(i can't) escape myself

by Redcap64

Summary

The happiest day of your life is when you realize that your soulmate is still alive.

The worst day of your life is when he speaks to you.

“Big man in a suit of armour? Take that off, and what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.”

Murderer.

Notes

I can't believe I have finally finished this one-shot; it has taken me forever. I really hope that people like it, and as always I would love to hear any thoughts, good or bad, in hopes of improving my writing.

Some house keeping before you begin:
Firstly, I wanted to thank spqr so much for allowing me to use their soulmate structure to tell this story. Eagles is an absolutely amazing fic that I 100% recommend to everyone, and it explains a lot more about the structure of the symbols that are the basis for this fic. It is linked above.

Secondly, this is almost entirely accurate to the MCU, except for the pesky little fact that I couldn't bring myself to kill off JARVIS, even though Vision is still alive. My justification for this: I am the author and I do what I want. (Also, I'm going to pretend that Tony found enough of JARVIS to reconstruct him properly in AofU.)

Lastly, I want to thank my most fabulous beta, kitseybarbours, for taking the time to read through this fic and help me find my mistakes. That being said, any mistakes that are left are entirely my own, and if you should happen across one I would love to know so that I can fix it. Check out my lovely beta's writing, because she is amazing.

I hope everyone has a great time reading this! Let me know what you think!

Edit: This fic was posted twice by mistake and I have quickly deleted the second, less read, copy. To the two people, Selia and Petitesorcieres, who left me comments, thank you so much. I'm sorry I couldn't reply. To everyone that left me kudos or bookmarked it, thank you also; I hope you find this version instead.

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You are in a cave.

The sand is cold between your toes, the dusty air ash in your mouth. Your body aches, spins. You wonder where your lungs have gone; you wonder where your ribs have gone.

In your arms, a car battery – blinking.

A clang; the fresh light is too bright. You close your eyes as the door swings wider. Water soaks the sand around you, coating your toes: thick clumps sticking to your feet, your calves, your knees, your hand, as you clutch the battery closer to your chest with the other; spare wires sparking, staring into a tub of water, now on your knees.

They say: “You will build us weapons.”

You say: “No, I won’t.”
You have found your lungs. They are full of water.

*

You find out when you are four: before you forget what hope is, before the self-doubt and the hatred and the never-quite-good-enough.

You find out when you are four, a circuit board in your hand, a smile on your face.

The desk is so tall, and you think, Sir hasn’t noticed me, so you reach up, up, up and lay the board across the desk, atop the maps and the pictures and the files of the Arctic and Captain America and the army. Sir frowns down at you, but you think, Look what I’ve done!, and you smile right back. “Mr. Stark, sir, look what I’ve built.” Dad, I did it for you!

“Basic,” Howard responds, “that will barely function,” and he pushes it aside until it drops to the floor, Captain America’s image tumbling with it, scrawny and shirtless. He does not speak to you again. You have been dismissed. You gather your things and you go, taking the photo with you.

You do not cry. Stark men are made of iron. Instead, you sit in your room, your cheeks feeling damp, a picture in your hands of a man with a mark on his chest exactly like yours.

You place the image beside your bed, propped up by the circuit board. You will make it better, faster, more advanced next time.

You find out, when you are four, many things:

You learn that Captain America is your soulmate.

You learn that you will never please your father.

*
The doctors say, “The symbols make sense; the science is there to explain them.”

The people say, “The soulmates are real, but everything else is a question.”

You say, “Fate is a sham; I will make my own destiny.”

But you can’t outrun the soulmarks, no matter how you try.

The death dates pile up.

Your soulmate is still dead.

*

They make some sense, in theory, the marks that cover your body. All the same, yet all different, from those around you.

On the back of your right calf and your left sit two different dates – when were you born? When will you die?

Across your chest lays a symbol – who will you love?

Along the bottom of your right wrist and your left are a skill and a trade – what will you accomplish? What will you do?

And then everywhere, anywhere, else are the others: your story, they say, but what do they mean?

You know some of them, understand some of them, question some of them. You cannot change them.

You have the symbol for creation on your right wrist, a rune for war on your left.
You have death on your palm, and sorrow behind your ear, and protection on your hip.

You have one date on your right calf, and nine on your left.

You have the Celtic symbol for strength over your heart, too, but it is a joke, a betting game of the gods. You have never felt more weak than when Yinsen dies; when the portal closes; when Ultron rules; when Captain America, shield raised, says, “He’s my soulmate, Tony.”

You want to say, “I am, too.” But you don’t.

You think, *This is for the best*, with your arc reactor smashed and your soulmate – soulmates, you realize, because if one has the other than you have them both – gone, forever.

You know, *This is for the best*, as the cold settles into your bones and you think about being safe with them, together, all the while knowing that, really, you will never have either.

Your body is stiflingly warm, locked in the clutches of the broken suit: such a contrast to the cold you felt only moments before.

Vision finds you sometime later, eleven death dates on your calf, JARVIS shocking you awake with the last of the suit’s power.

*

You understand, when you are eight.

When your Captain America socks turn black.

When your Captain America posters melt into the white wall.

When your Captain America picture is burned in the fire place, a passing memory of Howard’s rage.
You understand, when you are eight, that Howard will always love Captain America; that Howard will never love you.

You understand, when you are eight, that you will never love yourself either.

You look at the small rune for empty that rests on your thumb.

*

Yinsen is brilliant, witty and wise. He talks, rarely, about before, when you met at a New Year’s Eve party, when you were drunk and still smarter than everyone in the room. He offers you tea and conversation and willingness; he offers you hope when he talks of seeing his family once more. He offers you your life, packaged as a car battery.

There is very little to speak of in the cave.

“Do you have a soulmate?” he asks, when you slot in the arc reactor, looking at the mark that screams strength from your chest, barely missed by the hole now in your body.

“Dead,” you say. You do not want to talk about your soulmate; do not want to discuss the fact that, as defective as you are, your heart belongs to a man who died saving the world seventy years ago.

You do not deserve that, that wholesomeness. Who have you saved?

No one.

You look at the weapons around you, STARK stamped in bright white across each crate.

“So you are a man who has everything... and nothing.” Yinsen nods; he understands.

Who have you killed?
Millions.

*

You fix the Accords: hours, days, months of your life, poured into making them what they should have always been. You don’t eat, you don’t sleep. You have coffee running through your veins and a flip phone burning a hole through your bedside table.

You take out the phone when everything is fixed, and you think, *I’ll call them; this will make a difference.* Instead, you call the Wakandan king.

