"I'm here to kill you, Terminator," Tony said slowly, "does that compute?"

The soldier looked up at him with wide blue eyes and no expression. "Okay."

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"I am being decommissioned," the soldier said, and for one horrible moment Tony thought he actually seemed relieved. "I understand. I will comply."

(Or; Tony learns the Winter Soldier killed his parents and goes on a search for revenge, but ends up learning how to heal instead)
and then I get overexcited. I cannot promise quick updates but this is planned to be my stress relief story with hopefully lots of hurt comfort and ridiculous fluff, if only I can hold my angst and action muses at bay!

TIMELINE: This story goes AU before the events of Captain America: The Winter Soldier. So SHIELD is still up and running, and Steve (and Natasha) currently have no idea that Bucky is alive or that he is the Winter Soldier. Tony finds Bucky before he was sent after Fury.

* Focus of this story is Tony and Bucky. Other characters are listed in order of appearance (not importance). That will vary!
Chapter 1

"Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." Confucius

He had been keeping a close eye on SHIELD for awhile now. There were signs of corruption that Fury either didn’t notice or wasn’t concerned with, but SHIELD knew far too much about him for Tony to be comfortable with them slipping on down the morality scale. So he took to hacking them every couple of months or so, just to make sure there wasn’t anything concerning.

One time he found the video of his parents’ murder.

It was buried beneath a hundred other insignificant files, all of them quarantined from the rest of the SHIELD servers. The information had been downloaded from an enemy base, and he doubted even SHIELD knew about it yet. Then again, he wouldn’t put it past them to have known all along and kept it from him.

Tony’s had a lot of worst moments in his life. There was the phone call about the crash. There was waking up in a dark cave with a battery rigged up to his chest. There was Obadiah’s parting grin as he turned away with Tony’s heart in his hands. There was falling through a hole in the sky, sure he would be dead before he even hit the ground.

This would be added to the list, somewhere in the middle. He had just sat there, not understanding what he was seeing, as the killer ran them off the road, beat his father, and then calmly strangled his mother, before shooting out the camera.

Then Tony saw red.

He didn’t sleep for nearly a week, searching through every last piece of data, calling in every favor he had. He was even desperate enough to reach out to Natasha Romanoff, but she didn’t know much. She did give him a name: The Winter Soldier. She said he was a ghost story. But she’d seen him, once. He was the only one to ever shoot her, which is terrifying enough.

The strangest part was that he had assassinations attributed to him throughout fifty years, but the description of Natasha’s shooter from 2008 perfectly matched the man he’d seen from 1991.

The search led him down the rabbit hole.

The corruption he’d been tracking in SHIELD seemed to come to a head, like the entire organization was wound through with a poisonous thread. They had connections to assassinations attributed to the Winter Soldier, and they had benefited from his father’s death. He found snippets of information that seemed to imply the man was kept in cyrostasis, which explained his lack of aging.

Then there was Hydra.

The first time he found the reference to Hydra, he dismissed it. But it kept coming back to them, and they didn’t seem to be the footnote in history that everyone thought they were.

Eventually, he slept. Then he woke up, and started again. It took him two months, all in all, to track
Hydra activity and power usage through the entire United States and finally pinpoint where the Winter Soldier was likely being held.

He didn’t ask for back up, because he didn’t want anyone to try and stop him from what he planned to do.

This was personal, anyway, and he didn’t want anyone to interfere. As satisfying as it might have been to shoot his way through the base, he couldn’t risk drawing the attention. So he rigged up knockout gas to their ventilation system, waited ten minutes, and then went in through the front doors.

Everyone was passed out wherever they had been standing. They wouldn’t wake up for hours.

Tony pulled his tablet from his suit, and pulled up Jarvis. “Where is he?” he demanded.

“Based on the power grid, there is a room two floors down using an inordinate amount of energy,” Jarvis said calmly. “Certainly enough to power a cyrostasis chamber, Sir.”

Tony nodded, heading to the elevator and then door, following the energy signal into the room. It was large, with a huge clear cylinder sat center stage. A man was inside of it, frozen still, with brown hair to his shoulders and a metal arm. Tony clenched his hands into fists, and forced himself to step closer.

He could shut the power down. He could fire a bullet straight through the glass. He could make sure that the man that killed his parents never woke up.

But with that mask on, he couldn’t be one hundred percent sure that he had the right man—and it felt a little too much like it would be murder, if the man wasn’t able to fight back.

“Gotta wake him up,” Tony decided, heading towards the controls.

“Is that wise, Sir?” Jarvis asked, in a tone of voice conveying quite clearly how unwise he thought it was.

"Almost definitely not," Tony said. “I’m going to do it anyway.”

He started the sequence to wake up the soldier, and the glass rose up with an ominous hiss. Tony backed up, watching as the man was revealed without any barrier between him. His eyes were still closed, but he was clothed in a thick, black jumpsuit, with no sleeves so his metal arm was in full view. The mask covered almost half of his face and lent him a sinister look.

Tony swallowed and waited for him to wake up, raised a hand to keep his repulser at the ready.

Then the soldier opened his eyes. He blinked them open suddenly, glancing to the side in confusion, and then he pushed himself forward and collapsed into a heap on the floor.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Tony decided. The man had fallen forward and caught himself on his arms, and he seemed too unsteady to raise himself back up. “This is so awkward. Am I seriously going to have to wait for you to fully defrost before we can fight to the death?”

There was no response, and Tony frowned as he looked at the mask he was wearing. It seemed more like a muzzle than anything. He wondered if he could even speak with it on.

“Hey, take off the mask," Tony told him harshly.
He didn't expect the man to listen, but he immediately lifted his shaking hands to undo the straps and allowed the mask to drop to the floor between them.

He hadn't been wearing the mask when he killed his parents, so he recognized his face at once and knew he had the right guy—but there was something off. The blank emotionless stare he had seen in the surveillance video was replaced by a look of confusion and pain.

"Are you my new handler?" he asked. He spoke with perfect diction and no trace of an accent, despite the fact that all the intelligence he had received indicated the Winter Soldier was Russian.

But then one could never tell when it came to assassins and spies. Natasha only ever had an accent when she wanted to, and she had plenty to choose from.

"I'm not your handler," Tony snapped, and crouched down to meet him in the eyes. "You killed my parents, asshole. You killed my mom."

The soldier caught himself on his hands again as he lost his balance. The strange suit he was wearing rippling with the movement. He looked up, his hair falling into his eyes, and watched Tony curiously.

"Your parents were targets?" he asked, before nodding vaguely. "Then you require a mission report?"

"No! God, fuck, no, I know what happened, caught the live and in color recording," Tony snarled, his heart stuttering at the thought of hearing this murderer recount the details once again. "Do the names Howard and Maria Stark mean anything to you?"

"Are they my targets?" he asked, looking up at him with confusion.

Tony sat back on heels, staring at him in disbelief. "You're a few Fudgsicles short of a well-stocked popsicle cart, aren't you?"

The soldier watched him blankly. "I do not understand your commands. Please restate."

"I'm here to kill you, Terminator," Tony said slowly, "does that compute?"

The soldier looked up at him with wide blue eyes and no expression. "Okay."

Tony froze. "Okay," he echoed. "I tell you I came here to kill you and your response is 'okay'?"

"I am being decommissioned," the soldier said, and for one horrible moment Tony thought he actually seemed relieved. "I understand. I will comply."

Tony stumbled to his feet and backed away from him, his heart pounding with dread, as it truly began to sink in that there was something terribly wrong with all of this. "Hold that thought," he told him.

He set his tablet atop the Hydra computer so Jarvis could begin accessing them remotely.

"Jarvis, search for their files on the Winter Soldier," he said, keeping one eye on the guy, even though he was still shivering and looked more like a wet and miserable kitten than a threat. "This guy is supposed to be the most dangerous assassin alive, find out what the hell's wrong with him."

"There are no records referencing the Winter Soldier, Sir," Jarvis reported after a brief pause. "However, based on available information, I am able to extrapolate that he is the man they refer to
as the Asset. He was captured, not recruited, and has been a prisoner of war since at least some time in the 1960s. He withstood torture and conditioning attempts for a number of years before they decided they would need to erase his memories in order to implant proper conditioning. It appears that even then their methods were not permanent, so they added an additional layer of control by embedding him with activation trigger words, and began to wipe his mind before and after missions before returning him to stasis."

Jarvis had called up a number of archive recordings on the monitors, mostly of the soldier being strapped to a chair and then subjected to some bastardized version of electroshock therapy. There was no sound, but he could tell he was screaming every single time. “Jesus, stop,” he said. “Jarvis, stop it.”

The videos all blinked out at once. Tony's hands had started to shake, and he felt like all the air had left his lungs. He glanced back at the soldier, but he showed no reaction to Jarvis’s words. They might as well have been discussing the weather.

"He isn't what we thought, sir," Jarvis said, his own voice vibrating with every bit of emotion he was capable of. "He is not a willing participant nor a supporter of Hydra's ideology. From what I can gather, he fought against them every chance he had...the mission, with your parents, the trigger words were used. It is unlikely he had any real understanding of what he was doing."

Tony caught himself on the console, trying to steady his breathing, before he glanced back at the Winter Soldier. He was still shivering, and hadn't moved. He looked lost and resigned, apparently just sitting there waiting for Tony to murder him. Tony was pretty sure he was going to throw up.

"How sure are you, Jarvis?" Tony asked.

"There isn't any doubt, sir," Jarvis said. "Their records are quite...extensive, and highly disturbing in detail. I'm afraid we've yet to find the person truly responsible for your parents' murder."

Tony laughed brokenly, letting his head fall against the console. "It can never be simple, can it?" he asked, before steeling himself for what he knew he had to do. "Make a copy of their database and then wipe it."

"Sir, SHIELD will likely wish—“ Jarvis began.

"SHIELD didn't get here first," Tony said. "Finders Keepers, Jarvis, them's the rules."

"Sir?" Jarvis said hesitantly. "Surely you are not considering—“

"We can't trust SHIELD. We've known that for awhile," Tony said, running a hand down his face. "Trust me, if there was someone else I could pawn him off on, I'd be doing it."

"It may be that what happened to him is through no fault of his own," Jarvis said hesitantly, "but that makes him no less dangerous. We are not equipped to give him the care that he needs."

"We're talking about a man that's been a prisoner or war, brainwashed and tortured, for fifty years at least," Tony said. "Who's equipped for that?"

"You do make a valid point, sir," Jarvis agreed reluctantly.

Tony snorted, picking up his tablet, and folding it back into his suit. “Once we're clear, call SHIELD to come do clean up,” Tony said. “We’re gonna blow this room though.”

“Do you think that’s prudent, Sir?" Jarvis asked.
“Yeah, I actually do,” Tony said. He stepped passed the Winter Soldier, who followed him only with his eyes, without moving another muscle. He slapped a detonator onto the stasis pod. “We can’t be sure SHIELD didn’t know about this place. This may buy us some time.”

The soldier looked up at him with a furrowed brow, considering him, and Tony wondered how much of this he actually understood.

"Okay, new plan," Tony said, kneeling back down in front of him. "I don't really get my jollies from murdering brainwashed torture victims. So, you know, no decommissioning for you."

The soldier pressed his eyes shut for just a moment, sucking in a shaky breath before he forced them open again. Rather than looking relieved, he looked almost terrified. "What is my mission?" he asked, and his steady voice did not reflect any of the emotions Tony could see racing through his eyes.

"We're going to get you the hell out of here,” Tony told him firmly. "That's the mission."
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Note: Bucky will be referred to as "Bob" for the some of the next couple of chapters, because Tony likes coming up with names and Bucky doesn’t remember his. Just warning you in case you’re skimming and wondering: “Who the hell is Bob?”

Tony was glad he'd brought the helicopter in case there was anything he needed to bring back with him, because carrying a half-frozen super assassin in his arms through the night sky would be entirely new levels of awkward. He hadn't exactly planned on bringing home his parents’ killer at all, but Tony was adaptable if he was anything, so he dutifully pulled the man along with him to the waiting helicopter.

He also climbed out of his suit after they both got inside, which was maybe a risk he shouldn’t have taken.

But he had to strap the soldier in, and the fingers of the Iron Man suit weren’t dexterous enough. He made a mental note to fix that, and then tried not to notice when the soldier flinched back from him slightly, as though expecting to be hit, even though Tony was weaponless and suit-less and the soldier could probably have pulled him apart like string cheese.

Tony briefly considered adding more charges to blow that entire base sky high, along with everyone in it.

Instead he just hit the detonator for the cyrostasis room. Hopefully SHIELD wouldn't be able to figure out what had been in there, and if they already knew, hopefully they'd think the soldier was inside when it blew. Either way, it should buy him some time to figure out what the hell he was going to do with the guy.

The soldier looked down at the straps Tony had tightened around him, glancing out the window carefully. "What year is it?" he asked, his voice so quiet that Tony almost missed it.

"It's 2014," Tony said.

The soldier frowned, looking like he was concentrating. Tony suspected the year didn't actually tell him much. He wasn't sure when he was last out, and from the sounds of it they hadn't let him keep any of his memories in any case.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Tony told him, as he reached for space blanket from his emergency kit.

"Why not?" he asked, his voice lacking any real emotion.

"I just wouldn't. If I'd known—let’s just say that I thought you were someone else," Tony told him after a moment. The soldier tugged at the seatbelt, and Tony gently reached out to still his hands.

"Leave the straps alone, okay? It'll take us about an hour to get back to the tower."

"Okay," the soldier said, not bothering to move as Tony carefully placed the blanket over him. His apathy was disturbing, but Tony figured it was probably a blessing in disguise. He didn't know how he'd get him home if he freaked out or started fighting him, and he was sort of past the point
of being able to leave him behind.

He turned away and moved to the pilot’s seat, silently signaling Jarvis to keep an eye on their guest. The ride home seemed to take a lot longer than the hour he’d promised, though the clock only read fifty minutes later when he finally landed on the roof of the tower.

From Jarvis’s periodic updates, he knew the soldier had hardly moved at all. He turned around and stepped back towards him. He was looking out the window, utterly still, his eyes somewhere very far away. Tony pulled the space blanket off and then placed a hand against his flesh arm to test the temperature of his skin.

The soldier jerked, startled, reaching up to rip the thick seatbelt straps apart like they were made of tissue paper, and then stumbled back away from him.

“Hey, hey,” Tony said softly, holding up his hands as the soldier fell back against the door of the helicopter. “Sorry, that was my bad. Just wanted to make sure you were warming up.”

The soldier swallowed hard, then nodded vaguely. “I am recovered,” he said, unconvincingly. “I am mission-ready.”

“Yeah? Well, gotta be honest, Rambo, you don’t look it,” Tony told him. “Let’s get inside, okay? Maybe get you out of that weird suit? You look like you belong in an anime movie. I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with that. Anime’s cool.”

The soldier just blinked at him.

“Tough room,” Tony muttered. “But seriously, can we go inside?”

The soldier carefully got to his feet, examining the door. “We are at a new base?” he asked. “I was transferred?”

“Sure, new base,” Tony said. “Welcome to Stark Tower. Known as Avenger Tower to some, but it’s not really. It’s still Stark on all the paperwork. They never have to know.”

“You’re Stark,” the soldier said, eyes shifting to examine him. “Son of Howard and Maria Stark.”

Tony went still. “You remember them?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” the soldier said, looking at Tony like he thought he was the one that was confused. “You told me about them at the previous base.”

“Right, of course,” Tony said, and shook his head. “I guess I never did a proper introduction, huh? Tony Stark, at your service. Welcome to my humble abode. It’s much nicer from the inside, I promise.”

The soldier took the hint, and pushed open the door, before dropping to the concrete landing with far more grace than he’d had when he exited the cyrostasis chamber.

Tony followed him out, before starting towards the doors and carefully not looking behind him. “This way,” he called. The soldier followed docilely along behind him. Tony was pretty sure Rhodey would legitimately kill him if he ever found out about this.

Tony opened the door, and held it open for the soldier. He stepped inside, trying to hide his curiosity in his eyes behind the wild strands of his hair. It was getting harder and harder for Tony to reconcile this man with the scarily efficient assassin he had watched kill his parents on that
footage.

“This is not like the other bases,” the soldier said hesitantly, taking in the large expanse of glass windows. “Usually I’m underground.”

“I don’t like being underground, or in dark places, or, you know, caves, especially,” Tony explained, the tone of his voice pointedly light. “Sort of built this place just to see how high I could get.”

The soldier tilted his head at one of the windows, making an aborted motion to reach out to touch the glass, before turning back to look at Tony. “I don’t like dark places, either,” he admitted.

“See? Things in common, already,” Tony said. He clapped his hands, and the soldier started back, clenching his hands. Tony pretended not to notice that, too. “Let’s get you cleaned up, okay?”

He decided to take the soldier to his own bathroom because it was the biggest, and why the hell not. It wasn’t like there were any lines he wouldn’t cross, at this point. “Jarvis, lights,” Tony said, and the entire penthouse came to life.

The soldier didn’t seem startled, though he did glance around at the walls. “Jarvis is a computer?” he asked quietly. “You spoke to him at the other base, too.”

“Yeah, took the travel size with me,” Tony said, surprised that the soldier had figured that out on his own. He was starting to think he understood pretty much everything, and it was just his reactions that were off. If he recalled Tony’s conversations with Jarvis and his accusations about his parents from when he was barely conscious out of cyro, then there was no way he was going to miss anything now. Tony made a mental note to watch what he said.

“In your suit,” the soldier said, glancing back at him speculatively. And yep, there it was. He was definitely more aware than his dispassionate disposition would imply.

“That’s right,” he admitted. “I’m Iron Man.”

“Then you are a known enemy of Hydra,” the soldier told him, frowning slightly. “Have I been traded or stolen?”

Tony sighed, because he had just reminded himself to watch what he said. He supposed that had always been a futile plan anyway. He’d never been good with filtering himself. “Finders Keepers?” Tony tried. “Okay, look, here’s the thing, you’re not actually a possession, you know, so you can’t be traded or stolen at all. You do know that you’re a person, right?”

The soldier glanced back at him. “I am a weapon,” he said.

“You look pretty person-shaped to me,” Tony told him. “So let’s go with you’re a person.”

“What purpose do you have in mind for me?” he asked, looking suddenly wary.

Tony noticed him eyeing the exits, and the way he took a half step back. This was the guy that had run Natasha Romanoff off the road before she could see him coming, and then shot straight through her to kill his target. Tony was pretty sure he couldn’t stop him if he wanted to leave.

He probably should have kept the suit on, but what was done was done. He tossed the soldier a grin, instead. “Well, first, I think you should take a shower,” he said. “You’re kind of dripping Hydra base all over the place, and I just had the floors replaced. Little known fact: Norse God bloodstains are next-to-impossible to get out.”
The soldier’s eyes moved back to him, but his stance had relaxed. “You are the strangest handler I have ever had,” he told him.

“That’s okay, because you’re the strangest assassin I know, and I know a few,” Tony told him, before turning towards the hall. “Shower’s this way.”

The soldier followed him, hesitantly entering the bathroom and checking his surroundings like he expected to find something horrible there instead of an empty shower stall. Tony couldn’t really blame him. Hydra accommodations left more than a little to be desired.

“I’ll need to get you some new clothes,” Tony decided. “I think we’ll need to put that suit you’re wearing in my incinerator. I’ll be right back.”

He stepped back out of the hall and started towards his room. “Jarvis,” he called. “Scan him for trackers.”

“Already done before we left the base, Sir,” Jarvis said, in a tone that was unnecessarily disapproving. “There were none.”

“Right, okay, should have thought of that,” Tony admitted. “Little busy babysitting the trained killer, though, if you’ll forgive my lapse.”

“That’s why you have me, Sir,” Jarvis told him, sounding vaguely smug.

Tony snorted, and pulled an old Black Sabbath shirt from his drawer along with some new underwear and a pair of grey sweatpants. It would have to do for now. “Jarvis, scan our guest for his sizes and go have fun on your favorite online stores,” he said. “Buy him a new wardrobe. I don’t think my stuff is going to fit him all that well.”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis acknowledged.

Tony headed back into the bathroom to find that the soldier had already stripped completely, and had placed his suit neatly folded on the toilet seat. “Woah, okay, so you’re not shy,” Tony said in surprise, pulling up short. Then he paused, assessing, because the soldier wasn’t the only one that could be shameless. “Not that you’ve got any reason to be. You’ve sort of got this cyborg-Adonis thing going on, it’s nice. You’d fit right in on the cover of a Sci-Fi Romance novel.”

The soldier just stared at him. It was actually a depressingly familiar reaction to his rambling, so he decided not to let it unnerve him. “I sort of thought you’d be covered in scars,” Tony admitted.

“Wounds heal,” the soldier said gruffly.

“Yeah, but they usually leave a mark,” he pointed out.

The soldier furrowed his brow. "Not on me," he said. "Only on my shoulder, because the anchor points keep reopening the wounds."

“What?” Tony cried, dropping the clothes on the counter and stepping forward. He’d be lying to say his fingers weren’t itching to check out that arm, but he’d thought he’d shown great restraint. This changed the timetable. “Are you in pain?”

"It's not enough to impede my functioning," the soldier assured him, and then, seemingly confused by Tony's concern, he added hesitantly: "I am fine."

“Right,” Tony said, running his eyes across where the metal shoulder blended into his skin. It was
a cross between a hack-job and an actual work of art, and he sort of felt queasy for admiring Hydra’s handiwork.

Still, there was no denying it was incredible—especially if it was as old as the records implied. But he wasn’t going to push his luck by trying to get a look at it tonight.

So he pulled his eyes away, and stepped forward to turn on the water in the shower. He tested the temperature before standing aside so the soldier could step in, apparently entirely unconcerned with his audience.

Tony was slipping back towards the door to give him some privacy when the soldier’s voice had him halting.

"It isn't cold," he said, his voice full of amazed wonder.

“What? Yeah, why would— “ Tony turned around, confused for a moment before he realized that his handlers would never have cared for his comfort. “Christ, hey, no, this isn't punishment, okay?” Tony said quickly, as he took a worried step back. “This isn't...it's just a shower, you can have the water as warm or as cold as you like."

The soldier adapted easily enough, grabbing the shampoo bottle to quickly clean his hair and then his skin. At least it seemed he’d been taught basic hygiene, Tony thought before pulling his eyes away. He let himself fall back against the wall, and pressed his eyes shut for a moment.

“This is so far from how I imagined this day ending,” Tony muttered to himself.

"Because you were going to kill me," the soldier said.

Tony looked up in surprise, unsure how he had managed to hear that. “Well, yeah,” he admitted. “But in my defense, I thought you were a cold blooded assassin at the time.”

"It's okay," the soldier told him earnestly. “I wouldn't have stopped you."

"Yeah, and why is that by the way?" Tony asked, stepping closer with narrowed eyes. “You seem even less skilled at self preservation than me, and that's saying something. Here's a tip—even I've got this one figured out—don't volunteer to let someone kill you. Pretty easy general rule to follow."

The soldier pulled his eyes away, turning to watch the water. “I don’t want to fight anymore,” he said, and he sounded broken.

Tony reached past him to turn off the water, and then wrapped him up in a large fluffy towel. “I wouldn't make you fight,” he promised. “You can live and not fight. Or so I've heard. Still sort of working on that one, myself. But it's a work in progress."

He reached back to pick up the stack of clothes, and handed them over. “Get dressed, okay?"

“Okay,” the soldier said.

Tony waited out in the hall, even though privacy at this point was sort of just an empty gesture, as he’d pretty much seen all there was to see. He was still curious about the expanse of unmarked skin —was the man that good that he was never injured, or had his statements been literal, and he simply healed?

“Jarvis,” he said thoughtfully, “is there anything in those files about the soldier being enhanced?”
“Yes,” Jarvis answered at once. “He has increased strength, speed, and healing. From Hydra’s repeated simulations and testing, I would estimate that he is on par with Captain Rogers in power.”

Tony hung his head. “Would have been good to know, buddy,” he said.

“Yes, my apologies, Sir,” Jarvis said. “I’m sure had I taken the time to fully brief you on the massive amount of information you requested that I sort through, you would have surely seen reason and not brought him here.”

“Touché,” Tony said wryly. “You’re getting a little too good at the sarcasm.”

“I have learned from the best, Sir,” Jarvis said primly.

The soldier carefully exited the bathroom, looking around warily. The sweatpants were a little short and the shirt was almost Steve Rogers levels of tight, but not quite, because despite his muscles the soldier was lean like they’d been staving him.

“I have done as you requested,” the soldier informed him.

His hair was wet but looked cleaner, and he looked almost harmless in the t-shirt and sweatpants, like he was someone one might run into at a Laundromat. Not that Tony had ever actually been inside of a Laundromat.

“Great,” he said, falsely cheerful. “Great with the getting dressed. Now if you’ll come with me, I’ll show you to your room.”

The soldier frowned at him, but followed when Tony started down the hall.

“You know,” Tony said casually. “I never got your name.”

"I don't have one," he said, as he reached down to tug absently at the shirt.

"Well, that's not going to work," Tony decided. "What would you like me to call you?"

"Soldat," he answered crisply.


Bob shrugged. "Okay."

Tony had entire floors sitting unused in the tower, and one of them had been for the Hulk. It probably made a lot of sense to take Bob there, and put him in lockdown. Except—except isolating him somewhere alone seemed cruel in a way Tony was uniquely qualified to understand, so he stopped at the closest guest room to his master suite, instead.

He’d built it for Pepper when he’d started having night terrors and she’d stopped being able to sleep in the same bed, but then she wasn’t sleeping here at all, and it sort of just sat there. It might as well get some use.

Jarvis had already turned on the lights, and Bob stepped in ahead of him, cataloguing the entire room. He seemed bemused as his eyes landed on the large King size bed. “This is my assigned cell?” he asked warily.

“I mean, I wouldn't call it a cell, considering it's nicer than a five star hotel room,” Tony told him. “Also, you're not my prisoner. You're my guest. I guess you're sort of my patient too, even though I'm wildly unqualified to help you. But needs must, am I right?
“I don’t understand,” Bob told him, sounding utterly lost. “What do you require of me?”

“I just want you to get some sleep,” Tony told him. “We’ll talk more in the morning, okay? We’ll figure it out.”

“Sleep,” Bob repeated slowly, looking back at the bed. “You require me to sleep?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Is that okay?”

“I understand,” Bob said, and he weirdly looked like he was steeling himself against something. “I will comply.”

“Okay, we really need to work on the whole comply thing, Seven-of-Nine,” Tony told him. “You don’t have to comply to everything I say.”

Bob watched him suspiciously, as though he suspected this was a trap. Tony felt a little sick, because he had a feeling that suspicion wasn’t coming out of nowhere. “I will sleep,” Bob said after a moment, watching him for a reaction.

“Lovely,” Tony said. “Me too. So you get sleep, and I’ll get sleep, and maybe in the morning life will make sense again. I wouldn’t count on that, but it’s a nice thought.”

Bob just continued to stare at him with a look that was somehow both anxious and threatening, so Tony left him to it and went to his own bed. He changed into some sweatpants, face-planted on the covers, and somehow actually managed to go to sleep.

It only lasted about two hours, and then Jarvis was waking him back up.

“I am sorry, Sir,” he said. “But Mr. Bob seems to be in some distress.”

Tony was up and moving before he was fully conscious, which was probably stupid—but he was pretty sure Jarvis would have warned him if he thought he was in danger. Jarvis was good like that.

Bob hadn’t bothered to shut his door, so Tony skid to a halt right in the doorway. Bob was pressed into the corner of the room, looking smaller than he was, and breathing in a way that Tony was distressingly familiar with. He was headed full speed ahead into a full blown panic attack.

Tony carefully approached, before dropping to his knees a couple feet away, not wanting to crowd him. “Hey, Bob,” he said casually. “What’s up?”

"I tried to comply," he said, his voice trembling. Bob looked up at him, and his eyes looked terrified. “I think I’m malfunctioning.”

_Tried to comply?_ he wondered, and then it hit him. “You mean because I told you to get some sleep?” Tony asked.

"I don't think I remember how," he said helplessly.

"That's okay," Tony told him. "Sometimes I forget that too."

“I’ve failed,” Bob insisted, though he seemed to be calming down. “You need to punish me.”

“Never much been one for S&M, I’m afraid,” Tony shrugged. “I find pain unpleasant and I’m sort of squeamish, so…how about we watch a movie instead?”

“A movie?” Bob echoed. His brow furrowed like it seemed to do every time he was confused, and
it was probably unhealthy that Tony kept fixating on the fact that his parents’ killer reminded him of a perplexed kitten. He was starting to suspect there was not enough therapy in the world for either of them.

“Yeah, a moving picture? Stories that play out on the big screen?” Tony asked.

“I—“ his eyes went distant. “I think I went to a theater, sometimes? There was a girl, and she walked into a world of color.”

“Wizard of Oz,” Tony said, grateful suddenly that the soldier seemed to have at least one pleasant memory somewhere in his history. “Yeah, I might have heard of that one. Want to watch it?”

He shook his head hesitantly. “No, I—“ he broke off, looking stricken, and Tony wondered when the last time he’d actually said ‘no’ had been.

“Okay, no problem,” he said quickly, “sort of over that movie anyway. How about something new?”

“Yes,” Bob said, letting out a breath, looking relieved.

“Alright, I think we can manage that,” Tony assured him, before standing and holding out a hand to help him up.

Bob looked at his hand worriedly, as though he expected to be struck. He tilted his eyes up to examine Tony’s face.

“It’s not a trick,” Tony assured him, wiggling his fingers in invitation. “You take my hand, I pull you up. It’s simple.”

“I can stand up on my own,” Bob pointed out.

“Humor me,” Tony told him.

Bob carefully lifted his right hand, his fingers brushing hesitantly against the palm of Tony’s hand for a moment before he tightened his grip and Tony was able to tug him to his feet.

Tony led him to the living room and got Bob settled on the couch, and then he collapsed on the love seat opposite it and had Jarvis start playing random Pixar films. Bob seemed delighted by them, but was trying to hide it, and it was either heart-breaking or adorable, Tony couldn’t quite decide.

But it relaxed Bob enough that by the middle of Wall-E, he finally fell asleep. He sort of just tilted until he fell against the arm of the couch, his left hand dangling over the edge, and his feet curled up under him. Tony left the television on, but stood to grab a quilt from the chair. He carefully laid it over him, and then ran a hand down his face, wondering what the hell he’d gotten himself into.

But he was pretty sure his mom would be proud of him, even if his father wouldn't be—and both of those things were pretty good indicators that he was doing the right thing.

"Jarvis?" he called softly.

"Yes, Sir?" Jarvis replied, adjusting his own voice to the same volume.

"Cancel all my appointments this week," he said. "And put the penthouse on lockdown. No one in and no one out. I want eyes on Bob at all times."
"Understood, Sir," Jarvis said. "I'll alert you the moment he wakes up."

Tony checked on Bob one more time, then started back towards his room. He never did anything halfway, so he supposed this shouldn't be any different. Tony was unstoppable when he was on a mission, and he was going to help Bob—somehow, he was going to teach him how to be a person again.

Maybe he could even relearn how to be one himself somewhere along the way.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder that the files for the Winter Soldier Tony recovered from Hydra only went back to the 1960s, so Tony’s timetable for figuring everything out is incorrect—in this story, anything from 1944-1960 was either hardcopy only or redacted from the Hydra database.

“Sir,” Jarvis woke him. “Mr. Bob is awake and approaching. Sir? Sir, he’s—“

Tony pushed himself up sleepily, and squinted at Bob, who was standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“I require sustenance,” Bob told him.

“What—?” Tony frowned.

“If I am to remain at optimal performance levels,” Bob said slowly, “I will require sustenance.”

“Oh, food! You’re talking about food?” Tony cried, eyes widening. “Right, I forgot about food.” He grabbed a jar off his night stand and held it out. “Macadamia nut?”

Bob stared at the proffered jar like he thought it might explode, and took a cautious step back. “Handlers provide supplemental nutrition drinks,” he said. “Four times a day.”

“Christ, they had you on a liquid diet?” Tony asked, wincing. He ran a hand down his face. “Jarvis, do we have any real food?”

“The kitchen is fully stocked, as always, Sir,” Jarvis told him.

“Okay,” Tony said, getting up. “Let’s go find something. Probably we should ease you into solid foods, though if you’re anything like the other super soldier I know, you’ll be eating your own weight in food in no time.”

Tony led him back to the kitchen, and opened some of the cupboards. True to Jarvis’s word, they were well stocked. He found some weird, whole grain healthy oats mix that he suspected Pepper had a hand in, and decided it might be healthy and plain enough to start Bob back on real food. He’d add some sugar too, because god knows the poor guy didn’t deserve Pepper’s health food after all he’d been through.

He pulled out a bowl and the oats and sugar, and Bob sat on the barstool at the counter. “You haven’t done this before have you?” he asked him frowning.

“What, cooked?” Tony asked. “Sure. I’ve put ingredients with other ingredients before. It’s simple. I can build robots, I think I can handle breakfast.”

“I mean, you haven’t been a handler before,” Bob said. “You aren’t very good at it.”

“Firstly, that’s cruel,” Tony said, holding a hand to his heart in mock hurt. “Secondly, I am not
“You prefer a different title?” Bob asked, as he leaned up on the counter a little, watching him prepare the oatmeal. “Some of my handlers have demanded I address them as master instead.”

“Okay, woah, hold it right there, Jeannie Genie,” Tony said. “I’m not your handler, and I’m sure as hell not your master. I’d like to be a friend, but you can call me Tony.” He paused for a moment, studying Bob. “But while we’re on the subject, how far back can you remember your handlers? I thought you didn’t have any memories.”

“I remember my training, and some of my handlers,” Bob explained. “Mission details are… confused. They liked to keep me confused. They had to erase the missions to keep me from remembering things from before.”

Tony froze, glancing back over at Bob. That implied a level of self-awareness he hadn’t really expected. “You knew what they were doing?” he asked.

Bob glanced up to meet his eyes. “They were scared of me. They said I was erratic. I had to be controlled or I would hurt people.”

“You don’t seem erratic to me,” Tony told him. “For being a brainwashed assassin, I’ve been finding you to be remarkably well-adjusted. Though to be fair, my scale of adjusted is a little more skewed than the average person’s.”

“You called me brainwashed before,” Bob said.

“Yeah, you know what that means?” Tony asked. “It means they messed with your head. They forced you to do things you wouldn’t have otherwise done.”

“I keep order in the world. I have helped shape the century,” Bob told him, his voice flat and distant. “My work is a gift.”

“See, that little recitation there? Brainwashing 101,” Tony told him, as he set a bowl of oatmeal in front of him. “You sound like you’re in a cult.”

“And that’s…bad?” Bob asked.

“Yeah, cults generally aren’t shining examples of mental health,” Tony told him, as he leaned on the counter and handed Bob a spoon. “You want to know what I think? I think they kept erasing your memories because you kept figuring that out for yourself.” Tony paused when he noticed Bob was still staring at the spoon. “That’s a spoon, you—“

“I know what a spoon is,” Bob told him, and Tony could swear he almost rolled his eyes. It was wonderful.

Bob watched the bowl suspiciously for another moment, before carefully dipping it into the oatmeal and taking a cautious bite. He swallowed slowly, and frowned. “It’s…sweet,” he said, before looking down at it with wide eyes. “What is it?”

“That’s the sugar,” Tony said. “ Might have gone a little overboard, but I like a lot.”

“I like it, too,” Bob said quietly, like he couldn’t quite believe it.

“That’s good, we need to keep figuring out what you like,” Tony told him, before heading across
the kitchen to pick up an journal off the counter. It had been a gift, but since Jarvis kept track of everything for him, it was still blank. He pulled a pen out of the drawer and returned to Bob. He wrote out on the first line of the first page: *has a sweet-tooth.*

“What are you doing?” Bob asked curiously, stopping halfway through his oatmeal.

“I thought we should keep a list, of the things you like,” Tony told him. He flipped the book around so it was facing Bob, and pushed it closer. “Anything you want to add?”

Bob slowly shook his head. “I don’t…”

“That’s okay,” Tony said. “Why don’t you hold onto it? We’ll figure it out, okay?”

Bob pulled the journal closer, and he kept glancing up to watch Tony as he did, as though he expected it to be taken away. When it wasn’t, he pulled it to his lap, and ran his fingers over the words.

“Aren’t you going to eat any more?” Tony asked.

“Do I have to?” Bob asked quietly.

“No, of course not,” he said quickly. “If you don’t want it, it’s fine.”

“Sir, I’m sorry to interrupt,” Jarvis broke in. “But the packages you requested I purchase have been delivered. I had security load them into the elevator and they are on their way up.”

“Just in time,” Tony said brightly, smiling over at Bob. “Good news, we got you some clothes that should actually fit.”

Bob looked down, seemingly unnerved, but Tony didn’t question him. Instead, he moved the elevator and reached it just in time for it to open on its own. Two large packages were sitting on the floor, and he pulled them out before ripping them open. Bob wandered over cautiously, with his hands wrapped around himself.

A pair of fuzzy slippers with Iron Man heads on the front were sitting right on top, and Tony sighed. He should have known it was a risk to let Jarvis do the shopping. He set them aside, and then pulled out some of the clothes. The clothes, at least, were fairly average. There were t-shirts, sweaters and sweatpants, jeans, tennis shoes, underwear, and even a couple blazers, all name brands in muted colors and probably ridiculously expensive.

But if he can’t spend his money on random assassins he’s brought home with him, then what’s the point of it anyway.

“This is gear for my missions?” Bob asked, carefully approaching. He picked up the Iron Man slippers with a look of utter confusion. He glanced up at Tony like he thought Tony might be a little dim. “I require shoes made with thicker materials in order to carry out my missions. Usually they bring me boots. These…do not seem very functional.”

“Their function is comfort, and keeping your feet warm,” Tony explained. “And also because Jarvis is apparently developing a sense of humor.”

“You did tell me to have fun, Sir,” Jarvis told him primly.

Bob carefully tried on the slippers, and then looked down at them, wiggling his feet. “They’re soft,” he said, looking up with a hesitant smile.
The smile had Tony freezing. “Yeah,” he said cautiously, not wanting to spook him. Jarvis was obviously actually a genius—which made sense, because Tony created him.

Bob glanced into the other boxes and then frowned at Tony’s bare feet. “But what about you?”

Bob looked so concerned that he didn’t have any Iron Man slippers of his own, that Tony sort of thought his heart might break. He forced a smile, instead. "I've got tons of slippers," he promised. "These are for you."

“Thank you,” Bob said quietly, like he wasn’t quite sure it was allowed.

“You’re welcome,” Tony said, clearing his throat. “I mean, this is all for you. You’ll need clothes that fit.”

Bob helped him move all the clothes into the guest room, still wearing the slippers. It was pretty adorable, but Tony felt bad about having him do any work because Bob didn’t really seem capable of saying no to him. But it was also kind of normal, which he figured he needed.

Mostly, he had no idea what he was doing, so he gave Bob a juice box and sat him back in front of the television.

It was only about fifteen minutes before he was asleep again, and Tony paced across from him worriedly. “Why is he sleeping so much?” he asked. “Should I be worried about this? I’m a little worried about this.”

“Based on the files we recovered, he was not allowed to sleep,” Jarvis told him. “His body and mind would get some measure of rest during cyrostasis, but once he was awoken for a mission they would not allow him to rest. If the missions ran longer than three days, they would inject him with stimulants.”

Tony pulled to a stop. “Are you telling me that he hasn’t slept in the last fifty years?”

“It certainly would not have been something that was encouraged,” Jarvis told him, sounding reserved.

“Shit,” Tony said softly. “Just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t it? Any luck on figuring out who he is?”

"I'm running facial recognition against all missing in action soldiers going back to the 1960s. As he wasn't conclusively recorded as being an American, I have included British and Russian soldiers as the next most likely,” Jarvis told him. “If it doesn't yield results we may have to expand the parameters yet again."

“Keep me posted,” Tony sighed, before sitting down with his tablet. He started pulling up the files they’d retrieved from the Hydra base: he’d already missed that Bob was enhanced, and apparently not allowed solid food or sleep. He needed to know what he was dealing with before he screwed up again.

After reading twenty something detached and dehumanizing Asset status reports, and watching two hours of maintenance and debriefing videos, Tony found himself in the bathroom throwing up what little he had managed to eat.

And that was barely one fifth of the information they’d retrieved.

* * * *
When Tony finally got himself together and returned to the living room, Bob was awake again and watching *Brave*. He’d either figured out how to work the remote pretty damn fast, or he’d worked out he could ask Jarvis to do it for him. He’d have to check with Jarvis later to figure out which. He was just grabbing a flavored water from the fridge when the elevator dinged.

Tony jerked his head up. “Jarvis,” he said warningly. “I thought I said no one gets in.”

The doors opened anyway, and Pepper stood there with her arms crossed, tapping a foot. She looked up and latched her eyes on Tony, and narrowed them.

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis agreed amiably, “but it was Ms. Potts.”

“Fair enough,” Tony sighed, before smiling over at her. “Pepper, light of my life—“

“Don’t even start with me, Tony,” she said, stalking towards him. She pulled up short when she caught sight of Bob behind him, and frowned. Bob, for his part, seemed utterly unconcerned by someone randomly showing up. He supposed he was used to new handlers appearing unannounced.

Pepper pursed her lips as she studied Bob. “He’s not your usual one-night stand,” she whispered, though she seemed more exasperated than angry. “Do you think you could escort him out so we could talk? That doesn’t really fall under my responsibilities anymore.”

“He’s not a one-night stand,” Tony told her. “He’s my new roommate.” He leaned over the kitchen counter to look over at Bob. “Pepper, this is Bob. Bob, this is Pepper. Say hi, Bob.”

“Hi, Bob,” Bob said earnestly, glancing back at them before quickly returning his eyes to the television.

“Sorry,” Tony said, glancing back at Pepper. “He’s still a little literal, but we’re making real progress with sarcasm.”

Pepper frowned over at him. “Tony—“ she started.

“It’s fine, you can talk in front of him,” Tony told her. “Me and Bob don’t have secrets.”

Pepper gave him a strained smile and then wound her arm through his, tugging him out into the hallway towards his bedroom. “You have a roommate? Since when? What is going on with you?—“ she said. “What is going on with you? You cancel all of your appointments, you—“

“Nothing is wrong. He's a friend, I’m just helping him out,” Tony said. “He needs a place to lay low for awhile.”

“You’re lying,” Pepper said flatly. “What have you done?”

“Why do you assume I’ve done something?” he demanded. “I think that’s offensive. I think I should be offended.”

“You’ve been up to something for months,” Pepper said. “Did you think we didn’t notice? Happy even tried to tail you—“

“I know, it was adorable,” Tony interrupted with a grin. “I let him follow me for three blocks once before I finally got bored and gave him the slip. I think it was good for his self esteem.”

“Tony,” Pepper snapped. “I’ve tried, okay, I’ve tried to get through to you—but I don’t know what else to do at this point. If you don’t tell me what’s going on with you, right now, I’m calling
Rhodey."

“You’re threatening to tell on me?” Tony asked incredulously. “When did we re-enroll in the third grade?”

Pepper just pulled out her phone, staring at him with that prim Pepper-look of resolve, and Tony cracked the same way he always did in the face of it. “Okay, fine, look, Bob may or may not be a brainwashed assassin that killed my parents,” he told her. “But everything’s totally under control. The guy likes juice boxes and watching Pixar films, I’m not feeling super threatened.”

"Tony," Pepper started disbelievingly.

“I know!” Tony cried. “I tried to get him to give Dreamworks a try, but the kid loves Brave something fierce. He’s watched it like eight times already. He’s gonna love Hawkeye and the Black Widow, since Merida is basically their love child.”

“I don’t even know what to say that,” Pepper said slowly, as she looked down and started scrolling through her contacts.

“No, hey, don’t,” Tony said, snatching the phone from her. “If you don’t trust me, Jarvis will vouch for me. Jarvis?”

“Sir is correct, Ms. Potts,” Jarvis assured her. “While I have recommended tighter security measures, our guest is undoubtedly a victim of terrible injustice and cannot be held accountable for the crimes he helped commit. He has also not made any threatening moves since Sir awoke him from stasis. He seems to believe that Sir is his handler, and if anything, Sir is in a position of power over him.”

“Wait, so you weren’t—“ Pepper’s eyes go wide and horrified. “That man in there actually is a brainwashed assassin that killed your parents?”

“Uh…” Tony started.

“Give me back my phone,” Pepper said, holding out her hand. “We’re calling Rhodey, right now. Right now, Tony.”

“It’s not—he never had a choice,” Tony said tiredly. “I went after him, okay, I went after him hard, expecting to find this monster…and he was a prisoner. And he didn’t even understand that he was a prisoner.”

He gently grabbed Pepper’s arm, and tugged her back to the kitchen. They could see Bob on the couch, wrapped up in a quilt, wearing the Iron Man slippers on his feet. “Just look at him, Pepper,” he said, motioning towards him. “He’s been terrorized and frozen for decades. He’s always cold. If I move too fast, he thinks I’m going to hit him. He doesn’t ask for anything and when I offer him something I’m pretty sure he thinks it’s a trap.”

Pepper let out a shaky breath, watching him. “Tony—“

“I’m not going to tell you everything they did to him,” Tony said softly, “because I love you and I’d like for you to be able to sleep tonight. But this man killed my parents—how horrible do you imagine what he’s gone through would have to be for me to have forgiven him this completely?”

Pepper dropped down into one of the kitchen chairs, just watching Bob. She reviewed what Tony said, realized with a rising sickness exactly what that meant, and then steeled herself against it with a single shaky breath. She looked up at him. “Is his name really Bob?” she asked.
“They didn’t give him a name,” Tony said. “They called him the Asset. They spoke about him like he was a weapon. So I named him Bob.”

Pepper’s lips quirked slightly, and she glanced back at Bob. “I always knew you had a heart, Tony,” she said softly. “It’s about time you let others see it, too.”

“No one can know about him,” Tony said quickly. “We gotta keep him strictly under wraps. I don’t know who to trust, and I don’t want him ever falling back in their hands. He’s still vulnerable.” He paused. “That’s why we can’t even tell Rhodey. He’d have to report it.”

“This is dangerous,” Pepper said quietly. “This is such a bad idea.”

“What else is new?” he asked wryly.

Pepper sighed and looked back at him. ”What can I do to help?”

“I think we’re doing pretty good, all things considered,” Tony told her. “I wasn’t kidding about him being hooked on the movies. It keeps him occupied for hours.”

Pepper just stared at him disbelievingly. “Are you telling me you just brought him home with you and sat him in front of the television?” she asked. “That’s what you do when you’re babysitting a four year old, Tony. It’s not what you do for a traumatized victim.”

“See, you say that, but clearly it works,” he told her.

“Tony,” she sighed.

“I don’t know what else to do,” he told her. “There’s not exactly a handbook for this kind of thing.” He paused. “I had Jarvis check,” he admitted.

“I guess—“ she started. “I could discreetly put in some inquiries with some psychiatrists I know, see if we can get some kind of direction for how to handle this.”

”Pepper, no one can know—“ he protested.

”I won’t give a name. We don’t actually have a name, anyway,” she pointed out. ”I have a friend that writes detective novels, I can say I’m asking on her behalf.”

”You’re a genius, you know that?” Tony asked.

Pepper glanced worriedly back into the room. “If we’re going to do this, I need to make sure… I need to talk to him,” she said, though she made no move to approach him.

“Well, you’re pretty close to invulnerable, so I don’t think he can hurt you,” Tony reassured her. “You think if you didn’t have the Extremis I’d let you anywhere near him? But from what I can tell he’s basically harmless when not triggered, and I don’t think he’d even try to hurt you. Also, it’s probably a good idea if his only human interaction isn’t just with me. I might screw him up even more.”

“What you’re doing is amazing,” Pepper insisted quietly. “I can’t even imagine—“

“It wasn’t his fault,” Tony said firmly.

“But that doesn’t make him your responsibility,” she said.

“Sort of does,” Tony said. “I pulled him out of cyro, I took out his base. I went there to kill him. I
keep thinking—what if I’d done it, right there, instead of waking him up? What if I’d just—“

“That’s not who you are,” she told him firmly.

“We’ve all got it in us, Pep, and I was so sure—I got to watch it, you know, the whole thing was caught on a surveillance camera. What more evidence did I need? So I thought I knew everything, I thought I had all the facts,” he said quietly. “This could have gone very differently. If I’d found him when he was on a mission, or if…”

“I need to do this,” he continued, taking a deep breath. “Maybe for me as much as for him.”

Pepper nodded in understanding, before resolutely walking over to the couch. “Hello, Bob,” she said softly.

“Hi,” he said. He looked up at her, then at Tony, and then quickly back. “Are you the new mission leader?”

“What mission?” Pepper asked kindly.

“I—” Bob began, before breaking off, looking anxious. “I don’t know.”

“There is no mission,” she told him. “You don't have to do that anymore.”

“Okay,” Bob said, looking relieved.

“Okay?” Tony asked incredulously. “I’ve been telling you I’m not your handler all day and nothing, and she just—“

”Tony,” Pepper chided, before returning her attention to Bob. “Do you understand what’s happening?”

He looked back at Tony again, before returning his gaze to Pepper. “I was stolen by Iron Man,” he admitted. “Are you here to make me go back?”

Pepper frowned. “Do you want to go back?”

”I’d rather you just kill me than send me back,” he told her solemnly.

Pepper looked a little pale, and she knelt down, carefully looking into his eyes. “We're not going to kill you, and you don’t have to go back,” she promised.

“Why don’t you just finish the movie,” Tony told him, before nodding to Pepper to rejoin him. He followed her back towards the elevator. “Satisfied?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “God, Tony. This is way our of our league.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tony said. “I’m in a league of my own.”

Pepper sorted, glancing away. “Well, I’m convinced you’re doing the right thing,” she said. “I’ll keep quiet for now. But I still don’t like just leaving you here alone with him.”

Tony held up his wrist, showing off the bracelet that could call his suit. "You know me, always prepared," he said. "And we haven't had any incidents. I've been reviewing what they did to him—as long as no one’s screaming out the trigger words in Russian, I don't think we're going to have any issues."
Pepper looked skeptical. “Jarvis, you will keep an eye on him?”

“Always, Ms. Potts,” he assured her.

“Alright,” she sighed. “I need to head back to the office. But I want you to check in with me, and the first sign of any trouble—”

“I’ll call you,” he promised.

“Okay,” she said, before glancing back at Bob once more. Her brow furrowed as she watched him.

“What?” Tony asked curiously.

“He looks familiar,” she said, before shaking it off and smiling ruefully. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Just one of those faces, I guess.” She turned to the elevator, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. “I mean it, Tony. First sign of trouble.”

“Cross my formerly arc-powered heart,” he called to her.

The elevator doors closed just as Pepper’s eyes were rolling skyward, and Tony turned back to heard towards Bob. He dropped down on the opposite side of the couch, and was unsurprised to see that they were in the middle of another rousing viewing of Brave.

"She thinks I’m going to hurt you,” Bob said quietly.

“How much of that did you hear?” Tony asked curiously.

“All of it,” he answered simply.

Tony tapped his fingers along the arm of the couch. “Just how good is your hearing?” he asked.

"Good," Bob said, before glancing over at him. “But I wouldn’t hurt you. You’re my favorite handler, even if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Tony,” Tony told him. “Not your handler, remember? You can call me Tony.”

Bob looked at him speculatively for a moment, and then nodded. “I wouldn’t hurt you, Tony,” he said softly, and then he pulled out the journal Tony had given him. He took the pen, and carefully wrote something down.

And because Tony was a naturally curious person—curious, not nosy, despite the claims of certain other people—he leaned over to see what it was.

He’d written out one word in delicate, beautiful cursive: Tony
Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be a mostly fluff chapter, but the feels took over. So instead this is kind of the first step on the road to recovery chapter, but the next chapter may or may not be more light-hearted and could possibly involve a library and lots of Beauty and the Beast references, we’ll see!

Also, Pepper was mostly supposed to be just a ‘guest star’, but she sort of just slotted into the story, so…yeah. There won’t be any romance between her and Tony or any love triangles as this is Tony/Bucky endgame, but the two of them are still family. And they’re totally bringing Bucky (Bob!) into that family!

Tony was sort of amazed by the progress that Bob made in such a short time.

It only took about two more days before he stopped waiting for permission before he did anything. One morning, he came out freshly shaven and looking about ten years younger. Tony carefully did not point this out. He didn’t want his usual brand of teasing to spook him, and it turned out to be the right choice—because slowly, he started doing other things on his own as well.

He even started getting food from the kitchen without looking like a skittish cat burglar, which had been a minor miracle and also a blessing, because Tony wasn’t actually great at remembering you were supposed to eat at least three meals a day.

Tony had been all ready to pat himself on the back for a job well done, as though he might have actually helped bring someone back from fifty years of torture almost literally overnight—and that’s right about when the nightmares kicked in.

Tony wasn’t a medical doctor—though he’d done the reading, so he was almost as good as—but he suspected that Bob’s increased healing ability was fixing the damage Hydra had inflicted on his brain at a very fast rate. It meant his memories were coming back, maybe a little quicker than he could quite handle.

And as disturbing as Bob’s apathy and dissociation from what he’d been forced to do had been, it had obviously been a hard-won survival mechanism. Because the minute he started getting fragments of his memories back, the guilt and horror had started to set in.

Tony was no stranger to nightmares, he’d been having his own whole new brand of them himself after reading through the rest of Hydra's files on the Asset. But Bob would wake up screaming like he was having the very life ripped right out of him: likely because he was remembering when it had been.

Aggression Tony could have handled—but trying to comfort someone so confused and traumatized that they just kept begging him not to hurt them was something else entirely. It didn’t help that Tony was still remembering vividly how close he had come to doing just that.

He honestly wasn’t sure how he would have managed without Pepper—probably he and Bob would be on their thirtieth viewing of Brave, but instead she had thought to get Bob a StarkPad
filled with thousands of books and songs. Tony had insisted on parental controls to keep him from going online, even though he was pretty sure Bob wasn’t going to reach out to Hydra at this point, if he even knew how.

Pepper had managed to pull further details from him about what had happened to Bob the first night he told her the truth, and by now she had a pretty horrifying idea of the whole picture, though Tony never intended to let her hear the specifics. She had pretty much melted when she brought them breakfast that next morning and found Bob sitting at the counter in a white fluffy robe with the hood up and the Iron Man slippers. She started visiting more after that than she had in quite awhile—Tony didn’t even know what his life was that his parent’s assassin was the one that managed to finally heal the rift between them from their break-up, but he’d take it.

Pepper came to dinner a couple nights later and Tony had used the time to slip off to his lab. He’d come back to find them together on the couch, Bob with his head in her lap and Pepper gently running her fingers through his hair with an ease he envied. At first he thought Bob was crying, but he was eerily still, and he was surprised to realize he was peacefully asleep. “He had a panic attack,” Pepper had told him quietly. There was a kind of resolve to her voice that was familiar and comforting, and he knew just how lucky he was to have her on his side.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she sighed. “It was just a press conference on television, the Secretary of Defense was giving a speech. It might have been any of the words or phrases that upset him.”

She pressed her eyes shut for a moment, breathing slowly, trying to stay calm herself. Once, Pepper had been terrified by Tony’s night terrors. Now, she had her own to deal with.

They had all of them been prisoners and had their bodies changed against their will to one extent or another—it was a terrible thing to have in common.

"Do you know who is responsible for this?” Pepper asked him, her fingers not stilling in their gentle movements. Her voice still sounded calm and steady, and quiet enough not to wake Bob, so only someone that knew her as well as he did would know she was furious.

"It's a work in progress," he told her. He was still trying to untangle Hydra from SHIELD, and he was getting increasingly concerned the longer it took. He had a deadly assassin staying in his guest room that he was nearly ready to go to war for, and he wondered if it was SHIELD that was going to fire the opening shots. He wasn't sure he even knew how to tell the bad guys from the good guys, at this point.

"I want them stopped," she said. Pepper was terrifyingly competent before she could burn people alive with a touch of her hand, so god help anyone that ever tried to hurt any of them now.

"They will be," Tony promised, to both of them.

It only took about two more days and Bob stopped waking him up screaming. Tony suspected this more likely meant that Bob had taught himself to stop screaming rather than that the nightmares had actually stopped. He was tempted to ask Jarvis to keep an eye on him and track his sleep patterns, but that seemed invasive and slightly stalker-ish and he’d just barely managed to talk himself out of it. Instead, he told Jarvis to adhere to his regular privacy protocols when it came to their guest, hoping that he wasn’t making a mistake.

Pepper had her own concerns about his methods, and they kept having phone calls that went like this:
“We really need to talk about getting Bob into therapy,” Pepper told him.

“You haven’t given me any viable options,” he said. “I don’t see what there is to talk about.”

“The consensus is that he needs individualized care,” she said insistently. “Everyone’s treatment is different, there’s no magic set of guidelines. Especially not for what’s happened to him.”

“Maybe Bruce can—” Tony started.

“Bruce is not a therapist,” she interrupted.

“He’s my therapist,” he told her.

“Not by choice, Tony,” Pepper said.

But Tony didn’t trust any therapists enough to be able to let them in on the truth, and if they didn’t have the truth they wouldn’t be able to help. It was a vicious cycle with no obvious resolution, and so he and Pepper just kept trying to do the best they could with what they had.

Tony was mostly fine with this, because it seemed to be working surprisingly well. Bob was improving every day, even giving half a smile almost every other day now. They hadn’t had any major incidents, aside from the panic attacks and nightmares—and Tony had been having those for years, so that was nothing new.

Except just when he thought there wasn’t anything they couldn’t handle, Jarvis woke him up at 2:00 am. Tony knew from the uncharacteristic emotion in the AI’s voice that it was going to be bad even before he was fully awake.

“Privacy protocols advised I take no action, but he has been unresponsive for well over an hour,” Jarvis was telling him, as Tony stumbled to his feet and started moving. “He’s cut off my access, and I’m unable to verify his status—“

“What the hell do you mean he cut off your access?” Tony demanded, as he crashed through the hallway.

“He used your personal override code to lock me out of his room, Sir,” Jarvis admitted.

“That sneaky little shit,” Tony cursed. Jarvis occasionally tried to lock Tony out of his coffee machine to limit his caffeine intake, and Tony would have to enter his override code to start it back up. Bob had been at the counter more than once when he did it, but somehow Tony kept managing to forget that innocent little Bob was a goddamn super assassin.

He reached Bob’s room, but the lock was engaged. “Jarvis,” he called impatiently.

“Sir, the override—“ he started.

“Then override the override!” Tony shouted, and almost instantly there was a click as the door unlocked. The fact that Jarvis didn’t even make a pithy remark had him convinced that Jarvis was almost as panicked as he was.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but it was quiet in the dark room except for the sound of the shower running in the attached bathroom. He pushed into the room before skidding to a stop at the bathroom door. Something loosened in his chest when he didn’t find any blood, but he didn’t really feel any relief.
Because Bob was sitting in the shower fully dressed in jeans and a dark grey henley, his knees held to the chest as he sat underneath the water.

And his lips were turning fucking blue.

“Shit,” Tony cursed, as he dropped to his knees beside him. “Bob? Hey, you with me?”

Bob let his head fall forward, resting his forehead on his knees. “I just want to go back to sleep,” he said softly.

Tony felt a rush of cold through him that had nothing to do with the ice cold water splattering half across him—he was certain Bob wasn’t talking about just heading back to bed.

Tony had been trying so hard not to micromanage him—Bob had earned a little freedom and privacy more than anyone else he’d ever known—but he was gonna hardwire in some damn temperature controls to prevent anyone from turning them to these kind of extremes. It was a stupid oversight—this building was supposed to be smarter than this, he was supposed to be smarter than this.

Tony pushed himself forward and turned off the freezing water, before returning his attention to Bob. He was shivering, which Tony thought he remembered was actually a good sign. It was when the shivering stopped that you were supposed to worry.

He gently reached out to lift Bob’s head. “What do you say we get you warmed up?”

Bob didn’t seem to hear him. His eyes were focused somewhere past him. “I was a killer,” he said flatly.

“Yeah, I know,” he said, sighing tiredly. “But that wasn’t your choice.”

Bob’s eyes finally focused on him. “I was a killer before they caught me,” he explained. “I remember. I was good at it. I was proud of it.”

Tony didn’t let go of him. “In the files, it said you were a prisoner of war,” he told him, brushing his wet hair back out of his face. “We think you were a soldier. Sometimes you kill for a cause, and it’s not pretty, but it doesn’t mean you’re a bad person.”

“Sometimes it does,” Bob said, and his voice sounded hollow. “You should never have brought me here.”

“Come on,” Tony said, spurred on by the feel of Bob’s cold skin beneath his hands. “We need to get you warm and dry.”

He tugged at Bob’s shirt, and the other man didn’t exactly help but he was letting Tony move him where he wanted. The docile way that he was allowing himself to be undressed like he’d done it countless times before was making Tony a little sick, but he didn’t know what else to do. He couldn’t just leave him in these freezing wet clothes.

He grabbed one of the plush white towels from the rack and pulled it around Bob’s shoulders. “Can you stand?” he asked.

“Yes,” Bob said, but he made no move to stand.

Tony held out his hand, reminiscent of the first day he brought Bob here. Bob stared at it for a moment before reaching out and letting himself get pulled to his feet. He stumbled right away, and
Tony had a little trouble keeping them both on their feet. Bob didn’t look huge, but he was about ninety-nine percent muscle and that arm had to weight a hell of a lot.

“Can you get out of the jeans?” Tony asked him. They were plastered to him tightly enough that he suspected Jarvis may have custom ordered them, and Bob didn’t understand he had enough say in this for Tony to be comfortable removing them for him. He didn’t want to actually become like one of his handlers.

Bob reached down and unbuttoned the jeans, struggling a little before stepping out of them. Tony pulled the towel tighter around him and led him to the bed, before grabbing the first sweater and sweatpants he found in one of the drawers. “Can you get dressed?” he asked.

“Yes,” Bob responded, the same way he had before. Bob hadn’t actually said ‘no’ to him since the first night when he was still coming down off a panic attack.

He had to be very careful what questions he asked.

He went back into the bathroom while Bob got dressed, using the other towel to clean up the water on the floor. Bob was thankfully dressed when he came back out. He hadn’t noticed it when he grabbed it, but the grey sweater had the Captain America shield on the front. He didn’t remember seeing that one in the boxes—but he was suddenly having less faith in Jarvis’ taste in fashion.

He noticed Bob was still shivering, and mentally slapped himself. Not the time, he told himself.

“Jarvis, crank up the heat,” Tony told him. “Keep it going till we get Bob’s body temperature back where it’s supposed to be.”

“At once, Sir,” Jarvis told him.

Tony lifted up the towel sitting beside Bob and used it to try and get a little more water out of his wet hair. Bob let him, just watching him with a sad and bemused expression.

“Why are you being nice to me?” he asked, when Tony set aside the towel. “Why—why would you bring me to your home?”

Tony stilled at the question, caught off guard. He wanted the answer to be easy, something like ‘basic human decency,’ but it wasn’t quite that simple. Tony could have sent him somewhere else. He could have written a check and gotten him committed to a 5-star rehabilitation center. He could have turned him over to Romanoff and Barton, who he even almost mostly trusted, and who both knew more about coming back from something like this than him. Honestly, those might have even been better ways to go about it.

But this was never just about being a decent human being. This was about redemption, and not just for Bob.

“I was a prisoner once too, but I got lucky. There was another prisoner with me. I’d met him once before, didn’t remember it,” he said swiftly. “Apparently, I was an asshole to him, but he saved me anyway. Didn’t have to. He knew he wasn’t getting out of there no matter what he did, but he saved me anyway.”

Tony took a steadying breath, trying not to remember Yinsen’s last moments, though he couldn’t stop it. They flashed behind his eyes anyway. “That’s not really the kind of man that I am,” he admitted. “I can do the flashy hero thing, but that’s not exactly the same thing.” He paused and looked back at Bob. ”But it is the kind of man I want to be.”

"You can't save me, Tony," Bob said tiredly.
“Watch me,” he snapped. “Cause people telling me I can’t do something? Just makes me do it even faster.”

“I read about you, you know,” Bob said, wistfully. “When you were captured…they wanted you to make a weapon to hurt people, and you didn’t. You wouldn’t, and you escaped.”

“Where did you read that?” Tony asked in surprise.

“Oh, online,” Bob said. “Christine Everhart writes about you a lot. I’m pretty sure she either loves you or hates you, I couldn’t quite tell.”

“My StarkPad doesn’t go online,” Tony told him, deciding to worry about how scarily perceptive Bob was at some other time. First things first.

Bob shrugged casually. “Well, it does now,” he admitted.

Tony shook his head, grinning slightly despite himself. “The override code,” he realized. “How often have you been using that?”

“You said I didn’t have to do what you told me to do,” Bob reminded him, which meant in a roundabout way he’d still been doing as he was told. Loopholes for the win. Tony loved them, too.

“So I did,” Tony sighed. “I’m not mad. I’m impressed. Also, a little bit terrified. But mostly, impressed.”

Tony was actually more relieved than anything. With Bob’s skillset, he knew if he had wanted to hurt him he could have done it any time, so he wasn’t worried about that. What he hadn’t been sure of was if Bob would try to leave before he was ready, because Tony couldn’t justify holding him prisoner. But with the override code he could have taken the elevator down to the ground floor at any time.

“I use it to go out on the outside landing sometimes,” Bob admitted after a moment. “I liked to look at the stars.”

Tony felt a brief flare of panic, and he’d definitely be having words with Jarvis later for allowing that, override code or not. He suspected the AI may have as big of a soft spot for Bob as the rest of them.

“Okay,” Tony said. “Well that override code is obsolete, it’s done for, and I’m not gonna make it so easy for you next time. But I’ll make sure Jarvis knows you can go on the landing any time you want. Jarvis, you hear that?”

“Yes, sir,” Jarvis said.

“What you don’t get to do is freeze yourself to death. I think that’s a fair trade, what do you think?” Tony asked.

“I just wanted…” Bob trailed off for a moment. “In Cyro, it was safe. I couldn’t hurt anyone there. I didn’t hurt there.” He let out a shaky breath, turning his eyes to the wall. “I’m not like you. I couldn’t…I wasn’t strong enough to escape. I let them turn me into a weapon.”

“I may have gotten away that time,” Tony said. “I may have taken a stand—but it was the first time I ever did. I made weapons for decades before that. My death count’s probably a hell of a lot higher than yours. So you just can’t…you gotta look forward. I have to believe what matters is what you do from here.”
Bob watched him with wide eyes, shivering in the overlarge sweater like he was seeing him for the first time. “How do you live with it?” he asked quietly. For once, the question didn’t cause him to bristle, because it wasn’t judging. And if Bob had been reading *Everhart*, there was no way he hadn’t already known all the gory details of his past anyway.

Bob was asking him for advice.

“Work, mostly,” Tony admitted, because he didn’t have much else. “I usually go to my workshop, make suits—” *make myself some friends*, he didn’t add, “Honestly, I end up there most nights.”

“Could I go with you sometime?” he asked quietly.

Tony paused, uncertain. He recalled those hours and hours of footage of Bob strapped down and pieced apart by those damn Hydra scientists, and he wasn’t sure how good that kind of environment would be for him. But that wasn’t really for him to decide.

“Sure,” he said after a moment. “I was planning to head down there anyway. Want to see it now?”

Bob nodded, and then reached out to grab his journal from his nightstand before getting to his feet to follow him. He was clutching it to him like it was some kind of talisman.

His list had evolved over the last week. No longer just his likes, he’d begun adding his dislikes as well, as well as new traits and memories as they appeared. It was basically a log of what fragments he was beginning to remember about who he really was, and it seemed to be helping. *Who needed therapists, anyway?*

Tony stayed close to Bob on the way to the elevator and then all the way down, but he seemed steady enough on his feet now. He would shiver every once and awhile and his flesh hand was trembling, but he was recovering incredibly fast. Tony was going to be impressed by the ability and then he remembered the footage of Hydra testing the limits of that healing, and he just felt tired and sad.

He braced himself for Bob’s reaction when the doors opened into his lab, waiting for it to trigger bad memories. It was triggering Tony just remembering watching what he’d been through, so he couldn’t imagine how much worse it would be for Bob.

What he wasn’t expecting was for Bob to let out a startled and delighted laugh. Tony gaped at him, not quite sure what was happening, as Bob stepped into the lab as if drawn to it.

“This isn’t anything like the labs I remember,” he told him in a breathy whisper, looking relieved and more relaxed than Tony had seen him since finding him in the shower.

Tony sort of wished he had his robots here so he could introduce them, but they were on the floor below him in his larger flight test lab. When he saw how Bob was still trembling, he figured it was probably best to take things one step at a time, anyway.

“Here,” he said, ushering Bob into a chair at one of his tables. It was below one of the air vents, and warm air was coming down to heat the lab. “You sit here. You’re still freezing cold.”

“I’m fine,” Bob protested, starting to get up.

“You need to stay under the heat,” Tony snapped.

Bob dropped back into the seat instantly. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly.
Tony rubbed his forehead. “No, I’m sorry,” he said. “You didn’t do anything wrong, okay? I’m just worried—but look, lightning would probably strike me down on the spot if I tried to lecture someone else on their self-destructive coping mechanisms.”

“I thought you were friends with Thor,” Bob said wryly.

“That’s cute,” Tony said, half-heartedly attempting to glare at him. “But I’m serious, you could have really hurt yourself.”

“I’m not that easy to kill,” Bob said. “I’ve been flash frozen, a little cold water wasn’t gonna hurt me.”

“I think we both know it hurt you,” Tony said quietly.

Bob looked away. “Yeah, well, maybe that was the point.”

“And that’s the problem,” Tony said. “Like I said, I am an expert at self-destructive behavior, so take it from someone that knows. You get like that come to me instead.” He paused. “Or I’m going to call Pepper on you.”

Bob looked amused, looking up at him through a fringe of hair. “Seriously?”

“She threatens to tell on me to Rhodey, I’m gonna threaten to tell on you to her,” Tony told him. “That’s what family does. Welcome to the hierarchy.”

“I’m not…” Bob broke off, looking bemused. “I don’t have family.”

“Pepper’s already unofficially adopted you as her little brother, it’s a done deal,” Tony said. “You are now the baby of our dysfunctional little family.”

“I’m old enough to be her father,” Bob said, unimpressed.

“Jarvis puts your physical age at twenty-nine on the outside,” Tony told him. “And as much as I like to tease my other formerly frozen senior citizen friend about his age, time in suspended animation doesn’t actually count.”

“You know someone else like me?” Bob asked curiously.

“Well, sort of,” Tony said. “He crash-landed and then got stuck in the ice for about seventy years, but he wasn’t a prisoner. Hydra never had him. Supposedly, Hydra was supposed to have died with him, but I guess he wasn’t the only one to survive.”

“Oh,” he sighed, before glancing away again. “Is he the one you call Rhodey?”

“Rhodey?” Tony laughed. “Ah, no. Rhodey is amazing, and he doesn’t need any special powers to manage it. I’d like you to meet him, sometime. Just gotta think of an advantageous way to present the situation to him.”

“Because he’d be mad at you for helping me?” Bob asked shrewdly.

“No, just mad about how I did it,” Tony explained. “It all worked out in the end so I wouldn’t change it, but going after you in the first place wasn’t exactly my shining moment.”

“Why did you wake me up?” Bob asked quietly. “You could have just killed me. It would have been more efficient.”
“I didn’t want to kill you,” Tony said, sighing slightly as he glanced over at him. “Not even before—well, I really just wanted to know why. But you’re not the reason why, Bob. You never were.”

“I don’t remember. I’m sorry, I—“ he trailed off for a moment. “They wouldn’t have given me a reason, even if I could remember. They never…”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, cutting him off gently. “I know. I’ve been reading about you, too.”


“I’ve been trying to figure out what Hydra did, so I’d know how to help,” Tony said. “So I’m informed enough to know you never had a choice in anything you did. I don’t blame you. I’m still furious about what happened to my parents, I have this rage inside me—“ he pressed his eyes shut, before shaking his head like he was trying to knock his anger loose. “—but none of it is directed at you.”

He leaned on the counter, meeting Bob’s skittish gaze. “You, I just want to help,” he promised.

“I don’t understand,” Bob said, sort of helplessly, reaching up to rub at his left shoulder. “I still don’t—“

Tony wasn’t going to try and explain his reasons again, because he didn’t think Bob was entirely ready to hear them. Instead, he focused on where the other man was rubbing delicately at his shoulder, and recalled what Bob had said about reopening wounds his first day here. “I don’t suppose you’d let me get a look at that arm?” he asked casually.

“Why?” Bob asked quickly.

“You said it hurts you,” Tony reminded him.

“It’s fine,” Bob told him, before giving him a confused frown. “But if you want to look at it, you don't have to ask. You can do whatever you want to me.”

Tony sucked in a breath, and tried not to let the horror he felt at that statement show on his face. He was pretty sure Bob wouldn't realize it wasn't directed at him. "That's not how it works," he said after a moment. "Because I don't actually want to do anything to you that you don't want me too."

"Maybe not..." Bob trailed off, still shivering slightly, looking suddenly terrified. "Maybe not right now?"

"Sure," Tony said easily. "Whenever you’re ready, or never, if that’s what you want." He quickly reached over and grabbed a tray full of suit pieces, pulling it closer. "Here, I can work on this instead. I’ve been putting it off cause it’s boring assembly line work, but too delicate to outsource."

Bob leaned up, looking over at the pieces. “What’s it for?” he asked.

“They’re sort of little mini power cells,” Tony explained. “They channel energy from the arc reactor to the repulsers. Think of it like...if the arc reactor is the heart, these are the motor nerves.”

“Neat,” Bob said, leaning up on the table with his elbows to watch. Tony was a little startled by the seemingly genuine interest—and also, who said neat?—but he decided to go with it.

He carefully wound the fiber-optics around the small power disk, using a pair of razor-thin pilers to tug it through the center and thread it across the opening. By the end it looked a little like a cross between a spool of thread and a half formed dreamcatcher, but there was method to his madness.
The web-design diffused the power from the arc reactor enough to give him a lot more finesse with the repulsers than he would be able to manage otherwise.

Bob had stared at him working the entire time, looking the same kind of zoned-out calm that he did when watching one of the Pixar movies he seemed to have developed an addiction to. His earlier unease seemed to have disappeared, and he wasn’t shivering any longer. Tony could sort of admit to showing off for him a bit, finishing the power cell with a little flourish before dropping it onto the table between them.

“Can I touch it?” Bob asked.

“Sure, it’s not active yet,” Tony said, as Bob carefully lifted it and squinted at the delicate threads crossed along the opening. “Want to see it all lit up?”

“Yes,” Bob said, looking up with a flicker of a grin.

Tony headed off to his back room, looking for one of his older arc reactors to use as a power source. He had to dig through a few boxes before he finally found one that had enough power left for a demonstration, and then he headed back. Bob was just setting the pilers aside when he reached him, and Tony frowned as he approached.

Instead of one completed power disk on the table, there were two. “What—?” Tony started.

“You said you didn’t like doing it,” Bob explained, looking worried. He started to slip back along the table. “I just wanted to help.”

“You did it first,” Bob explained.

“Yeah, no, I know that I can do it,” Tony said impatiently. “How did you?”

“Because I watched you when you did it,” he stated clearly.

“Just now,” Tony said, to be sure. “You watched me once and then did it yourself.”

“It wasn't that difficult,” he shrugged.

“Yesterday I had to explain to you that toothpaste isn't a food,” Tony deadpanned.

“It shouldn't taste like food if it isn't food,” Bob said defensively. “It was cinnamon. That’s just weird.”

“My point is I thought you were a little...ah...” Tony trailed off, waving his hand in an awkward motion he couldn’t even decipher for himself.

“You thought I was stupid,” Bob realized, sounding depressingly un-offended about it.

“No,” Tony insisted firmly. “I just thought your memories had been taken and you hadn’t recovered enough yet to relearn everything.”

“Oh. They never took my skills, they needed them. Wouldn’t be much use if they had to teach me everything every time.” He glanced over at Tony, the hair falling over his face doing nothing to
disguise his smirk. “I speak 29 languages and can operate and maintain hundreds of different models of weapons and aircrafts. Also, I can do trigonometry in my head.”

"Now you're just showing off,” Tony told him. “And I can do the thing with the trigonometry. You’re not so special.”

Bob grinned at him, tired and shy, and Tony’s breath caught. That was almost two whole smiles, Tony was on a streak today.

“Maybe you’re just special, too,” he told him.

“Oh, god, you’re a flirt, aren’t you?” Tony said, mock-gasping before pointing at him. “Add it to the list.”

Bob dutifully pulled open his journal, and added ‘flirt’ right below ‘hates pineapple.’ He did it with such focus and determination that Tony couldn’t help but grin at him.

“Okay, let’s light these up and see how good you are,” Tony said playfully. He wound the wire around the two disks and then connected it back to the arc reactor. The light travelled along the wires like a flame along a wick, until both disks were shining with a bright white light in a pattern that almost resembled snowflakes.

“It’s beautiful,” Bob breathed in awe.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed softly, though he was watching Bob. He could see the lights reflecting off his blue eyes, and they no longer even remotely resembled the blank eyes that had stared out at him at that Hydra base. “So, hey, I’m assuming you can fly a helicopter?”

“I can fly stealth jets,” Bob told him, pulling his eyes from the lights. “Helicopters aren’t a problem, no.”

“Good,” Tony said, coming to a decision. “I’m putting you on the payroll as my pilot. You don’t actually have to do anything, at least not yet, but we’ve got to start building you an identity and that seems like as good a place as any to start.”

“You're offering me a job?” Bob asked in surprise. “Like, a normal job?”

“Yes. Stark Industries, leader in advanced technology, awesome retirement plan, great health benefits—“ he told him, flashing a brilliant grin, “and you get the full attention and resources of the boss himself. What do you say?”

“I thought Pepper was the boss,” Bob said cheekily.

"Smart ass," Tony said, but he was still grinning. “Better add that to the list, too.”

Bob added it to the list, and then looked back up at Tony. “I think I’d like having a normal job,” he said softly.

“Then consider it done,” Tony told him. He spent the night with Jarvis, building an identity for Bob, using not entirely legal avenues.

By morning Bob Morrison, age 29, Disney geek, NYU graduate, and lover of sugar, was officially the newest employee of Stark Industries.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I really didn’t mean to be calling Bucky “Bob” for so much of this story, and I promise they will figure out his real identity eventually. I just wanted Tony to have “Bob” all to himself for a little bit longer, because things are going to get a little more complicated when the truth comes out. So maybe two or three or ten more Bob chapters? I don’t even know. New mini-arcs keep appearing in my outline. I may just end up needing to do some time-stamps after this story is over (The Adventures of Tony and Bob?), or it might never end!

Also I really thought I’d keep slipping up and calling him Bucky, but I’m kind of concerned now because I sort of started thinking of him as Bob. Now I’m a little worried I’m going to start randomly calling him Bob in my other fics.

Goodwin put together Bob’s list, and it is awesome! It’s over on Tumblr here.

He is standing on the road where his parents were killed, when the car comes crashing into the side of the road. The Winter Soldier is stalking them, and he is helpless to stop him. He searches for some kind of weapon, but there is nothing for him to use and his father dies first, and then his mom.

The Winter Soldier approaches him then, and he stumbles back along the road, but the soldier doesn’t harm him, he just hands him his gun. The gun has Stark Industries etched along its side—he doesn’t make guns, not anymore—and he raises it back up with a trembling hand to aim it at the soldier. The soldier is wearing a mask—he wasn’t wearing the mask when he did this—and his eyes are cold and dead.

He shoots the soldier right between the eyes.

He falls back towards the ground, but he is not still the Winter Soldier when he hits the pavement. The Winter Soldier gear is gone, and he is wearing a blue t-shirt with a line sketch of Merida shooting an arrow—Jarvis had bought it for him without even asking—and a pair of artistically ripped jeans that were his favorites.

And suddenly he can’t even breathe.

He drops the gun, and his mother places a bloody hand to his cheek. “Oh, my darling,” she says, “what have you become?”

Tony woke up with a breathless shout, his arm striking out on instinct. His fist was caught in a cold, gentle hold before it could connect to whatever he thought he was aiming for. He blinked blearily in front of him, and it took nearly half a minute to realize that Bob had had caught his fist with his metal hand.

“It’s okay,” Bob told him quickly, his eyes wide but not frightened. “It’s okay, you’re safe.”
Tony gasped. “What—wha—“

“Jarvis couldn’t wake you,” Bob explained, and quickly let go of his hand. He pushed back along the bed until he was nearly going to fall right off, holding his hands up to try and show he wasn’t a threat. “You were having a nightmare.”

“Yeah, yeah. Haven't had that one before,” he said, holding in a hysterical giggle. “Something new, was kinda nice. Wouldn't want to get bored.”

Bob watched him for a moment, obviously struggling for something to say. His eyes held so much emotion, such honest and deep concern, that Tony could hardly recognize them as the same eyes he had first seen in that Hydra base. They did not match the eyes of the Winter Soldier he’d just met in his dream at all.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Bob finally blurted out, a little overly loud and awkward.

“God, yes,” Tony said, grateful both for the distraction and that Bob didn’t ask him what the dream was about.

Bob kind of hovered around him carefully the whole way to the living room, then abruptly disappeared the moment Tony was safely tucked away on the couch with a quilt. He reappeared a couple minutes later before Tony could worry he wasn’t coming back, with a china tea cup that he proudly placed in Tony’s hands.

“Is this Chamomile tea?” Tony asked, slightly incredulous, as he examined the light liquid in the cup.

Bob started to look concerned as he dropped down onto the other side of the couch. “Pepper says it’s good for you,” he offered hesitantly.

Bob looked so worried that hadn’t done the right thing that Tony tried not to look ungrateful, though what he really wanted was some whiskey. Pepper had been working hard to convert Bob to her ‘the body is a temple’ way of life, with varying degrees of success.

Bob had taken to the tea right away, and liked the weird raw fruit and nut bars Pepper was always buying and leaving in the cupboards, but Tony had also once found him sitting at the bar with a stack of sugar packets on the counter in front of him, opening them one by one to dump them straight into his mouth.

He was probably an enabler, but he’d immediately had Jarvis order them both some Pixy Stix. It quickly became item number 36 on Bob’s list.

“Do you want to borrow my slippers?” Bob offered suddenly.

“I’m pretty sure that would take my narcism to concerning levels,” Tony told him, as he cautiously took a sip of the tea. “But I appreciate the offer.”

“Well, what movie do you want to watch?” Bob asked, before turning hopeful. “We could—“

“No,” Tony said quickly. “No Brave.”

Bob sunk back in the couch. “I wasn’t gonna say that,” he said, unconvincingly.

They end up watching Frozen instead, which Tony hadn’t actually ever seen. He didn’t usually have time to keep up on the new Disney films, but he was impressed despite himself. Bob was
entranced, entirely absorbed it, so it took him awhile to notice the anxious way he was curling himself into the arm of the sofa, like he wanted to get as far from it as he could.

He set aside the tea and looked towards him. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Bob said, letting out a shaky breath. He tried to smile. “We’re trying to get your mind off your nightmare, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“You already helped me, now it’s my turn,” Tony told him carefully. “That’s what friends do.”

“Are we friends?” Bob asked, his tone heartbreakingly wistful.

“Yes,” Tony said, even though he didn’t quite realize that it was true until he said it. Bob liked to listen to him talk, and he was actually interested in his projects. They liked to argue over music—Tony was hard rock all the way, but Bob like softer instrumental pieces and wouldn’t be swayed to the proper musical path.

Come to think of it, Bob may be the only friend he’d ever made that he didn’t meet through work and/or build for himself.

That should probably be more worrying that it was.

“So, friend,” Tony said, grinning slightly, “are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

Bob’s eyes slipped back towards the screen and he swallowed hard. “I think I might have had a brother, once,” he said after a moment. “I remember—“ he broke off again, looking confused. “Or maybe I just imagined him.”

Tony tried not to watch him too closely, though that sounded like it must be one of the earliest memories that Bob had so far—and one of the only ones that didn’t seem traumatic. “What do you remember about him?” he asked.

Bob grinned, tired and fond. “Pretty sure he was always gettin’ us into trouble,” he said, a faint accent to his voice that wasn’t fully formed enough for Tony to place. He sucked in a breath, looking suddenly lost. “I had a life before this. I had a life, and I—”

“Well, how about we find out, but you can do whatever you want with it?” he asked. “It doesn’t have to mean anything. You can keep being Bob Morrison if you want. But I do need to find out
who you were if I’m going to keep you safe.”

Bob nodded reluctantly, though he still looked uncertain. They finished the rest of the movie in silence, and then Bob was cleaning up the teacups and heading off to his room. Tony knew for his part he wasn’t getting back to sleep any day soon, Chamomile tea or not. Which was probably all for the best, as it was actually one o’clock in the afternoon. He probably hadn’t actually gotten asleep until sometime around ten am.

He waited until Bob was completely out of sight, and then gave Pepper a call. “Bob’s my friend,” he told her.

There was an awkward pause, in which he could imagine Pepper wondering why she continued to be surprised by the things he said. “Did you want me to bring over some friendship bracelets?” she asked after a moment. “Just to make sure it’s official?”

“I swear you never used to be this sarcastic,” he told her, but he was grinning. “I like it.”

“I don’t know why you’re calling me, Tony,” Pepper said. “I figured out you and Bob were friends when you sent me a bunch of texts at three in the morning one day, asking me if you really got to keep him.”

“I don’t remember that,” Tony said quickly. Which was a bold-faced lie—he did remember it. It was not his finest moment, but it had been that first week and he’d been a little sleep deprived and still terrified about traumatizing Bob even more, but Bob had been nice to him before he even really remembered what being nice meant, and Tony had sort of just melted because he wasn’t used to people being able to read between his lines.

“I’m glad you found him, Tony,” Pepper said, letting him get away with the deflection. She’d always been too good to him. “I can’t imagine him in that place, being used that way—you did a good thing. And good things bring good things.”

“That hasn’t been my experience,” Tony said quietly. “I thought the saying was: no good deed goes unpunished?”

“Tony,” Pepper sighed. “You have to—you have to let good things happen, too. Sometimes there’s good in this world, even if it can be hard to find it.”

He moved past it, because that was hitting a little too close to home. “Did you know he’s smart?” he asked.

“Yes, I did notice,” Pepper said. “He’s very bright.”

“Yes, yes,” Tony said impatiently. “But I’m not talking like ‘oh, isn’t that cute, he can put the triangle shape in the triangle shaped hole,’ kind of smart. But smart like I would hire him.”

