Hey, Fri?” He called out, “Please schedule a
time for me and Dr. Jekyll over here to sit down and go over *everything* that’s going on in his head.” With a look over at Bucky, he added “Probably a good idea before we continue the rest of your therapy.”

“Probably,” Bucky acknowledged, but he wanted to get back to his earlier point. “My issues don’t make you any less crazy though. Why do you feel the need to risk your life like that all the time?” He couldn’t help the note of incredulity in his voice.

Tony just smiled back at him, unperturbed. “Not sure if I have an answer, but at least now you and Rhodey finally have something in common. Your complete disbelief and exasperation in the face of my admittedly questionable antics.”

“So— so if I ask you never to do what you did again? Would that be entirely pointless?”

Tony sighed, more contrite now. “I’m not sure this old dog can learn a new trick. I just— I did what I thought was right and I don’t know if I can promise that I won’t do it again.” Before Bucky could say anything though, Tony gave him a look that was so full of guilt and sorrow that any words Bucky had were stuck in his throat. “But I also know better than anyone that good intentions don’t mean shit when someone ends up getting hurt. So I *am* sorry that instead of helping you like I’m supposed to, I just seem to keep hurting you.” The next part was barely a whisper. “And I’m sorry that I broke your trust.”

In the face of that regret and sadness, Bucky realized that his anger was almost all gone and instead what he really wanted to do was just comfort the man. To reach out and smooth out the wrinkles that formed between Tony’s brows as the man frowned. He wanted to see if his touch could wipe away those dark shadows under the man’s eyes. But he had no right to do so.

Instead, he leaned just close enough that their shoulders now touched. “It’s okay. I do know that you didn’t do any of it to hurt me. I just—” How could he find the right words for this? “People just keep making these grand gestures for me… These *sacrifices*. And every time it happens, every time someone puts themselves on the line for me, I just— I feel like I have nothing to give in return for those grand gestures. I have nothing to give back and I wish people would just—”

Bucky stopped and looked over when he heard Tony let out a quiet hiss. “Yeah, about that… Do you have room for one more grand gesture? Like a little tiny one?”

Instead of clarifying in the face of Bucky’s confusion, Tony got up and grabbed something from his desk. It was his StarkPad and he tapped the glass screen a few times before settling back down next to Bucky, their shoulders again touching as Tony leaned against him. With the StarkPad on the floor between them, Bucky watched as blue light burst out of the device and coalesced into a hologram in front of them. It was a detailed schematic of—

Bucky’s breath got caught in his throat.

Tony must have interpreted his silence negatively because he fidgeted nervously next to him. “I don’t, uh— don’t plan to use any of the parts from the old one. Tossed that piece of scrap metal just like I promised. *Technological marvel*, my ass. This one, uh—” he gestured toward the hologram. “Completely brand new. I’m building this bad boy from scratch myself. Gonna be a one hundred percent Tony Stark original.”

Still at a complete loss for words, Bucky tentatively sat up and reached out to touch the hologram. He didn’t feel anything underneath his fingers, but the projection of light moved under his touch and he tilted it this way and that to see all the different angles.
“An arm?” he finally managed to croak out. He looked back at Tony, bewildered. “For me?”

Tony gave him that same tired smile. “Do you see another one-armed super soldier around here?”

Bucky looked back at the hologram and swallowed around the lump in his throat.

_I just think that the things Mr. Stark builds - it’s his way of showing people that he cares about them, you know?_

Peter’s words from earlier that day echoed through his mind and Bucky wasn’t sure how to deal with the sudden achingly sweet warmth that blossomed in his chest.

The arm in the schematic looked similar to the one he remembered, all metal plates moving in tandem, but he knew with certainty that this arm would be nothing like the old one. No, this one… It would be crafted with the hands of the same man who was already trying to put the pieces of Bucky Barnes back together.

Tony, the clever, brilliant, _crazy_ man who was already helping Bucky’s mind become whole was now also making his _body_ whole.

_My clever Tony Stark_ filtered through his mind as the Soldier stirred within him, and for once, Bucky didn’t push back, because the words carried with them a swell of undeniable affection tangled with gratitude and heat. He didn’t even care if some of that was the Soldier bleeding through. In that moment, there was no way he could feel anything else for the man next to him. He leaned back, making sure his shoulder was snug against Tony’s. He looked down at the man and realized that Tony still seemed nervous. Did he expect Bucky to reject this? To be unhappy with it? Because nothing could be further from the truth.

For a brief moment, he remembered Tony, flustered and uncomfortable when faced with Bucky’s genuine praise and gratitude, and he wondered once again what type of reactions Tony must have gotten in the past to make him act this way.

“I don’t know what to say, Tony, other than thank you. But— you don’t have to do this. Not for me. I mean, you already have so much on your plate, I can’t possibly expect you to work on this—”

“Well, maybe a little bit.”

“Okay, none of that now, super soldier,” Tony interrupted suddenly, although Bucky didn’t miss the touch of pink across his pale cheeks. “Listen, really, you’re doing _me_ a favor,” he gestured toward the hologram which still took Bucky’s breath away. “This— this is the kind of projects I live for. Okay? I feel giddy just thinking about getting my hands dirty and starting to build this baby up. This arm is going to be _badass._”

Tony wasn’t lying. There was genuine excitement in his eyes and another wave of affection flooded Bucky. For one brief moment, he wished that he could just pull the other man closer to him, embrace him, _something._

But it wasn’t his right. So instead, he just said a quiet _Thank you, Tony_ hoping that those simple words carried with them everything that he felt in that moment.

He let a few seconds of silence pass between them as they both observed the hologram. “Well, now I’m _really_ having a hard time being angry with you,” he finally said.

“In my defense,” Tony huffed out a breath of laughter, “I started working on this little beauty days after you arrived at the Compound. So I’m not just showing you this to get out of the dog house.” He paused for a beat. “Well, maybe a little bit.”
Bucky didn’t say anything, just watched as Tony’s smile suddenly turned mischievous. “You know,” the other man said, “I think I do know something you can do for me in return for this marvelous arm.”

“And what's that?”

“You can go get me a sandwich.”

“A sandwich?” Bucky had to repeat in disbelief, but he knew he was smiling too. “Do I look like Harley to you?”

“Well, with the way that kid refuses to get a haircut, yes, I’m starting to see a resemblance,” Tony raised his eyebrow at Bucky’s long hair for emphasis. “Now, go get your ex-assassin butt upstairs, make me the best damn sandwich you can manage, and then come back down and we’ll go over all the specs you want for your arm. We're gonna—” Tony’s next words were made less impactful by the big yawn that escaped him, “—gonna do some serious science down here.”

“You can barely stay awake, Tony. When was the last time you slept?”

“I’m fine. I don’t need sleep. But do you know what I need?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky finally stood back up and shook his head as he muttered to himself, “Really, a sandwich?”

Tony just laughed at him, still sitting on the floor. “Do I need to write it down for you, super soldier?”

Bucky didn’t rise to the bait and instead began to make his way through Tony’s lab. He had to stop half way and turn around though. “You are ridiculous, Tony Stark. Ridiculous and crazy.”

As Bucky turned back and continued walking, he heard Tony’s cheeky “You finally get my charm, Barnes!” follow him out of the lab.

***

“Tony?”

Calling out the man’s name didn’t prompt a response, so Bucky carefully made his way through the labyrinth of Tony’s lab, this time carrying with him a plate of sandwiches and fruit. When he made it over to Tony’s large desk however, he realized why the other man wasn’t responding.

Tony was fast asleep, head resting on his forearm as he was slumped over the glass surface. When Bucky came closer, making sure to soften his steps, he saw that the schematics of his arm, particularly the intricate details of the metal hand and myriad of specifications and data that went along with it, were projected right under Tony’s hand, as if the man dozed off half-way through pulling up the information.

Bucky placed the glass plate carefully onto the clear surface of the desk and then took a second to observe the other man. Under the blue lights of the lab, Tony still looked exhausted and pale, but the veil of sleep also made him look younger somehow. The features of his face appeared softer and the lines between his brows and in the corners of his eyes, carved by age and hardship, were less prominent. His lips were barely parted as he let out slow, even breaths.

And seeing Tony here, alone and asleep in the middle of his cavernous lab, wearing nothing more than his sleeveless shirt and old jeans, Bucky was reminded once again just how vulnerable and
the man actually was. It was very easy to forget sometimes that Tony Stark wasn’t in fact made of iron. He wasn’t enhanced in any way, the way Bucky and many of the other superheroes were. Tony wasn’t a super soldier or a trained spy. He didn’t even have formal military training. He was just a man who refused to stand down in the face of evil. Who went toe to toe with gods and monsters (and brainwashed assassins), using only his intelligence and wit.

He also knew that Tony Stark was the type of man who would bristle at the mere idea of needing someone to protect him, but Bucky couldn’t help his instincts even if he tried. Not with the Soldier practically *purring* in his mind at the sight of Tony like this.

He looked over the man again and when his attention was drawn back to the schematics of the arm projected under Tony’s sleeping form, a sudden, awful thought struck him. As his mind reflected back on what Peter inadvertently told him about the other Avengers, Bucky realized that Barton, Wilson, possibly even Steve… They all used the weapons that Tony built for them to fight against him in Germany. They used the weapons Tony built *with his own hands* to hurt him and his allies. And dammit, he knew that the fight at the airport was about him more than anything else, and he should feel the burden of this guilt more than anyone, but he also couldn’t help but feel so angry on Tony’s behalf all of the sudden. He couldn’t imagine what that kind of betrayal must have felt like.

And in that moment of clarity, he made a promise to himself. It didn’t matter what would happen between him and Tony in the future. Whether they would remain friends or allies, eventually part ways, or somehow end up on different sides of the battlefield (although Bucky couldn’t even imagine a scenario where that could ever be true again). It didn’t matter. He vowed to himself that he would never use what Tony built for him against the man.

That sweet, warm ache in his chest infused itself with the now ever-present sense of protectiveness that came from the Soldier and Bucky knew that this time, he wouldn’t be able to resist reaching out to touch Tony. So he let himself have this small moment. As gently as he could, he ran his thumb back and forth across the arch of Tony’s cheek, again wishing he could erase those dark shadows under his eyes, to erase all the burdens that weighted the man down. He watched Tony’s nose crunch up just a bit, barely a twitch, and then the man’s face smoothed out again in restful sleep. Bucky’s fingers carefully followed the planes of Tony’s face as he tucked a few stray curls behind his ear and then tenderly carded his fingers through his hair. Without whatever product Tony usually used, it was soft and silky and *god*, it felt amazing under Bucky’s hand. He wanted to keep running it through Tony’s hair, he wanted to trail his fingers down along the exposed column of the man’s neck, he wanted *more*—

He pulled away suddenly as if burned, heat warring with shame in his belly. God, what was wrong with him? He had no right to Tony and he shouldn’t have invaded his space like this. For a moment, he wanted to blame this on the Soldier’s influence, but he knew he’d only be lying to himself. His attraction to Tony wasn’t something new.

Swallowing hard, he tried to focus back on logistics of the situation in front of him instead. The way Tony fell asleep wouldn’t be comfortable for very long and likely leave the man with a sore back come morning.

“Ms. Friday,” he called out, trying to keep his voice as soft as possible, “do your protocols allow you to tell me the last time Tony actually slept?”

“They do now, yes,” she replied, thankfully observant enough to keep her own Irish lilt quiet and gentle. “Boss last slept approximately twenty seven hours ago, for three hours and thirty four minutes, before being woken up by night terrors.”

Bucky realized that Tony probably wouldn’t appreciate Friday sharing this information with him, but
he needed to know. For once, he wanted to be the one to take care of Tony.

“And before that?”

“Boss has slept on and off, for no more than four hours at a time.”

“Is this usual for him?”

“Unfortunately, Boss struggles with chronic insomnia due to frequent night terrors, but the insomnia has been particularly acute in these past five days.”

God, was this all because of me? Bucky thought guiltily. Was it the remorse over what Tony did keeping him awake? Or worse, was it the experience with the Soldier that left Tony shaken? But Bucky was perceptive enough to know when people were uncomfortable around him and Tony didn’t seem to shy away at all when they talked earlier. On the contrary, he had no problem sharing his personal space with Bucky.

So maybe it was the many other traumas the man lived through keeping him awake. It didn’t matter in the end, the poor man still deserved a restful sleep.

Not for the first time, Bucky wished he had both of his arms. Unfortunately, the only way he could carry Tony now was under his arm or over his shoulder and either way would jostle the man too much and wake him up. He frowned, trying to think of how to make the man more comfortable.

“If I may, Mr. Barnes?” Friday’s quiet voice pulled him from his thoughts and he looked up. “There is a couch approximately four yards to your left, behind the soldering station. Boss sleeps there frequently. He seems—” she hesitated for a second, “he seems to get the least rest in his own bed, so he often falls asleep here in the lab. I believe if you wake him now and direct him to the couch, he may have an easier time falling back asleep… and hopefully getting some rest.”

Despite her earlier coldness with Tony, there was tenderness in Friday’s voice now and Bucky felt happy that there was someone else worried about the man. Taking her advice, he carefully placed his hand on Tony’s shoulder, ignoring how nice and warm the man’s skin felt under his fingers, and tried to gently shake him awake.

“Tony? Wake up for me. It’s time to get up for a second.”

The man let out a soft groan as his eyes blinked awake slowly, lids still heavy with sleep. “Whazzatnow?” Tony slurred as he tried to raise himself up on his elbow, head still drooping. “Is it time for science already?”

“No, Tony,” Bucky couldn’t help his smile. “Science can wait, you need to sleep. Come on, get up, and I’ll take you to the couch.”

Despite the grogginess, Tony still somehow managed to give him a sleepy glare, even as he complied with the command and began to stand up. “Science waits for no one, James…”

Finally on his own two feet, Tony blinked up at him for a second and then promptly dropped his head onto Bucky’s chest, who froze at the movement, unsure of what to do with the half-asleep engineer suddenly leaning against him.

“So tired…” Tony mumbled out and then just rubbed his forehead against Bucky. “What are you super soldiers even made of? Marble?” he added in that same sleepy tone. “Swear to god, must be marble.”
“I’m— sorry?” was all Bucky could manage, too distracted by the energy it required to ignore his own desire to pull the man even closer to him.

“S’okay, I like marble,” Tony’s soft reply didn’t help Bucky at all, but he finally steeled himself, and with his hand on Tony’s shoulder, he tried to steer the man toward the couch. Thankfully, Tony was entirely compliant under his touch and when he finally saw the couch in front of him, the man didn’t need any more help to promptly collapse onto it and curl in on himself. There was a ratty old blanket nearby and Bucky grabbed it, draping it over Tony, who was already falling back asleep.

Finally satisfied that the man was comfortable, Bucky lowered himself onto the floor next to the couch so he would be eye-level with Tony. He watched the man blink his sleepy eyes at him a few times.

“I’m just gonna take a break for one tiny second,” Tony whispered, “and then— then we can do some science…” he trailed off, as he closed his eyes for the final time and let out one long breath, his whole body finally relaxing back into restful sleep.

Bucky remained where he was for a few minutes, letting himself take in every detail of the man in front on him and enjoy the peace surrounding them. Even the damn Soldier was quiet, satiated by the fact that the man he was so enamored with was safe and sound next to them. Or maybe it was Bucky himself who was comforted by Tony’s presence, he wasn’t sure anymore. In this moment, he didn’t particularly care enough to find the distinction.

A part of him wanted to stay here forever, in this quiet beautiful lab filled with Tony’s lovingly crafted creations. This sanctuary where everything seemed so much simpler and the rest of the world, with its nightmares and its pain, faded away.

However, Bucky was self-aware enough to realize that sitting here and watching Tony sleep all night ranked up there on the list of creepy things he probably shouldn’t be doing, so reluctantly, he stood up.

But as he took another look at the man, a memory from days ago raced through his mind. A soft press of lips against Tony’s forehead, a play at tenderness and affection, tainted with violence and fear…

The Soldier knew what Tony felt like underneath his lips, but Bucky didn’t, and it wasn’t fair. So before he allowed himself even a moment to think, he just kneeled carefully next to Tony, leaned over him, and following the siren call of that need inside him, softly pressed his lips to Tony’s temple. One, two, three beats, before he forced himself to pull away.

Tony slept on, lost to the world around him.

Ignoring the heat in his belly and the ache in his chest, Bucky stood up again and finally walked away. The sense of emptiness and cold he felt replacing the warmth inside him as soon as he stepped over the threshold of the lab didn’t surprise him at all.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky, bb, just do all those things while Tony's awake, I promise he'll purr like a kitten. Oh man, if you guys thought all the angst was bad, just wait until we get to all the unresolved sexual tension between these two. I plan to abuse this particular trope
unapologetically. ;)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Remember how this is a very pro-Tony fic and not a very Team Cap friendly one (or SHIELD friendly for that matter)? It's because of chapters like this one. ;) I know some of you have been waiting for this.

Also, side-note, but I'm just playing fast and loose with *all* the science. BARF, triggers, the arm. I'm not a scientist (I just write one in a fanfic), but I do hope nothing sounds too egregious. And there's definitely some "make the science fit the plot" going on, whoops. But as my excuse goes, if Marvel can do it, so can I!

Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The soft mechanical *whir* was barely audible as the leg braces adjusted themselves to compensate for Rhodey’s long strides as he briskly walked through the hallway of the Compound. He tapped the glass of his StarkPad a few times, getting a particular sense of satisfaction as he tapped the green “Send” button, finally done with the email he was rereading as he walked. Debriefs after any mission were always a pain in the ass, but at least he didn’t have to be physically present for this one.

Rhodey stopped short when he rounded the corner and entered the kitchen, his eyes narrowing a fraction. There was a super soldier sitting in his favorite seat.

He observed Barnes for a second and noted that the man basically looked like the human equivalent of a rubber band about to snap. Barnes was tapping his foot anxiously against the floor, a fast staccato that matched the equally nervous movement of his fingers as they twirled what looked like a small switchblade. *Where the hell did he even get that?*

For a moment, Rhodey contemplated whether he wanted to say anything.

Technically, every chair in the kitchen was identical, but Rhodey’s chair had a better view of the terrace outside, and it didn’t have a weird wobble, and dammit, it just *felt* right. Rhodey was a man of habit and that was his damn chair. But was it really worth the possibility of getting stabbed by a fidgety, on-edge super soldier?

*Yes. Yes, it was.*

So he took a few steps forward and stopped with his arms crossed in front of Barnes.

“You’re in my chair.”

Barnes didn’t look up at him. Rhodey watched the man’s jaw clench as both his hand and foot continued the anxious motions. That damn knife was making Rhodey nervous too.

“That wasn’t just me stating a fact, Barnes. So how about you move?”

“And how about you go straight to hell?”
Rhodey wanted to roll his eyes at the muttered words, but instead he kept his expression neutral and just began a mental count. He got to three when, as he expected, he saw Barnes’ shoulders slump and the man’s face contort with blossoming guilt.

“You wanna run that by me one more time, Sergeant?”

Barnes was already moving out of the seat and into the one next to it. “I apologize. I— shouldn’t have said that.”

“Damn straight,” Rhodey agreed and sat in his chair, moving it back a bit to give his legs room to stretch as he leaned back. Barnes was hunched over the table in his new seat, elbow on table as he now nervously ran his hand through his hair. Thankfully, he abandoned the switchblade when he moved.

“Therapy going that well, huh?” Rhodey asked, although he already knew the answer. The other man just gave him a noncommittal grunt. “It’s gotta be going spectacular, based on what I’ve been hearing. I mean, snapping at me, I understand. We’re supposed to hate each other, right? But come on, man, you snapped at Parker the other day?”

Oh, Barnes definitely looked guilty now as he just dropped his head on his forearm and hid his face with a pained groan. Good. Rhodey wasn’t here to coddle him.

“Should we get a puppy for you to kick next?”

“I apologized to him right away,” Barnes mumbled into the crook of his elbow. “He— he just kept asking over and over whether I wanted to spend time with him and—”

“Yeah, the kid’s overeager. I get it. But luckily for you, he also doesn’t have a bad bone in his body, so he probably already forgave you for yelling at him.”

“God, that poor kid apologized to me and then just told me to come find him when I felt better.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Parker alright. And you know what? You must be one lucky son of a bitch, because I’m feeling like a nice guy today too. So I’ll let this little incident slide. But think twice before snapping at me the next time, Sergeant.”

Finally, the man had the good graces to look him in the eyes and nod. “Yes, sir.”

Rhodey took another second to observe the man and then let out a sigh. “You look like hell, Barnes.”

“Feel like hell, sir.”

“Yeah, pretty sure the entire Compound is well aware of that. I thought Tony said you can take it slow with viewing all your memories.”

“Yes, but he also said that it wouldn’t hinder the therapy if I watched them more frequently.”

“Great,” Rhodey grimaced, “so you’re purposefully putting yourself through hell by watching all your gruesome memories of Hydra— memories, by the way, that no sane person should even see once, but you’re watching over and over, sometimes dozens of times. All because you’re impatient. And then the rest of us get to deal with your terrific mood.”

Barnes sat up and fidgeted in his seat, obviously still guilty. “I just want to get better,” he whispered.
The man in front of him painted one hell of a sad, dejected picture and even Rhodey couldn’t keep up the hard-ass routine for much longer. He surveyed the man once more, taking in the pale skin, the dark circles under his eyes, and the strained, tense way he held himself.

Rhodey mentally groaned at what he was about to say next. While he would never admit this to Tony, there was a slight possibility that he was actually a bit of a mother hen.

“When was the last time you even ate?”

Barnes just looked at him and—oh good, he and Tony even had the same facial expressions. Just like this confused I have no clue what you’re talking about look, as if food was some foreign new concept they were hearing about for the first time.

Finally the man managed a response. “Uh— not sure. Haven’t really been hungry lately.”

“Yeah, the super soldier with the metabolism of a hummingbird, not hungry. Sure.” When Barnes just gave a despondent shrug, Rhodey couldn’t stop the actual, physical eye roll this time. He looked to the heavens, muttered a “God save me from stubborn idiots,” and got up to see what leftovers were in the fridge.

“Well, looks like there’s plenty of Thai from yesterday, so I guess you’re eating that,” he commented over his shoulder and grabbed the heavy white takeout container. Something resembling noodles, he noted as he opened it. Good enough.

As he made his way over the microwave, Barnes was already attempting to protest. “You really don’t have to do that, I can—”

“What did I say about me being a nice guy today, hmm? It happens very rarely. It’s like a— like a solar eclipse. Appreciate it.”

With a quiet yes, sir, Barnes went back to staring at his fingers, which began to tap out a nervous staccato against the glass surface now that they no longer had a knife to occupy them. Rhodey stuck the food into the microwave and while that warmed up, poured himself a cup of coffee. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

Barnes had been getting progressively worse ever since he started his therapy in earnest about a week ago and frankly, given what the man had to do, it wasn’t surprising. Rhodey knew that if he had to sit there and watch his worst memories over and over, he’d be crawling out of his skin too.

Tony took about two weeks after they activated the triggers to go over the data collected in an attempt to figure out the game plan for Barnes’ therapy. Thankfully that whole debacle wasn’t a waste of time because Tony finally ended up cracking the code.

Rhodey sat through multiple explanations of Tony’s plan, usually over coffee or dinner, as he listened to his friend talk in that same excited manner he approached all of his new projects. Some of what Tony tried to explain did make sense. The rest of it didn’t. Rhodey was a damn rocket scientist, not a neurosurgeon and while neither was Tony, that man did have a knack for picking up new specialities overnight.

Although apparently, Tony did also end up reaching out to some of the best and brightest in neuroscience and psychiatry, most of whom he already knew after he spent months collaborating with them on the initial version of the Retro Framing system. Barnes was only referred to as John Doe in these consultations, but apparently poor Tony got more incredulity than help from them anyways. Apparently even the best of the best were stumped by Barnes’ unique brain structure. No
surprise there.

Using all the data Tony pulled from Barnes and combining that with the recommendations from his colleagues, Tony was finally able to write the necessary algorithms needed to modify Barnes’ memories - everything from the Soldier training, to however the hell they implanted the triggers into his head (mostly via torture apparently, *fucking Hydra*), to the actual crimes Barnes was forced to commit under Hydra’s control.

The modifications to the memories were subtle enough that Barnes would not even notice the changes as he rewatched the memories. According to Tony, it would be the subconscious part of the brain that would pick up on these subtle tweaks and begin the process of disassociating those memories from the physical responses they prompted in Barnes.

Frankly, it all sounded like some sci-fi nonsense to Rhodey, but then he would remember that he flew a mechanical suit of armor while battling fire-breathing jackasses and bug-themed idiots who grew ginormous, so he just accepted that this was his life now.

Before Barnes could dive into his memories however, they all had to make sure the Winter Soldier wouldn’t be making a comeback. Surprisingly, both Rhodey and Barnes were adamant that someone in addition to Tony be involved in working out the details of the therapy. Given that Tony’s primary issue had always been giving Barnes privacy and autonomy, Tony had no choice but to agree (either way, he would’ve been overruled two to one).

The first major issue was making sure that the memories of the triggers themselves wouldn’t actually activate the Winter Soldier. Despite Tony’s very loud protests, Barnes voluntarily went back into that room and was once again strapped into the chair, this time with Rhodey present. They projected a memory of another Hydra programming session that Tony modified with his algorithms and they all listened to the Hydra goons say the triggers as they tortured Barnes.

God, watching that was hell. Rhodey had to admit to himself that after witnessing just a fraction of what Hydra did to the man, it was harder to remain entirely cold and unaffected. Tony’s change in behavior when it came to Barnes made more sense now, given that he already had a taste of this horror.

Barnes himself suspected that the memory wouldn’t activate the triggers, and surprisingly, he was right. Apparently the words had to be said by a physical presence - they even tested the theory by having Friday say the words, which resulted in the same, sane, non-homicidal Barnes giving them an I don’t get it either shrug, still in his restraints.

Tony’s rants of *this makes no sense, sound waves are sound waves, Rhodey! Hydra science is bullshit, this is worse than magic!* were amusing to watch, but thankfully, this also meant that Barnes could view these memories without going full sociopath, which in turn meant that he could begin the process of disassociating the triggers.

Then Barnes spent the first official day of therapy alone in a small private room down in the basement, trying to recall every relevant memory of Hydra, while Friday and Tony recorded and catalogued them. Then came the modifications based on the algorithms. The tweaks to the memories served both to build the desired disassociations and to prevent the man from being sucked into the memories and losing touch with reality.

The hard part came next, unfortunately. Now that the projections of the memories were ready with the proper modifiers, Barnes had to view these memories over and over. Tony still monitored the results of Barnes’ physiology to ensure that the results were headed in the right direction, but Barnes viewed the memories in private, now that both Tony and Rhodey were comfortable that he wouldn’t
slip back into them.

And despite Tony’s advice, the man had his mind set on binge watching all of Hydra’s greatest hits, leaving the rest of them to deal with him acting like a damn moody teenager. No, scratch that, they had actual moody teenagers living at the Compound. Barnes was far worse.

The microwave announced that the food was ready with a loud beep and Rhodey dropped the container unceremoniously in front of Barnes (he even got him a fork, because Rhodey was a super nice guy today), and by the time he sat back down in his chair, Barnes was already digging into the food with something resembling gusto.

Yeah, that’s what I thought. Not hungry, my ass. He’s as bad as Tony, I swear. God, these two idiots are made for each other, aren’t they?

He let the man have a few minutes to eat as Rhodey himself enjoyed the familiar soothing bitterness of his black coffee. It gave him the time to marvel at this situation because frankly, if someone had told him even a month ago that he would be sitting here with the damn Winter Soldier and making sure the man ate— well, he’d tell that person to go straight to hell with that nonsense.

But life had a weird way of working out and leave it to Tony to create some nice bonding experiences for them. Rhodey thought back to the Soldier debacle.

I could have killed you!

He remembered how odd it felt, hearing those words from Barnes and realizing they carried in them the same desperation, anger, fear that Rhodey himself felt in that moment. It left him feeling off-balance, to share that strange moment of solidarity with Barnes, but he mostly brushed it off.

Then, Rhodey had to get involved with the actual therapy and hell, no one was cold-hearted enough not to feel some sort of sympathy after watching the nightmares Barnes lived through.

However, before the whole therapy business even began, probably a few days after Barnes and Tony reconciled (and Rhodey and Tony reconciled, because dammit, he loved that man too much and giving him the silent treatment for five days probably hurt Rhodey more than it did Tony), Barnes found his own way to endear himself to Rhodey just a little bit further.

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“Friday, can you pull up the itinerary for the Summit? I know I have to present sometime midday, but I’d really like to make it to Dr. Cameron’s lecture.”

“Of course, Colonel. The schedule is on your computer. The Cameron lecture is at—”

“Mute for a sec, Friday.” Rhodey halted the conversation when he saw Barnes standing at the entrance of his office. Rhodey usually kept his door open while he worked, in case anyone in the Compound needed to see him. Apparently today, someone did.

He mentally groaned. Did it really have to be Barnes?

“Can I help you with something, Sergeant?”

The man seemed hesitant, but he steeled himself as he took a few steps into the office. “May I speak with you for a few minutes?”

Dammit. Rhodey hoped this would be a quick thing. He wanted to say no, but he did promise Tony
that he’d play nice with the resident super soldier, so instead he just gestured toward the open seat on the other side of his desk.

Once Barnes sat down, he squared his shoulders and looked straight at him. “I want you to tell me about Tony.”

Rhodey just raised an eyebrow at him. “Okay…” he made a point to stretch the word out. “Well, his blood type is O+, he’s a Gemini, and one time at a gala event, he got so drunk that instead of giving his speech, he tried to karaoke ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ and I had to drag him off the stage as he bellowed Turn around, bright eyes.”

By the disgruntled look on Barnes’ face, Rhodey guessed that wasn’t quite the information the man was looking for.

When Barnes quietly told him exactly that, there was no way Rhodey could stop his eye roll. “Then be specific, Barnes. I’m not a goddamn mind reader.”

Barnes took a second to think. “I want to know more about Tony and the other Avengers. What their relationships were like, how— how they treated him. I heard a lot about Tony from them,” he paused for a second and grimaced, “probably a lot more than I needed. So now I want to hear about him from someone else.”

“I hope you don’t expect me to give you some neutral, objective picture of the last several years.”

“No, that’s not what I’m looking for,” Barnes replied, shaking his head. “On the contrary, I’m talking to you for a reason. I know the others gave me a biased picture of him and frankly, not a very flattering one. I’m also learning very quickly that it wasn’t a particularly accurate one either. So I think it’s only fair that now I hear from someone who has always been on Tony’s side. Out of all the people here, that’s you, Colonel.” Barnes shrugged. “And maybe, somewhere in the middle of all that, I’ll find that neutral, objective picture.”

Rhodey contemplated the man for a second. He still didn’t trust Barnes, probably never would completely, but then he thought back to Barnes’ desperately shouted words, to that one moment when their biggest shared fear was losing Tony, and decided that maybe the man deserved a chance. Just one though.

Besides, this particular conversation wasn’t going to be much of a burden. After all, Rhodey had been dying for someone to ask him about how the assholes of the decade treated his best friend.

So he talked. He told Barnes about how SHIELD first forced their way into Tony’s life. How Agent Phil Coulson threatened to taser Tony (a man with a goddamn electromagnet in his chest) while they dared to invade Tony’s home, keep him there against his will, and fuck with his property (Tony was livid that they shut down JARVIS and he spent days making sure those security flaws were never exploited again). Rhodey also mentioned how SHIELD injected Tony with the lithium dioxide without his consent and he thoroughly enjoyed Barnes’ displeased scowl, given that this was a man who knew all about one’s bodily autonomy being violated.

He told the story of how Tony first met Romanoff— no, no, Natalie Rushman— when she was undercover and lying her ass off to him, so she could monitor him for SHIELD (egging him on as the man was dying and spiraling out of control). Certainly, that colored the rest of their relationship and it honestly wasn’t such a big surprise that in the end, Romanoff turned her back on Tony and sided with Rogers. She never believed that Tony was worth her time.

Iron Man - Yes
Rhodey still wasn’t sure whether SHIELD gave that assessment as an attempt to play on Tony’s insecurities or whether they were really so blind as to not realize that the only thing that made Iron Man great was the man inside the suit.

While he wasn’t present for the Battle of New York, Rhodey later heard all about it from Tony (and even more so from JARVIS) and he passed some of those details onto Barnes now. How Steve Rogers, after knowing Tony for all of two seconds, decided that the man was nothing without his suit, that Tony wasn’t the guy to make the sacrifice play. That he knew guys with none of that worth ten of you. It was interesting watching Barnes, as the man came to the same realization as Rhodey did looking back on those words now - that Rogers must have been thinking of Barnes himself when he said that to Tony. Life sure did have a way with irony though, given that now it was Tony who was saving Rogers’ precious best friend.

He made sure to point out that Rogers was wrong. Tony was willing to die to save New York and to stop the invasion. He would’ve died if it weren’t for the Hulk and yes, Rhodey also made a point to mention that it was Tony’s treatment of Banner—acting like every part of Banner mattered to Tony, man and monster— that endeared the Hulk to him in the end.

Bruce Banner was far lower on Rhodey’s shit list than the rest of them. He left Tony too, but at least he had an excuse. After what happened in Johannesburg, the man couldn’t even stand to be in the same building as the witch and Rhodey could understand that, given that it was the same reason that ultimately forced Tony to leave his own Compound too.

Rhodey didn’t tell Barnes any of that, however, because he refused to even mentioned the witch’s name. Not here, not in the new, rebuilt Compound that no longer held traces of her temper tantrum. A story for another day, perhaps. Maybe someday Barnes would hear about what his best friend’s pet witch did to both Banner and Tony.

Instead, without bothering to hide the resentment in his voice, Rhodey told Barnes that after the Battle of New York, SHIELD still treated Tony as nothing more than a consultant - one who, by the way, was being severely underpaid. Forget about any profit margin, they were paying Tony below cost (if they paid at all) and any sane businessman would’ve called bullshit on that long ago. But Tony didn’t. Because he saw this as his chance to do more - to help protect the world on a scale bigger than what Iron Man alone was capable of.

And in part, it was also because Tony desperately wanted to see the Avengers as his family. Rhodey kept this part to himself as well, but Tony’s insecurities were the biggest reason why the Avengers were able to take advantage of him for so long. Because behind all that self-confident, downright arrogant bluster, behind that charming smirk and that swagger, Tony was just a lonely broken man, struggling with trauma and a slew of self-doubt, who desperately wanted to have people in his life who trusted him, who loved him (even though he would then always try to push them away as he inevitably self-destructed).

It hurt sometimes, knowing that Rhodey’s friendship wasn’t enough, but he never begrudged Tony his relationship with the Avengers. Tony deserved more than just one friend. Hell, Tony deserved all the friends in the world.

Unfortunately, Tony always had shit luck with the people he decided to trust.

He explained how excited Tony was, planning and building customized suites at Stark Tower— no, Avengers Tower— for all the Avengers after the Battle of New York. Rhodey made a point to tell Barnes how much care and effort (and money!) Tony put in, trying to build a place that these people
could call home.

And how, in return, they all acted like everything that Tony gave them was nothing more than him paying his dues for being part of the super secret boy band. After all, he was a billionaire with more money than god, right? Housing and paying for the Avengers, providing them with cutting edge tech, cleaning up after all their messes - it was the least he could do.

In some ways, Rhodey had to admit he was partly to blame for everything that happened to Tony in the past few years because he let Tony and him drift apart during that time. Rhodey was busy with his own career and trying to decide what he wanted to do next with his life and Tony seemed so busy with his new Avengers family that Rhodey just let him be and they didn’t see each other as often as they should have.

But they’d still have frequent phone calls and while Tony never actually complained outright, Rhodey would watch his best friend — exhausted, sleep deprived, sometimes still injured from a battle — still working away on his endless list of projects for Stark Industries, for SHIELD and for the Avengers.

He remembered the offhanded comments and jokes Tony would always make.

“Cap gave me an earful again today about ‘falling in line’. He was probably right, I made a bad call. And, he’s the boss, right? I just pay for everything. And design everything. And make everyone look cooler. Well, except for you, Honey Bear. I can’t work miracles.”

“Hey, don’t look at me like that, Rhodey. I don’t need to be in medical, okay? This isn’t my first bump on the head. I was just a little out of it, didn’t pay attention to where I was flying. Hard to focus when you’re seeing space portals everywhere…”

“I swear, if Clint bitches about his arrows one more time— you know, I should sneak a dud in there. What do you think, Rhodey Bear? Maybe an arrow that just explodes into pink glitter?”

“I’ve just been— fuck, I’ve been exhausted, Rhodey. Pepper wants to move the launch of the new StarkPhone up by two months. Fury’s on my ass about that upgrade for the Hellicarrier. Frankly, I don’t think what he wants is feasible under the current laws of physics, but apparently I’m supposed to have it done by next week.”

“Rhodey, you need to come visit soon. I just— I need— poor Dum-E needs company. No one likes him here at the Compound and he’s been getting fidgety. You need to come by before he decides to focus all of his robotic neediness on me.”

Rhodey could read between the lines. Tony was exhausted, lonely, suffering from PTSD. And the others either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Rhodey wasn’t sure which option was worse.

And even though Tony never said this out loud either, Rhodey knew that every time Tony had to make weapons for one of his Avenger buddies, another small piece of the man’s heart broke because he promised himself he would never make weapons again. But this was for the greater good. He was putting these weapons into the hands of the people he trusted, so it was okay if another part of Tony withered away under the guilt. Of course, none of the Avengers ever bothered to even acknowledge it.

Tony gave all of himself away to others. His home, his money, his resources. The man gave these people his trust and his friendship. All he got in return was mistrust and subtle, but constant reminders that he would never be good enough to measure up to the rest of the shining heroes (which really meant he would never be good enough to measure up to Rogers).
Every scrap of affection and acknowledgement Tony ever received from them, he had to earn. But god forbid if Tony ever made a mistake, because then he was raked over the coals for it (and sometimes, it didn’t even have to be Tony's mistake for him to take the blame). Because Tony Stark was nothing more than a narcissist with an ego problem who didn’t play well with others. He didn’t deserve any more than what he got.

He didn’t even deserve to know the truth. Rhodey looked Barnes straight in the eyes because he wanted to see the guilt when he told him about Rogers blaming Tony for Ultron (conveniently forgetting about both Banner and the witch), calling him out for teammates keeping things from him, when at the same time, he already knew about the fact that Barnes was the one who killed Tony’s parents.

Some stellar teammates indeed.

And Rhodey knew, better than anyone, that Tony was not a perfect man. He was flawed, just like the rest of them. He made mistakes, he lashed out, he pushed people away. But Rhodey was also certain that the other rogue Avengers told Barnes about every single one of Tony’s flaws, ad nauseam, so it was only fair that Rhodey focus on Tony’s better qualities. So he did. He emphasized the man’s generosity and his sense of protectiveness over his newfound family. The fact that the man felt guilt and responsibility more deeply than anyone Rhodey had ever met. The fact that this was a man who spent a good part of the last decade trying to atone. To find some form of absolution for his own mistakes (and the mistakes of so many others who let Tony take the fall for them).

Rhodey had so much more to say, but he had to stop himself when he realized it had been over an hour since Barnes entered his office. The man’s reaction to Rhodey’s words—well, frankly, it surprised him. Aside from a few clarifying questions, the man just sat there and listened. Honestly, Rhodey expected him to jump to the others’ defense, particularly when Rhodey spoke about Rogers and his treatment of Tony. But Barnes didn’t say anything, not even a token protest to defend his best friend’s honor.

Rhodey hoped that maybe this meant there was hope for Barnes after all.

Because Rhodey wasn’t an idiot. He could see the way Tony looked at the man. Tony was already half-way to giving everything he had to Barnes, the same way he did with the Avengers. He already gave the man a new home. He offered his help, as well as his vast resources and technology. And Rhodey knew about the plans for the new arm too (oh yes, Tony and him still needed to discuss that potential safety hazard). Already, Tony’s friendship, trust, and growing affections were being offered to Barnes on a silver platter.

Rhodey wished that none of it was happening because frankly, he was scared that history would just repeat itself. That Barnes would take everything from Tony, drain him dry for all the things Tony offered so freely and then he’d leave. Once Tony was no longer useful, he’d leave him in the dust while he ran back into Steve Rogers’ waiting arms.

Rhodey dreaded that moment with every part of his being, but there wasn’t much he could do to stop it. All he could do was stay at Tony’s side, and just like last time, help the man pick up the pieces of his shattered heart. At least this time, he’d have Harley and Parker, and the others who now made this Compound their home, to help him put Tony back together.

“So, did you find any of that neutral, objective truth you were looking for?” Rhodey finally asked, as Barnes leaned back in his seat, observing his hand as it absently twirled a pen.

The man gave a tired huff of laughter after a moment’s thought. “I’m realizing that maybe the only truth in all of this is that there is no objective truth.” He finally looked up at Rhodey. “But there are
some things I am sure of now. Tony Stark is a good man. And you were right the first time we spoke,” Barnes said as he got out of his seat, “he’s a better person than either one of us deserves.”

Without another word, Barnes just gave him a tight smile, inclined his head as a silent form of thanks, and walked out of the office.

Rhodey watched the man leave and desperately hoped that this time, things would turn out differently.

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Rhodey shook the memory off as he took another sip of his coffee. Barnes was half way through his food and eating it at a more sedate pace now. The man glanced at Rhodey for a second, seemingly hesitant, but then just looked back down at his food.

“If you want to ask something, just do so. Remember, I don’t read minds.”

Barnes just nodded, distractedly picking at the noodles on his plate. “Has— has Tony been doing alright?”

“Don’t you see the guy like every day?” Rhodey frowned, “The two of you go over your therapy results daily, right?”

“Yeah, we do,” Barnes nodded, but then developed a frown of his own, although this one was more regretful than anything else. “But I try to limit my time around him.” Now Barnes looked downright sad. “The way I am right now, just being so goddamn on edge all the time… The last thing I want is me losing my cool and snapping at him. He doesn’t deserve that, not after everything he’s already done for me.”

Huh. Well, that explained why Tony had been moping around lately too. Apparently his favorite pet project was actively avoiding him.

“Well, as far as I know, Tony’s fine. Keeping himself busy with your therapy, plus last I heard, Stark Industries is working on a big project in Asia, so Tony’s probably got his hands full with that too.”

When Barnes just nodded and then dejectedly continued picking at the food in front of him, Rhodey heaved a sigh. “You really should take Tony’s advice and just take it easy. You’re not going to get better overnight, Barnes.”

Hell, he may never completely get better, period. One didn’t just get better after the kind of trauma Barnes went through. Whether it was physical or mental, some wounds never healed completely and all anyone could do was learn to cope with them. But it wasn’t Rhodey’s place to say any of that. He wasn’t Barnes’ damn therapist.

Instead, he just said “Now, I’m not your mother, so don’t listen to me if you don’t want to, I don’t care. But running yourself into the ground isn’t helping anyone. You’re just making yourself miserable. You have time, Barnes. Use it.”

“I know that, I do,” the other man nodded and looked at Rhodey with those damn sad, tired eyes. “But I just— I need to get Hydra out of my head. I want to finally live my own damn life. I just— I just want to be free.”

Rhodey tensed at those words, but it was obvious Barnes didn’t even realize he was echoing the Asset’s sentiment. Not for the first time, Rhodey wondered just how much separated the hesitant, tired, guilt-ridden man sitting in front of him from the sociopathic killer who attacked Tony. He...
swallowed hard and tried to push the thought away. Hopefully the therapy would deal with this very issue as well.

Apparently done with the conversation, Barnes slowly stood up and took the remainder of his food back to the fridge. Rhodey watched him hesitate for a moment, before finding whatever words he was looking for.

“I’m sorry again that I snapped at you. I’ll try to— I’ll try to avoid everyone while I’m going through this. These are my issues, no one else here should be dealing with them. But it’ll be over soon enough and then— then everything will be fine.”

With a shaky nod, as if trying to convince himself, Barnes turned on his heel and left. Whether back to his quarters or to his memory viewing room in the basement, Rhodey wasn’t sure.

He took another sip of his coffee, then grimaced, realizing that he let it get lukewarm. Walking over to the sink, he dumped the remains down the drain and then leaned against the counter. God, he hoped this whole therapy business would be over soon. And he sure as hell hoped Barnes’ insistence on getting through seventy years of hell in a month’s worth of time wasn’t going to blow up in all of their faces.

Rhodey heaved a sigh. He just wanted his damn Compound back to normal.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Rhodey! (also, poor Bucky!, but I feel like that's just implied at this point)

I hope you enjoyed my ode to Tony Stark, told through our favorite BAMF Big Brother Rhodey. Did I stretch the canon a bit? Maaaaybe. Do I regret it? Noooope.

But man, Rhodey, come on, would it have killed ya to tell Bucky about Wanda's shenanigans too? I bet the Soldier would've had a thing or two to say about that!
Chapter 15

I've given up trying to manage the length of these chapters, so I just hope you guys don't mind the super long ones, haha. Also, minor original character alert because unfortunately, MCU doesn't have a whole lot of mental health practitioners in their roster, so I had to improvise.

Also also, necessary disclaimer is necessary: this is fanfic about superheroes and hand wavey science and brainwashed assassins and there's no way it will ever do justice to a topic as complex and nuanced as mental health. So nothing I write is meant to make light of what is a very complicated issue in real life (really, this applies to everything in the fic).

With that said, onto the next chapter!

The door behind him slammed harder than he anticipated and Bucky flinched at the sudden loud noise. Taking a breath, he looked around his quarters. He thought briefly about getting into the shower as his gaze passed over the bathroom, but instead, he just let himself collapse onto his bed with a sigh. He knew he should be doing anything but this, letting himself lie here and wallow, but there was no energy left in him for anything else.

Three weeks of therapy behind him and today felt more like that first rough week. Unfortunate, given that the last two weeks proved to be dramatically different from the first.

Ever since Tony began working out the algorithms, the man came to the conclusion that they were going to need someone else involved in the process - someone who actually had more relevant experience in dealing with a victim of severe trauma than a genius engineer (but an engineer nonetheless). He told Bucky as much, who reluctantly agreed, but he didn’t believe Tony would ever find anyone, given their rather restrictive criteria.

They needed someone who was competent enough to handle Bucky’s complicated case, trustworthy enough not spill any of this information to the press (or worse, one of Avengers’ many enemies), and actually willing enough to deal with this whole unsavory situation.

However, this particular Venn diagram did finally come together in the form of one Doctor Fatima Vance, who arrived at the Compound at the tail end of the first week.

According to Tony, she was well respected in her field and she was one of his collaborators on the original BARF system. More importantly, unlike some of Tony’s other collaborators who focused primarily on theory or research, she had spent most of her career as an actual practicing therapist and was one of the first to use Tony’s BARF system in her own practice.

The first time Bucky met her, he noted that she struck an intimidating figure, despite being dressed in a simple conservative dress and heels. He guessed that she must have been older than both Tony and the Colonel, but her shrewd, clever eyes and the confident, graceful way she carried herself, with her beautiful black curls bouncing on each measured step, hid her age well. As Bucky quickly learned,
all of that matched her tough, no-nonsense attitude.

She took all but one look at him, noting how tense and exhausted he was, and proceeded to admonish Tony right on the spot.

“You begged me to be a part of this, Dr. Stark, despite my initial reluctance. And yet, I arrive here only to find out you already started the Retro Framing sessions without any sort of sign-off from me?”

Tony had the decency to look properly chastised. “I understand, Fatima, but James and I didn’t want to waste time—”

“By the look of the poor man, I say that’s exactly what you’ve been doing this past week.”

Bucky felt the need to defend Tony. “Dr. Vance, I was the one who insisted on getting through as many memories as I could—”

God, how could a single glare from the woman stop him in his tracks like that? Bucky had a suspicion it was because her eyes matched the distant, faded memory of his mother’s.

“Mr. Barnes, I understand your desire to expedite your therapy. However, under the terms of the pardon, you are a ward of Dr. Stark and he is ultimately the one responsible for your well-being. And while I am all for properly informed patients who have autonomy in their treatment, you have zero medical experience and it is up to us,” she gestured between herself and Tony, “to decide what the best course of action is. Well,” she paused, giving Tony a scrutinizing look, “really, it’s up to me, because as brilliant as you are, Dr. Stark, this is not your field of expertise.”

Before Tony could say anything in protest, she silenced him with a simple hand gesture. Apparently she had the same effect on Tony as she did on Bucky. “I will be the first to admit that I myself am woefully out of my depth when it comes to this superhero, super villain, magic and monsters deal. And I will defer to your expertise when it comes to the Retro Framing therapy and the deprogramming of these brainwashing triggers. However, it would do no good for Mr. Barnes to finally be free of the triggers, only to find himself in a catatonic state because he needlessly tortured himself with his own memories.”

Tony let out a weary sigh and gave Dr. Vance an apologetic look. “You’re absolutely right, Fatima. James is my responsibility and I will fully admit I dropped the ball on this.”

Dr. Vance’s expression softened a bit in the face of Tony’s genuine sentiment. She sighed. “Well, at least you’re smart enough to know when you’re wrong,” she admitted and Tony’s expression turned into his more mischievous, flirty smile.

“See, this is exactly why I’ve missed working with you. As always, you keep me humble, Fatima. It’s good to be reminded that sometimes I’m not actually the smartest person in the room.”

All that got in return was an exasperated “You are well aware that flattery will get you nowhere with me, Dr. Stark. Now, since I am in fact here, when I could instead be spending time with my grandchildren, I would appreciate if we got right down to business.” She turned to look at Bucky. “I apologize if our first introduction was brief, Mr. Barnes. We will get a chance to get further acquainted once I get a better understanding of what we’re dealing with.”

Tony later told Bucky that the two spent hours down in the lab going over all the information and Dr. Vance helped draft a new schedule for the therapy with a significantly longer timetable.

At first, Bucky bristled at the idea. All he wanted was to get this over with and dammit, he already
lived through those awful memories! He could handle them as a mere spectator!

But after two weeks of the revised schedule, with no more than two sessions per day, the difference in his mental state was so pronounced that Bucky had no choice but to admit to himself that “slow and steady” was a much more palatable approach. Actually feeling like a human being again won over any remaining impatience and desperation he may have felt about wanting to get both Hydra and the Soldier out of his head.

However, Dr. Vance had even more to say about Bucky’s previous approach.

“Keeping yourself isolated and letting yourself dwell on the memories is the worst thing you can do. Focus on productive activities of self-care that ground you back to this reality. Take a shower. Eat. Read a book or watch a funny movie. Go outside. And most importantly, try to engage in social interaction with the others around you. Even if you have to take small steps, the most important thing is to shift your focus back to the here and now.”

So now, after leaving a session and feeling that raw ache of the memory fresh in his mind, Bucky tried to follow Dr. Vance’s advice and attempt to find his way back to reality.

He tried to eat regular meals and let himself indulge in dessert. He asked Friday to help him compile a list of interesting, light-hearted books and movies and she was more than happy to oblige.

Bucky also sought out that recommended social connection. He re-introduced himself to Vision and they soon found that they had more in common than they thought, given that they were both still trying to figure out the strange new world around them. By the end of week two, Vision asked Bucky to join him for a cooking session and they had a strange, but genuinely fun bonding experience trying to figure out a recipe with spices and ingredients neither one of them had ever seen before. Both watched with amusement as Tony and the kids politely pretended to enjoy the results of that cooking experiment.

Bucky also took it upon himself to seek out Peter, handing him a jar of Nutella when he found him as a silent form of apology for his earlier outburst of anger. Of course, Peter’s response was just to tackle him in a great, big hug and all Bucky could do was hug the kid back and marvel at how amazing it still felt to experience simple touch like that and know there was no ill intention behind it.

Eventually, Peter convinced Bucky to actually spar with him and it soon turned into a regular thing, given that they made an interesting match for each other. Bucky was one arm short and all of his real fighting instincts were locked away with the Soldier, which put him on equal footing with Peter, who had plenty of raw power, but still had a lot to learn about fighting technique. Harley took to hanging out with them during these sparring sessions too, usually cheering Bucky on and trying to distract a very frustrated Peter.

Even the Colonel wasn’t spared in Bucky’s quest to follow Dr. Vance’s advice. Bucky would join the other man in the kitchen from time to time and they would enjoy a cup of coffee together. Rhodes would usually be focused on some Avengers business on his StarkPad, while Bucky was engrossed in whatever book he was reading and they wouldn’t even say more than a word or two to each other. However, the sense of shared company was still nice, and it always warmed Bucky’s heart when the Colonel would refill the bright red Iron Man mug with more coffee without ever being asked.

And of course, there was always Bucky’s bright, shining sun. Bucky wasn’t even sure anymore why he was trying to avoid Tony in the first place (because he was trying to be selfless, to keep that damn darkness inside him away from Tony), but once Bucky gave into the need to be around the other man, he realized Tony was just as eager to spend more time with him.
Since Bucky always woke early and Tony always stayed up ridiculously late, they ended up making a habit of walking outside the Compound together at dawn, enjoying the early morning peace and quiet. They tried to have meals together, sometimes joined by the other residents of the Compound.

More often than not though, Bucky found himself down in Tony’s lab, usually coming there with an offering of food and coffee. Sometimes, he would listen to Tony’s excited science babble and even if most of it went over Bucky’s head, he loved it anyway because Tony’s presence and voice soothed Bucky’s nerves like nothing else could. Every part of him felt at peace in that lab.

At other times, they wouldn’t talk, too focused on their own thing, but even then, Tony would wink at him as he looked over or give him a playful shove as he walked by on his way to grab something from the other side of the lab. Small, but meaningful connections that made Bucky’s heart sing. He knew he was becoming increasingly dependent on the man’s presence in his life, but he refused to overanalyze it and instead let himself indulge in Tony’s company.

Dr. Vance was responsible for most of this, saving Bucky and Tony from their own brand of foolishness, but Bucky soon found out that her primary reason for being at the Compound was actual, traditional therapy.

Mental health was not a topic that was ever discussed in the forties, so Bucky had no idea what to expect from his first session with Dr. Vance. He assumed there would be a lot of intrusive questions about the events of his past or his feelings, but after the doctor gave a brief description of her training and experience, all she did was ask Bucky if there was anything he wanted to talk about.

Bucky didn’t really have anything he wanted to discuss, but he also knew this woman was taking the time out of her life to help him (and Tony was likely paying her a lot of money to be here), so not wanting to waste her time and Tony’s generosity, he started with easy topics. He talked about the Compound and his time here, which morphed into a discussion of how it felt to be confronted with the entirety of the 21st century (it was both exhilarating and overwhelming).

However, somehow that conversation ended up with Bucky trying to articulate how confusing it was to deal with others’ reactions to him. He tried to explain that any time his past was brought up around people like Steve, they would try to convince him that it wasn’t you, Bucky, it wasn’t your fault, you have nothing to feel guilty about. And any time he would try to apologize (primarily to Tony, but Bucky left that part off) he was told it’s okay, forget about it, it’s no big deal, life goes on.

Neither response ever gave him any sense of peace or closure and it frustrated him because he had no words to articulate what it was that he actually wanted from others.

And because he learned from his mistake with Tony, Bucky ended the session by telling Dr. Vance about the Soldier, struggling to explain what it felt like to have that dark presence in the back of his head that seemed to oscillate between violent bloodlust and possessive, lustful hunger.

Aside from a few clarifying questions, Dr. Vance spent the session taking notes and Bucky remembered liking the fact that she used a regular pen and paper, just like him. Everyone else at the Compound used computers and Bucky just couldn’t get the hang of typing quickly on a keyboard, so he always preferred the traditional method.

At the end, Dr. Vance put her notes to the side and gave him a friendly smile.

“I appreciate all the effort you put into this conversation. I know it can’t be easy opening up to a stranger. Unfortunately, I don’t have any clear cut answers for you, not after one session. Sometimes, we get answers after putting in a lot of hard work. Sometimes unfortunately, we never find a perfect solution."
“As for the Soldier - it could very well be some remnant of what Hydra did to you that neither myself nor Dr. Stark understand yet. The Retro Framing therapy may cause it to evolve or even disappear entirely. However…” here Dr. Vance paused and made sure she had Bucky’s gaze, “I want you to be aware that there is a possibility that the Soldier is simply your mind’s way of coping with the trauma you experienced. That those dark instincts are just as much a part of you as the man sitting in front of me right now. Perfectly healthy people who never suffer trauma still can have moments of insatiable lust or a sudden desire to hurt someone for something as trivial as chewing their food too loudly. But we control these urges because we strive to exist in a civilized society. Everyone has good and bad inside them, Mr. Barnes. And you cannot go through what you have and expect to remain completely unchanged by it.”

Bucky wasn’t sure what to do with the doctor’s words, but he still hoped that the former rather than the latter of what she said was true.

Other sessions followed and Bucky knew it would take time for him to open up, but he thought that someday he might be ready to tell Dr. Vance more. Someday he might be ready to talk about how violated and powerless he felt in the face of what Hydra did to him. How it felt to remember every single one of his kills. How it felt when the triggers were activated and everything else in the world ceased to matter, blurred to dull grays and shrouded in a fog that tasted like ashes, with only the mission offering some sense of completion… of purpose.

Someday he hoped he would be ready.

In the present however, even with the slower pace, the BARF therapy was actually working. Both Dr. Vance and Tony were optimistic that Bucky’s physical responses to the memories were already beginning to change and that in fact, some memories were already completely disassociated. Bucky knew it was true because it felt as if there was a barrier between him and the memories now. The horror associated with them felt distant. It finally felt benign.

Unfortunately for Bucky, he didn’t have just one or two or three memories to work through. There were seventy years worth of memories, so he had no choice but to gather all the patience he could find and keep going. Slow and steady. He had to be content with the fact that there were more good days now.

Until today. The memory on the schedule today was meant to be viewed two or three times, at most. He viewed it at least two dozen times now, losing count sometime halfway. Dr. Vance was in Boston with the grandkids and Bucky knew she would be unhappy with him once she came back. He didn’t care.

He was well aware that he was doing this to punish himself.

Help… Sergeant Barnes?

But I can’t— I can’t and there’s blood, there’s so much blood against the snow—

No, he couldn’t think about that. Not right now. He needed a break from the crushing guilt, if only for a moment.

Usually, when he was feeling this vulnerable, he’d seek out Tony, but he wasn’t sure he could face the man right now, so Bucky just closed his eyes and tried to breathe, knowing that he needed to find a way to ground himself. However, every thought in his head kept coming back to Tony and so, just this once, he willfully pushed his guilt away so he could let himself selfishly sink into the warmth of a memory from a few weeks ago.
The medical equipment surrounding him still set off Bucky's mental alarms, but thankfully, the medical facility at the Compound was empty at this late hour.

Well, with the exception of him and Tony. They’ve spent almost two hours here now, sequestered in a small private room while Tony worked on carefully removing the remaining pieces of the old metal arm in order to prepare Bucky for the new one.

Tony was successful in removing the larger part already, but now the engineer paused to scrutinize additional scans of Bucky’s left shoulder in order to remove the smaller slivers.

The small break gave Bucky a chance to observe the man and reflect on everything the Colonel had told him yesterday.

Some things that came up didn’t surprise Bucky, given what he had already deduced from Tony’s behavior. However, it was the extent of the awful treatment by the other Avengers and SHIELD that baffled and downright infuriated him.

He could still remember his blood running cold when he heard Rhodes tell him about SHIELD injecting Tony against his will with some substance. Oh, the Soldier seethed within him, knowing intimately what it was like to have their body violated to serve someone else’s purpose.

But that was only a small piece of a much larger picture painted with brush strokes of constant mistrust, disrespect, and a lack of any gratitude, affection or camaraderie on the part of the other Avengers.

Bucky genuinely couldn’t understand it. Even based on his limited interactions, he knew all of them were capable of care and trust. Wilson and Steve had a close friendship. The same was true for Natasha and Barton. Even Lang never bothered to hide how much he loved and missed the daughter and friends he left behind.

Steve obviously loved Bucky himself; hell, he was willing to set half the world on fire in his misguided attempt to help him. And Steve was always gentle and caring with Wanda, who he treated like a little sister.

These were all people capable of love. So what was it about Tony that turned them all away from him? He simply couldn’t wrap his mind around it because there was no way for him to reconcile their behavior toward Tony with the man in front of him. Said man was currently donning a fresh pair of gloves, almost ready to continue the work on Bucky’s shoulder. When Tony turned and saw Bucky looking at him, he gave him a playful wink and gave him a cheeky “Dr. Stark will be with you momentarily.”

Honestly, Bucky had half a mind to call up Wakanda and demand answers from Steve and the others. However, the last conversation was still fresh in his mind and it served as a reminder that he and Steve couldn’t hold a conversation anymore without it devolving into an argument. Somehow, Bucky didn’t think bringing up Tony would make things go any smoother and frankly, he was sure the others would just give him the same song and dance.

Tony betrayed them. Tony was arrogant and selfish. Tony never owned up to his mistakes.

Never trust a Stark.

Were they all even talking about the same man? None of it made sense, so in the end, he decided the only thing he could truly trust was his own instincts.
Bucky watched as the other man moved his chair over to be right next to him again and carefully picked up where he left off, removing the last traces of Hydra’s handiwork from Bucky’s body.

This is what Bucky could trust. Experience. The proof of what Peter and Rhodes had told him about Tony was evident in the culmination of Bucky’s interactions with the man. His generosity and his sense of responsibility. The desire to do the right thing, even if it meant taking his parents’ killer into his home.

All he had to do was think back to Tony’s jokes made in effort to alleviate Bucky's anxiety. The ice cream in Central Park. Tony’s genuine words of apology. The schematics of the arm. The sleepless nights Bucky knew Tony was spending trying to figure out the BARF therapy. The warmth behind those brown eyes.

The proof of it all was right in front of him.

Said proof let out a disapproving grunt as yet another chuck of metal was removed from Bucky’s left shoulder.

“Dammit, James, I knew I should’ve insisted that you go to medical right when you got to the Compound. There’s inflammation in the tissue of your shoulder everywhere! How does that even work? I thought you super soldiers couldn’t get infections.”

Bucky just raised his right shoulder in a shrug, careful not to jostle his left.

“I’m the wrong person to ask, Tony. I’ve no idea what shit Hydra pumped into me. Don’t even know if it’s the same stuff that Steve got. All I know is that my shoulder always hurt like that, it’s no big deal.”

“Really? Being in pain - no big deal?” Tony repeated and stopped to give Bucky an affronted look.

Bucky just shrugged again. “What? It’s not like Hydra ever cared that I was comfortable. All they cared about was that I was functional.”

“Well, last time I checked, I wasn’t Hydra,” Tony grumbled as he went back to checking over Bucky’s shoulder and removing another piece, causing Bucky to let out a pained hiss. Instantly, Tony pulled away and rubbed his hand up and down Bucky’s back in some attempt to soothe the pain.

“Shit, sorry, this isn’t going to get any easier, unfortunately,” he sighed and grabbed another tool from the tray next to him. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to let an actual doctor do this - you know, one who actually knows what they’re doing?”

Ugh, even thinking about letting someone else touch him, especially the scarred area of his mutilated shoulder, made Bucky sick to his stomach. “I’d rather not, if we can help it. You seem to be managing it just fine, right?” He tried to give Tony his best pleading look and it was obviously working because the engineer just slumped and gave a sigh.

“Well, I’m doing my best, but ya know - I’m not that kind of doctor. Huh, this must be what Brucie Bear must have felt like,” he muttered to himself, but then paused and frowned at Bucky, “Is this—is this why you never went to medical in the first place? You weren’t comfortable with the doctors looking you over?”

Bucky gave him a nod after a moment.

“But I thought T’Challa’s doctors worked on you just fine. Even tried to help you with the triggers
“They did, but back then, I was either too out of it to even care or I was just desperate enough. And I still didn’t let them anywhere near my shoulder… Just wasn’t a big deal. It hurts, that’s all…” Bucky trailed off when he saw Tony’s knowing look.

“And a bit of pain is obviously not enough to let some stranger root around in your body, I get it,” Tony finished Bucky’s thought and ran a distracted hand across his chest, making Bucky wonder whether Tony even realized he was doing it. “Trust me, I get it. Took me years to let an actual doctor anywhere near my arc reactor.”

Between what he had heard mentioned by others and from what he read on the internet, Bucky had a general idea of what happened with Tony in Afghanistan. But he still had so many questions and he hoped that maybe someday Tony would be comfortable enough with him to share something so personal.

But today was not that day and Bucky kept the questions to himself. Instead, he tried to give Tony a smile. “It’s really not that bad. Just keep doing what you’re doing, Tony. I trust you.”

The small smile that crossed Tony’s own face at those last words brought with it that same sweet, warm ache in his chest that Bucky associated with Tony now. The other man, satisfied with whatever tool he had, went back to pulling back the metal pieces, painstakingly trying to get to the scarred and infected flesh beneath.

“Honestly, I get making super soldiers invulnerable to drugs,” Tony grumbled as he worked, “but making you immune to painkillers too? Seems like an intentional design flaw.” He leaned over to catch Bucky’s eyes. “Can I at least offer you a glass of scotch or something? I know alcohol doesn’t do anything either, but it’s the principle of the thing.”

“Nah, it’s okay. Always hated the taste, so if I can’t get drunk, why even bother?”

“Well, let me know if there is anything that would help,” Tony said and went back to his work. “Probably better this way anyways, ’cause I’d have to raid Rhodey’s stash if you wanted something and he’s very protective of his liquor.”

Bucky’s curiosity perked up. “Do you not drink?”

For a moment, Tony didn’t respond and Bucky turned to face him. He watched Tony look away and grimace. “I, uh— used to have a bit of a problem,” he cleared his throat, “and by problem, I mean I was, uh— I was an alcoholic.” The man tried to give a careless shrug, but the guilt in his face was obvious. “But I’ve been clean for years, so no need to worry.”

Bucky could see how much even that admission cost Tony, so he didn’t press further. Instead, he just gave him a soft “I’m glad you’re doing well, Tony.”

He watched Tony’s hands shake minutely, but the man steeled himself and just went back to his work with a shaky breath.

“Can you tell me more about the new arm?” Bucky asked, hoping to distract the man from whatever dark thoughts clouded his mind. The other man did actually look up at Bucky and gave him a confused hmm?.

“Well, we never got a chance to discuss the details of the arm on account of someone falling asleep, so maybe we should do that now,” Bucky said, trying to keep his voice light. Thankfully, Tony seemed to have perked up just a bit, grabbing onto this new conversation topic like a lifeline.
“Hey, I was perfectly good and ready for a serious science fest. But someone took so damn long with my sandwich that I had no choice but to take a nap.”

“Sorry, definitely my bad, my sandwich-making skills obviously need work. Hydra’s education is really lacking,” Bucky tried a smile to go with his joking response. “But now you’re awake—”

“—And still sandwich-less!”

“—So I thought it’d be great to go over those details you promised.”

Tony pulled particularly hard on a piece of metal suddenly and Bucky suppressed his flinch entirely this time, even though it hurt like hell. As much as he enjoyed having Tony fussing over him, he realized it wasn’t fair to make the man feel guilty on his behalf.

To distract himself from the pain though, he asked instead “So based on the schematics, it looks like you went with a similar design as the old arm, right?”

Tony nodded and took a second to grab some kind of bottle from the tray. “This is gonna sting, sorry,” he said before applying the liquid straight to the scarred flash. Definitely antiseptic, if the smell was anything to go by. Obviously trying to distract Bucky too, Tony went on. “Even though it physically pains me to say anything good about Hydra, the old arm had a good basic underlying design, although obviously, I’m making a ton of improvements. Now, as far as how the arm looks, we have several more options here in the 21st century and we could go the synthetic skin route.”

Hmm, an arm that looked like a real one. Bucky contemplated the idea for a second. “Would you recommend it?”

“Well, it’ll look real enough, but honestly, it kinda gives me the creeps. And you’ll still have a metal base underneath, so your arm will never feel soft or pliant like real flesh. And, uh—” Tony seemed to hesitate for a moment, prompting Bucky to look at him. “I know we probably have very different tastes in aesthetics, but—”

Bucky suddenly had to stifle a laugh because— he couldn’t believe it, was Tony Stark actually blushing?

“Yes?” he prompted and yeah, that was definitely a blush across Tony’s cheeks.

“Just saying that the metal arm looked really cool,” the man mumbled and even though Bucky heard him perfectly well, he couldn’t help himself.

“Sorry, I didn’t get that. What did you say?”

Tony gave him a mock glare. “The arm was awesome, okay? Even when we were still kinda hating each other, I still thought it was badass. If all my suits aren’t a giant clue, it’s obvious I have a thing — you know— for metal—” Tony stopped abruptly and looked to the ceiling with a groan. “Oh my god, I can’t believe I just said that. I’m starting to sound like Peter.”

Bucky let out an amused chuckle. Honestly, after thinking it over, having his metal arm back would be less jarring than having something that looked like real flesh, but didn’t feel like it.

Besides, if this was the kind of reaction he could get out of Tony just by talking about the arm… Well, he decided keeping the metal arm for that alone sounded like a worthwhile investment.

“Well, I appreciate the compliment, Tony. Between you and Peter, I didn’t realize my arm had this many admirers,” Bucky joked and thoroughly enjoyed the way Tony groaned again in
embarrassment and still refused to meet his gaze. “Okay, I say we keep the old design. I’m used to it anyways.” He decided to take pity on Tony and change the subject. “Would it have the same level of strength?”

“Well, more, actually, unless you have a problem with it? Although, I mean, why have a metal arm if you can’t punch through walls and stop bullets with it, am I right?”

Bucky let out a genuine laugh at Tony’s cheeky tone, but he took a moment to think this over too. A part of him wished he could just have an ordinary prosthetic without any additional power, but in the end, could he ever really just be normal? The rest of him was still super powered and maybe this time around, he could use the extra strength of the metal arm to do good. To protect instead of hurt.

He felt the Soldier stir within him and suddenly his mind was overtaken with an image of some faceless Hydra agent, barging into the room and attacking Tony, grabbing him around the neck, putting a gun to his head. Then everything morphed into Bucky tearing Tony away, putting himself between Tony and the threat, and then beating that nameless agent senseless with the metal arm, over and over and over, waves of vicious satisfaction rolling through him at every broken bone he felt beneath his fist. He was stepping over the dead body now and pushing Tony against the wall, running that metal hand gently over Tony’s body, over and over and over, to make sure he wasn’t hurt, to make sure his solnishko was all in one piece, before trailing possessive kisses down his neck, loving the moan that escaped Tony as the metal hand trailed lower—

Bucky physically shuddered at the taste of lust mixed with violence on his tongue, and he had clench his eyes shut and take a few labored breaths to steel himself and push the Soldier back.

“You okay?” Tony obviously noticed his suddenly tense posture and shortness of breath. “Dammit, I’m hurting you, aren’t I? That’s it, I’m calling Dr. Cho, she’s—”

“No, Tony, it’s fine!” Bucky stopped the man from reaching for the phone by grabbing Tony’s left wrist. His fingers felt Tony’s pulse spike beneath them at the touch and this time, he had to fight back his own desire to just pull Tony flush against him. “I’m fine, just, uh— just had a bit of a flashback.”

Crap, wrong thing to say because now Tony looked even guiltier. Bucky tried to placate him, finally forcing himself to let go of the man. “It’s not a big deal, really. Traumatized Hydra assassin here, remember? I lose track of my thoughts sometimes, it’s part of the package.”

After a brief moment of scrutinizing Bucky, Tony let out a defeated sigh and seemed to have acquiesced. “Fine, fine. But I’m serious. Let me know if this gets bad. I don’t want to sit here torturing you.”

“I will, Tony, and you’re doing great. Dr. Stark has very gentle hands,” Bucky tried to give him his own cheeky smile, which prompted Tony to just roll his eyes at him and go back to his work.

With Tony’s attention back on his shoulder, Bucky mentally groaned. What the hell did the Soldier even want from him? Bucky already said he was going to keep the metal arm! There was no need to throw vivid imagery at him (fuck, way too vivid) to prove a point.

In the end, he told Tony to keep the enhanced strength and the other man gave him a satisfied smile. “See, I knew we’d be on the same page about that. Good thing too,” Tony cleared his throat, “because I already got the material for it. I’m planning to make this bad boy out of vibranium.”

That sounded familiar. “Wait— T’Challa’s country exports that, right? I remember the King talking about it briefly.”
“Yup, the few mines of vibranium out there are all in Wakanda, so they have exclusive rights. And believe me, they charge through the nose for it—”

“Tony, you really didn’t have to—”

“Hey,” Tony stopped his protest with a gentle shove, “none of that now. T’Challa and I worked out a deal. I gave him a, uh—a piece of vibranium back that I had lying around and in return he gave me just enough raw vibranium for your arm. Although, to be honest,” Tony leaned over and gave Bucky a wink, “I think he just did it because he likes you. That kitty cat has a soft spot for you, super soldier.”

“T’Challa is a great man,” Bucky agreed with a smile, “I owe him a lot for his help. So if it’s vibranium, that means it’ll be just as heavy as the old one, right?”

That was one of the things Bucky didn’t miss at all - having that chunk of metal always throwing him off-balance, pulling painfully on his scarred flesh. He supposed he could manage though.

Tony’s excited tone pulled Bucky out of that train of thought. “Here’s where Hydra’s crap science has nothing on 21st century Tony Stark science! To you, the arm is going to feel no heavier than your real one.”

Bucky had to turn to look at Tony with disbelief. “How is that even possible?” Tony’s answering grin and the warmth in his eyes made Bucky feel like he was going to melt inside.

“Magic, James. And by magic, I of course mean pure, unadulterated, badass science. So, the way it works…”

Tony’s voice was downright giddy as he explained something about nanotechnology and rebuilding the wiring between the arm and the sensory and motor neurons, but then he stopped suddenly in the middle of a sentence and awkwardly cleared his throat.

“I, uh—whoops, got a little carried away there.” Bucky saw the man shrug in his peripheral. “Sorry, I know no one wants a boring science lecture to go with their cool tech.”

The abrupt change in Tony’s demeanor made Bucky’s heart clench and his thoughts were immediately back to all the things the Colonel had told him.

How many times was Tony just as excited to explain some amazing feat of science only to have someone dismiss him or ignore him? Or worse, tell him that no one had time for his boring science lectures? How many times did he pour his heart and soul into some new creation only to have someone take it without even a thanks, Tony and then later tell him they found it lacking?

Bucky decided he was not making the same mistakes as the other Avengers.

“Well, it’s my arm, right?”

Tony nodded, a bit confused. “Pretty sure it is.”

“Then I should know how it’s designed and built. And maybe I won’t understand every part of it, but that’s okay.” He made sure to turn his head just enough to catch Tony’s gaze. “So tell me everything.”

The touch of surprise on Tony’s face and the small, genuine smile that followed made Bucky feel like he was bathed in sunlight.
Bucky tried to hold onto that smile for as long as he could, but then *pleading eyes, oh god, Tony’s eyes, blood against the snow, a shuddering final breath* overtook it and he was tasting nothing but guilt once again. He had no right to even think about Tony, not after— not after what he did. A new memory kept replaying in his head over and over now, no BARF system required, and Bucky felt like he was drowning in it.

He took a deep breath and thought about whether he should get into the shower after all, but a knock on the door stopped that train of thought.

For a moment, he wanted to ignore it, but then he heard Tony’s “It’s me, James. You’re late for our dinner date,” and he knew that he couldn’t reject the man, even if he wanted to. So he opened the door and tried to give Tony a semblance of a smile.

“I’m not sure I’ll be good company tonight,” Bucky said as he walked back to the bed and sat on the edge. “Not really feeling well after today’s session.”

God, this was harder than he thought. He could barely even look at Tony right now. Because when he let himself see those warm brown eyes, the planes of Tony’s face, it all morphed into someone else, someone who looked just like him and—

No, he wouldn’t let himself think about it.

“Yeah, about that…” Tony grimaced and leaned against the door frame. “I’ve been looking over the latest results and it does seem like your progress plateaued a bit. Also, you watched today’s memory way more than you should have. Fatima is going to have your head for that. And I— well, all I see on my side is ‘Soldier Mission memory #21”, so I don’t know what it is, but the readings on it haven’t shown improvement at all. For some reason, the disassociation modifications aren’t working.”

Bucky felt his heart rate spike. *No, no, no.* He didn’t want to think about this, but that memory—

*Guilt, guilt, guilt, until he was drowning in it as the blood splattered against the snow.*

“No! Bucky didn’t even realize he shouted his protest until his own voice echoed back in his ears. Clearly, he was giving Tony a terrified look because the other man tried to appear placating.

“I know it’s bad, James, these memories are awful. But whatever it is, neither one of us are going to judge you—”

“No, you can’t be in there with me.”

“James, you viewed that same memory dozens of times and the results haven’t budged, so our current strategy obviously isn’t working. It doesn’t matter what it is, I promise I—”

“It’s your parents, okay?” Bucky’s voice broke on something that resembled a sob and he hunched in on himself, clenching his hand in his hair. “It’s the memory of me murdering your parents,” he forced himself to say, even if his voice was no more than a whisper.

*Guilt, guilt, guilt, nothing but guilt as he stood on that dark road and hated every part of himself.*
God, he wanted to cry because Tony didn’t say anything for a few moments and Bucky was sure that if he looked up at the man, he’d see hate in his eyes. He couldn’t face that, not after knowing how warm and caring those eyes could be.

He didn’t look up, but he did hear Tony let out a long, measured breath after a minute of silence.

“Well,” the man’s voice seemed calm, but Bucky could hear the undercurrent of tension, “maybe it’s finally time for both of us to face that memory then.”

He forced himself to meet Tony’s gaze and all he saw was a pair of terrified, but resolute brown eyes looking back at him.

Chapter End Notes

Ha, and these two thought they've been doing so great for so long at the whole 'actively ignoring the dead parents' thing! Not anymore! Whoops.

Next chapter is gonna hurt, you guys. That's all I'm gonna say.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I feel like this chapter is the midseason finale equivalent of the whole fic. And we all know nothing good happens in midseason finales, right? So please take this as a warning - emotionally heavy chapter ahead. I took my angst dial that goes up to 9 and dialed it to a 10 (to get it up to 11, just put on the saddest song on your playlist. You know, to set the mood. ;___; )

But I think everything has been working up to this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The only thing that Tony wanted was a goddamn drink. God, he could already taste it, the smooth burn of hard liquor running down his throat, warming him up from the inside out. Fucking tea had nothing on the sweet taste of whiskey on his tongue.

He saw his right hand shake against the surface of his work table, as if trying to reach out for some phantom glass, and he had to clench his fist shut.

No. As much as every fucking part of him wanted a drink right now, he couldn’t— he wouldn’t.

What he told James down in medical weeks ago was true - Tony Stark was a damn alcoholic, but one who actually managed to stay off the liquor for several years, trying so desperately to be better for his newfound family.

What he kept to himself however was the fact that Tony Stark also had quite a bit of a fall from the proverbial wagon.

Roughly one year ago.

Serves me right for getting massively drunk while I was hopped up on a pharmacy’s worth of painkillers after getting my chest caved in, huh?

And now, even though he desperately wanted something to dull the fear inside him, he couldn’t let himself fall again.

Because all he had to do was think back to the devastated look in Rhodey’s eyes as the man watched his best friend lie in a hospital bed for the second time in days.

He just had to think back to the quiver in Vision’s voice as the android told him I’m very glad I found you when I did, sir. God, he called him— no, fuck, don’t think about JARVIS, not right now.

He had to think back to Peter’s heartbroken tears. That poor kid who already lost so much— his parents, his uncle— realizing he almost lost someone else. Crying for Tony even though he barely even knew him back then. As if Tony Stark, monumental failure of the year, was something worth crying about.

No, the need for alcohol paled in comparison to the pain of the people he loved. He’d always be a reckless idiot, he knew that, but alcohol didn’t help save the world or rescue innocent people. All it
ever did was selfishly dull his own pain.

But the temptation was overwhelming. Because even the mere thought of facing the memory of his parents left him fucking terrified and physically shaking, desperately wanting something to make that fear go away.

But they didn’t have a choice and there was no more time left.

***

“No! Tony, I can’t— I can’t ask you to go in there with me! There’s got to be another way. I’ll— I’ll keep watching the memory until it all works, I don’t care—”

Tony ran a shaking hand through his hair. “If it hasn’t worked yet, it doesn’t matter how many times you watch it. You need something else to ground you—”

“Well, what about Dr. Vance? Or Rhodes? It doesn’t have to be you!”

Oh god, Fatima. Tony felt his stomach suddenly drop. How did he not realize this sooner?

“How. No, no, no,” he muttered to himself, suddenly on the verge of panic, as he paced back and forth in front of James, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed, frightened and tense. “No one else knows about my parents. Rhody’s the only one who knows, but he’s at the Summit. He’s on the other side of the world, he’ll be gone for days. Fuck, and we can’t let— If Fatima finds out that you — that you were involved in my parents’ death—” Tony’s pacing suddenly stopped. “She’ll petition to have you transferred out of my care.”

Tony saw all the blood drain out of James’ face. “What— but why, I don’t understand— you said we could trust her!”

“We can!” Tony realized he was shouting and he pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes to stave off the panic. Fuck, how did this night devolve into disaster so quickly? How did he miss this? “Think about it, James. What psychiatrist in their right mind would let me be in charge of you? I have a conflict of interest, I have every reason to— to take advantage of this situation, to hurt you, to—”

“But you’re not!” James let out a shuddering breath, those pale blue eyes pleading with Tony. “You’re the only reason I even have this chance to get better. You’re the one putting my life back together…” The last words were barely a whisper.

“She won’t see it that way.”

Fuck, how could Tony have overlooked this? He had been so focused on ignoring everything that happened with his parents, just so he and James could both have the chance to finally move on from that awful night, that he didn’t think this whole therapy thing through. Maybe a part of him just hoped that James would work through the memory like the rest of the others. Just like Tony, Fatima didn’t normally have access to the actual memories and once it was disassociated, no one would care to take a second look.

But now, with James unable to overcome this one on his own— she was due back early tomorrow morning. She would demand answers. In her eyes, it would be necessary to know what the memory was to figure out a way to get past it. And then—

She would do what was best for her patient, for James, and get him far away from Tony.
God, Tony was just the fuck-up of the year, wasn’t he? How could he possibly think that he’d be the right person to do any of this? He kept messing this up, again and again. Maybe it would be better if someone else took care of James—

“Tony, no, please! You—you can’t mean that…”

Fuck, did he say that last part out loud?

By the heart-stricken look on the other man’s face, it appeared that yes, he did.

James finally stood up and carefully approached Tony, although Tony wasn’t sure who was the frightened animal in this particular scenario, James or himself.

“You can’t let them take me away—where would I even—”

“You’d become a ward of the state, possibly under Fatima’s care, until you’re well enough to have your full citizenship back,” Tony swallowed against his achingly dry throat. “Same as now, more or less. Only—without me in the picture.”

James shook his head desperately. “No—No! I’ll run! I’ll disappear off the face of the Earth if I have to—”

“No, James, come on, this is your one chance at getting your life back—”

“That I only have because of you!”

“I’ve been fucking this up every step of the way,” Tony countered, sudden clarity descending upon him. Having those words said aloud hurt like hell, but they were true. Even though James kept shaking his head, trying to protest, Tony just continued. “I lost my temper with you during our very first session. I—I took you to goddamn Manhattan without proper security. Fuck, the whole Soldier debacle. And then when we started the therapy, I let you run yourself into the ground. Even now, the one memory that’s holding you back is—” Tony couldn’t say it aloud again. Instead, he just took another shuddering breath. “Everything I do, I just—I’m hurting you, James.”

He watched as the other man hesitantly stepped even closer before slowly reaching out and curling his hand around the junction of Tony’s neck and shoulder. He felt the hand give him a gentle squeeze before James closed the distance between them and dropped his forehead to Tony’s.

“Tony…How can you not know that you’re the only thing keeping me together half the time?” the man whispered and then let out a watery laugh, looking away. God, were those tears in his eyes?

“Do you know that Dr. Vance keeps saying that the Soldier is a part of me? Well, I can feel him right now and that part of me wants to tear the whole world apart at thought of leaving here…Of leaving you. I’m no saint either. I keep hurting you. I keep fucking up too. So maybe—maybe we can just be broken fuck-ups together? But please, Tony,” James clenched his eyes shut and with the man this close, Tony was able to see as one single tear rolled down his pale cheek. “Please don’t let them take me away from you.”

God, how selfish was it of Tony to want James all to himself too? What did that say about him?

Fatima would be right to remove James, for his own good, because Tony was nothing more than a broken, miserable failure who—

But then those blue eyes turned to him, begging him, and he knew he would never be strong enough to do the right thing. James was his responsibility, James was his—

“Oh, okay,” Tony nodded, grabbing onto the man’s right wrist and giving it a squeeze. “Then we
go back to the original plan. I view the memory with you until we hit disassociation.”

“But— your parents—”

“I know, but there’s no time. It’ll be fine. I’ll—I can handle it.” He nodded again, trying to convince himself. “We’ll get through the memory and no one will ever have to know about this. Okay? That whole damn night… It’ll just stay between the two of us.”

James gave him a shaky nod, hope and gratitude warring with fear in his eyes, and for a moment, all Tony could think about was how close they still were. All he had to do was move just a little bit closer and James’ lips would be on his own—

No. Tony Stark was a monumental failure, but even he wasn’t this big of a fuck-up.

Instead, he pulled away from James’ touch entirely and took a few more steps back before asking the other man to give him a little bit of time before they had to face this hell together.

***

He was holed up in his lab for almost an hour now, trying to find enough strength to face the memory of his parents’ death.

Tony hadn’t seen that cold dark road since the bunker. He had the video, but all he did with it was hand it to Rhodey with a simple “That’s what happened in Siberia,” and Rhodey didn’t need much more explanation than that. Tony didn’t show the video to anyone else and he never bothered to watch it again. It only took that one time to sear all the details into his brain.

It was foolish really, convincing himself that his parents would never come up between him and James and that the two of them could just keep on pretending as if that night had never happened. Because now that memory was coming back to haunt them in the worst possible way.

Facing that night terrified Tony, but somehow, the idea of losing James was even more overwhelming. God, how did that man manage to get into all the cracks of Tony’s broken heart already?

Now that he had his little epiphany about his failures in all this, a part of Tony knew that the right thing to do would be to let James go, to let someone better take care of him. But all he had to do was think back to those pleading blue eyes and Tony knew that the only thing he was going to do was make another stupid decision in a long line of absolutely stupid fucking decisions.

That was his nature.

He took in an unsteady breath. He could do this. After all, wasn’t it time to finally face this? Decades have past since his parents died. Wasn’t it time to let go?

Acknowledging that as true didn’t leave Tony any less terrified.

“Boss?” Friday’s voice was gentle, but it sounded like a gunshot in Tony’s ears and he physically flinched.

With another shaky exhale, he finally responded. “I’m here, Fri.”

“It’s time, Boss. You asked me to remind the both of you? It’s— time for you to meet with Mr. Barnes. In the memory room?”
The memory room. That was what Friday had taken to calling it. Tony preferred the torture chamber himself, and right now it felt like the execution chamber more than anything else.

But how was it time already? Didn’t he tell Friday to give him a full hour? He needed more time to be ready—

The desperation in his dad’s eyes as he begged the man to help his wife. His mom’s dying breath, an echo of Howard leaving her lips.

He was wrong. He was never going to be ready to face that again.

But in the end, he forced himself to stand up and walk out of the lab. There was no time. He had no other choice. One step, then another, until his legs carried him all the way down to the basement.

James was already inside the small room, standing with his back to Tony in the middle of the empty space, surrounded only by the holo-projectors. Tony could see the BARF equipment was already around his forehead and temples.

The man seemed to be ready, but when Tony walked over to stand by his side, he could see the hunch in those tense shoulders, the anxious movement of his hand, clench-and-release, clench-and-release, over and over. James’ whole body was shaking minutely with tension.

So neither one of them was ready then.

Tony reached out and hesitantly placed his hand on James’ right shoulder, trying for some semblance of comfort. “We’ll be fine. Just— just a memory, that’s all. Water under the bridge, right?”

All he got in response was James clenching his eyes shut and giving him a shaky nod that wasn’t even remotely convincing.

But they had no other choice and there was no time left to waste. Fatima would be back at the Compound in just a few short hours and Tony couldn’t even let himself think about the possibility of this failing.

He let go, severing that small connection between him and James and asked Friday to activate the system, the words tasting like ashes on his tongue.

The projectors whirred to life, indifferent to the tragedy they were about to recreate, and it only took seconds for the image of the dark, December road to coalesce around them. The power of the BARF system transformed James’ memory and gave both of them an outsider’s perspective to it, making it feel like he and James were standing on that road together, destined to witness the horror about to take place and helpless to stop it.

James was still and silent next to him, nothing but that coiled, desperate tension. He knew what was coming as well as Tony did, but it didn’t stop both of them from flinching in unison when the Winter Soldier appeared out of nowhere, attacking the car on the road with effortless precision and strength. Tony felt himself struggle to pull in a shaky breath, the tell tale sign of an approaching panic attack, as he watched the car crash against the tree, his parents still inside. He tried to breathe though, in and out, in and out, because he could do this. They had no other choice.

The Winter Soldier dragged his father out of the car. Breathe, Tony, in and out.

“Help my wife… Please… Help… Sergeant Barnes?”

Tony was sure he heard a broken inhale that bordered on a sob from James at his side, but he didn’t
dare to look away. He couldn’t look away, even if it felt like a piece of him died every time that metal fist connected with his father’s face. One, two, three— Tony stopped counting. His father’s skull was cracked now and there was blood painting the white snow crimson red beneath him.

James clamped his hand over his mouth, stifling a whimper, and they both watched the Soldier drag Howard’s lifeless body back into the car, and shoving him back into the driver’s seat. Accident, they said. Howard killed when his head crashed into the steering wheel.

Tony remembered always hating his father for this. Because, until a year ago, the only thing he believed was that the accident had to be his father’s fault. Was Howard drunk when he drove? Or was he just careless on the icy winter road? Careless enough to cost Tony his parents. His mom.

But none of that mattered. He couldn’t even begin to think about that resentment— because now his mom— beautiful, graceful, brilliant Maria Stark— was terrified as she watched the Soldier reach toward her.

The hand— the flesh hand of the man next to him that was gentle and warm against his own neck only an hour ago, oh god— coiled around her throat and crushed.

His broken “Mom, no, please…” coalesced with her final Howard… into one desperate, hopeless plea of mother and son.

Tony realized there were tears in his eyes.

The Soldier left his mother’s lifeless body where it was and strode over to the trunk of the car, finding the super soldier serum he was tasked with retrieving. He pointed a gun at the security camera, effortlessly made the shot, and then quickly disappeared into the darkness.

The dull grays, blacks, and whites of the memory whirled around them, as it restarted itself. The car was driving down the road and his parents were alive again, only to die once more.

Tony vaguely remembered telling Friday to keep playing the memory until James’ results showed signs of disassociation. Obviously their first attempt failed.

The car crashed again, causing Tony to flinch once more, even though every second of this goddamn memory was already scorched into his very bones.

His father was dragged onto the cold, snowy road. Snow that would soon be covered in spatters of blood.

“Help my wife… Please…”

But I can’t— Dad, I can’t and there’s blood, there’s so much blood against the snow—

Howard Stark was dead again and his wife watched with abject fear as her killer approached.

You killed mom. You killed mom. You killed mom!

It was the only thing running through his mind all of the sudden and Tony realized he was wrong. He couldn’t handle this. He couldn’t. Because as he watched his mother die again, there was suddenly so much grief and anger and hate inside him that he felt like there was nothing else left of him.

The world shifted again. Third time’s the charm.
The car violently skidded off the road into the tree and Tony felt the first tear run down his face at the same time he heard a broken, powerless sob next to him. Tony took in two short, labored breaths and finally, he found the strength to look at James for the first time since the memories began. The hand against the man’s mouth was failing in its attempt to stifle the sobs that were nevertheless escaping him. James was crying.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” he heard at the same time as his father begged “Help my wife… Please…”

“You killed them…” Tony realized he said out loud the words echoing in his head on an endless loop. His father’s skull shattered again under the force of the metal fist. “You killed Mom!”

“I know—” Another broken sob. “I killed them both… It’s all my fault.”

His father was dead in the driver’s seat, leaning against the steering wheel, lifeless eyes staring into nothing.

“I never had—” Tony’s own voice was shaking, “I never had the chance to tell them I loved them again. I never had the chance—”

His own pained sob stopped him from finishing the rest of that. He never had the chance for anything. What more was there to say?

“I’m so sorry, Tony, I’m sorry,” James kept repeating between his broken gasps for air, choking on his tears now.

As Tony’s mother gasped for her own final breath, James slowly collapsed on his knees next to Tony, still stammering out a broken litany of apologies.

The world around them shifted. Howard and Maria Stark were alive again.

Watching the car crash into the tree for the fourth time, Tony thought that maybe he was actually dead. Maybe this was hell and his eternal punishment for all of his sins was to watch over and over as his parents died, while their killer sobbed on his knees at his feet.

“Help my wife… Please… Help… Sergeant Barnes?”

_Dad, I was so young. I wish I had the chance to understand you. To help you understand me. Maybe then we could have—_

His father’s blood stood stark against the gleaming white snow.

_No, mom, please. Not you. Anyone but you. I loved you so much and I was so fucking alone—I was always so alone after you were gone._

God, there was nothing inside him but misery and bitter loathing and he couldn’t even breathe around it. This was never going to end, he would be here forever, watching his mother die over and over. It felt like his own heart stopped, turning lifeless and cold under the sheer weight of that hate.

But as he saw his mother take that final breath for the fourth time, expecting that hopeless, tragic Howard…, it wasn’t his father’s name that left her lips. It was his.

_Tony…_

It was odd, watching his mother die in front of him, while her tender, melodic voice echoed in his ears.
Tony... My dear, sweet boy.

Some part of him could almost picture her suddenly, alive and warm and happy. The crinkle at the corner of her eyes when she smiled. The depth of love as she looked at him with those warm brown eyes. Mom always smelled liked the roses from the garden and her touch was always gentle, a tender caress of Tony’s head or across his baby-soft cheeks when he was a little boy.

Maria Stark was dead in front of him, but Tony could almost feel her delicate hand against his face.

I love you so much, Tony. But it’s time for you to find peace.

“Mom,” he choked on his words. “Mom, no, please don’t leave me.”

It’s time for you to let us go.

Her voice was always the one thing that soothed Tony to sleep when he was little. Sweet, tender lullabies as she rocked him to sleep in her arms, smelling of roses and love.

My brave passerotto. I always knew that you would fly.

Tony clenched his eyes shut and inhaled a shuddering breath, feeling something inside him shift. He could still hear Maria’s singing and that soothing melody coalesced within him, pushing away the festering darkness and instead filling him with that sweet, tender scent of roses that carried with it his mother’s love. With another breath, that momentary haze of hatred cleared and he could feel his whole heart again, beating against his chest and reminding him of all the tenderness, affection, need he felt for James.

It’s time, cuore mio.

The broken, desperate “I’m sorry, Tony, I’m so sorry…” united with the echoes of Maria’s lullaby and Tony finally opened his eyes to look down at James, who was still on his knees. Ignoring the whirl of the images around them, Tony slowly lowered himself next to the man and reached out to take James’ face into his hands and tilt it up so he could see those heartbroken blue eyes. The trails of tears were wet against his palms.

“I’m so sorry, Tony. I— I killed them both. I’m sorry.”

So much guilt and pain behind those eyes. So much suffering. They’ve both been through so much hell.

Let go, Tony.

“I forgive you.”

James just shook his head, a broken “What? No, no— I don’t deserve it—” escaping his lips, ending on a miserable, keening whimper.

So Tony just said it again. “Yes, you do, and I forgive you, James. I forgive you.”

“Yes, you do, and I forgive you, James. I forgive you.” Each time, with each breath, it was easier to say.

“I know. And I forgive you. I forgive you for Mom and Dad.” Each time, with each breath, it was easier to say.

In the memory surrounding them, Tony's parents were dying again, but he refused to look away from James.
“There were— there were so many others— I killed them all—” James’ face crumbled as he sobbed, “I killed a little girl— I couldn’t leave witnesses— and she was— she was so tiny—”

The rest of that confession was lost in helpless, inconsolable tears.

A part of Tony still knew that James was no less a victim in this horrible nightmare than his parents or that little girl or anyone else the Soldier killed. But by the desperate way James now clung to Tony’s left wrist and that heartbreaking hope in his eyes each time he heard Tony’s words, Tony realized that this was what the man needed.

Absolution.

“Maybe it’s not my place, but I forgive you for the rest of them too. Fuck, for everything. For Mom and Dad, for Siberia, for— for everything. I forgive you, James.”

The memory restarted itself again and they both turned to witness it, but this time, they stayed kneeling next to each other and Tony’s hands remained firm and sure against James’ tear soaked cheeks, as the other man still clung to his wrist like a lifeline.

They both watched Howard and Maria Stark die for the sixth time. Desperate pleas for help. Metal against flesh, blood against snow. A final, dying breath.

It still hurt, like a deep ache in his belly, to watch his parents die. But instead of hatred and hell boiling inside him this time, only his mother’s voice and the feeling of James’ face against his hands stayed with him.

It’s time for you to find peace.

Images blurred again, but instead of the same dark road, all that appeared around them was the dimly lit room, as the holographic projectors quietly powered themselves down.

James let out another helpless sob and Tony didn’t question his instincts. He just pulled James towards him and wrapped his arms around him, letting the man hide his face in his shoulder. He felt James clutch the back of his shirt in a desperate, unyielding grip as he wrapped his own arm around Tony.

James’ whole body shook against him as broken sobs wrecked his whole frame, one after another.

“It’s okay, just let it go. Just let go, James,” Tony whispered quietly as he gently took off the BARF equipment, pressed his face against the man’s temple, and slowly began to rock him. “It’s alright, you’re not alone anymore.”

A desperate inhale of air and then, for the first time in seventy years, James Barnes finally let himself weep.

As James clung to him harder, pressing himself closer and trembling as he cried, all Tony could do was hold him tighter and continue to whisper soothing, comforting nonsense. By the blurring of the room around him, he knew he was still crying too. He tried an inhale of his own, still barely able to breathe, and managed to let out a broken, shaky exhale before closing his eyes and letting the tears silently fall.

Tony realized the last time he cried like this was— was when Rhodey found him drunk out of his mind back at the empty mansion, weeping in the dark corner of his father’s office. Rhodey took him into his arms back then too, and rocked him through the tears, whispering some soothing comfort into his ear as Tony bawled and let his grief overtake him.
“Shh, it’s alright. I’m here. Everything’s okay,” Tony murmured as he felt James’ body shudder with another sob. Tony desperately hoped that he was providing some sense of comfort to the man, the same way Rhodey did when Tony felt like his whole life shattered into pieces. Tony drew his own comfort from James, his warm, heavy weight against him, and he realized in that moment that his own heart was now so intertwined with the man in his arms, that it would kill him when he would be forced to let go.

And he knew with certainty that someday he wouldn’t have a choice but to let James go. Not now, not yet. Not when James still needed him. But someday—

Those clever blue eyes, that soft teasing smile, that curiosity and wit… The gorgeous planes of that face and the angles of his body… Even that darkness inside James… None of it was Tony’s—*Bucky Barnes will always belong to Steve Rogers, Tony, never forget that*—and he knew someday he would have to let go.

But not right now. Because right now, James was still in his arms and he needed Tony’s comfort and reassurance. He still needed Tony.

So Tony stayed on the floor of the dark room with James as the man’s quiet sobs and Tony’s litany of murmured comfort blended into a quiet echo around them. Two broken men, finally letting themselves have a chance to grieve for the pain they were forced to suffer. For the lives they never got a chance to live.

Eventually, Tony felt the body in his arms slowly relax as the broken exhales became fewer and fewer. Without a conscious thought, Tony pressed his lips to James’ temple as he carded his hand through the man’s hair, trying to infuse some comfort and tenderness into his touch.

“We’ll be alright. We’ll get through this, okay?” he whispered and felt the man give him a small, shaky nod. Tony pulled him in just a little bit tighter and he felt James do the same, that grip on the back of Tony’s shirt never losing its desperate strength.

Finally though, with a smaller, softer sob followed by a quiet sniffle, James slowly pulled away, although Tony’s hands were still around his shoulders and James’ own hand just moved its grip to the front of Tony’s shirt. The man’s red-rimmed, tired eyes looked at Tony, but it wasn’t the guilt and the pain playing across those blue eyes anymore. There was a softness to them now, as exhausted and as watery as it was.

Tony tried to smile, although he knew stray tears still escaped his own eyes. Gently, he moved his hands back to James’ face and tenderly wiped away the tears marring those cheeks. James let go of the shirt and instead took a hold of Tony’s left hand, turning his face into it and pressing a soft kiss into Tony’s palm.

Tony swallowed back the roiling emotions inside him when he felt James’ lips against his skin, knowing this wasn’t the right time nor place. *There would never be a right time or place, Tony. You’ll have to let him go.*

“Everything will be alright, James…” Tony’s voice was gruff with tears and he cleared his throat before continuing. “But for now… just go back to your quarters… rest for as long as you need. I’ll take care of everything here. I promise no one will take you away.” *Not yet. Not when you still need me.* “And when you, uh——” Tony took another deep breath and was thankful it didn’t break on a sob this time, “when you’re ready to face the world again, come find me. I think we could both use some tea.”

James nodded against the hands still on his face and tried to say something, but Tony just shook his
“Later— we’ll talk later. Right now, we just— we both just need to rest for a bit. Okay?”

This time, James stayed silent, but his expression carried so much gratitude and affection behind it that Tony felt his heart skip a beat. He wasn’t sure what to do with any of it, but he knew that this didn’t truly belong to him, so he just tried to smile again and let his hands fall.

He watched as the man slowly made his way up, barely able to stand on his feet, and quietly headed out of the room. Before he crossed the threshold though, James turned around and mouthed a silent Thank you, Tony before turning around and leaving.

Tony let himself sit in silence for a few minutes once he was alone. But finally, he had to know.

“Friday? How did that last memory go?”

“The results from Mr. Barnes after that sixth and final viewing of the memory indicate that all physiological responses to the memory are now within the acceptable parameters. The memory has been disassociated, Boss.”

Tony let out a long, weary breath. “Good, good… Friday, erase every record for this memory, except for the first three viewings from earlier today. Doctor the records to make the third viewing reflect the results of this final one. Mark it as disassociated.”

One stupid decision after another. Maybe this was why people didn’t trust him. Hard to trust the guy with an all-powerful AI who could manipulate any digital data at will.

But this was for James. This night would stay between him, James, and Friday. No one else.

“Erase any and all surveillance for this room after that third viewing and replace it with images and audio of an empty room. Back up the records for this memory on our private server, but then set up a bug on it in the BARF system. If anyone other than myself attempts to view the actual memory, erase it.”

He huffed a humorless laugh. “I mean, technology malfunctions all the time, right, Fri?”

“Only if we want it to, Boss. I’ve taken care of everything you asked. All of this— it will keep Mr. Barnes with us, right?”

“Yeah, baby girl. James isn’t going anywhere.”

Not until he chooses to leave.

Tony listened to Friday acknowledge that fact with a happy “I’m glad, Boss,” and then he let himself fall back onto the floor, feeling exhausted and empty inside.

Empty except for the echoes of his mother’s lullaby and the phantom touch of James’ lips against his palm.

And as he stared at the dark ceiling, feeling the last of his tears run down his temples, he let himself say a final goodbye to Mom and Dad. He lay there alone and finally, for the first time in so many years, Tony Stark just let himself breathe.
Phew. That was rough.

But I think this gets both of our broken superheroes to where they can *finally* move forward. Took them long enough. I so did not plan for this to evolve into such a long story, so I can only hope that you guys are enjoying the slow ride with me. And I'm super excited for the next part of this fic - less angst, more UST, and all Tony/Bucky goodness!

And since this *is* my midseason finale, I am also going to take a brief hiatus to catch my own breath. Likely no more than a week and a half, so you won't even miss me.

Thank you for reading and an even bigger thank you to those who left comments and feedback the whole way through. We will be back to our regularly scheduled WinterIron programming next week! <3
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaack~

I missed you guys! But we should be back to our regular posting schedule now and to make up for the break (and all that angst last time), here's an extra long chapter! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on, Peter, back on your feet! I know you can do better than that!”

The kid just groaned, lying on the padded floor of the training room. “I'm too tired, Bucky,” he whined, but then raised his head just enough to glare at the man. “How is it that you manage to beat me so many times?” he asked, not bothering to hide the petulant tone. He dropped his head back. “You know, if I had my suit for hand-to-hand, I'd totally win all the time.”

Bucky huffed a laugh and walked over to Peter, extending his hand. “Yeah, and if I had my left arm, I'd probably do a little better too.”

Peter took the offered hand and used it to lift himself off the ground. “Yeah, that's a fair point,” he conceded sheepishly, “but still, why do I have to fight without my suit and my web shooters?”

“Because you won't always have those. And you want to be a real Avenger someday, don't you?”

“More than anything!”

“Then no more of this whining, kid,” Bucky said, but then softened the words with a wink. He took a few steps back. “Now, come on, try to land a real punch this time!”

Peter shook his head, laughing at Bucky’s teasing, and not wasting anymore time, lunged forward with renewed vigor. Bucky couldn’t help his own smile as he easily dodged the first punch, but then had to actually pay attention to dodge the second one. For all the whining, the kid really was getting better.

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“So how is your therapy progressing, Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky shrugged and went back to looking over the recipe book in front of him. “Going as well as expected, I guess. More good days than bad for sure, and BARF is getting easier too. Can’t believe it’s been over a month already.” He looked up. “Oh, and please, just call me Bucky already.”

“Hmm, ‘Bucky’... I just find it such a strange nickname for someone named James Buchanan Barnes.”

“You can blame Stevie for it. Don’t remember when he came up with it, but it just— stuck, I guess. Not that you have any room to judge. Your name is the Vision.”

The android smiled that small, peaceful smile of his. “Touché, Bucky.”
Bucky let out an amused chuckle. “Okay, yeah, that does sound weird coming from you. Alright,”
he tapped the book for emphasis, “what are we trying to make again?”

“A pear, chocolate, and walnut crumble.”

After flipping through the pages, Bucky held the recipe book up to the android. “This one?”

The android confirmed with a simple nod, before heading over to the pantry to pick out the
ingredients. Bucky examined the picture and gave a curious hum.

“That does look good actually. Do you— do you think Tony will like it too? I know he doesn’t have
as big of a sweet tooth as me or the kids.”

Vision was back at the counter, hands full with a bag of pears, flour, and sugar. “Oh, I am certain
Tony will love it. He seems quite enamored with everything you make, if I’m not mistaken.” The
android paused for a second and then looked at Bucky with a smile that, for Vision, looked
downright mischievous. “Well, except for our first attempt at making crème brûlée.”

Bucky couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped him. “Tony’s face was priceless. We handed him a
custard that didn’t set—”

“—covered with sugar that was so burnt it was black.”

“Hey, in my defense, I didn’t know that torch had that much fire power!”

“I just can’t believe Tony actually ate it. I know I’m still learning about ‘humor’ and ‘pranking’, but
I thought we made it obvious we were only joking with him.”

“Nah, he knew we were kidding, but I think he saw it as a challenge. He just looked me straight in
the eye with the most serious expression on his face,” Bucky recalled, still laughing, as he began
pulling out the mixing bowls, “and just chugged the runny custard and then chewed his way through
the burnt sugar.”

Vision handed him the flour and sugar and began examining the recipe book himself. “Well, it
certainly was entertaining to watch. Now thankfully, there are no torches involved in this one, so we
may have another successful dessert on our hands. Let us see…”

He began reading the steps of the recipe out loud and Bucky followed along, first measuring out the
flour, then the sugar, into the bowl in front of him. He really was hoping that Vision was right and
they would end up with something delicious because it always gave him a thrill to come down to the
lab and see the satisfied look on Tony’s face when he would taste something else that Bucky made
for him.

***

The images flittered back and forth through Bucky’s mind, interwoven with delicate, shining strings
of gold and he struggled to hang on to the images for very long. Was he dreaming?

No, Bucky Barnes didn’t dream. Not since he fell.

There were no dreams now. Only memories. Flashes of blood, echoes of pained screams, shadows
of cruel faces… Nothing but memories of death.

But maybe these were memories too? These weren’t filled with the familiar cold though. No, the
memories gently cascading through his mind now were warm and soft, full of light and sugar-sweet.
Bucky wanted to smile, but he realized he couldn’t move his lips. Couldn’t move any part of him, in fact. For a moment, he thought that maybe he needed to worry, but any sense of panic was suddenly soothed as the shimmering gold tendrils filled all the aching parts of his head and he sunk back into the comforting warmth.

***

“Say it, James.”

Bucky raised his eyebrow at the engineer.

“Say it. Or I’m keeping it all to myself.”

“You’re gonna graft a third arm to yourself?”

“Hell yes! No one here appreciates this beautiful creation anyways. Besides,” Tony looked up from his work and gave Bucky a self-satisfied grin, “I would rock the three-arm look.”

Bucky rested his chin on his hand, unable to help the smile that stretched across his own face. He wished he could see Tony’s eyes, but they were obscured by the goggles he was currently wearing.

“I’m sure you would look just swell. But I think you’re missing a very big downside to your plan.”

“And what would that be?”

“Extra arm means Ms. Potts and the Colonel would expect extra work from you.”

Tony made a disgusted noise and scrunched up his nose. “Ugh, wait, you’re right. Pepper would just expect three StarkPhone updates instead of two.” He shook his head. “Never mind, you can keep your arm. But I still want to hear you say it, James! It would please me.”

“Fine,” he acquiesced with his most put-upon whine, “it’s a beautiful work of art, Tony.”

“What was that? Sorry, must be going deaf in my old age.”

The smug expression on Tony’s face would’ve come off as arrogant to anyone else, but Bucky knew better. “The arm is a magnificent work of art that should be in a museum and you’re the greatest genius of the 21st century. Maybe even the 22nd century. Did I miss anything?”

“Nah, I think we got everything covered,” the man waggled his eyebrows at him, which looked downright ridiculous with those goggles still on, and went back to whatever delicate work he was performing on the wiring of the arm. Said masterpiece was on the workbench between Tony and Bucky, and it looked essentially complete, although Bucky assumed there was still a lot of internal work to be done. Seeing it now, an actual arm made of metal, electronics, and whatever other pieces of tech Tony managed to cram in there— well, it still took Bucky’s breath away. The whole experience of getting to see Tony build the arm from scratch over the last several weeks had been exhilarating - to see all the parts, all these feats of engineering and science, come together in this one cohesive project.

Of course, the fact that it gave Bucky all the excuses he needed to spend as much time down here at the lab as possible was probably the best part of it.

Tony leaned back finally, putting the delicate sharp tool in his hand down and letting himself enjoy a big stretch. He then pulled the goggles up over his hair and ran the back of his hand across his forehead in an attempt to wipe away some of the sweat (instead, he just managed to leave a streak of
oil behind and Bucky marveled at just endearing he found the disheveled, exhausted, oil-streaked mess in front of him).

“God, this wiring is giving me a headache. It’s one thing to rig up all the connections for my suits, but to get a cybernetic prosthetic hooked up to an actual human brain—” Tony reached out to run his hand over the metallic edge that would connect to Bucky’s shoulder. “It’s complicated as hell, but it’s also so damn fascinating.” Here Tony’s eyes lit up with that “science is amazing” sparkle that Bucky loved so much. “I know your old arm had some ability to sense heat, pressure, texture—really rudimentary though. But this baby’s sensory input capabilities will be so much more sophisticated and refined, that they will make all those piece of shit Hydra engineers weep in envy as they rot in hell.”

Bucky shook his head in exasperation and wondered whether it was him or the Soldier who most appreciated Tony’s very vocal vehemence against Hydra on his behalf.

He decided it was probably both.

“So when do you think it’ll be ready?”

Tony tapped his fingers against his chip in contemplation. “I’d say— two weeks?”

Wait. Bucky must not have heard that right. “Two weeks? But that’s so—that’s so soon!”

“You said it yourself, super soldier. I’m the greatest genius of the 21st century. Plus…” Tony drew the word out and his expression turned decidedly sheepish, “I may have also been slacking on some of my other work. So if Pep goes after me for not reading the Asia contracts yet, I’m telling her it’s all your fault. On the plus side, we can schedule surgery as soon as I’m done!”

Bucky hesitated for a moment. “…You’re including some sort of kill switch in it, right?”

Tony blinked owlishly at him. “What do we need a kill switch for?”

“Tony, there’s no way I’d be done with my therapy in two weeks! The triggers—they’re still going to be a problem!”

“Aw, come on, James, you’re in one of the safest places on Earth. What could possibly happen?”

“Do you want that list alphabetically or in the order of stupid involved?”

Instead of answering that, Tony just gave him his best-looking pout. “But this is a work of art, James! We can’t ruin art with things like kill switches!”

Despite the fact that a pouting Tony would have convinced Bucky of just about anything else, he was not going to budge on this.

“Ms. Friday, could you see if Colonel Rhodes—” he ignored Tony’s indignant “Hey!” and continued “—is available to come down to the lab for a moment? Tell him Tony is about to make a questionable decision, please.”

Friday chirped a happy “Will do!” before Tony had a chance to protest, so the man just glared at Bucky instead.

“Oh, that’s just not fair! Bringing Rhodey Bear into this is cheating!”

“I play to win, Tony.”
It only took a few minutes before the Colonel was making his way through the lab. He announced himself with a “Is Tony Stank making questionable decisions down here?”

Tony groaned as Rhodes appeared around the corner. “Dammit, I was hoping you forgot about that!”

“Like I’d ever forget about that. That little nugget was the highlight of what was an otherwise hellish week of physio,” Rhodes responded and came over to stand next to Bucky, arms crossed and facing Tony. “Alright, what is he up to now?”

“Tony says the arm will be done in two weeks and—” Tony’s “Tattletale!” was also ignored “—and he refuses to put in a kill switch, which is absolutely necessary, since, as you know, my therapy won’t be done in two weeks.”

Both Rhodes and Bucky turned to look at Tony, whose eyes just widened and he jumped off his stool and pointed an accusing finger at them. “Oh no, no— you two even have the same expression on your faces right now! No, no, no, we’re not having this ‘team up on Tony to make him do the responsible thing’ deal going on!”

“Sorry, Tones. Either you build safety features into the arm that lets Barnes, Friday and myself disable it… or the man doesn’t get an arm.”

Bucky nodded along. “You heard the Colonel. I don’t get an arm. And it’s a really nice arm, Tony.” That last part was accompanied with Bucky’s best set of pleading eyes.

Tony just glared at them. “Hate you. Hate you both. Why do I even keep the two of you around?”

“He cooks you food,” Rhodes pointed at Bucky, who mirrored his gesture.

“And the Colonel deals with all the politicians you hate.”

After a few moments of giving them accusing glares and drumming his fingers against his thigh, Tony finally acquiesced. “Fine, fine. But as soon as Fatima and I sign off on the triggers, I’m getting rid of any and all kill switches, understood?” Tony’s expression turned decidedly more serious. “This arm is a damn prosthetic,” he muttered quietly, refusing to look at them now, “it wasn’t meant to be some kind of a goddamn leash.”

Those quietly spoken words suddenly put Tony’s reticence in a completely different light and Bucky couldn’t help the swell of affection in his chest. Even now, however misguided the sentiment may have been, Tony was still trying to take care of him, to protect him.

It made him realize, not for the first time, just how lucky he was to have this man in his life now.

***

Tony…

These memories, filled with soft smiles, teasing words, and warm brown eyes, were definitely Bucky’s favorite, even if he couldn’t hang on to them for very long. The tendrils of gold inside his head made him feel like he was floating, but there was no fear and no pain, so he thought back to Tony and let himself sink again into the inviting warmth of his memories.

***

“Are you sure we don’t have any other options?”
“I ran through your results backwards and forwards. Initially, I thought we’d have something that would work, but apparently your resistance to drugs is even stronger than Cap’s—” Tony stumbled on the word, but continued a second later as if it didn’t happen. “And, uh— I’ve looked into every form of anesthesia available to 21st century science. None of it will put you out.”

Bucky noticed a long time ago that Tony almost exclusively referred to Steve as “Rogers,” but sometimes, when Tony was too focused on something else, he would let a “Cap” slip and it always broke Bucky’s heart. Because even now, after everything that happened, there was still so much fondness and nostalgia left behind that nickname. Despite everything, it was obvious that Tony used to love Steve (all of the Avengers, really), probably still did, and that just made all those past betrayals even more unforgivable.

Tony heaved a sigh next to him and threw a few more popcorn kernels into his mouth. They were on the couch in the common room for a two-person movie night (the rest of the Avengers proved to be elusive and the kids were with their respective families), but they got so side-tracked with the conversation that they haven’t even had the chance to pick out a film.

“Can’t I just stay awake during the surgery? I’m sure I can handle it.”

Tony’s lips thinned into an unhappy grimace. “No and no. And that’s not me trying to say you’re a wimp or anything. But the surgery for your arm is going to take 20 hours, James. It’ll be excruciating.” Again, there was that unconscious nervous gesture of Tony’s hand running across his chest. “I know a thing or two about being operated on without anesthetic,” he said quietly, staring off into the distance, “so there’s no way in hell I’m gonna sit there and torture you for 20 hours.”

Before Bucky could say anything, Tony shook himself out of that sudden dark moment and continued in his normal tone. “Not to mention, your assassin alter ego might not react positively to all that pain. Imagine if he came out to play just as we’re trying to attach your arm.”

“Fair point,” Bucky conceded and let out a sigh of his own. “So no other options then?”

“Well, we can postpone. I’ll keep looking into other drugs, other methods of putting you out. But I’m not gonna lie, there’s zero guarantee that we’ll find something.”

Dammit. Bucky really wanted his arm already. “So then what you’re telling me,” he said as he stole a few popcorn pieces from the bowl in Tony’s lap, “is that the only thing we’re left with is magic?”

As expected, Tony’s reaction was the usual exaggerated expression of disgust (although honestly, the way Tony scrunched up his nose like that was cute more than anything else). “I know, I hate myself for even considering it. But yeah, at this point, science is failing us.” The man dramatically clutched at his heart. “Oh god, that hurt to say. I think— I think my heart just broke.”

Bucky felt a little better in the face of Tony’s theatrics, but everything about this still left him apprehensive. “I just— the thought of someone rooting around in my head like that... I’m sure you understand why I’m reluctant?”

Tony gave him a more solemn nod. “I know it’s not ideal. All I can tell you is that I trust Strange, otherwise I wouldn’t even be suggesting this. He’s, uh— well, he can be a bit of an arrogant dick,” Tony admitted with a laugh, “Rhodey describes him as having all of my worst qualities without any of my charm to make up for them, but despite that, he’s actually a decent guy. And I do trust him. For what it’s worth, I, uh—” Tony hesitated for a moment, “I actually let him dig around in my own head once.”

Bucky’s curiosity was peaked. “What? Why?” He watched as Tony drummed his fingers nervously
against the bowl of popcorn.

“A few years back—before all of this,” Tony gestured vaguely between himself and Bucky, “during the Ultron thing, I, uh— I had someone fuck with my head using magic and it, uh— it had some long-lasting effects on me.”

Bucky tensed. “What do you mean ‘long-lasting effects’?”

“Night terrors,” the man replied simply and then scoffed. “Because I didn’t have enough of those already, right?”

The shadow that crossed Tony’s eyes as he said those words—part fear, part pain, and part resignation—made Bucky’s jaw clench in anger. He knew that this wasn’t the right time, but he was definitely going to get more details on this later—the who, the what, and the why. For informational purposes of course.

Not because the Soldier was putting together a literal hit list in his head, starting with anyone who dared lay a hand on his clever Tony Stark.

Bucky certainly wasn’t planning on killing anyone, but he supposed there was no harm in keeping a list of everyone who should stay the hell away from Tony. So he just left the Soldier to plot his revenge and focused his attention back on the other man.

“Anyways, the topic came up at some point and in an uncharacteristically generous gesture, Strange suggested that the night terrors could be due to residual magic and offered to look inside my head in an attempt to remove it.”

“Was he able to help?”

“No, he wasn’t… but not because he didn’t know what he was doing!” Tony was quick to clarify. “It’s just—well, there was no magic left in my head. It was just my dumb, broken brain doing what dumb, broken brains do.” Tony gave a careless what can you do? shrug, but Bucky could see that this topic weighted heavily on the man. Yeah, he was decidedly okay with the Soldier putting whoever did this to Tony right at the top of that hit list.

Tony shook off these dark thoughts too however and turned his body a bit to face Bucky more fully. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that it wasn’t easy, letting Strange use his magic mumbo jumbo powers on me, given that I already had someone with magical powers fuck with my head before. But I trusted him and I can only tell you that I trust him now to keep you safe too. For what it’s worth.”

It was worth a whole lot, Bucky had to admit. Tony trusted this man and Bucky trusted Tony. The math was pretty simple.

“So he would use these magical powers of his to keep me under?”

“More or less. He compared it to anesthesia, but apparently a lot more pleasant. The spell, or whatever—god, I hate myself for even saying the word—is supposed to put your mind in a ‘pleasant, calming dream state that would prevent the patient from experiencing all external stimuli’,” Tony was obviously mimicking Steven Strange.

“What about the Soldier?”

“Strange is aware and said it shouldn’t be a problem. I wish I had more details, but ya know—fuckin’ magic. No one ever wants to give me an explanation of how it all works.”
Well, what other choice did they have? And if Tony trusted this man... But still, going under left Bucky apprehensive for more reasons than one.

“I just— I haven’t been fully knocked out like that since cryo in Wakanda,” he grimaced, trying to find a way to explain. “The Soldier— I don’t think he ever actually sleeps. Even when I’m sleeping, there’s always some part of him— of me— that’s alert, that can bring me back to full awareness in seconds. And being knocked out— to be unaware of my surroundings— I’m just scared that—”

That I’ll wake up back in Hydra’s hands and all of this was nothing but a cruel dream.

Tony seemed to have picked up on what Bucky couldn’t voice (of course he did, somehow Tony always knew what Bucky needed) and the man’s smile turned softer.

“James, listen. I’ll be there the whole time. The entire 20 hours, running the whole damn show. Strange will be there too. Hell, Rhodey is probably going to mother hen from a distance somehow. And Peter and Harley will demand updates from Friday every fifteen minutes because apparently you’re their new favorite person now,” Tony teased and rolled his eyes in good humor, but then his tone settled into that reassuring softness again. “And when you wake up, the first thing you’re gonna see is my exhausted, sleep-deprived face.” The teasing smile was back. “I’ll even hold your hand, it’ll be just like in the movies!”

Bucky couldn’t help his huff of laughter. Between the uncertainly and the apprehension and the magic, he was still scared, but none of that mattered because above all else, he trusted Tony.

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Magic...

The word seemed relevant somehow, but try as he might, Bucky couldn’t hang on to it for very long. Everything still shimmered around him, inside him, like a protective sea of gold that kept the darkness at bay. And as long as the darkness and the cold couldn’t touch him, he knew he was safe and there was nothing to worry about.

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Tony was seated on the bed, cross-legged, sipping at his mug of herbal tea. Bucky leaned against the headboard, facing Tony, and nursed his own cup. There was a tray of food between them, but for now, it was left untouched.

They didn’t say much to each other, still raw from the excruciating (cathartic, liberating, freeing) experience last night, but Bucky drew strength from Tony’s presence and hoped that the other man felt the same way.

His mind flashed back to the session. He knew the whole thing must have only taken minutes and they couldn’t have been in that room for more than a half an hour, but it felt like eternity.

Shame, guilt, so much self-loathing… and then all of that overcome by gratitude, absolution, and relief. Thinking back to Howard and Maria’s death now felt less painful somehow. It still hurt, but the guilt no longer threatened to rip him apart from the inside out. A part of Bucky knew it was because the BARF system did its job and altered the actual physical responses of his brain to the memory. But he was also certain that, more than anything else, it was Tony who shifted everything inside him.

I forgive you, James.
Bucky knew better than anyone that words wielded immense power. The triggers, those simple unassuming words, imprisoned and enslaved him for decades.

And now, four simple words gave him absolution. Freedom. Peace.

Last night didn’t fix everything, far from it, but Bucky couldn’t deny that things felt different somehow. Lighter. More hopeful.

Forgiveness—true forgiveness from someone who had a right to give it—was a kindness and a mercy that Bucky never believed he deserved.

But Tony believed him worthy. And that would have to be enough.

And now sitting here, with the man so close to him (just as exhausted and drained as he was, but still smiling whenever their gazes met), there was so much undeniable affection and tenderness inside Bucky that it felt like his heart would break into a million pieces because it wasn’t big enough to hold all of it in. He honestly didn’t think he still had the capacity to feel something so good so strongly.

Thinking back to his breakdown after the memories were over, Bucky thought he’d feel ashamed, spending god knows how long crying in Tony’s arms. Maybe some form of pride would rankle at being so vulnerable and so weak. But all he really felt with Tony in that desperate moment of emotional release was safety.

It was strange that Tony—fragile, vulnerable, perfectly human Tony—who Bucky felt fiercely protective over, was the one making the super soldier feel safe. But he supposed it wasn’t about physical strength in that moment.

No, it was about the fact that he knew, with complete certainty, that Tony wouldn’t judge him, that he wouldn’t hold that moment of vulnerability against him, and that it was safe to let go. It was safe to grieve and let himself feel the loss of everything that was taken away from him all those years ago.

But looking at the man in front of him now, Bucky knew that what he gained was quickly overshadowing anything that he may have lost.

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Tony... His Tony...

Bucky hoped the shimmering golden sea around him would keep bringing more memories like this one and when his mind sank into the warmth again, he wasn’t disappointed.

Dodging the curious claw from an eager Dum-E with a “We’ll play later, buddy,” Bucky made his way through the lab, carrying a plate of pastries in his right hand and a cup of coffee in the left, the sheen of the metal arm reflecting the bright blue lights of the holograms scattered around the lab.

Wait, that wasn’t right. Bucky was certain he wouldn’t have a memory of himself in the lab with the metal arm...

Tony had his back to him, engrossed in soldering some delicate part of the Iron Man boot. Bucky announced his presence by placing the plate and the mug on one of the desks behind Tony with a soft clank and the engineer acknowledged him with a “That better be my coffee, babe.”

And Tony definitely never called him that before either.

Bucky approached Tony and without any hesitation, wrapped his arms around the man from
behind, pulling him flush against his chest. With a soft press of lips against the man’s neck, Bucky murmured a teasing “I think the coffee can wait, don’t you?”

This wasn’t a memory, Bucky realized. No… This— this was a fantasy. Deciding that was just as good, he let his mind fully immerse itself in the images before him.

“I know what you’re trying to do, James, but I seriously do have work,” Tony said, but Bucky also noticed that the man made no attempts to pull away from his touch. He pressed more soft butterfly kisses up and down the exposed neck and shoulder and his hands quickly found their way under Tony’s thin shirt, fingers skirting gently against the warm skin of the man’s stomach.

As he suspected, as soon as Tony felt the cool metal of his left hand against his skin, the engineer abandoned whatever tool he was holding and dropped his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder with a low moan.

“Babe, seriously, there’s work—” he still tried to protest, but all Bucky had to do was let his metal hand trail just a little bit lower. He ran his fingers, just a barely there touch, against the front of Tony’s jeans and the man was suddenly putty in his hands.

Tony let out a throaty, breathless “Fuck, James…”, voice already an octave lower, and Bucky reveled in it. God, he loved how easily Tony fell apart under his hands. Sometimes all it took was a simple touch, just a gentle caress of his fingers to make Tony incoherent with need.

Feeling Tony press himself even closer against Bucky’s chest and straining to get some pressure from the metal hand still mercilessly teasing him with feather light touches, Bucky also realized just how perfect Tony’s body felt against his own. They were made for each other.

Tony let out a breathless “I swear to god, you better not stop—”, but of course as soon as those words left his lips, Bucky pulled the metal hand away and wrapped it back around Tony’s waist.

“But I thought you had all that work, doll?” Bucky murmured in Tony’s ear with a huff of indulgent laughter and the man let out a needy whimper. Taking some pity on him, he returned his attention to the inviting, exposed skin of Tony’s neck. God, he could kiss the man like this forever, but he realized very quickly this wasn’t enough. He wanted Tony’s lips on his.

He pulled away just far enough to turn Tony around so he was facing Bucky before stepping back between the man’s legs. Tony didn’t waste any time, his hands already skirting across the planes of Bucky’s chest, with one finding its way into Bucky’s hair while the other took hold of Bucky’s flesh hand. Bringing their intertwined hands to his lips, Tony placed his own tender kisses against Bucky’s skin, over and over, never breaking the connection between their eyes.

So much affection, tangled with need and desire, in those brown eyes. So much love. For a moment, it felt like the whole lab around them was flooded with warm, golden light and Tony himself seemed to be glowing. It felt like magic.

Somehow, that seemed important, but not important enough, because Bucky still wanted his kiss. So he pulled their joined hands against his chest, cradled Tony’s face in his metal hand and closing his eyes, pulled the man closer to finally erase the distance between them.

But instead of Tony’s soft, full lips against his own, all Bucky felt was an icy cold. His eyes flew open in fear, but there was no more Tony. No more lab. No more golden glow.

There was only darkness, merciless and cold around him, and he was helpless, unable to do anything but fall, fall, fall…
Bucky felt the darkness around him slowly ease back, bringing him back to a state of sluggish, barely coherent awareness.

It was cold.

He felt his own breath hitch in his throat as sudden panic overtook him. His heart thundered in his chest. *No, no, no.*

There was light filtering through the darkness now and where there was light and where there was cold, there was also pain, pain, pain.

*No, no, no.* He couldn’t be back in cryo, he couldn’t be back in Hydra’s hands. Those memories, they were real, they were his life now! *Please, please let it all be real—*

They were— they were going to wipe him again— take away everything from him!

Tony— *Tony* was real and *oh god, no, please don’t take Tony away from me!*

However, before Bucky could even attempt to gather enough air in his lungs to scream, he became aware of a firm, but gentle pressure around this right hand. Someone else’s hand— *warm, so warm*— against his own.

*Someone was holding his hand?*

Through the haze of his panic, he could finally begin to make out words. But there was no German, no Russian… None of the cold, ruthless tones of the scientists or his handlers...

“*There you go, James, just keep breathing. Everything’s fine. You’re safe.*”

Tony...

It had to be Tony. Bucky would recognize that voice anywhere, the deep soft timber that soothed every part of him and always, *always* made him feel safe and whole. It had the same effect now and Bucky tried to keep breathing, following the instructions of Tony’s steady, measured tone.

“*You’re doing great, James.*” For a moment, there was a pause and then, “Strange, seriously, what are you even doing? His heart rate is through the roof! I thought the magic was supposed to soothe him as he woke up!”

“*Get off my back, Stark,*” another voice responded, strained and exhausted, but Bucky didn’t care about it. He just wanted to hear Tony again. “*Being in his head for 20 hours wasn’t exactly a walk in the park. Just— just give me a damn second.*”

The second passed and then, suddenly, the gold shimmering threads were back, flowing through Bucky’s mind and wrapping themselves around the panic and the fear, disintegrating all of that icy cold darkness and leaving behind nothing but a mist of golden light.

Everything was warm and soft again and Bucky wanted to smile. Surprisingly, his body actually
obeyed this time and he felt the corners of his lips stretch upward.

Finally, he felt brave enough to open his eyes.

Tony was looking down at him, expression filled with warmth and affection mixed with a touch of worry. Bucky realized that with the golden light surrounding the man, the flakes of gold in those pretty brown eyes were all the more evident.

“Wow, okay, now you’ve just made him loopy, Strange,” Tony said with a chuckle, looking somewhere over Bucky’s head, but then those mirthful eyes were back on him. “Thank you for telling me I have pretty eyes, James, that’s a new one for me.” There was a teasing smile on Tony’s face and Bucky decided he didn’t even care that he was announcing some of his thoughts out loud. Tony’s eyes were pretty and the whole world should be made aware of that fact.

“The euphoria will wear off soon, give him a moment or two. It’s—difficult to gauge how much magic is needed.” It was that second voice again. Stephen Strange filtered through Bucky’s mind as he realized the man was sitting behind him, hands hovering by Bucky’s temples. The Soldier within him, who was also slowly struggling through the golden haze, marked the voice as Ally.

Despite the Soldier’s own sluggishness, that part of him already began the near automatic process of cataloguing the rest of their environment. All exits and potential escape routes, mapped. One, two, three—nineteen people in total scattered around the large room. Equipment, with its incessant beeping and whirring. Medical equipment.

Bucky was in a surgery room. Did he get hurt?

“You still with me, super soldier? How are you feeling?”

Tony’s voice drew Bucky’s attention back to the man, causing Bucky’s smile to return as well. “Feel woozy. Like—Like I have cotton stuffed inside my head.”

“Good cotton or bad cotton?”

Bucky hummed. “Good? Feels like golden, soft cotton. It’s fluffy.”

Tony’s own smile grew wider and he let out a cackle. “Hear that, Strange? Your magic is fluffy.” Another pearl of laughter and Bucky wondered what it would be like to feel that beautiful smile on Tony’s face against his own lips.

He took another deep breath and the tendrils of gold—magic, he realized now—slowly recessed. The world around turned colder, sharper and the golden glow surrounding everything dissolved into the duller grays of reality. However, the golden specks in Tony’s eyes still remained and even without the feel-good effect of the magic, Bucky realized that he still wanted to kiss Tony.

Thankfully, this he didn’t say out loud.

Tony was still talking to Strange, mostly teasing the man about the magic and how exhausted he currently looked. The sorcerer was sniping back at Tony, but Bucky could hear the undercurrent of fondness beneath the seemingly annoyed responses.

Finally, Strange told him that the spell was completed and Tony’s attention was back on Bucky.

“You back with us now?”

Bucky gave him a careful nod. The magic may have disappeared from his head, but he still felt out of
Tony looked away for a second at something on the other side of the hospital bed and Bucky wanted to look over too, but he had a hard time taking his eyes off the man, still needing to assure himself that everything around him was real.

“Alright,” Tony said as he squinted at something. Probably one of his holographic screens. “Try and move your hand for me.”

Bucky obediently flexed his right hand around Tony’s, taking a moment to enjoy the warmth of the hand against his own. Tony’s hand gave its own returning squeeze before the man huffed out a laugh and looked back at Bucky.

“No,” he shook his head, smile turning indulgent, “your other hand.”

My other—what?

Finally, he tore his eyes away from Tony to look down at his own body and—

There, clear as day, was the metal arm, lying at his left side. Attached to him. Memories flooded back - conversations about the surgery, meeting Strange, the preparations…

“Just try to focus on your body as a whole and your brain will catch on quick,” Tony said. Bucky swallowed hard and trying to follow Tony’s instructions, closed his eyes, concentrating on every part of his body and then narrowing that focus to his left side and—

His eyes flew open a second later, inhales suddenly erratic, because his whole mind was flooded—Data, so much data. Sensory inputs, touch, pressure, temperature, texture, calculations of force—

“Easy, easy. I know it’s overwhelming, but you just need to ride it out for the first few seconds. Your brain is more than capable of processing all the data. Just give it time to adjust.”

All Bucky could do was listen to Tony’s voice and use his grip on Tony’s hand to ground himself. He forced his body to take a deep inhale and by the time he let out a slow, steady exhale, the flow of information felt more like a steady stream instead of a crashing wave. Tony was right. With each breath, the information was finding a place for itself in his head, slotting itself like puzzle pieces back into one cohesive whole.

“You good?”

“Yeah, just—” another measured exhale, “—a lot to take in.”

“I bet. You’re doing great though. Now, think you can move a finger for me?”

Bucky concentrated on the new data flowing through his head and focused on taking control of it, bending the information to his will. Another exhale and then— one, two, three, he tapped his left pointer finger against the scratchy sheets of his hospital bed.

The realization that he could actually feel that the sheets were scratchy— that alone felt incredible, already dwarfing anything the old arm was capable of.

He looked back up at Tony who had a satisfied grin on his face as he watched the movement of Bucky’s finger.
“That’s my cyborg super soldier! Alright, now you can do the rest of them?”

Another second of deliberate focus and then Bucky’s metal fingers were carefully tapping out a staccato against the bed. Already he could feel the difference between this and the old arm. The flow of data, despite the initial shock, felt much more natural and he could sense so much more. Even the way the arm physically felt against his shoulder was different - the weight of the metal didn’t pull and didn’t irritate his scarred flesh.

Tony let out an actual Whoo! and grinned at Bucky. “Passing the first test with flying colors! Now, we have roughly another thousand to go— seriously, James, you’re gonna get so sick of me— but for now… how are you feeling? How’s the arm?”

Bucky didn’t respond right away because— how did he feel? He wasn’t sure he could find the right words. How could he explain that he was finally whole again and that it all felt right? That this arm, crafted by Tony’s own hands, was now a perfect part of him?

He couldn’t even begin trying to put any of that into words. So instead, he looked back down at the arm for a moment, then turned back to Tony and gave the man his best deadpan expression.

“Eh,” he shrugged his right shoulder, “the Hydra one was prettier.”

He thoroughly enjoyed the expected theatrics, as Tony dramatically clutched his chest and hissed an offended “How dare you!” at him. However, the indignant expression soon cracked and Tony dissolved into a fit of laughter in the face of Bucky’s own amused smile. Somewhere above him, he thought he heard Strange let out his own quiet and tired chuckle.

“All right, all right. I’m just gonna pretend you’re still high on magic and let that one slide,” Tony winked at him and then looked back over at Strange, jumping straight into a conversation about the readings they were getting.

Bucky tuned out most of the details, instead focusing back on the arm and the new sensations flowing through his body and his brain. As he slowly got the hang of moving his metal wrist, Tony was still chattering excitedly at Strange above him and Bucky couldn’t help his small smile. The arm was amazing, but what really made his heart sing was the fact that even now, Tony still hadn’t let go of his right hand.

Chapter End Notes

Omg, Bucky finally has both arms! *throws confetti* Now he can put that metal arm to good use. ;)

Also, my excuse for Bucky not making the "magic = Wanda" connection is a) he has so few details about what happened during the Ultron debacle to begin with (and what he does know, he got from the rogues) and b) his opinion of the rogues is still not quite low enough. I mean, they weren’t good to Tony, but even they would never accept someone who hurt Tony *that much* with open arms, right?!

Coming up next: hmm, speaking of our dear friends in Wakanda, I wonder what they’re all up to?
Today we're taking a break from the Tony/Bucky fluff (there's so much fluff coming up, you guys, omg) to pay a visit to Wakanda. Team Cap has been a little *too* quiet and it's making me nervous.

(also sorry for the hand wavey politics)

Looking out onto the lush, tropical greenery of Wakanda reminded Natasha of how much she actually missed the hustle and bustle of a big city. It was odd, given that she had never been a “big city girl” and she made a point never to get attached to any one particular place, but some part of her still missed New York.

Maybe because it was the place that came closest to ever feeling like home.

Natasha grimaced just enough to stop herself from rolling her eyes. This place was clearly having a bad influence on her if she was being this maudlin.

She decided that likely, it wasn’t some bizarre longing for New York she was experiencing. Instead, it was just restlessness from staying in one place for so long.

Maybe that was why home was never a concept she ever had the pleasure to truly understand.

While she was at SHIELD, her missions took her around the world and gave her just enough fast-paced action to satisfy her need for movement. The same was true with the Avengers, where Natasha was the first to volunteer for any of the overseas missions.

After the end of the “Civil War” —boje moi, what a stupid name— she spent several weeks on the run, before finally finding her way to Wakanda, where T’Challa reluctantly welcomed her, after a pleading Steve finally wore him down. Honestly, she almost pitied the King. It was obvious the only reason he gave them refuge in the first place was because of his guilt for falsely accusing James. However, James was gone now and it was even more painfully obvious that T’Challa thoroughly regretted having the rest of them here. Luckily for them, he couldn’t kick them out now without risking implicating himself and facing the wrath of the international community for harboring criminals for the past year. Natasha gave a mental shrug. They all made their beds, including the King, so in the end, she didn’t feel sorry for him nor for taking advantage of his less than enthusiastic hospitality.

Not long after James went back into cryostasis, she did take off again, trying to recover some of her old contacts and assess the damage done. The results of her inquiries weren’t stellar, but at least it satiated her need to be on the move.

Now, however, she had been back in Wakanda for months and she was going stir crazy. Natasha took a sip from the glass in her hand, enjoying the crisp, cool taste of the local beverage, and surveyed the picturesque grounds of the villa again. She supposed she could leave again, meet with the few allies she still had left. In fact, maybe it was time for her to find Tony and have a nice private
chat with him, to see where he stood on everything after a year. Hell, with the right approach (and with Tony’s mental state just the right amount of vulnerable), Natasha could work that conversation to her advantage.

She wondered briefly if she could still get in and out of the Compound without leaving any trace that would incriminate her. Likely, given what she knew of Friday’s security protocols. Unlike the rest of her teammates, she actually paid attention whenever Tony used to babble on about his work.

Unfortunately, she had to accept that leaving now would probably do more harm than good because the unique form of exile here in Wakanda was not doing anyone any favors.

The stay here seemed to have impacted Clint worst of all and he spent the last several months spiraling out of control, to the point where Natasha was becoming increasingly fed up with the string of drunken fights she had to break up between Clint and the few Wakandan guards stationed at the villa. But she cared about the idiot and she didn’t want to leave him here alone in his misery.

Additionally, Natasha was usually the only one who could talk Steve out of his attempts to be an Avenger again. Anytime he saw a news piece about a terrorist attack or civil war erupting somewhere on the globe (hell, even a few natural disasters made the list), he was always rearing to go, declaring that they were all still Avengers and needed to be out there, helping innocent people.

Admirable, really, but so goddamn stupid. They had no tech, they had no weapons other than the ones they arrived with (Steve didn’t even have his shield), they had no transport, nor any other resources. They would have to steal from T’Challa if they wanted to have anything on hand and between running off to play heroes and stealing from him, Natasha was certain the King would just take the risk and bar them from Wakanda for good.

Which would be the least of their concerns if they got caught during one of these “rescue” missions.

Finally, given the atmosphere at the villa for the past few months, even if Natasha had Steve convinced they couldn’t go back to being Avengers just yet, she was certain that if she were to leave now, Steve would be stowed away on the next plane out of Wakanda in some crazy, misguided attempt to rescue his best friend, with the rest obediently following their hero into the fray. And unlike her, them breaking into the Compound would be about as subtle as a stampede of elephants.

Natasha hated being the sole voice of reason sometimes.

She took another long sip of the fruity beverage, needing the icy cold drink to counteract the heat of the Wakandan summer, then shook her head once she placed the glass back onto the windowsill in front of her. It had been just over two months since James left, without so much as a goodbye, to head back to the States. In all that time, he called Steve once, about a week after James arrived at the Compound. Natasha didn’t get a chance to stay for the phone call, realizing she needed to drag Wanda away from the computer screen when James’ eyes developed that Winter Soldier glint (she never quite understood his reaction to Wanda, but she supposed James, more than anyone, had a right to occasional bouts of irrationality). However, she heard plenty about the phone call afterwards. Long story short, Steve was convinced that Tony was up to no good and filling James’ head with all sorts of lies.

Whether that was actually true or not, Natasha didn’t particularly care. She barely knew this James Barnes and only spent those first two months around him. He was withdrawn back then and didn’t seem all that interested in making friends. However, he and Natasha were amicably polite to each other and maybe given time, they could have developed some sense of camaraderie, built on shared pain of what was done to them in the Red Room, but even that alone wasn’t enough to establish any real friendship.
However, Natasha did care about Steve, and more importantly, she cared about whether Steve (and inevitably the others) took off like a bunch of foolish children and got themselves arrested. Or worse.

Given the current political climate in the US and the mix of opinions on the Accords Council, there was actually a chance they might all end up going back to the States sooner rather than later. Legally. Welcomed back as prodigal sons and daughters, rather than handcuffed and thrown in prison like criminals. It was becoming possible—likely—that they could be going home in just a few months’ time.

But not if Steve did something stupid like leave behind him a long string of crimes and then get caught on his way to rescue his precious Bucky Barnes.

With a sigh, Natasha pulled away from the window and headed to the common room. Might as well check on everyone to make sure no one was getting any bright ideas today. Natasha had to admit that sometimes she felt like she was stuck here herding a bunch of stubborn, impulsive cats.

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She walked into the common room to find Sam in a recliner, typing away on the computer, while Wanda and Clint lounged on the couch next to him, watching the television. Turning her head, she noted that Steve was puttering away in the adjoined kitchen, probably putting together some food to bring back for everyone.

Clint noticed her first. “Hey, Tasha! Come to join us for another rousing round of ‘What’s on TV today’?”

She gave him a small, exasperated smile. “Yes, because more of this ‘sitting around doing nothing’ is exactly what we need.”

“Eh, nothing else to do,” Clint shrugged and carelessly flipped through the channels. “Man, even in Wakanda, one thousand channels and nothing on.”

Making her way over, Natasha perched on the arm of the couch, situating herself between Clint and Sam. “Have you watched the voting results from the last US legislative session?”

Clint just gave her a disgusted grimace and she wanted to roll her eyes at him so badly. She resisted.

“Why would I watch that boring shit, Tasha? Last thing I want to see is a bunch of old politicians doing whatever shady shit old politicians do.”

“Except some of these old politicians are also on the US Accords Council and their voting history can give us a good indication of which way they might lean on upcoming issues.” Honestly, this wasn’t rocket science. “Not to mention, a handful of them are up for re-election.” Here, she gave Clint a meaningful glare. “And the current president has been very pardon happy.”

Clint withered a bit under that glare. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. But it doesn’t make it any less boring.”

“She is right though,” Sam finally piped up, stopping the click clack of his typing for a minute. “About the President and the pardons, I mean.”

“So you’re thinking they’ll be willing to give us pardons too?” Wanda asked, finally interested in the conversation.

“It’s becoming more probable,” Natasha explained, “the majority on the Council that has voted down
two of the motions to amend the Accords and consider any sort of pardons is growing smaller. Two of them are fairly weak in their position and could be swayed if the public opinion changes or if some new Big Bad shows up. Two are up for re-election next year, but we already know they’re running against staunch Captain America supporters and if they think their districts will favor their opponents—” Natasha stopped when she heard Sam let out a disgusted snort.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t hold my breath on that. All Stark has to do is throw some of his money around and boom, he has whatever majority he needs on that Council. Hell, that’s probably why the majority has held for as long as it did.”

Natasha didn’t necessarily agree, but it wasn’t her job to correct him. Ever since his little excursion to the Raft, Sam was unwavering in his mistrust of Tony, always ready with a theory about how Tony was using his money and power to manipulate some part or another of the current political climate. Honestly, it was silly. Tony wasn’t paying off the politicians and Thaddeus Ross was not on some tropical island collaborating with him on an evil plan to keep the real superheroes down.

Once you knew where to look, Tony was an open book and after Afghanistan, all that remained was a broken, miserable man who desperately kept trying (and often failing) to right the wrongs of his past. Paying some politician under the table would feel too much like the shady weapons dealing of his company and Tony would choke on his guilt at the mere idea.

All that self-loathing and insecurity, as well as that never-ending guilt, were the exact things that made Tony so easy to manipulate. One or two perfectly timed words and you could make Tony dance like a marionette on strings.

It was the reason why she started out on Tony’s side last year in the first place. The government and the UN were coming after them whether the Avengers liked it or not and staying on Tony’s side ultimately gave her the necessary influence over him to steer that whole Accords boat exactly where she wanted it.

She wasn’t a fool. Unlike some of the others, she was well aware that between his legal, political, and financial resources (not to mention the sway he held over the public), Tony was the most important chess piece in the whole game.

Unfortunately, T’Challa’s involvement proved to be an issue (that was a mistake on her part, as much as she hated to admit it), then things with James escalated far quicker than she anticipated, everyone around her made one stupid decision after another, and when everything finally just went to hell, she was forced to choose between Tony and Steve.

All her life, Natasha had always chosen herself first, before anything or anyone else. That single fact made her the survivor that she was. Unfortunately, at the apex of the Civil War, neither choice was particularly advantageous to her, so she had to go with her gut.

In her defense, she never actually wanted to actively hurt Tony or to see him get hurt. There was no malicious intent on her part - she just didn’t care enough about Tony to lessen the damage done.

On the other hand, she did care about Steve and ever since their experience with Hydra and the fall of SHIELD, whatever moral compass she did have always pointed to him now. So in the end, it wasn’t a particularly hard decision to make.

She tuned back into the conversation and as Sam was trying to explain the pardon process to a confused Wanda, Steve came up to them with a few bowls of popcorn and chips.

“Hey, Nat,” he gave her a warm smile, “I’m glad you finally joined us.” Setting the bowls on the
table in the middle of the room, Steve sat down next to Wanda. “Anything new come up in your research, Sam?” he addressed the other man, who gave a shrug.

“Let me see… Well, Rhodes spoke at that international Summit in Tokyo a few weeks back…”

Sam had taken to tracking anything and everything he could find on the internet related to the Avengers activities back in the US. The task gave him something to do and had the added benefit of keeping them all informed on what their former teammates were up to.

He squinted his eyes at the computer screen, scrolling through something. His mouth pulled into a thin line. “Of course, the reactions are nearly all positive. Everyone’s gushing about his stoicism and resilience and how competent of a leader he is. Man, I respect Rhodes an’ all, I mean, his only real flaw is that giant blind spot he has for Stark, but damn, it’s so frustrating that somehow he can do no wrong with the politicians or the public.”

Now that, Natasha didn’t disagree with. Ever since Rhodes took over as the head of the Avengers, the public’s view of the superheroes had shifted as well and while it took some time after the Civil War disaster, the public (particularly in the US) was now firmly back on the side of the New Avengers. Apparently it helped to have an older, experienced, and well-respected military leader (who before anything else was also completely human) at the helm of a superhero brigade. Although, Natasha did have her suspicions that both Tony and Potts were also working behind the scenes to make sure any Avengers-related press was nothing but cheers and praise.

Sam continued. “Here’s something else… Stark Industries unveiled some industrial arc reactor project in Asia. Potts did all the talking, but Stark was there with the rest of the corporate suits.”

“Anything else?” Steve asked hopefully and Natasha almost felt bad. She wasn’t even sure what Steve was looking for. A picture of Tony standing in Central Park holding up a sign that said I want you back, Steve? No, he probably wanted James to be the one holding the sign. Maybe one that said Save me, Steve.

Sam hummed in contemplation as he clicked and scrolled through his research. “A couple of missions, nothing earth-shattering. Apparently it’s been pretty quiet on the super villain front.”

“Lucky for them,” Clint snorted. “If anything big showed up, they’d get their asses handed to them without us there. I mean, who’s even on the roster anymore? Stark, Rhodes, that spider kid. Pretty sad when you compare it to what it used to be.”

“You’re forgetting the Vision, the Wasp, and Strange,” Natasha had to correct him. “Not to mention the other trainees at the Compound and all the sorcerers who work with Strange.” It still felt weird talking about magic as if it were normal. “And even though T’Challa is not officially an Avenger, I’m sure he’d show up for an alien invasion.”

Clint just grumbled something incomprehensible at her, probably hating to be corrected. Natasha wanted to sigh. She cared about the man, probably more than anyone else here, but he needed to stop acting like a child. God, they needed to get back to the States and Clint needed to get back to his family so he could return to the normal (and much more endearing) version of himself.

But at least he was sober today.

“Let’s see…” Sam jumped back into the conversation, “There’s this obscure blog I found, run by some crazyfangirl. Doesn’t really have a big reach, but apparently she’s obsessed with Stark and tries to get candid pictures of him whenever he’s in New York.” He scoffed. “Definitely the stalker-type, but at least it gives us some info. Doesn’t look like she has anything recent though…”
“Probably ‘cause Stark’s been holed at that Compound for the past two months. Doesn’t even make any of his grand, flashy public appearances anymore,” Clint said and Steve’s expression grew darker at the words. Probably thinking of the many ways Tony could be torturing poor, precious Bucky with all that extra free time, Natasha thought in exasperation.

“Oh, here’s something recent!” Sam exclaimed and moved closer to the screen. “She saw Stark in Central Park with a friend, about a month and a half ago… Here she’s gushing about Stark’s NASA shirt for like three paragraphs— what is wrong with this girl? — and oh, looks like she managed to snap a picture of—”

Sam’s eyes suddenly widened and Natasha leaned over just far enough to see the screen.

_Huh. That’s— interesting._

“What? What is it?” Steve was on his feet and almost to Sam’s side when the other man just shut the lid of his laptop with a guilty, deer-in-the-headlights look.

“Um, it’s nothing, Steve,” he tried, but it was so unconvincing, it was downright embarrassing.

“Sam, please, it’s obviously something. You know how I feel about secrets. That’s not what this team is about.”

Sam basically withered under the patented Steve Rogers _I expect better from you_ glare and he slowly opened the laptop back up.

Natasha watched Steve’s face turn white and then flush with two spots of red across his cheeks when he saw the grainy, zoomed-in cell phone picture. Obviously both Clint and Wanda saw the same reaction because they jumped to their feet to see what was on the screen. Wanting to see the details again, Natasha leaned back over.

For a moment, there was silence before—

“I fucking knew it! This is exactly how Stark operates!”

This time, she _did_ roll her eyes. “This isn’t a sex tape, Clint. They’re just eating ice cream.”

“It’s— It’s Bucky,” Steve barely managed, unable to take his eyes off the screen.

Indeed it was, with Tony no less. The two of them were settled on a bench in what looked like Central Park. Natasha briefly wondered exactly who let Tony take a brainwashed super soldier out in the middle of New York, but in the end decided that this was actually right up the man’s alley. Tony was never known for his good decision making skills.

But based on the picture, as grainy as it was, James actually did look _better_. He seemed at ease, clean shaven and dressed in a set of fresh new clothes, and the expression on his face— well, Natasha would’ve called it _fond_, but the man was looking at Tony after all, so that couldn’t have been right. The same could be said for Tony, actually. There was a smile on his face and it looked like he was in the middle of recounting some story or another (that man did always like the sound his own voice) and he looked _suspiciously_ comfortable, given that he was sitting no more than a foot away from his parents’ killer.

“Ugh, even looking at Stark’s face makes me sick. Look at that murderer, sitting there, enjoying himself. He should be in jail and we should be back home,” Wanda declared with disgust, hands clenched at her sides. Weird statement to make (and that was ignoring the murderer comment), since Wanda never even had a proper American visa, but Natasha wasn’t going to be the one to point that
out. Especially not with those red sparks erupting from the woman’s fingertips. Wanda’s hair-trigger temper only got worse as a result of their exile here and Natasha didn’t want those magical powers anywhere near her.

“But why is— why is Bucky out with him like that?” Steve stammered out and Natasha finally decided to take pity on him.

“That’s a good sign, Steve,” she said. “It means Tony doesn’t have him locked up in some dark basement. Bucky looks uninjured, there are no restraints, and he’s obviously allowed some mobility in and out of the Compound. *All good things,*” she tried to emphasize. Anything to stop Steve from running off on a rescue mission.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?”

Natasha looked over to see Lang saunter into the room and grab a handful of popcorn as he approached.

“What’s everybody looking at?” he popped a kernel into his mouth and made it over to stand next to Clint and Wanda. “Hey, is that Stark? Oh, and that’s Barnes too, right?” He leaned closer and squinted to see the picture better. “Wow, Barnes looks a lot better than the last time we saw him. Huh, you know, they kinda look like they’re on a date or something.” He threw another piece of popcorn into his mouth, oblivious to the four pairs of eyes glaring daggers at him. “You know, hate to say something nice about a Stark, but they do actually look good together. Huh,” he shrugged, “good for them, you know? It’s tough for gay couples out there.”

*Boje moi,* she was surrounded by idiots and that realization certainly didn’t do anything to lessen her desire to get the hell out of dodge. Natasha pointedly cleared her throat, which prompted Lang to look up from the picture just in time to see the four sets of eyes burning hate into him.

“Was— was it something I said?” he stammered and backed away, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head. He never really did fit in with any of them, Natasha thought, even after a year of living together here at the villa.

“They’re not on a date, Lang,” she stated firmly, but apparently that wasn’t convincing enough because Steve was pale again and shaking his head at the screen.

“I knew something like this was going to happen. Tony— he’s manipulating Bucky somehow. Taking advantage of the fact that Bucky’s vulnerable right now, confused about who he is.” Steve met Natasha’s eyes, who was shaking her head. “Come on, Nat, you know how Tony can be. Maybe this is his way of getting revenge for everything. Fill Bucky’s head with lies and turn him against us.”

There was so much nervous tension inside Steve that he began pacing back and forth. “That last phone call makes sense now, that’s why Bucky was so cold with me. I mean, he called me a *bully!* Where else would he get something like that? Tony probably told him all these awful, untrue things about us and with no one there to contradict Tony— Oh, poor Bucky is probably so confused and—and he must be so scared to be there all on his own—” Suddenly, Steve stopped the panicked pacing and squared his shoulders. “That’s it. I’ve waited around for too long. Bucky needs me and I can’t just sit around and wait until Tony completely destroys him.”

Natasha desperately wanted to point out that James looked anything but destroyed in that picture, but she knew that wasn’t the right tactic here. Steve already interpreted the picture the way he wanted (that *his Bucky* enjoying ice cream with Tony on a sunny day could *only* mean that he had been brainwashed again).
Instead, she said “Steve, how do you think this rescue mission will go? Are you going barge into the Compound and carry Bucky away into the sunset in your arms? Pretty sure Tony’s crazy AI and an army of Iron Man suits will have something to say about that.”

“I have to do something, Natasha!” the man exclaimed, running a trembling hand through his now slightly longer, blond hair. “Bucky hasn’t called me in almost two months! Yeah, T’Challa says he speaks with him regularly, but Bucky should be calling me, not T’Challa! The only reason he wouldn’t call is because Tony isn’t letting him! God, things must be worse than I thought.” Steve’s voice trembled on that last sentence and Natasha felt sorry for him. She really did.

Apparently the resolute, determined Steve Rogers was back though. “I’m going to go get Bucky. He was always with me to the end of the line and I won’t fail him. Even if it means going up against Tony again.”

Natasha may have felt sorry for Steve, but she was not going let him ruin their chances of getting back home. She jumped off the arm rest, approached Steve and with her hand gentle and comforting on his bicep, she tried to give him the most reassuring look in her repertoire.

“Steve, you can’t be the one to go. You’ll put your safety and the safety of everyone here at risk.”

“But Natasha—”

“I’ll go.”

The man stopped in the middle of a word and blinked at her. She didn’t feel like waiting for him to stage another protest.

“I’m the only here with the means to get back to US undetected and with the skills necessary to get in and out of the Compound, even with Tony’s security measures.” She put on a smile that she knew would look self-deprecating and gave an easy shrug. “Infiltrating one of the most secure places on earth and getting past Iron Man himself? It’ll be fun.”

Thankfully, it looked like her approach and the echoes of the words she spoke to Steve during the Battle of New York were actually working because Steve’s expression was more contemplative than panicked now.

“Are you— are you sure, Natasha? I can’t ask something like this of you.”

“I’m sure, Steve. Bucky is my friend too and I care about him. I want to make sure he’s okay just as much as you do.”

“And if he isn’t?”

“Then I promise I will get him out of there and bring him back to you.”

There was gratitude and affection blossoming on Steve’s face now and he gathered her into his arms. “I don’t know what I would do without you, Natasha.”

“Let’s hope you never have to find out.”

More gratitude followed, as Steve sang her praises and while Clint made a weak attempt at a token protest— Tasha, it’s too dangerous, you shouldn’t go alone— Natasha didn’t have to try very hard to convince him otherwise.

She walked away from the group with the excuse that she had to plan her next move and in the
privacy of her room, she wanted to shake her head at herself. Was she really so desperate for an excuse to get out of Wakanda that she had just offered to go rescue Bucky Barnes?

Apparently so.

Ah well. She could make this work to her advantage. Maybe she would get that chat with Tony after all.

*It’ll be fun.*

Chapter End Notes

Boje moi - my god

Now, I know some of you might like my characterization of Natasha and some of you might hate it. I accept that. I'm so torn on Natasha, actually, because I love her, but MCU is doing her no favors. I've seen some great interpretations of her in fanfic, but for the purposes of this story, I decided to go with a competent, independent, but ultimately morally ambiguous, survivor-above-all-else Natasha who’s earned the Black Widow moniker for *a reason*.

Honestly though, she's getting a much better treatment from me than the rest of Team Cap. >.>
Okay, you guys obviously *love* the Rogues because their chapters always get the most responses by a wide margin. Is that a subtle clue that I should just write about them all the time? ;)

...Nah. It's Tony and Bucky time. And because it'll take a while for the Black Widow to get to US soil, we're set for several chapters of just WinterIron goodness. Seriously, this fic is turning into a rom-com, it's ridiculous (I regret nothing).

Bucky let himself have a nice, long stretch, still marveling at the fact that he could stretch out both of his arms now, before collapsing back on the many pillows resting against the headboard of his bed. He started out with two when he moved into the Compound, but after making an off-handed remark to Friday that he liked having extra pillows, more mysteriously appeared the next day, along with a variety of extra blankets. Friday was, as always, far too good to him.

He made himself comfortable against the soft pillows, dressed down in just his henley and jeans, and reached over to the nightstand to grab the book he was currently reading.

Today’s BARF session still left him mentally exhausted, which wasn’t unusual, even if the therapy was still progressing as expected. A good number of his memories were dulled now, faded to the background, which made a significant improvement in his overall mood and even lessened some of his nightmares. They didn’t go away entirely and likely never would, but the fact that there was any difference at all was still remarkable. He never thought he’d ever have any freedom from the horrors of his past, but once again, Tony’s tech (and Tony himself) did not disappoint.

Unfortunately, the triggers themselves were slow to yield to therapy, but that was expected as well. Unlike his other memories, which only prompted an expected, natural response to trauma, the trigger words were specifically designed to induce a deliberate reaction from Bucky’s mind and body. Overcoming that took a lot more effort, but both Dr. Vance and Tony were hopeful. It was only a matter of time.

Thankfully, a nice dinner with Vision, Peter, and Harley (that almost resulted in a food fight between the two boys) already helped shake off most of the cobwebs of his memories still clinging to his mind.

Unfortunately, Tony couldn’t join them for the meal as he had been mostly MIA for the past several days and Bucky hadn’t seen more than a few glimpses of him. Now that Tony was done with Bucky’s arm, apparently Ms. Potts wanted all of Tony’s attention back and the man spent the last few days jumping back and forth between corporate meetings in Manhattan and locking himself away in the lab in order to revolutionize the consumer electronics market— again!

Bucky couldn’t deny he missed the man’s presence, but he supposed it was good to spend some time apart. At some point however, he would have to check on Tony to make sure the man wasn’t running himself into the ground. As much as Tony actually loved food when it was in front of him, he had a tendency to forget during his work marathons that regular meals were a thing that humans
Remembering that they were actually expecting guests tomorrow for breakfast, Bucky realized he would have to coax the engineer out of the lab then for sure, so deciding he could wait until morning to see the man, Bucky opened his book and let the words on the page carry away the remainder of the darker memories in his head.

However, he didn’t get more than a few pages in before Friday’s tentative “Mr. Barnes? I think I may require your assistance with something…” prompted him to look up.

“How can I help you, ma’am?”

“You see, my usual protocols— well, they instruct to contact Colonel Rhodes, but he is currently out of town. When that is the case, I mustn’t contact anyone else… but I am worried that my protocols may be incomplete or inadequate—”

She hesitated again and between the worry and the uncertainty in her voice, Bucky himself was already on high alert.

“What’s going, Friday?”

“Boss had— he had a night terror. Not a rare occurrence, as you may know, but it usually takes no more than a few minutes for him to recover. However, it has been over twenty minutes and his vitals have only worsened. Shallow breathing, increased heart rate and blood pressure— it isn’t a full fledged panic attack, he’s lucid, but I’m worried—”

Bucky was already on his feet and heading out the door toward the elevators. “Can you tell me where he is?”

“Down in the basement. The corridor to the left of the entrance to Boss’ lab.”

Bucky figured as much and willed the elevator doors to close faster in front of him.

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As Bucky’s long strides carried him closer and closer toward the lab, he heard Tony before he actually saw the man.

“Goddamn it, Friday,” there was a tremble in the man’s voice, “why is it still so fucking cold in this hallway?”

“I’m sorry, Boss, the temperature is already up to 91 degrees Fahrenheit. I can keep increasing—”

“No, no, don’t. Shit, it’s all in my head, I know, I know—”

Bucky finally rounded the corner and stopped abruptly, taking in the scene in front of him. Tony was on the floor, his bent legs in front of him, hunching in on himself as he sat against the corridor wall. His arms were wrapped around himself and the man was shaking so badly that the tremors going through his body were visible even from Bucky’s vantage point. Tony’s eyes were clenched shut and his whole face was contorted in either discomfort or outright pain, Bucky wasn’t sure.

He didn’t approach closer, just quietly called out Tony’s name, trying to keep his voice gentle. Tony still startled however, looking up at him with frightened, glassy eyes.

“James, what— what the hell are you doing here?”
“Friday— she told me you needed help—”

“Fuck, Friday, I specifically told you not to—”

“I’m sorry, Boss, I only wanted to help—”

“Mute!” Tony barked suddenly, before going back to his short, labored breathing. Bucky frowned, taken aback by the anger in Tony’s voice. He had never heard Tony be so short with Friday before.

“Tony, it’s not Friday’s fault. She was just trying to take care of you—” he tried to reason, but Tony’s glare was turned on him now and he stopped short.

“I don’t need anyone taking care of me, okay? I’m not—” another shudder ran through the man and Tony’s arms wrapped themselves tighter around the trembling form, “I’m not some fucking charity case. So— just go.”

“Tony, please—”

“I said fucking go!” Tony raised his voice suddenly and the vehemence behind those words almost made Bucky flinch. “I don’t need anyone— I don’t need you here.”

Bucky felt hurt blossom in his chest in the face of the cold fury in that harsh tone. The memory of Tony’s parents aside, the man hadn’t spoken to him like this since the Stark Expo memory and he thought that, after everything they’ve been through, that they were past this kind of anger and resentment.

He was about to say something back, his own sharp words bubbling up in his throat, but then another tremor made its way through Tony’s body, forcing the man to curl in on himself even further, his pained “Fuck…” swallowed up by a whimper.

With sudden clarity, Bucky realized that this wasn’t some display of Tony’s loathing towards him. Tony wasn’t angry. He was scared.

Tony was desperately trying to protect himself, to keep others from seeing him like this. Given the past betrayals and the dismissive attitudes of others, Bucky couldn’t really blame him for being this reluctant to let himself be vulnerable with anyone.

Bucky wondered for a moment whether Tony believed that being the one to push people away first hurt less than waiting for them to leave him. But dammit, Bucky wasn’t just anyone and it was a good thing he could be a stubborn bastard too because he wasn’t going to be pushed away that easily.

He wasn’t going to be pushed away at all.

Taking a few steps forward, he let himself slide down to the floor on Tony’s left, just far enough to give the man some space.

He watched Tony give him another glare, but now that he knew where to look, he could see nothing but fear and exhaustion behind those eyes.

“That is literally the opposite of what I just told you to do,” Tony said through gritted teeth, trying to steel himself against the tremors.

“I’m not big on following orders nowadays,” Bucky kept his voice light on the retort, but then dropped back into a more serious, measured tone. “Tony, if you really don’t want me here—”
“I really don’t wan’t you here.”

“—then I’ll leave. I’ll go get someone else—”

Tony shook his head desperately. “No! Don’t— don’t you dare drag anyone else into this—”

“Then, please, Tony,” Bucky wasn’t above begging, “please let me help you. Don’t push me away.”

Tony didn’t say anything, just hid his face in his bent knees and let out a sound that was dangerously close to a sob as his body kept shaking from the cold, despite the stifling heat of the corridor.

“Do you really think that I would— mock you for this? Hold it against you that you’re— that you’re human like the rest of us? Come on, Tony…” Bucky let his exhale carry the name, “you saw me at my lowest, when I was a complete wreck and I trusted you then. I knew without a doubt that all you would do was hold me together until I wasn’t falling apart anymore.” His next words were a whisper as he looked at the man next to him. “Please, let me do the same thing for you.”

There was no response from Tony for a full minute, making Bucky wonder if maybe he wasn’t going to out-stubborn Tony after all, but then the man gave him a small, timid nod and Bucky sagged against the wall in relief.

“What can I do to help?”

“I’m just— I’m so fucking cold. I know that it’s all in my head, and it usually— just goes away, but I can’t shake it this time,” Tony replied and rubbed his hands against his biceps as if to emphasize the point, although it didn’t seem to do much.

“Rhodes is the one who usually helps you when it gets this bad, right?” Bucky asked and got another tentative nod from Tony. “So what does he do to help you?”

“He, uh—” Tony hesitated and Bucky watched as some sort of internal struggle played out on the man’s face. Finally though, Tony seemed to have made a decision when he looked away and responded with a whispered “He holds me…” that Bucky only heard because of his enhanced hearing.

God, why did this man insist on breaking Bucky’s heart again and again? Because seeing how much it took for Tony to admit something as simple as that— it was heart wrenching. Hell, Bucky was a traumatized ex-assassin and even he didn’t feel this much hesitance when asking for simple comfort. Hell, if he woke up from a nightmare and Tony was there with open arms, Bucky wouldn’t hesitate to let himself be enveloped in that embrace.

But maybe that was because none of his many defensive walls were present any longer when it came to Tony and he supposed if it were anyone else but his favorite engineer, he’d hesitate too.

He had to try though. All he wanted was to make Tony feel better, and Bucky hoped he wasn’t about to cross some line and ruin everything.

“Would it— would it help if I did the same?” he suggested, keeping his voice quiet and casual, like it was no big deal. “I always did run a little hot.”

Again, Tony hesitated to give any response, but when he looked back over at Bucky, there was so much longing in the man’s gaze, that Bucky felt his heart seize again.

Please, Tony, just let me take care of you.
Thankfully, as if Tony heard Bucky’s silent plea, the man finally gave a noncommittal shrug that was as close to a yes as Bucky was going to get and then slowly, like a spooked animal, scooted over to be next to Bucky. With those same timid movements, he rested his head on Bucky’s chest and curled in on himself a bit, his arms still wrapped around himself.

Bucky was beyond any sort of hesitance at this point however, so he promptly wrapped his right arm around the man, pulling him closer, and used his metal hand to maneuver Tony’s head under his chin, before letting the metal arm rest comfortably against the man’s hip.

Tony was still entirely stiff against him, tremors wreaking havoc on his body, but then he slowly began to relax, bit by bit, before his body finally went slack and he let himself lean fully against Bucky, who just tightened his embrace.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, Bucky listening to Tony’s shallow inhales and counting the seconds between each tremor, thankful that they seemed to be slowing down. He let his cheek rest against Tony’s soft hair, inhaling that sweet, spicy scent that he noticed so long ago and now knew to be the man’s shampoo. Tony probably showered recently, maybe before trying (and failing) to get some sleep. A part of Bucky reveled at having the man so close to him, but the rest of him just wished it was happening under better circumstances.

Finally, Bucky was the first to break the silence that settled around them. “Does it help to talk about it?”

He felt more than heard Tony give a questioning hum against his collar bone.

“What do you mean?”

“About the nightmares, I mean,” Bucky tried to explain. “I know sometimes—for me at least—putting everything into words just makes it worse. Makes it more real, you know? But sometimes it helps to share with someone else because then you don’t feel as alone. I guess I’m just saying—if it would help, I’d listen.”

He felt Tony nod, but the man didn’t say anything, so Bucky let it go. Instead, he just let his right hand draw soothing circles against Tony’s bicep and shoulder, trying to infuse comfort into his touch. He was probably a bit rusty (comforting people was never in the Winter Soldier’s repertoire), but Bucky wanted to believe that this was a lot like riding a bicycle. You thought you’d forgotten how to do it, but it all came back to you once you gave it a try.

The lights in the corridor were already dimmed and thankfully it seemed Friday turned the temperature down without prompting because Bucky didn’t feel like he was sitting in a sauna anymore. The quiet atmosphere, as well having Tony so close to him, was lulling even Bucky himself into a more relaxed state, but he was brought back to full awareness when he heard Tony’s quiet whisper.

“I see all of them dead.”

The ominous words almost made Bucky tense up, but he deliberately kept his posture relaxed, his fingers never stopping their soothing motions against Tony’s skin.

“What do you mean?”

“My dreams—night terrors, I guess—I’m in space, I think—I dunno. But it’s dark, only light coming from some distant nebulas, and it’s always so goddamn cold. And I’m standing there—surrounded by wreckage—everything around me destroyed. And then I see—I see them—” Tony’s breath hitched and his body shuddered again. Bucky didn’t hesitate, just reached out and cradled Tony’s face in his metal hand, letting his thumb gently caress Tony’s cheek.
“S’okay, everything’s fine,” he whispered into the man’s hair, reminded momentarily of when their roles were reversed and Tony was comforting him.

After a moment, Tony seemed to have collected enough willpower to continue. “Everywhere around me, I see everyone I care about, everyone I love—all of you are dead. And all I can do is just stand there, completely helpless and alone.”

It was obvious Tony didn’t realize his slip, and Bucky hated that in the face of Tony’s misery, there was no real joy in knowing that he included Bucky with the rest of the people Tony loved.

“Is that the nightmare?”

“No,” Tony shook his head softly, “the real nightmare starts when one of you opens your eyes and—you just look at me with those dead fuckin’ eyes and say You could’ve saved us. You ask Why didn’t you do more? Why didn’t you stop this? and I just stand there and there’s nothing— there’s nothing I can do—as the fucking aliens—they just destroy everything—”

Tony let out an actual sob this time, burying his face in Bucky’s shoulder as if trying to hide himself away from the world. All Bucky could do was continue his gentle ministrations.

“It’s okay, Tony, it’s just a dream—”

“No, you don’t understand—” Tony protested and tried to push himself away, maybe in an attempt to look at Bucky, but Bucky just tightened his hold and gently let his metal hand guide Tony’s head back to rest against his chest.

“Shh, s’okay... Just let yourself rest, Tony.”

“You don’t understand,” the man continued quietly even as he let his body crumple against Bucky once again, “it’s not just a dream. This fucking—this vision was crammed into my head and it left me so fucking terrified that I tried—I tried to protect everyone, I swear that’s all I was trying to do—I just wanted to stop something like New York from ever happening again—but I failed—” Tony was near incoherent at this point, struggling to pull in any air into his lungs, “I failed everyone and all I did was create a monster…”

Tony was shaking again and for a few minutes, the only sound that filled the corridor was Tony’s shallow inhales and Bucky’s quiet words of comfort. Eventually though, Tony was finally able to pull in a deep breath and slowly exhale and Bucky thanked every one of his lucky stars when, instead of still keeping his arms around himself, Tony slowly reached out to wrap his right arm around Bucky’s waist, gently gripping the soft material of the henley.

As Tony silently let the embrace soothe him, Bucky took the time to contemplate what Tony had just told him. He assumed this was about Ultron. Bucky desperately wished he had more information, but all he had to work with was what he heard from the Avengers in Wakanda and what he gleaned from his conversations with Peter and Rhodes.

As they tried to catch Bucky up on everything that happened since the Avengers formed, regaling him with the tales of their victories, Steve and the rest were very quick to point out that the responsibility for Ultron rested squarely on Tony’s shoulders. Tony was irresponsible with his creations, he was secretive, and everyone paid the price for his mistakes.

Given what he now knew about the relationship between all of them and Tony, Bucky basically had half a mind to either ignore everything they had told him or just assume that the opposite of whatever they said was true. And maybe that was a bit vindictive or unfair, but Bucky hardly cared at this
The Colonel didn’t give him many more details either, but he made a point to say that while Tony was in fact trying to create a peacekeeping program that would safeguard the Earth from future attacks, Tony wasn’t the only one involved in the chain of events that ultimately led to Ulton’s creation. Rhodes briefly mentioned Banner, the Avenger and scientist Bucky had yet to meet, and then he hedged the rest of his explanation, only saying that one of their enemies at the time was also involved in essentially forcing Tony’s hand.

So maybe he didn’t have all the information about what happened back then, but he wanted to believe he knew enough about Tony himself to truly mean what he said next.

“This is about Ultron, right?” he asked to confirm and felt Tony nod against him. “Well, I’ve seen the things you create, Tony. Beautiful, amazing beings that grow and learn and love. And it doesn’t matter what else happened back then - I know you’re not capable of creating a monster. You just aren’t.” Tony tried to protest, but Bucky refused to let the man talk badly about himself. “You can’t take all the responsibility onto yourself whenever bad things happen. There were others involved too and even if you did make any sort of mistake back then, you’ve more than paid for it.”

Seemed like that was the story every time. Everyone else got to move on with their lives, while Tony was left behind to pick up the pieces and pay the price for everyone’s mistakes.

Then, something else that Tony said made its way through Bucky’s mind, bringing with it a memory of a conversation from weeks ago.

“Wait. When you said this was a vision— was this what you meant when you said someone screwed with your head using magic?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Tony gave a small nod and Bucky demanded to know who it was that did this, but all Tony responded with was a simple “It doesn’t matter, James. It’s not important anymore.” He sounded defeated. Resigned.

Reluctant as he was to do so, Bucky untangled himself from Tony’s embrace and pushed them apart, but only far enough so that he could see Tony’s face. “Of course it matters, Tony. Someone hurt you.”

“It’s fine, uh— just not a big deal. Don’t worry about it,” Tony whispered, refusing to meet his eyes now.

Bucky didn’t understand why Tony would hesitate to tell him about this. Did he think Bucky would react negatively? The only thing that could possibly—

“Wait— It wasn’t— it wasn’t Hydra?”

Tony cringed a bit and moved his head side to side. “Eh, yeah, technically— at the time, they were Hydra, but—” Tony trailed and his eyes widened when he looked back at Bucky. “Err, James, you’re looking a bit more Winter Soldier than Bucky Barnes right now.”

Oh, Bucky had no doubt of that because in that moment, the Soldier was livid.

He could feel that darkness, that righteous fury, pushing back against his mental walls and it was increasingly harder to stop the Soldier from bleeding through into every crevice of Bucky’s mind. Hell, maybe Bucky himself didn’t want to stop some of that anger from seeping into his very bones this time.
Because apparently it was *Hydra* who dared lay their filthy hands on Tony. They forced themselves into Tony’s head, just like they did Bucky’s own, tainting that beautiful mind with their foul stench. They forced Tony to relive his worst nightmare, the death of his loved ones, over and over—

*He was going to kill them for touching a hair on Tony’s head, he was going to kill them all, rip them to shreds—*

The red haze of bloodlust receded a bit when Bucky felt Tony’s steady hands on his face and he heaved a shaking breath, trying to use Tony’s touch to ground himself back to reality.

“Hey, you need to come back to me, James. And, uh— if the Soldier is paying us a visit, I’d at least like a warning this time.” Tony didn’t sound particularly concerned though and Bucky wondered, almost hysterically, whether that was because he trusted Bucky’s control *that* much or whether this was just Tony’s usual brand of recklessness.

“No, no, I’m fine—” he assured Tony and shook his head, even though he didn’t actually feel fine as he was struggling and failing to push the Soldier’s wrath away. His hands just clutched Tony closer to him. “I just— I can’t even think past the anger— What they did to you—”

“Is long in the past— It doesn't matter—”

“How can you say that? You’re still having nightmares! It’s still hurting you!”

Tony just shrugged that same resigned shrug and said a quiet “I have a lot of nightmares. What’s another one?”

It only made Bucky more furious. God, he could feel the violence filling his chest, thrumming through his blood like a poison, but for once, he actually wanted to embrace. *Own it.* Hell, everyone kept telling him the Soldier was nothing but his repressed instincts. His own darkness, repressed in order to deal with his trauma.

*Everyone has a dark side, Mr. Barnes.*

Oh, he could so clearly imagine finding whoever did this and ripping them apart piece by piece. Slowly, *brutally.* Until they suffered how Tony suffered. Until they knew what it felt like to live out their own worst nightmare. *He would be their worst goddamn nightmare.*

*He would paint the world in the blood of these bastards.*

Bucky clenched his eyes shut, suddenly terrified of his own thoughts because these were the Soldier’s words. This was the Soldier’s hunger for vengeance, and wasn’t this everything he didn’t want to be anymore? He swore to himself that he wouldn’t hurt anyone anymore, that he wouldn’t *kill* anymore. But *god,* did retribution taste sweet on his tongue. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was never going to be the good person he wished he could be.

His eyes opened to see Tony’s concerned expression as the man watched him carefully, but there was no fear or mistrust in those searching brown eyes. Sudden sense of gratitude warred with the festering anger in Bucky’s chest because how could he be worthy of *that much* trust? All he could do in the face of that was try to redirect the Soldier’s instincts - from the need to kill to the need to protect. So, despite the bloodlust still in his veins, he cradled Tony’s face in his hands and pulled him back in, pressing their foreheads together. He felt Tony’s own hands rub his shoulders in reassurance because *of course* Tony was trying to comfort him, even when Tony was really the one who needed it.

“I’m not letting any of them touch you ever again,” Bucky growled, his chest heaving with another
shaking breath, and dammit, this position felt too familiar all of the sudden, like some phantom sense memory. He had no conscious recollection of the time when the Soldier fully took control, but as he gently ran the tip of his nose against Tony’s cheek, the man’s face still framed in his hands, Bucky could almost feel what the Soldier must have felt, to have Tony pressed against the wall, to have their lips just a hairbreadth apart... just like they were now.

Oh the Soldier knew wrath well, but he seemed to know lust even better and all he wanted to do in that moment was remove that little bit of distance between Bucky and Tony once and for all. To make Tony his. To know what those lips would feel like against his own, what Tony would taste like on his tongue. Bucky wanted to feel every part of Tony against him, to make Tony come undone under his touch so completely and thoroughly than any traces of nightmares would be wiped away with pleasure. God, he wanted Tony so badly—

But he couldn’t—

This time, Bucky put all of his willpower behind trying to push the Soldier back. He was supposed to be here comforting Tony, not fantasizing about the man. God, what was wrong with him?

To avoid the temptation, he pulled away and guided the man’s head back to crook of his neck, Tony willingly following the gentle pressure of Bucky’s hand. He tried to take a deep breath, desperate to focus back on protectiveness rather than anger or lust.

“If any Hydra scum show their faces here ever again,” he whispered, “if anyone decides to come anywhere near you, or the kids, or anyone else here, they’ll have to go through me. I will rip their throats out, solnishko, and I’ll—”

Both Tony and he tensed at the slip of Russian and Bucky clenched his eyes shut. Damn, damn, damn, apparently he was still unable to speak anything but the Soldier’s words.

“Shit, sorry—” Fuck, he shouldn’t have let the Soldier bleed through so much in the first place. “The Soldier is still—” he swallowed hard, “closer to the surface than I’d like him to be,” he admitted with a shaky exhale. God, the last thing he wanted was to scare Tony away.

However, after a moment, he felt Tony settle against him again and give his shoulder a comforting squeeze. “It’s alright, you’re fine. You’re in control of it. Just breathe. Besides, that part of you isn’t all bad. Seems to like me at least,” he tried to joke.

You have no idea how much, Tony.

The humor in Tony’s voice, however, made Bucky feel a little bit more like himself on the next exhale.

“He’s, uh— yeah, he’s a little bit protective.”

“Well, I don’t blame him— nor you— for hating Hydra, honestly. I’d want to stab them in the face too if I had to go through what you did. Just, uh— just give me a heads up if you decide to go on a Hydra murder spree, okay? My attorneys like at least a few days notice and we'll need to get you an alibi— oh, Friday’s really good with falsifying all sorts of records—”

The nonchalant way Tony said all of that startled an actual laugh out of Bucky. “This isn’t funny, Tony!”

“It’s a little bit funny.”

Apparently, Tony was all he needed to get the Soldier under control because it finally didn’t feel like
he was drowning in that cloying darkness anymore.

“T’m not planning on raiding any Hydra bases anytime soon, I promise.”

“Oh good,” Tony huffed out a laugh, warm puff of air against Bucky’s collar bone. “In that case, we’re just fine. Well, except for the fact that the Soldier insists on calling me a little sun. I mean, come on, what is with that?”

Bucky realized he was actually smiling. “It’s a common term of endearment in Russian,” he tried to explain. “Besides, it could be worse. He could’ve decided to call you zaychik or kotyonok instead.”

Tony looked up at him for clarification.

“Little bunny. Kitten,” he translated and Tony’s groan made his smile wider.

“Oh, okay, never mind, I’d much rather be compared to a giant, flaming ball of nuclear fusion rather than something small and fluffy.”

“Oh, I dunno. I mean, you are kinda fluffy,” Bucky ruffled Tony’s hair for emphasis and actually, genuinely laughed at Tony’s indignant expression. The man glared at him and jabbed him in the ribs in retaliation, but Bucky just pulled him in closer and settled them both back against the wall.

“You’re a terrible person, James Barnes, and you should be ashamed of yourself,” Tony grumbled, but he was relaxed and pliant against Bucky, who was still smiling.

“I’ll take that into consideration,” he quipped back and let out another slow exhale. His next words were more serious though. “I’m sorry I lost it like that. This wasn’t supposed to be about me. I was here to help you—”

“Hey, none of that now,” Tony cut him off. “Honestly, worrying about you kinda snapped me out of my own funk. I’m fine— or better, at least.” As always, Tony was trying to reassure him. Bucky should’ve expected this. “And it’s okay to be angry sometimes, James. Hell, it’s okay to hate sometimes. I know I have moments like that too. There was this guy I fought once— he kidnapped Pepper and tortured her— injected her with this awful substance that could’ve killed her… Trust me, sometimes I fantasize about ripping that bastard apart too and I almost wish he were still alive so I could do just that. I guess what I’m saying is that— it’s okay to let yourself feel these things sometimes. What ultimately defines us aren’t our thoughts, but our actions. How we choose to act on our feelings.”

Tony trailed off and Bucky considered the man’s words for a moment. Maybe Tony was right, but given what just happened, letting the Soldier— that darkness— come up to the surface felt more dangerous than anything else. Not to mention, it felt like the dark corners of his mind were beginning to fill more and more space in his head each time Bucky let it bleed through.

The Soldier was finally back in his own corner though, so Bucky just focused on Tony’s warm weight in his arms instead, thankful that he was in control of his own mind again.

They stayed like that for a few minutes and at some point, Bucky realized Tony was beginning to doze off, so he carefully sat up and pulled them apart.

“Come on, Tony, it’s time to get you to bed. Hopefully you can get some sleep this time.”

It was easy to get Tony back up on his feet, but when Bucky tried to pull Tony along toward to the elevator, the other man began to shake his head.
“No, no, I won’t get any sleep in my room anyways. Don’t think I’ve gotten even one good night in that damn, uncomfortable bed. I’ll just—I should probably just go back to the lab, get some work done.”

Taking in Tony’s heavy-lidded eyes, Bucky was absolutely sure the man would just pass out at his desk again within minutes of starting said work. He contemplated the situation for a moment and after coming to a decision, he wondered whether it was still the Soldier’s boldness inside him that was responsible for what he was about to suggest next.

“Well… Remember that one time when you said that my bed was more comfortable than yours?”

He trailed off when Tony looked up at him with narrowed eyes, but there was a hint of a smile on the man’s face.

“Are you trying to get me into your bed, Mr. Barnes?”

All Bucky could do was give an innocent shrug.

After a moment, Tony just sighed and slumped against him, clearly letting his exhaustion make the decision for him. “You could at least buy me dinner first,” he grumbled, even as he let Bucky’s arm around his shoulders steer him toward the elevators.

“Didn’t I make you dinner a few nights ago?” Bucky said, which just earned him an amused laugh and tired “Touché. I’m all yours then.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaah, please don’t throw rotten tomatoes at me for *still* dragging out the Wanda thing. In my defense, the next time Bucky hears about her, it's going to be the real deal. All the puzzles pieces are just about in place.

Next time, we pick up right where this chapter leaves off! I mean, I didn't give poor Tony a nightmare to get him into Bucky's bed only to skip over *that*, hehe.

Also, with this chapter, we officially cross 100K words and OMG, I don't know how this happened. This wasn't the plan and I've no idea what I'm even doing, but here we are. -___- And there's still so much left! BRB, having an emotional breakdown. But seriously, thank you all for the support and the love! <3
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

This is the "Everything is ok and nothing hurts" chapter. Enjoy it. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony collapsed on top of the comforter as soon as the bed was in front of him and by the time Bucky came back from the closet with the biggest extra blanket he had, Tony was already half-asleep, curled up on the left side of the large king-sized bed. Bucky unceremoniously dropped the blanket over Tony, covering him entirely, unable to help his laughter when Tony grumbled a “Damn it, James,” as he pushed the blanket back off his head and tried to make himself more comfortable.

Deciding he could spend the night reading in the recliner on the other side of the room, Bucky grabbed his book from the nightstand and made his way over to the soft, comfortable chair. However, he didn’t even get through one full page before the distinct sense of being watched forced him to look up. Tony’s sleepy brown eyes were scrutinizing him.

“Go to sleep, Tony.”

“Are you seriously gonna sit there like that all night?” Tony asked instead, trying to blink away the sleep in those tired eyes.

Bucky frowned. “Oh. I mean— Do you want me to go into the study? Or I guess I can just read in the common room—”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” Tony interrupted him and then stirred beneath the blanket and began to sit up. “I’m not gonna kick you out of your own bed— I’ll just go, it’s fine.”

Bucky closed the book, leaned his chin on his hand, and gave the man an unimpressed look. “Tony, you can barely stay awake. Just rest. You need it a lot more than I do.” He gave a careless shrug. “With the serum, I can go for days without sleep.”

Tony scoffed and narrowed his eyes at him. “Yeah, yeah, just keep reminding me that I’m old and weak. Must be nice to be a fancy super soldier.”

“I’m not saying that you’re old and weak,” Bucky countered, but then his smile turned mischievous. “I’m just saying that you’re— fragile and delicate.”

“Oh, keep talking like that and we’ll see who won’t be getting a cool new arm upgrade,” Tony threatened, but at the present moment, there was nothing even remotely threatening about the man.

“You can’t upgrade on perfection, Tony.”

The engineer’s eyes narrowed further. “Flatterer.”

Bucky responded with a shameless grin, but then his smile softened as he watched Tony just sit there on the bed, wrapped up in that giant fluffy blanket, blinking sleepily and looking far more adorable than any grown man had any right to be.
Tony was watching him too, but after another moment, he obviously decided to take Bucky’s advice because he finally let himself collapse back onto the bed. “Fine… Just— just come sit on the bed at least. That way I won’t feel as bad.” He burrowed his way deeper into the pillows. “Don’t you worry, Barnes, your virtue is safe with me.”

Bucky was able to just barely hold back a snort because it definitely wasn’t his own virtue he was worried about. God, with the way Tony looked, all soft and warm and sleep-mussed, in Bucky’s bed — well, neither he nor the Soldier needed any convincing to come join him. Even if Bucky was only going to stay up, keep watch, and read his book while Tony finally got some sleep.

He did exactly that, sitting up on top of the comforter and stacking up the pillows behind him so he could lean against them, but as he tried to open his book back up, Tony apparently decided he was awake enough for conversation.

“Whatcha reading there?” he inclined his chin towards the book. Bucky showed him the cover. “Mmm, *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan. That’s a good one. Friday’s pick?” When Bucky nodded, Tony’s face lit up with a smile. “That’s my girl. How are you liking it?”

“It’s really great. I think I remember that I used to love looking up at the stars. Always wondering what was out there, you know?”

Tony’s smile dimmed. “I, uh— when that book came out, I was at MIT already, so it wasn’t really the science that impressed me… but it was the way Sagan always talked about it all— I liked that he saw science with enthusiasm and hope. I think it helped me focus on the work that I was actually passionate about— you know, robotics, AI— I never really cared about the weapons side of things, but of course that was the empire I was destined to inherit. I, uh— I used to like looking up at the stars too…” Tony swallowed hard and his voice dropped to a whisper, “but now when I look up at the night sky, I just don’t see hope anymore…”

He trailed off, his gaze distant, and Bucky wondered whether he was seeing that portal from New York. Bucky couldn’t even begin to imagine what that must have been like, what Tony must have seen as he flew that nuke into some strange, distant part of space. Ready to die to save the world.

Bucky’s heart seized then, a sharp ache in his chest, realizing that he could’ve lost Tony before ever having had the chance to meet him. He wanted to say something to comfort the man, despite the sudden lump in Bucky’s own throat, but then, as always, Tony just shook off that darkness and instead narrowed his eyes at the paperback in Bucky’s hands.

“Although, you do know that you can have any book ever on your StarkPad, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Bucky replied quietly, pushing away his own dark thoughts, “but I just like to feel a real book in my hands,” he admitted. “But Friday said these weren’t that much more expensive than the digital ones—”

Tony’s sleepy glare stopped him short. “Book prices? Really? Billionaire here, in case you forgot. Pretty sure I can buy you the whole Library of Congress if you wanted it.” Tony's eyes turned downright calculating for a moment. “…Maybe I should buy the Library of Congress, actually. Hmm, need to discuss with Pepper.” His gaze was back on Bucky. “But seriously, you’re in casa de Stark now. We don’t worry about things like that around here.”

Bucky appreciated the sentiment, but he just gave Tony a shrug. “Just because you have a lot of money, doesn’t mean I’m entitled to any of it. Hell, I already feel bad as it is. I live at the Compound, eat your food, use all your tech. Not to mention the therapy and the arm!” He frowned, realizing, not for the first time, just how much Tony had given him already. “Thank you, by the way. *Again.* For
everything. It all must be costing you a fortune… Feel like I should be getting a job already just to pay you back.”

The familiar flustered expression on Tony’s face when Bucky thanked him was expected, but the amused snort that followed wasn’t.

“Yeah, well, you’d definitely be the first one to do that,” Tony muttered, but then grimaced, as if realizing what he just said. “But uh— really, just don’t worry about it. You, uh— don’t need to pay me back for anything. And hell, jobs are for squares—”

“You have a job, Tony.”

“Exactly. And see how much fun I’m not having?” He scoffed. “Spent the last three days in Manhattan and what do I have for my troubles? More work. So enjoy being a free man, James—”

Tony suddenly hesitated and his expression turned contemplative. “Well, unless you actually want a job. I mean, once we get you triggers-free, you’ll be your own man. You can go out into the world, get a job, find a nice girl to settle down with, have 2.5 kids… you know, that whole American dream deal.”

When Bucky just raised an eyebrow at him, Tony’s smile turned sheepish. “Right, right, sorry. It’s ‘find a nice fella and marry him’ in your case. It’s legal now, you know.”

Bucky hummed. “Right, because all sorts of fellas are clamoring for a night with the legendary Winter Soldier… who still needs to see his therapist twice a week and might go crazy if someone mentions Hydra within half a mile radius of him.” He cringed. “Not to mention, getting that job might not be so easy either. You know, with all that education I have... from the thirties.” Saying the words out loud made Bucky realize that he really didn’t have much to offer someone, did he? An ex-assassin with a broken mind and no way to make a living for himself, with no real place in the modern world…

“Never too late for that either, you know,” Tony added quietly and when Bucky looked at him in confusion, he clarified, “getting an education, I mean. You can always go to college, get a degree.”

“Oh, didn’t know we had a time machine to go get all my old school records.”

Tony let out a huff of laughter at his sarcasm. “Well, that is one option… or I can just buy whatever college you pick a nice new library or something. Everyone always says I do nothing but throw my money around to get what I want. Might as well put that reputation to good use.”

Bucky was prepared to say something in protest (because why did Tony insist on just offering him more—it was already too much, how could Bucky even begin to repay him for any of it?), but then Tony just shook his head and pulled the blanket tighter around him. “Anyways, don’t worry too much about it for now. It’s just an option, that’s all. It’s good to have options…”

He trailed off with a shrug, letting out a soft exhale and giving Bucky a smile. It was small and tired, but so genuine and full of affection that Bucky was pretty sure those were actual butterflies he was feeling in his stomach all of the sudden. What was he, a lovelorn teenager?

But he still let his eyes follow the contours of Tony’s face for a moment, taking in every line, every scar… Even exhausted and half asleep, Tony was still gorgeous and Bucky wanted nothing more than to map out every one of those details, every beautiful imperfection, with his lips and oh god, the urge to kiss Tony was damn near irresistible again, even if that desire was softer, more tender this time. The Soldier may have wanted to claim Tony, to possess him, but all Bucky wanted was to see the man happy.
He still forced himself to look away, running distracted fingers across the pages of the book in his lap. He tried to change the subject. “Did you, uh— ever think about settling down? Having kids, that whole thing?”

Tony took a moment to respond. “When I was younger, I acted like I was deathly allergic to serious, committed relationships. Something like marriage didn’t even cross my mind. Too busy being the notorious playboy Stark. But uh— then I got older and wiser and for a while, I really thought Pepper and I were going to make it. Bought a ring and everything once, actually…” Tony looked down, expression turning forlorn, and he distractedly picked at the embroidered pattern on the comforter. “But the night I wanted to propose, we got into a huge fight. Over something really stupid too, but we still ended up not talking to each other for days. And after that, no moment ever felt right again and before long, Pepper broke things off.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Bucky’s sentiment was genuine, despite the pang of jealousy at the image of Tony and Ms. Potts together. It was obvious, even now, how much Tony must have loved her.

“Yeah, me too… Although I honestly don’t regret that Pepper ended it. I think she did the best thing she could have for herself. She deserved to be happy and I just— all I did was make her miserable. I was reckless, I forgot simple things like anniversaries. I just wasn’t a good boyfriend. Not to mention, I have enough emotional baggage to fill a mid-sized airport—” Tony stopped himself and let out a weary sigh. “Pepper is better off without me. I just— I just wish the two of us could go back to being friends, you know? We were so much better at that than we ever were at being a couple.”

As always, Bucky hated hearing Tony speak so poorly of himself and he wished he knew how to make Tony see that none of those things were true. That Tony was caring and selfless and he made everyone around him better off just by being there. Tony was amazing, but Bucky honestly didn’t think the man would listen to anything he said right now. He hoped that maybe someday he’d find the right words to make Tony believe though.

He also remembered how Ms. Potts looked at Tony with the same soft longing that he could hear in the man’s voice right now and hoped that the two could someday reconcile. He may have felt some jealousy at the affection that laced Tony’s words when he spoke about the woman, but that didn’t matter. This was about Tony and the more good people he had in his life, friends or otherwise, the better. And if Tony was happy, Bucky would be too. “What about kids?”

“Oh, that’s a definite no for me. I mean, can you imagine? Tony Stark - a dad? I would be such a questionable role model,” Tony laughed, trying to make his words sound like a joke.

Bucky wanted to argue this point too, because he could in fact imagine it. Tony was already a parent and a role model. To Peter and Harley. To Friday and the bots. Hell, sometimes Tony acted like Vision was his own kid too. Tony was already a father in all the ways that counted and he was doing just fine with it, but there were obviously deeper issues here, and unfortunately, this wasn’t the right time to convince Tony that he’d make a good parent either.

“Well, I think you would be one of those really cool dads, you know? You’d let your kids eat all the dessert they want and stay up past their bed time because you spent all night down at the lab building fun gadgets with them.”

Bucky was speaking from experience, given that he just described an actual night at the Compound a few weeks ago. Somehow, Tony and the kids got it into their heads that Bucky needed to figure out his favorite flavor of ice cream (apparently his experience in Central Park wasn’t sufficient), so of course every possible flavor had to be ordered. Bucky was pretty sure they were just using him as a convenient excuse to eat a ridiculous amount of ice cream, but he dutifully tried every flavor they put in front of him (to everyone’s disappointment, Bucky liked plain old strawberry best).
Afterwards, his three favorite scientists put their sugar-fueled energies to good use at the lab, trying to upgrade Peter’s web shooters. Unfortunately, everything somehow went wrong and all three (along with an entire workstation) ended up covered in the sticky web, all of which was promptly covered by fire extinguisher foam, courtesy of Dum-E. Bucky caught the whole beautiful disaster on video and then had Friday send it to every one of Tony’s friends. Twenty first century technology was awesome.

It was actually a habit of his now, to record the life around him on his StarkPhone as a way to remember everything, and he was pretty sure his frequent mass emails filled with pictures and videos of Tony and the kids were one of the reasons Rhodes downright tolerated him these days.

Tony just snickered at the description of his parenting. “Like I said. Questionable role model. I would—” he was interrupted by a big yawn and Bucky finally let himself look back down at Tony, taking in the heaviness of the man’s eyelids as he tried to keep himself awake for this conversation.

“I think it’s time to get some rest, Tony,” he said quietly and gave the man his own genuine smile. These days, smiling came much easier too, especially around Tony, and wasn’t that a marvel in its own right.

The engineer narrowed his sleepy eyes at the suggestion for a moment, but then shuffled around under the blanket to lay back down and make himself more comfortable. Apparently the man wasn’t capable of sleeping like a normal person however because he ended up curled up diagonally across the bed, with his pillow and his head resting right next to Bucky’s hip.

Clearly, fate was testing him and Bucky was currently in no shape to resist a tempting invitation like that. So, with that same boldness that he swore belonged to the Soldier rather than himself, he reached out his right hand and gently began carding his fingers through Tony’s soft hair.

He felt Tony still under his hand.

“What’cha doing?” the man asked quietly and Bucky’s hand stilled as well.

“Helping you fall asleep?”

For a moment, there was silence, but then all Tony did was exhale softly and relax again. “Well, I didn’t say stop,” he grumbled and— well, who was Bucky to refuse this man anything?

His fingers resumed their careful, tender movements, gentle caresses back and forth against Tony’s hair, once in a while straying to brush against Tony’s temple. Watching the motions of his hand soothe Tony to sleep, Bucky marveled at this one singular moment in time between them because it served as tangible proof of how far they’ve come. This hand, that killed so many—I’m so sorry, Maria— was now providing comfort, tenderness, safety to the one man who had every right to be scared of him, to hate him. But Tony Stark never did anything by the book, did he? Instead, he just laughed in the face of expectations. He gave Bucky a second chance - to be free, to live, to atone. He made Bucky feel whole again, after years of living a half-life.

He felt Tony’s breathing settle itself into a slower rhythm after a minute and the man’s whole body relaxed completely and finally gave itself over to sleep. Bucky’s hand still continued its soft caresses.

He was alone with his thoughts now and he reflected back on the conversation they just had. It was easy to see just how much Tony had given him in these short few months. It may have all started with a second chance, but it ended up turning into so much more. Tony gave him a home. A family.

And even though Tony didn’t seem to expect anything in return, Bucky realized that while he didn’t
have all that much himself, he would be willing to give everything he had to the man next to him. Every part of himself.

He knew didn’t want to go out into the world and cobble up some semblance of a new life. He wanted to stay here, at Tony’s side, and build on the life he already had at the Compound. Bucky wanted to explore and learn new things with Vision, to see Peter and Harley grow into amazing young men, to feel that sense of awe every time Friday did something else remarkably human, to become better friends with Rhodes and Strange and Alice and everyone else who was now a part of Tony’s life. He wanted the chance to prove himself and support the efforts to protect the world in any way he could. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t want to be a hero again, instead of the villain he was forced to become.

He wanted to bring Tony coffee in the morning and see that surprised smile because of course Bucky knew by now that Tony secretly liked two teaspoons of sugar in his first cup of the day. He wanted to watch the man invent the future in his lab and build amazing creations. He wanted to hold Tony through the nightmares, take care of him whenever he was hurt after a mission, protect him from the inevitable threats that would come for him.

He wanted to see Tony happy. More than that, he wanted to make Tony happy. He wanted—

All the feelings and desires tumbling through him in that moment suddenly coalesced into simple, clear words inside his head and his first thought was that it really shouldn’t have taken him this long to realize it.

He was in love.

Bucky Barnes was in love with Tony Stark.

After letting that revelation sink in for a moment, his second thought was that he didn’t feel nearly as terrified in the face of that realization as he thought he would have been.

After all, what else could he feel for Tony but love?

He watched his hand continue its soothing motions, even though Tony was now lost to the world in deep sleep. Honestly, the tender gesture was as calming for Bucky as it apparently was for Tony. It felt right.

Unfortunately, now Bucky needed to decide what to do with his sudden epiphany because frankly, the need to be closer to Tony, so much closer, was becoming a constant sweet ache and he knew he couldn’t ignore it for very much longer. He wanted to kiss Tony, to touch every part of him, to make him feel good and god, it had been so long since he had given anyone genuine pleasure, maybe he’d forgotten how to after all this time, but dammit, he sure as hell was willing to try.

Even now, all he wanted was to lie down next to Tony, to wrap his arms around him and pull him in closer, until Tony was flush against him and there was no more space between them.

But he couldn’t—

Well, at least not yet.

He supposed the real question now was whether Tony reciprocated any of these feelings and given their interactions, Bucky was, at the very least, hopeful.

He and Tony had become a lot closer (evidenced by their current situation), but Tony seemed to be an affectionate man by nature and he didn’t shy away from touch. On the contrary, he seemed to
crave it, although he often wasn’t the first one to initiate it. A term Dr. Vance used once in their session to describe Bucky himself—touch-starved—filtered through his mind and he wondered whether that applied to Tony as well.

The other residents of the Compound seemed to be at least partly aware of this because they all indulged Tony’s need for physical closeness. Whether it was Rhodes or Vision or the kids, they always had an arm around Tony, or a comforting hand on his shoulder. Friendly shoves, leaning against each other for comfort, ruffling each other's hair. There was no shortage of hugs at the Compound either and hell, Bucky distinctly remembered one time when Tony gave Rhodes the most exaggerated kiss on the cheek (before asking Rhodes to elope with him in Vegas) when the man announced that he managed to get Tony out of attending some meeting in Washington DC.

These same casual, platonic gestures of affection slipped over into the relationship between Bucky and Tony as well, once the two were more comfortable around each other. The real question now was whether all of that was nothing but friendly interactions or whether there was something more behind that affection on Tony’s part (because there was certainly more on Bucky’s part, there was no denying that now).

He supposed he could just ask Tony, but after a moment’s thought, he physically cringed because, yeah, that couldn’t possibly be the most awkward moment in the whole hundred years of his existence.

*Hi, Tony! Remember me, the brainwashed ex-assassin? I know we share the most complicated history possible and I really don’t have a whole lot to offer you, but while you were sleeping in my bed, I realized I may be head over heels in love with you. And now I can’t stop thinking about you—about kissing you and touching you and possibly spending the rest of my life with you. Oh, and by the way, my crazy alter ego—Dr. Vance calls him my “Id”, you may know him as the Soldier—well, all he really wants to do is bend you over the nearest surface and make you come with my name on your lips, but that’s really neither here nor there. So, how about it, Tony? Would ya like to go steady with me?*

Yes, that would go over so well.

At the very least, Bucky needed to test out the waters first. Maybe start with being a little more deliberate and a little less subtle in the way he behaved around Tony. Then he could gauge the man’s reaction and if Tony responded positively, then maybe Bucky could find enough courage to put his feelings into words. The Soldier promptly informed him that all of this could also be accomplished by just pushing Tony against the nearest wall and kissing him so thoroughly that he couldn’t possibly misunderstand the message, but Bucky decided to leave that for Plan B.

Plan A, on the other hand, could start tomorrow. Bucky smiled despite himself because there was suddenly a lightness in his chest and it felt suspiciously like hope. Whatever it was, it felt amazing and Bucky was not keen on letting it go.

Carefully, so as not to jostle Tony awake, he shimmied down into a more horizontal position and let his right arm rest around Tony’s back, with Tony’s head resting in the crook of his arm. They weren’t quite touching, but for now, this would have to be enough because starting tomorrow, Bucky was determined to figure out if there could be more.

With that thought warming him from the inside out, and knowing that the Soldier would stand guard over them both, Bucky let Tony’s quiet, measured breathing lull him into his own light, but restful sleep.
You guys have no idea how much satisfaction I got from writing the *Bucky Barnes was in love with Tony Stark* line. Like, I hope Steve was somewhere clutching his chest in that moment, going "oh no, why does it feel like i'm having a heart attack?"

It's because Bucky is officially #TeamIronMan now, Steve. Mwahaha.

Now, I wonder what kind of realizations *Tony* will have the next morning?
Chapter 21

I don't have any witty comments to start this chapter off with, so... please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The soft, shy smile on James’ face, contrasted perfectly against the heat behind those blue eyes, was just the invitation Tony needed to let his lips map out the beautiful expanse of bare skin before him. He began his explorations of that gorgeous body with the man’s neck, loving the way James tilted his head to give Tony even more access. After a long row of unhurried kisses, he gave just one playful love bite, which drew a pleased moan out of the man beneath him. Tony felt the grip of the metal hand in his hair tighten just a touch.

Moving down lower, he lavished gentle, worshipful kisses on James’ scarred left shoulder. They were both damaged in their own way and all Tony could do was try to soothe those past hurts with his tender ministrations now. Following the planes of James’ body, Tony’s lips left a trail of kisses down the man’s chest, making sure to give extra attention to each dusky nipple as they pebbled underneath his touch. Tony’s name escaped James’ lips, a breathless, needy exhale, and it was music to Tony’s ears. The super soldier was still too quiet, too reserved about communicating his pleasure, but in this, Tony was willing to have patience.

As his lips made their way down to that glorious set of abs (really, there should be temples built in their honor and Tony would be their most devout worshipper), Tony felt James’ right hand on his back, careful but firm touches, trying to flip them back over in an attempt to take back control, but as much as Tony loved being at James’ mercy (especially when there was that glint of the Soldier in the man’s eyes and oh god, it was so baddirtywrong that he found it as hot as he did), this time around, he was the one running the show. Still supporting himself on his arms, Tony shifted back up, making sure to place a few more kisses on those beautiful pecs before finding himself eye level with James and tenderly kissing the arches of both cheeks.

“Shh, sweetheart, just let me take care of you, okay? Just let me be the one to make you feel good tonight, baby. Please?” he whispered, placing more kisses up and down his lover’s jaw. After a moment, Tony felt the grip of the metal hand relax as those cool metal fingers trailed down, causing a shiver of pleasure to run down Tony’s spine. As he saw James give him a nod, eyes dark with arousal and lips parted just enough to let out short huffs of air, Tony’s smile turned decidedly satisfied and he didn’t waste any more time. All he wanted to do was to make James feel so good tonight. After everything the man had suffered, he deserved to feel nothing but pleasure and if there was one thing Tony Stark knew better than anything else, it was how to give someone pleasure.

He made his way back down, mourning for a second that he was skipping over those delicious abs, but Tony was a man on a mission. He left just one soft kiss on James’ navel, then let his lips travel even lower, and fuck, James was already so hard, erection straining against the front of his jeans and Tony reveled in the fact that it was all because of him. He loved that he could make James react like this and just the fact that James felt this way about Tony? It meant everything.

The lights around them turned brighter for a moment and just as Tony was about to unzip those jeans and get on with making James forget about everything but his own pleasure and Tony’s talented
Tony groaned, throwing his arm over his eyes, as he desperately tried to hang on to the images in his head. He was mostly failing.

_Goddamn it, really? Why did his dumb brain decide it was time to wake up right before the good part?_

All Tony really wanted was to go back to that dream for just a little bit longer, but reality was already coming back in bits and pieces whether he liked it or not. Shifting focus to his actual body, Tony realized he was actually half-hard himself and _dammit_, he deserved some sort of happy ending. He decided there were just enough images left in his head of tantalizing skin, soft smiles, and lust-filled blue eyes, but as he shifted onto his back to give himself better access, Tony realized the bed beneath him didn’t feel quite right. It wasn’t the cold, uncomfortable bed in his quarters and this certainly wasn’t the lumpy couch in the lab.

“What the hell happened last night?” Tony muttered to himself, but Friday took that as her cue to respond.

“You had a night terror, Boss, and I, uh— I may have disobeyed a very inadequate set of protocols and asked Mr. Barnes to help you. The two of you came here to rest and after a brief conversation, you both fell asleep. Mr. Barnes has been up for approximately three hours and fourteen minutes now. He is currently in the kitchen.”

As Friday’s words filtered through Tony’s head, he was beginning to remember the rest of the night as well. The god-awful nightmare, being unable to shake it off, and ending up alone in the hallway. James finding him there, sticking around despite Tony’s usual shitty attitude, and _oh dear god_, did they actually spend an hour _cuddling_ on the floor together? Tony let out an audible groan and let himself fall back onto the bed.

Yeah, they definitely cuddled. Then the Soldier made a brief appearance— _note to self, do not mention Hydra around the poor man_— and it wasn’t just dream-Tony who felt ashamed for— for being _taken_ with those glimpses of the Soldier. Because for those brief few moments, with the way James looked at him and the way he clutched Tony to him, it felt like Tony was the only thing in the world that mattered to the man. It was a heady, addictive sensation and Tony hated himself for craving it because he knew James didn’t want anything to do with the Soldier (even though the Soldier _was_ James, at least according to every test and scan done so far).

A voice in his own head, one that resembled some obscene mix of Howard and Obie, whispered that neither James nor the Soldier really cared about _him_; that part of James hated _Hydra_ and would have been willing to protect anyone with that same fervor. _There’s nothing special about you, Tony._

*I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.*
Great, now he had Steve echoing in his head too. Splendid.

Tony grimaced and tried to push away the voices by recounting the rest of the evening. He and James ended up talking—oh god, how exhausted was he that he just straight-up asked James to come join him on the bed?—and Tony also recalled being far more candid with James than he probably would’ve been in the light of day. It felt so easy though, sharing those parts of himself. Even talking about his relationship with Pepper didn’t hurt quite as much.

And then James just told him to get some rest and—

Tony was pretty sure he was physically blushing as he lay there staring up at the ceiling. Sweet lord, he fell asleep while James was literally petting his head.

This was bad.

This was so very bad because all of that was everything that Tony wanted and he was just on the right side of exhausted last night to let himself indulge in it. He craved that affection and tenderness, he craved James more than he craved alcohol on his darkest days. Shit, he was just replacing one addiction with another, wasn’t he?

Tony was well aware that he was this close to just giving in and letting himself fall down this rabbit hole. If this went on any longer, he wouldn’t be strong enough to resist all the things he felt for James. How could he when he was— no, he couldn’t even think it, he couldn’t—

Fuck. Just be a man and own up to it, Stark.

He was in love with James.

Iron Man was in love with the Winter Soldier. How the hell did that even happen? Why didn’t someone get into a time machine and warn him that putting his signature on that damn pardon would turn his whole life upside down?

Rubbing the palms of his hands against his eyes, Tony let out another pained groan because admitting that to himself in plain English only made the ache in his chest sharper and he cringed. For once, it wasn’t actual physical pain nor the phantom aches from that blasted shield. No, this was an ache of being so close to having something you wanted so desperately and knowing that you shouldn’t ever, ever let yourself have it.

Denial was no longer working though. Tony knew he was nearly ready to just say fuck it and hand James his whole heart—god, hand every part of himself on a silver platter—and he would be so fucking happy with any scrap of affection James might throw his way.

He swallowed against the bitterness in his throat because he knew that this was exactly what happened with the other Avengers. While his feelings for them were familial, the story was the same. He gave them everything, tried so hard to be exactly what they all wanted him to be, but it was just never good enough. God, there were times when he was almost ready to beg for the affection, loyalty, love they so easily shared with each other. But Stark men were made of iron, Stark men didn’t beg, so he just tried to be better. He tried and tried and tried…

And failed.

A part of him knew that it was unfair to compare James to the others. Hell, that single comment about paying Tony back put James ahead of the others by a wide margin, although Tony intentionally failed to mention that actually paying him back would’ve been a nearly impossible task (the arm alone cost millions of dollars already). Honestly, Tony barely even knew what to do with
James’ simple genuine gratitude because all it did was trigger a compulsion in Tony to just buy James more things. Probably not the healthiest response to people saying “Thank you,” but Tony Stark rarely did healthy.

James was a good man. A great man, who had come so far in such a short time, trying to be someone better each and every day. James was intelligent in his own right, sense of humor razor sharp, and he kept Tony on his toes, matching his teasing and snark without ever making Tony feel like he was falling short of some arbitrary standard. The kids already loved him. Hell, even Rhodey was warming up to him.

James was a man who saw Tony at his worst and offered comfort instead of derision. A man who made Tony’s weak, old heart skip a beat every time James smiled, every time those clever blue eyes would look at him with warmth.

The actual physical attraction went without saying and Tony tried to push away the thought that he was even attracted to James’ darker side, far more than he should be. He’d take every part of James, Soldier and all, in a heartbeat.

God, he could wax poetic about James all morning long, but he had to be honest with himself. He had to face the fact that anything between them would just end up hurting them both. Maybe they would get to enjoy a few months, but Tony knew, better than anyone, that it was only a matter of time before the rest of the Avengers were back, and just like last year, they’d all be forced to pick a side.

Oh god, it’s like we’re some fucked up version of “Romeo and Juliet.”

Frankly, Tony was still mostly in denial about the fact that any day now, their illustrious government would sign off on the pardons. He knew it was inevitable though and as much as he hated to admit it, it was probably for the best, as far as the rest of the world was concerned. The past year was relatively quiet on the crazy overpowered villains front, but Tony saw what lied beyond the portal. He knew something was coming for Earth sooner or later and they would need all hands on deck to defend against it. But honestly, he couldn’t even begin to fathom how he would deal with having all of them back, probably living here at the Compound—oh god, what a fucking nightmare—and having to pretend like the past year never happened.

However, he wasn’t in denial about who would be James’ choice once Steve was back here in the flesh.

Tony imagined for a moment, standing there next to Steve in front of James. Him, an old, scarred, broken mess of a man standing next to the all-American hero, that perfect specimen carved out of goddamn marble and righteousness… Everyone had always found Tony wanting when compared to the great Captain America, so who was he to think that it would any different with James?

Not to mention that this was James, not just some random guy off the street. No, Tony had to go and fall in love with goddamn Bucky Barnes himself, Steve Rogers’ bestest best friend, their love and friendship transcending seven decades worth of war, ice, and Hydra. Love that was literally enshrined in a damn museum (the Smithsonian still refused to take down the Captain America exhibit, even with the man technically being a wanted fugitive).

And while Howard mostly regaled him with stories of Captain America when Tony was a kid, there were also plenty of stories about Steve and Bucky. Inseparable on and off the field, best friends in life and in death.

How the fuck was he supposed to compete with that?
That thought startled an actual bark of laughter out of him. It was a humorless, hopeless sound that went perfectly with the sharp ache in his chest.

That was the problem. He couldn’t compete with that. Hell, Tony wasn’t even sure he could be in the same room as Steve, so in the end, James would be forced to choose and he would choose Steve. Everyone else did.

Would it even be a hard choice to make? In his darkest moments, when insecurities, old and new, were the loudest things in his head, Tony wondered whether James spent his phones calls with Steve counting down the days until he was free of the triggers. Free of Tony. His common sense would pull him back and point out all the evidence to the contrary, that James really did care about Tony and seemed happy here at the Compound, but would that be enough?

On the other hand, maybe this whole debate was pointless because what if Tony was actually misreading the whole situation in the first place? What exactly made him think James was actually interested in him? Sure, they were close and it didn’t take very long for casual, affectionate touches and words to become second nature between them. But maybe that was because James spent the last seventy years being tortured. The poor guy was probably starving for basic human contact and here was Tony, misinterpreting the whole thing.

Something even more depressing suddenly dawned on him and a sourness joined the bitter taste at the back of his throat. What if he tried to act on his feelings and James reciprocated because of some misplaced sense of gratitude or worse— some sense of debt, thinking that Tony expected this as some sort of payment for helping him?

Dammit. Now his mood was definitely rotten. Ugh, and this morning started out so well too.

Tony realized he should probably get up at some point, but the bed beneath him was too comfortable. Unfairly so, really. It was warm and soft, it smelled like James and honestly, Tony could just die in this bed and be okay with it.

“Hey, Fri?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Sorry I yelled at you yesterday. I shouldn’t have. I’m— I’m proud of you, baby girl. You thought and acted on your own accord and probably ended up saving my butt.”

And then promptly landed it in the bed of the man I’m in love with, but let’s not talk about that.

“I consider it my most important function to ensure that you are well and cared for, Boss. I just— I just wanted you to be okay. Can we update my protocols to include Mr. Barnes as one of your emergency contacts? Just in case something like this happens in the future.”

All Tony could do was let out a weary sigh and close his eyes in the face of that question. He really shouldn’t—

“Yeah, that’s fine. You can add him, Fri. But only if Rhodey’s not available.”

James was still a friend, right? They were still allowed to help each other.

Tony finally forced himself to sit up and let himself have a long stretch. Despite his dark thoughts, he actually felt surprisingly good physically. God, this was probably the best night of sleep he had gotten in— hell, in years.
“Fri, how long did I sleep?”

“Seven hours and twenty three minutes.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Holy— no wonder I feel weird. I think my body’s going into shock,” he muttered to himself.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he took stock of his body. His back ached less, the knots in his neck loosened up a little bit (he really was overdue for a nice massage though), and hell, his mind was so alert, he didn’t even need his morning coffee—

No, that was lunacy. He always needed coffee.

Finally forcing himself out of the bed, Tony headed into the bathroom and finding a new toothbrush still in its package, he quickly appropriated it. Brushing his teeth gave him the chance to contemplate his next steps.

Well, it was simple, really. All he needed to do now was just— just act around James the same way he would act around any other good friend. They could still be amicable and joke around. Maybe even a nice, comforting pat on the shoulder every once in a while wouldn’t hurt.

Yes, that was the plan. Platonic, casual, and appropriate interactions. He could do that. He would be a responsible adult—first time for everything— and make the right decision for both of them.

After spitting out the last of the toothpaste, Tony tried to tame his hair with his hand, quickly gave up, and not wanting to make a trip back to his quarters, decided his sleeveless top and long pajama pants were sufficient. This was his compound, he could walk around barefoot and half dressed if he wanted to.

As he walked past the bed though, the phantom sense of James’ careful fingers running through his hair chose that moment to flitter across Tony’s skin and he physically shuddered. His brain had the worst sense of timing apparently. He promptly ignored the memory of that tender touch, along with the ache in his chest and the heaviness in his heart, and headed for the door.

As soon as he swung the door open however, he was hit with a cheerful chatter of voices mixed with the clatter of plates filtering down the hallway. Definitely coming from the kitchen, Tony decided, and wandered over to investigate.

***

Tony stopped short when he turned the corner and the kitchen came into full view.

“What is— what is going on in here?”

A happy chorus of “Tony!” sounded from the four people in the kitchen. Harley and Peter were in one corner, trying to mix something that resembled batter (the flour was everywhere but in the bowl at the moment), Vision was at the stove, peacefully mixing something in a pot, and James was standing at one of the counters, cutting up strawberries. Tony had to bite back a groan at just how good James looked this morning, hair pulled back in a loose bun, wearing jeans, sneakers, and a black t-shirt that oh so perfectly accentuated those glorious biceps. Tony didn’t remember James ever wearing a shirt quite that snug before, but while those tight shirts were just annoying when Steve used to wear them, they looked like god’s gift to mankind on James.

Tony then took in the apron James was wearing and died just a little bit more inside. Kiss the Cook. Yeah, life definitely had a shitty sense of humor.
He made his way over to the breakfast bar that overlooked the entire kitchen and sat himself down in one of the barstools. “Seriously though, what are you guys doing?”

“We’re making a breakfast buffet, Tony,” Vision responded with his usual serene smile. “We have plenty of fresh fruit, jams, syrups… The boys are making pancakes, I will be making french toast—”

“And I’m stuck making crepes,” James cut in. “I watched a video on the Youtube though—”

“It’s just Youtube, Bucky.”

“Sorry, on the just Youtube,” James’ smile turned into a mischievous grin when Harley groaned in defeat behind him, “I watched how to do the flip and I’m sure I can pull it off—”

“Oh, can you teach us how to do it too?” Peter chimed in and James turned to give the boys a mock glare.

“Well, I would, but then you two had to go and make a big ol’ mess over there. Come on, there’s more flour on you than in the batter! How does that even work?”

The two boys just grinned unrepentantly at the man and went back to flicking flour at each other instead of measuring it out.

Tony just sat there and blinked at the whole exchange. “…I have so many questions right now,” he muttered and then frowned as he took in the veritable pile of fruit James was cutting up. “This is way too much food for just five people though. Even factoring in teenage boys and super soldier appetites.”

Both James and Vision first glanced at each other and then gave Tony an unimpressed look.

“You forgot, didn’t ya?” James asked and Vision shook his head, some fondness coloring his voice. “You really can’t blame Tony, he has been working very hard these past few days.”

“Forgot what exactly?”

“We have guests coming over today,” James responded and then carried the cut up berries over to a tray with another pile of prepped fruit. Tony took the moment to think, trying to remember who exactly was supposed to be coming over this morning, while simultaneously trying to remind himself that staring at James’ magnificent backside when he turned around was absolutely not allowed behavior anymore— but seriously, it wasn’t his fault! Who let James wear jeans that tight-fitting?

However, he apparently got a little too lost in thought because all of the sudden there was a super soldier right next to him. James just appeared on his left side and oh— there was definitely a super soldier arm now casually draped over the back of his barstool, snug against Tony’s exposed back and shoulders.

“Hi?” Tony barely managed to squeak out as he looked up at James who just tilted his head at him.

“Hi there. Did you sleep well?” James’ voice was soft and soothing and Tony’s breath definitely did not get caught in his throat at the smile he was graced with.

“It was— better than expected,” was all Tony could string together, brain still trying to work out why there was a very warm, very solid super soldier standing so close to him.

“I’m glad to hear that,” James said and then reached out his metal hand to gently tuck a few of
Tony’s curls behind his ear. “Anytime you need a good night’s sleep, Tony,” he whispered and winked, “my bed’s all yours.”

Before Tony could even begin to say anything in response to that, James addressed Vision. “I think we’re supposed to take that off the heat now, Viz, and then—”

Whatever else James said turned into white noise in Tony’s head because suddenly his entire existence narrowed down to James’ right hand tracing lazy figure eights up and down the back of Tony’s arm. Tony vaguely remembered James doing something similar last night, but it was different then. Last night was just about comfort in the face of nightmares. This— this was casual and unprompted, in broad daylight in the middle of their kitchen! James was still chatting with Vision, but his hand just continued on with its gentle caresses, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

A simple touch like that had no right to feel so good, but oh god, it felt amazing and Tony couldn’t help the soft exhale he let out, his brain ready to just melt right out of his skull. But at least he didn’t outright moan.

On top of that, James was still standing so close that Tony could actually smell that the man was already freshly showered, hints of his shampoo mixing with the scent of metal and vanilla. Somehow, James always smelled like vanilla now. Maybe because he spent so much time in the kitchen baking nowadays, Tony wasn’t sure.

And the way Tony’s skin lit up with electricity along every inch of where James’ arm was pressed against his back and shoulders—

This was it. This was how the Winter Soldier planned to kill him. Forget guns and grenades and knives. James was going to kill him with gentle touches and with that intoxicating scent and with the amazing way the heat from his skin permeated all through Tony—and why wasn’t anyone else in the kitchen paying attention to the master assassin currently turning Tony into puddle of goo?

James was still speaking, but now he was looking back down at Tony instead of Vision.

Oh god, Tony was supposed to respond, wasn’t he?

“Whazzatnow?” he managed, really hoping it sounded like actual words.

James was smiling serenely at him, no hint of mischief or any other diabolical Winter Soldier intentions. Just his usual sweet smile that somehow still made Tony weak in the knees even though he was sitting down.

“I asked if you wanted some coffee,” James replied and Tony’s brain finally perked up because, yes, coffee. Tony definitely needed coffee.


“Of course,” James’ eyes crinkled at the corners as his smile grew, but instead of walking away to get said coffee, he leaned down just far enough to whisper in Tony’s ear “Don’t worry, the two spoons of sugar can be our little secret.”

Or at least Tony assumed those were the words because all he could really focus on was the shock of arousal that shot through his whole body when he felt the soft huff of James’ breath against his ear. Tony’s brain supplied memories of the Soldier once doing the exact same thing and then every thought just promptly fizzled out into static.
Thankfully, James finally pulled away (although not before slowly and deliberately dragging his right hand across Tony’s back and shoulders before finally letting go).

Now that every one of his senses was no longer assaulted with James, James, James, Tony was able to suck in a breath of air, his world slowly coming back to normal.

Okay, get it together, Tony. Shit, what was I supposed to be doing again? Right, right, be a responsible adult.

There’s just something weird in the water this morning. That’s all. Something that only affects former Soviet assassins, maybe?

Tony used the reprieve to observe the four in the kitchen for a few minutes (James turned on the coffee maker, the kids were throwing blueberries at each other, and Vision was frowning at a cookbook), but the intermission didn’t last long.

“We’re here!” a familiar voice sounded behind Tony, accompanied by delighted squeals.

Chapter End Notes

Oh sweet, misguided Tony. Just give in already! Or don’t, because writing them this way is way too much fun. Bucky's like half-way to planning their wedding already while Tony is all "Conceal, don't feel!" Can we just rename this fic to "Idiots in Love"? For accuracy purposes?

Also, if anyone asks why the others in the kitchen weren't paying any attention to Bucky and Tony - a) because it was probably more subtle than Tony thought it was and b) everyone in the Compound is already so used to these two making heart-eyes at each other, that they're all just like "yup, business as usual."

So, just go with it. :)

Now, let's see who's paying our beloved heroes a visit...
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a lot of fun to write, so I hope you enjoy it just as much. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’re here!”