“The Avengers can come home. Their crimes have been pardoned.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

*

The palladium under your skin is killing you slowly. The palladium in your chest is the only thing that keeps you alive. You are a cosmic joke.

You slip and fall and crash through the remaining days of your life, eight death dates on your leg, nine death dates once you die. You sell your art and promote Pepper and throw a party so spectacular that your best friend steals one of your greatest inventions.

Later, you find the cure, on an old recording from a long-dead father who never bothered to say *I love you.*

Your father says, “You will change the world.” Your father says, “My greatest creation is you.”
You laugh until you cry, because you are dying and if you can not even laugh when your father pretends that he wanted you, then what can you laugh at?

Starkanium comes out perfectly, heals you perfectly, but still you have failed.

You will never live up to the legacy Howard has left for you. Even twenty years later, in comparison, you pale.

*

When you are twelve, fourteen, sixteen, and you spring the world forward by lightyears, by galaxies; when you are thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, and you look at the small scars that line up like whip strokes across your back; when your parents are dead, and Jarvis is dead, and you’ve built Dummy and U and JARVIS in their stead; when you are locked in a cave with nothing to live for but a man who only wishes to see his family one more time: then, you claw at the strength that lives on your chest, trying to peel it from your body.

*

After, they come back in stages, trickling into the Avengers Compound like a ragged pack of animals. You watch them on the monitors, as you hide in your lab and you build, build, build, until your body aches and your arms tremble and your fingers bleed.

Creation: your greatest skill. Still, you think that the symbols have finally been proved wrong. War: your given trade. Can it not be your everything?

On second thought, perhaps they are right. Was this war not your creation?

You tried, honestly, to do what was right, but when you went against Captain America and his Winter Soldier – against two soulmates so in love it makes you ache – what chance did you have of winning?

What hope do you have of being good?
But no, you tell yourself – try to tell yourself – you were not wrong, not entirely. Have you not done what you had said? Have you not rewritten the Accords as you had promised?

And what have they done, but write you a barely-there apology and never speak of it again? What have they done to try and fix this with you?

Nothing.

*

You fight with them, live with them, but you do not understand them. Months have passed, and finally, finally, Hawkeye takes a dive off a rooftop, Falcon covers your six, Captain America accepts that your call may be better than his. You run the numbers, but you no longer know if you are right, if you can trust your own decisions, even if the others fight as though they trust you.

Sometimes, you feel almost as if things are back to normal, back to before.

It is nice to forget.

*

You hover, watching, above a fight when you see it: the building dropping like a stone, Captain America surrounded by enemies, too penned-in to move. You do the math, do it again, know you are right. The dive is fast, faster than normal, but you make it in time, launching Steve away from the debris.

Your suit crunches as you are buried against the pavement.

At least your soulmates are safe. You have heard they are thinking of marrying.

You feel crushed metal bite into your skin.

You ran the numbers.
You were correct.

*

When you are seven, you hate your marks. You do not want death, you do not want war, you do not want to be empty.

You tell your father this. You say, “I do not want the strength of a dead man.”

Your father says, “We will find Captain America, but you will never find love.”

You know, then, that a man who stands for peace and love and freedom could never love a person who stands for death and emptiness and war.

It does not matter, you reason; your soulmate is dead.

*

The hospital lights are too bright when you awaken, aching all over, parched.

You try to lift your body, turn your head, but the most you can manage is the flickering of your eyes; even that hurts. You can sense people all around you, feel a hand tucked into yours.

You try to say, “Ouch,” but all that you hear go through the room is a quiet groan.

A head pops up, swimming into focus – Steve! – and you feel the hand slid from your own as another head slips into view.

Steve and Bucky!
You look them over to make sure they are okay, whole and healthy.

They are talking to you, and you don’t catch much of what they say, except, “touch and go,” “lost you once,” “stupid stunt.”

And, “Thank you.”

That was Steve, Bucky, both of them, because they have each other and you have no one.

They have each other because of you.

When you are released days later (through grit and blackmail), you look at the dates piled along your left calf.

You have a new addition. Should you be running out of room?

You wonder if it matters.

*

Bucky is a shadow for the first months that he is in the compound. He trails Steve like a lost soul, never straying far from his side. You catch glimpses of him in the halls, but he is always gone before you can get closer.

You think that maybe this was Steve’s plan all along. To never let you meet.

It hurts to have them so close, yet so far, but you ignore it as you drain your way through coffee, breeze your way through board meetings, fight your way through battles, numb your soul through creation.

You have come to terms with the fact, even before they came back, that it was no one’s fault but HYDRA’s, no one’s fault but yours.
You had been lost, anxious, jittery from the images of BARF, PTSD flashing left and right.

You know that Bucky is a victim: more of a one, even, than you. You blame him for nothing.

But you keep this to yourself, because who will you tell? Who will believe you? Until Bucky is there, one night after hours, no Steve in sight, arm whirring loudly. His presence is the smallest of peace offerings.

You sit him down, and fix his arm, and let him know, that “It’s not your fault, nothing’s your fault,” as you replace one of the joints near his shoulder.

He says nothing, so you offer peace of your own. “Screw this,” you say, “Why settle for the B team when you have me?”

You pull up half-finished designs for a new arm and wait for Bucky to say something.

You are not disappointed.

* 

When Pepper leaves, you aren’t surprised. You know, deep down, that she is too good for you.

She deserves to be happy. That is not something you are able to offer.

Still, she will be your friend.

You take what you can get and are grateful.

*
The news comes out, somehow, that you are the cause of their pardons, the cause of the new Accords. You had hoped this would not occur; the records were sealed, but when you live with two super spies, these things are bound to happen.

They had accepted you before, on the fringes of their ranks, but now they look at you differently, one of them once again.

You cannot handle the affection, the love, between Steve and Bucky, so you do your best to steer clear of movie nights, of team bonding exercises, of family dinners.

You miss your family; you miss your friends; you wonder if losing them all would be more painful than seeing just these two.

Surfacing, occasionally, between inventing binges, you think that yes, yes it might be, and you come around more often, until you are pranking with Clint, watching movies with Natasha, sparring with Scott, smiling at Wanda.

You know Wanda understands when she says, “Will you tell them?” She follows your gaze to the two supersoldiers.

“Tell them what?”

She looks at you for a moment, searching, but says nothing.

“Stay out of my head,” you say.

“I do not need to read your thoughts to know what your eyes tell me.” Then she is gone.