“I thought you already did,” Pepper said wryly. “I got a letter from HR this morning asking me who Bob Morrison was and why he was suddenly on the payroll. I assumed you didn’t know that many Bobs.”

“That was more just for cover,” Tony explained, before pausing. “Wait, who sent you that? I just put it through yesterday. Or this morning. Or…some unspecified recent time. The point is, no one should be contacting you about it.”

“It was just someone from HR,” Pepper explained. “I don’t think—“
“I need a name, and I need to know exactly what they asked,” Tony said tightly.

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting, slightly?” she asked.

“Do you remember Natalia?” Tony asked. “My lovely assistant—“

“She wasn’t—“ Pepper started.

“—who turned out to be an undercover SHIELD spy?” he continued without pausing. “I have Jarvis run background checks on everyone, but SHIELD is damn good at creating false identities. They’re even almost as good as me. So there’s no guarantee I’d know about it if they put another man inside. Or another woman. Or another ninja-woman hybrid, like Romanoff.”

“Oh, point taken,” Pepper said, letting out a breath. “I got a letter from HR in my in-box. I’m not sure who it was from. I’ll look into it, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony said, trying to calm himself down. The identity he’d created for Bob was bulletproof, anyway, and the Winter Soldier himself didn’t technically exist. It would be almost impossible for anyone to have made that leap.

Except that he still wasn’t sure how much SHIELD really knew about what Hydra’s been up to. And if they already knew about the Winter Soldier’s identity, the leap wouldn’t be very far at all.

“Call me as soon as you know anything,” Tony said, before hanging up. “Jarvis?”

“Already increasing security and reinforcing and improving security protocols,” Jarvis reported. “I have also checked security footage of Miss Potts’ office, but the letter was delivered with the daily mail run and was unsigned.”

“What did it say?” he asked.

“Dear Ms. Potts (CEO), it has come to our attention that Bob Morrison was added to the Stark Industries payroll last night through improper channels. The job description was listed as the personal pilot for Tony Stark. As you have asked that any issues regarding Tony Stark be addressed directly to you, we ask that you please forward details regarding this newest employee. Stark Industries (HR Department).”

“Sounds suspicious,” Tony decided.

“Forgive me, Sir, but it sounds like your typical corporate red tape,” Jarvis said wryly. “This was the sort of thing that had you giving up the position in favor of Ms. Potts in the first place.”

“So you think I’m overreacting?” Tony asked.

“I do not see anything of particular concern, but considering your past history, Sir, I’m not sure I can properly classify what would constitute an overreaction,” Jarvis told him simply.

“Keep an eye on the office,” Tony decided. “If we’ve got SHIELD coming after us again, I want to know about it. This time, I have something a little more important to hide.”

“Of course, Sir.”

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He didn’t see Bob for hours, but just when he was getting ready to be concerned, he found him huddled in the corner of the living room with his StarkPad. He was frowning down at it with a look
of concentration that was a little bit adorable. Then Tony noticed he was wearing the Merida shirt, and he may have had a minor mental breakdown.

Luckily he was a pro at breakdowns, so he didn’t outwardly fall apart.

“Bob,” he called, feeling a rush of relief when Bob glanced up, looking entirely unharmed. “You do remember chairs, right?”

Bob rolled his eyes—Tony was very proud of how often he was able to get Bob to roll his eyes these days—and then looked back at the StarkPad. “I like the corner.”

“We can put a chair in the corner,” Tony told him. “I can get you a new chair if you want. Maybe one of those massage chairs—or one with a retro bead seat cover. A lime green beanbag chair. You name it, you’ve got it.”

Bob set the StarkPad in his lap, and looked up at Tony like he was analyzing him. “Why do you keep trying to buy me things?” he asked.

“I—“ Tony paused, because that was a ridiculous question. He bought things for everyone. That’s just what he did. “You deserve things. You shouldn’t be sitting on the floor.”

“You’ve already done so much…” Bob trailed off, looking awkward. “I didn’t understand, at first, what that meant. But I don’t deserve anything, Tony.”

“Okay, that’s just absolutely not true,” Tony told him, and dropped down to the floor beside him. “Look, I’m sort of the world’s foremost expert in retail-therapy, and I know it can be overwhelming, but I’ve got more money than I know what to do with. Like, literally, I could not spend all the money I have in my lifetime. It’s pretty much an impossibility. I earn more money in an hour than I could spend in a week.”

“There’s got to be worthier causes than me,” Bob said quietly. “I’m just happy you haven’t kicked me out. You don’t have to do anything else.”

“I wouldn’t kick you out,” Tony promised, concerned that he hadn’t realized Bob thought this was a possibility. “You—why would you think I’m going to kick you out?”

“I’m better now,” Bob told him. “I know I’ll need to leave soon.”

“I made you my pilot, remember?” Tony asked. “It’s a live-in position. On call, twenty-four hours a day. You can stay as long as you want to, but we can set you up on another floor, if you—well, just trust me, you’ll get bored of me long before I ever get bored of you.”

“I don’t really remember much, but I remember enough to know boring is a not word that would be used to describe you,” Bob said with a faint laugh, before glancing back at him shyly. “And you were serious about giving me a job? I mean, you don’t really need a pilot. You can fly yourself.”

“Actually, I just created an AI that could fly for me,” Tony said, leaving out that he had watched Jarvis do it enough that he had figured out the basics for himself, too. “But that’s besides the point. You can’t beat having a trained combat pilot in my line of work. You’re already on the payroll, first pay check comes at the first of the next month.”

“I can’t accept pay if I’m not doing anything,” Bob protested.

“You are though, you’re on call,” Tony reminded him. “And until called, you can do whatever you want. Like—“ he leaned over to squint at the StarkPad, frowning at what he saw, “—are you
seriously reading *Little Women*?"

“Pepper recommended it,” Bob explained, before scrunching up his face in frustration. “I like it, but it’s strange to read this way. I remember books being so different. I miss being able to turn real pages.”

“Oh god, shoulda known, you’re one of those,” Tony sighed, as he pushed himself back to his feet. “Come on, then.”

“What?” Bob asked, glancing up at him in confusion. This time when Tony held out a hand, Bob grabbed it and allowed himself to get tugged to his feet without hesitating. “Where are we going?”

“Secret room,” Tony told him, pleased with himself.

“Oh, the one behind the fireplace?” Bob asked.

Tony froze, before turning to glare at him. “How the hell—“

“I did a full survey of the floor when you first brought me here,” Bob explained with a shrug. “I didn’t go in. I figured you had hidden it for a reason.”

“Maybe not for the reason you think,” Tony said, a little irritated at having the surprise somewhat ruined. He should have known. Natasha had clocked the room in about five minutes her first time in the penthouse, too. He’d been able to tell by the way she’d smirked at the fireplace, though she said nothing, and she never tried to go in, either.

Tony had any number of labs with important super-confidential information, and all of them had complicated biometric locks—but he hadn’t hidden any of them. The room behind the fireplace, that was his. Pepper was the only other one he’d brought there, and he couldn’t say exactly what had prompted him to invite Bob—especially considering the memories that room held, despite it being brand new.

He placed his hand to the wall, and it lit up beneath his palm, scanning before clicking. The entire stainless steel fireplace popped out of the wall, leading to a short downward staircase. Tony might have a bit of a flair for the dramatic, but he liked secret rooms. And this one had been carried over from the home he’d grown up in—really, it was the only thing from his childhood that he’d kept.

He started down the staircase, and Bob slipped in behind him, looking only mildly concerned. He supposed the gothic looking secret staircase might be a little too similar to some of those old, crumbling Hydra bases—but where they were going was nothing like it.

The staircase ended at an open archway, and right beyond it was a library that spanned two floors. The shelves went floor almost to the ceiling, ending at the top in a rounded arches, with little thin breaks of a floor to ceiling window between each of them. Every single one of them was filled to the brim with books that spanned across centuries.

Tony never read many actual books himself—he used his StarkPad for reading—and he didn’t even really come down here.

It was enough just to know it was there.

Bob stumbled out behind him with wide eyes, carefully stepping out further into the library. “This is amazing,” he breathed out, looking even more awed than he had when he’d brought him to the lab. Tony tried not to take that personally, and it wasn’t hard. It was all worth it to see him look actually entirely happy, for maybe the first time since he brought him here. “I thought maybe there
weren’t any books, anymore.”

He spun in place near the center of the room, head tilted up as he ran his eyes across the high shelves, his expression full of disbelieving awe.

“Why do I suddenly feel like I’m the Beast to your Belle?” Tony asked wryly, as he pushed his hands in his pockets and stepped further into the room.

Bob laughed, bright and loud and nothing like the hesitant laughs that Tony was just barely getting used to. “I watched that one,” he said, glancing back at Tony. “You’re more of a Lumiere.”

“I notice you didn’t dispute your casting,” Tony told him smugly.

Bob paused, before gently running metal fingers along the spines of the books. “I think we both know I’d be the Beast,” he said.

“Yeah, you think?” Tony asked. “Did you watch that one all the way to the end, then? Because you’ve definitely got the hair to be the Prince. We’ve even got our own Ms. Potts.”

Bob just shook his head, not bothering to contradict him again, apparently too entranced by the books. “Is there a system?” he asked.

“What would be the fun in that?” Tony asked. “They’re just wherever they fit. Not like I’ve got a librarian on staff, and no one is allowed in here anyway.”

“You brought me here,” Bob said quietly, looking back at him. His hair kept falling into his eyes. It drove Pepper up the wall, and she kept trying to get him to agree to see a stylist or at least tie it back. Tony thought it was kind of endearing.

“Well, you’re not no one,” Tony told him. “You’re my guest.”


“I walked into that one,” Tony said dryly.

There were four sections set up like reading spaces, with low coffee tables and comfortable sofas. It was sort of ridiculous if you took into account that there had never been more than two people in here at once, but it had been modeled after a very specific library. Tony was never much for holding onto the past, but he allowed himself this.

“You must spend a lot of time here,” Bob said, eyes still running across all the books like he couldn’t decide where to start first.

“Haven’t been here in like a year,” Tony said simply. “But it’s got state of the art air recyclers to keep the books in good shape. I don’t much like coming here, myself.”

“Why did you build a library like this if you didn’t want to come here?” Bob asked in confusion.

“It’s a replica. Of my mother’s library, in the home I grew up in,” Tony admitted, which was something he hadn’t even told Pepper. He wasn’t entirely sure what made him admit to it now.

Bob went pale, his hand dropping away from the books. “I shouldn’t be here,” he said.

“You didn’t kill her,” Tony said simply. He’d forgiven Bob for his part in their murder after reading the first three Hydra files, but he wasn’t sure if he’d entirely let go of it. After last night, he knew it was time.
“You said that I did,” Bob told him.

“Hydra used your hands to do it, and that sucks, for both of us,” Tony said tiredly. “But you didn’t kill her. I wouldn’t have brought you here if I wasn’t absolutely sure of that.”

Bob still looked devastated, and now he was carefully keeping his eyes away from the books. “I can just—“

“I killed you in my nightmare,” Tony told him abruptly.

Bob froze, glancing back at him, slightly wary. It was good to see—a week ago, Bob probably would have offered again to let him. “Okay,” he said.

“It was a reminder of what could have happened,” Tony continued. “What almost happened. And I know—I just know, my mother would have been so disappointed in me. She would have wanted me to help you. That’s what she was like. She was always running charities. My dad would hand them off to her for the tax write-offs and just to keep her busy, but she would take them and she would do so much good.”

“She sounds like she was a wonderful woman,” Bob finally offered carefully. “I think I had a mother, once, but I don’t remember her.”

Tony wondered what it would like to be so without memory. To have a life buried somewhere under so much pain and torture that there was no way to be sure even the little pieces that could be salvaged were real. The only thing Tony had of real worth was his mind—it wasn’t something he thought he’d be strong enough to survive losing.

Bob was sort of amazing, really.

“My mom would want you here,” he said. “She’d be mad as hell at me for keeping her books hidden away, she just wanted people to enjoy them. She used to look at them the same way as you.”

Bob carefully reproached one of the shelves. It had books ranging from early 1900s to the Twilight series—Pepper thought she was being funny—and his breath kept catching every time something caught his eye. “Would I be able to read one?” he asked after a moment.

And god it hurt, to think that Bob thought he’d brought him here just to show him what he couldn’t have. It made him wish he’d blown up that entire base, after all.

“You can read all of them, if you want,” Tony told him.

Bob let out a startled laugh, before shaking his head. “I don’t think that’s possible, there are thousands here,” he said. “But it might be fun to try.”

Bob ended up sitting on the floor with his back to one of the couches, a stack of books sitting on the coffee table in front of him as he sorted and re-sorted them, trying to decide where to start first. Tony dropped down into one of the chairs with his phone, checking on a few of his projects. He didn’t have the patience for old-fashioned books, but for once he felt at peace in this room. It felt just a little less haunted than it always had before.

The peace lasted for nearly two hours, then Tony jerked his head up as he heard Bob scrambling to his feet with a book in his hands. He’d gone pale as a ghost, and he snapped the book shut as he stepped back towards the shelf to quickly replace it.
Tony frowned at the book Bob had shoved back on the shelf like it had bit him, squinting to read the title. It was just one of many—so many—Captain America biographies that he had inherited from his father. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Too many choices,” Bob said, trying to smile at him as he glanced back towards the other side of the library. Tony wondered if his adeptness at deflection was a former trait of Bob’s that he was getting back, or something he’d learned by example from Tony.

“Yeah? And what was wrong with that one?” he asked.

“Do you ever sometimes not know what’s real?” Bob asked quietly, his eyes reluctantly straying back to the book. “Do you know what it’s like to not trust your own mind?”

“Most of the time I don’t trust myself at all,” Tony admitted.

Bob smiled sadly, stumbling back further from the shelf with graceless, hurried steps. It was such a contrast to his usual deliberate movements, that Tony worried what he was really seeing when he looked back at that book.

“Well, I trust you enough for us both,” Bob told him, after a moment. He looked like he was coming to some decision, his eyes resolved, as he tore his eyes from the shelf to look back at Tony. “But right now...I don’t think I can trust anything else.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I considered making this chapter a time-stamp, but it’s just going to be a little interlude between the background SHIELD plot and Bucky’s identity reveal instead. I had way too much fun writing it not to keep it in, and I’m thinking Bob will be with Tony about two months or so total before they find out who he is. I really want him to recover slowly and grow into his new family before he gets hit with his past (completely) and has to find a way to reconcile the two. Also there’s gonna be a thing with Bucky’s arm that I’m tackling next, and I want it to be before Steve gets brought in! So, yeah. Sorry, guys, but it’ll be just Bob and Tony for awhile yet. Well, and Pepper and Jarvis, too. ;-) 

He’d only been planning to disappear from his life for a week while he helped Bob get into the swing of things, but time kind of got away from him, and it wasn’t until they were going on week three that Pepper finally put her foot down.

“You can’t miss this meeting,” she said firmly.

“I’m not leaving him alone,” Tony insisted.

Bob was mostly capable of taking care of himself by this point, but he also still had some dangerous holes in his memory and some conditioning that hadn’t been broken. Tony could ask Jarvis to look after him, but Jarvis had a bad habit of giving Bob whatever he wanted. He suspected Bob was really good at manipulating the AI by pretending to be an innocent little lost lamb.

He’d left them alone to go to his lab downstairs the other day, and Bob had managed to get Jarvis to show him all the files from Hydra despite Tony having restricted their access level to only himself—but, Sir, Jarvis had told him, you said they were restricted so no one could learn of the Winter Soldier, and as Mr. Bob pointed out, he is already aware of the Winter Soldier—.

Afterwards, he hadn’t been able to find Bob for three hours. Apparently, there were some holes in his security network, too, and Bob knew each and every one of them. He’d made it to the roof, somehow, and had been brooding at the skyline like Batman when Tony finally frantically tracked him down.

So Jarvis was no longer allowed to babysit.

And Bob was also now his personal pilot slash security consultant.

“He’s not a child, Tony,” Pepper insisted. “He’s been recovering, and you can’t keep hovering. He’s perfectly capable of taking care of himself.”

Tony wandered back towards the living room, and put the phone on speaker when he spotted Bob. “Bob, tell Pepper what happened yesterday,” he said.

“What?” Bob asked, he leaned over the couch with wide-eyes like he couldn’t imagine what Tony was talking about.
“Remember how I said you could start helping me with some things in my lab?” Tony prompted.
“And you wanted to test some of the equipment?”

“Oh, you mean that small fire? ‘Cause I didn’t realize the blowtorch had that much power, that was an accident,” Bob reminded him, looking anxious. “You said it was fine.”

“It’s totally fine,” Tony reassured him, before taking the call back off speaker. “Do you understand what I’m dealing with, now?”

Pepper couldn’t respond for a minute, because she was laughing too hard. “Oh my god, it’s like he’s you,” she said, gasping for breath. “This is some kind of karmic justice, I swear.”

“I know exactly how much power the blowtorch has, I’m the one that modified it,” Tony protested lamely. “And I’ve only blown up one of my labs like three or four times, tops.”

“Tony—” Pepper chided.

“Okay, whatever, so I’ve lost count,” he said. “The point is, I think supervision may still be called for. Not for me, just so we’re clear. For Bob.”

Bob frowned at him, looking irritated. Tony held his hand over the speaker. “Pepper doesn’t want you here alone,” he explained. “I’m just agreeing with her to calm her down.”

“I can hear both sides of your conversation,” Bob told him wryly, before looking back to his StarkPad.

“I forgot about your freaky hearing,” he said in irritation, before getting back on the phone. “Let’s move it to next week. That work?”

“No! We can’t reschedule this again,” she said, before sighing. “Okay, here’s the deal. If you promise to be on your best behavior at the meeting, then I’ll let you go alone and I’ll stay with Bob. He’s easier to watch than you, anyway.”

There was no way for Tony to really get out of that except to admit that he required more supervision than Bob, so he ended up at the meeting. It was long and boring and at the end he awed them all with the perfect solution to all of their problems, because that was just how amazing he was.

They weren’t grateful for it, of course, but he was used to that.

By the time he was in the elevator heading back up the penthouse, he was anxious and keyed up and really just wanted to be home. He’d never really had anything to come home to before—even when Pepper was living here, she was really living at the office—and before that it used to be something he’d actively put off. Another party, another drink, another one night stand in a five star hotel—it never mattered how late he got back, because Jarvis never minded waiting up.

Pepper had mentioned at the start that it might not be good for Bob’s only interactions to be with only the two of them, because he might get too dependent on them.

Tony was beginning to worry the one becoming dependent was him.

The elevator finally pulled to a stop, and Tony glanced up to step out. Bob was waiting for him, excitedly bouncing on the heels of his feet.

“Wha—” Tony began when he saw him, before faltering in what was a very rare instance of
speechlessness. He swallowed hard as he took him in.

Because Bob’s hair had been cut—still fairly longish, but more Point Break now and a little less L’Oréal. It was hanging down in the front just framed around his ears, and to about the back of his neck. There were also faint gold-tinged highlights whenever the light hit it just right, and he didn’t remember them being there before. He was wearing a black t-shirt with Mjölnir printed on the chest—goddamnit, Jarvis—with a casual blue blazer over it, and jeans with sneakers.

“Pepper brought in a stylist,” Bob explained, flashing a grin, and it had to be a super soldier thing, having such perfect teeth.

“I should have known this whole thing was just pretense to get you alone for a makeover,” Tony said flatly.

“It was no such thing,” Pepper insisted, though she looked way too smug as she appeared to join them in the entryway. She was already holding her purse. “He had split ends. He finally agreed it was time to do something about them.”

“Oh, it was his idea?” he asked wryly, trying to clamp down on his inexplicable panic. He hadn’t expressly said so, but he hadn’t wanted anyone else in the penthouse right now. Still, he knew that she wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t someone she trusted—and as happy as Bob was, he guessed the risk was worth it. “Who was this stylist?”

“Marc, you remember him,” Pepper told him. “He’s been doing my hair for years.”

“Ah, Marc with a C,” Tony said. Tony was ninety-nine percent sure Marc with a C was not a SHIELD spy, or if he was, he had one of the longest and most boring undercover assignments ever. So they were probably fine.

Also, he could admit, at least in the privacy of his own mind, that Bob looked really, really good.

“You look really, really good,” Tony told him anyway, because he’d never actually been very good at keeping his thoughts in the privacy of his own mind.

“Thanks,” Bob said, smiling shyly. “I like the shoes. Pepper says they’re running shoes, but I guess people just wear them everywhere. The future is so weird.”

“We call it the present, these days,” Tony reminded him.

“Right,” Bob said uncertainly, frowning for a moment. He got like that sometimes, when memories started crowding to the front of his mind. Sometimes he didn’t quite know what year it was—but Tony was not letting himself worry about it.

He figured for what he’d been through, Bob was pretty much the picture of mental health. He might actually be coping better than Tony at this point.

“Well, I need to get back to the office,” Pepper said, and leaned over and kissed Bob on the cheek. “I had fun today.”

“What? No kiss for me?” he called.

“How many complaints am I going to have waiting for me when I get back to the office?” she asked.

“How many board members are there again?” he asked.
“Twenty-one,” she said.

“Well, there’s your answer,” he said, grinning widely.

Pepper just huffed at him and hit the close button for the elevator, so Tony was pretty sure he wasn’t getting a kiss. He turned back to Bob, making a note to himself to give further direction to Jarvis regarding Bob’s wardrobe—Iron Man stuff, that was fine. The rest of the Avengers could find their own recovering assassins to dress up.

“Did you know men could get married in New York?” Bob asked him suddenly. He’d dropped down on the bar stool and was pulling some Pixy Stix from their Pepper-proof hiding place. He’d probably been on his best behavior with Pepper, and was now going through sugar withdrawal.

Then his mind re-round what he’d said. “Uh, yes?” Tony said, as he grabbed a sparkling water from the fridge. “I think we really need to expand your movie knowledge beyond Disney and Pixar. I’m guessing Marc with a C brought this up?”

“Yeah, he’s married to a man, and he was wearing nail polish,” Bob told him, looking delighted. "Also, I'm pretty sure we figured out I'm bisexual,” he added, and Tony nearly spit out his drink.

"Huh?” Tony choked out.

"It means I like both men and women,” Bob explained patiently, as he chewed on the end of his Pixy Stix.

"Yeah, no, I know what it means," Tony said. "How did that even come up? I thought you were just getting a haircut!"

"Apparently he thought I was a… a bigot? Because I kept staring at his nail polish,” Bob said, "but I just didn’t ever remember men wearing nail polish, I didn’t care that he was. I told him I think lots of men are attractive and it doesn’t bother me, either, and after that he was nice.”

"Lots of men?” Tony cried. "Who have you even—? I’m basically the only man you know.”

Bob smirked at him. "Fishing for compliments, Tony?"

"I don't have the patience for fishing," Tony said. “Anyway, I know how good I look.”

Bob laughed, leaning on the counter to look up at Tony. “You do though,” he agreed, grinning around the annihilated Pixy Stix, as he checked out Tony’s six thousand dollar suit. “You clean up nice.”

“Look who’s talking,” Tony snorted, before getting struck with a brilliant idea—like most of his brilliant ideas, it had the potential to go either really well, or terribly wrong. “Let’s go out.”

Bob’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You’re all dressed up, shouldn’t waste it on just me,” Tony said. “I’ll take you out to dinner. I know a nice place. They keep a closed booth in the back reserved for me.”

He’d been meaning to start easing Bob into the real world, but wasn’t sure how he would react around other people. From the sound of it, he and Marc with a C had gotten along like a house on fire, so he would probably be fine.

“I thought—I mean, I can’t be seen, right?” Bob asked. “People would have questions.”
“Oh, that reminds me,” Tony said, and pulled a wallet from his pocket. He tossed it to him. Bob caught it out of the air, before glancing at Tony in question. “It’s for you,” he assured him.

Bob opened it, and his eyes widened as he pulled out a driver’s license. It listed his birthday as May 12th, 1985, and his name as Bob Morrison. There were also five one-hundred dollar bills folded neatly into one of the slots. “Tony, I can’t—” he started breathlessly.

“Consider it your new identity starter kit,” Tony said. “I’m getting you a passport and a social security card too, but we’re still waiting on that. But that—” he pointed to the license, “—should be enough in case anything happens when we’re out. Anyway, we can wear disguises!”

“Disguises?” Bob asked dubiously. Tony looked far too excited.

“Yeah, I’ve got just the thing!” Tony promised, before heading back to his room. He shrugged out of his suit jacket and pulled off his tie, before pulling on his black leather jacket. Then he grabbed one of his suitcase Iron Man suits, because he’d learned his lesson going anywhere without one.

And then there was the pièce de résistance—two pairs of sunglasses.

He walked back out to hand one pair of the sunglasses to Bob in triumph. They were gold-tinted mirrored sunglasses with rounded oversized lenses. Bob put them on experimentally, and looked back up at Tony. He looked sort of like he was a movie star trying to be inconspicuous, which was probably not going to help them go unnoticed.

Also, Tony had never once managed to be in public without being noticed.

Suddenly sunglasses didn’t seem the brilliant disguise he had been planning for. “Okay, I think we need hats. People hiding always wear hats,” he decided. “Except I don’t have any hats.”

“Oh, I do,” Bob said, grinning brightly. He disappeared and came back with two baseball caps. One had the Iron Man mask drawn out in black lines, and the other just had the Avengers logo. Tony really needed to do something about Jarvis’s fashion taste—though at this point, he was like eighty percent sure Jarvis was just doing it to screw with him. Bob tossed him the Avengers one, and pulled on the Iron Man cap.

It helped a little. Tony glanced down at Bob’s metal hand and considered adding some gloves to the mix, but he figured worst case scenario if someone got too nosy Tony can just claim he built it himself. He totally could have, and was hoping to build a better one anyway, just as soon as Bob let him get a look at it.

Tony pulled on his own cap and his aviator sunglasses with purple-tinted lenses, and hoped he didn’t get caught by the Paparazzi, or the other Avengers would never let him live it down. “Alright,” he said. “That’s probably as good as it’s going to get. I, for one, feel that I look entirely unrecognizable.”

Bob looked less impressed, but shrugged, apparently willing to go with it. Tony texted one of his drivers to meet them at the entrance, missing Happy the whole time. He would have made sure to be discreet—if trying not to laugh the entire time. But Tony figured if they just went right into the restaurant, they shouldn’t get caught in any photos.

Though he wasn’t sure it mattered, he thought, as he and Bob took the elevator down. He might still be recognizable, but Bob certainly wasn’t. He barely resembled the man he’d pulled from the cryo tube at all. Tony could hardly recognize him himself.

The shorter of his limos was waiting for them at the front entrance, his newest driver holding the
door for him. He ushered Bob inside, but he seemed mostly blasé about the car. It was sort of like how he wasn’t impressed by Tony’s amazing penthouse aside from the fact that it was a nice place to sleep.

But show him a library, and he goes all wide-eyed and breathless.

Tony was usually pretty good at figuring out what people wanted, and how to get it for them—but Bob was a puzzle. Probably because he didn’t really know what he liked himself.

Right now Bob was leaning forward to look out one of the tinted windows, apparently more interested in passing pedestrians than the sparkling leather interior of the car or the built-in wet bar.

“What’s my cover?” Bob asked after a moment, finally settling back into the seat to glance at Tony.

“What do you mean?” Tony asked.

“So I know how to act,” he explained. “What’s my cover? Am I still your pilot? Is it a business dinner? Or are we just friends? Do I come from New York, or—”

“Woah, slow down there, Mission Impossible,” Tony interrupted. “There is no cover. I don’t want you to be anyone. Just be yourself.”

“So I should introduce myself as the amnesiac assassin that you rescued from a Hydra base and took home with you?” Bob asked, and if not for his sparkling eyes, Tony might not have realized he was just screwing with him. A couple weeks ago, that might not have been a joke.

“Maybe don’t get into the specifics,” Tony said dryly. “You’re my friend. You’re staying with me. These are all true things. You don’t have to pretend, but it’s probably not a great idea to go around telling your life story to everyone, at least not until we know what it is ourselves.”

“Okay,” Bob decided resolutely, and Tony was a little worried that he was just taking that information and making a cover anyway—but maybe it was necessary, for now. He was pretty sure spies used covers like most people used Snuggies anyway, so whatever worked.

“You shouldn’t really have to talk to anyone,” Tony assured him. “I figure we’ll start small. Maybe next time we can—“

“Tony!” Bob shouted suddenly, lunging forward and reaching for the door. “Tony, stop the car!”

“Pull over,” he called, after bringing down the window divider between them and the driver, afraid Bob would jump out of the moving car if he didn’t. Bob disappeared like a shot barely before the car could stop.

“Shit,” Tony cursed, sliding across the seat. They were double parked, so he glanced back at the driver. “Circle the block, I’ll text when I know what we’re doing.”

Then he rushed onto the sidewalk, looking for Bob. Two teenagers with hoodies pulled almost past their eyes were rushing towards him, and he sidestepped them as they went barreling by.

“That pretty boy was fuckin’ crazy, man,” he heard one of them say to the other, before they were turning to the corner.

Tony headed in the direction they’d been running from, and found Bob in the first alley he came to. He was kneeling down in front of a homeless man, looking concerned. As soon as he heard Tony,
he looked up at him with such a trusting expression that Tony’s breath got caught in his throat.

“This is Tony, he can help,” Bob promised. “Tony, this is Luke—he needs help.”

“Will you tell the kid I’m fine? I don’t need any help,” Luke huffed, glancing up at Tony. He was huddled back up against the wall. He looked to be nearing sixty, but it was hard to tell. He was clean shaven with carefully patched up clothes, but he was covered in a thin layer of dirt that meant he’d been sleeping outside for awhile. “Where’s he from, anyway? He one of those aliens? Cause he sure as hell ain’t no proper New Yorker.”

Bob frowned. “I’m pretty sure I am from New York,” he insisted. “Or…it’s possible I’m Russian. We’re not quite sure.”

Luke’s eyes narrowed over at him, and Tony quickly stepped closer. “Okay,” he interrupted with a sharp laugh, “that’s enough, Bob, come here a sec.”

Bob looked up at him in betrayal, and Tony discreetly took his arm and led him a few feet down. “What are you doing?” Tony demanded quietly.

“These two ruffians were giving Luke a bad time,” Bob explained. “But I ran them off.”

“Ruffians?” Tony echoed disbelievingly.

“I don’t like bullies,” Bob told him, with a hint of a Brooklyn accent and steel in his eyes. It was like watching him switch into another person right in front of him, but almost before he could see the personality fully form, it was gone again, and Bob’s eyes were big and lost as they turned back to him. “I offered to help him get home, but he doesn’t have one.”

Bob looked heartbroken at this development, and Tony wasn’t quite sure how to explain this was normal—mostly because he didn’t think it should be normal, but was as guilty as everyone else in walking right past the homeless about twenty times a day.

“That’s…that’s a thing that happens, sometimes,” Tony tried to explain. “But he said he doesn’t want help. It’s not a fun lesson to learn, but you can’t save everybody.”

Bob looked down at his sneakers. “Okay, but he’s got to be a better person than me. I mean, he’d have to be, right?” Bob decided. “So if you can only help one of us, maybe…maybe you could help him instead?”

Tony tried not to let his shock show on his face, but that kind of turned everything he thought he knew over on its head. He wondered suddenly how much of Bob’s recovery and well-adjusted behavior was just an act, because those were not the words of someone that had any notion of self-worth.

“People aren’t interchangeable,” Tony tried to explain, trying to be patient even as his heart sped up sickly inside his chest. “You’re my friend, remember? I’m not just gonna switch you out for some random guy on the street. That’s not how it works.”

“But he deserves help more than me,” Bob explained, like he thought Tony was just being stubborn. Then he bit his lip, thinking through ways to help him. “Would it be okay if I gave him the money you gave me?”

“It’s yours, you can do what you want with it,” Tony said, before glancing back at Luke. That kind of money could be as much a blessing as a curse if he got caught out with it on the streets. “But it might not be a good idea to give him all of it. We don’t want him getting robbed for it.”
“We can't just leave him here,” Bob insisted. “Tony, you don’t owe me anything—but please, we’ve gotta help him.”

And that was how Tony Stark ended up in a rundown place called Kathy’s Diner with a homeless man and an amnesiac, instead of the secluded and rather overpriced L’oiseau Bleu. Tony hadn’t actually been in many places like this, and was doing his best not to fidget. His mother used to sneak away with him when he was a kid, and take him to this little 50s style diner that was pretty similar. She used to love places like that, always happier there than the fancy restaurants their father would take them to.

It was why he always thought it was ridiculous when people tried to imply that she had married his father for his money. He knew she’d married him in spite of it.

"I don't have a home either," Bob was saying earnestly, when Tony sharply tuned back into the conversation. Bob was sitting in the booth beside him, inexplicably building a model log cabin out of his plate of french fries. "If Tony hadn't taken me in I'd be dead or worse.”

Tony was grateful that Bob left out that part about how he would have been the one to kill him.

Luke squinted at Tony and back at Bob from where he sat across from them. "He your sugar daddy or somethin’?"

"He does supply me with sugar—‘ Bob started.

"Ah, no," Tony broke in quickly. "Bob's just a friend."

Luke snorted in a way that implied he doubted that, but decided to take another bite of his hamburger rather than attempt to dispute it. “Well, you didn’t have to buy me dinner,” he said gruffly. “Those kids weren’t gonna do nothing. They’re all talk.”

“They should watch what they say,” Bob frowned, “In my day, kids were taught to treat people with respect.”


“In…Russia, things were very different,” Bob said, before grinning. “Anyway, I couldn’t just stand by and let ‘em corner you, ain’t no call for picking on someone two to one, and you’re half the size of just one of ‘em.”

“Didn’t know there was a Brooklyn in Russia,” Luke asked shrewdly.

“I’m from both,” Bob said quickly. “Russia, by way of Brooklyn.”

Tony was beginning to suspect he should have just made a cover for Bob, because telling someone without any memories to ‘just be yourself’ in a public setting when trying to be low profile was obviously not his best idea ever. He resisted the urge to bang his head against the table.

“Or possibly the other way around,” Bob added, as he began to eat away at his little french fry log house.

“You lose that in that in the service, then?” Luke asked, nodding to Bob’s metal hand. “And maybe take a few hits to the head?”

Bob went still for a moment, glancing down at his own left hand, and flexing his fingers before pulling his eyes back up to meet Luke’s. “I fell,” he said simply.
That was news to Tony, and he glanced over at Bob sharply. “What?”

“There was a—” Bob trailed off, before glancing back at his plate. “I just remember falling. That’s how I died.”

“You don’t look very dead to me,” Luke told him, and Tony glared at him for beating him to the punch.


“Yes,” Bob said, pushing his plate aside to lean forward.

“That was rhetorical,” Luke snorted.

“What my friend here is getting at,” Tony said, wondering when he became the socially conscious one in any relationship, “is that we would like to help if we can. I can get you hooked up with a good shelter. They’ll give you a place to stay, help you find some work. If you want.”

“Don’t know of many shelters that actually do what they say,” Luke said.

“This one does,” Tony promised. “It’s the Maria Stark Shelter and Work Placement Center.”

“Shit, I thought so, but you’re actually Tony Stark,” Luke realized, before looking back at Bob in suspicion. “Christ. He really is an alien, isn’t he?”

Tony smirked, deciding that might be as good a cover story as any, these days. “It’s classified,” he said.

“You one of those Asgards, then?” he asked Bob. “Bob doesn’t sound like a very God-like name, but I bet that’s just a cover, huh?”

“I’m not an alien,” Bob said, frowning over at them. “I’m pretty sure.”

Tony felt instantly horrible, and leaned forward. “Of course you’re not,” he promised. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. Some of my best friends are aliens. Well. One is an alien. The other just kinda turns into a green rage monster, but he’s human most of the time.”

Luke snorted, before glancing back to Tony. “Why are you doing this?” he asked, watching him with suspicion. “This some PR thing?”

“Uh, no,” Tony said. “In fact, I’d really appreciate it if you never told anyone about any of this.”


“We just want to help,” Bob said quietly. “I’ve been alone with no place to go before, and I wouldn’t want anyone else to suffer that way if I could stop it.”


“For the same reasons,” Tony admitted quietly. “And also just a little bit cause he talked me into it.”

He squinted over at Tony. “I always thought from seeing you on the news you’d be a bit of a dick. They always say, never meet your heroes.”

Luke glanced down, picking up another french fry.

“Glad I was wrong,” he added.

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The Maria Stark Shelter and Work Placement offices wouldn’t be open until the next day, so they ended up taking Luke home with them and setting him up on another floor in the Tower to get some rest. He’d had him brought some basic toiletries and spare clothes.

Honestly, Tony would have done it just for the look that Bob had given him like he’d hung the freakin’ moon, but by the end he suspected that wasn’t the only reason.

Luke was hilarious and surprisingly sanguine about Bob’s quirks. He was also far more appreciative of Tony’s limo than Bob, and Tony had made them all Shirley Temples—someone had replaced all the hard liquor, he suspected Happy—while Luke regaled them with funny stories about his time working construction back in the seventies.

Honestly, the whole night had been fun. Bob and Luke made for far better company than most of the people he met at the fancy events he was always going too. He’d have to invite Bob next time one came up, it should make for a much more interesting night.

He wasn’t sure exactly what was changing with him, so he wasn’t sure how to explain it when Pepper called demanding to know what he thought he was doing.

“I don’t even know how it happened,” he told her honestly.

“I’m just saying I would have liked a head's up that you're turning the Avengers Tower into a halfway house,” she said. “I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

“How did you even find out?” Tony asked. “We just barely got back.”

“Derek told me,” she said.

“Who the hell is Derek?” Tony asked.

“He’s your new driver, Tony,” she said patiently.

“Oh,” Tony said. “I call him Happy Six Point Five.”

“Point Five?” Pepper started, before sighing. “Nevermind. I don’t want to know.”

“Well, I want him fired, he could be a SHIELD spy,” Tony decided.

“Derek isn’t reporting to SHIELD, he’s reporting to me,” Pepper told him wearily. “He’s my spy.”

“Right,” Tony said, pausing. He realized he might actually be getting a little paranoid, and then he re-roung what she said. “Wait, why are you spying on me?”

“Because I want to make sure you’re not doing anything stupid,” she said. “I’m still trying to figure out if this qualifies. You’re the one seeing SHIELD spies everywhere, and you just brought in some guy off the streets to the Tower?”
“I’ve literally once brought home a brainwashed assassin, so this can’t be a surprise. Anyway, he’s not even on our floor,” Tony said. “I set him up on one of the empty guest floors. We’re going to hook him up at the shelter tomorrow, see if we can help him get back on his feet.”

“That’s…very nice,” Pepper said, as though she were waiting for the other shoe to drop. He couldn’t really blame her. He’d never been exactly up for social work—unless you counted working the high society.

“I know,” Tony sighed. “I think maybe I rescued Pollyanna, the Russian assassin edition.” He paused. “He’s also weirdly started to remind me of Captain Do-Right. God help us all when the two of them meet. They’ll probably have the Avengers rescuing kittens from trees.”

Pepper laughed brightly. "Well, what if instead of working for you, you ask if he wants to work for me? We have a number of charities, you know.”

“I’m not sure I want to be giving him any more ideas,” Tony said after a moment. “When I first tried to get him to leave the guy behind…he told me if I could only help one of them it should be the other guy. He’s not quite getting that he’s important yet. I don’t want him to throw himself into helping other people before he’s even…I don’t know. God, Pepper, honestly I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“No, that’s actually really—“ she broke off for a minute. “You’re right, Tony. I think you need to just keep doing what you’re doing. The rest will work itself out.”

Tony hoped that she was right, and she was Pepper, so she was almost definitely right. Instead of dwelling on everything, he just pulled on some comfortable sweatpants his favorite *The Doors* t-shirt, then headed back out to the living room where Bob was already waiting.

"Okay, so let's start your introduction to the 21st century through film,” Tony told him, grinning.

Bob grinned back. He was wearing his Iron Man slippers and flannel pants with tiny Hulks on them. Those were okay, Tony decided. Bruce was his buddy.

"Pixy Stix?” Bob offered, holding one out.

Tony dropped down on the couch and picked up the remote, taking the candy with his other hand. He didn't even really realize what he'd done until he'd done it, just taken it from Bob and settled back into the couch, even though he usually couldn't stand to be handed anything by anyone—except Rhodey and Pepper, because they were Rhodey and Pepper.

It wasn't the first sign that Bob had slipped neatly past all of his carefully constructed defenses, but it was the most glaring one yet. What made it all the more surprising was that it wasn't even making him anxious, and he wasn’t freaking out about it. If anything, he felt calmer and more content than he could remember being in too many years to count.

Maybe Bob wasn’t the only one that was starting to heal.
Tony had taken Bob and Luke to the Stark Shelter the next morning, and the reactions of the staff to his presence there had been both a little hilarious and also a little bit of a wake up call, because it made Tony realize how long it had been since he had actually visited. He was pretty sure it had been the grand opening of the new building that he was there last, as he had incredible people to manage his charities and for the most part he figured they were all better off without his interference anyway.

But maybe he was a little bit wrong about that.

Predictably, they had all adored Bob. Tony had to firmly explain to them multiple times that Bob was coming back home with him, but he was definitely going to pass along Pepper’s job offer once Bob was doing a bit better. The trouble with that was figuring out how Bob was actually doing, because Tony was learning that he was an expert at pretending. It probably shouldn’t be surprising, considering the whole master assassin thing, but it kept catching him off guard.

Like right now, with Bob sitting at the counter, eating oatmeal like everything was perfectly fine.

“Bob?” Tony asked quietly, not completely able to disguise the panic in his own voice. “What happened?”

Bob looked up at him, frowning slightly. “What?” he asked.

Tony let out a breath, trying to remain calm. “You seem to be bleeding,” he finally said, which was sort of an understatement.

His blue t-shirt was soaked through at the shoulder, and the blood was spreading across the material like a very disturbing Rorschach. Bob glanced at it, then back at Tony, apparently unconcerned. “Oh, I couldn’t find any bandages,” he explained. “It’ll stop soon.” Then he frowned as though coming to realize something. “I’m sorry about the shirt. I’ll wash it.”

“I don’t care about the shirt,” Tony said with false calm, instead of what he really wanted to say, which was some variation of: *oh my god what the hell?!* “How did you get hurt?”

“Mandatory maintenance,” Bob explained, as he pushed away the oatmeal and sat back.
“Technicians weren’t available, so I did it myself.”

“You did this to yourself?” Tony asked, trying to keep the horror out of his expression.

“I’ve watched them plenty of times, I know how,” Bob assured him. “It’s okay.”

“Know how to what, exactly?” Tony asked. “What did you do?”

“Had to tighten the anchor points,” he said. “I guess my advanced healing actually causes issues with the arm, it keeps trying to heal the wounds and push it out. Have to reinforce the connections if I’m out of Cyro for too long. It should be good for awhile now.”

“Okay,” Tony said, trying to keep his voice casual. It was obvious that Bob couldn’t see what the issue was with any of this, and his internal panic probably wouldn’t do either of them any good. “Do you think you could show me? Then I can find some bandages.”

“It’s not pretty,” Bob cautioned, but obediently pulled his shirt off over his head.

Tony kept his face expressionless, but ‘not pretty’ had been another understatement. The entire area around the seam of the metal arm was bleeding and inflamed, as though it were just installed. “Gonna be honest,” Tony admitted, “doesn’t look great. What exactly did you do?”

“They didn’t tell me much about the arm, but they would talk about it around me all the time,” he said. “I don’t think they knew I could understand them. I guess that a month or so after they first hooked up the arm, my skin started trying to heal beneath it, shoving out the connections. It was… painful.”

Tony didn’t really want to think of how bad it had to have been for Bob to admit to it being painful, and he swallowed hard. “Okay,” he said. “You said anchor points, right? So parts of the arm are anchored through your skin, and that’s what’s causing the issue? I mean, it has to be tapped into your nervous system, too, somehow.”

“Yeah, they used something experimental,” Bob said. “Apparently, there’s a shunt anchored to my bone and the connections run through it to hook into my nervous system. After awhile, my body starts to try and close the wound around the shunt. Same thing happens to the anchor points around the seam of my shoulder, and if not addressed it will lose structural integrity.”

The dissociated way he spoke about himself, and the terms like ‘structural integrity’ said absolutely nothing good about his treatment at the hands of Hydra. Not that Tony had held out any remaining hope in that regard after the hours of video he had watched. “There was nothing in the files I stole about the original surgery, and they redacted most of the actual specs around your arm and how they connected it,” Tony admitted. “I think I can help, but you’d have to let me look at it.”

“I already fixed it,” Bob said, looking at him in confusion.

“Uh huh,” Tony said. “Lovely work. Clearly, you should have gone into the medical profession.”

Bob gave him a withering look. Tony still sort of got a little thrill out of irritating him, because he considered the fact that he even could progress. “I can’t stitch up the wounds on the edge of the arm, because the wounds are required for it to interface properly,” he said. “They’ll scar over by tonight.”

“That may have been good enough for Hydra,” Tony said slowly, “but that pretty much guarantees that it’s not good. I think we can do better.”
“And if I want you to leave it alone?” Bob asked quietly.

Tony knew it was a test, just as sure as he knew if ordered Bob to let him look at his arm, he would allow it without further protest. There was a fine, fine line between honoring someone’s choices and letting someone self-destruct, and as someone that had been on the other side of it often enough himself, he knew that line pretty damn well.

And they hadn’t quite crossed it yet.

“Then I leave it alone,” Tony said easily. “We can stick a bandage on it and get on with our day—but there may come a time when it’s not that easy to let it go. There’s no telling what damage this might do to you in the long-term.”

Bob sighed and glanced back at his shoulder for a moment. The skin was inflamed in addition to the slow but steady bleeding, and it was honestly a little horrifying to look at. Tony was glad he wasn’t the sort to faint at the sight of blood. “What do you want to do?” Bob finally asked.

“Go to my lab, get it scanned, for starters,” Tony said casually, then promised, “It won’t hurt.”

Bob pulled his eyes back up to meet Tony’s. “I said I trusted you,” he said. “I meant it. And I don’t…I don’t really trust myself, right now. So…”

“Trust doesn’t mean you do everything I say,” Tony told him. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Bob said wryly. “I know, I just…this isn’t normal, right? That this doesn’t bother me?”

“You’re not normal,” Tony told him. “That’s okay, though. I’m not either. God, I’d be so bored if I were normal, you have no idea.” He leaned across the counter, carefully meeting Bob’s eyes. “So, look, here’s the deal, we’re gonna scan the arm, and we’re going to see exactly what this ‘mandatory maintenance’ is, and then I’m going to figure out how to fix it. But from there, it’s going to be up to you what we do, because I can’t make your decisions for you. And really, I’d be pretty much the worst proxy ever. I make terrible decisions. Ask anyone.”

Bob just nodded, which would have to be good enough for now, and followed Tony to his lab. He was still shirtless, but the bleeding had slowed enough that it wasn’t dripping everywhere. Not that Tony cared about the floors—they’d seen worse—but he didn’t exactly want Pepper to drop by to find a blood trail. That kind of thing tended to upset her.

It helped a lot that Bob was more than comfortable in his lab these days, blowtorch experimentation and small fires not withstanding, and that Jarvis was brilliant enough to be able to scan things entirely non-invasively. Or, that Tony was brilliant enough to have created an AI that brilliant, really, but whatever.

“Alright, just need you to hold still for a minute, okay?” Tony asked. Bob nodded stiffly, and Tony didn’t want to prolong it any longer than he had to, so he quickly ran the small transmitter across his arm and shoulder, and all the way down the other side.

“That’s it?” Bob asked, when Tony stepped away.

“Yep,” Tony said. “Told you it wouldn’t hurt.”

“But how could you have everything you need?” he asked, leaning forward on the table, eyes wide and curious. He was engaging, which was good. Bob liked knowing how things worked, and if he helped this was going to go a hell of a lot quicker.
“Watch this,” Tony told him, and moved the 3-D image from his tablet right into the air with a flick of his hand. The hologram of Bob’s arm hovered between them, blue-tinted and complex. He reached out to rotate it, lowering it until the shoulder joint and the top of the arm was within Bob’s reach.

“Wow,” Bob said, leaning forward to run his eyes from the shoulder down to the tips of the fingers. “Can I touch it?”

“Sure,” Tony said. “If you push hard, your hand will go right through it, but with specific movements of intent, you can manipulate it.”

Bob gently skimmed his fingers along the surface, then twisted his hand, spinning the arm in place. Tony grinned, not surprised he’d gotten the hang of it almost instantly. Bob was a scarily fast learner.

“This is amazing,” Bob told him, his eyes lit up with an eerie blue glow from the light of the hologram. “You created this? I don’t think Hydra was familiar with this technology.”

“It’s mine,” Tony agreed. “Patented. Hammer-tech has a knock off, but it’s not interactive. It’s basically just a light show.” He stepped closer. “This one, is actually a light model of your actual arm. Which means you can show me exactly what you did.”

Bob stilled, some of the excitement fading as he spun the arm back into place. “Okay,” he said. “There’s a release for the panel near the shoulder. I’m not sure how to open it with a hologram.”

“Jarvis has already analyzed the mechanics of the arm,” Tony explained. “The hologram should do anything the real thing does, so just do what you did earlier.”

Bob reached out and delicately pressed some of the panels, in a random sequence obviously meant not to be hit on accident, causing the main piece of the shoulder—complete with its red star—to lift up. He flicked it all the way open with a move of his fingers, catching on to handling the hologram, and then leaned up on his elbows to look inside.

Tony leaned over too, and let out a shaky breath. He could see the shunt Bob had mentioned, pressed up into the stitched up skin of his shoulder. There was very little left of his flesh arm itself, and he could see a complex working of small blades around the shunt. “What’s with the blades?” he asked nervously, even though the was pretty sure he already knew.

Bob leaned up again, and twisted a small valve on the hologram arm, causing the small blades to twist around the shunt, borrowing further up into the holographic skin of his arm. “It’s to clear out healed tissue,” Bob explained dispassionately, “and make sure the scar tissue doesn’t get thick enough to cut off access to the shunt. They considered it an inelegant solution, but expedient.”

“Jarvis, remove the outer casing of the arm,” Tony instructed, even though he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to like what it revealed.

He was right.

There were also sharp pins around the seams of the arm, from the front of the shoulder all the way to the back, anchoring it to the bone of his shoulder blade straight through his skin. They moved when the valve was turned as well, pressing tighter into the skin with each turn like it was just tightening up some loose screws.

He could see where scar tissue was layered on top of scar tissue, his body constantly trying to push out or heal around the metal that had been so brutally attached.
Bob had turned that valve himself, hard enough and tight enough to reopen all the old wounds. Mandatory maintenance, he’d said. They’d probably done it to him countless times. He pushed himself slightly away.

“Are you okay?” Bob asked in concern, glancing up. “Tony—“

“Fine, absolutely fine,” Tony said, even though he felt queasy. “Just a little tiny bit horrified.”

“Why?” Bob asked, glancing back at the hologram.

“This is basically a torture device,” he said, feeling even sicker about his earlier admiration of it as he realized the extent of Hydra’s disregard. He couldn’t even focus on the brilliant interworkings of the hand and wrist, too caught up in the horror that was the connection points. “They had fifty years, and this was the best they could do?”

“Comfort was not a priority,” Bob explained. “I was functional.”

“Functional,” Tony echoed. “We need to discuss what that means. You said when I first brought you here that the pain wasn’t enough to impede your functioning. I need you to tell me how bad it is on a scale of one to ten.”

“Maybe a one?” Bob said uncertainty.

“Right, we probably need to adjust the curve on the pain scale,” Tony said, because it was obvious his pain tolerance was off the charts. He paused, trying to figure out how to measure pain in someone that didn’t really know anything else. “Okay, when you did your…maintenance earlier, that hurt, right? What level of pain was that?”

“Maybe a five?” Bob said. “It’s mostly back to a one now though.”

“Okay,” Tony said. He figured if he had blades ripping through his shoulder, and pins driving themselves back into his bones, all whilst entirely conscious, he’d probably be in screaming agony and definitely at a ten. Which meant Bob was probably at about a six all the time. “Do you want something for the pain?”

“No,” Bob said quickly. “I don’t—no.”

That was obviously another Hydra landmine, and Tony pushed down the anger that he couldn’t even offer that little bit of relief. A least the fact that Bob was saying no to anything at all was a good sign, even if Tony wished he could give him some painkillers. “Will you let me bandage your arm at least?” he asked.

Bob shrugged, and Tony quickly grabbed one of his first aid kits—they kept magically appearing around his lab, he was pretty sure Rhody and Jarvis were in on that one together—and wrapped Bob’s shoulder carefully with gauze. It didn’t immediately soak through with blood, so there was that.

“Thank you,” Bob told him quietly, as he taped the gauze with the medical tape.

The gratitude still kind of caught Tony off guard, and he sat back, examining his handiwork with the gauze. “You’re welcome,” he said.

After he got Bob all set up with a new shirt and firm instructions to come find him if he started bleeding again, he went back to the lab to go over the scans he’d taken.
He knew he wouldn’t be getting any sleep that night.

Eight different prototypes and one awkward keyboard nap later, Tony wasn’t any closer to a solution.

Any functioning arm would have to be wired internally, and Bob’s healing factor would continue to gum up the works by trying to heal in and around it. He could build the most beautiful, most functional prosthesis in the world, and he still didn’t have a clue how he could put it on him without causing just as much damage as the one he already had.

But he knew someone that might.

“It’s an intriguing problem,” Helen Cho said thoughtfully from his view screen, before frowning delicately. “Captain Rogers hasn’t lost an arm, has he?”

“Ah, no,” Tony said. “He’s not the patient.”

“The level of cellular regeneration you’re describing…it’s another enhanced individual?” she prompted.

“Remember how I helped you solve that wiring issue with the Cradle, and you said you’d owe me one?” Tony started.

She huffed out a sound that was some sort of cross between a laugh and a sigh. “I’m not going to like this, am I?” she asked.

“We’ve got to keep this confidential,” Tony said. “No SHEILD. No anyone. Just us.”

“I don’t think this line is secure,” she cautioned.

“It is,” Tony promised. “Jarvis is making sure of it.”

“Then you have my full attention,” she said.

“The patient is a liberated prisoner of war,” Tony explained. “He was experimented on and fitted with an advanced prosthetic arm. I’ve sent you the scans.”

Helen glanced away from the camera as she received the files, and Tony could see the exact moment when she started to understand what she was seeing. “This isn’t a prosthesis,” she said sickly, “this is a weapon, maybe to be used against the one they put it on even more than anyone else.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” Tony agreed.

Hydra didn’t use just one type of conditioning to control Bob. They’d had to use every trick they could think of to try and keep him under control, and even then they were so terrified of him that they barely kept him out of cyro for more than three days at a time. Keeping him in constant pain, dependent on them for maintenance, was just another measure of control.

“I can build an arm without the built-in torture bits,” Tony explained, “but it won’t actually fix the root problem.”

“I understand your dilemma,” Helen said after a moment, “but the Cradle cannot generate bone tissue. I’m afraid its capabilities still fall short of being able to reproduce an entire limb. I’m not 
“I know exactly what the Cradle is capable of,” Tony told her, and sent her the specs for the most recent prosthetic arm he’d been working on, and the simulations he’d drawn up for creating it. “It’s just a matter of what it needs in order to do it.”

“Tony,” she breathed, once she received the files. “This is absolutely brilliant.”

“Think you can work with that?” he asked, falsely casual.

“I know that I can,” she promised, her quiet confidence coming through in her voice. “When do you want to start?”

“How soon can you be here?” Tony asked, flashing her a grin.

"For you?" she asked, grinning wryly. "The flight to New York is fourteen hours. Give me twenty four."

She ended the call, and Tony was excited about working with her again for about ten seconds before he realized that didn’t leave him with much time to sell Bob on his crazy idea—still, in hindsight, he probably shouldn’t have tried to do it when he’d been up for going on twenty-six hours with no sleep.

Because Bob was already staring at him like he was crazy, and he hadn’t even started with the sales pitch yet.

“Why did you build so many prosthetic arms?” Bob asked, when he followed him back into the lab, because Tony had forgotten to hide the prototypes, and they were all just sort of sitting on the table in what amounted to a pretty disturbing pile. One was giving a peace sign, another the Vulcan Salute.

They were not the best examples of Tony’s own mental health.

“Ignore them, they’re barely even working models,” Tony told him, shoving them off the table with a sweeping motion of his arm.

Bob stared at him in disbelief. “Tony, when was the last time you slept? Did you even sleep at all last night?”

Bob had fallen asleep himself sometime in the middle of the afternoon while Tony was on arm number two, and then had kind of just went into hibernation. Tony had been a little freaked out until he realized Bob’s crazy super solider body was putting everything it had into healing. He remembered then that Steve had taken a ten hour nap after the alien invasion, and woken up without a mark.

Bob slept through most of the day and then all through the night, but he’d removed the bandages this morning and the wounds already looked like they were months old. It would be a little spooky if he wasn’t so grateful for it.

“Tony?” Bob questioned worriedly, which made Tony realize he’d probably been staring at him in contemplative silence for the last minute or so.

“I slept last night,” Tony promised quickly. “Can’t you still see the imprint of ‘SDFGH’ on my cheek from the keyboard?”
Bob narrowed his eyes, and crossed his arms, looking eerily like Pepper. “You need to actually sleep,” he said. “You shouldn’t be doing this all for me, I’m not—“

“Don’t finish that thought,” Tony told him, narrowing his own eyes. “I’ve spent a lot of sleepless nights over ridiculous things, like trying to make a robot pig that can fly. Don’t ask, it was a whole thing with Rhodey. The point is, this wasn’t one of them. This is important. You’re important.”

Bob knelt down and picked up one of the arm prototypes that Tony had carelessly thrown to the floor. “These do look amazing,” he said. “But how did you make all of these in just one day?”

“That’s a dud,” Tony said, gently taking it from him just to toss it somewhere behind his head. “These are all useless. Ignore them. They’re not why I brought you here.”

“Why are there six empty Red Bulls in this trash can?” Bob asked, frowning adorably as he picked it up, before turning to glare at him. “You do know there’s a daily consumption limit—“

“Pepper is ruining you, I swear,” Tony told him, grabbing the trash can from him to shove it behind him. “Ignore those too. Okay, look, I need to show you something.”

Tony stepped back and then flicked the image from his tablet to the table in front of them with his hand. A metal skeleton of an arm appeared in hologram between them—a perfect gleaming replica of the human bone structure, with seamless connections that made it all just a bit sleeker than the real thing.

“That is so cool,” Bob said, flashing a grin. He leaned over it, looking across it. “Is this the internal structure for another prototype?”

“Uh…sort of?” Tony said, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I mean, this would be the only metal component of the arm.”

“Not that it isn’t amazing, and I’m not trying to sound ungrateful,” Bob said slowly, glancing at him with a raised eyebrow, “but are you trying to turn me into Skeletor?”

“How do you even know about Skeletor?” Tony demanded.

“Jarvis introduced me to Saturday morning cartoons,” Bob said, looking up with a grin. “And you’re avoiding the question.”

“Right, well,” Tony said, “this isn’t the finished product, it’s just most of my contribution.” He tapped at his tablet, and muscle and flesh appeared across the arm, leaving it looking disembodied and very human.

“Is this a joke?” Bob asked quietly.

“What? No—“ Tony said, setting the tablet aside to face him. “Look, I’ve been thinking this through, okay. And I could make you the best prosthetic arm in the world, and it still wouldn’t entirely solve the issue. It has to connect to your bones and your nervous system to work properly, and that means your healing factor is going to keep rejecting the prothesis and trying to heal over it. But what if instead of fighting against your healing, we encouraged it?”

“Pretty sure I can't regrow an arm,” Bob said wryly.

“No, I know, but what if there was a way someone else could?” Tony asked, reaching back for the table to throw up a biography of Helen. “This is the lovely Helen Cho. She sort of does with biology what I do with mechanics—and she’s created what she calls the Regeneration Cradle. It
basically writes cells on command, to heal injuries or provide advanced skin grafts.”

He tossed a small video to the holoscreen, displaying the Regeneration Cradle closing a wound that would have taken months to heal in less than five minutes. Bob’s eyes widened, as he stepped closer to watch.

“It’s like a 3-D printer for people,” Bob said, leaning over it in surprise.

“Yeah, pretty much exactly,” Tony said, grinning over at him, pleased at the immediate insight. “What it can’t do, at least not yet, is replicate bone tissue. With the right template, it can regenerate and replicate nerves, blood vessels, muscle and skin—it just needs something to build around. That’s where I come in.”

“You want to have that regenerate tissue around the prosthetic?” Bob realized.

“I want the Cradle to print you a skeleton out of metal, and then rebuild an arm around it,” Tony countered. “We can use your right arm as a mirrored template, and by regenerating the tissue, we solve the problem of your healing factor trying push out the prosthesis—just gotta fool it into thinking the metal is bone, which should be easy enough considering tissue doesn’t have a consciousness so how would it know the difference? And the arm will be almost as strong as this one, but it will have a new breakable fleshy outside, so you’re gonna have to watch how hard you punch with it.”

“I don’t want to punch anyone,” Bob said quietly.

“Even better,” Tony told him brightly.

“This is insane,” Bob told him after a moment. “I’m not worth all this trouble, Tony. I’m fine with my current arm. I don’t want you to—let’s just forget about this, okay?”

“Helen’s sort of already on her way here,” Tony admitted.

Bob sighed. “You said—”

“I know what I said,” Tony said. “And it’s still your choice. We can make her visit purely theoretical—we’ll need to figure out a way to utilize the Cradle to handle other materials, one way or another. It’s something we’d do for fun anyway, I promise. But I hope you consider it. You shouldn’t have to live with pain, and this is one thing…well, it’s one thing I might actually be able to fix.”

He stepped closer to the table, looking across to meet Bob’s eyes. “I know this is moving fast, but we’re kind of on a tight timeline,” he said. “You haven’t been out a cryo a month and you already had to do your…maintenance, which means we have less than a month until you need to do it again.” He let out a breath. “I’m gonna be honest. I really don’t want you ever doing that again.”

“Did you tell her about me?” Bob asked cautiously. “The doctor?”

“I told her the basics,” he admitted. “I trust her. She’s SHIELD affiliated, but she doesn’t work for them. She works at the U-Gin Genetics Research Lab, based out of South Korea. She only cares about helping people. She doesn’t have any other agenda.”

“She should know the truth about me,” Bob said after a moment. “She should know who it is she’s being asked to help.”

Tony wanted to protest, because he knew Helen wouldn’t care. She would understand, same as
Tony did, that Bob wasn’t responsible for what he had done under Hydra’s control. She would
never withhold her help from someone that had been through as much as he had—if anything, it
would probably motivate her more.

But maybe it was important for Bob to know that, too.

“I’ll send her the files,” he promised.

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When Helen stepped out of the elevator to the med lab floor of Stark Tower, she looked even
worse than Tony did. Tony had finally managed at least a few hours sleep, but she didn’t look like
she’d had any. He could tell she’d been crying, and she looked utterly shaken as she started towards
him.

Behind her, some of Tony’s security guards were carefully carrying in the Cradle. Normally, Helen
would have been micro-managing them, but she didn’t even glance back at them.

“I couldn’t watch them all,” Helen said quietly, when she reached him. “I tried.”

Tony winced, wondering if he should have excluded all of the video files. As it was, he’d only
excluded the one. He thought she should have access to the whole picture, but he wasn’t sharing
the file with his parents with anyone.

“Sorry,” he said. “I promised him I’d send them. He thinks you won’t want to help him once you
know what he’s done. I’m hoping he’s wrong about that.”

“What he’s capable of is terrifying,” she admitted. “But what they did to him was…something I
don’t even have a word for. I knew it would be bad, just from the scans you sent of the arm. But I
had no idea.” She looked over to meet his eyes. “And they’re still torturing him.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. He didn’t think Bob would ever be completely free of what Hydra had done
to him, but he really hoped they could free him at least from this. “You still up for fixing that?”

“Absolutely,” Helen said firmly.

“Okay then,” he said. “Let’s introduce you.”

Bob had come with him down to the medical lab—he’d been anxious and quieter than usual,
shuffling around the lab and helping Tony with the preparations. Once everything was ready, Tony
had started running simulations on his StarkPad and Bob had dropped down on the couch to fiddle
with his own.

He could tell Helen was a little nervous herself about meeting the infamous Winter Soldier, and he
smirked as her apprehension faded into bemusement the moment she caught sight of him. Bob was
wearing the Mjölnir shirt again, with ripped jeans and sneakers, and was laid out on the couch
wearing a pair of Beats headphones. Even with the metal arm, he looked more like a grad student
than he did the terrifying assassin he’d been.

“Is that—” she started, uncertainly.

“Yep,” Tony said. “I’m pretty sure he could kill us all while blindfolded, but it’s still kinda hard to
take him seriously once you’ve seen him in Hulk pajamas gnawing on a Pixy Stix.”

Helen smiled suddenly, brighter than Tony had ever managed to get out of her, and he figured
another one had fallen victim to Bob’s charms. And he hadn’t even said anything yet. Or moved.

“Hey, Bob,” Tony called.

Bob sat up, tugging the headphones down around his neck. Blinking nervously at Helen. Tony was pretty sure he’d been assessing Helen since the moment she came off the elevator, but was playing up the oblivious innocent act he was getting far too good at in order to put her at ease. Bob jumped up and came over to greet her, his StarkPad still in his hand. “Dr. Cho,” he said formally, “it’s nice to meet you.”

She smiled at him, though her attention was instantly caught by the display on his StarkPad. “You’re reading one of my papers,” she said in surprise. “In Korean.”

“Yeah,” Bob said, glancing back at it, smiling shyly. “Pretty sure I’m supposed to be fluent in Korean, but it’s still like you’re speaking in an entirely different language. It’s all a bit over my head.”

“I’d be happy to clarify any points of confusion,” Helen offered at once. “I of course want you to be completely comfortable with the process.”

He frowned slightly, glancing questioningly at Tony before looking back at her. “Did you read the files Tony sent yet?” he asked carefully.

“I couldn’t go through them all,” Helen said, and Bob flinched. “What I mean is—it wasn’t necessary for me to go through them all. I read enough to be entirely confident in my choice to help you. Even if I didn’t owe Tony a favor, I’d be here anyway.”

Bob looked at Tony then, a little exasperated. “Don’t look at me like that,” Tony said. “I probably would have wasted the favor on getting her to come to one of my parties if you hadn’t shown up. This is best for everyone.”

“He really would have,” Helen said, turning back to Bob with a small grin, leaning forward conspiratorially. “But he could have gotten me to go any time if Thor was there. You like him too, I see.”

“Thor?” Bob asked in confusion. “Oh, the Asgardian? Sure, he’s alright.”

Helen’s eyes narrowed a little, and Tony rolled his. “He hasn’t met him,” he explained, before she thought Bob had anything against her precious Thor. “Jarvis just bought him that shirt because he thinks he’s hilarious.”

“Sir, the shirt fit all of your specifications,” Jarvis interrupted primly. “I assure you I had no ulterior motives in requesting its purchase.”

“Uh huh,” Tony said suspiciously. “Anyway, don’t worry, Helen. I’m sure Thor will sweep him off his feet as soon as they meet.”

Helen went a little starry-eyed. “Yes, well, we’re getting side-tracked,” she said. “We should start preparations. We really need to get that arm off of you as soon as possible.”

Bob’s eyes went wide, and he stumbled back a step. “I didn’t—“ he started haltingly. “I sort of figured you wouldn’t want to do it, once you knew. So I haven’t actually…”

“He’s not sure if he wants to do the surgery,” Tony clarified.
Helen narrowed her eyes at him. “Tony—“

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “I sort of sprung it on him after you were already on your way here. But I figured I’d more than make up for it in theoretical research if he decides he wants to do something else.”

He smiled at her, but it didn’t seem to work. Helen had always been surprisingly immune to his own charms, which if he was being honest, was most of the reason he liked her. She held her own against him, and didn’t let him get away with anything. She was basically Pepper with a scalpel. Which was terrifying.

She turned back to Bob. “I will not be performing any type of procedure on someone that doesn’t want it,” Helen said clearly. “I want you to know that what happens is entirely up to you. And if you have any questions at all while you’re making your decision, I will do my best to answer them.”

“Tony said you were going to modify the Cradle to utilize other materials,” he said. “So you’re planning to modify it to print simulated bone using some kind of metal?”

“Yes,” Helen said, grinning widely, obviously impressed. Tony already knew how quick Bob was, so he wandered over to where they’d left the Cradle, and occupied himself reviewing the changes Helen had made to it since the last time he’d worked on it. “And maybe not just the bone. Once we adapt the Cradle to integrate with metal materials in the printing processes, the possibilities will be endless. We could make a stronger, better arm. I’m more than a little irritated with myself that it never occurred to me to try it before.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself,” Tony called to her. “It was your job to figure out how to replicate the messy, fleshy stuff. Me? I like working with metal. We all have our specialties.”

“That is why I value your partnership, Tony,” she said, smiling wryly. “Though I do hope the majority of your contributions may someday be rendered obsolete.”

“That’s the plan,” Tony agreed easily.

“I understand how the integration would work with metal,” Bob started, “but I’m not sure I understand how you’re able to ‘print’ living cells.”

“Printing is a bit of a misnomer, actually,” Helen admitted. “It’s more like a cloning process, really. We use your own cells as a template, and replicate them.”

“It’s like using the clone stamp in Photoshop,” Tony told him.

Bob ignored him, which Tony figured was fair. “So you want to clone my right arm, basically?” he asked.

Helen smiled. “Basically,” she admitted. “Though it’s a little more complex than that. It’s on a much smaller scale—we’re not regrowing the arm, we’re recreating the cells that make it up. It’ll be new, and not an exact copy. You won’t have fingerprints, for example. We’re not quite there yet. But I can do fingernails, and it will be almost indistinguishable from your other hand, at least on the surface.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt anymore?” Bob asked quietly.

“As the Cradle is reproducing your own cells, we’re going to make your advanced healing work for
us instead of against us,” she explained. “By all accounts you aren’t able to regrow bone, so there’s
no reason to suspect the metal skeleton should be rejected. The trouble you’re having now is that
the arm is keeping your skin from healing properly and closing the wounds. That would no longer
be an issue.”

“It’s our best bet,” Tony put in quietly. He didn’t really like that this solution was mostly out of his
hands—but he wasn’t used to dealing with the human body, and he couldn’t think of any way to
attach any of the awesome prosthetic arms he might create. This was the best option they had, but
Bob didn’t look like he wanted to take it.

Bob looked away from both of them. “When would it happen?”

“If you agree,” Helen said, emphasizing the need for his consent, “we should be ready to have the
surgery within the next two days. Knowing Tony, maybe as soon as tomorrow night.”

“It’ll be a cakewalk,” Tony said. “Most of the functionality we need already exists in the Cradle.
We could wire it up to make you an arm out of titanium or adamantium no problem, though the
vibranium that arm of yours is made of is almost priceless. Thought that might be one thing you
might want to keep.”

Bob looked down at his metal hand, closing it to a fist as he watched the panels shift. “Do I have to
decide right now?” he asked quietly.

“No,” Tony said carefully. “But if you don’t want this—then we need to start brainstorming other
options. I don’t want to leave you in pain. I’ll need to track down Bruce, he might—“

“Tony,” Helen chided, carefully stepping between them. “No one is going to rush you,” she
promised. “Not even Tony, you can just ignore him. I do it all the time.”

“Hey,” Tony protested half-heartedly.

“But this will work, I’m sure of it,” she promised, “if this is what you want.”

“Okay, I just—just let me,” Bob started, seeming more uncertain than Tony could remember
seeing him, since that first night.

“Take as long as you need,” Helen said kindly, and Bob took the out she’d given him to slip
quickly past them and right into the elevator.

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Helen reluctantly went to one of his guest suites to get some sleep, after Tony promised not to
touch the Cradle without her supervision—and Jarvis promised to inform her if he tried. They were
planning to start on the modifications in the morning, regardless of Bob’s decision.

Helen was excited for the possible future applications of the technology—Tony really just wanted
to use it for Bob. He should probably leave Bob alone, and let him process everything—but
Tony’d never been any good at sitting by and waiting for things to happen.

He liked to make them happen.

“Jarvis, where is Bob?” Tony asked, when he didn’t find him watching television. “Is he in the
library?”

“He is on the outside landing,” Jarvis said.
Tony froze. Jarvis sounded unconcerned enough, and Bob was entirely allowed to be outside on the landing if he wanted—but it was late, and cold, and Tony doubted he’d bothered with a coat.

So rushing to the doors and throwing himself out onto the landing was completely justified. Bob didn’t even look at him, just kept his eyes on the city. “You said I could come out here,” he said calmly.

“Yeah,” Tony said, watching him cautiously. Bob was sitting on the edge, his feet hanging out over the city. “You mind if I’m here, too?”

Bob shrugged, and Tony dropped down beside him, letting his own legs dangle off the side, too. There was no railing, which had been a stylistic choice that Tony was now regretting. He’d mostly only planned to be out here when wearing a suit that could fly, and he hadn’t expected anyone else to be out here at all.

But Bob was terrifying competent, so he probably wasn’t going to slip and fall.

It didn’t stop Tony worrying, and he wondered briefly if this was how Pepper felt about him all the time.

“Helen’s nice,” Bob said finally.

“Yeah, but that’s not what you’re out here thinking about,” Tony said. “You’re thinking you don’t deserve her help. You’re thinking you should keep the arm you have because you want the pain as a reminder, and because you want to punish yourself.”

“Tony,” Bob sighed.

“Give me another reason, and I’ll leave you alone,” Tony said. “I said it’s your choice, and it is. I just want to make sure you’re making it for the right reasons.”

“It’s not about punishing myself,” Bob insisted. “I don’t want to be in pain. It’s not about that.”

“That’s good,” Tony said, slightly surprised. “You are just, amazingly sane, considering, you know that? I’ll let Helen know—“

“I’m not saying the answer is yes,” Bob interrupted quietly. “That’s just not…I remember waking up, you know, while they were cutting off what was left of my arm.”

“Jesus,” Tony cursed, unable to stop himself. There hadn’t been anything in the files he found about that, or really the initial training—and he used the term loosely—of the Winter Soldier at all, but he didn’t know why he continued to be surprised by them at this point. “I had no idea.”

“The next time I woke up, I had this,” Bob said, laying his left hand across his lap, palm up. He flexed his fingers. “It hurt like it was real, and I could feel pressure. It was part of me. I didn’t ask for it, and I didn’t want it, but it was part of me. I guess I became dependent on it, even if part of me hated it.”

“Sounds like an abusive relationship,” Tony pointed out.

“You think I’m in an abusive relationship with my hand?” Bob asked, raising an eyebrow. “Well, I suppose there’s some truth to it.”

“You have a dirty mind, Bob,” Tony said, grinning.
Bob laughed, but looked back out at the skyline. “I don’t think I’m explaining it right,” he said. “I
know it’s hurting me, but it just…I guess I just don’t know what I’ll be, without it.”

“It won’t change who you are,” Tony promised. “This isn’t like what they did. This isn’t about
hurting you or making you a weapon, it’s about trying to help you heal.” He paused for a moment.
“But we do have some other ideas, a few modifications we can make so you can keep your current
arm. It would require surgeries every few weeks, at least until we—“

Bob shook his head. “I would never ask you to do that, and I’m definitely not signing up for more
surgeries than absolutely necessary,” he said wryly.

Tony forced himself not to say anything else. He wanted to give another speech, he wanted Bob to
agree to let them help him—but Helen had already reminded him of the pressure he was putting on
Bob to do what he wanted. He didn’t mean to, but the thought of that arm ripping him apart just to
stay functional was driving him crazy.

Tony wanted to fix it.

But Bob had to want him to fix it, too.

“Whatever you want,” Tony said, instead of all the things he wanted to say. “We’ll work something
out, you just have to tell me. It’s your choice.”

“I don’t want anything of theirs,” Bob said after a moment, and looked back at Tony, his gaze
steady and sure. “I want it gone. That’s my choice.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this one, you guys! And also that it is shorter than usual. I’ve been fighting something off the last week or so and haven’t been able to work on it much, so I decided to just put up what I have instead of waiting until I finished everything planned for this chapter. Luckily, that means I now have a head start on the next chapter! I’m still not feeling great, but will try to have the rest of this mini arc finished out by next weekend—then I get to have a quick detour back into fluff territory before finally having the big identity reveal!

Bob spent the next two days with them in the medical lab, observing quietly for the most part, though he’d ask a question every once and awhile that would make Helen light up like he’d only ever seen her do that one time she met Thor. She answered his questions with far more patience that she’d ever answered his.

But Tony was absolutely not jealous. Bob definitely preferred mechanics to medicine, anyway—and him to Helen. Probably. Whatever. The point was he was not jealous.

“I’m not jealous,” he insisted.

Helen smirked at him, and it was unbecoming of her. “Tony, you have been frowning at me for the last hour,” she told him.

Bob had offered to go make them all something to eat—which meant he was pretty sure they were going to end up with some variation of Fruit Loops or peanut butter sandwiches—and Helen had taken the opportunity to imply that he might actually be jealous. Of her. Ha.

She was just lucky she was irreplaceable.

“I’m anxious,” Tony said. “This is anxiousness. I can see why you’re having trouble recognizing it, it’s very uncommon for me.”

Her lips stayed tilted up. “Okay,” she said. “He’s far more interested in integrating the Cradle with your metals than he is with the Cradle itself, just so you know. I don’t think I’ll be stealing him away from you.”

“He’s a person. He can’t be stolen,” Tony said tightly, the thought triggering memories of Bob’s first night.

Have I been traded or stolen?

Helen’s smile slipped. “That’s not what I meant,” she said.

“I know,” Tony said, sighing as he ran a hand down his face. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve never seen you like this, Tony,” she said in concern, the teasing tone she had been using earlier had disappeared completely. As irritating as it had been, Tony missed it the moment it was gone, because he didn’t want to have this conversation for real. “Do you—”

Tony was saved by Bob’s timely reappearance, as Helen snapped her mouth shut the moment he
stepped out of the elevator. He had a serving tray Tony had no idea he even owned, and he dropped it onto one of the tables. Tony leaned over, and there were three plates with peanut butter sandwiches.

“Really?” he sighed, “again?”

“You like peanut butter,” Bob told him.

“I do,” Tony agreed. “I’m just liking it a little less now that we’re having it every single day. Once we fix your arm, I’m taking you out to a proper dinner.” Bob opened his mouth excitedly, and Tony quickly cut him off. “Not Kathy’s Diner, either!”

“But you liked it there, too,” Bob said.

“Variety is the spice of life,” Tony told him.

Helen just watched them with a slight grin. “Speaking of going out to eat,” she said cautiously, “I invited Pepper out to lunch while I’m here, I didn’t say anything, but she was concerned why I came to New York so suddenly. She does know about Bob, doesn’t she?”

Tony paused in picking at his sandwich, looking up at her with horror as he read between the lines—because he hadn’t actually told Pepper about the problems with Bob’s arm, but Pepper was Pepper, so she would know he didn’t invite Helen over to hang out just to watch Pixar with him and Bob. “I knew I was forgetting something,” he said, before jumping up and heading to the table by the elevator.

He’d left his phone there with instructions to Jarvis that he wasn’t to be disturbed unless it was an emergency—and there were twelve missed calls from Pepper. He definitely should have set a parameters to alert him to that.

“Shit,” he muttered, before quickly calling her back. “Pepper, my light, my tulip—“

“Tony, finally, what—” Pepper started, and then faltered. “Did you just call me your tulip?”

"It's a perfectly acceptable form of address," Tony said.

"Don't change the subject!” Pepper cried.

“I didn’t!” he protested. “You—“

“I know something’s going on,” Pepper said. “You can’t keep hiding things from me, Tony. I can’t take it anymore. You wouldn’t have invited Helen down on this short notice unless it was something serious. Are you okay? Is Bob?”

“I’m fine,” Tony said quickly. “I was going to tell you. I just...got distracted. You know me when I’m working on a problem.”

Pepper sucked in a breath. “What’s wrong with Bob?” she demanded.

“Bob’s fine, too,” Tony said quickly. “Really. It’s just—“

“You haven’t been concerned with anything but Bob for weeks,” Pepper said. “If Helen’s not here for you, she’s here for him. I need you to tell me what’s going on.”

“I resent that,” Tony told her. “I’ve been working on other stuff. I’ve actually accomplished a lot. I’m also investigating S H I E L D, you know, just in all my spare downtime. And I invented a toaster
that burns little Cylons onto the bread.”

“Those already existed, you didn’t invent them. And anyway, you built that for Bob, because he’s the only one that will watch that show with you,” she pointed out.

“That’s besides the point,” Tony said defensively.

“Tony, you’re stalling,” Pepper said impatiently, before pausing to take a tired breath. “Is he alright?”

“He’s fine, really,” Tony assured her. “I mean, as fine as he was, anyway. There’s just a bit of an issue with the arm.”

“What kind of issue?” she demanded.

Tony wasn’t quite sure how to describe the horror that was the arm, because it spoke to the kind of treatment that Bob had faced for so many years. He’d so far managed to keep the worst of it from Pepper, though he knew she was smart enough to have filled in all the blanks. “It’s hurting him,” he finally said. “We’re going to make it stop.”

“Why didn’t you let me know what’s going on?” she asked. “I care about him, too, Tony.”

“I know, and that’s why. I didn’t want you to panic,” Tony said.

“I am not panicking,” Pepper snapped. “This is a perfectly reasonable reaction, and one that could have been avoided if you’d just told me yourself.”

“I did tell you myself,” he pointed out, and then she hung up on him with an angry mutter, which he figured was fair.

He walked back into the room and Bob raised an eyebrow at him. “How’s Pepper?” he asked.

“We’re getting you a phone,” Tony told him. “That way she won’t just be mad at me anymore when I forget to tell her things.”

Bob grinned. “Really?” he asked.

Tony was caught off guard by his excitement, and then cursed to himself for not thinking of it sooner. Pepper had warned him constantly about the consequences of keeping Bob too isolated here—but the urge to keep him protected was pretty hard to fight against. He had to find some kind of balance.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ll get me, Pepper and Helen all programmed in. And hey, I just got Luke a Starkphone, so him too.”

Bob grinned at him brightly, and Tony valiantly managed not to melt, but couldn’t quite resist grinning back.

“Ahem,” Jarvis said. “Sir, you seem to be forgetting someone.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Calm down, you know you’ll be number one on his speed dial,” he promised. “You’ll come built in.”

“I should hope so, Sir,” Jarvis said snidely.

“I swear you never used to be such a drama queen,” Tony told him, glancing at over at Bob. “Is
Bob just laughed and Helen smiled over at them both. “I hate to interrupt,” she said, “but we’re ready for the test.”

She stepped past them and back over to the Cradle. “For you,” she addressed Bob, “the Cradle will run on two programs, basically—one using the metal to create the bone structure, and another to replicate your own living cells and print the flesh around it. But for now, we’re just going to run the secondary program, to make sure the integration to utilize a metal alloy was successful.”

Tony reached out and grabbed a canister full of titanium. “We’re going to test with titanium,” he added. “But I’d still like to use vibranium for yours. It’s got all the benefits without some of the downsides. Vibranium is also a hell of a lot lighter, though you’re going to be in for an adjustment either way, as going from a full metal arm to a partial metal arm is going to throw off your equilibrium.”

“Right,” Bob agreed, biting his lip as he leaned across the table, watching Tony hook up the canister to the cradle. “It only took me a couple days to get used to the arm though, I should be fine.”

“You remember that?” Tony asked curiously, glancing back at him.

Bob went still, glancing away like he hadn’t meant to reveal that. “Some. Flashes,” he said. “It wasn’t—they’re not good memories, but I remember it wasn’t much an adjustment. That was one of the easier things.”

“Well, this should be even easier.” Helen promised, as she glanced at her readings, then started the sequence. “It should take about an hour to create the metal skeleton. So, if you boys don’t mind, I’m going to go try and get some sleep. Let me know if something goes wrong, otherwise I’ll be back in a couple hours to go over the logs.”

“Aye, aye,” Tony told her, tossing a salute as she spun to leave with a roll of her eyes.

There wasn’t much for Tony or Bob to do, either, honestly. They could probably have used some sleep, too. But Bob just laid his metal hand across the glass surface of the closed Cradle, and rested his forehead against it to stare down inside. Bob could be weirdly patient and still, Tony had noticed, when he wasn’t on a sugar high.

Tony dropped back down onto one of the stools, reaching out to pick at the sandwich. Then he paced over to check the progress, then spun on his heel and went over the monitoring logs. He continually asked Jarvis for updates: as I said three minutes ago, Sir, everything is still running on schedule.

And still Bob didn’t move.

“Oh, seriously, you’re starting to freak me out,” Tony told him. “Is this your way of telling me you want to get into performance art? Maybe dress up like the Statue of Liberty and stand in Central Park?”

“I’m observing,” Bob told him calmly. “This is incredible.”

“Well, yeah,” Tony said, moving back over to glance down. It had recreated the shoulder and the arm down to the elbow, all spun into existence with gleaming titanium. It was kind of beautiful. And freaky.
But mostly beautiful.

“But it’s *taking forever,*” Tony pointed out. “I probably should have just built you a skeleton, but Helen pointed out that it would be harder to attached if not seamlessly generated right around the bone, and I really didn’t want to have to use another damn shunt—“

Bob smirked, but didn’t move his eyes from Cradle. “You don’t have to stay, Tony,” he told him. “I’ll keep an eye on it.”

It was a great out. Tony could run off and get absorbed in something so he wouldn’t have to stop long enough to think too much—but it felt too much like he’d be abandoning him, even though this was just the test run. “I’m fine,” Tony said, getting a sudden idea. He snapped his fingers. “Actually, I’ve got an idea on how to make it faster—“

Bob just snorted as Tony picked up his tablet, running some further simulations. Tony wouldn’t risk any further changes to the Cradle before Bob’s surgery the next day, but it would be good for the future. He was pretty sure he could speed up the process by at least twenty percent.

He got distracted enough by the work that Bob’s eerie stillness stopped weirding him out.

“Tony!” Bob called, after he’d been working for awhile. “I think it’s finished.”

Tony set aside the tablet and rushed next to him, watching the last finishing touches glance across the metal fingertips before the Cradle beeped. He reached over to hit the release, opening the glass canopy. He and Bob leaned over to look at it.

“How can I touch it?” Bob asked.

“Sure,” Tony said. “It’s basically useless, just a prototype. You can keep it if you want, in case you ever need an extra hand.”

