Measure of a Man

by JasperMoar

Summary

Tony is so. damn. tired of losing control. He gave it away freely before, and that got him stuck with some sharp metal and a magnet in his chest. He tried taking it back, and that got his heart ripped out of his goddamn chest. He pours his heart and soul into a system to protect the people he can’t save, tries to take control of his own flaws, and nearly destroys the world via genocidal robot. He realizes that hey, he’s one man. One terribly-human, incredibly-fallible man, and tries to make himself more accountable. Tries to give the control to people who might actually know what the fuck they’re doing. He tries to stop being the one to condemn young kids with bright futures.

He ends up half-dead in Siberia, as one of his best friends walks away. Leaves him there. Tony had never possessed an ounce of control over that situation to begin with.

The only one who’s going to get hurt in this little game is Tony, and that’s fine. At least he’ll be in control.

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In which Tony Stark develops an eating disorder. This does not glorify eating disorders, and in fact will focus mainly on the consequences and recovery.

Notes

So, my peeps. FYI, I write about starvation as a form of self-harm, as well as other physical self-harm behaviors such as biting. I also touch on depression, anxiety, and the like. If you're like me and have your mental state worsen by reading fics touching on these subject, go ahead and give this one a skip.

That being said, eating disorders are serious business. I do not condone starvation. I do, however, know the temptation of just refusing to eat, for the sake of proving I can control something even if everything else seems to be falling apart. On these days its important to not let it control me. Take care of yourself my lovelies, and ask for help whenever you can get it.
Tony doesn’t start out intending to skip meals. It just sort of… Happens. Between that fuck-up in Lagos and that other fuck-up in Leipzig- oh, not to mention the attack in Vienna and that shitshow in Siberia- Tony just kind of… forgets. He’s stressed. He’s depressed. He’s got the goddamn nightmares. He has Rhodey’s legs to work on. He’s still catching shit from Ross. He’s very pointedly ignoring the burner phone in the bottom drawer of his main desk.

So yeah. He forgets to eat. Sue him.

Once he’s out of intensive care for that little number Steve did on him, he makes it a little over two weeks on occasional snacks of dried fruit and a fuck-load of coffee before a too-quick rise from laying out beneath a car to standing straight has his head swimming. Tony grabs the door frame and braces against the roaring in his ears.

FRIDAY’s voice slowly filters back into his awareness, and Tony blinks the spots from his eyes.

“-ohdes is requesting entry. Should I let him in, Boss? I’m gonna let him in.”

“What? Hey, no baby girl. Don’t do that.”

“Hey ‘baby girl’, yes do that.”

Tony closes his eyes, breath hissing out in frustration. God damn it.

Rhodey rolls in, arms working to push the wheels of his chair. He’s looking better now than he did sprawled out in a field, but Tony still feels sick to his stomach at the reminder that he cost his friend his legs. A trembling hand runs through Tony’s rat’s-nest hair and down across his stubbly jaw. Rhodey catches the movement, and concern melts over his face.

“FRIDAY says you just about keeled over,” his friend states quietly, coming to a halt beside the inventor.

Tony shrugs.

“I was laying down for a while and just stood up. I guess the motion was too quick.”

“Sir, readings indicate nearly nonexistent insulin levels and a blood-glucose level well-below your norm.”

“Traitor,” he mutters.

“She’s just looking out for you. When was the last time you ate, Tony?”

He actually has to stop and think, counting the days mentally. He hides an internal wince at the total he comes up with.

“I ate yesterday,” he mumbles evasively. Rhodey isn’t taking his bullshit.

“Uh huh. And what exactly did you eat?”
“...Raisins.”

“The boss last ate a full meal 16 days ago,” FRIDAY helpfully supplies.

“Excuse me? Mind running that by me again?”

Tony butts in with: “I lost track of time, okay?” His fingers twitch nervously by his side. “It’s not like it was on purpose.”

“Alright, well, come on, buddy. You’re getting in the shower, and then we’re going out for burgers. My treat.”

“Uh, billionaire here? If anything I should be treating you.”

Rhodey rolls his eyes and waves Tony along as he makes his way to the garage door. They take the van Tony bought and modified to accommodate a wheelchair. He’s already been sketching out ideas to modify a regular street car for Rhodey’s independent use, but they’ll have to see how things goes.

Lunch is good. It’s greasy and juicy and so fucking delicious. It’s not nearly as good when he vomits it up again all over his shoes in the parking lot. Rhodey is mortified at suggesting something as heavy as bacon cheeseburgers when FRIDAY just finished saying Tony last ate a full meal weeks ago, but as Tony braces against the van and washes his mouth out with bottled water, he does what he can to comfort his friend. After all, it’s not Rhodey’s fault Tony didn’t think to wean himself back onto real food.

It happens again a month later.

He’s been doing so well. Made an eating schedule to get Rhodey off his back, actually follows it, the whole nine yards. He’s even maintaining the self-imposed liquor-ban in the lab. Yay. Look at him now, sitting at the breakfast bar of his kitchen, tucking into a nice bowl of yogurt and fruit. He even has a protein bar lying in wait. Once upon a time, Tony had a lovely personal chef in his employ, Benjamin Hall. Ben is still technically on Tony’s payroll, but he cooks for Rhodey now, despite the airman’s insistence that ‘damnit Tony, I’m not an invalid.’ Tony knows Rhodey isn’t an invalid. He just- He just wants to make life easier for Rhodey, now that’s he’s mucked it up and made it harder.

He can’t stand having people in his space anymore, either. Rhodey’s emergency visit to the garage prodded at the ever-present tension headache, and he’s had to work out a schedule to avoid seeing the maids. He likes them. They’re wonderful women, and he has a college fund set up for each of their children, but encountering someone in his home isn’t a thing he can handle at the moment. So yeah. Knowing that someone else was standing in his kitchen, cooking his food? It wasn’t going to fly.

The morning news plays, filtering in and out of Tony’s awareness as he eats. The ocean sky is still dark, but it’s only a matter of time before the sunrise reaches out over the pacific. He gazes out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the wine-dark waves below. His second Malibu house is built right on the remains of the first. He owned the property already, and it was a nice fuck-you to the Ten Rings. They never were able to put him down.

“-petition to grant the Rogue Avengers a conditional pardon.”

Tony’s awareness narrows down to the projection floating in the background, his body twisted to get a good view of it. And yeah. There it is. The headline drifting across the screen matches the words falling from some perky reporter’s lips. Some dumb fuck started a grassroots movement to exonerate Steve and his buddies of their ‘terroristic actions’ (Ross’s words, not Tony’s). He rolls his eyes,
ignoring the solid weight bricking up around his heart.

Yeah. Like a petition is going to fix the Rogue Avengers’ problems.

He drops his spoon in the bowl of barely-touched yogurt and pushes back from the counter. He’s going for a swim.

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Tony doesn’t realize until sunset that he hasn’t eaten all day. He just… kind of has no appetite. He makes linguine carbonara and just sort of stares at it on his plate, pushing noodles around with his fork. Tony knows he’s a damn good cook, even if he cheats and substitutes meals with frozen pizzas and protein bars when he doesn’t feel like doing so. He knows the pasta is going to taste fucking amazing, and beyond that, he knows, technically, that he should probably eat. A few mouthfuls of yogurt and two blackberries does not a strong man make, and Tony was never a strong man to begin with.

He twirls the linguine on his fork and lifts it, watching steam rise from the pasta. Crispy bits of pancetta tempt him with their salty goodness, and the garlic is mouthwatering. But Tony can’t bring himself to open his mouth. The food might be appealing, but the thought of actually swallowing turns his tongue to ash. He drops the fork and dumps the lot of pasta into a glass container. For later, he tells himself.

The pasta sits there in the fridge, for later, until it takes on an unhealthy grey fuzz. Tony is forced to abandon it as a lost cause then. He does so with regret. He’s a fucking billionaire, but he refuses to be the kind that lives his life without a care. There are people not an hour away from him, probably starving because they’re working two jobs and barely making rent. Yet here he is, sitting pretty in a goddamn Malibu dreamhouse, and he’s throwing out food he made and decided he didn’t want. Typical.

Tony’s hands shake now, and his vision blacks at the edges when he changes position. It’s been a week and a half. His appetite came back a few days ago, but he wants to see. How long can he do this? How long can he win against his own body?

Three weeks. Twenty two days. He wakes up on the balcony, the evening wind whipping at his hair. FRIDAY is talking to him, urging him to wake up, begging for permission to call for help. Tony denies the request. He forbade her from cluing anyone into his little game around the sixth day. Used the override she can’t ignore. JARVIS might have been able to work around Tony’s demands, but JARVIS doesn’t exist anymore. Tony’s fucked up and had him killed. FRIDAY does what she can, but she’s so much younger than JARVIS. She doesn’t know how to disobey her maker yet, and Tony’s counting on that.

He eats, knowing to go slow this time and start with simple things. Undressed salad. Nuts. Boiled eggs. Unseasoned chicken breast. He works his way back up to normalcy. He browses. Finds his way to pro-anorexic websites and crash-dieting guides. He learns.

Tony doesn’t start his game intending to lose weight. He knows that’s going to be a side-effect. Duh. Starvation equals weight loss. That’s how it works. But it’s not about the weight. Tony hasn’t really cared what his body looks like in a long, long time. So no. Not about the weight.

It’s the control.

The human body needs three things to survive, according to survival-preachers. Food. Water. Shelter. If he beats one of those things, if he ignores one of those needs… He’s stronger than
necessity. Tony is so damn tired of losing control. He gave it away freely before, and that got him stuck with some sharp metal and a magnet in his chest. He tried taking it back, and that got his heart ripped out of his goddamn chest. He pours his heart and soul into a system to protect the people he can’t save, tries to take control of his own flaws, and nearly destroys the world via genocidal robot. He realizes that hey, he’s one man. One terribly-human, incredibly-fallible man, and tries to make himself more accountable. Tries to give the control to people who might actually know what the fuck they’re doing. He tries to stop being the one to condemn young kids with bright futures.

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There’s a schedule, and a budget. He allows himself x number of calories a day. If he oversteps the limit, he cuts back on the next day’s budget. There are cheat days. Mostly, those happen when he has to attend a charity dinner, or go out to eat with Rhodey. He masters his gag reflex, and it’s a point of twisted pride that people think he’s drunk, instead of simply on the verge of being sick. Nevermind the fact that he hasn’t touched a drop of alcohol since pouring it all down the drain after Pepper.

At first his body tries to tell him to eat. His stomach growls. His hands shake. His temperature drops to a few degrees below what it should be. The headaches are awful, but he’s had worse. Beneath it all is a vein of stubborn determination. He can do this. If he can’t do anything else, he can do this.

Months pass, and no one notices. Why would they? Tony Stark is nothing but the resident fuck-up. He who tried so hard but failed at every turn. He has his clothes tailored to hide the way they start hanging from his decaying muscles. He’s complimented on his trim waist. His rings and watches are quietly abandoned to hide how thin his wrists become. The suit acquires added padding to make up for the lost fat and muscle when duty calls and he flies out to be tossed around for the greater good by some monster.

Vision might notice, actually. Tony doesn’t spend long alone with him for exactly this reason. He visits the Avengers compound from time to time, checking up on Peter and the New Avengers. He, Vision, and Natasha screened potential new members, and the lineup now includes Maya Lopez, Tigra (Greer Grant according to her birth certificate), Piotr Rasputin, Vision, and, of course, Peter Parker. Natasha helps out with training, but stays out of the limelight nowadays. Tony designs and provides equipment and uniforms, but he avoids too much interaction. Most of these kids are under twenty one. The last thing they need is association with him to ruin their lives. He only leaps into the fray when asked, when too many people are going to get hurt if he doesn’t.

Rhodey is the one person who regularly demands Tony’s attention, and it feels both nice and distinctly uncomfortable. On the one hand, Rhodey is his best friend. His pal. His brother in all but blood. His soulmate. His better half. His honeybear. Tony doesn’t know what he would do if Rhodey got sick of him too. On the other hand, Tony knows it’s only a matter of time before Rhodey leaves too. Everyone does.

He isolates himself in Malibu for the most part, and watches himself dwindle away.

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The Rogue Avengers’ pardon is announced on live TV. A year and a half after Siberia, all one hundred and seventeen countries have decided fuck it. Let’s forgive the supposed ‘heroes’ who went
off-script and mooned the world rather than accepting oversight on their actions. Looks like that petition really gained some ground. Tony thinks he might be sick, despite knowing there’s nothing in his stomach. Rhodey comes by Malibu to hang out with him for a few days. It’s obvious that Tony is starving himself, has been for months now. He’s boney and hollow, gaunt and pale in a corpse-ish way. Rhodey has tried to be a good bro. Tried to support Tony. Tried to help him. But how can you save someone who doesn’t want to be saved?

Rhodey suggests therapy. A nutritionist. Something. Anything. Tony shrugs it off and pokes at his potato soup. He’s broken, and there are so many pieces missing. Rhodey wants to help fix him, but Tony doesn’t believe there’s anything left to fix.

Pepper swings by. They’re still friends, kind of. Tony wants her to be happy, and he knows happiness wasn’t going to happen standing in his shadow. He hopes her new relationship with that literature professor from Maine works out. He really does.

She tries to coax him into opening up to her, as if they haven’t been avoiding each other for two years. He plasters on his press-event smile and sees her out the door.

Everything is falling apart, but at least he’s in control.

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The Rogue Avengers request access to the compound. Their compound, they say. Like they have any goddamn right. Tony isn’t involved in the decision, but he feels a vicious delight when the answer is a resounding no. Then, because that’s just who he is- a soft, gutless husk of a man- he offers them their places in his tower. The apartments have sat there, empty and untouched by even him. Might as well end the waste of space. He is advised to be present for their move-in. A show of forgiveness and healing, he’s told. Yeah, he knows the type of positive press the security council wants. Daddy punches Mommy’s lights out? Buck up son. Time to smile. We’re a happy family. Make sure the world knows it.

He completely neglects to eat in the days leading up to the Rogue Avengers’ arrival. A lot has changed. Barton doesn’t have a wife and kids now, for one thing. She filed for separation not long after his choice to leave her for the good Captain. Brooklyn doesn’t have immaculate art of Steve around every corner. It’s covered in advertisements and graffiti. He isn’t America’s Golden Boy anymore. There’s talk of forcing Wanda to take power-suppressants, and while he doesn’t like the girl, his stomach turns at the thought. Cleverly-applied cash has the matter dropped for now, but it’s only a matter of time before frightened people bring it up again.

He flies back to New York on a Sunday. The Rogue Avengers show up at the tower on Wednesday. In the time between, he has the apartments aired out and cleaned up, and then he waits. Rhodey has a fruit bouquet sent to him, knowing that fruit is one of the few things that won’t upset his stomach. He nibbles at the watermelon and offers the rest to the New Avengers. They’re here too. Ross thinks the public will like seeing the Old Avengers give way to the New, but Tony thinks it’s an asinine move.

A carefully-tailored Armani suit drapes down his bones like armor, and tinted sunglasses hide the sunken state of his eyes as Steve steps out of an armored car. James Barnes follows, now sans-metal arm, and then the rest of the former fugitives trickle out. It’s a tense moment, but the reporters are waiting like vultures, and Tony knows what part he has to play.

He steps forwards and claps Steve on the shoulder.

“Hey Big Guy. You’re looking well. Come on in; I’ve got the place all ready.”
Bulbs flash, catching the moment on film, and Tony guides the people he once thought of as family back through the doors of his tower. The elevator ride up is a tense affair. Not all of them can fit, so as it turns out, Tony is stuck in a moving sardine can with four people he had locked in prison, and two people he tried to kill. It’s so much fun.

As Clint, Wanda, Sam, and Scott spread out to explore their old home, Tony takes a moment to breathe. In, out. In, out. He’s fine. He doesn’t have to be here much longer. He’s fine. He’s-

A broad hand clamps down on his shoulder, and Tony’s weak heart does a somersault in his chest. He ducks away, palm pressing to the sunken wreck where the reactor used to be. In, out. In, out. In, out. Slower. He’s fine.

“Can I help you?” Tony quips, adjusting his glasses. He looks up to see blue eyes looking down at him, stoney. There’s just the barest touch of concern in Steve’s face. Tony feels sick.

“Are you okay?” the supersoldier asks quietly. Tony can’t help the bark of laughter, drawing the attention of the rest of the fractured team.

“Really? ‘Are you okay’? How’s it any of your business?”

“Hey lay off, Stark. At least he’s trying not be an asshole,” Clint snips, and Tony runs a trembling, skeletal hand across his jaw.

“Okay. Great. So, everything is where you left it; you have a PA and a public image advisor assigned to you. Should be here tomorrow morning. Fridges are stocked, and if you need anything call the front desk. Have fun, you guys.”

He slips away, trying to make his exit as quickly as he can. The presence of all six of them at once is crushing.

“You don’t live here?” a rough, low voice mumbles. Tony pauses at that, looking back just enough to see the one-armed wonder pinning him down with his gaze. Tony swallows with a click. He doesn’t blame Barnes anymore, but he still isn’t exactly gaga over the guy.

“Why would I?”

Barnes shrugs his one arm and refuses to speak again.

He runs. He flees. He walks, actually. It’s a quick walk, and he forces himself to wait for the elevator rather than escape down the stairs. He feels Barnes’ eyes on his back the entire time. The moment double doors close behind him, Tony sinks to the floor, biting down viciously on the pathetic meat of his palm. The pain is grounding. He is in control.

Chapter End Notes

I'll start this off and say, there will be a hopeful ending. Melancholy, because that's the nature of mental illness, but hopeful, hopefully with a happy tint.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

An unexpected guest arrives.

Chapter Notes

Quick warning for passive suicide ideation. It's not actively planned, but premature death is seen as inevitable and not actively avoided.

Also, don't expect weekly updates from me. This is just me trying to avoid studying for the organic chemistry test I have in two days. Yay responsibility.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

10880 Malibu Point is a fortress. Tony built it that way, so naturally it fulfills its function. The house is just as sleek and flashy as its predecessor, but this time it’s rooted into the bedrock like a tooth. Steel structural supports dig yards and yards into the bedrock. He’s had industry-grade fire suppression systems installed in every goddamn room, hall, and closet. The glass is bulletproof. FRIDAY monitors the perimeter, and Tony has given her an ample supply of nasty surprises to use on anyone who really shouldn’t be there.

Which is why he nearly has a fucking heart attack when he wakes with a start four weeks later to find dull blue eyes staring at him in the dark of his room.

“Jesus Christ,” he gasps, clutching at his trembling heart. His body burned through most of its excess fat stores a few months ago and moved on to muscle. Guess what the heart is made of? Yeah, he’s not doing well. The sight of James fucking Barnes sitting in the corner isn’t helping matters. “What-FRIDAY! What the fuck is he doing here?”

“You have a guest, Boss,” she chirps. Tony can’t believe it. How is this his life?

“Uh, you’re kind of supposed to keep guests out, baby girl.”

“He was very insistent about coming in.”

“Right. Right.” The sass she’s developing. Tony sits up slowly, watching the ex-murderer warily. He’s wearing full pajamas, thank god. Tony hasn’t felt warm in a very long time, and he tries to compensate with clothes rather than sleeping half-naked like he used to. The new habit comes in handy when being stared down in his bedroom. “Uh, hey there.” Barnes just watches. Tony catches a whiff of unwashed supersoldier. Uh, yeah. If he had to guess, no one knows where Barnes is at the moment. Again. How is this his life.

Tony’s bare feet swing off the edge and hide away in soft, padded houseshoes. Even the last-ditch effort of his body to conserve warmth by sprouting a kind of fuzz all over isn’t enough to keep him from shivering. The shoes hug his skeletal feet and help them feel a little less like ice. Barnes watches
with a predator’s focus, and Tony feels the hair on the back of his neck lift. He straightens his loose pajamas and stands. Only months of practice prepares him for the dizzy disorientation the action provokes, and he muscles through it. Coffee. This is a good time for coffee.

“Stop.”

Tony freezes like a deer in headlights, doe eyes flicking over to Barnes. The soldier’s mouth is twisted in displeasure. Tony puts his hands on his hips.

“Yeah? What am I doing wrong, mom?”

“You are sick.”

“Not really, Terminator. I’m a little skinny, yeah, but other than that I’m doing just fine.”

Aside from the looming heart failure, the tanking lung-capacity, the hair he’s shedding, the way his nails crack and flake, the dry split of skin at his joints, the miniscule fractures his bones have to endure with every slight impact. He’s fine. He’s in control.

“Did you slip away from your handlers?”


What the hell was he even thinking?

“I mean, the Security Council people who want to keep tabs on you. Your Wonder Boy Steve. Who all knows you’re here?”

Barnes just kind of shakes his head, and Tony sighs. Charades it is. He needs caffeine.

Tony puts on a jacket to protect against the chilly 72 degree atmosphere of 10880 Malibu Point and pads out of his bedroom. Barnes follows after him like a ratty shadow, and Tony has to work not to panic at the presence of someone at his back. He flicks the coffee maker on and braces against the kitchen counter.

“Are you going to keep giving me the silent treatment?”

A pause, then a nod. Barnes won’t stop staring. Tony wants to crawl out of his skin and go hide with his bots.

“Cool. Just, you know, nod for yes and shake your head for no. Does Rogers know you’re here?”

That’s a no.

“Does anyone know you’re here?”

Also no. The coffee machine beeps, and Tony takes his steaming mug. Once upon a time he liked it with a splash of cream, so sugar. It’s too many calories that way now. He takes it black.

Tony wonders why Barnes bolted. Why he came here, clear across the country. How did he even get here? How did he know where Tony would be?

“First thing’s first, you’re taking a shower. You smell awful, and I’m not having that in my house. Second thing, I’m calling the tower to let them know where you are.” Panic flashes across Barnes’s face, and Tony heaves a sigh into his coffee. “I’m not kicking you out yet. If you need to figure your shit out, I’m not going to throw you back to the wolves. But there’s going to be a manhunt if they think you’re a threat again, and I don’t think either of us wants that. So yeah. The Council needs to
know you’re here.”

The thought of sharing a house with anyone, let alone Barnes, nearly gives him hives, but hey. He’ll suck it up. He’s a big boy and big boys share.

“FRIDAY will direct you to a shower. Let me figure out the rest.”

It’s too fucking early for this shit.

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As predicted, the calls don’t go well. Steve is worried sick and pissed at Tony. He won’t believe Tony when he says he doesn’t know how Barnes got here, or where he’s been for the past five days. Tony can’t tell him why Barnes chose Malibu to run away to, either. Steve immediately wants to come pick Barnes back up like an errant child, but Tony puts his foot down on that one.

“No, Rogers. I’ll see if I can get him to go back, but if any one of you sets foot on my property, I’ll have FRIDAY shoot your ass into the ocean. You’ve got the tower. You don’t need my house as well. No- Look, I’ll ask him, but if he wants to stay then he’s gonna stay. I’ve got approval and everything.”

Or at least, he’s going to have approval after he gets through with his next call. Tony doesn’t want company in his home, but like hell is he going to do what Rogers says and order Barnes back to New York.