* *

You are in the kitchen, drinking coffee, when you get the news. Married, they say. They are getting married.
They ask for your help with the service. “Will you be Bucky’s best man?” And you want to scream, you want to cry. You don’t.

You smile and nod and foot the bill for everything, down to the little red bows that tie each bouquet together.

You think about getting horribly drunk, and when the dancing is over, you do, down in your lab with your bots and your bad attitude.

It’s too hot, suddenly; you are trapped in your lab, trapped in your skin. You rip at your clothes, stumbling through the rooms, empty, alone, just as you’re used to. It’s too much, too much. You sleep, your body pressed into the cushions of the couch.

You do not wake until the wedding party returns home.

*

In between long nights building Bucky’s arm, you talk as he sits in the lab, watching you work.

Sometimes, you talk about nothing, and sometimes, you talk about everything, but most of the time you trade stories, about Steve or past dates or wild parties. Bucky shares with you all of his new memories, sometimes foggy on the details, sometimes full of blood and pain and death.

You listen, quietly, when he tells you of the chair, the words, the missions, the asset.

You listen, quietly, as he tells you of his nightmares, heart still racing, calming down the more he talks.

And when he can’t talk, when the memories are too much for him to bear, you talk about Pepper and Rhodey and science. You talk until Bucky’s hands have relaxed and his muscles are no longer tense.

One night, he tells you that, “You have made the difference between being awake and being asleep, of having free will and having no freedom. Stevie, Steve should be enough, but there are just some things that Steve won’t understand. Things that you do, even though you refuse to tell me how.”
You grow quiet – you’re done talking that night – but, “I’m glad that I could help,” you say, and you mean it.

It is not until many nights later, when Bucky sets the cup of coffee he has grabbed you down by your elbow without even needing to be asked that you tell him the reason why you do not like to be handed things.

You have not told anyone that story, not in a long time.

Why is it that the only people you trust always leave you in the end?

*

They are loud, and they are passionate. At first you think that they’re fighting, the thump of a body against the wall jolting you awake, but when you finally manage to open your eyes, body aching all over, you know you could not have been more wrong. Bucky is up against the wall of the communal living room, feet from the couch, pressed back into the white surface by Steve’s body, hands carding through Steve’s hair as the two newlyweds trail blazing kisses across every piece of skin that they can reach.

Steve starts to move lower, working his way down Bucky’s body, and you know it’s time to go, no matter how much you wish to stay. You hold still for a moment longer, trying to figure out how to escape without being noticed. You wait too long, long enough for first one shirt, than the other to come off; long enough to see the soulmarks clear as day, branded on each heaving chest before you.

You lurch to your feet just as Steve drops to his knees, and you try to be silent, damn it, but your ears are still ringing, your head is still spinning from the alcohol, and you must have made some sort of sound, because they both pause, together, like one soul in two bodies, looking at you. Steve’s face is a vibrant red, the blush traveling down across his chest, but Bucky only eyes you, smirking, a lewd wink sent in your direction.

They take you in, run down and drunk and dying inside, and you’re pretty sure you’ve killed the mood, because they are both on their feet now, moving closer to you, concern on their faces.

“Tony, are you okay?” Steve asks, and no, of course you are not okay, but you smile and nod and do your best to deflect as you back toward the door like a cornered animal, excuses rolling off your
“Stop,” Bucky says. You do. Even if Steve is buying it – and you know he is not – there is no getting Bucky to believe you, not anymore. He knows you too well for that. Honestly, you’d die for this man.

Your eyes catch on their soulmarks before you drag them back up to look in their faces.

“Don’t mind me, boys, just celebrating the happy couple.” Just waiting for the end to come.

Bucky looks skeptical.

You shrug, and the look Steve gives you makes you cringe. “Really, I’ve been worse.” You rub at the scarring over your chest, self-conscious all of a sudden. When you catch yourself, you stop. You clap your hands together instead: “Don’t let me ruin your night.” You force a smile, wave your hands, ignore the way your muscles don’t seem to want to follow your commands. “Chop, chop. Wedding memories to be made.” They look less concerned now, but don’t seem to let it go. “I’ll just go see how the bots are doing; I never know what Dummy will try and poison me with next.”

That earns a small chuckle from Steve – he knows what the bots are like – but you’ve already turned, so done with the helpless pining in your chest, when the choked-off sounds behind you make you pause again.

“Tony,” Steve says, and he sounds so lost, so at odds to the tone he should be using on the happiest night of his life, the worst night of yours. You follow the line of his gaze as you look back over your shoulder, follow it directly to the death dates on your calf, three-quarters of the way down your leg. “What are those?”

You should have something to say: something witty and smart and disarming all at once. Words have never failed you before. They are the only tool you had to defend yourself in the years before you had the suit. You feel they have betrayed you, now.

Bucky moves forward, metal fingers twitching as he makes to place his hand upon your leg. You are frozen, unable to even jerk your calf away. Bucky’s eyes lock with yours, and what you see there – what you think you see there – is not what you want it to be, you know that.
You find your voice. “They’re death dates, Cap. You did have death dates in the forties, yes?” And maybe it’s cruel, maybe you shouldn’t have said something so laden with meaning, but you grin and turn around, finally managing to pull your leg from Bucky’s grasp. His eyes stay locked on the back of your head, Steve’s eyes stay locked on the place your calf used to be.

You do not want to have this conversation, there is no need for this conversation, but Steve asks, “How many are there?” and when have you ever been able to deny them anything? You have died for them; why can you not live for them too?

“Who knows,” you say. A pause. “No more than I deserve.”

You know, exactly, have always known, because who could lose count of something so real, something so final but… not, at the same time? You wish they did not know of any. Twelve; twelve death dates, twelve deaths.

You want to leave, and so you do, but not before you hear the sounds deep from Bucky’s chest, before you see the devastation splashed on Steve’s face.

“You’re married.”

*  

You come to with Yinsen kneeling above you, heaving water up onto the sandy cave floor. You remember a wire disconnecting, the fizzle of burning flesh as electricity shot through you, water splashing everywhere as you slump forward into the basin. You are surprised they pulled you out.

You notice Yinsen’s watery clothes, his labored breathing. He has saved your life again.

You have no way to repay him but to get him out.

“A new date for your collection,” Yinsen says. “We must stop ending your sessions like this.”

A sparkle in your mind, an idea you have been playing with coming back to rest in your thoughts.
You smirk, even though your whole body aches, even though your brain burns and your chest feels like it will crack apart if you move.

“We will.”

Yinsen waits for more, expectant.