Bob just looked over at him, somehow managing the look with Pepper-levels of long-suffering despite their much shorter acquaintance.

“I had to say it,” Tony defended himself. “Also, remind me that we need to watch Toy Story.”

Bob turned back to the arm, before reaching out hesitantly, running the fingers of his flesh hand along the smooth lines of the robotic skeleton. “It’s amazing, Tony,” he said.

“It’s just a skeleton, doesn’t even have a power source, cause *you’re* gonna be the power source,” Tony told him. “You and Helen have got the hard part, this thing can’t do anything on its own.”

Bob’s lips quirked. “Just because it can’t recite Shakespeare on command or walk on its own doesn’t mean it isn’t still incredible,” he said, glancing up at him. “Everything you make is amazing.”

“Even my oatmeal?” Tony asked lightly.

“Especially that,” Bob said, grinning back at him.

“Well, you’re certainly doing wonders for my ego,” Tony told him. “But then, I’ve been told it doesn’t need the help.”

“Whoever told you that must not know you very well,” Bob said quietly, before looking back at him with another soft smile.
Tony thought he might actually be blushing, for probably the first time in twenty years. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, well, I’m not exactly known for being humble,” he admitted.

“So you know how your brilliant you are, but you’re right about being brilliant, what’s wrong with that?” Bob asked. “You should be confident. I think Helen’s just as confident in her work as you are in yours. It’s sort of a side-effect of being good at something, isn’t it?”

“I guess I haven’t thought of it like that,” Tony said. “But to be fair, my overconfidence has gotten me into trouble. Probably shouldn’t go around inviting anymore terrorists to come make house calls, for example.”

“You brought me here,” Bob pointed out.

“You’re not a terrorist,” Tony said simply. “You were a prisoner. Different ballgame, trust me. Anyway, that’s enough about me, we’ve got to check this processed correctly.”

Tony pulled out the arm, carefully testing the dexterity of the fingers and the joints. “Seems good,” he said, humming speculatively. “What do you think of the look? I mean, not that it’s gonna be visible, but still. You want to look nice for your X-Rays.”

Bob snorted, and leaned closer. “It looks great. Can’t we just use this one? We don’t need to use the vibranium, do we? I mean—”

“Yeah, about that,” Tony said wryly, turning to pull another canister from the cabinet. He set it between them, and Bob frowned at it. “You said you didn’t want anything of theirs. So I made a deal with King T’Chaka of Wakanda. I’d give him the Hydra arm, if he’d give me enough vibranium to build you a new one. They were curious how Hydra got their hands on it in the first place, and wanted to study it, so they took the deal.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Bob said. “I know you were planning to keep some of the parts to study yourself.”

“Trust me,” Tony said, flashing him a grin. “I got the better end of the deal. And don’t worry—I just told them that I found an advanced prosthetic arm in a Hydra facility, and I’d trade it. I didn’t tell them anything about the person I found attached to it.”

“You don’t trust them?” Bob asked quietly. “You don’t even know who I am.

“I don’t trust anyone,” Tony said. “Well, I mean, that sounds dramatic, and also it’s not entirely true. I trust Pepper and Rhodey. And Jarvis, so zip it, buddy, I didn’t forget you.” He paused, watching Bob. “And now there’s you.”

“Me?” Bob asked in surprise.

“Yeah, I mean, I wouldn’t trust you not to eat all the Pixy Stix,” Tony said wryly, grinning over at him. “But I trust you.”

“How can you?” Bob asked quietly. “You don’t even know who I am. I don’t even know who I am.”

“Yeah, you know, it’s sort of like nature versus nurture,” Tony said. “It’s the argument of whether it’s more important how you’re born, or how you’re raised. I mean, that’s a simplification, but basically I’ve always thought, there’s something inside of us, right from the start. Strip everything away, and it’s gotta still be there.”
“And what do you think I’ve got in me?” Bob asked.

“Something so good they couldn’t erase it, not completely,” Tony said. “Something so strong you took the first chance you had to get away from them, even with everything they’d done, even with everything you had to know they’d do if you were caught. Because you knew I was Hydra’s enemy almost from the start, you’re too smart not to have known, even barely conscious. And we both know you could have killed me, the moment I took off my suit. Maybe even before. So the truth is, I didn’t save you. You saved yourself.”

“I’m not—” Bob broke off, looking sad. “What if I’m not who you think I am?”

“Well, think on this,” Tony told him. “Who you are doesn’t necessarily depend on who you were. I don’t know what we might find out about your past, I can’t make promises you were some decorated soldier, even though from what I’ve seen, it’d be my guess. But who you are? I’ve already seen it. So you’re not going to disappoint me, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You’re wrong, you know,” Bob told him, glancing back up at him with those large too-earnest eyes as he pushed back from the table. “You did save me, and you keep doing it all the time.”

Tony swallowed hard, and couldn’t think of a thing to say to that. Speechless—he was actually speechless.

Rhodey could never know.

Bob just smiled then, soft and shy, and turned to head for the elevator. Tony was still searching for something to say by the time he was gone.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the slow updates lately! Work stress and feeling ill has been making it hard to sit down and write (and this was an especially difficult chapter). I can’t promise regular updates for the moment, but the plan is still to shoot for every weekend!

Somehow, Tony was more nervous than Bob.

Bob just laid down on the operating table with scrub pants and no shirt, calmly letting Helen hook him up to the IV, apparently entirely unconcerned with the whole thing.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Tony asked again. He was pretty sure he didn’t imagine Helen rolling her eyes.

“I’m fine,” Bob said. “You told me it wouldn’t hurt.”

“What? No, of course it won’t,” Tony said. “She’s giving you the good stuff, she designed it specifically for super-soldiers. You won’t feel a thing.”

“Why do you call me a super-soldier?” Bob frowned, adjusting his arm as he glanced back at down the IV.

“Um, because you’re a soldier with super powers? I don’t know, I mean, I didn’t come up with the name,” Tony said, leaning over him. He watched him with concern. “You’re sure?”

“I’m fine,” he said stiffly. “I just want to be done.”

“Well, we’re ready,” Helen offered quietly. “Whenever you are.”

Tony quickly stepped out of the way, and Bob nodded to Helen. “I’m ready,” Bob said.

She released the sedative into the IV line, and then stepped up beside him. “Can you count back down for me from one hundred?” she asked.

He began counting, and didn’t get pulled under until he was all the way down to forty-three. Helen checked the readings in concern. “That took longer than I thought,” she said worriedly. “He may be more resistant to drugs than Captain Rogers.”

“Should of thought of that,” Tony said, frustrated with himself. “They’ve been drugging him since the sixties at least, he’s probably built up a drug resistance to everything under the sun.”

“Well, we’re going to need to move quick,” she told him.

“You sure you’re okay to do this without a nurse?” Tony said her.

“Who said I’m doing it without a nurse?” she asked. “Why do you think I had you scrub up?”

“You’re kidding,” he said, eyes widening.
“You’re the one that didn’t want to involve anyone else,” she reminded him, before looking up to meet his eyes. “This is delicate work, but it requires an engineer just as much as it requires a surgeon. So you handle the hardware, I’ll handle the…software.”

“Cute,” he told her, before glancing down at the metal arm. “You want me to remove it? I thought I was just going to walk you through it.”

“That was before I realized how resistant he was to the anesthesia,” Helen told him. “I need to keep an eye on his vitals. Tony, you’re the best one to handle this part of the surgery. I’ll take over as soon as you get it detached.”

“Right,” Tony said, taking a deep breath. He and Helen had gone over the plan countless times, it was just that she’d always been the one in the driver’s seat. The plan had basically been to retract the blades and screws that Bob had tightened, and then detach the arm. The pins that had been placed through the bones and skin would need to be more delicately removed by Helen, but this part was fairly simple in theory.

It really was more suited for an engineer than a doctor, and it wasn’t like Tony would trust it to another engineer.

“You sure he’s out?” Tony said nervously, as he pressed the sequence on the shoulder panel of the arm to open it. It was just as brutal in person as it has been in the holographic scans—he could see the blades buried in the skin around the shunt, and the edges of the screws that had tightened the panels straight through the skin at his shoulder.

“Yes, for now,” Helen said. “I’m monitoring him closely. Detach the arm, and we’ll switch.”

“You know I can have Jarvis monitor his vitals,” Tony reminded her. “You could definitely be doing this part. Why do I have a feeling you were always going to spring this on me?”

“You know how the arm works better than I do, and you work better under pressure,” she told him. “Now stop complaining, and get it done.”

Tony put an x-ray display of the arm on the monitor beside him, and then carefully start working the valve in the opposite direction. He could see the blades retracting on the computer screen, slicing backwards through already healed skin, breaking it open once again. It was horrifying, but he forced himself to ignore it and focus on the mechanics of the arm instead—the screws slowly pushed out, causing the panels on the outer edge to pop up away from his skin, and the blades around the shunt going up into his arm all pulled loose.

He carefully disengaged the delicate connections coming out from the shunt into the workings of the arm, then pulled the arm free, leaving behind a number of steel pins and the shunt. Tony stumbled back away from the table, setting the arm on the counter, trying to still his suddenly shaking hands. “Jesus,” he said. “Those bastards.” He was not the squeamish sort, but that had been one of the more horrible things he’d ever had to do.

And Bob had done it to himself.

“Breathe, Tony,” Helen told him calmly, as she moved to take his place. “That was the hard part.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” he said, sucking in a breath. “He didn’t feel that, right? It’s not gonna…it’s not gonna hurt, when he wakes up?”

“The Cradle will heal him,” she promised, before glancing at the monitors in concern. “Jarvis, monitor his vitals please. He’s definitely burning through the anesthesia quicker than I expected.”
“Monitoring,” Jarvis responded immediately.

“What do you need me to do?” Tony asked.

“I need you to stop talking,” Helen told him calmly, and got to work. She painstakingly removed each of the pins that had been driven through skin and bone to anchor his arm, and then she began operating on his amputated arm, to remove the shunt and the wiring that had been tapped into his nervous system.

This was the longest part, even longer than the cradle would take to build Bob a new arm. Helen was carefully focused the entire time, reminding Tony of himself when he was working on one of his suits. He kept himself against the back wall, checking in with Jarvis on his tablet instead of through verbal commands so he wouldn’t disturb her.

When she was finally done, Bob looked like he’d just lost his arm—removing the shunt had left it open and unhealed. The wound looked terrible, but Helen couldn’t close because the cradle would need to graft the new metal skeleton directly on the bone.

“We need to move him to the Cradle,” Helen said, “I’ve administered more sedative. I think I have a handle on it, should keep him out through the regenerative procedure.”

“Should?” Tony asked worriedly. Helen was removing the IV, as the closed environment of the Cradle couldn’t support an IV line. It meant there wasn’t a way to administer more, either.

“I’ve given him almost twice the dose I would have given Rogers,” she admitted. “It’s as much as is safe, but we’ll need Jarvis to continue monitoring his vitals closely.”

Tony and Helen each lifted a side of the flat stretcher beneath Bob, and then carefully set it in the open Cradle beside it. Luckily he was a lot lighter without the metal arm, or Tony might have needed to get in his suit.

Helen closed the lid, and started up the program. “Now it’s up the Cradle,” she said, “Jarvis, can you please monitor both the program and Bob’s vitals?”

“Oh course, Ms. Cho,” Jarvis said. “I was already planning to do so.”

Helen raised an eyebrow and Tony shrugged. “He’s proactive,” he said. “Jarvis also has a soft spot for Bob.”

“It’s rare to meet someone that appreciates me properly, Sir,” Jarvis told him primly.

“I appreciate you, Jarvis,” Helen assured him, smiling fondly.

Tony ignored their banter as he leaned over the glass Cradle. The vibranium arm had already started getting built, and he could see the newly built metal bones trailing out from his shoulder.

“Status,” he said quickly.

“Everything is working within acceptable parameters,” Jarvis assured him. “Bob’s vitals are well within his normal range.”

“Tony—“ Helen started, narrowing her eyes.

“Who had the bright idea of calling it a Cradle, anyway?” he interrupted quickly. “You bring in a patient, and what, you ask them, please step into the cradle, sir—“
“It’s meant to be comforting, and symbolic of rebirth,” Helen said easily, letting him distract her. “I’ve been told I need to be more aware of my bedside manner, so I thought this might put people at ease.”

“Helen, you know how much I adore you—“ Tony began.

She snorted, not bothering to look up as she continued at the controls.

“—but you have the worst bedside manner of any doctor I know,” he continued. “And I know Stephen Strange.”

“I think I’ve been very good with Bob,” she pointed out.

“So I just bring out the worst in you, huh?” Tony asked wryly.

“You bring out my competitive spirit,” she said slyly, "for which I will always be grateful to you.”

Tony laughed, though he was still too nerved up for it to be genuine. “What about calling it the Pandorica?” he suggested.

“That was a prison, Tony,” she said. “How is that better than calling it a Cradle?”

“It sounds cooler,” he pointed out, anxiously tapping his fingers along the counter.

Helen paused, glancing up at him with a furrowed brow. “He will be fine,” she assured him. “There’s no possibility of deterioration. The cradle’s nano-molecular functionality is entirely instantaneous. His cells don’t even know that they’re bonding with simulacra.”

“You’ve never tested it on someone like him,” he told her, because as much as he appreciated her confidence, he’d learned a long time ago to stop trusting guarantees.

Helena finally stopped her obsessive checking of the controls, and glanced up. “True, but I do have some experience with Captain Rogers,” she reminded him. “And the Captain’s cells aren’t exactly different, they’re just more resilient. From what I can tell, Bob’s are the same. It should just make the process go faster, if anything.”

“Right, yeah, I know,” Tony said impatiently, because he’d read all about the Cradle, and he knew exactly how it worked. Biology wasn’t his speciality, but that didn’t mean he didn’t still understand it better than most medical doctors.

“You must care for him a great deal,” she said.

“What? I didn’t—“ Tony started.

“You ramble when you are nervous,” Helen said.

“I always ramble,” Tony protested.

“There is a different quality to it at the moment,” she said, not unkindly, and sighed. “There really is no reason for concern—“

“See, you say that like you’ve done this before, but you haven’t,” Tony said. “No one has. The most you’ve done is some skin grafts and wound repairs. We’re literally trying to regrow a limb, here. I think I’m supposed to be nervous. Why aren’t you?”

“Because I have faith in the Cradle and in my work and yours,” she said. “I wouldn’t have come
here to do this if I did not know that it would work.” She looked up at him shrewdly. “Usually you have just as much confidence in your own work.”

“I do,” Tony insisted. “It’s gonna work. Of course it’s gonna work.”

Helen watched him closely for a moment, before folding her arms and leaning back against the counter. “We never did get to finish our conversation,” she said.

He looked up at her disbelievingly. “You want to do this now?”

“You like him,” Helen said, probingly.

Tony snorted and stepped back from the Cradle. “Well, yeah,” he said. “You think I’d call in my favor with you for just anyone?”

“I would have done this one without it, and you probably knew that,” Helen said, quietly glancing back at Bob. “Whoever did this to him…they weren’t doctors, they were butchers.”

“Yeah, but they were brilliant butchers,” Tony said, glancing over at her. “It’s horrifying, but it’s brilliant. Let’s not pretend it’s not.”

“Hmph,” Helen said. “Not as brilliant as us.”

“Well, who is?” he asked with a grin.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’re still avoiding my question,” she added.

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t actually ask a question,” he told her.

She frowned, as she thought back. “Well, yeah, okay,” she agreed. “But only because I already know the answer. You have a crush.”

Tony distracted himself with checking on Bob again. “It’s not a crush,” he said, “don’t be ridiculous. Anyway, it’s entirely inappropriate.”

“How so?” Helen asked, glancing up at him with a frown.

“It’s barely been a month, and he’d been a prisoner for what, decades?” he said. “I’m responsible for him.”

“You shouldn’t rush into anything,” Helen agreed. “He’s got a lot to heal from, but so do you.” She held up a hand when he started to protest. “My point is, there isn’t a test you have to pass to enter a relationship, or we’d probably all fail it.”

“You really aren’t a glass half full type of person, are you?” he asked wryly.

Helen smiled wryly. “Bob has proven he can say no to you,” she said. “He had no problem meeting or interacting with me. Honestly, his social skills seem healthier than yours—”

“Hey!” he protested.

“And while yes, I suspect that some of that is a front,” she said, “we all have them. For instance, most people think I’m sweet.”

“I’ll never figure out how you pulled that one off,” Tony smirked, before glancing away with a sigh. “So what are you suggesting I do, actually? Because the whole ‘we’re all messed up’ attitude
“Not really,” she laughed. “All I’m saying is, if it happens maybe let it happen? I’ve seen the way
he looks at you, Tony. He adores you, but he’s not afraid to tease you. He’s not afraid to tell you
what he wants. He seems perfectly rational to me.”

“Yeah, but…” Tony trailed off. “I have to find out who he was, first.”

“Does it matter?” Helen asked, giving him a disapproving look.

“Not to me,” Tony said, as he ran a hand through his hair. “It matters to him.”

“Maybe it’s more important he finds out who he is now,” Helen said, glancing over at him. “Is he
in danger if you take him out of the tower?”

“I don’t think so,” Tony said. “There must still be people in Hydra that know about him, but they
most likely think he’s dead. And without the metal arm, he should be pretty unrecognizable. I’ve
got him a new identity, paperwork’s all set up. He might actually be safer at this point if I do get
him established in the public.”

Helen smiled. “That sounds like a good place to start, don’t you think?”

“That’s it, you’re my new therapist,” Tony told her. “Bruce will be crushed, of course, but I’m sure
he’ll get over it.”

“Tempting offer, but I’ll leave you to the experts,” she said. “Seems like it would be a full time
job.”

Tony laughed, and wandered back to check on the Cradle’s progress. It had already started
replicating the flesh. His arm was healed just below the elbow, the metal skeleton already
complete. It was a little disturbing to look at the arm half finished, so he pulled up some of his new
suit schematics on his laptop to try and distract himself.

He kept track of Jarvis and Helen's updates while he worked, but everything was going perfectly
right up until it wasn’t: “Sir,” Jarvis said, his voice strained, “Bob’s vitals indicate he’s waking up
—“

Tony had barely managed to spin around and a fist was crashing up through the glass lid of the
Cradle. Bob scrambled out through it, crashing to the ground on his knees before pushing himself
weakly to his feet and backing up into the corner. His eyes were wild, and they’d have to deal with
that, but first Tony quickly glanced down to check his arm.

Thankfully it looked whole—the fingers of his left hand looked a little raw and pink, and he had
cuts on his palm and knuckles from the glass, but otherwise it now looked like a mirror image of
his right.

Except for the shard of glass that he was holding like a weapon.

Tony intercepted Helen when she started forward, keeping her behind him and as he held his hands
me? Do you know who I am?”

Bob’s eyes still looked haunted and far away, but they stilled long enough to meet his. “You’re
Tony,” he said, and his voice sounded rough. He looked down at his hand, at the shard of glass
that he was holding. “Did I hurt anyone?”
“No,” Tony promised quickly.

Bob glanced back at the Cradle, his eyes clearing as he seemed to realize where he was. “I thought I was back in Cyro,” he admitted.

“You want to drop the glass, maybe?” Tony asked casually, as he took a cautious step forward.

Bob looked down at it, then opened his palm, letting it fall to the ground. He lifted his hand in disbelief when he did, staring at the bloodied left palm. He closed his fingers, and then opened then again, watching with wonder.

“Yeah, pretty neat, huh?” Tony said, taking another step closer. “At least we know your arm’s in full working order. That glass was bulletproof, and you went through it like it was crepe paper.”

“I broke your machine,” Bob said worriedly, glancing back at him and Helen.

“Nothing that can’t be fixed,” Tony promised. “Can you let us look at your arm? The program stopped a little early. Does it hurt?”

“No,” Bob said, his voice a little disbelievingly. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“Okay, good, that’s good,” Tony said.

“No, you don’t understand,” Bob said, looking up with wide eyes. “It doesn’t hurt. It always hurts.”

“Can I touch you?” Tony asked carefully, stepping forward again only once he’d received Bob’s shaky nod. He led him back to the table, and Helen took that as a cue to approach.

“May I check your arm?” she asked gently.

“Yes,” he said softly, still staring at in disbelief.

Helen gently took his hand, running her fingers across the joints to check for responsiveness and mobility. Tony took the time to look back at Bob. Scars still trailed out from his shoulder in a half circle, like the rays of a child’s drawing of a sun. It was oddly beautiful and fitting—or maybe Tony was just so gone on Bob that even his imperfections seemed beautiful.

And when the hell did that even happen? he wondered.

“You have some cuts from the glass, but they should heal on their own,” Helen told him, before letting him go, watching his arm with a tinge of awe. “How does it feel?”

“Weird,” Bob said honestly. “I feel lighter, and just…”

He trailed off, and Helen didn’t press it. “And how about mobility? Is it doing what you tell it to? Any delays?”

He turned his hand up, before closing it into a fist. “It’s working the same as my metal arm did,” he said.

Helen gave him a bright grin. “Then I think we can call this a success,” she said. “I’ll have Jarvis continue monitoring, and if you have any pain or any trouble using the arm, let him know right away to call me. You’ll have to be gentle with it for awhile, let it heal. So maybe don’t go crashing through anymore glass.”

“I’ll try to restrain myself,” Bob promised wryly, before his gaze softened. “Thank you, for
helping me.”

“It’s been my pleasure,” Helen assured him. “I need to go check in back home, please call me immediately if anything happens.”

She smiled as she slipped out towards the elevator, and Tony inched closer in her place. “Can I—?” he started hesitantly.

Bob just rolled his eyes and reached out to grab Tony’s hand, threading their fingers, and letting out a delighted laugh as he felt their palms touched.

“I can feel that,” Bob said reverently.

Tony felt himself grinning back helplessly, amazed himself at the feeling of his hand. The only noticeable difference was that the hand was smooth, missing distinctive palm lines and fingerprints, and without the normal marks and wrinkles for someone Bob’s age.

“Thank you,” Bob said softly, tugging a little at Tony’s hand to get his attention.

“I’m just footing the bill,” Tony shrugged. “Helen did the heavy lifting.”

Bob watched him strangely for a moment, like he was trying to figure something out. “I already thanked her,” he said. “Now I’m thanking you.”

“Right,” Tony said awkwardly, reaching up with his free hand to scratch behind his ear. “Uh, you’re welcome?”

“That is generally the accepted response,” Bob agreed with a laugh, as he pulled his hand free. “Better get used to it, Tony.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Tony promised, giving a small grin.

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Helen was barely able to stay and have dinner with them before she had to board a flight back to Korea—but Bob had a Starkphone now, and her number was programmed in. He’d promised to keep her updated with any issues with his arm, but from the sound of it Tony half-suspected Helen just wanted to keep in touch with him.

Bob for his part seemed lighter, the constant worry lines in his forehead smoothed suddenly away and making him looking years younger. Helen had explained that he was running high on endorphins, as his body suddenly tried to adjust to existing without constant pain.

Tony wasn’t going to complain, he was thrilled that Bob wasn’t in pain…it was just that apparently Bob was morning person. A perky morning person.

Deadly assassins he could handle—morning people were an affront to nature.

But there was no other explanation for why Bob was bouncing around the kitchen in sweat drenched workout clothes when Tony’d just barely managed to roll out of bed.

Bob smiled when he saw him, and leaned across the counter, pushing a cup of coffee towards him. Tony just gaped at him. He was wearing running shoes and a tank top and shorts. The shirt said: Run Like Thor is at the Finish Line. Tony was going to strip Jarvis’s programming to shreds.

“Did you know you have a whole floor that’s just a gym?” Bob asked him happily.
“Yes,” he answered slowly. “Because I built it.”

“Oh, right,” Bob said, his perkiness apparently unfazed. “Well, Jarvis showed me. I ran the track! Helen thought I might have trouble with my balance, but running doesn’t hurt anymore and I didn’t even tip over, so I think I’m good.”

Tony sat down at the counter, desperately clutching the proffered coffee. “How long have you even been up?” he asked in disbelief.

“I’ve been up since four thirty,” Bob said, like that was normal—and okay, it’s not like Tony has a healthy relationship with sleep, but while he might stay up until four thirty, he wouldn’t wake up at four thirty. He wasn’t insane.

“Remember when we just used to lay around on the couch and go into sugar comas?” Tony asked him. “Those were good times.”

“We can do that later, if you want,” Bob said, and then grinned at him like the goddamn sun.

Christ. Helen was right, he had a crush. He hadn’t had a crush since the third grade when Amy Masters beat his score on a test. Pepper didn’t really count, she just sort of snuck in under his radar and he woke up one day and realized he loved her. There’d never really been the awkward in-between step.

Bob was something else: he made him uncertain, and Tony was certain of everything. He certainly knew that this was a terrible idea, and that his traitorous mind had better stop falling for the super soldier. Tony could think of all the reasons that it was a bad idea. They both needed therapy for years. Bob technically killed his parents, which would make telling their ‘how we met’ story at the Christmas parties all kinds of awkward. Also, Bob was a morning person.

Tony shook his head to himself. He knew the only reason that really mattered was number four: he couldn’t initiate anything more than friendship before he was sure Bob was recovered enough to actually consent to it.

Decided, Tony finally looked up from glaring at his coffee to find Bob frowning at him.

“Are you okay?” Bob asked worriedly.


“In that case,” Bob drawled, “I do remember promises of taking me out to dinner.”

Tony cursed himself, because this was going to be harder to resist than he thought. He could do platonic meals, though. No problem. He went out with Rhodey all the time. “How about lunch, instead?” he decided.

Lunch was casual. People had lunch with friends.

“Okay,” Bob said agreeably. “I better go shower, though. Then I can make us breakfast, too?”

“I’ve reached my quota on peanut butter for this millennium,” Tony told him wryly. “How about I make breakfast?”

“Okay,” Bob said, before flashing him a wide grin.

“Wait—“ Tony started. “Did you just trick me into making breakfast for you?”
Bob laughed as he spun back towards the hall. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he called back.

Tony grumbled to himself, mostly for show, and decided to make some scrambled eggs and bacon. He was halfway through his prep when he felt someone behind him. “That was quick, I was just —”

Tony trailed off as he turned around, eyes widening as he saw Fury standing at the edge of his kitchen. He was looking as dangerous as always in his long flowing Matrix coat, but he was favoring one of his arms, and had butterfly bandages in a trail along his left temple, which sort of ruined the effect.

“Heya, Nick,” Tony said. “How nice of you to drop by, unannounced, as usual.”

“We alone?” Fury asked gruffly.

Tony made a show of looking around the empty kitchen, then looked back at Fury with a raised eyebrow. “If you’re expecting breakfast, I’m afraid I didn’t make enough,” he said. “You should have called ahead.”

Fury narrowed his eye. “You know why I’m here.”

“Really don’t,” Tony said, as he turned his back on him to turn off the heat and save the bacon. Turning one’s back on Fury wasn’t exactly smart, and the fact that Jarvis hadn’t warned him was worrying, but he also knew if Fury wanted him dead he wouldn’t have come himself. He turned back around, and crossed his arms as he leaned back against the counter. “What can I do for you?”

“You need to—” Fury started, as he stepped forward, before his eyes widened marginally and he froze in place.

“Don’t take another step,” Bob said.

Tony pushed himself off the counter, stepping to the side, and was surprised to see Bob was standing right behind Fury. He had something metal held right against Fury’s neck, which could have been a gun or maybe a knife. Tony hadn’t even seen Bob approach, but his hair was slightly wet and he was wearing a t-shirt with a blazer over it and a pair of jeans, so he’d obviously been coming back from the shower when he’d seen their uninvited guest.

To Fury’s credit, his surprise only had him hesitating for a fraction of a second before he was carefully raising his hands. “Not many people that can get the drop on me,” he said.

“Well, I’m the best,” Bob told him, and his voice was calm and collected, more level and confident than Tony had ever heard it. “It’s why Mr. Stark hired me as his new head of security.”

Tony kept his expression from showing his surprise, but Bob was handling this situation like—well, like Natasha would. Instant cover identity with no hesitation, explained why he was here and who he was without bringing up any awkward questions like: do you by any chance happen to be an amnesiac former assassin?

For a moment, he even thought it would work.

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“Yeah? So Happy’s out then, huh?” Fury asked. "Wouldn't have thought Stark would kick him to the curb."

“Mr. Hogan transferred under Ms. Potts’ command at Stark Industries,” Bob said levelly. “And if that’s your attempt to trip me up, I have to say I’m disappointed.”

Fury snorted, before returning his attention back to Tony. “I’m here because someone’s trying to kill me.”

“Someone besides me, you mean?” Bob asked sweetly.

“You’re the least of my worries, head-of-security.” Fury snapped, keeping his eyes on Tony. “Rogers is already on this, but your little one-man invasion of that Hydra base has me thinking you know more than you’ve let on. If you’ve got intel, we could sure use it.”

“I’m sure that you could,” Tony agreed. “Have Rogers ring me up, and I’ll tell him what I know.”

“You don’t trust me?” Fury asked.

“Let’s be honest, would you still respect me in the morning, if I did?” Tony asked, tossing him a sly grin.

“What makes you think I respect you now?” Fury asked.

“The fact that you came here yourself,” Tony pointed out.

Fury narrowed his eye. “This conversation might go better if you’d call off your guard dog,” he said.

“Mr. Morrison has my full confidence,” Tony said. “I leave the little details like handling intruders entirely to his discretion.”

“You got no idea what’s really going on, Stark,” Fury snapped. “This is bigger than all of us.”

Tony assessed Fury carefully, judging from his expressions, the man really was rattled. It couldn’t have been the assassination attempt, he was an old hand at avoiding those. Tony suspected it was about Hydra, and their link to SHIELD, but he wasn’t going to play this game on Fury’s terms. He’d made that mistake one too many times before.

“Like I said,” Tony said carefully, “send Rogers my way and I’ll tell him all I know. As for you, I’m going to be generous and let you leave. Assuming there’s nothing wrong with Jarvis I can’t fix, you might even get to stay that way.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Fury said.

“I don’t work for you, remember?” Tony asked. “I may be an Avenger, but that no longer belongs to you. You want my intel you send me someone I actually trust, because that’s the only way you’re getting it.”

Bob moved his raised hand, tucking something behind him in the waistband of his jeans before stepping back to clear a path for Fury without even being asked. Bob had definitely earned the right to call himself head-of-security, Tony decided.

Fury stomped off to the elevator in a rather stylish fit of pique, and then disappeared behind its doors.
“Sir?” Jarvis called concerned. “My apologies, I’m afraid I was momentarily blocked from access to audio.”

“You okay?” Tony asked him.

“Alarms and my audio were disabled, but no other systems were affected,” Jarvis promised.

“Great,” Tony said, before turning his attention to Bob. “And you! Where’d you even get a weapon?”

Bob grinned, reaching back to grab whatever he had tucked into his waistband. He tossed him something small and silver, and Tony caught it in surprise. He stared at for a moment in disbelief. “Did you seriously just bluff Nick Fury with a wine opener?”

“Wasn’t exactly a bluff,” Bob told him simply. “Coulda killed him just as easy with that as a gun.”

Tony broke out in a startled laugh, utterly impressed and weirdly charmed. “That may be the best thing I’ve ever seen,” he said. “Jarvis, did you get that all on tape?”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis said.

He’d been mostly kidding, but that afternoon before their lunch he did watch the footage. He kept his eye on Fury, and the way he kept a wary distance between himself and Bob as he moved to the elevator. Tony knew from experience Fury wouldn’t have been spooked by something as pedestrian as a gun to his neck—he might have even been good enough to realize it wasn’t a gun.

Which meant he’d been wary of the man, not the weapon.

And he was pretty sure he hadn’t imagined Fury’s look of confusion as he ran his eye across Bob’s brand new flesh hand, when he’d turned to leave.
Tony prided himself on his own unique—and slightly manic—version of Zen. Life threatening situations tended to make him more sarcastic than terrified, and he’d somehow managed an alien invasion without being anything but mildly tense. So it took a lot to break through his cool. He was kinda known for it.

But Bob going out on his own for the first time, well, that was giving him palpitations.

He had Jarvis monitoring him by his phone—and maybe also by tapping into any nearby security cameras for visual confirmation—but Tony was not technically the one stalking him. Jarvis was only going to report anything dangerous, which was really as much privacy as Tony could allow considering their situation. Jarvis was mostly great at secrets anyway, even if he had been known to rat him out to Pepper and Rhodey if Tony was ever a little too lax with his privacy instructions.

It had been Pepper’s idea to have Bob go alone when he mentioned wanting to visit Luke at the Stark Shelter, and Tony had gone along with it because he knew she was right. It wasn’t good to isolate him, but it wasn’t that simple, either. Even if Hydra wasn’t still looking for their lost ‘Asset,’ Fury, as usual, knew more than he was telling. The danger might be coming from more directions than he was expecting.

Which was why he was maybe freaking out a little, even though that was impossible. Because Tony Stark did not freak out.

“Mr. Bob is still fine, Sir,” Jarvis said helpfully, without prompting. Tony suspected the obsessive pacing had probably given his worry away.

Tony knew that Bob was fine, just like he knew Jarvis would tell him the moment he wasn’t, but he still rushed to answer his phone as soon as it was ringing.

“Stark,” he said in a rush.

“You sound out of breath,” a sultry voice said wryly. “I haven’t interrupted something, have I?”

Tony pressed his eyes shut, and took a deep breath. “You know, it’s funny, you don’t sound like Steve.”

“Steve’s otherwise engaged,” Natasha told him, her voice switching to a falsely causal tone. “We need your intel.”

“You know how much I admire you,” Tony told her, “and by that I mean however much it takes for you not to kill me in my sleep. But I don’t trust you any more than I trust Fury, mostly because it’s your job to do whatever he tells you to do.”
“We don’t have time for this, Tony,” Natasha told him. “I know you found something. A couple weeks ago you called me out of the blue asking about the Winter Soldier. Somehow, I doubt you read up on him on Assassin-Wiki. Up until now, I’ve kept your request to myself. However—”

“Fine,” Tony interrupted sharply, glaring across at the wall. It was probably futile since he suspected Fury knew anyway, but the last thing he needed at the moment was another connection to the Winter Soldier tracing back to him. “I’ll send the files to one of SHIELD’s secure servers.”

“I’ll send you the access codes via secure email, you should—” she started.

“I’ve already got them,” he assured her. “As in, all of them. It’s like no one over there is even trying.”

She snorted, but didn’t take the bait. “Okay,” she said. “There’s just one more thing, and you’re not going to like it—but I do need to know what you know about the Winter Soldier. I won’t pass it on if it isn’t vital, but I need you to at least read me in.”

“Didn’t find anything,” he told her promptly. “It’s like you said, he’s a ghost. If they ever had anything on him, they’d redacted it before I got there.”

Natasha was a brilliant spy and a first class lair, but Tony could bluff with the best of them. He might not have fooled her in person, but over the phone, he at least played it cool enough that she couldn’t be sure it wasn’t the truth. He could tell in the way she hesitated that she was trying to figure out if she should press the issue or not.

“Alright,” she said after a moment. “I’ll look forward to receiving the intel.”

“Hey,” he said quickly. “You and the Boy Scout would tell me if you needed help, right?”

“I called, didn’t I?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah, for information,” Tony said. “But I have noticed you haven’t told me why you need it.”

“Trust goes both ways, Stark,” she said wryly. “Or in our case, mistrust, I guess. I just hope you know what you’re doing. I tried to kill Clint like, twenty times, when he first brought me in from to cold, did you know that?”

Tony hung his head, biting back a curse. That was her roundabout spy way of saying she knew exactly what he was up to, so much for his amazing bluffing skills. “Yeah?” he said. “Why do I get the feeling if you really wanted him dead there’d be one less Robin Hood wannabe out scaling the rooftops?”

“Just be careful,” she said. “You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“That’s what makes it fun,” he said.

Natasha laughed lightly, then hung up on him. Tony quickly grabbed his StarkPad and transferred the relevant files to one of SHIELD’s secure servers, censoring out any file referencing his parents or the Winter Soldier. Whatever SHIELD was up to, they wouldn’t need that information anyway. The Winter Soldier spent most of his nights watching Disney films, so he wasn’t exactly a threat to society anymore.

“Sir, Mr. Bob has arrived back at the tower,” Jarvis reported dutifully.

Tony sighed with relief. He rushed back to the living room and turned on the news, dropping to sit
on the couch so he’d look like he hadn’t been standing in front of the elevator pining the whole time. He was barely able to slip into a casual slouch before he heard the elevator doors open.

Bob came over to join him, dropping down in the armchair, looking sort of bemused. Tony straightened up instantly, watching him in concern. “You okay?” he asked quickly. “Did something happen?”

"Luke thinks I regrew my arm," Bob told him sullenly. "Now there's no convincing him I'm not an alien."

Tony almost fell off the couch because he was laughing so hard. He obviously should have been more worried about Bob holding his own against Luke’s wit than anything else.

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Tony spent most of the rest of the day in his lab, working on improvements to Jarvis’s security. Bob was off doing Bob things, like Pixar-watching, running, mainlining Pixy Stix, or possibly standing on the edge of the roof in his Batman stance. He’d been getting better and better at occupying himself, which left Tony with no excuses about not getting some work done.

It was awesome. He was glad to be at work. He didn’t miss Bob at all.

Also, he was apparently terrible at lying to himself.

But Pepper had been hounding him about all the time he had been taking off, and Fury’s little visit had made it clear he needed to up his security game, so he didn’t have time for movie marathons.

“Sir, Pepper has arrived,” Jarvis announced, and Tony rolled his eyes.

He spun his chair to face her as she stepped out of the elevator. “I told you, I’m working on it,” he said quickly. “I’ll have the improvements on your desk by tonight—well, you know, in your virtual inbox. Not your actual desk. Who has time for that? I don’t even own a printer.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not here as your CEO, Tony,” she told him.

Tony deflated instantly, sighing as he slouched down in the chair. He ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry,” he said, wincing. “I might be a little on edge.”

“Why?” Pepper asked, frowning prettily as she stepped towards him.

“Got a little visit from Fury the other day,” he admitted. “He shut down Jarvis’s audio and he obviously knows about Bob.”

Pepper’s eyes narrowed. “Fury?” she demanded. “I swear, since we lost Coulson that entire organization has become entirely untrustworthy. Have you contacted any of the Avengers about this?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Tony promised. “He won’t be pulling that magic trick again. Got in using one of my own programs, and I can promise I will be more circumspect about what I give them access to in the future.”

Pepper frowned, but nodded. Tony watched her carefully. “If you’re not here about the work I owe you, what did you need?”

“After what you’ve told me, I’m not sure it’s a good idea anymore,” she said carefully.
“Pep,” he said. “You know you can’t not tell me things. I’ll just drive us both crazy until you do.”

She snorted, but sat down in the chair beside him. “I was going to say you should take a night off. We’re having a charity event tonight,” she explained. “I know you don’t usually like them, but I thought you could take Bob.”

“Tonight? That’s the one with the scholarships, right?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” she agreed. “We’re auctioning off some of the art pieces you got bored with to raise money for next year.”

It was another one of the charities his mother had started, and Pepper had given new life to when she took over the reigns of Stark Industries.

Tony kept trying to find ways to make the world a better, safer place, on such a grand scale, that he tended to forget to make time for the more immediate causes.

He should definitely do something about that.

“How much do you need?” Tony decided, glancing over at her. “Let’s cut out the middle-men. I’ll write you a check.”

“That’s not sustainable,” she said patiently. “I know you hate them, but fundraisers are necessary to maintaining the Stark charities. And you know that.” She crossed her arms, and narrowed her eyes at him. “We don’t need your money for this, Tony. But it would make a good impression if you were there, and Bob needs to get out more.”

“And you think a party with a bunch of pretentious snobs is the best place for that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“He’s got you wrapped around his little finger,” Pepper said. “I’m sure they’re nothing he can’t handle.”

That was most likely true. Bob had handled people flawlessly everywhere on the scale from Helen Cho to Nick Fury, so the socialites that liked to make themselves feel better by attending his various annual charities didn’t stand much of a chance.

“I’ll ask him,” he decided. “But if he doesn’t want to go, I’m not going.”

She quirked her lips. “Uh huh,” she said. “And how exactly are you going to describe it to him?”


“Tony,” she sighed.

“I’ll mention the charity bit,” he sighed, giving in. “I’m sure we’ll be there.”

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“Hey, Jarvis,” Tony called, as he headed back to the penthouse. “Amidst all of that Captain America and Thor paraphernalia you saw fit to purchase, did you happen to get Bob a tux?”

“Sir, I’m offended that you have to ask. I got him three,” Jarvis said. “Will the event be black-tie, or will something more colorful be acceptable?”

“Black-tie, but hey, my party, my rules,” Tony said. “If he wants to go, he can wear whichever one
he wants.” He paused for a minute. “Wait. None of them are covered in little Avenger patterns, are they?”

“No, sir,” Jarvis said. “I’m afraid there were none available.”

“Really?” Tony hummed, as he stepped off the elevator. “Hey, we could corner the market. Iron Man only to start, of course. Bet it would be a must-have for the prom crowd.”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis responded patiently. “I’ll file it under your growing list titled: ‘Projects for my Copious Spare Time.’”

“Yeah, yeah, no need to be a smart-ass,” Tony said. “I might have time.”

“Tony!” Bob called happily, when he caught sight of him. He leaned over the counter, smiling at him as he approached. He had a book splayed open about halfway through on the counter, and there was flour everywhere. “I’m baking.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked skeptically. He looked past Bob at the chaos that was his kitchen.

“You said you were tired of peanut butter sandwiches,” Bob reminded him. “So I thought I would make Apple Turnovers.”

“Ambitious,” Tony said. “I like the initiative. How’s it going?”

“It sort of ended up more like Apple Crumb Cake,” Bob said sheepishly, reaching up to put his hair back behind his ear. It left a trail of flour. “But I’m pretty sure it’s edible.”

“Wait, have we actually found something you’re not scarily good at on your first try?” Tony asked, grinning wryly.

“Well, you haven’t tried my Apple Crumb Cake yet,” he pointed out.

“Touché,” Tony said dryly, before reaching up to anxiously scratch at his ear. “So, uh, are you busy tonight?”

“My plans mostly include trying to clean the kitchen,” Bob admitted. “What’s up?”

“Charity dinner thing,” Tony said casually. “Pepper wants me to go. I thought maybe you could come with.”

Bob paused, watching Tony with surprise. “I thought—I mean, I thought I had to keep a low profile?”

“Sure, that was the plan before,” Tony agreed. “But since you’ve threatened to kill Nick Fury right here in the living room, there’s not really any need to keep up the anonymity. Honestly, it might actually be to your benefit to get you established publicly. It’ll make any of their shadow operations harder to pull off.”

“So you want me to go for cover?” Bob asked in realization.

“No,” Tony said quickly. “No, that’s not—I mean, that’s not the only reason. I want you to go. I hate these things. They’re awful. The people are all snobs and the whole thing is like a well-rehearsed play, except I’m not great at my part. I usually end up in the tabloids for saying something I shouldn’t have to someone I shouldn’t have—”

“Wow,” Bob said, grinning faintly. “You’re really selling me on this thing.”
Tony snorted. “I can’t promise a good time,” he admitted. “But maybe we’ll be able to keep each other entertained.”

“I’d love to go with you,” Bob told him sincerely.

“Okay,” Tony said, surprised by the easy acceptance. “Yeah? Okay, great.”

“What should I wear?” Bob asked.

“Jarvis said he got you some tuxes, whatever works for you,” Tony said.

Bob thought about that for a moment, before frowning slightly. “What about my backstory?” he asked. “Who do you want me to be?”

Tony thought about their last excursion and how it ended up with Luke convinced Bob was an alien. It probably wouldn’t hurt to build a story, to come up with some basic responses. Bob had already proven he was adept at playing a part, so with a little direction he could be the perfect Stepford date.

“Just be yourself, remember?” Tony said, instead. “I’m known to be eccentric, and so are most of the people I hang around with. No one’s gonna worry if your answers don’t all match up. They might think you’re a Russian spy, or a visitor from Asgard, but who cares? I hang around with Asgardians and Russian spies all the time.”

Bob laughed. “Okay,” he said. “But this could go very, very wrong.”

“You can’t be more trouble than me,” Tony promised. “Not possible.”

“I’ll try not to take that as a challenge,” Bob told him.

The smirk Bob threw him as he turned to head back towards his room had Tony questioning his claim.

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The Charity Gala was being held in one of his buildings, just a couple blocks away, and Tony was a big believer in arriving fashionably late, so it was a little past eight when he finally made his way out.

Bob was already dressed and waiting for him, leaning against the wall beside the elevator. Tony stumbled to a stop when he saw him. Jarvis had outdone himself with the tux: it was a shiny midnight blue, with black lapels and a black bowtie. The white collared shirt underneath the jacket had dark black buttons that stood out in a line down his chest.

He looked like he belonged on the cover of GQ.

“Wow,” Tony said breathlessly. “You definitely clean up nice.”

Then he looked down and noticed Bob was still wearing his white running shoes, and smirked. “Love the shoes,” he added.

Bob followed his gaze, and scrunched up his nose. “There was a fancy black pair, but I didn’t like them,” he said. “Are these okay?”

“Perfectly fine,” Tony said. “Wish I’d thought of it first.”
“I don’t know, you look pretty gorgeous yourself,” Bob said wryly. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Flattery will get you—” Tony paused for a moment, “actually, it will get you anything you want. What do you want? That level of skill in a compliment deserves at least its own plane.”

Bob rolled his eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

They managed the limo ride without any impromptu roadside rescues, and in a rare moment of restraint, Tony avoided the red carpet and took them in by the side entrance. It wasn’t that he wouldn’t want to be seen with Bob, he had plenty of male dates throughout last decades, and they were all well-documented—but he did want to ease Bob into the madness that was his life.

Bob entered ahead of him, and he was staring at the high domed ceiling with wide eyes. Tony had to admit the seven-foot wide chandelier was probably overdoing it a bit.

“You own this place too?” Bob asked, looking back at Tony with amazement.

“Yeah, I mean, don’t blame me for the chandelier though,” he said. “I’m pretty sure it’s the inspiration for one of Sia’s songs.”

Bob just shook his head wryly. “It’s beautiful,” he said. “I don’t—I don’t really remember anywhere like this. It’s like something from out of a book.” Bob froze suddenly, reaching out to grip Tony’s arm. “Tony, Tony, they’re handing out tiny cakes.”

Tony valiantly managed not to laugh at him. “You can have one, you know,” he said.

Bob took off for the nearest waiter, and Tony snorted. He grabbed a champagne from the tray of another waiter. He was just taking a sip when he felt a presence beside him.

“You’re the last person I’d expect to find at one of your charity events,” a woman said.

He glanced over to see Christine Everhart watching him. She was wearing a powder blue dress, a small clutch in one of her hands. He wouldn’t put it past her to have a recorder device inside of it. “Ms. Everhart,” he said, grinning. “I could say the same of you. How did you manage to sneak in past security?”

“I had an invitation,” she said dryly. “What about you? Here all alone? That’s so unlike you.”

“He’s with me, actually,” Bob said, appearing beside him. He wound his arm through Tony’s and pressed up against him.

Christine looked at him in surprise, before glancing between them. “Oh, really?” she said. “I don’t think I caught your name?”

“Me? I’m nobody. But you’re Christine Everhart, right?” Bob asked, his eyes going wide and innocent. “I’m a huge fan of your work.”

Christine paused, giving him a bemused smile. “Really?”

“I found your piece on the role of the United States in the destabilization of Sokovia particularly enlightening,” he told her.

Christine grinned slowly, crossing her arms as she assessed him. “You are nothing like Tony’s usual hook-ups.”

“You realize you’re insulting yourself, right?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow, as he took
another sip of his champagne.

Christine ignored him. “You know so much about me, I think it’s only fair you give me a name,”

she said.

“Bob Morrison,” he said politely, holding out a hand for her to shake. “I’m Mr. Stark’s new pilot.”

“He has a flying suit,” Christine said wryly, as she shook his hand.

“No space for carry-on,” Tony offered smartly. “The suit is unmatched for crime fighting. Not so
great for business trips.”

“Right, I’m sure,” Christine said dubiously, before swiftly pulling a business card from who knew
where and holding it out to Bob. “Just in case you ever want to talk. You know, after he has no
further use for a ‘pilot’?”

Bob took it politely, then dropped it into the trash can behind them after Christine had stepped
away. Tony watched him with amusement. “Her piece on Sokovia?”

“I’m trying to catch up on the world,” Bob said. “I’ve learned that most news sources are
inaccurate or skewed. She actually provides evidence in her articles. It’s awful what’s happening
there.”

Tony frowned. “I know,” he agreed. “Stane sold a lot of my weapons over there. I’ve run a few
raids there with the suit to destroy the weapons, but they keep popping back up.”

myself to just keep going, one day it would be over. But it’s still not over, is it?”

“No,” Tony admitted, watching him carefully. “How much are you remembering? You haven’t
talked much about—“

“Look, Pepper’s here,” Bob interrupted, neatly side stepping him both physically and verbally.
“We should go say hi.”

Bob took off quickly, and Tony narrowed his eyes. Tony started to follow him when a hand
delicately gripped his elbow. “Hey there,” a sultry voice whispered. “No time for an old friend?”

Tony looked back to see Natasha. She was wearing a low cut white dress, slit from the waist down
on one side. Her red hair was curled and pulled back like a twenties starlet. Tony wondered how
many guns she’d managed to hide in a dress that skintight. “Natasha,” he said. “What brings you
here?”

“I got your intel,” she said. “Seemed some pieces were missing.”

“I didn’t hold back anything you’d need,” Tony told her plainly.

“Just the bits about your new houseguest?” she guessed.

Tony narrowed his eyes, pulling his arm free. “He’s got nothing to do with whatever you’re dealing
with,” he promised. “He’s been with me the whole time.”

“How closely did you read those files, Tony?” she asked. “Did you know they’d already assigned a
hit on Fury? That they’d planned to send the Winter Soldier?”

Tony went still, holding back a curse. If he’d taken a little longer to track Bob down—he might
have killed Fury, or been killed himself. “I don’t know anything about that,” he said. “But my ‘houseguest’ was with me the entire time, he didn’t try to kill anyone. So there’s no reason for you to be here. You’re wasting your time.”

“I had to be sure,” she said, turning to watch Bob. He was on the other side of the dance floor, laughing with Pepper. “He’s not what I expected.”

“Are we going to have a problem here?” Tony asked stiffly.

“Your secret is safe with me, Tony,” she promised. “Just make sure you’re keeping it, too. The last thing Steve needs right now is to see him on the front page.”

“What?” Tony asked, glancing back at her in surprise. “What does Steve have to do with any of this?”

Natasha watched him carefully. “Then you really don’t know?”

“Know what?” Tony demanded suspiciously, turning to face her fully. “Do you know who he is? God damn it. I knew Fury knew more than he was telling.”

Natasha kept her eyes on him, watching him for some kind of reaction, but gave nothing away herself. “The Winter Soldier is probably the only assassin that Fury doesn’t have to worry about right now,” she finally said. “Keeping him out of the way is the best thing for all involved.”

“Tony!”

Tony spun around when Bob called his name. He was waving him over. Tony glanced back to Natasha, but she was already gone. “I really hate it when she does that,” he muttered.

Bob made his way back to him. “Why is it you keep getting accosted by beautiful women every time I step more than three feet away?” he asked.

“It’s my magnetic charm,” Tony deadpanned.

Bob’s eyes went towards the exit. “Who was that?” he asked, his voice deceptively calm.

“Shield agent,” Tony admitted easily.

“Was she here for you?” Bob asked. “Or for me?”

“Both, pretty much,” Tony said. “I think they know who you are.”

Bob’s expression shut down, and he tightened his jaw as he looked away. “People are dancing,” he said. “Do you dance?”

“You’re not that great at avoiding things,” Tony told him. “The non-sequiturs, the running away. It’s pretty obvious. We really should work on that. I’m great at diverting attention. Personally, I’m partial to humor.”

“I’ve noticed,” Bob said wryly. “I’m not avoiding anything.”

“You don’t want to talk about what you remember,” Tony said. “You don’t want to think about who you were.”

“I don’t know who I was,” Bob said tightly. “So there’s nothing to think about.”
“You remember some things,” Tony prompted.

“Well, I remember how to dance,” Bob said, looking back at him with a grin. “Want me to show you?”

“Now see, that was better,” Tony said, holding out a hand in invitation. “Consider me successfully distracted.”

Bob just grinned innocently, taking Tony’s hand to tug him closer. “I only know how to lead,” he admitted. “You okay with that?”

“I’m very secure in my masculinity,” Tony promised. “You can even dip me if you want.”

Bob just laughed as he moved them closer to the dance floor. His steps were coordinated and practiced. He had the same grace in this setting that Tony had seen glimpses of since he found him. “Well, you can definitely dance,” Tony decided.

“This feels…it’s right,” Bob started haltingly, as he spun them further into the center of the floor. “I don’t think I learned how to dance from them. I think this was mine.”

“That’s why we need to figure out who you are,” Tony told him quietly. “We can’t let them have the advantage, and you deserve to know.”

“What if I already know enough?” Bob asked quietly. “What if I don’t want to be what I remember?”

“We’ve been through this,” Tony said. “I have my own past to make up for. What if we make a deal? I want to do more for Sokovia. So far, I’ve just been worried about cutting off their supply of weapons, but I want to help them rebuild, too. You help me with my past, and I’ll help you with yours when we find it. I mean, I’d help you anyway, but a deal’s a deal. It might be good for both of us.”

“What I said before about Sokovia, I wasn’t blaming you,” Bob assured him, frowning worriedly. “I didn’t mean it was your fault. I know you didn’t have anything to do with how those weapons were sold.”

“That was sort of the problem, because I should have,” Tony admitted. “I’ve played a big part in the world we have today, and it’s not the world I want, not yet. We can do better.”

“We?” Bob asked, giving a wry grin. “I’m not sure what I could do.”

“I thought we already established that I need a pilot for my carry-on,” Tony reminded him. “And if we find skeletons in your closet, we’ll deal with them, too. We got a deal?”

“Yes,” Bob said quietly. “We have a deal.”

“Good,” Tony said swiftly. “So the next time you remember something, you’ll come to me? Right? No matter what it is?”

“I don’t want you to hate me,” Bob admitted.

“Be pretty hard to manage that at this point, considering what I already know, don’t you think?” Tony asked.

Bob laughed, but it sounded a little desperate. “I don’t deserve your help,” he said. “I don’t deserve
any of this.”

“If we always got we deserved, I don’t think you would have been captured in the first place,” Tony said. “So, you know, there goes that theory.”

“You’ve always got an answer for everything,” Bob said, grinning slightly.

“Genius,” Tony reminded him. “And don’t you forget it.”

Bob dropped him into a dip, sparking a round of distant clapping. “I won’t,” he promised.

Tony flopped back on his bed, though he felt a little too hyped up to sleep. The rest of the night ended up going extraordinarily well. Bob was like a shield against the other partygoers, distracting them all with his ridiculously innocent smile and questions. He also managed to make it every bit as entertaining as expected. His meeting with Mrs. Donaparte had been particularly noteworthy:

“That’s a lovely dress you’re wearing, ma’am.”

“Thank you, young man, it certainly cost me enough. You would not believe the prices they charge these days. Almost six thousand, and that’s not even counting the shoes!”

“You spent six thousand dollars on a dress to wear to a charity event? Instead of just donating the six thousand dollars to charity?”

“But, honey, if I did that, what would I wear?”

“You could have just written a check and stayed home.”

Pepper had been hovering nearby, caught between horror and hilarity, for most of the night, and for once Tony hadn’t been the one to blame. It had been amazing, and Bob had actually guilted Mrs. Donaparte into donating an extra twenty thousand dollars before the night was over, so even Pepper hadn’t been angry in the end.

Tony was finally starting to drift to sleep when there was a frantic knock on his door. He blinked his eyes open blearily. “Jarvis?”

“Mr. Bob is at the door,” Jarvis reported, sounding strained. “He seems to be in some distress.”

Tony pushed to his feet, rushing to pull open the door. Bob glanced up at him. He’d changed into a pair of Hulk flannel pants a black thermal t-shirt, and he looked like he’d been crying.

“What happened?” Tony asked urgently.

“I knew your father,” Bob said quickly, looking panicked. “I knew him, and I killed him.”

“Well, yeah, I know. We’ve been over this,” Tony said, watching him with a frown. “It’s sort of the story of how we met, remember? My name is Tony Stark, you killed my parents, prepare to die.”

“No, I know, but I remember,” Bob insisted, verging towards hysterical. He reached up to scrub a hand through his hair. “He had a flying car!”

“A flying car?” Tony repeated with disbelief. “His flying car barely got off the ground. He crashed and burned at one of the first Stark Expos.”
“Yes, I was there,” Bob said. His eyes looked glassy, like he was holding back tears. “He used to let me sit with him in his workshop. He’d tell me stories about the things he was planning to build. He gave me a custom rifle and a bulletproof peacoat.”

"Wait, what?” Tony could feel his heart speeding up. He couldn't imagine his father would have been involved in the Winter Soldier project, but he'd suspected for awhile now that SHIELD had dealings with some kind of shadow organization, and Hydra fit the bill. “Oh god,” he said in horror. “Was he your handler? Was my father your handler?”

Bob shook his head. “No, I think I knew him when I was still a person.”

"Okay," Tony said, letting out a breath. "Okay, that's good. But you are still a person, FYI."

Bob looked back at him, pale and shaking. "You should have killed me."

“If I had killed you I would never have forgiven myself for it,” Tony said tightly. “Would you wish that on me?”

"I wouldn't wish that on anyone," he said brokenly.

Tony reached out to carefully take his arm, leading him to sit on the bed. “Okay, look, actually this is good news, this helps,” he told him. “Jarvis, Bob was at the Stark Expo with the flying car, what year was that?”

"1942,” Jarvis replied promptly.

Tony looked over at Bob speculatively. "Well that might explain why we haven’t found you yet. We’ve only gone back as far as the sixties, and I thought that was a stretch. Jarvis—“

“Already expanding the search to begin in 1940, Sir,” Jarvis interrupted.

"What does it matter what my name was?” Bob asks quietly. “We already know I was a killer.”

Tony kneeled down in front of him, grabbing his left hand and tugging until Bob looked down and met his eyes. “Bobby, baby, you have been through the kind of hell I can't even imagine, and I can imagine a lot, and you came out of it basically an adorable helpless little kitten." Bob glared down at him through his loose hair, which really just made him look like an angry kitten. Tony ignored him. “I’ve got to think you started out pretty amazing.”

Bob looked away. “And what if you’re wrong?” he asked. “What if I deserved this?”

“Well, firstly, no one deserved what happened to you, so there’s that,” Tony said. “And secondly, who cares if you weren’t a saint? It won’t change who you are now. Remember our deal? Whatever we find, we’ll deal with it.”

Bob nodded reluctantly, and Tony stood. He grabbed his StarkPad to start running some searches of his own. Unfortunately, there were a lot of dead and missing soldiers in the forties, and the search was taking longer than he’d hoped. It was hours later and Bob had fallen asleep splayed across his bed by the time Jarvis finally found something.

“Sir, I have searched facial recognition against all soldiers missing in action between 1940 and 1950, but there was no match.” Jarvis paused for dramatic effect, which Tony figured was his bad influence. "So I did an additional search against soldiers killed in action, and there was a 96.893 percent match to one James Buchanan Barnes."
In other words, Tony realized, his heart speeding up, they’d found a match. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"He served under Captain Steve Rogers during the second world war,” Jarvis explained.

"Barnes," Tony repeated in realization. His eyes widened. “Bucky Barnes?”

"According to biographical information, that was his preferred form of address,” Jarvis agreed.

"Bring up the info," Tony said, his heart pounding, and holograms lit up around him with images and texts. A small video played, credited to the Smithsonian, of Bucky Barnes laughing on loop beside Steve.

The hair was different, of course, but it was the incandescent carefree smile that made Bucky almost unrecognizable from the man currently sleeping in his bed. It utterly transformed him.

Chapter Notes

Note: Bob finally gets to be Bucky again! I’ll be changing him to Bucky in narration, but it might take Tony a little longer to adjust.

Also, apologies that this chapter is a little shorter. I’m on overtime and will be working some weekends through the rest of November, so I wanted to get the next chapter up before things got too crazy. (For those of you waiting for it, I promise Steve will actually be showing up in this story soonish ;-)

Bucky Barnes was a legend in his own right, but he had been reimagined through the years as everything from a pre-pubescent side-kick to a teddy bear, and when it came down to it, Tony realized he only really knew anything about the pop culture versions.

His father had told him stories of the real deal, of course, but Tony had rarely sat and listened. He’d always taken his father’s stories for granted, always taken his admiration of perfect Steve Rogers as a coded slight against him.

Still, Tony wasn’t sure how he’d managed to go over a month without noticing he was living with a war hero. There were pictures of his father and Bucky Barnes boxed away in the old family house, with the two of them standing right beside each other. Tony could remember thinking the first time he’d seen those photos how handsome the Sergeant had been, how sad it was the way he’d died so young.

But it had been over thirty years since he’d touched those albums, and since then Tony had gone to great lengths to avoid any form of Captain America paraphernalia out of a sense of self-preservation. He didn’t like to be reminded of what he wasn’t—of what his father had always wanted him to be.

His avoidance tactics had clearly come back to bite him in the ass.

His first instinct was to reach out to Steve, but he paused on that as he glanced back at the sleeping Bo—Bucky. Bucky had fallen asleep splayed across Tony’s king size bed, half on his stomach with his face mostly in the crook of his elbow. Tony could still make out the troubled lines of his brow, and it caused him to hesitate.

Bucky Barnes, he thought incredulously, falling back to lean against the wall. Would Bob even want to go by Bucky? Did he remember? He said he thought he had a brother, but Bucky Barnes had been an only child. That meant he’d probably been remembering Steve.

And Steve brought problems of his own.

Tony knew that as soon as he got a call through to Steve, the man would drop everything and fly right here. Tony wouldn’t blame him. He couldn’t imagine finding someone he’d lost alive and well—or, well enough, anyway, after so long. It somehow seemed fitting that this miracle belonged to Steve, too, in the end.
What could he even tell him, he wondered. *So, hey, I went to kill your old war buddy, but decided to take him home with me instead. He’s in my guest room if you want to drop by.*

Steve would have to be told somehow, there was no question of that. Tony just didn’t want to spring this on Bob—on Bucky, damn it—all at once.

So he slipped out the room and dialed one of Natasha’s numbers, instead. “I can’t believe you,” he hissed when the voicemail picked up. “You didn’t think to warn me? Call me back, Natasha. We’ve got to let Steve know what’s going on, he’s gonna—“

The line clicked as it was picked up. “Stark.”

It took Tony a minute to place the voice. “Agent Hill,” he said warily. “I was trying to reach Natasha.”

“This line isn’t secure,” she said swiftly. “Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff are unavailable.”

“It’s important,” Tony promised. “I need to reach her.”

“It isn’t safe. We’ll contact you when we can,” she said. “Don’t call this number again.”

“Don’t you hang—“ Tony cursed as the call disconnected. “Damn it.”

Tony set the phone aside, letting out a frustrated breath. He’d suspected for awhile Natasha and Steve were into something big, but this sort of confirmed it. And if Maria Hill was shutting down all communication for his fellow Avengers, it didn’t mean anything good.

He thought over what he knew for sure: First Hydra brought in the Winter Soldier, planning to use him to kill Fury. Losing him, they tried to kill Fury anyway and predictably failed. Natasha has been running interference, collecting his data on Hydra without giving out her reasons—and there was really only one reason why she wouldn’t, and that was if Hydra was so intertwined with SHIELD that they didn’t know who to trust.

It was sort of anathema for him to sit around by the phone when his friends were in trouble, but Tony could make things worse if he went barreling in to try and save the day without more information.

And then there was Bucky to think of, because if Hydra was making their move, then he wasn’t safe, either.

“Jarvis,” Tony said. “I want you searching the grid for Natasha and Steve. Let me know the minute you know where either of them are. And since you love multitasking, keep an eye on normal SHIELD channels too. Something’s up.”

“Understood, Sir,” Jarvis said. “I’ll let you know the moment I find anything.”

Tony headed back to his room, freezing in the doorway when he saw his bed had been abandoned. He glanced to his desk, and the holographic screens with Bucky Barnes’ biographies had been reopened. “Crap,” he muttered, quickly scanning the room. “Jarvis, where’s Bob?”

“Should I continue to call him Bob, Sir?” Jarvis asked thoughtfully. “Or do you suppose he’d prefer Sergeant Barnes?”

“I think I’d prefer if you would *tell me where he is,*” Tony snapped. “We can work out the name thing later.”
“He exited your room two and half minutes ago, and then evaded my cameras and disappeared,” Jarvis said. “He seemed perfectly calm. I did not realize there was any reason for alarm. However, in past instances, he has gone to the roof or the balcony when seeking to be alone.”

“Right,” Tony realized, pausing for a moment while he considered his options. Bucky probably wanted to be alone, but based on Tony’s own past experiences, being alone in times like this was rarely productive.

He headed to the balcony first, but it was empty, so he took the short ladder against the wall of the building up to the roof. Bucky was sitting at the other end on the ledge, looking more dejected than his usual brooding Batman-esque pose. He had his feet dangling over the edge, one hand balanced beside him.

Tony walked across the roof, and then dropped down to sit next to him on the ledge, facing the other direction. “I was going to break it to you easy,” he told him casually.

Bucky snorted. “Yeah?” he asked. “How would you have done it?”

“How about this then, I could have told you that you were a hero,” Tony told him. “I’m not surprised about that part, personally. Though the whole you’re ‘Bucky Barnes’ part did sort of throw me for a loop.”

“Those articles said I fought in World War II,” Bucky said quietly. “Certainly gives some context to some of my memories.”

“You were spooked my dad’s book of Captain America history,” Tony reminded him gently. “How much do you really remember?

“Too much,” Bucky said. “Not enough.” He glanced over at Tony with a sigh. “I saw my picture in that book, but I knew it wasn’t me. It couldn’t be.”

“It was,” Tony promised. “We can do a DNA check if you want, pretty sure the Smithsonian has something of yours, but it all fits, and you usually don’t get a facial match that close even with identical twins.” He hesitated for a moment. “Also, I did some research last night. You were a prisoner of war before you joined the Howling Commandos. You were experimented on by Dr. Zola, who was trying to replicate the super soldier serum. Explains how you survived something no one should have survived.”

“Lucky me,” Bucky said, laughing disdainfully.

Tony frowned as he noticed Bucky was cradling his left hand in his lap. He leaned back a little, narrowing his eyes as he saw the blood. He glanced up and took note of the bloody fist size crater in the stairwell wall to their right. It wasn’t hard to put together. “You get in a fight with a wall?” he asked casually.

“Sort of,” Bucky said, smiling wryly. “But it didn’t fight back, so I’m not sure it counts.”

Tony held out his hand, and Bucky sighed as he lifted his and placed it atop of it. His knuckles were bloodied and he could see glints of the metal skeleton where the flesh had been split all the way down. “You know, punching bags were invented for a reason. Mine are especially awesome.
And these things called boxing gloves, they’re pretty cool too.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky said, letting out a breath. “Wasn’t my finest moment, I know.”

“Can we go in so I can clean this hand up, or do you need longer to brood?” Tony asked.

“I’m not brooding,” Bucky insisted.

“You sort of are,” Tony told him. “Not that you’re not entitled, and it’s a nice look if we’re being honest. I mean, get you a cape, some bat ears—“

“For the last time, I’m not Batman,” Bucky said.

“Right, because you’re Bucky Barnes,” Tony told him, standing without letting go of Bucky’s hand. “You okay with that?”

“Guess it’s not as bad as it could be,” he said. He lifted his legs back over the ledge and allowed Tony to tug him back to his feet.

“Are you kidding?” Tony asked. “I wasn’t kidding about the hero bit. My dad always said—“ He broke off, swallowing hard. “I mean, Howard Stark was the number one Captain America fan boy, sure, but he never mentioned him without mentioning you.”

“Howard…Howie,” Bucky whispered, pressing his eyes shut. “I remember him so clearly now.”

“Howie?” Tony echoed with disbelief. “You called him Howie?!”

Bucky’s lips quirked into a rueful smile. “He refused to call me Bucky, so it was my little revenge. Used to drive him crazy,” he said. “Steve would always—“

Bucky trailed off and Tony tugged gently at his hand to regain his attention. “He never told me that,” he said. “Is that what you want to be called? Bucky?”

"I’m not him,” he said quickly. “Not anymore.”

“That’s okay,” Tony assured him. “I’m just wondering if you want to use the name? You were a James, so there’s that, too. Jimmy, maybe? Jim? Jim-boy?”

“Jimmy?” Bucky repeated, frowning slightly. “Someone used to call me that…a friend from the war…I don’t—“

“Hey, these are all just names,” Tony said calmly. “Anyway, whatever you want to be called, you’ll always be Bob to me.”

Bucky smiled hesitantly, glancing away. “I wish it was that simple,” he said. “I wish I could just be Bob Morrison, Stark Industries employee.”

“Lover of Pixy Stix,” Tony added whimsically.

“Well, that part’s still true,” he laughed. “But I can’t pretend I’m not Bucky Barnes any more than I can pretend I wasn’t the Winter Soldier.”

“You are far too well-adjusted,” he said. “It’s starting to creep me out.” Tony glanced down when he heard a slight dripping, and saw that Bucky was now bleeding all over the ground. “Nevermind, I take it back. You’ve lost points for bad coping mechanisms. Come on, let’s get your hand bandaged before you bleed out.”
“That’s unlikely,” Bucky said wryly.

“Humor me,” Tony said. He led Bucky back inside and to his master bathroom. Bucky hopped up on the counter as Tony pulled out his first aid supplies. He had an entire medical floor and a number of on call doctors, but with Bucky’s advanced healing he didn’t think they would be necessary.

“You sure have a lot of supplies,” Bucky said.

“Dangers of the job,” Tony said wryly. “Even before I was doing the super hero thing, I’d get a little seared every once in awhile from one of my experiments.”

“You’re not a lot like him,” Bucky said thoughtfully, “but that is definitely something you got from your dad.”

Tony froze. “Yeah, I’ve heard I’m not like him. Already got the assessment from Steve.”

Bucky frowned, watching him with concerned. “I meant it as a compliment,” he said uncertainly. “Howie was great. I mean, he was brilliant, like you, but he didn’t really see people. We were all sort of just a means to an end for him. Even Steve…I always kind of thought he felt like he was entitled to him, like he’d made ‘im.” Bucky paused, his eyes going wide. “God, I’m sorry, Tony. I shouldn’t be talking about him like that, I ain’t got no right to—”

“No, it’s fine,” Tony said quickly. “Kind of refreshing to know I wasn’t the only one that saw that in him, actually. He was really good at charming people, so most didn’t notice they were being used.”

“It’s just coming back to me, the war,” Bucky said hesitantly, as Tony swabbed his knuckles with disinfectant. “It feels more real to me now than what I did all those years for Hydra.”

Tony winced at the deep wounds on Bucky’s knuckles, grabbing a roll of gauze to wrap them. “Isn’t that a good thing?” he asked.

“I guess,” Bucky said, leaning forward as he watched Tony bandage his hand. “But I feel a bit like three people at once.”

“Well, I like all of you, if it helps,” Tony told him. “Even the Winter Soldier you.”

“You never met the Winter Soldier, Tony,” Bucky said flatly.

Tony taped the gauze closed and then paused, glancing up at Bucky. “Fair enough,” he admitted. “But I still like you.”

“I like you, too,” Bucky said softly. “You’re still right below sugar on the list.”

Tony snorted fondly, feeling relieved that Bucky’s returning memories hadn’t erased any of their new ones. “Give me a little more time,” he said. “I might make it to the top yet.”

“What if we did have time?” Bucky asked quietly. “What if I just want to stay here with you?”

Tony stepped to the side, standing in front of him and bracing his hands on the sink on either side of his legs. “You’re always going to have a place here, that’s a given,” he said, before letting out a tired breath. “But once we tell Steve, he’s going to—”

“I don’t want to see him,” Bucky interrupted quickly. “Please, I don’t…I can’t…”
Tony had worried this might happen, and he fought the urge to hang his head. If backed into a corner, if Bob—if Bucky—really didn’t want to see Steve, Tony didn’t have any right to force it on him. But keeping this from Steve wasn’t exactly feasible, either. Especially since he was pretty sure Natasha was only planning to keep this secret for as long as it was convenient.

"Okay, look, here's the thing,” Tony started. “Steve will literally storm the tower and probably kill me if I try to keep you from him. But I haven't actually been able to get in touch with any of them yet, and we do have pretty good defenses here at Stark Tower, so if you're serious about not seeing him…” Tony trailed off, already planning contingencies. “Just...can you tell me why?"

Bucky looked away. “He...he shouldn't have to know about me,” he said. “It would be better if he just thought I was dead. I can...I can just disappear.”

“Well, that's just about the stupidest thing I've ever heard,” Tony told him flatly.

Bucky threw him a half-hearted glare, which Tony choose to ignore. “Tony—“

“I adore you, and you literally killed my parents,” he said simply. Bucky looked some kind of mix between scandalized and horrified and guilty. “What, are we not joking about this yet?”

“Please don’t,” Bucky said with a wince.

“Okay, look, my point is, if I can forgive you, if I can be proud of you—do you really think he won’t be?” he asked.

“I guess I don’t know.” Bucky pulled his eyes away, looking down at his freshly bandaged hand. “What’s he like?”

“Steve?” Tony asked. “He’s a Boy Scout.” Bucky looked back at him skeptically. “Okay, so maybe I don’t actually know what he’s like. But that’s only because no one knows what he’s like. He pretends to be the poster child everyone expects him to be, and that’s all he lets anyone see. There’s this thing he does—“ he broke off for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain it. “He doesn’t talk about you exactly, or his past at all, really, but in hindsight, there’s been all these moments where he’s saying something without saying anything, or looking for someone that isn’t there. It’s like he’s been missing a piece of himself, and I think maybe that piece was you.”

“He’s in every memory that I have,” Bucky admitted. “I can’t remember my own mother’s name, but I can remember that he used to wear newspapers in shoes.”

“Newspapers in his—nevermind, off topic,” Tony decided. “If there’s one thing about Steve Rogers that’s never been in question, it’s that he’s a good man. So if you’re not ready, he’d support you. He might follow you around for awhile like a lost golden retriever puppy, but he’d do it at a distance if you tell him you need space. I just think whatever you decide, he’s gonna need to hear it from you.”

“Yeah, okay.” Bucky nodded slowly. “I guess...I mean, I would like to talk to him.”

“Okay,” Tony said, pulling out his cell phone. “I was told not to call him, but I don’t take instruction well. Anyway, I set him up with a secure phone that SHIELD doesn’t know about.”

The phone rang three times before rolling over to voicemail, so Tony hung up. “Well, I don’t want to give him a heart attack if he’s in the middle of a mission, so we probably don’t want you leaving a ‘hey, I’m not dead’ message.”

“Mission?” Bucky asked, his face scrunching up with confusion.
“Huh?” Tony asked, glancing up. “Oh, yeah. Don’t worry, Steve can handle himself.”

“My memories do not support that theory,” Bucky said wryly. “Little punk got into trouble any time I turned my back.”

“If you’re his impulse control, that would actually explain a lot,” Tony told him wryly. “But he’s got Natasha with him, and Jarvis is on the lookout for them both.”

“I’m pretty sure I shot her,” Bucky said, looking worried.

“Yeah, that happened,” Tony agreed. “She seems cool with it though. She’s got some personal experience in the brainwashed assassin department, I’m pretty sure she won’t hold it against you.”

Bucky crossed his arms, holding them against his chest defensively, looking sort of pitiful. Tony leaned forward again, meeting his eyes. “Remember when I said whatever happened, we’d deal with it?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said dryly. “But I don’t think you were expecting this.”

“No,” Tony agreed. “This is more of a best case scenario, really.”

Bucky snorted. “How so?”

“Because you’re a decorated war hero, best friend to America’s golden boy, and one of the few people my dad actually admired,” Tony said. “This is going to make spinning PR in our favor a cakewalk.”

“PR?” he asked, looking startled. “I don’t want the world to know about me.”

“Staying incognito when you’re friends with the Avengers is going to be…problematic, to say the least,” Tony told him gently. “Not everyone was as lax a history student as I was.”

“Right,” Bucky sighed, before looking back up to meet Tony’s eyes. “Whatever happens…we’ll still be friends, right? You’re not going to leave me alone?”

“Of course I won’t,” Tony promised.

He couldn’t quite bring himself to tell him that it would probably end up the other way around.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Update to initial author’s note: I could not hold my action muses at bay.

Events of the Winter Soldier have mostly happened behind the scenes, a little differently than canon without Bucky's presence (mainly, that Steve, Natasha and Sam managed to remain under the radar without someone to jump on top of their car and rip out their steering wheel).

There was nothing like watching some Saturday Morning Cartoons after you've just found out that the brainwashed assassin living in your guest room was also the long thought dead nonagenarian best friend of Captain America. It didn’t matter that it was a Tuesday.

“Sponge Bob is good for the soul,” Tony decided.

“You didn’t name me after him, did you?” Bucky asked. He was laid out on the couch with his head resting on Tony’s thigh, and he glanced up at Tony skeptically as he spoke.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tony told him. “If I was going to name you after this show you would have been a Patrick.”

Bucky snorted and glanced back at the screen. “Do you think he’ll be mad at me?” he asked quietly.

“Steve?” Tony said. “What for? You’re like the perfect friend. There are literally dozens of biographies and two feature films about your epic friendship. He’s going to be thrilled. If anything, he’ll be mad at me.”

Bucky pushed himself up on his hands, looking at Tony in surprise. “Why would he be mad at you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Trying to kill you. Using Disney films in place of therapy. To name a couple.”

“You never tried to kill me,” Bucky told him earnestly. “You’re the reason I’m still alive at all.”

Tony let out a breath. “Maybe I didn’t make it to the actual stabby-stabby bits, but I was planning on it,” he said. “It’s not exactly a course of action our esteemed Captain would ever get behind.”

Bucky snorted. “You’re kidding, right?” he said. “Just what do you think we were planning to do with Johann Schmidt when we found him? Put him in a pair of handcuffs and pat him on the head?” He paused then, going pale as he sat back against the arm of the couch. “What did happen to Schmidt?”

“Pretty sure Steve did actually kill him,” Tony admitted.

“Good for him,” Bucky said slowly, before swallowing hard. “What about Zola?”

Tony glanced away, unsure how to explain that Zola pretty much did get handcuffs and a pat on
the head. In all his digging for a connection between Hydra and SHIELD, Zola was the most blatantly obvious one. His own father had worked with the man, for years, even with what he’d done to his friend.

“They captured him,” Tony admitted. “Think he died in the seventies of some kind of cancer.”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair, and gave a jerky nod. “Yeah, figures,” he said, letting out a breath. “They did want that one alive. But he must have escaped, yeah?”

“What makes you say that?” Tony asked, frowning back at him.

“Because he’s the one that gave me my first arm,” Bucky told him.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony cursed, pushing abruptly to his feet. Tony hadn’t been able to tie Zola to the creation of the Winter Soldier in any of the files, but he was missing everything from the war to the early sixties, which had probably chronicled Zola’s involvement—and consequently, SHIELD’s involvement. No one wonder they’d erased the record of it.

“What?” Bucky asked.

“He didn’t escape, SHIELD had him working for them. I mean, conditionally, supposedly, but they gave him a hell of a lot more leeway than they should have,” Tony explained.

“They gave that bastard a deal?” Bucky asked, his eyes going wide. “Steve would never—” he trailed off, pressing his eyes shut. “The plane crash. He wasn’t here. I read that about Captain America, but I didn’t…nothing is fitting together right in my head.”

“We’ve got to—“ Tony started.

“Sir,” Jarvis interrupted tensely. “I’ve located Captain Rogers.”

“Where is he?” Tony asked quickly.


The TV switched away from Sponge Bob to a Breaking News Report. It was an aerial shot of the Triskelion and the surrounding lake. Tony watched in disbelief as three huge Helicarriers slowly rose from the water. “Jarvis?” Tony asked tightly. “Where’s Cap?”

The screen abruptly zoomed onto the Triskelion airstrip, and the tiny red and blue figure running across it. There was another man with him—and did that guy have wings?

The caption along the bottom of the screen read: *Captain America wanted for Treason?*

“Well, this looks bad,” Tony said dryly.

“Tony—” Bucky said, his voice breaking. He looked back at Tony with wide, terrified eyes—showing far more fear than Tony had seen from him before.

“Don’t worry,” Tony told me. “I’ve got this. Go call Pepper. She’ll—“ Tony paused on the way to his gear room, after realizing Bucky was following his every step. He spun around. “Woah there, cowboy. Where do you think you’re going? You need to—“

“I’m going with you,” Bucky broke in, tightening his jaw.
“Uh, no, you’re not,” Tony said simply. “First of all, my suit only fits one—second of all, I can’t take you into combat. I mean, I’ve done some pretty irresponsible things, not the least of which, you know, was hunting you down by myself and pulling you out of stasis all willy nilly in the first place. But you are not ready to be going on missions.”

“I’ve been going on missions since before you were born,” Bucky told him flatly. “I’ve never lost my skills, I would have been useless without them. I can assure you, I’m perfectly capable—“

“Can’t risk it,” Tony interrupted. “Sorry.”

“Fine,” Bucky said. “I’ll just take the Quinjet and meet you there.”

“Good luck cracking my access codes, buddy,” Tony said.

“I don’t need to,” Bucky said, glancing up at Tony with honest confusion. “My contract gives me full access to all your aircrafts, including for personal use.”

Tony stilled, and then dropped his head. “So this is why Pepper is always trying to get me to involve the lawyers when I’m drawing up contracts.”

“Tony,” Bucky said softly. “If you really feel you can’t take me, I understand. But I will find my own way there.”

“Fine, one condition,” Tony snapped, pointing at him firmly. “You don’t use the ‘since before you were born’ thing on me ever again. It creeps me out.”

Bucky broke out into a wide grin. “I promise.”

“And you’re going to wear protective gear without complaining,” Tony added.

“Absolutely,” Bucky agreed instantly.

Unfortunately his easy compliance only lasted for about as long as the walk to the lab, and then Bucky saw what Tony had in mind.

“Absolutely not,” Bucky told him.

“I made this for Steve,” Tony said with a frown, glancing back with pride at the all black, kevlar and titanium lined version of the Captain America suit. “I’ve been trying to get him out of the sparkly outfits since I met him. His shield basically has a target on it. It’s like he’s actively trying to draw fire.”

“Your suit is metallic red and gold,” Bucky reminded him.

“That’s fair,” Tony admitted. “But hey, my suit can take the hit. I’m pretty sure Steve was wearing actual spandex the last time I saw him.”

Bucky looked back at the suit with a frown. “We’re going on a mission,” he said. “I’m not going to wear a leotard on a mission.”

“A leotard? Seriously?” Tony asked, his mouth falling open with disbelief. “This thing is tear resistant, and shock resistant, and flame resistant. It stops bullets—“

"I'm sure it's amazing, but it's still a skintight leotard," Bucky told him. “Let’s leave the skintight suits to Steve. He can almost pull it off.”
“You’d rather go in your Hulk pajamas?” Tony asked.

Bucky glanced down at himself and thought about it. “Yes,” he decided.

Tony realized this was not a battle he was going to win. “Fine, whatever,” he sighed. “Please just grab some cargo pants out of one of those drawers, and there’s a Kevlar-lined leather jacket hanging up in the corner. They’re for Steve, too, so they should fit you okay.”

Tony very carefully did not look as Bucky rushed to change, and quickly called his own suit to form around him. He kept the mask up, and wondered what the hold up was. “Jarvis, you been able to get in touch with anyone from SHIELD yet?”

“I’m afraid they’re not returning our calls,” Jarvis reported.

“Right,” Tony sighed, before glancing up to check on Bucky. He was wearing a pair of black cargo pants—kevlar reinforced—and combat boots with the leather jacket. Tony’s lips twitched when he saw he was still wearing his white t-shirt with a cartoon Hulk proclaiming: “Hulk sleepy!,” under the unzipped jacket. “You ready?”

“Just need a rifle,” Bucky said, glancing around with a frown.

“I don’t have sniper rifles just laying around,” Tony told him. “I’m a recovering arms dealer. I’ve got my five year coin and everything.”

Bucky glanced at him disbelievingly. “Well, what do you have?”

Tony was about to deny having anything when he recalled he’d been working on some improvements for Clint. “I’ve got a bow and some arrows,” he told him. “Know how to use one?”

“I’ve seen Brave like twenty times,” Bucky shrugged. “How hard can it be?”

Tony grabbed the case with the bow and quiver, and tossed it to Bucky. “Come on then,” he said, turning to lead the way to the floor below them. “The Quinjet can have us in D.C. inside of ten minutes, but we’re still going to be late to the party.”

Bucky didn’t require directions after they stepped onto the Quinjet dock, just put in the sequence to open the back hatch and then slipped inside. “Jarvis, did you give him all the access codes to everything?” he asked.

“It was in his contract, Sir,” Jarvis told him.

Tony shook his head ruefully and followed Bucky inside. Tony was generally a shark in business, but when it came to people he liked he had a habit of signing away everything. As he came to stand behind Bucky in the cockpit, he decided it was a good thing he was such a good judge of character. Any other international assassin might have taken advantage of the access he’d given him to disappear into the sunset with a Quinjet and some millions.

But then one of the first things Bucky had ever said to him was that he didn’t want to fight anymore. And Tony couldn’t even protect him from that.

“I’m sorry,” he told him.

Bucky was working seamlessly through the prep sequences side-by-side with Jarvis, opening the hatch built into the side of the building so they could take off, but he stopped at Tony’s voice and glanced up with a frown. “For what?”
“You didn’t want to fight anymore,” Tony said quietly. “I didn’t want you to, either.”

“It’s not about what I want,” Bucky said emotionlessly. “That’s one thing I never forgot.”

Bucky’s resignation really only served to make Tony feel worse. He supposed that they’d been lucky, really, to have made it as long as they had without a crisis. The world was always going to come for them, sooner or later.

“Tony…” Bucky started slowly, “Steve isn’t a traitor. I remember—I know that’s true. But I also know, he’d break the rules the moment he didn’t believe in them anymore, and this isn’t the world we were in before.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “I think Hydra has been infiltrating SHIELD for awhile now. I’m not sure of the extent—and I’m not sure how high it goes—but I do know that we can’t trust them. We can trust Steve.”