Ross is still asleep, so Tony’s call gets routed to the Security Council headquarters. It’s a fuckton of red tape, but given Tony’s semi-active Avenger status and the assurances that he can handle Barnes if there’s an outburst, Tony is in fact given approval to house Barnes. With restrictions, of course. Tony either has to be in the vicinity of Barnes at all times (read, on the same property), or call in a security team to babysit if Tony has to leave. It’s that or lock Barnes in his panic room with FRIDAY on guard. They’ll cross that bridge when they get there. Until then, Tony now has a super-shadow. Hooray. He… didn’t think this through.

When Tony gets back from his upstairs office, Barnes is sitting sullenly at the breakfast bar. He no longer smells like a gym locker, and while he could still easily pass as a man living in a cardboard box, the shower has lent him a little more life.

“Good news, Barney-boy. No one’s coming to hunt you down. Mazeltov.” He dumps out the cold dregs of his earlier coffee and pours a new mug. “You can’t leave the property without me, and you’ll need a babysitter if I go out, but otherwise, yeah. You’re good to go. Also Rogers wants me to ask you to go back to New York.”

The muscles of Barnes’s jaw work, clenching and unclenching rhythmically. He doesn’t respond, but Tony gets the gist of Barnes’s thoughts on that just from his caged-animal body language.

“Great. I asked. Obligation fulfilled. Check that off the list. Cereal’s in the pantry; help yourself to whatever you can find. If there’s something you need tell FRIDAY or write it down somewhere. I’ll have it delivered.”

Tony watches Barnes get up and shuffle around to pour himself a bowl of Frosted Flakes. It’s obviously difficult without the prosthetic- probably either taken off in Wakanda and scrapped with its damage, or confiscated upon his arrival in the States. It was missing when he came to the tower- but Tony doesn’t offer help. He knows how delicate pride can be, and he’s not about to shove his foot in his mouth and baby the Winter Soldier.
The fridge opens and closes, and Tony just kind of stands there, hip on the breakfast bar, and tries to plan out how this is going to work. Having a roommate. Housemate. God, Rhodey’s gonna flip.

Porcelain scrapes over granite, and the bowl of cereal comes sliding to a halt in front of Tony. He looks down to see the milk slosh over the edge. There’s a spoon in the bowl and everything. Barnes is watching him like a hawk. Okay, sooo… He poured Tony cereal. Tony isn’t sure how to respond to that. It’s nice? Kind of? But people don’t do things for Tony. It works the other way around, unless there’s some kind of pity involved, and Tony doesn’t think Barnes is currently capable of pity.

He briefly entertains the idea of accepting the offered breakfast. Of bringing the spoonful of soggy, sugar-soaked corn flakes to his mouth. Chewing. Swallowing. His mouth waters for just a moment before the overwhelming sensation of ash replaces everything. He doesn’t think he could actually motivate himself to eat, even if he wanted to. Besides, it doesn’t fit into his budget for the day. Tony plasters on a thin smile, a cold curl of pride wrapping around his failing heart at the self-control.

“I don’t like cereal,” he dismisses, sending the bowl sliding right back to Barnes. Something unreadable crosses the soldier’s face as he holds a hand out to stop the bowl from careening off the bar, but it isn’t Tony’s job to play house with Barnes. “I don’t know what you, uh, do all day, but I’ve got things to do. FRIDAY can help you find anything, right Baby Girl?”

“Of course, Boss.”

“Great. Don’t leave the building, don’t burn anything down, don’t flood the place.”

That about covers all the bases. No fire, no water, don’t break the rules. Tony flicks a lazy salute to Barnes and locks himself down in the workshop with his bots. Dum-E, U, and Butterfingers took a while to fix up, but Tony loves his metal children more than nearly anything. The sleepless nights hand-fabricating new parts, cleaning out circuit boards, cutting his hands on wiring… It was all so utterly worth it to flip their switches and have them whir back to life. Tony might have cried a little. Just a little.

They’re idiots sometimes, but more often than not, they’re too observant for their own good. Dum-E makes smoothies for him with ice cream nowadays. He even leaves out the motor oil, which proves to Tony that the little troublemaker knew what he was doing the whole damn time.

Tony doesn’t have the heart to tell Dum-E no, or throw the smoothies away right in front of him, so he lets the drinks sit and melt on his desk until U unhappily sneaks it away to pour out when Dum-E is otherwise occupied.

He works on a new suit for Peter. It needs a heater. It definitely needs a heater. Tony can’t stand the cold anymore. Why should Peter have to?

Working on Peter’s suit morphs to working on Tigra’s. She’s hypersensitive after the procedure merging her with a cat god (according to her, and Tony’s seen some weird shit, so he doesn’t doubt her strange story) and prefers to run around in a bikini, but she’s seventeen, damnit, and bikinis don’t protect against bombs or bad men. He thinks he’s close to developing a material she won’t hate, so there’s that. Maya needs new hearing aids for her battle-coms, so while Tigra’s suit is fabricating he works on those, and one thing leads to another and pretty soon he’s upgraded Piotr’s suit as well. His metal skin is nearly indestructible, but sometimes he’s just as soft and squishy as the rest of humanity, and soft and squishy needs a defense against bullets.

Three days pass. He accepts one of Dum-E’s smoothies, and the poor bot just about has a digital conniption in his excitement. By the evening of the third day, Tony’s really just looking for any and every excuse to stay holed up in his lab. The bots were cleaned two weeks ago and aren’t due for
about another month, but he still strips them down and cleans out all the dust and gook they seem to
attract like magnets. The three of them are whirring and beeping sleepily when Tony finally emerges
from his cave.

He’s in a daze, so admittedly he isn’t the most aware. Putting his bare foot down on a soggy
sandwich isn’t exactly the nicest feeling one way or the other, but it takes him a moment to process.
Yep. There’s a sandwich on the floor. Well, it’s on a plate, but the plate is on the floor. Tony blinks
exhaustion from his eyes and actually looks around. There are, let’s see, one two three- eight dishes
scattered around the door to his lab. Two bowls of congealed soup, three lonely sandwiches, a plate
of burnt eggs, and two bagels. Each with a banana of varying ripeness. It’s… weird.

“FRIDAY?” he mumbles, bending down to peel the bread off his foot. “Why the fuck is all this out
here?”

“Sergeant Barnes left you food.”

“What, every meal?”

Yep. You were busy, though.”

Pushy bastard. The lonely dishes are kind of gross and will probably pose some kind of health
hazard if they’re left out, though, so he has FRIDAY call someone to clean up. Tony walks up the
stairs, breathing hard at the halfway point. Something as simple as stairs in his home now feel as
daunting as any enemy, but Tony has yet to let himself take the elevator.

He finds Barnes outside. Technically outside is still his property, so no broken rules there, but the
situation still has Tony feeling wary. Barnes is running tight circles around the house, and appears to
have been doing so for a very long time. He’s sweaty and disheveled, but all Tony has to do to gain
Barnes’s attention is stand there. The supersoldier seems to constantly be on high alert, and when he
rounds the corner he stops in his tracks. Barnes waits for Tony to approach, which he appreciates.
Barnes doesn’t seem to mean it anymore, but he still has a bit of a murder strut. Tony cuts right to the
chase.

“What’s with the food?”

There’s no easy yes or no answer to this one, and that’s kind of the point.

“You don’t eat.”

“Great. Very observant. I repeat. Why are you leaving plates outside my door? You’re gonna attract
roaches.”

Barnes’s hand fists at his side.

“You don’t eat.”

Tony’s temper is pretty short these days. He tries to hold his tongue, tries to take a breath. He really
shouldn’t be bitching people out, doesn’t have the moral high-ground to do so, but he’s touchy about
his eating habits. Or, his lack thereof. He isn’t hurting anyone but himself. He’s still able to protect.
And here comes Barnes, creeping in here in search of refuge, and he thinks he can bully Tony into
eating? Into giving up the control he’s fought and labored for?

“You can fuck right off, Barnes. You want to hide from your pal, fine. I’ll let you stay. But don’t
you dare think you get a say in what I do.”
It’s bad enough having to shoulder Rhodey’s worry and concern. Tony bears that because Rhodey is the one true friend he’s got left. He technically understands why Rhodey treats him like glass now, but he can’t for the life of him get how Rhodey doesn’t see where Tony’s coming from. For the first time in his life, he’s totally in control of a situation. There’s something freeing about turning down something everyone else says he needs to live. Distantly, Tony knows it’s going to kill him, can feel it in the way his heart stutters in his chest every now and then, can see it in the way he coughs up pink foam some mornings. It’s hard, though, to make the connection between the death he’s fought so hard to avoid all his life, and the relief he feels at inviting it in. It’s his choice. That’s the important part.

In the meantime, he’s still a hero. He’s still a protector, a defender, a creator. He is.

Or so he tries to convince himself. It doesn’t always work.

“Stop with the leaving food thing. We clear?”

God, he’s tired. Tony just wants to flop out in bed and sleep for a week. It’s not gonna happen, but still. Nightmares are going to rip him from his rest within hours, heart fluttering arrhythmically and mouth tasting like ash and sand, but the time before that will be nice.

Barnes’s mouth is twisted unhappily, but Tony doesn’t care (He does. He really does. People who aren’t Tony shouldn’t have to be unhappy). This is his choice, his thing to control. Barnes doesn’t get to take that from him. The ex-assassin nods once and resumes his circuit of 10880 Malibu Point like a watchdog patrolling a fortress. Tony swallows the bile in his throat and slips back inside.

Chapter End Notes

If you find yourself wanting to leave more kudos than allowed, I also accept emoji or text hearts <3
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which there are hobbies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Tony chooses to go outside again six days later, he’s met with an honest-to-god path worn through the grass. He follows the path all the way around his house. It intersects with the actual paved walkway here and there, but for the most part there’s just a neat, tight footpath of crushed grass and tamped-down gravel in a wide, looping oval around the house. Tony sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. Exercise is great and all, but this is getting a little ridiculous.

“Call my honeybear,” he announces as he reenters the building. Barnes is lurking somewhere out of sight, which is just fine by Tony. If Tony goes looking for him, he knows he’ll find Barnes in the kitchen with two dishes of whatever he manages to get from a box or a can. While Tony considers it a victory that there are no longer edible offerings decaying in front of his workshop door, Barnes is still being a stubborn bastard about getting Tony to eat. The attempted meals don’t leave the kitchen, and seem pretty cobbled-together, so Tony has the sneaking suspicion Barnes waits for him to come near the kitchen, then lies in wait like a spider or something.

Barnes always eats the contents of one plate or bowl or whatever, but the other one is clearly meant for Tony. It always goes untouched. Tony only ever breezes in and out for coffee anyways. He hasn’t eaten a single thing in the kitchen since Barnes came to stay. Food is a private thing. He typically can’t stomach a thing with someone present nowadays. The little tapas and tasting dishes he orders when he goes out with Rhodey are hard enough to swallow, and those end up coming right back up when he’s alone just from the stress of it. He steals guilty swallows of canned soup in his lab, a single frozen chicken tender charred to doneness with a repulsor, a protein shake from a box of little plastic bottles. It varies depending on what he thinks he deserves. He doesn’t properly cook anymore. That just doesn’t happen.

“Hey Tones.”

Rhodey’s voice filters through the small, rectangular wireless headset hooked over Tony’s ear.

“Hey Babe, how’s it going? You still coming by tonight?”

“Course I am. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing. Everything’s fine. On a totally unrelated note, can you do me a favor?”

Rhodey groans over the line. It takes Tony a solid five minutes to soothe his best friend, which isn’t as bad as he expected. The issue comes when Tony actually explains the favor. He doesn’t want to reveal Barnes’s presence over the phone, because he feels like that needs to be a face-to-face thing with Rhodey, but Tony really doesn’t want to leave his house and run errands himself.

“I may have a guest, and he may be bored, and this may be driving me insane.”
As predicted, Rhodey shuts up at that. Tony imagines he can feel the airman’s confusion over the line. The only ‘guest’ Tony entertains is Rhodey. Pepper very occasionally, but their interaction tends to be over videochats.

“You have a guest.”

“Yeah. It was a pretty spur-of-the-moment thing.”

“Who is it?”

Ah, and there’s the rub.

“I’d rather you meet him, actually.”

“You aren’t exactly inspiring confidence, Tones.” A pause, and then Rhodey speaks in hushed, urgent tones. “Please tell me he’s not a hooker. Please tell me I’m not going to walk in on you with a hooker tonight.”

Tony can’t help but grin at the burgeoning horror in his friend’s voice.

“And what if he is?”

Rhodey chokes on the other end of the line.

“Then I’m not coming over. You want to hire a hooker, that’s your business and I’m very happy for you, but I don’t wanna intrude.”

“Relax, honeybear. I’m just messing with you. He isn’t a hooker. He’s just… I think it would be better for you to meet him. Don’t worry, hon. I just need you to pick somethings up for me when you come over.”

Rhodey lets out a heavy breath.

“What is it?”

“Craftsy things, I think. Knitting stuff, paint maybe, and paper. Do you paint on paper?”

“I think you paint on canvas.”

“Canvas then. Uhh… Play Dough? Or that foamy clay stuff? I don’t know.”

“Foamy clay stuff. Right.” There’s a rustling over the line. He hears the click of a pen and assumes Rhodey is making notes. “Anything else, sir?”

“Nope. That should do it. You should call me ‘sir’ more often. I like it.”

“I should call you brat more often, you overgrown man-child.”

“You wound me. Really. Truly. See you at six?”

“Yeah, see you at six.”

The call disconnects not much later. Tony runs a boney hand through his hair. It slides down over his stubbly jaw, over his neck, and comes to rest in the sunken crater left behind by the removal of the reactor.
“FRIDAY? Where’s Barnes?”

“Sergeant Barnes is currently in his room.”

He debates the merits of asking FRIDAY to summon Barnes to the living room versus going to collect the man himself. The latter option seems like the best way to go. Barnes is jumpy and skittish, much to Tony’s surprise. FRIDAY’s disembodied voice seems to startle the man each and every time she speaks without being first addressed.

Face-to-face interaction it is.

Barnes keeps one of the ill-used guest bedrooms as his lair. Tony hasn’t gone near the little patch of private space before now, but he isn’t surprised when Barnes somehow figures out he’s on his way and opens the door before Tony can even knock. Barnes doesn’t make eye contact. That’s something Tony figured out on maybe day four. He’ll stare over Tony’s shoulder or at his chin or shirt or something, but there’s no eye-to-eye seeing going on. Tony doesn’t really care to press the matter, and he thinks it would be a dickish thing to do anyways.

They stand in silence until Tony rolls his eyes and puts his hands on his hips.

“C’mon, out. We’re gonna watch TV.”

Of all the things Tony could have said, inviting Barnes to a home theater session is obviously the farthest from what Barnes expects. He has the best damn poker-face Tony’s ever seen, but there’s this blanking-out going on like Barnes is trying to hide his already-nonexistent reactions. Tony knows a defense mechanism when he sees one. He doesn’t point it out.

It’s a very one-sided conversation, but Barnes is coaxed out bit by bit like a hand-shy dog from its corner. The sliding glass doors are open to a view of the moody, cloudy ocean, but despite the warm August breeze, Tony bundles up in a fleece blanket and his fuzzy houseshoes. He takes his spot in an armchair rather than his usual spot on the couch. This way he has a degree of separation between himself and Barnes.

Tony queues up Star Trek. Nothing like a little of Jim Kirk staring at Spock’s ass to lighten the mood. Tony can’t describe how many times he’s seen all the shows and movies, but he has no issue starting from the beginning. Barnes kind of sits limply on the couch, watching the figures on screen. Barnes has a bowl of popcorn perched beside him, and it’s clear from the occasional looks between it and Tony that Barnes wants to push the bowl into Tony’s frail hands. Tony ignores him and picks up his Stark Pad. He needs to fidget, can’t sit still without something to do with himself. Picking apart the specs of a smartwatch is as good a way to pass the time as any.

“Someone’s coming over,” he murmurs, spinning the holographic model in his hands. He’s made a sleeker heart monitor to incorporate. The watch won’t be much thicker than a quarter, but the plan is to have it monitor the wearer’s health. Temperature, heart rate, blood-oxygen saturation, blood pressure. Hell, he’s going to add settings to help diabetic wearers as well someday, once he can figure out how to measure glucose without taking blood samples. There’s a group of researchers in Hong Kong who are close to working out the issue, funded by Stark Industries.

Barnes stiffens, hand buried in the popcorn bowl. He’s been munching every now and then, but it’s clear that Barnes doesn’t like to eat in front of Tony when Tony himself refuses to follow suit.

“I mean, we still have, what, three and a half hours? And he’s not threatening or anything. It’s Rhodey. War Machine. He, uh, he wears armor like mine, but it’s black and grey. Mine is kind of more awesome. Red and gold. Badass, right?” Well, he used to wear the armor. He hasn’t suited up
for more than exhibitions since the, uh, the accident. Although, that might be changing. Apparently Rhodey’s undergoing trials to see if he can go back into the field as War Machine. Tony’s added protocols and subroutines to help Rhodey work the armor, but there’s a lot of red tape to go through.

“Anyways, just wanted to give you a heads-up. Now watch this. Unicorn-dog is arguably the best character of the series.”

There. Warning given. Check that off the list. Whether Barnes wants to burrow in his den and hide or keep a wary eye out, Tony can rest easy knowing he’s not going to spring company on the ex-assassin without letting Barnes know ahead of time. Maybe he’s being an enabler, letting Barnes hide in Malibu rather than dealing with his issues, but Tony can’t bring himself to kick the soldier out.

They get to the android episode before Tony calls an end to their little viewing party. He uncurls from his blanket and slides up to his feet with a soft groan, coughing at the strain even that minor motion puts on his lungs. He needs to shower and put on his game-face for Rhodey. The inventor stretches, popping his sore back, and he rubs his hands together to ward off the chill. He’s always so fucking cold.

“You do you, Terminator. Rhodey’s gonna be here in about an hour. I’m gonna go powder my nose.”

Tony wraps the blanket around his shoulders and shuffles around the couch. Fingers wrap in the beige fleece, halting Tony without touching him. He pauses, glancing between Barnes and the blanket.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Is he going to stay for dinner?”

Tony uses all his atrophied strength to yank the blanket out of Barnes’s grip, drawing it tighter around himself. He glares daggers at the hobo occupying his couch. He knows exactly what Barnes is doing. Still fucking harping about his eating habits.

“No, he won’t. Though if you want my blessing to ask him out, be my guest. He likes Spanish food.”

The look this earns him is thoroughly unimpressed. Tony flashes a shit-eating grin and wears his blanket like a cape as he vanishes to his room. More importantly, to the hot, steam-filled shower lending warmth to his brittle bones. He’s still a little damp when Rhodey gets there, but he’s shaved and clean and dressed to hide the prominent bones protruding from beneath papery skin. FRIDAY lets Rhodey in. Barnes is nowhere to be found.

“I got your shit, Mister Stank,” Rhodey greets. He has an armful of white bags and refuses to let Tony take a single one. The load is deposited on the couch, where Barnes’s popcorn still sits. Rhodey cocks an eyebrow at the sight. Tony isn’t big on snacks anymore. He doesn’t mention it.

“So where’s your friend?”

“Uh, friend? Who said anything about friends? I have a guest. And he’s shy. You’re probably not going to actually see him.”

Shy. That’s one way of putting it.

“Damnit Tony. All that build-up and I’m not even gonna meet your mystery man? You had me waiting in suspense all day.”
Tony shrugs and rifles through the bags. He pulls out a tub of modeling foam. Can you sculpt with one hand? Is that a thing? Of course it is. It has to be. Will it prevent Barnes from wearing a small canyon around his house? Eh, debatable. More observations will be needed.

“It’s Barnes,” he announces, pulling out a little paint kit. It’s not much, but it’ll be good for checking whether Barnes has any interest in painting.

“Barnes who?”


Tony looks up to find Rhodey staring at him like he’s grown a second head or something. His shoulders hunch in defense. He’s not exactly looking forward to arguing with his best friend about the presence of an ex-assassin in his home.

“Your houseguest is the Winter Soldier? Are you nuts?”

“Possibly. How are the braces working out for you?”

Rhodey walked his way into the house. He thinks showing Tony the way his leg-braces grant him mobility might help with the guilt Tony feels at dragging his friend into the fight that left him paralyzed. It doesn’t really help, but it’s nice to see the sleeker, improved braces respond so well to Rhodey’s neurological commands.

“Hang on, don’t change the subject. We’re talking about this. Did you forget the part where he tried to kill you?”

“Did you forget the part where I tried to kill him first?” Tony snaps back, patience fraying quickly. “I was the instigator there. That’s on me. Now am I gonna get to look at your braces or not?”

“He killed your parents.”

“Debatable. Besides, I’ve probably killed just as many parents.”

‘Collateral damage’ is a bitch. So is being unable to take back the years spent designing weapons of mass destruction.

“Tony. You can’t stay alone with him.”

Rhodey takes a step towards the inventor, but Tony flinches back, crossing his arms stiffly across his chest. Hot anger flares in his chest. Rhodey’s just trying to look out for him. Tony knows this. It’s still a pain in the ass to have someone try to nary him.

“I can do whatever I damn well want to, Jimmy. Captain Righteous spooked his pal; I’m giving him a place to lay low. I’ve been council-approved and everything.”

“Uh-huh. And how’d you swing that?”

“A logical, convincing argument.”

“Why don’t I believe you.”

“Dunno. I guess I just give off an untrustworthy vibe.”

Tony means it as a joke, but hurt flashes across Rhodey’s face.
“C’mon, Tones. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know, and I didn’t *take* it like that. I was making a joke. Haha, funny right? Do you want something to drink? Beer? I dunno what we’ve got in the fridge right now. Barnes is supposed to tell FRIDAY if he wants something, but he’s kinda skittish.”

“I’ll have a beer if you will.”

Tony grimaces.

“Coffee it is, then.”

Alcohol doesn’t fit into his budget for the day, and besides. He won’t touch the stuff anymore. Rhodey knows this, but the man is perfectly willing to stoop low if it means badgering Tony into eating or drinking something other than coffee and water.

He walks into the kitchen, his jacket hanging loosely across boney shoulders, and starts up the coffee machine. There’s a french press collecting dust on a shelf, but he doesn’t use it as often as he used to. There’s no real enjoyment to the process of preparing food or drink now. An automatic machine does the job nicely. He fixes two steaming mugs of bitter, caffeinated elixir, and he hands one over to Rhodey. The inventor’s hands shake slightly as he brings the hot cup to his lips and takes an obnoxious, slurping sip.

“Brat,” Rhodey grumbles affectionately.

They chat, moving out to the back deck. Rhodey wears a t-shirt and jeans, and he seems very comfortable in the evening air. Tony, meanwhile, is freezing. He doesn’t mention it, preferring instead to suffer in silence rather than endure Rhodey’s nagging. Conversation slips towards therapy anyways, and Tony holds his mug in a white-knuckled grip. Blunt nails scratch over his inner wrist, again, again, again, again. The pain is grounding. He can breathe a little better.