“Tell them I will build them their weapon.” You do not have a plan yet; you will tell him when the time is right.

Yinsen frowns, but gets the guard.

*

Your pounding hangover has long since faded by the time Steve and Bucky surface from their honeymoon. You have seen them once in the last two weeks, during a battle that lasted less than an hour. No villain has dared surface since.

You had flown off before they could talk to you, locking yourself up with your bots. You have never realized how lonely it is in your lab until Bucky is no longer around for chatter, Steve no longer draws on your couch. You miss their presence, but it is almost freeing, not having to worry about what you say, or what you do, or what you wear.

Maybe you should move back to Malibu. A whole mansion waits for you to walk through it, with no one around to find out the truth.

When you hear them, laughing in the kitchen for the first time since they saw your death dates, you almost turn around and head straight out the door. You do turn, actually, but just as you are about to go, Clint pokes his head around the opening in the wall. “Hey, man, have you seen Nat?”

There’s no retreat now. The laughing has stopped.
You blink innocently. “Just passed her on the way up to your quarters - smiling and everything. You may want to hide up in the vents for a few decades, Legolas; I’m sure she didn’t appreciate that shaving cream trick you played on her. So basic.”

Clint pales. “That wasn’t me, man.” His eyes narrow. “You set me up”

“Did I, Barton?” You did. “Then why did the little hawk leave a feather behind?”

“My vengeance will be swift and invisible.”

You are laughing now. “Survive Natasha, Tweety Bird, and we’ll talk.”

Clint grins at you as he moves out of the kitchen. “This is war.” He makes his way out of the living room. “A bloody, messy war. You shall perish in the flames of my awesomeness.”

“Send Romanoff my love,” you yell in response. “Revenge is a good look on her.”

You look back at the entrance to the kitchen, all humor draining away from your face now that Clint is gone. In and out, coffee and done. You steel yourself and enter.

The newlyweds are waiting for you.

*

Once, when the hospital lights have dimmed and moonlight slips in through your window, after everyone has gone home and the night janitor has wheeled through with his squeaky mop bucket, you lie awake in your bed, chest heaving. You think about Yinsen, dead, a gun in his hand, and the Ten Rings bodies, charred in the flames. You think about water filling your lungs, about shrapnel piercing your heart.

When the panic sets in, and you feel like you’re drowning, like your skin is too big and your body’s not real and you’re back in the cave, then you think about Captain America, that old black-and-white photo that once rested beside your bed; and, somehow, your skin shrinks back into place.
“Tony.” Steve is relentless.

You sigh. All you want is your damn coffee. “Yes, my nonagenarian friend?”

“Those dates-”

Your eyes land on the coffee pot, half-full and cold. It will have to do. Cold coffee seems like a fair enough trade if it means you won’t rip your hair out. You drift toward the pot, taking the mug that Bucky sets down on the counter wordlessly.

You tune back into the conversation: “We left you there,” Steve is saying.

“What?” Maybe you should have been paying closer attention; even Bucky looks somber for once. “Sorry.” You nod toward the coffee. Really, they should know by now that your black soul cannot function without some of Satan’s elixir of life. “Coffee,” you say by way of explanation. You drain the cup that you had poured while talking and top it up again, moving back out of the kitchen. “No hard feelings about the wedding night, Capsicle. Your resident genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, mood-killer just couldn’t help himself.”

When you are safely away from the Avengers’ communal floor, you play back the conversation in your mind: eidetic memory has its benefits.

You run over it, and then over it again. You phone Pepper. “I’m going to Malibu.”

“Is everything okay, Tony?”

“Peachy, Pep. Never better.”

She doesn’t believe you, but arranges for the transfer of your work anyway. You take the Iron Man suit and leave, immediately.
You travel on autopilot, unable to shake the words, “We left you there.” They had noticed the dates, acquired two minutes apart, from the day they had left you, freezing, your arc reactor gone dark. You have gone out of your way so that nobody knows, nobody but Vision and Rhodey. You had planned to live with the memory in silence, piled amid all of the other layers of death that have woven their way through your life.

You can handle the smallest new twist to your nightmares.

You did not want them to have to handle the guilt.

The beach looks lovely when you land.

*

Only eighteen missed calls and twenty-seven missed text messages: your retreat is going more smoothly than you had predicted. In all fairness, you had hoped that maybe they would try a bit harder to get you back, but you have not felt this relaxed in days, this free in months, and it crosses your mind that you could just never return.

You begin to make arrangements for Dummy and Butterfingers and U to be shipped out from New York. Pepper is concerned, and Rhodey offers to fly out from rehab if he is needed.

You refuse it all. Having no one around has never been better for you. Sure, sometimes you forget to sleep, and sometimes you are surprised when you find that all of the food in your fridge has suddenly expired, but JARVIS keeps a look out for you, makes sure you’re okay. You even manage to change your shirt out in the open, where anyone could walk in and see you. You’ve always been careful to hide your marks, an inherited fear from your father. You never know who will try to use the information against you; soulmarks are hard to fake, but it’s not as though it has never happened. Only recently, though, have you been afraid to change in your own home.

You are making some finishing touches to the latest model of the suit when the Avengers’ alarm blares. You have not been needed for so long that it takes a moment for you to move. The suit locks around your body and you are off, tapping into the comms.

“What do we have today? Please tell me it isn’t another one of those radioactive squids. I’ve barely managed to get the glow out of the Mark VII.”
“Iron Man?” Steve answers him first.

“Nice of you to show up,” Bucky mutters afterward, breaking into the conversation in seconds.

“Ladies, please, no need to tell me you miss me,” you say. Their voices are like a soothing balm. You have not realized how you have missed them until now. “Where am I headed, Cap?”

“Back to New York. Dr. Doom has made some new and improved robots.” There is a faint explosion in the background. Even from miles away you can tell Steve is offering his patented eyebrow of disapproval.

“Be there soon. Don’t have all the fun without me.”

*

You used to think that, without the soulmarks, life would be so much easier.

You have not changed your mind.

One fated man and a mountain of endless love are overrated.

What about those whose soulmates have died?

What about those who love someone else?

What about those whose soulmates don’t love them?

Maybe that’s just you.
“Honey, I’m home.” You fly onto the scene, taking out one of the doombots tailing Falcon. Sam shoots you a thumbs-up and dives off, circling over Natasha’s head. “Where do you want me, Capsicle?”

The blue and white and red of his suit grabs your attention. Steve is fighting off three bots at once, all floating and circular and offensive to every scientific mind in America. “Iron Man, can you find out where they’re all coming from?” Even Steve sounds short of breath. More doombots appear, replacing the ones that Steve has just finished destroying.