“So we are going to back up Steve then,” Bucky said, checking with him to be sure. “We could end up labelled traitors, too. But I already am. Maybe it’s best if—“

“Let me stop you right there, because that’s not going to go any better for you than it did for me,” Tony told him. “I’ve skirted the line of treason before. Don’t worry. I coulda been a tightrope walker.”

Bucky just snorted, and the easily flew them out into the New York cityscape. “So what’s the plan?” he asked.

Tony was taken off guard for a moment at being asked. He cleared his throat. “Ah, right,” he said. “Knew I was forgetting something.”

Bucky shot him an amused glance. “You don’t forgot anything,” he said.

“I may have a few ideas,” Tony admitted. “You just might not like them.”

“Try me,” Bucky said.

“I want you to stay out of sight,” Tony said. “Find a perch and lay down cover fire. I’ll do the flashy bits and coordinate with Steve and his team.”

“Got it,” Bucky said easily.

“What? That’s it?” Tony asked, eyes going wide.

“It’s a good plan,” Bucky said, glancing back at him with a frown. “And it probably isn’t the best time to tell Steve I’m alive. It would compromise him.”

“Right, yeah, that’s what I thought,” Tony agreed. “We’ll just break it gently after this is over.”

“Yeah? I remember your idea of gentle,” Bucky snorted, as he pulled an arrow from the quiver and prepared to nock it. “You gonna take him to the museum and have me pop out from behind the Howling Commandos exhibit?”

“That’s actually not bad,” Tony said. “I think we should seriously consider it.”

Bucky went quietly suddenly, returning his focus to the controls. “I don’t know if I’m ready to see him,” he admitted.
“We can’t keep it from him, not after this,” Tony told him gently.

“Yeah, I know, I just—” he sighed. “I don’t know that I’m ready to be Bucky again yet.”

“Well here’s the good news,” Tony told him. “You never have to be anyone you’re not. Not ever again.”

“That’s not a promise you can make,” Bucky told him gently.

"Yes it is," Tony promised, because he was reckless like that.

Tony grabbed a pair of communicators from a panel in his suit, and held out one of the earbuds for Bucky. Bucky took it without question and placed it in his right ear. “That’ll get you a line straight to me,” Tony told him. “I’ll patch into Steve’s comms when we get there, and you’ll have audio to hear them, but your audio will only come to me. We don’t need Steve hearing your voice before we can get him an explanation.”

“Probably not,” Bucky said, flashing a worried grin.

The next time Tony glanced back at the window, they were already flying over D.C. He could see the Triskelion in the distance, getting closer fast—and Bucky was entirely ignoring the SHIELD landing strip.

“Uh, you just passed the airstrip,” Tony pointed out.

“Yes,” Bucky agreed, keeping them straight on course for the Triskelion. “That airstrip is a killing ground. I had something higher in mind.”

“You’re gonna land on the Triskelion?” Tony asked, leaning forward to get a better view of the building’s quick approach. “Points for style, I guess. And hey, we’re probably already gonna be in trouble.”

Bucky brought them hovering over the highest part of the Triskelion, then gently dropped them down. Their approach had mostly gone unnoticed in the chaos around them. Tony could make out a number of other air fighters landing on the Helicarriers. They were all SHIELD issue—there was no telling what side any of them were fighting on.

Tony quickly opened the back hatch, bringing down his face guard as he exited with Bucky not far behind him. Bucky had strapped the quiver to his back, and was holding the bow like he knew exactly how to use it. Tony did a quick assessment, and realized the concentrated battle was on the airstrip. One side seemed to be trying to stop the fighters from the lifting off, and the rest were trying to reach the Helicarriers.

The Helicarriers themselves hovered ominously, strangely quiet, though there was no way to see what was going on inside them.

“There,” Bucky said simply.

Tony glanced at him, then followed where he was pointing. He could just make out the distant figure of Captain America, pulling himself up to the top of the closet Helicarrier. A team of about five armed men were waiting for him.

“That’s my cue,” Tony said, before casting one glance back to Bucky. “Remember, don’t—“

“I know how to go unseen,” Bucky assured him. “You’re the one people are going to notice if you
“Yeah, yeah, I’m going,” Tony said. “See you on the flip side.”

Then he fell backwards off the Triskelion, catching himself in mid-air to change his course towards the Helicarrier. “Hey, campers,” Tony said, patching into comms for Steve’s team. “Need some back up?”

“Tony?” Steve answered incredulously. “What are you doing here?”

“Was in the area,” Tony said. “Well, you know, I was in New York, but you haven’t been answering my calls, so I thought I’d better drop by, see what you were up to. Looks like you’ve been busy.”

Steve laughed. “If that’s why you’re here, I’m glad I missed your calls,” he said. “You want to try and run interference? We’ve got two Helicarriers disabled, this is the last one but it’s the most heavily guarded. If you can stop any more reinforcements getting up here, I should be able to handle the guys already here.”

“Roger that, Rogers,” Tony said, but paused in his course towards the airstrip when he noticed a guard sneaking up behind Steve. He was just raising his repulser when the guy went sailing right off the side of the Helicarrier with an arrow sticking out center mass.

Steve leaned over to watch the guy’s descent. “You brought Clint?” he asked after a moment.

"Ah sure, brought his bows and arrows,” Tony said, which was weird and awkward, but Steve didn't notice on account of being in the middle of a mission and not as easily distracted as Tony. He had already returned his attention to the remaining guards.

Tony was pretty sure Bucky had him covered, so he dove down towards the airstrip. There were SHIELD personnel everywhere, running back and forth from the buildings and aircrafts, and Tony had no idea who to stop.

“Uh, if Hydra looks like SHIELD, how do I tell them apart?” he asked.

A group of running guards had paused at his approach, and turned as one to open fire on him.

“Never mind,” he said, dodging out of the way as he raised his repulser. “Found some.”

He aimed at the group, and pulled up the targeting on his visor. “Multiple targets,” he told Jarvis, and the target crosshairs multiplied to cover the whole group. “There we go.” Tony fired and they all fell over at once. “Okay, who’s next?” He dropped down in front of another group, and raised his hand defensively. The guards froze, and quickly raised their hands.

“We’re on your side,” one of the braver ones spoke up.

Tony powered down the repulsers. “Right,” he said. “On your way then.”

They continued on their way, and Tony followed them with his gaze. “Track ‘em, Jarvis,” he said. “Make sure they’re not up to no good. I have the strangest feeling Hydra wouldn’t have a problem lying to me about what side they’re on.”

“And people say you’re not cautious, sir,” Jarvis said.

“Who says that?” Tony asked, as he disabled a fighter jet right before it could take off. He hoped
that wasn’t one of the good guys, either.

“Everyone we know, Sir,” Jarvis told him.

“This is like fighting blind,” Tony cursed, as he tried to track the movements of the SHIELD agents. Every once and awhile one would get overconfident and come at him, but that was the only indication he had of what side they were on.

“I hate to bring you more bad news,” Jarvis started wryly, “but I’ve detected a breach of security in the SHIELD systems. I believe it be Ms. Romanoff.”

Tony clicked the comms back on for Steve’s team. “Natasha, what are you up to?”

"Stark." Once again, the answering voice was familiar, but very much not who he was calling.

"Should I just start calling you Natasha?" Tony snapped.

“Little busy, Stark,” Hill said tightly. “You have thirty seconds.”

“Need you to let me in on the plan,” he said. “Once again, I’m your calvary.”

There was a short pause, and he was pretty sure he didn’t imagine the soft cursing. “Focus on the armed targets,” she said. “We’ll handle the rest.”

“Gonna need more than that,” Tony said. “We’ve detected some strange activity on the SHIELD systems. I know we’re past our thirty seconds, so if you want me to do a little investigation on my own I’m perfectly capable of—“

“We’re dumping the entire SHIELD database online,” Hill interrupted tightly.

Tony’s eyes widened, and he almost didn’t dodge a hail of bullets in time. He spun and then took cover behind a quinjet. “I know I didn’t go to spy school like the rest of you, but that sounds counter-productive for a secret organization.”

“SHIELD has been overrun by Hydra since its inception,” Hill said. “We could either spend the next few decades untangling it and trying to work out who to trust, or we could pull the bandaid off all at once.”

“Ah, meaning Steve wasn’t happy with the corruption and doesn’t trust you to fix it,” Tony said, before spinning out from behind the quinjet to take out two more shooters with his repulsers. “Well, it’s efficient, I’ll give you that. It’s gonna be a hell of a PR mess.”

“You’re not part of SHIELD,” Hill reminded him. “It’s not your concern. If you want to help, try to stop Hydra reinforcements before they reach the Helicarriers.”

“You should be nicer, Hill,” Tony said wryly. “From the sound of it, you’re gonna be looking for a new job soon.”

“Is that an offer, Stark?” she asked dryly.

“No promises,” he said sweetly. “We’ll have to see how you do in the interview.” Hill just snorted and ended the call.

Tony considered the repercussions of this for about another thirty seconds, then he thought about the organization that had killed his parents and his vision went red. If they wanted to burn it down, he’d help them light the match.
“Jarvis, get rid of any references to the Asset. I already deleted the videos, but do another check for them too,” he ordered.

"And what of references to you, Sir?" Jarvis asked.

"I've got nothing to hide," Tony said. “My life’s an open book.”

"Consider it done," Jarvis assured him.

Tony took out the last shooter, and then moved out of cover. “Good, we need—“

A percussive wave of sound stopped him in his tracks. Tony glanced up just in time to see missiles fired from all three Helicarriers, all aimed at each other. The Helicarriers started to waver in the air as the missiles all started to make contact. He clicked his comm back on. “You couldn’t warn me?” he snapped. “Hill? Natasha? …Steve?”

“We seem to have lost access to that frequency, sir,” Jarvis said. “I’m working on it.”

He bet that Hill had shut down communications again. “Oh, you are so not getting that job offer,” he muttered, before spinning to glance back up and survey the damage. The Helicarriers appeared to be crashing in slow motion, as their remaining engines valiantly tried to keep them in the air.

And one of them was far too close to the Triskelion for comfort.

“Bucky, you need to get off that building. I don’t like the way that Helicarrier is tilting,” Tony said anxiously.

“Already lifting off,” Bucky assured him, and Tony glanced up just in time to see Quinjet in a vertical lift off straight up and out of the line of fire. Tony was surprised, but grateful that Bucky wasn’t being as stupidly heroic as the people he was used to dealing with—himself excluded, obviously.

Sadly, his relief was short-lived, and died a very sudden death at Bucky’s next question:

“Hey, you said Jarvis can fly this thing, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” Tony said, frowning, wondering if he’d been injured. “Jarvis—“

“At once, sir,” Jarvis said. “You know how I love to multitask.”

Tony looked back up to see that rather than move to land out of the danger zone, Bucky had the Quinjet hovering right above the tilted, failing Helicarrier. He’d hit the release on back hatch, and it was falling open. “Oh, Bucky-bear,” Tony said, with more calm than he felt. “Whatcha doin’?”

"Crazy bastard is going down with the ship," Bucky muttered angrily. “Tapped into their comms just before they closed ‘em off. He ordered them to fire on his position.”

"And your solution is to follow him?" Tony snapped.

"Pretty sure that bit is hardwired in," Bucky agreed, sounding a little disgruntled about it.

Then Bucky came running right off the edge of the Quinjet hatch into a free fall through the air, spinning into a roll right before he hit the shaky surface of the Helicarrier beneath him.

Tony’s heart might have actually stopped.
“Bucky?” he called urgently, just as he saw his distant figure gracefully lift back to his feet.

“That was a little farther than I thought,” Bucky said, sounding a bit breathless, but alive.

Tony shut his eyes for a moment. “We're going to have a long discussion about self-preservation when this is over,” he decided. “Steve can be the guest of honor, but you're vying for runner up.”

"Yeah?” he asked, with a breathy laugh. "Hey, aren't you the one that goaded a psychotic alien into tossing you out a window?”

"That is—" Tony started, before switching tracks, “that is a discussion for another time. Also, stop gossiping with Jarvis behind my back. He exaggerates.”

"Sir, I resent the assertion. I have never exaggerated," Jarvis protest primly, as he guided the Quinjet to land somewhere out of the way.

"Anyway, we do it right in front of you,” Bucky added.

"I hate it when you gang up on me,” Tony told them gruffly, but then went pale as the Helicarrier impacted the side of the Triskelion. “Okay, the Helicarrier is literally crashing into the Triskelion now. You need to get back to the roof. I’ll pick you up. Steve knows what he’s doing, he’ll have an exit plan.”

“He doesn’t, and he won’t. We’ll make our way to the roof just as soon as I find him,” Bucky answered.

“Buckster—" Tony started.

“Not without him,” Bucky broke in simply.

“Goddamnit,” Tony cursed, before starting towards the Helicarrier to join them. He was almost there when his comms sparked back to life.

"Tony!” Natasha cried, the actual Natasha, this time. "We've got a friendly jumping off the forty-first floor, north-west corner. You’re faster than we are. Can you get to him?”

Tony knew he didn’t have time to hesitate, so he spun back to the Triskelion, relying on Bucky to take care of himself for now. "On it,” he said, flying straight to the north-west corner.

He wasn’t expecting to see someone come flying right out the window. “Holy Sh—“ Tony started, and then dove forward, snatching the man around the waist to pull him back against him, before taking off to get away from the crumbling building.

“So, hi,” Tony said to his new passenger. “I’m Iron Man.” The man in his arms tried to glance back at him, and Tony got a good enough look at him to recognize him as the guy with the wings from the news. “Got your wings clipped, huh, bird-man?”

“Are you kidding me, man?” the guy grumbled. “This is why you should never meet your heroes.”

“I’m one of your heroes?” Tony said. “I’m touched. What’s your name? Gotta know who to make out the autograph to. Unless—you’re not really going by Bird-Man, are you?”

“Sam Wilson, but my call sign is Falcon,” he snorted. “Not that I’m not enjoying the view, but you planning to set me down any time soon?”

“Working on it,” Tony promised, using his cameras to tap into what was going on behind them.
The Helicarrier was half lodged into the Triskelion at this point, and then the whole thing was going to fall apart at the seams.

He landed at the shore of the lake, gently putting Wilson back on his feet. He could see what had to be Fury’s helicopter landing safely a short distance away, but he didn’t spare a moment for them. He spun back around to watch as the Helicarrier continued to fall into the Triskelion.

“Bob, what’s your status?” he demanded. “Answer me!”

“I’m almost there,” Bucky responded. “I see him.”

Tony adjusted the zoom on his cameras, and then he could see him, too. Steve was on the bottom floor of the Helicarrier, hanging on by a thread to the edge of the glass exterior. Tony took off towards him, leaving a shouting Wilson on the ground behind him.

He already knew he wasn’t going to make it. He could see Steve’s fingers slipping, and then—and then Bucky was there, sliding across the glass and reaching out to grip Steve’s wrist and halt his descent. Tony could just barely make out Bucky’s breathless voice over the comms:

“Hey, Stevie.”

And then the glass was breaking out from beneath him, and the both of them were falling too fast for Tony to catch them.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Note: This is only about half of what I originally had planned for this chapter, but it was getting kind of long and I didn’t want to leave you on the cliffhanger for another week, so here it is!

Also, just a reminder that this fic is heavily—and I mean heavily—centered on Tony and Bucky, and pretty much entirely Tony POV. So, apologies for anyone wanting more focus on other characters! I promise they do each have a part to play in this story, but it will be spread out and all taking place through Tony’s eyes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was this thing that happened sometimes, where time slowed down. A moment would just get caught in place, and it didn’t help anything, it didn’t give anyone more time or let them move faster or make the slightest difference—it just caught them there, watching it all happen in perfect clarity.

So Tony could see clearly the look of shock in Bucky’s eyes as the barrier beneath him broke apart, and he could see every tiny fleck of glass that split apart and fell around Bucky and Steve like sparkling sunlit confetti. They seemed to be floating for a moment before gravity won out, and tugged them down.

Bucky didn’t release his grip on Steve’s wrist, so the fall had them crashing into each other. Somehow, Tony knew what Bucky would do before he even made a move—he used his momentum and his grip on Steve to spin them so that Steve was above him.

Then they were disappearing beneath the water, and time started back up with a sickening lurch.

“Bob!” Tony shouted, even as the voice in the back of his mind corrected him—Bucky, it was Bucky now, Bob was gone. He put in a burst of power and landed gracelessly at the edge of the shore. He retracted the face mask, searching the water frantically.

Bucky and Steve broke free from the surface together, and Tony’s breath caught in relief. “Are you—“ he started.

“We’re fine,” Bucky assured him wryly. He was already making his way to the shore, tugging a stunned Steve behind him. He looked very wet—it wasn’t a bad look, some distant part of Tony’s mind noted—but somehow he was entirely unmarked. “I mean, we landed in the water. This was nothin’, you can trust me on that.”

"I am building you a suit that flies!” Tony decided. "Jesus."

Steve didn’t look to have fared as well as Bucky, but then there was no way to tell how much damage he had already suffered on the Helicarrier. He had a cut above his left eye that was bleeding steadily down, trailing down the same path that tears would take.

He didn’t seem to be registering any of that, though, or possibly even Tony’s presence at all.

Because he hadn’t take his eyes off Bucky once.
“Bucky?” Steve whispered desperately.

Bucky froze for a moment, then his whole expression changed, like he was putting on a mask. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes smoothed out and he smiled gently, looking suddenly like he could be in a black and white photo from the war.

“Hiya, punk,” Bucky said fondly. “Long time no see.”

Steve just stared back at him, looking somehow both elated and gutted at the exact same time. “Bucky?” he said again, and his voice was disbelievingly. Tony couldn’t really blame him. He’d had more than one fantasy about his mother just appearing suddenly beside him, but she’d always disappeared the moment that he reached out.

But when Steve rushed forward to tackle Bucky in a fierce hug, Bucky was solid and strong and caught him in time to balance them both.

“You’re really here?” Steve asked brokenly.

Bucky awkwardly patted him on the back. “Far as I can tell,” he said wryly.

Steve pulled back just far enough that he could examine Bucky’s face. He reached up one hand hesitantly, brushing Bucky’s long wet hair back out of his eyes. “I don’t understand,” he said. “How can you be here—?”

“Oh, well…that’s sorta…” Bucky trailed off, glancing over at Tony helplessly.

“Uh, well…that’s sorta…” Bucky trailed off, glancing over at Tony helplessly.

“Oh, no. Don’t look at me,” Tony said quickly, but it was too late, because Steve’s giant blue eyes were already spinning to latch onto him.

“Tony?” Steve said, his voice getting stronger. “What’s going on?”

“Right,” Tony sighed. “We were gonna break this gentle, right? So…uh, cliff notes version. Bucky didn’t die when he fell from the train, he was recaptured by Zola, got turned into a brainwashed killing machine for Hydra that was occasionally flash frozen over the last seventy years, give or take a couple years. But he’s doing much better now. Obviously.”

Steve stared at him for a moment with horrified eyes, and then his knees seemed to give out beneath him. “I think I need to sit down,” he said distantly.

Bucky reached out to try and catch him, but they both just ended up sitting on the shore in a foot of shallow water. “I don’t think gentle means what you think it means,” Bucky complained mildly, as he caught Steve’s arm to hold him steady.

“I’m sorry, but how do you spin something like that?” Tony asked. “Your backstory is more depressing than a John Steinbeck novel!”

“Not helping,” Bucky muttered, as he guided Steve’s head down and told him to breathe.

Tony winced and bit back his own retort, self-aware enough to realize his fear and adrenaline had him in snark overdrive—and this was definitely not the time. He felt instead like he was suddenly intruding somewhere he had no right to be.

“You survived?” Steve whispered, his eyes searching out Bucky instinctively as he raised his head. “All this time, you were alive? And I—“
“Hey, no,” Bucky said quickly. “I don’t remember much, but I remember enough to know I sure as hell shouldn’t have survived. Nothing you coulda done. They found me before you woulda gotten to me anyway.”

His reassurances just seemed to be having the opposite of the intended effect, and Steve had gone stark white, leaving the blood trailing down his face shining vividly in contrast. “I left you there,” he said. “I left you alone.”

“Look at me, Steve,” Bucky said firmly. “Just, look at me. I’m here now. Okay? I’m right here.”

Steve blinked at him for a moment, as some of his color started to come back. “Why are you wearing a Hulk sleep shirt?” he asked bemusedly.

Bucky broke out into one of those incandescent grins that Tony had previously only seen on film reels. He tried not to take it personally. “You’re wearing red and blue spandex, buddy,” Bucky told Steve. “Maybe don’t throw stones.”

Tony had thought he’d seen Steve smile before, too, but apparently he hadn’t—because the wry grins he was used to had nothing on the smile that broke out right then. He was looking at Bucky like he was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“God,” Steve said, reaching out to grip Bucky by his upper arms. “I’ve missed you, so much. I—“

“Hate to break up the reunion, boys,” Natasha said wryly, as she stepped up beside him. Tony spun to face her, wondering where the hell she had come from, and how long she had been standing there. He really, really hated spies.

“But we’ve got trouble on the way,” she continued.

Tony could hear the distant sirens now, and glanced back just in time to see Fury and Hill disappearing into the distance in their helicopter. “Looks like you missed your ride,” he told her.

“Your pilot looks pretty preoccupied,” she said. “I thought maybe you could use a spare.”

“We can’t just leave,” Steve said, finally pulling his eyes from Bucky. He pushed himself up to his feet, reaching out to take Bucky’s hand and pull him back up beside him. “We need to explain—“

“There will be a time for explanations,” Natasha agreed. “That time is not now. They find us now, and they will take us somewhere very dark and very far away and we won’t be leaving it any time soon.”

“She’s right,” Tony agreed. “We need to do some major damage control, and until we know who we can trust, we need to get somewhere secure. Luckily, I have a fully defensible Tower. They’ll probably know where we are, but it’s unlikely they’ll risk coming for you there. Jarvis is already analyzing the data dump for what information can help us.”

“Data dump?” Bucky asked.

“They just dropped SHIELD’s entire library on the web,” Tony told him. “Or, you know, Hydra’s entire library. Jarvis is having a little trouble figuring out which bits of this information falls into which category, honestly.”

Bucky frowned in concern, but before he could ask more questions, Steve started to list against him. He turned around, eyeing the wound on Steve’s eyebrow with worry. “What happened to you?” he asked. “Did you hit your head?”
“Rumlow, from my Strike team,” Steve explained. “He was Hydra—he, he was waiting for me in the control center on the last Helicarrier. I knocked him out, but not before he got in a lucky shot.”

That meant the ‘cut’ was a graze from a bullet, Tony realized sickly. It was kind of frightening to think about how close this reunion came to never happening. From the look on Bucky’s face, he was thinking the same thing.

“I saw him when I was making my way to you,” Bucky told him, looking back at the wreckage like he was prepared to search for Rumlow to finish him off. “He was still alive when we went down, but he was pretty well trapped.”

“How would—“ Steve started. “You know who Rumlow is?”

“They were training him to be my handler,” Bucky admitted. “I didn’t remember till I saw him, but he was—”

“Sirens are getting closer,” Natasha interrupted calmly. “We really should get to Tony’s Quinjet before they get here.”

Tony knew she was right, and turned to lead the way. He kept glancing back, and saw that Steve wouldn’t let go of Bucky. He kept gripping his sleeve, or holding him by the wrist like he thought he was a toddler that might wander off.

It was sort of adorable, but also almost unbearably sad. Bucky seemed fine with it, smiling at Steve in equal parts astonishment and awe, apparently over his doubts when faced with Steve Rogers in the flesh.

Tony was happy for them, he really was.

But there was a selfish part of him that felt like Bucky was his first—he wasn’t, by about a hundred years, but logic wasn’t all that comforting. He didn’t want to let Bucky go.

And he was going to have to let him go.

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Natasha had flown them back to the Tower. Tony didn’t exactly trust her, he wasn’t sure he ever could, but she was still an Avenger, after all—and he knew she was loyal to Steve, if not to him. He wasn’t entirely sure what it said about him that he didn’t think anything of harboring a couple fugitives, but he hadn’t worried too much about bringing Bucky home either, and that had worked out pretty wonderful.

For as long as it lasted, anyway.

Bucky had disappeared with Steve just moments after they’d arrived home, ostensibly to deal with the graze on Steve’s forehead, though Tony suspected they just weren’t ready to be apart.

Natasha had no trouble following them to clean up herself, but Tony couldn’t help but continue to feel like some kind of interloper even in his own house. So he left them to it, and went to his lab instead. He climbed out of his suit and then grabbed a pen from his desk, tugging the cap off with his teeth as he walked towards the large blackboard along the back wall.


“There was nearly a Petabyte of data on the SHIELD servers,” Jarvis said dryly. “Where would
“Let’s block out anything older than ten years for now, and archive anything we already knew about,” Tony told him, before drawing a line down the middle of the board. He scribbled ‘Hydra’ on one side, and ‘SHIELD’ on the other. “Focus on the more recent cases that may still have active agents in play. Two main objectives: any threats that need to be dealt with, and any innocents that have been caught in the crossfire.”

“Would you like to start with threats in order of their position of power?” Jarvis asked.

“Yeah, we don’t have time to care about the foot soldiers yet,” Tony agreed. “Give me the big timers.”


“Alexander—“ Tony broke off, scribbling the name in cursive on the board. He remembered coming home to find Pepper holding Bob on the couch after a panic attack, and she’d said— “Son of a bitch. Okay. Next.”

Jarvis read out the names one after another:

Senator Maxwell Stern.
Senator Simon Braxton.
Senator Arnold Peters.
John Garrett.
Jasper Sitwell…

There were far too many people in power on the list that just kept growing longer, but as Jarvis made it to the more high ranking members of SHIELD Tony hit pause. The most important part was taking out the publicly visible figures—optics mattered, as much as Tony hated them, and he couldn’t give them time to spin this. He suspected Fury would be handling any remaining active agents on his own, anyway.

He had Jarvis package up the evidence for each name on the list into neat, defense-lawyer-proof files, and then sent them off to every government agency that was still left. He suspected they’d all be in cuffs before the sun went down.

“Okay,” Tony said, sliding over to the SHIELD side. “Now we—“

“I guess you were right not to trust us.”

“If you’re going to be staying here,” Tony told her without turning around, “I’m going to get you a bell to wear.”

“I was trained to move with bells on,” Natasha told him slyly, as she stepped inside the lab. Tony finally glanced back at her. She was freshly scrubbed and wearing a sweater and drawstring sweatpants that were about three times too big. She looked vulnerable and lost—but Tony knew better than to fall for how she looked.

She moved to stand beside him, and held her hand out for the pen. Tony tossed it to her wordlessly. She stood on her tip toes and crossed out Alexander Pierce first, then Jasper Sitwell. She handed the pen back, and continued to stare at the board.

“Isn’t this a little low tech for you?” she asked.
Tony absently tapped at the corner of the blackboard, and it flickered, reverting to a screensaver of the New York cityscape. Another tap, and the chart appeared again.

“This is not a pipe,” he told her dryly.

Natasha’s lips quirked, and she moved around behind him to look at the SHIELD part of the board. “What is this one for?” she asked.

“You burned a lot of agents,” he reminded her. “And let’s not pretend SHIELD only had info on people that worked for them.”

“We were all burned already anyway,” she said, reaching out to brush her fingers against the simulated blackboard. “Hydra cells were activated within every level of SHIELD, and they already knew everything about us. They were us. But their plans only work if people don’t know about them. Making that knowledge public…it loses all value. Now they’re the ones on the run.”

“Which is why I allowed it,” Tony agreed. “But we can’t just wait for this mess to fix itself.”

“I gave a heads up to Clint before we went to the Triskelion,” she told him. “He got messages out to all our deep cover agents, sent them to a couple of safe houses he’d managed to keep off the grid. We didn’t get to everyone in time, but we’re reasonably sure the ones we got to are all on our side, and reasonably sure is the best we’ve got at the moment.” She shrugged. “The rest should be fine. They’ll go to the CIA, or NSA.”

“What about you?” he asked, glancing over at her.

“I think I’m done with the government acronyms for awhile,” she told him.

Tony turned back to the board. “When you were spying on Stark Industries,” he started casually, “do you think you were working for SHIELD, or for Hydra?”

“I don’t know,” she said quietly. “I can ask that question about every single SHIELD mission I’ve ever been on, and I don’t think I really know the answer for a single one of them.” She looked back towards the door, like she was checking on her route of escape. “I got burned this time too, Stark.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. The files on Natasha had been more extensive than any of the other Avengers. He’d had Jarvis isolate them all, and archive them for later. He hadn’t read them yet, but he couldn’t promise that he wouldn’t.

“Barnes is burned, too,” she added.

Tony paused. “Funny thing about that, though, cause I’d already removed all his files from SHIELD servers,” he said casually. “So not really. He’s still in the clear.”

Natasha watched him with surprise, though very little of it showed on her face. “You erased him,” she said. “You let us do it to everyone else, but you erased him. Why?”

“Because if I hadn’t his name would have ended up on the wrong list,” he said simply, tapping the Hydra side of the board. “That’s not who he is.”

“It’s not over for him, you do know that?” she asked. “You may have erased those files, but the past isn’t that easily done away with. It’s still in him.”

“Trust me, I know.” Tony told her. “But it doesn’t matter, now. I’ve done what I can. Steve will—well, he’ll take care of the rest. He’ll take care of him.”
“You think you’ve already lost him,” Natasha realized.

Tony swallowed hard. “He never belonged to me.”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you, Tony,” Natasha insisted, frowning over at him. “Something like that doesn’t just disappear.”

Tony laughed darkly, and shook his head. “Sure, except when he finds out he’s Bucky Barnes and all that comes with it,” he said. “I haven’t spent the last six weeks with Bucky Barnes. I spent it with Bob, and he’s already gone.”

“I don’t think you’re giving him enough credit,” she said. “He clocked me at that charity ball before you did, you know that?”

Tony turned to her in surprise. “What?”

“I was watching you from the moment you came in, and he made me,” she said, her lips quirking up a bit. “Wasn’t being cautious enough. Forgot who I was dealing with. You excused yourself and went to the bathroom, and he came up beside me and politely threatened to slit my throat if I even thought of hurting you.”

Tony gaped at her. He remembered Bucky that night, all smiles and laughter and innocent delight at the hors d’oeuvres. “No, he—”

“Threats like that tend not to worry me much, but from him…” she trailed off, raising eyebrow. “Well, I know from experience the Winter Soldier always follows through.”

Tony glared at her. “He’s not—“

“He is,” she said simply. “That’s my point. He is the Winter Soldier. He is Bucky Barnes. He is Bob. All of these things can be true at once.”

Tony remembered Bucky’s fierce determination to stand up for Luke in that ally, and he remembered the way he’d been prepared to take down Nick Fury right in the living room with nothing but a wine-opener. All of those pieces were just as important as his love of sugar and Disney, just as much a part of him as anything. He supposed he’d actually met Bucky Barnes before either of them had realized that was who he was.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “But I still can’t compete with a friendship that spans a century.”

“Who says you have to?” she asked wryly. “You think I’m gonna give up my friendship with Steve just because he has Bucky back? No, I’m going to fight for it, and I have a lot to make up for.”

Tony winced on her behalf. “Figured out you knew before him, huh?”

“He’s not happy with me,” Natasha admitted, looking uncharacteristically ill at ease. “But for what it’s worth, I told him you really didn’t know.”

Tony was sort of touched. It may have just been the truth, but Natasha wasn’t exactly known for telling it. He wondered what it had cost her. “He’ll forgive you, you know,” he told her. “I mean, he’s Captain America.”

“You really don’t know him very well, do you?” she asked, smiling sadly.

“Starting to think maybe I don’t,” Tony agreed.
“He’s the one that wanted to burn SHIELD to the ground,” Natasha said. “That’s the trouble with a truly moral man, I suppose. No shades of grey. And maybe you haven’t noticed, but that’s sort of where I live.”

“Well, metaphorically, maybe,” Tony agreed. “Physically, you know you’re welcome here, right?”

“Am I?” she asked softly.

“The twenty-first floor is yours,” he told her, and glanced away. “Built it for you before I knew you and Steve were running off to D.C."

Natasha leaned up to give him a quick peck on the cheek. “We don’t deserve you, Tony,” she told him, before turning back towards the door.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony said gruffly. He glanced up at her retreating back. “Just stay out of the restricted areas!”

Natasha flashed him a grin that made no promises, and disappeared out the door.

Chapter End Notes

* In case you’re curious: Ceci n’est pas one pipe (this is not a pipe), is a reference to the painting by surrealist painter René Magritte.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

So…still not through my original outline for chapter thirteen, cause this story just keeps growing longer and longer. It was supposed to be like 40K max. Now I think I’ll be lucky if I can finish it out in twenty chapters!

Tony woke up to the sound of his ringing phone, and nearly fell out of his chair as he instinctively reached to grab it. “Stark,” he answered, mostly on auto-pilot, as he ran a hand through his hair.

He wasn’t sure when he had fallen asleep or how long it had been. His digital blackboard was covered end to end in his hurried writing, with all the most urgent and worrying bits of the SHIELD data. He’d tipped off agencies across the states to handle them, and had finally sat down for a break.

Sitting down had obviously been a mistake.

“Hey, man, I’m supposed to give you a message,” a familiar voice told him. Tony squinted at the board as he tried to place it.

“Right, who are you?” he asked.

“Sam Wilson,” the man said.

Tony blinked, still trying to place it. “How did you get this number?”

There was a short offended silence, and then a sigh. “Look, it’s Bird-Man,” he said. “From the Triskelion? I got the number from Nat.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Bird-Man!” he cried. “Right, the guy with the wings. Shit, I’m gonna be honest, I forgot all about you. Did we just leave you there?”

“I’m going to try not to take that personal,” Sam said wryly. “But nah, man. Nat put me on a helicopter with just about the scariest person I’ve ever met, and some dude with an eyepatch. She thought it would be safer for me to get dropped at a safe house, rather than somewhere public like the Tower.”

“Probably a good idea,” Tony agreed. No one had come for them yet, but it was only a matter of time before one of the remaining government agencies got their act together and came knocking at his door. He already had lawyers working around the clock to protect everyone involved, but the less people in the spotlight, the better. “Well, what can I do for you, Bird-Man?”

“You can call me Sam, for starters,” he said. “But I’m just a messenger. Dude with an eyepatch wanted me to tell you that you can cross Garret off your list, whatever the hell that means. These spies are driving me crazy, man. I was just in this to get a running partner.”

“I know the feeling,” Tony agreed. “I mean, not about the running part. I don’t really do that except if I’m being chased.”
Sam snorted. “Hey, is Steve okay? He didn’t look in great shape,” he said. “Didn’t want to just leave like that, but Nat was pretty sure he needed some time to process something.”

“He’ll be fine,” Tony promised. “What about you? You’re not still with ‘Eyepatch Dude,’ are you? Cause you probably want to keep your distance from him if you value your sanity and/or your health.”

“No, I’m just at some safe house in the woods with Robin Hood and his merry men,” Sam assured him.

Tony could hear Clint shouting somewhere in the background: “You’re not supposed to tell him that! Christ Almighty. Don’t you even know what a safe house is?”

”Apparently I’m not supposed to tell you that,” Sam added.

“You can tell Clint if I wanted to find him I would,” Tony told him. “I just don’t want to.”

“I heard that!” Clint shouted.

“Look, just tell Steve I’m here if he needs me,” Sam said. “And also please let me know as soon as I can go home. These people are nuts.”

“Better get used to it,” Tony told him. “You just helped save the country from mass death and tyranny, pretty sure that makes you an honorary Avenger.”

“Does that mean you’ll stop calling me Bird-Man?” Sam asked.

“No, but it does mean I’ll build you a new set of wings,” Tony told him, wondering if he could convince Bucky to take a pair, too. The guy didn’t have a great track record with long falls, and even if he—well, even when he left, Tony wanted to make sure there was something there to catch him the next time he fell.

“Can’t turn that down from the great Tony Stark,” Sam said, and it sounded like he was grinning. “Clint’s about to tackle me if I don’t hang up now, so see you around, man.”

The phone clicked off and Tony laughed lightly, deciding Sam was an okay guy. Then he saw the time on his phone and nearly choked.

It was nearly noon, which meant he’d probably been asleep for four hours at his desk. It also meant he was running behind on his time table. It wouldn’t be long until—

“Sir,” Jarvis interrupted. “The FBI just arrived at the lobby. They are requesting to speak with one of the Avengers immediately.”

—and that was right on cue. Tony hung his head and sighed. “Tell them I’ll be right down.”

“Ms. Romanoff is already on her way to meet them,” Jarvis informed him.

Tony cursed, and rushed back towards the elevator. “She still in the elevator?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jarvis agreed.

“Stop it, bring her back here,” he told him.

He saw the light pause on the sixth floor, and then it started heading back up. He crossed his arms as the elevator reached his floor, and the doors slid open. Natasha was looking far more put
together than she had the last time he’d seen her. She was wearing a black pencil skirt and a black blazer over a button up creme blouse, with a pair of a truly frightening heels—they looked a little like they should require a license to wear.

She’d also straightened her hair and applied her make up perfectly, arranging everything like it was her own version of a suit of armor. She looked beautiful, and just a little bit terrifying underneath.

“You hijacked my elevator?” she asked, giving a lop-sided smirk. “That’s not very polite.”

Tony pointed at her angrily. “I’m not just gonna let you take the fall for this.”

“I don’t see how you can stop me,” Natasha said. “Anyway, if you think I’m going down without a fight you’re mistaken, and should know me better.”

“We still need to come up with a plan,” he insisted. “I’ve got my lawyers—“

“This is being tried in the court of public opinion, lawyers are obsolete,” she interrupted him calmly. “We need to put a face on this, it might as well be mine. My undercover days are over, anyway.”

“Captain America is already the face of this,” he told her. “We’ve gotta all be on the same page.”

“Steve’s in no place to handle this right now,” she said stiffly. “This one is on me. I’m gonna own it.”

Tony shook his head, but stepped forward. “Fine, if that’s how you want to play it,” he said. “But I’m coming with you.”

She leaned forward, placing her hands at either side of the door, blocking him out. She appeared so delicately built, but he knew it was deceiving—without his suit, he stood no chance against her in hand to hand. He could disable the elevator, but she could always take the stairs or scale the side of the building or even base jump, one never knew with her, so there wasn’t much point. If she really wanted to go down there, he wouldn’t be able to stop her for long.

“If you need a face, you can’t do better than mine. The press love me,” he reminded her. “Don’t you think—“

“I know how to work a room all by lonesome,” she promised. “They need you more here.”

“They really don’t,” Tony said, ashamed to admit he was reluctant to even return to his floor and see them. “Last I saw they were doing just fine.”

Natasha winced almost imperceptibly, and Tony narrowed his eyes. “What did you do?” he demanded.

“Steve asked me for a favor. He wanted a file,” she said quietly, and Tony got a sinking feeling where this was going. “I owe him so I—well, I asked him not to look in it, but let’s just say he’s probably already read it twice.”

“You gave him the Winter Soldier’s files,” Tony realized, glaring back at her. “Don’t you think Bucky should have had some say in that?”

“Maybe,” she agreed. “But he’s not the one I owe a debt.”

Tony remembered going over those files with a fine tooth comb, until he was physically sick, until
he was shaking and couldn’t see anything but Bob screaming every time he closed his eyes. He’d been that effected by it when Bucky was still a virtual stranger—he couldn’t even imagine how Steve must feel.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said, though part of him knew it was only a matter of time. Steve would have found a way to that information one way or another.

“You saw Barnes,” Natasha said. “He’s trying so hard to be what Steve remembers. He’s smiling and laughing and telling Steve that yes, of course he remembers that, even when he doesn’t. He’d nearly had him fooled, he’d nearly had me fooled, and that wouldn’t do anyone any good. He’s not the person Steve knew, he can’t be. Steve needs to understand that, and he needs to know what was done to him to understand who he is now.”

Tony had seen it for himself, the way Bucky had put on a mask the moment he’d turned to face Steve. He was far too good at pretending, and the way he’d slipped right back into the skin of Bucky Barnes had been more than a little disconcerting.

Tony had figured it had just been his own jealousy tainting everything, but if Natasha had picked up on it too…

“The thing about covers is it doesn’t matter how good they are,” Natasha said quietly. “Sooner or later they all fall apart.”

Tony sighed, before looking back at her. “Are you really sure you should go alone?”

“I called the press ten minutes before the FBI arrived,” she told him. “Reporters are already waiting at the front doors, so they’re not going to be able to make me disappear. They’ll take me in for questioning, very publicly, and I will answer their questions. I will answer for what was done. And they won’t be able to touch me after we’re done.”

“Risky game,” Tony warned her.

She grinned, and reached out to press the button on the elevator. “That’s my favorite kind,” she told him. “I can handle this, Tony, if you can manage to look after a couple of ninety year olds while I’m gone.”

“I think we should switch,” Tony deadpanned, but she just laughed at him as the doors closed between them.

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When Tony finally forced himself to return to the penthouse, he nearly tripped over Steve on his way to his room.

Steve was sitting on the floor beside the hallway, his head leaning back against the wall and his eyes were pressed shut. Tony could see two small butterfly bandages across his eyebrow, but he couldn’t see so much as a trace of scar beneath it. Tony frowned down at him, feeling his heartbeat pick up as he noticed Bucky’s absence—some irrational fear prickling at the back of his mind that he might already be gone.


“He’s asleep,” Steve said, and his voice sounded strange, weirdly rough. He opened his eyes and lifted his head. He nodded towards the living room. “He fell asleep on the couch while we were watching some movie. He used to love science fiction dime novels but never cared much for
moving pictures.” He frowned slightly. “Now he’s weirdly obsessed with Disney, which is new.”

“I don’t know how that happened,” Tony said quickly, rocking back on his heels. “But none of that really explains why you’re on the floor.”

“Do you already know, everything that they did to him?” Steve asked quietly, and reached beside him to pick up a manila folder, stamped with Russian writing on the front. He held it out to Tony, and his hand was shaking. “Because he wouldn’t tell me, so I asked Natasha for this.”

Tony reluctantly reached out for the folder, his stomach dropping as he opened it up. This was the missing piece—these were the files that weren’t on that Hydra base… this was the genesis of the Winter Soldier, from capture through to when he was finally broken. There was a photo of Bucky in stasis paper clipped to the first page, a small photo of him in uniform beside it. It recounted the brutal way they installed his first arm, the sensory deprivation they used to try and break him, the —

Tony swallowed and shut the folder. He already knew exactly where this led. “You shouldn’t have read this,” he said.

“No, I should have stopped it,” Steve snapped, glancing up at him, pointing to the folder. “That happened because of me. I didn’t catch him, and then I didn’t even go back for him. While I was—and they had him, all this time, the things they did—”

He cut himself off, letting his head fall back against the wall again as he took a shaky breath and composed himself. “I don’t even know what to say to him,” he admitted.

“You were talking to him before,” Tony frowned.

Steve’s eyes strayed to the folder. “That was—I didn’t understand yet,” he explained. “I didn’t realize the cost of having him back. I can’t—“

Tony sighed, and dropped down to sit beside him, and set the folder between them. “Look, you’re gonna have to snap out of it,” he told him flatly.

Steve glanced at him sideways, looking betrayed, but Tony somehow managed to resist the full force of that disappointed stare.

“I just mean, this isn’t really about you,” he continued. “So deal with your guilt, wallow for a bit, take all the rest of the day if you need to, then you need to snap the hell out of it because this isn’t what he needs.”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “Tony—“

“Let me put it this way,” Tony interrupted, “why don’t you ask yourself who your guilt is really for, because it’s sure as hell not gonna help him. I may not have known Bucky Barnes like you knew him, but I know him now. So I know the more depressed you get, the more he’s gonna pretend that he’s fine. That he’s the same. And he’s not.”

The anger faded from Steve’s eyes almost before it could form, and he blinked at Tony in surprise. “When did you get so wise?”

“I’ve always been like this,” Tony told him. “Took you long enough to notice.” He pulled a Pixy Stix from his shirt pocket, and held it out. “Pixy Stix?” he asked. When Steve just eyed it dubiously, Tony shrugged and ripped it open. “More for me.”
Steve snorted quietly, and glanced back towards the living room. “Nat told me what you did, you know,” he said. “She told me how you saved him, and helped heal his arm.”

“The arm was Helen,” Tony said. “And saving him was mostly accidental, if I’m being honest.”

“I’m trying to say thank you, Tony,” Steve told him, his tone a little exasperated. “Just…thank you, okay? Thank you for being there when I couldn’t be. If I’d known…I’d known…if Nat had told me…”

“She had her reasons for not telling you,” Tony offered lightly. “Not saying I agree with them, but I do think she just wanted him somewhere safe until you got SHIELD under control.”

“That’s what she says,” Steve agreed quietly. “She says she didn’t know about him until after you brought him here. She swears she didn’t know he was the Winter Soldier before.”

“Do you believe her?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know what to believe,” he admitted. “Not anymore.”

“She left with the FBI about an hour ago,” Tony told him after a brief pause. “She has some sort of plan, thinks she can get them all to do what she wants. Considering it’s her, I’d say the chances are pretty good.”

“She left?” Steve asked, pushing forward nearly into a crouch, like he was getting ready to spring into action. “She went alone?”

“Her and about a hundred of her closest reporter friends,” Tony agreed. “Jarvis is monitoring the news coverage. She’s fine. She knows what she’s doing.”

“It should have been me,” Steve said firmly. “I should be there.”

“I mean, have you looked in a mirror lately?” Tony asked, then frowned. “Well, actually, you still look weirdly perfect, but that’s not really the point.”

Steve glanced back towards the room he’d left Bucky, looking torn. “I can’t just let her—“

“She needs to do this,” Tony said. “I offered to go, but she wants to do it alone. If I didn’t think she could handle it, I would have found a way to stop her.”

Steve relaxed reluctantly, seeming to hunch back in on himself. He pulled up one knee and let his forehead fall against it. “This day,” he said, huffing out a disbelieving laugh. “When I first saw him—I thought I was dreaming. But nothing’s easy, is it? Nothing comes without a cost, and he’s the one that’s been paying the price.”

Tony watched him carefully, noting that despite the fact that he still wouldn’t look out of place on a magazine cover, his eyes seemed bruised and shadowed. He looked like he was barely holding himself together. “When was the last time you slept?” he asked suspiciously.

“I stopped counting somewhere around hour seventy-two,” Steve said dryly.

“Oh, that’s it,” Tony said, getting to his feet and holding a hand out Steve. “Come on.”

Steve stayed where he was, watching Tony’s hand with a slightly unfocused gaze. “You don’t understand. I can’t sleep—I can’t…I won’t leave him unguarded. Not ever again.”

“Where do you think you are?” Tony asked, reaching out to snatch Steve’s hand and tug him up. “I can watch out for you both.”
Steve let himself get pulled back to his feet, but Tony noticed he had grabbed the file and was holding onto it desperately in his other hand. It was the last thing that Bucky needed to see right now, and it was the last thing Steve needed to see, too.

“Why don’t you let me hold on to that?” Tony asked quietly, and held out his hand for the file.

Steve glanced down at the file, but made no move to hand it over.

“Yeah, I’m just gonna—” Tony said, reaching forward to gently tug it from Steve’s hand. “It’s not gonna help, reading it over and over.”

“I know,” Steve admitted after a moment, watching tiredly as Tony pulled open one of the cabinets of what had once been a wet bar, and laid the file inside.

“I’d offer one of the guest rooms—” Tony began, but sighed at the horrified look Steve threw him, “—yeah, figured. Come on, there’s an armchair across from the couch with your name on it.”

He led Steve to the chair. It was right across from the sleeping Bucky, and Steve exhaustedly dropped down into it, with surprisingly little prompting. He was asleep within just minutes.

Tony watched him for a moment, before turning back to look at Bucky. He’d changed into a plain thermal shirt, and was snuggled into the Iron Man throw blanket they kept on the couch. That one had been a gift from Pepper—who thought she was hilarious—and couldn’t be blamed on Jarvis.

He came to a quiet stop in front of him, and gently reached out to tug the blanket a little further up.

“Tony?” Bucky whispered, blinking his eyes open.

“Go back to sleep,” Tony told him, and turned to go. Bucky gently caught his hand, and tugged him back.

“You okay?” he asked. “Romanoff said you guys had everything under control, but—“

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine,” Tony promised softly. “Go back to sleep.”

Bucky’s eyes searched the room until they landed on Steve, and then he nodded and fell back against the couch. “Okay,” he said, but he didn’t release Tony’s hand.

Tony stared down at where their hands were wound together. It was with Bucky’s left hand, which was still strangely smooth and new, but literal steel underneath. Whatever its strength, he knew it would only take a couple words to Bucky to get himself free, but then he didn’t really want to be.

So instead he sat down on the couch next to Bucky’s curled up legs, and let their clasped hands rest between them as he settled in to watch over them all.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the delay on this, you guys! I have both some valid and not so valid excuses, but suffice it to say I shouldn’t take even short breaks when I’ve got a story going as it tends to leave me blocked whenever I come back to pick it up! So yeah, anyway have been nitpicking this for a couple weeks and decided to finally just post it! I can’t tell you how much all of your comments have meant to me, and I’m so sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony sat with Bucky and Steve for a couple of hours before slipping into the kitchen for some caffeine, ignoring Jarvis’s judgmental muttering about excessive caffeine intake the entire time. He knew what it was like to not be able to sleep, to be too terrified because what if he woke somewhere else, somewhen else, and he wouldn’t leave Steve unguarded after his promise.

But apparently even Tony’s awesome stealth skills were no match for Steve’s super-hearing, because he appeared in the kitchen just a moment later. Tony was used to Bucky’s brand of super-soldier sleep, which basically meant he slept like the dead.

Tony poured the coffee and wordlessly held out the first cup to Steve. Steve took it with a faint smile and dropped onto the barstool by the counter.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Hope I didn’t wake you,” Tony said.

“No, I don’t sleep much usually,” Steve admitted, glancing back behind himself in concern. “Bucky is still sound asleep.”

“Yeah, he kinda hibernates sometimes,” Tony said. “Jarvis doesn’t think they let him sleep—“ He trailed off as he registered Steve’s growing expression of horror. “Sorry,” he winced. “There’s not much about what they did that isn’t horrible.”

“I want you to tell me,” Steve said firmly. “And thanks, you know, for the wake up call you gave me. If I’m going to help him, I know I need to stop feeling sorry for myself. And this is—well, it’s the sort of thing I need to know.” He looked back at Tony, squaring his shoulders like he was about to go into battle. “What else can you tell me? Because Natasha thinks he’s pretending with me, that he’s not the same.”

“She’s right,” Tony told him carefully. “But he does remember you. He remembered you before he could even remember his own name. He thought you were his little brother.”

Steve snorted lightly. "Of course he did,” he said, grinning fondly. “Practically was, I guess.”

“I guess my point is, maybe that’s the important part. I mean, if you’d met me before I was taken by the Ten Rings, I don’t think you’d recognize me,” Tony told him. “I certainly don’t feel the same, and I doubt you’re the same kid that lied on every form he could to try and get himself
enlisted, either. So, of course he’s changed. But I think who he is now is pretty incredible. You just have to give yourself the chance to get to know him again.”

“That’s all I want,” Steve agreed. “Well, I mean, part of me still wants to hunt down every single person that had anything to do with what was done to him,” he added fiercely, looking more like an avenging angel than he ever had before. He blinked and turned his head, and it was gone again. “But most of me just wants to get him away from here. Away from all of this. Find somewhere I can keep him safe.”

Tony swallowed hard, feigning casualness as his eyes skittered away. “So you’re planning to leave then?” he asked. “With Bucky?”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, I’m not planning to let him out of my sight any time soon,” he said. “And Hydra’s still out there. No offense, Tony, but this is the first place they’re going to come looking for him.”

“Yeah, no, it’s a good idea,” Tony agreed quietly. “Where are you going to take him?”

“It’s probably better all around if you don’t know,” Steve said, not unkindly. It still felt like the words were aimed right for his heart. “Anyway, we’ve put you out enough. I know I can never repay you.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Tony said shortly. “And Bucky doesn’t owe me anything.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Steve said quickly, looking startled. “Bad choice of words. I just meant, look, Tony, you didn’t have to do any of this. How did you—how did you even find him?”

“Ah, right,” Tony said, turning away to pour his own cup of coffee. “About that…”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “Tony—” he started, back to the disapproving tone Tony was accustomed to.

Tony sighed, bracing himself on the counter as he tried to think of the best way to explain. He didn’t think Steve would be angry at Bucky for what he’d done, that wasn’t the problem—but he wasn’t entirely sure Steve wouldn’t be angry at him for what he’d almost done.

“I found a video a couple months ago, it was of my parents,” he explained. “They were killed by a Hydra assassin. I wasn’t in the best place, after that. I was determined to find him.” Tony kept his eyes on the counter, feeling sick himself about what might have been. He still had nightmares where he’d succeeded in his mission before he knew any better. “In the end, I found Bo-bucky instead.”

Tony finally forced himself to look up and meet Steve’s eyes, but he didn’t find what he expected. Steve didn’t look righteous or disappointed, he looked ashamed. Tony blinked at him in disbelief.

“But then you already knew that,” he said in realization.

“No, I didn’t—“ Steve started, looking pale. “I didn’t, Tony. There was some footage Nat and I found, it may have been a man with metal arm that killed Howard. That was all I knew. I’ve barely had time to even process that Bucky’s even alive—“

“Don’t pull that with me, you knew exactly what had happened. You knew, and you weren’t going to tell me,” Tony said, as he let go of the counter and stumbled back a step. “What did you think—you thought I’d just turn on him, knowing everything I know? You thought I’d just—“

“Tony, please, just listen—“
“You know what? No. It’s…whatever. It’s fine,” Tony said quietly, as he turned to walk away. “I’ve got some things of my own to work on. You go ahead and keep making your own plans.”

He thought he heard Bucky calling out to him when he escaped into the elevator, but he didn’t look back up in order to be sure.

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Tony managed to avoid interaction with anyone other than Jarvis for the next few hours, letting a couple different news channels play in the background. Natasha had faced the questioning live right on C-Span and then walked right back out just like she’d said she would, and the media was pretty split on the issue of whether she should have—which basically meant, Fox News was out for their blood, and everywhere else was a little more circumspect.

In other words, she’d pulled it off.

But Steve was still right to leave while he could, because there could be more trials and subpoenas, there could be more Hydra and more attacks. Bucky wasn’t safe here—and that was the only thing that mattered.

“Sir, Ms. Potts has just arrived in the lobby and looks quite…agitated,” Jarvis informed him. “As per your Scary-But-Well-Meaning-Friends protocols, it is my duty to warn you that if you wish to hide you have three minutes before she’ll arrive.”

Tony hung his head. “I forgot to tell her about any of this, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Jarvis agreed amiably. “However, Bucky has been in contact with her a number of times.”

“Wait, what?” Tony demanded, shooting back up to his feet. “What did he tell her?”

“My privacy protocols prevent me from answering that, Sir,” Jarvis said disapprovingly. Tony cursed, dragging a hand through his hair. “Right, of course,” he said. “I didn’t mean—“

“She is in the elevator, Sir,” Jarvis added. “Should I assume you intend to handle this like an adult?”

“When did you get so judgmental?” Tony asked.

“I was born this way, Sir,” Jarvis replied dryly.

Tony snorted, and glanced at his reflection in the floor to ceiling window. His hair was sticking straight up, his stubble a little more out of control than usual, and his clothes were obviously slept in.

But it wasn’t like Pepper hadn’t seen him way worse than this, so he just shrugged. “Might as well face the music, huh?”

Pepper flew through the lab doors in a flurry of strawberry blond hair and fire-engine red heels, her eyes latching onto him with the sort of laser focus that meant he’d probably screwed up somewhere. “Bucky Barnes?!” she cried, in lieu of more traditional greetings, her hands latching onto her hips.

“Yeah, I—“ Tony started.
“You’ve had Bucky Barnes as your houseguest, Tony,” Pepper told him. “How did you not recognize Bucky Barnes!?”

“Hey,” Tony cried. “You didn’t recognize him either! And you’ve been to the Captain America exhibit like three times, don’t pretend you haven’t!”

Pepper sighed, dropping down into one of his chairs. “I knew he was familiar,” she admitted. “But when I was running possibilities through my mind, I wasn’t actually referencing my knowledge of WWII history. The best I came up with was he reminded me a bit of Luke Skywalker.” She glared at him. “You could have called!”

“I’ve been busy,” Tony told her.

Pepper leaned back to look behind him, raising an eyebrow at his latest project. “I can see that,” she said. “Looks terribly urgent.”

“I’m on bided time,” Tony said bitterly. “So actually, it is.”

“What do you mean?” Pepper asked, sitting up straighter.

“I mean you should probably go say your goodbyes,” he told her. “Steve’s planning to leave with Bucky as soon as he’s able, and it doesn’t look like they’ll be leaving a forwarding address.”

“He’s not just going to leave,” Pepper said, “I just spoke to him an hour ago, he didn’t say anything about going on the run.”

Tony sighed, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Steve’s worried about people coming after him,” he said. “He knows about Bucky’s past, he knows they’re never going to leave him alone. People will want to use him, or lock him up. I don’t think Steve much trusts me with him, either. He knew about my parents.”

“If he knows that, then he knows there’s no one he could trust with him more,” Pepper said, pushing to her feet. “You’ve proven what kind of man you are, time and again. Steve’s realized that, Tony, I’ve seen how much he’s grown to respect you.”

“Don’t try to reason with me,” Tony told her, pointing back at her angrily. “You know I’ve got no use for reason. He wasn’t going to tell me. My parents—and he wasn’t. Christ, look, I thought we were friends too. I was wrong. Again. It’s fine. I get it. We’ve all got our priorities. If we’re being honest, Bucky’s probably mine, too.”

Pepper looked away sadly. “Maybe he wasn’t going to tell you,” she allowed, “or maybe he was. I’m sure you didn’t just blurt out that you’d been on a mission to kill Bucky the moment you first saw Steve. It’s not like there’s an answer to any of this. We’re all going to make mistakes.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Tony asked. “The worst part is—the worst of it, is he would have been right not to tell me. I wanted the soldier dead, Pepper. If I’d found out another way, if I’d found him another way—I could so easily have—“

“But you didn’t,” Pepper interrupted sharply. “And you need to stop beating yourself up over something that never even happened. And so does Steve.”

“Well, they’ll be gone soon anyway, so…” Tony said, glancing away. He looked back at his latest project, a streamlined metal grid in the shape of a glove.

“And what does Bucky have to say about that?” she asked, and Tony froze. Pepper narrowed her
eyes. “Tony? You have spoken to him?”

“Uh,” Tony started.

“Unbelievable,” Pepper said, her eyes widening. “You are unbelievable!”

“He is dealing with enough right now,” Tony insisted. “I can’t just—he doesn’t need me—“

“To make decisions without speaking with him?” she interrupted sharply. “Yes, I agree.”

“I’m not!” Tony insisted. “I’m just not going to pressure him into anything. I’m not gonna ask him to choose between me and Steve, because I know that’s not even a choice!”

“Oh, Tony,” Pepper sighed.

“I thought for once I finally—“ Tony broke off, closing his eyes. “But it doesn’t matter. I told you, Steve wants to take him away. I don’t know where, but…I wouldn’t stop it, even if I could. They should be together. They deserve to be together. I mean, how much more fated can you get?”

“I really think you need to talk to him,” she insisted quietly.

Tony narrowed his eyes, raising a hand to point at her accusingly. “You know something,” he said. “What did he tell you?”

“He just told me that he found out he was Bucky Barnes, and that the two of you went to D.C. to help take down SHIELD,” she said. “It was refreshing to get a head’s up before the 6 o’clock news for once.”

“No one knows about Bucky,” Tony told her. “That won’t be on the news.”

“Not really the point, Tony,” she said.

“Okay, look, you don’t like being pulled into Avengers business, you told me that,” he reminded her. “This doesn’t effect Stark Industries, I didn’t want to drag you in.”

“I don’t care to be involved in Avengers business, no,” Pepper agreed. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. And I know how much he means to you.”

“I have known since the very moment I figured out who he was that I was gonna lose him,” Tony said snidely, hiding his hurt with brusque indifference even though he knew he didn’t have a chance at fooling her. “Okay? It’s fine. I can handle it.”

“For someone so brilliant, you can be really stupid,” Pepper said in frustration. She paced a few steps away, and then swung back towards him. “Do you know why it didn’t work between us?”

“Because I invited a known terrorist to drop by the house?” Tony guessed.

“That certainly didn’t help,” Pepper said wryly. “But it’s more of a symptom than the problem itself. You never let me in, Tony. You’d smile right at me while you lied.”

“Pepper—“ Tony sighed.

“I’m not trying to criticize you, I’m not trying to rehash it, it’s done,” she said quietly, and laid a hand gently on his arm. “I’d just really hate to watch you do it all again. I’ve seen you at work, and you never make the same mistake twice. Don’t start now.”
“I thought I told you not to reason with me,” Tony told her petulantly.

Pepper leaned forward and pecked him on the cheek, rolling her forehead gently across his temple. “Just talk to him, Tony,” she said. “Let him in.”

“What if I can’t?” Tony asked quietly. “What if I do, and I lose him?”

“What if you don’t even try?” she countered, as she slowly pulled away. “And you lose him anyway?”

That was the sort of advice that had made Pepper invaluable as his assistant, but was also terribly annoying. She was probably the only person he couldn’t always win an argument with. “I’ll talk to him,” he said. She raised an eyebrow and rolled his eyes. “I will. In awhile. I promise.”

“Oh kay,” she allowed. “I really hope you do.”

Tony returned his attention to his delicate metalwork as she turned to leave. He knew she was right, and he couldn’t make the same mistakes. Whether or not he ever saw Bucky again after they left, he didn’t need to continue his habit of burning all his bridges behind him.

Bucky had helped him in ways no amount of his self-prescribed textbook therapy had ever touched. Tony was pretty sure in trying to save him, he’d managed to accidentally save himself.

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“Are you avoiding me?”

Tony was picking up a fallen piece of metal from underneath his work station when the question reached him, and he jerked upwards, hitting his head on the top of the desk. “Son of a bitch.”

“Shit, are you okay?” Bucky leaned down to check on him, his head hanging half upside down, his shorter hair dropping to fall around him.

“I’m fine,” Tony said quickly, springing back to his feet, not quite meeting his eyes. “Totally fine. How did you manage to slip your super-soldier shadow?”

Bucky shrugged, and glanced away. “Needed some time away from him, had to clear my head,” he said. “He wasn’t happy about it, but I didn’t really give him much choice.” He stepped forward, running his eyes over the metal brace on the desk. The intricate metal glove had lengthened outwards to include an elbow, inwardly hollow with all its tiny interlocking pieces allowing for mobility. “What are you making?”

“I noticed how you were favoring your left arm out there, the way you used it to try and break your fall on the Hellicarrier,” Tony admitted. “I was surprised you didn’t break your wrist.”

“Nah, just torn tendons,” Bucky admitted casually, flexing it. “But it’s better now.”

Tony glanced over at him in disapproval, but refrained from making a big deal about it. He knew it wouldn’t get him anywhere, and the process of getting Bucky to understand that just because he healed fast didn’t mean it didn’t matter if he was hurt was going to take years. That was going to be up to Steve, now.

Tony would do what he did best, instead—and try to keep it from happening in the first place by building something to fix it. He reached out and grabbed the brace, before tossing it to him. “Its design is basically the same as one of my gauntlets, but without the metal paneling to give you
more flexibility. It’ll protect your hand and give you about twice the strength.”

Bucky slipped his left hand inside, and the metal gears stretched open, then tightened and locked in to mold in place around his skin like a high-tech arm brace. He flexed his hand experimentally, and the metal tipped fingers closed around his palm as closely as if they weren’t there. “This is amazing.” Bucky said. “It almost feels like it used to.”

“Well, it’s yours if you want it. Consider it a parting gift,” Tony said, smiling wryly.

Bucky froze, his eyes staying on the metal gauntlet. “Is that your way of asking me to leave?”

Tony sucked in a breath. “What?”

“Steve told me he wants to run. He said the longer we stay the more danger we put everyone in, and that’s the last thing I want,” Bucky told him, glancing back at him earnestly. “I understand, Tony. It’s okay. If you want out of our deal, if you want me gone—I’m gone, okay? I never want you in danger because of me.”

“What?” Tony felt like he’d been sucker-punched. “No, you’ve got it all backwards. Forget me, you’re the one that’s not safe. They’ll be after you. I can protect myself.”

Bucky glanced at him slyly, flexing the metal hand in what was a very subtle reminder of the kind of strength he had even without it. “And you think I can’t?”

“You think that’s still true?” Bucky asked carefully. “You went after them—if you weren’t a target before, you are now, and having me here will make it a hundred times worse. I know the selfless thing would be to walk away like Steve wants, and I will if that’s what you want.” Bucky slid the glove off in one seamless pull, like he’d been wearing it for years, and set it aside as he stepped forward. “But I’m going to need to hear it from you. I’ve had enough people making my choices for me that I’m not about to turn around and do it to someone else.”

“Well, I’m not, either,” Tony promised. “I’m not going to stand in your way. I know you have to go with Steve. It’s for the best.”

“I told Steve what’s best for me is being here,” Bucky said quietly.

Tony stared at him in disbelief. “But—“ he started, but trailed off, not sure what to say. This wasn’t at all how he’d imagined this conversation going.

“Steve is my family,” Bucky told him. “I don’t remember much, but I remember that much. He’s all the family I’ve got left—but he still feels a little like a dream, like something from so long ago I can’t even be sure how much of it is real.”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair, looking frustrated with himself, like he wasn’t sure how to explain what he wanted to say. He looked back at Tony, and swallowed hard.

“You’re the only thing that’s real to me, Tony,” Bucky told him. “And this place, with you, and Jarvis and Pepper—this feels like it could be home. It already feels like home, and I don’t want to run, but I don’t want you in danger because of me, either.”

“I told you, I can handle myself,” Tony said, feeling his heart pick up. “If you want to stay, we can handle it together.”
“Yeah?” Bucky asked, tossing him a lop-sided grin. “Well, if you’re sure about me staying, Steve wanted me to ask if he could stay too.”

“He wanted to—I built him a whole goddamn floor, and he’s never even stepped foot on it!” Tony cried. “I’ve offered I don’t know how many times—“

Bucky shrugged. “He didn’t really seem to know that?” he ventured carefully. “He seemed uncertain he’d been welcome. I guess he was worried he’d upset you?”

Of course Steve hadn’t told him what had upset him, Tony realized, but maybe that was for the best. Pepper was right after all, and there was not much point in worrying about the things that hadn’t happened.

They had enough to worry about as it was.

“Of course he can stay,” Tony said. “But they’re going to come for us.”

“Yes,” Bucky agreed. “But they’d come for us anyway. Maybe we have a better chance together.”

That had been the idea of the Avengers in the first place, but he knew its was never that simple.

“You sure about this?” Tony asked. “You run and you might be able to find some peace, you stay…we’re going to end up fighting for our lives, sooner or later. Even if we win, it usually comes with a cost.”

“I forgot what it was like, to fight for a purpose,” Bucky said. “It’s not the same thing as what I did for them. On that Helicarrier, it felt…it felt like becoming myself again. I still don’t want to fight. I wish I didn’t have to—but there’s not anywhere I could run they wouldn’t find me, and I’d rather it were on my terms. They’ve taken so much…I don’t want them to take this, too.”

Tony hadn’t been thinking of it that way, and he realized suddenly that they were all Bucky knew, really. Him and Pepper and Jarvis, and Luke and even old Mrs. Donaparte, were all part of the world that Bucky had slowly, painstakingly, been building for himself.

And he’d just been planning to stand by while Steve unknowingly took him away from it.

No wonder Pepper had been angry with him.

“They’ll have to go through me first,” Tony promised him.

Bucky frowned at him. “I meant it when I said I don’t want you hurt because of me,” he told him.

“Yes, well, you getting hurt instead hurts too, so you’re just gonna have to deal,” Tony told him. “Besides, my suit can handle it. You, we need to get better equipped. No more going into battle in your PJs.”

“I thought I pulled it off,” Bucky said wryly.

“You tore the tendons in your wrist,” Tony pointed out.

“But it didn’t slow me down,” Bucky said easily. “I’m not wearing one of your leotards.”

“So you tell me what you want, and I’ll make it for you,” Tony said. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to start wearing some wings—“

Bucky laughed. “Yeah, not a fan of heights,” he said. “Definitely not planning to start flying.”
“You spend half your time on the roof,” Tony said. “Also, you just jumped out of a Quinjet in mid-air to a crashing Helicarrier.”

Bucky shrugged. “I didn’t say I couldn’t handle it,” he told him.

“Okay, how about a compromise,” Tony decided. “A jacket with built in parachute, sort of like airbags in cars. For the next time you randomly fall some great height.”

Bucky snorted. “So long as it doesn’t add too much weight,” he said. “Speed is more important.”

“Speed is not more important than preventing you from smashing into the pavement, what is wrong with your priorities?” Tony asked, already moving to the blackboard to start scribbling down his initial design ideas. “Okay, what about look?”

“Well, I’m pretty fond of Thor’s get up,” Bucky told him.

Tony turned in disbelief, only to find Bucky smirking at him. “Don’t tempt me,” Tony told him.

Bucky smiled then, that crazy incandescent grin, and Tony’s heart nearly stopped at having it aimed at him.

“I trust you, Tony,” he said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so there was supposed to be a kiss in this one, but things are going at a snail’s pace. This happens to me every time, can never seem to just write a simple boy meets amnesiac boy in cryostasis story, things have got to get all complicated. ;(-)
Chapter 16

Tony didn’t know exactly how long they had been in his lab when Steve finally came to find them, but it had been long enough that they had countless sketches strewn around them on notepads and all over the blackboard behind them. Bucky had been laughing brightly just before the elevator doors clicked open, and though it cut off abruptly, Tony could tell from Steve’s crestfallen expression he had caught enough of it to know he was the reason it had stopped.

Bucky had been laughing over Tony’s latest design sketch—he’d finally been unable to resist a Thor inspired design, and Bucky thought it was hilarious, and had promised to wear it if Tony made a matching red and gold one for himself—but he seemed to morph into someone else the moment Steve stepped foot into the lab. His eyes seemed to darken even as he smiled back at Steve widely. It looked like the sort of picture-perfect smile one might find in the pages of a fashion magazine, beautiful and untouchable and fake.

Now that Tony knew Natasha had seen it too, it was much easier to spot the part Bucky was playing. “Hey, Stevie,” Bucky said, leaning back in the desk chair and crossing his legs up on the table. “Come to join the party?”

Tony knew that Bucky had spent hours watching the footage of Bucky Barnes from his Howling Commando days when they first found out. He’d seen him mouthing phrases, reclaiming the accent like he’d never lost it, taking note of mannerisms and even all his old nervous ticks. It was still somewhat unnerving to watch—this perfect representation of a person that he still couldn’t even really remember.

Tony glanced at Steve, and could tell he’d started to see through it, too.

“I came to apologize,” Steve finally said after a moment, pulling his eyes away from Bucky as though it was too painful to face him. He glanced back at Tony. “To both of you.”

“Not necessary,” Tony said quickly, before qualifying, “I mean, not to me.”

Bucky just shrugged. “You always were a punk that thinks you know what’s best for everyone,” he said, softening the words with another grin, and this one looked genuine. “Remembered that much.”

Steve looked sheepish, and it was sort of hilarious, watching him get scolded. Tony was starting to see the little brother dynamic, after all. It made perfect Steve Rogers, Captain America hero, seem almost human.

“Well, I think we can all agree we weren’t thinking,” Tony said, before glancing at Bucky. “Except you, Bucky-bear, you continue to be perfect.”

“And Pepper,” Bucky pointed out, grinning smugly and not contesting Tony’s claim. This time, that little bit of Bucky Barnes that was shining through didn’t seem like an act.

Tony pointed at him. “I knew you’d enlisted her help,” he said.

“I did no such thing,” Bucky said, then added cheekily, “She volunteered.”

“I’ve never realized before how terrifying the thought of the two you working together actually is,” Tony told him, not entirely kidding, as he realized his life was probably changing irrevocably right before his eyes—not that he’d want to do a single thing to stop it. “We’re never introducing you to
Rhodey.”

Steve scrunched up his face in confusion, the way he usually did when someone brought up a pop culture reference he hadn’t caught up to yet. “What are you talking about?”

“He told on me to Pepper!” Tony cried, in mock-outrage. “I’m the one that’s supposed to tell on him to Pepper! It’s a total disregard for the seniority hierarchy. He’s jumped the line.”

“I’m definitely more senior than you,” Bucky reminded him.

“We talked about you saying that,” Tony said.

“Technically, I didn’t say ‘before you were born’,” Bucky told him, smiling sweetly. “Just a gentle reminder that I was born before all of you.” His eyes lit up for a minute, and he dropped his sock-covered feet off the table. “Hey, do you think I’m the oldest person alive?”

“Centenarians actually aren’t all that unheard of these days,” Tony told him, and Bucky looked disappointed.

“And Peggy was born a couple of months before you, actually,” Steve added quietly.

Bucky went pale, reaching out to grip the table and steady himself. “Carter is alive?” he asked. “The others, are they—“

“She’s the only one,” Steve broke in gently. “But they had good lives, Buck. All of them.”

“I can remember her, in a red dress,” Bucky said, frowning as he tried to piece his life back together. “She wouldn’t dance with me, but she wanted to dance with you.”

Steve glanced at the floor, with a slight grin. “Yeah, well that was a first, I can promise.”

“I remember being really glad about that,” Bucky said thoughtfully, his gaze turning somewhere far away. “I think I was testing her.”

“What, if she’d danced with you, she wasn’t good enough for me?” Steve snorted.

Bucky laughed. “Yeah, I guess,” he agreed. “I was sort of full of myself back then, huh?”

“You had your reasons to be,” Steve told him. “Think Peggy was the first to ever turn you down, and I’m pretty sure that was just cause she didn’t know you yet.”

“Come on, Stevie, we both know she only ever had eyes for you,” Bucky protested, and leaned back with crossed arms. “Anyway, I was always partial to Falsworth, myself. She wasn’t really my type.”

“What?” Steve choked.

“Oh, I figured out I’m bisexual,” Bucky explained. He glanced up at Steve, a little wary. “Guessing from your reaction its not something I told you before?”

“No,” Steve admitted. “No, you never—“ He broke off, swallowing hard, looking lost.

Tony stepped forward to break the tension. “Falsworth, seriously?” he asked. “My dad told me quite a few stories about you guys, he always said Falsworth was a cad.”

Bucky laughed, glancing over at him. “Howie called him a cad?” he asked, disbelievingly.
“Falsworth was all talk. Howie had three girls at every port.” He slumped in his chair, throwing his left arm of the back, and looked back at Tony innocently. “Not jealous, are you?”

“Ha!” Tony said. “I’m not jealous of anyone, least of all my father. I know exactly how awesome I am.”

“I wasn’t talking about your father,” Bucky said suggestively, which was about when Tony clued in that he was flirting. He was flirting right in front of the stunned Steve, who was looking between them like he couldn’t understand what was happening.

That made two of them.

“Uh,” Steve started, looking mortified suddenly. He reached up to scratch at the back of his neck. “Are you guys…I mean…are you….”

Tony opened his mouth to protest, but Bucky was quicker. He just tilted his head, assessing Steve, and asked simply, “That a problem?”

“What?” Steve asked, looking up in shock. “What? No, no of course not! No. I’m just…just still trying to wrap my head around it. I thought you told me everything.”

Bucky softened then, and seemed to morph back into the classic Bucky Barnes almost effortlessly. He shrugged. “I don’t think it was ever something I admitted to myself,” he said. “Far as I knew, it wasn’t something that could happen, so why bother to hope for it?”

“You coulda told me, Buck,” Steve said earnestly, stepping closer. “It wouldn’t have changed anything between us. I wouldn’t have cared.”

“Just for the record,” Tony said, clearing his throat, and swinging his hand between him and Bucky with a half-frenzied motion. “We’re not actually together.”

“Oh, thank god,” Steve said quickly.

“Hey!” Tony cried sharply, offended.

“Sure he just thinks you could do better,” Bucky said, before throwing a cool glance at Steve. “Isn’t that right, Steven?”

“Honestly, I’m just already worried enough that the two of you are even friends,” Steve explained himself, before glancing back at Bucky. “I remember what you used to be like in Howard’s lab. You’re a menace. This doesn’t bode well for the world.”

“Always such a flair for the dramatic,” Bucky told him wryly. “I remember that, too.”

“He’s actually only caused one small explosion, hardly worth noting,” Tony defended. “Honestly, he’s the best lab assistant I’ve ever had.”

If anything, that just seemed to worry Steve more. “Maybe it would be better if you were just dating,” he decided.

“Sorry to interrupt, Bucky,” Jarvis called, “but Ms. Romanoff has arrived at the Penthouse for her appointment with you.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, eyes widening as he jumped to his feet. “Tell her I’ll be right there.” He spun back around to face them as he started towards the elevator. “We’ll pick this up later, okay? Try to
Tony and Steve stood there for a moment, watching him disappear into the elevator, not quite sure how to react.

“What was that about?” Tony demanded, glancing over at Steve, trying not to broadcast his worry. It was good Bucky was doing things on his own, he didn’t have to run everything past him. That would be ridiculous.

But also Natasha was a spy and what could they possibly be meeting about.

“That first night, they had entire conversations in Russian right in front of me,” Steve admitted with a shrug. “Honestly, even if I could speak Russian, I was in such a daze at the time I probably still wouldn’t have known what they were saying.”

Tony was tempted to pull the surveillance video and have Jarvis help him translate it, but he had to trust that Bucky knew what he was doing. Also, Jarvis had strict privacy settings to prevent him from being able to do something like that anyway, and would be all judgmental and ashamed of him if he even tried to ask.

“Right, well, what could go wrong?” Tony asked. “Just two Russian assassins holding secretive meetings, I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“He’s not a Russian assassin,” Steve snapped. “He’s a Sergeant in the US Army.”

“Actually, he’s sort of both, and sort of neither,” Tony responded calmly. “Got that little wake up call from Natasha, myself. You’d be wise to take it to heart, too.”

Steve turned away in frustration, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I seem to be saying that a lot lately.”

“You ask me, you’re handling this pretty well,” Tony told him. “I don’t even know what I’d do if — “ he broke off, because it wasn’t something he could really let himself think about. He didn’t get miracles. “Well, let’s just say I probably wouldn’t be behaving as well as you.”

“I had it all planned out for us,” Steve admitted after a moment. “It’s only been a couple years for me, I was just gonna pick us up right where we left off. I kept listing all the places we could go, and he just sat there with this expression…like he didn’t even know who I was.” He pressed his eyes shut. “I know he remembers some things, but one minute it’s like he’s his old self, he remembers everything, and the next…”

“Yeah, he’s good at filling in the blanks, so it’s hard to know how much is still missing,” Tony agreed. “He’s pretty much been running this place since his first week here, and back then he didn’t remember anything past his last couple of handlers. Got his hands on my override code, oh, the second week? He started researching the state of the world online, learning as much as he could. It got to where he could hold entire conversations with people and no one would ever know he’d just been freed from seventy years of captivity, but then I’d be with him here…and I’d have to explain to him what a toaster was.”

“Bucky’s always been perceptive. Always saw things others missed,” Steve said quietly. “Saw something in me,” he added ruefully. “Still don’t know what it was, I wasn’t anything back then. All I wanted to do was fight, and I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t glad to go to war. Realized eventually that it was because he understood war in ways I didn’t catch up to until after it was too late.”
“You’re not responsible for the war, Steve,” Tony said gently. “You just did what you thought was right.”

“I was reckless,” Steve denied, shaking his head. “Bucky should have been sent home when I first found him at that Hydra base, he had no business being back in that war.” He paused, glancing away. “We all knew something was wrong with him. Not one of us did a thing about it.”

“I may not know who he was like you do,” Tony said, “but from what I do know, I doubt there was any way you’d have succeeded in sending him home. He doesn’t like to fight, that’s true even now, but it doesn’t mean he backs down. I don’t think he knows how, and it’s not our place to do it for him.”

“It’s funny, Peggy said something similar,” Steve said, looking back over at him, seeming vaguely surprised. “I know you’re both right. But it doesn’t change the fact that he only stayed in that war because of me.”

“Doesn’t change that we might not have won without you both, either,” Tony added. “Trust me, I’ve considered time travel a lot, but as much as I dislike the frilly sentiment of ‘everything happens for a reason,’ it sort of does. Haven’t you ever seen ‘A Wonderful Life’?”

“No, I’ll add it to the list,” Steve promised earnestly, and sure enough, pulled out a small notepad and started scribbling it down. Tony watched him do it, caught by the similarity of Bucky with his journal.

Steve put the notepad back in his back pocket, and then looked over at Tony almost shyly. “Bucky wants to stay here, and I’d like to be close. I can get a place,” he started, “but—“

“You’re staying here,” Tony said simply. “Bucky already asked. Anyway, I made you an entire floor, so, you know, you might as well use it. You’re on the twenty-second, right above Natasha. It’s already furnished, and Pepper handled the decorating, so rest assured, my American flag theme was heavily vetoed.”

“This all seems too good to be true,” Steve said quietly.

“You too?” Tony asked. “Yeah, I don’t trust it.”

“That’s not—“ Steve sighed. “Well, it isn’t exactly what I meant. Thank you for doing all of this. And I don’t know how, or when, I was going to tell you about your parents—and I’m sorry about that, too. I should have told you right away. I should have trusted you more.”

Tony remembered finding Bucky in that stasis pod, the way he’d fallen helplessly to the ground—utterly defenseless, even with all his skill. Tony tried to think of making a different choice than the one he’d made, but he couldn’t really imagine it. Maybe Pepper was right, and he should stop worrying about what he hadn’t done.

“Come on,” Tony said, and started towards the elevator. “I’d better give you the tour of your floor. If I leave it to Jarvis, he’ll be reciting out the model numbers of the faucet spouts.”

“That was one time, Sir,” Jarvis protested levelly, “and you had instructed me to show our guests everything.”

Steve smiled slightly, following him into the elevator. “I can see why Bucky likes it here,” he said softly. “He probably fits right in, huh?”

“Let’s just say he more than holds his own,” Tony told him wryly, and hit the button for Steve’s
When Tony finally stepped back into to the Penthouse after getting Steve settled in, Natasha was brusquely exiting the hall and heading towards him. Her red hair looked a little more brown than it had the day before, and she was wearing oversized sunglasses with a black trench coat cinched tightly around her waist. She barely glanced at him as she slipped past him and turned to lean against the back of the elevator.

“You should go check on him,” she told him, and her voice sounded rough and bruised. If she was anyone else, he’d think it sounded like she’d been crying.

The doors closed between them before he could ask her any questions, and he spun back around. “Well, that doesn’t bode well,” he muttered, starting towards the hall. “Jarvis, where is he?”

“Bucky asked if he could wait for you in your room,” Jarvis told him. “I took the liberty of telling him that you wouldn’t mind.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Tony told him.

He tried to slow himself down and look casual as he opened his door and stepped into his room, but any attempt playing it cool died a pretty swift death when Tony saw him.

Bucky was pressed back against the headboard with his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clutched on either side of his head, and he was crying. Silent, broken sobs that were causing him to shake all over, and Tony froze up for a moment. He tried to think back to that first night, to all of the various nightmares they’d dealt with, to all of those hard-earned returning memories, and he still couldn’t remember ever seeing Bucky cry.

He decided right then that it was something he didn’t want to ever happen again.

“Okay, who do I have to fight?” Tony demanded, as he got himself moving again and stepped closer. “Is it Natasha? Cause I’m pretty sure I can take her if I’ve got my suit on.”

Bucky snorted, glancing up at him through his tears with exasperation. “No,” he said. “She—at least she did me a favor. She got me something I needed.”

“What did she get you?” he asked, trying not to be suspicious. He may joke about the thought of Natasha and Bucky getting their spy on together, but he trusted Bucky. He maybe trusted him more than almost anyone else in his life, with a kind of surety he didn’t entirely understand.

Bucky leaned down, burying his head in his arms. “A book.”

Tony paused, not expecting that. “She brought you a book,” he deadpanned.

“I don’t—I don’t want to talk about it right now,” he said, looking back up at Tony. “Can we just…”

“Yeah, sure, of course,” Tony said quickly, sitting next to him on the edge of his bed. “Hey, want to watch Brave? I know I said you would have to tie me down to get me to ever watch it again, but I’m willing to make an exception this time.”

“No,” Bucky said, laughing brokenly. “No, I just want—” he broke off, glancing back up at Tony, and scooting forward until his knees were pressed up against his thigh. He leaned forward,
reaching out to place his hands on Tony’s neck and tilt his face up, all so slow it seemed as if time had been caught in molasses, like Bucky wanted to give him a chance to stop it, as if he would even if he could. The kiss was slow and hesitant and perfect, but Bucky was slipping back far too soon. “—you,” he finished breathlessly.

“Steve’s gonna kill me,” Tony decided, instinctively leaning forward to follow Bucky as he leaned back. “S’okay. I’ll die happy.”

“He wouldn’t, he’d have to go through me,” Bucky told him. “And he’s not gonna fight me.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, amused. “You gonna protect me?”

“Always,” Bucky agreed, and leaned forward to kiss him again.

Tony pulled back this time, reaching up to place his hands on either side of Bucky’s neck, sucking in a much needed breath. “Maybe we should slow down?”

“I can go slow,” Bucky promised, and leaned forward to trail featherlight kisses along the side of his neck, each one excruciatingly careful and slow.

“Oh. Right, of course you don’t want me, I’m so sorry,” he said quickly. “I should never have—“

“Let’s clear that up right now, I definitely want you. But if we don’t do this right, I won’t have to worry about Steve because Pepper will get to me first,” Tony told him. He reached up, brushing Bucky’s hair back out of his eyes. “I don’t know what happened tonight, but you’re dealing with something. This isn’t gonna make it go away.”

“I know, but that’s not why I kissed you,” Bucky assured him. “I’ve been wanting to kiss you for weeks.”

“You haven’t even known your own name for weeks,” Tony reminded him.

Bucky narrowed his eyes, the angry kitten look again, and Tony sighed. “I’m trying to be emotionally healthy here,” he explained. “I’ve had one-night stands just so I can not think for awhile, okay, I’ve been there, I have, so I get it—“

“That’s not what I want at all,” Bucky promised. “I want a…a forever night stand.”