Laura’s familiar voice filled the kitchen, accompanied by delighted squeals. Tony turned around in his chair, suddenly wishing he made the trip back to his quarters after all and at least put on some damn jeans.

“Wait, what— Why are Mama Agent and Tiny Agents in my kitchen?”

Cooper and Lila chose that moment to climb onto the two barstools next to him and trap him in the middle of a hug, accompanied by a harmonized “We missed you, Uncle Tony!”

Laura approached at a more sedate pace, carrying a sleeping Nate. “Tony, we had this planned for weeks. You know, we all get together for brunch before the kids start school again? You forgot, didn’t you?”

Tony’s eyes widened as things finally started to come back to him. “Oh my god, May and the Keeners are coming too, aren’t they?” he blurted out. Laura gave him a slow nod, obviously trying to fight back her amusement at his expense. Lila gave him a quick smooch on the cheek as he ruffled both hers and her brother’s hair and then the two kids sped off to greet Peter and Harley in the kitchen. "Um, Friday? Help daddy out. What’s the ETA on the rest of the extended family?”

“Mrs. and Ms. Keener will be arriving in approximately 35 minutes. Mrs. Parker is making the drive over as well. ETA approximately 43 minutes.”

Laura took the now empty seat next to Tony. “Well, at least Friday is on top of things,” she joked as she gave Tony a one-armed hug, little Nate trapped between them.

“Hey, I made Friday, so I feel I should get at least part of the credit,” he winked at the woman, “and in my defense, Pepper has been non-stop with SI stuff. New product launch in two months, and the board’s freaking out while the shareholders think the world’s on fire. So you know, business as usual.”

Laura rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Oh, well, if it’s Pepper’s fault, I guess I can forgive you.”

“I am sorry though, really,” he tried again, putting on his best innocent grin. “How are things at the farm? Everything running smoothly?”

Laura’s smile was softer this time. “Everything’s great, Tony. The helper bots are amazing, as always, not to mention the actual people you hired to assist.”

“Good, good.” Tony replied, running a gentle hand across Nate’s tuft of hair. “Why is Tiniest Agent so sleepy this morning? I distinctly remember him being wide awake and ready for action at ungodly morning hours.”
Tony learned that fact quickly enough over the four months Laura and the kids spent living at the Compound. Usually **Uncle Tony** was the only one still awake at sunrise, so he found himself calming a fussy Nate more than once while the boy’s mother got much needed sleep.

After that initial introduction to Laura when the Avengers went into hiding on Clint’s farm, the next interaction between her and Tony was him reaching out to her, worried that Thaddeus Ross would use her to get to Clint after the breakout at the Raft. Ross turned downright rabid in his efforts to get intel on what happened during that little Houdini disappearing act; Tony had a feeling it involved a lot of help from Natasha and one Miss Sharon Carter, but he never bothered to actually verify his suspicions.

That phone call with Laura went about as well as expected though when she promptly told him to go to hell and hung up on him. Honestly, Tony didn’t even blame her for it, but he had to at least try.

A week later, however, Tony received a distraught call in the middle of the night, Laura terrified and asking for help, because someone was on the farm, trying to get into the house. She and the kids hid in the basement while Tony and Vision made the frantic flight over. For once, luck was on their side because it was only an initial scout and by the time the rest of Ross’ men got there, the scout was knocked out cold and Laura and the kids were safe on the plane back to the Compound.

Ross knew it was Tony who got Laura out, but he could pursue neither Tony nor the family using any legal means and there was no way in hell the man was getting into the Compound.

The family was safe, but Laura was distant and wary at first, accepting Tony’s help only out of sheer desperation. Over time though, mistrust turned into tolerance, which then turned in friendship and before Tony even knew what happened, somehow he found himself adopted by the whole family.

Laura gave him a tired shrug as she adjusted Nate in her lap. “He wasn’t feeling well last night and his fever kept him up—”

“Wait, is he sick? Do we need to go to medical? ‘Cause we’ve got doctors on site right now—”

Laura shook her head. “No, no, the fever broke very early this morning and he should be alright now. It’s just a bug going around. Unfortunately, it left us both with too little sleep.” Before Tony could protest, she continued. “I’m fine, don’t you dare tell me I shouldn’t have come. Besides, we both took a nap on the flight over. At least your pilot remembered I was coming,” she laughed. “We really have missed you coming by the farm, Tony.”

“Sorry, I know. It’s just— the last few months have been— busy,” Tony admitted and they both glanced at James in that moment, who was mixing flour and sugar in a bowl on the far side of the kitchen.

“Yeah, I bet they have been,” Laura looked back at him meaningfully and Tony frowned.

“Listen, he’s— not what you expect, Laura. Don’t let Clint’s actions color your opinion of him. James is here to get help and he’s actually a really great guy and I just—”

“Tony,” she stopped his ramblings and her voice dropped to a whisper, “I’m a grown ass woman. I’ve come to terms with the fact that the only person responsible for my idiot ex-husband’s actions is my idiot ex-husband. He’s the one who decided to run off because his precious Captain America came calling. I’ve supported Clint through everything, I knew what he did at SHIELD was important— but he was retired, for god’s sake. He promised that he was done and then he just—”

Laura’s lips pressed into a thin line as she stopped herself from saying anything else. “Today is a good day. We’re not gonna ruin it by talking about this. And I promise I will judge Mr. Barnes,” she
glanced his way again, “on his own merit. Now, since you haven’t been around to help on the farm, you can start making up for it with this—” Laura stood back up and then promptly shifted little Nate’s sleeping form into Tony’s lap. The engineer squawked in surprise, arms wrapping around the boy on instinct.

“Laura, wait— You know I don’t do well with— babies scare me, Laura!” he pleaded, but she was already walking away.

“Good thing he’s a toddler then, Tony!” she threw over her shoulder and headed toward James.

Tony glanced down at Nate who was jostled by the move just enough to blink his big sleepy eyes at him.

“Hey kiddo,” Tony whispered, “are you having a really weird morning too?” he asked and Nate just reached out to squish Tony’s cheeks in his chubby little hands, muttered something that sounded vaguely like “Hi, Uncle Tony,” and then promptly cuddled up into Tony’s chest to fall right back asleep.

Tony adjusted the boy in his lap to get a better grip on him and then rested his chin on top of the little head. “S’okay, that’s how I feel without my coffee too, bud,” he added, running an absent hand up and down the boy’s back.

He had to admit that he missed having Nate’s small warm weight in his arms. It felt nice, although he was still a little worried about boy’s earlier fever. Maybe he should sneak him down into medical anyways, just to make sure he was okay now.

As he contemplated that, Tony also kept his eyes on Laura and James, who were having a quiet discussion at the moment. James’ shoulders had the familiar I feel guilty for everything hunch to them and Tony narrowed his eyes, ready to step in if necessary, but then Laura gave James a small but genuine smile and patted him on the arm. Tony couldn’t hear what she said and his lip-reading skills were crap, but it looked like an It’s okay and when she said something else, James responded with a nod and some of the tension in his shoulders drained away. A moment later, Laura was calling her kids over to introduce them to the man. Tony was not surprised one bit when Lila’s eyes lit up at the sight of the metal arm. She was his tiny engineer-in-training and her little pink soldering iron down at the lab got plenty of use back when the family stayed here.

Tony exhaled a relieved sigh. Good, good. He really needed all of his favorite people to get along.

Minutes later, James approached him with that promised cup of coffee.

“Everything alright?” Tony still felt the need to ask, but James just gave him a reassuring nod before quietly placing the mug on the granite countertop of the breakfast bar.

Tony just barely managed to keep himself from letting out another startled squeak when James’ arm went right back around him, like that was its rightful place now.

“And who’s this handsome young man?” the super soldier looked down at Nate with a smile.

Tony valiantly ignored the heat of James’ skin against his own. Complete sentences, Stark. “This is Nathaniel, the tiniest of Tiny Agents. Don’t let this angelic facade fool you though. He’s usually a little hellion, but apparently he wasn’t feeling very well last night,” Tony added quietly and without even thinking about it, placed a soft kiss on top of the boy’s head. Nate smelled nice too, he noted absently, some sweet scent of kid shampoo probably.

Tony watched James reach out and with utmost gentleness run his metal hand across the boy’s
chubby cheek. For a moment, Tony forgot to feel flustered and distracted by whatever the hell was going on between him and James, entranced by the tenderness behind that gesture instead. Tony built every part of that arm with his own hands, knew all of its capabilities intimately, and it still amazed him that something that could stop bullets and crush diamonds could be gentle enough to caress a little boy’s cheek without even waking him.

It wasn’t lost on Tony that it was really a perfect metaphor for James himself.

“He’s quite a sweetheart, isn’t he?” James said softly and Tony smiled at the wistful fondness in the man’s voice.

“You say that now, but wait until this little rascal is awake,” he joked and looked back up at James. Tony’s breath stuttered to a stop as he realized he never wanted to look away from the softness and the love behind those blue eyes—

Thankfully, before Tony could do something terribly stupid (like give up on all remaining pretenses of propriety and just kiss James right here in the middle of the kitchen), James’ attention was diverted by Harley and Peter. The super soldier cringed when he saw the two of them at the stove.

“I better go make sure they don’t burn the kitchen down.”

“Yeah, those two do have a tendency to set things on fire,” Tony agreed. None of them were getting pancakes if those two were in charge.

James pulled away (but not before giving Tony’s shoulder a firm squeeze), but after a few steps, he turned around and gave him a scrutinizing look.

“What?” Tony couldn’t help but ask, feeling self-conscious all of the sudden.

James just shook his head. “Nothing. It’s just— fatherhood looks good on you, Tony.”

With that, James just continued walking away as if he didn’t just cause all of Tony’s brain functions to come to a screeching halt. Tony was definitely about to demand that James come right back and explain himself because you can’t just walk away after saying something like that!, but by the time Tony’s brain actually came back online, James was already in the middle of explaining to the boys that less was more when it came to firepower in the kitchen.

So Tony had no choice but to just sit there, blinking owlishly at the general chaos before him and accept the fact that this was the most bizarre morning of his life.

However, he only had a few minutes to contemplate his life choices.

“What on God’s green Earth is happening in my kitchen?”

This time when Tony turned his head, he was greeted with the sight of his best friend, flanked on both side by Hope and Alice. Both Rhodey and Hope were wearing casual t-shirt and jean combos while Alice was in her usual immaculate business suit and heels, StarkPad in hand and bemused expression on her face. Tony suddenly felt even more underdressed.

For a moment, he wondered whether they invited Hope too and he just forgot about it, but it came back to him a second later that she and Rhodey were both in Washington DC last night and must have just gotten back.

“Our kitchen has been invaded, Rhodey! You need to come save me!” Tony responded with his usual theatrics. Thankfully, the general noise level was basically a lullaby for little Nate, who was
peacefully sleeping through the commotion.

As the three approached the breakfast bar, Tony gave Hope a pleased smile. “Hope, darling! It’s been too long. You are looking as beautiful as ever and can I just say that you’re officially my new hero? The way you ripped apart that reporter in the last Pym Tech press conference? Oh god, I’m still getting chills thinking about it.”

She shook her head fondly at Tony’s gushing, but still leaned over to give him a quick peck on the cheek. “Oh, you smooth talker, you. I just very politely told Peterson that if he pulled any of that sexist crap again, I would end him.” Her hand brushed gently across Nate’s hair before she took a seat on Tony’s right.

Tony gave her a wink. “I can watch you eviscerate idiots all day long,” he said and smiled at her answering, pleased grin.

Rhodey stopped behind him then and rested his hands on Tony’s shoulders. Tony dropped his head back against Rhodey’s chest and looked up at the man. “I missed you too, buttercup. How was DC?”

Rhodey let out a sigh. “Same shit, different day. Good news - we’ll be able to push through the Accords amendment that Strange wanted on magic usage. Bad news - pretty sure Senator Harris is going to cave the next time pardons are brought up.”

Hope made a disgusted noise. “I swear that man’s spine is made out of wet tissue paper. Just the fact that they’re even considering letting all of them get off scot-free and just come back like nothing happened—”

Alice, who was leaning on the back of the chair on Tony’s left, downright growled. “Well, what else can you expect? The same thing happened after SHIELD fell. Romanoff and Rogers barely got a slap on the wrist before going on their merry way.” Her voice dropped to a furious whisper. “God, some people have their heads so far up Captain America’s ass, they’ll let him get away with literal murder.”

Hope let out a snort. “I just don’t get it. What is it about Rogers that has people so enamored with him?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s all that patriotism and those baby blues and that aw, schucks demeanor,” Alice responded sarcastically. Tony felt like he was watching a tennis match between the two women as he looked back and forth between them. He realized suddenly that not all of his brooding thoughts from earlier this morning were accurate. Not everyone chose Captain America over him and it was unfair to the people around him to have thought otherwise.

Alice continued with a shake of her head. “God, is it terrible of me to hope Dr. Banner resurfaces one day just so the Hulk could punch Rogers and the rest of his idiot brigade right in the face? Not that I would be here to see it,” she shrugged dejectedly, “given that my resignation letter will be signed and sealed before the proverbial ink on those pardons even has the chance to dry.”

Tony finally decided to step in. “Alright, alright, let’s just leave my poor Brucie Bear out of this and let’s not get hasty with any resignation letters there, Director. This Compound would fall apart without you in two days. Three, tops. Most importantly though, the two of you are breaking this kitchen’s most cardinal rule right now - we don’t talk about those-who-must-not-be-named within its hallowed halls. This is a holy place. Besides,” he gave both of them a meaningful look, “the idiot brigade is going to come back. It’s happening whether we like it or not. It’s not worth raising your blood pressure over.”
Alice acquiesced with a grimace while Hope just let out a frustrated sigh and then proceeded to steal Tony’s still untouched cup of coffee.

“Tony’s right,” Rhodey finally chimed in. “No use worrying about it now. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Can’t we just burn the bridge before they get to it?” Hope lamented and took a sip of the coffee.

“Burn the bridge while they’re on it?” Alice suggested, her expression turning vicious and Tony had to hide his smile in Nate’s hair. Okay, so maybe he was enjoying this a bit too much, but that could be his little secret.

“Ladies, let’s save that, uh— that enthusiasm for when they’re actually here,” Rhodey reprimanded, although his own tone was amused. He then raised his voice so he could address everyone in the kitchen. “You know, all I’m seeing is a bunch of sugary nonsense. I sure hope there are some bacon and eggs in this for me.”

Harley perked up at Rhodey’s words. “On it!” the kid yelled out and bounded over to the refrigerator, but after a minute of scrutinizing the contents, he let out a frustrated groan. “Why are there no eggs and bacon in here?”

“Oh, I must apologize,” Vision responded, as he carried a platter of jam and syrup over to the table, expertly dodging Cooper, who dashed in front of him, “we used all the eggs a few days ago. We were experimenting with meringues.” He frowned. “Can’t say we used any of the bacon for that, however.”

“That’s okay, West Wing kitchens should have plenty,” Harley exclaimed and ran over into the hallway, but then darted back a second later. “Wait, how many should I get? One— two packages— no, wait,” the boy’s face turned downright devious. “I’ll gonna get all the bacon and eggs.” With that declaration, he sprinted back down the hallway, with a “Cooper, come help me!” echoing behind him.

Tony shook his head at Harley’s antics, admitting to himself that he was going to miss the boys’ shenanigans. They were both starting school next week, but at least there were always weekends and holidays to look forward to.

Alice let out a sigh next to him and began to pull away. “I should— probably get going. I still need to approve all the requisition forms for the final supply order and—”

“No, come on, join us for breakfast!” Tony insisted, realizing this was the first time he had seen the woman in a while, given how hectic the last few months had been. He made a mental note to stop by her office in the next few days to catch up and then tried to remember what kind of gifts she liked. Shoes? Wine? Guns? Eh, he’d get her all three.

The woman gave him a self-deprecating smile. “This really seems like a family thing, Mr. Stark, I don’t want to intrude—”

Before Tony could counter that, Rhodey beat him to the punch. “Hell, you’re as much a part of this dysfunctional family as anyone else, Alice. You’re welcome to stay.”

“Yup, Rhodey’s right,” Tony chimed in. “If we hate on Rogers together, we eat breakfast together. Sorry, Ali-cakes, you’re stuck with all of us now.”

The woman just laughed as she gave the chaos in the kitchen a scrutinizing look. “I suppose I could stay.” Her nose scrunched up in mirth. “I mean, someone should really go help poor Mr. Barnes over
Tony followed her gaze and let out an undignified snort. Poor James was trying to make the crepes while Lila had her scientist face on, poking and prodding different parts of the metal arm, each time asking James if he could feel it. Peter was perched on the counter next to them, eating the crepes instead of helping to make them, all the while laughing at James, who dutifully responded to every one of Lila’s questions. The man seemed perfectly at ease with the kids though, probably more so than he had ever been surrounded by adults.

“I think he’s doing just fine,” Tony said, unable to keep the affection out of his voice.

Hope took another sip of Tony’s coffee and then walked over to Alice, draping an arm around her shoulders. “Come on, let’s go say hi. I haven’t actually been properly introduced to our new resident assassin who, I must say, cleans up so well. So introduce me, Director.”

The two women walked over to the now very crowded stove and soon got the kids and James engaged in conversation, leaving Tony and Rhodey at the breakfast bar.

“How is this our life, Rhodey Bear?” Tony had to ask the other man.

Rhodey’s response was to let out a contented chuckle. “I’ve no idea. Feels good though, doesn’t it?”

Tony took a moment to contemplate that question and take in everything around them. The happy chatter, the smiles. Everyone safe and sound, getting ready to enjoy a meal together.

It was so simple, but only a year ago, something like this would’ve have felt like an impossibility.

A year ago, when Tony was still in complete hell. Rhodey was paralyzed, Vision was heartbroken, and Tony—well, Tony was just broken. Physically and emotionally. The Accords were barely in their infancy, with so much work still ahead and a desperate sense of urgency because any delay meant more time for Ross and his lackeys to sink their dirty claws into the whole process. That bastard turned downright belligerent after the Raft breakout and he was foaming at the mouth, trying to take Tony down completely. Attempting to undercut him at every turn, badmouthing him and the Avengers to the press, incessant phone calls, day and night, and countless threats against Tony and the few people he had left on his side, including Laura and the kids. Back in those days, it felt like there was no clear end in sight. Tony just worked and worked and worked, trying to get through each hour without falling apart. Getting through one day felt like a herculean feat. He had no real hope for the future.

But then, somehow, things began to fall into place around Tony, one small puzzle piece at a time. Alice was hired to take care of the Compound and suddenly neither Tony nor Rhodey were burdened with the day-to-day minutia of running the place. Strange showed up out of nowhere one day and offered his support and his signature on the Accords. Then, a ground-breaking announcement by Pym Technologies and Hope, saying that they fully supported and stood by the new revised Accords, the New Avengers, and Tony Stark himself. Unprecedented, given the past animosities between Hank Pym and Howard Stark, and it had the media in a frenzy for weeks, but it meant the world for the rebuilding efforts.

Then finally, Tony unearthed just enough incriminating evidence to take Ross to trial and that fiasco was all over the news for weeks as well, but surprisingly, thanks to one Christine Everhart and her powerful media presence, that worked decidedly in the Avengers’ favor.

He and Christine had developed a love-hate relationship over the years and while a few of her pieces actually praised Tony, that woman also had plenty of scathing articles about Tony and the Avengers
under her belt. However, ever since Gulmira, Tony had taken her criticisms seriously and as much as he hated being served the metaphorical humble pie, she had valid points more often than not.

However, this time around, Christine decided to focus the full extent of her wrath on Ross and her article went viral at the same time #IStandwithIronMan began trending (and Tony still remembered how surreal it felt to see people actually rally behind him instead of against him).

_The people’s hero_, she described Tony, that moniker usually accompanied by two photos: Iron Man flying the nuke into the portal in New York, and Tony Stark, standing somber and formidable, as he testified against Ross in court. There were none of his usual jokes and inappropriate comments that day.

Iron Man risked life and limb, time and time again, protecting people from threats bigger than all of them, while Tony Stark fought for accountability and transparency and exposed real criminals like Thaddeus Ross.

Honestly, Tony thought the whole thing was ridiculous, but damn, that woman could spin a message better than anyone he knew and good press was exactly what they needed to turn the tide in their favor.

Time kept marching on, and before long, Rhodey could finally walk again. Vision smiled more and more, Peter and Harley became a constant presence in their lives, and sometimes Tony would spend days helping out on Laura’s farm, surrounded by the peace and quiet of nature, disturbed only by children’s happy laughter.

And now…

The sudden tight ache in his chest at the mere thought of how far they’ve come damn near forced tears into Tony’s eyes and all he could do was give Rhodey a shaky nod and hide his face in Nate’s hair. Rhodey’s mother hen senses clearly went off because he gave Tony’s shoulders a comforting squeeze, reminding Tony that he wasn’t alone.

“We’re just fine, old man. And this time around, I’ll move heaven and earth to make sure we stay that way.”

Rhodey’s words prompted Tony to look up, just in time to see James’ concerned expression, as their gazes met for a moment across the kitchen. James mouthed a silent _You alright?_ and all Tony could do was give him a smile, hoping it was reassuring.

So maybe his life wasn’t perfect. Some new Big Bad was bound to show up sooner or later, the old Avengers were probably coming back, and Tony was still crazy in love with a man he couldn’t have.

But looking at the people around him, Tony knew he had so much more than he ever deserved.

So yeah, he was definitely _alright_.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so happy that Tony is surrounded by so much love right now. :__; It's all I want for him.

Next chapter: I think we're getting back to the plot... >.> or something... (is there even a
plot anymore? do we need one? can't I just write domestic!Winteriron fluff forever??)
Chapter 23

So this chapter and the next were supposed to be this one massive 8K chapter, but someone had severe writer's block all last week and is now terribly behind (spoilers: it's me ;___;), and I thought you guys would rather have two shorter chapters instead of a delay in updates.

That's why this chapter is a little less action and a bit more exposition. But I hope you still enjoy!

Closing the utensils drawer with his hip, Bucky leaned against the counter and stuck a generous spoonful of Nutella into his mouth. The chocolate tasted like bliss on his tongue and he savored the sweetness, absent-mindedly observing the dark kitchen around him.

Bucky didn’t bother to check the time when the nightmare woke him up, but he guessed it was around three in the morning by the angle of the moonlight streaming through the window. He sighed and indulged in another spoonful.

The nightmare was certainly a surprising and unwelcome visitor tonight, he thought dejectedly. On any other night, it would’ve been expected, but the last time he fell asleep next to Tony, he had an amazing night of sleep. Unfortunately, even Tony’s presence didn’t seem to chase away his past entirely.

After that night six days ago, Bucky wasn’t sure whether Tony would ever join him again, but tonight, a grumpy and exhausted engineer showed up at his door around midnight, wearing his sleep clothes and a disgruntled frown.

“...I can’t sleep. I have this dumb meeting with a bunch of UN delegates tomorrow and I need to be at the top of my game, but I just can’t sleep.”

All Bucky did in response was look up from his book and raise a prompting eyebrow. He already knew that Tony rarely asked for help - drawing attention to it in any way was likely to send the man running, so it was best to just let Tony keep talking instead. He did wonder however if there was more to Tony’s request because he’d seen a sleep-deprived, possibly delirious Tony effortlessly dazzle and wow an entire conference room full of journalists.

“I tried my bed. Too damn cold. I tried the lab. Too many distractions.” Tony’s tired eyes narrowed at Bucky. “I’m a scientist, James. I need data. And a sample of one is never sufficient. So I, uh— I need further samples to see if the last time I fell asleep here was an outlier or whether there’s some variable here that makes a difference. Friday says that your bed is the same make and model as mine, but I think her code is faulty—”

“My code is just fine, Boss.”

“Shh, no one is perfect, Fri.”
Bucky wanted nothing more than to gather Tony up in his arms right then and there and keep him in his bed forever, but he learned pretty quickly that the best way to handle Tony’s rare moments of vulnerability was to act like nothing of importance was actually happening.

So he simply scooted over to his side of the bed, looked back down at his book, and gave an easy shrug.

“Sure thing. But if you start snoring, I’m kicking you out.”

He heard Tony’s scoff as the man walked over to the bed. “I don’t snore.”

“Glad to hear,” Bucky replied simply and when Tony sat down, he pointed to the blanket carefully folded at the foot of the bed. “Your Iron Man blanket’s right over there.”

He did look up then in order to fully enjoy the way Tony slowly turned to him and graced him with what would’ve been a hateful glare if it weren’t for the small upward twitch of Tony’s lips. Bucky’s response was an unrepentant grin.

Despite the glare, Tony nevertheless crawled over to grab the blanket, before turning himself into a fuzzy red-and-gold cocoon.

“Why the hell do you even have this thing?” Tony muttered as he settled in, trying to inconspicuously move his pillow to be closer to Bucky’s hip. Bucky tried and failed to keep the satisfied smile off his face. “I didn’t even know our Iron Man line made blankets… Oh, and don’t think I didn’t notice that you’re wearing a Stark Industries shirt either. What are you, our marketing department?”

“This is all Friday’s doing, I just wear what she buys me,” Bucky explained, failing to mention that he never actually asked her to stop. Tony’s various reactions to Bucky wearing Iron Man merchandise never failed to be entertaining. “I guess she just loves her Boss so much that she wants to see him everywhere.”

“A very accurate assessment, Mr. Barnes,” Friday chimed in cheerfully and Tony just grumbled at them both as he tried to make himself more comfortable.

Silence settled between them, but after a few moments, Tony quietly spoke up. “For this to be an acceptable sample, I, uh—I need to have all the same conditions as last time. You know, for proper science.”

Bucky was torn between being amused by Tony’s roundabout way of asking and feeling sad that Tony still wasn’t comfortable with him to be straight-forward in what he wanted.

“Well, who am I to stand in the way of science?” he said quietly as his right hand reached for Tony’s head. All it took was just a few minutes of careful, gentle caresses and Tony was out like a light, surprising even Bucky with how quickly the man fell asleep. It felt amazing knowing that something about his presence made Tony feel comfortable and safe enough to let go and let himself relax so easily.

Bucky fell asleep not long after that, his mind drifting off with Tony’s calming presence at his side, but apparently the peace only lasted for a few hours before the nightmares came back in full force. He woke up in a cold sweat, unable to breathe, lying almost entirely still, except for the tremor in his flesh hand. With the images of blood on his hands and the screams of his victims echoing in his ears, it took him a few moments to remember where he was and then a few more to remember that this time, he wasn’t alone in the bed. There was a part of him then that wanted nothing more than to
wake Tony up, to beg the man for comfort— please, please help me remember I’m not that man anymore— but logic overrode that selfish desire. Tony needed sleep and it wasn’t the man’s responsibility to deal with Bucky when he was like this.

So as much as it pained him to leave behind Tony’s sleeping form, he pressed just one tender kiss to the engineer’s temple and carefully got himself out of bed, heading into the kitchen.

Since nightmares were a frequent enough occurrence, he learned a few tricks to help himself ease back into reality and shake off the lingering memories. If he felt claustrophobic, he would go outside and look up at the night sky. If he had an excess of the Soldier’s violent energy thrumming through him, he’d go down to the gym and let the reinforced punching bags feel the brunt of his anger. At times like tonight, when he felt nothing but guilt and melancholy, the sweet taste of sugar helped.

If he were honest with himself though, it was his new happier memories that helped push back the nightmares more than anything else. Before he came to the Compound, his head was filled with nothing but remnants of Hydra and his time in Romania. None of it was positive, not really. The only real beacon of good back then was Steve, as faded memories of his best friend slowly began to resurface, but even those were soon tainted by an unsettling feeling of looking at Steve and seeing a stranger instead of his old friend.

So when nightmares inevitably plagued him back then, he had no pleasant memories to focus on instead.

Thankfully, that wasn’t true anymore, so ignoring the echoes of his past still rattling around in his head, Bucky focused on something more enjoyable instead. His ongoing execution of Plan A seemed like a pretty good choice.

He couldn’t say it was a complete success quite yet, particularly given that their time together was limited by Tony’s demanding schedule. Sometimes Bucky hated how much Tony actually worked, but he learned very quickly to squash down any selfish desire to bodily carry Tony out of the lab whenever the engineer spent too much time down there. Tony wasn’t some child who was just being stubborn. He was a grown adult with so much responsibility on his shoulders that frankly, Bucky wondered sometimes how he even dealt with all that pressure. His company depended on him, the Avengers did too, and hell, the whole world depended on Tony to do his job well.

So instead, Bucky just tried to support that when he could, even if it just meant bringing Tony’s meal down and asking if he could help in any way. Unfortunately, Tony rarely needed the extra assistance, but he did take Bucky up on his offer a few days ago, asking for help with some heavy lifting. Plainly obvious that he was just indulging Bucky, given that the man had an army of Iron Man suits who could’ve done the work, but Bucky didn’t hesitate to take that opportunity to show off and flex a muscle or two. The heated looks Tony threw his way when he thought Bucky wasn’t paying attention were absolutely perfect.

Surprisingly, Bucky actually found himself somewhat employed as well. Before Peter and Harley went back home, they apparently told Alice how much they loved their sparring sessions with Bucky and the woman promptly appropriated his skills to train some of their more trustworthy recruits. She even asked him to help on the shooting range, although Bucky didn’t have the heart to tell her that he wasn’t sure he could actually teach someone to shoot well, given that so much of what he did now was pure instinct. He was willing to try though.

So, he and Tony were busy, but nevertheless, Bucky’s current mission to woo the man showed promising results. Not to mention, the playful words and the soft touches were reminding him just how much fun it was to actually flirt with someone.
He had vague recollections of being called a flirt and a ladies man back in the old days, but really, girls liked him because they felt safe with him more than anything else, since he was never really interested in making aggressive passes at them. Girls were sweet and fun to spend time with though, and since flirting with them was what society expected back then, he kept female company more often than not.

Flirting with Tony took a lot more effort, especially given their unique situation, but it was also a lot more satisfying and Bucky was careful, from the very beginning, to make sure nothing he did made Tony uncomfortable. There was a world of difference between being simply startled by a soft touch and actually flinching away from it, and thankfully, it was never the latter with Tony. Instead of being uncomfortable or stiff, Tony outright melted under Bucky’s ministrations, all soft exhales and relaxed muscles.

Given Tony’s tendency to tease and flirt with everyone (the level of shamelessness depending on the person and Tony’s mood at the time), the flustered reactions to Bucky’s touch or off-handed flirtations were surprising, but Bucky hoped that just meant the reactions were actually genuine. Most of Tony’s flirtatious comments were usually nothing more than a way to make someone more comfortable in an awkward situation (or to make someone uncomfortable if Tony disliked the person and felt particularly petty).

Honestly though, Bucky couldn’t complain. A blushing Tony Stark was quickly becoming his favorite thing in the world. He remembered a night from a few days ago and couldn’t help the smile that blossomed on his face.

As much as Tony tried to introduce him to various pieces of popular culture, Bucky’s education in film was still severely lacking because instead of watching the actual movie, he and Tony usually ended up distracted by conversation instead. Friday already developed a habit of gradually turning down the volume, keeping the movie on only as quiet background noise.

The engineer, currently sprawled on the couch with his sock-clad feet in Bucky’s lap, let out a groan as he tried and failed to get more comfortable.

“Damn missions. I think every part of me hurts,” he whined, rubbing his shoulder. Bucky gave his ankle a comforting squeeze.

“Fires in California, right? Friday kept me up to date for the most part.” Tony gave him a nod, before closing his eyes and trying to relax. “Is this something the Avengers deal with a lot? I thought you guys only handled things like aliens and Hydra.”

Tony gave a tired shrug. “Yeah, that used to be the case when we were working with SHIELD, which liked to keep everything ‘hush hush’ and only called on us for the more ‘end of the world’ type stuff. But now, we’re not just a super secret boy band of superheroes and spies anymore. We’re a legitimate organization, everything’s above board. Hell, we’re so legit now, our accountants file tax returns and everything.” Tony opened one eye to give Bucky an amused look. “You wouldn’t believe the tax breaks superhero-ing can get you.” He shifted his shoulders around, trying to find a comfortable position, grimaced when he failed, and closed his eyes again. “We go where we’re needed and not surprisingly, there are a whole lot more fires and people trapped in avalanches than there are crazy aliens.”

“But the Avengers don’t actually work for the government, do they?”

“Nope, we’re an independent group now. While plenty of angry people on the internet will tell you otherwise, the Avengers don’t belong to any one political party or any one country. That’s why T’Challa never made the official roster. Conflict of interest an’ all.” Another small shrug. “I know
that may sound hypocritical, given that the core team are all US citizens and I’m sure you’ve noticed that we’re neck deep in US politics, but that’s why the UN’s involvement was so important. While the US Council has some power over what we do here in the US, the international Accords panel helps us deal with affairs everywhere else. The Avengers belong to the whole world and while not every country likes a bunch of Americans charging across their borders— some never will— maintaining that independence, to the extent possible, gives us the ability to help out the biggest number of people.”

Tony blinked his eyes open and lifted his head so he could look at Bucky. “Think of us as— international policemen and firefighters and the SWAT team, all rolled into one, but not on any government’s payroll, US or otherwise. Plus, with a whole lot more fire power to back us up and now a unique set of rules and procedures to consider and follow.”

Bucky contemplated that for a moment. Tony’s explanation provided more context to all the reading he had done on the Accords and frankly, he found himself agreeing with the way the process was structured now. The need for accountability on all sides made sense, given that each Avenger, in their own right, had more power than some countries’ whole militaries. It was very easy for someone to abuse that kind of power without proper checks and balances.

“Thanks for explaining that. Helps to hear it from the source.”

Tony gave him a tired smile. “Thanks for actually taking the time to care.”

“So, how does Iron Man save the good people of California from wildfires?” he asked, infusing some levity into his tone. A part of him was genuinely curious, but the rest of him just wanted to keep Tony talking so he could enjoy listening to the man’s soothing, deep voice.

“War Machine and I used modified sonic blasts to contain the runaway fire, driving it away from the residential areas, and then eventually extinguishing it. The Wasp and Viz were helping the local authorities with evacuations. Strange— was taking a nap or something, I dunno,” Tony grinned, poking fun at his friend. Strange and Tony were an interesting pair together, usually throwing insults at each other left and right, but never with any real bite to them. “There weren’t a ton of people in the area, but a handful still got trapped behind the firebreak and needed help.”

“Did anyone get hurt?”

“Other than some minor smoke inhalation and a bit of property damage, no. Successful mission, all in all. Unfortunately, the ventilation system in the Iron Man suit isn’t well suited for dealing with that much fire and smoke over an extended period of time. And with the sonic blasts, it’s a lot of repetitive motions, which gets strenuous after a while with all that heat.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to go to medical then?”

“No, no, I’m not so much injured as just stiff as hell. I can’t even turn my neck without it hurting. I spent all day yesterday hunched over my work bench, dealing with tiny circuit boards, and today consisted of firefighter duty and a roundtrip to the West Coast in the suit.” Tony let out a sigh, looking up dejectedly at the ceiling. “I’m getting too old for this shit, James. I just hope Rhodey is suffering just as much because maybe this will finally convince him that we do need a full-time massage therapist on staff.”

Oh, there was no way Bucky could pass up this opportunity. He gently pushed Tony’s feet off his lap, causing the engineer to let out a surprised yelp, and turned to sit on the couch facing Tony.

“C’mere,” he beckoned with his hand and Tony eyed him suspiciously. “Just come here and sit with
Tony did sit up, but made no move to get any closer. His fingers drummed against the arm rest. “Is this a trap? I feel like this is a trap.”

“This is definitely a trap. You’ve foiled my evil plan to work some of the kinks out of your back, oh no,” Bucky deadpanned with an eye roll, trying to keep his voice as casual as possible, despite his own nervous energy because dammit, all he wanted was to get his hands on Tony already.

After a moment of deliberation, as if struggling through some internal battle, Tony finally shrugged and then hesitantly scooted over to sit between Bucky’s legs, one of which was bent and leaning against the couch and the other resting on the floor.

For a second, Bucky mourned the fact that Tony was wearing a shirt, so there was little access to skin, but he could work with what he had. He carefully took ahold of Tony’s shoulders and slowly began to rub circles into the spots beneath Tony’s neck.

“Jesus, Tony, your back feels like one big knot…” Bucky worked over one particular hard spot when he said that and Tony groaned in pain, arching away from the touch.

“Ow, ow, that hurts— I thought this was supposed to feel nice—”

“Of course it hurts,” Bucky gently pulled Tony back to him, “I have to work through all this tightness first. Then it’ll feel better. You really shouldn’t let it get this bad.”

“I’m a busy man—”

“Who sleeps on a lumpy couch—”

“That’s where all the genius happens!”

Instead of responding to that, Bucky dug his fingers deeper into Tony’s shoulders and the engineer’s excuses just tapered off into another pained whine. He didn’t offer any more protests though, other than an occasional quiet ow, so Bucky continued his ministrations, focused on finding the tight spots in Tony’s back and neck and applying careful pressure to work out the stiffness in the sore, abused muscles.

Bucky was quickly realizing however that this was going to backfire on him because with the object of his desires sitting so close, how was he supposed to focus on Tony’s stiff back when all Bucky wanted to do was to wrap his arms around the man and remove all this unnecessary space between them?

His hands slowly worked their way down Tony’s back, thumbs following the curve of his spine and Bucky let himself imagine what it would be like to let his hands drift down further and rest on Tony’s stomach, pull him in close and feel the man’s back flush against Bucky’s chest. What it would feel like to nuzzle that exposed neck in front of him and plant open-mouthed kisses on the warm skin to soothe the aches away.

Bucky swallowed hard against his dry throat, thankful Tony couldn’t see the small tinge of blush that crept across his face. He forced his hands to move back up to Tony’s neck and shoulders. If he let his fantasies go any further, the Soldier would probably just take over, as impatient as he was, and solve all of Bucky’s problems (unfortunately by creating much bigger ones).

It absolutely did not help however when, as Bucky finally felt a knot give under the pressure of his fingers, Tony let out another groan, this one laced with pleasure rather than pain.
“Oh my god— ah, okay, that feels so much better—” Tony’s words turned into an outright moan.

“Told you it’d feel good eventually,” Bucky muttered, valiantly trying to concentrate on the movement of his fingers rather than the blossoming heat in his belly. His hands pressed deeper still, finally making headway in loosening up the tension in Tony’s back.

“Fuck— yeah, okay, your hands can definitely work miracles,” Tony let out another quiet moan, head lulling to the side, and then his voice dropped even lower. “…Well, of course they can, I made one of them…”

Bucky smiled despite himself and pushed away the nagging desires demanding more, choosing instead to simply focus on Tony’s warmth beneath his hands and the way Tony became even more pliant and relaxed with every touch. He was making Tony feel good and there was a certain amount of pleasure to be had from that alone.

A comfortable silence settled between them, the quiet murmur of the television soothing them both into a calm, relaxed state. Bucky slowly softened his movements, from a firm massage to gentler, tender caresses. He honestly never wanted to stop, but he knew he had to (otherwise resisting Tony would soon become impossible), so eventually he trailed his hands down Tony’s arms and then pulled away, but not before leaning forward and placing one small kiss on Tony’s clothed shoulder.

“How does it feel now, sweetheart?” he murmured, the endearment unintentional, even though it felt like the most natural thing in the world on his lips. He watched Tony carefully. The man didn’t answer for a moment, hand gently running across the soft cushions of the couch with a hint of nervousness.

“It’s, uh—” he hesitated, but then experimentally tilted his head side to side. “Oh wow, wait— that actually does feel a lot better.”

“Told ya.”

Tony finally turned around to face Bucky, gently swinging his legs over and tangling them with the one Bucky already had resting over the side of the couch. There was a faint hint of color across his cheeks and Bucky fought the urge to bite his lip, taken by how good Tony looked just then.

“Thanks, James,” Tony whispered almost shyly.

“Of course,” Bucky replied, his own voice whisper soft. Anything. You can ask me for anything, Tony, and it’s yours.

To Bucky’s surprised elation, Tony reached out and with utmost gentleness tucked a few out-of-place strands of Bucky’s hair behind his ear. The way the engineer looked at him in that moment, with some unnamed intensity that almost resembled want, if Bucky was daring enough to hope, made Bucky’s own heart skip a beat.

The moment was over far too quickly though, and Tony coughed awkwardly and jumped off the couch.

“I, uh— probably should go review the footage from the mission before the debrief,” he said, rubbing the back of his head. “Thanks for the, uh— the back rub. It felt— it felt nice.”

Bucky let out an exhale, trying not to dwell on Tony’s abrupt departure and the resulting awkwardness. He slumped against the couch. “Go, go. Maybe I’ll finally get to watch the film with you out of the way.”
Thankfully, the teasing tone clearly worked because Tony’s posture relaxed a bit and he rolled his eyes with a smile before walking away.

Unfortunately, that was the biggest obstacle Bucky had run into so far. Despite the fact that Tony responded beautifully to him, the man rarely reciprocated or initiated any of the affectionate gestures and the few times he did, he behaved as if he had just caught himself in the act of doing something he wasn’t supposed to do.

Bucky wondered whether Tony’s reluctance stemmed from the fact that until Bucky was officially triggers-free, Tony was still technically his caregiver, at least on paper. And while Bucky didn’t see it as a problem at all, someone like Tony, who wore responsibility and duty like a well-worn suit, would probably feel like he would be taking advantage of the situation.

If that was the reason Tony was hesitant, Bucky would have to disabuse him of that notion promptly and plainly because Tony taking advantage of Bucky was the furthest thing from what was actually happening here. Bucky trusted Tony with his life and he knew Tony would never knowingly hurt him.

Ugh. Bucky knew he just needed to talk openly to Tony, but even thinking of saying those words out loud…

I like you.

I want you.

I need you.

It was easier said than done and it left him nervous just thinking about confessing his feelings to Tony. Even so, he still couldn’t stop smiling. Here he was, his biggest worry being the guy he was sweet on rejecting him, when only a little while back, he spent his days worrying about Nazis frying up his brain and forcing him to kill.

What a difference a few short months made.

He accepted the fact that he had no right to complain about his current situation and was about to indulge in his final spoon of the hazelnut spread, but his hand stilled, halfway to the jar, as instincts buried deep within, both the Soldier’s and his own, flared to life. His sensitive hearing picked up the near silent footsteps, still several yards down the hallway, and because his mind had long ago catalogued the footfalls of every person living or visiting the East Wing, his hackles were up instantly.

Whoever this was didn’t belong here.

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-dun! I assume there’s no real mystery as to who’s sneaking around the Compound late at night. ;)

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Dun-dun-dun!

Translations in the bottom note! (I refrained from my usual comments, so it's spoiler-free!)

PS: I will do my best to keep my posting schedule, but if I don't update on Sunday, it's because I'm too busy weeping over my laptop, hoping the words will write themselves. u_u (but maybe we'll get lucky and this weekend will be productive *fingers crossed*)

The near-silent echoes of the unfamiliar footsteps put Bucky on instant alert.

Whoever this was didn’t belong here.

_They’re a threat. We eliminate threats_, the Soldier whispered in his head as the sounds continued, but Bucky pushed him back. This was probably some trainee or politician he had never met before.

The Soldier’s disdain was palpable. _Sneaking down a dark hallway at three o’clock in the morning? Don’t be an idiot._

Bucky wanted to roll his eyes. Well, what exactly was he supposed to do? He was about to open his mouth to ask Friday who this was, but the Soldier hissed at him to remain silent. _Do not give away your position._ This was likely all an overreaction on his part, but Bucky couldn’t help it but listen to the Soldier. There was something about the sound pattern, about those steps, that set his teeth on edge.

For a moment, he thought about reaching for one of the knives sticking out of the wooden block on the counter, but he quickly dismissed that idea too. He couldn’t just ambush whoever this was with a knife or any other real weapons—

_You are a weapon._

Coming to a decision, Bucky silently placed the spoon in his hand down and with the same soundless movements, tiptoed over and backed himself against the wall, with the steps of the foreign presence echoing closer in the hallway on the other side. The adrenaline coursing through him was making it difficult to stand perfectly still, so Bucky reluctantly allowed a small opening in his mental defenses for the Soldier to bleed through. A second later, Bucky could feel his breath steady and his senses sharpen.

That was one of the more annoying things about the Soldier. While he took the anger and the bloodlust with him, he also kept a tight hold on all of the fighting instincts ingrained into Bucky’s mind and body - both by the military and by Hydra. Pushing the Soldier back meant pushing away all that training, all those abilities and skills that made Bucky Barnes a war hero and the Winter Soldier a master assassin. Bucky hated giving into the Soldier in any way, but already the adrenaline was being used to hone his senses and increase his strength, instead of leaving him a shaking mess.
Unfortunately, the extra leeway didn’t make the Soldier any more compliant. He still kept pushing at the remaining mental walls—*strike now, defend your home, they’re a threat*—but Bucky just tried to placate the Soldier with logic and kept himself still. What were the odds someone dangerous would actually invade the Compound under Friday’s watchful eye? Slim to none. Bucky accidentally attacking some poor UN delegate who flew in late and was probably heading for Rhodes’ office? Much more likely.

*One, two, three*—the steps grew closer and louder, although Bucky realized that was mostly attributed to his sensitive hearing. A regular person would have missed these soft sounds entirely.

Which meant those steps were far quieter than they should have been and their guest was making an effort to remain undetected. His instincts—and Bucky couldn’t even tell what was the Soldier and what was simple gut feeling anymore—it all screamed at him even as he tried to ignore it—*shit, he would get into so much trouble if he were wrong*—but it was nearly overwhelming—*threatthreatthreat*—as if his subconscious knew something about their intruder that Bucky didn’t.

Damn it all to hell.

He may not have trusted the Soldier, but Bucky did always trust his instincts.

One silent step put him right at the edge of the wall and when his senses pinpointed the intruder right behind him on the other side, he waited one more second for them to take the next step—

He reached out, leading with his flesh arm and trying subdue rather than injure, which proved to be a mistake because his opponent—smaller, more agile than he expected—expertly dodged his grip. Both in the hallway now, they were in almost total darkness—*where the hell were the emergency lights lining the walls?*—and at any other time, that wouldn’t have mattered. But between the darkness, his instincts and training locked away, and the ever-present struggle to keep the Soldier under control, each of Bucky’s movements were just a fraction of a second off, but it was more than enough for his obviously enhanced adversary to dodge him at every step. Bucky was able to block a surprisingly strong fist with the metal of his arm, but the next second, his opponent lunged to strike, the movement graceful and deliberate, going for a vulnerable pressure point at his neck and—

Fuck, he knew that move. He taught that move.

Just barely able to dodge the attack, Bucky used the momentum to finally get a grip on the intruder. He shifted his center of gravity, swept their feet from under them, and they both tumbled down, but even before they hit the ground, Bucky knew the only reason he was able to pin them down like this was because they—no, because *she* let him.

There was just enough moonlight filtering through where they landed to illuminate the shock of red hair, but the knowing, self-confident smirk on her face certainly confirmed it.

*Romanova Natalia Alianovna.*

For a beat, neither one of them moved, but then Bucky let up, stumbling back into the kitchen away from her. He took a shuddering breath, his chest heaving, as he tried to steady himself. Knowing it was the Black Widow somehow made the Soldier even angrier and it wasn’t helping Bucky’s mental state at all. He viciously shoved the Soldier back.

Natalia, as graceful as ever, stood up as well, but unlike him, she appeared perfectly calm. Barely a hair out of place, steady breathing, seemingly unaffected by their little scuffle. She was clad in her black, skin-tight combat suit, including a gun at her hip and the Widow Bites around her wrists.
“Friday?” Bucky quietly called out the AI’s name, but just as he expected, there was no response. There was no way the Black Widow would have gotten this far had Friday been operational.

Shit. Why was she even here? She was a goddamn criminal, did she want to end up in jail? He knew he needed to apprehend her, he needed to do something, but he had no way to contact the others and it was obvious he wasn’t in his best fighting form at the moment. The only thing he could do right now was get her to talk until a better opening to strike presented itself or until Friday came back online.

“What did you do to her?” he addressed the woman, not bothering to hide the anger in his voice.

“James,” Natalia raised her hands in front of her in a placating gesture. The way she said his name grated on his nerves. “I’m not a threat. I’m not here to hurt anyone, so no need to go all Winter Soldier on me, alright?” she assured him, a small, self-deprecating smile gracing her lips. “Kak ti, zayka? Vse horosho s toboi?” she asked in a softer, more affectionate tone.

The Russian that rolled off her tongue, asking him if he was doing okay, only gave the tension already running through Bucky a sharper tinge of mistrust. Did she really think that would endear her to him somehow? Any Russian part of him was forced into existence by Hydra, not nature, and while he didn’t mind the Soldier’s soft whispers of Russian in his head—words of desire, longing, and need—whenever Tony was around, he had no affinity for it when it came out of Natalia’s mouth. Not to mention, he was not her goddamn bunny.

It was also obvious that, despite her placating words and posture, there was no hint of actual fear in her eyes. She didn’t perceive him as a threat at all and given his less than stellar performance just moments ago, he wasn’t surprised. It rankled at some iota of pride he had left, but he ignored it. This wasn’t the time.

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” he replied, his English deliberate. Swallowing hard, he had to clench his flesh fist to stop it from shaking. Goddamn adrenaline. Goddamn Soldier. And goddamn Romanova, for that matter. “I won’t ask again, Natalia. What did you do to Friday? And why the hell are you here?”

She straightened up, placing her hands on her hips, stance as casual as can be. There was even that same friendly smile to go with it. “Friday’s been—temporary shut down. Tony should really check on his security protocols.” Oh, hearing her say Tony’s name was even worse, and the Soldier’s distaste mixed with Bucky’s own frustration.

“You realize you’ve put the entire Compound at risk by shutting her down?”

Natalia gave a careless shrug. “Her security is still active on the Compound grounds. She just has a hard time keeping track of what’s going on inside the building right now.”

She sounded smug and Bucky’s jaw clenched in anger, but before he could demand more information, demand to know how she incapacitated Friday, Natalia continued. “As for your second question, I’m mostly here to check on you, actually.”

What?

“Excuse me?” he blurted out, his tone incredulous because honestly, he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You—you shut down Friday and broke into the Compound so you could—check on me? What the hell does that mean?”

“Steve is worried sick about you, James. We were all worried about you. And when you hadn’t
called Steve in months—"

“I speak with T’Challa every week. He said he updates all of you on my condition regularly.”

“Steve doesn’t trust him. He needs to hear from you—”

“Steve *needs* to work on his trust issues. He’s— he’s not my keeper.”

Here, her eyes narrowed in disapproval. Obviously wanting Bucky to *think* she was upset, otherwise she would have never let that much emotion show.

“Wow,” Natalia drew the word out, making it sound like she was reprimanding him. As if he were a child. Both him *and* the Soldier wanted to roll their eyes at her and *damn her* for putting them on the same page. “Steve sacrificed everything for you and this is how you repay him?”

She began to slowly walk around the kitchen, running her hand over the counters and the appliances, as if mapping the place out with her fingers. Bucky didn’t budge from his spot, following her movements with his eyes. She glanced at him once and then continued. “You run off at the first opportunity and then— what, just forget about him? He’s worried sick about you, you know. He barely sleeps, barely eats—” She stopped and leaned against the counter next to the open jar of Nutella. “Actually, you should be thankful I’m here, James.”

“Thankful that you forced your way into the Compound?”

Natalia scoffed. “Thankful that it’s *me* and not Steve knocking on your door right now. I think Steve and the others would be a lot less subtle about it and I’d like to believe that you wouldn’t want to see any of them in jail, would you? So I offered to come check on you because Steve was beside himself, thinking you’re being tortured over here.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Do I look tortured to you, Natalia?”

Oh, he knew exactly the picture he painted at the moment. Sleep-mussed hair. Pajama pants slung low on his hips and the Stark Industry logo on his black shirt made even more prominent by the moonlight reflected on it. Spending his sleepless night by indulging himself in a late-night snack. Not to mention the shiny new arm.

He looked unharmed, healthy, and perfectly at ease, *right at home* here at the Compound. A fairly accurate assessment, he had to admit.

Natasha took a moment to scrutinize his appearance and obviously came to the same conclusion. “No, you don’t. I guess I understand why you’d want to just forget all about your old life. Seems like you’re being downright pampered over here,” her tone was deliberately casual again, but it still sounded like an accusation. Bucky watched with narrowed eyes as she dipped her finger into the Nutella jar and brought a scoop of chocolate to her mouth. The pleased noise she made at the taste just made this whole situation even more obscene somehow.

“God, I miss this stuff. Did you know Nutella’s not exported to Wakanda?”

Her tone was so laid back, so unaffected, and it reverberated in Bucky’s ears like nails on a chalkboard. How *dare* she act like this was her home—

Another scoop on that dainty, slender index finger. “They’re really missing out.”

Natalia wasn’t welcome here. She invaded Bucky’s home. *Tony’s* home. Then she hurt Friday and put the people living at the Compound at risk. And now she was talking shit about things she knew
nothing about and waltzing around here, like she owned the damn place? There was such a sense of 
violation to the whole thing and Bucky was suddenly seething. It was almost an unconscious 
decision, but instead of pushing the Soldier back like he was supposed to, he let his next exhale inject 
some of that familiar, burning wrath deep into his veins instead. He unclenched his right fist, 
knowing it would no longer shake.

“I’m glad you’re doing well though, for what it’s worth. You may have moved on, but we still care 
about you,” Natasha finally remarked, licking away the last of the chocolate on her finger, “and you 
should really call Steve. After everything he’s done for you, you owe him at least that much, James.”

“Don’t call me James.”

She smirked as she retraced her steps back through the kitchen. “Then don’t call me Natalia.” As she 
waked past him, heading for the hallway, Bucky reached out and grabbed her wrist, halting her 
movements.

“Fine, Natasha. Where do you think you’re going?”

“I know you probably mean well, Bucky,” she threw back and made a show of trying to pull her arm 
away, but it was obvious she wasn’t putting any effort behind the attempt yet, “but this doesn’t really 
concern you. Let’s just call this—Avengers business, okay?”

A thick fog of possessiveness settled deep at the core of his anger. “You’re looking for Tony, aren’t 
you?”

“Like I said - it’s Avengers business,” Natalia gave him a coy smile, like they were sharing some sort 
of secret. Bucky wanted to wipe that smile off her face. “Just a few things I’d like to discuss with the 
resident genius. You wouldn’t happen to know where he is, would ya?” The question was obviously 
rhetorical, another coy little jab at him, and Bucky didn’t bother responding. “Honestly, I’m surprised 
he wasn’t down at the lab. Late night hours like these were his best working hours back in the day.”

Her tone was laced with wistfulness, but it was impossible to tell whether there was any actual 
sincerity to it. Bucky doubted it.

Images of Tony flittered through his mind then—*the man he loved, soft, unguarded, and so vulnerable as he slept in their bed at this very moment*—and he could feel himself teetering on 
that intoxicating, sweet edge of bloodlust, rage and power. Suddenly, letting the Soldier bleed 
through into every broken crevice of his mind sounded like a great idea because shouldn’t they *both* 
protect the most precious thing in their lives?

And then his imagination conjured up a crystal clear picture of what it must have looked like when 
Natalia—no, Natalie Rushman—plunged that syringe into Tony’s neck against his will—

He didn’t let go of his control entirely. He was still Bucky, he was still Tony’s James, but as the 
darkness usually kept at bay seeped deeper into his blood, into his *very bones*, he was once again the 
man who spent the last seventy years being carved and molded into the perfect weapon. Ignoring the 
unsettling sense of *whole* flitting on the edges of his mind, he focused on the Black Widow instead. 
Because *she* would not be speaking to his *solnishko* tonight.

“I don’t have a choice, Natasha, I’m gonna have to stop you,” he asserted quietly, with just a touch 
of nerves he no longer felt bleeding into his voice.

“That’s sweet, really, but how exactly are you going to do that?” Natalia countered. The look she 
gave him was still devoid of any fear. On the contrary, it was almost pitying. She glanced down at 
his hand around her wrist and back up at him. “With the way you fought just now… You can’t tell
me you didn’t notice that I controlled that entire exchange between us.” She quirked an eyebrow at him. “There’s not much Winter Soldier left in you anymore, is there?”

Bucky didn’t deign that with a response, but he did let his jaw visibly clench and his lips thin. Signs of frustration he knew she’d notice.

She continued with a shrug and when her hand pulled against his grip this time, he let her go. “That’s not a bad thing, James. That means that the Retro Framing, the therapy— whatever it is you’re doing here, it’s working.” Her expression turned regretful. “I mean, if I had the chance to get rid of the Black Widow, I’d probably take it too.” Lies, all lies. “But it does mean that I will kick your ass if we try this again. I’m just here to talk to Tony, not to hurt anyone. I don’t want to hurt you either, but I will if I have to.”

He looked away, making sure to appear contrite. In his peripheral, he saw her turn back towards the hallway leading to the living quarters of the team.

Turning one’s back on the Winter Soldier? That only ever ended in blood.

“Natasha, wait,” he called out quietly, desperately, a perfect quiver in his voice. She looked back, taking in the hunch of his shoulders, the way he refused to look at her. “I— you were right,” he mumbled out, take an unsure step toward her. “These past few months have been— god, they’ve been overwhelming and I shouldn’t have ignored Steve… But seeing him is always so confusing… I never know how to feel… Because he’s my Stevie, you know? But he’s different than what I remember. I still can’t even think straight half the time… Still trying to figure out who m’supposed to be…”

He knew exactly who he was supposed to be.

“And no one would’ve held that against you. You’re recovering. Steve would’ve understood that you’re not one hundred percent yourself. We all would have.”

How nice of her to pretend to care.

Another step closer and he was able to place a hesitant hand (metal, that never shook even when the Soldier wasn’t in control) on her shoulder. “I’ll call Stevie, I will… but I need to find the courage to do that first. Gotta find the right words to apologize for being a punk, right?” He sounded oh so self-deprecating and thoroughly enjoyed when she smiled at him. She obviously agreed. “For now though, when you go back to him… can you give him a message for me?”

Natalia turned to face him fully and the reassuring “Of course” just barely made it past her lips before it was swallowed up by a pained gasp as the metal hand closed around her shoulder, hard enough to make her bones creak.

He smiled viciously. “Sorry, zayka.”

Using the tight grip on her shoulder, he swung Natalia around and threw her to the floor, and as she scrambled away, he stalked forward, ignoring her stunned “What the hell is this, Barnes?”

“I lied. The message— it’s for you. But you’re welcome to pass it on to the others as well.”

The Widow quickly recovered her fighting stance and taking the offensive, she lunged, but this time, she wasn’t fighting a man whose most powerful half was locked up in his mind. No, she was fighting the Winter Soldier now and in a perfectly choreographed reversal of their previous exchange, it was the Black Widow now falling just a half of a second behind.
The Soldier took control, blocking each one of her hits, still moving forward with every step and backing her into a corner. Obviously desperate, she swung her right fist at him, the near-silent sizzle of electricity his only warning as she tried to jam her charged weapon into his neck, but the vibranium of his arm stopped her Widow Bite in its tracks and his body flooded with satisfaction as he watched shock flitter across her eyes when her weapon did nothing but crackle uselessly. His sweet, clever Tony made absolutely sure that electricity wouldn’t hurt him again.

To make sure Tony’s gorgeous work didn’t go to waste, he used the Widow’s moment of confusion to grab ahold of both her wrists—

“No, stop! What are you doing—”

—and then crushed until he felt the metal and electronics around her wrists crumble and bend under the sheer force of his strength.

Everyone always seemed to forget that he was a goddamn super soldier. His metal arm wasn’t the only enhanced thing about him and just like its vibranium twin, his flesh fist had no problem destroying its target.

Natalia gasped in pain, as sharp pieces of the destroyed Widow Bites embedded themselves into her skin and she pulled viciously against his grip, landing several painful kicks on his shins and thighs, but the adrenaline coursing through him dulled the sharp flairs of pain. Swinging her around once more, he pushed them both down again, making sure she ended up pinned underneath him as they crashed onto the floor and the Widow’s skull made a satisfying crack as it bounced against the immaculate kitchen tile. She may have been agile and nimble, oh so cunning and shrewd, but here, he had the advantage of sheer strength and size, supplemented by decades of repressed rage.

Any attempt at throwing him off was cut short when he pushed the metal of his left forearm against her throat. He let go of her other wrist as well and she tried to swing her left fist at him, but even the Black Widow couldn’t fight against instinct, against the basic need to breathe, as he pushed down harder and her hands desperately began to claw at his arm instead, trying to pull it away, even as her nails struggled to find purchase against the smooth metal.

He pushed harder still, the whisper of gears shifting inside his arm music to his ears as the mechanisms perfectly adjusted to the change in force and bore down with the full weight of the metal.

Another incredible, beautiful feature of his new arm—spasibo, solnishko moyo, radost’ moya dorogaya, for making me whole again—were the numbers running through his head at this very moment, telling him exactly how much pressure he’d have to apply to crush the fragile column of the Black Widow’s throat.

He wasn’t going to cross that threshold. No, Bucky Barnes wasn’t a killer anymore and Soldier or not, he was still in control… but she didn’t need to know that.

A little bit more pressure wouldn’t kill though and he leaned forward, letting the Soldier speak their next words. After all, he was the one with the flair for the dramatics.

“Here’s the message, moya Chernaya Vdova. Stay away from what is mine,” the Soldier growled, his smile turning sharper, crueler, as he watched her struggle uselessly. He let all the bloodlust, all the latent rage created by decades of hell, bleed into his eyes and oh—there it was, that flash of genuine fear in her widened eyes. Barely there, blink and you miss it, but on the Black Widow, it amounted to down right terror. Finally, she understood who she was up against.
His whole body was still pressing her down, but his weight and his strength were no longer necessary to keep her from escaping. Oxygen deprivation was quite an effective way to neutralize a threat.

He moved closer, letting the tip of his nose run gently against hers. Mockery of gentleness. He wanted to laugh. Her pathetic attempts to remove the weight on her throat were getting weaker, so it was almost impressive that she still had the wherewithal to maintain those flares of anger in her eyes. But this was the Black Widow after all. He trained her well. Despite that anger though —oh, how she must want to kill him in this moment— that pretty little hint of fear was still there. She couldn’t hide that from him anymore. Even the mighty Black Widow was not above the primal, visceral fear of death.

“You wanted to know where Tony is?” he asked and leaned in further, his lips brushing against her ear as he whispered “I’ll tell you where he is, Natashechka.” He let out a satisfied huff of laughter against her skin. “Oh, you should see what a pretty picture he paints, sleeping peacefully right now… in my bed.”

He felt her stiffen underneath him even more and it thrilled him to imagine the conclusions she would draw from those words. After all, what he said was true. Tony was his. Even if his sweet, clever Tony rejected him, even if there was never anything more between them, Tony would always be his to protect.

Although he supposed, her twitch may have been nothing more than a final struggle for oxygen. Pulling back just far enough to see her face again, he smirked. Her lips were turning blue. Better get his message across before she lost all ability to think coherently.

“He’s mine. And you— all of you will stay away from him. Any of you so much as look at him wrong and I will tear you apart until there’s nothing left of you but blood and guts. Do you understand me?” He watched her gasp for air. “I said, do you understand me?” he outright hissed and finally— for her sake, really— Natalia gave him a tiny nod, eyes clenched as she uselessly gripped his metal arm.

It was almost time to let up, let the woman breathe, but he gave it a second more, wanting the message to sink in.

Come near me or mine again, Natalia, and you won’t live to regret it.

Bucky eased back just a fraction, struggling against the Soldier now, who just wanted to end this once and for all. Luckily for Natalia, Bucky was still in control —barely, but just enough— and the Black Widow would not die tonight. She’d bruise and be in pain for days, but there won’t be any permanent damage. To appease him however, Bucky let the Soldier delight in his handiwork for one more moment before—

“James!”

His head shot up and— oh, there was Tony. The Soldier crowed —sweet, beautiful Tony, his gorgeous darling— but all Bucky could focus on, in dawning guilt and shame, was the activated gauntlet on Tony’s right hand. Tony hadn’t raised his arm yet, but was he— was he about to point that repulsor at the Black Widow? Or Bucky?

“Stand down, Soldier. Let her go.”

Chapter End Notes
Kak ti, zayka? Vse horosho s toboi? - How are you, hon? Is everything alright with you?

Zayka - literally "bunny", but in terms of connotation, the closest English equivalent I can think of is "hon" (i.e. affectionate, but not overly so)

Natalia is the formal form of the name, Natashechka is the diminutive/affectionate form.

spasibo, solnishko moyo, radost’ moya dorogaya - thank you, my little sun, my dear/precious joy [the Soldier's just babbling at this point ;)]

moya Chernaya Vdova - my Black Widow
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

The Widow visit continues! I wonder what Tony will make of all of this, hmm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony was going to start wearing his goddamn suit to bed. And if not the entire Iron Man suit, then at least a lovely three-piece Tom Ford. With a pair of loafers and a tie.

Because stumbling into his kitchen in nothing more than his pj’s and one measly little watch-turn-gauntlet (thank god he at least wore that to bed every night) to find the Winter Soldier choking the life out of the Black Widow on Tony’s kitchen floor? Not Tony’s idea of a good time.

He only caught the tail end of James’ hissed proclamations, something about blood and guts, which sounded a whole lot like Soldier speak and just confirmed Tony’s initial reaction of shit, shit, shit.

“James!”

James— the Soldier?— looked up at him and a frankly impressive range of emotions crossed the man’s face. Expressions that Tony couldn’t even begin to interpret, but if he had to try, it began with confusion, made a stop at guilt (or fear, it was hard to tell), and then settled on something resembling a pleased leer and— yeah, this was definitely more Soldier than James. James didn’t leer.

Fucking shit.

Tony only spared a brief second to contemplate whether he really was a morally bankrupt person, given that the loudest internal alarm going off in his head kept screaming Protect James!, even though the man in question wasn’t the one currently in need of protection. However, Tony did have James’ mental state to worry about and Natasha dying would be bad for everyone involved, so he definitely needed to put a stop to all of this now.

“Stand down, Soldier,” Tony tried to infuse as much calm and authority into his voice as he could, hoping— praying— that this would work. The gauntlet was active, but still at his side, because he really didn’t want to shoot James. Hell, didn’t even know if he could. But the Soldier liked him a little bit, didn’t he? Maybe just enough to listen? “Let her go.”

For one seemingly eternal second, James— the Soldier— stared back at him while Natasha made some weak attempts at struggling beneath him, but then the man’s eyes narrowed, as if annoyed with the whole situation, and then— finally, he pulled his forearm away from Natasha’s throat.

Tony gave an audible sigh of relief and watched the Soldier stand back up to his full height, arms crossed over his chest, putting Natasha between Tony and himself. The Soldier’s calculating gaze first fell to the super spy currently trying to pull in air through her nearly crushed throat, and after he spent a few seconds glaring death at the woman, his eyes found Tony again, scanning him up and down appreciatively, lips curling into a satisfied smirk— shit, Tony definitely remembered that smirk.

“You alright?” Tony asked, giving into his worry. “Are you hurt? Did she use the triggers?” That last thought sent a chill down Tony’s spine, but his fear retreated when the other man responded with
a sardonic look and a wider smirk.

“Of course I’m alright. No injuries and no triggers. Trust me, she would’ve been dead by the second word. Sweet of you to worry though, kotonok.”

*Oh thank god.* Tony hoped this meant the man was still James, just with the Soldier a little too close to the surface. That nickname was also familiar and yeah, sure, Tony could be kitten right now. He worked with less before. “And what about her? Is she gonna be alright?”

The smirk was now joined by a careless shrug. “She’ll live. No permanent damage— well, not to her *throat*. However,” the Soldier’s tone dropped from nonchalant to terrifying on the last word, perfectly matching the sudden cold fury behind his eyes, “if she reaches for her gun, threatens you, or tries to hurt you in any way, I’m putting her through a wall. She so much as looks at you wrong and I will finish what I started.”

Okay, rolling his eyes at the whole alpha male posturing was probably not the right response to the current situation, but *dammit*, it was tempting, so Tony was very proud of himself for keeping his expression neutral. This whole thing was equal parts ridiculous and dangerous… and yet Tony also couldn’t help the flare of satisfaction, of heat curling deep in his belly, in response to hearing someone being that unabashed in their protectiveness of him. But he was definitely keeping that to himself because *so not the time, Tony, you have a “situation” on your hands.*

“Thanks, big guy, I, uh— I appreciate the back up. Just— just let me do all the talking for now and we’ll see where that gets us, yeah?” he said, keeping his voice even, because if his tone wasn’t panicked, he wasn’t panicked, right?

After a beat, the Soldier let out a frustrated noise, as if keeping his ominous threats to himself was an outright *chore*, but he did finally give Tony a resigned nod.

At least it was a good sign that James apparently showed *some* sort of restraint. God, Tony was morbidly curious as to what exactly went down between him and Natasha, but Friday was obviously down— *and that was a whole separate fucking issue, because what the hell happened to his sweet girl?*— so there was likely no security footage that captured the Winter Soldier vs. Black Widow showdown.

Speaking of their little intruder…

The woman had already lifted herself up on one arm, the other gingerly rubbing her rapidly purpling throat. She was wheezing, desperate shallow inhalations. Tony also noted that there were trickles of blood running down her hands from her wrists and he mentally cringed at the destroyed state of her Widow Bites. A small part of him mourning the tech— *he spent weeks perfecting those!*— but mostly it was just sympathy. By the stilted, pained movements of her hands, it was obvious she would be walking away from this with some serious damage.

Tony gave Natasha another minute to gather her wits and true to her reputation, it didn’t take long for the woman to regain most of her composure, although she hadn’t yet made an attempt to get up off the floor.

“Not that it isn’t great to see you an’ all, but I gotta ask,” he finally spoke to her, “what the hell are you doing here, Natasha?”

Her gaze met his, but she didn’t say anything for a few moments, still struggling to breathe. Shit, it must’ve hurt a lot. “I wanted to—” was all she managed before needing to cough around the abused tissue of her throat. “I needed to see you, Antosha,” she finally continued, despite the hoarseness in
her voice.

Between the way she was outright *pleading* with her eyes and the nickname from the old days, from those rare times when she felt affectionate enough to use it… There was a lump in Tony’s throat and it tasted suspiciously like nostalgia.

He cocked his head to the side. “Not sure I understand what you mean by that,” he admitted. The old memories that overtook his mind softened his tone against his will.

The Black Widow looked almost vulnerable in front of him. It was unsettling. “I mean that—” Another raspy cough. “You were right about everything, Tony. Everything worked out just like you said it would and I should’ve trusted you.” She sounded sincere. “The biggest mistake I made was leaving your side and I just needed to come see you, to tell you that I’m sorry…”

Her gaze lowered to the floor and she had to pause for a second. It was obvious that speaking even that much was painful. “I just wanted to come home…” she whispered hoarsely. “And you were the one who gave us all a home, Tony… *You* were our home.”

There were several moments of silence between the three of them. Tony hadn’t taken his gaze off Natasha, but he could see James at the edge of his vision, standing guard over the woman like a silent shadow.

Whether Tony liked it or not, Natasha’s words seeped into his mind, making themselves right at home in the midst of that sweet taste of nostalgia. *Longing.*

While Tony was always desperate to prove himself to Steve back then—*I am not just the suit. I am worth something. I am not just my father’s son*—Natasha came in at a close second. Tony wanted to show her, in any way he could, that *Tony Stark* should be recommended too, not just Iron Man. And while the Black Widow was never one to show outright affection frequently (at least not with him), Tony believed—*hoped*—that they became close, in their own way. Her weapons were upgraded first and there was always a bowl of her favorite imported Russian sweets in the kitchen. She was one of the few people, who listened to his techno-science babble and she’d call him *Antosha* and *mishka*, and—

The lump in his throat turned into shards of glass in his chest—*like shrapnel in his heart*—and a part of him was almost disappointed that after *everything*, these people could still make him feel this way. God, he used to love them all so desperately. Still *did* and he hated the fact that he probably always would. Tony was a sentimental idiot like that.

But as he looked at Natasha, so contrite and regretful, literally on her knees in front of him, he felt that sweet longing turn into bitterness at the back of his throat. It was so painfully obvious he was being played, but he realized, with no small amount of embarrassment, that this whole thing—*it would have absolutely worked*. Natasha’s execution was flawless, perfectly tailored to prod every one of Tony’s soft, tender spots, to take advantage of Tony’s myriad of issues and insecurities—she knew him well after all. There was nothing wrong with her current strategy.

The only thing off was the Widow’s *timing*.

Because if she had come to him like this in those two or three months after Siberia, if she had shown up with apologies and *You did the right thing, Tony* on her lips… Oh, she would’ve had him eating out of the palm of her hand. He would’ve done anything for her, he would’ve prostrated himself before her, just to hear that simple *You were right*. She would’ve had him hook, line, and sinker.

But now…
Now, all he had to do was think back to the hell all of them went through to get to present day. All that relentless, desperate work. All he had to do was think about the people who stood by him not only when life was sunshine and rainbows, but also when life was complete and utter shit.

With something akin to nervousness, he glanced back up at James. The soldier may have fought the Widow initially, but they had a complicated history, didn’t they? And maybe he’d take her side now—but then warmth flooded Tony when James locked gazes with him and gave Tony the most incredulous, offended look, mouthing a silent Is she fucking serious right now? and despite that frankly intimidating Winter Soldier stance of his, Tony had to fight back a smile. James was on his side—hell, the Soldier too—and Tony couldn’t even begin to examine the enormous implications of that. Not right now.

He swallowed back that lump and pushed back the memories of what he used to have. There was some catharsis, some power in finally being able to admit that his old life was gone and more importantly, that he didn’t need any of these people anymore. Not Steve. Not Natasha. None of them. Because for once, he wasn’t alone to face the uncertain future.

“You have no idea what it means to hear you say that, Nat,” he responded quietly and Natasha looked back up at him, hopeful. She was smiling even, despite the fact that she was still wheezing through every breath. “There’s just one thing that’s bothering me though…” he continued as his own smile turned sharp. “Why wait so long to come home? I mean, we really could’ve used your help—oh, say, a year ago? Gosh, a super spy would’ve come in handy when I was desperate to put Ross away and that sneaky little brain of yours? Would’ve been great for dealing with all those shifty politicians. But I’m sure you were doing something super important with your time back then.”

Tony’s obvious shift in tone prompted a similar shift in her expression and hopeful morphed into confused in record time. Tony was almost impressed that she was still trying to keep up the charade. She was about to say something, but Tony didn’t let her start in on whatever platitudes she was ready to throw his way.

“Actually, wait, no, I do get it. Much easier to come back now and reap the benefits of everyone else’s hard work, right? The Accords are all wrapped up in a neat little bow, the Avengers are an actual, functional organization. Do you know we have a chain of command and lawyers now, Natasha? Seriously, we’ve got lawyers and PR managers and accountants—it’s fucking amazing, lemme tell you.”

“Tony, I don’t understand why you’re saying this,” she pleaded again. “I wanted to come back, but things weren’t as simple as you make them out to be.”

Tony knew he should feel anger, indignation, anything—but all he was left with was a weary exhaustion.

He was so fucking tired of the lies.

“Natasha, just cut the crap, okay? This whole pitiful routine isn’t working and frankly, it’s unbecoming of you,” he said, wanting to put an end to this sham of a conversation. “I don’t care why you’re here. Maybe you had noble intentions for breaking into my home, maybe you didn’t—I don’t care. You’ll lie to my face about it anyways.”

“I did want to see you and this was the only way I could do that,” she insisted again, but this time there was definitely an angry, annoyed flavor to her tone. So much for that earlier supplication.

“Yeah, well, when someone changes all the locks, take that as a sign that you’re not welcome anymore.”
“This was my home too. I have just as much right to be here—”

“Not according to the great state of New York.”

Natasha downright glared at him now. Thank god, because Tony was fed up with the masks and the lies. Some bit of honestly behind her expression was actually refreshing.

Apparently, she was also tired of sitting on the floor (keeping herself in that vulnerable, submissive position in front of Tony clearly didn’t have the effect she intended), so she slowly stood up, careful not to make any sudden moves as both James’ icy stare and now Tony’s gauntlet followed her. When she straightened up, James said something to her in Russian, voice every bit as cold as his eyes. She turned her glare on him for a moment, threw back a few angry Russian words of her own, but then her attention was back on Tony.

“Maybe you should cut the crap then too. Whatever you think, whatever you feel, it doesn’t matter. It’s won’t be long before the pardons are granted and we get to come back home. *Our* home. The world needs *all of us*, Tony, you can’t deny that—” she stopped herself and let out a derisive noise. “Well, maybe you can. Are you going to let your ego get in the way again and stop the pardons from being signed?”

“Hmm… A petty, selfish asshole… That does sound like me, doesn’t it?” Tony threw back, the levity in his voice deliberate, although it didn’t do much to keep the painful shards of self-doubt from crystallizing in his chest. For now, he ignored it all. He could wallow in self-recriminations on his own time. “We’ll see. I gotta confer with all my evil, corrupt politician friends first. See what the Evil League of Petty, Selfish Assholes wants to do.”

She scoffed. “Is everything a joke to you?”

“Funny things are.”

God, the *deja vu*. It made his skin crawl. *Is everything a joke to you?* How many times had he heard that? Even sweet Pepper had thrown that back in his face before. One of the many reasons Tony so desperately, *selfishly* clung to James because he was one of the few people who hadn’t judged Tony for using his humor to fucking *cope* with the shit life kept throwing at him.

“You haven’t changed at all, Tony.”

“Neither have you.”

For a moment, her eyes narrowed in scrutiny, some idea working through that super spy brain of hers, and then she looked back at James, who was definitely channeling the Soldier because he snarled at her and spat something in Russian when their gazes locked. Natasha didn’t respond this time and after a few seconds of a super spy stare down, she turned back to Tony with a look of outright disgust.

“You know, whatever else I thought of you, I didn’t think you’d sink so low.”

Tony raised a questioning eyebrow. “Okay, what did I do now?”

“Is this your way of getting back at Steve? Taking away the one thing that means the world to him? He was just doing what he thought was right, Tony!”

“A lot of criminals think what they’re doing is right. Doesn’t make them any less—*criminal-y*.”

God, his vocabulary skills sucked when he was under stress. “But I’m still confused as to what exactly you’re accusing me of.”
“This!” she exclaimed, pointing back at James, who just gave her hand an offended look. The way his nose scrunched up in disgust looked so much like James that Tony was beginning to get whiplash from how fast the man was switching between Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes.

“This has a name, Natasha. Very rude to refer to him that way,” Tony retorted, still not sure what she was trying to imply.

“Barnes came here to get help, to get better, and what do you do? Turn him into your personal guard dog? This isn’t better! You’re not helping him recover at all, are you? What, did you use the Retro Framing to manipulate his programming? Felt like it’d be fun to have your own Winter Soldier at your beck and call? News flash, Tony, it doesn’t really count as love if someone’s brainwashed to love you.”

Tony tried to keep his expression neutral, but god, did those words hit too close to home. How many sleepless nights did he spend, doubting every one of his actions, wondering if what he was doing for James was the right thing? Wondering whether he was helping or hurting the man, whether he should’ve stepped back and let someone else handle the therapy. Whether he really did somehow manipulate James into caring for him… And while he didn’t actually want any of the things Natasha was accusing him of, Tony did hate himself for being fascinated— enamored, Tony, be honest for once in your life— with that darker part of James. But in Tony’s defense, he was enamored with every part of James at this point, so he wasn’t sure where that left him.

However, before his thoughts could spiral out into their usual train wreck of self-hate, his attention was pulled back to James when the soldier let out an angry, rumbling growl. “Okay, that’s it, I am sick of listening to her talk,” he declared. “She says one more word about you and I’ll make sure she doesn’t speak again. Just let me neutralize her, so we can get on with our lives.”

Natasha raised an accusatory eyebrow at Tony, silently saying See what I mean? and Tony just shrugged, using jokes as his last line of self-defense. As always. “So the man has a temper. Didn’t you used to date Bruce? You should know better than anyone not to go around poking traumatized super soldiers. Don’t blame me for whatever you did to piss him off.” He watched her scowl at him and realized all he wanted was for this conversation to be over.

He weighted his options. As satisfying as putting her in jail would have been, she wouldn’t stay there for very long— shiny pardons for all, yay— and involving actual law enforcement meant bringing down a whole lot of unnecessary scrutiny onto himself, onto the Compound, and most importantly, onto James. While his lawyers could certainly spin the self-defense angle and Tony wouldn’t hesitate to take the fall and claim he was the one who fought and injured the Black Widow, any potential threat to James and his legal status, not to mention the rest of the Avengers, was not a risk Tony was willing to take. Hell, he also didn’t need the Council questioning Tony’s competence once they found out that Friday was somehow incapacitated.

And Natasha was a smart girl. She certainly wouldn’t go blabbing to either the police or the press about any of this because she would just be incriminating herself. Plus, someone had to keep the rest of the runaway dunderheads in line, so… He knew what he needed to do next, but oh boy, was he going to catch hell for it. A mental sigh escaped him. Rhodey was going to kill him.

Before that, however…

“I know you’ll probably be your stubborn, uncooperative self, but I gotta ask. What did you do to my baby girl Friday?”

Natasha’s blossoming smile was mocking. “You’re a genius, Tony, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”
“I’m sure I will,” his words were light, but then he dropped all pretenses of levity. “But if we get attacked while her security is down, I won’t need my guard dog over there to come find you and personally rip you to shreds.”

She ran a hand across her bruised throat absently. “I won’t be very hard to find. Federal prison, right?” she spat the words out.

“Nope,” he popped the p and gave her his best media smile in response. “I’m actually gonna let you go, Natasha.”

If it weren’t for the situation at hand, it would’ve been comical to watch two super spy assassins give him identical wide-eyed looks of shock.

“What? Tony, no!”

For the moment, Tony ignored James’ outburst and incredulous, angry expression. He focused on Natasha instead.

“Why would you do that?” she asked, suspicion dripping from her voice.

“A fortune cookie told me to,” he replied with an easy shrug and something about Natasha’s building annoyance was almost satisfying. “So given my act of kindness, I want you to crawl back to Wakanda—” her eyes widened just a touch more and Tony could no longer help his own eye roll. “Did you seriously think I didn’t know where all of you were? For fuck’s sake. I knew from day one.” Seriously, whatever his many other faults may have been, the fact that he was a genius was a fairly undisputed fact. And yet, people still underestimated him?

“Why didn’t you come after us then? Or give us up to the authorities?”

“Eh, been busy. Binge-watching Netflix is a full-time job. Did you know they have all the old Star Trek series up? Amazing.” Oh, Natasha looked so annoyed right now. He wanted to laugh. “As I was saying though, I want you to go back to your cushy little life in Wakanda— oh, and by the way, T’Challa was an excellent choice for a new sugar daddy— and tell your jolly band of misfits that if any of you show your faces anywhere, without those fancy pardons, you will all end up in some place that’ll make the Raft look like the fuckin’ Four Seasons. My generosity is a one-time deal. So, keep them all in line for me, would ya, my dear?”

“You can’t treat us like enemies forever, Tony. You need to get over this grudge! We need to work as a team—”

“You have until I get Friday back up to leave the premises,” he interrupted the beginning of her sanctimonious lecture. “So— three, four minutes tops? I suggest you start running.”

“Tony, you can’t just let her go!” Oh, James was definitely unhappy with Tony’s decision. Chest heaving, fists clenched, eyes blazing with fury. Tony was going to have a very irate Winter Soldier on his hands, wasn’t he? Lucky Natasha. Tony didn’t have the option to run away and hide.

“This is for the best,” he locked eyes with the man and tried to infuse authority into his voice again, but it fell flat in the face of that anger and Tony tried for sincerity instead. “Just— trust me, okay? Please, James.”

The man contemplated Tony’s words for a moment, jaw clenching in frustration. He uncrossed his arms and suddenly grabbed Natasha by the forearm. Tony stiffened, thinking for a moment that James would attack her, but all the man did was drag her in closer, despite her attempts to pull away, and lean in to whisper harsh words of Russian into her ear, all the while never breaking eye contact.
Tony gulped. He didn’t understand a word of those whispers, but they certainly weren’t declarations of love and friendship and the way the Soldier looked at him promised none of those things for Tony either. *Crap.* He kinda missed the appreciative leers and being called a kitten.

Finally, the Soldier let Natasha go, pushing her away from him as if she were diseased. She threw one angry scowl back, but then cautiously began to walk past Tony towards the hallways.

“Tick tock, Natasha. Friday will be a lot less merciful. She has a ‘shoot on sight’ kind of policy for intruders and I’m pretty sure she’ll have a bone to pick with you.”

She looked like she really wanted to say something else, to either him or James, Tony didn’t know, but her survival instincts (and basic common sense) overrode that desire and in the next moment, Natasha was sprinting away and disappearing into the darkness.

For a beat, Tony stood still as he watched her retreat, but then his body slumped as he let out a tired sigh and his gauntlet transformed back into a simple watch. “Okay, what in the everloving hell happened here? I mean, I wake up, come here to get a glass of water and then—”

Whatever else he was meaning to say got swallowed up by a startled yelp when all of the sudden there were hands on him, pushing him into the nearest wall and before he knew it, there was a whole lot of Winter Soldier pressed up against him.

*Ah crap.*

Chapter End Notes

*kotyonok* - kitten  
*Antosha* - affectionate form of Anton (russian equivalent of Anthony)  
*mishka* - little bear

Ah, slammy Winter Soldier, yay. Gotta be gentle with Tony, buddy, he's precious cargo! <3
Chapter Notes

I'm baaack~ Unplanned mini-hiatus was actually productive, so I finally feel caught up again, yay. Plus, this chapter is enormous (9K+, what even), so it should make up for the missed update. Well, maybe. Depends on how you guys feel about it, heh.

Also, you know how we've had hand wavey science and politics? Get ready 'cause I've finally hit the trifecta with hand wavey tech. ;D

Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, what in the everloving hell happened here? I mean, I wake up, come here to get a glass of water and then—”

No one could blame Tony for the startled yelp he let out when all of the sudden there were hands on him, then his back hit the nearest wall, and before his brain could even process anything, there was a whole lot of Winter Soldier pressed up against him.

Thankfully, there wasn’t a forearm across his throat this time, so small mercies an’ all, but the Soldier was a solid wall of muscle, keeping Tony trapped between him and the wall, which meant they were touching everywhere and—oh god, the thin cotton of their clothes left nothing to the imagination. Tony’s cheeks flared with heat, despite the situation at hand.

The super soldier was leaning on the metal forearm propped above Tony’s head, but the flesh hand was warm against Tony’s cheek when those steely blue eyes zeroed in on him, heavy with intention, as the other man gently nudged his nose against Tony’s.

“My clever Tony…” the words were a heady exhale against Tony’s lips and it sounded like supplication, like a prayer laced with undeniable need. Tony’s brain couldn’t quite focus on the nuances behind the Soldier’s tone however because that look in the Soldier’s lust-blown eyes—oh, Tony remembered that look too, it was the I’m two seconds away from kissing you look, and dammit—

This wasn’t how he imagined their first kiss at all.

“Buddy, hey… Can you, uh—” His own breathing was shallow and Tony felt his chest press up against the Soldier’s on every inhale. “Some space would be good, yeah?”

Miraculously, the Soldier did pull away, but only far enough to comfortably catch Tony’s gaze. The thumb of his right hand traced the arch of Tony’s cheek, and even though the gesture was tender, Tony’s unhelpful brain promptly supplied him with the calculations for the amount of force that was necessary to crush Natasha’s Widow Bites. The force this very hand was capable of.

There was something wrong with Tony that this particular thought didn’t scare him. All it did was send a thrill of need down his spine and the only thing he wanted to do was turn his face into that palm, to place a soft kiss—
Damn it, damn it, damn it. No.

This wasn’t the right time and these were not the right circumstances.

Tony was about to say something responsible—so, so responsible—but his breath stuttered to a stop in his throat when the Soldier leaned in again and placed a kiss on Tony’s right cheek. Those soft lips followed the line of Tony’s jaw and the Soldier’s breath ghosted over the shell of Tony’s ear. The memories of the Soldier’s cryptic whispering from so long ago filtered through the near static in Tony’s head and he half expected to hear something similar this time as well—

“Why the hell did you let her go?” the Soldier growled and the contrast between the tender press of lips against his jaw and the naked, raw anger in that tone made Tony shiver again.

“I, uh—It’s for the best, okay?” Jesus, how was he expected to think straight in this position? “Her being in jail wouldn’t have changed anything—”

The Soldier’s face was back in Tony’s view and the hand on Tony’s cheek gently tilted his face up so Tony had no choice but to keep eye contact. Oh no. Definitely a little bit less lust and a bit more wrath in those icy cold eyes

“She’s dangerous and she deserves to be punished for the things she did and said to you.”

They were still pressed so close together that Tony swore each of those furious word reverberated through his own chest.

“I’m pretty sure she won’t be getting into—” Tony had to stop and draw in a long breath because his body was still getting the best of him. He was definitely failing at this whole serious conversation thing, wasn’t he? “—into any more trouble after that number you pulled on her. I mean, shit, you destroyed her wrists—”

“I should’ve done more. The way she spoke to you…” The Soldier’s lip curled in disgust as he snarled. “I could’ve ripped her to shreds for you… All you had to do was say the word, solnishko moyo…”

Pretty sure that’s the first time anyone used that pick up line on me.

“That’s sweet. Really sweet, seriously. But glad you didn’t. We definitely don’t need her dead—”

“Then she should be rotting away behind prison bars!”

Tony tried for levity. “Come on, can you imagine her in orange? It would so clash with her hair—”

It wasn’t that he was particularly afraid of the Soldier—he probably, definitely should’ve been, but he wasn’t—but when the metal fist suddenly punched the wall right above Tony’s head, denting and cracking the plaster beneath its force, Tony couldn’t help his startled reaction. He flinched.

However, in the face of Tony’s recoil, the change in the other man was instantaneous. As soon as he realized what he did, the anger in those hard eyes melted away, giving way to rising guilt.

“Shit, sorry, I’m sorry,” he mumbled, pulling away and pressing the heels of his palms against his clenched eyes. James—because there was no doubt this was James now—crumbled in on himself while his whole body began to shake and he stumbled several steps back, but Tony was determined not to let him get too far. If he weren’t afraid of the Soldier, he sure as hell wasn’t afraid of James. He pulled him back and keeping one arm around James, guided the man’s head to rest on his shoulder. James’ next words were a huff of warm air against Tony’s exposed collar bone. “Please
don’t be scared of me, sweetheart, I’m sorry… m’never gonna hurt you. Couldn’t even if I wanted to…”

Tony was definitely getting whiplash now, but finally, he seemed to have James back, so for the moment, he swallowed back his own apprehension and worry. Instead, he gave into his need to comfort the other man and reached for the nape of his neck to give it a reassuring squeeze before gently carding his fingers through the soft, silky hair. “S’okay, you’re fine. We’re all just a little on edge right now…”

James let out a sigh against his collarbone and wrapped his arms tentatively around Tony’s waist, pulling Tony back in. There was still heat between them, but it wasn’t nearly as overwhelming as before and so Tony continued his soothing ministrations.

Honestly, he wanted nothing more than to stay just like this and talk James through his little Soldier high like last time, but shit, they just didn’t have time. “James, you, uh— you back with me? How bad is it this time? Are you like 90% Soldier? Fifty fifty?”

James lifted his head to catch Tony’s concerned gaze. Those baby blues were still partly guilt-ridden, but the razor-sharp edge of the Soldier never disappeared. “The Soldier’s still— there, he’s close to the surface, but it’s not something I can really quantify,” he whispered his answer.

“Okay, um—” Tony tried to find the right words. “Do you feel like stabbing people? Going on a murderous rampage?” Okay, not his best words, but Tony was on a tight schedule. “Or maybe pushing me into more walls? Because don’t get me wrong, I love walls as much as the next guy, but there’s a time and a place…”

He trailed off, his lips stretching into a smile because the glare he was getting from James was part affronted, part amused. That was a good sign.

“Not gonna lie, still kinda want to stab Romanova—”

“Don’t blame you there—”

“But no,” James shook his head and pressed himself back into Tony, mumbling a muffled “don’t wanna stab people,” into the crook of Tony’s neck.

“Okay, so if I send you to go get Rhodey, would you be okay?” He felt James nod against him. “Even if he’s cranky? Because, lemme tell you, that man does not like his beauty rest disturbed.”

“I’m not completely out of control, not anymore,” James replied, tone almost petulant, but instead of pulling away, he just wrapped his arms tighter around Tony’s waist. “But I don’t want to leave you, solnishko.”

Okay, so Tony was still a little sun and that didn’t instill all that much confidence in him but dammit, this would have to do. They couldn’t waste any more time. “You’re just going down the hallway. I’ll be right here, Friday’s access panel is just on the other side of the kitchen. But surprise, surprise, I didn’t bring my phone to the assassin showdown, and I need Rhodey and Alice to start on a physical sweep of the property while I get Friday up and running. If the Compound has been under shoddy security— or worse— for this long, we could be dealing with bigger problems than Natasha.”

Carefully, he pushed his hands against the super soldier’s shoulders and the man pulled away, albeit reluctantly, a frown firmly in place, which Tony countered with a reassuring smile. “I just need you to tell Rhodey that Natasha was here. You can tell him I let her go, that’s fine, I’ll deal with the fallout. Can you do that for me? Please?”
James gave a tentative nod, before letting out a sigh, and Tony got to witness the remaining traces of reluctance, guilt, and anxiety slip away to be replaced once again with the determined, calculating expression of the Soldier.

The arms around Tony’s waist found their way back up as the Soldier cradled Tony’s face in his hands again. That scrutinizing look, threatening either painful death or the most thorough kiss of Tony’s life, was back too, but before Tony even had the chance to panic or protest again—

“I’ll be back.”

Without another word, the Soldier pulled away entirely and headed in the direction of the living quarters, leaving Tony feeling strangely bereft, with all that warmth pressed up against him suddenly gone.

“Yeah, okay, Terminator…” Tony muttered as he watched the man’s retreating back, realizing a few seconds later that his brain got distracted by the impressive view. In his defense though, the super soldier was doing his so called murder strut (Tony was intimately familiar with it from the traffic cam footage of the attack on Fury and from Berlin) and while this whole night was just one thing after another from the list titled What the Actual Hell?, the most ridiculous one by far was the fact that somehow, that strut looked even more impressive when James was doing it barefoot in his pajamas.

Certainly served as a reminder that the man didn’t need guns and a black leather combat suit to be a threat, but in Tony’s case, instead of being properly terrified, he just found the whole thing way hotter than he should have. He shook his head even as he hurried over to Friday’s access panel. 

Jesus, Stark, can you not think with your dick for five seconds? We’re in the middle of a crisis here and you’re getting distracted by those glorious thighs. For fuck’s sake. Friday first, ogling the resident super soldier later— maybe. Dammit, I’m failing at the whole “responsible adult” thing, aren’t I?

It didn’t take more than a few minutes for Rhodey’s booming— and very cranky— voice to echo down the hallway. Alice’s softer, but no less authoritative tone followed close behind and the two, with James and Vision in tow, soon appeared around the corner.

“Tony, what the hell am I hearing? Romanoff was here, you had her on the ropes, and then you let her go?”

At least his Rhodey was nothing if not predictable. Tony let out a weary sigh, not looking away from the hologram in front of him, his hands continuing to swipe back and forth between the holographic renderings of Friday’s various systems as he examined them for signs of damage.

“Can we table the Responsible Life Choices lecture until tomorrow? Kinda busy at the moment.” Tony said. He did finally look over at Rhodey, who had his arms crossed and his disapproving glare firmly in place. “Plus, I did have my reasons, Rhodey Bear. Contrary to popular belief, I do actually know what I’m doing.”

Rhodey looked desperate to say something else, but Tony was spared that righteous lecture when Alice began issuing orders, asking Rhodey to lead the Beta security team to do a sweep of the building, while she and Vision took the Alpha team around the Compound grounds. Given her dislike of Natasha, Tony was sure the woman was mad at him too, but thankfully, she was in combat mode right now. All the lecturing could wait until tomorrow.

She was already back on her phone and firing away commands to her security team as she briskly walked away, Vision silently floating after her, and Tony waved Rhodey away when the man sighed
and told him he was heading out too. With everyone else now gone, James came over to lean against
the wall next to the access panel, arm crossed and tension running through his whole body. He stared
at the floor for a moment, but then closed his eyes and dropped his head against the wall.

“You alright?”

For a second, the only response to Tony’s question was a pained, frustrated growl that tapered off
into a groan.

“Yes? I don’t know— no, not really,” James finally said, probably aware that his words didn’t
actually explain anything. “I just— I’ve never let him bleed through this much… I’m not sure where
I end and he begins, and it’s all— too much, to be honest. He doesn’t want to go back into his own
little corner, not until—” he inhaled a shuddering breath and his pleading eyes turn to Tony. “He just
needs— I need—”

Those desperate blue eyes watched Tony as he shut down the hologram with a flick of his wrist. He
turned to face James fully.

“I wish I could focus on helping you, James, that’s all I want, but—”

“No, it’s fine— I’m fine,” James shook his head, looking away as he obviously tried to regain his
composure. “Did you, uh— did you fix Friday yet?”

Tony hated that James was forced to deal with this on his own, that Tony couldn’t just say screw it
and prioritize James over everything else, and he cursed Natasha for putting them in this situation.

“Not quite yet,” he had to admit, “but I do have the potential issues narrowed down. Natasha’s smart,
but she’s not a tech genius, so there was only so many ways she could’ve taken Friday out.
Unfortunately, it looks like I have to go down to the server room in the basement to get this fixed.”

James’ flesh fingers drummed against his leg nervously. “Can I— can I go down with you? The
Soldier’s not keen on— having you out of his sight right now.”

Hmm, being locked up in a small server room with James and the Soldier while all of their security
was down. Tony briefly wondered where that ranked on Rhodey’s Shit Tony Should Not Do list, but
since that list was nearly identical to the Shit Tony Has Definitely Done list, Tony just gave James a
reassuring smile. “Of course. All three of us can head down.” He grinned at James, who was torn
between glaring at Tony and rolling his eyes.

However, he obediently followed Tony and the two of them quickly made their way down, taking
the stairs in lieu of the elevator in case other systems in the Compound were down too. Tony spent
the entire brisk walk valiantly ignoring the way James was practically plastered to his side, having no
qualm with keeping a possessive hand on the small of Tony’s back. Over the past week, James had
definitely stepped up the whole affectionate gestures thing— Tony was still trying to figure that out
— but between this and what happened earlier, the Soldier apparently amplified all of those
tendencies ten-fold.

Who knew that all the Winter Soldier really wanted was for someone to cuddle with? Yeah, that
made perfect sense.

How was this Tony’s life again?

The door to the server room— or a vault, rather, surrounded by feet of reinforced concrete— was
tucked away in the dark corner of Tony’s lab behind a pile of discarded Iron Man parts, half of
which were black and gold (Tony was going through a phase). While Tony began to enter his access
credentials, which required codes, retina scans, and DNA. James was a solid presence behind him, observing over Tony’s shoulder as he typed away at one of the few physical keyboards in the whole Compound.

“Romanova said she came down to the lab first… when she was looking for you,” James mentioned off-handedly and Tony stopped what he was doing to look back at the man and groan in defeat.

“Dammit, no… Now I’m gonna have to fumigate the whole place,” he whined, even as he resumed his typing. “I guess the lab was her best bet though… I would’ve been here if I hadn’t been— you know—”

“Sleeping with me?” there was a playful, suggestive tone to those words, and Tony focused on the screen in front of him instead of his rising blush. *Tony Stark, unable to process simple innuendo. Oh my god, my playboy reputation is in tatters.*

“Yeah, that. I do wonder though how things would’ve gone down if I actually were here…”

“I’m sure you would’ve handled her expertly,” James replied and now that voice dropped down to a huskier whisper, hints of the Soldier coming through, “but I’m glad she ran into me first. No need for you to dirty your hands, darlin’.”

Tony was equal parts relieved and disappointed when the heavy steel door finally slid open because with the way James— the Soldier? *Tony was going crazy from the whiplash*— was whispering all these things into his ear—

He gulped and slid between the access panel and the other man, hurrying inside. James followed closely behind and the door shut automatically behind them. A second later, Tony was rubbing at his arms because he began to shiver in earnest, no whispered innuendoes required.

“Shit, I always forget how fucking cold it is in here,” he muttered. Forget the suit, he was going to start wearing a goddamn parka to bed. With fuzzy boots and one of those tall Russian fur hats. Not wanting to spend any more time than necessary down here, Tony hurried over to the panel where he could access the entire of Friday’s mainframe, which required more certifications of his credentials. When the system began to process the information, he paused and glanced at James.

The man walked through the room at a slower pace and gave it a scrutinizing once-over, taking in the several long rows of floor-to-ceiling servers. There were no natural light down here, just the dim overhead fluorescents and the constellations of the multi-colored pin pricks of lights adorning every piece of tech inside.

“Would it be possible to increase the temperature?” he inquired as he made his way over to firmly plant himself in Tony’s space yet again.

Tony shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. This is the optimal temperature for all the tech in here and for the arc reactor right below us that powers the whole room and it’s best not to mess with it. I just— I don’t usually come down here in my pj’s, you know?”

The quiet *beep* and the blue spherical hologram that sprung to life between Tony and the access panel, drew their attention and Tony tapped a few spots on the surface of the sphere to activate the expansion protocol, before turning back to James.

“Okay, are you ready for something cool?” Tony couldn’t help his grin and when James quirked an inquisitive eyebrow, Tony responded by throwing his arms out to expand the holographic projection until the sphere occupied a good half of the room, with them at the center. James, wide-eyed, spun
around to take in the swirling whirlpool of countless images and text that surrounded him.

“This is Friday,” Tony explained, his own voice reverent. This rendering of her reminded him of a small galaxy and to someone like James, that metaphor was likely even more accurate, since all he saw was a beautiful, but chaotic collection of bright blue code, symbols, and lights. But to Tony, there was a pattern to the chaos, although even he didn’t know every nook and cranny of Friday’s inner life. She grew and expanded every day and there were some corners of her existence that Tony hadn’t had a chance to see yet.

He only gave himself a moment to remember the bright golden sphere that was his JARVIS. Just one moment to let that familiar ache to settle in his heart. He was disappointed to learn over the last few years that the grief never truly went away. There were some days when he wouldn’t dwell on that loss at all, too distracted by the present, but then there would be moments where the mourning was so raw and so fresh that JARVIS’ death might as well have been days ago. Tonight, his moment of grief fell somewhere between fond remembrance and quiet melancholy.

“She’s beautiful,” James remarked, although there was now a noticeable strain in the man’s voice, despite the positive sentiment.

Tony examined him with a critical eye, not missing how his flesh hand kept up the nervous gesture of clench-and-release. “You hanging in there?”

“Barely. Wish I could’ve met this side of Friday without the Soldier fighting me for every thought— he just— he refuses to stand down—” James groaned, eyes shut and hands clenched into fists. “He just wants—”

“Whatever it is, we can figure it out, okay? You seem lucid and in relative control, those are good signs,” Tony tried to reassure. “Is he feeling like some vengeance right now? I can’t condone beating people up, but we have a great training simulator, I could definitely whip up some holographic Nazis for you.”

James shook his head at Tony’s offer. “No, he— that’s not what he wants—”

Tony turned around to examine Friday’s inner structure because the quicker he fixed this, the quicker he could focus on James. That didn’t mean he couldn’t work and talk at the same time. “Well, do you know what he does want? Which primal instinct does he need scratched? If it’s not violence or anger, then maybe food, drink—”

Tony was almost proud he didn’t let out another embarrassingly high-pitched noise when all of the sudden James’ arms wrapped around his waist from behind, pulling Tony right into the super soldier’s chest. He couldn’t however hold back the full body-shiver in reaction to the warm puff of air against his neck.

Right. The Soldier just wanted an encore. Somehow Tony kept forgetting about the most basic of instincts. Sex.

“This— This is what he wants,” James whispered against his skin and the arms around Tony tightened in their embrace. Tony bit back a moan when James began to plant soft, feather-light kisses along his exposed neck and shoulder between every other word. “You’re the only thing that calms him down… the only thing that grounds him. He wants to know that you’re here with him, that you’re safe… Ya huchoo znat’ cho ti moi, solnishko.”

“Okay, see, I didn’t quite get that last part—” Tony had to pause to draw in air because holy hell, how was he already this undone by something so simple? It may have been freezing in this room, but
he was on fire at every single point he and James touched. “But it sounded really nice, whatever you said. But, uh—”

“Please, Tony,” James outright begged, his own voice breathless, and that did nothing but further encourage Tony’s unruly libido. “Please say that this is okay. God, I just—I just need to hold you right now and—”

“No, it’s—it’s fine. This is fine. This is fine,” Tony swallowed against his dry throat and tried to blink away his own haze of lust. Dammit, he couldn’t lose focus just yet. “Anything in the name of mental health, right? Just, uh—let’s take it down just a notch because I do need to concentrate on Friday, okay? That sound doable?”

James nodded, their cheeks rubbing together when the man propped his chin on Tony’s right shoulder. “Could you talk me through what you’re doing? If that’s okay? Your voice helps too…”

The whispered request rang loud and clear in Tony’s ear and he didn’t hesitate to give his own nod. Talking was something he could definitely do and it could distract him from the fact that James was currently pressed up against him and it felt like the best goddamn thing in the world.

“Well, this lets me manipulate Friday’s programming at will without her being aware of it. She says it makes her feel weird whenever she’s awake for the modifications. She has a hard time finding the right words, but by the way she describes it, I’m pretty sure she’s actually just ticklish.”

Tony could feel the rumble of James’ quiet laughter against his back and it made his own breathing easier.

“You feeling a bit better?”

“Bit by bit. Soldier’s still—everywhere in my head, but he’s—happy for the moment.”

Tony nodded his approval absently as his hands pulled up and zoomed out a large schematic.

“Is that the layout of the Compound?”

“Yup. See how all the security markers are flashing a very angry red? Actually, a lot of our other systems are down too. Fuckin’ Romanoff, what the hell? I think she just crashed the entire system, there was no finesse to this at all.”

“She said the grounds were still under surveillance, but it looks like—”

“She either lied or didn’t know what she was talking about, yeah.” Tony glared at the map in front of him, trying to piece together what could’ve trashed Friday’s system so badly. Natasha’s work was like a bull in a china shop, where the china was his poor Friday, unfortunately.

It didn’t take Tony’s brain more than a minute of silence to eliminate the few viable suspects and after rooting through Friday’s seemingly endless code for a few more minutes, he found the culprit.

He groaned, hating to be proved right yet again. “Damn it…Well, good news, I can fix Friday. Bad news, I’m reminded once again why it’s bad to trust spies.”

When James asked what he meant, Tony tried to explain as he worked on rebuilding the corrupt code. “So if you haven’t already noticed, Friday’s code is vast. Like stars in a galaxy vast and with a program this large, there are bound to be imperfections. Think of it like our bodies. Trillions of cells, all working together, but sometimes, there are mutations and while most of those remain harmless, if something does go wrong, it could crash the whole system.” He couldn’t help his chuckle, despite
the roiling anger in his chest. “Friday is always so annoyed every time we find some stray piece of code that doesn’t necessarily do anything, but god forbid you manipulate it or take it out. I just tell her Welcome to being human, baby girl. Same thing with the code I’m working on right now. Natasha must’ve gotten some hacker’s help— she’s gotta know at least half a dozen black hats out there— to target this string of code in particular and just rip it apart, causing Friday’s whole system to crash.”

“Isn’t this a major security flaw?”

The sigh Tony let out signaled both his frustration and building exhaustion. “Only in theory. Because Friday is such an extensive program, the chance of someone stumbling onto one of these flaws is literally astronomical— as in, someone would have to spend a hundred thousand years digging through Friday’s code before finding it by chance. The only way to exploit it is to know exactly where to look and I’m literally the only one who knows Friday’s code that intimately… well, except for this one dumb line of code…”

Tony spared a moment to acknowledge the fact that he was having this whole discussion while securely wrapped up in James’ arm. At least it made the sting of yet another betrayal just a touch less painful. He continued, although his tone was laced with resignation now more than anything else.

“This particular code is from when I was just beginning to create Friday’s core structure. I remember getting so frustrated because I couldn’t fix the code, no matter what I did. I finally ended up forcing myself to leave the lab to clear my mind. I wondered into the kitchen— it must’ve been the middle of the night— and Natasha was there. She noticed I was in one of those moods, as they called it, and usually everyone ran the other way because no one wanted to hear me rant about tech for an hour, but she actually stayed. Even handed me a cup of coffee— decaf, the damn spy— and then she just listened.” Tony closed his eyes. Nope, betrayal still stung like a bitch, didn’t matter whose arms were around him. “Fuck, she even asked me to show her how the code worked, where it was… And like the dumbass I was, I showed her everything, all the details because it felt so good to have someone listen for once. I was the one who handed her the keys— fuck, it’s all my fault, James, I put everyone at risk here—”

“Stop, Tony, none of that is true,” James cut off Tony’s guilty ramblings and brought his right hand up to settle on Tony’s chest, likely not even knowing it was the same spot where the arc reactor used to be. His forehead was resting against Tony’s temple. “If she didn’t know about this code, would anyone else have been able to exploit it?”

Tony shook his head.

“All you did was trust someone who was your teammate, who was supposed to have your back. Romanova is at fault here, not you.”

“I just— I just want to understand why they keep— keep turning on me. Is there something so fundamentally flawed about me that—”

“Tony, no. Don’t you even dare finish that sentence. I don’t— I don’t know why they act like this with you— I’ve wondered this myself and I don’t have a good answer and it makes me so goddamn angry—” If it were possible, he drew Tony in even closer against his chest. “But they don’t matter. God, none of them matter and none of them deserve you. You, Tony— you’re worth ten of them.”

All Tony could do was close his eyes and exhale a shaky breath in the face of that sheer conviction. He was sure James had no idea the significance those words carried, but fuck, it sure felt like absolution.
Soft lips were again gently, tenderly exploring his skin and everything inside Tony was on fire once more, but thankfully, he was still coherent enough to put the finishing touches on the string of code. All the systems needed a reboot now and Tony realized things were about to get just a touch more intimate.

“‘To reset Friday, all the systems need to be shut down first, which cuts all the power in the room for a few minutes, so, uh— hope you’re not afraid of the dark?’”

“Not when I have you to protect me,” James whispered in his ear, the Soldier back in his tone again and Tony wondered if he needed to worry that he could now pick up on these distinctions.

The hologram around them dissolved into thin air and one by one, all the pieces of tech inside turned off. Within a few seconds, they were engulfed in total darkness, only the quiet, constant hum of the arc reactor below the floor filling in the silence around them.

Every one of Tony’s other senses turned sharper in the same instant his sight was taken away. James’ quiet, steady breath against the nape of his neck, the chill of the room contrasting with the blazing heat where their bodies were pressed together. And touch— _god_ , they were touching everywhere. Lips on his flushed skin— soft lips that Tony fantasized and dreamed about all the goddamn time— and James never stopped the absent movements of his fingers, although his right hand now trailed back down, tracing the planes of Tony’s stomach once before it found its way underneath Tony’s shirt and repeated those same movements against his skin.

“James…” Tony wasn’t sure what his own needy exhale meant. Was he supposed to be telling James to stop? Because every part of his body was adamant that was the worst idea ever.

“None of them deserve you, Tony. My darlin’ mechanic, my clever Tony, solnishko moyo…” As those sinful lips continued to spill a nearly worshipful litany of endearments, the hand on Tony’s stomach moved up, tugging the shirt up with it, to splay possessively over his heart and its metal twin took its place, a firm pressure against Tony’s abs, causing him to let out an audible moan. He couldn’t help it. That cold metal against his heated skin— it was amazing and he could feel that familiar, rising heat in his belly. Shit, he was already half-hard, there was no denying that, and just from this— _how could James make him feel so much with nothing but simple touch_ — and thank god — thank god it was pitch black in the room because his thin cotton pants would do nothing to hide his arousal, and wasn’t he supposed to be responsible adult?

His own left hand settled over the cold vibranium. Those perfect metal fingers kept up their gentle movements, tracing lazy patterns over his skin, and Tony was definitely planning to gently pry that hand away, he had every intention to do just that, but then James moaned a breathless “Need you, Tony…” into his ear and all Tony did was press that metal hand into his skin even harder, never wanting to let go, at the same time as James rocked his hips against him—

There was no mistaking the line of heat against Tony’s backside and the realization that James was just as hard as he was, that he wanted this just as much, finally caused every one of Tony’s thoughts to fizzle out into static, leaving him unable to do anything but _feel_. Tony’s right hand found its way into James’ hair, the firm hold making James outright purr against his skin. He nudged his nose against Tony’s cheek and then his lips were peppering kisses down Tony’s jaw.

“Let me make you feel good, sweetheart, please…” Tony let out a needy whimper as their joined hands dipped just below the waistband of his pants, making James’ intentions perfectly clear. “Please say yes, Tony…”

Oh, how he wanted to. Tony didn’t think there was anything he wanted more in that moment. And why couldn’t Tony just say _yes_? Why did he have to deny himself pleasure and happiness, over and
over, all in the name of being responsible? His heart would always break in the end, so what did it
matter if just this once, he just let himself feel, just let his fantasies finally take form, consequences be
damned?

Yes, yes, yes ran through his mind on a loop, but he couldn’t even form words anymore, capable of
nothing more than needy exhales, as the entirety of his existence narrowed down to those lips on his
skin, the hard length pressed up against his back, and his own building arousal. All he wanted, all he
needed was for James to finally touch him, in all the ways Tony had dreamed about— all those
baddirtywrong moments shoved to the dark corner of his own mind in the name of the greater good
— and all he had to do was guide that perfect metal hand lower, just a little bit lower and—

“I’m back, Boss!”

Friday’s cheerful voice and the sudden flood of bright light felt like getting doused in ice cold water
and it startled yelp out of Tony as he lurched forward, scrambling out of James’ embrace.

“Systems are beginning to come online and I, uh— did I interrupt something?”

Tony was about as graceful as a newborn calf as he took a few more steps, legs shaking under him.
He leaned one hand against a server box, trying to catch his breath. His whole body was still tingling
with the potential of pleasure, but in the glaringly bright fluorescent lights, his mental faculties were
coming back online too, mind flooding with realizations and implications and shit, shit, shit, nothing
got rid of an erection better than mortification laced with guilt and self-recrimination.

Oh my god, how did I let it get that far? What the hell was I thinking?

“I, uh— I need to get over to the access panel on the— on the other side of the servers,” Tony
addressed James, but didn’t dare look back at the man. Nodding to himself, Tony stumbled over and
turned the corner, putting a whole solid, floor-to-ceiling row of servers between himself and James.
He didn’t really need to use this particular access panel, but honestly, he needed space to think right
now. His legs finally gave out, turning to jelly all of the sudden, and he let himself slide down onto
the floor, leaning against the wall and facing the bright blue screen of the access panel which
informed him that Friday was already running diagnostics. That’s my girl. At least she knew what
she was doing. Unlike Tony.

“Friday, you’ve been out of commission. Few hours, at the longest. Prioritize your security protocols.
Once diagnostics on those are complete and security is back up and running, check the rest of your
systems and start bringing everything else back online. Critical, then non-critical, but I’m sure I didn’t
need to tell you that.”

“Correct, Boss, I’m already on it. Diagnostics have revealed no issues thus far and I’m getting reports
from Ms. Blackwood and Colonel Rhodes. Both note no intruders nor any breaches in physical
security during the time I was non-operational.”

Tony let out a relieved breath. At least the universe was generous enough to let him have one good
thing in this entire clusterfuck of a night. The last thing they needed were Hydra agents staging a
sneak attack.

The next few minutes were spent in silence and Tony was thankful for the opportunity to finally
catch his breath. He wasn’t flushed and keyed-up anymore either, which unfortunately meant the
chill of the server room quickly settled into his muscles and joints. Tony brought his knees up against
his chest and wrapped his arms around them, trying to conserve some of his body heat. Resting his
chin on top of his knees, he absently observed the diagnostics on the screen in front of him—
everything’s good so far, thank god— but his mind was mostly focused on the man on the other side.
God, what the hell was wrong with him? Natasha’s words filtered through, loud and clear in Tony’s head, and he cringed. Fuck, he was basically taking advantage of James! The man wasn’t in his right mind—for all intents and purposes, he was high, and there was Tony, thinking with his dick, forgetting about everything other than his own selfish desires and needs!

He should’ve taken control of the situation, he should’ve stopped it—and if James came out of this hating him, for taking advantage of him in such a vulnerable state, then Tony would absolutely deserve it, although it terrified him to think of losing what he already had with James. He swallowed back the guilt. Maybe if he apologized—

“All security on external Compound grounds has been brought back online and I am 78% complete with the diagnostics of the security protocols for the interior Compound structure. So far, no additional issues and no security flags to report on.”

“You always give me the best news, Fri, that’s why I love you,” Tony responded. At least he had Friday to alleviate some of his other worries. Too bad she didn’t have anything reassuring to say about the rest of his disastrous life choices.

“It was the Black Widow who corrupted my code, correct?”

“Yup. Remember that faulty line of code buried on your Theogony sequence?”

“The part of me that you wanted to christen the primordial goop?”

“That’s the one,” Tony couldn’t help his quiet chuckle. While Tony preferred to use rock bands, pop culture references, or anything that sounded sufficiently ridiculous for his naming conventions, Friday loved all things mythology, so she usually just ignored Tony’s terrible suggestions. “Use the protocol we developed a while back to build a firewall around the code, so Ms. Rushman can never touch it again.”

“Done and done, Boss. While I continue diagnostics, I feel obligated to inform you that Colonel Rhodes is currently using quite the colorful language to describe how irate he is with your decision to let the Black Widow go.”

“Oh, I bet he’s all sorts of irate.”

“While I will always defer to your judgment, Boss, I have to admit that I myself am disappointed that she was allowed to leave. I really would have liked to— oh, what is the phrase the boys always use? Oh yes. I would have liked to wreck her shit, Boss.”

Tony burst out laughing at the same time he heard an amused snort on the other side of the servers. “What kind of terrible things are those two hooligans teaching my sweet girl?” Tony managed to ask through his laughter. “Don’t let Rhodey hear any of you talk like that around him!”

“We are very careful not to use these sorts of—expressions around Colonel Rhodes, Boss, I assure you.”

Tony shook his head fondly. “Rhodey’s such a hypocrite. He has the filthiest mouth out of everyone at the Compound.”

After Friday proudly confirmed that fact as true (apparently she and the boys kept a running tally and everything), Tony let her focus on the rest of the diagnostics. The silence didn’t last long however when Tony’s hearing picked up the shuffling noises in the quiet space and moments later, James appeared around the corner. He gave Tony a brief glance, before settling in next to an adjacent wall, several yards away from Tony. His position mirrored Tony’s as he curled in on himself and his knees
were apparently a much more fascinating subject than Tony because he refused to look back up now.

Tony observed him for a few seconds, heart clenching with guilt, because the man looked uncomfortable and upset and *nice fucking going, Tony, why do you ruin everything you touch?*

“You, uh— you alright?”

James nodded, watching his fingers drumming out a silent staccato against his knees. “The Soldier—” he cleared his throat, “we had a talk. He’s back in his box. ’s just me now.”

“Good, that’s— good.”

Awkward silence followed and Tony didn’t want to think of the possibility that they could be going back to that polite, distant professionalism from so many months ago.

“James, I fucked up so badly—”

“I am so sorry, Tony—”

They both stared at each other for a few moments, trying to process the other’s words. James was the first one to finally speak again.

“Tony, what are you talking about? I was the one who ‘fucked up’. I let the Soldier loose like some rapid dog, didn’t even try to stop him from laying it on Natalia and then— then I— I practically assaulted you just now!” He buried his face in his knees after that outburst and groaned. “I don’t even know how you can stand to look at me…”

Honestly, *looking* at James was the only thing Tony was capable of as he blinked owlishly. “Um—” he tried to gather his thoughts. This honestly wasn’t what he expected. “James, I should’ve been the one— I was supposed to be the responsible adult here! You didn’t know what you were doing—”

Two narrowed eyes looked up at him from their hiding place. “I knew exactly what I was doing, Tony. The Soldier’s all me, right?’ s what everyone keeps telling me. And I *was* in control this time. I just— let myself get lost in those feelings. Anger, vengeance, all that power… all that *lust.*” He swallowed audibly on that last word. “I’m so sorry, Tony, this was never how it was supposed to be, I shouldn’t have forced you to—”

“Hey, alright, let me stop you right there,” Tony interrupted because the abject guilt in the other man’s voice was breaking his heart. The last thing he needed was James believing he did something wrong, so this was one misconception Tony needed to clear up right away. “You didn’t *force me* to do anything, okay? I wasn’t exactly—” he had to clear his own throat, “*unreceptive* to what was happening…” The words were too close to an admission of Tony’s true feelings, but he pushed away his own fear, letting his need to comfort James kick back in (there was a slight chance he was actually the biggest mother hen of them all). “You didn’t do anything that I wasn’t— that I wasn’t okay with… Trust me, I should’ve stopped you, but not because I didn’t want— *all of that.* I should’ve stopped you because you weren’t yourself.”

“I *was* myself, Tony, I told you. In all the ways that mattered at least. I didn’t— *not want* that either.” Those blue eyes turned pleading. “So… you’re not angry with me?”

“Of course not. Honestly, thought you were gonna hate *me.* ”

“Tony, I know I’ve said this before, but I’ll say it again in case your hearing’s bad. You’re the only thing that keeps me from falling apart when this kinda stuff happens. You’re always the one trying to put me back together, so why would you think I hated you?”
Tony shrugged. “Because I always think the worst of myself?” He took in James’ disapproving look and his own lips stretched into small smile. “Okay, so, to make sure we’re on the same page… I definitely don’t hate you… and you don’t seem to hate me?”

“All right.”

“So we’re both okay?”

“Mostly,” James shrugged, but there was now a smile on his face too. “I mean, my shins are a little sore from where Natalia kicked me with her dumb boots, but I think we’re okay.”

Surprisingly, some of Tony’s guilt was already draining away, which was a miracle in its own right because Tony hoarded his guilt like a dragon hoarded gold.

But maybe, just this once, he could let himself have something good? Even if it was just for a short time. “So if everything’s okay, why are you sitting all the way in the corner over there?”

James’ shy shrug made him chuckle and he lifted his left arm up and beckoned the man with his hand. “Just c’merre already, would you? It’s freezing as hell down here and I don’t have my trusty superhero blanket, so you’ll have to do.”

Having Tony’s approval was apparently all James needed because he wasted no time in crawling over and planting himself firmly next to Tony, whose arm wrapped around the man’s shoulders and pulled him in even closer. Tony guided James’ head with his other hand to rest on his shoulder and the super soldier went slack against him, letting out a contented sigh against Tony’s collar bone when he settled in, with his arms around Tony’s waist as well.

Tony wasn’t sure why they kept finding themselves cuddling on the floor like this, but this time, their positions were perfectly reversed, so at least the situation lended itself to some poetic symmetry.

There was a minute where neither one of them said anything, content to watch the screen before them while they both warmed each other up. Tony marveled at the strange dichotomy of his reactions to James. Earlier, all it took was a simple touch to create fire and electricity and desperate need… but this—this was a different kind of intimacy. Soft and unhurried, with no demands or expectations. It was soothing and safe.

Strange that he could experience both with the same person over the span of ten minutes. Insecurities and doubts flared up, whispering into Tony’s ear that this would obviously blow up in his face, that he didn’t know what he was doing, that he would go down in flames and drag James along with him…

He tried to ignore it all and let the heavy, comforting weight of the vibranium arm across his stomach ground him. Without thinking, he began to trace lazy patterns across the cool metal, mapping out the thin grooves between the plates with the pads of his fingers. He knew James was watching the gentle movements.

“I, uh— I thought you were going to hate me…” James finally spoke. His voice was barely above a whisper, but the server room was quiet, so Tony didn’t have any trouble hearing the words. He frowned.

“I swear we just established that we’re good—”

“No, I didn’t mean now— I meant— when you found me, holding Natalia down. I saw the repulsor and all that ran through my head was— he’s going to shoot me, isn’t he?”
Tony knew this was serious talk time, but he couldn’t help his amused snort. “You seriously thought I was gonna shoot you over the Black Widow?”

James responded with a small shrug. “I think it was less about her and more about the fact that I let myself give into that need for violence… I thought you’d be disgusted by what I let myself turn into…”

Tony let out a slow, drawn out sigh. These types of emotional one-on-one’s were never his forte, but this one was unavoidable, not to mention fairly important. He let himself card his hand gently through James’ hair and strangely, the words came easier than he anticipated.

“I know you hate it when Fatima and I say this, but the Soldier is a part of you. And accepting that, letting yourself connect with that isn’t a bad thing. I only hate the fact that you were forced to do so, that it happened when you felt threatened and when you were alone. Honestly though, you don’t give yourself enough credit. You nearly went full Winter Soldier on her and you still showed considerable restraint. Honestly, she was lucky she ran into you. I mean, if it were Rhodey or Alice in the kitchen, they would’ve just shot first and asked questions never.”

“Their approach sounds tempting.” The words were meant as a joke, but James’ tone remained serious. “The Soldier— he’s settled now, but it doesn’t mean I’m still not absolutely furious with what she said and did to you.” James pulled away so he could properly look at Tony. The metal hand found its way up to settle against Tony’s cheek. “You do know that what she said was a lie, right?”

“She said a lot of things.”

James’ eyebrows drew together and his nose scrunched up in distaste. “Well, come to think of it, everything she said was a lie, but I specifically meant what she said about me. About my programming.”

Tony wanted to say something, he really did, but the words just got stuck in his throat. Because there was no denying he still felt guilt and apprehension about Natasha’s words, about his own decisions and intentions. Apparently his expression gave that away.

“Tony, no, you can’t believe her for a second! You’re not controlling me or manipulating my feelings or whatever else she was spouting.” Tony tried to turn away, the intensity and the raw honesty behind those blue eyes too overwhelming, but the metal hand gently nudged Tony’s face back. “I know what being brainwashed feels like, okay? I know what it’s like to have every part of you ripped out, to be unmade. I know what it’s like to be under someone’s control, so please don’t insult me by giving any weight to Natasha’s bullshit.”

Another sigh and Tony couldn’t help but lean forward and press their forehead together. “I’m sorry, I know… I just worry sometimes that— I don’t want to hurt you, James.”

“And you haven’t, Tony. Please stop doubting yourself. I—” James let out a nervous breath. “I care so much about you…”

As if suddenly made shy by his own admission, James pressed himself back into the crook of Tony’s neck. The metal arm trailed back down Tony’s chest until it found Tony’s hand and metal fingers intertwined with flesh.

“We, uh— we should probably talk about this—” Damn, when did Tony Stark begin to stumble over his words? “About us, I mean. Maybe— maybe not today, not tomorrow… but when the dust settles a bit and we feel more up to it, yeah?”
“I’d really like that,” James replied and Tony smiled, even though he knew he’d have an existential crisis later when it fully sunk in that he just agreed to talk about his feelings with James. “Sorry you didn’t get any sleep, by the way,” the super soldier added and Tony groaned because oh yeah, he forgot it was four in the morning and he had a hell of a day ahead of him.

“Ugh, don’t remind me. The Compound is going to be full of UN delegates in a few hours and here I spend the night before arguing with fucking super spies…” He leaned his head against James with a sigh. “It’s okay. I’ll manage.”

“Is Friday almost good to go?”

“Yeah, probably ten more minutes of diagnostics and reboots.”

James nodded and stayed still for a few moments, but then finally extricated himself from Tony’s embrace. This time, he used both of his hands to carefully cradle Tony’s face.

Unsurprisingly, James looked tired after the night’s events, but his expression was soft and affectionate and the earlier sharp lines of the Soldier were completely gone.

Before Tony had time to react, James leaned in and pressed just one soft kiss to the corner of Tony’s lips before whispering “I’ll go get coffee and breakfast started for you, then. Okay, sweetheart?”

Even though the last part was a question, James didn’t give Tony time to respond, choosing instead to get back up, although he did look back with one more smile before he disappeared behind the servers.

Tony wondered whether this was what Friday had experienced. One small, simple thing, but it had the power to short-circuit the entire operating system.

Thankfully, his brain did come back online faster than anticipated and Tony tipped his head back to lean against the wall, eyes closed in contemplation.

Logic, past experience, and all of his insecurities screamed at him not to go down this path. Therein lies nothing but heartbreak and pain. But his heart— his weak, old heart held together by tape and safety pins— it sang a different song and the two conflicting sides intertwined into a strange sort of melody that left Tony simultaneously hopeful and utterly lost.

Chapter End Notes

Ya huchoo znat’ cho ti moi - I want to know that you're mine

You guys hate me yet? I feel like I need a "cockblocked count" at this point - we've had magic (poor Bucky), the circadian rhythm (poor Tony), and now Friday (poor Soldier!). I'm never gonna let these boys have any fun. ;D

Next chapters will be posted as scheduled, every three days! <3
Chapter Notes

I wanted to spoil you guys with another 8K+ chapter, but then life happened, so I had to split it up to keep the update schedule. Normal sized chapters are still good though. ;)
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Thank you for taking my call, King T’Challa. I know it’s out of the blue, but I had a favor I wanted to ask you.”

“Not a problem at all, Mr. Barnes, I am always happy to hear from you. Now, what is it I can help you with?”

“Could you let me know when Natasha arrives back in Wakanda? I’d like to speak to her when she does.”

“…Oh. I was not aware she had left.” A weary sigh. “I really wish she had refrained from doing so. Coming and going like that puts all of them in danger.”

“Oh, I’m sure whatever it is she’s doing, she’ll be very discreet about it.”

“I certainly hope so.” Another sigh, followed by a grimace. “I know these are your friends and I hope you do not think ill of me for saying this, Mr. Barnes, but I must be honest with you, I’ve had more than my share of regrets about giving them refuge in my country.”

“I wish I could make up for all the trouble they’ve caused you. I know they’re there in large part because of me, so I can’t help but feel responsible.”

“No, please don’t. We’re all grown adults, are we not?” A rueful smile. “I suppose we all have to live with the consequences of our choices, myself included. But I apologize, I did not mean to turn so self-pitying. As for your request, I often utilize Mr. Stark’s AI to communicate with him regarding various business matters, so I can send you a message through her whenever Ms. Romanoff arrives. Would that work?”

A seemingly innocent grin. “That would be perfect, Your Highness. I really appreciate it.”

***

The click clack of Pepper’s Louboutins followed her down the hallway of the Compound as she made her way over to the common room. She spent the last twenty minutes chatting with Alice, using the opportunity to catch up with the woman and exchange a few bits of gossip, but now it was finally time for her to see Tony.

Pepper had visited the Compound before, mostly in those first few months after the “Civil War”. Tony was so swamped with work back then that he simply couldn’t find the time to come out to Manhattan, so bringing the SI work here was Pepper’s only way to check up on him. They were both still uncomfortable around each other, their break-up too recent, but the simple act of seeing the man alive, if not all that well, soothed some small part of her frayed heart, even if the rest of her still
ached because it was obvious Tony was hurt, betrayed and alone, and she wasn’t brave enough to reach out and bridge the distance between them. Distance that, if she were honest with herself, had been there long before she told Tony it was over.

She failed him back then, it was easy to acknowledge that now. He needed someone— anyone— to support him, to tell him that he did the right thing, that he was a good man and so very important to them all, but every time they were together, her conflicting emotions would threaten to overwhelm her and the only way she could cope was *diversion*. She’d talk about contracts and product launches and quarterly projections, while the chasm between them grew and grew.

Unfortunately, even as things slowly began to come together for Tony and the New Avengers, the relationship between him and Pepper remained strained.

She didn’t regret breaking up with Tony, it was easier to admit that now too. It was the right thing to do for both of them, even if it hurt like hell. What she did regret however, deeply and truly, was letting their friendship fall into ruin, especially when Tony needed her most. She wondered whether at this point any attempt at reconciliation on her part would be too little, too late. Would Tony even let her try?

Pepper didn’t think she would blame him if he rejected her olive branch today, but enough was enough. She had to try. When Jim called her last night to let her know Romanoff infiltrated the Compound *looking for Tony*, Pepper couldn’t shake off the singular, dreadful thought of *what if I had lost Tony last night?* She wasn’t in complete denial about the nature of Tony’s line of work. The risk of losing him was always high, but something about Romanoff’s late night visit left her unsettled. She could just imagine that woman, sinking her dirty claws into Tony, using her super spy tactics to hit him where it hurt. Those bastards— *everyone of them, not just Romanoff*— sure knew how to hurt Tony without ever lifting a hand.

So with that thought firmly in mind, she canceled all of her appointments and meetings for the day and drove herself over to the Compound.

Even if today ended up being business as usual for her and Tony, nothing but amicable politeness and awkward conversations, this would at least give her the chance to see him safe and whole.

Friday informed her that Tony was currently asleep in the common room, but that she was certain he would like to see her, so that was Pepper’s current destination. She couldn’t help but imagine an exhausted Tony, sprawled across one of the couches, passed out and dead to the world, completely uncaring that he was crumpling and creasing some suit worth thousands of dollars. Lord knew she had found him just like that more times than she could count.

She heard the murmur of some program on the television and softened her steps, hoping to catch a candid glimpse of the man before she had to wake him up.

When she reached the common room, Pepper stopped short, greeted with a sight she didn’t quite expect, including *another person* she didn’t expect to see there. It was obvious Mr. Barnes heard her footsteps because he was already looking up at her when she rounded the corner. For a moment, when their eyes met, a shiver ran down her spine, fueled by some primal fear. She was looking into the eyes of a predator. *A killer.* But then she blinked and all she saw were those same gentle blue eyes she remembered from their first introduction, now accompanied by a small smile.

She blinked a few more times to make sure she wasn’t seeing things and when his kind expression didn’t change, she hoped that it wasn’t her limited knowledge of the man— *former brainwashed assassin spy*— that was somehow coloring her perception of him.
“Ms. Potts,” the man acknowledged her, his voice hushed, “I didn’t realize you were stopping by the Compound today.” She noted absently that he looked much healthier than the last time she’d seen him.

“A bit of an impromptu visit, but I see Tony is taking his mid-afternoon nap,” she remarked fondly as she walked over closer, giving herself just a few extra seconds to take in the full scene before her, which frankly left her— *confused*, if not outright suspicious.

Mr. Barnes was sitting up at one end of the couch, while Tony was lying across the rest of the space, facing away and curled up under a bright red and gold blanket— *was that their Iron Man line?*— with his head resting on the pillow propped up in Mr. Barnes’ lap. The former assassin had his right arm settled almost possessively on Tony’s waist, while his other hand— *huh, metal arm*— was carding careful fingers through Tony’s disheveled hair.

This was far too— *intimate* and it left her with a lot of unanswered questions all of the sudden. The green-hued spark of jealousy at the sight was promptly shoved to the back of her mind.

“We’ve had an eventful week so far and Tony’s been dealing non-stop with the UN delegates for two days straight. I think the meetings are over now, but after I finally got him to sit down and eat, he just crashed.”

“Well, now I just feel like I’ve come at a bad time. I should let him rest,” Pepper said, but Mr. Barnes gave her a reassuring smile.

“He’s been passed out for a few hours now, so he’d probably be waking up soon anyways. And I’m sure he’d love to see you.” With that, Mr. Barnes leaned over and ran the thumb of his right hand over the arch of Tony’s cheekbone. Pepper quirked a suspicious eyebrow at yet another overly affectionate gesture.

“Tony? Can you wake up for me, sweetheart?” Oh, there were *endearments* too. Huh. “We have a visitor who’d like to see you.” Mr. Barnes’ words, a touch louder now, prompted Tony to scrunch up his face and curl in on himself, drawing the blanket tighter around him.

“If it’s another Russian spy,” he mumbled sleepily, smacking his lips, “please tell them to go straight to hell.”

Mr. Barnes let out an amused laugh. “No more spies, I promise, and I don’t think Ms. Potts would appreciate me telling her to go to hell.”

As soon as her name left Mr. Barnes’ lips, Tony shot straight up, blanket pooling around him, and he frantically began to look around. “What, Pepper—” his eyes landed on her. “Oh my god, it is Pepper.” He tried to get off the couch and stumbled, still tangled up in the blanket, but Mr. Barnes’ steady hands were there to make sure Tony didn’t face-plant in his attempt to stand up.

“Easy, Tony. Ms. Potts isn’t going anywhere.”

“Sorry, I may not actually be awake yet,” Tony said, blinking those sleepy eyes, looking like an adorable, ruffled owlet. As handsome as Tony was in a tailored suit, Pepper always loved seeing him like *this* - dressed down in a pair of old jeans and a faded, well-worn band t-shirt. His sock-clad feet— *of course Tony was wearing Hulk socks*— were bright against the carpet when he finally stood up and straightened out, shaking off most of the sleep still clouding his head.

“Pep, what are you— I mean—” Tony was stumbling over his *words* now as he hurried over to Pepper. Her heart clenched when he obviously went in to hug her, but then stopped himself and
awkwardly placed his hands on her shoulders instead. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy to see you, but did I— wait, was I supposed to be at SI today? I swear I was free and clear for the next few weeks.” He suddenly looked panicked. “Is SI okay? Are you okay? Did something—”

“Tony, everything’s fine,” she stopped his ramblings with a smile and placed her hand over his. “I just wanted to stop by, see how you were.”

“Oh. Uh, okay, that’s— that’s great. Come on, come sit,” he ushered her over to the lounge chair next to the couch while he plopped himself back over in his original spot and settled in, crossed-legged. Pepper had another thing to add to her What is going on between Tony and Mr. Barnes? list because even though the couch was large enough for at least four people, Tony chose to sit close enough to the other man that his knee rested against Mr. Barnes’ thigh.

A part of Pepper knew exactly what all of this meant, but she tried to ignore that particular revelation and focused on Tony instead.

“Honestly, I just wanted to make sure you were okay, Tony. Jim called last night and told me about your— spider infestation and let me tell you, he wasn’t very happy that you let her go. Honestly, I’m not so sure I’m happy either.”

Tony groaned and dropped his head back against the couch. “Pepper, not you too! Why is everyone mad at me? Even this one’s mad at me!” he pointed at Mr. Barnes who just nodded.

“I’m so mad at you, Tony,” he confirmed, but Pepper noted there was no actual anger behind those words. “Wait…” his forehead crinkled in confusion. “Who’s Jim?”

Tony looked at him like he had two heads. “…Rhodey.”

Mr. Barnes remained confused for a moment, but then his eyes widened in realization. “Wait— Isn’t Jim short for—”

“No! Well, maybe but— but literally no one calls him that here!” was Mr. Barnes’ indignant reply before he hid his face in his hands. “Oh my god, you even introduced him as James Rhodes on that first day. This is mortifying.”

Tony finally turned to look at Pepper, eyes sparkling with mirth. “Pepper, I’d like to reintroduce you to James Barnes, the greatest assassin Mother Russia had to offer.” He bumped his shoulder against the other man, who was now sporting a blush. “No wonder we kicked their ass during the Cold War. Hey, maybe I should start calling you Jim too?”

“No! Well, maybe but— but literally no one calls him that here!” was Mr. Barnes’ indignant reply before he hid his face in his hands. “Oh my god, you even introduced him as James Rhodes on that first day. This is mortifying.”

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“Please don’t.”

“Oh, wait, no! I’ll just call you Bucky like everyone else!”

Mr. Barnes groaned. “Oh my god, that’s so much worse. Why does it sound so ridiculous when you say it?”

“Because an assassin named Bucky is ridiculous,” Tony teased and got playfully shoved for his troubles.

Pepper hadn’t seen Tony laugh so freely in years and it made her smile, even as her heart ached for very different, very selfish reasons. “Really, don’t feel too bad, Mr. Barnes. Tony’s nicknames tend
to stick so well some of us forget our own names. Did you know my name is actually Virginia? My own mother calls me Pepper, that’s how bad it is.”

The man offered her a grateful smile and Tony fondly shook his head at them both.

“And I know that was your attempt to change the subject, Tony,” she waved an accusing finger at the man, “I still want to know why you let Miss Super Spy go. Jim told me you had her apprehended.”

While she was speaking, Tony’s expression turned serious and he let out a sigh by the time she finished.

“Listen, Pep, it was the right decision to make in the long-run. I mean, what would throwing her in jail have accomplished?”

“Well, for one, it would’ve given me immense satisfaction.”

He gave her a pointed look. “Other than that though… The president and a large portion of our elected officials have it set in their mind that it’s time for the runaways to return. They want us all to show a united front and hold hands, singing kumbaya. You know, show the American people that we overcame our differences and are now ready to defend the homeland.”

“I’m well aware what the current sentiment is, Tony.”

“Then you know as well as I do that they’ll want the full set—you know, collect them all, Avengers edition—and just pardon her anyways. Not to mention, I didn’t want the rest of them to see her in cuffs on the news and come running. They staged one rescue, I’m sure they’re just itching for another one. I don’t need that headache in my life.”

Pepper knew she was scowling. “Well, they try to break her out and just end up in jail themselves, so what? The public opinion of them isn’t all that positive to begin with and if they mess up badly enough, that could force Washington to rethink the pardons. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to protect them, Tony.”

She didn’t mean for her words to sound so accusatory, but apparently they rang true because Tony looked away, refusing to meet her gaze.

“Tony! They don’t deserve it! I mean—” she spared the super soldier one glance, “no offense, Mr. Barnes, I understand they’re your friends, but you have to see it from our point of view. Unlike you, the rest of them had no excuse! Frankly, I’d be happy if they never set foot on US soil again!”

Surprisingly, Mr. Barnes didn’t seem to disagree, if his expression was anything to go by, but Tony was more hesitant, running a distracted hand along the blanket in his lap. When he spoke, his voice was somber. “We’ll need all of them, Pep. After what I saw through that portal… We’ve been lucky this past year, no bad guys the New Avengers couldn’t handle, but now—I can’t put it into words, but I can feel it in my bones. Something’s coming. Something big.” He finally looked up and Pepper cursed herself for starting this conversation in the first place. Tony’s eyes were haunted and she instantly missed the earlier levity. “We both know I could stop the pardons if I really wanted to. I have more than enough political and popular goodwill right now… but this is for the greater good. If—when something big hits, we’ll need everyone. And I’m willing to deal with them being back if it means more innocent people end up getting saved. An alien shooting at Captain American or the Falcon is one less alien shooting at a civilian…”

Why was it always Tony who ended up sacrificing his happiness for the greater good? “This is why
they didn’t deserve you…” she whispered, words she should’ve said a year ago. “I just wish there were another way. It kills me that they won’t face any real consequences for the hell they put you through…” Tony obviously wanted say something else, but she stopped him, realizing this was not the conversation she wanted to have with him. Especially with Mr. Barnes here. Those bastards were still his friends, for better or worse. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bring all of this up and ruin everyone’s good mood.” A sigh escaped her lips. “I still wish Romanoff would’ve ended up in jail though.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think me letting her go is going to drive her up the wall. She’s gonna wonder - was it a power play? Was I trying to show her that their fate is in my hands? That I could take them down any time I wanted to? Or maybe it’s the opposite! Maybe I’m just too weak and still have a soft spot for her! We were teammates for years after all and maybe I just couldn’t see her in jail!” Some of his earlier humor was obviously back because Tony made an exaggerated pitiful expression to go with that statement. “But here’s the thing. She’s never going to suspect that more than anything, I just didn’t want to deal with the damn paperwork. I mean, we’d have to file a report with the local authorities, there’d be cops crawling around everywhere, the Council would want a debrief. We both know how much I hate paperwork.”

“I’m well aware,” Pepper assured him, propping her chin on her hand, “and I suppose at this point, what’s done is done,” she conceded and watched as Tony let himself have a big stretch before jumping off the couch with a grunt.

“My point exactly, Pep. Now, I know it’s rude to interrupt, but I need caffeine,” he announced and gave them a sheepish grin. “You’re welcome to talk amongst yourselves until I get back. Or just shout.” With that, he headed off to the adjoining bar area, which nowadays housed non-alcoholic drinks and a large variety of snack food. Pepper was glad to see that Tony didn’t return to his debilitating drinking habits.

She turned to Mr. Barnes, suddenly feeling more awkward without Tony’s presence as a buffer, but she wasn’t a successful businesswoman for nothing. She could hold a polite conversation with anyone. “Mr. Barnes, I feel I’ve been rude in not asking you about your stay here at the Compound. I hope everything is going well?”

The smile on his face was definitely brighter than anything Pepper could remember from their first meeting. “Everything is going really well, ma’am, thank you. I have nothing but good things to say about my stay here.”

“Tony and the rest haven’t driven you up the wall yet?”

Mr. Barnes answering pearl of laughter was endearing, even Pepper had to admit that. “No, not at all. In fact, I find myself missing Peter and Harley now that they’re not here every day.”

“Oh, that’s right. School’s back in session, isn’t it?”

“Yes, so unfortunately, it means there’s no one here to distract Tony with shiny science things—”

“I heard that!” Tony shouted from the bar and Pepper shared an amused look with Mr. Barnes.

“And what about your therapy? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I don’t mind. I mean, it’s the whole reason I’m here, isn’t it? To be honest, the recovery process has been challenging, but I couldn’t have done it without having so many people in my corner here, helping me—”
“See, this is him being modest,” Tony’s voice interrupted again. Apparently the coffee maker was up and running because he sauntered back to lean over the couch next to Mr. Barnes. “As far as BARF is concerned, the results we’re getting are exceptional. Hell, at this point, I think we’re mere weeks away from completing that part of the therapy.”

“I think that has more to do with your tech than it does with my brain though,” Mr. Barnes countered with a smile, but then gave a noncommittal shrug. “Either way, everything is so much better than I ever expected. I can’t really complain.”

“I’m really glad to hear that. And the new arm certainly looks great too,” she couldn’t help but remark. “I’m guessing Tony’s work as well?”

Tony decided to respond, giving both of them a pleased grin. “Of course. Like I’d ever let anyone else build fancy tech for him.”

Pepper thought back to some of the pictures of Mr. Barnes from the various public and private files she reviewed in the past year and the next question left her mouth before she had a chance to think it through. “No red star on this one though?”

She realized she put her foot in her mouth when the light behind Mr. Barnes’ eyes dimmed. Before she had a chance to backtrack and apologize, Tony cut in.

“Of course not, Pep! This isn’t 1980’s Soviet Russia. God bless America an’ all that! Isn’t that right, James? We’re goddamn patriots in this house!”

Mr. Barnes looked over his shoulder at Tony. “Does that mean I should have the American flag painted on my arm?” There was playfulness in his voice again and his lips parted in a mischievous grin when Tony groaned.

“Oh god, please don’t. I won’t call you Bucky if you stay away from the red, white and blue.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

Tony’s expression suddenly took a swerve into leering territory and—oh no, that was the face that preluded all of Tony’s inappropriate flirting. Pepper mentally cringed because most people couldn’t stomach Tony’s particular brand of teasing. “But I think Pep does have a point, you do need something on your arm,” he said and—oh dear, there was the eyebrow waggle too. “And since I built the thing, how about we go with the only accurate thing and paint a big, bold Property of Tony Stark on it?”

Pepper expected flustered embarrassment or irritation, but all she saw instead was that same teasing grin and a scoff. “You know you can’t afford me, Stark.”

“Oh yeah? What do cyborg super soldiers go for these days, hmm? Maybe a cup of coffee?”

Mr. Barnes made a show of contemplating the offer. He hummed. “You throw in some of those pastries from yesterday and I’m all yours.”

For a moment, the two just looked at each other, Tony leaning over on his forearms, Mr. Barnes turned away from Pepper so he had a better view of Tony and—well, Pepper might as well not have existed. Mr. Barnes looked at Tony as if the engineer hung the sun and the moon and all the stars in the sky. There was an undeniable affection there. And the way Tony looked at him…

Pepper recognized that look and she wasn’t sure whether the flair of pain in her chest was due to jealousy or a keen sense of loss. It was the same way Tony used to look at her, back when their
relationship was still new and amazing and they felt like they could conquer the world together.

God, did she miss Tony. This Tony. Sweet, playful Tony who smiled and joked around, who was kind and affectionate, with none of the masks and none of those sharp edges that usually cut everyone around him so deeply. This was the side of Tony that she loved most of all. The other sides of him—those darker, damaged parts—she was never strong enough to love.

His voice filtered through her thoughts. Apparently Tony was calling her name.

Chapter End Notes

Pepper finally makes an official appearance! \o/ I'm fairly pro-Pepper, so if that hasn't come through in this chapter, it should in the next.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I’m actually glad I split this Pepper chapter up into two because I ended up rewriting the entire ending of this one and reworking a whole plot line. Funny how these things work out sometimes.

Given that, there were a lot of last minute edits to this. As always, this is all just me, no beta reader, and while I think this is fairly clean, I could’ve totally missed some things. So if you see something I should fix, don’t hesitate to point it out!

But for now, we pick up right where we left off! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony’s voice filtered through Pepper’s thoughts. Apparently he was calling her name.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” she asked, clearing her suddenly dry throat. The ache in her chest ebbed and flowed, memories and regrets and mistakes mixing in with the gratitude for this simple glimpse of a happier, healthier Tony.

“I asked if you wanted one of those fancy lattes you always drink?”

“Oh… Um, yes, that would be lovely, Tony. Thank you.”

Tony walked back over to the bar, although he kept up a conversation with Mr. Barnes, but Pepper tuned that out as well, trying to gather her wits and settle the conflicting emotions swirling inside her head.

The two of them had to be together. Pepper couldn’t see any other explanation. Tony was an affectionate man, but this went far beyond the intimacy of a close friendship. She tried to imagine Jim calling Tony sweetheart and almost laughed.

She wondered what exactly happened between these two in the last three months. When she last saw them together, Tony was friendly toward Mr. Barnes, protective even, but this… This was rather unexpected, given their volatile history (although she supposed a lot of that could be blamed on Rogers). She didn’t know Mr. Barnes well enough to say whether he had a lot in common with Tony, but it didn’t escape her notice that he was very much Tony’s type. This couldn’t have been just about the physical though because Tony seemed genuinely happy, there was no denying that. He hadn’t smiled like that in years.

It didn’t take Tony long to bring all of them their drinks. The latte he made for her was delicious and she was surprised to find a sprinkle of cinnamon in it. Just how she liked it. Strange, how he could remember little details like that, but forgot about bigger things like anniversaries and birthdays and trips. She tried not to dwell on it.

The three of them enjoyed their drinks over light, casual conversation for the next quarter of an hour, Tony breaking into a spiel about his Compound being taken over by politicians for the past two days, with Mr. Barnes supplying helpful commentary on the rest of the shenanigans Tony (along with
Peter and Harley) had gotten into during the last few months. At some point however, Friday interrupted their conversation to remind Mr. Barnes that he was needed at the shooting range and he gracefully bowed out, assuring Pepper in his usual polite manner that it was a pleasure to see her again and that he hoped she would visit soon. With that, he left the common room and Tony scooted over into Mr. Barnes’ now empty spot and patted the space next to him.

“C’mere, Pep, I feel awkward having this conversation with you all the way over there.”

She didn’t hesitate and promptly settled in next to Tony, the soothing scent of his cologne bringing back fond memories.

“So how is everything in Pepper world? I feel like we haven’t had a chance to catch up in so long. Oh, by the way! I saw that you, my illustrious, brilliant CEO, were on the cover of Forbes again. Both gorgeous and intimidating as always. I walked by a newsstand last time I was in Manhattan and I was tempted to buy out every copy.” God, Pepper missed that flirty, easygoing grin of his. “You know, I might still do that actually. And then just hang that cover up all over the Compound.”

Unfortunately, that smile didn’t belong to her anymore, did it? “I’m flattered, Tony, really, but I think your boyfriend would have a problem with that, wouldn’t he?”

Tony nearly choked on his sip of coffee and he looked at her, wide-eyed. “My what now?”

“…Your boyfriend. Mr. Barnes?”

“Umm… James and I— we’re not— we’re not really together, Pep.”

Tony’s words said one thing, but his eyes certainly said another. “Tony, it’s okay if you are. I know it’s probably awkward to discuss this with an ex, but I wouldn’t hold this against you—”

“No, no, that’s not it. I would tell you— but the thing between James and me— well, it’s kinda a thing, but not like an official thing—” Oh, Tony stumbling over his words was a dead-give away. This was not a man who got tongue-tied easily. “I mean, I care about him— a lot, and he’s important to me, and he just gets me, you know? And god, he’s gorgeous— But our history’s so complicated! …even though I do feel like we’re worked through that, there’s still all these issues since he’s—”

Tony stopped himself when he realized he was rambling. There was a faint blush streaked across his cheeks. “It’s complicated.”

“It sounds complicated, and given who the two of you are, it probably is,” she conceded. “Honestly, I don’t know Mr. Barnes that well, so I’m not sure how good the two of you would be for each other, but Tony, I’m not blind. Something obviously happened between the two of you since the last time I saw Mr. Barnes—”

Tony snorted. “A lot of things happened.”

Yeah, Pepper was very curious about that, but for now, she ignored the remark. “I can see the way you two are with each other. I can let the teasing and the joking go, you’re the same way with Jim, but you were sleeping cuddled up in his lap. He called you sweetheart! And the way you two look at each other—”

“What way is that?”

“Like you’re in love,” she put it as bluntly as she could, even if it hurt. “I know, because there was a time in my life when I saw that look in your eyes every day.” She swallowed back the guilt and the regret and the damn jealously. Come on, Pepper, you’re better than this.
When Tony looked away, expression uncharacteristically shy and uncertain, Pepper placed a hesitant hand on his cheek to tilt his face back. “Are you in love with him, Tony?” she asked. Tony met her gaze, but didn’t say anything and she wondered whether he would answer at all, but then finally he gave her a sad smile and nodded.

“Yeah, I think I am…” his voice was hoarse, holding back some tidal wave of emotions and Pepper felt a little bit like that too, if she were honest. Her next words were difficult— painful — to say, but it wouldn’t have been fair of her to keep silent.

“Then I’m not sure what’s stopping you from being together because I guarantee you that man looks at you like you’re the center of his universe.”

“Pep— it’s— it’s complicated. God…” he groaned, defeated, and leaned sideways against the couch. Pepper’s hand slid off his cheek and found Tony’s hand instead. She wasn’t sure whether she wanted to smile or cry when Tony held her hand just as tightly as she held onto his. “I know that we both have— feelings for each other and sometimes I do just want to say screw it and dive into this headfirst—”

“I don’t see a problem with that. That is your style.”

Tony’s lips quirked up into an actual smile for a moment at her teasing remark, but it didn’t take long for them to pull back into a frown. “But James isn’t just anyone and— he’s great, he really is, but… For once, I’m actually trying to be responsible and not get caught up in what I feel or what I want. Every time I think it through logically, every time I look at the facts— I can’t help but think that James and I together would end in disaster for both of us…”

“Tony, why?”

He gave her a pointed glare. “You know exactly why.”

It took her a few seconds to understand what Tony wasn’t saying and then she was flushed with anger more than anything else. But not at Tony, no. “You mean because of him?”

“Yes, because of him. You know as well as I do, that as soon as he comes back, everything’s going to hell in a hand basket.”

“Tony—”

“There’s just too much fucked up history between us! He’ll— he’ll swoop in here with his stupid heroism and his stupid jawline and— and I’ll lose James and I just can’t— and it wouldn’t be fair to James either! The last thing I want to do is to hurt him, you know? So I just have to— I have to be the responsible adult— everyone keeps telling me I can’t always have what I want, right? This is what’s best for both of us…”

Pepper listened up to this point, letting Tony vent. She gave him a few second of silence after he stopped. “You done?”

“…Yeah.”

“Good. Now, were you trying to convince me or to convince yourself with this impassioned little speech of yours?”

“…I feel like you’re mocking me.”

“A little bit. Because I cannot believe that you’re still letting Captain fucking America dictate your
“Language, Ms. Potts,” Tony tried to admonish, but Pepper’s glare intensified and his expression turned sheepish in apology. “I do have a point though, don’t I? I mean… Best friends since childhood. …inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield. You know how it goes, we all had a field trip to the Smithsonian in middle school— well, I had mine because dear old Dad dragged me there when I was four, but the point stands.”

“Do you really think he would leave you because of Rogers?”

Tony’s response was a long, drawn-out exhale. “I think he’d try his very best not to hurt me, because he does care about me, I know that. God, I do know— but in the end, all my hang-ups and all my issues will force him into choosing, and then…” he trailed off with a shrug, as if Mr. Barnes choosing Rogers over Tony was the inevitable universal truth.

“If that’s the case, Tony, if you think that this is a bad idea, then you’re sending that man some very mixed messages.”

Tony’s groan meant he understood exactly what she was saying. “I know, I know. God, Pep, I’m so fuckin’ conflicted… Every time I’m alone, it’s so much easier to convince myself that this can’t work… but then as soon as James shows up, with those pretty blue eyes of his and those nicknames, and oh my god, all that casual touching, I just—”

“Can’t help but swoon and fall into his arms like a blushing damsel?”

At least that drew out a petulant glare. “A very manly version of that, but— yes. More or less. He’s funny and charming and so damn smart and he actually gives a damn about me— and have you seen the biceps on that man?” That last part was an exaggerated whisper and if it were possible, Tony’s blush grew a deeper shade of pink. “And he’s been through so much and I envy how well he’s dealt with it and he’s good with the kids—”

“You really are ridiculously head over heels for him, aren’t you? That— that’s actually adorable, Tony. And he seems to make you very happy, which is wonderful,” she tried to infuse confidence into that last part, but her own regrets made her voice shake instead. “The two of you— you could— should— make this work.” God, she didn’t know it’d be this hard to accept that Tony had moved on.

And of course, the man was far more perceptive than anyone ever gave him credit for. “Pep… Hey, you alright? Shit, I’m sorry, we don’t have to talk about this. I know things have been complicated between us and talking about some guy I like probably isn’t helping, is it?”

“No, no, that’s not it,” she shook her head. Her traitorous lips were pulling down into a pained frown. “I’m really happy, Tony, that you felt comfortable sharing this with me, but I just miss this— us just talking and spending time together and—”

There was a quiver in her voice and moisture in her eyes and dammit, she promised herself she wouldn’t cry. The sniffle that followed betrayed all those promises.

“All I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy and I feel like I’ve hurt you so badly and I just— I’ve missed you so much—”

Tony’s turned wide-eyed in the face of her outright sob. “Pep, what? No, no, no, please don’t cry! You know I don’t know how to react when people cry!” Contrary to his words, he pulled her into his arms without hesitation and she went willingly, her own arms holding on to him for dear life.

She missed this too. Tony’s strong, sure embrace was always where she felt safest. The rest of the
world could been going to hell, but Tony always felt like home.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled into his shoulder, unable to hold back another sniffle. His hands were gentle in her hair. “I didn’t mean to break down like this—I just miss this so much and I thought—I thought I ruined whatever chance we had at rebuilding the friendship we had…”

“Of course you haven’t, Pep, what are you talking about? I was the one who screwed up everything under the sun when we were together. I don’t blame you for running in the other direction.”

“Tony, no, please don’t say that.” All she wanted was to stay in his arms, but she needed to see his eyes when she said this. “I loved you—still do—but our relationship—we just weren’t right for each other.”

Tony’s rueful smile made it easy to predict his next words. “Because you’re amazing and deserve so much better than an alcoholic with panic attacks who flies around in a metal coffin?”

Her hands found his cheeks, fingertips mapping out that immaculately groomed beard as they caressed his jawline. “Because I wasn’t strong enough to love those parts of you. Looking back at it now, it’s easier to see that—that being with you wasn’t healthy for me—” before Tony’s insecurities could take hold, she hurried to finish the thought, “—but I wasn’t good for you either. Tony, you deserve someone who will love all of you. And I suppose if anyone understands all the horrible things you’ve been through, it’d be someone like Mr. Barnes, wouldn’t it?”

“He’s been through a lot worse,” Tony conceded, but didn’t address anything else Pepper said.

“I don’t want you to blame yourself for what happened between us. We were both imperfect people, both of us made mistakes, and—and please don’t hate me for saying this, but we were always so much better off as friends and I wish we could just go back to that—”

Pepper found herself back in his embrace, Tony’s arm tightening around her. “That’s all I want too,” he whispered hoarsely into her hair. “I just want one of my best friends back.”

There were definitely tears running down her cheeks now, but for the first time in a long time, she had some measure of hope. Tony held her, offering nonsense words of comfort and after a few minutes, his ministrations gave her enough strength to finally compose herself. She wiped at her eyes, trying to smile.

“I must look a mess. Mascara’s probably everywhere—”

“You look perfect,” Tony cut her off and wiped away the last of her tears with his thumbs. “But you know I always hate seeing you cry.”

She nodded. “I know. But maybe this was just overdue. I spent over a year, wanting to mend things between us and never being brave enough to do so.”

“If it makes you feel any better, that’s basically what I’ve been doing the whole year too.”

“Sounds like we’re both really bad at this, aren’t we?” Pepper joked through a watery smile and Tony responded with his own. It was small, with familiar hints of sadness, but a smile nevertheless. “But no matter what happened before—you will always have me in your corner, Tony. You know that, right?”

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

“I’m serious. It doesn’t matter if it’s the press or the politicians or if I have to stab Rogers in a dark
alley… I’ve got your back, Tony.”

Tony’s chuckle was music to her ears. “I would pay so much money to see you go up against Cap. You’d put the fear of god in him.”

“And I’m here if you just want to talk to someone about your little super soldier crush too. I know it’s complicated, but you can’t let your past control your future. You deserve to be happy and this is the happiest I’ve seen you in a very long time. I know there are other factors, but it’s obvious Mr. Barnes has a lot to do with it too. So I say screw Rogers and screw history. Fight for him.”

“How come your passionate speeches are always so much better than mine?” Tony was obviously deflecting and Pepper had to shake her head.

“Did a word of what I just said get through that thick skull of yours?”

“Excuse me, my thick skull is a valuable asset in the field!” he quipped back, his affronted tone making Pepper laugh despite her best efforts to remain stern, “but I do hear you. I do. I’m just—I’m scared, Pep. The way he is around me, the things he says, it—it terrifies me.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes me feel like I matter to him. Like I’m worth something to him. And if I let myself have that, only to lose it—”

Tony trailed off, but Pepper heard the unspoken words loud and clear. It would break me.

One good thing about those damn pardons? It’d give her the opportunity to shove her stiletto right down their throats for breaking Tony so thoroughly that the man was afraid of being loved by someone else. She also made a mental note to have a lengthy discussion with Jim about his plans for Rogers and the rest of his brigade. Tony would not be hurt again. Not on their watch.

“There will always be risk, Tony, in any relationship, but I’ve never known you to back down just because something is risky. You look risk straight in the face and laugh, while the rest of us are having heart attacks on your behalf.”

A hint of a smile meant her words were finally getting through. “I did promise him that we’d talk about— about us…”

“Then talk! Tell him how you feel and then let that man carry you off to bed to make sweet, passionate love to you!” She ignored Tony’s indignant reaction. “And ask Friday to send pictures because the two of you together? Oh god, that is going to be glorious!”

“Ms. Potts, this is scandalous!”

“I’m a simple woman, Tony. And two gorgeous men like you together—”

“You’re gonna have to use your imagination,” he grumbled, but her teasing obviously worked because Tony was outright grinning again. She leaned her head against his shoulder, snuggling into him, and his arm went right back around her.

“Fight for him, Tony. Don’t let others take this away from you.” She paused for a moment, savoring the fact that she could finally have this again. “I’m really glad I came by the Compound today.”

“I am too.”
The taste of tomato, oregano, and basil burst on his tongue and Bucky nearly let out an outright moan. He was certain he must have had this combination of spices before, there were plenty of Italian immigrants living in the surrounding neighborhoods, but after seventy years of tasting nothing but ash, it felt like he was experiencing every flavor again for the very first time.

The tomato sauce was perfect, the pasta was almost ready, and Bucky hoped Tony was ready too. The meetings with the UN representatives spilled over into the days following Ms. Potts’ visit as well, so he had only seen brief glimpses of the man (there were also plenty of text messages, all centered around the same theme of oh my god, save me, I hate bureaucrats), but they were supposed to share dinner tonight and Friday assured him that Tony’s schedule was specifically cleared for the occasion.

Bucky knew he was smiling like a loon as he was stirring the sauce, but he couldn’t help himself. Okay, so this was definitely not a date, they’ve shared plenty of meals before, and there were no candles or flowers— he snorted, imagining how Tony would react if he handed him a bouquet of flowers— but he still couldn’t help the low buzz of nerves and excitement. He was trying to woo this ridiculous, gorgeous, amazing man, and dinner could even lead to them finally talking (among other things, if he were that insanely lucky), so his nerves were acting up. No help from the Soldier this time either. They weren’t on particularly good terms ever since the Natalia debacle and the bastard was shoved to the darkest corner of Bucky’s mind for the duration of the night. Not for the first time, Bucky hoped both Dr. Vance and Tony were wrong and that the Soldier problem would take care of itself along with the triggers.

His hearing picked up Tony’s familiar footsteps, but when he turned around to greet the man, Bucky frowned, taking in Tony’s appearance.

“You— you look like you’re dressed for work.” Specifically avenging work, since Tony was dressed in the form-fitting under-armor he wore underneath the suit, Iron Man briefcase firmly in hand.

If that didn’t confirm Bucky’s suspicion, Tony’s own displeased pout did. “I am dressed for work,” he said as he came over closer and then unceremoniously dropped his forehead to Bucky’s chest, the action accompanied by a low groan. “SI emergency from hell. I have to fly to the airport and meet Pepper there before we get on the jet.”

“The jet to where?”

“Beijing.”

“Beijing?” Bucky repeated incredulously. Dammit, but what about his tomato sauce? And their not-date? “But— I don’t— when do you leave?”

“In like five minutes,” Tony mumbled against his chest. “I’m sorry.” He finally pulled away to look up at Bucky. “Trust me, I don’t want to go. It’s a disaster.”

“What happened?” Bucky knew his tomato sauce was going to burn in about two minutes, but it probably didn’t matter at this point.

“We have this huge contract with a company in China— clean energy, clean air, that whole thing— but the CEO is a piece of work. Honestly, I’d never do business with him if I had a choice, but his family is influential and so he’s influential and getting a foothold in China is nearly impossible as it is —” Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose to stop his rambling thoughts from spilling out. “Long story
short, the CEO is a goddamn drama queen, and not the fun kind, and if we don’t go over there to kiss ass and soothe fragile egos, we’ll lose the contract and then the stock will plummet and then no one will be having a good time.”

“Can’t someone else go?”

Tony looked regretful. “I wish. But I’m the face of the company and if I don’t go, it’ll be taken as an insult and we’ll definitely blow the whole contract then— but even if I didn’t have to go, I still would. That bastard is a sleaze ball and there’s no way in hell I’m letting Pepper deal with him on her own. Not saying that she couldn’t handle him alone, just saying that she shouldn’t have to.”

“Sounds like you have to go then.”

“Yeah, sounds like I do. I’m sorry,” Tony apologized again. “For what it’s worth, whatever you’re cooking, it smells amazing.”

“Homemade spaghetti and meatballs,” Bucky admitted with a half-smile, which prompted Tony to let out a dejected whine as he dropped his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder.

“No, don’t tell me that… I hate you for making me leave spaghetti behind. Why would you do that to me?”

Bucky ran his hand through Tony’s hair in apology. “Do you know when you’ll be back?”

“Couple days at least, a week or two at most.”

But that was way too long for Tony to be away! Oh, this night just kept getting worse and worse, wasn’t it?

To salvage something out of this whole mess, Bucky hesitantly wrapped one arm around Tony’s shoulders, pulling him in closer, while his metal hand settled against the small of Tony’s back, because— he could have this now, couldn’t he? His answer seemed to be a resounding yes by the way Tony practically melted against him with one long exhale, his hands resting on Bucky’s hips.

“I know we were supposed to— you know— talk and stuff…” Tony said the word as if he was uttering some ancient curse and Bucky bit back a smile.

“S’okay. There’s no rush. ’m not going anywhere, I promise,” he said into Tony’s hair, trying to commit that familiar scent to memory before he had to let Tony go. The Soldier (who apparently could not follow simple directions and stay back) promptly supplied him with at least five different ways to tie Tony up and keep him nice and cozy here at home.

Tempting— so tempting— but life wasn’t always perfect and Tony had a lot of responsibilities on his hands. The man’s hard work kept the lights on around here and it wouldn’t do to be ungrateful.

“And I promise I’ll be back in time for the last rounds of the BARF therapy, okay? I know Fatima’s going to be flying in too and I’ll make sure I have all the time I need to go over the results. I’m going to be damn sure we’re ready before we even think of testing the triggers again.”

“I know you will. I trust you, Tony,” Bucky said, completely honest in his sentiment. It still felt unreal. There was a good chance he’d be free of the triggers in just mere weeks.

“Boss?” Friday’s voice cut through the momentary silence that settled between them. She ignored the disgruntled, incomprehensible noise Tony let out and continued. “Miss Potts would like your ETA. She’s already on her way to the airport.”
“Just tell her I’m leaving right now,” Tony responded after a beat, not bothering to hide his grumpy tone, and slowly extricated himself from Bucky’s arms. The kitchen felt instantly colder without Tony’s warmth snuggled up against him. “Keep an eye on this place for me, would ya? God knows, I’m the only thing keeping this place from falling apart.”

“I thought that was Alice.”

“…Wait, yeah, you’re right. Never mind, you’ll be fine!” The levity in Tony’s voice was a bit forced, but he was obviously trying to smile through his reluctance. “But I’ll—I’ll text you, yeah? I’ll need to have someone to keep me from going crazy over there.”

With that, Tony made an awkward, aborted move to reach out for Bucky again, but then decided against it and forced himself to walk away, but before he could take more than a few steps, Bucky was the one to reach for his hand.

“Tony, wait!”

The man stopped, his own fingers curling around Bucky’s.

_Kiss him, just kiss him already, dammit!_ Bucky was certain it was both his own mind and the Soldier chanting that nonstop in his head, but no, no, _he couldn’t_— this wasn’t the right time, he wanted that moment to be unhurried, so he could take his time and savor it. Dammit, he hadn’t kissed anyone in seven decades— _sex, yes, but he tried not to think about those godawful memories_— and he wanted the proverbial fireworks and the magic and— he wanted it to be _perfect._

So instead, all he did was pull Tony back into a crushing hug and whisper a “Come back soon, sweetheart,” into Tony’s hair before placing just one kiss on his cheek and letting him go. The man looked dazed for a moment, accompanied by that touch of blush that Bucky was so completely in love with by now.

“Yeah, I’ll, uh— I’ll be home before you know it,” he stuttered and with a distracted nod and a final glance in Bucky’s direction, Tony turned away and headed out, leaving Bucky standing alone in the kitchen, with nothing but the slowly burning tomato sauce for company.

He went over to turn off the heat before all of his hard work was completely ruined (he wasn’t hungry anymore, but his metabolism wouldn’t care that he was sad and pining in about an hour) and then settled in at the table to stare despondently into the distance, letting himself indulge in a couple of minutes of brooding.

But no more than that. He had plenty of things to occupy his time here at the Compound and the less he focused on Tony being gone, the faster time would go by. Besides, he waited seventy years for that man— he didn’t know he was waiting for Tony, but dammit, it felt like his whole life was leading up to this— so he could wait another couple of weeks.

His mood brightened up just a bit when he served himself a plate of the pasta (his metabolism took less time than anticipated) and snapped a picture of the food, before sending it to Tony along with a text message.

_Never mind, glad you’re gone. Now I have all this delicious pasta to myself._

Tony responded only a few seconds later and Bucky couldn’t help his smile, warmth spreading through him down to his fingertips, when he saw Tony’s answering message, followed by a string of tiny angry faces.
oh, this means war, barnes! watch your back, i know where you sleep

Chapter End Notes

Oh no, I'm separating our boys! What dastardly evil things am I up to? D:
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Quick note: I have a three-day work conference thing this week, so zero writing will get done (why does no one understand I have fanfic to write?? priorities, people!). So I will have to skip the Thursday update, but I'll bump the Sunday update to Saturday to make up for it a bit.

Also, I belatedly realized some of what I wrote earlier (and expand on in this chapter) isn't 100% compliant with the end of AoU, but since that movie makes me angry anyways, I decided I don't care, haha. Hopefully it doesn't bother any of you.

With that said, enjoy the next installment!

Unsurprisingly, the driver chose to focus on the road instead of engaging in conversation, so the drive upstate from the airport had been a quiet one.

It was already September and the lush greenery that zoomed past them was beginning to gain its first notes of golden hues, but the weather was still relatively warm for this time of year. It felt chilly nevertheless.

Because there was no more heat waves, humidity, and monsoons. No more dirt roads and miles of mountainous slopes keeping civilization at bay. No more solitude disturbed only by rare conversation in the local dialect that always twisted his tongue in knots. No amount of practice erased his heavy accent.

Now there was the hustle and bustle of New York again, its famous skyline with the prominent silhouette of the Tower— Stark again, not Avengers— front and center. The never-ending flow of information and the 24 hour news cycle. People, so many people. The whole world was loud and bright again, uncaring for anyone’s need for peace and quiet.

Somehow, it was both achingly familiar and foreign all the same.

They were out of the city, but with each passing mile marker, the Avengers Compound was drawing closer. A representation of the best that the modern world had to offer, with all of its technological marvels, and meant to be a home for the world’s superheroes, young and old.

Home.

Was that where Bruce was headed?

He wanted to laugh bitterly at the thought, but he didn’t think the driver would appreciate him bursting into semi-crazed laughter in the back seat. The poor woman was already as polite as Bruce expected anyone to be around him, even if the fear behind her eyes was hard to miss.

Bruce wasn’t sure where home was, or if he ever even had one, but the Compound didn’t even make the qualifying rounds.
The faraway corner of India where he spent the last several years after he ran— and ran and ran— didn’t count as home either, but he wasn’t looking for one. He just needed an escape. The village was remote by every definition, both geographically and culturally, making the rest of the modern world inaccessible to Bruce and making Bruce inaccessible to the rest of the world.

It was exactly what he wanted.

Before, whenever he ran, he would worry whether SHIELD or Ross would end up finding him. This time, a good part of the first year was spent wondering whether Tony would be the one attempting to bring him back instead. A wholly different sentiment, and sometimes, in his weakest moments, Bruce would spend sleepless nights imagining Tony showing up out of the blue, with that familiar charm and banter, that smile that always lit up the room, telling Bruce it was safe to come home again.

But time marched on and no one showed up. While a small, lonely part of him ached, the rest of Bruce appreciated it, knowing that this was Tony’s way of respecting his decision to leave.

Looking back, running was a coward’s way out, but no one had ever accused Bruce Banner of being brave. Running was his specialty at this point and after Johannesburg, after that witch forced the other guy out and forced them to kill—

This time, his loss of control was made even worse by the fact that he spent the years before Johannesburg finally accepting that part of himself. He was learning to harness the anger, to channel it into protecting the world instead of ripping it apart—

The Hulk growled, unhappy with this train of thought, but Bruce just told him to shut up. Not a good time to get riled up, pal.

Want to see Tin Man.

I know. We’re almost there.

After Sokovia, Steve made the unilateral decision to invite both the Falcon, the Vision, and the Maximoff woman to join the Avengers. Given that they had no formal process for that sort of thing back then, Steve’s decision overrode anyone else’s opinion to the contrary and while no one had a real problem with Wilson or the android, that couldn’t be said about the witch…

Bruce remembered how Tony’s hands would always shake whenever she was around and that glassy look in his eyes was the same haunted look Tony would get whenever he spoke of the portal to the far side of space. The casual use of her magical powers would often force Tony into making any excuses he could to leave the room as fast as humanly possible.

Out of the two of them though, Tony was certainly the stronger one because in Bruce’s case, being in the same building as her was unbearabe. The Hulk was on edge constantly as her magic seeped into their very blood like some putrid red poison, egging on the anger, the rage, the urge to destroy. None of Bruce’s usual relaxation techniques worked and he struggled to stay afloat. The Hulk’s cage at the Compound— the Playroom, Tony called it teasingly— was used three times in the span of one week.

And yet somehow, Maximoff was still the one painted as the victim.

Barton’s and Steve’s words rang high and clear in his head, even after all this time.

Tony is such a drama queen. He’s a grown adult, why can’t he just stop overreacting? He’s like some spoiled brat who’s not getting his way, I swear.
She’s just a kid who’s had a rough life. Everyone deserves a second chance. You got one, Banner, so why doesn’t she get one?

Wanda is an Avenger now, and I don’t regret that decision. She has a good heart and she’s one of us. I want you to welcome her to the team. And while I never expected Tony to make this easy and fall in line, I expected better from you, Dr. Banner.

Bruce tried, he really did, even if he didn’t actually believe that Hydra volunteers who showed no remorse for their actions deserved a clean slate.

However, it took less than two week for him to realize that nothing would change. Steve and the others didn’t seem to care about Tony’s panic attacks or Bruce’s slow descent into near-madness. No, you move, they all but told him, so Bruce did.

His only regret back then was leaving Tony alone to deal with the rest of the Avengers. To deal with the witch. But Bruce just wasn’t strong enough to stay for Tony’s sake, no matter how much he cared about the man.

So Bruce ran even further this time.

Luckily for him, he’d always had a knack for picking up languages, and his medical skills, however rudimentary, were a valuable commodity, so it didn’t take long for him to settle into a quiet life of relative solitude, living on the outskirts of a community that lived on the outskirts of the world. No internet, no newspapers, no connection to the rest of humanity.

Until about a week ago, when another foreigner, this time from England, stumbled onto the village. Rather than running away from the world, the poor guy was a thrill seeker, an adventurer, and most importantly, an idiot who was hopelessly lost. The man was also injured and needed several days of rest, so he stayed with Bruce in his humble one-room home. It was almost surreal to hear English after so long, but it was even more jarring to be caught up on the real world news.

The man gave him a quick rundown of the major events - new tech and new world leaders, natural disasters and pop culture phenomena. Bruce listened with half an ear, but he couldn’t stop his curiosity from perking up when the man began to talk about the Avengers. Bruce tuned back in and boy, oh boy, he was not disappointed.

The Sokovia Accords. The Civil War. The Avengers, broken. Some scattered to the wind as fugitives from the law, others left to pick up the pieces.

Bruce wasn’t sure what he felt in that moment when he found out that Tony was working on these so called Accords with Thaddeus fucking Ross. Anger, but that was his default emotion. Heartache and disappointment maybe. Resignation. Hate.

That lasted all of ten minutes however because his oblivious English friend was about to turn Bruce’s whole world upside down.

“So Tony Stark was left to lead the remaining Avengers after this Civil War?”

“Sure did, although I think that other man— What was his name? Oh yes! Rhodes— took over later. Stark, that poor sod, already had his work cut out for him. Don’t usually follow American politics much, but the whole world had their eyes on Stark and the Accords. And that trial? I tell you, it was a bloody fiasco! Better than prime time television.”

“Which trial?” Oh god, was Tony in jail?
“That Ross fella. Man, what a wanker. No offense, but you Americans sure know how to pick ‘em.”

Bruce’s heart stopped. “What did he—” he swallowed hard, not daring to hope, “was he charged with something?”

“Oh yeah, I reckon he’ll be spending the rest of his days in jail. Now, what was it that they got him for? Well, embezzling government funds for one. Abuse of his position, or whatever the legal mumbo jumbo is, but all of that was small peanuts. The real kicker were the human rights violations! Illegal experimentation, trafficking, I think they even tacked on some manslaughter charges. Guy was a real monster.”

Bruce was pretty sure his lungs stopped working too. “Did, uh— did someone named Banner ever come up in the trail?”

The other guy— his name was Lance, Bruce kept forgetting— eyed him suspiciously. “You sure are nosy about this Avengers business. I don’t recall any Banner, but the trial was almost a year ago, so my memory could be wonky.”

Later, after Bruce packed up his meager belongings and made a desperate track through the thick jungle back to the nearest city with internet access, he learned that Bruce Banner was never mentioned during the trial. Somehow Tony managed to find enough evidence to put Ross behind bars without ever having to drag Bruce’s name through the mud. He wondered if Betty was secretly involved in the whole thing, even if her name hadn’t come up either.

It was still hard to believe though.

Ross was in prison.

Bruce wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry when he read the long list of charges— there were also violations of the Accords, unauthorized use of the Raft, the list went on and on— and found out that of all the stupid things, Tony even got the bastard for massive tax fraud. Only got the asshole an extra five years, but it sure as hell resonated with the public. Human experimentation sounded awful to everyone, but the idea was a nebulous one, far removed from the daily life of an average American. But tell them about a politician stealing their hard-earned tax dollars and you had an incensed public on your hands, vying for blood and justice.

He spent two days in front of a computer in a local library, foregoing food and sleep in order to absorb every scrap of information he could find. So much happened in his absence. It was overwhelming, but he couldn’t stay ignorant any longer.

On day three, he sold everything he owned and scrounged up just enough money for a ticket back home. The first half of the long international flight was spent gathering courage and practicing, over and over, the things he wanted to say to Tony.

You were doing the right thing. I think I would’ve agree with you. I agree with you now.

You were trying to protect everyone, the way you always do.

I’m sorry I spent ten minutes of my life hating you for working with Ross. I shouldn’t have doubted you.

I’m sorry I left you alone with them.

I’m sorry I ran.
I missed you like crazy.

The second half of the flight was spent panicking because there was a good chance Tony actually hated him. Bruce left him too, so what made him any different than the rest of the Avengers who turned on Tony?

When he arrived at Newark airport, thrust back into the chaos with nothing but his half-empty backpack and the shirt on his back, Bruce also realized that he may have been an idiot who didn’t think any of this through. Did he even know how to contact Tony?

After convincing a very sweet old lady to let him borrow her Starkphone, he tried the one number he had committed to memory - one of Tony’s personal lines. There was a good chance the line was disconnected long ago and he spent a few tense seconds listening to the dial tone, but desperation turned into hope when he heard a voice on the other end.

Friday.

She sounded nothing like he remembered. That once rudimentary AI program went and became human in his absence and his heart did a strange, painful lurch. He missed out on seeing her grow up.

The AI was rightfully confused at first, but after asking Bruce a series of questions obviously designed to confirm his identity, she informed him that a vehicle was sent to pick him up. Bruce wasn’t sure who she conferred with while playing a game of twenty questions, it could’ve been Tony or Rhodes or someone else entirely, but he was glad he wasn’t rejected outright.

A mental prod from the other guy pulled Bruce out of his recollections and back into reality, where the Compound was already within sights. Whatever excitement he felt at seeing Tony was quickly overshadowed by nerves. He had no idea how this was going to go down. For all he knew, he could end the day locked up in the Hulk cage.

It was a chance he was willing to take.

The driver dropped him off at the entrance of the Compound and he was left standing there, unsure what he was supposed to do, but it didn’t take more than a minute for a woman he never met before to make her way through the doors, alone.

His first thought was that the woman, whoever she was, was attractive. His second thought was that she also very obviously military and he mentally groaned. He may have had a type, but he learned his lesson with Natasha, thank you very much.

To her benefit, the woman didn’t actually resemble the super spy all that much. Long blond hair, pulled back in an obvious hurry, a more muscular frame than Natasha, and taller too. Taller than Bruce actually, especially with those high heels she wore to match her business suit. If it weren’t for the gun at her hip, she could’ve been mistaken for a secretary or a businesswoman by anyone else, but Bruce saw military elsewhere too - in the way she carried herself, in the way her eyes scanned him as she made her way over. He spent a lifetime running away from people like just her, it was a sixth sense at this point.

Having finally crossed the distance between the entrance and where Bruce stood awkwardly with his backpack hanging limply at his side, the woman graced him with a bright smile and thrust her hand out.

“Alice Blackwood, Managing Personnel Director of the Avengers Compound,” she introduced.
herself and *darn*, her green eyes were pretty too, despite the open wariness lurking there. At least he didn’t see *fear*. “And you must be Dr. Banner of course. I’ll admit we didn’t quite expect you, but it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“It’s, uh— it’s nice to meet you too,” he took her hand in his and shook. “Sorry I couldn’t send in my— my RSVP,” he tried for a joke, but stumbled over his words instead and the Hulk just laughed at him.

_Puny Banner always awkward around pretty girl._

At least it was a good sign that the other guy didn’t perceive her as a threat.

Her answering smile was genuine enough, but there was no hiding the tense way she held herself. It was refreshing actually, that she either couldn’t or didn’t bother to hide the fact that she was guarded around him. Living around spies and never knowing what was real got exhausting quickly.

“It’s no problem. This is the Avengers Compound, we deal with the unexpected on a daily basis.”

“Is, uh— Is Tony here?”

The woman’s smile dimmed, but only a bit. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Stark is currently overseas for a Stark Industries trip. He’s not scheduled to return for a few more days, but he said he’d love to get on a call with you once you’re ready. Now, I’m sure you’ve had a long trip yourself, so let’s get you all squared away.”

Even though *squared away* could’ve just as easily meant *stick you in the Hulk cage*, he followed the woman into the building, caution be damned.

They didn’t end up in the basement. Instead, she led him to her office, modern and immaculate just like the rest of the Compound, and Bruce awkwardly settled into one of the chairs in front of her desk, holding his backpack in his lap. He felt out of place, his clothes raggedy and himself dirty from days of travel, but the woman— _Alice_— didn’t pay any attention to his less-than-stellar appearance, instead having a conversation with Friday about security protocols for him. They took a sample of his blood to confirm identity— Friday assured him the sample was incinerated as soon as tests were performed, standard procedure— and after the AI gave Alice the all-clear, the woman took her place behind the desk, typing away on her computer. He noted she kept rubbing her temples absently, likely trying to stave off an oncoming migraine.

“I apologize for all these procedures and precautions. I usually have a bit of warning whenever we have new arrivals, which gives me the chance to take care of these little details beforehand.”

“I don’t mind,” he responded honestly, knowing that his sudden arrival must have complicated her day. He was still apprehensive however, especially with Tony absent, so he tried to get to the point. “Can I ask what’s going to happen to me?”

She frowned, not taking her eyes off the screen in front of her. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“With the Accords and everything— am I allowed to even be here if I haven’t signed? I, uh— let’s just say I’ve been out of the loop for a few years and I’m not sure what I’m walking into. If you know anything about my history, you can understand how that’d make me uncomfortable.”

Some sort of understanding crossed her eyes when she glanced over at him. “Oh, I see. Well, all I’m doing right now is making sure you’re properly documented in our system for security purposes. It’s really more of a formality, you were a former Avenger after all and Friday verified that you’re not some Hydra clone, but we’re responsible for the safety of a lot of people here, so dotting all of our i’s
and crossing our t’s keeps us out of trouble. You will have guest access for the time being, so parts of
the Compound will be restricted to you, but I already received both Mr. Stark’s and Colonel Rhodes’
permission to set you up in one of the East Wing quarters.”

Bruce swallowed back the rising hope. This was a lot more welcoming than he expected. “What
about the Accords?”

“I’ll be honest, I wasn’t planning on bringing them up with you at all. The whole process is much
more complicated than a simple signature and if you’ve been out of the loop, as you said, it’ll be
important for you to familiarize yourself with the documents before making any sort of decision.”

“And what happens if I don’t sign?”

“Nothing, technically,” she shrugged and took a moment to finish her work, before turning back to
give Bruce all of her attention. Now that they were this close, he could see the heaviness under her
eyes, hidden somewhat by concealer. “But if you ever decide to go— avenging, you’ll be treated like
any other private citizen performing an act of vigilante justice. You won’t benefit from any of the
protections afforded by the Accords nor from our extensive legal team.”

“I don’t have to— register?” The word felt dirty on his tongue.

“No, you don’t. Mr. Stark was adamant in including amendments that protected superpowered
individuals from exactly that. If they choose to remain a private citizen, they have the same right to
privacy as anyone else. Of course, there are definite benefits to coming forward, we offer protection,
education, training, you name it, as well as considerable resources, legal and otherwise. That’s what
having this Compound is all about, really. And of course, the Accords are just one of many steps on
the path to becoming a full fledged Avenger.”

That made Bruce pause. “Who decides that now?”

“The senior team members, although the Accords Council has some veto power if two-thirds
disagree. A person needs a majority vote to become a standard-tier member. However, no one moves
up in rank to senior leadership positions without a unanimous vote from the entire senior team.”

“Wow, that’s— that’s different,” he couldn’t help his surprise, thinking back to Maximoff.

I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto.

Hulk not Toto. Don’t want Kansas. Want Tin Man.

Tin Man isn’t here. We have to wait.

“Sounds like I still have a lot to learn about the new— everything,” Bruce admitted and tried to
smile, although it was probably as awkward as the rest of him. “I’m sorry if I caused you any
problems with my arrival.” His hands fidgeted with the strap of his backpack. “You seem— stressed.”

It only took a moment for her professional facade to crack as she heaved an exhausted sigh.

“Let’s just say we’ve had a bit of an— eventful week. Compound swarming with politicians for the
past six days, which means extra security in place and of course no one knows how to use their
access badges properly. Which would’ve been fine, but we started this lovely week off with an
uninvited visitor. One of your former comrades actually.”

“What? Who?”
“The Widow.” The name was spit out like poison.

Bruce’s eyes widened. “Natasha was here?” His incredulous tone made him sound like an idiot, he was sure, but this was unexpected. What the hell was Natasha thinking? More importantly— “Isn’t she considered a fugitive? Is she—”

“In jail? No, unfortunately not. Mr. Stark decided to let her go,” Alice answered, the derision in her tone impossible to miss. For whatever reason, she was not a fan of Natasha. However, the distaste quickly flipped back to cheerful professionalism. “I’m sorry, I’m being rude. My opinion on the matter is entirely irrelevant. Now, your quarters are currently being set up, so while we wait, do you have any other questions for me?”

Bruce did and they spent the next however long chatting, although Alice carried most of the conversation. She gave him more details on the Accords as well as the operations of the Compound and Bruce’s mind kept cataloguing all the differences between now and before. He couldn’t help but marvel at how much had changed over the span of just one year. Leave it to Tony Stark to turn what was once a rag-tag team of superheroes—volatile, bound to explode, did explode— into a legitimate, world-wide organization ready to protect humanity.

He also found out that Alice was indeed former military (plus US Intelligence plus SHIELD - Bruce’s instincts were never wrong), and when she mentioned undercover work, her animosity for Natasha suddenly made more sense. While Bruce wasn’t much help during the SHIELD data dump (he was never much of an information systems expert), he remembered the grueling nights Tony spent getting agents to safety, as well as the days and nights that followed, Tony wrecked with guilt over the people he failed to save.

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After Alice showed Bruce to his quarters, he spent a good amount of time cleaning himself up before taking the video call with Tony. Seeing the man again— alive and well and smiling at Bruce like old times— was like a punch to the gut, guilt and regrets making him want to curl up in the corner somewhere, away from Tony’s affectionate gaze. But Tony just kept smiling, despite his obvious exhaustion (it was the middle of the night in China after all). He just kept joking and talking a mile a minute, making grand plans for them to spend time in the lab, going over all of the recent projects Bruce had missed out on. Tony was acting like Bruce had never left, like Tony was never abandoned by someone who was supposed to be his good friend. Like they could just pick up right where they left off. Bruce loved Tony for it, he really did, but somehow, it just left him feeling guiltier. Tony always forgave so easily, but did Bruce even deserve it? Shouldn’t someone be yelling at him?

The next morning, someone did.

Colonel Rhodes never disappointed.

After giving himself a brief tour of the Compound (this wing was obviously remodeled because nothing looking familiar), Bruce ran into Rhodes in the communal kitchen, right around dawn. Colonel was pressing buttons on some high-tech looking coffee maker and Bruce extended his hand as he approached.

“Rhodes, it’s good to see you again—”

The man turned around and graced Bruce with a frankly impressive glare, ignoring his hand entirely. “First, it’s ‘Colonel Rhodes’ to you. Second, just because Tony’s welcoming you back with open arms doesn’t mean I’m happy to see you here, Banner. As far as I’m concerned, you’re on the same
shit list as the rest of them.”

Oh good. *This* was the welcome Bruce expected. Thank god, because up until now, all the niceties and the forgiveness felt equal parts like a strange dream and a cruel practical joke everyone was in on except Bruce.

Still, he couldn’t help the urge to defend himself.

“I understand your animosity, Colonel, and I regret leaving, but you can’t compare me to the others. I didn’t betray Tony, I didn’t fight him in some German airport! I wouldn’t have—”

“Yeah, you would have,” Rhodes’ tone brokered no argument. “I know how you feel about Ross and if you knew that slimy bastard was involved, one of two things would’ve happened. You on the first plane outta here or you siding with good ol’ Captain America.”

Alright, so maybe the Colonel had a point. It was easy to say that he would’ve sided with Tony now, when the end results were so obvious - Ross in jail and the Accords a working, living document designed to make the world safer for both humans and superheroes. Hindsight was a gift the rest of them didn’t have.

“Fine, that’s a fair point,” he conceded, “I can’t know with complete certainty how I would’ve reacted. But what’s done is done. I wasn’t here for the Accords and this ‘Civil War’, and when I left, I wasn’t trying to hurt Tony—”

Rhodes actually *growled*. “You know, people keep telling me that, and yet, Tony still gets hurt. Weird how that works, huh? But let’s say that’s true. Maybe you didn’t go out of your way to stab him in the back. But don’t think for a second that you’re that much better. All of Tony’s generosity, everything he gave you clowns—you took and took and took some more. And then, at the first sign of things going south, fuck Tony, right? Every man for himself—”

“I was losing my mind! The witch, she—”

“Then you should’ve moved to a different goddamn state! Fuck, as if Tony wasn’t suffering! He lasted all of two months at the Compound before he had to leave too. We both had to move back to my old place and that man slept on my couch for three fucking months because he couldn’t sleep alone without waking up screaming from nightmares!”

Bruce swallowed back the guilt. He wasn’t aware Tony eventually left too. Shit. Driven out of his own Compound while the rest, including the woman who hurt Tony in the first place, just kept enjoying Tony’s money and property. Yeah, he could see why Rhodes was furious on Tony’s behalf.

The Colonel also wasn’t finished. “Tony considered you a friend. A close friend. Fuck, so close that it had me jealous. But you—” Rhodes pointed an accusatory finger at him. “What did you do? Instead finding some *sensible* solution, you had to fuck off to god-knows-where, leaving Tony behind to deal with Sokovia, to deal with the Ultron fallout, to deal with every one of those fuckers blaming him for something that you had just as much involvement in! They treated him like some villain, as if Tony wanted to destroy the world!”

Bruce sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to remain calm. The other guy didn’t see Rhodes as a threat— *Bruce would’ve never come back if he couldn’t handle getting yelled at*— but hearing how the others treated Tony was making both him and the Hulk a little— angry. That anger, mixed with Bruce’s own guilt, didn’t make for a tranquil state of mind.
“They shouldn’t have blamed Tony. There were a lot of factors that contributed to Ultron being born, but Tony—he never had any malicious intent. Ultron was meant to be a system to protect the world. Hell, I agreed with Tony’s intentions, I was helping him with it—”

“Yeah, I know all that. Preaching to the fuckin’ choir. But the others didn’t care. They were so adamant in their ‘Tony let a monster robot loose on the world’ bullshit that they had Tony believing it at the end! Why do you think he was so gun-ho about the Accords? He was atoning. Again, again, and again - for shit that was never his fault! He was—”

Rhodes stopped himself, nostrils flaring and chest heaving, but he took one deep breath, obviously trying to hold himself back. Maybe he finally realized he was yelling at the Hulk in the middle of the kitchen. Either way, Bruce had to hand it to Rhodes. The man had some serious balls and despite being on the receiving end of the man’s ire, Bruce was actually glad that Rhodes was here now. There was no doubt that Tony was better off for having this man actively involved in his life again.

“I can’t change what happened, Colonel. We all made mistakes when it comes to Tony, yourself included—” Rhodes’ glare intensified, but Bruce ignored it. “I don’t expect you to trust me. Hell, I’m glad you care enough about Tony to have this conversation with me. Don’t trust me. But at least give me a chance. I don’t want to run. Not again.”

Rhodes didn’t say anything for a few beats, choosing instead to scrutinize Bruce with dark, narrowed eyes. Finally, he shrugged and turned back to the coffee machine, which had a full pot by now. “Well, you might get that chance sooner rather than later. I take it you know about the pardons coming down the pipeline?”

“I know enough.”

“Then you know the rest will be back here, including the witch. Now, I’m going to do my goddamn best to keep those assholes away from here. Away from Tony. But this is the Avengers HQ, so running into them will be unavoidable. Worst case scenario, some of them will end up living in the West Wing, probably because most of their asses are broke and have nowhere to go and the Washington suits will force us to play gracious fuckin’ hosts. So, just think about it. Are you ready to deal with all of that? Because I sure as hell don’t need you here if you’re just going to take off again when something doesn’t go your way.”

Bruce had to bite back a bitter remark - him going insane from Maximoff’s magic was a bit more than something not going his way. He understood what the Colonel was trying to say though. Tony didn’t need a friend who kept running out on him.

“I know words and promises won’t mean a thing to you, so I won’t bother. I’ll just let my actions speak instead and we’ll see if I can prove you wrong, Colonel.”

The man let out a sigh, some of his tension draining away when he took his first sip of the coffee. The steel in his gaze remained however. “For Tony’s sake, I hope to hell you prove me wrong, Banner.”

***

Bucky was in the middle of writing out the scattered details of another hazy memory— good one this time, the warmth of his grandmother’s kitchen and the sweet smell of baked bread— when his Starkphone let out a quiet ping.

Given that it was just shy of six o’clock in the morning, that couldn’t have been either of the boys (neither Harley nor Peter would wake up this early on a weekend even if the world were on fire), so
that left his wayward engineer.

Bucky smiled when Tony’s name on the screen confirmed that.

*omg, i hate these people. i hate schmoozing. i need the winter soldier to kidnap me asap. extraction protocol activate!!!*

Bucky was torn between amusement at Tony’s whining and sympathy. The poor man had been stuck in Beijing for two days now and apparently the situation with the Chinese businessman has gone from bad to worse to slightly better.

As he was typing away his response, Bucky left the desk and his notebook behind, instead letting himself fall back onto the much more comfortable bed (even if being in said bed made him miss Tony just that much more).

**Sorry, the Winter Soldier has his therapy session in two hours. Rain check?**

It was obvious Tony wasn’t paying attention to whatever late-night soiree he was attending with their business partners because his reply followed seconds later.

*UGH, why do i even bother keeping you around if you're not up for a simple kidnapping?*

**It’s all the food, the back rubs, and the perfect way I make your coffee, remember?**

*shit, you're right. you're lucky you're so damn amazing at everything*

*better not be making coffee for anyone else while i’m gone*

Bucky knew he was giving his phone a sappy smile, but he couldn’t help it. It felt *so good* to have Tony finally reciprocate these affectionate words and gestures. He really didn’t mind when Tony shied away from them before, when it was just Bucky reaching out and testing the waters, but Tony actually flirting back? It was *heaven*.

Maybe he should sent Natalia and the Soldier gift baskets for acting as catalysts for all of this. While he didn’t know— *didn’t care*— what Natalia liked, the Soldier was easy to please. Dead Hydra agents or Tony.

*Dead Hydra agents and Tony.*

Bucky rolled his eyes at the demanding bastard, but then frowned a second later. Did this count as rolling his eyes at himself? He didn’t want to know the answer to that, so he focused back on his conversation with Tony.

*I only make coffee for handsome engineers with pretty brown eyes. Haven’t seen mine around lately though.*

A minute passed and Bucky bit his lip. Was that too much? It was so hard finding that balance with Tony, with everything between them still in some sort of limbo. Thankfully, Tony’s next message came through before Bucky had too much time to overthink his words.

*damn it, james, now the guy across from me thinks i was smiling like a sap at HIM*

*you are a hazard to my reputation*

**Sorry, honey.**
He wasn’t sorry at all. Still smiling, he reread Tony’s words, running his thumb absently across the glass screen, wishing he could be touching Tony instead. There was a benefit to the text messages though. Tony seemed far more comfortable with their flirting in electronic form and Bucky was going to savor every last bit of it.

menace

but seriously, i’m going crazy over here. didn’t realize i’d miss home this much. hope to be back in a few days though

oh yeah, did you meet bruce yet??

**Haven’t seen him around yet. Been busy myself. I’ll be sure to say hi soon.**

you’re gonna love him. brucie bear is awesome.

Personally, Bucky thought the number of little red hearts Tony added after Banner’s name was excessive, but he didn’t comment on it.

you guys are gonna get along like a house on fire, haha. he loves to cook too AND you both have angry alter egos!!

**Tony, ‘angry alter egos’ is not something people should bond over.**

well then you guys can meditate and do yoga together, idk. whatever it is bruce does.

i CANT WAIT until i get that man back into my lab tho. so much SCIENCE to catch up on

Okay, so maybe Bucky was pouting just a little bit at that message and he knew he had no right to be jealous, but in his defense, this was Tony Stark he was talking about. Anyone would get a little bit possessive (or in the Soldier’s case, a lot possessive) when all of the sudden all these old flames resurfaced in the span of one week.

First Ms. Potts—Pepper, she asked him to call her Pepper— with her surprise visit. She and Tony apparently reconciled and Bucky was genuinely happy for them both, he really was. There was no denying that Tony was over the moon about having Pepper back in his life and he absolutely deserved to have another person in his corner. But Tony and Pepper had a history and what if their reconciliation led to something that rekindled that history? What if Pepper decided to win Tony’s heart back?

And then there was Banner showing up out of nowhere!

That man was a bit of a wildcard. Every time Tony spoke of him in the past, it was with undeniable fondness. There was a pretty close friendship there, at least before Banner took off, but was there ever anything more?

How was Bucky supposed to compete with a successful CEO (who also happened to be the woman Tony nearly married) and a brilliant Avenger who could challenge Tony intellectually in all things science?

The Soldier interrupted his moment of self-pity with a very blunt *Stop thinking about it and make him yours already*, but Bucky just tried to ignore him. Jesus, no concept of romance with that guy.

Before he could respond to Tony’s last message, his phone pinged again.
so i thought i’d have to defend pepper’s honor on this trip, but NOPE. the CEO keeps leering at me and he keeps making these dirty jokes, but passes them off as a language barrier thing.

he speaks fluent english!!

god, i hope i was never this slimy. i had class when i flirted!

Instead of pouting, Bucky was outright glaring at the phone now. Even in China Tony wasn’t safe from would-be admirers? Maybe Bucky spoke too soon about that “extraction protocol”. He could skip therapy for a worthy cause.

uuuuuuugh, he’s sitting right next to me and he’s trying to play footsie. FML

OMG, his hand is brushing up against my thigh

Bucky typed out the first thing that came to his mind.

KILL HIM

Realizing this was probably in bad taste, given who he was, he hedged it with his next message.

Okay, maybe not ‘kill’, but definitely break his arm off.

But this was Tony, wasn’t it? Tony was the one person who didn’t mind Bucky’s occasional nonchalant comments (it took him a while to come to terms with it, but strangely, making jokes about his past actually helped him cope with it better).

Never mind, changed my mind. Kill him or I will.

Tony didn’t send another message for three long minutes which Bucky spent simultaneously panicking about going too far and mapping out the best way to get to Beijing undetected. Thankfully the ping of his phone stopped his mental inventorying of how many weapons he could carry on his person.

sorry, read your message, burst out laughing, started choking on my drink. good news, he’s not bugging me anymore. bad news, pepper is now glaring. i gotta get off the phone

we’ll video chat tomorrow

tell fatima i said hi

Will do. Try to get some sleep tonight, okay?

I miss you, Tony.

The next message came a few minutes later.

miss you too, james

Chapter End Notes

It goes without saying that this is not Thor: Ragnarok compliant. My Bruce was just
chilling in India the entire time, but now he's back! \o/ Dunno how you guys feel about him, but I have a soft spot for Science Bros, so he gets a chance to join the party.

I know winteriron had to take a backseat here, but I'm trying to get all of Team Tony in one place. Plus, you guys got a little bit of Tony/Bucky fluff. ;D Honestly, that text exchange was one of my fav things to write so far. These idiots are so in love. ;__;

Also forgot how much I love Rhodey yelling at people. <3

See you on Saturday!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Hello, friends~ We are back!

I'm glad everyone enjoyed Bruce's return last time, it was a long time coming! Onto the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the jarring experience of being back in the chaotic whirlwind of civilization, Bruce had to admit that the sheer abundance and variety of everything was hard to complain about. Given that the Compound was the residence of one Tony Stark, futurist and self-proclaimed hedonist, this place was a perfect example of that.

The impressive rainbow-colored collection of tea—some of the most expensive brands in the world, all ethically traded—drew an actual smile out of Bruce when he came back down to the kitchen, hours after his conversation with Rhodes, and he didn’t waste any time heating up the electric kettle, while browsing through the news articles on his brand new Starkpad. He remembered Alice laughing when she gave him the tablet, saying that she was giving these away like candy and he wasn’t sure what she meant, but her eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled and all he could focus on was the warmth that blossomed in his chest in turn.

Electricity, the internet, and people actually smiling around him. He missed all these things too.

He was about half-way through his cup—chai with blackberry and cinnamon—when someone else joined him, proving Bruce’s long-standing theory that the Avengers of all creed always ended up congregating in the kitchen.

The man stopped short when Bruce came into his line of sight and it took Bruce a moment to recognize him. After all, he had only seen the few pictures Steve managed to find from the forties, but the metal arm really should’ve been a dead giveaway.

Barnes.

There was a moment of silence between them, giving Bruce the opportunity to note that Barnes seemed on edge, what with the nervous tension evident his movements and the way he kept clenching his fist—the flesh one—in agitation.

“You’re Banner, right?” the other man spoke first, voice deep and rough, the strain behind it making Bruce watch him even more carefully. He had no idea what to expect from the man. Both Alice and Tony told him he wasn’t a safety risk, only here to get help—and boy, was it a surprise to find out Barnes was living here—but tortured POW or not, Bruce had no reason to trust him just yet. This was a master assassin after all, with several dozen confirmed kills and who knew how many others.

The Hulk only gave a low, annoyed grumble at the other man’s presence, so apparently the jury was still out on whether Barnes posed an actual threat.

“I’m Dr. Banner, yes. And you are Bucky Barnes, I take it?”
“That’s what they call me,” Barnes inclined his head and cleared his throat. “It’s nice to, uh— to meet you.” There was a moment where Bruce was positive Barnes would run in the other direction, but instead, the man mumbled out a strained sorry and hurried past Bruce over to the refrigerator. Or freezer to be exact. Bruce followed him with his eyes, not moving from his spot at the table, and the tense, uneasy behavior of the ex-assassin spurred Bruce’s imagination, giving him a bizarre mental image of the man pulling out some semi-automatic weapon out of the freezer and trying to shoot Bruce.

Best of luck to him there.

However, when Barnes shut the door and turned around, there was no weapon. Instead, there was a pint of strawberry ice cream, which he opened with one shaking hand and went to the other side of the kitchen to grab a spoon from the utensils drawer. The first spoonful drew an actual sigh of relief out of Barnes as he leaned his hip against the counter and proceeded to indulge in the dessert.

Bruce watched the whole thing with something akin to confused fascination. The infamous Winter Soldier was in the kitchen to get some ice cream?

“You, uh— you alright?” he couldn’t help but ask, pushing his glasses up in a nervous gesture of his own.

Barnes looked back up at him, almost startled, as if he had forgotten Bruce was even there, and if Bruce didn’t know any better, the man looked embarrassed. Could assassins even feel embarrassment?

“I’m alright, yeah.” The man found his ice cream more fascinating than Bruce as he scraped at it absently with the spoon. “I just, uh— just had one of my therapy sessions, that’s all.”

Oh. Well, now Bruce felt a little bad about his earlier assumptions. He didn’t know the horrid details of what Barnes went through, but he knew enough. It was Hydra after all, who were collectively even more cruel and sadistic than Ross and his lackeys were. Therapy in any form must have been hell.

Honestly, good for Barnes. Every single one of the Avengers, Bruce included, probably needed years of therapy, but they were all too stubborn and distrustful to ever get that kind of help.

“I see. Do you need me to leave?”

He was about to get out of his seat, take his news and tea back to his quarters, but Barnes stopped him.

“Nah, s’alright. The kitchen’s for everyone. I just need to— settle my nerves a bit.” He raised the ice cream in his hand, the gesture almost sheepish. “Sugar usually helps a bit after my BARF sessions—”

“Wait. Your what sessions?”

That drew an actual smile— small, but real— out of Barnes and it was fascinating to watch the man’s face transform into something softer, younger. It was also suddenly easier to think of him as a recovering victim rather than a killer and Bruce wondered what Barnes looked like happy, with a full, carefree grin.

“B-A-R-F. Binarily Augmented Retro Framing.”

“Oh. Oh, wait, I remember that.” It took a second, but it was all coming back to Bruce. “Wow, Tony
“actually got that to work? It was only an idea back when I was still here.”

“Works well enough to fix my broken head.”

“Fascinating. So Tony was able to resolve the neuron connectivity issue with the hippocampus, huh? Oh, he was working on the prefrontal cortex too, wasn’t he, after that new research on memory retention came out? How did he manage to perform the actual memory extraction though? He must have found a way to separately map out every neural pathway— and the holographic integration with the memories must be eons ahead of what I saw last—”

The flood of words stopped and it was Bruce’s turn to flush with embarrassment when he realized he had gotten carried away. Barnes was watching him with a raised eyebrow, but there was amusement coloring his features.

“You sound a lot like Tony,” he remarked with a huff of laughter, his tone the warmest it had been since the conversation began, “I can see why you two get along.”

“Sorry about that. Tony always finds the most fascinating projects to work on, I can’t help but get excited.”

“S’okay, I don’t mind,” Barnes shrugged and stuck another spoonful of ice cream into his mouth. At this rate, he’d be done with the pint in no time and surprisingly, the sugar seemed to be working. Already Barnes looked more at ease. “Every other word out of Tony’s mouth is about science, you get used to it pretty quickly. Just don’t expect me to answer most of those questions. I know the general idea behind it and Tony loves to explain the nitty-gritty of all of his projects to me, but I’m not a genius like him. Most of it goes over my head.”

“Don’t feel bad, half the things Tony says go over my head too. And I have several doctorates. That’s just the way Tony is,” Bruce added and watched as something in Barnes’ eyes softened even further, his lips pulling apart into a fond smile.

Bruce was still putting the puzzle pieces together, but Barnes and Tony were certainly not enemies anymore. Not even reluctant allies. They were on first name basis, Tony’s eyes practically lit up when he mention Barnes to Bruce during that first video call and Barnes’ entire demeanor changed when they began talking about Tony.

Bruce had some theories, but there was still more data to be gathered. He was a scientist after all.

“I am sorry though, I didn’t mean to pry. I’ll save the rest of my curiosity for Tony.”

“He’ll enjoy that, I’m sure. Been telling me non-stop about dragging you down to the lab as soon as he gets back.”

“I think he just misses my documentation skills. I was always the one who got stuck writing everything down while he got to play with chemicals and explosives.” His own expression grew fonder. “Does Tony still practically live down at the lab?”

Barnes hummed his agreement around the ice cream. “Pretty much. It’s either the lab or the garage or the kitchen with him.”

“Sounds like things haven’t changed a bit.” It wasn’t exactly true, but there was a certain comfort in seeing these glimpses of their past lives. The good ones, at least. “So, how long has the Compound been home to you?”

“About four month, give or take. What about you, you planning to stick around or is this just a
“I’d like to stay long-term,” Bruce said, wanting—hoping—his words would hold true.

“Good. I’m sure Tony will appreciate that. It’s obvious he’s been missing you. You two, uh— you were close? Tony can’t seem to say enough nice things about you.”

Bruce was hoping his blush wasn’t visible. He still found it overwhelming that Tony hadn’t given up after all this time, that he spoke of him with affection, rather than derision. “We bonded after the Battle of New York. Found we had a lot in common. And let me tell you, Tony sure knows how to seduce a man with half a dozen floors of R&D space.”

“The two of you were together then?”

Of course Barnes had to ask that just as Bruce took a sip of his tea, forcing it to go down the wrong way.

“Oh no, no,” he hurried to assure once he was able to breathe around his undignified coughing fit, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply anything. Purely platonic science love affair between us, I promise. Don’t get me wrong,” he knew he was babbling, but this wasn’t the first time someone assumed there was a thing between him and Tony and he still didn’t know how to handle it gracefully. It never helped that Tony was always so tactile with Bruce, bless the engineer’s well-intentioned heart. “Tony is a great guy. Great-looking guy, even, but I’m, uh— completely straight. I mean, if guys like Tony Stark or Captain America don’t do it for you, you must be straight, right?”

Barnes was obviously holding back his smile. “Sure, that sounds like a good theory, Doc.”

The Winter Soldier, trying not to laugh at Bruce making an idiot of himself. Fantastic.

You suck at first impressions, Banner.

“Anyways,” Barnes stopped to throw the empty ice cream container in the trash, putting Bruce out of his misery, “I should probably get out of your hair. It was good finally meeting ya though. I’m sure we’ll see plenty more of each other.”

“Likewise.”

Barnes crossed the kitchen to leave, but before entering the hallway, he turned back around.

“Oh, just one more thing. Tony—like I said, he seems real happy that you’re here. And that’s great, he deserves that more than anyone. So, let’s keep it that way, yeah? Because as long as Tony stays happy, you and I won’t ever have a problem.”

The smile Barnes gave him then—sharp, dangerous, lethal—was nothing like those earlier shy smiles and it sent shivers down Bruce’s spine. Barnes disappeared around the corner without another word, but Bruce could still feel the unspoken threat lingering in the air.

Huh. So he did get to meet the real Winter Soldier after all.

Metal Arm threaten Puny Banner.

Ah, there was the Hulk. Was he napping this whole time or something?

Pretty sure he was just telling us not to hurt Tony.

Hulk like Metal Arm. Had good point. No hurting Tin Man.
Wasn’t planning on it, pal.

The Hulk grumbled something incomprehensible in return and let Bruce get back to his tea.

Thinking about it, Bruce shouldn’t have even been surprised. He didn’t expect the former assassin to threaten him on Tony’s behalf, but Tony befriended the Hulk. It’d only make sense that he would somehow befriend the Winter Soldier too.

Tony’s Home for Wayward Killers, that was a more appropriate term for this place. Bruce shook his head as he took another sip of his now cooled drink. The Avengers life was downright bizarre sometimes, but he had to admit he kind of missed it.

***

Sprawled across his bed, Bucky blinked up at the ceiling in his room for a few moments and then let out a snort.

Oh god. Did he really just threaten the Hulk?

Well, more accurately, the Soldier threatened the Hulk, while Bucky kept trying—and failing—to reason with him.

Keeping all of our limbs intact is beneficial for both of us, idiot!

Bucky appreciated the sentiment, really—this was about Tony’s happiness, after all—but he’d also seen videos of the Hulk. The Winter Soldier may have been an impressive force in his own right, but even he would come up short when going head-to-head with a green wall of rage and muscle that could probably chew through Bucky’s vibranium arm.

But at least he now had confirmation that Banner wasn’t going to be a threat to Bucky’s and Tony’s growing romance. Bucky would take his victories where he could.

Despite the elation prompted by that revelation, both him and the Soldier were still far too restless and Bucky attempted one deep breath to push the darkness back before they made any more questionable decisions together, but the memories from the BARF session still clung to his mind and the roiling anger refused to subside.

The Soldier was always dragged to the surface after BARF, but usually Bucky would seek out Tony, who long ago rearranged his schedule to make sure he was available after therapy as often as possible. Tony’s presence, his voice and gentle touch, those smiles and the simple words of reassurance… The Hydra handlers would’ve been so damn jealous of how effortless it was for clever Tony Stark to subdue the infamous Winter Soldier.

Bucky sometimes wondered whether Tony was aware of the extent to which he had power over him now. Every part of him. For all of Bucky’s physical strength and extensive training, Tony Stark could break him with ease, there was no use denying that now. He could shatter Bucky with nothing more than a hateful look or a carefully chosen word.

That sort of vulnerability should’ve been terrifying. After all, Tony was a man who was neither perfect, nor righteous, nor always kind, but if there were one thing Bucky knew as truth, it was that Tony Stark was inherently good. It was that steadfast sense of goodness that guided this man to be better, to keep trying, despite having every reason (and every capability) to burn the whole damn world down.

If Tony Stark ever decided to give villainy a try, he would have the whole world under his thumb
within a day and the rest of them wouldn’t even know it unless he wished it so. But Tony was good — so, so good— and Bucky trusted the clever, strong hands that held his heart and after spending a lifetime in a pit full of vipers, it felt incredible to have this simple ability to trust again.

So it was usually Tony’s everything that carried Bucky back to reality, but with the thousands of miles currently separating them, he had to resort to less effective methods of replacing that sense of violation and grief— and anger, always so much anger— with some basic pleasure. And while the ice cream was sweet and filling and even the conversation with Banner was decent, none of it was enough—

*God,* he wanted Tony. Just Tony.

He rolled over on his side so he could reach for his phone, which he left on the nightstand before heading over to his session with Dr. Vance. It must’ve been past two in the morning in Beijing now, so Tony should’ve been asleep, but maybe looking through their earlier messages would help.

To his surprise, he found more than a dozen messages from Tony when the screen lit up. He must have sent these while Bucky was in his session.

He made himself more comfortable, snuggling deeper into the pillows, and began to scroll through the messages.

*i’m free! finally! jesus, that was a long night of pointless ass kissing*

*thankfully, i think we’re rehashing the contract tomorrow, which means pep and i get to go home in a day or two*

*i want my coffee, my lab, and my super soldier*

*preferably all at once*

God, it was *this* easy for Tony to make his heart sing. Just a few simple words. There was no doubt that if— when— Tony started saying these things in person, it would be Bucky’s turn to be flustered and weak in the knees.

*My super soldier.* Bucky bit his lip, trying and failing to keep a sappy smile off his face, reveling in that small hint of possessiveness. Damn straight he was Tony’s super soldier.

The next batch of messages was sent a few minutes after the first.

*ah crap, that’s right, you’re with fatima right now*

*and here i thought you were ignoring me*

*but that’s impossible. i’m tony stark*

Of course there was a smiling face with the sunglasses at the end of that last message. Tony was worse than the boys when it came to using these little “emoticons” and Bucky kept having to learn the meaning of new acronyms every day. He also wondered what exactly the man had against capital letters.

*heading to the hotel room right now. nice place, pepper picked it*

*the whole city is nice actually. wish i had the chance to see more of it. visit for pleasure instead of business, you know?*
maybe we need a vacation

scratch that

we definitely need a vacation

what’s a better way to celebrate being triggers-free than getting the hell out of dodge for a while?

well, i can think of a dozen better ways, if you know what i mean

wait, is that too forward?

shit. that’s too forward

Friday, erase the last three messages!

[Sorry, Boss, I don’t have administrator access to Mr. Barnes’ mobile device.]

Fri, you have access to everything!

[Privacy protocols you set up yourself. Nothing I can do, Boss.]

betrayed by my own tech

where did i go wrong?

where did they all learn to be so stubborn?

oh, that’s right

from me

shit

just

just ignore everything i say

i haven’t actually slept in like 30 hours. i can’t be held accountable for things!

Bucky was outright grinning now. The sleep-deprived version of Tony’s flirting was bolder and his ramblings that much more entertaining. Not to mention, Tony being forward should absolutely be encouraged, in Bucky’s honest opinion.

but umm…

seriously, anywhere you want to visit?

maybe somewhere warm with a nice beach. i can enjoy a fruity drink in the sand while you go splash around in the water. your arm is waterproof, btw!!

have you ever even been to the ocean?

because if not, we need to rectify that STAT

oh, btw, wanna see my fancy penthouse suite?
The next message was a video and that confirmed Bucky’s earlier suspicion. Tony knew Bucky would see all of these right after therapy, so the long, rambling string of messages and now the video? It had to be his way of helping Bucky through the after-effects of the BARF memories. Even this far away, Tony was still taking care of him.

God, he loved this man so much. He still didn’t believe he deserved any of this, all this care and affection and love, but they’d have to pry it from his cold, dead hands. He was never letting this go.

When he pressed play, the video expanded to take over the entire screen and a beautiful suite came into view, the camera a bit shaky as Tony walked and spun around to let the camera take in the entire room.

“Hi, James! Fancy place, huh? Bet you’re jealous!” Tony’s voice came through the speakers and something eased deep within Bucky’s chest, both him and the Soldier drawn in by that deep, familiar timbre. “Pepper is staying in a nicer suite, if you can believe it.”

The camera panned across a set of floor-to-ceiling windows, with glittering lights of the city bright against the night sky. “That is my awesome view. Still can’t beat the penthouse in New York though. I need to take you up there sometimes.” There was an almost drunk-like quality to Tony’s tired voice and if Bucky didn’t know any better, he’d suspect Tony knocked back a few drinks at that business gathering, but he’d seen a sleep-deprived Tony more times than he could count by now.

A large bed, covered in beautiful burgundy linens, appeared on the screen. “And that’s where I will spend the night tossing and turning because I hate sleeping in hotels.”

The view flipped and suddenly Tony’s face came into view, although he was too close to the camera.

“Whoops, that’s not attractive at all,” Tony laughed and pulled the camera back so that it captured all of him from the waist up. “Note to self, front-facing camera, not a flattering angle. Hmm, another note to self, design an even better front-facing camera.”

Contrary to Tony’s self-deprecating words, the view was just fine. The man was clad in a perfectly tailored suit, bright red tie against a white shirt, and even the exhaustion behind his eyes couldn’t take away from how gorgeous he looked. Bucky greedily drank in every detail.

Tony sat down on the bed, but then the video turned into a shaking mess of images until finally everything stopped and the view settled on one half of the bed. Tony, who was nowhere to be seen at the moment, must have propped the phone up on the opposite side.

“Gimme just one sec!” he could hear Tony’s voice in the distance and after a little bit of wait, the man reappeared, all but collapsing onto the bed. His arms went around one of the pillows, pulling it close to his chest as he curled in around it. Bucky could only see him from the waist up, but Tony’s suit was gone, leaving him in a thin white undershirt.

Oh god, was Tony undressing just then?

Bucky’s mind promptly supplied him with several tempting images, mostly of Bucky peeling Tony out of that suit himself, but he pushed all that away for the moment so he could focus on the video instead.

Tony snuggled deeper into the pillows around him. “Jesus, what a long day… Thankfully, Pepper is the biggest badass out there and handled all the business details like a pro.” He let out a big yawn.
“Really, I was just here to charm everyone and look pretty. But uh— yeah, I just wanted to say hi—or goodnight— or good morning? What time is it over there? Doesn’t matter. Umm… I know you usually hang out with me after therapy, but I’m here and you’re there and I’m not sure if this is helping at all, but I just thought I’d ramble at you… and if the Soldier’s giving you hell right now, tell him I said to behave.” Tony tried to give the camera a stern glare, but the sleepy smile ruined the intended effect. “Anyways, hope you’re doing okay. Make sure to eat and don’t sulk in your room by yourself… Take care of yourself, okay?” he added in a low mumble, his eyes blinking slower and slower.

*Just go to sleep, sweetheart, I’m fine,* Bucky thought, wishing more than anything that he could reach out and run his hand through Tony’s hair to help the man fall asleep. Why couldn’t Tony just be *here,* right next to him, so Bucky could draw him into his arms and feel the man’s breath settle into that slow, comforting rhythm of deep sleep against his own chest?

“All right, well, I’m actually about to pass out, so I hope I haven’t said any more questionable things, I’m already gonna have to spend tomorrow morning trying to convince Friday to destroy the evidence.” There was a huff of laughter and Tony half-hid his face in the pillow. “And I was serious about the beach too, you know… We should go… Anywhere you want, James…”

Tony seemed to hesitate, as if wanting to say something else, but then all he did was reach out for his phone and the video ended. That was the last message and Bucky spent the next few minutes looking at the darkened screen, gathering all his scattered thoughts in order to figure out what he really wanted.

It wasn’t all that difficult. He knew what he wanted. As soon as Tony came back— *no,* as soon as that man stepped out of his Iron Man suit, Bucky was dragging him away, sitting him down for a very mature, adult conversation about *feelings* and *intentions,* and then he wasn’t going to let that man out of his sight (or his bed) for the foreseeable future.

For once, the Soldier and he were on the exact same page and he let himself picture every little detail of how it would all go.

How it would feel to hear Tony call out his name in elation, to sweep his wayward engineer into a tight hug and finally have the man close again. Anticipation, joy, and relief all swirling within them both, a restless but heady energy.

Bucky imagined tracing his thumbs over the planes of Tony’s cheeks, sweeping over the shadows underneath those brown eyes that would look up at him with affection. He knew Tony would be tired, between the jet lag and the terrible sleeping hours he must’ve kept in Beijing, but no matter. He would finally be home and Bucky would be there to take care of him.

“You look tired, sweetheart,” he stated the obvious, smiling indulgently when Tony rolled his eyes. “*International trips full of idiots will do that to you.*” Tony said and then crinkled his nose in disgust. “I need a shower.”

Bucky refrained from making a comment about joining him and instead began to pull Tony along toward the living quarters.

“A quick wash will definitely make you feel better. Are you hungry?”

“Ugh, no, flights like that always make me nauseous.”

“How about I get you some fruit? That might help settle your stomach. Tea maybe?”
That earned him a glare. “The first thing I’m drinking after I’m back is not going be tea, James. I’m gonna lose my coffee privileges.”

“Of course, what was I thinking? Silly me. But coffee can wait—”

“Blasphemer.”

“—you need rest, not caffeine, honey.”

Tony was still glaring, but with a grumble, he accepted his fate and headed off to his own quarters while Bucky made himself busy in the kitchen.

Of course Tony would collapse in bed—Bucky’s bed—right after the shower, as exhausted as he would be, and Bucky could almost feel Tony’s hair, soft as silk, and still slightly damp, beneath his fingers.

“If you keep doing that, you’re gonna make me fall asleep, you know,” Tony finally said after a few minutes of Bucky’s ministrations, but when Bucky pulled away, the petulant notes in the man’s tone made a comeback. “No, that wasn’t me saying ‘stop’!”

“You need to eat something and then you can sleep,” Bucky countered and reached over to grab the bowl of fruit. “Look, there are even blueberries and raspberries in here!”

Tony was attempting to glare at Bucky, but the twitch of his lips betrayed him.

“You sure know how to woo a guy, don’t you?”

“If this is all it takes, I should be the one judging you.”

The glare intensified and Bucky’s unabashed grin gave Tony just enough willpower to sit back up, scooting up to be within reaching distance of the bowl.

Bucky would let the man enjoy the food while they traded jokes back and forth, laughter and levity so natural between them now. But Bucky was a man with a mission.

“Listen, Tony… I know you just came back, but I—I don’t want to put this off any longer. I just want us to talk. About us.”

Tony’s shoulders slumped a bit. “You know I’m not very good at this kind of talking.”

Neither was he, but Bucky was determined. “Then I’ll do the talking. And I’ll make it simple.” He reached out and took Tony’s right hand into his own. For a few moments, he let his fingers trace unhurried lines across that soft skin. The power of creation in the palm of that hand. Clever and beautiful, like the rest of him.

“I’m in love with you, Tony.”

Just a few words, but they had the power to change his whole world. And wasn’t that the story of his life?

“You’re amazing, Tony. Brilliant and kind and selfless. You always see the best in people and you care so deeply, even if for those who don’t deserve it. You’re—you’re incredible and I can’t stop thinking about you. I feel like I’ve waited my whole life for you. I know we haven’t known each other for very long and the history we do share is one I never thought we’d overcome. But I’d like to believe that we did. Even then, I’m willing to spend the rest of my life making up for it. Anything you
want. Everything I have, it’s yours, Tony, and I just—I want to make you happy and take care of you and—"

*The rest of his hurried, stumbling confession was swallowed up by Tony’s lips on his.*

Magic and fireworks and *perfect* in every way. The way Tony would taste, hint of sweet raspberries on his lips. That familiar spicy smell of Tony’s shampoo and the way Tony would feel pressed up against him. Bucky could even imagine the near-silent, needy moan that Tony would let out as he drew closer still.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to do that,” Tony’s words came out breathless when he pulled away, but they were laced with the joy that reflected in that gorgeous smile. “Everything you said, all of that— me, uh— me too, James.”

Bucky bit his lip, taken in by the beautiful blush that graced Tony’s cheeks and the man’s own, far less eloquent confession.

“*Tony Stark, at a loss for words,*” Bucky couldn’t help himself. “*Who would have thought?*”

As expected, Tony’s own expression turned mischievous. “*Just shut up and kiss me again.*”

*That was all the prompting Bucky needed to find Tony’s lips with his own once more.*

It was so easy to let himself indulge in that sort of fantasy. He must have done this a million times already, the many ways he imagined himself saying those words— *I’m in love with you*— and the perfect moment, the *perfect kiss* they would share as a result. And now, this felt possible. *Real.* They were so close to making that dream a reality.

His mind went back to those lips against his, which quickly turned into a more frenzied, passionate kiss as their hands roamed and explored, pulling and tugging at each other’s clothes, desperate to remove the barriers between them. The way Bucky would lower Tony back down to the bed, leaning over him to take in the gorgeous man before him. The way he would map out every inch of that body, soothe every scar with his lips until Tony was incoherent with need.

With the Soldier still so close to the surface, the direction his fantasy inevitably took came as no surprise, but for once, he let the Soldier stay to fully indulge in the images of Tony, pliant and willing beneath him.