“Roger, Rogers.” You fly above New York, diving in every so often to help one of your team mates. The search is slow and methodical, the suit running background scans as it looks for consistent patterns among the bots. “At least we know where Doom’s been all this time. Trying to clone himself. Didn’t think he could get any uglier.”

Clint snorts. “You sure they weren’t modeled after you?”

“Now that just rude, birdbrain. Rude and uncalled for.”

“I’ve got to even the score somehow, man. You disappeared before I could defeat you. My awesome has lain dormant too long.” You can hear the question in his voice: Are you okay?

“Only because I wanted to spare you a scorching defeat.”

“How’s about you save my life and we call it even?”

You see Clint plummet from the edge of the building where he is perched. Pushing the thrusters as fast as possible, you level up beside him, barely managing to grab him in time. Depositing him on the nearest rooftop, you resume your search.

Clint launches an arrow at one of the robots that has just zeroed in on you. “God damn, cutting it a bit close there. I said save my life, not shave off ten years.”
“I was still so stunned that you knew the word *dormant,*” you respond, and Steve cuts in over the comms.

“How are we looking?”

“Gorgeous, Cap,” Clint says back. “Do you even need to ask??” There is another explosion of metal in his general area.

“Boys, a little help on 56th would be nice about now,” Natasha calls, and does she sound a little out of breath?

You hear Wanda responding, but don’t pay much attention as JARVIS flashes red signals across your screen. “Sir, it would appear as though the bots have gathered behind you. Might I suggest employing some basic evasion maneuvers?”

“Right you are, JARVIS. Pull the weapons system online.” The display in your helmet changes, laying out arc distances and missile ranges and targeting systems. “Bring ‘em down, J.”

An explosion rocks the air behind you, but you are already out of range, diving as one of the bots launches something at you through the air and another barrels toward you full force. Below, there are explosions.

“Do you know how much that is going to cost me?” you huff as you blast another bot from the sky. “J, how much is that going to cost me?” You send out a short burst of energy and the closest doombot explodes, taking two more with it.

“Chatter, Iron Man,” Steve says, but you’re banking left, then right, too focused to respond.

“You know what, J, don’t answer that.”

You cut all the power to your thrusters so you drop like a stone, the collision of two more bots above you raining down as you fall through the air. The remaining three on your tail follow your descent, gaining on you as you approach the ground.
“Iron Man, report.” Steve sounds panicked, and you see him running toward you as you get closer and closer to the ground. Maybe plummeting from the sky isn’t the best way to instill confidence in your teammates.

Almost there now.

“Cap, I’m fine. Dandy even.” Fifty feet, forty feet, thirty feet. “Could even say I’m the bee’s knees, the cat’s meow, the ant’s pants.” You hear a collective groan from the team. Twenty feet; fifteen; fourteen; thirteen. “Did I use those terms right, Cap? Someone from your century should weigh in for the critics on the comms.”

Nine; eight; seven. Steve is watching your fall, stress lines around his mouth visible even under the cowl. Five; four; three. You fire your systems back online and launch yourself out of the way, skidding across the pavement, barely controlled but okay. The three doombots following you are not so lucky, piling onto each other in a tangle of rubble and scrap parts.

“Cap, on your left.” Busy making sure you are okay, Steve has missed the descending mass of doombots. “Getting slow in your old age, man?” You get to your feet, and okay, maybe hurtling toward the pavement and then spinning across it as a means of slowing down was not the best idea you have ever had. You ignore the urge to sit down, and launch back into the sky, flying farther into the city.

The bots are coming in faster now, multiplying. You see the Hulk launch himself between buildings, puffs of dust following in his wake. Over to the left, Wanda’s red sparks shoot into the air and the Widow’s red hair stays flawless as she executes a perfect flip. Bucky has joined the Captain, a perfect team on and off the field, fighting back to back, while Hawkeye knocks off one of the robots that still seem to be following Falcon. You’re not too sure where Ant-Man is, but then you never really are.

You switch back to your private comms: “How we looking, JARVIS?”

“Analysis almost complete, sir.”

“What do you have for me so far?”

“It would appear the ‘Doombots,’ as you have taken to calling them, are controlled by a central server.”
“Seriously? You’re kidding me, J.”

“I would never, sir.”

“How can Doom call himself an evil mastermind? That’s the number one no-no they should teach people at Super Villain High School. Who is running Rookie Mistakes 101? This is disgraceful, insulting. I’d like to have one decent bad guy one of these days. Someone who knows their-”

“Sir?”

“Don’t interrupt Daddy when he’s ranting, J.”

“Yes, sir, but as I have already done so, and you are no longer ranting, you may wish to know that the location of the server is .98 miles south of your current location.” JARVIS’s voice makes the Sahara Desert look wet.

“Did I program you with this much sass? Dry humor is the lowest form of… well, that’s not quite right, but still. I will not stand for this disrespect. Daddy’s feelings are hurt: hurt and ready to send you off to community college. Live in those servers for a few hundred days and we can talk about welcoming you home.”

“If you insist, sir. Should I download myself into their computers now, or after I have shown you to Dr. Doom’s servers?”

“Make a note, J. Make a note that I’m selling you.”

“Duly noted, sir.” You can swear you hear the faintest hint of amusement.

“Now lead the way.”

You land on the rooftop in record time, the doombots dropping like flies from the sky as you destroy the machines and place Dr. Doom into police custody, again. You do not see the small green light,
blinking away on your suit, somehow attached during the battle.

*

You are flying home. No, not home. Home is in Malibu now. You are flying back to the Avengers compound to debrief before you leave again. Of course, it has nothing to do with checking more closely on the married couple within your midst; nothing to do with making sure they are okay.

You chat with JARVIS as you make the trip.

The blinking light keeps blinking.

You do a flip, a barrel roll, a dive, showing off to Sam, who has decided to stay in the plane.

The blinking light keeps blinking.

You wonder where Vision is, and when you ask Wanda, you are told in a mix of colorful Russian to “Kindly shut up, please, she is sleeping.” At least, you think Natasha said please.

The blinking light stops blinking.

You let Natasha know where she can shove her pleases – you will pay for this later, but for now you are safe.

The light on your suit has now turned red.

You hear JARVIS say, “Sir, a malfunction in the suit.”

Your repulsors stutter, stutter, stop - you are falling now, much like before.

Frantic, you check in with JARVIS: no systems are coming online.
Fifty feet; forty feet; thirty feet.