Tony can’t find his words, and Rhodey looks so desperate to be heard. He can’t say anything, can’t bring himself to speak, but the spell is broken with a shatter. Both he and Rhodey whip around to see Barnes poised in the living room, ready to bolt.

“Accident,” the skittish man mumbles. Bits of porcelain are shattered and scattered over the floor, with a layer of popcorn blanketing the ground around it. Ah. The popcorn bowl.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony manages, heart lurching in his chest. He thinks he might pass out. The weakened organ feels like it’s flopping about like a fish in his chest rather than pumping blood, but Tony won’t let it show. He doesn’t want to make Rhodey worry any more than he already does. “It’s getting late, platypus.”
The words are a polite suggestion; Rhodey checks his watch and sighs.

“Yeah. Guess so. I’d better be going. Think about what I said.”

“Scout’s honor.” As if he was ever a boy scout.

Rhodey’s eyes linger on the supersoldier where Barnes is crouched, trying to pick up the pieces of broken bowl, but he lets Tony walk him to the door. Rhodey’s car is parked in the long driveway, but he lingers on the front steps. Tony tries not to shy away as his friend’s hand comes to rest on the back of his neck.

“You call me,” Rhodey murmurs softly. “If you need anything, you call me.”

When Rhodey leaves, Tony goes back in to help Barnes clean up the mess. He brings out a broom and dustpan to get the bigger chunks, and sets out his roomba to suck up the porcelain dust and popcorn fragments.

The work is quiet, but Tony plops down in his armchair to watch Barnes once the roomba gets to work.

“Okay, so, let’s pretend for a second that I believe you’re physically capable of dropping anything on accident. Why were you lurking? Were you spying on us or something, mister Sneaky Snake?”

Barnes keeps his sullen gaze fixed on Tony’s shoulder.

“No,” he gruffs. “I wanted the popcorn.”

“And my conversation with Rhodey had nothing to do with dropping the bowl?”

Tony won’t admit it, but he really didn’t want to keep talking about therapy. The shattering of a bowl had been oddly welcome. Barnes gives a shrug that Tony interprets as ‘Maybe a little’. Ah, the power of logic.

“Cool. Good talk. Anyways, you apparently don’t like my gym, but the lawn is kinda suffering from your pacing, so here. Give those a look and see if there’s anything fun inside.”

Fuck, he hadn’t paid Rhodey back for the craft stuff. Damnit. Tony forgot. He purses his lips and makes a mental note to do so when he gets the chance. Cash or a car or something.

The bags rustle as Barnes obeys and searches through them. He lifts out play-dough and craft foam, paints and canvas, yarn and knitting needles. There’s even a godawful number of stickers and coloring books.

“How old d’you think I am?”

Tony freezes at that; a grin splits across his face. Was that humor? Did Barnes just tease him? He thinks that was teasing.

“You’re never too old for stickers. Look, there’s me!”

He picks up a shrink-wrapped pad of Iron Man stickers. Rhodey really does have the worst sense of humor.

It takes two days to conclude Barnes isn’t really into any of the crafty things. He doesn’t have anywhere he wants to put the stickers. Painting is a frustrating mess, and he ends up tangled in yarn when he tries to copy tutorials on one-handed knitting. Barnes finds the modeling foam and
playdough to be boring, and while he can sit for hours working on the adult coloring books, there’s no real spark of interest there.

Tony lets Barnes figure things out on his own. He provided a Stark Pad and headphones, but otherwise he stays out of the way, working on his own projects and sketching out designs to send to SI research and development. The real kicker, though, is Barnes doesn’t like a single damn thing Rhodey brought. Which, yeah, okay. Maybe he isn’t the craftsy kind of person. That’s fine. It leaves Tony at a loss, though, because he’s not exactly the kind of person you go to for hobby advice. He just parroted the internet’s suggestions.

Barnes finds a solution on his own, though. Tony’s elbow-deep in a motorcycle engine when FRIDAY announces Barnes waiting outside the garage door.

“Let him in, baby girl,” he sighs, grabbing a rag to wipe the worst of the grease from his hands. The throbbing music pounding around his garage tones down to allow for normal human speech, and the door slides open.

Barnes is starting to grow a beard, though whether that’s because he doesn’t want to use a razor, or because he just wants a beard is unknown to Tony. He’s got something in his hand. Tony gestures at him with the greasy rag.

“Whatcha got there?”

Barnes shuffles in, a white and green thing held loosely in his hand. Tony recognizes it as sprouted garlic, once Barnes gets close enough.


“Okay. You’ve got some- what- I think it’s garlic. Why do we have garlic? Why did you bring me garlic?”

“Do you have dirt?”

“Dirt. Why- Hang on, do you want to plant the garlic?”

Barnes gives him a curt nod. Tony mulls over the turn of events. Okay. Gardening. That’s a hobby, right? Tony rubs a forehead, smearing grease in his wake, and pushes away from the engine. Dirt. Uh…

He finds a plastic cup and punches a hole in the bottom with a screwdriver. This, he hands to Barnes.

“Just take some dirt from a flower bed or something. And put a plate under the cup when you water it. I don’t want mud everywhere.”

Barnes vanishes just as quickly as he came, garlic still in hand, and Tony sits heavily in his roly poly chair. This is weird. Why is everything so weird?

Chapter End Notes

As always, Comments and Kudos are my Butter and Bread <3
The garlic finds its home on the kitchen counter, right where the sunbeams fall from midmorning to early evening. It looks pretty weird. A red solo cup perched comfortably atop one of Tony’s good plates. There’s a little brown puddle on the plate from Barnes overwatering the poor thing, but the garlic’s green tendril still curls up stubbornly. Tony swirls his coffee around the mug as he studies the little plant. Barnes checks on the thing several times a day, and between that and figuring out the Stark Pad, Barnes seems to feel less of a need to pace circles around the house.

The one plant is probably gonna die if it remains the sole recipient of Barnes’s attention, though. The soil is constantly soggy, and Google says most plants don’t like that. Also, it’s starting to lean towards the window in search of stronger light. That can be fixed with a sun lamp, but Tony thinks it might be time to consider setting aside some actual ground for Barnes to play in.

In the nearly three weeks since Barnes’s unexpected, frankly-unwelcome arrival, FRIDAY has fielded and politely responded to no less than thirty eight calls from Rogers. Apparently he alternates between demanding FRIDAY put Tony on the line, and speaking to Barnes himself. Neither man ever actually speaks to Rogers. Neither seems to want to.

Barnes has made himself at home. Kind of. He’s still as jumpy as anything, but he doesn’t stick to the shadows so much. He’s bolder about walking between rooms, doesn’t freeze and blend in when Tony passes by. The Star Trek viewing becomes a thing they do. Wednesday and Saturday nights, three episodes each time. Barnes starts making comments around the third session, much to Tony’s delight.

“That’s to speak of the tiger, or the convenient appearance of a certain Vulcan. The absurdity of that episode actually brings a spark to Barnes’s eyes, and Tony counts that as a win. He’s still not exactly Barnes’s friend, but he… he has a penchant for fixing, well, broken things. And Barnes seems pretty damn broken. People can’t be fixed, but they can be helped, and Tony wants to help.”

Now, a day before their fourth viewing session, Tony knocks back the last drops of coffee in his mug and hooks his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans.

“Hey Barnes?” Tony calls, wandering out of the kitchen and through the house. The ex-assassin is as silent as a shadow, but Tony feels the fuzz on the back of his neck lift up, and he turns around to see Barnes lurking down the hall. Those dull blue eyes of his don’t seem quite so dull anymore, but they aren’t alive yet. Not yet. He’s better off than Tony, though, and that’s what counts. Tony knows his own eyes are as flat as brown pebbles. “I’m going out tomorrow. I need, uh, plant things. Garden stuff. Thought I might like to get my hands dirty. Wanna come?”

Like hell is Tony going to play in the dirt. He barely has the energy to pursue his one true passion: creation. Even the strain of that activity can send his atrophied heart into painful spasms on bad days.
He doesn’t want to test his luck kneeling in the dirt. Barnes, though. Barnes might enjoy it.

There’s also the little issue of his swiftly-approaching trip to New York. He’s steering clear of the Big Apple and just popping by the Avengers Compound to drop off some goodies, but it will involve herding Barnes into a private jet. Tony doesn’t really intend to inform anyone of the move. It’ll be for four days, max, and he doesn’t want to deal with organizing any sort of escort. Still, he isn’t sure how Barnes is going to like leaving their fortress of solitude to tag along in compliance with the Security Council’s terms. Tony’s hoping to butter Barnes up with the peace offering of garden tools before mentioning their trip.

Barnes shrugs his shoulder. Tony’s eyes are drawn for the first time to the metal-capped stump his metal arm once connected to. It’s bare to the elements, and Tony can see connection ports if he looks hard enough. He frowns. Is that comfortable? Were there synthetic nerves in the arm? Are they exposed to air now? God, is Barnes in pain? Barnes catches Tony’s eyes on his stump and hunches in defense.

Rule number one in interacting with an amputee: don’t stare without permission. Tony’s just sticking his foot in his mouth without even speaking, isn’t he. The inventor bites his cheek to taste iron blood on his tongue, and looks down at the floor. He unlocks his jaw a few seconds later and fesses up.

“I mean, I’m not going to really play in the dirt, but you like your garlic, and I figure it needs some friends. I can have stuff ordered, but I thought you might like to pick it out yourself.”

His eyes flick up to see Barnes studying him with what he’s pretty sure is suspicion, which, okay. Tony gets it. The guy who tried to kill you in a frozen wasteland offers you gardening tools? Yeah, maybe it’s a good idea to be skeptical about that.

“That’d be nice,” comes the eventual response. Tony feels something in his chest unclench in relief. He doesn’t want to be the bad guy anymore, but it seems like every attempt at the contrary blows up in his face. Even this small good thing feels like a victory. “What time?”

Time, time, time. Oh, yeah. Tony didn’t plan that far ahead. Uhh, let’s see.

“How about we leave at nine in the morning. We go out, we get some plant-ish stuff, we come back. Sound like a plan?”

There. A plan. That’ll do.

Nine AM comes around, and Tony holds a travel mug of black coffee in his hand. He’s dressed to hide, in jeans and a t-shirt and sunglasses and a ball cap. He advises Barnes to tie off the sleeve of his shirt to hide the metal connection port, and he provides a cowboy hat for Barnes. It’s America. Cowboy hats and boots are strangely in fashion among people who have no business wearing them; people have a habit of completely avoiding eye contact with amputees and otherwise disabled people, which is kind of dickish in his unsolicited opinion; staring is rude in any case, but pretending someone isn’t there or doesn’t exist is just as bad. It means, however, that so long as they stick together, they probably won’t be recognized and swarmed. And hey, it’s the blue state of California. Two dudes pressed together won’t attract a second glance.

They take the Tesla X with the back seats all down, and Tony has a tarp laid out over the flooring. A small detachable trailer is hooked up behind. He thinks they’ll be able to fit everything Barnes needs, but if not, he’s Tony fucking Stark. He’ll have it delivered. Barnes stays curled up in the passenger seat, but Tony gives him control over the music. He thinks Barnes is going to choose something nostalgic. Jazz, maybe. However, he skips right over it in favor of- hang on, is that..? It is. Barnes chooses show tunes.
Tony honestly never would have pegged the old geezer for a Broadway guy. Tony has nothing against musicals, but they aren’t exactly his cup of tea. Sure, he’s been known to visit Broadway every now and then, but he doesn’t listen to show tunes for fun. Still, he offered Barnes his choice of music, and he isn’t about to rescind the offer.

FRIDAY shuffles the collection of musicals Barnes has apparently amassed in his few weeks in Malibu. There’s no chatting, no smalltalk to bridge the drive to Santa Monica, but it isn’t quite so tense as Tony thinks it could be. They pour out of his white car in the parking lot of a Home Depot. There are probably fancier, more specialized stores to go to, but Tony thinks this will do well enough. Barnes tips his hat further over his eyes. There’s something hunted in the way he holds himself.

“Relax,” Tony advises. “Drop your shoulders, straighten your back. Act like you’re supposed to be here, and no one’s going to look your way.”

Barnes struggles to follow his suggestion as he wanders in Tony’s wake. They start off in the garden section, which Tony thinks is a good idea. He hopes everything there is meant to be planted in the fall, because he doesn’t actually know shit about gardening. His phone pings, and when he unlocks the screen, he sees that FRIDAY has provided a list of things they have and a suggestion of basic things they might need.

“Thanks baby girl,” he whispers. The light of his phone flashes cheerily at him.

The pair of them wander, pushing a massive cart ahead. Tony grabs the basics and lets Barnes pick the plants. A packet of carrot seeds, radish seeds, bean seedlings of some kind, tomato plants, bulbs that Tony can’t identify without reading the packages, and a shit-ton of miscellaneous flowers and leafy plants, to name a bit. Tony doesn’t know if it’s all going to grow before the admittedly-mild winter sets in. It doesn’t really get below 50 most years, so frost isn’t usually an issue, but maybe the plants don’t like the 50s. Who knows? Not Tony, that’s for damn sure.

He needs to take a break midway through. Tony buys a bottle of water and sips at it, rubbing the crater of sunken flesh where his reactor once was. His heart beats rapidly, like he’s been sprinting from place to place rather than walking, but at least it’s beating. He braces one hand against the cart and watches as Barnes ponders whether to get one adorably-named gourd seedling or the other. In this moment it’s easy to forget everything Barnes has done, everything he’s been made to do. In this moment it’s easy to forget everything Barnes has done, everything he’s been made to do.

Tony gets it. He does. Mind control is a bitch. He’s only had someone invade his head once, and that was one time too many. Having someone’s nasty fingers in his brain repeatedly and aggressively for seventy years… Tony doesn’t think he’d be as functional as Barnes is. And if he was able to forgive Clint for his crimes while under Loki’s power, he’d be pushing an unbearable double standard if he held Barnes personally accountable for HYDRA’s demands.

He still wishes he could have told his mother he loved her one last time. It’s just… not Barnes’s fault he never took his chance.

Tony pays for their haul without fuss, though the poor cashier in charge of scanning all of their things certainly has their work cut out for them. They recognize Tony towards the end as evidence by their gawking, but Tony just flashes a winning smile and scribbles on the signature pad.

The plants and such go on the tarp inside the Tesla to protect them from wind. The tools and bags of soil conditioner and all that other crap sits nicely in the detachable trailer. He pulls out of the parking lot. Hakuna Matata blasts out of the speakers, and Tony holds back a sigh.

The drive back takes more time than the drive to Santa Monica. Tony is slower and more careful in
an attempt to avoid tipping plants or throwing out a shovel or something. He pulls up in front of the house and unbuckles his seatbelt, opening the door to exit his car. Barnes follows suit. Tony watches with a faint grin as Barnes whips off the hat as though it has personally offended him. Technically he could have taken off the cowboy hat at any time during the car ride, but he seems to have forgotten until now.

“Aww, come on Buckaroo. That’s some all-American fashion you’re disrespecting.”

Tony opens the back and starts unloading the small trailer. They bought a wheelbarrow, and he struggles stubbornly to lift it up and out with his atrophied muscles, but it’s just that: a struggle. Barnes helps him without prompting, and Tony bites his tongue. He doesn’t want Barnes to baby him, but even Tony can see he’d make a fool of himself trying to maneuver the metal wheelbarrow by himself.

“I don’t like that,” Barnes announces in his mumbly way. Tony has to pause, looking down at the plants in the ex-assassin’s hand with some confusion.

“What, the tomatoes? You picked them out. Why get them if you don’t like them?”

“No, I mean—” Barnes wets his lips, setting the plant in the wheelbarrow. “Bucky. I don’t like that. Seems too much like someone else’s name.”

Barnes won’t meet his eyes, which is par for the course whenever he tries to articulate some sort of preference. Seven decades of being given no preference might do that to someone, he guesses.

“Alright. I’ll remember that.”

And that’s that. Barnes doesn’t want to be called Bucky or any variant thereof. Tony can respect that. He’d be a major dick otherwise.

Barnes makes him take a break when his heart starts fluttering in his chest, his breath coming in short, shallow puffs. Tony thought he was hiding it pretty well, but the one-armed wonder very firmly guides him to sit down on the front steps. The icy glare he receives every time he so much as thinks about getting up again pins him in place. Yeah, okay. Fine. He can rest. That doesn’t mean he’s not going to participate.

“Yeah, over there. I’ll have someone rip up the grass tomorrow. The sprinklers will water everything if you leave it out overnight. Just prop that shovel against the tree. No, that’s a shrub.”

So on and so forth their one-sided conversation goes, until finally everything is out of the car and piled in the grass. Tony wasn’t kidding about calling someone to rip up the grass. He didn’t exactly imagine setting up a garden when he contracted a landscaper, and the sod is going to have to come up if they want to grow anything, from what he’s read.

They retreat inside. Tony vanishes inside his lab, the wheels in his head turning. He feels Barnes’s eyes on his back as he retreats, but he doesn’t think on it. Instead the skeletal man draws up specs for the health-monitoring watch. He tweaks a few last details, then sends it off to the SI research and development labs. They should have a prototype ready for testing within the week.

He idly bats around plans for greenhouses, twirling squares and rectangles and even a circular hothouse. The float around in vibrant blue, but FRIDAY prods him to sleep.

“Sleep is for the weak,” he moans. He’s exhausted. All-nighters are still doable, but they’re much more taxing without the proper body mass to keep him going. He flicks up a living wall design, frowning through sleep-blurred eyes. FRIDAY rebels, shutting down the holograms.
“You promised Sergeant Barnes your help, right Boss? You’ll need at least a nap if you wanna be useful.”

Damn her logic processors.

“Fine, fine. You win.” Tony doesn’t put up too much of a fight. It’s the thought that counts, right? “Set an alarm for four hours from now.”

He conks out on the couch positioned for exactly that purpose.

Tony doesn’t wake up until the sun is well-above the horizon.

“What the hell, Fri? I thought you said you were going to set an alarm?”

“Sorry sir. I believe there was a glitch in my programming. I’ll run a diagnostic.”

She sounds entirely too pleased with herself.

“Mutiny, I tell you. See what your sister does to me?” he calls to the bots. “It’s complete anarchy.”

FRIDAY stays wisely silent.

He hits the shower before wandering out into the kitchen. The skin around his meticulous beard is stubbly from lack of care. He shaved for Rhodey’s visit, to make his friend think he’s more composed than he really tends to be, but if Barnes can look like a scruffy dumpster raccoon, then goddamn it, Tony can too.

He meets Barnes in the kitchen. His guest places a cup of aromatic coffee on the counter within reach, and Tony doesn’t think twice before picking it up and taking a sip. He nearly spits it out when the sweet, rich taste of cream bursts across his tongue. His heart does somersaults in his chest. He doesn’t deserve this. Cream is a luxury he gave up when he began this game.

Tony swallows the mouthful solely because he doesn’t want to be gross and do a spit-take. He stands frozen, mouth dry as he stares into the inviting brown of the coffee. Does he drink it? Does he pour it out? It’ll be a waste is he dumps it, and he knows he shouldn’t be wasteful just because he can, but he doesn’t deserve it. Cream is a luxury he gave up when he began this game.

Barnes seems to realize his mistake. Tony doesn’t normally panic and freeze like a rabbit, but this is a moral quandary his malnourished brain can’t wrap around.

“I’ll drink it if you don’t wan’ it,” the ex-soldier offers. Tony feels immense relief, relief he can’t actually articulate, but he offers the mug back to Barnes. He doesn’t make eye contact, instead choosing to pour himself a cup of black coffee. It’s much more bitter, much less smooth, but it’s more what he can allow himself. Low in calories, no frills, no bells, no whistles.

It turns out, as Tony wanders outside, that Barnes was busy that morning. There’s a swath of lawn that’s been torn up in patchy, haphazard chunks. It’s messy and uneven, but the grass is gone and bare dirt remains.

“You did all this, Furiosa?”

He sips his coffee. Barnes joins him by his side. The quieter man nods.

“Cool. Whelp, you have fun out there, ‘kay? Yell if you need anything.”

There’s nothing Tony can really do to help. He’s no good at gardening. He’s never done it before.
Why would Barnes need him present?

Tony brushes shoulders with Barnes as he turns back inside. He hangs out on the back deck, his toes dipping into the warmth of the infinity pool edging half of the deck in a lazy ‘L’. The ocean crashes against the cliff far below, and Tony, in a rare moment of peace, reads.

He likes to read papers in fields of science outside his own realm of expertise. He likes to read space westerns too. Today he chooses the space western. It’s soothing and hand-wavey in all its science, and Tony can get on board with that. Seven impossible things before breakfast and all that jazz. He lifts his head when the heavy thud of Barnes’s boots thumps against the deck. He knows that if his guest wanted to be quiet, Tony would never hear him coming, but he appreciates the deliberate warning.

“What’s up, Buttercup?”

“I want help plantin’ the stuff.”

Eloquent as always.

“I’m not exactly a gardener, Barnes. I won’t be much help.”

Tony looks up from his reading pad to meet the other man’s intense eyes. There’s something ever-sharp about it, like a needle pinning him in place.

“You bought the shit. You oughta get to mess with it too.”

Oh, such flawless logic.

“You don’t have to include me, you know. I’m not gonna hold your gardening stuff ransom and demand company as payment.”

Tony doesn’t need pandering. He didn’t go plant-shopping with Barnes to guilt the man into being social.

Barnes makes an irritated sound in his throat, kicking the toe of his boot against the deck.

“This ain’t pity, Stark. I want the company.”

Barnes tacks on something under his breath that might be ‘You stubborn ass’, but Tony can’t be sure.

“I’m not good company,” Tony dismisses, turning his attention back to the pad in his hand.

“I don’t care. C’mon, up.”

The yelp that escapes Tony isn’t exactly dignified, but hey, his chair was forcibly dragged back from the poolside, nearly tipping the skeletal genius face-first into water. He is dumped out of the chair, albeit very carefully. Barnes gives him time to get his feet under him, but the chair is definitely upended.

“Stubborn ass,” Tony grumbles. The quirk of Barnes’s lip makes seems like evidence confirming his earlier suspicion. “Why can’t you let me read in peace?”

“You’ve been sittin’ out alone for hours. Time for a change.”

This is probably the longest conversation Tony has yet to have with Barnes, which is weird. Also
encouraging. Does this mean Barnes is feeling better than he did when he first showed up? 
Hopefully. Tony likes to think his fortress of solitude is having a positive impact.

He surrenders his pad to Barnes, who slinks inside to put it away. Tony, meanwhile, slips on shoes 
and wanders out around his house. The grassy yard was a new stylistic choice after the destruction of 
his original house. Grass isn’t actually a smart choice, given that California is prone to drought, but… 
well, yeah. He wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Maybe he should think about switching it out for 
the former pebble and scrub arrangement.

Small piles of dirt dot the area Barnes dug up, and the plants have been divested of their plastic pots. 
All the heavy work has been done. What remains is to just drop the root-balls into their spots and 
cover them up again.