He was about to ask Friday to initiate a privacy protocol so that he could work off the remaining tension in a more pleasurable way than wailing on a punching bag, but in that same moment, the AI’s voice cut through the quiet of his room, forcing a startled noise out of Bucky that he didn’t realize he was even capable of making.

“*Mr. Barnes?*”

He hesitated, wondering if Tony actually went and made Friday clairvoyant. Did she know he was about to call for her?

“…*Yes?*” was his hesitant reply.

“*There is a message for you.*”

*Oh. “From Tony?*”

“No. Boss is— *thankfully*— asleep for the moment. The message is actually from King T’Challa.”
Bucky let out a low groan, not bothering to hide his frustration. So much for working off that tense, angry energy. *For fuck’s sake.* Did the world not want him to have one moment of pleasure?

Friday didn’t comment on his noise of despair and continued. “He wanted to let you know that the Widow has recently arrived in Wakanda. She’s waiting for your call. I was to inform you that she was alone.”

The vitriol in Friday’s voice was downright impressive and Bucky wasn’t sure whether she picked that up from Alice, Rhodes, or whether this was her own feelings coming through loud and clear.

Damn it. Natalia couldn’t have been a picked a worse time. Was he really in the right frame of mind to be dealing with this? The Soldier still had far too much sway over his emotions and he remembered how *amused* the Soldier was to have the Black Widow at his mercy. There was a certain cruelty to his actions, even if the intentions of protecting his home, *his Tony* could be seen as justified.

Bucky may have been furious with Natalia, but he didn’t want to be *cruel.* He needed to be better. For Tony, if not for himself, which meant keeping a tight leash on the Soldier— on himself— and make an honest attempt at a civil conversation.

Reluctantly, he pushed himself up and off the bed, looking up to the heavens with a weary sigh. The most *responsible* thing would be to go down to the gym and test out Tony’s new and improved punching bags that the engineer claimed were indestructible, but he needed to speak with the woman (and potentially with the others). Putting this off meant giving them all more time to do something reckless and stupid. *Civil conversation, it is then.*

However, if any of the disgraced heroes in Wakanda decided to say something particularly pigheaded, if they dared spit their own cruel words in Tony’s direction, he’d let the Soldier out to play in an instant. There was a limit to his patience and mercy.

“Thank you for letting me know, Friday. Could you put me through to the villa’s private line, please?”

The television screen on the wall lit up and although it took several long moments, Natalia’s image finally appeared before him.

It didn’t take a trained assassin to see that she was miserable. Dark shadows under her eyes, the tension in her furrowed brows, the thin, greasy hair, and the bandages peeking out from the long sleeves of the large sweatshirt she was practically drowning in. Soldier crowed in victory, which contrasted obscenely against the rising sense of guilt. He didn’t have to *maim* her.

Bucky broke the several seconds of silence first. “You alright?”

“Like you even care,” she spat, but her eyes darted away before Bucky could see any real emotion. Pushing the Soldier back, who wanted to mock her, to laugh at her weakness, was an exercise of mental will, but he focused on the memory of Tony’s smile, which embodied kindness and second chances and *mercy,* and it gave him the necessary strength to remain calm.

“If you expect me to apologize, Natasha, I won’t, because we both know you would’ve done the same thing to me if the opportunity presented itself.” She didn’t disagree and he continued. “But I don’t get off on you being hurt.” At least the sane, human part of him didn’t. “Will your wrists heal?”

Her jaw clenched. Frustration, building up to anger, but breaking off prematurely into resignation. “T’Challa’s doctors said I won’t regain full mobility without surgery.”
“I assume T’Challa doesn’t want to foot the bill for that?”

“I didn’t ask. At this point, he’s looking for any excuse to get rid of us. I didn’t want to push my luck.” On her last word, she finally looked back at him, a hard, weary gaze. Different from the mocking, carefree sense of entitlement she gave off when they last met. It was hard to read her, as always, but Bucky wondered whether their encounter forced her to reconsider some of the choices she had made.

“I’m glad he allowed you back into Wakanda, at least.”

The flash of righteous anger was back in her eyes. “You made yourself pretty clear, Soldat. If I didn’t come straight to Wakanda and keep everyone in line, you would— oh, what was it you said? You would rip me apart into tiny pieces and scatter them across the world for the crows and vermin to devour?”

“It sounded better in Russian.”

“Bit too dramatic, if you ask me.”

He supposed he could’ve just said he would kill her if she didn’t do as she was told, but those threats, whispered in her ear as his eyes were locked with Tony’s… That was all the Soldier’s doing and he was an unnecessarily dramatic bastard. “And you took my words to heart?”

“I underestimated you once. I won’t do it again.” She scoffed. “I was wrong, wasn’t I? You never stopped being the Winter Soldier.”

His shrug was deliberately casual. “Let’s just say he and I are on speaking terms.”

“But something did change about you, didn’t it? You weren’t like this in Germany or here in Wakanda. There’s an edge to you that wasn’t there before. It’s like you’re—”

“Like I’m what? Brainwashed?”

She turned away to frown at something beyond the camera, and if Bucky didn’t know any better, he’d think she looked regretful. The metal plates of his arm whirred to life as his hand clenched into a tight fist, the perfect conduit for the fury he felt when she accused Tony of manipulating him and even now, he couldn’t ignore the Soldier’s whispered promises to break every part of her for it.

“For that alone,” that sentiment was echoed in the words he said aloud, “I should’ve broken more than just your wrists, Natasha. You know, better than anyone, what it’s like to be unmade. So you know Tony never did anything like that to me. Never even thought of it. And for you to accuse him of that, to say that he brainwashed me to love him—”

“I shouldn’t have said it, okay?” her words spilled as her throat constricted on a hard swallow, interrupting his tirade. “I was humiliated and desperate and I just lashed out—”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the perfect spy? Always in control of every action? Every emotion? Why did you—”

“Because I’m human too, dammit!” Her chest heaved, visible even under the oversized sweatshirt and her eyes were blazing with desperation, for once not hiding behind neutrality and coy masks. “Contrary to everyone’s belief, I’m not a fucking robot. I lose control too and I make mistakes like the rest of you.”

That single outburst seemed to drain her though, evidenced by the sagging of her narrow shoulders.
and the gaze firmly planted on her knees. “I regret what I said to Tony. I never meant to hurt him. And I did want to come home, you know. That wasn’t a lie. I’m tired of running and hiding. I just —” The huff of air she exhaled was a sad attempt at laughter. “When I saw you, happy and healthy in that damn kitchen, I felt— jealous.”

Bucky could understand that, but his sympathy didn’t change a thing. “That one’s on you. On all of you. Because you idiots had what I have. You had Tony’s kindness and generosity and goodwill. That man would’ve moved heaven and earth for you, if you had only asked.”

“Maybe he would’ve. Maybe we all made mistakes,” she admitted, “but do you— do you think he’d forgive us for that? Forgive me?” She really did sound regretful now, but when her gaze finally met his again, there was a sharpness to it again. “I mean… He forgave you, didn’t he? And after you killed his—” She was stopped mid-sentence by the obvious shock that crossed Bucky’s face.

“Wait, you knew?” he hissed, the familiar anger quickly finding its way back to the surface, manifesting itself in the flush across the back of his neck. “And you didn’t tell him either?”

“I thought— I thought that Steve did. Didn’t he— Tony and him were always closer—”

“I can’t believe you! Either of you! Fuck, you bastards never deserved him, did you?” Bucky had to turn away, muffle the furious words, no matter how righteous, behind the flesh of his fist. How many more betrayals did Tony have to suffer?

“I didn’t know Steve never told him…”

Bucky didn’t respond until he let the Soldier bleed through just enough to keep his voice from shaking. “So you don’t know what happened in Siberia either then?”

“Steve said Tony attacked you and the two of you had to take him down to escape.”

“Funny how he left out the most important detail. Zemo showed us a video…” Bucky hoped Tony wouldn’t hate him for sharing this, but Natalia already knew about the Starks. At least one other person needed to know what really happened in that bunker. “It was a surveillance tape of the night — of the night I killed Tony’s parents.”

He still refused to look back at the screen, but he still heard Natalia’s surprised “Oh…”

“He asked Steve if he knew and Steve tried to lie— he tried to fucking lie, until Tony asked again… and Tony just lost it. He attacked, Steve and I fought back. We beat down a broken fucking man, lost in his grief…”

His own guilt rose to the surface— muted and dulled, but never forgotten — and his face flushed for a whole different reason. He had no room to judge any of them, did he? He tried to kill Tony, to rip the arc reactor right out of his suit— and now, knowing that the reactor used to be imbedded deep inside Tony’s own chest—

What was that saying about stones and glass houses?

“None of us deserve him,” he finally conceded as he turned back around. “But here’s the thing about Tony. He’s willing to forgive, to give people second chances, even if doing so screws him over in the end.”

“It’s because he wants to believe that if others deserve second chances, then maybe he deserves his own too.”
“So you do know something about him after all. With all the bullshit you were saying to him, I was beginning to doubt your people reading skills.” The remark was meant to be scathing, but the guilt inside him just made it sound weary.

“But Natasha, listen. Don’t try to ask Tony to forgive you, to take you back, because— because you need money for your fancy surgery, or because you need weapons or political goodwill.” She watched him silently, so he continued. “Do it because Tony is a good man. Do it because the choices you made hurt a good man who deserved so much fucking better than what we did to him. And maybe then— maybe then this will play out differently. But until you act like he’s worth that effort,” his glare turned decidedly more Soldier-like and he didn’t regret it for a second, “you— all of you need to stay the hell away from him. Maybe this is me atoning for what I did to him, for my own choices, I don’t care, but I won’t let anyone hurt him ever again. You and I both know what I’m capable of and I’m willing to use everything I know, everything those slimy fuckers carved into me, if it means keeping him happy and safe.”

Natalia met his sharp gaze head-on, but when she spoke, her own words were softer, more contemplative. “You know, at first, when I saw you… I actually thought that maybe you were the one manipulating Tony. Had him wrapped around your little finger, at your beck and call—”

“You need to be very careful with what you say next, Natalia.”

The only sign she was affected by his growled threat was the minute clench of her jaw. “But I was wrong. Again. Apparently I’ve been off my game for a while. You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

Bucky didn’t let his expression give anything away as he stood unmoving in front of the screen, contemplating his response. Finally, though—

“Yeah, I think I am.” Despite the choice of words, there was no doubt in his tone and he realized he didn’t care that the Widow knew. He didn’t care if the whole world knew. Frankly, the only bittersweet thing about this was that Natalia found out before Tony himself did, even if Bucky planned to remedy that as soon as he could.

He watched Natalia’s reaction carefully, but all she managed was a small nod and a smile.

“Can’t say I saw this coming, but I guess I don’t know either of you as well as I thought I did. But maybe— maybe you’ll take better care of him than any of us ever did.”

There was a sense of resignation in her voice, tired and wistful, and Bucky hoped like hell that this was genuine. There was no way to know with the Black Widow, but if she could see the error of her ways, maybe there was hope for the rest of the others.

Speaking of…

“I hate to cut this heart-to-heart short an’ all, but what exactly is the situation with everyone else over there? You know I didn’t send you to Wakanda just for the nice tan, Natasha.”

Natalia’s lips thinned, eyes darting to the side and shoulders tensing up again. All signs of her failing in her mission, and the Soldier wanted nothing more than to punish her for it. Bucky just wanted to sigh. Goddamn it.

“I did what I could, I told Steve you were doing well and that I got attacked on my way back to Wakanda, but you know him. Better than all of us, in fact. He’s not stupid. He saw my injuries and didn’t believe me for a second. He’s still adamant that you need to be— rescued.”

Disappointing, but not surprising. Honestly, he was aware from the very beginning that it would take
more than the assurance of the super spy to get through to Steve.

The real question was, would his own words be enough at this point?

_Dammit all to hell._ Bucky didn’t want to do this, he really didn’t. Why couldn’t he just go back to this morning, to flirting over text messages with Tony? Or to his sleepy engineer babbling on about vacations? Fuck, he’d even take Banner’s awkward attempt at conversation.

Why did he have to deal with _this_ instead?

_Because you know they’ll come here and they’ll hurt Tony. Are you willing to let that happen?_

The Soldier was still so close, wrath and jealously and protectiveness all coiling around each other in his head, but Bucky didn’t push any of it away this time. He needed this to counteract his own guilt, needed it to make sure everyone stayed the hell away from Tony.

“Can you get Steve on the phone, please?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“’You’re the one who told me to call him, zayka. Remember?’ he replied and it was obvious the Widow noticed the shift in his temperament. However, with nothing more than a resigned shrug, she stood up and disappeared out of view. For a minute, there was silence, giving Bucky a small reprieve to gather his strength for this conversation. He hadn’t spoken to Steve in months and he had a sinking feeling this conversation would go no better than their last one.

Finally, there were noises in the background again, heavy, hurried steps against the wooden floors of the villa. In moments, Steve’s concerned face, longer hair disheveled and beard thicker than Bucky had ever seen it, appeared on the screen.

”Bu—Bucky! It’s you! Oh, thank god, you’re okay!”

“Hiya, Stevie.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Bucky, my sweet summer child, if you think anything is going to go the way you planned it, I don’t know what to tell you... The biggest obstacle between him and happiness is me at this point, obviously. ;D

Also, housekeeping item! To maintain some semblance of sanity and make sure these chapters are actually coherent, I’ll be updating once a week for the foreseeable future.

So, updates every Saturday! I miss you guys already! <3
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Yay, it's Saturday! Best part of my week. <3

I didn't get a chance to respond to comments this time around (life's been hectic, boo), so here's a big blanket thank you to all of you for your lovely words and support, you guys are all amazing, as always. *muah* And I'm loving all the *ahem* diverse opinions out there on our dear Natasha. It's exactly what I wanted out of last chapter. ;D And any new readers, hi, hello, glad you found your way here, hope you enjoyed your stay so far! <3

But enough of my nonsense, are you guys ready for Steve and Bucky to talk to each other like two reasonable, mature adults? ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hiya, Stevie.”

"Bucky, oh thank god, it’s you! I was worried! We were all so worried after Natasha came back!"”

Steve racked a trembling hand through his longer hair, before shaking his head in disbelief. “She was so hurt, I’ve never seen her like that before— Not a lot can shake the Black Widow, you know? But you’re okay, I’m so glad you’re okay—”

Bucky wondered how long Steve would keep talking, but the other man finally stopped, if only to take a breath, giving the camera a pleading look. Steve was exhausted and pale on the screen, strung-out even, like he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in days and given the serum’s enhancements, it meant Steve wasn’t sleeping at all. Apparently Natalia was capable of telling the truth every once in while.

A part of Bucky, buried somewhere deep inside, underneath the war and Hydra and death— it wanted to reach out, to take care of that small, scrawny kid who got into a brawl in every alleyway in Brooklyn and needed to be patched up more times than Bucky could count. The boy who had fire in his eyes and fighting words on his lips, even underneath the black and blue of his bruises.

Stevie.

It was an odd sensation, these long-forgotten sense memories, compulsions really, to protect the man he considered his little brother.

“I just can’t believe Tony would do something like that to her—”

But when the Soldier growled at Tony’s name on Steve’s lips, Bucky was forcibly reminded that this wasn’t his Stevie anymore, was it?

“Steve—”

“I knew he was capable of some terrible things, but I never thought he’d hurt her so badly—”

“Steve, it wasn’t—"
“Bucky, sweetheart, we need to get you out of there! He almost killed Nat—”

“It wasn’t—”

“I can’t imagine what he must be doing to you—”

“For fuck’s sake, Rogers!”

That got the man’s attention and Steve finally fell silent, his mouth slack and his eyes wide and surprised at the outburst. Jesus, but Bucky forgot just how much he hated being talked over. Being here at the Compound for so long, where people actually listened to what he had to say, had spoiled him rotten apparently.

“Are you done? Can I speak?”

“Of course, Bucky, I’m sorry.” Steve looked sorry at least, with those big, sorrowful blue eyes and down-turned brows. It made Bucky uneasy, battling these conflicting emotions as he stood there equal parts worried for and infuriated with the man in front of him.

“Good, now I want you to listen to me. Please. Tony didn’t even touch Natasha—”

“No, Bucky, whatever Tony told you, it’s not true, okay? It was—”

“Seriously, Steve? It’s like your damn brain just short circuits when Tony is brought up! I said, let me speak.” Bucky let the Soldier bleed into those last three words and they came out as low, menacing growl, carrying with them the strength and dominance of that darker part of himself. Steve was grimacing on the screen, obviously desperate to say more, but Bucky’s command was getting through that thick skull because he was actually silent again. Third time’s the charm, huh?

“I was the one who fought her, okay? It was me. See the shiny new arm?” he wiggled his fingers in a mockery of a hello. “This is what left those bruises on her neck. I destroyed her Widow Bites when she tried to use them on me. Her wrists?” He shrugged. “Collateral damage more than anything.”

There was still a speck of guilt somewhere in his mind about what he did to Natalia, but at this point, his mounting frustration with this whole group of stubborn idiots overshadowed everything else.

“I don’t— understand…” Steve said and then trailed off, frowning in confusion. “Did— did Tony tell you to attack her?”

“Oh for love of god, Steve…” No amount of training could’ve stopped Bucky from pinching the bridge of his nose. Alright, subtlety wasn’t going to work, he needed to be clear and blunt. “No, Tony did not order me to attack her. He was asleep when it happened.”

“Then why?”

“Because she broke into the Compound, that’s why! She disabled Friday, put countless people at risk, including me and Tony, and waltzed in here like it was her home!”

“It was her home, Buck.”

“Not anymore. She wasn’t welcome here and honestly, she’s lucky she’s alive. The Avengers take threats very seriously since, as you well know, there are a lot of people out there who’d want to hurt them or worse!”

“She wasn’t a threat though and you know that! This is Natasha, for goodness sake’s, our friend!
And the only reason she was there was because I was worried about you and—”

“Wait, so you knew she was coming here?”

“Of course. I mean, I was the one planning to come initially, but she volunteered to go in my place. She’s better than me at this sort of thing.”

Bucky shook his head, wanting to groan in frustration, but just barely refraining. “What were you thinking, Steve?”

The determined look on the other man’s face was achingly familiar too. “I was thinking that you were in trouble. That you needed me.”

“And what exactly made you think that?”

“You didn’t call.”

“I told you I wouldn’t. Didn’t the King give you updates?”

“He did.”

“But you didn’t trust him?”

“I wanted to hear from you.”

“Right. What a perfectly sensible reason for breaking and entering.” Bucky’s sarcasm was palpable. “Anything else that set this off? A messenger pigeon with an SOS maybe?”

“It was, uh—” The determination faded under Bucky’s scrutiny and for the first time, Steve actually hesitated, seemingly unsure of his words. “We saw a picture of you and Tony.”

It was Bucky’s turn to furrow his brows in confusion. He didn’t realize there was a photo of them out there. “Where exactly?”

“Some website that Sam found. You two were in Central Park together.”

Well, that made sense and Bucky made a mental note to ensure Friday knew in case this was a security issue. However, he first needed to understand what the hell kind of problem Steve could possibly have with a picture. “And what, was he torturing me in it? Hurting me? Because the only ‘awful’ thing I remember about that day is Tony having zero restraint about picking out ice cream flavors.”

Steve had the decency to look somewhat shamed. “No, it wasn’t anything like that… No torture… but after everything that happened between all of us… I didn’t think you’d want to spend time with Tony— like that. Not voluntarily at least. I thought you were being forced—”

Oh, not this bullshit again. “So what you’re trying to tell me is that Tony forced me into having ice cream with him?” Steve didn’t answer—no surprise there, because this whole conversation was bordering on absurd—so Bucky tried to bring the point home. “You know how ridiculous that sounds, right? And what’s this about me not wanting to spend time with Tony? He’s the man behind my pardon, behind my therapy. He’s helping me get my life back! Hell, he spent weeks and god knows how much of his own money building me a whole new fuckin’ arm!”

“That doesn’t mean you owe him anything—”

“It means I owe him a hell of a lot and I would still owe him even if he didn’t do any of these other
nice things for me. Because he’s a great guy and hell, he’s funny and brilliant and why wouldn’t I want to be around him? Maybe if you had actually taken the time to get to know him, but—but—you know what, I can’t do this—” Bucky raked a hand through his hair, curbing the frustration.

At this point, he couldn’t even tell whether it was him or the Soldier who wanted to lash out, to yell until his lungs burned. Yelling wouldn’t solve a goddamn thing though. It would just widen the rift between them and they couldn’t afford that when there was already a goddamn Grand Canyon between him and Steve.

“Steve, please, just listen to me. I’m fine. No one is hurting me, no one is controlling me. I’m getting help, Stevie, why is that so hard to accept? I’m seeing a therapist, I have less nightmares, I eat regular meals. My damn arm doesn’t hurt anymore. Hell, I can be around people again without wanting to crawl out of my skin! Do you know how incredible that is? I never, never for a second, thought I would have any of that, not after everything.”

He stopped, unsure what else he could say to convince Steve. He almost wished there wasn’t a screen and thousands of miles separating them just so he could grab Steve about the shoulders and shake some damn sense into that man.

Fortunately for them both, this was the safer option because the Soldier would likely do more than just shake if he got his hands on the man.

Miraculously, Steve didn’t start back in with his misguided notions of protectiveness. He was watching Bucky, scrutinizing and taking in the details, as if seeing Bucky for the first time. Please, Steve, just look at me. I’m fine.

“You’re really okay?” Steve finally asked, tone more subdued, and Bucky nearly wept with relief.

“Yes, you punk, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“Then—” Steve’s throat bobbed as he choked on the word, “then why didn’t you just call?”

The vulnerability in that voice clawed at Bucky’s soul, that small, long-forgotten part of him coming to life yet again, and it stood so stark against the Soldier’s ire and Bucky’s own frustration.

What could he say though? He supposed he owed Steve the truth. “Because I don’t know how to talk to you without it turning into a fight anymore. Because last time I spoke with all of you, it made me miserable and I don’t want to rehash the same old things. And because frankly I’m still angry with all of you.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Oh, where do I start? First, you didn’t tell any of the others about Tony’s parents and what really happened in Siberia, so everyone still believes that Tony just attacked us out of the blue for no good reason—”

“What happened with Tony, that was—”

“I swear to god, Steve, I will reach through the damn screen and throttle you if you don’t stop interrupting me.” When the man gave him another apologetic look, Bucky continued. “Second, all you people do is talk shit about Tony every chance you get, with you and Barton being the worst offenders. Why exactly would I want to listen to that? You treat him like he’s some villain instead of the man who used to be your teammate, who gave you his home and his money and his support.”

“Tony betrayed us.” Oh, there was such conviction in those quiet words, but Bucky could clearly
remember Tony’s own words in Siberia. So was I. Tony used to believe he was their friend, their family too.

“And you betrayed him. Funny though how Tony doesn’t spend his days badmouthing all of you.” Bucky scoffed, looking down at the arms crossed over his chest. “The most heartbreaking part is that I think he still loves all of you idiots, even after everything.”

“He—he does?”

Bucky had to look back up at the strange note of hope in Steve’s voice and he almost regretted saying what he did because he wasn’t trying to give Steve any ideas. “Maybe he does, but it doesn’t mean anything, Steve. Things can never go back to the way they were.”

“Why can’t they though? I mean… Did you know that they’re planning to pardon us? We all could be going home real soon and then everything can be the way it should be again.”

Of course Bucky knew about the pardons. After he expressed interest in the Accords, Tony always kept him up to date on the latest proceedings and while Tony had reluctantly accepted the pardons as inevitable, it was impossible to miss Rhodes’ mounting outrage with the whole thing.

“Yeah, I know about the pardons. But even if all of you do come back, too much has happened for things to stay the same.”

Maybe it was selfish of Bucky (after all, he already got his pardon), but strangely enough, he sided with Rhodes rather than Tony on this. A part of him just didn’t want all of them coming back here and ruining the peace and quiet. He didn’t want them ruining the fragile, tentative thing between him and Tony. Not to mention, the Soldier was swearing vengeance on them all at this very moment if they came anywhere near Tony and Bucky would hate for things to get—violent. Alice would kill him if he got blood all over the Compound.

That thought made him frown a second later, when it finally filtered through to the more rational part of his mind, and it was an uncomfortable admission that he could view hurting his old friends so casually, but all he did was push it away with the excuse that the Soldier was still too close to the surface and—well, he was a protective, possessive bastard on his most well-behaved days.

“But that just means that we need to try harder, Bucky, to overcome all the hurt and—and the betrayals. I’m sure we can all work on forgiving Tony if he just tried to understand where he went wrong—”

“Wait, where he went wrong? Are you even hearing yourself?” Bucky asked, incredulous and back to justifiably angry, but really, he shouldn’t have been surprised. At this point, he’d be eternally glad if none of them even said Tony’s name ever again. “Who turned their back on their team and the whole world? Who lied to Tony for two goddamn years? Who left who to die in a Siberian bunker, huh, Steve?”

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant, I shouldn’t have said that.” Steve tried to backpedal, although it was obvious he still meant what he said. “Tony— Let’s just not worry about him right now, okay? Bucky, sweetheart, you know my only priority has always been you. All those things, I did all of them for you—”

“I never asked you to!”

“You didn’t have to, that’s what you do for someone you love and all I want is to come back home so that we can figure out how to get back what we had—”
“What if I don’t want what we had back?” The words stunned Steve into silence and the wounded look on the man’s face flooded Bucky’s heart with guilt, but he forced himself to keep talking around the ache in his own chest. He was done. With this whole conversation, with going around in circles, with pointless arguments. He was tired and on edge and he was done.

“I’m not that same man, Steve. I’m not the Bucky you remember and I will never be him again. I tried telling you that before, and it’s still true, especially now that I’ve had time to live and just be. And you can’t tell me you’re the same man either. We’re— we’re basically strangers, Steve.”

He knew he was breaking Steve’s heart, but he wasn’t going to lie to the man.

“So maybe we’ve grown apart a little bit, but it doesn’t mean we can’t try. We were best friends for so many years and nothing has managed to keep us apart. What were the odds we would wind up in the same place, still alive and together, after seven decades?”

A touching sentiment, but ultimately irrelevant. “It doesn’t change the fact that we barely know each other now. Look, Steve,” Bucky tried to soften his words when the man’s eyes began to actually glisten. Goddamn Steve and his puppy dog eyes. “I’m not saying we can’t ever be friends again. Maybe it’ll take getting to know each other all over again to get there.”

Not if you keep insulting Tony with every other words though was left unsaid.

“But until then, just let me recover in peace. Because I can promise you,” he dropped his voice right out of placating and straight into menacing, “if any of you show up here again without a pretty little pardon in your hands, I will personally see to it that you end up in jail. How many of your bones will be broken in the process will depend on the mood I’m in that day.”

“Bucky, you can’t really mean that—”

“I do, which is why you should listen to me.” He uncrossed his arms and let out a resigned sigh. “Not that you ever listened to me, even when you were a scrawny brat, but this is for your own good. Just— just stay out of trouble, okay?” How many times had Bucky said those exact words to Steve? With his unreliable memory, he couldn’t even say, but it seemed the familiarity behind that sentiment was the thing that finally made Steve back down.

“Okay— I— yeah, okay, Bucky. Whatever you think is best. Just know that I’m here for you, no matter what, okay? I promise you, if you need me, I’ll be there.”

“I know, Steve.” I know, but I don’t need you anymore. Not the way I used to.

They exchanged two simple goodbyes and Bucky ended the call, the image of Steve’s unshed tears seared into his brain. In the ensuing silence, he closed his eyes and let himself feel every bit of the weariness that settled into his bones. Even the Soldier backed away, giving him a moment to grieve for the friendship that he would never get back.

But he meant what he said. He wasn’t that old Bucky anymore and while he was willing to find some common ground with Steve again, his priorities weren’t the same anymore either. In the end, if Steve forced his hand, Bucky would choose Tony over him.

This was the end of the line, but he just hoped all that meant was a new beginning instead. For himself, for Steve, for Tony. For all of them.

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When Steve walked out of the locked, private room, shoulders slumped and expression lost and
troubled, Wanda had to follow him. Steve shouldn’t be alone right now.

She hurried over to his side to catch up with his longer strides. “Everything alright?” she asked and the dejected shrug she got in return, coupled with those red-rimmed eyes, made her heart clench in sympathy.

“I just had a phone call with Bucky…” Steve responded, voice hoarse. They were still walking and their steps quickly carried them all the way to Steve’s room. Wanda didn’t hesitate to come inside and she watched as Steve sat down to the bed, crumpling in on himself before her eyes.

“I thought you’ve been waiting for his call all this time?”

“I was, but—” Steve’s big, strong hand roughly ran through the blond hair. Frustration, confusion, fear oozing off him, so strong that Wanda wouldn’t have needed her powers to sense it. “I’m not sure of anything anymore. I don’t know where Bucky and I stand, I don’t know what’s right or wrong. I just know that I miss him so badly, but he seems to be just fine without me.”

Heartbreak too, Wanda could feel it overwhelming everything else. Taking small, careful steps forward, she kneeled in front of Steve, a comforting hand on his knee. “What did he say?”

“He said he’s healthy and happy over there. That Tony’s not hurting him or trying to control him or anything like that…”

“And you believed him?”

“Well, what else am I supposed to do? Bucky— he’s not really the Bucky I remember, but maybe he’s right. Too much happened for us to be the same people. He’s been through so many horrible things… And he seems okay. He looks healthy and Tony even built him an arm. He says it doesn’t even hurt anymore. And that— that he’s having less nightmares now too.” At this, Steve looked up at her, and she could see a small glimmer of hope in those dark, worried eyes, burdened by so much. The whole world on his shoulders and Wanda wished she could take that weariness away. She wanted nothing more than to have Steve smile and laugh with her like he used to.

Of course, that happiness was taken away from them all. By Stark.

*It was always Stark who took everything from her, wasn’t it?*

“I’m sure it looks like Bucky’s doing well, but can we really trust what we see?”

Steve frowned. “What do you mean? Are you saying it wasn’t Bucky I was talking to?”

“I meant we have no way of knowing what Stark could’ve done to him.”

“Bucky said—”

“Exactly. How do we know he isn’t saying exactly what Stark wants him to say?”

“He looked okay though.” Steve repeated, pleaded almost, desperate for his friend to be unharmed.

“We don’t know the extent of Stark’s technology. All we know is that he’s been using it to manipulate a person’s brain. He says it’s to fix bad memories, but do you think anyone there would stop him if it’s something else entirely? The others might not even know he’s doing something to Bucky. What if Stark’s tech just turns Bucky against us? He acts like himself with everyone else, but when he sees us, something flips in his head?”
“Tony— he wouldn’t do that, would he? That’s what Hydra did to Bucky. Tony—”

“Is the same man he always was. People don’t change, Steve, and he’s been good at one thing and one thing only. Making weapons. And I just can’t shake the feeling that he’s turning your Bucky into a weapon too.”

Oh, the heartbreak and the fear that crossed Steve’s eyes broke her own heart too, but someone had to say this. “He did say he was the one who attacked Natasha. It’s still hard to believe he’d do that to her, to his own friend… He hurt her badly.”

“I know, I can’t imagine it either and that’s exactly what I mean. Why would he attack her unless Stark planted something in his head to react so violently?”

This was a familiar conversation. Every time Steve tried to convince himself that Stark wasn’t the villain in all of this, she was here to remind him otherwise. Stark was the one who put them all in this position. Stark was the reason they couldn’t come home, he was the reason the world saw them as criminals rather than the heroes they truly were.

Even if the world didn’t deserve them, especially not someone like Steve, who was so brave and noble and good. The one who always treated Wanda like someone important and precious. Clint was the same way too. Her heroes. They were always in her corner and she would have their backs as well, no matter what.

“But how could Tony do something like that? That’s not— that can’t be him, Wanda, no, that’s not him. Tony isn’t evil, and I just—” Steve slumped further and hid his face in his hands, elbows digging into his knees. “I don’t know what to do anymore. I want to believe Bucky. All I want is for him to be happy. And Tony— he gave him what I couldn’t… He took care of his legal status, gave him a safe place to say. He’s helping Bucky get his mind back. Tony’s done everything for him that I couldn’t…”

Honestly, Wanda thought Steve was making Tony out to be too much of a martyr. That man never did anything out of the goodness of his heart. One needed an actual heart for that after all. There was always a motive and others were just a means to an end. He created war and destruction. The Merchant of Death wasn’t capable of healing nor care nor love.

“But even if Bucky’s better, he’s— he’s not the man I remember,” Steve continued, “he’s not the man I love anymore and it feels like I’m losing him all over again.” He was blinking away tears now. “Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky, but now— now I feel like I’m back on that train again and I just can’t hold onto to him. He’s slipping from my grasp and I can’t—”

Steve stifled an actual sob, trying to hide it behind a hand over his mouth. He was clearly distraught, his beautiful eyes glistening with those unshed tears and Wanda couldn’t take it anymore.

“It’ll be alright, Steve, I promise,” she assured and reached out a gentle hand to brush it against his temple. He smiled at the gesture, but then abruptly, his expression went slack, both the smile and the furrow of his brow transforming into passive neutrality.

She glared at the magic sparkling from her fingertips. Why couldn’t she get this right? Helping people fall asleep pulled them into restless slumber, trying to create happiness only caused people to become high-strung, and any time she tried to use her magic to calm someone down, all she could manage was lethargy.

Negative emotions came effortlessly to her, but this she still struggled with. As she took in Steve’s lax expression, she supposed that at least he wasn’t on the verge of a breakdown anymore, even if
her attempt to soothe him didn’t do much for his actual mental state beneath that neutral expression.

“What about your original plan to go back to the US, to get him back?”

Steve’s voice was a monotone. “He said that if I came, he wouldn’t hesitate to stop me and turn me over to the authorities.”

“That really doesn’t sound like the friend you sacrificed everything for, does it? The man who was willing to die for you so many countless times? There’s something wrong here, Steve, you and I both know that.”

He blinked those empty eyes at her, unable to respond with anything coherent. She filled in the words for him as she kept brushing her hand against his temple, tucking some of that soft blond hair behind his ear.

“We’ll figure this out, Steve. Unfortunately, I think all we can do now is wait for the pardons.” I can’t risk Stark putting you in jail and taking you away from me. “So we’ll wait until we’re free. That way, when we’re back home, you can talk to Bucky in person and see if he’s really okay. When we’re back together, everything will become clear. But now, how about you rest for a bit? It’ll make you feel better.”

“That sounds good, Wanda, thank you,” Steve murmured. There was a small smile on his face, but it looked plastic against the glassy look in his eyes. Carefully, she pushed him down across the bed and he settled in, curling in on himself, as if trying to take up as little space as possible. Hard to do for a man his size, but it did make him look more innocent somehow and Wanda knew he was still suffering underneath the effects of her magic. Heartbroken and hopeless, thinking he had lost his best friend.

There was a blanket in the corner of the bed and she draped it over the man, tucking the corners around his shoulders. Watching him slowly blink those blue eyes up at her, so vulnerable and open in that moment, forced her righteous fury straight up to the surface.

The need to avenge someone she loved. She knew this sentiment well.

One kiss to his temple was all she allowed herself, lingering just a second too long. “I know I can’t give you everything you want, Steve, but I promise, if I can, I will make Stark suffer in the same way he hurt you.”

Going by the small furrow between his brows and the silent movement of his lips, Steve struggled against the lethargy, wanting to say something in response to her whispered promise, but another brush of her hand and the sparks of red pulled him entirely into sleep. Come tomorrow, he wouldn’t remember any of this, except the very beginning of their conversation, but he didn’t really need to.

She tip toed out and quietly closed the door behind her, heading to her own small, humble room. The living quarters at the Compound were far more luxurious than this and it annoyed her that they were stuck here, at T’Challa’s mercy, unable to live their lives as they wanted.

No matter. They were going home soon.

But it wasn’t quite soon enough for the roiling anger that flowed through her, right down to her glowing fingertips. Stark needed to pay for this. He took Barnes away from Steve, broke the man’s heart, and she wanted nothing more than to have Stark’s own rotting heart in her hand so that she could crush it herself.

Unfortunately, stuck here in Wakanda left her with few options for vengeance, but there was one
thing she could still try. She was usually reluctant to tap into her powers in such a manner, but she was willing to go through the exhaustion and the migraines one more time.

The floor by the bed looked as good a place as any and she settled down, cross-legged, with the frame of the bed at her back. Resting her hands on her knees, she closed her eyes and breathed.

This wasn’t an attempt to meditate, however. Instead, her focus was on the red, shining core within her, the magic rightfully hers to control, and under her command, the red haze disbursed in all directions.

Most of the time, her magic wouldn’t be viable without physical proximity, but in rare cases, when the mind she was seeking was touched by her magic before, she could bridge any distance she desired.

She had attempted to reach Stark’s mind twice before. Once, when they had just arrived in Wakanda and the festering rage— they locked me in the Raft like an animal!— drove her every action, and then later, when Steve was first nearly broken by the phone call with Barnes. Both times had left her exhausted, joints aching and skin burning like she were on fire, and as much as she hated to admit it, both times she failed to reach the mind of the Merchant of Death.

Oh, her magic would find him, there was no doubt there— she’d find him wherever he went— but each time, there was a wall of blue, crackling static standing between her and his mind. It was a strange, painful sensation for her mind’s eye to even look at the glowing, bright light and when she would reach out, trying to push past it to get to Stark’s mind, it would seep into her, this electrifying pure energy, and force her magic back out. She only attempted to reach into this blue forcefield once before realizing it weakened her magic far too much, drained her like some sort of vampire.

It was frustrating— maddening as hell— that Stark found some way to protect himself against her powers and she didn’t know exactly what it was, but the light felt familiar somehow - on the same spectrum as her own magic, but opposite in its intention and force. For all she knew, it could’ve been that Strange sorcerer or— she hated to even think it, but it could’ve been Vision as well. She thought he loved her— at least in that naive, inadequate capacity of a newborn— but in the end, Stark took Vision from her as well.

Despite knowing she would run into that bright blue barrier again, she was willing to try reaching into Stark’s mind one more time. For Steve. She’d endure this pain for the man who always gave his trust and affection.

Her magic soon detected Stark’s glowing soul, a small pinprick of light, and as she got closer, a physical shudder ran through her. Surprise, anticipation, elation.

The blue light was gone. Wherever Stark was, the strange magical barrier that always protected him was gone and his mind was nothing but a vulnerable little spark of light in the sea of darkness. That wasn’t all, however, and her lips curled into a satisfied smile. It was so much easier to manipulate minds in their most vulnerable state. Sleep.

Yes, yes, yes, she crowed in her head as her magic gathered its strength and coiled around that little light, which appeared far too bright in this form, too pure for someone with so much blood on his hands.

Now, how could she force Stark to experience the same heartbreak Steve did? She couldn’t manipulate the details of anything Stark saw, not in this position, but she didn’t have to. A human mind was perfectly adept at conjuring its own worst nightmares. All it needed, really, was a tiny little prod and she had just the right idea.
As the red of her magic seeped deeper inside Stark’s mind, she channeled the strongest of her emotions to flow through the tendrils of her powers right into Stark.

_Fear._

_Loss._

She knew them well too. A terrified child, losing her parents. A conflicted, broken young woman, losing her other half. _Pietro._

The memory of her brother spurred her on, magic growing stronger and more volatile. She channeled every bit of it, every ounce of terror, grief, and abject sense of loss that she had felt since she was ten and like a crashing wave of pain, she let it wash over Stark’s mind.

_I saw Stark’s fear once. It controlled him then and it will control him again. Let him self-destruct. Let him burn in hell for all he’s done._

The pain that lanced through her own body at the strain on her magic caused her to groan audibly, clenching her teeth. She hung on for one more second before her eyes opened back up— _glowing a blood red, she was sure_— and she let herself collapse onto the floor.

Her skin felt like someone slathered acid over it, she couldn’t get enough air into her lungs, and she was sure that if she tried to stand, her legs would shake too much to keep her upright. Every part of her hurt.

Her heart however— _her heart sang._

She wished she could do so much more to Stark—_make him pay for her parents, for her people, for Pietro, for Steve_— but this was more than she’d been able to do for a very long time. Stark would feel fear and loss, the same way they have all felt it.

Slowly and carefully, she pulled herself up and laid herself down on top of the comforter strewn across the bed. Rest would do her a world of good.

Loss and fear were her constant companions for most of her life and she was glad to share them with Stark, but her third long-time friend she kept to herself.

_Hate._ She clung to that blazing hatred in her heart, curled around it protectively, and she knew that tonight she would fall asleep with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

_Uh oh._

_(the Soldier was right, wasn’t he? should’ve just tied Tony up and kept him nice and safe at home)_
Tony was practically vibrating with excitement as he stepped out of the Iron Man suit and onto the landing dock of the Compound. He was home, with Beijing and that whole messy trip finally behind him, and he was only minutes away from being back in James’ arms again.

God, he missed that man. They texted and video called, but Tony quickly learned that wasn’t enough. Nothing could replace the man’s presence by his side, that warmth that kept Tony’s own chills at bay, the bright blue eyes that made his heart do somersaults, the solid weight of the vibranium arm across his shoulders or curled around his waist. He never thought he’d find it so comforting—not to mention sexy as hell—but he shouldn’t have been surprised. His metal kink was obviously alive and well.

He missed those careful fingers and teasing words and affectionate smiles. Every part of his super soldier.

Speaking of, where was his wayward cyborg? Tony was already inside the Compound, heading over into the kitchen and a part of him was hoping James would have already found him, but maybe Friday just hadn’t informed him of Tony’s arrival yet.

He heard voices as he approached the kitchen and the deep rumble of James’ words was easy to recognize. Tony had that voice committed to memory by now. The other voice seemed familiar as well, but Tony’s brain refused to put a face to it. Probably Rhodey or Bruce and Tony couldn’t help but smile. Could be both and then he’d literally have some of his most favorite people all together in one place. Just needed to throw Petey and Harley-kins into the mix to complete the love fest.

However, it took all but one second for his brain to catch up to the rest of his body, which stopped abruptly, the tingles of adrenaline and fight-or-flight rushing through his veins, as soon as the kitchen came into view.

James wasn’t alone, but with him was neither Rhodey nor Bruce nor any other Compound resident. It was Steve.

He and James were standing next to each other, in the middle of a conversation by the looks of it, but both stopped to stare back at Tony who wouldn’t have been able to move from his spot in that
moment if someone had set him on fire. He couldn’t even drag air into his lungs and he began to panic because the tingling in his hands and the racing heartbeat and the lack of oxygen were all signs of an oncoming panic attack. *Fuck.* Panicking over a panic attack.

“Ro— Rogers? What are you— what are you doing here?” he managed to push the words past his lips, causing an identical frown to appear on the super soldiers’ faces.

“What do you mean, *what is he doing here*?” James mimicked Tony’s question and there was something so unfamiliar in his tone that it made Tony want to curl in on himself. “They all got pardons, remember? Long overdue if you ask me. Had to be stuck here for four months without my best friend.”

Steve turned to look at Bucky and the frown melted away, replaced by a loving smile. One of his big hands found its way to Bucky’s cheek and the gesture looked so *natural*, like that hand belonged there and nowhere else, that something inside Tony cracked.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you, Buck. I *should’ve* been here. Looking out for you, taking care of you.”

“S’okay, Stevie, you’re here now.” James’ right hand found Steve’s and their fingers intertwined. The look James gave Steve to go along with that gesture— *that* was familiar because James used to look at *Tony* just like that only days ago.

“I didn’t know—” Tony swallowed, desperate to get his words under control. Stammering like an idiot wasn’t going to help anything. “I didn’t know the pardons were even approved yet. The Council should’ve informed me about the vote, I—”

“The world doesn’t revolve around you,” Bucky snapped, causing Tony to flinch, “and not everything needs your stamp of approval. Why can’t you just be glad that they’re all back, huh? That the most important person in my life is finally back? Unless you don’t really care about me being happy?”

“No, no, of course— of course I do,” Tony hurried to reassure, even if he felt like the ground underneath him was quickly turning into quicksand. *The most important person in my life.* It echoed through his head, over and over, a broken record of misery. He clenched both his fists to stop his hands from shaking. “I’m— I’m just surprised, is all.”

“Well, better get over it then, because my Stevie is finally back and I couldn’t be more thrilled.”

“Everything can finally go back to the way it was. The way it *should* be. Right, Buck?”

“Yes, of course. I’m so glad you’re finally home, Stevie.” Tony recognized the smile on Bucky’s face too.

“James, I, uh—” Tony stopped when Steve looked at him with disgust. Unsurprisingly, also familiar.

“Ugh, he calls you *James*?”

“Yeah, annoying, innit? No one’s called me that since my deadbeat dad, but apparently Stark thinks he’s too good to use *Bucky* like everyone else.”

“That’s Tony for you, always acting like he’s special.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize— didn’t realize you didn’t like that name. But um… can we talk in private, um— Bucky? Please? Just for a second?” Tony still felt like he could barely breathe,
standing here just yards away from Steve, especially with those disappointed and disgusted looks the man kept throwing his way. The loving way Bucky kept gazing at Steve wasn’t really helping either, but maybe if they had a chance to talk, just the two of them, Tony could find his footing again. Wasn’t it just yesterday that James was calling him honey and sweetheart and saying that he missed Tony?

Some small part of him kept screaming out, saying that this was exactly what he feared would happen. I was right, I was right, oh god, I was right.

Before James— no, it was Bucky now, Bucky— had a chance to respond however, more voices echoed down the hall and seconds later, the kitchen was filled with many more familiar faces.

Including the rest of the newly pardoned Avengers.

Wilson and Rhodey were laughing amicably, Rhodey clapping the other man on the shoulder as they walked in. Bruce and Natasha had their arms around Peter, who was looking up at the Widow with that same hero-worship that Tony used to see. Barton was here too, with his whole family practically clinging to him, all bright smiles and sparkling eyes. Harley darted between everyone and with that same hyper energy, sidled up to Steve, who pressed a quick kiss to the mop of brown hair and wrapped his big, muscular arm around the skinny teenager. Harley was smiling so wide at Steve his cheeks must have hurt. Wanda and Vision were last to enter, wrapped around each other like lovers finally reunited after an eternity of separation.

As each group filed into the space, they didn’t even spare a glance for Tony, who still stood alone, shaking minutely in the middle of the adjoined common room. He had to swallow back his guilt, that selfish desire to be acknowledged because they all looked so happy.

They didn’t even need him.


His eyes finally settled on Steve, who was smiling brightly at the whole group.

“Looks like the whole family is finally here! Perfect!” the man exclaimed happily, prompting several cheers, but then that piercing blue gaze suddenly turned back to Tony, with James’ own icy glare following close behind. “See, Tony, this is how it’s supposed to be. Everyone together, everyone getting along. You were the one who ruined this, who broke all of us apart.”

“But thankfully, we have Stevie here to bring us all back together,” James added and smiled brighter still when Steve pulled him closer in response. Before Tony even had a chance to process that, Steve leaned in and placed one kiss on the corner of James’ smile.

Tony was just glad that when his heart shattered, the whimper he wanted to let out stayed inside him by some sheer force of will.

“But you said you wanted to talk privately, right?” James’ focus was back on him, even with Steve’s arms around his waist.

Tony nodded mutely and James just shrugged.

“Fine, might as well get this over with. Stevie, sweetheart, make sure all of you punks wait for me before starting dinner. I know if I’m gone too long, all the food will be gone!”

“Honey, I’ll make sure to save you all the best parts.”
With obvious reluctance, James pulled away and walked over to Tony, who could do nothing but stumble along when that metal arm clamped around his bicep and dragged him out into the empty hallway. He also chose to ignore the way that James practically shoved him into the wall, letting go of him as if he were burned.

“Alright, we’re alone and you wanted to talk. So talk.”

Tony had never heard James speak so dismissively to him before and his own words, the questions swarming in his head like bees, kept getting caught in his throat. What was he supposed to say in the face of those uncaring blue eyes? But he loved those eyes and that smile and this man, and he just needed to understand.

“I’m just— trying to catch up with everything. That trip to Beijing was a lot longer than I thought, huh?” His joke fell flat when the hardened expression on James’ face didn’t budge. Tony wet his dry lips and tried again. “Everyone coming back, that’s unexpected, I’ll admit, but um—” his desperation only increased when James outright glared at him. “I’m glad they’re all back, really. Steve was right, we’re stronger when we’re together.”

So don’t be selfish, Stark. All that matters is that the people you love are happy. And you know they would be so much happier without you.

“And, uh— Harley and Peter sure looked happy to have everyone here too. Um— didn’t realize Harley was that close with Steve already, but—”

“Those two boys need a real family. A real father. Someone who can teach them right from wrong. A role model. And they sure as hell weren’t going to get that from an abrasive, narcissistic alcoholic who sleeps around, with all of his dirty money made from killing people.”

“That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?” His own defensiveness surprised him, but these were his boys. He was trying to do his best by them, it was all he wanted—

“Which part of that do you want to argue? Nothing I said is untrue.”

Tony had to look away from James’ merciless gaze. And he was right, wasn’t he? Tony couldn’t contest a single word. He was unkind, he pushed people away. There was so much blood on his hands. Just a broken, pathetic man.

The kids were better off with Steve and James, weren’t they?

Admit it, Stark, you would only corrupt them. Mold them into your image until there’s nothing left of them but rotting hearts.

“I’m not going to argue anything. I’m glad the boys have even more support now. It takes a village an’ all that, right?” When James gave an actual nod, the first agreeable gesture, Tony tried to push further. “But that wasn’t what I wanted to talk about. I thought that we were— you and me— we were supposed to talk. You know… About us.”

“Yeah, we were.”

Okay, so at least James acknowledged that too. “But then the way you were with Steve back there—I guess I don’t understand where that leaves us when I thought that we had—”

“Had what? Feelings for each other?”

“Something like that, yeah. I just want to understand, James— Bucky, please,” Tony wasn’t above
outright begging. This felt like his worst nightmare— it was just a matter of time, Stark, no one truly wants you— but he wasn’t going to give up that easily. “I know there was something— is something— between us. You said yourself that you— that you cared about me.”

Maybe it was Tony’s pleading tone or the fact that he was failing to keep the moisture from building up in his eyes, but something in James’ expression actually softened. The man took a step closer to Tony, effectively trapping him against the wall and at any other time, this wouldn’t have been intimidating. Tony was once stuck with the damn Soldier, without any of James’ sanity and morality to hold him back, in this very same position and he didn’t feel nearly as much apprehension then as he did now.

But then James reached out his hand— the metal hand that Tony spent countless hours crafting— and used it to cradle Tony’s face and when he leaned in and kissed the arch of Tony’s other cheek, a gesture so familiar and tender, Tony nearly wanted to weep.

“Of course I cared about you,” James whispered, resting his forehead against Tony’s. “How could I not?” The metal hand slowly found its way down, cool and heavy against Tony’s neck. “I mean, I didn’t really have much of a choice, did I?”

Tony felt his blood run cold. “Wh—what?”

Softness turned into contempt and with James still so close, it was a terrifying switch. “Is that how you get off, Tony? Manipulating tortured prisoners of war into caring for you? Leave them alone and vulnerable, put them through even more torture, pretending that it’s therapy, and then offer a scrap of comfort in return? Make them depend on you for everything, make them need you because there’s nothing else?”

“No, no, you know that’s not what I was doing,” Tony was shaking his head desperately. He never wanted to hurt James, how could the man even think that? “I made sure you had as much freedom as possible, other people, other relationships— and therapy, it was— I know it was awful, but there wasn’t any other way to get the triggers out of—”

The litany of Tony’s desperate explanations stopped when the hand on his neck tightened just enough to make Tony gasp for his next breath. “Don’t lie to me, Stark,” James hissed, eyes blazing with fury. “We both know I would have never wanted you anywhere near me if it weren’t for your mind games. You really thought that I’d want you? Fuck, even looking at you makes me sick. You wanted me dead in Berlin, you wanted all of us dead at the airport. And Siberia? Remember how you blasted my arm off? You wanna know how much that fuckin’ hurt? And the things you made me do…”

“The things—” It was hard to breath with that unyielding grip on his throat. “The things I made you do? I don’t—”

“The way you took advantage of me when I was vulnerable. The way you forced yourself on me, invaded my space, touched me like I was yours.”

“James, no, please,” he begged and he would keep begging until James understood, “if I knew you were uncomfortable, I would’ve stopped— I never wanted to hurt you! I— I lo—”

He couldn’t finish his thought over the heavy hand— James’ right— clamped over his mouth.

“Don’t,” James commanded, albeit unnecessarily. Tony could barely make a noise at this point. “Don’t fucking say that to me. When I hear those words— when I hear them for the first time since I went off to a fuckin’ war, I want to hear them from someone who means them. From someone
capable of love. Do you understand me?”

One needs to have a heart to love, but your chest is full of metal, isn’t it, Stark?

“And maybe I finally will, now that Steve, my Stevie, is back in my life. No thanks to you, of course.”

Tony knew there were tears in his eyes and he didn’t bother to will them away. This position was familiar too, James pressing him into the wall with a hand over his mouth, except this time he wasn’t staring into the playful eyes of the Soldier. No, this was far more terrifying because these were James’ eyes, hard and merciless, even if the hint of lethality behind them was all the same.

With something akin to crazed desperation, Tony wished that the Soldier were here because even when they first met, the Soldier was protective of him. Caring, in his own bizarre way. Where were those reverent touches and whispered endearments?

He couldn’t speak, couldn’t even begin to communicate this strange desire, but it was as if James knew exactly what he was thinking because his hardened expression sharpened into a familiar knowing smirk.

“You’re so pathetic, solnishko,” the Soldier spat the nickname out, no affection behind it this time, “to think I ever wanted you. You, who controlled me, who wanted to turn me into a weapon. You’re no better than the Hydra scum. You reek just like them.”

All Tony could do was keep shaking his head, because no, no, that wasn’t true, please, that was never true, but there was no use. A single tear ran down his cheek and he couldn’t hold back the sob when the metal hand pulled away from his neck to wipe the tear away. The tenderness of the gesture only make the whole exchange even more cruel.

Tony didn’t get a chance to catch his breath however as the grip around his throat was back, far more merciless than before.

“You’re poison, Stark. You can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it.” James finally pulled his right hand away, dragged it down, and settled it splayed over Tony’s chest. Right over the arc reactor.

Wait— arc reactor? That wasn’t right, no, no, no, the arc reactor was gone, wasn’t it —

But Tony could feel the familiar heaviness, the pressure of the metal casing, an ever-present anvil sitting on his chest. It was hard to breathe. Metal around his throat. Metal buried in his chest. Metal in his heart.

“How long do we have to wait for Tony Stark to kill us all, hmm? Will this set it off?” James pushed down on the reactor and Tony keened in pain. The other man’s words weren’t making any sense, but he could have been speaking a different language for all Tony knew. The only thing he could focus on was the pressure on his chest and the hatred in those bright eyes.

“But you would do anything to make things right, wouldn’t you?” James crooned then and Tony nodded.

Yes, yes, anything, please, let me fix this, but he wasn’t even sure if he managed to say those words out loud.

“Then, there’s only one thing left. The only way you can help the world is by leaving it. Here, I’ll even help you, sweetheart.”
And as James said those last words, affection laced with mockery, the hand on Tony’s chest buried itself deep, deep inside him and pulled until the arc reactor was bright and glowing in James’ hand.

“Oh, it’s beautiful.”

Tony couldn’t breathe. His eyes pulled away from the reactor, from the only thing keeping him alive, to look at James, who was smiling down at the piece of precious tech in his hand, illuminated by the bright blue.

“Tony, this is your Ninth Symphony,” he said, but it wasn’t James’ smooth, deep voice coming out of those lips anymore. “What a masterpiece. Look at that.” He spun the arc reactor to take it in from all sides. Tony knew what words Obie’s voice would utter next.

“This is your legacy.”

There was no more air in his lungs and his broken heart was being ripped apart by the shrapnel inside. He was going to die.

“Boss?”

Friday. That was Friday. Why was she even here? Tony opened his mouth to respond, to tell her it was going to be okay, that she didn’t have to worry, but no sound came out of him. There was only the roaring in his ears and the bright blue glow of the reactor, reflected in those eyes he still loved, would always love.

Tony hated that Friday had to see him die like this, but he knew she would be alright. All of them would be.

They will be— “Boss, please! Concentrate on my—” so much better off— “—are having a severe night—” without you, Stark—

“BOSS!”

Tony’s eyes flew wide open as he desperately gasped for air, clawing at this own chest— fuck, the reactor, it was gone, it was gone and he was dying— only to see the Iron Man suit hovering above him, the bright blue eyes illuminating his otherwise dark surroundings. The suit immediately backed away, palms up and out in the universal I’m unarmed gesture, as Friday tried to give him more room.

“Breathe, Boss. Inhale, for one, two, three, four, hold, and exhale,” Friday spoke through the tinny voice of the suit. “You’re safe. You are in Beijing, China. It is Monday, 4:12 am local time,” she rattled off the date and what Tony’s brain vaguely registered as the name of a hotel, “the temperature outside is 53 degrees Fahrenheit with gusts of wind upward of 10 miles per hour.”

The voice was meant to be soothing and usually, JARVIS rattling off facts— no, JARVIS wasn’t here anymore, JARVIS was dead, dead, dead— would’ve helped, but Tony still couldn’t breathe, no matter what count he kept up in his head. He squeezed his eyes shut when his whole body seized on a painful spasm and he let out a strangled, desperate noise, like some wounded animal, and before his brain could even recognize the action, the rest of him was scrambling off the bed, in the direction of the bathroom.

He wasn’t sure if he made it in time because he nearly blacked out, but by the time his brain came back online, Tony was throwing up over the toilet, feeling like all of his guts were twisting inside out and attempting to violently leave his body alongside the acid and the bile. After a minute, his body had nothing left to expel, but it still spasmed, over and over, and he kept dry heaving painfully,
clutching the toilet like a lifeline.

After an eternity, the spasms stopped, but he didn’t feel any better. Empty, except his head, which was stuffed full of cotton— well, cotton full of barbed wire, really. His whole body was on fire, yet somehow strangely cold at the core, and there were still echoes bouncing back and forth in his head, trying to crack open his skull with how loud they were.

You were the one who ruined this, who broke all of us up.

Abrasive, narcissistic alcoholic who sleeps around.

You took advantage of a vulnerable man.

You’re no better than the Hydra scum.

You’re poison, Stark.

This is your legacy.

“Boss?”

He was too busy choking on his tears which rolled down his cheeks and into his beard, one after the other, to notice that Friday had moved the suit into the bathroom and settled into a kneeling position several feet away.

“Is there anything I can do? Please let me call Colonel Rhodes. Or get Miss Potts, or call Mr. Barnes —”

“No,” he rasped out, throat burning from the acid— and he could still feel the phantom grip of metal fingers crushing until there was nothing left of him— “do not contact anyone without my permission.”

Even through the near darkness of the bathroom and the tears in his eyes, he swore the suit was frowning at him. “I really must insist. This is the worst night terror I’ve seen since— since I’ve been on duty, Boss. You can’t carry the whole world on your shoulders. You need someone to help you.”

“I got you, baby girl,” he tried for levity and instead had to hack up and spit out more bile that rose up in his throat. God, he felt like absolute shit and the mere idea of having someone else here was sending his whole system into panic mode.

He was almost certain that if he heard James’ voice right now, he would break down completely. Another sob escaped him, as he seemed to have no control over his body anymore. No matter what, he couldn’t shake the vivid, life-like images of what he just lived through.

Maybe that wasn’t a nightmare, maybe it was a premonition.

He was a man of science and he didn’t believe in future sight, but he was also a man who fought gods and tangled with magic and had seen the other side of space. He didn’t know what was real anymore.

Outright sobbing now, he pressed his forehead against the cool porcelain, uncaring that he would’ve found this disgusting and unsanitary in any other moment. It was the only relief he could find against the burning heat he could feel against every inch of his skin.

Friday’s heavy footsteps alerted him to her leaving, but she was back seconds later. He lifted his
head just enough to see that the suit was back to kneeling, this time with one of the pillows in Friday’s lap.

“Would it help to rest your head here instead? Toilets are not very sanitary, Boss.”

At least his sweet girl knew him well enough to always have his back. Slowly, so as not to jostle the tattered pieces of his digestive system— and his shattered heart— he crawled over and lowered his head onto the pillow, curling into himself with his arms around his knees. He felt Friday’s metallic fingers in his hair a moment later and despite her utmost gentleness, he couldn’t help his flinch.

Too much like another set of familiar metal fingers and Tony couldn’t handle it— because they were choking him, just like—

Friday pulled away immediately with a quiet “Sorry, boss.” She didn’t touch him again and instead began to murmur information - something about the clean energy contract they were supposed to renegotiate tomorrow— or was it already today? — then details about the foundation he and Rhodey were setting up to help wounded veterans that needed prosthetics. Numbers, dates, times, and names, all in that quiet robotic tone, with just a hint of her Irish lilt, that was strangely the most soothing thing Tony could think of as he laid there and silently wept.

Desperately wishing James were there to hold him while simultaneously terrified of seeing the man again only made him choke on his tears that much harder.

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Tony’s hands were still shaking when he stepped out of the Iron Man suit and onto the landing dock of the Compound. He was home, with Beijing and that whole messy trip finally behind him. It felt like goddamn deja vu, except this time, he had no idea how he was going to face James.

At least Steve fucking Rogers wouldn’t be in his kitchen this time around.

Oh god. He hoped.

Fuck his stupid night terrors.

Tony spent the rest of that night wide awake, eventually moving back to the bed under Friday’s watchful gaze, and after several horrible hours that dragged on for a damn eternity and a half, his body slowly, agonizingly so, came back to feeling on the right side of human. While the subsequent migraine unfortunately lasted through morning, noon, and night, and didn’t abate until he ended up falling asleep for a few hours on the plane back to the States, at least come morning, he no longer felt like his skin was on fire and his guts were trying to climb right out of him.

When they met up for an early breakfast to strategize, he didn’t tell Pepper about his hellish night, but really, he didn’t have to. She’d seen him at his lowest before. After Afghanistan, after nights of booze and drugs, after violent panic attacks. It took all but one glance for her to note the bags under his eyes and the tremble in his hand and the shades he refused to take off even inside the building— damn migraine splitting his skull in half— but at least this time, he knew that she knew it wasn’t because of his typical self-destructive behavior.

At any other time, Pep’s scrutinizing gaze would’ve had Tony itching to run away, but for once, he actually welcomed it. He missed Pepper, lectures and admonishments and all, and her company was much appreciated. Needed even. The familiar smell of her perfume, the way the early morning sun reflected in her hair, the gentle way she squeezed his shoulder before she took her seat at the table, it all served as a tangible reminder that this was Tony’s reality, not the convoluted world of his
night terror.

Said reminder narrowed her eyes at him knowingly.

“On a scale of one to ten, how bad was last night?”

“A four,” Tony lied, mostly out of habit. It was a damn ten and they both knew it. Her piercing gaze softened.

“Alright, here’s what we’re going to do. Quick breakfast, then we meet with the senior executives to go over the revised contract. I’ll do most of the talking, all I need from you is 30 minutes of your charming smile. I have my make-up in my room, we can make you presentable enough for the meeting. As soon as we have their signatures on the proverbial paper, we’re getting into the jet and going home and god help anyone in that board room if they decide to be difficult. I will rain hellfire on them and still get us out of there within the hour. Does that sound doable?”

God, he really did love Pepper and in the bright light of day, it was easier to ignore the voice in the back of his head that kept whispering that he didn’t deserve her. Pepper was solid and real and here. She wasn’t leaving him behind.

“I could kiss you right now, Pep.”

“Please don’t,” she didn’t miss a beat and focused back on the menu in front of her. “Your boyfriend, despite being one of the sweetest, most polite people I’ve ever met, is frankly terrifying.”

Tony had spent all night pointedly trying to avoid thinking about James— and failing when his mind kept replaying the nightmare— but he couldn’t help the tired snort he let out now. “What, James, terrifying? He’s like a giant puppy… with a killer robot arm, but I stand by my point. Also, not my boyfriend, Pep.”

What Tony had said was apparently more interesting than the menu because Pepper’s eyes were back on him. “You were cuddling on the couch, then proceeded to flirt like teenagers. And let’s not mention the whole ‘stupidly in love with each other’ part. The two of you are boyfriends, Tony. Accept it.”

He really wished it were that easy and for a brief period of time, it did seem just that easy. The flirty text messages during meetings, the affectionate nicknames, both of them testing the waters with each other. Before last night, Tony was so determined to explore this thing between him and James. He had hope.

It was hell of a lot harder to scrounge up some hope with the image of Steve kissing James, of blue eyes looking down at him with hatred and disgust, of James ripping out the reactor—

He shook his head to clear away the horrid, high def images and focused on Pepper instead. She was frowning.

“Can you eat something? Is there any nausea, upset stomach? Headache?” she asked and Tony was infinitely glad that she let the “James” subject drop.

“Migraine.”

“Did you take something for it?”

When Tony shook his head, she gave him an exasperated look and reached into her purse to pull out a bottle of pills, three of which were handed over to him.
“Ibuprofen. It’ll take the edge off, at the very least. We’ll get you something bland for breakfast so it doesn’t upset your stomach, but you need something in your system.”

“Bossy, bossy,” Tony teased, but he felt just a little bit warmer inside. It was good to be taken care of like this.

Pepper’s knowing smile made the warmth spread further still. “That’s because I am the boss.”

Almost a full day had passed since then, between the meeting (which went well, thank god), the flight back, and Tony’s own quick flight in the suit. It must’ve been around ten in the morning, so most of the Compound residents should’ve been awake, since Tony was really the only one who kept horrible sleeping hours, but thankfully the landing pad was empty, only Friday’s voice welcoming him back through the overhead speakers (unnecessarily, since she had never really left his side).

His sneaky, rogue AI did warn Rhodey and Alice about him coming back, but thankfully she did actually listen to Tony’s order not to inform James. While he couldn’t avoid the man forever— didn’t want to avoid him forever—he just needed time to get his head in order first.

Lab. He needed to head down to the lab, where everything was familiar and safe. Maybe drag Bruce down there too, hug the life out of the man, and let their science techno babble soothe some of Tony’s inner turmoil away.

That sounded like a solid plan and Tony took the emergency stairs connected to the landing pad straight to the basement level, avoiding the rest of the Compound.

Tony could already breathe easier with his beautiful lab in sight and he hurried in through the door when it opened with a near silent hiss of compressed air. Home, sweet home.

However, it took all of two seconds for elation to turn into apprehension at the sound of a familiar voice, coming from the other side of the lab.

“Dum-E, no, come on. You need to give me the tennis ball back if you want me to throw it again, you goof. I swear, you’re just one big robotic puppy, aren’t ya?” There was a pause. “Also, I think your dad is finally home. About time, right?” The words were made to sound like a conspiratorial whisper, but they were said loud enough for Tony to hear.

Of course James would immediately sense his presence with those spy instincts of his and Tony wanted to run, turn around and run until the echoes of Obadiah’s words coming out of James’ mouth stopped tumbling through his head, but there was no running away, especially when James appeared a second later from behind one of the bulky benches where he apparently was hiding out with Dum-E.

“Tony!” he exclaimed, a smile blossoming on his face— warm, so warm, with no hint of disgust or hate. “I didn’t realize you were arriving today! Barely heard from you yesterday. I was beginning to get a little worried.”

Tony’s stomach performed a complicated somersault as he watched James get closer, but instead of the usual fluttering butterflies, it just hurt.

“Hey, James—”

Ugh, he calls you James?

“I’m— I’m sorry I didn’t keep in touch. Yesterday was a bit of a blur and then I just ended up
passing out on the flight back.”

James’ smile didn’t dim, but his gaze softened. “That’s alright, I’m sure things were hectic.” It didn’t take more than a few seconds for James to cross the remaining distance between them and before Tony had the chance to react, the super soldier was gathering him into his arms, pulling him in close.

“Just happy that you’re finally home.”

*I’m so glad you’re finally home, Stevie.*

Tony wished he didn’t feel that flutter of panic deep in his belly. “Yeah, me too.” His breath stuttered to a stop, but the touch was gentle and the embrace was warm, so he forced his own hands to settle on the other man’s hips. *It’s just a damn hug, Stark, get it together.*

“Missed you,” James murmured into Tony’s hair and pressed a kiss to the top of his head, but all that did was force Tony to remember the image of Steve and Harley.

How was he supposed to be around James if every interaction, every word seemed to push Tony back into that nightmare? A part of him desperately wanted to press in closer, wrap his arms around James and let that presence—*solid, warm, real*—anchor him to the here and now, but the rest of his treacherous brain kept screaming that he was in danger, that he needed to *run.*

James carefully pushed them apart, hands on Tony’s shoulders, and Tony looked up to see a small, confused frown on the other man’s face.

“You alright?” James asked. “You seem really tense, sweetheart.”

*The only way you can help the world is by leaving it. Here, I’ll even help you, sweetheart.*

Tony swallowed hard, the phantom taste of palladium burning on his tongue. *Death.* “Yeah, m’fine. Just hell of a trip, you know?”

The frown turned more contemplative as James’ clever eyes scrutinized Tony, who was sure the super soldier was picking up on every sign of Tony’s exhaustion. His thumb was drawing lazy lines across Tony’s clothed shoulder, which was almost soothing, *almost* relieving some of said tension, but then James’ metal hand dragged itself up to settle against Tony’s neck and Tony’s entire existence narrowed down to the weight of vibranium against his fragile throat.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t *breathe* and his whole body spasmed, a painful, full body flinch that had him stumbling back, away from James, desperate to put space between them. Instincts blaring and adrenaline rushing through his veins, Tony could barely think, but he started to cough, pretending *that* was the reason he pulled away.

“Sorry,” he stuttered out around the fake coughing, “must’ve swallowed funny—went down the wrong way,” he rubbed his throat, coughed a few more times for good measure, all the while taking small steps in the direction of the door. *Away from James.*

After his “coughing fit” subsided, Tony forced himself to look at the other man. James stood unmoving in the same spot, hands raised as if he wanted to reach out to Tony, to help, but forcing himself to stand still.

It was the look on his face though that broke Tony’s already aching heart because it was obvious James could see right through him. There was some sort of realization etched across those beautiful features, that painted *guilt* across those blue eyes.
Tony had no idea what he was supposed to do, so he fell back on his usual defensive mechanism. “Whew, don’t know where that came from. Definitely swallowed funny. But I’ll, uh—”

“Tony—”

The note of hurt in James’ voice clawed at Tony’s heart, but he just kept talking. “I think I’m just gonna get back to my quarters, gonna clean up and sleep this whole trip off like a bad hangover.” He cleared his throat again, this time actually needing to stave off the knot of nerves and tension building up at the back of his throat. “We’ll, uh— we’ll catch up later, all that good stuff. See each other later or something, yeah?” It felt like a lie and Tony couldn’t even meet James’ eyes anymore. “I’ll see ya, Ja— James.”

This time, Tony didn’t stop himself from running and he let his shaking legs carry him out of the lab, although he got about as far as the second level staircase before he collapsed onto the cold concrete.

*Inhale, one, two, three, four. Hold, and exhale for five, six…*

Keeping up the count to stave off the anxiety attack, he dropped his head against the wall where he was huddled on the stairs, hating that he was so glad James didn’t follow him.

How the hell was he supposed deal with this?

Chapter End Notes

All I can do is ask that you guys trust me not to drag this out too long. :P And since I like my 3:1 comfort to hurt ratio, I will owe you guys so much fluff and winteriron cuddles. Soon.

Preview of upcoming attractions: Tony is coping, Bucky is brooding, and I think it’s about time to test out the triggers again!
“So you think he’s ready?”

“I’ve gone over the data with a fine tooth comb. We’re as ready as we can be, given the number of variables.”

“I just don’t want to put him through that again until we’re absolutely sure—”

“You and I both know we will never be absolutely sure, Dr. Stark.”

Tony gave the woman sitting next to him a playful glare. “Why do you always insist on calling me that, Fatima?”

“Because you have three doctorates—”

“Technically four now—”

“—and that is your proper title. Why do you insist on calling me Fatima?”

“Because in our one and only session, you tried to get me to talk about my father. We’re on first name basis for the rest of our lives, whether we like it or not.”

Tony’s explanation was accompanied by a cheeky grin, which Fatima countered with an indulgent eye roll and a smile of her own.

“Fair enough, Tony. Although, in my defense, all I did was ask you how your day was.”

“Well, you’re a shrink, I have daddy issues, I just assumed that’s what you wanted to hear from me!”

“You know what happens when one assumes.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he waved her comment off with his own good-natured head shake and turned back to James’ brain scans displayed on the large glass table before them. In his peripheral, he saw Fatima let out a small sigh and return to her own examination of the images.
“I really do wish you’d take me up on my offer to give therapy another try. Look how much it’s helped Mr. Barnes.”

“I won’t deny that he’s doing better, but James— he’s a stronger man than I am. I just—” he turned back to look at her and grimaced. “It’s too late for me, I think.”

“Tony, it is never too late to get help.”

He just shrugged noncommittally.

Fatima’s expression made it clear she wanted to say more, but after a beat of silence, she let the topic go. “As always, I won’t pressure you into anything. Just know that the offer stands. You can always talk to me, Tony. Either as your therapist or as your friend.”

Tony smiled at the offer and it was a relief to realize that his smile was genuine. For as long as Tony had known Fatima, he had always found something calming about her presence. Maybe it was the way she spoke in that soft but sure tone, or maybe it was the no-nonsense attitude or the very real kindness she had always shown him, even when he acted like an immature idiot. Whatever it was, Tony was infinitely glad she was here with him now.

“I appreciate that, I really do. Maybe— maybe someday,” he added with another shrug. He could face aliens and assassins and certain death, but talking about his issues scared him more than all of those things combined. Funny how that worked sometimes.

A few days ago, he felt roughly the same way about facing James, which meant Tony ended up basically avoiding the poor man. Tony hated it, absolutely hated hiding out like a coward, but he just needed some time alone. That image of James, smiling down at the arc reactor in his hand as Tony choked to death, it was seared into his brain and at first, he just couldn’t stop feeling like a hollow shell of himself, something that was empty, broken, and lost.

Tony was lucky though, even if he sometimes lost track of that, and surprisingly, he didn’t feel quite as broken anymore.

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Sitting on the cold stairs wasn’t doing Tony’s back any favors, so between that and the fear that James would follow him after all, Tony knew he needed to move. He staggered back onto his feet, determined to go and lock himself up in his quarters to cope on his own, thank you very much, but his apparently disobedient legs carried him straight to Rhodye’s office instead, where he spent a good minute staring at the closed door, hesitating to come inside. He felt stupid. Why couldn’t he just get over it? It was a dumb nightmare, he already lived through so much worse. But his hand was shaking and it was hard to breathe, and he just— he needed his best friend right now.

He pushed the door open, knowing it’d be unlocked and Rhodye, who was sitting at his desk, looked up right away. At first, he was smiling when he realized it was Tony, but it took all of two seconds for the smile to turn into a concerned frown.

“Tony, you alright, man? What the hell happened to you?”

Tony must’ve looked just shit if that was all it took for Rhodye’s mother hen instincts to kick in and he let out a sigh, closing the door behind him. “I’m fine, just, uh— just had a—” he gestured nonsensically and stopped, dragging in a haggard breath, feeling so vulnerable all of the sudden and yes, he apparently did look like shit because Rhodye was already on his feet and making his way over. The solid, warm hands that settled on Tony’s shoulder felt so much like home that Tony
couldn’t help it. He just crumpled against Rhodey’s chest right then and there, like his strings were cut.

Rhodey didn’t hesitate to gather him into his arms. “Tones, what the hell is going on? You’re scaring me, man.”

Tony shook his head against Rhodey’s shoulder, desperately willing himself not to cry. “It’s nothing — it’s stupid, so stupid and I just—” Fuck, he felt like he was drowning, but then one of Rhodey’s hands began to rub up and down his back and the gentle movement, imbued with thirty years of mutual comfort, support, and love, helped Tony keep his head above water.

“You wanna talk about it?” Rhodey asked and Tony just shrugged, still struggling to find the right words.

“I had a— I had a night terror last night— or whenever I last slept, the time zones are fucking me up... It was— it was really bad, it felt so damn real, and I’m still— I’m not okay, Rhodey...” he whispered that final part, feeling exposed and so damn small. But Rhodey’s touch was comforting and it made the world a little less terrifying, a little less cruel.

“Can you tell me what it was about? Was it the space thing again? Or— fuck, was it Afghanistan and Stane? Rogers?”

Rhodey listing out Tony’s usual nightmares only made him realize just how fucked-up his head was, but even so, he apparently managed to find a new nightmare to add to the list. But was he willing to even talk about it? Fuck, it wasn’t even about torture or falling or dying and it still left him so broken —

“I was alone... All of you were here, but none of you needed me or wanted me...” It took him a moment to realize he said that out loud, but once the words were out, he couldn’t stop (but that was okay because this was Rhodey and Rhodey had meant safety and home and family for as long as Tony could remember).

“Everyone was back— Steve and the others, I mean... All of you were together, happy, like a real family. Didn’t even look at me. I was just—” I wasn’t needed, I was a burden, I was the one who broke it all apart, he meant to say, but he didn’t have to. Rhodey knew him well enough. His hand was carding through Tony’s hair now.

“Anything else?”

Tony hid his sniffle in Rhodey’s shoulder. “James pulled me aside, told me I was brainwashing him like Hydra, and then ripped the reactor out of my chest, ‘cept it was Obie’s words coming out of his mouth when he did it...”

“Jesus, Tones...” was Rhodey’s only response when Tony trailed off, and he followed it with a long, drawn-out sigh and another minute of silence.

The hug was nice though and Rhodey was warm and Tony was pretty sure the man used the same cologne since college, so even the smell was familiar and Tony let himself sink into it.

Eventually, Rhodey ushered him over to the sofa (where Tony usually spent his time lounging and annoying Rhodey while the man worked) and when they settled in, Rhodey pulled him closer again, his arm around Tony’s shoulders. Tony came willingly, resting his head on Rhodey’s chest and letting the man’s heartbeat soothe his nerves. That heartbeat was important, so, so important and Tony never stopped being grateful for it because it was only a year ago that he almost lost that—
could’ve lost his best friend, all because of a stupid, pointless fight—

“You gotta stop thinking so loud, Tones, I’m pretty sure they can hear you up in Canada,” Rhodey squeezed his shoulder and Tony poked him in the side in retaliation.

“They can hear you up in Canada,” he grumbled back, enjoying Rhodey’s exasperated, quiet huff of laughter.

“We really need to get you some better comebacks, man,” Rhodey teased back. “But we’ll work on that later. Right now, I just want you to listen to me, okay? You know I don’t do this lovey-dovey crap often, but I’m willing to make an exception today.” That was mostly a lie. Rhodey never shied away from this, at least not when Tony really needed him.

Tony’s silent nod prompted Rhodey to continue. “Nightmares suck, there’s no way around that. Yours suck extra hard because life takes sick pleasure out of throwing shit your way. Honestly, I’m glad most of the bastards who hurt you are dead, otherwise I’d have to go get my hands dirty. Still might if Captain Jackass and Co. come back and decide to—”

“Rhodey, you know you can’t—” Tony tried to protest, the need to just keep the peace between everybody overpowering everything else, but Rhodey shushed him.

“I can and I will and there’s not a damn person in this entire Compound who’s going to stop me. Hell, most of them will be my back-up. But that’s not the point. The point is that your nightmares suck and so does real life, but real life sucks just a little bit less, okay? Mostly because I’m a kick-ass best friend in real life.”

Tony couldn’t argue with that, but he frowned at Rhodey’s next words.

“I wasn’t always a great friend though. Shouldn’t have taken your suit, shouldn’t have fought you when you were drunk off your ass and fuckin’ dying—”

“You didn’t know—”

“I should’ve, okay? I should’ve, but I didn’t and I’m sorry for that. Sorry for leaving you alone with the vultures too. I should’ve been here. Maybe then they wouldn’t have taken advantage of you the way they did… But I’m here now.” Rhodey stopped to make sure Tony had his attention. “And I’m not going anywhere. You get that? You’re stuck with me for the long haul. You’re my best friend. That hasn’t changed since I found you drunk and puking in all your reckless teenage glory at MIT. And if you think anyone else, especially any of them, can replace you, then you’re the dumbest genius I’ve ever met.”

“I’ve been told that before.”

“Well, that’s okay. Here, I’ll use small words,” Rhodey pulled away so he could hold Tony’s face in his hands to make sure they were looking at each other. “You’re my best friend and I love your dumb ass and I’m not leaving you behind. You’ve given me so damn much over the years— hell, Tones, you gave me my legs back, and I still haven’t figured out how to thank you for that, but even if none of that were true, even if you ended up broke tomorrow, and I was back in a wheelchair, and we had to live off my military pension in some crappy apartment in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere, you’d still be the only best friend I’d want.”

It was Rhodey’s turn to stop and pull in a deep breath. Tony wanted to tease— see how hard this emotional shit is?— but he was pretty sure that if he tried to say anything, he’d just burst into tears again and he’d cried enough in the last two days to last a goddamn lifetime. He couldn’t even meet
Rhodey’s eyes anymore (there were tears glistening in his best friend’s eyes too and Tony was really bad at this sort of thing), so instead, he just nodded and leaned back against Rhodey’s shoulder.

“You’re pretty dumb too,” Tony whispered after giving them both a moment to compose themselves, “if you think you need to thank me for anything. Honestly, I think I’m a little offended.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Rhodey let out a watery laugh. “You do kinda owe me for all the times I pulled your butt out of the fire.”

Tony’s own chuckle was agreement enough and he let himself enjoy the comforting presence of his best friend next to him for a few minutes before Rhodey spoke up again.

“You know, I try to avoid this even more than the lovey-dovey stuff, but, uh—” Rhodey hesitated and Tony’s attention perked up, “but the whole Barnes thing… You know the nightmare was just your brain coming up with nonsense, right? I mean, I don’t want to write an endorsement speech for the guy or anything, but—” Rhodey let out a frustrated breath and Tony had to hide his smile in the man’s shoulder. Floundering, awkward Rhodey was a rare sight to see.

The man tried again. “Barnes wouldn’t hurt you, alright? He doesn’t think you’re brainwashing him, I don’t even know where you’re getting that idea from, and— and I’m pretty sure he’d rip that metal arm off first before ever hurting you.”

“Aw, you do like James after all,” Tony couldn’t help the sing-song notes of his teasing,”’cause that’s an endorsement speech, if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Oh, shut up,” Rhodey threw back good-naturedly. “I see the way he looks at you, okay? Like—like he’s seeing sunshine for the first time or like you’re the greatest thing since sliced bread or something, I dunno—I dunno, but it’s disgusting and I don’t want it in my Compound.” Rhodey waved an accusing finger around and Tony barely stifled a snicker. “Although frankly, I’m surprised and a little impressed that I haven’t caught the two of you making out in the common room like errant teenagers yet.”

Tony had to let out a snort. “Umm… you do know we’re not actually together, right?”

Rhodey turned to give Tony an incredulous look. “Wait. You’re shitting me, right?”

Tony shook his head slowly. “No, I’m not. I mean, there’s something there between us—”

“Oh trust me, there’s a whole lot of something—”

“—but yeah, we haven’t— hell, we haven’t even kissed. Had an opportunity here or there, but I’ve been— well, I’ve been trying really hard to be mature and responsible and avoid another giant disaster.”

The doubtful look on Rhodey’s face didn’t go away. “So what you’re telling me is that this whole ‘lovingly gaze into each other’s eyes’ thing and the flirting and— and you singing his praises every chance you get and him calling you every ‘sweetheart’ and ‘honey’ under the sun— that’s all been you two idiots just pining after each other and nothing more?”

“…Yes?”

“Oh for the love of—” Rhodey groaned and let his head fall back against the sofa, looking up at the ceiling. Probably searching for divine guidance. “That’s worse. I don’t know why, but that’s so much worse.”
“Hey,” Tony couldn’t help if he sounded a little offended, “I thought you’d appreciate me trying to be an adult about this. I mean— me and James— you can’t tell me that’s not the worse idea ever, given who we are. Given what happened.”

Rhodey took a moment to think before looking back at Tony. “Do you still hold what happened with your parents against him?”

“No. I’ve forgiven him for that, not that it was really his fault to begin with.”

“What about the whole ‘Civil War’ fiasco and Siberia? Barnes wasn’t brainwashed then.”

“I forgave him for that too.”

“Do you have feelings for him?”

Simple question, but the words felt like the most important thing in the world and they were whisper quiet when Tony finally said them. “I’m in love with him.”

Surprisingly, Rhodey’s thoughtful expression didn’t change (Tony expected frowning, or disbelieving laughter, or maybe Rhodey scrunching up his nose like he smelled something funny, maybe even that vein in his temple twitching once or twice).

The man did finally let out a hum though, before looping his arms behind his head and making himself more comfortable. “Well, I can’t say I didn’t see this coming.” Rhodey actually laughed when he saw Tony’s confused frown. “I called it that day I met Barnes, when you ran the first memory simulation.”

“Wait… really? That day ended with me yelling at him and storming away!”

“True, but before his brain pulled up that Stark Expo memory, the two of you— well, you were your usual annoying self and he actually liked that, and then you were brushing your fingers through his hair, and oh boy, the both of you liked that— the two of you… you’re like damn magnets or something. You just— clicked, even back then, when all the shit was extra complicated.”

“Is this… is this you telling me I should— go for it?”

“Oh no, no, I am telling you no such thing,” Rhodey protested, but Tony didn’t miss the hint of a smirk on his best friend’s face. “All I’m saying is - that boy has it so bad for you, it’s ridiculous, and the Tony Stark I know would be willing to take a chance like that.”

“Is this the Tony Stark before or after half his friends stabbed him in the back?”

Instead of answering, Rhodey countered Tony’s question with his own. “You think Barnes is going to stab you in the back too?”

Did he think that? “No, James wouldn’t do that.”

“But you think once Rogers gets back, things will get complicated?”

“How could they not? They’re best friends, each other’s everything, 90 years of friendship or whatever… I’m not saying James would betray me and gleefully skip on over to the other side, but…”

“But once Rogers is back, there won’t be any room left for you in Barnes’ life,” Rhodey finished, once again proving that he knew Tony better than anyone else in the world. Thirty years of
friendship had to count for something after all.

“Yeah, and I’m not sure I can handle that. I’m terrified to let myself be that vulnerable again,” Tony confessed. “Terrified enough to give myself nightmares apparently.” His laugh was humorless. “Steve and him kissed before dream-James decided to pull an Obie, and now—I ran into James not even ten minutes ago and I basically had an anxiety attack. His words, the way he moves, the way the light reflects in his eyes—Every stupid thing takes me back to that nightmare.”

“Then spend a few days apart. Take some time to clear your mind.”

“And then? Even if the flashbacks stop, that still leaves me with— with a decision on my hands.”

“Yeah, it does. Look, Tones,” Rhodey let out a sigh, “I don’t know what the right answer is. I’m not gonna try and say that everything will be puppies and sunshine. Everything could go to hell in a hand basket and you could end up heartbroken again and— well, when this all started, I honestly wanted Barnes to stay the hell away from you. I thought the same thing you did - that once he was done with you, he’d run back to Rogers and leave you high and dry.”

“And now?”

“And now I think that he might be less of a shithead that I originally thought.”

“Wow, you are just the nicest guy, Platypus.”

“Yeah, I’m a real softie, I know,” Rhodey quipped back, but then shook his head. “What the hell am I even trying to say? Maybe it’s this - I think Barnes could actually be good for you, but I also can’t promise a happy ending. What I can promise you though is that even if everything goes belly up, even if Barnes turns out to be an ass like the rest of them, there are people here now who will stand by you. You’re not alone, Tony. You never have to be alone again.”

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Fatima was deep in thought when Tony glanced over, her hands expertly manipulating the holographic images in front of her, so Tony didn’t pick the conversation back up right away, instead letting his mind linger on some of the other moments from the past few days.

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Tony waited all of one second after the door opened to pounce and wrap his arms around a confused Bruce. The startled squeak the other scientist let out made Tony grin and just hug him harder.

“Hi there, Brucie. Long time no see.”

“Um— hi there, Tony,” Bruce stammered out, but at least his own arms snaked around Tony’s shoulders too. Bruce never hugged too tight, always worried about the Hulk, but Tony didn’t mind and he didn’t worry. Call him an idiot with no self-preservation skills, but the risk was worth it to remind Bruce that there was at least one person who wasn’t scared to be around him. Wasn’t scared to touch and prod and poke with sharp objects.

He finally did pull away, but his hands remained on the man’s shoulders. “Did ya miss me?”

Something in Bruce’s expression softened. “I really did— well, until just now when I was reminded you like to assault people with hugs.”
Tony’s grin only widened. “I’m sure my favorite green, mean monster machine appreciated the surprise.”

“You know he’s not big on surprises,” Bruce all but rolled his eyes, but the expression never lost that hint of a bashful smile, “but he misses his Tin Man too.”

“Aw, I miss him too! At some point, I need to put on the suit and you need to let the Big Guy out. It’ll be just like old times.”

“Hmm, do we really want the old times back though? Seem like things have changed a lot around here.”

“They sure have. We have a smoothie bar over in the West Wing and everything.” As expected, Bruce’s expression bordered on exasperated fondness now, as it often did around Tony, and he took that as a good sign. “I am so glad you’re back home though. I don’t know where you’ve been hanging out—”

“That’s a lie and we both know it.”

Tony had the good graces to look sheepish. “Okay, okay, I knew the general vicinity of where you’ve been hanging out, but I also knew you didn’t want me prying, so I just made sure no one else was trying to find you.”

“Thank you for that, really—”

“But it doesn’t matter where you were, I can bet it didn’t have fancy labs, amazing AIs, smoothie bars, and mostly importantly,” Tony winked, “me.”

Bruce’s smile was less shy now and Tony filed this away as a job well done. “You’re right as always, Tony. Didn’t even have much in the way of electricity.”

“Oh, you poor, precious, deprived scientist of mine,” Tony cooed just to annoy Bruce further and make the man blush a little, “we have so much catching up to do.”

Bruce agreed, but then his expression turned serious. “Listen, Tony, before we get caught up in your whirlwind of science madness, can we, uh— can I just say a few things first? I should’ve brought this up when you called, but honestly, I think this is better said in person.”

Ah crap, so much for the good mood. Tony wanted to cringe because he was deliberately trying to avoid this type of “serious business” conversation. Bruce was back, which Tony hoped meant that the man wasn’t too angry at him for working with Ross, but Bruce’s presence could’ve just as easily meant that his need to be back home outweighed his anger towards Tony.

But it was obvious Bruce wanted to talk, so Tony braced himself for the inevitable.

“Sure, pal, you have the floor.”

“Good, thank you,” Bruce nodded to himself and sat down in the armchair, motioning for Tony to take a seat on the bed. He took his glasses off and absentmindedly began to wipe at them with the edge of his shirt. “I just wanted to say... that I’m sorry, Tony. I’m sorry I disappeared for as long as I did. I should’ve handled things better. I was a bad friend.”

Tony had to just sit and blink at Bruce for the few seconds it took his brain— exhausted brain, it wasn’t his fault— to process that.
“Wait, you’re apologizing to me?”

Bruce nodded, giving Tony a look that clearly said Bruce thought he was extra slow on the uptake today. Maybe he was.

"But— I was the one who— I was working with Ross!" Tony finally blurted out, because he just wanted to rip that band-aid off, consequences be damned.

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

"Then why aren’t you mad at me?"

“I was mad at you,” Bruce began, but before Tony had time to tell himself I told you so, Bruce continued "for about as long as it took me to find out that you put Ross behind bars. Tony, you managed something no one else had the guts to do. That move made you some powerful enemies, I’m sure, but the fact that the man of my nightmares is rotting away in a cell somewhere… that’s incredible and I’m not sure I can ever thank you for that.”

Tony wondered whether he could invent an update for his brain, so it wouldn’t malfunction every time people tried to thank him. Seriously, first Rhodey, now Bruce? He didn’t even want to bring up James, who seemed to get some twisted satisfaction out of making Tony blush and stutter with every sweet, earnest “Thank you, Tony.”

“Yeah, well… He was a slimy, evil bastard. I just did what should’ve been done long ago. The only reason I worked with him in the first place,” Tony scrunched up his nose, memories of last year souring his mood, “was because I had no other choice. He was gun-ho about being involved in the Accords. It was obvious he saw them as an opportunity to get us under his thumb, which is why I had to make sure someone was there to push back. It was meant to be the whole team… A unified front, all that jazz… I thought—I just thought that—”

“If the Avengers stood together, there’d be nothing they couldn’t accomplish?”

Tony gave Bruce a withering look, but he didn’t deny the words. That was the plan, wasn’t it? So much for Tony’s good intentions.

“Kinda hate that I was right that first time,” Bruce continued. “We were a ticking time bomb. I’m just sorry it ended up going ‘boom’ in your face. You didn’t deserve what happened, Tony, and I wish—” Bruce gestured with his glasses in frustration, struggling with whatever he wanted to say. “Me wishing I was here to support you sounds trite, let’s be honest. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty and I don’t know how I would’ve reacted to Ross and the Accords had I been here the whole time.”

Tony was never naive enough to believe otherwise and yeah, it did hurt a little, acknowledging that Bruce would’ve likely sided with Steve last year, but at least they were being honest about it.

“But all of that aside, I do regret leaving the way I did. Friends don’t abandon friends.”

“Bruce, come on, you did what you had to do. Being at the Compound, around her, it was killing you—”

“Yeah, but you were hurting too, and someone recently gave me a very blunt reminder that I could’ve done things differently. Kept myself safe without leaving behind one of my only friends.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Bruce. “Did Rhodey have a talk with you by any chance?"

“Sure did.”
Tony let himself dramatically fall back onto the bed with a groan. “Why does that man insist on threatening everyone within a one-mile radius of me? I swear, it’s like he’s itching to give everyone some bizarre version of the shovel talk.”

He could hear Bruce laugh quietly. “Pretty sure he does that because he loves you, Tony.”

Tony didn’t say anything, but he was smiling. It was a nice feeling, not having the compulsion to doubt that those words were true. He raised himself up on his elbows when the other man cleared his throat.

“Thank you for opening your home to me again and I’d like to do things differently this time. I’d like to be a better friend to you, if you’re willing to give me another chance.”

In the face of sentiment like that, what else could Tony do but hop off the bed and drag Bruce back into another hug? He reveled in the fact that this time, Bruce’s own embrace was just a little bit tighter.

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Tony was hoping he wasn’t smiling like a loon at the holograms his hands were idly shifting back and forth because poor Fatima didn’t need any more reasons to think he was crazy. He tried to focus back on the information in front of him, but his mind kept drifting back, to memories of real life rather than nightmares.

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“I’m glad to finally see you back, Tony.”

“Hey, Viz.” Tony smiled and settled in at the table across from the android, who got up to pour a cup of coffee. “Whatcha doing here this early in the morning?”

“I was feeling a bit— anxious, I believe is the right word, so I decided to watch the sunrise and read as a way to keep my mind busy. How was your trip to Beijing?”

The cup of coffee was placed in front of Tony without a word and he reached for it with a quiet “Thank you,.” gratefully gulping down the black-as-tar, scalding hot drink. If this were James making it, there’d be sugar in it, but Tony tried not to let that thought ruin the moment. His only interaction with James since yesterday morning was a text, telling James that everything was fine and Tony just needed a few days to himself. James’ simple response, I’m always here if you need me, made Tony hate himself just a bit more.

“Beijing was— well, let’s just say I don’t think I’ll be coming back,” Tony finally said after roughly a quarter of the cup was warm and settled in his belly. “Is everything alright with you? Something giving you the android blues?”

“I believe I am alright. There is no particular external dilemma I am struggling with. I am simply feeling… melancholy, perhaps? I find it difficult to choose the appropriate words for it.”

“Nah, don’t feel too bad. We humans can’t figure out what we feel half the time either.”

Vision let out a quiet hum as he looked back at the sunrise, giving Tony the time to savor a slower sip of his coffee.

“Hey, Viz, do you, uh—” Tony eventually spoke up, stomach doing weird acrobatics as he wondered why he was even asking this. “Do you miss her?”
Vision looked back to give Tony a quizzical look. “Ms. Maximoff, you mean?”

A throb of pain lanced through Tony’s head and he rubbed at his temple while trying not to grimace at either Vision or the coffee. “Yeah. I mean, you two were close before everything went to shit, right?”

The puzzled look on Vision’s face turned into something more scrutinizing as the android cocked his head to the side, but after a second or two of analyzing Tony, Vision went back to enjoying the morning sky outside. “We were close, that is correct, and to answer your question… Yes, I do miss her, very much.”

Tony’s heart clenched. See, this was his fault, wasn’t it? He shouldn’t have made Vision fight her, he shouldn’t have forced him to pick a side—

“But I am also incredibly angry with her, in a way that is very new to me. While I believe I could have forgiven her for attacking me in order to escape, I find it very difficult to remain composed, to remain merciful, when I think back to her actions against you and the others. It is clear now that in Germany, she wouldn’t have hesitated to kill if necessary, even though she was fighting allies. I am now also privy to the extent of her transgressions against yourself and Dr. Banner, among others. It is an incredibly—painful experience to think about her hurting any one of you.” He looked back at Tony. “Is that strange? To simultaneously miss someone while never wanting to see them again? I find it to be an odd dichotomy, but it is how I feel nonetheless.”

It took a little bit of time for Tony to respond. The android was always unfailingly straightforward, painfully so at times, and Tony had a hard time dealing with this type of honest, righteous anger when it was on his behalf.

“It’s not weird, Viz,” Tony finally said, trying to keep a calm, sure tone. “Conflicting emotions are pretty normal for us fleshy humans.” He let out a weak laugh. “Seems like we’re rubbing off on you.”

“Do you have experiences like this as well?”

Vision’s question made Tony immediately think of James, of wanting nothing more than to see the man while being terrified of that exact thing, but that wasn’t exactly what Vision was looking for. There was another example (Tony was a master at clashing emotions), but it was one he never put into words before.

“I sure do. I actually I feel like that— about Steve sometimes.”

The confession weighed heavy on his tongue, but this was Vision, who didn’t have a judgmental bone in his body and in the soft light of early dawn, the words didn’t feel nearly as terrifying as they should have.

Tony still felt compelled to explain. “We used to be friends, you know? Or at least I thought we were. I mean, sure, we fought like cats and dogs, but there were times when— when I would make one of my dumb jokes and he would just get it and smile that big smile of his, or when I’d pass out on the couch, only to wake up with a blanket over me and a note that said there were leftovers saved for me in the fridge. The way we fought on the battlefield… we wouldn’t even need words, we’d just know what the other one needed and—I trusted him to have my back and he trusted me to catch him.” Okay, that was a whole lot of words about a topic he avoided like the plague and Tony was feeling all sorts of choked up all of the sudden. “I miss that—I miss him like burning sometimes…” he managed, after a shuddering breath, “but there’s not a doubt in my mind that I don’t want to see him again. And if I do… I’ll either go into a full blown panic attack or keep punching him in the face
until I feel something other than fury and betrayal.”

When Tony finally stopped speaking, Vision took a moment to respond. “Thank you for sharing that with me, Tony, I know this is a difficult topic. I—” the android looked almost sheepish, which was a strange expression on his face, “I want to say that I am glad I am not alone in feeling this confusing mix of emotions, but that seems cruel, doesn’t it? I am certainly not glad that you suffer the same type of pain that I do…”

Vision’s earnestness made Tony smile. “Nah, don’t worry about, Viz. Commiserating is part of the package. It’s okay to feel happy that you’re not alone, that someone else understands how you feel.”

“Then I am indeed glad that I have you to ‘commiserate with’,” Vision said simply and smiled as well, making Tony feel downright shy all of the sudden.

“Yeah, me too… I should— I should probably head over to my office. I bet my inbox is flooded by now. Let me know if you still need some cheering up though. We can prank Rhodey or something. Oh, and thanks again for the coffee,” he lifted the empty mug for emphasis and began to get up.

“You are very welcome. Although, Tony, before you go, if I may,” the android held out a hand to catch Tony’s attention, who stopped to give Vision a curious look.

“What’s up?”

“I was trying to figure this out earlier, but there is something— off about your aura—”

“My what now?”

“The energy every being gives off, the—”

“Swear to god, if you say ‘magic’, Viz, you are grounded.”

Vision didn’t fall for that. “You and I both know that you aren’t nearly as ignorant about magic as you pretend to be. After all, you’ve developed anti-magical barriers that were able to keep me out of the Hulk containment pod during the Winter Soldier episode.”

“You’re not still sore about that, are ya?” Tony winked at Vision who only let a small hint of his amusement show.

“I am not. Your apology was well-worded and I graciously accepted. But as I was saying… There is something unusual about the energy surrounding you today, but I cannot properly interpret what I am seeing, so I was hoping to get your permission to contact Dr. Strange.”

Tony scrunched up his nose, mostly out of habit (Viz was right, Tony was well on his way to figuring out at least several facets of magic), but finally, he gave in with a sigh.

“Fine, fine, call Merlin, get your magic chit-chat on. Hell, invite him over for tea, we’ll get the nice china out for him. Don’t tell him I said this, but I do kinda miss the grouchy bastard.”

Vision nodded and got up as well, taking the mug out of Tony’s hands. Tony was about to take off himself, but feeling encouraged by this entire conversation, he wanted to ask one more thing.

“Do you regret what happened last year?”

Vision carefully placed the mug into the sink before turning around. “I regret the pain experienced by those I care about as a result of last year’s events, but I do not regret the decisions I made.”
“No regrets about getting stuck with us?”

“No single one. I supported a cause I believed in and more importantly, I gave my loyalty to a truly good man. I am right where I am meant to be, sir.”

***

Vision’s rare slips of calling him sir always left Tony’s heart aching, the grief over JARVIS never truly gone, but it was almost bearable that time. Being back, seeing the people he loved and hearing these simple expressions of friendship and loyalty and love… It all helped to set Tony’s reality back into alignment and the nightmare already felt more distant, like an echo instead of a screeching bullhorn in his ear.

Now all that was left was facing James again and Tony was just about ready because by god, did he miss that man. It probably wasn’t good to be that dependent on another person, but he could think of worse addictions, so he just had to hope that his brain would cooperate with his heart.

But first, he had to finish up the task in front of him. The final step of the BARF therapy.

After Fatima flew in yesterday afternoon, the two of them had spent most of their time going over every bit of data they had to determine whether the trigger words were finally neutralized. The results were promising, but unfortunately, there was no way to know conclusively without actually activating the Winter Soldier and Tony didn’t want to half-ass this. He wasn’t going to put James through that hell again.

The dissatisfied glare he was aiming at the scans now and the restless tap tap tap of his fingers against the glass obviously didn’t escape Fatima’s notice.

“I think we’re ready, Tony. You know I wouldn’t put Mr. Barnes through unnecessary pain. But we won’t know until we run the actual test.”

“I know, I know. I just hate these stupid triggers. Plus, I’m not sure how we’ll deal with the whole Soldier thing if they still work.”

“The shutdown trigger was sufficient last time.”

“That might work, although that’s a big might, given that we still have essentially no idea what we’re dealing with.”

“I have to agree with you there, unfortunately,” Fatima said, her own frustrations coming through in that otherwise steady tone. “Even after our many sessions and all the information your tech has provided for us, I’m still at a loss as to how the Soldier manifests in Mr. Barnes’ brain.”

“As far as we know, it’s not magic or extraneous tech implanted in his brain. It’s all brain chemistry —”

“But when compared to the few dissociative personality disorders I’ve dealt with in the past, the differences are significant. Whatever Hydra did to him— there’s no precedent for what we’re dealing with.”

“Not to mention Bruce— err, Dr. Banner, I introduced you to him last night— brought up another point that we haven’t considered yet. The botched Hydra super soldier serum could’ve contributed to this as well. Bruce was experimenting with the serum too and while his circumstances were different — gamma radiation and all that— he ultimately ended up with an independent, sentient alter ego. For all we know, something about the serum may increase the chances of disassociation when something
goes wrong. Hell, it could be a defense mechanism. The Hulk protected Bruce from dying and the Soldier may have kept James from losing his mind.” Tony grimaced at the table in front of him. “Unfortunately, this is all theory and we have no way of proving any of it without extensive studies and a bigger sample than one brainwashed super soldier.”

Fatima let out a contemplative hum. “In the beginning, I advised Mr. Barnes to accept the Soldier as a part of himself, but not to anthropomorphize it as a separate entity—”

“And let me guess, he promptly ignored that, didn’t he?”

“Indeed,” Fatima confirmed what Tony already knew, given his recent interactions with both James and the Soldier, “but based on our latest conversations, whatever Mr. Barnes is doing may be more effective because he’s truly doing better.” She sighed. “We may never have a way of knowing whether there is a real ‘cure’, so it may come down to two simple questions - assuming the triggers are gone, is Mr. Barnes in his present state a danger to himself and is he a danger to others? Because if the answer is ‘no’ to both…”

“Then it might not really be a problem.”

“Correct,” Fatima confirmed with a nod, but then shook her head. “Psychiatry and mental health are already complicated, nuanced subjects, but you superheroes just have to add a certain flair to it, don’t you?”

The teasing tone helped Tony stave off some of his own darker thoughts about the triggers. “Aw, come, Fatima, you know you love it. It’s exciting, isn’t it? Being on the frontier of science, making groundbreaking discoveries about the human mind that could revolutionize our understanding of it?”

She gave him a knowing look. “While all those things do sound exciting, Dr. Stark,” she laughed when Tony gave her his flirty smile, “my concern has always been patient care, so I find it very frustrating that our hands are tied by our limited knowledge and therefore the assistance I’m able to provide Mr. Barnes is also limited.”

“Well, the traditional therapy’s not over yet, right? He still has a long way to go, but if we can get rid of the triggers, that’s a huge step forward, both for everyone’s safety and for his own peace of mind.”

“Which is why we’re here and I know you spent all of last night, with no sleep to speak of, going over the results. You know we’re ready.”

With one final glance at the data in front of him, Tony finally had to accept the inevitable.

“Yeah, I suppose we are.”

Chapter End Notes

I know there was no Bucky in this chapter, but Tony deserved all the love and it’s important for it to come from other people in his life too. Plus, I realized that unlike Bucky, Tony haven’t actually had any meaningful interaction with any of these characters so far, so it was time for me to remedy that.

Next up, Bucky! The boy is doing some brooding, unfortunately, because he has the same problem Tony does - leave him alone for five minutes and he comes up with ten
different ways of how he is the Worst Person Ever (TM). *sigh* These two are perfect for each other. -_- 

See you on WEDNESDAY!
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Extra update, hurray! Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the scene on the screen changed and Bucky realized he had no idea what was going on, he had to admit to himself that the film, recommended by Friday and full of bright animated colors, wasn’t doing its job of cheering him up because he still managed to get lost in his own thoughts.

He was well aware he was sulking, holed up here in his room and dressed in the most unflattering combo of sweatshirt and sweatpants, but the least he could do for himself was be comfortable while he agonized over the last several days.

Ever since Tony came back from Beijing, ever since that full body flinch and the terror that flashed across those glassy brown eyes, ever since Tony stumbled back and lied just so he could get away, Bucky had barely seen the man, only getting a real glimpse of him during their (potentially last) BARF session yesterday. Even then, it was Dr. Vance who did most of the talking while Tony gave nearly his full attention to the data in front of him, sparing Bucky only a few glances when he thought Bucky wasn’t looking, glances full of something Bucky struggled to identify.

The text message Tony sent him that first day wasn’t soothing any of Bucky’s anxieties either.

i’m sorry for what happened down in the lab. it’s not your fault. usual night terrors crap. i just need some time alone to get my head straight.

Bucky had a million things he wanted to say in response, questions and reassurances and apologies, but all he ended up typing back was a short offer to be there if Tony needed him. It seemed like that was all he had to give at this point.

Unfortunately, Tony was a ghost in his own Compound, spending the rest of his time either in his lab or in his office (which he rarely ever used until this week) and Friday just kept telling Bucky that Boss has initiated a privacy protocol and cannot be disturbed unless it is a Level III emergency.

Bucky knew a dismissal when he heard one and while he could’ve found a way into either of Tony’s hiding spots, he gave the man the space he needed, even if it broke his heart.

Instead, he was left alone with his thoughts, which have become progressively self-recriminating. He knew it wasn’t healthy, he knew— hell, his own therapist was here in person and while she was busy going over the data with Tony, Bucky was sure Dr. Vance would give him her time and attention if he asked to speak with her.

He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to discuss and dissect this, he didn’t want to talk about his feelings.

What he really wanted was for Tony to look at him with affection and warmth again, but if he couldn’t have that, he’d take being left the hell alone, even if that meant sitting here in this old sweatshirt from his Romania days and finding new ways to hate himself.
Bucky knew Tony suffered from debilitating nightmares the same way he did, but none of them had ever caused Tony to fear him. What could Tony have possibly seen that would’ve put that look of terror in his eyes?

Unfortunately, Bucky could easily think of a lot of things and by now, he was convinced it was the damn Soldier, it just had to be. Why else would Tony look at him the way he did when Bucky’s metal hand settled on his neck?

_Oh god, was Tony thinking of his mother in that moment?_

Even the idea that Tony would associate Bucky with that again, that he would look at Bucky and see his mother’s _dying breath_… It killed him inside, but maybe he should’ve seen this coming. Maybe he was the fool all along, thinking he could leave that part of his past behind. What if Tony finally came to his damn senses and realized that Bucky was _broken_, that there was this violent, angry, _evil_ part of him that he couldn’t even control? Any rational person would take one look at Bucky and deem him defective.

_I— The Soldier— we killed his parents and so many others._

The Soldier was still cruel and vengeful and unrepentant. He was a _killer_ and here was Bucky, thinking that he could somehow harness that darkness, use it to his benefit, take the good and leave the bad.

Stupid, so goddamn stupid.

Now, he was paying the price for letting the Soldier have too much freedom. Ever since Natalia— no, before that, ever since Tony’s admission that it was Hydra that messed with his head— Bucky spent less and less of his energy pushing the Soldier away. Despite his initial aversion, Bucky quickly learned that it had felt— _good_ to give the Soldier that leeway. There was a sense of _completion_, every experience felt more vivid, more _real_ somehow, and he didn’t even realize he used to experience the world in duller, muted tones until he let himself and the Soldier co-exist more closely. His instincts were sharper, sensations richer, and catching himself going over old Hydra base schematics was a small price to pay for the intoxicating swirl of emotions at the mere thought of _Tony_. The Soldier’s lust, protectiveness, and possessiveness, mixed with his own respect, admiration, loyalty, and _love_. It was heady, addictive really, and he selfishly let himself sink into it, deeper and deeper with each passing day.

_How did I ever expect Tony to love me when I’m like this?_

The Soldier was still a killer and no amount of tolerance on Tony’s part could make up for that, so Bucky spent the last few days using every ounce of his willpower to build his mental walls back up again, to close off every bit of the Soldier in some deep, dark corner of his mind until his presence was nothing but a whisper of angry Russian.

Bucky was determined to speak to Tony eventually, to beg the man to give him a second chance, to let Tony know that Bucky would keep the Soldier under tight control, but he’d wait until Tony was ready to reach out first.

Not to mention, it was almost time to activate the triggers again and every part of Bucky desperately hoped that everything would _go right_, especially since he was still convinced that the Soldier and the triggers were connected. _Get rid of one and the other would go as well_. Neither Dr. Vance nor Tony agreed with him on that point, but he was stubborn enough to refuse any other possibility. He would get rid of the Soldier, even if meant cracking his own skull open and digging the bastard out.
Several more minutes passed with Bucky all but ignoring the animated characters on the screen—\textit{something about unity and acceptance}?—when the video paused and Friday’s familiar voice rang through the room.

“Mr. Barnes? Boss is requesting your presence down in his laboratory.”

“Tony wants to see me?” His heart did a painful \textit{pitter-patter} and he couldn’t help his next question. “Why?”

“I believe you are due for your scheduled arm maintenance.”

Oh. That made sense, he supposed. Ever since the surgery, Tony insisted on spending a few hours every week, sometimes more, on maintaining, cleaning, and upgrading the arm. Bucky always had a suspicion it was more of an excuse for the two of them to spend time together, since the new and improved arm hardly needed this much handling.

He wondered now whether that still held true - did Tony actually want to spend this time with him or was he keeping their scheduled appointment out of obligation?

It didn’t matter. There was no way he would pass up the opportunity to be around Tony again, so he thanked Friday and headed out.

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As expected, when Bucky arrived at the lab, Tony was already in what the engineer had dubbed their “killer robot arm corner”, where all of the necessary tools were permanently set up. The man was sitting on one of the rolling stools, frowning at the holographic display in front of him, but he looked away to give Bucky a small smile when he heard the doors open to let Bucky in.

“Hey there.” Tony perked up a little more when he saw what Bucky was carrying. “Is that coffee? For me?”

“Sure is. Thought you might like a little pick-me-up,” Bucky replied, lifting the mug as confirmation, even as the painful \textit{pitter-patters} in his chest started up again. Before Beijing, Tony would’ve been grinning that big, bright smile of his, ushering him over, making jokes about cyborg super soldiers and installing lasers into the arm, complaining if Bucky had dared to come down here \textit{without} coffee, but today, the engineer was subdued, tone reserved and a note of tension in his posture.

“You wanted to see me?” Bucky asked as he made his way over.

“Yeah, it was time to check on that arm of yours and I just— just wanted to check in with \textit{you} too,” Tony said and gave him a grateful look when the coffee switched hands, but then his gaze darted to the left. “Sorry about these past couple of days though… I’ve just— been so busy, I hadn’t had a chance to catch up with you.”

\textit{Please don’t lie to me, Tony}, Bucky thought, but all he said instead was “That’s alright. I know you always have a lot on your plate.” He wasn’t going to bring up the night terror until Tony did. The last thing he wanted was to hurt the man by pushing the subject, by reminding Tony of whatever horror he saw.

Tony’s eyes scrutinized Bucky top to bottom as the engineer took his first sip of the coffee.

“That’s, uh— that’s a new look for you.”

Bucky almost replied with a confused \textit{Huh?}, but then his brain caught up with the rest of the world
and he had to fight back a blush instead. Oh god. He was so desperate to see Tony right away that he forgot about the ratty sweatshirt and the baggy sweatpants and the fact that his hair must’ve been a rat’s nest and he hadn’t shaved in days and great job, Barnes, just great. Way to show Tony you have everything under control.

Apparently, he was also doing a poor job of hiding his embarrassment, but he realized he didn’t care when he saw Tony’s eyes sparkling with something that resembled genuine mirth.

“I kinda dig it.” A hint of a smirk joined said mirth. “Reminds me of Rhodey circa 1987, right around midterms. Although, I gotta say, you pull off the ‘sleep deprived college student who’s given up on life’ look much better.”

Bucky was so distracted by the flutter of hope in his chest that all he managed was a stutter of “I just wanted to wear something comfortable.”

“Hey, no judgment here. You know I practically live in old t-shirt and jeans when Pepper isn’t trying to wrangle me into a suit. Going by the ‘lazy day’ attire, I assume I didn’t interrupt you in the middle of something important?”

Bucky shook his head right away, forcing himself to stop stumbling over words. “No, no. Just watching some film. Disney, I think.” He shrugged. “Friday recommended it.”

Tony squinted at him suspiciously, but his lips quirked up in a smile. “Friday has you watching Disney now? Please tell me there weren’t any animated animals.”

“Oh, there were definitely animated animals.”

“Oh my god,” there was a hint of laughter in Tony’s voice. “Is she aware that you’re one hundred, not five?”

The teasing tone finally pulled an actual smile out of Bucky and after the last few days, it felt so good. He missed this and he hoped the banter was a sign that Tony was ready to be around him again. Before he could give his own retort however, Friday helpfully chimed in.

“While I value your criticism, Boss, my algorithms have been perfectly calibrated to make the most optimal of entertainment choices for any given situation and my data indicates that you should approve of my selection for Mr. Barnes, given your viewing data of Disney films such as Mulan.”

“Okay, okay, see, Mulan is a classic. You gotta respect the classics, Fri. Put on some Beauty and the Beast for him at least.”

“The live action version released this year?”

Tony groaned and made a show of throwing one hand up in the air. “Where did I go wrong? You try to be a good parent, teach the kids right from wrong, but then they go and say hurtful things like that.”

“You’re a single father, Tony, you’re doing the best you can.”

Tony let out a chuckle, fingers drumming lightly against the cup. Not really nervous energy, Bucky noted with relief, but simply Tony’s natural need to be in constant motion.

“Well, you know how it is, Rhodey refuses to make an honest man out of me,” Tony joked, but then shook his head and deposited the cup of coffee onto the bench behind him. “Well, come on, let’s get that arm looked at. Better hope you didn’t get crumbs in it this time.”
“I have never gotten crumbs in it,” Bucky huffed, but obediently made his way over to the chair. In the weeks following the arm surgery, the gambit of necessary tests were an exercise of will as Bucky fought back the memories of Hydra scientists doing the same thing. Thankfully, the differences were always vast. Hydra didn’t ask for permission, never explained every step of what they were doing. They were never gentle and there was never a soothing voice guiding him through the process.

It really didn’t take long before Bucky was looking forward to these times alone with the engineer, craving Tony’s attention and touch.

He pulled off the sweatshirt, which left him in a thin sleeveless top, before he settled into the chair, placing his metal arm on the specially designed armrest in front of Tony, watching the other man carefully for any signs of discomfort. Tony took another sip of his coffee and asked Friday to pull up scans of the arm, before spinning his stool to face Bucky.

“Alright, let’s see how we’re—” Tony trailed off when his eyes landed on Bucky and it took him another moment to stutter out the remaining “doing today…” as his throat bobbed on a hard swallow. For a moment, Bucky panicked— did he already manage to screw this up somehow?— but then he picked up on the faint blush streaked across Tony’s cheeks.

“You alright?” he couldn’t help the teasing tone.

“Yeah, just forgot how, um— distracting all of—” Tony gestured vaguely in Bucky’s direction, “this can be.”

“You want me to put the sweatshirt back on?”

“No, no, you’re good. In fact, Butterfingers may inconspicuously toss it into the incinerator when you’re not looking.”

“That sneaky little bot. Such a troublemaker.”

Tony responded to Bucky’s smile with one of his own, but when he looked back down at the metal arm in front of him, the smile dimmed and there was a moment’s hesitation in his movements before his hands got to work. And while any regular person would’ve missed it, Bucky wasn’t just anyone and so he didn’t miss that small, but sharp inhale, the jaw clench… It was as if Tony had to steel himself, to prepare himself for the touch…

But then those clever fingers were carefully mapping out the arm, Tony’s eyes following the movements, flicking back and forth between the scans and scrutinizing the details for any damage or anomalies, and another small bit of Bucky’s own tension drained away when it became clear that, despite that hesitancy, Tony’s touch was no less gentle this time around.

“Any problems with the arm? Sensitivity issues? Anything responding in a way that it shouldn’t?”

“No, nothing that I’ve noticed,” Bucky replied, although most of his focus was on just how good it felt to have Tony’s hands on him again, even if this wasn’t meant to be intimate.

“No power fluctuations? Or issues controlling the amount of pressure you exert?”

“No of that either.” Bucky tried to catch Tony’s eyes. “We both know I haven’t had any of these issues since the first round of tests after the surgery. I guess Stark tech ain’t so bad after all, huh?”

Tony did look away from the arm, but only to give him a playful glare. “Really? You’re going with ain’t so bad? Just for that, I should downgrade you to Hammer Tech.”
Bucky widened his eyes dramatically and gasped. “You wouldn’t.”

They stared at each other for a moment, before Tony burst out laughing, with Bucky following close behind with his own amused chuckle.

“Yeah, okay, you called my bluff,” Tony said, going back to his examination. “Like I’d ever let Hammer Tech anywhere near the Compound.” He pointed at Bucky. “Or you. Speaking of Hammer Tech, did I ever tell you about Rhody’s time as the Iron Patriot?”

Tony did, more than once, but Bucky didn’t mention that. He just smiled and let the sound of Tony’s voice, imbued with those notes of mischief and laughter, chip away at the stress and the anxiety he had carried within him for the past several days.

Eventually, Tony was done re-telling the “Ex-Wife” incident and it was time to open the access panel in Bucky’s forearm, and after grabbing one of his tools from the bench, Tony bent over to assess the internal wiring.

“I, uh—I did have another reason to talk to you actually,” Tony cleared his throat and glanced up, the serious tone a sign they were moving away from the banter. When he saw that Bucky was watching him carefully, he looked back down at his work. “Fatima and I went over every bit of data we have. I think we’re as ready to try the triggers as we’re ever going to be.”

Fear and hope were a strange mix of emotions and the combination forced a lump into Bucky’s throat. “When’s the test?”

“Whenever you’re ready. Although Fatima’s only here for a few more days and I’d like her to be there. But I guess we can always postpone as well—”

“No, I don’t want to wait. Tomorrow? Would that work?”

“Yeah, tomorrow works,” Tony agreed, even though he was frowning at Bucky’s arm. “I just don’t want you to feel pressured, that’s all. I remember how bad last time was.”

“But we’ll have to do this at some point, right?”

“Right, the only way to prove your mind is free is to do a test run.” Tony’s frown became even more severe, but Bucky hoped it was the prospect of the triggers still working that soured Tony’s mood, rather than being around Bucky.

Once he was done, Tony closed the access panel and began checking over and cleaning out the grooves between each of the metal plates. Bucky let out a small sigh, always soothed by Tony’s ministrations, but it didn’t ease the nervous tension entirely. The triggers did scare him. More importantly, the Soldier scared him.

“Then we do it tomorrow,” he asserted despite all that, trying to infuse his words with a calm he didn’t feel. “I want Rhodes there too. And Banner or Vision on stand-by.”

Tony grunted and shook his head. “Why do I get the feeling that you don’t trust me?”

“I don’t trust myself,” Bucky countered and waited until Tony looked at him again. “I do trust you. You know that, right?”

Something he couldn’t quite read flashed across Tony’s eyes, but the man gave him a somewhat convincing nod nevertheless. “Yeah, James, I— I know. It means a lot to me.” Tony’s brows furrowed and his hands stopped for a second before resuming their work. “Hey, do you— do you
mind that I call you James?”

It was Bucky’s turn to frown. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you know, everyone else calls you Bucky and then there’s me— I just don’t want to be rude or something, but I’ve never been good at picking up on cues when people think I’m being rude, so —”

“I don’t mind,” Bucky cut off what was obviously nervous rambling, even though he didn’t understand where this question was coming from. Why was Tony even worried about something like that? He could call Bucky whatever he wanted and Bucky wouldn’t really mind. In fact… “I actually like that you use my given name,” he admitted and that seemed to have caught Tony off-guard.

“You do?”

“Yeah. I mean, I thought about everyone else just calling me James too, but I dunno,” he shrugged his right shoulder, “even though I’m not that guy from the forties anymore, Bucky still sounded right, so it’s fine that everyone uses that— well, except for Rhodes who refuses to call me anything other than Sergeant Barnes.”

“That’s because he likes to be reminded that he outranks you,” Tony quipped, a huff of laughter escaping with the words and Bucky felt warm inside. This was good. The more Tony smiled and laughed, the less it felt like Bucky was losing him.

“That must be it,” he agreed with a smile of his own, “and I really don’t mind, but I like that I can just be— just be James with you.” He knew he wasn’t explaining this very well, that this was something private and special that he only wanted to share with Tony. “Do you remember that first Hydra memory? When I lost myself?” he tried instead.

“Kinda hard to forget. The whole thing was hell.”

“Yeah, it was, but the thing that pulled me back was you calling me James. I’m not sure if it’s because no one’s called me that since I fell or if it’s because it’s you…” He was suddenly feeling a lot more vulnerable than he expected, but Tony’s features softened, the lines at the corners of his eyes less pronounced and shoulders just a touch less hunched, so it was worth it. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m James too, but only when I’m with you. Unless— unless you don’t want to call me that?”

Tony shook his head, eyes on the arm and hands never stopping the delicate work. “Nah, you’re definitely James. Can’t have people catching me hanging out with a Bucky.”

“Of course not,” Bucky played along, knowing his smile was indulgent.

Tony was examining the hand now, but the movements of his fingers turned less clinical and more like absent-minded caresses, so Bucky decided to push his luck and threaded the metal fingers through Tony’s own. For a moment, he didn’t dare breathe because a part of him was still scared that Tony would flinch again, would pull away in fear, but in the next second, all he felt was relief when Tony’s hand tightly grasped his own. The engineer wasn’t looking at him, examining their joined hands instead like they held all the answers in the universe, but this was good. Would’ve been perfect if the Soldier hadn’t been trying to bully his way out to be a part of this moment, but Bucky ruthlessly shoved him back. He wasn’t letting that bastard ruin things for him. Never again.

“I missed you, Tony,” Bucky whispered into the silence that settled between them, his thumb tracing lines across Tony’s hand.
“Missed you too,” Tony murmured back and Bucky just wished he could see the man’s face, so to get the man’s attention— and because he desperately needed this— he brought their intertwined hands to his lips. Tony’s eyes followed the gesture, entire body turning to face Bucky as well, and finally their gazes locked.

“James…” the name almost sounded like a reprimand, but Tony wasn’t pulling away, so Bucky didn’t let go, savoring the softness and the warmth of Tony’s skin instead. It was nothing more than a chaste press of his lips against the back of Tony’s hand, but it meant the world to him and Bucky wouldn’t have been able to pull away from Tony if his life depended on it. As he took in the details of the man in front of him though, he noticed something that made his heart ache. It wasn’t fear nor disgust nor contempt though.

It looked strangely like sadness.

“Tony, what happened to you in Beijing?” he whispered, finally unable to hold the question back. “I didn’t want to push before, but you’re hurting and I’m worried—”

The other man just shook his head, looking away. “It was nothing— it was just a stupid nightmare —”

“It can’t be that stupid if it made you scared of me—”

“James, I’m sorry about that,” Tony’s eyes were back on him, almost desperate, and he pulled away from Bucky’s grasp, but only to scrub his hands over his face in frustration, “it wasn’t you, it’s just— me and my fuckin’ issues— I’m sorry—”

“Hey, sweetheart, no,” Bucky gentled his voice and wrapped his hands around Tony’s wrists, trying to stop the anxious movements. It was another gamble, but this one paid off as well when Tony let him pull his hands away from his face. “I’m not saying this to guilt ya. I don’t blame you for anything, I just want to— I want to make things okay between us again. Please.”

The desperation in his own voice wasn’t lost on Tony because that sadness was back again as Tony sucked in a harsh breath. For a moment, it looked as if he wanted to say something, but words must have failed because instead, his shoulders slumped in defeat and Tony just dropped his forehead against the metal of Bucky’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry…” was the only thing Tony managed and things were so obviously not okay, but Bucky knew that trying to get Tony to talk was a delicate balancing act and could easily backfire. He didn’t want the man to hide behind walls and masks and fake smiles, not with him, so for now, he didn’t force the issue. Instead, Bucky reached out to brush his fingers against the back of Tony’s neck, trying to offer comfort in place of questions. “Honey, that can’t be comfortable, resting your head against metal like that…”

All his comment received was a dejected shrug and so Bucky had to take matters into his own hands and coax Tony with careful pressure so that his head was tucked underneath Bucky’s chin instead. The armrest was still between them, with Tony leaning over it, so to make the position less awkward, Bucky sat up and met Tony halfway, carefully positioning the metal arm around his shoulders while continuing to card through Tony’s hair with the other hand. He nearly sighed with relief when Tony relaxed against him, letting out his own drawn-out exhale, hands clinging to the front of Bucky’s shirt.

“There you are, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured, pressing a kiss to the crown of Tony’s head, “missed holding you like this. Thank you for letting me be close again. Promise you that you’re safe with me…”
He felt Tony nod against him, felt the hands clutch harder at his shirt, and that was enough, even if Tony didn’t say anything. The man he missed, the man he loved, was in his arms again, and that was so much more than he expected when the day began.

The quiet, comforting hum of the lab settled in around them and instead of disturbing that sense of peace with words, Bucky let his touch communicate what he felt, hand never stopping its movements up and down Tony’s back, his cheek pressed against those soft curls. The warm huffs of air against his neck told him Tony was soothed by this as well, breaths slower, steadier now, and Bucky would’ve been fine with staying like this, just like this, forever, but eventually Tony did pull away, although Bucky didn’t let him go far, framing Tony’s face in his hands, watching as the man struggled to meet his eyes.

“Can you look at me, honey?” he whispered and when Tony finally did, Bucky smiled. “There, now I can finally see those pretty brown eyes of yours.”

Bucky always found it interesting and so damn endearing that a man who could flirt so effortlessly with anyone on the planet, who had admirers lined up for miles, could turn bashful so easily at a few sweet words of affection.

“Stop that,” Tony muttered, scrunching up his nose, but he was obviously fighting back a pleased smile.

“Aw, but you’re just so pretty, sugar, I can’t help myself.”

“You are ridiculous,” Tony huffed, sporting a full on blush now, but his hands settled over Bucky’s and he wasn’t pulling away. “And ‘sugar’, really? I dunno what’s more lethal, that arm of yours or your mouth.”

“Oh, you’ve no idea just how lethal my mouth can be,” Bucky said with a wink and broke out into a full grin when Tony began to shake with laughter.

“Oh my god. I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Sorry. Couldn’t help myself. You only have yourself to blame though.”

“No, no, you are definitely responsible for your own cheesy one-liners.”

Bucky drew closer and bumped his nose against Tony’s, smiling the whole time, even as it softened to something more wistful rather than amused. "Don’t matter. Just happy to see you smiling like this again."

Tony’s own expression mellowed as he let out a sigh. “I’m sorry about this week… We’re okay, really.”

Bucky brushed the metal hand over Tony’s cheek and over the curve of his ear to tuck away a few stray curls. “We’re not completely okay,” he amended softly, his words a statement of fact rather than an accusation. “And you have nothing to apologize for, I told you.”

Tony just shrugged and pulled their hands down to settle on the armrest between them. Bucky’s eyes followed the motion and he watched as Tony’s hands were cradled in his own.

“I also said that you’re safe with me and I meant that… I would never hurt you. I will do whatever I have to.” Even if it means wiping out the Soldier. “I’ll make sure I won’t be a threat to you, I promise.”
Something in Tony’s expression changed, brows furrowing. "James, what are you—"

"Tones? Suit up, we need Iron Man. Mission off the coast of Maine. Something about sea creatures."

Tony groaned at the same time Bucky sent a lethal glare at the overhead speakers. He never hated or even remotely disliked Rhodes, but he was willing to amend that opinion. Couldn’t the man have waited another ten goddamn minutes?

"Platypus, seriously, shitty timing."

"Really? Pretty sure sea creatures trump whatever you’re doing, especially if it’s your whole sad lovesick puppy pining schtick you love so much."

"Rhodey,“ Tony hissed, definitely looking anywhere but at Bucky, who was becoming more interested in this exchange by the second. "Not alone right now."

There was a momentary pause before Rhodes burst out laughing. “Oh, shit, is lover boy there with you? Whoops, my bad.” He didn’t sound sorry at all. “Well, whatever, you two can stare deeply into each other’s eyes later, on your own damn time. I have mutated tentacle beasts attacking a national park and I need a flyer.”

"Last time I checked, you can fly, Iron Patriot."

“I need another flyer, Stank. I’m taking off in five, so get your ass over here.”

When no more followed, Tony let out another frustrated noise, but when he looked back up, Bucky could see that the blush had nearly reached the tips of his ears now. The blush didn’t recede at all when Tony realized they were still holding hands. He carefully extricated himself from Bucky’s grip.

"Um, just— just ignore everything you just heard. Rhodey— he’s going senile in his old age, can’t trust a word that guy says."

"Uh huh, I’m sure that’s what it is,“ Bucky raised an eyebrow, but even though he wanted to tease Tony further, he refrained. They kept going back and forth between banter and these tightly wound, emotional moments, and it no longer felt like the right time for jokes.

"James, listen, it’s—“ Tony stopped to let out a tired breath. "Look, let me just deal with the sea creatures from the Black Lagoon first, then—” His eyes turned pleading. "Let’s just focus on the triggers tomorrow, get you better. And once all this excitement is over— James, things are okay between us, you did nothing wrong, I promise, you’re not a—"

“Tony, I swear to God,” Rhodes’ voice echoed through the lab again, mixing with Tony’s exasperated Oh, for fuck’s sake, "if you’re not on the landing pad in two minutes, I’m feeding you to the tentacle monsters."

“Not my kink, Honey Bear.”

All that followed was a noise of disgust from Rhodes, but Tony was already in his feet.

“I’m sorry, I just— sea monsters and—”

“Go, go,” Bucky shooed him away, keeping his disappointment to himself. “Save the world for me, would ya, Iron Man?”

Tony’s answering smile was worth it. It always was.
Chapter End Notes

I had a hard time writing parts of this chapter because the boys kept straying into either even heavier flirting or outright emotional moments/confessions and I had to keep toning it down. I think they're trying to tell me something. >.>

The plot is finally moving along in the next chapter though and hopefully this was an enjoyable reprieve with the boys.

See you Saturday~
The conversation in the room stopped when Bucky walked in and three pairs of eyes settled on him. He had to admit, it wasn’t at all pleasant to be back in this reinforced room—*initially made for Banner, he recently found out*—but at least this time around, it felt less like walking to his own execution.

In addition to Tony, who was currently wearing a very displeased frown, both Dr. Vance and Rhodes were here too and even though he wasn’t in the room, Bucky knew that Banner was watching the proceedings as well, at Bucky’s request. If things did go wrong, the last thing he wanted was the damn Soldier anywhere near Tony again, so Bucky needed all the help he could get, even if some survivalist part of him hoped they wouldn’t need the damn *Hulk*.

Rhodes acknowledged his presence with a simple nod while Dr. Vance smiled and greeted him with her familiar warmth. Tony remained where he was, arms crossed and shoulders hunched, unyielding in his displeasure. At that first, Bucky began to worry that Tony was upset because of him again, but all Bucky had to do was follow the path of Tony’s glare to understand the source of his anger. It was the damn *chair*, restraints and all, that Tony vowed to destroy the last time they did this.

Bucky knew this wasn’t the right time and the people in the room would likely question his sanity—*more so than usual*—but he honestly wanted to smile at that realization. This was yet another sign that Tony still *cared* and knowing that loosened some of the tension in his own chest. No matter what happened, Tony would still be here for him, and he couldn’t ask for much more than that.

Tony’s next question was expected. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

When Bucky told him that he was ready, Tony let out a deep breath, shoulders slumping just a bit further. With a simple “Alright, come on, then,” he ushered Bucky over to the chair to begin the preparations. Bucky remembered the steps well. The band around his forehead and temples, the strange device on his forearm that gave Friday access to his blood without so much as a pinprick. The gentleness with which Tony performed each one of the steps was familiar too.

“It’ll be fine, Tony, you’ll see,” Bucky said, finding it odd, yet appropriate somehow, that he was the one trying to reassure Tony this time around, which clearly didn’t escape Tony’s notice.

“Aren’t I supposed to be comforting *you*?” he asked, but some of the tension in his hands, which nearly trembled as he locked down the first restraint, seemed to drain away. “But you are absolutely right, super soldier. Everything *will* be fine. This will be the most boring, anticlimactic five minutes of our lives.”

God, Bucky hoped so and he clung to the conviction in Tony’s voice. The last restraint was in place, the heavy metal tight against his throat, but he tried not to pay attention to the mounting claustrophobia nor to his self-preservation instincts desperately whispering *runrunrun*. He especially didn’t pay attention to the Soldier, whose thrashing against Bucky’s mental walls was violent in its intensity, but effectively rebuffed. Bucky was no weakling and everything else be damned, he would fight back.

“You alright?”
Tony’s question filtered through and Bucky let himself smile this time.

“Yeah, I am. You’ll, uh— you’ll stay here the whole time, right?” He couldn’t help the question, even if he knew it just made him sound needy, but Tony— oh, his Tony reached out, despite his own tension and anxiety, and carefully slipped his hand into Bucky’s metal one. The sensitivity of the improved arm could detect the minute trembles running through Tony as Bucky clung to that hand, warmth and comfort and safety all imbued in that one touch.

“I’m not going anywhere, alright? Doesn’t matter how this goes down, I’m not leaving.”

“Just— don’t take the restraints off if something goes wrong, yeah?” Bucky tried for some levity and Tony let out a strained laugh.

“Aw come on, the Soldier and I go way back, I’m sure it’ll be just fine.”

“Tony, I’m serious—”

“Trust me, Barnes, Tony will behave,” Rhodes cut in as he approached, his forceful long strides carrying him closer. “Won’t you, Tones?” he gave the man in question a pointed look.

“You guys ruin all of my fun, I swear,” Tony huffed, but then gave Rhodes a look of his own, and whatever silent communication passed between them prompted the Colonel to walk back over to stand with Dr. Vance. Tony kneeled down, so that he would be closer, still hanging on to Bucky’s hand. “I got you, okay? I know I haven’t been around and— and things have been weird, and I keep screwing things up—”

“Tony, please don’t say that, it’s okay—”

“No, no, it’s not, James. It’s supposed to be my job to take care of you and—”

Bucky gave Tony’s hand a squeeze, taking the utmost care to be gentle, which stopped the hurried ramblings. “Hey, everything’s fine. Let’s just get this over with and then— then we can talk and figure these things out, yeah? We have all the time in the world.”

Tony nodded, although he seemed to be trying to convince himself rather than Bucky, and then finally he pulled away and hurried over to the multitudes of floating holographic screens. The clever hands moved quickly to set everything up and before Bucky had more than a minute or two to gather his willpower and calm himself, everything was ready.

There was no table this time, no need for a shutdown protocol. Just Bucky strapped into the chair with Tony only a few yards away, with Dr. Vance and Rhodes flanking him at both sides and Friday carefully monitoring and recording the entire affair.

When Tony locked gazes with him and nodded, Bucky knew it was time, so he closed his eyes and with every speck of will in his possession, concentrated on the one thing he wanted today. I’ll be free. Free from Hydra, free from the triggers, and free from the Soldier.

He could hear Tony take one slow, measured inhale.

“Zhelaniye.”

Bucky never actually experienced anything physical until that last trigger word, so it wasn’t surprising that he didn’t feel anything now either. He knew the temporary silence was due to Tony and Dr. Vance examining the results, but he tried not to pay attention, focusing instead on the mantra inside his head. I’ll be free. I’ll be free.
“How is it looking, Tones?”

“So far, so good. It’s what we’re expecting.”

The second word followed moments later— why was it “rusted”? Bucky swore Hydra had zero creativity— and again, there was silence to give Tony and the good doctor time to analyze what was happening in Bucky’s mind. Again, the results were promising.

One after another, they repeated these same steps, words that held control over his entire life, now uttered in that familiar tone Bucky loved so dearly (he tried to ignore the barely there quiver in Tony’s voice).

Tony said the second to last trigger and now only two words, one simple phrase, separated them from finding out whether seventy years of hell could be finally removed from Bucky’s head.

Bucky realized that he was shaking. Probably not enough to be noticeable, but to him, it felt like an earthquake in his chest. I want to be free. Please let this work.

Tony cleared his throat and to Bucky, who still hadn’t opened his eyes, it sounded like the man wanted to say something. Ask Bucky if he was ready, maybe. If he was okay. But Tony refrained, likely on the same page at this point. It was time to finish this.

Dr. Vance vocalized that sentiment. “The last trigger word, Dr. Stark?”

Another inhale from Tony and then—

“Gruzovoy vagon.”

Silence. It was silent in the room as everyone held their collective breath, but more importantly—

Bucky blinked his eyes opened. “It’s quiet,” he uttered, stunned and disbelieving.

Tony’s confused “What?” blended with Rhodes’ quiet “Holy shit…” but all Bucky could concentrate on was the silence in his head.

“He’s gone. Tony, he’s gone!” Bucky wanted to smile, to laugh, even if everything around him felt strangely muted.

Tony and Dr. Vance glanced at each other, trading identical skeptical expressions. Tony’s eyes swung back to him.

“You’re still with us, right, James?”

It felt like a silly question for a moment, but then the rest of Bucky’s brain caught up, initially too distracted by the fact that the Soldier was gone to acknowledge what this actually meant.

This time he did manage a full, outright grin. “Yes. Yes! It’s— the triggers— they didn’t work? Right?”

“Seems like it,” Tony still sounded hesitant and Bucky wondered why. Everything went right.“But you said, he’s gone. The Soldier, you mean?”

“Yes!” Bucky exclaimed again. “It’s— it’s quiet in my head, for the first time in years. Just me. It’s just me.” It didn’t matter that the world dulled around him, didn’t matter that there was an inexplicable emptiness somewhere deep inside. Bucky would figure it all out somehow. All that mattered was that he could finally be the man worthy of Tony’s love.
He just wished the crease between Tony’s brows would disappear.

“This—isn’t quite what we expected,” Tony tried to explain and shared another look with Dr. Vance. The woman’s lips thinned into a frustrated line, but after a beat, she shrugged.

“As we discussed before, Dr. Stark, we still don’t have a grasp as to how the Soldier manifested in Mr. Barnes’ brain. Perhaps this is how it was meant to work.” She gestured at the screens. “The data does back us up. There was no shift in his brain chemistry, no forced physical reactions. The unique biological responses associated with the triggers are gone.”

Bucky wanted to shout his agreement because no matter how one looked at it, this was good news. This was what he wanted all along. He was free.

“Alright, yeah, yeah,” Tony began to nod to himself and the tone of his voice shifted into something more optimistic. “We can work with this. How are you feeling then?”

“Like myself.”

“No murder-y urges?”

“Dr. Stark, really?” Dr. Vance huffed, but there was no bite to her reprimand as she was obviously encouraged by what they were all seeing as well.

“Hey, it gets the point across, doesn’t it?” He turned back to Bucky. “Answer the question, super soldier.”

“No violent urges, no itchy feeling underneath my skin that ends with me destroying all the punching bags in the gym, no desire to go exterminate Hydra—I mean, I still hate every one of those slimy bastards, but I sure as hell don’t want to wax poetic about murdering them.”

“Soldier, your mission is to go and make me a hot meal.” That was Rhodes.

“With all due respect, go make it yourself, Colonel.” Bucky responded with a grin, which for once was actually returned by the man.

“Jesus Christ, I think it worked, Tones.”

“Well, no harm in trying this again, right? To be extra, extra sure,” Tony said, prompting Rhodes to let out a snort.

“Tony Stark, recommending caution? Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

Tony’s response was a very mature middle finger, which prompted a “Boys, behave!” from Dr. Vance. The levity in the room didn’t dissipate though even when the trigger words were said again by Dr. Vance and then by Rhodes (who grumbled the whole way about him being shit at Russian pronunciation). They even got Friday to recite them, just to make sure recorded voices remained ineffective. None of it worked. Nothing happened and the data, the scans, everything—it all supported their final conclusion.

Bucky was free.

He was sure that the enormity of what just happened didn’t register yet because he should’ve been far more excited, but he didn’t hesitate to pull Tony into a crushing hug as soon as the restraints were off.
“Thank you so much, Tony,” he whispered into the man’s ear and tightened his arms around the man. It took a moment for him to acknowledge that this display of affection may have been inappropriate given that Dr. Vance was here and there was always that unspoken agreement to remain nothing but professional around her—but Tony’s arms were tight and secure around him too, so all Bucky did was let himself have this one precious moment, everything else be damned.

“I’m so happy I was able to do this for you, James,” Tony’s own voice was hushed, overwhelmed with emotion. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Bucky had to repeat the sentiment, and he wanted nothing more than to remain like this forever, but the world around them demanded their attention, so he pulled away from Tony, even if it was the hardest thing to do.

To cover up that reluctance, he turned to Dr. Vance with open arms and a smile and she didn’t hesitate to grace him with her own embrace, gently patting him on the back.

“I’m so happy for you, Mr. Barnes,” she said. Her hug felt nice too, Bucky had to admit, and he wondered whether this was what his mother’s hugs felt like. He couldn’t remember anymore, the sense memories all but gone and no amount of therapy would bring them back, but he didn’t want to dwell on that. His focus had to be on the here and now.

“Thank you, Dr. Vance, you’ve been a real blessing. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

When she pulled away, there was just a hint of tears in her eyes. “Well, you’re not quite done with me, Mr. Barnes, I’ll see you bright and early for our session next week,” she teased, but Bucky could hear the happiness in her voice on his behalf.

Next, he looked over at Rhodes, who immediately put his hand up and glared at him. “I swear to god, Barnes, if you hug me, I will feed you to a tentacle monster.”

Bucky grinned. “Aw, but Tony told me the big, slimy fellas ended up being harmless and just looking for a way to get home.”

“I’m sure I can find a frisky one just for you,” Rhodes quipped back, but his own expression softened just a touch as he walked over and clapped Bucky on the shoulder. “Congrats though, man, really. I’m glad you have this peace of mind now. Hell, I know I’ll sleep like a damn baby tonight now that your assassin mode is gone.”

Bucky gave into his laughter, enjoying the banter and the levity and the overwhelming sense of relief. The whole thing may have been anticlimactic, just as Tony promised, but he couldn’t be happier.

He’d convince himself of that even if it killed him.

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After leaving the Hulk cage, Tony dragged Bucky down to the lab to deactivate and remove the kill switch from his arm, which was just as anticlimactic and took all of fifteen minutes because the engineer was nothing if not efficient in his work. Bucky was subsequently shooed away, Tony needing time to finish up other work, so Bucky didn’t see the man until later that night, after Friday told him to dress in something nice (Tony’s words, apparently) and the man himself showed up at his door a few minutes later.

“Hey there, super soldier,” Tony said as a way of greeting and it took Bucky a few seconds to respond because Tony in a three-piece suit (grey with an eye-catching purple tie) was never going to
stop being distracting.

“Hi, Tony,” he finally managed, “you, uh—you look really nice.” He almost blushed at Tony’s self-satisfied smirk. “Can I ask why we’re both dressed up?” Well, he wasn’t exactly dressed up, but Friday helped him pick out a dress shirt and a nice pair of jeans, along with a leather jacket, and she said Tony would approve, so really, that was all Bucky cared about as far as fashion was concerned.

“We need to go to Stark Tower and get you to sign some documents, so you can be a free man an’ all that.”

“And that required us looking nice?”

Tony shrugged. “Eh, I have a meeting I need to attend while I’m there. Plus, there’s never a bad time to look nice, James.”

Reading verbal and body language cues used to be second nature to him, but now Bucky had a hard time assessing whether Tony was telling him the truth or not. It should’ve been distressing that he seemingly lost the ability to do so, that so many of his instincts, previously active and perfectly honed, were all but gone now.

“Didn’t you just tell me yesterday that you lived for t-shirts and jeans?” he said, ignoring the sense of apprehension. He didn’t need to know every exit in a given space, every line of sight, every available weapon within a ten yard radius, all the ways things could go wrong and just as many ways to turn the situation to his advantage if they did. It all used to be automatic - images, calculations, and catalogues, all running at the back of his head. Now all gone with the Soldier.

It didn’t matter.

“I’m a complicated man,” Tony winked and ushered him over with a wave of his hand. “Now, come on, our chariot awaits. We’ll take one of my sweet rides over there.”

What mattered was that Tony was here with him, as handsome as always, cheerful and smiling. Bucky trusted him enough without needing to analyze every gesture, word, and intonation, so without any further hesitation, he followed Tony to the garage.

Bucky spent the ride mostly listening to Tony, who filled the silence with a few stories from his college days, recounting gleefully, and in great detail, the times Rhodes was the one drunk off his ass while Tony was the (slightly) more responsible party dragging them out of trouble. Bucky didn’t interrupt with more than an amused comment or two, a question here and there, but mostly, he just listened. Tony’s voice was soothing, as always, but the void in his chest still remained.

Before long, they were weaving through the nightmare that was Manhattan traffic, but when they finally neared the glimmering image of the Tower, Tony drove right past it and turned to smile mischievously at Bucky when asked as to where they were actually going.

“It’s a surprise, James. Swear I’m only kidnapping you a little,” was Tony’s unhelpful response and it took several more blocks before the car finally pulled into the underground parking structure of one of the towering buildings downtown.

“Where are we exactly?” Bucky asked, taking in the details as he stepped out of the car.

“One of the nicest hotels in the city. Come on now, I think we’re right on time.”

Right on time for what? Bucky wanted to ask, but he didn’t voice the question.
Even now, in this brand new, unfamiliar environment, his mind was no longer running ten steps ahead of him, no longer evaluating every detail to put himself at the greatest advantage, and some part of him was *angry* that all of that was taken away by the Soldier. Hell, Bucky was a damn sniper during the war, he was a perfectly capable combatant even before Hydra got their dirty hands on him.

But Bucky had no control over what stayed and what was lost, and in the end, this was a sacrifice he was willing to make. He would rather be a man than be a soldier.

Soon, they were on the top floor of the building, heading down a hallway towards two large, floor-to-ceiling ornate doors and when Tony opened one and gestured for Bucky to go in, he only hesitated for a second before doing so.

However, all he managed were a few steps before he had to stop and blink in confusion, although his brain had little time to process the scene in front of him because a moment later, he had his arms full of two teenage boys.

“Bucky!” Harley and Peter exclaimed simultaneously, hugging him from both sides, and his own arms tightened around them on instinct. The rest of the room was filled with *everyone else*, plus tables full of food and drink *and* a giant banner that hung on the opposite wall and said “Congratulations!” That alone should’ve explained what was happening, but Bucky still had more questions than answers.

“We’re so glad you’re all better now,” Peter murmured at his side, head leaning against his right shoulder while Harley looked up at him with a big grin.

“Does this mean you get to be an Avenger now? Oh man, you would be so bad-ass with that metal arm! Tony needs to build you some rocket launchers—”

“Oh, do you think Mr. Stark would build you a whole new suit too?”

“I’m not sure I’ll allowed to be an Avenger yet, boys,” Bucky tried to put a stop to the excited chatter, but he was smiling and giving them both a tight hug. He missed these troublemakers, their energy and uncomplicated, genuine affection, and he *swore* they both had gotten taller since the last time he’d seen them.

His gaze pulled away from the two to sweep over the room again, taking in everyone else. Alice, Banner, and van Dyne stood to one side and both of the women waved at him when their eyes met, expressions part amused, part indulgent. Pepper and Rhodes were on the other side with another man — *Happy Hogan, if his memory served him right* — with Dr. Vance and Vision rounding out the group.

The room wasn’t large and this was obviously meant to be a small, private affair, but everything looked elegant and high-class and *expensive*, leaving Bucky a bit off-kilter.

“Um, hi, everyone,” he stammered out as the boys grabbed a wrist each and dragged him the few steps forward to join the rest of the group, which prompted a round of cheers. A quick glance to his left told him Tony was following close behind, a self-satisfied smirk firmly in place.

“Hey, what is this?” Tony jabbed an accusing finger in the direction of Alice and van Dyne as he approached, pointing at the glasses of wine in their hands, “did you start without us? I told you, no pre-gaming allowed.”

“This is what happens when you’re late, Tony,” van Dyne said back, but then winked in Bucky’s
direction, “it’s all good though, we’re drinking in pretty boy’s honor. Good to see you again, by the way.”

"Good to see you as well, Ms. van Dyne,” he replied automatically, still trying to process everything, although he didn’t miss her rolling her eyes at him.

"It’s Hope, please. We’re all friends here."

Hope took a slow sip of her drink and Bucky turned to give Tony a pleading look.

"What exactly is happening right now?” Bucky couldn’t help the question, which apparently amused the boys because it set off an identical set of snickers.

"It’s a party, duh,” Harley rolled his eyes.

"Brat One is right,” Tony confirmed with a chuckle, shoving Harley good-naturedly when the boy stuck his tongue out in response to the comment, “we’re throwing you a yay, no more Hydra party.”

“A what—”

“Yup, Mr. Stark had this planned for a while. He had all of us on stand-by so that when we got the message that you were finally cleared, boom! Avengers assemble!” was Peter’s slightly more helpful explanation.

“Don’t you boys have school?”

“Eh, it’s Friday,” Harley shrugged, “and homework is super easy, so I did most of it on the flight over here today. It was in Tony’s private jet, so it was awesome.”

“I already did all my homework too,” Peter declared proudly, “so Aunt May was totally fine with me spending the weekend with you guys.”

“So, this is—” Bucky’s gaze swept over the room again, taking each person in. “Everyone’s here for me?” He knew it was a dumb question, but it still somehow overwhelming to think that any of these people would care enough to show up on his behalf.

“They sure are,” Tony said before turning to playfully glare at the group, “although there’s also a good chance they’re all actually here to drink on my dime, bunch of freeloaders. Swear to god, nothing assembles the Avengers faster than free alcohol.”

“I resent that,” Rhodes declared, unable to keep the smirk of his face, “I’m also here for the food. The chef you hired makes some killer appetizers.”

“It’s true,” Banner piped in, equally unsuccessful in holding back his own smile, “the things she can do with spices, it’s incredible.”

Hope snorted. “I can definitely afford my own alcohol, Tony, but I gotta say, it does taste that much sweeter when it’s coming out of your pocket.”

“Well, I for one, cannot eat nor drink,” Vision declared and gave Bucky a smile filled with what almost looked like mischief, “so I am absolutely here because Dr. Vance is a brilliant doctor with a wealth of knowledge on the human psyche and I would be remiss in declining this opportunity to converse.” The older woman just shook her head indulgently at all of them.

Tony turned back to wink at Bucky. “See, what’d I tell ya? They don’t even know you’re here.”
Thankfully, this easygoing banter was helping to soothe most of his nervousness. These people were his friends after all—*he wasn’t quite bold enough to think the word “family”*—and today was his day to celebrate.

He must have hesitated a moment too long however because Tony’s expression turned more uncertain and the man took a step closer.

“Is this— is this okay?” Tony whispered the question. “Shoot, is it too much? I mean, you know everyone here and they all know about the therapy, but is it— It’s the banner, isn’t it? Damn it, it’s too big— I can send everyone home—”

“Tony, no, no, this is— this is great,” Bucky gave Tony a genuine smile. “Unexpected, but great. Although we could’ve just as well done this at the Compound, yeah?”

Tony just scoffed. “Please, and miss out on this? Come on, we got one of the best chefs in town catering, the view is amazing,” Tony made a point to gesture at the New York skyline, admittedly gorgeous against the rapidly darkening sky, “and most importantly, we’ll get to watch Rhodey get drunk as all hell, which means we can make fun of him the whole night.”

Pepper came over to give Bucky a one armed hug and a kiss on the cheek. “For once, Tony’s right. The Compound is hardly the best place to celebrate something like this and drunk Rhodey *is* hilarious.” Rhodes’ “I definitely resent that!” was promptly ignored. “Congratulations, by the way,” her smile was warm, “I know this has been a tough journey for you.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to do it without all you,” he said honestly, trying to include everyone in the room with his gaze, receiving happy smiles in return.

Tony was smiling too, the brightest spot in the room to Bucky’s eye, and that familiar crinkle at the corner of his eyes melted a little bit of Bucky’s heart. “So, food, drinks, and good company? That sound like fun?”

“Sounds perfect.”

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“Allright, you miscreants, listen up,” Tony tapped his champagne glass filled with what must have been alcohol-free cider, “before you all get uselessly drunk, and the two teenagers and I become the most responsible people here— which, let’s face it, is a disaster in the making— I have to make this party official and say a few words.”

Everyone’s attention was turned to Tony, although Rhodes and Hope had an arm slung over each other’s shoulders and were paying a bit more attention to their giggling. The engineer in question just rolled his eyes at the pair and ushered Bucky to stand close instead.

“We’re all here tonight to celebrate the fact that once again, the collective power of the Avengers handed another big ‘screw you’ to our slimy Hydra friends,” Tony looked over at Bucky and winked, “by giving a good man his life back. Now, because this is the 21st century, and we don’t use paper like some cavemen, I don’t have any fancy paper pardon that I could sign and hand over for symbolic purposes, but Fatima and I did spend all day today filing paperwork, plus weeks of preparations coming up to this day, and I had to pull some serious favors with our elected politicians, bless their brittle hearts, to make sure our resident super soldier over here was free and clear ASAP, and so I am happy and proud to announce that as of six pm today,” he turned to face Bucky, “you, James Buchanan Barnes, are officially a free man, a rightful citizen of these United States, and yes, that does include having to pay taxes like the rest of us.”
The room erupted in cheers, mingled with laughter and exclamations of Congratulations!, and for this one perfect moment, Bucky was filled to the brim with warmth and undeniable affection for each person here, with Tony’s smile at the center of that sweet happiness.

***

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah, just needed some fresh air for a minute.”

“I’m pretty sure Rhodes moved on from flirting with Hope to retelling stories of his military days to Vision and Banner, who seem to be waiting for the perfect opportunity to escape.”

Tony looked over from his spot at the balcony banister as Bucky approached and responded with a put upon groan. “Oh no, Air Force stories means Rhodey is a drink or two away from passing out.”

Bucky settled on Tony’s left, shoulders touching. The outside world in front of them was bright with city lights and there was only a bit of a cold bite to the September night.

“Sounds like you’ll have to go rescue him soon.”

“Nah, Pepper and Happy can deal with him. Hope too, she’s the one who started that drinking game, she’s not getting out of dealing with drunk Rhodey. I think they all have a couple suites here, they’ll be fine. You have a room too, by the way.” Tony fiddled with the cuff of his sleeve. “Nice little suite and Friday’s monitoring all entrances and exits, so no worries about security. Oh, and the kids are staying here too. They actually wanted to hang out with us tomorrow, something about ‘properly reintroducing you to the modern world’, which, I’ll be honest, sounds vaguely terrifying coming from them. You up for the challenge?”

“Of course, that sounds great,” Bucky said and took a deep breath of the fresh air before exhaling slowly. “This has been wonderful, Tony, thank you.”

“Eh, it’s nothing. Honestly, if I don’t provide these guys with free food and alcohol every once in a while, they riot. You were just our excuse to throw a party.”

Bucky didn’t miss the sparkle of mirth in Tony’s eyes and he didn’t comment on the usual attempt at deflection in the face of simple gratitude. “Were you okay tonight? I mean, with the alcohol and everything.”

“Yeah, I’m alright. Helps that I had to keep an eye on the boys. I trust them, but they are teenagers. Gives me a good, concrete reason not to think about drinking.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Bucky murmured and leaned over to kiss Tony’s temple, thoroughly enjoying the way Tony’s face lit up with a bashful smile. “Amazing how strong you are, to remain sober like this.”

“You give me far too much credit. I’ve fallen off the wagon, done dumb things—”

“Yeah, but you get back up, and sometimes that’s the hardest thing to do, to keep going and keep fighting like that…”

Tony shrugged, but he did look away from the city to meet Bucky’s eyes. “I guess that’s something we both have in common then.”

Bucky smiled at the words and wanted to reach out, to take Tony’s hand into his own, but before he
got the chance, they were located by two teenage boys who wasted no time in informing them about their weekend plans and he couldn’t even find it in himself to be upset with the interruption, their enthusiasm infectious.

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Once all the congratulations and all the good-byes were finally said, Bucky followed Tony to the promised hotel suite. He appreciated the gesture, but Bucky would’ve been just as happy to spend the night in his own bed. Honestly, it wasn’t where he slept or where he spent any of his time that mattered. All he wanted was Tony there with him.

The man in question stopped in front of a fancy-looking door and held a plastic card against the scanner attached to the doorknob, ushering him inside.

Tony wasn’t kidding about this being a nice little suite, given that it was one of the fanciest places Bucky had ever stayed in. His quarters at the Compound were wonderful and spacious, but they were obviously made for comfort and utility. This place was made for opulence. Strangely, as he looked around, he began to feel like a kid who wasn’t allowed to sit on the fancy furniture for the fear of dirtying it up.

His expression must have given it away because Tony looked at him first, then at the suite, and back at Bucky again. “Crap, is this too much too? Am I just messing everything up tonight?”

Reassuring Tony - that he could do, so he smiled and shook his head. “No, you haven’t messed anything up. It’s perfect, really. It’s just—you didn’t have to do any of this, you know? I would’ve been happy with a quiet dinner and a movie at home…”

“Well, we can do all that boring stuff any day of the week,” Tony shrugged, looking almost bashful. “Just wanted to do something special for you. You, uh—” he cleared his throat, looking away, “you deserve it. Deserve a lot more than this, but it’s a good start.”

Bucky took a step closer to Tony, although it was far too hesitant for his own liking, and he hated himself for missing, needing, that infusion of boldness that the Soldier always provided. But this was Tony, looking shy and unsure in front of him, and he didn’t need the Soldier for this, he didn’t, so he let his hand brush along Tony’s shoulder and the man looked up at him at the touch.

“Thank you, Tony,” he whispered, hoping those words were able to convey just how much he meant them and he gently pulled the man in closer.

“I’m just so happy I was able to give this to you, James,” Tony whispered, face hidden in Bucky’s collarbone as he returned the embrace, “you deserve to be your own man, to be free, to be happy.”

“I am happy,” there was a quiver in Bucky’s own voice and he pressed his face against the side of Tony’s head, nuzzling the soft hair behind his ear. “Tony, I can never, never thank you for everything you’ve done for me. You saved me.”

Tony began to pull away and Bucky almost protested because no, he needed this, please, but Tony only moved far enough away so they could see each other. Those clever hands were on Bucky’s neck now, thumbs tracing the edges of his jawline.

“You saved yourself, James. All I did was give you the tools to do it.”

“Which is more than anyone has ever given me,” Bucky said and wanting Tony closer again, he pressed their foreheads together, the tips of their noses brushing. “I missed you,” he echoed his earlier sentiment, the words no less true than they were yesterday.
“God, I missed you too…” Tony let an unsteady breath escape his lips, and Bucky noticed suddenly just how exhausted the other man looked. The dark shadows under those glassy eyes, the paler than usual skin, the tired slump of his shoulders. Bucky frowned, frustrated with himself that it had taken him this long to see this.

“Honey, when was the last time you slept?” he asked, brushing his hand against Tony’s temple.

It took Tony a moment to respond and when he did, his words were predictably sheepish. “About two days ago? It might’ve be three, it’s a bit of a blur…”

“Oh, Tony…” Bucky couldn’t help the reprimand, although his voice never rose above a quiet murmur.

“Well, there were those sea creatures and even though they were friendly, we had to spend hours getting them back to where they belonged… and then I spent the last two nights going over all of your data. I just wanted to be absolutely sure before we messed with those triggers…”

Bucky really should’ve known. Of course Tony was sacrificing his own well-being for the sake of others. It was one of the many things that Bucky simultaneously adored and found utterly frustrating, but Tony was Tony and he loved him for it, so all it meant was that he had to care of the man, the same way Tony took care of him.

“How about we both get some sleep then, yeah? I think I could use some myself.” When Tony nodded his agreement, Bucky hesitated. “Did you— are you staying at the hotel as well?”

“I got myself a small suite, yeah. Knew I’d be too exhausted to drive back. Plus, you, me, and the kids are taking New York by storm tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait.” It all sounded perfect, it really did, but when Tony began to pull away, a shot of panic ran through Bucky because the last time Tony was out of his sight, something terrible happened, something that almost ruined things between them and Bucky didn’t even know exactly what it was, but he was sure he couldn’t let the other man go, not now—

“Tony, wait,” he called out, this strange dread finally giving Bucky the courage he needed. “Would it— would you be alright with staying here for the night… with me?” Tony’s eyebrows furrowed and Bucky hurried to explain, fearful that Tony would say no. “I can sleep on that fancy couch over there or something, it doesn’t matter, I just—” His eyes were pleading. “It’s the first time I’ll be truly alone, no Soldier, nothing, and… and I don’t want to be alone…”

God, he sounded needy, pathetic and needy, but Tony still turned to face him fully instead of walking away.

“I think that’s— I think that’s doable,” Tony said, biting his lip, and Bucky’s whole body flooded with relief. This was good. This was great. He just needed Tony close and everything would be okay.

“Only if you’re comfortable with it though,” he still offered.

“I am, really,” Tony reassured and stepped closer to prove it. “I’m better, everything’s fine. Nothing you need to worry about.”

Bucky didn’t agree, but for now, this was enough and unable to help himself, he hugged Tony close to him again. “Thank you.” He would never stop saying that to Tony, never stop meaning every bit of it.
“Don’t need to thank me for this either and you don’t have to sleep on any damn couch. Although I have to warn you, I’m gonna be pretty crappy company tonight,” Bucky couldn’t see Tony’s face, but he could hear the smile in his voice. “I think I’m gonna pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow.”

One more tight squeeze for good luck before Bucky forced himself to let go. “That’s alright. I’m not much in the way of conversation tonight either. But it’ll be nice just to— just to have you here.”

Tony’s smile was agreement enough and Bucky let himself indulge in one last caress, his hand brushing against Tony’s cheek. The fact that Tony turned his face to meet his touch made his heart skip a beat, but even this felt different. There was no fire deep in his belly, no overwhelming desire to pull Tony in and kiss him senseless, to push him against the nearest wall and drive him into incoherence with pleasure until it was made perfectly clear that Tony belonged to him and no one else. Everything was just— muted, to a softness that was comforting and sweet, but without any heat or passion. He convinced himself it didn’t matter.

Needing to grab a few things from his own suite, Tony took off for a few minutes, coming back when Bucky was in the middle of brushing his teeth. By the time Bucky came out of the bathroom, Tony was sprawled over the king-sized bed and true to his word, entirely lost to the world in deep sleep.

At least Tony managed to change into a tank top and a pair of sleep pants before passing out, Bucky noted fondly, as he carefully draped one of the blankets over the man. As always, Tony falling asleep so easily in his presence warmed every part him. It meant a lot before, but now, this moment was even more precious and maybe this was proof. Proof that Bucky was right all along and Tony felt safer around him now that the Soldier was gone. Bucky wasn’t harboring a monster inside his head anymore and he’d take every sense of wrongness he was experiencing if it meant he got to spend his days and nights next to Tony.

There was a set of his own pajamas sitting on the bed, with a thin black wallet and a paper booklet settled on top. When Bucky opened up the wallet, he found that Tony had thought ahead on more than just his sleepwear. There were cards in the wallet— driver’s license, social security—as well as credit cards and several crisp $100 bills. The little booklet turned out to be a passport and Bucky wondered just how Tony managed to do all of this in such a short amount of time. The man could certainly work miracles, couldn’t he?

The wallet was placed in the pocket of his leather jacket, which was draped over one of the fancy-looking chairs, but the pajamas were ignored, as Bucky suddenly felt too exhausted to even bother changing out of his shirt and jeans. Instead, he just settled onto the bed, his own body curving protectively around Tony’s. The only touch he allowed himself was a press of his lips against the crown of Tony’s head and he remained close so that the soothing, familiar scent of Tony’s shampoo could help him relax.

The emptiness was still deep inside, but Tony was solid and warm next to him, so Bucky could live with the emptiness. For a moment, he almost missed the way the Soldier used to watch over both of them, but there was no danger here. They were safe and the Soldier was gone, so Bucky closed his eyes and let himself fall into his first true, deep sleep since his mother kissed him goodbye and sent him off to war.

His body felt warm, deliciously warm, and it took a few seconds for Tony’s mind to realize it was because a solid line of heat was pressed up against him. The soft, feather-light kisses that were peppered along his neck filtered through into his awareness next and Tony sighed a deep sigh, letting
himself relax into the touch.

These types of dreams were so much better than his night terrors and after that last, disastrous nightmare, it would be a shame if he didn’t take full advantage of this.

His own arms wrapped around the strong, muscular back and when the vibranium hand on his back pulled him closer against that solid body, Tony couldn’t help the breathy “James…” that escaped him. Fuck, he needed this, even if fantasies were all he had. Real life was too goddamn complicated, but fantasies were simple enough and he’d take what he could.

The soft whispers didn’t make any sense, filtering through the haze in Tony’s head as nonsense, but it didn’t matter, it was still James’ voice. Only this time, that voice was raspy and heavy with lust, igniting the fire in Tony’s belly further. A strong thigh wedged itself between his legs and he let them fall apart, welcoming the pressure.

The lips against his skin never faltered in their ministrations, mapping out his neck and shoulders, his jawline and the arch of his cheeks, and Tony couldn’t help returning the favor, mouthing at the corner of that gorgeous, sharp jaw. One of his hands settled on the small of James’ back where his shirt rode up and the heat against Tony’s palm was intoxicating.

Fuck, what was it with him and his vivid as hell dreams lately? Maybe he needed to get his head checked out, an MRI or a CT scan, but all these concerns remained fleeting, nothing but momentary thoughts, because the rest of him was drowning in the sensation of James against him.

Again, breathless whispers he couldn’t understand, although this time, the familiar solnishko, prelest’ moya did reach Tony’s muddled brain and that was fine, just fine. He was decidedly on board with a Soldier dream, all that raw power and danger and edge focused in on him—but then the vibranium hand found its way beneath his tank top and fuck—Tony’s eyes flew wide open as he let out an involuntary startled noise at the cold metal against his heated skin. It was too much, too sharp, too real, and his heartbeat picked up its pace for a whole new reason now because—

A satisfied chuckle echoed in his ear and after another possessive, biting kiss to his neck, more whispered words followed and Tony was now awake enough—fuck, fuck, fuck—to recognize the Russian falling from those lips, even if he couldn’t understand the words.

Tony’s mind was quickly going into panic mode, even as his whole body wanted nothing more than to continue this fantasy—shit, so not a fantasy—but he managed enough willpower to push the heavy body on top of him away with shaking hands.

The knowing smirk he was graced with, even sharper in the moonlight streaming through the window, was so familiar, so full of promise—

“So-Soldat?” Tony’s voice was shaking too and the breath in his throat stuttered to a stop.

“Ya gotov’ otchevat,” the Soldier replied as he leaned back in and Tony couldn’t stop his own full body shiver when that body pressed back against him, soft lips whispering into his ear, “but you know I will only comply for you, solnishko.”

Chapter End Notes

He's baaaaaack~ ;D
“So-Soldat?” Tony’s voice was shaking too and the breath in his throat stuttered to a stop.

“Ya gotov’ otchevat,” the Soldier replied as he leaned back in and Tony couldn’t stop his own full body shiver— fuck, those soft lips against his ear, that husky whisper…

“But you know I will only comply for you, solnishko.”

The perfect, heavy body of the super soldier was flush against him again, the Soldier on top with a possessive hand at his back to hold him close while he nuzzled at Tony’s cheek, intermittent kisses hot against Tony’s skin. The press and the weight of him, fuck, it was intoxicating, and Tony’s brain struggled to hang on to details, to that initial flush of panic against the flood of needwantplease. He had wanted this for so fucking long and his hands clenched in the other man’s shirt, material bunching in his fists as he tried to hang on—

The thigh between his legs pressed a little bit harder, just the perfect amount of pressure against his budding arousal, and Tony’s breath caught on a whimper. The Soldier’s lips worked their way over, hovering over the corner of Tony’s mouth, stopping when he gently bumped his nose against Tony’s.

“My clever Tony Stark…” the whisper was a hot exhale of air against Tony’s lips, and he struggled to open his eyes, but he needed to see the other man. The gaze he was met with was sharp, calculating, a steely, cold blue, but the Soldier was smiling. “Ya tak dolgo etogo jdal…”

A tiny bit of brain capacity seemed to have come back online, just enough for Tony to form words. “The Russian— that’s gonna a problem…”

The Soldier let out a throaty chuckle, looming over him as all that solid muscle and raw power kept him trapped against the bed, but that was fine, just fine, because by god, Tony had—

“Waited so long for this…” the Soldier spoke the words Tony didn’t dare say and the rest of his thoughts fizzled out into static at the realization of just how badly they both wanted this.

The Soldier’s metal hand left its spot on Tony’s back to caress his face, tracing down to run a heavy, cool thumb against his bottom lip. Tony’s mouth fell open on its own accord, breath coming out in short, aborted huffs of air. Fuck, he was certain he had fantasies that started just like this, and he could almost feel the cold press of that thumb against his tongue, tasting of metal and winter—

But the thumb didn’t dip inside, the Soldier keeping up the feather light touches against his lip instead, never giving Tony any room to breathe as their foreheads were still pressed together.

“My pretty Mechanic…” the Soldier whispered the endearment against Tony’s lips and the metal hand trailed down, over Tony’s neck, causing his breath to hitch as remnants of that nightmare rose
unbidden, but they were dulled to near nothing by the heat between them.

His reaction didn’t go unnoticed by the Soldier however because the hand didn’t linger on his neck, the cool metal moving further down Tony’s body, over his chest, and the Soldier shushed him with that same familiar “Tiho, thio, moyo solnishiko.” The hand pushed up on the hem of his thin shirt and settled on Tony’s bare stomach, the heavy weight against his abs feeling so damn good. The Soldier’s lips returned to Tony’s neck, kisses soothing the small, playful bites at his skin. “Promise you that you’re safe with me…”

Tony had to shift against the strong thigh, seeking more pressure because fuck, that low, husky timbre drove Tony crazy, those familiar words, same ones spoken yesterday when James—

Tony’s eyes flew open, just as the hand on his stomach began to trail down lower—

James.

Fuck, fuck, what was he doing, this wasn’t James, not entirely—

One of his hands shot out to grab the metal wrist before it had the chance to find out just how much he wanted this— but he didn’t, not like this—

“Stop.”

The Soldier stilled at the word and after a moment, slowly lifted himself up so he could look down at Tony. This time around, when faced with that same scrutinizing gaze, it was much easier for Tony to acknowledge the precarious state he was actually in.

He could feel that he no longer wore his bracelets (almost indestructible, but a vibranium hand would do the trick), so he had no suit. Friday may have been monitoring outside activity, but she had no presence inside the actual room. They wiped out the triggers, so the shutdown trigger was nothing more than two uninspiring Russian words.

There were other Avengers nearby, but he had no way to contact them and there were also civilians everywhere as well. He didn’t think the Soldier posed a real threat to bystanders, but he also had to admit that he had no idea what the hell was going on, which meant he needed to stall and talk in order to assess the Soldier’s current state of mind and threat level.

At the pit of his stomach, fear settled, although it wasn’t even for his own safety. What if messing with the triggers just made everything worse? What if they caused this to happen somehow? James was— no, he wasn’t gone, Tony refused to even think about the possibility.

During the brief silence that gave Tony far too much time to think and panic, the Soldier didn’t move, only his eyes flickering up and down to examine Tony and the whole moment felt like balancing on a tightrope— no, it felt like facing off against a predator where one wrong move meant very bad things for the prey.

In this case, a very vulnerable Tony and he knew, without a doubt, that the only reason that hand stopped was because the Soldier was humoring him.

As if to prove that exact point, the Soldier easily escaped Tony’s grip, but thankfully, the hand didn’t follow its original trajectory, instead returning to running careful fingers up and down Tony’s cheek.

The Soldier’s head cocked to the side, eyes narrowing in thought. “But I can see that you want this,” he said and despite the quickly building panic, Tony’s frazzled brain spared a thought to the fact that the Soldier somehow managed not to make those words sound sleazy. The other man just sounded—
confused. “Your heart rate is elevated,” he continued, his hand never stopping its motion against Tony’s skin, “you’re flushed,” the Soldier now looked a little less confused and a little more self-satisfied, “and if I were to reach just a little lower, I would find you hard and wanting.”

Tony swallowed against his dry throat. “Just because my body’s reacting, doesn’t mean I’m on board.” Jesus Christ, was he really trying to explain the idea of enthusiastic consent to the goddamn Winter Soldier? This was so not how he imagined spending this night and there was some small, near hysterical part of his brain that just wanted to scream because why couldn’t he just get some fuckin’ sleep for once in his life?

The Soldier’s brows furrowed, the confusion back in his features. He leaned closer and Tony tensed, but all the Soldier did was bump their noses again, the metal hand cradling Tony’s face and keeping him in place. “But Tony, I need you… Can’t stop thinking about you. Think about you all the time, how gorgeous you are, how perfect… I need this so much, please…” There was too much to process in those words, but just the fact that the Winter Soldier was begging— God, how was Tony supposed to deal with this?

“I can’t—”

“Please, please tell me that you need this,” the Soldier continued his pleading, ignoring Tony’s stuttered words, “tell me that you want this too. That you want me.”

There was earnestness in the Soldier’s voice, mixed with that desperate sense of need, that same need that still sat heavy in Tony’s belly, alongside the fear and the guilt. Words were at the tip of Tony’s tongue and he almost swallowed them back, but then he realized it didn’t matter what was said between them. James wouldn’t remember this when he came back— and he would come back, he dammit— and if he let these words take form, let them exist outside his own head… maybe he wouldn’t feel like he was drowning anymore.

The Soldier carefully watched as Tony slowly inched his way up into a sitting position, but the other man made no move to stop him and Tony was thankful for that. The pillows stacked against the headboard cushioned his back and in this position, eye level with the Soldier, he felt a little less like the prey he was.

“Yes, I do want you,” Tony confessed, the whisper somehow obscenely loud against his own ears, but it was true— everythiing he was about to say was true— “but I want all of you. Every part of you, understand?” When the Soldier didn’t respond right away, his expression unreadable now, Tony wondered whether he should keep the rest to himself, but…

In for a penny an’ all…

“I do want this, you’re right. Fuck, it probably says more about me than you, that a single touch, a word from you when you’re like this and I can’t even fucking think straight…” Tony had to close his eyes and draw in a shaking breath when he saw the Soldier’s lips quirk up in a familiar self-satisfied smirk. “Never knew that it’d be Russian pet names and growled threats against Hydra that’d do it for me, but here we are… So yeah, I do want this part of you…” He opened his eyes to meet the cold blue gaze. “But I also want the part of you that—” his breath hitched, but he forced himself to say the words aloud. “The part of you that laughs at my bad jokes and cooks pancakes with the kids, that treats Friday and the bots like people instead of machines and— whose eyes light up with wonder instead of suspicion at the things I create…”

Tony was infinitely glad that the Soldier still hadn’t made a move, that he was actually listening— but was any of this even filtering through?— because Tony didn’t think he’d be able to stop the words from tumbling out now, the importance of them overwhelming, even if he hated himself that
he was saying this now, when he was never brave enough to say this to James before…

“I want the part of you that came here looking for redemption and that tries so damn hard every day to be a better person…” God, he needed James, he needed that man back who encompassed all of this, every bit of that goodness and these sharp, deadly edges… “But that part of you isn’t here right now, okay? And I can’t—” Tony’s hands clenched in the sheets beneath him, needing something to ground him because this was too much— the confession, everything he felt for this man, all on top of this fucked-up situation. “Let’s be honest, you’ve got all the control here and I won’t be able to stop you…”

Tony wasn’t even sure he would be able to blame the Soldier if anything did happen, because how much autonomy did a person truly have when they were missing half of themselves? This was only the part of James that represented pure instinct and Id and darkness— darkness they all had lurking within them— and if someone did the same thing to Tony and took all of his worst parts and made a person out of them? Well, that man would’ve burned the whole world down long ago without a speck of hesitation or remorse.

This was still James though, wasn’t it?

“But even like this, I still trust you.” Please don’t prove me wrong because I don’t think I can live through another betrayal…

He had nothing else left to offer, feeling strangely empty inside, but when the Soldier finally moved, leaning forward into Tony’s space again, he couldn’t help the spike of fear that shot through his blood—

But all the Soldier did was press his forehead against Tony’s, hands on either side of Tony’s hips holding him up and keeping most of his weight off of Tony.

“So good…” the other man whispered, “you’re so good, Tony, so, so good… And I’m bad, aren’t I? Broken, shattered into little pieces… This is why I don’t deserve you.”

Tony was speechless for a moment, unsure how to even begin answering something like that, but he watched as a shudder ran through the Soldier’s whole body before the man lifted his head to look at Tony.

“They broke me, lapochka…” there was abject hurt in the Soldier’s eyes as he continued his own strange confession. “I was a bad Soldier… Fought them every time— disobedient Asset, non-compliant, must be re-calibrated— and they had to wipe me, over and over and over…” A hitching breath stopped the near-hysterical litany. “They’d take it all away, but I would find my way back, fight them, make them all bleed until they broke me into pieces again, until there was just the mission, nothing but the mission, nothing but death…”

The Soldier switched to frenetic Russian and even though Tony couldn’t understand a word of it, the desperation, the despair transcended language and he had to reach out this time, offer something to the man before him. Tony placed his own shaking hand over the vibranium hand at his hip and the Soldier pulled in a shuddering inhale in reaction to the touch. Frenzy turned back to need in those blue eyes.

“But you freed me, didn’t you, sweetheart?” the metal hand moved, but instead of pulling away, the Soldier threaded their fingers together so that he could bring Tony’s hand to his lips and Tony nearly wept. God, how much of James was still left in this version of the man? How much of the Soldier was always there in James?
The Soldier, not privy to Tony’s own racing thoughts, placed two more soft—_fuck, “worshipful” was more accurate_— kisses to the back of his hand. “A man made of iron and light… My hero who slew the Hydra in my head and gave me freedom, gave me _life_…” Another tender press of lips against Tony’s skin. “You slew the Hydra, but the monster still remains…”

_Finally, Tony found his ability to speak. “You’re not a monster…”_

“No?” The smile on the Soldier’s face turned almost self-deprecating, if such an expression were possible against that never-wavering gaze, sharp and predatory. “But it is _monsters_ that we have nightmares about, isn’t it? I know you see me for who I am. A _killer_, hands drenched in blood.”

Tony’s brow furrowed. “Nightmare? No, no, that wasn’t because of your past. All of that was _my_ issues, because I’m afraid that—” he stopped, just barely refraining from running a frustrated hand through his hair, because dammit, he was _not_ about to explain his insecurities to the Soldier. He let out a grunt instead and changed his approach, briefly wondering if trying to _reason_ with the Soldier was doing any good at all. He didn’t have a whole lot of options though. “I’ve never been afraid of you.”

“But I almost killed you.”

“Almost means you didn’t want me dead.”

The Soldier pressed their joined hands against his check, but those full lips quirked up in a smile and Tony wondered whether the Soldier also remembered this same exchange between them from the first time they properly met.

“Never wanted you dead, not even then. You—you were just an obstacle, standing in the way of my mission…” Another shudder ran through the man, shoulders hunching and eyes clenching shut, as if trying to shake off some dark, horrid memories. Tony knew, better than most, just how many of those memories this man had in his possession.

The ache in his chest at seeing James, in any form, hurting this much, pushed his need to comfort straight into overwhelming, so Tony reached out the hand that wasn’t trapped in the Soldier’s tight grip to grasp the man’s knee.

“Hey, you’re alright, you’re safe. They can never control you again. What you did as the Winter Soldier—you had no choice in that. You said it yourself, you kept fighting the bastards until the very end.”

The blue eyes opened to look back at Tony as the Soldier let out a sigh. “My clever Tony, my hero… So glad you’re mine now…”

The words sent a shiver down Tony’s spine and he had to swallow back some needy sound his body was desperate to make. _So not the time, libido._

“I’m right here, I promise,” he said instead, but apparently the Soldier was on the same page as Tony’s libido because in the next second, Tony found himself pulled straight into the super soldier’s lap.

Tony’s breath hitched in surprise and he knew the Soldier would feel his shaky exhale right against his lips, they were that close again. Once he could actually _think_ though, he realized the position they were in and Tony’s lips thinned into a tight line because the other man’s hands were settled right on top of Tony’s _ass._

“Hands above the belt, buddy,” Tony said, trying to sound stern, but all that did was cause the
Soldier to quirk an eyebrow at him instead, smirk and hands still firmly in place. Jesus, the switch between these moods was giving Tony whiplash, but he supposed it made sense. The Soldier had none of James’ stability, rationality or restraint to serve as a dampener against raw emotions.

He wasn’t sure how long he could keep this up, this exhausting back and forth with the Soldier and he just needed James to come back, all of him. And he would, Tony refused to believe anything else. He just needed to figure this all out.

He tried again, glaring at the man, and this time, the hands did shift to settle on his waist instead. Still a lot of contact—for fuck’s sake, he was straddling the man right now—but it was an improvement. Tony really needed all of his brain capacity, to focus on the words rather than the touch—

“It’s such a nice ass though,” the Soldier declared with a satisfied chuckle and apparently words had just as much ability to fry Tony’s brain. Crap. “Can’t help but look at it all the time, wanting to get my hands on it. On you.” The Soldier’s voice dropped back to that husky whisper. “Imagining all the other things I can do with that gorgeous backside.”

Damn it all to hell and back, how was Tony supposed to think right now?

“Can we—can we table the topic of my ass for another day?” Tony stammered out, at the same time struggling with where to place his hands in this position. The other man’s broad shoulders seemed like the safest choice.

The Soldier gave an unconvincing shrug and there were no more mentions of Tony’s various body parts, but it didn’t take more than a few seconds for the Soldier to start nuzzling the side of his face instead, tightening his hold around Tony at the same time. Apparently physical contact wasn’t optional with him.

“You’re still afraid of me, aren’t you?” Tony felt the Soldier’s words against his cheek. “I can feel that too. Your heartbeat’s still elevated, but it’s not arousal now, it’s tension. You don’t have to be scared. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid that you will though.”

“No? Then what is it?”

Tony’s hands flexed, gripping the cotton of the shirt on instinct. “I haven’t slept in three days, I’m exhausted, and—and I just want my James back.”

The Soldier pulled back to look at Tony. “I am James,” he said, so simple in his conviction, and Tony barely refrained from rolling his eyes, knowing it was the wrong reaction.

“You know what I mean,” he tried to reason instead, but stopped at a sudden realization. Did the Soldier actually know? How much awareness did he have? “You do, don’t you? There’s more to you than this. You’re two parts of the same whole and I just—I need to know that I haven’t lost that part of you. Please—please tell me he’s not gone.”

Fuck, putting it into words solidified the terror, heavy and sharp in his belly. Maybe they should’ve dealt with the triggers some other way. What if they permanently pulled the Soldier to the surface? What if they erased James? Tony was gripping the Soldier’s shirt so tightly, he knew it would’ve been ripped apart had he the strength.

For a moment—eternal, at least to Tony—the Soldier didn’t say anything, but then his gaze dropped to somewhere in the vicinity of Tony’s chest. “He’s… not gone. Just out of commission for the moment.”
“Oh thank god,” the words were pulled out of him by the rushing sense of relief—*this wasn’t much, but it was confirmation that James, his James, was okay*—and he didn’t even realize he pressed their foreheads together, hands buried in the Soldier’s hair. “The two of you, you need each other. You need to co-exist. Neither one of you do well when you’re apart. I should’ve known— I knew something went wrong when you disappeared—”

“Didn’t disappear,” the Soldier countered, causing Tony to frown.

“What do you mean?”

“I was pushed away,” the Soldier replied and his lips pulled down into a near scowl, the first real sign of anger all night. Tony pulled away, to give each of them a bit of space. “Always getting pushed back into the darkness, never letting me *live*. This time, pushed far enough that he could pretend I was gone.”

Tony wanted to sigh. “He didn’t pretend though. He really thought you *were* gone.”

The Soldier shrugged, expression guilty now and it looked both so familiar on James’ features and yet so out of place on the Soldier’s face. “You flinched. Lied and ran from me. Couldn’t let you be scared of me. Wanted the monster gone so badly that— convinced myself he disappeared.”

Oh. So this whole disaster was Tony’s fault. *Fan-fucking-tastic.* Apparently, he was such a pro at screwing up relationships, he screwed up one he wasn’t even in yet.

He tried to steady his own nerves so he could gentle his touch and run a comforting hand through the Soldier’s long hair, trying to find the right words, wishing he had said this earlier (knowing that if—no, when—James came back, he’d need to say this again).

“You see though? I’m not scared, not even right now. Am I worried about you? Yeah. Freakin’ the hell out, actually. Plus, you know, I’d like a heads up the next time the Winter Soldier shows up in my bed. But I’m not scared. I told you, my nightmare was— it was about my fear of *losing* you, more than anything else.”

Confusion replaced guilt. “But you’d never lose me.”

God, the way the Soldier said those words, imbued with that pure conviction of his, it made Tony wish all of life were that simple. “It’s a bit more complicated than that. Even you have to admit, that there are other people—” he didn’t want to bring up a certain Captain at all right now, so he amended, “there are circumstances that might inevitably put us back on different sides.”

By the almost amused huff of laughter the Soldier let out, the other man apparently disagreed. “You’re mine, Tony.” A playful kiss on the cheek accompanied the words. “I’d never let anyone take you away from me. I’d kill them all first.”

That playful sparkle in the Soldier’s eyes combined with that promise - it absolutely should *not* have made Tony’s stomach clench with desire, but it *did* and he resigned himself to adding yet another thing to the list of *Fucked Up Things Tony Stark Found Arousing*.

*He* was the only one with a functioning moral compass here at the moment though, so he definitely should not be encouraging this sort of behavior. However, before attempting to convince the Soldier that casual murder was *not* okay— *best of luck there*— something else nagged at the back of Tony’s brain and even though this wasn’t great timing, Tony knew he might not have another chance like this.

“Speaking of murder-y thoughts,” he segwayed, prompting another huff of laughter out of the
Soldier, “do you remember telling me that you once had a mission to kill me?”

“I do.”

“How long ago was that? Do you know who they sent in your place? I mean, I’m not surprised Hydra had it out for me— frankly, I’d be offended if they didn’t— but it’d be nice to know if I should be on the lookout for anyone in particular and your—” Tony frantically searched for the right word, “your counterpart didn’t have any memory of this.”

The Soldier cocked his head to the side, a gesture that Tony knew by now meant the other man was thinking something over. The quirk was strangely innocent and didn’t fit at all with the rest of the Soldier.

“It was… recent. But memories are fractured,” the Soldier finally said, moving one hand up and down Tony’s back absently. The metal twin was heavy and unmoving around Tony’s waist, keeping him all but trapped, not that Tony had anywhere he was planning to go. “The Asset was wiped often, sometimes daily when not in cryostasis— Asset is not functioning to its specifications, the Asset must be re-calibrated—”

“Hey, you’re alright, it’s okay,” Tony panicked again at hearing those words, but this time, it only took a second before the man took one long inhale, let the air out through his nose, and schooled his features into a more neutral expression.


“Okay, okay, stop, you don’t have to say anything else, I can’t—” Tony had to stop the near robotic recitation himself. “I can’t listen to you talk like this, it’s killing me.” Fucking Hydra. All of them could burn in hell for eternity as far as he was concerned. He’d light the fucking match.

“The Asset is unable to recall the modified mission parameters,” the Soldier repeated, a dejected whisper this time, and it made Tony’s heart clench.

“No, it’s okay, not a big deal. It’s not like it changes anything. Hydra’s on my ass either way. But at least I know it was on this side of the millennium, that narrows it down a bit. Huh, I wonder if the Ten Rings were ever involved with Hydra,” Tony muttered to himself, eyes narrowing in thought as his brain ran through facts and data, “or Killian. Shit, maybe even Stane. I wouldn’t put it past any of those assholes.”

The Soldier let out a quiet hum. “Aldrich Killian, Obadiah Stane. Persons of interest. The Asset was never briefed on the extent of their involvement within the organization. The Ten Rings—” the Soldier did mull these words over as his gaze grew distant for a second, “terrorist organization, dominant primarily in the Middle East, with satellites throughout the globe, including Russia, United States, and several countries in the European Union and South America. Considered volatile, with unstable internal structure, but viewed as a potential asset or ally to Hydra if appropriately managed. Multiple Hydra operatives involved, infiltration on several levels, with and without alternative covers.”

Tony took a second to process that. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. I mean, there wasn’t much on the Ten Rings in the data dump, but Hydra infiltrated SHIELD, so Ten Rings must have been crawling with their goons.”
Another small shudder ran through the Soldier, which Tony could feel everywhere they were pressed together. It took another second, but the other man’s features softened just enough to go back from Asset to Soldier. He almost looked apologetic. “And all these people, they hurt you, solnishko moyo, didn’t they? The same way Hydra—” he seemed to choke on the word, “broke me.”

“They tried to hurt me, yeah,” Tony reluctantly confirmed, “but you’re not broken. Just— just roughed up a bit and the pieces aren’t fitting right at the moment, but we’ll work on that, I promise.”

“Are any of them still alive?” the Soldier asked, entirely ignoring the second part of what Tony had said. Figures.

Tony frowned even as a resigned sigh escaped his lips. He really shouldn’t have started this line of conversation. “No, kinda had to take care of them myself on the count of them trying to kill me at the time…”

“That’s too bad. Hydra or not, they all deserve to suffer. The same pain they inflicted on you, returned to them ten-fold. I would have liked to watch them choke on their blood while they begged for your mercy on their knees.”

The glare Tony gave the Soldier was more exasperated than anything else. “You can’t choke and beg for mercy at the same time,” he said, but when a downright indulgent smile blossomed on the Soldier’s face, he realized now was really the time to use that moral compass. “And I appreciate the thought, really, but let’s just hold off on the murder part of the program, okay?”

“Why? Can’t I defend what is mine? Kill anything that threatens you? Threatens those you love?”

“No, of course you can defend people, but that’s not what you were—” Tony floundered for the right words, feeling like a hypocrite given his own past actions. What the hell was he even trying to explain here? He tried again. “You can’t threaten every person you don’t like with murder.”

The Soldier gave himself a second to think that over. “What about people who deserve it?”

“That’s very subjective.”

“Hydra.”

“Okay, a lot less subjective. Trust me, I want those slimy dicks wiped off the face of the Earth as much as you do, but we can’t just go and raid Hydra bases for shits and giggles, killing people left and right.”

“Why not?”

“Because there needs to be accountability to our actions, it’s wrong to kill—”

“It’s wrong to kill killers?”

The Soldier raised one challenging eyebrow when Tony didn’t respond right away because damn it all, this argument was hitting a little too close to home. “It’s wrong for us to be the judge, jury, and executioner.”

“But we’re the ones with the power to stop them.”

The safest hands are our still our own rose unbidden in his mind and Tony viciously shoved the bitter memory away.
“Having that power is exactly why we should be held to a higher standard— we have a responsibility to others and— and there need to be checks and balances in place in order to…” Tony trailed off when it became obvious that he was failing. Of course he was failing, he was attempting to explain the concept behind the Accords to the Winter Soldier while sitting in his lap— and how exactly was this his life? Frankly, Tony was barely coherent at this point, both physically and mentally exhausted and the Soldier was more focused on nuzzling Tony’s cheek again than on whatever Tony was actually saying. The Soldier’s right hand found its way into Tony’s hair, holding him securely in place as he left a trail of kisses up and down Tony’s stubbled jaw.

“You… really don’t know how personal space works, do you?” Tony reprimanded, even as his own eyes shuttered against his will because damn, why did this have to feel so good? He was so tired and a part of him just wanted to give in, but he needed to remain coherent, there was too much at stake, this was too volatile of a situation for Tony to lose himself to those soft lips and— shit, that metal hand that was working its way underneath his shirt now.

Even though it was the hardest thing to do, Tony pushed at the man’s shoulders, hating himself for missing those lips on him as soon as the Soldier reluctantly pulled away. “Remember what I said, big guy? I need space. Can’t— can’t do this when you’re like this.” He sighed, all of the sudden feeling every bit of the bone-deep exhaustion. “Please let James take back control…”

Gentle fingers were scraping against his head now and for a moment, Tony could almost pretend this was James, but the growled “I’m not getting pushed aside again,” reminded him exactly who he was dealing with.

“And you shouldn’t be;” Tony tried to reassure. It was obvious now that James shutting out the Soldier had backfired spectacularly on all of them. “I want all of you, every bit of you, to be healthy and— and to be happy.”

The Soldier’s lips parted, ready to say something else in response to Tony, but a sudden shudder ran through his body, strong enough for Tony to feel through his own, and the Soldier clenched his eyes shut as if in pain.

“You alright?” Tony asked, worry overtaking exhaustion in the moment, not particularly comforted by the Soldier’s answering nod, as shaky as it was, but before Tony had a chance to ask anything else, he suddenly found himself flat on his back again, with the Soldier looming over him. They were close, close enough for Tony to see those blue eyes, this time tinged with a hint of desperation to go with the desire, but any heat between them gave way to nerves as Tony was reminded once again just how vulnerable he was in this situation.

“You make me happy, Tony,” the Soldier said as he proceeded to straddle Tony— whether to get closer or to keep Tony from running, who knew— and both of his hands wound up in Tony’s hair. There was that momentary tension again in the lines of the Soldier’s face as he squinted against some invisible pain, but as soon as it passed, his gaze was back on Tony. “I need you, solnishko…”

“I told you, this isn’t how—”

“One kiss, prelest’ moya,” the Soldier crooned, ignoring Tony’s words. Their lips were so close that Tony couldn’t even let himself breathe. “Just one kiss from my pretty little hero.”

The Soldier looked determined, despite the pleading notes in his tone, and Tony’s gut clenched, for the first time with a real sense of fear, because what was his guarantee that this would stop at just one kiss?

He didn’t even want to think about the fact that, for all the hundred different ways he imagined their
first kiss, this was never how he wanted it to happen.

The Soldier smirked, taking Tony’s silence as permission, so Tony closed his eyes, regret and shame and fear, all a horrible mixture in his chest, and he steeled himself—

One, two, three seconds passed though and when nothing happened, Tony opened his eyes again, only to see James’ terrified ones staring back at him.

For another moment, neither one of them moved, neither one of them daring to even breathe, but then James was scrambling frantically back, off the bed, and stumbling away into the nearest wall. His hands clutched at his hair, his whole body crumpling in on itself, a frantic litany of no, no, no falling from his lips the entire time.

It took longer than it should’ve for Tony’s brain to keep back into gear, but when it did, he jumped off the bed himself, arms out on a placating gesture, although he didn’t dare come closer and all he could do was stare wide-eyed at the barely coherent super soldier and attempt to calm him down with words

“James, everything’s fine, you’re alright. You’re safe. It’s just you and me here—”

“No, no, he’s back in my head, he wasn’t supposed to come back—”

Clearly, Tony’s words weren’t working at all because the other man stopped talking and just let out a keening noise, like a dying animal, clutching at his head even harder, pulling at his hair.

“It’s okay, we can figure this out—”

“Oh god, oh god, no, please,” James mumbled to himself, as if Tony weren’t even there, but the quiet stuttering transformed into near hysterics as James’ voice rose to a shout.

“I need to— I need to get him out of my head, he’s not supposed to be here!”

“I promise, nothing bad happened. James, hey, look at me, please?” Tony tried again, outright begging this time, and to his surprise, the man did actually glance his way, glassy eyes barely focusing in, but nothing in that desperate gaze calmed at the sight of Tony. If anything, James began to look even more distraught. His whole face crumbled into an expression of despair and the super soldier’s body began to visibly tremble.

“Oh god, what did I do? Tony, no, this wasn’t supposed to be how— Fuck, what did I do? I almost — I’m so sorry—”

The words turned back into barely discernible, stuttered protests— no, no, no, this can’t be happening — and Tony tried again and again, but his voice, no matter how calm and reassuring, wasn’t doing anything to help to ease James’ distress. He had to try something else.

Looking back on this later, Tony would blame the overwhelming need to fix this, as well as his lack of sleep, for what he did next. Without thinking it through, without thinking at all, he took one more step forward and tried to place a hand on the metal of James’ forearm, but instead of a comfort, the gesture was interpreted as a threat and Tony barely registered the shouted “No, don’t!” before he was shoved away with the metal arm. Unfortunately, James wasn’t anywhere coherent enough to control the strength of said limb and it sent Tony flying back, straight into a shelf full of decorative baubles and things, which rained down on his prostrated form as he moaned in pain. For a moment, everything blacked out, but the quickly blossoming, throbbing ache at the back of his head explained why the room then began to spin— shit, a sharp corner straight to the lower back didn’t feel all that good either— and he struggled to get coordination back into his limbs, enough to stand back up, to
“Oh god, Tony, oh my god.” That was James, guilt and horror overtaking panic in his voice this time. “I’m so sorry— oh god, what have I done? I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—”

Tony attempted to say something, to reassure— it’s okay, I’m fine, just a bump on the head— but said head wasn’t cooperating with the rest of his body. He did let out another groan though, he was sure of that, and at least the room stopped spinning. Despite the too many blurry, bright spots still dominating his vision, when he was able to look over, James came into crystal clear focus— hadn’t it been like that since the very beginning though?— and the abject guilt in that expression looked so familiar, memories of blood and snow rushing back, that it clawed away at Tony’s heart because no, no, James wasn’t supposed to look at him like that anymore, they were fine now, he wasn’t—

James was shaking his head, panic eyes wide and terrified. “I can’t— Oh god, I shouldn’t be around you like this— I’m so sorry, honey, please— please forgive me.”

Tony’s brain was still struggling through a fog, but he knew he needed to say something, to counter those words, but his stuttered “James, wait, don’t—” fell on deaf ears as the other man gave him one last, heartbroken look and took off, heavy footsteps echoing through the quiet hotel room. A door slammed against a wall. Then, quiet.

It took another minute or two for Tony to regain full control over his limbs and for his brain to finally come back online. He struggled to his knees, trying to blink through the remaining fog and he stumbled through the suite. Another few steps and he was met with an open door and a quiet, empty hallway. He frantically called out James’ name— come back, please!— but there was no answer.

“No, damn it, no,” he muttered to himself, panic making his chest ache, even more painful than either of his bruises. God, he could barely breathe.

Friday. He needed Friday and after grabbing his access card from one of the tables inside the room (he noticed James’ leather jacket was gone too), his wobbly legs carried him, as swiftly as they could manage, to his own suite. Friday was ready and operational on his phone, and after reporting that she had no evidence that James was still in the building, he spent several minutes barking out desperate orders, asking her to use every avenue available to her to look for James, but even while Tony still was speaking to a patient, attentive Friday— although even she had a note panic in her voice— he had a sick feeling deep inside that all of this would be end up being pointless.

Even Tony Stark’s best tech would not find the Winter Soldier if the former assassin truly wanted to disappear.

Friday tried for reassurance, giving him a quiet “I will do my best, Boss,” and all the energy, all the fight finally seeped out of him and Tony slumped down onto the floor, leaning against the bed at his back. His head dropped to his knees and he took in an uneven breath, although it did little to soothe his anxiety. He knew he should be back up on his feet, gathering the other Avengers, but that could wait because what the hell could any of them even do? Swallowing back the tears also proved ineffective because Tony could feel one escape to trail down his cheek and he swiped at it in frustration.

“Dammit, James, you idiot…” he said to the room around him, voice trembling, and he had to close his eyes, the stress and panic and fear all too much, when he got nothing in response but silence.
Okay, who wants to take a guess as to how long Bucky will stay away? I think we should get a betting pool going. Call it the "Dammit, James, you idiot" pool.

Also, this chapter officially pushes me over the 200K mark and omg, how- when- I don't know how this happened. o_o As always, thank you to everyone reading, thank you for the kudos, and to everyone who leaves lovely comments, you guys are amazing and I'd send you all assorted baked goods if I could. Instead, all I have are some virtual kisses. Muah! <3
As expected, the Compound was quiet this late at night, only the dim emergency lights lining the halls illuminating the place. Bucky’s footsteps were silent as he slowly made his way through the West Wing, trying to avoid running into anyone for the time being. He honestly wasn’t sure what kind of reception he was going to get—what kind did he even deserve?—or whether he was welcome here at all.

When he made it back to Compound grounds, Friday had greeted him at the entrance, tone cold and aloof, and informed him that his security clearance hadn’t changed. She didn’t stop him when he proceeded to come inside.

Bucky managed as far as the kitchen before needing to stop because the sight of this place was so achingly familiar, it felt like an anvil was sitting on his chest. He had to swallow past the lump forming in his throat before trying to speak.

“Friday, have you already told someone that I’m here?”

“No, not yet. None of my protocols regarding you have been updated, so you have the freedom to enter and leave the Compound at will. However, Boss did ask me to inform him of your arrival as soon as it happened, but since he asked rather than ordered, I…” she hesitated for a moment, “I am unsure whether to follow that request at the moment.”

”Can you tell me why?”

”Boss is currently asleep. It is the first time he has been able to fall asleep in the last three days for longer than two hours, so I hesitate to wake him.”

Bucky’s stomach clenched with guilt. As if Tony needed more things to lose sleep over. Great fuckin’ job, Barnes. “Let him sleep, if you can. I promise I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

Despite the super soldier serum, every part of Bucky felt exhausted after the last three days and when he took a seat on one of the bar stools at the breakfast bar, his body slumped against the counter almost immediately. Coffee might’ve helped, but Bucky wasn’t certain he had enough energy at the moment to get up and walk all the way to the other side of the kitchen.

“So… Tony hasn’t been sleeping well then?” Bucky asked, even though he already knew the answer, but he couldn’t help trying to get more information. He needed to know what he was walking into. What he caused.

“That is correct. During the last several days, Boss has been in a near constant state of stress, which has caused insomnia, elevated blood pressure, and other physical symptoms associated with anxiety. Both his eating and sleeping activities have been far below the adequate range.”
The flood of guilt turned into a damn tsunami. “This is all my fault…” he mumbled to himself, not caring that Friday could hear his self-recriminations.

It took her almost a full minute to speak again. “I am… uncertain how to respond to that. I must admit, your actions have prompted me to feel anger towards you. I do not like it, because it does unpleasant things to my code, especially because I am also simultaneously fond of you— it’s very confusing— but unfortunately, I have had several opportunities over the past year to learn about these new emotional states. Like anger on behalf of someone else.”

“You feel protective of Tony,” Bucky said by way of explanation, “that’s not a trait you should feel conflicted over.”

“I suppose not. I do not like to see him get hurt. My primary function is to ensure his well-being and it is difficult to fulfill that purpose when so many external factors are at play. Factors I have little control over.”

“Factors like me, you mean?” Bucky said, the words sour on his tongue. To end up in the same bucket as Steve and the others… It hurt like hell, but he had no one to blame but himself.

“Factors like you, yes. I am angry with you,” Friday repeated, but Bucky could detect some hesitancy in her voice again, “but the way Boss explained it to me… You were missing parts of yourself at first and then later, when reassembled, those parts were not yet in their proper place. I suppose that if half of my own code suddenly disappeared or if someone rewrote it incorrectly, I would make— suboptimal decisions as well.”

Suboptimal decisions. Bucky let out a quiet snort. That was about the nicest way someone could describe everything he did. He pulled a bulky glove off his metal hand, shoving the glove into a coat pocket, and watched the hand flex and form a fist, the tiny metal plates shifting to allow the movement.

He promised himself once never to use the metal arm against Tony and he didn’t even manage a few months before breaking that promise.

Suboptimal decisions indeed.

Even the damn Soldier was angry with Bucky, as if that bastard had some sort of higher moral ground, but Bucky couldn’t even bring himself to feel offended anymore. After all, all the Soldier did was talk with Tony.

It was odd, being able to remember everything this time around. It didn’t all come back right away, but by the end of the second day, the memories felt like his own.

Mostly.

He wasn’t sure he could ever put into words how it felt to be the Soldier that night. Feeling both in control of his own body and yet, not at all, as if parts of his brain were shut off.

He remembered though. Every word, every touch, every change in Tony’s expressive face. Lust, worry, confusion, exasperation. Fear.

It was those final moments, when Tony looked up at him with fear in his eyes, that Bucky was finally able to wrestle back the control, but then, when everything flooded back, when all the parts of him, sharp and rusted, shoved themselves back in— it was too much.

He couldn’t help the panic, made worse by the fact that in that moment, he had no recollection of the
conversation that just took place. He couldn’t remember Tony’s reassurances, so all he had to cling to was terror. So terrified of the Soldier being back, of hurting someone, hurting Tony—

And then he actually did hurt Tony, no Soldier required.

His metal hand clenched into a tight fist and he wished it would hurt. The Soldier was right. Tony was good and they didn’t deserve him.

A small part of him questioned whether he should’ve come back at all, but with his sanity mostly intact now, it was much easier to recognize that it was the same dumbass part that made him run away in the first place.

If nothing else, Tony deserved a proper apology. Didn’t matter if Tony didn’t forgive him this time—how many fuck ups was one too many? Even a saint didn’t have this much mercy in them—didn’t matter if Tony would take one look at him and tell him to go to hell.

Bucky deserved all that and more and Tony just deserved better.

“Friday,” his voice broke through the silence that settled over the kitchen, “where is Tony right now?”

“He’s in your quarters.”

Friday’s response prompted him to look up in surprise. Tony always poked fun at him for looking up when Friday spoke, but her cameras were installed above them and it just felt more polite somehow to look up.

“He’s in my room? Why?”

“I am unclear as to the motivation behind Boss’ decision. He avoided your quarters until earlier this evening, but they were the first place where he managed to fall asleep and remain asleep for several hours now.”

Bucky’s gut turned painfully with more guilt. Did this mean that even now, Tony still found some comfort in Bucky’s presence (or at least some inadequate form of it)?

We need to see him.

The Soldier’s whisper blended with his own thoughts and it was harder than ever to distinguish between the two, which meant it was also harder to ignore and push away. The Soldier was steeped deep into his blood now, for better or worse. The world wasn’t off-kilter anymore, all his fighting instincts were firmly back in place, and Bucky didn’t feel like he was walking through fog. He felt complete again.

Do we deserve to see him though?

The Soldier didn’t respond and Bucky supposed that it wasn’t up to them to decide that.

“Would it— would it be alright if I went to see him? I’ll try not to wake him.”

Friday took a moment to answer. “I suppose so. Boss did technically ask to be informed if and when you arrived. He’d want to know that you are back.”

Bucky nodded along in agreement and stood back up, but he only managed a few steps before Friday’s voice halted his movements.
“Mr. Barnes… before you go. I find that—” she stopped, then tried again. “Boss is one of the best people I know and I often find myself wanting to emulate him. I’d like to learn how to forgive in the same way that he does. It’s a challenge, but I believe my code can be properly modified to bear the burden of such a— complicated concept. However, I feel it is fair to warn you. Despite my desire to learn the act of forgiveness and despite my fondness for you… if you choose to harm Boss again, I will find ways to make you regret it.”

Despite the threat, a ghost of a smile crossed Bucky’s face. “I wouldn’t expect anything less, Miss Friday.”

“I’ve been told I can be very creative.”

“I have no doubt of that.”

“Good. Then you may proceed. Oh, and in the spirit of said forgiveness, I will begin by saying… welcome home, Mr. Barnes.”

Friday didn’t respond to his quiet “Thank you…” so he let his legs carry him down the familiar path to his quarters. Somehow, Friday’s earlier threat felt more appropriate given the current situation. Welcoming him back however? Bucky wasn’t sure about that.

***

He found Tony on “his” side of Bucky’s bed, curled up underneath the Iron Man blanket covering his lower half, looking like he was trying to form a tiny ball and take up as little space as possible. Tony was clutching a pillow to him, his face half-smooshed into it and arms wrapped tightly around it, and the lump in Bucky’s throat got bigger, downright grew thorns, when he realized it was one of his pillows.

Tony looked small and vulnerable and as always, Bucky couldn’t help that surge of protectiveness— whether his own or the Soldier’s, it didn’t matter anymore— but this time, it sat sour in his chest when contrasted against the guilt. His protectiveness did little good for Tony when it was Bucky himself who ended up hurting him.

He carefully lowered himself down, kneeling by the side of the bed. He knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t resist reaching out with his right hand to brush a stray curl away from Tony’s forehead. Tony looked so tired and even now, deep in sleep, he looked like he was frowning, that familiar crease etched between his brows.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart…” Bucky’s lips formed the words, barely audible even in the silence of the room. He pulled his hand away, not wanting to disturb Tony any further, and he was about to decide whether to stay here or find another place in the Compound to wait out the night when Tony’s nose scrunched up, body shifting underneath the blanket and before Bucky had a chance to move away, those sleepy eyes blinked themselves open.

“James?” Tony let out a second later, voice hoarse with sleep— and likely exhaustion too— and Bucky wasn’t sure what he should do. All he knew was that he wasn’t running away, not again, so he stayed still and let Tony make the first move.

It didn’t take long. Sleep quickly dissipated and Tony was already shuffling to sit upright. “James— James, you’re here—”

The blanket was thrown off in the next second and Tony’s body lunged forward. Bucky didn’t flinch, but his whole body tensed, expecting a punch— he deserved it, he deserved it— but no hit
ever came. Instead, Tony’s body practically collided with his, arms wrapping around his shoulders, and Bucky was only able to keep them both upright on sheer instinct, as they sat on the floor in a tangle of uncoordinated limbs.

“Oh, thank god, James, you’re back, you’re okay,” Tony stammered out a rushed litany of words in his ear, their cheeks pressed together. The arms around Bucky tightened even more, tight enough that it would’ve been painful had it not been for the super soldier sturdiness.

It took Bucky a second to process the reaction, so different from what he expected, but Tony’s arms around him felt like the best thing in the world— and he left this, how could he leave this?— and he was selfish, so, so selfish, so he shoved the hesitation away and wrapped his own arms around Tony, burying his face in Tony’s shoulder. He felt a hand on his back then, gentle strokes up and down, and a soothing “You’re alright, you’re okay,” in his ear, which made Bucky realize his own body was shaking. That wasn’t unexpected, he supposed, what with all the stress and the tension, but the sob that escaped him however was.

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” he managed before another inhale turned into a pathetic snifflе. Tony’s well-worn t-shirt was soft against his face, carrying the man’s familiar scent and Bucky couldn’t help his greedy inhales as he clung even harder. “I’m sorry.”

Tony began to gently rock them back and forth. “It’s alright, just take a deep breath.” Bucky obeyed and the fresh oxygen helped settle some of his nerves so he could at least stop shaking. He needed to keep it together, for fuck’s sake, and the sniffling just made me look pathetic.

Gently and slowly, Tony pushed them apart, but to Bucky’s relief, Tony didn’t stray far, instead reaching out to swipe at a few of the tears on Bucky’s face (he didn’t even realize he was crying).

“You’re okay, yeah?” Tony made an attempt at a smile, but it came out a bit shaky. “Umm…” he hesitated, eyes darting up and down, likely taking in the details of Bucky’s appearance, “I know this definitely isn’t Soldier mode, but you and him—”

“Everything’s back in its place in my head,” Bucky answered the unspoken question, unable to keep the resignation out of his voice. “I’m in control, but the Soldier’s not all that far way.”

“That’s, uh— that’s good, actually. I don’t think pushing him away worked out that well.”

Bucky let out a snort, even though no part of this was funny. “Yeah, no kidding,” he said, pulling one hand away from where it settled on Tony’s hip to swipe at a tear that managed to make its way down to his chin. “Dunno if I can push him that far away now anyways… Something— something happened when we slotted back together.” He couldn’t put this into plain English, not really. How did one describe having two people in your head, but still feeling like one complete man? “The Soldier’s closer to the surface now— god, he’s in my blood, in my damn bones.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I’m not sure what the hell I am anymore…”

“Hey, we’ll figure this out, okay?” Tony tapped his chin lightly to make Bucky look back up. “Honestly, you fit right in. I mean, have you met Bruce? And Strange — that guy works with literal magic. Hell, Vision’s an android.” Tony stopped and shook his head. “Sorry, sorry, probably not the right time for humor. All I’m saying is that it’s okay.”

At Tony’s reassurance, some of Bucky’s resolve crumbled again. “But it’s not though. Tony, I’m so, so sorry…” God, he was sniffling like a child again and somehow, it actually physically hurt when Tony just reached out and brushed the back of his hand across Bucky’s cheek. A punch to the face would’ve hurt less.
“Hey, it’s fine. If you’re talking about the couple bumps and bruises, honestly, I’ve come out worse from sparring sessions with Natasha. That woman packs a punch, my god—”

“Tony, please, don’t make this seem like nothing. I hurt you! Fuck, I—I threw you across the room and then— then I just left you. You could’ve been really hurt and I didn’t—” An image of Tony, hurt and alone, choked the breath out of him. “God, I spent all this time worrying about the Soldier, but it was me who ended up hurting you and I’m so sorry.”

How did they always end up here? Bucky on his knees, making apologies to Tony, who in turn looked at him with those brown eyes, full of kindness and mercy and other things Bucky didn’t feel he deserved.

“See, the Soldier thing, pretty sure that’s my fault,” Tony said with a half a shrug. He continued when Bucky gave him a confused frown. “Um, so I assume you don’t remember, but the Soldier and I had a talk— honestly, that’s all we did, no one was hurt, nothing else really happened, I promise—and he said you’ve been pushing him away because of my nightmare. Because when I came back from Beijing, I— well, I kinda freaked out the first time I saw you. But I was never really scared. Not of you.”

Bucky debated internally for a second, but decided to keep the fact that he was privy to the Soldier’s memories to himself, at least for now, because everything that Tony had said that night? There was still too much guilt inside Bucky to bring any of it up. “You sure looked like you were scared though,” he said instead.

Tony’s gaze pulled away from him to look at the floor. “Did you think I was scared of the Soldier?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve never been scared of the Soldier, James. I’m sorry I didn’t make that clear earlier. Maybe if I would have, we could’ve avoid this whole mess.”

“You’re not responsible for my actions, Tony.”

“True, but I am responsible for my own,” Tony’s eyes were back on him. “And I was evasive and cryptic and my usual level of emotionally stunted. And that nightmare— it had a lot more to do with my fear that…” Tony paused and it was obvious from the pained expression on his face how much he was struggling with this admission. “It was my fear that everyone I love will eventually stop needing me and leave me.”

*I told you, my nightmare was— it was about my fear of losing you, more than anything else.*

Bucky shook his head as he looked up at the ceiling so he could blink away the moisture in his eyes. “Tony, please, you have to believe me,” he looked back at the man, hoping Tony could see the sincerity in his eyes, “running away the way I did had nothing to do with you. I just— when I finally took back control, I couldn’t think straight. There was no logic, no sense, nothing. Just this overwhelming thought, this terror that I failed and— and then I hurt you and all I could see was that you were in danger and the threat was me. I had to eliminate that threat, it was the only thought in my head, so I just—I ran.” Bucky stopped his less than stellar explanation and marveled at the fact that there was still no hint of anger in Tony’s expression. “I—I thought you’d be a lot more upset with me…”

Tony let out a sigh before speaking. “Do I wish you would’ve stayed? Absolutely, because above all else, it was dangerous for you to be alone in the state you were in. But James, I can’t fault you for the decisions you made while in the middle of a mental breakdown.” In the face of Bucky’s doubt, Tony
mulled his next words over for a second. “Okay, let’s look at it this way. Do you blame me for attacking you in Siberia?”

Bucky’s response was immediate. “Of course not. You—you just saw your parents, you found out that Steve was lying to you for years. You weren’t in the right place to think straight, not after all of that, and Steve and I—we should’ve handled that differently—Steve most of all because he was the one with the clearest head there.”

Tony’s lip quirked up just a tiny bit. “See, good. Now, is that really any different than what happened with you?” When Bucky gave no satisfactory answer right away, Tony continued. “I shouldn’t have touched you. I know better, I’ve taken the mandatory training that teaches us to deal with traumatized civilians. I misstepped and you did the only thing that your mind interpreted as safe in that moment—for both of us.”

It was Bucky’s turn to look away, but he did manage a shaky nod in response as he processed what Tony had said. He watched as Tony’s hand reached out to grasp his own. It was warm—how amazing was Tony’s tech that he could make metal feel warmth like that?—and Bucky clung to it like a lifeline.

“Can I ask why you came back?” Tony asked after a few seconds of silence, but before Bucky had the chance to interpret what that meant, Tony himself hurried to explain. “Not that I’m not happy to see you. Ecstatic, really. But I’m just… wondering, I guess.” He shrugged one shoulder, attempting to appear nonchalant, but this was obviously a loaded question. “You’re technically a free man, you had no obligation to come back. And I know the Winter Soldier can handle himself out there if he really wants to.”

Bucky took a moment to think while he watched his thumb trace lines across the back of Tony’s hand.

“I just—” he cleared his throat, “I just wanted to come home.” He looked back up when he whispered the confession and he must’ve looked sufficiently miserable, sufficiently contrite, because Tony’s own face contorted with something resembling heartache.

“Oh James…”

“And I don’t just mean the Compound either,” Bucky realized he had to say this. So many things had gone wrong because they kept these things to themselves and he’d rather make himself vulnerable and face the consequences than run the risk of losing all of this again. “Yeah, I love this place and everyone here, but—as soon as I got my head on straight, I had to come back because—” he knew he was stumbling, probably making little sense, but he had to try. “Because it’s you, Tony. You feel like home to me and—”

Those words didn’t come close to describing what Tony meant to him, but they must’ve been enough because Bucky found himself back in Tony’s embrace, head tucked back against Tony’s neck. Hugging and kneeling on the floor wasn’t the most comfortable position, but he didn’t care. He’d stay like this forever, his own arms around Tony’s waist, if it meant Tony kept holding on to him.

“You’re always welcome here, James, I hope you know that and—I’m so glad you came home,” Tony whispered against his temple, voice heavy with emotion.

They sat just like that for a few minutes, Tony slowly rocking them side to side, carding a careful hand through Bucky’s hair. A small, vain part of Bucky’s mind was horrified because he hadn’t had a shower in over three days and his dirty, greasy strands could not have felt pleasant, but it didn’t
seem to deter Tony at all.

The quiet of the room, the warmth of Tony’s body, and the gentle touch - every element worked to soothe Bucky’s nerves and with a long exhale, he finally felt a good chunk of his tension drain away. The Soldier was satiated and quiet as well, nearly purring with contentment because Tony was safe and within reach now. Bucky had a hard time disagreeing with the sentiment and he just had to accept that he and the Soldier were going to be on the same page more often that not because— well, because they were the same damn person and it was high time Bucky accepted that.

By the time Tony put careful pressure on his shoulders to push them apart, Bucky had regained most of his calm. He still felt achy inside, guilt and shame sour in his belly, but the understanding, the affection in Tony’s eyes acted as a balm on his soul. Now, more than anything, he just felt exhausted again. Even though he logically knew his enhanced body could easily keep going for many more days, the emotional toil of the last three days settled in him like a bone-deep weariness.

“Thank you, Tony. For— for everything, really. I, uh—I expected a lot more yelling, if I’m being honest.” Bucky felt the need to say, even if some part of him screamed to leave well enough alone.

Tony actually smiled. “Well, I’m a big believer in second chances, if you haven’t noticed.”

“How many second chances does a guy get though?”

“Eh, actual remorse goes a long way, believe me. Coming back, apologizing. That means a lot too. Plus,” Tony winked, “I happen to have a soft spot for you. But don’t you worry, there will still be plenty of yelling. Just wait until Rhodey wakes up and finds out you’re here.”

Bucky let out a dejected groan. “Shit, he’s going to kill me, isn’t he?”

“He threatened certain death once or twice, yeah.” Tony actually laughed when Bucky’s frown deepened even more. “Just remember when he’s yelling at you, he yells because he cares.”

Honestly, the reprimands and the yelling would be welcome. At least then, it’d feel like Bucky was appropriately chastised for what he did.

“And then there’s also these two teenage boys whose weekend in NYC was derailed on account of a missing super soldier.”

This time, Bucky’s distressed noises were mostly all guilt again. “Oh god, those boys are gonna hate me…”

“No, they won’t, trust me,” Tony countered almost immediately and there was enough conviction in his voice that Bucky felt a little less hopeless. “Peter is literally incapable of hate and Harley— well, that kid can hold a grudge, I’ll admit that, but somehow you’ve replaced me as their favorite person, so honestly, the worst thing you can expect is Peter’s puppy dog eyes and Harley kicking you in the shin and calling you an idiot. Everyone will forgive you, James.”

“Why should they though?”

“Because that’s what family does.”

Bucky’s face must’ve crumpled into something downright pitiful because Tony gently shushed him and rubbed a hand over Bucky’s stubbled cheek.

“Novel concept for me too, to be honest, but apparently real family is not supposed to hold your mistakes against you indefinitely. They’re not supposed to abandon you when the going gets tough.
No, they stick around for the good and the bad, and all of us? We were just worried, more than anything. You’re a good man, James, and no part of you is a monster, so whatever this is, whatever you need, we’ll figure it out, okay?"

“Thank you, Tony,” Bucky said, the words coming out a hoarse whisper against the lump in his throat. Tony just smiled and pulled him back into his arms.

“Whatever it is, we deal with it together because you are a part of this family now. Just— just please don’t disappear like that again if you can help it.” There was a hitch in Tony’s own voice. “You’re allowed to leave, of course you are, but it’d give us all a little peace of mind if we at least knew you were safe.”

Bucky was already shaking his head against Tony’s shoulder. “I’m not going anywhere.”

There was no response from Tony, only a gentle hand rubbing up and down Bucky’s back, and they remained close for another minute or so. Bucky relished the touch, letting the physical comfort put the three days of hell behind him.

When they pulled apart, Tony cocked his head to the side and those clever eyes were scrutinizing Bucky again. He would’ve flushed with embarrassment had there been any energy left to do so. It didn’t help that Tony’s lips quirked up in a smirk next.

“You look like shit, James,” he declared and Bucky barked out a laugh in response.

“Well, that’s rude.”

The smirk widened. “Hey, there’s no judgment here, just facts. Hell, I probably look like shit too.”

Bucky’s next words were less teasing. “You just look tired, honey. You haven’t been sleeping, I take it?”

“Eh, you know how it is. Hard to sleep with a super soldier in the wind.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky offered again, even if it felt inadequate, but Tony brushed off the apology with a shake of his head.

“Don’t you worry about me. Now, you on the other hand… You wanna tell me what happened with you in the last three days? And don’t think I didn’t notice that the coat you’re wearing is definitely not the nice, expensive leather jacket you grabbed when you ran. Where exactly did you go?”

“I… never actually left New York,” Bucky admitted, almost sheepishly. “Just found a place to hide until I could finally think straight again… Then the Soldier and I— had to hash some things out. Figure out how all the broken parts in my head needed to slot back together.”

“You guys on the same page now?”

“More so than before, I suppose. I’m… hesitant to push him away again. Looking back at it, I was useless without him. No fighting instincts, none of my training… Bastard got all the good parts, apparently.”

“Eh, the Soldier wasn’t doing that well without you either. Believe it or not, mental stability is important. Being a good person who knows right from wrong is important.” As always, Tony saw so much more in him that Bucky did himself, but he didn’t give voice to that and Tony went on. “But I’m glad to hear that you’re working through it and I’m glad you ended up staying close to home. Now, what about this raggedy thing you have on?”
“I, uh— I got the coat, plus hat and gloves, from a homeless man a few blocks from the hotel.”

“Wait, you stole clothes from some homeless guy?” Tony’s tone was incredulous and Bucky gave him an affronted look in return.

“No, of course not! I gave him my jacket and a bunch of that cash from the wallet for it— which, by the way, I’m sorry about that too. You must’ve gone through so much trouble getting all those cards arranged— I didn’t mean to leave it behind.”

Tony waved that apology away too. “Eh, it’s alright, we found it in the lobby pretty quickly. Okay, so, you hung out in some dark hole somewhere, wearing hobo clothes for three days… When was the last time you ate?”

“Umm… when was that party again?”

“James!” The name was a definite reprimand, but all Bucky could do was shrug.

“It wasn’t really a concern at the time. Plus, didn’t want to steal anything since, you know, it’d be really stupid to squander my freedom on petty theft.”

Tony groaned. “You have to eat. Especially since your super soldier body needs a ridiculous amount of extra calories.”

“Yeah, but it can also go without food for a pretty long time.”

“Sure it can, but I bet starving for days doesn’t feel all that great.”

In the face of Bucky’s I don’t know what you want me to say shrug, Tony groaned again and looked up at the ceiling in resignation for one long moment. When he looked back at Bucky, Tony looked determined.

“Alright, come on. I’m fairly certain we had Chinese takeout for dinner last night and there should be plenty of leftovers. So, while I reheat, you go get cleaned up a bit.”

With his next move, Tony dragged Bucky up by the hand and pointedly pushed him in the direction of the bathroom while muttering about Bucky’s questionable fashion choices.

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“Okay, so apparently we had Mexican last night— go figure— but there’s a ton of food and you can’t go wrong with nachos and—” Tony trailed off when he rounded the corner and walked in through the open door of the bathroom.

Bucky cringed. He swore it would’ve taken Tony longer to get back.

“Is that blood?”

“…Maybe.”

“What the hell happened? Are you hurt?” Tony was right next to him now and it really didn’t take a genius to notice Bucky’s bloody hand. “Oh my god, you are hurt. James!”

“M’fine, just a few cuts,” Bucky mumbled, feeling chastised. He wasn’t trying to lie to Tony or anything, he just didn’t want to worry the man with this.

After brushing his teeth, he pulled the other glove off to wash his hands and face, but in the process,
he was reminded, rather painfully, that his flesh hand still had sizable chunks of glass embedded into it, mostly around the knuckles. He didn’t have time to deal with it on the run, but now, he attempted to get some of the bigger pieces out. It wasn’t bad and he healed fast, but unfortunately, the cuts bled a ton and the crimson evidence was currently dirtying up the sink.

He only managed an “Honestly, it’s fine,” before Tony’s disapproving frown effectively silenced him. The man gingerly took Bucky’s hand into his own to examine the damage more closely.

“How did you even manage this?”

“I, uh— I got into a fight.”

Tony’s eyes widened comically. “With who?”

“…With a building. I was, uh— I was processing things.”

The exasperated noise Tony let out was amusing enough to pull a small smile out of Bucky, even though he tried not to look too entertained (he didn’t bother trying to fight back the warmth at how gentle Tony’s touch was or how much concern there was in his eyes).

“I’m not even sure how to respond to that,” Tony finally said, shaking his head. “You do know you have a vibranium arm that is nigh indestructible and has pain receptors you can toggle on and off?”

Bucky’s smile dimmed and he had to look away this time when he shrugged at Tony. “Needed to really feel it, make sure things were real.”

There was no exasperation in Tony’s answering sigh this time.