“Iron Man, report.” You hear Steve calling through the radio.

You say nothing. You do not have the time to waste.

Twenty feet; fifteen; fourteen; thirteen.

“Iron Man, come in. Come in, Iron Man.” Steve again; Bucky, swearing in the background.

JARVIS? JARVIS? Stop the shutdown. Reroute the power.

Nine, eight, seven.

JARVIS, isolate the virus.

Five, four, three.

“Tony?” You can hear Steve getting desperate now. “This isn’t funny. Tony, come in.”

Two.

Bucky, a voice full of fear, breaking in over Steve’s: “Stark, stop.”

“Good-bye, Steve. Good-bye Bucky.”

One.
Sometimes, you think there is something... else, in the darkness. Damp drops – small rivers running across your face. Angry shouting – a forest fire, raging in your ears. Soft touches – tall grass, tickling your fingers.

And pain.

Pain, pain, pain - eating you alive, eating through your chest, eating through your heart.

*My mark, my mark, don’t touch it! Don’t touch it.*

*It burns.*

*It burns.*

Steve?

Bucky?

Where are you?

*Waking up this time is different. You’ve felt pain: felt chunks of your lungs missing, felt bits of your chest missing, felt pieces of rib missing.*

You’ve felt death. Death, death, death everywhere. Twelve moments of peace mixed in with all the pain.
This time, though, you feel nothing, numbness. Black, black; a face.

And then sleep.

*

_Steve?_

_Bucky?_

_Where are you?_

*

_I miss you._

*

_Why won’t you love me?_

*

There are more faces this time. Unfamiliar and looming. A straw shoved between your lips. Your tongue, rough as sandpaper.

Sleep.

*

_Steve?_
Bucky?

I’m lonely.

*

Please hold me.

*

Don’t hate me.

*

The faces are familiar, like a word that sits on the edge of your lips, so close to being remembered.

Sleep.

*

Steve?

Bucky?

Where are you?

Where are you?

Where are you?
Familiar red hair, soft Russian and a kind face.

Sleep.

Where are you?

Where are you?

Where are you. Where are you. Where are you.
Where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you where are you?

Steve? Bucky? Where are you?

Blond hair, brown hair, and then sleep.

The squeaking of a mop bucket jolts you awake. The lights are out, dimmed for night, but you know where you are. The smell of old people, and antiseptic, and death making your heart race. Your room is empty.

The faint glow of the clock someone has set up by your bed reads 3:57 a.m.

You struggle into a sitting position, weak and exhausted.

You have to pee, desperately, and rip the wires that cover your body away from you, taking stock of the casts and bandages, machines and medicine bags.
A morphine drip. That explains your muddled thoughts, your confused movements.

You swing your legs over the side of the bed, counting the seconds until you stand: one, two, three.

Pain; pain and a hard floor, cool and welcoming.

The squeaky mop bucket stops. You hear the flatline of a machine that you must have disconnected.

And then sleep.

*

“He tried to leave, Buck; you heard what the nurses said. He tried to leave and we weren’t even here.”

“I know that. Don’t you think I know that? But we have to talk to him. We have to let him know that we can still work as a team, even after seeing his mark. We have to tell him that we don’t blame him for hiding it from us."

“But not yet. He tried to leave and he didn’t even know that we were aware of the soulmarks. If we tell him how we feel, he won’t be around long enough for him to know that we can adjust to this. We have to live with it first. Make sure we can handle knowing that he’s our soulmate and then tell him after, once he’s healed.”

“How many nights have we stayed awake talking about this? It’s not right. He shouldn’t have kept it from us and we shouldn’t have to keep our thoughts about if from him. What if I decide I can’t keep working with him? What then? He’s a genius, he’ll know right away something is wrong. This whole time, I’ve had this feeling, and to think that he… to think that – I don’t think I can do it, Steve. I don’t think I can take being that close to him, being his friend, when the whole time we’ll know.”

You wish it was still nighttime, still 3:57 a.m., head on the cold floor, mind full of drugs.
“Please, Bucky.”

Silence.

They know.

You try to squash it down, but your heart picks up its pace, faster and faster, the beep, beep, beep of the monitor running through the room. The shuffle of footsteps surrounding your bed.

“Tony?” There is no point in pretending you haven’t been awake. You open your eyes.

*

You had their picture on your wall – Steve and Bucky – the Howling Commandos.

It was grainy and gray and hard to see, but that image is still better than the one of your father ripping it down and burning it with all of your other memorabilia.

*

They are more beautiful than you remember them; they are more beautiful than you deserve.

Fitting, then, that they do not want you. It is everything you had imagined and worse.

You look away when a smile breaks across Steve’s face, your attention drawn back by the sound of splintering wood as Bucky’s metal hand crushes the edge of your nightstand.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asks; his eyes glisten, and you are pretty sure that you have never seen them that bright before - the brightness before tears.

Bucky does not even give you a chance to answer. His voice is low and raspy. “How much did you
“Nothing.” A pause. “The end.” You see Steve opening his mouth, rush forward, push the words out so that you can shatter apart in peace after they leave. “I’m-”

Silence; they are letting you speak. “I- I fucked up.” You turn your head toward the ceiling, count the tiles to distract from the pain in your chest, from that cold, sunken feeling of dread. “I didn’t tell you because – look, I knew this would happen. I’m sorry I couldn’t bring myself to let you know before.”

* 

Sometimes, when the night is black and the stars are out, you go flying – up, up into the sky – until a rush of space consumes you, and you forget what breathing is.

* 

“How did you find out, anyway?” You go to raise your hand to wave off the question and then think better of it. After last night you’ve learned your lesson about moving. “Never mind, it’s not important. You weren’t ever supposed to end up knowing.”

You look at them again, their faces so lost and confused that you think if you talk more, if you explain more, maybe they’ll understand.

* 

When you can’t breathe, you hate yourself, because you are fine; you’ve had worse; you’ve died twelve times.
How is this worse than dying?

*

“This would never work. I’ve known that since I built my first circuit board, Steve, known since I took a picture of you from my father’s study when I was four and he wasn’t looking. You’re you, and I’m me, and you were dead, all my life; years and years of knowing that I’d never have you; knowing that you were an American icon and I was an American massacre. The Merchant of Death, that’s my name, and how could I reconcile patriotism and fighting Nazis with selling bombs to terrorists and killing American soldiers?”

You force yourself to take in their faces.

There are eighty-seven roof tiles.