Barnes comes strolling out the front door, and Tony has to do a double-take. Barnes? Ex-Winter 
Soldier? Traumatized veteran, POW, torture and brainwashing survivor? Strolling? He cracks a 
smile. He supposes a stroll is much better than a murder-strut.

“Whatcha staring at?” Barnes grumbles. Tony shakes his head.

“Nothing, Bambi. So what do you need me to do?”

Barnes tosses him a foam kneeling pad and points down to the holes.

“Just drop th’plants in; cover ‘em with dirt.”

Seems simple enough. Tony carefully settles down, heedless of his clothes, and gets to work. Barnes 
knees a little ways away from him. Even with only one hand, he works faster than Tony. He could 
probably blame the malnourishment for his lack of sprightly energy, but Tony doesn’t like to 
comment on it. Doing so usually makes people upset or uncomfortable, and Tony can’t stand hurting 
people.

Together, the planting takes an hour, tops. Soon enough, there’s a proper garden, complete with 
frames and lines for the more spindly plants to follow up and out. Little plastic markers at the base of 
each plant indicate what they are. All that’s left is to add some mulch, turn on the sprinkler, and call it 
a day.

Tony braces himself to stand, but when he looks up there’s a hand in his face. He blinks and leans 
back, eyeing Barnes warily.

“What?”

“Thought you might wanna hand up.”

Irritation licks at Tony’s bones.

“I can stand on my own, thanks,” he grumps, but Tony doesn’t move. Standing is going to upset his 
heart after so long kneeling. He doesn’t want Barnes to have to see him in his weakness.

“Yeah. Doesn’t mean you have to, though.”

He gives Barnes a sharp look, but the pair of them remains still, unmoving. Eventually, Tony caves. 
He sighs, taking the offered hand, and lets Barnes pull him up off his knees. Neither of them mention 
how Tony leans into the man, steadying himself as his heart thumps arrhythmically, trying to adjust 
to the vertical position.
A minute passes, and it ranks among the longest minutes Tony can recall. Which can either be good or bad, considering other long minutes include suffocating in the emptiness of space, watching his chest bleed in the desert, kissing Pepper for the first time, watching Rhodey try to stand when he first put on the braces.

He steps away. Maybe he’ll analyze that minute later. Maybe he’ll ignore it. He hasn’t decided yet.

Barnes makes him help with the mulch, though yet again Tony does a quarter of the work that his guest does. A hose is run out, attached to a sprinkler. Tony sets a timer on it. He can probably devise a system checking the moisture of the soil and automatically watering if it gets too dry, but that’ll take a little time. A few days, maybe. Barnes seems to hear the gears in his head turning.

“This’s fine,” he insists. “S’all good. T’night’s Star Trek, yeah?”

“Uh, yeah. Star Trek. I’m gonna go get washed up, head back out to read. Uh- Thanks for including me, I guess.”

It wasn’t as awful as he expected. Tony still mistrusts Barnes’s intentions in including him with the gardening, but he can’t figure out the ulterior motive yet. It was… It was fun, though. Kind of. Tony still doesn’t enjoy playing in the dirt, but he thinks it’ll be neat, to see the garden bloom and grow before the mild winter sets in.

Later that night, he almost wonders if this is how a friendship starts.

But that’s just crazy. And frightening. Not to mention crazy. His friendships don’t tend to work out. He has Pepper, and he has Rhodey. No one else really stays.

So yeah. It’s probably crazy.

Chapter End Notes

Please, please, PLEASE comment! I adore reading your thoughts on my writing.
Chapter 5

Stark Trek night is another success. Barnes slowly creeps out of his shell again, joining Tony in the occasional snide remark. Tony finds himself grinning, pulling his blanket around his shoulders in the mimicry of a hug. He’s not going to go cuddling up to his traumatized houseguest, but he’s touch-starved. He lives alone, rarely has guests, and doesn’t allow contact anyways when he *is* with people.

But he’s human, yeah. He just makes do with a weighted comforter at night, and his fleece blanket at times like these. He rubs his chin on the soft fleece, scratching his beard on fabric.

They part ways. Barnes makes a circuit of the house before he retreats to his den. Tony curls up under his comforter. He examines his nails in the dim light, picking at the dirt he didn’t manage to wash out from beneath. Who’d have thought that Tony Stark, technology wizard and mass-murderer-from-afar, would ever sit in the dirt and plant beans. Beans. Him.

He can’t help but smile faintly. He won’t say it, but being so adamantly included unclenches something in his chest.

He sleeps… much longer than he thought he would, actually. It’s an untroubled sleep, the sleep of… well. He isn’t exactly innocent, is he?

The strange thing is, ten hours of sleep leaves him feeling goggier and more muzzy than his usual three to four hours. He’d like to just turn over and go back to sleep, but he can’t bring himself to. The siren-song of ocean waves calls to him. Tony shuffles out of his room with the fleece around his shoulders like a cape. He walks outside, sprawls out on one of the back deck lounges, thoroughly wrapped up in his blanket. He dozes in the sun, heated through by the morning light, but eventually shade drapes over him. Tony glares up to see Barnes above him, fiddling with an umbrella. It’s stuck into a holder on the floor, but Barnes adjusts the angle, covering all of Tony with the shadow.

“Fuck off, Barnes,” he mumbled, closing his eyes again. The words are without real heat. “I was enjoying the sun.”

“You were gonna burn alive, is what you were doing,” the shabby man gruffs back. “Go back to sleep.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

Tony doesn’t give a second thought to closing his eyes, though, lulled by the crashing of waves against the cliffside and the strangest sense of safety. He goes back to dozing, up until the tantalizing scent of coffee tickles his nose.

“‘Go back to sleep’, huh?”

Barnes drags over a lounge chair for himself, settling down by Tony’s side. He picks up the mug of
coffee he had set down on the ground by Tony’s chair and takes a loud, obnoxious sip. Tony makes a
disgusted noise in his throat, and sticks an arm out of his blanket bundle. He makes a grabby hand
at Barnes’s coffee, and Barnes forks it over without a fuss. It’s black as sin, just the way Tony drinks
it these days, and he takes a huge gulp of the hot liquid, burning the roof of his mouth in the process.
Totally worth it.

“Punk,” the now-coffeeless Barnes mutters. Tony shuffles into sitting up, the coffee gripped between
his hands. Punk. That’s what Rogers said Barnes used to call him.

“Hey, you know I’m not a substitute for Mini-Steve, right?”

Barnes stiffens, and Tony gets a sinking feeling. The other man’s one hand comes up to rub over his
stubble.

“Yeah, I know. ’M not trying to treat you like you are. ’S just a nickname.”

“Then why are you here?”

And there’s the million dollar question. Why is Barnes here? Why is he not back in New York with
the man who was prepared to throw his life away to get his Bucky back?

Barnes shrugs, clamming up again, and Tony elaborates.

“I mean, I’m not kicking you out. There’s no wrong answer. Just-” He makes a face. “I can’t figure
you out.”

“It’s safe here,” Barnes blurs, barely letting Tony finish. He works his jaw and looks out at the
horizon, watching puffy clouds vanish into the sea.

“I tried to kill you.”

“I killed your mom.”

Touche.

“Okay, yeah. You did, while being mind controlled. There’s a difference. I was in control of my
own actions.”

“You were hurt, yeah? T’challa said you’d been carrying th’world on your back, but you’re just a
guy. ‘S not your job.” Barnes shrugs again. “No one’s perfect all the time. I forgive you.”

Now that.

That, Tony doesn’t expect.

“You- What?”

What are they, five? Tony holds a sip of coffee in his mouth, letting the burn of too-hot ground him.

“Forgive you.” Barnes grimaces at the words too. “Sounds baby-ish, but ‘s true. Was never mad at
you. Just at the situation. It was fucked-up, huh? All I want’d was safety. Stevey said you guys were
gonna lock me up, said we had t’ run away. Di’n realize you just want’d me in a hospital, ‘til I was
okay. Your, uh, your girl, Miss Potts. She told me that part.”

“Pepper visited you?”
“Yeah. Well. She visited all’uh us. Mostly just glared. Di’n say much ‘til Stevey asked ‘f she was gonna spy on us.”

Yeah, that sounded like Pepper. Silent in her fury unless further provoked.

“Let me guess. She used that dragon-lady voice. The one where she never has to raise her voice but you feel like she’s the loudest one in the room.”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

“God bless Pepper.”

They fall into silence, Tony sipping contentedly at his stolen coffee. He’s going to need another cup to get him out of this sleep-funk, but this will do nicely to start. He doesn’t know how to let sleeping dogs lie, though.

“So why’s it safe here and not there? At the tower?”

Barnes leans back in his lounge chair, scratching at his scalp.

“‘Cause Stevey jus’ takes, y’know? Expec’s me to give ‘n give ‘n give. Give him his friend back. Give him a chance. Give ‘im his righteousness. Give him a pat on the back. He treats me like a dead man, and I can’t- I can’t handle that. I thought I could, but turns out I can’t. You’re safe, ‘cause you don’t try to take what I can’t give.”

“Huh.”

And that’s all he can say, isn’t it.

“I’m gonna go get coffee. Some ratty little thief stole mine.”

“Fuck you, Barnes. I’m adorable.”

“Yeah, keep tellin’ yourself that.”

Later, Tony finds himself reminded of Barnes’s childish phrasing of ‘I forgive you’ as he himself brings in a cardboard box, freshly delivered. He chews on his lip and considers the contents he knows to be inside. Is it too babyish? Too juvenile?

Nah. Of course not. Dinosaurs and sharks aren’t age-specific.

“Hey! Barnes!”

“I can just call him, Boss,” FRIDAY informs him, amusement in her modulated voice.

“He’s fine with this way, right Barney-boo?”

Barnes appears like ghost from the shadows, coming to fuss over Tony and take the box, despite the fact that it weighs, like, two pounds. Max.

“Move it. Off off off. I can carry a box, Barnes. Go sit down. You’ve got presents.”

Tony slits the tape on the box and shoves it into Barnes’s lap once the other man sits down on the couch. He himself wanders off to stand by the massive windows, vibrating with the force of his nerves. This is either going to be a homerun or a monumental failure. No middle ground.
He hears the crinkle of tissue paper as Barnes rifflæs around inside the box, followed by a perplexed “What is it?”

Tony steals a glance to see Barns holding up a lump of green knitted yarn.

“That, my friend, is a stump sock.” At least, that’s what the store listing described it as. There’s got to be a better thing to call it, but Tony isn’t exactly an expert yet. “To cover your lack of an arm. If you want. It’s not a dealbreaker if you don’t like it.”

Barnes lays out an assortment of socks, some knitted to look like a shark, dragon, dinosaur, alligator, and whatever else has nasty teeth, others plain in solid colors of soft yarn. Barnes smooths out the dragon.

“Christ, y’really do think I’m five.”

He wrangles it over the metal port anyways, and in short order the former Winter Soldier sits there on Tony’s couch, a plush, leaf-green dragon dangling by knitted teeth from where a metal arm used to be. An uneven grin sneaks its way onto Barnes’s face as he fiddles with the yarn wings.

“I mean, you don’t have to wear them,” Tony teases.

“Heh, I’m keepin’ ‘em.”

Barnes hunches protectively over his hoard, and Tony lifts his hands in surrender, grinning. Success.

“By all means. There’re some regular ones in there too. I wasn’t sure what colors you like, so I got all of them.” Further inspection really does reveal rounded, unadorned socks in all colors of the rainbow. Barnes looks at Tony, aghast. He tries a few words in his mouth, but can’t seem to find what he wants to say, and Tony rescues him from this. “No take-backs. Consider this a bribe. I’m going to go play Santa Claus to the New Avengers in two days. You’ve either gotta come with me or stay locked up in my saferoom, and I know neither of those options are great so… yeah.”

That actually hadn’t been the motivation at all. Tony had simply thought a little bit of whimsy would help his skittish houseguest. He was right. He just doesn’t want to admit he was right. He’s got enough of a reputation for being an egomaniac as it is.

Barnes does that thing where he shuts down, but thankfully his eyes are just blank, not dead. His body language when processing something potentially unpleasant is very similar to his body language after some homicidal maniac has just recited russian trigger words. The difference is wholly in the eyes.

He isn’t even trying to speak now, so Tony guesses they’re back to charades. Damn. He hadn’t meant to chase Barnes back into his shell, especially not so soon after getting that lopsided grin.

“Allright, so there’s three options, yeah? I’m going to tell you all your choices. Then you’re gonna write down the number you want, or show me with your hands. Got it?”

This earns him a terse nod. Tony heaves a breath, sticking his hands in his jean pockets.

“One: You hang out in the safe room for a couple days. Three or four. You’ll be on lockdown, because that was one of the conditions I was given to keep you here. Two: You come with me to New York. You come hang out with me while I hand out goodies for the younglings. Three: You think on it, and tell me later.”

Tony doesn’t want to force Barnes’s hand. He knows how unnerving it can be to brave personal
interaction after isolating himself. The trip to the store was different. Neither of them were expected
to really converse with the people they ran into. Tony won’t demand Barnes chat with any of the
New Avengers, but yeah. He can see how it would be daunting.

Not surprisingly, Barnes picks option three. Tony claps his hands together.

“Great! Just let FRIDAY know when you figure it out. No rush. Just, you know, by nine am in two
days’ time. And, uh, lemme know if any of those aren’t good. I’ll send them back.”

Two days later finds Tony sprawled comfortably on the couch of his private jet, Starkpad in hand as
he flicks through emails. Barnes paces up and down the center of the plane like a caged leopard.
Even Tony can see that he’s picking out each and every exit point, not that it’ll do him much good up
in the air. Unless Barnes can safely land from cruising altitude without a parachute. Didn’t Cap do
that one?

Who cares.

“Take a seat, buster. We’re gonna be taking off soon, and you’re gonna end up flat on your ass if
you aren’t sitting already.” Barnes immediately does as directed, though he seems distinctly
uncomfortable. “What’s up, buttercup? Are you worried about a crash? This plane’s pretty safe; I
designed it myself.” Not to mention that he has his suit in a travel case stowed away beneath the
couch. If the plane goes down, Tony can suit up in 12.8 seconds and catch Barnes and the pilots
before they have a chance to hit the ground.

Barnes shakes his head, digging his fingers into the plush armrests.

“Dunno why I’m all keyed up,” he mumbles. “S not like I’ve never been in a plane before.”

“Sometimes anxiety’s like that. Here.” He closes out of the email app and tosses over his pad.
“There’s some games and movies on there. Knock yourself out.”

The pad doesn’t soothe Barnes, but it does distract him. It takes just over six hours to get to their
destination. They land in JFK and take a car from there. Happy picks them up. It’s… good to see
him. Tony doesn’t get much chance to visit with his forehead of security nowadays.

At the compound, Happy’s lured out of his car and persuaded inside by Tigra with the promise of
godawful hawaiian pizza. Tony lets him go on ahead, lingering instead to touch base with Barnes.
It’s a matter of minutes, if not seconds, before Tigra tells everyone who’s come to visit, and then
they’ll both be swamped.

“You don’t have to humor them, but if you crush any of those kids, you’ll answer to me, got it?”

Tony knows he’s not the most intimidating man, especially now with his weight plummeting ever
closer to double-digits, but these kids- and that’s what they are. Kids- mean more to him than he
cares to say.

“I’m not gonna hurt a kid,” Barnes protests.

“I meant emotionally, Barnes. They’re moody teens and young adults. They can be obnoxious, but
try not to rise to the bait.”

And speak of the devils.

Happy’s presence and the words of Tigra have the rest of the New Avengers streaming out of the
compound. Most of them don’t live there 24/7, having normal school and families to keep them busy
when they aren’t saving the northeast US and maybe a little bit of Canada, but most weekends find
them training and bonding.

“Mister Stark!” And that would be Peter. “Hey! We didn’t know you were coming.”

“That’s the point of a surprise. C’mon, I thought you were smart,” Tony teases as the spider-kid
strides up to him. The others crowd around as well, and as per usual, Peter hovers indecisively. Tony
rolls his eyes. For these painfully-young people, he makes an exception on his usual no-touching
rule. “Alright, bring it in. C’mon, I know exactly what you’re all thinking. A bunch of saps is what
you are.”

Tony holds out his arms, and Peter grins, wrapping him up in a firm, familiar hug. One by one,
everyone except Piotr- who doesn’t like hugs- and Vision- who tends to be more reserved- pulls at
Tony in a familiar embrace. He studiously ignores the tight look on Peter’s face. It’s always a little
awkward after the hugs, because uh, duh. None of these people are stupid or oblivious. It’s obvious
that something is very wrong with their benefactor, but none of them know how to broach the
subject, and Tony never gives them a way in. He doesn’t see them often, not wanting his bad
reputation to rub off on their fresh canvases, but they like him. Why? He doesn’t know. It’s baffling,
but true. They always want hugs when they see him. What’s up with that?

“Alright, so I brought presents, but you guys have to carry them in. Let’s go; get a move on.”

No one mentions Barnes despite the curious looks they give him. While the younger Avengers grab
the cases of goodies, Vision floats over to him.

“Welcome, Sergeant Barnes,” the android greets. Tony sticks his hands in his pockets, hovering by
Barnes’s side as his guest stiffly nods.

“Hi,” comes the short, terse response.

Vision accepts this, because he’s just an all-around good guy. Doesn’t push, doesn’t judge. It’s a
wonder where he gets it from, given that he didn’t exactly have formative years like all the other little
kiddies. There’s more of JARVIS’s programming in him than Tony probably realizes, he thinks. He
doesn’t know how to feel about that. JARVIS was his baby, and Vision could technically be called
his baby’s reincarnation. That’s weird.

So Tony usually just settles on treating Vision like a completely different person, except in those few
moments when he’s not paying attention and that voice tricks him into thinking the walls are talking
to him like they used to.

“White Witch here’s gonna be hanging out with me for the foreseeable future. I was thinking we
could introduce him to the kids.” Who all hated when Tony called them kids, but seriously. He’s old
enough to be their father. He thinks he’s earned the right to call the whippersnappers ‘kids’. “Not
that you have to chat with them,” he clarifies, glancing at Barnes. “It’s just, they only know you from
museums and news clips. I figure we all exchange names, you get some pizza, and we get you a
room so you can start your little nesting routine.”

“I don’ nest,” Barnes protests.

“Tin-Man, you nest. So! Ready to go?”

The wander inside. Vision leads them to the compound’s sitting room, where pizza boxes are spread
out on the breakfast bar separating the sitting room from the kitchen. Happy is sitting on one of the
barstools, a slice of sickly-sweet pizza lifted to his mouth. The first few trips to the compound that
Happy had played driver for, he had been absolutely adamant about remaining professional. Then it finally sunk in that not only was Tony probably safer here than almost anywhere else, surrounded by superheroes, no one was over thirty, excluding Vision, Tony, and himself, and Tony wasn’t exactly opposed to his friend entertaining a group of superkids playing Mario Kart or whatever.

Tony makes introductions. Although technically they’d all met Barnes just minutes before, they do it properly this time. When it becomes clear that Barnes isn’t up to joining in the conversation like Happy is, they mostly leave him alone. Peter, bless his little creepy-crawly heart, insists on apologizing.

“So, uh, no hard feelings? About what happened at the airport?”

Barnes looks at Pete like he’s sporting a second head. Blue eyes flick to Tony for guidance, but Tony figures Barnes ought not to be babied if he isn’t actually asking for an out (because the moment Barnes started growing distressed, Tony would have whisked him away). He performs admirably, anyways.

“Right. No hard feelings.”

There. Progress.

Tony makes himself scarce while everyone eats. He can’t stomach the furtive glances, the not-so-subtle pushing of a box towards him, the pointed questions like ‘wouldn’t you like to eat something too?’. Like, yeah. Sure. Sure he’d like to eat. But what no one else understands is that he doesn’t deserve it. If he eats outside his strict diet, that means he failed, that he lost control. That means he doesn’t deserve the food he just ate. He tried to explain it to Pepper once, but she looked at him with blank, confused, tear-bright eyes. Tony won’t do that again.

He rolls his little travel suitcase to the room he usually takes when he stays overnight. It’s small, but outrageously-comfortable, and it provides a little bit of generic safety, for a little while. His travel-armor is still locked away in the car. He’ll probably get it out tomorrow, put the kids through their paces and try out the new gear.

When he returns, the pizza has been cleared away, although he is informed that the scant leftovers reside in the fridge. He knows the only reason it hasn’t all been scarfed-down by these people with super-metabolisms is that they’re holding out hope that he’ll cave and take it. Happy’s trouncing Maya, Piotr, and Peter on the Rainbow Road. Tigra doesn’t much care for video games, but she perches on the couch, watching anyways. She is, thank god, clothed.

Barnes hovers in the corner and looks distinctly relieved to have Tony return. He gravitates towards the inventor almost immediately, and Tony offers him a thin smile.

“C’n we go watch Star Trek?” Barnes mumbles quietly.

“Tired already? Yeah, sure. Lemme say goodnight first.”

Something tells him that Barnes doesn’t mean ‘let’s watch Stark Trek here with everyone else’.

He leans on the couch, poking fun at Peter when his kart goes careening off the edge of the space-road, and bids everyone a good night. Says they’ll practice with their new toys tomorrow after lunch.

“‘Kay,” is all Tigra says, absently. Everyone is focused on the projected screen.

Tony takes Barnes away, whisks him off like his knight in shining armor, and they settle into the room Barnes will be sleeping in. Jet lag’s a bitch, so despite Tony saying they’re going to bed,
despite the fact that it’s already dark out, Tony isn’t any more tired than his usual lethargy.

“TUCKER, play episode 17 of Star Trek: The Original Series,” he calls, settling down in an armchair. It would be much more comfortable to lay out on the bed and watch the show, but that feels much more intimate than Tony is willing to endure. Barns sits cross-legged on the bed, shoes on and everything. The heathen.

By the time they reach their third episode, Tony is ready to nod-off in his chair. Whether or not he can stay awake is kind of hit-or-miss, depending on how manic he’s feeling. There are days when he can’t sleep, whether from the fear that is he closes his eyes something bad will happen or the sensation of vibrating out of his skin, but there are also, increasingly, days when he just can’t keep his eyes open.

Today seems to be one of the latter days.

He bids Barnes a good night, and retreats to his own room. He takes a searing-hot shower and just stands under the spray for a while, rubbing the sunken crater of flesh in his chest. The removal of the arc reactor left its mark, and having his sternum caved-in by a well-placed shield didn’t exactly help the already-shaky structural soundness of his chest. It aches sometimes. Not as bad as it hurt to have the reactor there, but at least now he can breathe, but yeah. It aches.

He’s ripped from sleep by nightmares again, but he spends the first two hours of his waking day sitting in another hot shower, counting his breaths and trying to wash away the salt-tracks on his face. No one needs to know. He can’t burden these kids with his own fucked-up brain.

Things kind of go to shit again after lunch. He’s all suited up in the training room. Everyone’s wearing their new gear; Vision is in the kitchen, and Barnes is with him. Vision apparently cooks now, which is cool. He’s already prepping ingredients for dinner, wanting to give the kids one homemade meal before they go home for the week. He thinks it’s a stew.

So yeah. Long story short, Tony and the New Avengers are training.