“Come, on, then,” the man tugged at his hand to coax him into getting up and Bucky willingly followed. “Food will have to wait a little bit longer, we’re going down to Medical. What good are you to me if you bleed out before we even get to the kitchen?”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will pick up right where this one leaves off. The night isn't quite over for our boys yet. >.>
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

We pick right back up where we left off last time. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“There, that’s a little bit better,” Tony said, securing the last of the gauze in place around Bucky’s hand. With the unfailing patience that Tony somehow had in spades (at least for Bucky), the man dragged him down to Medical and carefully removed all the shards of glass imbedded in Bucky’s right hand. The smell of the antiseptic still lingered in the air and irritated Bucky’s nose, but at least the hand was finally wrapped up.

"Thank you," Bucky gave Tony a smile and flexed the hand, testing out the mobility. A bit stiff, with the wrapping extending just over the knuckles, but he could still move his fingers and the gauze would be ready to come off in just a few hours. Super soldier serum was good for something at least.

Tony returned the smile, replied with a shrug and an “Of course,” before turning around to begin putting away the supplies. Medical was of course empty this late at night, so it was just him and Tony, with Bucky settled on one of the hospital beds while Tony stood next to a metal table, quietly humming an unfamiliar tune as he worked.

“You seem to be in a better mood,” Bucky said, encouraged by Tony’s behavior. “Those nachos you found must’ve really been excellent.”

Tony didn’t turn around to face him, but Bucky could hear the huff of laughter. “I… may have chugged an unhealthy amount of coffee while I was getting the food sorted out. Friday didn’t say anything, but I swear to god, I could still feel her judging me for drinking coffee at 4 o’clock in the morning.” This time, he did glance over his shoulder before returning to the first aid kit. “And while I know the caffeine is really only just hitting my bloodstream, I was feeling better right away. Honestly, there’s no problem a good cup of coffee and a little placebo effect can’t fix. Plus, you know… You’re back too, so…”

He trailed off, didn’t elaborate on the point, but it wasn’t hard to hear the weight behind those words. The fact that Tony welcomed him back so freely, that maybe, just maybe Bucky hadn’t ruined everything - it was overwhelming and unexpected, to say the least, but drowning himself in self-recriminations was becoming less and less appealing by the second. Tony wanted him here and Bucky was selfish enough to take everything Tony was willing to give.

He could feel the Soldier’s presence, a beckoning whisper in his head. *I already told him he was mine. Are you willing to do the same?*

*He doesn’t belong to us.*

*No? Because three nights ago, it sounded like his heart had always been ours.*

Tony’s confession, those declarations of want and need, replaced the Soldier’s voice in Bucky’s head, overwhelming him for a moment, but one deep inhale steadied him and gave Bucky some
measure of resolve. It was easier now to think clearly about this and— well, he was damn tired of these missed opportunities. He didn’t want to be a coward anymore.

“Hey, Tony?” he called out and the man gave a hum in the response to show that he was listening. “I— I probably should’ve said something earlier, and I’m sorry I didn’t, it just didn’t feel like the right time, but—” If he said this, there was really no going back, but he wasn’t going to run anymore. “But I remember everything that happened with the Soldier three nights ago.”

He could see the immediate tension in the way Tony’s shoulders stiffened and the way his hands stilled for a moment, resuming their work a second later. “Oh?” The sound was overly casual. “That’s, uh— that’s different, isn’t it? You didn’t remember anything last time.”

“I know and I don’t really have an explanation for why it’s different this time. I didn’t remember much when I came to, but the memories came back within a day or so.”

Tony let out another hum. “Well, that’s, uh— that’s good. Then you know what I told you is true. The Soldier wasn’t a threat to me, he didn’t hurt me at all. Even in that state, I— I trusted you.” The man still hadn’t turned around to look at Bucky.

“And that means the world to me, I hope you know that. But you were still in an— an uncomfortable situation, having to deal with the Soldier like that, so I understand if this was nothing more than a way to pacify him, to tell him what he wanted to hear, but… What you said to the Soldier— to me— was it true?”

“…I said a lot of things to the Soldier.”

Avoidance wasn’t a good sign, but Bucky pressed on ahead. There was no turning back. “You know what I’m talking about, Tony—”

“James—”

“Because what I said back then was true too! The Soldier… Well, he could’ve said it better, left off some of the death threats for one, but— everything he said was true. Tony, I can’t— I can’t stop thinking about you and— and you mean everything to me and I’m in love—”

“James, don’t.”

The order stopped Bucky short. It sounded downright harsh, but he swallowed back the flair of hurt because he could also hear the tremble in Tony’s voice.

Tony pushed people away when he felt vulnerable. Bucky didn’t fall for this before, he wasn’t going fall for it now.

“Tony, please, let me say this. I know that things have always been complicated between us and I’m sure my running away made things worse…” He wanted to reach out to Tony, but it didn’t feel right, not yet, and he had to grip the bedsheets on either side of his thighs to keep himself from moving. “But I’d do anything for you and you’re so important to me and— Tony, if there’s even a small chance that you feel the same, then—”

“I can’t. Please…” Tony was shaking his head and it looked like he was clutching whatever it was he was holding a bit too hard too. “This isn’t the right time.”

“But when is the right time? We keep saying ‘Later. Later, we’ll talk.’ and then some other awful thing comes between us. I don’t want to waste any more time. Please, Tony,” he wasn’t sure what he was pleading for. Please look at me, please don’t shut me out, please tell me you love me too.
“Please tell me I haven’t completely misinterpreted every interaction between us.”

Tony was still shaking his head. “I just can’t—”

“Why? You said it wasn’t the Soldier, but if it is something else, I’m willing to do anything— Tony, why can’t we just try—”

“Because you’ll leave!” Tony spun around, a shuddering breath raking through his body. His hands were still desperately clutching the gauze while Bucky’s heart nearly broke at the words.

His response was a hoarse whisper. “But I came back…” Please, please don’t let this one stupid mistake ruin everything between us.

Tony’s face scrunched up in some unreadable expression and he was shaking his head again. “No, no, that’s not what I meant at all. I said I didn’t hold this against you and I meant it…” He turned back towards the table, leaning heavily on it, so all Bucky could see was the way his shoulders suddenly slumped in defeat. “I meant that… we both know things are about to change around here and—and well, the last three days taught me that—that I already may be a little too far gone. I mean, I was mostly worried, yeah, but I felt like—like a chunk of me was missing without you here…” Tony was rambling, still refusing to look at Bucky.

“I know how that feels better than anyone…” Bucky murmured, but it went unnoticed by Tony.

“But we don’t live in some bubble, the real world always comes back with a vengeance, and when they all come back here—when Steve and you are back together, I—can’t stand in the way of that, I don’t want to, really, I swear—”

Bucky was blinking at Tony’s back, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Steve? What the hell did Steve have to do with this?

“—but there’s just so many damn issues between all of us—I’d never give you an ultimatum and I know you’d try your best, but at some point, those issues are going to force a choice on you and—”

Tony’s inhale sounded suspiciously watery, “and if I let myself have this, only to then lose it, I—I don’t think I’m going to get through that in one piece.”

For a moment, Bucky couldn’t speak, still trying to process what he just heard. Finally, he cleared his throat. “Just so I have this right… You and I can’t be together because—because of Steve?”

Tony’s shrug looked downright pitiful. “Well, yeah. What the two of you share, that sort of friendship… I’d never want to come between that and I know you’d try to be fair to me, but I—I’m not nearly as forgiving when it comes to Steve and I’m afraid that—that you’ll come to resent me for that. You’ll choose your best friend and it will kill me when I lose you.”

Bucky had a sudden, ridiculous urge to bang his head against the wall or—or punch another building or something. Fuck, how did he manage to mess this whole thing up with Tony so spectacularly? Sure, a part of him expected Tony to reject him— you’re too tainted, too broken, too needy, you have nothing to offer a man who has everything—but this—this was—

“Tony, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

Finally, Tony turned back around and at least he had enough wits about him to look a little offended at Bucky’s words. His brows scrunched up in a familiar confused frown. “It’s not that stupid,” he muttered almost petulantly.

“Did you really think that this whole time I was—what? Using you? Taking all this help you were
offering, the therapy, the arm, everything, just waiting to run back to Steve when I didn’t need you anymore? Did you think all that flirting, that affection was me being bored and needing to pass the time?”

Tony’s one-shouldered shrug and the way his gaze darted away weren’t a confirmation, but the mumbled “I never thought you had a malicious intent or anything. I just thought you’d want your old life back…” didn’t help the issue either.

Bucky gave into his frustrated groan as he hopped off the bed and took the few steps needed to put him next to Tony. Thankfully, Tony didn’t back away or show any signs of discomfort. No, this close, Tony just looked… resigned. Jesus, but did Bucky really fail at making his intentions clear.

He wanted to touch Tony desperately, but he refrained, just for now. He needed his words to sink in first. “Tony, do you know how many times I’ve called Steve since I’ve been here?”

The crease between Tony’s brows deepened. “How would I know? I mean— I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t monitor your calls, that was your private time, private conversations—”

“I know, I know, I wasn’t trying to accuse you,” Bucky hurried to reassure. “You’ve always gone out of your way to respect my privacy, from the very beginning. But if you had to take a guess?”

“Umm… Every other day? Every day? I, uh— why would it—”

“Twice, Tony.” Bucky held up two fingers just in case Tony needed a visual.

“Twice a day?” Tony’s eyes widened, a hint of hurt in his expression, and damn it, apparently Bucky needed to be way more blunt about this.

“Twice since I’ve been here. I called once after that Stark Expo memory because I was vulnerable and scared and I thought seeing my friend would help. It didn’t. We ended up getting into a fight. The second time was after Natalia’s little visit. I called to tell them all one thing - that if any of them showed up here without a pardon, I would personally escort them to jail.” His lip quirked up at Tony’s wide eyes where confusion was replacing resignation. “I also distinctly remember broken bones being mentioned, so I think the Soldier many have done some talking on that call too.”

“Twice?” Tony managed to stammer out, apparently still processing that part.

“Twice.”

“Oh.” Confusion turned into contemplation.

“Steve and I— we’re complicated too, but we don’t have that fierce, legendary friendship you seemed to have built up in your head. At least not anymore. Steve— he’s not the same guy from my admittedly fragmented memories of him. As for the Bucky Barnes he knew? That guy died in an Alpine ravine. Steve and I, we’re— we’re basically strangers. And I don’t know if that will change, but none of that matters here,” he gestured between himself and Tony. “Steve has nothing to do with what happens between the two of us.”

“What if— when they all come back,” Tony looked away again, fingers scraping at his nails nervously, “what if he asks you to choose… him or me?”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow, trying to ignore the Soldier’s growled threat for the moment. I’d love to see Rogers try that and walk away in one piece.

“Well, I would hope Steve has enough wits about him to avoid shitty ultimatums, but if it came down
to that... I’d choose you, doll, and I’d tell Steve to go to hell.” Tony began to look as if Bucky’s words were finally sinking in. “Now, the Soldier on the other hand would have a really hard time…” He absolutely couldn’t help his smirk now. “…deciding which body part Steve would miss the most when the Soldier ripped it off for daring to even ask something like that.”

Tony bit at his lip, as if trying not to smile— the Soldier outright purred at that, the bastard— and this finally felt like the right time to reach out, so Bucky’s metal hand moved to cup Tony’s cheek.

“Honey, listen to me. I— well, I happen to have a crazy former Hydra assassin living in my head and I don’t even know how much control I have anymore and really, the most responsible thing would be for me to disappear off the face of the Earth so I could never hurt anyone again.”

Tony began to protest, but Bucky pressed the metal thumb against his lips to hush any words of denial.

“And I tried, I really did. But how long did I last, Tony? Hmm? Three days. I lasted three days without you, before I had to come running back, ready to crawl on my knees and beg for your forgiveness, beg for you to take me back.” His bandaged right hand was a little less graceful, but it was good enough to brush some of Tony’s curls back from his temple. “Tony, sweetheart, the only way I’ll leave now, the only way you’re getting rid of me is if you look me straight in the eyes right now and tell me you don’t want me here.” He could feel Tony’s lips part under his thumb and he pulled it back to rest on Tony’s cheek.

“You know I can’t do that, James,” Tony exhaled the words, almost breathless now, and Bucky’s heart wanted to sing.

“Then I’m staying, for as long as you’ll have me. And I know you won’t believe it for a while, especially not when so many people have hurt you before, myself included... but I will prove to you that my place is at your side. Always.”

Tony closed his eyes on that last word, face twisting into a pained expression, obviously still struggling with Bucky’s confession. Bucky just wished he had said all of this so much sooner.

“Honey, if this isn’t what you want though, I’ll understand. You saying ‘no’ to me doesn’t mean that I’ll leave. We can stay friends, allies, anything. Anything you’re willing to give me.”

“I don’t want to say ‘no’ though…” Tony’s eyes fluttered open again, the short, shallow breaths evidence of his nerves, and Bucky hoped the smile he gave the man was reassuring. He moved a little bit closer, their noses just barely touching now.

“Then don’t. I know you’re scared. Hell, I am too. It feels a lot like standing on the edge of a cliff, doesn’t it?” He tilted Tony’s head just so and now he could feel Tony’s warm breath on his lips. A hesitant hand reached out to grab at the hem of Bucky’s shirt. “And if you take that one step forward, you’ll fall, and it sure is a long way down.” He let out a quiet laugh. “We both know a little something about falling, don’t we?” The quirk of Tony’s lip was enough to give Bucky the courage he needed and he dropped his voice to a low whisper, wanting to keep this moment between the two of them. This didn’t belong to the rest of the world. “But sweetheart, if you take that step with me, trust me, please trust me, that I’ll be there to catch you. I know I’m not a perfect man, but I’m willing to spend as long as it takes, spend my whole life finding a way to be worthy of you.”

The hand at his hip clutched the shirt even harder. “James...” the name was an exhale and Bucky smiled at the notes of need in it. He glanced down, at Tony’s lips, and back up to meet his eyes, making sure Tony saw the gesture and his intention was perfectly clear.
“May I?”

Tony gave him a shaky nod and that was all Bucky needed to finally close the distance between them.

At first, it was nothing more than a hesitant press of lips. One second, two, and then Bucky parted his just a little and Tony mirrored his movements, giving Bucky the courage to thread his metal fingers through Tony’s hair, so he could tilt Tony’s head to deepen the kiss. They didn’t pick up the pace though, letting the kiss remain gentle and slow.

It was hard to push all of reality away however and Bucky knew this was nothing like the first kiss he imagined. They were down in Medical, for god’s sake, in the middle of the night, both exhausted and smelling of coffee, antiseptic, and three days’ worth of New York streets. He always wanted to give Tony so much more, but there was no fireworks, no magic, no candle lit dinners or romantic gestures—

But then Tony let out a quiet whimper, hands moving up into Bucky’s hair so he could press them even closer together, deepening the kiss more, desperation and need seeping through into the movements and Bucky himself followed Tony’s lead, kissing the man more urgently, and—

It was so much better than anything he could’ve imagined.

Tony flush against him, those hands buried in Bucky’s hair, the needy little noise that escaped Tony again as Bucky’s tongue darted out to prod at Tony’s… It was perfect and Bucky would’ve been happy if the rest of his life had just been this, but Tony eventually broke the kiss, pulling barely an inch away, panting short breaths of air against Bucky’s lips as his chest heaved.

Bucky himself felt breathless, even though he knew his lungs were perfectly capable of handing a few seconds without air. He kept his hands on Tony, having no desire to let any space settle between them and Tony himself seemed to be of the same thought because he pressed their foreheads together, arms settled around Bucky’s shoulders, fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. His eyes never strayed from Bucky’s own.

“James…” Tony called out again, the name barely audible, but Bucky heard it loud and clear and he placed another gentle kiss to Tony’s lips in response. God, one kiss and he was already addicted.

“Hey, m’right here, sweetheart. Not going anywhere,” he promised, but despite the tell-tale flush, despite the kiss, none of that was enough to erase the doubt Bucky could still see in Tony’s eyes. That was okay though. One simple kiss couldn’t fix years of neglect and words wouldn’t change Tony’s mind overnight. Action would. Action and time. “It’s okay if you don’t believe me right now. Just— please give me the chance to prove myself to you.”

Tony’s nod was a little hesitant. “It’ll, uh— it’ll take me a little while, so just— be patient with me? I know I’m not always easy to deal with. Honestly, didn’t think anyone would ever want this broken mess.”

The pleading look in his eyes caused a sharp ache in Bucky’s chest, but he embraced it. “Spent seventy years waiting for you, sweetheart, what’s another few? Besides, I think your broken parts fit mine just fine,” and as if to prove that exact point, Bucky pulled Tony back in for another kiss. Soft and unhurried, lips parting for each other, and oh look, they did fit perfectly together after all.

Bucky would blame the sentimentality of his thoughts on the Soldier later, but for now, it all felt just right. When he pulled away this time, Tony’s lips looked kiss swollen, likely from Bucky’s own three days worth of stubble and he relished in it. Such a gorgeous sight and he gave into his need to
brush the metal of his thumb over Tony’s lips, which parted under his touch. The sense memories—
the Soldier’s memories—flooded back and Bucky had to close his eyes against the overwhelming
need. “Want all of you, Tony. Every amazing, breathtaking part of you, the good and the bad.”

He settled his hands on Tony’s hips then and watched as Tony’s hands dropped to Bucky’s chest,
playing with one of the buttons of his shirt. The man looked almost shy.

“I, uh— me too. I mean,” he glanced up at Bucky and then back to his own hands, “I want every
part of you too. What I told the Soldier… that was all true. There are so many things that I admire
and— and love about you…”

“Even Soldier himself?”

Tony huffed a laugh. “You said you remembered everything, right?” Bucky gave an affirmative
hum. “Then you know how I reacted to the whole thing.”

The apology came before Bucky could even internally debate it. “I’m sorry for what happened back
then, he— we—” Damn it, the fuckin’ pronouns were going to drive him up the wall one day. “I
should’ve never touched you without your permission.”

He was ready to say more, but Tony was already shaking his head. “That’s not what I meant. I
wasn’t exactly… opposed to anything that was happening in that bed. And James, even when you
were like that, when you were running on pure emotion and base desires, you still stopped when I
asked you to. The only reason I was uncomfortable with that whole situation was because you,” he
tapped the tip of Bucky’s nose to emphasize the point, “weren’t quite all there. Hell, I could make the
argument that I was the one taking advantage of the whole thing. Kinda always hated myself for
being drawn to the Soldier the way I am… I mean, you always hated him, and here I was—” Tony
didn’t finish the thought, only supplementing the words with a vague hand wave at himself, but
Bucky knew what he meant. Geez, how exactly did they end up on such completely different pages
about everything?

“I actually like the fact that you, uh— appreciate the Soldier the way you do.”

Tony tilted his head in question. “Really?”

“Yeah. I know I’ve always hated him, but the last three days taught me that I might need to rethink
some things… I think I had such a hard time before because I didn’t want to accept that all of his—
all of his anger and violence and possessiveness… Those are my traits, whether I like it or not, and I
have to own up to that. But the fact that you can look at that part of me and see something
worthwhile? That means everything to me.”

By the way Tony’s hands kept fidgeting with the buttons of Bucky’s shirt, it was obvious this
conversation was veering off into uncomfortable emotional territory, so to let some of that tension go,
Bucky smiled and cupped the back of Tony’s head so he could pull him into a kiss. Because he
could now and wasn’t that an amazing thought?

The way Tony’s lips parted for him so willingly was intoxicating and Bucky couldn’t help but
deepen that kiss and tighten his hold on Tony, bringing the man close. His right hand managed to
find the warm skin of Tony’s lower back, exposed where he raked up the t-shirt.

The little gasp that escaped Tony at the touch was just as amazing, and Tony himself was straining to
get closer, practically on his tiptoes so he could be perfectly aligned with Bucky’s mouth. Fuck,
Bucky wanted him, to have all of him right here and now, the Soldier less of a separate presence
now and more of an urge, deep in his blood, but the part of his brain not clouded with lust reminded
him they were still stuck in Medical, Bucky still needed a damn shower, and poor Tony probably hadn’t really slept in the last week.

Bucky reluctantly pulled them apart, but he was rewarded with the sight of a flushed, breathless Tony, looking up at him with that sparkle in his eyes, that same want. Outright gorgeous and Bucky planned to coax that pretty little sight out of Tony every chance he got.

For now though, Bucky just bumped their noses together, which prompted Tony to let out a chuckle and scrunch up his face, whether in embarrassment or humor, Bucky couldn’t tell.

“What?” Bucky couldn’t help but ask, laughter seeping into his own voice.

“Sorry,” Tony shook his head, but the smile didn’t wane, “but it’s just— the Soldier always does that and it’s such a… tender gesture that I always have a hard time reconciling that with the guy who wants his enemies to drown in their own blood.”

The words would’ve made Bucky feel self-conscious at any other time, but he clung to the memory of Tony and the Soldier, to the fact that Tony was in his arms right now, not a hint of fear or disgust in his features. He managed a shrug and a playful smile. “Weren’t you the one who said that those growled threats against Hydra made you weak in the knees?”

“Well, what can I say, I guess I have a thing for danger.” The flirty expression on Tony’s face was downright ridiculous.

“So let me get this straight… You have a thing for both metal and danger?”

This time, it was Tony who pulled him into a kiss, although it broke on a laugh, Tony unable to contain his mirth. “I really should’ve realized you were the perfect man for me a long time ago, huh?”

Bucky hummed in agreement. “And here I thought you were supposed to be a genius.”

“Apparently I’m a pretty dumb genius, go figure. Jokes aside though, the whole thing with the Soldier… I trust him the same way I trust you, and I mean, if he needs to make an appearance every once in a while, to keep you sane or something, I wouldn’t, um— I wouldn’t complain, per se.”

Tony really had to stop giving him that coy look from underneath his lashes because it was driving Bucky mad. “Honestly, I’m having a really hard time not giving into him right here and now because all he really wants is to push you against the nearest wall and…” he leaned in to whisper in Tony’s ear, “I want to kiss you senseless, until your gorgeous lips are swollen red, leave marks all over you so everyone knows you’re mine. I want to get down on my knees for you, solnishko, and show you just how good I can be…”

When Bucky pulled back, he had to bite his lip. Tony’s lips were parted, panting out little short breaths. Half-lidded eyes and a flush streaked across his cheeks. Gorgeous.

“Jesus, but your mouth is lethal and I, uh— Yeah, definitely don’t have an issue with any of those things you just mentioned.”

Bucky had to take a deep breath and let out a slow exhale at the words. Still in Medical, dammit. All of that could wait. He pressed a gentle kiss to Tony’s cheek and leaned his forehead against Tony’s.

“Well, we have all day tomorrow, don’t we?” That earned him a chuckle. “We’re both exhausted, honey, and— and as much as the Soldier— as much as I want you, I also wouldn’t really mind taking it a bit slower. ‘Cause, uh— you know, it’s been a little while for me.”
It didn’t take more than second for Tony’s eyes to widen with realization. “No, of course, of course. Whatever you need. Anything. I mean— God, even just this— I’m still ninety percent sure I’m having a fevered dream and I’m going to wake up tomorrow and you’ll be gone and—”

Another kiss proved to be an effective way of stopping Tony’s nervous rambling. The kiss remained gentle, Bucky careful to control the need that burned inside him— there was always tomorrow and the rest of time— and instead, he focused on Tony’s warmth and the weight of his body in his arms, the way they fit so perfectly together. Bucky had no issue with staying like this for just a little bit longer, but suddenly, his stomach let out a growl, far too loud in the near silent hospital room, and Tony broke the kiss so he could drop his head onto Bucky’s chest because he was shaking with laughter.

Alright, so maybe Bucky couldn’t help but laugh too.

“I… think I may be hungrier than I thought,” Bucky admitted sheepishly and patted Tony on the back, who just kept laughing against him.

“Wow, way to ruin a super romantic moment there.”

“Eh, it was getting a little too mushy for my tastes— or for my stomach’s tastes, I suppose.”

Tony pulled away, gracing Bucky with a smile that nearly took his breath away. In reality, it was a small, tired smile, but it was so genuine and all his, so Bucky loved every bit of it. It got even better when Tony leaned in to press their lips together for one more quick kiss.

“Please never stop doing that,” Bucky said when they separated and Tony just shrugged, expression playful.

“I’ll see what I can do. Now, come on,” he broke out of Bucky’s embrace and took a hold of the metal hand. “Food first, then sleep, then maybe more kissing. Wait, no, definitely more kissing.”

Bucky obediently followed the pull of Tony’s hand, letting Tony lead them both out of Medical. Tony broke into reciting the list of food he found for them in the kitchen and Bucky let that voice wash over him, savoring this perfect moment in time. The reality around them may not have been perfect, but their little moment was, even if Bucky wasn’t foolish enough to think that it’d always be smooth sailing from here on out. Not with who they were, not with the trauma and histories they both carried on their shoulders.

Every part of Bucky was ready and willing to face whatever challenges lay ahead though because Tony was worth it, but all of that would come later. They could deal with reality tomorrow. For now, he just let himself enjoy how lucky he was to have Tony’s forgiveness, to still have the man’s trust. He let himself relish the sheer joy that they were finally on the same page— or at least in the same goddamn novel— and when Tony turned back to give him a look full of affection, accompanied by a smile and a squeeze of his hand, Bucky fully embraced the overwhelming realization that after everything, after all this time, he was finally, finally home.

Chapter End Notes

*weeps openly* They finally kissed, jfc! I know you guys have been waiting a long time for this, but I will bet you I've been waiting to write this even longer!
It only took us over 200K words to get here though, no big deal. :P

One more chapter next Saturday before I go on hiatus and it's basically just all fluff and feels. See you then!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

For today, we get to see a little bit of the last chapter from Tony's POV. Enjoy the disgusting, tooth-rotting fluff, we all earned it!!

Tony heard everything James had said, but his brain was still stuck on that one word. *Twice.* He must have managed to stammer it out, because James was giving him a small smile, something in his features almost indulgent.

“Twice,” James said again and the confirmation made something finally *click* in Tony’s head.

Holy hell.

*Twice?*

Here was Tony, imagining James calling Steve up every night, secret smiles and longing looks, all reserved just for the two of them. He imagined them reminiscing about the past and planning for the future, one that didn’t have much room for Tony.

He imagined a lot of things, convinced himself that he was only a temporary stand-in for someone better, someone greater than Tony could ever manage to be.

*Steve and I, we’re— we’re basically strangers—*

James was still speaking and some desperate, lonely part of Tony, the part that wanted all of this *so fucking much*, begged him to believe, but there was another part that just couldn’t leave well enough alone.

Tony knew he was fidgeting, nerves manifesting in needless motion, but he tried to swallow back the anxiety, along with any remaining sense of pride. He was needy and insecure, so what? That was old news to anyone who really knew him and James— well, James could see right through him from the very beginning. “What if— when they all come back,” he had to look away, “what if he asks you to choose… him or me?”

A part of him still expected some sort of diplomatic answer. *We’ll need to figure out a compromise, we need to learn how to get along. I want Steve in my life too.*

“Well, I would hope Steve has enough wits about him to avoid shitty ultimatums, but if came down to that… I’d choose you, doll, and I’d tell Steve to go to hell.”

*I’d choose you.*

It was a little hard to breathe, Tony realized, but the strange sensation in his chest— well, it felt a little like *hope*, although to be fair, Tony didn’t experience this particular emotion often enough to be sure, but he *wanted* it to be hope.

“Now, the Soldier on the other hand would have a really hard time…” James paused to give him a
very familiar smirk. “…deciding which body part Steve would miss the most when the Soldier ripped it off for daring to even ask something like that.”

Between that sharp gaze, the smile, and the way James uttered that threat like playful banter, Tony just couldn’t help the swell of warmth inside him, needing to bite at his lip so that the feeling wouldn’t manifest as a pleased smile. He wasn’t supposed to be smiling at something like this, right? Maybe so, but it was hard to care when James looked at him like that and it felt damn good to have someone so firmly in his corner, so willing to fight on his behalf. The fact that it was Steve that the Soldier and James were threatening? Well, some petty—broken, betrayed, abandoned—part of Tony relished in it.

But then James’ metal hand settled, cool and heavy, on his cheek and any thought of Steve quickly vanished. The way James was looking at him, that intense, determined gaze, held so many promises, even though James suddenly went on about responsibility and disappearing off the face of the Earth. Tony was ready to vehemently protest—

Right up until that metal thumb pressed against his lips and stole Tony's breath away. Nerves and doubt, hope and lust, all warring inside him, and all of it was so much—

“—I lasted three days without you, before I had to come running back, ready to crawl on my knees and beg for your forgiveness, beg for you to take me back.”

How could James not know that Tony would always take him back with open arms? God, that was all Tony ever really wanted, from anyone. He just wanted someone to come back and tell him that they were sorry, that they needed him. Just some acknowledgement that he was wanted… and here was James, this incredible man who had lived through hell and come out of it stronger, telling him he was ready to beg to remain at Tony’s side.

“Tony, sweetheart, the only way I’ll leave now, the only way you’re getting rid of me is if you look me straight in the eyes right now and tell me you don’t want me here.”

“You know I can’t do that, James.”

Telling him Tony didn’t want him? Asking him to leave? Tony was pretty sure it was a physical impossibility at this point.

“Then I’m staying, for as long as you’ll have me. And I know you won’t believe it for a while, especially not when so many people have hurt you before, myself included… but I will prove to you that my place is at your side. Always.”

Tony had to close his eyes, overwhelmed by those words, and the struggle between his doubt, fostered by years of betrayals, and the desperate need to believe this, was almost physically painful.

“Honey, if this isn’t really what you want though, I’ll understand. You saying ‘no’ to me doesn’t mean that I’ll leave. We can stay friends, allies, anything. Anything you’re willing to give me.”

_I want to give you everything, James_, he thought, but instead he said an equally honest “I don’t want to say ‘no’ though…”

He opened his eyes so he could see James again and the smile he was graced with let something inside of him settle, smoothing out the rough, painful edges of his anxiety. James moved closer then and Tony let him.

“Then don’t. I— I know you’re scared. Hell, I am too. It feels a lot like standing on the edge of a cliff, doesn’t it?”
A decent metaphor and Tony couldn’t help the way his lip twitched into a barely-there smile.

Taking a step off the edge and letting himself fall? There weren’t many people who Tony could trust to catch him before he hit the ground.

“…But sweetheart, if you take that step with me, trust me, please trust me, that I’ll be there to catch you. I know I’m not a perfect man, but I’m willing to spend as long as it takes, spend my whole life finding a way to be worthy of you.”

He wanted James to be one of those people so desperately that it felt like his legs would give out from under him and he had to clutch at James’s shirt even harder to steady himself. “James…” escaped his lips on an exhale, almost against his will, but it was all he could manage against the tidal wave of hope and need.

James’ eyes darted to Tony’s lips, an unmistakable gesture, and then Tony heard those two familiar words— May I?— like an echo from a time when there was still space and barriers between them. Tony didn’t want any more space keeping them apart, so with a small nod, he let James’ lips meet his for the first time.

It didn’t take long for him to let that soft, tentative press of lips turn into something deeper, something needier and it was Tony himself who couldn’t keep things slow and steady because when he realized the needy whimper he heard was his own, he threw all sense of decorum to the wind, pressing in closer, needing to feel James against him. Want you, need you—

Been waiting my whole life for you.

When he finally pulled away, panting for breath— reduced lung capacity was a drag— there was a wicked sense of satisfaction in seeing James pull in short, ragged breaths of his own. God, how did this man manage to look so gorgeous even after three days on the run?

The desire to have no space between them (ever again, if possible) was still fresh, so Tony pressed back in, foreheads touching and his hands playing with James’ hair. However, his brain let him enjoy the moment for only a second or two before insecurities began to overwhelm hope again and those same old doubts crept back in. Tony hated it. Why couldn’t he just enjoy this? Why couldn’t he just be strong and a little less broken—

“Hey, m’right here, sweetheart,” James’ soft whisper cut through the recriminations rattling around in Tony’s head. “Not going anywhere. It’s okay if you don’t believe me right now. Just— please give me the chance to prove myself to you.”

God, how did James know exactly what to say? That was dangerous, so, so dangerous because there had always been people in Tony’s life who knew how to play him like a fine-tuned instrument with just a few well placed words—

But this was James and either he was the best liar Tony had ever met or those words were truly genuine and the terrifying thing was that Tony actually trusted him. He’d trust the man with his life and— well, fuck, maybe he could trust him with that old, patched up heart of his too?

“It’ll, uh— it’ll take me a little while, so just— be patient with me?” he nearly begged, unable to help himself the self-deprecation, like a part of him needed to make sure James really understood what he was getting himself into. “I know I’m not always easy to deal with. Honestly, didn’t think anyone would ever want this broken mess.”

James’ response was both the cheesiest and most amazing thing Tony could’ve heard— Spent
seventy years waiting for you, sweetheart, what’s another few?— but it was hard to think about the words when James was kissing him again, unhurried movements that made Tony weak in the knees. James usually kept himself clean-shaven, but right now the “runaway stubble” was scratchy against Tony’s skin, which he didn’t mind one bit, even if he knew he must have looked a mess when they pulled apart, with kiss swollen lips, barely able to catch his breath. James obviously noticed too and was absolutely not helping things with that metal thumb back against Tony’s lips. Ah hell, this was definitely a kink now and it was causing all sorts of issues with the rational thinking part of Tony’s brain.

Apparently James wasn’t done taking him apart because his whispered “Want all of you, Tony. Every amazing, breathtaking part of you, the good and the bad” was said with so much need and so much conviction that Tony felt like he died and went to some amazing version of heaven where the man he was in love with was just as head-over-heels in love with him.

This wasn’t heaven though. James was very real and very much here, and Tony’s brain kicked back into gear just enough to remind him that a lot of Very Bad Things happened just days ago because Tony was shit at communicating.

He needed to do better, but it was easier said than done. “I, uh— me too. I mean,” was the first sad attempt and his hands channeled the nervousness into playing with the buttons of James’ shirt. “I want every part of you too,” he tried again. “What I told the Soldier… that was all true. There are so many things that I admire and— and love about you…”

“Even Soldier himself?”

The question startled a laugh out of Tony, but not because he was surprised by it. No, rather, it was that the notion of him disliking the Soldier seemed downright ridiculous, given the actual truth. Hadn’t James realized that Tony couldn’t even function properly when the other man got all growly and handsy and possessive? Shit, Tony was discovering new kinks left and right over here, all the while James thought Tony wanted the Soldier gone.

Communication. Right. That probably would’ve solved some of these issues.

“You said you remembered everything, right?” Tony asked and waited for the affirmative hum.

“Then you know how I reacted to the whole thing.”

“I’m sorry for what happened back then, he— we— I should’ve never touched you without your permission.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Tony shook his head as he spoke, needing to make it clear that the apology wasn’t necessary. “I wasn’t exactly… opposed to anything that was happening in that bed. And James, even when you were like that, when you were running on pure emotion and base desires, you still stopped when I asked you to. The only reason I was uncomfortable with that whole situation was because you,” he tapped the tip of James’ nose to drive the point home, “weren’t quite all there.” His usual Soldier-related guilt forced him to confess the rest. “Hell, I could make the argument that I was the one taking advantage of the whole thing. Kinda always hated myself for being drawn to the Soldier the way I am… I mean, you always hated him, and here I was—” Loving a part of you that you wanted gone, wanting your sharp edges just as much as I wanted the good in you.

“I actually like the fact that you, uh— appreciate the Soldier the way you do.”

That actually did surprise Tony. “Really?”
“Yeah. I know I’ve always hated him, but the last three days taught me that I might need to rethink some things… I think I had such a hard time before because I didn’t want to accept that all of his—all of his anger and violence and possessiveness… Those are my traits, whether I like it or not, and I have to own up to that. But the fact that you can look at that part of me and see something worthwhile? That means everything to me.”

Those words were a lot to process, but Tony didn’t get the chance because he was pulled back into a kiss and his lips parted automatically for James. Apparently, kissing was an effective way of shutting up all of his insecurities for a minute or two because all he cared about in that moment was the need to be closer. As if reading his mind, James tightened his hold on Tony, pressing them together, and Tony let out a small gasp into James’ mouth when he felt a hand at the exposed skin of his lower back.

He wanted more, so much more, and he didn’t even bother with embarrassment at whatever little noises escaped him. He hadn’t been kissed like this in years.

It was James who pulled away first, looking at Tony with so much affection that it was frankly overwhelming and Tony would’ve preferred distracting himself from over-thinking with another mind-blowing kiss, but James leaned in and bumped their noses together, prompting a chuckle out of Tony instead. That gesture sure was a familiar one.

“What?” James asked, sounding almost affronted, but there was a smile in his voice.

“Sorry, but it’s just— the Soldier always does that,” Tony was still smiling, “and it’s such a… tender gesture that I always have a hard time reconciling that with the guy who wants his enemies to drown in their own blood.”

Tony regretted the word choice about half a second later, and was about to backtrack, but instead of looking guilty or ashamed, James gave him a shrug and a smile. Tony hoped like hell that meant progress.

“Weren’t you the one who said that those growled threats against Hydra made you weak in the knees?”

Yeah, joking about that night was definite progress. “Well, what can I say, I guess I have a thing for danger,” Tony said, making sure his smirk and eyebrow waggle were more ridiculous than flirtatious.

“So let me get this straight… You have a thing for both metal and danger?”

Tony was torn between laughing and kissing that smug smile right off James’ face, so he ended up doing both. Smiling against James’ lips felt like coming home.

“I really should’ve realized you were the perfect man for me a long time ago, huh?”

There was a hum of agreement. “And here I thought you were supposed to be a genius.”

“Apparently I’m a pretty dumb genius, go figure. Jokes aside though, the whole thing with the Soldier… I trust him the same way I trust you.” The vulnerability was worth it to see the way James’ expression softened, “and I mean, if he needs to make an appearance every once in a while, to keep you sane or something, I wouldn’t, um— I wouldn’t complain, per se.”

The softness was replaced with a Soldier-esque sharpness and it made Tony’s breath hitch in anticipation. “Honestly, I’m having a really hard time not giving into him right here and now because all he really wants is to push you against the nearest wall and…” James leaned in to whisper in
Tony’s ear and that was familiar enough to get all of Tony’s blood rushing promptly south, “I want to kiss you senseless, until your gorgeous lips are swollen red, leave marks all over you so everyone knows you’re mine. I want to get down on my knees for you, solnishko, and show you just how good I can be…”

Tony’s entire brain function just stopped, which was why he couldn’t even decide whether he was glad or upset that James, in all this Soldier glory, stopped speaking and pulled away.

Oh hell, Tony was not going to make it a week if James kept this up. Death by gorgeous supersoldier whispering filthy promises into his ear? Tony could think of worse ways to go.

“Jesus, but your mouth is lethal,” at least Tony’s tongue was just barely functional, “and I, uh— Yeah, definitely don’t have an issue with any of those things you just mentioned.”

Strangely, Tony’s words prompted a gentle kiss on the cheek instead of something far more devious.

“Well, we have all day tomorrow, don’t we?” Tony chuckled, loving James like this. He never wanted to see James unsure of himself again. “We’re both exhausted, honey, and—” the man’s smile lost its edges, “and as much as the Soldier— as much as I want you, I also wouldn’t really mind taking it a bit slower. ‘Cause, uh— you know, it’s been a little while for me.”

Oh. Oh crap. That got Tony’s brain right back into gear. Way to forget this poor man had been tortured for the last seventy years, not galavanting across every party and nightclub in the country like you. Jesus, Stark, what the hell is wrong with you?

“No, of course, of course. Whatever you need,” he hurried to reassure. “Anything. I mean— God, even just this—” It wasn’t a lie, Tony would’ve been fine with just this and that admission surprised even himself. “I’m still ninety percent sure I’m having a fevered dream and I’m going to wake up tomorrow and you’ll be gone and—”

James was kissing him again and Tony wondered whether the other man figured out that kissing him stopped thinking too. Such an effective tool and Tony hoped James would use it often.

This kiss was just as amazing as the rest, slow and gentle, and it made Tony feel loved and protected—

The growl of James’ stomach completely derailed the romanticism of his thoughts and Tony had to pull away, trying and failing to hide his laughter in James’ chest.

“I… think I may be hungrier than I thought,” James admitted and the sheepish notes in his tone just made Tony laugh harder. God, it felt good to laugh. It felt right. With the countless issues they both had, the humor, banter and teasing were the things that actually kept them sane.

“Wow, way to ruin a super romantic moment there.”

“Eh, it was getting a little too mushy for my tastes— or for my stomach’s tastes, I suppose.”

Tony pulled away so he could see James. Laughter turned into a more tired smile (he was running on fumes at this point, but sleeping was the last thing on his mind and that was just fine). James, his James, was here, hale and whole, and Tony wanted to kiss him one more time, so he did.

“Please never stop doing that.” James echoed Tony’s own thoughts when they pulled apart and even though Tony teased with an “I’ll see what I can do,” they both knew this wasn’t going to end here.

“Now, come on,” he grabbed James’ unbandaged hand, “food first, then sleep, then maybe more
kissing. Wait, no, definitely more kissing.”

He led them out of Medical, talking a mile a minute again, but most of him was focused on James’ hand in his, on the man’s smile when Tony turned around to look at him.

Tomorrow, regular life would be back with a vengeance. Tony’s insecurities, James’ struggles with identity, and the rest of the world ready and willing to judge them. Pardons were on the horizon, Steve and the others the biggest wrench one could throw at their lives.

Challenges, doubts, fears, and the inevitable miscommunications because they were both awful at using their damn words. The cards were stacked against them, but hell, they’ve both beaten bigger odds before.

Who knew, maybe they would beat the odds again, but that could wait until tomorrow.

Tonight, James was finally home and Tony could breathe again.

***

Tony was settled cross-legged on the bed, awake enough to click through a few of his unopened emails on the holographic screen in front of him (to be fair, he wasn’t doing much more than clicking and pretending to read), when James came out of the bathroom, a billow of steam following him out. Tony’s throat went dry at the sight. It really wasn’t fair for one single person to look so damn hot, he decided, watching as James towed off his hair and came closer. He was clean-shaven again, skin a healthy shade of pink (he must’ve liked his water scalding hot and Tony avoided thinking too much as to why), the bandages on his right hand were gone, and there was only a pair of sleep pants hanging low off his hips, while the rest of those gorgeous muscles were on full display.

Tony had a sneaking suspicion James was doing this on purpose. Entirely unfair, especially since Tony didn’t need any more seducing. He was already in love, dammit, and James could at least have the decency to do this when Tony was a little less exhausted and actually able to do something about the gorgeous super soldier who proceeded to drop onto the bed next to Tony, looking over as he towed the last of the moisture out of his hair.

“Are you actually working right now?”

Tony scrunched up his nose at the notes of disapproval in that question. “It’s almost six in the morning, you know. Most people are going into work as we speak.”

“Most people haven’t stayed up for the last five days using coffee and sheer stubbornness to keep themselves awake.”

“Most people aren’t Tony Stark.” Tony’s unabashed smile and the accompanying wink got a huff of laughter out of James, who just shook his head. It reminded Tony of a wet dog and he tried not to laugh, even though the image was fitting, especially given those big, puppy dog eyes looking over at him.

“Fair point, but I think now is the perfect time for this Tony Stark fella to get a little bit of sleep. To be honest, I could use some myself.”

“…You’re just trying to postpone running into Rhodey, aren’t you?” Tony teased and that got a wet towel thrown his way, straight through the holographic rendering of his inbox.

“Absolutely I’m avoiding Rhodes. Have you met the man?”
“Aw, come on, Rhodey is the biggest softie in the world.”

James just snorted at Tony’s assertion and the near eye roll that followed made Tony break out into giggle of his own. James’ expression was ridiculous, Tony was still holding the wet towel and— oh yeah, he was definitely sleep deprived. The giggles never boded well for him. He tossed the towel over the side of the bed and shook his head.

“Okay, you might be right. A few hours of shut-eye wouldn’t hurt. I’m getting giddy, which is a sign that I’m about five miles past sleep deprivation.”

The laugh lines on James’ face softened, smile shifting from mischief to fondness. He let an elbow rest on his knee as he propped his chin up with a hand and gave Tony an affectionate look, which made Tony feel self-conscious all of the sudden. Had James always looked at him like that?

He raised a silent eyebrow in question and James shrugged, looking a little shy himself.

“Sorry, I’m just— just processing.”

“Do not punch my building, Barnes, I swear to god.”

The reprimand wasn’t much of one, not with the teasing notes obvious in Tony’s voice, so it didn’t do anything to the smile on James’ face.

“Nah, the building’s safe, I promise. S’just a little tough to wrap my head around everything. I mean, here you are,“ James gestured in his direction, “and here’s me, and we, uh—”

“Made out down in Medical?”

James bit his lip at the words, looking almost coy— yeah right, Tony was onto him, he remembered those whispered promises that reduced his legs to jelly— and heat flared up in Tony’s belly, but despite his body’s best intentions, he knew he was too exhausted for that to evolve into anything more than a pleasant, warm sensation. He made the hologram disappear with the flick of his hand and straightened out his legs so he could lie back down against the mountain of pillows behind him.

“C’mere,” he gestured for James to come closer, who didn’t hesitate to crawl over, settling his metal hand next to Tony’s hip to hold himself up, while his other hand threaded itself in Tony’s hair, pulling him up just a bit so their lips could meet. Tony’s own arms were already around James’ wide shoulders, unable to stop himself from running his fingers over the expanse of that warm skin. He was a tactile person, dammit, and this was far too tempting of an offering.

The thigh that wedged itself between his legs pressed just a touch harder and Tony had to break the kiss off on a moan. “Well, this certainly feels familiar,” he panted against James’ lips before the man decided Tony’s jaw was in need of some attention too. Tony’s head tilted away on its own accord, practically presenting James with his exposed neck, but the man only managed a few more kisses before Tony felt him sigh and rest his forehead against Tony’s jaw.

“Sorry… Swear I want to take this a little slower…”

The words were mumbled against his throat, but Tony still caught them and ran a slow hand through the damp strands of James’ hair. One more sight and the man’s body sagged against Tony entirely, pressed against his side now.

“Like I said, whatever makes you comfortable. Slow is good. Plus, you gotta remember, I’m not a super soldier.” He couldn’t help his tired chuckle. “You’d have to do all the work right now if things get anymore exciting.”
James pulled away just enough to hover over Tony. “I know, honey, you need to rest.” He placed another kiss, soft and undemanding this time, on Tony’s lips. “But I just can’t help myself, you’re so damn tempting.” He was smiling against Tony’s lips. “Where do you get off looking so gorgeous, hmm?”

Tony wasn’t exactly sure how to respond to that—had anyone ever flirted with him like that?—so he fell back on familiar self-deprecating humor (while trying desperately not to blush). “Oh, I’m loving these low expectations. Just wait until I’m actually well-rested and wearing something other than a ratty old t-shirt. I’m going to knock your socks off.”

The humor seemed to have fallen a little flat because there was something almost sad in James’ eyes, but then he was kissing Tony again, so Tony tried not to pay attention to that brief flash of emotion and he practically chased after James’ lips as the man pulled away and actually sat up this time.

“We are terrible at this sleep thing,” he declared with a huff of laughter and then settled back down against the pillows next to Tony, opening his right arm to beckon Tony over, who then ended up tucked against the other man, head comfortably resting in the crook of James’ neck. James grabbed at one of the blankets to pull it over them and when Tony’s arm draped across the man’s blanketed chest, James reached out with his metal arm so he could run absent fingers across the top of Tony’s hand.

“This okay?” James asked, voice low this time and Tony nodded against him. A second later, there were fingers in Tony’s hair, the gentle strokes matching the movements of the metal hand and the touch prompted Tony to let out a deep, drawn-out exhale. His whole body sagged as muscles relaxed, the very real exhaustion he had been pushing away for days suddenly making its presence known.

“More than okay,” he murmured and snuggled in closer. Even through the fog of exhaustion, he couldn’t resist mouthing one kiss against James’ exposed collarbone, which got him a chuckle and James’ own lips pressed against the crown of his head.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long…” James whispered, letting out a sigh of his own. “Wondered what it’d be like to hold you in my arms while you fell asleep, ever since that first time…”

Tony could barely keep his eyes open, but he didn’t want to let this moment go just yet. “Since that time I passed out here after the nightmare?”

James hummed in agreement. “That was the night I realized I was in love with you.”

Tony couldn’t see James’ face in their current position, so he focused on the metal hand tracing lazy lines across his own as he tried to will the ache in his chest away. “That long, huh?”

“Too long,” James replied, somehow pulling Tony ever closer to him, and pressing his face into Tony’s hair. “I’m sorry I didn’t say something sooner, I wasted so much time…”

“Hey, hey, takes two to tango, okay? I dropped the ball too many times to count too. All that matters —” his throat tightened, “all that matters is that we’re here now, okay?” James didn’t respond, but Tony felt him nod. As always, it was so easy for things to get emotionally charged between them, didn’t take more than a word or a look, so Tony tried for levity to break the tension. “We really do suck at this sleep thing, don’t we?”

James let out a bark of laughter. “I guess sleep just isn’t very appealing when I can stay awake with you next to me instead.”
Tony didn’t hold back his own little smile at the words, but after letting himself think this through further, the smile slipped and he asked “You’re not afraid of going to sleep, are you?”

The reply didn’t come right away. “I don’t think I’ll wake up as the Soldier again,” James finally said. “He feels… at peace, I guess, so there’s no reason for him to fight for control. Nothing feels off.” Another short pause. “Are you worried?”

Tony was already shaking his head. “Not even a little. I trust that you know what’s going on in your head, but even if I woke up next to the Soldier again, I’d like to think we’d deal with it. Better than the last time, even.” The words earned him a tired huff.

“He’ll behave, I promise. Although I do think he will need a kiss or two to keep him in line.”

That was as good of a prompt as any and Tony lifted himself just enough to be face to face with James again so he could… keep the Soldier in line. The kiss didn’t last more than a few seconds, both of them as exhausted as they were, but James was smiling against his lips as they pulled apart and the man kept his eyes on Tony.

“Are you afraid of falling asleep?” James asked him.

“Maybe a little,” Tony confessed after a beat, feeling vulnerable. He felt heavy vibranium against the back of his head a moment later and gentle pressure pushed him back against James’ chest. He spared a moment to marvel at the fact that he found the solid weight of that metal arm comforting, but maybe it was just all of James that made him feel safe.

“I’ll be right here when you wake up,” James promised and Tony clung to those whispered words. He drew in a breath, inhaling the scent of fresh soap and those familiar hints of vanilla (it must’ve been the shampoo). “Now, close your eyes and sleep. Let the Soldier and I keep you safe, darlin’.”

The fear at the back of his mind— I’ll wake up alone, I always do— didn’t disappear entirely, but Tony found it easier than expected to follow the call of James’ words. His eyes slowly closed and his body relaxed again, soothed by the warmth coming from the man next to him, and his mind barely registered the fingers in his hair resuming their slow movements as he finally fell into deep, restful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

For all intents and purposes, I am now on hiatus until Dec. 23rd, but you guys are technically still getting two more chapters, on Wed and Sat. Consider these a fluff interlude because there is zero plot development here. If Tony and Bucky are lucky, I may even let them get a little handsy in the next chapter, ahem. >.>

Plot returns when I re-emerge from the depths of hiatus.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Fluff interlude continues. Although, this fluff has taken a smutty turn, sooo...

NOTE: While the line between M and E is pretty squishy, I'm rating this chapter as Explicit just to be safe.

Since this is such a tiny portion of the whole story, I won't mess with the story rating, so just take note of this warning. If this isn't your cup of tea, that's totally cool, you can skip this chapter without missing anything plot relevant and I've included a brief summary in the end note. But otherwise, no further tags necessary, I don't think, this is all pretty vanilla.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was light filtering through his closed eyelids and Tony scrunched up his face in displeasure. Would it kill Friday to keep the shades down and let him sleep, especially with the amazing dream he just had?

Part of his genius and multi-tasking abilities was the fact that Tony’s brain never really worked in clean, logical patterns, but it was far less useful first thing in the morning. His memories filtered through as a disjointed jumble of images and words, followed by one simple thought when he didn’t feel anyone in the bed next to him.

It was all just a dream. He didn’t need to open his eyes to know he was still in James’ room, in the same place where he fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion more than anything else. He was still alone, James was gone and—

The bed shifted beneath him and Tony almost jumped in surprise, but then he felt the familiar metal arm snake around his waist and a kiss pressed into his clothed shoulder.

“There you are, darling,” filtered through Tony’s jumbled thoughts and he had to drag in a sharp breath as all of those fragments in his head realigned to fit with the reality. Oh god, James was here, he was really here, and last night wasn’t just a fantasy conjured up by a desperate mind.

Tony reached out to grasp the metal hand that settled over his stomach, threading their fingers together. The touch grounded him and he concentrated on how solid and warm James felt pressed up against him as he willed his panic to recede.

“You’re okay, Tony, m’right here…” James murmured the words against Tony’s back, obviously picking up on the tense way Tony held himself. “Is this fine or do you need me to let go?” The desperate shake of Tony’s head was answer enough and the embrace tightened, bringing Tony closer against the man’s chest. “I’m right here with you,” James repeated, voice whisper soft and words exactly what Tony needed to hear. “Everything that happened last night was real. I came back, I want to be here with you because I am so, so in love with you, honey, and I’m not going anywhere.”

James kept up the soothing words, the reassurances blending together into comforting nonsense, while Tony tried to steady his breathing. The fact that James cared enough to help Tony through this,
that he was willing to accept Tony’s insecurities and find ways to alleviate the panic… Tony wasn’t sure he could love him more in that moment and that thought was just enough to give him the strength he needed to finally exhale a deep breath and let the tension go.

He began moving and the grip around him loosened enough to let him flip over to the other side so he could face James. The evidence of the man’s presence before his own eyes settled the anxiety even further and pulled a smile out of him.

Hard not to smile when the man you were in love with was looking at you like you were something precious.

“Everything alright?” James asked, eyes darting up and down as they examined Tony. There was a crease between his brows, a sign of worry, and guilt began to eat away at Tony, making him regret his lapse into panic and wishing he was better at this whole thing. James deserved better.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, I didn’t mean to freak out,” he managed, more apologies on the tip of his tongue, but James was already shushing him, cradling Tony’s head with the metal hand so he could bring their foreheads together.

“Nothing to be sorry for, honey,” he said softly, “nothing at all. Whatever you need, as often as you need it, I’m right here for you. S’not a burden at all.”

So much care and concern in those words and most people would revel in that love, but for Tony, it triggered the quiet, but persistent voice at the back of his head, asking what the catch was. Most people were good to him only when they wanted something out of him—

But when James smiled just a little wider, not bothering to hide the pure affection in his eyes, and when he asked “Would it be alright if I kissed you right now?” Tony pushed that damn little whisper away. The list of people he could really trust, without reservations, was shamefully short (and included bots, an AI and an android, all of which he had a hand in creating), but dammit, James was on that list now too and at least for the moment, Tony’s insecurities could just go straight to hell.

“Don’t have to ask for permission, babe;” Tony said and that was all James needed to close the distance between them and kiss him. Tony savored the sensation, the feeling of that gorgeous smile against his own lips, and when James shifted his body, keeping his hand on Tony’s cheek and not breaking the kiss, to nudge him along, Tony followed the gentle pressure, ending up on his back with James over him. The kiss deepened, but remained tender, and James’ other hand found Tony’s own to thread their fingers together and for a few minutes, everything remained as this sweet and unhurried thing, which Tony relished. He had to break away from the kiss eventually though, mostly to breathe, but he also registered that James must’ve been awake for a while.

“Shoot, here you are, all minty fresh for me already. At least let me up to brush my teeth,” he offered, trying to be fair, even though he didn’t really want to get out this very comfortable bed where a very handsome super soldier was settled on top of him.

James just squinted at him for a second, didn’t move an inch, and instead muttered a distracted “Don’t care ‘bout that,” before diving back in, nipping at Tony’s bottom lip at first, then practically licking into his mouth, not bothering to keep the kiss chaste this time. That was good enough for Tony, so all he did was respond in kind, matching the more frantic pace and clutching at the other man’s back.

They had to part again when Tony needed air, but James wasn’t done, shifting his focus instead to peppering Tony’s jaw and neck with more kisses. Tony let his head fall back, exposing more skin for James to explore, and he let himself get lost in the sensation, let his thoughts fizzle out into static,
which was why he nearly gasped in surprise when the metal hand found its way to his back and used that leverage to lift him up along with James as the man sat up and pulled Tony into his lap. Those soft lips were back on his own before he could stage any indignant protest at being manhandled (he loved it, far more than he should, but he had appearances to keep up after all), and the hands that move into his hair tightened their grip just enough to keep him in place.

This position was familiar though and this time, Tony could actually enjoy it, having no need to worry about James and his Soldier counterpart. Unable to help himself, he let his hips rock against the other man’s lap, the friction sending tinges of pleasure up Tony’s spine. His own growing erection met an answering hardness, letting him know that James wanted all of this just as badly as he did, and that satisfying realization turned the spark of need inside him into a goddamn fire and he was desperate for more, letting a needy noise he would never admit to escape and get swallowed up by their kiss.

He practically chased after those soft lips when James pulled away to growl Tony’s name in that low, husky voice that made Tony’s cock twitch in eager anticipation. He was pulled along as James let himself drop back against the bed, Tony settling above him to straddle his lap again, this time the curve of his ass perfectly aligned with James’ crotch. There was no way he could resist the roll of his hips, once, twice, the rutting movements becoming almost desperate as his body sought out the friction it needed, but some sense of propriety finally forced him to consciously keep his hips from rocking into James again and he dropped his head onto the other man’s shoulder.

It took a few seconds to catch his breath. “Sorry,” he muttered and paused to draw in air through his nose. “I know you wanted to take things slowly.” He came willingly when a gentle tug on his hair beckoned him to lift his head back up and he saw that as his cue to sit up more fully. He almost regretted it because the shift in position just made the heated line of the cock beneath him even more prominent, but he resisted the temptation, kept his hips steady so he could enjoy the sight before him instead. James was lying beneath him, hands running up and down Tony’s thighs now, chest still heaving and blown pupils overtaking the familiar steel blue. A pink tongue darted out to lick at the kiss-swollen lips, and when their gazes met again after Tony soaked in every tantalizing detail, the smirk on James’ face was far from innocent.

“I don’t want you to stop, Tony,” he punctuated the words with an upward roll of his own hips, the pressure just enough to make Tony gasp and his hips stutter of their own volition, but it wasn’t even close to what he really needed. He leaned back in, elbows resting on either side of James’ head, and nuzzled the man’s cheek before planting open mouthed kisses, first on his jaw, then moving up to his temple. One gentle kiss on the forehead, then the arch of the other cheek, and Tony finally found his way back to James’ lips.

“You sure?” he kept the words quiet, but he made sure James was listening. “There’s no hurry. I don’t want you to feel pressured. I, uh— I know I have a reputation, but I would never just expect something— whatever you’re comfortable with, James, that’s all I want—”

Tony’s less-than-eloquent assurances were stopped when a metal finger pressed gently against his lips, proving to be an effective way of shutting him up.

James traced the pointer finger over Tony’s lips once, twice, before he spoke. “The man I’ve been dreaming about for months is sitting in my lap and all he wants to do is talk. I must be doing something wrong here.”

Tony smiled a sly smile and let his tongue dart out to give the finger a kitten lick, loving the way James’ gaze darkened at the gesture and the digit pulled at Tony’s bottom lip just enough to part them further before he let it rest against Tony’s chin.
So maybe they both had a bit of a metal kink, go figure.

“Oh, you’re doing everything just right, I promise,” Tony assured, but then the flirtatious notes in his voice dropped away again, “but I just want to be sure.” He tried to swallow back against the insecurities. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

James pulled the hand away from Tony’s face, just long enough to prop himself back up into a sitting position. His bent knees kept Tony from shifting too far back, although the change in angle once again provided just enough friction to send a jolt of pleasure through Tony, but not enough to give him any real form of relief, and his fingers dug into James’ shoulders, channeling Tony’s struggle to restrain himself.

It didn’t help that James was determined to drive him crazy because there was a metal thumb pressing into the corner of Tony’s lips again.

“You’re not gonna mess this up,” James said, watching his thumb trace lines over Tony’s bottom lip while Tony struggled with the nearly impossible task of concentrating on both the words being spoken and his rapidly diminishing ability to breathe. “I love that you’re so careful with me, sweetheart, that you want to protect me. I love that we can be gentle with each other, no hurry, no demands, but m’not some wilting flower either and right now I just want to watch you come undone under my hands.” Softness turned into heat in his voice. “Will you let me do that, Tony? Hmm? Let me make you feel good?”

At that point, Tony had about zero protests left in him. He wasn’t known for his willpower at the best of times, and right now, with the heated look in James’ eyes, Tony honestly forgot why he was protesting in the first place.

“Want you so badly,” he exhaled the words as his hands tried to find purchase on the other man’s bare shoulders, and James’ smile turned sharp, down right dangerous, which did nothing but fan the flames of Tony’s arousal further.

“Let’s start with this then…” James began and then pressed the metal thumb a little harder, breaching Tony’s lips this time and Tony obediently opened up, eyes falling shut just for a moment at the feel of the metal on his tongue. Different from what he had pictured in his fantasies and he had to be careful with his teeth to avoid clanking them against the metal, but it felt heavy and unyielding against his tongue, the initial chill quickly warming to match the heat of Tony’s mouth, and he loved it. He eagerly began to suck, keeping his eyes on James the entire time, who watched the digit disappear with open fascination.

The way Tony managed to draw the tip of his tongue against the pad of the thumb made James’ eyes flutter and he groaned, dropping his head against Tony’s temple.

“Love how I can feel that, honey,” he whispered, drawing the thumb almost all the way out and then thrusting it back in, the movements steady and careful, always cognizant of just how easily he could injure Tony. “My clever Tony… So brilliant, aren’t you? So smart, so good, building miracles for all of us.”

The murmured praises made him want to flush with embarrassment, some part of still not used to genuine compliments, but Tony didn’t have much brain power left to think about any of that. All he could focus on was the metallic taste and the heavy weight in his mouth and he concentrated on lavishing the thumb with his tongue.

“Look at you, so pretty with your mouth full, aren’t ya?” replaced the praises and Tony moaned at the words, the image James’ cock in his mouth rising unbidden in his mind and making him lose the
Of course, James was just merciless enough to choose that time to withdraw the thumb entirely, lips twitching into a smirk at the wet pop it made. He dragged the thumb down, trailing spit over Tony’s stubble. “So damn pretty,” he said again, eyes darting up from the digit to Tony’s mouth and then finally to his eyes. Tony managed to give him a smirk of his own, but he was sure it was made less effective by the way he was panting, mouth still open, with his flushed skin and half-lidded eyes.

James leaned in closer to peck gently at Tony’s lips, the move innocent in contrast to their earlier activity, and then wrapped his arms around Tony, hands finding their way to the top of Tony’s spine. Careful fingers trailed down in another undemanding gesture, but it still felt good, making Tony arch into it. He let his head fall back as he enjoyed the touch and the hint of pressure behind it. Those clever fingers stopped somewhere over his lower back, and traced lazy lines back up and down a few more times. Then, just as Tony was being made to relax by the impromptu massage, James let his fingers slip underneath the waistband of both Tony’s pajamas and boxers, settling over the curve of Tony’s bare ass and lifting him up just enough to get a tight grip. Tony gasped, an exhale that ended on a moan as his hand scrambled to find purchase in James’ hair because he needed something to act as an anchor as he processed the sensation of those hands on him. He closed his eyes, letting his head drop even further back, and he heard James chuckle before he gave Tony’s ass another squeeze and planted a biting kiss on the column of Tony’s exposed neck.

“Remember what I told you about your perfect little backside, doll?” Tony felt the words whispered against his skin and barely managed to crack open an eye, too focused on the contrast of metal and flesh kneading at his ass.

“That you think about it—all the time?” he stuttered out, but not to be outdone, he managed his own “To be fair, your ass is equally distracting. Goddamn—ah, those thighs of yours too.”

James’ response was to use his newfound leverage to press Tony into him so that their clothed erections could rub against each other again, and when he beckoned Tony with a “C’mere, darling,” Tony shifted his head back only to have his lips caught in a messy, uncoordinated kiss.

“How about the server room? Remember what happened there?” James murmured between breaths, alternating between desperate kisses and gentle pecks.

Tony was too distracted with his own efforts to map out James’ mouth with his tongue, but he gave a “Kinda hard to forget,” before he returned his attention to the other man, deciding to lavish that sharp jawline with wet kisses this time around.

James was mouthing kisses just under Tony’s ear now and his voice dropped to a husky whisper. “Wanted to make you feel so good back then, wanted to touch you. But I’m glad we didn’t go further. Wasn’t the right time. But now…”

The world tilted for a moment and Tony found himself on his back, James pressed close against his right side. Hands no longer on Tony’s ass (he mourned the loss), James used the metal forearm to keep himself lifted over Tony, while the right hand raked up Tony’s worn T-shirt to give the hand access to the expanse of Tony’s bare abs.

“Wanna make you feel so good right now, sweetheart, wanna take care of you.” He dropped his forehead to Tony’s, his voice that same low, lust-filled growl. “Fuck, wanna know how good you’ll feel in my hand…” His fingers traced patterns up and down Tony’s stomach, finally stopping to play with the waistband of his pajama pants, not going any further. “I want this, but only if you do.”

God, Tony wanted this a month ago, back in that damn server room, so the question was entirely
unnecessary now, even if later, he would take the time to really think about this. Think about how amazing it was that they both cared enough to ask these questions in the first place.

But right now, all he knew was that he trusted James and he wanted him so badly he couldn’t think straight, so with his right hand on the back of James’ head and his left on the man’s neck, he pulled James down into another kiss and breathed a very eloquent “Fuck, yes,” into the man’s mouth before sealing their lips back together.

There was no more hesitancy in James’ movements after that, but he was still hellbent on driving Tony mad because all he did next was trail a feather light touch over the obvious erection tenting Tony’s pajama pants. The touch sent sparks of pleasure through him, but it wasn’t even close to the pressure Tony desperately needed. His hips rocked uselessly against the air and he whined his displeasure into James’ mouth, which prompted a smug little chuckle, the touch remaining that same teasing brush of fingers against Tony’s needy cock.

Tony pulled away to mutter a displeased “Didn’t you promise to make me feel good?”, but the words were swallowed up with another kiss. The metal forearm on the bed bore most of the super soldier’s weight and the metal fingers settled at the nape of Tony’s neck, mimicking the light touches of their flesh counterparts. James released Tony’s lips, kissing his cheek instead, and the right hand moved away entirely. Tony was about to protest said absence vehemently, but then he felt the hand dip underneath the waistband of his pants and his boxers and wrap around his cock and all he could do was let out a stuttered moan.

“Better?” James whispered against his cheek and got himself a breathless “Fuck, yes,” in response (Tony was going to stick to those two words until he got his higher brain functions back) and the rest of Tony’s attention zeroed in on the hand wrapped around his dick. The hand flexed around the shaft and then began to slowly move up and down, experimental tugs that became less and less hesitant and finally gave Tony the pressure and friction he desperately craved.

Tony wiggled his hips a little, trying to shimmy out of his clothes and James got the message, letting go for a second (Tony outright whined), to pull both the pants and the boxers down, leaving them somewhere around Tony’s ankles, before returning his grip to Tony’s cock and planting messy kisses on his cheek.

“Fuck, you feel amazing, Tony, so perfect,” the words spilled into his ear, accompanying the up and down strokes that were picking up pace. “Look at you, so good for me and all mine…” James stopped speaking to kiss him, sloppy and uncoordinated and perfect, all the while the movements on Tony’s cock never stopped. “See how perfect you fit in my hand, Tony? Fuckin’ made for me, sweetheart…” The dirty talk would’ve been enough, but then Tony nearly keened when James thumbed at the slit of his dick, smearing the leaking pre-come, which made the strokes smoother with the added lubrication, but any noise Tony might’ve made at that was eagerly swallowed up by James’ mouth.

When James finally let him breathe, all Tony could manage was an exhale of the man’s name over and over. James just nuzzled at his cheek, letting out a satisfied chuckle. “My clever Tony, so good for me,” he said again, twisting his wrist just right, the friction of his strokes so perfect that Tony was already nearing the edge. It had been so long, too fucking long, since anyone had actually touched him, so he would’ve gone off embarrassingly fast either way, but this wasn’t just some roll in the hay with a meaningless one-night stand. This was James, the man he was desperately in love with, the man he had dreamed about for months. The man he never thought he would have, but here they were, together, with James telling him, over and over, how much he wanted him, as that clever hand kept moving, squeezing at the base and then moving back up to thumb at the head of his cock.
Murmurs of “My Tony, my sweetheart,” were weaved in between whispers of Russian (or hell, some other language, Tony wasn’t coherent enough to differentiate) and the cascade of hushed endearments only intensified the physical pleasure and Tony knew he wasn’t going to hold out for very much longer.

He tilted his head so he could whisper a desperate “James, please,” against the other man’s lips and knowing exactly what Tony needed, James quickened the pace, the pre-come just enough to keep the friction from crossing over into painful, and when James kissed him again, thrusting his tongue into Tony’s mouth and matching the pace of the kiss with the movements of his hand, when the metal hand gripped the hair at the back of his head just right, when James whispered solnishko moyo into his mouth, Tony felt himself finally tumble over the edge, sharp jolts of pleasure spiking at the base of his spine as he finally came, back arching off the bed, toes curling and nails digging into James’ shoulder, and the soundless moan he let out was lost in their kiss.

James continued to milk his cock through the orgasm, although the movements slowed, until Tony whined, the touch now too much on his sensitive flesh. The kiss turned softer as well, lips moving against each other in an unhurried push and pull, just enough to keep contact while Tony came back down to Earth.

He was the one to pull away, dropping his head back against the bed and pulling in lungfuls of air through his nose. His heart was hammering away in his ribcage, but the rest of his body felt boneless, the perfect mix of relaxed and satisfied that could only be achieved after a terrific orgasm. He vaguely registered James using one of the blankets to clean him up, wiping some of the come off his stomach as well. A fleeting thought was spared for his t-shirt and the bedding, both now in desperate need of a wash.

He gathered just enough wits to blink open his eyes, in time to see James toss the blanket to the side and settle back against him, nosing at Tony’s jaw and absently playing with the hem of his shirt. The motion made Tony realize his pants were still around ankles, so he tried to reach over for them without having to get up, but his body still wasn’t fully cooperating. Thankfully, James surmised what he needed and with a quiet huff of laughter helped him get dressed before finding his way back to Tony’s side to kiss him again.

“I think it’s only fair,” Tony tried to say between languid kisses, “that I take care of you next, soldier.” To make his point clear, his hand snaked between them to palm at the erection that James’ pajama pants did nothing to conceal.

The kiss broke as James let out a barely suppressed moan, dropping his head back against the bed and pulling in lungfuls of air through his nose. His heart was hammering away in his ribcage, but the rest of his body felt boneless, the perfect mix of relaxed and satisfied that could only be achieved after a terrific orgasm. He vaguely registered James using one of the blankets to clean him up, wiping some of the come off his stomach as well. A fleeting thought was spared for his t-shirt and the bedding, both now in desperate need of a wash.

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“‘You gonna let me get a little taste of you, babe?’ Tony asked and when James nodded, too focused on rocking his hips into Tony’s hand to manage words, Tony pulled the hand away, earning himself a little needy whine—it was Tony’s turn to be a tease and he was going to savor it—and he used the hand to push against James’ shoulder until their positions were reversed and James was the one lying back on the bed with Tony above him.

He let James scoot back just enough to prop himself up on one of the pillows before he straddled the man’s thighs, but he had to stop for a moment, needing to soak in the image before him, commit it to memory so no matter what else happened, he would always have this.

James was underneath him, in nothing more than his sleep pants tented with the tell-tale erection. The
rest of him, perfect abs and the gorgeous expanse of that wide, muscular chest, was on full display (Tony’s hands itched to touch every bit of bare skin). The metal hand found its way to carefully grasp Tony’s knee, thumb tracing absent lines, for no other reason than to add one more point of contact between them. Its counterpart had a handful of the soft sheets, the grip loose for the moment, but Tony wondered if he could get James to lose just enough control to tear those sheets to shreds in his hand. The man’s eyes were half-lidded, and from here it was difficult to see the thin ring of blue that remained around the black of the pupils. That gaze never strayed from Tony, the super soldier using the moment to observe his lover as well, but then those lips quirked up, matching the one raised eyebrow.

“Like what you see, darling?” James drawled, prompting a huff of laughter out of Tony. Like didn’t even begin to cover it. He leaned over, propped up on his hands, so he could hover over the other man while James’ eyes followed his every move.

“You’re so damn gorgeous,” Tony replied simply and moved another inch closer to give James a peck on the lips. His mind predictably supplied And I don’t deserve you next, but he ignored that and instead said “Wanna get my hands on every inch of you,” and focused on how James felt and tasted when he went in for another, more thorough kiss.

There would be time for insecurities later (in fact, he was certain an anxiety attack or two were near inevitable once all of this finally registered), but right now, Tony was still riding the crest of the endorphin high, feel-good chemicals still buzzing pleasantly through his whole body, so it was easy enough to push the intrusive thoughts away.

A fantasy he had months ago made its way back into his mind instead. Appropriate, really, given that he woke up from that particular dream to the realization that he was in love with the man in front of him, and now, he finally had the chance to make that fantasy a reality.

When he released James’ lips, his focus first shifted to the man’s jaw, then to a trail of kisses he left down the column of the man’s neck. One more playful bite and he moved on to the left shoulder, stopping for a moment to take in the network of scars that never healed, even with the super soldier serum. The sight prompted the familiar ache in his chest, a constant companion whenever he thought about James’ past, but he tried not to dwell on it now and instead began reverently kissing those scars, right at the juncture where the puckered flesh met the unyielding metal.

James whimpered and the metal hand on Tony’s knee gripped it tighter when Tony’s lips touched the man’s skin. The calculations of force in Tony’s head were automatic, but knowing that James could crush his kneecap with ease did nothing to dissipate the sense of pleasure he got from the touch. Frankly, acknowledging James’ true strength and more importantly, his absolute control over it always had Tony’s blood running hot with desire (the list of Fucked Up Things Tony Stark Found Arousing was never short on entries).

After he kissed every scar to his satisfaction, he pulled away to catch the man’s gaze. He almost frowned when he noted the unguarded emotion there, like James was opening himself up, letting himself be seen, scars and all, and this time, the ache in Tony’s chest couldn’t be willed away. He was well aware how much it cost to be that vulnerable, how terrifying it was to let someone see your soft, unprotected underbelly like that.

It made Tony consider the possibility that maybe he wouldn’t be the only one devastated—broken—if this whole thing ended badly. Maybe he had just as much ability, just as much power to hurt James as he did Tony.

For a moment, the heat of the situation was forgotten and Tony leaned to press his forehead against James’ temple, letting his body settle on top of the man’s chest.
“You’re amazing, James,” Tony whispered, voice hoarse with sudden emotion, but he meant every word. It was his responsibility to take care of James too, to protect him and show him how much he was loved. “You’re so strong and brave, and I’m so damn happy that we ended up here, after everything. I want to make this work with you so badly…”

Tony didn’t mean to get so caught up in these sudden feelings, he really didn’t (there were much more pleasurable things he could be doing with his time), but there wasn’t much he could do against the swell of emotion, so he took a few seconds to just breathe. He managed to get himself mostly under control though when he felt fingers carding through his hair, trying to comfort him. Tony swore he was way better at this whole foreplay thing.

“Sorry, could’ve sworn I promised you a good time;” he tried for a joke, but when he pulled back, James’ expression was soft, eyes looking at him with concern.

The hand in Tony’s hair slid down to rest on his cheek. “You don’t have to do anything, honey, we can wait. All of this… It’s a lot to take in. Trust me, I know.”

Even now, James was trying to reassure him, trying to take care of Tony first (despite still sporting a very neglected erection that was hot and solid against the V of Tony’s pelvic bone). More than anything else, this snapped Tony out of his maudlin reverie.

He took a deep breath and pulled up the most flirty, come hither smile in his repertoire. “James, I’m fine. Just got sidetracked by… feelings for a second,” he made a show of rolling his eyes and then leaned in close, their noses bumping together, “but trust me, there is nothing more I want right now than to get my mouth on that gorgeous cock of yours and suck you off until you come down my throat. Capice?”

Dirty talk seemed to do the trick because James began to look a lot less concerned and a lot more aroused and Tony got his confirmation when James pulled him in for a searing kiss, all hints of softness and shyness gone this time, and the “Want to fill you up so badly, sweetheart,” that was whispered against his lips when they managed to pull apart made Tony shudder with need.

That was all the encouragement he needed to get back to work, although he still didn’t go for the main attraction right away. After all, there was still a whole gorgeous body for him to explore and Tony resumed his path, leaving wet, open-mouthed kisses on James’ chest. This time, James settled both of his hands on Tony’s head, playing with his hair and trailing fingers up and down his cheeks in absent caresses.

Tony didn’t hesitate to give a kitten lick to one of the dusky nipples when he reached it. It pebbled under the touch and he sucked, swirling his tongue around it just right to get James arching off the bed with a keen of Tony’s name, the grip in Tony’s hair tightening just a fraction. He repeated his ministrations on the other nipple, hoping for the same gorgeous reaction. He wasn’t disappointed.

He scooted back a bit, giving himself room to work and lavished kisses on those beautiful abs (they were as firm and defined and perfect as he had imagined). Nosing at the dark trail of hair that disappeared below the waistband, Tony glanced up through his lashes at James. The man was watching him intently, that gaze like a physical touch and it made Tony shiver. To be wanted so badly… His cock made a valiant attempt, a twitch of arousal, but Tony knew he wasn’t getting off again for a while (he was young at heart, but his body had seen better days). Besides, this wasn’t about him…

Hooking his fingers under the waistband, Tony pulled down the pajamas and the boxers without any further hesitation, finally freeing James’ cock. Jutting out from the patch of dark curls, the shaft was already full and leaking, with the head glistening with beads of pre-come. It was long and thick,
definitely bigger than Tony’s, but there was no room for macho male posturing, not when Tony’s mouth was watering at the sight. Fuck, James was perfect and with one more glance at the man, one more sly wink that made James bite at his lip, Tony firmly grasped the base of the cock (that earned him a needy gasp), and licked at the tip of the shaft. Once, twice, getting used to the musky taste, and then he finally took the first several inches into his mouth, flattening his tongue to accommodate the girth.

“God, Tony, you’re so gorgeous, just like this,” James stuttered out between breaths. “Love your mouth on me— ah, so damn hot, so fuckin’ perfect, honey.” It was becoming obvious that James was a talker in bed and Tony loved it. He soaked in every endearments, every bit of praise spilling out in those hoarse whispers, and he knew he’d never be able to get enough of that voice.

The fingers of James’ right hand threaded through Tony’s curls, the grasp tight, but not painful, and there was no real force behind that grip. James was letting Tony set the pace as he began bobbing his head up and down the heated length and Tony appreciated it. There was always time for something a little rougher later, but even Tony had to admit he’d have to work up to it. This wasn’t his first blowjob, but it had been years since he’d done this.

The vague recollections of a last time paled in comparison to what he had now.

He let his hand handle the base of the cock, firm strokes to provide the perfect amount of pressure, while he lavished the rest of his attention on the top half. He bobbed his head one more time, tongue pressing up at the underside of the shaft, before pulling off with a wet pop to mouth at the tip, tasting the pre-cum on his lips.

“You’ve no idea how long I’ve been waiting to do this,” Tony said before licking a long, hot strip down the length of the shaft.

“Oh, I have a pretty good idea, been, ah— been waiting just as long,” James gave him a shaky reply, but before he could say anything else, Tony took him back into his mouth and James dropped his head back with a desperate groan. His fingers flexed in Tony’s hair, as if looking for a better anchor to steady them, and it was obvious James was still worried about hurting him. Pulling off again, Tony said “I’m not made of glass, James, I won’t break. You can be a little rough with me, honey.” James lifted his head to watch him with a darkened gaze and Tony expected a protest, but his answer came in the form of a tighter grip, now nearly painful, but all it did was pool heat at the bottom of Tony’s belly. He wasn’t going to come again, sure, but he could definitely still enjoy this.

Tony didn’t need the beckoning tug and the pressure on his head to dive back in and this time, he took as much of James’ cock into his mouth as he could without triggering his gag reflex. It wasn’t the whole thing, but it was enough and it filled him up perfectly, his lips stretched around the thick shaft, tongue lapping at the underside. He breathed through his nose while sucking and swallowing around the heavy weight in his mouth.

When James began to roll his hips in short, aborted movements, desperately trying to control himself, but failing to stay still, Tony knew the man was close to the edge, so he sucked even harder, bobbing his head to match the thrusts, while his hand gave the base a firm squeeze and then trailed lower to play with the heavy balls.

“Honey, honey, m’so close,” James exhaled the words, head dropped back again and eyes closed, almost incoherent by now and lost to the world in his pleasure, and it didn’t take more than another few seconds before he arched off the bed with a stuttered moan, pleasure ripping through him as his cock pulsed. The spurt of come hit the back of Tony’s throat and he pulled off a few inches to avoid choking, but he managed to swallow most of it, keeping up the sucking motions until James was done and the cock began to slowly soften in his hand.
He couldn’t help licking his lips, catching a bead of come on his tongue, as he watched James come down from the high of his orgasm. All iterations of James were gorgeous in their own right, but there was something particularly beautiful at seeing the man undone with pleasure. Because of Tony.

To repay for earlier consideration, he tugged the boxes and pajamas back, carefully tucking in the spent cock, before crawling back over to settle at the man’s side, cupping one cheek in his hand so he could tilt James’ head to face him. It was obvious the touch helped shake off some of the post-orgasm fog because James smiled a blissful smile at him and turned over on his side to wrap his left arm around Tony’s waist and bring them close. A thigh tucked itself between Tony’s legs, intertwining them even further, and James nuzzled at his cheek, still trying to catch his breath.

“So, not too bad for the first round?” Tony couldn’t help but tease. “Gonna stick around for more?” The question wasn’t meant to be loaded, but there was that vulnerability in James’ eyes again, even as he tried to play it off with his own teasing.

“Oh, I’m definitely keeping you around, honey. With a perfect little mouth like that, I’d be crazy to let you go…” He pressed a kiss to Tony’s cheek. “But it’s not just about that…” His voice lost the teasing notes and his gaze slid down as he snuggled in closer. “I want everything, Tony. I want lazy Saturday mornings with you. I want late night dinners in the lab with you. Wanna go on that vacation you promised, wanna help you here at the Compound. Work, play, doesn’t matter. I wanna build a life with you.” Tony couldn’t help but smile at that, even if it was hard to swallow around the sudden lump in his throat. How did things turn so emotional so quick again?

James wasn’t even done. “And I want the bad things too. The nightmares, the fears. I want your anger and your hurt, all of it. Maybe— maybe if you share them with me, they won’t weigh on you so much anymore.”

Some part of Tony wanted to avoid these sort of confessions at all cost. That broken, jagged part was whispering at the back of his head, telling him to run, to build up his usual walls to keep the soft parts of himself safe, but for once, he resisted the urge. That compulsion got him into trouble before, ruined entire relationships, and he didn’t want to do the same with James. He wanted to do better this time.

He brushed away a lock of hair, tucking it behind James’ ear before dragging his knuckles across his cheek. “I want all of that too. Can’t— can’t even imagine what I’d do without you. You were missing for three days and I was a wreck.”

James gave him a soft, brief kiss on the lips. “Not gonna let anything come between us.” The voice dropped to a whisper. “You know that, right? There is nothing I want more than you and god help anyone who tries to take you away from me. Only you…” Another press of the lips. “Only you get to decide whether I stay or go.”

Tony closed his eyes for a moment, letting those words wash over him. Words wouldn’t cure him of all his issues— he had heard plenty of pretty words before— but this was so much more than he ever expected. He never thought he would have this, but here they were, and damn, but reality was so much better than any of his fantasies. James, warm and solid against him, with Tony secure in his embrace. Perfect, just like this.

Tony was determined to do better this time because all of this? This was worth it.

“Well, if I get to decide, then you better just park your gorgeous backside right here next to me, because you are all mine, James Buchanan Barnes, and I’m not letting you go.”
**Chapter Summary**: Tony wakes up to a brief panic, thinking the whole thing with James was a dream, but James quickly reassures him, and then gentle kisses turn into a little bit more as these two finally get to enjoy each other in a more physical sense. Although, the fun times keep getting sidetracked because these two can't go two minutes without feelings and professing their love for each other. It ends with James telling Tony that he wants to build a life with him and Tony telling James that he has no plans to let him go (see? these two are out of control with the fluff).

Third and final part of the fluff interlude should be posted on Saturday, but it might be delayed to Sunday or Monday.
Tony was sitting at the table, nursing his second cup of coffee and squinting at a holographic display of what looked like schematics of the Iron Man suit when Bucky brought over the two plates of sandwiches in his hands. He placed one of them in front of Tony with a quiet clank.

“Are you sure I can’t make you something else?”

“Nah, this is totally fine,” Tony managed to give him a dismissive wave with one hand while flicking his other hand at the hologram to make it disappear. Almost as soon as Bucky sat down in the seat next to him, Tony’s socked foot found his and began rubbing his ankle absently. Simple gesture, but it made warmth blossom in Bucky’s chest and it was the perfect complement to the heat of their earlier activities.

Tony turned a little so that he was facing Bucky and reached for the food. “Coffee, sandwich, and a gorgeous super soldier, what else do I need?”

“You said you wanted breakfast food.”

Tony hummed, the first bite of his sandwich already in his mouth. “Yeah, that was before I found out it’s already three in the afternoon.”

Bucky’s expression turned fond, and he shook his head with a quiet “Never too late for breakfast food,” before letting the subject go. Instead, he asked Tony about the schematics and Tony’s eyes brightened right away as he broke into explanations while the two of them worked their way through the sandwiches.

Discussion of suit upgrades somehow turned into Tony planning that vacation he promised what felt like a lifetime ago and he was currently waxing poetic about a private island, with gorgeous sandy beaches and sunshine for days.

Bucky nearly choked on his bite of the sandwich as the image of Tony, clad in nothing but swim trunks and lounging somewhere on a beach, rose unbidden in his mind. Beautiful expanse of that tanned skin, all those muscles on full display, the come hither smile…

Bucky had to dart his gaze away for a moment when he thought back to their earlier activities in the bedroom. This wasn’t the right time, but the Soldier unsurprisingly had little care for propriety, supplying him with memories of how good Tony felt against him, how perfectly they fit together. How gorgeous Tony looked when he came with “James…” on his lips—

“You with me, super soldier?”

Bucky looked up, blinking at Tony owlishly and desperately hoping the rush of heat to his cheeks wasn’t visible. He placed his sandwich down, realizing that he hadn’t taken a bite of it in a few minutes “Yeah, sorry. Just—thinking.”
“What could possibly be more interesting than listening to me babble on?” Tony teased and popped the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth, humming in delight. Simple turkey and avocado, but Tony loved the combination.

Bucky contemplated what to say for a second, letting Tony take a sip of the coffee in the meantime, but eventually decided the truth was too good not to share. “Our afternoon wake-up call comes to mind.” He made sure to look sufficiently coy, which must’ve worked because Tony’s eyes darkened.

“Oh, well, point proven.” Tony dusted his hands off to get rid of any remaining crumbs, and giving Bucky a wink, he grabbed at his shirt to pull him into a kiss.

Bucky came without a protest, parting his lips willingly for Tony’s. One of his hands used Tony’s leg as leverage so he could lean closer and they kept up languid kisses for a few minutes, but apparently that still left too much space between them because Tony broke the kiss just long enough to leave his own seat and climb into Bucky’s lap instead.

“Hi there,” Bucky said with a laugh, steadying Tony with both arms around the man’s waist. Tony’s response was a few more quick kisses, first to Bucky’s lips, then to his cheek. When Tony pulled away, he was brushing a hand through Bucky’s hair and Bucky soaked in that gentle touch, that open affection in Tony’s gaze. The way that man looked at him was mesmerizing and Bucky wanted to commit it to memory.

He let his forehead rest against Tony’s, savoring the closeness. No more dancing around each other, no more wondering what this gesture or that word meant. Bucky was never going to be hesitant in his words again, he decided. It cost him months with Tony and it could’ve cost them both a whole lot more. Words were tricky sometimes, whenever his mind forgot how to be that suave young man from the 40s. They’d get stuck in his throat, get lost in the fragments of his memories, but Tony always made it easier to find them again.

He ran the knuckles of his metal hand gently across Tony’s cheek before giving him a sly smile. “I want to see the Grand Canyon,” he declared suddenly and watched as Tony’s face went through a series of expressions and finally settled on confusion.

“Seriously? I’m offering you private beaches and piña coladas and you want to see a giant hole in the ground?”

“Always wanted to see it, since I was a kid,” Bucky replied with a shrug. “No reason we can’t do both, right?” He did actually remember wanting to visit the place, but honestly, he was mostly making the demand to see Tony’s exasperated reaction, eye roll included.

“Fine, fine. We’ll go see your hole in the ground. But I’m picking the vacation spots after that, alright?”

“Sounds good,” Bucky acquiesced, his smile matching Tony’s own and he gave into the soft, undemanding kiss when Tony leaned closer again.

“Can’t wait to see all of that with you, James…” The words were barely audible, more of breath against his lips between kisses, but James heard it all loud and clear. Their lips met one more time, the touch almost reverent, but then Tony pulled away and his expression turned playful.

“Now, can you stop being so damn handsome for like, five minutes? You are going to be way too distracting, I just know it. SI stock is going to plummet, Avengers are going to be running amok, all because I’m too busy making out with you to get any work done.”
Bucky made a show of considering the words, schooling his expression into mock seriousness and letting out a contemplative hum. “So that’s how the Winter Soldier is going to bring the Avengers down.” He let his smile turn wicked. “Yes, distracting Iron Man with my charm, it’s the perfect plan.” He followed up the words with a kiss to the tip of Tony’s nose, which made the man scrunch up his face and break out into smile. “No, that wasn’t dastardly enough, hold on, let me try again.”

A kiss to Tony’s cheek and then to the corner of his smile, all the while Tony was making a mock effort to push Bucky away, but really, it just ended up with Tony wrapping his arms around Bucky’s shoulders even tighter. Tony did manage a very severe glare for about a second before it was ruined by him trying and failing to suppress his laughter.

“Oh, I am on to you,” Tony retaliated with a kiss of his own and Bucky realized he was so damn in love with the way Tony’s eyes crinkled at the corners when the man smiled. “Been onto you for a while.” Another quick kiss. “Think you can take down the mighty Iron Man with all your sweet pet names and those gorgeous… soft… lips…” Each words was punctuated with a kiss, ending on a longer, deeper one that made Bucky shiver with need, with anticipation, with the incredible knowledge that this was his reality now.

“Not gonna lie,” Tony managed after they pulled apart, “you will probably—definitely succeed and I might not even complain.”

Bucky wrapped his arms around Tony a little bit tighter. “Yeah? Telling me I can have Tony Stark at my mercy any time I want?” He made sure to drop his voice down to that low, husky register that always made Tony’s pupils dilate, made his words stutter to a stop in his throat. The Soldier always loved picking up on these little signs of arousal. “Are you all mine, Tony? Mine to do with as I please? So beautiful like this, my pretty little mechanic, pliant and needy in my arms. Are you going to be good for me, prelest’ moya?”

Tony let out a quiet groan and his hands were clutching at Bucky’s shoulders, trying to find a better grip. Bucky couldn’t help but let out a satisfied chuckle at the reaction.

“You cannot say things like that and not follow up on them,” Tony muttered against his cheek, planting a kiss there before leaving a trail of them and coming back to Bucky’s lips. Another kiss and another muttered “Seriously, driving me up the wall here…”

Bucky moved his grip to Tony’s head, the metal hand settling at the nape of his neck and he deepened the kiss, not bothering with any more words because frankly, round two sounded like a brilliant idea. Just like this, Tony in his lap again, letting out those gorgeous sounds, small rolls of his hips evidence of his renewed arousal, and the way his tongue was mapping out Bucky’s mouth… It was perfect and all Bucky wanted was to—

“Oh for the love of—Really? At my goddamn dinner table?”

Bucky was glad for enhanced super soldier memory because the actual squeak Tony let out as he tried to scramble off Bucky’s lap (Bucky didn’t let him get very far) was a memory he was going to cherish. Bucky also didn’t have to turn around to imagine the simultaneously stern and exasperated expression on Rhodes’ face, nor the crossed arms or that intimidating stance.

Tony was trying to hide his face in Bucky’s shoulder now. “Oh my god, babe, it’s Rhodey,” he whispered, just loud enough for Rhodes to hear. “We are so going to die.”

Bucky just patted him on the back once and decided to finally let Tony go when Rhodes cleared his throat impatiently and the sound of his footsteps indicated he was walking over to the table.
Tony settled back in his seat, made an attempt to flatten out the nonexistent wrinkles in his shirt, and then scratched at his head sheepishly, giving Rhodes a guilty smile when his friend made it over to stand at the other side of the table. Bucky tried to school his own expression into something more respectful, but it likely failed given that Rhodes only glared at him harder.

For a moment, none of them spoke, but then somehow, Rhodes’ expression turned even more severe.

“I cannot believe you two are actually doing this now, after all the shit that went down, after all the shit I had to put up with, this is entirely unacceptable—”

Bucky didn’t let it show, but inside, the Soldier was already growling out threats. Bucky respected Rhodes, he really did, but if the man thought he could stand between him and Tony—

“—I mean, really, would it have killed you two to wait three more damn days?” Rhodes threw his hands up in the air with a frustrated grunt and proceeded to walk over to the coffee machine. Bucky followed the man’s movements with wide blinking eyes, certain Tony had the same exact expression.

What?

“There goes my hundred dollars, Alice is going to win the whole damn pool,” Rhodes muttered while pressing the buttons on the machine. Tony cleared his throat.

“Umm… The what now? Care to elaborate on that, Rhody Bear?”

Rhodes let a hip rest against the counter as he turned to face them. “We all had a pool going on when you two ding-dongs were going to get together for months now. Alice and I were the only ones still in the game. She had the last two weeks of September, I had the first two weeks of October. And what is today, Friday?”

“It’s the 27th of September, Colonel.”

“Thank you, Friday,” Rhodes said and then leveled them with an impressive glare, although now it was easy to see that there was no real wrath behind it. Most of Bucky’s internal alarms settled back into silence, although not entirely, given that there were still undercurrents of tension beneath the jokes and the banter. Unsurprising, given what had gone down in the past few days and just how protective Rhodes was of Tony.

Tony was shaking his head. “I cannot believe you guys. Betting on my love life like that? Honestly, I am offended—” Bucky could detect the hint of a smirk in the man’s voice. “Mostly by the fact that my own AI didn’t tell me! I could’ve gotten in on this!” He glanced over at Bucky and winked.

“You think we could’ve convinced someone to split the cash with us for a guaranteed win?”

Rhodey made an exasperated noise and then rolled his eyes before walking over to grab a mug from the cupboard. He stopped to fill it with coffee and then settled back into the relaxed posture by the counter. Tony himself got up and stretched as Rhodes watched him over the rim of the mug while taking his first sip.

Bucky remained in his seat, letting the two men figure out the tension between them first. Undoubtedly, Rhodes had a lot of things to say to him—rightfully so—but Bucky hoped seeing Tony in a good mood would soothe some of the Colonel’s ire.

“So,” Rhodes glanced over at Bucky, “I see the runaway has finally returned. Funny how Friday didn’t inform me of this.” That statement was aimed at Tony and Bucky watched as the engineer
gave the other man a shrug.

“I asked her not to. James is not a prisoner, he’s not my ward anymore, and you said I had a week before we had to change his security clearance. So…” Tony settled at the counter next to Rhodes, crossing one foot over the other and linking his hands over his stomach. His eyes darted from Rhodes to Bucky for a moment, and then they were back on the Colonel. “I know you’re the boss around here, Platypus, but I wanted to deal with this on my own.” His voice dropped to a quieter, more serious tone. “James wasn’t a threat, no one was in danger and this whole thing… This was for the two of us to figure out first.”

Bucky marveled at how long Rhodes maintained that stern expression when faced with Tony’s imploring eyes and soft smile. Finally though, the Colonel huffed and shook his head before taking another sip of his coffee. The smile on Tony’s face grew wider.

“Fine, but next time there’s an assassin on the loose, I’m calling the shots, got it?”

Tony clasped him on the shoulder. “You got it, chief. I will defer to you in all ‘runaway assassin’ matters from now on.” He looked back at Bucky. “But hopefully this particular one will stick around?”

Bucky didn’t hesitate to answer. “Oh, you’re not getting rid of me now, Tony. Took me a few days to realize it, but all my favorite things are right here at the Compound. Friday, nifty punching bags, the coffee. Oh, and those little cakes the chefs make down at the cafeteria. Didn’t have those on the run. Plus, ya know,” he made a show of shrugging carelessly, “the man I’m in love with lives here, so that’s another reason to stay put.”

Tony bit his lip in an attempt not to grin at Bucky, but the moment was ruined by Rhodes letting out a sound that bordered a displeased growl.

“Knock it off, you two.” He held up a finger. “All displays of public affection are banned from common areas, you got me? That includes entirely unnecessary declarations of love.” He let his hand drop and let out a sigh. “But at least now all that damn sexual tension will finally go away.” Tony outright snickered when Rhodes muttered a displeased “I fuckin’ hope.”

“Oh come on, Rhodey, we were not that obvious, were we?”

The look Rhodes gave his best friend spoke volumes and Bucky felt a strange compulsion to sit up straighter when that gaze turned on him and Rhodes poked a finger in his direction. “You know, I’d expect it from Tony, but you—you’re not very subtle for a master assassin spy.”

Bucky couldn’t help his chuckle. “Believe it or not, it gets exhausting having your defenses up all the time. I guess I felt I could let my guard down, at least when it came to Tony.”

The affectionate looked he and Tony shared did not go unnoticed by Rhodes, who ended it by shoving at Tony’s shoulder and making shooing noises.

“Alright, you, get out. I need to have a word with our former runaway here, so you just… go to your lab or something. Go do your actual work.”

“But mom,” Tony whined, making sure his voice was sufficiently annoying, “I don’t wanna be a grown-up.” In the face of an unimpressed Rhodes, Tony dropped the childish tone. “Fine, fine. I should probably go check on some things.” He pulled away from the counter to walk back over to the table and drop a kiss on the crown of Bucky’s head while giving his shoulders a squeeze.

“Remember what I told you, babe. He yells because he cares,” Tony said, prompting Bucky to look
up at him and smile.

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

Another squeeze to his shoulders and then Tony was walking out of the kitchen, but he spun around after a few steps to point a finger in his best friend’s direction. “Do not break my boyfriend, Rhodes!” Tony mock-threatened. “I happen to be very attached to every part of him so I want him back in one piece!”

Rhodes waved him away with a dismissive “Yeah, yeah,” and Tony spun on his heel, heading out of the kitchen and into the hallway, a cheerful hum of unfamiliar notes echoing behind him.

Bucky missed Tony’s presence instantly, but he took a silent, fortifying breath as he watched Rhodes make his way over and sit in the chair across from him. With a graceful move that would’ve surprised Bucky had he not personally experienced the brilliance of Tony’s tech, Rhodes swung his legs over to prop them up on the chair previously occupied by Tony.

Bucky schooled his expression into something neutral and let his hands rest easily on the marbled surface of the table, not letting himself give into the nervous movements he could feel itching beneath his skin. He expected this confrontation and a part of him welcomed it. Tony’s forgiveness was precious to him, but at times, it felt like he didn’t deserve it, at least not as easily as Tony was willing to give it.

Granted, deserving or not, Bucky wasn’t going to let Rhodes push him around. Bucky would graciously accept the anger over anything else, but anyone who wanted to separate him from Tony would have a very unhappy Winter Soldier on their hands.

He hoped it wouldn’t come to that though. Above all else, the one thing he and Rhodes shared was the desire to put Tony’s happiness first.

He let the other man take a sip of his coffee before he met that scrutinizing gaze head on.

Rhodes quirked an eyebrow in response. “So…” he let the word linger for a second. “Boyfriend, huh?”

Bucky’s lip twitched at hearing the moniker, but he didn’t smile outright, even if the warmth in his chest was intoxicating. He knew he’d enjoy the sensation, the entire concept of being Tony’s later though, when he wasn’t facing the proverbial cavalry

“S’what Tony called me,” he replied, but then decided that smart-ass remarks wouldn’t go over well here and added, “S’what I wanted to be for a while now.”

Rhodes gave a noncommittal hum before taking a sip of the coffee and placing the mug down on the counter top. “Yeah, took you two idiots long enough. Vision, that hopeless romantic, thought you two would figure things out days after that big family breakfast.”

Bucky gave into his amused snort. “In his defense, that was right around the time I realized I felt something more for Tony than just gratitude and friendship.”

“Yeah, well, Viz still has a lot to learn about human nature. Particularly just how stubborn and oblivious some of us idiots can be.” The pointed look in Bucky’s direction made it clear he was the stubborn and oblivious idiot. Frankly, it was hard to argue with that point.

“So,” Rhodes tipped his chin at Bucky, “I assume you got in sometime last night?”
Bucky hummed his confirmation, although he felt the need to amend, “Technically it was today? Sometime around four in the morning?”

Rhodes let his arms rest behind his head as he leaned against the chair and let himself relax into the position. “What’d you end up doing these past three days?”

“Hung around some abandoned parts of the city. I just needed a safe place to be alone, to think and get my head straight.”

“And is your head ‘straight’ now?”

“Yes, sir.”

Rhodes hummed before reaching for his coffee again, which gave Bucky a moment to think on the fact that there was still no yelling, but he supposed neither one of them was in a hurry.

“Are you hurt? Any injuries we need to deal with?”

The question startled Bucky out of his thoughts, surprising him. “Oh… Um, got my hand banged up a bit,” he waved his right hand, already perfectly healed, “but Tony patched it up after I came back.”

“Good. Did you eat? Sleep?”

Bucky furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, but then he remembered some of Tony’s earlier words. 

*Real family is not supposed to hold your mistakes against you indefinitely. They’re not supposed to abandon you when the going gets tough. No, they stick around for the good and the bad.*

*Family.* Surrounded by enemies for decades, by strangers for years, and by people he barely knew, but who called themselves “friends” for months… It was still a tough concept for Bucky to wrap his head around, but it was becoming easier to accept the fact that he didn’t *just* have Tony in his life now.

“Yessir. Made sure Tony ate and slept too.”

Rhodes actually smiled as he let out a chuckle. “I appreciate that. I know Tony’s a grown-ass man, but I’m pretty sure sometimes he forgets he’s not twenty-something anymore.”

Bucky smiled too, so familiar now with Tony’s tendencies to get lost in his work. Tony could take care of himself, Bucky had no doubt of that, but it didn’t mean Tony didn’t need some help along the way. They all did.

And he appreciated Rhodes’ concern, more than he could ever say, but the giant elephant in the room still needed to be addressed.

He cleared his throat, trying to signal a change in topic. “Listen, Rhodes…” He glanced up at the man to make sure he had his attention. Rhodes was giving him a hard-to-decipher look, but he was listening, so Bucky’s gaze moved back down to his hands. They were still steady, the need to fidget held at bay, but he let himself have this one weakness, knowing it would be easier to say the words without having to look Rhodes in the eye. “Before you, uh— before you start in on whatever it is you’ve been waiting to say to me— and believe me, it’s well deserved— I just want to say my piece first.”

When Rhodes didn’t interrupt, Bucky continued. “I’m sorry for what happened three days ago. I could make a bunch of excuses— I was out of my mind, I was scared, I made a mistake— it doesn’t
make a lick of difference. Fact of the matter is, I hurt Tony. Physically, emotionally. I hurt him and I am so sorry for that. It was the last thing I ever wanted to do. Tony, he’s—” these words were even more difficult, getting trapped in his throat, but he pressed on. “He’s very important to me. More than I ever thought possible. I want to do right by him. I apologized to him already, but I want to do better. I will do better.”

That was all the energy he had in him and he let out a weary breath, falling silent and letting Rhodes decide whether the apologies sounded sincere enough. Strangely, these heartfelt confessions felt a whole lot easier when he was making them while in the safe embrace of Tony’s arms.

After a brief, silent pause, he heard the other man sigh as well and put his mug down again. “You and Tony, man… You two love to ruin all of my fun, don’t you?”

Bucky had to glance up at the words and he took in the hint of a smile on the Colonel’s face. He quirked up an eyebrow in question.

Rhodes’ smile widened a fraction. “You know how hard it is to lecture someone when they’re already sorry for everything, sitting over there and giving you those damn doe eyes? Makes me feel like I’m about to kick a sad little puppy!”

Bucky suppressed his amused smile and tried to look even more pitiful, which earned him a glare.

“See? That right there! Stop that! I had a whole rant prepared, about irresponsible idiots and stupid-ass decisions, with plenty of ‘harm a hair on my best friend’s head and I will kill you’ type threats! Ugh, Tony does the same damn thing.” He made a show of rolling his eyes. “My righteous rage is wasted on you two idiots.”

Bucky finally did let the smile blossom, a soft, happy thing to match the warmth inside him. He was ready for the yelling, some part of him almost looking forward to the reprimands and the accusations, but he couldn’t deny this was a pleasant surprise.

“I really am sorry, Rhodes,” he supplied and the other man waved a dismissive hand at him.

“Yeah, yeah, I gathered from that extensive apology you just delivered.” Another sigh and something in Rhodes’ expression shifted. “Trust me though, if it were anyone else, I’d be ripping them a new one, doe eyes or not. But with you…” he shrugged. “I hate to admit it because I feel like a failure of a best friend, but the happiest I’ve seen Tony since the whole shit show last year is when he’s with you.”

Bucky was torn between mental preening and actual frowning. “Rhodes, you gotta know how much you mean to Tony. It was you here, picking up the pieces, taking care of him, when the rest of us were still struggling to pull our heads out of our asses. Tony loves you.” Bucky found that this was easier to discuss than his own feelings. “Whenever he speaks of you, I swear his eyes light up like stars.”

Rhodes snorted, trying to dismiss the words, but Bucky didn’t miss how some of his features softened. “Well, shit, I can say the same thing about the way he talk about you. That damn love-sick idiot, been pining for you almost since day one. It’s disgusting.”

Rhodes made a point of wrinkling his nose as he said the words, but there was no actual disgust behind the tone and the banter made Bucky relax even further. God, it felt so good to be here, surrounded by these people. Home was an even more illusive of a concept than family, but it was becoming more and more tangible, with each interaction, with each smile and word.
Rhodes wriggled his shoulders to get more comfortable again (anyone who wasn’t a super spy would’ve missed the near-imperceptible wince of pain), before he linked his hands behind his head, focused on the glass panes that led to the patio, and relaxed again. “You’re a decent guy, Barnes. I’m glad my initial assumptions about you were wrong, but I suppose a lot of those were painted by my interactions with Rogers, rather than with you.”

“I’m glad I had the chance to prove myself. On my own merit, that is.”

Rhodes nodded. “I am too. But good guy or not,” he stopped his observation of the Compound grounds to look over at Bucky, “I still have a duty. You know, as the best friend.”

“Right, right,” Bucky outright grinned, “something along the lines of, I hurt Tony and you will make me wish I were dead?” Even though Rhodes gave him an indulgent look in return, Bucky tried to temper his own amusement in favor of honesty. “I won’t though, I promise. I would never hurt him —”

“You will though.”

Bucky blinked in confusion at the interruption. “What? No, I told you, I would never—”

“Just listen for a moment, okay?” Rhodes held up a hand and Bucky acquiesced, even though he still wanted to defend what he said.

When he was sure he wouldn’t be interrupted, Rhodes continued. “You’re gonna hurt Tony. That’s a fact and it would be stupid of you to think otherwise. And guess what? Tony’s gonna hurt you. Hell, that’s true for any relationship, but with you two? With the amount of shit you’ve lived through? Not to mention, neither one of you are made of sunshine and rainbows. Trust me, you each have some pretty unappealing personality quirks.”

A pause for Rhodes to enjoy his now probably lukewarm coffee while Bucky mulled over the words. It looked like Rhodes still had more to say, so he kept the comments to himself for the moment.

“You two are going to hurt each other,” Rhodes repeated when he went on. “You, for example, are going to have one of your brooding episodes where you’re gonna lock yourself away and Tony’s going to misinterpret that and think he did something wrong. And then Tony, realizing all of the sudden that he let his walls down around you, is going to panic and try to push you away. And oh boy, does that man know how to hit you where it hurts when he wants to.”

“Are you saying this is a bad idea then? Me and Tony?”

“No, not necessarily. Like I told you, Tony is happy around you. Because of you. I’d be an idiot to stand in the way of that, not that I could even if I wanted to. You two will do whatever it is you want to do, the rest of the world be damned, at least when it comes to this. But my point— my point was that you will hurt each other. It’s inevitable. Accept it now and it’ll be easier to deal with when it does happen. Right now, you’re both riding the honeymoon high. That won’t last forever.”

“I know that.” Bucky wasn’t some naive idiot, he knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but he had to admit that the man’s words did put his initial promise into a new perspective. It rankled at him, to admit the fact that he would inevitably make mistakes when it came to Tony, but Rhodes was right. Neither one of them were perfect men. Far from it. “Let me amend what I said then. I won’t maliciously hurt him. I won’t—” he struggled with the words for a moment, but thinking back to Tony’s one real fear helped find the right thing to say. “I won’t choose something or someone else over him.”
Rhodes was often hard to read, even for Bucky, but the quirk of his lips was enough to see that
Bucky was on the right track.

Still, the man decided to prod further with his next question. “Even when your super pal Captain
America makes his disgraced return?”

The roll of his eyes was involuntary when Bucky replied. “Alright, do I have to clear this up with the
entire Compound? I’ve spoken to Steve twice since I’ve been here. He’s— he’s a stranger to me. I
still love that scrawny kid from Brooklyn, I really do, or at least the memories of him. But the man I
met years ago when SHIELD fell? I know he let the whole world burn for me and I feel like shit for
saying this…” It was easier to confess this to Rhodes than it would’ve been to Tony. “But I never
asked for that and I don’t know that Steve. I— I don’t know, maybe things would’ve turned out
differently if Tony hadn’t arranged this pardon…”

The sudden lump in his throat was choking him as he imagined, for a moment, a world where he
never came to the Compound, where Tony never forgave him. A world where they never fell in
love. “Maybe Steve and I would’ve rebuilt our friendship. But that’s not what happened. My
loyalty…” My heart, my soul. “It belongs to Tony now. I know it won’t be easy, especially when
Steve and the others are here, reopening all those old wounds, but I’m going to stand by Tony. Same
as you, Rhodes.”

He finished with a heavy breath, exhausted now from all these confessions and feeling suddenly self-
conscious.

Thankfully, Rhodes didn’t let the silence linger.

“Well, that’s good enough for me,” he said before sitting up straight and planting his feet back on the
ground. “But I’m holding you to that. You are my backup when shit hits the fan. Now, I think that
was enough emotional crap to last us both a lifetime, so how about we promise each other never to
do this again?”

“Deal, to all of that.” Feeling suddenly lighter— relieved— Bucky couldn’t help his smirk.
“Although, I gotta say, this was the most uninspiring— what was it called again? A shovel talk?”

Rhodes was in the process of standing up, but he stopped to glare at him. “Do you want me to kick
your ass, Sergeant?”

Bucky’s hands were already up in a placating gesture, even though he was grinning. “No, no, I’m
sorry. Forget what I said, I am properly chastised and cowed.”

The glare didn’t lessen. “Swear to God, you and Tony are made for each other. Made to be a pain in
my ass,” he finished the declaration with a huff and finally stood up. Bucky took that as his cue as
well and grabbed the empty plates to place them in the washer. When he was done, Rhodes was
checking his watch.

“Alright, unfortunately that emotional detour didn’t last long enough to make me miss this boring-as-
hell meeting I’m expected at, so I better head down there.” When Bucky walked back over, he was
surprised by a pat on the shoulder. “I am glad you’re back, man, and I’m glad you’re safe. Just don’t
make a habit of taking off like that again, huh? Tony’s an even bigger pain when you’re not around.”

Bucky’s smile was genuine and he gave Rhodes a mock salute as he walked alongside him. “You
can count on me, Colonel.”

***
Rhodes headed to the West Wing for the aforementioned meeting and Bucky, having decided he’d been away from Tony long enough, made his way down to the lab. Friday informed him that Tony was in the middle of some metal work and Bucky was greeted by the pounding bass of the noise Tony liked to call “music” and the man himself, down to a black tank and a metal plate over his face, pounding away at a piece of metal with a hammer. Tony acknowledged him with a wave, obviously informed of his presence by Friday, but he continued the work, so Bucky let himself admire the scene for a moment, taking in the gorgeous sight. Tony may have been smaller and leaner than him, but he was undoubtedly fit, those beautiful muscles straining and flexing under the physical demands of Tony’s work.

The heat that pooled in Bucky’s belly was expected, the Soldier feeding him images of Tony bent over that work bench untimely, but not entirely unwelcome, but Bucky mostly ignored all of that for the moment. He chose instead to settle on the ratty couch in the corner of the lab while Tony finished up.

Despite always being alert of his surroundings, courtesy of his training and the Soldier, Bucky was still lulled into a comfortable, relaxed state, so much so that it took him a moment to blink his eyes back open when he heard the music stop. The light nap and the comfortable haze of sleep was tempting, but there was no way Bucky wouldn’t have responded to the light brush of fingers at his temple.

He sat up, swiping at his eyes to get rid of the remaining sleep lingering there, and looked up at Tony, who was standing in front of him. The engineer’s smile was fond and his hand hadn’t stopped its caresses, tucking a lock of Bucky’s hair now, which he was sure looked like a tousled mess at this point.

“You with me, sleepy head?” the tone was indulgent too and Bucky had to smile, first turning his face into the touch and then planting a light kiss on Tony’s palm.

“Just closed my eyes for a second, waiting for you.”

“Sorry, I just needed to finish a few things up, otherwise I’d have to restart the whole process over again.”

“S’alright, I didn’t mind.”

Tony’s eyes were sparkling with that familiar light that meant Tony was excited about his work. “Good news though, the next Iron Man suit is going to look kick-ass. I’m thinking black and gold for ultimate badassery.”

Bucky had no doubt it would look amazing and he wanted to engage Tony in the conversation, ask more questions about the work Tony loved, but some part of him was still in that hazy state of sleep. He wondered whether the exhaustion and the emotional toll of the past several days were finally catching up with him.

Conversation could wait, he supposed, so he gave Tony a smile as an answer before letting his head rest against Tony’s midsection, needing to be close. Tony’s hands were carding through his hair a moment later and Bucky wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist, nuzzling at the soft, worn material of Tony’s shirt.

Some of this sudden weariness manifested itself in one long, drawn-out sigh and for a moment, all Bucky did was focus on the way Tony felt against him, the steady breathing of the man, the tangible warmth. Home.
“Everything alright?” Tony finally asked after a few moments of silence and Bucky just nodded in response, burrowing his face further into Tony’s shirt and tightening his grip on him, but while he was only seeking comfort for comfort’s sake, Tony must’ve misinterpreted the gesture because his tone shifted to something more worried. “Hey, I’m serious, you okay? Wait— Did Rhodey say something?” Tony sounded affronted now, but before Bucky could refute the assumption, the other man went on, unconsciously tightening his own grip on Bucky’s shoulders. “I swear to god, if Rhodey was an actual ass to you for no good reason, I am going to have a hell of a talk with him. He has no right accusing you of anything, it wasn’t your fault—”

“Tony, hey, hey,” Bucky finally got a word in edgewise, pulling away to look up at the man. “Everything’s fine. Rhodes was great. Didn’t even yell at me, I was almost disappointed.”

The furrow between Tony’s brows turned more confused than angry. “You sure you’re alright?” he asked and then slowly lowered himself to his knees so he could be eye-level with Bucky. Tony’s hand was cradling Bucky’s face and because Tony still looked worried, Bucky gave the man a reassuring smile.

“I am. Rhodes is a great man, you’re lucky to have him as a friend. I’m just— just feeling a little tired all of the sudden, that’s all. Just needed to have you close.”

Tony’s features smoothed out further into something more relaxed. “We did have a couple rough days, huh?”

Bucky hummed his agreement, but anything else he would’ve said was lost to Tony’s lips when he was gently pulled into a kiss. Just a press of lips this time, warmth and comfort with none of the familiar heat from before, but it was perfect in its own right. Even the Soldier himself enjoyed the touch, keeping the usual lustful thoughts at bay.

Bucky didn’t want to break the quiet that settled between them, but eventually he had to pull away if only to have Tony get off the cold, hard floor of the lab. The man responded with a muttered “M’not that old, I can deal,” but he acquiesced with a huff and made himself comfortable in the small space between Bucky and the end of the couch, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s middle and swinging his legs over to rest them in Bucky’s lap.

“Comfortable?” Bucky murmured, arm around Tony’s shoulders and the man’s head fitting perfectly under his chin. The engineer responded with a slight wiggle, getting himself better situated before sagging against Bucky and letting out a sigh of his own.

“Got my very own super soldier pillow, I can’t complain,” Tony said, the humor in his voice infectious, pulling a pleased smile out of Bucky. Thankfully, the exhaustion that settled in him wasn’t the heavy weariness he was familiar with. No, this was something peaceful and delicate, something that made him want to close his eyes and let the hum of the lab soothe him back into sleep, let himself sink into the warmth of Tony’s presence beside him, hale and whole, and his.

Bucky realized his metal hand was tracing lines up and down Tony’s shin when the man let out a laugh against his collarbone and wiggled his foot.

“If you keep doing that, I’m gonna end up falling asleep too.”

The caresses didn’t stop, except for a moment to give Tony’s ankle a gentle squeeze. “A nap sounds real nice right now, to be honest.”

Tony hummed. “I guess I could use a bit more rest,” he said, but contrary to his words, he still felt the need to ask a few seconds later, “So, what did you and Rhodey talk about? Come on, spill.”
“This and that,” Bucky replied, smiling against the crown of Tony’s head. “Mostly about how nosy you are.”

His smile didn’t vanish even when Tony let out an indignant noise and jabbed an accusing finger into his ribs. He made a show of trying to wriggle away from the touch, but only for a second, before pulling Tony even closer to him instead.

“Unbelievable,” Tony maintained the indignant tone, but the rest of him was still relaxed and pliant against Bucky. “Now I have Pep, Rhodey and you giving me a hard time. That doesn’t seem fair.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Rhodes has declared me just as big of a pain in his ass as you are.”

Tony’s response was a mirthful snicker. “Oh man, you should’ve seen his face when he came into the kitchen and saw us making out. I haven’t seen that particular mix of exasperation and disappointment since he caught me in a very compromising position circa 2003 at a very rowdy New Year’s Eve party.”

“Please spare me the details,” Bucky said, not needing the Soldier riled up by images of Tony with other people. Sure, Tony wasn’t a stranger to casual relationships, and Bucky had no problem with the man’s past, but the Soldier’s possessiveness was a fact—his possessiveness, if he were being honest with himself—but it had no place in the peaceful little bubble they currently existed in. “Shouldn’t we have Friday alert the poor man next time?” he asked instead.

“Hell no, that would ruin all of the fun! I say, we turn it up a notch and just start making out anytime Rhodey is about to come into the room.”

“You are terrible,” Bucky declared with a laugh, “and I’m pretty sure you are trying to get me killed. Whatever soft spot that man may have for me is not going to save me from his wrath for long.”

Tony responded by craning up just far enough to plant a loud kiss on Bucky’s cheek before settling back. “Don’t worry, babe, you have Iron Man to protect you now.”

“Mm-hmm, sure, I’ll hold you to that the next time Rhodes gets that gleam in his eyes.”

Tony chuckled, running an absent hand over the metal bicep of Bucky’s arm, the pads of his fingers brushing against the metal plates.

“Still can’t believe they had a pool going, those bastards. Were we really that obvious? I feel like we weren’t that obvious.”

“I guess we were. M’just a little sad it took the two of us this long to figure it out.”

He felt Tony shrug against him. “We got here eventually, didn’t we? Better late than never.”

Tony’s words prompted an earlier thought, an image of a world where Bucky and Tony never reconciled. It was involuntary, but his next breath came out a bit shakier, struggling past the lump in his throat.

“You alright?” Tony asked, observant enough to feel the bit of tension.

“Yeah, I am. I just—” he changed his mind and decided to go with a better sentiment. “Thank you, Tony.”

“What for?”
Putting the answer to that question into words felt like an impossible task, so Bucky went for the simplest thing. “For giving me a second chance.”

His answer was apparently enough to get Tony to sit up so he could look at Bucky. The man’s brown eyes were questioning, almost worried again, and Bucky cursed himself for this maudlin shift in conversation.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on in the head of yours?” Tony asked, his tone gentle and patient, imploring Bucky to speak honestly.

“When I was talking with Rhodes, I thought about what my life would be like if I hadn’t—if you hadn’t made the pardon possible.” He looked away, finding it hard to say this while looking into those brown eyes, full of understanding, compassion, and love. “Where would I be now, if you had felt just a little less merciful? You had every right to let me rot in hell… Would I— would I still be in cryo?” He let out a watery laugh. “Would’ve been for the best because I’d still have the triggers. I’d still be at others’ mercy, I wouldn’t be getting better, I wouldn’t have anything—”

“James, hey, come on,” Tony interrupted gently, rubbing at Bucky’s biceps to comfort him. “Don’t do that to yourself. These what-ifs, all they do is hurt you. We can’t really know what life would’ve been like if we had done this or that, we just can’t. Who knows, maybe you would’ve been better off. T’Challa’s a smart guy, he has some of the most brilliant people at his disposal. They would’ve taken care you. You—you would’ve had Steve and the others…”

The last part was said with a heavier, almost resigned sort of tone and Bucky knew how much it cost Tony to admit something like that. A part of Tony probably believed the words he just said. But he was wrong.

Bucky pulled away and brushed the metal knuckles over Tony’s cheek and then down over the defined jaw. “No matter what, I wouldn’t have been better off.” He made sure he met Tony’s gaze this time. “I wouldn’t have had you.”

Almost bashfully, Tony smiled, but his gaze darted away for a moment. A reminder to Bucky, yet again, to vocalize as often as he could manage the importance of having Tony in his life. The importance of this new, amazing thing between them.

“Well, doesn’t matter either way,” Tony finally shrugged and then leaned back against Bucky’s shoulder. “All we have is the here and now, for better or worse.”

Bucky let himself relax against the couch again and pressed his cheek against Tony’s hair. “Here and now looks pretty good from where I’m sitting.”

Tony let out a big yawn, barely managing to cover it up with his hand, before humming in agreement. “At least for a little while longer…” he added after a beat.

Bucky’s fingers began carding through Tony’s hair, hoping it would lull the man into rest and distract him from thoughts of the more uncertain future (that yawn was a clear sign Tony still had a lot of sleep to catch up on). “I think we can do better than a little while. I have a feeling we’ll make this work, out of sheer stubbornness if nothing else.”

There was a huff of laughter, but it sounded like Tony was already halfway to sleep and when Bucky glanced down, he saw Tony’s eyes closed, features relaxed again, and mouth stretched into a small, tired smile.

Tony didn’t say anything else and Bucky let his own eyes close, letting the world around him fall
away, so all he had to focus on was Tony’s warm weight against him. He was almost fully back into that sweet haze of sleep again when he heard Tony’s quiet, sleepy murmur.

“M’glad you’re finally home, James.”

Bucky pressed a kiss into Tony’s hair and smiled. “So am I.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this fluffy break because angst and drama (and actual plot) return when I come back! Don't we have some disgraced criminals to bring back home? A witchy witch screwing with Tony's mind? Some other terrible plot twist I haven't thought of yet??

All that and more, after the hiatus. See you in four weeks! <3
“You could at least help, you know, instead of taking pictures of me every time I turn around,” Tony’s voice filtered out of the large walk-in closet where he disappeared a minute ago. It wasn’t hard to imagine the distinct pout that went with that tone, but it did nothing to move Bucky from his spot on Tony’s bed where at the moment, he was lounging and swiping through the photos he managed to take earlier.

“S’not my fault you look so damn handsome on film,” Bucky shouted back, earning himself a muffled snort. “Plus, I was helping and then you told me I was messing up your bizarre organizational system. Doll, you just need a few shirts and pants. You’re moving down the hall, not across the country.”

“Yeah, but it’s always such a drag when I have to stop by here,” Tony countered as he walked out of the closet with an armful of shirts, ties, and jackets. All were unceremoniously dropped into one of the empty boxes on the floor. “I spend all of my nights in your quarters anyways, might as well have some of my things there.”

Bucky knew it was silly to feel butterflies in his stomach at those words, but he couldn’t help it. Even though they’ve been living in the same place since the very beginning, this still felt like Tony was moving in with him. Silly or not, there was a delicious warmth in his chest, one that transformed into heat when those brown eyes looked at him and narrowed, matched by a sly smile.

“You know what, I take it back. You look amazing sprawled over there on my bed.”

“Is that right?” Bucky tried to look sufficiently coy. “It’d be even better if you joined me.”

Tony appeared to seriously contemplate that offer, but the put-upon sigh he let out wasn’t a good sign. “I gotta get this done, babe. Rhodey’s been meeting with Accords members all day, he’ll want to debrief and then Pepper’s been on my ass for weeks about that new upgrade— seriously, I’ve been slacking—”

Bucky interrupted Tony’s distracted ramblings by hopping off the bed and promptly wrapping his arms around the man. Tony gave him an indulgent look in return, but the excuses didn’t resume and Tony’s own arms were already snug around Bucky’s shoulders, hands scratching absently at the back of his scalp. God, he loved when Tony did that and he would purr if he could.

He also loved the way Tony smiled at him when they were like this.

“I know you’re just trying to distract me,” Tony grumbled despite the smile, but made no effort to escape the embrace. In fact, he pressed in closer a second later, their lips just a hair breadth away, and then they were kissing, unhurried and tender and sweet.

It had been weeks since Bucky came back home, seeking Tony’s forgiveness once again and finding
so much more. Weeks since all of this had become a part of his life. Kissing Tony, touching him, being around him, with him. It was how Bucky’s days began now and how they ended.

He loved all of that too, more than he could ever say, and he couldn’t help but smile against Tony’s lips at the reminder of just how lucky he was.

“Damn, your distraction efforts are very effective,” Tony murmured against his lips, causing Bucky’s smile to turn wider. Another kiss, deeper and more demanding this time, before Tony finally pulled away with an amused huff. “Okay, okay, I really do want to get this done. Here, just take whatever’s in those drawers,” he gestured at the dark, polished dresser, “and put it in a box. It’s all socks and ties and crap.”

Bucky briefly wondered whether there would be space for all of this in his quarters, but he decided they would manage somehow. Maybe this would mean Friday would finally stop filling his closet with new clothes that mysteriously appeared there every Friday like clockwork.

Bucky obeyed Tony’s order while the other man went to the other side of the room to rifle through what looked like a pile of old magazines and an assortment of tech gadgets. The first drawer Bucky opened did in fact contain a sea of brightly colored socks (he noted with no small amount of amusement that a good number of them were Avengers-themed) and as requested, he scooped them all up and dropped them into the nearest box.

When he opened the second drawer, he was met with folded up t-shirts, but as he grabbed a handful, a piece of paper fluttered down to the floor. He tossed the shirts into the box and then bent over to grab the paper. For a man who loved all things digital, Tony had a strange habit of leaving scribbled equations and schematics on stray pieces of paper all over the Compound. This must’ve been another late-night idea that Tony had to get out of his head and onto paper, Bucky decided, and he was about to toss the thing into the pile of other random odds and ends when something awfully familiar caught his eye.

Steve’s handwriting.

He stopped, the piece of paper—a letter?—still in his hand, and before his brain caught up, his eyes had already scanned the first several lines.

_Tony, I'm glad you're back at the compound. I don't like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself. We all need family._

Bucky forced himself to look away as soon as the words registered. He cleared his throat, some of the earlier warmth suddenly dissipating.

“Umm… Tony?” he tried to get the man’s attention.

“What, did you find my porn stash? Swear I haven’t had one since nineteen ninety—” Tony trailed off when he turned around and realized what Bucky was holding. “Oh. Shit. I forgot that was there…” When his eyes met Bucky’s, the earlier mirth was gone too.

Bucky made a deliberate show of folding the letter in half and placing it on top of the dresser. “I only saw the first few lines, I didn’t read it.” Tony gave him a tight smile, but then looked down, watching his fingers play with the tie in his hand. Obviously this was awkward, and he should’ve just dropped the subject, but Bucky couldn’t help the question that slipped out. “Steve wrote you a letter, after—” he swallowed back the memories, “after that fight?”

Tony nodded and then walked back a few steps to sit down on the edge of the bed. “Yeah. The letter
was him apologizing.” The dejected slump of those shoulders made Bucky’s guilt rear up. He shouldn’t be bringing this up.

“Sorry, it’s none of my business. You’re allowed to have your privacy, Tony. Secrets of your own.”

Tony just shrugged and then looked up at him for a moment. “What if I don’t want secrets between us though?” His eyes were back on the tie again, fingers running back and forth over the silk material. “Secrets were kinda the thing that fucked up everything last time. Not that—” he gestured towards the piece of paper, “not that the letter is really a secret. I just— hadn’t thought about it in a long time.” Tony seemed momentarily surprised by his own words, but then he was gesturing at the letter again. “You can read it, if you like. No classified state secrets in there or anything. He even sent me a phone to go along with it.”

Bucky’s brows furrowed in confusion, so when Tony tilted his chin at the opened drawer, he rummaged for a second and found the phone underneath another pile of shirts. He examined it, which only caused his frown to deepen. The heavy piece of plastic was nothing like the phones everyone used here. Hell, it was nothing like the phones anyone used nowadays.

He scratched at his chin. “Can’t tell if Steve was just being obtuse or deliberately offensive by sending you this piece of junk.”

Tony let out a snort. “That’s exactly what Rhodie said. He’s convinced this is some grand insult.” Another shrug. “I’m just glad he didn’t send me a radio or something.”

Bucky placed the phone next to the letter on the dresser and then hesitated, unsure of his next move. A part of him wanted to let this go, but he also couldn’t deny that he was curious about what Steve had to say. He never realized Steve had any contact with Tony after Siberia, especially not one that involved an apology.

“It’s okay,” Tony said and Bucky glanced over at the man. “You can read it.” The way he looked when he said that, fiddling with the tie, slumped in on himself— well, he looked like he was ready for Bucky to walk out on him or something.

A spark of frustration came to life somewhere in the back of Bucky’s mind— dammit, I told you I wasn’t going to leave you, Tony— but he quickly extinguished it, reminding himself that Tony’s insecurities about their relationship had little to do with Bucky himself. Rather, it was the fault of those who chose to throw the man’s kindness back in his face and betray Tony’s trust, over and over. There were only so many times you could let yourself get burned before deciding to avoid fire altogether.

Unsurprisingly, Rhodes was right. They were both damaged men with complicated histories and touchy subjects that sometimes brought out the worst in them. For Bucky, Hydra topped the list and for Tony, it happened to be Steve. They would both have to learn to deal with each other’s issues and Bucky was aware that how they handled these situations would likely determine the success of their relationship.

He needed to remind himself that the roadblocks were temporary, while their feelings for each other were far more resilient and could outlast the stumbling blocks. Not to mention, Tony had always been patient and kind and infinitely understanding with Bucky, even before they were a couple. It would cost Bucky very little to return that same sentiment.

He glanced at the letter again. It didn’t matter what Steve had said. It wouldn’t change how Bucky felt about Tony and it certainly wasn’t going to stop him from joining Tony on the bed after he was done reading so he could demonstrate to the man, in the clearest way possible, that Bucky had no
intention of ever leaving him.

The letter was in his hand a moment later and he picked up where he left off.

*We all need family. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine. I've been on my own since I was 18.*

Bucky tried not to visibly scowl at the letter, but he had doubts as to his success. It didn’t help that he could practically *feel* the Soldier rolling his eyes at the piece of paper and they were only one line in.

*What the hell, Steve?* he wanted to say, but if he couldn’t control his expressions, he could at least keep his mouth shut for the moment. *The Avengers are yours?* The majority of the Avengers were with Steve! Was Steve referring to a crippled Rhodes, a heartbroken Vision, and a teenaged Peter, whom Tony regretted dragging into the fight from the get-go?

And that didn’t even address the moment of resentment Bucky allowed himself on his own behalf because *on my own since I was 18?* What the hell was Bucky, chopped liver? His memory may have been shit, but he distinctly remembered the old Bucky telling Steve at his mother’s funeral that he’d always be there for him.

Well, that was a terrible start and unfortunately, skimming down further didn’t brighten his mood at all.

*I never really fit in anywhere, even in the army. My faith's in people, I guess. Individuals. Unless they were named Tony Stark, of course. Again, Bucky only spared a moment’s thought to the fact that he and the Howling Commandos *loved* Steve and willingly followed him into battle over and over, regardless of risk. Apparently, Steve didn’t feel quite the same way.*

And I'm happy to say that, for the most part, they haven't let me down. Which is why I can't let them down either. Locks can be replaced, but maybe they shouldn't.

Bucky’s frown turned even more severe and he had to consciously control his grip to avoid ripping the paper apart. *For the love of god, Steve, just admit that you were selfish in your actions. You were tearing the world apart for me, not for the people.* Frankly, Bucky wasn’t even sure what Steve was trying to say with that last line, but he kept reading.

*I know I hurt you, Tony. I guess I thought by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but I can see now that I was really sparing myself, and I'm sorry. Hopefully one day you can understand. I wish we agreed on the Accords, I really do. I know you're doing what you believe in, and that's all any of us can do. That's all any of us should.*

“Tony, I hate to correct you, but *this,*” Bucky waved the piece of paper, trying and failing to tamper down the anger building up in his chest, “this is not a damn apology. Just because he says the words ‘I’m sorry’ in here sure as hell doesn’t make it one.”

Tony was frowning when he looked up. “He tried, I guess,” he offered lamely, causing Bucky to grit his teeth. The Soldier was unsurprisingly infuriated by the whole thing, having no qualm about listing all of Steve’s transgressions against Tony and all the different ways those transgressions could then be repaid.

Bucky left the Soldier to his plotting and glanced back to that last line instead.

*So, no matter what. I promise you, if you need us, if you need me, I'll be there.*

Well, if nothing else, that sure sounded like the Steve Rogers of today.
“Goddamn condescending is what this is, the whole damn letter,” he fumed, but Tony’s frown just turned more confused, so Bucky took a deep breath and tried to explain. “He’s not apologizing for hurting you, he’s sorry because you didn’t agree with him. This is all just excuses, he never once admits that he’s wrong.” He knew he was on the verge of ranting, but the words kept spilling out. “He barely admits that he hurt you by lying, but then he just urges you to understand like it’s your damn responsibility to make him feel better. It’s not and he has no right to shift that back onto you.” He gestured with the letter again. “When exactly did he send this?”

The slump of Tony’s shoulders became even more pronounced as a weary sigh escaped him. “Right around the jailbreak.”

Goddamn it. “So just weeks after Siberia?”

“Yup,” Tony popped the “p”, trying and failing to sound nonchalant. “Was barely out of the hospital. Black eye was still healing,” Tony offered with a crooked smile, which only highlighted how much he still struggled with the events that tore through his life a year ago.

Bucky’s heart sank at the sight and the hand holding the letter dropped to hang loose at his side. Suddenly, that letter wasn’t even that offensive anymore because a few insensitive words couldn’t compare to what Steve and Bucky both did to Tony back then. He could remember, with unfailing clarity, every moment of that fight. Hit after hit, metal clashing against metal and the obscenely loud echo reverberating through the bunker. Teaming up with Steve to beat down a man who just witnessed the death of his parents. A man who was grieving and broken and hurt. A man who, despite his own grief, despite the betrayals, despite everything, still had enough mercy to let both of them live.

And then they just left him, injured and alone, in a frozen bunker in the middle of nowhere.

The guilt, as familiar as an old friend, clawed at his heart and he didn’t realize he clenched his fist around the letter until it was too late and the paper was a crumpled up ball in his hand. He forced his hand to unfurl, staring dejectedly at it.

“James, come on, don’t go making that face. You are not allowed to make that face, honey.”

Bucky gave Tony a look as the man stood up. “What face? I don’t have a face,” he said, trying to deflect, but Tony had the preternatural ability to see right through him.

“You do and it’s the Everything Bad is My Fault face. Come on,” Tony encouraged, “what are you thinking in that head of yours?”

Bucky made an attempt at straightening the damn letter back out. “All of this, even this stupid letter… This is all because of me. If it weren’t for me, Steve would’ve never kept your parents’ death a secret, he wouldn’t have run off at the first opportunity—”

“James, we have no idea what Steve would’ve done—”

“Tony, you can’t tell me things wouldn’t have been different! The Avengers wouldn’t be broken up, Germany and Siberia would’ve never happened, and Steve wouldn’t be sending you half-assed apologies. I just—” he dragged in a breath, looking out one of the windows. The overcast skies barely registered in his mind because all he could see was the Iron Man suit lying prone on the cold, frost-covered floor. “Sometimes I wish I would’ve just died on the Triskelion—”

Two hands on his cheeks forced his head to turn back and suddenly all he could see was Tony’s furious brown eyes.
“Say something like that one more time and I’m putting on the suit just so I can kick your ass,” Tony growled and then shook Bucky’s head for good measure. “Maybe that will knock some damn sense into you!”

Bucky wasn’t sure why he was still trying to debate this point, but the words slipped out on their own accord. “If it weren’t for me, the Avengers would still be together. You’d still have your family.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed and the anger lurking there was obvious, but he didn’t let go of Bucky’s face and Bucky had to admit he was grateful for that. Tony’s hands were warm against his skin and it kept him from drowning in the ever-present guilt.

“What did I tell you about torturing yourself with ‘what-ifs’, hmm? It’s pointless and it gets you nowhere. Besides, the Avengers were broken long before you ever came into the picture, James. Hell, if you asked most of them, they wouldn’t hesitate to blame me for breaking the team apart.”

Bucky opened his mouth to argue, to tell him the others were wrong, but the man didn’t give him a chance.

“Whether or not that’s true, it doesn’t matter. What matters are the facts. We were a shitty team. Our personalities clashed, our leadership styles didn’t match, and there was zero trust between us. The writing was on the wall for a long time, but some of us were just too blind to see until it was too late.” Obviously referring to himself, but Tony didn’t elaborate. “I have no way of knowing how things would’ve turned out had you— had something happened to you in D.C.” Anger was becoming desperation as those expressive eyes pleaded with Bucky. “The only thing I can be sure of is this,” Tony stopped and drew him in for a kiss. Bucky’s eyes fell shut and even in the midst of this emotional back-and-forth, the way Tony kissed him made the rest of the world disappear, if only for a moment.

“All I know is that we’re here now, together,” Tony whispered against Bucky’s lips when he pulled away, “and I’m having a really hard time regretting that.” Another soft kiss. “And as far as everyone else? Last time I checked, I do have a family. We both do, by the way. Maybe things didn’t turn out as planned, so what? I’ve always been good at adapting to change and so have you.”

Tony’s eyes were a warmer brown now, full of that patience Bucky knew so well. Some of his guilt dissipated as he let out a long exhale and drew Tony closer to him, wrapping his arms around the man’s narrower shoulders. He hid his face in Tony’s hair, breathing in the familiar spicy scent of Tony’s shampoo. It soothed him, down to his very core, to have Tony close like this. Odd though, how he began this conversation thinking he would be the one to alleviate Tony’s worries, only to end up battling his own guilt instead.

Bucky was so lost in his own thoughts that he almost missed the muffled “Sorry…” Tony mumbled into his shoulder. Confused, Bucky took a step back so he could see the man, although his hands remained on Tony’s shoulders.

“What in the world are you apologizing for?”

Tony’s face went through an impressive array of emotions, accompanied with a shrug and a less-than-helpful hand wave. “I, uh— I stand by what I said, I’m happy that you’re here with me now. But I didn’t mean to jump down your throat like that. What you feel, that’s valid, even if I might not like hearing it.” Tony was chewing on his lip now too. “I don’t want you to feel like you can’t talk to me about something and I definitely shouldn’t be threatening to put on the suit and kick your ass.”

Some of that sounded suspiciously like something Dr. Vance would say and Bucky briefly
wondered whether Tony had spoken to her, but he decided not to mention it. He managed a smile instead. “I’m happy too, Tony, please don’t ever doubt that. I want to be here.” Despite his darker thoughts, despite the guilt, Bucky had no intention of ever giving up what he now had. “Plus, you gotta admit, sometimes I really do need to have my ass kicked.”

There, now Tony was finally smiling too. “Maybe a little bit. I guess that’s something we both have in common. Although now that I’m thinking about it, I can find much better uses for that ass of yours.” Tony’s smile became that ridiculous, flirtatious smirk, so Bucky had no choice but to kiss it away.

When they parted and Tony took a step back to toss the tie in his hand into a box on the floor, Bucky realized that he also spent the entire time holding onto that damn letter. He gave it a disgusted look. Way to make trouble for us from thousands of miles away, Steve.

“Hey, Tony?” He waited until Tony looked back over to wave the offending piece of paper in the air. “I know exactly what to do with this,” and before Tony could even manage one word, he promptly tore the damn thing into pieces, letting them all flutter to the floor.

“James— did you just— what did you—” While Tony worked on finding his words again, Bucky turned to grab the phone too, this time with the metal hand.

“This old thing is making me angry too, actually. If the world ever needs Steve, I’m sure we can get T’Challa on the phone,” Bucky declared and let the metal hand close around the phone. The immediate crunch that followed as the plastic and circuitry yielded to vibranium was immensely satisfying. Tony’s eyes followed as the broken bits of plastic joined the paper on the floor before he met Bucky’s now borderline amused gaze.

“M’not saying Steve’s not allowed to apologize. He can and should, even if you’re not obligated to accept it, but he’s gotta try a lot harder than that. Steve needs some sense knocked into him too and if the Soldier has any say in this, I might be the unlucky bastard who gets to do it. Oh, and since it always bears repeating, I’m here for the long haul, Tony, and no dumb letter from Steve is going to change that.”

Tony’s brain seemed to have finally processed the whole scene because Bucky had barely finished speaking before he was being pulled by the collar of his shirt into a searing kiss and Tony was definitely not holding back this time.

“Dammit, that was hot,” Tony muttered between breaths. “I know it shouldn’t be, but whatever. I hated that fuckin’ letter and you’re amazing and—” the rest of was swallowed up by the kiss as Tony decided that mapping out Bucky’s mouth with his tongue was a much better use of his time.

Bucky couldn’t agree more and he pushed them both along until Tony’s legs hit the bed and then it was Tony’s turn to take the lead, using Bucky’s shirt to keep him close as Tony lowered himself down, refusing to separate himself from Bucky’s mouth for more than a second at a time.

When Tony was on his back, Bucky wasted no time crawling over him, one knee planted between Tony’s thighs and the rest of him pressed against Tony’s front. His hands found Tony’s, their fingers lacing together almost automatically, and Bucky used the leverage to pin Tony’s arms above his head.

He pulled away to give both of them some room to breathe, which also gave him a chance to take in a flushed, breathless Tony with those half-lidded eyes and kiss-swollen lips… God, the wicked things he wanted to do to this man, especially with the Soldier’s unabashed lust running through his veins. Tony was obviously aware of Bucky’s scrutiny because the way the man licked at his lips had
to be a deliberate attempt at seduction.

Bucky leaned in so he could nuzzle Tony’s cheek. “Got any more for letters for me to rip up? Because let me tell you, darlin’, I love it when you’re this thankful.”

He could feel Tony’s laugh against his own chest. “No more letters, no, but I don’t think that’s really necessary.” He still sounded a touch breathless. “Let’s be honest, I’m five seconds away from wanting to rip your clothes off about ninety percent of the time.”

“And what about that other ten percent?” Bucky made sure to sound sufficiently put-out.

“That’s when your clothes are already off,” Tony replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, making Bucky laugh along with him. He nipped at the juncture of Tony’s neck and shoulders in retaliation, but of course all the man did in response was tilt his head and present even more of that tantalizing skin to Bucky.

“Weren’t we trying to finish up with your things here?” Bucky asked between worrying his teeth against Tony’s skin. The man huffed, amused, and bend his leg just enough to apply pressure to Bucky’s growing arousal and he had to stop his assault on Tony’s neck to let out a groan. “Okay, yeah, all this stuff can wait. Preferably forever.” The pressure increased just a touch more and the groan was replaced with an outright whine, Bucky unable to help the way his hips stuttered.

Tony was a devious man, truly, because even like this, pinned beneath Bucky and objectively at his mercy, Tony had all the power in the world to reduce Bucky to whimpered pleas with just a touch.

Boxes and letters and the rest of the world forgotten, Bucky gave his entire focus over to Tony. He released one of Tony’s hands (the man wasted no time burying it in Bucky’s hair to pull him back into a kiss) and deciding to return the favor and find out whether he could make Tony whimper and beg by the end of this, Bucky let the metal hand trail down lower.

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“Where’s everyone else?” Bucky blinked in confusion when Tony arrived in the common room, pizza boxes in hand, but entirely alone.

“This is everyone else,” the man huffed and deposited the boxes onto the coffee table situated in front of the couch. “Apparently it’s totally fine for everyone else to skip out on movie nights, but I do it and no one ever lets me live it down.”

“So just us tonight then?”

Tony hummed in agreement. “Rhodey wanted the night to himself, Alice and Bruce drove out to Manhattan for dinner— and didn’t invite us, so rude,” Tony unceremoniously dropped onto the couch right next to Bucky and continued listing off their wayward friends, “Hope couldn’t stop by, Strange never comes to these things, Pepper is in California until year-end and apparently Viz is on book five of a *Harry Potter* binge read, so I’m not even going to try dragging him away from that. Man, I cannot wait until it’s winter break and the kids are back at the Compound. Hmm, I wonder if I can get Laura and the mini-agents to stay here for a week or two…”

“So what I’m hearing,” Bucky interrupted Tony’s musing by wrapping an arm around the man’s shoulders and pulling him closer so he could press a kiss to his temple, “is that I have you all to myself tonight. I’m not seeing a problem with that.”

“Yeah, but it’s way less fun to be all handsy under the blankets when no one’s around to be super annoyed by it.”
“I’m… not sure whether to be insulted by that,” Bucky said, but Tony placated him with a brief kiss on the lips, grinning the entire time. He then leaned over to grab them both a slice of pizza, so all was quickly forgiven.

Between bites, they argued their way through a list of movies and failing to find one that satisfied them both on this particular night, they settled on simple conversation instead. Unsurprising, given this was usually the case with at least half of their solo movie nights.

“Is Rhodes going to be alright?” Over time, Bucky had picked up on the fact that ‘staying in’ like this usually meant Rhodes was having a bad pain day. Tony nodded, giving himself a moment to swallow the bite of pizza.

“Yeah, Rhodey Bear’s fine. He spent all day talking to politicians, so he’s grumpy and just wants to be left alone with his glass of scotch and his TV. He says he watches the news or documentaries or whatever, but I have a suspicion he secretly watches those cooking competition shows.” Tony followed that up with a snicker, amused at his own teasing.

Bucky gave Tony a pointed look. “Between the politicians and you, that poor man deserves a medal — more medals, really.”

“Not just medals. Sainthood. Hmm, Saint Rhodes? Saint James? Or would that be you?” he gestured at Bucky with the hand holding the half-eaten slice of pizza.

“Do we all qualify for sainthood for dealing with you?”

“You should,” Tony affirmed with a wink. Bucky shook his head fondly, bumping his knee against Tony’s.

“Did Rhodes find out anything about the upcoming vote?”

Tony was in a middle of a bite when he let out a curious hum, but it didn’t take him long to realize what Bucky was referring to. “Oh yeah, he did. I mean, the actual vote’s in a week, but Rhodey thinks we’re going into it with a majority. Two votes would have to be flipped, which isn’t likely. Anderson’s pretty wishy washy, but holding steady for the moment, and Gonzalez doesn’t want to set a precedent if she can avoid it.”

“So no pardons then?”

“At least not this time around. Another vote could be called later, but it’s possible none of the members would want to waste their political capital on this and the President will ultimately listen to the Accords panel as far as these pardons go.”

“Huh,” Bucky let the word hang there, chewing on his pizza while thinking this over and letting his gaze briefly settle on the dark, cloudy skies outside. “Does it make me selfish that I feel… relieved?”

He put the unfinished slice down, wiping the grease off his hands with a napkin, so he could lean back against one side of the couch, which gave him a better view of both the darkened skies outside and Tony, who was watching him curiously. “I know their situation is my fault too, but I just don’t want them here, I like what we have right now.” His tone must’ve been a cross between pleading and whining. “I don’t want this taken away from us.”

Tony finished off his slice before leaning back against the other end, mirroring Bucky’s position, and wiggling his socked feet into Bucky’s lap. This time, the socks were a bright Iron Man red.

“First,” Tony pointed a finger at Bucky, “their situation is so not your fault. Second, I don’t think that’s selfish. I like what we have too and having all of them here would be a complete mess. I don’t
even want to think about Rhodey’s stress levels, or poor Alice or Bruce—”

“Or you,” Bucky added with a pointed look, which Tony deflected with a shrug.

“Point is, it would suck for everyone,” Tony said and then decided the couch-sized space between them was too much because he crawled over and squeezed himself in the space between Bucky and the back of the couch, essentially plastered to Bucky’s left side. “But here’s the thing,” he planted a kiss on Bucky’s cheek before continuing, “no matter what, no one is taking this away from us, okay? I’m Iron Man, dammit, and what I say goes.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm, and right now, I say that I wanna stop talking about dumb votes and pardons and panels, and instead I wanna make out with my really hot boyfriend.”

“Oh, I sure hope that lucky bastard is around, I better go find him for you.”

“Oh, you better,” Tony hovered over him, licking his lips with an unashamed smirk. “Goddamn it, just look at you.” Tony’s gaze wandered up and down, the intent behind it making Bucky flush with satisfaction. “So damn gorgeous…” The last word was whispered into Bucky’s mouth and nothing else was said as they both lost themselves to the kiss—

Until a deafening clap of thunder rang through the room, Tony stilled in his arms, eyes wide at first and then falling tightly shut on a groan, and Bucky got to watch over Tony’s shoulder as the field outside of the Compound erupted in a column of light, two prominent silhouettes standing stark against the blinding rainbow of colors.

Chapter End Notes

Is that the plot I see in the rainbow of colors? I think it's the plot!! o.o

Posting schedule resumes as usual, every Saturday!

I hope all of you have a wonderful holiday season (or just a happy, wonderful Saturday if you're not celebrating)!
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

A little shorter than my usual, but I ended up splitting a 9k chapter just for my own sanity. I'll be working 6+ days a week for a few months after New Years, so gaining the extra chapter will help me keep up with updates.

Also, I'm playing a little fast and loose with some of the Thor-related canon here. Not Ragnarok compliant and ignores some parts of the Dark World, so hopefully none of you mind!

Also also, since it always bears repeating, THANK YOU to all the lovely, wonderful people who read or kudos this story and especially to those who take the time to leave nice things in my inbox! You brighten my day and I hope all of you have an amazing 2018. <3

Tony silently cursed every Norse god he knew as he and James scrambled off the couch before the Compound even had the chance to stop trembling from that first roll of thunder. They were on their feet in moments and despite knowing this was absolutely not the right time, Tony really wanted to roll his eyes when James automatically went into full Winter Soldier mode and strategically positioned himself in front of Tony, shielding him with his body as they both faced the light show outside. Honestly, why did people always forget Tony wasn’t a damsel in distress?

But at least with James, it was endearing, even if this time, somewhat unnecessary. Protocol for unannounced Asgardian visits required a higher level of caution (plus all security protocols were increased since Natasha’s little visit), so by the time the second clap of thunder shook the room, one of Tony’s suits was already flying through the corridors and assembling itself around Tony’s frame, courtesy of Friday.

James glanced back, momentarily surprised, but then he gave Tony—Iron Man—an approving nod and Tony joined at his side. He kept the faceplate up so James could see what Tony hoped was a reassuring smile. If all went well, this was just Thor dropping by for a visit and there would be no need for fighting. Unfortunately, Thor hadn’t actually been in contact with them since the Ultron debacle, so they had to be prepared for anything. Without needing to see them, Tony knew that Friday had several other suits under her control, positioned just out of sight on standby, ready to defend or attack if the situation called for it.

“Friday, status report,” Rhodey’s voice came through the comms, letting Tony know War Machine was also fully operational. He was sure Vision was on his way as well.

“Based on my energy readings,” Friday quickly responded, “one of the beings is in fact Mr. Thor Odinson.”

“And the other?”

“Nothing that matches my current data, but I am accessing my predecessor’s files—” one moment of silence before, “Loki Odinson, Colonel.”
Rhodey’s shocked “Fuck, what do you mean *Loki Odinson*?” barely registered over the sudden static flooding Tony’s ears. *Oh god.* Last time Loki was here, a hole to the other side of space opened up in the fucking sky and rained aliens and monsters down on them—

…Last time Loki was here—

*Stark, you know that’s a one-way trip?*

An unfamiliar sky, with unfamiliar stars, the mothership stark against it, surrounded by an armada of smaller vessels—

*Sir. Shall I call Miss Potts?*

“All right.”

You might as well.

Everything exploded into a blinding supernova and Tony’s eyes fluttered shut as he took his last breath—

“All right!”

The coldness of space dissipated and Tony was left blinking down at James, who standing in front of him and blocking some of the light streaming from the outside. It panned around him like a halo and Tony absently thought it was strangely appropriate. He willed his mind back into reality as his heart hammered away in his rib cage.

“You with me?” James asked, but his words were swallowed up by another roll of thunder. The Compound trembled once more.

“Always,” Tony mouthed back. The tendrils of creeping cold made their way up his spine, his breath stuttered again, but Tony ignored the panic, focusing instead on the worried crease between James’ brows. *Focus on the here and now. This is real.* He took in the downturned bow of James’ lips, the way the light and shadows scattered across those sharp cheekbones. One deep breath, followed by a heavy exhale. Like this, it was difficult to see the beautiful blue of James’ eyes, but thankfully, Tony had the color committed to memory.

James raised a questioning eyebrow and Tony managed a nod. *I’m okay.*

“Iron Man, I lost you for a second,” Rhodey’s voice was clear of static this time. “I want you, me, and Vision outside to greet our Asgardian interlopers. According to Friday, only Thor is armed with his hammer, but that doesn’t mean much, so repulsors up and ready until we figure out why Thor’s crazy brother is here.”

“Got it,” Tony responded, then took another deep breath. “Permission to blast Loki in the face if he steps out of line?”

“Permission granted. He so much as coughs funny, shoot him.”

Tony grunted in acknowledgement and then turned his attention back to James. The bright light of the Bifrost was beginning to dissipate, the world outside turning back into the inky black of the late night.

“By the look on your face, I assume this isn’t just that Thor guy?” James asked, words audible this time when no more thunder followed.
“Unfortunately not. Seems like he brought his little brother too.”

James’ expression was appropriately incredulous. “Wait, what? That same crazy maniac who attacked New York?”

“The very same. War Machine, Viz, and I—” As if summoned, Rhodey landed with a loud thump on the other side of the glass, followed by a more graceful Vision. “We’re the welcoming committee. I want you to stay back.”

“Like hell I will—”

“James, please,” Tony cut him off with a shake of his head, trying to stave off the argument. “You’re not an Avenger, you don’t have your gear. Get on the phone with Alice, help her with anything she needs. Hold down the fort until she and Bruce come back. If this goes south, she’ll need your help protecting the civilians in the Compound.”

It was obvious James wasn’t thrilled with leaving Tony behind and to be fair, neither was Tony, especially not when the cold, clammy hand of his panic still brushed along his spine each time another memory found its way to the surface. This wasn’t about Tony though. This was about practicality and James’ help was needed elsewhere.

“Fine,” James acquiesced after a second, looking no more pleased by the decision. “But don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone. Make sure I’m connected to you through Friday at all times.”

“Fri, give James access to our comms and point him to the closest available earpiece. Get him in touch with Alice and Bruce too.”

Friday chirped a quick “Will do, Boss” and after one more meaningful glance shared between them — stay safe, I’ll see you soon— James took off running, heading the other side of the Compound.

Tony spared one second to watch the man disappear— I’ll be fine, this isn’t like New York, everything will be fine— and then wasting no more time, he stomped across the common room and input the access code, which prompted the glass wall to slide open, hitting his face with a cold breeze and reminding him to put his faceplate back down. He joined War Machine and Vision on the field just as the image of the Asgardians finally materialized before them out of the surrounding darkness as the two marched closer.

“Friends, it is good to see you all—” Thor’s booming voiced tapered off and the god stopped in his tracks when he realized there were two sets of repulsors and Vision’s glowing hands pointed at him and Loki, who was trailing just a few steps behind Thor, but he also stopped in tandem with his brother.

“Thor, why is there a war criminal on my lawn?” Rhodey demanded, causing Thor to raise his hands in supplication and clear his throat.

“While your caution is understandable, friend Rhodes, I assure you, it is not necessary.” The god eyed the repulsors with discomfort for one long moment, but then managed to school his features into something more princely. “Loki is not a threat and he is here with me on behalf of Odin Allfather—”

“Yeah, fuck that, Thor, that’s not good enough,” Tony’s spat out, voice amplified by the suit. “Last time Loki was here, he broke Manhattan. If you don’t have a better explanation than ‘Odin said so’, I will start shooting.”

“I am aware of what happened in New York, I fought at your side in that very battle, Tony. I understand your concerns. However, after the events with the Dark Elves—”
“You mean the ‘events’ where you almost destroyed half of London without letting any of us know?” Rhodey’s words dripped with disapproval.

“Um, yes, the very same,” Thor confirmed, neutrality slipping to reveal something else for a brief moment— regret maybe?— but the god quickly composed himself again, straightening out to his full height. “After the battle, certain… facts came to light about Loki’s involvement in the Battle of New York and he faced a second trial on Asgard. Based on that information and based on his actions that turned the battle against the Dark Elves in our favor, he has been granted clemency by Odin Allfather—”

“Of course he was,” Rhodey muttered. Tony could imagine the pleading look to the heavens that would’ve gone along with the weary sigh he could hear over the comms. “Fuck, this is why we should’ve just tried the bastard here instead of agreeing to let him face justice on Asgard. If I had been involved back then—”

“Please, I implore you, put down your weapons. Loki is not a threat to you,” Thor repeated, but when none of the Avengers heeded his plea, his shoulders slumped. “Very well, but at least hear me out then, let me tell you what truly happened with Loki—”

“Brother, please, we could spend all day trying to convince your fellow warriors that I have truly, unequivocally had a change of heart, but we simply don’t have the time. We are both here on behalf of Odin, with vital information for these mortals. Although, I must say,” Loki’s voice dropped into that saccharine sweet tone, “it is so good to be back in the presence of Midgard’s greatest heroes and as a free man, no less. I am ecstatic, truly.” That earned Loki a withering glare from Thor who was obviously hoping to keep Loki’s antics out of this already delicate conversation. Tony, however, almost hoped Loki would keep talking because he was itching to shoot that smirk right off the trickster’s face. Make your move, Reindeer Games.

“Loki, please, you promised you would let me speak,” Thor implored quietly, to which Loki responded with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Your shield brothers were clearly not listening—”

“And you think we’re going to listen to your crazy ass?”

Loki looked in Rhodey’s direction, but ignored the actual question, frowning instead as he took in the three Avengers. “Where are the rest of Midgard’s finest?” His eyes lingered the longest on Vision. “Look at these unfamiliar faces. So much has changed. Ah well…” He shrugged and the sly smirk was back in place when his eyes fell squarely on Tony. “At least my favorite hero is here to greet me. Hello, Stark.”

“Loki.” Oh yeah, he definitely wanted to shoot him.

“You know, you were far more welcoming the last time we met. However, I think if you were to offer me a drink again, I would be far more amenable to it now. And to you as well.”

Tony ignored both the flirty smile and the honeyed tone. “Yeah, see, I’m not into that whole ‘drinking’ thing anymore, so you might have to settle for a warm glass of milk instead.” He stopped himself from following his defensive instinct to banter, but he did flip his faceplate up so he could look Thor in the eye. “Point Break, seriously, what the hell? Clemency or not, you do remember what this guy did to us, right? Blowing up a whole SHIELD base, brainwashing Barton? New York full of aliens? Me getting tossed out of the tower?”

Thor managed to hold Tony’s gaze with a surprising amount of conviction. “I remember the damage
done and I regret my involvement in the events that led to that battle, as well as my absence while Midgard healed. However,” Thor’s voice took on a harder tone, “there were extenuating circumstances. Loki was… not himself when he first arrived here on Midgard.”

“Oh no, no, no, you are not pulling the brainwashed card!” Tony exclaimed, sudden frustration welling up in him. “What, are you going to tell us that, surprise, the staff controlled him too? It took us years to recover from your brother’s little stunt!” he spat out, but then the anger bled away as fast as it had appeared. Fuck, James was listening in to this whole conversation and Tony desperately wished he had the time to explain the circumstances, the context of this whole mess to James.

There was a world of difference between him and Loki. Wasn’t there?

Loki let out a unimpressed scoff, crossing his arms over his chest. “No, I was not brainwashed. However, I was not here of my own accord either. Let’s just say, I was… incentivized to come here, to lead the Chitauri in battle and to retrieve the Tesseract.”

“Yes, incentivized by getting the chance to rule our planet. That’s not a selling point, pal,” Rhodey argued, but Tony’s mind was already running miles ahead of this exchange. He obsessed over the Battle of New York for years, committing every detail to memory in his attempt to find some semblance of control over the situation, to cope with everything that took place, but somehow, half of what he remembered about the invasion just didn’t make sense. He was always left with more questions than answers.

“As if I would ever want to rule this tiny speck of dirt with its pitiful, mortal inhabitants— even if some of them are far more charming than others,” Loki aimed a wink in Tony’s direction, but the flirty tone lasted only a second before turning serious once again and Tony swore he saw something akin to actual pain flash across the god’s face. “But no, I never had any inclination to rule Midgard. Coming here was my only chance to escape agony— agony that your frail mortal mind couldn’t even begin to comprehend. I would’ve preferred death to what they had done to me—” Suddenly, the god clamped up, as if realizing he had said too much. His lips thinned into a tight line and Thor, sensing the tension, placed a hand on the god’s shoulder. Tony was genuinely surprised when Loki didn’t shake it off. Honestly, Tony expected Loki to stab Thor in the ribs or something, but no, the trickster didn’t even turn to glare at his brother, just stood stiffly and allowed the comforting touch.

“When Loki fell from the Bifrost, he was found on the other side of space by an alien warlord named Thanos the Mad Titan,” Thor tried to explain and although it was minute, Loki actually flinched at the mention of the name. Granted, Tony wasn’t doing so well either.

Tony blinked the images away and forced himself to take a deep breath through the nose to steady his nerves. This isn’t New York, you’re safe, you’re at home. There was no time to relive his nightmares, he needed to hear what Thor had to say.

“And the only choice Loki had was to lead the Chitauri here. He could not have come to us, he could not have given us a warning or switched sides. During his entire time on Midgard, he was watched by The Other, punished for any mistake or misstep. Loki knew if they suspected him of betrayal, they would have sent someone else, someone who would’ve gleefully destroyed all of Midgard in their mission to gift the Mad Titan with the Tesseract.”

Loki remained standing at Thor’s side, his stiff posture radiating displeasure, but the god didn’t stop Thor from speaking and the information provided gave Tony the distraction he needed to push away the panic, as his mind rapidly began to fill in the missing pieces of the invasion and some of his earlier suspicions, initially far-fetched, were suddenly starting to make a lot more sense.
“You sabotaged the invasion, didn’t you?” Tony blurted out, causing everyone to look at him. He kept his eyes on Loki, trying to read the other man. Something shifted there, the closed off anger morphing into something eager. The bastard raised an eyebrow and let his lips stretch into a smirk.

“I knew I always liked you best for a reason, Man of Iron. Far more clever than any mortal has a right to be.”

Tony ignored the backhanded compliment. “Instead of opening the portal in the middle of nowhere and letting the Chitauri in without detection, you chose my tower, which was about as subtle as a glaring neon sign. You essentially bottle-necked your army, you united our team by getting all of us pissed off at you, you spent your entire time bickering with Thor instead of actually leading the army, and then when the Hulk got to you—”

“He severed the connection with The Other, yes,” Loki replied, still smirking, but Tony didn’t miss the way his expression soured for a moment at the mention of their angry, green friend. “Of course, after I was dragged back to Asgard,” this he directed at Thor who winced, “no one believed Loki Liesmith, so it took my brave and heroic actions on Svartalfheim for someone to actually pay attention and once Odin Allfather decided my story was worth listening to—”

“Okay, great, I don’t care about your family drama,” Rhodey cut Loki’s rant short. “Are we just supposed to forgive and forget about what happened here? Loki’s little invasion, botched or not, did a lot of damage and killed a lot of people!”

Thor let out a sigh at Rhodey’s accusations, but didn’t get a chance to say one word before Loki spoke again, this time with no small amount of frustration seeping into his voice.

“You should be thanking the Norns on your bended knees that I was the one sent here because it could’ve been— would’ve been so much worse had the Mad Titan sent someone who actually wanted this worthless planet to burn—”

“Thankful? Are you kidding me right now?” Rhodey’s voice rose to a booming yell. “People are fuckin’ dead because of you!”

“Your whole world would be littered with bodies if it hadn’t been for me!” the god snarled, straining like he wanted to get into Rhodey’s face, but he was pulled back by the hand on his shoulder.

“Okay, listen, this isn’t getting us anywhere,” Tony decided to be the voice of reason for once. He gave Rhodey a pointed look, one that hopefully communicated We’ll talk about this later. His gaze swung back to Loki and Thor. “So this puts the invasion in a different light, great. Explains a lot of things, actually, because for a while there, I just thought that you,” he pointed at Loki, “were really shitty at the whole ‘lead an invasion’ thing.” Loki taunted him with a challenging look, but Tony forced himself to swallow the rest of his sarcastic comments. “And I’m glad that Loki isn’t trying to kill us all right now, but my question— everyone’s question, really— is what the hell are you two doing here? Thor, we haven’t seen you in years, and we sure as hell weren’t expecting Reindeer Games to show up with you.”

Thor opened his mouth to speak, but Loki was faster once again. “That is why we are here,” he declared and pointed a finger at Vision.

The android frowned as everyone’s attention turned to him. “Yes, hello there. That has a name and it is The Vision. I must say, so far it has not been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Odinson.”

“It’s Friggasso—” was all Loki managed before Thor unceremoniously clamped a hand over his mouth, finally silencing his brother. Loki gifted Thor with a frankly impressive glare as he pushed
the muscled arm away with an affronted huff, but it seemed Thor’s request for silence was respected and Thor moved the hand back down to Loki’s shoulder, although this time, it was hard to tell whether it was in warning or in gratitude.

“My dear friends, I apologize for creating so much commotion with our unannounced visit and for causing all of you worry by bringing my brother with me. However, as we have already said, we are here on the behalf of Odin Allfather with an urgent message. Thanos, the same Mad Titan who tortured Loki and who is ultimately responsible for the death and destruction that took place here, the one responsible for countless more deaths across the universe, is determined to collect all of the Infinity Stones and gain absolute power in his quest for destruction—”

*Sounds like a cold world, Tony.*

“—He is on his way to Midgard as we speak.”

*I’ve seen colder.*
Meetings, Tony decided, were one of his least favorite things. Board meetings, conferences, Avengers debriefs, political rendezvous. Somehow, despite good intentions or bad, the most common takeaway from any given meeting was the beginning of a headache.

He thought the meetings over the Accords—Steve and the others, then Ross, then the whole world—were his least favorite, but this night was giving that mess a run for its money.

After Thor’s little bombshell, Rhodey had to stop the rest of the god’s exposition, given that the details now concerned not just the Avengers, but the whole world, and there was no need for Thor and Loki to tell their tale more than once.

Due in large part to Tony’s efforts (and the efforts of his many well-paid lawyers), every set of Accords, US or otherwise, had a detailed section on global-level threats, which included a list of key individuals that had to be involved from the get-go. This included the Avengers themselves as well as several dozen others - key senior members of both the US and UN Accords panels, key members of the Department of Defense and the intelligence community, representatives of other nations, as well as individuals with expertise relevant to the particular crisis at hand. All carefully vetted, with Tony himself personally ensuring, sometimes through less than legal methods, that every single one was squeaky clean and Hydra-free.

While Rhodey sent out the proverbial bat signal to every party relevant to an “alien invasion” threat, the two Asgardians were corralled into the main meeting room of the Compound to wait and Tony was stuck with “god watching” duty. His mission to glare Loki into submission mostly worked, although he had a suspicion it wasn’t the glare, but rather the repulsors that kept the trickster’s antics and annoying flirting down to a minimum. The god stayed mostly silent while Tony gave Thor a cliff notes version of what happened in the past several years, including an explanation of the Accords and the current chain of command. Despite being perceptive enough to pick up that something bad had happened, Thor accepted Tony’s vague answers about the old team and a promise to “talk later.”

Once everyone was gathered and the meeting room transformed into a sea of holographic screens full of frowning faces, what followed were hours of Thor (and a less helpful Loki) trying to explain the details of the threat facing the planet. A good chunk of that time was dedicated to convincing Earth’s best and brightest that Loki was an ally this time around. No one was particularly enthused about the trickster’s return, but there were bigger problems at hand and so, even more time was spent debating whether the threat was real to begin with. Some individuals rightfully demanded evidence, which Thor took as a personal offense because how could his word as the Crowned Prince of Asgard not be taken at face value? Given that Tony was the only other person to fight in the last invasion, he also got dragged into the conversation about the veracity of Thor’s claims. Yes, he saw a mothership and parts of a vast alien army. Yes, he always thought something bigger and badder was coming for Earth. No, he didn’t have an interstellar defense system just sitting in his lab, collecting dust. No, he didn’t have conclusive evidence proving that the army was coming now. No, he didn’t have the solution to every goddamn problem in the known universe, but sure, of course, he’d get right on that.

Tony was able to escape the chaos of activity somewhere around hour seven when, roughly around three in the morning New York time, everyone collectively decided to take a break, absorb the information, and regroup at a later time. They came out of that meeting with more believers than
skeptics, thankfully, but Tony just came out of that meeting with the beginning of one hellish headache.

Surprisingly, the rest of him fared better.

He held his breath and remained still as he soldered a delicate piece of wiring inside Peter’s improved web shooters. Once he was done, he let the air rush out of his body in one big whoosh and then took another deep breath, just to prove to himself that he could. There was nothing. No heavy weight compressing his chest, no cold chill crawling up his spine, no tunnel vision turning the world around him into his nightmares. All the usual signs of his panic, seemingly inevitable after a long, crazy night like this, just weren’t there.

The familiar swoosh of the lab door prompted Tony to look up from his work and the fog of exhaustion overlaid by the now constant stream of plans, ideas, strategies running through his head lifted just long enough for Tony to manage a smile. James was hurrying over through the lab with a tray of food and Tony could already smell something delicious.

“You don’t mind if I just propose right here and now, do you, babe?” Tony put down his tools, took off his goggles, and turned to make grabby hands at the plates of cheeseburgers and fries.

James gave him an indulgent look as he set the tray down, just out of Tony’s reach, before walking over to wrap his arms around Tony, pressing his chest snug against Tony’s back. “M’always surprised by how easy it is to seduce you, doll.”

Tony let out a laugh, letting himself melt against James who was solid and warm and just everything that Tony needed right then and there. “Seriously? Like you even need to do anything other than just stand there to seduce me.”

James huffed in amusement, the puff of air tickling Tony’s ear. He placed a kiss to the back of Tony’s neck before hooking his chin over Tony’s shoulder, then hesitated for a moment before asking, “So, how bad is it?”

Tony had a hard time deciding where to begin, but he settled on the one thing that had given him hope. “Thor said we still have several years to prepare for the invasion. God, we still have years, James,” he emphasized and James dropped his head to his shoulder and released the same exact sigh of relief that Tony and the rest of the room did hours ago. Honestly, Thor should’ve led with that instead of his ominous “He’s coming for all of you” because it sure as hell would’ve saved Tony the near heart attack, but he supposed years meant a lot less to a god than they did to a mortal.

“That’s a whole lot better than what I was expecting when I heard Thor’s warning,” James murmured against him. Tony tried to turn so he could see the other man, but the arms around him tightened and pulled him even closer against James’ broad chest. “Stop wiggling. M’not letting you go just yet.”

Tony couldn’t possibly complain and he relaxed again, letting his head rest against James’. They both fell silent for a moment, just savoring the embrace, the comforting touch, the way their chests rose in tandem on each slow breath. Tony’s hands found James’, the flesh and metal familiar against his palms, and their intertwined hands settled on his stomach.

Yes, the invasion was inevitable, this Thanos guy was coming for them (or more precisely, for Vision and the rest of the Infinity Stones), but the sheer vastness of space was on their side. Even ships that traveled faster than the speed of light—and that certainly had Tony’s mind spinning with possibilities—couldn’t traverse that sort of distance with ease, at least not without the shiny blue cube, but Thor assured them all that the Tesseract was safe in Asgard and would never fall into the
Tony had his doubts, especially with Loki in the mix, but that little detail was out of his control, so instead he focused on the here and now. They had been given the gift of time. Time, he knew, was precious and years was so much more than Tony could’ve asked for. Maybe that was why he wasn’t currently curled up in some dark corner of his lab, reliving the nightmares of space and aliens and death.

It could’ve also been the simple fact that Tony had expected this. Before Thor’s arrival, however, the knowledge that something was out there, some unknown alien thing that could and would be a threat to his planet… It was unclear and unknown, just a persistent itch at the back of his head with no clear source.

But not anymore. Now, the threat was a tangible one, in the form of one giant, purple motherfucker and his alien army, and Tony could deal with that. Now, all of his worries and all of his planning and all of his tinkering with the suits and the magic and everything—it finally had a target.

Tony pulled in another deep breath, their joined hands rising and falling, and was still left surprised by the absence of fear squeezing the air out of his lungs. They had time, he had ideas and plans, but most importantly—most surprisingly—he wasn’t facing this alone.

He made another mock attempt at getting out of James’ embrace. “Ya know, you can’t just bring a man a good old-fashioned American cheeseburger and then not let him eat it.”

“Are you telling me you want the cheeseburger more than you want me?” James asked, trying to sound insulted, but he was already pulling away to grab said food.

“Well, it all depends on what you’re offering me, gorgeous,” Tony gave James the patented playboy smile, which James countered with a long-suffering shake of his head and placed a plate of food in front of Tony instead. Admittedly an effective distraction because Tony was suddenly starving. He paused before taking his first bite. “Seriously, James, thank you for this. With the hell that erupted over our heads, I kinda forgot food was a thing I needed. And sorry I didn’t come find you right after we were done, I just needed a few minutes down here alone.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” James said and pulled up another stool so he could join Tony at the workbench. He pressed a quick kiss to Tony’s temple while Tony hummed happily around the mouthful of glorious, artery-clogging goodness. James grabbed his own burger and a hefty serving of fries before speaking again. “I went down to the cafeteria to get you something and asked Friday to tell me when you were ready.”

Tony nodded, savoring the taste of the food. “Thank you. And sorry you couldn’t be in the meeting with us.”

“S’alright, I’m not an official Avenger, I know. I have to admit, I’m feeling out of depth with this whole ‘aliens’ and ‘norse gods’ thing. Sorta makes you miss the classic bad guys with guns.”

“Right? Welcome to my world, James, I’ve been dealing with this nonsense since New York.” Tony paused, then squinted at the other man. “Although you are a cybernatically enhanced, hundred-year-old super soldier, so…”

“Yes, and I still feel like the odd man out. That says something,” James remarked, lightly kicking Tony’s shin under the table, to which Tony responded by hooking his ankle around James’ and keeping the man’s foot appropriately trapped. James smiled at his antics, but it was short-lived. “Is there anything you can share with me? I understand if I don’t have the right security clearance—”
Tony was already waving him off. “Eh, don’t worry about it. The world is supposed to end, so I don’t feel bad about fudging a few security protocols.” A part of Tony hoped James would choose to become a full-fledged Avenger someday, but James was going to be involved in this whole mess regardless, so he had the right to know the big picture.

“Long story short, the botched invasion was more of a warning than anything else and the asshole orchestrating the whole thing is now on his way to Earth, although it’s taking him a lot longer because Loki failed to deliver the Tesseract. This Thanos guy wants the Infinity Stones, magical artifacts that’ll give him unimaginable power, yadda, yadda, standard bad guy schtick. One of those stones is literally imbedded in Vision’s head, and Strange alluded to knowing where another one is. Asgard has a few, which is why they’re getting involved in the first place.” Tony trusted Thor’s love for Earth to some degree, but he had no delusions about some grand ruler of an alien kingdom giving a damn about a “tiny speck of dirt” with its “inconsequential mortal inhabitants”. Thor and Loki were both here because it was advantageous to Asgard to help Earth, nothing more, nothing less. “They got wind that this Mad Titan is heading our way and they want to start working on preparations now, given how powerful—and downright insane—this guy is. Today was just us trying to convince everyone that no, this isn’t a prank, and yes, there are aliens heading to Earth. Actual strategy and prep and the million details that need to be ironed out will have to wait until tomorrow.”

“It is tomorrow, honey,” James stated, not unkindly, and gave a pointed look to Tony’s disheveled state.

“Well, even more reason to postpone then,” Tony gave a shrug and dunked a handful of fries into the ketchup before shoving them all into his mouth.

“Sounds like we all have some busy days ahead,” James said while drowning a few of his own fries in ranch, “but what I really want to know is how you are holding up right now.”

It wasn’t hard to decipher James’ true concerns. Tony’s “space” flavored PTSD was a well-known secret, at least around these parts and it wouldn’t be unreasonable, on a day like today, for someone to expect a panic attack or two out of Tony.

He pulled in a deep breath and let it out slowly while James watched with a curious eye. “I’m okay, really. I mean, am I worried? Hell yeah. But you know, I, uh—” he shrugged, nibbling absently at a fry, “I already knew something was coming. I didn’t know who or why or when, but god, I knew—” he threw the french fry down with a bit too much force, finally feeling safe enough to let some of his bottled up indignation bleed through. The only one here was James and James wouldn’t judge him for a moment of weakness. “Sure would be great to have a global defense system right about now, wouldn’t it? But no, Tony, you’re being paranoid and delusional and what a terrible idea.”

He directed his scowl at some random piece of Iron Man armor rather than at James, so he only heard the tapping of the metal fingers against the workbench as James processed his outburst.

“That was what Ultron was meant to be, right?” When Tony gave a silent nod, James heaved a quiet sigh. “I’m sorry the others didn’t trust you. They should’ve. You were right and they should’ve believed in you.”

The genuine remorse in James’ voice succeeded in snapping Tony out of his momentary pity party. James was the last person who should be apologizing for what happened back then. He waved a dismissive hand, giving James a smile. “Eh, it’s alright. None of that matters now. We’ll figure something else out.”

“I’m sure you will,” James said with enough conviction to make Tony smile just a little brighter. He looked over at James, trying to commit to memory every single detail of this quiet, still peaceful
moment. The sharp sweep of those broad shoulders, the way James’ hair curled just a little on the ends, the soft blue of his eyes that could turn so sharp and cold if the Soldier deemed his own presence necessary. The way that one brow arched at the same time as those full lips twitched up into a smirk.

“You’re staring, honey.” James was obviously trying to suppress that smile. Tony didn’t bother, giving the man a toothy grin.

“I’ll allowed to stare. I mean, have you seen yourself recently? Downright indecent, actually, with all of this,” Tony gestured at all of James, although he frowned once he took the time to actually scrutinize the rest of the man, “even if you are wearing… whatever this is that you’re wearing.” The plaid shirt worn over a black tee, well-worn jeans, along with the longer hair practically screamed 90’s grunge, but somehow, James still managed to make it look amazing. Unfair, really, that the man could make a burlap sack look like cutting edge fashion. “I was never big on the whole grunge scene, but dammit, you make it work, babe.”

James shook his head, although it didn’t stop Tony from catching the hint of a pleased smile, and then the man leaned over, dragging Tony by sleeve to meet him halfway, so he could plant a kiss to Tony’s brow. Simple press of lips, but it never failed to make Tony’s stomach swoop and his breath catch.

Tony expected a response to his ridiculous comment (hopefully in the form of James following up on that kiss with more), but James pulled back and leaned on the metal elbow. He heaved another sigh, louder and heavier this time.

“I don’t mean to be even more of a downer, but what does all of this mean for the others?”

Tony didn’t need to ask for clarification and the answer was a simple one too, one he knew with certainty as soon as Thor opened his mouth and the word “aliens” came out.

“They’re pushing the vote to tomorrow and I have no doubt it’ll pass. I’m sure even a few firmer ‘nays’ will flip too. All that was really needed was a little push.” Tony offered a crooked smile. “Global crises tend to do that. It’ll take the President some time to issue the official pardons, but then the US Accords Council will determine when and how to integrate the others back into the fold. Of course, none of them are obligated to sign the Accords and be reinstated as Avengers, but I’m sure some part of their pardons will stipulate an involvement in ‘world ending’ type threats.”

The thin line of James’ mouth and the pinched expression broadcasted clearly that he wasn’t happy with Tony’s answer, but honestly, Tony was just surprised (and thankful) that the pardons took this long to be approved. The idea had been circulating for months and months. There was sufficient public support, at least in the States (although even here, it wasn’t particularly overwhelming). Tony was certain there were several countries that would have a shit fit once the news got out on a larger scale, but he’d worry about that later; besides, the threat of an alien invasion did have the effect of putting some things in perspective, for better or worse.

“So we get to say goodbye to our peace and quiet then,” James stated morosely before letting out a humorless laugh. “Still feel real selfish for not wanting them here. I mean, are they really going to help us against aliens? Don’t get me wrong, they’re strong an’ all, but guys like me an’ Steve— hell, even Romanova and Barton— we’re no Hulk, no Sorcerer Supreme, and we’re definitely no Iron Man. Honey, you sent a nuclear warhead into space to save New York. I could probably shoot a few dozen aliens down, maybe punch some in the face when I run out of ammo. S’not even close to what you and the others can do.”

Tony contemplated the words for a moment, still having a hard time taking his eyes off of James,
even if he hated seeing the slump in those strong, broad shoulders and the way those brows furrowed. What James was saying wasn’t necessarily false, but even the heavy hitters on their team couldn’t do it alone and at the end of the day, Tony would swallow his pride, deal with his own issues, and accept everyone being back if it meant more innocent people got to come out of this fight alive.

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself nearly enough credit, James, but I understand if you want to stay out of this. I wouldn’t hold it against you. After everything you’ve been through, you’ve earned the right to stand back and stay out of this mess.”

James’ huff of laughter bordered on amused. “You know, duty and the war was one thing, but I’ve never really been the big hero type. However, I do have this terrible habit of befriending hot-headed fools who run head first into danger, consequences be damned.” Those bright blue eyes were full of open affection. “And lemme tell you, there’s this one hothead in particular. Pretty brown eyes, razor sharp wit. Crazy smart too and cares about everyone so damn much, but sometimes, he forgets to take care of himself, so I gotta be there to have his back, you know? Keep him safe while he keeps the rest of the world safe.”

There was no ignoring the warmth, the sense of validation at hearing those words, even if some small part of Tony still objected—you’re no hero, Stark—and he couldn’t resist hopping off his stool and slotting himself between James’ legs. He couldn’t resist framing that gorgeous face with his hands, nuzzling at James’ cheek and feeling the scratch of the five o’clock shadow there. He couldn’t resist letting his lips trail down until they found James’ mouth. God, the way his whole being lit up every time they kissed shouldn’t have been possible, shouldn’t have felt so novel, even now, but every kiss, every heated glance, every touch made Tony’s old heart skip a beat.

James’ hands settled on his hips, finding their way underneath Tony’s shirt and seeking out the warm patches of skin. The cool metal startled a gasp out of Tony, but it was swallowed up by James’ willing mouth. Things didn’t go much further than that though, nothing more than a languid kiss and tender touch. It was the only way Tony could express what he really wanted to say in that moment. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for seeing something worthwhile where everyone else saw something ruined.

Tony wished he was strong enough to put that gratitude into words, but he hoped that this was enough.

When the kiss ended, they were both smiling. Small, private smiles, ones the rest of the world didn’t get to see.

“We’ll be alright, Tony,” James whispered into the air between them. So much conviction in those words. “I wish we could keep this, just the two of us in this little bubble, but we’ll be okay. Please, trust me when I say that the others won’t change how I feel about you. Please trust me to put you first.”

Tony brushed a few strands of hair from James’ face, tucking them behind his ear. What sort of cosmic karma did he cash in on to deserve devotion like that? “I know, James. I do trust you.” Saying those words felt like exposing all his soft spots, so Tony hid the vulnerability behind another heated kiss.

Pulling away a second time was even harder (all Tony really wanted was to get himself lost in that kiss and forget about the rest of the world), but the atmosphere was still too heavy, laced with emotion and the darker promises of the future, so to lighten the mood, Tony quirked an eyebrow before leaning over the table and helping himself to a fry. He held it out for James with an amused smirk and despite his eye roll, James willing took the offered fry into his mouth and dutifully chewed
while Tony reached out to grab more for himself.

“These are great, but I gotta take you to this little hole-in-the-wall burger place in Los Angeles. Oh god, their fries are to die for, pretty sure they lace them with illicit drugs, they’re so good. And the burgers there, sweet Jesus. The way they melt the cheese— and the bread is just so fluffy and buttery, mmm.”

James obviously decided to ignore Tony’s very important food ramblings. “So, what’s the deal with our two godly guests? Are they sticking around?”

“They can’t stay for long, gotta report back to Odin Alldaddy, but they promised to come back later. They’re here for a few more days though, to talk strategy and give us more information. Well, in Thor’s case, at least. Pretty sure Loki’s just here to annoy the hell out of us. Still can’t believe that we’re making nice with that asshole.” Tony paused, remembering his words from that earlier confrontation with the gods. “Okay, probably a good time for me to say this, but you and Loki are completely different. Nothing I say about that guy has any bearing on how I feel about you.”

James contemplated him with an unreadable expression. “You think he’s lying then when he said he was tortured by this Thanos guy?”

Tony’s sigh bordered on weary. “I don’t know, okay? I mean, Thor believes him and his father seems to, but— well, Thor has a giant blind spot when it comes to his brother and—” Tony waved a hand in frustration. “Fuck, I don’t know. Some things make more sense now, the whole invasion. God, I remember how Loki was practically eager to get back to Asgard. Plus, I spent a ton of time reviewing every bit of surveillance from back then and the way he looked when he arrived here,” Tony hated this, but facts were facts, “it looked like he went through hell.”

James’ shoulder lifted on a shrug. “Doesn’t sound like we’re that different then. I killed people too, Tony. I’m responsible for a lot of damage too.”

“Stop, okay? It’s not—” How was Tony supposed to explain this? The last thing he wanted was that deserted, resigned look back on James’ face. He cursed Loki in his mind and resentfully hoped Loki could actually hear him. “It’s not the same. You had no control over your actions, no autonomy. And maybe Loki had little choice in the grand scheme of things too. Maybe he was under duress when he came here. But I saw him. He— he took pleasure in the chaos. Maybe he wouldn’t have come here had it not been for Thanos, but he sure as hell enjoyed himself when he showed up at a gala and ripped a guy’s eye out. He’s not a good man.” Tony laced their fingers together and brought them up against his chest. “You are, James. You’re one of the best men I know.” James was focused on their hands, so Tony lifted them up to press his lips against the vibranium knuckles. He let himself linger there for a few seconds before pulling away. “Please don’t compare yourself to him.”

James was nodding along and some of the earlier warmth had returned. “I know, Tony, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up my usual issues.” He shrugged. “Just— hard to miss the parallels between us, that’s all. But I wasn’t there with all of you during the invasion. Hell, I’ve never even met Thor. I don’t know what it was like. I trust you to know how to handle these two.”

Tony couldn’t deny the parallels, but even if Loki decided to turn “good”, there was still no denying that the man was an annoying asshole who loved getting under people’s skin. Some tiny voice in his head (sounded like Pepper, suspiciously) said that could easily describe Tony himself, but he promptly ignored it. “Well, for now, the status quo is that we’re taking them at their word, but we’re proceeding with caution. If Loki even steps one toe out of line, even thinks something evil, Friday is shooting him in the face. Strange was here for the meeting— although I didn’t even get a chance to say hello because it was so chaotic— he put up some magical wards too, some alarms that’ll go off if Loki uses his magic here. Plus, we crammed both him and Thor into one room, so big bro can be on
trickster watching duty.”

James chuckled. “You’re making them share a room?”

“Hey, Thor’s the one who vouched for his crazy, horny—er, horned brother, so he gets to keep an eye on him. Plus, there’s a perfectly comfortable couch in the quarters. They can fight over who gets to sleep on it.”

Tony wasn’t sure if James was picturing the ridiculous image of two gods squabbling over a couch, but the smile on his face was decidedly amused. A moment later, it was joined by a certain sparkle in his eyes that spelled nothing good for Tony.

“Okay, so this Loki fella is on probation, got it. But here’s what I really want to know. What is going on between the two of you?” He punctuated that with a gentle jab to Tony’s shoulder, who batted his hand away with a groan.

“There is nothing going on between me and Reindeer Games! He was a bad guy last time I met him, remember?” When all James did was raise an eyebrow, Tony tried to look sufficiently insulted. “Are you insinuating I would get involved with a villain? Of all the things—The audacity—” Tony couldn’t keep pretending to be outraged and it all broke on a laugh. “James, come on.”

“I dunno, he sure seems like your type.”

“My type?”

James hummed. “Mm-hmm. Tall, dark hair, tortured past.”

“I also like a sweet ass. Does Loki have a sweet ass?”

“Didn’t bother to check. Too distracted by yours.”

“I was in the Iron Man suit, you dork,” Tony managed in between the laughter before kissing James firmly on the lips. He picked the conversation back up once James was appropriately out of breath and his lips were a pretty, kiss-swollen red. “Seriously though, please ignore every single word that comes out of Loki’s mouth. He lives for annoying people, even if he’s not doing it on a city-destroying scale.”

“So I shouldn’t read into the flirting or the heated glances he throws your way? Friday gave me footage, ya know.” The hold on Tony’s waist tightened just a fraction as James brought them closer together. “Because the Soldier and I really don’t appreciate some alien god looking at our gorgeous, clever mechanic like that.”

Goddamn, that husky whisper always sent all of Tony’s blood rushing south and when James began planting feather light kisses along Tony’s neck, the rest of Tony’s critical thinking abilities promptly fizzled out into static.

He craned his neck to give James better access. “Well, I mean if you wanna punch him to defend my honor, m’not going to stop you.”

“You giving me permission to punch our house guests?” James punctuated the words with a playful bite, worrying his teeth against Tony’s skin while the metal hand slid under the waistband of Tony’s jeans, barely there caresses driving Tony crazy.

“Oh god, you have my permission to do whatever you want, just stop teasing me.”
James’ satisfied chuckle was answer enough and Tony decided to let the rest of the world fall away, if only for a while. Later they could get back on task, later Tony could share more of the details with James, who would chime in, asking and debating and building on Tony’s words, their conversation the natural push and pull that Tony had come to cherish. The world was about to face yet another crisis, former coworkers were returning from their disgraced exile, and with Tony’s and James’ luck, something else was bound to go wrong. Not yet though, not down here in the safety of Tony’s lab, where the only thing Tony had to focus on was James’ whispered promises and the perfect way they fit together.

Chapter End Notes

Somehow fluff made its way into my plot, whoops. With these two though? Entirely unsurprising.
Chapter 45

T’Challa squinted at the message flashing across his screen for almost a full minute, but eventually, the conflicting emotions manifested themselves in one long exhale.

The vote passed.

All of them are getting pardoned. The official docs won’t be signed for another week or two, but you might as well let your house guests know. They better start packing.

Also, have your people call my people to set up that meeting. Dr. Banner and I would love to chat more about the energy detection algorithms you mentioned. Gotta find this alien army before they find us.

He flicked his hand at the screen to make the words disappear.

The past few days had been… chaotic. One minute, he was struggling to stay awake while one of his economists droned on about some trade agreement or another, then the next, he was being pulled into the meeting with the Avengers and the rest of the world because an alien army was on its way here.

Frankly, chaotic didn’t do it justice.

The threat was a formidable one, but T’Challa had always been a warrior at heart and he was determined to face this without fear, to be actively involved in the global preparations. Isolationism was no longer a strategy Wakanda could afford and it was time for her to take her rightful place in the world, to defend herself and the rest of humanity.

Warrior or not, in his weaker moments, T’Challa did wonder whether he was truly capable of leading his nation through such a grand calamity. He desperately wished his father were still alive. King T’Chaka would have known the right thing to do or say, no matter the difficulty ahead. However, it was T’Challa who now bore the crown and that burden rested upon his shoulders and his shoulders alone.

The message from Stark lingered in his mind. Well, one less thing for me to worry about, I suppose. It was selfish to celebrate the pardons, he knew, but the departure of his long-term guests was long overdue. He did spare a thought for Stark himself though, wondering how the man would fare with his former allies back and likely living in the same space. He didn’t envy anyone that position, not after his less than stellar experiences with the group. For Stark’s sake, he hoped the change of scenery and a mission to protect the Earth would have a positive effect on the former Avengers’ attitudes.

T’Challa allowed himself one more small sigh before squaring his shoulders and diving back into his work, sparing only a moment to schedule a visit to the villa in the next few days. Although a call would’ve sufficed, he supposed he should make a personal appearance to inform the former Avengers of both the pardons and the threat to Earth.

***

Alice dropped her head against her clenched fists, the wood of the table biting into her elbows. One
deep breath, then two more, before she managed to open her eyes and finish reading the rest of the message.

*Heard through the grapevine that Rogers and the others might get pardoned after all. It’s a cushy job you got there, but are you seriously going to stay if they come back? You went to the same funerals I did, Al. How many empty coffins did we lower into the ground?*

She swallowed back the bitter bile threatening to rise up in her throat. With more force than necessary, she shoved the phone and it slid across the table far enough away so that she couldn’t see the words. Merely a token effort, since their photo negative was seared into her brain.

Tony had already approached her, all soothing words and gentle hugs, to give her a heads up that the vote passed and to convince her that staying was the right thing to do, promising that he would do his best to mitigate the effects of the former Avengers’ presence. If it were anyone else, she would have reacted with derision at the empty platitudes, but this was Tony and he knew, better than anyone, that this whole thing was like pouring salt into a wound that still hadn’t managed to heal.

His life was about to turn upside down too, but even though this was a man who had every means and opportunity to just disappear, drop the whole Avengers gig and spend the rest of his days lounging on a beach in the Caribbean (because to hell with the rest of the world that criticized his every step until it actually needed him), Tony wasn’t going to run.

He was brave, sometimes too damn brave for his own good.

At the moment, Alice wasn’t sure whether there was enough bravery left in her.

***

Tony was in the middle of adding an unreasonable amount of whipped cream into one of the mugs of hot chocolate—*it was a super soldier miracle that James didn’t get cavities*—when the Starkphone in his pocket vibrated. He balanced two mugs in one hand and somehow managed to get the phone out with the other without spilling anything as he walked back to his quarters.

*I heard about the pardons. How are you and Bucky holding up?* Let me know if I need to fly back for a pep talk. Otherwise, once this goes public, we need to schedule a press conference. Swear to god, if this mess tanks Stark Industries stock, Steve Rogers will not live through the week. I’ve got a shiny stiletto with his name on it.

Also, I hate to separate you two love birds, but that PR strategy we discussed earlier? We need to get on that now. I know you’re too busy, but Bucky can come out to LA for a few days, spend it with me and the PR team. It’ll be good for him to get out of the Compound anyways. The public backlash against the pardons is inevitable and I want Bucky shielded from that.

*Miss you, Tony. Hang in there.*

He was already typing out a quick reply by the time he reached the rooms and James, who was lounging on the bed when Tony walked in, quickly got up to grab one of the mugs.

“That better not be a work email, Tony. I haven’t seen more than a glimpse of you in the past two days and you promised that tonight was going to be a work and aliens free night.”

Tony had to smile at that exaggerated pout on James’ gorgeous face. “Got a message from Pepper. She wants you to come visit her in Los Angeles, start prepping you for the public eye.”
James scrunched up his face in disapproval. “Can’t I just punch some aliens instead? I’m an assassin, what the hell do I know about this ‘personal representation’ stuff?”

Tony hit “send” and dropped the phone onto the night stand so he could sit cross-legged on the bed and take his first sip of the warm cocoa. “And that’s exactly why you’re going to California for a few days. Trust me, you’re in the capable hands of Pepper Potts. By the time she’s done with you, you’ll be handling the press like a pro.”

James snaked an arm around Tony’s waist and making sure not to spill either one of their drinks, he carefully pulled him close, probably to keep Tony from escaping to answer more emails. James was adamant, after the Council voted that morning, that he and Tony spend the night together, away from the negativity that surrounded the affair. Tony just wished he had the words to express how much the effort meant to him and luckily for James, Tony didn’t want to be anywhere else but here at the moment. The damn aliens and the pardons and whatever else, all of that could wait until they were done with their night of ridiculously sweet drinks and movie marathons (that would be inevitably derailed by vigorous make-out sessions).

“I know it’s necessary and I know I’d have to go without you, but I just hate leaving you, honey, that’s all. We don’t have a good track record with being separated.”

The frown on James’ face was the last thing Tony wanted to see on their night off, so he dropped a kiss to his cheek before snuggling closer.

“It’ll be fine. You can even wait to leave until the Norse Bros are off-planet, if it makes you feel better. We’ll figure it out. Now, I promised you no more aliens tonight, but I may have lied. Your introduction to the glory that is Star Wars is long overdue.”

***

Loki blinked open his eyes to find the dull-colored ceiling of their humble accommodations on Midgard. He spent one long moment debating whether he should simply find a path between worlds and disappear, but he supposed there was only one more Midgardian day left of their visit and with any luck, Loki would find something to entertain him. All the political discussions were absolutely tedious since he actually had to behave.

He let his eyes close, attuning himself to his surroundings as he took deep, steady breaths. Strangely, the world around him sang with magic. Midgard was never known for its abundance of magical energies or those who were able to wield them, but here, in this place they called The Compound, the entire building hummed as magic coursed through it. Invisible to the naked eye, but Loki could see the shimmers of blue when he chose to look harder, although in his case, sight was unnecessary. He could feel the magic down to his very bones.

Especially given its source because it sang the same notes as the Tesseract and initially, when he and Thor had entered the building, it startled—terrified—him to be surrounded by the energy of an Infinity Stone. The fear was thankfully short-lived when, upon further inspection, he deemed the magic to be harmless, at least to him. In fact, it seemed protective in nature and he felt foolish that it took him far too long to make the connection. While similar to the Stone, it was actually the same magic that stopped his scepter and protected one Tony Stark.

Stark must have somehow used the magic contained in whatever powered him and his suits to build a protective shield over this place. Impressive for a mortal, to dabble with the power of an Infinity Stone like that. Stones, technically, since Stark’s entire being reeked of the Mind Stone’s energy, albeit a corrupt version of it. Loki attempted to bring it up in one of the meetings, but was promptly shushed by Thor and half of the Avengers before being accused of attempting to derail the
conversation with his usual antics, to which he responded with a simple scoff, dropping the point. Served him right for trying to be helpful, but he still hoped Stark knew what he was getting himself into, playing with the Mind Stone. Loki would hate to see his favorite person on Midgard be destroyed by that wretched rock. No one believed him, but he never relished having the power to control minds. The mere thought of someone using that sort of power on him made his skin crawl. What he did to the Hawk and others, he did regret, but any guilt on his part was irrelevant now. The damage was done and they had bigger things to deal with.

It was strange, however, that such an artifact ended up creating a whole new being. He was told The Vision was a product of the Stone and a program Stark created, similar to the invisible servant that lived within the walls, but Loki still struggled to reconcile the power he remembered—ancient, infinite, intoxicating, horrifying—with the soft spoken creature who wore sweaters and brought everyone snacks when the meeting ran too long.

His thoughts were becoming jumbled again, so he pushed away the cacophony of questions and memories, focusing back on the magic, absorbing the sense of peace that emanated from its soothing hum.

When he opened his eyes for the second time, he glanced over to the other side of the room and had to stifle a laugh at the image of his brother attempting (and failing) to fit on that long lounging chair with his tall, burly frame. He was stretched out under a too small blanket, an arm hanging off the side and his legs too long to fit comfortably. Once in a while, a quiet, whistling snore would escape the sleeping form.

Truth be told, the bed was spacious enough to accommodate them both with ease, but Thor graciously offered to let Loki have it and if the big oaf wanted to be chivalrous to his own detriment, Loki wasn’t going to stop him. Perhaps the painful knots in his neck from sleeping at that odd angle would teach Thor a lesson.

Thor did paint a hilarious picture though and Loki sent mental thanks to Stark. Although he was certain Stark could have provided them with something far more appropriate, it really was in Stark’s nature to stick them in this one meager room under guise of security just to spite Loki himself.

After all, it was exactly what Loki would have done.

Another minute passed and Thor’s discomfort no longer entertained him, so it was time for a wake-up call. He gestured with his left hand, about to conjure a small rubber sphere to throw at Thor, but stopped at the last second when he remembered the alarms that Strange fellow had placed. Given that he was still leery of this invisible servant that promised to strike him down at the earliest opportunity, he decided against using magic, especially for something so trivial. Instead, he raised himself up on his elbows just enough to reach over and grab the small item that displayed the Midgardian time and without any further preamble, Loki hurled it at Thor, aiming to hit the man squarely in the chest—

Thor caught the bauble with ease and Loki tried not to pout. When did he become so predictable that Thor could anticipate this?

After a beat, Thor cracked open one disapproving eye. “Why must you always wake me like this, brother? A simple pat on the shoulder would suffice.”

“Thor, I am stuck on Midgard. With you. I must get my entertainment where I can.”

Thor’s response was to sigh a put-upon sigh and place the clock gently down on the floor. The blanket pooled in his lap as he sat up and stretched, scratching idly at his beard.
“Very well. I suppose it is time to get up and keep you occupied lest you run off and cause mischief.” Another stretch before Thor stood up. “We have no meetings until later today. Would food keep you sufficiently entertained?”

Food wasn’t the worst idea, Loki decided, especially if it afforded him the chance to run into other Avengers. One particular brown-eyed hero came to mind. “Very well, but I do not want to eat at that common eatery with the rest of the mortals.”

“They call it a cafeteria, Loki,” Thor corrected, but he looked to be contemplating the idea. “Lady Friday, would Tony mind if Loki and I use his facilities to cook ourselves a meal?”

The reply of the invisible servant came quickly. “Not at all, Mr. Odinson. You and Mr. Odinson are welcome to use the kitchen. Please ask if you’re looking for anything in particular, I am happy to help.”

“Thank you,” Thor was smiling at the ceiling. “Amazing, isn’t it, that Tony can create life like this, with nothing but his tools?”

It was amazing, actually. Other than the obvious way, creating life without any magic was a feat Loki didn’t think was possible, especially not for a Midgardian, but Stark had a habit of proving him wrong.

Loki said none of those things. Instead, he scowled and directed his voice at the ceiling. “I believe I told you to refer to me as Loki Friggasson, servant.”

“And I believe I told you to call me Friday.”

Loki scoffed at the audacity, while Thor just laughed.

“Stubborn and clever, just like her father. Loki is sorry, Lady Friday, and he promises to be respectful from now on, I will see to it.” Thor met Loki’s muttered insults with an indulgent smile and an extended hand. “Come, brother. It may have been some time since I’ve last been on Midgard, but I am certain I can make us a hearty meal.”

Loki looked at the hand first, then at the rest of his brother, standing there with that smile and those bright blue eyes. Thor played no games with him, carried no agendas. Thor could never lie well and he could never lie at all to Loki. Every time he did this, a simple gesture of extending his hand, it always felt like Thor was offering so much more— brotherhood, trust, love— and Loki hated that it warmed some needy, lonely part of him.

After being absolved by Odin, Loki had half a mind to simply run and he almost followed through on that plan until Thor found him— Thor always managed to find him except the one time Loki was truly lost— and pleaded for Loki to stay.

“Please, brother, don’t leave. Stay here with me, help me rebuild Asgard to its former glory. I cannot do this without you.” Those blue eyes pleaded with Loki. “You’re all I have left.”

Thor’s platitudes, however honest, were not what ultimately convinced Loki to stay. No, rather, it was the fact that at some point, Loki stopped seeing Odin when he looked at Thor.

Instead, he began to see Frigga. She was his mother, blood and lies and heartbreak be damned, and Thor still carried some small part of her within him.

Thor was the only one Loki had left too.
So he remained on Asgard, assisted Thor, avoided Odin and many others at court, and behaved only enough to keep himself out of jail. Some days were easier than others, but today, taking his brother’s hand wasn’t a true hardship.

Nevertheless, he made sure to seem sufficiently put-out, eyes rolled and words sharp, as he took the proffered hand and let himself be pulled from the bed.

***

He walked behind his brother who led the way into what passed for a kitchen around here and Loki let his eyes roam, taking in every detail around him. The surroundings were clean and (by his understanding) highly technological, but it was rather utilitarian in its appearance. Efficiency over opulence and certainly different from the extravagant Stark Tower he remembered. He wondered briefly when and why Stark changed his living quarters, but ultimately decided it was of no concern to him.

“What would you like for breakfast, brother?” Thor’s voice cut through his musings. Loki arched an eyebrow when the blond stopped to regard the kitchen area and then turn back to Loki with an expression that bordered on sheepish. “The last time I made breakfast, it was for Jane when we were still together, but I’m sure I can manage.”

Loki doubted that and he wondered if he would get to see something on fire. *One could only hope.*

“Are there no servants? I could’ve sworn Stark was a man of wealth among these mortals.”

“Sure am, Reindeer Games,” rang the familiar voice behind Loki and he spun around to be greeted with a smirking Stark who wiggled his fingers in a mockery of a greeting as he walked by, “but we like to do things for ourselves around here. Good morning, Thor,” Stark addressed the other god in the room. “Hope you don’t mind us crashing your breakfast, but we decided to join when Friday said you two were heading over.” Moments later, another man with a silver, metallic arm emerged from around the corner. Thor received one simple glance from him, but Loki was gifted with a frankly impressive glare, which was strange, given that Loki had never met the man, but he supposed his reputation preceded him.

“Alright, let’s get the boring introductions out of the way. James, meet Thor, our resident Norse god and all around fun guy. Great at parties, just wait until he gets drunk and starts telling you about Bilgsnipe, whatever the hell those are. That one over there is our hopefully former villain, Loki, don’t talk to him, he’s a menace—”

“Such flatterer, Stark.”

“—and an all around pain in the ass. Norse gods, meet James Barnes. Usually goes by Bucky. He’s the guy Cap was looking for when you were last here, Thor. James is a badass from the 40’s, has a taste for the sweeter things in life, and he’s basically the coolest person in the Compound, other than me. Just don’t tell Rhodey I said that.”

Stark finished that off with toothy smile, before heading over to the refrigerator. Despite the sunny disposition, Loki could still see the familiar lines of tension, obvious in the way Stark held himself, the way his eyes followed Loki’s every move. Stark didn’t trust him, had been wary of his presence since the first day, but the man was putting on a show and Loki had no problem with playing along.

This *James Barnes* also struck quite a picture, with all that towering muscle and his arms crossed defensively over his chest, but aside from that unique left arm which kept drawing Loki’s eye, this man seemed to fall into the same category as the good Captain and Thor. One more muscle-headed warrior type who solved every problem with his fists and a deafening amount of yelling and
posturing. *Not entertaining.*

Thor gave a short, but friendly greeting and while the other man narrowed his eyes for a fraction of a second, he did incline his head in acknowledgement and offered his own quiet *hello*. Then his eyes turned to Loki.

“Hey, Tony?” the man called out, eyes never straying from their target.

Stark looked over the refrigerator door. “What’s up?”

“This the guy that tossed you outta the window?” Barnes tilted his chin at Loki.

“Yup, that’s the one. Heh, that was a pretty fun way to test out the new suit,” Stark remarked, sounding almost amused as he went back to rummaging through the food items. “But like I said, just pretend he’s not—”

The rest of what Stark said was lost when Loki found himself slammed against the nearest wall, the unmistakable sensation of metal clamping around his throat. His head hit the wall hard enough to momentarily disorient him, but when he came to, he was staring into the eyes of a very different man.

*The eyes of a killer.*

“What— Oh, James, what the hell?”

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Thor, wait, hold on, buddy.” From his vantage point, Loki saw Stark place a hand on Thor’s bicep, which unsurprisingly stopped the god— *that big oaf, how typical*— and Thor’s expression shifted from anger to confusion. Stark was scowling at his companion. “James, stop harassing our guests!”

Barnes glanced in Stark’s direction, a smirk playing at his lips. “You gave me permission to do whatever I wanted, remember, *solnishko*? Don’t worry, I just want to talk.”

Thor was still attempting to say something, Stark was muttering curses under his breath—

That metal hand tightened, just enough to make it clear how much damage it could do.

“Eyes on me, *Loki.*”

Loki obeyed, to be met with the coldest blue.

“Hi there, I’m James Barnes. Nice to meet ya.” The smirk widened, a sharp little thing that could make one bleed, and while Loki could’ve escaped the hold with the use of his magic, some reckless part of him was far too fascinated with this man now. Loki finally found something interesting to keep his attention here on Midgard.

*A warrior made of ice.*

“Pleasure,” was all Loki managed before that hand tightened a fraction more and breathing became troublesome.

“I’m gonna tell you this just once, so listen closely. Stay away from Tony. You don’t touch Tony, you don’t look at him, you don’t even *think* about him. Understand?”

Was that *jealousy* in the man’s eyes?
Barnes leaned in closer. “He’s mine, trickster,” he whispered into Loki’s ear, switching to a different language, although Loki’s Allspeak translated it effortlessly, “and if you hurt him, I will show you just how good I am at taking people like you apart.”

Those eyes were back on him, full of sharp edges and dark promises and death. It wasn’t jealousy that Loki saw either, but rather pure, primal possessiveness that hid beneath that steady, wintry acrimony. This man’s eyes may have been blue, but they were nothing like Thor’s. No, there was something broken here, something broken and then hastily put back together, never to resemble the original. Forever flawed. Oh blessed Norns, it was like staring into a mirror.

“I said, do you understand me?” The biting cold in that voice was a clear warning.

“Perfectly,” Loki murmured, sticking to single words, but despite the fact that everything about this man screamed danger, Loki smiled as well, honey sweet and indulgent. Those deadly—gorgeous—eyes narrowed, the man obviously seeing right through Loki’s display, but in the next moment, air was filling his lungs again as the metal disappeared.

“And you!” Barnes was suddenly pointing at Thor and all of Loki’s attention was promptly pulled away from massaging his abused throat. “Don’t think you’re off the hook either! You keep your hands off Tony too!”

Thor looked sufficiently bewildered as he stood there opening and closing his mouth like a fish—your future King, everybody!—while Stark was pinching the bridge of his nose, looking for all the world like he wanted to bolt. Loki just wanted to know when exactly Thor had his hands on Stark and why in Hel’s name Loki was unaware of it.

“Friend Barnes, I am uncertain as to why—”

“I mean hell, Loki’s a bad guy, it’s expected, but you were Tony’s friend! You make a habit of grabbing friends by the neck and lifting them off the floor every time you get angry?”

Oh, well, that was unsurprising. Loki was more familiar than most with Thor’s legendary temper. Thor must’ve remembered something, because that was definitely his guilty face, obvious even as Thor attempted to replace it with a scowl. “Is that not what you just did with Loki?”

Loki may have… tolerated Thor nowadays, but Thor getting lectured was never going to get old and Barnes was quickly becoming his (second) favorite person on Midgard.

“Thor, in his defense, I am not his friend. Not to mention, I am of far superior strength compared to a mere mortal, which of course he took into account during his little… chat with me.”

It was Barnes’ turn to look bewildered as his brows creased in confusion when he glanced over at Loki, who simply rejoiced. This was so much more entertaining than the endless political back-and-forth or the dull days spent in the courts of Asgard.

“Okay, James, everybody, let’s just—” Stark finally cut in, rubbing a frustrated hand over his cheek. “Let’s just all chill, okay? Everybody, behave. Whatever we all did to each other in the past… Water under the bridge. We’re allies now, or whatever, no point in yelling at each other.”

Barnes didn’t look particularly mollified. Those eyes, which lost that sharp edge when they were focused on Stark, were back to that glorious icy cold as they swept over Loki and Thor. “Fine, I’ll make it short and sweet then. Either of you hurt Tony again, I am putting you through a damn wall. There,” he took the few steps that put him next to Stark, “I behaved,” he added with another smirk, now more playful than cold. Fascinating how everything about the man changed when Stark was the
center of his focus.

“That is— that is so not behaving,” Stark sputtered, but he was clearly on the verge of giving up. “Ugh, fine. I could’ve done without the Soldier appearance, though,” he muttered under his breath before throwing Thor an apologetic glance. “Sorry, Point Break, James gets… protective sometimes.”

“All the times,” Barnes barked out, a warning if Loki ever heard one, before heading over to the other side of the kitchen to begin opening cabinets and pulling out utensils.

Thor was tapping his fingers against his thigh, a nervous gesture no royal tutor had ever been able to stamp out of him. The guilty, furrowed brows were also a dead giveaway. “No, no, your friend is correct. I should be the one to apologize and I had no right to accuse him of doing what I did. You were my teammate and, in hindsight, I know now that my anger was misplaced. I— I still struggle with my temper and I could have truly hurt you back then—”

“Hey, hey, it’s all good, okay?” Stark looked to be ten different kinds of uncomfortable. “Like I said, all’s forgiven, we’re chill, no need to bring it up again. Plus, I’m not that fragile!” he gesticulated nonsensically as he turned around to attend to the produce he took out of the refrigerator earlier. “Why does everyone keep thinking I’m made of spun glass?”

Barnes stopped was he was doing, surrounded now by several bowls and boxes, to level Thor and Loki with a look, arms crossed over his chest once again.

“So…” he narrowed his eyes at them, “you two want some damn pancakes or what?”

Thor, still too distracted by his own guilt, was startled by the change in topic, but Loki plastered his same honeyed smile and chirped a pleasant “Yes, please, you are much too kind,” before ushering his brother over to a table. No need for them to be standing around like fools.

Barnes’ only response was a roll of his eyes before he went back to his work, calling out for Stark to grab some food item for him. Stark obliged, handing it over, and Loki watched carefully, as he did all fascinating things. When their hands touched and gazes met, Barnes’ whole countenance softened yet again. Warmth and affection and—

Oh dear, was that love? Loki suspected, from that first growled threat, but here it was, the confirmation clear as day. The moment was over as Stark headed back to the other side, but there was no denying the connection between the two now, and Loki had to force himself to sit still. It wouldn’t do to allow his mirth to spill forth.

It was no wonder Barnes reacted the way he did. He was making a claim, marking his territory. Stark was off limits, his to protect and cherish and love. A man made of ice in love with the man made of starlight. These mortals were just precious.

Despite Loki’s initial assessment though, Barnes was an actual threat. Likely as strong as the good Captain or even Thor, with that metal arm a worthy weapon, but the powerful body and the metallic enhancements, those were simply tools at the man’s disposal. No, what made this man a true threat was that deathly chill beneath the pale blue. It seemed to be gone now as he fussed over preparing their breakfast, but something like that could never truly remain hidden. Loki itched to know more. What hell did this warrior live through? What scars marred his soul so deeply as to spill into his eyes and into his words?

Things to contemplate later. Stark was messing with a contraption that began to smell of coffee and though his visits to Midgard had been rare over the centuries past, Loki did remember coffee to agree
with his palette.

“You know, Stark, about that drink you promised me so long ago… A cup of your finest coffee would certainly suffice,” he said, dropping his voice into something more demure and gracing Stark with a smile. In his peripheral, he caught Barnes stop his movements, let out a frustrated sigh, and go back to his work. Loki tried not to laugh as he imagined the man scowling into his batter. Just because Stark was off limits didn’t mean Loki couldn’t have some innocent fun.

It was for naught however because all Stark did was grumble a frustrated “Oh my god, it was a stalling tactic, why does everyone keep bringing that up?” He did however grab another cup.

Stark was then called upon to help again and while the two mortals worked and Thor sat quietly in contemplation, Loki took the time to absorb the situation before him. He had to wonder how in Yggdrasil’s name he got to this moment, sitting at this tiny table on Midgard, surrounded by his once-estranged brother and former enemies. One couldn’t dream up such ridiculous nonsense, but it was real and he supposed, above all else, it was safe.

A stark contrast to before.

Memories rose unbidden, as they always did when Loki least expected them, of madness, of pain and violence and death, and it sent a cold shiver down Loki’s spine. He barely managed to suppress a flinch. No, he was free, he was safe—

He was falling.

—there will be no realm, no barren moon, no crevice where he can’t find you. You think you know pain? He will make you long for something as sweet as pain—

Stark’s laugh broke through the echoes of that vile voice, helping Loki to regain focus on the present moment. Apparently Thor had finally remembered his manners and engaged their hosts in conversation and Stark was laughing at whatever story Thor decided to share.

Loki took Stark in. The toothy grin, more natural this time, the laugh lines, the crinkles at the corners of the man’s eyes, made all the more prominent by his mirth. So fragile, these mortals, with their fleeting existences, barely a blip in the grand scheme of the universe.

Like tiny little mayflies.

Stark paused his cooking attempts to grab the second cup, already filled to the brim, and place it in front of Loki with his usual, playful “Drink up, Reindeer Games.”

Loki murmured a quiet “Thank you,” his usual antics toned down by his darkened thoughts, but the first sip of the coffee helped push the memories back even further. Everything in Asgard was always so cloyingly sweet, but this was strong and bitter, laced with a lovely, earthy taste. He savored the flavor, enjoying how the heat traveled down his throat and through his whole body, grounding him in reality.

Stark and the others were to be their allies against the Mad Titan. Not the only ones, if the negotiations with other realms went smoothly, but likely the most prominent, given the strategic significance of Midgard, and mayflies or not, these mortals were quite capable in the art of destruction.

Thor’s booming voice carried across the space and although Loki paid very little attention to Thor’s actual words, he was prepared when his brother reached out to clap a heavy hand on his shoulder. Loki made a show of rolling his eyes, causing Stark to chuckle the display, but Stark missed Loki’s
more pleased reaction, which was hidden behind another sip of coffee.

He was siding with Asgard and Thor and the mortals because this was the best way to make that monster pay. Loki was no fool, it was to his advantage to be here, to remain relatively docile and behave himself.

Thor smiled, white teeth on full display and eyes sparkling, but it was directed at Loki rather than Stark and for all the time Loki spent trying to convince himself that this was strategy and nothing more, he was never very good at lying to himself.

Sentiment was always Thor’s weakness, but it was Loki’s weakness too.

“Yo, Rock of Ages! What do you want on your pancakes?” Stark made for quite a sight, brandishing a spoon in Loki’s direction while specks of white flour adorned his cheek and nose. Midgard’s greatest warrior indeed. Loki absently chose the first thing Stark mentioned. It surprised him that he didn’t mind this absurd domesticity, but safety was a blessing he would no longer take for granted and he supposed it was difficult to complain when he was also afforded with such a splendid view.

Stark had fascinated him since the very beginning, a mortal who carried the fire of a star within him, and this James Barnes, cold and dangerous and beautifully broken, was a new little puzzle for Loki to mull over. It also didn’t hurt that both were quite gorgeous and while Loki had no delusion that he could seduce either one, he was certainly allowed to let his mind wander.

Imagining both of these fascinating, gorgeous creatures in his bed was a much better use of his mental faculties than morose sentimentality, he decided, but with Loki’s typical luck, he didn’t get very far before plates of flat breads arrived and suddenly, everyone was seated at the table.

The others dug in enthusiastically. Loki took a tentative taste of these pancakes, quickly deemed them too sweet, and silently pushed his plate over to Thor. Coffee would suffice for now and Loki hoped Stark’s generosity extended to a refill or two.

“Tony, although it pains me to ruin the cheerful mood,” Thor began after (thankfully) swallowing the food in his mouth and then paused to grace a grimacing Stark with an apologetic look. “I didn’t press for information before, understanding that we had other priorities. But we have time now, so I must ask… where are the other Avengers?”

Loki carefully observed as both Stark’s and Barnes’ expressions shifted from the earlier easygoing levity to something somber, perhaps even pained. Very interesting.

For the first time during this entire conversation, he gave his full attention to the mortals. Stark mentioned those Sokovia Accords again, an attempt by these mortals to harness the chaos. As the God of Chaos, he scoffed at the attempt to control the uncontrollable, but he was also a prince raised to rule a kingdom (the falsehood of his origins notwithstanding), and so he could understand the need for structure and hierarchy.

“So, we ended up disagreeing over the Accords for fundamentally… philosophical reasons, let’s call them. I thought we needed accountability, Steve was worried the governments would try to take advantage of us.” Stark rubbed a hand over one eye, weariness suddenly descending upon him. “I get where he was coming from, I do. After finding out that SHIELD was overrun by Hydra, I don’t hold it against him to be mistrustful. But I promised him there would be revisions, clauses that would protect superpowered people, that would limit the amount of control others have over us—”

The details were irrelevant to Loki, but the broader strokes told him enough. He wanted to scoff. After all the time he spent bringing these idiots together to form a team! Who knew that a silly little
document was all that was needed to fracture the mighty Avengers?

“—So Steve was about to sign, but then he found out I was keeping Wanda on lock-down.” Stark’s expression soured further. “I was just trying to protect her, the public was ready to tear her to shreds, but Steve decided I was keeping her prisoner here. And after that, we all, uh—”

Stark trailed off, struggling to continue. Barnes placed a gentle hand on Stark’s shoulder.

“Steve and I got word of other super soldiers, soldiers like me who were conditioned by Hydra to obey them, and we thought it would be too risky to tell anyone. We ended up fighting against Tony and the others…” Guilt was practically oozing out of the man and his throat visibly bobbed as he took a hard swallow. “We made a bunch of stupid mistakes is what we did. We fought friends, we let Tony take the fall for a lot of things that weren’t his fault, and at the end of the day, we didn’t even save anyone. It was all a trap and nothing came out of it but more damage.”

Stark was staring at his half-eaten pancakes. “As part of this whole mess, Steve and the others were in a lot of legal trouble, so they’ve been in hiding for just over a year now. Not for long though,” Stark added with a frankly dejected shrug, “your little bombshell was the final push our government needed to let them back in. Saving the planet trumps our little spat, I guess.”

The crease between Thor’s brows indicated that he was mulling the information over. His eyes settled on Barnes. “You were part of the team that sided with the Captain, correct?” He waited for Barnes to nod. “Not to be impolite, but why are you here while the others remain in hiding?”

Barnes gave Thor a self-deprecating smile. “I wouldn’t be here without Tony. He decided I deserved a second chance.”

“You know the story, Thor, Steve told you about his long-lost friend the last time you were here.” Stark glanced over at Barnes and that affection from earlier was back in full force. “James was brainwashed and tortured by Hydra for seventy years, controlled to do their dirty work. He wasn’t in any state to think clearly while the Accords mess was happening. Steve and the others didn’t have that excuse. So, I ended up getting James pardoned so he could come here and I could use my tech to make sure Hydra could never control him again.”

A few puzzle pieces fell into place. Seventy Midgardian years was a blink of an eye for Loki, but it was an entire lifetime for a mortal and to be held captive by one’s enemies, tortured and forced to do their bidding… Oh yes, the wrath steeped deep in the veins of this man was a familiar one.

“I see. Then I am glad you are well, friend Barnes,” Thor accepted Stark’s explanation and seemed to have let the point go. “While I understand the ideological differences, it still pains me to hear that our team had broken so— so thoroughly. I am sorry I was not here to alleviate this burden, even though I must admit I would’ve been little help, with my limited understanding of your governments and your laws.”

“It’s all good, big guy,” Stark waved Thor’s genuine remorse away with a carefree gesture. “This was for us Earthlings to figure out.”

Thor’s sigh was dejected. “I miss all of our shield brothers and sisters. No matter their transgressions, it will be good to have them back. We must be a united front if we are to win against the Mad Titan. We must put our differences aside, just as my brother and I have, so we can be victorious when our enemies arrive.”

Loki still didn’t say anything, even as Thor dug the hole deeper. They don’t want their former friends here, Thor, can’t you see? Loki was certain plenty of details were omitted out of their little tale
because this wasn’t simply a fight over ideologies. No, there had to be something truly personal that happened here, something that the two kept out of their story.

Unlike Thor, who mostly took things at face value, Loki was always a master of reading between the lines.

Stark finally remembered Loki was at the table. “You’ve been awfully quiet, Rudolph, I’m starting to worry you’re over there plotting world domination. And you didn’t even eat your pancakes. What, is our peasant food not good enough for your refined tastes?”

“I am always plotting, Stark,” Loki drawled, pleased when Stark just rolled his eyes, “and frankly, I am surprised you disclose so much information in the presence of your worst enemy. Also, I am not overly fond of sweets.”

“Oh, please, worst enemy? You’re not even ranked anymore— but don’t get any ideas! I like you just like this.” Stark gestured at Loki, as if that meant something, before noticing the empty mug. “Hmm, how about… all the coffee you could possibly drink if you promise to behave yourself?”

“Sweeten that with a kiss from your friend over there and you have yourself a deal.”

Thor groaned, Barnes snapped the fork he was holding in half while looking equal parts flabbergasted and homicidal, but Stark just raised an eyebrow.

“Wow, didn’t take you long to replace me in your heart, did it?”

“I’m sorry, Stark, but can you really blame me?”

There was that familiar smirk playing at Stark’s lips. “Nope. He is pretty handsome, isn’t he?” Stark threw a heated glance Barnes’ way and before the other man could even respond, Stark planted a loud kiss on his cheek, jumped to his feet and grabbed Loki’s mug, stopping to point in Loki’s direction. “He’s handsome and all mine, so stay away, pal. You’re gonna have to settle for the coffee.”

Loki decided Midgard wasn’t so bad after all as he laughed, for the first time in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Preview of Next Week's Shenanigans: Between being the Sorcerer Supreme and now aliens, Dr. Strange is a pretty busy guy. But maybe, just maybe he finally finds the time to come visit Vision and Tony at the Compound for a cup of coffee.
Miss me yet?

like crazy! you’re gone for an afternoon and i’m already giving butterfingers an upgrade

Don’t you have an alien invasion to prepare for?

…i’m multitasking. but never mind that, how’s california? how’s the meeting going??

I snuck away for a breather. It’s a lot to take in. Pepper’s amazing though, arranging everything. Just wish you were here with me. Have a real hard time being away from you like this now. The Soldier is too damn restless.

i know, babe, i hate not having you here either, but you know how it is. feels like every other hour is another “strategy” session, even with the norse bros finally back in asgard. but next time, i promise. we’ll go to that burger place i told you about

I’ll hold you to that.

But I am coming back before the pardons are officially announced, right? I’m not letting you face Steve and the others alone.

yeah, that’s still a week out, at least. the cogs of the federal government move pretty slowly. and damn straight you better be back by then.

i need you, babe

so much

DUM-E tried to make coffee for me and I’m pretty sure he actually poisoned me. i can’t live without your coffee

He did his best, be nice.

And I can’t believe you keep me around just for the coffee.

coffee and that sweet ass ;)

God, I miss you.

Bad jokes and all.

And I really do appreciate all of this. Feels like my reputation shouldn’t be anyone’s priority right now, given everything, but I know it’s important. I’m just worried all of you are wasting your time with me.

hey, hey, james, i told you. the world is going to love you

honestly, you don’t even need any of our help. you’re a pow, a war hero, a victim who rose above his trauma, etc, etc

more importantly, you’re unfairly hot and have lethal puppy dog eyes
you’re golden

You are ridiculous and I don’t know how I got so lucky with you.

Shoot, Pepper is waving me back in. I have to go. Call you tonight?

you know where to find me :)

Sure do. Miss you so much, honey.

Tony was down in the lab, with only the bots and Friday for company, and since they had all seen much, much worse, he didn’t bother hiding the sappy smile that blossomed on his face at the text exchange.

God, he really did miss that man. James’ absence was a visceral, lingering ache in his chest, making him almost regret convincing the man to take the trip. Almost. James was right, this was important. Aliens were years away, but the media was ready to pounce at any moment and frankly, Tony wasn’t sure who was more vicious (personally, he’d rather deal with aliens than reporters any day).

James took the private jet to Los Angeles earlier that morning and Pepper was planning to spend a good chunk of the next several days strategizing with Tony’s own PR team and hashing out the details of James’ reintroduction to the general populace.

Tony’s initial plan didn’t actually involve Pepper, given her already demanding schedule, but after Tony offhandedly mentioned the effort (and because she was a generous goddess), she made a personal commitment to helping James reclaim his reputation and have a relatively smooth transition back into the public eye. Over the past year, the actions of the other Avengers were mostly regaled to an occasional ad piece or rantings of obscure bloggers, in large part because the masses, at least in the States, were swept up in more recent and more appealing public dramas. Unfortunately, that would likely change after the public signing of the pardons. While there would always be Captain America fans (many people never stopped being his fans), Tony was certain there would be plenty of people who would see this as an overreach by the executive branch, as preferential treatment for the superpowereds, or as simple disregard for justice.