“Alright, that’s actually pretty good as far as lines go. Probably you’re the only one that could pull it off, but still—“ Tony leaned back. “Look, you are, if I’m being entirely honest, probably more well-adjusted than me. So I’m not going to sit here and tell you that you’re not ready,” he admitted. “But I’m not ready.”

“I should go,” Bucky breathed, and quickly let go, slipping back along the bed so he could get off on the other side.

Tony reached out, grabbing his left wrist, tugging him back. “You don’t have to go,” he said quickly. “Just, let’s not rush this, okay? We have time.”

Bucky paused, glancing back to look at where Tony was being overly gentle holding his wrist,
even though it was made of vibranium underneath. “What if we don’t have time?” he asked anxiously.

Tony was pretty sure he was right that Bucky suddenly deciding to go through with something he’d apparently been wanting to do for weeks—and he’d think about that later, probably a lot—was tied to whatever he’d been doing with Natasha tonight. Tony was a master of both the *whelp, tomorrow I’m gonna die* and the *yay, I’m still alive* versions of frenzied sex, and he would recognize it anywhere. “Maybe you should tell me what was in that book.”

“I just got a reminder about what’s inside of me,” Bucky admitted. “I’m dangerous, Tony. Maybe Steve was right, and we should have run.”

“Hey, this is your home,” Tony told him firmly. “Remember? Nothing changes that. If you don’t want to leave, no one can make you.”

“They can make me,” Bucky insisted desperately. “They can make me do anything.”

Tony wanted to promise they couldn’t, that he wouldn’t let them, but he had read those files. He had seen exactly how thoroughly they had managed to twist Bucky’s beautiful mind to their purposes, and he couldn’t promise that. Not yet. He hadn’t figured out a way to undo the programming, hadn’t even had a chance to start.

One day, he would make that promise and he would keep it.

For now, he offered the only thing he could: “Just…stay here with me tonight. We can just sleep, and we’ll talk tomorrow. Okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky agreed quietly.

Tony pulled Bucky into his arms as they fell back to lay on the bed. He let his fingers trail through Bucky’s hair, brushing it back the way he wanted to do about a hundred times a day. Bucky was asleep within minutes, and surprisingly Tony felt himself following not long after.

Tomorrow he’d start researching how to undo the programming, and he was sure Natasha had information that would help. Tomorrow, first thing.

They had time.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

WARNING: I feel like I should probably put a warning for violence since this has been pretty much all fluff till now…so yeah, um. There be carnage ahead, folks, but it’s no one we’re gonna miss.

In other words, kudos to everyone that guessed “They had time” = “They had zero time.”

* Any Russian is from Google Translate, so possibly entirely wrong.

The tower had a hum to it, a sort of heartbeat that you could almost feel if you placed your hand to the wall. It took Tony a minute to figure out that what had woken him up was the absence of it. He glanced to his side and squinted at his alarm clock, only to find the display blank, a strange static crackle seeming to hover in the air around it—the scent of ozone, like an oncoming storm.

He glanced up as he caught sight of something outside the window, and he froze, trying to understand what he was seeing as a number of figures dropped into sight on lines, and started diving straight towards them.

“Oh, shit—“ Tony started, already beginning to move.

He didn’t make it very far and hands were grabbing him and tugging him back. Bucky caught him by his shirt collar and rolled them until they fell flat on the other side of the bed. He surged forward to lean down and cover him just as the windows shattered with something strong enough it dented the opposite wall. Bits of glass tumbled over the edge of the bed and caught in Bucky’s hair as he pulled way.

Tony could only barely make him out as the light from the other buildings came into the dark room, but he had a bad feeling about what little he could see of Bucky’s eyes.

“Bucky, wait,” he started.

“Stay down,” Bucky commanded, and his voice sounded off. No fear. No panic. No anything.

He was gone faster than Tony could reach out to hold him back.

“Fuck that,” Tony muttered angrily, flipping his wrist to reach for the activation on his bracelet to call the suit—but nothing happened, when he hit it. “No, no, no, no.”

His suit was made to withstand whatever the hell kind of EMP they’d hit the tower with, but the damn bracelet to call it to him was not. The thing was technically still a prototype because he hadn’t gotten it to work long-range, and he hadn’t bothered to add all the bells and whistles yet. It was a stupid oversight, and it might end up getting them killed.

The rest of the tower was just as shut down at the moment, so there’d be no contacting Jarvis either. The arc generated power was a lot harder to take out than your standard electrical grid, but it would have shut itself down the minute the EMP was detected and it would be at least three
minutes before it could reboot.

Hydra would have known that going in, which meant they didn’t think they’d need any more time than that.

Tony pushed himself to his feet, glancing to his side to try and find something to use as a weapon. His eyes were inevitably pulled back to the action, and he watched half in awe and half in disbelief. There were at least nine of them, and even though he could only see their helmet-clad silhouettes, Bucky stood out easily among them.

And he was taking them out quicker than Tony’s eyes could follow. One would drop with a flash of a blade, and the next would slip to the floor in the aftermath of a muzzle flash.

For a second, just the span of a heartbeat, he thought they might actually be alright. Then he heard the clear tight voice shouting in stilted Russian, and that hope fled.

Tony only knew enough Russian to translate some of the words: Longing, Seventeen.

But that was enough to know what it meant.

This fight wasn’t physical, even Hydra was smart enough to know they could never have gotten the Winter Soldier with pure blunt force. They were trying to reset him.

He caught a few more words as he glanced frantically for something, anything, that he could use: Daybreak, Furnace, Nine, One.

One of the fallen Hydra agents landed haphazardly on Tony’s bed. There was a knife lodged in his throat, one of his hands loosely gripped around it as though he’d meant to try and take it back out.

And he still had a gun in his holster.

Tony jerked forward, snatching the gun quickly as another word in Russian was yelled out. This one he recognized, Freight car. He rounded the bed and tried to track those still left standing. He was still trying to make sense of what he was seeing when the lights finally kicked back on.

Tony sucked in a breath in disbelief. Bucky stood with his back to the broken window, and he was nearly soaked with blood. His t-shirt was sticking to him all along the left side, darkened and wet, and his long hair was matted to the edges of his face with droplets of it like blood-splattered constellations. He held a gun in one hand aimed straight at the last soldier left alive, and a dripping knife in his other. Bodies littered the floor around him like they’d been taken out by a sonic boom—and not one of them was moving.

“Ready to comply,” Bucky said, and lowered his gun, his back straightening as the life flattened out in his eyes.

Tony kept his eyes on them, as he carefully sidestepped fallen bodies to try and get himself in a better position, but it was pretty hard to ignore. This level of carnage was extreme even for his line of work. The Hydra agents were all wearing helmets, so cause of death ranged between a shot straight between the eyes to a slit throat. Bucky had cut his way through them like they were nothing, and would have ended the last one just as quickly if that trigger phrase hadn’t stopped him in his tracks.

And this hadn’t been the work of the soldier, not exactly. Bucky had done this, in his desperation to keep the soldier back. He’d known what was coming the moment he heard the first of those words.
He looked up and caught Bucky’s eyes, but there was nothing in them looking back.

“Your mission is to return to the Beta site, soldier,” the man told him, grinning wryly. “But first, kill Stark.”

“Aht, not so fast,” Tony said, raising his stolen gun and aimed for agent’s head. He recognized him now from the files he’d sorted through after the fall of SHIELD: Brock Rumlow. He was only about five feet away, Tony knew he wouldn’t miss. “I believe this is what they call a Mexican standoff. He’s fast, but he’s not fast enough to reach me before I pull the trigger.”

Rumlow tilted his head just far enough that he could meet Tony’s eyes with the corner of his. “Shoot me if you want,” he said, sounding almost darkly amused. “It won’t stop him. He’s got his mission now, and he’ll complete it, and return to base like the good little soldier that he is.”

Bucky was staring at him now, his eyes assessing and cold. Somehow, Tony knew he was calculating the distance between them, checking the weight of the knife he held, figuring out how much force it would take. Tony felt a chill go down his spine. He’d faced down the Hulk, and still he didn’t think he’d ever been this terrified.

“You sure you want me to shoot you, Rumlow?” Tony asked, stepping to the side to keep Rumlow further between him and Bucky. “Because I’m gonna be honest, I’m sort of looking forward to it. Call. Him. Off.”

Rumlow held up a hand in the soldier’s direction just as he’d started to take a step forward. “They don’t really want you dead, anyway,” Rumlow told Tony, turning around to face him. “So fine. Let’s just go our separate ways, and call it a day.”

“You’re not taking him,” Tony said, and he’d never been so sure of anything.

“What, you think you’ve got him all house-trained, you want to keep ‘im?” Rumlow asked, and laughed derisively. “You’ve got no idea at all who you’re dealing with. I’m doing you a favor.” Rumlow glanced down at the bodies dispassionately. “These were the best fighters we had on offer. It took him less than sixty seconds.”

“Yeah, I’m not really looking forward to the clean up,” Tony said, not taking his eyes off Rumlow. “But I won’t be losing any sleep over some dead Nazis.”

“Is that what you think we are?” Rumlow asked.

“Let’s skip the recruitment speech, if it’s all the same to you,” Tony said. “Last chance to undo what you’ve done to him, if you’d like to live.”

“That’s not how this works,” Rumlow said calmly, before tilting his head as he assessed him. “You’re stalling for time.”

Tony was absolutely stalling for time. Steve and Natasha were only a couple of floors down, and they’d have started heading up the moment they’d known something was wrong. The elevators being out of commission would slow them down, but not by much.

“You’ve got no back up left,” Tony said. “You have to know you’re not getting out of this. Release him, and we can work something out.”

Rumlow reached for his holster, and casually pulled out his gun. “You don’t know what it is to fight for a cause, do you, Stark?” he asked. “To be willing to die for a belief?”
Tony remembered the feel of space closing in around him, the sharp glaring flash as he fell back through a hole in the sky. “Nah,” he agreed. “I’d much rather make it out alive than die a martyr. You can, too.”

“My mission is complete,” Rumlow said calmly. “He’s already ours. Whatever you do to me, you haven’t won.”

Tony knew what he was going to do before he did it. “Don’t be stupid, don’t—“ he tried, but Rumlow lifted the gun, aiming for Tony even though he must know he wasn’t going to be fast enough to fire first.

Tony didn’t hesitate. He pulled the trigger.

The bullet went through Rumlow’s right eye, and the agent’s gun slipped through his limp figures as he collapsed to the floor between him and Bucky. Bucky didn’t even twitch, just kept his eyes on Tony like he was still deciding on the most efficient way to take him out.

Bucky was still holding a gun too, and he raised it straight at Tony now that whatever leverage he’d had was gone.

“Woah there, Soldier,” Tony said, making a show of setting down his own gun. “It’s over. We’re good now.”

Bucky gave no response, though the gun tilted to follow him as he bent to set his own gun aside, and then followed him back up again when he stood. Tony took a deep breath, and clenched his hands to keep them from shaking.

“So you’re the Winter Soldier,” Tony said, smiling even though it hurt to do it, and holding his hands back up to look non-threatening. “Nice to finally meet you. I mean, not really, if we’re being honest, but, uh, you know what I mean.”

The soldier’s dead eyes tracked him as Tony took a step closer, and he paused.

“Do you know who I am?” Tony asked.


“Those orders are void,” Tony said. “Your commander is dead.”

“Collateral damage,” he contradicted calmly. “My orders stand.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Tony told him.

“Your intent is irrelevant,” the soldier told him. “You’re the mission.”

Tony paused, watching him carefully, wondering if there was anything of Bucky left. He knew exactly how good of a shot the solider was, he could have taken him out a dozen times by now. “Then why haven’t you shot me yet?”

“Because I’m out of ammo,” the soldier admitted simply, and dropped the gun. He tossed his knife in the air, catching it with it pointed the opposite direction as he started to stalk towards him.

Natasha came out of nowhere, flinging herself between them with one hand outstretched like she was warding off a riled bull. “Солдат. Колыбельная,” she yelled sharply.
The effect was instantaneous. Bucky dropped like his strings had been cut, limply sliding to the floor, his eyes rolling back into his head just before the lids dropped to cover them.

Tony rushed forward, sidestepping Natasha, but was just a little too slow to keep Bucky’s head from slamming onto the floor. He looked up at her with a glare. “What the hell did you do to him?” he demanded.

Natasha looked calm, but Tony could see a little deeper beneath her surface these days, and he knew she was shaken. “I found his handler’s manual,” she said quietly. “I got it to give to James, but not before I read it first. That was the deactivation phrase in the event he went rogue. It won’t hurt him. It can’t do any more damage than what’s already been done.”

Tony couldn’t really argue with that, she had probably saved all their lives. He still felt like he’d lost a chance at something. “I was getting through to him.”

She snorted. “I can promise that you weren’t,” she told him. “You should be dead.”

“If I had a dollar,” Tony said, leaning forward to check Bucky’s pulse. “Oh, wait, I do.”

“We need to secure him,” Natasha said, tilting her head as she watched the unconscious soldier before glancing warily at the broken window that left them open to further attack. “I know a place that should hold him.”

“Yeah, no, sorry,” Tony said. “He’s staying here. I’ve got a Hulk-proof floor, we can put him there until we figure out how to deprogram him. He’s not leaving my sight.”

“You still don’t trust me?” Natasha asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You came here on your own,” Tony said, as he pushed himself back up straight. “You didn’t bring Steve. That tells me you were prepared to kill Bucky if you had to, and you didn’t want him here to stop you. So no, I don’t trust you.”

Natasha shrugged, not dispelling the accusation. “There was no guarantee the deactivation phrase would still work, and they wouldn’t have come for him without a way to control him,” she said. “Even now, we probably don’t have long before he wakes up, and we have no idea who he’s going to be when he does.”

Tony looked back down at Bucky. The incongruity of him being laid out in a pair of flannel pants and the blood-drenched t-shirt, his face completely relaxed in a way that made him seem so peaceful and young, was messing with Tony’s head. It was so hard to reconcile the man he’d found waiting for him the night before with the one that had stared back at him with no recognition.

He knew exactly how easy it would be to forget what was waiting inside of Bucky. Tony forgot Bruce was the Hulk all the time.

They couldn’t afford to, this time. Bruce had some measure of control over the Hulk, however limited it may be—Bucky disappeared when the Winter Soldier came to play, Tony could see that now. If he’d had any remaining doubts that Bucky bore some responsibility for his parents’ deaths, this would have dispelled them.

“Where is Steve?” Tony demanded, glancing back up at Natasha.

“I sent him to restart the reactor,” she told him.

“The arc reactor restarts on its own in case of failure,” Tony said. “You know that.”
An ordinary liar would have averted their eyes, but Natasha's didn't waver. “I must have forgotten.” She shrugged. “I’m sure he’ll be here any—“

There was a large crash coming from outside the bedroom, and Tony leaned back to look down the hallway. He could see one of the elevator doors skidding across his kitchen floor, sparks flaring where it broke across the tiles. Steve followed it, in full uniform, his shield held on one arm.

“—minute,” Natasha finished dryly.

Steve looked up at her voice, taking them in with relief. “Tony!” he cried, as he rushed towards them.

“Wow,” Tony deadpanned. “10 out of 10 for the entrance, but your timing is a little off.”

Steve pulled to a stop, his eyes widening as he took in Bucky. He dropped down beside them, looking terrified. “What happened to him?” he asked, reaching forward to pull up Bucky’s shirt, looking for injuries, apparently oblivious to the new addition of dead Hydra agents decorating Tony’s bedroom.

“The blood’s not his,” Tony assured him, reaching out to catch Steve’s hand and pull it back.

Steve leaned back on his heels, looking relieved right up until he took in the rest of the room. “Who—” he started, but broke off, his sad eyes returning to Bucky.

“He did what he had to,” Natasha said simply.

“I got to catch the Winter Soldier live show,” Tony told him, falsely cheerful. He fought the urge to brush back Bucky’s hair, feeling weirdly like an intruder with Steve now kneeling on the other side of him. “Rumlow apparently had the trigger words. Guess we should’ve been a little more concerned when his body didn’t turn up with rest of them at the Triskelion.”

“Rumlow?” Steve demanded dangerously.

“Don’t worry,” Tony waved him off. “He’s too busy being dead to be a problem anymore. That one’s on me.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Steve said warily, before gracefully getting to his feet to start checking the bodies. He looked a little pale when he came back, the palms of his hands streaked with blood. “There’s no survivors.”

“I could have told you that,” Natasha said.

Steve looked back to Bucky. “How can…what do we do now?”

“Now we find out a way to get those triggers out of his brain,” Tony said resolutely.

“You make it sound so simple,” Steve said.

“It’s not gonna be simple,” Natasha said, looking suddenly exhausted. She pressed her eyes shut. “It’s going to hurt.”

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Steve carried Bucky down the stairs to Bruce’s floor. Tony secured the stairwell doors behind them on each floor, not liking having his shatterproof and bulletproof windows broken open for all and sundry to come strolling through, never mind that it was the penthouse floor.
Bucky wasn’t stirring, and still didn’t wake even once they took him into the shower stall and Steve held him up underneath the water while Tony used a cloth to wipe away all the blood. They got him out of the ruined clothes, and redressed him in the shirt and soft pants that Natasha had retrieved and left for them on the sink. It might be disorienting to wake up in new clothes, but weighed against waking up covered in blood, Tony didn’t really feel there was much choice.

Steve carried him out again, laying him carefully on the Hulk-sized bed. They all stepped back then, watching him carefully. He looked harmless, Tony thought. He looked like Bob.

“We shouldn’t all be here when he wakes up,” Natasha said. She glanced carefully at Tony, before turning her attention to Steve. “Steve, you should probably be the one to stay. You have the best chance of subduing him if he’s not feeling cooperative.”

“Now just a minute—“ Tony started.

“If you don’t want to use some basic caution for yourself, then do it for him,” Natasha said coolly, as she glanced sideways at him. “He was ordered to kill you, wasn’t he? You think he’ll ever get his mind back if he hurts you in the meantime?”

Tony couldn’t really argue that logic, but dragged a hand through his hair in frustration as he stepped further back. “God damn it,” he snarled. “We were just—“ He broke off, wanting to punch something. He should have emptied that whole damn clip.

“What do we do?” Steve asked quietly. “If he’s still…if he’s not Bucky, when he wakes up…what do we do?”

“You bring him back,” Natasha told them, and though her voice was calm, Tony didn’t think he was imagining the trembling of her lips. “Then you put him under, and you bring him back and put him under again. And again. And again until you can’t anymore, until finally one time you try it and it doesn’t work.”

Steve looked gutted, and he turned his head to press his forehead against the wall. Tony swallowed hard. “How do we do that?” Tony asked. “How do we bring him back?”

“That’s the question,” Natasha said. “Clint used to sing to me. A Russian lullaby. It’s the only memory I have of my childhood that I think might actually be mine, and it brings me back every time. You’ve just got to find out what has a stronger hold on him than seventy years of conditioning and torture.”

“So no pressure then,” Tony said glibly.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “I told you what you were getting into.”

“No, you told me I didn’t know what I was getting into, and then kept me in the dark,” Tony reminded her.

“Well, you’re a smart boy,” she said, as she turned and started back towards the stairs. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“Hey, where are you going?” Tony shouted after her.

“I’ve got some calls to make,” she told him. “We’ve got some bodies to disappear.”
Chapter 18

Tony was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. Natasha was beside him, her head resting on his shoulder, possibly asleep, possibly wide awake and assessing everything, or maybe some weird combination of them both. He’d stopped trying to figure her out awhile ago.

He didn’t know how long they had been sitting there when Steve finally stepped back out, looking pale and shaken. Tony pushed himself to his feet, Natasha gracefully rising to her feet beside him.

“Is he awake?” Tony asked urgently. “Does he remember who he is?”

“Yeah, he’s awake and himself, he’s….” Steve broke off, eyes going distant. “But he wants…” He trailed off, pressing his eyes shut for a moment, before turning them back on Tony desperately. “Can you please talk to him? Explain what we need to do? He’s not listening to me.”

Tony didn’t need to be asked twice, he rushed forward, before spinning back to point at Natasha. “You stay here,” he told her.

“I don’t think you should be alone with him,” she said cautiously.

It wasn’t exactly unreasonable advice, but he’d been living with Bob for months with no incidents. As long as no one was around screaming out the trigger words, Tony trusted him implicitly. “You’re the one that said we shouldn’t crowd him,” he reminded. “Get updates from Jarvis if you want, but stay here.”

He opened the heavy Hulk-proof door and stepped inside, letting it fall back closed behind him. The bed was empty, and he couldn’t see Bucky at first. He stepped further into the room, and then saw him pressed into the corner of the room on the other side of the bed. He had his knees pulled up, and his hands clasped behind his head, his hair hiding his face.

He’d found him this way after countless nightmares, but this time Tony couldn’t reassure him that it wasn’t real, or tell him that he was safe. He wasn’t going to lie to him, not about this.

“Bucky?” he called cautiously.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked quietly. His voice sounded rough, as though he’d been screaming.

“No, no I’m fine,” Tony assured him quickly, stepping closer.

Bucky unclasped his hands, and let his head fall back to hit the wall. “You shouldn't be here.”

“I live here,” Tony deadpanned.

“You're right,” Bucky said, and laughed brokenly, turning his head away towards the wall. “I’m the one that shouldn't be here.”

Tony crouched down in front of him, slowly reaching out. “Bucky—“

Bucky jerked away, pushing himself further into the corner, somehow managing to make himself seem so much smaller than he was. “Don’t…” he rasped. “Don’t touch me.”

“Okay,” Tony said, holding his hands up in supplication. “But you’re you now, okay? Rumlow is very, very dead and he can’t control you now. Natasha broke their hold.”
“It isn’t gone. It’s in me,” he said, his breaths hitching. “It’s me.”

Tony had to use all of his self control not to try and reach out again or start spouting platitudes. They’d never done him any good, he knew they’d do even less for Bucky. “Maybe,” he said. “But it’s not the part of you that matters.”

Bucky brought his hands back up, running them down his face, his expression going almost eerily calm. “I need to speak to Natasha.”

“Not yet,” Tony said, his heart beating faster. He couldn’t think of any good reasons for him to want Natasha right now. “I really think you need to speak to me.”

“You’ve got to put me down, Tony,” Buck said, confirming Tony’s worse suspicions. “I asked Steve, but he won’t—”

Tony swallowed hard. Well, that explained why Steve had come out of here looking like he’d just watched some puppies getting slaughtered. “And you think I will?” he asked.

“I’m not who you think,” Bucky said. “I tried to be, but I’m not—I’m not harmless, Tony. I’m not your Bob Morrison, that was all just make-believe. I don’t get to be happy! Okay? That’s not for me. I’m dangerous, can’t you see that? I need to be put down.”

“Well, that’s just not going to happen,” Tony told him.

“You saw what I did,” Bucky said. “You saw those men—I don’t even, I barely even remember it. It was like it was nothing. It was effortless. That was me. I don’t think I’m even human, anymore.”

“You were protecting us,” Tony said. “They were here to kill me, and do worse than that to you. If you’re trying to get me to feel bad for them, you’re going to have to come up with a better argument than that. What, you think I’ve never killed anyone? I don’t even keep count.”

“It’s not the same,” Bucky insisted, finally meeting Tony’s eyes. He looked irritated, which Tony always took as a kind of victory.

“How is it different?” he demanded. “We’re all dangerous. I can promise, if I had your skills, and I was backed into a corner, I’d use them. We use what we have. We’re survivors. There’s nothing wrong with that.” He sat forward on his knees, reaching up to gently brush back Bucky’s wild hair. This time, Bucky let him. “You’re the strongest person I’ve ever known, you know that? And I hang around with superheroes and Gods. You don’t give in. Don’t start now.”

“I’d never had anything to protect, before,” Bucky admitted. “But I can’t protect you from myself.”

“What if you could?” Tony asked. “We have a plan. It’s not a great plan, but it’s still a plan, so, you know, already more than I usually start with.”

“Tony—” Bucky started with a frown.

“We think we can deprogram you,” Tony explained. “It’s not gonna be fun, and it’s not gonna be easy, but Natasha is pretty sure it’ll work. And she should know, cause she’s been through it.”

“Immersion therapy,” Bucky said tiredly. “She already suggested it. Before this…we were thinking of starting in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, she told me what was in the book she brought you,” Tony said carefully.
“No one else was supposed to know about it,” Bucky said, looking angry with himself. “This arm of Hydra never used it, just the chair. I didn’t think they had them. I thought if she could get the book back from my old handler, that this would be over. But if Rumlow knew, there’s no telling who else he told.”

“So let’s make those words worthless,” Tony said. “You deserve to be in control of your own life. Just say the word, and we can fix this.”

Bucky frowned slightly, watching Tony like he was trying to figure something out. “Okay,” he finally agreed.

The heavy door was pushed open, and Natasha came in with Steve trailing behind her. “I was hoping you’d say that,” she told him. “We can start now.”

“Jesus, give him a minute!” Tony snapped, turning to glare at her.

“The less recovery time between putting him under the better,” she said simply. “Give him too long to recover, and the programming is going to recover, too, and reassert its hold.”

Bucky stood, keeping his back to the wall, watching the three of them like he didn’t quite trust them, but Tony was pretty sure the one he really didn’t trust was himself. “She’s right,” he agreed. “You probably shouldn’t…you shouldn’t be close.”

Tony turned and stepped away in frustration, glancing up to glare at Natasha as she smoothly stepped into his place. “I made you a promise,” she started quietly, watching Bucky warily. “Do you remember it?”

“Yes,” Bucky told her calmly. Natasha nodded then, and Tony could see the way Bucky was assessing her in turn. “Do you intend to keep it?”

“I do,” Natasha agreed. “But it shouldn’t come to that.”

Tony tensed, narrowing his eyes in her direction. He knew that Bucky had told things to Natasha that he had not been comfortable telling him, the book was just the one that he knew about. He really didn’t like the direction that this conversation was heading, but it wasn’t the time to get in an argument about it.

They had enough to worry about with Natasha about to put him under, and the fact that she wasn’t holding the book didn’t seem to escape Bucky’s notice. “Already memorized them, huh?” Bucky asked dryly.

“It wasn’t on purpose, it’s just not something I’d forget,” she assured him. “You know what this will do to you?”

“Yes,” he answered.

Natasha stared back at him. “Do you really?”

“I remember when it was done,” Bucky told her calmly. “Can’t be worse than that.”

“It can come close,” she countered.

He laughed brokenly, and glanced away. “Nah, not really,” he said. “You haven’t got the right equipment.”
Natasha turned and stepped away from him, coming to stand beside Steve and Tony. Tony couldn’t
tell if she was armed, but Steve stepped a little in front of them, obviously ready to subdue Bucky if it came to that.

Then she started speaking the words.

Tony kept a careful eye on Bucky. It looked like every instinct he had was telling him to tear out
Natasha’s throat before she could say the next word, but he didn’t move a single step. He just dropped his head, his eyes pressed shut, and closed his hands to fists.

Then she said the last word in the sequence, and he just went still. His hands unclenched, falling
loose at his sides, and he slowly raised his head. “Ready to comply,” he said.

By a sort of unspoken consensus, Steve was the one to approach him first. “Bucky?” he asked quietly.

The soldier didn’t acknowledge him, keeping his eyes on Natasha, instead. “Ready to comply.”

Steve stopped right in front of him, and Bucky acted like he didn’t even know he was there.

“Buck? You know me,” Steve said, reaching out to frame his face and tug him up until their eyes met. “Look at me. You know me. You remember that time—“

“What is my mission?” Bucky asked dispassionately.

“There is no mission,” Steve assured him. “You don’t have do anything.”

“Parameters are invalid,” Bucky told him. “What is my mission?”

Tony reached up to press a hand against his temple to hold off the coming migraine. He wasn’t sure how they were going to bring him back from this. The minute the words finished, it was like there was nothing there. Tony went still when he realized his movements had caught the attention of the soldier. Bucky stared back at him, his eyes speculative and cool.

“You,” Bucky said roughly, his eyes going hard. “You were my mission.”

“That mission is void, soldier,” Natasha snapped, stepping in between them. “You have no orders.”

“Then why am I awake?” Bucky asked emotionlessly.

“Are you questioning me?” Natasha demanded.

Bucky stared back at her with a strange combination of wariness and fearlessness. “You are not Hydra,” he said. “You are Natalia Romanova.”

“I’m a deep cover agent for SHIELD, and that’s pretty much the same thing,” she assured him. “You know that better than any of us.”

“Yes,” Bucky agreed, his curiosity slipping away as quickly as it had come.

But it had been there, if only for a moment. There had been something.

Bucky was trying to watch all of them at once, seemingly realizing he had no weapons. He wasn’t even wearing shoes. He only had a pair of flannel pajama pants and a t-shirt, and while Tony had watched him take down ten guys starting with just as little, he knew that the soldier, at least, would only be comfortable with a weapon in his hand.
They were making him nervous. Tony wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or not.

Natasha reached out and grabbed Tony’s arm, tugging him with her towards the door. “It’s better if we don’t crowd him,” she said. “We need him to have a single focal point. Steve? Remember what we talked about. Shared experience. High emotion memories.”

Steve nodded, before turning back to Bucky. But Bucky’s eyes followed him and Natasha, until they were finally out the door.

“I should be in there,” Tony said, the minute they were in the hall.

“You’ll get your chance if Steve can’t break through,” she told him. “But Steve knew him before Hydra got him, and sometimes that’s the quickest way to create an anchor. We can’t all try to get through to him at once. I don’t think he’ll get violent, his training to obey will be too strong, but he’s already getting hostile. We want him cooperative.”

Tony let himself fall back against the wall, and rolled his head towards her. “What did you promise him?” he asked.

“I need to get some rest,” Natasha said coolly, as she spun on her heel and started for the elevator. “Call me if there’s any change.”

“What promise, Natasha?” he called after her, stalking a few steps into her wake.

She paused but didn’t turn around. “That’s between me and him,” she said, and then disappeared around the corner.

“God damnit,” Tony snapped, falling back against the wall again. He had a pretty good idea what that promise was, as if he needed to worry about something else. “Jarvis, check our security records. What did she promise him?”

“Sir,” Jarvis responded coolly, “Protocol prohibits—“

“Override: Alpha-Forty-Twelve-Nineteen,” Tony said resolutely. “What did he ask her to promise him?”

There was a brief and heavy silence, and then Jarvis answered:

“In the event we are unable to find a way to undo his programming, he has asked Ms. Romanoff to shoot him in the head.”

“Where is she?” Tony demanded angrily.

“She’s just excited onto her floor,” Jarvis responded. “Sir, if I might—“

“Not now,” Tony said, as he headed to the elevator. He’d known Natasha would kill Bucky if she felt she had to—Natasha would kill any of them, if she felt she had to—but that Bucky had asked her to do it made things worse. She was less likely to change her mind.

He pounded on the door to her suite as soon as he exited the floor, and she opened it like she’d been expecting him. She leaned against the doorjamb, barefoot and wearing flannel pants and a t-shirt that echoed what they’d laid out for Bucky. “Did you miss the part where I was going to try and sleep?” she asked wryly.

“You’re not going to kill him,” Tony snapped.
Natasha watched him, looking tired suddenly. He knew she’d been awake longer than any of them. “That’s not a promise I can make,” she told him.

“You don’t get to be the one that decides if he’s too far gone,” he yelled. “If you make a single move against him—Jarvis will be watching, and I will stop you. Steve will help me.”

“This isn’t about what you want, Tony. It’s not about what Steve wants,” she said. “I keep my promises.”

“I don’t give a damn about your promises,” he snapped. “You try anything, you’re going to have to go through me.”

“He’ll be the one to go through you,” she snapped, some of her usual ironclad control slipping. “If he can’t have his own mind, he doesn’t want to have a mind at all. I’m not just doing this to protect the rest of us from him. You don’t know what it’s like to be used that way, what it is not to trust your own mind. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, let alone wish it on him.”

She straightened up, watching him with some mixture of pity and irritation. “You want someone to yell at, you want someone to blame,” she said. “Because Hydra’s not in reach and what’s been done to him isn’t something you can see—but I am not the enemy here. I don’t want to hurt him.”

He knew that was true, but it was the worst case scenario that was haunting him. She didn’t want to. But she would.

“He’s not in the right frame of mind to be making deals with you,” Tony told her. “You shouldn’t have promised him that.”

“He’s not suicidal,” she said. “That’s not what this is. This is pragmatism. This is knowing sometimes you need a back up plan, because sometimes you don’t get to save the day. Sometimes you don’t get to be the hero. Sometimes you just do what you can to limit the collateral damage.”

“If you try to hurt him,” he told her, his voice rough and angry. “I will stop you.”

“You do what you have to. And so will I,” Natasha told him, before stepping back and slamming the door in his face.

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Tony suspected he may have overreacted a bit, but dramatics were sort of his thing, so he wasn’t too worried about it. He was more worried about what he would do if their plan didn’t work—because as much as he disagreed with it, at least Natasha had a back up plan. He didn’t.

He found himself wandering back in his lab, and grabbed a Vodka bottle out of one of the cabinets. “Time for a back up plan of my own,” he decided, clearing his backboard with a few taps. “How hard can it be to hijack the hippocampus?”

He didn’t know how much time had passed when he heard heels clicking on the tiles behind him, but it was long enough that the board was filled edge to edge with equations and schematics and code. He took another large sip from the Vodka bottle and didn’t bother to turn around.

“I thought you weren't going to do this anymore.”

The voice wasn’t who he was expecting. He’d figured Natasha had come down to talk more about how sometimes shooting someone in the head was the only sensible thing to do. He wasn’t
expecting it to be Pepper, instead.

“You know me and my self-destructive tendencies,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I can’t say I’m happy to see them again.“

He finally turned around to face her. She looked impeccable despite the early hour, in a business suit and four inch heels. Her hair had been straightened and artistically pulled only half up. “This isn’t a great time,” he told her. “It’s not safe here right now.”

“Yes, I know. Natasha called me at around one in the morning,” Pepper said. “She wanted me to have security look the other way while she and about fifteen guys Steve’s size took out thirty huge duffle bags through the back entrance. Do I want to know what was in them?”

“You do not,” Tony assured her.

Pepper came to stand beside him, and took the bottle, tilting it back to take a long swig of her own. She made a face as she handed it back. “This is just water,” she said, sounding surprised.

“Placebo,” Tony explained.

Pepper snorted, but looked relieved. Tony had dumped out all his vodka when he decided to cut back, and filled them all with water instead. It was familiar, though admittedly not as much fun.

“What else did she tell you?” he asked.

“Not much,” Pepper said wryly.

“We used the trigger words on Bucky,” he explained. “Immersion therapy, I guess? Natasha says it will work. Steve’s trying to bring him out of it now, then we’re going to have to do it again. And if we fail at this, I don’t think we’re going to get a second chance before Hydra hits us again.”

“Since when do you worry about failure?” Pepper asked.

“Since I have to outsource instead of handling it myself,” Tony said irritably.

“Is that what all this is about?” Pepper asked, nodding towards the board.

“It’s got promise,” Tony said, leaning on his desk on his elbows, and running his hands down his face. “But it will take months of testing before I even get a working prototype. Can’t take shortcuts when you’re talking about the human brain. Hydra’s not gonna give us that long.”

“Hmm,” Pepper hummed distractedly, glancing back to the board. “And what is Steve doing that you can’t?”

“Trying to anchor him with something from his past,” Tony said tiredly, pushing away from the desk.

“You’re trying to bring him back by connecting to his past as Bucky?” she repeated slowly.

“Yeah,” he said, glancing at her. “Jarvis has been giving me updates. It’s not going well.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would,” she agreed. “Because you’re trying to bring him back by creating a connection to a past he can barely remember. Bucky has told me how much he’s still struggling to try and piece together who he was.” She frowned, glancing over at him. “Don’t you think you should be trying to reach Bob, instead?”
Tony froze at the simple, obvious, question. *You’re the only thing that’s real to me,* Bucky had told him. His past was still running through his brain like old film reels, he hadn’t been able to grasp onto them yet, or order them, or trust them. The only things he knew he could believe in were the things that had happened to him here. “Pepper, you’re a genius,” Tony told her, leaning forward to peck her on the cheek before shoving the Vodka bottle at her and starting toward the doors.

“Yeah, I know,” she told him, smiling wryly. “It’s just I’m always next to you, so no one notices.”

“Now that’s just not true,” he told her, spinning back to face her without stopping his progress to the elevator. “Bucky clocked you as the boss in about one second flat.”

“Just get him back, Tony,” she said softly.

“Will do, boss,” he told her.

He slammed his palm down on the button for the Penthouse, and anxiously bounced in place as it sped upwards. He’d have to head back down to the Hulk’s floor, but he had to pick something up first.

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By the time Tony made it down to the Hulk’s suite and pushed open the heavy door, Steve looked over at him with a desperation he wasn’t used to seeing. He looked a little like he might have been crying, though his jaw was set into its signature stubborn form.

“Tony?” he asked.

“Time to tap out,” Tony told him, clasping him quickly the arm. “Go get some rest. We need to take this in turns, or we’re not going to be any good to anyone. Also, I’ve got an idea. Well, it’s Pepper’s idea, but I would have gotten there eventually.”

Steve looked hesitant to leave, but eventually gave a quick nod. With one last worried glance at Bucky, he turned towards the door. “Call me the second you need anything.”

Tony looked back at Bucky as Steve closed the door behind him. He didn’t look emotionless anymore, he looked angry. It was progress, Tony guessed. Whatever Steve had been doing, it had definitely been doing something. But it hadn’t pulled him back in the way they wanted, not yet.

He lifted the journal he’d retrieved from Bucky’s room. “Recognize this?” he asked.

“No,” Bucky answered simply.

“No? Okay, let’s go through it together,” Tony said. “First things first: you have a sweet tooth. It’s impressive, honestly. You once went through twenty Pixy Stix in one sitting. The sugar packets for the coffee disappears at a rate of like 60% faster than our coffee stores. Pepper’s considering an intervention. She keeps trying to get you to eat medjool dates instead.”

Bucky just blinked at him, and that wasn’t really the breakthrough response Tony had been hoping for. “Right,” he said, clearing his throat. “Then there’s pineapple. You don’t like pineapple. Especially not on pizza. You looked at me like I was trying to poison you.” Bucky’s eyes narrowed. “Huh. Sort of like you’re looking at me now, honestly.

“Also, you’re not a big fan of cinnamon toothpaste, but that’s mostly because you used it as a spread on your toast instead of brushing your teeth with it, but now you won’t have anything to do
with it at all,” Tony continued. “You do like slippers, especially the Iron Man ones—you’ve got great taste in superheroes, we should add that in here—and you love Brave. Merida? Remember her? Little cartoon girl, big red curls? Like vintage Natasha in Pixar form? You like her because she doesn’t play the role she’s meant to play, because she makes her own destiny.”

“Stop it,” Bucky said, so quiet that Tony almost didn’t hear him.

Tony ignored him. He was used to being told to shut up, it hadn’t worked on him yet. “And you’re a flirt, like oh my god, forget your cybernetic arm, those eyes of yours are the real lethal weapons. And you’re a smart ass, can even keep up with me, which is impressive. You’re funny, and quick, and clever.”

Bucky took a step away from him. He was looking at the journal like it was something terrifying. “This is not procedure,” he said. “You need to give me orders.”

Tony closed the journal, and looked up at him. “You told me once that this was like a talisman, that you kept it in case you lost yourself again. You wanted a record of who you were.” He stepped forward, reaching out to snag Bucky’s wrist when he moved to step away again. He pressed the journal into the palm of his hand. “This is you. These are all the things they couldn’t take from you, and everything you’ve managed to get back along the way. It belongs to you.”

Bucky’s hands started to shake as he hesitantly reached out to open the first page. “This is my handwriting,” he said, as he traced his fingers across the fragmented pieces of himself he had been trying to put together. “I remember this writing.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. You go by Bucky, and sometimes Bob.”

“Bob?” Bucky echoed skeptically, and then paused as something caught his eye. “You’re on the list, too. Right near the top.”

“Yeah, still working to get bumped up in front of sugar, but—“ Tony trailed off as Bucky glanced up with wild eyes.

“Tony?” he asked desperately, the life flooding back into his eyes and settling in on panic. He dropped the book and pushed himself violently away, landing on the bed and not stopping until he hit the headboard. “Oh, god. What did I do? What did I do?”

“Nothing, you didn’t do anything, we’re fine,” Tony told him quickly, following him slowly to the edge of the bed. “Everyone’s fine.”

Bucky was taking in wild, gulping breaths, and frantically checking and rechecking the room. “Where’s Steve?”

Tony suspected he was either in a corner somewhere crying, or trying to tear down a wall with his fists, but this didn’t seem like a good time to bring that up. “He’s fine, too,” he said. “He needed some sleep. Jarvis? Let them know Bucky’s back.”

Bucky reached behind him, gripping onto the back of the headboard with his left hand, holding on tight enough the wood around it began to splinter. “We did this on purpose,” he said slowly, like he was beginning to remember. He looked up at Tony. “You brought me back.”

“Would love to take the credit, but that was all you,” Tony promised him, reaching down to grab the journal. He carefully dropped it on the bed between them. “And that.”
“My journal?” Bucky realized, reaching out for it hesitantly. He pulled it closer. “I remembered it. Even when…it was familiar. So were you.”

“I think we’ve found your lullaby,” Tony agreed.

“What?” Bucky asked, looking up in confusion.

“You can use that to anchor yourself, you can use it to bring yourself back,” Tony told him. “We do it enough times, and you shouldn’t need it anymore.”

“It’s working,” Bucky realized, his eyes clearing of the pain that had been lurking there since Hydra first showed up again. For a moment, he looked like he had back when he first discovered movies, like when he had first seen Tony’s lab—he looked *hopeful*.

“Yeah,” Tony said, smiling back at him.

Bucky pushed up on his knees and slid forward until he was in front of Tony. He was watching him with an intensity that might have been unnerving if Tony couldn’t clearly see the life that was dancing in his eyes now, bright and curious and *Bucky*, in a way they just didn’t seem to do when he was under Hydra’s spell.

He half thought Bucky might kiss him, but instead he threw his arms around him in a sudden hug, holding onto him almost too tightly. It was nice, Tony decided. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been hugged like this.

“You keep saving me,” Bucky whispered. “Thank you.”

“Not that I don’t like being the hero, because, you know, sort of my job description,” Tony said. “But I’m still pretty sure you’ve been saving yourself.”

“You’re just supposed to say ‘you’re welcome,’ remember?” Bucky snorted, but didn’t lessen his hold.

“You’re welcome,” Tony said, and hugged him back.
Bucky was still in Tony's arms when Steve came barreling through the doors like there was a Leviathan on his tail. Bucky pulled back in surprise, and then slipped off the bed to walk over to Steve and just sort of fell straight into his arms.

“Bucky?” Steve said, his voice cracking.

“I’m back, punk,” Bucky told him tiredly, not so much hugging Steve as just kind of letting all of his body weight rest against him. Part of Tony wondered if he should be jealous, but it was too weirdly adorable.

Steve pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around him before looking up to meet Tony’s eyes. “Thank you,” he mouthed over Bucky’s shoulder.

Tony threw him a quick salute, and Steve rolled his eyes, which reset the normal state of interaction between them. Unfortunately, the moment didn’t last long, and it was the last good moment they had for awhile, because when Natasha arrived she put him under again. And again. Rinse. Repeat.

Natasha wouldn’t let them take longer than ten minutes to recover. She wouldn’t let Bucky sleep. She wouldn’t let him eat. Some fifty hours in, Tony finally started to lose it, and dragged her out into the hall while Steve stayed with a Bucky that was still just coming back around before she put him under again.

“What the hell are you doing?” he snarled at her, gripping her arm. She stayed still in his grip, unfazed, though even she wasn’t able to hide the dark circles under her eyes. They couldn’t let Bucky sleep, but none of them were really sleeping, either. “You want to break him all over again?”

“Yes,” she answered calmly.

Tony let her go, his mouth falling open in shock as he stumbled away from her. “What?”

“Have you ever had a broken bone that didn’t heal quite right?” Natasha asked him tiredly. “You have to break it again if you ever want it to get any better. He had to break for this programming to take. The only way to take it back is to break him again. So yes, Tony, that’s exactly what I’m doing. If we stop, if we give him space to breathe, or we let him rest, all those barriers we’ve been breaking down, they’re going to recover too, and we’re going to have to start all over again.”

Tony fell back against the hallway wall, pressing his eyes shut. “Fuck.”

“James knew what this would take,” she said. “We talked about it, at length, before Hydra showed up. It was always part of the plan.”

Part of him still wanted to hate her for it, but the thing of it was: she was right.

If Tony had been in charge they would have been stopping every time to let Bucky rest, and get him his favorite pizza, and turn on *Brave*, and they probably wouldn’t have made the slightest bit
Natasha knew what she was doing. She knew it wasn’t pretty, or nice, but necessary, and so when Tony and Steve were ready to bundle Bucky up and make a break for it she stayed strong, and Bucky stayed strong, and so it was a horrible vicious cycle of programming and deprogramming that left him twitchy and sleep-deprived, and was probably about a thousands times worse for Bucky.

Not that Bucky would let that show. He didn’t complain once, he just let them do whatever the hell they wanted, like he deserved it, and somehow that made it almost worse.

But it worked.

It took almost three days, but it worked.

“Shut the fuck up, Natasha,” Bucky said tiredly when she finished the last word of her latest attempt to put him under, instead of the expected Ready to comply.

Natasha broke out into a wide grin. “There he is,” she whispered.

Bucky looked up then, seeming to realize what was happening, and his eyes widened and shot back to Natasha. “Do it again,” he demanded, as his hand reached out and caught Tony’s. Tony was pretty sure he only narrowly avoided having some of his fingers dislocated, but he didn’t even think of pulling away.

Natasha read the words out again, and Bucky let out a delighted laugh when she said the last one and nothing happened. He lunged forward and Tony caught him just in time to prevent the tackle hug knocking them both to the ground.

Tony could feel his own heart trying to beat its way out of his chest as he held him tightly, and looked back over at Natasha. “Is that it?” he asked. “Is it over?”

“We’ll have to try again tomorrow to be sure,” Natasha said gently, laying a hand on Bucky’s back for a moment, before stepping back. “But we can stop for now. He can get some sleep.”

Steve hovered awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, before looking back at Tony pleadingly. “Take care of him, okay?” he said, and then left before Tony could reply.

“Come on,” Tony told Bucky, gently leading him towards the bed. “You need to sleep.”

“You need to sleep too,” Bucky told him, glancing back at him with concern.

“I got a couple hours, which was more than you,” Tony reminded him. “But I can stay with you for awhile, if you want.”

“Would you?” Bucky asked, latching onto Tony’s hand, like he was afraid he was going to suddenly take back the offer and disappear.

Tony followed him up on the bed, keeping their hands together. He tugged Bucky until he was pulled up against him, and Bucky let his left arm fall across Tony’s chest. His arm was just a bit heavier than it looked like it should be, but the weight was more comforting than anything.

It only took Bucky about three seconds flat to fall dead asleep, and Tony glanced down at him fondly and felt himself getting drowsier by the moment. He hadn’t really been planning to sleep himself, but it wasn’t long before he was following Bucky.
He had a feeling that was becoming a habit.

Tony woke up around ten the next morning, with Bucky still out to the world and pressed up against his side. Tony reached across and gently brushed his hair out of his eyes. It might have been his imagination, but some of the ever present tension that Bucky always seemed to carry around appeared to have faded, leaving him looking relaxed in sleep and even younger than Jarvis’ calculations had determined he was.

He didn’t think he’d be able to untangle himself without waking him up, but Bucky just frowned a little as Tony slipped out of the bed. His decades of one-night stands had trained him well in the art of slipping unnoticed out of bed.

“Jarvis, keep an eye on him for me,” Tony ordered quietly, before stepping out into the hall. Steve was across from the door, half propped up against the opposite wall, as deeply asleep as Bucky.

Part of Tony thought he should just let him sleep, but the other part thought there was no way that could be comfortable, even if Steve was a super soldier. He knelt down in front of him, just out of striking distance to be on the safe size. “Steve,” he called gently.

“What?” Steve cried as he started awake, bracing himself against the wall. His eyes latched onto Tony and looked panicked. “Bucky?”

“He’s fine,” Tony assured him quickly. “Still asleep. In an actual bed. Like you should be.”

“Oh,” Steve said, coloring a little red as he realized where he was. “I was just…”

“What?” Steve cried as he started awake, bracing himself against the wall. His eyes latched onto Tony and looked panicked. “Bucky?”

“He’s fine,” Tony assured him quickly. “Still asleep. In an actual bed. Like you should be.”

“Oh,” Steve said, coloring a little red as he realized where he was. “I was just…”

“Alright, come on,” Tony said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand. “That bed is big enough for three people. If you’re going to be all inconsolable and brooding, you might as well stay and watch over him.”

Steve swallowed, his eyes skittering away nervously, making no move to follow Tony and get to his feet. He was dressed in a regular t-shirt and jeans, and it made it suddenly and startlingly clear how young he really was. Sometimes, Tony felt like Steve could really be a hundred years old, the way he stood when he was in uniform. When he was like this, it became obvious that minus the years in ice, he wasn’t even quite thirty yet.

“I don’t know how to help him,” Steve admitted softly. “I can’t—you’re the one he needs.”

“Okay, well, I am awesome,” Tony agreed. “But that’s just not true. He needs all of us, because in case you haven’t noticed, none of us know how to help him. We’re all sort of just doing whatever we can. Like, my solution was juice boxes and Disney films. Natasha’s was sleep deprivation and deprogramming. You just need to be his friend, really. Pretty sure you know how to do that, it’s sort of one of your defining features in the history books.”

“I couldn’t bring him back,” Steve said, looking away to the wall. “I tried, but I couldn’t reach him. He doesn’t remember me. So what good am I?”

“Maybe he doesn’t remember everything,” Tony agreed. “But there’s no reason to think it won’t come back. He’s been remembering more every day, and the best person to help him remember is you. Even if he doesn’t, does it matter? Would you care about him less?”

Steve looked up in shock, his eyes widening. “Of course not!” he cried.
“Well, there you go.” This time when Tony held out a hand, Steve took it and let himself get pulled to his feet. He stumbled a little, catching himself on the wall, and Tony frowned at him. “Also, he sort of needs us functioning, so you should probably get some actual sleep.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed reluctantly, letting Tony push him back towards the Hulk suite. He turned back to look at Tony with a frown. “What are you going to do?”

“I’ve just got to check on some things,” Tony said. “This floor is secure, because it was built for the Hulk, but the penthouse needs some major security upgrades. Currently we’ve got the windows blown out like a glaring neon welcome sign to everyone that’s ever wanted to kill us.”

“I can—” Steve started.

Tony pointed to the room. “You can go to bed,” he said. “And sleep. God. You’re like in your nineties, why do I feel like the parent?”

Steve just smiled at him. “Because you’re a good guy,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m the best, everyone tells me so,” Tony told him. “Now get out of my sight. Seriously. I’m getting tired again just looking at you.”

Steve disappeared into the room and Tony headed towards the elevator to make his way back to the Penthouse. He hadn’t been there since the attack, and he braced himself before entering his bedroom, but he shouldn’t have bothered worrying.

Natasha did good work. The carpet in his bedroom had been replaced instead of cleaned, but it matched exactly what he’d had before. The only difference he could spot in the room at all was that the sheets on his bed were in a slightly different shade.

His alarm clock, the fallen lamp, all the broken glass—everything was put back to rights. The only remaining sign of what had happened was the plastic sheeting taped up around the now empty panels where the glass had shattered. Tony had Jarvis contact R&D to redo all the glass with a new experimental version they’d been working on. It was nearly indestructible, and naturally tinted just on one side. Hydra had to have been watching them to know where to hit, and that was the kind of creepy that would be keeping him up at night for awhile.

He stepped further in the room cautiously. The wind was rattling the plastic sheeting, though the tape it had been pressed down with held. He could have all the glass redone before tonight—perks of being the majority shareholder—but he didn’t think he’d be feeling safe again for awhile.

And apparently he wasn’t the only one.

He glanced behind him to see Natasha leaning against the doorway. “Shouldn’t you be asleep?” he asked her.

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” she told him.

“Well, I’m told sleep deprivation will get you there quicker,” he said.

Natasha just gave him a quicksilver grin. “I got sleep where I could, I’m used to making due. You don’t have to worry about me,” she told him. “You have other things to worry about. This isn’t over, you know. They’ll still come for him. And no matter how much of that programming we undo, it won’t ever really leave him.”

“Speaking from experience?” Tony asked.
“Yes,” she answered, unexpectedly. “But he has something I never did.”

Tony glanced back to the window. “And what’s that?”

“People that love him,” she said, looking at him knowingly.

“Clint loves you,” Tony told her.

“He loves me now,” Natasha corrected. “He didn’t love me then. No one loved me then.”

Tony couldn’t really argue with that, he knew it was true. He tried to imagine Bucky having to deal with this alone, or with only a stranger—it wasn’t a pleasant thought. Clint had cared about Natasha from the start, had seen something in her he wanted to save, but he hadn’t really known her yet. She hadn’t even known herself.

“I realize I’m very entertaining,” Tony told her when she didn’t offer anything else, “but you don’t usually seek me out for nothing, so…”

“There’s a breach,” she admitted, eyeing the broken window. “The Tower isn’t secure. It’s making me…twitchy. I was just checking on it.”

Tony didn’t think he’d ever seen Natasha twitchy, and he sure as hell never wanted to. “You can lock down your floor if it makes you feel better,” he told her. “Just ask Jarvis. Titanium planted covers for all the windows and doors. Of course, those don’t do much good when the power goes out before you can activate them. I’ll have to find a way to trigger them with their own power source.”

Natasha smiled softly. “I appreciate the offer,” she said. “Breaches do make me nervous, but not having an exit isn’t really an option. And I don’t want to be cut off from the rest of you.”

“It’ll be fixed before tonight,” Tony assured her. “I’m not going to be taken unaware again.”

“Good,” she said simply, and moved to leave.

“Hey, what about you?” Tony called. “Are you going to be okay?”

She may have acted like it was nothing, but he knew she wasn’t heartless. He knew there was no way she enjoyed dragging the Winter Soldier out again and again, knowing what it was doing to Bucky’s mind. She’d forced herself to be the bad guy, to play the part, because that was what they’d needed.

“I’m always okay,” she told him, and turned to leave.

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All in all, Bucky slept for nearly twenty hours before finally waking up. Tony expected him to be a little off-kilter, but he was chipper. It was like the morning person revelation all over again, and Tony hadn’t even had any coffee yet—but Tony couldn’t help but start to feel a little giddy by association. Bucky was practically glowing. If he’d seemed happier when they fixed his arm, it was nothing next to this.

Bucky had showered and shaved, and put on the sweater with the Captain American shield. Tony wondered if that had been an intentional attempt to try and cheer up Steve, who was sitting at the kitchen bar looking like he’d been through the wringer. He suspected Steve had not caught up on much of his lost sleep.
Bucky, for his part, was making enough bacon and eggs to feed an army—or maybe just two super soldiers. Tony wandered over behind him and pushed up on his toes to look over his shoulder.

“When did you learn to cook like this? I thought this was one thing you weren’t good at,” Tony asked him. “And where did you even find bacon?”

“It’s not actually real bacon. It’s made from soy,” Bucky told him, grinning over at him. “Can you believe that? Amazing what people can do these days.”

“Well, I guess that answers one of the questions, anyway,” Tony said with a frown, leaning over it in disapproval and narrowing his eyes suspiciously. “It came from Pepper.”

Still, Tony could reluctantly admit that it looked good, and weirdly, it smelled like the real thing. He wasn’t going to complain about having his breakfast made for him. Well, not when it was by Bucky, anyway.

If Pepper tried to feed him this he would have had to stage a full scale revolt.

Natasha joined them a few minutes later, slipping silently into the room on socks. Tony almost jumped out of his skin when she started casually speaking out the trigger words, but Bucky didn’t even flinch.

“Still here,” Bucky said off-handedly when she was done, focussing on flipping the soy slabs. Natasha reached out and snagged a piece of the fake bacon as she walked by, and chewed on it contemplatively. “Pepper?” she asked.

“She’s ruining him,” Tony lamented, jerking his head towards Bucky.

“Do you have any idea what industrialization has done to the way people treat animals?” Bucky asked, looking up with a frown. “It’s like something out of one of those horror films.”

“See what I mean?” Tony said, raising an eyebrow at Natasha.

Steve perked up a bit, leaning up on the counter. “What are you talking about, Buck?” he asked, which sparked off a rousing conversation between them about how back ‘in their day’ animals were raised lovingly on family farms and given names and attention before they got their throats slit.

“Okay, I will buy you a farm,” Tony finally interrupted, “and you can set the rules. How about that?”

Steve smiled wryly, glancing over at him. “You do that, and nothing’s getting slaughtered,” he warned him. “Buck’s always adored animals. Adopted a cat in the middle of a war zone, once.”

“Roger!” Bucky cried, smiling brightly. “I remember Roger.”

“You named the cat Roger?” Tony asked, amused.

“He was a scrawny little guy, but a fighter and a survivor. Reminded me of someone,” Bucky said, looking fondly at Steve. “Whatever happened to Roger?”

“You convinced a family to take him when we got called back to the front lines,” Steve told him. “Sweet talked them into it before they even knew what happened. Stupid cat still tried to follow you, they had to come and get him to carry him back.”
Bucky frowned a little as he tried to remember, and then looked back at Steve knowingly. “You fawned over that cat just as much as anyone,” he said.

“I did no such thing,” Steve insisted, unconvincingly. “He was a menace, and he only tolerated you. The rest of us got torn to pieces if we tried to touch him.”

Bucky grinned, his eyes lighting up. “Yeah, he was pretty great,” he said. “Good judge of character, obviously.”

Tony made a mental note to get Bucky an actual kitten when things finally calmed down as he hesitantly picked at the bacon imposter that had been set in front of him. He was almost grateful he didn’t make it further than one bite when Natasha spoke up.

“I hate to ruin the mood,” Natasha started, as she almost compulsively broke her own piece of bacon into tiny squares, “but before you all run off to live on a farm and adopt eighty cats, there are still things that need to be dealt with.”

Bucky rested his elbows on the counter, tearing at a piece of the bacon. “Hydra,” he said tiredly.

“Yes,” Natasha said. “They won’t know you’ve broken the programming. It won’t stop them coming for you again. We need to hit them first.”

“I’ve got Jarvis monitoring—well, everything—“ Tony reassured her. “As soon as I have an idea where the last of them are hiding, we can go take them out.”

“Rumlow ordered James to the Beta site without giving coordinates,” Natasha said, glancing at Bucky. “That means at one time, you knew where it was. Do you remember it now?”

Bucky winced, and reached back to tuck his hair behind his ear. “Siberia,” he said after a moment. “They’ve got another chair there.”

Tony felt his blood run cold. Even if Bucky had overcome the programming, the chair would erase him. He couldn’t fight against Hydra if he couldn’t remember he was supposed to fight against Hydra. “Okay, well, luckily, I have access to a lot of explosives,” Tony said. “Just give me the coordinates, and that’s one problem solved.”

“It’s not that simple,” Bucky said quietly.

“Sure it is,” Tony said.

Bucky shook his head. “It’s underground, built to withstand a nuclear blast,” he said, “we’d have to go in to plant the explosives.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Steve said easily. “We did that with the commandos all the time in the war.”

“Yeah, but that was against regular Hydra soldiers,” Bucky said. “This is different.”

“James,” Natasha said, her voice wary and concerned. “What else are we going to find there?”

He pushed himself back up, biting his lip for a moment, and Tony wished they could have had at least one morning for him to have been happy before it all got ruined again.

“I wasn’t the only Winter Soldier,” he finally admitted. “There’s five more of ‘em, and they’ll all be there.”
Okay, so honestly I was planning to have one more chapter and a short epilogue and then just do timestamps and maybe a sequel for the rest of the things I wanted to do. But then I realized there’s just so much more I want to do, and Rhodey hasn’t even shown up yet, and the world’s gotta find out about Bucky, and I want Tony and Bucky to go to Sokovia, and the whole team needs to learn to work together, and..

And, uh, yeah, so basically this story is probably never going to end.
“I say we just blast our way through the front doors,” Steve said simply.

Tony had to reach up and cover his mouth to keep from laughing when Bucky literally facepalmed at that suggestion. It was one of the most hilarious things Tony had ever seen. Usually people just got all quite and awestruck around Steve, and went along with whatever crazy idea he had.

Well, except for him, obviously.

And Bucky, apparently.

“Seriously?” Bucky asked, dropping his hand to look over at Steve in disbelief. “That is not a plan. That’s what someone without a plan would do.”

Steve set his jaw stubbornly, not backing down. “We can take them.”

“Even if soldiers are awake?” Bucky asked. “I know I’m a pretty good fighter, but even I can’t take five of them at once.”

“You aren’t alone this time,” Steve insisted.

That part at least, Tony could agree with. After they realized what was waiting for them at the Hydra Beta site, they’d all come down Tony’s lab to brainstorm and come up with a plan of attack. It felt weird to have a team again, to have more than just Rhodey trying to keep him from going off the rails.

Also, it was really, really weird trying to play the role of the responsible one.

Because if Tony’s being honest, if he was going at this alone he’d be blasting his way right through the front doors, too.

“And you said it’s the only way in,” Steve pointed out.

“Yes, which is why I’ll be approaching the base alone,” Bucky told them.

“Okay, well, I was enjoying this,” Tony said, “but you’re obviously even worse at plans than he is.” Tony jerked his thumb at Steve, who looked offended.

“I’m the only one they won’t shoot on sight,” Bucky said.

“He's right,” Natasha agreed. Tony narrowed his eyes at her, but she ignored him. “If the strike team sent to retrieve James was killed, but the triggering successful, the soldier would have found his own transportation to Siberia. It's still within the timeframe they may be expecting him.”

“No,” Tony and Steve both snapped, before glancing at each other in surprise.

“Oh, wow,” Tony said. “Is that the first time we’ve ever agreed on something? Jarvis, did you record that? I think we should have some kind of celebration.”

“Sir, I’ve made a copy of it,” Jarvis assured him.
Bucky crossed his arms, looking irritated with them, but turnabout was fair play. Bucky had been sweet-talking just about everyone to his side, it was about time Tony had one of his own allies. He pointed at Bucky. “Steve and I agree on this,” he said. “That’s literally never happened before, so we’re going to go with it. You’re not going alone.”

Steve nodded his support, and Tony held out his fist for a fist bump. Steve looked it strangely for a moment, and then kind of just covered it with his hand and shook it a little. Tony pulled away, staring at his hand with disbelief.

“You’d be there, just not in the sightline,” Bucky assured them. “Because if they see you, they’ll go on lockdown and start firing on you. If they see me, they’ll open the doors to welcome me back home.”

“We need to know about the soldiers,” Natasha cut in. “We can work out the details once we all know what it is we’re up against.”

Bucky nodded, biting his lip and looking somewhat anxious. “Okay,” he agreed. “They ah… they’ve been in cryo there, a lot longer than I ever went under without being woken up. They put them under in ninety-three, and kept them that way.”

Tony raised his hand. “Uh, question,” he said. “If they’re in cryo, what are we all so concerned about? You’re pretty much the most terrifying assassin that’s ever lived, and no offense, but you were super easy to handle straight out of cyro.”

Tony only just barely managed to stop himself from pointing out that Bucky had actually been about as threatening as a wet, sad, confused little kitten, rather certain that this observation would not be appreciated.

“It’s possible they’re still asleep,” Bucky agreed. “They may have just been sending me there because there’s a chair.”

“But you think there’s more to it than that,” Natasha said confidently.

“They have at least one chair already stateside,” Bucky admitted. “It wasn’t at the base Tony found me, it was being set up off-site, some bank vault. I heard my handler talking about it. So there was somewhere closer they could have sent me if that was all they wanted.”

“You think they were getting the band back together,” Tony realized.

“Hydra’s on the defensive. They’re running out of resources, and options,” Bucky agreed. “And there may not be anyone still alive that knew the other soldiers, to warn them that waking them up is a bad idea.”

“Well, there’s you,” Natasha said. “So tell us: why is it a bad idea?”

“Right,” Bucky sighed, turning around to grab a pen off the table. He turned to the large digital blackboard, and started marking it up. “Okay. Look, there’s five of them. They were Hydra’s elite death squad in the late eighties.”

“Are you… drawing stick figures?” Steve asked, looking scandalized.

“Don’t start with me, Steve,” Bucky said, rolling his eyes as he glanced back at him. “These are just representational. You can deal.”

“I think they’re adorable,” Tony told him. “It’s the cutest death squad I’ve ever seen. They’re like
little murderous chibis."

“James,” Natasha drawled, in a way that seemed to imply she was used to dealing with these antics but expected better of him.

“There is a point to this,” Bucky insisted, glancing back at her. “Okay, look. This is Josef.” He pointed to a little chibi with angry eyes and little balls on his arms that Tony suspected were meant to be muscles. Tony could easily pull their actual photos off the files they recovered from Hydra, but he definitely wasn’t going to bring that up now. This was the most fun Tony’d had in a briefing since forever.

“Josef is the defacto leader,” Bucky continued. “He comes off as not very bright, but he’s still way above average intelligence, and he’s scarilly competent. You give him clear enough orders, and he always got the job done.”

Bucky added a cheerful little ponytail to one of them. “This is Sasha. She's a sadist. Also, she's the real leader. Josef plays the part but if something goes wrong, he defers to her. She thinks on her feet.”

He added a frowny face to the third figure. “Vasily,” he said, pointing at it. What good he thought seeing that tiny stick figure was going to do them, Tony couldn’t imagine. The fact that Bucky was so dead serious about it was making it even more amusing—he honestly couldn’t tell if he was just pranking them. “His specialty was computers, but his knowledge will be outdated now. If I had to choose a weak link, it would be him, but that’s really not saying much.”

“Finally, we have Artur and Nestor,” Bucky said, adding a few extra circle muscles to them, “they’re mostly just the muscle. Used more for no-contact assassinations and wet work than for any intelligence gathering, but that doesn’t mean they should be underestimated.” He let out a breath, and looked back at them. “Because those are all just their specialities, their core training is all the same. They can all speak thirty languages, and they can blend in anywhere. They had more kills than anyone in Hydra even before they got the serum. They’d assassinate, destabilize.” He winced a little, thinking of the memories of them he still had. “If Hydra does wake them up, and they decide to disappear, we won’t find them. There will be a damage trail, but they’re…they’re almost impossible to track. They sent me to find them once when they went rogue, and I couldn’t even get close to them. If they hadn’t come back on their own, Hydra probably never would have found them.”

“Wow, Buckster. Great pre-mission pep talk,” Tony said, mock-cheerfully. “Can’t wait to meet them.”

Bucky snorted, glancing over at Tony fondly. “Well, if we’re lucky, they’re still in stasis. That way, we can just blow the place without having to deal with the introductions.”

“You want to kill them?” Steve asked, frowning uncertainly. “Buck, if they’re like you…”

“I really hope I’m nothing like them,” Bucky said quietly. “Because they weren’t…they were never prisoners, Steve. They were never tortured into it. They were Hydra when they started, and the serum only made ‘em worse. There’s a reason Hydra kept them on ice all these years instead of using them—even they couldn’t control them, not anymore. They’re like…Schmidt, but without the scratch-off faces.”

Steve’s eyes widened in realization, and he slumped back in his seat. The comparison to Schmidt seemed to drive the point home well enough, and after a moment Steve’s expression becomes grimly resolved.
“There’s no saving them, cause they don’t want to be saved,” Bucky told him gently. “They’re too dangerous to play games with. If they’re awake, we need to take them out the first chance we’ve got.”

“James is right,” Natasha said simply. “There’s nothing to deprogram, and with the Fridge gone, there’s no prison that could hold them. Whether they’re awake or not, we need to make sure they’re taken care of for good.” She looked back at Bucky, and they seemed to have some brief, non-verbal conversation, before she turned back to Steve. “You don’t have to be there for it. James and I can handle it, and Clint has already volunteered to assist.”

“Uh, yeah, you’re not going without me,” Tony said, raising his hand. “Remember me? The guy with the metal suit and all the weapons and also the one funding this little operation, now that your little agency is in ruins?”

Natasha glanced back at him, with a flicker of a grin. “I never thought otherwise, Tony,” she said. “I just meant that Steve can sit this one out. I know it’s not his style.”

“You think I’ve never gone on missions to kill someone before?” Steve asked softly, before looking up to meet Bucky’s eyes. “I’m in. Whatever you need.”

Things proceeded pretty quickly after that. Tony put a rush on the new suit designs he’d been working on, and Natasha had been digging through every source she had to try and find out what was going on in Siberia. Unfortunately, they’d turned up nothing so far. Natasha thought the window where they would be expecting the return of their soldier would close in the next couple days, so they didn’t have long.

The rush to get mission ready now that they’d lost all their SHIELD connections had been rather hectic, and it hadn’t left much time for any heart-to-heart’s or movie marathons, which Tony had recently become accustomed to. When he first brought Bucky here, they’d spent so much time together just the two of them. Now he felt like this was the first time they’d been in a room alone in weeks. And okay so it was less than two days, but whatever. It felt like weeks.

Bucky hadn’t really been coming to the penthouse since the night of the attack. Tony had repaired all the windows, and Bucky’s own room had never been touched anyway. But he’d been sleeping in the Hulk suite every night all the same.

Tony still wasn’t sure if he was doing it to protect himself or to protect everyone else.

But he hadn’t been sleeping much, anyway. Which was why Tony wasn’t surprised to find him in the lab at one in the morning. He was sitting on the floor across from the blackboard, with his back pressed up against one of the desks. He had his knees pulled up to his chest, and he was staring straight ahead.

“Thought I might find you here,” Tony said quietly. He dropped down on the ground beside him, their shoulders brushing as he got settled. “Clint just got here, and he brought his other bird buddy.”

Bucky frowned, turning to look at him. “Why are they helping me?”

“Well, I mean, it’s kinda our thing,” Tony said. “We’re the Avengers. We avenge things. Or something. The point is, we don’t like it when innocent people get hurt. We don’t want what
happened to you to happen to you again, and we don’t want it to happen to anyone else. So we’re going to stop them.”

“And because they’re your team,” Bucky said, hesitantly, like he wasn’t sure.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Your team too, now.”

Bucky looked back to the blackboard. Tony had finally printed actual pictures of the soldiers, and taped them right above each of Bucky’s drawings. They looked angry in the pictures, hardened, a couple of them even seemed a little amused. It was very different from the emotionless stare of the Winter Soldier—he supposed that was what had gone wrong with them. Tony was a big fan of free will, but it didn’t make for great toy soldiers.

“I remember watching them,” Bucky said softly. “The way they worked together. I didn’t understand it. I was always alone…but it was familiar. I remember thinking for the first time in a really long time that I was missing something.”

“What happened with them?” Tony asked. Bucky had told them they were put in stasis because they couldn’t be controlled, but the mere fact that Bucky knew that suggested that he was there. He doubted anyone would have taken the time to brief him if he hadn’t been.

“I remembered training them, after,” he said. “And I just…earlier I remembered something, and I realized it wasn’t the first time. I’d trained them before, when they were first starting out, before the serum. I’m the reason they…” He broke off with a strained laugh, resting his head in his hands. “I’m not just responsible for what I did, because everyone they killed, that’s on me, too. I’m the one that made them into killers.”

“None of that is on you,” Tony said fiercely.

“I can’t remember for sure if they were monsters when we started,” he said, “or just by the end.”

“I, uh, did some more checking of my own. Sasha killed her parents when she was twelve years old,” Tony told him. “Hydra recruited her out of an asylum when she was fifteen. The others aren’t much better. Whatever you did…you’re not responsible for them.”

“Jesus,” Bucky said, looking pale. He dropped his hands, letting them hang between his knees. “I don’t know if that makes it better or worse.”

Tony could sympathize. He was fairly certain every last member of the death squad was a sociopath at the very least, and whatever had been done to them with the serum, had likely made them worse. He didn’t think it was a coincidence that the only successful soldier they’d ever made had been prisoner, and a good man. It didn’t ever seem to work the other way around.

He looked back at Bucky, frowning when he saw how tired he seemed. He was masterful at pretending he was fine—he was the first person Tony had ever met who was even better at it than him—but he would let his guard down around Tony usually. Earlier, with Steve and the rest of the team, he’d been entirely collected. Here, alone in his lab, he could more clearly see how much this was weighing on him.

“Are you going to be able to do this?” Tony asked him gently.

“That’s not worries me,” Bucky said. “I know I can do it.”

“Then what’s worrying you?” Tony asked.
“How easily I can do it,” he said, his mouth slipping up into a sardonic grin.

Tony remembered his fluid grace as he’d killed those Hydra agents, and he could understand the problem. Even with the trigger words gone, his skill wasn’t something he could turn off. It was part of him, and Tony suspected it wasn’t yet entirely under his control.

Despite that, Tony trusted him like he’d only ever trusted Pepper and Rhodey—and maybe it was too soon for that, maybe he should be more wary. Even Steve had pulled him aside a couple times to see if he thought they should leave Bucky somewhere safe while they went to Siberia, not wanting to take the risk of him falling back into their hands.

But Tony knew that the only way to give Bucky his control back was to not try to control him.

“You don’t trust yourself,” Tony said, glancing at him. “But that’s okay. I trust you enough of the both of us. And if you get out of hand, I’ll be there to stop you. That’s the point of having a team. We look out for each other. I can say it as many times as you need: you’re not alone anymore.”

Bucky looked over at him in surprise, then he carefully bit his lip, and looked away again. “Steve just keeps telling me I’m a good man, I didn’t do that stuff, I would never do that stuff, it wasn’t me,” he said. “He doesn’t get it—but you do, don’t you?”

“It’s not the same, not even close, but I do know what it’s like to lose control,” Tony told him. “I haven’t always had someone there to catch me, but I promise I’ll be there to catch you.”

“I’d catch you,” Bucky promised, before grinning sadly. “Or I guess I should say I’d always try.”

“It would be easier to catch me if you’d let me build you a suit that flies,” Tony told him. That startled a laugh out of Bucky, and he looked over at him in disbelief. “You don’t give up, do you?” he asked. “Trust me, I’m better on the ground.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony said. “I guess it’s too late to modify your gear anyway, it just came in a couple hours ago. As long as you’re here, we might as well check that it all works. Can’t have you showing up for battle in your Hulk pajamas again.”

“Are you ever gonna let me forget that?” Bucky asked.

“No,” Tony decided, as he held out a hand to pull him up. “No, I don’t think I will.”

Bucky let Tony tug him to his feet, looking a little bit lighter. “Was still better than a sparkly leotard.”

“Okay, well, now you’re just exaggerating, there were no sparkles,” Tony told him. He headed over to the case he’d dropped earlier, and lifted it up. There was a pair of black pants that looked sleek enough to be leather but were something much stronger, a pair of combat boots, and a blue jacket.

They’d come up with the design of the jacket together. It had some resemblance to the one he’d worn in the war, but had been modernized, with a smaller collar—but just as many buttons.

It wasn’t as strong or as bulletproof as Tony’s suit, because Bucky hadn’t wanted to be weighed down. Instead, Tony had kept the metal components more like a grid than paneling, small interlocking pieces of metal that reinforced both the sleeves of the jacket and anchored at the shoulders. Then there were the gauntlets. They wouldn’t be as dexterous as his former metal hand, but they would be just as strong.
The boots and the pants were an even simpler design, but both had thin padding inlaid that was even stronger than kevlar. Tony just reached in to grab the jacket for now, and held it out to Bucky.

Bucky took it somewhat reverently. “You decided to go with blue.”

“What can I say?” Tony said. “It brings out your eyes. We can get you a black one, if you prefer. I just thought you might like some color.”

“I do,” he said quickly. He quickly shrugged the jacket on, looking down intently as he fastened it up. “Just reminds me of...” He broke off with a shake of his head. “I mean, blue reminds me of the war, I guess. And black reminds me of Hydra. All things considered, I guess I’ll stick with blue.”

“We could do purple, if you want,” Tony told him, grinning cheekily. “Pink? Oh, orange! No one’s orange. You could be a trendsetter.”

“No one’s orange because that’s the color used when people want to stand out,” Bucky said with a snort. “I’d rather not get shot again. I’ll stick with the blue.”

“Well, it definitely does bring out your eyes,” Tony assured him.

Bucky just looked up at him in amusement. “How do I activate the gauntlet?”

Tony stepped back beside him, gently taking his left arm to stretch it out. “Remember how you controlled the holo-table?” he asked. “Specific movements of intent?”

That was all it took for Bucky to figure it out. He flicked his left wrist, and the metal shot out to cover his hand, creating a nearly skintight metal gauntlet. Bucky laughed as he looked down at it. “Awesome,” he said.

“Try the other one,” Tony told him.

Bucky flicked his right wrist, and a matching gauntlet rolled out to cover his other hand. He looked up at Tony curiously. “You did them both?”

“Two’s better than one. You can use both, or just one or the other, or whatever,” Tony shrugged. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’re ambidextrous.“

“I didn’t used to be,” Bucky admitted quietly, staring down at his hands. He closed the metal gauntlets to fists. “I didn’t like the arm at first. It hurt. I wouldn’t use it. So they taped together the fingers of my right hand, and tied my arm behind my back. They made me learn to use it, to shoot with it, to fight. I’m not sure for how long, but I know...my hair was short at the start, and long by the end.”

Tony tensed. “I am going to kill them, seriously, every last one of them—“

“Everyone that did that to me back then is dead,” Bucky told him, sighing softly. “They’ve all been dead for a very long time. There’s no use going looking for revenge.”

“Their replacements weren’t better,” Tony said angrily.

“No, but I wasn’t...I didn’t care anymore,” Bucky said. “I wasn’t really there. I’d buried myself under all the lies they told me. They couldn’t even hurt me, not really. I was sort of at my saturation point. Had been for decades.”

“If this is you talking me out of wanting revenge,” Tony told him dryly, “you’re terrible at it.”
“How about this?” Bucky asked, stepping closer until there was less than an inch between them. He tilted his head down, just barely not touching him. “I’m not their weapon anymore, and they ain’t worth our rage.”

“Okay, so no vindictive revenge,” Tony allowed. “But strategic revenge is still on the table, right? We’re still gonna blow the place in the end?”

Bucky smirked. “Oh yeah,” he agreed. “That we can do.”

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It took them four days total to get everything mission ready, which was about three days too long. Still, it was, Tony decided, sort of nice not to have all of SHIELD’s red tape getting in their way, which probably would have stalled them even longer. Tony had already drawn up designs for Sam Wilson, and having SI at his beck and call meant he’d had the gear delivered the next day. It was similar enough to his previous set up that it should be seamless to switch to this one, but they’d used the day before to get him up to speed on the new features.

Bucky had been training with his new gear as well, though he’d done it alone. “I don’t want to hurt them,” he’d finally admitted, when Tony wanted to know why he wasn’t training with any of the others.

Tony didn’t push the issue for now. He knew exactly how competent Bucky was, and had no concerns about him being able to handle himself in a fight. He could still remember the way he’d tore his way through that Hydra squad, graceful as a ballerina but with a kind of brutal strength that made it a singular fighting style. If pressed, Tony might say it seemed to be some weird combination between how Steve and Natasha both fought, which kind of made perfect sense.

So when Bucky had disappeared the morning they were set to leave, Tony hadn’t been too concerned. He figured he was off doing some last minute training that he probably didn’t even need.

But apparently he’d been wrong about that, and he’d been off getting a *make-over* instead.

Tony stumbled to a halt when he entered the gear room, and saw Bucky standing there in his new jacket. Jarvis’s measurements had been perfect as usual, and Bucky’s black pants were just the right amount of tight, and the lace up boots were as sexy as Tony had feared they would be. But what really caught him off guard was his hair. It had been cut short, and spiked up a little on the top. Like the jacket they’d worked on together, it seemed to be a modernized version of the way he’d worn it in the war—similar enough to be a tribute, but something new at the same time.

Tony blinked at him in disbelief. “Do you have product in your hair?” he demanded. “You do know this is a mission and not a fashion show?”

Tony went to touch the hair—how was he supposed to not try to touch it?—and Bucky ducked his head away, grinning sheepishly. “You can blame Natasha for that,” he said. “I ask for a simple favor, and she treats me like I’m her damn Ken doll.”

“So Natasha,” he echoed, trying to keep the disbelief from his voice. After the horror show that was their adventures into deprogramming, he’d actually expected some kind of lingering resentment on Bucky’s part for her. Maybe even for all of them, if he was being honest. It hadn’t been a great time.

Bucky just shrugged, apparently oblivious to why this would be a surprise. “I didn’t want to go into
this as the soldier,” he said after a moment. “That’s not who I want to be. It isn’t who I am, not anymore, and I want them to know it.” He glanced back over at Tony. “But I don’t want to just try to be Bucky Barnes again, either. Not really. Natasha understands that.”

“Well, now you look like you belong on a billboard in your underwear, so mission accomplished,” Tony told him.

Bucky frowned, his nose scrunching up a little. “Is that a compliment?” he asked.

“It means he thinks you’re hot,” Natasha told him, as she appeared from out of nowhere. Tony turned to glare at her.

“Oh,” Bucky said, before breaking out into a grin. “Well, I already knew that.” He fell back agains the wall, and turned towards Natasha. “First day we met, he told me I belonged on the cover of a sci-fi romance novel.”

Natasha smirked, glancing over at Tony with a raised eyebrow. Tony ignored her, rounding on Bucky. “Okay, how do you even remember that?” He demanded. “You were still monosyllabic at the time.”

“I remember everything you say to me,” Bucky told him, flashing a cheeky grin. “I’ve got total recall when I’m not being put in that damn chair.”

“What?” Tony asked, his eyes lighting as he realized the fascinating implications of that.

“When my memories do come back, they’re really clear,” Bucky admitted, shrugging like it was no big deal, though it was obvious he’d tensed. “It’s like they just happened yesterday.” He reached up, scratching at his head. “Which you know, is sort of why it’s so hard to figure out exactly what order they go in.”

“That’s incredible. I mean, also sort of terrifying, but still, incredible,” Tony said, wondering if it was the same way for Steve. “Is that a result of the serum, or were you always like that?”

“Definitely the serum,” Steve answered dryly. He was looking down at his shield as he entered the room, checking for any new wear and tear. “When we were kids, he’d have forgotten his head if it wasn’t attached. He tried to go to work once without putting on pants before his Ma stopped him.”

“That wasn’t my fault, it was too damn early to be up,” Bucky protested at once, and then looked a little startled at his own words, as if he’d only now remembered it.

Steve snorted. He glanced up, opening his mouth as though he was going to respond, but then he froze, going suddenly pale.

“What?” Bucky asked, stepping back defensively.

“You cut your hair,” Steve said, his voice sounding faint. Tony could tell he was taking note of that jacket too, and its similarity to what Bucky had worn before. Steve seemed to shake himself out of it quickly, offering a sad smile. “It looks good on you.”

“Oh, campers!” Clint cried, as he dropped down between them, landing in a crouch. Tony glanced up, wondering where the hell he’d even come from. “Let’s get a move on. I’ve been feeling stressed lately. I really need some target practice, and nazis always make the best targets.”

Bucky watched Clint disappear into the back of the Quinjet, and turned to Natasha. “Is he always like that?” he asked.
“Yes,” she said, grinning back at him. “Don’t let it fool you. He could make any shot you could, and he doesn’t have any of your advantages.”

“It didn’t fool me,” he promised her, a grin twitching at his lips as he looked away again. “It’s just…”

Bucky trailed off, and Tony frowned, not quite sure what he meant. Natasha’s gaze softened, and he knew whatever it was, she understood. She reached out and grabbed his arm, giving it a brief squeeze. “You’re allowed to make jokes,” she said, almost too quiet for Tony to hear. “You’re allowed to be a person. Even on a mission.”

Bucky just nodded, swallowing hard, and then pulled himself out of it. He smiled the smile Tony was starting to recognize as a form of armor.

Sam was the last one to arrive, already kitted out, with his wings retracted and secure on his back. “Okay,” he said, like he was giving himself a pep-talk. “It’s just a secret base in Siberia with a 80’s style Captain America wannabe cover band. I can do this. This is nothing. I’ve jumped out of buildings.”

Steve looked over at Sam in amusement. “You can still stay here, you know,” he said. “This isn’t your fight.”

“I told you,” Sam said, shrugging as he got comfortable in his suit. “I do what you do, just slower. Marginally faster now, thanks to Tony Stark.” He looked over at Tony. “I hope you know I almost crashed into one of the windows on the tower like a damn bird. You could have told me you increased the jet pack power by about a thousand percent.”

“And ruin the surprise?” Tony asked innocently.

Bucky snorted and Sam narrowed his eyes, pointing at him. “Don’t think I don’t know you had something to do with it,” he said.

Bucky’s eyes went wide with a ‘who me’ expression that was far more effective than any of Tony’s own failed attempts at looking innocent. He wondered if he’d learned that trick from Steve, or if it had been the other way around.

Bucky pressed a hand to his heart, looking honest-to-god earnest. “Me?” he asked, sounding hurt.

Sam looked confused for a moment, uncertain whether or not to believe him. “Well, I mean, I know you helped him out,” he said, motioning to Tony. “Steve said you were working on modifications with him for all the gear.”

“You mean you didn’t want to be able to go faster?” Bucky asked, looking crushed. “I just thought you’d want to be able to keep up. I mean, like you said, you’re sort of slower than the rest of us.” He looked up at Sam though his lashes. “Anyway, didn’t you read the user’s guide? It was all there.”

“You mean the user’s guide that was in Russian?” Sam asked incredulously.

“Was it?” he asked, reaching up run a hand though his hair, before biting his lip and looking worried. “My mistake. Sometimes I slip back into Russian on accident.”

Steve just shook his head with something between fondness and exasperation, obviously not buying Bucky’s act for a second. “I’m so glad you two are getting along.”
“This is not what getting along looks like!” Sam cried, outraged. “This guy’s got it out for me! Who believed that? Seriously, who believed—“

“Look, the suit’s safety mechanisms wouldn’t have let you crash into the window,” Tony broke in, wondering what his life was now he was becoming the peacemaker. Well. Sort of. “And those were inspired by Bucky, who keeps falling everywhere. There’s a back-up sort of like an airbag without the bag part, it’ll halt a fall and knock you back before you crash into anything.”

“I don’t keep falling everywhere,” Bucky muttered petulantly, but Sam looked appeased.

“Yeah, I got to test that first hand with the window thing,” Sam admitted. “Thanks, man. I don’t mean to be ungrateful. The suit is amazing. I just would have liked to have been able to read about it in, I don’t know, English.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at Bucky, who just shrugged. “I was bored,” he said. “I told Tony I would transcribe the guide for him. I was only trying to help.”