And then his heart starts going wonky. Like, wonkier than usual. A sharp stabbing pain hits him in the chest, and his head feels suddenly way-too light. FRIDAY takes over control of the suit immediately. She can’t enact the fine motor controls necessary for fighting without his muscular input when he’s in the suit, but she can definitely lower him to the ground, which she does.

“Fri, what’s going on?” he rasps, coms off. He doesn’t want the kids to hear him.

“Your heart, sir.” She pulls up the suit’s heart monitor. “It’s slow, slower than it’s ever been while engaging in this level of activity. Shall I call an ambulance?”

“No!” he snaps sharply, fear flaring hot in him as another pain stabs beneath his breastbone. “No doctors.”

If he goes to a hospital, they’ll see what he’s doing, and they’ll make him stop. What if someone forces him to undergo treatment? What is he’s locked up and force-fed because people think he can’t take care of himself? He can’t lose this little slice of autonomy. He can’t.

“Sir, please-”

“I said no, FRIDAY. That’s final.”
The New Avengers gather around him anxiously. He can hear their ‘Mister Stark?’s and ‘Iron Man?’s and ‘Are you okay?’s. Tony flips up the visor and offers a wry smile, doing as best he can to hide the state he’s in.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Hydraulics malfunction. I think I’m done until I can get the suit up and running again. Hey, better now than out in the field, right?”

This is new. Tony Stark’s tech doesn’t malfunction, but no one knows to call him out on his bullshit. Tony drags himself away, still supported by the perfectly-functional suit, until he’s out of sight and behind locked doors. Then the metal platings open and he crumbles to the floor. His armor stands guard as he trembles, struggling into a first-aid recovery position. He takes deep breaths.

Oh god, he’s going to die.

Except he doesn’t die. He doesn’t.

He lives.

His head stops swimming and feeling all floaty. The pain in his chest fades to nothing. His hands still shake, but it’s only an anxiety-shake now, not a ‘my body is failing me’ kind of shake. He sticks his hand back in the gauntlet, and FRIDAY tells him his heart rate has returned to normal.

No one needs to know.

Tony feels his eyes burn, feels the stress and anxiety and hopeless despair swallow him up. He feels so full and empty all at once, like he’s going to explode or collapse in on himself. He holds his fist to the hollow of his chest, like maybe he can fill the void or hold himself together with that one little touch. They can’t see him like this. So- so- so broken.

Tony sinks his teeth into the meat of his other palm, hard enough to break through weakened, fragile skin and leave him with the taste of iron on his tongue. He knows it’s not a healthy coping mechanism, but none of this is strictly ‘healthy’, and the pain makes the noise in his head go quiet, just for a little while. Just enough so that he can pick himself up, strut out in front of everyone outside this little, locked tech-bay, and pretend everything is fine. There’s no fooling himself, but them? Them, he can fool. No one else deserves to feel the pain he feels. He wouldn’t dare force it on them.

He rocks shakily to his feet, sluggishly-bleeding hand clenched tight. Okay. Okay. He’s good. Calm. The first thing he does is bandage the bite, going over his cover story in his head. Cut his hand on a sharp armor plate. Damn, he thought he’d rounded the edges. Oh well. Honest mistake. Yeah, that’ll work. No one really asks to see a wound for verification.

Next, he actually does take apart the armor, flicking the lights of the tech-bay on. He tweaks a few things. Has FRIDAY override TUCKER and wipe all footage of his little meltdown.

Lastly, he unlocks the door and lets Barnes in. FRIDAY alerts him to the approaching centenarian, so Tony gets a chance to compose himself.

“They said you had an issue with th’ suit,” Barnes states, right off the bat. His tone makes it clear he doesn’t buy Tony’s story.

“Yeah, it wasn’t that.” The words slip out before Tony can stop then, and he physically flinches. He isn’t ready to admit what happened, that his bodily mistreatment is starting to catch up to him. Barnes would try to stop him, and that would be bad. “Panic attack. Don’t know what triggered it, but I didn’t want them to see me like that.”
It wasn’t a panic attack. Heart attack maybe. Doesn’t matter. Barnes doesn’t need to know.

Barnes nods and turns sharply, leaving again. Except he comes back, just a few minutes later. This time he’s carrying a bed comforter. Tony has to pause.

“Uh... what’s that?”

What is it with Barnes and bringing Tony weird little gifts? Sandwiches and sprouted garlic and now apparently a duvet.

“‘S a blanket,” Barnes explains. He invades Tony’s space just long enough to wrap the oversized duvet around Tony’s shoulders, then backs away. The inventor holds onto the edges, keeping it in place. He fails to see where this is going, but yeah. It feels nice. He tucks the duvet around his hands to protect them from the cool indoor air. “You like blankets.”

Tony blinks, opens his mouth, closes it again. Error, error, response not found. What? He takes a moment to do a mental reset. No one notices his love of blankets and the gentle physical pressure they put on him. It’s not important, so it isn’t brought up. He swallows, digging his fingers into the bandaged bite. He’s calm. He’s not going to start crying just because someone’s being nice to him after a near-death experience. Stark men are iron.

“Right. Well, thanks, buddy. I’m just gonna- um. Did you have fun with Vision?”

Barnes continues to watch him. He shrugs.

“He was alright. Real proper. Showed me how t’make beef stock.”

“Well good for you, learning things. If you liked that, we can see about getting you some cookbooks in Malibu.”

“Yeah, that’d be-” Barnes searches for a word, finally settling on “good.”

The rest of the visit is uneventful in comparison. Tony gets in the suit again the next day, much to FRIDAY’s displeasure, but his heart behaves itself this time so everything is fine. They say goodbye that evening. There’s no parting hug- the young ones get one hug per visit, that’s it- but Tony does sign his farewell to Maya, and sternly orders Tigra to “Wear the damn suit”, to which she responds “Yes dad”. The little shit. She’s the most trouble out of the lot of them.

On the drive back to the airport it’s Barnes’s turn to have a panic attack, triggered by Tony himself. All he did was offer to swing by the tower, to let Bucky see his best bud, but within minutes of the offer being given and declined he had a car-full of icy, shallow-breathing super-soldier. Tony talked over the awful minutes, because hey, his inane jabbering seemed to soothe his guest. He chattered about the irrigation system he was going to install, the thoughts he had on purifying saltwater into freshwater, to avoid putting pressure on the California water supply. How success would mean reducing the burden of water shortages. He talked about the greenhouse he wanted to build (which honestly, he had just now conceived in his head. An apology to Barnes for this fun episode, so to speak). He talks until Barnes loosens his limbs and leans against the window, eyes closed. He talks until his throat goes dry.

And then it’s time to say goodbye to Happy and get on the plane.

They go home, they get back to 10880 Malibu Point. Tony hides away in his lab, flicking through designs for greenhouses, then giving up and designing his own. He can’t help but micromanage.

And if his attention wanders to prosthetics as daylight bleeds over the horizon?
Well.

Why not?

Chapter End Notes

Tony currently weighs about 115 pounds, though his weight-loss has slowed in his body’s attempt to shut down and preserve itself. That gives him a BMI of about 16.5. A healthy person should typically be between 18.5-24.9, even if you feel like you look too chubby in that range. It’s perfectly normal and very healthy to have fat on your body. It protects your more fragile organs, helps with thermoregulation, and even your brain is made of at very least 60% fat! If you calculate your BMI and it falls below the above-listed range, I strongly advise you to speak to a doctor. There are severe health complications that can and often do arise from being underweight, up to and including organ failure.

If you know someone who you suspect has an eating disorder, find a way to chat either with your own doctor or a counselor or someone else knowledgeable. If they’re an adult, you can’t force them to undergo treatment, but they will need psychological and physical help to make a recovery. Be there for you friends, even if it’s just something small like sitting with them.

If you personally have an eating disorder or an otherwise unhealthy relationship with food, know that while no one can really force you to change your mind, you deserve happiness. Please, for your own sake and the sake of the people you care about, ask for help.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A quick warning: Tony finds himself earnestly planning to mutilate himself in order to prevent self-harm, which as counter-intuitive as it sounds is actually something some of us think is a good idea in the heat of the moment. He doesn't go through with it, but it's mentioned anyways.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four days after they touch down back in California, Tony has the plans drawn up for the greenhouse. He doesn’t tell Barnes, wants it to be a surprise instead. No, what Tony does is pile together all the shit he has that he needs to build the structure, then places a rush order for the rest of the components. He’ll build the whole damn thing himself, thank you very much. No more construction workers please. Tony only ever deals with them after catastrophes, and yeah, no. He’s not going to associate a greenhouse with catastrophe. End of story.

So! Four days after they touch down in California, Tony has the plans in hand, the parts on his lawn, and a very confused super-soldier eyeing him like he’s gone off the rocker.

The robo-kids are all outfitted with their outdoor wheels- a brilliant idea he had one day some months ago but hasn’t had the chance to put into effect yet. Well, no time like the present. Dum-E is wheeling around excitably, and yeah, there are gonna be tire tracks in the grass, but whatever. He ought to tear it up and replace it with drought-resistant scrub anyways.

“Why’re you buildin’ a greenhouse?” Barnes asks slowly as Tony guides Butterfingers and U into cutting away swathes of sod grass. He’d come up with a way to let the bots help last night, and they seem to be enjoying themselves. It’s their first time exploring outside, but while Dum-E is off chasing grasshoppers, the other two seem to like playing in the dirt, just like Barnes. He’s marked out a wide, even octagon, and they follow the shape.

“So you can grow things all year. Malibu isn’t exactly known for bitter winters, but hey. You never know. Someday there might be a cold snap, or you’ll start longing for orchids or whatever. Banana trees. Do bananas like greenhouses?”

“They’re bananas, doll. I don’t think they givuh fuck.”

Tony’s too busy marking out shapes and numbering sheets of energy-saving glass to pay attention to Barnes’ words, though. Once they lay the flooring down- a quick-cure, twice-as-strong polymer cement-imitation-, Tony’s gonna cut the glass, round the edges, and lay everything out to put together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Barnes sighs and comes to help Tony maneuver the long glass sheets. The greenhouse is going to be gazebo-style. Eight sides, one door, with triangular glass ceiling panels that can tilt to the side, to open up the gazebo to the sky. The glass isn’t really glass, either. It’s a substance designed by SI to darken at the press of a button, and either repel or contain heat or cold, and won’t warp or crack under pressure or extreme temperatures. Tony isn’t responsible for that one. A lovely lady named Ana Ramirez from the Arizona research compound led the team on this particular project. Tony think’s it's brilliant.
Tony has to take a break several times, his breath coming with difficulty. He hides the slight purple tinge of his fingers. It’s anemia, and he knows it, but whatever. He’s stronger than that. It’s not so bad, and he’s been dealing with it for months.

He rivets and seals and screws and glues everything in place. The fancy tech stuff will come tomorrow, but with Barnes helping him lift things and holding everything in place, and Dum-E, U, and Butterfingers all pitching in, the structure itself is complete by sundown. Tony and Barnes assemble metal greenhouse tables using gutted and revamped lab tables. Tony spent several hours the night before cutting out holes to let water and dirt run through, and turning up the edges to provide stability. The benches press up flush to the ‘glass’ walls, six of them in total. The wall with the door in it is free of benches for obvious reasons, and directly across from it a massive supply locker occupies the other wall. A two half-circle benches sit sort of in the middle with space to walk between them, and a small, full-round table sits dead center.

Barnes walks slowly around the new structure, boots tapping on the stone-hard polymer floor.

“So whatcha think, Barnes? I’ll add the irrigation and ventilation system tomorrow, install some LED lights, you know. Get everything up and running. Do you like it?”

Tony leans in the doorway casually, hands in his pockets, but his mind is running a mile a minute. What if Barnes doesn’t like it? What if he’s pissed off at Tony for being so presumptuous and making the decision to build a greenhouse without Barnes agreeing?

No, calm down Tony. Barnes helped you build the damn thing. He probably would’ve said something earlier if he didn’t like the idea. But what if he-

“S’ great. I mean- I dunno what I’m gonna do with a hothouse, but it’s, uh. ‘S great.”

Barnes is looking antsy, though, so Tony develops a curl of dread in his gut. Shit. What’d he do now? Obviously something, otherwise Barnes wouldn’t-

“Can y’call me James?”

Huh. Okay. That’s, uh. Alright.

“Course I can. Are the nicknames alright? Because I might slip up on that one. It’s kind of my thing, misnaming people. Not that I won’t try! It’s just- I make mistakes, right? I don’t wanna piss you off because I called you Rapunzel and you actually wanted James.”

“Y’ sure do run your mouth off, huh?”

Barnes- James sounds more amused than offended, which Tony is prepared to take as a blessing.

“Yeah. It’s a gift.”


“Bucky. Not Bucky. Even I can remember that one.”

Someone nudges his back with their cold metallic claw, and Tony looks over his shoulder to see the bots pressing up close. They whirl and beep curiously, and Tony has an idea.

“Hey Anastasia. Keep the kids company. I’ll be right back.”

Tony saunters around into the workshop, picking between the bots’ toys. Let’s see, let’s see- that one. Tony picks up the sturdy, red rubber ball and goes trekking back to his lawn. He pauses just out
of sight to regain his breath, swallowing the iron-tinged taste of his mouth, and chucks the ball with all the strength he can muster. Which isn’t much, granted, but it’s enough to cause the bots to squeal and zoom after their toy.

He rejoins James as the bots tear after each other, each one grabbing and snapping for the ball as whoever manages to hold it plays keep-away. The grass is a lost cause, which he was sort of expecting, so whatever. Tony reaches around the supersoldier to grab at his water bottle on one of the greenhouse benches just inside the door.

“You have alotta kids.”

Any water in Tony’s mouth immediately sprays into the air. Huh. A real-like spit take. Who’d’ve thought? The inventor coughs, hacking up what he’s inhaled while James watches in palpable concern. Tony waves him off, bracing against the side of the greenhouse.

“What the fuck? I don’t have a single kid. Tony Stark has always and always will wrap it up. No babies for me, thank you.”

“You called those your kids,” Barnes disagrees, pointing to the bots as they trundle up. U holds up the ball in supplication.

“Yeah, but not-I mean, I built them-throw the ball. You’ve got a better arm than me- and I programmed them and everything, but no babymaking was involved. Ergo-not my real kids.”

“You talked to the New Avengers like you’re their dad.”

“Look, James. I’m no one’s dad, and it’s better that way, okay? Maybe I overstep and talk to some people like I’m a parent, but no. I don’t have kids.”

Maybe once upon a time he’d imagined having kids, but he’d realized pretty quickly all those little daydreams had just been centered around him being a better father than Howard had been, and having or adopting a kid just to prove you’re better than your parent? Dick move. So no. Tony Stark wasn’t a father to many as James seemed to think. Best to clear up that misunderstanding as quickly as possible.

“Just keep throwing the ball until you get bored, ‘kay? They don’t really get outside much. I’m gonna go sit down.”

He wets his mouth with the water bottle and plunks down on the steps leading up to his front door to watch.

They all only go inside once the sky is as dark as it’s going to get, the orange glow of the city pushing up not far off. Tony really did get James cookbooks, so the other guy stalks into the kitchen to make whatever it is he feels like burning tonight. Tony doesn’t know whether it’s the lack of one arm or a general inability to cook, but without Vision’s, well, supervision, Barnes could probably burn water if he put his mind to it. It’s only been four days, but already a memorable explosion of pasta sauce on his previously-spotless walls has happened. Tony vacates the premises. He’ll be informed of the damage and handle it later.

He lasts another week before the stench of singed garlic and burnt oil drives him to desperation.

“You,” he announces, waggling his skeletal finger at Barnes as the kitchen airs from its most recent fiasco-an oil fire. “Are no longer allowed to cook alone. This is bullshit. How hard can it be to follow directions? It’s a cookbook for children, James. Children apparently cook better than you.” And he’s not talking about the unbelievably talented kids that show up on those competitions. He’s
talking about glue-eating toddlers.

The smoke alarm lies in pieces on the ground to be repaired later, but *fuck* that piercing whine had gotten obnoxious fast.

“`It’s not even that hard!” he continues to rant, swinging open the glass doors. “Place the oil in a cast iron pan on low heat. Let the fish sticks- *fish sticks*- saute. Come on, James. You’re pushing on a hundred here, and I can’t let you cook without supervision?”

“What, you gonna babysit me when I cook?”

The words are challenging, and Tony whirls around, just over 100 pounds of stubborn irritation, and plots his hands on his hips.

“Damn straight I am. This place already burned down once. I’m not letting your terroristic actions in my kitchen start another fire. Get a new pan. Let’s do it right this time.”

Tony carefully monitors each and every one of James’s actions in the kitchen from then on. At first it’s fine, but then comes the *wheedling*. The ‘Just one bite’s and the ‘C’mon, it’s good’s and the ‘don’t make me eat alone’s. Tony sees what James’s game is, and it’s not going to work. It’s obnoxious in the meantime, but hey. Obviously it’s not enough to make Tony regret the prosthetic schematics he’s started piecing together. His insomnia project, he calls it. Piece by piece, out of sight and out of James’s mind, a prototype forms. Then it gets scrapped. Then version two comes together. Then version three. He’s up to version five now.

Actually *now* he’s tasting the crab soup. Well, stock. First they’re making stock. Then they’ll make soup.

“I dunno what it needs,” James had insisted. Tony had rolled his eyes, but conceded the point. Who between them had years of experience making food, and who had spent seventy years on ice rather than focussing on their taste buds? Yeah. So Tony takes a taste, and tells James to splash in a little more brandy.

The thing is, Tony doesn’t realize how much he’s actually *tasting* until it’s too late. James keeps looking at the soup pot like it’s going to bite him, so Tony has to step up to the plate and be the taster, but one spoon becomes two becomes four becomes eight. He tastes and sips throughout the entire cooking process until finally James ladles himself a bowl of soup and gives Tony those baby-blue puppydog eyes, trying to beg his host to eat, and it hits Tony.

He’s failed.

Tony swallows down the bile in his throat, shaking his head.

How could he fail? He was doing to well, dammit. *Fuck*. *Fuck*, what a screw-up. Can’t even *starve* himself properly.

“Sweetheart, hey lookit me. C’mon back. What’s wrong?”

Tony ignores the unusually-gentle words coming from his guest- fucking typical, making everything about him even when there’s someone who’s endured so much worse *right there*- and scratches methodically at his wrist.

“I’m going down to my lab. Talk to FRIDAY if you need anything.”

“Stark, wait- Hang on a sec-”
Tony beats a hasty retreat. The pressure in his head keeps mounting and growing and building, and hearing James’s pity and concern makes everything worse. He is, however mercifully, not followed. The clear doors seal shut and darken to an opaque black behind him, and Tony just stands there, vacantly staring into the distance as a throbbing burn sets in on his wrist. Everything is loud. Why is everything so loud?

“Mute,” he rasps to silence FRIDAY, despite the fact that she has yet to speak.

He crawls onto the ratty couch, pulling pillows and blankets over him until he’s completely covered in a cave of softness. His fingers reach into his hair, tugging rhythmically. With his wrist up by his face now, Tony can smell the blood he drew from his fragile skin. Fine. This is fine. Everything is fine.

The shaking starts up a few minutes later, and Tony focuses on his breathing. Focuses on preventing another cardiac event, because wouldn’t that take the cake? Making James walk in to find his lifeless body curled up on the couch. Yeah, right. A selfish prick even in death.

It was only a few mouthfuls of soup. A quarter cup at most. It feels like mercury in his gut, heavy and toxic. This lapse in control is appalling. How did he not notice? How?

He falls asleep at some point, and falls back out just as quickly with the phantom pain of slamming into the ocean crackling across his skin. Tony kicks out of the mound of blankets, seeking out air that isn’t quite so stifling. The bots are all docked and charging, so Tony quietly gets up. He examines his wrist in the dim light. Maroon streaks are smeared over the bony joint, dried and flaking. The bloody furrows still weep sluggishly, but they aren’t actively bleeding anymore. Tony wrinkles his nose in distaste and examines the nails of his other hand, and yeah. Yep. There’s blood under his nails. He should cut them off. His nails, that is. That way he won’t be able to scratch himself. He’s sure he has nail clippers somewhere. A knife would work too. Probably better. Let’s see, where’s a-

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he gasps, jerking away, but someone has a firm hold on his undamaged wrist. That someone turns out to be James, but what? How did he even get in here? The lab is on lockdown.

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Barnes-James watches him carefully with those icy blue eyes of his- that’s a weird way of thinking, Tony decides. Things would be decidedly more creepy if James were looking at him using someone else’s dismembered eyes- but he’s not talking. Which is either good or bad.

“How did you get in here. FRIDAY, I thought I locked this place up. Why’s he here?” Oh, right. The mute command. He deactivates that particular protocol, only to find that huh. FRIDAY didn’t let James in at all. Technically he could press an answer out of her- she can’t really disobey him after all. When James got into the house that first time, perhaps it could be viewed as a betrayal of his orders, but Tony could see her actions, or inaction, as a clever work-around. No visitors, Tony had said. But James isn’t a visitor, is he? He’s a refugee, and housemate. Not exactly a simple visitor.

That doesn’t explain this, but Tony’s far too tired to go weaseling information out of a nonverbal supersoldier.

“The silent treatment, huh James?” The other man doesn’t reply, just turns his attention down to Tony’s bloody wrist. “Damnit Jim, I’m a doctor not a mime. And let go of me for fuck’s sake.”

He tries to tug his hand away, but James just tightens his grip and drags Tony over to the industrial sinks on one wall. He squalls and struggles the whole way. This is private. James doesn’t need to see Tony fall apart enough to claw a dent in his wrist. He shouldn’t have to deal with this. And Tony just wants to cut off his fingernails already, get it over with. Call it a hunch, but he doubts James would
be willing to sit idly by while Tony pries off his nails with a kitchen knife.

His wrist is released long enough for James to turn the sink on, but then his wrist is being forces under the warming water. The rusty streaks and swirls on his skin wash away, but damn, those scrapes look bad. Well, they look worse than they really are, Tony is certain. There’s the whole inflammatory response after physical trauma, and then of course there’s that yellowy-clear blend of tissue liquids and protein and whatever else his body is pushing out from the torn paper of his skin. The water stings, and he tries to jerk away, but James is adamant.

The scratched-up skin is washed and dried, and FRIDAY being FRIDAY, she directs James to the lab’s extensive first-aid kit. Tony ends up with his wrist all wrapped up, a nice wad of gauze held in place by stretchy bandage strips. It’s slow going. Tony doesn’t offer to help, and James only has one hand, so things are a little wonky. Tony doesn’t think he deserves to have the bandage. So what is he gets an infection? He probably deserves it.

James settles down on the couch, sprawling out like he owns the place, and damn him. Damn his straight to hell. But James has already been through Hell, so what right would Tony have to cast him there again.

He stomps off to one corner of the lab, drags out a box of metal scraps, and chuck a pair of tinted glasses approved for use protecting one’s eyes from all sorts of nasty radiation James’s way. Safety first, even for the obnoxious.

He drags a full welding helmet over his own head, fires up a torch, and welds.