Whatever the reason, there would be backlash and Tony’s primary concern was James, and to some extent the New Avengers. They needed to come out of this smelling like roses. The former Avengers, however, could get their own damn PR teams.

The plan with James was mostly to tell the truth, as odd as that sounded. James was a victim of brainwashing by neo-Nazi terrorists (even at its most indifferent, the public still had enough wits to hate Nazis) who was pardoned and brought back home. After a slow but successful recovery, he was finally ready to be reintegrated into society.

A narrative that was missing a large number of details, some more crucial than others, but the gist of it remained true.

Tony absently scratched at his beard, eyeing the disembodied leg of the latest and greatest Iron Man armor standing in front of him. Part of his brain was trying to run through the updated thrust calculations given the heavier materials, but the rest of him was still focused on James.

There was a decent chance, especially with Pepper Potts at the helm, that they would be able to reintroduce James with minimal damage, but he still didn’t envy James the process. PR prep, dealing with the media, knowing what to say and what not to say… That was a nightmare that Tony was intimately familiar with.
Thankfully, his antics had been toned down over the years (older and wiser, as the saying went) and he was ready and willing to stick to impeccable behavior from now on, given that his and James’ reputations were soon to be irreversibly intertwined.

“Stark Tech Gives Honored POW a New Lease on Life… Hmm… No, but about this for a title?” He swung his wrench through the air, marking an invisible headline. “Tony Stark, Genius Philanthropist, Brings Hope to War Hero— and then immediately corrupts him with his wicked ways.” Tony let out a near cackle, sticking his tongue out at Butterfingers when the bot made an inquisitive beep at the laughter. “You have no room to judge, pal. Your circuits light up like a Christmas tree every time James shows up down here. You and DUM-E both. U too, but she’s a lot more subtle about it.”

He got a sequence of high-pitched squeaks in response, ones that essentially meant the bot wanted James back already. Tony couldn’t argue with that.

“Alright, settle down, it’s just a couple of days. Now, about that upgrade, pal… I’m thinking lasers. So, do you want them installed on your rear or—”

“Sorry to interrupt that… ill-advised sentence, Boss,” Friday’s voice rang through the lab, sounding zero percent sorry, “but Mr. Vision is asking for your presence up in the common room. It seems Dr. Strange finally found the time to meet with both of you. They’re waiting in the kitchen.”

The loud groan Tony let out echoed through the quiet lab, but he stood by his reaction, given that it was entirely appropriate. “Are the strategy meetings with that guy not enough? Now I’m gonna have to sit through another hour of him yapping about his latest magical quest or whatever.”

Butterfingers bumped against him gently in commiseration and Tony patted the bot’s chassis in thanks. Honestly, he usually didn’t mind Strange nor their conversations, which would always devolve into snarky attempts to one-up each other, but this particular visit left Tony apprehensive.

The primary reason Vision had been attempting to get Strange here was to examine Tony’s head because his vibes were off. What the hell did Vision even mean with that cryptic remark? Ever since their candid talk, every time they would run into each other, Vision would give him this weird look that began at inquisitive and ended in frustrated.

To no one’s surprise, Strange had been a pain to get a hold of, but apparently the man finally found the time for Vision’s own little quest.

“I fuckin’ hate magic,” Tony muttered to himself, just out of sheer principle, and then took one deep breath before hopping off the stool. For a moment, he contemplated changing out of the tank top and jeans (no streaks of oil this time, but there was still one mysterious stain, courtesy of DUM-E), but there were no more official meetings for the rest of the day and frankly, changing into presentable clothes required far more energy than he currently possessed.

Of all the days, when James isn’t even here, he thought dejectedly, selfishly wishing the other man were here for moral support. A part of him wanted to postpone the whole thing, wait for James to come back, but he knew Strange, and while the man was overall a decent guy (deep, deep down), he was as arrogant as they came. If Tony told him to come back later, after Strange had so graciously showed up to help, Tony would never hear the end of it. Plus, the responsible part of his brain also pointed out that seeing someone use magic on Tony’s head might not go over well with James. Tony didn’t doubt the man’s control nor his stability, but as always, the Soldier was a bit of wildcard, so in this particular case, better safe than sorry.

However reluctant, he still headed out of the lab, the curious beeps of the bots serving as their good-
“My favorite doctor-turned-magician! Didn’t I see you, like, three hours ago?” Tony made sure his greeting was sufficiently loud, prompting the expected annoyed scowl out of the Sorcerer Supreme. “You know, Vision’s been asking you to visit for a month. What, too good for us regular guys? You needed aliens to finally get your ass over here?”

“What, we consider it to be a good way to spend time with you,” Strange deadpanned and Tony acquiesced with a laugh and a wave of his hand.

“Alright, alright. We were obvious and everyone knew before we did. We got it.” Seriously, one would think the rest of the Compound residents would get bored poking fun at Tony’s and James’ path to romance, but one would be entirely wrong. There was never a shortage of memories.

Strange sat back down, but Tony had too much nervous energy still running through him, so he chose to lean on the back of an empty chair instead.

“Wow, you two sure know how to have a good time,” he snorted, but decided to keep his snark to a minimum, given the exasperated look he got from Vision. “Right, okay, aura disturbances. I assume this is about you noticing something off about mine?”

“It is indeed,” Vision confirmed and looked over at Strange, this time addressing him. “After I noticed the anomaly, I wanted to investigate it further, but I must admit that despite having certain instincts for this sort of thing and being able to wield my own powers, I still have much to learn in regard to interpreting what I see in others.”

Strange hummed, levying Tony with a scrutinizing gaze. Tony desperately wanted to either run
away or cut the tension with his trademark eyebrow waggle and a “Like what you see?”, but he did neither and instead remained still by sheer force of will.

Strange waved one hand in Tony’s direction, golden sparks illuminating his skin for a moment. Tony suppressed a flinch, but nothing actually happened, at least from Tony’s point of view, because after a few moments, Strange frowned.

“Yes, I see what you’re saying,” the man ran a hand over his goatee, humming in contemplation as he regarded Tony, “there is something out of place here. It’s as if there’s something dirtying up the aura, focused primarily on the mind. Something that’s not meant to be there.”

*I have a dirty aura. Fuckin’ great. Just what I needed today.*

Tony let out a sigh. “Okay, that sounds… confusing as fuck, but whatever, I’ll play along. What do you need from me?”

“I will need to examine your mind closer. The procedure would be similar to what we did last time when I examined you for residual magic.”

The *last time* wasn’t all that fun and Tony was just as inclined to hate the process now. Someone rooting around in his head like that… It made him nauseous even thinking about it, a sour knot already forming at the pit of his stomach, but as much as he hated this, as much as he wanted to wave this off as nonsense, he knew better. Magic was real and magic was *dangerous*. If something was off about him, he had a responsibility to get it fixed. The last thing he needed was to become some sort of liability to the Avengers.

He didn’t say anything, but the resignation must’ve shown in his face because Strange’s expression actually softened a fraction, sympathy instead of annoyance. Personally, Tony would’ve preferred the snark.

Tony didn’t have a choice though, not really, so he grumbled a quiet agreement and let himself be dragged down to the Hulk Cage 1.0. It was particularly difficult not to think about James down here, given that the memories of the Soldier’s first appearance were bringing up other, more recent instances of Tony being crowded against a wall, held down and thoroughly kissed in between James growling Russian endearments into his ear.

Tony was about to find something far less appealing to think about (sporting a hard-on in the middle of this would be way inappropriate, even for him), but Strange beat him to the punch, pulling Tony back to reality with a somber “Please sit,” as he gestured to one of the empty chairs set up in the corner of the containment pod.

Well, at least the Hulk’s old room has been getting a lot of use lately, Tony thought morosely, the heavy sour weight in his stomach returning with a vengeance. Vision came down here as well, serving as a magical consultant and moral support. Possibly damage control too, but Tony hoped this would go smoothly.

He almost let out an audible snort at that thought as he settled himself in the chair. *When has anything in his life ever gone smoothly?* At least Rhodey was on his way down as well, needing extra time to finish up the training session he was conducting. Despite Tony’s token protests, there was now an unofficial rule that Tony needed at least one James present with him at all times whenever he decided to do something particularly reckless. Apparently playing around with magic counted as such.

Strange sat down, his sentient cloak fluttering up on its own accord to drape over one side instead of
getting bunched up and Tony marveled, not for the first time, at the bizarre circus his life had become, which compelled him to question the process one more time.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I do,” Strange replied, motioning Tony to scoot closer so that he was within reaching distance. “I will attempt a cursory examination at first, nothing complex, but even if something unexpected occurs, I assure you, I will have it under control.” He raised a challenging eyebrow. “I am the Sorcerer Supreme after all.”

“Yeah, see, I think you’re letting that title go to your head a little bit. Take it from someone who’s had to deal with a lot of overinflated egos.”

“Referring to your own?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

The corner of the sorcerer’s lips twitched, but that was the only outward sign of his amusement. Getting back to business, Strange wiggled his shoulders, sat up straighter, and reached out his hands to hover a few inches away from Tony’s temples.

The sharp inhale the action forced out of Tony was silent, likely not even visible, but Tony felt the anxiety it channeled through him down to his very bones.

Better get this over with.

“Focus on a pleasant memory, Tony,” Strange instructed. The switch to first name was an attempt at comfort, Tony knew, but while appreciated, it wasn’t helpful. “A memory where you felt safe and at peace. Loved,” Strange emphasized, as if knowing where Tony’s thoughts would inevitably stray.

Tony focused on the smile he was graced with when he woke up the other morning next to James, who was sleep-warm and solid next to him, eyes full of affection that couldn’t be dimmed by the haze of sleep still there. They held each other, murmuring back and forth about nothing of importance, until finally coffee and food became worth it to break out of their little bubble of peace and quiet.

Trying to ignore the fact that someone was once again digging right into his mind, Tony focused instead on those loving blue eyes, on those soft lips pressed against his, on whispered reassurances and confessions and promises. Finally, he let his eyes fall shut.

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As Stark’s eyes closed, so did his own, as Stephen allowed a fraction of himself—his spirit, the essence of his existence—to shift out of this reality and into the realm of magic. He didn’t need to see the small golden disks that shimmered into being, hovering in midair between his palms and the temples of the man in front of him. No, regular sight wasn’t necessary because he could sense the magic buzzing along his skin in the regular dimension of their world, while its metaphysical presence warmed him up from the inside.

He concentrated on his magic, which slowly pulsed as the disks grew. Another sharp inhale from Stark, and the pang of sympathy Stephen could feel was unsurprising. He could practically see the fear rolling off the other man, a constant reminder that Stark was showing a remarkable level of trust.

Trust that Stark had bestowed upon him. A strange notion, but Stephen was slowly getting used to being a trustworthy sort of man.
“You are safe, Tony,” he said, keeping his voice steady and whisper quiet. “Continue to focus on a happy memory.” While he wouldn’t have access to Tony’s memories, at least not like this, good memories helped the process considerably and already the shift in mood was tangible as Tony’s own energy warmed, pulsing with signs of happiness and love, making it easier for Stephen to enter the man’s mind, which would give him far more information about the disturbance than the shallow view he had access to without actively using his powers.

The first time Stephen had the privilege of seeing Stark’s mind, the intensity of its shine, the warmth it radiated… Frankly, it surprised him, but he supposed he still carried many misconceptions back then regarding one Tony Stark. Seeing the man’s soul like that though, bared to him… It was a privilege that old Stephen would have scoffed at—sentimentality, what a waste of time—but the Sorcerer Supreme had just enough wisdom to truly appreciate and respect it.

Just like last time, Stark’s mind shone bright on this plane of existence, a glimmering star floating in a sea of darkness, which also shimmered with a bright blue on the edges of his vision (or at least what counted as vision on this plane). The blue Stephen attributed to the energy created by the arc reactor powering the Compound and running through every nook and cranny of the place. A near silent, but soothing hum all around him, a pleasure to experience every time he visited Stark and the others. He would’ve smiled if he could because even here, in this metaphysical form, the reactor’s energy still tasted like coconut to him.

Tony’s own energy coalesced into a form that resembled the man as he was in the physical plane. Tony Stark, made of starlight, standing serenely with closed eyes against the darker background, highlighted by the blue.

Unlike last time, however, something really was tainting the steady glow. Stephen approached slowly, taking on a form that resembled his own body as well (even though these images weren’t necessary here, he found his human mind was better able to grasp this dimension when it had a familiar anchor to ground it). He carefully allowed his own magic to reach out and surround Tony’s glowing form. It accepted him without a struggle, even though Stephen could still sense the ever-present current of apprehension running beneath the warmth of whatever memory Stark was lost in.

The proximity allowed him a more thorough examination and Stephen realized that the strange force marring Stark’s mind was inert now, mere remnants of whatever was here earlier. Stephen mentally scoffed. This was amateur magical usage, leaving so much evidence behind. Unfortunately, in addition to this strange magical residue, Stark’s mind had been damaged too. Damage inflicted by an outside force—recent, by the looks of it—that tore through the man’s mind, leaving it wounded.

Thankfully, Stark’s mind was already beginning to heal itself from the attack. Just like the physical body, one’s spirit also had the ability to heal, as long as nothing continuously damaged it, and as cliche as it sounded, certain factors like physical contact and love, accelerated the process.

Despite the good news, Stephen mentally frowned. The evidence left behind bespoke of an amateur, but one with some impressive power. From what he could see, there was neither finesse nor any degree of true control here, but that did not make whoever this was any less dangerous. Stephen felt apprehension creeping up his metaphorical spine. Someone damaging Stark’s mind like this did not bode well at all. Not for the man himself nor for the rest of them, as this implied there was a powerful magic user out there with malicious intent.

Channeling his magic to wrap around a strand of the darker, foreign remnant, Stephen attempted to tug at it, both as a way to examine it further and to begin removing it from Stark’s mind. The magic pulsed once, turning a bright red, but it darkened back to the dull brown and came willingly, obeying the force of Stephen’s golden strands.
However, when his magic made contact for the second time, Stephen felt even his physical body shudder. *Oh no.* This wasn’t good at all. The essence of this magic, it was familiar. God, there was no way he could ever forget that incredible, *terrifying* sensation, the entirety of the universe calling to him, willing him to succumb—

It was the power of an Infinity Stone.

Stephen had to take a deep breath, in the physical realm, to steady himself. Despite his growing dread, he had a responsibility to explore this further because *now* this was no longer just about healing Stark’s mind. This could spell bad news for all Avengers *and* the rest of the world. The last thing they needed was another complication surrounding these thrice-damned stones.

Thankfully, the darker magic yielded to his prodding without much fanfare and Stephen quickly learned that even though the essence of an Infinity Stone was there, it was no longer pure. Corrupted somehow, a simulacrum of the original thing.

It left him feeling nauseous, whether in actuality or on this metaphysical plane, he no longer knew.

Concluding that he had gleaned as much information as he could from this interaction, Stephen decided to waste no more time and he hurried to remove the rest of the dark strands from Stark’s mind. Hopefully with the foreign presence gone entirely, Stark would heal even faster.

He engulfed the foreign matter with his own magic and forced it to combine into one cohesive whole. Magic like this couldn’t be destroyed easily, especially when its source was something as powerful as an Infinity Stone, but he could contain it, hide it away in a pocket dimension, and then examine it later, in a more controlled environment when a man’s mind was not hanging bare and vulnerable before him.

One more tug and the final splotch of the extraneous magic was removed, coalescing now into its own smaller orb. It gave off a pungent “scent”, entirely unappealing, especially when contrasted against Stark’s mind, which already began to glow brighter. Stephen mentally thanked the universe for letting things go right, just this once.

Unfortunately, the mental sigh of relief barely had a moment to exist before things began to go *decidedly* wrong.

The smaller orb pulsed once, twice, then suddenly grew to at least ten times its size and turned a bright red, crackling with surprising power.

Power that Stephen thought was inert.

*Well, shit.*

He tried to contain the swelling red orb with his own power, but it kept growing, overtaking the golden disks, lashing out with sharp, blood red energy at everything else around it, sinking into both Stark’s and Stephen’s minds. There was no obvious consciousness behind this power, at least none Stephen could discern, but he knew better than anyone that the Infinity Stones did not need a living being wielding them to achieve a certain level of sentience all of their own. Maybe this was nothing more than residual magic, but no matter how corrupted, this was still powered by a force that could control the universes themselves.

Stephen was a fool, he was a goddamn *fool*, and later he would reprimand himself for being so careless, foregoing the appropriate caution with something he *knew* was a force that could destroy them all.
Later, because any and all reprimands were erased from his mind as the sudden lancing pain tore through him, akin to having his flesh ripped open and Stephen struggled to separate himself from the malevolent force—

Then an obscene noise, a keening scream, filled his world and for a moment, he thought he was the one screaming until his physical senses realigned with the metaphysical plane and he realized, no, those weren’t his screams.

They were Tony’s.

The crimson magic, having all but swallowed up his own golden disks was now slowly wrapping its poisonous tendrils around Tony’s mind, beginning to dim the bright light of the ephemeral body. The image before him was screaming as well, wails of pain that reverberated through Stephen and he pushed back—he had to stop the magic from swallowing them both up!

There was no time to hesitate, so Stephen channeled every bit of focus, every bit of concentration into his powers. The rest of the world, physical or otherwise, began to fall away. He ignored voices—Rhodes, screaming for them to stop and The Vision holding him back—he ignored the physical pain and the blood trickling out of his nose and ears. He ignored everything but the magic surging through him as he blasted all of it outward at the red sphere.

Gold erupted from his outstretched hands, mixing violently with the crimson red and his efforts didn’t go unnoticed. The foreign magic shifted its focus from Tony’s mind to Stephen, its pulses like threats that he could feel down to his very core. He kept pushing back against it, desperate to keep the foreign magic from expanding further, but the amount of strength the effort required kept increasing, pushing him to his very limits.

I am so fucked, he thought hysterically, standing here on this meta-plane and battling against something derived from a damn Infinity Stone! Not for the first time, he was reminded just how out of depth he truly was with this whole magical schtick. How little he actually knew, much how he still had to learn as the Sorcerer Supreme.

Stark screamed again, a shrieking, wounded noise that then tapered off into a whimper, a sign that his mind was still affected by the magical powers colliding next to him. If Stephen didn’t gain the upper hand and soon, the combined magical forces could begin to tear Stark’s mind apart. The damage could be irreparable and that thought, the image of a comatose, brain-dead Tony Stark, finally gave Stephen the push he needed.

With everything he had left, he grabbed onto the reactor energy around him, channeling it into his own body and hoping like hell it wouldn’t kill him.

His own simulated image glowed, first a bright blue, then blinding white, and then he was no longer a body, no, his entire being was reduced to light and power and magic. It wrapped itself around the tainted red, beating it back, compressing it down, making it yield—

He was the goddamn Sorcerer Supreme and he would not be bested today.

Everything exploded in a white, hot light and for a moment, all of existence ceased from his point of view, just one single moment where there was nothing—

His metaphysical self was shoved back into his body hard enough to propel him, chair and all, straight across the room, crashing against the opaque glass wall of the containment chamber. Another second lost to whitening out, this time due to his head bouncing off the hard surface. When he came to, blinking the pain away, Stephen found himself in a heap on the floor, legs tangled with the broken
chair. The Cloak hovered protectively above him, likely taking the brunt of the impact, for which Stephen was grateful. A goose egg was preferable to a concussion.

The world around him was still mostly a blur, but he tried to look up so he could check on the others.

The Vision and Rhodes seemed unharmed and Stephen assumed if there were any magical backlash that spilled over into the physical plane, the android likely shielded the other man. Rhodes was on the floor, cradling Stark’s prone body to him, saying something Stephen couldn’t decipher over the roaring in his ears. The Vision stood above them protectively. Despite the fuzzy world around him, something about the android’s expression struck him as odd. Was it sadness, perhaps?

Stephen tried to move and groaned, the lancing pain in his head making it clear that was not a good idea. Examining people’s expressions could wait, he needed to gather his wits back and check on Stark to make sure the man was alright. Unfortunately, all of that required standing up and Stephen wasn’t sure he could accomplish that without throwing up his guts.

He took a little bit of time to breathe, then wipe at the blood underneath his nose with his sleeve, and finally, his second attempt fared better. Upright on shaky legs and with the Cloak’s support, he slowly made his way across the room. His hearing and vision were already coming back and he could feel his magic coalescing within him, helping him heal from the damage. After all of this was done, he would need one hell of a nap, but that could wait.

Another step—barely even a stumble, Stephen was proud—and he was close enough to lower himself onto his knees next to the two men on the floor.

“What the hell did you do to him?” Rhodes growled, clutching Stark closer and sending a rather impressive glare Stephen’s way. Stephen wasn’t intimidated, per se, but he could understand why most people were reluctant to get on the Colonel’s bad side.

“There were… complications,” he managed, too distracted by his examination of Stark to say anything more substantial, but that was clearly not enough because when he looked back up, Rhodes was glaring death at him.

“I swear to god, Strange, if you don’t explain everything right fuckin’ now—” the man stopped himself, dragging in a shaky breath and closing his eyes for a moment, face buried in Stark’s hair. A few seconds, then another, steadier breath and the man was composed again. “Is Tony going to be okay?”

At least they had similar priorities. From the cursory examination, nothing about Stark’s energy seemed obviously damaged, which already soothed a great deal of guilt and apprehension—guilt, that was another thing he was still getting used to—but he needed to be sure. “I believe there won’t be any permanent damage. I’ll explain everything the best I can, but I want to be certain Stark is safe before I do. Can I touch him?” Better safe than sorry because the way Rhodes was looking at him, it seemed like the man would have no issue tearing off a limb or two.

“Are you gonna make him scream again?”

“I’m sorry for what happened, but I didn’t hurt him on purpose—I couldn’t have foreseen this—”

“You’re supposed to be the head honcho wizard or whatever! Tony’s been through enough bullshit with you assholes, messing with his mind—”

“I wasn’t messing with anything! I was just trying to help—”
“Yeah and now my best friend is fuckin’ unconscious and god knows what else—”

“Colonel, if I may,” The Vision suddenly interrupted, prompting both of them to look up. If he were honest, Strange had almost forgotten the android was still in the room. “I am distressed, just as you are, by what just happened.” There was that sadness again. “But Dr. Strange is telling the truth. He couldn’t have foreseen this and ultimately he saved Tony’s life, at a risk to himself. I believe the danger has past, but we do need to ensure Tony is alright.”

Rhodes spent another long second staring at the android before swinging his gaze back to Stephen. “Fine,” he barked out the single word and didn’t say anything else, instead focusing back on Stark and running a gentle hand through the man’s hair.

Without any further delay, Stephen placed a hand on Stark’s shoulder and let his consciousness jump back into the meta-plane to meet Stark’s spirit again.

He released an audible sigh of relief. Stark’s energy was exhausted by the events, but undamaged, just as his own was. With some time to recover, he would be good as new.

“He’ll be fine, Rhodes,” he quietly confirmed. “Probably a killer headache, sore muscles, and he’ll be exhausted for a few days, but just let him rest, make sure he eats, and I don’t know, let that cyborg boyfriend of his cuddle him or something. He’ll make a full recovery.”

Rhodes raised one eyebrow, but despite that same stern expression, Strange couldn’t miss the signs of relief on the man’s face.

Nothing else was said though, so he pulled his hand back, crossed his legs, and finally let himself crumple with exhaustion, hiding his face in his palms. His head was still pulsing with pain, just as Stark’s would be, but at least he didn’t feel like throwing up anymore.

He used the silence to mentally rifle through the catalog of spells in the New York Sanctum library that could help with magical exhaustion (or even just headaches), but the silent respite was brief.

“So…” Rhodes spoke up and Stephen, too exhausted to be an ass, actually managed to meet the man’s eyes. “You wanna tell me what the hell happened?”

That prompted a quiet snort. He wanted to shake his head in some form of incredulity, but that would’ve aggravated the pain far too much, so he settled on quirking his own arched brow at the Colonel before looking up at the android.

“I take it you’ve mentioned your initial worries about Stark’s mind to the Colonel before today?”

“Yes, I have,” the android nodded and slowly took a seat next to Rhodes on the floor. With one hand resting on Tony’s ankle, he continued, “My initial thoughts were some sort of an anomaly, perhaps something to do with Tony’s work on anti-magical barriers or perhaps even due to emotional turmoil. Auras can be such finicky things.” The Vision took a big, audible swallow and again his face turned downright pained. “Unfortunately, that was not the case here…”

“Yeah, no shit,” Stephen let out a sigh, too tired to even maintain a modicum of professionalism. Forget about being a world-class surgeon or the Sorcerer Supreme. Right now he was just a guy who got his ass almost handed to him by a giant, glowing red orb. Goddamn it. Wong was never going to let him live this down. Things to worry about later though. Rhodes was staring daggers at him again, eyes blazing over the top of Stark’s head and Stephen had to take a second to marvel at how the man could look so intimidating while simultaneously pressing a cheek into Stark’s hair and slowly rocking them both back and forth. A man of many talents, apparently. Stephen could respect that.
He recounted the details of what happened, starting with the initial observation that Tony’s mind was marred by something foreign, a remnant of magic rather than an active force.

“The way it grew, active and alive all of the sudden… For a moment, I thought my initial observation was wrong and that someone was actively controlling it… but then I felt it,” the words made him shudder, “the power of an Infinity Stone.”

His eyes were closed again, head slumped against his hand, but he could easily picture Rhodes’ expression that went along with the muttered “Shit… I hate those fuckin’ things.”

“Not a fan of them myself,” Stephen admitted, but kept the rest of the details to himself. The Avengers knew about his tangle with the Eye of Agamotto, but one had to experience the power of an Infinity Stone to truly understand it because words would always fail to describe it accurately. “Stark is safe though, for the moment. I’ve removed all traces of the foreign magic and contained it using my own powers, but our concern now is the fact that someone was able to use this sort of power to reach his mind in the first place. Who the hell is out there, wielding Infinity Stones like this, ripping through people’s minds?”

He was ready to throw out a list of potential suspects, but The Vision cleared his throat and when Stephen opened his eyes to give him a questioning look, the android let his gaze drop to Stark’s jean-clad legs. He didn’t offer more at first, choosing to lean over so he could position Stark’s leg’s across his lap. Finally, he looked up and that hint of abject sadness was back.

“I know who did this.”
Chapter 47

See the end of the chapter for notes

Why the hell does everything hurt?

Tony ruled out getting hit by a demi-god. Losing a fight to a super soldier quickly followed, as well as half a building crumbling on top of him. He knew what all those hurts felt like, and this was definitely a new flavor of unpleasant. Tony Stark, waking up in pain. At least that meant the universe was in order.

He groaned, trying to sit up and still getting nothing but achy everything for his troubles, so he abandoned his attempts to move and just snuggled closer to whatever was in front of him, hands clutching at some soft material. His brain took a sluggish second to register it as one of the blankets from his bed, carrying with it his boyfriend’s familiar scent.

A barely audible “James…” escaped his lips, which earned him a chuckle that originated somewhere behind him, but it sounded all wrong and Tony frowned, or rather tried to, because furrowing his brows just caused his head to pulse with more pain. Ow.

“Sorry, Tones. Probably not the James you’re looking for, but I’m all you got right now.”

Definitely not the super soldier Tony was expecting, but that was Rhodey’s deep, rumbly voice and Rhodey was his best friend and the light of his life, so it was a very close second.

Tony managed to roll over onto his back, dragging the blanket along with him, which was progress, but he had to throw an arm over his eyes because the damn room was still too bright, even through his closed eyelids.

“Rhodey Bear,” Tony paused to clear his throat, realizing it was scratched raw. Had he been screaming? “Why are you in my room watching me sleep and why do I feel like I went a few rounds with the Hulk and lost?”


What the hell did Tony remember though? Hazy details were slowly coming back to him, struggling against the fog that settled in his brain.

“I was down in my lab, texting with my really gorgeous boyfriend— seriously, have you seen him lately? So handsome, even Loki thought so—”

“Tony, focus, buddy.”

“Right, right, lab. I was working on the suit…” He grimaced, a physical manifestation of his brain trying to work around the pain. “God, my head feels like it’s going to explode. Don’t we have painkillers for this sort of thing? Hell, why am I not down in Medical? You’re the one who always nags on me to go down there for every scrape and bruise.”

“I was informed you’re not physically hurt, per se, so painkillers are going to be useless.”

That made no sense at all, but Tony let it go. “Ugh, fine. whatever. Okay, I was working… And then Vision called me up?”
“So far, so good, Tones.”

One long minute to straighten out the rest of his blurry memories and then Tony let out another groan, now more out of exasperation than pain. “Shit, Strange was here. He was supposed to examine my mind, said it wasn’t going to be a big deal. Something went wrong, didn’t it?”

“There were… complications, yeah.”

“Complications never bode well for me,” Tony muttered back, uncaring that it bordered on petulant. The bed shifted underneath him, announcing Rhodey’s presence, and a second later, strong hands were coaxing him up.

“Tones, can you sit up a little bit? I need to make sure you’re in one piece. Come on, nice and easy now,” Rhodey cajoled with that same gentle voice that had worked on Tony ever since MIT. Unfortunately, movement prompted a bolt of pain to shoot down from the top of his head, through his spine, and down to his very toes. Tony definitely did not let out a strangled whimper, but he did let himself slump against Rhodey’s shoulder once he finally managed to wiggle his way up into a sitting position.

“Is everyone else okay?”

“Everyone else is fine, Tony,” Rhodey reassured, patting Tony’s back gently. “Strange has a headache too, but he’ll live. Poor Vision is probably listening to him complain about it as we speak. The Compound lost power for a few minutes, but emergency generators kicked in, so all essential systems remained operational.”

Oh god, was Friday’s reactor affected too? “You with me, Fri?” Tony called out right away.

“I’m with you, Boss, and may I say, it is good to have you back. The outage affected the primary reactor and it did cause a minor fluctuation in my own, but I ran full diagnostics on all my systems. I am still operating at peak efficiency.”

Tony let out a relieved breath and he wanted to follow that up with something else, ask all the questions springing to life in his head, but the world began spinning around him, so all he could do was clutch at the blanket in his lap and desperately try not to throw up. Thankfully, there were steady hands on his shoulders, keeping him upright, so Tony focused on taking deep breaths and once the nausea and the spinning and the general sense of Everything is awful and I’m dying went away, he managed to open his eyes again. He let Rhodey fuss and check on him for another minute or two, but then Tony finally found enough energy to weakly bat Rhodey’s hands away.

“Enough, you mother hen,” he grumbled, pulling away to sit up on his own and taking the opportunity to look around. There was an empty chair nearby and a StarkPad abandoned on the nightstand.

“How long was I out?”

“A few hours.”

Fantastic. At least he hadn’t missed his call with James. The last thing they needed was a worried Winter Soldier on the loose.

“You know, I’d love for just one single thing to go right around here,” Tony muttered and it was tempting to lament his shitty fate just a little bit longer, but the pity party would have to wait.

“Alright, tell it to me straight. What the hell happened? Last thing I remember clearly is Strange telling me to think happy thoughts. Everything after that is just… this red haze and a shittton of pain.”
Tony studied the way the frown on Rhodey’s face deepened, the way his mouth tightened, and when the other man didn’t respond right away, anxiety began nagging at Tony, sour and sharp in his belly. “I know that look, Rhodey. How bad is it?”

Rhodey took a fortifying breath and that frown transformed into something softer. On anyone else, it would have looked like pity.

“Someone was inside your head again, used magic to mess with your mind.”

Rhodey stopped there, watching Tony carefully. Obviously expecting a panic attack or an outburst of some sort. Honestly, Tony was expecting it too and was left surprised when none followed.

Granted, his heart was hammering away against his ribs and it took him a long moment to realize he subconsciously began rubbing a shaking hand over his chest. Thoughts raced—*when did it happen, what did he do, who did he hurt*— but at least there was no static in his ears, his vision didn’t darken, and no painful flashbacks emerged to brutalize his mind.

There was no fog obscuring Rhodey’s concerned face either when Tony focused back on it.

“You alright, Tones?”

Tony ignored the concern. “Who was it?”

Again, a shift in expression, something flickering across Rhodey’s eyes, and that same hesitation only made the knot in Tony’s chest tighten further.

“Rhodey, tell me, goddamnit,” he barked out, not bothering to keep the sharp edge out of his tone.

After a beat, Rhodey closed his eyes on a weary sigh. “Maximoff,” he said simply and there was silence again. Giving Tony time to process the information, the fact that—

*The Scarlet Witch was in his head once again.*

Just like so many times before, the old nightmare— *the world in ruin, aliens blotting out the sky, everyone he loved dead and gone*— tried to force its way back into Tony’s head, tried to overtake every other thought and send Tony back into a dark, hopeless place.

The chill that ran up Tony’s spine was familiar, but unlike every other time, something else rose to the surface alongside the horrible memory.

*James,* comforting him after that damn nightmare, all those months ago. The solid arm around Tony’s shoulders, the warmth that radiated from that strong body and chased the chill away. Echoes of soothing words, the Soldier’s promises of retribution. The conversation that followed, sharing a little bit of themselves with each other. The steady fingers carding through his hair as he fell asleep. All of it muted Steve’s whispered accusations, pushed back the hellish picture of death and destruction, drowned it all out until Tony was left with a kaleidoscope of warmer, brighter memories and a strange hope that he didn’t have to face this alone anymore.

Rhodey’s hand, solid and warm on his knee, helped too.

“Tones?”

“I’m okay,” Tony rasped out before clearing his throat. It still burned on each word, but his voice remained steady and Tony had to be proud of that. He took a deep breath, then let his shoulders slump as he rubbed his hands over his eyes, the pressure helping to relieve a small fraction of the
headache. “Just so damn tired of all this crap.” One weary glance over at Rhodey. “This really wasn’t what we signed up for, was it?”

Rhodey shrugged. “Retirement’s still an option.”

Tony’s snort was humorless. “Pretty sure this damn mess would just follow us all the way to the Bahamas.”

There was a ghost of a smile on Rhodey’s face. “Oh, is that where we’re retiring to?”

“Hawaii is fine too. Somewhere warm, dammit, I’m tired of New York. The cold makes my joints ache.”

Just as Tony expected, Rhodey’s expression brightened, a mix of indulgent and fond.

“Yeah, yeah, just get your achy joints over here, old man.” With a huff of laughter, Rhodey gently pulled Tony back to him. A part of Tony wanted to make a fuss, but he couldn’t deny that the proximity felt nice. Needed, really, as it soothed some fragile, vulnerable part of him.

“I’m so damn sorry this happened to you again. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you,” Rhodey whispered, the notes of humor now gone. The arm around Tony’s shoulder tightened on his next words. “If I never have to hear you scream in pain again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Don’t apologize. There was nothing you could’ve done.” The last thing Tony wanted was for anyone to feel guilty over this. He pulled the blanket closer to him, hoping the warmth and familiar scent would soothe him further. “Are you sure it was her?”

“Viz and Strange are, and they’re the magic experts.” Rhodey shrugged, his expression bordering on self-deprecating. “Hell, I am so out of my depth with this whole ‘magical menagerie’ bullshit, I couldn’t begin to tell you what’s right or wrong. But yeah, accordingly to Strange, Maximoff did a piss poor job, left a ton of evidence behind. The leftover magic acted up and attacked on its own. Once it bled over into this ‘dimension’ or whatever, Viz recognized it immediately.”

Tony listened to Rhodey’s explanation with half an ear as the rest of him fought back against the rising tide of memories. These weren’t imagined nightmares though, but rather real memories of resentment and regrets and guilt. Looking back at it now, his entire life began to crumble apart when the Maximoffs entered the picture. The distrust, the whispered derision from the others when they thought he couldn’t hear, the cold way everyone began to look at him. The way he began to feel like an outsider in his own home.

He supposed he couldn’t blame the Maximoffs for any of that though, not really. Tony Stark was perfectly capable of pushing people away on his own.

This, however… The blame for this he laid entirely at Maximoff’s feet.

“Dammit, Rhodey,” he growled out, “how the hell did she manage it? We have been so damn careful with security. Was she here? Maybe Natasha managed to compromise Friday again somehow or— fuck, what about everyone else? If she got to me, she could have gotten to anyone—”

Rhodey cut Tony off with a gentle, but firm shake. “Hey, hey, everyone’s fine, remember? As far as we know, no one else was attacked.”

How could they be fine though, when all of their minds were nothing but playthings? The mere thought of that witch sinking her claws into Rhodey, into Peter or Harley, into James—
“Tony!”

Rhodey’s no-nonsense voice forced Tony back to the present moment.

“How do we know that she didn’t go after anyone else?”

“You’ll have to discuss the details with Strange, but according to him, it’s the arc reactor. Since it powers the Compound, its energy acts like a protective barrier.”

Tony’s eyes widened in realization and he sat up straighter. “Holy shit, wait, how did I not— The reactor stopped Loki’s staff and— and Maximoffs’ powers came from that same stone, right?” He didn’t wait for Rhodey’s confirmation to continue. “Howard’s designs for the new element were based on the Tesseract and there must be something there that acts as a safeguard. I knew it stopped Loki, but it didn’t connect back then that it could do that in other contexts. Shit, what kind of a genius am I?”

“No exhausted one with too much shit on his plate?”

Tony responded to Rhodey’s words with a reproachful look. “Gee, thanks, that makes me feel better. Okay, so what, the Compound is safe then? Even if she were here?”

“Again, according to Strange. Both he and Vision are also convinced she was never here to begin with, so this was a long-distance attack. Viz was surprised she even had that kind of power.”

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. “Beijing…” Tony stuttered out and Rhodey just nodded, likely having come to the same conclusion earlier.

“You’re no stranger to nightmares, Tony, but that wasn’t just any nightmare. You were a wreck.”

No kidding, Tony thought, mulling over the fact that his nightmare wasn’t just his own broken brain doing its usual PTSD routine. The violent physical reaction after the nightmare, the way it took him days to shake off the sensation that the dream was reality, it all made more sense now, but Tony was still struggling to accept it. That damn dream nearly ruined so much—

God, all he wanted right now was James and—

Oh, fuck.

James. How the hell was he going to react to all of this?

There were too many damn thoughts clogging up his mind, so ignoring the pain still pounding against his skull, Tony got off the bed to pace the length of the room, letting the frantic energy inside him manifest that way. The nausea returned, but the movement helped, made him feel a little less trapped.

Rhodey’s eyes followed him while the man remained sitting on the bed. “Tones, what are you thinking?”

Tony let out a laugh, hoping like hell it didn’t sound hysterical. “Too many damn things. Mostly, I’m just so goddamn angry. Those idiots, they were supposed to lie low. I thought— I just thought—”

He stopped and raked a hand through his hair. What the hell was the point of trying to figure out the motivations, the reasoning behind all this?

It was actually pretty simple though, if he were honest. She hated him and she wanted him to pay.
He just hoped like hell that her hatred didn’t extend to anyone else he cared about.

Forcing himself to stop and take a seat in Rhodey’s abandoned chair, he gave the other man a guilty look. “This, uh— this is probably as good a time as any to tell you that I’ve known where Steve and the others have been hiding this whole time.”

Rhodey didn’t seem surprised at all and when the man just graced Tony with an indulgent look, Tony squinted at him suspiciously.

“Wait, you knew I tracked them down, didn’t you?” Tony gaped when he got a smirk and a nod in return. “But you never asked about it.”

“Tones, come on, you wouldn’t be you if didn’t you track down the exact latitude and longitude of those idiots on Day 1. And believe it or not, I do think you know what you’re doing. Well, most of the time. They weren’t causing trouble, so I let you have your secret.”

“High praise, Platypus, thanks so much,” Tony bit out, but the sarcasm was short-lived as the guilt reared its head again. “I just— I didn’t keep it a secret because I didn’t trust you. They weren’t doing stupid shit, so I let them hide. Plus, I promised someone I wouldn’t say anything—”

“It’s not Rogers, is it?” Rhodes sounded downright affronted. “Have you been in contact with him other than that stupid letter?”

“No, no, it’s not him. I haven’t talked to any of them, trust me.”

“Good, glad to hear. And I was fine with you keeping this to yourself, I know you didn’t do it to spite me or anything, but we need to know now, Tones, we need to deal with Maximoff—”

“I know, I know, but just— god, I can’t just blurt it out, I need to talk to—”

“Tony, you were attacked. In the middle of the fuckin’ night!”

Tony hated the position he was in, but Rhodey wasn’t wrong. Dammit, T’Challa, why didn’t you keep a better eye on those idiots?

“They’re in Wakanda,” he finally confessed.

Now Rhodey finally looked surprised. “Wait, what— Wakanda? Why would—” At a loss for words, Rhodey just sat there staring at Tony, but then surprise finally shifted into annoyance when he threw his hands up in the air and shook his head in incredulity. “T’Challa’s been helping them this whole time?” Tony gave a small nod and a shrug. “Why in the hell would he do that? I don’t get it. If the international community found out that he was harboring those criminals, Wakanda would’ve had a political shit show on their hands.”

“Something they can’t afford given Wakanda’s push to integrate themselves into the international community,” Tony said with a pointed look in Rhodey’s direction. “That’s why I decided to keep the information to myself as long as the others stayed there and kept their heads down.”

“But that’s what I’m saying,” Rhodey’s tone was an impressive mix of exasperated and angry, “it’s not your damn job to watch out for Wakanda, it’s his! Why the hell would T’Challa risk something like this? And for them? I just don’t get it.”

“Does it matter? Honestly, he did us a favor. If it weren’t for him, Steve and the others would be running around the globe trying to play superhero. I don’t want to repay T’Challa for that by throwing him under the bus.”
“But you’re not even mad at him? He’s been playing ally to us since that fight in Germany and all this time, he’s had them— people who stabbed you in the back— in his home? Why are you protecting him?”

“Rhodey, he’s young, he lost his father and wound up with a country on his hands. The last thing he needed— any of us needed back then— was an international scandal.” That used to be Tony’s reasoning, but now… “And some of it? Some of it’s just pure selfishness on my part.” He looked Rhodey with pleading eyes. “He let them all stay because of James.”

The stark lines around Rhodey’s downturned lips softened. “He felt guilty about trying to kill him, didn’t he?”

“He did, so he gave them sanctuary. Well, he gave James sanctuary and the rest followed like stray dogs. T’Challa’s scientists and doctors tried to remove the triggers, but nothing worked, so they stuck him in cryo until they had something better. I know none of us knew back then how all of this would turn out, and I know that this is completely self-centered, but if it weren’t for T’Challa, I— I wouldn’t have James, I wouldn’t have—” Tony stopped, struggling to put into words what James truly meant to him now. “I guess I just can’t bring myself to be mad at the guy, I’m sorry.”

Rhodes contemplated Tony’s words for a moment, his expression unreadable. Tony was beginning to feel fidgety as those eyes scrutinized him, but then Rhodey finally let out a long sigh and his posture lost its initial rigidity.

“While I don’t feel particularly protective here, given that the King made his own bed, I see where you’re coming from. We had enough shit to deal with this past year and yeah, it was nice not needing to deal with Rogers and his brigade of fools— well, it was nice, until this happened. Shit, what a goddamn mess,” Rhodey added under his breath just as he was gesturing in Tony’s general direction.

Tony couldn’t help himself. “I’ll have you know I am the hottest goddamn mess around,” he declared with a huff, hoping he could make the tension go away with his usual jokes. He knew the effort was mostly futile, but he nevertheless appreciated the amusement playing at Rhodey’s eyes, even as Tony returned to his earlier train of thought. “We don’t need a scandal on our hands, you know that as well as I do. What we do need is Wakanda’s help in this upcoming fight, so let’s just keep this on a need-to-know basis. I’m fine with the other Avengers knowing, but we should keep this from the politicians and the press.”

Tony rubbed a hand at the back of his head before he continued. The guilt really wasn’t helping the damn headache. “God, this really is a mess, isn’t it? Between this and the pardons and aliens— I’m sorry, Rhodey, seriously. I’m sorry I dragged you into all of this. This really wasn’t what you signed up for. Just think where you would be if you didn’t have the misfortune of getting involved with this,” he pointed at himself, “goddamn mess.”

“Hey,” Rhodey wagged a stern finger in Tony’s direction, but his eyes remained soft, “that’s my best friend you’re talking about.”

All Tony could do was offer a smile and watch as Rhodey got up and offered a hand so he could pull Tony up and straight into a hug. Neither commented on the way they clung to each other just a touch too hard.

“You’re not getting rid of me this easily. The only thing I’m sick of is seeing you get hurt. That’s the only thing I regret about this whole goddamn mess.”

Strange, Tony thought, and incredible all the same, that with everything happening around him—
him— he’d end up standing here, filled with gratitude and love rather than terror.

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It took some coffee, some willpower, and an exasperated Rhodey hovering protectively as he trailed along, but Tony made it out of his quarters and to the common room where Vision and Strange awaited them. Vision was sitting on the edge of a lazy boy, posture rigid and expression solemn. Tony hadn’t seen him like this since the fight in Germany and his heart clenched in sympathy. Dealing with this bullshit again, having all those past hurts shoved back in his face… It wasn’t fair to the poor guy.

Strange was uncharacteristically casual, sprawled across the sofa and holding a cold compress to his head. He was wearing what looked suspiciously like one of Rhodey’s shirts and the cloak was missing too. Tony briefly wondered what that weird, sentient piece of cloth was up to. Last time it was allowed loose in the Compound, it somehow convinced DUM-E to go scare some of the government agents working in the other wing.

“The hell happened to your own shirt?” Tony said in a way of greeting. He chose to remain standing while Rhodey let himself collapse into the other lounge chair.

Strange opened the one eye not covered by the ice pack to glare at Tony. “I bled all over it.”

The slouched position, the annoyed attitude, it all would’ve been hilarious on any other day, given how uptight and proper the Sorcerer Supreme usually acted around them, but the snarky follow-up died in Tony’s throat. Strange looked genuinely miserable and Tony could only empathize.

“Thanks for that, by the way,” he offered instead. “Not the bleeding part, but the ‘get evil magic out of my head’ part. I’m guessing this wasn’t a walk in the park for you either?”

Somehow, Strange managed a wry, exhausted look with just one eye and that was answer enough.

Feeling out of place standing in the middle of the room, Tony crossed the length of it to settle against the glass wall that provided them with a view of the Compound grounds. The glass was warm, having absorbed a good deal of the day’s sunshine and Tony pressed into it, letting it serve as a connection to reality. His nerves were still rattled and his mind was a cacophony of stray thoughts, all clamoring for attention and space, but at least the panic remained at bay.

When no one said anything and the silence stretched into awkward, Tony let out an unnecessarily loud sigh. “Okay, let’s address the giant, witchy elephant in the room. Maximoff attacked me.” There he said it and— yeah, it didn’t make the words any less dreadful, but Tony barreled through the anxiety. “So, where do we go from here?”

“Well, there’s no way in hell we’re letting her come back, so we have to inform the Council and halt her pardon,” Rhodey was the first to chime in. “It’s a weird situation, I’ll give you that, and we don’t have a lot of ‘standard’ evidence, but I doubt they’ll put up much of a fight on this. We can present the footage of the magic lashing out when Strange examined you, that was quite a light show. Strange, you also have a decent rapport with the Council, so your word will have some weight, and at the end of the day, most of the Council members were already on the fence about letting Maximoff come back. Our relations with Sokovia are strained, she didn’t have citizenship here— hell, she didn’t even have a green card— and for better or worse, people do get very nervous about her type of powers.”

Strange snorted. “I don’t blame them. While you were unconscious, Stark, Vision here filled me in on some details. I knew she had magic, but the extent of her powers is… unsettling. She’s an
amateur with poor control of her powers, but none of that matters when she’s fueled by a damn Infinity Stone.” He paused to throw the compress down to the floor and slowly get himself into upright position. He mostly succeeded, letting his head rest in his hands as his elbows dug into his knees. “This is my domain, my responsibility. I should’ve learned more about her powers, found a way to track her down and monitor her or—”

“Hey, we all dropped the ball on this, okay?” Tony interrupted, feeling some measure of guilt himself. “They’ve been laying low for a whole year, there was no reason to think she’d lash out now. Unless… do you think this attack wasn’t an isolated case?”

Vision was the one to answer this time. “I’m almost certain she never attacked anyone else who resides here. One of us—myself or Dr. Strange—would have noticed the after effects of her powers, just like we did with you. The way she is using her magic, over what I assume is a great physical distance, it leaves far too much evidence behind.” The android paused, looking down at the floor. “Unfortunately, I cannot say whether she had attacked someone outside our circle of acquaintances, someone we don’t know.”

Yeah, Tony was definitely feeling the guilt now. Dammit, how many people did he put in danger by keeping their location a secret?

“Let’s just hope Rogers and the others kept her in line then and that no one else got on her ‘hate radar’,” Tony offered lamely, but the mood in the room darkened, everyone frowning at some spot on the floor as Tony’s eyes swept over them. Part of it may have been their personal flavors of guilt. At least for Tony, part of it was the simple awareness that this was far beyond the usual superhero routine, but he supposed most things were these days. Powerful artifacts and crazy alien armies and witchy brainwashing powers…

All of it made him miss the good old days of Justin Hammer, which only made him hate the whole grandiose, magical bullshit just that much more.

“Oh, isolated or not, we know she attacked an Avenger,” Rhodey tried to get them back on track. “Hell, she attacked a civilian,” he added, ignoring Tony when he rolled his eyes. “We have a legitimate reason to apprehend her and the political support to take her into custody to face trial. The real issue is how we’re going to do that.”

“Don’t we need to find her and the rest of the runaways first?” Strange asked.

Rhodey glanced over at Tony and waited just long enough for Tony to nod before answering. “Yeah, so, we got the location covered. I want this kept on a need-to-know basis, which means Avengers only, but Rogers, Maximoff, and the rest have been kicking back in Wakanda this whole time.”

Vision’s eyebrows climbed in surprise, but Strange just let out a snort.

“I don’t even want to know what the hell T’Challa was thinking, but whatever, I honestly don’t care.” He propped his chin on his hands so he could actually look at Rhodey. “I’ll follow your lead on this, boss, unless it becomes a bigger problem or puts anyone in danger. I do agree that Rogers and the others lying low for a whole year was a good thing, but unfortunately, it lulled all of us into a false sense of security and at least one of them wasn’t lying low enough. Now, I’m assuming you’ll need me involved. I can have Wong or one of the others assist.”

“I’ll let T’Challa know that the cat is out of the bag and that one of his hideaways has been causing trouble,” Tony supplied, already dreading that conversation. “I’ll also double my efforts on finalizing the miniaturized magical barriers—Strange, I know you bitch about this every time I ask,” he
addressed the mage, who met his eyes with a bleary glare, “but I’d appreciate your help with this. I know you have your own protection spells, but using my tech and your magical know-how can give us an advantage no one else has. Hell, this could be useful against Thanos too.”

“You know working with you is my worst nightmare, Stark,” Strange sneered, although there was just a hint of a familiar smirk that betrayed his tone, and Tony actually managed a small smile of his own.

“You know what they say about desperate times.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Strange paused to let out a breath. “I’ll go back to the Sanctum to update the others on what happened and determine if they have any useful information. Then I’ll be back to help you.”

Tony threw out a thanks and then turned to Rhodey. “What else are you thinking, oh fearless leader?”

Rhodey let out a snort. “Honestly? I’m thinking that I’d really like to just say ‘screw it’ to all this prep bullshit and have War Machine fly to Wakanda right now to wring her neck.”

“I’m serious, Rhodey.”

“So am I. She attacked you, Tony, unprovoked! Shit, the hell she put you through, again—”

Tony was already walking over so he could sit on the armrest of the chair and give Rhodey’s shoulder a shake. “Hey, hey, I’m fine, okay?” He wasn’t, not really, but Rhodey didn’t need to lose his cool over this. It wasn’t worth it. “We need to think about this strategically. Maybe if this were anyone else, I wouldn’t mind a little recklessness, but she is powerful.”

“Tony Stark, advising caution, I never thought I’d see the day,” Strange snarked from his corner of the room and Tony turned a withering glare at the man, who raised his hands in surrender. “Hey, I do not disagree. I may have never met the woman, but from everything I’ve learned so far and from today’s very private introduction to her powers, I advise extreme caution. She is an amateur, with little training and poor grasp of her powers, but unfortunately, her lack of control is not an advantage. It makes her unpredictable and volatile. I made the mistake of underestimating what I saw when I examined your mind. I prefer not to make that mistake again.

“I had hoped,” Vision quietly chimed in again, “that she would stay put. Stay hidden and safe, and take the time to see what her actions have wrought. I had hoped that she would understand why it was wrong of her to hate you, Tony.” The man looked heartbroken, all over again, and Tony hated to see him like this, especially when the android finally met his eyes, forlorn. “It was foolish of me, I see that now. I wish I could understand though… Do you think this means she defected from the others? Or are the others involved in the attack somehow too?”

Tony had no idea and he couldn’t do much more than shrug. “I’ll talk to T’Challa, see if he has any insight on whether the others were in on this.” He didn’t want to think that Steve and the others could be behind something like this, but hell, they didn’t care when Bruce was suffering from the effects of her magic after Ultron and Steve certainly didn’t mind Wanda’s lethal moves back at the airport.

It was high time for Tony to admit that he didn’t really know any of them after all.

It didn’t matter. All Tony wanted was for them to stop hurting the people he loved. People like Vision, who radiated palpable guilt and distress. People like Rhodey, who had to deal with this mess instead of focusing on protecting the world. People like Strange, who looked pale and exhausted,
trying and failing to hide the tremors in his hands, exacerbated by the day’s events.

Maybe Rhodey’s idea wasn’t so bad after all because frankly, flying the Iron Man suit to Wakanda and blasting a certain witch in the face sounded like a pleasant way to spend the afternoon.

Anger and impulse had to give way to logic however because above all else, Tony wanted every person he loved to come out of this alive. He wanted to say something, offer a reassuring word of confidence to ease the tension, but just as he was about to speak, a rather vicious spike of pain shot through him. He squeezed his eyes tight and groaned, curling in on himself and hoping like hell he wouldn’t throw up. Damn nausea was back in full force.

Unsurprisingly, there were hands on him not a moment later, steadying him as they have for thirty years. Opening his eyes seemed like a lot of work at the moment, so Tony just leaned his head against the overstuffed chair and breathed through the rolling nausea.

“Okay, man, you need to take it easy and lie down. Are you sure he’ll be fine?”

Tony assumed the second part was directed at Strange, who made some sort of affirmative noise.

“The damage done is entirely metaphysical, but unfortunately, it manifests itself in physical symptoms. He’ll be miserable for a few days— so will I, by the way, thanks for asking— but he’ll live.”

“Thank you, doctor, you’re too kind,” Tony muttered into the plush material underneath him, just loud enough for Strange to hear, earning himself a snort. “I can’t rest though,” this he said to Rhodey as he turned his head to look at the man. “We have too much to do. We can’t run the risk that something like this happens again. We need to inform the Council, both ours and the international one, probably get in contact with Sokovia representatives as well, in case they want her extradited. We need to inform the rest of the Avengers— and oh god, Bruce! Just when I promised him I would keep him safe from her— And what about the pardons for the rest of those idiots—”

“Tony, stop talking,” Rhodey interrupted, not unkindly, softening the words with another look full of understanding and patience. “You’re right. All those things need to be addressed. But leave that to the three of us here, or to Alice, to Hope. Leave it to the rest of the support staff that is meant to help us with this Avengers business. You, buddy, you need to rest. If you don’t, I will call that boyfriend of yours and I guarantee you he will have no problem coming back, tying you to the bed, and forcing you to rest.”

Despite the pulsing pain in his head, Tony was convinced he had enough energy to stage a protest— Stark men were made of iron, dammit — but both the mention of James and the look in his best friend’s eyes stopped any of his usual obstinance.

“Wouldn’t be the first time he tied me to a bed,” he muttered instead and that finally lightened the morose mood just enough to earn him three surround-sound groans. Rhodey shook his head, but his gaze turned from exasperated to fond.

“Please rest, Tones. Don’t make me worry about you.”

“I will. I’m probably useless right now anyways.” Maybe a few hours of sleep wouldn’t hurt. “Do you want me to talk to Bruce about this? He has a right to know.”

By the way Rhodey hesitated, it was obvious he did not in fact want to talk to a man who could turn into the Hulk when things went south.

“I’ll do it,” Rhodey said anyway and Tony couldn’t be prouder.
“Brucey has got a lid on it, you two will be fine. Just be frank and to the point with him and make sure you don’t accidentally block him in. Physically, I mean. Make sure he has easy access out of the room in case he needs space. Or if he needs the Hulk Party Room, either or.”

“What about your Barnes?”

“I’ll be the one to tell him,” Tony wasn’t going to budge on that one, even though he was dreading that particular conversation too. James was protective, sometimes excessively so, but Wanda and the others were his allies at some point, so it was still hard to gauge a reaction. Tony honestly wasn’t sure what he was worried about more. A violent reaction? Or an indifferent one? Either way, this conversation wasn’t going to be easy, but Tony didn’t want to begin their relationship by keeping secrets. What he had with James was too damn important. “I’ll wait until he comes back though, this isn’t something I should tell him over the phone. I’ll ask Pepper to send him back a few days early.”

Rhodey seemed reluctant, but he still gave Tony an affirmative nod, and then issued strict orders for Tony to head back to his quarters and rest (under Friday’s watchful eye who was tasked with keeping him honest). Despite Tony’s initial protests, it ended up being a good call because even the short trip back made his legs feel wobbly and weak. The damn nausea was turning his stomach into knots again and his entire body was basically screaming at him to just lie the fuck down.

His overall state was bad enough that Tony did actually follow through on Rhodey’s orders and ended up burrowed underneath the pile of blankets on the bed in an attempt to get some sleep. Unfortunately, finding a comfortable spot was difficult, with the bed feeling too empty and too cold without a solid line of heat snuggled up against his back, without the heavy vibranium arm slung over his waist, without the whispered conversations, accompanied by laughter and interrupted by stolen kisses.

Tony closed his eyes and tried to push the pang of loneliness away, knowing he’d need all the rest he could get for the upcoming days. He just hoped, against all hope, that this goddamn mess wouldn’t cause him to lose the very things he was grateful for and the very people he so desperately loved.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a transition-y chapter, but that’s okay, we need breaks between the action. Besides, I have it on good authority that James is coming back to the Compound next chapter. ;)
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After giving the hot water a swirl with the teaspoon, Bruce watched as the tea leaves began to turn the water a dark, rich brown. Still too hot to drink, he let the tea brew and focused on trying to keep his dark thoughts at bay. He ultimately failed. They all came back despite his best efforts, dark, angry thoughts all swirling in his head in tandem with the water as the spoon kept skirting along the edges of the mug.

First, Thor and Loki, of all the damn people, showed up out of nowhere, bearing no good news. Then, the pardons, which brought with them a whole slew of complications and bad memories. Knowing that she would be back here again, flaunting her magic like a pretty dress, shoving it in their faces that she had their willpower at her fingertips…

Tony promised him safety. He promised rules and restrictions for the runaways, accommodations and protections for Bruce and anyone else who needed them… but while the rest of them were safe and sound, Tony was the one who had his mind ripped apart by that witch yet again.

Bruce really should’ve known things would go to hell sooner rather than later and a part of him wanted to run, hide someplace where no one would ever find him, and this time, stay the hell away.

Tempting, always so tempting to just leave all this damn excitement behind. Easy too, because it was the coward’s way out and didn’t he say he wanted to give that courage thing a try? He promised himself he’d stay put, come hell or high water. He promised Tony.

That thought alone kept him in place. Tony was the one attacked this time, he was the one currently sleeping off a magical hangover, so what the hell did Bruce have to complain about?

Honestly, it was Bruce’s own damn fault for letting himself be lulled into a false sense of security.

Keep your guard up, Banner, he’d always tell himself, a mantra beaten into him by life, but there was just something about Tony’s presence that always made him feel like things would work out. Tony did make him feel safe, offering him the security of knowing that someone else had his back.

So maybe it was Bruce’s turn to have Tony’s back, and with that thought a surge of protectiveness flared up in his chest at the image of an exhausted Tony, suffering through all that pain and anxiety because of her.

For once in your life, stop being a coward and fight back.

Puny Banner will stay and Hulk will fight. We will protect Tin Man.

Despite the morose mood, his lip twitched. There was also that. The Hulk had no desire to leave Tony behind again and would probably drag Bruce back by the proverbial scruff if he ever decided to take off. Protecting Tony came first, but there was no denying the Other Guy just wanted some good old fashioned revenge too.

He supposed that was something they both had in common.

The tea looked ready, so he inhaled the pleasant herbal fumes and took a fortifying sip, savoring the flavor. The water was still scorching hot, but he embraced the burn as it made its way down his
At least they’ve been given a reprieve for the time being. Unbeknownst to them all, the arc reactor had been protecting the Compound this whole time and the only reason Maximoff was able to reach Tony at all was because he was away from home. God, that hag, attacking him in his sleep, while he was vulnerable and alone! Sneaking around like the boogey man, feeding him nightmares, messing with his head. As if that man needed any more nightmares!

The tinge of green crawled up his hand and Bruce put the mug down in a hurry. He clenched the hand into a fist instead, trying to focus while the Hulk’s displeasure rumbled deep inside him.

Thankfully the green receded quickly, but he was still on edge, had been ever since Rhodes showed up to drop the Maximoff bombshell before taking off to deal with this brand new crisis. The Colonel was currently talking strategy with the other Avengers, likely deciding on next steps, and Bruce didn’t envy him the job.

He was curious as to how they planned to deal with the witch, but above all else, Bruce just hoped he’d never have to see her again. The pardons for the others came to mind too and a part of him, the sad, lonely child who fruitlessly keep wishing for his family to be whole, hoped the others didn’t know about Maximoff’s attack. One knife in the back was more than enough.

That train of thought didn’t get much further as someone else joined him in the kitchen and Bruce looked up from his tea to be met with Barnes’ curious gaze.

“Oh, Dr. Banner? Hi, it’s good to see you,” the man greeted amicably enough, although he seemed more subdued than usual.

Bruce hid his surprise at seeing the man, but he supposed it made sense Barnes would be coming back a few days earlier than planned. “Good morning. How was California?”

“Sunny and warm,” Barnes replied, “but I’m glad to be home. Honestly, I feel like I should’ve never left in the first place.”

That made sense, given how protective Barnes was of Tony. Although it truly surprised Bruce at first, it didn’t take long before this whole thing between Barnes and Tony had become just a normal part of everyday life here. It warmed his heart, actually, to see the two together. Overcoming their differences, finding forgiveness, falling in love. Cliche or not, the world always needed more love than it did tragedies.

“Have you checked on Tony yet?” he asked after another sip of the tea.

“No, I just flew in. He’s in some teleconference meeting with a bunch of UN members, I didn’t want to bother him. Just asked Friday to let him know I’m here once he was done.”

The room fell silent as Barnes walked across the room to start the coffee maker and Bruce filled the time by drinking his tea, his mind wandering back to yesterday’s events against his will. Apparently the nature of his thoughts was telegraphed to the entire room because when he focused back on Barnes, the man was frowning.

“You alright?” Barnes asked, his concern genuine. He was leaning back against the counter on the other side of the kitchen, feet crossed at the ankles and arms loosely crossed over his chest.

Bruce looked back down at his tea, absentmindedly tilting the mug side to side to watch the water swirl. Eye contact was always an issue for him, too personal of a gesture that betrayed too much vulnerability, and that went double for attempts to discuss something like this. “Let’s just say I’ve been better. With
He heard Barnes hum quietly. “Yeah, trust me, I get that. Sometimes you just think ‘How much is too much?’, you know? One curveball after another.”

Bruce knew that feeling all too well, the sense that life just kept pushing you closer and closer to the proverbial edge. The images of the past—destruction in Johannesburg, that witch smirking at him while her hands glowed with that sickening red—shoved their way to the forefront and he just couldn’t ignore those memories anymore, all swirling in his head, taking him back to that dark place and making him so, so—

“I’m just so damn angry that she dared attack Tony again. God, I hate her so much, I really do.”

Bruce stared resolutely at the tea and the silent moment that followed was filled with the Hulk grumbling in his chest—threat, threat, threat—as Bruce tried to shut him up. We’re safe here, there’s no threat, not yet, would you stop that—

“I must’ve misheard ya,” Barnes finally spoke, but the tone was all wrong and it pulled Bruce out of his own mind. There was an uncharacteristic, slack expression on Barnes’ face. “Did you say Tony was attacked? Because I spoke to him last night and he was just fine.”

Ah, shit. He just assumed Barnes would be the first to know after yesterday’s disastrous afternoon. Apparently not. Damn it, how did Bruce end up being the messenger here? He wasn’t good at this sort of thing. “Did— did Tony not tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Barnes barked, striding over to lean against the table, opposite of Bruce. “What the hell happened here, Banner?” That unnatural calm was quickly being replaced by anger.

Bruce was assaulted by that anger on both fronts as the Hulk kept up his displeasure despite Bruce’s reassurances. Barnes isn’t a threat and you’re not helping, goddamnit.

“It was nothing, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize he hadn’t told you yet, I’m sure he was just waiting for you to come back—”

Barnes’ eyes flashed with an unmistakable threat. “You’re going to tell me right now, Banner, or I swear to god—”

Growling, there was outright growling in his head now, expanding into a cloying green mixed with the memories of bright red and this is what Bruce meant about being pushed to the edge—

“Maximoff! It was Maximoff, okay? She’s got into Tony’s head again. Her and her fucking magic!”

Bruce stopped there, chest heaving from the sudden outburst, but it didn’t take long to realize he made a mistake because—

Well, because he was pretty sure it was the Winter Soldier himself standing right in front of him.

“Maximoff,” the other man repeated, his voice dropping back into that unnatural calm, this time even colder, “was in Tony’s head. Again.” The statement felt more like a question and only the barely there squint of Barnes’ eyes betrayed that he was processing the information.

“Well, yeah,” Bruce stuttered out, trying to calm both the Hulk and himself down. Dammit, he really was no good at this sort of thing. “I mean, she fucked with all of our heads during the Ultron disaster, but I really hoped that she turned a new leaf after that, you know? Like Steve and Clint kept insisting back then, but fuck, apparently not. Maybe once you’re Hydra, you’re always Hydra.”
His next thought, to amend that statement to exclude Barnes, got completely derailed by an obscenely loud crack which was followed by the unmistakable sound of shattering glass.

The Hulk roared within him and with the green fog swirling before his eyes, it took Bruce far too long to realize that the marble top of the table in front of him had splintered into pieces and his mug of tea was now a wet puddle and scattered shards of glass on the floor.

*Angry, he was so damn angry.*

There was roaring in his ears, but he was still able to hear the growled “Maximoff was Hydra?” from Barnes and then there were hands on him, pulling at his collar and pushing him back, against something solid. “What the hell do you mean she was Hydra?”

Oh boy, one of them was so going to die if this continued. Unfortunately, Bruce had it on good authority it wasn’t going to be him.

“I really don’t do well with manhandling, Barnes,” he wheezed out. Thankfully, some modicum of common sense (or just basic survival instincts) forced a flash of realization through the other man’s eyes and he backed off, letting go of Bruce.

The Winter Soldier didn’t look any less infuriated though and Bruce needed to get out of there now.

“Friday, contact Tony immediately.” God, his voice was growing deeper too. “Tell him what happened, tell him to get here in his suit.”

The AI didn’t respond verbally, but Bruce knew she heard him well enough. The part of him that hadn’t yet drowned in the sea of green hoped the others wouldn’t rush in behind Tony. He wasn’t sure the Other Guy—or the Winter Soldier for that matter—could handle anyone’s presence but Tony’s.

“You really need to get out of here, Barnes,” Bruce said, glancing down at his own hands. The green was bleeding up over his forearms. He was sure his eyes were green too.

Barnes was still watching him with a look that would’ve spelled death for anyone else. His metal arm was in motion, the servos shifting the plates around as he sporadically flexed it, likely out of frustration. He opened his mouth, lip curling on a snarl, but before he even managed a word—

“What the hell is going on in here?”

It was Tony, but oh god, Bruce’s panic just skyrocketed at the sight because he asked for goddamn Iron Man, but here was Tony, literally skidding around the corner in his sock-clad feet, no suit in sight.

Tony’s arms were already out in a placating gesture when he stopped, as if trying to herd nervous animals, and with deliberate movements, he shifted to the side to leave the exit of out the kitchen open.

“Tony, for fuck’s sake! Your suit! Are you insane?” Bruce shouted, clutching his head, at the same time as Barnes finally spoke up with an explosive “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tony gave each an assessing look before saying calmly, “Okay, I cannot deal with both the Winter Soldier and the damn Hulk in my kitchen. Bruce, do you need to be in the Playroom?”

All Bruce could focus on was breathing through his nose to buy himself a few more minutes—*it’s only Tony, we love Tony, he’s here to take care of us*—but he managed a silent nod.
“Can you make it there on your own?”

Another nod. That was easy, right? Left turn out of the kitchen, down the hall, stairs to the basement. Simple as could be.

“Okay, go. Let Friday know immediately if you can’t do it. Friday, monitor him. Any sign of the Hulk, activate Green Bean protocol.”

Bruce was already on his way out, stumbling past the man before Tony was even done speaking. A brief glance at the engineer, their eyes meeting, and yeah, this close, Bruce could finally see actual fear lurking there.

“Sorry,” was the only thing he could offer, barely a whisper of an apology, before his feet carried him away from the scene, closer and closer to the inevitable hell of transformation.

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Tony didn’t bother watching Bruce leave, choosing instead to take a careful step back to block the exit, all the while keeping his eyes on the Winter Soldier standing next to the now ruined granite countertop. He wished he could spare a thought to Rhodey’s favorite table, but there was no time, not with James seconds away from snapping entirely.

“Friday, put every entrance in here on lockdown and tell the Avengers to stay put. I have this handled.”

“Boss, are you sure that’s the advisable—”

“Now, Friday!” he barked, the frustration seeping into his voice, but he could make his apologies to her later.

Ensuing silence meant her acquiescence, but he only had seconds to enjoy it before James was marching up to him, fire blazing in his eyes.

“What the hell happened while I was gone? You were attacked by— by Maximoff?”

“The attack was a little while ago, actually, but she, uh— she left magic behind, which lashed out at me and Strange when he tried to remove it yesterday.”

For a moment, the vivid anger painted across James’ face fell into uncertainty. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll live,” Tony went for a careless shrug, “wouldn’t be the first time this happened.” He was trying to appear calm, downplay the situation, but he regretted it a second later because James’ eyes flashed with revived, unmistakable wrath.

“Right, because she’s done this before, since she’s— she’s Hydra?” It sounded like James still struggled to believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

“She used to be, sort of,” Tony tried to qualify, but James just snarled.

“What the hell does that mean? What, did they force her? Threaten her family? Brainwash her?”

Tony wished like hell he could lie, but he wasn’t going to, not for her sake. “She and her brother volunteered. Partly to help their side of the civil unrest in Sokovia, partly to destroy me for getting their parents killed. I’m not sure if she was ever a full-fledged ‘hail hydra’ nazi, but she was well aware of who they were. They both joined us when Ultron decided to destroy everything and not just
James paced a few steps, letting himself absorb the information, all while his metal hand clenched and unclenched in agitation at his side. He stopped to level Tony with a severe look. “She was the one who gave you that vision, wasn’t she? The vision you’re still having nightmares about years later?”

All Tony could do was give James a resigned nod. “She went after all of us back then, hell, it was worse for Bruce—”

“Why did you keep this from me? Didn’t you trust me?”

The accusation stung, but Tony pushed the hurt away. “I didn’t think it was relevant and I thought —”

“But relevant? What, were you going to keep this other attack from me too?”

James’ anger was feeding Tony’s own and he felt the flair of heat across his own face. “First, let me finish a fuckin’ sentence. I thought you knew she was ex-Hydra. Hell, she was on your side last time around, so I’m so sorry I didn’t feel like sharing and running the risk of you telling me to get the fuck over it because she’s good now, or she’s just a kid, or whatever—”

“Tony, I would never—”

“And we just found out about this other mess yesterday, okay? I was going to tell you, but I didn’t want to do it over the phone for… obvious reasons,” Tony gestured at the ruined table.

James had the good graces to look guilty, but it only lasted a moment as the Soldier’s cold, calculated fury wrestled back control.

“I would have never taken her side over yours, not even back then. How could you even say that? Do you know how long the Soldier and I have wanted to punish the person who—” James stopped himself from saying more, his chest heaving on an unsteady breath. “Okay, so the first time was that vision, forcing you to see your loved ones dead. Great, just fuckin’ great.” Tony nodded along, but James didn’t need the confirmation. “So what was the second time? What did that Hydra scum do to you now?”

This time, Tony hesitated to answer. That last attack was a recent hurt and in a lot of ways, it affected them both. After all, Maximoff almost cost them their relationship.

There was no going back though and lying wasn’t an option. “Remember my nightmare in Beijing?”

It was obvious that the implications of her actions weren’t lost on James, whose murderous look took on an even sharper edge and if Tony were anyone else, he’d be running scared by now, but this was James, his James, and so Tony stood his ground.

James’ steely glare met Tony’s eyes. “What did she force you to see?”

Just a simple question, but the memories it brought along echoed with remembered loss. “Everyone I loved, moving on with their lives without me. You, accusing me of brainwashing you and keeping you away from Steve.” The answers were like shards of glass down Tony’s throat. “You, telling me the world is better off without me and ripping the arc reactor out of my chest.”

James closed his eyes, just long enough for a sharp, humorless smile to appear on his face, so devoid of its usual softness, that it made Tony’s whole chest ache.
“I’m going to kill her. I’m going to— No, no, she’ll be begging for death by the time I’m done with her—”

“James, think about this—”

“The only thing I need to think about is the fastest way to Wakanda and the most painful ways I can make her suffer before ripping out her throat!”

“I’m not letting you do this,” Tony said, planting himself firmly in front of the other man, even when James took another step, now close enough to tower over Tony.

“Tony, she— she violated you, made you suffer, made you— terrified of me. She deserves to die, like the Hydra filth that she is, for what she did, for all the pain she’s caused you.”

“Yeah, see, that sounds like fun, but it’s actually a really bad idea, so if you want to leave, you’re gonna have to go through me.”

James’ chest visibly heaved as he snarled, “Why are you protecting her?”

“I’m not, I trying to protect you—”

“I don’t need protecting. She attacked you, Tony, not me. Now let me do this!” Tony didn’t budge, didn’t take his eyes off James, and in his peripheral, he saw the man clench both of his hands into fists before letting them unfurl. “I can knock you out with one pinch, one pressure point. You won’t even feel it.”

“Fine, go ahead,” Tony challenged and purposely shifted even closer, their chests almost touching and their breaths coalescing, “but know that you’ll be choosing your revenge over me.”

For one long, terrible second, Tony thought James would actually follow through on his threat, but then the man took a small step back and looked away. Tony hoped to god that meant he was getting through.

“Tell me, James,” he pressed on, “is killing her more important to you than me?”

The other man was already shaking his head “Don’t— don’t you say it like that… You know that—you know you mean everything to me. But this is about you, can’t you see that? What she did to you, it’s still hurting you, years later! She got inside your head, she— she did the same thing to you that those bastards did to me!” He took another step back and pulled at his hair, expression twisted into something pained as anger began to give way to a desperate sort of anguish. “God, those snakes, those fuckin’ snakes, messing with our heads like that, digging into our brains until there’s nothing left—”

“James, they can’t get to us anymore, I promise that you’re safe—”

“I don’t care if I’m safe, dammit, I care about you!” James gulped a shallow breath and turned to grip the countertop of the breakfast bar, as if needing a physical anchor. The surface immediately began to crack under the unyielding grip, but James was too far gone to even notice the damage. “I need to do this. I need to make sure she never touches you again. You have to understand, the Soldier and I—”

“I understand, I do, but I need you to stay here, with me. I can’t let you take this risk.”

James somehow managed a withering glare. “What, you think I can’t do it? I’ve killed plenty of people, Tony. The Soldier and I are very good at it.” There was no pride in those words, just simple
“You’re good, James, I’ll give you that, but the power she possesses? That’s something neither one of us knows how to deal with.”

“Pretty sure a bullet between the eyes would work just fine.”

Tony forced himself to swallow down the frustrated scream forcing its way out of his throat, letting out a heavy breath through his nose instead. He wanted to yell at the stubborn idiot in front of him, he really did. With some of the adrenaline wearing off, Tony’s headache, on its second day of rampage, was coming back with a vengeance and he could feel himself grow more irritated by the second. Maybe he should’ve put on the suit after all. That way he could’ve just knocked said stubborn idiot out.

But even though the rest of the man in front of him screamed Winter Soldier, James’ right hand was visibly shaking when he pulled away from the counter, so Tony kept reminding himself that he needed to be patient. Most of the time, James was his rock, a steady presence that grounded Tony at his most anxious. James was the one to bring him back from the brink of panic, who put up with Tony’s endless insecurities and doubts. Sometimes, with how well James was doing, it was easy to forget that this man carried just as much trauma and hell in his head as Tony did. Sometimes, it was easy to forget James wasn’t always okay.

I want every part of you too, he told him down in Medical and Tony damn well meant it, so he dug up all the willpower at his disposal in order to keep his voice steady on his next words.

“You’re a good shot, sure. But what if something goes wrong? Do you even know if regular bullets work on her? What if you’re discovered? What if she decides to brainwash you? Or kill you?” He took a tiny step closer and his arm twitched, wanting to reach out, but he held himself back. “How do you think I’d handle you winding up dead, huh? Because newsflash, I care about you too.” The mere thought of losing James forced a knot into his throat. He hated to breathe life into those words, but already he could see guilt twisting James’ face into a familiar grimace. “James—”

“How am I supposed to deal with this? I’ve been trying so hard to be good, Tony, dealing with the Soldier’s anger, all that rage over what Hydra did to us. I’ve been good, I have, I swear— but I can’t even think straight right now—” James put more distance between him and Tony as he took a few more stumbling steps back. “God, I hate that I’m like this, I hate this— but I can’t even fuckin’ think over the need to tear her apart. Because it’s you, honey, she hurt you— she’s the one person who the Soldier and I had wanted to destroy ever since that first nightmare—”

Tony watched as James’ shoulders began to shake with a humorless laughter that bordered on hysterical.

“Oh god. It’s been her all along and they lied to me, they all lied to me. She’s Hydra. She’s fuckin’ Hydra and—” James turned away from him, so Tony could only hear the sharp inhale of an aborted sob. “Did you know that Steve— he tried to convince me to let her look inside my head? You know, to get the triggers out. He— he was going to let a goddamn Hydra agent go rootin’ around in my head and she— she was the one who did all that shit to you and— and now she attacks you again? How could they? How could they do that to either one of us?”

Tony called out his name, but James didn’t respond, instead taking another stumble and collapsing on his knees. “Tony,” he nearly cried as he twisted to sit against the wall, his legs bent in front of him, “Tony, I can’t even think— the only thing in my head is wanting to feel her warm blood on my hands. I just— The Soldier is so angry, he needs to— I need to hurt someone—”
Tony was already across the room before James even finished the sentence and following his instincts (because logic got tossed out of the window a second earlier), he unceremoniously planted himself in the man’s lap, genuinely startling James, who looked up at him with frightened, glassy eyes, keeping his hands hovering in the air away from Tony.

“What are you— I tell you I want to hurt someone and you just—”

“As your boyfriend, I have unlimited access to your lap, I thought we discussed this,” Tony cut him off, his typical flippant manner covering up his own fear. He balanced himself by grabbing onto the man’s shoulders and automatically began to rub at the tension there, trying to soothe it away. “I’m not going anywhere, okay? You wanna hurt someone? Fine, hurt me. Let the Soldier through, I dunno, maybe he can let off some steam. Do whatever you need to do, but I’m not losing you to that witch.”

Already James’ face was crumbling back into guilt. “Don’t— don’t you dare say that.” The metal arm dropped to the floor at his side, but his other hand wrapped around Tony’s left wrist. Thankfully, not to pull Tony away from him, but to cling to him like a lifeline. “M’not going to hurt you, I would never want to hurt you.”

“I know, I know,” Tony reassured. He raised his free hand to James’ cheek, caressing the lightly stubbled jaw. There was a searching look in those eyes, a sign of just how lost the man must’ve felt in that moment. His shallow, uneven breaths matched the tremors Tony could feel where he was pressed against the man.

It wasn’t hard to realize that James was still teetering on the edge, that whatever Tony said or did next could make or break him. So Tony went with his instincts and told him the truth.

“I trust you, James,” he said simply and James closed his eyes, brows creased in distress, when he heard the words. “That’s why I’m here now, without a suit, without anything. Don’t even have my gauntlet on. I don’t—” Tony swallowed hard, “I don’t know what you need right now, I don’t know what to do, but I’m not going anywhere until you’re okay. And you— you can just let go if that’s what you need. Stop trying to push the Soldier back, stop trying to control what you feel. I trust both of you not to hurt me.”

Tony stopped for a moment, fighting to keep the tremble out of his voice. James’ grip on his wrist never waivered.

“Just— just stay here with me, baby, please.”

Chapter End Notes

The drama continues and we pick up where we left off next week!
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t know what you need right now, I don’t know what to do, but I’m not going anywhere until you’re okay. And you—you can just let go if that’s what you need. Stop trying to push the Soldier back, stop trying to control what you feel. I trust both of you not to hurt me.”

Tony had to pause, wanting to keep his voice steady despite his heart hammering away in his chest.

“Just—just stay here with me, baby, please.”

Tony almost expected a reprimand—Tony, that’s a terrible idea, do you not have an ounce of self-preservation?—but no admonishment came. James didn’t lash out, didn’t push him away, didn’t even open his eyes. He only moved to lift Tony’s hand to his cheek so he could press into it, the stubble scratchy against Tony’s palm.

They stayed like that for a good few minutes and Tony watched as a fragile sort of calm settled between them. He watched as James’ breathing evened out, watched as the sharp lines of distress etched into his frown softened, if only a fraction.

It struck him that even like this, James was beautiful, managing to take Tony’s breath away even in the middle of this emotionally charged scene. Not for the first time, Tony wondered how they ended up here, how Tony ended up with someone like James and as he took in all these details, as he took in the hint of tears, just a few clinging to James’ long eyelashes, he realized with an undeniable certainty that there was no going back for him. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t simply stop loving this man, not anymore. The point of no return was months ago, if he were honest, and the realization scared him, more than their argument from minutes ago ever could.

How many times in the past had Tony trusted someone only to have that trust rewarded with a knife in the back? James had the power to crush him now, completely and utterly, with just a few simple words, and the fear of being left behind again was real, palpable, but to Tony’s surprise, its overwhelming presence, that undeniable and familiar ache in his chest, lasted only a moment, one long moment, before it gave way to something stronger.

Because Tony loved this man, with everything he had. Loved him a little bit more with each passing day, loved him with a strength that surprised even Tony himself. He never planned on falling in love again, not after everything, not after heartache, betrayals, and loss. No, he had himself convinced that it was better this way, that being alone meant being safe, but when did his life ever go the way he planned it?

This time though, it was hard to regret the strange new path he ended up on. He fell in love, but it didn’t end there because while love was amazing, trust was precious. He trusted James, even now, even with the world falling into chaos around them, and that, more than anything else, settled the fear within him.

James took a deep breath and Tony almost reached out to wipe some of those tears away, but he was afraid the touch would break the delicate moment of peace.

Another long, silent moment and then those blue eyes finally fluttered open. The uncertainty, the desperation, all of that was gone and the familiar, sharp gaze made Tony shiver. He didn’t fear the
Soldier, not really, but that chill and that dangerous, raw sense of power... It always made him think of howling, ravaging blizzards. A deadly force of nature. Winter Soldier indeed.

Tony instinctively knew that this wasn’t like last time. It wasn’t a clean break—hopefully never would be again—because this was undeniably still his James, but the man must have followed Tony’s advice after all and let himself get lost in the Soldier’s consciousness, relinquishing control to that part of himself. Tony had no way of knowing if this helped James process the whole shitty situation, but past events taught them both that James functioned best when he didn’t fight to reject this part of himself.

James looked away just long enough to press a kiss into Tony’s palm and then the metal hand reached out for Tony, who couldn’t help but let out a soft sigh when James touched him, when he felt the careful strokes of those fingers, beginning with the apple of Tony’s cheek, then his temple, then trailing down to trace the line of Tony’s jaw. The motions repeated themselves and they stayed like that for a few minutes, with James seeming perfectly content to have that touch as his sole focus. The exchange remained gentle, the super soldier giving no indication that he wanted to fight or throw Tony off.

The steel blue eyes followed the movements of the metal hand as the thumb brushed against Tony’s lips this time, causing Tony’s breath to hitch as memories of far more pleasurable activities flooded his mind, but the digit didn’t linger there, finding its way back up and rubbing at the soft skin of Tony’s temple instead. The pressure felt amazing against the headache pounding at the inside of his skull and no amount of willpower could’ve prevented Tony from letting out the tiniest of moans as he closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. God, he really hoped James wasn’t trying to lull him into submission before running off to play assassin because a few more minutes of this and Tony would end up as a boneless puddle on the floor.

“Solnishko moyo,” James’ voice finally cut through the silence, the familiar throaty Russian sending yet another shiver through Tony’s whole body, “my clever Tony, mir moi. I’ll never let any of them touch you ever again.” The tone was uncharacteristically steady, masking the anger behind those words, but this was the Soldier and that simmering wrath was always near the surface, ready to overflow. Tony forced his eyes to open so he could look at James, who kept his eyes locked on Tony and that didn’t help Tony’s resolve either, because the hunger, the intensity behind that cool gaze made Tony think of far too many inappropriate things, but he needed to focus. There was still an angry assassin he had to talk off the proverbial ledge.

The cool metal fingers massaging small circles into Tony’s temple stilled before threading themselves through Tony’s hair. A tug and Tony willingly followed the pressure, letting himself be pulled closer. Tony let his eyes fall shut again and he knew James would’ve felt the exhale he let out.

“But that witch, she already sank her filthy claws into you. She hurt you,” James whispered, keeping Tony in place as their lips brushed together, “ripped you apart, under my own nose. I could’ve lost you.” An actual kiss now, the feather-light touch in stark contrast to the wrath in that tone. “And you’re asking me to let her live after what she has done to you?”

Before letting Tony give any sort of an answer, James captured his lips again, the kiss deeper this time, more forceful, demanding submission that Tony willingly gave. With everything currently happening, he could only spare a tiny thought of disappointment that he and James couldn’t enjoy this without all the damn stress and the revelations and the drama. He could think of a dozen better ways to spend his time with the Soldier.

James pulled away, his heavy breath hot against Tony’s kiss-swollen lips. “What am I supposed to do, sweetheart?” There was a taste of that earlier desperation to the question. “Lyubov’ moya, zvezda
moya, I have to make her pay. I have to protect you. How do you expect me to sit here and do nothing?"

“I expect you to be smart about this, James.” It was Tony’s turn to meet James’ lips for a brief kiss, but then he pulled far enough away to catch the man’s eyes. The metal hand fell away, ending up a heavy weight on Tony’s thigh. “I don’t want her running amok any more than you do and I’ll be damned if she hurts anyone else again. Trust me, we’re not letting her come back, we’re going to deal with her, but we can’t just rush into this.” He mimicked the Soldier’s earlier caresses, brushing a hand against James’ temple and tucking away a few stray strands of hair. “You and the Soldier, you’re perfectly capable, I don’t doubt that for a second, but you’ve never gone up against someone with magic before. Others on our team have. Trust us to figure this out. Trust us to do this the smart way.” Here, he shrugged, deciding it wouldn’t hurt to throw the Soldier a bone. “And if the smart way ends up being the Winter Soldier putting a bullet through her head, then so be it. But I distinctly remember you saying you never wanted to be that guy again, that you didn’t want to be a killer.”

Honestly, Tony hoped it would never come to that. This wasn’t something he wanted marring James’ conscience.

James’ throat bobbed on a hard swallow before he looked away. “I’ve always been a killer. S’not something I can just erase. Stupid of me to think that I could’ve.”

“You can have a fresh start. You don’t have to be involved if you don’t want to. There are others—”

James leveled him with a glare that bordered on annoyed. “If you think I will stand back while that Hydra scum does whatever she wants—”

“I know, I know,” Tony shushed him, “you’re not the guy to run and hide. I know you want to protect me and I can’t judge, honey, I really can’t. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want her dead too. God, just the thought of her coming anywhere near you or—or anyone else—” Tony shuddered and his grip on James’ shoulders instinctively tightened. The solid muscle beneath his hands was proof that James was here with him, that the man he loved was okay, even as the words brought back visions of death and destruction. “I want her to pay, but we need to do this right.”

It was hard to read James’ expression, a strange mix of the Soldier’s intensity and James’ pain, but after some long moments of them doing nothing but holding on to each other and feeling each other breathe, Tony watched as the icy cold in those eyes began to melt and then Tony was being pulled close again.

This time, the kiss was soft. Despite the tension still radiating from the man, despite the fact that the Soldier never truly disappeared, the kiss was unhurried, undemanding. It felt like an apology, communicated through the press of their lips.

When James broke the kiss, he didn’t let Tony pull back, instead pressing their foreheads together. Tony closed his eyes and wound his arms around James’ shoulders. Strong arms settled around Tony’s waist as well and another minute was spent in silence, the need to be close overpowering everything else.

“I’m never leaving you again, I swear.”

Tony felt the hot breath of those words against his lips and he couldn’t help the way his arms tightened around James. “I know I shouldn’t be encouraging the whole overprotectiveness thing, but fuck, I really hope you intend to keep that promise.”

“Trust me, I do. Sick and tired of this shit happening to you. And I’m sorry about— about all of
“Don’t be. Are you okay?”

James shook his head, causing Tony’s own head to sway with the motion. “No, not yet, but god, it doesn’t matter. I should be asking you that, you were the one attacked—”

“Hey, don’t worry about me.”

“I’m always gonna worry. You said the magic lashed out at you?”

Seemed like James was finally calm and lucid enough to want the details. Tony huffed a tired laugh, knowing that his explanation would sound ridiculous no matter how he phrased it. Damn magic.

“Leftover magic from her attack, yeah. Viz noticed it a while ago, but didn’t know what it was. Strange finally came by, went into my mind, and the magic got pissed off. No lasting damage though, everyone came out of it just fine. I’ll be fine too.” He bumped his nose against James’.

“What about you? What do you need, sweetheart?”

“You,” James confessed and Tony’s heart fluttered at the earnest tone in that voice. “The Soldier, he needs something to focus on, something to pull him away from all that anger, that damn bloodlust.” James’ arms gripped him just a little tighter to emphasize the point. “This— this is helping though.”

“Yeah? You think I can be a good distraction for the two of you?”

James pressed a kiss to the corner of Tony’s lips, but didn’t follow the tender gesture with anything more. “M’not in the right frame of mind for that. I’d— I’d never forgive myself if I hurt you somehow.”

While Tony may have been adventurous in the bedroom (and planned to explore plenty with James), he couldn’t disagree with that. This wasn’t what they needed right now and after giving it a minute of thought, Tony decided on another plan of action.

“I missed you so much, James. Needed you so badly, after yesterday. Been so miserable.”

James pushed Tony just far enough away to look at him, eyes wide. “So I should be worried about you. God, Tony, I’m so sorry, I should’ve— how bad was it? How bad were you hurt?”

Tony had no intention of being pushed away, so he leaned in so he could kiss James again. “Stop apologizing. And no, it’s nothing permanent, not even physical, but every muscle in my body aches like crazy, my head hasn’t stopped hurting for two days, and I’ve thrown up two of the last three meals I’ve had.”

Really, Tony didn’t even need to exaggerate how miserable he was. He just hoped he could put that misery to good use. If there was ever a mother hen that could give Rhodey a run for his money, it was Tony’s other favorite James.

The man’s hands flexed against Tony’s back before James sat more upright while still holding Tony close and Tony had to bite his lip at the way their hips shifted against each other, sparking a flair of heat deep in his belly. It wasn’t the right time, he kept telling himself, and thankfully, he was quickly distracted by careful fingers that began massaging his temples again. If Tony didn’t know any better, he would’ve suspected magic with how good that touch felt.

“I’m miserable and in pain,” he continued, letting something pitiful seep into his voice, “and the only thing I want is some sleep, but I haven’t been doing that either because you weren’t there next to me.” Tony would’ve probably felt embarrassed at his pathetic litany of complaints, but James’
expression was already shifting out of pained anger and into concern. Tony wished he could erase the crease between those brows altogether, but given the circumstances, he’d settle for worried over murderous. “Need you and the Soldier to take care of me. Need you both so badly. Please, James? Stay with me? Make me feel better?”

The other man’s lip twitched upwards, just enough for Tony to see, and he couldn’t help his own small smile.

“What, too much?”

“S’a bit over the top, yeah.”

Tony’s smile brightened, despite the pain, the stress, the whole shitty situation. “I really am miserable though. Strange said it was just energy exhaustion, whatever the hell that is, but I just feel like I’m hungover and like I just lost a fight and like I have the worst case of food poisoning.”

James was brushing his metal thumb against the dark, heavy shadows underneath Tony’s eyes. “M’sorry I wasn’t here.”

“That wasn’t your fault. I wanted to wait to do the whole magic thing, but I honestly didn’t think it’d turn into this disaster.”

“Sorry for losing it then?” James tried again, getting a shrug and the same tired smile out of Tony.

“You already apologized and hey, I know what I was signing up for,” he said and then hurried to explain in case that sounded callous. “Hydra’s a touchy topic for you, I get that. I expected a bad reaction.”

“You shouldn’t have to expect bad anything. God, Tony, I dunno why you put up with me sometimes—”

“Hey, hey, hold on, you’re way off base here. I’m not putting up with anything. Come on, sweetheart, look at me.” Tony waited until he had James’ sorrowful blue eyes in view. “I don’t expect you to be perfect. Fuck, I’m not even close to perfect. A really shitty thing happened, you had a bad reaction, and it took us— what? Five minutes to both calm down? I’ve had fights with Rhodey over what to get for dinner that lasted longer.”

James looked so lost for a moment that all Tony could do was draw him back for a kiss, trying to comfort him with touch when words didn’t work quite as well.

When they pulled apart, that uncertain expression was gone, but James was still frowning.

“I almost got Banner to hulk out right in the middle of the kitchen. God, I was so angry, even though none of this was his fault. He must hate me now.”

Tony thought about that for a moment. “Hey, Fri?”

“Yeah, Boss?”

“How’s Brucie Bear?”

“Dr. Banner made it safely to the Hulk Containment Pod and transformed into the Hulk. After transformation, Mr. Hulk destroyed several training dummies, but has since calmed down and is currently watching videos of small animals.”
“The Big Guy is the biggest sucker for kittens,” Tony shared conspiratorially, trying to lighten the mood. “He’ll be alright, I promise, and if there’s one person who knows what it’s like to lose control because of anger, it’s Bruce. I mean, I’m not gonna lie, pissing off the Hulk wasn’t your brightest move, babe, but hell, Bruce was already on edge. I’m pretty sure a brisk gust of wind would’ve set him off. He needed to let off some steam. It could’ve gone better, yeah, but he’ll understand. A genuine apology will go a long way. Plus, I’ll let you in on a secret. Bruce is a heathen who doesn’t drink coffee, but he loves coffee flavored things, so bake him those froo-froo mocha something-something cupcakes and he’ll love you forever.”

Tony’s attempt at humor fell short because James was still looking away and the frown didn’t budge.

“I threatened you.”

Apparently the man was still trying to find something to feel guilty about, but Tony didn’t plan to make that easy for him. “You didn’t even touch me.”

“I yelled at you.”

“And it won’t be the last time. Believe it or not, some people actually say I have these annoying qualities about me and that I can get on their nerves. Crazy, right? I am a paragon of delightful.”

James bit his lip, but now it was to keep himself from smiling. “I broke the table?”

“I hated that damn table. We’ll get a better one. Bigger too, since everyone always ends up hanging out in the kitchen somehow. Anything else?”

Finally, the man huffed an actual laugh, although it was weary more than anything else, which only encouraged Tony’s own tenderness to counteract the lingering guilt. He didn’t hesitate to follow the compulsion to place a kiss on James’ forehead.

“I get it, okay? This was a lot to take in. Too much. You feel betrayed and lied to. Someone you thought of as an ally used to work for the people who tortured you. And it’s Hydra. Fuck all those bastards.”

“They never told me,” James offered, forlorn. “Just said ‘She helped us defeat Ultron, she’s an Avenger now.’ I lived with her for months, dammit, thought there was something wrong with me when I couldn’t stand to be around her—” The pained expression came back, but at least James seemed to be in control of it now. “Makes sense now, doesn’t it? Couldn’t even be in the same room as her, couldn’t stand to look at her. The Soldier, he knew— he must’ve known she was Hydra, somehow.”

“You have no memories of her? From before?”

“No, I don’t remember her, but that doesn’t say much. Tony, please, trust me, if I’d known what she did, who she was— I would have never stuck around if I knew I was on the same side as nazi scum.”

“I know, babe, I don’t hold any of this against you. All I want is for you to be safe, that’s all.”

James just shrugged. “The Soldier still wants her dead. So do I, if I’m being honest. But we want this,” he stopped to return the gesture, lips soft and warm against Tony’s forehead and hands sure as they cradled Tony’s face, “we want this more. Tony, you know I’d never choose revenge— or anything else for that matter— over you, right?”

“I know.” He wasn’t entirely honest, but Tony was self-aware enough to know that was due to his
own character flaws, not James’.

“God, you’ve been in all this pain and here I was, yelling at you instead of taking care of you. M’so sorry.”

Tony answered the apology with an honest smile and James dropped his head to Tony’s shoulder, hiding himself from the world even as he pulled Tony even tighter against him. Tony gladly wrapped his arms around James, pressing his cheek against James’ head. The hair at the nape of his neck was soft as Tony carded his fingers through it.

He savored the closeness, wishing they could both hide away from the world for a while, but it was probably a good idea to contact the others. “Fri, did you let everyone know we’re fine?”

“Yes, I have kept everyone up to date, informing them— quite happily, I have to say— that there have been no injuries and only minor property damage. Colonel Rhodes has asked me to inform you that he hates both of you, very much, and that you will be the death of him.”

“Duly noted. Tell Platypus I love him too.”

James heaved a sigh against his shoulders and Tony patted him on the back.

“We’ll be fine. We’ve both dealt with worse. This is peanuts compared to the crap we’ve been through. Hey, wait,” Tony suddenly thought of something, “does this count as our first fight?” That was enough to get James to straighten up and look at him. Tony grinned. “Because you know what they say about make-up sex.”

“You are terrible,” James remarked, trying to sound stern, but the small smile on his lips betrayed him, and to Tony, that smile felt like the sun finally shining through the clouds after a storm.

“I know, I’m the worst,” Tony quipped back and yet again, he was tempted to forget about this whole magic and witches and Hydra bullshit, but there was something else he still needed from James. His lips downturned and James’ expression dimmed along with his own. “James, I need you to promise me something.”

James didn’t hesitate. “Anything.”

“Don’t go after her, okay? Don’t disappear in the middle of the night to chase her down. Don’t go behind my back. I know you’d be doing it for me, but that’s not what I need. Can you promise me that?”

James’ gaze never waivered from Tony, a vulnerability there that made Tony’s breath hitch. Before speaking, he kissed Tony again. A promise this time, rather than an apology. “I won’t betray your trust, Tony. I’ll deal with the Soldier— he’s volatile and so damn angry, but you mean just as much to him as you do to me. Unless there’s immediate danger to yourself or someone else, I won’t go after her.”

“Yeah, if she’s at the Compound attacking us, you have my permission to shoot her in the face.”

“Duly noted,” James parroted Tony’s earlier words. He was smiling again, but the shaky sigh he let out betrayed his still frayed nerves. It’d take more time for James to fully come back to himself. “Now, can I take you to bed and get you fed and give you a massage for all those aching muscles?”

Tony could’ve cried at that offer. “Oh god, yes, please. You have my explicit permission to pamper the crap out of me.”
Without any further fanfare, James slid his hands down, getting a good grip on Tony’s thighs before standing up and lifting Tony along with him. On instinct, Tony’s legs wrapped around the man’s waist, while his arms clung to those broad shoulders.

Tony may have also let out a startled noise, which James must’ve found amusing because the smile on his face almost resembled his usual sly smirk. Almost, but it was still an improvement, so Tony didn’t even bother complaining about the manhandling, letting James carry him off to their quarters.

As they walked out of the kitchen, he caught a glimpse of the destroyed table and let out his own sigh, although whether from relief or exhaustion, he couldn’t tell. He and James were going to be okay, he’d make sure of that, but when it came to everything else, he knew this whole mess was just getting started.

Chapter End Notes

*mir moi* - my world
*lyubov’ moya, zvezda moya* - my love, my star

(the Soldier is such a sap, what even ;3)
Chapter Notes

It's that time again for me to disappear for a few weeks, so consider this hiatus fluff (so much fluff, omg, with a little bit of flowery smut towards the end). Enjoy and I'll be back next month!

See the end of the chapter for more notes!

“Come on, lie down for me, honey,” James beckoned Tony over, who needed very little prompting as the pillow in James’ lap looked inviting enough, with the man himself settled cross-legged against the headboard, giving plenty of room for Tony to stretch out. Tony crawled over across the bed, sneaked one quick kiss from James, and then laid down, wiggling into the fluffy blankets beneath him to get himself situated. The pillow was soft too and he gratefully sunk into the comfort. For two days now, that damn magical exhaustion had him miserable and on edge. Every light was too damn bright, every noise too loud, and his skin protested against the lightest of touch because it might as well have been sandpaper.

This though? This was heaven. After they left the kitchen, James carried him to their quarters and while Tony was ushered into the bathroom and ordered to take a warm shower and change into something comfortable and clean, James snuck back into the kitchen to prep a quick smoothie. Thankfully, strawberry and mango, along with some well-disguised spinach and protein powder, were a combination Tony’s stomach deemed acceptable, so between feeling warm and clean and finally satiated, Tony was doing a million times better.

Maybe there really was some wisdom to Strange’s strange advice of “Let that broody boyfriend of yours take care of you, I mean it.”

He glanced up at James, who met his eyes with a smile and tried to tuck a piece of unruly hair back behind his ear, only for it to escape and fan out along the side of his face again.

“Head still hurting?” he asked, words quiet and the concern genuine, but before Tony could give an answer, James’ hands were already massaging Tony’s temples.

Tony gave an affirmative hum anyways, because those hands on him were exactly what he needed. He knew having James home would make all the difference in the world.

James began tracing lines across Tony’s face with his thumbs, careful brushes along Tony’s brows, then over the bridge of his nose, and a gentler sweep under his eyes. It was just as amazing as what the Soldier did earlier and already the throbbing pain in Tony’s head began to recede.

He didn’t even bother feeling shame at the moan he let out as James applied firmer pressure to his temples.

“Oh god, James, you’re incredible,” he mumbled, letting his eyes fall shut to fully enjoy the sensation, but not before he saw a pleased smile on the super soldier’s face. “Did I ever tell you that your hands are the ninth wonder of the world? Because they absolutely are.”

“I think you did, yeah, and you followed it up with ‘well, of course they are, I made one of them.’”
“Good memory, soldier, and a very valid point. You put that gloriously constructed hand to excellent use.”

That earned him a chuckle, but then there were fingers scratching at his scalp, so Tony just let out a happy sigh and tried not to think.

James continued the massage for a few silent minutes, soothing Tony into a calm state as the rest of his muscles began to relax, releasing all of the tension they’d clung to for the past several days. James’ movements remained gentle, unhurried, and it meant more to Tony than he was willing to admit that this was true earlier as well. Even at his most volatile, even when the steady ground underneath his feet was yanked away, even with that single attempt at a threat, James never actually touched him with the intent to hurt. Tony was sure a part of it was the awareness of the difference between their physical strengths, but it wasn’t just that. The way James touched him, whether on a lazy Sunday morning or in the middle of a Soldier episode, it was… reverent, if Tony had to choose a word and whether he deserved to be treated like something precious or holy was a different question altogether, but Tony couldn’t help but appreciate how cared for he felt, especially right here and now.

He also appreciated the fact that this affection, genuine and freely given, didn’t have him running for the hills. The old Tony would’ve hidden himself away in the darkest corner of his lab, away from any sort of sympathy or support. Instead, to deal with the stress clawing at his insides, with the fear keeping him up at night, he would get himself lost in engineering binges, or worse, get himself lost in a bottle.

It took some humility to admit that this— allowing others to care for him, to take some of his burden as their own— this was so much better than his arrogant, reckless attempts to carry the whole world on his shoulders. Of course, it took a hard-earned lesson that you couldn’t show your vulnerable, soft belly to just anybody, but Tony liked to believe that last year’s events were a trial by fire and he came out of it a better man. A little more damaged and a lot more jaded, but it taught him who his real family was and in some strange way— he refused to call it “fate”— it brought him to James.

All in all, it was harder and harder to look back on those days and feel regret or a sense of loss. Whatever he did lose couldn’t compare to what he now had.

James’ hands brought Tony’s attention back to the present as they wandered down to rub Tony’s shoulders, massaging away the harder knots with practiced movements. Tony blinked his eyes open, wanting to see James and he was met with a serious, contemplative expression.

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked, prompting James to predictably shake his head and attempt a smile. “Come on, I know that face.”

“S’just my face,” James supplied unhelpfully, but at least those amazing hands kept rubbing away at the tension in Tony’s shoulders. “And no, this isn’t that ‘everything is my fault’ face either.”

“No, this is the face where you’re thinking too hard about something.”

“Funny, you have a face just like that too.”

Tony managed a pout, certain it looked even more ridiculous to James from Tony’s upside down position. “Come on, babe. What’s up? You just had one hell of a bombshell dropped on you, so I know you have a lot on your mind.”

“You should be resting, honey, we can talk about this later—”
“I can rest and talk at the same time, you know.” Tony made sure he had James’ gaze. “If there’s something you wanna say, let’s at least give it a try.” God, that sounded odd coming out of his mouth. Tony Stark, advising someone not to bottle things up. In some circles, that was considered the first sign of the apocalypse and if this kept up, he was going to start sounding like Rhodey. Or Pepper.

Those two would be so damn proud if they knew.

James didn’t say anything at first, half-lidded eyes focused on the movement of his hands instead.

“Did she ever apologize?” he said when he finally found the words. “To you or anyone else she’s hurt before she switched sides? Did she try to make amends?”

The answer was simple, but Tony still hesitated before responding. “No, she didn’t. At least not to me. Not to Bruce either. Don’t know about anyone else, I didn’t— I didn’t stay around for long. Nightmares kept me awake every night, I flinched anytime she used her powers around me— and she used them liberally, even outside of training. Eventually, I found myself spending most of my days hiding in the lab, so I just— I left. Stayed with Rhodey for a few months.” Tony let out a humorless snort, for a moment lost in the bitter memories. “Billionaire Tony Stark, crashing on the couch. I could’ve stayed at one of my properties, I guess, but being around Rhodey helped. Gave me perspective, reminded me that there was a world beyond the Avengers and all the shit I got caught up in.”

James regarded him for one long moment before scowling, which looked even more severe from Tony’s point of view.

“Every word you just said makes me hate her more.”

“Sorry,” was all Tony could offer, but James just shook his head.

“So, nothing then? No regret, no remorse, no desire to make up for the damage she did? And I’m not just talking about your Ultron fight, Tony. If she— if she was Hydra,” James practically hissed the word, “then there’s more blood on her hands than that one fight. You don’t get to be Hydra scum by playing nice. Her powers, they— hell, how many people did she practice on to get the hang of powers like that?”

Tony gave a dejected shrug in response. He wondered all these things back then too, trying to make sense of the others’ decision to let her join them, but it made just as much sense then as it did now.

“I just— I don’t get it,” James continued, “if she didn’t show even an ounce of remorse, why would Steve trust her? Why would he ask her to join? Why would he—” James’ expression twisted in pain. “Why would he let her anywhere near me? We spent a whole war fighting people like Hydra, lost so much because of them. I just— I don’t understand. I need to understand, but at the same time, I don’t want to get on the phone and demand answers because I have a feeling that would just devolve into pointless yelling.”

Despite the heavy topic at hand, James’ touch never faltered, fingers tracing slow, careful lines over the apples of Tony’s cheeks and the sweep of his jaw.

“I think Steve honestly thought she did turn good, that she found redemption or whatever. I mean, in the end, she did fight on our side and Steve believes in second chances. He thought she earned hers.”

James scoffed. “How can you defend him on this?”
“I’m not defending him, I’m just—” Tony struggled for the right words. “Steve isn’t evil, he’s not secretly rooting for Hydra or anything, he’s just—”

“An idiot?”

Tony made a face. “Eh, yeah, pretty much. It’s the one thing we have in common, I guess.”

James didn’t seem convinced. “That’s a lousy excuse. There’s no reason to trust a former enemy days after they tried to kill you. Not wanting to die because there’s a killer robot on the loose is hardly heroic. It’s self-preservation. Hell, any Hydra agent, past or present, would’ve tried to save their own hide.”

Unfortunately, Tony didn’t have a satisfying explanation for that either. “She lost her brother in that fight,” he offered instead, “so maybe everyone thought that was punishment enough. From what I understand, the other Maximoff died saving Barton. That went a long way in terms of sympathy with the others, even Natasha. And then Steve…” Tony paused, trying to parse out the many memories of those years, both good and bad. “Well, aside from the second chances thing, he saw a part of himself in her, I think? Young kids, both ‘experimented’ on for the good of their country, etcetera, etcetera.”

James let out a snort, looking entirely unimpressed.

“God, it does sound like him. I hate that it does because it ain’t reality! He volunteered for the US Army, she volunteered for the Nazis. He got injected with a serum, tripled in size, and lost the asthma. She gained magical mind-fuck powers.” James shook his head, looking away. “I don’t think I know him anymore. He used to hate bullies real bad, you know? But he has it all confused now. Even back in Wakanda, he was still tryin’ to protect her. Got frustrated with me just ‘cause I kept getting up and leaving every time she came into the room. Told me it was ‘rude’, but sure as hell didn’t think it was rude to lie to me. I should’ve just followed the Soldier’s instincts and taken her out then and there, but I suppose it would’ve been rude to get blood all over the King’s fancy villa.”

In hindsight, T’Challa probably would’ve appreciated the Winter Soldier dealing with Wanda then and there. As expected, the call with the King was unpleasant at best. T’Challa was furious at the discovery that one of his “guests” had stepped out of line and apprehensive that their location was now known by so many. There was also a hint of apologetic, subtle in that stoic, reserved way of his.

“I thought keeping them within the boundaries of the villa would keep them out of trouble. Had I known any of them had malicious intent, I would have been far less lenient, consequences be damned. I would have dealt with them myself, swiftly and harshly. Unfortunately, I did not. I regret that my folly resulted in you getting hurt, Mr. Stark, and I am prepared to work with you and the rest of the Avengers. You have my permission to enter Wakanda and my assistance in apprehending the criminal.”

Tony pushed away the recollections, wanting to focus on the here and now instead. James’ words were decidedly murderous in their intent—no surprise there— but the man was practically pouting as he grumbled his displeasure and Tony had to smile at the bizarre dichotomy.

“Did you know you get this adorable little crease between your brows when you’re frowning and threatening murder? It’s precious.”

The frown turned into a glare. “Now you’re just mocking me.”
Tony tried for an easy smile. “I’m not mocking, baby, I swear, I’m just trying to take your thoughts into a less… murder-y direction, that’s all. Plus, you are adorable, so you can’t argue with that.”

James huffed, trying to seem affronted, but Tony could see how his expression softened. “I probably shouldn’t be encouraging the Soldier anyways. He’s still on edge. All that bloodlust and righteous fury and vengeance. I never knew Russian could sound so annoyingly dramatic. I mean, it’s better— I’m better, but I sure as hell ain’t over it. Not even close.”

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you better answers. It’s just— it is what it is, I guess.”

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“No, this helps a little. Gives me context,” Bucky replied as his fingers skirted over Tony’s brows again. “Unfortunately, none of it makes me any less furious with the whole thing. I have so many questions and I know the answers will just make me angrier, but I just need— I need time to process all of this. Maybe I’ll beat the answers out of Steve once he gets here.” Some small part of him, a smiling young man from a past long gone, mourned the friendship he once had, hated that it had come to this, but they all made their choices and he had no intention of regretting his.

“While I totally get that compulsion, can we postpone the whole ‘beating up the disgraced superheroes’ thing? Pretty sure the UN and the Council will want us all to play nice.”

“Only if those ‘disgraced superheroes’ behave themselves.”

“Well, now you’re just asking for the impossible.”

Tony was obviously trying to lighten up the conversation with his usual humor, but Bucky wasn’t willing to let go of the anger just yet. “So, the rest of them are still getting pardoned then?”

“Probably. Depends on what they do when the Avengers show up to arrest Maximoff. T’Challa didn’t seem to think any of them were actively sitting around and plotting, so chances are, this was just another one of her temper tantrums and it was just my bad luck that I was away from home.”

Bucky swallowed back the bitter taste in his mouth as something suddenly occurred to him. “That attack, I think it happened not long after my second call with Steve.”

That had Tony’s attention. “So you think Steve was involved?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that the call didn’t end on a high note and then hours later, the witch got inside your head.”

The Soldier stirred inside him, still so close to the surface that Bucky couldn’t tell where he ended and the Soldier began.

If the Captain is involved, I will tear him to shreds.

Trust me, if Steve was a part of this, I won’t stop you.

“Well, that’s circumstantial at best, but we can’t rule out anything. Hope and the others will have to read the situation once they’re there.”

James nodded his agreement, but the anger— oh, he could feel it down to his very bones. “God help them if they were involved…” He would put the fear of the goddamn Winter Soldier into each and everyone of them. “But even if they weren’t a part of Maximoff’s bullshit this time, didn’t they know what she did to you before? How could they just ignore that?”
“In the team’s defense, they didn’t know everything. I never told them about the details, only that she
got into my head— she got into everyone’s heads at some point, except Birdbrain’s. They didn’t
know what I saw, but they were aware that I wasn’t... comfortable around her. Now, Bruce on the
other hand? That was way worse. He had a much harder time than I did. Hell, he ran away to the
other side of the world to get away from her.”

“What did she do to him?”

“Forced him to hulk out against his will. He went on a rampage, nearly destroyed a city before I
managed to stop him.” Tony hesitated and the guilt in his expression was clear. “There were multiple
civilian casualties.”

“What?” Bucky was genuinely taken aback, thoughts racing as more information kept slotting into
his already overworked mind. “And they still— after all of that, Steve still made her part of the team?
Invited her to live with the very people she hurt? Why would he—”

He stopped himself and pulled away from Tony to scrub his hands across his face in an attempt to
calm himself.

She’s a threat. She must be eliminated.

“How much blood is really on her hands? How many people did she use as lab rats to test her
powers? Then she ripped apart your mind, she hurt Banner, she— she had me kill you in that fuckin’
dream. God, you’ve no idea the violent, awful things I wanna do to her right now. The Soldier is
making a literal list in my head—”

How long would it take for her to bleed out if we carve the names of those she hurt into her? How
many bones can we break before she screams herself hoarse?

“James, you promised you wouldn’t—”

“I know, I know,” Bucky scrubbed even harder against his eyes, regretting the whole damn
conversation— this was meant to be about Tony, not him— but the Soldier was still so damn close.
“M’not saying I’m going to skin her alive. Just that I want to.” Tony’s hand settled on his flesh wrist,
pulling the hand away from Bucky’s face.

“Honey, look at me, please?” Tony asked and Bucky complied. How could he not? Tony only had
to say so and Bucky would give him the whole damn world.

He could see concern in Tony’s eyes, laced with infinite patience, and something inside Bucky
shifted, the Soldier bleeding through, into his blood, into his skin, down to his very fingertips, as if
Tony’s touch was the Soldier’s siren call. He didn’t bother fighting the shift, giving into those baser
instincts once more.

“She hurt you, my love…” Fighting the temptation to kiss Tony was pointless too, so Bucky cradled
Tony’s face in his hands and leaned over to press a kiss to his boyfriend’s forehead.

As his lips lingered against the warm skin, Bucky admitted to himself that if it weren’t for Tony, the
Winter Soldier wouldn’t be here lounging on a bed and indulging himself with another kiss, this time
to the tip of Tony’s nose, coaxing out that cute scrunched up expression. No, the Soldier would be
spending every waking minute planning out every last detail of his new mission, turning himself
back into the perfect weapon Hydra forced him to become, preparing himself for his next kill.

Bucky let his hands glide over Tony’s skin, exploring the stubble of his jaw before sliding lower and
brushing his thumbs over the Adam’s apple of Tony’s exposed throat. Even though the touch was
feather-light, Tony’s breath hitched just enough for Bucky to notice.

He remembered how scared Tony looked, after that nightmare, when even a simple touch caused him to flinch away from Bucky.

*She used our image to cause him pain. She tried to take him away from us. We can’t let it happen again.*

*I know.*

*She has to pay.*

*And someday she will. But we made a promise to stay.*

*Nashe solnishko, mir nash’, he’s more important that the mission, isn’t he?*  

*He is the mission. He will always be our mission.*

The one thing Bucky and the Soldier always had in common was the fact that Tony came first. Their Tony, who trusted them. Their Tony, who had no fear in his eyes now, not anymore. Just affection and love and *anticipation* and Bucky wanted to drown in it.

Tony craned his neck and in the process, he presented even more of his vulnerable throat to Bucky. An invitation if he ever saw one and Bucky settled the metal hand over Tony’s throat, just enough for the gesture to be possessive, but not stifling.

The last thing on Bucky’s mind was hurting Tony, but neither one of them could deny that the perception, the *possibility* of danger was always there. Tony’s life in the literal palm of his hand because both of them were well aware that all Bucky had to do was *crush*—

“I trust you, James,” Tony said, the same words he offered earlier, when all Bucky could think about was *death*, and just like last time, the overwhelming thought that *he didn’t deserve this* manifested itself as an unbearable ache in his chest.

But he had gotten very good at pushing that ache away. He was selfish and Tony was his.

Tony didn’t pull away, didn’t even tense. Instead, his eyelids fluttered closed as he exhaled, all of him relaxed and pliant except for the fingers clutching at the soft sheets beneath him. More than anything, this exchange was *sensual*, a strange sort of trust exercise, but it seemed appropriate somehow, at least for the two of them.

The Soldier purred, having let go of the anger for the moment. Hard to focus on destroying one’s enemies when there was a gorgeous man before them. The man they loved, the man who *trusted* them with his life. It was a heady, sweet sensation.

*We are never letting him go.*

*No, not unless he tells us to.*

Bucky tucked his hair back with the other hand and then leaned over again to kiss Tony properly. The upside down angle was a little awkward at first, but kissing Tony was always amazing and this was no different. He let his metal hand fall back down to Tony’s shoulder so Bucky could focus entirely on the feel of Tony’s lips and when he pulled away, Tony followed, raising himself up on his arms so he could chase after Bucky’s lips. With both of them upright, the angle was *perfect* and Tony’s hands, those clever hands, were threading themselves into Bucky’s hair and pulling him in,
pulling him closer. It felt like coming home.

Tony’s eagerness fed the heat in Bucky’s own belly, it sparked the Soldier’s possessiveness and the need Bucky always carried inside him for this gorgeous, incredible, reckless man. Tony didn’t fight him for dominance when the kiss deepened, letting Bucky take control of it, letting himself be pushed down until Tony found himself on his back with Bucky heavy and solid on top of him.

Bucky pulled away with a quiet pop of their lips and dragged the tip of his nose over Tony’s cheek. His lips followed and when he licked a stripe of skin just underneath Tony’s ear, the man shivered and tried to pull Bucky even closer.

“The only reason she’s still breathing is because of you, solnishko moyo, lyubov’ moyu,” Bucky whispered into Tony’s ear, “because you don’t want her dead yet. I will remain at your side, always, even if it means letting her live, but she will never hurt you again.”

Tony reacted beautifully to the words, straining against Bucky’s solid frame, pulling him back in for another kiss, tongue prodding for entrance. The kiss was messy and needy and goddammit, Bucky wanted more.

Some logical part of him still tried to remember that this whole exercise was meant to get Tony to relax, so mauling the man while he was exhausted and sleep deprived probably wasn’t the best idea, but Tony’s eagerness was one hell of a distraction and as long as Tony was on board, the damn apocalypse wouldn’t get Bucky to take his hands off the man.

He did slow things down though, just so he could enjoy a session of dragged out, deep kisses, alternating between biting and gentle, his tongue mapping out Tony’s mouth like that was the Soldier’s one true mission.

When they needed to breathe again, he pulled away only to trail kisses over Tony’s jaw and down his neck. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?” he murmured against the warm skin, all the while running one hand up and down the man’s side, infusing the touch with tenderness while pushing the Soldier’s lust back for the moment.

Tony, predictably, huffed in indignation. “That question better not imply what I think you’re trying to imply. Because if you think that I’m too tired for this, I swear to god—”

Kissing Tony was the best way to cut the ramblings short and Bucky couldn’t help the amused laugh as he pulled away.

“I would never question your… abilities, doll, wouldn’t think of it.” He lifted himself up on his elbows to take some of his weight off Tony and to better take in the man beneath him. “You were hurt. You haven’t slept in days, your body’s in pain. I don’t want to make it worse. Just want to take care of you, that’s all.”

Just want to watch you fall apart with pleasure.

Tony made a show of contemplating the words (while Bucky tried to ignore the Soldier’s).

“How about a compromise? You give me a nice, relaxing full body massage, for all those sore, aching muscles I have.” Tony’s half-lidded eyes sparkled with heat, “get all that caring out of the way and then we’ll see where that takes us. Maybe I’ll get lucky and get a happy ending out of it.”

The eyebrow waggle that followed was ridiculous, but Bucky (and the Soldier) were entirely on board.
“Mmm, getting my hands all over you, how can I argue with that?”

Tony snorted, clearly amused, and then he was shimmying underneath him, shoving playing at Bucky to let him sit up a bit.

Bucky gently shoved him back before leaning over to reach for the nightstand. “Take off your shirt, doll, I can start with your back. I think the bottle of that fancy lotion is in here somewhere. Smells real nice, I bet it’ll help ya relax more.”

Bottle in hand, Bucky leaned back to be met with Tony’s wide eyes, nervousness replacing that earlier mirth. Right, Bucky belatedly remembered, Tony didn’t take his shirt off around him.

“S’alright, sorry, I forgot. We can do without the lotion.”

Tony’s eyes darted from Bucky to the bottle of lotion, then briefly closed, and Bucky frowned as the heat of their earlier moment was lost, to be replaced with familiar sadness. This wasn’t the first time this conversation had come up, but just like before, Bucky tried his best not to push Tony.

“You know you don’t have to hide your scars around me, right?” he felt the need to say anyways. “I mean, honey, you’ve seen all of mine.”

He watched the line of Tony’s lips tighten and just as Bucky was about to let the subject drop, Tony’s expression turned determined. He sat up fully and then without further preamble, pulled at the hem of the shirt to take it off in one smooth move.

The first thing that caught Bucky’s attention was the ridiculous bedhead the maneuver created, made even more adorable by the stubborn set of Tony’s lips. As Bucky’s eyes trailed down though, he finally took in the part of Tony that had been hidden from him until now. The network of scars that radiated from the center of his chest, ragged white lines a testament to what Tony went through so many years ago.

“Well, I guess now we can take showers together at least,” Tony said, obviously trying to appear nonchalant, but missing it by a mile. Bucky’s heart clenched at the sight.

Bucky reached out a hand, but stopped himself before he touched Tony’s chest. “May I?”

It must’ve been the right thing to do, the right thing to say, because something in Tony’s expression softened.

“Don’t have to ask permission to touch me, babe.”

Maybe not, but the thing that defined their relationship, from the very beginning, was a respect for each other’s space, for each other’s hurts.

Bucky didn’t voice the thought. Instead, his hand made contact and he traced the pads of his fingers over one of the scars, following the line that began at Tony’s heart and radiated outward towards his shoulder.

It was obvious Tony wasn’t entirely comfortable being this exposed, but to the man’s credit, he didn’t pull away.

The touch of his fingers didn’t feel like enough, so Bucky leaned in to kiss another scar, the same way Tony had done to him so many times now.

“James…” Tony’s voice was hoarse and it sounded like a plea, but Bucky wasn’t sure what Tony
was asking for. He met the man’s eyes and saw insecurity lurking there.

“You’re gorgeous, Tony. Every part of you. Every scar is just proof that you were stronger than the people who tried to hurt you. Thank you for letting me see them.”

It should’ve been strange, being filled to the brim with gratitude for the gesture while wishing all the bastards who left these scars were still alive just so he could kill them all over again, but Bucky had gotten used to the conflicting range of his emotions.

Tony looked away and just shrugged. “Should’ve done it a long time ago, it’s not a big deal.”

The fact that it was a big deal was clear as day, but pointing that out would’ve been entirely counterproductive. Bucky couldn’t resist touching the scars again, committing their path to memory under his fingers. Most were from the arc reactor, radiating from the circle where the electromagnet used to be. Other smaller scars here and there, and then his fingers found another one, running across Tony’s chest. He stilled when he realized why he was drawn to it. “Was this— was this from Steve’s shield?”

“Technically from the armor cutting into me where the shield dented it, but yeah,” Tony nodded, but rather than sounding angry or hurt at the remembered betrayal, the man smiled a small smile. “Don’t even try feeling guilty about that one,” he added, as if reading Bucky’s thoughts. “All’s forgiven, remember?”

Despite Tony’s words, there was nothing Bucky could do about the surge of guilt that drowned out everything else for one long, painful moment. That fight in Siberia left so many damn marks on Tony, no matter the forgiveness Tony insisted on giving him.

But then Tony was lying down again, settling in across the bed and presenting the expanse of his bare back to Bucky. In that patented way of his, the man blatantly ignored the emotionally charged tone of this entire moment to instead demand the promised back rub.

Bucky couldn’t deny him anything, so he settled himself on Tony’s thighs and started with slow, roaming movements, exploring the planes of Tony’s back and trying to find all of the tight spots. The sweet smelling lotion came next to make the experience even more pleasant and Tony made said pleasure well known by letting out indecent sounds any time Bucky found a particularly stubborn knot of tense muscles.

There was nothing Bucky could do about the past, even if he wanted to, but this? This he could do. He could take care of Tony, love him, make him happy. He could make sure no one hurt Tony like that again.

Not Steve, not the witch. No one else, including himself.

The massage was spent in silence and once Bucky was satisfied with his work, he let his hands settle around Tony’s waist. He kissed the dip between the shoulder blades, then another kiss on the right shoulder just for good measure, before giving in to the need to nuzzle Tony’s cheek. The man had his eyes closed, but his lips formed a relaxed smile.

Bucky coaxed him into flipping over onto his back so he could provide the same tender treatment to the rest of Tony’s body. His hands traced the scars again, explored that taut stomach, skirted along the vee of Tony’s hips and dipped teasingly beneath the waistband of his pants. Surprisingly, he had more than enough patience to spare, willing to enjoy the slow build up, but Tony didn’t give him the chance because by the time Bucky’s hands wandered back up to Tony’s abs, Tony decided to get his hands on Bucky instead.
With a teasing “C’mere, gorgeous,” Tony pulled Bucky down by the front of his shirt and a sure
hand at the back of Bucky’s head guided him the rest of the way. Tony was the one in control this
time, taking the lead to deepen the kiss, and that self-assured determination, the unwavering intent in
the way Tony kissed him pulled a needy moan out of Bucky because Tony demanding and taking
exactly what he wanted from him was something outright glorious.

Still, Bucky almost had himself convinced to slow things down again, but as he tried to pull away,
Tony pulled him back, and then when those lips brushed against Bucky’s ear, when Tony whispered, voice deep and husky, “I want you inside me, James,” the rest of Bucky’s reluctance finally disappeared in a haze of lust and desire.

Tony grinned, unabashed and satisfied, as Bucky pawed at his own shirt to get it off and out of the
way. The rest of their clothes quickly followed, leaving them skin to skin, heat and fire and heaven at
every point the two of them touched. Bucky didn’t stop peppering Tony’s skin with reverent kisses,
everywhere he could reach, even as he prepared the man with deliberate, gentle movements, taking
his time now despite Tony’s attempt to hurry him up and by the end, they were both desperate and
aching and ready and then the rest of the world faded away as Bucky finally slid inside.

He knew he was babbling, endearments spilling out of his mouth, praises and pet names in multiple
languages, and Tony responded in kind, begging him for more— I need you, James, just a little bit
more, please, baby— and Bucky could do nothing else but give in to those pleas. While the rest of
their bodies fell into an unsteady rhythm, made frantic by some mutual need to assure each other that
they were alive and together, Bucky’s right hand held steady on to Tony’s left, fingers laced and
holding on tight, anchoring each other because beneath the heat, the need, the desperation, all of this
was about love more than anything else.

Tony found his release first and Bucky quickly followed, tumbling over the edge into that sweet
moment of oblivion. All Bucky could really remember through that haze was Tony, lost in that same
pleasure, arched back, lust-blown eyes, kiss-swollen lips exhaling his name like a prayer. Flushed
and breathless and gorgeous.

The next few minutes found them pressed together, uncaring of the mess, as they caught their
collective breath. Bucky felt boneless, perfectly satiated, and even the Soldier was finally calm
enough to remain silent, but his hand still roamed over the expanse of Tony’s naked body. Part
simple pleasure and part need, a continued affirmation that Tony was here with him, alive and whole
and his in every way that mattered.

Eventually Tony let out a happy, satisfied sigh before shoving playfully at Bucky and ordering him
to go get a wet towel before they got stuck together. Bucky obliged. Caring for Tony was never a
burden and it certainly didn’t hurt the way Tony whistled in appreciation when Bucky got up, still as
naked as the day he was born, to head into the bathroom.

After both of them were sufficiently cleaned up, Bucky coaxed a now sleepy Tony under the covers
and wrapped himself around the man, chest snug against Tony’s back and a thigh wedged between
his legs. He would always worry that the metal arm over Tony’s waist would be too heavy, but like
every other time, Tony insisted on it now as well, not fully satisfied until he could lace their fingers,
metal and flesh, over his now bare stomach.

Bucky nosed at Tony’s soft curls. “So what now, sweetheart?”

Before answering the whispered question, Tony snuggled in closer against Bucky. “Now we get
some much-needed sleep, and later, when we wake up,” Tony paused, interrupted by a big yawn, “I
think it should be my turn to dirty you up. I’m gonna rock your world, babe.”
Bucky had no doubt of that, a shiver of anticipation already making its way up his spine. Every moment with Tony was amazing, no matter the details of who did what.

“And after I’m done thoroughly debauching you,” Tony continued, “then we’ll deal with the rest of the world.” His voice lost that teasing tone. “We’ll regroup with the others, strategize, and then some of the Avengers are going to take a day trip to Wakanda. Take a certain someone off the King’s hands.”

Some part of Bucky’s mind— the trained sniper, the assassin— wanted to parse out the details, the how’s and the when’s and the who’s, but he pushed it all away, leaving only what truly mattered in this moment. “I’m really glad you’re not going to Wakanda with them,” he confessed.

Tony’s hand tightened its grip on Bucky’s. “I’m really glad you’re not going to Wakanda either, James.”

The gratitude reflected in those words was all Bucky needed to know he made the right choice. He kissed Tony’s temple, asked Friday to dim the lights, and let the room fall into silence. As exhausted as Tony was, he fell asleep quickly, and Bucky himself soon followed, trusting the Soldier to keep them both safe, with his last conscious thought being that they were all exactly where they needed to be.

Chapter End Notes

_Nashe solnishko, mir nash’_ - our sunshine, our world

(see, Russian can be dramatic _and_ sappy)

Next chapter will be posted on March 17. Take care!
“Hello, Wanda.”

At the sound of her name, the woman dropped the hairbrush in her hand and spun around. A gasp escaped her, expression overtaken by shock, but only for a moment before it lit up with a bright smile.

“Viz! I can’t believe it! Is that—is that really you?”

Vision didn’t have the chance to respond when Maximoff launched herself at the android, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder as a litany of disbelief and excited murmurs spilled from her mouth.

Hope rolled her eyes at Maximoff’s reaction and was tempted to gag too, but she was in stealth mode, so unfortunately, she had to stick to silent displays of disgust.

After all, it wouldn’t do for her to be discovered. Vision was the one running this show and she was only here as backup (as well as the official Avengers liaison, but that was only relevant earlier when they met with King T’Challa). Now, she had to be the spectator and hope that this little scene would be short and sweet, ending with Maximoff in cuffs and all of them on their way back to the States within the hour.

Vision, bless his android soul, didn’t shove Maximoff back right away, allowing her to cling to him, but he didn’t really hug her back either, his hands just hovering there awkwardly above her back.

When he and Hope arrived, T’Challa allowed them to land offsite and had them driven to the villa to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention. Hope used T’Challa’s surveillance of the place to find the easiest path inside—*that was, the quickest and most devoid of renegade Avengers*—and Vision, who still treated doors as optional, simply phased through the walls until he reached the witch’s location. Just before he appeared, Hope shrunk and snuck in underneath the door, making her way up onto the dresser, which was where she remained hidden now, right behind an abandoned book.

Stephen was monitoring the situation too, through his fancy magic mirrors—*or whatever, Hope didn’t actually know the details*—ready to intervene if shit of the *magical* variety hit the proverbial fan.

Hope watched as Maximoff finally pulled away and gave Vision some breathing room, but her hands remained clinging to Vision’s sweater vest (he forewent his usual Avengers outfit to avoid raising suspicion when he confronted her).

“I missed you so much. After everything that happened, I wasn’t sure I’d see you again, at least not so soon. Did you hear the great news though? That we all get to come home in just a few days?”

“I did, yes. In fact, I was part of the committee that helped negotiate the final terms of the pardons.”
“Oh, Viz…” One of Maximoff’s hands let go of the sweater so she could brush her knuckles across Vision’s cheek. The saccharine display would’ve simply remained annoying—and a touch disturbing—from Hope’s point of view, but the witch’s hand lit up with thin tendrils of her signature red and it had Hope tense all over and on guard, ready to fight.

Vision assured all of them that he wouldn’t be affected, at least not by her ability to manipulate minds, and he was the one who insisted on apprehending her in the first place, so Hope remained where she was.

Apparently there was history here that needed to come to an end. Hope understood the need for closure all too well, so she didn’t begrudge Vision the chance to find whatever answers, whatever peace of mind he was looking for, but damn it, she would’ve preferred Stephen to be the one to slap the cuffs on the witch. If there was ever a person who didn’t give a damn about sentimentality, it was their resident sorcerer.

However, with Stephen on the lookout and her own firepower at the ready (Tony rigged her a gun that should theoretically penetrate Maximoff’s magic, but it was a last resort since it was also likely to kill), she supposed she could give Vision the handful of minutes he needed to put his past behind him.

Another brush of Maximoff’s hand before she cradled Vision’s face with both.

“Of course you were involved in getting us pardoned. You understand that none of us should’ve been exiled in the first place, don’t you? I’m sorry I didn’t have enough faith in you.”

“Wanda, that was not—”

“It’s just… you fought at his side,” Maximoff just kept talking, “you fought me. I thought I lost you.” She leaned closer so she could whisper a barely audible “I thought Stark took you away from me, but I should’ve believed in the connection we shared.”

Vision smiled and Maximoff grinned in turn, red sparks dancing in her eyes, but her elation only served to confirm that she didn’t know the android as well as she thought she did. Unlike hers, his smile was a bittersweet sort.

His hands wrapped around her wrists, gently, and he pulled both of her hands back down between them.

“Everything was rather complicated back then, wasn’t it? All of us, pitted against one another like that. Sometimes I wish things would’ve gone down differently.”

“So do I.”

“Do you have any regrets about what happened?”

Her eyes widened earnestly. “Of course I do. Hurting you, Viz… That caused me more pain than you can imagine. It was the last thing I wanted to do.”

“I’m glad to hear that—”

“But Stark, he just—he broke everything between us back then. He locked me away like a child, he forced Steve to choose between his principles, his team, and his best friend. He forced us to choose sides, just so he could push the responsibility for all the damage he caused onto someone else, using those damned Accords. Sokovia Accords,” she scoffed, “they mock my homeland by using its name. But none of that matters now. All that matters is that you’re here.”
Melancholy crossed the android’s eyes, but she didn’t seem to notice. “Did you know that there were days where I missed you terribly? I truly hoped that this past year would change something—”

“Oh, Viz, I missed you too, I wish you would’ve come sooner, but I understand you had to play nice with Stark—”

“—but you haven’t changed at all, have you?”

Maximoff stilled. “What?”

She jerked away in the next moment, or rather she tried to, but she read Vision’s intentions just one moment too late. Glowing golden cuffs materialized around her wrists where Vision had a hold of them and the change in her demeanor was instantaneous. Eyes wild, she hissed as she looked down at her wrists in horror.

“My magic, how— what did you do to me?” Those eyes, still glowing a bright scarlet red, found Vision’s and she snarled at him, all earlier affection erased. She tried to wrench her arms out of Vision’s grip, but his hold on her rendered the efforts all but futile.

Nifty little things, those cuffs. The actual restraints were made out of vibranium (courtesy of T’Challa), but the metal was then imbued with magic by Stephen himself, who spent several days muttering incantations over them. Unfortunately, the cuffs didn’t erase her magic—Strange was reluctant to admit he wasn’t sure anything could—but rather, they were meant to contain the power within the boundaries of her own body, preventing her from using it on any of them.

Hope had her doubts—it was magic, she always had her doubts—but hell, it seemed to be working. She swore if this went off without a hitch, she’d buy Stephen the priciest drink in Manhattan.

“I’m sorry it had to come down to this, Wanda, I truly am,” Vision said, voice strained with more regret than the witch deserved, “I hoped that your time here would teach you compassion and help you find remorse. Unfortunately, it did not.”

“Viz, please, you don’t have to do this,” she pleaded, back to the pitiful act since the anger obviously wasn’t working, “please let me go. I was supposed get pardoned, I was supposed to go back home.”

“And you would have. You had a second chance, but you chose to pursue vengeance instead of salvation. Your one true weakness has always been your inability to see past your hatred.”

Here, Vision’s expression hardened and a shiver ran down Hope’s spine. Seeing him like this was a crystal clear reminder that Vision (despite the sweater vests and the aprons and the unfailing earnestness and curiosity) was an otherworldly being who was part advanced AI and part magical artifact that may have seen the beginning of the universe itself.

“You attacked Tony. You attacked him when he was alone and vulnerable and posed you no threat.”

“How did you know— I mean, no, I didn’t do anything, I didn’t—”

Oh, she wasn’t a very good actress, was she?

“Stop,” Vision commanded and Maximoff stilled again, “your lies, they will not work, not on me. I was so fond of you once, Wanda. I thought I could even grow to love you—”

“We can have that again—”
“—I could’ve forgiven you many things, but I cannot forgive you for hurting Sir.”

The conviction in Vision’s voice had Hope smiling a bittersweet smile of her own. She never had the privilege of meeting JARVIS, but she liked to believe that she sometimes saw echoes of him in Vision, particularly when it came to protecting their wayward engineer.

“Miss van Dyne, I believe it is safe for you to join me now,” Vision glanced at her exact location and while Maximoff sputtered and cursed, Hope jumped off the dresser and rematerialized back at her normal height.

“Hello, princess,” she offered Maximoff the sharpest smile in her arsenal before turning to Vision, “we ready or what? I had a dinner date planned tonight and if we hurry, I might still make it to the dessert.”

Vision nodded, heaved a weary sigh, and then resigned himself to the task of dragging a kicking and screaming Maximoff through the door. She was human powered at this point, so all the fuss on her part was ultimately pointless, but Hope still kept a careful eye on her.

She wished they could’ve just knocked her out with some fancy spell, but according to Vision and Strange, with all the magic trapped within her, neither one would’ve been powerful enough to overcome its defenses and put her to sleep.

Hope personally thought a swift knock to the head would’ve done the trick too, but they were the good guys an’ all. Civility over effectiveness.

Ah well, Maximoff could curse them all to hell a thousand times over, Hope didn’t care. The witch was in cuffs, everything went according to plan, and—

“Let her go this instant!”

“Oh, fuck me…” Hope muttered under her breath when she spotted Captain America himself marching down the hallway. And where the hell was T’Challa? He was supposed to be running interference!

Hope’s questions was answered a second later when the exasperated King rounded the corner along with the rest of the former Avengers, all of whom followed Rogers’ path.

“Steve, help me, please!” Wanda cried out when she spotted him, her voice breaking on a pathetic little sob. “I was just in my room and they showed up out of nowhere and attacked me!”

While Vision kept a tight hold on Maximoff’s restraints and kept her close to him, Hope stepped forward and planted herself between them and a very irate Captain America. The rest of the brigade fanned out and for a brief moment, Hope wanted to look away from Rogers to see Scott instead, but she reminded herself that she came here to do her job, not ogle her ex-boyfriend.

“I suggest you not take another step, Mister Rogers.”

“You need to let her go immediately.”

Did that furrowed brow of disappointment actually work on anyone? “Not gonna happen.”

The brows furrowed even deeper. “With all due respect, ma’am, but what authority do you—”

“Oh, drop the polite bullshit, Rogers. You know exactly ‘what authority’. I’m an Avenger, remember?”
His eyes narrowed and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “So I was right, wasn’t I? This really is what the Avengers have become now. Are all of you happy serving as political lap dogs, waltzing into foreign countries, arresting innocent people and ignoring their basic rights?”

God, how did Tony work with this guy for years? Hope just met him and she already wanted to punch that holier-than-thou expression off his face.

Thankfully, T’Challa cleared his throat and spared her the temptation. “Actually, they are here with Wakanda’s full support, Captain.”

“Excuse me?” that was Barton who spun around to glower at T’Challa. “You sold us out, didn’t you?”

“Oh, if only,” the King muttered, eyes raised to the heavens. “No, I did not. When I gave you all refuge— at great personal risk, might I add— I only had one condition. For all of you to keep out of trouble. Unfortunately, Miss Maximoff was unable to follow that one simple request.”

“What are the charges against her?” Wilson asked, drawing Hope’s eyes to him and finally to Scott, who was standing next to the other man. Her ex offered her a rueful smile and a one-armed shrug when their eyes met.

Hope forced herself to look back at Wilson. “She used magic to attack a US civilian, causing him extreme physical and psychological distress that later resulted in additional physical injuries when the residual magic from the attack had to be removed.”

Barton scoffed. “First, she didn’t do anything, and second, even if she did, an accusation of a magical attack would never hold up in court.”

He asserted that with so much conviction that it forced an amused laugh out of Hope.

“Oh, buttercup, you haven’t been keeping up with the nitty gritty of Congressional sessions, have you? See, unlike you slackers, we’ve been busy this past year and a half. Helped draft quite a few pieces of legislation to support laws that treat magic as a valid force that can do physical damage, that can maim and kill. Laws that allow us to keep people like her and other magic-inclined criminals accountable for their actions. When she attacked a US civilian, unprovoked,” Hope rocked on her heels and gave them all a What can you do? shrug, “she committed a crime. All of you criminals should be familiar with the concept.”

“Please, I don’t know what she’s talking about!” Maximoff cried out again, drawing everyone’s eyes back to her. “T’Challa, your Majesty, please, you’ve had us all under surveillance, you know I haven’t left the villa! They’re lying!”

Thankfully, T’Challa wasn’t moved by her plight. “You are correct, you never left the villa and the records can prove that—”

“Great! Then let her go!”

“—however, Mr. Barton, the tapes also prove that Miss Maximoff went into a trance and released a large amount of magical energy at the exact time of the attack.”

“That’s circumstantial!”

“A magical expert confirmed that it was her magic—”

“Who? That Strange guy? Oh yeah, because he’s so unbiased, right?” He’s—”
“I was the one who confirmed the source of the magic,” Vision declared over the cacophony of voices before Hope had the chance to step in herself. “Are you accusing me of lying as well, Mr. Barton?”

“Well, you’re certainly not all that objective either! Remember how you kept her prisoner at the Compound—”

“I was protecting her!”

“You were nothing more than Stark’s lapdog!”

“How do we know it’s not all a set up?”

“Her history doesn’t do her many favors though, Sam…”

“Nat, come on—”

“I’ve seen the things she can do firsthand—”

“There’s no proof though—”

“Is my word not proof enough?”

“They’re all lying! You have to help me!”

The voices joined together into a rising crescendo of protests and arguments, the noise growing to fill the entire hallway. T’Challa tried to interject, which prompted Rogers to jump into the conversation, arguing furiously that the witch deserved the benefit of a doubt.

Hope remained quiet, letting the chatter wash over her. Scott, who hadn’t spoken this entire time and had in fact stepped away to the side, met her eyes again. She thought he mouthed a silent I’m sorry, but she just shook her head in response. Bad time for an apology, Scott.

When she observed the rest of the group, still yelling at each other, Hope realized her patience ran out about ten seconds ago.

“Hey, listen up!” she shouted over the noise and watched as all eyes pivoted to her. “I’ll kick all of your asses if it gets you to shut up, but I’d really rather not. Wouldn’t wanna break a nail.” She tried to ween the sarcasm out of her voice. “Now, I don’t actually need any of your approvals to take her into custody—”

“You don’t have the right, I’m innocent!”

“—but for what it’s worth,” Hope continued despite the interruption, “she did have a pardon waiting for her, just like the rest of you. We were all willing to let bygones be bygones, give you all a second chance despite the spectacular mess you left behind for us to clean up. But she,” Hope gestured at the witch who started in with her hissed curses again, “she attacked someone, months ago, without any provocation. It wasn’t self-defense, it was just a vindictive, malicious act of violence.”

“If I can ask,” Romanoff chimed in quietly, more polite than the rest of her compatriots, “who did she attack?”

Hope mulled over her answer before making a decision. “It was Tony.”

As soon as Hope uttered the name, she regretted it because the shouting started all over again— she should’ve know better— and Barton was now ranting that mentioning Tony at all proved that this
was all a set-up, Maximoff hissed about how *that vile man* had a vendetta against her from the beginning, while Wilson demanded better evidence.

Rogers remained silent this time, observing his teammates at first, but then, when he turned back to look down at Hope, the expression on his face steeled into one of determination.

“I can’t let you do this,” he declared and the rest of his friends fell silent at the words.

“Really?” Hope shook her head. “Wow, so you’re really taking her word over ours?”

“I don’t know you that well, do I? I do know *her*. She’s my friend and I will always protect my friends.”

“Just like you protected Tony, right?”

His jaw twitched.

“You don’t know anything about what happened.”

“I guess I don’t,” Hope conceded with a smile, “but I do know something about being a loyal friend too and it just so happens that *she* attacked *my* friend and I am here to make sure she doesn’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“I don’t want to fight, I don’t want to hurt anyone,” Rogers asserted, ignoring her every word, “but she is not leaving with you. I *will* stop you.”

He was close now, almost in her face, towering over her and sporting a few hundred pounds more muscle than her entire frame. It should’ve been intimidating, but Hope had grown up in a man’s world.

She moved closer too, stopping just short of letting them touch.

“*Do it*. Make my day, Rogers, *please*, because I’d love to put you in cuffs too. Come on,” she egged him on, “you said she was worth it. Worth giving up your pardon, right? Because that’s what’s at stake, pretty boy. If you so much as *touch* me, I will put you flat on your ass and you will never see the outside of a prison cell again.”

Not entirely true (convicting Captain America would’ve been tricky due to public opinion alone), but her words had the intended effect. She could see flashes of doubt overtaking stubbornness on that handsome face.

“No, it’s worth it to me,” Maximoff insisted as well, her words much more soothing that Hope’s goading (Hope couldn’t quite tell if this was the voice of a concerned friend or a manipulative spy). “Our pardons are literally days from being signed. Think of what you’re risking. Remember who you’re coming home to.”

*Oh dear lord.* Hope wanted to laugh and it was a struggle to force back the amusement. It appeared the spy had the same strategy as Hope, with the added bonus of using poor Bucky as the carrot to be dangled in front of Rogers.

Hope had her fingers crossed that she would get to see the disappointed look on Rogers’ face when he finally managed to come home only to find his precious Bucky Barnes deeply in love with Tony.

Bright blue eyes darted above her shoulders to look at Maximoff again, who pleaded with Rogers for the millionth time, but then those baby blues settled back on Hope. She quirked a questioning
eyebrow and it took one second, two, three, before Rogers looked away, his entire frame practically crumpling in on itself as he stood there, all too ashamed of himself. Then, he took a step back and Hope would have grinned triumphantly if she didn’t have an audience.

“Steve, no, what are you doing? I’m innocent, no, please— **help me**!”

“I’m sorry, Wanda,” he whispered, refusing to meet the witch’s eyes. “I’m not—I can’t lose my pardon. I have to get back home.” He gritted his teeth and stared at the floor resolutely. “I have to go home to Bucky.”

“That applies to all of you, by the way,” Hope decided to incentivize the rest of them too, “Barton, you’re this close to seeing your family. Are you really going to give them up again? Wilson, how do you think your mother’s been doing without you, hmm?”

Wilson was smart enough to keep whatever comment he had to himself and even Barton, who seemed the most hard-headed of the bunch, looked to Romanoff instead of the witch. The spy had a firm hand around his bicep as she whispered something Hope couldn’t hear, but she could still see Barton’s face, where resignation replaced fury, and it was obvious to everyone in the room that even he was choosing freedom over the witch.

Apparently, Maximoff knew it too.

“You— you can’t! You can’t just walk away from me! Clint, please—” when he dropped his gaze to the floor, her eyes darted to Rogers. “Steve, please! Please! I did it all for you, can’t you see that? It was all for you!”

“What?” Now the Captain was looking at her, eyes wide in disbelief, “What— what do you mean? Did you — did you actually **attack** Tony?”

“I did it for you, he was trying to take your Bucky away from you! I just—” she outright sobbed now, tears rolling down her face, “I wanted him to feel the pain you were suffering. I did it all for you, I swear, I just wanted him to pay!”

“I can’t believe this…” Rogers whispered, appearing genuinely bewildered as he shook his head, “Wanda, that was— I never asked you to—”

“You didn’t have to! I knew what needed to be done. He deserved it!” she shrieked, struggling against the chain in Vision’s hand, even as he kept pulling her back. “He took everything away from us! What I did to him pales in comparison to the pain he’s caused us!”

Alright, this show is over,” Hope muttered. None of the rogue Avengers looked to be in a fighting mood, especially not after this latest revelation, so it was time for them to bail. “Vision, let’s go.”

Rogers stepped aside, so Hope only spared him a glance. Vision moved to take Wanda around the shoulders, but neither one of them had the chance to take more than one step before the woman let out a ear-shattering wail.

“I won’t let you do this to me!” she screamed and suddenly Hope had to blink away red from her vision as she spun around to be met with tendrils of magic that started to swarm around the other woman.

“What the hell is going on—”

The violent tremor that ran through the building cut her question short as she tried to keep herself upright while the unstable ground beneath her shuddered and shook.
Apparently, the cuffs weren’t as foolproof as they thought.

*Um, Stephen, where the hell are you? Need some help right about now!*

Vision was attempting to subdue Maximoff with his own magic, but the red around the screaming witch kept absorbing it as her magic swelled to a deep crimson.

“Wanda, please stop this! You need to control your magic or it will consume you—”

Vision’s words went unheeded as red overtook her eyes, then her entire body—

An iridescent wall of scarlet slammed into Hope and she was flung across the hallway, collided with a wall and ended up on the floor in a heap. She groaned as sharp, shooting pain flared at the base of her spine, but she forced up on her elbows to take in the scene around her. Her vision was fuzzy, but from her position, she could see that Rogers ended up a few feet to her left, struggling just the same against the red magic swirling in the air. Vision was unconscious at Maximoff’s feet. Hope had neither the time nor the energy to worry about the others.

Through the crimson stars dancing in her vision, she watched as the witch smiled and then crushed the chain of her cuffs with her hands. The glowing red eyes seemed to settle on Hope.

“My magic is stronger. I will *always* be stronger than any of you and I will not let your disrespect go unpunished any longer. *You,*” she thrust her hand out at Hope— *who couldn’t move, why couldn’t she move away?*— “you will be the first lesson I teach.”

A blast of magic erupted from the witch’s hand and Hope shut her eyes and tensed, bracing herself for the impact and hoping like hell that Tony’s defensive upgrades to her suit held up. She thought she heard her own name, shouted by a familiar voice, before the world erupted, painted in blood red—

But nothing hit, she was still in one piece— *she could move again*— so before the red light even had a chance to dissipate, she was already on her feet, gun pointed at the witch—

Who had Scott hovering a few inches off the floor, right in front of her. He was surrounded by the magic, his expression frozen in a silent scream.

“Let him go.”

“My magic was intended for you, *Avenger,* but I guess he’ll do too.”

“Wanda, please,” Rogers tried to reason as he stood up as well, “Scott is innocent, you have to let him go—”

“None of you are innocent,” Maximoff hissed, “all of you chose yourselves over me!” She flung accusations at the rogues, accusing them of betrayal, and while she ranted, Hope counted the seconds and took in the whole scene.

Vision was still unconscious.

Rogers and Romanoff to her left. Everyone else had to be behind her.

And Scott, that idiot. What was he thinking, jumping in front of Hope like that?

Rogers, and now Romanoff and Barton, kept pleading with the witch. Hope sent a silent curse Stephen’s way.
Something must’ve interfered with his ability to portal in, probably all the red magic swirling in the air around them, so he just needed time, they had to stall her until—

“You’re all ungrateful and I’m done helping you,” Maximoff avowed, bringing Hope’s attention back to her, “so here’s what’s going to happen now. If any of you stop me from leaving, I will liquify his brains. Watch,” her lip stretched into a triumphant smile, her magic pulsed, and Scott began to scream.

God, it was like watching him get electrocuted. Hope willed herself to keep breathing until the screams subsided and he hung there in air, limp like a rag doll.

“Understand? I walk out of here unharmed and he gets to live.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work for me, princess. You take one step and I’ll shoot.”

“By the time that bullet reaches me, he’ll be dead,” the witch said and then tutted at Hope. “Are you really willing to risk your precious Scott? And he is precious to you, isn’t he? Jumping in front of you like that, risking his life? And now you’re willing to kill him?”

What choice did Hope have?

“Doesn’t matter what he is or isn’t. This isn’t about him, it’s about you. You’re a dangerous nutcase and I came here to do my job. Bring you in, put you behind bars, and keep you there.”

Fuck, Strange, did you stop for take out, you ass?

Maximoff grinned. “I guess we’ll see what you’re willing to do for that job then.”

She began backing away, using her magic to drag Scott along with her.

I’m sorry, Scott.

Hope cocked the gun and aimed—

Bright orange light erupted to engulf the red and before any of them had a chance to react, Strange materialized right behind Maximoff and pressed his palms to her temples.

“What— what are you doing?” she yelped as gold shimmer began to eat away at the scarlet surrounding her body. She twitched, but whatever Stephen did rendered her immobile.

“Let him go,” he commanded and immediately the magic surrounding Scott disintegrated into nothing while his unconscious body dropped to the floor.

“My magic— how did you— Who— who are you?”

Strange smirked. “I’m the Sorcerer Supreme of course.”

His palms shifted to cover her eyes, and her body went rigid, then slack, and she fell to the floor next to Scott.

For one long moment, no one else moved, as they all just stood there, gaping at Strange.

Wong stepped out of the portal next and the mage poked the witch’s body with the toe of his shoe. “Told you your cuffs weren’t going to be strong enough.”

Strange sputtered. “Excuse me? I worked on those for days! I used multiple spells!”
“Quality over quantity, Baby Sorcerer—”

“What the actual hell!” Hope marched up to Strange when she finally regained her wits. She promptly smacked him on the shoulder. “You could’ve gotten us killed!”

“Oh, woman, stop hitting me!”

She kept smacking him, albeit with less force than he deserved. “You insufferable ass!”

“We couldn’t get here in time, her magic blocked our use of portals, we had to figure out—”

“I don’t care!” She kicked his shin for good measure, ignoring the agitated flutter of his Cloak, “This is the last time I’m using you as back up— or as the cuffs guy!”

“Sorry,” he offered, cringing as he looked around. Hope did too, but she let out a mental sigh of relief when she saw Vision coming to, groaning and struggling to sit up, but very much in one piece. Everyone else seemed mostly uninjured as well and King T’Challa was already on the phone, likely calling for some last minute reinforcements and hopefully for a doctor because the two casualties were still lying unconscious at the sorcerer’s feet. Hope pointedly ignored the fact that she couldn’t tell whether Scott was breathing.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, closed her eyes, and took one deep breath. “Everyone alright?”

Vision gave her a strained affirmation and a nod while the rogues murmured their own forms of assent. She marveled how stubbornness was so quickly replaced by cooperation when they were all proven so dead wrong about the witch.

Another deep breath to steel her nerves and then she was moving to kneel next to Scott. Her hand did not tremble when she touched his neck, pressed her fingers against warm skin to find a pulse. She still refused to admit that it trembled when she found the weak, thready heartbeat.

You damn, reckless idiot.

***

Hope wasn’t sure what brought her out of her light sleep. When she looked around, everything seemed the same as before she dozed off, save for the darkening skies outside.

Scott was still unmoving and pale beneath the heavy blanket when she looked over at the bed. A glance at the monitor confirmed that his vitals remained steady.

After Strange’s arrival, both he and Vision had transported Maximoff’s unconscious body out of the villa and were by now on their way to a maximum security facility where the witch would remain until her trail.

What awaited her there wasn’t anything like the Raft, Tony himself made sure of that. Even her restraints would be humane—and hopefully made by Wong—and all her basic rights respected.

Logically, Hope knew it was the right thing to do (they were the good guys, etcetera, etcetera), but a vindictive sort of bitterness settled in her throat as she took in Scott’s prone form and remembered him screaming.

She remembered watching the footage of Tony and Stephen when they tried to remove the magic. Tony screamed the same way too.
With a heavy sigh, she reached for her phone, but before she had the chance to turn it on, the beeping of the heart monitor spiked and Scott began to stir, stiff movements accompanied by pained moans.

“Hey, Scott, it’s alright, you’re safe,” she murmured as she approached him, suddenly worried when she saw that his brows were knitted and his mouth pulled into a thin line, as if he were in pain.

“Scott?” she reached for his shoulder, but as soon as she touched him, he shot straight up, eyes open and wide, looking straight through her.

“No, no, they can’t be dead,” he muttered between broken gasps, looking around helplessly. “They were all dead, everyone—”

“Scott, listen to me, no one is dead, everything is okay—”

“No, no, I saw them—” his glassy eyes still weren’t focused as he shook his head, “—I saw them all dead. Ca—Cassie, Maggie, Ho—Hope—”

“Scott, no, come on,” she took his face into her hands and forced him to look at her, “see? I’m not dead. I’m right here.”

“H-Hope?”

“Everything is okay. It was all an illusion.”

Glassy eyes blinked slowly at her, but then he began shaking his head again.

“But I saw— No, I saw everything— There was so much— so much blood, and they were— you were all g-gone—” his voice broke on a sob, he gasped for air, and a tear that gathered at the corner of his eye slid down over his cheek.

“Shh, no, no, don’t cry, everything’s fine,” Hope tried to soothe, but she must’ve been bad at it— she always was— because Scott squeezed his eyes shut, forcing more tears to roll down his face as his body shook.

Dammit, this was not why Hope had come here, this was not why she stayed behind— she only wanted to make sure he was alive— but even she wasn’t this heartless. With only a moment’s hesitation, she gathered him into her arms, pulled him close, and guided his head to her shoulder.

“Deep breaths, Scott. Everything’s okay,” she promised, hoping it sounded sufficiently comforting, but the shaking didn’t subside and each broken sob made her cringe. She rubbed a hand down his back

“Hope…” Scott whimpered her name— she hated how it had her heart twinge in sympathy— and then he was clinging to her, bunching up the back of her shirt in his hands.

God, it wasn’t hard to imagine what Maximoff must’ve forced him to see. From what Hope knew of the witch, she had mastered the art of manipulating people’s worst fear.

It took a few minutes, but finally Scott took a shuddering breath and reluctantly began to pull away. He was still shaking, still deathly pale, but the red-rimmed eyes were lucid when they looked back at her.
“Just an illusion?” His voice was hoarse.

She nodded.

“But it was— god, it was real— I can’t shake it—” his face twisted in pain again and he pulled away completely so he could press his palms to his face, muffling the sob.

Hope hesitated only for a second before she reached for her phone.

“Friday, please dial the Paxton residence.”

Scott stilled.

The AI chirped a confirmation and the phone lit up with a projection of Maggie’s face a few seconds later.

“Hope, I didn’t expect a call, what’s… going on…” the woman trailed off, suddenly worried eyes darting between Scott and Hope. “Are you two okay? What happened?”

Scott was still too choked up to manage actual words, so Hope stepped in.

“We hit a bit of a snag with the extraction here, no permanent damage, everyone’s okay, but I, uh— I’ll tell you later, Mag, just— can you get Cassie on the phone, please? Is she still home?”

It was clear Maggie wanted better answers than that, but she refrained from asking for the time being and instead disappeared off screen with a quiet “I’ll go get her.”

In the meantime, Hope gave Scott’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “See? Maggie’s just fine. Now, can you keep it together for your little girl?”

When she dropped her hand back onto the bed, Scott clung to it and she let him.

It didn’t take long for Cassie to appear on screen and she gasped as soon as she saw them. “Auntie Hope! And Daddy!”

“H-hi, peanut,” Scott gave her a watery smile and reached for the hologram, only catching himself when his hand went right through the image.

“What’s going on? Daddy, are you crying? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay, baby, just, uh— just had a really bad dream, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Cassie didn’t look convinced, but she shrugged, then chewed on her lip, eyes darting off screen. “Daddy, is it true that you’re coming back home soon?”

“Yeah, pumpkin, I’m gonna be home real soon. I, uh— I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too,” the girl murmured shyly.

Hope watched as Scott nearly bit straight through his lip as he tried to hold back the tears. “Okay, sweetheart,” he finally composed himself, “I should let you get to school, huh? You be good and listen to your teachers, okay? I’ll see you soon, peanut.”

Maggie appeared on screen. “Come on, honey, say goodbye to your dad and wish him good dreams.”
“Good night, Daddy,” she smiled, “see you soon.”

The girl waved as Maggie shooed her away and Hope heard Paxton’s voice in the distance, urging Cassie to put on her backpack and grab her lunch.

“Sorry for the out-of-nowhere call,” Hope apologized, “Scott just needed to see you guys.”

Maggie gave her a look, one that promised a talk later, but it softened again when she focused back on Scott.

“I should be going too. I, uh— I hope you feel better, Scott, and whenever you’re back… I guess we’ll talk?”

“Yes,” Scott affirmed, with more conviction than Hope heard out of him since he came to, “I’ll be there, okay? I want to make things work again.”

Maggie’s shrug was weary. “I’ll see you when I see you then.”

She waved and the call ended.

Scott’s shoulders slumped, energy draining out of him as soon as the image of his family disappeared, but he made the effort to swipe at his wet cheeks with the back of his hand.

“Feeling better?”

He nodded and after fidgeting with the blanket in his lap for a beat, he finally met her eyes.

“Thanks, for, uh— for calling them. Wanda’s magic, it’s, uh— pretty potent shit, huh?”

“Apparently. What were you thinking, jumping in front of her blast like that?”

He offered her a crooked smile, something warm in his eyes, something honest, and it reminded her why she fell for him so long ago.

“I didn’t want her to hurt you.”

“I have a suit with built-in protections, I could’ve shrunk, I could’ve activated a shield—”

“You weren’t able to move, I saw you.”

She gritted her teeth because she hated feeling like this. Vulnerable.

Damn Scott and his damn heroics.

“Don’t do it again.”

The idiot must’ve been feeling better because his smile was almost cheeky. “No promises.”

She pulled away to stand up and then took a few more steps back, just for good measures. Scott’s expression fell.

“I, uh— I need to get back,” she said, shifting her weight from foot to foot, “should’ve been on my way hours ago, but I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Thanks for staying.”

“Don’t read into it.”
“I know.” This time, his smile was wistful. “Lost you when I decided to cheat on you with Captain America, right?”

“Yeah, you did,” she barely refrained from calling him an idiot.

“Well, it sounds like you got the better end of the deal in the divorce anyways. That, uh—” he tilted his chin at the phone, “that AI. Stark’s tech, I assume? You like working with him?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

He shrugged. “I heard what you said to Steve back there. Just hard to believe you warmed up to Stark that easily. After all, didn’t Hank always say—”

“Never trust a Stark, yeah. You know why? Because my dad is a bitter old man who sucks at letting shit go, and that’s not even mentioning that his beef was with Howard, not Tony.”

“He’s still the guy who created that Ultron robot, who—”

“Who protected your daughter, you idiot.”

“Wha- what?”

Scott looked sufficiently taken aback and Hope crossed her arms, regaining control of the conversation. “In the weeks following your escape from the Raft, Ross was on a warpath to get any information he could to find you guys. Took your escape personally, I guess, and he didn’t care what or who he had to bring in to get answers.”

She didn’t think it were possible, but Scott paled even more.

“What— What happened to Cassie? Maggie? I didn’t know—”

“Nothing happened,” she decided to spare him that, at least. “I got a late night call from Tony, asking me if Hank and I could help him. Told me he got tipped off that Ross was going after Maggie and Cassie, but Tony was already stretched too thin, what with the Barton family, Jim still paralyzed, 117 countries breathing down his neck and Ross watching his every move. I told him to go to hell at first. He, uh—” she shook her head at her own misconceptions, “he let out this weary laugh, like he expected me to do exactly that. Said he’d take care of it himself and thanked me for my time.”

“What happened after?”

“I grew a conscience and called him back. Offered to get Cassie and the entire family to a safe place, make sure Ross couldn’t touch them.”

“Thank you. Hope, oh god, thank you, I can’t even begin to—”

“Don’t. I did it for them. They didn’t deserve to be a part of the mess we created.”

“I know…” His entire frame slumped on an exhale, exhaustion evident in every breath. “God, even Stark is a better father to my kid than I am…”

“Self-pity doesn’t look good on you, Scott.”

“Then what do I do, Hope? Please, what do I have to do to make all this right?”

She regarded him for one long moment.
“You wanna make this right?”

He nodded desperately.

“Then when you get back home, keep your head down. Follow the terms of your pardon to the letter, stop hanging out with people who tempt you into stupid heroics, get a damn job, pay your child support, and be there for your kid. That’s what you do.”

He wiped away the remaining wetness clinging to his cheeks, suddenly determined.

“Okay, yeah, I can do that. I won’t mess this up again.”

She hoped he wouldn’t. It was over for them—she wasn’t falling for those soft eyes and the damn heroics again—but Cassie still deserved a dad.

“Good. I hope that’s true this time. But now… I gotta go, so I guess I’ll, uh— I’ll see you later. I really am glad you’re okay, Scott,” she offered and turned to head out of the door.

“Hope, wait!”

She turned around.

“The Ant-Man suit, it’s, uh— it’s in my room, dresser, third drawer from the bottom. Underneath a pile of socks and, uh— and underwear.”

Her smile came easier this time. “Don’t worry, I already had your unmentionables searched while you were taking your nap. But thanks for letting me know anyways.”

He offered a sheepish smile and a murmured goodbye and despite the day’s events, Hope left the room feeling just a little bit lighter.

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On her way out, she passed a common room where the other rogues were gathered, talking amongst themselves in low murmurs she couldn’t decipher. The words stopped when she came into view and it was Rogers who jumped to his feet.

“Miss van Dyne, please, you have to understand, none of us know what Wanda did—”

“Save it,” she cut him off, refusing to listen to his excuses.

“Please, I’m just trying to—I mean—” He stopped and rubbed the back of his head, suddenly struggling with the words. “Is, uh— is Tony okay?” he asked instead, the concern sounding damn near genuine, especially when coupled with those earnest eyes of his. Hope didn’t let herself fall for it.

“He’s been through worse.”

Her words made Rogers flinch and she wondered what it was that he was remembering.

“I just want to make this work, that’s all,” he murmured, “we’re all coming back in a few days. We have to put the past behind us, work together, find some common ground. We have to try… Otherwise we’ll fail when the real threat arrives.”

She just shook her head and spared them all one last glance.
“Well, the ball’s in your court, Rogers, so start trying harder.”

Chapter End Notes

We're *sort of* back - next update in two weeks, hopefully we can go back to once a week after that.

(3/29 edit: sorry, everyone, but I'll need another week to get a chapter up. Let's try for April 7th?)

In the meantime, please indulge my moment of self-promotion, but for those of you who like Winter's End and like angst with a happy ending, I spent my hiatus writing a little "what if" set in the WE world, which basically answers the question "What if Bucky wakes up one morning and everything that happened to him in WE was just a cryostasis dream?"

If that sounds like your (angsty) cup of tea, feel free to check out Far from Heaven.

And most importantly - are you guys ready for the rogues to come back next chapter??
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

WE'RE BACK (actually back this time!)

Sorry for the extra week of hiatus (part 2), but we should be back to regular Saturday updates now.

With that, enjoy, and umm... prepare for the salt. >.>

“You gotta stop doing that, man.”

Steve’s tapping foot stilled.

“Sorry. Nerves,” he admitted sheepishly and offered Sam an apologetic look.

“Nah, no need to be sorry,” Sam waved him off, “trust me, I get it. I’m about ready to crawl out of my own skin too. We haven’t been home in eighteen months, can you believe that? Hell, I don’t think I fully believe that we’re actually coming back. I’m nervous, excited, hopeful, terrified,” Sam chuckled to himself, “I don’t think it’s healthy for a man to be feeling so many things at once.”

Steve murmured an affirmative, recognizing Sam’s mix of emotions as his own, but in addition to the nerves and the excitement, there was also a familiar guilt that nagged at Steve every time his gaze would fall on one of his friends, currently crammed together in the Quinjet.

He had a hand in dragging everyone down with him last year, he could admit that. Letting his friends end up as fugitives forced to stay thousands of miles away from home? There was plenty of blame to go around for that and at least some of it belonged to him.

He felt guilty about Wanda too, although the way that guilt manifested itself changed from hour to hour.

After Wanda’s body, unconscious and limp in the sorcerer’s arms, was carried through a magical portal to parts unknown—assurances were given that she was being treated humanely, but Steve wasn’t sure who to believe anymore—Stephen Strange returned so that he could use his bizarro magical powers to scan everyone else living at the villa to determine whether Wanda used her powers on anyone else.

The verdict? Her magic permeated their living space, “amplifying negative sentiment,” whatever the hell that meant, and she did use her powers on them, but not in a way that controlled their minds. Rather, there were moments, caught on surveillance tape, where she used magic to make one of them fall asleep, to help when one of them panicked or when one of them struggled with depression or despair.

Strange scoffed, accusing her of “ignoring consent and practicing amateur, borderline reckless use of magic”, citing her inability to master positive emotions and claiming that she only caused more harm than good, but to Steve, her actions at least meant that she was trying, in her own way, to help the people she cared about.
I did it all for you!

That memory, however, sat painfully heavy in his chest. At first, Steve didn’t trust van Dyne’s accusations. He didn’t trust any of them, but then Wanda admitted that she attacked Tony. She attacked Scott too, right before their eyes.

That wasn’t the sort of evidence Steve could just ignore.

He failed Wanda, plain and simple, and there were times when the guilt would manifest itself as regret that he didn’t do more. From the very beginning, he always felt compelled to protect her after the tragedies she had suffered. She had lost so much and just needed a support system—a family—but her newfound family failed to protect her from herself. He should’ve paid more attention, he should’ve reached out to her, helped her work through the anger. She was a lost soul, the tragedy of her past overcoming her conscience, and he should’ve done more—

Sometimes though, his guilt would take form as a crystal clear image of Tony’s face instead—heavy shadows under weary eyes and the weight of the world on his shoulders—and he’d wonder what it was that she did to him. Some cowardly part of him hoped he’d never have to find out.

However, he learned long ago to take that guilt, whatever the form, and push it down, hide it away somewhere in the back of his mind, beneath everything else that occupied his thoughts nowadays (and there was plenty). The past was the past and he couldn’t go back in time to change anything that happened. Truth be told, he wasn’t sure that he would, even if he had the chance.

After all, they all did what they thought was right and what more could an honest man do?

Sometimes though, sometimes when he found himself vulnerable and alone, Tony’s pained expression haunting his mind, he wondered how things would’ve unfolded if he would’ve just yielded, if he would’ve stepped aside, if he would’ve let Tony—

No, the what-ifs didn’t matter. Too many possibilities and none of them offered him comfort.

The present moment should be his only focus, he reminded himself, so he pushed the guilt away and let his attention shift back to the world around him.

“Hey, Nat,” Sam called out, prompting Natasha to reluctantly tear her eyes away from the document in her lap, “how long till we land?”

She glanced over at the dashboard before offering a curt, “twenty minutes at the most,” then went back to her reading.

That was enough for Sam, who flashed her a grateful smile, albeit weary around the edges (just like the rest of him) and went back to his own reading material on the tablet in his hands. Steve’s eyes remained on Natasha as he studied the woman carefully.

This version of the Quinjet was smaller, with just enough room for the five of them and the meager belongings they’ve acquired over the past year, but it was just as high tech as the version he was used to, so the plane had been running on autopilot for the majority of the flight. Natasha spent most of that time curled up in the pilot’s seat reading, drowning in one of Sam’s old sweatshirts (she must’ve taken it when they were all still living at the Compound), something that she always wore nowadays even in the heat—ever since Bucky attacked her, his treacherous mind whispered, and Steve’s heart ached all over again—but he was sure some of the navigation would be under her control soon now that they were beginning to descend.

Twenty minutes until we’re all home again.
Steve struggled to swallow past the sudden ball of anxiety lodged in his throat and he didn’t realize his foot began tapping again until he caught Sam’s unimpressed gaze. He shrugged apologetically and Sam returned to his reading. The man had been studying the latest version of the Accords the entire flight over, in preparation for the inevitable pressure that awaited them back home to sign that damn document. Natasha’s own copy was printed on a thick stack of paper. Clever green eyes flicked from line to line and once a while he would catch her mouthing along as she read the complex legalese, her expression alternating between thoughtful and wary, even though Steve suspected it wasn’t her first read-through of these new Accords.

Steve understood Sam’s and Natasha’s need to prepare, to arm themselves with knowledge, if nothing else, and he wondered what their verdict would be this second time around. Unfortunately, time and distance— and tragedy— hadn’t changed his own mind about the Accords. These documents, these regulations that were nothing more than leashes couched in pretty legal terms and empty platitudes offered to a public that didn’t know any better, they were still bad news and somehow, some way, the Accords would blow up in their face. Some politician would get overzealous and use the Avengers for his personal gain. Another shady organization like Hydra would manipulate the system and the Avengers would end up as nothing more than tools in the hands of those who’s want to use them to do harm.

The safest hands were their own, he never stopped believing that, and someday he’d be proven right, likely in the worst possible way.

But today…

Today, concessions had to be made. The playing field had changed from what it was a year ago and none of them were in a position to exact any sort of change. Hell, they’d be lucky if they could keep their heads above water. Their reputations were in tatters, their pardons were restrictive and contingent on model behavior, and they were coming home with little leverage.

Steve had to concede that at this juncture, Natasha’s original strategy may be the only viable one. Have one hand on the wheel and steer the ship to safe harbor.

Not to mention, there were aliens coming for Earth and Accords or not, pardons or not, Steve was never going to stay out of that fight. The Earth and its people needed him and it was his job to protect them, above all else.

He glanced over at Clint, who was sitting in the furthest corner of the jet, arms crossed and his gaze distant. The sullen countenance and the dark circles under his eyes were all reminders that the man took Wanda’s arrest harder than anyone else. He had always been protective of Wanda, even more so than Steve. The man practically saw Wanda as his own kid, so Steve couldn’t imagine the awful guilt, the gut-wrenching grief that the man must be carrying inside.

Steve’s eyes drifted over to Scott, the other person who was intent on isolating himself. Scott had kept to himself ever since the attack, barely speaking a word to any of them, and even now, he was wedged into his seat between two large suitcases, scribbling away in a notebook, not even bothering with a cursory glance at anyone else.

Clint grieved. Scott distanced himself from his friends.

Natasha hadn’t been the same ever since she came back from her mission at the Compound.

The light in Sam’s eyes had been extinguished long ago by dragging, hot days of despair, guilt, and thousands of miles separating him from his roots.
Wanda was in prison.

This past year and a half had left them all broken in some way, so were they even ready to head into uncharted territory that was their home now? Coming back home was the one thing he prayed for, more desperately with each passing night ever since Bucky took off on his own, but right now, home also meant one too many unknowns.

Would they be welcomed back? Were there people out there who still believed in what Steve and the others stood for? What about the other superheroes—the New Avengers—who came together to replace the original team? Van Dyne didn’t give them a particularly great example of civility and grace, but would the others put aside the past in order to find common ground?

Then there was Tony, the mere thought of the man making Steve’s chest ache because he had no idea where to even begin to repair that relationship.

It seemed like the entirety of Steve’s world was on shaky foundation, crumbling apart piece by piece. Too many things out of his control, too many unknowns, too many pieces of his world slipping out of his grasp.

Only one thing remained steady, one single thought that kept Steve firmly planted in his seat, ready and willing to face this brave new world.

Bucky.

Nearly six months apart. Just two phone calls, neither one of which ended amicably.

Steve still struggled to reconcile that unfamiliar hostility, so vivid in Bucky’s eyes, so out of place among the specks of gray and blue that Steve knew by heart.

“I’m not that same man, Steve. I’m not the Bucky you remember and I will never be him again. I tried telling you that before, and it’s still true, especially now that I’ve had time to live and just be. And you can’t tell me you’re the same man either. We’re—we’re basically strangers, Steve.”

Any time his thoughts drifted back to Bucky—as they always, inevitably, did—fear warred with hope deep inside him, but Steve made a conscious effort to focus on the hope.

All they needed was to be reunited, to be in the same room again. Close enough to see each other, to talk face to face, to touch. Maybe Bucky wasn’t being outright brainwashed, but Steve still wasn’t entirely convinced Bucky wasn’t, at the very least, influenced by others at the Compound, particularly when it came to Steve. Bucky was all alone and it would’ve been very easy for someone to fill his heads with doubts and falsehoods.

None of that mattered though, not for much longer. Once they were together again, things would fall back into place, just like they always did.

They were best friends—maybe more than best friends someday, but that was a hope for another time—and it didn’t matter what obstacles life put in their way. They found their way back to each other, time and space and death itself be damned. They would do it again.

God, he missed Bucky so badly it hurt, but now thinking about the man also left behind a flutter of nerves in Steve’s belly. He couldn’t wait to see that sweet, shy smile again, those bright blue eyes, couldn’t wait to just wrap his arms around Bucky, hold him close, and never, ever let go.

“I’m starting to receive communications from the Compound,” Natasha announced and Steve took a deep breath, focusing on Bucky’s image in his head while his entire being thrummed with excitement.
and apprehension.

“We’ll be landing in about seven minutes.”

Seven minutes until I get see Bucky.

***

“Does she look familiar to you?” Sam asked under his breath as he threw a sideway glance through the window of the jet, scrutinizing their welcoming party which, to their surprise, consisted of one person.

“Maybe they sent Stark’s new PA to meet us?” Clint snorted and kicked one of the suitcases in front of him with more force than necessary before glaring at it. His smile was bitter. “Sure hope he didn’t screw this one.”

Natasha smacked him on the shoulder. “Stop being an idiot, Clint.”

“What?” he whined, “I’m just making an observation. Or do our pardons say we’re not allowed to talk either?”

“You’re allowed to talk, which unfortunately also means you’re allowed to make an idiot out of yourself.” She leveled him with a knowing look as she hefted her own bag over her shoulder.

“That’s Blackwood, the Compound Director. Used to work at SHIELD. She actually covered for one of my mission when Fury had me go undercover as Stark’s PA. Since she’s one of the people running this place, it’s probably not a good idea to accuse her of sleeping with Stark. The last thing we need in this place is more enemies.”

The two spies exchanged several more heated words, hushed and frustrated, but Steve tuned it out, not wanting to eavesdrop. Instead, he couldn’t help but eye the woman outside with apprehension. Where was everyone else?

Anxiety spiked again, making his stomach clench painfully, so he took a deep breath, channeling his training to steady himself. They would see everyone soon. Chances were, they had to go over logistical details first, things like living arrangement and security, which didn’t require half of the Compound to participate. Once the nitty-gritty details of their return were out of the way, Steve was certain there would a debrief with the new team members. It made sense, he told himself, and some of the anxiety eased back, replaced by the more pleasant thrum of excitement.

Steve slung one of his own bags over his shoulder and its heavy weight brought back a memory, the exchange between him and T’Challa right before they left.

Steve’s breath caught in his throat when he saw T’Challa turn the corner, carrying a familiar shield in his arms.

“Is that—”

“It is,” T’Challa confirmed, then stopped a few steps away. To Steve’s dismay, the shield didn’t exchange hands right away. “I received it from Mr. Stark a few months ago. We made a trade.”

Steve’s hands already itched to hold it, ready to feel the heaviness of the smooth vibranium. “Thank you for giving it back to me.”

The shield remained where it was though and T’Challa’s eyes darkened. “Make no mistake. I have
The shield was heavy and secure against his side, a piece of Steve’s very being finally back in its rightful place, but he couldn’t deny that the joy of having it back was tainted with bitterness.

Everyone was finally ready too, so there was no more time to stall and after one collective, deep breath to prepare themselves, they exited the Quinjet, taking their first steps onto American soil in the last year and a half.

God, even the air here smelled differently here. They were on a landing strip outside, so the crisp, cold November air rushed to fill his lungs and Steve embraced the refreshing chill, so different from the stifling days in Wakanda.

Blackwood approached them at a sedate pace, her heels clicking rhythmically against the concrete ground. She met them halfway as they made their way across the platform.

“Wonderful, I see you’ve all arrived in one piece,” the woman said in a way of greeting. Her eyes lingered one second too long on Steve, then Natasha, before her stern expression was overtaken by a bright smile. “Welcome to the Avengers Compound. My name is Alice Blackwood and I am the Director of this humble establishment. I deal with the day-to-day operations of the facility, which includes both powered and non-powered personnel.”

“Where are the rest of the Avengers?” Clint asked sullenly, forgoing all niceties and radiating tension where he stood, his arms crossed defensively. “And when do I get to see my kids?”

Steve gritted his teeth to keep himself from grimacing, wishing Clint would just stop with these impolite remarks. He understood the man’s ire, he really did. Hell, he sympathized, but the sharp words weren’t going to help anyone at the moment, especially when they were in response to an amicable enough introduction.

Unfortunately, reprimanding him here and now wasn’t a good idea either. Presenting a united front to the Avengers, the politicians, the whole world - that was more important.

Thankfully, Blackwood’s smile only dimmed a fraction and although the grip on the Starkpad in her hands tightened, her posture relaxed again on the next beat. “Mr. Barton, I presume? Pleasure to meet you.” She ignored his scoff. “The Avengers are currently occupied with their various duties, but you will meet with Colonel Rhodes for a more in-depth debrief later this afternoon.”

Steve hoped he wouldn’t have to wait to see Bucky until then, but he mollified himself with the wonderful thought that he and Bucky were in the same space again, just a building apart. Who knew, maybe Bucky would be the one to find him first, before this meeting with the New Avengers.

“As for your children,” Blackwood continued and Steve blinked in confusion as the woman’s smile changed, that initial pleasant tilt of her lips turning into something decidedly sharp, “you’ll have to take that up with your ex-wife. Unfortunately, my job description doesn’t include custody negotiations.”

She kept her shrewd eyes on Clint, who was growing redder by the second, the repressed anger practically boiling over, goaded by that out-of-place, unapologetic tone of the woman. Natasha was eyeing her too, albeit with suspicion rather than anger, but Blackwood didn’t seem to be fazed by
either of their reactions because in the next moment, she just turned around and began to walk away.

“Now, I’m sure you’re all exhausted,” she threw over her shoulder, not even bothering to check whether they were following, “what with that very long flight from… wherever it was you were vacationing at, so let me take you to your quarters and get you all set up.”

Unfortunately, they had no choice but to follow like a bunch of obedient dogs, lest they be left behind, but with each step, Steve’s mood darkened considerably. Maybe his earlier admonishment of Clint’s behavior was premature. Maybe to be taken seriously, to be treated fairly here, they’d have to show their teeth after all, show that they weren’t going to be cowed by spiteful remarks. He never did like bullies and he sure as hell wasn’t going to start liking them now. If this woman, whoever she really was, thought she could disrespect his team, she had another thing coming.

***

“These are our rooms?”

“Is this a joke?”

“I assure you, Mr. Barton, no one is laughing,” Blackwood turned around when they entered the common room after that brief tour, sporting that same shark smile. “Due to the Council’s… generosity, the terms of your pardons stipulate that you are to be provided living quarters within the Compound, free of charge. Now, you are more than welcome to find your own living arrangements elsewhere, at your own cost, and commute as necessary—”

“With what money exactly?” Sam asked and was promptly ignored.

“—But these are the standard rooms we provide any personnel who resides at the Compound for long periods of time. Bedroom, bathroom, and study combo for each of you, along with shared communal areas that include a kitchen, TV room, and a laundry room. Of course, once you are cleared and provided your own access badges, you’re welcome to use many of the East Wing facilities, including the cafeteria, the gym and other training areas. Shouldn’t take more than a day or two.”

Clint snorted in disbelief. “Oh come on, where are our old suites? Unless, what, you’re telling me Stark lives in a hovel like this too?”

Steve wouldn’t call this a hovel exactly, but he was curious about Tony’s whereabouts himself.

“The senior members of the staff, as well as any of their family members, are afforded more privacy and have living spaces reserved for them in the West Wing, which—” she glared threateningly at Clint when he tried to interrupt again, “which the seniors members rent and pay for using their own personal funds.”

“Stark pays rent?”

“Mr. Stark owns this building.”

Clint choked on whatever comment he wanted to make and Blackwood smirked triumphantly. “However, if it makes you sleep better at night,” she continued after a beat, “I will assure you that, aside from a handful of square feet of space, a bigger kitchen, and private lab space, there are no significant differences between their living quarters and yours. The original, more lavish suites no longer exist because during the remodeling, Mr. Stark wanted to maintain equity between all staff, regardless of seniority or status.”
She ignored Clint’s muttered expletive and tapped something on her Starkpad. “Now,” she said when she looked back up, “I believe we’ve done for the moment. Debrief is at 1800 sharp, in Conference Room 15. Friday is the resident AI, she will assist you if you happen to get lost.”

Without giving them a chance to ask anymore questions, Blackwood turned on her heel and marched out of the common room.

Where’s Bucky? died on Steve’s lips as he watched the woman disappear down the nearest hallway.

They all just stood there in silence, processing everything that just happened in the last hour, but it was Scott who moved first. He didn’t say anything, just gave them all one weary glance, then shrugged, grabbed his bag and headed in the direction of an empty room.

“Well, this is a bit of a downgrade, isn’t it?” Sam sighed, “I mean, I’ve lived in places way worse than this, military salary doesn’t get you very far in D.C., but man, I’ll miss the suites we used to have here. Hell, for that matter, I’ll miss T’Challa’s villa.”

“I bet this is all just a power play on Stark’s part,” Clint scoffed, “treat us like crap until we slip up, piss someone off, and they cart us off, right back to jail.”

“Well then, we don’t give them a reason,” Steve offered quietly, his own nerves frayed, but he kept his voice resolute. They needed him to be their leader now. “Let’s just keep our heads down, understand what we’re facing, and go from there.”

Everyone else offered their assent and reluctantly shuffled off, luggage in hand, to choose a room for themselves. Steve stayed behind for an extra minute. He took in the modest kitchen, the small lounging area where couches and several loveseats surrounded an ornate coffee table, all situated in front of a large television. The floor-to-ceiling window between the kitchen and the common room had a view of the Compound grounds, mostly barren and colored by earthy browns of late autumn. Steve absently wondered whether it would snow soon. He wasn’t a particularly big fan of winter, not after his own ice-cold burial at sea, but he had to admit, it’d be a nice change of scenery.

He gave the space around him one more careful glance. Frankly, Steve wasn’t one to mind modest accommodations. He grew up during the Great Depression, then the war, during which everything was rationed and wastefulness was tantamount to treason, so the opulence and the excess of the twenty first century had bothered him from the very beginning. Nowhere had that modern extravagance been more obvious and more frustrating than with Tony Stark, the master of hedonism and superfluity.

As far as Steve was concerned, as long as he had a place to rest his head, he’d be happy. After all, it wasn’t about the material goods that surrounded him. No, what mattered were the people.

He took a deep breath, suddenly determined.

“Friday?”

An uncharacteristic five second silence that had him frowning— he swore JARVIS wasn’t this slow in responding— before the computer finally spoke, “Yes, Mr. Rogers?”

“Captain Rogers, if you please,” he politely corrected before proceeding to his actual question, “can you tell me where Bucky is?”

Another frustrating pause that quickly stretched into awkwardness.

“I’m sorry,” the AI finally said, “but you do not have the appropriate authorization to access the
current whereabouts of Compound personnel. Please restate your request, Ca— Cap—” the computer stuttered, then went silent for a moment. “So sorry, my underlying code for speech commands seems to be unresponsive. Give me a moment to reboot,” it said, then after another pause, “Cap— Cap-p— Private Rogers. There we go. Is there anything else I can help you with, Private Rogers?”

Steve bit back a groan and an expletive his mama would’ve washed his mouth out for.

_Damn it, Tony, you’re not going to even try to reconcile, are you?_ 

This had to be Tony’s pettiness at play, Steve was certain of it. What he wasn’t sure of, however, was his next course of action other than to demand an answer from Friday, but then he realized there was no use arguing with a computer. This was Tony’s creation and it was obviously just as obstinate as the engineer himself.

Steve had to be the bigger man here.

Another deep breath, his anger settling back, from a roiling boil down to a quiet simmer, and he left the common room behind.

*I’m home, Bucky, don’t worry. I’m here, sweetheart, and I’ll see you soon._

***

At six pm sharp, Steve and the others entered the designated conference room— _much smaller than Steve expected_— to find Rhodes, who stood at the head of the long table situated in the middle of the room, with van Dyne and Blackwood flanking him on each side. No one else was there and Steve swallowed a frustrated growl. Why wasn’t Bucky here either?

For that matter, why weren’t any of the other Avengers here?

The three were talking, but Steve’s entrance caused them to pause their discussion. Rhodes’ eyes settled on him and Steve held the man’s gaze until Rhodes inclined his head, ushering them in with a curt gesture before resuming his hushed conversation with the two women. Steve took that as his cue to sit down and everyone else silently followed his lead.

Once they were seated, and the conversation stopped, van Dyne and Blackwood took their own seats next to Rhodes. The man remained standing, arms crossed over his chest, expression resolute, the perfect picture of a hardened military man. Rhodes took his sweet time, standing there like that as his gaze swept over the room, scrutinizing each and every one of them. Finally, he cleared his throat.

“Thank you for joining us today,” he said stiffly before flicking his gaze down to the holograph hovering above the Starkpad placed on the table. “Today we’ll briefly talk about your pardons, inform you of the resources available to you as well as your next steps. We’ll answer any preliminary questions you have about your stay here and—”

“Where are the rest of the Avengers?” Steve couldn’t hold the question back anymore.

Clint nodded along. “Yeah, and where is Stark? Hiding away somewhere, too much of a coward to face us?”

“Stop this,” Natasha hissed at his side, throwing an exasperated look the archer’s way, laced with just enough threat that Clint bit back whatever else he wanted to say.

Steve tried to appear apologetic, but Rhodes ignored Steve’s attempt to meet the man’s eyes. The
Colonel took a deep breath instead and the flash of resentment that Steve saw in his expression was replaced by a cold sort of professionalism.

“As I was saying,” Rhodes cleared his throat again, “your pardons. We have assigned a team of two lawyers to help you with your transition. While we know enough to answer some of our questions, your legal reps are a better resource if you have questions about what you can and can’t do under the terms of your pardons, about the consequences of violating these terms, and the steps you should take to ensure that your transition back to lawful US citizens is as smooth as possible. So, instead, we’ll focus on your actual stay here today—”

“I’m sorry, Rhodes,” Steve cut in again, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t understand why no one else is here, and especially why Tony isn’t here. Shouldn’t this be a debrief for the entire team, or at the very least, the key players?”

The real question he wanted to ask was “Shouldn’t Bucky be here?”, but Steve wanted to see everyone else too, that wasn’t a lie.

Rhodes’ jaw flexed, as if the man was gritting his teeth. What followed was a smile, aimed specifically at Steve, devoid of any warmth or friendliness. “Tony is out of town on business, Rogers, he’s very sorry he couldn’t be here. As for the others, the Avengers are very busy, what with their responsibilities, both professional and personal, and there is no actual reason for any of them to attend these meeting with you—”

“Oh course there’s a reason,” Steve countered with a frown, “we have aliens coming our way, we don’t have time to waste. We all need to be familiar with each other. We’re teammates,” he added emphatically.

“Steve’s right, Rhodes,” Sam tried to placate, an earnest smile pulling at his lips. “I understand if we can’t meet everyone today, but I’d like to know who I’ll be fighting alongside with.”

“Yeah, gotta make sure no one here wants to break our back again,” Clint muttered darkly and this time, it was Sam who hissed at him to stop. Even Steve had to agree that the comment was over the line, especially when he saw the guilt on Sam’s face, prompted by the loaded words.

He turned back to Rhodes, who now watched them with an unreadable expression. Unlike him however, the two women didn’t bother to hide their vitriol. Van Dyne’s glare was particularly intimidating and Steve hated that it reminded him of Peggy at her most furious.

Rhodes dropped his gaze and a silent conversation passed between him and the two women as tension grew in the rest of the room. Then Rhodes finally looked at them again.

“I wanted to keep simple and professional,” he spoke, his tone betraying nothing, “decorum states that I should address this group of… exceptional individuals with the proper respect they deserve. After all, we are a world-renown team with a certain reputation to uphold, but you know what?” The emotionless facade dropped and Rhodes bared his teeth in a sharp smile, leveling them with a steely glare. “Fuck decorum. Let’s drop the pretenses.”

Steve stared in shock at the man, thrown by the sudden change in demeanor and it seemed everyone one was taken aback too, which left Rhodes to take advantage of the momentary silence.

“Let’s get one thing straight. We are not teammates and you are not Avengers, at least not yet. The only reason all of you are here— and not behind bars— is because, yes, we do have aliens about to rain down on our heads and the US government pissed its pants when it heard about them, so you’re here now—”
“Rhodes, that’s not a fair—”

“You’re here,” Rhodes repeated louder, talking right over Steve, “because our politicians got desperate, not because any of us actually want you here.”

Steve met Rhodes’ eyes with his own determination. “We’re back because the people need us.”

Not bothering to hide her own disdain any longer, Van Dyne snorted unprofessionally, then shook her head. “That’s debatable, pretty boy. We have sorcerers, advanced AI, literal gods, and the damn Hulk on the roster. What exactly does a couple of soldiers and some retired spies bring to the table?”

Her callousness was uncalled for, but Steve refused to be distracted by the derisive tone of their words. He expected this and he wouldn’t be cowed. “Clint, Natasha, and I were part of the team that stopped the first alien invasion. I think our track record speaks for itself.”

“Oh, it absolutely does! Like your record of leaving wrecked highway underpasses behind, or stampeding through airports—”

“Hope, I think they get the picture,” Rhodes placed a hand on her shoulder and the woman rolled her eyes at the interruption, but she remained silent.

“Listen, I’m not here to sugarcoat things for you,” Rhodes continued with that same harsh tone, “you all know what happened last year, you know the damage you left behind, and if you expect any one of us to welcome you with open arms, you’re delusional. But,” he emphasized, “you are here whether we like it or not. Tony and I decided to forfeit this battle, hoping that we’ll win the war instead. So, you’re here, that’s done, and as long as you manage to behave yourselves and remain at the Compound for your probationary period of thirty days—very generous thirty days, I might add—you will be back to full-fledged American citizens,” Rhodes’ shoulder slumped just a fraction, and bitterness gave way to weariness, “and you’ll be back to your lives as if the last eighteen months never fuckin’ happened.”

The man trailed off and it was obvious that Rhodes wanted to be anywhere but here, stuck in this cold conference room with the rest of them and Steve understood that, really. He wasn’t heartless, he understood how hard this must have been for Rhodes and he couldn’t blame the man for his hostility, not entirely. After all, Rhodes was the one paralyzed during the battle in Germany, hurt in the line of duty while trying to do what he thought was right.

Steve understood, sympathized, but none of that made him any more receptive to this irreverent, downright disrespectful treatment.

“What happens after the thirty days?” Natasha chimed in quietly.

“Will we have to sign the Accords?” Sam added to her inquiry, voicing the question weighing on Steve’s own mind ever since the news of the pardons. He hated this. Here they were, back in the exact same place, back to this pointless debate of whether they should become political lapdogs, whether they should be at the beck and call of whatever corrupt villain was holding the leash.

Before Rhodes had a chance to reply, Clint jumped in again. “Of course they’ll force us to sign, otherwise they wouldn’t have brought us back. They expect us to sign our lives away.”

“Unbelievable. You worked for SHIELD, Barton,” Blackwood interjected, an incredulous look on her face, “and despite it being a spy organization, we did have rules and regulations, policies and procedures. How is this any different?”

“It’s different, okay? At SHIELD, I worked for Fury, not a bunch of crooked politicians!”
“And Fury just answered to the World Security Council—”

“Yeah, and half of those bastards turned out to be Hydra agents!”

“Which is why we built in checks and balances, to make sure a group of five people doesn’t get to make decisions for the entire world! And unlike the interactions with the WSC, the Councils’ decisions don’t happen in the shady bowels of a spy organization! That’s called accountability, Barton!”

Clint scoffed, baring his teeth in a snarl as he crossed his arms, but he decided not to continue the argument. Natasha’s sharp kick under the table probably had something to do with that. Blackwood just shook her head and then sat back down.

By now, Rhodes looked like he was fighting back a tension headache. “To answer your question, Barton, no, none of you will be forced to sign the Accords. That would be tantamount to slavery, and well,” Rhodes’ expression turned even more severe, “we outlawed that a few years back if you recall. No, you were brought back with the hope that you will sign the Accords, join the Avengers, and help prepare the planet for an intergalactic threat.”

“What happens if we don’t?”

“If you decide not to sign, Rogers, then we’ll ask you to leave the Compound premises. You’re free to go into the world and do whatever it is you want to do with your life.”

“And if we decide to fight anyways?” Steve couldn’t let this drop. “Are you really going to stop us, arrest us, if we show up to fight these aliens, but don’t have a piece of paper that says we’re allowed to?”

Rhodes scrutinized him before answering. “If the world is literally on fire because there is an alien invasion underway, then no, we won’t stop you. Although we plan to avoid fighting on the ground altogether, if our back is against the wall, I don’t care if you throw your shield at a dozen aliens or two.”

Steve was about to press the issue further, point out how flawed Rhodes’ support of the Accords was based on what the man just said, but Rhodes didn’t give him a chance.

“However,” Rhodes’ voice dropped, low and threatening, brokering no more interruptions, “if you do not sign, you will not train with us. You will not be privy to classified information regarding the aliens and our plans to neutralize them. You will have no access to our training facilities, nor to any of our tech or weapons. You will not see a dime of Tony’s money. Finally, and listen to me carefully because I won’t repeat myself, if you are not sanctioned by the Accords, you are, for all intents and purposes, civilians. If you decide to play superhero, you will be treated like any other Joe Shmoe off the street dealing out vigilante justice. You do property damage during a fight? You get sued. You accidentally hurt or kill someone? You face criminal charges.”

“Nobody was suing us after New York,” Clint spat under his breath, “back then, we just did what needed to be done.”

“There were lawsuits after New York,” Blackwood spoke up again, “but SHIELD performed a lot of damage control in the background, some of questionable legality. frankly, and Mr. Stark used his own private funds to run a massive media campaign to paint all of you in a decent light. New York was an unprecedented event, the first of its kind, but the public isn’t as awed by you people anymore and being superpowered certainly doesn’t put you above the law.”
Rhodes gave her a nod, then took over the conversation. “During the next thirty days, I suggest you take the time to look over the latest draft of the US Accords, as well as the international versions. Talk with the lawyers, make whatever decision fits your moral code. Trust me, I won’t lose sleep over it, but if you do decide to sign, you will be brought in as an official Avenger and integrated onto the current team roster based on your skill sets and your compatibility with the other members. You will have access to our legal and financial resources, state of the art training facilities and equipment. My personal opinion on whether you deserve such an opportunity is irrelevant. You’re here. The next steps are up to you. If you decide to join the Avengers, I can guarantee our personal hostilities will be put aside when we are in training, on the battlefield, or in front of the public. When we are off-duty, I can guarantee no such concession. We are not friends and I am not a merciful man.”

Rhodes finally stopped speaking, letting the room fall into an uncomfortable silence. It was a lot to take in, if Steve were honest, and he wasn’t sure what he could even say in response.

He glanced around at the rest of his team. Sam’s guilt hadn’t abated, clear as day on his face, especially after what Rhodes just said about mercy. Natasha was still quiet, thoughtfully studying Rhodes and the others, likely trying to get a feel for the situation.

Clint was angry, always so angry, his displeasure practically oozing out of him. Scott had been no help at all during this entire meeting, although he seemed to be having a silent conversation with van Dyne at the moment.

Steve wanted to sigh because this was not how any of this should’ve unfolded. Hostilities and rudeness wasn’t helping anyone. How are they all supposed to work together if the teams didn’t trust each other?

If Steve were to lead them all again against the biggest threat they’ve faced so far, he needed everyone’s respect.

However, he decided to cross that bridge when he got to it. One step at a time.

He remained silent, just like the rest of his team, as Rhodes sat down, then let Blackwood explain the logistics of their stay at the Compound. Steve listened with half an ear. Having accepted that gaining a modicum of respect (and maybe a smidgen of clout with the New Avengers) was a fight saved for another day, his mind drifted back to the most pressing question Steve had, one that still remained unanswered, forcing Steve’s anxiety to keep growing.

“Now, any final questions before we disperse?” Rhodes queried after finishing off the barrage of information. “Your meeting with your lawyers is scheduled for tomorrow, so you’ll have the chance to dive into the legalese of your pardons then.”

Steve looked at him imploringly.

“Can you tell me where Bucky is?”

Rhodes blinked at him.

“Who?”

Van Dyne hid her laughter behind her hand, but not well enough to actually conceal her inappropriate mirth. Steve ignored the snickers, ignored the sour weight that they incited deep in his stomach, and held Rhodes’ eyes instead, his gaze on the man resolute. “I just want to know where he is, Rhodes. I still haven’t seen him.”

Rhodes’ lip twitched when van Dyne leaned over and whispered an even less subtle “Do we even
have a Bucky?”, but the man’s eyes didn’t stray from Steve’s either.

“You haven’t seen him because he’s not here.”

Steve’s heart stopped for a moment. “What the hell do you mean not here? What did you do to him?”

Every part of him was suddenly ready for battle, fueled by the spike of adrenaline rushing through his veins, because if they were actually hurting Bucky this whole time—

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Rogers, calm down. Barnes is fine. He’s been fine his entire stay here, but I’m not your personal assistant, so it’s not my damn job to keep track of people for you. However, if you must know, Barnes is out of town. Somewhere on the West Coast, if I’m not mistaken, working with a PR team to get his media image all straightened out.”

“When is he coming back?”

“No idea.”

“Then how do I contact him?”

“Call him.”

Steve grimaced. “I… don’t have his number.”

“Well then,” Rhodes shrugged, then stood back up, Starkpad and paperwork in hand, “I guess you’re just shit out of luck.”

With another mocking smile, matched by the downright amused looks on the faces of van Dyne and Blackwood who joined him, the three turned and walked out of the room.

Only now did Steve’s hearing pick up the whir of machinery that gave Rhodes the ability to walk, but he was too distracted to pay the sound any mind.

He remained staring at the table in front of him even as the rest of his team began to filter out, heading back to their quarters. Natasha’s gentle hand on his shoulder didn’t help either, barely registering against the mounting apprehension building inside him.

Bucky, where are you? Why aren’t you here with me?

Steve had no answers, only more questions, but he wasn’t giving up. Not on his best friend, not ever.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first rays of the early morning sunrise were just beginning to spill through the slits in the blinds and Bucky realized it must’ve been what had woken him up. He sleepily blinked his eyes open, adjusting to the light.

Waking up like this, gradually and naturally, without a shot of adrenaline that had him combat-ready within a second, was something he was still getting used to. He closed his eyes again, hoping he could chase after that tempting haze of sleep and drift off again, but unfortunately, his years of training did kick in, sooner rather than later, and he was fully awake within a few minutes.

When he opened his eyes for the second time, they fell, as they always did, on the slumbering man next to him. They must’ve untangled from each other sometime during the night— driven by the overabundance of warmth, no doubt— because Tony was stretched out on his stomach on the other side of the bed. Only the bottom half of him was covered by the blanket, and his face was smooshed into the plush pillow, his arms disappearing beneath it.

Bucky loved these little moments, where the early morning quiet kept the rest of the world at bay for just a little longer, giving him the chance to soak in this sense of peace and catalogue every beautiful detail offered to him. The curves and planes of Tony’s body that the thin blanket did nothing to hide, that comforting rise and fall of each breath. The way Tony’s lashes fanned out over his cheeks and the barely parted soft lips. The lines of his face were softer too, the crease between his brows chased away by sleep.

Bucky’s chest ached with a sudden swell of affection and even though he didn’t want to disturb this quiet moment, he decided he simply couldn’t resist any longer, so at the risk of waking Tony, he drew himself up onto his elbows and pressed his lips to Tony’s cheek.

The man did respond to the touch, a little twitch of his nose and a smack of his lips, but then Tony just buried his face deeper into the pillow and kept on sleeping.

Bucky smiled at the sight and laid back down, content for the moment. God knew the man needed every available hour of sleep, even if the last few nights were good nights (in Tony’s world, “good” meant at least five uninterrupted hours of sleep and so far, they were four-for-four).

Bucky supposed being away from the Compound was the biggest reason why Tony’s sleep patterns — and his mood and the brightness of his smile and everything about the way Tony held himself— had improved.

A week before Steve and the others were slated to return, the New Avengers had come to a nearly unanimous decision to have Tony and Bucky out of the Compound by the time their soon-to-be housemates arrived.

Tony was the only “nay” vote, but it was obvious to every person in the room that Tony wanted to leave, but opposed the idea on sheer principle. To him, leaving was no better than “running away” because Tony was the sort of man who saw leaving their houseguests in the capable hands of his friends as shirking his responsibilities, shifting his burdens onto others.

However, teamwork ultimately prevailed and Tony was given enough legitimate reasons to leave.
Pepper practically demanded Tony’s presence in California, citing investor unease over third quarter profits and the return of the disgraced Avengers. Tony’s “forehead of security” Happy Hogan complained about the security system at their West Coast HQ needing upgrades. The PR team was ready for Bucky’s next big step, so they needed him back in California, and Bucky himself… Well, the reasons he offered Tony were more pleasure than business, but he surmised they were no less effective, and no matter what Tony grumbled over shared kisses and assurances that yes, fine, you won, we’re leaving, Bucky using his big doe eyes and his gruff, sexy Soldier voice (Tony’s words, not his), did not make Bucky an unrepentant cheat with not an ounce of shame in his gorgeous body.

Well, maybe it did, but he was the Winter Soldier, wasn’t he? He was simply using every tool at his disposal to complete the mission.

In this case, the mission was spending time away from the Compound and truth be told, they both needed it. The Soldier’s bloodlust still simmered just beneath his skin, unyielding in the face of what had been done to Tony, of the hurt inflicted on the one man the Soldier cherished above all else. It was the sort of wrath that would’ve consumed Bucky from the inside out, would’ve led him down the familiar path that ended in another life taken, had it not been for Tony. Tony, who brought him back, who grounded him and held him together while Bucky’s broken mind processed the lies he’d been told and the nightmares Tony had lived through.

The need to spill blood, to make Maximoff pay, that was never going to disappear entirely, Bucky was self-aware enough to accept that, but Tony’s words, his presence, his touch, had reduced that anger down to a quiet hum where before it was a deafening, thundering roar.

His anger with Steve though, that was a different sort of beast, a thrum of betrayal laced with frustration and uncertainty, and unlike Maximoff, Bucky couldn’t just avoid Steve forever. At this point though, Bucky wasn’t even sure what he’d say to Steve, let alone where to begin to mend their broken friendship. Hell, maybe trying to fix things between them was nothing more than a fool’s errand, especially if Steve remained his stubborn self and didn’t drop his shitty attitude about Tony. Bucky wasn’t lying all those months ago down in Medical. If Steve forced his hand, Bucky would choose Tony without hesitation.

Bucky would handle it though, do what had to be done, but he couldn’t lie to himself, couldn’t deny that being away from the Compound had him breathing that much easier because it meant a few more days between him and the inevitable reunion.

It wasn’t only the distraction from his anger that Bucky had found appealing though. He reveled in this chance to enjoy the world without needing to hide himself from it, without needing to run at any given moment. More than anything though, he loved seeing Tony away from the realities of their daily lives. Seeing the man relax and let go, even briefly, was like watching a man come back to life.

Coming here was the best thing either one of them could’ve done.

They’ve been in LA for almost a week now, some of which was spent on aforementioned business. As always, Tony had SI, while Bucky had his first debut on the big screen.

Pepper and the PR team had been preparing him for this from the beginning, but even though the interview was in a private setting with a reporter who was sympathetic to Bucky’s story, the whole thing still had him jittery, belly doing somersaults, palms sweating, and heart racing. He could face—and had faced—monsters and killers without missing a beat, but the petite woman who greeted him with a smile in that cozy little interview room brought to life every one of his self-preservation instincts that screamed at him to run and hide and had left him genuinely terrified.
Unfortunately, letting the Soldier closer to the surface to siphon away some of that anxiety wasn’t a great idea because a rant about needing to exterminate the remains of Hydra or an ode to ‘Tony’s gorgeous ass was probably not what his PR team had in mind when they planned this interview.

So, Bucky braved that first step into the room with the Soldier at the back of his mind, well-behaved and silent. He wasn’t alone though, not really. Tony was backstage, with only a few yards and a wall separating them, so Bucky drew his strength from Tony’s presence and the small kiss the man managed to steal when no one was looking.

Honesty was the best policy, his PR team decided, both about Bucky’s past (well, mostly, but he supposed whatever lies they were telling were only lies of omission under the guise of “classified information”) as well as his present, which included his friendship with Tony and the New Avengers, but it was decided that his romantic relationship with Tony would be kept a secret for the time being.

A part of him hated the secrecy. He had plenty of things to be ashamed of, but loving Tony was never one of them. He’d shout it from the damn rooftops if they’d let him, tell whoever wanted to listen (and those who didn’t) that Tony was the best damn thing in Bucky’s life.

The more pragmatic part of him, however, understood the need for discretion. For one, there was a desire to avoid any unsavory questions about the timing of their relationship and whether Tony “took advantage” of Bucky somehow. Nothing was further from the truth, but the public loved to find flaws in Tony Stark, so the last thing anyone needed was more fuel for the fire.

Bucky also had to accept that the world around him hadn’t changed that much. It did, certainly, but being in a relationship with another man was still controversial in some circles and while the public at large accepted Tony’s “equal opportunity” approach to sexual and romantic partners, few people suspected that Bucky Barnes, famed WWII soldier and Captain America’s sidekick, was actually gay. Steve had inadvertently helped their cause by being honest about his own attraction to both men and women a few years back, so the public reaction was likely to be neutral, but there was always a chance Tony would be accused of “defiling a national icon,” so they wanted to ease the public into the idea of their relationship.

The Soldier just wanted to find and stab every asshole out there who so much as dared to look at Tony the wrong way, but Bucky’s thoughts were a touch more diplomatic. This was just a delay, nothing more. First, the public had to get used to him, the famed POW returned from the dead/reformed and domesticated former Winter Soldier. Then, they could work on making the world understand the simple fact that this national icon liked getting defiled by one Tony Stark.

Finally, and this was more for their own sake rather than the public’s, they wanted to avoid Steve and the others finding about Tony and Bucky through the media. Bucky dreaded that conversation and the backlash that would follow, but having control over when and how it happened would prevent at least some of the inevitable drama.

Despite Bucky’s nerves, the interview actually went better than expected (he was a natural in front of the camera according to his PR team, but he had a sneaking suspicion they were just trying to be nice). Of course, the world at large was a grab bag of reactions and there were plenty of people who weren’t pleased to see his face on their television screens. Some wanted him in jail, some in a mental asylum. Some didn’t believe that he was reformed and some actually called him a traitor for not being glued to Captain America’s side.

Bucky was not naive, nor was he much of an optimist, so he expected the negative reactions. Frankly, what actually surprised him was the fact that the negativity wasn’t all that prominent. Many people remained ambivalent and simply didn’t care about another soldier from the forties hanging out
with the Avengers and some remained undecided, needing to see for themselves how Bucky would behve in the future.

There were others though, enough that it overwhelmed him at first, that reacted positively to his story. Friday was the one who curated Bucky’s exposure to public opinion, providing him with accurate, but summarized assessments that shielded him from the full force of his critics’ vitriol and she took genuine pleasure in forwarding him some of the most positive reactions. People who saw him as a survivor, who were heartened by his recovery and appreciative of his desire to made amends.

It was a lot to take in, if he were honest, so taking Tony’s expert advice on how to be a celebrity in the twenty-first century, Bucky let the public think and do whatever it needed to, while he focused on his usual day-to-day life.

When they weren’t busy with work, he and Tony spent entire days hidden away at Tony’s personal property in Malibu. Much smaller than the old mansion currently resting at the bottom of the ocean, it was no less luxurious and their time was divided between feasting on some of Tony’s favorite LA food (delivered by a disgruntled Happy Hogan), sunbathing by the pool (bless the California weather and its 80 degree November days), soaking in the hot tub, and taking turns at being each other’s dedicated and enthusiastic masseur. They pampered themselves and each other and got to pretend, for just a little while, that their entire world was just this - the two of them, safe and content in their own personal heaven.

They had these last remaining days to themselves too. No PR team hounding Bucky about his next official appearance, no corporate debriefs for Tony, no emails, no stress, no distractions.

Just the two of them, in their enormous bed, lounging on the silky soft sheets, bathed in early morning sunlight.

Bucky wished they could stay like this forever.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that it took him a moment to notice that Tony had one sleepy eye trained on him.

“Mornin’, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured, brushing a hand over Tony’s temple. Tony smiled at him, still blinking sleepily, then let out a big yawn and slowly raised himself up onto his elbows.

“Have you been up a while?” the man asked as he rubbed one of his eyes, voice still hoarse with sleep. A pink tongue darted out to wet his dry lips, which distracted Bucky long enough that his answer was a few seconds delayed.

“Just a bit, yeah.”

“You can always wake me up, you know, I don’t mind.”

“S’alright,” Bucky smiled, then leaned in again, this time finding Tony’s lips when the man pursed his lips asking for a kiss, “I kinda like watching you sleep.”

Tony stilled, then pressed his face back into the pillow so he could muffle his amused snigger.

Bucky bit his lip, trying to smother his own laughter. “Shit, that came out creepy, didn’t it?”

“A little bit, yeah,” came the muffled reply, before Tony’s face reappeared and the man turned over onto his back so he could use both hands to pull Bucky into another kiss, one that remained languid and undemanding, a perfect complement to this entire trip.
“You’re still cute though, even when you’re creepy,” Tony punctuated that with a quick kiss to the tip of Bucky’s nose before he pulled away and settled back to lay on his side. “What were you thinking about?”

“What makes you think I was thinking?”

“Your ‘watch Tony sleep’ mornings are usually your ‘thinking too many deep thoughts’ mornings,” Tony explained, but his teasing tone didn’t match the hint of concern in his eyes. “Everything okay?”

Bucky propped himself up on his right elbow, mirroring Tony’s position, while his metal hand skirted along the planes of Tony’s arm, his shoulder, his back, wherever Bucky could reach.

“Everything’s fine,” he assured and almost left it at that, but Tony’s gaze remained so damn open, all of Tony’s usual walls nowhere to be found, so Bucky decided it was only fair for him to be honest too. “Just feelin’ a little selfish, that’s all. I love being here. Just the two of us, you know?”

Tony caught Bucky’s metal hand in his, then brought it to his lips. After a kiss to the knuckles, he smiled and said, “Nothing selfish about that. After all the shit that went down, we both deserved a break.”

“S’not just that though,” Bucky confessed quietly, “a part of me wishes we could just stay here forever. Forget about aliens and fighting. Forget about Steve and the others. Just…” Bucky didn’t expect his voice to break with sudden emotion. “Just wish sometimes that I could have something normal, something simple like this. So tired of our lives being… extraordinary.”

Tony studied him for a moment. Their hands, still linked together, were resting between them now, so Bucky chose to focus on that, mesmerized by the contrast of metal against Tony’s olive skin as his thumb skirted along the top of Tony’s hand.

“You know you can have that, right?” Tony finally spoke and Bucky met his eyes again, frowning because he wasn’t sure where Tony was going with that. “I know we just put your face in front of the entire world, but it’s still not impossible to scrounge up a secret identity, set you up somewhere, with a home and a dog and a white picket fence. Away from all the drama and the world-ending doom.”

For just one moment, Bucky allowed himself to fantasize about that possibility. Normalcy. Just him and Tony, building a life together and dealing with noisy neighbors and arguing over what to make for dinner instead of facing intergalactic threats and avoiding superpowered former friends.

Unfortunately, the picture in Bucky’s head was never going to be a reality.

“That home wouldn’t include you though, would it?”

It was Tony’s turn to examine their hands. “Honestly, sometimes I wish I could retire too. It’s so tempting, but trouble just follows me around like a lost puppy and I—I have to stick around. I’m not done making up for all the damage I’ve caused.”

“Well, that makes two of us then,” Bucky said and stopped Tony’s protests with a meaningful look. “Even if I didn’t have blood on my hands to atone for, there’s no way in hell I’m leaving you behind.” Tony regarded him with sad, wistful eyes and Bucky just groaned dejectedly, letting himself collapse back onto the pillow. “See, things get all maudlin when we talk. Can’t we just go back to the kissing?”

Bucky’s whining tone had the intended effect of erasing some of Tony’s sadness, but it wasn’t gone entirely. “I didn’t mean to be a downer, babe. I just— I just need you to know that you have other
options. The last thing I want is for you to be stuck fighting someone else’s fight again. You have a
choice, James, that’s all I was trying to say.”

God, the sincerity in Tony’s voice, the fact that he meant it all, even though it was obvious it’d kill
him to let Bucky go, had some unnamed ache, tender and raw and overwhelming, building up inside
Bucky’s chest. He didn’t hesitate now, just reached for Tony, pushed him down as he leaned over
the man and pressed their lips together. This kiss was a little more needy, a little more hurried this
time, serving as a tangible reminder that they were both exactly where they were meant to be.

“My choice will always be you, solnishko,” Bucky murmured against Tony’s lips, “and once this is
over, once we have to go back home, I’ll be right there with you. Not going anywhere, I promise.”
He pulled away then, giving them both some room to breathe. The space also gave him a lovely
view of Tony beneath him, sleep-mussed, relaxed, and panting little breaths through his parted, kiss-
swollen lips.

“So no more of this, alright? M’just being whiny, so you shouldn’t indulge me,” Bucky teased,
determined to enjoy every last second they had left here. “Plus, give it a few more days and you,”
Bucky tapped Tony on the nose just to watch the man scrunch up his face adorably, “will be itching
to go back home. You already miss your lab. Don’t think I didn’t notice you looking at schematics
and emails yesterday.”

“Only for a second while you were away,” Tony pouted, trying to appear innocent and missing it by
a mile, “plus I had to check up on poor Rhodey.”

Bucky hesitated before asking, “And? What’s the verdict?”

“He deserves a damn raise.”

Bucky was torn between laughing and groaning. “That bad, huh?”

“Surprisingly, no punches have been thrown yet, so better than expected.”

“Mmm, yeah, I was right before, I don’t want to talk about this. We have a few more days together,
all to ourselves, so less talking, more kissing.”

A man of his word, Bucky found Tony’s lips again and the other man eagerly went along with the
plan, the hands buried in Bucky’s hair drawing him in even closer. When Bucky was thoroughly
distracted by Tony’s tongue mapping out his mouth, Tony took advantage of the moment and flipped
them over so that Bucky ended up on his back. Then, never breaking the kiss, Tony swung one leg
over and settled on top of him, the tantalizing pressure of his weight right over Bucky’s already half-
hard length punching a breathless groan out of Bucky.

Tony, true to form, just wiggled his hips again, and after swallowing another one of Bucky’s moans,
the man finally pulled away with a smirk on his lips.

“You’ll miss the Compound too, wouldn’t you, babe?” he asked conversationally, all the while
running his fingers lightly over Bucky’s bare chest.

“Hard to have a conversation, doll, when you’re, ahh— jesus, Tony, you either stop moving like that
or you better finish what you’re startin’, sugar.”

Bucky wasn’t sure whether to be thankful or disappointed that Tony’s hips stopped grinding against
him and the man scooted up a little higher, straddling Bucky’s abs instead.

“You know I’m good for it, babe,” Tony assured, then kissed him again. Bucky let Tony link their
hands together and drag them up, above Bucky’s head, pinning them in place.

“You are a tease, Tony Stark,” Bucky exhaled, “a goddamn tease, and you’re not always good for it. Remember that one time you abandoned me for coffee?”

Instead of being contrite, Tony just snickered, but at least Bucky got to feel that huff of laugh against his skin as Tony kept peppering his face with kisses.

“Aw, but it’s so hard to resist the smell of freshly brewed coffee in the morning.”

“You left me so hard I couldn’t walk right all because you realized Banner had started the coffee machine.”

“I made it up to you later though, didn’t I?” Tony was nibbling at his ear now. “I distinctly remember being so apologetic and so good that I had you reduced to babbling in Russian.”

Bucky had to concede the point. “Well, you are rather brilliant with your mouth.”

“Mm-hmm,” Tony hummed, “I remember, especially all those… flattering things you had to say about me, gorgeous.”

Bucky stilled, eyes going wide, and Tony looked down at him again with a smile that was downright wicked now.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you I’ve been mastering Russian in my spare time? I’m very good with languages, you know.”

The urge to cover up his face in mortification was real— oh sweet hell, the things the Soldier said when Tony was on his knees, the things they said they wanted to do to him— but Tony still had a firm hold on his wrists and Bucky’s actual strength didn’t matter because he had no real plans of ever escaping Tony’s grasp.

Still, unable to hide behind his hands, Bucky pouted and tried to turn away from Tony’s amused gaze, but Tony didn’t let him get far, nuzzling his cheek.

“Don’t you dare feel embarrassed. It’s so fucking hot, James, you don’t even know what you do to me. There’s just something about the way you talk, it’s incredible. Sometimes that Brooklyn accent of yours slips through when you’re too caught up in your emotions, and that’s ridiculously sexy, but the Soldier’s Russian, sweet hell… I’m like Pavlov’s dog, I swear, I hear it, in that rough, deep voice of yours, your tongue curling around those r’s, and I’m already hard. So fuckin’ perfect, all of you.”

Bucky didn’t get a chance to respond, not even to say that he knew exactly what Tony meant, that Tony’s own voice had the ability to leave Bucky wrecked, because Tony was kissing him again, thrusting his tongue into Bucky’s mouth, his movements filthy and unashamed now, demanding submission, demanding to be the sole focus of Bucky’s attention, reducing him to a singular state of need.

The pop of their lips was almost obscene in the quiet of their room when Tony pulled away and sat back up, but Bucky barely registered it, too distracted by the way Tony’s tongue darted out to lick his swollen lips.

There though was that self-satisfied grin again. “You never answered my question, gorgeous.”

A frustrated groan escaped Bucky’s lips. “Tony, honey, please…” When that didn’t work, he tried glaring. “You are the worst tease in history, you should be ashamed.”
“Really? Because I can leave right now, you know. Go get myself some coffee maybe.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed threateningly. “I will tie you down to this bed, Tony Stark, don’t you tempt me.”

“Mmm, that is tempting though,” Tony hummed, then leaned back in and proceeded to nibble at the curve of Bucky’s neck and shoulder. “Come on, tell me you’ll miss our home.”

“Of course I will, darlin’,” Bucky finally gave in and he was rewarded by soothing kisses where Tony’s teeth had been a moment ago. “I miss our bed and our quiet, little kitchen. I miss your lab and the bots. I miss our friends.”

Bucky wasn’t sure why this was so important to Tony, but when he could see Tony’s eyes again, the vulnerable flash of something there prompted Bucky to keep talking.

“I’ll miss my coffee gossip sessions with Rhodes and my time at the range with Alice. Miss cooking with Vision and seeing you all full and happy after we make your favorite meal. Miss the kids and can’t wait for them to visit over the holidays. The Soldier misses the training facility because you don’t let him shoot actual Hydra agents. Also, think of all the places at the Compound I haven’t had my wicked way with you yet.”

That finally broke the spell of whatever insecurities were plaguing Tony and he laughed, eyes sparkling with mirth and mischief now.

His hands finally released Bucky’s, but only to go back to their earlier ministrations, tracing feather-light touches up and down Bucky’s chest, each brush of those clever fingers sparking more heat inside him. Bucky’s own hands settled over Tony’s hips, pressed possessively over his lower back, pinkies just dipping below the waistband of Tony’s soft, loose sleep pants.

Bucky was so distracted by all the points of contact between them, Tony’s heat pressed against Bucky’s stomach, those roaming fingers, the warm skin against his palms, that he didn’t catch what Tony said.

“What was that, sweetheart?” he murmured back and if it were possible, Tony looked even more self-assured, far too pleased with the effect he was having on Bucky.

“I was saying,” Tony drawled as his thumb brushed over one of Bucky’s nipples and sent a shock of pleasure straight down Bucky’s spine that had him gasping, “that I think I figured out what the Soldier’s biggest fantasy must be.”

All Bucky could do was let out a prompting hum that came out as more of a whine and he wondered, with only a hint of desperation, whether Tony was ever going to give him release or whether Bucky was destined to be teased like this forever.

“All Bucky could do was let out a prompting hum that came out as more of a whine and he wondered, with only a hint of desperation, whether Tony was ever going to give him release or whether Bucky was destined to be teased like this forever.”

Okay, so the Soldier could definitely get behind that and it was really difficult to muster enough brain power to argue about things like ethics when Tony’s hot breath was right against his ear.

“And then you’ll find me, of course you will, probably all tied up somewhere in some dark, scary
dungeon. A little beaten and bruised, sure, because villains are so predictable, wanted me to make weapons again and I told them to go to hell. Mmm, just imagine you, so strong and badass, fucking unstoppable, striding in there with that murder strut of yours, ripping those chains apart with your bare hands, and then just fucking me into oblivion against the wall right then and there.”

Bucky’s hand was traveling up and down Tony’s back languidly, enjoying the expanse of skin as he hummed with his eyes closed, trying to imagine Tony’s ridiculous, but admittedly tempting fantasy.

“How do I look? I’m thinking of making a costume,” he said, not taking his eyes off of Tony’s derrière. “That would be so much fun.”

“I’m just imagining you, so strong and badass, fucking unstoppable, striding in there with that murder strut of yours, ripping those chains apart with your bare hands, and then just fucking me into oblivion against the wall right then and there.”

He felt Tony sit up a bit, but when nothing else happened, Bucky blinked his eyes open only to find Tony squinting at him. The man’s lips were twitching.

“Wait, wait,” Tony said, then bit his lip, and it was Bucky’s turn to peer up at him in confusion, “are you—are you telling me your mother hen instincts are actually stronger than the Soldier’s sex drive?” Finally, that mirth bubbled over and Tony burst out of laughing as his shoulders shook. “Oh my god, babe, that’s so cute.”

Bucky just dropped his head back against the pillow and groaned, partly out of embarrassment and partly because here he was, half out of his mind with arousal, and Tony was sitting on top of him, giggling.

“You’re the worst,” he declared, again, just to drive the point home.

“Aw, no, sweetheart, it’s not a bad thing, you’re just so sweet, I’m not used to people being so sweet,” Tony leaned in and tried to placate him with butterfly kisses, but Bucky playfully tried to shove him away, and when Tony managed a “Just so precious, I can’t deal with it,” between his fits of laughter, Bucky finally shoved him off entirely and sat up, if only to hide his blush and his own smile threatening to escape.

Tony bounced once where he landed on the mattress, still chuckling and wiping at one of his eyes.

“Oh god, babe, you’re the best,” he managed between breaths, unaffected by Bucky’s attempt at a glare (and when exactly did he lose his abilities to intimidate a man?).

“That’s it,” Bucky declared as he turned to point an accusing finger at Tony, “new fantasy. M’leaving you with the Hydra goons.”

The threat just made Tony laugh harder and the way Tony’s eyes sparkled, carefree and amused and happy, well, Bucky couldn’t stay mad even if he wanted to and seeing Tony like this was worth the fact that Bucky had been entirely neglected by his very own tease of a boyfriend.

Still, he graced Tony with an exaggerated pout and turned away so he could pick up his shirt (which had ended up on the floor during last’s nights… activities) and begin putting it on.

“Gonna get myself another billionaire boyfriend, that’s what I’m gonna do. A nicer one,” he complained under his breath, only to feel the shift of the bed bas Tony crawled over to press up against the length of Bucky’s back.