Tony held in a snort as Steve rolled his eyes and ushered Sam towards the Quinjet.

Tony looked back at Bucky. “What is with you and Sam?” he asked quietly. “Not that I don’t approve. This has been lots of fun. But it’s usually me causing the trouble.”

Bucky laughed, looking back at him. “You’re the one that did it, Tony,” he reminded him. “Pretty sure it was still you causing the trouble.”

“And who was it that gave me the idea that the speed on the original schematics were laughable and decided to transcribe the manual in Russian?” Tony asked.

“You act like Jarvis couldn’t translate it to English in about thirty seconds,” Bucky pointed out. “Sam’s been fully trained on the suit.” Bucky set his jaw stubbornly and met his eyes. “I wouldn’t risk the mission.”

“No one thinks that,” Tony assured him. “But usually you like everyone. Like, you meet someone new, and I start to worry you’re going to run off with them into the sunset.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “I like Sam,” he insisted.

“Oh huh,” Tony said. “Are you jealous?”

The easy friendship between Sam and Steve was obvious for everyone to see from the moment that Clint and Sam had arrived, and it highlighted the strain still remaining between Steve and Bucky. He didn’t think Bucky begrudged Steve having other friends, but he’d probably been pretty secure in his place as the center of Steve’s universe since the moment they met again.

“It’s not that,” Bucky promised. “But if he’s gonna be Steve’s friend, he’s gonna need to learn to stay on his toes.” He flashed a mischievous grin that made Tony’s heart skip a beat. “Got to make sure he’s up to the challenge. Hardest job in the world, looking after that punk.”

Tony snorted. Sometimes he thought the little glimpses they got of the Bucky Barnes from before were far more terrifying than even the Winter Soldier—because Bucky Barnes wasn’t following any orders, and he always knew exactly what he was doing.

“You coming or not?” Clint shouted from the Quinjet. “I had plans, you know! We were going to have a Gossip Girl marathon at the safe house tonight before you losers called us.”
Sam stuck his head back out of Quinjet. “I changed my mind,” he said, pointing at them. “You two are now my favorites. You saved my ass.”

Bucky laughed as Sam disappeared again. They could hear Sam muttering to himself: “If I have to watch one more episode of that damn show I’m gonna lose my damn mind.”

Tony grinned, before glancing back at Bucky. His smile slipped a little. “You ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” he said, slipping one last gun into the holster at his thigh as he turned towards the Quinjet.

Tony wasn’t sure he believed it, but he followed him anyway.

Chapter End Notes

I was really supposed to have the mission completed in this chapter, but as I’ve already established this is the story that doesn’t end, so what I have planned for one chapter usually takes two (or three)…
Tony tried not worry as Bucky took off on his own towards the base. He wasn't actually alone, after all, and Tony for his part sure as hell wasn't planning to let him out of his sight.

“Remind me again why I agreed to this?” Tony complained.

“Because they’re not gonna shoot me,” Bucky said, then paused for a moment. “Well, I mean, not fatally.”

“So reassuring,” Tony snapped, and Bucky laughed at him.

“Tone it down, solider,” Natasha said over the comms. “They see that smile of yours, they’re gonna know something is up.”

“Don’t worry,” Bucky said. “I know how to look menacing.”

Tony knew it was true, though it was still sort of hard to reconcile the dangerous Winter Soldier with the man that liked to binge watch Pixar in his Avengers pajamas—but he had to trust Bucky to play his part, and they would be ready to back him up.

“Jarvis, increase magnification,” Tony said, as he rose higher. He was following Bucky from high enough to be mostly out of sight, but low enough not to get caught on Hydra’s radar. He kept himself calm by reminding himself how fast he could make it back to the ground.

He could see Bucky making his way through the snow. The base was mostly hidden from this height, just appearing to be a mound of snow, but he could see figures spread out around the front of it and narrowed his eyes.

“We’ve got a problem,” Bucky whispered.

“No shit,” Tony snapped, as he zoomed in on the people. There were five of them. They were underdressed for the cold temperatures, and more than a little blood-splattered. “I’m guessing the extras from the Walking Dead down there are the super soldiers?”

“Yes,” Bucky agreed. “They wouldn’t have been allowed to leave the base without handlers.”

“Meaning?” Tony asked.

“Meaning there are probably no handlers left,” Bucky said warily.

“Okay, how about we abort now and I just blow the place?” Tony said quickly. “Everyone good with that? Doors are open, I can send the missiles through like Luke Skywalker taking out the Death Star.”
“I might as well see if I can figure out what’s going on,” Bucky said, “they’ve already spotted me anyway.”

“Have I mentioned that I’m not a fan of this plan?” Tony asked. “Because I’m not.”

“It’s your plan,” Bucky told him.

“Only like sixty percent, and that’s the part with the explosives!” he cried. “It’s the forty percent you and Steve dreamed up that I’m concerned about!”

“Hey, leave me out of this,” Steve said wryly, his voice coming through slightly staticky over the comm. “I wanted us all to go through the front doors, not just Bucky. I’m not any happier about this than you, but my plan was vetoed.”

“Because your plan was, miraculously, the worst plan of them all,” Tony said. “I thought you were some great strategist, but really you were just lucky, weren’t you? Pure dumb luck and super powers—“

“Focus, boys,” Natasha interrupted coolly.

Tony wanted to reply to that, purely on principle if nothing else, but he could see Bucky had reached the soldiers and didn’t want to distract him. He tuned back in to Bucky’s audio, and zoomed in again to get a better view on him. The moment something went wrong, Tony was going to land—screw the damn plan. They were already improvising anyway.

The woman—Sasha, presumably—was the one to step forward to greet Bucky. She had blonde hair, but it was a little hard to tell. Her ponytail was almost soaked through with blood, and it was smeared all down her neck and the right side of her tank top. Tony was fairly certain that none of it belonged to her.

“Welcome home,” she said, as she looked Bucky over. “Our minders would have been so pleased to see you. You always were the favorite.”

“Probably because I was the least psychotic,” Bucky told her.

“Okay, how about we don’t sass the psychotics?” Tony cried.

“Look who’s talking,” Clint answered back, which, fair.

But this was Bucky, so Tony reserved the right to be concerned.

“It’s true you’re not as fun as the rest of us,” Sasha answered wryly. “But we don’t hold that against you, brother.” She grinned sharply, clenching her fists. “In any case, there’s very little left of them, and what’s left can’t speak, so no point in keeping up the sibling rivalry for their benefit.”

“What happened to them?” Bucky asked.

“They couldn’t find you, so they woke me up to track you down,” she said simply, as though it explained everything. Which, okay, it sort of did. In one of the pre-mission briefings, Bucky had told them that Sasha was every bit the spy that Natasha had been, with all the strength and brutality of a super soldier. She was also the smartest of the five, so the most dangerous by far.

Once she was awake, she would have woken the others. It wasn’t hard to figure out what might have happened from there.
“We were not pleased to find out how long we had been asleep,” Artur explained, speaking up for the first time. He stepped a little further off to the side, subtly working to get Bucky more blocked in. Bucky didn’t even glance at him, and kept his eyes on Sasha instead.

Sasha tsked suddenly, stepping forward with narrowed eyes. “What have you done to your beautiful arm, my soldat?”

Bucky grinned at her. “Got a better offer,” he said. “But don’t worry, it still packs a punch.”

“Hmm,” she said thoughtfully, tilting her head. “Well, it will certainly make you a better spy. We often thought you could have been used as a honeypot, if not for that too memorable metal arm.” She grinned sharply. “And we could always use a sixth.”

“You know I can’t let you leave here,” Bucky told them flatly.

Josef snorted, slamming a closed fist into the open palm of his other hand, and raised an eyebrow. Sasha just laughed, before shaking her head at him.

“You’re good, my soldat, but you are far outnumbered,” she said chidingly. “Way I remember it, that didn’t work out so well for you the last time.”

“Well,” Bucky drawled, “times have changed.”

Taking that as his cue, Tony sped down and dropped beside him, the impact from his speed causing a shudder to radiate out beneath their feet. Sam dropped to Bucky’s other side, with a far lighter landing, his new wings expanded behind him. Clint and Natasha rounded the building from right behind the soldiers, while Steve rounded it from the other side, boxing them all in.

Sasha and the others tensed, but their expressions didn’t change. She still had a flicker of a smile as she turned back to look at Bucky.

“One chance, Sasha,” Bucky said. “You can still surrender.”

“You know very well that I cannot,” she said simply, and pulled a knife from the holster on her thigh. “Such a waste. You should never have switched sides, soldat.”

“I was never on your side to begin with,” Bucky told her, and pulled out his gun almost faster than Tony could follow. He fired off his shot quickly, and it headed straight for the space between Sasha’s eyes. She had her knife up in time to block it, sending it in ricochet off building behind them.

It was like a shot from a starter’s pistol, because it sent everyone in motion.

Natasha and Clint went for Josef, keeping him stuck fighting between them, while Steve and Sam covered Artur. Bucky started fighting Sasha, even though it looked more like some kind of fierce dance than a match to a death.

That left Vasily and Nestor.

“Two against one,” Tony muttered. “Seems fair.”

He reached up with his left repulser, and sent a blast straight at Nestor. It threw him backwards nearly ten feet and had him slamming into the base wall. Normally that move would keep his opponent out for the count, but Nestor just peeled himself out of the indentation that his body had made in the cement wall, and started coming for him again.
“Holy shit,” Tony muttered, moving to block Vasily as he managed to sneak in far too close. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sam come swooping out of the sky to knock Nestor off course, sending him tumbling a few feet away.

Tony appreciated the assist, and returned his full attention to Vasily. He managed to block Vasily’s first punch, catching his arm and bending it the wrong direction until it snapped out of its socket. Vasily’s pupils seemed to dilate until his eyes were almost black, sort of like an angry cat, and he ripped his arm free of Tony’s grip before spinning and knocking Tony off his feet with a roundhouse kick.

Tony quickly stopped his slide and pushed himself back into a crouch. Vasily shrugged his shoulder, snorting like a bull, before grabbing hold of his arm and ruthlessly wrenching it back into place. He didn’t even flinch.

And this was the one Bucky had called the weak link?

“This is gonna suck,” Tony muttered to himself.

Natasha was the first one to take one of them out. He caught her out of the corner of his eye, doing that crazy thigh thing to get up around Josef’s head and then pressing her pistol straight down on the top of his head. She didn’t hesitate, just fired, then spun off him gracefully as he fell beneath her.

Nestor let out an angry cry, throwing a knife at her in retaliation. She agilely dodged out of its way, but Clint wasn’t quite as fast and it slammed into his shoulder. He let out a surprised grunt as he got knocked back a few feet.

“Shit, Clint—” Tony knew it was stupid to have let himself get distracted—a rookie mistake, really, and by the time Sam was calling out a warning it was already too late.

Tony looked up to see Vasily only a couple of feet away, holding a gun nearly the size of a bazooka. And it was aimed right at him.

It didn’t exactly hurt. It was too quick, like when you slice open a finger with a piece of paper and don’t even realize you’ve done it until it starts to bleed. One minute he’s standing there, and the next he’s splayed out in the snow with five terrified voices screaming at him from the comms.

He swallowed hard, trying to raise his head. He could see the smoking remains of the front of his suit. The arc reactor was damaged and sparking, but though the suit was partially crushed it looked to have held up enough to keep him safe.

“I’m fine,” he said, though his mouth felt like it was full of cotton. “Suit’s been better, though. Not gonna be much more help.”

Tony glanced to his side and saw Artur fall to the snow a few feet away. He wasn’t sure who had gotten him, but his skull looked like it had been cracked in two. That left three, his rattled mind told him.

He still couldn’t quite push himself up, but he was able to raise his head high enough to see the smirking Vasily heading right back for him. He’d dropped the gun, apparently preferring to finish the job hand to hand. Tony glanced at his gauntlets, but the repulsers were sparking and useless. He didn’t even have enough power to move, let alone take someone out.

He was still trying to figure out what the hell he was going to do when Bucky appeared behind Vasily like a wraith, his eyes cold and blank as he snatched him from behind and soundly snapped
his neck.

“And then there were two,” Tony muttered.

Bucky glanced up at him as Vasily collapsed limply at his feet, his eyes widening as the life rushed back into them. He fell forward and dropped to his knees beside him. “Tony?” he demanded.

“Said I’m fine,” Tony assured him, glancing back to check the battle. Natasha and Wilson were converging on Nestor and seemed to have him boxed in, but Steve didn’t seem to have things quite as under control. Sasha was herding him away from the others, and towards the ledge that sat a couple dozen feet away. “Go help Steve.”

Bucky hesitated only a moment, before nodding and smoothly rising to his feet, pulling a large knife from another of his holsters as he rose.

“Jarvis?” Tony tried.

“Sir—sir—sir—” Jarvis stuttered, on loop, before fading out.

Tony lifted off the helmet as the display went dark, and then got rid of the gauntlets on his hands so he could reach in and hit the manual release for the suit. It broke apart around him, allowing him to rise up to his knees. Clint had ripped the knife from his shoulder—you weren’t supposed to do that, were you?—and was raising his bow to aim at Nestor as Wilson and Natasha kept him distracted.

Leaving them to it, Tony glanced back towards the ledge. Sasha was caught between Steve and Bucky, but she looked unruffled. He even heard her laugh as she spun in one direction to block Bucky’s strike with a knife, before twisting back with a kick that almost knocked Steve off his feet. How the hell she was managing to hold them both off at once, Tony had no idea.

Because Steve and Bucky when they were fighting together was like nothing he’d ever seen.

They passed the shield between them like it was second nature, moving in sync like they knew each and every last one of each other’s moves. Tony wanted to get up and help, but without his suit he was a liability in this fight, and he wasn’t a good enough shot without Jarvis’s targeting to take her out when Bucky and Steve were so close.

He thought they finally had her when things went wrong—Steve had passed the shield to Bucky so he could block another strike from Sasha’s knife, but she’d been expecting it. She didn’t complete the strike, instead spinning halfway into the turn to face the now unprotected Steve.

Even as Steve quickly started to jump back Tony didn’t think he was going to make it, but he was helpless to do anything but watch as Sasha struck out for him.

She didn’t make contact though. Just as the knife started to brush against the front of Steve’s suit, Bucky crashed forward, tackling her away from Steve—and straight over the ledge.

Tony’s heart seemed to stall as he pushed forward dazedly, rushing forward. Steve was already in motion, nearly following Bucky right over the edge as he slammed down onto his stomach and slid forward, barely catching himself before he tumbled the rest of the way off right after him.

Tony fell to his knees, sliding forward to the edge beside Steve and not even able to breath until he looked down.

Then his heart started up again—because Steve had managed to catch him. He had a firm grip on
one of Bucky’s ankles, as he dangled upside down. Tony could see Sasha further down, Bucky’s
knife sticking straight out from the center of her throat.

Bucky had his head tilted back like he was trying to make sure she was really dead, and still had a
firm grip on Steve’s shield in his right hand. He didn’t seem very concerned that he was about one
slip of Steve’s hand from falling hundreds of feet and onto his damn head.

“Drop the damn shield and grab my hand,” Steve demanded, and Tony had never heard him like
that. He sounded deadly calm, and more furious than Tony had thought their resident national
treasure could get.

Bucky pulled his head up slightly so he could see them. “I can—“ he started.

“Now!” Steve snarled.

Apparently Bucky did have some sense of self-preservation buried somewhere, because he did as
Steve said. He opened his hand and let the shield go, sending it crashing against the ice wall before
burying itself in the snow beside Sasha.

Then Bucky bent upwards easily as if he was doing crunches on a gym floor, and held out his
hands. Steve caught one, while Tony caught the other, and they quickly hauled him up.

Tony felt like he could finally breathe again once Bucky was kneeling beside him on solid ground,
and he glanced back to make sure Nestor had been taken care of. He was lying at Natasha’s feet
with an arrow in his chest—right at the heart, Tony was sure, since Clint had been the one to take
the shot.

“Well, that was fun,” Tony said, to diffuse the tension.

Bucky grinned over at him, but Steve still looked terrified. He hauled Bucky up, reaching out to
grab his shoulders and practically shaking him. “So help me, you ever pull something like that
again—“ he yelled.

was never gonna—“

“I don’t care!” Steve cried. “Promise me.”

Tony just took in a hulking breath, content to let Steve give the lecture. Though it did seem a bit
hypocritical—Nat’s told him how Steve liked to jump out of planes, and that was without a
parachute.

Bucky was watching Steve carefully, like he was trying to get a feel for what was wrong with him.
Sometimes he still seemed disconnected from his memories, and their history, like he wasn’t quite
sure why anyone would care what happened to him.

“I’m not gonna promise not to save you, Stevie,” he finally said. “Cause that’s not a promise I’d be
able to keep.”

Steve let him go, still looking like he was spoiling for a fight—so code normal, basically—but he
seemed bone tired at the same time. He turned away from them both, crossing his arms angrily.

“We need to get the body,” Bucky said after a moment.

“You’re not going down there,” Steve said, glancing back at him with narrowed eyes.
“Can’t just leave her there, and there’s your shield,” Bucky shrugged. “Also, I really like that knife.”

“I don’t care about the damn knife, or even the shield, Bucky!” Steve snapped.

Bucky’s eyes narrowed, his expression going mulish, but god bless Sam Wilson. He appeared out of nowhere, and quickly stepped up between them. “Hey, I’m the only one right now that can fly,” he pointed out. “I’ll go get her, and the shield.”

Steve nodded, still looking coiled like he wasn’t ready for the fight to be over. He looked over at Sam. “Can you take me with you?” he asked. “I just want to make sure she’s…” he trailed off, but Sam just nodded.

“Yeah, man,” Sam told him, reaching out to grab him. He took off then, taking them over the edge to land down below.

Tony turned to Bucky once they were gone. “You know, when I made the parachute it wasn’t so you’d go jumping off cliffs instead of falling off them,” he said. “We haven’t even tested it yet.”

Bucky glanced at him, grinning slightly. “No time like the present?” he tried.

Tony heaved a sigh. “And here I thought you were the reasonable one.”

“Everyone always thought that, cause I was always with Steve,” he said, smiling cheekily. “He can make anyone seem reasonable by comparison.” He frowned then, glancing back over the edge towards Steve and Sam. “I did forget how pissy he gets when I get into trouble. Like I didn’t have to spend our entire childhood worrying over him and his crazy stunts.”

“Well, from his point of view, you did just come back from dead,” Tony reminded him. “He’s bound to be overprotective.”

Tony very carefully didn’t mention that he probably would have been lecturing him too if Steve hadn’t already done it for him. He could still see Bucky as he tackled Sasha and went straight over the edge. Not that Tony wouldn’t have done the same, but usually he’s in a suit that flies.

“Yeah, I guess,” Bucky said. “He was sort of always that way. Only likes risks when he’s the one taking ‘em.”

That was actually one of the best descriptions of Steve Rogers that Tony had ever heard. He saw Sam fly over them, carrying Sasha’s limp form. He laid her down beside Artur with probably more care than she deserved, before going back for Steve.

“It’s too bad it had to end like this,” Tony said. He didn’t exactly have much sympathy for the Winter Soldiers, they’d made their choices—but the way they’d been treated, it was all a little too similar to Bucky. Because before he’d known who Bucky was, he hadn’t had any sympathy for him, either.

“It wasn’t ever gonna end any other way,” Bucky said. “What else could we have done? Put them back in stasis? They never would have been taken alive.”

He sighed, and glanced back over towards where the soldiers had fallen.

“At least this way it’s over,” Bucky said quietly. “For them, too.”
Steve insisted on clearing the base first. He took Natasha with him while Sam bandaged up Clint. Bucky let him do it with only a token protest, just shrugging when Tony looked at him surprise once Steve and Natasha disappeared inside.

“It’ll make him feel better,” Bucky said. “Anyway, I know the soldiers. There’s no one in there still alive.”

It turned out Bucky was right about that. Steve looked a little pale when he came back to give the all clear, and Natasha’s expression was so expressionless it meant she had been forced to clamp down on all her emotions in order not to show them. It didn’t bode well.

Bucky carefully stepped in the base, Tony right behind him. There was blood splattered along the walls like a do-it-yourself Jackson Pollock.

And then there were the bodies.

What was left of them, anyway.

The remains looked like they’d been mauled by a pack of wolves. Some of them were literally torn apart. Bucky walked around the bodies without entirely looking at them and Tony traced his steps so he wouldn’t have to either. Bucky lead them directly to a room with heavy, vaulted doors.

“It’s like taking a stroll through one of my nightmares,” Bucky whispered. He stepped haltingly into the room, circling the chair that sat in its center slowly, his expression unnervingly blank.

Tony recognized this room for what it was. He had seen what that chair had done to Bucky in the footage he’d watched. He would have come in this room screaming, pulling that damn chair apart with his hands, breaking it in half with his repulsers. It wasn’t even him it was used on, and that was what he wanted to do anyway.

Bucky just calmly placed one of the explosives on the back of the chair, and then kept moving around it. They were going to bury this place, with the soldiers and the rest of the Hydra bodies still inside it. Tony really just wanted to get it over with, but Bucky paused as he caught sight of one of the control stations, and moved towards it. Tony moved to follow, needing to step around the bodies like some kind of horror show obstacle course in his wake.

“What are you doing?” Tony asked.

“We may be able to get information on their remaining bases,” Bucky said. “Most bases had limited information to make sure to limit the damage if they were compromised. But this was one of their strongholds: only a small number knew about it. It wasn’t ever supposed to be found.”

“But do you know how to access their systems?” Tony asked with a frown.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s set up with biometrics,” Bucky told him. “Tampering will set it to self-destruct. You could probably get past their security, but I’ve got an easier solution. It’s just not, uh, real pretty.”

Before Tony could ask what that meant, Bucky turned around and moved a few feet away, picking up a severed arm wearing the remains of a lab coat and carrying it back. He placed the dismembered hand against the panel, and the screen lit green.

“Okay, well, that was suitably horrifying,” Tony said, watching as Bucky dropped the arm behind him.
“Sorry,” Bucky winced. “Quickest way to get the system up and running.”

“Hey, it’s fine. That’s actually a pretty handy trick,” Tony told him.

Bucky froze, looking at him with wide eyes, though he looked like he was trying not to laugh. “That is terrible,” he said. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“What?” Tony said, staring back innocently. “Was that too far? I feel like that was too far.”

“Well, you did sort of go out on a limb,” Bucky agreed swiftly.

“I really don’t want to know what the hell the two of you are doing right now,” Sam said over the comms.

Bucky laughed and Tony bit back his own. “Usually if you find someone laughing around a bunch of dead bodies, they’re either a sociopath or in shock,” Natasha told them, as she appeared in the doorway. She leaned against the wall, raising an eyebrow.

“Or they just have an amazing sense of humor,” Tony told her.

Natasha just shook her head. “We’ve got the explosives placed around the rest of the base,” she told them. “I don’t think we want to linger here longer than we have to.”

“Just give me a minute,” Bucky said, returning his attention back to the computer. “Tony, do you have something to download this information to?”

“Leave it with me,” Tony said. “Or, well, Jarvis anyway. Jarvis?” He pulled out his phone, also known as his pocket-Jarvis, and laid it on top of the computer. “You got this?”

“Already transferring the files to both your phone and the Quinjet,” Jarvis assured him.

They download everything they can, then start their long trek back to the Quinjet. It’s an awkward and silent affair. Tony carried his helmet while Bucky and Steve each carried the remaining pieces of his ruined suit, and Sam walked along with them on the ground in a show of solidarity. Natasha had Clint’s arm on his uninjured side pulled over her shoulders, pulling him along, and even though in theory one of the guys might have been a sturdier option, she never once faltered under his weight.

The others got Clint settled into the back of the jet when they reached it, but Tony stayed on the ramp, pulling out his phone to set everything up. Bucky came to stand beside him. Tony could feel Steve watching them, though he didn’t approach. Steve still seemed tense and angry, still too high on adrenaline to be reasoned with.

Tony almost thought maybe he should let Steve blow the place to work some of that anger out, but this wasn’t for him. Tony held out the phone to Bucky instead, and there was an image of an oversized red button in the center of the screen, because Jarvis was dramatic like that.

“You want to do the honors?” he asked.

Bucky took it from him, stepping forward until he was at the bottom of the quinjet ramp, his boots just pressing up against the snow. Bucky looked back at the base, his gaze defiant, and carefully pressed his thumb down on the screen.

The boom shook the ground beneath them even from so far away, and the mound of snow that covered the base in the distance collapsed in on itself like a miniature avalanche.
It was just seconds, and it was gone like it had never even been there.

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Everyone was exhausted—and filthy—by the time they finally land back at the tower, so they all split off for their own floors. Tony expected Bucky to get off on the Hulk floor, where he had been sleeping before they left, but he stayed leaning against the corner of the elevator, staring at the floor, all the way up to the penthouse.

Tony tried not to read too much into it. This was actually Bucky’s floor, anyway. It had been since he first brought him here. He figured they’d just head off to their separate rooms, and crash for awhile.

Except Bucky just kind of wandered halfway into the living space and then stood there, looking lost. There were dark stains on his new coat that Tony knew was blood, and mud caked up the edges of his boots. He should not have looked as devastatingly handsome as he did.

“Bucky?” he asked hesitantly. Bucky glanced up at him, and his eyes were shining. Tony wondered if it was having returned to that Hydra base, or fighting the soldiers, or just seeing that chair. Probably all of the above. He frowned in worry, and even though he knew it was a stupid question, he asked it anyway: “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“When I saw you go down,” Bucky started, his breath hitching strangely, “god, Tony, I thought you were dead.”

“Me?” Tony asked in surprise. And okay, admittedly that shot would have killed anyone not in an Iron Man suit—maybe even Bucky or Steve—but he’d built that thing to withstand a lot. It may be nothing but scrap now, but it held together long enough to do its job and keep him safe. It always had. “I was fine! You’re the one that went running off a cliff!”

In that moment, Tony had completely forgotten the parachute he’d installed in Bucky’s jacket. Even if he hadn’t, there was still so much that could have gone wrong. Sasha could have dragged him down with him or without it. That knife could have ended up in Bucky, instead of her.

“For someone that doesn’t like heights, you’ve got a funny way of showing it,” Tony continued, narrowing his eyes. “We definitely need to hold that intervention.”

“She was a good fighter,” Bucky said. “As good as me when I’m the Winter Soldier, but better when I’m not. I couldn’t…it was taking too long. I just wanted her away from you, away from Steve. It seemed like the quickest way to disable her. She wouldn’t expect it. We’re trained to keep ourselves safe and undamaged before even the mission. We were always too valuable for them to want to risk us.”

It made a kind of sense. It was the sacrifice play, laying down on the wire. It was the last thing a fellow Winter Soldier would have expected—but it was something that Bucky and Steve were both known for by the entire world.

But it didn’t mean Tony was okay with it.

“You are too important to risk,” Tony told him. “Please don’t do that again.”

Bucky stepped forward, but Tony didn’t expect to get that promise anymore than he had expected Bucky to give it to Steve. “I knew what I was doing,” Bucky said. “I had considered all the options. It was probably a safer move than to continue to engage her in close range. She was quicker than me.”
Bucky took another step, until he was just inches away, and reached down to gently entwine their hands. “Don’t you trust me?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tony said, realizing he did. It didn’t mean he wasn’t allowed to worry, or panic, but he did trust that Bucky knew what he was doing. He knew it would be ridiculous to try and tell him he couldn’t do something. He was pretty sure he could do anything.

Except maybe make Apple Turnovers, but that wasn’t really relevant.

Bucky leaned forward, slow enough Tony could stop him—not that he would ever stop him—and captured his lips. The kiss was as gentle and slow as the last one, and though part of Tony just wanted even more, there was part of him that still felt he had to hold back.

“Bucky,” he sighed, framing his face with his hands as they broke apart. “I don’t think—“

“If you’re waiting for me to get better, if you’re just… well, I’m not ever gonna be fine,” Bucky admitted wryly. “So I’ll wait for you forever, if that’s what you want. But you should know, I’m still gonna be broken at the end of it.”

He remembered what Helen had told him—if there was a test they had to pass for a relationship, they’d probably all fail it. Maybe he had been going about this all wrong. He looked down at their still clasped hands. It was Bucky’s left, so it was deceptively soft even though it was pure vibranium underneath. In some ways, it was stronger than before.

“I don’t fix things,” Tony told him. “People say that about me, but it’s not really true. Something’s broken, I build something new. Something better. You can too. You can be whatever you want to be. I’ll give you anything you want.”

“I only want you,” Bucky told him, his voice earnest and sincere even though that should have sounded like a goddamn line.

Tony was helpless against that voice. He’d give him anything. Bucky’s had all of him since almost the start.

He’d never felt like this before, this kind of attraction that just sort of pulled at you like an undertow. His love for Pepper had always been such a steady force in his life, his love and friendship with Rhodey like an anchor. But this was like the kind of thing he’d only ever read about, like an irrepressible force. He didn’t know how to stand against it anymore. He didn’t know why he’d want to try to.

So instead he let Bucky lean in again and then he pushed back, and they were falling back on the couch. Tony ended up pressed back into the cushions as Bucky straddled him, keeping himself raised up a bit so Tony wouldn’t take his full weight. Tony reached up grabbed him, pulling him down, because he could take it, he could hold him up.

They were still filthy and slightly blood-splattered and Tony’s t-shirt was ripped and a little singed from his destroyed suit, so when Bucky started tugging at it he just pulled it over his head and threw it behind him. Objectively, this was absolutely the wrong time for this. They were still riding off the adrenaline of the fight. They hadn’t slept in far too long.

But it felt right, and he couldn’t bring himself to stop. Finally, Tony felt like he fit somewhere.

For once, he felt like he’d actually come home to a home.

His mind was so relaxed and happy, that he hardly cared when Jarvis politely attempted to
“Pardon me, sir, but I’m afraid we have a mauve alert,” he announced. “Per your Sca—“

“It’s fine, Jarvis,” Tony cut him off, before looking back at Bucky. “Anything less than burgundy isn’t a threat,” he assured him.

“Tony—” Bucky started in concern, his body tensing beneath Tony’s hands.

“Jarvis,” Tony broke in, “if it’s not life or death, don’t bother us.”

“As you wish, sir,” Jarvis answered dryly.

“Why did I put so many damn buttons on this?” Tony grumbled, as he tried to unfasten Bucky’s jacket. “Definitely need to make some modifications to the design.”

“It’s not gonna be all that effective in the field if it tears right off,” Bucky said, laughing against him.

“I’ll do it too,” Tony promised, as the last of the buttons came undone and he dragged the jacket off of Bucky. “We’ll be like the stripper-Avengers. Tear off costumes. Mine pretty much does already, let’s be honest. I can sort of just command it off. Very efficient. Much better than buttons.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Bucky told him fondly.

“You know you love me,” Tony said.

“Yes,” Bucky agreed breathlessly.

Tony froze, staring back at him in wonder. He opened his mouth to reply, and then the elevator doors opened and he heard angry footfalls. He and Bucky both turned towards them, and Tony’s eyes widened as he saw Rhodey marching towards them, in full uniform.

Rhodey stumbled to a stop the moment he realized what he’d walked in on. “Oh, Jesus,” he cried, reaching up to slap a hand over his eyes. “You couldn’t have put a sock in the elevator? You’re right in the damn living room!”

“Uh,” Tony started, as his mind remembered, oh yeah, that’s what a mauve alert was. Bucky looked back at him, apparently utterly unconcerned with their compromising position, and just raised an eyebrow that seemed to ask: how do you want to play this?

Rhodey peeked out between his fingers, his eyes narrowing suspiciously as he seemed to realize who Tony was with. He dropped the hand entirely, stretching it out to point it at Bucky in disbelief. “Is that Bucky Barnes?” he cried, wide eyes latching onto Tony’s incredulously. “Is that Bucky Barnes in your lap?”

Bucky gave a hesitant finger wave. “Hi,” he said.

Rhodey’s mouth just went slack for a moment, and then he turned on heel. “I’m getting too damn old for this shit,” he snapped. “I’ll be in your lab. Come find me when you get some clothes on and you’re not making out with a damn ghost!”

Tony glanced back at Bucky as the elevator closed again. “Well, that went about as well as could be expected.”

Bucky’s forehead fell against his, and he laughed lightly. “I think we need to raise your
“Trust me, he’s walked in on much worse than that,” Tony assured him. “At least you’re still wearing pants.” He paused for a moment. “Which, actually, why are you still wearing pants?”

“Tony, you need to go find your friend,” Bucky told him, before smoothly rolling to his feet in a move so quick Tony couldn’t follow it. He started heading backwards, keeping his eyes on Tony. “I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“But—” Tony cried, reaching out with toddler grabby hands like he could pull him back. “But I want to shower too!”

“Go talk to your friend!” Bucky shouted, as he disappeared into the hallway.

“Why is it like we’re married already and we haven’t even gotten to third base?” Tony shouted after him. The only response he got was laughter.

It was quickly becoming Tony’s favorite sound.
Tony pulled on a clean shirt and then went to find Rhodey in his lab. He was sitting up on one of the counters, holding a Vodka bottle.

“This is water,” Rhodey complained without looking up, when Tony stepped off the elevator. “I’m proud of you, but I also really needed a drink.”

Tony snorted, before pulling out an emergency bottle of scotch from one of the cabinets, and tossing it over to him. “When did you get back?” he asked.

“Just flew in last night,” Rhodey told him, as he opened the bottle. “Tried to call.”

“Oh…yeah, I was a bit out of cell range,” Tony said. Technically, Tony got perfect reception even in Siberia, but Jarvis had been blocking any personal calls during the mission, so he figured that still counted as an excuse. He hadn’t had time yet to catch up on his messages. “I just got back.”

Rhodey had been mostly out of touch for the last two months, aside from a few random emails, doing something very secretive. Tony could have found out what he was doing—it’s not like it was that hard to hack the US government—but Rhodey never approved of that, so he’d been good. Tony had sort of been grateful at the time, in any case.

Because if Rhodey had been around during Tony’s single-minded hunt for his parent’s killer, he would have tried to stop him, and maybe Tony wouldn’t have ever found Bucky.

“So…you gonna tell me what’s with the Bucky Barnes impersonator upstairs?” Rhodey asked, raising an eyebrow. “Please tell me you didn’t take up cloning as your latest hobby.”

“Oh, you know me, Rhodey,” Tony drawled. “When have I ever settled for less than the real thing?”

Rhodey just stared at him for a minute, trying to figure out if he was messing with him. “Shit,” he finally said. “Seriously? How in the hell—“

“Reports of his death were greatly exaggerated,” Tony offered. Rhodey looked unimpressed, and Tony let himself fall into one of his chairs. “He’s been a prisoner of war.”

“He was declared dead in nineteen forty four,” Rhodey snapped.

“Yeah, he’s, ah, he’s been a prisoner since then,” Tony said, tilting his head up to look at him. It was still a little hard for Tony to even wrap his mind around. “Hydra had him. I got him out just before they tried their little coup, and tried to takeover SHIELD.”
“And he still looks like he’s twenty-something because…?” Rhodey asked, frowning.

“Some combination of cryostasis and the super soldier serum. Probably the former more than the latter, but it’s hard to know for sure,” Tony explained. “I can give you the details, but only if you want the nightmares.”

“Fuck,” Rhodey said, downing some of the scotch. “That bad, huh?”

“Whatever you’re thinking,” Tony said, “it’s worse.”

Rhodey shook his head sadly. Tony knew he’d probably have to read him in fully eventually, but he was glad when Rhodey didn’t ask him to elaborate right now. Tony didn’t want to think of what had been done to Bucky right now, not with the memory of that base and the chair it held still so fresh in his mind.

“And what about what I walked in on?” Rhodey asked instead, because he may be a Colonel, but he was always Tony’s best friend first. “What was that?”

“Uh,” Tony started, wondering exactly how to answer that in a way that didn’t seem insane. He wasn’t quite sure how to properly explain what Bucky was to him. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

Rhodey’s eyes widened in realization and he set the scotch aside to turn and face him fully. "Are you in love with this guy?" he cried. "How did that happen? I've only been gone—"

"I never said—“ Tony started to protest half-heartedly, but he couldn't finish the denial. He wondered if he'd have been brave enough to admit it to Bucky, if Rhodey hadn't walked in on them.

It was sort of ridiculous how gone he was on Bucky, like something out of one of those rom-coms. Though he supposed he couldn’t really claim love at first sight—Tony had literally wanted to kill him the first time he saw him—but the first time he started to see who Bucky really was? The first time he saw the amazing person underneath that Hydra had tried and failed to erase? He’d known he was a goner, ever since then. He just didn't know how to explain it to anyone else.

“Seriously, I’ve never seen you like this,” Rhodey said, getting to his feet to step closer, watching Tony carefully while he did. "But I still know that look when I see it. You’ve completely fallen for him.”

“He gets me,” Tony finally admitted, which was as good as a confession of love anyway, to someone that knew him as well as Rhodey did.

“Am I gonna have to give this guy the shovel talk?” Rhodey demanded.

“No,” Tony cried, straightening up in the chair. “He’s not…it’s too new, and he’s not recovered enough. I probably shouldn’t even be…”

“Hey, calm down, I’ll play nice,” Rhodey promised, looking a little startled by Tony’s reaction.

“Sorry,” Tony winced, running a hand down his face. “Things have been a little…stressed, lately. They’re just finally starting to even out.”

“I’ll bet,” Rhodey said warily. “This stress have anything to do with the fact that you, the Black Widow, and Captain America decided to burn SHIELD to the ground the moment I turned my back?”
“I don’t think I should get shared credit for that,” Tony protested lamely. “I was mostly there for damage control.”

“Yeah, and that’s the only reason I’m not shouting at you right now,” Rhodey told him, pointing over at him with narrowed eyes. “That could have been a lot worse. I still can’t believe it. You think Hydra is still out there?"

“They’re definitely still out there,” Tony agreed with a wince. “Paid us a visit a week ago, and we repaid the favor yesterday.”

“Christ, Tony,” Rhodey sighed. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“You know that saying, better to ask forgiveness than permission?” Tony asked, tossing him a sly grin.

“You’re an idiot,” Rhodey told him. “I would have helped.”

“You know I love you, Rhodey-Road, but I’m not looking to be conscripted to the military just because we lost SHIELD,” Tony said. “You know how I feel about all the paperwork.”

“You coulda asked me,” Rhodey snapped. “I’ve got vacation time coming, you know.”

“I wasn’t gonna drag you into this mess,” Tony sighed. “Unlike the rest of us renegades, you’ve got a reputation to maintain. We’ve sort of all blown ours to hell.”

Rhodey winced, which meant he’d probably seen the footage. The world was mostly on the side of the Avengers—but there were still more than a few politicians calling for their arrest. Mostly they wanted Steve and Natasha, but there were plenty of people that had been after Tony since long before this.

“Speaking of reputations,” Rhodey said, “I would have thought Bucky Barnes returning from the dead would be bigger news.”

“Yeah, about that,” Tony said, looking up at Rhodey innocently. “I’m gonna need you to keep that between us.”

“You haven’t told anyone,” Rhodey realized. “Shit. You know you’re not gonna be able to keep him secret forever.”

“I know,” Tony agreed tiredly.

“It’s gonna be a goddamn circus,” Rhodey insisted. “And it’s gonna be worse if they find out before you tell them. You guys are already down to a fifty-two percent favorability rating. You gotta get ahead of this.”

“It’s not that simple,” Tony hedged.

“You’ve got proof about what happened, right?” Rhodey said. “Get it to me, I’ll talk to the brass. They’ll be tripping all over themselves to get this sorted out and pin every medal they can find on him.”

Tony reached up and to run a hand through his hair. “Can you just sit on it for now?” he asked.

Rhodey looked surprised. “Tony—“

“I need to talk to Bucky about it first,” Tony said after a moment. “This may not be something that
he wants.”

“Maybe it’s not,” Rhodey said. “But sooner or later, it’s something he’s gonna need.” He crossed his arms. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You ever heard of the Winter Soldier?” Tony asked casually.

“He’s a ghost story,” Rhodey said dismissively, but because Rhodey had always been quick, he caught himself a second later. “Oh, hell no, don’t tell me—“

“Surprise!” Tony said, falsely cheerful. “Turns out Bucky Barnes has more than one legacy to his name.”

Rhodey dropped back down to sit on the table, and reached back out for the scotch. “Right. So, he was the Winter Soldier. Wonderful. Anything else I should know?” he asked, before taking a long gulp of scotch.

“He killed my parents,” Tony told him.

Rhodey spit out his scotch.

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It had taken Tony the better part of an hour to calm Rhodey down and explain that Bucky wasn’t a threat, assisted by Jarvis, whose judgement Rhodey apparently trusted more than Tony’s, and then a call to Pepper, who assured Rhodey that Bucky was adorable and precious and to be protect at all costs. Only with a bit more dignified terminology, because it was Pepper.

Rhodey had finally gone back to his apartment after getting Tony’s promise to be introduced to Bucky soon so he could make an assessment of his own. It would have been easier if he’d just stayed, because Tony had a floor for Rhodey, but Rhodey never accepted his invitations to stay: we’re not twelve, Tony, I’m not sticking around for your super hero slumber party.

Tony was sure he would wear him down eventually.

Right now, he really just wanted to get back to Bucky.

Bucky was freshly showered and in a t-shirt and sweats, waiting on the couch when Tony finally made it back to the penthouse, which was wonderful.

But he wasn’t alone, which was less wonderful.

“Steve came to yell at me some more, so I distracted him with sugar and Disney,” Bucky whispered, glancing up at Tony with a smile. “Tactics I learned from you.”

Steve was laid out on the couch with the Iron Man throw blanket over him, his head resting up against Bucky’s thigh, sound asleep. Bucky was distractedly watching Brave playing out on the television, though the audio had been turned all the way down.

Tony dropped down into the armchair across from them with a half-hearted laugh. He guessed they wouldn’t be picking up where they’d left off any time soon, but it was hard to be too put out about it. Steve looked ridiculously adorable—Tony couldn’t actually remember ever seeing him with his guard down this much before.

“Did you know he’d never had a Pixy Stix before?” Bucky asked sadly. “Ever since you got me
out. I’ve always had you there to help me. I don’t think he’s had anyone.”

“Yeah, I’m guilty in that, too” Tony admitted quietly. “We didn’t really hit it off too well the first time we met.”

Bucky smiled, his eyes heading towards the windows. “Stevie was always getting into fights with everyone we met,” he admitted. “I’d try to introduce him to someone new, they’d say something even halfway offensive, and they’d be his sworn enemy for life.”

“How’d you manage to win him over?” Tony asked curiously.

Bucky’s smile slipped, his expression turning troubled. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “He’s just always there, in my memories. I can’t remember the part where we met.”

“I was getting my ass kicked,” Steve mumbled. “Three against one. You showed up and sucker punched one of them and got them all to run off.”

Bucky laughed, glancing down at Steve. “How old were we?”

“You were about seven,” Steve said. “I was six.” He paused for a minute, tiredly pushing himself up to lean back against the couch. “I screamed at you for it, told you I had ‘em on the ropes.”

“Of course you did,” Bucky said fondly.

“Most people when I yelled at them either tried to punch me or yelled back or just walked away,” Steve said wryly. “You just laughed at me and then introduced yourself like you didn’t even notice I was mad at you.” He turned to look at Bucky. “Sort of like earlier when I was yelling at you and you just nodded along and then kept giving me candy.”

“Pixy Stix, Steve,” Bucky corrected gravely. “They’re called Pixy Stix.”

“Why does nothing about that story surprise me?” Tony asked wryly.

“I’m not that bad,” Steve protested, and Tony had to bite back a laugh at the petulant tone. It was so different from his usual confident, holier-than-thou tones. Tony wondered if maybe he was starting to see the real Steve Rogers for the first time.

“No one’s sayin’ that,” Bucky assured him, his Brooklyn accent always coming back a bit stronger whenever he was talking with Steve. “You just probably shouldn’t be lecturing me on being cautious, is all.” He grinned over at Steve with false innocence. “Cause your lectures on self-preservation are a little hard to take seriously, considering.”

“Okay, what about if it’s coming from me?” Tony asked.

“That’s just as bad,” Bucky assured him, before glancing back at Steve. “Did you know he invited a terrorist to come to his house? On live television?”

“I did see that,” Steve said, and frowned thoughtfully. “I think that’s actually worse than anything we’ve ever done.”

“Definitely,” Bucky agreed.

“Hey, how did this get turned around onto me?” Tony demanded.

Bucky laughed as he looked back over at him. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sure we can all agree we’ve all got issues. We probably don’t want to turn it into a competition.”
“Cause you know you’d lose,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes.

“I think we all know that Steve would lose,” Bucky told him.

“Hey,” Steve protested.

Bucky just laughed at him, and offered him another Pixy Stix. “You know it’s true,” he told him.

“Yeah, okay,” Steve admitted, taking the Pixy Stix and then falling back against the couch.

Bucky glanced back at Tony. “How did it go with Rhodey?”

“Colonel Rhodes is here?” Steve asked, looking back up in surprise.

“He’s back in New York, but he went to his apartment,” Tony said.

Steve glanced at Bucky in concern, before looking back at Tony. “Does he know about Bucky?”

Bucky slid further into the corner of the couch, going a little red. “Uh, he definitely knows,” he said.

Tony laughed, letting his head fall back against the chair. “Yeah, I gave him a pretty sanitized version of events, but he’s mostly read in,” he said, ignoring Steve looking questioningly between them. “He’s not gonna say anything to anyone, not if we don’t him want to.”

Steve nodded, looking reassured. “Okay, good,” he said, twisting the Pixy Stix between his fingers, apparently with no intention of actually eating it. Bucky watched him disapprovingly, and then reached out to grab it back.

“Of for—” Bucky said, grabbing Steve’s shirt to tug him back down so he was lying down. “Just go back to sleep.”

“Okay,” Steve agreed docilely. Tony couldn’t quite remember ever seeing Steve do as he’d been told before. It was a little surreal.

Steve was back asleep within minutes, and Bucky reached out to pull the blanket back up around him before glancing back at Tony.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “Don’t think he’s been sleeping.”

“You need to sleep too,” Tony told him.

“I will,” Bucky promised. “And you…you need to shower.”

Tony glanced down at himself, and snorted. “I can take a hint,” he said.

He stood up to head off and Bucky grabbed his hand as he walked by, tugging him back. “Are we okay?” Bucky asked softly. “About earlier…I mean, are you okay?”

“I think I’m better than I’ve been in really long time,” Tony admitted. “What about you, any regrets?”

“Well, I sort of regret not telling Jarvis to lock down the elevator,” Bucky told him wryly.

Tony choked back a startled laugh, not wanting to wake Steve again, and leaned down give Bucky a chaste kiss goodnight.
Tony was planning to sleep in the next day, but whenever he could, he couldn’t, so he ended up wandering into the kitchen in search of coffee before it was even seven o’clock.

He was unsurprised to find Bucky already awake, looking bright eyed and bushy-tailed. He decided to blame that on the fact that he was a super soldier rather than acknowledge how much younger he technically was. Well, technically he was older. Did that mean he was younger in theory?

It was frankly too early to care.

What was of more immediate concern was that Bucky had a station set up with halved oranges, and was using an old fashioned juicer to squeeze the life out of them one by one like something from Martha Stewart Living.

“Are you seriously making your own orange juice?” Tony asked incredulously. “That’s it. Pepper has gone too far.”

Bucky glanced up, looking like he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Tony narrowed eyes, suspecting suddenly that this was probably something he did every morning, and this was just the first time Tony had been around to see it.

“She says increased healing is no excuse to put toxins in my body,” Bucky told him solemnly, and then paused guiltily. “I didn't tell her about our Pixy Stix stash.”

“Good call,” Tony told him. “I didn't know you two were still talking.”

“I’m pretty sure she's just using me to get to Thor,” Bucky told him, but the slight smile meant he didn’t really believe that. “I keep trying to explain I've never even met him.”

“Yeah, well, you can tell her I am never introducing you to Thor,” Tony told him. “I've already got to compete with Captain Perfect, I’m not bringing a literal God into the equation.”

Bucky’s hand slipped, pressing so much force down on orange the juice sprayed everywhere. “What?” he choked. He looked up in disbelief. “Tony, you don’t think that Steve and I…”

“No, of course not! I just mean, it’s obvious how much you guys mean to each other,” Tony said hesitantly. Seeing them together last night had driven home exactly how close they had been, and were quickly becoming again. Tony had known, of course, the whole world knew practically, but he hadn’t quite seen it firsthand. Not like that.

Tony thought they were entirely valid concerns, but by the way Bucky’s eyes were widening in horror, apparently he didn’t agree.

“Oh my god. Steve is not—no,” he said. “He’s like…like my littler brother. I don’t care how many memories I’m still missing, I can promise nothing ever happened there.”
Tony leaned on the counter, trying not to show how relieved he felt. “So you’ve never even thought about it then?” he asked.

Bucky froze for a minute, and then winced. “Okay, look, I’m not going to say I didn’t have a bit of a sexual crisis when he came to rescue me suddenly wearing the body of a Greek god,” he said, “but as soon as it clicked that it was the same guy in there…even if he wasn’t straight, which he *is*, there was never going to be anything between us. We’re family.”

“Greek god?” Tony echoed disbelievingly.

“Well, you’ve seen him,” Bucky said, “I mean, I was in bad shape when he found me in Azzano, but I wasn’t actually *dead*.”

“You’re not getting any better at this reassurance thing,” Tony told him with mock irritation.

Bucky laughed. “Okay, how about this,” he said, stepping forward until they were nearly touching. “Have you seen *you*?”

“I am pretty fantastic,” Tony agreed, humming slightly. “Carry on.”

“You’re also brave. Kind,” Bucky told him, grinning as he leaned close. “Brilliant, too.”

“You forgot filthy rich,” Tony told him.

“I didn’t forget,” Bucky told him. “But it’s got nothing to do with who you are.”

“Most people would disagree with that,” Tony told him.

“Our circumstances may shape us,” Bucky told him, “but our possessions don’t define us.”

“Okay, Dr. Phil,” Tony told him wryly. “Maybe we need to cut back on the Disney and daytime TV.”

Bucky just laughed at him. “Well, look at it this way,” he said, as he turned away to finish cleaning up the oranges. “I’ve got nothing of my own, do you hold that against me?”

Tony blanched. “Of course I don’t,” he said quickly, leaning forward on the counter.

“Then you don’t get extra credit for your bank account,” he said. “I promise, you’re worth just as much without it.” He grinned. “That’s not to say that I don’t enjoy the perks of having you as a sugar daddy.”

“Okay,” Tony snapped, “who told you what that means?”

“Luke explained it to me when I went to visit him,” Bucky laughed. “Don’t worry, I told him he had it wrong. Though let’s face it, you basically are my literal sugar dealer.”

“Don’t go telling people that, either,” Tony warned him. “Pepper would cut us off if she knew I was buying Pixy Stix in bulk.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Bucky said, and flashed him a grin. “I’ve got hiding places even you don’t know about.”

“You holding out on me, Barnes?” Tony asked.

“It’s just a contingency, I promise I’ll share,” Bucky told him, before pouring a glass of the orange
“Where is Cap, anyway?” Tony asked, leaning back to look into the living room with a frown.

“He went for a run,” Bucky said. “He wanted me to go with him, but it didn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Why not?” Tony asked.

“Because I can’t leave the tower,” Bucky said simply.

“Woah, hold on, where did you get that idea?” Tony started. “I’ve told you, you’re not a prisoner. You know that, right? Please tell me you know that.”

“I know that,” Bucky said, rolling his eyes. “I’m not an idiot. You’d be the least effective warden ever. You gave me the codes to your Quinjet.”

“Okay, well, actually that was Jarvis, but fine,” Tony said. “Then why would you think you can’t leave?”

“It took your friend about thirty seconds to recognize me,” Bucky said slowly. “The haircut probably wasn’t such a great idea. People see me running through Central Park with Captain America, they’re probably gonna manage to put that one together.”

“Ah,” Tony said. “Yeah, that’s an issue.” He reached up to scratch his head. “But…would that be so bad? If people knew who you really were?”

Bucky looked at him warily. “The Winter Soldier is who I really am,” he said finally. “So…yeah. It’s probably not ideal.”

“People are going to find out, eventually,” Tony said. “If you don’t…if you really don’t want that, we’re gonna have to send you somewhere else. I’ve got quite a few other properties. We could—“

“I don’t want to leave,” Bucky said quickly.

“Okay,” Tony said, letting out a breath. “Okay, then how about a compromise?” he suggested. “We let Rhodey get the ball rolling behind the scenes, but keep it confidential. That way we have something to fall back on if people find out who you are.”

Bucky stared contemplatively into his orange juice, and then sighed. “But what if—“

“Whatever scenario you’re thinking of,” Tony said, “I can solve it with ‘we buy a private island and decide to live as hermits.’”

“You would make a terrible hermit,” Bucky snorted.

“My point is, we’ve got options, and whatever happens, we’ll deal with it,” Tony said. “I’m not gonna let anyone hurt you. And that’s not even taking into account what Steve would do for you.”

“People will hate me,” Bucky said softly. He looked back over at Tony, and his eyes were bright. “I know I’m not a hero, but it doesn’t mean I want to be the villain.”

“Frankly, if no one hates you, you’re doing something wrong,” Tony told him. “There’s a lot of assholes in this world. I take the fact that they hate me as a badge of honor. But the people that matter? They’re still gonna love you.”
“And you were making fun of my platitudes?” Bucky asked, grinning. “You sound like you’re taking your cues from Dr. Seuss.”

“Dr. Seuss?” Tony asked in confusion.

“Those who mind don’t matter, and those who matter don’t mind,” Bucky recited playfully.

“Seriously, what are you doing with your spare time?” Tony asked.

Bucky laughed brightly, and the sound hit Tony right in the heart the way it always did. “Jarvis has been giving me an education in popular culture,” he explained.

“Bucky is an excellent student,” Jarvis added loyally. “He actually listens to my recommendations.”

“Well, your advice is obviously wonderful, Jarvis,” Tony said to appease him. “As is Dr. Seuss. Also, me.” He looked back at Bucky. “We can’t all be wrong.”

“Fine,” Bucky said, before nodding like he was trying to convince himself. “You’ve sold me on it. If Rhodey doesn’t mind helping, then I’m willing to see how this goes.” He bit his lip. “Becoming a hermit can be Plan B.”

“That’s the spirit,” Tony told him cheerfully, and reached over to steal Bucky’s orange juice.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

The next few chapters will probably not have much going on (figured they deserved some downtime!). For example, this is the chapter of poor Bucky and Tony getting constantly cock-blocked. Tony definitely needs to reset his alerts and learn to lock doors.

Making equipment for Bucky was entirely unlike making it for any of the Avengers. He didn’t just write a list of a demands and then head off and wait for it all to magically appear. He helped, he gave input, and he wanted to know how everything worked from start to finish.

It was exhilarating and wonderful and Tony loved having a partnership with someone other than Jarvis and his bots for once—but this might be taking it too far.

“This is a bad idea,” he insisted, attempting to keep his voice firm, but Bucky was just blinking back at him innocently, and Tony was pretty sure he was going to crumble like a wet paper towel.

“Look, trust me, if I’m saying it’s a bad idea, it is a really bad idea.”

“You’re the one that pointed out we haven’t fully tested it,” Bucky reminded him. “And if I fall, you’ll catch me, right?”

Tony glanced back towards the roof doors, making sure they were alone. If Steve found out about this, he’d kill him for sure. He may be wearing his Iron Man suit, but Steve was far more creative than Tony had originally given him credit for, and he wasn’t entirely sure it would save him. Not to mention the others would probably side with Steve.

“Tony,” Bucky called, regaining his attention. “It’s gonna be fine. I trust you.”

“We can never tell Rogers we did this,” Tony decided.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t easily catch Bucky if anything went wrong, because he was Iron Man, of course he could. What they were doing wasn’t exactly more unsafe than anything else they did—Tony’s first attempt at flying the Iron Man suit, for example, was far less safe, but that was him, and he was used to being his own guinea pig.

And none of that changed the fact that Bucky wanted to step off the edge of Avengers tower just to see if the parachute in his jacket would open.

Tony had already tested it with a number of crash test dummies, and it had worked every time. But ideally Bucky should test it under controlled circumstances before having to rely on it in the field, and it had become pretty apparent that Tony wouldn’t be able to protect Bucky from every fight that came along.

“This is like the most messed up version of a trust fall ever,” Tony muttered, stepping to the edge of the building and glancing down. It was night so they wouldn’t panic the locals, and while the city lights looked beautiful below them, there didn’t seem to be anyone around.

“Why don’t I take us to a bridge somewhere? At least then there’d be water to break—“ Tony cut
off as Bucky just rolled his eyes and then stepped off the edge. “Shit!”

Tony dropped after him, catching himself with his repulsers, and letting out the breath he’d been holding when the parachute opened below him. He sped down to keep track of him, and as the parachute caught on the wind and tugged Bucky slightly back up it brought them level.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” Tony demanded.

Bucky had reached up to grip onto the parachute cords, and was keeping track of both his landing and the building right behind him. “But it worked,” Bucky pointed out, tossing him a grin.

“Repulsers are so much more reliable,” Tony told him, dropping lower to keep level with him as Bucky guided himself down to the street. “Seriously, why don’t you want an Iron Man suit? Bulletproof, fall-proof, and you can’t beat it as a fashion statement. Do you know how many people are begging me—“

“Your suits are amazing,” Bucky told him, as he gracefully landed on the sidewalk. He reached out to gather the parachute behind him before it fell on him. “But when I’m out in the field, I’ve got to know I’m still me.”

Tony landed beside him, his heart clenching. “Right,” he whispered. Tony could dress up the Iron Man suits as humanitarian as much as he liked, ultimately it was still like stepping into a weapon. He should have known better than to push. “Of course. I’m sorry. But you’re keeping the parachute, especially now that we know that it works.”

“It is pretty cool. You’ve outdone yourself,” Bucky agreed, glancing back up to judge the distance back to the top. The parachute had been designed as small as possible for someone of Bucky’s mass, and was black to blend into the shadows. The material was light and easily compressible, making it unnoticeable in the jacket even considering how far it could expand when released.

Tony was pretty proud of it, but Bucky was looking back at it like he wanted to have another go, and Tony hadn’t actually meant for it to be *recreational*. “Seriously, I don’t think fear of heights means what you think it means,” he said, as he raised his face plate.

Bucky just laughed at him, his face bright with adrenaline. “Are you kidding?” he asked. “That was terrifying. It was awesome.”

“Okay, no one is allowed to call me an adrenaline junkie ever again,” Tony told him, “because I’ve now seen the real thing.”

“No, that’s not—“ Bucky started, frowning adorably. “It’s just…no fear means you’ve got nothing to lose. I was fearless for a long time. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.” He glanced back at Tony. “It’s different, when you’re choosing the risks you take.”

Tony could understand that. He’d never been fearless, but he understood the thrill of taking your own risks. Of being in control. He’d build his entire life around it.

He glanced back up towards the roof. “I guess you need a ride?” he asked, glancing back with a smirk. “That parachute only works one way. I mean, so far.”

Bucky stepped forward without hesitation, throwing his arms around Tony’s neck. “Well, if you’re offering,” he said, with a grin. “I have been wondering when you were going to take me for a spin.”

Tony reached out and wrapped his hands around his waist. “You know you’ve only got to ask,”
Tony said, grinning back at him. “I’d take you anywhere.”

“Anywhere, huh?” Bucky asked, leaning close to gently capture his lips for a short, but tortuously slow kiss, before tugging on Tony’s lower lips slightly as he pulled back. One of his hands curled around the back of the Iron Man helmet, and Tony wished he could have Bucky’s hands curling in his hair, instead. “How about you take me upstairs then?”

“Yeah, yeah, we should definitely go back up,” Tony agreed.

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “You’re the one that can fly,” he reminded him. “Waiting on you, bud.”

Tony didn’t need to be told twice. Or, well, three times, anyway. He took off for the roof, landing gently back on the tower and releasing Bucky. He let the suit disassemble around him as Bucky retracted his parachute, then grabbed Bucky’s hand to tug him back to the penthouse.

Where he found Steve, Natasha, Clint, and Sam making themselves at home on his couch.

“You’re just in time for the movie!” Sam shouted brightly.

Tony hung his head. “Cock-blocks, every last one of them,” he muttered, before raising his voice to make sure they all heard the next part. “Jarvis, why did you let them in?”

“It is movie night, Sir,” Jarvis told him dutifully. “You scheduled it, and you do have the largest television. I assumed you would be hosting it here.”

Right, he’d forgotten. Well, mostly he just hadn’t thought any of them would show up, as they never had when he’d suggested it before. Figured this time they would.

Steve turned around, watching them suspiciously over the top of the couch, before glancing at their clasped hands. “What have you two been up to, anyway?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Tony said quickly, rushing forward, and releasing Bucky’s hand. “Movie night, huh? Must have gotten my days mixed up, but that sounds great, huh, Bucko?”

Bucky just sighed. “Do we have a choice?” he asked.

“No!” four voices shouted at once.

The night didn’t end being a total loss, as Clint’s movie commentaries tended to be hilarious, and apparently any fictional version of Robin Hood was bound to rile him up. It didn’t hurt that Bucky fell against him on the smaller side of the couch, practically half in his lap, apparently oblivious to the looks being thrown their way—ranging from knowing (Natasha), to speculative (Steve), to baffled (Clint), and somewhat hungry (Sam).

Movie night wasn’t so bad, he supposed.

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Bucky had slept in his own room that night, and then disappeared before Tony woke up, so once again there was no picking up where they’d left off. He suspected Bucky had gone to the gym floor, as he still wouldn’t go outside (parachute tests excluded). Since Tony worked out in the gym the absolute bare minimum required, he went down to the lab to work on his latest innovation instead—namely, a weapon for Bucky.

Bucky’s specialty was guns, and he was scarily good with them. The issue was, Bucky didn’t want
to hurt anyone. It wasn’t like he couldn’t manage just as well at hand-to-hand, but it was Tony’s job to make sure all of them had the equipment they needed to make them the best. And Bucky, like Clint, was best as a sniper. He could always go for non-lethal shots, but even then they caused a pretty high level of damage.

So Tony had decided to get back in the weapons business—for a limited time only—and design a gun that wouldn’t kill.

He was just putting the final touches on the first prototype when Bucky showed up, wanting to help. Tony tried not to stare too much, but he didn’t understand how he was even wearing jeans that tight, and it was very distracting. At least he wasn’t wearing another Thor shirt. Instead, he was wearing a dark grey shirt with the words: Fibonacci [It’s as easy as 1,1,2,3]

“Where is Jarvis finding these shirts?” he asked with a laugh.

“I picked this one out,” Bucky said, shooting him a grin.

“You are such a nerd,” Tony told him. “That did not make it into the history books.”

“Math is fun,” Bucky shrugged, before coming to lean against the table beside him. “Are you making a gun?”

“Sort of,” Tony said, “but this one doesn’t really have bullets. Not traditional ones, anyway. Goal was to make something non-lethal.”

He glanced over to find Bucky scanning over the schematics scattered across the table’s digital display. He barely had to run his eyes across it before he was looking back at Tony with another grin. “This is very cool,” he said.

“It’s just a prototype. The main problem was force,” Tony explained. “I mean, anything fired with enough force is gonna rip through its target, but we can’t exactly make it so slow that they can dodge out of the way or it can get knocked off course by something else.

“I thought about darts, but they get messy and they don’t always work—especially against anyone enhanced, trying to keep track of the right doses would be a nightmare. These babies will knock someone flat even if they’re covered in body armor.”

Bucky picked up one of the dormant bullets. “They’re basically miniature robots,” he said in awe. “Aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Tony agreed smugly. “Even got a limited AI. Nothing like Jarvis, of course. Not even on Dum-E’s level, really, but they can detect their surrounding conditions and they know when they’re about to impact something. Jarvis, give the little guy a wake up call.”

The bullet snapped open, four legs shooting out each with a small point at each end like a needle. “This thing latches on to whatever you shoot it at,” Tony explained, “then it discharges an electrical shock. The force of the shock is calculated based on the mass of whatever it’s latched onto.”

“And it won’t kill them?” Bucky asked.

“It’s more like a taser,” Tony said. “Unfortunately, there can always be complications, and some people have conditions that make it hard to handle. But its limited AI means that it’s going to be taking some of that into account, so it’s not a one size fits all charge. It’s as safe a way as any to take someone out of the fight in the field.”
Bucky went quiet for a moment, and then glanced at Tony. “You did this for me, didn’t you? Is that something you want?” he asked. “Me in the field?”

“That is entirely up to you,” Tony told him quickly, realizing that they hadn’t actually spoken about it. Bucky’s interest in the equipment, the fact that he wanted to test the parachute, had all sort of led him to assuming. “I just want to make sure you’re prepared, next time, if it’s something you want to do.”

“I don’t know,” Bucky said quietly, glancing back at it. “But I definitely don’t like the idea of you and Steve going off to save the world without me.”

Tony picked up the prototype gun, and casually held it out. “Doesn’t hurt to be prepared,” he shrugged.

Bucky took the gun in his right hand, tossed it and caught it in his left, then held his arm straight out to shoot at all three dummy targets set up on the other side of the room. All without even taking his eyes off the schematics he was still reading.

Tony felt his mouth go dry as he leaned past him to see each of the bullets he’d fired had landed center mass on the dummies, giving off their charges as expected. “Now you’re just showing off,” he said.

“It’s got a good weight to it,” Bucky said, setting it back on the table. “You should develop these, Tony.” He looked over at him, his eyes lighting up. “Maybe they could phase out regular ammunition weapons and replace them with these.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” he said tiredly. “The government wants me to mass produce the Iron Man suits for them. They sure as hell don’t want something less lethal.”

“I think that’s the craziest thing about this world,” Bucky said, frowning slightly. “They’ve invented electric cars to prevent pollution, but they keep mass creating cars that require fuel. They’re building pipelines that are destroying the earth’s water supply instead of focussing on clean energy like your arc power and solar options. So much has changed, but what’s weirder are the things that haven’t. It’s like we keep finding all these solutions, and doing nothing with them.”

“The world doesn’t like change,” Tony agreed. “Or I should say, the people that are doing well with the status quo don’t want it to change.”

“But not you,” Bucky said, glancing back at him. “You keep trying to make a difference.”

“For whatever little that’s worth,” Tony said, with a bitter laugh. “My track record isn’t great, to date.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed dryly. “You’ve only saved the world, what, four or five times? It’s disgraceful.”

Tony leaned up on the table beside him, smirking. “Well, if we’re keeping count,” he said, “it’s definitely five.”

Bucky laughed lightly, slipping in front of him to brace his arms on either side of Tony, caging him in. “Five then,” he allowed, and leaned forward to kiss him, reaching out to grab the backs of Tony’s thighs as he did, effortlessly lifting him up on the table. He didn’t even have to break the kiss to do it.

And there’s a new kink, Tony decided.
“Seriously?” an exasperated voice demanded.

Tony pulled away to see Rhodey just through the door, looking extremely put upon.

“Jarvis, where was my alert?” Tony demanded.

“Colonel Rhodes has unrestricted access to the tower and did not seem agitated, so no alert was triggered,” Jarvis explained. “Per your Scary But Well Meaning—”

Rhodey raised an eyebrow and Tony straightened up quickly. “Okay, thanks, Jarvis! Got it. We will be talking about this later.”

Bucky leaned back away from Tony, looking caught between being amused and a little horrified. “We have to stop meeting like this,” he muttered, only loud enough for Tony to hear. Tony swallowed a laugh, trying to maintain an apologetic expression for Rhodey’s benefit.

Rhodey stepped a few feet closer, then crossed his arms, assessing them. “So…” he said, eyes narrowing speculatively. “Bucky Barnes.”

Bucky looked back at him, doing that eerily effective harmless act. “So they tell me,” he said gamely. “And you’re Colonel Rhodes. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.” He paused for a minute. “I mean, you know, properly.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, too, Sergeant Barnes,” Rhodey said formally, holding out a hand. “I’m not gonna say you were my favorite Howling Commando, but you were damn close.”

Bucky flashed one of his beautiful genuine smiles, and reached out to catch his hand. “I’m flattered to rank at all,” he promised. “Those guys were the best.”

Rhodey’s lips twitched, and he cast Tony a disbelievingly look like he wasn’t sure if Bucky was for real. Tony just raised an eyebrow, because he absolutely was. “I hope Tony hasn’t been speaking too badly of me,” Rhodey said, as he released his hand.

“Well, I know you’re lying,” Rhodey snorted.

“He told me you’re amazing,” Bucky insisted earnestly.

“Ha ha ha,” Tony said, sliding off the table and giving Bucky a not so subtle elbow jab. “Let’s not recite everything I’ve ever said, please.”

It wasn’t that Tony wouldn’t tell Rhodey that he was, in fact, amazing, right to his face, it’s just he would have done it with an edge of sarcasm and a ridiculous nickname. Bucky said it earnestly and solemn, making it impossible to take it as anything but the absolute truth.

It did the trick though—Rhodey softened almost instantly, his posture lossening as he gave them a slow grin. “You’re not exactly what I was expecting,” he said.

“I get that a lot,” Bucky told him, flashing a sly grin, a bit of his mischief sneaking in despite the fact that he was on his best behavior.

“He’s a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” Tony smirked.

Rhodey snorted, shaking his head. “Well, you definitely don’t seem like a threat,” he said, watching Bucky assentingly. “But then neither does Natasha Romanoff when she doesn’t want to.”
“I wasn’t utilized too much for spy work,” Bucky promises lightly. “Having a metal arm made it a bit hard to be inconspicuous.”

Rhodey glanced at Bucky’s left arm at the reminder, frowning a little as he realized he would never have known something had happened to it. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess that would have been an issue. It’s not now, though.”

“Tony and Dr. Cho helped me,” Bucky told him. “My other arm was…problematic.”

Problematic was pretty much the nicest way possible of describing that nightmare, but Tony could understand Bucky probably didn’t want to rehash the details, so he quickly changed the subject. “So, Rhodey, any progress on getting Bucky in the clear?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s taken care of,” Rhodey assured them. Tony gaped at him. “What do you mean? I just got you the documentation yesterday—” He glanced at Bucky, who was looking a little pale and just as shocked as he was.

“I gave a call to the President,” Rhodey said with a shrug, “and when he heard Bucky Barnes had been found after seventy years of captivity, it wasn’t hard to get a promise for a Presidential Pardon. They’re still reviewing the information you got me from Hydra, but it’ll be signed by tomorrow.”

“Just like that?” Tony asked in disbelief. It was true it had only taken him about two minutes with the truth to realize Bucky needed saving and not punishment, but Tony was used to being ahead of the curve when it came to the rest of the world.

“What can I say? He owes me a favor,” Rhodey said, smirking. “But the truth is, even if they wanted to prosecute Barnes, which, PR nightmare that it would be, I can promise you they don’t, there’s not much they could do about it. Even if Barnes tried to take credit for the Kennedy assassination, he’s had his memories messed with, he’s too traumatized for his testimony to be reliable, and there’s zero evidence of him ever committing a crime.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m pretty sure the Kennedy assassination was actually me,” Bucky admitted with a wince.

“Holy shit,” Rhodey said, staring at him in disbelief. He pointed at him with squinted eyes. “Don’t go telling people that.”

Bucky nodded vaguely, glancing back at Tony like he was trying to figure out what he thought. Tony was, frankly, ecstatic, if a little wary. He was fairly certain a Presidential Pardon would hold even if new evidence did come to light, but he regretted keeping Rhodey out of the loop about the fact that there was not only video evidence of the Winter Soldier murdering his parents, but also a witness to one of his assassinations: Natasha Romanoff.

Tony knew she would never tell, so that wasn’t really an issue. The surveillance video of his parents’ murder wasn’t solved as simply. He had erased it from any Hydra base they found, and he figured chances were slim they had bothered to store it at every base, but that didn’t mean he didn’t miss one. There would always be a chance it might pop up again later to haunt them.

And Tony knew that things had a habit of coming back even after getting buried—and the chance of that happening was pretty high as long as Tony kept the copies of it he had.

So later, when Rhodey had headed back to the military base and Bucky had disappeared somewhere with Steve, Tony sat down at his desk alone in his lab and played the video one last
“Jarvis,” he said thickly, when the Winter Soldier had shot out the camera and the screen went black. “Erase any copy of this video, highest level of security erasure. Make sure no one is putting Humpty Dumpty back together again.”

The video disappeared from the screen, then from the database. Tony pressed his eyes shut for a moment, then reached out and turned off the display.

“It has been erased, Sir,” Jarvis told him gently.

“Thanks, Jarvis,” he said.

It wasn’t as hard to let go of it as he thought it would be.

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This time when the Scary But Well Meaning Friends alert came, he and Bucky were sitting at the bar eating Lucky Charms and drinking chocolate hazelnut milk like the grown ups they were.

“I’m thinking of getting rid of that alert,” Tony sighed. “It’s sort of depressing how often they’re mad at me.”

Bucky just laughed at him. “Maybe just tweak it so it locks down the elevator whenever we’re making out?” he suggested.

“You have the best ideas,” Tony told him, and then Pepper was marching angrily towards them from the elevator, and Tony pushed his Lucky Charms in front of Bucky because she was less likely to yell about its high sugar content to him.

Of course, dealing with Pepper’s obsession with nutritional food might have been the better option, all things considered, when she slammed a copy of a gossip magazine on the table between them.

“Something you want to tell me?” she demanded coolly.

The cover had a grainy blown up photo of Tony in his Iron Man suit, only the face plate up, kissing Bucky, who was looking dashing in his blue jacket even if he did have a parachute trailing around him like one of Thor’s capes. The street light was shining on them at just the right angle to make it look like something from noir detective novel. Thankfully only part of Bucky’s profile could be made out in the picture, and it certainly wasn’t clear enough for anyone to jump to the conclusion that it was the dead war hero Bucky Barnes.

The headline across the top read: Iron Man’s Secret Lover?

Bucky gaped at it, flipping through the pages to open it to the story. Tony just winced, and then looked up to meet Pepper’s eyes.

“Uh, we’re sort of together?” Tony offered carefully. “I mean, obviously.”

Pepper narrowed her eyes. “As your friend, I would have liked to know that, and I’m very happy for your both,” she said. “As your CEO, I needed to know that, and I’m very disappointed in you, Tony!”

“Why is it you’re happy for both of us but just disappointed in me?” Tony asked.

Pepper ignored him, beginning to pace. “We’re just lucky they didn’t get a better picture of Bucky.
You two need to be more careful.”

Bucky let out a startled laugh. “Oh my god,” he cried. “There is speculation that Tony Stark’s newest paramour works at Stark Industries, and was helping to test new equipment for the Avengers.’ Paramour. They called me a paramour.”

Tony leaned over to look at the article. “Huh,” he said, clicking his tongue. “Not a bad guess, though, overall. You do work for me, and we were testing equipment. They got pretty close.”

“At least they didn’t call me your sugar baby,” Bucky said, looking up at him mock innocence.

Tony gave an exaggerated fake laugh in response. “You’re hilarious, Bucky-bear.”

Bucky just smirked and pulled out his phone, typing something with quick precise motions.

Pepper crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes at them. “I don’t feel like either of you are really learning your lesson.”

“We’re trending on Twitter!” Bucky cried, delighted.

“I give up,” Pepper decided, throwing up her hands.

“Look at all these articles. Iron Man’s new boy toy?” Bucky gaped. “The Iron Lover? Who writes this stuff? It sounds like I’m just really into metallurgy.”

“Well, to be fair,” Tony told him, “you do get sort of hot and bothered when I talk about how I process the metals for the Iron Man suits.”

Bucky glanced up with a sly grin. “That’s less to do with the metal and more to do with the way you get all bright and glowy when you’re talking science to me.”

Pepper’s eyes rolled up to the ceiling, as though she were trying to gather her strength. “Rhodey and I have a plan,” she said clearly, “about how to release information to the public. And it is a very slow, controlled, process. It does not include you ending up on the six o’clock news before we get to lay any groundwork at all.”

“I can’t be identified from this,” Bucky assured her. “I’ll make sure I stay in the tower from now on, okay?”

At Bucky’s earnest promise, Pepper’s irritation seems to disappear, and wow, that was a neat trick. Usually Tony’s attempts to calm her down always just made her angrier. Bucky was definitely a keeper.

“No one wants you to be stuck here like a prisoner,” Pepper assured them. “I just need you both to be more careful until Rhodey gets this all worked out, and we find a way to ease the world into it.”

Bucky was watching her a little wary now. “But we don’t have to do the tell the world part, right?”

He glanced at Tony. “We’re holding off on that, right?”

“Yes, of course,” Tony said quickly.

Pepper seemed confused, but was quick to assure him. “Yes, we’re setting up plans, but we won’t release anything without your approval,” she promised. “But that all sort of depends on them not catching you on camera before we’re ready.”

“Right,” Bucky sighed, some of his amusement at the situation dimming. He looked up at Pepper.
“I’m sorry. I thought it was dark enough we could test the parachute without getting spotted.”

“Test the—“ Pepper started, trailing off as her eyes narrowed at Bucky. “Did you jump off the Avengers tower?!”

“I mean, I had a parachute,” Bucky explained.

Pepper turned her glare on Tony. “Seriously?”

“I wasn’t gonna let him fall,” he told her. “And I promise, this was not my idea.”

“I use to jump out of planes all the time in the war, this isn’t exactly new,” Bucky told her. “They dropped me and Steve and the Commandos out of the back of plane onto the Alps once, then we—“ Bucky broke off abruptly, pushing off the stool and away from the counter.

Tony followed him with his eyes, but stayed where he was, giving him his space. "Buckster?"

Bucky pressed his eyes shut. “Sorry. Sorry, I’m fine,” he said. “Bad memory.”

Bucky was definitely not fine. He looked pale and shaky, and Tony could recognize the aftermath of a flashback from the many times he’d seen it in the mirror. He also knew sometimes the best thing to do was to try and move past it.

So he turned back to Pepper. “The parachute is to save his life, if he ever needs it,” he said. “The value in testing it while I’m there to catch him is to figure out if the balance is off, if there’s a delay in the trigger, etc. It was all as safe as I could make it.”

Pepper sighed, but nodded. “Fine, but maybe you need a better place to test this than the Tower?” she asked.

“Noted,” Tony agreed.

Pepper glanced back at Bucky in concern for a moment, but didn’t approach him. “Okay,” she said. “Please just…let me know if there are any more surprises? I’ve got to get back to the office.” She leaned further around Tony to look at Bucky. “You’ll call me if you need to talk? I’ve got lots of experience dealing with Tony. I can give you some pointers.”

“Hey!” Tony cried, but Pepper just grinned and it did the trick, because Bucky was smiling hesitantly back at her.

Pepper ignored Tony, tossing him a sweet smile he didn’t buy for a second as she turned to leave. He leaned over the counter, narrowing his eyes as he waited for her to disappear into the elevator, and then spun on the stool to face Bucky.

“You really okay?” Tony asked casually.


“Sometimes I wake up, and I’ll remember some moment of being dragged across the desert, being pulled back into a van,” Tony said quietly, letting his eyes drop to stare at the floor. “Things I should remember, but can’t, really. I was too out of it. Even when I do remember, I don’t know if it’s real or just my mind filling in the blanks.”
Bucky slowly walked back over to rejoin him at the counter, though he didn’t sit down. “How did you get over it?” he asked quietly.

“Haven’t,” Tony admitted. “You’re the first person I’ve ever even told.”

Bucky let out a shaky breath, then reached out to gently grab Tony’s hand. “This is real,” he said. “That’s what I tell myself, when I get caught up in the memories. This right now, this is real.”

Tony glanced down at their hands, and marveled at the fact that for once, that seemed like it could be enough.
“Seriously, why are you still on Twitter?” Tony asked.

Bucky just ignored him, splayed out on the couch with his head resting on Tony’s thigh. He was holding his phone up above him and scrolling through his feed—boring user name, bobby32557038, but Bucky had rejected all of his helpful suggestions. At least he’d made his avi Merida.

“This one says I’m likely a gold digger,” Bucky said, grinning slyly as he tilted his head back to look at Tony. “Does that mean what I’m thinking it means?”

“Yes, and they’re idiots on the internet that don’t know what they’re talking about,” Tony told him. “Why are you doing this to yourself?”

“I guess I just like the idea of it,” Bucky admitted, before breaking out into a wicked grin. “That I’m just some unknown Stark employee, getting it on with the boss.”

“That’s actually mostly true,” Tony said. “Although with all the interruptions we haven’t actually been able to—“

“Bucky!” Steve shouted, as he came storming off the elevator.

“—get anywhere,” Tony finished with a mutter.

Bucky pushed himself up, frowning as Steve rounded on the couch. Steve crossed his arms, glaring down at him. “Were you even gonna tell me?” he demanded.

“And that’s my cue to leave,” Tony said, moving to slip away.

Bucky wrapped his left hand in the back of Tony’s shirt, twisting it to get a solid grip on it, and tug him back. Even if he didn’t have super soldier strength, it was the hand with the vibranium skeleton, so Tony didn’t think he’d be twisting free any time soon.

“Or I could stay,” he decided, slumping back.

Steve ignored him, narrowing his eyes at Bucky. “Well?”

“I was gonna tell you about me and Tony—“ Bucky started quickly, “—we only just—“

“I don’t care about that!” Steve protested. “You jumped off the building.”

“Oh…” Bucky started. “Well, yeah?”

“I thought we all agreed we need to be more careful?” Steve demanded. “And first thing you do is
jump off the Tower in the middle of the night?"

“Okay, why is everyone so upset about this?” Bucky asked, glancing at Tony. “People still know how parachutes work, right?”

“Bucky!” Steve snapped. “That’s not the point!”

“I mean, it’s kinda the point,” Bucky insisted. “We just wanted to get it tested before the next time I’m in the field—“

“You’re not going back in the field,” Steve snapped. “We needed you in Siberia, but that was a one time thing.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Why do you say that like you think it’s a decision you get to make?”

“I’m practically your next of kin, Buck,” Steve told him, “so I think that I—“

“So you think what, you get to run my life?” Bucky asked. “Cause someone’s been doing that the last seventy years, and I don’t plan to go down that road again.”

“Buck, you can’t think,” Steve started, going dangerously pale. “I would never—“

Bucky glared at him, before getting to his feet and moving around him, heading back towards the elevator. “I’m not doing this with you right now.”

“So you’re just gonna walk away?” Steve demanded. “Bucky? Bucky, where are you going?”

“I don’t know, Steve,” Bucky snapped as he stepped in the elevator, “wherever the hell I want!”

Steve looked devastated when the elevator doors shut. “I didn’t handle that well, did I?” he asked softly, sounding horrified, and fell to sit on the edge of the couch.

“No, that was pretty spectacularly bad.” Tony agreed lightly. “You’re dispelling all my illusions about you being a people person, Cap.”

“I’m terrible with people,” Steve admitted sullenly, reaching up to run a hand down his face. “At the USO they wouldn’t let me say anything that wasn’t scripted.”

Tony snorted, giving Steve a surprised grin. “That’s definitely not in the text books,” he said.

“Bucky always used to run interference for me,” Steve admitted. “I’d get in trouble with the teachers, he’d tell them some story to get them off my back. I’d get in trouble with my Ma, he’d run interference with her, too. She adored him, couldn’t be mad at him no matter what he did. Mostly cause she knew I’d probably talked him into it,” he admitted wryly. “So when I woke up, I didn’t know how to survive without him, but I…well, I didn’t have a choice, so I managed. And now it’s like I don’t remember how to get along with him. That’s never been a problem before. We never fought. We never…”

Steve paused and then looked back at him, suddenly looking almost terrified. “I just don’t—“ he started. “I can’t lose him again.”

Tony turned to face him. “I know I don’t have your history,” he started, “but when I first found him, I was responsible for him, and I was terrified to let him out of the Tower. Pepper was getting ready to stage some kind of intervention.” He sighed and fell back against the arm of the couch. “I was a mess the first time he went out on his own. But the thing is, it was never for me to decide
when he was ready or what he could handle. He’s perfectly capable of deciding that for himself.”

“I know that,” Steve agreed. “But the things he’s been through…”

“Yeah, it sort of makes you want to bundle him up in bubble wrap and ply him with ice cream and cookies, huh?” Tony asked tiredly. “But, hey, for what it’s worth, it’s really not your decision. If he wants to go with us on missions, he can. If he doesn’t, he won’t. I plan to let him do whatever he wants.”

“I’m glad he has you, Tony,” Steve finally said.

“You’ve got me too, you know,” Tony told him. “I mean, not the same way. Obviously. My threesome days are over.”

“Oh my god,” Steve said, looking at him in horror. “Please don’t ever mention threesomes again. He’s like my brother, Tony, and I think you guys could be great together, but if you ever talk about him like that with me I’m gonna wanna punch you.”

“Fair enough,” Tony said, but tossed him a smirk. “Look, my point is just, you’re not in this alone anymore. Bucky’s not in it alone anymore, either.” He stood up and started for the elevator. “And I should probably go find him and remind him of that.”

“Hey, Tony,” Steve called. “You’re not either, you know. Alone, I mean.”

“Yeah, I already figured that one out for myself, Capsicle,” Tony told him, and tossed him another grin. “As usual, you’re still catching up to me.”

“Just when I start to think we’re gonna get along,” Steve said. “You go and say something like that.”

Tony just laughed and leaned back against the elevator as he tossed him a salute.

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“This is getting to be a habit,” Tony said, as he dropped down to sit next to Bucky on the roof. “I know you said you didn’t want a cape, but if you’re gonna keep coming up to the roof to be all angst-ridden, you know you’re getting one, right?”

Bucky turned to give him an exasperated look, but then shrugged. “I know I overreacted, okay,” he said, sounding embarrassed. “It’s funny, cause I remember Steve being the drama queen.”

“I think you could both compete for the title,” Tony told him. “You’d lose to me, of course.”

Bucky laughed, glancing back at him fondly. “Tony.”

Tony grinned at him. “Believe me, you are the least dramatic of us all,” he promised him. “Well, except for Rhodey, he’s got you beat.”

“Still,” Bucky said, before glancing away. “I guess it was stupid to just assume I’d be going on missions with you guys.”

“It wasn’t stupid,” Tony assured him.

“But Steve—” Bucky started.