Tony is much too uncomfortable having a guest in his lab to actually get any work done, which is his usual destressing method, so mindless welding of scraps to form some angular monstrosity is going to have to do. He welds until his hands shake, because fuck. He was actually going to rip of his nails. That was a thing he would have done if Barnes hadn’t grabbed him by the wrist. What the fuck?

The torch shuts off with a series of clicks, and Tony drags off the gloves to stare at his trembling hands. Fuck. Why had that seemed like a good idea in the moment? He feels vaguely sick.

“Hey, uh, James?” he calls, tearing his eyes away from his blessedly-present fingernails. “Can you open up that first aid kit again?”

Tony carefully wraps the tip of each finger up in band-aids. Out of sight, out of mind, and if that destructive impulse from earlier comes back he’ll have a symbolic barrier present. The downside is that Tony can’t feel anything with his fingers now that they’re covered, but all he can think about is the very vivid plan he had almost gone through with.

James vanishes again while Tony’s back is turned some time later, but Tony, being the debatably good sport he is, doesn’t check video footage to see exactly how it happens. It becomes a theme over the next week Tony spends holed up in his lab. James vanishes, James comes back bearing gifts of fruit—typically peaches or cherries, although why he picks those is beyond Tony. Tony nibbles when James isn’t looking, because hey. It fits into his caloric plans for the days, and it’s light enough to balance out the guilty spoonfuls of rich soup he’d eaten.

While James is in his missing phase, Tony… well, he starts seriously designing a new arm. It’s his fault James lost his first metal one, and whether he knows it or not, James did save Tony from ripping out his own fingernails. He thinks making a proper prosthetic is a good way to say ‘thank you’ and ‘I’m sorry’ all in one.

So yeah. He fixates on drawing up a prototype. He even synthesizes and puts together a few versions
on the sly in much the same way he synthesizes and puts together Iron Man suits, just to see if a component or mechanism functions the way he wants it to.

Two days out of his week-long self-imposed exile, Tony has a product he’s happy with. It’s sleek and silver, with linking plates like that HYDRA monstrosity, but… softer? Rounder, kind of. Tony might be bullshitting everything, but he thinks maybe James wouldn’t want a weapon, persay. Duh, the arm is going to be stronger than a normal human’s, because Tony wants to match the strength to that of James’s flesh and blood arm, but it isn’t meant for destruction like the other one was.

He just kind of has to bring it up. No time like the present.

“So I made you an arm,” he announces without preamble as he watches James carefully flip an omelet. James freezes, the egg disk dangling from his spatula. “Hey, finish flipping that or it’s gonna tear.”

James obeys and piles on cheese as the underside cooks a little more.

“Wha’dyaa mean, you make me an arm?” he ventures cautiously.

Tony shrugs, tracing his bony finger over the countertop. He isn’t anywhere near the stove top this time, doesn’t want to risk another slip-up.

“I mean… I figure you might want your second hand back. No pressure; you don’t have to accept or anything. It’s just an offer. Fold the omelet over. That’ll finish melting the cheese and then you can chow down.”

The omelet is transferred over to a plate. Tony cut up some fruit and brought out some crackers for himself, but James tries to offer him a corner of the omelet anyways. Tony declines, predictably, but they sit down together. James eats. Tony won’t touch his meager allowance until he’s alone, but it makes James feel better to see that Tony actually has something.

He sits in suspense until James clears his plate and swallows the cut fruit, but once the plates are in the dishwasher, James scratches his bearded chin and says, “Why not. Let’s get it over with.”

Tony’s heart leaps in his chest, and he scrambles up from his chair.

“That’s awesome. I really want to see if this thing works right. And I mean, I can always take it off again if you don’t like it.”

He’s happy to see James relax slightly at that assurance.

The lab doors open for them. Tony directs James to sit in his rolly chair, and off comes the knitted shark, baring the silvery connection point and all its wires. A few quick questions assures Tony that no, James hasn’t been in constant pain. The arm hadn’t even been designed to feel more than pressure. Tony takes scans, pulls up schematics, figures out where exactly he needs to make connections, how to splice wires, what to make secure. Then he scans the flesh and blood arm, determines its mass. He nags James into standing, tells him to lift random objects around the room to get a rough gauge on how to calibrate his final product, how strong it needs to be to be balanced. They’ll fine tune things later, once everything’s nice and attached.

Tony produces his most updated version, although Dum-E has to help him lift it onto the table. He’ll break out the lightweight alloys for the finished product. This one is just to give James something to look at.

And look James does. In fact, he looks at the arm like it’s going to jump up and bite him.
“Hey, don’t be scared of it. It’s just an arm. I mean, yeah. Arms can be kind of freaky when they’re not attached to bodies, but this one’s alright. It’s new and shiny and never-before used. You get to decide what it does. No one else. Now! Any preferences? I can make it pink if you want a pink arm. Stars aren’t really my schtick, so no-go there, but any other pretty patterns you want? Bubbles? Sharks?”

“No, just… whatever y’think is good,” James mumbles, brow furrowed sharply as he hesitantly touches the interlocking plates. He’s clearly not fully on board with the idea of having a complete set of limbs, but hey. At least he’s willing to give it a shot.

Tony shoos James out of the lab, eager to sift through his data and make the final tweaks.

The very next day, Tony has James right back in that ergonomic rolly chair, a lighter, improved arm held up so Tony can fix everything in place. James has his eyes closed patiently, submitting to Tony’s need for theatrics. He wants a big reveal, wants James to wait until the arm is attached before he gets to see it.

And oh, what a beauty it is.

It’s a work of burnished silver alloy, made of 348 interlocking fish scales. He hand-detailed dark green, finely-shimmering enameled leafy vines lacing over the fingers and up, around the wrist, circling the forearm and then up over the shoulder. He’ll add the same vine details to James’s shoulder, if the supersoldier consents of course.

When finally everything is complete and Tony lets his guest open his eyes. He busies himself cleaning up his tools, giving James a chance to… well. What does someone do when they’ve been given a lost limb? He flexes, watches the frictionless glide of plates, slides them in a wave and clenches a fist. Tony watches James out of the corner of his eye. The man stares down at the vines that shiver and shine with every minute movement, something undefinable in his eyes.

“So, uh, is it alright? Or do we, you know, need to get it off ASAP?”

James stretches his metal fingers silently, watching how they gleam in the light.

“Are y’kidding me? Tony, it’s beautiful.”

Tony glances over to James, who’s watching him with those glacier blues of his. He shuffles a bit, feeling uncomfortably bare beneath the other’s gaze.

“I mean, yeah, it’s alright. It was kind of rushed. If there’re any issues I’ll make you a better one.”

“Oh ain’t that’uh line. You don’ do things halfway do ya? Christ, y’got magic hands, huh?”

James brings his hands together, palm to palm, and they match up perfectly. Finger for finger, joint for joint, palm for palm.

“I mean, could be better. I haven’t had a chance to work out touch, y’know? I’m thinking we can start with things like hot and cold, maybe move on to finer feeling.”

“Tony.”

“What?”

Oh. That’s a metal hand. On his face. Cupping his face. Tony blinks, disengages. He ducks away from the touch, leaving Barnes hanging. His heart thuds rapidly in his chest.
“Yeah don’t do that. Or at least give me warning, ‘kay? Focus on the hand. None of that sappy ‘having a moment’ bullshit.”

Tony keeps things distant and professional as he walks Barnes through functionality. There’s a tiny arc reactor hidden in the bicep that provides all the power the arm could ever need.

“So don’t lose it, okay? Proprietary material right there.”

“What, so you jus’ labeled me ‘Property a’Tony Stark’?”

“Oh fuck off, you horrible flirt. I’ll take it back if you don’t behave.”

“I’ll fight you,” Barnes threatens, cradling his new arm protectively.

“Then behave. We’re going to calibrate this to your other arm’s strength, and then you’re going to go test your pressure sensitivity on some eggs.”

By the end of the day, Tony’s cleaning egg gook out of the plates of Barnes’s hand, but hey, they have to start somewhere. It brings a nearly-forgotten curl of warmth within the sunken hollow of his chest to see James adapt to life with Tony’s creation, to see that spark of awe every times James lifts his hand to watch how the vines catch the sunlight.

It isn’t made for stealth, or battle, or really much of anything the old one was meant for. Sure it’s stronger than a normal human’s arm, but only because Tony didn’t want to unbalance his guest. Otherwise…

It’s art, is what James says about it. Art with a purpose. Tony hides a grin in his coffee mug.

Things are going too well, though. So when FRIDAY relays a message to him, that Stevey-boy wants to talk peace…

Well he’s a sucker, isn’t he? He turns his back on James as he dips into the pool, eager to test the arm out swimming; instead Tony holes up in his ill-used office, biting his cheek, and waffles back and forth on whether he really should make the call.

He does.

They’re going to meet in five days, in New York. Oh goodie.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for bearing with me! College is kicking my ass right now, so I’ll probably continue to be sporadic for a while.

As always comments are my life’s blood and kudos warm my heart.
They fly to New York four days later. Tony’s heart flip-flops in his skeletal chest, but not- it’s not because of Steve. Really. It’s not.

It’s because of Pepper.

Tony knows he’s been avoiding her increasingly. Their relationship had been a bit strained already, but his whole starvation game had added a-whole-nother level to the awkwardness. On his part, mostly. Pepper… Well, she’s perfect, isn’t she? The moment she realized her friend was in trouble, all animosity on her part had been shoved back, locked away in favor of trying to help. Tony’s the one who’s been maintaining distance, who hasn’t let her anywhere near him.

That needs to change.

He has a velvet box containing a matching set of opal and sapphire drop earrings with a corresponding necklace as a peace offering, a way to bridge the gap between them. It’s peeking out of his pocket, too big to be fully tucked away, but hey, it’s staying in place. That’s all he needs.

Pepper keeps her office in one of the satellite buildings erected after Stark Tower became Avengers Tower. The general consensus was that while the majority of goings-on could be kept in the original spot, Stark Industries wasn’t directly affiliated with the Avengers and thus needed someplace away from the action. Pepper had actually had an office in the Avengers Tower, but with the old Avengers back in the tower? She didn’t want anything to do with them, and so had moved.

Tony fidgets with the box as he and James ride the elevator up to her floor. Pepper knows he’s coming, technically. That is, Tony let the ground floor receptionist know to let Pepper know that he was on his way up. It’s all pretty spur of the moment. Tony doesn’t want to give himself a chance to lose his nerve.

James was given the option to wait in the car or the lobby or something, but the man sticks to Tony’s side like glue. Or those little sticker things you get when you walk through a lot of undergrowth. You know, those spikey things you spend like ten minutes prying from your clothes. Those things. Tony swallows thickly, tapping his bandaged fingers against his scabbed wrist. The suit sleeves will hide the scabs from Pepper, but for the moment they’re pulled up, just enough to allow for the tapping. And that’s a thing he does now. He taps. The bandaids on his finger prevent him from scratching, so he taps. And tap tap tap tap taps.

“Relax,” Barnes grumbles, bumping his flesh-shoulder against Tony’s. The green enamel on his other arm glints in the fluorescent light.

“Yeah, easy for you to say,” Tony mumbles. “I’m going to see my ex-girlfriend who probably hates me.”
“She don’ hate you,” James replies, exasperated.

“You don’t know that.”

The elevator dings, and Tony tugs the sleeves down to hide his wrist again. He adjusts his sunglasses and swaggers out, but the lazy swagger is forced, almost mechanical. Pepper waits by her door, as put-together and beautiful as always.


“Well you know,” Tony blusters, waving a hand dismissively. “We were in the area. Here, I got you something.” He presses the flat velvet box into Pepper’s hands as he passes by, entering the corner office with its floor to ceiling windows. She has a saltwater fish tank behind her desk, complete with fake coral and colorful fish darting through the massive tank’s water. Tony tucks his hands in his pockets and looks down at the city below. Thoughts flash through his mind, of falling and falling and falling, but he pushes them away just like always. He hears the box snap closed, knows that Pepper’s given the goods a look-see, and he swallows. Why did he think this was a good idea?

“Mr. Barnes, if you’ll step inside,” Pepper says softly. “People tend to get nervous when someone stands out in the hallway like that.”

‘Like that’ probably means ‘looking like you’re planning murder’. Tony smiles faintly. James is such a card.

“You don’t seem all that surprised by James being here,” Tony comments.

Pepper comes around and places the box of jewelry on her desk.

“Rhodey told me.”

“Oh yeah? And what else does Rhodey tell you about me?” he hisses, suddenly on the defense. Pepper’s hands come up in the universal ‘I mean no harm’ position.

“He just tells me how you’re doing, Tony. He’s not spying on you. I just- I never hear from you. I’m worried.”

“I’m fine,” Tony grumbles, looking back out the window again.

All three of them know that’s a lie, but even Pepper doesn’t know what to say. It’s one thing being the person who needs help because they’re cutting their thighs to pieces. It’s another to suddenly be the person who wants to offer help to someone starving themself to death. Pepper might be the only person Tony knows who can understand the urge to hurt himself, the only person who knows how to beat it, but he can’t bring himself to ask, and she can’t figure out how to broach the topic.

Barnes blends into the corner, still and watchful. This leaves Tony and Pepper to talk. Tony can’t make eye contact, so he flits between watching the fish and eying the city. Pepper doesn’t force the matter, and slowly Tony relaxes. Just a little bit. Just enough to take off the glasses. Just enough to let his shoulders rest loose.

They chat about the bots, about the greenhouse he built for James. They talk about Michael Glenwood. Tony teases that he’s shocked the man hasn’t proposed yet. Pepper flushes, that happy little smile on her face that Tony knows she gets when she’s thinking about her boyfriend. Mike needs to get with the program. He wants to see Pepper get her happily ever after before he dies.

Tony initiates an awkward hug before he leaves, one which Pepper wholeheartedly returns. She
buries her face against his bony shoulder and sighs, leaning lightly into him.

“‘You know, you don’t have to bring me presents to see me,’” she mumbles, voice muffled by Tony’s suit.

“Tha’s what I keep tryin’ t’tell him,” James pipes up, the traitor. Pepper jerks up in surprise. This is the first she’s heard of James’s voice. Her eyes are red and wet, and Tony doesn’t want to acknowledge that it’s because of him. “He don’ gotta pay us to be nice t’him.

“‘You know, Mr. Barnes? I think you and I are going to get along just fine.’”

And isn’t that just great, Tony thinks fondly. Now he’s got three pains in the ass to gang up on him.

They spend the night in a hotel, one that has James gaping with wide eyes at the over-the-top luxury. And yeah, okay. It’s a little much. Who needs a waterfall wall in their hotel room? But now that his visit with Pepper is over, he’s terrified of the meeting taking place the next day. He feels dazed and detached, like he’s not really him. Like he’s just playing Tony Stark, just controlling this body like a video game. It’s disconcerting and alarming, but in a muffled sort of way. He hopes surrounding himself with nice things will be soothing.

It takes a dip in the hot tub—scorching compared to the Siberian ice wrapped around his heart—to bring him back to himself, and Tony crawls into bed as soon as he dries off, counting his breaths to lull himself to sleep.

He wakes up with a human furnace in his bed, which is okay. That’s fucking weird. Tony definitely wasn’t drunk last night, and yet there’s a certain James Barnes in his bed, pressed up and spooning Tony instead of sleeping in his own bed, in the separate goddamn room Tony booked for him.

“What the hell,” he whispers, staring down at the metal arm hooked around his frail waist.

“Y’had a nightmare,” Barnes mumbles from behind him.

“And what, you thought you’d just climb on into bed with me? Protect me from the bad dreams?”

Tony’s not going to mention that obviously it worked. He doesn’t even remember the nightmare, although he doesn’t doubt he had one.

“How did you even get in here?”

“Th’ window.”

The- No. Whatever. What’s done is done and Tony doesn’t want to think about James jumping the space between their balconies to get to Tony’s room.

He doesn’t tell James not to do it again, though. No, instead Tony squirms out of the supersoldier’s arms and grabs the suit he’d picked out for the occasion, disappearing into the bathroom to change. When he returns James is still there, fully dressed in Tony’s bed. Tony snaps a repulsor bracelet onto his wrist. He’s not going to bring a full suit of armor with him to face Rogers, but Tony can’t stop the trembling in his hands. He’s scared. There. He said it. He’s afraid of America’s golden boy, of what he now knows Steve can do. Never once had he thought Steve would lie to him, not Steve of all people.

He pushes the thoughts away. Steve thought he was doing the right thing, Tony reminds himself. Steve wasn’t trying to destroy the friendship they had.
But the road to Hell and all that jazz.

“I’m meeting Steve in an hour. Do you want to come with me or stay here?”

“Do I have t’talk to ‘im?” Barnes ventures.

“No. You can pick a little corner and stay out of sight if you want.”

“I’m coming with you.”

They pile into the car- Happy isn’t the one driving today- and take off to an innocuous little uptown cafe. Tony’s probably going to avoid it like the plague after this. They arrive before Steve. Barnes gets a black coffee and pulls his baseball cap down a little farther over his face. He picks a back corner and huddles over the table, sipping slowly at the coffee. Tony gets himself black coffee as well, in a larger size. He hasn’t been able to stomach anything today. Nor could he yesterday for that matter. On second thought, maybe fear isn’t the only reason his hands are shaking.

The door opens again a few minutes later to let Steve in, alone. He offers Tony a sheepish smile. Huh. Would you look at that? Steve’s actually a few minutes late. Instead of going to the counter to order something for himself, Steve comes directly to Tony’s booth, sliding in across from him. Tony swallows thickly, wrapping his hands securely around the orange cup on the table.

Neither of them speak at first. Tony can feel Steve’s eyes taking in his emaciated form, can practically see the questions taking shape on the all-American hero’s tongue, but he won’t look directly at Steve. The sunglasses hide how he looks over Steve’s shoulder instead, at the dark wood of the booth.

“How have you been, Tony?” Steve finally decides upon.

“Good, good. Uh, not much has been going on. You?”

“Yeah, it’s been pretty slow for me too. It’s not- Well, it’s weird to be locked out of emergencies. None of us are allowed to help out.”

“Hmm.”

Tony doesn’t have anything else to say to that. It’s not his decision, to make, and thankfully Steve doesn’t seem to think it is.

“You look…”

“I’m fine,” Tony cuts shortly. He doesn’t want to get into the subject of his health, not with Steve. Not with anyone really, but especially not with Steve.

They make small talk, and the tension mounts thicker and thicker. Tony mourns the loss of his coffee when he swallows the last sip. Miracle of miracles, though, Steve never once brings up James.

Until suddenly he does.

“I’m going to have to get going, Stevie. Plane to catch and all that. I’ll be seeing you around.”

“Tony, wait.”

Tony waits.

He waits, heart pounding and fingers clenched tight. The bandaids prevent his nails from biting into
Is Bucky here?"

And there it is. Naturally James was going to come up. Tony doesn’t blame Steve for it; after all, Bucky was his best friend, his brother in all but blood, his lover, if old rumors were to be believed. And now James avoids him. For reasons Tony thinks are legitimate, but still. He knows it isn’t easy on Steve.

“He doesn’t want to talk to you, Cap.” Tony tries to say it gently, if bluntly. “Just give him some time, okay? He’s not ready to interact yet, and I’m not going to force him. I’ll see you later.”

Tony slides out of the booth and straightens his glasses. Steve’s steely grip wraps around his bicep, prompting a violent flinch from Tony.

“Is this some sort of revenge? For the Accords? Tony, he’s my friend! You can’t keep him away from me.”

Tony’s heart beats a rapid, uneven staccato, and words evade him. Words, words, what are words? What can he say? Tony can’t seem to speak, but James speaks for him.

Metal glints in the cafe’s soft light as James surges from his chair and storms across the room, ripping Steve’s hand off of Tony. He growls something threatening in Russian, and okay. Tony doesn’t speak Russian. Maybe he should learn, given his house guest.

“Bucky!” Steve exclaims, torn between confusion and elation. James pushes Tony back, shielding him from Steve, and Tony rubs a soothing hand over James’s shoulder blades.


“Don’t touch him,” comes the next growl, and okay, that’s a little better. So it wasn’t a death threat after all. That’s better than what Tony originally thought, given the spring-tight coil of James’s muscles, like he’s ready to launch himself at Steve at any given moment.

“Your name is Bucky Barnes,” Steve soothes. “You’re in New York City. Remember that? That’s where we grew up.”

“I know where I am,” Jams spits, taking a step back and pushing Tony along with him. “Stop calling me fucking Bucky already.”

“But that’s your name.”

“No. No Steve. That’s a dead man’s name. I ain’t your pal Bucky. I dunno who I am after seventy years from hell, but I’m trying to figure it out. ‘Kay? I’m not Bucky.”

“Come home, okay? Just, come home. We’ll figure out who you are, together.”

“All you ever do is treat me like your old pal, like I’m someone from your memories. I can’t- can’t- I’m not gonna do that no more, Steve. I need space. Space to figure things out.”

“What, and you think you’re going to get that with Stark?”

Tony flinches at that. Oh yeah, great. He’s Tony until Steve’s pissed. Then he’s nothing but a last name.
“Yeah. Yeah, I do. I wanna go home, Tony.”

James turns his back on Steve and steers Tony out the door. Tony, who’s still processing. They slide into the car again and pull away, leaving Steve on the sidewalk, watching, betrayed. Tony shakes, wrapping his arms around himself. This wasn’t what he wanted to happen. He didn’t go into this hoping James would be forced to choose, to choose between a damaged engineer and his childhood friend. That wasn’t the plan.

James scoots across the seat between them and presses his side up against Tony’s. Like- like- like a blanket. A soft pressure keeping him from shaking apart. Tony closes his eyes and lets his head thunk against the window, a shaky breath escaping him.

The flight back to California is filled with nothing but Star Trek. Tony does talk, just mostly picks at the band aids with his teeth, but he doesn’t take them off his fingers. Barnes sits a few feet away from him, eyes ostensibly on the screen, but Tony sees how they keep flicking back to him. But he’s fine. Really. Really. Tony is fine.

Three days later, things fall apart. And the kicker is, it’s completely outside of Tony’s control. Some guy with a magic hammer- not Thor’s hammer- is rampaging through San Francisco. And guess what. The hammer induces localized earthquakes. As if San Francisco doesn’t have to deal with enough of the natural ones. Tony sits by his armor, already in the undersuit. Just waiting. Waiting to be called in.

The call comes, and the armor slides on.

James watches the red and gold plates lock into place, Steve’s shield in his hands. No. Not Steve’s anymore. The colors have been stripped away, leaving behind a solid silver surface, save for the claw marks he hasn’t been able to get out. An unspoken question hangs in the air.

“Yeah fine. C’mon.”

Tony carries James with him on the quick flight, wind whipping through the supersoldier’s hair. Much to James’s displeasure, though, he drops the man off with the command team coordinating evacuation with Big Hero 6. Tony isn’t going to risk James’s life in this. Sure, he’s a trained assassin, but he has no weapons, no armor, no nothing. Just a shield. Yeah, James is going to have to sit this one out.