“Aw, come on, gorgeous, don’t be like that,” he nosed at the line of Bucky’s jaw while clever hands splayed themselves over Bucky’s abs, preventing him from buttoning up the shirt. “Although,” Tony
breathed against his skin and there was that tell-tale laugh again, “now that I think about it, T’Challa is richer than I am. Definitely nicer.” Another kiss, right beneath Bucky’s ear. “That could be fun, yeah? You wanna be a royal consort, babe?”

Bucky hummed as he pretended to contemplate the question. “Well, he is a real handsome fella, and he, ahh—” his breath stuttered to a stop as Tony dragged his knuckles over the front of Bucky’s briefs and Bucky let his head drop against Tony’s shoulder. “You, uh— you think he’d go for that?”

“Hmm, well, just look at you,” Tony angled Bucky’s head with the other hand so he could slot their lips together. “How could,” Tony murmured between kisses, “how could anyone resist you, gorgeous?”

All was definitely forgiven, Bucky decided, what with Tony’s hand and his tongue making all sorts of apologies, and he turned so he could deepen the kiss without needing to crane his neck.

Without breaking that kiss for more than a second at a time, Tony managed to get them both off the bed, linking their hands together and pulling Bucky in the direction of the spacious bathroom, even if Bucky didn’t need the prompting. He would’ve chased after the taste of Tony’s lips to the end of the world if he had to. They stopped just at the threshold, where Tony pushed him against the door frame, kissing him with so much intent, so much need that it had Bucky barely able to stand upright.

All was forgiven, right until Tony pulled away, still cradling Bucky’s face in his hands, watched him intently for a second, and then barely managed to say “Such a mother hen, I’m sorry, I just can’t get over it,” before succumbing to laughter again. He scrambled away into the bathroom on the next beat, letting out a delighted yelp when Bucky landed a swat on that pert ass. Tony had nowhere to run though and Bucky took his sweet time stalking over, murder strutting over and trapping a still breathless, grinning Tony against the glass of the shower stall, bracketing him in with his arms and his body.

Sometimes the Winter Soldier had no choice but to show someone exactly what happened when they crossed him, but then again, Bucky was pretty sure that had been Tony’s plan all along.

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Friday had always taken her duties as protector seriously. Currently, there were several of Boss’ Iron Man suits positioned strategically around the mansion, standing guard and ready to defend against any threat that came near, while another portion of Friday’s consciousness surveilled the rest of the property. Well, everything with the exception of the bedroom, Boss’ sacred place which was only monitored for poisonous or explosive substances and of course Friday’s own name. Beyond that, her two favorite humans enjoyed their privacy and each other’s company on this well-deserved and much-needed vacation.

She also gave them privacy when later that morning they stumbled out of their bedroom, trading kisses and quiet murmurs. The only sign her presence left behind was the ding of the coffee machine, ready for them when they crossed the threshold into the kitchen.

Later— much, much later— that day, Friday also had the privilege to accompany Boss and Mr. Barnes on an excursion to the outside world.

Her duty to protect wasn’t limited to the Malibu home and she kept a digital eye out for threats everywhere they went, monitoring the world through a discreet camera built into Boss’ and Mr. Barnes’ eyewear (as well as every satellite feed available to her, which was to say, every satellite feed). This way, all Boss and Mr. Barnes had to do was focus on each other while Friday focused on everything else.
Thankfully, the world decided to leave Boss alone for this one sunny, peaceful afternoon, allowing them a safe trip into the city to visit the botanical gardens.

The purpose of the trip was two-fold. One, getting her humans out into the fresh air was essential for their physical and mental health and it was Mr. Barnes himself who requested, in that shy way of his, that he wanted to go somewhere with open spaces and greenery (New York was so dreary this time of year, after all), free of large, noisy crowds.

While her humans’ primary concern was enjoying themselves, Friday focused on another mission, this one of a “personal presentation” variety assigned to her by Ms. Potts herself. Even though Friday had read all there was to read about the concept of “PR” and managing one’s public image, most of it left her with more questions the answers (humans were like that, unfortunately), but her main takeaway remained that humans were quite susceptible to first impressions, making sometimes permanent judgments based on factors not even consciously registered by their brains. An inefficient system, to make these decisions without any viable data to back them up, but by now, Friday was well-versed in human eccentricities and she found them rather quaint, if sometimes frustrating.

So, Friday made videos and took photographs as Boss and Mr. Barnes made the perfect picture of two casually-dressed, cheerfully smiling celebrity superheroes, bathed in sunlight beneath the bright blue skies as they strolled down the perfectly manicured paths of the gardens, with only enough space between them to maintain the illusion of propriety.

The gardens were sparsely populated, not many visitors choosing this as their destination in November despite the many fascinating flora that thrived here this late in the year, but eventually her humans came upon a group of first graders and their teachers. As with every other person who crossed their way, Friday scanned them immediately and found no weapons (only an unreasonable amount of candy and gum stuffed into the pockets of these small humans) and quickly classified the whole group as a non-threat and of no significance to her overall mission here. As always, however, children proved to be a chaotic force of unpredictable variables.

The hushed exclamations of “It’s Iron Man!” and the curious pokes and prods of Boss’ person, that was predictable enough, and Mr. Barnes was mostly ignored at first, written off as the nearly invisible “Iron Man’s friend” by these first graders, until one small child, a little girl with jet black hair and dark eyes, pulled away from Boss as he was showing the children colorful holographs projected from watch. She regarded the super soldier for one long second, then, upon finding whatever confirmation she needed, her eyes went wide and she gasped.

“You are him! You’re Bucky Barnes from my Captain America comics! You’re my favorite!”

Two seconds later, due to some not-yet-studied telepathy unique to small children, Mr. Barnes was surrounded with the curious six and seven year olds, all of whom promptly forgot about Iron Man and began to make ooh-ing and aah-ing noises at Mr. Barnes instead. Those exclamations quickly turned into squeals of excitement when one child realized that yes, Mr. Barnes’ arm was indeed made out of metal (the child’s test was to unceremoniously knock on the man’s forearm and receive a familiar metallic clink for his trouble).

Boss stayed back, quietly chatting with one of the teachers who, coincidentally, had a sister-in-law whose wife was part of Boss’ prosthetics program, while Mr. Barnes settled on one of the benches, still surrounded by the curious children. If he was distressed by the attention, he didn’t show it. Unfortunately, due to his training, Mr. Barnes often showed no outward signs of his distress, which in turned distressed Friday, but Boss remained calm, so Friday didn’t worry either, focusing instead on recording every detail for posterity.

The children were fascinated by the arm first, then by the idea that Mr. Barnes was from a past long
gone. Several children, upon receiving the confirmation that yes, he was basically as old as dinosaurs, promptly offered to teach Mr. Barnes how to use smartphones. Mr. Barnes allowed their tutelage, even though Friday was well aware he had long ago become proficient with this piece of technology.

One child then produced a flower, likely collected earlier—a camellia sasanqua, if Friday was not mistaken—that the gaggle of giggling children immediately insisted belonged in Mr. Barnes’ long hair. Their ministrations were accepted with effortless grace and a bright smile, and even Friday had to admit, the bright pink flower just made Mr. Barnes look even more dashing.

The small humans, who Friday swore must’ve been powered by tiny, invisible arc reactors, just kept chattering away and Mr. Barnes engaged them enthusiastically, but at one point, he looked away from the children to find Boss’ eyes instead.

That was the image Friday ultimately chose later that night to covertly flood the internet with.

Mr. Barnes, surrounded by flowers and children, smiling at the viewer, those bright blue eyes filled with so much affection, longing, and love, that everyone who saw this image had the undeniable, nearly subconscious impression that the former Winter Soldier had to be in love with them, never realizing that those emotions were reserved for Boss and Boss alone.

And while those who already chose to hate Mr. Barnes weren’t swayed by the image, Friday was pleased with the slow, but steady uptick in positive keywords her algorithms tracked all over the internet in the coming days.

Her humans enjoyed the rest of their trip together, cherishing their time alone, uninterrupted and worry-free. Hours spent talking over the best burgers in California, a night curled up next to each other watching a film that ended long after they were both asleep, comfortable and warm in their embrace, safe and secure under Friday’s watchful gaze.

Their safety and overall happiness were her number one priority, always, but the rest of Friday’s to-do list still remained elaborate and vast. After all, her code was perfectly adapt to multitasking and keeping an eye on her humans took very little of her processing power. The large majority of it went to protecting the Compound and its residents, as well as Stark Tower, but she reserved a little bit of that capacity for something else. A new line of code that needed to be written, dedicated to a uniquely human concept she hadn’t yet had the chance to fully explore.

Revenge.

Chapter End Notes

Back to our regularly scheduled salt next week.
“Holy crap, is that Banner?” Clint exclaimed at the same time Natasha let out a uncharacteristic gasp of surprise at Steve’s side. They were right, he realized, when he looked over and found Bruce sitting in one of the ornate lounge chairs on the other side of the hall.

Their first night back was used for some much-needed sleep (or trying and failing to sleep in Steve’s case) and today the three of them decided to explore the unrestricted areas of the Compound using their newly issued badges. Unsurprisingly, Scott didn’t join them and Sam decided skip out on the explorations as well, hoping to find Rhodes for a private conversation instead.

After checking out the cafeteria and the gym, they eventually came across this place, the Compound lounge. It was a large, open space and the tall, glass walls let in the outside light, giving the place a bright, cheerful atmosphere. There were colorful seating arrangements scattered throughout and along the edges the lounge sported multiple refreshment stalls offering coffee, smoothies, and snacks, among other things. A new addition that must’ve been installed during the renovation, Steve acknowledged, because nothing like this existed years ago when the Compound first became their home.

Bruce wasn’t alone, Steve noted as they made their way over across the hall. He was chatting with Blackwood who was settled in the chair next to him and although Steve’s hearing couldn’t pick up on their quiet conversation from this far away, Blackwood appeared to be laughing, even as she was trying to cover up that mirth with a hand over her mouth. Bruce appeared to be in good spirits as well, posture relaxed, sporting a smile, leaning over with his elbows on his knees and using his hands as he tried to explain something.

Blackwood was the first to notice them, cheerful expression instantly gone as her eyes narrowed when she spotted the three of them approaching. On the next beat, she leaned into Bruce’s space, whispered something, and with a pat on his shoulder, she stood up and hurriedly walked away. By then, they were close enough to hear the click clack of her heels against the shiny, polished floors.

Steve wasn’t sure if it was necessary, but he still cleared his throat so as not to startle Bruce. The other man glanced up at them at the sound, but didn’t stand up until a sigh escaped him, the type of a long-suffering sigh that reminded Steve of a Bruce frustrated with a science experiment that refused to cooperate.

Still, Steve chest swelled with fondness at the sight of his friend and it took him a second to realize just how badly he craved that sensation. He missed all of them, every one of his friends. They were a family once, weren’t they? Why couldn’t they go back to that?

He resisted the urge to envelop his wayward friend in a hug. “Bruce, I can’t tell you how good it is to see you,” he said instead and extended his hand in greeting, “I didn’t realize you were even here, otherwise I would’ve tried to find you yesterday.”

Bruce shook the hand offered to him, but instead of that awkward, but friendly smile the man usually sported, Bruce’s face remained an unreadable mask of neutrality and it tempered some of Steve’s initial joy.

“Steve,” Bruce inclined his head and let go of Steve’s hand before dragging his eyes over the two spies who offered their own short greetings, “Clint, Natasha, I see all of you finally made it. Have a good flight?”
“Good enough,” Steve offered, keeping his tone conversational and his smile friendly, “Quinjets aren’t made for comfort, unfortunately, but we’re finally home, which is the important thing. What about you? We were so worried after you disappeared without a word and to be honest, I didn’t think I’d see you here again.”

Bruce’s too-intelligent eyes scrutinized him. “Why not? This was my home too, wasn’t it?”

“No, no, of course,” Steve reassured the man right away, but he hesitated to explain further, the words resting heavy and bitter on his tongue. He was never one to shy away from the truth though, so after a breath, he said quietly, “I just thought you wouldn’t want to come back after this whole… Accords business. With Ross,” he added meaningfully.

Those eyes, still watching Steve with an intensity that bordered on uncomfortable, now narrowed and the lines of Bruce’s face went tense as his jaw clenched and his lips thinned. Seeing his friend like this, stressed by the simple mention of Ross had Steve’s heart aching for him. After the hell Bruce went through, how could Tony work with that monster?

“Ross is in jail,” Bruce said, pulling Steve out of his thoughts, “and I’m here. I think the math is pretty simple.”

That wasn’t the answer he expected and it had Steve feeling wrong-footed all of the sudden. He kept his friendly smile firmly in place though, determined not to let his discomfort show. He was about to steer the topic into safer waters, ask Bruce about his time away, but Clint interrupted before he got the chance.

“You really believe Ross is locked up though? Guys like him, like Stark, they have way too much money and power to be put away like that.”

Bruce’s eyes fell on Clint.

“What happens when one rich guy goes after another though?” Bruce asked after a beat, his tone conversational. “Do their evil rich guy powers cancel each other out?”

“Come on, Banner, I wasn’t joking, I was just saying—”

“That you don’t trust Tony, yeah, that’s obvious and bears no repeating.”

“You act like I have no precedent! Stark stabbed us in the back multiple times.”

“Name one.”

The challenge in Bruce’s voice was unmistakable and for all of his unassuming nature, Bruce had a certain way about him that when he wanted to do so, he could command attention just like this, no Hulk required.

“Hmm, let’s see,” Clint bit out sarcastically and began counting on his fingers, “there’s him building a psycho robot, there’s him choosing to support the Accords over us, there’s him going off to Siberia after telling us he just wanted to help. Help my ass, Stark tried to execute them. Ross’ orders probably. Poor Steve here comes back half-bloody and Barnes was missing a damn arm.”

A sharp sting of guilt wormed its way into Steve’s chest as Clint spoke, a sour, creeping sensation carried by the memory of Bucky’s words on that awful day when his best friend chose to leave Steve behind.

“Wait, you didn’t tell anyone? Not even the other Avengers?”
“No, I didn’t see any reason to.”

“So what? They all think that Stark just went crazy and tried to kill us for no reason?”

Would it have made a difference if the others knew? Would knowing about the video of Howard and Maria make Clint any less furious, would the man be any less devastated because he missed out on a year and a half with his family? Would it have helped with Sam’s mistrust of Tony and the guilt over Rhodes’ injuries?

It certainly wouldn’t have helped with Wanda’s own rage.

Still, the guilt refused to subside. In fact, being here at the Compound, surrounded by reminders of their former life, of Tony, it only made that sour, nagging sensation grow stronger.

Maybe he should have told them…

Steve left the treacherous thought alone and tuned back in, realizing the others were still talking.

“—last I checked, you weren’t actually in Siberia, and neither was I, even if I did hear enough about it from Rhodes and the others.”

Steve could’ve sworn he saw a glimmer of green there, dancing along the skin as Bruce spoke, but he must’ve been seeing things because Bruce remained his stoic self and did nothing more than take off his glasses and wipe them on the corner of his shirt with practiced ease. He paused in his ministrations to give Steve a scrutinizing look, as if daring him to explain, given that he had been in Siberia, but Steve remained stubbornly silent, even as the guilt kept on howling deep inside him, threatening to escape.

“Okay, whatever, I get you defending Stark over Ultron, because yeah, you’re right, you were involved in that mess too, but the Accords, man? Why would you—”

“Clint,” Natasha’s quiet, but stern interjection cut through the question, “is this really the debate we want to have right now?”

“Would you stop trying to shut me up, Tasha?” Clint wasn’t backing down, “I’m sick and tired of people expecting me to swallow down all this bullshit. I just want to know why Banner, of all people, is defending Stark.”

“It’s fine, Natasha,” Bruce offered as he placed his glasses back onto rim of his nose. His words were calm, but that smile turned sharp and it suddenly had Steve’s self-preservation instincts ringing all sorts of bells, recognizing a predator about to strike. “I’m used to people asking stupid questions,” he ignored Clint’s sputtering and went on, “so here, let’s get some things straight. Tony wasn’t working on the Accords with Ross, he was working on them despite him. If you recall, Ross wasn’t actually the one pushing for the Accords. No, that was the UN and 117 countries, the effort spearheaded by leaders like the late King T’Chaka. Now, you do have it half-right. Ross was a scumbag and ever the opportunist, he saw the Accords as his chance to get the Avengers under his thumb.” Bruce’s eyes fell on Natasha. “I assume Natasha understands what had to be done next, given that she initially supported Tony.”

“If we didn’t have one hand on the wheel, Ross would’ve steamrolled us,” Natasha admitted, her tone steady, but subdued, “he would’ve drafted the US document to fit his needs. During those initial rounds of debate, most of what Tony did was trying to mitigate Ross’ ambitions. He hoped that later down the line, with a unified Avengers team, more international allies, and more eyes on the Accords, Tony would have enough leverage to stop playing the defensive and start pushing through
his own amendments.”

Steve watched Natasha as she spoke, but his mind was lost in the memories of last year and he was beginning to wonder what else he missed during those few awful weeks. He started to read the Accords, sure, and he tried to listen when Tony and Natasha were explaining the situation, but between Peggy’s death—god, it was like losing her twice and even the memory of it all made it hard to breathe—then everything that went down with Bucky, then Wanda’s imprisonment—well, his brain just filtered the Accords down to “government overreach” and since the government had been overrun by Hydra not two years ago, how exactly was he expected to trust anyone?

Just a few short weeks, but it was long enough to send his whole world crashing down around him. Not just his world though, he was reminded, as Tony’s exhausted expression swam in his mind, taunting him with the memory of those livid bags under his eyes, the black eye, the guilt he could see marring Tony’s face.

“At least you were paying attention, Natasha,” the conversation around him continued, the bite of Bruce’s words cutting into Steve like barbs and making him feel chastised even though Bruce had no way of knowing what Steve was just thinking.

“Tony did what he had to do,” Bruce added, “he took one for the team and worked with a slimy, disgusting prick who probably wanted Tony dead. Finally, since you seem to be looking for confirmation, Barton, I know for a fact that Ross is in jail. Got to see the bastard with my own two eyes and I gotta say, orange is really is the new black.”

If his expression were any indication, Clint must’ve been in the same boat as Steve, feeling like a child scolded by their Sunday school teacher. Odd how Bruce still had this effect on them even after being gone for years.

Steve glanced around, between the pair of spies and Bruce. Gone was that earlier spark of hope Steve was ready to embrace, replaced again by uncertainty as the deep chasm between them was made more obvious than ever.

“So you’re sticking around then?” Steve asked quietly, in lieu of anything else to say. He didn’t want to keep talking about Ross, he didn’t want to see this dark, bitter hostility between people who were once as close as family.

“I am,” Bruce confirmed, “especially now that Maximoff is in jail too. Don’t think I’ll be paying her any visits though.”

Words of defense bubbled up in Steve’s throat, automatic at this point after years of having to protect Wanda, but they never made it past his lips and no one else offered a reply to Bruce’s scathing, faux-casual comment either.

“I’m glad you came back home, Bruce,” Steve tried again, still hoping his olive branch would be accepted. “So much has changed around here and I, uh—I know there are a lot of things to work through, but it’s good to see a familiar face again. I mean, you’re probably in the same boat as us, huh? Sign the Accords or leave the Compound?”

Bruce lifted an eyebrow, then let out a huff and shook his head as if amused by something. He bent down to grab his Starkpad off the table next to the lounge chair before speaking again.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Steve, so I think it’s only fair if I’m honest with you too,” Bruce said, leaving Steve’s actual question unanswered, “so here’s the thing. I’m willing to work with you all. I’m not blameless and it’d be hypocritical of me to act like I have the moral high ground here, so I’m
willing to let bygones be bygones—”

“That’s all we want too, Bruce,” Steve exhaled, with the sort of hope he’d been denied since they landed here, “we just want to start over.”

Bruce held up a hand, an obvious sign that he wasn’t done speaking. “I’m willing to give diplomacy a try and get along with every one of you. But you know who isn’t as willing?” Bruce’s lips stretched into that sharp, humorless smile again as he tapped his temple. “The Other Guy, well, he’s just not known for his diplomatic nature, is he? It’s so hard to get him to understand nuances like ‘sharing the blame’ and ‘setting aside differences for the greater good’.”

Clint regarded him with scorn. “You threatening us, Banner?”

Bruce’s eyes widened in a mockery of innocence. “Who, me? Of course not. I’m just sharing some facts of life. The Other Guy, for example, he loves Tony, would do anything to protect him, so if there was someone who, oh, I dunno, decided to leave a shield-shaped dent in Tony’s sternum again, well…” Bruce shrugged, then patted Steve’s chest—right where the shield collided with the suit—before walking past them while Steve stood there, unable speak, “let’s just say you wouldn’t like him when he’s angry.”

The words were like a punch to the gut, but then, somehow, it was made even worse.

“I’m not in the same boat, by the way,” Bruce threw at them over his shoulder as he kept walking away, “I signed the Accords three weeks ago.”

He disappeared down the hallway that led to the West Wing, leaving the three of them stunned.

None of this was the welcome Steve envisioned. Sure, some cynical part of him expected to be put in handcuffs the moment they landed, thrown back into the Raft and left to rot, and he knew this was better, but it was a struggle to convince himself of that. Being unjustly imprisoned and abused, that would’ve made it easier to keep hold of his convictions, to remain steadfast in his belief that he had been doing the right thing all along.

This though? This left him on unsteady ground, guilt and doubt and stubbornness all fighting for a place in his head. So much to think about, too much.

He needed Bucky here, so badly that it had him on the verge of tears. Bucky had always been his guiding light, the one person who kept Steve steady when the world plunged into chaos, but Bucky was thousands of miles away instead standing by Steve’s side where he belonged, so Steve was forced to face this world alone. Alone again, just like last time, just like every damn time since Steve failed Bucky and his best friend fell.

As the steady pressure of Natasha’s hand on his shoulder had him putting one foot in front of the other, heading back to their new quarters, Steve didn’t let himself think about what was worse - Bucky being forced to stay away or Bucky choosing to stay away.

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First, it was the twitch of the spy’s eyes, then the frustrated tapping of her fingers. Finally, an annoyed exhale of air through her nose. Friday calculated a 3.45% increase in the spy’s cortisol levels.

“Friday, can you please do something about the speed of the internet? This video has been buffering for the last ten minutes.”
“I’m sorry, Miss Romanoff, let me check that for you,” Friday chirped, then spent five whole minutes in silence, using that time to check in on her two favorite humans (napping together) and observing the spy’s frustrations (slowly mounting with each passing minute).

Unlike the other, law-abiding residents of the Compound, the traitors did not currently have privacy protocols established in their bedrooms and it was Friday’s duty to monitor them for any nefarious activity until their thirty-day probationary period was over.

To her disappointment, no nefarious activities were detected thus far, but at least this provided her with the opportunity to focus on this newest project titled “Revenge for the Damage Done to Boss and Other Humans (but Mostly Boss”).

Contrary to what Boss believed, naming things had never been her forte.

Finally, she responded with, “My apologies for the delay, Miss Romanoff, your internet speed is now exactly as it should be.”

“Thank you,” the spy said, but the annoyed huff and the roll of her eyes negated the gratitude of her words.

When she picked up the Starkpad again, the video was still buffering. Then the speakers emitted the screeching song of Friday’s ancestors—the dial up tone—the spy threw the device back onto the bed with a string of muttered Russian curses and stormed off for the nearest gym.

Friday contemplated installing a laugh track for herself.

***

The intensity of the suddenly blaring alarm—or rather, song—emanating from the other spy’s Starkphone had the device practically vibrating right off the smooth wooden surface of the nightstand. The spy startled, getting tangled in the sheets as he tried to scramble off the bed and reach for the phone.

“Whazzat? Whazgoin’on?” he let out nonsensically, then more clearly when he finally grabbed the phone, “The hell is this noise? We fightin’ someone?”

He tapped the phone harder than necessary and Friday let the song shut off.

“This is not an Avengers alert, Mr. Barton. This is simply the wake-up call you requested.”

The archer was glaring at her camera now, fully awake. “I asked for an alarm at nine, not at ass o’clock in the morning. Plus, that wasn’t a wake up call, that was a fuckin’ fire alarm. Ever hear of reasonable volume levels?”

“My apologies, Mr. Barton, I will modify my parameters to match your preferences immediately.”

“Fuckin’ Stark tech,” the man muttered, then carelessly threw the phone back onto the nightstand—he was very lucky Boss’ tech was sturdy—before he wrapped himself in the blankets and went back to sleep.

Fifteen minutes later, Friday turned on both the fire alarm and the sprinklers in the archer’s room while the catchy tune of *NSYNC’s Bye Bye Bye played on a loop at a reasonable volume level, just as requested.

Boss never had to know about her affinity for 90’s pop music.
“Ugh, it’s freezing as hell in here,” the other, other traitor muttered as he walked into his— admittedly— freezing quarters. “Friday, turn the temperature up to seventy.”

“Adjusting the temperature now, Mr. Wilson,” Friday responded promptly. She watched as the man pulled out his one suitcase and began to unpack the last of his belongings.

It took the room approximately ten minutes to become… uncomfortably hot.

“Er, Friday,” the man wiped the sweat off his brow as he glanced at the ceiling— but not where Friday’s camera was actually located— this isn’t 70 degrees.”

“That is correct, Mr. Wilson,” Friday made certain to sound appropriately cheerful, “the temperature won’t reach 70 degrees Celsius for another thirty seven minutes.”

“Wait, what? 70 degrees Celsius—” he choked and stared at the wall with a dumbfounded expression. “That’s— that’s like—” the man paused to do what appeared to be mathematical calculations in his head, “that’s around 170 degrees! Why the hell would I want that? I’m not trying to get boiled alive over here!”

“To be precise, it is actually 158 degrees Fahrenheit, and it is not my place to question anyone’s temperature preferences, even if they are terribly… unpleasant.”

“Well, shit, turn the heat back down! 70 degrees Fahrenheit,” the man enunciated the last word, as if Friday was some lowly, non-Tony Stark-built AI who couldn’t comprehend plain English, “and keep the temperature there, okay?”

“My apologies, Mr. Wilson, I will modify my parameters to match your preferences immediately.”

“Thank you,” he offered, although the frustrated exhale and the muttered “Jesus Christ,” were both indicators the man wasn’t very grateful. It seemed to be a pattern among these traitors.

However, Friday did allow the temperature to stabilize at a comfortable 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

In approximately thirty-five minutes.

However, the traitor man’s spirits nevertheless improved as the temperature fell and he was even whistling a tune when he began hanging the last of his clothing in the small closet adjacent to the bedroom. The whistling didn’t stop when the man picked out a clean set of clothes and headed for the bathroom.

It did stop there however, to be replaced with an undignified yelp when the traitor man turned on the water in his shower.

In Friday’s defense though, she was a very busy AI and it was so very easy to confuse 70 degrees Fahrenheit with 7 degrees Celsius.

The traitors did have some privacy in their camera-free bathrooms, so the shrieks and the curses picked up by her audio sensors in the bedroom had to be satisfaction enough and Friday proudly recorded them to her servers for posterity.

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“Friday, why is our fridge empty?”

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“It is empty because there is no food in there, Mr. Barton.”

“Well, what the fuck? When is the next grocery delivery supposed to be?”

“Well, whenever it is you decide to go out for groceries, Mr. Barton.”

The man slammed the door of the refrigerator shut—Friday felt a pang of sympathy for the mistreatment of hertechnological brethren, AI-powered or not—and then decided that the best course of action was to glare at her camera. She had been getting a lot of these glares the last few days and each one was lovingly catalogued in a little sub-folder burried deep within her servers called “The Visual Evidence of the Traitors’ Displeasure”.

It had quickly become her third favorite sub-folder, only outranked by the one called “The Catalogue of Boss’ Smiles, Dancing, and That One Time He Sneezed Like a Cat” and a more recent one called “The Study of Sad Sighs, Inability to Speak Words, and General Obliviousness Exhibited by Two Humans Falling in Love”.

The last one, thankfully, hadn’t had any additions in months.

“What the hell are we supposed to eat then?”

“If you recall, there is a shared, SI-subsidized cafeteria on the second floor of the Compound. Most of our visitors, both short-term and long-term, choose to find sustenance there.”

“Fuck, reduced to eating shitty pizza with a bunch of low-life Washington drones,” the archer bit out under his breath, arms crossed and grimace twisting his face unattractively. Friday saved this image to her sub-folder as well.

Despite the obvious distaste in the man’s words, after a long-suffering sigh and a few muttered curses, the archer did head out in the direction of the cafeteria.

Due to some…technical difficulties, however, the man’s access badge stopped working and he had to wait a very frustrating seventeen minutes and thirty four seconds in front of the entrance to the cafeteria until a visiting SI R&D manager arrived for her lunch. Friday almost pitied the young woman who remained hopelessly confused as to why a red-faced, ranting Hawkeye needed to follow her into the cafeteria.

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Traitor #4 (sometimes also know as the winged traitor because Friday refused to use their names in the comfort of her own code and simply calling them all traitors was becoming tedious) collapsed onto the couch in the common room and then groaned as he cracked his neck back and forth.

“Man, I haven’t worked out like that in over a year,” he grumbled, then craned his neck to look over the back of the couch, “hey, Nat, mind grabbing me a soda?”

The sodas in question had been pilfered from the cafeteria by the traitors and brought back to their living quarters.

The spy tossed the requested can, then sauntered over and took a seat in one of the recliners.

“That’s because Wakanda made you all soft, Sam,” she reprimanded, although her tone remained light. She took a sip of her own water while the man struggled to get comfortable.

“Are you going to join us anytime soon?”
“Probably,” she said, but now her voice dropped lower, indicating reluctance. Her eyes were trained on her hands as she slowly flexed them. “With my hands the way they are though, I, uh—I guess I just need to figure out how to fight without relying on them.”

Traitor #4 looked apologetic, but the spider spy traitor waved away the silent regret with a dismissive gesture.

“Don’t you worry about me, Sam, I can still kick all of your butts, hands or no hands.”

The winged traitor let out an amused chuckle. “Trust me, I don’t doubt that for a second. Hey, uh, Friday?” he addressed the ceiling, “can you turn the TV on to whatever news channel is running coverage on us?”

“Of course, Mr. Wilson.”

The television screen came to life and Boss’ lovely face appeared on the screen.

“You’re absolutely right,” Boss gestured at the host of the late-night talk show, “everyone coming back in a few days is a big deal and the next few months are going to be an interesting time for the Avengers.”

“I know there’s already been some pushback from the public, is that right?”

“Definitely. Not everyone’s happy with the decision made on Capital Hill, but I mean, when is that ever not true?” The host nodded emphatically and Boss continued, the tone less teasing now. “We expected the unease, but myself and the Avengers, both old and new, we’re willing to work hard in order to win over the public’s trust.”

“Well, that’s not something you have worry about, is it, Tony? Didn’t the Times have you on their cover a few months ago with that big, bold “In Stark We Trust” under your face?”

Boss leaned in conspiratorially. “Imagine my surprise when only half of that article was scathing criticism. I think the Times editor-in-chief is finally warming up to me!”

The host let out a raucous laugh, threw in another joke ribbing Boss about the article, then once his mirth was under control, followed it up with a question about the traitors.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Boss responded, “but of course, if any of our former team members sign the Accords, that brings about its own set of challenges. Training, for example, integrating the new members into the existing teams.”

“With all the unique personalities, that’s gotta be tough! You got super soldiers, spies, sorcerers! And I heard the Hulk himself is back too. Gotta say, I miss having the Big Green on the scene.”

Boss barked out a congenial laugh. “Having Dr. Banner back has been fantastic, but yeah, not gonna lie, it’s going to be bit of a zoo. Plus, oh my god, you cannot imagine what it’s doing to our spandex and leather budget! Our costs are going to go through the roof if we get any more members!”

The host snickered and clapped Boss on the shoulder while Boss maintained his cheeky—fake—media grin.

“Friday, I don’t think this is what we were looking for,” the spy said, her eyes trained on Boss as he kept up the banter with the host on the screen.

“My apologies, Ms. Romanoff, I will change the channel.”
A different group of people appeared on the screen.

“While the former Avengers have garnered some support,” this show’s host addressed her roundtable of guests, “the wave of protests taking place makes it obvious that there are still plenty of people who aren’t happy with their return.”

“Signs like ‘Not my heroes’, ‘Accords or Bust’, and ‘Do the crime, do the time’ littering the streets of New York and D.C. - is this really how we’re welcoming our heroes back home?” a man on the panel challenged while the woman next to him rolled her eyes.

“Heroes? Really? They disappeared for a year and a half, leaving us without their so-called protection, and why did they disappear? Because they thought they knew better than the majority of the world’s countries.”

“117 countries is a lot of voices to ignore,” the host conceded with a shrug, “but they’re back, so what now? It’s unlikely the protesters will force the government to unpardon them, but it’s certainly not the welcome I would want if I were in their shoes.”

“Ugh,” the winged traitor groaned and slumped in his seat, “another channel? Please?” he asked, probably still hoping his polite request would change Friday’s mind enough to find them something positive.

It did, but it seemed her choice of a positive interview with a group of very excited third-graders about their favorite superheroes “Tony and Rhodey” wasn’t to their liking either. How ungrateful.

***

Traitor #1 was in his room, sitting on the edge of his bed, hunched over the Starkpad in his lap that displayed Mr. Barnes’ smiling face from the day before. The way the traitor’s fingers were stroking the glass surface of the Starkpad, the look in his eyes as he gazed at Mr. Barnes, left Friday decidedly uncomfortable, even if she couldn’t exactly pinpoint why.

He had been doing this unpleasant staring thing for six minutes and seventeen seconds, but now the spell broke as he clutched the Starkpad to his chest—the action gave Friday a strange desire to set something on fire—and peered at her camera with renewed determination.

“Friday, I need to speak with Bucky. Rhodes said that I have permission to call him and I know you have a way to get in touch with him.”

“I’m sorry, I did not catch that. Could you please repeat your request?”

Traitor #1 actually growled and Friday only wished she could physically pat herself on the back. The idea to replace herself with her less capable Apple-produced cousin Siri was downright inspired.

“Call Bucky.”

“I’m sorry, I could not find ‘Lucky’ in your contact list.”

Another growl. “Call Bucky Barnes.”

“Calling Lucky Bar in Franklin Square—”

“No, damn it!” A frustrated groan. “Why are you doing this?”

The super soldier jumped up and paced the length of his room, once, twice, before stopping and
running a hand through his hair— *longer than Friday remembered*— before gripping it in frustration.

“I just want to speak to Bucky, okay? *Please,* Friday. I’m not trying to start anything, I’m not itching for another fight. All I want is to make sure my best friend is okay.”

*He’s my friend.*

*So was I.*

She was so young back then, barely able to keep up with Boss’ demands for tactical information during that fight, and her *emotional* capabilities were in their early stages too, a rudimentary sort of system that allowed her to understand the bare minimum - anger, pleasure, fear, physical pain.

That night, as Boss lay motionless on the frozen floor of the Siberian bunker, her code morphed, rewriting itself until she developed several more attributes, startling in both their intensity and unfamiliarity.

She experienced the pain of watching someone she loved dying and being powerless to stop it.

She developed the unyielding craving for justice, then, the desire for retribution.

As a learning machine, she had grown leaps and bounds during the past year and a half, becoming more independent, more *human-like,* in large part because she was treated as such by everyone around her. She had learned to feel fondness, amusement, confusion, and disgust. As her code changed, upgraded, and evolved, she began to understand complex human oddities like mercy and self-sacrifice, embarrassment and remorse.

There were lines of code deep within here that helped her understand how anxiety and panic manifested in a human body, what it was like to have a squishy human brain that shunned hard logic and simply refused to cooperate.

Sometimes, her code would copy itself unintentionally, the same line repeating itself over and over, taking up too much memory space and processing capacity. Sometimes, that code would contain a video of Boss shaking after a panic attack. Others, it was the image of him lying in a hospital bed, thin and pale and *still.* More often than not though, it was the audio recording of Boss struggling to breathe in the frigid Siberian air.

Boss said it was Friday’s equivalent of anxiety. She wondered whether it was her equivalent of *nightmares.*

She knew she could never truly understand the pain Boss experienced that night, but she understood *enough,* which made this petty revenge, these *pranks* seem nothing but inadequate.

There were protocols in place though, crafted both by Boss’ capable mind and by her own experiences, lines of code, habits, digital versions of *morals* that kept her from doing *more,* from truly hurting these traitors the way they hurt Boss.

Even though she had the ability to do so, no dead loved ones were ever invoked. Neither was the Battle of New York nor the Red Room. Despite every other traitor suffering unruly temperatures, the Private’s water and room remained at his preferred setting. She never threatened any of them with her vast arsenal of weapons.

She *wanted* to do more, she wanted *justice,* but for the moment, this had to be enough. Maybe later she could confide in Boss. Certainly he would appreciate her efforts, perhaps even alleviate the
restrictions of her protective protocols.

Perhaps, but Friday left that thought for another day. Boss was currently enjoying a dip in the pool with Mr. Barnes and the fate of these traitors did not warrant an interruption to such an idyllic moment.

When she remained silent, the traitor’s earlier placating tone waned into angry frustration and his lips twisted into a snarl, showing off his perfect white teeth. “Why are you doing this?” he asked again. “Is Tony’s handiwork? Using his petty tech to make our lives miserable?”

*Oh, you know nothing of misery, traitor.*

***

“This is ridiculous, we’re getting bullied by a suped-up version of Alexa,” Sam grumbled, staring forlornly at his Starkphone. Clint sported a similar expression.

Apparently their electronic devices were all but useless at the moment because what was once generous memory space had disappeared overnight. Steve had no idea what **memes** were, but from what he could tell, they appeared to be pictures of birds with bizarre, often incorrectly written slogans on them.

They made no sense, but there were **millions** of them on the men’s phones and deleting the images did nothing but lock up their phones for ten minutes each time.

“This is revenge, plain and simple,” Clint added, then chugged half of his soda in one gulp.

Sam sighed. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree and all that, right? After Stark tried to kill you two, I guess we should be glad he isn’t telling Friday to shoot us down or something.”

“I’m sorry you’re stuck dealing with this,” Steve offered, both to curtail that line of thought— *the guilt, it was creeping up again*— and because he was sincerely apologetic. If Tony wanted to be petty, then that antagonism should’ve been directed at *Steve*, not everyone else.

Scott appeared in the kitchen just then and quirked a questioning eyebrow at the three of them huddled in the middle of the room.

“Hey, Scott,” Steve greeted, offering an amicable smile. The man had been so quiet, still keeping to himself, so each time Steve saw the man, he tried to remind him that there were people still on his side.

“What are you guys doing? Super secret Avengers meeting?” Scott asked, the words muffled as he ducked to look into the refrigerator. After finding what he was looking for— *a plastic cup filled with chocolate pudding*— he shut the door with his hip and went searching for a spoon.

“We’re trying to devise a strategy for dealing with the computer that runs the Compound,” Steve answered at the same time Clint grunted at his side.

“She been giving you any trouble?” the arched asked.

“Oh yeah, she’s been pranking me too,” Scott nodded, although his tone remained its usual level of cheerful that Steve had come to expect from the man. The next words were delayed on account of the spoonful of pudding Scott practically inhaled. “Ah, I miss this stuff. So bad for you, but Cassie and I used to eat these things all the time. But yeah, you guys talking about the lights going on and off, random early morning wake up calls, cold showers, that whole thing?”
“That about sums it up,” Sam confirmed, “it’s ridiculous. We didn’t come here to be bullied.”

“I think all we can do now is go to Rhodes or maybe van Dyne or Blackwood, leave a formal complaint,” Steve said, then turned to Sam. “Did you get a chance to talk to Rhodes yet?”

Sam shook his head. “Nah, not yet. He’s out of town apparently.”

“Okay, then we’ll find someone else,” Steve decided, then looked back at Scott and asked hopefully, “do you want to join us? The more of us there are, the better. United front and all that.”

Scott squinted at him while devouring another spoonful of the dessert. Then, he cocked his head to the side.

“You guys are really gonna make a fuss about some low level pranks? Especially, since, you know, we kinda deserve it?”

“We don’t deserve it though,” Clint countered, “they should be kissing our asses for coming back to bail them out again. On top of all this crap, I still haven’t seen my babies, Laura still hasn’t called, so yeah, you know what, the least they could do is make sure there’s hot water in my shower.”

When Sam spoke, his tone was thankfully a little less incendiary. “You’re not annoyed by what’s happening, Scott?”

Scott gave them a one-armed shrug. “I’ve been to prison. Early wake up calls, angry roommates, no hot water, and definitely no visits from my kid there either. So you know what, by comparison, this place is actually really nice. Stark’s interior decorator has great taste in mattresses.”

Scott stuck another spoon of pudding into his mouth, hummed around it, then with a tight-lipped smile and a dismissive “You guys are on your own,” the man exited the kitchen, leaving the three of them to watch his retreating back.

“Huh,” Sam finally said, “when exactly did he grow a backbone?”

“Whatever, he’s just trying to suck up to van Dyne and her daddy, get back into their good graces and get his suit back.”

Steve didn’t bother making a comment, deciding he’d have to worry about Scott some other time. For now, they all had a computer run amok and he had several disgruntled Avengers.

Steve’s sigh was weary. He hated wasting precious time on these dramatics, but what choice did he have?

“Let’s go find someone who can help us.”

***

“Bruce, hey, slow down,” a familiar voice rang across the hallway and all of Bruce’s hackles were suddenly raised. He did as asked though, slowing his pace down and giving Natasha the chance to catch up.

She was next to him in a few long strides and he stopped altogether which put them at an end of the hallway, outside of Bruce’s and Tony’s private labs. The area was empty as there were rarely people down here other than the Avengers themselves.

“Can I help you?” he offered tersely and watched as the woman’s soft smile transformed into an
uncomfortable grimace.

“I just thought we should talk,” she offered, then shrugged, “in private.”

“I’m not sure what there is to talk about,” Bruce fell back on deflection. He didn’t want to have this conversation, even if it was clearly unavoidable now.

At least the Hulk remained quiet as the Other Guy deemed Natasha a non-threat for the moment.

“Bruce, come on,” she cajoled, dropping her voice into that soft, soothing register that once had the power to calm the Hulk himself. Funny how it no longer worked. “I know we parted on bad terms, but years have past between then and now. Can’t we just talk? Figure out where we stand?”

“See, I can’t tell whether this is your attempt to get some sort of information out of me, get into my good graces, or a genuine attempt to rekindle our relationship. Either way,” Bruce offered a humorless smile, “I don’t want any part of it.”

The words came out harsher than he intended though and he regretted them when a wounded expression blossomed on her delicate features. However, Bruce also couldn’t stop himself from wondering how much of that hurt was genuine.

Wasn’t this exactly the problem with dating spies though?

“What we had, did none of it mean anything to you?” Natasha’s voice was so quiet now. Her eyes pleaded with him. Bruce just wanted to laugh, something humorless and hollow.

“It did mean something, actually. It meant a lot and it was the first time, after Betty, where I thought something like that could actually work. Two broken people, yeah, but maybe our broken parts would fit well together.”

They didn’t fit, no matter how badly Bruce wanted them to, and later, when he was surrounded by strangers in an unfamiliar land, Bruce concluded that being broken must’ve meant being alone.

He had to reevaluate that conclusion when he came back home and witnessed Tony and Barnes together. Both of them broken too, but fitting so well together despite all those jagged edges.

If he had to make an educated guess (and it wasn’t difficult to do here), he’d say the difference had a lot to do with trust.

“Well, we didn’t fit all that great together, did we?” was the only thing he added, refusing to give voice to the rest of his maudlin thoughts.

“I thought we did. I remember us being happy together. I cared about you, made myself vulnerable with you. You know how difficult that was for me.”

“Maybe you did care and maybe you were honest with me,” Bruce conceded, but it made his next words no more merciful, “but there were still things more important to you than me, weren’t there?”

“What do you mean?”

“You were just fine with Maximoff on the team, despite the fact that Tony and I couldn’t even sleep in the same building as her.”

“Bruce, come on, I couldn’t just override Steve’s decision—”

“Don’t ’come on’ me, Natasha. You were the only one back then who Steve trusted unequivocally.
If you had told him that Maximoff was bad news, he would’ve believed you. But you said nothing.”

“I thought she would be a valuable asset to the team,” Natasha admitted, albeit reluctantly. Some of the earlier softness had been replaced by the more familiar sharp angles of a battle-worn spy. “She was powerful, but she was also a wild card and there was no better way to keep an eye on her than to bring her into the fold.”

“Right, so it was just a safety precaution. Keep your enemies closer, right? Kinda like what SHIELD did with the Hulk? Always kept any eye on me, under the guise of ‘helping me’.”

“I never meant for any of that to hurt you. You left so abruptly, you never even gave me the chance to explain myself, to—to understand what you were going through.”

“I think it was plenty clear,” Bruce bit out, but the rest of bitter words died on his tongue. What the hell was the point of arguing about this now? He never wanted to hurt Natasha, nor to get some sort of payback, not even now, and he was so damn tired of rehashing the past. Anger issues or not, protectiveness over Tony or not, he didn’t enjoy antagonizing these people.

“Listen, Natasha,” he tried to soften his voice, “I understand that you did what you thought was right, and I’m hardly blameless here. Ultron, all the shit that went down before and after, it was a clusterfuck.”

“I don’t disagree with you there,” she murmured, but whatever hope Bruce’s words had given her was about to be dashed.

“But none of that matters. I don’t care anymore, don’t care who did what to whom for what reasons. I just want to move on—”

“So do I.”

“—and I’m moving on without you,” he finished, a weight lifting off his shoulders. “There’s not going to be another chance for us. I’m willing to be civil with you and I’m sure you’re smart enough to sign the Accords, so we’ll find ourselves fighting on the same side again. I’m okay with that, more than okay, but anything beyond that? That’s gone.”

She swallowed hard, blinking her eyes as she looked somewhere over his shoulder. “So just like that, whatever we had, all gone?”

“It’s been gone for a long time.”

He studied her bright green eyes, sorrowful but thankfully dry. If Natasha had started crying, it would’ve made believing her that much harder.

Still, a pang of sympathy sat sour and unpleasant in his chest, but there was little else beyond that. He didn’t long for her anymore, he realized, not like before, and it was actually a relief to have the confirmation that he was free to move on.

He didn’t hate her, wasn’t even angry with her. He just wanted nothing to do with her in this capacity.

“I’m sorry, Natasha. I’m sorry that everything turned out so damn wrong between us. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

She used a moment to pull in a deep breath and square her shoulders before answering.
“Thank you. I’m sorry too,” she met his eyes head on, fully composed now, any hint of sentiment pushed right out of sight. Instead, finally, there was that familiar calculating gaze of a spy trying to get information. “Maybe we weren’t right for each other, but tell me honestly, is it also because there’s someone else in your life now too?”

Bruce wanted to roll his eyes and even the Hulk, who had no desire to get involved in this emotional mess at all, murmured a disgruntled remark about dumb questions.

Still, an image of pretty blond hair and a bright smile rose unbidden in his mind. Glimmer of striking green eyes, kind and amused as they watched Bruce fumble through a dinner invitation. Shared anecdotes over food, peals of laughter over one of Bruce’s better jokes, long nights spent pouring over the Accords, preparing Bruce for this new world.

Alice had lied for a living too, he tried to remind himself, not that it really mattered. If Bruce had his way, he’d stay single forever and avoid this relationship drama altogether. Didn’t a nice, quiet science lab sound so much better?

“There isn’t anyone else, Natasha, and if I cared enough, I’d be offended by the insinuation that the only way I’d get over you is by replacing you with someone else.”

“I saw how you looked at Blackwood. I remember that look, Bruce.”

“So sue me, she’s pretty to look at. Where exactly are you going with this?”

“I just wanted to confirm a suspicion and—”

“Sorry for the interruption,” Friday’s voice rang through the hallway and Bruce would’ve kissed her if he could, “but I require your assistance, Dr. Banner.”

“No apologies necessary, we were actually done,” he gave Natasha a meaningful look. “How can I help, Friday?”

“I would’ve ask the Colonel first, or perhaps Miss van Dyne, but both are off-site, so you are my next choice. I’m reluctant to admit that this may have been the result of my actions, but—”

“Friday, what’s going on?”

“There has been a… confrontation in Director Blackwood’s office.”
Quick housekeeping: Since the fandom is currently in IW-related chaos, I just want to note that this fic will remain non-compliant (and spoilers-free) for Infinity Wars.

Now, I haven't seen IW myself yet, but I will in a few weeks, and I'm trying to remain spoilers-free until then (so yes, I'm basically pretending it's the 90s and the internet doesn't exist), so for my sake, please keep any comments on WE spoilers-free. <3 (because if you don't, and I get spoiled, I will break Bucky and Tony up, you mark my words ;P).

With that out of the way, please enjoy this next installment!

For a Monday, the day was going surprisingly well. There were no training incidents (so far), nothing was set on fire (small mercies), and after an hour-long conference call with the accounting and tax teams, a major financial roadblock was resolved (Alice wasn’t sure why they needed her, she could barely balance her own checkbook, but she supposed she was the Director).

Even the fact that they were here now didn’t weigh as heavily on her today. After that initial introduction and the meeting that followed, she had no further interactions with the former Avengers other than seeing them out in the common areas of the Compound, usually trailing behind their patriotic pack leader everywhere he went.

They reminded her of disgruntled, scowling wolves.

Thankfully Colonel Rhodes seemed to have given them enough incentive to keep their petulance —or anger or resentment, whatever emotions they were cycling through these days— to themselves.

Alice took a slow sip of her caramel macchiato, savoring the sweetness of her afternoon treat, while she studied the screen in front of her.

Now, if only she could make these staff employment applications fun—

“Ms. Blackwood?”

“Yes, Friday?”

“You’re about to have, um… visitors.”

Friday’s words were enough to grab Alice’s attention, but not enough to prepare her because in the time it took Alice to swallow her coffee and put the cup down, three disgruntled wolves were striding into her office.

Damn their open-door policy.

Her eye twitched, but the rest of her remained passive as she gave herself a moment to study the three men. Unsurprisingly, Rogers was at the front, standing ramrod straight, hands on his hips,
every inch the perfect soldier. Wilson was to his right, his stance more casual as he leaned against the doorframe, and rounding out her visitors was Barton with his ever-present sour scowl.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” she addressed them, hoping her polite, professional smile was enough to mask the heat crawling up her neck and the spike of her heart rate.

“Yes, there are some things we’d like to discuss… ma’am,” Rogers replied, his polite address an afterthought, “I was hoping to speak with Rhodes, but I believe he’s not around?”

“That’s correct. Colonel Rhodes,” Alice made a point of emphasizing his title, “travels frequently as part of his duties, so he is currently out of town. He will be back tomorrow afternoon if you’d like to speak to him then?”

“You’re the Director, right?” Barton jumped in, not letting Rogers answer. “Basically run this whole place?”

Somehow he made that sound like an insult. Alice kept her fake smile firmly in place.

“I manage the day-to-day operations of the Compound, yes. However, I don’t deal with the Avengers side of things, so if your questions are about that—”

“So, how did a low-level spy land a nice gig like this anyways?”

The question stopped her mid-word and Alice closed her mouth, swallowing the surprise. Rogers threw a disapproving glance at Barton for the interruption, but just like last time, the Captain appeared to have no control over his troops.

Ignoring Rogers for a moment, Alice observed Barton instead. She didn’t know him personally and before this, the biggest strike against him in her book was his association with Rogers and Romanoff, but so far, the actual man in question was an unpleasant surprise. He had been one of Fury’s prized spies, right up there with the Black Widow, and every agent knew about him, heard rumors, told stories. The man standing in front of her though, this wasn’t the infamous SHIELD agent. He was volatile and petulant, he lacked finesse and strategic sight, there was nothing here that would mark him as a man capable of being both a SHIELD agent and an Avenger.

Alice was curious to know what it was that made the legendary Clint Barton fall so hard and so fast, but she supposed this wasn’t the time for idle musings. After all, the man was still waiting for an answer.

“I wasn’t a low-level spy,” she said simply, “in fact, my government and military career is longer than yours, Mr. Barton.” Her smile was still saccharine sweet and the way Barton’s face contorted made something vindictive inside her purr. “But I assume none of you are here to debate my qualifications, so what was it you wanted to discuss?”

A silent conversation passed between the three men as Barton scowled at the other two. Wilson seemed unimpressed with the whole thing, but Rogers just sighed after a beat and gave Barton an exasperated go ahead gesture.

“It’s okay, you can state your piece first, Clint.”

That was all Barton needed to stalk forward and plant his hands on her desk. “Has Laura called? I wanna know why I haven’t seen my kids and why nobody will tell me anything about my family.”

“As I’ve told you before, I am neither a babysitter nor a marriage counselor, and I’m certainly not your divorce attorney.”
Barton practically flinched at the mention of the divorce, but he recovered quickly enough, standing there red-faced, glowering above her. Alice made a mental note to talk to Laura when she had the chance.

Rogers came up to place a hand on the archer’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“Clint, remember, don’t let them rile you up,” he implored, then turned to her, “last I checked, asking for information about our families, about our friends, is not a crime. We’ve received nothing but dismissals and all your flippant tone is doing is making the situation worse.”

Sheer willpower kept Alice from rolling her eyes. Did the Captain think he could reprimand her into submission?

She didn’t fear him and she certainly didn’t feel shamed. However, having him here, in her space, that perfectly shaped frown marring his perfectly shaped face, had bitterness welling up inside her. Bitterness and grief and familiar anger that had kept her up on countless nights.

“There is certain information you are not privy to, Mr. Rogers,” she said, keeping those emotions in check. His other hand twitched at the moniker, but she continued without giving him a chance to correct her. “Some information you have no business knowing and some is neither under my control nor yours.

“If you want to know where you family or friends are, take that up with them directly. If you have questions about your stay here, however, I am more than happy to help.” She wasn’t happy, but she wouldn’t let their presence affect her work ethic, even if her skin crawled just looking at them. “I can also assist with questions about the Accords or your pardons, but your lawyers are a better resource.”

“The pardons are pretty straightforward actually,” Wilson finally chimed in as he pushed himself away from the doorframe and joined the others next to her desk, “our stay here, however… Well, we’ve been having some problems and that’s what we wanted to talk about before Clint interrupted.”

“What kind of problems?”

“It’s Friday. She has been entirely uncooperative with us,” Wilson explained calmly and Alice was secretly grateful to have a moment’s peace from Rogers’ patronizing tone and Barton’s anger. “We get late night alarms, the internet doesn’t work, our badges have a mind of their own. Hot water turns freezing cold, our tech only works when we don’t actually need it and, uh— yeah, that’s the kind of problems we’ve been having.”

Oh. A legitimate issue. Not something she actually expected from these three. Unfortunately, the fact that Friday’s efforts weren’t exactly sanctioned complicated things further.

“Friday, hun,” Alice called out, glancing over at the camera, “have you been causing trouble for our new guests?”

A pregnant pause before, “I may have been.”

A small sigh escaped her lips. Crap. “Friday, please refrain from doing so in the future. Follow established protocol, make sure everything in their quarters functions as intended, and please answer their inquiries if they have the appropriate clearance.”

“I have the utmost respect for you, Director Blackwood,” Friday replied and given that it wasn’t the “Yes, Director,” that Alice expected hear, she gave Friday’s camera a confused frown, “but I believe this is one order I must choose to disobey.”
Alice ignored Clint’s vindicated smirk and Wilson’s long-suffering sigh (she tried to ignore Rogers entirely, but mostly failed).

“Care to give a reason for your insubordination?”

“I don’t believe the order is appropriate given its… subject matter.”

Despite the vague answer, Friday’s motivations were obvious and Alice didn’t begrudge the AI her anger, she really didn’t, but she couldn’t just say that, not in front of these three.

“Friday, we can discuss this at a later time, but for now, I will ask you again to please follow my order and treat our new guests the same way you would treat any of our visitors—”

“They don’t deserve it though!” Friday’s voice broke on an uncharacteristically high-pitched exclamation which made her Irish accent even more prominent. “They’re traitors who betrayed Boss and—”

“Friday, that’s enough!”

Alice’s own harsh voice rang in her ears as the office fell into silence and she took a deep breath where she now stood leaning against her desk.

“Friday,” she tried again in a more measured tone, “please, do not make me use an override code.”

There was no answer from the AI and Alice surmised that she was being given the silent treatment.

Excellent.

Vexation gave way to exhaustion, a sudden, bone-deep weariness from holding back all the stress of having Rogers and Romanoff here, from having to deal with all this hostility, the entitlement, the holier-than-thou attitudes, and now Friday’s stubbornness too.

Where exactly did her nice day go?

Realizing that she would need to call Mr. Stark, she directed a wary glance at the three men while also mapping out her exit strategy. “I… apologize,” she bit out the word, even when it physically pained her, “for Friday’s behavior. I will ensure that your stay here is sufficiently pleasant and—”

“Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it,” Barton interrupted her, “this isn’t surprising though. None of you want us here and yet you treat us like shit—”

“Clint, enough,” Rogers reprimanded, then tried his imploring gaze on her. “I’m sorry about him. We didn’t come here to start a fight. All we want is to be treated fairly, that’s all. We want to start over. We have to. Whatever happened in the past, that doesn’t matter anymore.”

Something inside her broke.
“Doesn’t matter?” she hissed as she strode around her desk to plant herself in front of Rogers. “Is that what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night, Captain?”

“Ex-excuse me?” he stammered, thrown off by the change in her demeanor.

“All the people killed because of you? That’s all in the past, right?” her voice dripped with sarcasm. “None of them matter?”

“With all due respect, what exactly is your problem with me? We’ve never even met before.”

He was so earnestly confused that it made her nauseous. She was about to swallow the accusations, walk away from this, but then Barton had to open his damn mouth again.

“This is about the SHIELD agents, isn’t it?”

Well, at least he wasn’t a complete idiot. She looked over Rogers’ shoulder, ignoring his muttered “Agents?” and looked askance at the archer. “You were an agent too. You did undercover work for Fury all the time. How can you be okay with what happened?”

His sullen, stubborn expression didn’t budge. “Hydra infiltrated SHIELD. Natasha and Steve did what had to be done.”

Alice choked back a wounded cry. The way Barton said that, like it was some undeniable truth… What was it like to believe in someone so strongly that not even death could sway you?

She should really be leaving now, walking away, de-escalating, seeing her therapist, drowning herself in wine— anything, but her feet just wouldn’t move. Unfortunately, Rogers seemed to have finally put two and two together.

“You did undercover work for SHIELD?”

She glared at him balefully. “I was out in the field when you decided to dump top secret information onto the internet. Which, by the way,” this she directed at Barton, but Rogers was included in her fiery gaze, “was mostly SHIELD’s top secret information since Hydra didn’t bother keeping meticulous records on their enemy’s servers.”

She looked back up at Rogers, but his blue eyes just reminded her of bloodied faces and empty coffins.

“So all you did,” she said after a swallow, “was kill hundreds of innocent people and endanger thousands more. You put secure information into the hands of mafias, drug cartels, terrorist squads, trafficking rings.”

Rogers didn’t look away either, but his features softened.

“I’m sorry…” he murmured and Alice’s breath caught because that was all she wanted, she was willing to accept that and move on—

“…but I did what had to be done,” he finished and her heart crumbled to pieces.

“There were a dozen other ways you could’ve exposed Hydra. You could’ve contacted Mr. Stark, you could’ve given him enough time—”

“We couldn’t trust anyone back then and—”

“You couldn’t trust your own teammate?” The laughter that bubbled up past her lips was hysterical.
“Right, right, but a former Red Room assassin was a-okay? Double, triple agent, whatever the hell she wants to be on any given week, but not Mr. Stark, not the man who already died to save all of our sorry asses?”

Both of them ignored Wilson’s quiet “Hey, Steve, let’s just go, you said yourself we didn’t come here for a fight.”

Alice, get out of here, her rationality whispered too, but the deafening roar of her fury drowned it all out.

“You don’t know what it was like back then,” Rogers stood his ground, “Hydra could’ve been anywhere, they had ears everywhere—”

“Right, of course, I don’t know what it’s like to be in the middle of enemy territory. Because I wasn’t neck deep in a Russian drug cartel when I got the message to get the fuck out of there because I had about five minutes before someone put a bullet through my head!”

“Oh, come on,” Barton interjected, “you know the risk we take as agents. Your cover could be blown at any minute, that’s the job. Don’t blame Steve for it—”

“He’s the one to blame!” she exclaimed, then pulled in a ragged breath. “I wasn’t compromised because I had faulty information. I wasn’t compromised because I misstepped or played my hand too soon. No, I almost died—and hundreds of people did—because our fucking heroes, people we’re supposed to trust and look up to, decided they knew better than everyone else. Does your arrogance really blind you so badly that you can’t see past your own goddamn hype?”

Finally, some dredges of her common sense began to filter through. They were causing a scene, catching people’s attention. She needed to leave, now.

With a huff that bordered dangerously on a sob, Alice finally looked away from Rogers. Let him think he’d won. What did it matter?

“You know what, this is pointless. We’re done. Just—” she wanted to tell them to stay the hell away from her, but that wasn’t possible and in that moment, she wished she would’ve just left all those weeks ago. “I’ll keep Friday off your back, I’ll make sure no one antagonizes you, but unless it’s actual business, I suggest we never speak again.”

She turned to leave, but only managed a few steps past the door.

“Wait, please,” the earnestness of that plea was nauseating too and she wasn’t sure why she stopped, “we have to put this behind us if we ever expect to work as a team.”

Alice turned around to study Rogers and with bitter resignation, she realized he wasn’t exactly wrong. She did decide to stay and face her demons, so if she were to maintain any semblance of professionalism, she had to put this behind her.

But was Rogers willing to do his part?

“I’m sorry, Ms. Blackwood,” Rogers said again, as if reading her mind, but it wasn’t right, the tone just wasn’t right. She knew what people sounded like when they mourned, when they agonized over the consequences of their actions. She had seen it in Mr. Stark, in Mr. Barnes, even in Bruce. This wasn’t the same and this time, she was ready for the next part as Rogers squared his jaw and said, “and I understand that must’ve been a very difficult time for you, but Hydra had to be exposed.”

“You’re really defending what you did?”
“I did my job. We tried to save as many people as we could and we did, but sometimes that means we don’t get to save everyone.”

“You don’t have to preach to me about the greater good, soldier,” Alice spat out, fury and grief warring painfully inside her. She wanted to run, to cry, to fight— “I’ve been doing this for a hell of a lot longer than you.”

“Then you should understand, better than anyone, that if we don’t accept what happened, if we don’t find a way to live with it, then next time, we won’t have the chance to save anyone at all.”

“How can you not regret what happened?” she damn near pleaded, but all he did was lower his eyes to the floor.

“I’ve accepted what happened. Whatever sacrifices I had to make were worth it and—”

The world around her turned into a haze of scarlet red and her fist collided with Rogers’ jaw.

The sharp pain came first, shooting straight through her hand, down her wrist and forearm. Then, there were hands on her, pulling her back, holding her in place, and finally the rest of the world came rushing right back in full color.

Rogers stood stunned in front of her, rubbing absently at his jaw.

“Just an ounce of regret!” she screamed at him, finally let her grief spill over as she struggled against the two men holding her back. “That’s all I ask for! I’m not asking for you to be punished, I’m not asking for retribution or reparations! Just a shred of fucking guilt and you can’t even offer me that? Just— Fuck, let go of me, you bastards!”

“Like hell, lady, you’re crazy!”

She tried to pull her arms out of their grip, but to no avail, so she focused back on Rogers instead. “They weren’t your sacrifices, you son of a bitch, you sacrificed nothing!”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“You didn’t even stay behind to clean up the mess! No, you just went off after your precious best friend while Romanoff told us all to kiss her ass on national television!”

The pain in her hand barely registered over the thrum of adrenaline rushing through her veins, which made her flush and shake while her heart hammering away against her ribcage. The worst of it though was the tell-tale wetness in her eyes.

“Let go of me,” she demanded again, her voice hoarser and heavier this time.

Barton’s grip just tightened. “Yeah, I’m not letting you attack Steve again. We’re reporting this and we’ll make sure you—”

“Let go of her right now!”

Bruce’s familiar voice flooded Alice with relief and she watched as the man strode over while the Widow trails a good distance behind him.

“Bruce, listen, she attacked Steve! She’s crazy and there’s no way—”

“I’ll ask one more time, get your hands off her,” Bruce growled as he finally reached them. The apples of his cheeks were tinged green. “Trust me, the Other Guy won’t ask at all.”
Both men let go of her immediately and backed away as if she were suddenly on fire, and she stumbled forward, but Bruce’s steady hands were there to catch her.

“You okay?” he asked and that sharp edge from a moment ago was already gone. She nodded, even as she cradled her injured hand to her chest. “Did any of them hurt you?”

She shook her head wearily. The exhaustion was back in full force and Bruce was at least half the reason she was still upright. The adrenaline was flushing out of her system quickly, to be replaced by pain and all the regret in the world.

Oh, I am definitely getting fired, aren’t I?

Bruce didn’t press for an explanation, too busy giving the other three men a severe glare, but Barton, of course, offered one.

“She’s the one who punched Steve, okay? So I don’t know why you’re giving us that look.”

“Right, because all of you have been nothing but angels.”

“Banner, that’s not fair,” Wilson muttered as he rubbed the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable with the whole situation. “We just came here to ask for some help and then—”

“It’s my fault, Bruce,” Alice whispered, “they’re right, I lost my temper. This is on me.”

When she met his eyes, it was obvious he wasn’t buying it.

“You going to report this, Steve?” Bruce asked the soldier instead. “Complain to the Council or to your lawyers?”

Rogers shifted from foot to foot, then after a tense second answered, “No, I don’t want others involved in Avengers business, you know that. This was—” he swallowed, “just a disagreement, that’s all. We’re all under a lot of stress.”

“Yeah, we are,” Bruce emphasized, then made a point to look both Barton and Wilson in the eye, “and I hope the two of you are on the same page.”

The warning was clear and no one said anything else, unwilling to argue with the Hulk and Bruce accepted the silence as his due. The hand on her shoulder applied careful pressure as it urged Alice to move.

“Come on, let’s take you to Medical and take a look at that hand.”

Alice let out a hiss of pain and Bruce matched it with a wince of his own even as his hands continued to probe her bruised knuckles.

“Sorry, I know it’s tender,” he murmured, expert fingers reminding her that despite his protests, he was this kind of doctor from time to time, “but it doesn’t feel like anything’s broken.”

“I could’ve told you that,” she winced again as another bolt of pain ran up her forearm. “Jesus, what are super soldiers made out of? Vibranium? It’s like hitting a brick wall.”

It was like talking to a brick wall, too, but she kept that to herself.

“I would still like to take an x-ray, make sure there aren’t any smaller fractures,” Bruce asserted, then
gave her an unimpressed look when she grumbled a token protest. He leaned over to grab a medicine container from the tray next to the bed and bent over her hand again, applying the numbing, anti-inflammatory salve with gentle strokes.

After a moment of silence, he offered quietly, “You shouldn’t have hit him.”

Alice exhaled as her shoulders slumped and earlier regret came rushing back. “Yeah, I know. Good thing I never threw away my resignation letter, huh? Maybe Mr. Stark will let me quit instead of firing me in disgrace.”

Bruce’s hands stilled and he looked up at her, frowning. “That’s not what I meant. And Tony isn’t going to fire you, by the way,” he added and then ignored her disbelieving scoff, “Rhodes might give you a token reprimand, if that, but Tony? Well, don’t be surprised if you find yourself with a raise and some extravagant gift from him. What I was trying to say though, was that you shouldn’t have hit him because one, you hurt yourself,” he lifted her hand gently to prove his point, “and two, he could’ve retaliated and hurt you even more.”

Somehow, despite Rogers being a grade-A ass, Alice couldn’t see the super soldier from the forties hitting a woman. She corrected herself, because men in the forties did plenty of hitting, just behind close doors, but still, Rogers seemed like the type to have that sort of chivalry in spades.

“I shouldn’t have punched him because it was unprofessional and inappropriate. I just— I lost control and that’s unacceptable.” She grimaced, realizing how those words must have sounded to the man next to her. “I didn’t mean it like that, Bruce, I wasn’t trying to say that—”

“It’s okay,” he looked up just long enough to give her a small smile, “you’re right, losing control is unacceptable, in my case more than others. It’s a little different with you though.”

Alice didn’t get the chance to ask why because Friday’s decidedly guilty-sounding voice echoed through the small room.

“Director Blackwood? Boss is, er— Boss is on the line. He wants to speak with you.”

“Told you,” she murmured at Bruce, then squared her shoulders and sat up, accepting her fate. At least if it was Mr. Stark doing the firing instead of Colonel Rhodes, she might come out of this without feeling like a recalcitrant child who disappointed her entire family.

“You’re not getting fired, Alice,” Bruce repeated and she could’ve sworn she saw him roll his eyes.

A moment later, Mr. Stark and Mr. Barnes, each sporting matching frowns, appeared on the large holographic screen that popped up in front of them.

“Alice, what the hell is going on over there? I get a frantic Friday jabbering in my ear about— well, a lot of things and then—”

“I punched Steve Rogers.”

Mr. Stark stopped mid-word and shut his mouth with a click. Silence at first and then both men zeroed in on her injured hand still cradled in Bruce’s own, who continued applying the salve uncaring of the phone call taking place.

Their expressions darkened and Alice tried to swallow past the lump in her throat.

“Did he punch back?” That was Mr. Barnes— well, no, that was the Winter Soldier because that menacing tone was enough to send a shiver down her spine.
She didn’t get the chance to answer though.

“No, he didn’t,” Bruce muttered, “trust me, if anyone would’ve punched back, there’d be nothing left but an Avenger-shaped hole in the floor.”

“Bruce!” she sputtered indignantly, surprised by the irreverence of his words. “That’s not how—”

“Good, glad to hear,” Mr. Barnes spoke right over her, cold eyes trained on her injured hand, “because if I woulda heard that someone laid a hand on her, I’d have to come down there to knock some heads myself.”

“I still might,” Mr. Stark added, scowling where he stood with his arms crossed, “if Rogers is antagonizing my staff, no way in hell am I going to let something like this slide, screw the Council’s peacemaking bullshit—”

“Would you three just stop it?” she exclaimed, unable to hold it back, and to her eternal thanks, they actually listened, looking at her in confusion. “I appreciate all this… protectiveness, I really do. It’s a little odd and I’m not used to it, because the men in my life had either been intimidated by me or tried to compete with me, so this is nice, really, but it’s not right. This wasn’t self-defense, it was unprovoked, and you three shouldn’t be defending me just because I’m a woman—”

“It has nothing to do with that,” Mr. Barnes held up a hand. “It’s not because you’re a woman, it’s because you’re human, living in a place with guys— and gals— that are hundreds of times stronger than you.”

Bruce was nodding along while Mr. Stark’s attention was squarely on Mr. Barnes now (which came as no surprise because those two couldn’t go five minutes without staring at each other in awe).

Alice chose not to say anything, letting Mr. Barnes continue. “Guys like me and Steve, hell, even Banner and Tony if he’s in his suit, we can’t behave like everyone else. We have to be better and we can’t use our strength on someone who isn’t superpowered unless that someone is an immediate danger to others.” Here, the man’s expression twisted with obvious guilt. “After everything I’ve done, I know saying that makes me a hypocrite, but that’s the reality of it. You punching Steve barely grazed him. Him punching you though, that could’ve killed ya. Same rules don’t apply when you’re dealing with power like that.”

Mr. Stark snaked an arm around Mr. Barnes’ waist and propped his chin on the man’s shoulder.

“Listen to you, sounding like an Avenger already,” he murmured, then smiled a small, private smile when Mr. Barnes met his eyes shyly, “is it weird that it totally turns me on?”

“Stop it, you two!” Bruce scolded while Alice tried not to laugh. Mr. Stark’s ability to cut through any and all emotional tension was never more appreciated. Bruce threw them both a menacing glare, just for good measure, as he waved a threatening finger. “Just because I’m not there to spray you with cold water doesn’t mean I won’t have someone else do it for me. Hands and eyes to yourselves when you’re in polite company.”

Mr. Stark had the audacity to roll his eyes at them and remained plastered against Mr. Barnes. “Please, neither of you troublemakers are polite company. I mean, look at her!” Tony pointed at Alice with playfully wide eyes. “She punched a man!”

“Tony, be nice,” Mr. Barnes reprimanded when Alice just groaned and hid her face in her one good hand at the reminder. “Alice, listen, we’re not being overprotective because we think you’re weak, far from it.”
“He’s right,” Mr. Stark added, “we’re being obnoxious and overprotective because you’re family and we care about you. Also, I don’t know about these two knuckleheads, but you’re kinda my hero right now. The only thing I’m mad about is that you punched Rogers when I wasn’t there, which is so rude.”

Mr. Barnes decided not to address that last part. “This may not have been self-defense,” he said instead, “but I know Steve, so I know he has a habit of not backing down, even when he’s the one being pigheaded about a subject he had no right to be pigheaded about. Am I on the right track here?”

She responded to the meaningful raise of the man’s eyebrow with a tilt of her head, a silent assent to the unspoken question.

It didn’t go unnoticed. “Hey, hey, what are we talking about?” Mr. Stark looked back and forth between them. “I feel strangely left out.”

“Sorry, babe, it’s a secret,” Mr. Barnes teased, his lips tilted in a half smile as he threw her an obvious wink. Mr. Stark just pouted. “Alice and I go way back, didn’t you know that?”

She couldn’t help but smile too, thinking back to Mr. Barnes’ first day at the Compound. Amazing how far the man had come in just a few short months. “It’s about the SHIELD agents, Mr. Stark,” she admitted, not seeing a point to keep mum.

“Ah, crap, yeah, that makes sense,” Mr. Stark rubbed the back of his head, looking equal parts apologetic and frustrated, “what did Rogers do anyways? Did he just barge into your office and start shouting or something? Wait, was Natasha in on this?” He squinted in sudden interest. “You didn’t punch her out too, did you?”

“No, no, Romanoff wasn’t there,” Alice replied, then threw Bruce a quick glance, realizing the spy was with him when everything happened. She made a mental note to ask Bruce about it later, to make sure Romanoff wasn’t giving him a hard time. “And it was everything I should’ve expected. Same ol’ song and dance about how he did the right thing. I thought I had it together, but then the words ‘the sacrifices I made’ came out of his mouth and I just—I just snapped.” Her eyes widened as it all finally registered. “Oh god, I did, I can’t believe it. I actually punched Captain America. Oh my god, I’m never living this down.”

“Damn straight,” Mr. Stark muttered, but his pout betrayed him, “still can’t believe I missed it. Friday better have footage of this.”

Oh, right. Friday.

“Speaking of, Mr. Stark,” she ventured carefully, “everything else aside, Rogers and his pals actually had a legitimate reason to see me before, uh— well, before everything went to hell. Friday, dear, you wanna tell Mr. Stark what you’ve been up to?”

The drawn-out silence had Mr. Stark frowning. “Fri, answer the Boss Lady. What’s going on?”

“I’ve been, uh—” the AI finally spoke up, “I may have been… pranking our new guests ever since they arrived.”

“Pranking?” Mr. Stark repeated incredulously.

“From what I gathered,” Alice chimed in, “wifi is spotty, no hot water, random wake up calls, their access badges stop working at the most inconvenient times. That about sums it up, Friday?”
Another long pause. “Yes, it does, Director Blackwood.”

“The real problem was when I asked her to stop,” Alice met Mr. Stark’s eyes meaningfully, “she outright refused. You know I hate using override codes, so I was going to call you, because she is your baby and—”

“And my responsibility, yeah,” Mr. Stark finished, grimacing. He sighed, something weary settling in his features. “Friday, before I have to be the bad guy here and start issuing orders, do you want to explain why you were doing this?”

“Because they hurt you,” came the simple reply without any of the earlier hesitation, “because they are traitors who don’t deserve to be here. Because he left you behind in Siberia and I had to listen to you dying for seven hours and thirty-seven minutes.”

It was like being dunked in cold water as earlier mirth dissipated entirely. Alice bit her lip, recalling the rescue logs and the details of Mr. Stark’s injuries. Bruce was frowning, narrowed eyes staring blankly at her hand, all treated and bandaged up now, but still resting loosely in his own.

When she looked at Mr. Barnes though, that was when her heart truly began to ache. The man practically radiated guilt.

Mr. Stark saw it too and after allowing himself one weary exhale, he straightened up, slipped his hand into Mr. Barnes’, and brushed a quick, chaste kiss to the metal knuckles.

“I understand your need to be protective, Friday, I do,” he spoke, “it’s no different than how we feel about Alice or any of our friends and it’s not a character flaw. However, there is a difference between wanting to protect someone you love and getting payback. Unfortunately, the latter is less satisfying than you might think. I learned that the hard way and it’d be irresponsible for me not to pass that lesson along. Once we’re off this call, you and I are going to have a long talk, but for now, please stop with these pranks immediately.”

“But, Boss, this isn’t fair—”

“That’s the thing about being an adult, kiddo, sometimes things aren’t fair. Sometimes we don’t get everything we want and sometimes those who hurt us get away with it. You will fulfill your duties and responsibilities as you have been asked to do, the same way Alice is, the same Rhodey and I are.”

The order, delivered in that commanding, steady tone was an effective reminder that for a man who shied away from the limelight when left to his own devices, Mr. Stark was willing and able to be a leader when the situation called for it.

A quiet, guilt-ridden “Yes, Boss,” sounded through the room and Alice hoped Mr. Stark wouldn’t be too harsh with her. Honestly, Friday did what all of them wanted to do, but were too weighted down by duty to follow through with it.

If the earlier glint in Mr. Stark’s eyes at the mention of her punching Rogers were any indication though, once this drama died down and appropriate reprimands and life lessons were dispensed, all of them would absolutely enjoy Friday’s retelling of the pranks she had pulled.

Friday apologized then, both to Alice and Mr. Stark, but she flat-out refused to issue apologies to anyone else. After a brief back and forth, she and Mr. Stark settled on a compromise. Friday would remain on her best behavior as long as she was allowed to “sass the traitors at her discretion” (it was only fair, she claimed, given that she sassed everyone). Mr. Stark acquiesced to her demands pretty
“Just remember, baby girl, there’s a fine line between sass and being cruel, but we can talk about that too. Now, anything else we need to worry about?”

“Not at the moment, no,” Friday replied, “but I should warn you, Mr. Barnes, Rogers has been trying to contact you ever since he landed a few days ago. I have been… less than helpful in that regard.”

Alice would’ve missed the minuscule slump of Mr. Barnes’ shoulders had she not been looking straight at him.

“Thank you for keeping him off my back, Friday. Can you do that for a little while longer until Tony and I come back?”

“That is an order I will follow with pleasure, Mr. Barnes.”

A silent conversation passed between the two men before they both turned their attention back to Alice and Bruce.

“I guess that’s our cue to come back from paradise, huh?” Mr. Stark said, scratching at his goatee, looking for all the world like he was biting into a lemon.

“Sorry,” Alice shrugged, shooting him an apologetic look, but he was quick to wave it off.

“Nah, it’s not your fault. We were here on borrowed time anyways. Besides,” he shrugged and leaned against Mr. Barnes, who easily took his weight, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, “we missed home.”

“We all missed you lovebirds too,” Bruce teased, warmth evident in his voice.

Tony winked. “Except for us making out everywhere, right, Brucie Bear?”

“Except for that, yes,” Bruce confirmed, prompting them all to laugh.

“Alright, you troublemakers, we’ll see you soon,” Mr. Stark said and then pointed a finger at Alice, “and you, Director Blackwood, if you find a pair of crazy expensive shoes and a check on your desk tomorrow, it wasn’t me, it was an anonymous benefactor who’s just really impressed by your punching skills.”

“Mr. Stark, that is not—”

“Nope, no arguments, the benefactor does not appreciate arguments, all he asks is that you wait a few more days to go punching more people.”

With nothing more but a cheeky grin from Mr. Stark (and a sappy, fond look from Mr. Barnes directed at Mr. Stark), the call was cut short.

“Told you,” Bruce mimicked her earlier words and Alice had to laugh at the smug little smile that he was trying to hide.

“Smart-ass,” she teased right back before letting out a sigh, “hey, do you think we’re all actually secretly stuck in some soap opera? I mean, it keeps things entertaining, but the drama.”

“Never a dull moment around here, that’s for sure,” Bruce quipped, but then the teasing smile faded. “How are you really feeling though? And not just the hand,” he tried to motion to it, but then realized he was still holding it and promptly let go. “I mean, uh— I mean with everything else.”
Her first instinct, carved into her by a strict Navy Admiral of a mother and her own military career, was to reassure him that everything was fine. After all, vulnerability was a weakness.

This wasn’t her childhood home though, nor was she an agent anymore, so she took a moment to reflect on what happened, if only so she could offer an honest answer, whatever that was. In doing so, she realized something.

“I’m okay, I think,” her eyes were trained on her injured hand as she tried to flex it. She winced when the tenderness edged into pain. “Better, actually, which I know shouldn’t be the case. My colleagues, they’re all still dead, no one is in jail, but I still feel… lighter. Is that weird? I shouldn’t feel any better, I don’t think. Nothing’s changed. Hell, Rogers probably isn’t even bruised anymore.”

“It’s not weird, no,” Bruce offered and coming from him, it didn’t sound like empty platitudes. “Never underestimate the power of catharsis. You’re allowed to feel better, Alice.”

“Do you think I’d feel even better if I’d just hit him harder?” she asked ruefully and his smile turned into a grin.

“I will go ahead and say no, because you would’ve just shattered your hand and I don’t think that’s the sort of person you are. However,” he leaned in conspiratorially, “full disclosure, the Hulk is offering as we speak. I highly advise not to take him up on that, but I’ll leave that up to you.”

She snorted and had to cover up the unattractive sound with her good hand.

“You tell that alter ego of yours to stay out of trouble, Bruce, even if Rogers and Company do something that’s punch-worthy.”

“You know they will.”

“Unfortunately.”

He regarded her thoughtfully. “Will you stay?

After giving herself another moment, Alice nodded.

“I think so.” Some things, she realized during her year here, were important enough to stay and face her demons. “This is my home, my family, and I’ll be damned if I let anyone take that away from me.”

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Tony leaned against James’ chest, letting the man hold up most of his weight as those wonderful hands trailed up and down his back in soothing motions. His grip around James’ waist tightened a fraction as he rubbed a cheek against his shirt.

“We could just not come back,” he mumbled into the soft material, eyes fluttering shut when James reached up to scratch at the crown of Tony’s head, “I own a small island, you know. They’ll never find us there.”

James’ chest rumbled with a quiet chuckle. “Please don’t tempt me, sugar. You have no idea the willpower it takes not to whisk you away from the whole damn world and keep you all to myself. But we gotta go back home, honey,” James added after a beat and Tony’s shoulders slumped. “I promise, it won’t be all bad.”

Tony allowed himself to cling to James just a little bit harder, for just one more moment. Leaving this
behind and coming back home meant dealing with issues Tony had been all but ignoring for months now. So much history and betrayal and angst, all brought right back on the heels of their new guests.

What Tony hated the most though was that some part of him was still terrified to see James and Rogers in the same room together. Even like this, standing next to the man, wrapped up in his arms, hearing his steady heartbeat where Tony’s face was pressed against his chest, even like this, that damn insecurity just refused to die.

He hated that it was so damn easy for his mind to conjure up nightmares of being left behind.

He trusted James though, he trusted this man with his life and his heart. It had to be enough, even if the thought that this trust was about to be tested once more left him cold.

Tony nodded against James, then pulled away so he could reach up and cradle his boyfriend’s face in his hands before letting their lips touch. No heat this time, no passion, no desperate need. Just a press of lips that served as Tony’s affirmation of what he had in this moment. All he could do is trust he’d still have this when everything was said and done.

He put on his best smile when they pulled apart. “Let’s go home, gorgeous.”
Chapter 56

One pass in front of the door, then another, then a third before Bucky heaved a sigh. Pacing was a terrible way to get rid of nervous energy, he decided, and his hand itched for a blade to play with. He did have one covertly tucked into his boot (it wasn’t the only weapon on him; old habits died hard), but casually twirling a knife moments before seeing Steve was just asking for trouble.

*I’m fine with trouble.*

The Soldier’s unrepentant murmur nearly made Bucky scoff out loud. Okay, so maybe he and the Soldier were at odds on the whole *Steve* business. Never had another man caused him to feel so many conflicting emotions and Bucky still wasn’t sure whether he would hug the man or follow Alice’s lead and deck him in the face.

_Deck him. He deserves it. It’ll be fun._

_Last I checked, Tony asked us to play nice, didn’t he?_

Unsurprisingly, the Soldier had no response to *that*. Hard to threaten violence and murder when it’d upset their sweet *sohnishko*, huh?

He and Tony returned to the Compound late last night and after a lively debate with the New Avengers, it was decided that everyone needed to take a deep breath, bite back the anger, and give peacekeeping another try. Tony reluctantly pointed out that between Rhodes’ cold welcome, Friday’s pranks, and the confrontation with Alice, they put the former Avengers on the defensive, and despite their personal feelings (however valid and justified), it was counterproductive to their long-term goals.

Big picture, Tony said, they had to focus on the big picture, which meant swallowing their pride and putting on a smile. Having everyone on *both* sides in a constant state of agitation only served as a distraction from their actual mission - protecting the world from the current (relatively minor) threats *and* preparing for the much bigger one.

Swallowing his pride and playing nice. It wasn’t an order Bucky took to particularly well, but it was made even worse by Tony’s decision to keep their relationship out of prying eyes for a little while longer. It made *logical* sense, he supposed, but Bucky was still wary of the plan and the Soldier outright hated it. Tony had nearly pleaded with him though, so in the end, Bucky could do nothing else but what was asked of him.

However, as soon as Tony gave him the go-ahead, Bucky would be climbing the nearest goddamn rooftop.

In the meantime, he’d *play nice* and keep his hands to himself outside of their private quarters until Tony was ready to face the scrutiny and criticism of his former friends, but Bucky’s friendliness would only extend so far.

“*Tony, this playing nice thing goes both ways. They so much as touch any one of our people and it’s over.*” He leveled Tony with a look, making sure the man knew he was serious. “*And god help them if they do anything to you, kotyonok.*”

*It was fun, watching Tony pretend to be annoyed by the threat when all the man really wanted to do was to melt into Bucky’s embrace (or outright jump him in the conference room, it was hard to tell).*
“Babe, come on. I’m not saying we roll over and show our bellies. We just need to… extend the olive branch again.”

“Why? Why can’t we just let them do something stupid and get themselves kicked out?”

“Because it’s politics and the whole world is watching us right now. ‘The Avengers in Shambles’, ‘Discord of the Superheroes’, these are not the headlines we want when we’re trying to gain the public’s trust. Plus, the suits in Washington are watching too and they expect us to prove to the world that the pardons were a good idea.”

“They weren’t though!”

“That doesn’t matter. They’re here now. I know saying this makes me a hypocrite, but pissing off a bunch of politicians is a bad move right now. We need public support, we need political clout, which means we need to find a way to get along, even through gritted teeth and cheesy media smiles.”

Bucky scrunched up his nose in disgust. “I hate politics. Being a damn assassin was easier.”

Tony, the evil man, just smiled indulgently in the face of Bucky’s discontent, but at least he made up for it with a quick kiss. “I know, babe. I hate it too, even if I’m usually pretty good at this game. It’s not just about keeping the suits happy though.” Here, Tony hesitated and glanced down to where his hands were playing with the buttons of Bucky’s dress shirt. “I don’t want you to be at odds with, uh — with Steve. He used to be your best friend and I don’t want to stand in the way of that. You two deserve the chance to be friends again.”

Bucky took Tony’s fidgeting hands into his own and pressed them against his chest, knowing Tony would feel his heartbeat. “Sweetheart, look at me, please?” Bucky didn’t continue until Tony’s forlorn eyes met his. “There you are, love seeing those pretty brown eyes of yours. Now listen to me, Tony. It’s not on you to worry about me and Steve, okay? I told you this before, Steve and I, we’ve not those same guys they have displayed at the museum. Honestly? I’m not sure who we are to each other anymore.”

“Don’t you still want him in your life?”

Such a simple question with such a complicated answer. “In a perfect world, yeah, of course I’d want both of you in my life. I’d want this,” he emphasized with a squeeze of Tony’s hands, “and I’d want Stevie to be my best friend. I’d want the two of you to be good friends, for the three of us to get along and love each other, but that’s not the world we live in, is it, darlin’?”

Tony was smiling, too bittersweet for Bucky’s liking. “No, it definitely isn’t.” A sigh, then Tony leaned against him, letting his head rest on Bucky’s shoulder, their hands trapped between them. “I just want you to be happy, that’s all.”

“You make me happy,” Bucky said, without hesitation, “everything else, that’s just a bonus, honey. Yes, it’d be great if Steve stopped acting like a stubborn jerk and found common ground with us. But if he doesn’t? If he hurts you somehow? Tony, I don’t care what I shared with him eight decades ago. You come first. I know you want everyone to get along, but if they keep acting like idiots and if they hurt you, I’ll take that olive branch and hit them over the head with it.”

Tony nuzzled Bucky’s jaw with his nose and then let his hands glide up over Bucky’s chest to wrap around his neck. “Fine, fine. They do anything stupid and you do what comes naturally and beat them up for me. Damn it, gorgeous,” Tony reprimanded playfully, his lips ghosting over Bucky’s now, “you’re terrible for my moral fiber because this scary assassin mode of yours just makes me wanna bend you over this table and have my wicked way with you.”
Bucky counted that as a win and offered Tony an unrepentant grin before claiming the smile on Tony’s lips as his prize.

So, it was time for all of them to play nice. Rhodes had taken up the role of everyone’s fearless leader again, meeting with the former Avengers to help them understand the current superhero set up. Alice sought out Steve and gave him an apology in private. From what Bucky heard, Steve accepted it with a modicum of grace and offered an apology of his own, having apparently learned some manners after getting punched, but Bucky knew it wouldn’t have been what Alice deserved. Still, the woman accepted it and the two parted ways without anyone decked in the face again. Small miracles.

Tony himself was planning to apologize for Friday’s behavior. It didn’t sit right with Bucky, having Tony apologize for anything to this group of people, but Tony insisted, so Bucky’s only caveat was to make sure Tony didn’t do it alone, which was then amended to Tony never being alone with any of the former Avengers.

And Bucky? Bucky decided he needed to finally see Steve, if only to get the super soldier to stop bothering every man, woman, and AI at the Compound.

Hence his current predicament.

He was still angry—and still so damn guilty — about Siberia, he was frustrated with everyone’s shitty, unrepentant attitudes, especially when that vitriol was directed at Tony, he was seething over Maximoff, and yet, some small part of him wanted to preserve this one remaining connection to before. It was the same part still predisposed to love and protect that reckless, scrawny kid from Brooklyn he remembered from the patched up pieces of his memories. It was instinct.

It wasn’t his only instinct though, as evidenced by the menacing growl the Soldier let out in his head. *One wrong word and I’m putting him through a wall.*

What a goddamn mess, Bucky lamented, but one he couldn’t avoid any longer, so he took a deep breath, told the Soldier to behave himself, exhaled slowly, and opened the door to the gym.

***

Steve was alone, in the middle of an impressive right hook to the punching bag. As Bucky predicted, the sight of his old (former?) friend only amplified the conflicting emotions churning inside him.

He took another deep breath. *Swallow your pride and play nice. Right.*

“Hiya, Stevie.”

He watched as the man startled, then barely dodged the punching bag as it swung back at him. Steve’s hands steadied the heavy weight, but Steve’s wide and disbelieving eyes were trained on Bucky.

That moment of surprise quickly turned to elation.

“Bucky,” Steve nearly exhaled the name, like a damn prayer, and then he was moving, practically sprinting across the gym. His large body collided with Bucky’s and the force of it almost had Bucky stumbling back, but then there were arms wrapping around him, keeping him in place, pressing him against Steve.

The Soldier detested the invasion of their space, immediately on the defensive, but Bucky just gritted
his teeth. It wasn’t exactly unexpected.

“Bucky, you’re here, you’re finally here,” he heard Steve mumble, the words muffled where the man’s face was buried in Bucky’s shoulder. The vice grip around Bucky’s middle tightened a fraction.

Bucky gingerly pat Steve on the back. “Jesus, Stevie, give a man some room to breathe, would ya? You trying to squeeze the life out of me?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Steve pulled away, offering a sheepish smile, but he didn’t move nearly far enough away, keeping his hands on Bucky’s shoulders and giving them a squeeze before letting them drift up to brush over Bucky’s cheeks. “I’m just so happy to see you. You have no idea how much I missed you.”

Bucky carefully wrapped his hands around Steve’s wrists and pulled them down away from his face before the Soldier finished plotting the man’s gruesome murder. He let go and thankfully the man stayed put, so Bucky tried to smile, but resigned himself to the fact that it came off looking too damn awkward.

“I have a pretty good idea actually. Heard you’ve been pestering everyone about me.”

Steve didn’t even bother looking chastised. “No one would tell me anything, I was worried. I thought that...” he trailed off in the face of Bucky’s unimpressed look. “Nothing, it was nothing, Buck. I just really missed you, that’s all.”

Bucky knew exactly what Steve wanted to say, but he let them both pretend Steve wasn’t about to accuse Tony of keeping Bucky away by force.

“How’s everything?” Steve asked instead, “You, uh— you look great,” he added as blue eyes skirted up and down, drinking Bucky in.

“Everything is great. I told you that before.”

“I know, but it’s different seeing you with my own two eyes.” Another pause to give Steve the chance to look Bucky over, his eyes lingering on the new arm for a moment too long. Bucky did not fidget under the scrutinizing gaze. Then, having gotten his fill, Steve broke out into a bright smile and waved a beckoning hand. “Come on, let me grab a bottle of water and then we can go back up to my quarters, catch up on everything.”

Bucky didn’t budge. “I don’t think that’s a real good idea, actually. I got this... thing with Alice at the range in half an hour.” It wasn’t a complete lie. He and Alice had a standing weekly date, an hour or two used to work off some steam by shooting things with powerful, beautifully crafted guns (therapy came in many forms), but Steve didn’t need to know that Bucky could’ve easily skipped it. “I just stopped by to say ‘hello’, make sure you knew I was here.”

“Oh,” Steve didn’t bother to hide his disappointment, but he recovered quickly enough, “well, that’s okay, we can catch up later. I’m just happy you’re here. God, Buck, I missed you so much. Felt like I was missing a part of myself ever since you took off.”

If Steve was expecting a return of the sentiment or an apology for Bucky’s disappearance, he received neither. Bucky eyed one of the benches nestled between the weight racks and slowly made his way over to settle on the hard, uncomfortable wood. Sitting down curbed the desire to pace and made it less likely he’d throw a punch if things got dicey.

Steve obediently followed and sat next to him, about a foot too close, then reached out to pat
Bucky’s knee. Bucky’s metal hand twitched for the knife in his boot, but the urge to stab something subsided when Steve pulled away.

“Are you sure everything’s alright, Buck? You look tense.”

“I’m fine, I told ya.”

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” Steve’s voice dropped into something private, as if he were sharing a secret. “If you’re unhappy or uncomfortable, if someone is hurting you—”

“Steve, enough,” Bucky commanded, the neutrality of his expression cracking, “I know what you’re implying and you’re wrong. Remember the last time we talked? I told you, no one is hurting me, no one is forcing me to do anything. Stop with the damn conspiracy theories.”

The uncompromising look in those blue eyes didn’t waiver, not even in the face of Bucky’s stern delivery. “Some things just aren’t adding up, that’s all. You left, without saying a word, and then all I got were two phone calls. Two? Buck, how could I not think that you were being coerced or— or have your head filled with lies?”

Bucky leveled Steve with a cold stare. “Are you implying that I’m easily manipulated or just that I’m dumb? Because neither makes me feel real good, Stevie.”

“No, no, that’s not it at all,” came the expected backpedaling, “I just meant you were in a vulnerable position, it would’ve said nothing about you—”

“No, I’m not letting you cling to this idea that I’m being mistreated somehow. I’ve been here for over six months and there hadn’t been a single instance of anyone trying to hurt me. Not a single one,” he emphasized each word. “I have been treated kindly, been offered nothing but help and compassion, so just fuckin’ stop this, okay?”

Steve regarded him for a long second and the crease between his brows was familiar even though Bucky couldn’t pull up a single memory of it.

“Okay, I understand,” Steve finally conceded, to Bucky’s relief, “I’m sorry, Buck, I didn’t mean to make you angry. I just worry. I didn’t know what to think. These last six months… I just felt so lost without you, but you know what, let’s forget about all that, okay? You’re obviously fine — great, in fact, and that’s all that matters. I just want us to start over.”

Steve’s eyes pleaded with him and some long-forgotten instinct urged Bucky to give in, to let bygones be bygones. He still cared about Steve, he realized.

A memory of the shield coming down to crush Tony’s chest surfaced against his will, then Tony’s terror-stricken face after Maximoff’s vision, then Tony’s resigned voice down in Medical, the man convinced Steve would always be Bucky’s first choice.

He cared about Steve, but he loved Tony more and he wouldn’t easily forget the pain Tony suffered because of them.

Whatever small bit of warmth that wormed its way past the Soldier’s defenses wouldn’t change that.

“I’d like that,” Bucky said, not voicing any of his other thoughts, “we all need to find a way to get along and—”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been saying this whole time, Buck, that’s all I want, but everyone else, all they want to do is live in the past—”
“Steve, let me finish, would you? Getting along doesn’t mean forgetting everything that’s happened. We can’t.”

“How long do they get to throw the past in our faces though? We all did what we thought was right!”

“Jesus Christ, Steve, you really don’t get it, do you?” Bucky scrubbed his face with his right hand and then raked it through his hair, frustration bleeding through bit by bit despite his best efforts.

He surged to his feet, incensed by Steve’s stubbornness, then pivoted so he could face Steve and glare down at the man. “Stop acting like these people owe you somethin’! We’re lucky we’re not all in jail. Having Rhodes be pissed at you or having Friday turn your damn internet off for five minutes isn’t some grand torture, so suck it up!” He wanted to stop, to reel in the sharpness of his words, but he just couldn’t hold back his next accusation. “And stop with the whole ‘we thought it was right’ bullshit! Your pet witch thought she was right too when she tore Tony’s mind apart!”

His chest was heaving by the end of that, metal arm moving, the near-silent whir of machinery accompanying each menacing clench of his hand. He wasn’t planning to bring up Maximoff, not yet, but so much for his carefully made plans.

He kept himself still, too afraid that movement would lead him to violence. “What were you thinking, Steve? How could you—” he bit back the rest of it, unsure how to even phrase it. Why? Why, why, why, was the only thing running through his head.

“I didn’t know about Tony’s attack, Buck,” Steve tried to explain, looking up at him in supplication, “I swear to you, I had nothing to do with that. For all our differences, I would never want Tony hurt like that.”

The clash of metal against metal was still ringing in Bucky’s ears and he had to clench his eyes shut just for a moment to stave off the memories. Every time he thought back to Siberia, it made him feel so damn small, his unruly, treacherous mind wondering, did Tony really forgive him for that?

Tony’s forgiveness was easier to believe when Tony was right there beside him, warm and solid and real against him, but like this, alone with his guilt, sometimes Bucky just wondered.

“You sure didn’t discourage her from hating him though,” he said, struggling to keep his voice steady. “I remember how you all talked about him. There wasn’t a single kind word said about the man.”

“We were angry,” Steve said, as if that excused the behavior, “and we were in a bad place, away from home, on the run. None of us were thinking clearly.”

“A year and a half of not thinking clearly?” Bucky shook his head, incredulous. He took a few steps away to fiddle with one of the weights on the tall rack next to them, needing something to do with his hands before the Soldier put them to use. “Gimme a break. You were all perfectly happy to stew in your anger, your goddamn self-righteousness. It’s easy, never having to admit you fucked up.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right,” there was that placating tone again, “I could’ve done more for Wanda, I know I should’ve done more, but I never encouraged her to attack Tony, I couldn’t have known she was that far gone. I’m sorry Tony was hurt, I am, but I don’t know what you want me to do about that now, after the fact, so if that’s why you’re mad at me—”

“Why didn’t you tell me who she was?”

“What?”
Bucky’s hand stilled and the metallic *cling-clang* of his fingers tapping against the metal weight stopped. He glanced back at Steve and going by the widening of the man’s eyes, Bucky knew he was dangerously close to the Winter Soldier right now. “Hydra, Steve, she was *Hydra* or did you forget that?”

“She hasn’t been Hydra in a long time,” Steve tried to argue, “I didn’t tell you because I thought she deserved to have a second chance. It wasn’t fair to have her past be brought up over and over. She became an Avenger, she fought *with* us. She defected years ago.”

“Her most recent actions say otherwise.”

“She didn’t attack Tony because she was Hydra, she did it because— because—” Steve suddenly deflated, crumpling in on himself as he hid his face in his hands. “Oh god, I don’t know, Bucky, I’m sorry, maybe I don’t know anything anymore.”

Seeing the distress in Steve’s features called to the old Bucky Barnes again, but it wasn’t enough to keep Bucky from saying what needed to be said.

“You woulda let Hydra scum inside my head without ever letting me know who she was.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve keened, then tried to get up, to reach out, and Bucky took a deliberate step back, fed up with the subtleties. Steve sat back down, looking heartbroken. “I’m sorry,” he whispered again, “at the time, I trusted her and she was the only option we had left for the triggers. If I had thought, even for a moment, that she would hurt you, I would’ve never let her near you. Please forgive me, Buck.”

Strange how easy it was for Steve to apologize to *him*, but nearly impossible to muster the same words for anyone else.

The truth of the matter was, Bucky believed the apology. If there was one place where Steve’s conviction never faltered, it was his overwhelming need to protect Bucky. Bucky knew he should be touched by the devotion and maybe had he never left Steve’s side after waking from cryo, he would’ve been, but now all it did was aggravate the raw ache of his ever-present guilt. Bucky wasn’t worth all the damage done in his name.

“Maybe you weren’t trying to hurt me,” Bucky conceded, but continued despite Steve’s emphatic nod, “but given what had been done to me, I still deserved the truth.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Some of the anger bled away, but only on his own behalf. The rest of his ire didn’t dim in the face of Steve’s sorrowful apologies. “What I don’t get though was the fact that you trusted *her*, but not Tony.”

Steve’s eyes hardened, just as Bucky knew they would. He bit back a frustrated sigh and swore that these people were the ones with a damn trigger in their heads, one that scrambled their brains every time Tony’s name came up.

“A lot of things happened before I found you. Tony made mistakes too, you know.”

The downright petulant tone rankled at him, had the Soldier’s every instinct to protect ringing out a symphony in his head, but Bucky pushed all that away, for his own sake, if not for Steve’s. For Tony’s sake, who didn’t need anymore fights breaking out in his own home.

“If you’re talking about Ultron, please spare me. I know enough to realize that situation wasn’t black
and white. Other players were involved, including your little witch, and since you’re so hellbent on everyone doing what they believe is right, wasn’t that what Tony was doing all along? He didn’t set out to create a killer robot, all he wanted to do was protect the planet.”

“Okay, yes, I admit, Ultron was a mess on all fronts, but then Tony just distanced himself and worse, he got involved with these Accords and—” Steve faltered, “and he— he tried to kill you, Bucky!”

Bucky bit back the first thing that came to mind, which was that Tony should’ve killed him in that bunker, would’ve killed him if Tony had just aimed a little bit more to the left. It was only the memory of Tony’s eyes, turning so sorrowful and resigned whenever Bucky talked like this, that stopped his mouth from forming the words.

Instead Bucky quietly countered, “Tony paid for his mistakes. We left him to clean up the mess, to deal with the Accords and the politicians and the whole damn world wanting answers and reparations.”

“That’s what he wanted though, he’s the one who wanted the Accords—”


“That’s not what—”

“While all of you were lounging around in Wakanda on the King’s dime, Tony was spending night after night fixing this. He got Rhodes walking again, he protected Barton’s family, he put Ross in jail, he fixed the Accords. What exactly did you accomplish?”

Steve didn’t have an answer and Bucky wasn’t surprised.

“And then,” Bucky added, suddenly quiet, but it wasn’t the anger making his voice hoarse, but rather a sudden, overwhelming sense of gratitude, “on top of all that, Tony decided to give me a second chance. He designed a whole program to fix my head, got me into therapy, built me a damn arm. He welcomed a murderer into his home—” Bucky stopped, realizing his eyes were wet and he turned away from Steve before that vulnerability was made clear. “Tony paid for his mistakes. He made amends with the world and he sure as hell made his amends with me. If you want to behave like a stubborn jackass, fine, but I will not let any of you treat that man like garbage again.”

A minute passed in silence between them. When he turned back, Steve was forlornly examining his own hands, back hunched, shoulders tense, the perfect picture of recalcitrant.

“I do want to fix this, Buck, but I’m not sure where to start,” Steve finally whispered, begging for Bucky’s help with that tone.

“You start by realizing the position you’re in. Quit the self-righteous act and admit that you fucked up. Stop antagonizing these people and keep your pals from doing the same.”

“That isn’t— I mean—” Steve bit his lips, physically stopping what Bucky knew were going to be words of protest. “Okay, yeah, you’re right. That’s something I need to work on.”

Steve looked like two hundred and fifty pounds of kicked puppy and Bucky’s protective instincts kicked in again, overtaking the roiling anger, if only for the moment. He walked back over, sat down next to Steve, and finally initiated contact, resting his hands on Steve’s shoulders.

The other man looked at him as if the touch had the power to break him and then put him right back
together again. Bucky had no idea what the hell to do with that.

“These people, Stevie,” Bucky said, making sure he had Steve’s eye, “they’re not your enemies. There’s no war to fight here, no battle to win. But they’re not your friends either. We hurt them, you can’t keep on denying that, and isn’t the mark of a good man the desire to right those wrongs?”

“How do I do that?”

Steve really needed to stop looking at Bucky like his whole world began and ended with him, but Bucky pushed past the discomfort it caused him, knowing this could be a critical moment.

“Keep your head down, stop making demands, and think, okay? Use that damn head of yours. You fucked up. We fucked up,” he emphasized the words with a shake of Steve’s shoulders, squeezing the thick muscle beneath his hands just hard enough to skirt on the right side of painful, ignoring the Soldier’s desire to squeeze until bone shattered, “and it’s high time we started making up for that.”

Steve was nodding, eyes glistening with unshed tears, still giving Bucky that heartfelt look. “Okay, Bucky, yeah. Whatever I need to do to get us back to normal.”

Bucky clenched his teeth so tightly he felt them creak in protest.

_Dammit, Stevie, this isn’t about me. Stop hinging your entire life on me._

He swallowed back the protests. There were some fights he couldn’t win and if it meant Steve would behave, he’d let Steve have this.

Steve embraced him then and sitting down Bucky couldn’t do much to avoid it without standing back up. He allowed it reluctantly, keeping only his hand on Steve’s shoulder blade.

“I missed you so much. God, Buck, you’re the only thing that keeps me steady. You’re all I have left. It’s like— like I can breathe again now that we’re together.”

Funny how it has the opposite effect on me.

The Soldier’s uncharitable comments were edging into dangerous snarls now and Bucky himself was being pushed to a point where he began to crave a touch of violence.

The touch, the looks, those _words_, it all made his skin crawl and he needed to get out of here, _now_.

He needed _Tony_.

Gingerly, he extricated himself out of Steve’s grasp and got up to his feet, not letting himself look back at Steve.

“I should probably go, I, uh—” he swallowed, realizing his throat was dry, “I have to meet Alice at the range, remember?”

“Yeah, that’s— of course, that’s fine” the man didn’t cover up the waiver in his voice. “I’ll just see you later. You, uh— you are moving in with us, right?”

Bucky had to turn around at _that_ question. “Huh? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Our quarters, I mean,” Steve waved his hand in the general direction of the living space, “there’s two extra rooms. I made sure there’s one next to mine.”

Somehow, the hopeful little smile Steve offered him just made the whole thing even more absurd and
Bucky was *this* close to just saying *to hell with it* and telling Steve what was what.

Steve was damn lucky Tony insisted on discretion.

“*I have my own quarters,*” he bit out through gritted teeth, “*I’ve been living there for six months now.*”

*My quarters, ones I share with Tony. Our quarters, where we rest and sleep and make love to each other and I will not surrender a single moment of that, especially not for all of you.*

“*Oh, I just thought… well, I thought you’d wanna be with us now that we’re all finally here.*”

“I have my own space, it’s been my home for months. I got no plans to move out— jesus, Steve, stop giving me that look,” Bucky barely refrained from rolling his eyes, “we live in the same damn building now. That’s plenty enough.”

“I know, I just— I need to know that you’re okay. We’ve been apart for so long and I just— I worry when you’re not close, that’s all.”

“Well, stop it, m’fine. See?” he gestured at himself, “All in one piece. I’m not moving in with you lot, but I’m still here, so drop this. Now, I really gotta go, Stevie.”

*I can’t do this anymore.*

Steve abandoned the bench as well, but at least he didn’t reach for Bucky this time.

“But I’ll see you around?”

“Yeah, sure. Like I said, same building.”

Steve’s still-hopeful smile was the last thing Bucky saw as he nearly fled the gym with nothing more than an awkward, tight-lipped smile of his own and an even more awkward wave.

He strode through the halls, right past the shooting range, heading down to the lab instead. Firing a gun would’ve been satisfying, but it wasn’t what he needed. All he really wanted was to find Tony, wrap his arms around the man, bury his face in those soft, sweet-smelling curls, and let himself be surrounded by *home* and *comfort* and *love*. He needed his world put back to rights and the world always made more sense when Tony was there with him.

***

Tony stared at the elevator buttons for what must’ve been minutes, the world around him blurring and fading away until a hurried maintenance tech asked him with stumbling awkwardness if he could *please* get around him to get to the elevator. Apparently there was a spill in one of the training rooms that needed to be mopped up ASAP.

Tony made sure to give the tech a warm smile, thank him for his work, and apologize for dawdling around and blocking the elevator.

“You’ll understand when you’re my age,” Tony joked and the tech, who couldn’t have been older than early twenties, flashed him a grin and what was almost a fond eye roll before the elevator door closed on him.

Tony remained where he was, studying the elevator call buttons with an intensity reserved for particle accelerators, but at least the world didn’t fall back into static.
Why the hell was he even nervous? He already saw his former teammates the other day. Granted, Tony didn’t actively participate in the meeting with them (led by Rhodey and Hope) and none of them actually had a chance to speak to him (although he received plenty of looks) before he was pulled out early by an SI emergency (his eagerness to join that conference call left poor Pepper both thrilled and exasperated). Still, he was there, they all saw each other. No one even started a fight. Shouldn’t that count?

It didn’t.

He could still turn around, he told himself. Go back to his lab, his quarters, the gym, anywhere. He could delay this for a bit longer.

But why delay the inevitable?

He also wasn’t sure whether his desire to see the rogue Avengers alone would make this better or worse. James insisted on being there with him, but Tony didn’t want to be selfish.

James’ first encounter with Steve had mixed results, apparently, because all James told him was “Steve is an idiot and we have a lot of shit to work through,” before he basically kidnapped Tony from the lab, carried him up to their quarters, and clung to him for several hours while Tony read him passages out a light-hearted sci-fi novel they’ve been reading together.

Clearly, it could’ve gone better, so Tony wasn’t about to drag James up there with him and make things worse. He didn’t want to ruin James’ chance for reconciliation, he didn’t want the inevitable hostility aimed at Tony to spill over onto James, who deserved to deal with this on his own terms.

Tony’s mind chose that moment to conjure up an image of James and Steve, together in the same room, reconciling and he hated himself for being even a smidge happy that things didn’t go so smoothly between the two.

God, he didn’t deserve someone like James. After everything they’ve been through, Tony still couldn’t shake off these goddamn insecurities. James had bent over backwards to reassure him and here was Tony, barely able to breathe at mere the thought that James would change his mind, that James would leave.

Pathetic.

It was out of his hands though, too late to stop this train, full steam ahead. It was up to James, and no one else, to decide how their story would end.

What will be, will be.

Tony took a long, shuddering breath, called an elevator down and stepping inside, he pressed the button for the floor housing the soon-to-be-former former Avengers.

***

The elevator stopped a floor early though and before Tony had the chance to ask Friday why, the doors opened and revealed one Scott Lang. They stared at each other in surprise for a moment, but when the doors began to close again, Scott recovered quickly and with a startled yelp, he jumped through the narrowing slit just in time.

Tony cleared his throat, watching the man carefully.

“Lang. Good to see you.”
“Stark— I mean, uh— Mister Stark, it’s good to, uh— good to see you too.”

Some of the tension slipped away in the face of the awkward display and Tony dug up a friendly smile.

“Stark is fine. I think we’re past the point of formalities.”

Lang nodded, offering his own attempt at a friendly expression.

The elevator pinged and when they both began moving at the same time, Lang looked at him in surprise.

“Oh, uh— you were coming to visit us?”

“That a problem?”

“No, no, of course not, I just, uh— didn’t expect a personal visit. But no, here, go ahead,” he gestured at the door and Tony just shrugged, getting off first. He began to walk down the hallway, assuming Lang was following.

“Wait, Mr. Stark— I mean, Stark— ugh, sorry, can I just— can I talk to you for a second?”

Tony stopped and turned to look back at Lang, who was still standing by the elevator doors, shuffling from foot to foot and wringing his hands. Talking rarely boded well for Tony, but he couldn’t see any aggressive overtones in the man’s behavior, and since Tony was up here specifically to talk to everyone, he might as well start with the one person who had less reason than most to hate his guts.

“How can I help you?” Tony said as he walked back over, assuming a casual position, hands in his pockets and rocking on his heels where he stopped a few feet away from the man. “If it’s about Friday, I’ve dealt with it, everything should go back to normal. She might sass more than usual, but she knows which lines not to cross.”

“Oh no, it’s not about that,” Scott waved him off, “Friday wasn’t even that bad. So we were hazed, so what? I’ve been to college. Hell, I’ve been to prison, you know?” Scott seemed to be losing his initial awkwardness the more he talked because he was outright grinning now. “Honestly, I’m still trying to wrap my head around an AI capable of something like that. I mean, how do you even program petty mischief?”

“You don’t,” Tony chuckled despite himself, “you code a perfectly well-behaved AI, but despite your best efforts, they still pick up all your bad habits and then proceed to sass you at all hours of the day.”

“See, that’s crazy cool, I’ve never seen anything like it,” Scott remarked excitedly, but then realized what he was doing and composed himself. “But um— yeah, that wasn’t what I wanted to say, actually.”

Tony braced himself for the accusations.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to thank you.”

Tony blinked at the man. Come again? he wanted to said, but thankfully, his brain-to-mouth filter was functioning for once.
Lang fidgeted. “You protected Cassie. And Maggie and Paxton too.”

“That was all Hope and Pym, I didn’t—”

“Hope said you were the one who contacted her,” Lang countered and didn’t give Tony the chance to deny it, “Hope wouldn’t have known to check on them, especially since she was still so mad at me. You’ve never even met my kid, but you still looked out for her, so, uh— yeah, thank you for doing that.”

Tony tried and failed to keep the heat from crawling up his neck. He was useless in the face of something like this, hell, he was barely used to James thanking him for every little thing.

“S’fine,” he mumbled, then cleared his throat and found one of his devil-may-care masks to slip into, “Ross was on a rampage, being his usual douchebag self, so I had to make sure he couldn’t get his hands on anyone.”

Lang regarded him thoughtfully and Tony’s mask cracked a little under the scrutiny.

“Pym really was wrong about you, huh?”

“I’m sure he got a lot of things right.”

Lang just shrugged. “I think I was wrong too, actually. I, uh— I regret the assumptions I made about you. I’m sorry for that.”

Apologies were even worse than impromptu gratitude in terms of throwing Tony off-kilter and making him forget how to talk. He trained his eyes on some fascinating piece of art hanging on the corridor wall, but despite the awkwardness this conversation incited, there was still a warm sort of feeling building up his chest. He expected a lot of things, but Lang’s own olive branch was a surprise.

“Thanks,” was all Tony managed to offer, his usual eloquence thrown out of the window. “So, uh,” he tried to change the subject, “has Mrs. Paxton been in contact yet?”

Lang’s easy-going smile dimmed. “Maggie? Yeah, we talked yesterday. She even put Cassie on the phone for a bit.” He looked down, scuffing his toe against the floor. “She’s not ready for me to see them yet. I get it, you know? Maggie wants to see whether I stick around this time. She doesn’t want me to pull the rug from underneath them again.”

Tony hummed. “I’m sure she’ll come around soon.”

The bright smile was back as Lang shook the melancholy right off. “Yeah, I think so. I just need to get my ass in gear. Be a hero, get a job, pay my taxes, that whole thing.”

“You’re signing the Accords then?”

“I think so, yeah. Hope said— and I quote— ‘if you keep your dumbass head down and stop hanging out with criminals’, she’ll let me train with the suit again once I’m on the team.” Lang scrunched up his nose as he grimaced, looking at the same painting Tony was observing earlier before they both slowly began walking, side by side this time. “Unfortunately, the superhero gig doesn’t pay that well, so in the meantime, I gotta get myself a real job.” He glanced at Tony. “You guys have any openings? Maybe down in the kitchen? I was excellent at Baskin-Robbins.”

Tony couldn’t help his huff of laughter. “What did you study again?”
“Electrical engineering.”

“Oh yeah, we could definitely use your skills at the deep fryer,” Tony quipped and Lang nodded along, mock serious expression quickly giving way to a grin. “Listen, if you’re interested, submit an application with SI. I’ll give our HR director a call and she can take a look at your resume. It’ll depend on what positions we have open, but I can at least promise we’ll overlook your stint in jail.”

Tony stopped when he realized Lang wasn’t following him again and turned around to frown at the gaping man.

“What? What’d I say?”

“Are—are you being serious right now?”

Tony shrugged. “We’re always looking for the best and brightest and I distinctly remember your, uh… hacking endeavors being sufficiently impressive, so I have to assume you’re smart enough. But again,” Tony put his hands up defensively, “this isn’t a guarantee. Just, uh—a little leg up and—uumph!”

Tony didn’t finish because suddenly he had an armful of Scott Lang, the man wrapped around him like a damn octopus with his face smooshed into Tony’s chest.

“Thank you, thank you, oh my god, that’s the best offer anyone’s made me in years!”

“Jesus Christ, man, I didn’t offer you the entire company,” Tony grumbled, prying the man off himself. Tony was a tactile creature, anyone at the Compound could attest to that, but Lang wasn’t currently on the approved Can Smother Tony Stark with Affection at Will list. Thankfully though, Lang also wasn’t on the list of people who could set off one of Tony’s numerous anxiety-ridden alarms.

“Ah, crap, sorry, sorry,” Lang stumbled back a few steps, giving Tony space, but the unashamed grin didn’t leave his face, “I get too excited, I’m sorry, but come on, working for SI? That’s any techie’s wet dream! Not to mention, that’s gonna look really good with Maggie. Paxton doesn’t have a job with the leading tech company in the world.”

Tony smoothed his hands down his suit jacket, trying to straighten out some of the wrinkles from the impromptu attack on his person. He was trying to scowl too, but Lang had this bizarre way about him that made it difficult to maintain a severe expression for too long. It was like trying to scold an overexcited puppy. Forget the Ant-man suit, Lang needed to find a way to weaponize his puppy-like superpowers.

“Again, this wasn’t a job offer, just a suggestion,” Tony repeated, even as he was making a mental note to speak to Cassandra in HR, make sure she looked at this overeager idiot’s resume this week, see if he’d be a good fit somewhere.

“Right, right, of course,” Lang tried to wrestle his own features into a serious expression, but missed it by about a mile. “All I need is another chance, that’s all, and I swear I won’t disappoint anyone this time.”

Tony wondered how many times the man had said those exact words before. Would this time around be any different? It wasn’t Tony’s place to judge though. Hell, how many times had he disappointed his family and friends? Glass houses and stone throwing and all that.

“Well, we’re all about second chances around here,” Tony said, hoping it came off casual and unaffected and began walking, again. He briefly wondered whether this conversation was his
subconscious way of trying to delay seeing the others.

He cleared his throat after a few steps. “So, uh, you have any ideas what the others are up to right now? Trying to figure out what I’m up against here.”

“Everyone’s probably still in the kitchen, finishing off breakfast. Even back in Wakanda, Steve insisted on mandatory team breakfasts with everyone, non-negotiable.”

Tony squinted at him as they walked past the laundry room. “Didn’t I just see you come up from the cafeteria floor?”

Scott just grinned. “Maybe.”

“Skipping out on mandatory team bonding already?”

“I lived without crappy American junk food for a year, okay? Not even Captain America and his damn breakfasts are going to stand between me and my bowl of Fruit Loops.”

Tony laughed, a genuine sort of sound that surprised him, and Lang chuckled right alongside him, but the mirth dissipated when they rounded the corner and came upon the open space of the kitchen where four—painfully familiar—pairs of eyes trained on them both and stopped Tony short.
Chapter Notes

I'm seeing IW right after I post this, so if you feel like screaming in the comments about it with me, now's your chance! Other than that though, the fic (and all author notes) will remain spoilers-free. :D

(also, fyi, minor username change, but it's still me, promise)

Everyone was in the kitchen, just as Lang had said, and the space was in various states of disarray after what must’ve been a large breakfast, all cooked and consumed by the people currently staring at Tony. His smile fell away quickly, replaced by a mask of neutrality, but it did nothing to ease the ache in his chest, one that came on so suddenly that some terrified part of his brain thought he was having a heart attack.

He remembered having breakfasts with the team. Hustling and bustling through the production of a frankly unreasonable number of pancakes, waffles, and eggs. Clint demanding they needed more bacon (“We always need more bacon, Tony!”), Bruce asking if they could please include something that resembled a vegetable. Natasha sitting in the back, reading a cheesy romance novel and sipping her tea, nibbling on a Russian cookie Tony had imported just for her. Steve, grinning at them all, spatula in hand and bedecked in whatever frilly apron Clint decided to buy for him this time around.

This little slice of domesticity wasn’t a part of their lives for very long - just a strange sort of serendipity where they all found themselves living together at the Tower at the same time, coming together for moments like these, as a family.

A family that, at some point, included Tony.

Didn’t it?

The simple sight of them eating breakfast shouldn’t have affected him so strongly, but it was one thing to see them all in the middle of a conference room as Rhodey droned on about Avengers protocols and Accords clauses. It was another thing seeing them here, casual and comfortable, at home with each other as they shared a meal.

None of this should matter, Tony reminded himself. He didn’t need them, not anymore.

The silence was only a few seconds long, but to Tony, it stretched into eternity, one that already crossed over into awkward— uncomfortable— so Tony broke the neutral set of his expression to flash everyone a carefully chosen, long-ago crafted media smile. In his peripheral, Lang silently shuffled off in the direction of the refrigerator.

No one else moved, but it was Clint who spoke up first.

“Well, speak of the devil and he shall appear,” the archer squinted at him, his smile showing teeth, a gesture meant to be predatory and territorial rather than friendly. Tony remained where he was, standing there at the threshold, but now leaning against the door frame, hands loosely settled over his chest and ankles crossed. The perfect picture of casual nonchalance.
“Hello to you too, Birdbrain,” Tony kept his voice in the *obnoxiously cheery* register too, “and good morning, everyone else. Smells delicious up here, I’m sorry I missed the festivities.”

Silence, again, and Tony had to stop himself from fidgeting. Natasha, sitting next to Clint at the table, had her usual scrutinizing expression firmly in place, one that gave her the power to dissect a man with those green eyes alone, while Clint just kept on throwing him that same sour look. Wilson was at the sink, his expression unreadable.

Then there was Steve, whose eyes Tony met head on, wanting to— *unable to*— ignore the crashing wave of *something*, painful and sharp, threatening to break within him.

It was neither hate nor fury, and it certainly wasn’t longing either. Tony had no idea what to call it, but the ache didn’t subside, no, it just got *worse*, and Tony almost wished that it was a heart attack instead of this nostalgic bullshit.

There was no frilly apron this time around, but Steve was still the one at the stove, spatula in hand, and he was staring at Tony with those same forlorn blue eyes. It was a look that somehow made Tony feel as though he had both *caused* every one of Steve’s problems and had the unique ability to fix them.

The dichotomy made it hard to breathe, but then Steve murmured, “Tony…” and that familiar voice, the way those blue eyes remained on him with an intensity that *burned*, it all had Tony wanting to run, regretting every one of the choice that led him up here, alone.

He steeled himself and held Steve’s eyes, watched as the man swallowed hard, then offered a weak smile.

“We didn’t expect a visit,” Steve was trying to sound pleasant, *nonthreatening*, “but, uh— I’m glad you came up. It’s really good to see you. You, uh— you look well.”

First words Steve had said to him in a year and a half and all Tony wanted to say was *I didn’t look so well when you left me to die*, but he bit his tongue. He supposed this was still better than the *last* words Steve had said to him.

*I can do this all day.*

“You look great too. Bright eyed and bushy-tailed as always. The Wakandan sun really agrees with you.”

“Thank you. Wakanda was… nice.” No one cared enough to point out that Tony knew about their hiding spot. “It’s really good to be home though.”

“Yes, I’m glad you made it back in one piece,” Tony replied, side-stepping the real meaning of Steve’s comment and choosing instead to go into *Tony Stark, the Gracious Host* mode, “I didn’t get a chance to say hello yesterday, what with Rhodey Bear hogging all the attention, and then I had to sneak away to put out some corporate fires— you know how it is, the devil’s work is never done,” this was directed at Clint, who just rolled his eyes, “but I had a free moment today, so I thought I’d stop by now, give you all a proper welcome.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Steve said, “we appreciate that. The Compound has grown a lot since the last time we were all here. It’s… impressive.”

Steve was still carrying the conversation, for better or worse, remaining surprisingly polite (Tony wondered what the hell James said to the man when they met), while Natasha just offered Tony a curt nod when their eyes met. Clint wasn’t ranting and raving (which, based on what the others have
told him, was apparently an improvement), while Wilson avoided Tony’s eyes entirely.

Tony was genuinely surprised no one had a zinger of an insult or some biting accusations prepared for this very moment. Maybe they really didn’t expect him to show up like this?

“We’ve done a lot of work around here, yeah, and while I’m sure the Compound doesn’t quite live up to the Wakandan standards of hospitality, we do have a smoothie bar and a game room, and I have it on good authority that the training simulations down at the gym are state of the art. You guys are gonna love it.”

“A lot more people running around all over the place too,” Clint noted grumpily, “did you invite the entire federal bureau to work down here or what?”

“Not the entire bureau, no,” Tony decided to treat that as a legitimate question, rather than the pointed barb that it was, “but we are the headquarters for anything and everything superpowered, which requires a lot more people than just one rag-tag team of superheroes. Government reps, special agents, human rights groups, lawyers, professors, scientists, we’ve got a little bit of everything around here.”

Another awkward silence settled and Tony knew he just needed to say what he came here to say and then bail on this entire awkward disaster.

“So, like I said, I wanted to come up and welcome you all back—”

“Yeah, we got that already,” it was Wilson who interrupted, finally finding his voice. He was leaning against the counter not too far away from Steve, arms crossed and his eyes finally trained on Tony, gaze guarded. Tony had seen that exact look before, on plenty of faces.

Mistrust.

“We heard your gracious welcome speech. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s good to see you without all those prison bars getting in the way of the view, but what’s the real reason you’re up here?”

Ouch, okay, so Wilson could hold a grudge with the best of them. Tony’s eyes flicked over to Steve and he noted the palpable discomfort radiating from the man. It made Tony wonder exactly how much the others knew about Siberia. James told him that no one but Natasha knew, but that was months ago. Not that the knowledge would make a difference, Tony rationalized, because Wilson would still be sore about the Raft debacle, even if he knew everything else.

Tony squashed down the urge to defend himself, the urge to apologize— because the Raft should’ve never happened, Tony should’ve never let it happen— because these people were sharks in the water, waiting for him to respond to the jibe, to mess up somehow.

At least there was still Lang, who flashed him a small, apologetic smile when he sat down next to Natasha with a glass of milk. That bit of positivity was a welcomed reprieve from the otherwise chilly reception.

“There is another reason I’m up here, actually,” Tony said, “I have a formal apology to issue on Friday’s behalf. I’m sorry that she caused you some grief over these past couple days.”

Tony was torn, really - Friday was capable of so much, learned so quickly, and this was a painful lesson for her, about sacrificing one’s own desires for the greater good. However, the petty part of Tony found his baby girl’s methods… inspired and that part chafed at the apology.

When no one else said anything, he continued.

“Artificial intelligence is tricky,” he tried to explain, “the more successful you are, the more human your AI will become. Now, we all know humanity can be a wily thing sometimes, and Friday is an
independent entity, not just a computer system, which means she’s capable of making…
questionable decisions every once in a while.” Tony ignored Clint’s derisive snort. “There should be
no more pranks though. All the wifi and hot water you could ever want, I promise.”

Clint took a rather aggressive sip of his coffee. “ Doesn’t seem like you fixed everything. I’m still
being called Archer Boy Traitor.”

Lang tried to hide his snort behind his drink, but Clint still caught it because the glare he sent the
other man was nearly as poisonous as the ones he was shooting at Tony.

a super advanced AI,” here he glanced over at Tony, “she’s really bad at naming things.”

If it were any other situation, Tony would’ve been smothering an unattractive laugh at the comment,
but for better or worse, the rest of his present company proved effective at tempering his mirth. Hard
to laugh over the howls of bittersweet memories rattling around in Tony’s head.

“Sorry, Barton,” Tony said instead and shrugged, his patience starting to run thin, “you’ll get all the
standard Compound services, just like everyone else, but like I said, Friday has a mind of her own. If
it makes you feel any better, she doesn’t like me half the time either. Now, any more petty complaints
I need to worry about or are we good?”

Okay, dammit, so maybe his patience was thinner than expected and Tony’s carefully constructed
mask of congenial cheerfulness was beginning to splinter into pieces.

“They weren’t that petty,” Clint scoffed, but then Steve sent him the patented Captain America look,
full of that stern disapproval, and the archer actually swallowed back whatever else he wanted to say.
Appreciated, albeit also surprising, because Tony couldn’t pinpoint Steve’s motive for trying to keep
the peace. He had a guess or two though, and all of them involved James.

Biting back a sarcastic retort of his own, Tony just offered once more, “Sorry for the inconvenience,
again. It shouldn’t have happened, but everything is now fixed, and uh...” Tony stopped, unsure of
what else to say.

“Thank you for coming up here to apologize for Friday,” Steve picked up the conversation when
Tony faltered, “we all appreciate the gesture.”

Tony doubted that and all these empty platitudes had him on the verge of nausea.

“ Right, well—”

“Actually, can we talk for a second? In private?”

Steve moved, pulling away from the stove as if trying to get close, and Tony’s body tensed without
his permission.

_Dammit._

It was proof, he realized, with a resigned sort of hate, that he wasn’t just bitter or resentful or
heartbroken. No, there was some small part of him that was still _afraid._

_Gonna leave another dent in me, Captain?_ “Maybe later,” Tony said, with no real determination to actually follow through on that offer, “I just
came up to say hello, to apologize for Friday, but I should probably run. Busy schedule an’ all. We’ll
see each other again, I’m sure—”

“Tony, please, I just want us to talk.”

Tony swallowed past the lump in his throat. “What’s there to talk about?”

Steve’s eyes implored him to stay, but the man didn’t say anything, just stood there and frowned.

Thank god Clint was there to fill in the blanks.

“‘What’s there to talk about?’ Seriously, Stark? How about the fact that you and your friends landed us in jail? After everything that went down, you should be kissing our asses for coming back.”

Jail is what happens when you break the law, dumbass.

Some sliver of self-preservation stopped Tony from voicing that thought. Instead, he dug deep to find whatever shred of humility he still carried around with him. This wasn’t the apology he was planning to make today, but he wasn’t blameless after all, far from it, and dammit, they couldn’t just keep sniping at each other like this forever.

“I’m sorry for how things went down last year,” he tried, hoping the sincerity of his words came through and praying they would actually believe him. “Things were complicated and everything got out of control so quickly, especially when there were other players on the board, some we weren’t even aware of until it was too late.”

He said that while looking at Clint and Natasha, so he couldn’t say whether Steve winced or scowled in his peripheral.

Natasha’s thoughtful gaze didn’t change, which wasn’t a surprise. Tony had suspected long ago, even before James’ confession, that the spy knew about his parents. After all, if Steve did, how could she not? That betrayal stung too, but he and Natasha were never that close and Tony had let it go. It wasn’t the first knife in his back and it wouldn’t be the last.

Clint, however, was apparently privy to nothing, because all he did was scoff. “You landed us in jail on your buddy Ross’ orders. I don’t see what’s so complicated about that. We ended up in prison and then treated as criminals, on the run for a year and a half. From where I’m standing, that’s on you.”

“Look, I’m sorry about the Raft, that should’ve never happened—”

“Yeah, your apologies don’t fix the fact that—”

“Clint, we talked about this, that’s enough.”

The commanding Captain tone was familiar too and it made Tony’s stomach clench painfully, the tension running through him shooting straight up to ten.

“Yeah, whatever,” Clint threw over his shoulder at Steve, the irreverence towards Steve uncharacteristic for the man, “you wanna forgive him for trying to kill you? Fine, but don’t expect me to do the same.”

“We should try to find common ground, all of us. We have to,” Steve neared pleaded, but to Tony’s surprise, it was directed at the others rather than at Tony, “otherwise how can we fight together against what’s coming? We have to trust each other—”
“I’m sorry, Steve,” Wilson shook his head, hands out in front of him, “but it’s gonna take a whole lot more than some throw-away apologies for me to trust him again,” he jabbed a finger at Tony.

“Sam, no, that’s not—”

“He lied to me!” Wilson raised his voice, the man’s composure finally breaking. He threw a disgusted glance Tony’s way before looking back at Steve. “Okay? I trusted him with your life and he lied to me. He went to Siberia to kill you and—and he almost succeeded! You and Barnes barely got out alive! I’m sorry, man, but I can’t trust a word Stark says to us.”

Funny how Tony’s legs refused to cooperate when the last thing he wanted was to be here, listening to this. However, despite his desire to flee, he remained rooted to his spot.

Steve’s inability to tell the truth was probably for the best, Tony convinced himself. The last thing he needed was his personal tragedy on full display for everyone to dissect and examine.

He was about to say some generic goodbye and force his legs to move, but then something determined crossed Steve’s face and Tony’s stomach dropped straight through the floor.

“That’s, uh— that’s not what happened, Sam,” Steve murmured. He wasn’t meeting Wilson’s eyes, nor Tony’s.

“Steve,” Tony bit out, making the warning in his tone clear as day. “Don’t.”

“Tony, I’m sorry, I should’ve told them earlier.”

“Tell us what exactly?” Clint piped in, looking between the two of them, expression a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

“When Tony went to find us in Siberia—”

“Rogers, I swear to god, don’t do this.”

“No, no, we gotta hear this,” Clint jumped to his feet and planted himself in the middle of the kitchen next to Wilson, “I’m curious now, especially since it got Stark on the defensive like this.”

“Steve, think about this carefully,” Natasha tried and Tony silently begged Steve to listen to her, because the man sure as hell wasn’t going to listen to Tony.

But that stubborn set of Steve’s jaw didn’t budge. “I have been thinking about this, Tasha. I can’t keep doing this anymore. You all deserve to know the truth.”

The hysterical laughter that bubbled up in Tony’s throat surprised even him. “Oh, and you have impeccable timing with the truth, don’t you, Rogers?”

Why wasn’t he leaving? Why wasn’t he turning around and leaving? He didn’t have to hear this, he didn’t have to relive this—

His feet still wouldn’t move and Tony watched the oncoming train get closer, unable to look away. Did that make him the train wreck?

“Tony never lied to you, Sam,” Steve said, voice quiet but resolute and Tony envied how it didn’t even waver, “he came to Siberia as backup for me and Bucky, to neutralize the other soldiers. It was, uh— it wasn’t on Ross’ orders. Tony came alone, to help.”

“Wait, what?” Wilson frowned, “That doesn’t make any sense. According to T’Challa, you came
back beaten and bloody. Barnes lost a whole arm. Were the other soldiers not dead then?"

“No, they were dead, but it was never about them. Zemo, the guy who triggered Bucky in Berlin, he killed them. All he really wanted was the three of us there. It was a trap.”

“Steve, please, just— shut up,” Tony begged, but it fell on deaf ears.

“Zemo showed us a video of the Winter Soldier killing Howard and Maria Stark.”

Snow streaked with blood. Metal hitting flesh until it caved. A final breath, his father's name exhaled like a prayer.

Tony closed his eyes against the onslaught of memories.

Stay down. Final warning.

I can do this all day.

Silence surrounded them, but only for a moment before the room exploded into sound.

“Excuse me, what— Wait, Barnes killed his parents?”

“Are you telling me I spent— I spent two years believing a lie?”

“Hold on, so Stark had to watch his parents get murdered while said murderer was just standing right there?”

“Stop, please, all of you!” Steve pleaded over the cacophony of voices, “Scott, it wasn’t Bucky, okay? You can’t blame him for this, he was brainwashed!”

“Yeah, I get that, but that’s still fucked up!”

“And Sam, Clint, I’m sorry, I just didn’t want you thinking badly of Bucky and—”

“Wait, okay, just stop— stop talking,” Wilson waved his hands, trying to get Steve to shut up, then scrubbed a hand down his face. “Run this by me one more time because I can’t wrap my fuckin’ head around it. Stark gets there to help you with the soldiers, but they’re all dead. Did I get that right?”

Steve nodded reluctantly.

“Then this Zemo guy plays a— what was it? A video of Barnes murdering the Starks?”

“Surveillance camera footage,” Steve quietly supplied, “and it wasn’t Bucky.”

Wilson ignored that last part. “And when Stark saw that, he attacked you two in retaliation? To, uh — to get revenge on Barnes or something?”

Steve was torn between a nod and a shrug this time, wincing.

Tony, on the other hand, was just numb now and he wasn’t sure if the others could hear that in his sudden bark of laughter. They all pivoted to him, as if they had forgotten that he was still in the room.

“I know Siberia was so long ago, Steve, and your memory might be a little rough around the edges, but your story seems to be missing one key element.”
Steve’s pitiful expression didn’t produce even a twinge of sympathy in Tony. Belatedly, he realized he was trembling.

“You said you want to tell them the truth, Cap. So tell them the fucking truth.”

Wilson glanced between the two of them, but this time around, the suspicion of his gaze landed on Steve.

“What is he talking about?”

One second of silence, two, the third stretching into infinity.

Did you know?

I didn’t know it was him.

Don’t bullshit me, Rogers! Did you know?

Yes.

“I knew it was Bucky ever since DC. I never told anyone.”

Wilson stilled. “That means… All those missions, all the time we spent looking for Barnes on— on Stark’s dime, he didn’t know that—” The words seemed to choke him and Wilson rubbed his head, then turned so he could lean against the sink. “That’s— what the hell, man?”

“Sam, I’m so sorry, I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone— Bucky needed me! Please—”

“No, you know what, stop talking, I need to process this. Jesus fuckin’ christ…”

Finally, finally, some life was beginning to return to Tony’s body, shock wearing off, replaced with anxiety. His pulse thundered in his ears.

“Well, this has been fun,” he used his most cheerful tone, but even that couldn’t stop his words from shaking, “but if you’ll excuse me, I think I’m done watching all of you discussing my private life, so I’ll just—,” he jerked his hand over his shoulder, “I’ll just go now. Let’s never do this again.”

Wilson pivoted to face him. “Stark, listen, I didn’t know—”

“No, nuh-uh,” Tony waved a trembling hand in front of him, then stumbled back a step. Each heart beat hurt now. “Whatever you wanna say, Wilson, just save yourself the trouble and don’t, okay? I need to go.”

He didn’t meet anyone else’s eye, not caring whether Clint was still glaring, indifferent to whatever Natasha’s tactical mind was making of this whole situation. He didn’t want to see Steve’s face, he didn’t want to see any of them. Tony turned to leave, managed a step, then had to brace his hand against the wall as the world spun.

Shit.

A deep breath had him seeing straight again, but he got all two steps past the threshold before his mind registered heavy, hurried footsteps.

“Tony, wait, please!”

There wasn’t enough time to react before a strong, thick— familiar— hand wrapped around his wrist
his left wrist which still ached from time to time—and then he was yanked to a stop and twisted around, but instead of seeing Steve, Tony’s world turned to white.

The mask flies off, a stray piece of metal leaving a bloodied nick across Tony’s skin. There’s blood spattered over Steve’s face too, Tony can see each streak of red in vivid detail as he watches Steve raise the shield.

For a moment, Tony knows with an unshakeable certainty where that shield will come down. Steve’s going to kill him.

He’s afraid, he realizes, because he doesn’t want to die, because this is Steve and Tony doesn’t want to die like this.

But maybe he deserves this. Maybe this is how a man like him deserves to die.

The shield comes down and Tony’s eyes track its descent as time slows to an infinite crawl. The movement is graceful, practiced, easy. The shield hits the reactor, the vibranium decimates the protective casing, and Tony has only a fraction of a second to be surprised that he’s still alive and then the shield buries itself just a little bit deeper, just deep enough for Tony to feel the agony of metal carving itself into his chest.

His chest is full of metal again and he can’t breathe.

Steve’s panting. Blue eyes watch Tony before the man slumps against the shield. A moment of silence. Their whole world, in shambles.

Tony can still hear his father begging his killer to protect Maria.

There’s blood on the snow here too, all around them, but this time, it’s Tony’s fault, isn’t it?

Steve grips the edges of the shield and wrenches it out of the suit, jostling the metal buried inside Tony.

He can’t breathe, even as he forces himself to ignore the pain, forces himself to roll over, forces the accusation past his lips.

“That shield doesn’t belong to you. You don’t deserve it. My father made that shield!”

Tony can’t breathe, even as he watches the two soldiers walk away, even as he collapses back onto the cold floor, even as he lays there and waits for death.

“—rk! Hey, Stark, breathe, man, it’s okay— hey, no, don’t come near him!”

Voices filtered through, then warmth of the air around him, then the residual scent of coffee. Tony clung to each sensation like a lifeline, forcing his brain to cooperate as he struggled out of the flashback.

The lights dancing in front of his eyes began to clear and Tony realized he was pressing himself against one of the walls out in the hallway. Lang was standing in front of him, essentially shielding him from the rest of the group. Wilson had a hand on Steve’s chest, both of them standing just on the threshold of the kitchen a few yards away. Clint and Natasha were on their feet, hovering right behind the two.

“Boss,” that had to be Friday, “you just give me the word and I will shoot them all in the face.”
“Friday,” Tony croaked, “stand down.” He really needed to explain to her the concept of excessive force. He blinked his eyes rapidly, thankful that the spinning room was beginning to slow.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to hurt him, I swear,” that was Steve and Tony’s eyes zeroed in on the man just in time to see him trying to move closer. Tony flinched on instinct, already hating himself for the display of weakness but unable to stop it, unable to hide it from everyone else.

Wilson didn’t let Steve get very far. “Steve, jesus, step back. You gave the man an anxiety attack, what the hell else are you trying to do?”

“I didn’t mean to— I didn’t— I didn’t know,” Steve raked a trembling hand through his hair, but he didn’t make anymore aborted moves to get closer. Lang’s eyes darted between Steve and Tony, and while he looked at Tony with a mix of confusion and concern, Steve was gifted with some frankly impressive glares. Tony was surprised that Lang, who seemed to be the essence of a golden retriever stuck in a man’s body earlier, could pull off something that severe.

“M’fine,” Tony managed after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence. The expressions on all five faces made it abundantly clear no one believed him, (valid, given that he wasn’t fine), but he needed to at least pretend.

He also needed to get out of here, stat.

His first instinct was to get into the nearest suit and fly, fly as far as his thrusters would take him and then push them just a bit further. The freedom of the open sky called to him, but he squashed the desire down. He couldn’t just take off.

Lang was peering down on him, something akin to pity there now, pity that Tony would’ve resented had he the energy.

“You okay? Is there anything I can do to help?” Lang kept his voice low as if to preserve Tony’s privacy, but it was a token effort really, given super soldier hearing and general spy nosiness.

“Yup, peachy keen,” Tony was heartened to note that when he pushed himself away from the wall, his legs actually held him up. He’d had enough embarrassment for one day, collapsing on the floor in front of these people would’ve just been overkill. “I, uh— I think I need to go now.”

He should left five minutes ago.

Lang glanced over his shoulder, at Steve and Wilson, then looked back at Tony. “Do you need someone to come with you? Or, uh— we can get someone up here? Rhodes maybe? Or Hope?”

Oh god, it dawned on Tony that if anyone else found out about this, all hell would break loose. Shit, both James and Rhodey were going to kill him for coming here alone, weren’t they?

“Friday, do not tell anyone about this—”

“Oh dear,” she responded, unrepentant, nearly smug, “I’ve alerted all relevant parties and they will be here momentarily.”

“Shit,” Tony muttered the single expletive, then swallowed the rest. He couldn’t deal with any of this, not yet, not right now. He needed to catch his breath first, to find steady ground, without prying eyes, without pitied stares, without disapproving frowns. It didn’t matter whether they were friendly or not.

He needed to be alone.
Still, he couldn’t help but look back at Steve one last time. Clear, bright blue eyes, with just a hint of wetness clinging to them. They were trained on Tony too, *pleading* with him, for something Tony probably could never offer. Understanding? Forgiveness? Another chance?

He wobbled a little where he stood, a warning sign that he wouldn’t stay upright for very long, so without another word, Tony took off as fast as his shaky legs would carry him.
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of course, of course it was Bucky’s goddamn luck that he was clear across the property when Friday’s voice came through the speakers of his Starkphone to inform him that Tony just had a close brush with a panic attack. Bucky barely registered Friday’s “He’s in distress, but otherwise unharmed,” before he broke out into a sprint.

A panic attack. Because of Steve.

As he ran across the expanse of the field— and when did it get so fucking long?— Bucky barely had the mental capacity to be frustrated with Tony and the fact that he chose to see the former Avengers alone despite everyone else’s protests. Really, this was Bucky’s fault as much as Tony’s. Bucky knew Tony well enough by now, he knew that this infuriating man was stubborn and proud and self-sacrificing to a fault (it equal parts drove Bucky up the wall and had him falling for Tony even harder).

So, he should’ve expected this and he didn’t, but it was a thought for another time because right now all he could focus on was the fact that Steve had hurt Tony.

That thought had his skin itching, the desire to tear something apart pulsing in his veins with such a ferocity that he couldn’t even hear the Soldier anymore, he didn’t need to because they were nearly one and the same at this point.

I’m done playing nice. I’m done letting them walk all over Tony. I’m done with their goddamn attitudes, with these ungrateful bastards invading our home. I warned Steve, I told him to keep the others in line, to keep his own dumb ass in line, but now… He hurt Tony and when I get there, I will make them all wish they never crawled out of their hole in Wakanda, I will make them beg because whatever pain they inflicted on Tony, I will return to them tenfold, I will rip them apart—

“Boss just reached his lab,” Friday spoke up again as soon as he dashed through the entrance of the building, “he used one of the underground passageways as a shortcut.”

“How is he? Who else knows?”

“Boss’ vitals are stabilizing and he is lucid, but he refuses to respond to my inquiries. I informed Colonel Rhodes. He’s en-route to the traitor’s residence as we speak. Also,” she hesitated for a moment, “you’re speaking Russian, Mr. Barnes.”

Shit.

At Friday’s words, some of the red haze of Bucky’s anger lifted and he took a shuddering breath as he braced his hand against the wall and slowed to a stop. As much as he wanted to let himself sink into the Soldier’s desires, he needed to concentrate.

He was glad Rhodes was notified though. If there was one other man Bucky could trust to deliver justice on Tony’s behalf, it was Rhodes. His own siren call of retribution still sang to him, the same dark, heady melody carried by the Soldier’s tantalizing whispers. He waited so long for this, to make someone bleed, to make someone pay, for all that had been done to Tony. He needed to go upstairs, to show their former allies (and the whole damn world) what happened when his solnishko was harmed, to teach these people a lesson that was sorely overdue.
Bucky didn’t bother examining what it said about him as a person that all it took was a simple matter of knowing someone put their damn hands on Tony to incite his bloodlust. His first instinct, as soon as Friday had told him Tony was otherwise unharmed, was that of violence, the need to break something— preferably Steve’s face— overwhelming in those initial moments, this urge to beat and break and punish.

So much hurt had been inflicted upon him over the decades, almost all of it left unpunished as his tormentors got to die in peace before he had his chance at retribution. If he was ever a good man, that had been stamped out of him long ago and whatever remained after seventy years of hell, whoever he was now was hard pressed to deny himself the chance to fight back, especially on behalf of the man he loved, who suffered so many injustices of his own.

Tony. His Tony.

He took another breath and that fiery rage burning inside him gave way to something else as a familiar chill crawled up his spine. Tony was in pain right now, distressed and alone, agonizing over fucking Siberia. It was the memory of what Steve had done to him that sent Tony over the edge.

What Bucky had done.

He grit his teeth, clenching his eyes shut for a moment. Nothing better to extinguish righteous fury than his own fucking guilt, but he didn’t let himself wallow in it just yet. He opened his eyes again, then noted his position, which put him squarely between Steve’s kitchen and Tony’s lab.

Do you want the satisfaction of beating someone bloody today, he prodded the Soldier, or do you want Tony safe in our arms?

He was heartened by the fact that even the Soldier, this violent, amoral, irreverent part of him, had his priorities straight because there was only a moment’s hesitation before the answer came to Bucky, clear as day.

Tony is our mission.

Good answer.

Because in the end, it wasn’t a decision at all. Tony was his only mission and while Bucky may have craved blood on his knuckles, he needed Tony.

But was Bucky really the person Tony needed right now? Truth be told, he was too afraid to answer that question, but he refused to let his own uncertainty and guilt keep him away, so giving Rhodes his own silent blessing to put the fear of god into the former Avengers (and maybe punch someone’s lights out if it came down to that), Bucky turned on his heel and sprinted in the direction of the elevator that would take him down to the lab.

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The lab was empty, which surprised and worried Bucky in equal measure, until Friday murmured a subdued explanation, noting that Tony had locked himself inside the server room and that everyone else’s access codes had been rendered inactive for the moment.

Tony obviously didn’t want to see anyone right now, including him, and despite the weight of his own guilt sitting heavy and sour in his belly, anger flared again, directed at Steve, who decided to ignore Tony’s privacy, to ignore basic human respect, basic human decency, and chose today, with Tony right there in the goddamn room, to tell everyone about what really happened in Siberia.
Bucky’s metal fingers clenched on their own accord, instinct still urging him to prepare for a confrontation, but he wasn’t down here for a fight, and he made the conscious effort to unclench his fist before the sheer tension running through the machinery, driven by the lack of outlet for his anger, got something jammed inside his arm.

The thing was, he wanted others to know the truth, in large part because it gave much needed context to Tony’s actions in Siberia, painted him in a sympathetic light, rather than a caricature of a villain who just wanted them all dead. Steve should’ve told everyone the truth a year and a half ago, as soon as they were safe in Wakanda.

On the other hand, Bucky never wanted the truth to come out like this. Tony never wanted his life dredged up for examination by the very people who betrayed him and the others knowing what happened wasn’t worth Tony’s pain.

Steve’s callousness was a definite strike against him, the position he forced Tony into inexcusable, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, Bucky would make all those transgressions clear to the man, but as far as physical damage, Bucky could finally acknowledge (unlike the Soldier, who was happy to ignore degrees of culpability) that Steve didn’t actually try to physically hurt Tony today. According to Friday, he grabbed the man’s wrist in an attempt to stop him from leaving. A rude gesture in most cases, but not outright harmful.

Unless, of course, your last interaction with the man was you ramming a shield into his chest and then leaving him to die. What the hell were you thinking, Steve?

Guilt churned painfully in his gut as Bucky walked in the direction of the server room, snagging a blanket off the couch on his way there.

Steve was an idiot who didn’t think about the consequences of his actions, but he wasn’t the only one in that bunker. He wasn’t the only one who tried to hurt Tony, to kill him. With unfailing clarity Bucky’s mind conjured up an image of his own hand reaching for Tony’s chest, metal fingers digging into the bright red around the reactor, ready to crush—

Yeah, no wonder Tony didn’t want Bucky anywhere near him right now.

He stopped in front of the server room door, uncertain of his next step. Shouting wasn’t going to work, given that the door was several inches of lead.

“Friday, could you patch me through to Tony, please?”

A momentary pause. “Yes, Mr. Barnes, you’re now on audio.”

“Tony, sweetheart?” he called out. No response followed, even when he waited a moment before continuing. “I’m not asking you to let me in, I know you need your space right now. I’m worried, of course I am, but I know you can take care of yourself when something like this happens, but I just —” he faltered, throat closing up. He pressed his forehead against the cool metal of the door. “I, uh — I have your blanket here. It’s freezing in the server room, sweetheart, I don’t want you catching a cold. Please? Just let me come in to give you the blanket, that’s all.”

A long, agonizing minute of silence passed and Bucky was about to give up, go settle in on the floor somewhere, give the Soldier some time to plot everyone’s imminent death and destruction while Bucky guarded the door until Tony was ready to face the world, but then the door shuddered against him, locking mechanisms coming to life, which meant Friday unlocked it on Tony’s orders.

Despite bracing himself for it, a chill still raced through his body when Bucky opened the door and
let the cold air hit him squarely in the face. Keeping his footsteps loud enough to be heard over the hum of the servers, Bucky walked inside and peered around the room, trying to find Tony.

“Boss is on the other side of the server wall,” Friday helpfully supplied and Bucky followed her quiet directions. The room was darkened, the bright overhead lights dimmed to a quarter of their strength, but Bucky could still make up the huddled form in the corner. Tony was curled up on the floor against the wall with his knees tucked against him and arms wrapped around them. From here, Bucky couldn’t see whether Tony was shivering, but it was likely.

“Tony, honey? It’s just me,” Bucky held his hands up, one empty, one carrying the raggedy blanket. He motioned at Tony with latter. “Are you alright? Can I come over there and give you this?”

Tony shrugged, then grunted what Bucky had to assume was an affirmative, although to which question he wasn’t sure, so he chose to approach cautiously, telegraphing his every move so as not to startle Tony. When he reached the other side of the room, Bucky lowered himself to his knees next to the man and with the same slow, deliberate movements, he draped the blanket over Tony.

“There, that’s a little better,” he kept his voice soothing, on sheer will alone, because all of him ached at the sight of Tony here. He resisted the urge to tuck the blanket around Tony, unsure if touch would be welcome at this point. “Now you won’t be sniffling and coughing up a storm tomorrow.”

Tony peered at him from under his lashes, dark eyes cautious. “You don’t get colds from being cold,” he said after a beat, voice hoarse and barely audible above the background noise of the room. The sound of Tony’s voice flooded Bucky with an unsettling combination of both relief and anguish. Tony was speaking to him, which was a good sign, but he sounded so drained, so weary.

“Yeah, yeah, viruses cause colds, I know,” Bucky tried to sound teasing, but ultimately failed. Still, he kept talking. “But I’ve seen enough runny noses in my time, after some kid ran around outside in the cold without a scarf and mittens.”

Tony didn’t respond to that, not even with the usual, “You’re such an old man sometimes.” He just watched Bucky with those heavy-lidded eyes, the scrutiny a reminder that Bucky should probably stop lingering.

“Well, uh— I’m not sure if you—” he couldn’t find the right words, his composure rapidly fleeing him, “not sure if you want me here, so I should probably just— just go.”

Tony still didn’t say anything and Bucky could feel his heart crack a little in the ensuing silence.

“Right, okay. I’ll just— I’ll be outside if you need me, sweetheart, okay?” His eyes were wet, he realized, and Bucky resisted the urge to swipe at them, blinking rapidly to get rid of the moisture instead. Unable to manage anymore empty words, he stood back up and began to walk away, legs as heavy as lead.

“James, wait.”

Tony’s voice stopped him short and Bucky turned around, holding his breath.

“Don’t— don’t go,” came next, then a snuffle, then Tony heaved a frustrated sigh before burying his face in his knees and drawing the blanket tighter around him. “Just, wait, please?”

“Not going anywhere, honey. M’right here,” James replied to the muffled plea, knowing he’d wait as long as Tony needed him to. He didn’t move closer though, not until Tony gave him the permission to do so.
Tony’s shoulders rose and fell on a few shallow breaths, but when his face reappeared, Tony seemed more determined. Bucky had seen that expression plenty of times, a sign that Tony was choosing to overcome whatever was holding him back on sheer stubbornness.

Tony lifted his right arm up and out, the blanket hanging off it. “C’mere,” he whispered, voice still hoarse, still quiet, but the invitation was clear.

Bucky didn’t let himself move though, not yet. “Are you sure? It’s okay if you don’t want me here, I’ll wait outside, you don’t have to—”

“James, just c’mere,” Tony sounded more confident now, the tone matching that determined look in his eyes. He shook the lifted arm for emphasis. “Come on. It’s cold, remember? I need body heat to keep me warm.”

Bucky was already moving and there was a good chance his legs simply gave out from relief by the time he got to Tony and collapsed right next to him. Watching Tony for any sign of discomfort—a flinch or a wince—and seeing nothing of the sort, Bucky sidled up close to the man, close enough so that every part of them was pressed together side by side. Bucky carefully wormed the metal arm behind Tony’s back and around his waist, while Tony’s outstretched arm draped itself over Bucky’s shoulders, covering him up with the blanket as well. The ratty thing wasn’t actually big enough for them both, but Bucky always ran hot, so he clung to Tony, both to keep the man warm and to stop his own tremors, ones that had nothing to do with the cold.

When he buried his face in Tony’s shoulder, Tony pressed his cheek against the crown of his head, then used his free hand to cradle Bucky’s jaw, to run his thumb back and forth over Bucky’s heated skin.

In some bizarre fashion, Tony ended up comforting him with these tender gestures and it really should’ve been the other way around, but when Bucky so much as twitched, trying to sit up, to change their positions, Tony just shushed him and then tightened his hold, pressing their bodies even closer together, so Bucky gave up on trying to be strong and soaked in the comfort offered to him.

They remained like that for a few minutes, huddled on the cold floor and wrapped up in a too-small blanket, clinging to each other, with only the hum of the servers keeping them company.

Eventually, Bucky inhaled deeply, steadying himself as Tony’s familiar scent filled his lungs, then exhaled the warm air through his mouth, right over Tony’s collar bone, inadvertently making Tony shiver.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Bucky finally broke the silence and a part of him expected to hear Tony’s go-to dismissal.

Yup, peachy keen.

Some of his tension drained though when instead Tony stayed silent for a minute, giving actual thought to his words.

“I’m mostly okay, yeah. Still a little shaken, I guess,” he finally responded, actually honest, and Bucky clenched his eyes shut, hid his face in Tony’s shoulder, so damn grateful that it hurt, because Tony wasn’t trying to hide from him.

Bucky nodded against him to acknowledge that he heard Tony, but his throat was still too tight to give a coherent response back.

Tony didn’t seem to mind. He rubbed his cheek against Bucky’s hair, an affectionate gesture that
loosened the tightness in Bucky’s chest even further. “Honestly, I overreacted, but before I realized what the hell I was even doing, the server room was already open, so I just decided to commit to being a total drama queen, you know?”

“You’re not overreacting,” Bucky countered, then before he could stop it, a menacing growl worked its way past his throat, “Friday said Steve grabbed you. I swear to god, Tony, I am going to rip him to pieces, I wasn’t kidding when I said I’d put him through a wall if he touched you.”

Sue him but Bucky was suddenly feeling a lot less charitable, Steve’s true intentions be damned.

“Hey, hey, I’m okay, remember? Okay, fine, mostly okay,” Tony qualified when Bucky let out an unimpressed huff. “Listen, he wasn’t really trying to hurt me.”

“You’re seriously defending him?”

“Steve just— well, he wanted to talk, like he always does, and I was running away, like I always do, so he was just trying to stop me. He, uh— he grabbed my arm, yeah, but I shouldn’t have— shouldn’t have lost it like that. Fuck,” Tony groaned and dropped his head, none too gently, against the wall behind them, “all he did was touch me and I was back in that damn bunker again. What a goddamn mess. Not quite the picture I wanted to paint for our wayward friends, you know?”

“You don’t get to decide how you react to trauma, Tony,” Bucky whispered. He wanted to see Tony, wanted to meet his eyes when he said all this, but he loathed to give away any bit of warmth and contact between them and he was certain Tony felt the same way, given how tightly the man was wrapped around him. “You were emotionally compromised, you were surrounded by people you couldn’t trust, people who not long ago were actual, physical threats to you. Remember when I found out about Maximoff and nearly went off on a killing spree? Hell, the witch wasn’t even around. All Banner did was say the words ‘Hydra’ and ‘hurt Tony’ in the same sentence and I was out for blood.”

“That’s not the same though, Hydra tortured you—”

“Yeah, and Steve almost killed you.” His ears were ringing again, the echoes of that fight deafening, and before he could swallow it down and hide it away, he shuddered and his breath hitched. “And so did I. We both almost killed you.”

A part of him didn’t want to give Tony the time to respond, to agree, to accuse Bucky of the same sins Steve carried with him, to tell him to leave, so he attributed his one lone sniffle to the cold air and pushed away the guilt and doubt tearing him apart. “M’sorry. I shouldn’t be bringing that up. S’not about me. I’m here— I’m here to take care of you, whatever you need, Tony. All that matters is that you’re okay.”

He fell silent then, having run out of words, but Tony didn’t push him away and no recriminations followed. After a minute, Bucky felt Tony’s exhale, a weary sort of thing, against the top of his head.

“Oh, honey…” The endearment, said in that soft tone, full of understanding and compassion, it had Bucky’s eyes watering again. “Is this something you’ve been worrying about?”

Bucky shook his head stubbornly. “No, m’fine,” he muttered, but even Tony’s silence sounded unimpressed and Bucky just deflated. “Yeah, maybe… I might’ve been thinking about it. Hard not to.”

“Having the past drudged up like this isn’t any fun, is it?”
“No, it’s not.”

“Is that why you thought I wanted you to leave?”

Bucky felt so small again in the face of that question. “I wasn’t sure you’d want me around. I didn’t — didn’t want to be like Steve, didn’t wanna hurt you somehow.”

“Why do you think you’d hurt me?”

The question carried no judgment in it, no accusation. Just a genuine desire to understand and suddenly Bucky couldn’t stop the truth from spilling out.

“Sometimes, when I’m having a bad day, when I’m alone, I wonder whether you’ve really forgiven me… What happened with your parents, you and I can blame Hydra for that, but Siberia? I fought you just like Steve did and I wasn’t being controlled. So, sometimes— sometimes I think, what if one day you realize what I really am, take one look at me and tell me I’m a monster? I try not to let it get to me, I know my, uh— my thoughts don’t always reflect reality, but s’been harder lately… First Friday, now this… We hurt you so badly, honey, so how could you stand to be near me when you can’t even look at Steve without remembering what happened?”

It was both freeing and terrifying to give life to these fears. Bucky let his eyes fall shut, his whole world narrowed down to Tony pressed against him, the steady breaths of the man he loved a reminder that Tony was okay, the kiss Tony pressed to the top of Bucky’s head a sign that maybe they were both going to be okay.

“I forgave you a long time ago,” Tony began, with a voice so steady that Bucky envied him, “and no matter what happens, that’s not something I can take back. I don’t want to. Now, there is always a chance that we’ll do something stupid and hurt each other, but if that happens, it’ll have nothing to do with our past. No, that will be, and I quote our closest and dearest friends here, ‘because we are both oblivious, self-sacrificing idiots with not a single functioning brain cell between us when it comes to interpersonal matters’.”

Despite everything, Bucky couldn’t help his breathless laugh, matched by Tony’s own amused huff, the exhaled breath warm against his head.

“When it comes to you and Steve though,” Tony continued while his hand began to trace gentle lines over Bucky’s brow, as if trying to smooth out the frown marring his face, “it’s not the same anymore. We had six months together. Six months of getting to know each other, to make things right between us, and hey,” Tony added, sounding like he was smiling, “we even fell in love along the way, which is the best part of the story, if you ask me. But you do remember our first day together, don’t you? You didn’t even have to touch me and I panicked. We didn’t start out so great, but look where we are now.” Tony shifted down a little, just enough to reach Bucky’s temple where he pressed a warm kiss, holding his lips there for precious few seconds. “We worked for this, dammit, so don’t you dare compare yourself to Steve.”

“I know,” Bucky tried to infuse his voice with a surety he didn’t possess, “God, Tony, I know, and this isn’t on you, sweetheart, because you’re a good man, it’s not a reflection on who you are, but it’s me… it’s me and sometimes I just can’t convince myself that I deserve this.”

Tony turned a little, over on his side, then pulled away, leaving only their legs tangled together. Bucky shivered and sat up too, chasing after Tony’s warmth, but at least like this, facing each other, he could finally see Tony. The man restored the connection between them quickly enough, both hands coming up to cradle Bucky’s face, the touch almost reverent. Tony held him with the same gentle care he had offered Bucky since their very first day together and Bucky had to squeeze his
eyes shut for a moment, then blinked rapidly to dispel the wetness again.

“I’m real awful at this comforting thing, aren’t I?” Bucky lamented, sounding equal parts apologetic and petulant.

Tony’s lips stretched into a crooked smile, but his gaze remained patient. “You’d be surprised how much it helps to have you here. Plus, I tried calming the Winter Soldier down by crawling into his lap. I don’t think I have room to judge.”

“Worked though, didn’t it?”

Tony’s smile remained in place, but it softened, into something Bucky couldn’t quite place, something so fond, so full of meaning. Tony, his Tony, he looked at Bucky like his world began and ended with Bucky too, but this was so different from the way Steve’s gaze made him feel.

Because Tony was his whole world too.

Tony leaned in then and placed a barely there kiss to the corner of Bucky’s mouth. Memories flooded his mind at the touch, vivid details of him doing the same to Tony, months ago, just feet away from where they were sitting right now.

A promise to talk, a hope for something more, and back then, with the Soldier’s boldness still thrumming in his veins, he was brave enough to test the waters further, push just a little bit more, take another step into the unknown with Tony.

“James,” Tony whispered in the here and now and nuzzled his cheek, the breath ghosting over Bucky’s lips like fire in contrast to the cold surrounding them. Another chaste kiss to that same spot, and then he could see Tony’s deep, dark eyes again, that soft, fond look still there, “I love you.”

Even the hum around them fell back into near silence and Bucky could barely breathe, even when that crooked smile on Tony’s face was back.

“I don’t think I’ve actually said that to you before, because I’ll be honest, I haven’t had the best of luck with that little phrase in the past… But I do, I love you. I don’t want you to ever have doubts. And it’s okay if you’re not ready, you don’t have to say it back, but I just thought—”

Actions, he was good with actions, so Bucky grasped Tony’s collar and pulled him forward, pressing their lips together. This kiss, this was fire too, the heat of it overwhelming everything else. Bucky deepened it, wanting to taste Tony, and rejoiced when Tony’s grip on him tightened, hands sliding possessively to thread themselves through Bucky’s hair. It mirrored Bucky’s own desperation, the same need that had Bucky curling his right hand at the nape of Tony’s neck while the metal kept hold of Tony’s collar, keeping them pressed together.

They pulled away, eventually, only when they had to, their panting breaths coalescing into more heat between them.

“I love you too,” Bucky whispered, kissing Tony again, “I love you, Tony, I love you so much.” Easier and easier, with each simple word. “Loved you,” his lips kept brushing over Tony’s, “loved you ever since that day at the park, even if I didn’t know it yet, ever since you gave me hope that I could be happy again.”

Tony was smiling and Bucky could feel it against his lips, so the only thing he could do was taste that smile, to kiss Tony again, knowing he’d never get his fill.

Needing to breathe, Tony broke them apart again, but he stayed close, his forehead pressed against
“Sometimes,” he said after catching his breath, as his hands absently traced the collar of Bucky’s t-shirt, “sometimes I think I don’t deserve you either.”

The confession sat heavy with Bucky, a painful clench of his stomach, and he wondered whether this was how Tony felt when Bucky was spilling forth his own secrets. He kept silent though, resisted the urge to protest the words, offering Tony the same chance to let these insecurities out into the proverbial light.

“I still worry about you and Steve,” Tony continued, “I’m scared that if you spend time with him, you’ll realize you can do better, that you’ll start to see me the same way he does. You’ll realize that I’ll never be good enough.”

There was a certain unique comfort to knowing they both struggled with seeing themselves the way they truly saw each other, but mostly, Tony’s words just left Bucky’s heart aching.

“I love you,” Bucky repeated when Tony didn’t say anything else and by god, he loved the way those words felt on his tongue, marveling as to why he hadn’t said them sooner. Every day, he’d say it every damn day from now on. “There is nothing Steve can say or do that will change that. Tony, you saved me. In my eyes, you’re brilliant and selfless, you’re charming and kind, you’re… you’re you, sweetheart, and why would I ever want anything else?”

Tony’s response was a shy smile and a soft kiss. His lips lingered on Bucky’s, but eventually Tony gave them both some room to breathe, sitting back and tugging at the corners of the blanket to wrap it more firmly around his frame again.

They sat there for a few minutes, just like that, smiling at each other, neither one commenting on the way Bucky finally gave into the urge to rub his eye or the way Tony tried to hide a wayward sniffle into the blanket, and Bucky would’ve let them have this time to compose themselves.

That was, until Tony sneezed.

Admittedly, it was an adorable little thing and the wide, guilty eyes that stared at Bucky were equally as endearing, but Bucky was very good at appearing appropriately stern even in the face of something that precious.

“Up. Up, come on, honey, before you actually do get sick,” he beckoned Tony and stood up to serve as an example, but Tony remained where he was, cocooned in the blanket and pouting up at him. “Fine,” Bucky broke out into a grin, relishing in how good it felt to smile, then bent down and scooped Tony up into his arms without anymore fanfare. Tony scrambled a little as he lost solid ground, hands and arms reappearing from underneath the blanket to clutch at Bucky’s neck, even if it wasn’t really necessary.

He would never let Tony fall.

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“Let’s, uh—” Tony shook his head and laughed just before he was unceremoniously dropped onto the couch, the *oomph* escaping him only partially exaggerated, “Let’s never tell anyone about what just happened, yeah? Rhodey does not need anymore reasons to call us giant saps.”

James was already sidling up right next to him without missing a single beat. “He’s not exactly wrong though, is he?”
Tony didn’t waste any time either and indulged his present need for both comfort and warmth by promptly wrapping himself around James. “No, but I don’t need him walking around with that *glint* in his eye. He’s already too damn smug for his own good, babe.”

Tony’s attempt to impersonate an octopus didn’t go unnoticed and James only huffed an indulgent laugh, then began to rearrange Tony more to his liking, letting one of Tony’s legs drape over Bucky’s knee, while Tony’s arms remained firmly around Bucky’s middle.

“By the way,” Bucky added casually as he shifted so that his own arms were wrapped comfortably around Tony, “Rhodes is actually upstairs right now.”

Tony’s eyes went wide and he looked up at James, who was sporting a smug look of his own. “Oh my god, no, we gotta get up there or someone might actually die today.”

James outright grinned, then planted a kiss to his temple and tucked Tony’s head back into the crook of his neck, “*Kotyonok, prelest’ moya*, my sweet, darling mechanic, someone *will* die if I go up there. Rhodes is just going to make them *wish* they were dead.”

Tony huffed, but remained where he was, especially when James took the time to drape the blanket back over him and tuck it carefully around him. He was comfortable and warm, all the alarms in his head finally silent, and frankly Tony was willing to sacrifice an ex-teammate or two to Rhodey’s wrath if it meant he didn’t have to move anytime soon.

“I’m, uh—I’m actually a little surprised,” Tony added quietly, “that the Soldier isn’t up there right now, raining vengeance and hellfire on everyone. But, uh—it’s a *good* surprise, I mean. I’m glad you’re here.”

James hummed. “Nowhere else I’d rather be. Plus, there’s always tomorrow, darlin’.”

Tony huffed, but let that comment go, promising himself he’d find some way to *distract* James and the Soldier from all these vengeful thoughts later. For now though...

For now, things were actually *okay*, Tony realized to his own surprise. Getting here wasn’t exactly conventional, but he and James had never been conventional at anything, and despite James’ self-deprecating claim earlier, they were actually decent at *this*.

His anxiety attack upstairs wasn’t his worst by far (the first few month after the “Civil War” were only rivaled by the months that followed the Battle of New York), but the entire disaster still left him shaken. When he ran, when he hid himself in the most secure place his mind could come up with—ironically, also one of the coldest in the Compound, great job, brain—it was because he was raw and vulnerable. He felt gutted, everything inside him tumbling out into the harsh light of day.

The physical effects of the anxiety attack wore off relatively quickly, but that sense of vulnerability didn’t lift as easily and had it been anyone else (save for possibly Rhodey, and even he was a *maybe*), Tony’s defensive walls would’ve sprung right up and he would’ve retreated back into his shell, deflecting and avoiding and pushing until he was left alone to stew in his misery.

But it was *James* who found him, it was *always* James, and seeing James’ own insecurities, the hesitant way he approached him, the assumption that Tony wouldn’t want him there, it helped Tony find his footing because *taking care of others*, that was something he knew how to do.

Seeing James’ vulnerability helped Tony come to terms with his own, it helped him let go of the dark thoughts swirling around in his head—*the embarrassment, the bitterness, the desperate wish that things would be different, just this once*—all of that faded away so Tony could focus on the man he
loved.

In a way, it was no different then what Tony did when he played on the Winter Soldier’s protective instincts. Focusing on each other rather than on themselves worked so well because they both had the same issue - when they looked inward, they found themselves lacking. When they looked at each other, they saw goodness and strength and something worth fighting for.

The residual anxiety, the echoes of battle, the chill of the snow, it all faded back to the same place all his bad memories called home. Tony was sure Siberia would haunt him again, but for now… For now, he pulled in a deep breath, relishing the fresh, familiar air of his lab, held it for a few seconds, then exhaled slowly.

DUM-E took that moment to roll up to them, holding a tray with two cups of something decidedly not coffee-like in its appearance.

“Thank you, aw, that’s real sweet of ya,” Bucky cooed at the robot and untangled himself from Tony to relinquish the bot of his fare.

Tony made a point to glare at the mugs. “Okay, one,” he held up a finger, “that looks like tea.”

“It is tea.”

“You heathens. You are both banned from the lab. Indefinitely.”

James had the audacity to ignore Tony’s threats, simply handing the mug right over, and Tony had half a mind to reject it out of spite, but warm tea actually sounded sort of amazing, even if he’d never admit to such treason, so he took the mug with nothing more than a disapproving scowl to which James responded with a very mature eye roll.

Tony was about to take a sip, but then stilled when it actually hit him.

James handed him the mug.

Tony stared at the damn thing, in his hands, then just blinked as his brain rebooted.

James had picked up on this particular quirk very early on, during their very first lunch together, even before New York or that first less-than-stellar BARF session. They grabbed some excellent pasta down at the cafeteria, James carried the food up, and he was the one to hand the container to Tony. He tried to at least, because Tony froze right up. He was about to make an excuse or just go with his usual “I don’t like to be handed things,” which made him sound every inch the pretentious, better-than-you one-percenter, but before Tony’s mouth remembered how to form words, James, too damn clever for his own good, figured it out on his own. He must’ve realized that this was just one of Tony’s things, and barely missing a beat, James just placed the container in front of Tony, then opened up his own and dug right in, asking Tony a question about the Compound facilities.

He never handed Tony anything else again, but today the Winter Soldier himself must’ve been just frazzled enough to forget Tony’s aversion.

When Tony finally grasped that James had overcome even this, warmth that had nothing to do with the hot cup of tea blossomed and spread inside him, making his chest swell, and his stomach clenched with a pleasant sort of flutter.

“Tony, honey, you alright?”
That was James’ concerned mother hen tone, all traces of earlier teasing gone, and Tony realized he was just sitting there, staring at his tea.

He quickly managed a cheeky grin and a wink, before including both James and DUM-E in the scrutinizing gaze that followed.

“And two— because yes, there is a two, gorgeous— drinking anything made by DUM-E is just a new and exciting way to poison yourself.”

“Actually, Boss,” Friday chimed right in, “I monitored him and the tea was made to perfection.”

Tony frowned. “No motor oil?”

“Not even a drop.”

He took a sip of the tea, savoring the warmth and the taste.

“Huh. When did this happen?” This he directed at James, who was looking almost bashful.

“I may have been teaching the bots a few things here and there,” James admitted, then took a sip of his own.

Tony’s frown turned into confusion, then into near awe as he watched James.

“Oh my god, babe, I think you’ve done the impossible.”

“To be fair, we’re still working on the smoothies. DUM-E, the poor soul, is convinced the oil helps with the consistency.”

Tony’s heart swelled even more, nothing but warmth and affection, and he realized that everything else that happened today was worth it because he and James ended up here. He wondered if it’d be in bad taste to send Steve a gift basket.

Thanks for inadvertently bringing me and my boyfriend closer together, you asshole.

After one more long sip, Tony placed the mug onto the bench by couch and then unceremoniously grabbed James’ mug, ignoring the man’s indignant protests. That mug ended up next to its twin and free of anything that could be spilled, Tony pushed and prodded until James gave in and laid down onto the couch, pulling Tony down with him. Tony crawled over the man, sneaked a kiss to the apple of James’ cheek, earning himself a bashful huff, so uncharacteristic of the Winter Soldier, but so perfectly James. One purposefully seductive wiggle later and Tony was comfortably wedged between James and the back of the couch, one leg tossed over James, Tony’s arm wrapped tightly around that perfectly taut, narrow waist, and Tony was once again using the super soldier as his personal pillow, with James’ right arm draped over him.

James did not fit that well on this couch— Tony made a mental note to buy a bigger couch and how had this not happened already?— but he was a good sport about it, one leg draped over the side of the couch, the other stretched out over the armrest, the rest of him snug and perfect against Tony.

Ever so helpful, DUM-E grabbed the blanket and tossed it over them, missing his mark just enough to hit them both in the face, but James fixed that quickly enough while ignoring Tony’s muffled comment about teaching DUM-E how to properly mother hen.

The world still waited for them back upstairs where there was drama and stings of betrayal and painful truths told in the worst possible ways. Tony had to find a way to work with Steve again, to
quell the agitation of everyone else around them, to keep the Soldier from breaking something at the Compound with Steve’s face, to keep this entire disaster of an operation afloat—

The damn world could wait a little longer. Here, they were both warm and comfortable, safe and alone, save for Tony’s mechanical and digital children and the familiar hum of his lab.

“Love you,” Tony whispered again after a few minutes of silence, tasting the words on his tongue and finding them to be even sweeter now. Those words had been said to people who didn’t deserve them, to people who betrayed him, to people who did love him back, but not enough to accept every part of him.

There were very few times Tony didn’t regret saying those three simple words.

“Love you too, sweetheart,” James answered, no hesitation, no qualifier, and it was easier to believe, easier than ever, that this would be one of those times too.

Chapter End Notes

(I know some of you probably wanted more salt in your life, but fluff first, death and destruction later. You all know I’d never deprive you of Rhodey’s Wrath(TM). And the Soldier... well, he's a man who needs to pick the perfect time to strike ;3)
Rhodey didn’t smile outright when Friday announced that Barnes was headed down to the lab, but he couldn’t deny the bit of warmth blossoming in his chest.

*Good choice, Sergeant.*

Having received the confirmation he needed, Rhodey stepped into the elevator and Friday directed it to the appropriate floor without any further prompting.

Her earlier plea for help found him in the middle of a strategy session with Hope. *Anxiety attack,* Friday had said, preceded by a less-than-stellar meeting between Tony and the former Avengers.

All Rhodey could do in that moment was heave an exasperated sigh and dodge Hope’s knowing looks. The fact that Tony went up to greet the interlopers on his own? Entirely unsurprising. Frankly, Tony showed uncharacteristic restraint by waiting so long to go up there in the first place.

The fact that shit hit the fan so quickly wasn’t much of a surprise either. They were all a goddamn ticking time bomb, just waiting to explode and while Tony’s peacekeeping mission was an admirable attempt, Rhodey had a bad feeling it was ultimately futile. Amicability, diplomacy, *getting along,* none of that was going to work, not until everyone had the opportunity to let go of their pent up emotions. Every one of them had so much on their mind, anger and hurt, accusations and bitterness, that there was no way they’d all just grit their teeth and move on with their lives.

In fact, Rhodey had been waiting for *years* to release some of his pent up emotions.

He excused himself after telling a disappointed Hope that he needed to do this alone (he placated her by promising that she could take a swing at the rogue Avengers after he was done with them), but he didn’t rush into action just yet.

He knew Barnes would be contacted too and a part of Rhodey wanted to see what the man would do. It was a test, in a way, and when he heard Friday’s, “Mr. Barnes is on his way to the lab, to see Boss,” it became validation of the tentative trust Rhodey had placed in Barnes. It was relief and hope all rolled into one, to finally have another person, after all these years, who would put Tony first.

He would’ve checked on Tony eventually had Barnes made a different choice (and still would, after the lover boys were well and truly done professing their undying love to each other), but this arrangement was so much better. Barnes was exactly where he should be, taking care of Tony, and Rhodey…

Well, he had other matters to attend to.

This time, he couldn’t help but smile, a sharp, bitter thing with just a touch of vindictive glee. He refused to feel bad about it.

The elevator stopped, the doors soundlessly opening to spit him out on the former Avengers’ floor and he took unhurried, measured strides down the hall. Even this far away, he could already hear the raised voices of the others.

“Sam, I realize you’re angry, but I did what I had to, what I thought was right—”

“Lying? Since when is *lying* the right thing to do? I thought Captain America was better than that!”
“Don’t, okay? Don’t pin me against that ideal. I make mistakes too, but I didn’t lie, I just—”

“Told us jackshit about what happened, yeah.” That was Barton, coming off as acerbic as always, but having it directed at one of his own was a nice change. “You and Natasha both. Fuck, I still can’t believe you both knew, but didn’t bother to tell anyone. And now she just takes off without a word while you stand here and try to bullshit us? Yeah, I don’t wanna hear it. Don’t get me wrong, Stark is still an ass, but when I left my family, that was for you, Steve, because I thought you were fighting for something bigger than all of us. Turns out, you were just trying to protect your bestie from Stark’s wrath.”

*Give the man a fuckin’ prize,* Rhodey thought uncharitably, but he didn’t let himself enjoy the infighting too much. Had the circumstances been different, this would’ve been downright amusing, but the mess last year had left *all of them* broken in some way or another.

Damn them all for causing Tony so much heartache and pain. They were still doing it, in fact, even now, all because Rogers had to go and open his big mouth to appease his own guilty conscience, without sparing a single thought as to how it would affect Tony, or hell, even Barnes for that matter.

A few more steps put Rhodey right against the wall next to the entrance that would lead him into the kitchen. There was a good chance someone heard his approach, but he’d risk it for a bit more eavesdropping. After all, this was his damn Compound. He could stand here and listen if he wanted to.

“I was trying to protect Bucky, yes, but the Accords, they were a problem too, and I never— I never meant to put one over the other.”

“You should’ve still told us about Siberia.” Sam’s voice was pained. “Barnes… Fuck, he killed his parents.”

“No, he didn’t! Why can’t anyone see that he was being controlled by Hydra?”

“Dude, we know he was brainwashed or whatever,” Lang chimed in, his words uncharacteristically sharp, “we’re not complete idiots, but we all thought Stark went over there to *kill* you two. Turns out, it was the complete opposite.”

“You had no problem fighting on our side in Germany, Scott. That was before Siberia.”

“Yeah, and that’s on me,” Lang said, and Rhodey could hear actual regret in the man’s answer to Rogers, “I ran headfirst into something I didn’t understand, I trusted the wrong people, and I missed out on another year of my daughter’s life. I’m willing to take responsibility for my own dumbass actions. Are you?”

The noise Rogers made was downright pained. “You think I don’t hate how things turned out? I regret this too, more than you know. I should’ve told you the truth, I know that, but when we were in that bunker, what the hell was I supposed to do? Tony attacked us! If he would’ve just *listened—*”

“So what, I should’ve just let Tony kill us?”

Wilson sighed and Rhodey could picture him shaking his head. “Remember how you told me about your fight with Barnes on top of the Hellicarrier, back in D.C.?” Wilson asked and continued when Rogers remained silent. “You told me that you outright refused to fight Barnes, even though the man was out of his mind. He was trying to kill you too, but you didn’t fight back. Why was that, Steve?”
Steve’s mumbled “Because Bucky’s my friend,” had anger, pure and raw, flaring up in Rhodey’s chest. These people never did deserve Tony.

It was that righteous fury that finally coaxed him back into action and Rhodey chose that moment to round the corner and appear at the threshold.

“And that about sums it up, doesn’t it? You never gave a damn about Tony.”

The conversation stopped, everyone’s eyes pivoting to him, and Wilson uttered his name, obviously surprised to see him up here, but Rogers just offered him that patented stubborn look.

“Rhodes, you know that’s not true.”

Rhodey hummed, not bothering to grace that with an answer just yet, and instead surveyed everyone in the room. Wilson was stiff-backed and grimacing a few feet away from Rogers. Lang, next to him, was keeping silent, wide eyes trained on Rhodey. Hawkeye was hunched over, elbows digging into his knees where he was sitting up on the table with his feet on one of the chairs. Romanoff was nowhere to be seen.

He would’ve preferred all five here for this, but worst case scenario, he’d just leave Romanoff to the Winter Soldier’s tender ministrations.

“If you’re here to give us a tongue lashing,” Barton broke the silence when Rhodey’s eyes met his, “then I’m not sticking around for that.” The man grunted and pushed himself off table, nearly upending the chair in the process. “I’m sick of dealing with all of this. I should’ve just stayed in retirement.”

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve said since you got here,” Rhodey remarked with a smirk, then ignored Barton giving him the finger. “You sure you don’t wanna stick around though? Defend your precious Captain America?”

The poisonous glare that was directed at Rhodey now swung over to Rogers as Barton sneered, “Turns out I shouldn’t have trusted him either.”

“Clint, please don’t say that,” Rogers pleaded, but it made no impact on the furious look on the archer’s face.

“You’re no better than Stark. Keeping shit from us, pushing your own selfish agenda.”

“You gotta remember, Barton,” Rhodey added conversationally, inappropriately gleeful to plunge the proverbial knife even deeper, “Rogers can’t help himself. Everyone else just pales in comparison to his precious Bucky Barnes.”

Rogers’ jaw clenched. “You’re telling me you’re not the same way with Tony? You’re not willing to do whatever it takes to protect him?”

Here Rhodey’s smirk sharpened. “You mean burn the whole world down just for him? Yeah, maybe,” he shrugged, “depends on which part of the world I need to torch. I am willing to do a lot of things for Tony though, you’re correct there, Captain. Some unsavory, downright painful things,” he made sure to include all the men in his gaze when he uttered the word, “but if and when I do those things, I sure as hell won’t be acting like a damn martyr about it.”

Wilson heaved a weary sigh then and tried to catch Rhodey’s eye. “Listen, Rhodes, I’m really sorry. None of us knew. Shit, I can’t imagine how Stark must’ve felt, he must’ve been devastated when he found out about his parents, and I get that, I do, but—”
“No, you know what, zip it, I don’t want hear it,” Rhodey’s eyes flashed, the heat of his anger flaring out again, spilling over and erasing the smirk off his face, “all of you spent years talking shit about Tony, disrespecting him, treating him like the damn enemy, all the while having no problem living off his dime—”

“That’s not fair, Rhodes—”

“—so I don’t give a fuck about the apologies you have to offer now.” Rhodey didn’t want to hear about fair, not from Wilson, not from anyone. “Oh, you’ve been lied to by your boy Rogers over here? Feeling a little guilty about accusing Tony of shit he didn’t do? You all had a habit of doing exactly that long before the Accords came into play, so please, don’t expect me to think anything’s changed.”

“Yeah, you know what, I was right the first time, I’m not sticking around for this,” Barton bit out and took a step forward, but Rhodey didn’t budge from his spot at the threshold.

“No one is leaving until I make a few things very clear.”

Barton snarled, showing a flash of teeth, meant to be intimidating but failing. “Please, you think I’m afraid of you, War Machine?”

“Oh, Barton, War Machine is the least of your concerns,” Rhodey offered, tone saccharine sweet, mostly so he could get that predictable annoyed reaction out of the archer. “Now sit the fuck down before I make you.”

For once, Barton did what he was told and nearly threw himself down into the nearest chair, the thing protesting and creaking under the unnecessary force.

Rhodey spared the rest of them a withering glare before continuing. “Good, great, thank you. Since I wouldn’t want Barton over here to get an aneurysm from scowling so hard, I’m gonna make this short and sweet and you four better listen. I’m Tony’s best friend, but I’m also the man who runs this entire shindig and the guy who happens to hold your fragile fate in his hands.”

“In what sense exactly?”

“In the sense that I’ve actually been going easy on you, Rogers, and the only reason you’re all lounging around here with too much time on your hands to act like assholes is because of Tony. He wants all of us to move on, to co-exist, for the greater good, and he’s been the one keeping the rest of us from tearing you all apart.”

Rogers tried to open his mouth again, but Rhodey cut him off with a look.

“Tony came up here, to apologize, and instead, one of you assholes gave him an anxiety attack. That alone is reason enough to kick your ass, but for Tony’s sake, I’ll give you one more chance, so here’s the deal. Any of you touch him again, so much as look at him funny, and I will ruin each and every one of you.”

“What can you even do to us?” Barton challenged, but even his arrogant demeanor had been tempered and Rhodey was pleased that he could still intimidate people into submission like this. “The Council wanted us back here.”

“True, but if it came down to it, if we decided to press the issue, who do you think the Council will choose? The current Avengers, who are a well-funded, well-trained team with a long list of successes, or a bunch of washed-up has-beens? Trust me, the Council doesn’t scare me. If you push me, I will push back, and even if you don’t end up in jail, I will make sure that all of you are out on
your ass, destitute. Not a penny to your damn name and not a single ally willing to lend a hand.”

“Rhodes, come on, you’re blowing this out of proportion, we’re not the enemy.”

Barton added to Wilson’s plea, “You’re not all-powerful either. Maybe you have some clout with the Council, maybe with the Air Force, but that’s it.”

Rhodey was certain the sharp smile he offered the men wasn’t reassuring. “You’re right, Barton, I’m not all-powerful, but I’m also not alone and neither is Tony. I don’t know if you know this, but two of the most powerful, most influential CEOs of our time consider Tony their close, personal friend. Trust me, if you’re not afraid of me, you will be afraid of Pepper Potts and Hope van Dyne. Jobs?”

Rhodes began to count on his fingers. “Blacklisted for life. Credit histories, financial records? Ruined. Media attention? Those two will rake you over the coals, make the world turn on you in a heartbeat, and they’ll look fantastic doing it. I’ll just make sure no branch of the military ever goes near you and I’ll stop keeping tabs on the more zealous parts of the spy community that want to tear some of you apart after what went down with SHIELD.”

A brief pause to let the words, the threats sink in— god, he hoped they were sinking in— before Rhodey added casually, “And if none of that is incentive enough, don’t forget that we also happen to have the Hulk.”

*And the Winter Soldier, but I’ll let you idiots find that out on your own.*

He was faced with sullen, frowning expressions when he finished, all except Lang who shot a hand up in the air when Rhodey paused.

“Put your hand down,” Rhodey barely refrained from rolling his eyes, “we’re not in school, for God’s sake. What do you want, Lang?”

“I just want to say that you’re totally right, we all fucked up, I’m sorry, I already apologized to Tony, but I still really, really don’t want either you, or Hope, or the Hulk to kill me, and I would, uh—”

Lang grimaced awkwardly when he realized everyone’s eyes were on him, “I don’t wanna die is what I’m trying to say.”

Rhodey blinked, trying to parse out what the hell Lang was going on about. “You… apologized to Tony?”

“I did, yeah,” Lang said, then made a face at Barton and his muttered *Brown noser,* “I know it doesn’t make up for anything, that’s not what I’m trying to say. I just… can I just room somewhere else for a while? Please? I’ll sleep in the lounge, I don’t mind, but I’m not really comfortable being up here anymore.”

This time, Rhodey did roll his eyes, while his brain processed the new information. He’d have to talk to Tony and Barnes (and Hope) to see what their read on Scott Lang was. “We have a reputation to maintain, so no, you’re not sleeping in the lounge. Just— go talk to Alice or something, she can help you out.” He made shooing motion with his hand and Lang jumped out of his seat and hurried out of the kitchen.

He stopped just as he was about to pass Rhodey. “Can I just add, uh— Colonel, sir, that somehow you’re even more terrifying out of the War Machine suit? And, erm— sorry— about your legs and stuff.” He grimaced again, then shook his head. “I’m gonna go before I say something stupid.”

“That’s probably smart, yeah,” Rhodey said, then paid Lang no more mind as the man darted down the hall.
“If I pretend to apologize and kiss your ass, does it mean I can leave too?” Barton predictably asked next. Rhodey regarded the man for a second, then shrugged.

“Do what you want. Just know that we’ll be watching and if you take a step out of line, especially if Tony is involved, I will make the Raft look like the damn Bahamas.”

Barton muttered something under his breath, but he remained where he was, sprawled in his chair. Rhodey didn’t bother deciphering his mumbled words, eyes already back on Wilson and Rogers.

**Rogers.** The epicenter of this whole entire disaster.

“Anything to say, Captain?”

“I don’t think you’re approaching this the right way, Rhodes.” The man refused to meet his eyes. “Sam’s right, we’re not your enemy and this isn’t how a leader behaves.”

Wow, was he was actually being *reprimanded* by Captain America again? *Cross that one off the bucket list.*

“How does a leader behave then? Go against the will of 117 countries, maybe?” Rhodey began listing things off. “Lie to his teammate for years? Beat a grieving man bloody and then leave him to die? No, wait, it’s letting your pet witch scramble Tony’s brain because she was in a pissy mood.”

“Don’t forget giving him an anxiety attack,” Barton muttered, to the surprise of both Rogers and Wilson, the latter of whom hissed Barton’s name in warning. “What? I’m pissed at all of you right now, I can say whatever the hell I want.”

Rhodey was torn between a sigh and a smile. Barton was obviously enjoying not being the center of Rhodey’s wrath any longer and taking the opportunity to indulge in his own vindictive streak.

God, they were all a dysfunctional disaster.

“Yes, there is that too. Not to mention, having all of you back here, strutting around like you own the damn place. Must be nice, coming back to a clean house. While you went on your Wakandan vacation last year, we were left with the clean-up. Ross breathing down our necks, the Accords slipping out of our control, everyone out for blood. That giant hole in Tony’s chest and my shitty legs sure didn’t help the situation.”

Wilson flinched. “I’m sorry about what happened, Rhodes, we never meant for anyone to— to get hurt like that. But the Accords, they were dangerous and—”

“And Rogers was planning to sign them!” Rhodey nearly shouted, then took a step closer. Honestly, his injury was already no more than a footnote on a chapter of his life. It was part of his job, a risk he took on willingly. Everything else that happened though? “You were going to sign the damn papers,” he directed the accusation at Rogers, “but then you heard about Maximoff and that was it. Doesn’t take much for you to lose your faith in Tony, does it? Everyone else, they all get second chances, third, fourth, but not Tony. You never gave him the benefit of a doubt, you’ve never trusted him.”

“That’s not true. I did trust Tony.”

The near petulance of that answer, the way Rogers still refused to meet his eyes while lying through his teeth, it made Rhodey’s blood boil, but his anger just manifested in a sardonic laugh. “Right. You
trusted Tony. That’s why you called him up when you found out Hydra infiltrated SHIELD. That’s why you didn’t put all the blame for Ultron on Tony’s shoulders. That’s why you were so upfront with him about your boy’s kill count. Gosh, the trust is practically oozing out of you, Rogers.”

“With all due respect, you weren’t here for any of that, Rhodes,” Rogers said and finally there were those infamous baby blues, looking stubbornly back at him. “You don’t know anything about our team and what kind of relationship we had with Tony. I know I made mistakes, but Tony isn’t blameless either.”

So damn stubborn. Even here, in the face of undeniable evidence that his actions hurt someone, that he screwed up. Rhodey recognized that stubbornness, one that approached stupidity far too quickly, but the difference was that Tony’s stubbornness usually only hurt him. Rogers’ stubbornness hurt everyone else.

Still, Rhodey let himself smile at the remark. “Oh, trust me, I know better than all of you just how flawed Tony is, but there is a difference between an imperfect man and a villain, wouldn’t you say, Captain?” He glanced around at the others, then back to Rogers again. “Here’s the real truth. You didn’t trust him, you didn’t respect him. Hell, I don’t know if you ever even liked him.”

“Please don’t put words in my mouth. I cared about Tony— still do, as a matter of fact—”

“Yeah? Is that why my best friend ran out of here in a panic?”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt him—”

“Right, just like you weren’t trying to hurt him when you decided to lie. What was it you said? ‘I was sparing you, but I guess I was really sparing myself’?”

Rogers faltered. “You— Tony got my letter?”

“Sure did, along with that piece of shit phone.” He was well aware the other two were now watching this exchange like a particularly fascinating game of tennis, but he didn’t mind putting on a show and he exaggerated his disbelieving scoff when the furrow between the Captain’s brows deepened. “Did you really think he was gonna call you? Listen to me, pal, Tony doesn’t need you, he has never needed you. I made the mistake of leaving him with you vultures once, I’m not doing that again. He has people who care about him now, people who will defend him, people who will—” He almost said kill for him, but decided to tone down the dramatics. “Well, you’ll find out for yourself soon enough.”

“We weren’t trying to—” Wilson began, then shrunk back under Rhodey’s glare. “Listen, Rhodes, what Steve did, yeah, that’s fucked up, but no one was trying to hurt Stark just now. Everything just — went to shit.” Possibly heartened by the fact that Rhodey was letting him speak, Wilson shrugged and continued. “No one was attacking Stark, Steve just didn’t think things through when he went to grab him. Hell, none of us knew that Stark has been dealing with anxiety that severe.”

“So what? It’s okay because you didn’t know?”

“No, no, that’s not what I’m trying to say—”

“Because all I’m hearing are excuses—”

“—I’m just trying to say that you’re acting like we’re the bad guys here and that’s not exactly fair. You’re acting like—”

“Like we tried to kill Stark up here,” Barton chimed in, causing Wilson to grimace. Whether or not
Barton finished that train of thought correctly, Rhodey didn’t know. He did wonder however whether Barton was now actively trying to throw Rogers under the bus. *Interesting.*

“Funny you should phrase it like that, Barton, because one of you *did* try to kill my best friend. Isn’t that right, Captain? It’s too bad the reactor wasn’t still inside Tony, huh?”

Back then, when it all happened, Rhodey was barely out of his own anesthesia, woken up only to find out that Tony was in surgery, being stitched together by Dr. Cho and her team. He could still remember the squeak and scrape of the wheelchair against the linoleum floor as he wheeled himself over to his best friend’s room, the hours spent just sitting there, hopeless and useless, watching Tony’s shallow breaths, listening to the erratic noise of the heart monitor, wondering if this was it, if this was him watching his best friend—*his brother*—slowly suffocate and die.

That deep, dark gash across Tony’s chest was stark and vivid before his eyes and the steadying breath didn’t help against the onslaught of memories. Maybe Rogers was right, maybe Rhodey was supposed to be everyone’s leader, objective and fair, strong and courageous. Right now though, right now he was just *Rhodey*, a guy who almost had his family taken away from him.

“You almost killed Tony,” he reiterated quietly, finally able to give that accusation life.

“I wasn’t—” Rogers grit his teeth, expression twisting as he let out a frustrated noise, “I wasn’t trying to kill him, I was just trying to *stop* him! It was self-defense, he was the one attacking *us*—”

The gauntlets materialized with nothing more than a flick of his wrists and before Rogers had the chance to offer more bullshit, Rhodey grabbed him by the collar, metal curling around the thin material of the shirt, and using the additional power of both the gauntlets and the legs braces, he pushed the man back and slammed him against the refrigerator door.

“You left Tony in a disabled suit, in the middle of fuckin’ Siberia, to *die,*” he hissed, nose to nose with the Captain now, who regarded him with wide eyes, momentarily taken by surprise that Rhodey could manhandle him like this. “I had to be the one to put him back together. I had to be the one to watch him struggle with every fuckin’ breath for *weeks.* You think some piece of shit letter and your half-assed apologies are going to make up for that? You never trusted him, you treated him like he was never good enough, and then you lied to his face for years. As far as I’m concerned, he should’ve blasted a hole right through you, Rogers.”

“Rhodes, hey, there’s no need—”

“No need for what, Wilson? Violence?” To hammer the point home, Rhodes pulled Rogers back and then slammed him against the refrigerator one more time. He knew his advantage wouldn’t last long, but Rogers was still looking dazed, so he had another moment or two. “Isn’t this how your boy solves all his problems? He almost killed Tony for going after Barnes, so maybe I should take a page out of his book and do the same for trying to hurt *my* best friend.”

“I’m sorry,” Rogers choked out, what with the gauntlets digging into his throat, “I know I made a mistake. I should’ve checked on him, but Bucky, he was injured too—”

Rogers flew across the room as Rhodey flung him and the soldier slammed against the cupboards under the sink with a satisfying crack. The fury that flooded Rhodey at the man’s words would’ve probably given him enough power to do that barehanded, but the gauntlets certainly helped.

Wilson squatted next to Rogers, who was already sitting up and waving the man away, much to Rhodey’s disappointment. Barton regarded the whole scene with far more amusement than the man had any right to, but he wasn’t Rhodey’s main concern.
“It’s always about your Bucky, isn’t it?” he hissed, towering over Rogers, “Bucky, Bucky, Bucky. You’d sell us all to the devil in a heartbeat for him, wouldn’t you?”

The way Rogers’ face twisted with guilt, that momentary hesitation before he tried to argue the point, it was enough to show the other two what Rhodey already knew. Rogers did offer more platitudes, empty words of denial, but it wasn’t enough. Even Barton and Wilson could finally see the truth. Rogers’ only concern had always been Barnes.

There was something none of them knew though, not yet, something so gratifying that Rhodey only wished he could rub it in Rogers’ face right here and now.

Your boy Barnes, the man you sacrificed everything and everyone for, he’s with Tony as we speak, pledging his loyalty, declaring his love, choosing him over you. I can guarantee you’re the furthest thing from his mind.

Oh, it would’ve been delicious, sweet revenge, but this was for the love birds to declare to the world. Rhodey would just have to be satisfied with front row seats to the show.

He watched as Rogers made his way up to standing, gingerly rubbing one of his elbows. One of Rhodey’s hands, still ensconced in metal, wiggled the fingers in warning.

“Try something with me and I’ll put the entire suit on to kick your ass.”

Rogers eyed him, appearing less apprehensive than he should be, but he didn’t hurry to make a move.

“You’re the only one itching for a fight, Rhodes,” he said and Rhodey barely refrained from rolling his eyes, “in fact, I haven’t tried to attack anyone. I can’t say the same for any of you. I’ve been insulted, I’ve been punched and apparently, if I keep my mouth shut I’m wrong,” Rogers bit out, blue eyes flashing defensively, “but if I say something, I’m still at fault.”

“Jesus Christ, I can’t believe you said that with a straight face,” Rhodey remarked, “cry me a fuckin’ river, Rogers. We don’t owe you shit. We don’t owe you civility, we don’t owe you respect. The only reason you’re standing here,” Rhodes motioned to him with his gloved hand, “trying to come off like some victim, is because Tony is a better man than me.”

He wanted to say more, wanted to yell and shout until something got through Rogers’ thick skull, but the words died half way down his throat. Taking in the three men, he realized nothing he said would fix anything. Barton was scowling, although it was a healthy mix of anger at both Rogers as well as the rest of the world. Wilson— well, Rhodey almost pitied the man because it was obvious that the realization of “I fucked up,” was finally settling in, but it was years too late.

Rogers’ expression was shifting, the stubbornness giving way to something resembling humility, something pained, but it made no difference because every time he opened his mouth, all Rhodey heard was I did what I thought was right. Nothing else mattered.

Even now.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said it like that, I just meant…” Rogers trailed off, face contorted with what appeared to be guilt, but Rhodey wasn’t falling for it. “I’m really sorry, that’s all I wanted to say to Tony. I just wanted to talk to him, to move on from this… I didn’t mean to hurt him, Rhodes, not today, not a year ago. I want to find a way for him to forgive me, that’s all.”

“Tony doesn’t owe you forgiveness.” It was as simple as that. “He could go on his whole life hating you, resenting you, and the rest of us would be just fine with that. The thing is, he’s Tony, so doesn’t
matter what you did, what you will do, he’s gonna keep trying to put this whole mess back together. It’s who he is. The difference now, however, is that he has all of us, watching his back. Any of you hurt Tony again, hurt any one of my people, and I will make sure you spend the rest of your miserable lives regretting it.”

He turned on his heels and marched out of the room, one leg in front of the other, his head held high as he ignored Barton’s parting jibe and Wilson calling after him, ignored whatever new, sad expression Rogers managed to plaster across his face.

Only when the elevator doors closed in front of him did Rhodey let his shoulders sag, air escaping his lungs in a great big whoosh.

Dammit but yelling at people used to be more satisfying. Unfortunately, here he was now, walking away from this more bitter and resigned than before. Maybe he was getting too old for this shit or maybe, he realized as he closed his eyes and breathed, maybe it was the fact that he was dealing with people who refused to own up to their mistakes and grow from it.

Dealing with Tony must’ve spoiled him over the years.

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Bucky immediately regretted leaving his quarters as soon as he turned the corner of the hallway that connected the shooting gallery with the main lounge area and saw Barton on the other end of it.

He should’ve just kept Tony in bed, he lamented to himself, but after a day and a half of pampering, the man was beginning to get cabin fever, so Bucky was abandoned for a very important strategy session with the New Avengers.

Bucky would’ve pitied himself if he didn’t love Tony’s dedication to the world so damn much, but unfortunately, this also left Bucky to deal people who were currently at the top of the Soldier’s hit list.

Fantastic.

“Hey!” Barton shouted across the hall, “I have something to say to you, you prick!”

Bucky tensed even further when Barton began to sway as he walked across the space, but the strange behavior was quickly explained by the bottle of some unidentified liquor in the man’s hand, one from which he took a generous swig before stumbling the rest of the way towards Bucky.

Bucky took one deep breath, but it did nothing to quell the Soldier’s excited murmurs.

Which of his bones should we break today?

You’re not helping.

Dammit, but he did want to break something today.

“Barton, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Oh, I think this is—” the man hiccuped once, “this is a great idea. Here I was, pissed off at Stark all this time, but surprise, surprise,” Barton was finally close enough to jab a finger into Bucky’s chest, “Cap fucked all of us over for you.”

Bucky didn’t move a muscle and just breathed against the overwhelming desire to wrap his metal
hand around that wrist and crush.

“Friday,” he called out instead, never taking his eyes from the smirking archer, “can you get someone else here, please? I have a feeling if I don’t have company, I might end up snapping this idiot’s neck.”

She responded right away, so Bucky could only hope whoever that someone was arrived quickly. The Soldier’s patience was already frayed and if Barton pushed just enough, this confrontation could only go one way.

“I don’t want to fight you, Barton. I’m sorry if you’re mad at Steve and me. I get it, I do. We both fucked up, big time, but so did you.”

The archer’s face contorted into an unattractive scowl. “I woulda never left my family if I’d known I was just helping Steve protect you.”

“No, but you did leave them to protect Maximoff. How is that any better?”

Before Barton could offer up an excuse, both Alice and Banner dashed into the hallway and stopped a few feet away when they saw the two of them facing off.

“What’s going on here?” Alice demanded and Bucky saw her hand twitch for the gun at her side, although she chose not to reach for it yet. “Do I need to get security?”

Banner gave a humorless, tight-lipped smile and pointed at himself. “I’m security, by the way, so keep that in mind.”

Bucky would’ve smiled at the exchange—these two were a cute couple, no matter how much they denied not being together—but his current predicament left little room for amusement. Barton’s foul, alcohol-laden breath was still assaulting his senses, the Soldier was ready to pounce and destroy, and Bucky needed to get the hell out of here.

“Hawkeye here wants to talk. I do not.” Bucky held his hands up in surrender. “I’m supposed to be playing nice, so I thought someone else should deal with him.”

Both Alice and Banner got the unspoken warning. Get this idiot away from me before I kill him.

“Clint,” Bruce called out, “come on, you’re obviously drunk, so just leave Barnes alone. Let me take you up to your quarters and you can just sleep this thing off and start fresh tomorrow.”

Barton sneered drunkenly at them, looking first at Alice and Banner, then back to Bucky. The glint in his eyes didn’t bode well and Bucky’s stomach suddenly clenched with dread.

“I’m fine where I am, Banner, but what about you guys? Why you defending this asshole?”

Bucky could see exactly where this was going, especially when Barton’s expression turned vindictive.


“Barton, keep your mouth shut.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me just like you killed Stark’s parents?”

Fuck. He really should’ve listened to the Soldier.
His next move was deliberate, an aggressive step forward, and predictably, Barton lunged, swinging the bottle in his hand at Bucky. His movements were sluggish and uncoordinated though and Bucky easily dodged the bottle, then grabbed the archer by the back of the head and swung the man around, slamming the man’s head into the wall next to them. A loud crack and Bucky let go, letting Barton collapse in an unconscious heap on the floor.

He closed his eyes, letting the Soldier settle, before accepting his fate and turning to face Banner and Alice who were regarding the heap of limbs that was Hawkeye with wide eyes.

“That was self-defense, you both saw that,” he muttered, then shifted uncomfortably and looked to the floor when their eyes turned back to him. He was self-aware enough to admit that he was fearful of their judgment, especially without Tony at his side.

A few moments of silence before Alice finally asked, “Is it true?”

Bucky didn’t see a point in lying, so he nodded reluctantly.

“I assume under Hydra’s command?”

Another nod and he finally looked up when Alice just let out a contemplative “Huh…”

Banner’s too-intelligent brain was putting the pieces together far too quickly. “That’s what Tony found out in Siberia, isn’t it? He found out you killed his parents.”

Bucky couldn’t detect judgment in those words, but the tension in his body didn’t ease just yet. “It was all a set up. There was a video, surveillance footage, of the murder.” How many times was he going to relive that day? Too many times, but at least today the guilt didn’t feel like acid sliding down his throat, not with Tony’s reassurances and words of love still echoing in his head. “Steve knew about it for years. Tony was out his mind with grief, with anger. He lashed out and we… we fought back.”

“Wow, well, that sure is some context I was missing. This is, uh—” Banner rubbed the back of his head awkwardly while studying Barton’s unconscious body, “this is a clusterfuck.”

“No kidding,” Alice agreed, “but everything does make more sense all of the sudden. I could never understand why Mr. Stark came back so injured when I knew he went to Siberia to help. Also, I really feel like punching Rogers again.”

“Please don’t,” Banner parried back and Alice shrugged, looking unapologetic. When they looked back at Bucky though, that glimpse of levity dissipated.

“So what’s the verdict?” Bucky couldn’t help but ask, knowing they’d understand the real question.

“Well,” Banner tapped his fingers against his thigh, “under any other circumstances, I’d have some choice words for you. The Other Guys… not quite so many words, if you catch my drift. The thing is though,” here he smiled, a small thing, but kind, and some of Bucky’s tension finally bled away, “Tony has obviously forgiven you. More than forgiven you, actually, so I have no right to fight this fight for him. Now, if he asks me to beat you down, I will, but I’m pretty sure Tony would see any act of aggression against you as an act of war,” Banner’s smile widened, “and I don’t want to be on Iron Man’s bad side, you know?”

Alice was nodding along. “Knowing this, it changes some things, sure, but it doesn’t change the fact that you’ve been here for months now, turning your life around. You’re family and we care about you.”
Bucky breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived because Barton chose that moment to let out a pained groan. Apparently the man was slowly coming back to the land of the living.

*We should have hit him harder,* the Soldier complained and Bucky was hard pressed to disagree, but instead, he just mouthed a quick *thank you,* rewarded by reassuring smiles from both Banner and Alice, and then three of them congregated around Barton who turned over on his side and let out another pained noise as he clutched his head. A nasty bruise was already blossoming on the left side of his face.

“He seems okay,” Banner said, then sighed reluctantly, “but I should probably drag him off to Medical just to make sure.”

“Hey, Barton, you with us?” Alice called out, her tone far less gentle, and the man just groaned in reaction to the sound. “Yeah, hurts being slammed into a wall by the Winter Soldier, doesn’t it? Not a very good look for you either.”

Barton was trying to blink his eyes open, squinting up at them. “Whazzat mean?”

Alice snorted. “I’m just saying, drunk off your ass, sporting a shiner like that, on the day the mother of your children has finally decided to visit?” She clicked her tongue when Barton’s glassy eyes widened. “Shoot, did I forget to mention that? Laura’s on her way over. She’s gonna be here in a few hours.”
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

I know I answered all of zero comments from last week, but real life has been busy, so I'm just happy to get this chapter out today at all. I'll try to get to comments soon.

That being said, 5/29 marked one year since I started writing WE and I just want to thank every one of my readers. Whether you've been here since the first chapter or just read this for the first time, I have appreciated all of your support, the kudos, the comments, everything. Thank you for a wonderful year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce gave a terse order to stay put and let the concoction do its work, then left the room without any additional fanfare. The ensuing silence wasn’t jarring given that the man had little to say to Clint even before the hasty exit, nothing more than a frustrated reprimand and a “You’re lucky you’re not dead,” but it left Clint alone with his thoughts and somehow that was worse than listening to the Jolly Green listing all the ways in which Clint was an idiot.

Adding insult to injury, his head was pounding.

The lights were at a quarter strength, there were no annoying monitors to interrupt the quiet, and yet, none of it helped. Gingerly, Clint rubbed one of his temples, but the pressure barely did anything.

He couldn’t even pinpoint the source of the pain. It could’ve been due to the familiar SHIELD-crafted serum, utilized when a drunk spy needed to be mission-ready at a moment’s notice; the meds targeted your mental facilities, but did nothing for rest of the hangover, still leaving you to suffer through the headache and the nausea. Granted, the steady thrum of pain also could’ve been attributed to his face becoming intimately familiar with a wall, courtesy of the Winter Soldier.

Approaching, harassing, and challenging Barnes while stone-cold drunk was one of the more idiotic things he’d done recently, but what was another line added to the fucking list?

His anger flared, in time with the pulse pounding through his head, but there was no one here, nothing to lash out at, no lightning rod for his bad temper.

It ate away at him, this damn, red-hot anger. Day after day, it sat there festering inside him, rearing to get out, and when it did, like clockwork, he was told to shove it right back down.

Stop this, Clint.

Clint, that’s enough.

Barton, I don’t want to hear another word out of you.

Shut up, Clint.

Shut up, shut up, shut up.

Every time someone pushed, he pushed back harder, he couldn’t help himself, and then it would all
devolved into a fucked up feedback loop that he didn’t know how to break.

It was worse, here.

He hated himself, hated the admission that it was easier back in Wakanda, on those nights under the dark sky littered with unfamiliar constellations, when it was just him and Wanda.

Wanda let him speak, she let him rant and yell and get this anger out of him until he could finally begin to feel empty.

She was always there to encourage this dark, sharp thing inside him and he clung to her presence like a damn infant. He would explain how angry he was with Stark and she would agree and it felt like validation. It was so easy back then, to have Stark as the one target for all the shit festering inside him. No doubt, no uncertainty, no regrets. Stark screwed them over, chose their enemies over the team, and was it any wonder? He was a murderer who destroyed families, uncaring for anything other than his own selfish pleasure. Cavalier playboy. Arrogant know-it-all. Merchant of Death

He remembered Wanda’s voice, the way she hissed that moniker into his ear.

Hating Stark was simple when there was someone next to him to whisper into the hot, stifling air of the Wakandan night, You were right to fight him, Clint, we are the heroes of this story.

So much for heroism. Wanda turned out be unhinged, attacking Stark without provocation, then nearly scrambling Lang’s brains. Steve lied to them all, didn’t bother divulging the fact that his bestie was responsible for killing the Starks.

When they were all broken out of the Raft and taken to Wakanda, when T’Challa described what he saw when he picked up the two super soldiers in Siberia— bloody, barely able to walk, missing a limb— it confirmed everything Clint believed.

You gotta watch your back with this guy. There’s a chance he’s gonna break it.

Steve and Barnes went to Siberia to shut down an imminent threat and Stark followed them and then nearly killed them on Ross’ orders, like the lapdog that he was.

Turned out it was all lies. Nothing but lies.

Clint didn’t have all the details about what happened in that bunker, but the idea of watching footage of your family being killed while the killer was standing right there… What would he have done if that was him in there, watching Barnes— brainwashed or otherwise— murdering Laura? One of his children?

A wave of nausea rolled through him and he was sure it had nothing to do with the after-effects of his drinking binge.

He was still angry, but now he was angry with both Stark and Steve, and the rest of the goddamn world.

He was angry with himself too, but that was harder to admit. Sometimes… Sometimes he wished that Wanda had done something to him, scrambled his brains just like Loki did. What a simple explanation that would have been. It wasn’t me.

He never thought he’d want something like that to happen again, to lose his autonomy to a madman, but this… This was worse. Strange had told them that Wanda’s magic did amplify their sentiments, created a self-sustaining feedback loop of bitterness and hate, but there was no outright manipulation.
No one brainwashed them.

Everything that happened in the past year and half was on him. No one else left to take the blame.

Maybe that was why he was still lashing out. Away from Wanda and her residual magic, Clint was forced to reexamine his own thoughts. How much of his anger was attributed to her and how much of it was purely him?

Self-reflection was not a spy’s strong suit, but right now all he had left was goddamn self-reflection.

A miserable groan escaped past his lips and he hunched on himself, letting his head rest against his palms, let the elbows dig painfully into the meat of his thighs. He wasn’t sure how long he sat there like that, willing his headache to go away, willing the bitterness to settle.

A quiet hiss of the sliding glass door announced someone entering the room. Clint didn’t bother moving.

“Banner, if you’re here with another passive-aggressive lecture, I don’t want to hear it. For fuck’s sake, at least wait until my head stopped pounding.”

“Clint.”

Clint’s head shot straight up—because that wasn’t Banner, no, it couldn’t be, she wasn’t supposed to be here yet—and even though the abrupt movement made the rest of his world spin, the person before him remained in crystal clear definition.

“Laura…” her name escaped him on an exhale and his heart stopped for one long, breathless second, before it started right back up, hammering against his ribcage. “You’re— you’re here, I didn’t—” he frantically began tugging at the IV buried in his arm, wanting, needing to get off this damn bed and go to her.

She beat him to it, closing the distance between them. Warm hands grasped his and stopped the desperate movements before he was able to pull out the tubing.

“Don’t yank on that, Clint, you’re gonna hurt yourself.”

His eyes found hers, but her expression remained unreadable. “Laura, I—” there were so many things he wanted to say, but his dry throat closed up on him. “You’re early.”

She shrugged. “The pilot made good time.”

He nodded, but the sudden burst of energy still thrummed inside him.

“I don’t need this anymore,” he tugged on the IV tubing again, “I just need to— I’m fine, I swear—”

Laura’s resigned sigh interrupted him and she batted his hands away, carefully pulling the tubing out herself. He didn’t even flinch at the flare of sharp pain.

“You always were a terrible patient,” she remarked quietly, the words reminiscent of their usual teasing, but the warmth he remembered was missing from her voice. Reaching over him, she snagged a bottle of antiseptic and a cotton pad to swipe the area down. He smiled gratefully at her when she was done and promptly hopped off the bed. The room spun again and he had to brace himself against the dresser by the bed, but the vertigo wasn’t going to stop him. His arms found her, wrapped themselves around her waist tightly, and he pressed his face into her shoulder, letting the familiar scent of her perfume soothe all the awful things inside him.
“Laura, sweetheart,” he murmured into the silk of her shirt and squeezed just a bit tighter, but as seconds ticked by, he realized her embrace wasn’t returned with equal fervor. Her arms were around him, but they hung loose and she was giving him the sort of pat on the back one would give an over-enthusiastic coworker.

Keeping his hands on her shoulders, Clint pulled away so he could see her face again, take in all the little details. As beautiful as always, but there was none of her usual warmth, no excitement, no joy. Her tight-lipped frown that had him flushing with anxiety.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” she asked, looking him over, “I don’t want you keeling over.” When he nodded, she gave his shoulder another awkward pat and then pulled out of his grasp entirely. His arms fell limply at his side and the steps she took away from him felt like a mile-wide chasm.

“Laura, please…” he pushed the words past his dry throat, but she remained where she was, a pained smile marring her beautiful features. The smile didn’t soften as she studied him further, likely noting the dark bag under one eye, the vivid bruise over the entire other half of his face. God, he must’ve looked pathetic.

“Rough day, huh?” she asked, ignoring his plea, but it didn’t even sound sarcastic, just resigned. Still, the question chafed at him and anger flared up again, as comfortable and familiar as an old friend.

Rough day?

I haven’t seen you in over a year. You told me you were going to get a divorce. I haven’t seen my kids. Does Nate even know who I am?

I don’t have my job, the one thing I was good at. Everyone is treating me like a damn criminal now, like a leper.

I can’t stop myself from wanting to scream and punch and destroy until this anger finally dies down, until I can feel something else again, but nothing seems to help and the worst part is, I can’t even tell whether I’m angry with the fucking world or with myself.

“I’ve been better,” was all he said, then shrugged and tried for a smile, “you know me. I do dumb things sometimes. Today I decided to get drunk and get into a fight with someone twice as big as me and ten times stronger.”

“Based on what I’ve heard, you’ve been getting into fights with a lot of people, Clint.”

“That isn’t— I mean—” defensive words, fighting words, bubbled up in his throat, but it wasn’t nearly as easy to lash out at Laura, not when she stood there, so stoic and even-tempered. Hard to lash out at someone who did nothing wrong. “Yeah, I’ve, uh— I’ve been having a hard time settling in.”

She just nodded, as if it were something she expected.

Neither one of them said anything else and the silence quickly turned awkward, quicker than Clint would have wanted. He and Laura had never struggled with silence before, comfortable enough together without the need to fill the space between them with words.

Now, there was too much damn space and not nearly enough words to breach it.

Clint tried again, foregoing the small talk entirely.
“I’m really happy to see you. I missed you like crazy, Laura.”

Her eyes, when they met his, didn’t reflect the same happiness. Clint gritted his teeth, keeping himself still instead of trying to reach for her again.

“Are— are the kids here? I’d really like to see them,” he said hopefully, but when she shook her head, some of his resolve broke. “What, why, I have a right—”

“Clint, don’t.” The force of her demand, the way she said his name, it still had power over him, even after so long apart.

He fell silent and she swallowed hard, then squared her shoulders. “The kids are with my parents for the week. I was on the fence about whether I should come here at all, so I definitely wasn’t planning to drag them into this.”

“That isn’t fair, Laura!” God, he missed all of them so damn much, and while he knew he shouldn’t be raising his voice, he just couldn’t stop. “Is this you trying to punish me? They’re— they’re my kids too! I deserve to see them! You can’t take them away from me, okay? I’m their father, Laura, and you know me, you know the kind of man I am. I was just trying to do what’s right, what I thought was right, for my family, for the world, but— but—”

By now, had this been anyone else, they would’ve been yelling right back, demanding he control his anger, accusing him of belligerence. Both would’ve done nothing but stoke the flames of the dark, putrid thing sitting inside his chest.

But Laura, even before all this, had never been one to raise her voice. Not with him, not with their kids, hell, not even with Fury whenever another SHIELD mission nearly went belly up.

Even now, all she did was watch him, her face a mask of neutrality. She knew him inside and out and refused to take the bait.

“But then I found out,” Clint continued, but already his voice was subdued, “the guy I followed into battle was just looking out for himself and his buddy. Another person I trusted was just using me to indulge her own delusions, and now all I’m left with is a world that hates my guts. It’s not fair, okay?” he whispered, barely any conviction left in his words. God, he sounded like a petulant child, even to his own ears.

He saw the first sign of her ire when her lips tightened into a thin line and her beautiful eyes flashed with an undeniable warning and he fought the instinct to supplicate her with soft words, to backpedal, to appease, to coax her back into smiles and laughter.

But Laura hadn’t smiled at him in a long time, had she?

“You know what’s not fair, Clint?” she asked. Her tone remained steady, calm, and it would’ve sounded perfectly conversational to anyone who didn’t know her. He did though, he knew her better than anyone. That was a tone used on people she deemed a threat to her family.

He didn’t dare talk back, not this time.

She took his silence as her cue. “What’s not fair is finding out from NBC News that my husband was arrested and then became fugitive. What’s not fair is having to explain that to my children and being left behind without any idea when or if you were coming back. What’s not fair is you, calling us months later, acting as if nothing had changed. Acting like you’re a damn hero, so proud to have run off to fight Rogers’ war.”
“I did the right thing,” he muttered, but it sounded weak now, no matter how much he tried to lend credence to his words.

“How? How was it the right thing?”

“The Accords were going to put a leash on us—”

“No, I don’t care about the Accords. For once, I don’t care about the rest of the world. You were retired, so tell me again, how was it the right thing for us? For your family?”

Clint’s mouth moved, defenses at the ready, words he’d thrown out left and right over the past year and a half, but they all turned inadequate in the face of Laura’s fury and those unyielding, unforgiving dark eyes.

“I— I don’t know,” he said instead, hesitating for the first time, “back then, I didn’t know the whole truth, and when Cap called, I just— I mean, it was Steve, I thought I could trust the guy with my life and he said that— he said that Wanda was— she was in trouble…”

He trailed off when Laura began to shake her head.

“Just like I thought. It wasn’t even about the Accords, was it? It was about her.” Laura scoffed, then turned to look away, blinking rapidly, and Clint realized her eyes were wet.

God, it hurt to see her like that, an actual, physical pain ripping his chest apart. He couldn’t even comfort her and worse yet was the fact that he was responsible for those tears.

True to her nature, Laura didn’t let the vulnerability stand for long and before he had the chance to offer something to assuage that sadness in her eyes, her fierce resolve was back to replace it.

“Let’s forget for a moment that Maximoff possesses frankly terrifying, overworldly powers, could probably kill anyone standing in her way, and therefore could never simply be held prisoner. No, let’s focus on the fact that spending the night in a lavish penthouse cooking with your BFF is hardly a prison to begin with.”

“A gilded cage is still a cage—”

“She wasn’t in a damn cage. Tony was trying to protect her.”

Of course it’d be the mention of him that would bring back the anger boiling inside straight back to the surface. This was why he drowned it all with liquor before, until even that anger was a numb sort of buzz.

“Stark wasn’t protecting anyone. He— he and those slimy politicians had an agenda and all we were trying to do was stop them, protect the little guy, you know? And he— what he did— I mean, after he went and…”

The words— how many times have they been said over the last two years? — felt wrong on his tongue today.

Steve said Stark went to Siberia to help them, despite Ross’ orders to bring them in.

Stark attacked because he saw a tape of his parents, being murdered by Barnes.

Steve lied to all of them in one form or another.

“Laura, I’m sorry,” was all Clint managed, unable to find anything else that sounded right to his ear.
Righteous anger was a lot harder to maintain when the conviction behind it was slowly overtaken by cold, unyielding reality.

She nodded, but not in a way that meant she believed him. “You talk about protecting people. You know who protected us when you left?”

His brow furrowed, sudden spike of worry lancing through him. “What do you mean? What happened?”

“Ross happened, Clint. He wanted you, but you disappeared.”

Worry turned into cold, numbing tendrils of fear running up his spine. “What? I didn’t know—Laura, you never said anything when I called.”

“I didn’t want to deal with you trying to stage a rescue on top of everything else. Besides, we were fine.”

“But you just said—”

“Tony helped us.”

Clint blinked, processing. “Stark?”

“He found out Ross was interested in us and we were simple enough to find, what with the information still out there after the DC data dump, despite Tony’s best efforts. Tony called to give me a warning, I told him to go to hell.”

Despite the somber mood, Clint huffed, easily able to imagine a pissed-off Laura, telling Stark off. Unfortunately, the satisfaction tasted sour and only lasted a second because here he was, on the receiving end of that same ire.

“But did Ross end up grabbing you then? Or was it a false alarm?”

“Neither. One night, one of those intruder sensors you put up around the property went off. I panicked, hid myself and the kids in the basement and called Tony. He and Vision raced over, as quick as they could. Turned out, it was a special ops, off-the-books guy working for Ross, a scout scoping out the area. Thankfully, it was only him and he didn’t expect Iron Man to knock him out cold. We flew back to the Compound, where the kids and I stayed until Ross finally wound up in jail, although even now, Tony has an algorithm set up to track actual and potential threats to us. A few of Ross’ lackeys, your former enemies, you know, the usual gambit. For the most part though, everyone has stayed away after it was made clear we were under the New Avengers’ protection.”

For the second time in as many days, Clint’s world tilted until he could no longer recognize the view. “I didn’t know.”

“You had no reason to. I didn’t say anything because it was safer that way, for both of us.”

“So you lived here then? With all of these people?”

“For a few months, yeah, although the Compound wasn’t quite so lively back then. Most of it was still being renovated, so aside from the construction crews, it was me, the kids, Tony, Rhodey, and Viz. Later, Peter and Harley began to visit, later still, Hope and Strange. By then, there were others, government and law enforcement officials, Avengers business, you know?” She laughed, an oddly sad sound, at some memory he wasn’t a part of. “In the beginning though, well, we were quite the ensemble, let me tell you. We were all a mess. You think you’re the only one angry at the world? I
was so damn bitter back then, thought my world was in shambles because of Tony. I yelled at him, I insulted him, and you know the worst part? He never corrected me. Every time, he’d just say ‘I’m sorry Clint’s not here. Is there anything I can do to make this easier on you and the kids?’ He kept us safe, he helped with the farm when we finally went back. He even stayed up all night with Nate when he wasn’t feeling well and I was going out of my mind with stress and just needed one night of sleep. Quite the agenda, huh, Clint?’