“We met, and you hated me, which was no surprise to me, really; so I made it worse, I fanned the flames, because throwing myself at your feet wasn’t an option. But you made me like you anyway, with your stupid hair and your stupid abs and your stupid courage. So, fine, we were friends.

“And then I killed millions all over again, with Ultron.”

*

Once, you think, What would it be like if no one knew I was a killer?

After, you think, What would it be like if I wasn’t a killer?

Later, you never think of it again.

*
“I wanted to change – I tried to change – but it was never going to happen. Or not enough, anyway.”

*

Death is so peaceful, you tell yourself one night, and change is so hard.

You know you do not deserve peace.

You have more red in your ledger than the Black Widow herself.

*

“I thought about telling you, in the middle of the night down in my lab, when you’d make me eat or make me sleep or you’d sit down beside me as I invented and you drew. I’d sit there and I’d think, this could work, I could make this work, but I never said anything; and then you showed up.”

You look at Bucky now, stare at his face, your eyes locked.

*

The cold is what kills you in your dreams: the cold of space, the cold of Siberia cutting through your suit.

The heat is what kills you in your dreams: the heat of Afghanistan, the heat of palladium eating through your veins.

Everything kills you in your dreams.

Your dreams are what will kill you.
“You came, and Steve chased you, and I tried to help him, because I could tell that he loved you – even when I didn’t know that you were soulmates – but after, with the Accords and the ice and my powered-down suit, with the the shield lying beside me – when everything finally made sense as Steve told me about you, I knew I was right not to have said anything. I knew that the two of you together was for the best.”

“Stop.” Steve says it so quietly that you think you may not have even heard it.

* 

When you are freezing, dying in Siberia, heat sucked from you body by the coffin that is your suit, the ringing sound of Cap’s shield hitting the ground is more painful than the ice that makes up your limbs.

* 

“There was never going to be room for me in a relationship so perfectly made for two. I wasn’t going to ruin the team for my own selfish reasons, about this or the death dates or anything; and I’m not going to now. I can behave like an adult. My house in Malibu is all ready for me, and I’ll be around for battles and team meetings as much as is needed, no need to worry. Nothing has to change, nothing has to -”

“Tony, stop.” It is Steve, Captain America voice out in full force, and you think back to when he said, “He’s my soulmate, Tony,” and silence rings in your ears.

Your mouth clamps shut and you wait.

* 

“He’s my soulmate, Tony.”

And you want to say, “I am too.”
But you don’t.

*

The silence stretches in the room; long. Both men have gone sullen and cold: Steve’s skin pale, Bucky’s teeth gritted.

All you want is to remain on the team. If they kick you off, if they make you leave – Iron Man is your life, and there is nothing there without it.

Maybe, secretly, you want them to love you; but in your dreams, they kill you too.

*

The happiest day of your life is when you realize that your soulmate is still alive.

The worst day of your life is when he speaks to you.

“Big man in a suit of armour? Take that off, and what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.”

* 

“Murderer.”

* 

“How can you be so stupid?” Bucky says, finally, staring you down as you wilt like a dying flower. He turns to Steve. “Stevie, how can he be so stupid?”
“Buck-”

“No, shut up, the both of you. You’re both idiots. Everyone is an idiot. If I had known that the future was going to be full of angsty middle-aged men, I would have made damn sure I never fell off that damn train.”

“Language, Buck.”

Bucky whirls on him. “Don’t even get me started on you. If you had just listened to me in the beginning, would we be having this problem? No. Did I not tell you to go talk to him about your fucking feelings the moment we got back into that tower? But no; we can’t all be as wise and as emotionally repressed as Captain fucking America, am I right? Don’t give me that wounded look. This needs to be said. I can expect emotional constipation from Stark-”

“Hurtful,” you say, but you’re mostly just talking on autopilot right now; your brain is still trying to reboot from the blue screen of death that Bucky’s proclamation has caused.

“-but you’re supposed to be bursting at the seams with that go-get-em attitude people call courage. Instead, you slunk around that damn tower like a ghost because you felt bad about moving on while you thought I was dead. That’s what people are supposed to do when someone they love dies, Steve.

“But you just had to make martyrs of us all, because who cares what Bucky Barnes has to say? He can’t possibly understand what it’s like to have feelings for someone other that his soulmate; he can’t possibly be telling the truth when he says he has the hots for Iron Man, too. He’s just trying to soothe Captain America’s ego because he’s still hung up on some other doll when he’s supposed to be marrying his soulmate. Well, good fucking luck getting anyone else to believe that.”

Bucky is almost panting now, and you are still so stunned that you have yet to even try and get a word in.

“Honestly, Stevie, when have I ever given a damn how your ego feels?” He says the last part almost quietly, suddenly gentle. “Tell him now, because there is something that I’ve been wanting to do for a long time, and it’s never going to happen if you don’t speak the hell up.” He’s looking at you now, eyes locked with yours, and you can’t tell if your heart is trying to beat its way out of your chest or if it has stopped working altogether. “Listen to Stevie, Stark, and then we’ll talk.”

You nod, still so stunned, so confused that you want to cry, because this cannot be happening, good
God, why are they playing you like this? But you move your eyes to Steve’s face, and you wait, just like they did for you.

*

Years later, when Dr. Doom is a shell of his former (non)glory, you go and visit him, to thank him for the moment that brought you the rest of your life.

It is late by the time you return home and when you crawl into bed, settling down between Steve and Bucky, you do not think about space, cold, heat; when something sends you starting awake in a cold sweat, it is the thought of forty more years of loneliness.

*

Steve looks as though a mountain has been dropped on top of him. His skin is pale, his eyes gleam, and his shoulders hunch in a very un-Stevelike fashion.

“He’s not wrong, Tony. I can see that you don’t believe him.” Steve reaches forward, brushing what you know is filthy hair back from your face with the tips of his fingers. “When I met you, it was like something was different inside of me, like this big gaping hole that Bucky’s death had opened up in my chest suddenly had a light at the bottom of it. Like you had come and thrown some high-tech glowstick into it and were waiting to see when it hit bottom.”

Steve’s voice cracks, and when he blinks you almost miss the tears that drop like stones. “You were so bright and vibrant and full of life, and I hated it so much; I loathed it, because that hole was supposed to remain empty. That hole was supposed to swallow me up, and you wouldn’t let it.”

You can’t possibly miss the tears this time and you desperately want to wipe them away. Bucky presses himself against Steve’s side.