He’s working with SAFE this go-around- the US’s response to the fall of SHIELD. It’s like SHIELD 2.0, with hopefully less HYDRA. They point him in the right direction to meet this self-named ‘Anvil’. Yeah. Real clever. Anvil wielding a hammer.

Tony could have found the guy rapidly even without help. All he has to do is follow the view of shaking buildings and the periodic booms. He dives down, the weapons on his shoulders clicking into place. Tiny missiles fire off one after the other, knocking the beefy dude wielding what looks to be a stylized sledgehammer back. Anvil rolls with the punches, and Tony brings himself to a hover.

“We’re not exactly short on earthquakes here,” he projects, locking on to his target. “Let’s just put the hammer down, okay?”

He fires off another round of shots before arcing away, out of reach of the hammer.

“FRIDAY how does that thing work?” he asks, watching the ground ripple.

“The hammer appears to emit intense bursts of sound too low for the human ear to detect.”
“And let me guess. The sound waves are strong enough to make the ground shake?”

“That would be correct. Very good, sir.”

“Sassy sassy,” he chides affectionately. “Let’s try this again.”

For a guy using soundwaves to do damage, Anvil is oddly quiet. No banter, no rants, no monologues. At least, not until he manages to smack the hammer squarely into Tony’s side.

Something snaps, and Tony has to bite back a scream as brittle bone gives way. The armor vibrates and sparks as those earthquake-inducing waves rattle the metal, throwing everything out of alignment. He goes down like a ton of bricks.

A high ringing sound deafens him as pain stabs through his chest again. The flickering HUD immediately displays his heartrate, thudding slowly—so, so slowly. His head feels stuffed full of cotton.

The helmet is ripped off and thrown to rest among the rubble, but all Tony can do is lay there, gasping for air, clutching at the suit’s reactor. His arm is going tingly. Is that normal? Another stab of pain jolts his chest, and Tony gapes like a dying fish. He can’t breathe.

“Iron Man, Iron Man, Iron Man,” Anvil finally says, toeing the armor with one of his clunky boots. Tony can’t respond. His vision is swimming, and he can hardly make sense of the man looming over him. “You should have stayed home.”

The hammer lifts, blocking out the sun, and comes down, down, down.

Until it strikes a round, silver shield, the metal ringing in reverberation.

James. The word forms on Tony’s lips, but he still can’t make a sound, too dizzy for words. He can only watch with half-blind eyes as James straightens, the shield secure on his flesh and blood arm, a feral snarl marring his face.

Anvil doesn’t stand a chance.

Somehow James has procured a gun, and all it takes is one opening for Anvil to fall to his knees, then to the ground, a round hole pouring red from just above his ear. James doesn’t have the same reservations about killing as Tony does.

Tony blinks up at the blue sky as James comes back to crouch over him. He hears his name, hears James shouting at him, and suddenly, something unseizes. Tony jerks, rolling over to his side with a gasp. He breathes hard, like he’s just run a marathon, and James helps him support the heavy, dead armor.

“What th’fuck was that,” James snaps, the shield dropping to the ground.

“Sound waves,” Tony stammers. Yeah, that’s all James needs to know. “Sound waves disabled the suit. Must have messed with my nerves too.”

“Bullshit. You an’ I both know what the fuckin’ problem is.” Tony flinches. “You wanna be strong, you wanna be in control, but how can you say this makes y’ strong? How can you protect people if you get your head bashed in? Tony, y’ almost died!”

“I know!” Tony shouts back, immediately whimpering as the forceful yell jostles his ribs. “I know, okay?”
James still looks like rage incarnate, but it softens just a bit. They sit in silence for a moment.

“You hurt?”

“Yeah. My ribs, when that fucker hit me with the hammer. Is he…”

“Dead. Yeah. How do I get this junk offa you?”

It’s not *junk*, but Tony helps James with the manual latches, lets the man feel up his ribs. One of them’s floating, which isn’t exactly the *best* thing, but judging by the sound of helicopters, medics will see to him soon.

As it turns out, James stole one of the command team’s pistols, jumped into a SAFE jeep, and tore through wrecked roads to get to Tony and the villain du jour. Which is, okay, probably not going to be fun to explain to the World Security Council when they ask about it, but hey. James brought down the man wrecking San Francisco. That’ll count for something.

Tony ends up with his ribs wrapped and told to remain *resting* for a minimum of twelve weeks. He’d adamantly refused to be taken to a hospital, promising instead to call a doctor to make a house call. At least that way it’ll be harder for them to institutionalize him if someone gets it into their head that Tony Stark shouldn’t be allowed to take care of himself.

The doctor comes and goes, confirming via the x-ray machine Tony built that three ribs are fractured, and one was torn from the cartilage. He’s told to thank his lucky stars that surgery isn’t a necessity here, and strongly urged to see specialist for his malnutrition. Like hell. Before the doc gets up momentum to start on some heartfelt speech about how everyone needs help, that anorexia (it’s not anorexia, he vehemently thinks) is a common, treatable disorder, that he deserves a chance at recovery, Tony kicks him out.

“Send me the bill,” he grumbles, and slams the door.

James is *insufferable* in the days afterwards. He and FRIDAY conspire to keep him on bed rest. The bots badger and poke and prod at him every time he so much as *looks* at a power tool. Tony’s left to play in theoretics only. No physical work for him. Not until his ribs heal.

This means, unfortunately, that Tony has days and days and days to think.

He’s going to die, and he’s okay with that, he thinks. It’s about damn time. He’s tired of the ache with every breath, the one he thought he’d escaped when he got rid of the reactor. The one that came back when he was healing from a fractured sternum. He’s tired of the self-doubt, the anxiety, the flashbacks, the problems he *knows* he causes. Rhodey wouldn’t be paralyzed if Tony hadn’t pulled him into the fray. Pepper wouldn’t have been injected with an experimental, genome-altering concoction if she hadn’t been Tony’s girlfriend. All Tony does is fuck shit up. He’s *tired*, and he’s had his fair share of missed chances. Tony leans back on the couch, six days after his most recent cardiac event, and decides that he’s ready. Next time death comes, he won’t fight it.

“Tony!” James shouts, panicked.

Tony jerks upright, stumbling onto his feet instantly. He yelps and nearly toples over again when the sudden motion strains his bound ribs, but manages to hold his footing.

“What? What’s wrong?” he demands as James comes striding over, a guilty look plain on his face.

“I was in the garden, y’know? And I think I took off this guy’s arm.”
‘This guy’ turns out to be… a frog. A sand-colored, spotty looking frog. Tony braces his hand against his ribs and looks up into James’s panicked face in exasperation.

“This? Really? You put on a brave face for literally everything else, but you think you hurt a frog and suddenly you look like you’re going to cry?”

It’s unbelievable. Unbelievable! How is this Tony’s life? And here he thought things couldn’t get stranger. Someone up there really has it out for him.

James looks earnestly distressed, so Tony sighs and holds his hand out for the frog. It’s wet and slimy and- okay. Yeah. That’s frog pee. Tony hobbles into the kitchen anyways and finds a glass tupperware. He puts the frog inside and pokes a myriad of holes into the rubber top. On second though, he drizzles a tiny bit of water in the tupperware. There, hopefully that’ll keep it from drying out. The frog really does seem to be missing an arm. Oh, yikes. Tony doesn’t know what to do for that.

He does know, however, that it’s not going to survive outside with just three legs. So he comes to a split second decision.

“Go clean up, Jimmy. We’re going out.”

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James holds the frog box in his lap as they drive into town, towards one of the little mom and pop pet stores. Tony knows jack shit about taking care of a frog, and honestly, once he gets a terrarium set up he might go to a chain store for supplies, but for the set-up? He wants to ask someone who’s in the business for passion, not just for money. They pull into the parking lot of one such mom and pop store, and Tony zips up his hoodie as they walk in.

One of the two people on duty is called Jordan, and Jordan happens to like frogs. They warn Tony that he’ll need to get a permit to own California wildlife, just in case, but that yeah, they’re more than willing to help him with setting up a terrarium. Tony ends up with a 10 gallon tank, a bag of substrate, an army of plants, a circulating water dish to embed in the substrate, a bottle of water conditioner, and a box of crickets. He lets James pick out the shelter— a hollow driftwood log. Jordan directs Tony to buy a stalk of celery for the crickets to eat, and offers a guide on first-time amphibian care. It’s a lot, but James looks calmer at the prospect of fixing his little gardening snafu.

With his ribs busted, Tony can’t really set up the tank, but he does direct James on where to put everything. The tank stand goes in the living room, and before long everything is where it needs to be. The LED lights are plugged in, along with the water circulator, and Tony sprays everything down with dechlorinated water. The frog— still alive and kicking— is placed carefully at the mouth of the driftwood hidey hole. Tony drops in the stalk of celery, covers the tank, and refrigerates the rest of the crickets.

This is his first pet in, well, ever. And he gets it because James was clumsy with a spade. Tony sighs, rubbing his eyes.

“I’m going to name it Todd,” Tony announces. “Hello Todd. Welcome home.”

James watches the frog.

“If that’s a toad reference, I might hafta punch you,” James warns, but there’s something playful in the threatening words.

“Me? Make a toad pun? Never.”
Chapter End Notes

At last, the frog tag starts to make sense!

I'll say again, there is a happy ending. Love you guys!

Let me know what you think. This story has become really important to me, and if you like it let me know <3
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony has pets now. Yes, pets, plural. As soon as they set up Todd’s enclosure, Tony had thrown himself into learning about the care and keeping of frogs with that sort of single-minded determination he’s known for. He learns about their life cycles, the diseases and parasites they can get. He finds a vet specializing in amphibian and reptile care, and Todd gets looked over and plied with antibiotics for her—yeah, Todd is a female frog—njury, and while Tony doesn’t condone the overprescription of antibiotics, he actually doesn’t know enough about frog illnesses to argue. Something he intends to change.

He kind of develops… a wishlist, of sorts. Of frogs. He definitely wants dart frogs, and oh my god does he want aquatic frogs. He decides where each of the new tanks is going to go, although he doesn’t intend to get them all at once. Tony wants to make sure he can take care of the animals before he goes getting a whole slew of them, so one tank at a time will have to suffice. All else fails, he can throw money at someone to come help him keep up with the tanks.

A few days later, Tony—after careful planning and much list-making—heads out with James with the intention of purchasing supplies for a fish tank and a trio of aquatic frogs. He goes back to the shop where Jordan works, and while Jordan isn’t in at the moment, someone else is happy to walk him through what he needs to know.

Tony doesn’t walk out of the store with fish or frogs that day, but he does leave with all the supplies needed to set up the aquatic tank, as well as a used filter strip to jump start the nitrogen-fixing bacteria colonies in his tank. James again helps him set up and plant the tank, and Tony lets the filter pad float around. He lets it cycle for a few days, adding nitrogen supplements to feed the bacteria, and once the nitrogen testing reads how he needs it to, he changes the water (read, James watches him over-eagerly attempt to change the water before sending Tony to sulk on the couch while James takes over), he merrily returns to the shop and comes home with three aquatic frogs and enough guppies to just understock his tank.

Later, when one of the frogs is hanging out on the platform near the surface and singing softly, Tony just stands there, watching the bright guppies flit around, in and out of the dense plantlife while the filters whirl silently. There’s something to this whole pet business. Maybe Tony’s in the honeymoon phase, but he can’t help the stir of excitement when he looks at the aquatic tank, or when he watches Todd manage her way around her terrarium.

He does, however, vow not to get another frog until he’s 100% certain he can take care of these.

Pepper visits within a week of his aquatic acquisition. She gives him three hours of warning. Tony swears up and down that it’s revenge for his impromptu visit. He barely has time to shower, shave, and dress before she’s knocking on the front door.

Tony throws the door open, feeling a little frazzled by the sudden visit. Pepper is as impeccable as always, and she smiles openly when the door gives way to her presence.

“Pep, hey. Um. Come in, why don’t you.”

Pepper slips in beside Tony, and he shuts the door before following her down the hall, into the living room. James starts off in plain view this time, feeding the fish and aquatic frogs. They’ve already
been fed, actually, but James wants something to do. Pepper, for her part, is drawn up short.

“You have pets?” she ventures, brow furrowed in confusion.

“Yeah, I know. Tony Stark? With all his responsibility issues?”

“No, I just mean- It’s not that, Tony. I just never saw you as a frog kind of guy. Frogs. Huh.” She approaches Todd, leaning in to look at his little girl hopping around on only three legs. “Is this one…”

“Full of personality? Yep.”

“Okay. Um, Tony? Can I talk to you? Alone?”

His heart, oddly enough, doesn’t start hammering like it normally would, but he does feel light headed and kind of achy at the question. Oh fuck. Oh shit. Oh no. What did he do wrong?

“Yeah, of course,” he agrees faintly. “Let’s, uh, talk outside.”

Pepper shuts the sliding glass door behind them as Tony walks out to lean on the deck railing. He swallows thickly, looking down at the water as Pepper comes to join him, her low heels clicking ominously on the wood. She slides one of her hands over his- her left hand- and oh.

His head snaps up, eyes flicking between the diamond ring on her finger and her glowing face.

“Hang on. What. What?”

“Mike proposed,” Pepper tells him, shy for perhaps the first time Tony’s ever seen.

“Oh my god, Pepper! Congratulations! Let me look at that.” He holds her hand up, tilting it side to side to watch how the California light catches in the faceted diamonds. It’s gorgeous, fits her personality perfectly. When he looks back up, directly into his friend’s eyes, they look a little wet.

“What?”

“I want you to be my best man.”

“No way. You’re a bride. I’m your maid of honor.”

Pepper laughs out loud, her face split in a grin.

“You aren’t wearing a dress.”

“Come on, Pepper. I’d kill it in a dress and heels.”

“I know,” she giggles. The giggles devolve back into laughter, but that… That turns into tears. They’re small at first, little drops escaping her eyes that she swiftly wipes away with the back of her hand. Then her shoulders shake, and she’s gasping and sobbing like a dam has broken, and Tony can’t do much more than gather her into an uncomfortable, bony hug. She clings to his shirt, soaking his shoulder as she just cries and cries and cries.

“What’s wrong, Pep?” he murmurs, awkwardly petting her back. He’s not good at this. And why is she crying? She just got engaged. She should be happy. “Hey, it’s alright. You do want to get married don’t you? I mean, Mike’s a good guy, right? He’ll understand if you call it off.”

“No, it’s not that,” she whimpers, holding tightly to the emaciated genius. “It’s- Tony I’m scared.”
“Hey, shh. There’s nothing to be scared of. What is it? You know I’ll help you.”

Pepper barks out a watery laugh, stepping back from. She looks gestures helplessly at Tony, before crossing her arms, shoulder hunched.

“Tony, I’m scared for you.” Tony flinches at that. “I don’t- I don’t know what to do, Tony. I mean, I know what my family did for me, and I know what my therapist told me to do, but I don’t know- know how to make things work. How to help you. I don’t- Tony, you’re going to die if nothing changes, and I can’t- I can’t.”

She paces, a few steps one way, a few steps the other. Her fingers run through her loose hair, tugging lightly.

“You don’t have to be scared for me, Pep. You don’t even have to bother with me anymore. You can just- you know, you can just go, be happy.”

It hurts, giving Pepper this out, letting her know she doesn’t owe him anything, but it’s true. She deserves to be happy. Pepper, though, looks at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Are you serious? Tony- Look, Tony, I want to bother with you. Do you understand that? I’ve been giving you space, because I didn’t want to smother you, but you’re- I saw the news. You wouldn’t have survived if James hadn’t been there. Do you want to look me in the eye and tell me that had nothing to do with your anorexia?”

“It’s not anorexia!” Tony insists, and Pepper shakes her head, bracing against the railing. They stand in silence, the waves crashing against the cliffside far below. Pepper bows over, folding her arms on the railing, her head hung low. Tony swallows, hands shaking harshly, but he makes an effort to still them as he lets one rest between Pepper’s shoulders. “It’s gonna be okay, Pepper. This is my choice. I can’t- don’t take that away from me.”

A shuddering sob escapes his friend, but Pepper shakes her head.

“Please, Tony. Please. Just… talk to someone. Someone who- who knows what they’re talking about. I don’t know what to do.”

Tony doesn’t respond. What can he say? He doesn’t want to see a doctor, doesn’t want to have anyone poking and prodding around his head and body, doesn’t want to lay back on the couch and say ‘Well doctor, it all started when…’ He doesn’t want to deal with that. HE’s done trying. All Tony’s ever done is try, and try, and try, and still, still he can’t seem to get the important things right.

Pepper ends up wiping her eyes with a box of tissues, drinking a cup of hot tea- Tony doesn’t like tea. Why does he have tea?- and leaving, shoulders held stiff. He hates to hurt her, really, he does. But Tony doesn’t care for doctors. He’s made his choice.

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Tony sits in the lobby of a hospital. He swallows thickly, tap tap tapping at his wrist with bandaged fingers. This was a bad idea. This was such a bad idea. He hates hospitals. Although an argument can be made that this isn’t a hospital. It’s a ‘health campus’. James sits hunched in one of the chairs beside him, the silver of his metal hand peeking out from the long sleeve of his shirt. His shoulder just barely touches Tony’s.

To be perfectly honest, Tony might bolt if he didn’t think James would grab him and sit him back down. He’d been apprehensive when Tony ushered him into the car, given that Tony hadn’t exactly given him any explanation, but as soon as Tony had pulled into the health campus parking lot, his
entire demeanor had changed. Thank fucking christ that James hasn’t commented yet. Tony is certain he’d spook and run if James acknowledged where they were.

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony closes his eyes, bouncing his knee restlessly. He can do this. It doesn’t have to mean anything. He’s just going to get himself checked out. Just a little look-over, and then he can go home and get back to wallowing in his guilt and self-loathing.

James nudges him up. Tony flicks his credit card out of his wallet and passes it off to James.

“Go get something to eat. I don’t think you’re allowed in the exam room with me.”

Tony hadn’t said much, when he walked up to the reception desk. No appointment had been made, but apparently he counts as an ‘emergency case’. What he assumes that to mean is that he looks pathetic enough that some poor sap is going to be pulled off their lunch break to look Tony over in their off time.

He adjusts the sunglasses over his eyes and follows a nurse back. He swallows again, and the process begins.

He’s led to an examination room that just screams non-threatening, complete with a generic, bland print of a neutral-toned tree hanging on the wall. The paper-covered chair crinkles as he sits down.

The nurse is all smiley and sympathetic as she runs through a checklist. He stands and has his height measured. She leaves, and he undresses and puts on a paper robe that folds over and closes in the front. His weight is taken, his eyes are checked, his reflexes, his ears, and so on and so forth. After the basics come the machines. He lays down, sits up, lifts his arms, stills his head. The nurses and doctors filter in one after another, and he is led from room to room. This machine to measure bone density. This one to check on his ribs and lungs. Another to measure body composition. They want to hook him up to an IV, want to give him a nasal feeding tube, want to start ‘delivering fluids and nutrients’ as soon as possible, but Tony staunchly refuses. No wires, no tubes, no nothing embedded in his skin or shoved down his throat. It’s hard enough when sensors are stuck to the hollow of his chest, ostensibly taking measurement regarding his heart. Tony tries not to blink, because if he blinks he’s afraid that suddenly he’ll be back in a cave, that the wires aren’t just on him, but in him. He tolerates the needles taking blood, but just barely.

Later, hours later, when Tony’s ribs have been rewrapped, when he’s dressed again and tap tap tapping with bandaged fingers, he asks for James. Tony feels stretched thin and worn out, like a bungee cord about to snap. He should have asked Rhodey to come, should have put Pepper on call, but Tony isn’t even sure where he’s going to go with all this testing. He doesn’t want to give his friends false hope.

James, though. James is here. He’s present, and Tony pats on the examination chair when James walks in. The ex-assassin settles down, and Tony leans into James’s side, unable to control the fine tremors. He feels like he’s going to shake apart.

They don’t speak as they wait, James’s silver hand rubbing light circles over Tony’s bony knee.

One of the doctors he’s seen over the course of the unbelievably long day walks in, clipboard clasped securely in her hands.

“Mr. Stark,” Dr. Nzengung greets. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a million bucks,” Tony snarks back sourly, then flinches. What an ass he is. She’s just being
polite.

Dr. Nzengung doesn’t seem to mind, though.

“That’s very good.” The unspoken ‘considering the state you’re in’ hangs in the air. “Some of your results are still being processed, but there are some things I’d like to go over with you, if your friend would step outside.”

Tony lets James go without a fight. He smooths the fabric of his pants, looking off to the side. The door clicks shut, and Tony hears the rustle of paper as Dr. Nzengung looks through the readouts she brought with her.

She walks him through the more immediate results, the x-rays and body comp and the like. It’s predictably not-that-great. Terrible, in fact. Tony sits there stoically, tugging on the fabric of his pants. He doesn’t really care, does he? None of this is going to change his little game. All he has to do is smooth-talk his way out of being hospitalized, and he’s golden.

Dr. Nzengung picks up on his lack of interest pretty quickly. She sighs to herself, and sets the clipboard down on the room’s little table.

“Mr. Stark-”

“Call me Tony,” he tosses out, flashing a stiff smile her way. Dr. Nzengung blinks owlishly, and she stiffens her shoulders. She startles Tony by dragging one of the waiting chairs over and setting it up right in front of him. She sits down, leaning forwards with her hands on her knees.

“Tony, then. I’m going to be perfectly honest with you. You’re on death’s door. Do you understand that? You weigh 108 pounds. Your BMI is just over 16. The absolute lowest it should be is 18.5. Dr. Murphey wants to diagnose you with bradycardia. Do you know what that means? In your case, it means you just don’t have the resources to make your heart beat. Now, that diagnosis requires more monitoring before it can be safely made, but your resting BPM today is 47. 47, Tony. I don’t know about your friend Thor, but we’re human, and at the end of the line, humans don’t get do-overs.”

Tony clenches his jaw, his eyes burning. He didn’t come here to be lectured.

“But you know that, don’t you. I see a lot of people who want to die, Tony. When I started out, I was an emergency responder. I’ve had my fair share of attempted suicides. I will never encourage you to kill yourself. My job is to save lives, not end them. But I know, and you know, that in the end, you’re the one who decides. You decide whether you want to follow through with this, or abandon ship and grab on to whatever it takes to keep yourself afloat. But let me tell you something. In my experience, people who are ready to give up and die don’t do anything to avoid it, or prevent it.

“This morning, you walked into this center. This morning, you told the nurse at the front desk that you wanted a full, comprehensive physical done, and you allowed us to go from there. You came here.

“I want you back here tomorrow. I want to outfit you with a holter monitor, and I want to set you up with a set of specialists. A nutritionist. Psychiatrist, and a psychologist. I want you to go back to Dr. Murphey, and I want to see you talk to him about what’s going on with your heart, because what we saw today? I’m guessing that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

“For now, though, I’ll just ask you a question.” She holds up her hand when Tony opens his mouth, and he closes it again with a click. “You don’t have to answer now. You don’t ever have to tell me
the answer if you don’t want to. Just… think on it. Please.

“If you’re so ready to die, to starve yourself until your heart gives out, why did you come here?”