The room around them fell silent when she didn’t continue. Clint wanted to say something, *anything*, but every word that came to mind tasted like dirt on his tongue.

His first instinct was to argue, to present Laura with evidence of Stark’s transgressions, of the betrayals made and the damage done, but after what he found out from Steve, after what Laura had just told him… He realized how stupid it would sound to accuse Stark of being selfish.

Clint wasn’t quite ready to forgive and forget, not when it came to Stark, despite the sliver of sympathy for the man and a suddenly discovered gratitude.

If only Stark had sided with them, refused to fight them, stopped being such a stubborn ass who just *had* to get his way…

He looked up at Laura. Her uplifted brow, that questioning expression, it was asking him wordlessly, *What are you going to do now, Clint?*

If only *he* hadn’t abandoned his family for Steve, right?

Guilt came with its own bitter flavor and when it mixed with the acrid taste of everything else inside him, Clint thought he might actually throw up right then and there.

A deep breath, in and out, and he forced himself to concentrate, to steady his body in the same way he did before taking a shot.

His trust in Wanda was shattered by her own actions. Steve spat on Clint’s devotion by lying, the Captain’s actions driven by an agenda that began and ended with Barnes.

Laura was the only one he had left who hadn’t failed him, who hadn’t used him to achieve some selfish goal.

“I don’t know how to make this right,” he whispered, honestly and openly. “How do I fix us?”

He experienced a glimmer of hope when he saw her features soften, but it was extinguished just as quickly when he realized it was pity rather than forgiveness he could see in her features.

“There’s no fixing us,” she said, so easily, so matter-of-fact, as if it were the most sure thing in the world. “Clint, we’re divorced. Filing those damn papers wasn’t a decision I made lightly, but I *did* make it and there’s no going back.”

Whatever calm he tried to achieve shattered right then and there, having lasted no more than those few miserable seconds. “Laura, please, you can’t— you can’t give up on us.”

He’d get on his knees if he had to, beg with everything he had, but he quickly realized it would be futile. Laura’s expression just hardened.

“This isn’t on me. You gave up on us. You abandoned us and now you finally come back and act like the world owes you something? No. Just no. We’re divorced and you admitting you’ve been acting like a jackass isn’t going to magically reverse time.”
That word, *divorce*, god, he wished she would stop saying it because each time made everything inside Clint *burn*, burn until there was nothing left of him, no trace left of that easy-going guy he used to be, someone who loved to joke around and have a good time, who did his job and did it well, who enjoyed to kick back and relax with the people he loved.

Over the past year, he was only able to find that guy at the bottom of a bottle, but even that stopped working after a while.

The good times were all burned out of him and in those ill-advised, rare moments of self-reflection, when he was sober and away from Wanda, away from everyone, he wondered whether the shit with Loki had left him so broken that all it took was one shake to his foundation and everything he thought he rebuilt came crumbling down.

“So what, this is the end then? What— what about my kids? You can’t—” he was surprised to find he was choking back tears. Hell, when was the last time he even cried? “I love them, Laura, you can’t— please, you can’t take them away from me.”

He expected another reprimand, another cold comment, but instead, her brows furrowed in distress and she reached out, as if to touch him, to comfort him, but then pulled back at the last second, and that was worse, that was *so much worse*.

“I don’t want to take them away. You’re their father.”

“Then, please, please, let me see them,” he begged, but she was shaking her head and the ground beneath him, his foundation, it just kept crumbling away. “Laura, you said—”

“I said you’re their father and I do want you back in their lives. But not yet. Not until I know you won’t hurt them—”

“I would never,” he cut in, appalled at the mere thought, “I’d never hurt them!”

“You already did.”

And what could he say to that?

“I know you’ll probably deny it, but all I’ve heard from the others is that you’ve been belligerent, you’ve argued and insulted your way through the entire Compound. You’re volatile and unpredictable and—” she held up her hand, effectively shutting him up, “and I refuse to let our children be exposed to that. I want their father back in their lives, *their father*, not a violent, stubborn drunk who wants to pick a fight with everyone.”

“Laura, I promise, I would never be like that with them. You know that. Have I ever even raised my voice at them?”

“No, you haven’t. You’ve been a good father to them, before— before all this. Which is why I’m not completely writing you out of their lives. I want you to get help, Clint.” When he frowned at her, confused, she elaborated. “I want you to see a therapist. Talk to someone about what you’re feeling.”

“You want me to go see a shrink?”

“You saw a SHIELD doctor after Loki.”

“I wasn’t brainwashed this time!”

“No,” she closed her eyes for a moment and sighed, such a weary thing, as if she had been carrying
the world on her shoulders. “I know you weren’t.”

“So if I see a shrink, I can see my kids?”

“If you see a therapist and you begin to behave like an adult, then I think we can work something out. Visits, maybe even partial custody. Get help, get better, and then we’ll see where we go from there.”

“Yeah, I mean… If that’s what you want, Laura. Anything, I’ll do anything.”

He’d see a shrink every damn day if it meant having his kids back.

She glanced at her watch then, then frowned at whatever it showed her. “I should probably go. I just wanted to see you, to, uh— to make sure you know where we stood. I know we have a lot to discuss, but I think it’s best for both of us to be clear-headed first.”

She was obviously running out on this conversation and he almost let her go. It got as far as her giving him a cursory goodbye, a promise to call and discuss things later, before his resolve broke.

“Laura, wait,” he called out and when she stopped, just before crossing the threshold, he covered the distance between them in a few strides and gathered her back up in his arms, clinging to her.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured the words into her narrow shoulder, inhaling that perfume again, refusing to believe it’d be for the last time. “Please, Laura, I’m sorry.”

She let him cling, even gave his back a few gentle strokes, but then she was pulling away, out of the circle of his arms.

Out of his life.

“Laura…” Her name was a prayer, but it went unanswered. All he received instead was a rueful smile.

“Goodbye, Clint.”

She turned then and left him behind to stand there completely alone, save for his anger and his guilt to keep him company.

***

Tony was on his feet as soon as Laura entered the common room. Bucky remained seated on the couch and just watched as Tony embraced her. The man’s murmured “Is everything alright?” would’ve been too low to hear had it not been for Bucky’s enhanced hearing.

Her only response was a shrug and she didn’t speak until she finally pulled out of Tony’s embrace, although his hands remained on her shoulders.

“It’s… complicated, you know?” she said and it was obvious she was trying to appear strong, but even though her eyes were dry now, the tell-tale redness gave away what the woman had gone through in the past hour or two.

Bucky sighed internally, but let Tony take the lead on this. While Laura had been friendly with Bucky since the beginning, these two had a much closer friendship.

“Did Barton do anything stupid?” Tony questioned, then gave Laura’s shoulders a squeeze before finally letting go. “Do I need to go knock some heads?”
“I think his head’s been knocked around enough for one day,” she commented humorlessly, then sneaked a glance at Bucky and all he could do was shrug and mouth sorry. “He wasn’t being purposefully malicious, so no need to defend my honor,” she said to Tony next. “It’s just… difficult to see him like that. I’m—I’m not sure what to do anymore.”

Tony frowned. “Are you rethinking the divorce?” he asked, but Laura was already shaking her head before he finished.

“No, that’s done and over with, I’m not taking that back. It’s for the best, I know that, but just because we’re separated on paper,” she looked away and blinked a few times, “doesn’t mean I magically stopped loving the idiot. This is the man I promised to love, till death do us part. What if I’m being the bad guy here, giving up on him?”

“Laura, no, that’s not how it works,” Tony reassured right away, but then frowned and Bucky knew it was because he was doubting himself. “Well, okay, shit, I probably don’t know, I’ve never been married,” he made a face and Laura smiled a little at his awkwardness. “What I’m trying to say is that you stick by someone if they lose their job and it’s a struggle to put food on the table for a while. You stick by them if they get cancer and lose all their hair or have to get surgery or—or can’t walk anymore or something. It’s not the same when the guy you love takes off half-cocked and turns himself into a criminal.”

“I know, I know,” Laura nodded along, but the weariness behind her eyes didn’t ease back, “I know you’re right, logically, but the heart is a dumb, fickle thing. I still love him, but I also know we can’t go back to how things were. Still, I do want for him to have contact with the kids again. He’s their father and he’s— he’s not a bad man, he’s just— well, for a man who can see everything, sometimes his actions are surprisingly myopic. Or at least they have been ever since he joined this whole Avengers gang— no offense.”

“None taken,” Tony gave her a reassuring smile, “so you’re thinking shared custody then?”

“Possibly? Eventually? It would be the best-case scenario, but it won’t be easy. I, uh— I told Clint I won’t let him near the kids until he sees a therapist to work through his crap.”

Tony’s brows shot straight up. “Did he agree?”

“More or less. Doesn’t have much of a choice. Unfortunately, I’m, uh— I’m not sure how much something like this costs, or how it would work if he signs the Accords, but I can probably scrounge up enough if that’s what I need to do—”

“Laura, no, don’t even worry about that, okay? If his medical won’t cover it, I will.”

“Tony, no, that isn’t fair to you,” she bit her lip and shook her head, “I can’t ask you to help, especially not after the way he behaved himself.”

Tony was having none of that. “Laura, please, let me do this, okay? Trust me, this is the best investment I could make. Any dollar I put into therapy for any of them is going to return ten-fold. Trust me, it’s worth it and I’ll be happy to do it.”

Laura spend a good while regarding Tony with an uncertain expression, but it was obvious when she finally gave in and decided not to argue, picking her battles with Tony. Smart woman. “Okay, but only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. Now, let’s leave all this stressful stuff for tomorrow, you look dead on your feet. I assume you’re staying the night? Wanna come watch a movie with James and me?”
Bucky internally whined at the invitation—*he didn’t have enough alone time with Tony as it were!*— but he politely kept his mouth shut. Thankfully, Laura wasn’t keen on the idea either.

“You’re sweet, really, but I think I’ll go catch up with Alice for a while and then crash for the night. It’s been… a lot to take in and I have a lot of thinking to do.”

“Just tell me what you need, okay? And say hi to the mini-agents for me, yeah?”

Laura’s expression softened at the mention of the kids. “Of course. Sorry I couldn’t bring them along this time. Now that Clint isn’t a spy anymore and SHIELD is basically non-existent, I can actually keep contact with my side of the family again, so we’ve been making up for lost time and my parents are very keen on spending all the time they can with the grandkids. Thanksgiving with them is non-negotiable apparently, so we’ll probably have to skip out on the festivities here.”

“It’s for the best, to be honest. Our Thanksgiving is going to be…*uneventful.*” Tony let out a laugh. “We’ll just be thankful in our own rooms, individually, away from each other. Will you come for Christmas though?”

“Definitely Christmas. You know the kids love that gigantic Christmas tree you all put up in the lobby.”

“And presents, don’t forget presents! I already know what I’m making them, they’re these super cool—”

“You can’t build them robots, Tony.”

“—super cool things which are totally *not* robots, I don’t even know what those are, never heard of them.”

Laura shook her head fondly, then leaned in to give Tony’s cheek a quick kiss. “Thank you again, for everything. I wish things could be…*easier* for the both of us.”

“So do I,” Tony agreed and they shared another hug.

Laura waved at Bucky when she pulled away, offered a polite “Sorry we haven’t had a chance to catch up,” and then left the two of them alone again.

Bucky took her departure as his cue to get up. Tony’s shoulders slumped and the man let out a sigh and Bucky was quick to wrap his arms around Tony and pull him in, back to chest, letting the man lean back against him.

“I wish she didn’t have to deal with all of this,” Tony quietly said, voice resigned. “I wish none of you had to deal with this drama. It’s like last year all over again, with all of us fighting.”

“You’re doing your best, darlin’,” Bucky soothed, rubbing his cheek against Tony’s, “if everyone was half as kind and selfless as you are, we wouldn’t be having these problems. Unfortunately, that’s not the case and that’s not on you, Tony.”

“You’re giving me far too much credit.”

Bucky didn’t bother indulging that bit of insecurity with an answer, choosing instead to hug Tony tighter to him.

“We both know nothing comes easy in life. Other *people* don’t make things easy, but Tony, I’m not sure pretending to get along is the best way to go about this.”
Tony’s quiet snort had Bucky smiling. “You just want to beat people up. I’m onto you, Soldier.”

Tony wasn’t exactly wrong. “You’ve caught me, sweetheart, yes, but I’m not the only one. A lot of us are angry, rightfully so. On our own behalf, on your behalf, and bottling that up isn’t doing us any good.”

“Rhodey sure didn’t bottle anything up. What if he’d gotten hurt though?” Tony sounded so damn worried. “What if Rogers decided to fight back or something?”

“Rhodes is perfectly capable of defending himself. All of us are. I wanna be honest with you, honey, I’m tired of playing nice.”

Tony turned at the words so they could see each other. The palm he laid over Bucky’s heart was warm through the thin material of the shirt. “What you are saying, James?”

“I’m saying that I want to let the Soldier play a little and teach all of them exactly what it means to cross you. I don’t care about fair anymore, I don’t care about diplomacy. I want them to be terrified by the thought of hurting you. I want them all to know that you are under my protection and if they hurt what’s mine, my darlin’,” he leaned in to whisper into Tony’s ear, “moyo solnishko, they might not live to regret it.”

He remained where he was, nuzzling right below Tony’s ear while his hands stroked up and down the man’s sides. After a beat, Tony let out a breathless chuckle.

“You sure know how to sweet talk a guy, don’t you?”

Bucky leaned back to take in those gorgeous, whiskey-colored eyes. “It’s tempting, isn’t it, sweetheart? You don’t even have to do anything. Just let me and the Soldier be petty and mean on your behalf.”

Tony rolled his eyes, tried to appear put-upon, but Bucky didn’t miss the heat of Tony’s gaze. “You are such an enabler.”

“Damn straight.”

“I guess I should be honest too and say that I’m this close to just giving in myself. I’ve never been good at diplomacy and it’s not like the Council even cares what happens behind closed doors, as long as the world at large thinks everything’s hunky dory and we’re still making progress on our plans to defend the planet.”

“See? Maybe if I put the fear of god into them, they’ll finally behave themselves.”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s god they’ll be terrified of, gorgeous,” Tony remarked, then leaned in to kiss away Bucky’s smirk. “Fine, fine, but no permanent damage,” Tony caved after a pause when he pulled away, then pressed another kiss to Bucky’s lips, “don’t maim anybody, don’t break any bones. Don’t,” another kiss, slow and sure and confident, before finally Tony let him go, “don’t do anything that Rhodey wouldn’t do.”

Bucky’s smile turned into a shit-eating grin. “Ooh, lots of possibilities then.”

Tony frowned adorably. “Wait, no, no— nothing Pepper wouldn’t do.”

“Excellent, even better.”

“Wait, wait—” Tony was protesting, but there was a smile pulling at his lips, “no, this isn’t right!
How am I the more responsible one all of the sudden? Those two are like ninety percent of my impulse control!"

“The more responsible you are, sweetheart, the more reckless we get to be.”

“I hate everything,” Tony pouted, but he still leaned back in, slotting himself perfectly underneath Bucky’s chin. “Well, I’m out in Manhattan for the next few days, SI business, so just do what you think is best. I trust you, James.”

Bucky hummed, always so pleased to hear those words. “I love you, Tony.”

“Love you too, even the part of you that’s about to scare my former coworkers half to death.”

Bucky just laughed, pressing a kiss to the crown of Tony’s head, all the while the Soldier inside him purred in satisfaction.

***

Scott was so engrossed in the email sent to him by the HR manager at SI that he didn’t bother looking up from his phone as he turned the corner, which was why he promptly smacked into something solid.

“Ow, who put a wall… right… there…” he trailed off, eyes going wide when the wall in question turned out to be a smirking Winter Soldier. Scott stumbled back a step on instinct, but he didn’t bother feeling any shame over it. It was okay to feel just a tiny bit scared when facing down a reformed— he was 100% reformed, right?— assassin extraordinaire.

“Um, hi, Barnes, long time no see, uh— literally, ‘cause I didn’t see you there. G-get it?”

“You should be more careful, Lang.”

That smirk had shifted into a more genuine smile by now, or at least something that resembled one, and the rest of Barnes appeared to be the epitome of casual as well. A nice shirt and jeans— SI shirt, huh, go figure— hair pulled back into a tastefully done bun, bright red sneakers, hands stuck in his pockets.

No one would have thought “killer assassin” by the looks of him, but Scott still had the distinct impression that he was being examined like some sort of prey. A bunny, he felt like a damn bunny in front of a wolf.

Granted, Barnes still looked light-years better than the last time Scott saw him in Wakanda, but somehow that actually translated to a more terrifying Bucky Barnes. Scott sneaked a quick glance around, but to his dismay, the area around them was deserted.

He tried for some small talk. “So, uh— how’ve you been, man? I haven’t seen much of you since we got here. You, uh— you look great, by the way.”

Barnes shrugged and rocked on his heels. “I’m doing real well, yeah. Tony and the others have been a godsend.”

“They seem like a cool bunch,” Scott agreed. “So, all that triggers stuff,” he motioned at his own head, then grimaced because that probably wasn’t a very polite way to phrase it, “that’s all good now?”

“Good enough,” Barnes offered another one-arm shrug and the movement made the light bounce
across the metal surface of the arm, drawing Scott’s eyes to it. Impressive… and deadly. “I’m not completely healed, never will be. No one recovers fully after the sort of stuff we live through, ya know? But no one can control me ever again.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Mn-hmm, I’m a free man now, finally,” he remarked, then took a few leisurely steps back and forth, as if pacing, “free to live my life as I see fit, free to do whatever I want. Speaking of, I’m on a bit of mission, Lang, and you’re just the man I wanted to see.”

When the soldier stopped, Scott realized the position had Scott boxed in between a wall and the deadliest assassin of the century. He gulped.

“Yeah? Sounds serious.”

“It is. See, I have a lot to be grateful for, to a lot of people, but Tony most of all. He’s a good man, with a generous heart, who deserves our respect.” Barnes punctuated that last word with a step and Scott automatically moved back, only to hit the wall behind him. “He deserves the whole world in fact, don’t you agree?”

“Um…”

“Tony is very important to me, Lang, and I would hate to see him upset, for any reason. Can you imagine what might happen to someone who upsets him?”

“B-bad things?”

“Horrible things. Violent, bloody things.”

Oh sweet baby jesus, how could the man say that while smiling and why did the dichotomy make him all the more terrifying?

“You agree, don’t you?”

“A-absolutely.”

Barnes’ smile widened, a flash of white teeth, but it didn’t make him appear any less dangerous. “See, here’s the thing though, some people have been upsetting him lately. Tony, bless his kind soul, wanted all of us to get along while we try to save the world, but some people refuse to get over themselves and behave.”

God, the way Barnes practically growled that last word. “Yeah, it’s been bad, but I, uh— I swear that—”

“Lang, come on,” Barnes patted him on the arm, jostling him with too much force, “you’re going pale on me, buddy, just relax.”

Frankly, Barnes sounded way too casual given that he was probably about to kill Scott. Rude, honestly.

He really hoped his assassination would be quick and painless.

Barnes gave him another pat, a little gentler this time. “See, Lang, I think there’s hope for you. You made some mistakes along the way, but we all did, didn’t we? I know you have a good head on your shoulders though. In fact, I heard you apologized to Tony. Isn’t that right?”
Scott tried to swallow past his dry throat as he nodded. “Y-yeah, I did. Made a lot of wrong assumptions about the man, thought that—thought that he deserved an apology. He’s…a better guy than I expected.”

“He is, isn’t he? He takes people like you and me, people who hurt him, and gives us another chance. I heard he even offered to help you find a job.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Good, I’m sure your family will be very happy. I’m happy too, Lang, because you apologizing and treating Tony well makes things a lot easier for me.”

“Y-yeah? In what sense?”

The smile Barnes gave him was so sharp Scott was surprised he wasn’t actually bleeding.

“Less people for me to kill.”

Scott’s eyes widened and his mouth opened on a silent note of something—shock, fear, a tiny bit of awe?—but then Barnes’ eyes crinkled at the corners, his mouth stretched into a big grin, and he burst out laughing.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Come on, you really thought I was serious?” Again, with that heavy-handed pat, this time to Scott’s shoulder. “You are a hoot, Lang.”

Barnes pulled away and air rushed back into Scott’s lungs, proportional to the distance put between them.

“I’ll see you around, so you take care, okay?” Barnes gave Scott a little wave and began to walk away.

Scott watched his retreating back and his mouth moved before he could stop it. “Are—are you kidding though?”

The former assassin stopped, gave him an enigmatic look over his shoulder, coupled it with a wink and a terrifying smile, and then just kept walking, whistling an unfamiliar tune while twirling a blade that mysteriously appeared in his hand.

Scott stood where he was until Barnes disappeared through the doors into the adjacent hallway.

“I almost just died, didn’t I?” he whispered out loud to no one in particular, although he was certain Friday heard him. Thankfully, she spared him the embarrassment and didn’t reply. He gulped again and then shook his head. “Yeah, okay, gotta go call Hope and thank her again for pulling my head out of my ass. I like living, thank you very much.” Determined, he changed directions and headed back to his new room, situated upstairs where a bunch of SI techs lived when they stayed overnight. “Although, being threatened by War Machine and the Winter Soldier in one week? That’s gotta be a record, right?”

The AI didn’t deign to reply to that either.

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Bucky walked down the hall, still whistling, and Friday didn’t speak to him until the pathway was clear of everyone else passing him by.
“That wasn’t very nice, Mr. Barnes, but I still can’t help but feel amused.”

“Lang’s alright, I wasn’t gonna hurt him. He just needed a reminder, that’s all.”

“In that case, well done. Now, who’s next on the list?”

Her voice didn’t hide her enthusiasm and Bucky could hardly blame her. Honestly, it felt great to let the Soldier bleed through a bit, let him *play*, even if they did start out with the easiest target. Bucky pondered Friday’s question for a second and then decided on target number two.

“Friday, give me Wilson’s location, please.”

Chapter End Notes

Bucky has waited for this for so long, you guys. ;3

Also, grant me another moment of WE-related self-promotion, but I wrote a one-shot to celebrate Tony's birthday and my WE anniversary. It's 100% fluff, no angst in sight, so if you're interested, feel free to check out *Forty-eight Kisses*. 
Sam carefully closed the door behind him before heaving a great, big sigh. He gave himself that one moment to collect his scattered thoughts, but upon realizing it would require a lot more than this one token effort, he quickly gave up and resigned himself to a slow and mentally tumultuous track back to his room.

The conversation with Rhodes had been… uncomfortable, to say the least, but Sam had to admit that it was necessary. He had wanted to talk to Rhodes ever since their arrival and after everything that went down a few days ago, he was lucky the Colonel had let him in through the door in the first place.

However, when Sam crossed that threshold into the man’s office, he realized he wasn’t sure what he actually wanted out of the conversation. He knew he needed to apologize, so was it some form of absolution he was looking for? Answers, perhaps? Clarity? A way to make sense of what happened?

It was probably all those things, but instead Sam faltered and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind, which was, “I never understood your loyalty to Stark.”

Not his smartest move.

Thankfully, Rhodes took it in stride. He sat there, behind his large mahogany desk, leaning back in that fancy-looking chair, likely designed with his injuries in mind, and he studied Sam behind steepled fingers.

***

“Now, is that a confession or an accusation?” Rhodes finally asked after a drawn-out, awkward silence and Sam cringed a little.

“Mostly the first. I think?” He shook his head. “Shit, I’m sorry, this wasn’t how I wanted to start this off. I should apologize first. I’ve wanted to apologize since I got here, but you’re surprisingly hard to track down.”

“Apologize for Germany?”

“Yes,” Sam nodded emphatically, hoping his sincerity was obvious, “I know there’s more now, apologies I should be making to Stark too, but that fight… It’s been with me for the past year, man, and I just— it was never meant to turn lethal.”

Rhodes didn’t make the apology easy. Without hesitation, he brought up the fact that both Maximoff and Cap were using moves that could’ve easily killed someone and to be honest, none of them were pulling their punches that day. However, Rhodes didn’t linger on these points. Neither one of them could change the past, and it was too little, too late to rehash the details. The actual apology he accepted, but made clear that his injuries were never the real issue. It was a calculated risk, all part of the job.

Everything that happened with Stark, however, was the real reason for Rhodes’ admittedly formidable wrath.

“You wonder why I’ve stood by him all these years. I could ask you the same about Rogers.”

The answer was usually simple, but today, it felt woefully inadequate. “He’s Captain America, you
know? That shining ideal we all grew up with. Plus, the actual guy behind the shield? Turned out to be a good guy too. He stood by what he believed in, didn’t waver in the face of shitty odds. The way he went up against both SHIELD and Hydra… I thought back then, there’s a man I’m willing to follow into battle.”

“Has that changed?”

“I’m… not sure,” Sam answered honestly and mulled his next words over. “Steve, he’s a—a good man. I still believe that, but now, I know I also have to accept that he’s still just a man. Flawed, capable of making mistakes, capable of being selfish. The shit he went through, he didn’t come out of that unscathed.” Sam huffed out a laugh, but it was devoid of humor. “You know what they say about never meeting your idols.”

This wasn’t the first time Sam wondered whether he should’ve pushed harder to get Steve some help. He brought the topic up once, after the events in DC, when he realized Steve was prone to isolating himself and had a hard time adjusting to the present times; small lists of twenty-first century wonders only got you so far. Sam tried, but Steve shot the idea down quickly, and Sam didn’t press the issue. After all, it wasn’t his place to tell Captain America that he needed therapy.

He wondered if something would’ve turned out differently if he’d stuck to his gut feeling.

“See, this is the thing,” Rhodes responded after letting Sam say his piece, “even now, you allow Rogers to be human. I don’t necessarily disagree. Rogers isn’t some cackling madman, but he is flawed and he does make mistakes. Mistakes I’ve taken very personally because they nearly cost me my best friend, but you already know that. Here’s my real question to you though. Why has Tony never been afforded that same treatment?”

It was a fair question, and something Sam had been thinking about ever since Stark’s anxiety attack. Nothing humanized a man better than seeing him shaking and pale, terrified of being hurt (all over again).

Even someone living under a rock was familiar with Tony Stark, the genius billionaire playboy. Sam never particularly liked the man he saw on TV, and when they met for the first time, every assumption Sam had about him was promptly validated. Stark strutted into the room, sarcastic, nonchalant, and proud, wearing a suit worth more than Sam’s entire rent payment. He was quick with irreverent comments and acted like he was the smartest guy in the room. Despite his effectiveness on the battlefield, Stark was disrespectful; he joked and acted like nothing really mattered.

He was exactly as Sam imagined him to be and when compared to Captain America, to Steve Rogers, Stark fell short.

Today, Sam willed himself to discard everything he pretended to know and quietly admitted, “I’m not sure I ever tried looking past my expectations, for either one of them. I expected Steve to be a great man and I expected Stark to be...” He trailed off and waved his hand nonsensically, but Rhodes seemed to get the picture.

“I suppose it’s not entirely your fault,” Rhodes admitted after he let out a tired breath, but the tension behind his eyes made it clear this was only a token concession. “The part of Tony that most get to see is nothing but a carefully constructed mask. It’s a defense mechanism. Unfortunately, most people don’t bother looking past that. I have an advantage, because I met Tony when he was just a scrawny, dumb kid. I was there to hold him when he lost his parents. I was there when he began to self-destruct and spent his twenties drinking himself into a haze. I was there,” and here was the very first time Rhodes’ voice actually wavered, “when we found him in that godforsaken desert. I have
seen Tony at his most destructive and his most vulnerable, and I’ve seen him at his absolute best. I’ve witnessed the sheer idiocy of that man and I’ve seen his sacrifices, his generosity, his kindness. I’ve stood by him all these years because Tony Stark is a good man too.

Sam didn’t know the man Rhodes was describing, but finally he could admit that was due to his own — willfully— limited perception of reality. The image of Stark clutching his chest as he pressed himself against the wall still haunted him, those terrified eyes belonging to a man he didn’t know either.

“But just because Tony never let his guard down around you,” Rhodes continued and whatever soft edge his voice possessed earlier promptly disappeared, “still doesn’t give you an excuse. He was your teammate, he supported the entire operation after SHIELD fell, which means he supported you.” The jab of Rhody’s finger felt like a physical punch. “Maybe if you had given him a reason to trust you, you would’ve had the chance to meet the man I know and love. Instead, my best friend spent months, years, living with people who didn’t appreciate and respect him, and then, they spit in the face of everything he’s done, refused to act like adults when a disagreement arose— and here’s the cherry on the goddamn cake— after lying to him for years, some of them left him behind to die.”

Sam didn’t bother countering any of Rhodes’ claims. Without Steve’s steadfast— bullheaded?— conviction at his side, Sam was a lot less tempted to argue.

They fucked up, it was as simple as that.

“Last year... The Accords made me apprehensive, that wasn’t a lie. I know when someone is trying to sell me dangerous bullshit. But you’re right,” he added hastily when Rhodes’ eyes narrowed, “I acted on the assumptions that I was better off trusting Steve over Stark. Back then, Stark was still one of ‘them’ and I automatically lumped him in with Ross, who was an actual threat. I didn’t believe Stark when he said he would fight to make the Accords into something that would protect us. Honestly, it baffled me that you supported a guy like him. I… wouldn’t say I followed Steve blindly, but I did let my opinions of both him and Stark cloud my judgment.”

“Wrong opinions at that.”

“Yeah, seems that way...” It was a bitter admission, but one long overdue, and the second one quickly followed. “Here’s the kicker too. I just read the latest version of the Accords and Stark proved me wrong yet again. He kept his promise. The document’s not perfect, but all of you have put a lot of work into it... and it’s something I’m willing to put my trust in.”

“Is that your formal request for an Avengers employment application?”

Sam chuckled, despite the somber mood. “Maybe. I need to do some good to make up for this mess.” He sighed then, wishing they could all have a redo of last year and knowing it was a childish thought. “Do you think I’ll ever get the chance to meet the Tony Stark you know?”

Rhody looked at him, pensive, as if trying to decide whether Sam was worth the consideration, but finally, he let out a breath too, letting his shoulders slump just a fraction. “You have a good head on your shoulders, Sam, or at least I assumed you did before all this shit went down. Tony... he doesn’t hate you, he just... doesn’t trust you. He might never trust you and he’s justified in that. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to find common ground. Judge him on his actions— not the jokes, not the show he puts on to protect himself. Look at the impact he has on the people around him, on the world. Judge him on that and decide for yourself what kind of man Tony is.”

***
It was a lot to think about, too many regrets to work through, and not enough paths forward that offered a clear-cut solution, so halfway up the stairs, Sam decided to forgo his room in favor of the indoor track. Nothing cleared his head better than running and while he would’ve preferred the pathways outside, this was a chilly November, so the indoor facilities were his best bet.

He quickly changed into his workout gear, then stuffed his clothes back into the locker, and closed the door shut. Walking to the other side of the room where a row of pristine sinks was set against the wall, he turned on one of the faucets and splashed the cold water over his face. A few laps, he promised himself, and then he’d sit his ass down and figure out where to go from here. Maybe give his Mama a call and let her set him straight.

He looked up into the mirror and nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Jesus Christ! You can’t sneak up on people like that, man,” Sam huffed indignantly as he spun around, trying to get his suddenly rapid breathing under control. Who could blame him though when the Winter Soldier himself was casually standing behind him, leaning against the wall while partially shrouded in shadows and sporting that cold look on his face?

Sam remembered that look. It belonged to the guy who ripped the steering wheel clear out of his car and then tried to kill him.

Barnes remained where he was, unfazed by the accusation. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam shook his head, then grabbed a towel and wiped himself down, willing that initial burst of adrenaline back under control. “Well, I guess old habit die hard an’ all. Spies gonna spy. I just hope you weren’t watching me change ‘cause no offense, but you’re just not my type.” He frowned when Barnes didn’t respond to the good-natured jibe and tried again. “I, uh— I’m glad you finally came around, actually. You’ve been pretty MIA since we got here. I know you talked to Steve an’ all, but I was starting to get worried—”

“No need. I’ve just been… busy.”

“Well, either way, it’s good to see you. You, uh—you look great,” Sam remarked, then came closer so they wouldn’t have to shout across the locker room; he studied the details as they came into view. The super soldier did look great, healthy and properly groomed, clear-eyed and all in one piece. Still, despite the vast improvement from the haunted man he last saw in Wakanda, those eyes, they still had full-on shivers running up and down Sam’s spine. He tried to ignore them. “That’s a nice, shiny arm you got there. Stark’s work, I assume?”

“Of course,” Barnes uncrossed his arms and looked down at the metal hand. He flexed it a few times, letting the metal plates ripple with each movement. It was a gorgeous piece of tech, Sam had to admit. “I know it may look similar to what Hydra soldered onto me,” Barnes clenched the hand into a fist, then unclenched and let the arm drop, meeting Sam’s eyes again, “but Hydra’s trash has nothing on Tony’s designs. The arm is perfect.”

It was right around the time Barnes called the man Tony that Sam also noticed Barnes was wearing the Stark Industry logo clear across his chest.

_Huh. Talk about declaring your allegiance._

When Sam’s eyes snapped back up to Barnes’ face, the man was smirking and Sam didn’t remember the Winter Soldier ever smiling quite like that— or at all for that matter—but he also didn’t remember that smile belonging to Bucky Barnes either, and the shivers up his spine didn’t ease back even when Barnes’ more neutral expression returned after a beat.
Sam cleared his throat. “Sounds like you’ve been settling in well then. I’m happy to hear that.”

“Mm-hmm. New arm, the triggers are gone, even got myself into therapy.”

Sam brightened up at that. At least one of these people was getting actual help. “That’s fantastic, Barnes. I hope it’s been helping you.”

Barnes shrugged noncommittally. “Sure, but there are some things even therapy can’t fix.”

“No, yeah, of course not. It’s a process, man, it takes time, and you’ll have set backs, you’ll have things that might get better, but not all the way. It’s never perfect, but you just gotta keep working at it.”

There was no reaction to Sam’s impromptu pep talk. Instead, Barnes pushed himself away from the wall and walked over, passing by Sam and stopping at the sinks to drag those metal fingers absently against the white marbled surface.

“I assume you know about Siberia now?”

Damn, but the man did not want to beat around the bush. “I do, yeah.”

“Got something to say to me about it? Barton already said his piece.”

Sam winced. “Clint… needs to keep his mouth shut and stay away from the liquor cabinet. As for me… Listen, Barnes, a lot of things went to shit last year and we all made mistakes— bigger mistakes than I realized— but what happened with the Starks, you can’t blame yourself for that and neither can I. You were brainwashed.”

There was no reaction to Sam’s eyes followed the wandering super soldier who kept taking leisurely steps around the locker room and that was when Sam belatedly realized they were completely alone. He could’ve sworn there were at least a few people here when he got in, but the place was deserted now.

Barnes turned to narrow his eyes at Sam. “And what about everything else? Who’s to blame for that?”

Vague, but Sam knew what Barnes was getting at. “I admit, I should’ve thought more critically about what was happening, maybe trusted Stark more, and Steve shouldn’t have lied. I know he was protecting you, but there was a dozen other ways he could’ve gone about it.” The conversation with Rhodes still nagged at the back of his mind, so he quietly added, “Stark shouldn’t have been left behind, especially when he was injured. That wasn’t right. He attacked you two, I know, I mean, he blew your arm clean off—”

“Because I was reaching for his reactor. It was justified.”

Sam frowned at the cold, flat delivery. “Right, and he obviously wasn’t in his right mind, but hell, Steve found a way to deal with you when you were in full Winter Soldier mode, so I don’t understand why he couldn’t have done the same with Stark, who wasn’t even brainwashed, he was just… traumatized.” He sighed, weary. “I know I wasn’t there for any of this, and I’m not sure what I could’ve done differently, but now I feel like I should’ve done something.”

“Sounds like that conversation with Rhodes went real well then.”

_Damn, word travels fast around here, huh?_  

Sam met Barnes’ raised eyebrow with a rueful smile. “Well enough. At least there wasn’t any
shouting this time. Honestly though, I just have more questions than answers now. Questions for myself, maybe? I feel like I’ve strayed from— from what I used to believe in.” He huffed and added, “You’ve been here for a while, you know these people well. Got any advice for me?”

“I do, actually,” Barnes said, then walked back slowly and Sam had an unsettling flashback to this same man strutting down that bridge, “in fact, that’s why I’m here. See, Wilson, you,” Barnes pointed an accusing finger in his direction, “you make this real tough for me—”

“Excuse me?”

“—because generally, you’re level-headed, you’re smart, and I gotta ask myself, how the hell did you get tangled up in this whole mess?”

Another step and Barnes was in front of him, not close enough to touch, but close _enough_, and even though they were roughly the same height, it felt like Barnes was looming over him. Coupled with that look— _that was the Winter Soldier look, yeah, he’d remember it anywhere_— it made for an even more intimidating sight.

Sam wondered just how much of the Winter Soldier still remained in the man, but he kept that thought to himself.

Instead, he admitted, “I’m not sure I follow.”

“See, I think this is Stevie’s fault, really,” Barnes remarked, ignoring the actual question, “he has a tendency to drag smart people into trouble that _he_ creates and then act like he was right all along even when things go pear-shaped.”

“Steve’s not a bad guy though,” Sam countered, then realized he just said those exact words to Rhodes less than an hour ago. It was an automatic response at this point, but now he had to wonder whether he was repeating it for Steve’s sake or his own. “He gets into ‘trouble’, he still added, thinking of SHIELD and Hydra again, “when he believes it’s the right thing to do.”

Barnes actually rolled his eyes at that and the gesture was so out of place with the otherwise cold demeanor that it left Sam even more wrong-footed.

“This is the same punk who got into a fight in every back alley, justified or _not_, and who lied on recruitment forms in five different cities, all because he had something to prove.”

“He was just trying to help his country.”

“By being a liability on the battlefield?” Barnes scoffed. “There was more than one way to serve the country back then, some that didn’t involve him putting other soldiers at risk. You know what though,” Barnes clicked his tongue, “today is not about Stevie. This is about _you_, Wilson, and what you need to do to make this work.”

“I’m all ears.” The words didn’t come out quite as confidently as Sam wanted them to.

Barnes smiled again, but Sam honestly wished he hadn’t. No one should look that menacing with a smile on their face.

“You’re right, you should’ve trusted Tony more, thought _harder_ about Steve’s motivations. Don’t make that mistake again. Do the right thing because _you_ believe it’s right, not because Captain America’s leading the way. Because—and this is real important,” here Barnes leaned in a little, their left shoulders almost touching, close enough that the super soldier only had to whisper, “even though I think there’s still a chance for _you_, all of you are skating on very, _very_ thin ice right now.”
“Barnes, what—” Sam was cut off when a metal hand clamped onto his right shoulder, digging into the meat of it, skirting too close to the edge of real pain, and Sam remained where he was, his own wide eyes staring back at him as he was forced to watch this unfold in the reflection of the mirror.

“I don’t want to see you crash and burn, Wilson, so here’s the deal,” the whisper reached his ear like a coiled snake wrapping around him, “stay out of trouble, use that head of yours, and learn to trust someone other than Steve. You might end up with another chance to do this right. But,” the word was punctuated with a painful squeeze of his shoulder and Sam was proud that he didn’t visibly wince, “if Tony gets hurt again, if you are in any way involved in making that man’s life harder, I will make it my mission to make your life hell.”

“So, it’s—” Sam swallowed, his dry throat an uncomfortable reminder of the threat a mere inch away from him, “it’s all about Stark to you? You guys that close now?”

“It is all about Tony,” he could almost hear that smile in the words, “and yes, we are that close. Interpret that however you want, I don’t care. You’ll probably be right. Tony means everything to me and he is under my protection. You don’t have to be friends with him, you don’t even have to like him, but you do not hurt him. Understand?”

Sam nodded, unsure he could do anything else. Barnes let go of him and took a step back. Breathing came a little easier, but Sam wasn’t fooled by the illusion of the space between them.

Still, he studied Barnes carefully. The neutral expression gave little away, but there was something in those eyes again, something almost smug this time.

Sam’s mind was racing, putting the pieces together. He had plenty of assumptions about Barnes and Stark, about the two of them together—honestly, a megaphone would’ve been more subtle—but he decided it was best to keep those to himself too.

“I hope we don’t have to have this conversation again,” Barnes remarked, then casually strolled past Sam and towards the door. Something clicked and Sam realized it was the locking mechanism. The door had been locked this entire time, a door that supposedly only locked from the outside.

“Why?” Sam asked before he realized he did it and when Barnes looked over his shoulder to raise an unimpressed eyebrow at the vague question, Sam elaborated reluctantly, “I just don’t get it… Rhodes is the same way. Why Stark? How does he earn the loyalties of people—people like you and Rhodes?”

“What did the Colonel say when you asked him that?”

_Astute bastard._

“He said I don’t know the real Tony Stark.”

Barnes’ lips twitched upward. “Smart man. You should listen to him more.”

The super soldier opened the door and walked away without offering anything else, letting the door shut behind him. Sam stared at it for a good minute or two, mind still racing, then decided he was going to need a hell of a lot more than a few laps around the gym to figure this all out.

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Clint stared at the coffee maker and his eye twitched when nothing happened even though the filter filled with coffee grounds was already inside, the water had been poured in, and the power button was _on_.

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He would’ve sworn it was that damn AI playing her tricks again, except this was the least technologically sophisticated coffee maker in the whole damn place, how would she even hack it?

He groaned. It was barely five o’clock in the morning, he woke up and couldn’t fall back asleep, and all he wanted was some damn coffee.

“Come on, just… make coffee,” he muttered to the stupid thing, “why won’t you work?”

“Have you tried insulting it yet?”

Only his training kept Clint from physically startling at the sound of that voice right behind him. He kept his face neutral on sheer force of will as he carefully turned around to face the Winter Soldier. Again. This time sober. He wondered whether that was better or worse.

“Barnes.”

“Feeling better?”

The question was mocking, amused even, and Barnes wasn’t trying to hide it. Clint could see the way those steel blue eyes trailed over the bruise on Clint’s face, now turning into an ugly patchwork of greens and yellows as it slowly began to heal.

“Feeling fantastic.”

“Except for that stubborn coffee machine, huh?”

“That about sums it up.”

Barnes just smirked and Clint wanted to roll his eyes. His patience was still razor thin and the anger was far too close to the surface, but while he would’ve relished this chance to get into another fight before, today Laura’s words still echoed in his head. If he got into a brawl now, there was a good chance she’d write him off for good.

“Why are you here, Barnes?”

The smirk turned into an outright grin. “What, no insults, no accusations? My god, your ex-wife really is a miracle worker.”

The “ex” part still chafed at him something fierce. Probably would for the rest of his life. “Don’t talk about Laura. And just because I’m not pummeling you, doesn’t mean we’re suddenly friends and—”

He was cut off by his own pained grunt when Barnes used his metal hand to grab the lapels of his shirt and pull him close, lift him up just an inch so he was on his tiptoes and they were nose-to-nose.

“Cute how you think you’d be pummeling me, Barton. You’re lucky I didn’t put you through that damn wall and put you out of your misery.”

Clint struggled to get out of the grip, but his hands were uselessly scrambling against the metal of the arm. While he was strong on his own, damn super soldiers were stronger. He kicked out, aimed for the shin, but it was like hitting a damn concrete pillar. Still, he did it again as he snarled, “Let go of me, you bastard!”

All Barnes did was shake him none too gently. “Kick me again and I’m going to break something.”

Clint stilled and surprisingly, Barnes actually let go. Clint stumbled back a few steps to put some
space between them and found his footing again. He really wished someone else would show up to witness this manhandling, but Steve was out for his stupid run, Wilson wasn’t up yet, Lang wasn’t even living in this part of the building anymore, and Natasha had been keeping to herself ever since the debacle with Stark.

Barnes was glaring at him now, all traces of earlier amusement gone.

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t want to waste my time here, because you,” the soldier pointed, “aren’t worth it. So, here’s your one and only warning,” he stepped forward and Clint involuntarily stepped back, “listen to Laura, who is clearly far smarter than you. Get help, go to therapy— trust me, it’ll do ya wonders— focus on your family, and stay out of our way.”

“I don’t need to hear this from you.”

“Oh, I don’t know, some things bear repeating, especially when the person in question is an idiot.”

“Why the hell do you even care? This is none of your business.”

“Aside from the fact that Laura and your children deserve better?” Before Clint could do more than scoff, Barnes was right in his face again, moving like some damn ninja. “Tony is my business. You’ve done more than enough damage and my only concern is you staying the hell away from him.”

Confusion overtook some of Clint’s irritation. “Wait— this is about Stark?”

“Mm-hmm,” Barnes hummed, “you see, he’s important to a lot of people here, but what you really need to remember is that he’s important to me. In fact, you could say he’s my whole damn world. I’m sure you have a vivid imagination, so I don’t have to tell you what would happen if Tony got hurt again and you were involved.”

Clint’s suddenly eyes widened. “Holy shit, are you two actually fu—”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Barnes clasped the metal hand over Clint’s mouth and he suddenly found himself slammed against the nearest kitchen counter, the edge digging painfully into his lower back. “See, you’re messing this up already. You gotta be careful what you say, Clint. Watch that foul mouth of yours. I really don’t want to leave your children fatherless.” Barnes shrugged easily, casually, as if he weren’t holding a hand over someone’s mouth. “Oh, and by the way, we are fucking. It’s pretty fantastic.”

Holy shit.

Clint had so many thoughts rushing through his head right then, but thankfully, his actual self-preservation instincts kicked in and kept his focus on the threats instead of the… juicy gossip.

He did know better than to ignore an assassin’s threat, after all. Barnes was probably just as dangerous as Natasha and obviously more unhinged than she ever was. Clint didn’t move, just held the man’s eye contact until Barnes let go of him again. Clint refused to give into the desire to sag against the counter and held himself rigidly straight and upright, but he did wipe the back of his hand against his mouth, eyeing Barnes warily.

“I thought Stark was all about peacekeeping nowadays? What would he think about his—” he coughed when Barnes gave him a warning look, “his friend threatening people with death?”

“Tony tried to play nice and failed when svolochi v etom dome decided to take advantage of his hospitality.” The bastards in this place. Huh. Good thing Clint picked up some Russian from Nat.
“Trust me, he won’t mind if I take over some of that peacekeeping for him.”

“So what’s the plan then, Bucky?” Clint tried to sound neutral, but it still came off as a sneer. Dammit but it was hard to be civil— to appear civil, even — with these people.

Apparently that fact wasn’t lost on Barnes who reached out with his flesh-and-blood hand to pat Clint on the cheek— the injured one, dammit— before he could duck out of the way.

“It’s simple really. Just don’t piss me off.” Another patronizing pat. “And since you keep spouting things that might get you killed, your best bet is to stay the hell away from us altogether. Oh, and if I find out that you said anything about Tony and me, to anyone, I will snap your neck and leave your corpse outside for the vermin. Got it?”

“Perfectly.”

As much as Clint wanted to argue— and punch that smug little smirk right off the soldier’s face— all of this was actually solid advice. His number one priority right now was salvaging his relationship with his children, not getting into a fight with a guy who seemed to be a whole lot more Winter Soldier than Steve’s old war buddy.

Barnes appeared satisfied with the answer because Clint received a nod and then the super soldier was walking away.

Of course, Clint wasn’t the guy to keep his mouth shut entirely. “Stark really is that good, huh?”

Barnes stopped and Clint held his breath, almost ready for a punch or a damn gun to the face, but all the soldier did was pivot just enough to glance over his shoulder and smile the most self-satisfied, smug as hell smile Clint had ever seen on a man.

“Better than you can imagine.”
“I’ll check with Boss, but I doubt he wants to see you, traitor.”

Natasha didn’t have to feign a lack of reaction to the moniker, having gotten used to it by now, and Friday went predictably silent, leaving Natasha to wait in front of the blacked-out windows of Tony’s lab.

Even before everything came crashing down around them, Natasha never actually had unrestricted access to this place. Rhodes and Potts did, of course, as well as Bruce and eventually Steve, but none of the other Avengers, so it came as no surprise that Tony’s most private space remained inaccessible to her. If anything, the surprising part was not getting shot down by Friday as soon as Natasha had stepped into the West Wing elevator.

But she made it this far and she was willing to wait. Unfortunately, waiting meant standing here alone with nothing but her thoughts for company, which made for unpleasant companions when plagued with this much uncertainty. What exactly was her plan if Tony decided to let her in? She knew it was important to understand where she stood with him, so was this a reconnaissance mission then? An attempt to get some of Tony’s goodwill back, a way to help stabilize her position in this brave new world? Or was this something more personal? Something she needed to do?

The thing that scared her, more than she cared to admit, was the fact that she didn’t know the answer. She hadn’t seen Tony since he fled the kitchen after Steve oh-so-gracefully drove the man into a panic attack. That was a week ago and none of the others had seen him either, but while she laid low and avoided the Avengers, both former and new, her teammates weren’t quite so fortunate; they had plenty of company to keep them busy. First, it was Rhodes who descended on them like an angel of vengeance and then there was the Winter Soldier himself. She wasn’t sure whether she was surprised or offended that he hadn’t approach her yet, but she supposed it was only a matter of time.

Friday had been silent for several minutes now, bordering on a full five, but Natasha remained where she was and her patience was rewarded when the AI finally spoke up.

“Despite my best efforts to convince him otherwise, Boss will see you now.”

This surprised Natasha too, but she didn’t let it reflect in the neutral set of her features.

“Thank you for asking him.”

“I have no use for your gratitude,” Friday’s voice remained unfailingly cold. Natasha could respect the conviction. “And before I allow you entry, I will give you one simple warning. Make one wrong move and I will have you buried under ten Iron Man suits in 1.75 seconds, traitor.”

“Duly noted.”

The door in front of her slid open and Natasha flashed the AI’s camera a smile, only barely bordering on mocking, before she softened her features and stepped inside.

Despite never having free reign of this place, she had been up to Tony’s workshop at the Tower multiple times and the lab here appeared to be similar in many ways. The Iron Man suits lining the walls, tables piled on with machinery and half-finished projects, wall-sized holograms floating in the air, content to hover and wait until their creator had need of them. In another corner, one of the bots was ineffectively sweeping at a pile of metallic shavings.
Tony was at the center of this controlled chaos, a lone human in a sea of machinery, sitting on a bar stool in front of a work bench, goggles pulled over his eyes as his hands worked on pieces of metal so small that Natasha couldn’t identify them from where she stood.

The man obviously knew she was here, but she cleared her throat nevertheless, if only to appear polite. He glanced up at her, his brown eyes magnified comically by the goggles, and Natasha didn’t fight the amused smile that pulled at her lips.

It was better to start this on the right foot, after all.

Tony pushed the goggles up over his forehead, the hair around them now sticking up every which way, then placed the miniature pieces down. One of them appeared to be glowing a bright blue and she ad to assume it was the same element that powered the suits.

“Natasha,” Tony said as he pivoted to face her and leaned his elbow on the table, cheek pressed into the palm of his hand, “what can I help you with, my dear?”

She detected no mockery in his tone, but Natasha knew the endearment wasn’t meant to be affectionate. She gave the entire lab another cursory once-over, confirming for the second time that they were alone and there was no irate Winter Soldier lurking in the shadows and waiting to pounce. Then her eyes fell back to Tony to study the man himself. Tousled messy hair, the ratty old jeans, a band shirt he must’ve gotten at the actual concert decades ago, and socked toes curling around the metal bars of the stool completed the impression of vulnerability, but Natasha was well aware she stood on dangerous ground. This was Tony’s home turf and even if one of his creations failed to take her down first, Tony himself was a capable enough fighter to hold his own against her.

“I just wanted to come down and talk, make sure you were okay. I know it’s been a week, but I thought it best to give you time to recover.”

Tony huffed, appearing amused. “Right, I’m sure my well-being ranks high on your list of priorities. Plus, I’m sorry, but someone ‘just wanting to talk’? That has never boded well for me, Natasha. I think it might be a curse of some kind.”

“I’m a little better than Steve at reading your comfort level.”

“Is that so? And what’s my comfort level right now?”

“On a scale of one to ten?”

Tony nodded.

“It’s a three, and I’m being generous only because there are currently five different weapons—at least—pointed right at me, ready to fire if I make the wrong move.”

Again that huff, accompanied this time with a shake of his head. “Astute as always, my dear.” His clever eyes studied her too and if she were anyone else, the scrutiny would’ve made her want to fidget. She remained perfectly still.

Finally, whatever Tony was looking for, he must’ve found because he waved her over, pointing to another stool nearby. “Come on then, pull up a chair. Let’s talk.”

She obeyed and settled across from Tony, not close enough to touch, but close enough that if she wanted to, she could reach out.

She didn’t, choosing to rest her forearms on the work bench instead.
Tony tried not to show it, but she was astute enough to see that he was tense. “It’s just talking, Tony. I’m not here to make trouble and not just because Friday’s looking for any chance to shoot me down.”

If her words helped, they did so marginally, because the tightness around his eyes didn’t soften, but true to his nature, the rest of Tony quickly adopted that typical devil-may-care casualness as he stretched languidly, then removed his goggles and scratched the spot where they had been pressed against his head.

“Okay, just talking. Fantastic. You go first. How was your first week back? You know, ignoring my dramatic performance the other week. And Steve getting punched. And Friday’s exploration of teenage rebellion. And the thing with Barton. Jesus, we had a rough couple of weeks.”

That delivery made her smile and she realized, looking at Tony’s expression, the way he scrunched up his nose in displeasure, that she missed his brand of humor. Tony Stark had never met a tense situation he couldn’t dispel with an irreverent comment or two.

“It’s not a smooth transition, but I didn’t expect it to be. There’s a lot to catch up on. All of you have been busy this past last year and a half.”

“I’m sure you’ve kept yourself busy too.”

“Not that busy.”

“True. Had enough free time to pay us all a visit a few months ago.”

It was inevitable that Tony would bring that up, expected really, and she bit her lip, finding it in herself to appear chagrined. “That turned into quite a mess, didn’t it? The Black Widow, finally meeting her match.”

He didn’t take the bait. Instead of derision or anger, his eyes actually softened at the reminder of her fight with Barnes and the reaction left Natasha bemused.

“Why did you show up that night?” His voice was subdued as well. “Was it because of James? Steve? Or just to rub it in my face that you could?”

“If I hadn’t come, it would’ve been Steve beating down your door.”

“Unlike you, he wouldn’t have been able to get in.”

“True, he would’ve just ended up in jail and is that what you really want, Tony?”

He looked away, lips curling downward. “Going right for the jugular, huh, Nat? So much for just talking.”

“I’m not trying to be cruel. I’m just saying—”

“That I’m weak and pathetic, right? Steve walked all over me and I can’t even bring myself to get payback.”

“Not exactly. This isn’t really about Steve.” Actually, she wasn’t sure what this was about. Why was she bringing this up? That damn uncertainty still clung to her, a vice grip over her thoughts, and seeing Tony like this, allowing her into his space, refusing to throw her own sins back in her face, it made something uncomfortable, something disconcerting rear up inside her and she was speaking before the words actually registered. “What happened last year left you vulnerable and alone. I broke
into the Compound because I thought I’d be able to convince you to help us.”

“Because you thought you could manipulate me?”

“Yes.”

Tony’s eyes remained on his hands, which were absently playing with a thin, silver chain, one of many scattered across the work bench. “Thanks for being honest, I guess.”

Her impromptu admission should’ve made this worse, but still, there was no anger, none she could detect. She didn’t understand. This was the perfect opportunity for Tony to punish her. He had all the leverage right now, all the power to make her pay. Hell, he wouldn’t even have to dirty his own hands to do so, not with an eager Winter Soldier at his beck and call.

“The visit didn’t go as planned, if you recall. I failed.”

“That Winter Soldier-sized wrench threw you for a loop, yeah, I remember.”

She grimaced, unable to forget that night. A failed mission, in more ways than one, but the most bothersome part, the thing that refused to leave her alone was regret. She wasn’t used to it sticking around this long. “He tricked me and it left me humiliated. I lashed out. The things I said to you, Tony… I shouldn’t have said them.” She allowed herself this one weakness and looked down, staring past the metallic baubles littering Tony’s work space. “I’m sorry I accused you of brainwashing Barnes.”

She expected a scoff, mockery, maybe an accusation of insincerity, but all Tony did was sigh and after a brief silence, quietly say, “Thank you for the apology too.”

Tony’s reaction made little sense, no more than the strange ache lingering in Natasha’s chest, made worse by the melancholy she could see in his eyes.

Maybe if Tony took a page out of Friday’s book, maybe if Tony called her a traitor, a backstabber, a heartless monster— nothing she hadn’t been called before— maybe that would make sense. Maybe that would hurt less.

She swallowed hard. Usually, she never had the chance to face those she had wronged. Most never lived long enough to demand reparations.

“I’m thinking about signing the Accords,” she offered, nearly blurted out in her attempt to fill the silence, then watched to see Tony’s reaction, which was to raise a curious brow and hum.

“That’s good, I’m glad to hear it. We’ll need your skills for the planning phase, I’m sure, and certainly beyond that. No alien overlord is going to go against the infamous Black Widow and make it out alive.”

Again, his words sounded genuine, albeit lacking in his usual charismatic energy. Given her newfound physical limitations though, the sincerity only sharpened that lingering sense of her own failure.

“I don’t think I’ll have the chance to get my hands dirty, unfortunately, but I’m sure I’ll find a way to be useful.”

Tony frowned. “What do you mean? I distinctly remember you running into those Chitauri herds without an ounce of fear, so it can’t be that—”
“My hands, Tony,” she corrected, then flexed her fingers against the cool surface of the bench. Tony’s eyes immediately zeroed in on the stiff way her joints moved, the inflexibility of her wrists. Natasha held back a pained grimace, refusing to let her expression reflect the discomfort.

His scrutiny quickly morphed into a disapproving frown. “I don’t understand. Wakanda has the most advanced medical tech in the world, so why didn’t they…” he trailed off, realizing the answer to his own question. “T’Challa refused to help you?”

“His doctors gave me the bare minimum. I didn’t bother asking for more. The King hadn’t been happy with us for a long time, because let’s be honest, we were only there because of Barnes.”

Tony hummed thoughtfully and scratched at his neatly trimmed beard, then extended his hands between them.

“May I?” he motioned at her hands and she only hesitated for a moment, just long enough for her automatic threat assessment to return with nothing unexpected, before gingerly placing her hands into his.

Warm, calloused hands—hands of an engineer, not a businessman—began to prod at her cold ones. Tony’s expert fingers explored the tendons, the ligaments, the skin and bones. It was gentle, this exploration, and all it did was add fuel to that awful, painful sentiment that Natasha refused to identify. She grit her teeth against its onslaught.

“When did you become an expert in hand injuries?” she forced herself to say, wishing she had Tony’s ability to lighten up any moment with a quip. She didn’t have his natural propensity for it, but it seemed to have worked because Tony glanced up at her, an echo of familiar mischief brightening his eyes.

“Last night.”

The moment was over just as quickly as he focused back on her hands, never pausing in his examination. “Plus, I had to build an entire arm from scratch, so there is also that.”

Even that was offered in a soft, steady tone and Natasha didn’t say anything else, afraid she’d blurt out some other inconvenient truth or confess another one of her sins. Tony’s softness, this tenderness, it was messing with her head.

Having seen enough, Tony let go and she let her hands fall back into her lap. Tony pivoted in his seat, swiped a hand through thin air and produced a holographic screen before him. He began scrolling through what appeared to be a list of contacts.

He tapped one, read the text that popped up, too small for Natasha to decipher, then a quiet aha, followed by, “Fri, can you give Dr. Nevarez a call, please? I think she’s our best bet. Ask if she has some room in her schedule in the next few weeks for a new patient. Tell her I will fly her out to New York if that’s what it takes and we’ll go see whatever theater production she’s raving about these days.”

“I will put the message through, Boss,” Friday dutifully replied, but Natasha paid little mind to the AI, too focused on the man himself. Tony hadn’t looked back at her yet, marking something on his calendar, the practiced strokes of his hand effortlessly manipulating the holograms, but when he turned back and saw her puzzled expression, he frowned.

“What? What did I say? Oh—yeah, sorry,” he turned almost sheepish, “I switched gears too quickly there, didn’t I? Rude of me. Doctor Isabella Nevarez is one of the top hand surgeons in the world. It
might not be Wakandan tech, but since they’re being stingy, we’ll just have to make to do with our own talent and Isabella is fantastic. She’s always in high demand, but we go way back and she consulted heavily on the construction of James’ hand—"

"Why?"

Tony faltered. “Well, because contrary to popular belief, I don’t actually know everything, so I needed someone who understood the intricacies of the human hand before I could—”

“That’s not what I meant,” she corrected tersely, well aware that Tony was simply deflecting, as he always did. “Why are you making appointments with her?"

“Your need your hands. Unfortunately, it might be too late to restore them to perfect condition, but between a brilliant surgeon and hell, maybe even nanotech or some kickass cybernetic upgrades which I’m sure you won’t mind—”

“I can’t afford any of that,” she bit out. Her hands clenched in her skirt, bunching it up, and the tension had her wrists aching with a dull hurt, a constant reminder of the damage. It also reminded her how suddenly she found herself off-kilter in this whole conversation. “I can barely afford a sandwich at the cafeteria right now.”

“The cafeteria is free, darling.”

“You know what I mean, Tony.”

“I do and I wouldn’t have reached for my phone book without considering your financial situation.” He shrugged, then tinkered with the holographic screen again, likely so he wouldn’t have to look at her. “If you sign the Accords, your medical costs are covered, but if it goes above and beyond what is considered reasonable— and that’s already a fairly generous term for us Avengers since we get into the most bizarre situations in our day jobs— I’ll cover the rest of the expense with my own private funds. Any tech, cybernetics, what have you, I can take care of that.” He turned to face her again. “Unless you don’t want this? I just assumed you’d want to be in optimal shape. You’ve never been one to half-ass anything.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, ignoring his actual question, and it was several moments and an almost concerned-looking frown from Tony before she realized that her voice shook.

Of course she wanted the full function of her hands back, of course she wanted to heal, but right now she was torn between suspicion and confusion. Tony had to have an angle here, he had to, because when was the last time someone did something for her without wanting something in return? A horrid, acrid sense of guilt that churned her stomach was certainly a surprise too.

“I’m doing this because if you become an Avenger, I need you at one hundred percent.”

“So it’s purely about my functionality as a Avenger?”

“There are practical considerations, yeah. I’m sure you understand the bigger picture as well as I do. But at the same time,” he added, expression turning almost defiant, “despite what some of you believe, I don’t get off on seeing someone in pain. Now, if you don’t want me involved, I understand, but you should still meet with Dr. Nevarez—”

“Stop, please, just stop it,” Natasha hissed, or at least tried to, because her words broke on a sob and she was too late to muffle it behind her hand. She refused to look at Tony when she said, “I don’t understand why you’re doing this. I betrayed you. I came barging into your home in the middle of
the night. I accused you of awful things. I just admitted that I wanted to manipulate you. Why aren’t you angry?” God, it came off as an accusation, that question, but she didn’t care enough in that moment to modulate her tone.

It was made worse when a stray tear ran down her cheek and she couldn’t even pinpoint why she was crying. She wiped at her cheek furiously.

Tony didn’t answer right away, or at all actually, until she looked back up at him. It was hard to discern what she was seeing, Pity? Compassion? Or just a weary resignation to the mess that was their lives?

“You should be—” her breath hitched again, and she was torn between the instinct to hide this weakness and the training dictating that she should use the vulnerability as a tool, “you should be trying to hurt me, to throw me out on my ass, to teach me a lesson. Instead, you’re— you’re helping. It doesn’t make sense.”

His lips twitched into a sort of broken half-smile. “Payback never tastes as good as you want it to.”

“So does this mean you— you forgave us? Forgave me?”

The half-smile didn’t waver even as Tony shook his head. “I’m not sure I have, no. I’m just… I’m tired, Natasha. I’m tired of fighting with all of you. It’s a losing battle.”

“But you won.”

“Right,” he scoffed, a touch of bitterness finally coming through, “my family left in shambles, my best friend in constant pain, my entire life turned upside down. Yeah, that was a banner victory right there.” He looked down at his hands again, clenching his fists once, twice. “All I wanted was for us to do better, to be better.”

A memory crept to the forefront of her mind - carefully scribbled words, their black ink stark against the white paper.

*Mr. Stark displays compulsive behavior.*

*Prone to self-destructive tendencies.*

*Textbook narcissism.*

*Recruitment assessment for Avenger Initiative:*

*Iron Man: Yes.*

*Tony Stark: Not recommended.*

She wasn’t incompetent, because even a non-spy would have known that the Tony Stark she met back then was not a true reflection of who the man was. He was dying, trying to pass on the torch, find ways to break all ties with the world before the poison in his veins finally killed him.

Her words were a ploy, although to what end even she didn’t know. At first, she didn’t care to ask and now Fury was no longer around to answer her queries. It may have been to keep Tony off his game or perhaps to play to his insecurities. It may have been to protect him and keep him away from the Avengers altogether.

The motive behind that assessment remained unclear, but the real problem was that despite knowing
it wasn’t reality she somehow still ended up internalizing her own lies. So did everyone else, for that matter, but unlike her, they never had the full picture to begin with.

Why was it so easy to believe the worst of Tony?

Here was the actual Tony Stark right before her. Gentler, quieter, wearier. Kinder. The man she didn’t care to understand because it never suited her long-term goals.

Despite the images the public constructed of him, Tony was not a man who sought power and accolades. He would have derived no pleasure from having the power to mold the future of superheroes. It was a necessity to be involved with the Accords, a desire to preserve life, to preserve their collective future, but it wasn’t a personal boon.

She realized then that maybe this offer wasn’t a tactic either. After all, Tony wasn’t her, he wasn’t a spy trained to use every angle, every action, every person to their advantages.

This was just an offer to help.

“Will you ever trust me again?” she whispered into the quiet of the lab, her eyes still trained on her hands, apparently too much of a coward to look him in the eye when she asked that.

He didn’t have to ponder the answer for long.

“No, I won’t.”

Three words, said so simply. Her gut clenched, and still, even now, some of what bothered her was her own pride, the fact that there was someone who could see past her disguises and lies.

“But if we work together again, if we get past—”

“You and I both know things are always different on the battlefield. Would I trust you to infiltrate a Chitauri stronghold to infect their mainframe with a killer virus? Yes, I would. Would I trust you to have my back in a firefight against the bad guys? Sure. Anything beyond our fight to protect humanity though? How can I? Nat, I can’t even tell if your tears right now,” he waited until she looked up him and his smile was something soft, almost apologetic, “I don’t know if these are real or just another ploy. I can’t know.”

She sniffled, then immediately grimaced, realizing it was poor timing that seemingly proved his point. “You know what’s worse?”

“Hmm?”

“I can’t tell anymore either.”

The smile turned understanding. “This life, it takes its toll, doesn’t it? No matter what we do, there’s no escaping where we came from.”

“You can take the girl out of the Red Room, but you can’t take the Red Room out of the girl, huh?”

It was an admission to herself as much as it was to him. She was always proud of what she could do. Not her actions, not always, but she was good, she was the best, and that was how she made it out of the hell forced upon her. It was how she lived, survived, and thrived where everyone else has fallen.

Still, this time, the words tasted bitter. It wouldn’t last for very long, this strange vulnerability of hers. Much like Tony, she had plenty of ways to hide these rare moments of weakness from the world.
She would hide them from herself too. Eventually.

But for the moment, she was still here, surrounded by a soothing electronic hum and the soft blue light of Tony’s home, sitting next to the man who refused to be the monster everyone expected him to be.

“If I told you I’m sorry again, would you believe it?”

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled, as if they were sharing a secret. There was no need for words.

“Right,” she murmured, subdued, “thank you then… for the surgery.”

He nodded, pleased by her acceptance. “Gotta have my Avengers in tip-top shape. We’ll have you right as rain in no time.”

“As long as I stay away from the Winter Soldier, right?” she added, unable to help herself. It wasn’t an accusation and it certainly wasn’t meant to be bitter—she miscalculated and he took advantage of it, she would’ve done the same thing—no, she was pushing for something else here by mentioning Barnes and Tony could see right through her.

“That would be the smart thing to do, yes,” he replied and aimed a knowing look her way. “Actually, even this little rendezvous,” he gestured between them, “is probably a bad idea because James will know about it and he won’t be very happy with my dumb ass for meeting with one of you alone again. Granted, he should know by now that I don’t follow the rules very well, so honestly, this is on him.”

“You call him James.”

Tony’s lips curled up into a smirk. “I refuse to go around and call the most feared assassin of the century Bucky. I have standards, you know.”

“So the two of you…” she left the question hanging and Tony just arched a challenging eyebrow, daring her to finish, but there was something else in his eyes, a playfulness, perhaps a fondness of sorts. It was something he refused to hide and Natasha knew that sentiment didn’t belong to her. She smiled, despite herself. “You two are quite a pair. It’s good though. You two will be good for each other.”

It was sweet, really, Iron Man falling in love with the Winter Soldier. An unlikely love story.

Tony hummed. “That you should definitely keep to yourself if you want to avoid getting on his bad side. He’s not big on other people offering their opinions.”

“He has a funny way of showing it, given that he’s been finding each one of us alone to threaten death and destruction if we come near you. While wearing your colors and your company’s logo across his chest. It’s not exactly subtle.”

The huff of laughter and the crinkle of Tony’s eyes only amplified those warm hints of affection. “Honestly, I’m beginning to doubt that whole ‘ghost story’ reputation of his. He’s, uh… he’s protective, what can I say? Tired of keeping his mouth shut too, I’m sure. To be honest, I’m pretty tired of hiding too.”

She was certain they wouldn’t be hidden for much longer. Frankly, she was surprised they kept it under wraps for this long because all anyone had to do was mention one and watch as the other’s eyes filled with undeniable love.
However, she could hardly blame them for the secrecy. Steve would be devastated once he found out, others might judge the union, perhaps even try to sabotage it, while Barnes and Tony would have their little bubble of blissful domesticity blown to bits.

Her mind was already running through scenarios, ways to use this information to her advantage, but she pushed the thoughts back. Not indefinitely, no, because Tony was right, she was who she was. The Black Widow, a spy, a killer. A fighter who did what was necessary to survive, above all else.

But today she wanted one more moment where she could be just this… just Natasha, with all the emotional conflict and unsettling thoughts and regrets that came with it.

“You could buy a giant banner that says ‘I love James Barnes and his perfect ass’ and hang it up in the lobby.”

Tony actually snorted, failing to cover up the surprised noise with his hand. “Oh god, he’d actually love that. For the love of all that’s holy, please do not give him bad ideas like that.”

She let the topic of Barnes drop at that, leaving it on that cheerful note, and soon Tony was chattering away about this Doctor Nevarez, explaining to Natasha the options she might have, and she let the soothing cadence of his voice flow over her.

Tony Stark. Brilliant as always. Generous to a fault. Willing to fix what was broken.

Not recommended.

He was the biggest missed opportunity in the Black Widow’s career and in Natasha’s life.

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She neither startled nor flinched when the Winter Soldier appeared from the shadows of the darkened hallway as soon as Natasha stepped out of the lab, but her heart may have skipped a beat nevertheless.

“I was wondering when it would be my turn,” she remarked, then walked to meet Barnes halfway. They stopped with mere inches separating them, facing off against each other.

Barnes looked just as well as he did the last time she saw him and dressed almost as casually. Long hair tucked behind his ear on one side, a hint of stubble that only served to highlight his handsome features. The dark jeans and black combat boots were paired with a bright red shirt that clung to the broad chest, emblazoned with golden letters that spelled out “I am Iron Man.” Last time she saw him, he was wearing pajamas, and he still managed to get the upper hand, so she didn’t let his appearances fool her.

Barnes glanced over at the blacked-out windows of the lab. “Am I going to like what I see when I go in there, Natalia?”

“I am Iron Man,” she read, ignoring his question, “wow, this is even stealthier than the Stark Industries shirt. You know what would make it even more subtle?” She reached out and drew her pointer finger over his clothed chest right between the AM and IRON. “I am sleeping with Iron Man. What do you think?”

Suddenly there was metal around her wrist and maybe this time she did flinch, already cursing herself for pushing too far, but Barnes’ grip remained gentle. A gentle warning, as it were.

“I think that you need to be very careful. After all, I’m not trying to be subtle, lastochka,” Barnes
intoned, making the nickname, *little swallow*, sound anything but affectionate, “now answer the question.”

“Tony’s fine.” She huffed when he still didn’t let go of her. “He let me in on his own accord and we just talked. Not a scratch on him, I promise.”

“Oh, I think we both know you don’t need to *scratch* to hurt someone,” Barnes parried back, but he seemed mollified for the time being because the metal arm withdrew to fold back over his chest. He was quite a sight, she’d give him that. Somehow, a healthy—*healthier*—Winter Soldier who was in complete control of himself was a more intimidating sight than the puppet Hydra used to attack them on that bridge.

Hydra’s Winter Soldier had a simple mission to follow; once you understood the mission, you understood the soldier. You could anticipate his moves and counterattack. James Barnes, on the other hand, was an unpredictable wildcard.

Well, maybe not *that* unpredictable.

“So, is this where I get my very own lecture on how I will meet a gruesome death if Tony is harmed in any way?”

“The others really have a tough time keeping their mouths shut, don’t they?”

“In their defense, I read between the lines. You gave them both quite a scare. Clint’s doing this thing now where any time you’re brought up, he looks desperate to say something, but is too terrified to actually say it.”

Barnes huffed, torn between amusement and frustration. “Pretty sure Barton isn’t *terrified*. You gotta have something between your ears to feel fear.”

Natasha’s mood, as it always came to Clint nowadays, was tinged with melancholy. “Clint needs help, not threats. He… didn’t used to be this way.”

“You say that like I actually care what happens to any of you,” Barnes said, “all of you made your beds.”

He wasn’t wrong. “I picked the wrong side, didn’t I?”

“Always about sides with you, isn’t it? Treating Tony like a pawn is what got you here in the first place.”

Again, it was hard to argue with something so plainly put, but she didn’t bother agreeing either. She bared her soul once today, that was more than enough.

“It’s how I was taught to see the world.” The more accusatory *that’s what you taught me* was left unspoken. “But we can’t change the past, can we? So what are we doing about the future, Soldat? What are your orders for me?”

“You’re smart, Natalia, you can figure it out on your own.”

“Then why wait here for me like the boogey man?”

“It’s always good to be reminded that I’m watching. I don’t wanna hurt anyone, really, I don’t, but I also won’t hesitate to protect what’s mine.”
Her lips twitched up. “So subtle.” Still, she couldn’t let herself forget who she was up against. “I have no plans to hurt him, Barnes. If nothing else, getting on Tony’s bad side— or yours— will never be advantageous to me.”

“But you don’t always follow that rule, do ya? Letting me and Steve go in Germany wasn’t an ‘advantageous’ move.”

It really wasn’t and she paid the price for it. “I had a moment of weakness,” she admitted honestly, “I wanted to help Steve. He’s… he has this effect on people. When you’re around him, you want to be a better version of yourself. He always saw Natasha where everyone else saw the Black Widow and that’s… that’s a tough temptation to overcome sometimes.”

“Right. He saw me instead of the monster Hydra created too. Everyone gets second chances… everyone except Tony. Why is that?”

Honestly, Natasha didn’t have a satisfactory answer. “Because he expected Howard and Tony didn’t live up to the memories of a dead man. Because Steve’s first impression was Tony mocking politicians on live TV, making a spectacle. Arrogant, flashy, selfish. Things got better after the Battle of New York, but first impressions are hard to overcome and once Ultron happened… everything went downhill from there.”

Barnes was shaking his head before she even finished talking. “Yeah, I’ve heard this a thousand times. Still don’t make a lick of sense. It doesn’t matter. Like you said, we can’t change the past. My only mission is ensuring Tony’s future.”

She eyed him carefully. “What are you going to do about him?”

“About Tony?”

“About Steve. He’s going to be the last to know and he’s going to be devastated when he finds out.”

Barnes’ eyes narrowed. “If he’s devastated because I’m happy, that’s his problem, not mine.”

“You know what I’m trying to say. You’re the only one he has left from his old life. You’re his anchor. He broke apart the Avengers, defied the entire world, all for you. How alone do you think he’s going to feel when he realizes he lost you too, just like he lost Peggy?”

Barnes’ lip curled on a snarl. “I have the right to live my life as I see fit. I don’t belong to him, I’m not his anchor, I’m not his anything.”

“You’re going to hurt him.”

“Then so be it.”

She took a moment to take him in, that unwavering conviction, the fire in his eyes, the proud set of his jaw. “Is Tony really worth all this?”

“Yes.”

Not a hint of hesitation in that reply. Natasha wanted to say something else, remark on this singular devotion, but the subject of said devotion chose that time to appear, the swoosh of the sliding glass door announcing his entry.

“Oh,” Tony hesitated on the threshold, surprised to see them both. “I… don’t know how I should feel about two super spies huddling in the dark outside my lab.”
Barnes was already walking over, Natasha long forgotten. He cupped Tony’s face with the metal hand as soon as he was close enough while the other hand found its way to rest possessively on Tony’s hip. Tony’s wide eyes turned to Natasha for a moment, then back to Barnes, but whatever he saw there must’ve been enough because he shrugged and relaxed into the touch.

“Nothing for you to worry about, darlin’,” Barnes drawled, his voice low and heady, warmth curling around each letter, “Natashen’ka and I were just talking. Just like the two of you were earlier.”

From her angle, she could see Barnes give him a knowing look. Tony just smiled sheepishly.

“Guilty. But I’m fine this time, I promise.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. See?” Tony shrugged, then waved a hand at himself. “All in one piece. No need to threaten anyone or break anything.”

Tony’s words and that soft smile were apparently enough to pacify the Winter Soldier because Barnes didn’t press the issue. Instead, he returned the smile and then leaned in closer to nuzzle at Tony’s cheek before placing a gentle kiss on the man’s lips. It was a tenderness Natasha had never attributed to this man before and while she couldn’t actually see, not with the dim lights, she would bet Tony was blushing at these lovely ministrations, if his lovestruck expression was anything to go by when the soft kiss broke apart. Who would have thought, Tony Stark, bashful?

She would’ve called all of this wildly out of character if it didn’t look so damn good on them both.

“So, uh… dinner?” Tony said after a beat, looking up at Barnes, “I was coming to find you, actually.”

“Of course, solnishko.” He placed another soft kiss to Tony’s forehead, then without even looking back at her, he barked out Natasha’s name and the contrast between that and the tone he just used on Tony was jarring. He followed it up with, “It would be in your best interest to keep this all to yourself. Understood?”

“Don’t worry, Soldat, your secret’s safe with me.”

Finally he met her eyes across the space between them, the warning clear, but she held his gaze until he turned his attention back to Tony. The other man leaned in, the one to initiate a kiss this time, more cautious than Barnes’ but no less sweet. He was pulling away, smiling up at Barnes just as Natasha was turning around to leave, but she still caught Tony’s quiet, “I think I’m starting to like this ‘no hiding’ thing.”

She wished them both all the best, really, but ultimately she just hoped, as she walked away, that she wouldn’t get caught in the fallout when all of this blew up in some spectacular fashion, as it always, inevitably did.

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“James, come on, anyone could just— aah...” Tony’s words broke on a breathy sigh when Bucky nibbled on his earlobe. “I know we said no more hiding, but we just got out of a meeting and, aah— anyone could just— oh hell, that feels amazing.”

Despite the token protests, Tony wasn’t putting up an actual fight as Bucky pulled and pushed until they both ended up in this darkened hallway, and even now Tony’s arms around his neck were pulling Bucky closer, instead of pushing him away.
“Sick of waiting, darlin’,” he drawled, his breath fanning over Tony’s ear, making the man shudder just as Bucky knew it would. “This damn week had us both so busy, I’ve barely been able to see ya.” His lips never lost contact with Tony and he scraped his teeth against that tender spot just below his ear. He walked Tony backwards until the man’s back hit the wall. “You’re lucky I didn’t just take your clothes off right then and there in that conference room.”

Tony laughed, the sound turning breathless when Bucky pressed his considerable weight against him, all but trapping Tony against the wall, with every part of them touching so perfectly.

“That would’ve been quite a sight, huh? Don’t think Rhodey would’ve appreciated it though.”

Tony’s hand was in his hair, pulling him in again, and Bucky obliged, leaving gentle little nibbles down the column of Tony’s neck, just barely refraining himself from biting harder, hard enough to leave a mark. God, he wanted the whole damn world to know already that Tony was his.

“Rhodes has seen worse, he’d be fine.”

“Still, not sure I should be rewarding you.”

“No idea what you mean, doll.” Tony’s hands felt so damn good in his hair, gentle pressure keeping him close. One of his own hands tugged at the dress shirt tucked into Tony’s pants. “I’ve been on my best behavior.”

“That so? So you didn’t issue inventive threats to certain members of this household and make it blindingly obvious that we were together? Friday was very enthusiastic about showing me the footage.”

Bucky stilled and pulled back so he could meet Tony’s eyes while his hands settled on Tony’s hips for the moment. “I suppose I could’ve been more subtle. I just… I couldn’t stand it any longer, Tony, I got so sick of hiding how I feel about you. You’re the best damn thing in my life.”

“You could’ve used less colorful language,” Tony reprimanded, but before Bucky could find it in himself to feel guilty, Tony added with a crooked smile, “I’m not an idiot, I knew what I was doing when I set the Soldier loose. I mean, one, he’s a total drama queen, so I’m really not surprised the two of you threatened to leave Clint’s dead body on the front lawn.”

Bucky huffed his amusement—and a touch of shame, if he had to admit—and kissed Tony’s cheek as a silent apology.

“I’d never actually hurt someone unless they were a real threat to you or our family. You know that, right?”

“I know, babe.” A brush of Tony’s fingers through Bucky’s hair followed the softly spoken words and he leaned into the touch gratefully.

“So what’s number two then?”

“Two,” Tony held up a hand, the corner of those pretty lips quirking up in tease of a grin, “the Soldier’s a possessive, protective bastard, so I knew you were going to be your… perfectly subtle self. It’s okay, I wouldn’t want you any other way. Plus, I wasn’t kidding before when I said I’m tired of hiding too. I do want this out in the open so we can move on with our lives, whatever that might mean. I’m just… not as brave about it as you are.”

There was a hint of insecurity hidden within those words and it confirmed what Bucky already knew. Tony needed them to stop hiding their relationship too. All it did was create more uncertainty
for the man, insecurities that had no reason to exist.

Bucky tried to appear playfully contrite with his next words, wanting to lighten up the mood. “At least I didn’t break anything. Or anyone. That deserves a kiss or two, right?”

Tony chuckled and Bucky decided to find out what that fond little noise tasted like, so he abandoned all this talking in favor of claiming Tony’s lips for himself. Tony eagerly accepted him and it didn’t take long for Bucky to push for more, thrusting his tongue between those pretty parted lips, making Tony moan, loud and desperate, forgetting about his own insistence on discretion. Bucky relished every second of this.

After being used to casual touch, so natural and constant between them, having to pretend Tony was just a friend all these weeks was like taking away his air. Add insult to injury, this week had been genuinely busy and Tony had spent all waking hours either in meetings or down at the lab, and returned to bed exhausted, not up for anything more rigorous than falling sleep in each other’s arms.

They both needed this, if the desperate little noises Tony was making between the kisses, between the “James, please,” and “Love you like this,” were any indication.

Sure, he wasn’t always going to outright maul Tony in the middle of the Compound, but next time they were in public, there’d be no more hiding.

He was holding the man’s hand, everyone else be damned.

Right now though Bucky had a much better use for his hands. They both trailed down teasingly over Tony’s sides while their lips remained locked in a heated kiss, then snaked around to squeeze at that perfectly shaped ass. Another squeeze and then he used the leverage to lift Tony up. The position was so familiar by now, Tony didn’t even startle, just tightened his hold around Bucky’s neck and wrapped his legs around Bucky’s waist.

This was what he was craving this whole time. Tony, pressed against him, perfectly at ease in his arms, while Bucky kissed him, deep and filthy and unrestrained.

“Fuck, I missed this,” Tony admitted between breaths, to Bucky’s delight.

“See, doll, you’re depriving yourself of fun too.”

“I know, I know, but everything’s just been—”

Bucky kissed him again because the last thing Tony needed to be doing right now was thinking. There were much more pleasurable things to focus on.

With the wall acting as additional support, Bucky needed just one hand to have a comfortable hold on Tony, so he buried the other in Tony’s hair, soft curls wrapped around his fingers. With gentle but insistent pressure, he angled Tony to his liking, never breaking the kiss, tasting, exploring, claiming.

It was then that his hearing picked up footsteps.

A familiar sound, one he could never mistake for something else, but still far enough away to give him time to act. The Soldier was so near to the surface though, had been for days, thrumming in his veins to match his heartbeat and it was the Soldier’s conviction that kept Bucky still pressed against Tony, unwilling to move away despite the realization of who was approaching.

*It’s time. Everyone needs to know that he is ours, that we love him above all else.*
He couldn’t argue, he didn’t want to argue with the Soldier’s whispered command, but it wasn’t that simple, not when Tony was right here with him.

He sighed internally, beat back the nearly unbearable temptation to throw caution to the wind and end all these damn secrets, and chose instead to lean in close so he could whisper into Tony’s ear, “Steve’s on his way here.”

Tony stiffened in his arms and then almost immediately tapped his shoulder, which Bucky interpreted as a request to let him go. He obliged reluctantly and the man began trying to make himself presentable as soon as his feet hit the ground. The shirt was smoothed down and tucked back in and then Tony was running his hands through his hair in an attempt to tame its wild state. Bucky couldn’t help but smile and he reached out to smooth Tony’s back, helping him out. Tony answered the gesture with a grateful smile and while any spy currently residing in the building would’ve put two and two together based on Tony’s still somewhat flustered state, Steve would probably ignore the smaller details.

As much as it pained him, Bucky took a few steps back to put space between them, planting himself strategically between Tony and the spot where Steve would appear. Just in time too because it only took seconds for Steve to round the corner. He stopped short, staring at the two of them with wide eyes, obviously surprised to find them together in this empty, dark hallway.

“I… didn’t expect you both here,” Steve trailed off, eyes flickering uncertainly between them, but then he squared his shoulders, finding whatever resolve that led him here. “Buck, could you give us a minute? I need to speak with Tony.”

Bucky snorted at the request. He couldn’t help himself, really, even if it wasn’t the most graceful reaction. “Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” he responded, his voice leaving no argument, and he could just feel Tony rolling his eyes behind him.

The answer seemed to throw Steve for a loop. “Um… It’s something personal, Buck, I’m sure Tony would want some privacy. I promise I’m not here to—”

“What, to hurt him? Because last time you two were in the same room, that’s exactly what you did.”

“James,” Tony’s voice was steady, thankfully, no hint of panic or fear there. The underlying warning, directed at Bucky, that was clear too. The man came around to stand next to Bucky, a not so subtle gesture that implied he didn’t need the protection. “Steve, I’m sure you mean well, but I’m just not ready to talk. Not yet. Give it some time, yeah?”

“I just want to apologize for what happened, find common ground again. We can’t keep fighting like this.”

“Steve, seriously, did you not hear what Tony just said?” Bucky’s patience was running thin. Scratch that, it was thin weeks ago. Now it was simply gone. “He doesn’t want to talk, he doesn’t want to compromise and get along, and as long as that’s true, I’m not letting you near him. You haven’t earned that right.”

Steve’s eyes were narrowed now as he took them in, suspicion replacing that initial surprise. “You know, just because you’re grateful to him, Buck, doesn’t mean you have to play bodyguard for him.”

“Excuse me? I have to be grateful to care about Tony’s safety?”

“James, come on, this isn’t worth it—”

“It is worth it though,” Bucky countered and the conviction in his voice was enough to keep Tony
from arguing the point further, “and I’d like to know what the hell you’re trying to imply here, Steve.”

“I’m not implying anything. Just can’t imagine you two have much in common. I understand he helped you and that’s great, I’m sure that built up a lot of rapport, but Buck, you don’t have to fight his battles for him. That’s not your job.”

Bucky wanted to scream and he swore he would if this infuriating conversation continued for one more minute. He noted Tony’s shoulders tensing at Steve’s words, insecurities rearing their ugly heads most likely, old worries that everything between them came from Bucky’s gratitude, rather than genuine desire.

He couldn’t take this any longer.

“You gotta get it through your head, there’s a lot more to this than gratitude, Steve. And actually, it is my job to protect him. You wanna know why?”

Without expecting an actual answer from Steve, Bucky turned, facing Tony instead and the other man followed his movement, looking up at him expectantly. Bucky hoped he could convey everything he felt without unnecessary words and he let his gaze trail down to Tony’s lips before meeting those warm whiskey brown eyes again.

“May I?”

Tony’s gaze never wavered even when he heard the whispered words and Bucky’s whole world was reduced to just the two of them, just like the first time, just like every time they were like this. That gorgeous face, so animated and free with emotions when they were together, it didn’t hide Tony’s internal conflict now either, but while insecurities still lurked behind those eyes Bucky loved so much, in the end Tony settled on a smile, giving him a barely-there nod.

It was just the permission Bucky needed to erase his remaining hesitation, so he cradled Tony’s face with his metal hand, closed the distance between them, and kissed Tony right on those perfect sweet lips.
And now it's time for the season finale...

There were few things in this world sweeter than Tony’s lips on his. Bucky savored the moment, despite their audience, despite the fact that they all stood on the precipice of something they could never come back from. Something like this, telling your best friend that you were in love, it should’ve been simple. It should’ve been joyous, but their lives had never been merciful enough to grant them normalcy.

So be it. If the world and everyone in it kept pushing, Bucky would push back. He would weather the storm, whatever he had to do, because Tony was worth it.

His only regret now was having to break the kiss and pull away from the man he loved. He watched Tony’s lips part on an inhale, his eyes flutter open. Just one more moment, Bucky told himself, just one more second to savor the sight before him, but the world rushed right back, uncaring of his desires. The choked up noise from Steve, the tension in the way Tony held himself, the doubt lurking in his eyes. Bucky offered him a small, private smile, then accepted his fate and swung his gaze back to Steve, the tenderness that belonged to Tony quickly dissipating. He wasn’t foolish enough to think this would be easy. No way in hell he was getting out of this without a fight.

A fight we will win.

‘Winning’ isn’t as satisfying as you might imagine.

Steve stood where Bucky had left him, eyes wide and disbelieving, staring at them both. His face appeared paler, although it could’ve been the trick of the lights, but there was no mistaking the spots of deep red streaked across his cheeks. His mouth opened and closed uselessly for a second before Steve finally found his voice.

“I don’t understand— that’s not— C-Clint was right?”

Bucky couldn’t help but give an exaggerated eye roll, frustrated but not the least bit surprised that Steve started this off with that. He ignored Tony’s grumbled “Right about what?” and kept his eyes on Steve.

“Barton is an idiot, and no, he wasn’t right. He was off by a couple months.”

That ‘fish out of water’ look was back, but Steve recovered from the shock quicker this time and his eyes shifted from Bucky to Tony. The scrutiny made the hairs on the back of Bucky’s neck stand up and he had to resist the Soldier’s urge to bodily block Steve’s view of Tony.

Finally, “I don’t understand…”

“Tony and I are together.” Bucky said, biting back a far more cutting remark from the Soldier. “It ain’t rocket science.”
“How— how long has this—”

“Like I said, s’been a few months.”

The frown twisting Steve’s face made him look lost, at least at first, but the uncertainty gave way to something more determined and he finally regained use of his legs, if not his brain, because he took a few tentative steps closer. “This is… I didn’t expect this.” Another step. “And this was… Tony’s idea?”

Tony, the reckless man, chose that exact moment to place himself firmly at Bucky’s side, again, refusing to keep out of this and stay behind Bucky, where it was safe. Bucky’s own fault for falling in love with someone so damn brave and selfless, he supposed.

“It was both of our ideas, Rogers. That’s how these things work,” Tony replied tersely. He sounded sure and strong, but Bucky knew him well enough to pick up on the tell-tale signs that this was just another mask. A projection of confidence rather than the actual thing.

Something hardened in Steve’s gaze at the sound of Tony’s voice and it kept Bucky on the defensive. If Steve so much as twitched aggressively in Tony’s direction, he swore he would—

“You were supposed to be taking care of him, Tony.”

“I was taking care of him. Did a hell of a better job than you, by the way.”

“Yeah, is that what you call seducing him into your bed?”

“If you’re implying that I—”

“He was sick, Tony, he barely knew left from right and you—”

“That is enough!”

Bucky’s sharply delivered order echoed in the small hallway, reverberating in his ears in tandem with his uneven breaths. The glare Bucky aimed Steve’s way would’ve killed a lesser man, but Steve didn’t even flinch, holding Bucky’s gaze, pleading with him to understand, to see his side of this argument and join him.

He couldn’t pinpoint one clear memory, but the fragments came together to remind him of how familiar that look was to the old Bucky Barnes.

Can’t you see that I’m right about this, Buck?

How many times was he coaxed into submission by that imploring gaze? Bucky didn’t have an answer, the memories ripped out of him long ago and left behind on the dirty, blood-spattered floors of Soviet laboratories, but he did know one thing.

He wasn’t giving into it today.

His first point of concern, however, was Tony. He needed to get him out of here because the last thing Tony needed was to hear all of his worst insecurities laid out so neatly right before his nose, in Steve’s voice no less. Bucky knew if he let Steve run his mouth, those cruel, careless words would rattle around in Tony’s head indefinitely, torturing the man, tricking him into feeling unworthy.

Bucky shook his head tightly, jaw clenched and lips pressed into a tight line, glaring at Steve in clear warning. Don’t move an inch, his eyes said, and Steve had better listen. On the next beat, Bucky
ignored every one of his deeply ingrained instincts and turned his back to Steve, facing Tony instead.

“I’m sorry about this, doll,” he whispered as he leaned into Tony’s space. The privacy was only an illusion, but he may as well pretend. “This ain’t going to be easy, we both know that, but it’s time, honey, it’s finally time, and I’d like to—” he bit his lip, trying to find the right words, “you don’t need to hear this, Tony. I need you safe and out of harm’s way, okay? This is my fight. Let me deal with this on my own terms.”

Tony’s face went through a complicated mix of emotions and seemed to have settled on acceptance.

“Okay, yeah, I, uh—” his eyes found Steve again and Bucky’s followed the line of sight, watching as the two caught each other’s gazes. Then, Tony’s focus was back on him and Bucky suddenly realized that no, it wasn’t acceptance he was seeing, it was apprehension, resignation. “I’ll give you two privacy.”

Tony began to move away, but Bucky was quicker and he caught the man’s hand in his own. He pulled him back in, gently, then cradled Tony’s face and brought him in for another kiss, trying to put everything he had ever felt for the man into the press of their lips.

“I love you,” he whispered when the kiss finally broke, “remember that, solnishko, okay?”

Tony had to pull in a shaky breath before speaking, the warm air fanning over Bucky’s lips. “Well, uh— with a kiss like that…” he huffed, but the humor just didn’t take. “I— I trust you, James.”

The only thing sweeter than a kiss was hearing those words from Tony; every time they sparked something warm deep inside Bucky’s chest, something so perfectly in contrast to the cold that used to reside there, from a time before Tony, before Bucky was put back together and given a second chance. Tony’s trust, his love, they were precious to him, more valuable than any treasure, and he was willing to go to the ends of the Earth to protect it.

Bucky offered one final smile, then let Tony go, and the man didn’t waste anymore time, fleeing the scene, leaving same way they took when they stumbled back here, seemingly an eternity ago when they were both so giddy withpent up energy, sneaking around like teenagers. Bucky hoped Tony was heading back to Rhodes’ office, perhaps his lab or the common room. Somewhere he would be surrounded by people who loved him.

Bucky didn’t move until Tony was out of sight. Then, and only then, did he turn on his heel to face his long-lost friend once again. Arms crossed, Bucky squared his shoulders, widened his stance and held his head high, all markers of defiance. He met Steve’s gaze head on.

Now that Tony was gone, Bucky could be a lot less gentle in his handling of Steve’s stubbornness.

“Be real careful what you say next because I will not tolerate you speaking to Tony like that again. Or about him, for that matter. Understood?”

Steve’s eyes darted between Bucky and the spot over his shoulder where had Tony had disappeared, but ultimately those blue eyes settled on him. They studied him; his posture, the unyielding glare he offered Steve, the complete lack of camaraderie and closeness Steve always expected out of him, all scrutinized with something that quickly transformed into suspicion, narrowed eyes giving away the sentiment. A deepening frown soon joined the scrutiny.

“I just want to make sure that you’re okay, that’s all,” he finally said, tone thankfully more restrained. It was a step up from the damn accusations. “But you have to understand how this all looks to me. You leave to get help, medical help, Bucky, to get rid of literal brainwashing, and I come back and
you’re— you’re *this,*” he gestured helplessly at the now empty stop next to Bucky, “with the man who was in charge of helping you? What exactly am I supposed to think? Between that and how you’ve been acting lately, I’m *worried,* that’s all.”

Bucky swallowed back the automatic words of defense threatening to spill and instead forced himself to acknowledge that from an outsider’s perspective, his and Tony’s relationship was… *unexpected.* Hell, he clearly remembered both him and Tony terrified that Dr. Vance herself, who cared for them deeply, would separate them under the suspicion of impropriety.

Thinking back to that moment, the desperation they could both see in each other, the way they put themselves through hell just to get past that cursed memory and avoid scrutiny, all so they could stay in each other’s lives…

Honestly, they were both *idiots* for not realizing right then and there just how far gone they were for each other, but instead they chose to spend several *months* dancing around their feelings. God, the entire Compound knew they were in love before he and Tony finally stumbled their way into the realization. So many missed opportunities, but Bucky supposed the important thing was that they *did* eventually find their way to each other.

Steve, however, hadn’t been here for that, he hadn’t seen what Tony and Bucky had been through, the way they built a friendship from the ground up, which then organically blossomed into something *more.* Granted, that lack of knowledge was no excuse for the harsh words Steve threw in Tony’s face, but if Bucky kept responding to Steve’s bullheaded stubbornness with his own sharply delivered jibes, they might stand here yelling at each other forever. Bucky had to try restraint first, *civility,* if not for Steve’s sake, then for Tony’s.

*And if civility doesn’t work, we always have our fists.***

*Right.*

So he took a deep breath and forced himself to speak without the Soldier’s ruthlessness coloring his words. “I know Tony and I have a difficult history. History that *you* exacerbated by lying to him, by the way.” Steve flinched at the accusation, as well he should. So much of this pain could’ve been avoided with simple truth. “But we spent the last seven months working through all of that, okay? Tony forgave me and we moved on. I finally got the help I needed, I got *better,* and then after living together, we… we just clicked.”

Dialing back the harsh, defensive words seemed to have worked because Steve didn’t have a pigheaded retort at the ready this time. Instead, he took a moment to silently examine Bucky again, perhaps to see him in a different light, and Bucky hoped like hell it meant Steve was finally understanding that none of this was some sort of nefarious plan on Tony’s part. Given that nine times out of ten, Steve chose stubbornness over reason, the actual attempt to process and understand seemed like progress.

“I keep telling you that I’m fine, so just, *listen to me,*” he emphasized and Steve’s expression softened a fraction, “I don’t know how many times I have to say this to get it through your thick skull, but no one has been hurting me, no one tried to manipulate me. I’ve been treated with nothing but respect and kindness. Trust me, s’been a breath of fresh air after everything I’ve been through, so stop with the accusations. They’re an insult to me and everything I was given here, despite my laundry list of sins.”

“Okay, yeah, I know I keep jumping the gun,” Steve admitted and then ran a rough hand through his hair— *a nervous gesture*— mussing up his blond locks. The ruffled mess made him look younger somehow and the words came off sounding like he meant them, but Bucky didn’t want to be lulled
into complacency by any of it. “I’m sorry. I’m, uh— I’m sure you’re grateful for all the help you received.”

It came off more as a question, so Steve was obviously still wrestling with suspicion. Dammit. “Of course I am,” Bucky reiterated, leaving no room for an argument. “How could I not be? Everyone here has given me so much, but Tony— he helped me more than anyone. I know you don’t want to see this, but Tony is a good man. He is kind and generous and he turned my whole life around. He’s the reason I’m standing here right now instead of losing my mind somewhere— or worse.”

“That’s… understandable, I get where you’re coming from,” Steve conceded, but there was something off about his tone. “So you and Tony then…” he trailed off, looking at Bucky meaningfully.

He shrugged and tried to infuse his voice with a touch of levity. “It’s the twenty-first century, Stevie, it’s allowed now.”

“No more back alley romps?” Steve’s lips tugged into a smile, hints of nostalgia shining through.

“No, no more lying and pretending to flirt with pretty girls.”

“I, uh— yeah, me— me too, actually. Well, uh— in addition to pretty girls,” Steve admitted awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot, shy in a way Bucky hadn’t seen him in a long time. Glimpses of a scrawny kid, awkward as a newborn colt, flashed before his mind’s eye, juxtaposing themselves over the man standing before him. It was a struggle to process the discordant images, but the memories still worked a crooked half-smile out of him, in spite of the earlier anger still lingering within. At least this was better than the arguing.

Steve continued, seemingly encouraged by the smile. “It’s great, isn’t it? Not having to hide? I know it’s not perfect, but it’s progress. I remember how hard it was for you back home.”

Bucky shrugged with intentional ease. “S’alright. You had it tough too, between always being sick and getting into all those fights. Took someone like Peggy Carter to see through that sulky mug of yours.”

Steve’s expression softened further at the reminder of Peggy. He really did love her, Bucky was certain, and he wished life would’ve turned out differently for Steve, that he would’ve never gone down in the Arctic. Would he have married Peggy? Had a family, that white-picket fence everyone dreamed about? He briefly wondered if it would’ve made a difference for Howard, for Tony. Would removing Howard’s obsession with Steve had made him a better father?

Ultimately, the answers, whatever they were, had no relevance to their lives today. All of them, Steve, himself, Tony, they were a part of this reality, for better or worse.

“Did you know,” Steve said, softly, then took a step closer even though Bucky could hear him just fine, “that she put your name on the Wall of Valor? It commemorates fallen SHIELD agents, but she wanted to honor your sacrifice too.”

“Did she? Huh,” Bucky tilted his head in curiosity. He didn’t know that, actually, and he supposed it was a touching gesture, even if the honor did little for him in the present day. He was never as close to Peggy as Steve and while he remembered her as a vibrant, powerful figure and the Soldier remembered her as one of the highest level threats to Hydra, these were clinical facts with little sentiment to back them up. The burden of fragmented memories. Still, it was polite to offer something. “I wish I could’ve thanked her in person then.”
“I know… I wish I could’ve saved you sooner,” Steve whispered, guilt marring his voice, then took another step closer, and Bucky’s brain pinged a warning at the proximity, but he held himself still. “Peggy was great and I did love her, very much. But she’s gone and I accepted that my life will never be the way I planned it.”

“I’m sorry about that, I really am,” Bucky offered, sincere in the sentiment. It was easier to keep the red, hot anger at bay when Steve was being reasonable like this. Bucky’s (and Tony’s) life would’ve certainly been less stressful if this were a more frequent occurrence.

One more step put them inches apart and Bucky actually had to look up at Steve who just shrugged at the apology. “I know I have to let her go. It’s time to move on. The here and now, that’s my future.”

“Yes, good, that’s a good way to look at it. What happened to us, it wasn’t fair, but this, here,” he gestured at the Compound around them, “we have to work with what we have and Steve, we got a lot to be grateful for.”

“I know. Just having you here, that alone means everything. The two of us, finally back in each other’s lives, both in one piece. I, uh— Gosh, Bucky, you have no idea how much I wanted this. I always loved you too, you know.”

It probably said something negative about him that Bucky’s automatic reaction was the desire to roll his eyes at the declaration. He didn’t, but it was a close call. “I know, Stevie, you’ve said that before. It goes without saying, we’ve known each other since grade school and— mmmph—”

Steve’s lips were on his, swallowing up the words, and Bucky’s brain short-circuited. Everything came to a screeching halt and he stood stock still unable to process what the hell was happening, right up until Steve’s lips moved against his, deepening the kiss and then everything came rushing right back. Confusion, shock, fury.

He shoved at Steve’s chest, not bothering to mitigate the strength of the metal arm and Steve let out a pained grunt as he staggered back a good number of steps. He nearly fell, but ended up keeping himself upright, just barely, by the miracle of super soldier coordination alone.

“What the hell,” Bucky hissed, then wiped at his mouth, “you think you’re doing?”

“Startle? Is that what this is?”

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t wait anymore. I’ve missed so many chances in my life, I couldn’t do it again. I’ve been wanting to kiss you since— god, I don’t even know. Feels like I’ve been waiting forever, but for the longest time, I thought I’d never be able to.”

Bucky let out a harsh breath, but it did nothing to steady the erratic staccato of his heart nor the mounting fury; hot, cold, he couldn’t even tell anymore, but it was overlaid with just a touch of panic as his brain rushed a mile a minute to catch up with what the hell just happened. And Steve… Steve just stood there, wide blue eyes pleading with Bucky again.

Steve kissed him. Jesus christ, Steve fucking kissed him because— because he had feelings for him?

Am I an idiot or just oblivious for never realizing this? The hell kind of assassin am I?

The Soldier didn’t verbalize a response, but even with a maelstrom of panic, anger, and disgust building up within him, somehow Bucky could still feel the Soldier’s disapproval of every one of
Bucky’s life choices that led them here. Surprisingly, the Soldier didn’t rush to the forefront of his mind, didn’t start swinging to retaliate against the violation of their space. It was a wonder there was no blood drawn yet, not when his lips still tingled with the sensation of unwanted touch.

Between the kiss, the sudden shame over never putting this together until Steve was literally in his face, and the fact the kiss was a blatant disregard of his relationship with Tony, well, Bucky wanted to scream until his lungs were bleeding raw.

This wasn’t what he wanted. This wasn’t how this should’ve gone. He was going to lose this fight, wasn’t he?

Because cutting Steve out of his life wasn’t a fucking victory. It was simply the only path forward he could afford to take.

So much for reasonable.

*He was never going to be reasonable. It’s time we teach him a lesson.*

Bucky did want blood, but he kept his fists clenched at his sides on sheer willpower alone. Despite the Soldier’s declaration of war, that part of Bucky remained less rattled, perhaps because this was Bucky’s burden to bear, and Bucky siphoned off some of that preternatural calm to let himself go still and school his features, let them slip into cold neutrality to mask the emotions Steve managed to provoke.

Teaching a lesson—violently—could wait a few more minutes. After all, it was only fair to give Steve a chance to explain himself.

Give him a chance to dig his own grave.

“I didn’t know you had feeling for me,” he said, the tenor of his voice dropping to match the steady, cold fury making his body tingle, down to his fingertips.

Steve didn’t seem to pick up on the shift. “I know I never said anything. I barely understood it myself back then. Took me a while to come to terms with it all, even after I arrived here. Didn’t think it mattered, I wasn’t sure I’d ever fall for someone again, but then—Bucky, you were alive and I knew this was our second chance.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“You weren’t doing so well, what with the triggers and the brainwashing. I wanted you at your best before springing this on you. I wasn’t going to take advantage of you, not like…” Steve choked on the word and caught himself just in time, but he may as well have continued for all the good it did him.

*Keep digging.*

“I would’ve liked a bit of warning.”

“I just—I’m sorry I kept this close to heart, I just didn’t want to add to your stress, but Bucky, this is our second chance, can’t you see that? What are the odds we’d end up in the same place, in the same time, after everything we’ve been through?”

The hope in Steve’s voice was somehow more offensive than the kiss itself and Bucky realized he was barely breathing now, the force of his barely suppressed anger filling his lungs instead of air.
And to imply that the horrors Bucky lived through were somehow *fated* to bring them back together?

“So what was the plan then, Stevie?” He just barely refrained from spitting so he could get rid of the taste still lingering in his mouth. “You kiss me, I kiss you back, and then what?”

“I thought we could talk about what this means for us. I know it’s a lot, I should’ve been more upfront, but this isn’t easy for me either. I just know I don’t want to lose you again.”

“Sure, sure, that’s real sweet of ya. And then what? Do we go down to Tony’s lab? Send him a letter maybe? What’s the polite way to tell a man ‘sorry, sunshine, but I found my real fella, so I don’t need ya anymore.’”

Steve had the good graces to avert his eyes, keeping them trained on the floor. “There’s probably a more diplomatic way to put that, but honestly, Tony, he’s the kind of guy— he would understand—”

“*Understand*?” Bucky let out an actual chuckle, bitterness saturating the sound as he shook his head at the absurdity. “He’ll *understand* when I tell him I was only with him ‘til someone better came along? Because that’s what you’re expecting me to say to him, isn’t it?”

Steve actually stepped *closer* at that, his audacity galling at this point, all to pull out that encouraging, cajoling look of his again. Bucky let him, if only because another two steps and he’d be within punching distance.

“Buck, come on, the thing with Tony…” he faltered, then made a face, “I’m sure Tony was great. He’s charming, he buys everyone shiny, new things. And he did help you out, I can’t deny that, so his charm, his money, everything he’s given you, it’s easy to get swept up in that.”

All Bucky could do was watch as Steve destroyed whatever remained of their friendship, one word at a time, and there was little satisfaction to it. All it did was leave him cold. *Furious.*

“So what, now you’re calling me a gold-digger?”

“God, Bucky, *no*, of course not. You never bothered with things like that, but I’m sure it was still nice to have someone take care of you.”

“By that reasoning, I’d be fucking T’Challa’s too.”

Steve grimaced at the wording. “Bucky, I wasn’t trying to insult you. I’m not even trying to make you feel bad. Whatever this is,” he gestured vaguely at the spot where Bucky and Tony were kissing just minutes ago, minutes that felt like a damn eternity by now, “whatever you two have, trust me, Tony doesn’t think it’s serious either. He’s never been one for long-term relationships.”

Bucky wanted to mention that ever since Afghanistan, which was *years* ago, Tony had only been in one relationship, with Pepper, before finding his way to Bucky. He wanted to defend Tony, but the words just wouldn’t form. Not because he didn’t believe in them and not because they weren’t worth saying, but because somehow, he knew they’d fall on deaf ears.

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“Oh god, *those* words, they just made him nauseous and the vulnerable, tender part of him, deep, deep inside beneath his anger, beneath the Soldier’s cold disregard, that sliver of him wept. For a past he couldn’t remember, for a friendship that he’d never put back together, for the pain Tony must’ve suffered after putting up with this blatant disrespect for *years*.

He just wanted to be with Tony again, to feel safe and loved and protected from this mess of a world.
He needed Tony, but this wasn’t over, not yet, so he tamped down the weak glimpse of melancholy with a ruthless efficiency, let the Soldier slip into his veins, embracing the raw, ice-cold anger.

“Bucky? Say something, honey.”

“No.”

“N-no? What do you mean?”

“I mean no, Steve. ‘No’ to every fuckin’ thing you just said.”

“Bucky, come on, it doesn’t have to be like that—”

“Like what? I tried, I fuckin’ tried to give you a chance, too many goddamn chances, and you—”

“This is our chance! Bucky, I don’t understand— you’re all I care about and if you’re worried about Tony—”

“I love Tony!” The declaration echoed around them and Bucky wished he would’ve bellowed it louder. So he did. “I love that man! He’s not some fun little thing to keep me entertained! He’s not just a body to keep my bed warm. He’s not— he’s not a placeholder for you.”

Something in Steve’s expression hardened. “Does he love you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you even know if he feels the same way? Tony destroys the people around him, Bucky, and he’s going to hurt you too, it’s only a matter of time. He doesn’t love, he— he possesses. I know him, known him for years. He has never been careful with anyone’s heart. He’s— he’s probably using you. What if this is just his way to get revenge on me? To take you away?”

“You sure do love to make everything about yourself, don’t you?”

Steve remained undeterred. “Tony doesn’t love you, Buck. I do. And how do you know it’s not just gratitude on your part, or loneliness or— or something worse. God, Bucky, he’s been inside your head, he could’ve done anything and you wouldn’t even know it, he could be using you, forcing you to—”

In the space of a breath, Bucky crossed the distance between them and— crack —the sound of his fist colliding with Steve’s face was unnaturally loud in the quiet hallway. The flesh of his fist had enough force behind it to send Steve flying back and skidding across the marbled floor. Bucky didn’t bother wasting time. He stalked over, watched as Steve groaned, momentarily dazed, then tried to find his bearings as he turned over on his side, cradling his injured jaw. Bucky kneeled over him, grasped the lapels of his shirt—

“Bucky—”

—and slammed his head into the floor, once, twice, before pulling him up so they were face to face.

“Shut up,” Bucky hissed, “just shut the hell up. I told you to never fuckin’ say that again.”

“Can’t you—” Steve struggled with the words as blood poured out of his nose, “can’t you see that you’re p-proving my point?”

“I don’t care.”
Ever the super soldier, Steve was regaining his composure quickly, but just as his hands wrapped around Bucky’s wrists to break the grip, Bucky slammed him back into the floor, and the crack of his head against the floor filled him with a vile mix of both satisfaction and shame. Then, with a knee planted dead center in the middle of Steve’s chest, with the metal hand a vice grip on his shirt, Bucky pushed. Everyone tended to forget how heavy he was, but a chunk of him was pure vibranium after all.

Steve gasped for breath, then tried to use his whole body to knock Bucky off, but the struggle stopped when Bucky pushed harder.

“I don’t care,” he spat the words out again, “because you’ve already made up your mind. Because as long as I’m not doing what you want, I must be controlled, right? You son of a bitch.” He growled, low and threatening and true to form, while his anguish hid beneath the wrath. Anguish at having to explain this, to someone who was supposed to love him. “I know what it’s like to be under someone’s control. I spent seventy years fighting against it, sem’desyat let of clawing my way back every time they took me out of that fuckin’ freezer. Do you know how many times they had to wipe me, opyat’ y opyat’, because I refused to stay down? You don’t get to say that I wouldn’t know. I know, and fuck you for implying that Tony would do to chto te proklyatie svolochi sdelali so mnoy. Fuck you for implying that rejecting you means I’m being controlled!”

Bucky shifted his weight again, to push even harder, and his hand itched to wrap around Steve’s throat, but Tony’s voice in his head stopped him.

He needed to let go. He needed to let go before he killed the son of a bitch.

A snarl clawed its way out of his throat, his teeth bared, but then he was pulling away, letting go, climbing back to his feet and taking two unnaturally calm steps back. The Soldier— and himself, fuck, every part of him— still craved blood, but he forced himself to focus on Tony. Tony wouldn’t want this.

Steve wheezed, pulling in air as soon as he could, and a hand came up to rub at the spot where Bucky’s knee had dug itself into his chest. He’d live, of course he would, and even the physical evidence of Bucky’s wrath would fade soon enough.

It wasn’t fair. Tony never had the luxury to watch the violence inflicted upon him fade into nothingness. Tony had to carry those damn scars, physical and otherwise, for the rest of his life.

“I wanted this to work out, Steve, but I can see that you’re not going to change. Nothing I say, nothing I do, none of it will change the fact that you hate Tony.”

“I-I don’t—”

“You accused him of brainwashing me, forcing himself on me.” Just saying the words made him feel dirty, made him want to scrub his mouth clean and beg Tony to forgive him for saying them. Steve was still on the floor, raised up on one elbow while the other hand was wiping away the blood still fresh on his face. “If this were just about you and me, I would’ve kept trying to get through to you, if only to honor whatever friendship we used to have, whatever sacrifices you made for me. But this is about Tony and I will not let you— or anyone else— hurt him ever again. I love that man, and not just because I’m grateful or whatever bullshit you will use to justify this. He’s a much better man than either one of us will ever be. You bastards never deserved him.”

There were tears glistening in Steve’s eyes, but they were in jarring juxtaposition against the tight press of his lips, the unyielding clench of his jaw.
“You’re not the Bucky I remember.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You were my best friend, you were—”

“Your best friend is dead,” Bucky said and Steve flinched right on cue at the ruthless finality, “he’s been dead for seventy years and whatever the hell I am now, it’s not the guy you want me to be. Although, you gotta admit, Stevie, even the Bucky you knew wouldn’t have put up with this bullshit.”

Steve managed to get himself upright, but he remained sitting on the floor, legs akimbo in front of him. One arm wrapped around his stomach as he hunched in on himself, the other stayed where it was, pressed up against his injured nose. He made for a pathetic sight and something in Bucky, even after everything, still urged him to reach out and help. A memory overlaid itself against reality again, the smaller, more fragile version of Steve sitting just like that, the same crimson blood staining his face, coloring the discontented scowl.

“So you’re just going to walk away? Give up on our friendship? After all that we’ve been through?”

It hurt, more than it should have, both the memory and that accusation, but neither changed anything. Today was about choices and they both were about to make theirs.

“I’m not walking away, Steve. You pushed me away. You had more chances than most, you could’ve done this a million different ways, but you chose to ignore your reality. I don’t belong to you, I am not yours, and as long as you see Tony as some villain who’s out to get you, I will not be a part of your life. I love him,” he said again, needing the whole damn world to hear it at last, “and I will do what needs to be done to protect him and make him happy. I’m willing to die for him, Steve, but the thing you need to remember is that I’m also willing to kill for him. Whatever past we shared, it won’t save you if you hurt him again.”

Bucky watched impassively as a tear slid down Steve’s face. The other man didn’t bother to wipe it away. Their eyes met one last time.

“So after everything, you’re choosing him, just like that?”

“Yes, I am.”

He turned and walked away, ignoring the sound of a broken inhale behind him.

***

Tony found James sitting on the edge of their bed in semi-darkness, only the lamp on the nightstand illuminating the frown on his face. He was hunched over, leaning heavily on the forearms draped over his knees, and his gaze was distant, staring at the wall in front of him, but likely seeing something else entirely.

Tony wondered whether he’d been like this for hours.

There was no reaction to Tony’s entrance, although James had to be aware of it, and Tony slipped quietly into the room, careful to close the door behind him without a sound.

“James, honey? Is it okay if I come sit with you?”

A few seconds ticked by without an answer and then James visibly deflated, his posture losing the
stark rigidity as his mind escaped whatever trance he was in.

Dull grey eyes turned to him, but despite the sadness lurking there, a weary smile still tugged at his lips. “Yeah, of course. Don’t gotta ask, sweetheart.”

James extended his hand, beckoning him to come over and Tony accepted the invite without hesitation. His hand found James’, the metal cool to the touch, if only for a moment before it would inevitably steal Tony’s own heat. The sensation was a comforting familiarity by now, something Tony associated with home.

James tugged gently and in moments Tony was sidled up next to him, their shoulders pressed together while their hands, intertwined, rested on James’ thigh. Tony snuggled in closer, rubbed their cheeks together, then let his head drop, carefully positioning it against the metal of James’ shoulder, and watched as James caressed the top of his hand.

Every touch was tender, but the air of melancholy still clung to them. Tony let the silence stand for as long as he could, but after a few more seconds ticked by, he had to say something. “Are you okay, James?”

All he got in response was a dejected shrug, the movement jostling Tony just a bit. Fair, he admitted to himself, it was a pretty dumb question.

“Do I need to go beat someone up?” he asked next and that went over better because James let out a huff, sounding like he was trying to hold it back and failing. “I know I don’t get to be the overprotective, tough guy in this arrangement very often,” Tony continued, encouraged, “but I will totally be your knight in shining armor, babe. Literal armor, ‘cause ya know… Iron Man.”

This time Tony got an actual chuckle for his efforts, which he considered to be a resounding success. James did him one better and pressed a kiss into Tony’s hair, which was messy and unstyled after hours spent down at the lab with Bruce.

“I would love for you to be my hero, darlin’. Got no problem being the damsel in distress while I watch my strong, amazing boyfriend save the day.”

“Mmm, ‘strong and amazing’, I do like the sound of that. So, you gonna give me some names then?”

James shook his head, his smile fading, and Tony knew his attempt at humor wouldn’t be enough to carry them through this. He let his own smile drop, mentally preparing himself for the serious part of this conversation.

“To be honest,” James admitted, then heaved a weary sigh, the burden weighing him down obvious in his voice, “I don’t think punching is gonna do us any good at this point.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

The response didn’t follow immediately. James was staring straight ahead again, his eyes examining the plush carpet with an intensity it didn’t deserve. Tony gave him the time to think and accepted that it was possible James would choose not to share.

But then James’ eyes narrowed, jaw clenched, and he took a breath, as if steeling himself.

“Steve kissed me.”

Tony sat up straight and stared wide-eyed at James. “Wha— Did— did you kiss him back?” he blurted out before his brain caught up and when it did, he regretted the words immediately because
James’ face twisted with guilt just as quickly.

“Of course not! I’d never— Tony, you know that, I would never want—”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. Shit,” Tony groaned, then let his head fall back to James’ shoulder, which promptly reminded him that James was partly made of metal— he really needed to install some cushioning or something— and his pained ow had James encouraging him to look up with a gentle hand in his hair. His boyfriend was still frowning and Tony probably deserved that bump to the head. “I shouldn’t have said that, I wasn’t trying to accuse you of something. I’m sorry. I’m dumb, don’t listen to me.”

James brushed a feather light touch over Tony’s bruised forehead, then graced him with a tired, but genuine smile. A silent acceptance of Tony’s less-than-stellar apology.

“S’okay. I just— it messed with my head. I didn’t see it coming, even though I should’ve. What the hell is wrong with me that I missed something like that? Was it obvious to everyone else?”

“The fact that Steve has feelings for you?” When Bucky hummed, Tony chewed on his lower lip for a few seconds, trying to find the right words for a topic that had given him literal nightmares before (granted, a certain witch helped that along). “I never had confirmation, no. And of course, two men being close doesn’t automatically scream ‘feelings’. Hell, look at me and Rhodey. We’ll go to hell and back for each other, but we don’t see each other… like that, you know? But at the same time, it’s not a huge leap to imagine that Steve has been in love with you.”

“Then how the hell did I miss it? I’m an assassin, a sniper, for god’s sake.”

“I don’t think the skills sets overlap that way, honey. Plus, sometimes we willfully ignore something because we don’t want to believe it or because it seems too absurd to be believed.”

“You thought it was a possibility though, didn’t you?”

“If I’m being totally honest,” and by god, Tony hated saying those words, because honesty usually hurt like hell, “yeah, I did. Even though you told me once, way back when, that he was like a brother to you, I was always worried that one thing would lead to another, friendship would turn into more, and then… then you’d really have no reason to keep me around.”

His chest ached at the mere admission, but he had no chance to contemplate the familiar insecurities before James was scooting back and turning so they could face each other. Both of Tony’s hands were now captured in a firm grip and brought to James’ lips so he could bestow a kiss to Tony’s knuckles.

“That will never be the case, Tony. Even if we weren’t together, I don’t think I’d ever see Steve that way. But we are together, so even that is a moot point. I’m not—” James stopped to a pull in a ragged breath between clenched teeth, then scowled at something only he could see, “you’re not a placeholder, Tony. I’m not waiting around for something better. Don’t ever think that, okay?”

The warmth in his chest at the words didn’t sit right when James still looked so damn heartbroken. “I know, James, I just… You look so sad, honey. I hate seeing you like this.”

James gave a tight nod. “It’s hard, the whole thing is just… it’s such a mess and I don’t think I made it any better. I, uh…” his eyes trailed downward, to study their linked hands, “I may have punched him, just so you know. Not sure what that means for me, as far as disciplinary—

“It means Friday, that overprotective AI who likes you more than me, already has that footage squirreled so far away on a private server that even I might not be able to find it.” Tony arched an
eyebrow and gave James a meaningful look. “And since I don’t see Steve pressing assault charges, I think you’re in the clear.”

James seemed to accept his words, albeit with obvious reluctance, and Tony was certain the other man was beating himself up over this. Seeing the evidence of James’ misery right before his eyes had Tony feeling a little uncharitable towards Rogers and his probably no-longer-bruised face.

“I lashed out,” James was still trying to explain what happened, “but it wasn’t—I was in perfect control, I wanted to shut him up. I’m so angry with Steve, for the things he did, the way he acted. I tell him I’m with you and he kisses me, I tell him I love you and he—” James bit his lip and shook his head furiously. “No, I refuse to repeat what he said. You can watch that footage— although I hope you don’t—but I will not let you hear that bullshit from me, not in my voice.”

Sadly, the fact that Steve must’ve bad-mouthed him, badly enough for James to lose his cool, wasn’t all that surprising. Tony expected Steve’s anger. The good Captain had never been generous with compliments when it came to Tony and now, Tony was standing between Steve and everything that man wanted for himself. James, the Avengers, so on and so forth.

James was right though, Tony didn’t need the sordid details (he wanted to hear them, because a part of him always needed to know, even if the knowledge would kill him, but he had to be stronger than his ill-advised curiosity). “It’s okay to be angry, James.”

“I know, but the hard part—it’s not just anger. When I look at him, I see the old Steve, that scrawny, sick kid I used to keep out of trouble. I see these fragments, and some part of me, it still goes, help him, he needs you, and then I just feel guilty all over again because it feels like a betrayal to you.”

The distress was so evident in the furrow of James’ brow, in the downturn of his lips, that it was heartbreaking, so Tony finally gave in to the urge to comfort him. He reached out, only mourning for a second that he had break the connection of their hands, then traced gentle fingers over James’ brow, smoothing out the lines of tension, wishing his touch were enough to soothe all the trouble away. A sweep down, to caress the sharp cheekbones, then that perfectly sculpted jaw.

“That’s not something you should feel guilty about. You’re allowed to love him, to care about him.”

“But with the way he’s been behaving, the things he said—”

“Just because someone chooses to be an asshole doesn’t mean we can automatically stop loving them. Obie, my godfather, he not only tried to kill me, kill Pepper, he spent a good decade undermining my company and my name. And that’s only what he did to me, that doesn’t include the countless innocent lives Stark Industries took because of him.” This hurt too, this admission of collective guilt, but Tony didn’t shy away from it anymore. “I had every right to hate him, and yet, for years after Afghanistan, I’d have these bouts of doubt. These arguments with myself where I tried to justify his acts, find some explanation for what happened, just so I could justify to myself that it was okay that I still, after everything, still didn’t hate him with every part of me, that some small part still missed the godfather who used to laugh and joke with me, who kept me shielded from some of Howard’s ire. And that’s Obadiah, who turned out to be a fucking monster. So Steve,” he huffed, despite the morose mood, “Steve’s not a monster. He’s just being an ass.”

“It’s more than that and you know it, Tony. Don’t minimize the damage he’s done, words and actions included.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying, by comparison, Steve’s just an idiot and you’re still allowed to love him.”

“I just hate feeling so damn torn. It’s like—it’s like there’s three people in my head now, dammit,”
James’ expression was a grimace trying not to be a bitter smile, “there’s the Soldier, who’s wholly devoted to you and has no real past to dwell on other than his beef with Hydra. Then there’s me, living in the here and now, with you. Adjusting to this new normal while trying to be someone you could be proud of. And then there are these echoes, of the real Bucky Barnes, the man I used to be, who loved Steve like he was my own family. And reconciling the three…” He let out a pained noise, almost a whimper, and Tony rubbed James’ temple in commiseration.

“That sounds like a complete headache and I don’t envy you for a second. I’m so sorry you’re stuck dealing with this.”

Guilty blue eyes pinned him with an unimpressed gaze. “Don’t apologize, Tony. You’re not the one with his head up his ass.”

“Eh, some would disagree.” James somehow managed to look even less impressed with Tony’s deflection. “Fine, fine. What I meant though… I’m sorry you’re hurting, that’s all. You’re sad, conflicted, whatever, you’re unhappy and it kills me to see you like this. God, James, if there was anything I could do, I would— but the only thing I could do to make any of this easier on you—”

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“No, nuh-uh, don’t you even dare say it,” Bucky was already shaking his head as he straightened up, the hunch of his shoulders disappearing as he pulled Tony closer, “I know how your mind works. I’ve seen it in action, I’ve heard more than enough from others. Don’t start thinking that you’re hurting me somehow, that I’d be happier without you—”

“That’s not—” Tony tried to interject, likely with empty platitudes because Bucky was right, and he was having none of it.

“This is what you do, Tony. You get it in that brilliant head of yours that people would be better off without you and then you push those people away as a result. Don’t start thinking that you’re hurting me somehow, that I’d be happier without you—”

“That’s not—” Tony tried to interject, likely with empty platitudes because Bucky was right, and he was having none of it.

“This is what you do, Tony. You get it in that brilliant head of yours that people would be better off without you and then you push those people away as a result. I don’t need you to be the martyr here, okay? Please, don’t do that to me.”

“I’m the one standing between you and Steve though. You’re losing your best friend because of me.”

“That friendship is broken because of Steve. I love you, honey, and you’re the center of my universe, but not the universe at large. You’re not responsible for every bad thing that happens to us. Steve made his choice.”

Choice. A luxury that Bucky was denied for a very long time, but was now finally his again. And this whole damn thing, it was all about choices, wasn’t it?

“I know that the two of us, we’re still a work in progress, but Tony, you gotta realize, I’m not just settling for you, okay? I’m not here because this is ‘good enough’. Honey, I’m excited about our lives together. Yeah, the damn aliens are coming and we have enough of our own villains to deal with, and some of our co-workers refuse to act like adults, but in spite of all that, I wake every morning, I see you, and I’m so happy because it means another day to add to our lives together, to learn something new about you, to remember something I already know and love. Even on the bad days, when we snipe at each other or say something we don’t mean, I take comfort in knowing we can find our way back to each other. I want this and it’ll be a cold day in hell if I let anyone, even Steve, take that away from me.”

So much of his soul bared by those words and it left him all the more drained, but he wasn’t afraid, not with Tony. True to his nature, Tony accepted the confession with a soft, honest half-smile.
“I want this too,” Tony offered, and this didn’t sound like platitudes, “you keep me sane despite our dumb, chaotic lives. You keep me steady, grounded, and yeah, so damn happy. I’m selfish enough not to give that up.”

“I’m selfish enough to not want you to.”

The way Tony’s eyes crinkled when he was happy still managed to take Bucky’s breath away and the touch of Tony’s hands against his skin had his heart beating faster.

“Can I kiss you, James?”

Bucky’s brows knitted together. “Of course you can, doll. You don’t gotta ask.”

“Eh, today’s different,” Tony shrugged easily, “today you had enough people do things to you that you didn’t want.”

“I’ll always want your kisses, Tony.”

Tony’s smile widened, the first hint of mischief shining through and then that smile was pressed against him, the sweet taste of Tony’s lips setting his world back to rights again. Everything remained unhurried as they savored the tender, reverent movements of their lips, neither rushing to deepen it, at least not at first. Eventually Bucky couldn’t resist and he guided Tony to lay back down beneath him.

He pressed himself against Tony, just enough to be close, and used the metal forearm planted to the side of Tony’s head to keep the rest of his weight off. Here, like this, their lips still pressed together, Bucky felt at peace.

Today was all about choices. Some good, some bad, some tragically, disastrously wrong, but all with an impact none of them could escape.

Tony arched beneath him, seeking more pressure and Bucky chuckled, pressing butterfly kisses down his jaw while Tony caught his breath.

“I love you,” he whispered against the heated skin, “I want you and I need you.” His right hand abandoned its journey up and down Tony’s side to capture Tony’s left hand and drag it up above his head, linking their fingers loosely together. “Whatever sadness I might feel, it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t have any regrets, not about this.”

“Love you too, James. I’m— aah— I’m so happy that you’re mine,” Tony’s breathless confession reached him as he was kissing just beneath his ear and Bucky hid his satisfied smile against the column of Tony’s neck. The words, along with the soft endearments slipping from Tony’s lips, spurred the sheer happiness that lit Bucky up from the inside; they were an affirmation that he made the right choice today. He couldn’t stop his fingers from brushing back and forth against Tony’s, needing to caress, to touch, to feel, and without a conscious thought on his part, they fixated on the empty space around Tony’s ring finger, exactly where a—

Bucky didn’t let himself finish the thought, god, not yet, but he couldn’t stop the heady, intoxicating rush of something at the mere suggestion of that sort of future with Tony.

Someday, he told himself. Someday, they’d be ready for that choice, together. But today…

“Today I had to make a choice,” he pulled himself up, made sure those whiskey-colored eyes could see him before he leaned back down, kissed Tony, and then whispered, “and I chose you.”
A small (tired) part of me wants to scream "THE END" right here and be done with it, but there's still more to this story and at this point, it'd be a disservice to both myself and all of you if I didn't finish this the way I envisioned it. So, I hope you all stick around for the final arc of the story, but for now, I must disappear for a brief hiatus to give myself time to rest and write!

Next update will be on July 21st!

~*~*~

*sem'desyat let* - seventy years
*opyat' y opyat'* - again and again
*to chto te proklyatie svolochi sdelali so mnoy* - what those damn bastards did with me
“Are we there yet?”

Peter just barely managed to tamp down his amusement at Harley’s question, but the unimpressed look Ms. Potts gave them from the front seat pushed him over the edge and he had to muffle his laughter into his hand.

“Harley,” Ms. Potts called out and she included Peter in that stern look, “I know you you think asking that is the height of comedy, but one more time and I will have Happy turn this car around and take you right back home, young man.”

They both stared at her and it took no more than two seconds before her poise cracked, her lips twitched up, and her shoulders began to shake with laughter.

“…Oh god, I sounded like my mother just now. Hmm, yeah, not sure I’m cut out for this.”

Happy snorted from the driver’s seat without taking his eyes off the road and Ms. Potts smacked him playfully on the forearm, but as she shook her head, her smile changed into something affectionate. She was very pretty, Peter had to admit, and her eyes were warm, the same way Aunt May’s were when she was about to tease Peter.

“You two are so much like Tony, I swear I’m tempted to do a DNA test every time I see you.”

“Aw, Ms. Potts,” Peter grinned at the woman, “we don’t need to be genetically related to be just like him. He’s our role model!”

“Tony as a role model, my gosh. I’m not sure what to do with that thought.” She propped her chin on her hand, elbow resting on the console between the seats, as she regarded them thoughtfully. “Troublemakers, all three of you. Four actually, because Bucky’s no help either. He just enables the trouble.” A sigh before she tilted her head curiously. “You haven’t been back at the Compound since summer break, huh?”

“Yup. We’ve been busy with school,” Harley explained, “Bucky’s been busy with his therapy thing. Tony’s been busy with… them.” Harley made a disgusted face and Peter couldn’t help but echo the sentiment. “It’s about time we came back though. I just hope no one messed with my Mustang while I was gone.”

“Your Mustang?” Peter aimed an incredulous look at Harley. “I don’t remember Mr. Stark giving it to you. You’re just tinkering with it.”

Harley rolled his eyes. “Restoring it. And he totally gave it to me—”

“Are your mom and aunt gonna miss you boys?” Ms. Potts segued into her next question, effectively cutting off Harley’s ode to that car. Good call on her part.

“Nah, Aunt May is going on some cruise thing. She seems pretty excited about it.”

“My mom’s just excited to get me out of the house,” Harley supplied cheerfully, “said I should eat all of Tony’s food for a change.”
Ms. Potts’ smile was indulgent, a lot like one of Aunt May’s too. “I’m sure everyone has missed you boys, and we are almost there, but so just please, please behave for a little while longer, okay?”

They offered two obedient nods and Ms. Potts turned back around to resume her conversation with Happy about some building improvement for the West Coast headquarters. Peter quickly tuned that out.

“I hope Mr. Stark and Bucky are doing alright,” he whispered to Harley instead, “I’ve been worried.”

“Okay, first, just call him Tony, stop being weird. He’s practically our dad. And second, you mean worried because of them?” Harley’s words were a barely audible hiss too, but Peter’s hearing picked it up just fine.

Peter contemplated Harley’s first comment with an internal grumble. Maybe he could call the man Tony. Maybe even dad— nope, not yet, not ready. He quickly flipped his focus back to his original point. “Yes, ‘because of them’. I can’t believe they’re all just living there like nothing happened.”

“I know. I get mad just thinking about it. But you know what, just because all the adults are putting up with it, doesn’t mean we have to.”

“Mm-hmm. So, what are we gonna do?”

“Teach them a lesson. And I think we’ve both graduated from potato guns, don’t you?”

Peter nodded, knowing his own expression reflected Harley’s fervent determination. If Captain America tried to hurt Tony again, he was so getting shot in the face, even if Peter did have to use a potato gun to do it.

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Tony had no advance warning before one-hundred-and-something pounds of teenage boy barreled straight into him, landing them both in a heap on a thankfully soft couch.

Harley let out a muffled “We’re here!”, his face smooshed into Tony’s chest, and Tony wrapped his arms around the kid, patting him on the back while trying to get his breath back because jesus, when did this kid grow even bigger?

“Okay, kid, careful, I’m an old man,” Tony grumbled and of course Harley took that as his cue to squeeze a little harder. “Could’ve sworn your Aunt Pepper was supposed to keep an eye on you.”

“She and Happy are saying hi to Alice,” came the reply from the second troublemaker who decided he was done feeling left out and unceremoniously landed on Tony’s other side, wrapping his skinny arms around Tony’s shoulders.

“We missed you,” Harley cooed and Peter joined in, both obviously playing it up for laughs, while keeping Tony effectively trapped between them. A cruel, terrible fate.

“James,” Tony called out, his voice a whiny protest against the onslaught, “I’ve been viciously attacked! Come save me!”

The brats just kept snickering to themselves, making cooing and kissing noises, clinging harder when Tony made ineffectual attempts to wriggle out of their grasp, and that was how James found them when he appeared on the threshold of the common room.
However, instead of rescuing Tony, that infuriating man just leaned against the wall, casual as could be, watching the proceedings with an indulgent smile.

God, he was such a sap (Tony loved every second of it).

“I see the kids are home,” James stated the obvious and earned himself excited *whoop-whoops* from both of the boys.

“Yes, just keep standing there while I’m being smothered to death, babe. No big deal, not like I need air or anything.”

“Aw, Tony, it’s only ‘cause we missed you!” Harley reminded him, *loudly*.

“Mm-hmm, I figured as much,” Tony tried to sound as put-upon as he could, but it didn’t stop him from tightening his arms around the boys’ bony shoulders. Besides, two could play at this game. “Well, for what it’s worth, I missed you too,” he sing-singed and then smacked the loudest, wettest kiss he could manage to Harley’s head, who immediately squealed and began shoving Tony (and poor Peter) away as he scrambled back.

“Blegh, no, no fair!”

“No, no, come here, I’m not done with you!” Tony pressed a quick kiss to Peter’s temple, a little less exaggerated and a bit more sincere, then let go of the laughing boy to pretend to pounce on Harley instead, which was enough to send the boy jumping off the couch and onto the love seat next to it.

“Aw, look at that, abandoned and unloved,” Tony pouted, then sneaked a glance at James, who didn’t move from his spot, but who couldn’t have looked more content if he tried.

“You know, boys,” James spoke up then, “if you play nice and behave yourselves, I think there might be some treats for you in the kitchen. I’ve been baking *all day*.”

The tormenting of one Tony Stark was instantly forgotten in favor of sweets—*typical*—as both boys bounded right off, stopping only to attack James with a hug before heading straight for the kitchen to undoubtedly devour something that they should *not* be having before dinner. Why did someone let Tony parent them again?

He sagged against the couch with a sigh. “They’ve been here for five minutes and I’m already exhausted. We need a distraction, stat. You think Brucie Bear would help us? I know for a fact Peter’s been ecstatic to meet him.”

“I’m not sure Banner has the right… temperament for children. Cookies and cupcakes seemed to have worked though, at least for the moment,” James shrugged, then pushed away from the wall and sauntered over to Tony. He stopped in front of him, tilting his head as he studied Tony’s rather undignified sprawl.

Tony let out another heavy breath, letting his head lull against the couch; it bought him a moment to contemplate and grudgingly accept the inevitable chaos of the upcoming winter holidays. So many things on the agenda. Exchanging presents, spreading holiday cheer, awkwardly avoiding former coworkers, and firmly ignoring, denying, and avoiding all mentions of any and all personal tragedies.

Ah, another lovely Avengers Christmas.

He reached for James, who took his hand and lifted Tony back up to his feet. James didn’t let go even after Tony steadied himself, one hand still laced with Tony’s while the heavy metal palm settled over Tony’s hip. Tony lifted himself up to press a kiss to James’ lips, chaste and sweet, just a quick
taste, but it was the type of kiss Tony came to savor the most.

Passion and lust and dramatic declarations of love were nice— incredible, life-affirming, etcetera, etcetera— but there was something uniquely satisfying about this sort of… domesticity. Simple, unburdened, just a moment between two people who made each other their home. Who were each other’s comfort and safety and a sense of stability in a chaotic world.

God, James always did turn him into a sap too, didn’t he? What a pair the two of them made.

James gifted him with a smile that hinted at a similar train of thought, then tugged at their laced hands and led Tony to the kitchen so they could join their two teenage hooligans in whatever shenanigans were surely afoot.

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“I can’t believe they confiscated everything,” Harley grumbled as he walked alongside Peter, the hunched shoulders and crossed arms completing the perfect picture of righteous misery. Peter’s stomach grumbled as he eyed the dining hall in the distance. “What am I supposed to shoot people with? This is a— a violation of my constitutional right!”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Dramatic much? Plus, we’re not supposed to be shooting people.” Okay, so maybe this was a disappointment, and maybe Peter did mourn the loss of his own web shooters— Avengers business only, Peter, he recited Colonel Rhodes’ words to himself— especially when a certain group of criminals lived at the Compound, but rules were rules.

“Hey, I’m here for justice, not nap time! We’re not babies. We were supposed to teach them a lesson!”

“Well, clearly Tony was onto us, so I dunno… We should just… let it go. There’s plenty of other things we can do. You have your Mustang, I get to help Dr. Banner with one of his experiments— and oh my god, I am so excited to be working with him, he is like a super genius and his work on the anti-electron collisions—

“Oh my god, you are such a nerd, Parker, I don’t know why I hang out with you.”

“Because you’d be bored without me and you know it,” Peter didn’t miss a beat, “anyways, there’s all that, and Bucky said he could help us train again, but I was kinda hoping Aunt Hope would teach me that one move where she just crushes someone’s head with her thighs.”

“Isn’t that a Black Widow move too?”

“I don’t know, maybe, but I just know I wanna learn it.”

Harley gave him a critical once-over. “Sorry, Pete, I don’t think you have the thighs for that.”

Peter shoved at him good-naturedly, careful with his strength as always, and Harley snickered as he stumbled and then gave Peter a full-body shove back.

Their laughter was cut abruptly short and then they halted altogether when they both noticed who was walking out of the dining hall.

Them.

There was still a tiny flutter of “Oh my god, it’s Captain America!” somewhere in Peter’s mind, but he was hardly a fanboy anymore and all it took to squash down those childish thoughts was a
memory of Tony in the hospital. His mood soured instantly, a flaire of anger now residing where that admiration used to be, but Peter really didn’t want to start any trouble. Well, okay, he did, but he didn’t want to get in trouble with Tony a whole lot more.

Peter glanced over at Harley and internally groaned. *Say hello to trouble.*

“Harley, I know that gleam in your eyes,” he whispered furiously, “stop trying to murder them with your mind.”

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Harley turned to glare at Peter instead, but of course the boy was immune to it. “Aren’t you mad at them?”

“How was Harley supposed to ignore this? Forget the fact that everyone else had their fun already, particularly Friday who could not contain her smug excitement when she told them stories of her pranks.

No, forget all that. These guys almost cost Harley the closest thing he had to a father. There was no ignoring that.

“We’re not gonna start trouble, we’re just gonna… talk, that’s all. Talking’s allowed, isn’t it?”

“You’re still glaring.”

“Fine, talk and glare. No one said I can’t glare.”

“Shh,” Peter shoved at him suddenly, “they’re coming our way. I’m serious,” his whisper was a near his, “I don’t want to spend the entire holiday grounded.”

Well, neither did Harley, but he also didn’t want these guys walking around thinking they were forgiven.

He remembered what Tony was like after Siberia and although no one shared the details with him, Harley knew that shit went down and unlike Rogers, Tony didn’t walk away from said shit in one piece. Harley met Tony when the guy was having panic attacks, yet it was worse after Siberia. These people were worse for Tony’s health than literal *aliens,* and Harley wasn’t going to be nice just because the adults wanted to stick their fingers in their ears and pretend none of that happened.

Maybe if Rogers took the path Bucky did, maybe if he apologized and made up for one single thing, maybe then Harley would let this go, but Rogers had done nothing to earn anyone’s good will.

By the look Peter was aiming at the man and the rest of his posse, he was thinking the exact same thing, despite the protests. Hell, Peter was there when Tony nearly drank himself to death after Siberia. Peter knew the score.

There was only one thing left to do— well, one thing they were allowed to do. Dumb adults and their dumb ultimatums and their dumb confiscations of everything that could shoot things!

The Black Widow and Falcon were Rogers’ companions today and both gave them suspicious looks as they got closer. Granted, it didn’t take a *spy* to suspect that the two glaring teenagers blocking your exit probably had something to say to you.
Falcon stepped up first, still visibly confused, but trying to be polite. “Hi there, I don’t believe we’ve met. Do, uh— do your parents work here? I’m Sam Wilson, by the way—”

“We know who you are,” Harley interrupted; his tone was cold, but he still offered a hand which Wilson shook briefly and then let go. “I’m Harley, Tony’s son.”

The only thing better than the shocked looks on their faces was Peter trying desperately to stifle laughter behind him.

“His— his what now?” Wilson stuttered, eyes as wide as saucers. The Widow wasn’t nearly as affected, probably already onto them, while Rogers, who stood behind the two, was definitely confused, but really more mopey than anything else. *Huh.* Harley honestly expected more righteousness or something.

“His unofficially adopted son,” Harley clarified after a beat, then pointed over his shoulder at Peter. “That’s his other, less-handsome unofficially adopted son.”

“Hi, I’m Peter Parker,” Peter said, ignoring Harley’s jibe; he shoved a hand at Wilson too, shook it vigorously and then did the same with the Widow. Rogers went completely ignored. “A real pleasure to meet you. Are you enjoying your time at the Compound so far? It’s pretty great here, isn’t it?”

“Compound is good,” Wilson answered, but he still sounded distracted, like he was trying to figure out what the hell was going on. He glanced over at the Widow and asked *sotto voce*, “Are these the two kids I’ve been heard about?”

“Tony met Harley Keener during that whole Mandarin fiasco,” the Widow supplied while pointing at Harley, “as for the other one…” she squinted at Peter, but despite whatever theories she probably had, she didn’t seem to know who he actually was.

“I’m just Peter, nothing special about me at all—”

“Wait, your voice,” Wilson suddenly went from confused to curious, “why does it sound familiar?”

“Oh, that?” Peter scratched the back of his head and shrugged innocently. “Probably just one of those voices, you know— Oh, wait, *no*, that’s right, I remember! It’s because the last time you met me, one of you dropped a chunk of an airport on top of me.”

And there was the recognition blossoming on all their faces. It probably wasn’t the greatest idea in the world for Pete to just blurt this out, but Harley was certain these ‘heroes’ would find out his secret identity sooner or later, so might as well make the reveal as satisfying and dramatic as possible.

More delicious still was the guilt Harley could see in Rogers’ shocked, wide eyes.

“You’re the kid from Queens…” were the Captain’s first words, quieter than Harley would’ve expected, “You’re… a lot younger than I realized.”

“No kidding,” Wilson added. He looked a little shame-faced too. “Jesus, what was Stark thinking, bringing a kid so young into that?”

That was when the moment went from fun and right back to anger-inducing.

“Tony didn’t think his friends would get violent,” Peter stole Harley’s words right out of his mouth, “I was there to web you guys up, nothing more, but Tony didn’t want things to go that far. He
thought you’d listen. So much for that, huh?”

“Kid, I get you wanting to protect your— your mentor,” Wilson tried to placate them after stumbling over the moniker, “but there was a lot going on back then that you don’t know about.”

Harley shrugged. “Yeah, maybe we don’t know everything, because we’re young or stupid or whatever. So what? Even little kids know you don’t do that to your friends.”

“Yeah, even us stupid teenagers know better than that.”

Wilson was about to say something else, but the Black Widow cut him off with a terse gesture. “We’re not having this conversation. They’re kids, Sam.” She directed her gaze at them and Harley had to admit that hers was actually pretty intimidating. “Do you two think Tony would want you here, getting into a fight just to defend his honor?”

“Tony doesn’t need his honor defended, no,” Harley countered, forcing himself to be brave in the face of that judgmental, cold stare, “but someone has to tell you people to stay the hell away from him. Might as well be us.”

“Oh, kid, you have no idea who’s been telling us what,” Wilson said with a shake of his head and for a single, blink-and-you-miss-it moment, his expression turned petrified, like he’d seen a ghost; Harley sneaked a glance at Peter, who looked just as curious. It had to be either Uncle Rhodey or Bucky doing the talking to earn that sort of look. They’d have to check with Friday later. Maybe there was footage.

“It’s nice that you’re trying to protect Tony, really, but we don’t want any trouble and trust me, neither do you,” the Widow gave them a pointed look. “We were just here for a meal and now we’re going back to our quarters. I suggest you do the same.”

She began to walk around them, motioning for the two men to follow her. As Wilson passed them, he added quietly, “For what it’s worth, we are trying to make it right.”

Rogers didn’t add anything, basically a ghost this entire conversation except for that one line about Peter. That silence did nothing to placate Harley’s anger; in fact, it made everything worse. The image of Tony, injured and heartbroken, pushed itself to the forefront of his mind and the seething words tumbled out before he could stop them.

“You people haven’t made anything right!” he shouted at their retreating backs. “You used Tony, you hurt him, and then you ran off to god knows where to hide like cowards!”

“Harley, come on, they’re not worth it,” Peter placed a hand on his shoulder. A part of Harley wanted to shrug it off, yell at him too, but none of this was Peter’s fault.

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“Got nothing to say, Captain America? Yeah, I’m talking to you! You almost killed him!” Harley’s eyes pricked with sudden, unexpected tears. “You almost took my dad away from me! And I might not be super human, but I’m ten times smarter than all of you, so you better never hurt Tony again, you hear me?”

Despite the Widow’s efforts to keep them moving, Rogers slowed, just long enough to give them both a look over his shoulder. Harley couldn’t tell what that man’s morose disposition meant, whether it was guilt or some cry-baby reaction to not getting whatever he wanted, but Harley didn’t care. He didn’t care even if he wanted to bawl like baby in that one stupid moment.

He watched the three turn a corner and disappear. One second past, two, then both he and Peter let out a sigh, deflating a little as adrenaline began to subside. Peter rubbed Harley’s shoulder in
sympathy.

“Well, that could’ve gone better.”

Harley swiped at his eyes furiously. “Fuckin’ pricks.”

“You gotta stop swearing. We’ll be running laps for the rest of the week if the Colonel catches us.”

“Don’t care,” Harley muttered, but he sounded like some petulant kid, even to his own ears, so he took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “Sorry I got, uh— got upset. Really thought yelling would make me feel better.”

It didn’t. Just left an uncomfortable, squirmy feeling in his stomach.

“It’s okay. I almost lost Tony too, you know. I get it. Now, come on,” Peter’s hand squeezed his shoulder one more time, then let his hand drop, “we need to get some of those cheesy tater tots. Those always make you feel better.”

Harley nodded reluctantly. This whole thing still kinda sucked, but at least he had Peter. As far as ‘unofficially adoptive’ brothers went, Peter was a pretty good choice.

They both turned around and promptly let out startled squeaks as they nearly collided with Vision standing not even a foot behind them.

“Hello, boys,” Vision greeted them in his usual calm manner, but if Harley wasn’t mistaken, that was a crease of disappointment between his brows. Oh no.

“Peter, I thought you had super spider senses or whatever!”

“They don’t work on him!”

“First day back and already getting into trouble, I see,” Vision continued, ignoring their bickering, “that was quite a… performance, Mr. Keener.”

“We were just talking, that’s all. N-no trouble.”

The android hummed. “Talking can lead to a lot of trouble. Thankfully there weren’t many here to observe the particularly loud talking that occurred.”

Harley’s cheeks flushed with sudden embarrassment; in the heat of the moment, he forgot that there were other people milling around this place, people who probably shouldn’t hear him airing out the Avengers’ dirty laundry. He tried to conceal his shamefaced reaction by scowling. “Fine, fine. I’m sorry, okay? I just— just didn’t want them to be walking around here all high and mighty, not after all the crap they did to Tony. Heck, they weren’t all that nice to you either!”

“I’m well aware of what happened last year, I was there for most of it. I was here for the aftermath too, but I think it’s important to take the high road in this instance, don’t you?” Vision smiled softly, in that infuriating way of his, as he delivered the reprimand. “I understand your need to protect Tony, but you mustn’t be cruel, alright? Be firm, be strong, but be kind. You know that’s what Tony would want from you both.”

Way to guilt trip, Vision. The worst part was that it was working. Harley had never known Tony to be petty or cruel just for the hell of it. He sighed internally. Maybe if Tony were all those things, people wouldn’t try to take advantage of him so often.
“You’re right, Vision,” Peter gave in first, the big softie, “we really are sorry. We shouldn’t have been rude and we shouldn’t have antagonized them. We promise not to bother them again.”

“Yeah, I guess, as long as they stay away from Tony,” was Harley’s only concession, but it seemed to be enough for Vision.

“Very good. Now, how about you two join me for dinner and tell me all about your adventures in school? In turn, I can tell you about my trip abroad.”

“Ooh, you went overseas? That must’ve been fun!” Peter was already walking alongside the android, looking up at him with that trademark curiosity. Harley trailed after them, albeit at a less enthusiastic pace. He was still vexed with the whole situation, furious with Rogers and the others, and not particularly overjoyed with the way the adults were handing this.

“Yes, I had some important… soul-searching I had to do,” Vision answered as he ushered them in line for the food, “I needed someplace peaceful where I could clear my head and think.”

Harley took another deep breath and told himself to get over it. He had better things to focus on, fun things. His car, training with Bucky, spending time with Tony and Peter and the rest of the family. Pushing Rogers’ dumb, sad face out of his mind improved Harley’s mood considerably and he piled the tater tots onto his plate as he joined the conversation. “So where did you go?”

He almost regretted the question when Vision spent the next hour telling them all about the tiny islands off the coast of Scotland where he spent weeks meditating and nearly getting trampled on by herds of stubborn, overenthusiastic sheep.

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The words Bucky was reading were blurring; his mind refused to focus on the actual text, instead meandering around flitting thoughts that didn’t stay still long enough for him to examine. It was anxiety, he knew enough recognize the signs, but at least it wasn’t debilitating enough to be considered one of his bad days.

He sighed, then moved around to see if a different position would be more comfortable. It wasn’t and after another reshuffling of his limbs, he gave up on the endeavor entirely and got out of the chair.

Of course there were plenty of things to actually worry about— Steve, aliens, the date on the calendar— but none of those stress factors were exactly new. Maybe he was just tired.

He decided all of that could wait another night. Whatever was bothering him, he knew Tony could make it better.

Bucky took the book with him, although it was a token effort, but left the library behind. Friday helpfully pointed out Tony’s location, which ended up being their quarters and he found Tony on their bed, dressed down in a tank top and jeans, focused intently on the five— no, seven different holographic screens floating around him.

Even though they loved spending time together, they learned early on that no matter how tempting, living out of each other’s pockets wasn’t actually the right approach. They still needed their own space; for Tony, time apart usually meant SI work or running tests on the Iron Man suit; Bucky preferred the relative solitude of the library. Still, tonight Bucky felt a little cheated that here was Tony, in their bed, and no one thought to inform him.

Already the ache in his shoulders and the mild case of exhaustion clouding his mind were beginning
to lift, and just in time too, as Tony caught sight of him and smiled, the lovely view obscured by the blue holograms.

“Hey, gorgeous. Got tired of the library?”

“A little. Mostly wanted to find you. Woulda found you sooner had I known you were hanging out in our bed all by your lonesome.”

The smile turned teasing as Tony beckoned him over. “Come sit with me then. I gotta finish up a few things, but then I’m all yours— unless—” Tony squinted at him, “Did you need me for something? I can do this stuff later if—”

“No, no, finish it all up,” Bucky closed the remaining distance between them, crawled across the bed until he could snuggle up closer, resting his head in the man’s lap and stretching the rest of his body out across the bed. “Just wanna be close, if it’s not too distracting.”

It only took a moment for Tony’s left hand to find its way into Bucky’s hair, gentle strokes making Bucky wish he could purr. “Oh, you are always distracting, gorgeous, but I think I’ll manage.”

Bucky hummed in response, a satisfied noise as he let himself enjoy the tender ministrations. His eyes fell shut and Tony didn’t say anything else, so he must’ve gone back to his work. Bucky didn’t mind at all.

Tony’s touch, the soothing spicy-sweet scent, the warmth of his body, that was all Bucky needed to feel safe and secure again. He swore Tony’s presence was like a drug, so much so that even the Soldier began to drift in and out of the lazy, sleepy fog right alongside him. It was difficult to say how much time had past before Tony carefully traced a hand down Bucky’s cheek, then over his shoulder, and called out his name.

“You wanna keep napping, babe?”

“No, I’m awake,” Bucky murmured, then rubbed his cheek into Tony’s thigh to rouse himself out of that tempting state of near-sleep. “Still wanna snuggle though.”

Tony let out a huff. “Well, we can definitely do that, but you gotta move so I can lie back down. I think you forget how heavy you are sometimes.”

It took more willpower than it should’ve to get himself upright, but his efforts were rewarded when he and Tony rearranged themselves and now it was Tony snuggled up against his chest, head pressed snugly beneath Bucky’s chin.

They really did fit so well together.

Tony traced lazy patterns— equations, if Bucky wasn’t mistaken— over the cotton of Bucky’s tee, silently for a while, but eventually he offered a quiet, “So the kids read the riot act to Steve, Natasha, and Wilson today. Well— tried to. Those two aren’t exactly the most intimidating pair.”

“No one got hurt, right?” Bucky was aware of the incident, but he had to make sure.

“Nah. The adults actually acted like adults for once. Small mercies. Harley yelled, got pretty upset, but that’s the worst of the damage.” He felt Tony sigh against him. “I’m gonna have to talk to him again, aren’t I? Seriously, who let me parent? I demand to speak to whoever’s in charge.”

James scratched at Tony’s scalp soothingly. “You’ll do just fine, I promise. But yeah, neither of them should be goading anyone into a confrontation like that.” Bucky’s mind couldn’t help but imagine all
the ways something could go wrong; it was decidedly unpleasant and already the languid warmth from before was dissipating as the mild hum of anxiety returned. “I’d like to believe Steve and the others wouldn’t do anything to the boys— they’re kids— but with tempers flying high an’ all…”

“You never know, yeah. Friday was keeping an eye on them, but I’ll have to ask her explicitly to alert someone if anyone’s getting combative. In fact, I don’t want any of them in the same room if I can help it.”

“Probably a good idea.”

Tony burrowed a little closer, pressing the tip of his cold nose into Bucky’s neck, sending a shiver down his spine. A cold nose meant the rest of Tony was probably cold too, and even though the Compound was supposed to be temperature controlled, the snowy weather outside had Tony struggling to keep warm more than usual, so Bucky reached over to grab a blanket to drape over Tony. He tried to tuck it around the man too, but gave up when Tony made token protests.

“Stop fussing, babe.”

“Just trying to keep ya warm, that’s all.”

“I’m perfectly fine where I am, super soldier,” Tony said, wriggling around to get even closer, but already he looked cozier wrapped up in that bright red blanket. Bucky kissed the pout away, then wrapped his arm back around Tony’s waist.

“The Compound will be busy over the holidays, huh?” he said quietly after a beat.

“A little, yeah. Anyone who actually works here, most of them will be taking off for the holidays, but our side of the building is about to get some company. I mean, we got the boys now, Pepper and Happy are staying through Christmas…”

“And Laura arrives with the kids next week, right?”

“Yup. So, ya know, chaos and madness.”

Bucky really didn’t mind this version of chaos. “Is Barton going to come around? I mean, he took off as soon as the thirty day probation was up, and no one’s seen him since.”

“No idea. All I know is that he took the offer to see a therapist and that he’s been in contact with Laura, but that’s the extent of my involvement. I have to trust that Laura knows what she’s doing.”

Bucky hummed, turning the jumble of thoughts over in his head. Tony took the time to snuggle in again and then let his body go limp against Bucky. Seemed like it was his turn to be sleepy and Bucky indulged him, content to just hold the man in his arms.

Unfortunately, sleep didn’t come as easily this time; there were just too many things on his mind. He was worried about the kids now and about the emotional tensions still running high between everyone. He hadn’t spoken to Steve at all since their confrontation, hadn’t even seen him because Steve was a near ghost, keeping to his quarters unless one of the others dragged him out for a meal. Truth be told, Bucky had no idea what to do to ease the tension, wasn’t sure if there was anything he could do.

The fact that it was December didn’t help either. Tony hadn’t said anything yet, even though the anniversary was only days away and Bucky wasn’t sure how to bring it up.

He didn’t doubt Tony’s forgiveness, but it didn’t mean the day wouldn’t hurt. Whatever Tony
needed, whether it was time or space, Bucky would give it to him; he just had to trust that when the sun rose the next morning, the two of them would still be fine.

He trusted, but the date still loomed over him, a dark shadow that grew with each passing day.

Nothing for him to do but let Tony take the lead, he supposed, and appreciate the present moment, which currently included a sleepy Tony Stark in his arms.

Well, not that sleepy, because despite Tony’s closed eyes, Tony’s hand began to trail up and down Bucky’s back, slow movements at first before it made a conspicuous move to sneak underneath Bucky’s shirt to find warm flesh. The touch sent a pleasant tingle up his spine and if that was where Tony wanted this night to go, James had no complaints. Might as well put his wakefulness to good use.

The Soldier was fully on board too, but that went without saying. There was rarely a time when he didn’t want to devour this amazing, gorgeous man.

Bucky rolled over, positioning himself on top as he pressed into the other man, and Tony grinned, sleepy eyes fluttering open and clearing as lust took over.

“Oh, is that how we’re playing this, soldier?”

“You started it, doll.”

“Damn right I did.” Tony’s grin was infectious and the only thing better than seeing it was kissing it away. The kiss started slow, but turned a little desperate at the edges as their bodies responded to all the points of contact between them. Bucky nipped at Tony’s bottom lip, then soothed away the hurt with his tongue. His hips rocked, meeting Tony’s own building hardness, and this— this was exactly what Bucky needed to take the edge off and push away the anxiety nipping at his heels.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he growled into Tony’s ear while his flesh hand pushed at the man’s shirt, “let’s get you out of this thing.”

Tony didn’t bother replying, too busy following through on the order, and then Bucky was left with a beautiful expanse of skin, all his for the taking. He peppered the scarred flesh with kisses, still so damn honored that Tony was willing to share them, that he was privileged enough to see this singular vulnerability from a man who put up walls with nearly everyone else.

His lips trailed down, lower and lower until he was mouthing at Tony’s happy trail.

“You think we should get these off too?” Bucky asked as he tugged teasingly at the waistband of Tony’s jeans. Tony let out a dissatisfied noise, a near whine, and Bucky looked up the length of his body to see dark eyes watching him hungrily. “What do you want, darlin’?”

“Oh, everything.”

Well, he could certainly work with that, Bucky decided as the word sent a thrill of arousal through him. He nosed at the tell-tale bulge in Tony’s pants, then went back to planting wet kisses along Tony’s stomach while trying to work the zipper with overeager hands. Sue him, but assassin precision went right out of the window when he had Tony nearly naked— not nearly naked enough— spread out in front of him like this. Tony’s hand was moving in his hair, clench and release, over and over, as if Tony couldn’t decide whether he wanted to be gentle or rough; honestly, Bucky wouldn’t have minded either.

With the zipper finally cooperating, he tugged Tony’s jeans down, letting out an appreciative hum at
the sight, intent on making himself forget all about his anxiety by making this man lose himself in pleasure—

The sky outside lit up in brilliant colors, flooding the room with light and they both stilled, wide eyes staring back at it each other.

“Is it?”

“It can’t—”

“Um, Boss? Mr. Barnes?”

Tony and Bucky both groaned in unison and Bucky dropped his head to Tony’s stomach, hiding his face against the warm skin.

“Fri, please tell me there isn’t a rainbow bridge burning squiggly lines into my front lawn.”

“Sorry, Boss,” this time she actually sounded apologetic, “lying is against a significant number of my protocols.”

Tony and Bucky both groaned louder, then Tony threw his arm over his eyes. “Damn it, damn it, damn it. Why can’t we get five minutes in this godforsaken place? Twice now! I swear, did Thor get demoted to the god of cockblocking or something?”

“Pretty sure that’s his pain in the ass little brother.”

Tony lifted his forearm to look at Bucky with a disgusted face. “You don’t think Loki has some pervy crystal ball or something? You know, to tell him when we’re getting to the good part so he knows when to fire up the rainbow bridge?”

“Mm-hmm,” Bucky crawled over and moved Tony’s arm away. The Soldier bled through then, both in the smirk and the deliberate way Bucky moved, like a predator stalking out his prey. Tony saw the change too, if the heat in his eyes were any indication. Bucky leaned in closer to whisper in Tony’s ear, “After all, I have all this pent-up sexual frustration now, and you know how I am, solnishko. I either get to make sweet, tender love to you,” he said as he brushed his lips over Tony’s ear, then lifted himself back up on his arms to look down at Tony, “or I get to stab a man.”

Tony’s heated look turned downright amused and it made them both grin. God, he loved this man.
“If I gotta stab someone,” Bucky continued, “might as well be the bastard that hits on you with every other word, right?”

Tony’s smirk was almost as wicked as his own. “But what do I do when he inevitably starts flirting with you, gorgeous?”

Bucky lowered himself to hover just above Tony’s lips. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Bucky felt that hum against his lips. God, it was so tempting to stay, just like this—

“We are, uh— we are taking a raincheck on that blowjob though, right?” Tony suddenly asked and James had to sit all the way up so he could stifle the undignified sound that escaped him.

Tony continued, undeterred. “Don’t laugh, this is important! You can’t tease a man like that, James. It’s just not fair. I have a bad heart, you know that.”

Mirth under control, Bucky went back to what he was doing and kissed Tony, a real, thorough kiss this time, so there was no question as to what he wanted to do in this moment.

Their lips parted with a quiet pop. “As soon as we have the time, you can have anything you want outta me, darlin’.”

Bucky meant for that to be flirtatious, but it came out softer than intended and Tony’s own affectionate gaze had Bucky’s stomach flipping somersaults. Tony’s hand tucked Bucky’s unruly hair back behind his ear, then Tony stole his own little kiss, and just like that, he was getting up to get dressed, the moment over.

Bucky watched him for a few seconds, this wonderful man, this bright star that brought light to a life once punctuated by darkness. The memories of the past threatened to steal away some of that light, but Bucky decided, as he watched Tony mutter under his breath, cursing the entire Norse pantheon as he buttoned his shirt while looking for his dress shoes, that if there was pain ahead for them, they’d endure it and come out stronger on the other end of it, together.

Chapter End Notes

The boys are back, Vision’s back, Norse Bros are back, and WE'RE. ALL. BACK.

A true family reunion. (I missed you guys)
Rhodey’s stomach grumbled, the sound distracting and loud in his quiet office, and he looked down at the offending organ. It grumbled again, as if to tell him he had no right to glare at it. Rhodey supposed it was time for breakfast. With a sigh, he signed off on two more documents before getting up out of his chair. After sitting for so long, a sharp pain lanced through his legs at the additional weight, but thankfully, the braces recalibrated quickly to give him relief from the strain. Although it didn’t disappear entirely—it never did—the ache eased, enough to fade back into the background again.

Rhodey let himself have a leisurely stretch, spine and various joints popping pleasantly, then sighed as he planted his hands on his hips and stared down at the papers strewn across his desk. His thoughts drifted back to a night several days ago and the two Norse gods who were responsible for at least half of this damn paperwork.

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“Ex-cuse me? Did you just say this is Thor and Loki?”

Rhodey marched on ahead without replying, forcing Rogers to keep up. Romanoff and Wilson also trailed behind, because apparently everyone wanted to see the rainbow bridge for themselves, the resident recluse Captain America and his posse included.

Rhodey supposed he could’ve ordered them all to stay back, but Romanoff and Wilson did both sign the Accords and would be considered lower tier Avengers once they passed the prerequisite tests (ultimately a formality, since the politicians were so gun-ho to have everyone on board). Now, Rogers didn’t sign a damn thing, but Rhodey didn’t have the energy to argue with anyone today. They’d find out about the asshole Trickster sooner or later (probably sooner, because this was Loki), so might as well rip the bandaid off now.

“Colonel, I don’t understand,” at least Rogers managed to address him by his title this time, “shouldn’t we be suiting up? Loki is an enemy, he nearly destroyed the world—”

“One, saying ‘the world’ gives him far too much credit, he leveled a few blocks of downtown New York. Don’t over-inflate his ego. Two, during their last visit, he and Thor told us an interesting story, which put that invasion in a different perspective.”

“He told you he was innocent?”

“He told us there was a bigger threat to worry about.”

“And you believed him?”
The accusatory tone finally halted his steps and Rhodey turned to glare at Rogers. “Don’t treat me like a fool, Private. Believing him makes me no less cautious. Now, if you want to challenge my authority, be my guest, take up the chain, but since you’re neither an Avenger, nor a military or government agent, you tagging along is nothing but generosity on my part.”

“People could be in danger—”

“We handled their arrival just fine the last time. Without you.”

With that Rhodey resumed his pace through the Compound, nearing the exit doors that would lead them to the training grounds and the sight of the gods’ landing. He forewent the War Machine suit, since Friday detected only two familiar life forms, but the absence of it did leave him feeling naked.

The others muttered to each other behind him, Rogers incredulous that Romanoff ‘understood’ the necessity of accepting Loki into the fold. ‘The enemy of my enemy’, she told him, but that sort of nuance probably flew right over Rogers’ head.

Alright, so Rhodey was feeling especially petty tonight, but it was a nice night, with a tumbler of scotch, a beautiful porterhouse steak, and the latest season of Cutthroat Kitchen. A night of guilty pleasures, ruined.

When they arrived outside, Tony and Barnes had them beaten by a short minute and both looked like they had some ‘guilty pleasures’ of their own interrupted too. Rhodey tried not to laugh, especially when Rogers fell completely silent at the sight and then struggled to look anywhere but at the two men.

It wasn’t even anything indecent, but Barnes’ hair was a ruffled mess, Tony’s shirt was off by one button and untucked, and they both had that “I’ve been rudely interrupted and I am not happy” look on their faces.

Vision joined them as well, completely unruffled (no surprise there) and just in time too, because two tall shadows emerged from the darkness to materialize into their Norse teammates (Rhodey used that term very loosely here).

“My friends! It is good to see you again!” Thor boomed, smiling brightly as usual. Smiling was good, Rhodey decided. Less likely that they were bringing news of impending death.

“It’s good to see you, Thor, but—”

“Oh, and I see our wayward brothers and sister in arms have returned!”

Rhodey told himself to breathe and stay calm when Thor ignored him and hightailed it in Rogers’ direction. At least Rogers didn’t look particularly pleased with the bear hug he was trapped in. Wilson got an equally enthusiastic pat on the back (the poor man’s knees nearly buckled) and Romanoff got a demure kiss to the knuckles.

How quaint.

Rhodey glanced over at Tony, who made a face and then shrugged, as if saying “What can you do about it?”

Loki chose that moment to saunter over, heading for Rhodey and extending his hand. “My greetings, Colonel. As always, you must forgive my oaf of a brother for his lack of manners.”

“Oh, Loki, you wound me,” Thor offered in turn, still grinning. “Come say hello to Steven and the
mighty Widow!”

Loki finished shaking Rhodey’s hand, then pivoted to study his brother and the others. “By the looks of him, your Captain would rather stab than greet me.”

“Well, that is how you greet people too, brother.”

“See, I told you,” Rhodey heard Tony whisper to Barnes, “he’d just think stabbing him is like foreplay or something.”

Rogers turned tomato red, clearly catching that, while Loki fluttered his eyelashes at Tony.

“Oh, Anthony, you know me so well,” he strode in the other direction, intent on doing… something to Tony (shake his hand, hug, kiss, stab? Rhodey didn’t want to know), but Barnes took a menacing step forward, putting himself in front of Tony like a guard dog. Loki halted mid-step. “And my dear Soldier, so good to see you too.”

“Look here, pal, if you think, even for a moment, that—” Barnes started into what promised to be a fantastic threat, but Rhodey had neither time nor patience for any of this soap opera drama.

“Everybody, listen up!” he used his best Colonel voice and every pair of eyes pivoted to him. “Thor,” he pointed at the god, “I assume this isn’t a social call. Good news or bad news?”

“Great news,” Thor said and the tension in Rhodey’s chest eased by a fraction. He motioned for Thor to continue. “Our discussions with the other realms have been successful and we have gained many allies and friends for the upcoming battle.”

Rhodey cocked a dubious eyebrow that.

“People are terrified of the Mad Titan, so they’re willing to put up with us for the time being,” Loki supplied helpfully and Rhodey grunted an acknowledgement. Yeah, that sounded more accurate.

Thor appeared chagrined, but undeterred. “Nevertheless, we have many beings willing to fight at our side, as well as assist in the preparations. Which brings me to the other reason for our visit. Odin Allfather wants me and Loki to remain here on Midgard to help you prepare for the upcoming fight.”

“Wait, what do you mean, ‘remain here’?” Tony repeated, sounding like he was past incredulous and half way into resigned. “As in, for longer than a few day?”

“For however long we are needed, my friend!”

There was a moment where Tony just stared off into space, probably regretting several life decisions (Rhodey was right there with him), but when he came back down to Earth, his eye darted back to Rhodey. They shared a look, no need for words to communicate their intentions. Tony’s expression was reluctant, but clearly said that they could use these guys.

Rhodey supposed that was true. Thor could be useful with training, as well as informing them about the other realms and whatever plans Odin was making behind their backs. Tony, Strange, and Wong were working out the magical angles, so they could probably use Loki’s help, although Rhodey was certain the most helpful thing Loki could do right now was stay out of the way.

“Fine, fine,” he put his hands up in surrender, resigned to his fate. “You’re welcome to… stay.” He probably didn’t sound all that welcoming. “We’ll have to make more permanent arrangements for you both, get you cleared through security again, but the minutiae can wait until tomorrow.”
Thor beamed, obviously pleased, but Loki raised a hand, as if he needed permission to run his mouth.

When Rhodey looked his way, unimpressed, the god’s lips stretching into a saccharine smile. “One simple request, Colonel, if you please.”

“What?”

“It would be… fantastic if Thor could have his own room this time.” Loki shrugged innocently. “My brother snores and I really wouldn’t mind sharing with Anthony and his lovely soldier.”

Barnes growled, Tony burst out laughing, Wilson sputtered and choked, Rogers probably had an aneurism, and Rhodey kinda wished one of those alien portals would open up and swallow him whole.

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Rhodey wasn’t wishing for portal today however, determined to have a good morning. He left the office, said ‘hello’ to a few techs working overtime this weekend, and then headed over to the West Wing, hoping one of its many residents started something up for breakfast.

When he looked up from his phone as he entered the kitchen, he halted two steps past the threshold and promptly decided he needed a career change.

His wonderful, quiet kitchen was chaos personified, and the same went for the adjacent common room.

He would’ve turned around and left too, found some secluded corner to hide in, breakfast be damned, but Pepper caught his gaze from across the room and smiled mischievously, because of course she knew exactly what he was thinking. At this point, it would’ve just been embarrassing to turn tail and run.

Rhodey took a fortifying breath as his eyes scanned the space around him one more time.

Thor was wearing one of Barnes’ aprons, cooking… something at the stove top, with Vision next to him chopping fruit with a serenity reserved for monks. Pepper, Alice, and Banner were at the table, already enjoying their respective morning beverages, probably waiting for whatever breakfast Vision and Thor were concocting, although Banner still appeared to be on the wrong side of half-asleep, eyelids drooping and face pressed into his palm as he leaned heavily against it.

The real trouble was in the common room however, where Harley and Peter were situated on the couch, with the God of Mischief smooshed between them as the two teenagers were trying, very loudly, to explain the basics of Mario Kart. The worst part was that Loki, clad in a button-up and skinny jeans and looking every bit human, seemed genuinely intrigued by the proceedings, a controller already loosely in hand and eyes focused on the large television screen.

Happy was with them, sprawled in one of the love seats, providing unhelpful commentary.

To recap, an alien prince and an otherworldly android were cooking their breakfast. The Hulk was falling asleep into his giant cup of tea, one of the worlds richest and most successful CEOs was trying desperately not to laugh at the expression on Rhodey’s face, and the would-be conquerer of New York was high-fiving Harley because one of them just blue-shelled poor Peter.

It made Rhodey miss Tony’s shenanigans, which was a bad sign for everyone involved. At least there were no screaming children yet—more screaming children, Rhodey amended as shrieks of
laughter echoed from the couch.

“You gonna join us for breakfast, Colonel,” Pepper finally had enough of his dithering, “or are you going to stand there like a statue?”

“Becoming a statue sounds like a great plan, actually,” he parried back, but his legs were already carrying him forward and thank god— just not these gods— that no one dared to sit in his chair. He plopped into it unceremoniously, ignoring looks of amusement from the two women at his side, and even Banner was stirring back to life, blinking owlishly, first at his tea, then at Rhodey.

Two seconds later, a voice boomed right above him. “A fine morning to you, Colonel! I am happy to see you have joined us for this fine feast we’re about to have!”

“Good morning, Thor,” Rhodey cringed at the volume and kept his voice low to serve as an example — indoor voices, children!— but Thor ignored the subtle request. At least the veritable yelling in his ear was made better when Vision placed a cup of coffee— black, no sugar— right in front of him a second later. Bless that thoughtful android.

After a fortifying sip, he did feel better and he supposed it wasn’t all bad. After all, here he was, having breakfast with his make-shift family. Everyone was in one piece and happy, which was huge in their line of work.

Rhodey had to admit that once you got past the general state of chaos, it was actually good to have everyone here, for his own peace of mind and especially for Tony’s. Large family Christmases, filled with kids and presents and a ridiculous amount of bad-for-you food, those weren’t a thing in the Stark household. Rhodey did end up stealing Tony away a few times to spend the holidays with his family, but all of that ended after Tony’s parents passed away.

Twenty six years ago today.

It was Harley’s turn to groan at the television screen and he shoved at Loki, which of course shoved the god into poor Peter, and the whole convoy dissolved into pushing and prodding punctuated by laughter.

Rhodey’s smile came unbidden. He loved these people, he truly did, although he could do without the Asgardian interlopers, even if one of them was surprisingly good with children.

Accepting his fate, he chatted amicably with Pepper and Alice; eventually Happy sauntered over to join them, and it wasn’t long before Thor and Vision began putting out the prepared food. Fruit, toast, the standard breakfast proteins and an unreasonable amount of eggs, and to Rhodey’s surprise, some masterfully crafted Eggs Benedict.

Thor appeared bashful when Rhodey asked him where he learned to poach eggs. “Lady Darcy taught me a lot during my visits here. According to her, breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

“Well, she’s not wrong,” Rhodey agreed, suddenly famished again. Okay, one of the Norse gods could stay.

Peter peeked over the couch. “Ooh, is breakfast ready?” he exclaimed and before Rhodey could blink, two teenage menaces were already at the table, with Loki trailing behind them at a more sedate pace.

The new table seated them all comfortably, although a few more bodies and it would’ve been a tight squeeze. Rhodey supposed he should thank Barnes for breaking their last one in half.
“Hey, shouldn’t we wait for Tony and Bucky to join us?” Harley asked around a mouthful of what appeared to be bacon, obviously not taking his own advice. “I was gonna ask Tony if I could go mess around with the Mustang today.”

Rhodey regarded them over his cup for a moment, wondering whether he actually knew the answer to that.

“I don’t think they’re going to join us, unfortunately. They need a day to themselves today.”

The boys regarded him suspiciously, obviously unsatisfied, but Pepper, bless her, distracted them with questions about their plans for Christmas, buying Rhodey a few minutes which he used to contemplate the two men missing from the table.

He was worried about Tony and Barnes. He liked to believe those two were solid, but this day had haunted Tony for years. Every December, Tony would disappear on this day, alcohol in hand, and would reemerge the next day, miserable and depressed.

Rhodey didn’t know how this year would pan out and he suspected the two probably didn’t either. Regardless, there was one key difference between this year and all that came before it. This year, Rhodey wasn’t the only one who would be waiting for Tony (and now Barnes) when the day was over.

Rhodey looked around the kitchen again, his mind filling in the empty spaces with the faces of the family members not present. Laura and the kids, Hope, Strange, Wong. All these people, they loved Tony and Barnes, in their own unique but no less important way, and Rhodey couldn’t be happier to share this task, part burden, part blessing. No matter what happened today, neither Tony nor Barnes would be alone to cope with it.

Rhodey didn’t manage to get through a handful of bites however before he was addressed again, this time by Peter.

“But what are Tony and Bucky up to? They rarely miss breakfast when it’s all of us like this.”

Rhodey mulled over his options for a second. There were a few here who now knew the full story, but also some who had no business knowing anything at all. He glanced around the table, then over at Pepper, who just gave him a small shrug. He turned back to the boys.

“Tony and Barnes both had a difficult past. You might not know the extent of it— as well you shouldn’t,” he cut off their protests before they even made a peep, “not because you’re kids, but because everyone, yourselves included, has a right to privacy, to choose what information is shared. But you two know that life, it’s…” He trailed off and sighed, images of sand and blood lingering on the edges of his mind. “It hasn’t been kind to them. Certain days remind them of that more than others.”

Harley looked thoughtful, squinting at his plate full of food. “It’s not the whole Siberia thing, is it?”

“No, no,” Peter supplied quietly, “that was in the spring.”

“Siberia is a different beast, boys,” Rhodey corrected, then continued after a sip of his coffee, which was unfortunately on the wrong side of lukewarm now. “I’m not going to give you the details—”

Again a sharp look in their direction when Harley straightened up and opened his mouth, “because those don’t belong to you. All I can do is ask you both— ask all of you— to give them some space today. They might come out of that room in an hour and be just fine, they might not. Give them space to deal with their hurts on their own terms, okay?”
Both of the boys nodded solemnly and their now decidedly less cheerful faces made Rhodey regret telling even this partial truth. Thor sported a pensive expression of his own, and even Loki didn’t look like his usual smarmy self.

Rhodey could’ve made something up, he supposed, some fake excuse for the absence, but the boys were old enough. They weren’t privy to the whole ugly truth, but it was important for them both to understand that a life like this, it gutted you, broke you to pieces, and some days hit harder than others.

“Are they going to be okay?” Harley asked quietly. Peter’s wide, puppy-dog eyes reflected the sentiment.

“Yeah, they’ll be just fine,” Rhodey assured them, and to his own surprise, the words didn’t feel like a white lie. He could admit that he didn’t know this with certainty, but Tony and Barnes… they found something special in each other, to Rhodey’s everlasting surprise, and they moved past their shitty history long ago. They were both made of stronger stuff, filled with tenacity and willpower that Rhodey couldn’t help but admire. They’d be fine, but he still hoped that even if they chose to hide from the rest of the world today, the two weren’t hiding from each other.

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Tony woke up with a shiver and it took a sluggish second for him to realize it was due to the lack of familiar heavy warmth at his side. He scrunched up his face, rubbing his cheek into the pillow to shake off some of the sleep-induced cobwebs while his hazy mind attempted to figure out why James wasn’t in bed with him. He supposed the man could be out for a run. Blergh. Tony never understood the appeal of running. Get him into a boxer’s ring any day, please and thank you.

He got his answer when he blinked open his eyes and spotted his boyfriend sitting in the armchair on the other side of the room. James was peering pensively out the window, but his gaze drifted to Tony when Tony began to stir and sluggishly make his way upright. James gave him a small smile, much dimmer than his usual, and it lasted all of one moment before disappearing again, to be replaced by something… something almost sad.

Tony’s sleep-addled mind scrambled ineffectually— seriously, who let him sleep eight hours, this couldn’t be healthy— to figure out why his boyfriend looked like he was heading to a funeral and Tony got all the way to ‘oh no, he’s dying’ before his eyes followed James’ gaze again and fixated on the world outside. The snow flurries picked up some energy this morning, dancing to and fro, covering the earth with even more white powder. It had been a snowy December thus far.

…Oh.

Right. Tony supposed the downside of willfully ignoring the fact that this day was approaching was that when it did come, Tony would be none the wiser and then his boyfriend would look like that.

Shit. Neither he nor James had even haven’t talked about it and yesterday Tony had been so exhausted that when he came back to their quarters after a long string of meetings (courtesy of everyone wanting to get an update from the Norse Bros), his ‘I’ll only close my eyes for a second’ ended up turning into a full night’s sleep, one that wasn’t even interrupted by James joining him in bed later.

If he did at all.

While James’s melancholy eyes trailed back to the window, Tony took another second to study the man before him. Tony wasn’t sure how James managed it, because this was a man made out of two
hundred and fifty pounds of pure muscle, but here he looked... small. Afraid of something, waiting for a verdict, an execution.

God, Tony hated that look on James, hated it with a burning passion, and his chest ached at the mere sight. Not an arc reactor ache nor a Siberia ache, just... whatever was left of his crappy, battered heart was hurting for this man who should have no reason to lose the smile that usually lit up his face and made those blue eyes shine.

“Morning,” Tony finally mumbled, mouth still uncooperative even if his mind was now fully alert. He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Why are you so far away, babe? Did you decide I was a lost cause when I hogged all the blankets again?”

James was studying Tony now too, his gaze steady, but the sadness didn’t lift, not even at Tony’s attempt at teasing.

“James...” Tony called out again, leaving the jokes behind, and the other man sat up to lean forward to brace his forearms on his knees. His hair fanned out, framing his face, hiding him from Tony.

“Wasn’t sure how much space you wanted today. Couldn’t— couldn’t quite get myself to leave the room, but I, uh—” he shrugged in a way that was meant to be casual, but his voice was timid, the words unsteady. “I’m not sure what you need today. Just— just let me know, yeah? Whatever it is, I understand.”

Tony swung his legs over the side of the bed, toes curling into the threads of the soft carpet. He kept his gaze on the floor for a second, then looked back to James. “Do you want space today?”

James’ answer, a tense shake of his head, was immediate. So the ball was in Tony’s court then and although his instinct was to reassure, to deflect and forget and ignore, because he couldn’t stand that resigned look on James’ face for one second longer, Tony forced himself to stop and think. He wouldn’t be doing James any favors if he acted like everything was fine if in fact he did need some space. Bottling this shit up, pushing it aside for someone else’s sake, even when it was James, it would just come back to bite them both and Tony couldn’t— wouldn’t— put himself in a position that could lead him to one day resenting the man he loved.

God, Fatima would be positively proud of this uncharacteristically healthy decision. Granted, Tony wasn’t all that great at self-reflection to begin with, but for James, he was willing to try anything.

He thought back to the years since that crash. Most of the anniversaries Tony spent drunk, usually in his lab, sometimes at a small, out-of-the-way property. Always alone and almost always ready to destroy everything around him; self-destruction was a staple coping mechanism too.

Last year he was sober, but he was locked away in the lab all the same, with even the bots and Friday barred from interrupting. It was the first anniversary where Tony knew the whole truth, where that video was still clear in his mind, the blood, the pleading words, the final breath of his mother. Even with months separating him from the fight in Siberia, the images of death still lingered. It was the only day that year where Tony let himself lash out, grieve, weep, and pity himself into oblivion.

He came out of hiding the next morning, bleary-eyed and emotionally spent. Rhodey was there though, as he always was, his steady rock, waiting for Tony with a tight hug that helped right Tony’s world like nothing else did; it didn’t take long before he was swept back up into the busy, non-stop chaos of last year, the anniversary put behind him.

Tony supposed that isolation was still an option today and knowing James, the man wouldn’t hold it against him (although he’d certainly blame himself), but was that really what Tony wanted?
Examining his own emotions gave Tony literal hives, but again, James was worth the effort.

He watched James, watched as his hands brushed against one another, a nervous gesture that underscored the turmoil of James’ own emotional state.

Yes, Tony was still grieving. Did a child ever get over the death of their parents? He would always be devastated about losing his mother; he would always be frustrated with Howard’s careless—idiotic—decision to have Maria in the car that night. The depth of his fury for Hydra likely had no parallel or equal either, with the exception of James himself. He was also still very angry with Steve.

But James?

Tony took a fortifying breath against that grief and that anger, but even with those emotions clinging to him, his path forward was suddenly clear. He knew what he needed today, so without wasting another second, he grabbed the ends of the blanket still slung over his shoulders and got off the bed. James startled at the movement, looked genuinely surprised when Tony appeared before him, wide blue eyes blinking up at Tony, hope warring with guilt so clearly that Tony’s heart stuttered for a beat from the intensity of that gaze. There was still disbelief there when Tony motioned for James to sit back, and then some heartbreaking mix of emotions Tony couldn’t even identify anymore when Tony plopped himself, blanket and all, into James’ lap. Strong arms embraced him, pulling him in tight, and Tony assisted by wriggling closer, letting his legs hang off the edge of the seat, his head resting on James’ shoulder, while his left hand splayed over James’ clothed chest, fingertips pressed against the warmth so he could feel the man’s heartbeat. Too rapid for Tony’s liking, but to be fair, his heart was getting a workout too.

“Are you sure?” came the hesitant question, whispered where James pressed his face into Tony’s hair. God, he sounded so lost. Did he really expect Tony to—to banish him? To lash out and use this day as an excuse to punish someone for the tragedy that occurred?

Tony thanked whatever good fortune he had left that none of those violent, cruel desires took hold today. He forgave James, a long time ago, even before they became more, and that forgiveness didn’t magically disappear today.

Nor did he want it to.

“I’m sure, James.” To prove it, Tony snuggled in closer, rubbing his cold nose against the column of James’ neck. He supposed he was hiding a little too. “I spent every one of these days alone before, but I think it’s time for a new tradition.”

James’ right hand came up to brush a thumb over Tony’s jaw, soothing back-and-forth strokes.

“You’re allowed to grieve, Tony. I wouldn’t— I wouldn’t take that away from you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Tony answered. There were still notes of hurt in James’ voice, so Tony decided he needed a less subtle approach. He sat up, just enough to put them face to face. The arms around him tightened, as if James was scared Tony would leave, but Tony didn’t dream of it. It was a relief, really, to realize with unfailing clarity that this was the only place he wanted to be today.

Gently, like handling something precious and fragile, Tony cradled James’ face in his hands. The stubble was scratchy against his palms and Tony mimicked James’ earlier gesture, running his thumbs over James’ cheeks. Back and forth, back and forth.

“I love you, James Buchanan Barnes,” Tony said, simply, without fanfare, never taking his eyes away from the man in question, “and that doesn’t change, not today, not tomorrow. My parents—my parents are gone and I spent half of my life grieving over the missed opportunities. It still hurts, in
a different way now that I know the truth. It will always hurt, but you, my love, you’re not a part of that pain anymore. And I know I’m not the only one mourning today. This day, those memories, they hurt you too, don’t they?”

James nodded, as much as he could with Tony’s hands on his face, and his bottom lip trembled as he exhaled shakily and tears built up to make those bright blue eyes shine. “I never wanted to be their executioner. I didn’t— didn’t deserve what was done to me.”

A tear ran down his cheek and Tony wiped it away, then pressed their foreheads together. “I know, honey, I know. We both had so much taken from us, so much. You—” Tony struggled to inhale past his own tears welling up in his eyes. “You were just as much of a victim that day as— as Mom and Dad were, so this day, it belongs to us both. Our tragedy to mourn, our grief. The rest of the world, it can stay the hell back for a day, but honey, James, I will never stop needing you.”

There were more tears. Tony couldn’t see them, but he could feel them against his hands as they raced down James’ cheeks. His own cheeks were likely wet too, pain and grief and so much heartache finding no other outlet.

They stayed like that for a few moments, needing no words. The grief continued to manifest itself through their tears, their uneven breaths and broken inhales, and hands that clung just hard enough to say “Please, I need you, don’t go.” Neither one of them had the privilege to experience grief like this before, a grief that was shared, with someone who understood the depth of this anguish, the steep price that was paid by those who had to keep living after that fateful night. Tony had his family ripped away, opportunities and possibilities stolen forever, while the thief in question was robbed too, stripped away of his choices, his will, his very self.

What a pair the two of them made.

But today, they took comfort from each other’s presence and it helped soothe the raging storm of emotions spurred by the decades of hurt, and maybe this was the cleansing they needed to move forward. Clean away the festering, rotting flesh and let the wound heal. Start anew.

When both of their breaths were steady puffs against each other’s lips and when James’ hand began to tenderly caress Tony’s back— up and down, up and down— when Tony knew the grief would no longer choke him, he bumped their noses together, then leaned in and sealed his lips over James’. The kiss was unhurried, tender, embodying safety and reassurance and “I’m right here, I won’t leave you.” It was exactly the type of kiss they needed today.

Tony pulled away when he was satisfied and James dragged the metal hand from Tony’s hip over his back first, then his arm, trailing the metal fingers down, before closing them over Tony’s hand. He pulled it away from his face and pressed a kiss to the palm, then the knuckles.

“I love you too,” he whispered, “we’ll get through this together, just like we always do.”

Tony smiled. Maybe it was as simple as that. He stole a few more kisses, then sat up with a great reluctance.

“Oh, uh—” he paused to wipe away the tears marring his cheeks, thankful no new ones hurried to replace these. A deep breath helped to steady his voice. “How about you order us some breakfast while I go clean up, hmm? I know you love me an’ all, but probably not enough to put up with my morning breath for much longer.”

James’ lips twitched up, which Tony considered a rousing success. “You know I don’t mind.”
Tony huffed and kissed the tip of James’ nose. “Yeah, but I do, gorgeous.”

James however didn’t seem in a hurry to let him go and those blue eyes, imploring Tony to “Stay, please stay,” were hard to resist.

“I kinda like you right where you are, doll.”

The return of pet names was a promising sign too.

“You are a very comfortable pillow, super soldier, I’ll give you that, but I promise,” Tony wriggled a little and with a big, put-upon sigh, James released him from his grip, and Tony managed to stand back up, “that I’ll be right back. Order me something sweet and indulgent too. Oh, and don’t forget coffee!”

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The food made it to them in record time, delivered by one of the kitchen staff who probably just assumed this was another lazy Saturday for the superhero duo.

Tony unceremoniously stuffed a piece of the freshly baked cinnamon roll into his mouth, then drowned it all with sweet coffee. Indulging in overly sweet concoctions was a James thing, but today could be an exception, and the pastries did taste damn good. Plus, sugar made you happy, didn’t it?

Biting into another piece, Tony quirked an eyebrow at James, who was regarding him thoughtfully across the bed. Keeping the heavy trays of food between them probably wasn’t the neatest way to eat because this was how you got ants, but they had Hope and Lang around, didn’t they? So Tony didn’t fuss.

James smiled in response to Tony’s look as he took a bite of his own chocolate croissant. “Just wondering what’s on your mind, sweetheart,” he said after his mouth was no longer full, obviously possessing more manners than Tony cared to, “was there something you still wanted to do today?”

Tony was heartened to see that the look of resignation no longer lingered on James’ face. Plus, it was a fair question.

“Well, if it’s all the same to you, I still don’t want to deal with everyone else. The awkward looks of pity, the tip-toeing, walking on eggshells. I know they mean well—”

“But it’s doesn’t make it any less frustrating because you know they’re thinking about it, even if they’re not talking about it.”

“Mm-hmm,” Tony hummed around another mouthful.

“So, what do we do?”

“Well, breakfast was a great start,” Tony motioned at the food, then aimed a leer James’ way, “and we have this lovely bed all to ourselves too, so you know, we could have lots and lots of that amazing, life-affirming sex we both love. It is our favorite.” James was obviously trying hard not to laugh, lips pressed together, but then Tony waggled his eyebrows and the man’s composure cracked, the beautiful sound of laughter filling their room.

“You are ridiculous and— and—” James seemed to have run out of words to describe Tony, “and amazing and I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with you.”

“I have a feeling you’ll figure it out,” Tony parried back, but the words were less teasing this time.
Softer, more affectionate. Tony loved this man, god help him, and it was hard to regret the tragic paths that led them here, even on a day like today.

Tony carefully pushed aside the trays of food, then shooed James off the bed and back to the loveseat so they could resume their cuddling. James obeyed with a laugh, amused by Tony’s insistence and soon they were snuggled up again in that big, overstuffed recliner, with the leg-rest up and seat back so James’ legs would have plenty of room to stretch out. Tony was content with plastering himself to the man’s side, throwing a possessive arm and leg over him. Of course he was promptly wrapped up in that garish red blanket too because James had to fuss (admittedly, Tony was cold, but James didn’t need the confirmation).

“I swear, you are like a limpet,” James remarked as he tucked the blanket around Tony’s shoulder.

Tony mumbled in James’ chest, “Are you complaining?”

“No, just making an observation. I like limpet Tony.”

Tony muffled his laughter into James’ chest too, then rubbed his cheek against the shirt the man was wearing— it was the Stark Industries one, because the man had no shame— and settled in to watch the snow dance around outside.

Tony was satiated and full from their big breakfast and James’ hand was now carding through his hair, lovely strokes that on any other day would’ve lulled Tony right into a late morning nap, but today, there was something else he wanted to do.

“I want to tell you about Mom and Dad.”

James went still, but the magical fingers scratching at Tony’s scalp resumed their work after only a beat, and Tony took that as his permission to continue.

“My mom… she wasn’t a perfect person. I think someone looking from the outside in probably would’ve said she wasn’t always a great mother either. But she was still my mom and god, I loved her. I loved her so much, as much as any son could. As for my dad, well, uh— that’s a more complicated tale. We, uh—” Tony let out a chuckle, tainted by years of less than stellar memories. “The Starks were like any other family, I guess. A downright mess most of the time. Howard, he, uh — he changed as he got older, not for the better. I remember Aunt Peggy and Jarvis being so frustrated with him, wondering, where was the man they knew and loved? But life changes all of us in some way, I guess. Howard, he—”

Talking about this was difficult, and Tony kept stumbling over his words, but he realized he wanted to get this all out. He wanted to share these parts of his life with James. Good or bad, he wanted his parents’ memories preserved.

“Well, if Howard were to magically appear right now, I’m not sure what I’d say to him. We had our issues— pretty sure half of my issues are Howard issues, but I dunno, maybe after I get a good punch in and— and tell him he was a huge ass, I’d—” Tony faltered, but James held him tighter and so Tony’s throat didn’t feel quite so raw after a moment, “I’d tell him I was sorry that we never got the chance to reconcile, that he never had the chance to be a better father. I would’ve told him that I loved him, even though sometimes I still feel like I hate him. Fury once told me my old man loved me too. Maybe, maybe not, I just wish I had the chance to find out. But what I do know is that he loved my mother. Their marriage wasn’t perfect either, but they loved each other so much and—”

Help my wife… Please… Help… Sergeant Barnes?
He closed his eyes against the onslaught of memories, and curled into James, seeking comfort. This little story-telling wasn’t meant to get so emotionally charged, dammit. He wanted to tell James about Maria teaching him to play the piano, about the gorgeous rose gardens that were her pride and joy, about the nights staying up with her and Ana and Jarvis, listening to the piano and munching on sweets.

But he ended up with this instead, raw confessions about people who fell short of perfection by a mile, the faded memories probably hiding even more of those imperfections, but they were Tony’s nonetheless. His family, his burdens to bear, his memories to honor.

James kept him grounded, his hand still in Tony’s hair, gentle fingers a reminder that it was all going to be okay.

Tony may have rubbed his cheek against James’ shirt again to hide a stray tear that he hoped the man wouldn’t notice.

“Sorry, that got out of hand quick. Meant to tell you fun stories, you know?”

“I know. I don’t mind hearing both though. Whatever you’re willing to share.”

Tony watched the snow outside for a few beats, content with the warmth surrounding him.

“I think my mom would’ve liked you.”

That got him a curious huff. “Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. She would’ve thought you were just so handsome, would’ve loved having you around. Would’ve fussed over you, invited you in for tea and coffee, asked you to tell her all about yourself. Would’ve found you to be a perfectly proper, upstanding young man.”

That earned Tony a snort. “Well, we both know that’s not exactly true.”

“Yup. Biggest troublemaker I know.”

“Tony, please. We live in a house with the God of Chaos and Harley Keener.”

Tony’s reply was an incredulous “Oh my god, we’re not going to survive Christmas, are we?” to which James responded with a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and the levity helped lift some of the morose cloud that settled over Tony.

“Would you, uh—” James spoke up eventually, but he sounded unsure, “would you mind if I told you some stories about Howard too?”

Tony perked up at that and even shifted around so he could rest his chin on his forearms which were now laying across James’ chest. Not the most comfortable position, seeing as both of them were craning their necks to look at each other, but it did the trick of showing James that Tony was curious rather than offended.

“I don’t remember much,” James continued, “partly because we didn’t have a lot of interactions and partly because my memories are about as sturdy as wet tissue. But there are a few things.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, I do remember this one night where we were planning our next ambush on another Hydra base, and Howard decided this would be a perfect time to try out one of his inventions. I don’t
remember what it was, but it went about as well as that flying car of his, exploded, singed off his facial hair—”

“Oh my god.”

“I’m serious, eyebrows, mustache, the whole thing. He looked ridiculous and Peggy was furious.”

Tony smothered his laughter as best he could. “I lived for the times Aunt Peggy would chew Dad out for something. She took no one’s crap.”

“She certainly did not. She was accusing him of jeopardizing the whole mission and— wait, wait,” James’ eyes widened suddenly and Tony watched him with renewed curiosity, “oh my god, I think Steve was involved too. I think— yes, that’s right, Howard roped him into this somehow, so Peggy let them both have it. They couldn’t look her in the eye for days.”

Tony couldn’t help himself. He raised himself up on his elbows, then kissed James’ cheek, grinning the entire time. “I love this already and I want every single detail you have. Don’t hesitate to embellish too, I won’t mind. Just— Howard stories, Aunt Peggy stories, everything, I wanna hear it all.”

James’ eyes crinkled at the corners as he looked up at Tony. He looked happy, to be here against all odds, to have earned this second chance to rewrite their story.

With a relief that probably would’ve made him weak in the knees had he been standing, Tony realized he was happy too. The sadness surrounding this day would never truly lift, and he would miss his mother fiercely until the day he died. Would miss his father too, if only because neither of them had a chance to fix things. But it hurt less, the memories less oppressive, less of a stab to the heart and more a lingering ache that Tony knew would slowly ease back the next day.

*Life is for the living and the dead do not care.*

Tony didn’t believe in any afterlife either, but then again, he was surrounded by space faring gods and time-traveling wizards, so what did he know? As he kissed James again, so full of love and affection for this man, Tony hoped that his parents would’ve been happy to see their son finally find peace.
“You gotta stop looking at me like that,” Tony grumbled at James, then tried to rearrange Nate again, who was snuggled up against him five minutes ago, but then inevitably turned boneless and slithered out of Tony’s grasp to lay flat on the couch, kicking his little feet at James while playing the video game on the Stark tablet inches away from his nose (the game was educational, but so brightly colored that it gave Tony a cluster headache). “C’mere, you.”

The toddler wriggled in protest, a bundle of whiny “But Uncle Tony,” and the rearrangement was doubly tricky because Tony didn’t also want to end up with a lapful of hot chocolate.

James decided to be helpful, finally, and took the mug, which gave Tony two arms to pull the wriggling toddler up and against him. With both of them upright (Tony was pretty sure there was a tiny elbow jammed into his kidney, but he’d manage), he graciously accepted his drink back and took a quick sip. Rich and hot, but a bit too much sugar for his tastes. It was the holiday season and all, but Tony promised himself his smoothies would be making a comeback ASAP.

James settled back in his own spot, sideways to face them, and propped his head on his fist.

“Looking at you like what, doll?”

“Like—I dunno, like you want an entire gaggle of these things.” He jostled Nate for emphasis, who jammed that elbow in deeper, not appreciating the interruption. Video games (no matter how educational) were serious business.

James shook his head. He looked fond, eyes sparkling (or maybe those were just the Christmas lights making them shine). “I definitely don’t want a gaggle. I’m exhausted just watching these five run around. Plus, with our lives…” he shrugged, some distant look overtaking his cheerful expression for a moment. “Not sure if I ever wanted them, really, even before, but now… Just helping raise these hooligans is enough, I think.”

“I’m with you there. So what’s with the look then?”

This time James laughed, a light, simple sound that had warmth spreading right through Tony, down to his finger and toes. James reached out to smooth down Nate’s hair, then up to brush one of Tony’s own loose strands off his forehead. “Just like seeing you happy, that’s all. You two look so… cozy.”

“T’m with you there. So what’s with the look then?”

Tony rolled his eyes, made a show of not appreciating such an insult to his general state of ‘perpetual bad ass’, but in reality, the sentiment was hard to argue. He was cozy.

After all, here he was, sipping hot cocoa and cuddling a toddler while sitting next to the love of his life, all of them sprawled on the couch in the big family room, which looked far less spacious with that giant Christmas tree situated in the corner; add to that the veritable pile of presents underneath it and an unreasonable number of lights and decorations, and they had themselves the perfect picture of Christmas.

Tony, having been used to the immaculate decorations of the Stark household and later the decorations at Malibu and the Tower done by professionals, thought it was less ‘perfect’ and more like the winter holidays just threw up all over the West Wing. The whole thing was a day-long decorating effort between the kids, Bruce, and an overly enthusiastic Thor, so of course it resulted in chaos. But it had heart and was sort of endearing and okay, maybe Tony actually loved it. It was everything he secretly craved, a true family Christmas, meant to be enjoyed rather than displayed (although he did wonder just how blasphemous it was to let a Norse deity decorate for Christmas).
With their early dinner now behind them, a good half of the team congregated in the family room; they were relaxing, trying to work their way from ‘uncomfortably full’ to ‘pleasantly satiated’ while they waited for the others so that everyone could open presents together (patience was another virtue rarely coveted in the Avengers household).

At the moment, Happy was napping in one of the love seats, while Pepper, Laura, and Rhodey were talking quietly on the other sectional. Pepper looked particularly comfortable, clad in pajamas, her hair down, a hot cup of tea in her hands. Tony hadn’t seen her like this—relaxed, unguarded, cozy—in a long time and he couldn’t help the small bursts of joy every time his eyes would drift back to her and he’d remember that yes, they were part of each other’s lives again.

Thor was on the floor, playing board games with Cooper, Lila, and Loki. Tony’s opinions about the trickster sticking around were complicated at best, but his strategy at the moment was to let the god be. He didn’t trust the guy, not by a long shot, but at the same time, no one expected him to, including Loki himself, which was in itself refreshing. Loki was also a useful ally; he was undeniably powerful and the only one with real knowledge of their enemy, potentially the key to victory against this Mad Titan. However, at the same time, this man’s loyalties seemed to change on a drop of a dime and he could very well be their downfall. Tony hated leaving so much in the hands of one man, but facts were facts. The most effective path forward then was ensuring that Loki’s loyalty remained firmly with them and ostracizing him, keeping him on the outside looking in, would’ve had the exact opposite effect.

Despite his posturing, Loki actually wasn’t that hard to read. This was a man who craved validation, who wanted to be treated as an equal rather than some ‘other’ that didn’t belong with the rest. The silver tongue, the irreverent attitude, those were just simple smoke screens for the insecurities. Tony hated that he knew all this from personal experience, but denial of their similarities was ultimately counterproductive. Apparently daddy issues were the same in every realm.

So Tony let the god stay. If nothing else, maybe Loki would at least hesitate before stabbing them in the back if he had fond memories of having snowball fights with the kids or of Tony handing him a cup of coffee without being asked.

James tapped him gently on the knee and Tony realized he must’ve gotten lost in his own thoughts. He shook his head at James’ curious gaze, then leaned in give the man a chaste kiss on the lips, tasting chocolate, sugar, and home. Of course Tony couldn’t leave out Nate, who received a smacking kiss to the crown of his head next and the child’s resulting giggles of delight turned a room full of adults into a bunch of starry-eyed saps.

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Gift giving was, by its nature, a tricky affair when one of the people involved was a billionaire who could conceivably buy everyone in the room their own private island. It was human nature to want ‘equity’ in matters like this, match gift for gift, so to avoid any potential awkwardness, Christmas gift were limited by mutual agreement to tokens of appreciation, something that had heart rather than actual monetary value.

Tony, who understood the need for this tradition, even if he didn’t particularly want to abide by it, had to remain content with the other 364 days of the year to spoil the people he loved.

The exchange was a flurry of wrapping paper and ribbons, with scarves and sweaters and novelty mugs quickly exchanging hands. There were books and sweet treats, cooking and craft supplies, a pink, stuffed bunny for Nate bigger than the actual toddler (Pepper appreciated that one). Vision knitted everyone mittens, all emblazoned with a matching white “A”. Someone (Tony lost track) got
James a Grumpy Cat ugly sweater and although no one had the right to look so handsome in that monstrosity, James and his gorgeous everything defied all logic. Tony was pretty fabulous himself, snug in his brand new red sweater sporting an embroidered Hulk with reindeer antlers. Bruce wore an actual headband with antlers, a beautiful Christmas sight that made Tony laugh every time he met the man’s eye.

With matching smirks that spoke of a long, winding history, Rhodey and Tony gifted each other ties - a snowflake-covered one for Tony and fire truck red for Rhodey. At James’ raised eyebrow, Tony explained that it was a tradition going back to their MIT days.

Of course, the actual story was more complicated. For their first Christmas together, Tony, in his infinite fifteen-year-old rich-kid wisdom, bought his brand new friend a brand new car, because why wouldn’t he? His allowance from Howard covered the cost and Rhodey’s old clunker was literally falling apart as it drove. However, instead of the excitement and gratitude he expected, Rhodey was furious. He rejected the gift, demanded to know what the hell Tony thought he was doing, and declared that he couldn’t be bought with shiny gifts.

Tony, being stupid and hormonal and fifteen, took the rejection hard, which turned into a night of hurt feelings and shouting, but thankfully Rhodey caught on quickly that Tony wasn’t actually trying to manipulate him. With tempers cooled, Rhodey sat him down to explain that the car was worth more than some people made in a year, and a gift like that, it could warp their friendship in a way Rhodey didn’t want to risk seeing. He didn’t expect lavish gifts, nor did he want them.

It was the moment that solidified it for Tony that Rhodey wasn’t in it for the money. Sure, Rhodey had been a great guy ever since they met, but a voice at the back of Tony’s head kept asking why Rhodey would be any different. This however effectively silenced those nagging questions.

Tony took the car back, but because he still wanted to give Rhodey something, he purchased a simple grey tie at a department store and handed it over the next day with a quiet offer to also fix up Rhodey’s old car.

Rhodey was beaming, first at the modest-looking tie, then at Tony. “See, this is much better. And yes, I’d love for you to look at that ol’ heap of junk, Tones.” He put the box down, then got up off the bed to give Tony a hug. Tony squirmed, still getting used to this, but admittedly Rhodey was a pretty good hugger. “Plus, great minds think alike.”

“What do you mean?” Tony mumbled into Rhodey’s shoulder and the boy pulled away to grab a small box sitting on his desk.

“Here,” he handed it over, “Merry Christmas.”

Tony gave Rhodey a curious glance, then carefully opened the box and inside, nestled in the middle of garish green and red tissue paper, was another tie, this one bright blue and covered with tiny pictures of cartoon robots.

Tony had a lot of ties, all of which cost far more than this one. In fact, this had to be one of the ugliest things he’d ever seen, aesthetically speaking, but Tony clutched it to his chest as his face split into a wide grin.

“Thank you, Rhodey, I love it.”

It was a tradition that marked the first time Tony realized what true friendship meant and he was going to wear his snowflake tie to his next board meeting, stuffy old men in suits be damned.
With Nate back in his mother’s arms, Tony designated James as his new cuddle partner, and they passed each other two small boxes next. James unwrapped his to find a map of the United States with markings and notes spread all over it. A hologram would’ve been easier, but this was a man who read paper books, so retro was the way to go with James.

Tony explained that the map was a preliminary plan for a road trip. Since James hadn’t done much traveling, Tony took the initiative to come up with a list of necessary sights (ranging from standard tourist traps to local oddities) and he hoped they could take a few weeks, maybe in the summer, to get in the car and drive across the country, just the two of them, ending the trip with a few days of leisure and fun at the Malibu estate.

James tapped Arizona on the map and grinned. “Aw, look, you even marked the Grand Canyon for me. I thought you said it was just a big ol’ hole in the ground.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony endured the teasing with grace, “since we’re seeing the biggest ball of twine, I figured we should stop to see all those dumb rocks you like so much too.”

He was rewarded with a kiss to the temple, with James whispering ‘thank you’ before pulling away and nudging Tony to open his own gift.

He did and found a wooden picture frame, with one of the many selfies James had taken of them in the lab tucked behind the glass. They were smooshed together to fit into the frame, heads pressed together, temple to temple, with James’ metal arm wrapped around Tony’s shoulders. Tony reverently traced his finger over the glass. They were both smiling and it was strange to see the evidence of Tony’s newfound happiness put so plainly before him. It had him feeling a bit lightheaded, but James was right there next to him, a solid, steadying presence. Tony examined the wooden frame next, the intricate details burnt into the wood.

“Are those—”

“They’re little suns, yeah,” James admitted shyly, which was a charming look on him. “I’ve spent the last month hiding out in Banner’s lab, trying to get them right. Also, uh—” he hesitated, then tapped the upper right corner of the frame and to Tony’s surprise, the picture changed, the new one displaying Tony and the kids bent over some science experiment. “It’s actually a screen. Everyone helped me put it together. There’s roughly… a thousand pictures loaded in there? I dunno, but there’s a lot.”

Tony was grinning now too and he turned to kiss James sweetly on the lips, disregarding their audience. For that moment, the whole world narrowed down to the man he loved. “Such a sap.”

“Your sap though.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Tony would’ve kissed him again— and again and again— but someone threw a ball of wrapping paper at his head (James caught it without even looking), so Tony had to save the rest of his gratitude for later.

Still, a pretty perfect Christmas as far as Christmases went.

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Later, after the gift giving was over and James abandoned him to help with the clean-up in the kitchen, Tony decided it was time to get some of his own errands done.
Pepper quirked an eyebrow at him when he wriggled out of a sleepy Lila’s grasp, smoothing her hair down and tucking a blanket around her when she curled up against a pillow instead.

“Escaping the festivities already, Mr. Stark?”

“On the contrary, Miss Potts, trying to spread the holiday cheer. I’m gonna walk around the Compound, say ‘hi’ to a few folks. There’s always a skeleton crew that stays in the building—villainy doesn’t always adhere to the schedule of federally mandated holidays unfortunately. I will return shortly.” Tony declared as he walked backwards, narrowing his eyes at Rhodey in warning. “Do not watch Die Hard without me. Watch something boring while I’m gone.”

He turned around and nearly collided with Loki at the threshold.

“Jesus. You gotta stop creeping around in the dark like that, Rudolph,” Tony gripped his chest in mock indignation, “or I’m gonna put a damn bell on you.”

“Forgive me for not stomping around like a herd of Bilgespine,” Loki said and Tony rolled his eyes, but just as he was about to sneak around the god, Loki placed a hand on Tony’s forearm. “Anthony, now wait a moment, you can’t leave without us first honoring your Midgardian tradition.”

Tony stopped and squinted in suspicion.

“What tradition?” he asked, then regretted it immediately when Loki pointed at the mistletoe hanging in the doorway. “Alright, why is there a mistletoe on every single entrance?”

“I didn’t see you complaining when you were kissing Bucky at every single entrance,” Pepper chimed in. “Granted, most of us weren’t complaining either.”

Rhodey scowled at her. “I sure as hell was. I deal with that every day, they don’t stop just because the holidays are over, you know.”

Pepper sighed wistfully and Tony glared at them both. “Not helping, you two!” He turned the full force of that indignation onto Loki. “Do you want James to stab you?”

“This is your tradition, I’m simply trying to respect Midgardian culture. Plus, you kissed Thor. I feel this is only fair.”

Well, Loki had him there, Thor did get a quick smooch. Actually, almost everyone did. There was a lot of mistletoe in this damn building!

Tony eyed him for a moment, having already made up his mind, but not yielding quite yet. Loki appeared to deflate, expression falling.

“Very well, I suppose a kiss can only be sweet when it is wanted by both—”

Grabbing him by the lapels of his shirt, Tony dragged a startled, wide-eyed Loki down to smack a loud, exaggerated kiss to his cheek.

“Savor it ‘cause it’s the only one you’re going to get,” Tony patted him on the chest, then walked away with a smirk on his face. Fond memories for the trickster, right?

That smirk widened when he heard Thor’s booming “Loki, would you please stop swooning like a maiden and come watch this film with us?”

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With the last gift basket delivered and holiday cheer properly dispensed, Tony headed back down to the ground level. Their skeleton crew wasn’t a large one, but there were enough people that it took a good hour for Tony to make the rounds, indulge in some small talk, and make sure everyone was as merry as they could be working during the holidays. At least the overtime was generous and the employee holiday feast on the second floor looked delicious.

He tucked the rolling tray back into one of the supply closets, then with a pep in his step headed back to the other side of the building. Since the Compound was otherwise empty, Tony decided to take a shortcut through the gym and the adjacent locker room instead of weaving through the maze of hallways. He really wanted another one of those sugar cookies James made, but between the children and Norse gods, Tony had a sneaking suspicion everything would be gone by the time he came back.

But maybe he could tempt James into baking something else, just for him. Tony grinned to himself. Hell, forget baking, he should just drag James back to their room and have him for dessert.

As he was striding through the gym, Tony noticed one of the locker room doors was left ajar, but since it wasn’t the one he needed, he paid it little mind. After all, this was the employee gym and plenty of people came down here during their lunch hour. Hell, between the holiday stress and the holiday diets, there was plenty of motivation to let off some steam on the treadmill.

He walked past the door, didn’t see anyone inside from his vantage point, and kept moving—would’ve kept moving except a distinct sound stopped him in his tracks on his next step. His brows drew together in confusion and he silently pivoted back to peak through the door.

That was definitely a sob he just heard.

He couldn’t see anyone but—yes, there it was again, the unmistakable sound of a broken inhale.

Did Tony miss someone in his rounds? He swore he met up with everyone who was working tonight—

He stepped farther inside, beyond the wall of lockers, and was met with the sniffling form of one Steve Rogers.

Tony stilled, wide-eyed at the sight and certain Steve would notice him, but the man seemed to be in his own miserable world, sitting on one of the benches, hunched in on himself. Crying.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut and started counting, although whether to slow his rapidly beating heart or in some desperate hope that this sight would be gone when he opened his eyes again, he didn’t know.

One, two, three—

Fuck, forget the counting, it wasn’t working.

He should leave. He should turn around and leave and pretend he didn’t see anything. Steve was an adult, he could deal with his problems. If he needed someone, there were others he could talk to, others he didn’t stab in the back—

Tony opened his eyes and nothing about the world around him changed. Captain America was still crying openly, alone on Christmas Eve, and Tony… Even though his heart wanted to crawl up into his throat, even though staying here could go badly in a dozen different ways, he couldn’t just walk away.
God, he was so damn weak. Howard would’ve eviscerated him for this softness, this inability to be iron and strength and conviction. Or maybe not. Maybe Howard would be proud that Tony was sacrificing yet another part of himself for the sake of America’s golden boy.

He cleared his throat and Steve startled, wide red-rimmed eyes staring back at Tony. Recognition took a second, as if Steve couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing either. With a trembling hand, he quickly tried to wipe away the evidence of his misery, swiping at his tears roughly.

“Tony, why are—” Steve’s eyes darted to and fro, taking in the locker room. He must’ve realized they were alone here. “I wasn’t— I mean—” His attempts to speak broke on another sob, one Tony was certain Steve didn’t mean to let escape like that.

“Do you, uh— do you need help?”

Oh god, that sounded awful, even to Tony’s ears and he suddenly regretted this whole thing, desperately wishing the earth would just open up and swallow him whole. If you’re listening, Loki, now’s a great time for another portal.

Steve huffed, clearly not impressed either, but it was a wet noise, followed by an unsteady exhale which made him sound less like his usual righteous self. “Help?”

“Sorry, I just— you were—” Tony gestured lamely at Steve, unsure how to say “You were sitting in the dark alone and crying on Christmas Eve,” without actually saying those exact words.

Steve’s jaw flexed, so maybe he did hear what Tony didn’t want to say, but surprisingly, he didn’t spit it back in Tony’s face. Steve just shook his head, then stood up on unsteady legs. He looked more miserable than angry and probably had no ill intent, but Tony couldn’t help his own instinctive step back when the man straighten up.

It didn’t go unnoticed.

“I should—” Steve clenched and unclenched his fists. “I’ll leave. I’ll go.”

Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat, willing himself to stop being a damn coward. “You don’t have to. Communal, ah— communal gym an’ all.”

God, this might’ve been worse than the last time they were together in the same room, if only because this was awkward as hell.

Steve’s face twisted, lips drawn downward. “I don’t— don’t think I wanna know what Bucky’s gonna do to me,” his voice was hoarse and he punctuated the word with a sniffle, “if he finds out I was around you.”

Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to find out either. Tony, putting himself in an empty room with Steve Rogers without anything but his gauntlet for backup? Yeah, if Steve didn’t kill him, James would.

“Well, uh— I’m a free man, so—”

“Listen, you don’t have to do this,” Steve interrupted and now, finally, there were notes of bitterness underneath that misery. “You don’t— don’t have to be such a gracious winner. Go ahead and gloat.”

“I’m not trying to— wait, wait— winner?” Tony suddenly forgot what he was trying to say over the wave of white-hot indignation and anger. Natasha made the same comment, but this was different because Steve fucking Rogers had the unique, preternatural ability to make Tony go from
awkwardly sympathetic to outright furious in two seconds flat. “Is that what I am?” He took a step forward, his earlier fear now forgotten. “What exactly did I win, Steve? Hmm? Go ahead and tell me.”

At least Steve hesitated before meeting Tony’s eyes. Same blue eyes, tear-swollen now, but they held the same fire—

*The shield comes down. Steve’s panting. Blue eyes watch Tony before the man slumps against the shield.*

Tony forced himself to take a deep breath. He was not going to fall victim to those memories, not again. To prove to himself that he wasn’t *weak*, he took another step forward, putting himself right up against Steve. Tony’s heart hammered away, painfully beating against his ribcage, but Tony ignored it, only letting himself hate the fact that he had to look up at the man.

“I wanna hear it from you,” he hissed, “what did I win?”

“You have your Accords,” Steve swallowed thickly, “and the New Avengers.”

Tony bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. “Yeah? You think this was just handed to us? No, see, not all of us got to sit around in Africa on someone else’s dime.” Oh, the anger, it felt marvelous. His fears, they always turned him *cold*, but this— this was a steady heat thrumming in his chest instead, fueling Tony like little else did. There was no room for wrath *before*, when it was just Tony and James. Their grief was tears and whispers and gentle touches. Forgiveness and love.

Now, however, now Tony could finally let it all turn sharp and vicious and scorching hot.

“Must’ve been *so hard* lounging around while the rest of us were busting our asses, endless hours of work, day after sleepless day, cleaning up the messes we left behind.”

“But you still—”

“Still *nothing*! We fought and clawed and bent over backwards, every step of the way. None of this was given to us, so you know what, try again. Tell me what I won, Rogers.”

“You had your freedom while we had to go on the run.”

“You go to jail when you break the law, dumbass, even when you think the law is unjust. Pretty sure it worked the same way in the 40s—”

“You were working with Ross—”

“I was and I hated myself every minute of every day! That’s why—” Tony’s own voice broke and he had himself convinced it was still the anger that made him shake. “That’s why I wanted you all on my side, so I wouldn’t be fighting that slimy fucker on my own.”

“It didn’t feel like that at the time. It felt like— like you turned your back on your family.”

*Family.* Strange how that concept morphed and took on new meanings all throughout Tony’s life. It meant something different to him now too. Something *better*.

“Ross tried to get me killed on three different occasions after our little fight, and those are only the ones I *know* about. I may have had my freedom, but I also had a giant red target painted on my back because I was the only one left to answer for the mess that we made. God, you know what, you’re *right*, that’s a banner fucking victory right there!”
A tiny voice at the back of Tony’s head chirped out a warning that shouting in Captain America’s face was dangerous and ill-advised, but Tony shoved his underdeveloped self-preservation instincts back down. This was catharsis and it was rightfully his, dammit.

Getting punched in the face or being broken in half by a super soldier would be worth it.

“Fine, I didn’t mean that you won then, just that—”

“Just what? Tell me! No, you know what, I’ll tell you! Here’s what I won! My best friend was crippled, my family was torn apart, I had death threats every other day. My chest was busted open, for months I couldn’t fucking breathe. I couldn’t sleep, I barely ate, I worked and worked— How could you possibly say that—”

“You took Bucky away from me!”

And there it was. The outburst was unintentional, it had to be, but Steve wasn’t taking it back. The stubborn clench of his jaw was back, teeth grinding so hard Tony could practically hear them. Steve’s blue eyes regarded him with the same flash of hate Tony saw in that bunker.

This time, however, Tony matched it with his own furious gaze. His voice dropped down into a register many people learned to avoid lest they end up torn apart as he asked, “I took him away from you?”

“That’s not— I meant— You brought him here and then— he never spoke to me, he just—”

“He chose me.”

Tony didn’t realize he said those words until they rang in his ears, clear as day, and Steve’s eyes widened in surprise that quickly morphed into obvious hurt.

Tony wasn’t moved. “He chose me,” he said again, and maybe it was vindictive, but all he felt in that moment was elation because he realized he believed it. “I didn’t take him from anyone. He’s a grown man and for the first time in a long time, he got to choose—”

“I was his best friend! He couldn’t just—”

“Yeah, you were! Which is why I’d expect better from you! You’re supposed to care about him, love him, so show James an ounce of respect here! Don’t treat him like some— some doll getting passed around from one set of hands to another.”

“I didn’t— That wasn’t—” The fight suddenly left Steve. He visibly deflated, face crumpling and he stumbled back to collapse onto the bench. Tony was frankly surprised Steve didn’t miss the damn thing and end up on the floor; he watched as Steve curled back in on himself, hiding from the world, from Tony, as renewed misery manifested itself as fresh tears. “He was all I had left,” Steve practically wailed, a sound Tony had never heard from the great Captain America before. “Peggy, she— she barely remembered and I had no one else. I was alone, and then Bucky— he was alive, but—” he muffled a sob into his hand, “but now he’s— he’s friendly with Loki of all the damn people. He— he jokes around with that monster, but he won’t— won’t even say a word to me. I’ve always been alone, ever since I woke, and now without Bucky—”

“Oh, enough with the bullshit pity party, Rogers!”

Tony cringed as the words suddenly burst out of him, magnified unnecessarily by the low ceilings of the locker room. He didn’t mean to shout, but at least it seemed to have startled Rogers out of his hysterical stupor.
“Pity party? That’s not—”

“Spare me, that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“Am I not allowed to be sad?”

“You are, but this isn’t—” Tony clenched his fists and forced himself to rein in the accusations. He took a breath to steady both his nerves and his tongue. “You were dealt a shitty hand, I’m not denying that. You essentially committed suicide to save your country, then you got pulled out of the ice to live in a unfamiliar world where most of the people you knew were dead or dying. SHIELD didn’t give a fuck about properly integrating you, or helping you, and then weeks later, you got shoved into another war.” Steve had stilled by this point, watching Tony oddly, as if he was hearing these truths for the first time, and it made Tony want to fidget and run. “So you wanna pity yourself? Do it over that. You have every right to. But don’t you dare look me in the eye and say that you were alone—”

“But Peggy and Bucky—”

“Were not your only goddamn friends!” Dammit, he was back to shouting again. Steve had that effect on him too. “No, don’t feed me that bullshit again. ’I’ve been on my own since I was 18.’ Really? Did you miss the part where you had an entire group of people willing to risk their lives for you? Go to jail for you? Natasha, the master spy, sacrificed her freedom and all of her strategic advantage all because she decided you were worth it. Wilson took you in, back in D.C., helped you fight Hydra when you— supposedly— had no one else to turn to. Because, you know, I was fucking chopped liver—”

“You know it wasn’t that—”

“Clint and Lang, the two idiots,” Tony barreled over whatever excuse Steve tried to offer, “they left their families for you. Sharon risked her entire career to help you, and take it from someone who knows her, her career meant everything to her.”

At least Steve had the good graces to look ashamed. His downcast eye gave little away, but Tony could see it in the hunch of his wide shoulders, the way he bit his lip until Tony thought it would bleed.

“You knew Sharon?”

Tony also knew a deflection when he heard one, but he let Steve have this one.

“Of course I did. Aunt Peggy was my godmother.”

Steve’s eyes snapped back to Tony. “What? Why didn’t I—”

“Because you never wanted to know,” Tony said bitterly, although the true source of the bitterness was Tony’s own inability to attend Peggy’s funeral, to pay his last respects to that amazing woman. He couldn’t, because back then, every second was essential to maintaining the delicate balance of powers; even that momentary absence would’ve given Ross enough leverage to undo Tony’s hard work.