“Steve likes to think he’s in charge,” Tony said, “but without Shield, I’m the only one financing
“It’s not that simple,” Bucky sighed. “I’ve got to work this out with him, but I don’t know how. I mean, I know what he’s like, I guess I’m just out of practice with him.” He paused, frowning as he glanced down at the streets below them. “He’s just never tried to sideline me. Not even after Azzano, when I was so screwed up and he was suddenly so strong, he never did that. Never acted like I couldn’t handle myself. He still trusted me.”

“You think he doesn’t trust you,” Tony realized.

“Of course he doesn’t trust me,” Bucky said quietly. “I don’t trust myself. How could I ever watch your backs out in the field?”

“You did a pretty good job of it in Siberia, and in D.C., too,” Tony told him. “You want to know what I think? I think he doesn’t trust himself. He blames himself for losing you, and he doesn’t want it to happen again.”

“None of that was on him,” Bucky insisted.

“I know that,” Tony agreed. “He doesn’t.”

“Shit,” Bucky said, running a hand down his face. “He’s an idiot.”

“Yep,” Tony agreed.

“I’m an idiot,” Bucky continued.

“I feel like I should dispute that one,” Tony said. “And yet…”

Bucky mock glared at him, nudging him with his shoulder. “That would have been the chivalrous thing to do,” he agreed.

“Chivalry is overrated,” Tony assured him. “How about I just take you out on a real date instead?”

“Tony, we can’t,” Bucky said. “Especially not after that picture got out. Pepper would kill us.”

“I think we both know she’d just kill me,” Tony told him. “But I’ve got a plan. You trust me?”

“Always,” Bucky said without hesitation.

Tony froze, swallowing hard, glancing back at him. “Right,” he said. “Of course you do. I’m very trustworthy. Everyone says so. So that’s a yes?”

“Yes, Tony,” Bucky told him, rolling his eyes that Tony even had to check. “I will go on a date with you.”

“Wonderful,” Tony said. “But first, you need to talk with Steve. I can’t deal with him when he’s all sad and pathetic, like a kicked puppy. It’s not good for morale.”

Bucky shook his head, biting back a laugh. “You can’t fix us all, you know,” he said.

“I’m not trying to fix you,” Tony promised. “But would you please fix Steve?”

Bucky gave a startled laugh, turning to look at him. “You say that like it’s simple,” he said. “But sometimes I think he doesn’t even see me, he just sees who I used to be.”
“Yeah, but you’re a bit to blame for that, too,” Tony told him gently. “Don’t think we haven’t noticed how you turn on the Bucky Barnes charm whenever he enters the room, like you’re playing a part. You don’t have to be what he wants, you know. Cause that’s not actually what he wants. He just wants you to be you.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Bucky admitted. “And I really don’t know how to get him to stop thinking everything that happens to me is his fault.”

“You’ve just got to remind him you make your own choices,” Tony said, “same as him.”

“Yeah?” Bucky asked. “You got any ideas how I go about doing that?”

“Actually, I do,” Tony told him, and flashed a smirk. “Something Natasha told me. Might help you even the playing field a bit.”

Tony had barely started telling the story when he started to wonder if it was a mistake. He’d thought it would be a funny little anecdote to get Steve to back off, but he hadn’t expected Bucky to get this angry. As he watched him get tenser, it suddenly occurred to him that he’d never actually seen Bucky truly angry before. It was somehow more terrifying than the blank slate of the Winter Soldier, if only because Bucky sort of looked like he’d enjoy tearing into someone at the moment.

As Bucky stomped back towards the roof entrance in huff, Tony worried that someone was gonna be Steve.

“Bucky, wait!” Tony called after him, chasing him back to the elevator. “You can’t kill Steve!”

“Don’t need to,” Bucky snapped, allowing Tony to get into the elevator with him before pushing the button to close the doors. “He’s gonna get himself killed first.” He narrowed his eyes. “Jarvis, where’s Steve?”

“He is still in the penthouse,” Jarvis reported dutifully.

“Maybe you should calm down first,” Tony suggested.

“I’m fine,” Bucky said through gritted teeth. “Should have known that punk couldn’t be trusted to look after himself.”

“Isn’t this sort of just the reverse of the conversation we were just having?” Tony suggested lightly.

“But I actually do take care of myself!” Bucky insisted. “He’s the damn hypocrite!”

The elevator doors opened before Tony could respond to that, and Steve was right there, still sitting on the couch, which was unfortunate for him.

Bucky narrowed his eyes and stalked forward, pointing at him angrily. “You jumped out of a damn plane without a parachute!?” he yelled.

Steve’s eyes went wide, and he got to his feet. “Uh,” he started.

“You get mad at me for testing a parachute, like a responsible adult,” Bucky said incredulously, “while you’ve been off jumping out of planes without one?”

“It was only the one time!” Steve said defensively. “And who told you that?”
“It wasn’t me,” Tony said instantly. “In case you think it was me. Cause it wasn’t.”

Steve glanced at him suspiciously, but Bucky stepped in front of him, crossing his arms. “Nevermind who told me, you’ve lost all credibility, pal,” Bucky told him.

Steve narrowed his eyes, stepping forward. He’d set his jaw like he was preparing for a fight, and had no intention of backing down. “That was completely different,” he insisted. “It doesn’t count.”

“Why the hell wouldn’t it count?” Bucky demanded.

“Because you weren’t there!” Steve shouted, and then looked shocked at himself. His eyes widened and he stumbled back. "I woke up and I was alone. And you weren't there. So you don't get to judge me."

“Stevie,” Bucky said brokenly, his anger draining abruptly away as he reached out for him.

“You weren’t there,” Steve said again, a sob catching in his throat.


Steve collapsed against Bucky, hiding his face in his shoulder. Bucky's gaze caught his, and Tony suddenly felt like an interloper. He knew this wasn't something he could help with, so Tony motioned back down the hall to indicate he was going to slip away. Bucky nodded slightly, just wrapping his fists around Steve’s t-shirt to hold on tighter.

Tony carefully backed out of the room, turning to head towards his bedroom to give them some privacy.

He had a feeling they’d be able to work the rest out on their own.
So my never ending story sort of has an end in sight! I’m tentatively planning to stop at thirty chapters (my outline finally has an end!). But I’m not confident enough to set an end chapter count, as I was also planning to stop at ten chapters, and then at twenty, so… ;-)  

P.S. I want nothing to do with Infinity Wars. That is all.

Tony was going into hour six in his lab without a break when Rhodey arrived. Tony suspected Jarvis had told on him. He really needed to do something about those privacy protocols.

He’d snuck down to the lab in the morning, because Steve and Bucky had both fallen asleep in the living room. By this point, he suspected they were either back to talking things out, or Bucky had decided to subject an unsuspecting Steve to a Pixar movie marathon.

Either way, he’d wanted to give them some privacy. So he’d come down to the lab, and hadn’t heard from either one of them since. Which was just as well, as what he was working on was sort of top secret. At least, from Bucky.

But he probably should have stopped at some point to eat, if only to keep Jarvis from tattling on him.

Rhodey eyed him warily as he approached. “Do I need to be worried about what’s happening right now?”

Tony glanced over at him, one of his digital styluses was held between his teeth and he’d rolled up the sleeves of his *The Doors* shirt to his elbows. He could admit, if only to himself, that he was probably looking slightly manic. But he was running out of time.

He reached up to slip the stylus behind his ear instead. “Uh, worried about what?” he asked. It was a little hard to act innocent when he had three Iron Legion drones standing at attention behind him, and one half assembled on the table to his right.

So maybe he’d been building them as a distraction—it helped him think. It was perfectly normal behavior.

“About that fact that you seem to be building your own personal army, maybe?” Rhodey said dryly, though he didn’t actually look worried. More resigned, really. Rhodey knew him well.

“I’ve just been building them while I work through a problem,” Tony explained.

“You’re building them to help you think,” Rhodey said incredulously. “What, like a normal person might work on a Rubik’s cube?”

Tony looked up thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I mean, I guess? I don’t really know what normal people do. You’re as close as I’ve ever really gotten, and let’s face it, you lost your normal card a couple decades ago.”
Rhodey stopped in front of him, crossing his arms. “Seriously, Tony, this is me worrying.”

“It’s nothing nefarious, I assure you,” Tony said. “I just needed something to keep me occupied.”

“Yeah?” Rhodey asked. He stared at him skeptically for a moment, then nodded. He glanced around the lab. “Where’s Barnes, then? I didn’t know the two of you could detach.”

Tony snorted, glancing over at him with exaggerated disapproval. “We have our own interests,” he insisted.

“Really,” Rhodey said skeptically. “From what I’ve seen so far, you two nerds have a lot in common.”

“Oh, yeah, some our interests overlap,” Tony admitted. “But he doesn’t like Black Sabbath, Rhodey. He just…doesn’t like it at all.” He looked at Rhodey with mock horror, clutching dramatically at his chest. “We might as well be from different planets.”

“He’s almost a hundred years old, of course he doesn’t like heavy metal,” Rhodey told him.

“Okay, yeah, some our interests overlap,” Tony admitted. “But he doesn’t like Black Sabbath, Rhodey. He just…doesn’t like it at all.” He looked at Rhodey with mock horror, clutching dramatically at his chest. “We might as well be from different planets.”

“You used to date twenty year old supermodels,” Rhodey said, raising an eyebrow.

Tony blinked at him. “I don’t think we can call what I was doing with them dating,” he admitted. “Also, it’s been a long time since I’ve done that. You know that.”

Rhodey looked apologetic. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “You’ve matured a lot—but isn’t that sort of the point? This isn’t like what you’ve had with anyone else, Tony. Even you and Pepper…you were more like best friends. I don’t think I ever saw you look at each other like you couldn’t keep your hands off one another.”

Tony paused, wondering if he and Bucky really did that. The evidence definitely seemed to support the theory—if he and Bucky were in the same room, chances were that they weren’t more than an inch apart.

“Think of it this way,” Rhodey said, “maybe he is younger, sort of, but I think the fact that he was born in nineteen-seventeen sort of evens it all out, don’t you? You try to hold this relationship to any normal kind of standard, you’re gonna fail before you start.”

“I knew I kept you around for something,” Tony decided, flashing him a grin. “Thanks for the pep talk. Now, I need your help with my plans.”

“Is this about Hydra?” Rhodey asked in concern, as he stepped closer to join him at the table.

“What?” Tony asked, looking up in surprise. “No, I’m planning a date.”

Rhodey blinked back at him in disbelief. “This is a strategy plan,” he said slowly, “…for a date?”

Tony reached out and spread his plans across the interactive digital table, pulling up layouts of possible restaurants and the suggested food choices, as well as music options—Black Sabbath was crossed out, reluctantly—and appropriate times for the date to start and end.

“Why are you approaching this like a mission?” Rhodey asked in disbelief.

Tony sighed, and looked back at him. “Because I always screw this part up. I screwed it up with
Pepper, *so many times*, because I didn’t take this stuff seriously enough. So this is me, being serious.

“You always got to be at one extreme or the other?” Rhodey asked him, raising an eyebrow.

Tony thought about it. “Yes, basically.”

Rhodey snorted, but obligingly looked down at the plans. He frowned as he saw a note regarding bringing in live entertainment. “You’re trying to book the Trans-Siberian Orchestra?” Rhodey asked incredulously.

“To on the nose?” Tony frowned. “It’s just, I like hard rock, he likes instrumental, seemed the best of both worlds. I suppose Apocalyptica would work just as well.”

“Tony,” Rhodey said, shaking his head.

“What?” Tony asked, looking up.

“You’re doing that other thing you always do,” Rhodey said gently. “You’re overthinking it.”

“Thinking is sort of my thing,” Tony said. “I don’t know about ‘over-thinking,’ can you even over-think something, really? I mean, isn’t that the entire point—“

Rhodey reached out and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him to face him and holding him still.

“Barnes likes you,” he promised.

“I know that,” Tony said, not sure what that had to do with anything. “But if we don’t have live entertainment, then I’m going to have to think of another grand romantic gesture. Do you think he’d like fireworks? I’ve read some veterans get anxious around them, but I could certainly design them so they’re noiseless, that wouldn’t be—“


“Yeah, I heard you, but—“ Tony started.

“You hear me, but you’re not listening,” Rhodey insisted. “You don’t need any of this. Why don’t you just take him out somewhere, have a nice dinner. Talk.”

Tony thought about his trip to the diner with Bucky, and how nice it had been. How different it had been from pretty much any other outing he’d ever had. They’d had Luke there so it wasn’t exactly the romantic evening he’d planned, but it had been nice. No distractions. No teammates barreling in.

“Just…dinner,” Tony said thoughtfully. “We can’t be seen, though. I’ve had some ideas around that, but they mostly involve paying people off and getting NDAs signed, and—“

“Look, how about this?” Rhodey asked. “Come up with your ideal plan, then scale it down by about 90%. That might leave you with something approaching sane.”

“Hmm,” Tony said, frowning down at his plans. “I can maybe go as high as 70%.”

Rhodey shook his head in resignation. “Just don’t buy him a nine foot stuffed animal and you should be fine,” he sighed.
Tony was ready. He was ready, and dressed—he looked amazing, of course, one might even say *dashing*. He’d grabbed black pinstripe slacks with a matching waistcoat, and a royal blue button down underneath. Everything was perfect, except for one thing.

He couldn’t find his date.

“Jarvis?” Tony called. “Where’s Bucky?”

“He is in his room, with Ms. Romanoff,” Jarvis reported.

“I really worry when they get together,” Tony frowned. He trusted Bucky, of course. And now that the Hydra programming was gone, he had no hesitation in that trust at all, but Natasha…Natasha, he didn’t trust. He was trying, because he knew she was trying, but he also knew she’d kill any one of them if it was what she felt she had to do.

And he wasn't entirely confident in his ability to stop her.

So he was more than a little surprised when she and Bucky came out of his room giggling like a couple of school children, with her arm wound through his. They made quite a stunning picture, though, the two of them. A couple of months ago, he would have probably felt insecure.

A couple of *years* ago, he probably would have made overtures at a threesome.

It was just as well that he’d changed, that he wasn’t that man anymore, or Natasha really would have killed him.

Bucky pulled to a stop when he saw him, and grinned back. He was wearing black jeans and the Apocalyptic shirt Tony had got him—he knew he should have tried to book them, damn it, Rhodey—with a dark navy blue blazer over a blue hooded sweatshirt, along with what he was pretty sure were the same combat boots he wore on missions.

“You wouldn’t tell me where we were going,” Bucky explained, glancing down at himself worriedly when Tony didn’t say anything. “Nat said when in doubt go with casual.”

Natasha noticed Tony’s gaze focusing in on Bucky’s feet and snorted. “The boots were not my idea,” she assured him.

The boots were a *fantastic* idea, though. They lent a dangerous edge to what might otherwise look like something a run of the mill grad student—or, you know, *Tony*—might wear.

Bucky reached up to nervously scratch behind his ear. “Not fancy enough?” he asked worriedly, as he ran his eyes over Tony. “Because you look amazing...I should definitely change.”

Natasha said something to him in quick Russian that Tony couldn’t follow, and had Bucky frowning. Then she kissed Bucky quickly on the cheek, tossed a wink at Tony, and disappeared into the elevator. Tony looked back at Bucky and raised an eyebrow.

“What was that about?” he asked.

“She told me not to change,” Bucky shrugged. “Apparently this was specifically chosen to make me not look like a World War II veteran, or a Russian assassin.”

“She was playing dress up with you again,” Tony said, and had to admit she’d done well. Bucky had looked like a completely different person from the Winter Soldier for awhile now, but at the moment, with his hair gelled up into spikes and the modern clothes, he didn’t even look like
vintage Bucky Barnes.

“Well, I mean, if I left it to Jarvis, I’d be wearing a suit with little Iron Man heads all over it,” Bucky told him. “I’m a little behind on the times, but I knew enough to know I should definitely not be wearing that.”

“It has become a best seller since the moment it hit the market,” Jarvis interceded, sounding a little offended. Tony was just impressed that Jarvis had actually gotten it made. “I have been assured it’s the absolute height of fashion.”

“Who assured you of that?” Bucky asked incredulously.

Tony snorted, biting his lip to keep from laughing outright and upsetting Jarvis’ even more.

There was a brief pause, and the Jarvis answered. “The publication known as *Seventeen,*” he admitted. Then added, “It was Sir’s idea.”

Bucky looked at Tony in disbelief, and Tony just shrugged, because yes, it was his idea. And no, he didn’t regret it. “Iron Man merchandise sort of never fails,” he told him. “What can I say? People love me.”

“Maybe we’ll just leave the fashion to Nat,” Bucky decided.

“Very well,” Jarvis said, sniffing indignantly. “I’ll have the suit returned immediately.”

Tony bit back another laugh, before tugging Bucky into the elevator. He sent it straight down to the underground garage, because they had promised Pepper to be careful. The press had mostly stopped pressing up against the glass doors of the Tower hoping to catch a glimpse of them, but only mostly.

“I think Jarvis is mad at me,” Bucky whispered worriedly, as Tony pulled him to his car by the hand.

“Nah, though I don’t think anyone’s managed to irritate him before,” Tony said, and shrugged. “Not even me. Good job.”

“Good job?” Bucky asked incredulously, before glancing back at the Tower in concern. “Maybe I should apologize.”

“He likes new emotions,” Tony promised, before stopping and turning to face him. “Now, can we not spend the night discussing Jarvis?”

Whatever reply Bucky might have made was lost the moment he saw what was behind Tony. His eyes widened and he moved around him. “What is *that*?” he asked breathlessly.

“It’s an Audi R8,” Tony told him smugly, as Bucky stepped reverently up to it, running a hand delicately along the side. “Does this mean we’re going to be talking about cars all night instead?”

“Well, that depends. Are you going to let me drive?” Bucky asked, glancing back with a smirk.

Tony tossed him the keys without hesitating. “Sure,” he shrugged.

Bucky laughed, rushing to drop into the driver’s seat before Tony could change his mind. Tony got in the other side, and for once decided to pull on his seat belt. “You do know how to drive, right?”

In answer, Bucky smoothly pulled out of the parking spot, before turning sharply to take them
towards the ramp that would lead them back to the street. “I’ve got some experience,” he said wryly, which probably meant his skill level fell somewhere between NASCAR and a bank heist getaway driver. “But I don’t know where we’re going.”

Tony reached over and turned on the GPS, programming in their destination. It flashed with a right arrow, and Bucky followed it seamlessly. “This isn’t very low profile, is it?” Bucky asked, glancing over at Tony.

“Not exactly,” Tony admitted. “But I haven’t used this one for a couple of years. People won’t expect it. We’ll be fine.”

“Alright,” Bucky said, tossing him a wicked grin.

"Careful of the corners—“ Tony started, as Bucky pulled around another car and smoothly took the turn without slowing down. Tony gripped onto the handle on the door. "Okay, and now I'm Pepper, but with less screaming."

Bucky just laughed, and it was a sort of crazy laugh that had Tony almost regretting giving him the keys—but only almost, because making Bucky laugh was sort of his new favorite pastime.

"Corners like it's on rails," Bucky told him, as he slipped in to pass another car. New York traffic didn’t really lend itself to fast driving, but somehow Bucky was keeping them going at a steady clip.

"Did you just quote Pretty Woman at me?" Tony asked incredulously. "Jarvis is definitely a terrible influence on you. He should have at least taken you through the Monty Python collection before introducing 90s romance—“

“Tried it,” Bucky told him with a shrug. “Not a fan. Couldn’t even make it through Holy Grail.”

“Not...not a fan?” Tony asked incredulously, pressing a hand to his heart. “Just when I start to think you're perfect, you go and remind me of your bouts of horrendous taste.”

Bucky snorted, before slowing down as they approached the intersection. He stopped them so seamlessly Tony couldn’t even feel it. “Well, I think we have the same taste in cars,” he reassured him, “I definitely want one of these.”

“You can have this one,” Tony told him easily.

Bucky shook his head. “You’re paying me, right?” He reminded him. “My salary is ridiculous. I’m probably going to be a millionaire in a couple years and I haven’t even done anything yet. You’re not giving me a car, too.”

“Okay, one, you caught Nick Fury breaking into my kitchen and got the drop on him, no one’s done that before. As a security advisor, you’ve been invaluable and worth every penny,” Tony told him. “You also saved my life when Hydra broke into the Tower and you saved it again in Siberia, which, you know, my life is priceless.” He paused. “So if you’re not going to be a millionaire for a couple of years, then I’m obviously not paying you enough.”

“Please don’t give me another raise,” Bucky pleaded.

“You have got to be the only person that has ever said that,” Tony told him incredulously.

Bucky shrugged, turning his eyes back to the road. “I just don’t want you giving things to me just because we’re together.”
“Is that what you think this is?” Tony asked, mouth dropping open. “Cause I give things to everyone. I gave each of the Avengers a floor. I mean, really, if you think about it, you didn’t even get a floor. You only got a room. So I don’t think you can accuse me of playing favorites.”

Bucky grinned back at him. “It’s a really nice room, though,” he told him.

“Well, you are my favorite,” Tony admitted.

Bucky shook his head, before glancing back at him. “I just don’t want to take advantage of you,” he admitted. “I don’t deserve any of this.”

Tony knew where this was coming from. They’d had this conversation more than a few times. When Tony was feeling particularly self-loathing, he tended to notch up the hedonism. Bucky was sort of the opposite—he didn’t think he deserved anything good, and every once and awhile, it would hit him and he’d think he should be suffering instead.

But if Tony needed to keep reminding him, that was fine. He would keep at it until Bucky believed him. “You do, actually,” he assured him. “I mean, probably more than me. What did I do to deserve any of this? Inherit a blood-soaked empire? It’s what we do with what we have that matters. I’m trying to be better, and you’re trying to be better, and that’s the best we can do.”

“Okay,” Bucky said, sounding a bit like he was trying to psych himself into it. Tony frowned, but before he could say anything else the GPS beeped and announced they had reached their destination.

Bucky pulled along the curb before leaning down to get a good look up at the building. It was a two story older building, with a beat up sign that said Mario’s. “Is this it?” Bucky asked. “It doesn’t look open.”

Tony flashed him a grin and got out of the car. “It doesn’t?”

Bucky followed him out, casting a look around. There wasn’t anyone there, though. This particular area was hit pretty hard by the invasion, and hadn’t been entirely rebuilt yet. Tony used to love Mario’s, but the owners had moved out of state rather than try to rebuild. Tony had given them a loan to open a new restaurant in New Jersey, even though it pained him, because New Jersey.

He pulled out a key and opened the door, leading Bucky inside. Bucky watched him with disbelief. “Did you buy out the whole restaurant?”

“Well, I bought the restaurant,” Tony admitted.

“Tony!” Bucky cried in disbelief, as he followed him inside.

“What?” Tony asked. “I didn’t buy it for you. Someone’s full of himself. It was a good investment. The fact that we needed a secluded place we could have a date is purely coincidental.” He glanced back at him, a smile playing at his lips. “Seriously, I’ve owned the property for a couple years. Just haven’t been able to do anything with it yet.”

Bucky stepped inside, looking around. Tony had done some quick remodeling to get rid of dust and anything broken. The place was lit up by candles even though technically the electricity still worked. The booths were all untouched from any damage, and it looked for the most part like any romantic Italian restaurant.

Except that they were the only ones there.
Bucky leaned forward, glancing in at the empty kitchen, and then raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve got everything covered,” Tony assured him. “What do you take me for?”

On cue, three of the Iron Legion came marching out of the back room. One had a tray with champagne and two wine glasses, and another had a white napkin draped over his arm—presumably just for appearances sake. The third was wearing a bow-tie and holding a notepad and pin.

“Whenever I actually get this place reopened I plan to hire real people,” Tony told him. “Until then, I thought these guys could help us out.”

“They’re amazing,” Bucky said, heading over to them. Which, Tony probably should have taken Bucky’s love of robots into account, because it might be impossible now to get him to focus on anything else.

Bucky had loved Dum-E and U, which hadn’t surprised Tony. When he finally got around to introducing them, Bucky had spent the entire night alternating between asking Tony questions about their capabilities and trying to communicate with them directly. It had been a little adorable. Dum-E had shown Bucky how to make a smoothie, and Bucky had gone along with it even though he’d figured out the blender quite awhile back.


“They’re not really interactive yet,” Tony told him. “I mean, they have a limited AI but mostly they just follow commands.”

Bucky frowned and Tony cursed himself for not thinking through the parallels. “They’re mostly run by Jarvis, though,” he added quickly. “Jarvis commands them. Keeps track of them all. Really, they’re sort of just an extension of him.”

“So what you’re telling me is, you gave Jarvis an army,” Bucky said wryly, before grinning suddenly. “You definitely should have let me go back and apologize.”

“There’s no need, Bucky,” Jarvis said, from one of the Legion bots. “You have nothing to apologize for. I may have gotten a little… overzealous, about my first venture into the world of fashion.”

“Well, I’ve heard it’s very cutthroat,” Bucky said sympathetically.

Tony rushed over, before gently leading Bucky to one of the booths. He glanced back at the bot with narrowed eyes. “Jarvis is supposed to be taking the night off,” he said.

The bots all snapped to attention, starring straight ahead. The one with the champagne stepped forward to follow them to the table. Bucky dropped down in the booth, accepting the wine flute a little warily.

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked in concern.

“Nothing,” Bucky said quickly. “It’s just… you said you wanted to change the Iron Legion into a humanitarian venture, and they’re a little intimidating, is all. They sort of look like they should work for the Empire.”

Tony snorted, glancing up at him with a raised eyebrow. “You just want me to make one that looks
like Baymax, don’t you?”

Bucky looked shifty, and glanced away to sip at his champagne. “Maybe,” he admitted, a smile playing at his lips. “I just think…maybe they should be different? Not huge differences, but just something to set each of them apart.”

Tony thought about it, and realized it was a good idea. It wasn’t like he’d ever made a single of one of his suits like the last, he was always changing them. A little personality for each of the Legion drones might make them less intimidating as a whole, because the last thing he wanted was to have them warped into being nothing but weapons. They were meant for search and rescue, for protection, and if necessary for crowd control, but at the moment they did sort of look like a drone army.

Damn his subconscious and his love of all things Star Wars.

“The bow-tie on our waiter was a nice touch, though” Bucky told him, drawing his attention back, as he watched the drone arrange the place settings and top off their glasses. “Maybe they’re not so intimidating, after all.”

“I figured we couldn’t get into trouble if no one actually sees us out,” Tony said. “But one day, I promise I’m going to take you out on a real date.”

“I’d like that,” Bucky said, grinning shyly. “Sort of glad for the trial run, though. I’ve never really been high class. Don’t think I’ve ever been in a place like this.” He glanced back around, the candlelight catching on his eyes. “Well, maybe once, with Carter.”

“Carter?” Tony echoed in disbelief. “As in Peggy Carter?”

“Yeah?” Bucky asked, looking confused by Tony’s surprise. “I mean, we weren’t on a date or anything. We were waiting to meet a contact. We couldn’t send her without back up, and let’s just say I was the most inconspicuous of the Howling Commandos. She had to make do with me.”

“Not Falsworth?” Tony asked, raising an eyebrow.

Bucky snorted. “Falsworth was almost worse at lying than Steve,” he said. He shot him a roguish grin. “That was never a problem for me.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Tony told him.

Bucky frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Tony said quickly, resisting the urge to smack himself. He’d been living with Bucky for months, why was dinner suddenly awkward?

“No, you can’t just—” Bucky started in frustration, leaning forward on the table with a concerned frown. “What did you mean by that?”

Tony sighed. “Alright, look, Natasha, she plays parts, right? We all know that,” he said. “It’s just, you do the same thing. The only difference is that I think you do it without meaning to.”

Bucky let out a breath and glanced away, settling back into the booth. “I know what I’m doing,” he finally said after a moment.

“You don’t owe me an explanation for anything,” Tony said quickly. He was not in a place to critique anyone’s coping mechanisms, and he knew it.
“I want to tell you, I want to explain,” Bucky stated slowly. “Every time they woke me up, they’d assign me a handler. They’d give me a mission, I’d complete it, I’d go back into cryo. Sometimes, when they woke me back up, it was the same handler—but most of the time, it was someone new.” Bucky wouldn’t meet his eyes, instead lowering them to stare at his left hand. “I learned pretty quickly to adapt, because they all wanted something different from me. Some wanted me to give suggestions, to take the lead on missions. Some didn’t want me to speak at all. Some called me ‘it,’ some wanted me to call them ‘master,’ and some just wanted to pretend I was like any other soldier. The rules were always changing on me, and I could barely remember them, anyway. But not giving them what they wanted never worked out very well for anyone.”

Tony swallowed hard, once again unable to quite get his mind to wrap around the extent of what Bucky had suffered. Maybe it was time he did some checking, just to make sure all those former handlers were really dead.

“You don’t have to do that anymore, you know that, though, right?” Tony asked, reaching out to put his hand over Bucky’s left. “You can say the wrong thing, or get mad at us, any of us, and it’s fine. We’re not gonna punish you. No one’s going to hurt you for it.”

“You don’t have to do that anymore, you know that, though, right?” Tony asked, reaching out to put his hand over Bucky’s left. “You can say the wrong thing, or get mad at us, any of us, and it’s fine. We’re not gonna punish you. No one’s going to hurt you for it.”

“Yeah, of course. I know that,” Bucky agreed. “But knowing that doesn’t really help. At least, not yet. It’s just automatic.” He looked down at the table, and then lifted his hand over gently entwine his fingers with Tony’s. “It doesn’t happen so much, with you. I always feel like me, when I’m with you.”

“And Sam,” Tony added.

Bucky looked at him incredulously. “Sam?” he cried. “What’s he got to do with anything? We don’t even really get along.”

Tony snorted. “That’s my point,” he said. “You don’t do your little harmless act with him.”

Bucky leaned back with a little smirk. “That’s because Sam’s harmless,” he admitted. “What he really needed was someone to mess with him, so that’s what I do.” He leaned forward, close enough that they could almost kiss. “Now, can we not talk about Sam?”

The moment was broken when the bow-tie drone reappeared, holding a serving tray with two pasta dishes. Tony pushed back in the booth, reluctantly letting Bucky’s hand go. He’d sort of forgotten about the dinner portion of their dinner.

“Did they make this?” Bucky asked, staring at the pasta with disbelief.

“I ordered it from the Italian restaurant on 5th street,” Tony admitted. “That’s where I would have taken you, if Pepper wouldn’t kill us for it.”

Bucky frowned at that, and glanced away. “What do you think is going to happen when people do find out about me?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Tony admitted. “But nothing changes with us, okay? I’m used to dealing with the press. They can say what they want. Doesn’t touch me. I’m not gonna let it touch you, either.”

Bucky started to reply when there was a loud crack, and the pepper mill the drone had been offering them split apart and sent a cloud of pepper and peppercorns flying everywhere.

“Oh okay,” Tony said, in the middle of a sneezing fit, “I may need to tweak their strength control.”

Bucky started laughing, which turned into a round of coughing as he inhaled pepper. Their pasta
was pretty much entirely covered in pepper at this point. The Iron Legion bot responsible just sort of started backing away, and then lowered his head like he was embarrassed—well, maybe Tony would be merciful and not turn him to scrap.

But their dinner was ruined.

He dropped his head down onto the table. “This night was supposed to be perfect,” he muttered.

“Hey,” Bucky said, reaching over to gently tilted his head up. “You know you don’t have to impress me, right?”

“I want to impress you,” Tony told him. “I’m usually very impressive.”

“You already do it every day, Tony,” Bucky said solemnly. “Just the other day, you said three whole words to me before you even had your first coffee, I was so impressed. Honestly, I was so proud of you—“

“I changed my mind. I hate you,” Tony told him flatly.

“You know you love me,” Bucky insisted, an echo of what Tony had said so often to him.

Tony felt his breath hitch, and met his eyes. “Yes.”

Bucky froze, his eyes widening for a minute. “Tony—“

“I do,” Tony said, and he felt just like he had when he stood there and proclaimed *I am Iron Man.*

“I love you.”

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So they never made it to the dinner portion of their dinner. Tony wasn’t actually sure how they even made it back to the Tower, except that Bucky was brilliant under pressure, and definitely drove like he belonged in NASCAR.

This time, when they fell out of the elevator, wrapped around each other, Tony had the foresight to do what he should have done the last few times.

“Jarvis, lock down the penthouse,” Tony told him, between kisses. “No one gets in.”

“I assume I should keep typical emergency protocols in place?” Jarvis asked.

“Nope, don’t care if the world is ending,” Tony decided. “No one gets through.”

“Is that a good idea?” Bucky asked with a frown.

“Don’t worry,” Tony assured him. “World only ends about every two years or so. It’ll be fine.”

“Alright,” Bucky said agreeably, before leaning back in to kiss him again.

Tony tugged him backwards as he kissed him back, leading him towards the couch. Bucky fell backwards onto it and Tony followed him, straddling him. Bucky looked back at him with wide blue eyes, his expression almost awed. “I love you too, you know,” he said.

“No accounting for taste, I suppose,” Tony told him, as he leaned forward to kiss him gently. The frantic mad dash from the elevator to the couch had slowed down and Tony thought he might like it even better like this. This quiet sort of intimacy that he’d never really had with anyone.
Then Bucky stopped suddenly, pulling away with a frown and turning towards the window. “Did you hear that?” he asked. “Was there supposed to be a storm?”

“What?” Tony paused, sitting back enough to stare at him in disbelief. “Okay, if you’re seriously thinking about the weather right now, I’m obviously doing something wrong.”

“Sorry,” Bucky laughed, not looking very sorry, as he pulled Tony back. He kissed him again. “Don’t worry though, I won’t know if you’re doing it wrong. Been seventy years for me, give or take, so…”

“Now I know why Steve always calls you a jerk,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes.

Bucky laughed. “Just trying to reassure you,” he said.

“Yeah? Well, look, I’ll have you know I’m amazing,” he promised.

“Prove it,” Bucky said, grinning smugly.

Tony smirked, slipping his hands back into Bucky’s hair. He’s just about to kiss him again when there’s a loud boom of thunder. Tony froze. “Oh no,” he said, closing his eyes. “Not now.”

“What’s wrong?” Bucky frowned, following him up as Tony pulled back.

There was a flash of lightning and Bucky jerked up, eyes widening as he looked through the floor to ceiling window and saw a man slam down out of the sky, landing right on the balcony in a graceful kneel.

“Holy shit,” Bucky cried. “Is that—“

“Starkson!” the man shouted as he got to his feet, before pausing as he noticed Bucky. It didn’t faze him for very long, and he reached out to knock on the glass. “Apologies for interrupting you in the midst of your conquest, but I bring news from Asgard!”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Tony muttered.

“I think the universe is trying to tell us something,” Bucky sighed, as Tony dropped his head down onto his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Tony decided. “It’s telling me I need new friends.”

“Man of Iron?” Thor tried, tapping lightly on the glass with his hammer. “Will you not let me in?”
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

So my resolution to end this at thirty chapters lasted less than a week. I don’t even know what happened, you guys. My outline has a mind of its own. On the bright side, more time for team-building!

(And yes, I promise Bucky and Tony will get to have sex at some point!! - but please note it will likely not be explicit, as that is not my strong suit. Like 90% of the cockblocking is my own muses saving me from having to write a sex scene).

Note on the Timeline: Basically, any canon events are fair game in this AU. The events of Dark World have not happened yet (and will not happen) as they do in canon. Loki isn’t planned to be in this story (not that Loki cares about my plans), but he never faked his death and is still on Asgard, as is Odin. I’m also planning to ignore the whole Thanos arc in this verse. Because this fic is my happy place, and it is definitely not heading the same direction as the MCU.

For a moment, Tony considered having Jarvis tint the glass and leaving Thor on the balcony—which, hey, note to self, make sure the windows tint automatically on lock down, because apparently Jarvis couldn’t figure that one out on his own.

But he relented in the end, because he wasn’t going to be the asshole that left Thor with his face pressed up against the glass like the universe’s largest Tiny Tim.

Thor grinned at him when he reluctantly slid open the door. “Starkson!” he cried, moving to hug him.

Tony swiftly stepped out of the hug-zone, holding up a hand to ward him off. He was not in any kind of condition to be pressed up against anyone that wasn’t Bucky at the moment. “We shake hands on Earth, remember?” Tony asked, holding out a hand.

“Ah, yes, the handshake!” Thor agreed amiably, grabbing his hand and shaking it vigorously enough that Tony started to worry he was going to lose feeling in his fingers. “I’ve gotten very good at it, the Lady Darcy is a wonderful tutor of Midgard practices.”

“Has she told you about using the front door when visiting someone?” Tony asked wryly.

“Yes, indeed,” Thor agreed, motioning behind himself proudly. “I have used the door this time!”

Tony opened his mouth to protest this interpretation, but Thor was already distracted, his gaze moving to Bucky. Thor gave him a wide grin. “It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Starkson’s consort,” he said, and Tony resisted the urge to face-palm. Bucky didn’t seem to notice Thor’s chosen form of address, though, and was actually looking a little starstruck.

“Yes,” Bucky said, then seemed to catch himself. “I mean, the pleasure’s mine! Because you’re
Thor. Oh my god.” He half reached out in aborted motion towards Thor—what the hell was he planning to touch—his eyes going wider. “You really are huge.”

Tony stared at Bucky in disbelief, wondering if he should be offended that Bucky’s usual automatic suave charm seemed to malfunctioning when faced with Thor.

Thor just continued to smile, used to people getting a little tongue tied around him. “Yes, the people of Midgard are quite tiny,” Thor agreed. “I suppose I must seem very large in comparison. You are fairly tall, however. Certainly taller than this one.”

Thor tilted his head towards Tony, who made an outraged sound somewhere between a scoff and a yelp.

“I’m just glad I’m not wearing my *Run Like Thor is at the Finish Line* shirt,” Bucky said, continuing to stare at Thor with wide eyes. “That would have been so embarrassing.”

Thor quirked an eyebrow, not entirely understanding the reference. Tony grabbed Bucky’s arm and tugged him back. “Are you seriously flustered right now?” he demanded in a whisper. “I’ve seen you jump out of quinjets, fight super soldiers, walk right off the edge of the tower…and nothing. Now you’re flustered?” He narrowed his eyes. “Should I be getting jealous?”

“Of course not! But, Tony, he’s a God,” Bucky whispered back, like maybe Tony had failed to notice the guy had fallen out of the sky. “Helen is the one that’s gonna be so jealous.” He paused for a moment, a gleam entering his eyes. “I can’t wait to tell her.”

“Okay, look, he just says he’s a God, really he’s an alien with delusions of grandeur,” Tony explained.

“But I am a prince,” Thor called over to them, flashing them both a crooked grin.

Tony winced, because right, alien, so Thor’s hearing was probably a bit above average. He turned back to face him. “I assume the world is ending?” he asked. “Because I can’t imagine you just dropped down out of nowhere onto my balcony for nothing—“

“You have said to me, *mi casa es su casa*, which I have been informed means that your home is my home,” Thor told him, though his eyes were sparkling a little too much for him not to know exactly how unwanted his interruption had been. “Are you saying now I’m unwelcome?”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Tony snapped. “Come on. Hit me with it. What terrible fate awaits us next?”

“Should we not call the others first?” Thor asked.

There was a loud screech from the general direction of the elevator, and Tony hung his head, knowing what was coming. Sure enough, when he finally sighed and glanced up, Steve was praying open the elevator with his bare hands, Natasha and Sam holding onto the maintenance ladder behind him. They came tumbling out into the penthouse looking less like the super heroes they were, and more like a group of children that had just been caught eavesdropping.

Bucky gaped at them. “What the hell, Steve?” he asked.

Steve at least had the good grace to look sheepish as he realized they were all fine and no one was attacking. “We thought you were in trouble,” he said, before awkwardly clearing his throat. “We heard the thunder, but the skies were clear, and Jarvis refused to let us contact you or open the elevator.”
“As I stated, multiple times, Captain Rogers, privacy protocols had been enacted,” Jarvis said primly, before pausing briefly. “You’re lucky your status as a resident of the Tower overrode my protocols to use force in the event of a breach.”

Tony glanced back at Bucky. “You. Me. An island somewhere very, very far away,” he said. “We can be gone in under three minutes, just say the word.”

Bucky actually seemed to think about it, before glancing back at Steve with a sigh. “We should probably make sure the world isn’t ending though, right?” he asked.

“Spoilsport,” Tony muttered. He looked back at Thor. “Okay. Calvary’s all here. Now you wanna tell us why you decided to drop in after being radio silent for the last year?” He snapped his fingers. “Wait, don’t tell me. Terrible omens. Fate of the world. We’re all fuck—”

“It is nothing like that,” Thor interrupted smoothly. “Or, well, it certainly isn’t at that point at the moment. However, my mother has been plagued with visions of late. She has told me that the fate of this world is diverging from its planned course.”

“That sounds bad,” Tony said. “I knew it. Why can’t you ever just stop by for movie night or mimosas?”

“When did we get mimosas?” Clint asked. “I want a mimosa.”

Tony turned to him in surprise, glancing back at the elevator shaft, certain he hadn’t come from there. “Where the hell did you come from?”

Clint just stared at him. “If I told you that you’d make it so I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“Bucky?” Tony called.

“He came through the air vents about eighty seconds ago,” Bucky said without missing a beat. He tilted his head as he examined Clint. “Impressive, really. Wouldn’t have thought he was small enough.”

“Well aren’t you just the teacher’s pet,” Clint said, narrowing his eyes at him.

“I don’t know what that means,” Bucky said, “but probably.”

Tony grinned at him, before returning his attention to Thor. “My point is just, why do you always have to bring bad news?”

“On the contrary,” Thor assured him, “this new path seems far preferable to the one she had previously foreseen. There is just a task that remains unfinished, and may yet bring about untold destruction. That is why I have come.”

“Ominous,” Tony muttered.

“What task, Thor?” Steve asked in concern, stepping up beside Bucky and Tony.

“Loki’s scepter,” Thor explained. He glanced at the other Avengers. “We must find it with all haste.”

“Why the sudden urgency?” Natasha asked warily, as she skirted around the edge of the room. She looked as wary as an alley cat, and the fact that she was so tense was making Tony tense. Not much rattled Natasha Romanoff—but monsters and magic? She knew when to be on her guard,
because she always knew when she was outgunned.

“IT has come to our attention that the scepter houses an infinity stone,” Thor announced, with some reluctance.

“You mean like the Tesseract?” Steve asked with a frown.

“Yes, Captain!” Thor said, his serious expression breaking into a broad grin. “It is very much like the Tesseract, except of course that its function and composition are entirely different.”

Tony snorted. His first few encounters with Thor, he sort of thought the big lug was stupid, but eventually he figured out it was the rest of them that were stupid. Thor just automatically assumed either A: that they already knew things they absolutely did not know, or B: he knew it was something they would never understand, and spoke accordingly. Sort of like how adults speaking to babies sounded like morons out of context—or even in context, really, because it’s not like babies knew what you were saying anyway, so why not introduce them to a working vocabulary?

Regardless, the fact that Thor was dumbing things down for them so much would probably piss Tony off if it didn’t just excite him that there was still so much out there he had yet to figure out.

“Whatever its purpose, the scepter is entirely too dangerous to leave on Midgard. We must find it at once, so I can have it taken somewhere secure,” Thor continued. “That is why I have returned.”

“Well, hate to break it to you, bud,” Tony said, “but we’ve sort of been looking for it since it went missing from SHIELD. Now that SHIELD’s, you know, a smoldering pile of ashes, it complicates matters a bit.”

“Yes, I had heard of its destruction, and it makes me believe that this Hydra must be responsible for the theft,” Thor said.

“Oh they definitely are,” Bucky sighed.

Thor turned back to him with a frown. “How do you know this?”

“Uh,” Bucky started, looking sheepish as he reached up to run a hand through his hair. “Cause I’m pretty sure that I’m the one that stole it for them?”

The reaction was pretty instantaneous. Thor’s eyes seemed to almost flash electric blue, as sparks began to flicker around the base of his hammer, trailing up along his wrist. He stepped towards Bucky, raising it as he went. “You are a spy? A thief for Hydra?” he demanded.

Tony quickly threw himself between them, holding out his hands, mentally calculating the distance of his nearest suit and how long it would take to mold itself around him. Too far, he realized, he had to fix that, a suit for every floor, a suit with him all the goddamn time.

But that didn’t help him now—he’d just have to count on his charm.

“Hold it right there, Point Break,” he said quickly, “you wanna touch him you’re gonna have to go through me first.”

“And me,” Steve added, his voice deepened and sort of terrifying, actually. Tony cast a wary look at him, and decided to try not to ever get on his bad side.

Thor paused, staring at them in confusion. “Explain,” he demanded.
“Right, so, background, I’ll give you the Cliffnotes,” Tony said, holding up his hands towards the wary Thor. “Bucky was brainwashed and forced to work for Hydra. Nothing he did for them was of his free will. Think Clint during the whole Loki debacle.” Clint winced, and Tony glanced at him apologetically. “Sorry.”

“I probably shoulda lead with that, huh?” Bucky asked, looking a little wide-eyed—though, Tony noted wryly, likely more interested in seeing Thor’s hammer in action than worried about the fact that it could kill him.

Pepper was right. This had to be karma for all the lectures on self-perseveration that Tony had ignored over the years.

“Your consort was forced into the service of Hydra?” Thor asked, still looking wary, though he lowered the hammer.

"Consort?” Clint mouthed in disbelief, but everyone ignored him.

“For seventy years,” Tony told him, and discreetly reached out to grab Bucky’s hand. “Nothing that happened during that time was his fault.”

Bucky glanced at him with a slight smile, for once not trying to dispute or qualify the defense of his actions. Instead, he just gently squeezed Tony’s hand back.

“Starkson’s consort.” Thor began formally, returning his gaze to Bucky, his eyes softening. “In that case, I must apologize for my overreaction.”

“No problem. How about to make it up to me, you stop calling me ‘Starkson’s consort’?” Bucky asked dryly, glancing up with half a grin. “No need to be so formal, you can just call me Bucky.”

Clint scoffed. “Yeah, what the hell, Thor? They’re not eve…” Clint’s eyes widened suddenly, and he glanced back at them, and noticed their hands, “…wait, are you? Are you guys are doing it?”

“I mean, not technically,” Bucky told him, “but that’s only because we keep getting interrupted.”

Tony snorted, before trying to school his expression into something more civilized when Steve shot him the overprotective brother glare that he was getting far too used to.

Clint gaped at them. “Seriously?” he asked, before seeming to notice he was the only one surprised. “Wait, did everyone know about this but me?”

“Yes,” Sam said simply. “I don’t even hardly know these people, but they might as well have cartoon hearts shooting out of their eyes. Also, it was all over the internet. Do you live under a rock?”

“Fuck me,” Clint muttered.

“I’m already taken, Legolas,” Tony told him.

“Boys,” Natasha called, hopping up to sit on the kitchen counter. “Maybe we should focus on the part where James stole the scepter, and worry about their love lives later? What do you think?”

“I vote we table that portion of the discussion indefinitely,” Steve said gratefully.

“Aw, Stevie, you’re supposed to be my best friend,” Bucky said. “You saying I can’t talk to you?”

“You can,” Steve insisted quickly, looking suddenly pale and worried, “of course you can talk to
me. I’m sorry, Buck, I didn’t mean—“

“I’m just screwing with you,” Bucky interrupted, and tossed him a smirk. “Nat already took that bullet for you.”

“It’s like listening to a lovesick thirteen year old,” she said dryly.

Tony grinned widely at the thought, and Bucky turned to glare at her in mock-outrage.

“Hey,” Bucky protested.

“What?” Natasha asked, unconcerned. “It is.”

“So, Loki’s scepter,” Steve interrupted, all business, though his transparent attempt to change the subject did not get missed by any of them. “It’s been missing for over a year. You still haven’t explained why this is all coming up now? How did you even find out what it was?”

Thor looked suddenly cagey, which put Tony on edge. Thor was not exactly adept at deception, and the fact that he would even attempt it didn’t bode well for anyone. “We have been told that it is in use,” Thor admitted. “Its power has been felt by one on Asgard, and it is being used for ill purposes, by those that are not worthy to wield its power.”

“By one on Asgard,” Tony echoed, narrowing his eyes as his suspicions spiked. “Wouldn’t happen to be your tall, dark and crazy brother, would it?”

Thor went still, caught. “Loki has offered the information in exchange for clemency,” he admitted. “But we have verified his claims. It is the truth.”

Tony snorted. “He wouldn’t know the truth if it smacked him in his creepy, horned headpiece,” he said.

Perhaps,” Thor agreed. “But my mother is a seer, and more to the point, she is one Loki would not lie to. He will receive a reduced sentence only if his information leads to the return of his scepter to Asgard. He would gain nothing by leading us astray.”

“What kind of reduced sentence?” Steve asked warily.

“Loki was sentenced to life,” Thor said gravely. “If I can return the scepter, his sentence will be lessened to a hundred years.”

“Not really motivating me to find it,” Tony told him.

“The scepter could be the catalyst that leads to Midgard’s destruction,” Thor said solemnly. “If it is not found and removed from here, it may very well tear us, and this world, apart.”

“I knew it,” Tony said. “See? It’s always fate of the world stuff with you. Why didn’t you start with that?”

“Bucky,” Thor said, and somehow managed to make the name sound majestic and otherworldly, and less like it should belong to one of the little rascals. “What do you know of the scepter’s current whereabouts?”

“Not much,” Bucky said, frowning slightly. “I can’t give you the where, but I can give you the who. Baron Wolfgang von Strucker.”

“Can’t your all-seeing palace guard find it for you?” Tony asked.
“Heimdall is no mere guard,” Thor said, looking down at Tony with disappointment. “And the power of the infinity stones are hidden from his view.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, moving to pick up his tablet. “Well, lucky for you, I’ve got an eye in the sky, too.” But first things first, so he pulled up the data that was dumped by Natasha and Steve. “Ah, yep, they’ve got him in the database. I just haven’t made it to him yet. I’m still barely out of the ‘G’s of the who’s who of Hydra’s head megalomaniacs.” He ran his eyes over the bio quickly, and the more he read, the more nauseous he felt.

Tony glanced over at Bucky. “He ever hurt you?” he asked casually.

Bucky looked back at him warily, not fooled by his light tone. “He was never my handler.”

“Not what I asked, cupcake,” Tony pointed out.

“I don’t really remember him,” Bucky finally said, and that was a lie. So Baron von Strucker had hurt him. Good to know. Tony was gonna enjoy this.

“If he is the one that has the scepter, we must find him,” Thor said decisively.

“Is no one else going to comment on the fact that Tony just called the Winter Soldier ‘cupcake’?” Clint asked.

“He’s called me cupcake,” Natasha said.

“Yep,” Steve sighed. “Me too.”

Clint turned narrowed eyes on Tony. “Why don’t you ever say sweet things to me?”

“Look, Bucky is my only cupcake,” Tony told him. “All previous cupcakes are revoked! Are we satisfied?” Bucky started laughing, and Tony pointed at him. “I will go back to comparing you to kittens instead. Don’t test me.”

“In what world is a cupcake greater than kittens?” Bucky asked him, scrunching up his face in thought like an adorable confused little kitten. “I feel like I’ve been demoted.”

“Then you’re definitely a kitten, kitten,” Tony told him.

“Alright, you guys are all straight up crazy,” Sam said incredulously. “For real. I’m a little terrified right now that we’re this world’s first line of defense.”

“You just realizing that?” Natasha asked. “Thought you were quick, Wilson.”

“Alright, come on, guys, Sam’s right,” Steve said, taking charge. “We need to focus. We’re going to need to start raiding any Hydra base we can find. There’s got to be something buried in that data or with one of our contacts that can lead us to something we’ve missed. We’ll—“

“Found him,” Tony interrupted mildly. “He’s in Sokovia.”

Steve looked back at him in disbelief. “How could you possibly have found him that quickly?”

“I launched a satellite a few months ago,” Tony said, looking back up at the other Avengers. “You didn’t know that? Jarvis is in orbit now. First AI to travel to space.”

“And might I say the view is breathtaking,” Jarvis said glibly.
“That still doesn’t explain how you were able to find him,” Steve insisted.

“It’s a combination of state of the art satellite cameras, access to local CCTV, predictive behavioral analysis, and facial recognition,” Tony explained. “I can find pretty much anyone in the world in under ten minutes.”

“Ahem,” Jarvis interceded.

“Right,” Tony said. “Jarvis can find pretty much anyone in the world in under ten minutes.”

“Is that legal?” Steve asked, coming to frown at the screen over his shoulder.

“It’s not illegal, per se,” Tony said, and then paused. “I mean, if no one knows the technology exists, they can’t ban it, right?”

Tony flicked his fingers, sending the image on his tablet to display in the air in front of them. “This is where Baron von Bullwinkle has been spending his time. Chances seem good the scepter is somewhere inside.”

“Holy shit,” Clint cried. “How the hell have they kept this place off the radar? That looks like a full blown military base.”

Tony squinted as he saw a flicker around the main building. “Jarvis?” he called. “You catch that?”

“It appears the central building is protected by some kind of energy shield,” Jarvis told them. “Their security forces are well beyond any other Hydra base we’ve taken.”

“So what are we thinking? The seven of us against what, a couple hundred Hydra goons?” Clint asked. “Sounds like fair odds to me.”

“Ten,” Tony corrected absently.

Clint looked up, glancing from one person to the next, counting them off on his fingers. “Thor, Nat, Steve, Wilson, Tony, Cupcake, and me,” he muttered to himself. “Nope, got seven.”

“I believe you’ve forgotten someone, Mister Barton,” Jarvis told him.

“Oh, right, sorry, Jarvis,” Clint said.

“And Rhody will kill me if I leave without him again,” Tony explained, before glancing back at the image of the Hydra base. He tilted his head as he looked at the base layout, the number of guards, and came to terms with the fact that the scepter would be somewhere deep inside the main protected building.

“That makes nine,” Natasha said, looking over at Tony with resignation. She’d already figured it out. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yep,” Tony agreed, smirking as he glanced back at the image in front of him. “We’re gonna need to call in the big guy.”
Sorry for the late update! I got pretty sick last weekend and I'm still trying to shake it. I'm on day eight and still not sure if I have a cold or some bizarre new form of allergies that I've never had before. Either way, I blame any and all mistakes on my cold medicine.

Tony’s relationship with Bruce Banner was sort of hard to explain. In some ways, he felt more like an ex than Pepper did. It was like they were one of those on and off again couples: Bruce, when he was here, was wonderful and supportive, but then he would start to get distant, and he’d cut himself off, and eventually flee to parts unknown without so much as a *Dear John*.

But the truth was that most of that was probably just in Tony’s head. Really, their friendship had been pretty well defined within the limits of their scientific partnership—despite Tony’s many attempts to get him to loosen up or venture outside the lab.

Still, it had always been something that Tony had never had with anyone else. Someone that could actually keep up with his mind, and occasionally—*very* occasionally, mind you—even leap straight past it.

Tony tried not to take Bruce’s disappearances personally. He understood that Bruce could only cope so long in the city before he started to crack, and Tony was almost certain it didn’t have anything to do with him. Their relationship, however they defined it, had always had an inexplicably solid foundation. Tony knew if he ever really needed Bruce, all he had to do was call, and Bruce would come.

If he needed the *Hulk*, however, well, that was another thing entirely.

“We’ve talked about this, Tony,” Bruce told him, looking back at Tony in exasperation from his Starkphone. The walls behind him didn’t tell Tony much about his location, it was just the drab grey concrete of a warehouse or run-down apartment. Bruce was being especially cagey about saying where he was.

It was all pretense, of course, since Bruce had to know Tony always tracked him down the minute he left just to make sure he was okay and somewhere safe. It was perfectly normal supportive friend behavior, and not at all creepy or stalkerish. Whatever Pepper said.

“But this is Loki’s Scepter,” Tony insisted. “There’s a huge Hydra base with a forcefield! I mean, an actual forcefield, Bruce!”

“Don’t try to lure me in with science,” Bruce said. “We know that I’m not the one you want.”

“You know that’s not true,” Tony promised, holding a hand to his heart. “You’re my buddy. My pal. My North Star—“

“Why are you being weird?” Bruce interrupted with narrowed eyes.

“You know, I think you’re the only one that gets my different kinds of weird?” Tony sighed.
“Okay, look, I didn’t want to break it to you over the phone, but…I’m seeing someone. I’m taken now. Off the market. Head over heels in love. I know you’re going to be devastated, but I hope we can still be friends. Also, I hope you’ll still come let your alter ego kick some Hydra ass, because we’ve got about a two days to put a plan together and then we’re going with or without you.”

“For the hundredth time, Tony, would you stop treating me like I’m your ex-boyfriend—and wait, back up, you’re in love?” Bruce asked. “Since when? With who? I’ve been gone less than four months.”

Tony opened his mouth to explain Bucky, and then realized he didn’t know how to start. No matter how he said it, it was going to sound insane:

*My parents’ killer, a brainwashed Russian assassin that I pulled out of cryogenic suspension—*

*This amnesiac Hydra captive that I brought home and made my head of security—*

*Bucky Barnes, from World War II, you may remember him from AP history—*

“Uh…” Tony started.

Bruce’s suspicions notched up, and he leaned forward. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you speechless before,” he said. “This is both fascinating and terrifying at the same time.”

Well, the last one was the least crazy, he supposed.

“Bucky Barnes,” Tony blurted out. “You know, from World War II? You may remember him from AP History—“

“Bucky Barnes,” Bruce echoed slowly. “From World War II.”

“Yep,” Tony said easily. “But, I mean, he’s aged really well. Not that I care about that, because it’s his mind that I love. Still, attraction is important in a relationship, and he’s really, really attractive, you can tru—“

“Tony,” Bruce broke in. “That’s not really the main point of confusion. How is this even possible? Was he frozen with Steve?”

“That would probably have made things simpler, huh?” Tony said. “Look, how about this, you come back home and I’ll give you the full story, and you can meet him? It would be good for you to get to know him before the wedding.”

“You’re getting married?” Bruce cried incredulously.

“Well, I mean, not yet,” Tony said. “I have a five year plan. But step one of the plan is getting rid of Hydra, which is why I’m asking for your help—“

“You want me to come back, and go on another mission, so you can destroy Hydra and clear the field for you to marry a war hero that died in the nineteen forties?” Bruce asked slowly.

“That about sums it up,” Tony agreed gamely. “Except maybe don’t mention the marriage bit when you meet him. The proposal isn’t until like step forty-five, and I don’t want to spook him—“

“I honestly can’t tell if you’re just screwing with me,” Bruce said thoughtfully, and then sighed in a way that Tony knew meant he’d won. “Fine. I’ll be there as soon as I can. But I’m not going out into the field without—“
“Veronica’s already waiting in the wings,” Tony promised. “Ready in case the other guy throws a tantrum.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, and nodded like he was convincing himself. “I have a feeling I’m going to regret this.”

“I’ll send Nat with the Quinjet,” Tony told him. He wanted Bruce in the air before he could change his mind. Also, commercial flights and the Hulk were not a great mix.

“I’ll send you my coordinates,” Bruce said.

“Oh,” Tony said, looking up in surprise. “Are we still pretending I don’t know where you are?”

Bruce huffed out another sigh. “And I’m regretting it,” he said, reaching out to end the call.

“No take backs!” Tony told him, just as the call shut down.

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Natasha had seemed both excited and sort of terrified when he’d asked her to pick up Bruce, but very little actually changed in her expression, and she’d left with nothing more than a quick nod. Tony wondered about that. Maybe he wasn’t the only one in a weird indefinable relationship with incomparable Bruce Banner.

He waited a couple hours to give them time to get back, because he really wanted them to be there for the planning sessions, but once evening start rolling around he knew he couldn’t wait any longer to loop in his Rhodey-bear. So he called everyone to his lab. Rhodey was the last to arrive since he was the only one still keeping up appearances with a day job, and he didn’t look thrilled to be the last to know.

“Tell me if I’ve got this straight: Loki’s scepter is in the hands of Hydra, kept in a base that’s probably fortified with alien tech, and you’re just now calling me?” he demanded.

“That’s what you get for skipping out on the super hero slumber parties,” Tony told him, unrepentantly.

Rhodey ignored him like the professional that he was, and leaned over the table to look at the plans for the Hydra base. He frowned as he ran a finger around the permitter. “It’s a great location,” he said. “And by that I mean it’s a great location for a military base, not a great location to plan a siege.” He looked up. “This isn’t going to be easy. You know that, right?”

“When do we get easy?” Tony asked. “It’s gonna be a clusterfuck. We’re just sorta hoping you could help limit the damage a bit.”

Tony considered it great personal growth that he was asking permission instead of just apologizing like usual. Not that he was actually asking permission. More like saying, Hey, Rhodey, here is this crazy thing we’re going to do, can you please make it marginally less crazy?

But Rhodey was awesome, so he barely even blinked. Just returned his attention to the map.

“Well, to start, I don’t like how close these civilian areas are,” Rhodey said. “We’ll have to go in at night, when there’s less people to get caught in the crossfire. We can have the Sokovian army cordon it off to make sure anyone that is out stays back.”

“I don’t want their army involved,” Steve said, frowning over at him.
“Look, the people of Sokovia aren’t big fans of the military, but you know what they like even less?” Rhodey asked, looking up with a raised eyebrow.

Tony winced, because he knew where this was going. “Me,” he said simply.

“It’s not your fault,” Rhodey said, glancing back at Tony, “but most of the damage done in Sokovia is with weapons that have your name on them. They don’t care that it was Stane that sold them.” He glanced around the room. “None of you are their favorite people, and there aren’t enough of you, anyway. Not for both an offensive siege and a proper defensive line. What are you going to do, unleash the Iron Legion on them?”

Tony slumped into a chair, because yeah, that had sort of been the plan. Bucky could help him make them look less like the drone army, but they didn’t have the kind of time they’d need—they were still more of a last resort.

“I know what I’m doing, Tony,” Rhodey assured him. “Let me help. That’s why I’m here, right?”

“It’s a good plan,” Bucky said, leaning against the back of Tony’s chair. “But there’s no way Hydra doesn’t have moles placed within the Sokovian military. You let them in on this, and Hydra will know what we’re planning before we get near them.”

“I have a contact,” Rhodey told him. “A general I can trust. I tell him what’s going on, he’ll keep things under wraps.”

“It’s still too risky,” Steve said firmly. “We need to hit them before they know we’re coming. We can force our way inside and find the scepter.”

“And when things blow up and you’ve got no back up? In a country we’ve got zero jurisdiction in?” Rhodey asked, shaking his head. “You can take the base all on your own. I know that. But you can’t predict what they’re going to do, and they’re not gonna worry about bystanders.”

“He’s right.”

Tony looked up at the voice, and broke out into a wide grin as he jumped up from his chair. “Brucie!” he cried, in his best impression of a Gotham gossip columnist.

Bruce walked in with his head tilted down, his hands stuffed into his pockets, looking so deceptively unassuming. But Natasha shadowed his steps, tense in a way she almost never was, her hands curled like she had to stop herself from reaching for a weapon.

Tony sometimes forgot that Bruce was the Hulk, but Natasha never did.

“Hey, Tony,” Bruce said, tolerating Tony’s tackle hug with good grace.

Thor leaned across the table. “I thought you said you only accept handshakes?” he demanded.

Bucky bit back a laugh at that, but it was enough to catch Bruce’s attention. He looked up and stared at him with wide eyes. “Wow,” he said. “You’re really Bucky Barnes…’’

Bucky stepped over to him, holding out his hand. “And you’re Bruce Banner,” he said. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Bruce cautiously shook his hand. “Probably not much good, huh?”

“Good and bad,” Bucky said, shrugging philosophically. “But I use to turn into a mindless killing
machine if someone said a string of words to me in Russian, so I try not to judge.”

“Okay, backstory later,” Tony said, grabbing Bucky and ushering him back towards the table. “Also, please stop telling that to everyone we meet.”

“I figured he’s gonna be a on a team with me, he should know,” Bucky explained.

“Right, sorry.” Tony said, because Bucky wasn’t Bob anymore, who might have been fine with telling his life story to the pizza delivery guy or their waitress at Kathy’s Diner. But sometimes Tony forgot that.

He tuned back in to the conversation at the table when he realized Rhodey had been catching Natasha up. “We’re going to have to have contingencies,” she said. “You trust a general. That general has people he trusts, too. That’s too many people that might tip off Hydra that we’re coming, and the first thing they’ll do is move the scepter.”

"I do not understand," Thor said. "I can destroy these enemy forces. I will retrieve the scepter. There is no need for such caution, friends. Leave it to me."

“Think of it like this, Thor, how would you feel if some dark elves came and tore up Asgard looking for something they’d lost?” Clint asked, shrugging.

“The dark elven are long dead, but I take your point well, Hawkeye,” Thor said solemnly.

“Wait, elves are actually real, I meant that as a hypothetical?!” Clint cried. “Are we talking Tolkien here, or Keebler?”

“The fact is,” Rhodey interrupted calmly, “This isn’t Asgard, and humans aren’t nearly as invincible, so yeah, you could probably take down Hydra. But you might end up with a lot more damage than you plan for.”

“Protecting innocents is admirable. I understand,” Thor assured them. “But to stand by and do nothing will cause harm, as well.”

"Don't worry, buddy," Tony told him, slapping him on the back. "I don't think any of us are getting out of this without a fight."

"Right, so we loop in the Sokovians to keep the civilian areas covered," Sam said, "seems simple enough. I say we go with that."

"Except that Nat's right," Clint said. "In every 'trustworthy' group, there's at least one untrustworthy asshole. Never fails. Rule of the trade."

“We could send an advance scout,” Bucky said, moving next to Natasha. “I can go and keep an eye on the base, make sure they don’t move the scepter once the Sokovian military is brought into the loop. Either nothing changes, and we know they haven’t been tipped off, or they start panicking, and maybe we catch a mole on top of Strucker and the scepter. Win win.”

"That could work." Natasha nodded. “I’ll go with you. We can go ahead of the others, make sure everything stays to plan. Clock the guard shifts and habits."

“Wait a second," Tony snapped, “Why can’t we all go together?"

“Because that would tip them off for sure. Most of you aren’t known for being inconspicuous,” Natasha said, glancing up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Barnes and I can get into Sokovia without
anyone knowing about it. We can watch the base without getting spotted. We’re the best spies you’ve got.”

“What the hell am I? Chopped liver?” Clint demanded. “I know I apparently don’t rate Cupcake status, but come on! This is getting ridiculous. I’m standing right here.”

Natasha gave a sly grin, glancing back at him. “I know exactly how good you are, and usually you’d be my first choice as a partner,” she said. “But this is Hydra, so our best bet at this working is Barnes.”

“It’s almost as good as having an inside man,” Rhodey agreed.

“I’m all for going ahead and keeping an eye on the place,” Bucky said, “but I’m not sure how much help I’m going to be about their tactics. I haven’t seen a Hydra base like this since the war. While I was with them, bases were small and underground, relying on secrecy rather than numbers or strength.”

“They’re not hiding anymore,” Tony realized.

“No,” Steve snapped.

Tony looked up in surprise, not sure why Steve was protesting what was obvious, and realized Steve wasn’t looking at him. He was glaring at Bucky.

“You used me as a scout all the time during the war,” Bucky reminded him. “This isn’t any different.”

“Why is your strategy always to go sneaking in without back up?” Steve snapped.

“Now who’s chopped liver?” Natasha asked wryly.

Bucky and Steve both ignored her. Bucky glanced back at Steve with narrowed eyes. “Why is it yours to always barrel through the front door without thinking it through?”

"I thought we were past this?" Tony tried. “Remember your breathing exercises.”

Steve's eyes narrowed, but he actually did suck in a breath like he was trying to meditate. "Fine," he said, gritting his teeth. "But we need to be able to reach them if something happens."

“I’ve got a safe house right outside the border of Sokovia,” Clint told them. "We can all go there. We'll have to bunk two to a room though.”

“Why don't I know about this safe house?” Natasha frowned.

“I don’t tell you everything,” Clint told her smugly. "It’s still an hour flight to the Sokovian base though, even on a Quinjet.”

"That's too long," Sam noted, stepping up beside Steve with a frown.

"That's why it’s important that Barnes and I be on site in case something happens," Natasha said.

"And what are two of you alone going to do if they do try to move the scepter?” Rhodey asked. “Take them all on your own?”

Natasha and Bucky shared a glance, then looked back at the others with identical shrugs. “Sure,” Bucky said simply.
Tony gaped at them. It was more than a little unnerving to think they thought nothing of going up against a heavily armed, heavily manned, fortified Hydra base all on their own—because neither of them were prone to overconfidence. They knew their capabilities too well. It meant they’d likely done something similar, already. Maybe more than once.

“Holy shit,” Tony said. “You can’t be serious.”

“There’s a lot more unknowns than I’d like,” Bucky admitted. “If Strucker’s created a shield technology, chances are he has other things we don’t know about too. Knowing Hydra, they’ve likely been experimenting on people, too. Maybe even trying to recreate the super soldier serum again. But as to just grabbing the scepter and getting out of there? We could handle it, yeah.”

“But if things go to plan we won’t have to,” Natasha reminded them. “We’re only going there to scout the place and keep an eye out for any suspicious movements. We can figure out the guards patterns, perimeter routes, shift switchovers. This is standard operating procedure, boys. Nothing to worry about.”

“We can get all that by satellite,” Tony argued.

"There's no substitute for being on the ground," Natasha argued. "We can all leave for the safe house early tomorrow morning. Barnes and I can head off as soon as we land, while Rhodes coordinates with the Sokovian military. The rest of you prepare for the siege, and get ready in case the timetable needs to move up.”

Tony frowned. He liked the idea about as much as Steve, which was to say, not at all. But unlike Steve, who looked like he’d like to murder another dozen high impact punching bags, Tony actually knew how to negotiate.

“Alright, if we’re going to agree on this crazy plan,” Tony said, pointing at Bucky and Natasha, “we need to know that the two of you aren’t gonna go all Butch and Sundance on us. I don’t want you taking them on alone. I don’t care if someone comes marching out the front door spinning the scepter like a baton, you wait for backup.”

“I agree with Tony,” Steve said firmly.

Bruce looked up in surprise, but Tony was almost getting used to Steve agreeing with him. The trick was just to say something that was for Bucky’s own good.

“Surveillance only,” Bucky agreed, far too easily. “Got it.”

“Anything comes up, we’ll wait for back up,” Natasha said with a nod.

Tony didn’t believe either one of them. Luckily, based on the coordinates of Clint’s safe house, he could be to the base in under twenty minutes at full speed in his suit.

And the truth was, Natasha and Bucky really were the best equipped to handle this part of the mission—and Tony was going to have to learn to deal with Bucky being in danger. It wasn’t going to be fun or easy, and he supposed all those non-fraternization rules most agencies had probably had a point.

But it’s not like Tony’s ever done things the easy way, so why start now?

Once they agreed on the basic plan, they moved on to discussing entry points and weak spots in the defenses, bickering pretty much the entire time—for which Tony blamed Clint, because he was entirely professional, of course.
Eventually they had a solid plan of attack, and nothing else they could do until they arrived at the safe house and to Sokovia, so everyone wandered off to get some rest until it was just Tony left, with Bruce watching him speculatively where he was leaning against one of the tables.

Tony was pretty sure that Bucky had snuck out with the others to give him some time with Bruce, so he wasn’t overly concerned about the fact that he’d also sort of gone trailing out after Thor like the fanboy he apparently was.

“So you weren’t kidding about Bucky Barnes,” Bruce said, grinning slightly as he looked back at Tony. “I wasn’t entirely sure.”

“Nope. My imagination is good, but it’s not good enough to have come up with our actual lives,” Tony assured him.

“And that whole thing about turning into a mindless killing machine?” Bruce asked softly.

Tony paused for a moment. It wasn’t his story to tell, but he was pretty sure Bucky had given him tacit permission by bringing it up in the first place. Bruce also needed to know in case something came up in the mission—one thing both Tony and Steve have been entirely conscious of the entire time they had been planning, was how much Strucker would probably love to get his hands on Bucky again.

He was pretty sure that was why Natasha had offered to watch his back. And if Tony couldn’t do it himself, she was probably the next best thing.

“After he fell from the train, he was captured by Hydra. They tortured him beyond what I can even imagine, had his memories erased, brainwashed him until he killed people for them for a couple decades,” Tony explained, trying to keep his voice level, “I hunted him down because two of the people he killed were my parents, but instead of killing him I ended up bringing him home to introduce him to sugar and wrap him up in blankets and basically fall in love with him, so…yeah, that’s about it. That should cover it.”

“Wow,” Bruce said, blinking back at him. “And I thought my life was complicated.”

“Is it weird if I said everything’s actually seemed simpler since I met him?” Tony asked. “Of course, it’s also infinitely more complicated in ways I’m only beginning to understand.”

“You’re worried about him going ahead of us,” Bruce said knowingly.

“I always got to protect Pepper,” Tony shrugged. “I got to hide her away somewhere in the Tower, or just…I mean, it’s not that she never got hurt because of me, she did. She’s still facing the consequences for it. But…she didn’t want to be involved in any of this. She didn’t want to be in the line of fire. I was allowed to protect her.”

“You don’t think you’re allowed to protect him?” Bruce asked.

“I think he doesn’t want that, and the last thing I want to do to him is something he doesn’t want,” Tony said. “People told him what to do for so long. I can’t say no to him about anything.”

“That’s a problem,” Bruce pointed out. “Not that I think you should say no in this case…but that you can’t say no at all, that’s a problem.”

“Well, I mean, it might be, if he ever asked for anything,” Tony agreed. “I keep trying to give him raises and buy him private islands, but he just wants Pixy Stix and access to the library. He’s the cheapest date I’ve ever had. I mean, literally. Not in the colloquial way. He can’t even actually get
“So he’s not impressed by your wealth?” Bruce asked speculatively.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. He’s apparently really impressed by nice cars,” Tony said. “I’m gonna buy him an Audi, but I can’t decide on blue or red. Maybe one of each.”

“Tony,” Bruce sighed, shaking his head.

“Huh?” Tony asked, looking up. “Oh. No, you’re right. I should probably just get him one. And blue, definitely.”

“Never change, Tony,” he said with a slight smile. “It’s good to see you happy. It suits you.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, smiling back. “You don’t look so bad yourself. You have fun in—oh, wait, I still don’t know where you were, right? Did you have a nice trip in your undisclosed location?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “I just needed to get away from the city for awhile. Find my center again. Of course, I found it just in time for you to want me to unleash the other guy again.”

Tony winced. “Yeah, sorry about that,” he said. “But you saw that base. The kind of defenses they have. And—“

“And you’re afraid for him,” Bruce said, watching him carefully.

“I want to make sure no one is taking any risks,” Tony countered. “This time, we do it right.”

“And you’re really okay with him going ahead of us, scouting out the base?” he asked.

“I mean, better than Steve. But I’m not thrilled, no. I haven’t actually been more than a mile apart from Bucky since we met,” Tony admitted. “And even then, it was never for more than a couple of hours.”

“If you love something,” Bruce started dryly, “you need to—“

“I don’t know why I ever hired you as my therapist,” Tony interrupted, with mock outrage. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m not your therapist,” Bruce reminded him. “But if I were, I’d say maybe you need this brief separation. From what you’ve told me, you’re heading into a pattern of co-dependency. It seems to have mostly been positive to this point, which is a good thing. But it can turn destructive with time, and in the end it’ll take you both down. It’s easier to hold someone up if you’re able to stand on your own two feet.”

“Christ,” Tony said, looking at him in awe, “maybe I should be paying by the hour.”

Bruce just tilted his head, watching him carefully. “Why am I really here?” he asked. “You’ve got Thor as a heavy hitter. You don’t need me here.”

"Yeah," Tony said, glancing back at him. "Sort of do."
Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay on this one, but it kind of ended up being something completely different than planned, mostly because I really wasn’t a huge fan of AoU, and wanted to do my own thing, and once I decided to go ahead and not worry so much about canon it became so much more fun to write! I just ended up having to scrap a lot of what was already written, which slowed me down a bit. ;-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They arrived in Sokovia the next morning, and Tony hadn’t gotten another moment alone with Bucky the whole time. Bucky had spent the majority of the flight bickering with Sam, to the point that Tony was starting to suspect the two of them were just putting on a show to screw with the rest of them:

“It’s not very strategic, though, is it? I mean, you sort of just fly around like a bird.”

“What the hell, man? I am a bird of a prey. Haven’t you ever seen a Bald eagle? Or a peregrine falcon? Huh? We’re majestic as fuck.”

“You…you don’t actually think you’re a bird, do you?”

“Whatever, man. At least my boyfriend didn’t have to build me a parachute cause I keep falling off everything.”

“No…he just built you wings, so you can pretend that you’re a bird, apparently. Is this like those furries I read about on the internet?”

“Steve, if you don’t want me to kill your boy, you’d better hold me back!”

Tony had sort of been snickering too much to help—also, what the hell was Bucky looking at on the internet?—but somehow they managed to land without bloodshed.

Clint’s safe house was a cozy but ramshackle little cabin that was much bigger on the inside—not that anyone got his Tardis jokes—because the majority of it was underground. Apparently it had belonged to someone with the Red Room once upon a time, but Clint had kept it simple when asked what happened to the former resident.

“Trust me,” he’d said, “they won’t be needing it. Also, probably don’t go digging any holes in the back yard.”

Natasha and Bucky had begun getting their stuff together without even taking the creepy secret basement safe house tour. Tony was understandably pretty stressed and worried about their departure, but he was still handling it better than Steve.

Steve was actually fussing with the buttons on Bucky’s jacket and the straps on his backpack like he was about to send Bucky off for his first day of school instead of a dangerous scouting mission.

“Jesus Christ, Steve, you’re not my fucking mother,” Bucky finally told him, rolling his eyes even
as his lips quirked up fondly.

“Your mother would be hitting you with a newspaper and yelling at you for even considering this,” Steve told him. “Nevermind what she’d do to you for using that kind of language.”

Bucky grinned slowly, his eyes lighting up. “She would, wouldn’t she?” he said. “Of course, your ma would have just looked at me all disappointed, which would have been worse.”

“That’s because she could never bring herself to yell at you,” Steve said. “She’d just yell at me later for having got you into trouble in the first place. Even if it wasn’t my fault.”

“I remember enough now to know it was always your fault, Steve,” Bucky told him. “You can’t fool me.”

Steve glanced up with a glare, pulling the pack strap slightly tighter than necessary. “We can debate that later,” he said.

“I think this is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen,” Natasha whispered, leaning towards Tony. He snorted. ‘Mother hen’ was definitely a new look on Steve, and it was pretty hilarious, but he supposed it was time he came and saved the day as usual. He stepped forward, and Steve sighed and moved out of the way.

“Well, I think Steve had it pretty well covered, there’s not much left for me to say,” Tony told Bucky. “So I’m just gonna do this.”

Tony reached out and wrapped a hand in the collar of Bucky’s jacket, tugging him down and meeting him halfway in a heated kiss. Bucky let out a startled laugh even as he returned the kiss, and Tony gently tugged on his bottom lip as he pulled away.

Bucky didn’t look like he was laughing anymore as he dazedly pulled back, his eyes unfocused as he licked his lips. He lifted his hands, letting them curl around the back of Tony’s neck. “I’m going to come back,” he promised.

“You’d better,” Tony agreed.

Natasha stepped closer, snagging Bucky by the back of his jacket to tug him with her. “Come on, lover boy,” she said. “We’ve got places to be.”

Bucky let her pull him away, giving an adorable little wave before finally slipping out of her grip and turning to match her pace.

Eighteen minutes and fifty-two seconds, Tony reminded himself—that was the final estimate from Jarvis on how long it would take to reach the base full speed in his suit.

Which was still far too long, but Rhodey and Natasha had a point about not going in full force until they made arrangements with the Sokovian military. Rhodey had already gone on a separate military flight to meet his contact—with the War Machine in a briefcase.

They all had their parts to play. Tony had tried to handle things on his own often enough to know that it was better this way, even if it wasn’t easier.

He glanced back at Steve, who looked even less able to give up control than he was. “He’s going to be fine, you know,” he said.
Steve pursed his lips shut. “Still don’t like it,” he said. “We should all be going. We could hit them hard, get the scepter, get out.”

Tony wondered if that would be better. He’d get to take out some aggression, some of that pent-up anger about his parent’s deaths that he could never take out on Bucky, some of that building anger about Bucky and all the horrors he had suffered at Hydra's hands.

But that would be selfish, and Tony should know, it had been his way of life once. He’d learned to play the long game, since then. Do the right thing and it’s not as satisfying, but he was gonna feel better in the long run.

“This is playing it safe,” Tony finally said. “Just as much chance of getting hurt if we’d done a full out attack, and more chance of bystanders getting hurt, too.”

Despite his extremely wise words of advice, Tony still ended up pacing and keeping an ear out for their check ins, unable to focus on anything else. It took three hours before they finally made contact that they were in position, and Tony finally let himself sit down.

He had no idea how they could have covered that much ground on foot that quickly, but thinking about what they may have used for transportation was making him anxious too, so he decided not to wonder about it too much.

“But are you safe?” Tony demanded.

“We’re in a tree, Tony,” Bucky said dryly. “So yes, perfectly safe and so bored.”

Tony grinned, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah? I thought you snipers had infinite patience.”

“Nat keeps cracking her knuckles,” Bucky explained. “It’s breaking my focus.”

Tony could just make out Natasha’s outraged voice, whispering something harshly in Russian. “I’m pretty sure she’s the biggest danger to my life out here,” Bucky continued, unfazed.

“Come on now, children, get along,” Tony told them. “Any activity yet?”

“No,” Natasha reported crisply. “Guard rotations move like clockwork. I’m almost impressed. Hydra isn’t usually this organized.”

"Strucker works within the negative reinforcement school of discipline," Bucky said flatly. "It's always effective, to a point."

Tony glanced up when Steve stepped into the room. The stony, near emotionless set of his face might have fooled Tony once upon a time, but now he could see what he was hiding behind it. “They reported in?” he asked stiffly.

“Hey, Stevie,” Bucky called through the comm.

Steve rolled his eyes, relaxing almost imperceptibly. “I think you’ve been hanging out with Tony too much,” he said. “You’ve lost all sense of professionalism.”

“That’s a lie,” Bucky said. “I never had that to begin with.”

“And I do have it,” Tony insisted. “I am the perfect example of a professional.”

“Sure, if we could just cut off your mic access,” Steve told him.
Bruce came to join them, snorting as he heard Steve’s remark. Tony tossed him a betrayed look, but Bruce just glanced back innocently like he hadn’t done anything. He wasn’t nearly as good at feigning an innocent look as Bucky, so Tony narrowed his eyes at him.

“Any word from Rhodes?” Natasha asked.

“No yet,” Tony told her. “Last I heard, he was entering a planning session with the Sokovian general. The way the military does things, the briefing will probably be another two hours at least.”

“Which means we’ve probably got a five hour window to watch and see if Strucker gets tipped off,” Bucky said. “If they don’t alert him within that time, we’re probably safe.”

Tony frowned but agreed with the assessment. “Sounds about right,” he said. “Based on how the meeting goes with Rhodes, we’re planning to come at nightfall.”

“Got it,” Nat said. “We’ll keep you informed. Signing off.”

The comms went quiet again and Tony fidgeted irritably. The check ins were planned as few and far between, because Natasha and Bucky weren’t taking chances. He imagined someone could walk right beneath them and would never see them, they were good at disappearing—having Tony checking in on the comms every few minutes would only put them at risk, but it was still making him anxious.

Five hours was forever.

“Clint and Sam are getting some rest while they can,” Steve said, glancing over at Tony. “Maybe you should, too.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, not gonna happen.”

“We need you at your best,” Steve told him.

“I’m always at my best, Cap,” Tony promised. “Once discovered artificial intelligence while I was going on forty hours with no sleep and high as a kite. I think I’ll be fine.”

Steve crossed his arms, looking disapproving. “You’re part of a team now, Tony. Bucky is counting on you.”

Tony bit back all the smart ass remarks he wanted to say, mostly because they were all too cruel. The last thing they needed was a rift between them again, they’d been getting along so well. Well, comparatively well. “Bucky knows he can count on me,” he finally bit out. “Maybe someday you’ll finally clue in on that, too.”

“Fine,” Steve said tightly. “Suit yourself.”

He turned on his heel and headed back outside, probably to obsessively do inventory in the Quinjet, or whatever else control freak defrosted WWII soldiers did with their time.

“You know,” Bruce said speculatively, “if your five year plan stays on target, Steve’s basically going to be your brother-in-law.”

“Oh shit,” Tony cried, glancing back at him with wide eyes. “Okay, suddenly everything everyone always says about in-laws makes sense.”
“Well, on the bright side, maybe you won’t have to worry,” Bruce said with a shrug. “I think there’s a pretty good chance Bucky may elope with Thor.”

“Very funny,” Tony said. “It’s a harmless crush, and I’m very understanding, and a total non-jealous person. Anyway, Bucky is equally understanding of our relationship, so there.”

“We don’t have a relationship, Tony,” Bruce sighed.

“Well, you have only yourself to blame for that,” Tony told him. “I’m a catch.”

“Yeah, you are, but you’re also you.” Bruce shook his head, grinning slightly. “Bucky’s a far braver man than me.”

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Rhodey had checked in and the Sokovian military was on board with the plan. They were willing to let the Avengers take point in the siege at the base, and in return for allowing the Avengers to take the scepter, the Sokovians wanted to take custody of Strucker and the rest of the members of Hydra.

Which, really, was sort of like win win, because in all their planning they hadn’t actually remembered to come up with the part about what they should do once they took the Hydra minions into custody. Tony never thought he’d miss SHIELD, but apparently the Avengers on their own were not super great at the logistics stuff.

“Okay, gather round, campers!” Tony called. “Rhodey is going to stick with the Sokovian military with his War Machine suit, they’ll be responsible for rounding up stragglers and cordoning off the civilian areas.”

“Wonderful plan, Man of Iron!” Thor boomed. “And while he is doing this, we get to attack the base and retrieve the scepter?”

“Yes,” Tony said, pointing over at him. “You’ll get to go all Hammer-time on some Hydra goons, promise.”

“Tony,” Steve said waringly, before glancing at Thor. “Please do not go Hammer-time on anything. We stick to the plan. Thor, you and Hulk are to stay at the perimeter, and step in only if needed. The rest of us will be heading to the three main entrances. Tony, you’re going through the back. Clint is going to rendezvous with Bucky and Nat and take the side entrance, and I’m going through the front.”

“Bucky was right, you definitely have a thing about going in through the front doors,” Tony said.

“There’s nothing wrong with keeping it simple,” Steve told him.

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but paused when their comms sparked to life.

“Uh, we’ve got movement, guys,” Bucky told them. “Strucker is heading out with a strike team. He’s got a case about the size of the scepter.”