“Do you remember that night, when I was up on the top of the tower, leaning down over the edge and just staring at the city when you stumbled onto the roof with me? I hated it when you drank – no, hate it when you drink – and this was worse than usual. You wobbled over to the edge and you asked if tonight was the night we both jumped off, and you laughed, like it was the funniest thing you had ever heard. And then you told me that if we went through with it, there was no replacing Captain America, but there were always ways to replace a man in a suit.”
You do remember that night, vaguely, but you certainly do not recall it being quite so touchy-feely; you are quite sure that displaying that much emotion would have had you waking up in hives. “Even then I knew that the best way to distract a Capsicle was to throw something even more broken than him into his path,” you say quietly. “And what could possibly compete with me?”

Steve looks so heartbroken that you wonder if you should ever be honest again. Bucky just kisses Steve’s cheek, but his knuckles have gone white where they are clasped around Steve’s body.

“I wasn’t planning on jumping, at least not really, so I picked you up,” Steve continues, and it is getting harder to understand him as his body shakes more and more with emotion. “And I carried you back into the tower, all the way down to the lab like JARVIS instructed. By the time we made it there, you were asleep, drooling all over my shirt.” Steve let out a small chuckle. “That was when I knew things could be different, for both of us, even if I didn’t have Bucky around to prop me up any longer. I thought that maybe we could prop each other up, and stay off the roof, together.”

“You never told me any of this,” Bucky says.

Steve nods: “There didn’t seem to be a point before now.” He stops talking, but you won’t accept that this is done.

“And then what?”

“And then I fell in love with you. For months I tried to pretend it wasn’t happening, but there was no ignoring it. I hated that, too. That I had found someone who was so much like Bucky, but would never be him. I hated the fact that I had found a way to be happy when Bucky was dead. But I couldn’t stop it. You won me over with your kindness; you won me over with your charm, and the way you can’t survive without coffee, and the way you burned down the kitchen trying to make pasta—”

“That was one time!”

“And the way you are a wonderful father to your bots, even if you were never shown the same courtesy. I tried to show you that I wanted you, with food and trips to fancy restaurants and quality time in your lab, but you never seemed to return the feelings, and I didn’t want to push. I didn’t deserve you, anyway. When everything with SHIELD happened and Bucky came back, that pit in my chest opened up even wider, and it just tried to swallow me again. He had been out there the entire time, my soulmate, while I had been trying to make another man fall in love with me.
“So when we found Bucky, after everything that happened in Siberia, when we-” Steve’s voice cuts off and he cannot even seem to get the words out.

“When we made it to Wakanda,” Bucky continues for him, “he told me everything. All about you. All about how you had held him together, even when he thought that he couldn’t go on. How you gave him something new to live for. How you reminded him of why he had become Captain America in the first place.” Bucky pulls Steve even closer, running his metal hand through his hair. “And I was damn fine with it, punk, and I told you that in the beginning, but you wouldn’t believe me. I was happy that you had moved on.” He looks back at you.

“We came back to the tower, but Stevie was always so filled with guilt over his totally imagined sins” – he gives Steve another squeeze – “that I had to hunt you down myself to get to know you. And I understood almost instantly what Stevie did: that you were important to us, that you made us feel whole.”

Now Bucky backs away from Steve and rolls his eyes at you, suddenly less serious, giving Steve the moment alone that he so desperately needs. “But this guy didn’t want to scare you off. He didn’t think you could possibly be interested in one of us, let alone two. Punk kept saying, He has a soulmate, Bucky, don’t get in the way. He’ll find them eventually. Even after we got engaged, he wouldn’t let up. Then he found out about your death dates – which is a whole other conversation that we are damn well gonna have – and he got even worse, if you can believe it.

“And I had just convinced him to say something when you ran off – which is something else we are going to be talking about, don’t even try to get out of it, Stark – and then you went and almost got yourself killed again. When they pulled you from the suit after they got to your body, they had to cut off your shirt to stop some of the bleeding in your side. Stevie here wouldn’t move more than a few feet from you, no matter how hard Natasha tried to distract him, so when the shirt came off the game was up. Your soulmark – our soulmark – was there for the word to see. You can probably guess the rest. Confusion, very little sleep and one interrogated superspy later-”

Steve had recovered enough to add, “What he meant to say was, Tasha came to us with information in an attempt to bribe Bucky into going home for a shower.”

“The little tattletale,” you say, but you don’t really mean it. “I knew she and Wanda were in this together.”

“After she came and volunteered some information, we waited for you to wake up so we could find out what the fuck you were thinking.” There is a sudden flicker in Bucky’s eye that you find intimidating. “And also so I could do this.”
And you do not even know what is happening, panic settling in, irrational thoughts at home in your mind, until you feel soft lips pressing against yours, so much more gentle than you had imagined, but perfect nonetheless.

You have always thought of this moment being wild and passionate and desperate, but instead it feels like coming home – or at least, what you imagine that would feel like. When Bucky pulls back, you are gasping for breath, and when he rests his forehead against yours, you never want to look away from his eyes. You have always been partial to red and gold, but maybe blue is growing on you.

“I am absolutely in love with you, doll,” Bucky says. “And I know Stevie is too. Will you do us the honor of going out with us?”

“Once you’ve healed completely, of course,” Steve adds quickly.

All you can do is nod, speechless. Maybe Wanda had been right all along. (You will never let her know that.)

Steve manages to bump Bucky out of the way. His eyes are still red, his cheeks a blotchy pink, but he is glowing like the sun, and when he swoops in to ask if he can kiss you too, for a moment you no longer care that Stark men don’t cry, because nothing your father taught you ever made you think that you could have this either.

*

Pepper gives you a dressing-down so fierce that your ears ring, and your hands itch to find out a way to ward the suit against future attacks.

You want out, desperately, and you manage it faster than anyone would like, especially your newfound boyfriends, but you have made them each deals that you know swing largely in your favor.

In the meantime, before you are released, Bucky makes it a game to sneak into the hospital wing after visiting hours and leave it almost impossible for you to think of anything at all.

Often, you wonder if this is a dream, sure that when you wake up you will be lying on sand in a
cave, lying on snow in the cold.

Will this dream be the one that kills you?

*

Months will pass before you tell them, before you say, “I’m damaged goods; I’ll break this, too,” while you are under a car, your face hidden from view. You will say, “End this quickly, when you stop loving me.”

They will pull you from underneath the car, Steve swinging you up into his arms, and you will not cry, goddamn it, when they say:

“You’re our soulmate, Tony.”

And you will want to say, “You’re mine too.”

So you do.

End Notes

The title is from the song "I Can't Escape Myself" by The Sound

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