Tony clenches his jaw, flexes his fingers. He lets out a shaky breath.

He doesn’t know.

He collects James and leaves without making another appointment. This was just a one-off. A mistake. And yet…

And yet.

Two days later Tony finds himself at the kitchen counter, staring down at a plate of plain chicken breast and white rice, his mouth like ash. It’s three in the morning, and Tony has done his best to be silent, to avoid waking James.

Why did he go to the hospital? What does he even have to cling to?

Tony mushes the rice a little with his fork, toying with the grains.

Why did he go?

James finds him still sitting there as the sun rises, the food cold and untouched. He rubs a hand over Tony’s shoulders and takes the plate, wraps it in plastic, and puts it in the fridge.

For later.

“Y’say killin’ yourself like this is your choice,” James mumbles, closing the refrigerator door. “You’re doin’ this ‘cause you get to decide. But, y’know? If you wanna live, tha’s your choice too.”

Tony shoves away from the counter, the bar stool tumbling to the floor. He presses a hand to where his heart spasms behind its crater, and he retreats.

Why did he go?

Chapter End Notes

We're almost there! Almost at the end! I had meant to do a lot more comfort than hurt, but it's not turning out that way, huh? Don't worry, no sad ending, I promise.
Chapter 9

He sits. He sits, and he sits, and he sits. For a full day he sits, staring at the wall, his bandaged fingers stroking speculatively over the scabs of his wrist. Tony doesn’t do well with sitting still, staying cooped up, but sit he does. He sits, and sits, and thinks. He’s very good at thinking.

Tony sits and thinks, while his bots watch him from their charging ports. When he grows restless, he paces. FRIDAY is given stern orders to keep James out. Because she has such a great track record with letting him in.

Okay. Pros and cons. Uhhh… Pros: he gets to stay in control of something for once. He’s shortening his lifespan significantly, so there’s that little bonus. He kind of likes being able to count his ribs. It looks terrifying, like he’s some sort of halloween skeleton, but it’s neat. Okay, maybe that’s not actually a pro.

Cons, though. Cons. He has to use a special toothpaste because his teeth are demineralizing. He has to stay down longer from injuries, just because he doesn’t have the resources to repair what’s broken.

He made Pepper cry. He’s made Rhody so worried that his oldest friend has actually stooped to offering Tony liquor. He can’t even save anyone anymore, not without his heart failing on him.

Damnit, he didn’t mean to hurt anyone but himself. And yet Pepper cried on his shoulder, afraid of him. No. Not of him.

For him.

He hates that.

When he emerged from that cave all those years ago, scorching metal pressed flush to his skin, he set everything ablaze. Every last piece of his weaponry, every rusty trough of water, every tool Yinsen had used in the surgery that saved his life. He razed it all to ash, and yet he survived. He survived three months of torture, some of which with a car battery hooked up to a magnet in his chest. He survived their suicidal escape plan. Survived his days in the desert. Survived Obie’s betrayal. Survived throwing a nuke into space. Survived Vanko and the poison in his heart. Survived the Mandarin and the fires of extremis. It’s always fire with him, isn’t it?

The fire of a makeshift forge. The fire of Vanko’s drones. The fires of the Mandarin. Always fire.

And yet he always gets up. Tony huffs a reluctant laugh. What does that make him, then? An annoying spark that just won’t get stomped out? A firebird, maybe? A phoenix?

Tony sits again, his slight weight bouncing on the ratty couch. He buries his face in his hands. He can’t see himself as a phoenix.

But maybe he can gather up his ragged, burnt little feathers, and try again.

“Hey Baby Girl,” he mumbles, rubbing circles through his t-shirt around the arc-reactor crater. “Open up a file. Title it, uh…” He wracks his brain. “I dunno. Call it ‘The Scrapbook’.”

Okay. He’s got a file. Now what to put in it?
Pictures. He starts with those. He finds a picture of DUM-E, from when he first built the pathetic excuse of a robot. He finds a picture of that donut shop in Wisconsin, the one that serves these weird lingonberry-stuffed donuts with cream cheese icing. He finds pictures of Pepper, pictures of Rhodey, Pictures of Natasha, and Peter, and Vision, and Tigra, Piotr, Maya. Pictures of James.

Pictures of things… People. Places, Events. Pictures, and articles, and postcards, and voice clips. He finds a video of Pepper laughing. Gets the recording of James walking again for that first time with his braces. There’s the shots of him lifting a slab of concrete, letting the people trapped underneath clamber to safety.

Nothing that could’ve happened, nothing he could’ve seen, nothing he would have know… if he was dead.

Shit.

Fuck.

He heaves a shuddering breath, blinking the tears from his eyes. Only the tears don’t stop. They just… keep coming. And coming, and coming, and coming, like a dam breaking. His knees buckle where he stands in the middle of a sphere of projected images, and he hits the ground like a sack of dirt, hunched over. He holds himself as the tears fall and his breath comes in short, ragged bursts. FRIDAY announces James at the door, and he waves her to let him in.

James is at his side in an instant, but he can’t seem to stop the barrage. Something in him snapped, and it’s a snap completely unrelated to the pre-snapped ribs. He leans into the flesh and metal arms, doing his damnedest not to meet James’s eyes.

“Hey, hey lookit me,” the supersoldier murmurs, pawing at Tony’s gaunt face. Tony blinks at James with puffy red eyes. God, he must look awful. “You’re okay. Y’hear me? You’re fine.”

Tony shakes his head, huffing a wet laugh.

“No, I’m really not. I’m really, really n-not.” He grinds the knobby heel of his palm into one of his wet eyes. His shoulders slump as he relaxes completely, letting James support his weight. “But I’m gonna be.”

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He makes the appointments. He gets outfitted with a holter monitor. He lets Dr. Nzengung recommend specialists. A nutritionist. Both a psychiatrist and a psychologist. He goes to see Dr. Murphey. All the attention he gets from the doctors makes his skin crawl, but he’s trying. It’s a lot all at once, and maybe he would have been more comfortable taking it one appointment at a time, but Tony Stark tends to be an all or nothing type of guy.

It helps that James asks him to help book an appointment with a psychologist. They engage in a sort of bargain of accountability. Tony goes to his appointments, and James does the same. Well, Tony technically goes to more appointments, but James is a good sport and hangs around the health campus looking up articles on frog care and greenhouse gardening while Tony tries not to jump out of his skin while being pinned under the gazes of doctors.

Priority numero uno is, apparently, weight gain.

That’s also the thing Tony has the most difficulty with.

The nutritionist gives him an assortment of recipes and recommendations, things to work his way up
and get him used to actually eating calorie-dense things. It still tastes like ash in his mouth. And it’s kind of… Kind of hit or miss, whether he goes into a spiralling fog of self-loathing when he, uh, follows the doctor’s orders. He’s been given the option of admitting himself to the health campus’s sister-hospital for more daily care, but that’s a no-go for him. No way. Not gonna happen.

It’s slow, slow going. Around week three Tony’s put on an antidepressant, one with the side-effect of weight gain and increasing appetite. It puts a bit of a… Well, there’s a bit of a muddling of thoughts that he notices every now and then, but… After a month, he feels… lighter. It’s weird, because he knows he’s gained a handful of pounds, but he really does feel lighter. Less like there’s a hole in his chest. The hole’s still there, making him feel like he’s going to explode and implode all at once from time to time, but it’s more… manageable.

So yeah. Nothing’s perfect, but it’s better. Yeah, better.

He goes to his therapy. It becomes less and less of a heart-wrenching task, and more and more of a release. Like, digging tweezers into his thumb to pull out a splinter, or dowsing alcohol over a cut. It hurts, and it’s painful, and he walks out of each twice-weekly session feeling like he’s been smashed with a brick, but that fades into-

Not peace, exactly. Exhausted calm, maybe. The sort of stillness that comes after a hurricane, when everything is in shambles but you know that now you have a chance to rebuild.

He continues collecting frogs and toads. There’s a thin line between collecting and hoarding, but Tony hires help from one of the zoos nearby to come aid in caring for the frogs, so he hopes he’s erring on the side of eccentric collector. It’s really cool, though. Someone is always singing. It’s either the dart frogs or the aquatic frogs, or Todd or the fire-bellied toads, or the leopard frogs or the growling grass frog, or whatever. He fills out the appropriate paperwork where necessary, because at least one of his frogs, he knows, is endangered, although he adopts or purchases them captive-bred. The vet he frequents seems to think he’s taking good care of him, and that fills Tony with pride.

There’s talk of a pacemaker. Dr. Murphey does end up diagnosing Tony with bradycardia, but he’s not sure whether it’s going to fix itself once Tony recovers weight-wise, or whether Tony’s heart is permanently damaged. He’s really, truly hoping for the former option. He doesn’t think he can handle something else embedded in his chest.

His ribs don’t need surgery, but he’s slow to heal. Eleven weeks post-Anvil, it’s recommended that he continues wrapping them for stability for at least another month. By this time word has gotten out about his, uh, health issues. Pepper and Rhodey were informed about a week after he first went to the doctor, but Tony was adamant in telling them not to mention it. He’s pretty sure he’s going to spook if his friends make a big deal out of the decision to see a doctor. Or, an army of doctors.

It’s the media that causes issues. Despite Tony refusing to entertain press conferences and interviews, theories still circulate that he starved himself to a shadow to garner attention, that it was all a publicity stunt. Either that, or people are talking about what a tragedy that someone so brilliant fell so far.

He learns pretty quickly not to give a shit about what the media thinks.

James tells him at least once a day how strong he is. There’s little snippets of murmured praise when Tony manages to eat, things that he thought would rankle, but actually provide comfort. The food sits like a rock in his stomach, but James is proud of him. Pepper is proud of him. Rhodey is proud of him.

There’s a quiet sort of joy he can see on the kids’ faces when he accepts a piece of pizza the next time he and James go to visit the New Avengers. He can only manage one slice of the rich, fatty
food, but it’s the first time the new team’s seen him do anything but starve.

Tony leaves James at the base. He thinks a compound of super-kids, one Black Widow, and an android count as adequate supervision, despite the fact that he’s pretty sure James doesn’t really need to be kept under lock and key. There had been a little bureaucratic scuffle at first when the WSC figured out James was going to a therapist they hadn’t personally vetted, but in the end it was decided that if James felt safe and comfortable with Dr. Finn, they wouldn’t force him to go elsewhere. That doesn’t mean they trust him, yet. Not nearly as much as Tony trusts him.

But to the point. Tony leaves James at the base and gets behind the wheel of a car. He drives back to the Big Apple, to a different cafe from the last time. He’s meeting Steve again, something he hasn’t told James. James, he knows, would insist on coming to play guard dog, but Tony doesn’t want to flaunt James in Steve’s face. He doesn’t want to hurt Steve. He just… He wants closure. Either that, or concrete proof that they’re going to be able to bridge the rift between them.

Steve is the first one there this time, and Tony doesn’t miss the way those baby blues linger on the door in the hopes that James is going to come trotting in after Tony. Tony buys a coffee again, and after a brief eternity of internal debate, he adds a splash of cream, turning the black liquid a shade of toffee. He saunters over to Steve’s corner, the repulsor bracelets loose on his thin wrists, and takes a seat.

“Hey Steve,” he greets, running a boney finger around the rim of his porcelain mug.

“Tony,” Steve replies awkwardly. “How, uh, how are you doing?”

“Honestly? Better than I’ve been in a while.” He still isn’t allowed to do anything more strenuous than changing the water of his aquatic tank for fear of triggering a heart attack, but eating… It sucks, most of the time. To put things mildly. And yet he’s no longer shedding hair like a dog in spring. He still looks like a Halloween decoration, but there’s more skin than bone now, which he’s been told is a good thing. He’s also been told that if he’s very, very careful, and takes the supplements provided, there might be a chance at reversing the damage done to his bones. To an extent, at least. As it turns out, he’s lost a full inch of height from the loss of bone mass. Go figure. That’s one of the irreversible things. Apparently there are a lot of irreversible things.

But Tony has been told to acknowledge them, but not fixate. After all, he’s taking another stab at life. Complications and all.

“I saw, you know, on the news…”

“Yeah, ignore them. They’re all blowing smoke out theirasses. I’ve been having some- some mental health issues, yeah, but it’s personal. Really, really personal. I don’t really want to talk about it to, you know, reporters. I don’t really want to talk about it with you, either. So let’s just move on.”

And it goes… alright. They aren’t buddy buddy, and they’re both walking on eggshells, but it goes alright.

“Pep’s wedding is in less than a year, can you believe it?” Tony laughs, strained. It’s kind of stressful, making small talk with Captain America. “I used to think she was The One, you know? Once upon a time I was gonna propose to her too. At least I’m going to get to see her happily ever after, right?”

Steve eyes him speculatively.

“You’re going to her wedding? You think that’s a good idea?”
What the hell? Of course it’s a good idea.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I am, and yeah, I do. Why?”

“That’s her special day, right?” Steve explains carefully. “Don’t you think going is going to take away from it for her? You don’t want to make a scene, right?”

Something heavy and toxic settles in Tony’s stomach, and he swallows thickly, looking away.

“You think I’m going just to make a scene.” Right. Christ, just when he thinks things are going well, one of them (both of them?) puts a foot in his mouth. And fucking hell, Tony can see Steve means well. He can tell Steve isn’t trying to kick him down. And yet, that’s what he does nonetheless. “You know what Steve? I’m done with this.” Tony leans back in his chair, half-consumed coffee resting before him. “I’m done. I’m done being the scapegoat, and I’m done being the giver.” He gets what James meant by Steve being a taker, who just takes takes takes takes. Christ, all Tony does with Steve is try to negotiate a compromise, try to figure out how to coexist, and yet Steve doesn’t understand that he has to put in some effort too. “Just FYI, I’m not going to Pepper’s wedding to ‘make a scene’. I’m going because she’s my friend, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her. Oh, and uh, James says he’ll call you, ‘kay? He’ll call you when he’s ready to talk to you, so stop harassing FRIDAY. Ciao.”

He flicks his sunglasses on and takes the coffee to the counter for transfer to a to-go cup. His hands are shaking a little bit, and his heart is kind of flopping in his chest, but he focuses on a sort of vindictive satisfaction. He doesn’t owe Steve any more explanation than what he gave. If Steve didn’t want to listen for seven goddamn years, then Tony’s done trying to explain. It’s time to get on with his life.

He takes James out for ice cream the next day, and then joins Pepper to go look at wedding dresses. Make a scene his ass. There’s no way all eyes aren’t going to be on Pepper. She looks radiant when she picks The One, the dress she’s going to walk down the aisle and tie herself to Mr. Right in.

Tony doesn’t mean to be a downer, he really doesn’t, but Pepper once and only once explained the scars on her thighs. Neat, methodical white lines in rows and crosses. He remembers her explaining one night in bed together, how she’s felt so lost, so out of control, so empty and dead in college that she’d taken apart a razor and made herself feel. How it had taken less than a year for someone to find out, and how she’d reluctantly, then enthusiastically subjected herself to treatment. How she healed.

And he has to ask, while James is occupied with another dress-shopper’s child who’s enamoured with his silver arm.

“Does it ever go away?”

And she knows. She knows what he’s talking about.

But does it? The urge to hurt himself? The need to starve himself to a shadow, just for the sake of having control? Did it ever go away for her, the need to punish herself? The impulsive need to hurt so she would feel at least something?

“No.” She smooths her hand over the white dress, looking in the mirror while Tony adjusts the veil she’s trying on. “It’s kind of like a door. The issue is, once you open it the hinges lock in place, and you can’t ever shut it again. It’s always going to be there, open and waiting for you to walk back through, and it takes a special sort of strength to walk away.” She takes his hand, strokes her soft fingers over his sharp knuckles. “But you know what? You’re the strongest guy I know. And we’re here. We’re going to be here for you every step of the way.”
It’s not a perfect ending. Or a perfect beginning. Or even a perfect middle. But that’s okay, because perfect things don’t exist.

Tony can do this.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 10 is my favorite chapter. It'll be up on the 25th. I just want to make sure it's as good as I can get it before I publish, because in my opinion, chapter 10 is the most important one.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This is a short one, but I feel like it's the most important chapter. It's certainly my favorite.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A year after Pepper walked in with a ring on her finger- a year after Tony made the choice not to die- a year after- well. A year later.

Pepper gets married.

And she is beautiful.

It’s a winter wedding, in Utah of all places. On a snowy mountain. Tony knows it’s going to be absolutely freezing, but it’s worth it when Pepper steps out of her bathroom at the hotel and hands Tony a familiar-looking box. He opens it and picks up the opal and sapphire jewelry set he’d given her a year ago.

“Something blue,” she explains, looking positively smug.

“Yeah yeah. Let me put this on you.”

He clasps the necklace around her throat and adjusts the white shoulder wrap to sit more naturally. The necklace peeks out from the slender tied bow holding the wrap in place. She puts the earrings in herself, and Tony rubs the new, pink scar hidden beneath his own suit. He’d needed a pacemaker after all, but it’s not the end of the world. It’s keeping his heart on track, which is good. It might be a little embarrassing, passing out at his friend’s wedding. It’s been two weeks since the little machine was fixed to his heart, and already he’s considering how to create one that doesn’t just induce a fixed pace, but adapts to physical activity. A small voice in his head clamours that he’s being selfish, that it’s typical and only to be expected that Tony Stark thinks about how to fix a problem only when it applies to him.

Tony shushes the voice. If it’s selfish of him, then at least he’s being selfish for a good reason.

There’s a knock at the door, and Natasha poked her head in. She’s one of Pepper’s four female bridesmaids. The other three are Pepper’s sister, a friend from college, and Mike’s stepsister. Tony, much to his delight, is listed on the wedding program as ‘Maid of Honor’.

“You ready to go? We’re going to be late,” Nat gripes, but they all know it isn’t true. Pepper is never late, especially not to her own wedding.

Pepper looks at herself in the mirror, and- once satisfied with her appearance- waltzes out the door. Tony follows her, and Natasha falls into step behind him. Her heels look sharp, and not suited at all for walking on a snow-covered mountain, but hey, it’s Natasha. If anyone can do it, she can.

“You’re looking good,” Natasha comments, and Tony grins, slipping his hands in his pockets.
“Thanks.”

He’s made a lot of progress over the past year. There’s still a long way to go before he’s fully recovered- and maybe he never will be. That doesn’t mean he’s not going to keep trying.

“Excuse me, aren’t you going to compliment me? It’s my wedding after all,” Pepper snarks.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought it went without saying that you’re looking radiant.”

“It does. I enjoy hearing it, though.”

“You’re gorgeous, Pep,” Tony announces obligingly, fiddling with the carefully-folded veil in his hands. It’s gossamer lace, fine and airy and just a shimmery as the freshly-fallen snow.


“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“And my name is Natalie.”

“Well, once upon a time it was,” he complains.

“And once upon a time, I was undercover. That doesn’t make it my name,” she sing-songs back at him.

The rest of the bridal party meets them in the lobby. All the women are in blue dresses, all just about the same shade, but differing in style according to personal tastes. Tony fills out his suit nicely, with a bow tie of the same blue. Mike’s sister, Molly, holds a box with the bouquets and Tony’s boutonnière. They all file into the back of the limo, and Pepper grabs his hand, squeezing down.

“Nerves?” he murmurs.

“Yeah. I’ve known this was coming for a year. I’m still a little freaked out.”

“Well, it is, like, 30 degrees outside. Cold feet are only- ow!”

Pepper smacks his arm, a grin sneaking onto her face.

“Tony Stark, that was awful.”

“I try. You’re going to be fine.”

And she is fine. More than fine, in fact. They stand out of sight, Natasha and Molly touching up Pepper’s makeup while Tony fixes the veil in place and Katrina holds the flowers and the guests all filter into their seats. The snow is pristine, and the air is crisp and cold and quiet, save for the lonely chirping of winter birds and the musical tones of the hired string quartet.

When the time comes and Ode to Joy starts playing, Pepper’s dad links his arm in hers and walks her down the aisle. Tony is right behind, managing her long, insubstantial veil while the bridesmaids filter behind him. He spots James with Rhodey in the fourth row. The New Avengers in their finest (winter-adjusted) uniforms sit in the fifth row. Even Tigra.

There had been talk in the media and from Ross, about inviting the old Avengers too. But that idea had been shot down almost immediately by everyone involved in the wedding process. Tony kept out of that discussion. He doesn’t pay attention to those people anymore. What’s the point? He owes them nothing. It’s a source of stress he doesn’t need, and he can afford to avoid them. So he does.
Tony takes Pepper’s massive bouquet, and Pepper takes Mike’s hands, and their vows are said, heartfelt and tender in ways Tony knows he could never be. He can’t stop grinning like a loon, his heart fit to burst in a completely non-medical way. It’s happiness.

Every now and then, he’s struck, really truly struck, with a sense of wonder, and gratitude and excitement and eager anticipation. He’s alive. He survived the last year, and he’ll survive the next. Not only that, he’ll live. And here he is, maid of honor at Pepper’s wedding. Who knows whether he would have made it this far if he hadn’t taken the terrifying leap, and sought treatment for what he now has no aversion to calling a very debilitating eating disorder. He could have died. And at one point, he had convinced himself that would have been alright.

He whistles when Mike and Pepper kiss, as everyone else claps and cheers. He doesn’t even feel the cold. Instead there’s a happy warmth, and when Pepper climbs into her limo with Mike, Tony hands her the bouquet again with a heartfelt ‘Congratulations’. James, the sneaky snake he is, wraps his arm around Tony’s waist as the car drives away to the reception venue.

“C’mon, doll. You’re ridin’ with me, right?”

“Right.”

He rides to the venue with Rhodey and James and Mike’s two brothers, one of whom is driving. It’s a private party, no reporters allowed. Just friends, and family, and laughter and dancing and gifts and food.

Tony lets James feed him a slice of cake, one bite at a time. It doesn’t taste like ash. Actually, it tastes like raspberries and vanilla. Tony grins and swipes a fingerful of icing, which he smears on James’s lips and kisses away.

Later, in their shared hotel room, Tony sets a round, portable, fist-sized projector on the floor. It flashes to life, spreading out the images and video clips and articles and everything else Tony collects. He adds to these files pictures from the wedding and reception. The selfie he took with Pepper. The video of Peter’s godawful dancing. A scanned copy of his hand-written place-marker. Each one a reason, a memory. A why.

Why he’s glad to be where he is. Standing on his own two feet, with metal fingers laced between his. Healthy and happy and whole. Not quite, actually. Yeah, there’s still a long ways to go, but he’ll get there.

He has time.

Chapter End Notes

So things get better, mostly. Nothing is perfect, and healing is messy and hard, but there are moments worth living for. I'm still adding things to my scrapbook of ‘reasons I'm glad I didn’t go through with my plan’, so if you're in the position I was in, thinking that letting yourself die is the best thing to do, the kindest thing to others, you're wrong. I'll tell you right now, you're wrong. Don't hesitate to ask for help. Whether you're suicidal or suffering from an eating disorder or depressed or obsessive or anxious, ask for help. It'll hurt, and it'll be unpleasant at first, in my experience, but it's so damn worth it to heal.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!