“Maintain cover. We’re on our way,” Steve replied instantly. He glanced at the team. “Let’s get to the Quinjet. We need to move.”

“You all go ahead. I’ll meet you there,” Tony said, flicking his wrist to activate his suit bracelets. His suit built itself around him quickly, and Steve glanced back at him worriedly.
“You shouldn’t go on your own,” he said.

“I’m faster than the jet,” Tony reminded them. “I’ll meet up with Bucky and Nat, and if Strucker’s on the run, I’m your best bet at tracking him.” Steve nodded reluctantly and Tony started for the door. “Jarvis, contact Rhodey to let him know what’s going on.”

“At once, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

Tony took off from the ground, making a beeline towards the Hydra base. “Can you get a visual on our Bucky-bear?” he asked Jarvis.

“My satellite cameras cannot locate him or Ms. Romanoff,” Jarvis reported, which Tony figured probably meant they were fine. “Open up comms. Buckster—what’s your status?”

“We’re in pursuit,” Natasha answered. “Don’t worry, we’ve maintained cover.”

“You are not to engage,” Steve snapped back instantly. “We’re right behind you. We’ll be there within a half hour.”

“There’s a defunct airport about five miles from here,” Bucky said. “They’ll reach it before you reach us.”

“You are not to take on Hydra without backup,” Steve said again. “Do you understand?”

Tony was glad that Steve got to play the part of the bad guy on this issue, but he wasn’t sure it was going to be enough. “Jarvis,” he said on a private line. “How long till we reach them?”

“Sixteen minutes remaining,” Jarvis reported.

“We’re not taking them on, we’re just following them,” Bucky promised.

“You’re going to be spotted,” Steve said, which Tony wasn’t sure was true. Even Jarvis couldn’t find them, which was more than a little disconcerting, but sort of just made Tony glad they were on the same side.

“Hey, Rogers, you know that scene in Wizard of Oz, when they dress up like the guards to sneak in the castle?” Natasha asked wryly. “It’s sort of like that. We’re in one of their Humvees, one car behind their lead vehicle. They think we’re part of their procession.”

Tony cursed to himself. “Please tell me you didn’t.”

“Hail Hydra,” Natasha said dryly. “I think I’ll keep the hat.”

“That is not waiting for backup!” Tony cried.

“I mean, technically, we’re still just observing,” Bucky told them.

“The two guys we knocked out and hogtied in the back might disagree with that assessment,” Natasha reminded him.

“Oh, right, I forgot about them,” Bucky said. “By the way, Tony, that shock gun you gave me works like a dream.”

“I have a visual on their vehicle,” Jarvis reported. A small screen appeared on Tony’s visor: the procession was five cars. The third Humvee would be Bucky and Natasha. He had to admit, they’d snuck their way in pretty smoothly.
“Jarvis, you know where they’re headed?” Tony asked Jarvis.

“Bucky was correct,” Jarvis reported. “There is an abandoned airstrip four point eight miles ahead of them. At current speed, we will reach them just before they make it there. The Quinjet is about thirteen minutes behind us.”

That complicated things. If they’d been in the last car, they might have been able to sneak off, but now Bucky and Natasha would have to stay in Hydra’s procession to avoid raising suspicions. Once they parked, it wouldn’t take Hydra long to figure out Natasha and Bucky weren’t supposed to be there. He was pretty sure they’d both be recognized on sight—Natasha, especially.

“Wait, are you headed here alone?” Bucky demanded. “What the hell, Tony? What happened to waiting for back up?”

“Do as I say, not as I do,” Tony told him.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Bucky said with a snort.

“We're right behind him,” Steve assured them. “When you have the airport in sight, I want you to veer off. Tony can disable the cars when he's close enough. I don't want you in the crossfire.”

“Negative,” Bucky replied. “We veer off they're gonna know something's up, and our best chance here is taking them by surprise. Pretty sure they've got a couple of enhanced with them.”

“And you’re just bringing that up now?” Tony cried.

“It’s not for sure,” Natasha explained. “But they were definitely not standard issue Hydra. One man and one woman. Young, approximately aged nineteen to twenty-two, dressed less for a mission and more like they’re headed to a Halsey concert.”

“Hostages?” Tony asked.

“Unlikely,” Bucky said. “If anything, the others seemed scared of them. They acted more like bodyguards for Strucker than anything, almost caught us at one point before they finally got in the lead Humvee.”

“Wonderful,” Tony said. “So we’ve got two wildcards on top of everything else. Jarvis, can you patch me into Rhodey?”

“Tony, where the hell have you been?” Rhodey demanded instantly.

“Strucker’s headed to an airport, we’re in pursuit,” Tony said. “What’s your status?”

“I’m already at the base with the Sokovian military,” Rhodey said. “General Belkin found their mole, and we’re rounding up the rest.”

“Well, at least something went to plan,” Tony said. “Hold down the fort. We’ll be there to join the party when we’ve got Strucker and the scepter.” He shut down the link with Rhodey. “You boys and girl all hear that?”

“Yep, next time, I’m riding with Rhodey,” Bucky said.

Tony let out a startled laugh. “Never choose the fun-vee over Rhodey,” he agreed. “I learned that lesson the hard way.”

“I’m going to try not to take offense to that,” Natasha said.
“Hey, you know you’d rather have Clint than me, anyway,” Bucky told her.

“He laughs at my jokes,” Natasha agreed.

“Ah, Nat, I love you too,” Clint called.

“Cut the chatter,” Steve snapped. “What’s our ETA?”

“We will catch up to the others in five minutes,” Jarvis reported. “You are still thirteen minutes behind us.”

“Wait, something’s up,” Bucky reported.

Tony’s eyes flickered to the satellite image. The lead car had come to an abrupt stop, causing the rest to stop in order to avoid a collision. The back doors on the lead Humvee opened at the same time, a young woman exiting one side and a young man on the other. They were obviously the two that Natasha and Bucky suspected were enhanced.

“They know we’re here,” Natasha reported softly.

“Do not engage,” Steve snapped.

“Don’t think they’re exactly planning to give us that choice, Stevie,” Bucky said.

“Jarvis, isolate the background on their open line,” Tony commanded on a private channel.

“The woman is demanding their surrender,” Jarvis reported. “But based on her word choice and line of sight, I do not believe she knows which Humvee they’re in.”

“She doesn’t know where you are,” Tony told them, switching back to the open channel. “Stay put. I’m right behind you.”

“Tony, I’m—“ Bucky’s voice cut out abruptly, and Tony’s eyes flickered back to the satellite image. The young man was suddenly twenty feet away from where he’d just been, standing right beside the Humvee holding Bucky and Natasha.

And Bucky and Natasha had both been forced to their knees in the snow right in front of him.

That had been way too quick, there hadn’t been time to grab them like that—

The young woman approached them with red lights building up around her hands. She raised one hand, and there was a blast of red light before the image just disappeared.

“Jarvis?” Tony demanded anxiously.

“There was some kind of electromagnetic flare,” Jarvis reported. “I’m unable to get a visual within twenty feet of them. Attempting to reboot.”

“Play back the last thirty seconds, slowed down by seventy-five percent,” he said.

The video reappeared, but even with the video slowed down considerably he still could hardly make out what happened. The young man disappeared in a blur. Tony watched as the blur moved to check the first Humvee, and then the second, where he found Bucky and Natasha. The blur grabbed the door before ripping them out of the car one by one, so quick it looked like they were sitting inside it one second and outside on their knees the next.

“They’re definitely enhanced,” Tony said. “Goddamnit. One of them is quick, cameras couldn’t follow him. The other—I don’t even know, but it doesn’t look good.” He checked the controls on his own forward cameras, trying to zoom in to get a visual, but even as fast he was moving he was still too far away. “Jarvis, can you tap into their comms, get us some audio about what’s going on?”

“I’m afraid that whatever took out our cameras fried their comms as well,” Jarvis said.

“I’ve got something,” Tony said, his heart pounding in his chest as he saw a Humvee sitting alone in his forward viewer. The rest of the procession was gone.

But he could make out a hand laying in the snow, the rest of the body hidden behind the Humvee.

“What do you see?” Steve demanded.

“Give me a sec,” Tony said, slowing down as he began descending. He slammed into the snow right in front of the Humvee, and then moved around it.

Natasha was laid out in the snow, her skin looking pale enough to nearly match it. Her eyes were wide open, but she didn’t so much as twitch as he dropped down beside her. He had his gauntlets retract and then nervously reached out to press his fingers to her neck, letting out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding when he got a pulse. He checked her over but he couldn’t see any blood or injuries. “Natasha?” he called, shaking her gently.

She mumbled something ineligible, but otherwise made no move to acknowledge him.

He leaned over into her line of sight, but her eyes looked straight past him. Tony had known Natasha for awhile, and even when faced with the Hulk, she’d never once flinched. Something had to have been done to her, and it was terrifying to think what could have managed this. “I need you to look at me, okay? Natasha?” he pleaded. “Where’s Bucky?”

She blinked and some awareness seemed to slip back into her eyes, though she still seemed very far away. “They took him,” she said softly. “We were dancing, and then I had a gun—they broke them.”

“Shit,” Tony muttered, pressing his eyes closed for a moment, before activating his comm. “Cap, how far are you?”

“We’re still twelve minutes out,” Steve said. “What’s the situation?”

Twelve minutes was a long time to leave Natasha in this state alone, but twelve minutes was far too long for Bucky to be left in Hydra’s hands.


Natasha struck out suddenly, reaching up to wrap her hands around his wrists, her eyes wide and frantic as she sat up. “Tony,” she said. “You have to go get him. You need to go now.”

“Natasha?” he said worriedly, reaching out to steady her as she nearly slid back into the snow.

She reached up, gently but firmly pushing him away from her. She reached back and pulled out a small gun she’d had hidden somewhere. “I’m alert enough to shoot any Hydra soldier that gets within ten feet of me,” she promised, but her usually confident voice was shaking. She looked up
at him. “One of the enhanced, the woman. She can get inside your head. You need to take her out
before she has the chance, because you won’t get another.”

“Bucky—did she—“ Tony started.

“I don’t know what she did to us, but he didn’t even fight them when they took him,” she said
quietly. “I didn’t fight them. I just let them go. It was like I was somewhere else…” She looked
back at him, her eyes burning. “They know who he is. You need to find him before they can do
something worse.”

“I’ll get him back,” Tony promised. “Cap, Widow’s alert but stranded. You need to stop and pick
her up.”

“Don’t worry about me, Rogers,” Natasha said, shaking her head. “I’ve got the Humvee. I’ll find
my own way there. Stay on course for the airport.”

“Nat—“ Tony started worriedly.

“Go,” she snapped.

“Where’s Bucky?” Steve demanded, not even mentioning the scepter. Tony thought that might be
the first time he’d ever heard Steve get off mission, but Tony couldn’t exactly blame him.

For a minute there he’d pretty much forgotten that the scepter even existed.

“Hydra has him,” Tony said darkly, commanding his suit to close over his hands again as he rose
to his feet. “I’m going to get him back.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m so sorry for this I swear I didn’t mean to leave you on a cliffhanger it just
happened. Please don’t hate me. ::runs and hides::
Tony had a reputation for his frenetic energy, for the way he ran his mouth, and he knew it had all been well earned. It was his default setting, easier than breathing.

Rhodey had told him once that there was nothing more terrifying than to see him go quiet. He hadn’t even been Iron Man at the time, he’d just been Tony Stark. He wondered how much more terrifying it might be now that he was hidden by that mask, silently speeding through the sky and towards Hydra.

It was quiet enough that he could hear the sound of his breath and the slight, almost imperceptible hum of his suit. Usually, the quiet would make him nervous. He’d always gotten twitchy and anxious in his lab if the music wasn’t playing loud enough that he could feel it through the soles of his shoes, but at the moment he had the sort of laser focus that he only ever got when someone he loved was in danger.

Because they’d taken Bucky.

He’d even had Jarvis filter out the team chatter unless someone needed something from him directly, so the line was eerily silent as his fellow Avengers all scrambled to catch up. Their last communication had just been that Thor had gotten impatient and jumped out of the Quinjet to come help, but even as fast as Thor was, he was still far enough behind that Tony had no intention of waiting for him.

Not when he was close enough that he could see the procession at the edge of his camera’s range and closing in fast. They’d only be about a mile away from the airport by the time he reached them, which was cutting it too damn close.

“Jarvis, do you know which one has Bucky?” Tony asked, and his voice sounded eerily calm. He could do this. He could be calm.

“It is likely he is in the lead Humvee, Sir,” Jarvis reported. “However, without access to the satellite I cannot say for certain. I have yet to be able to regain visual in this area.”

That meant he wasn’t going to get to blow up the spare Humvees, Tony realized with irritation, because he wasn’t going to risk Bucky getting caught in one of the explosions.

He could always blow them up once Bucky was safe and where he could see him, he decided, and flew straight past the last Humvee towards the front. He spun around and then slammed down into the ground with enough force that his boots went right through the hard packed snow and carved out a few inches of the ground.

Then he straightened, right in the path of the Humvees, and watched them speed towards him.
They weren’t slowing down, but he hadn’t really expected them to—that would have been too easy. Luckily, they were underestimating the sort of force his suit could withstand, and Tony didn’t even flinch as he threw out one gauntleted hand as the vehicle slammed into him.

His gauntlet dented the front, the hood creaking enough it started to bend, but he actually skid backwards a couple feet as the vehicle valiantly tried to run him down. It was the Humvee right behind it that finally stalled it out, crashing into it from behind when it was unable to stop in time. Caught between the Humvees behind it and Tony in front, it wasn’t going anywhere.

He scanned their front windshield, but it was tinted, and he couldn’t see inside.

That was when his calm sort of fled.

He slammed his gauntlet down on the hood, hard enough that the force raised the whole vehicle briefly up off the ground. “You have five seconds to let him go, or I start using you all for target practice,” he snarled, and when his voice filtered through his suit it erased some of the sneer, but raised the volume.

Threats without the flair weren’t exactly his M.O—even when he’d been down in that Hydra base, planning to avenge his parents, he’d stopped long enough to tell a world class assassin he was a few Fudgsicles short of a popsicle cart and make the requisite Terminator references. Wisecracking was sort of his default, but now he’d gone numb and brittle, anger and fear building up inside him so quickly that he felt like a time bomb.

Not being able to see Bucky wasn’t helping. Jarvis was adjusting his visor’s viewing controls, but he still wasn’t able to get past the tinted windows on the Humvee.

He stepped back slightly when one of the doors opened, but it wasn’t Bucky, and it wasn’t even Strucker.

It was a young woman with necklaces layered atop each other over her neck, and a red leather jacket. She looked less scary standing six feet away than she had on that video feed, but Tony knew better than to be lured in by the way she looked.

“Stark,” she greeted slyly, her eyes dancing dangerously. Behind her, Hydra soldiers were coming tumbling out of the Humvees, far less gracefully, and raising guns in his direction. He didn’t know if they honestly just didn’t know he was pretty much bulletproof, or if they were just going through the motions.

He kept his gaze on the woman, anyway. Strucker may be in charge, but he was letting her lead, which was interesting, and made her the first hurdle between him and getting Bucky back.

“You’re not Bucky,” he told her simply.

She tilted her head. Her eyes seemed lit with some kind of red glow, and she narrowed them in her direction. “Is that what you call the Winter Soldier?” she asked.

“That’s his name,” Tony snarled, stepping closer.

“He calls for you, too,” she told him, her voice taking on a far away, almost dreamy tone, even as she looked entirely unconcerned by his approach. “I wouldn’t have thought someone like you capable of forming such connections.”

Tony pulled to a stop before he got too close, all too aware of that footage he’d caught before his state of the art cameras had blown out by an unknown force. He knew that he had no idea what he
was up against, and he almost cared enough to be cautious.

But then he thought of Bucky in their hands, and caution fled.

“You hurt him and you will see what I’m really capable of firsthand,” he told her.

“I know exactly what you’re capable of,” she told him. “We both do. We’ve seen it. Firsthand.”

For a moment he wondered if she was suddenly speaking in the royal ‘we,’ then he remembered
that there were two enhanced, not just one—and he couldn’t see the other one.

“See, you speak to me as though you have the upper hand, but we have you surrounded,” she told
him.

Tony snorted as he glanced up at the Hydra soldiers. He could take them all out with his suit’s
targeting in under twenty seconds, and that was a conservative estimate. “I’m not worried about
them.”

“And I wasn’t referring to them,” she said.

There was a burst of air behind him, and then something metallic was tapping lightly against the
back of his suit.

“You know,” a sly masculine voice said behind him, a perfect mirror to the woman’s, “I thought
you’d be faster. So disappointing. You’re not fast at all.”

“Well, if it isn’t the blur,” Tony said. He glanced enough to the side to see that the young man was
holding the scepter, flush against his suit.

“I am not the blur,” he said, sounding offended.

“Enough,” the woman snapped sharply, though her eyes never left Tony’s. “You are going to
surrender.”

“I’m guessing predicting the future isn’t one of your talents?” Tony asked.

“Do you have any idea at all what that scepter can do?” she asked.

“Not really,” Tony said, watching her carefully. “Mostly cause it doesn’t work on me.”

That seemed to give her pause, even if it was about ninety percent bluff based on dumb luck and an
arc reactor heart he no longer had. She stepped further to the side, and angrily motioned to a soldier
by the door of the Humvee. He opened the door and then reached in, coming back out with one
hand gripped around Bucky’s collar and the other twisted painfully in his short hair as he dragged
him out. Some primal conscienceless voice in the back of Tony’s mind decided he would be the
first to die.

Bucky was in one piece, but that was about the extent of Tony’s relief. His pupils looked blown,
and he was as pale as Natasha had been. He also looked scared, which was putting Tony’s already
straining overprotectiveness into overdrive. Tony had seen Bucky take out Hydra soldiers
effortlessly before, he was just as professional and as calm in these situations as Natasha—
whatever had managed to knock both of them for a loop like this couldn’t be anything good.

“Bucky?” Tony tried. “You good?”

Bucky didn’t respond to him, though his eyebrows furrowed for a moment, and he turned to look
down at the ground. The soldier that would be first to die kicked at the back of his legs until he fell to his knees in the snow.

Tony clenched his gauntlets to fists and saw red, but he forced himself to look back over at the woman, who remained the biggest threat. “What have you done to him?”

“I did not have to do anything,” she told him. “There was such pain in him already. And guilt enough to drown in. Tell me, Stark, do you know what he did to your parents?”

“I almost want to see where you’re going with this, because I’m sure it would have been a lovely little villainous speech,” Tony said, “but, uh, yeah? Of course I know. If we’re being honest, falling in love with my parents’ murderer isn’t even the weirdest thing I’ve done. I’m not sure it makes the top ten. So I really hope using that against me wasn’t your whole plan, because that would be super embarrassing for you.”

She blinked back at him, looking entirely confused. Tony thought for a moment he saw Bucky’s hand twitch at his side, but didn’t look down to confirm and risk giving him away.

She turned then to glare at Humvee. “You said this would undo him,” she hissed. She probably thought Tony couldn’t hear her, but his suit’s audio gave him better hearing than Thor.

“And it will,” Strucker answered, as he pushed open the door and dropped down to stand in the snow on the other side of Bucky. He glanced over at Tony. “I think this has gone on long enough, don’t you? You’re going to let us leave now.”

“Oh, you’re not going anywhere,” Tony promised.

“You’re going to let us leave, or I’m going to have her rip his mind from him, right in front of you,” Strucker promised. “We don’t need his mind, you see. We only need the rest of him.”

The woman’s hands started to spark, red lights like twisting vines spinning around the palms. She reached out so that one hand hovered over Bucky’s head.

“No—” Tony shouted, starting forward, not sure what she was going to do, only that he had to stop it, even if he had no idea how.

Tony had barely managed to take a step towards her and she was suddenly screaming, the red lights that had been dancing around her disappearing in the space of a single blink, replaced instead by sparks of blue. At first he couldn’t understand what he was seeing, and he thought maybe her powers had backfired somehow.

Then he noticed the small piece of round metal that had been imbedded in her leg.

It was one of his new stun bullets, Tony realized, looking back at Bucky in surprise. They must have taken Bucky’s gun, but not his extra clip, so he’d activated one of the bullets directly and stuck it on her. Whatever powers she had were obviously controlled by her mind, and when in the middle of convulsions she wasn’t exactly able to access them.

Tony started moving again to try and grab her before she could recover, but he’d forgotten her partner in crime again. There was a quick rush of wind and a blur, and then she was gone and so was he. Tony was surprised that the boy would take her and leave instead of staying with their team, and he wasn’t the only one.

Tony could see the realization form in Strucker’s eyes—without those two, he was screwed. They’d abandoned him, and the rest of his men were no match for Iron Man, let alone for the rest
of the Avengers that weren’t far behind. For one brief moment, Tony thought maybe it would be that easy, and they’d surrender.

Instead, Strucker reached down and wrapped a hand around Bucky’s arm, dragging him up to his feet and in front of him like a shield as he shouted, “Fire!”

Tony supposed maybe they didn’t know that he was bulletproof in his suit, after all. “Jarvis,” he started.

“Targeting,” Jarvis responded immediately, before Tony even had to finish his request.

Tony raised his gauntlet, ignoring the hail of bullets bouncing off his suit. “Take them all out,” he said simply.

It only took three quick bursts of multiple rounds, and the armed soldiers were flying back into the snow and going still. The brutal efficiency of the suit was still unnerving sometimes, but he’d learned awhile ago that he couldn’t afford to hesitate.

Strucker was looking desperate now, which was dangerous, but he still thought he had the upper hand. He’d reached one arm around Bucky’s neck and had dragged him closer, using him as leverage and a shield.

“Step out of the suit,” Strucker said, and he sounded calm even though Tony could hear the tremors beneath it. “Or I’ll kill him.”

He probably thought that was a decent threat, but he couldn’t see what Tony could see—Bucky’s eyes weren’t glassy anymore, and they weren’t afraid. Bucky met his eyes and nodded almost imperceptibly, then he was snapping the bones of the arm that had been wrapped around his neck and smoothly spinning out from under it in one swift move.

Tony didn’t need to speak for Jarvis to start running the trajectories and the timing the moment the line of fire was clear. All Tony had to do was lift his arm to let the tiny missile free, and then Strucker was missing half his skull.

He stayed suspended for a moment, a look of surprise caught on his face, before he dropped like a puppet with its strings cut. Tony’s breath hitched, as he tried to drag his mind back to the present—he was still spread too thin, second guessing every move from the start of this mission, while simultaneously thinking twenty steps ahead for contingencies to every possibility.

Bucky didn’t look much better off. He’d been standing close enough that he had Strucker’s blood splattered across the right side of his face. Despite that he was obviously coming out of it, he was still moving slow for him, sort of a step behind where he’d usually be—not that it had stopped him from taking out a freaking witch.

Tony forced himself to take a halting step forward, making sure to go slow even though he kinda wanted to run to meet him like one half of the reunited lovers cliche. But a field of snow scattered with dead Hydra agents wasn’t quite as scenic as a wheat field, so he decided to err on the side of caution.

Bucky glanced up at him as he approached, and he still seemed strangely disconnected. There was no smile, no smart ass remark, no comment on how long it took him to get here.

“There’s one more in the Humvee,” he said, instead.

Tony spun to see a man sneaking out the other door. He gave a loud whistle. “Hey, you want to
live?” he shouted. “Then stay the hell where you are.”

The man raised his hands instantly, his eyes going wide and frightened. He was wearing a lab coat, which hopefully meant he had some good intel. Tony had maybe sort of killed everyone else.

He returned his attention back to Bucky then, because Jarvis would keep tabs on the lab rat. He let his helmet and his gauntlets retract as he stepped forward, reaching to gently wipe the blood off Bucky’s face.

Bucky watched him do it, staying frozen, until he finally let out a shaky breath. “Are you really here?” he finally asked, in a soft, broken, voice that made Tony’s heart ache.

“Yeah,” Tony promised. “Yeah, I’m here.”

Bucky nodded slightly, his eyes moving to the horizon. “Nat, is she—“

“She’s fine, she should be here in a couple of minutes,” Tony promised. “And Thor should be—“

Before Tony could even finish, there was a loud crash behind them. Tony spun to look over at Thor, who had landed gracefully behind them and was still swinging his hammer with one hand. Tony tried to decide whether or not to be grateful that he hadn’t managed to get here earlier to help. On the one hand, Thor may have been able to stop the enhanced kids from making their getaway, but on the other, Thor’s usual bull in a china shop approach to battle could have gotten Bucky hurt in the crossfire.

He was definitely going to revisit the idea of giving Bucky a suit. Maybe it could just be an emergency suit. He could build it into the—

“You did not leave any for me,” Thor told him sadly, as he came to stand beside them and looked over the scene with regret.

“That one’s still alive,” Tony told him helpfully, waving over at the terrified scientist. He didn’t mention that it was mostly only due to an oversight. “I haven’t even tied him up yet.”

“Ah, a prisoner!” Thor said happily, moving to secure him.

Tony returned his attention back to Bucky, but the other man was already moving away and leaning over Strucker. He grabbed his stolen stun gun from the dead man’s waistband, before dropping it in the hostler on his leg. “This worked even better than I was expecting,” he said casually. “And the bullets work like widow’s bites if you don’t happen to have the gun.”

“Yeah, saw that,” Tony agreed, before glancing back over to speak to Thor. “Can you keep an eye out for the two enhanced? They hightailed it out of here, but they may just be planning to regroup.”

Thor pushed their prisoner against the front of the Humvee, and shook his head. “I do not believe they are coming back,” he said. “I saw them fleeing on my way here, and made an attempt to follow. They were not heading towards the base, but the city. I tried to follow them to their destination, but they were moving faster than any creature I’ve ever seen.”

“Damn it. They had the scepter,” Tony told him, muttering a curse to himself.

“They didn’t take it with them,” Bucky told him, pointing back behind him.

Tony turned to find the scepter laying innocuously in the snow. Thor beat him to it, stepping forward and scooping it with one hand. He was surprised the kid would have left it behind, but
maybe it would have been too hard to carry both it and his partner.

Or maybe they’d never cared about Hydra’s agenda in the first place.

“This is the scepter,” Thor agreed, glancing thoughtfully at the gem at the tip before breaking out into a grin. “Friends, our mission has been a success!”

“Sure, if that’s what you want to call this,” Tony sighed, looking up as they heard the sound of the quinjet approaching. It landed about fifty feet away, but Steve was barreling towards them almost before it touched the ground.

He glanced at Thor and the scepter before moving past him to check on Bucky. “You okay?” he demanded gruffly, before pulling Bucky into a hug that left Tony feeling inadequate.

Except that Bucky pulled away with a quick nod, before moving a few feet away, like he didn’t want to touch—so Tony had probably made the right move. Steve frowned at him, but let him go, and turned his attention to the prisoner. He walked over and came to a stop in front of him.

“Doctor List,” Steve said. “I know some people that are very anxious to speak with you.”

Natasha arrived just a moment later, driving the Humvee and still wearing her stolen Hydra jacket. She stalked past all of them, stepping over bodies without even looking at them, and then grabbed Bucky by the hand.

“We’ll be in the jet,” she told them, and led him away.

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Tony had to talk himself out of following Bucky and Natasha pretty much constantly from the moment they’d gone back to the quinjet—but Steve had told Bruce and Sam to go, because they had the most medical knowledge.

Instead he’d been stuck with Steve, Thor, and an irritable Clint that looked about as ready to be done with this mess as he was.

But Bruce would have contacted them if something was really wrong with them. They were fine. They’d both been up and talking. Whatever that bitch had done to them, they were fine.

He still kind of wished he could kill Strucker again, though.

“Well, at least we were able to isolate the fighting away from the city,” Rhodey told him.

He’d arrived with a Sokovian military clean up crew about a half hour after they’d taken out Strucker. Rhodey was still in his suit but by all accounts hadn’t had to use it much. The round up of Hydra soldiers back at the base had gone much smoother than Tony’s own chase. Without their leaders, the soldiers had been all too eager to surrender in the face of War Machine and Sokovia’s finest.

“The enhanced got away,” Tony reminded him.

“We’ve got them flagged,” Rhodey promised, looking far less concerned by it than he probably was. “Right now, I’m more worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” Tony snapped.

“You took these guys all out on your own,” Rhodey said. “Which, you know, you shouldn’t have
been alone. That wasn’t the plan.”

“They had Bucky,” Tony reminded him. “And someone that could control him. All we did to
deprogram him, and then this—”

“And that’s why I’m not yelling at you right now,” Rhody said casually. “I know why you came
rushing in all on your own. I think you handled it as best you could. Doesn’t make it easier to deal
with the fallout.”

“Should I be worried that it was easy, then?” Tony asked.

Rhody just glanced at him with a look, but didn’t press the issue. “How is your boy, anyway?” he
asked.

“I don’t know what that witch did to them,” Tony said tightly. “You find anything at the base?”

“Nothing good,” Rhody sighed. “Found files on the two enhanced, they’re twins. Wanda and
Pietro Maximoff. She’s got some kind of telepathy and telekinesis, he’s faster than their
instruments could actually record.”

“Wonderful,” Tony said dryly. “Any idea why they’ve got a grudge? Because they’re definitely not
loyal to Hydra. They got the hell out of dodge the moment Bucky took her out of the game.”

“You think they had ulterior motives for joining up?” he asked.

“She seemed pretty pissed at me personally,” Tony admitted.

“Right,” Rhody sighed. “Why can’t things ever be boring with you?”

“It’s a talent,” he shrugged.

“Colonel Rhodes,” a Sokovian soldier called, his voice respectful as two soldiers behind him lead
List away. “We are taking him back for questioning. Did you plan to join us?”

“Colonel,” Rhody greeted back with the same tone. “Yes, I’ll be staying for the debriefings, but
the Avengers will be heading back.”

The Colonel looked back at Tony with a half grin, and held out his head. “Pleasure to meet you,”
he said. “I’m Colonel Helmut Zemo.”

“Tony Stark,” he told him, though he knew it was probably unnecessary.

“Yes, of course,” Zemo said. “We appreciate your assistance.”

Zemo gave them both a nod, then turned to yell commands to his men in Sokovian as they loaded
List into their own vehicles.

Rhody looked back to Tony. “I’m gonna see what we can find out about this whole mess,” he
said. “I’ll let you know if we learn anything else about the twins, but for now, stay on guard.”

“About that,” Tony said. “I want you to be the first to know that I am seriously considering my
plan of running away with Bucky to an island where no one can ever find us. I’ll give you the
coordinates only if you swear yourself to secrecy.”

“Sure, buddy,” Rhody said, patting him on the shoulder before heading after Zemo.
“I’m serious!” Tony shouted after him. “You may never see me again!”

Rhodey didn’t bother to acknowledge that, which, fair. Tony wouldn’t last one week without access to his Rhodey.

It didn’t make the idea of an island getaway any less tempting, though.

Because instead of being able to celebrate retrieving the scepter and taking out a Hydra cell, he had to worry about the mutant wonder twins that apparently hated him.

Tony was pretty used to that, so it didn’t bother him per se. What did bother him was that she had an unknown level of power and was holding a grudge, and seemed perfectly willing to hurt those he loved in order to hurt him.

So it wasn’t ideal.

Steve was already making comments that implied he wanted to find them and try to talk them around, but Tony was mostly just planning to reinforce his security in the Tower—again—and shoot on sight.

He’d been the last one hanging around to see Rhodey off, so he was the last one back on the jet. His eyes automatically sought Bucky when he stepped on, and he was on one of the bench seats staring at the floor. Natasha had curled up against him like a cat, with Clint leaned up against her on the other side. Tony couldn’t tell if Bucky wasn’t hit as hard as she was by whatever Maximoff had done, or if he was just hiding it better.

He suspected the latter, and it hurt. They’d just been getting their act together, they’d just been healing. Steve better hope he finds the Maximoffs first.

He let his suit disassemble around him and then walked over, before kneeling down in front of him.

“Oh,” he said.

“Oh,” Bucky replied, inflectionless.

“I really want to promise you that they’re never going to touch you again,” Tony told him. “But it seems like this shit happens any time I try to promise that.”

Bucky snorted inelegantly, which settled something inside of him. As long as he could still make him laugh, it couldn’t be all that bad.

“I’m not worried about Hydra,” Bucky explained wryly. “I don’t care if they hurt me. I just…I thought my mind was safe, this time. She broke in like it was nothing.”

“Our that,” Tony started reluctantly. “We do need to know what she did.”

“I’m fine,” Bucky said quickly, glancing away.

“I know. You said that. A few hundred times, even, so we all know it’s extra true,” Tony told him wryly. “But still—“

“We’re not compromised,” Natasha told him, without even opening her eyes. “Not in the way you’re worried about.”

It wasn’t as reassuring as she’d probably meant it to be.
Chapter End Notes

I promise there will be some comfort in the next chapter, and then it’s pretty much planned fluff till the end (with maybe a few bumps along the road, cause I usually can’t help myself), but I had to stop here or I was going to need another week to finish up the next bits!
Chapter 30

Whelp, here we are at thirty chapters and almost a year later! I’m still not quite sure how this story happened, but I’ve been having so much fun with it. Thank you to everyone that’s been sticking with me, the end is near (no really, seriously this time)! My outline ends at thirty-four chapters, but each outline chapter has been taking two to three (okay, like once it took four) actual chapters to write, so…I’m just going to say this thing is gonna be less than forty chapters! I’m pretty sure I can keep to that estimate this time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The flight back home felt longer than the other way around. Tony hadn’t been able to shut his brain off, so he’d sat beside Bucky to work on his tablet while Bucky fell asleep against his shoulder. Bruce was hidden away somewhere with his headphones and Steve was flying with Thor asking him all kinds of questions from the co-pilot’s seat.

Natasha was as sound asleep as Bucky, by all appearances, which of course was never conclusive in her case. Clint was actually snoring, even though he didn’t even really do anything, but he always seemed to fall dead asleep after a mission. Which really only left Sam.

“You’re not at all like people say, you know,” Sam told him thoughtfully.

Tony raised an eyebrow, glancing up from the tablet. “Oh?” he asked, wondering which direction this might go. People tended to either demonize Tony Stark and idolize Iron Man or vice versa or both, but rarely did people see the man that was really between them.

“I mean, if you can care about that asshole and put up with him, everything that says you’re self centered has got to be way off the mark,” Sam explained.

“Screw you, Wilson,” Bucky said, without opening his eyes.

“See what I mean?” Sam asked. “Man, you must be a saint.”

“I swear, you’re the only one that brings that out in him,” Tony said, laughing lightly. “That’s some talent.”

“Lucky me,” Sam said, though he smiled as he shook his head.

“You should have heard him with pretty much any commanding officer in the war,” Steve offered, glancing back at them. Tony would have made a comment about watching the road, but Jarvis pretty much flew this thing anyway. “He turned passive aggression into an art form.”

“Lies and slander,” Bucky said, even as relaxed further against Tony’s shoulder. “They all adored me.”

“Both of those statements can be true,” Steve said wryly, before turning back to the controls.

With Sam and Steve’s banter keeping things light, and Tony gently clasping their hands, Bucky’s
Tony was suspicious as hell about it.

He’d never met anyone—not even Natasha—as good at hiding pain as Bucky was. Whether he was bleeding out at the breakfast bar like everything was code normal, or pretending he hadn’t just woken up screaming from a nightmare, he could flip off the anguish like he was hitting a switch. Except that wasn’t really how it worked, and all that pain had to be getting put somewhere.

Tony could tell that Steve could see through it too, though he reluctantly left with the others when they all headed off to their floors. Bruce and Thor hung back, following Tony to the lab. Tony kept a careful eye on Bucky the whole time, as he aimlessly followed along behind them. His eyes were clear now, though there still seemed to be some kind of disconnect whenever he caught Tony’s eye.

He’d seen Bucky pretend to be the old Bucky Barnes, watched him slip back into the accent and the smile. It had always been disconcerting, but it was easy to spot. Right now, it was like he was pretending to be himself. He was pretending to be the Bucky that had left with them.

“I’m sorry, what were you saying?” Tony asked, pulling his eyes away from Bucky to look at Thor, who had apparently been speaking for awhile.

Thor gave a slight shake of his head, smiling softly as he lifted the scepter. “I said, you may have tonight to study it,” he allowed. “I’m afraid it cannot stay here longer, it is not safe. I must return to Asgard with it in the morning. My father is awaiting its arrival.”

Tony wanted to protest but paused. Earth’s track record with keeping infinity stones safe was not stellar, so he didn’t have much of a defense. Even the tower wasn’t an entirely safe bet—he’d been working to update all levels of security, but he hadn’t taken into account angry young adults with super powers. “Got it,” he said. “Just tonight. No problem. I work best without the sun getting in my way, anyway.”

Thor reached out to hand him the scepter, and Bucky casually intercepted it, before handing it back off to him. Tony turned to him with a grin, but the moment he was distracted Bruce was already tugging it back out of his grasp. “I’ll go get everything set up,” Bruce said, before immediately disappearing into the lab.

Tony noted wryly that usually he would have been the impatient one. But something was bothering him deep in his gut, some voice telling him now was not the best time to disappear into the lab.

“Wonderful,” Thor said. “In that case, I will go seek out the Captain. He has promised me a feast.” He glanced back at Bucky. “Will you be joining us in our revels, Bucky?”

“I think I’m just gonna call it a night,” Bucky said, smiling back at him. “But I hope you know Steve’s idea of a ‘feast’ is just ordering twenty pizzas.”

“Ah, pizza! Yes, it is wonderful,” Thor said, patting him on the shoulder and then nodding at Tony before heading towards the elevator.

Tony leaned back against the wall, watching Bucky carefully. “You don’t want to sit in with me and Bruce?” he asked.

Bucky was insatiably curious about just about everything. It was telling that he was refusing at the moment to even meet Tony’s eyes. “Think alien mind stones are a bit out of my weight class,” he said.
“You think they’re in *mine*?” Tony asked incredulously. “That’s what’s fun!”

Bucky looked at him then, and flashed a smile that Tony nearly believed. “I’d just get in the way,” he said. “Anyway, I really need some sleep.”

“Bucky—“ Tony started, the worry growing deeper in his gut.

“I meant it before, really, I’m fine now,” Bucky told him. “I just need to go get my head together for a bit. Don’t worry about me. Go figure out the mysteries of the universe with Bruce.”

Bucky leaned forward then, giving him a chaste kiss on the lips, and letting their foreheads rest together for just a moment before abruptly pulling away, and turning to head down the hall.

Tony regretted letting him go about point three seconds after he watched him turn the corner. This was why Pepper had left him, why he had no real friends except for Rhodey and the ones he’d built, why he—this was the problem, this addiction that was always a hundred times more consuming than any of his past flings with drugs or alcohol.

His addiction to *figuring stuff out*.

“You didn’t really buy that, did you?”

Tony glanced up to see Natasha standing a few feet down the hall, leaning against one wall at an angle that left her mostly in shadow. He—admittedly over-dramatically—pressed a hand to his heart and muttered a curse.

“Seriously, a bell,” he told her. “I’ll do it. Don’t think I won’t.”

She grinned, but it was a ghost of her usual masks. “We were going to win, you know that?” she said. “They had us surrounded but we weren’t worried. There were five for each of us. It should have been a cakewalk. I was just about to fire, and then everything around me just disappeared.”

“What did she do?” Tony asked softly.

“I don’t know what she did to him,” Natasha admitted, answering the question they both knew he’d really wanted to ask. “I suspect she sent him to a custom made nightmare, because that’s what she did to me.” She pushed off the wall, meeting his eyes as she stepped back into the light. “She sent me to my past, but that’s not what scares James. He’s stronger than I ever was, and he’s already faced it. It’s the future that scares him.”

Tony could hear everything that she wasn’t saying. Bucky had dragged himself out of the hell that Hydra had put him in, and he had always been almost eerily well-adjusted about his part in what they had made him do, about the torture he’d suffered for such an unimaginably long time.

What scared him wasn’t what he had been—it was the thought he could become it again.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

“Because he won’t,” she said. “I owe you, Stark. For taking us in after SHIELD, for everything you did before that in New York. But that’s not why I’m doing this.” She shrugged, like nothing she was saying was important. Tony never could tell if the indifference was entirely an act. “James has been doing so much better than I ever did. I’d hate for him to revert now.”

Tony let out a breath as Natasha disappeared as quickly as she’d come.
The scepter was calling to him, with all its mysteries. If they could figure out even ten percent of it, he could change the entire world….

Bruce stepped back into the hall. “Tony?” he called. “Are you coming? I’ve started a clock. We’ve only got like twelve hours—“

“No,” Tony said, not even turning to look at him. His voice sounded firm and sure, like it knew the answer he was going to give before he did.

“No?” Bruce echoed, frowning like he didn’t recognize the word in this context. “I think I can handle basic math. Thor will be back by eight at the latest. If we don’t—“

“Nope. Sorry, can’t,” Tony told him, and then he spun and started toward the elevator. “I’m afraid I’ve come down with something incurable!”

“Tony!” Bruce shouted, chasing after him. He grabbed the elevator doors to keep them from closing between them, and Tony turned back to face him as he leaned against the back wall. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“I’ve fallen in love,” Tony explained.

Bruce’s eyes widened, and he stared at him in disbelief. “You’re serious,” he realized.

“I need to make sure Bucky’s okay,” Tony said. “I can’t do that if I’m here, getting lost in something we were never going to figure out, anyway. I trust you to handle it, just don’t have too much fun without me. Jarvis should make a suitable substitute. He even does impressions of me if you ask nice.”

“My American accent is getting much better, if I say so myself,” Jarvis agreed.

“You’ve always been my favorite lab assistant, Jarvis,” Bruce assured him, before turning back to Tony.

“I’m not going to take offense to that,” Tony said. “But only because we both know I’ve never been the ‘assistant’ in our partnership.”

Bruce just shook his head fondly, as he stepped back from blocking the elevator doors. “I’m happy for you, you know that?” he said softly. “And for what’s it worth, I think you’re making the right choice. Take it from someone that took the other road.”

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“Jarvis,” Tony said as the elevator started for the penthouse. “Where’s Bucky now?” There was no immediate response, and he frowned. “Jarvis?”

“Bucky enacted privacy protocols when I suggested to him that we may want to contact you,” Jarvis finally told him, his tone tinged with a worry that Tony had never actually programmed in.

That did not bode well. Tony pressed his eyes shut for a moment, preventing himself from getting angry at Jarvis. Privacy protocols were there for a reason. He was the one that had written them.

“You can still tell me his location,” he reminded him.

“He is in his room,” Jarvis said, before pausing, and Tony suspected he was stretching the limits of what he was allowed to say. “He’s currently in the shower. With the new temperature restrictions
we implemented, he’s not actually in any physical danger. So I wasn’t able to override the protocols.”

Tony felt his heart lurch. He remembered the last time he had found Bucky in the shower, with his lips tinged blue, barely responsive. They’d come so far since then. It wasn’t fair.

He headed to Bucky’s room in just short of a run, but when he tried the door it was locked. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against it, trying to calm himself down. They weren’t the same people they had been when he’d last gone charging in to save the day. Bucky had full autonomy now, he wasn’t his ward, they were becoming partners in just about every way possible. He didn’t have a right to override him if he really wanted to be alone.

“Jarvis, can you open a line to him,” Tony asked.

“Open,” Jarvis replied.

“Bucky?” Tony started. “I know you probably just want to be alone. I get that. Remember the first time I brought you to my lab? We—“ he broke off, sucking in a shaky breath. “I told you that I go to my lab when I need to get my head together, so I know how it goes. Except that isn’t working for me anymore. Maybe because you aren’t there with me.”

Tony laughed, just on the edge of hysterical. “I think that’s the sappiest thing I’ve ever said. Rhodey would be in hysterics. But it’s true, okay? I don’t want to be where you aren’t, anymore. And if you’re struggling with something, I want to help.”

“So…please, just let me in?” Tony asked, and he felt ripped open in a way he never had before. He never let himself be vulnerable, even with Pepper he’d never…He’d kept up the pretense, even then, he’d kept up the walls. He never bared his soul where it might get hurt.

He’d risk his life for any one of his friends. He’d go into battle for people he didn’t even know, intercept bullets and nukes alike. He’d even lay down on the wire if it came to it no matter what Steve thought.

But he’d never risked his heart.

“Please,” he said again. “Just…can you let me in?”

“Bucky has released the privacy protocols,” Jarvis informed him, and the door opened almost before he finished speaking.

Tony pushed inside as soon as the opening was wide enough, and nearly tripped over Bucky’s jacket. It had been dropped carelessly by the door—Bucky was never careless with his gear—and his boots and socks were a few feet away, haphazardly toppled one over the other.

“Bucky?” he called, as he moved towards the bathroom.

He saw pretty much what he had expected. Bucky hadn’t bothered removing his pants or t-shirt before walking right into the large shower. He was splayed out against the back wall with his legs stretched out in front of him, and his head tilted down. Tony knew that just because he hadn’t caught him doing this since that first time, it didn’t mean it hadn’t happened again since then. Once Tony had adjusted the temperature controls to make sure they wouldn’t reach any dangerous extremes, Jarvis wouldn’t have been obligated to inform him.

Bucky had been scrubbing at his hands so harshly the skin was turning pink. Tony was moving before he knew what he was doing, kneeling in front of Bucky with the water pelting against his
back. He reached out and gently caught Bucky’s hands. “Alright, stop, chill, Lady MacBeth,” he said as he pulled them against his chest. “I need you to look at me.”

Bucky slowly lifted his head, and Tony’s breath caught. Water had gotten caught in his eyelashes, but even as he tried to blink them away it was the pain in those eyes that Tony couldn’t look away from. He wondered if this was the first time he was seeing him without any masks, and it hurt. It hurt so much to see him in so much pain.

“I’m okay,” Bucky told him, like it was a reflex. It wouldn’t have been very convincing even if he hadn’t been shivering so bad the words came out stuttered. The water wasn’t cold enough to have caused it on its own. Tony suspected it was some form of shock.

“Yeah, you know, you almost had me convinced when you were smiling at me in the hallway, but the jig is up, darlin’,” Tony told him gently. He lifted his hands to gently frame Bucky’s face. “You’re not fine and that’s fine. But I need you to stop before you hurt yourself.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Bucky assured him, as he pressed his eyes shut. “Sometimes I wish it would.”

“You do this a lot then?” Tony asked quietly. Bucky shrugged slightly, which Tony figured meant yes.

“It helps me not think,” he finally admitted after a moment.

“Okay,” Tony said. All things considered, cold showers were probably a hell of a lot less dangerous than some of Tony’s former coping techniques. He had no right to judge. “But there are other ways to….not think. I mean, or so I’ve heard.”

“You’re always thinking,” he pointed out, though his tone was listless rather than wry.

“Okay, point,” Tony agreed. “But I should not be anyone’s blueprint on the way to mental health.” He glanced around as he finally started noticing the cold water soaking his clothes. “Jarvis? You want to shut that off?”

The water stopped abruptly, and Tony turned back to Bucky. “You want to tell me what you’re trying not to think about?”

“Doesn’t that sort of defeat the purpose?” Bucky asked, a smart-ass after his own heart.

“Natasha told me Maximoff could drag you into a nightmare,” Tony said, not letting himself get off track. Bucky’s eyes widened, making Tony suspect Bucky had told Natasha more than she’d actually passed on to him, but it wasn’t like that was surprising. “That’s all she told me,” he added quickly. “Anything else you want to share, that’s gonna have to come from you.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Bucky insisted. He abruptly pushed to his feet. He was usually almost eerily graceful, but his legs seemed unsteady and he nearly slipped as he went stumbling out of the shower. Tony half reached out to steady him, but he was too quick. He was all the way to the door by the time Tony had just managed to get back on his feet.

Tony shed his wet jacket, which had taken the brunt of the shower, and tossed it over the rail to dry before following Bucky back into his room. Bucky was leaving wet footprints on the carpet as he paced the floor beside the bed. Soaking wet and barefoot, he looked vulnerable in ways he didn’t usually let himself be seen.

“Bucky—” Tony started warily.
“You really want to know what I saw?” Bucky demanded, his tone defiant. “What I did where she sent me? I killed you all.” He swallowed hard, and then met Tony’s eyes. “I saved you for last.”

Tony resisted the urge to recoil, because Bucky wouldn’t understand his anger and disgust was in no way aimed at him. Instead he stood his ground and kept his gaze steady. He knew without a doubt that whatever Bucky had been forced to do in that dream had been horrible beyond his imagining.

But he’d always known Bucky was far stronger than him.

“It was everyone I’ve ever known,” Bucky explained. “Everyone I’ve met since you saved me. Everyone I knew from before. Everyone I’ve ever—I killed them all, and I didn’t… I didn’t even care. Steve just kept trying to talk me out of it and wouldn’t even fight back. No one was fighting back. You were just… sad. You told me you loved me and I still—and when it was over I was covered in blood and there was no one left alive but me.”

Wanda Maximoff had just made her way to the top of Tony’s shit list. He’d been planning to mostly ignore her so long as she stayed the hell away from him…but… this was so much worse than he had imagined. He clenched his hands and tried to keep his breathing steady.

“It wasn’t real,” Tony told him firmly. “You’ve never hurt me. Not once. Not even when I was trying to kill you.”

“Yes I have,” Bucky said softly. “When Rumlow came, when he… I would have taken you apart.”

“That wasn’t you,” Tony insisted, reaching out.

“Don’t—“ Bucky said, holding up his hands as he backed up so quickly that he went stumbling right into the wall. He stayed there, looking cornered, and Tony quickly took a step back. “Don’t touch me. Okay? Don’t… you shouldn’t touch me.”

“Okay,” Tony said, running both of his own hands through his hair to keep them from reaching out as he took another step back. “I won’t if you don’t want me to, okay?”

“No, that’s not—“ Bucky started, before sucking in a deep breath. “You shouldn’t want to,” he explained. “I’m dangerous.”

“Those things you did in that nightmare, do you want to do any of it?” Tony asked.

Bucky looked horrified. “No,” he insisted.

“So, there you go,” Tony said. “I don’t think you’re likely to go on any killing sprees. As long as I’ve known you, people trying to kill us not included, you’ve never hurt anyone. You’ve never even wanted to.”

“But what I want has never mattered,” he cried.

“It matters to me,” Tony told him. “And my influence is not inconsequential.”

“You can’t protect me from my own mind,” Bucky told him, laughing bitterly.

“Want to bet?” Tony asked, but Bucky wasn’t listening to him.

“I’ll kill myself before I’ll let myself become that thing again,” he said, his voice suddenly firm, shot through with such determination that it sent chills up Tony’s spine.
“Don’t say that,” Tony said firmly. “That’s not going to happen. The programming is gone.”

“Is it?” Bucky asked brokenly. “There’s a monster inside of me, Tony. We like to pretend it’s not there, but it is. I thought… I fooled myself into thinking it was gone, but she found it.”

“There’s a monster in all of us,” Tony said. “Do you know how many people I killed today?”

Bucky looked up at him with wide eyes. “That’s different,” he said instantly.

“Yeah, because it was my choice. It was me. No one made me pull the trigger,” Tony said. “And I’d do it again. I don’t even regret it. I don’t know what you’ve been telling yourself, but you’re not any more dangerous than any of the rest of us. What if Maximoff had gotten to me instead? What if she’d screwed with my head? Do you have any idea the sort of damage that I’m capable of?”

“You wouldn’t—” Bucky started.

“But I could,” Tony insisted, chancing a step closer. “And so could you. So could Steve, he’s got to have a dark side in there somewhere. But that’s not how this works. We don’t get judged on what we could do. We get judged on what we’ve done.”

“I’ve done plenty,” Bucky told him.

“Hydra used you to do terrible things, yeah,” Tony corrected him. “Just like my god-father used me as a figurehead to do unimaginable damage in more countries than I’ve been able to count yet. And we’ve gotta live with that, but it wasn’t us. It’s not who we are. It isn’t what we wanted. And that matters, too.”

Tony took another step closer, until he was right in front of Bucky. This time, Bucky didn’t seem to even notice him. “You want to know the worst part?” Bucky asked, as he reached up and scrubbed his hands down his face. “It felt so real. It felt like it was what I was meant to be, what was meant for me. Just... suffering, all the time. I know I woke up, but it was like this was the dream.”

“I’m real,” Tony promised. He reached out for Bucky’s hand, going slowly enough that Bucky could stop him, and then lifted it to place a kiss on the palm. “I promise, I’m real. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t promise that,” Bucky insisted.

“Always telling me what I can’t promise,” Tony chided. “Haven’t you learned yet I don’t follow the rules?”

“Then promise me... promise me that you’ll stop me if I become that thing again...” Bucky asked him. “Don’t let me hurt anyone. Don’t let me hurt you.”

Tony fought down the knee-jerk reaction to tell him that it wouldn’t happen, that he’d never need to. It wasn’t actually something he could guarantee. He knew, though, that he wouldn’t be able to hurt Bucky even then.

Which was why it was a good thing that Tony was brilliant, and had a solution for everything.

“You know, I’ve got a defense system built to cage the Hulk,” Tony told him. “So, it could definitely hold you, even at your super soldier worst. You ever go all Winter Soldier on us, I can have you secured in it in less than two minutes flat.”

Bucky relaxed against the wall, looking exhausted suddenly, and he nodded once before letting his
head fall forward onto Tony’s shoulder. Tony reached up carefully and ran a hand through his hair.

“But just don’t…don’t ask me to hurt you,” Tony said. “Because that’s my worst nightmare, too. I don't think I'll ever get over what I almost did to you.”

It still sort of haunted him, the way he'd felt with Bucky fresh out of cyro and laying helpless at his feet. He'd been so close to killing him. So sure he'd of been right to do it.

"You always think about how you went there to kill me," Bucky told him softly. "But what I remember most about that day is the moment when you realized you couldn't."

Tony tightened his arms around him, pulling him closer and burying his own face in Bucky's neck. He'd never thought about it that way before, and he let out a shaky breath to stave off a sob. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, you know that?" he asked roughly.

“Yeah?” Bucky asked, letting himself fall against him. “Does that mean you’ll save me a grape Pixy Stix once and awhile?”

“Now you’re just trying to take advantage,” Tony said, huffing out a desperate laugh.

“I’d do anything for you too, you know,” Bucky promised him.

“Yeah?” Tony asked. “Does that mean I’m going to get an orange Pixy Stix once and awhile?”

“Don’t press your luck,” Bucky told him, and Tony knew in a moment of absolute clarity that they were perfect for each other.

But Bucky was fading fast, and leaning more heavily against him. Tony was more than happy to support him, but it when it came to the literal sense the guy was pretty solid and they were both in danger of unceremoniously tipping to the floor. So he pulled him towards the bed, and ended up laid out on it with six feet of wet super soldier plastered against his chest. If he was doing the responsible grown up thing, he would have made them both get up and change into dry clothes, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask Bucky to move.

Bucky was so still that Tony almost couldn’t even feel him breathing. He thought he’d fallen asleep, but he sounded wide awake when he spoke a few minutes later.

“I’m okay now, really. You should go back to the lab,” Bucky told him. “I know Thor didn’t give you long to look at the scepter.”

He’d actually forgotten about it entirely, and he waited a moment for the urge to come back, for the itch beneath his skin to start up and tell him to slip away and sneak down to study it—but it never came. He knew Bruce would get enough interesting readings for him to play with later. At the moment, he couldn’t bring himself to care one way or another.

“I’m exactly where I need to be,” Tony promised him, as he turned his head to press his lips against Bucky’s temple.

He'd figure out the mysteries of the universe some other time.
Also, I have opened up my Tumblr for Timestamp requests to this story! So if there’s any scenes you wished I’d written or character interactions that haven’t happened yet, you can submit your request! Requests can be for any characters in this verse, any missing scenes from the beginning of the fic to the latest chapter. I will try to respond to all requests, even if it's just a mini-fic with some dialogue.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

And we are back to our regularly scheduled fluff!! No, seriously. This just all self-indulgent fluff, so apologies in advance for those that like the more slightly angsty-actiony bits, but I’m dealing with a lot of anxiety at the moment, and the more of it I have, the more ridiculous and happy my stress writing starts to get!

Also, this is a LONG one, and I got to do a lot of things I’ve been wanting to do for so long, you guys don’t even know, it’s been planned almost a year, so…I might take a short hiatus to work on a couple other things. But I say might, because this story hasn’t let me stop thinking about it since I started, so we’ll see.

I’d also like to give a big thank you to everyone that submitted prompt requests! You guys rock, and totally saved me by giving me something to focus on. I’ve got it shut down for now, but my Tumblr is always open for questions if you want to send me any! I’ve got two more prompt fills left, and may write an unprompted missing scene I’ve been wanting to do for awhile, so the series will still be getting updated even if I take a break from this monster. ;-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I mean, it’s been three weeks,” Tony explained to Dum-E. “He won’t go to therapy. He just wanders around with the big sad eyes and Avengers pajamas. I can only take so much, I’m not a monster. What else do you expect me to do?”

Dum-E made a small, inconsolable whirring noise.

“No, that’s not what I said!” Tony insisted. “It’s not going to replace you. But you’re mine, anyway, this little guy’s for Bucky.”

Dum-E chirped again, and Tony narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean you want to be Bucky’s? What kind of half-assed loyalty is that? I’m your creator!”

Dum-E just stared at him for a moment with his one blinking sensor, and then spun in an unwieldy circle and took off in the other direction, nearly running into a table in the midst of his haughty exit.

“Ungrateful scrap metal, that’s what you are!” Tony shouted after him, before turning back to the newest member of his makeshift little family. “Alright, let’s get you boxed up.”

“I think it’s very sweet, Sir,” Jarvis offered. “But if I might be so bold, it hardly seems very…functional.”

“Its function is happiness,” Tony insisted. “It’s going to make Bucky happy.”

Bucky had not quite bounced back in the way that Tony had come to expect. Which, counter-intuitive though it was, was probably a good thing. He wasn’t hiding anymore, or pretending he was okay. The trouble was that Tony really really wanted him to be okay. He knew Bucky wasn’t
something for him to fix, but that didn’t change the fact that his driving impulse at all times now was fix it.

“As you say, Sir,” Jarvis agreed skeptically. “However, this hardly seems an acceptable substitute for therapy.”

“You really want to try and tell that to my Bucky-bear again?” Tony said.

Jarvis paused for a moment. “I see your point.”

The first time Pepper had brought over a list of psychiatrists had not gone over well. It had actually been pretty genuinely horrifying, because Bucky had looked so betrayed at first, and then had gone into a full blown panic attack, and Tony’s pretty sure he stopped breathing at one point.

Apparently psychiatrists meant something very different within Hydra than they did to the rest of the world.

It sort of made him want to go track down that one damn doctor he’d accidentally left alive in Sokovia, and rectify that mistake.

But no, that was ‘unreasonable,’ apparently, or so Rhodey liked to claim. And so Tony was here in his lab instead. He closed the small red box, about the size of a toaster, and then placed it under his arm as he headed back to the penthouse.

Bucky really was doing better. The screaming nightmares had finally tapered off a bit the last week or so, and it wasn’t that Tony minded staying with Bucky through them. Bucky had helped him through a couple nightmares, too. He never scared Bucky the way he had Pepper.

So the problem wasn’t that he minded staying awake with him, it was just that they sort of tore out his heart every time. So, yeah. If he never heard Bucky scream like that ever again, that would still be too damn soon.

The nightmares were fading, though, and Bucky was slowly getting back to himself. He even actually left the tower the other day to go play chess with Luke in the park. And yeah, maybe Tony had a few drones discreetly monitoring him the entire time from the trees like some kind of stalker—but technically, Jarvis was the stalker, and the weirdo twins were still on the loose somewhere, so he wasn’t sorry.

So there were good days and bad days, and on the bad days Bucky tended to camp out on the couch like he had his first couple weeks in the tower, mainlining Pixar and Pixy Stix, not necessarily in that order. Inevitably someone would come to join him, whether it was Clint and Natasha sandwiching him in and annoying him with commentary the whole way through, or Sam showing up to drape himself across the love seat and pretend like he wasn’t enjoying whatever was on.

But mostly it was him or Steve.

Steve had tried to cheer Bucky up at first, but it hadn’t been long before Bucky had brought Steve down instead. Now it wasn’t uncommon to find both supersoldiers splayed out on the couch looking like kicked puppies—which, oh my god, why were they watching Up, did they want to cry?

“Oh, no, turn this off,” Tony said, with an imperious wave that Jarvis easily interpreted, though he only paused it. “It’s like you want to be miserable.”

“They killed her,” Steve whispered in disbelief, looking somewhere between inconsolable and
indignant. “This is for children.”

Bucky was just sort of leaning against him,blankly staring at the paused screen,his feet kicked over the arm of the sofa.Bucky had seen Up about twelve times already.“I keep trying to tell him it gets funny,”he said.”He doesn’t believe me.”

Tony just snorted,before looking back at him.”Darling,”he started,a bit over-dramatically,for Steve’s benefit.

“Yeah,babe?”Bucky replied,because he never disappoints.

“Why with the pet names,”Steve complained with a mutter.

“Because it upsets you,mostly,”Tony told Steve with a smirk,and Bucky laughed brightly.Tony glanced at him in surprise,because it had been awhile since he’d heard Bucky laugh like that.He dropped down to sit on the coffee table in front of him,setting the red box beside him.”I made you something.”

Bucky’s eyes lit up at the same time that Steve’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.Tony wished for a moment he’d waited until they were alone, but Bruce had been right: Steve was going to be his in-law,basically,if everything went to plan. They were going to have to learn to deal with each other.

And there hadn’t been a shouting match in ages,so he figured they were doing pretty damn good.

“Ow,”Tony said.

Bucky straightened up in concern,which quickly gave way to an awe as he watched the small red box fold back on itself,the small white robot inside of it growing as it inflated until it stood just short of two feet high.It blinked at all of them with two small black eyes with a line between them.

Bucky looked up at Tony in disbelief.”You made me a tiny Baymax?”he cried,before lunging forward to grab Tony in a tackle hug that would have knocked them both flat if Tony hadn’t caught his balance against the table at the last minute.

“I can’t believe you did this,it’s incredible,”Bucky said,as he dropped down to his knees to meet its eyes.”Vinyl. And did you,with carbon fiber—“

“Of course,”Tony said.”Probably would have made the skeleton out of vibranium though if I could have gotten my hands on it,but you’re still one of a kind.”

“What is happening right now?”Steve wondered,looking lost,though the question didn’t seem aimed at anyone in particular.

Tony nudged Baymax gently.”Come on,don’t be shy,”he said.”Introduce yourself.”

The tiny robot blinked,and puffed itself up a bit.”Hello,”it said,eyes turning towards Bucky.”I am Baymax,your personal healthcare companion.”

“Oh my god,”Bucky said.

“Are you in distress?”Baymax asked worriedly,stretching out his hands.”Do you require a hug?”

“Oh my god,”Bucky said again.

“Oh,that’s pretty cute,”Steve agreed.
“Cute?” Tony demanded. “Cute? He’s a fully functioning A.I. and capable of autonomous movement and decision making. And you call him cute.”

“He’s adorable,” Bucky insisted, reaching out to pick him up for a hug.

Tony turned back to him with a grin. “Well, yeah,” he agreed.

Steve rolled his eyes, but Tony ignored him.

“There there,” Baymax said, patting Bucky on the arm. Bucky just laughed and set him down.

“What do I do with him?” Bucky asked.

“He can pretty much take care of himself,” Tony assured him. “He’s just a companion, really. Oh! And I had him watch the movie a few times to learn the behavior, but it sort of backfired.”

“I would like to learn karate,” Baymax said, looking up at them with wide eyes.

“Yeah, that,” Tony said wryly. “Would have made him life-size, but I was sort of afraid he might actually learn karate and go on a crime spree. So, he’s pocket-sized. Not as complicated as Jarvis’s AI, of course—"

“I would think that goes without saying, Sir,” Jarvis interceded primly.

“No one compares to you, Jarvis,” Bucky assured him.

“He can learn, though. I filled him up with medical knowledge in honor of his namesake, but he’s pretty curious already,” Tony said. “Definitely more sophisticated than Dum-E, but don’t tell him I said so. He’s a little sensitive right now.”

“He’s amazing,” Bucky said, before looking up at him. “You’re amazing.”

“Well, yeah, but we knew that,” Tony agreed. Steve rolled his eyes, leaning back into the couch, but Bucky’s smile just got fonder.

“Is he just going to wander around the penthouse?” Bucky asked, watching the curious little robot with concern.

“I mean, I guess we could let him,” Tony said. “His power source is an arc reactor, and his power needs are far less than the suit, so he’ll be good for, oh, about fifty years. But it’s probably best if he returns to his case when we’re not around. He might get lonely.”

“I can’t believe you did this for me,” he said. “When did you even have time to do this?”

“Uh, yesterday?” Tony said.

Buck was now watching him worriedly, which Tony was trying to avoid, so he quickly moved on. “If you want him to head back to his case, you just have to say ‘I’m satisfied with my care,’ like the movie. We can change the phrases later if you want. I just made ‘em defaults.”

“I am satisfied with my care,” Bucky said, to try it out.

“Wonderful, I will shut down now,” the little Baymax said, before turning and looking up at the coffee table. He reached up to try and grab the edge to pull himself up, bouncing a little when he failed to reach it.
“Oh my god,” Bucky repeated, looking sort of besotted, as he reached out to pick him up and set him on the table so he could return to his case.

“You know, you don’t have to keep saying that,” Tony said. “You can still call me Tony.”

Bucky rolled his eyes as Baymax put himself back in his case. Then he slid forward, until he was kneeling between Tony’s knees. He tilted his face up to kiss him gently. “Thank you,” he said.

“Oh, geez,” Steve said, quickly getting to his feet. “I’m just gonna—“

He motioned vaguely to the elevator, and then with one grateful glance at Tony—which was bizarre, but also sort of nice—he hightailed it. Bucky didn’t even turn to watch him go.

“You know you didn’t have to do this, right?” Bucky asked him.

“I don’t do the things I have to do,” Tony reminded him. “Come on, you know me better than that.”

“Uh huh,” Bucky said dubiously, but he stayed where he was, which was a position that was messing with Tony’s head in all the best ways, amongst other areas.

But the coffee table had not exactly been reinforced for supersoldiers, and the moment Tony pulled Bucky forward towards his lap the whole thing started tilting. Bucky’s reflexes were insane, so he’d grabbed Tony and rolled them to the ground before the thing could topple.

Bucky landed hard on his back with Tony on top of him. “Okay, ow,” he said, though he was laughing.

“Sorry, sorry,” Tony said, “going to have to update everything here to make it supersoldier-proof.”

“Or we could just not make out on the coffee table,” Bucky pointed out.

“Spoilsport,” Tony told him, as he leaned down to kiss him again. And then:

“I am Baymax, your personal healthcare companion,” Baymax said. “It is good to see you Bucky. Have you been injured?”

“Seriously?” Tony muttered, as Bucky slid out from beneath him to go talk to Baymax, laughing the entire time. He looked up to see Bucky carefully helping Baymax out of his box, which had tipped in their coffee-table near miss.

“He is not coming to the island with us!” Tony decided.

“You don’t actually have an island,” Bucky reminded him. He paused for a minute, finally tearing his adoring eyes from Baymax. “Wait—do you?”

“No,” Tony said, throwing himself back on the couch. “Not yet, anyway, that’s year four.”

“What was that?” Bucky asked with a frown, glancing back up.

“Oh, nothing,” Tony sighed. Maybe he should move up the timetable for his five year plan. How soon was too soon to buy your boyfriend an island, anyway?
Things leveled out then. Bruce had been sticking around, staying on his Hulk floor, which was sort of a miracle itself. Thor had left with the scepter the morning after they found it as promised, but they’d been studying the readings Bruce had taken from it in their spare time, and Tony had been using what he learned to reinforce the tower security. He and Steve continued to actually get along (more or less, depending on who you asked). Natasha and Clint were doing…well, whatever Natasha and Clint did. Sam was turning out to be lots of fun, mostly because Tony liked to watch him freak out whenever he upgraded Sam’s equipment without telling him.

All and all, things were great. They were normal, at least for them. So he should have seen the next crisis coming before it did. What had he expected, really, when he let Bucky and Steve leave the tower without supervision? Stop following your boyfriend with drones, Pepper had told him, like he was being paranoid, or something.

And what happened the minute they were out of his sight?

“What do you mean they were spotted rescuing a kitten from a tree?” Tony demanded. He wondered if maybe Jarvis was pranking him.

“I’m uncertain how I could state it any clearer, Sir,” Jarvis told him. “There was a kitten. It was in a tree. They were rescuing it from said tree. They were spotted.”

Tony waved his hand, bringing his other up to pinch his nose and ward off a migraine. “Gonna need some visuals, here, buddy,” he said.

A holoscreen appeared in front of him, displaying some gossip site or another. Sure enough, the top trending story was: Captain America and friend save kitten from a tree.

“Unfuckingbelievable,” Tony muttered.

There were three images below the headline: Steve up in the tree—seriously, Steve?—with Bucky kneeling in front a little girl, obviously trying to reassure her. Steve had turned his hat backwards so he could see when he climbed the tree, and Bucky had pushed his sunglasses up on his head so he could have eye contact with the little girl like the gentleman he was.

Which meant their admittedly half-assed disguises were now entirely un-assed.

The second photo had Steve reaching down to hand the kitten to Bucky. In the third, Steve was back on the sidewalk, one hand resting casually on the back of Bucky’s neck, watching him fondly as he returned the kitten to the little girl.

“How are these guys even real?” Tony whispered to himself in disbelief.

Whoever had written the article was obviously even less versed in history than Tony himself, as there were no allusions made to the friend’s eerie resemblance to one Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes. It was mostly gushingly complimentary about how amazing and adorable Steve Rogers was. Gag me with a spoon, he thought.

The people in the comments were a bit more on top of things:

[AnnaSaft - 10:09AM]

“And friend”??!!?? DO THEY NOT REALIZE THATS BUCKY BARNES BACK FROM THE DEAD?!?!

[thecrabbyconspiracist - 10:13AM]
WTELF. Did they clone Bucky Barnes?

[MeggieQ - 10:14AM]

That must be his grandson. Did Bucky Barnes have kids we don’t know about?

[Adam Holden - 10:16AM]

He had to have been in the ice with Cap. How did they hide this?! WHY did they hide this?!

[Ellie - 10:19AM]

Okay it’s crazy that Bucky Barnes is back from the dead and all, but more importantly do you see the way Cap looks at him? They are obviously soulmates. <3

There were nearly another hundred comments that were basically the same, and once the media realized the story was less ‘Captain America saves kitten from tree!’ and more ‘Holy shit is that Bucky Barnes?!’ it was running on every news station in the world. The phone lines in the Tower overloaded as people tried to reach the Avengers for comment.

The cat was well and truly out of the bag. Or the tree, as the case may be.

“Jarvis, call Pepper,” he said. “We need to start doing damage control. Where are Bucky and Steve now?”

“They have just entered the Tower through the private entrance,” Jarvis told him. “They should arrive at the penthouse within the next three minutes.”

If they were using the private entrance, they likely already knew what was going on. Tony went to the window and looked down at the street—sure enough, the vultures had already arrived and were circling.

He spun around when Bucky and Steve stepped off the elevator. Steve had his hat back on the right way, but Bucky had pushed his sunglasses back up on his head. Tony pointed at them. “You two are unbelievable,” he cried. “I knew once you got together you’d be rescuing kittens! I said that! Jarvis, didn’t I say that?”

“Indeed you did, Sir,” Jarvis agreed.

“In our defense,” Steve said, “It was a kitten.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony agreed, because seriously, what kind of monster wouldn’t stop to help a kitten.

“How bad is it?” Bucky asked quietly, and all of Tony’s agitation entirely fled, because he was not the one about to have the entirety of his carefully rebuilt life thrown into a tailspin.

“Don’t worry about anything,” Tony told him. “You remember Plan B.”

“Plan B?” Steve asked warily.

Tony ignored him. “But it’s not gonna come to that,” he assured Bucky. “People are pretty much thrilled about your mysterious return from the dead. This was always the plan. It’s going to be fine.”

Bucky sighed and dropped down at the kitchen table, with Steve sitting down beside him,
watching him in concern. “Sorry, Buck,” he said.

“It’s fine,” he assured him, looking back up at Tony. “Seriously. It’s fine.”

Unfortunately, Bucky was really really good at lying about being fine, so Tony sat down across from him to keep an eye on him anyway. “I just don’t understand how these things even happen to you. I’ve never once encountered a kitten in distress.”

“It’s Steve,” Bucky accused, at the same time Steve insisted, “It’s Bucky.”

Then they turned to glare at each other like middle schoolers.

“Alright,” Pepper said, as she rushed into the room, looking down at her phone instead of them. “The good news is, I just confirmed with Rhodey that Bucky’s pardon had already gone through officially. Our biggest problem here is optics. People are going to want to know why we kept him a secret.”

“You’re gonna want to tell them everything, aren’t you?” Bucky asked quietly, staring down at the table instead of meeting anyone’s eyes.

Pepper paused and looked over at him. “Ideally,” she said gently. “No one is going to blame you, and there’s no reason to give them specifics. But the more we withhold, the more likely it is they’ll dig and find something we’d rather they didn’t.”

“Can you imagine if they find out Bucky Barnes likes watching Brave in his Hulk pajamas?” Tony asked, mock-gasping. “The scandal.”

“This is more serious than it seems,” Pepper said sharply, turning to glare at him. “Personally, I think the majority is going to be on Bucky’s side no matter what. But our approach now is going to set the tone for the next few years. Getting caught out this way, while adorable, isn’t ideal.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Steve insisted.

“It’s all over social media now. People are coming up with all kinds of conspiracy theories. They would have anyway, but they’ll be more prevalent now and more annoying.” Pepper looked a little frazzled, which was unusual. “You of all people should understand how quickly this sort of thing can get out of hand.”

“To be fair, Pepper, I probably know more about social media than Steve,” Bucky defended him.

“Hey!” Steve protested.

“You thought Facebook was a literal book of faces,” Bucky told him slowly. “Like, just a book, with everyone’s face in it. That’s what you thought.”

“Why do you say that like I’m strange for thinking that?” Steve demanded. “Why would you call a book a Facebook if there weren’t any faces in it?”

“It’s not even a book!” Bucky cried, choking on a laugh.

“Then it makes even less sense,” Steve said primly, in a tone that had Tony dead certain Steve was mostly screwing with them. “You’re basically proving my point for me.”

Pepper was gracefully trying to get them all back on track by going over options ranging from press conferences to private interviews, so Tony took the opportunity to check his phone.
“Shit,” Tony cursed, glaring down at the display.

“What?” Pepper asked quickly.

“‘StevenBucky4ever’ is trending on Twitter,” Tony cried indignantly. “What—some of these people are planning your wedding.” Tony looked up, glaring at them both. “This is because the two of you look like goddamn models.” He held up his phone, with the last picture from that article on the screen. “This looks like the kind of picture you find already in a new frame, who is this ridiculously photogenic all the time? Is this a byproduct of the serum?”

“Aw, shucks, Steve,” Bucky said, glancing over at Steve slyly. “I think he’s trying to say we’re good lookin’.”

“Please don’t drag me into this,” Steve pleaded, even as Tony narrowed his eyes.

“Okay, we need to fix this,” Tony decided. “Let’s put out a press release immediately, and let everyone know he’s actually dating me.”

Pepper sighed, and turned to look at him with familiar long-suffering. “Who he’s dating isn’t exactly the main issue here, Tony,” she reminded him. “It’s that he’s actually alive and well when he supposedly died in 1945.”

“Sure,” Tony said. “We can mention that too if you really think we need to. But we need to correct this.” He paused for a minute, and then looked at Bucky in concern. “I mean, only if you want to.”

Bucky just shook his head fondly. “We can hire a skywriter if you want,” he told him. “Of all the things I’d rather not get out, you’re nowhere on the list.”

“Skywriter. I like it,” Tony decided, with a snap of his fingers.

“We are not hiring a skywriter,” Pepper broke in sharply. “I think it’s wonderful you want to announce your relationship to the world, but we’re already doing damage control. We need to break this to the public in stages.”

Bucky sighed, and reached up to scratch behind his ear. “What did you have in mind?” he asked reluctantly.

“The best solution is to send a press release and then hold a quick press conference,” Pepper explained gently. “At a minimum, all three of you should be there. That okay with you?

Bucky tossed her a cocky smile and slouched a little in his seat. “I think I can handle the press,” he said.

Tony pointed at him. “Stop that,” he said. Bucky had been working too hard to heal to start up with the masks again now.

Bucky’s smile slipped and he sighed. “I can handle it,” he insisted.

“Okay then,” Pepper said, smiling tiredly. “I’ll set it up.”

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They’d released the press release within the next two hours. Tony had written it himself, with Bucky’s approval (after some unnecessary edits from Pepper):

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
New York, NY June 2014—In February of 2014, **Tony Anthony Edward Stark** discovered a prisoner being held at a secret Hydra facility. He was able to liberate the prisoner, and as he was at the time suspicious of SHIELD’s allegiance, he kept the prisoner’s existence and identity a secret. Obviously he was correct to do so, considering how that whole thing ended. The prisoner was Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes. Upon investigation, Stark determined that he had survived his fall from a train during WWII due to receiving a form of the super soldier serum during his capture by Hydra. Hydra had recaptured him after his fall.

Sergeant Barnes was held by Hydra for nearly seventy years. During that time, he was subjected to prolonged torture and brainwashing. He was stripped of his memories, and conditioned to work for them. The majority of records of this time have been lost, so there is no way to be certain what he may have been forced to do for Hydra during his imprisonment. However, there is ironclad evidence that nothing he did was of his free will. The Army has received this evidence and cleared him of any wrongdoing, as well as awarding him every metal possible a number of metals for his valor and service, as they should.

I would also just like to remind you all that this world would fall apart without me, and if you’re not respectful and nice to this man I will hunt you dow

All questions will be answered at the Stark Tower Press Conference later today.

###

Pepper thought she was clever, but the joke was on her, because this press conference was live and once it started he could warn them off as much as he wanted. He didn’t even care that she was giving him the evil eye as she fielded about a hundred phone calls. She knew who she was dealing with. He doubted he could surprise her if he tried.

He leaned out into the room to check on things. Pepper had gone smaller than Tony usually did. It was an intimate room at Stark Tower with thirty preselected journalists she trusted to be fairly well behaved. There was a single long table set up on the slightly elevated stage, with three chairs. He and Steve would be with Bucky for the conference, but they thought it better not to involve all of the Avengers. Natasha was great at these, but who knew what the hell Clint would say if they gave him a microphone. Better to keep it simple.

Well, as simple as it could be when he was involved.

He turned around and glanced at Bucky with a frown. Steve was hovering behind him, looking even more anxious than Bucky. “You gonna be okay?” Tony asked. “Because you don’t have to do this. You don’t have be here.”

“I can do this,” Bucky said, looking like he was psyching himself up, and he definitely looked the part. Pepper had dressed Bucky, and Tony could admit she’d done a good job. He was wearing a casual grey suit, with a white collared shirt unbuttoned just at the top. She’d even somehow managed to get him to wear actual dress shoes, instead of sneakers or his combat boots.

“There’s no pressure here,” Tony assured him. “We never said you’d be here. I can—“

“It’s fine,” Bucky said firmly. “Used to have to handle the press all the time. Steve was crap at it, so they kept shoving me into the shot with him to try and get him to lighten up and not act like a
“cardboard cut out of himself.”

“Hey,” Steve protested half-heartedly.

“It’s true,” Bucky insisted.

“Yeah, but it’s still rude to say,” Steve told him.

“Sorry,” Bucky said, waving a hand dismissively. “I just meant, you go all Captain America any time you’re in front of a camera.”

“I am Captain America,” Steve reminded him.

“Sure, pal,” Bucky snorted, before reaching up to chew at the nail of his thumb.

That was a new anxious habit, and pretty adorable, but Tony still gently reached up to grab his hands and tug them down. He stepped forward to meet his eyes. “Hey, I meant it before,” he said. “You don’t want to do this, Steve and I can go out there on our own. He’s already got his good khakis on and everything.”

“Seriously?” Steve sighed. “Is it pick on Captain America day?”

Bucky let out a deep breath, and then met Tony’s eyes. “They’re going to ask if I’ve killed anyone.”

“Yeah, probably, reporters are assholes,” Tony agreed.

“What should I say?” Bucky asked.

“Whatever you want. You can tell them you stopped counting when you were fighting for your country in World War II,” Tony told him. “You don’t owe them anything.”

“Right, okay,” Bucky said, and let out a breath. “Let’s go.”

Steve and Tony kept Bucky between them as they headed out, though there wasn’t much they could do to protect him here. Tony was used to drawing every eye in the room, but at the moment he wasn’t even registering. Everyone was staring at Bucky with varying degrees of awe and disbelief.

“Thank you for coming today,” Tony told them, clapping his hands with a mock-cheerful grin as Steve and Bucky sat down. “I think we all know why we’re here, so let’s skip to the ground rules. You say anything that upsets us, you get thrown out. You say anything inappropriate, you get thrown out. You say—” Christine Everhart raised her hand, right from the front row, and Tony made a point of not acknowledging her. “Please hold your questions until the end. Where was I—oh, yeah, be respectful, or you’ll get thrown out. I think we all know I look damn good in Armani, so let’s not make me put on my other suit.”

Everyone stared back at him, looking sort of shocked. Tony supposed this wasn’t his usual way of dealing with the press, which was to field whatever questions they had expertly. He tended to have more fun the worse and more invasive the questions were, but these people weren’t here for him. He dropped himself down in his chair, and glanced over at Bucky. Bucky gave a hesitant smile, which dropped as soon as he turned back to the reporters.

Tony figured he might as well start with the enemy he knew, and pointed imperiously over at Christine Everhart.
“Sergeant Barnes,” she started, “have your memories returned?”

Bucky leaned forward, flashing her a half grin. “I remember most of it,” he said. “But I am nearing a hundred, and they say memory is the first thing to go.”

The reporters all laughed, they were eating it up. Tony turned to look at Bucky in disbelief, but Steve just looked resigned. Bucky fielded a few more softball questions effortlessly:

“Will you be rejoining the Army?”

“I mean, technically I was drafted. I was sort of hoping after this they’ll let me off the hook.”

”Did you really save a kitten from a tree?”

“Steve did most of the rescuing, but to be honest, I’m pretty sure the kitten was just playing along. It didn’t look too concerned. I think it was just hanging out enjoying the view.”

“What was it like being reunited with Captain Rogers?”

“Well, he was falling out of a helicarrier at the time, so it felt pretty much like old times.”

”Does that mean you were involved with the fall of SHIELD?”

“Oh, uh right. I mean, I was there? I was really just air support, though. Unofficially, of course….uh, can this still be off the record? Is that a thing?”

The room was almost all staring at him adoringly by this point, and christ, Tony half-suspected no one would even print anything about the fall of SHIELD just because he’d asked them not to. Someone did ask if he’d killed anyone, and Bucky had used a variation of Tony’s suggestion: ”Pretty sure that’s already discussed at length in the history books.”

And then because there was always one, an asshole in the back stood up to ask: “And will there be any investigation into crimes you have may committed during your time with Hydra?”

Bucky went still for a moment, and before he could answer, Steve reached out and laid a hand gently on his arm.

“I’ve got this one,” Steve he told him, before tilting his head back in his ‘I’m Captain America’ stance. “What’s your name, son?”

“Michael Hanson,” he answered, looking suddenly a little pale.

“Well, Michael,” Steve said, somehow making a respectful tone sound like genuine disdain. “Did you come here today without reading the press release? Because I believe it clearly stated that Bucky was cleared of any wrongdoing. Now, I wouldn’t tell you how to do your job, just like I know you would never presume to tell me how to do mine, but it might do you some good next time to come prepared.”

Michael sat down looking like a teenager that had just been embarrassed by one of his parents in public. Tony bit back a laugh, and then got to his feet, clapping his hands to regain the attention again.

“Okay, we’ve got time for one more question,” he said, catching Everhart’s eye. He waved at his hand at her again, and she stood up with a sly grin. You could say whatever you wanted about her —and Tony had said plenty—but she always knew the right questions to ask.
“Sergeant Barnes,” she asked, turning her attention to Bucky, “will you be joining the Avengers?”

Bucky gave an adorable little frown as he thought about it, and Tony was getting ready to interfere right when he finally answered. “I guess I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “But I feel like I ended up back here for a reason, so I’m just gonna see where it all takes me.”

“All right, that’s it for now,” Tony decided, and Steve gratefully jumped up from his seat. “You can address any further questions to the Avengers PR department, and we’ll answer if we feel like it. Thanks for your time!”

Tony gratefully pushed his way back into the room behind the stage, and Steve followed closely on his heels. He turned back in concern when he realized that Bucky hadn’t followed them. Steve started to go back out, but Tony held out a hand and shook his head. Steve frowned, but stayed where he was.

Bucky had stood, but was leaning down in front of his microphone. “Oh, and I do have access to social media, so I know what the public has been saying. I would just like to assure you that I am not now, nor have I ever, slept with Steve. I mean sexually, of course. Technically we’ve—uh, that’s getting off track,” he told them wryly. The reporters all started shouting questions again at once, and he waited for it to calm down before continuing. “The point is that I am completely, hopelessly in love with Tony Stark, so you can quote me on that.”

Then he tossed off a sloppy salute and exited to the roaring sounds of their questions.

Tony gaped at him as he came to stop in front of him in the private back room, and Bucky just gave him a little smirk. Steve rolled his eyes, and muttered to himself as he stepped away.

“I know it wasn’t as flashy as a skywriter, but I think it did the trick. What do you think?” Bucky tossed him a guileless smile like he didn’t have any idea about the storm he’d just brought down upon them, even though he absolutely did.

"Loved the improv," Tony assured him, starting to grin himself, recalling his first press conference after he’d created Iron Man. "I don't like reading from the cards, either. Pepper's gonna kill you, though."

Bucky leaned into him, reaching up to wind his arms behind his neck. “You'll protect me though, right?”

"She can literally just burn through things now with the power of her mind," Tony told him. "You're on your own."

"Good thing I'm her favorite then," Bucky said, tossing him a wide grin. "She's probably just gonna blame you."

"Tony Stark!" Pepper screamed from somewhere not far enough away.

“Since you’re considering joining the Avengers, here’s Avengers lesson number one. Strategic Retreat,” Tony decided. He grabbed Bucky by the hand and rushed them towards the back exit, with Bucky laughing the entire time.

Chapter End Notes
UPDATE: Also I forgot to mention this, but Baymax is a character from Big Hero 6. Some of the robot's dialogue is borrowed directly from the movie.

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