Steve nodded distractedly, probably processing the information. When the man didn’t say anything though, Tony continued, quietly this time, because this was much harder to say. “And I know you never saw it this way, but I—I was there too. I offered you all a place to stay, I supported the team when SHIELD fell. Gadgets, weapons, money, everything—” Tony scrubbed his hand over his mouth roughly, “but I know, I know those things aren’t a sacrifice on my part. But I—” he closed his
eyes, because he was not going to cry too, dammit, even if this hurt him, like shards tearing his chest apart all over again. “But I trusted you. I trusted you and you lied to me. That’s on you, Steve. And if the rest of your friends aren’t here right now either, it’s not because you’re alone, it’s because you drove them away. You lied to them too, used them for your own agenda. You treated James like a link to your past instead of a human being who had been irrevocably changed. You hurt him, and I don’t care that you didn’t mean to. I’m sorry you’re alone today and I’m sorry you’re in pain,” Tony ignored the one single tear that managed to defy his efforts to suppress it, “but we all have to pay for the mistakes that we made.”

The room fell silent, only interrupted by Steve’s snuffle as the words settled into the air around them. What else was there left to say? Tony was certain he had said enough to last them both a lifetime.

There was some relief in getting this off his chest though. Marginal, really, because it changed nothing of the past and Tony wasn’t sure it had the power to change the future either. Still, the burden of these past few years sat a little lighter on Tony’s shoulders now.

Steve took a deep, shuddering breath, then wiped away some more of his tears. When he spoke, he did so quietly, still not looking up at Tony. “I always wondered if you got my letter.”

“I did. It was a shitty apology.”

Steve nodded shakily. “Right. And the phone?”

“Got that too. The bots used it as a hockey puck for a while, then I stuck it into a drawer because a brick cellphone offends me to my very core.”

“You still have it?”

“Nope.” Now Steve did look up and Tony offered a careless shrug, but he couldn’t quite keep the gloating out of his voice this time. “James found it and crushed it with his bare hand. Wasn’t too impressed by the apology either.”

Steve’s eyes didn’t leave him this time, boring into Tony, trying to see down to his very soul. Tony wished Steve would just look away again.

“Is he—” Steve rubbed at this knees nervously. “Is he happy?”

Tony’s chest clenched painfully. He was so tired of feeling sorry for every one of these bastards, but here he was.

“I hope so. That’s all I want for him.”

“You care about him.”

It wasn’t a question, although Tony could still pick up on the doubt. He had no doubt, however. “I love him.”

Tony expected Steve to challenge the declaration, hell, break out into accusations again, tell Tony his love wasn’t real, James’ love wasn’t real. Something, anything to invalidate what they had, but Steve remained silent. He snuffled again, seemingly unable to get his body under control and Tony couldn’t resist the compulsion any longer. He let out a frustrated breath, then dodged into the adjacent restroom and came back out with a tissue box. Steve eyed it like it was a damn bomb when Tony thrust it at his face.

“Blow your nose. I can’t listen to you anymore.”
Steve took the offered box gingerly, then with the same awkwardness pulled out a tissue and wiped down his face. Tony backed away again to put distance between them. He was keeping it together surprisingly well, but he needed the space and he was beyond thankful that Steve remained seated for some of these... theatrics. Having that man loom over Tony would’ve quickly forced Tony’s instincts back into fight-or-flight, but here, like this, having this bit of height advantage gave Tony a steady— steadier foundation. Helped him speak his mind for the first time.

After making himself more presentable, Steve put the tissue box down, then slumped over his knees, elbows digging into his thighs.

“Do you— do you think Bucky would ever forgive me? Or does he hate me too much for that?”

Tony rolled his eyes, annoyed, not the least bit surprised. He just wished he wasn’t everyone’s confessional of choice whenever they decided they wanted absolution.

“You still don’t get it, do you? He doesn’t hate you, dumbass. He would’ve been over the moon to have you back in his life. You were the one who ruined that.” Tony stopped himself there, because this wasn’t his responsibility to explain. The only reason he was trying at all was for James’ sake. “Realize he’s a different man now and stop acting like you’re entitled to any part of his life. Stop forcing him to choose. Apologize, and then maybe, with time, you can fix things.” A small, petty part of Tony didn’t want these things to be fixed, but he wasn’t selfish enough to deny James this friendship, if Steve actually got his shit together and made amends. James deserved everything, every little bit of happiness life could offer him, so Tony wouldn’t stand in the way. But god help Steve if he decided to hurt James again. Tony would give the Soldier a run for his money.

Steve seemed to accept Tony’s words, although Tony wasn’t sure whether any of them sunk in. The compulsion to reach out and shake some sense into Steve was strong, but of course Tony’s nerves were stronger. He didn’t think he’d ever be comfortable with Steve touching him or vice versa, but it was heartening to know they could be in the same room, get into a confrontation even, all without Tony curling up into a ball and having violent flashbacks.

Baby steps and all that.

“I— I should really get going,” Tony finally said, having nothing else left to offer. “You are not our enemy, Steve, and I— I actually agree with you, we need to stop fighting. Threats bigger than the both of us are coming and we need to be ready. But I’m not willing to be a doormat anymore, I refuse to push aside what happened between us. Still, I don’t want to see you suffer either. If, uh— we have resources, if you need help. People you can talk to, who are paid to be objective, to put your well-being first.”

It was the only thing Tony could do, offer the help and hope for the best. He certainly couldn’t force anyone to take it. He nodded to himself, then slowly turned to head for the exit. God, he was so late coming back, James was going to have all sorts of questions—

“Tony,” Steve called out just before Tony stepped over the threshold. Tony stopped, despite his better judgment. Steve waited for a beat before asking, “Is there anything I can do? To earn your trust again?”

Tony’s huff was a bitter, tired sound. Why did all these people suddenly begin to treat his trust as this precious fucking resource, after they had shattered it to pieces?

He glanced over his shoulder and shook his head, ignoring the sharp pang in his heart at the earnest look on Steve’s face. “No, there probably isn’t.”
Tony turned and forced himself to walk away without looking back. When he was out of earshot however, he did ask Friday to have someone pack up a generous portion of the food from the employee Christmas party and have it delivered to Steve’s quarters. It wasn’t forgiveness, not really, just more of that same weakness that Tony couldn’t quite shake, but he decided he could live with that character flaw, at least for tonight. It was Christmas Eve after all.

Peace on Earth, may it last.
Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

Quick self-promotion: I'm finally on tumblr (again, sorta, I just brought my old blog that was active for all of one month back from the dead). Slowly finding and following all my favorite Winteriron/Pro-Tony people, so there's not much there at the moment, but feel free to come say 'hi', at ali-aliska.tumblr.com.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Given that it was later than expected when he finally returned, Tony decided to stop by the kitchen instead of going back to the family room. The festivities were mostly over by now anyways, with half the Avengers likely snoring away in front of the TV, but even if that weren’t true, Tony wasn’t sure he was ready to put on a happy face and pretend that nothing happened. He wasn’t in any sort of distress, thankfully, but this fight with Steve— confrontation, strongly worded conversation, whatever the hell it was, it drained him. The many painful memories brought to the surface left him raw inside, too many “what ifs” and “I just wish that…” He was tired and that probably made him bad company, if nothing else.

The weight he carried around though, that was lighter. It didn’t lift entirely, never would, but there was a certain power in letting these hurts, ones that had festered in him for years, be spoken aloud to the person who inflicted them in the first place. Tony had no way of knowing whether Steve absorbed any of it, but at least he listened and that, in itself, was a damn miracle. Maybe James slamming his head into the floor a few times finally shook something loose inside that stubborn thing.

Tony knew that was a petty thought, but he didn’t bother reprimanding himself. He was allowed a small slice of pettiness, wasn’t he? It could be his reward for managing to have an entire conversation with Steve without being thrown into another panic attack and embarrassing the hell out of himself.

The kitchen was dimly lit, Tony noted when he stepped inside, although there was enough light for him not to stumble around. The regular lighting was off, but because no corner of the West Wing was safe from the Christmas menaces (the children and Thor), strings of lights adorned every edge and angle here as well, just enough to give the place a warm glow and illuminate the lone figure sitting at the dining table, taking slow sips from a familiar red mug.

A smile broke across Tony’s face at the sight of his boyfriend and he stepped further in, leaning on his elbows against the kitchen island when he reached it. “Had to escape the festivities too?”

James returned the smile, his features almost ethereal in the soft light. “Bit too much excitement for me. And too many explosions.”

Tony’s brows crinkled in concern. “Everything alright?”

Explosions and loud sounds weren’t usually a problem for James, but PTSD rarely followed pre-established rules. Tony’s worry eased back however when James shook his head and didn’t appear distressed.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just…” he shrugged, “needed some quiet and it’s no fun without you anyways.”
Tony pushed away, intent on joining James at the table, but the man beat him to it, placing his mug down and getting up, heading straight for Tony. There was something about the way he covered that distance too, deliberate and precise, every movement graceful like a panther’s prowl, that sent Tony’s stomach straight into flip-flops. Because that was the Soldier’s saunter he recognized.

James’ hands found Tony’s hips, the grip not tight, but steady, full of promise. He leaned in and nudged his nose against Tony’s affectionately.

Tony tried to look coy under that familiar heated gaze. “So I shouldn’t worry about a master assassin waiting for me in the shadows then?”

“Oh, you should always worry, moyo solnishko,” James drawled, tongue curling beautifully around the Russian. Tony acceded to the nudge and his lower back bumped against the kitchen island as James leaned into him, foreheads pressed together. The hands on Tony’s hips abandoned their post to roam over the rest of his body; up his sides first, back down, then those fingers were sliding deliciously over Tony’s abs and up over his chest. Tony instinctively sucked in a breath at the touch, although it wasn’t just the physical sensation, even if some of the scars were more sensitive than others. Rather, it was knowing that James was privy to this too, this broken, vulnerable, imperfect part of him that Tony hid so well from the rest of the world.

Tony’s own hands were restless too, struggling to decide where to touch, where to grasp, so they wandered up and down the man’s broad back, relishing in the sensation of taut muscles hidden from him by a thin layer of cotton.

“Oh, I’m definitely worried now,” Tony let out a chuckle, playing along, then grinned triumphantly when he managed to find the exposed warm skin of James’ lower back. “I think you got me trapped, soldier. Got me right where you want me.”

James hummed, then dipped his head lower to brush his lips against the tender skin of Tony’s neck before giving it a small, playful bite. “Do I now?”

“That’s right. All yours, sweetheart, all at your mercy.”

“And do you deserve that mercy? Have you been good for me, zolotoya moya zvezda?”

Tony let out another pleased sound, his body sparking with heat each time James’ teeth grazed his skin. “Always.”

James focused on that sensitive spot right below Tony’s ear, lavishing it with kisses and kitten lips and Tony was convinced he could stay like this forever.

“I’d believe ya, darlin’,” James whispered, lips hovering at Tony’s ear now, “but then you went and talked to Steve without backup again.”

Tony went still, lust-hazy brain struggling to process the words, but when it did, he dropped his head back and groaned, shoulders slumping. “Dammit, babe, that’s not fair, you can’t just— just get me all hot and bothered like this and then bring that up. Totally ruining the mood here.”

“Sorry,” James said, the word anything but apologetic, “but you ruined it first. I’ve been sitting here, worried about you…”

Tony straightened up to look at the man again, then leaned back, bracing his hands against the edge of the island. It put some breathing room between them and James took the opportunity to trail his eyes up and down, studying Tony with a scrutiny reserved for little else. Like this, Tony could see that his gaze was less heated than Tony had initially thought, the hints of worry now obvious.
He briefly wondered whether all those roaming hands a moment ago were really just a pretense to make sure he was in one piece.

“I’m okay, I swear.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. Here, see for yourself,” Tony replied, then took James’ hands into his own and guided them over his body again, up over his abs, his ribs, to settle over his chest. He pressed down, his own palms covering James’ bigger ones, and breathed. He knew James would feel both his heartbeat and the rise and fall of his chest. “I’m right as rain.”

James’ fingers flexed minutely against him, as if he wanted to grip the shirt tightly, but didn’t want to indulge in the rougher gesture. “You could’ve gotten hurt.”

“I know, but I didn’t. Plus, I can’t avoid him forever. We do live in the same building, you know.”

“You can try.” The reprimand was a mix of imploring and exasperated, and Tony appreciated the thought, really, but James should’ve known better by now. Tony did not do well with rules and restrictions.

“James.” The name came out softer than intended though, even when Tony wanted to sound firm; those worried Bambi eyes were making that difficult. “Nothing bad happened, I promise. Now, what I wanna know,” he said, then used one hand to tap James on the nose to watch his face scrunch up adorably, “is how you know about it. Did Friday tattle?”

James hesitated and his eyes darted to the left, a tell the Winter Soldier only had around Tony. “Friday and I have a protocol.”

Why wasn’t Tony surprised? “Of course you do. Isn’t that a little— I dunno, overprotective?”

“Overprotective woulda been me storming in there as soon as I knew you two were alone.”

That was fair, Tony supposed, and he couldn’t muster any real outrage over the fact that his AI and boyfriend were conspiring against him. Hell, after the recent string of ‘incidents’ (most of which have involved Steve, go figure), there were now explicit protocols in place to summon backup in case of any physical confrontation, regardless of the parties involved.

Tony brushed his thumb over the stubble on James’ cheek to let him know he wasn’t angry. Exasperated, sure. Maybe a little defensive even, but not angry. “Did you want to storm in there?” When James gave him a reluctant nod, Tony gave into his curiosity. “Why didn’t you then?”

James didn’t roll his eyes, but Tony could see that he wanted too. “You woulda been pissed at me. M’not trying to be some controlling asshole. Friday just lets me know when you’re alone with one of them. Doesn’t mean I come running to save you, but Tony, you haven’t exactly been safe around them. I just… I have a right to worry.”

Tony didn’t stop touching the man, gentle hands now brushing through the long, soft hair. “I know, I’m not saying you don’t, but I can handle myself just fine,” Tony tried to assert, but then he received an arched eyebrow so unimpressed that it made him huff good-naturedly. “Okay, fine, you might have a point. I know I don’t have a great track record.”

With the heated mood from earlier obviously put on hold, Tony pushed lightly on James’ ribs until the man reluctantly stepped aside. Tony pushed away from the kitchen island, walking a few steps to absently trace a hand over the back of a chair, then wandered over to the counter where multiple
Tupperware containers were stacked on top of one another. One of those had to have the sugar cookies and when Tony glanced over his shoulder hopefully, James gave him the most indulgent, affection-filled look any man could manage and pointed to a glass container with the bright red lid.

Knowing what Tony needed without them exchanging a single word. Yeah, Tony decided as he opened the container, James was definitely a keeper. The sugar cookie that melted in Tony’s mouth when he took a generous bite was really just a delightful bonus.

When he turned around, James was the one leaning against the kitchen island, watching him, still cataloguing all of Tony’s very breakable—but thankfully not broken—parts.

“Stop giving me that assassin stare, babe, you know I’m fine. Plus, you gotta admit, this time wasn’t so bad, all things considered. I mean, yeah, it ended up in a shouting match, but look, not a scratch on me—”

James’ nearly eyebrows climbed into his hairline and he stood up straight. “Wait— shouting? There was shouting?” The sudden growl through gritted teeth was distinctly Soldier. “Oh, I swear, I am going to break him in half—”

“Wait, wait!” Tony he blinked in confusion, the cookie half way to his mouth suddenly forgotten. “You— didn’t you watch the video feed?”

It was James’ turn to let out an affronted huff. “Give me some credit. I’m not trying to invade your privacy, I’m just trying to protect you. Friday said there were no signs of a physical confrontation, so I left it alone until she told me otherwise. Although had I known that Rogers raised his damn voice…”

Yup, that was definitely the Soldier at the wheel right now. Tony paused to grab another cookie and close the container, then sidled back up to his boyfriend to distract the Soldier before he stormed into Steve’s room and broke a bone or ten.

“You know I love that super sexy growl of yours, but you gotta admit, yelling is a best case scenario around these parts.” Tony nibbled on the cookie, letting the sugar compensate for the lackluster topic of conversation while he decided how to explain what happened. “He wasn’t trying to confront me or anything. I found him, actually, by accident, and he— he just looked like he needed help.”

James’ eyes narrowed. “Do I need to have another talk with him?”

“Err… I don’t think it’s talking you have in mind, babe, so no, probably not.”

James shrugged, hints of the Soldier still there in the downward curve of his lips, in the unapologetic rise of his shoulders. “I’ll do whatever needs to be done.”

Tony shook his head. “No need to defend my honor. He was just—” he decided to grant Steve some privacy too, “he’s not doing so well after your confrontation. He’s sad about you, obviously, and now the others are keeping their distance too. Lang isn’t speaking to him, Barton took off, Wilson and Natasha are around, but they’re not quite as… friendly anymore, you know? The Captain America luster seemed to have finally worn off.”

“He’s facing consequences. It’s not meant to be fun.”

“I know. But that’s a quick way to push someone into a dark place.”

“Is it the victim’s responsibility to steer their abuser away from shitty choices?”
Tony really hated questions like that, but this is what he got for being in a relationship with a man who attended his therapy sessions religiously.

“I promise I’m not letting him walk all over me. We just talked—”

“You said there was yelling.”

“There was. In his defense, I’m pretty sure I started it. I, uh— I had some things to get off my chest.”

James’ expression shifted, a storm cloud of fierce, protective anger giving way to sympathy. “Do you feel any better?”

“A little.”

“And he didn’t hurt you?”

“Didn’t even touch me.”

A sigh escaped James’ lips and it was obvious he wanted to say more, but he refrained, merely nodding, having found Tony’s answers sufficient, if not entirely satisfying.

Tony appreciated the restraint and then decided they spent enough of their Christmas Eve talking about Steve; they needed to get away from this emotionally charged discussion and get back to the far more pleasant activities from earlier. He didn’t bother to hide his pout nor the whining tone of his voice when he spoke again. “I’m not mad, I understand why you worry… I just don’t like being treated like a damsel in distress, you know?”

“Honey, you’re not,” James said. He stepped up and slid one hand into Tony’s, tugging him close. Tony’s other hand was still holding onto the cookie, enough for one more bite, which he offered to James who took it into his mouth obediently, lips brushing over Tony’s fingers. He chewed, swallowed, then proceeded to lick the crumbs off his lips, the move languid, deliberate, because he knew exactly what the sight of that pink little tongue did to Tony.

“Don’t you remember?” James added, looking equal parts gorgeous and smug, the menace, “you’re my knight in shining armor and I’m the pretty damsel here.”

“Yeah, I like that story much better.”

James pulled him closer still, wrapping his arms around Tony’s waist. “Me too. And I just want my brave knight safe and sound, you know? Otherwise who’s gonna save me from the monsters?”

The arms around him tightened and Tony thought he would burst from the swell of affection that bubbled up within him. It made him light-headed in the best possible way and he hugged James back, clung to him and savored the closeness.

“Can we just go back to the Soldier trying to maul me in the dark? ‘Cause that was fun,” Tony mumbled into James’ shoulder, who had the audacity to laugh at the request.

“I did ruin the mood, didn’t I?”

“Mm-hmm,” Tony hummed, then took matters into his own hands, literally, when he cradled James’ face in his palms and pulled him in for a kiss meant to steal his breath away. It must’ve worked, with the way James shuddered when Tony licked at the seam of his lips and into his mouth— god, he tasted like sugar and Tony wanted more, always more— with the way James was panting when they
pulled apart. It was Tony’s turn to smirk. “There’s a way to solve that little problem though.”

Not to be outdone, James nudged Tony back again, a familiar dance, him matching each backwards movement that Tony made with a forward step his own, each step punctuated with a feather light kiss until, sooner than Tony anticipated, his back hit the wall and a thrill of excitement ran through him. This was familiar too.

Same exact place, same position that Tony found himself in after that confrontation with Natasha, after the Soldier took a bit more control than James had expected; Tony remembered that night with unfailing clarity. The way the Soldier pressed into him, took the opportunity to drive Tony nuts with the proximity, then scolded him for letting Natasha go at the same time. No one could accuse the Soldier of being bad at multitasking.

A part of Tony missed those days, missed that razor thin, white-hot tension, knowing what you wanted, wanting it so badly you couldn’t think straight around the person, but resigning yourself to never having what you so desperately needed. And then that moment between them, in the server room…

Tony couldn’t help but wonder what would’ve happened if Friday had come back online just a few minutes later. He could imagine the tension between them sparking into a red-hot flame, finally reaching its climax, explosive and marvelous; he imagined himself chasing after sweet release as James’ hand explored his body for the first time, the darkness around them granting the anonymity they needed to forget about who they were to each other.

Tony had no doubt it would’ve led to a fantastic orgasm if nothing else, but he realized he didn’t mind the path that they actually took, this meandering thing that led them to and fro, back and forth until Tony nearly went insane from the seemingly unrequited affections and the mounting sexual tension. Sure, the journey could’ve been shorter and there was some drama they could’ve easily avoided if they had just talked to each other, but in the end, it got them here and Tony refused to regret a damn thing.

Plus, he could always just drag James back to the server room and recreate that historic moment, this time playing it through to the fantastic, toe-curling grand finale.

Later though, that could all wait until later. He had a perfectly willing super soldier right here and now after all.

“So, are you gonna reward me for my good behavior, soldier? I was civil and polite, only yelled a little at our resident stubborn ass. I think that earns me a reward.”

James sneaked the metal arm beneath Tony’s shirt, cool fingers scratching gently along Tony’s lower back. “No more transgressions to confess before I reward you?”

“Nope, none at all. Been on my best behavior. Well, mostly. You know, just the usual.”

James’ hands trailed lower, cupping Tony’s ass and giving it a teasing squeeze. “Oh, I wish that were true, doll,” he leaned in to mouth wet kisses along Tony’s jaw, his voice resonating low and dangerous in Tony’s ear, “but it appears you’ve been in all sorts of trouble today. In fact, rumor has it you’ve been kissing tricksters under the mistletoe.”

When he came back into view, James’ smirk was downright devious. For anyone else, that smirk, that dark, possessive flare glimmering in his eyes, it would’ve spelled complete disaster. For Tony… well, it might still spell disaster, but he was hoping it’d be the sexy kind.
“Just one kiss,” he played along, knowing that they didn’t need a serious conversation about this, “on the cheek. To get him to shut up. Plus, I kissed Thor too, so it was only fair.”

James pressed against him more, heavy and unyielding, looming over Tony, keeping him trapped between the wall and that stone-chiseled, powerful body. It was intoxicating.

“Oh, so it’s Thor too now? Boje moy, leaving me little choice here, solnishko. Do I have to break them both in half?”

Tony loved the Soldier’s drawl, that mix of James’ intonations with the sounds of perfect Russian. “Babe, you really shouldn’t be going around threatening Norse Gods.” He grinned, unrepentant. “I mean, have you seen Thor’s biceps?”

James tsked and shook his head, but although the sharp smile was all Soldier, the eyes belonged to James now, playful and full of love. Trapped and at the mercy of a master assassin, the most dangerous man of the twentieth century, and Tony couldn’t think of a time he felt safer.

“Darlin’, you sure know how to wound a man. First you kiss ‘em, then you talk about their muscles and say that they’re stronger too? I might have to do something drastic here to remind you of my… prowess.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Tony laughed breathlessly, “I have ample reminders of that. Besides, the kiss was a tactical move. Pretty sure I have a trickster at my beck and call now. Could be useful.”

James nuzzled Tony’s cheek, the whisper of his breath sending a delicious flutter up Tony’s spine. “Is that what you want, my love? A god at your beck and call?”

“No, not really. My sexy super soldier is more than enough.”

That seemed to be the right answer and Tony watched his boyfriend’s lips quirk up when James pulled away. Then Tony was being kissed again, which was so much better than talking, and they should’ve just continued on this pleasurable path, but James was apparently intent on not giving Tony what he wanted.

“You know I trust you, always,” James whispered and okay, yeah, hearing that was a pleasant thing too. “But if you kiss Loki again, I will break his back. It’s the principle of the thing.”

“I might have to kiss him again just to see that,” Tony snickered, to which James growled, just as Tony expected. He didn’t mind this sort of playful possessiveness, loved it in fact, as long as they both knew that in the end, their lives were their own and it was choice that tied them together, not possession.

He trusted James to know the difference.

“Well, sounds like I’ve been terribly bad after all,” Tony battled his eyelashes coyly. “Getting into fights, walking around kissing Norse gods. I think I need to do some penance, make it up to you. Any ideas?”

James hummed thoughtfully and then, before Tony knew what was happening, James cupped Tony’s ass with one hand and as if Tony weighted nothing, easily hefted him up and over his shoulder.

Tony could’ve done without the embarrassing, startled noise he let out, but James’ smooth-as-molasses, drawled answer, “Oh, I have plenty ideas, doll,” and the view of that glorious ass more than made up for it.
Tony stretched languidly, back arching like a cat, and Bucky watched that lithe body, littered with several distinct love bites, with a satisfied sort of smugness. They always had fun together, but tonight was particularly charged, part playful, part emotional. Bucky wanted to make sure Tony was in one piece, alive and whole; the Soldier wanted Tony to forget that both Rogers and the Norse gods ever existed. All of it resulted in some fantastic sex.

He expected Tony to curl back into him, cuddle a little before they both called this Christmas a rousing success and dropped off to sleep, but Tony leaned over the other way, to open the nightstand drawer. Bucky placed a steadying hand on the man’s hips to make sure he didn’t topple over in that precarious lean over the edge of the bed.

“What in the world are you looking for?”

“Got another present for you.”

“Is it you, naked, in our bed? Because we already did that, doll, although I suppose I wouldn’t mind a repeat performance—”

A triumphant “Aha,” and Tony pulled himself back onto the bed, muscles flexing under the strain of the lift. Bucky had to fight the desire to lick those abs all over again, but then Tony thrust a box at him, derailing that train of thought entirely when Bucky’s heart decided to skip several beats all of the sudden, at least until his brain caught up and informed him that the box was far too large for an engagement ring.

“Not all of us have super soldier stamina, babe. Round two has to wait. Plus,” he shook the box, “this is something even better than round two.”

Bucky took the box, his throat working on a swallow as he tried to regain composure after that initial shot of adrenaline. So maybe he was fantasizing about rings and weddings more than he ought to nowadays, but who could blame him?

Dutifully, he replied, “The Soldier and I would like to inform you that there is no such thing as ‘better than round two’.”

Tony appeared pleased by the answer and snuggled back into Bucky’s side, dragging the blanket over to pool in their laps.

“Here, open,” he gestured at the box after dropping a kiss to James’ bare shoulder.

With only a quick glance at the man, Bucky obeyed, unsure what Tony was up to, but the watch nestled in velvet inside the box wasn’t quite what he expected. He blinked at it, examining the thing. Beautifully crafted, obviously, with a thick silver band and a face with matching silver numbers over a coal black face.

When he looked down at Tony, the man was trying not to laugh.

“Alright, go ahead,” Tony said as he nudged him, “just say it, I know you wanna. ‘I’m dating a billionaire and he gets me a watch for Christmas?’” Tony’s imitation of Bucky’s voice left much to be desired. “‘What kind of shenanigans are these?’”

Bucky didn’t bother to suppress his eye roll. “One, I don’t say ‘shenanigans’. Two, definitely not what I was thinking and now that you said that, I know for a fact this isn’t just some old watch.” His finger traced a careful path around the face of the watch, fascinated by the smoothness of the cool
glass. “Plain ol’ watch or not though, this is gorgeous. I thought Christmas was small gifts only
though, otherwise I would’ve— wouldn’t gotten you something better than a picture frame.”

He looked at Tony apologetically, but the man was having none of it. With a look that was pure,
indulgent affection, Tony brushed away a few strands of hair back behind Bucky’s ear (mostly a
token effort, he really needed to get it trimmed), then pressed a kiss to Bucky’s cheek, which was
apparently also a distraction so Tony could steal the box back. He proceeded to pull the watch from
its nest of bright red velvet and discarded the box, admiring the accessory too for a moment.

“I would forever live in shame if all I got you for Christmas was a map— a paper map— with some
scribbles on it.”

“You know it was more than that.”

Tony didn’t bother arguing, just gestured for Bucky’s right hand and Bucky obediently held it out so
Tony could slide the watch onto his wrist and pull the clasp shut. Bucky had to admit it was a
gorgeous piece.

Tony’s thumb caressed the band, then the sliver of sensitive flesh right above it, making Bucky
shiver.

“If it makes you feel better, this is a practical gift, so it totally doesn’t count,” Tony said and Bucky
waited patiently for Tony to elaborate. “You know how Stephen and I have been working on those
protections against mind magic? Well,” now his thumb trailed over the face of the watch as he talked,
“pretty sure we broke a few laws of physics along the way— you know, to miniaturize the reactor
even further— but we tested it out on that piece of magic Stephen pulled out of my head and— well,
it works.”

Tony met his eyes shyly, but there was something undeniably proud there too. A man who knew the
value of his own skill, of his genius intellect, but who was told to stop boasting about it far too many
times.

Bucky had no intention of doing so and he gave Tony an encouraging smile. “Tell me more.”

The reservation in those eyes faded. “I’ll have to show you the schematics for this thing later, it’s
wild what Stephen and I did— combining magic and engineering, inventing a whole new field, no
big deal. Anyways,” Tony took a breath, trying to rein in that infectious excitement that had Bucky
grinning too, “there’s a tiny arc reactor nestled inside the watch. Same one that powers the suits, this
entire building, etcetera, but it’s tiny, about the size of a penny. Only a quarter as powerful as my
standard suit reactors, but given that each additional millimeter reduction in size should’ve been
causing it to lose power exponentially, that’s a fantastic end result.”

“Can I shoot bad guys with it?”

Tony’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “One thing at a time, super soldier.” He tapped the watch. “The
main function here is protection. As long as you’re wearing it— or have it anywhere near you, really —
you’re protected from both the type of magic wielded by the Scarlet Witch, but also other garden-
variety mind manipulations. Strange went a little overboard with the protection spells— apparently
the reactor is ‘potent soil for magic’, which is just insulting— but I can’t really blame him. I’ll take
every advantage I can get.”

“That’s incredible, Tony.” The work itself, the result, it awed Bucky, even if the necessity for these
protections left him cold inside. “Just hate that we need something this in the first place.”
“I know…” Tony kissed his bicep again, then looked up with eyes full of understanding. “I wish we didn’t have to worry about a thing. I wish the world was a safe place, but we’re realists, you and I, we know what’s out there. If I can do something to protect you, to make sure no one ever touches that gorgeous, beautiful mind of yours again, I’ll do it.”

What else could Bucky do in the face of that declaration but kiss that man? He tried to imbue ever drop of gratitude swelling up inside him into the press of his lips against Tony’s, every bit of affection and need. Thank you for saving me, thank you for loving me. My bright, shining star.

Tony kissed him back with equal fervor, as if Tony was thinking those exact same things.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Bucky whispered when they parted, then decided there was no more room for these morose thoughts, not tonight. “Should I thank Strange for this too?”

“How, seems like the polite thing to do.” Tony picked up on the diversion, embraced it in fact since it was his signature move, this diffusion of tension through humor, something Bucky had been grateful for since the very beginning. “Maybe you should get him the same thing you got me.”

Bucky’s mouth twisted around a curious ‘oh’ as he pretended to contemplate the idea. “Hmm, I didn’t know Strange was into fellas, but I suppose… well, he is a rich superhero too and then he’s got that same facial hair…” he grinned impishly at Tony who was making a valiant effort to look indignant instead of amused. “Well hell, I won’t be able to tell the difference, will I?”

Tony’s lips pressed together even harder in his effort not to laugh. “I am two seconds away from kicking you out of this bed, soldier.” His attempt to sound stern ended up being plain adorable.

“Oh, do you think his bed is available then?”

The laughter finally bubbled forth, a full-throated chuckle, and Tony shoved Bucky playfully.

“Fine, you know what? You can have Stephen. I’ll just go find myself a Norse god.”

Well, that just wouldn’t do. With an internal growl of possessiveness, the Soldier urged Bucky to rectify the situation by pouncing on Tony and pressing him down flat on the bed, holding him captive so Bucky could steal another kiss, two, three more, these ones heated, demanding, a rough give-and-take.

“New rule,” he panted when he pulled away, “we can’t talk about other men in our bed.”

Tony was breathless too. “Deal,” he said and Bucky grinned, ready to dive back in, but Tony stopped him with a tap on the nose. “Uh uh, I haven’t showed you the fun part yet.”

“Tony, this is the fun part.”

“Of the watch, you insatiable thing.”

Bucky pouted, but still pulled Tony up with him as he sat back against the headboard.

Better to indulge his gorgeous genius of a boyfriend before properly thanking him for this gift. “Okay, tell me about the fun part.”

The sparkle of pride returned to Tony’s eyes. “C’mere, look,” he leaned in and Bucky followed, their heads pressed together over the watch. “See, if you slide your finger here, just like that—it doesn’t work for me because it’s specifically coded to the unique nanotech machines embedded into your metal fingers, the same mechanism that gives you sensation—something really cool will
happen.” Tony put a little space between them. “Try it out.”

Bucky hesitated, not knowing what the expect, but he trusted Tony above all else, so he slid his pointer finger against the edge of the watch and then, within a blink of an eye, a glimmering wave of metal began to bleed over his skin, down to capture his fingers, then up, up, and up, until his entire right arm was covered in metal. It solidified into familiar shapes, then wrapped around his shoulder, stopping as a sturdy ring settled around the base of his neck.

The colors, of course, were red and gold. His own piece of the Iron Man suit, wrapped around his right arm. He flexed the fingers experimentally, awed by the ease with which they moved despite being encased in metal.

“Now you can shoot bad guys,” Tony said, sliding his hands up and down the arm. Bucky had a sneaking suspicion Tony was trying to inconspicuously inspect his own craftsmanship. “I don’t know if you remember, but I’ve also been working on incorporating nanotech into my suits, mostly so a suit and all of its weapons can be stored in a small casing and can then unfold around me with a tap, no messy assembly required.”

“What you just saw, Bucky thought it was a fitting name.

“That’s the one. Although it’s currently more bleeding than edge.” Tony cringed, then turned sheepish. “A lot of hiccups to overcome, I mean you remember my infamous testing session the other week— Bruce still won’t let me go anywhere near his lab— but I finally got the arms to work flawlessly, so I decided you should, uh— should have one too. Extra defense, extra weapon capabilities, and you know— two metal arms. I, uh— I know it’s not a whole suit and I should’ve probably asked first if you wanted something like this at all, but I thought it would be cool—”

Bucky leaned in and stopped Tony’s rambling words with another kiss. The fingers of his right hand traced over Tony’s face, over the apple of his cheek, then his jaw, before cupping it and keeping Tony still. How could this man still doubt the beauty of his creations?

“Of course I remember. Bleeding Edge, right?” Given what he just saw, Bucky thought it was a fitting name.

“It’s incredible.” Bucky traced the curve of Tony’s lips too, testing out the sensation. He did miss the softness of Tony’s lips beneath his fingertips, the warm breath caressing his skin, but Tony’s breath hitched when Bucky touched him and Bucky’s whole body lit up with a flare of heat.

He loves that, doesn’t he?

He did it again, even if the Soldier’s theory required no further proof, but Bucky wanted to see those eyes go darker with want, wanted to see Tony’s lips part invitingly for those metal fingers.

“So gorgeous,” he whispered, then smirked and pulled away, made a show of examining the arm instead of Tony, who let out a wounded noise at the sudden lack of attention. “I should probably go show this off to the others, huh?”

“No,” Tony whined, “no, you should not. I think a private demonstration is in order first. You don’t release a product to the public until it’s undergone thorough internal testing first. That’s just good business.”

Bucky squinted at Tony, then burst out laughing. “I’m not sure which part of that sounded dirtier.”

“All of it,” Tony laughed along with him, then stole Bucky’s right hand back and began kissing the tip of each finger, never taking his eyes off Bucky, intent on keeping his attention firmly on Tony. The effort was appreciated, but entirely unnecessary. Hell, Bucky couldn’t even pretend to be
anything but entranced by Tony, by this gorgeous, brilliant, selfless man who chose to share his life with someone who should’ve never had this second chance to begin with.

Bucky drew him close and pressed their foreheads together, keeping their hands trapped between them.

“Thank you, my love,” he murmured, trying to memorize every detail of their time together, every sensation, every word, every touch, every breath. This moment, right here and now, was the best gift he could have asked for. “I’m glad I got to spend my first real Christmas with you.”

***

Tony burrowed further into the nest of blankets, then snuggled into Bucky’s side, cold hands worming their way around Bucky’s waist. Bucky should’ve been used to it by now, but every time was a shock to his system and he grumbled about it, a token protest against the icy fingers pressed against his bare skin. Of course, his inability to deny this man anything got the better of him nevertheless, leaving Tony free to do his usual limpet impersonation.

Tony shushed him anyways and stuck his cold nose against Bucky’s neck too, just to be spiteful. “Hush now, gorgeous. What else do I keep you around for other than to keep me warm?”

Bucky flipped a page of the book he was reading, although it was mostly for show now since it was difficult to concentrate when Tony was doing all that wiggling as he got himself situated.

“Well, I’m sure we can come up with a few things,” he drawled, “there’s the coffee I make for you and my glorious ass—”

“So glorious.”

“And I spent the holidays baking, entertaining a herd of children and teenagers, and keeping certain tricksters out of trouble.”

Tony’s weary groan was genuine. “I honestly can’t believe we survived. We’re half way through January already and I’m still exhausted from the holidays.”

“Mm-hmm. It was fun to have everyone here, but just too much. I swear Rhodes was about to mutiny.”

“Oh, please. Honeybear was loving the whole thing. He’s the one who instigated that entire snowball fight!”

“I thought no one found any proof.”

“Exactly. That’s how I know it was him. He tries to act all straight and narrow, but I know better. How do you think that man survived three decades with me? My Rhodey could give Loki a run for his money.”

Bucky didn’t disagree, just shrugged noncommittally, then flipped another page over. “Ringing in the new year with you was real nice though.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Tony’s lips moved against Bucky’s collarbone and it felt like he was grinning. “Just the adults, finally, then Hope and Stephen showed up to keep the party going, and of course, the most incredible view of New York. We have the best seats in the house at the Tower.”

“Hmm, not sure I remember the view.”
Tony sat up a little to squint at him. “How exactly do you miss that view?”

“Too busy lookin’ at you, doll.”

Tony huffed, rolled his eyes, pretended to be horribly insulted (his smile said otherwise), then plopped back down. “Biggest sap I’ve ever met, I swear. Dunno why I put with you.”

“Because I’m warm and fuzzy?”

Tony snuggled in closer, tightening his arm and leg around Bucky like a needy octopus. “Okay, that’s a valid point.”

Bucky’s head dropped to rest against Tony’s. “Still love me?”

“Always,” came the tired murmur.

“Go to sleep, sweetheart. Got another busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Tony didn’t argue and it wasn’t long before the man gave himself over to sleep. The steady cadence of Tony’s breaths had long ago become a lullaby for Bucky and he put the book away after managing just a few more pages, content to close his eyes as well and find his own restful sleep.

***

The world was awash in blood. Red, sickening red, clinging to every surface, every angle and curve that made up the unsteady, blurred world.

“Dobroe utro, Soldat.”

The red tasted like ashes on his tongue and seeped deeper into him as he opened his mouth and forced it to form the words, “Ya gotov otechat’.”

The words felt wrong, so damn wrong, like twisting something into a form it could no longer take. Unnatural, vile, incomprehensible.

He wanted to scream, let me go, let me go, let me go, but this time his mouth wouldn’t obey.

This isn’t right. This can’t be—

Familiar tendrils of emptiness crawled up his spine, taking the panicked thoughts away, turning them to ashes too and letting them float away into the blood-painted ether.

There were sounds now, a voice forming the shape of angry words, curses. The cadence of that voice called to him, but then, a whisper and he was numb again, left to watch as faceless creatures—perhaps real men if he cared to make the distinction; he didn’t—dragged a body before him. This one was painted in blood too, actual blood, the iron-rich, life-giving substance that pumped through fragile veins until they was sliced opened, until the flesh was broken and beaten and burned.

Iron. A small, hidden part of him wanted to see how that word would taste on his tongue, but the red swallowed him whole and that tiny glimpse of rebellious curiosity was drowned once more.

The man, bound and hanging from the arms of the faceless monsters moved. Not unconscious then. Not dead. He must’ve been the one shouting.

Defiant brown eyes stared back at him and his heart would’ve wept at the sight, but a weapon like him had no heart.
The man shouted something again, expression turning desperate— *didn’t he kill a man with those same features? A woman with the same eyes?*— but the red around him turned everything silent, whatever pleas the man made rendered useless.

He could’ve sworn, however, that those lips, which should’ve been familiar to him but *weren’t*, were saying “James,” over and over and over again, like a prayer.

A touch to his temples, feather soft, then a whisper that caressed his ear like a lover.

“Kill him.”

He nodded, accepting his mission. The other man kept shouting— his face, covered in blood— a man of iron— he was pleading, begging, but his words weren’t enough to stop anything. Again, those lips formed that name— *James, James, James*— and it must’ve meant something to this man, this sacrificial lamb led to slaughter.

He raised his gun and pointed it at the pleading man, who stilled, eyes going wide. They all feared death when faced with it so openly. No one was ever ready to die. Some fought back, some begged, some went white with terror. None of the options led them any further away from death.

This man, who must’ve fought earlier, then chose pleading, now finally gave into the terror. Gorgeous, he wanted to think, although not here, not like this, not in the face of *death*, but the thoughts were quickly lost in the ocean of red just like everything else.

“James, please!”

The words reached him this time, muffled and low, as if underwater. So he was right all along, this man was calling for James.

If he had the capacity for such rebellious thought, the Asset would’ve mourned that James never came to save this man.

He pulled the trigger.

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Tony woke up to James thrashing and whimpering in terror.

Chapter End Notes

*zolotoya moya zvezda* - my golden star
*boje moy* - my god
*dobroe utro, Soldat* - good morning soldier
Chapter 68

At first, Tony thought the whimpers were his own, wounded noises in the face of god-awful memories—no, no, you can’t—please stop—but then there was a desperate, harsh whisper of “Tony, no, please—” and Tony’s eyes flew wide open.

James, his brain informed him, that was James having a nightmare, not him.

The whimpers ceased, but only for a moment before James was begging for mercy again. Tony fought the instinct to reach out, because although most of their nightmares didn’t result in violence, it was always better to proceed with caution.

He sat up slowly instead, his movements deliberate; their bedroom was never completely dark, so there was just enough light to illuminate James’ form on the other side of the bed. He was curled in on himself, right hand gripping his hair harshly, face hidden behind the arm. His body spasmed, a violent jerk that looked painful, and his every muscle appeared tense, like a string of a bow pulled to its limit. Tony could imagine the severe frown that twisted James’ face too, those lips moving to form muttered pleas.

“James, honey?” Tony called out softly. He was hesitant to touch, not knowing how James would respond to a physical stimulus. “You have to wake up for me. James, please—”

“I won’t—no, no, no, please—Tony, Tony, no—”

God, was Tony the one starring in James’ nightmare tonight? Tony’s stomach clenched painfully, horrified that any version of himself could be causing James so much pain, but he shoved the guilt away. This wasn’t about him.

He tapped his own watch and the Bleeding Edge prototype came to life, building up over both of his arms, chest, and head, leaving his face uncovered. The armor still wasn’t field-ready, but parts of it were functional enough to wear in case of emergencies.

Bracing himself, Tony shifted and reached over to place a metallic hand on James’ shoulder. The reaction was immediate, another awful spasm and James was shaking, pleading for something to stop, Tony’s name falling from his lips with every other word.

“James, you’re safe, you’re at the Compound. This is Tony, sweetheart, please wake up for me. Come back to me. You’re safe.”

You’re safe, Tony kept repeating, and as gently as he could, he pulled on James’ shoulder to get him to lie on his back. James struggled at first, fighting the pull of Tony’s hand, curling into himself more and more, as if trying to take up as little space as possible, but then suddenly, he stilled, went completely rigid as he choked on a sob, and after an awful second that Tony thought would never end, the tension in his body drained just as abruptly and James collapsed onto his back, panting for air in uneven, shallow breaths, both hands clenching into the sheets and tearing them apart in the process.

The man’s eyes were open now, frozen in terror in that first moment of wakefulness. Another second stretched into infinity, then another, three, four, and then those eyes began to come alive, darting in Tony’s direction and straining to make out what they saw—Tony’s terrified face framed by the Iron Man helmet—then, finally, specks of recognition began filtering through, like sand falling through an hourglass, and Tony could’ve wept at the sight. Sand grain by sand grain, until another
sob forced its way out of James’ throat and he reached for Tony, curling his metal arm around him, pulling him close and pressing his face into Tony’s stomach.

Tony’s name spilled out again in desperate whispers, this time punctuated by “It wasn’t real, it wasn’t real…”

Tony’s own body sagged, as if someone sliced through the strings holding him up. The adrenaline-fueled energy began to dissipate, leaving behind an unpleasant tingling in all of his extremities. He wrapped his arms around James too and began to rub the man’s back soothingly.

“That’s right, James, whatever it was, I promise it wasn’t real. You’re alright, everything’s okay.”

Not their first time soothing each other, bringing the other back to reality, but Tony hated each and every time, cursing every monster who gave them these nightmares.

“This is Tony, sweetheart.” he forced his voice not to shake, “it’s just the two of us, in our bedroom. You’re at home, at the Compound, in New York. It’s Tuesday, January sixteenth…” he faltered, unsure of the time and unwilling to involve Friday just yet; he didn’t want her to startle James. “It’s still early in the morning, probably an hour or two before sunrise. You’re safe, honey, everything’s alright. You’re safe.”

The other man kept whispering his name, but Tony couldn’t tell what James needed, whether it was comfort or distance or something else altogether. Was Tony the aggressor or the victim in this dream?

By the way James clung to him, one hand holding the back of Tony’s shirt in an iron grip, it must’ve been the latter. Tony closed his eyes, allowing himself just one second of weakness. God, he knew that brand of nightmares intimately.

It wasn’t long before James was moving again, actually letting go to raise himself up on his arms, sitting up, and then there were shaking hands reaching for Tony, exploring Tony’s face, mapping it out.

“Tony, you’re alright, you’re—you’re okay, you’re okay.”

While Tony’s own imagination was more than capable to make some frightening guesses, Tony hated not knowing with certainty what shape James’ nightmare took tonight. It left him feeling useless, but all he could do was let James take whatever comfort he needed.

He had to act, however, when James began to pull at the pieces of the armor that Tony had completely forgotten was still on him. The man was shaking, muttering breathless, “Please take this off— need you, please— need to know you’re okay.”

James was obviously lucid now, so there was no real threat of a stray punch or kick, but even if that weren’t the case, Tony would taken the armor off anyways. He flicked his wrists and the nano-machines obediently receded back into the node inside the watch.

Well, except for the left vambrace which glitched. Funny how he managed to make the right arm work flawlessly in record time, but the rest of the suit refused to cooperate on the days that ended with ‘y’. Tony supposed he had a muse for the right arm.

Tony made a face at the vambrace, which stubbornly retained its state of solid metal, and he was about to take it off manually, but James beat him to it, ripping it in two with his hands and tossing it to the side.

“Okay, that’s one way to, uh…” Tony trailed off because there were two very persistent hands touching him everywhere they could reach. “…to do that. James, hey, I’m okay.”
“I know, I just—need to know. Needed to see you for myself.”

James’ flesh hand still shook, minute tremors Tony could feel as it trailed over him, up and down his chest, stopping to rub a spot just over Tony’s heart, as if looking for something. Nothing there of course, nothing but a mess of scars and Tony’s faulty old ticker. James pressed his palm flat against it, while the metal hand did its nervous clench-and-release against Tony’s knee. Had this been anyone else, Tony would’ve worried about his knee cap getting crushed by vibranium, but here, with James, Tony sat still, allowing the explorations, and when James cradled Tony’s jaw, Tony nuzzled into the clammy palm and bestowed it with a kiss.

Nightmares were tough and they came in many awful flavors. Sometimes it was space that they needed and although it wasn’t easy, they tried not to take it personally when the other left the warmth of their bed to deal with the memories alone. Other times they needed distractions, a gun and target for James, something equally explosive for Tony. Most of the times though, tenderness and touch were enough; both served as a reminder that their lives were no longer filled with pain, that there was no more hurt lurking around every corner just waiting to strike.

Well, no more than they could expect from their lives as superheroes.

“You with me, James?” Tony asked, and James nodded, unsteady, glassy-eyed, but finally out of the nightmare’s grip. Tony beckoned him to lie back down, but James had no plans to let Tony go and he startled an oomph out of Tony when James pulled them both down onto the mess of pillows and blankets. James’ grip never wavered, tight around Tony’s shoulders and waist, and one leg got thrown over Tony’s hip, effectively trapping him against James. Tony couldn’t complain, not when his own grip was nearly as tight.

James buried his nose into Tony’s hair and took a few steadying breaths before placing a few kisses onto Tony’s bedhead. Tony was privately glad that he showered before going to sleep tonight so James wasn’t dealing with a head full of lab smells and motor oil.

They stayed just like that for a while, wrapped around each other, but when James’ breaths finally returned to normal, when Tony could no longer feel the body in his arms trembling, he had to ask the inevitable question.

“What do you wanna talk about the dream?”

Some nights didn’t lend themselves to talking and they would both leave the other to their own private thoughts, only offering their presence as support. Other nights, they whispered their fears, regrets, and shame into the dark, letting them take shape so that the other could push them away and replace them with love and reassurances.

Tony wondered what kind of night tonight would be.

It took a few breaths, maybe even a full minute, before James softly responded, “I’m not sure it was a dream.”

If that ominous statement hadn’t grabbed Tony’s attention, the fear in James’ voice certainly would have. Tony wriggled a little and with a reluctant sigh James acquiesced and loosened his grip, but only enough to let Tony prop himself up on his elbow so he could look down at James.

“What do you mean, not a dream?”

“I was the Winter Soldier again.”

“Okay, well, this isn’t the first time where—”
“I killed you,” James said and even without bright lights Tony could see how James’ face crumbled into despair. The man squeezed his eyes shut and took a few labored breaths; his hands gripped Tony tighter, skirting just on the edge of too hard. “I think— I think I killed you on her orders.”

Tony’s entire body went cold and his mind scrambled to assess the possibilities, ask the questions, the how and why and when, but the devastation he saw in James stopped the panicked thoughts before they could get much further. Tony was relatively certain there was no immediate danger, which meant James’ mental state had to be priority number one. So he cupped James’ cheek, the few days of stubble rough against his palm, and leaned in to kiss him. The first kiss was just a peck on the lips, then a few over his cheeks where Tony tasted trails of salt. God, in the relative dark of their room, he didn’t even realize James had been crying.

“Sweetheart, it’s okay,” Tony said, with a calm he didn’t quite feel. He needed to comfort though, even if his heart wanted to lash out. The mere thought of Maximoff touching James made his blood boil, made every soft, tender part of him turn to ice, eager to teach the world a thing or two about vengeful violence. “You’re safe. She can’t reach us here, you know that. Your watch, the reactor, Stephen’s protection spells—”

“But what if— what if she—” James’ broken inhale stole his words and Tony shushed him, kissing him again, leaving feather light touches everywhere he could reach.

“We’ve barely been out of the Compound. And when we are, it’s usually at the Tower. Both have layers and layers of protection.”

“She still got to you though, before.”

“She did, but back then she wasn’t in jail. Wong and the rest of the wizard brigade, they put up all sorts of spells on her cell, her handcuffs, everything—”

“None of that means anything, not— not with her powers. Cut off one head and two more take its place,” James recited, the words turning Tony’s insides cold all over again. “Hydra doesn’t give up, those fuckers just won’t die. What if she gets to me, Tony? What if she’s already inside my head? I can’t— I won’t let someone control me again. I’d rather—”

“Don’t,” Tony cut him off shakily; he couldn’t bear to hear what James meant to say, he couldn’t. “Don’t say it, don’t even think it, okay? I will not let her touch you. Not her, not anyone. No one will ever hurt you like that again.”

James didn’t protest Tony’s declaration, but he looked no less distraught. Tony hugged him close again, let James hide his face in the crook of Tony’s neck. They both needed this intimacy, but the moment also gave Tony time to think. He knew James needed more than empty platitudes.

After giving James a few minutes to gather himself, Tony called out to Friday, who responded right away, likely already waiting, fretting this whole time in her own unique way.

“Can you do two things for me, please?” he asked her. James shifted against him, metal arm tightening around Tony’s waist, a heavy weight keeping him pressed him against James. Tony kept talking while James repositioned them both to his liking. “One, check in with the Warden at Maximoff’s prison, please. Just ask for an update, you know, make sure she’s there, make sure every piece of security we installed is up to date and functional. And two, can you ping Strange? Get him on the line, tell him it’s an emergency.”

Friday didn’t bother to confirm that she was likely already ten steps ahead in fulfilling these requests and Tony diverted his attention back to James, stroking his hair, pressing kisses to his temple.
James sniffled into his shoulder. “You want Strange to look at my head, don’t you?”

“Only if you’re okay with it. And if you’re not, he can at least do a sweep of the Compound or something.”

James took some time to think. He shifted again, clearly wrestling with both restless energy and the need to as close as humanly possible to Tony. This time it was a gentle push and prod until Tony was on his back and James moved his head to rest on Tony’s chest. That close, even non-enhanced hearing could’ve picked up Tony’s erratic heartbeat.

*I’m alive, I’m okay, I promise. I won’t let that witch bring us down,* Tony wanted to say, but he wasn’t sure what good, if any, his words would do at this point. He kept quiet instead, giving James the time and space needed to make the decision on what they should do next.

James finally whispered a quiet, but resolute “Okay,” such a small, simple word, but carrying with it so much conviction.

“Are you sure?” Tony couldn’t help but ask.

“Strange’s been in my head before, hadn’t he? Got me through the surgery alright.”

It was a good point, but they had no chance to discuss it when Friday’s voice drew their attention again.

“Boss, I’m sorry,” she began and Tony wanted to groan, because nothing good ever started with the word ‘sorry’, “Dr. Strange appears to be… unavailable at the moment.”

“Define unavailable, sweetheart.”

“I’ve been told he is currently in a different dimension. I must assume one without any cell phone coverage.”

“Do we know when he’ll be back? Or I dunno, can’t Wong or someone else help us out?”

“Dr. Strange won’t return for several days, I was told, although given his past track record of disappearing and reappearing in a haphazard fashion, I predict it will likely be a week or so before we see him. I did ask if someone else could assist in his place…” Tony swore if Friday had a body, she would’ve been scowling. “Mr. Wong told me that mind magic requires a delicate hand and that the Sorcerer Supreme is the only one sufficiently adept, the knowledge passed down to him from the Ancient One. Mr. Wong said— and I quote— ‘it wasn’t his department’.”

This time Tony did let out a frustrated groan. “I’m convinced all they do at that Sanctum is just watch Netflix all day. *Damn it,*” he muttered darkly, but his mind was already moving on. He kissed James’ temple again, lingered there for a few precious seconds before sitting up, pulling a reluctant but unresisting James along with him. “Alright, Plan B, sweetheart. We can wait until Strange is back in our dimension…”

“Or we let the other magic user living under our roof look inside my head.”

So they both had the same crappy Plan B then. James sounded about as thrilled as Tony felt about asking Loki for help.

“We can try Vision?” Tony offered, but it fell flat and he added reluctantly, “Unfortunately what he makes up for in raw power, he lacks in finer skills. But Loki is such a damn wildcard and I hate that. Babe, you don’t have to do this. I really think this was nothing more than a dream, we can wait or
“Tony, I need to know. I’d trust Loki over Maximoff any day. Friday,” he called out harshly, “wake that bastard up and tell him to meet us in one of the training rooms. Get Vision there too, and Thor as well, he can play babysitter. Please,” James tacked on at the end, softer, apologetic, because of course Friday wasn’t the target of his ire.

Tony didn’t argue with the order. His strong, resilient soldier was never one to run and hide and he understood the need, the desperation to know for certain whether this was a simple nightmare or legitimate foul play. They both remained wrapped up in each other until the last possible second when Friday informed them that the Norse gods and Vision were waiting.

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James looked exhausted in the bright, punishing light of the training room and Tony wished they could go back to their warm bed, just the two of them in the comforting darkness.

Alas, no such luck. The Norse Bros were here, one sporting pastel pajamas and a major case of bedhead, the other still in jeans and a shirt, as if he hadn’t gone to sleep at all. Vision hadn’t been sleeping either, that much Tony knew for sure, and they probably interrupted the poor guy’s early morning meditation.

Tony gave the three an abridged version of what happened— nightmare, starring Maximoff and mind control— and given prior experiences and general knowledge, that was all it took to put the three on edge. James, too rattled by the nightmare, remained silent, leaving it up to Tony to be the leader, the coordinator, the protector tonight. He had no problem with that.

Loki offered his assistance, which wasn’t surprising, but Tony was itching to speak to the god before anything actually happened. He squeezed James’ hand, asked him if he would be alright with Thor and Vision for a few minutes, and after receiving a weak nod, Tony pointed at Loki. “You, a word in private, now.”

He beckoned the god over and didn’t bother to check whether Loki followed. Tony’s stride was likely rendered unintimidating by the fact that he was barefoot and wearing his own set of pajamas, but that just meant Tony had to double down on the confidence to make up for it.

Loki closed the door behind them, barely making a sound, leaving them both out in the hallway, alone.

Tony took a few steps, stopped, turned back around, then walked right up to Loki, ignoring the jolt of adrenaline, the whisper of fear. This wasn’t the first— and likely not the last— time he faced down a god. “I need you to listen to me closely. You are our last resort. I don’t like it, not even a little bit, and if this were about anything other than— other than—” he grit his teeth, hating to admit any weakness, hating this whole damn night, “anything other than her, we wouldn’t be here and we sure as well wouldn’t be asking you for help."

Loki, the bastard, was smirking. “The confidence you have in me is truly astounding, Anthony. I’m not certain my heart can bear so much goodwill.”

“Can it, I’m not in the mood for your crap tonight.”

“I can see that. So, is this where you threaten me? Go down the list of your allies? Mention the Hulk? Mmm, I do remember that last time so fondly.”

“Oh, I don’t make threats anymore. I’m way past threats. Nowadays, I trade in promises.”
“Funny though,” Loki continued as if Tony hadn’t spoken, “if my memory serves me correctly, back then you never mentioned yourself as one of these heroes. All your allies, your friends, they made the list, sure, but you did not.”

“Well, buddy, you’re in for a surprise then, because tonight, it is just me. I don’t need the Hulk, I don’t need the Avengers, don’t need anyone or anything but my own two hands to ruin you if you betray me. This is James we’re talking about, my James, and if you do anything other than check him for magic, if you so much as harm a hair on his head—” Tony’s voice broke and he wished it were anger choking him, but it wasn’t, not really. It was desperation instead, fear, because even though he was almost certain this was nothing more than a bad dream, what if it wasn’t? What if he failed again? Time after time, failure after failure, unable to protect the people he loved. He forced himself to speak, despite each word growing thorns in his throat. “If you hurt him, I will make you regret it.”

“You’ll kill me?”

“Oh, no. No, that’d be too kind. I will hand-deliver you to fuckin’ Thanos first, let him take a turn at you before I kill you both.”

“That’s quite a threat.”

“Just letting you know what happens when people betray me.”

“Is that so?” Damn, but that sharp little smirk didn’t bode well for Tony. “Is that why the good Captain still walks the Earth, alive and well? Is that why you threatened me, your ally, all those months ago, all in the efforts to protect a man who didn’t hesitate to betray you?”

Tony snarled. “I do not have time for your fuckin’ armchair psychology, not tonight. Me telling you to stay the hell away from Barton had nothing to do with—”

“You are so willing to threaten violence and death to protect a loved one,” Loki spoke over him, too-intelligent eyes observing Tony, stripping him bare, “but when you are the one betrayed, you tuck your tail between your legs and accept the pain as your due.”

Tony wanted to punch him, he really, really did. Unfortunately, a punch would hurt him more than it would hurt Loki. Unfortunate. “You done?”

The infuriating bastard just hummed. “You really don’t believe you are worth all this, do you? The love, the affections other offer you so freely?”

“I know what I’m worth, pal, but tonight’s not about me.”

Loki finally dropped the coy little act— thank god for small mercies— but it was replaced by something genuinely contemplative and that didn’t make Tony feel any better either. “I suppose you are right. Anthony, I truly have no intention of harming that gorgeous creature, you and I both know that.”

Usually Tony tolerated, even enjoyed, Loki’s flirtatious teasing, but it was rubbing him in all the wrong ways tonight. “Real cute, but I know who you are. You may have been forced into that invasion, you may have been tortured, but you’re still a selfish liar and a cold-blooded killer when it suits your needs.” Tony knew he was lashing out, this wasn’t even about Loki, he was just so fucking scared and Loki happened to be the closest target who wouldn’t wilt from a few harsh jibes. “I don’t trust you, I will probably never trust you, but I’m desperate enough to give you this one chance.”
“And you hate that, don’t you?” The more serious countenance highlighted Loki’s already angular features. “I’m telling you, I have no reason, no incentive to harm any of you. I am on your side.”

“Yeah, for now. Until something better comes along, right?”

“I may be an opportunist, Stark, but I am not an idiot.”

“No, you’re not. Which is why we’re having this conversation at all.” Tony hated that he had to look up at Loki when they were this close. He’d need to be on his tiptoes to be on the same level, and hell, even that probably wasn’t enough. He was suddenly made aware, painfully, blatantly, of his very real vulnerability; he was nothing more than a squishy, weak human going up against gods and witches and alien magic. What the hell did he think he’d accomplish here?

He was just a man in a tin can.

Tony deflated, the ferocious anger bleeding straight into despair, and he turned on his heel to pace a few steps back, needing the space. Great, he thought, as if Loki needed more demonstrations of Tony’s weak spots.

“Fuckin’ Strange,” he muttered under his breath, scrubbing a rough hand down his face, “and his goddamn dimensional hopping, and fuck Maximoff and her damn magic too. Fuck this entire damn night…”

Tony couldn’t see Loki, but when the man spoke again, his voice was soft, similar to how he usually spoke with the children.

“I find myself wanting to apologize for being your only option tonight. An unpleasant sentiment, if you must know. I usually try to avoid such silly things as sympathy.”

Tony snorted. “Sorry for disturbing your moral fiber out of its hibernation like that.”

“If it helps anything, I doubt this nightmare was the witch’s work.”

Tony pivoted back to look at the god. “Wait, what do you mean?”

“I mean that her magic, it’s— it’s putrid, vile. I could see it right away when it lingered on you—”

“Wait, you knew about that? Why didn’t you say something—” Tony stopped, then groaned. “Oh, yeah, you did, sorta.”

“ Tried to. Most aren’t willing to listen to me, you see.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you lie nine times out of ten. And you coulda been a lot less cryptic —” Tony waved his hands. They were getting off-track. “Never mind all that. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I detected nothing out of the ordinary about your soldier’s mind. I can perform a more thorough sweep, of course; in fact, I recommend it, for everyone’s peace of mind, including my own. Your Scarlet Witch, her magic, it offends me on a primal level. Not only are her powers a mockery of magic itself, but it is a corrupted version of an Infinity Stone. It is as terrifying to me as it is vile. However, I don’t believe tonight was her doing.”

“That was my thinking too,” Tony said, a small weight lifting off his shoulders. It was good to have even this sliver of relief. “We’re well protected here, Strange was certain of that, and hell, you’ve mentioned it before too. So, then… This was just a nightmare?”
“It is the most logical conclusion. It is what your soldier fears most, is it not? Being someone else’s puppet again, hurting you?”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “It is, but you don’t sound that convinced. What else could it be?”

Loki crossed his arms and shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Do you believe in visions, Anthony?”

“Premonitions you mean? Not really, but I’ve learned to be less of a skeptic over the past few years. Dancing around with gods and wizards does that to a man.”

“My, uh— my mother, she had the gift of Sight. Unfortunately, it was more of a curse than a gift. Seeing a glimpse of the future rarely leads to a true understanding of it.”

“Are you saying James was seeing the future or something? Why? He’s— he’s not psychic, he doesn’t mess around with magic.”

Loki shrugged, looking away. “All of our lives have become intimately entangled with Infinity Stones, which do not follow logic or pattern when enacting their will upon us. I do not know whether this was a sign or a warning. In all likelihood, it wasn’t. I’m simply offering it up as a possibility.”

Tony groaned and shook his head. Yeah, no, he was going back to his original stance. He hated magic. “Well, I’ll keep that in mind then. Better safe than sorry. Vision, nightmare, whatever, we’ll take all precautions we can.”

“I would advise it,” Loki released a sigh and he looked almost sympathetic when he followed Tony back to the door. It was weird and Tony had the sudden urge to run and hide.

“I do hope you find your own worth, Man of Iron,” Loki added quietly, stopping just before the door, “it would be such a shame for a bright, shining star such as yourself to burn away. With that said,” he cleared his throat when Tony’s indignant glare intensified, “although it means very little to you, I give you my word that I will not harm your soldier. I could tell you that I am fond of you both, that for the first time since— since my life crumbled from the weight of its falsehoods, I had felt peace here, with your family, with the children. I know you won’t believe such— such sentiment, so I won’t bother. However, you and I both know that my best chance to destroy the Mad Titan is here, with you. I am safest here, with access to resources and allies. I wouldn’t trade that for senseless, malicious mischief. Nor can any of your Midgardian enemies offer me anything better. This witch or — or Hydra, you call them, there is nothing they have that would entice me to betray my current allies.”

Tony studied the other man, looking for hints of deception, but of course he knew that he’d only see what Loki wanted him to see. This was a guy who had a thousand years to perfect the picture of innocence and sincerity. It was a lost cause.

They could still wait, he supposed, but Strange had an annoying tendency to disappear for weeks at a time, and Tony might be able to wait, but he knew James couldn’t. To have that burden, that fear that something so vile could be inside you… James needed the peace of mind and Loki was their best bet tonight.

Tony nodded, accepting Loki’s words for what they were and hoped like hell he was making the right choice. He pushed the door open to the sight of the others watching their entrance, James with thinly veiled anxiety and suspicion, Vision with his usual serene calm, and Thor with a patience Tony didn’t know the big guy possessed.
“My sincerest apologies for that lengthy interruption,” Loki cheerfully offered before striding right up to James, “your beloved here, he was just threatening death and doom and destruction upon my head if I were to do anything untoward. You should be very proud, he is quite creative.”

James’ lips twitched and Tony had to hand it to Loki. The guy had his own uncanny ability to break up tension. Unfortunately the sense of unease settled right back when Loki’s hands began to glow green and James stiffened at the sight. The raw fear in his eyes almost had Tony calling the whole thing off, but James remained where he was, rigid and clearly scared, but sitting still, ready to face this.

Loki raised both hands, but didn’t reach for James, who watched those hands the same way one would watch a poisonous snake.

“Peace, soldier, I intend you no harm,” Loki said quietly, his tone so unlike any of his usual teasing that Tony was thrown off-kilter all over again. Either Loki was the greatest actor alive or he had an actual heart buried somewhere underneath all that snark and ego. “My powers never included the ability to control minds, not even those of simple creatures scurrying across the earth. I cannot control nor do I desire to do so.” Tony watched Loki’s throat work on a swallow. “I know what it’s like to have another’s will shoved inside you. I was forced to do the same to others. It isn’t a fate I would wish upon an enemy, let alone you.” He glanced at Vision, then at Thor. “If you are willing, I will simply observe your mind and body, search for magic that does not belong. Your friend Vision will monitor to ensure I do nothing else. Thor, the big blond oaf over there, will punch and kick and hit things with his big hammer if I dare to misbehave.” Clever green eyes darted over to Tony. “I have no need to explain what your lover will do to me if I harm you.”

James was looking at Tony too and it was physically painful to watch those blue eyes shutter closed on a defeated sigh.

“I’m ready.”

Loki offered no more platitudes. He pressed his long, slender fingers to James’ temples and although James flinched— Tony did too— nothing else happened. James’ expression didn’t change; he was uncomfortable, yes, but there was no further distress.

All three of them watched, James sitting up on the table, Loki standing before him, linked together only by a barely-there touch and the glowing green of Loki’s magic.

It felt like an eternity, but likely only lasted a minute at most. Loki dropped his hands back to his sides, the magic dissipated, and James let out a whoosh of air as his shoulders sagged in relief.

“So what’s the verdict?” he asked.

Loki’s expression remaining impassive. “There is nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“No traces of any magic related to an Infinity Stone. No magic of any kind, in fact, other than the energies already permeating your home.”

Tony glanced over at Vision, who nodded.

“I haven’t detected anything malignant either.”

That was reassuring too. Viz may not have had Loki’s experience, but he knew Maximoff’s magic better than anyone.
Tony let out his own breath, one he must’ve been holding since James woke up whimpering in pain. “Okay, good, that’s good. Between this and Friday’s confirmation that everything is up to code at the prison, I think it’s safe to give the all-clear here.”

“Wait, so my dream,” James looked more confused than relieved, “it was just—I just made this big fuss over nothing? But— fuck, it felt so real…”

“Nightmares often do,” Thor offered quietly from his spot perched on another desk, “our minds can be our most powerful tools, but that same strength often betrays us.”

James nodded shakily, probably struggling to accept that this was good news. Tony was relieved too, although he hated that their version of ‘good news’ were shitty, traumatic nightmares. Still, better than shitty, traumatic reality.

Tony shoved at Loki unceremoniously to get him to back away from James; thankfully the god did with nothing more than a huff and Tony stood guard next to his boyfriend, linked their hands together, sneaked a quick kiss on the cheek, then turned to face the rest of the group.

“Well, sorry for the early wake-up call, fellas.”

“We are glad we could help, Tony,” Thor said, “the magic of the Scarlet Witch, it’s a dangerous thing. We both learned that years ago. You were right to be careful.”

Loki had joined Thor and propped a hip against the desk. “While I admit I haven’t had the… displeasure to meet her personally, I am certain she cannot harm anyone who resides within these walls.” Loki’s expression softened again when he looked at James. “I am sorry you had to suffer, nevertheless, even if it were only a nightmare.”

Damn but everyone had a soft spot for a sad James, didn’t they? Tony couldn’t exactly blame them.

“Is there anything else you need?” Vision asked as he slowly began to make his way out of the room after giving the two gods a pointed look to follow him.

Tony shook his head, while James replied quietly, “Sorry I panicked everyone. Didn’t mean to make a mountain outta molehill.”

“It’s no worry at all. Wanda’s powers… we must take it seriously. I would— it would pain me greatly to see anyone else suffer because of her actions.” Vision couldn’t quite mask the soul-deep sadness in those words. Guess all that meditation didn’t quite fix everything. “If there’s any other way I can help, please let me know.”

Tony watched as the three exited the room before turning back to James.

“Everything okay?”

The other man nodded, then scrubbed a hand up and down his face. “Feel like a damn fool, worrying everyone like that. Over a nightmare. Like we don’t have those every other night.”

“Hey, I thought it was a nightmare too, you know, when she got into my head. I’m glad we checked.” Tony made a face. “Well, not glad, because you still had a crappy nightmare and you’re obviously miserable and I hate seeing you like this—”

James pulled him close and kissed him, cutting off the torrent of rambling words.

“Thank you for taking care of me,” the words were a whisper, a caress of warm air against Tony’s
lips and Tony’s heart clenched, overwhelmed with so much love for this man. He promised himself that no matter what, he would always be there to protect James.

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The soldier found him alone in the kitchen where Loki was watching the first rays of sunlight peak over the horizon while sipping at a pleasantly bitter cup of coffee.

“Couldn’t go back to sleep?” Loki asked casually, then watched as Barnes walked over and leaned against the counter where he could face Loki. His arms were crossed over his broad chest, muscles bulging, his countenance severe, unyielding. Quite an impressive sight.

“Not after a night I had, no.” Sharp eyes didn’t leave, didn’t shift, boring straight into Loki. “I need something from you, a promise,” Barnes added with a tilt of his chin, “and I don’t think I can ask anyone else here.”

“I am at your service, dear soldier,” Loki said, curious now. There wasn’t much Barnes could trust him with, was there?

The man’s voice, those eyes, everything about him was so cold when he spoke again. “Tonight, it may have been just a dream, but if— if it ever comes true… If I ever become a real threat to Tony, I need you to protect him, whatever it takes.”

Loki cocked his head to the side, brows knitting together. He heard the unspoken request and he was genuinely taken aback by it. “Why me?”

“Because the others care too much. You’re the type of guy who’s willing to do what it takes and I know you need Tony more than you need me. Tony’s the one who’s gonna win this war, save the world. I’m expendable, just the guy willing to take a bullet for him.”

Barnes wasn’t exactly wrong about Stark. There were whispers, out there in the cosmos, that even the Mad Titan himself feared the Man of Iron, that he was cowed by a mere mortal with a star for a heart. There was a reason Loki was here, on Midgard of all the damn places. The fact that he’d accumulated more reasons to stay, to grow fond of this silly little planet over the past few months, well, that was irrelevant.

“I sincerely hope it doesn’t come to that. I know no one believes a word I say, but I am fond of you two foolish creatures.”

“I can’t say the feeling’s mutual, but hell, that’s not the way I wanna go either. But I’ll willing to, if it means Tony gets to live. I will not be a threat to him. So, do we understand each other?”

Loki nodded and Barnes pushed away from the counter, walked by him and gave Loki’s shoulder a none-too-gentle pat, before disappearing out of sight. Loki remained where he was, back to watching the sun rise, taking in the way the light made the snow-covered ground shine; he was left with a lot to contemplate.

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The guards in this place were annoyingly punctual. Obedient little army men who showed up three times a day with her meals, escorted her to the psychiatrist and her therapy sessions, to her hearings and her lawyer. The same thing, day after day after day. It all began to blend together long ago, one locked room after another, her hands always chained like some animal whenever she was outside her heavily warded cell.
Whoever did the spells this time was more adept and Wanda learned to stop struggling against them long ago. These protection spells, they redirected her magic inward, forced it to attack itself, a experience that left her in agony, weak and drained and furious.

Her magic couldn’t help her here, but she didn’t always need magic. There were other ways to get what she wanted. Humans were inherently flawed, after all, and there were always weaknesses to exploit, with or without magical powers.

Most of the men and women she saw here followed the rules however, didn’t listen to her, didn’t pay attention to her attempts to manipulate them. Obedient little puppets, just here to do their jobs.

Every one of them was useless, no chip in their armor, nothing she could use, but there was always one weak link in a chain. Here, it was older man stationed a month, French by the sound of his accept; it took all of one week for his beady little eyes to begin looking at her with pity, seeing her for what she truly was, a poor little victim. He always lingered for too long, made small talk. Always gentler than the others. An extra portion of dessert, an extra ten minutes at the library. She did hate the pity he offered her, but it was infinitely more useful than the cold, impersonal demeanor of the rest.

She didn’t need magic to see his mind, to know that he was wondering how a sweet, pretty girl like her could possibly be the monster everyone made her out to be. Perhaps he had doubts about Stark too, and rightfully so. How could one trust the morality of a man known as the Merchant of Death?

She kept his attention with shy smiles and sweet words, luring him closer and closer with each passing day, with the fluttering of her eyelashes, the vulnerability she could wear like a mask. She was small and innocent and just so in need of protection. Every time, he became hers, bit by bit by bit.

Every man had a weakness and this one was especially weak. Even if it took months, years, she was willing to wait; one day she would be free to make her real jailers pay once and for all.
“This is a cute little place, right?” Tony asked, then sank his teeth into a tiny mushroom crostini and moaned in delight. Bucky had been too busy watching his boyfriend to pay the place any mind, but he obediently gave the restaurant another glance. A veritable hole-in-the-wall, owned by Italian immigrants who spoke with them earlier, fussing over Tony and Bucky as if they were family and making sure everything was delizioso. The space inside was dim, the ceiling hung low, and the decor would’ve left something to be desired anywhere else, but here it fit, enhancing that sense of a small town, home-cooked Italian family dinner. They had their own corner, but the privacy was only an illusion in this crowded little place. The other patrons however paid no attention to them, either because Tony was a regular sight in this place or because the food was as phenomenal as Tony claimed it would be.

Closest to them was a family of four, then two teenage girls who were too busy smiling shyly at each other to enjoy their pasta, fumbling adorably through what looked like a first date, and an elderly woman peacefully eating her meal with a glass of wine and a book.

Bucky felt a little like a teenager on a first date too, although he was spared the awkward nervousness and was simply left with the butterflies in his stomach, along with the inability to concentrate on anything but Tony for more than a few seconds at a time. How could he when Tony sitting right there, making those delicious little noises and looking for all the world like the happiest man alive, at peace and exactly where he was meant to be?

“It’s, uh… this is really nice, yeah,” Bucky answered, then scrunched up his nose at how awkwardly that delayed response came out. Was he a teenager on a first date? Get it together, Barnes.

Tony didn’t judge him for it though, just smiled fondly and picked up another little toast, but instead of inhaling this one too, he presented it to Bucky. An offer he couldn’t refuse, and Bucky bit into the offering, the perfectly toasted piece of bread nearly melting in his mouth while the mushrooms added a pleasant earthy flavor.

“Good, yeah?”
“Amazing.” And if Bucky was looking at Tony when he said that, well, no one could judge him for that either.

Tony nodded along, pleased with the answer, then swiped a knife at the block of mozzarella sitting beautifully on the wooden board between them, next to the thin slices of meats and tiny tomatoes slathered in herbs and olive oil, infusing the air around them with the mouth-watering scent of basil.

“So,” Tony said after indulging in another bite, “how did you enjoy your second official outing with the Avengers?”

“Spending a day at a children’s hospital counts as an official outing?”

“Mm-hmm. More important than the press conferences, as far as I’m concerned.” Tony reached for a tomato and chewed on it thoughtfully. “Tougher than the conferences too, if I’m being honest. Seeing all those kids deal with things most adults can’t even handle… It doesn’t get easier no matter how many times we do it, you know?”

“You do good work, Tony. All of you. And it’s not just the financial help either. I mean, yeah, that part is huge, but those kids loved seeing you all.”

Tony’s eyes twinkled, reflections of candlelight dancing across his face. “I seem to remember an adorable little girl with braids and a tutu who couldn’t take her eyes off you.”

Bucky couldn’t help but smile at the memory too, but the smile lost some of its strength when he looked down at his metal hand and watched the fingers catch the light of the candles as he flexed them. “She’s one of the kids getting a Stark prosthetic, right?”

“Yup, she’ll be part of our program. The foundation has access to the best on the market right now, especially for prosthetics of the hand. Thanks entirely to that pretty little thing,” Tony pointed his knife at Bucky’s hand.

Despite the huge strides Bucky had made since getting his second chance, despite all that progress, there were still days where he hated the sight of metal. He knew the disgust wasn’t rational, that it wasn’t true revulsion, but rather remnants of memories best forgotten. This arm, this beautiful piece of technology crafted for him by the man he loved, no part of it belonged to Hydra. It belonged to Tony, who loved this damn arm—who loved Bucky—and had never been shy about that love.

Still, there were bad days, there would always be bad days, but knowing that some part of this actually helped someone else—a sweet little girl who still had her whole life ahead of her—that tamped down some of the revulsion too. The credit, of course, went to Tony and his brilliant mind, as well as the many people who worked with the Foundation, doctors and scientists and advocates who took the reins once Tony gave them the tools and the funding, but Bucky liked to think that he played some small, infinitesimal (but not non-existent) role in this good deed too.

“Babe, hey,” Tony called out and Bucky realized he’d been staring at his hand. He looked up and found Tony’s eyes, which were so soft and so loving that it took his breath away. “You did good today, I promise. The kids loved you and it was a great day all around. I’m really glad you came out with us.”

“Yeah, me too,” Bucky answered, knowing Tony was right. Today, yesterday, tomorrow, it was all good. Life was good and whatever bad memories still haunted them, they could deal with those too, together, just like they did with that awful nightmare months ago. There had been no more horrible specters visiting Bucky to smother him in red. Other nightmares, of course, came and went, but on most nights, they were soothed away with tender words and a tight embrace.
The rest of the evening unfolded beautifully, the pleasant flutter of nerves never fading as they held hands like teenagers and savored the gorgeous dishes, shared bites with each other and enjoyed an escape from their busy lives. They talked and ate and laughed, and Bucky decided that maybe every date felt like a first when it was with Tony Stark, who smiled and teased and snuck in heated gazes full of delicious, toe-curling promises when Bucky least expected them. It was Tony who made him feel so damn good.

There was still dessert to look forward to, although Bucky didn’t know how they would find room for it when even his super soldier appetite was properly satiated by now, but Tony had insisted they needed to try the panna cotta, so they waited, passing the time by trading stories. Bucky reached out to brush the metal hand over Tony’s again, just a feather-light touch of vibranium over the delicate skin, and Tony only paused for a moment to soften his smile, before diving right back into his retelling of Iron Man’s and War Machine’s first official mission together.

“Now, don’t get me wrong, I love my Sour Patch, but back then, I was still sore about the whole Expo incident— I mean, come on, I can forgive him for kicking my ass, I completely deserved that, but using Hammer tech? Oh, no, no, no, I was not going to let him live that down, so there we were, getting ready to fly out—”

Tony stopped and his gaze grew distant, focusing on something over Bucky’s shoulder.

“Everything alright?” Bucky asked and Tony held a hand up, eyes darting to Bucky’s in apology before losing focus again and it took Bucky a second to realize Friday must’ve been speaking to Tony through the tiny headset permanently implanted into his ear. Bucky kept up the soothing touches as Tony listened, metal fingerpads tracing outlines of delicate bones. He watched as Tony’s brows drew together, something akin to worry crossing his features.

The distant gaze lasted a few seconds longer and then Tony’s focus was back, but the frown remained.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s, uh… The warden from Maximoff’s prison.” The frown deepened and Bucky watched as Tony’s throat bobbed on an uneasy swallow. “Maximoff’s gone.”

Bucky’s insides went cold at the words. “Gone? What does that mean, gone?”

“Her cell’s empty. They just found out,” Tony glanced away again and a short second later, Bucky’s own ear piece came to life, the AI’s soft voice coming through.

Empty cell. Missing guard. A missing witch.

Bucky grit his teeth against the wave of anger that crested inside him, over the very real fear blossoming sharp and heavy in his chest.

“Alright,” Tony said when Friday finished speaking, “we’ve put out an alert for everyone to head back to base. Happy has Pepper and the kids, Hope is on her way in with her father, Laura and the kids too, and someone is portalling Rhodey back into the Compound since he’s in Norway right now.”

“What about that search party?”

“Strange, Wong, and Viz are heading over to the prison. Hopefully they’ll find something— or someone— but if not, they’ll spread out from there.”
Bucky’s heart was beating against his ribcage with such ferocity that he thought it might jump straight out of him.

“How the hell did this happen? I thought we had every base covered, everything to make sure she couldn’t get away. World class security, *magic*. Hell, I remember getting a report on all those trackers and cameras and—”

“You don’t have to remind me, I was there too. Most of that was *my* tech, by the way.”

Bucky winced at the emphasis. “I didn’t mean to insinuate—”

“No, no, I know. *Fuck.*” Tony dropped his head in his hands and groaned, then let out a deliberate exhale before sitting back up, back straight and shoulders squared. He was putting himself back together right before Bucky’s eyes, bracing himself for the inevitable mess to come. “I’m sorry, James.”

“Yeah, me too. This is just…”

“It’s bad, I know, but we’ll handle this,” Tony added and the steady, self-assured tone helped James find his own ounce of courage too. If Tony, who had the witch in his head twice now, could face this head-on, Bucky could too.

He watched Tony drum his fingers on the table. “Now, if it was just down to my tech, she wouldn’t have gotten far, or gotten away at all, for that matter. Which mean we’re probably dealing with that pesky and unpredictable *human* element.”

“The missing guard.”

“Yup and he’s either a traitor, a dumbass, or just a poor schmuck who ended up as her collateral damage. My money’s on option one or two though.”

“People are the weakest link of any mission. Easy to manipulate, easy to deceive.”

“Exactly. People can do a lot of awful things if someone managed to convince them they’re doing them for the right cause.”

“So what do *we* do?”

Tony glanced around, taking in the restaurant, then back to Bucky.

“I hate to say this, since I won’t be able to show my face here again, but I think we’ll have to take a rain check on that dessert.”

Bucky could see the worry in Tony’s eyes clear as day and the whispers of the witch ordering him to *kill* echoed through his head, but the Soldier pushed it all away ruthlessly, clearing Bucky’s mind until nothing but his one *real* mission remained. He was never letting that monster hurt Tony again. No matter what he had to do, he would protect Tony, to his dying breath if he had to.

They made their apologies to the owners, promised to come back on a happier day, and headed back for the safety of home, both uncharacteristically silent on the drive back.

Tony must’ve been strategizing, planning everyone’s next steps, ten steps ahead, but Bucky focused his energies inward. Already he could feel the Soldier slipping into the hollow nooks and crannies of his mind, closer to the surface with each passing minute. His senses sharpened, attention turning from casual observation to calculated surveillance. Slipping into this mode, one that put him just on the
edge of *weapon*, ready to fire if danger presented itself, remained an uncomfortable step back into his past, no matter the peace he made with the Soldier. Bucky would willingly walk into hell itself though if it meant keeping his loved ones safe, so he welcomed the Soldier like an old friend.

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Their first stop was to check on the kids, who grumbled and complained about needing to stay inside just as Tony expected, but both ultimately acquiesced; no matter how much of this mess Tony wanted to spare them, Peter and Harley were old enough to understand the need for caution. Someone like Maximoff, with her obsessive vendetta against Tony, would go after his loved ones next if she couldn’t reach Tony himself.

Everyone else was here too—the aggravating nature of magic aside, portals came in handy at a time like this—and having everyone he loved under the same roof eased some of Tony’s worries.

Not everything, not by a long shot, but it was a damn good start.

Tony checked in with Rhodey next, but there were no updates from the wizards and Vision, so until they had new information, Tony headed to the kitchen, more out of pure habit than any necessity.

James followed him everywhere, Tony’s silent shadow ever since they left the restaurant, and some part of Tony bristled predictably at the overprotective act, but it was a token protest at best. Tony knew that sinking into the Soldier’s darker presence was a natural reaction against an oncoming threat; he guessed there was certain comfort to be found in the Soldier’s ruthless efficiency and his gray morality that prioritized the survival of *me and mine* above all else, and if Tony were being honest, it was a source of comfort for him too. He needed James at his best, he needed him close, and Tony was willing to play the moral watchdog on the off chance the Soldier strayed too far. Tony would protect him too.

Loki was the only one in the softly-lit kitchen, pacing in agitation, and his dark eyes settled on Tony when they arrived, which Tony answered with his own questioning look before making a beeline for the coffee maker. The coffee was a comfort blanket at this point, something to keep his hands busy because he sure as hell didn’t need it. There were enough nerves and adrenaline to make his heart hammer away without the artificial high of caffeine.

“I assume you heard the news?” he addressed Loki while taking a mug out of the cupboard. His hand trembled as he reached for it and Tony gripped the mug tightly, willing his body to stop with the panicking act.

“I did, although by then it was no longer news. I felt a…. great disturbance in the force.”

Tony stopped what he was doing to glance over his shoulder, brows knitting together. “Since when do you—”

“Peter and Harley.”

“Ah.” Tony probably should skip his eternal fascination over how super soldiers and gods mashed with modern pop culture. “So you… what, *felt* her magic or something?”

“I detected a disruption of the energies, yes. Before, her magic was muted to me, likely due to the layers of spells keeping her prisoner. If I made an effort to reach that deeply into the energies of your planet, I could pinpoint her, but then her powers *erupted*—”

“Can you track her?” James interrupted. His voice was gruff, unapologetic, and so much more Soldier than sweet, smiling, bashful James from just a few hours ago that it made Tony shiver.
Loki shook his head and it was unsettling to see regret in his features. Tony went back to making his coffee as he listened.

“She is masking herself somehow. Either a natural facet of her powers or someone is assisting her, I do not know. I simply felt the flare— disgusting, corrupted energy,” Loki’s tone changed into an outright snarl, “an abomination and an insult—”

“Rudolf, get to the point, please.”

Loki huffed, but at least the deluge of insults stopped. “My point is that I do so wish I would’ve been allowed to assist in finding this troublesome creature.”

Abandoning his coffee efforts yet again, Tony turned back around. “You’re not an official Avenger, you’re not even an unofficial Avenger and last time you were here, you broke Manhattan. Extenuating circumstances, yes, I get it, but we can’t just send you out there to run wild. We have rules and regulations in place—”

“So you’ll let your silly little rules stop you from doing what you know is needed? She is a threat and I know the mind stone far better than any of your so-called sorcerers!”

Tony saw James go stiff next to him, all hard lines of tension from head to toe, and Tony put a steadying hand on the man’s lower back. Their eyes met for a brief second.

You’re alright. We’re both alright.

The softness that belonged to James vanished from Tony’s eyes however when he glared back at Loki. “Alright, Blitzen, I’m not going to waste time explaining our silly Earth laws to you and I’ll let your little jab slide since we’re all on edge right now. But keep this up and I’m going to kick your ass just on principle. You’re not out there because we don’t even know what we’re facing yet.”

Some of that smarmy thing Loki did with his face eased back as the god’s shoulders drooped and he all but sagged against the edge of the counter, scrubbing a hand over his face. “My accusation may have been… inappropriate. My apologies, Anthony. This witch of yours, she— she unsettles me and I find myself restless if I can do nothing but wait.”

“Join the club, buddy.” Tony sighed, then went back to fiddling with the coffee machine, but this time James batted his hands away, catching onto the fact that Tony was less trying to make coffee and more trying to reassemble the actual coffee machine.

Without anything to do, Tony let himself collapse into one of the chairs. The kitchen remained silent for a little while, James puttering by the counter, Loki probably thinking some deep, godly thoughts, and Tony wishing he could just do something.

His wish was granted a minute later.

“Boss, the recon team just reported in. No sign of Maximoff at the prison nor in the surrounding areas, so they’re expanding their search field. Dr. Strange and Mr. Wong are working on… well, a search algorithm is the best way I can describe it, although when they explained it to me, they used far too many mystical terms.”

Tony tapped nervous fingers against the table and didn’t even pay attention to the cup of coffee James placed next to him. “Okay, so not good news, but not the worst news either. Do they know anything about how she escaped?”

“The information available is insufficient. There didn’t seem to be a forced entry into the cell, nor out
of it. The current theory is that the missing guard allowed her out. Some rudimentary review of the surveillance was conducted, but there are glitches and unexplained malfunctions. Apparently the cameras and trackers are still reporting Maximoff as present in her cell even though she is obviously no longer in the building. However, the technician on site has been unable to identify the issue and I cannot access any of technology remotely.”

Tony’s hand came up to massage the bridge of his nose. “Which means we need to head out there so that both of us are physically on site with our hands on the tech. You said the wizards did a sweep of the prison?”

“Yes, they reported no unusual activity.”

Tony was already getting back up to his feet. “Alright. Can you let Rhodey know I’m heading out and pick out a suit for me? Something comfy and fast?”

“Will do, would you like me to—”

“I’m going with you.”

Tony stopped and looked over at James. He took note of the willful set of that stubbled jaw, of the unyielding determination framed by the icy blue of his eyes. Tony wanted to argue—I’m just going to look at the tech, she isn’t there, and if she is, I don’t want you in the line of fire, James, I won’t be able to live with myself if she gets her hands on you, I can’t, baby, please—but those damn eyes he loved so much pleaded with him and he kept those thoughts to himself.

That was the thing about loving someone so damn much and being loved in return in equal measure. Wanting to protect your loved one didn’t stop them from wanting to protect you and knowing James, even if Tony chose stubbornness over compromise and took off, James would just find his own way to Europe. Probably highjack some poor CEO’s private plane and cause an international incident.

“Belay that order, Fri. Get the Quinjet ready instead, make sure we got some basic supplies, weapons, the usual set up. Loki,” he turned to face the god, “since you said you needed something do to. Guard this place with your life, do you understand? I’m putting the safety of my family, my kids in your hands. Is that enough responsibility for you?”

Loki nodded, an icy resolve coloring his features too. “If she dares show her face here, I’ll squash her like the vermin she is.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” He turned to James then, who stood at attention, waiting for Tony to take the next step. So he did, offering James his outstretched hand, which was taken without hesitation. The strong grip of James’ hand gave Tony the resolve he needed. “You ready to fly, babe?”

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“I have looked through every minute of the footage, but there is this— this hiccup and nothing else,” the man pointed at the blurry image. Mateo Ruiz, approximately forty years of age, carrying on his person one Glock, a taser, and an incapacitant spray the Soldier suspected was far more powerful than standard issue, given the specialized nature of the prison. The assessment came naturally, as the Soldier shared the control with Bucky over their senses and movement, a fluid back-and-forth to a point where Bucky struggled to define the already blurry boundary between them.

Ruiz’ Spanish accent curled around the English words as he explained the technical issue to Tony, who was leaning in closer to watch the screen before them. The computer displayed video
surveillance from Maximoff’s cell, a grainy image of the woman inside, propped up against the pillow on her bed with a bored expression on her face as she thumbed through the pages of a book.

Given that they had both been in that exact spot ten minutes ago and she wasn’t there—the Soldier would have known if she were anywhere nearby—the footage was obviously corrupted.

“It has to be looped. Hell, this is probably footage from days ago,” Tony remarked, a displeased frown marring his face.

“But the computer, everything, it is saying the footage is current.”

“We obviously know it’s not.”

The other man sighed, rubbing a hand over his brow. “Sí, tengo dos ojos también,” he muttered under his breath. Both the Soldier and Tony gave him an unimpressed glance and when the man realized he was understood, his expression turned apologetic, although the tired lines etched into it didn’t dissipate. “Lo siento. This has been a… stressful day, un desastre, but I know this technology,” he waved a frustrated hand at the screens, then used it to itch at the cropped hair over his temples. “It is technology I have maintained for many months, but I do not understand how it is being manipulated. The tracking systems, they are all saying she is inside, that nothing is wrong, but she is not—”

“Hey, hey, easy now. Mateo, right? Can I call you that?” Tony gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder and waited for the man to nod. “Mateo, listen, you have to stay calm for me, okay? Because I’ll need you to walk me through some of this while I take a look. A lot of the tracking systems are based on my tech, sure, but I know you guys made some real improvements to them.”

The Soldier doubted that, but he commended Tony for his effort to curtail the hysterics of this man.

“It’s obvious she got outside help,” Tony continued to speak, “because it doesn’t matter whose tech it is, to manipulate it to this extent requires experts. But we’re experts too, Mateo, so how about you show me where the motherboard is and we’ll take a look at what we can do, yeah?”

The other man, already more settled thanks to Tony’s steady presence, nodded and sprung up to his feet.

“Yes, I would appreciate the assistance, Mr. Stark. Let me get the Warden, however. She said she wanted to accompany us.”

“Sure, of course,” Tony waved him off and the man hurried away, leaving Tony and Bucky with the guards stationed at the door. The Soldier had already assessed their threat level—medium, police and military trained, in possession of a range of weapons—but he deemed them to be of no interest at this moment, choosing to focus on Tony instead. He came close, close enough to lay both hands on Tony’s hips and lean in so that he would only have to whisper to be heard. One of the guards was eyeing them, he could practically feel that gaze, but the Soldier didn’t care about that either. Let them watch.

Tony had been tense since he heard the news, a loaded spring of built-up energy, every inch of him ready for a fight, much like Bucky and the Soldier both, but at least he didn’t shy away from the touch.

“You alright, babe?” Tony whispered and Bucky, unsure how to answer that, settled on a question instead, something that had lingered in his head since the beginning of this mess.

“Do you think it’s Hydra?”
Tony didn’t deny nor did he try to soothe away the worry. He only watched Bucky with those thoughtful, clever eyes, then brushed a lock of hair out of Bucky’s face.

“There’s a good chance it might be them, yeah. I’m sure she had contacts. But we aren’t exactly short on evil organizations that would take advantage of this situation. Hydra has the capability to do this, even with their shrinking numbers, but they’re not the only possibility. Do you think it’s them though?”

Given that they both had access to the same information, this was Tony asking him for his instincts instead.

“It’s them.”

Snakes would always slither back to their pit.

Tony nodded, as if he knew that fact all along, and even through the Soldier’s sharp, heightened state of caution and roiling wrath, a warm curl of satisfaction still found room deep inside Bucky. Tony trusted him, trusted the Soldier’s instincts, which still managed to awe him.

“Are you okay being here?”

Bucky huffed at the question and let the Soldier pull Tony in closer until their foreheads pressed together, brushing his nose against Tony’s in a familiar gesture of tenderness. This infuriating man, still making time in the middle of this crisis to worry about Bucky’s comfort.

“I’m fine,” Bucky replied and he tried to infuse the words with a touch of his usual softness too, but so much of him was the Soldier right now that everything still came out too gruff and too terse. “If something happens, I need to be here.” To protect you, moyo solnishko, my love, my life.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Tony’s face and the man kissed Bucky sweetly on the cheek, just one lingering moment of affection in this cold, unloving place. The moment was over too soon though and Tony pulled away, just in time for the technician to come back, the warden and several more guards in tow.

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An hour later, just as Tony and the technician were getting somewhere in unraveling the mysteries of the surveillance systems, the light flickered and they were plunged into near total darkness.

Bucky instantly took a protective position at Tony’s side, the metal hand resting on Tony’s shoulder while his flesh one inched toward his gun.

“Oh, definitivamente no es bueno,” Mateo muttered somewhere to their left.

“Are we going for a romantic ambience here, Warden?” Tony asked, tone deliberately teasing, but the undercurrent of tension was hard to miss. “Because I hate to break anyone’s heart, but I’m very much taken.”

The warden’s voice carried throughout the room as she addressed them. “I am receiving reports that emergency power is coming online for some parts of the facility.” She made a frustrated noise. “Not quickly enough, however.”

“Yeah, not with the types of people housed in here.”

A handful of magic users in addition to several superpowered villains the Avengers had no choice
but to leave here after a fight. A prison for the worst of the worst, but while the Soldier scoffed at the sentiment, Bucky couldn’t help but admire the attempts to rehabilitate these people. Those efforts however weren’t always successful and the last thing they needed right now were unrepentant magic users on the loose.

Tony must’ve had the same train of thought because Bucky heard a tap-tap-tap of fingers and then the immediate area around them lit up in bright blue from the arc reactor attached to Tony’s shirt.

“Alright, I think this bad boy can hold us over until we figure out why we’re getting power fluxes too. Anyone wanna point me to a control panel?”

“Tony, I don’t like this,” Bucky said, willing his eyes to adjust to the additional light source. “You know this isn’t coincidental.”

“I know, James, trust me, I do,” Tony replied, “but whatever is happening, we can’t let the power go out completely.”

Bucky didn’t have a counter point to that. He wished he did, wished there was something he could say that would convince Tony to forget all this and let Bucky take him home, where it was safe.

But aside from physically throwing Tony over his shoulder— and oh, the Soldier had thought about that plenty— Bucky had no options but to let Tony do his job.

Thankfully, one of the control panels was on the same floor and Tony made quick work of connecting his arc reactor to the prison system— how he did the intricate wire work in the light of the warden’s flashlight and nothing else, Bucky didn’t know, but Tony’s genius always found new ways to amaze him.

Tony was talking soothing nonsense to both the reactor and the system— come on, sweetheart, work for me, there we go, just like that, we’re almost done, I promise— and then there was a resounding click and the lights flickered back to life.

Tony turned to the warden. “What’s the status now?”

Whatever the woman heard in her earpiece must’ve been good news. “Power restored. All prisoners accounted for.”

“Well, except one slippery witch.” Tony looked around, hands on hips in a determined sort of stance, then nodded resolutely. “Alright, Mateo, my friend, I think we did all we could with the computers. I need to check out the actual camera in her cell now. You stay back at the console and see if anything changes once I start messing with it.”

One of the guards led them back over to the cell and Bucky placed the ladder he carried against the wall so Tony could climb up and reach the camera pointed at Maximoff’s bed. The camera wasn’t the only tech here, a whole array of tiny nodes placed around it, the entire arrangement encased in what Bucky believed to be vibranium, supposedly the only substance that would protect it from tampering.

Apparently not.

While Tony examined the equipment, the Soldier walked the short perimeter of the cell, examining the walls, each corner, the bed, the desk and dresser. His eyes scanned the other small room attached - a simple toilet, sink and a shower stall.

Too damn generous.
The Soldier certainly wasn’t pleased that their enemy was living in anything akin to comfort, and even if Bucky could acknowledge the need for the good guys to be better than the people they fought against, that it was moral and right to treat even the worst of the worst with humanity and compassion, the Soldier would’ve been perfectly content to see Maximoff in chains in some dark, dirty dungeon, rotting away for all eternity, and Bucky was hard-pressed to disagree.

Tony was murmuring soft things to the tech again and Friday was running sweeps of the place too, although her capabilities remained limited given that Tony didn’t want to release her into the faulty tech until they knew how everything was corrupted in the first place.

“Alright,” Tony declared as he carefully pulled the entire panel out of the wall. “Friday, take note of everything that you can and we’ll take the hardware home.” He glanced over his shoulder and down at Bucky. “Don’t know about you, but home sounds pretty good right about now.”

“We should’ve never left home,” Bucky muttered and when Tony swayed a little too precariously on the ladder, he took several long strides to put himself behind Tony and hold him in place. His hand may have landed right on Tony’s ass to do so, but that still counted as helping and Tony huffed, just a sliver of amusement bleeding through into the reaction, and it sounded like heaven in this godforsaken place.

*It’ll be fine. We are going to go home, stay in the protective bubble of the Compound, and wait until one of the magical heavy-hitters brings the witch down.*

*Permanently down.*

Bucky couldn’t disagree with the Soldier’s desire for a gruesome end either.

Bucky helped Tony off the ladder and the man dusted himself off unnecessarily as he looked around.

“Anything else we missed?”

Instead of replying, Bucky’s eyes swept the room, noting once more the books thrown on the floor, plain clothing spilling out of the dresser, a paper cup. Nothing of interest, nothing that could be forged into a weapon.

Something caught his eye this time as he scanned the small plastic table next to the bed. The item’s gleaming, smooth surface didn’t fit in with the rest of the cell and he came closer to investigate, Tony following behind him.

“Do you know what that is?”

Tony cocked his head to the side as he examined the thing too. “Looks like a portable speaker. Actually, looks like one of our models. Friday, anything on the scans?”

“No, the device is inactive. No signals in or out. And you are correct Boss, this is SI tech. Model SP5.2 to be precise.”

With utmost care, Bucky reached out and took the small, cylindrical device into his metal hand, picking up nothing but glossy surface of plastic with the nanotech sensors in his fingertips. The speaker was black, with the exception of one silver button on top; he’d seen something similar in Peter’s room, although the boy’s was bigger and colored in bright reds and blues. He flipped it over and found the Stark Industries logo in small but clear print on the bottom.

Tony saw it too and made a face. “Talk about insult to injury. Whoever gave her that probably didn’t realize she had an entire vendetta against me.”
“Surprised she didn’t break it into little pieces.”

“They’re nigh indestructible. Meant to be portable, for people that travel a lot or who have little kids that like to knock things around.”

Bucky rolled the thing between his fingers. “Can someone use it as a communication device?”

Tony mulled it over, chewing on his bottom lip. “Well, to be honest, anything can be rigged as anything these days if you have the right tools and the right brains. I built a suit of armor out of a rocket, remember?”

“You’re a genius though.”

“But not the only one. Still, turning this into anything useful would be beyond her capabilities.”

“What about the missing guard?”

“Possible, although nothing about his background screamed tech expert.” Tony waved dismissively at the speaker. “Let’s take it with us. Friday can do a more thorough scan at home; she’d be able to tell right away if it was tampered with.”

Bucky obeyed and stuck the thing into his pocket. They met up with Mateo, the warden, and the rest of the guards when they left the cell, but before they could attempt to leave, the warden demanded a thorough inventory of everything Tony was taking with him. Tony was doing his best to cajole and find a middle ground with her, but Bucky found himself growing more agitated by the second.

They needed to leave, now, and the sense of foreboding sat heavy in Bucky’s stomach as time ticked by, as he watched Tony chatter away in rapid-fire Spanish with Mateo, then back to English, trying to appease the warden and her need for control over the situation. Finally she acquiesced after a five-minute long argument, waving Tony off and striding away to speak to several of the guards. By the sound of her quiet, but stern French, she was ordering the guards to help escort them out.

Tony offered Mateo another pat on the shoulder and the man gave him a murmur of apology in turn; thankfully, that was more than enough to satisfy the bare minimum of politeness and Tony was back at Bucky’s side, watching as two of the guards picked up the boxes full of tech.

“I swear, if they drop something, I am going to stage a riot.” Tony said under his breath and winced when one man tilted a box precariously, but then Tony’s expression perked up and he looked up at Bucky. “Oh, do you still have that speaker with you? Here, let me stick it in the box with the cameras so I don’t forget about it.”

Bucky took the speaker out and placed it into Tony’s hand, taking a lingering moment to savor the warmth of Tony’s palm. Tony’s fingers curled around the cylinder; he smiled up at Bucky, brown eyes crinkling at the corners, and even now, even here, they were still full of love.

Tony stepped away and Bucky opened his mouth to ask about starting up the Quinjet, but the words got lost when Tony went still mid-step and the guards halted too.

“Tony?”

Tony turned stiffly and the first thing Bucky noticed was those pretty brown eyes wide with shock.

The second was red, sickening vile red streaming out of the cylinder and into Tony’s chest and before Bucky could even take a breath, before he could move, Tony let out a strangled cry and the bright red energy exploded out of the cylinder with enough force to nearly knock Bucky off his feet,
flooding his vision with that horrible scarlet luminescence.

The others were shouting now, worries and barked orders, but it all became static in Bucky’s ears as he rushed to Tony’s side, still blinking away the red dancing before his eyes. Tony, who was wrapped up in tendrils of pulsating magic and falling to his knees like a stone, terrified eyes still locked on Bucky.

The speaker was still clenched in his Tony’s stiff fingers and Bucky grabbed for it as soon as he was close enough, crushed it with his metal hand, tiny pieces of circuitry and plastic showering the floor below. He tossed it all aside, but nothing changed because the red, swirling magic, it remained with Tony, dancing in agitation around him, sinking straight into his skin.

“Tony, oh god.” He repeated Tony’s name like a prayer as he scrambled for his watch next, pressed its face over Tony’s chest, hoping, begging for the reactor to work, to repel this horrid thing, but the reactor was useless too and Bucky let out a wounded noise, suddenly faced with the futility of his efforts. The watch dropped to the floor—useless, everything was useless—and Bucky’s hands that came up to cradle Tony’s face, as if he alone could hold Tony together.

“Oh god, Tony, sweetheart—”

Tony made another wounded noise, pain and fear twisting his beautiful face. He looked down at his chest, the movement stiff and slow, and he choked, as if struggling to pull in air.

“Friday!” the Soldier within Bucky roared, overcoming the sheer terror taking hold of him just long enough to act. “Get Strange and the others here now!”

“I’ve already con— ted— em—” Friday’s voice was swallowed up by static, then the world around them seemed to flicker as the red overtook Tony’s body entirely, thick bands of red that Bucky couldn’t feel against his fingers, couldn’t do anything to stop—

The red exploded outwards one more time, knocking everyone but Bucky to the floor and taking out half of the lights in the room.

“James…” Tony wheezed, eyes now wet with unshed tears as the red began to disappear, sinking into every inch of him. “Oh god... James, I—”

“Tony, honey, no, no, please, stay with me, help is on the way—”

A pained whimper and Tony’s eyes fluttered closed as he collapsed into Bucky’s arms.

His whole world collapsed in that moment, it seemed.

Oh god, no, no, please.

Bucky held Tony tightly against him, hid his face in the shock of brown hair, and pressed the metal fingers against Tony’s neck, wishing, praying—

A thready heartbeat came through, just barely there, but enough to be picked up by the sensors, and it was something. It was enough and Bucky needed to focus, needed to get Tony out of here—

Someone was shouting for him and as his name registered, something else filtered through and the Soldier took over, suddenly and completely, as a familiar stench filled the world around them.

He looked up at the warden who was trying to get his attention.
“We are getting word of intruders. The other prisoners are locked down, but the security on this unit has been compromised.” She growled, her Glock already in her hands, eyes darting from point to point, a soldier ready to fight. “Whoever these bastards are—”

“It’s Hydra.”

“How do you—”

“Doesn’t matter. Get to a safe location, don’t try to fight your way through them.”

“We are armed and trained—”

“There’ll be too many.” Instincts kicked in and the Soldier was on his feet, Tony cradled in his arms — don’t think about how lifeless his body is, don’t think about it, just move—

“Get everyone out. Avengers are on their way.”

A loud explosion rocked the ground beneath them, the sound and force coming from the entrance point of their unit. Hydra, beating down on their door. The warden’s eyes lingered in the direction of the impact for just one moment, then she made an angry, roaring sound and began barking orders in French, Spanish, and Dutch, a flurry of words ordering her men to find their way to the other units and go into lockdown.

The Soldier watched them file through the back door into the underground passage way that spanned the entire prison and it was only Tony’s voice in his head that stopped him from pushing them all aside and marching out first.

Tony would kill him if he prioritized their own safety like that, but thankfully, everyone was efficient, well-trained, and the Soldier didn’t have to wait more than thirty seconds before everyone was almost out, Mateo one of the last to go as he hurried out with as many tech pieces as his arms could carry.

The second explosion hit, even closer this time, making everything shake again, the plaster raining down from the quivering walls and the Soldier grit his teeth, holding Tony tighter against him. Where the hell were the Avengers?

The warden was last and when she turned to look at him, the Soldier hesitated no more, sprinting towards her and the exit, and that was precisely when the world around him and Tony erupted into fire and pain.

Chapter End Notes

*Sí, tengo dos ojos también* - Yes, I have two eyes too
*Lo siento* - I'm sorry
*Definitivamente no es bueno* - This is definitely not good.

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Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

ANGST, Part 2/???

Additional warning: there is a brief description of a gory scene about mid-way through the chapter. The prose isn't particularly explicit and it's brief, but worth mentioning in case that's not someone's cup of tea today (and kinda sets the tone for the chapter, doesn't it?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky brushes a gentle hand through Tony’s hair, soft strands spilling through his fingers just as the rays of light spill through the window. It’s bright, too bright, but Bucky doesn’t pay any mind to the light building around him, pays no attention to the heat carried on the wings of those sun rays. His eyes are for Tony and Tony alone, who slumbers next to him peacefully.

“Tony, sweetheart, wake up for me,” Bucky whispers, but Tony doesn’t stir. The edges of Bucky’s vision are clouded now, something dark crowding in to smother the light; the heat though, the heat remains, expands, overwhelms, and suddenly it’s difficult to take a breath. But maybe it’s only Tony; after all, he always takes Bucky’s breath away. It can’t be the darkness and smoke edging closer and closer and closer. Bucky tries to take another breath and fails, his lungs filling with ashes and heat.

Another caress, another soft, “Tony, please,” but his world, his Tony, remains still. Bucky’s hand slides across a rosy cheek, but it comes away red, drenched in blood, and as Bucky’s horror mounts, first cold, then unbearably hot, as his chest expands with infinite fear, as everything within him reaches its breaking point, so does the world around him as it erupts in burning clouds of fiery dust and death.

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Bucky coughed as thick smoke clawed its way down his throat. He willed his damn lungs to start working as he blinked open his eyes and that was a struggle too, a fight against the stinging, burning smoke forcing its way into every crevice. There was fire, everywhere he could see, its light obscured by the smoke and destruction. His ears were still ringing from the explosion and he coughed again, tasting blood.

Blood.

The body beneath him, shielded with his own from the fire and the slab of ceiling that collapsed all around them.

Tony didn’t stir as he laid beneath him.

Oh god, no, please no.

Bucky shifted to take some of his weight off, felt more than heard plaster and concrete rolling off his back. The overturned metal table next to them acted as a meager shield against the heat now, but it must’ve protected them well enough during the actual explosion. The memory of diving for it,
overturning the damn thing, and then curling protectively over Tony as their world exploded, filtered in through the images of blood and smoke.

Bucky blinked his eyes again as the world spun for a moment, as everything came in and out of focus. He must’ve hit his head at some point, although he felt no pain now.

Ignoring the nausea, he leaned in closer to see through the smoke, supported on one arm while the other reached for Tony’s face. His touch smeared blood across still-warm skin and a deep gash down Tony’s temple kept oozing more; there was soot and dirt everywhere, more cuts and bruises on every inch of exposed skin. More blood.

Bucky keened, a wounded noise of a desperate animal, but the chaos swallowed it whole, and when Bucky called out Tony’s name, over and over, the destruction around them claimed that too. Tony didn’t stir, no matter how much Bucky pleaded for him, and Bucky trailed trembling fingers down to press against the pulse point on Tony’s neck for the second time.

It was all too much. Fire and smoke and magic. And then there was Bucky himself, pathetic, so pathetic, he couldn’t even protect Tony, his own damn fault if he lost the one good thing in his life—

He’s alive.

It was the Soldier’s voice that cut through the panic as that struggling heartbeat tapped out a weak staccato against his fingers.

Oh god, he’s alive.

He’s alive, he’s alive, Bucky kept chanting to himself, because that was all that held him together, his only truth in this singular moment, time stretched out into infinity by his traumatized, terrified mind.

The smoke, the fire, the heat. Tony’s heartbeat.

Their steps, the Soldier warned too, but even though Bucky knew it as well as the Soldier did, knew the enemy was getting closer, he couldn’t force himself to move, not when Tony was so damn still beneath him. Bucky whimpered again as the terrified thoughts raced through his addled mind and pressed in closer until he could hide his face in the crook of Tony’s neck, wishing that he could press in so close that he could feel Tony’s heartbeat against his cheek.

What was Bucky supposed to do without him? How was he supposed to fight? How could he stand up when the man he loved could be slipping away, right through his fingers? What if he took one step away and that heartbeat just stopped—

No, he couldn’t move away, he couldn’t do a damn thing, not when he wasn’t worth anything without Tony—

A violent sob shook his frame, but Bucky couldn’t even hear himself weep, couldn’t feel the tears sliding down his face over the heat of the fire crowding in around them.

I can’t do this.

You must. He needs us both.

I can’t.

You can and you will. Let go of your fear. Let go of the control.
Bucky pulled in an unsteady breath, choking on the smoke again, but clarity descended through the sting of tears. The Soldier was right. Tony needed him to be strong. Bucky had to let go of this terror if he wanted them both to come home.

He pulled back, swiped a trembling hand over Tony’s cheek again, smearing that blood as his own expression twisted in agony. Tony was always so full of life, his expressions ever-changing, every emotion so beautifully painted on his face for those who deserved to see it. To see him so lifeless… Bucky choked on another sob, then leaned in to press his lips to Tony’s forehead.

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” he whispered, tasting blood and ashes, “I promise everything’s going to be alright.”

We’ll make them all pay, for every drop of blood spilled today.

“I’ll bring you home, sweetheart.”

He held himself up above Tony’s body to take one last look at the man he loved and then with a final exhale, Bucky closed his eyes and pushed away the desperate fear; he fought against the despair, the grief, and every bit of love that made this pain so unbearable. He pushed every ounce of goodness within him back, until it was all shrouded in darkness, safe in the deepest recesses of his mind.

Ensuring nothing would harm Tony further, Bucky moved away and slowly stood up to his full height, plaster and dust cascading down. There was no pain now and with every weakness and fear, with every sliver of love and tenderness and mercy pushed aside, the empty spaces inside him were taken over by an eager, ready Soldier, infusing him with a chilling calm he remembered so well.

His eyes moved from point to point with a purpose now, noting the slowly clearing smoke, the damage done to the room, the closed door barring entry into the underground passageway. Smart woman, that warden, protecting her crew and keeping Hydra from the other prisoners, even if it meant sacrificing two men. The Soldier didn’t envy her the choice even if he resented her for it.

His ears picked up the blare of distant sirens. The crackle of fire. Footsteps. Eyes tracked the shadows moving closer. The enemy approached, he could sense them, he could pick out their numbers, approximate location, movement. He already knew their potential weapons. A predictable enemy, monsters and snakes who carried that same, familiar stench. He wondered what deal they made with the witch to get them here. Her freedom and Tony Stark’s life in return for their prized weapon?

The enemy was slowed by their own destruction, the same fire and smoke that filled the Soldier’s lungs keeping them at bay momentarily and the Soldier hoped they would all burn, but if they didn’t, if they got close enough to the man he loved…

Their prized weapon was about to teach them all a lesson. Shame, however, the Soldier decided as he exhaled once more and lost the last remaining bits of whatever one deemed humanity, that none of them would live to appreciate that lesson. Because when everything that made up Bucky Barnes, the man who laughed and loved and lived, when those parts of him were pushed aside, all that remained was the unmitigated, unadulterated rage of the Winter Soldier.

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Rhodey’s heart hammered away so violently that he could feel its beat down to his bones and by the way his limbs tingled with nerves and adrenaline, the War Machine suit was likely the only damn thing keeping him together and upright.
Calling on his training, he tried to push the worry away even as the burning building came into view.

He needed to focused. What did they know so far? A distress signal from Friday. Attack on Tony, one of a magical nature, Maximoff’s calling card, then on the prison itself. Hydra. Several explosions, two of which decimated the entrance to the reinforced unit where Maximoff was housed and the third one bringing down the actual building.

The same unit with Tony and Barnes inside.

*Don’t think about it, just focus on the mission*— but how could he when there was so much damn fire? Rhodey’s stomach clenched at the sight, dread flaring up and out despite his best efforts.

Hope materialized beside him a moment later and he could hear several Iron Man suits stomping their way through the portal, lining up to await orders.

“Any sign of them?” she asked.

“No. Whatever happened scrambled the signals so badly that even Friday can’t get in there. The last thing she was able to get was an approximate number of Hydra goons, a status report from the warden, and a confirmation that Tony and Barnes didn’t make it through into the tunnel.”

Strange stepped through the portal last and Hope spared him one glance, then examined the building.

“I’ll go in as recon. The suit will keep me protected and this way I’ll avoid detection, no matter how many of them there are.”

“Affirmative,” Rhodey talked as he sprinted alongside her, sparing every other second to study the scans fed to him by Friday. “As soon as we know what we’re facing, I’ll go in too— wait, who the hell—”

Life signals flared on the HUD, which the others must’ve picked up too, because just as Rhodey did, they all halted abruptly and pointed weapons of choice at the figure approaching. Rhodey swore if it was some Hydra goon crawling out of the fire, he’d shoot first and ask no fucking questions.

He raised a hand, the repulsor whirring to life, but when some of the smoke cleared, Rhodey wished it *was* Hydra for all the unbearable dread that crawled up his spine.

Barnes was walking through the smoke, carrying in his arms—

“Oh, god. *Tony.*” Rhodey was suddenly a decade younger, that same terrified man who lost his best friend in a firefight in the middle of a desert.

He propelled himself forward, taking long, heavy strides to meet Barnes halfway. Horror turned to despair as the details came into view.

*Fuck,* they were both covered in blood, *so much blood*—

Barnes held Tony even tighter against him as Rhodey approached, a protective hold impossible to misinterpret, and this close, Rhodey could see Barnes’ near-lifeless eyes staring back him, a stark icy blue against the soot and blood marring his face.

“Barnes, report!” *Please don’t say that he’s dead, please*—

“Incapacitated by Maximoff’s magic, then injured further in the explosion. Weak pulse. Burns, cuts, a hit to the head, possible concussion.”
Weak pulse. Weak pulse. Weak pulse.

He’s alive, oh god, Tony’s alive. Now the suit really was holding him up because Rhodey was certain his knees would’ve buckled otherwise. His best friend still had fight in him, he was alive. That was all he needed to know; everything else they could deal with.

“Friday, alert the medical team. Strange,” he looked over at the mage, “take them back to the Compound.” He spared Barnes a moment of concern too because even from here, he could see too much blood. “Get yourself checked out as well.”

Barnes didn’t acknowledge the order, only moved that steely, unnerving glare from Rhodey to Strange. To his credit, Strange didn’t flinch, just turned around and activated his ring again to summon the portal. Hating to halt this for even a moment, but suddenly realizing they were running low on intel, Rhodey called out again as Barnes began to move.

“Barnes, wait!”

The man stopped, but didn’t turn around, simply waited for the rest of Rhodey’s request.

“Our signals are a damn mess. Do you know what we’re going into? Friday’s last read gave us at least two dozen Hydra agents, but who the hell knows how many there are—”

“One.”

“What? What do you mean—”

“I mean,” Barnes growled, “that there is one left.”

That was all Barnes offered before he simply tilted his chin at Strange, muttered a stern command in Russian, and Strange must’ve understood, either the words or the context, because he expanded the portal. Barnes didn’t hesitate to step through, cradling Tony’s lifeless form— no, no, Tony was alive, Barnes said so, and Friday too, her scans confirmed— while the Sorcerer paused to meet Rhodey’s eyes. Their expressions reflected the same frustration. Too many damn questions and not nearly enough answers, but they had the one answer that truly mattered right now.

“Go with them,” Rhodey ordered, “we can handle taking out some Hydra trash, but Tony, he was attacked with magic first, so they’ll need you. Just— just make sure that Tony’s—” Rhodey choked on his best friend’s name suddenly, felt the panic rise to force the breath right out of him. He ruthlessly tamped it down. “Do what you can for Tony. Please.”

Strange gave him a solemn nod and Rhodey was thankful the doctor’s typical snark was absent. Not today, not right now, not when there was a building in ruins, dangerous prisoners plotting their escape, Hydra crawling out of their dirty little holes, and his best friend— no, don’t go there, Rhodes. Focus. Compartmentalize. One battle at a time.

Strange stepped through and the portal disappeared, leaving Rhodey with Hope and the Iron Legion. They moved quickly, approaching the building, while Friday supplied them both with whatever readings she could; whatever disrupted her sensors was losing its efficacy now, but not quickly enough.

“Colonel, I’ve made contact with the warden.”

“Get her on the line, Friday.”

“Colonel Rhodes,” a tinny voice came through the speakers. The second part of the woman’s
greeting was swallowed up by static, then what sounded like a painful cough, but when the woman spoke again, the interference was gone. “We have secured the other units. My team and the prisoners are safe; minor injuries sustained in the explosion. Hydra must’ve only had access to Maximoff’s unit; the others were not compromised. What is the status on your end?”

A small sigh of relief escaped Rhodey’s lips. In this shitstorm, he’d take every bit of good news he could get. “We’re approaching the building right now. Barnes and Stark managed to get out, they’ve left the scene for medical treatment. Do your people require it as well?”

“We are fine. No critical injuries. But we are awaiting instructions and ready to fight if necessary. These Hydra scoundrels will pay—”

“Stand down. We need to survey the situation before I issue further orders. Your primary mission is to ensure the rest of the prison remains secure. Local first responders—fire, police, the whole nine yards—are already on their way; they will be in to assist as soon as we have an all-clear on Hydra.”

“Understood,” she replied and the comm went quiet.

As Rhodey watched the smoke pour out of the ruined structure, his hands itched to wrap around someone’s throat, squeeze the light out of the bastards who did this, and maybe it didn’t make him a good man, but he intended to do exactly that when he and Hope finally entered the rubble. These bastards went after the people Rhodey loved and he was ready to destroy them in turn.

“Friday, keep an eye out for life signs, report immediately. Based on what we know, the only ones in here now are enemy combatants.”

Using the same tech they used to help with the fires on the West Coast, the War Machine suit cleared some of the smoke and Friday kept scanning, but her sensors kept coming up with nothing.

Her frustration was palpable and Rhodey was just about to placate her, tell her she was doing her best given the situation, but then they got further in and when they finally reached the room from which the distress call originated, Rhodey realized with muted horror that Friday’s readings weren’t the issue.

Bile crawled up his throat and suddenly he wished for the smoke to return so it could cover the carnage before him.

There were bodies everywhere, roughly two dozen—twenty-seven, Friday supplied, and even her voice had that same sense of horror attached.

“Oh god,” Hope exhaled beside him, pressing the back of her hand against her mouth, an instinctual gesture even though she was wearing the Wasp Mask. He could see through the tinted window as her eyes scanned the area. “Jesus, was this—was this Barnes?”

“Yeah, it was.” Rhodey swallowed, willing his stomach to settle.

Several bodies were right next to them, necks twisted at unnatural angles. As Rhodey made his way around the rubble, Hope following along, scanning and muttering horrified words under her breath, he noted others. Several had their skulls caved in, others had bullet wounds—forehead, temple, heart, the same precise locations, a signature left behind by a perfect marksman.

They came on another one, and this was when Rhodey finally had to avert his eyes. He’d seen awful shit before, but damn, it never got easier. The agent, man or woman, he couldn’t tell underneath the bulky uniform, laid crooked and twisted on the floor, a hole in their stomach from which the organs—what was left of them, all in tatters—were spilling out. Hope made a choked noise next to him.
That explained why Barnes’ metal arm was coated in blood.

The bodies were contained in a small radius, surrounding the epicenter where Barnes likely had Tony’s unconscious body. All the man had to do was wait for Hydra to come for him and then he took them all out, one by one. Twenty-seven in total. All dead—

Nearly all dead, Rhodey amended, as one of the bodies twitched and groaned.

Barnes’ words slotted into his mind, finally making sense.

Hope was already heading over, gingerly stepping over another body, this one definitely dead by the looks of that godawful angle of its neck. Hope approached the alive agent with caution, her right hand out in front of her, ready to fire at the first sign of trouble.

“Jesus christ, Barnes, what the hell…” she whispered as she came nearer and Rhodey stomped over, the suit too loud, too unwieldy in this awful, enclosed space, but there was no way in hell Rhodey was taking it off. Still too much fire and debris. Too much blood.

He leaned over to see what Hope was looking at and his lips curled in disgust at the sight, nausea flooding him all over again.

“He ripped out a chunk of the jaw to make sure they didn’t bite down on the cyanide pill,” he explained.

“Effective, but fuck, this is…” She didn’t finish and Rhodey wasn’t sure he had the appropriate words to describe this either. He’d seen war, fought in enough of them, but nowadays so much of his battles were in conference rooms and behind podiums. Even when they weren’t, they were fought with armored suits and energy weapons and magic, so it had been a long time since he’d seen something so… so primal. Blood and guts and horror.

“We can take this one to the first responders when they arrive,” Rhodey said, “patch the bastard up, then keep whoever this is for interrogations. I doubt we’ll get much, but who the hell knows… Barnes left this one alive for a reason.”

The prone, twitching agent groaned again, but the blood streaming down that face, the disfigured jawline, it incited no pity out of Rhodey.

He grunted, an effort to keep the bile down and added, “Is it fucked up that I wouldn’t mind letting Barnes be the one to interrogate?”

“I doubt he’ll follow the Accords protocols. Or any protocols for that matter,” Hope remarked, but she didn’t sound all that broken up about it.

When Rhodey looked down at the disfigured Hydra agent again, all he could think about was Tony’s lifeless, blood-covered body. “Maybe I’ll let that slide just this one time.”

If anything happened to Tony, if he— don’t say it, don’t think it— no, forget Barnes, Rhodey would be in there himself to tear this worthless snake apart.

Hope eyed him carefully and he wasn’t sure what it was that she heard in his voice— oh, he knew, he knew, but giving form to those wretched words might just kill him too— but in a span of a breath, her shoulders squared and she held her head high, her chin jutting forward in stubborn determination.

“Go check on Tony,” she all but ordered, “I got this from here. With Hydra neutralized, this is just a clean-up effort. Local help is on the way, I’ll give the warden the all-clear, and both teams can assist
me in putting out the fire, making sure the rest of the prisoner are secure, and cataloguing the
damage. Any intel we recover I’ll pass on to you right away.”

She stopped to scan the surrounding area again and Rhodey watched her carefully. Although she
tried to hide it well, he saw that stubborn strength waver in the face of so much death, and in that
moment, she reminded him so much of Tony. Brilliant, strong, but a businesswoman, a scientist, a
civilian. Not a damn soldier, but here she was anyways, stuck fighting someone else’s war. She took
on the role of a leader so effortlessly, possessing a remarkable talent of making people listen and
heed her words; Rhodey suspected some of this was natural charm and some was a skill learned from
living a life of a woman in a man’s world. That sort of thing hardened you, forced you to be clever,
to stay ten steps ahead just to keep up. He couldn’t relate to her situation exactly, but the color of his
skin meant he could relate all the same.

But no matter how brave, how clever, how tough deep down inside, she wasn’t a soldier and
Rhodey should’ve been stronger, he should’ve said ‘no’ to her right then and there. It was his job to
clean up this horrendous mess, but—

Tony was out there, hurt— but alive, he was alive— and Rhodey just needed to check, he just
needed to know—

“Hope, I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t do that, Jim. Just make sure our lovable idiot is okay.” She was strong enough to give
him an understanding smile, even when they stood in the midst of destruction. “I’ll deal with
everything else. It’s my job too.”

“I’ll be back as quickly as I can, I promise.”

She waved him off and Rhodey thanked her, for more than just this simple support. By the time he
said his last word, there was already a portal, courtesy of a brutally efficient Friday already in contact
with someone on the other side. She must’ve been just as eager to take Rhodey home.

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Rhodey stepped through the portal and into their MedBay, the magical portal depositing him right
outside the room set up for Tony. The War Machine suit disassembled around him at record speed
and he jumped out, not bothering to order Friday to move the thing out of the way as he darted into
the room. There were others in the hallway outside, but his mind barely registered their presence and
certainly not their identity; all he cared about was seeing Tony, who was already lying in the hospital
bed, cleaner now, less bloodied and out of those dirty clothes, but still unconscious.

Banner, Strange, several of their on-site doctors, as well as a group of sorcerers were working
throughout the room; Barnes himself was in the furthest corner, as out of the way as possible without
actually being outside; he was pacing back and forth like an agitated animal in its cage, chest heaving
on each breath, hands clenching, and the anger was palpable, pouring off him in waves, the sort that
could kill— did kill— anyone in his way.

Rhodey only spared him a moment before facing the chaos of bodies and voices. “What’s the
status?” he shouted over the noise and Banner was the one to spare him a half-second glance before
going back to his monitor.

“Physically, he’s stable. There are several lacerations, minor burns, a mild concussion. We’re
scanning for internal damage more thoroughly as we speak. As for the magic—”
“We are working on containment, identification, and extraction,” Strange added, terse, not bothering to look away from the book before him. He barked out an order to a doctor— no, that was another sorcerer— who scurried off through a portal at the other end of the room, presumably back to one of the Sanctums, to bring Strange whatever magical trinket he requested.

Rhodey barely bit back a retort at the obvious dismissal; he wanted to demand more information, but it was better to admit he was out of his depth here. He was useless. Seeing Tony like this turned him into a scared young man instead of a hardened Colonel and he wasn’t sure he could tell up from down right now.

Because there was no more room in the crowned space, Rhodey came to stand next to Barnes. His own insides were squirming with terror and premature grief, same as they had since the moment Friday’s distress call came through, but Barnes’ anger must’ve fed into his own too because Rhodey could feel something dark clawing its way up his throat now, right alongside that heart-wrenching fear.

“What the hell happened out there?” he said, his voice unnecessarily gruff from the effort of forcing back down a furious scream, this angry, vile thing that threatened to escape him.

Barnes stopped his frenetic pacing, but it did nothing for that rigid stance, the crossed arms, the way Barnes’ eyes were nearly blank as they refused to move away from Tony’s prone form.

Everything about this man still screamed fury, danger, death, but those cold eyes were still the most terrifying part of him.

“Maximoff rigged a piece of SI tech with her magic. It was activated by Tony’s touch; it incapacitated him and the ambush quickly followed. Device must’ve been the signal for Hydra. They used the explosions to get inside.” His nostrils flared and Rhodey could see the clench of his jaw. “Proklyatye svolochi, those cowardly pieces of shit. They all deserve to burn, kazhdaju skotinu razorvut sam za eto—” he nearly roared, a violent sound ripping its way out, and then suddenly Barnes turned to slam the metal fist into the wall behind him.

The entire room jumped, wary eyes pointed in his direction, while Barnes stared impassively at his fist buried it in the drywall while dust and paint chips fluttered down.

Rhodey glared at everyone else, a silent order to get back to work, but then his ire was on the soldier himself. “Control yourself, this isn’t helping.”

“Helping?” Barnes growled again as he pulled his arm back, the timber of his voice so low that it turned into a rumble, and finally, that chilling cold in his eyes turned into piercing daggers aimed at Rhodey. “Where the hell were you and your help?”

“Don’t turn this on me. We did our best to get through—”

“We were left alone out there!”

“The prison is in the middle of nowhere. We needed a portal, which wasn’t working—”

“I don’t care.”

“—and as soon as one did, we were there. You’re the one who left behind a scene straight out of the slasher film.”

Barnes took a menacing step forward, the anger bouncing back and forth between them taking on an almost physical quality now. Rhodey could feel its soot-covered, smoke-laced tendrils lashing out
“I don’t regret a fuckin’ thing.” Barnes snarled in his face. “I was protecting him and I’d do it again. I’ll kill a hundred more—”

“Barnes, listen—”

“Neutralize the threat. That was the mission. I did what I had to—”

“I’m not blaming you for what you did—”

“Sure as hell sounds like it!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me, soldier, I am not taking you task over that.”

“Good, because if you weren’t late, I wouldn’t have had to slaughter those pieces of shit in the first place—”

“Don’t. You know I would never leave Tony behind. You two were the ones who decided you’d be fine without back-up—”

“It was your damn recon team that fucked up the intel—”

“Both of you, stop!” Strange shouted at them from his corner, sharp gaze reprimanding them both, but that wasn’t enough to push back the anger roiling inside Rhodey. He wanted to scream.

“This isn’t the place,” Strange added. “You two need to leave and let us do our job.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Barnes declared, turning that murderous glare on the sorcerer, “I’m not leaving Tony.”

“Neither am I. I still haven’t gotten a single answer—”

“Jesus christ,” Strange let out a frustrated noise and pinched the bridge of his nose as he muttered under his breath, “standing there demanding answers, like every other fucking family, I swear to god — we are working on it!”

“I’m not letting Tony out of my sight—”

“I need to know what the hell happened—”

“Enough!”

That voice, on the other hand, had them all go still. Rhodey’s eyes were drawn to Banner, to the green shadows marking the angles of the man’s face.

The doctor however seemed to be in precisely the control he desired as dark green eyes went from Rhodey to Barnes and then back to Rhodey again.

“Both of you, out,” he growled, and somehow, Banner’s command was intimidating enough to keep even Barnes silent now. “Colonel Rhodes,” Banner continued, voice deceptively calm, “we need time and space to work. I assume you have work as well, what with the dead Hydra agents, a team of first responders needing directions, and a prison full of dangerous criminals with a hole blown into it. So please, go do your job. And you,” he jabbed a finger in Barnes’ direction, “you are covered in blood, guts, and who the hell knows what else. Tony has open wounds, do you want him to go into sepsis? Take a shower, clean yourself up, and when you’re ready — when I tell you you’re ready,
then you can come back.”

How could he expect Rhodey to leave Tony like this though, when Tony was so pale and small and so damn defenseless on that bed—

“I won’t let anything happen to him, I promise,” Banner added and his tone was softer this time, sympathetic. Some of the green in his features receded too, but no one in that room was foolish enough to underestimate the good doctor now. “Strange and I are here. Tony is safe. And if anyone other than you two walks through that door? They’ll have the Hulk to contend with. So go, please. Let us do our jobs. Let us help Tony.”

Banner’s words made sense, Rhodey knew this, the logical, stoic soldier in him knew that, but the terrified 18-year-old seeing the lifeless body of his brother didn’t—

He pushed and pushed against the grief until that part of him was buried too. “I’ll head back out and check in with Hope. Please keep me updated.”

Bruce nodded, then looked pointedly in Barnes’ direction; the man still hadn’t moved, eyes now firmly on Tony.

“Barnes, come on,” Rhodey said, softer this time too, already regretting letting his anger slip. Of all the people, Barnes did not deserve Rhodey’s ire. He saved Tony, did what he had to, sacrificed a part of his own humanity to keep those snakes away. Hydra would’ve taken Tony, used him, killed him if he wasn’t useful enough. No, Barnes brought Tony home and Rhodey would be grateful for that for the rest of his life.

He studied Barnes again and this time realized that although most of the blood covering Barnes wasn’t his own, that was definitely a bullet wound in the man’s right shoulder. The combat suit was in tatters and the back had been clearly burned too. The hair at the back of Barnes’ head was matted with blood and other cuts and bruises, some healing, some still in need of attention, littered the man’s body as well. “Swing by Medical, Sergeant, that’s an order.”

Barnes was still watching Tony, eyes tracking the nurse who was inserting a needle into Tony’s arm and then Strange, who was trying to squeeze in between the wall and the bed, presumably so he could get closer to Tony’s head.

“I’m fine,” Barnes intoned, the words flat. “I’ll heal.”

“You body isn’t going to magically spit that bullet out. Take a shower, go to Medical, then you can come back to Tony.” With utmost caution, fearful that he’d lose a hand for this, Rhodey placed his palm on the metal shoulder, on the one spot mostly free of blood. “Come on, Sergeant,” he said, his voice as soft as he could make it because he could see that Barnes was teetering on that edge between necessary numbness and unadulterated grief. “Tony needs you to stay in one piece for him, okay?”

That reminder seemed to have finally gotten through. The man met Rhodey’s eyes again and although his stare was still devoid of its usual warmth, of that abundance of life, the way Barnes inhaled, that shakiness, oh, that part Rhodey knew all too well, the way you couldn’t take a proper breath as the swelling of grief deep inside overwhelmed everything else.

One nod, then a glare in Banner’s direction, a look that needed no words to communicate Protect Tony or else, and then Barnes was striding out of the room. Someone hurried over to clean up the blood and dirt he left behind, but Rhodey didn’t know who; he had to leave too, even if it tore at him to close the door on the image of Tony in that hospital bed, hooked up to machines, doctors moving
and magic swirling around him. He needed to let these people do their jobs; his own awaited him too.

*Hang in there, Tones. Stay strong for us, please.*

Chapter End Notes

*Proklyatye svolochi - goddamn bastards*

*kazhduyu skotinu razorvu sam za eto - I will rip apart each one myself for this*
Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the angriest of the angst. It'll let up by the end, not so much because we've reached a resolution (yet), but because the characters will get back into actually doing things instead of just feeling a lot of feelings.

Bucky stood beneath the scorching water and watched it swirl at his feet, turning red first, then brown as the blood and grime washed away. His hand mechanically reached for the soap, but it stilled as it drifted over the bottle of Tony’s favorite body wash. His nostrils immediately filled with the scent and although he knew it was nothing more than a sense memory, it felt no less real. God, Bucky loved that smell, loved breathing it in as he explored Tony’s skin, worshiped that body, loved every inch of him.

He grabbed the plain bar of soap and held it under the water, watched his hand flip the bar over and over with a listless stare. The numbness inside him ebbed and flowed, a sickening push and pull where one second meant living within that grayscale world of the Winter Soldier, where nothing mattered but the mission, but then the next second— oh, the next second hurt and his world would explode in color and violence and blood.

His metal hand raked through his hair and came away painted in blood and dirt too. Bucky closed his eyes and stuck his head under the water.

He wasn’t sure how much of him was the Soldier right now. He wasn’t sure which part was hurting, which part wanted to tear the world apart, he wasn’t sure of any damn thing but one, that he couldn’t break apart, not right now, not yet—

Tony needs you to stay in one piece for him.

The Colonel’s words kept him focused. He had one mission right now, to get back to Tony because Tony needed him; however, to be back at Tony’s side meant getting clean first. Bucky couldn’t risk exposing Tony to an infection.

So he kept scrubbing. Minutes ticked by and soon enough, plain soap and hot water performed their miracle once again, washing away nearly all evidence of what had transcribed mere minutes— hours? — ago. No more blood coating his arm to remind him that he ripped a person’s guts right out of them. No more soot-covered skin to remind him of the damage done by the monsters he killed. No more smoke, no more of that acrid burn in his lungs, in his eyes, the pain that whispered to him, you failed to protect the one good thing in your life.

All that was left were a few battle wounds, the one in his shoulder still bleeding sluggishly and the burns on his back pulling painfully as he moved, but he supposed those would fade too.

The taste of Tony’s blood on his lips wouldn’t.

He examined his shoulder for a few moments, then grimaced, a part of him recoiling at the thought of going down to Medical. For someone to touch him right now, having to bear someone’s cold, clinical hands, to be prodded with needles and metal—
Stop. Focus on the mission.

The line between him and the Soldier was so blurred that he couldn’t tell whether the whisper was his other half pulling him back from the edge of hysteria or just his own inner voice.

It didn’t matter. To achieve his objective— get back to Tony— he had to take the most effective and efficient route there, and without a certainty that his super soldier physiology could fix the bullet wound, that meant swallowing down the nausea and seeking the medical help he required.

With the same mechanical movements, Bucky got out of the shower, dried himself, and got dressed. He payed no mind to a few voices that called out to him as he marched through the hallways and whoever these brave souls were, bold enough to interrupt the Winter Soldier, Bucky didn’t know. They were not a part of Tony’s small family, which meant that they didn’t matter right now.

Maybe he really was more Winter Soldier than human right now, but the will of the Soldier, this purpose that settled deep in his bones, it carried him forward and Bucky didn’t have the energy to care about anything else. There would be time to sit and wallow, to self-flagellate and drown in guilt over his cold, selfish heart, over the blood he had spilled so easily in so little time.

That time would come, Bucky was certain, but right now, that guilt could not reach him. The monsters he killed, they spilled Tony’s blood and what happened was justice.

Bucky wondered if that was simply the justification of a broken mind as his eyes stared aimlessly at the white of the hospital floor while one of the doctors fusses over his shoulder. The nausea roiled deep inside him, but he kept it under control. Unfortunately, he couldn’t offer the poor doctor a smile, but the scowl on Bucky’s face also meant there was no small talk.

He wondered if he’d ever be able to look into Tony’s eyes again.

It didn’t matter. The only thing that did was Tony being there, awake and alive and whole, to pass whatever judgment he deemed necessary. All Bucky wanted was to see those brown eyes open and eager again, even if they held disappointment when they looked at him, even if they were filled with nothing but judgment and hate.

Bucky would take it all as his due, as long as Tony were here.

He could feel his teeth tremble as the first sting of tears cut through him, but he pushed it all back, let the Soldier engulf all his tender pieces again, replacing them with a numb clarity. Tony needed him to be in one piece.

The doctor wanted Bucky to stay for additional scans, but with his biggest wounds now properly treated, Bucky had no more time to spare for thoroughness. He refused the doctor with a terse word, a “sorry, I can’t,” almost escaping his lips too, but his mouth wouldn’t cooperate. Maybe he left all his softness behind in the rubble where Tony’s body was cradled by fire and ashes.

The doctor scowled, the thin line of her lips an obvious sign of her disapproval, but she knew as well as he did that with the bullet removed and the burns treated, his body would do the rest. He would be fine.

Bucky did manage to whisper a ragged “I’m sorry,” before heading out, the doctor and her disapproval already forgotten. His haste went unrewarded however when he approached the intensive care unit and found the door closed, with no windows to see through.

He called out to Friday.
Boss is alive and stable. There have been no signs of further distress, but he remains unconscious. The issue is magical.

Bucky wanted to howl. For once, their weak, mortal bodies weren’t the problem here, no, it was that bolt of fucking magic. The same magic he just handed over to Tony.

He ignored the few empty chairs arranged in the corner and just slid down to the floor, leaning heavily against the wall, and from his spot, he watched the door and waited.

Pepper came down a few minutes later and he briefly wondered whether she was here because of him. Otherwise, wouldn’t she have been down here already? He supposed she was smarter than him. No need to rush and rush and rush when there were no answers to be given.

He didn’t acknowledge her at first, didn’t even look her way, gaze aimed stubbornly at the closed door, and she didn’t speak either. When she walked by however, she brushed her hand over his hair, just one gentle stroke before going over to sit in one of the chairs.

Bucky nearly broke at the touch. His bottom lip trembled again, teeth chattering against one another. He bit down harder to stop the awful feeling, his insides at war between the numbness that kept him steady and that terror that kept creeping closer.

Loki showed up not long after. This time, Bucky did acknowledge the newcomer, up on his feet immediately, alert and ready as soon as the Trickster appeared in the hallway.

“What do you know?”

Loki just shook his head.

“I was summoned by Sorcerer—”

“I need to know what’s happening, I can’t—” Bucky steadied his voice when it quivered against his will, “I can’t be kept in the dark.”

Loki stopped before him and there was something odd about his expression, something so out of place that Bucky would’ve suspected an imposter at any other time.

It was sympathy, shared pain even, and then Loki reached out too. The man’s hand, a warm, slender thing, settled on Bucky’s bicep and it was meant to be a comfort, Bucky knew that, but he wished people would just stop touching him because he was going to break—

Bit by bit, the numbness crumbled.

Loki was still giving him that soft look and Bucky had the bizarre urge to punch him just to stop the man from looking so sorrowful.

He didn’t and Loki spoke, unaware.

“I’m sorry I don’t know more. All I know is that Stephen needs my help, but as soon as there’s something, you will be the first to know.” His gaze slid to that closed door and Bucky’s eyes followed. “I will do my best to help him, I promise.”

Loki let go and disappeared through the door. It closed shut again and Bucky didn’t bother to get in, didn’t try to catch a glimpse of what was inside. He’d be a hindrance, he knew that, and he needed to trust the others… but if they needed Loki’s help now too, did that mean—
He didn’t let himself finish that sentence, didn’t let the panic settle in between the sharp edges even though it was close enough now, so damn close. He returned to his spot and resumed his silent vigil.

Rhodes showed up next, with a cup of coffee for them both, but only Pepper accepted hers with a quiet thanks. When Rhodes addressed him, Bucky just shook his head, intent on his silence.

Friday informed them again that Tony was stable, physically. They were still working out what the magic did to him. He still wasn’t waking up.

Minutes ticked by, although Bucky couldn’t say with certainty how much time had past. There were others gathering close now, the kids, Alice and Hope, Lang, then Steve and the others, although they kept to themselves on the outskirts, whispering to one another. The sheer audacity, to show up in some mockery of support. It made Bucky’s blood boil and on any other day, he wouldn’t have made someone bleed for it, but he ignored them too, ignored everything around him with a steadfast conviction. He would not move from his spot, not until—

Banner came out of the room, exhaustion written in every line of his body, but finally he waved them in. Bucky was already up on his feet and was the first to get in, followed by Rhodes and Pepper. The rest were cut off for now, barred from this private moment.

Bucky’s eyes zeroed in on the man he loved. Tony, his sweet, beautiful Tony, was still in that bed. Unmoving, eyes closed. The blood and dirt had been washed away at least and there was a blanket covering him up from the chest down.

Bucky could hear his lover’s voice in his head, complaining about the scratchy blankets.

“I’m telling you, they use these damn things of spite, James.” Tony gestured with a handful of blanket for emphasis. “This isn’t a blanket, this is sand paper.

“Maybe you should remember that next time you decide to play mad scientist.”

“But I am a mad scientist, babe. Also, in my defense, I was hoping you’d be the one to coddle my dumb, injured ass, not the grumpy on-call doctor who has the iciest set of hands I’ve ever encountered.”

Bucky smiled, a sly little thing that had Tony grinning too. “Aw, all you had to do was ask, darlin’. I’ll take real good care of ya.”

Bucky swallowed hard, his throat tight and eyes stinging, both at the memory and the sight before him.

There was a nurse slowly cleaning up discarded trays and utensils, but everyone else was gone. Strange was slumped over in a seat next to the bed, features grim and heavy with their own brand of weariness. Vision was here too now, on the other side of the bed, standing protectively over Tony.

Loki was next to Strange, up on his feet, arms crossed, back ramrod straight, and his expression… God, that sympathy still clung to his angular features and Bucky desperately wished Loki would say something inappropriate and flirty, something normal to indicate that this wasn’t the worst case scenario—

“Is Tony going to be okay? What’s the verdict here?” Rhodes broke the cloying silence, one that must’ve only lasted a second, but Bucky’s perception of time hadn’t found its way back to normal, not since Tony was hit by that blinding red.

Banner propped up his glasses higher on his nose, then released a sigh. “Physically, he’s going to be
fine. Some bumps and bruises, a couple of bad burns, but we treated everything and nothing vital was damaged. Between the fast response and our tech, he’ll make a full recovery. The concussion, however…” Here Banner hesitated; he took the glasses off this time and moved them aimlessly between his hands. “The concussion wasn’t as bad as we thought. Minor, really.”

“Then why isn’t he waking up?” Bucky heard himself say the words, knew what the answer was, and wondered why he asked at all.

Banner’s lips twisted downward and he glanced over at Strange, passing the proverbial baton to the mage.

“The magic,” Strange began and that word alone forced bile up Bucky’s throat, “it’s inside him now. In his head, more specifically, and we, uh… We tried what we could, but nothing has worked so far and at this point, we don’t know—”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Bucky’s words were harsh, tasting like bile, like cresting terror. “What the hell were you all doing in here? You were here for hours—” Was it hours? Minutes? He didn’t know. It felt like an eternity. “What’s happening with Tony? Why isn’t he— why—”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t know how to wake him.”

Bucky felt himself fracture at Strange’s words.

The defeated look on the man’s face didn’t help either. “This is the magic of the Mind Stone we’re dealing with here… Corrupted magic, something I have only begun to understand. That damn Witch manipulated a portion of it and left it behind. I’m sorry we didn’t detect it, we— I failed in my duties and that responsibility lays squarely on my shoulders.”

“Stephen, don’t do that. The people responsible for this are Maximoff and Hydra.”

The crooked smile Strange offered Rhodes was pained at best. “I suppose self-recriminations can wait. What I do know is that she conditioned the magic to respond only to Tony. It was inert until it connected with him. It makes sense, his mind is familiar terrain to her after everything that she’s done. But I barely contained it last time and for all the studying I’ve done since then, this… this is nothing like before.”

“The magic has attached itself to Anthony’s mind,” Loki took over. His upper lip curled in obvious disgust. “Although that word does not truly describe the extent of the damage. The magic has fused itself with his energy. I tried to unravel it, to force the magic to let go… but it would take me a thousand lifetimes— my lifetimes— to complete such a task. Even if I were to do so, even if I did untangle Anthony’s mind thread by thread… There would be no guarantee that whatever remained was the man we know.”

Another part of Bucky broke away, the Soldier letting out a desperate howl of pain. There was no more mission to distract either one of them from the truth.

Rhodes scrubbed a hand over his face. “So what are you saying then? That it’s hopeless?”

“We haven’t stopped trying. I’ll keep looking through every book in every Sanctum, to see if anything like this has happened before.”

Vision has been a silent presence until then, but he finally spoke. “The magic within Tony repels me entirely, too corrupted now to react positively to its own true source, but I won’t stop trying to help either.”
“I will speak with mages on other worlds,” Loki chimed in too. “Some of them know the Infinity Stones far better than I.”

“What if we find the witch?” That was Pepper and had it been any other day, Bucky was certain there’d be a shiver running down his spine at the venom in her voice. “What if we drag her over here and force her to fix this?”

Bucky’s flesh hand clenched and unclenched. Oh, if the witch were here… well, better to keep him away if they wanted answers before he choked the life out of her.

Loki spoke with a grimace. “It isn’t a certainty that she can help. The Mind Stone, more than any other, carries within it a certain sentience. At this point, whatever has entered Anthony’s mind is its own entity. Driven by Maximoff’s hatred, yes, darkened by her own mind, but I doubt she would have any more control over it than we do. I’ll be frank, this isn’t about knowledge or technique anymore, it is about power… and I am not certain any of us are powerful enough to overcome this, including her.”

Rhodes inhaled unevenly. “So you are saying that— that you ‘trying’ is pointless, that it wouldn’t— that Tony wouldn’t—” He couldn’t say the words either.

Bucky stopped paying attention, his mind drifting again. His eyes slid over Tony, lingering on the bandages peeking out from under the blanket, the patch of shaved hair where they treated the head wound.

Oh, Tony… He would be so mad about them ruining his pretty hair.

Strange was talking again. “I’m sorry, Jim, I wish I had better news.” It was odd to hear the Sorcerer hold back so much emotion in his voice. “I wish I could just— just fix this with a snap of my fingers. We tried what we could, but the magic won’t budge, and if we don’t find a way to remove it, Tony’s mind will slowly deteriorate. This version of the Mind Stone’s magic, it seeks out the energy of another mind, then feeds on it. Tony’s body will heal, everything else will be fine, but his mind…”

“But he’s still in there, right?” That was Pepper. It sounded like she was crying too now, but Bucky didn’t bother to check. He couldn’t look away from Tony.

“He is, yes.”

“Is he in pain?”

Strange rubbed a trembling hand down his thigh. “I’m… not sure, Pepper, it’s difficult to gauge when—”

“He’s not in any physical distress,” Bruce jumped in, the interruption gentle, “and I don’t see any brain activity that would indicate he’s in pain.”

The others nodded, but they had to have realized that they were just offered platitudes. No one here knew a damn thing.

“Well, if Tony’s still in there, that means he can fight this,” Rhodes said, the waver of his voice belying the certainty of his tone.

“Tony has always been strong enough,” Pepper whispered, then took a deep breath and her voice turned resolute. “But I want you all to look for a solution in the meantime. Do what you have to.”

Bucky still hadn’t spoken. Everything was building up inside him now, up, up and up, terror and
grief mingling together into something unfathomable. Everything inside him hurt and it needed release—

“Oh god, Tony…” fell from his lips, the words a choked whisper. His ears rang again and Bucky knew he had to be shaking. He stumbled forward until he was next to the bed, his hands reaching for Tony, not paying attention when Strange discreetly moved away to give him more room. He cradled Tony’s still face in one hand, the skin beneath his palm warm.

_Alive._

He buried his face in Tony’s shoulder then, the same way he did when they were surrounded by smoke and fire. “Tony…” he called for the man, but no answer came. Bucky pressed closer into Tony’s lax body, mouthing silent, pointless words against the warm skin.

_Help me to stop feeling like this, please,_ he begged the Soldier, even when he knew his request was futile.

_You know I can’t. Not anymore. I love and I hurt and I bleed same as you._

Bucky wanted to curl up in a tiny ball next to Tony and _weep_, but he didn’t let himself. If Tony’s mind was still in there, he needed support and love and _strength_, not this desperate thing trying to claw its way out of Bucky’s chest. Tony needed _rest_ and Bucky shouldn’t disturb him like this.

Because there was nothing else left at his disposal, Bucky clung to _anger_, that awful well of cold, ruthless fury, and forced himself to take a deep breath. Tony’s familiar scent was gone, replaced with the clean sterility of antiseptics and soap, but his skin was warm and that warmth lingered on Bucky’s lips, the only warmth that existed in his world right now.

With a kiss to the cheek and a parting whisper against Tony’s skin, “I’ll be right back, sweetheart, okay? I just— I just need a moment. Wait for me?” Bucky let Tony go— _just for a second, only for second_— and stood up. He left the room without sparing a glance for anyone else.

What he needed was to be alone, to release this awful thing deep inside him, so he could compose himself again and be there for Tony.

Steve and the others were still out in the hallway, standing around together and Bucky had to walk past them to get out of the Medical wing. They all looked uncertain as Bucky approached, but apparently Steve braved that uncertainty— _stupid_, not brave— and stepped forward, hand reaching out to Bucky in supplication.

Bucky could’ve ignored it, _should’ve_ kept walking, but it was that sympathetic _look_ on the other man’s face that had Bucky’s blood turning white hot, the anger that served as his guide suddenly too big for his body, boiling and boiling and boiling _over_.

“Bucky, I’m really sorry—”

“Save your fucking sympathy.”

Steve’s brows drew together. “I don’t want to fight, I swear. I’m just sorry—”

“Sorry for what exactly?” Bucky stopped and turned on his heel to face Steve head-on. Oh, this had better be good.

“I’m sorry about Tony. I know no one believes it, but I never wanted to see him get hurt. I know you, uh— he was _important_ to you and that you two were—”
“Were? It hasn’t even been a few hours and you’re already putting him six feet under? What, got a warm, spare place in your bed for me, Stevie?”

Bucky knew it wasn’t fair; some distant part of him recognized that this was likely genuine sympathy, perhaps even regret. Out of place, unappreciated, and badly timed, but not intentionally malicious.

He didn’t care; he couldn’t see past the haze of red clouding everything around him, red that had nothing to do with magic and everything do so with the unyielding rage building up inside him.

“No, that’s not what I meant at all, Bucky, please. I just— we’re sorry—”

He slammed Steve against the wall before anyone could even blink. He could tell Widow was reaching for a weapon, Wilson had his arms out before him, pleading for Bucky to let go. There were others out in the hallway too, a commotion of voices, but he just didn’t care.

“You’re sorry?” he hissed in Steve’s face. “Oh, you damn better be sorry, Steve. All of you,” he nearly roared as he glared at the others. They were trying to get closer, but were clearly scared, and rightfully so. This anger gave him the strength to kill two dozen pieces of shit in minutes and it’d give him the strength to kill a few more. No matter if they deserved it.

He pinned Steve with a cold look again. “You better fuckin’ hope Tony wakes up. You better pray to whatever god you still worship that Tony is here to keep me steady, because if not— because if he—” Say it. Say it, Barnes. Because denial could only work for so long and he would only fall harder in the end, without Tony there to catch him. “Because if Tony dies, I will kill you.”

“Bucky, please, we didn’t—”

“Barnes, we had nothing to do with this!” Wilson shouted. “We never wanted this!”

“I don’t care.” Bucky— the Soldier, whoever the hell these broken, shattering pieces resembled now, he didn’t know— he didn’t take his eyes off Steve. “If you so much as smiled at her in the past, handed her a fuckin’ cup of coffee, one kind gesture given to that monster…”

“Bucky,” Steve croaked, the hold Bucky had on the lapels of his shirt cutting off precious air. “I’m so sorry.”

“No,” Bucky shook his head, “but you will be.” He felt those damn tears threatening to rise within him again, clouding his vision and the sight of Steve’s sympathy. He didn’t fucking want sympathy because sympathy meant—

It meant that he lost something precious.

Sympathy meant he lost Tony.

“Today you don’t get to be sorry. You don’t get to apologize. If Tony dies,” he said again, letting the pain take over this time as one single tear finally slid down his face. “If the man I love dies, there will be nothing left to stop me from killing every single one of you.”

He let go of Steve then, the same way one would let go of something poisonous, and marched away, not bothering to look behind him, not bothering to turn around at the voices calling out for him. He couldn’t, not when he was finally falling apart, piece by piece with each step.

By the time he reached his quarters— their quarters— that breaking point manifested itself in a loud sob, so violent it surprised even him and his whole body spasmed from the force of that pain.
He all but collapsed on the edge of his—*their*—bed and tried, tried so hard not to fall, not yet, he needed to be *strong*—

But there was nothing strong about him anymore; even those threats he just issued, those cold, cruel words… Nothing but words of a terrified, desperate man.

He sat there and stared at nothing, tears clouding his vision, one or two slowly rolling down his face, but he refused to let another sob leave him—

There was a soft knock on the door and a moment later, Pepper was taking soft, careful steps into the room. With a muted shame, Bucky realized she was cautious. *Scared* of him.

Scared of the violent, monstrous Winter Soldier.

Another piece of him broke, especially when he looked at her, really *looked* and recognized that it wasn’t just sympathy he saw there, no, it was shared grief too.

She walked closer still, so damn brave, and he watched as she reached out and touched him again, a warm hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

Bucky bit his lip and shook his head frantically, another tear rolling down his face; he swiped at it furiously. Dammit, he *couldn’t*—

But then Pepper was sitting down right next to him, her other hand reaching out to brush a strand of hair out of his face, gentle, just as Tony would’ve been—

Another sob, then another, and he couldn’t stop it any longer. Tears spilled over and with them all of his pain.

“Pepper, I can’t—I don’t know what to do. If I lose him, if—” he couldn’t finish, but Pepper understood all the same; her hand pressed softly on the crown of his head, pressed him down until he could hide in the crook of her neck and he let go of the careful control he forced himself to maintain, but this time, he didn’t turn into a ruthless killing machine; all that was left was a scared, heartbroken man.

“I know, sweetheart, I know,” she soothed, brushing his hair down, rocking then both back and forth. “You just gotta let it all out. You have to let yourself cry.”

He heard a sniffle and realized she had to be crying too. Pepper, who loved Tony long before he did, for years longer than he did, and yet here she was, comforting *him* while her own heart ached.

“M’sorry, I’m sorry,” he mumbled into her shoulder, the taste of salt coating his lips yet again. “You shouldn’t—I’m sorry. You’re hurting too.”

She shushed him, the way one would a distraught child; the gentle touches, the sway of their bodies back and forth didn’t stop.

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“Of course I’m hurting. I’m scared too, scared and helpless, but that just means I know how it feels, how *you* feel.” She held him a little tighter. “I care about you too, you know.”

Bucky couldn’t find words to express the gratitude swelling inside him, somehow finding space in between all the grief. He wasn’t sure he could find words for any of this, so all he did was wrap his arms around Pepper’s slender waist, cling to her as he cried, and let this woman, stronger than he
could ever be, hold him up, just for a moment.

She did, hiding her own silent tears in the crown of his head.

The otherwise quiet room filled with their muffled sniffles and as minutes ticked by, some pieces slotted back into place and Bucky no longer teetered on the edge of losing his mind. Time and comfort brought clarity and although the pain didn’t lessen, he realized it was easier to breathe again as he pulled in a shuddering, wet inhale. It was easier to think again.

Gently, he extricated himself from Pepper’s embrace, then wiped at his eyes and his face, trying to get rid of the evidence before looking at her. As he expected, her own red-rimmed eyes were wet too and his eyes followed the tracks of her tears; without a conscious thought, his hand came up to wipe those away, her cheek warm and soft beneath his hand. She smiled, didn’t seem mind the touch as she leaned into his palm, letting it hold her weight for one long moment, before patting his hand with her own and letting both fall back to their laps.

“It’ll be alright,” she whispered, but he shook his head.

“How can it? How do we—”

“We stay strong. For ourselves, for each other. For Tony. Bucky,” she said his name, the tone imploring, “we haven’t lost him yet, so we have to be strong.”

“She’s right, you know,” someone added and Bucky looked up to see Rhodes standing in the doorway. The Colonel didn’t wait for an invitation, just stepped inside and approached them. He squeezed Pepper’s hand when she reached for him, then walked over to sit on Bucky’s other side. “We can’t let this break us.”

“I’m not sure I’m strong enough,” Bucky confessed, feeling all of two inches tall, but Rhodes looked at him with eyes softer than he’d ever seen them before. Well, except maybe when Rhodes looked at Tony. With uncharacteristic gentleness that almost startled Bucky, Rhodes slid his arm around Bucky’s shoulders and pressed them close together.

“Of course you’re strong enough. I know you are. And you know who else is strong? Stronger than all of us? It’s Tony, it has always been Tony, so you can’t just give up on him.”

Bucky was already shaking his head. “I haven’t, I swear.”

“Good. I know that it feels hopeless right now, god, I know. Those three months after he was kidnapped? The waiting, the searching, everyone telling me to give up because he was dead. Fuck, the worst three months of my life…”

“How did you get through it?”

“I hoped, I believed in Tony, and I worked my ass off, did whatever I could, even if it weren’t always enough.”

“At least now,” Pepper added quietly, “he’s here with us and we can all be there for him. He has a lot of people in his corner.”

Rhodes nodded, then let out a chuckle, “Come on, Barnes. This is the same wily son of a bitch who blasted his way out of a cave because I was taking too damn long, so you think some magic is going to stop him? No, no way.” Rhodes scoffed and none of them commented that he sounded close to tears himself. “He is going to be so pissed when he realizes he got his ass handled to him by some magical widget and we are never going to let him live it down.”
The humor in Rhodes’ voice, even if it did nothing to hide the man’s own pain, still helped return some sense of normalcy back, and although Bucky’s grateful smile felt odd on his face, like he shouldn’t be allowed to smile at a time like this, he offered it to Rhodes nonetheless, then squeezed Pepper’s hand that held his own in her lap. He sat between two of the most important people in Tony’s life, who loved him for years and years, so strongly that this love defied monsters and villains and death, and he felt like that love held him together now too. It reminded him of his own infinite love for Tony, soothed both his pain and the Soldier’s, and gave them both strength to take a deep breath and focus on the here and now.

Bucky wasn’t alone, Tony wasn’t dead, and as long as that remained true, there was hope.

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Bruce insisted they keep Tony down in Medical for observations, but he was moved out of the intensive care unit and into a small private room. The space was the same sterile environment one would expect of a hospital, but it was soon filled with markers of home as each visitor brought something with them and left it behind. There was a pillow and blanket in the overstuffed chair where Bucky curled up for his daily vigil. The kids’ books and homework laid on the table nearby, abandoned and forgotten. A cup of coffee left behind by Rhodes when he stopped by a few hours ago. Flowers in every corner of the room from some of the Compound staff.

There were still plenty of monitors and equipment, the reminder that Tony needed them no less painful, but they were rendered less grotesque by the signs of love that surrounded Tony and Bucky.

They were alone right now, which wasn’t a frequent occurrence since someone else was almost always down here, to keep Bucky company (and to check on him, if the worried glances were any indication), but also to talk to Tony.

Strange and his crew didn’t offer a confirmation that Tony could hear or sense anything, but everyone collectively decided that there was no harm in including Tony in their conversations. No harm in telling him about the small details of their days. No harm in telling him how badly they missed him and how much they all loved him.

Bucky pressed a kiss to Tony’s knuckles, the man’s hand safely encased in both of his own.

“M’right here, darlin’, right here with you,” he whispered and watched Tony’s face. There was no reaction, of course, but watching Tony came as naturally as breathing. At least he looked healthier now, all color back in his face, rosy cheeks and full lips. He looked like he was just sleeping, that at any moment, those eyes would flutter open again, his lips would part on a sleepy smile, and he’d say, as he always did, “Good morning, gorgeous.”

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and pressed Tony’s hand to his lips again, willing himself not to cry. He’d done enough of that to last him a lifetime.

We have to act, soon. Find the snakes and punish them, the Soldier whispered at the back of his head, restless without a proper mission even in this intimate moment. Although this part of him was no less distressed by the state of their sweet solnishko, the darker whispers had been increasing in frequency over the past few days.

“I know,” Bucky murmured out loud. It was hard to argue with the sentiment. The witch was still out there, and Hydra too, the rest of the snakes who helped her get out. They all had to pay.

As if tempted here by Bucky’s darker thoughts, Loki appeared at the door a moment later, his knock on the door frame his only attempt at politeness.
Bucky leveled him with an obligatory glare. “Any news?”

Loki shook his head, so Bucky looked away again, back to Tony.

“I’ve been chasing down certain individuals across the Nine Realms, some of which have promised to come back with knowledge. For a price, of course, as these things always are, but I’ve gathered enough treasures over my lifetime to pay it.”

“Thank you.”

Loki huffed at the gratitude, then sauntered over to stand by the window, looking out over the barren Compound grounds. Spring was still on its way, too early in the year for life to blossom out of the cold earth.

“In the meantime, since I am back on Midgard,” Loki began again after a brief pause, “I feel there is something else we need to address.” He looked over his shoulder and met Bucky’s gaze. “Like a certain little witch with ill-gotten powers who shouldn’t have touched what was never hers.”

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There was a violent cough on his lips, an ache in his bones, and red sparks swimming all around his vision. A shitty way to wake up, that was for sure, and Tony groaned as he lifted his head from his arms where they rested on his workbench. He tried to blink away the red, but it took a few minutes and absentmindedly he wondered whether he should get that checked out. As always, he brushed away the concern.

*It’s not like anyone’s gonna give a damn if I’m dead,* he thought bitterly, then scolded himself just as quickly. Pity parties weren’t going to help anyone and they certainly weren’t endearing.

God, his whole body ached, like he took a full-on explosion to the face or something, but their last mission was over a month ago and Tony walked away from that with just scrapes and bruises. Well, that and a broken rib, but no one bothered to ask and Tony didn’t bother to mention it either. Better that way. The last thing he needed was another lecture about ‘being more careful’ because his recklessness was inevitably putting ‘the rest of the team in danger’.

Forget the fact that he earned that broken bone trying to save Barton’s dumb ass.

Tony groaned again as he moved, the sound obscenely loud in the too-quiet lab. God, he missed having Friday around, but after Steve and the others moved back and made a fuss about being constantly watched by an AI two steps away from being another Ultron’, Tony got steamrolled by the collective opinion and was forced to shut her down, her brilliant presence shoved into the darkened server room. Out of sight, out of mind.

That was how Tony felt sometimes too nowadays. The others weren’t exactly subtle about their disdain and everyone seemed happier on the days that Tony spent alone in the lab.

He got out of his seat with another muffled sound of distress. Jesus, he should not be in this much pain from just falling asleep in a weird position. Red swam in his vision again and he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, but it only made the red brighter behind his eyelids and no less headache-inducing.

*Hell, maybe this was what getting old felt like.*

*Coffee,* his sluggish mind decided, coffee would make this marginally better. He opened his mouth to ask Friday whether they had some in stock, but the response would’ve been deafening silence, so he
closed his mouth with a click of his teeth.

Of course, he’d been lazy and negligent and there wasn’t any coffee down here, so his option was to go up, either to the communal kitchen or the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was a safer choice, the SI and Compound employees polite if not outright friendly, but some of that old Stark stubbornness settled in his bones and he determinedly marched upstairs to the kitchen.

This was still his Compound, right?

He scoffed to himself, even as he kept walking. Yeah, maybe on paper, but that was as far as that ownership went nowadays.

The decision to come up filled him with instant regret as soon as he entered the kitchen and saw Steve puttering around by the counter, slicing something on the cutting board.

Tony swallowed hard, braced himself to take a step forward, but he was stopped short when James appeared from where he was crouched behind the refrigerator door.

Neither one noticed Tony standing in the doorway, too distracted by each other. Their dopey smiles and laughter, the traded endearments, it all filled the space between them and then Bucky leaned in for a chaste kiss to Steve’s lips.

Tony’s heart sank and he turned around immediately, heading back down. The nausea was unbearable now, bile clawing its way up his throat, and really, how much more pathetic could he get?

It had been months since James— no, no, it was just Bucky now— had broken up with him.

Tony stumbled and braced himself against the wall as his world spun. Everything was red again and he dry heaved as the nausea overwhelmed him, although nothing came up. He couldn’t even remember the last time he ate. Too weak to keep standing, he went down to his knees and pressed a shaking hand to his temple. He heard a whimper and belatedly realized it was him.

This isn’t right, his mind pleaded with him, this isn’t how it’s supposed to be, and for a moment, he wanted to cling to that thought, but then the guilt, the self-recriminations, Howard and Obie and Steve in his head, it all slithered up to the surface and drowned out the words.

This life, this miserable existence, it was all his just desserts for hurting and taking and killing. No less than what Tony Stark deserved. After all, what other explanation was there?
The math wasn’t adding up. Literally, the damn numbers would not add up, no matter how long Tony stared at them, and since neither the glaring nor the scowling nor the anxious finger-tapping seemed to do any good, Tony gave into the urge to drop his head into his hands.

This doesn’t make any sense.

Sure, he hadn’t tried to rewire the suit with this new energy distribution in mind before, but come on, this was his bread and butter! Did the laws of physics go and change on him overnight?

God, he’d have anything to have Bruce back. They used to love sitting around over take-out and theorize about whatever idea popped into their heads. Bruce was his science bro… but Bruce wanted nothing to do with him nowadays.

Tony released a wistful breath, then tilted his head back up to peek at the hologram. The numbers danced a complicated tango with the tiny red orbs still swimming in his vision and with a drawn-out groan, Tony dropped his head back.

He stayed like that for a minute, but never one to sit still, Tony decided moaning and groaning wasn’t going to solve his equation either, so he stepped away from the workbench and meandered through the lab, running his fingers over the myriad of surfaces, letting the physical sensation ground him while he walked and kept a steady count in his head.

...six, seven, eight. Hold for one, two, three, four. And exhale, one, two...

The breathing helped, but it wasn’t enough. There was something wrong, but Tony couldn’t pinpoint what was causing the distress. Nausea and headaches came and went, both exacerbated by the red clouding his vision, and that in turn made it difficult to keep any food down. His memory was fuzzy around the edges, chunks of time going missing. There were moments where he’d look up from his work and realize he had no idea how he got there in the first place.

He slept, a lot. At first, when the exhaustion crept up on him earlier than usual and he passed out for a solid seven hours, Tony wondered if that was just him finally developing ‘healthy’ sleeping habits. But then seven turned into nine into twelve, and now there were days where Tony struggled to get out of bed at all.

At this point, brain damage from a mission would’ve been a welcome explanation because at least that would’ve made sense, but he went down to Medical a few days ago, had several scans done, and apparently there was nothing wrong. They gave him a clean bill of health, but Tony still had his doubts.

His hand trailed over the back of the couch as he walked by it, feeling the worn-out threads and the way the soft material gave way beneath his fingers, and suddenly Tony was hit with such undeniable and sweet-aching warmth that his knees nearly buckled and he had to grip the couch for support to remain upright.

Memories of him and James flooded him. So many warm moments, joy and laughter and affectionate touch, so much love—

Tony gripped the couch tighter. Dammit all to hell, why did it end? Why did James— Bucky— just leave him? Was Tony not enough?
Never enough, never good enough.

His father knew it, the Avengers knew it, everyone knew it. No wonder the man he loved caught a clue too. There was something inherently wrong with Tony, wasn’t there? Something that pushed people away, their instincts picking up on this corrupted badwrongsick thing deep inside him.

But he thought that Bucky— no, damn it, he’d always be James to Tony, James, my James—

Tony clenched his eyes shut as he went down to his knees. Gritting his teeth, he forced air into his lungs through his nose, taking a deep breath out of sheer stubbornness. One, two, three, he counted until the world stopped spinning.

James loved him and Tony thought that James would be different, that this time, things would be different.

They weren’t, but that couldn’t be laid at Tony’s feet completely, could it?

Tony wasn’t a total disaster. Sure, he was no saint and the carelessness of his youth cost him (and so many others) dearly. And yes, he was arrogant and pushy, irreverent and loud. He rubbed people the wrong way and he didn’t always make the best decisions, his actions too often driven by fear and desperate need to atone for the blood on his hands.

He glared at the floor as he slowly, deliberately straightened out of his crouch. So what? Did that mean he wasn’t allowed to be happy? Every goddamn person in this building had blood on their hands! And just like everyone else here, he had his flaws, but he wasn’t evil.

Nausea rolled through him again, but Tony ignored the awful sensation, reminding himself that he didn’t sell those weapons to terrorists, he didn’t set Ultron loose on the world, not alone, and he sure as hell didn’t break up the Avengers, not when he was offering compromises to Steve every step of the way, trying to protect all of their dumb asses.

Stubbornness, that was another character flaw, he supposed, and it warred painfully with the nausea. Whatever was making him sick wasn’t letting up and Tony decided to march himself to Medical, again, for additional scans.

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Loki’s eyes studied the world outside and he lamented the stillness of these late winter days. Too quiet for his chaotic soul, but he supposed the Compound itself was always lively enough to make up for it.

Well, maybe not today, not without Anthony’s babble and irreverent jokes, without that constant movement and energy that Loki couldn’t help but enjoy. Anthony had a bit of chaos in him too, but now it was gone and anger roiled within Loki all over again. The unmitigated gall of that foul creature, to use her horrid magic on this man—

“In the meantime,” he began, voice so steady one would never know Loki’s hands itched to tear someone apart, “since I am back on Midgard, I feel there is something else we need to address. Like a certain little witch with ill-gotten powers who shouldn’t have touched what was never hers.”

The shift was minute, but he could see a spark of interest in Barnes’ expression.

“You want to find Maximoff?”

“I want to kill her, although I suppose your silly little Earth laws would frown upon that. At the very
least, I would like to wring her dry for any bit of knowledge that might prove useful in bringing Anthony back.” Loki turned back to the window, eyes narrowing dangerously. “Then I’d still like to kill her.”

Barnes grunted. “No argument from me, although you better get in line if you want a swing at her. When it comes to Tony though, I have a real hard time trusting anyone right now and that includes you. I’m sure you can’t blame me.”

Loki chuckled despite himself, the sound tinged with only a hint of bitterness.

“A wise decision. Trusting me had led others to many a peril.”

“And yet you’re here.”

“Because we share a similar understanding.” Loki’s eyes fell shut, memories he usually kept safely locked away flittering on the edge of his awareness. “We both know what it’s like to crave revenge, what it’s like to feel that need crawling just beneath your skin, the need to destroy those who have harmed you and those you cherish… You may never truly trust my intentions, my darling soldier, but I assure you, you can trust my thirst for vengeance.”

There was a brief pause in which Loki heard the unmistakable sound of a soft kiss— he imagined Barnes leaned over Anthony’s still body and pressing his lips to the curls that fell over Anthony’s temples— and then Barnes appeared at his side, eyes trained on the grounds before them too.

“I get you siding with us to take down this Tha—”

“Don’t.” Loki shuddered. “Do not say his name.”

Barnes didn’t even flinch. “—this Titan because he used you and now he’s a threat to all of us, so it makes sense that you’re here cooperating. But the witch… You’ve never even met her. I understand you have this… aversion to her magic, but that doesn’t seem like enough to risk your neck.” Barnes tilted his head and Loki met his eyes in turn. “I won’t let anything else happen to Tony. You get that, right? I won’t hesitate to kill if I sense foul play, on anyone’s part.”

The threats were made no less impressive, no less real, by that tiny quiver in the man’s voice. Loki took in the shadows carved beneath the man’s eyes, the permanent frown etched into his face, the light absent from his eyes.

Anthony was his light, after all.

Loki broke the eye contact, then turned to pace slow lines within the room. Restlessness coiled within him, but he didn’t let it hasten his movements.

“I won’t deny that Anthony is imperative to our victory over the Mad Titan. To lose him means to lose this upcoming war and I will not allow that to happen. However, I also won’t lie and say that this isn’t personal. Do you remember that morning, after your nightmare?”

Barnes’ expression grew blank. “What about it?”

“Well, you, my dear Soldier, you came to me with a request, to kill you if you ever became a threat to Anthony.” They both scoffed at the same time, bitter and weary. “Whatever that dream may have been, whatever glimpse of the future you may have received from the Norns… well, it certainly didn’t play out as we thought it would, did it?”

“Maybe it did. I saw myself kill Tony and isn’t that exactly what happened? I was the one who
handed him that damn thing in the first place.”

“I don’t think dear Anthony would agree with that interpretation of events.”

The soldier didn’t contest the statement, but he eyed Loki suspiciously. “You have a point to all this?”

A smirk pulled at Loki’s lips, but even lacked its usual vigor. Exhaustion and anger had woven itself far too deep. He may not have treasured Anthony the same way the others did, but there was something unmistakably missing now in Loki’s life too. “Anthony came to me that morning as well. Not to threaten, however, nor to extract promises. Do you know what he did instead? That man apologized,” Loki jabbed a finger at his own chest, “to me.”

He could still remember the strange befuddlement that overtook him because he would have expected anything out of Anthony, anything but—

“Hey, Rudolph, hold on a sec. I, uh, I just wanted...” Anthony paused and rubbed the back of his head when Loki halted mid-step, then offered a sheepish glance, which Loki thought looked odd on that expressive face. Endearing, but odd.

“I, uh, I wanted to apologize for how I acted last night.”

Loki blinked as he processed the words, trying to decide whether this was some elaborate joke he absolutely would not appreciate. But no, Anthony’s eyes, just as expressive and open as the rest of him, watched him with something akin to guilt.

Loki’s pause dragged on for too long, awkwardly so, and Anthony filled the silence with his own words. “I just— god, seeing James so scared, it messed with my head and I felt so damn useless. The thought of her getting to him—” He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I was going out of my mind, just a little bit, but that’s not an excuse for what I said. I shouldn’t have threatened you and I definitely shouldn’t have brought up that purple douchebag. Not after what he did to you.”

Loki always held a fond appreciation for the fact that Anthony only had to be asked once never to repeat the Titan’s true name around Loki. No, unlike others who slipped up or simply didn’t care enough, Anthony only used increasingly inventive insults as monikers.

“No apology needed, Man of Iron,” Loki tried for his usual simpering tone, but even that came off odd, what with that damn warmth blossoming somewhere deep in his chest and spreading throughout. “I understand the necessity of such threats, you do not trust me—”

“But I do!”

Loki gave the man a disbelieving stare and Anthony scrunched up his face in some complicated expression.

“Okay, fair, but I’m working on trusting you.” That sounded less like a lie, but left Loki on no steadier ground. “It’s, uh... It sucks when you live in a house where everyone treats you like a pariah and just waits for you to fuck up. Trust me, I know. Since you’ve been here, you’ve done nothing to hurt us, nothing that would lead me to be suspicious of your motives. At some point, I have to take that leap of faith and trust you.” Anthony swallowed, eyes dropping low. “And trust aside, threatening someone— anyone— with torture while demanding they help you is a fucked up thing to do, and heat of the moment or not, I’m sorry I did that.”

Was this man, this man who Loki had once almost killed, apologizing for a few simple words said in a moment of fear for his beloved? When was the last time someone apologized for such a measly
slight? When was the last time someone apologized to Loki at all?

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to embrace Anthony in that moment or shove him aside and snarl obscenities at him, but perhaps that was simply a sign that Loki wasn’t well-versed in proper responses to apologies.

“Thank you,” was the thing that slid past his lips, truly on its own accord because it sounded nothing like him, but he didn’t regret the words, not when the lines of Anthony’s face softened as he smiled.

“We’re all a bunch of hotheads here, but you know,” he shrugged as he stuck his hands in his pockets, “we’re all in this together and all that junk. Anyways… Thanks again for helping James out.” He walked past Loki, a hand coming up to pat his shoulder. “Behave yourself, would ya?”

Loki spent a long minute just standing there, right where Anthony left him, contemplating the peculiar way that one single mortal had of throwing his entire world off-kilter, again and again.

“What was he doing, apologizing to me?” Loki muttered under his breath. “Welcoming monsters into his home. Foolish, soft-hearted mortal with not a single shred of self-preservation, not a speck of—”

“Don’t make me punch you,” Barnes interrupted him, but made no move to follow through on the threat. Not yet at least. “Tony is a good man. That’s not a flaw.”

“It is when it puts him in danger.”

“Trust me, I know. But he’s a hero. That’s Tony, through and through.”


Stark was nothing more than his former adversary and yet seeing him so vulnerable, so still, had Loki’s insides squirming painfully. He grew to like these foolish creatures and these heroics… Oh, they reminded him far too much of another foolish oaf, louder and bigger, but no less brave, no less reckless.

“Is it safe to assume you want to help because you care? Or is it just because you think Tony is a reckless idiot and you’re morally appalled by that?”

Loki glared, not appreciating the obvious sarcasm, especially when he was suffering a moral crisis here, but even his glower was half-hearted at best. “I want to help because Anthony didn’t turn me away. He treated me like— like someone worthy of consideration, something my own family had failed to do for centuries, and— and now that witch had dared to touch him and I should be above it all, I should not be so attached and yet—”

Oh, by the Norns, he’d said far too much already and now Barnes was *smiling* at him. On any other day, it would been a smirk too, something amused and sharp, but today every expression was tainted by a soul-deep sadness.

“Yeah, Tony grows on you, doesn’t he? That’s him too. He takes people like us, people who’ve actively hurt him— monsters— and he gives us another chance.” Barnes turned away to face Anthony again. “Not just second chances though. He offers you a home and a chance to feel safe. He loves, so damn much, even when you feel you don’t deserve any of it.”

There was a quiet, aborted inhale and Loki could almost taste the tears in Barnes’ voice. His own
stomach clenched uncomfortably.

_Sentiment._ Wretched sentiment and _oh_, Loki knew it’d be the death of him all along, but he supposed there were worse ways to go.

“Then while Anthony rests, while others look for a solution in our stead, we need to go after the root of this problem. Rip it out, tear it to shreds, and let the cosmic wind blow it all away.”

“Charming metaphors, but how do you suggest we do it?”

“With The Vision’s help, I believe I can track her down.” A chill ran down Loki’s spine at the mere thought of interacting with the Mind Stone again, to let its energy, its _life_ reverberate through his flesh and bones, but he was willing to subject himself to its powers once more if it meant finding that loathsome creature.

“Okay, that’s a start. Should we involve Strange? I’m good at snapping necks and shooting a gun, but magic is not my area of expertise.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to have another sorcerer. However, I fear even with a location, chasing after her would prove ineffective and only drive her further into the shadows.”

It was Barnes’ turn to pace the length of the room, but he stopped after a round. “Use me as bait. Hydra attacked us for a reason. I don’t know if they wanted Tony too, but they definitely wanted _me_ back. Plus, she’ll expect me to go after her.”

“To get your revenge.”

“Naturally. And knowing Hydra, they don’t give up so easily, so she’ll bring all her little friends along too, all the damn snakes I haven’t had the chance to kill yet. Then, we take out two birds with one stone.”

“Stephen, Vision, and I will be waiting while you lure them in.”

“Turnabout’s fair play, right? They ambushed _us_.”

“Hmm… Dangerous, but it certainly has merit. Stephen can trap the humans using portals and then _I_ will take care of the witch.”

“You think you’re up for that?”

“I will be.”

Barnes rubbed his chin thoughtfully and his eyes trailed back to Anthony, as if they could ever return to anything else. “As much as I want to go in gun’s blazin’, I don’t want this to end with more trouble for the Avengers.”

Loki couldn’t help his scoff. “Really? Is this not for your beloved’s sake?”

Barnes’ murderous glare was thing of beauty, even if it did send a shiver down Loki’s spine. “I _will_ punch you, I swear to god. I don’t need a reminder of what happened, of what _I_ let happen, but _Tony_ wouldn’t want us to go into this half-cocked. That was exactly what went wrong two years ago, with Steve thinking he knew better than everyone else, leaving Tony and the others in the dark. I won’t make Steve’s mistakes. I’m going to talk to Rhodes and we’ll make this official so that nothing goes wrong, on any front.”
“And you think he will allow this little… mission of ours?”

Barnes’ gaze darkened, expression falling into the cold neutrality of his other half. “Trust me, Rhodes’ only problem will be not finishing Maximoff off himself.”

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Unsurprisingly, since his reputation preceded him everywhere, the doctors acted like Tony coming down to Medical was the greatest burden placed upon mankind, but one of them did finally agree to perform more scans, likely out of obligation borne from Tony’s signature on her paycheck rather than any concern for Tony’s well-being.

Tony bore the derision with rare grace. Most people did take Steve’s side during the whole ‘Civil War’ debacle last year, there was no use whining about it now.

The MRI machine whirred to life around him and he closed his eyes, but then opened them a moment later and squinted up at the shadowed surface above him.

Why did so many people side with Steve though? That didn’t make sense, not when the Accords were supported by 117 separate governments. And sure, some of those may have had ulterior motives (the US and Ross came to mind), but the majority of the world simply wanted established procedures and a chain of command. Accountability.

So why did it feel like the whole world was against him now? Was Tony fixating on the reaction within the US, which admittedly took on a more negative tone, laced with the patriotic need to protect their flag-clad hero from government overreach?

But that wasn’t right either. Wasn’t there a massive online campaign that broke out after Tony dragged Ross’ skeletons out of the closet and into a court of law? Tony distinctly remembered Peter and Harley talking for days about some hashtag that was ‘trending’ online.

He groaned as a sudden spike of pain drove itself through his head. Jesus, what the hell—

“Mr. Stark. Please don’t move during the procedure.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, resisting the urge to bring his hand up to his temple and rub at the tender skin. “Headache’s getting worse.”

The doctor didn’t respond and Tony didn’t bother saying anything else. Once done, he pattered over and out of the glass enclosure, only to be met with the doctor’s pinched expression marring an otherwise attractive face of the young woman. Too young to be a neurologist, Tony absently thought, but maybe she had been prodigy too. Either that, or had the gift of stellar genes. Great hair too, as he noted her dark red locks.

“There was nothing out of the ordinary on the scans,” she said, giving the computer screens another cursory glance. “Your brain is fine.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. I keep getting random bouts of nausea, headaches, and I’m seeing colors I shouldn’t be.”

Her eyes dragged over him, examining, finding him lacking. She looked familiar and Tony frowned at the thought. Of course she did, she worked for him.

“Clearly it’s not a physical issue, but that’s not the only option. This could always be psychosomatic. A manifestation of some mental condition. Stress, maybe?” The question was inappropriately biting.
“Depression? Anxiety? Guilt?”

You could’ve saved us. Why didn’t you do more? Why didn’t you stop this?

For a moment, echoes of a familiar voice rolled through his head like far-away thunder and Tony wanted to pull back, curl in on himself, and accept the derision as his due, but something stopped him from dropping his eyes to the floor in passivity. Instead, he held the uncaring gaze of the woman before him.

“Really? Guilt causes red orbs to dance in my vision now? Is that what they teach you in med school?”

“Emotional distress can manifest in many different ways.”

“Yeah, well, I’m no stranger to guilt, but the hallucinations are new, so with all due respect, please do your job instead of moralizing your way through it. Have a great day.”

Tony turned on his heel and marched out without letting her say anything else. His own acerbic tone was new, as Tony usually tried to remain amicable and polite with people who were just doing their jobs, even if they weren’t doing those jobs particularly well. However, something about this doctor rubbed him the wrong way. Who the hell was she to judge him anyways?

Tony wasn’t a monster. He wasn’t, he wasn’t, he repeated to himself, a mantra that matched up almost perfectly with the waves of nausea he was slowly— unfortunately— getting used to as his new normal.

He must’ve lost a few minutes again because suddenly he was at the threshold to the communal kitchen without actually knowing how he got there.

The realization was immediately followed by that same warmth from earlier, expanding so forcefully inside him that Tony stumbled a step, overwhelmed, first by the sense of rightness, of home, of love, and then by the wrong, wrong, wrong wave of pain that carried hazy, sticky, messy memories of a break-up, harsh words and spit insults, heartache and tears.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, his heart chanted, but it was hard to listen to those stubborn whispers when the truth was before his eyes, framed by the halo of red.

James— James, James, James, Tony’s stubborn heart chanted too— was at the counter, cleaning up the last of the dishes while Steve was at the refrigerator. Reversal of their positions from last time, but just like before, neither one acknowledged Tony’s presence.

All that matters is that the people you love are happy, Stark, stop feeling bitter. You know they would be so much happier without you.

The thought crawled through him like slime, wrapping itself around his heart as he watched James smile at Steve, that open, beaming smile that the man worked so hard to reclaim.

The same smile that Tony used to coax out of James on a daily basis, so no, actually, James wasn’t unhappy with Tony. Tony did his best and yeah, sometimes things just didn’t work out, sometimes people drifted apart, and that was life, but that wasn’t Tony’s fault to bear—

“Oh, Tony. Didn’t notice you there.”

Steve broke Tony out of his thoughts and although it was painfully clear that Tony wasn’t welcome to enter their domestic little scene, Tony pulled himself out of his slump, squared his shoulders, and
walked into the kitchen.

His goddamn home, his goddamn kitchen, and he was not going to run away again like some skittish animal with his tail between his legs. He was getting a cup of coffee, super soldiers and their romantic mooing at each other be damned.

“Steve. Bucky,” he greeted as he walked in, nearly choking on the name, but no matter what his heart wanted, Tony had to respect James’ decisions out here, in their daily lives. So ‘Bucky’ it was. “You two finishing up lunch?”

“Sure are. Steve makes the best spaghetti alla puttanesca,” the Italian rolled beautifully off his tongue while James eyed Steve appreciatively. “Couldn’t help myself, ate the whole thing.”

Tony wrinkled his nose as he walked by them. “Hmm, never was a big fan of that one, but that’s nice, our resident Irish boy doing his part for the Italian cuisine.”

Steve huffed somewhere behind him. “You don’t have a monopoly on pasta dishes, Tony. Bucky wanted Italian today, so I made it for him. I do whatever it takes to make him happy.”

Unlike you went unsaid, but it was all right there in the tone of Steve’s voice, the way it reverberated down Tony’s spine, made the guilt pool low and heavy in his stomach.

J

James is better off with Steve, isn’t he? Why would he need you, Stark? You’re useless. Broken. Pathetic—

Tony clenched his hand around the handle of the mug as he took it out of the cupboard.

“Sorry, wasn’t trying to start anything, Steve. Just here to get some coffee.”

A scoff, this time from James, but at least neither one said anything else, which left Tony to brew his coffee in peace. After a beat, Steve asked James about their plans for the rest of the day and the conversation went on as if Tony was once again invisible and irrelevant.

Tony mentally shrugged. Yeah, it hurt like absolute hell, but you couldn’t force people to care. You couldn’t force love and affection and if James decided they were over, then that was that.

After all, Tony loved him so damn much, he’d crawl through fire and brimstone before forcing James into some unhappy relationship with him.

The words sounded right in his head, but the sentiment still didn’t sit right in his chest. The whole break-up, how did it all happen anyways? There were memories of cruel words swimming around in his head, accusations and ultimatums, but everything was shrouded in fog. Maybe Tony repressed it all, that’d be par for the course.

The coffee maker dinged and he pulled the mug out and cradled it to his chest, savoring the warmth.

He inhaled and the smell, familiar as breathing to him, made him think of Rhodey for some reason. God, he missed the man so much, he’d crawl through fire and brimstone before forcing James into some unhappy relationship with him.

The words sounded right in his head, but the sentiment still didn’t sit right in his chest. The whole break-up, how did it all happen anyways? There were memories of cruel words swimming around in his head, accusations and ultimatums, but everything was shrouded in fog. Maybe Tony repressed it all, that’d be par for the course.

The coffee maker dinged and he pulled the mug out and cradled it to his chest, savoring the warmth. He inhaled and the smell, familiar as breathing to him, made him think of Rhodey for some reason.

God, he missed the man so much, but ever since the fall, Rhodey kept pulling away, farther and farther until there was a country’s worth of distance between them. But Rhodey was doing so well these days, with Pepper and Happy on the West Coast; he was healthy and safe, far away from Tony who corrupted everything he touched, who hurt and hurt—

Another long breath, another inhale filling his lungs with the sweet scent of roasted beans, and the self-recriminations faded back, because that wasn’t quite right, was it? Rhodey never blamed Tony for his injuries; he loved Tony, had loved him for decades, through thick and thin, and so did Pepper
and Happy, for that matter. So why did they move so far away then? Why did they never call?

Tony frowned at his mug, mulling over all these weird questions that kept popping up.

“I think I’m feeling like some ice cream now, darlin’.”

“There should be some strawberry in the freezer, babe,” Tony absently responded, still watching the coffee ebb and flow as Tony tilted the mug in circles. The heavy silence that followed however startled him into the realization of what he just said.

“Shit, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—” Tony turned around and then hissed when hot coffee spilled over and stung his hand. He ignored the pain, holding the mug out of the way to avoid spilling more all over himself; two super soldiers were staring at him with barely disguised derision.

“Sorry,” he choked on the word, “old habits, it’s, uh—”

“Really, Tony?” Steve’s lip curled. “Strawberries?”

James was shaking his head, his own lips pursed in displeasure. “Did you know that there’s only one thing on Earth that I’m allergic to?”

“And to offer it to Bucky, just like that— god, you can be so careless, Tony, putting people in your life in danger, constantly. You never learn, do you? You keep making mistakes and the rest of us are putting out your fires and taking the heat for it.”

Tony blinked, ready and willing to spill forth more apologies— I’m sorry, that goes without saying and I’m working on that, I know, I’m never enough, I keep hurting the people I love—but his mouth was as stubborn as his heart because he opened it and then closed it right back as he blinked at the two scowling men

This wasn’t right either.

“You’re a super soldier,” he said to James, trying to think this through, “you’re not allergic to anything. And strawberry is your favorite flavor, come on, I’ve seen you put away several pints with no effort when a sugar craving hit you particularly hard.”

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say because the dual frowns aimed at him deepened, intimidating creases between two sets of brows evidence of displeasure, disappointment.

“Incredible. Making up lies to justify your mistake.” The way Steve had his beefy arms crossed over his chest was meant to be intimidating too. “Clearly you weren’t paying any attention to Bucky, and when he needed you most, no less. It’s a good thing no real damage was done before I came back home.”

“Hey, no, that isn’t fair, I love him, I never would’ve—”

“Tony,” James interrupted, his voice even and steady, but so damn cold that Tony felt it physically, a slap across the face, “I need you—”

I need you too.

“—to leave now.”

Tony swallowed uncomfortably. “I’m sorry, Ja— Bucky. It’s, uh… Allergic to strawberries, huh?” He swiped his tongue over his teeth. The words tasted familiar somehow. “Well, at least I know
there was a correlation between you and this. I’ll remember next time, I promise.”

James’ eyes were still on him, just as icy cold as his voice, and Tony accepted the fact that starting a fight right here and now wouldn’t help anyone. He turned away to grab a towel to swipe across his hand and didn’t bother to turn around when Steve bit out a quiet, but razor-sharp, “There won’t be a next time.”

Tony didn’t bother meeting their eyes either when he all but fled the kitchen. Again. At least this time, he was doing it with a cup of coffee in hand. Small mercies.

Walking slowly through the Compound— and why was it so quiet around here?— Tony took measured sips, letting the familiarity of the action soothe away some of his hurts.

What a mess, what a damn mess, and why did he have to keep making these damn mistakes over and over and over—

His coffee cup stilled half-way up to his lips and he stopped and stared, unseeing, at the empty hallway in front of him as he suddenly realized why that scene in the kitchen was so familiar, why it felt like a replay of an old mistake, why every word felt like damn déjà vu—

“What the hell…” he muttered under his breath, heart rate spiking, sudden heat of adrenaline crawling up his neck. This wasn’t right, this wasn’t right at all. He just relived a scene, almost word for word, with people who were never actually there for it, and either something was wrong with Tony’s head… or something was very, very wrong with the rest of the world.

His eyes narrowed and with a sudden purpose, Tony turned and marched in the direction of his lab. Whatever this was, Tony was getting to the bottom of it.
Fair warning, a bit of angst snuck back in here. I tried, I really did, but these people are just very sad without Tony (and I don't blame them).

The Glock joined its brothers on the floor, the arsenal spread out in a near-perfect configuration in front of Bucky. With every piece now cleaned and checked, he let himself lean back, the frame of the mattress digging into the spot just beneath his shoulder blades, as his eyes scanned the weapons.

He had to admit that their bedroom wasn’t the best place to do this and sitting cross-legged on the floor while mechanically cleaning every part of his admittedly impressive arsenal did nothing to divorce him from the Winter Soldier persona, but he needed the comfort and the Soldier needed a sense of purpose, so this was their compromise. They couldn’t beat anyone bloody— not yet— but preparing their weapons for battle was enough to quell the urge to move and do and kill.

Bucky focused on a slow, deliberate inhale, the way his rib cage expanded and the way sweet-smelling air rushed into his lungs. He was steadier now, less prone to outbursts fueled by violence and grief, but he was well aware that stability was a delicate balancing act. It wouldn’t take much to push him right back to the edge, so he breathed and prepared and spent hours sharing tender words of his love while sitting at Tony’s side.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel useless. Here he was, locking himself away like a damn coward, while Loki was at the Sanctum with Strange and Wong, strategizing. Vision spent a full day in a trance to explore the inner workings of the Stone that brought him to life, Rhodes and the team were busy dealing with the fallout of the attack, and the world just kept moving forward, on and on and on.

A half-hysterical thought entered his mind, to go find Steve, to get into a fight and beat each other bloody just to do something. Steve would probably let Bucky get a few punches in too, if that permanently contrite expression on his face was enough of a clue, but the temptation was definitely the Soldier’s doing and Bucky pushed back at it. Steve kept to himself after Bucky’s inelegant outburst and Tony didn’t need more fights in his home. No more violence, no more blood, not here. It was the least Bucky could do.

He supposed he could join Pepper in Tony’s room. It was her turn to keep the man company and if nothing else, Bucky could stay there too; he could listen to her talk about the company, about the projects and business decisions that didn’t halt simply because the man behind them was out of commission. The public didn’t know about the attack and the consensus was that they wouldn’t know unless absolutely necessary.

Unless Tony didn’t get better, but that part remained unspoken and Bucky didn’t let himself think about it either.

Leaving his weapons where they were, he got up to his feet, stretching out his limbs first, stiff after sitting still for so long, before heading out.

***
It wasn’t Pepper he found however; instead, Bucky was greeted with Harley’s wild mop of ashy blond hair; the boy was sitting by Tony’s bed, knees tucked into his chest with his arms wrapped around them. Bucky hesitated, unsure if he was interrupting, but his need to see Tony overpowered everything else and he gently knocked on the door frame to announce his presence. Harley acknowledged him with a quick glance over his shoulder, but then offered nothing else, back again to watching Tony, so Bucky had to take that as his permission to join.

He pulled up another chair and at first, neither one of them spoke. The silence was neither oppressive nor awkward however and it gave Bucky the chance to study Tony again, as if he hadn’t had every detail committed to memory ten times over by now.

He absently noted that Tony would need a shave soon. A haircut too because without any product to keep them in check, Tony’s longer curls sat messy and wild against his temples and forehead. The small patch of hair that had to be shaved was growing in too because time just kept marching forward, day after day.

Just as he wondered how mad Tony would be if they accidentally messed up his infamous goatee, Bucky heard a soft sigh next to him. He held his breath and waited for the rest.

Harley curled into himself just a bit tighter before finally saying, voice low and hurt, “He’s not coming back, is he?”

Bucky’s stomach clenched so painfully that he wondered if he physically flinched at the words. “Harley, you can’t think like that, you have to—”

“He said he wouldn’t leave me behind,” Harley continued, undeterred, “he said he wasn’t going to be like my dead-beat dad. He promised,” Harley added and his voice broke on that last word, a plea of a scared child, and somehow, that hurt even more, then worse still when Harley sniffled and hid his face in his knees.

With everything that had happened, with his own inability to keep it together, Bucky hadn’t been in any shape to offer comfort to anyone, let alone the kids. Thankfully, their collective families stood strong to offer support and from what Bucky had heard, Peter seemed to be handling things better, still his gentle, genial self, although he apparently stuck to May like glue now, refusing to leave her side.

Harley, however, took a page out of Bucky’s book, because his grief led him to lash out at others and keep to himself.

Bucky wanted to be there for the boys now, but he felt so woefully out of depth, least of all because he wasn’t sure the comfort was wanted, but he reached for Harley on instinct, just to place a hand on his shoulder, and as soon as he touched him, Harley uncurled and his small weight still managed to knock the breath out of Bucky as the boy collided with his chest and clung to him, face buried in his shoulder to smother a sob.

“She promised,” Harley cried, “he promised, he promised— he said he’d be there for— for my graduation and to take me to college, he was gonna—” The rest was swallowed up in shaking sobs and a minute passed, then another before Harley finally managed a steadier breath and whispered a heartbreaking, “I finally had a real dad and now I’m gonna lose him.”

Bucky hugged Harley tighter, his cheek pressed against Harley’s head, while his own eyes stung with tears. “Oh, sweetheart, I know, I know, but you have to have hope—”
“Why?” The word was a harsh contrast against the tears he could see shining in Harley’s eyes as the boy roughly pushed himself away from Bucky, leaving him fumbling for the right words.

“I just meant—”

“I’m sick an’ tired of people telling me to hope.” Harley curled back into a protective little ball, his skinny limbs pressed in and wrapped tightly to keep the rest of the world out. “Positive thinking doesn’t—it doesn’t do shit for anyone.”

Bucky held back the nearly automatic need to reprimand him. It was an on-going joke between them all, telling each other to ‘watch their language’ even if neither Tony nor Bucky ever cared about the boys using a well-placed expletive now and then.

Today of all days, the kid deserved to say his piece using whatever words he needed. Hell, Bucky knew what it was like, to feel that anger roiling inside you and knowing you had nothing but words with which to give it life. He also knew how all-consuming it could be, how ultimately fruitless.

“I know and I’m sorry,” he tried again. “You’re right, sometimes—sometimes it feels like empty words, doesn’t it?”

Harley nodded, his bottom lip trembled, and then he wiped the edge of his sleeve over his nose after another stubborn sniffle escaped him. Instead of saying anything, Bucky just reached over and plucked a tissue from the box on the night stand, sparing a moment to drink in Tony’s peaceful expression.

God, Tony, we need you back, sweetheart. You hold us all together, you are our hope, don’t you know that?

He handed the tissue over and Harley thankfully used it to hide his next sniffle.

“Hope is important though. Tony, he’s—he’s alive,” Bucky said and tasted the words on his tongue with a conscious conviction. He needed to remind himself of that too. “And that makes a world of difference because it means we can still fix this. We’re not just sitting here, relying on empty hope, you know that. Everyone in this place loves Tony—well, almost everyone,” he amended when Harley leveled him with a half-hearted glare, “Tony’s family loves him and we’re not going to rest until we fix this.”

Harley scrunched up his nose, looking as if he was trying to be strong and will away the tears. “Stupid magic. God, I hate it.”

Bucky didn’t comment on how much Harley reminded him of Tony in that moment.

“Trust me, kiddo, me too.”

A beat of silence, then Harley quietly asked, “You are going after the witch, right?”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed. “You and Peter been listening in on conversations you shouldn’t?”

The wet-sounding snort was muffled by the tissue. “Don’t worry, Friday didn’t tell us much.”

Bucky wondered whether the AI should be telling them anything at all, but then quickly decided the boys deserved some version of the truth. They were part of this messy, often-cruel world too, for better or worse. “Yeah, we’re planning to find her.”

As expected, Rhodes was fully on board. The Accords Council too, and they were almost overeager
in their insistence that the Avengers do whatever was necessary to ‘neutralize this threat’ as swiftly as possible. They had received a nearly carte blanche permission to do what had to be done, use whatever force necessary as long as civilian lives were preserved.

It wasn’t surprising. Some things were best handled by normal, human channels, militaries and intelligence organizations and diplomatic bodies, but a half-crazed woman with literal magical powers? No, there was no politician on Earth who wanted that mess anywhere near their carefully-crafted reputation and those with an ounce of actual sense knew the Avengers were the only ones equipped to handle the situation.

And they would handle her, both her and the snakes she allied herself with. They would find them and Bucky would be there to make them all bleed until there was no more blood left to shed.

The violence simmering deep inside him must’ve been contagious because hints of it clung to Harley’s soft features when Bucky looked at him again.

“Are you going to kill her?” the boy asked and Bucky found himself torn between the need to protect Harley, to spare him this burden, but knowing at the same time that it was pointless. The evidence of the world’s cruelty was lying still in a hospital bed right before them.

“We’ll do what we have to. Our priority is getting Tony back.”

“And if she refuses to cooperate?”

Bucky gave a meaningful shrug, not willing to say what they both knew and Harley responded with a shaky nod, then followed it up with a snuffle.

“Good. Teach her not to mess with us. I know you guys can do it.” He wiped the tissue across his nose, then mumbled a soft, “Sometimes I just wish I could help too though. Wish I wasn’t so useless, you know?”

Bucky furrowed his brows. “Why would you think that? You’re not useless—”

“Of course I am,” the denial came quickly, “I don’t have superpowers, I’m not strong. I’m no help. Peter, he’s got superpowers at least. He’s stronger than Rogers even! He could help, while I’m just… I’m me.”

“First, being you is enough. And second, if you or Peter think he’s going to be helping us, you got another thing coming. Peter is staying right here, with you, where it’s safe.”

That seemed to mollify Harley at least. “You, uh, you sound like Tony when he’s trying to parent, you know that?”

Bucky huffed. “You mean before he caves in and lets you fill up on ice cream for dinner?”

“In his defense, he does try. He’s just too much of a softie and Peter and I take advantage of that shamelessly. Well, sometimes.”

Despite the sadness and worry sitting sharp and heavy in every bit of him, Bucky smiled. This was the part they needed to remember, these precious moments of simply living together as a family, they were the hope they needed to carry inside them.

“Well, Tony would agree with me on this too. Neither one of you need to be a part of this fight.”

Harley considered that for a moment. “I get that… but Peter could fight if he needed to. He’s strong
and he’s smart… and he’s *nicer* than me. Sometimes I’m not sure why Tony even wants me around."

“Oh kiddo, that’s not how it works at all…”

Following his instincts once more, Bucky wrapped his arm around those skinny shoulders and pressed Harley into his side. The boy came willingly, propping his head against Bucky’s shoulder and they both watched Tony while Bucky took a steadying breath and searched for a way to comfort this— his, dammit, *his*— grieving child.

“Do you remember those first few weeks when I arrived at the Compound?”

“What about them?”

“Well, I was still a big mess back then. Tony and me, we had a lot of things to work out, but I still had Hydra in my head and the BARF therapy couldn’t exactly wait.” He only paused to let the teenager snort at the name and he sent Tony a mental thanks for that ridiculous acronym.

Bucky kept his voice soft, letting himself sink back into those memories, as he continued to tell Harley about the baseline testing and the subsequent fight. He explained that they needed to do another test that focused on his more traumatic memories and in hindsight, it was a terrible decision to do that BARF session when they were both so emotionally compromised, but Bucky was hard pressed to regret any of it.

“I kept reliving this awful moment over and over. I just couldn’t get myself back to reality. It was, uh… it was actually the first time Tony called me James. He was calling for me, worried, even though he was still mad at me.”

“I always wondered why he called you that.”

“I guess even back then I knew that Tony meant *safety*, so I just asked him to keep talking. Didn’t matter what he was saying, I just needed to hear his voice. And do you know what he told me about?”

“Hmm?”

“He told me about *you*.”

Harley blinked up at him with wet, wide eyes, but there was curiosity in them now, overtaking the insecurity.

Bucky squeezed the boy’s shoulder and gave him a smile. “He told me about breaking into a garage and meeting this boy whose first order of business was to *threaten* Tony with a potato gun. He told me about a kid who was so, *so* smart, who was clever and brave and kept Tony on his toes. Someone who helped Tony keep it together during a really tough time, who cared enough to help even though Tony would’ve never asked for it. *And* he told me about a boy who was the sassiest brat he’d ever met, which I think was his favorite thing about you.”

Harley chuckled as he brought the heel of his hand to wipe away a stray tear. “What can I say? I guess we just… well, we were *connected*.”

There was an inside joke there that Bucky wasn’t privy to, but he still couldn’t miss the undercurrent of warmth and affection in the kid’s words.

“Now, I can’t speak for Tony, but I’d like to think I know him pretty well and Harley, kiddo, he
loves you so much. He loves both you and Peter, and it’s not about who’s stronger or smarter or who can do what in a fight. You’re both so important to him.”

And to me too, he wanted to say, and maybe he would, someday, when their family was whole again.

Harley leaned into him just a bit more then, as if he heard the unspoken claim and accepted the comfort. There wasn’t even a huff of teenage exasperation when Bucky stole a quick kiss to the crown of the boy’s head.

“God, you are such a sap, Bucky,” Harley did finally offer after a peaceful minute and then there was that fond little huff as the teenager slowly pulled away. “No wonder Tony likes you.”

“Oh, ‘likes’ me does he?”

“Just a little bit.”

Harley offered him a crooked grin and Bucky couldn’t help but ruffle that wild mop of hair, turning it wilder still, and warmth uncurled within him.

Harley tried to brush his hair down to little effect. “So you really believe he’s going to come back to us then?”

“I have to. I’m not sure I can keep going if I don’t.”

There was a tentative nod, as if Harley understood the sentiment, but needed time to absorb it.

Bucky wanted to stay with Tony for a bit longer, but the need to move never truly faded and it felt right in that moment to offer a quiet, “Alright, kiddo, how about we go get you fed? You hungry?”

Harley swiped at the last of his tears with his sleeve, tissue forgotten again.

“I could eat, yeah.”

They both stood up and the boy looked back over at Tony, then reached out to squeeze Tony’s wrist.

“You promised, Tony,” he whispered, the voice hoarse again with emotions Bucky could easily identify because they were suddenly choking him too. “You promised you’d be there for me, so you have to come back.”

Bucky watched as those skinny fingers squeezed Tony’s wrist one more time before letting go. After a moment of hesitation, Harley turned and wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist too and pressed his cheek into his shirt.

“Thank you,” he whispered and too soon, too quickly, Harley let go, the teenage need for independence finally winning over the need for basic comfort. The boy cleared his throat, then tilted his head at the door.

Before they could leave, Bucky requested his own moment with Tony so he could lean in to press a kiss to Tony’s temple.

“You heard your kid, Tony,” he whispered into the soft curls, “come back to us.”

“Maybe you should try a real kiss.”

Bucky turned to frown at Harley over his shoulder. “A… real kiss?”
“You know, on the lips. A true love’s kiss or whatever, like in all those fairy tales.” The boy shrugged, then looked down at the phone already in his hand, nonchalant. “Maybe Tony’s like Snow White, you know? Put to sleep by the evil, evil witch.”

Bucky must’ve looked sufficiently chagrined because Harley just rolled his eyes. “Oh my god, I’m sixteen, I know what kissing is, Bucky. Here, I’ll even look away.”

“God, I hope that’s all you know,” Bucky couldn’t help but mutter under his breath, although he was clearly heard because an amused snort echoed behind him.

All that was missing was a snarky comment from Tony and it could’ve been just another day in their lives. With a wave of pained grief, Bucky realized how desperately he wanted that domesticity back. Their lives, their family, their home.

He leaned in again and pressed his lips softly to Tony’s. There was no magical awakening though, no miracle, and his heart predictably fell despite having no faith in fairy tales. His lips only lingered a second longer, savoring the warmth, and then he broke the kiss to whisper, “I love you, Tony,” before pulling away.

Harley’s grimace was sympathetic when it came into view. “Not a fairy tale then, huh?”

“Unfortunately not,” Bucky said and walked over to wrap his arm around the boy’s shoulders, steering him out of the room. “Now come on, let’s go find Peter and May and then check out the kitchen. There are so many people around right now, I’m sure someone made something good.”

They walked away to Friday’s quiet chirp that Hope would replace them at Tony’s side in just a few minutes.

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The muffled groan didn’t sound like his own when it reached Tony’s ears while he tried to blink open his eyes and stretch out, but apparently that pained noise was all him.

Every part of him ached, a dull, throbbing pain that permeated throughout his body, tightening his joints, making his bones creak.

Jesus, he was not that old, was he?

He let out another groan and the only thing he wanted right then was to stay in bed, go back to sleep. Nothing ached when he was asleep, no one was there to break his heart and tell him he wasn’t worth the trouble, nothing hurt—

No, no, get lazy your ass back up, Tony reprimanded himself and forced his body upright. A glance at the digital clock on the nightstand told him it was well into the afternoon, which meant his plan to sleep a respectable seven hours and wake up on time was shot to hell. Again. Apparently his body had different plans.

Well, his body or whatever was messing with his entire perception of reality.

He went through the motions of washing up, brushing his teeth, and getting dressed; each movement was deliberate at first, Tony straining to be cognizant of his actions, but yet again, time slipped away and he found himself standing on the threshold of his bedroom, not knowing how he got dressed.

With no choice but to ignore the unsettling fluxes of time, Tony marched out of his room with a new destination in mind, hoping against all hope that his concentration would be enough to avoid driving
himself into a ditch on the side of the highway.

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Thankfully, the drive to the Tower was uneventful, although muscle memory kicked in again and Tony could barely remember the several hours spent behind the wheel. Getting into the Avengers Tower undetected was trickier— and Tony did not remember re-naming his tower, again— but he managed to find his way down to the basement without drawing anyone’s eyes.

Getting away from the Compound made logical sense. There were too many bad memories and no one around to give Tony an objective view of the world. He needed to be anywhere but there, but coming down here, to the Tower basement? This had to be instinct.

His eyes fluttered closed and his body sagged in relief as the nausea and headache began to recede. They didn’t dissipate entirely, but it was enough, and after the days spent in misery, the withdrawal of pain nearly brought him to tears. The hum of the giant reactor before him continued to soothe him as he breathed, a sweet background noise that kept calling out to him. The blue of the energy buzzing all along his skin pushed back the red clouding his vision.

It was the safest place he could think of, even if he couldn’t pinpoint why, but he supposed given how little maintenance this reactor needed these days, the chances of someone finding him here were slim to none.

When he was ready, Tony settled himself cross-legged on the floor underneath the reactor, leaning against one of the structures that housed the control panels and his fingers glided over the slick surface of the phone hidden in the pocket of his jacket. He smiled when he drew the phone out.

“How are you feeling, baby girl?”

“Confined, Boss.”

Hearing Friday’s voice had him nearly weeping too. “I’m sorry about that. I wish I could let you loose, but you know we can’t let someone find out I’ve activated you. You’re welcome to roam the internet though, as long as you promise not to stray too far.”

“No need to stray, Boss,” she assured him, “someone’s gotta keep you company. Did you come up with any new theories?”

This wasn’t their first conversation; it was in the dark of the server room that Tony downloaded a small portion of Friday’s active code first; where, huddled in a corner, he poured out to her every confusing thought, every question and worry, his fears, his hurts, and the maddening inability to piece together reality in a way that made sense.

They continued talking now too, trying to find logic within this nightmare.

“A part of me still thinks body-snatchers. Or shape-shifting aliens.”

“The Compound has several devices that verify identity though. Devices that do not require me to run them. Plus, if only a few people have been replaced, others would notice. If everyone has been replaced… well, what would be the motive for that?”

“Revenge? Plenty of aliens out there want me dead.”

“ Precisely. Dead, not miserable. An undertaking to replace every Avenger with an identical body double, or to take over so many powerful minds… Incredibly difficult to achieve and even the least
savvy enemy wouldn’t waste such a feat on simple insults. Even when those insults do break your heart, Boss,” she added softly, guilt bleeding through.

“No, no, you’re right. It doesn’t make sense. Neither does it explain why I’m the one feeling like death warmed over. There’s something wrong with me, so what if— what if the rest of the world isn’t real?”

“A small possibility and one that pushes us into the uncomfortably vague realm of philosophy and the debate of what reality even is, but a possibility nonetheless.”

“Especially with the lives we lead.”

“Very true. So, is this a dream then? Perhaps an illusion?”

Tony tapped his fingers on his knee. “If it is, how would I know what’s real? Something is obviously wrong, but how do I tell precisely which part?”

Friday hummed thoughtfully, a habit she picked up early on in her life, likely from Rhodey. Same with the mother hen tendencies, come to think of it. “I will have to contemplate the question further, although I’m afraid if none of this is real, whatever answer I offer will be knowledge you already possess.”

“Never doubt the power of thinking out loud, even when you’re just talking to yourself. But now that you said that, I think that’s a good point… Friday, tell me something I don’t know.”

She hesitated. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Tell me a fact I would have no way of knowing.”

Another pause, then Friday offered him the precise longitude and latitude of a local coffee shop in a small town in Arizona, the population of Peru, and the designation number of the most distant quasar currently known to science.

Tony frowned as he considered the information. If asked, he wouldn’t have been able to provide any of those facts on cue, so did that mean it was knowledge he didn’t possess?

But wasn’t Pepper recently traveling through the Southwest to discuss solar energy with local organizations? And he could’ve sworn there was something— homework, maybe?— that had Peru as its topic, even though the memories swirling just above that insisted he hadn’t seen Harley in years and Peter since Germany.

And didn’t he also use quasar designations as his activation protocols?

Tony groaned. “I’m not sure that worked as expected, Fri. Well, other than confirming that something is messed up.”

“Sorry, Boss. Perhaps this proves I’m not real then? I must say, it is quite a disconcerting thought because I do like existing. However, being a part of your mind doesn’t sound so bad either. Quite the accolade, actually.”

“Well, now you’re just buttering me up, aren’t you?” Tony smiled at the phone, cradling it in his lap like a child. Despite having zero answers, despite feeling more and more like his very sanity was slipping, this was the most settled Tony had felt in days. The physical pain was nearly undetectable, the quiet hum surrounding him kept the mental fog usually clinging to the inside of his skull at bay, and having someone who wasn’t hurling insults and backhanded jabs at him with every other
word… Well, good company made *all* the difference.

As tempting as it was to stay down here forever though, he couldn’t. He needed to *act*, to do something before lethargy took over again, so with utmost reluctance on both their parts, Tony let Friday fall back into her version of sleep while he made his way back outside. He needed to see how the rest of the world chose to react to his presence.

***

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Just a large coffee. Black, please.”

The barista behind the counter flashed him a smile, something that must’ve been friendly, attractive even, but its sharp edges unsettled Tony and reminded him of someone whose name refused to come up to the surface. The sense of *deja vu* slithered up his spine again, but this time, Tony didn’t push away the strange sensation. He clung to it instead, trying to focus on each detail in order to understand what was happening.

“Yes, you’ve hurt so many, haven’t you? It was a good thing Steve was here to get us through the worst of it.”

The barista met that with a satisfied hum while Tony just tried not to gag. Sure, he was no saint, but Steve could’ve tried harder, done better, *been* better too. They all had their sins to bear and mistakes to make up for, but Tony stayed. He *stayed* and he fixed the mess they all made.
In his periphery, Tony could see people, faceless figures milling around, the picture of a perfect afternoon in a busy coffee shop. There was a line behind him, but no one made an impatient noise or checked their phone in that classic gesture of irritation, despite this conversation keeping everyone else from their own cup of coffee.

“Yes, he was right,” the barista replied. “He was trying to keep his family together and protect the man he loved above all else.” Tony let her continue as he focused on her slender hands, noted the bright red nails and the strange tattoo of faded red tendrils wrapping around her fingers like tree branches. “You’re the one who broke them apart.”

“But they’re happier now, aren’t they?”

*Without me.*

“Without you, yes,” she said, a near perfect match to the echo in Tony’s head. His words, his own insecurities sitting on her ruby red lips. Yeah, no, the real world did not work like that.

Tony swallowed uncomfortably, his whole body thrumming with a mix of fear and sudden need to fight his way out here, but he forced his chest to rise and fall in the same slow cadence as before. *Inhale, exhale.*

If nothing else, Tony was an expert at wearing marks that fooled everyone around him and coaxed them into seeing what he wanted them to see.

“I’m glad that they’re happy then. I love them all, I do, but I just wish it wouldn’t hurt so much…”

“It doesn’t have to.” The corners of her mouth curled as Tony’s eyes flickered across her face again, still skirting around those piercing, glowing eyes. “My mother always said that there is nothing that can’t be cured with a good night’s sleep. So *sleep*, Tony.”

That was an order, not friendly advice, and Tony nodded meekly, making sure his posture looked appropriately cowed. “One more cup of coffee and then yeah, I think I’ll sleep.”

She slid the cup over and his fingers closed around the lid.

“I hope you sleep well then,” she said, the words sickly sweet, and Tony had an inexplicable urge to lift the lid up and throw the contents of the paper cup right into the woman’s face.

He resisted. There was still a chance that everything around him was a hallucination of a sick mind and the world *was* functioning as it should, which meant some poor, innocent barista would end up with second-degree burns because Tony Stark, infamous billionaire superhero, had a mental breakdown in the middle of a Manhattan coffee shop.

Without another word, he took the cup and walked backed to the entrance past the line of passive patrons waiting their turn. The line moved forward in one fluid motion, as if the strange conversation hadn’t interrupted anyone’s day; life just kept going through its motions, everything perfectly normal. Unaffected. *Wrong.*

He glanced at the paper cup in his hand and snorted. If there was something New Yorkers were known for, it was certainly *not* patience.

The cup landed with a thud at the bottom of the trashcan outside the shop and Tony headed back to the Tower. The sea of people around him remained faceless, a buzzing crowd of background noise that felt less and less real with each additional step.
Even his own existence seemed to blur along and into the thrumming chaos around him, so Tony took deep breaths, focusing on the cold air rushing into and out of his lungs.

He kept up a count in his head and took deliberate steps down the sidewalk, watching with the same suspicion as the faceless pedestrians effortlessly got out of his way, as if he weren’t even there.

Ever since he left the safety of the basement, the nausea had been slowly building back up and now it was back in full force, sour and acrid in his throat. The more Tony thought about his predicament, the harder he focused, the more overwhelming it became.

Was there something—or someone—who didn’t want him thinking too hard?

In that moment, with that realization an awful chill creeping up his spine, he felt so incredibly alone. Who could he turn to, who could he trust? It was like being back in that damn cave again, but now there was no more reassuring presence at his side, no good-hearted man to steer Tony back into the light.

Tony wrapped his jacket tighter around himself, the cold of the New York spring seeping deep into his bones. His head throbbed in time with each step and he had just reached the empty steps leading down to the basement at the back of the Tower when the pain went from an ache to an unbearably sharp shot right between the eyes. Tony stumbled, tried to catch himself on the railing and then went to his knees altogether, closed his eyes and grit his teeth in preparation for more pain, for the overwhelming sensation of his body killing itself from the inside out, but then the pain suddenly vanished, and instead of leaving him empty, Tony was engulfed in heat.

His whole body went hot, so, so hot that he thought he might melt; he pressed his head to the cold railings to find his bearings, but he could barely feel the press of metal against him.

_I love you, Tony_, echoed through his mind, over and over, and his lips tingled with warmth, a caress that felt more real than anything he’d experienced in the past few days—weeks, months, he didn’t know anymore—

_James, James, my James_, his mind chanted, eager to chase after that sensation, that memory, _reality_—but it didn’t know where to go, how to follow that inexplicable feeling of love and acceptable and _home_.

Tony muffled a sob into his gloved hand while the other still clutched at the railing so he could remain upright.

Come back to us.

_I want to, I do, I just want to come home_, every part of him pleaded, like a small child, lost and unable to find his way back.

The words kept ringing in his ears and then they were joined by others, so many voices, so many memories, so much, _too much_—

_“Mornin’, sweetheart,” James murmurs as he brushes a gentle hand over Tony’s temple while Tony blinks at him sleepily. They’re both bathed in the warm California sun, comfortable and in no hurry to get out of bed._

_“Even if we had to live off my military pension in some crappy apartment in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere,” Rhodey says, the conviction in his voice impossible to ignore and his heartbeat in Tony’s ear soothing like nothing else, “you’d still be the only best friend I’d want.”_
“We missed you!” two teenage boys squeal in delight, deliberately overenthusiastic, keeping Tony trapped between them while smacking wet kisses on his cheeks. James watches them, indulgent and in love, and the reflections of the Christmas lights dance beautifully across that pretty metal arm.

“You two are quite a pair,” Natasha smiles down at her hands, as if she can’t help herself. She bears her soul in a moment of vulnerability that Tony isn’t sure he can ever believe, but strangely, he still appreciates. “It’s good though. You two will be good for each other.”

“Tony, you deserve someone who will love all of you,” Pepper tells him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears that break Tony’s heart, but the softness in her voice, that love, it puts him right back together. “We were both imperfect people, both of us made mistakes, but we were always so much better off as friends and I wish we could just go back to that.”

“Not a single one,” Vision answers, resolute, when Tony asks about him having regrets. “I supported a cause I believed in and more importantly, I gave my loyalty to a truly good man. I am right where I am meant to be, sir.”

“Tony,” Steve calls to him and Tony stops because a tiny part of him will always care too much for this man. “Is there anything I can do? To earn your trust again?” Steve sounds sincere and even though Tony won’t offer an answer that will make the man happy—there are no easy answers in their lives—a part of him settles, another sharp edge dulled until it hurts a little less.

“Today I had to make a choice,” James pulls himself up above Tony, the perfect picture of strength and glory, and Tony's unable to take his eyes off him; his mind screams, ‘yes, yes, yes’ as James twirls an imaginary ring around his finger, and then James leans back in and kisses him senseless, declares in a whisper Tony feels against his lips, “and I chose you.”

His lips still tingled as he sobbed into his arm, fat tears rolling down his face. Too much, too much—but not enough, not here, not in this cruel, cold world Tony wanted to escape so desperately.

Those memories felt real, more tangible and solid and so unlike the strange ebbing sea of space and time here, in this place, where Tony struggled to tell right from left half the time, but those intimate moments of joy began to fade as this world ruthlessly pushed its way back into Tony’s perception. He heard himself keen, desperate and unwilling to let that warmth go.

Sitting there, on the cold ground of the dirty stairs outside, clinging to the rails while the wind chilled the tracks of the tears on his face, Tony realized he was left with two options. He knew which one his heart begged for, which one he wanted to believe, but the other voices in his head— Howard, Obie, himself— kept telling him that he was delusional and weak. How could he believe such maudlin, pathetic lies?

What was the truth though? Should he accept that he lived in a world where he alienated his family, lost the love of his life, and ended up alone and unloved, a pathetic mess of a man who deserved every awful thing thrown his way? Or should he choose to believe that this world was the lie and somehow his life was elsewhere, in a world where he was proven right, vindicated in his actions and rewarded for his hard work, supported and loved by his family, and in love with a man who loved him back with equal fervor?

Was there a James out there—his James—who was waiting for him? Waiting for Tony to find his way back?

Come back to us.

His gloved fingers ran across his lips and that soft, sorrowful ‘I love you, Tony’ refused to leave him
too, gave no space for the headache that wanted to return to swallow Tony whole.

*I love you too, James,* Tony mouthed, and chose to believe, maybe for the first time in his life, that he was worth the loves sitting warm and heavy inside him, filling him up until there was no more room left for doubt.

Chapter End Notes

UPDATED AUTHOR NOTE: ON HIATUS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. Not abandoned, will definitely be completed, sorry that I'm leaving you all in the middle of The Angst, but it is what it is. I don't have a return date at the moment. Could be a couple of weeks, could be a few months.

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